



Sculpture, Video, and Dance: Thoughts About the Consistency of Gestures

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To draw a line is to have an idea. A drawn line is the basis of construction. To draw is to innovate in multiplicity. The line gives the work an explicable definition. It defines and redefines the sculpture. To cut is to draw a line, it is to separate, to make a distinction.

Richard Serra

For Richard Serra, to sculpt is to act on a space, to resignify it and, we must say, to reveal it. By seeing the drawing as a revelation, we can connect its tracings to the cut. When he defines the line as a cut, he does it precisely because he sees that it adds to space. To cut is to add one's own space – and not to subtract it, as we would normally think. When a cut is considered a line, it becomes revealing not by showing the inside of the space, its subterranean parts, but especially by perceiving the space as a surface that is built by acting on its re-framings. This is Serra's great cognition: to allow the emergence of perceptions that, before his geometric sculptures, look both at and through them. The sculpture, its cutting line, is an element of distinction (1997, p.7).

Having a shipyard for a studio and solid iron for raw material, Serra says he knows more about the heavy than about the light. But if we take his written words and force them into our own intonation, we can hear them as if they were spoken by a great dancer. "To draw a line ...," "a drawn line ...," "to draw is to innovate," "the line gives ...," "it defines and redefines ...," "to cut is to draw ... to make a distinction." The verbs act, dance, improvise images, become passive, unexplain themselves, sculpt, fragment and multiply spaces. As a dancer, Serra seems to tell us that he knows the weight as a property of matter, its risks and its disposition before gravity. Yet, matter, as far as its most concrete and substantive definition is concerned, seems insufficient in the face of another weight dimension, namely

consistency. From the tons of his iron sculptures arise inadequacies of the scales of the world. What is big becomes small, fragments explode before the eyes, torpor snatches us: there is something great happening. It is not only what can be measured from the weight that matters to him, but what it brings on as immeasurable. Serra works his substance by conferring upon it a weight that science does not measure – lacking it yet abounding in grams. The weight of his work is inadequate to this measure, since the weight of the gesture derives from the concreteness of the sculpture.

Consistency then is the possible weight of the gesture. After all, what is a gesture made of? The matter of a gesture is not a bone, a muscle, a nerve, the skin, or cast iron; it is not air, it is not the achievement, or even anyone else. A gesture is *insubstantive*, but not for this independent from matter. A gesture is, therefore, this unique event that arises from matter, uses it, inhabits it, enlivens it, and cuts it. The gesture borrows resistance from matter, rubs itself on it, highlighting it, turns air masses into breezes, forces itself on the densities of the world, delimits and de-subjectifies bodies, confers affection upon things, confines and extends spaces. And this takes place at the current point in time of the gesture, and not just as a consequence, a *posteriori*. The gesture is intangible *par excellence*; it is the drawing that exists as it evolves and lasts phenomenologically according to its intensity, distinguishing matter from itself. From this perspective, space changes so much that its possible definition is but the trace of the gesture.

By that, however, I do not mean that the function of every gesture is to create spaces. This statement would bring functionalization and awareness to the gesture, which could even prevent it from happening. What I mean is that the space is a remainder that is inherent in the gesture. To make gestures is to inhabit, to integrate ourselves into spaces and vice-versa, even if, as a trace, space is doomed to disappear. The gesture, as a space creator, locates and moves, making each duration vary. While it is not a function of space, it is on its consistency that the temporality and intensity of the trace directly depend. We are constantly spatializing ourselves, recreating spaces, renewing them. Sometimes using our sharpest perception, sometimes not so much. In many cases the automatism of the gesture empties its consistency. When this occurs, changes become minimal. Perhaps that is why we may say that most of the familiar spaces we inhabit are ephemeral. Be-

cause the change does not last, it simply goes away. Following the same approach, maybe that is also why contemporary dance is so proficuous, as it uses the same inadvertent gestures, the same everyday movements, in such a consistent manner that its traces last longer in time. By the gesture, space is mistaken for its perception, also being time, duration.

The consistency of the gesture is a matter of duration. Bergson tells us that duration is precisely the capacity of matter, in affirming the immutability of its nature, to differentiate it from itself (1999, p. 132). In this way, in view of the immutable nature of matter, of the "this-is-how-it-is" of matter, we can think of consistency as the capacity of forcing matter into a new adjustment that allows it to review its own nature. Duration, therefore, is not a mere distension in time that freezes matter, but, conversely, what allows it to change, to borrow a pulse. In a consistent gesture, of a longer duration, the change lasts. In inconsistent gestures, the change vanishes. Hence, we return to the use of everyday gestures by contemporary dance. If I listen to Serra as I listen to a dancer, it is because I perceive dance as a sculpture in progress. Consistent gesturing is the present space.

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It is interesting to see that an artist wrapped up in weight, gesture and space uses cinema as the raw material in some of his works. Again, in addition to materiality, to the filmstrip, and to the magnetic, Serra is interested in the cut as a filmic narrative device. In one of his untitled movies shown in *Video Acts at PS1* (2002), the artist clearly deals with the plane's density through cut. A video recorded on magnetic tape is treated as a film on a flatbed and endlessly displayed on VHS. The result is a video with horizontal and vertical maladjustments that uses the image noise as texture, highlighting the very matter of which it is made. This noise is the rust on the screen, the magnetic oxidation that emerges when a tape is cut, the adhesive that is reordered and worn out by repetition. The exhibition of this video makes us notice the deterioration of other movies of his, such as *TV Delivers People*, not in terms of loss of quality, but in terms of a gain in texture that only wear and tear may create.

Cinema is also in line with Serra's interest in the work of art based on the act of looking. Space is dual. It is the location, but it is also the field of view, the framed space, but not confined in itself. On the contrary, it is this frame, this limited

support, which makes space fully variable in scales. Perceiving a sculpture for its ability to last gives the tone of his movies, since filmmaking sculpts time and is formed by the perception of movement. Hence, a gesture gains even more strength as a sculpture, which today has moved away from the need for an internal meaning, seeking on the other hand its external meaning. Again the cuts highlight space as a surface, rather than for its subterranean parts.

It is the externality of the image, the plane, which matters in *Hand Catching Lead*, Serra's first film. Here, an open hand palm turned to the camera tries to catch small pieces of lead falling down from above. The movement is repeated throughout the video, with the hand sometimes catching the small pieces of lead, sometimes missing them, but the repetition goes on in such a way that the movement establishes its retromotivation to us. Catching the lead seems to matter more as a continuous movement than as the finished act itself.

Action does not matter much by its completeness – it never ends. Generalizing the narrative of this film, it points to the mechanical nature of the act of indefinite repetition; however, the mechanics are too human and have specific aspects inherent in each catch, which makes each attempt a new attempt, and a reason for celebrating or not. However imprecise, and exactly for this, we notoriously watch the consistency of the gesture. Imprecision is, in fact, in the hand that tries to catch the lead and in the hand that drops it from above – even out of frame and at various time intervals. Sometimes what Serra catches is the hand itself, quickly closing and opening it. In general, this may even be the purpose of the video, i.e. the hand catching itself, the hand modulating itself in each catching gesture. Well, is it not the gesture that makes us perceive the body? Is it not through each gesture that we subjectify its discouragement, that we identify tiredness, that we project ourselves in cheer, and that we become surprised when the rhythm of the falling lead is broken after a successful catch? Our attention is caught by that fragmented body that acts with vigor and concentration on the screen. But the gestures we watch seem to introduce us primarily to a phenomenology of space, more than to necessarily the knowledge of the body. The catches shrink and expand the plane. The hand becomes a great nucleus from which lines of force break out into fields that dissipate. From this perspective, a piece of lead that is caught seems like an extended paroxysm that increasingly pervades the forces to make them explode in fields.

Another more formal dialogue is a dialogue with the very geometry of the plane. Images gain graphic weight thanks to high contrast; the falling pieces of lead verticalize the lines of force, cut horizontally by the forearm stretched out on the screen. The field of view is where the force field dissipates through. And, even more than the artist's body out of the field, this is the focus of the film. The gesture here is not one more subjectifying element than one that builds spaces. The body itself is perceived in an external manner. In turn, it is imprecision that shows the flesh as another material, and points to mutability as it has rhythmic dirt as its narrative element.

It is through this relationship with the body as plastic matter that I find the connections with contemporary dance in Serra. I notice in some videos that the repeated movements of different dancers highlight the differences between the bodies without even asking us for a subjective interpretation. At the same time, it does not prevent us from doing it – it just does not stand as the focus of the work.

This is the case with Anne Teresa de Keersmaeker and Thierry de Mey in *Rosas Danst Rosas* (1997) and in *Come Out*, one of four videos comprising *Fase* (2002). In the latter, the gestures of the two interpreters are based on the rhythmic metric proposed by Steven Reich, and on the repetition of phrases on the video. Speech is the initial device in *Come Out*: it is important to the choreography for its rhythm, and also for what it brings about in texture and duration. It is these two properties that ensure the connection between the gestures performed by Keersmaeker herself and by Michèle-Anne De Mey. Despite the choreographic structure, and hence its richness, the relationship between them is not more formal than material. The video's overture establishes very well this relationship in which the gesture of one body adds traces to the gesture of the other. This notion of traces seems to act directly in the choreographic design of *Come Out*. Keersmaeker creates detours for De Mey amidst the verses they perform together, and then follows the detours. In view of the synchronicity of movements, we also watched delayed movements, offset by elliptical constructions. It is the interweaving of these three temporal relations, namely the detour, the delay and the ellipsis, that gives us the notion of repetition in the video.

Repetition is structural in the soundtrack of *Come Out*. The voice not only becomes disembodied and mechanically amplified but also wears out the semantics in this

repetitive act. The insisting phrase "*Come out to show them*" gradually empties intelligibility to underscore the texture of the voice. Perceived by its sonorous materiality, the voice is now a transcendent gesture to the body and to what produced it. If the recorded voice is disembodied par excellence, there are, however, two bodies in the video. Two bodies that "respond" to the externality of this phrase, which semanticates itself and prevails for its sonority, giving rise to new senses. These two bodies that we watch turn each variation into a new pattern, leading us to perceive the structure as a process of creation that emerges by unfolding, by what differs in repetition, in other words, by the duration itself. The consistency of the gesture presents itself as the accentuation of its repetition. Repetition is perceived as the difference per se, not as an automatism. Change lasts in repetition. As in *Hand Catching Lead*, the gesture modulates the body of the performers. The stimulus to the gestures is external to them and it is the externality that we watch. Repetition turns dancing into an endurance test for the body, and instead of reversing into a primarily subjectivizing element, it reverses into building force fields. This field draws attention to our ability to relate, to perceive, to watch them, impregnating ourselves with their gestures in such a way that a change in rhythm may hold us in brief suspense, or perhaps simply in suspension. However, unlike *Hand Catching Lead*, both *Come Out* and *Roses Danst Roses* suggest a choreography for the camera.

The voice and externality of the body of which we speak is also narrative material for Serra in *Boomerang*, a video co-created with Nancy Holt. Sitting in a chair against a blue background, Holt tells us: "*You are seeing a world of double reflection and refraction.*" Well, would this quote not be the epiphany of Serra's work? The duo uses a disembodied reverberated voice to precisely problematize the limits of the body's constitution. The body throws things at the world, and the world, like a boomerang, throws them back. And at the time of this performance, Nancy Holt sometimes repeats all the sentences over and over, sometimes just a word, sometimes only the gerund suffix. "*The world keeps boomeranging-ing-ing things back.*" It is the voice that is mirrored, scattered, intercepted, and that returns in delay, that overlaps with the new word, that prevents new words from emerging, the thought from continuing its flow. The repetition here is ironic in the sense that, when trying to wait for the reincorporation of her own voice, seeking to jointly

recover the flow of thought, she continues to come across fragments, breaks and intermittences. In view of the attempted synchronism of the gestures of speaking and listening, we watch the movement that extends and is created between the instant and the delay. From this gap emerges the erotic tasting of words. Nancy Holt eats them more than she utters them – she swallows the signifiers.

In *Boomerang* and *Hand Catching Lead*, Serra seems to make use of acts that, given their consistency, evidence his eroticism. Eroticism is enabled through matter and this helps us to create immeasurable spaces. Accordingly, the boundaries of the frame are revealed on a fixed, but expanded, plane, which is cracked with every fall of lead, and compressed at each muscular tension of the hand. The two – the lead and the hand – seem to create lines of forces that verticalize space at times, create it centripetally at one point, generate it centrifugally the next. Similarly, the echo-effect of the audio in *Boomerang* assumes a measure of area by the distance traveled by the sound until it finds a limit in the scenario and returns to the utterer herself. However, reverberation is created electronically, that is, there is no possible or necessary space. The space that is created is the remainder, it is the libidinal crossing brought about by the act of speech. It is the anti-space. It is otherwise the repetition of the gesture – de-subjectified (the hand) or disembodied (the voice) – that creates this suspension of space.

The space also seems to me like a remainder in *Come Out*. It is this creation of the residual space that allows dance, when applied to cinema – or cinema when seen as dance – to free space from a trap in which the machinist technology often catches it: the assertion of verisimilitude with reality. Cinema has been conventionally accepted for its capacity of representation. Thus, the perception of the externality of the image decreases, and the perception of its internality increases, that is, in the sense that it refers to a model space, as if this space were the essence, the center that generates the image. However, regardless of this fetishism of the image of reality being recurring, as Deleuze (2000, p. 24) shows, cinema goes beyond representation to bring about the modulation of reality. Cinema speaks from within reality, both changing it and mirroring it. In view of the expectation of verisimilitude, the consistent use of gestures breaks its mirror, enhancing the image's capacity for discovery. The consistent gesturing of the video-dance performance revives cinema with the presentness of its image. The narrative produced

by these gestures thus reveals the image in its material property rather than in its form – usually naturalistic, or mimetic.

I dare say that the exhibition of materiality allows spatializing the narrative despite the temporal progression of the videos. In *Passages in Modern Sculpture*, Rosalind Krauss inserts Richard Serra's video work into the sculpture tradition that had evolved seven or eight years before repetitions and continuities were proposed, which Donald Judd (200, p. 292) describes as “one thing after another.” A very clear insight into sculpture, I wonder, therefore, if we can apply this phrase to *Come Out* or even to *Rosas Danst Rosas*, and, mainly, how to connect this to filmmaking and even more to cinematographic cutting. On the one hand, the idea of continuity of one thing after another seems to explain well the continuity of gestures, given the very indefinite nature of *one* thing after *another*. A generic flow brings the movement into the perspective of unfolding and quotidian, with one thing not functionalizing into another. It is a definition that acts upon the fissure of the choreographic structure dealing primarily with its evolution.

But “one thing after another” seems to compose a temporal succession toward spatialization. Time becomes a builder of spaces. When the image perceived for its externality becomes the great generator of meaning, the temporal linearity seems fragile, even that of one thing after another, with its characteristics being more routine-driven than historical. The most interesting line to which we can refer here is again that of the cut. Not the cut between one thing and another, but the cut that puts one thing inside another. There is a simultaneity that builds and spatializes the narrative. This is because the question here may be about the between that is built and that does it for some kind of relationship. This is the line that cuts through the images and relates the gestures of the dancers to each other and to the gestures of the very camera that films also in its own choreography. Narrative is not a mere chain of actions, but rather the phenomenological perception of space. It is no longer about the succession of time, but about its simultaneity, a great presentness of traces. Unlike what is proposed by classical cinema, this simultaneity does not occur on parallel paths, it involves one image being crossed into another as a result of the cutting of images. In the very choreographic movement of the dancers, we identify the recurring movements that operate as their fissure. A dancer who stands up in the middle of a synchronic verse to re-align the three

seats in which she was sitting down; another dancer runs and leaves the room in the middle of the gesture; yet another one who stops running to lean against a glass door and rest. The paradox of this lies in realizing the fissure as a critical element to the structure. The choreography encompasses rupture without even capturing it. It is from these ruptures, as well as from the repetition of gestures, that the narrative becomes spatial and lasts. The space is formed from materiality, since on the one hand the matter is resignified by the gestures, and on the other hand it also brings them about.

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However, if space is a complex circuit of gestures and matters, this means that the choreography in a video-dance performance also derives from the materiality and the gestures of the cinema, which may be included in the concept of structure and fissures. I dwell on the cut, the primeval gesture of cinematographic montage.

How should we think of the consistency of the film cut in the work of Thierry De Mey and Keersmaeker? It is by the cut that they make cinema choreograph a unique perception of dance. At the beginning of *Come Out*, the juxtaposition of plane and counterplane is the imaging score of a sound repetition. The audio cuts include a gap that clearly shows the mechanical repetition of the phrase. However, regardless of how mechanical the repeated voice is, it is apprehended by its proposed successiveness. Even being repeated, it is "one gesture after another." The sound gap left by the cuts in the recording coincides with the trace left by the previous action, which remains for brief moments of paused movements. The pauses are dirty and reveal the cut to the counterplane. This pause and this gap allow us to see the concreteness of the cut.

The use of the cut as a concrete action is less obvious than it seems. Actual montage per plane/counterplane conventionally, in filmmaking, is at the service of the parallelism of actions and of a represented simultaneity. According to André Bazin, "scenes were broken down just for one purpose, namely, to analyze an episode according to the dramatic logic or material of the scene." In this case, the cut cannot cut, as it may be seen as a subtraction, and is therefore at the service of "this invisible editing [that] fails to make use of the full potential of montage" (1984, p. 24). Invisibility turns space into a unit that serves dramatic actions. Space must be the beginning of action, the place that holds the logic of all narrative unfolding. Hence

the idea of continuity: the images extend over each other, hiding the cuts. In this context, the concrete evidence of the cut is also seen in breaking the hierarchy from space to action. In *Come Out*, space becomes the remainder of the action.

In view of this use of montage from the perspective of continuity, the juxtaposition of planes is determined not only by the completeness of the action, but by its trace, which accentuates the cut. This visual pause and sound gap are suspensions that provide the planes with density. Likewise, the camera's traveling around is largely connected to the order of the soundtrack based on the repetitive vocal command that abstracts the infinitive *to come out to show them* and replaces it with the imperative *come out to show them*. The camera moves away; it withdraws to "show" us.

Since *Rosas Danst Rosas*, montage has been the primary element in filmmaking that builds the movies shot by De Mey and Keersmaeker. The camera's very accuracy reveals a choreographic superstructure that assumes a specific montage. But the superstructure also makes it clear that this is not a film registry, but a film on dance production. The cinema dances and, by dancing, externalizes a body: it is its gestures and its materiality. This becomes more evident in the scene that is conducted by the circularity of the camera. The action in question is a great complex pertaining to the relationship that the dancers tighten among themselves in a great force field and to the perception of these forces by the camera, which, in an elliptical orbit, tightens this field to the same extent. The cinema accepts the consistency of its gesture, and becomes an observer that shares the process. And I mean the cinema in its entirety, not only the presence of the camera, since choreography involves a set of fixed planes joined by the dry cut. This cut is the great line of *Roses Danst Roses*, as it is in fact the element that distinguishes space from itself. This scene, given the very elliptical movement that structures the change in scale of the dancers, is built in such a way that each cut allows the space to review its own nature. The habit of form often loses strength before the strangeness that arises at each succession of planes. One thing is never completed for another to begin – one goes through the other and lasts therein. Perhaps more than the succession in the elliptical narrative, this camera choreography draws attention to the fact that each plane that produces this ellipse is also its tangent.

Rosas Danst Rosas has these two gestures of the cinema, the act of looking and

the act of cutting. But, interestingly enough, the act of looking already assumes the act of cutting. This indissociation from one another resignifies an important assertion by André Bazin when he coined the term "Forbidden Montage." For Bazin (1984, p. 50), "when the essence of a scene demands the simultaneous presence of one or more factors in the action, montage is ruled out." If a situation emerges from the relationship between existing elements, there is no question of cutting this moment of the relationship, as there may be "a failure of consistency." After all, the cut would separate the elements and render the relationship between them impossible to occur. But how to forbid montage when it is one of the factors assumed in the physical contiguity of the event? This seems an interesting paradox in which De Mey inserts the cut into *Rosas Danst Rosas*. The cut we are talking about is a paramount physical element that externalizes spatialities, rather than condenses them into a unity. The cut itself is what the space reveals to us, and is therefore the act of looking.

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