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Weighing One's Gestures

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The Werner Herzog film entitled “Where the Green Ants Dream” (1984)¹ tells the story of a conflict between a mining company and the aboriginals. The fictional events take place somewhere in a desert in Australia. The company makes tests and preparations in order to start mining activities in an area that for the aboriginals is a holy land.

Art and research do not play any major role in the film, and the film is even less about something we might want to call “artistic research”. Neither has our motivation for referring to this film to do with the fact that we would consider this particular film an example of artistic research.

Instead of this kind of considerations we feel that a particular scene in the film tells us indirectly (as if in an allegorical mode) something essential about artistic research.

In the film the aboriginals prosecute the mining company for violating the holy land. The case is to be decided in the Supreme Court. During the court proceedings the aboriginals bring in as the evidence of their ownership of the land a “sacred object” wrapped in cloth. When this object is shown to the judge and to the representatives of the mining company and their lawyers a deep confusion takes over. The court reporter whispers to the judge:

“How the hell should I record *this*, your honour?”

The judge whispers back:

“Wooden object: carved with markings. The markings: indecipherable. The significance of the markings: not plain to this court”.

This scene (and actually the whole film) is about the encounter of two fundamentally different belief systems, one that builds on rationalized discourse and another that builds on oral tradition and legends. These two systems not only have very different notions of ownership, they don't share the ideas of writing, mapping and documenting.

In this situation, communication in terms of exchange of information turns out to be highly problematic, since no stable enough relation between form and content can be established. Legal texts and sacred objects simply do not communicate across the divide of the two systems. Or more precisely: they do not serve

¹ The original title of the film is *Wo die grünen Ameisen träumen*. The images in this editorial are stills from the film.

communication, they cannot be used as a means of communication. In short, they cannot be instrumentalized, since there is no shared idea of communication.

There is still another twist to be noted in the scene. The judge recognizes that the situation is challenging, because the material evidence brought in doesn't lend itself easily to the legal process. What he doesn't recognize is the ambivalence of the "this" outspoken by the confused scrivener. The judge takes for granted that the sacred object brought in is, in the aboriginals' view, the key to the resolution towards which he should proceed. For him, "this" refers unequivocally to the object.

The judge doesn't recognize the fact that "this" is as much about the gesture and the clash of belief systems as it is about the object. The aboriginals bring in a piece of evidence that makes evident something about the situation itself, as if they were saying: "this is not just a piece of evidence, this is *just* evidence".



The courtroom situation is not unlike the one facing this issue of RUUKKU, focused on artistic research gestures. There are several striking similarities.

Firstly, one central concern is to identify on what level(s) and scale the gesture takes place. The gesture can be a very concrete action or feature within the artistic research project or the research project *itself* can become understood as a gesture through its particular alignment or discord with other research orientations. Sometimes these two overlap, like in the courtroom situation the gesture can relate to the act of passing over of the object just as much as to the contextual differences of the two worlds. In effect the gesture becomes a sort of revelatory negotiation, one that highlights its own conditions of existence.

Secondly, the situation relating to a gesture is one of hesitation or doubt, nicely exemplified by the confusion of the court reporter in the abovementioned scene. To explore this "feeling of uncertainty" further we can turn to a particular medium, in this case photography. In "Towards a Philosophy of Photography" Vilém Flusser notes that the photographic gesture is one of "phenomenological doubt", something at once post-ideological and programmed. He notes how photography is akin to hunting, yet "photographers are not pursuing their game in the open savanna but in the jungle of cultural objects, and their tracks can be traced through this artificial

forest. The acts of resistance on the part of culture, the cultural conditionality of things, can be seen in the act of photography, and this can, in theory, be read off from photographs themselves.”² He adds, however that “the structure of the cultural condition is captured in the act of photography rather than in the object being photographed..”³

“The act of photography is divided into a sequence of leaps in which photographers overcome the invisible hurdles of individual time-and-space categories. If they are confronted by one of these hurdles [...] they hesitate and are faced with the decision about how to set the camera..”⁴ This hesitation, visible or not, constitutes the “doubt” and it lingers in the image confusing itself with the doubt of the beholder of that image, the two doubts amounting to a sort of residue.

The photographer stands before a choice of innumerable and fundamentally equal viewpoints, discovering that preference for any single one of them is not the issue, but the realization of the many. He seems free of any particular – that is ideological – viewpoint, but that freedom is illusory as he is still acting within the program of the camera. The gesture also reveals the program. Similarly, when Duchamp placed a readymade in a context, made that gesture, it not only gave the status of an artwork to whatever object was chosen, but made visible the idea and conditions of display. A gesture is not only doing (that is performing an action) but also demonstrating and underlining the consequences of that action.

The gestures amount to actions done by someone or something, some agency at a moment of hesitation and doubt. Someone performs or poses, “carries the body” (etym. *gestura*), where the ‘body’ can refer to a range of different kinds of objects, corpuses or systems. Artistic research might not be *the law*, whose justness is determined in a court, nor does it constitute a *program* in Flusser’s sense of the word. The artistic researcher hunts in a particularly diverse cultural taiga for particularly diverse prey. Accordingly, the gestures that are related to these encounters take many unpredictable forms, which is something that this issue stridently shows.



² Vilém Flusser, *Towards a Philosophy of Photography*, trans. Anthony Mathews. London: Reaktion Books, 2006, 33.

³ *Ibid.*, 33–34.

⁴ *Ibid.*, 37.

Sepideh Karami's exposition "Interruption as dissenting gesture" questions conforming to established structures head-on. Karami explores art's dissensual capacities that charge research as dissident. The gestures are performed by fictional characters – lieutenant Fontaine's escape in Bresson's film is seen as an activity of 'architecting' – just as much as by the placement of the fictional *Al Croquis* publication on to the shelf of the library. These *nonfitting* actions, simultaneously real and fictional, explore out loyalties to the various disciplines and institutions that surround us, architectural tradition especially.

Falk Hübner's exposition "Hard Times. Lecture Performance as Gestural Approach to Develop Artistic Work-in-Progress" explores the artistic work and theoretical-conceptual framework as two distinct, but interrelated, processes. The performances take place in the particular venue of conferences, and an important aspect is that the research is in-progress and heuristic. The performative acts carried out by the performer are thus not mere illustrations or examples but real and tangible physical events. Their vulnerability, and the opportunity for feedback that these "research gestures" provide, also opens the research for further developments.

Tuomo Rainio's exposition "Reconfigured Image" enacts and evokes a game and gesture of navigation and hunting (even of the Snark). The exposition presents the artistic terrain of shaping and reshaping of images in form of a log of a journey full of twists and turns that first appear as deviations but on second thoughts start to determine the course in a precise way. A map of reconfigurations emerges.

Insofar as a gesture involves a 'body' of some kind, it is also necessarily finite, limited in its appearance and scope. The efficacy of a gesture relies on suspension and interruption, even. Michael Schwab and Paulo de Assis highlight the fragmentary dimension of gestures in their exposition entitled "Nietzsche 5: The Fragmentary" and urge us to consider whether certain fragmentation necessarily – and productively – accompanies the epistemic ambitions of artistic research.

Otso Huopaniemi's exposition "Dear Rita" turns the white space of the Research Catalogue page into a stage where the terms of communication and signification are anything but stable. The abyss of machinic dimension of language surfaces in the form of a discourse contaminated by algorithmic processes. Framed within the particular context of this issue and given the RC 'support medium' used, Huopaniemi's exposition nevertheless enacts a self-reflective gesture that has wider relevance within the larger field of artistic research.

The expositions of this issue provide diverse – and in no way definitive – approaches to the role of gestures in artistic research. Ultimately the gesture that they perhaps perform the best is one of opening doors to terrain where methodological, discursive and epistemic stakes still run wild.

Alongside the expositions we publish a number of invited “voices” on the front page of RUUKKU and also Tero Nauha’s *lectio*, his introductory talk prepared for the public defence of his artistic doctorate on 29th January 2016. Nauha’s text opens a new series of *lectios* in RUUKKU.

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