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ARTICLE

Abstract Spontaneity: On Brushstrokes as Gestures

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Abstract

An old improvisational semiotic practice is gesturing by hand. Hand gestures have often been regarded as spontaneous embodiments of psychic processes, and also as a primal and universal mode of human expression. The view not only characterizes some psychological and lay theories, but also schools of modern art, most explicitly Abstract Expressionism. This article is a study of hand gestures by an art historian discussing two Abstract Expressionist painters. It shows how an ideology of gestures and brushstrokes as spontaneous emotion-driven expressions is articulated by the expert's hand gestures, but also shown to be a calculated effect of the images, a figuration. Following the analysis of the videotaped episode, the construal of gesture as primal and emotional is shown to match conservative ideologies seeking to suppress the alleged wildness of gesture. A review of the art-historian's own improvisational, kinesthesia-driven gesture practices concludes the article.

Keywords: abstract expressionism; gesture; improvisation; kinesthesia; video-analysis

Brushstrokes as gestures

In traditional figurative painting, brushstrokes (the acts) are made to conceal themselves: while a brushstroke on a canvas (i.e., the mark) is known by everyone to be the imprint of a bodily action, it is not meant to be looked at, but only seen as part of an image *of something*, not as an index of painterly action. When our gaze falls on an image, painted, gestured, or otherwise, we see it twofold: we see what it shows, and we see it as an object (Wollheim 1987), but what matters is what it communicates, what it shows. This tradition of painting was eventually subverted by artists such as van Gogh, whose brushstrokes came to be seen as imprints of mood, of anxiety or anger, and did not hide, but rather exhibited at the surface, by its tactile features, the actions by which they had been made. We see van Gogh's brushstrokes both iconically (as clouds, wheat stalks, crows) and indexically, as marks of the painter's actions, which appear to have been driven by psychic forces.

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Abstract Expressionist painters endeavored to ban any reference to the outside world, any figuration, from the canvas. What particularly the New York School painters explored were the kinetic and communicative equivalences between gestures and brushstrokes as physical acts, and they regarded gestures, and thus their painterly actions in the "gesture field," as spontaneously expressive activity. The distribution and thickness of the paint on the canvas thus had to be seen as a sign—and made to appear as a natural or primal sign (Cernuschi 1992)—of the painter's impulsive motor acts. New techniques were thus being developed to transcend the limits of, and enliven, a medium that arrests time.

Richard Shiff (Shiff 1987, 1991, 2011) has explained the difference between traditional (iconic) and modern (indexical) modes of painting in terms of transparency and opacity:

> Modernist painting speaks a language of surface. … The modernist interpretive gesture … is to take marks 'literally', as actual physical imprints or impressions. … An indexical sign works by 'representing' or indicating the physical process that brought it into being. … The indexical relationship corresponds to the immediate contact of touch or handling (Shiff 1987, 98).

What the viewer is invited to see in the patterns of paint, of lines and colors, on the canvas was not the visible world, but marks of the dynamic, tactile, creative, abstractly expressive, *free* actions of the artist. Abstract Expressionism, like Bebop, was celebrated as an assertion of freedom from convention, and of the autonomy of artistic expression, an icon of the Free World (Menand 2021) and its "culture of spontaneity" (Belgrad 1998).

In the following, I analyze episodes from a videotaped conversation that I had in 1992 with a German art-historian, Christian Schneegass, who was at the time Secretary of the Division of Visual Arts at the Akademie der Künste in West Berlin. He depicts and interprets works by Franz Kline and Jackson Pollock and their production process. Schneegass (CS) is seated on a sofa in his living room. On the walls, we see sketches that document his own experimentation with *écriture automatique* (Michaux 1954).[1] I examine the two episodes gesture by gesture, focusing on their sensory features, their shifting references, the resources they draw upon, and, especially, their development over time. I will revisit the improvisational practices that the art-historian deploys at the end of the article, after situating Abstract Expressionism's understanding of gesture in the context of gesture ideology.

My analysis of the art-historian's gestures is informed by a typology that distinguishes between indexical or "environmentally coupled" gestures (Goodwin 2007; Streeck 1996), among them pointing gestures; depiction; conceptual gestures (giving kinesthetic-visible form to an idea); metapragmatic; and transactional gestures such as greetings (see Streeck 2009, 2010). Depictive and conceptual gesturing is often

[1]Even though this did not come up in our conversation, Schneegass also had a vital interest in improvisation, notably in group processes (Schneegass 1997).

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lumped together under the term "iconic," but these modes differ in their communicative ecology and function (depictive gestures invite and require recipient visual attention, conceptual gestures do not; Streeck 1993).

A gestural eruption: Franz Kline

Franz Kline's (1910–1962) paintings[2] have been described as "gestural black-and-white canvases" (Everitt 1975, 35), as "free-standing black gestures" resulting from a "gestural eruption" (see below), and an exhibition of his work was entitled *The Vital Gesture* (Gaugh 1985). The paintings

> explode before us at a point-blank range permitting no distance. It is a confrontation entirely visual in its immediacy, so strong as to be all absorbing, and creating a dialogue between work and spectator as at first to permit no thought of method. … These works seem to have expanded from within and, grown from the energy of opposed directions, to hold their borders at bay, creating the spaces essential to their expressive existence (Goldwater 1967, 6).

The art historian first posits that at the beginning of a Kline painting is a "pure emotion," an "eruption" ("Ausbruch," out-break): "One somehow has an eruption," he says, and his first gesture embodies it. He pushes both hands, fingers spreading, rapidly forward from the chest, our culture's home of the emotions (Figure 1, line 6). The "eruption" is quickly renamed "gestural eruption," coupled with a larger eruption gesture (Figure 2, line 8).

(1)

1	JS	Und Kline, Kline, wie is das bei de:m?
		And Kline, Kline, how is that with him?
2		Wie würdst'st das bei dem sagen?
		How would you say that with him?
3	CS	Ähhh hhh das- is äm- das denk ich mal
		Uh that is uhm I think like
4		der Beginn des Bildes ist auch glaube ich eine reine Emotion.
		the beginning of the picture is also I believe a pure emotion.
5		(- -) äh und die wird dann mehr (.) reaktiv (.) weiterentwickelt.
		uh and it is getting more reactively developed.
6		Also man hat irgendwie n A**u**sbruch
		Like one somehow has an eruption

[2]Good examples of the group of paintings to which the art historian refers are *Mahoning* (1956): https://whitney.org/collection/works/1997 and *Black and White No.2* (1960) in the Blanton Museum (https://www.artsy.net/artwork/franz-kline-black-and-white-no-2).

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7 JS Hm.
Hm
8 CS ge**s**tischen Ausbruch
gestural eruption



Figure 1.



Figure 2.

The gesture eruption is subsequently "driven further" (line 9, Figures 3–5) by motions of the hand which, if they left traces, would one by one make a semblance of a Kline

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painting appear, a crisscrossing of large, hand-wide strokes that we see as stripes being made by large strokes. By his gestures, the expert shows paintings *as* gestures, as he takes the position of the painter vis-à-vis the canvas. But his gesturing hands do not drag the paint, as they would were they holding a brush, but push, an image in line with the verbal descriptor, "*driving* further," but not the painter's moves. While this has no effect on the viewer's ability to see a painting in the gestures, conceptually, it is the emotional eruption, not the brush, that is driven further.

(2)

9		und der wird dann weitergetrieben
		and that then gets driven further
10	CS	auch emotional reagierend
		like reacting with emotion
11		also möglichst nicht so sehr vom Kopf
		like if possible not so much from the head
12		sondern eben- wenn man mitm Kopf arbeitet
		but now- when you work with the head
13		is bei der Malerei
		in painting
14		entsteht was anderes
		something different comes out
14		als wenn man- (.) sozusagen aus der Bewegung heraus denkt.
		then when you like think from the movement



Figure 3.

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Figure 4.



Figure 5.

The gesture is part of a multimodal interpretive description that merges reference to the act, to the picture, and to the psychological process bringing it forth. This seems apt, given the nature of the depicted phenomenon, an abstractly expressive painting.

Emphasizing the "directness" and "spontaneity" of Kline's works, the art-historian then explains some of their inherent tensions. He gestures throughout, but his gestures neither depict the works nor their production, but are conceptual, concretizing notions such as "balance," or serve meta-pragmatic functions. Only at one moment, when he says about the artist, "Ich bestaune *ih*n" ("I admire him," transcript not shown),

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does he perform a single, short diagonal stroke while looking at his hand, and thereby invokes the painting as a visual object. The gesture shows that "admiring him" does not mean admiring the man, but his work. Now the gesture bears an indexical relation to prior gestures and the meanings that they have accrued in context. He also re-uses the hand shape of his Kline gestures when he discusses their overall composition and balance, but the motions conceive these qualities (e.g., balance), rather than depicting paintings.

The final gestured depiction of a Kline painting is the most elaborate one, and it is an expanded unit with a clear beginning and end. It is made from the same strokes, but the right hand is in a grip, as if holding a brush (Figs. 6–9). The gesture phrase is affiliated with the metaphorical description "das was da als schwarze Geste so frei steht," "that which stands there so freely as a black gesture."

(3)

47 so dass dann äh
so that then uh

48 das was so als schw**a**rze G**e**ste
the [thing] which so, like a black gesture

49 da so fr**ei**: steht
stands there, freely



Figure 6.

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Figure 7.



Figure 8.

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Figure 9.

But already at this point, CS has subverted the claim that the paintings make, to come from big, ballistic gestures: just before, he has shown Kline applying white-out and reworking the black strokes to intensify their gestural effect. The thumb squeezes the tube, the hand drags it along (Figs. 10, 11).

(4)

42	CS	Aber es gibt da noch eine dritte Ebene
		But there is also a third level
43		das ist mir aufgefallen
		I noticed that
44		der geht da mit- D**e**ckweiss ran und-
		he gets to it with – white-out and
45		(- -) k**o**rrigiert (-) manche Dinge
		corrects some things
46		Hmm
		Hmm
47		so dass dann äh
		so that then uh
48		das was so als schw**a**rze G**e**ste
		the [thing] which so, like a black gesture

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49 da so fr**ei**: steht
stands there, freely
50 ist später auch noch mal
later also gets another
51 (- -) überarbeitet
work-over.



Figure 10.



Figure 11.

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I have suggested that the gesture with which the art historian depicts, or conjures, these paintings—a broad stroke across the interlocutor's visual field—is invented ad hoc, unrehearsed. But through repetition, it becomes a ready-made resource.

What the art historian articulates here can be called an *ideology of gesture* (Hoenes Del Pinal 2011). Gesture is construed as primal: a spontaneous eruption of emotions that burst out into the open in ballistic motions of arms and hands. Gesturing is construed as a primal process, unconstrained by inhibitions of convention and grammar. I will return to the ideology of the primal gesture below.

The element of chance: Pollock pouring paint

Many of Jackson Pollock's "paintings" (they hang on walls) were made with the canvas stretched on the floor, by pouring paint on it or dripping it from a brush or stick. These works are known as *pourings* and *drippings* (the methods are usually combined in a single work).[3] The art-historian analyzes these works as a "dialogue between guided and unguided motion" and highlights the element of chance or risk in Pollock's practice. On one hand are the emotion-guided motions of the artist, on the other a number of forces, including, in the case of pourings, the mass and consistency or fluidity of the paint, the pull of the heavy bucket, even the momentum that the painter's arm itself develops. Apparently relying on his own tactile experiences with paint and paint buckets, the art historian's hands seem at some points to *inhabit* paint, evoking a *feeling*—not just an image—of what it would be like to be paint swooping out of a bucket, and at others the artist's hands holding and tilting the bucket or stirring paint.

As he produces the initial characterization of Pollock's work as a "dialogue between guided and unguided movement," CS first brings his thumbs together to count with them, projecting that there will be a second item, but then, when he refers to the second item, "'not-guided movement," he makes the tip of one index finger tap the tip of the other, creating a tactile connection, corresponding to *zwischen*— "dialogue *between*" —in other words, indexing not the two items, but figuring their connection. (These gestures are not shown here.)

(5)

1	CS	Ja im Grunde genommen is das n Dialog zwischen-
		Well, basically it is a dialogue between
2		zwischen gest**eu**erter und nicht-gesteuerter Bewegung.
		between directed and undirected movement

Depictive gesturing begins when the art historian shows how the paint behaves as Jackson Pollock is pouring it out of a bucket. The hands are the paint, their motions the paint's flow or flight (Figs. 12-14). This flight is simultaneously described by the onomatopoetic noun *Schwupps* (which the dictionary badly translates as *whoosh*), more

[3]Good examples of Pollock's works from this period, for example, *Number 26, 1951* and *Echo, 1951*, can easily be found online. A film document of Pollock at work is *Jackson Pollock 51* by Hans Namuth, available on YouTube.

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precisely by "Masse des Schwupps" "mass of the whoosh").[4] As the paint has mass, so do arms and hands; when either is set in motion, it develops its own momentum. This is important, as CS himself will later point out, for the understanding of the artist's practice, but also for how we may explain how hand movements can embody the flow of paint: what they have in common are the ballistic and sinuous trajectories of their movements—their kinetic and kinesthetic melodies (Luriia 1976; Sheets-Johnstone 2012). In that sense, the living body of the speaker may be able to empathize mimetically with paint thrown into flight.

(6)

3		denn w**ie** die Farbe rausläuft
		because how the paint flows out
4		hängt mit der Eigensubstanz und de-
		depends on the proper substance and th-
		[
5	JS	der Farbe zusammen
		of the paint
6	CS	der Masse des Schw**up**ps sozusagen zusammen
		the mass of the swoosh so to speak
7		wieviel Farbe über die Kante dieses Farbeimers kommt
		how much paint gets over the edge of the paint bucket



Figure 12.

[4]The sound structure of German *Schwupps*—sh-w-oop-s—is a kinesthetic and sound image of the process it describes: the approach (sh), the obstacle (w), formed by closing the lips, the sudden descent with a falling tone, and the splash (oopps).

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Figure 13.

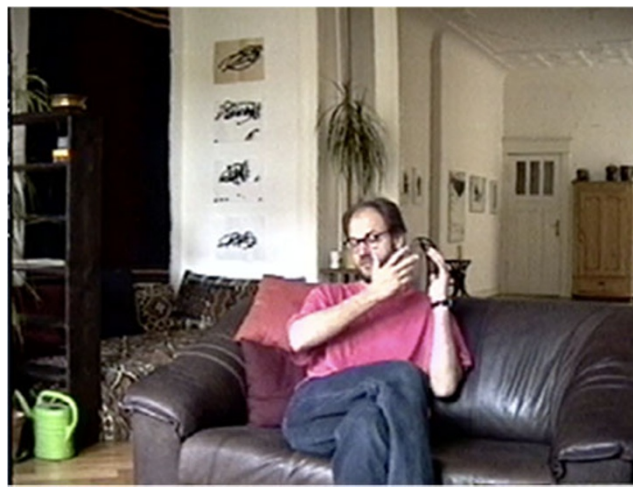


Figure 14.

The *Schwupps*-depicting gesture is repeated and expanded when "mass of the Schwupps" is redescribed as "how much paint comes over the edge of the paint bucket." Here, too, a fleeting reference shift shows the *ad hoc* nature of gesture production. Having retracted his hands, CS first repeats the sinuous forward motion that embodies the flow of paint (Figure 14), but then stops as his hands-as-paint reach the edge of the bucket. He says "Kante" (edge) and then adds "dieses Farbeimer's" (of this paint bucket). As he says this, his lax hands combine to a two-handed hold as they quickly seem to set an object down: the paint bucket is positioned before the viewer-listener.

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Figure 15.

Into a depictive movement that refers to paint is inserted a gesture that introduces a new object into the discourse.

The art historian continues to discuss the factors that are in dialogue in Pollock's work. At line 11, he embarks on a word-search, possibly for the word "Viskosität" (viscosity) or "Liquidität" (liquidity—both feminine and in agreement with "die"), but then abandons that search and settles for (masculine) *Flüssigkeitsgrad*, "liquidity level." When, during the search, he repeats the article, "die" and rubs finger and thumb, a common gesture made when people search for a word or a proper formulation, but is also the mode of "active touch" (Gibson 1962) by which liquidity would be assessed. Such condensations of meaning are not uncommon in gestures (Figs 15, 16).

(7)

8	CS	Und is das weniger oder-
		And is this less or
9		und dann hängt das auch mit der S**u**bstanz der Farbe zusammen.
		and it also depends on the substance of the paint
10	JS	Hm.
		Hm
11	CS	also die die die ähm der Flüssigkeitsgrad der F**a**rbe
		I man the the the uhm degree of liquidity of the paint

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Figure 16.

CS continues to identify the factors that determine the paint's behavior: its "Trägheitsmoment" (moment of inertia) and "Expansionsfähigkeit" (expandability) beim "Aufklatsch" ("at on-splash"). With "expandability," the art historian's hands once again embody the paint as it specifically behaves as a result of Pollock's actions. The gesture he makes as he searches for the term launches a theme that is then elaborated in several increments, but this elaboration does not add features but is rather an increasingly self-aware analysis of the same, repeated motion. Looking at this gesture phrase closely, we can see how the art-historian's thoughts unfold along with his movements. The relationship between thought and gesture is usually explained without regard for the fact that it is the hands that are making gestures and the contributions they make, or for the role of kinesthesia in the gesturing speaker's lived experience (Efron 1972 (1941); McNeill 1992). But, evidently, CS responds to his kinesthetic sensations as he feels his gestures, and these sensations impact what he says. We can see, to paraphrase Kleist (1807-8), "how he fabricates thoughts while gesturing."

The art-historian has introduced the paint's moment of inertia ("Trägheitsmoment") as one of the uncontrolled forces conspiring in the paint's splatter. This is a physicist's term that lay people rarely use. The art-historian quickly seeks to replace it, first coming upon, but apparently, by-passing, either "gravity" ("Schwerkraft") or "momentum" (Schwungkraft; see initial "Sch"/sh, line 13). He then settles on "Expansionsfähigkeit," "expand-ability," and adds "beim Aufklatsch," "at on-splash." His hands find fitting imagery faster than his voice. Already when he utters "Sch- äh," his arms rapidly spread apart as far as they can, figuring the expansion of the paint—the growth of the splatter—on the ground. When he then utters "Expansionsfähigkeit," he repeats the gesture. As he utters "auf der" (on the, line 14), he makes a small tapping motion with both hands, a deictic gesture, indexing the ground. Then he makes the on-splash gesture a third time, the hands this time falling from a higher level, sharpening the figure. (The images show the third installment.)

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(8)

12 mit ihrem eigenen Trägheitsmoment oder
with its own moment of inertia or

13 Sch::: äh äh Ex- Expansi**o**nsfähigkeit
sh::: uh uh ex- expandability

14 auf der-
on the-

15 beim **A**ufklatsch:
at the on-splash



Figure 17.



Figure 18.

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Figure 19.

What follows is yet another gesture showing the motions of paint, but not this time at the moment of splash, but flowing out of the bucket. The gesture (not shown) is a sinuous up-down motion of the right arm, embodying the trajectory of the paint's flow. The phenomenon is described as "the mass that runs over the edge."

(9)

16 äh äh mit der M**a**sse die über die K**a**nte läu:ft
uh uh with the mass that runs over the edge

To this uncontrollable force is added the movement of the artist, first depicted by a horizontal circular motion pivoting at the elbow, then repeated twice from the wrist and thus more closely matching the artist's hand stirring paint, but now in synchrony with "des Eimers," of the bucket. Gesture and speech briefly part ways, and for once, gesture lags behind. McNeill calls this "gestural inertia" (McNeill 2000).

(10)

17 mit der Bewegung
with the movement
18 des Künstlers
of the artist
19 des Eimers
of the bucket
[
20 JS Hm
Hm

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Figure 20.

We can put together a mosaic: we see the artist somehow bringing the paint in a bucket into rotation so that it begins to spin, at which moment it will be poured onto the canvas, its mass and momentum of inertia shaping the marks that it makes.

Kinesthesia's contribution to this unfolding semiosis (or meta-semiosis) reveals itself most clearly in another series of gestures, also built from the expansion gesture, the last part of the discourse to be investigated here. First, CS sums up his previous points as illustrations of the element of chance in Pollock's practice, the contributions by forces "that have nothing to do in the narrower [sense] with the artist." Then he re-introduces the movements of the artist as the other voice in the dialogue, in order to quickly return to a force the artist cannot fully control: the momentum of his own arm, which, after all, is attached to a heavy bucket. The artist's "emotion-driven" movements are first evoked by a small, one-armed version of the expansion gesture (Figure 21, line 40, during "emotional gesteuerten"), which is now more sinuous, the left arm swinging down and to the side, rather than sideways. He repeats the gesture and adds the motion's own dynamic as a force (line 41, "aus der Dynamik der Bewegung heraus"); and produces a third, much larger, version along with "sich verselbständigenden" ("self-emancipating," Figures 22, 23, line 42), and retracts the hand on "Bewegung" (movement), finally arriving at the end of the 14-word noun phrase.

(11)

30	CS	Das was ich beschreiben will
		What I want to describe
31		versucht auch nur deutlich zu machen
		only tries to make apparent
32		denn die die Verbindung
		for the the connection

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33		aus Z**u**fall?
		of chance?
34	JS	Ja:
		Yea:h
35		und äh wobei der Zufall eben mit den z Dingen zusammenhängt
		and äh that the chance like hangs on the things
36		die ich beschrieben habe
		that I've described
37		aber (- -) äh nichts mehr mit dem K**ü**nstler zu tun hat
		but uh has nothing really to do anymore with the artist
38		im **e**ngeren
		in the narrower
39	JS	Hmm
		Hmm
40	CS	und dann der wirklich emotional gesteuerten oder
		and then the really emotionally guided or
41		aus der Dyna:mik der Bewegung heraus
		out of the dynamics of the motion
42		äh sich vers**e**lbständigenden Bewegung
		uh independent-becoming movement

But then he appends "auch eines Armes" (also of an arm), separating the arm from the artist: whatever the artist's driving emotion, the mass and momentum of an arm constitute its own force. For this increment, he switches arms. He brings his right hand to his face and then swings it down and all the way to the side, following the hand with his eyes (Figures 24, 25).

(12)

43		auch eines Armes
		as well of an arm

By switching arms between installments of the swinging gesture, which began as an illustration of emotion-driven motion, the current idea, the autonomy or independence of the movement of the arm as a physical object, is conveyed by one bounded gestural image. Schneegass repeats the gesture two more times, as he explains that the arm gives in to the momentum of the bucket. This is embodied by a small, quick head and torso tilt to the imaginary bucket's side (at line 45).
Alternatively, the artist can respond to the centrifugal momentum of arm and bucket by pulling it back with force and beginning to steer, as CS demonstrates with his last gestures (Figure 26., lines 48–49).

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Figure 21.



Figure 22.

As he makes these gestures, the art-historian becomes aware of their kinesthetic melodies. When he makes the first gesture with his left arm, he notices the arm's momentum, and then he exhibits it in another, more expansive and granular gesture. As he makes that gesture, apparently due to his own bodily memory or his imagining the artist at work, he realizes that the arm would be attached to a bucket and moves as if his did, too, and then unpacks what this gesture has shown (the pull of the bucket), and goes on to describe and embody an action that Pollock could take in response.

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Figure 23.



Figure 24.

We can call the art-historian's understanding of the art tactile and kinesthetic: he feels and grasps the birthing of works by gestures that apprehend the feel of actions and materials, experiencing the flow of paint in the flow of his motions. His interpretation unfolds along with his kinesthetic awareness.

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Figure 25.

(13)

44 Denn der Arm
Because the arm
45 gibt ja **a**uch einer Schwungkraft
gives in to the momentum
46 des **Ei**mers na:ch
of the bucket
47 äh äh d- zentripeta:l oder
uh uh th- centripetally or

(14)

48 oder er holts mit der Kr**a**ft zurück
or he pulls back with the force
49 und fängt dann an zu steuern.
and begins to guide

Ideologies of gesture

Since the earliest extant accounts of gesture in European history, notably by the Roman rhetorician Quintilianus, but also in Hinduism and many other cultural contexts, some types of gestures, or their motion range and tempo, or the practice of gesturing as such, have been subjected to cultural valorization and regimentation. Quintilianus ([100] 1978) forbade public speakers any kind of iconicity, not to mention pantomime,

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Figure 26.

because these modes—showing the world rather than evoking it by words—belonged to the actor, not the rhetor, on the stage, not the rostrum. The gestures he ordered were metapragmatic: marking emphasis, mapping out the arc of a sentence, embodying illocutions, and so on. Burke (1992) has reconstructed the restraining of gesturing among the Catholic clergy during the Counter-Reformation, "which formed part of [its] moral discipline" (Burke 1992, 76). The goal was "gravity." To achieve a habitus of gravitas, it was necessary "to be conscious of one's gestures in order to control them. The hands and legs in particular need[ed] discipline" (loc. cit.). But, Burke notes,

> the reform of gesture, if not more rigorous, was at least more successful in the northern Protestant parts of Europe … than in the Catholic south; … the stereotype of the gesticulating Italian, still current in the north, came into existence in the early modern period; and …reflects a contrast between two gestural cultures, associated with two styles of rhetoric (more or less copious) and other differences as well (Burke 1992, 79).

Hoenes del Pinal, in *Towards an ideology of gesture* (2011) contrasts the comparative bodily comportment and discourse on performance styles among two Catholic denominations in a Q'eqchi-Maya village in Guatemala, one mainstream, one charismatic. Members of both congregations are prone to show their mutual disapproval by producing and debating hyperbolic versions of one another's gestures:

> Mainstream Catholics might place their hands high above their heads to mimic the characteristic 'hands up/palms out' posture of Charismatic prayer when criticizing the latter's loud prayer meetings. Mainstream Catholics … claim that Charismatics are loud and "out of control" when they should properly be quiet and respectful. Similarly, Charismatics criticizing Mainstream Catholics' practices will fold their arms and hunch their shoulders as a means of both mimicking

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> the latter's characteristic prayer postures and advancing the idea that this sort of prayer lacks enthusiasm and is thus undertaken in bad faith (Hoenes Del Pinal 2011, 597).

All these three discourses are built on the binary opposition between a primal, "wild" impulse to gesture and moderation, achieved by self-control. The Abstract Expressionists operated with the same dichotomy, but situated themselves on the side of spontaneity and wildness. Pollock, according to Cernuschi (1992), understood his art as coming from his unconscious, primary processes. But he was influenced by C.G. Jung and his belief in a collective unconscious, and thus himself came to believe that, by letting movements flow from his own unconscious, he gave uninhibited expression to the primal, collective unconscious of the human species.[5]

Reviewing the books that Pollock read, Cernuschi shows the influence of 19th century anthropologists' colonialist construction of the "primitive mind" (for example Lévy-Bruhl's *Primitive Mentality*; Lévy-Bruhl 1923), and the idea that humanity, in its cultural evolution, replicates the development of a child: "Mankind as a whole had to pass through the phases of intellectual and physical development which today characterize the development of each individual in the human mass" (Boule 1923, 212).

"Gestural painting… [exhibits] a fascination with the primal sign, with traces of the artist's hand as images, and their relation to the beginnings of communication" (Cernuschi 1992, 216).

> The quick, spontaneous movement of the hand, and the often improvisational quality of the marks, reveal an attempt to translate a physical gesture on canvas directly, without mediation … The creation of primal signs ostensibly reconstructs the original style of creativity, when humanity was attempting to express messages with marks not yet systematically codified in a written alphabet. In this way the marks retain an autonomous quality as expressive signature, rather than as a specific character functioning within a predetermined system of communication (Cernuschi 1992, 216).

Barnett Newman, speaking on behalf of the New York School about tribal art, argued that

> there is an answer in these works to all those who assume that modern abstract art is the esoteric exercise of a snobbish elite, for among these simple people abstract art was the dominant, well-understood tradition (Newman, cited in Cernuschi 1992, 215.)

But their own practice belied their ideology. This is most evident in the works of Franz Kline.

> Each of Kline's paintings seems the spontaneous, unretouched record of an impulsive mood noted in broad, confident strokes, quick in their application,

[5]It is noteworthy that Willem de Kooning, whose canvases look most like the debris of intense, tactile, gestural struggle, more "primal," less controlled and methodical than Pollock's serial drippings, rejected any such mythologizing interpretation (Shiff 2011).

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> sure in their placement and relation. Yet Kline rarely worked in this fashion and only a few pictures were executed at one sitting. Most of the canvases are actually the final result of long study, of adjustment and readjustment, with edges shifted back and forth and areas painted and repainted until the artist was satisfied that he had achieved the right relation of form, the … interplay of … energy and restraint, flat surface and deep space. Many of the broad directional strokes, whose force seems the product of a single inspirational gesture were actually painted with small brushes; and many an entire outsize work had its model in one of Kline's innumerable small sketches, only later quite deliberately enlarged …We must … not be deceived into easy correlations between mood and method, substance and process. In their ultimate aspect, as we examine them today, these pictures largely conceal the stages of their construction. They are apparently unrehearsed, and we seem to see them grow. But this is in fact illusion and we cannot in fact relive their progression. By the same token, the final work is far from being the direct, unfiltered record of a state of mind impetuously … externalized in gesture upon the canvas. Without clarity of image and cohesion of structure spontaneity would not strike us with the force it does, and these qualities are attained only by analysis and reflection. (Goldwater 1967, 7)

The art of improvising gestures

Hillewaert, in her contribution to this issue, describes the "gap" that can open up at any time between the rehearsed, memorized grips of a rock-climber on a climb and the conditions that the climber's hands and feet encounter on any *this* occasion. Gaps can also open up at any time in a speaker's utterance when a word does not want to rise from lexical memory. Gesturing the intended meaning is a common practice to bridge the gap (Goodwin and Goodwin 1986). Word-searches magnify the circumstances under which speaker-gesturers find themselves whenever they need another word, phrase, or gesture. But there is more than an analogy between climber and gesturer: both are groping for the right grip. The root-meaning of the Latinate word "concept" is grip; the German equivalent is "Be-griff," cognate with "grip." (A colloquial German word for brain is "Grips.") These etymologies point to the insight that grasping is a primal human way of knowing the world. The gesturing hands of speakers often speak the language of grips, informed by tactile and haptic world-knowledge. Hands articulate whatever needs conceptualization by schemata derived from their interactions with the world at hand (Streeck 2009, 2021). This is how they help speakers to "bridge the gap." There are many sources that can inform the formation of a gesture.

Many of the art-historian's gestures are formed by mimesis: he enacts versions of the actions with which the artists apply paint. These gestures are informed by his intimate, "muscular" knowledge of how such art is being made. He himself has experimented with *écriture automatique* and other modes of art-making that are "dialogues between controlled and uncontrolled movement." But he also makes depictive gestures that are drawn from a more widely shared stock. When he points out that, what first appears as free-standing black gestures has been worked over with white-out, his hand enacts squeezing a tube. This is the schema of an ordinary action that everyone who

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has handled tubes would make, and thus a gesture any member of the material culture understands. Common everyday actions are also seen when he rubs thumb and index finger as he searches for the term "liquidity level," enacting an abstracted version of an exploratory action by which this feature would be tested, but also thereby, perhaps not incidentally, making a gesture that is frequently made by speakers searching for a precise formulation "condensation" of meanings (Freud 1955). Whenever we watch people who gesture copiously during storytelling or other genres of talk about the world, we see such rapid shifts between symbolic resources (Goodwin 2018) and methods (Streeck 2008, 2017).

Musicologist Joseph Schloss (2009) illuminates the importance of improvisation in break dancing (*b-boying*). The break dancer must know what can be done on different surfaces "look into [their] … repertoire to choose … what … would work with the surface." (Schloss 2009, 95):

> The more options you have in any given situation, the more freedom you have to choose the most appropriate one. … You are not tied to any particular strategy and have the luxury of changing your approach as the situation changes. B-boying … teaches its practitioners exactly how to negotiate change. (Schloss 2009, 96).

This is also true of everyday gesturing, an art that is rarely trained or taught, but acquired by osmosis and practiced and elaborated by individual society members to different degrees, allowing for individual styling, which the culture may attribute to personality traits. But gesture offers much greater freedom for improvisation than b-boying or other regimented, competitive improvisation genres, and this freedom is copiously exercised by many speakers when they tell stories or explain the world. A hallmark of the improvisation of gestures in everyday conversation are the frequent and unpredictable shifts between semiotic modes and resources that they are drawn from, and the astonishing ability of listener–viewers to track, and at the same disregard, them—all of which is possible only against the backdrop of shared knowledge that is partly accumulated in the conversation, partly assumed: only someone who has seen a Kline painting can see it in the gestures; only someone who has handled buckets—or seen someone handle them—can see one in the art-historian's hands (Gombrich 1961).

A feature that gesture shares with b-boying and other forms of improvisational semiosis, such as Greek oral poetry, rap, and jazz, and that can be observed in this conversation, is the fabrication and stabilization of new resources through parallelism and repetition. Hillewaert conceives of the incorporation of grips through repetition as a lexicalization process. The art-historian first introduces Kline's paintings via the "eruption" of two expansive, diagonal strokes, and subsequently produces abbreviated, elaborated, and combined versions. Successive gestures layer brushstrokes over brushstrokes, and a Kline painting, presenting itself as arrested motion, emerges in them. Variations of the gesture bring different ways of apprehending the works to the fore, their composition, or immediate effect, or inner tension.

Sense-making by gesture involves varieties of transformation, synthesis (or blending, condensation), and reconfiguration of sensations. Always and inevitably, gestures produce *enactive* (kinesthetic) sensations—*feelings of action*—in the maker. At the

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same time, they are objects of visual perception for the addressee. Gestures can make tactile experiences visible. Transmodality (Murphy 2012), transposing sensory experience from one modality to another, is one of the ways in which hands make sense by gesturing.

McCullough writes:

> Whereas the eyes stay fixed on the outer surface of things, hands have a way of getting inside, and so they contribute more to our belief in the reality of the world. … Hands also discover. They have a life of their own that leads them into explorations. For example, a sculptor's feel for a material will suggest actions to try, and places to cut. Learning through the hands shapes creativity itself (McCullough 1996, 8).

German playwright Heinrich von Kleist (1807-8) observed in his essay *On the gradual fabrication of thoughts through speech* that we often do not know what we are going to say and that our thoughts accrue to us from our spontaneous speech to others and from their responses. "A glance which announces a half-expressed thought as already understood often gives us the expression for the entire other half" (Kleist 1807-8, 2). No matter how the addressee responds, we have seen that gesturing is also a dialogue within the speaker, who usually does not consciously control it, but often notices making a gesture after the fact (or while making it). And human hands draw upon the whole range of memories, skills, practiced methods, the public gesture stock, and more as they are making sense of something by making gestures. This is their improvising take on the world.

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