

First published as
'Le geste manquant'
in *Etats de corps*, no. 5,
1994, pp. 63-75.

Gesture

an interview with Hubert Godard

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June 1994

The Missing



Barry Laing. Photograph by Brian Rapsey

DD Could you start by defining, in broad terms, the object of your work?

HG The work revolves around the analysis of movement. It takes place in three different contexts: firstly, in the Department of Dance at the University of Paris VIII; secondly, kinesiology training, within the framework of the Ministry of Culture; and thirdly, at the National Centre for Cancer Research in Milan, Italy, where I've worked for seven years. The latter comprises research that is more technical, concerning functional anatomy in relation to certain corporeal impairments, and at the same time more fundamental, dealing with the gestures of doctors during practice.

DD *Could you specify what you mean?*

Initially in Milan I was invited to work in a very classical way on the physical approach of doctors in relation to their patients, a large part of which is connected with touch. It was in a department focusing on post-operative problems and on grief. The project was to ameliorate the relationship between doctors and their patients in terms of their therapeutic practice, using a different quality of skill, something closer to dance. With this as a starting point, the field was wide open.

You often find that departments of 'psychology', 'functional rehabilitation' and 'trauma' are separated off. But in this case the professor, Gemma Martino, and the outstanding team she had been able to bring together, had no desire to continue with purely sectional research; they wanted to connect the different medical fields systematically. So gradually, in conjunction with a team, I was required to attempt a close study of the gestures of both patients and doctors.

From a practical point of view, I worked in particular on breast cancer and the subsequent functional impairment of the shoulder. We noticed that, quite often, despite muscular, tonic, articular recuperation, something was still not working. Something that was of the order of movement and gesture, and which was not visible in the usual tests. The patient recovers all of her strength, an articular amplitude, and yet certain gestures are missing, absent ... Existing equipment for the analysis of gesture also proved inadequate for measuring this absence.

CR *Is it possible to give some idea of this 'missing gesture'?*

Our first approach consisted of watching the patient in movement, which in itself was already unusual. We asked them to walk, to stroll up and down, to grasp objects; and we realised that there's a functional impairment which cannot be defined through deficits – nervous, muscular or any other. For example, when the person walks up and down, the impaired arm no longer moves with the same coordination.

DD *Did you have to be there in order for the doctor to perceive this?*

It's not obvious, watching someone walk up and down and realising that one shoulder no longer has the same pendular balance as the other, that it's less precise. The difficulty is in grasping what's actually happening here – given that when you ask a person to move, to walk up and down making spontaneous pendulum movements with her arms, she can do it immediately. So the question is this: is this uniquely an impairment of what in broad terms one might call the body image? or is it something more physiological that has been overlooked by traditional analysis?

DD *But do the patients experience this other kind of 'disability' themselves? Do they feel this missing gesture?*

No, rarely. This lack is not articulated much at all. Perception of it corresponds with a great deal of work I've done on *the sphere of gesture*. When I say 'gesture', I'm not thinking exclusively of movement, but of all of its signifying, symbolic implications. By asking the patient to shake hands, to grasp an object, to indicate points in space, one brings to light a debility of gesture, which is not functional; and it enables us to posit that a certain investment in the relation of this arm or this shoulder to the world has been withdrawn.

In order to further develop this research in a more scientific manner, we had to take on control groups and systematise observation; and we became aware that this impairment of gesture was often present before surgical intervention. So we made studies before and after surgery, and in this way we realised that, fairly often, there was already an impairment anticipating the illness. So the problem was to understand whether the oncological impairment had any connection with the organisation of the gestural sphere.

CR What sort of connection?

One must be humble in relation to this type of problem. One could think that there's some sort of connection between the impairment of the immune system in a spatial, corporeal localisation; one might imagine that something is being performed metaphorically, analogically, in relation to the gestural universe of the person; but this is of such extreme dimensions, that one must exercise an equally extreme prudence.

CR Without proposing any hypothesis on the causal link, does this mean that a point of debility in the gestural sphere would coincide with the oncological impairment itself?

Yes.

DD Isn't the notion of gestural sphere problematic, in so far as it assumes a sort of plenitude?

Yes, absolutely. The idea refers to the *kinesphere*, as described by Laban and Bartenieff, and also to the *dynamosphere*: what is the dynamic organisation of a person? I can't develop this idea more thoroughly here, but in the first instance one might think of a cinematic vision. I measure a person's movements geographically. So, for example, there is a flexion of the arm and then an extension of the shoulder in the carriage of arms; this indicates spatial movements, but not the dynamic of the forces brought into play to create the gesture. Hence the second concept, developed by Laban, of the *dynamosphere*: in other words, the qualities of movements which enable recognition of the construction of this cinematic gesture.

Then I propose the notion of *gestosphere* to designate the idea that we are constituted by what one could call 'founding gestures'. At a certain moment, these gestures are given, they develop more or less according to the person; in such a way that every one of us develops a way of being in the world, with a sphere of possible gestures in relation to each of these gestures in a particular situation. Very simple things – like the gesture of pushing away in a child, when it uses this physiological functionality for the first time – immediately have a charge in relation to the situation at that moment. How does the child categorise this gesture of 'pushing away'? What impact do the surroundings have? From a technical point of view, one perceives that certain muscles play a pivotal role (such as the trapezius), allowing this gesture of pushing away to be made, a gesture which appears in the child at the same moment as the fact of denying, of saying no. So there's a very strong interconnection between the capacity to say no and the constitution, from the point of view of the gestural sphere, of my shoulder.

In some people, the gesture of pointing is reduced, or almost non-existent; in others, the gesture of pushing away doesn't exist, or if it does exist, it's the person herself who, in certain spatial directions, pushes herself away. To speak technically, either it's the *pectoralis major* which effects the push away, or it's the trapezius; and this produces two diametrically opposed qualities of gesture, each constituting an appropriate way in its own context. It's

quite clear that a situation is categorised as gesture through the intermediary of the surroundings; it is through exteroceptive return that the unification of the body occurs, that the body image is constituted – or the exteroceptive self, as discussed by Lacan. One could say that what is of the order of physiology, the bodily schema, is constituted through proprioception, through the development of the interior; but that at a certain point, I will unify myself through the gestures that I make.

So one can no longer talk of the body, but of *corporeity*, as Michel Bernard does, or of gestosphere, with its symbolic implications. The founding gestures – such as the movements for going towards, pushing away, designating – are not cinematic gestures, but gestures whose implications are significant in relation to the surroundings. Recently I read an article about autistic children, in which the author¹ talked of the impossibility of designating. For such children, the gesture of designation is totally interwoven with the gesture of taking: in other words, there is no capacity to share a spatial projection, to triangulate. An autistic child designates an object in order to take it, but for example she would not be able to show someone near her a direction in space, an object – that which subsequently brings children to name the object. The gesture of designation is completely foundational ...

DD Might one not think that there are also more abstract modes of designation, in which there is neither object nor concretely designated zone, but which would nevertheless designate something?

Yes, but this more abstract gesture you mention is necessarily constructed, originally, in relation to an object. It's a gesture which has an efficacy in relation to the grasping of an object, the designating of an object that the mother will be able to provide. It is always operative. The abstraction consists in being able to separate off this gesture which was constituted at the level of the effective bodily schema, 'real' in terms of its power to grasp or designate, and to differentiate its capacity to be inscribed with another meaning, another direction.

DD So you don't think the child or infant can have gestures that are not operative, but – to borrow a term of Kandinsky's – that are a 'gestural treasure', devoid of initial reference?

We need to refer to another concept: that of tonic function, tonic dialogue. It is true that the child has gestures which are affective, inscribed in a relation to the other, therefore in an object relation.

CR Is the triangulation you mentioned a little while ago effected at the level of tonic function?

Yes. In order to talk about this, I will extend Wallon's concept by suggesting that the tonic function is tonic-expressive and tonic-affective. It emerges, at least in part, from something that is measurable; it's the gravitational organisation, the gravitational tonus which will enable the child to achieve autonomy. It's the moment at which she will be able to turn over on her own, manage gravity on her own, whereas at the beginning her mother did it for her. This tonic function immediately becomes an object of dialogue. There is a close relationship between this tonic management, the relation to gravity and the relation to the mother. Because I can constitute myself in terms of gravitational musculature, through the separation from the mother, I will be able to broach a distance which will be the tensor of the inscription of my own language ...

CR *Is it at that moment that the triangulation occurs?*

One can make an analogy between triangulation in the Freudian sense and gravitational triangulation. It's not the motor sphere that's in play, but the perceptual sphere. One can consider perception as gesture and talk of a perceptual *habitus*, perceptual connections or networks. There's no such thing as a tautological look. When I look at a body, it is already inscribed with a reading grid which revolves around tonic function, as it's inscribed in the gravitational muscles. Tonic function is immediately coloured when it is in relation, and then gravitational autonomy is attained through separation from the object of love. It's this separation that makes me autonomous. From this moment on, one can talk of a spatial triangulation as much as of an affective triangulation. A third character emerges at the Oedipal level, whereas at the level of the constitution of gravitational musculature, a new direction emerges. Ponderality, and thus embodied existence, is immediately accompanied by a spatial direction, a directed attention. These two vectors – the ponderal vector and directed attention – constitute a gravitational axis, an axis coloured straightaway by the dialogue established with the object of love. And one rediscovers this tonic function behind all gestures.

For example, it's only recently that we have known that if I raise an arm in front of me when standing, the first muscle to move is the calf muscle. Traditionally we thought: if I make a gesture, it unbalances me and my gravitational musculature reacts. We have just realised that in fact it's the inverse; the restoration of gravitational balance and verticality anticipates the gesture. This means that any gesture is literally born from the gravitational function, rooted within the tonic function. It's the tonic state of the moment that will produce the quality of the gesture. Now, this tonic state is connected with the peculiar constitution of the particular history that made me gravitationally independent.

DD *When you talk about the possibility of indicating a direction, you always hold out your arm, towards a space that is quite distant. Might one not imagine gestures which, on the contrary, are intimately or infinitesimally connected to the organism, to the interiority of the body?*

Indeed it is a space particular to the individual, but nevertheless, at a given moment, this space is constituted in an object relation.

DD *However, a certain representation of space – in the background – presides over this constitution. Bataille talks of an 'aberrant space' ('espace voyou'); he says that there's as much space in a crocodile that swallows a man as in the distribution of stars in the sky. How do you conceive of the notion of space?*

Lacan expressed the incredible idea that proprioceptive space is fragmented. This space does not exist, I don't exist, as long as there is no return through the exterior. One can compare this idea with the phenomenological idea that suggests I am constituted, not through corporeal structure, but through events which inscribe me. And it's the gestures that constitute me, those primary gestures: throwing, pointing, pushing away, going towards, stopping. This is not simply theoretical, it has an entirely practical dimension.

Let me refer you to a test: you ask someone to put on glasses with curved prism lenses, and to grasp an object. Obviously this person then places their hand beside the object; but it only takes ten seconds for them to readjust and grasp the object correctly. So they have

reorganised space in order to make the grasp. But if you ask them to throw the object into a bucket, once again the same error will occur, and in order to make the gesture of throwing they will have to reorganise space yet again. They will have to reconstruct the space for each of the gestures that I call 'founding' or 'foundational'. So one is dealing with something very real here. There are *Gestalt* for different gestures, and one perceives that a gesture is not only the functional accumulation of capabilities, like flexion of the elbow or the wrist. It is the mirror stage which enables the constitution of a unity, and this unity is only gestural.

CR What I find decisive in what you're bringing to bear is the fact that each gesture requires and comprises its own real.

With dancers, for example, sometimes there are gestures which are difficult. For many of them, throwing is pushing, throwing doesn't exist. There's no neural or muscular accident, it's simply the sphere of 'throwing' (*jeter*) which has not constituted itself. And if this throw doesn't exist, all the steps that follow – like the *jeté* in ballet, what's called the *saut-jeté* (lit. 'jump-throw') – will be difficult.

DD The gesture you've just made contained as much throwing as jumping, and they're not at all the same thing.

Indeed, they are not the same thing. That's why the *jeté* ('throw') with the feet is a push, a jump, and the throwing of a ball or a javelin is a throw. These are totally different universes. There's the famous example where you get someone to write "the sky is blue" on a piece of paper: first of all with the right hand, then with a straight arm to which a pencil has been attached, then with the left hand, then with the mouth, finally with the foot. On each occasion, one recognises the writing, which remains identical to itself. It's connected both to the phrase "the sky is blue" and to the person's gestosphere. Instead of thinking of the body as a functionality, I think of it as a symbolic universe of gestures. And it's this symbolic universe which will explain and in-form the anatomy, not the other way around.

DD What you're saying might lead one to think of contemporary dance as also being a search for the missing gesture; and that choreographic work consists of bringing back into play what one is given initially,



far left: 'Queen Elizabeth in mid-air assisted by the Earl of Leicester'
left: Ballet Nationale du Nancy et de Lorraine
Photograph by Geneviève Stephenson

contesting and even opposing this primary sphere, putting it to the test. Could one also interpret or perceive a choreographic work from this starting point?

It's always difficult to respond to such a question. I'm going to over-simplify somewhat. If I take the movement of reaching towards, or of pushing away, they are not only connected to the hand, but also to the foot. If I compare the work of Trisha Brown with that of Merce Cunningham, the latter is concerned with pushing away from the floor, whereas Trisha's is about going towards the floor. So the qualities are radically different at the level of the constitution of gesture. In Trisha's work, this 'going towards' reflects the continuity of flow and, at the same time, reversibility; she is dealing with reversible gesture. Cunningham's dancers push away, they are dealing with the spatial inscription of irreversible gestures, with cutting: I cut space. There is an affirmation, a creation of direction, whereas with Trisha, things aren't played out on this level; rather her work is concerned with sensation. Which tallies with the choreographer's will; Cunningham pushes away the spectator, in order for the dancer to remain Other.

DD Yes, but what also immediately becomes apparent with Cunningham is an effect of resistance to external forces which could be reductive or oppressive. He maintains a distance so that it cannot be destroyed, whereas with Trisha Brown one doesn't get this sensation – as if, in her work, there wasn't any resistance to something other ... These are two different aesthetics and ethics.

Yes, absolutely. In Cunningham, the gesture is in *bound flow*, whereas in Trisha Brown, it's in *free flow*.² This is most marked, in terms of the connection to the gestosphere, through the particular relationship to the floor. Cunningham has repeatedly said that it is not the dancer one watches, but the trace of the dancer's gesture. Consequently, at no moment am I able to 'go into' the sphere of the dancer; whereas with Trisha, I literally enter this sphere. In her work there is a kinesthetic empathy, whereas Cunningham compels abstraction, obliges the spectator to cut the umbilical cord of kinesthetic empathy, in order to look at something else, his discourse.

DD This exteriority can be every bit as perilous as it is beneficial ...

What I find fantastic in Cunningham's work is precisely this admittance to abstraction, and the happiness of being able to perform in a space free of all affective ties at the moment of performance. He does not encourage kinesthetic empathy, and I am sure that one could measure, with electromyographic equipment, the difference of flow in the nervous systems in a Cunningham spectator and a Trisha Brown spectator. In Trisha's work, the spectator remakes the dancer's gesture but without sufficient intensity to realise it; whereas Cunningham forbids, cuts, prevents any rapport of this kind. Cunningham never provides any indications as to the proprioceptive origin of the movement; it's that, or it's not that; whereas with Trisha Brown, all of the research on the skeleton, the Alexander work, entails a journey into an interior geography, which in turn provokes the spectator. In her work, movement is reversible. But the danger of a reversible movement would be of inscribing nothing at all ...

DD That's not absolutely true; in Trisha's work, there are also points of inscription ...

Of course, but I warned you that I was over-simplifying. What we really need to do is to develop Wallon's thinking, and show the extent of its modernity, at the level of tonic function; it has not been adequately cultivated.³

CR To return to the question of oncological impairments, what means of reading them are provided by tonic function?

We ask the patient to carry out gestures, and a way forward at the therapeutic level is indicated by reading these gestures. We will reconsider the object relation, rather than rebuilding the muscles in one part of the body that is purportedly failing. For example, instead of giving a banal massage to one limited part of the body, we massage it while the patient makes a gesture, and we examine the situation of this gesture. So, I have an object in my hand, and they will work on my shoulder while I move this object. By modifying the relation to the object, I modify the tonic function. For example, if the patient grasps the object without recognising it, she will be in *bound flow*; in other words, the antagonistic muscles of the movement will tighten in order to have control; if I manage to get a movement made in *free flow*, then the situation is modified.

To give a very simple example, instead of saying to the patient: 'Grab the bottle or the weight that's over there', which she will do with a particular tonic state, I tell her: 'That object is going to grab your hand, the object is attracting your hand'. If the proprioceptive and exteroceptive relation is modified, immediately the tonic function of the organisation of the gestures is changed. What organises the gesture is the function of the tonic muscles which carry the trace and the memory of the entire dialogue and the entire ontology of my object relation – but also, from a very physiological point of view, of my entire history of coordination. Certain specific muscles in the back coordinate the gesture (such as the rhomboid muscles), and the fact of modifying the body state in terms of tonic function will modify the gesture completely.

DD That makes me think of an Etienne Decroux exercise, which consists of taking a glass with the awareness of a gesture that "will not hurt the space".

It's exactly that. When the (hi)story that's in the process of unfolding in relation to the object is modified, it's staggering to see the immediate modification of the body state.

Take the situation of a doctor who touches a patient; I can see if the doctor is distanced from their internal geography, in such a way as to enable them to create a positive no man's land between them and the patient, or if, on the contrary, they are literally bound – in other words, if their tonic function is knotted. So they are obliged to have a distant gesture, something one often sees with masseurs as they feel the patient's body. If my own democracy, my internal administration of territories does not enable this distance from the other, I will not be able to receive and welcome the other. Consequently, the work on the capacity to establish a distance that is possible will enable one to touch the other, to exchange in triangulated relations; there will be a space of listening, expression and reception. Whereas if I have a *bound flow*, I will grab the patient as I would grab the glass; in terms of the Decroux expression you have just evoked, I would hurt the space. My movement would be completely controlled, but it would be caught in a dyad, which would not open out into a triangulated space.

DD From this perspective, are there good and bad gestures, or are they of another dimension: gestures

that are just or unjust, right or not right?

Since it's the gesture that makes the body at every instant, there are no good or bad bodies, there are only gestures that are adapted, suitable. In the context of functional reeducation, I am compelled to think that it is the gesture that is failing; I cannot abstract what surrounds it – work the muscle with the physiotherapist and the gesture with the psychoanalyst.

CR If I understand you fully, the 'positive no man's land' you referred to must be located not only between the person making the movement and the other, but also between the different spheres or categories of gestures, in order for them to be able to play together.

Absolutely. The idea would be to open up the territory. If I only ever touch the other in *bound flow*, the space is completely contracted and restricted. So how could the other move freely? On the other hand if I can move freely, if I can dance in relation to my own corporeity, I can open up a field within which the other can emerge, a space that will grant them access to another gesture. Tonic function is contagious. The body state within which I stand is contagious. I believe the supreme contagion to be that of the body state. From this perspective, all trance phenomena are body states. It is for that reason, nonetheless, that dance represents a particular point. There is no greater inductor of empathy than making the gesture of an-other; at that moment, one is immediately in a mini-trance. It's something that is produced every day with a teacher or a choreographer who shows a gesture that the dancer takes up literally.

DD Trance, transport: does that signify alienation?

It could do, since it is contagious. When one observes two people talking together, the exchanges they make, one can see reciprocal modifications of body states, as a function of what occurs between them. Certain words can constitute a limitation of the opening to the other.

CR It seems to me that, starting from there, one could reflect on the different qualities of transference in analytic experience. In fact there's a whole range of modes and qualities of transference which come from the analyst, in so far as the transference in care is sustained by one particular analyst. (There can be lots of variations in the manner in which the same analyst sustains the transference throughout his or her practice). And undoubtedly one could read these qualities and modes, at least in part, in the light of the proposals you're putting forward. Moreover this is why it seems to me to be of such importance, and increasingly so, for analysts to be practiced with their own bodies. In actual fact, there are qualities of transference which close or delimit, and others which are the inverse, opening up this positive intermediary space – which is not unrelated to Winnicott's transitional field. So what should the quality of the analyst's 'gesture' be?

In his last book, Winnicott has a wonderful passage on gravity.⁴ Etymologically, transference relates to transport. So transference designates a movement of gravitational administration and organisation, and consequently of tonic function. The foundation of transference, its essence, is a modification in the body state. The notion of transference is necessarily supported by tonic function.

DD Nevertheless, this interplay can produce effects of fascination, even in truth of 'fasciation'; or, on the contrary, of opening, of democracy.

That's why I used the term democracy just now. Sharing a territory with several others already entails sharing one's own internal territory. One of the problems of our era is that of

promiscuity and how to manage it. Dance speaks only of this: the question of territory, the difficulty of managing a space with several dancers each in resonance with one's own internal territory.

DD I don't yet feel that this question is at the centre of contemporary choreographers' preoccupations ...

It's not articulated in an explicit way; and analysis or criticism in dance tends to stick to the choreography, the choreographers' words, the scenography, rather than the gestures of the dancers; the semantic shortcomings of the critical language prevent us from becoming aware of these gestures. It is not easy to describe the hedonistic delights in the gestures of the other, and thus to know of the effects of dance. That's what makes Laban's endeavour so enormously important, he opened up this area of enquiry. It was also one of the great hopes of Marcel Mauss: to succeed one day in looking at the gestures of cultures – not the bodies, nor the functionalities, but the infinite spaces of gesture ...

[Trans. David Williams]

Notes

- ¹ Uta Frith, in *Pour la science*, no. 190, August 1993.
- ² 'Bound flow' and 'free flow': Laban's terms are in English in the original text.
- ³ For further details on the work of psychologist and phenomenologist Henri Wallon see Gilbert Voyat (ed.), *The World of Henri Wallon*, N.Y., J. Aaronsen, 1984.
- ⁴ D.W. Winnicott, *Playing and Reality*, London: Tavistock, 1971.



far left: Design by Daniel Rabel for the "Danscours de Sarabande" in *La Douceur de Billebahout*
Collection: George Chaffee: Harvard
left: Trisha Brown *Foray-Foré* (1990)
Photograph by Genevieve Stephenson