

Figure 8

by

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Abstract

Figure 8 is a 35-min video recording of a solo movement performance that explores displacement, ancestry and identity through the lens of gesture. Based on interviews conducted with eight of the artist's family members from Rio de Janeiro, Brazil, the work follows the artist as she situates them in her home and moves through their gestures using mimesis. Set within an improvisational structure, the piece is split into five sections that offer a different relationship to the gestures as influenced by the audio, use of the objects, space, and costume. The sound score interlaces portions of each family member's voice clips from the interviews with distortion, repetition, and pop references while the gestures are repeated until they begin to dissolve in a process of entropy. The piece was envisioned as a live show in the theatre but transformed into an online performance due to COVID-19, and as a result was able to be shared with, experienced, and witnessed by the very people it was seeking to treasure.

Keywords: gesture; mimesis; mimicry; family; improvisational movement; dance theatre; entropy

To my mamma, my eternal dancing partner

To my papi, my eternal logic (and “eu interior”) partner

To my big sister, my eternal bravery partner

And to my husband, my eternal life (and forró) partner

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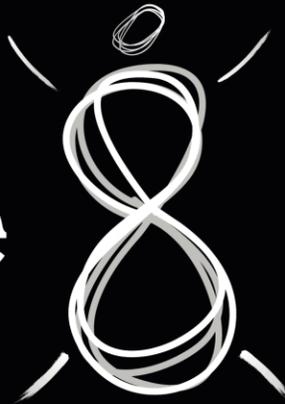
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MFA Graduating Project

Figure 8



A PIECE ABOUT LOVE, FAMILY, & MIMICRY.

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This work will be presented and has been developed on the unceded traditional territories of the Coast Salish peoples of the Musqueam, Squamish, and Tsleil-Waututh Nations.

Defence Statement

Placing Figure 8: Situating my artistic practice

My creative practice dives into the structures of gesture and mimesis to reveal knowledge and meaning that is harnessed within the body. By gathering social and cultural references as sources for mimesis, my work uses repetition, distortion, and entropy to break down the body and use it as a site for investigation. This framework allows me, as an artist, to create space for thinking about archetypal references and how they might be conditioned by culture, and to recover/discover alternate meanings that may lie underneath.

Matters of displacement, ancestry and identity inform my artistic work. Having grown up in Rio de Janeiro and gone back and forth from Brazil to the United States and Canada, to now create a home in Canada, I find myself caught in between the North and South, feeling fragmented and grappling with unsettlement. Additionally, by carrying an ancestral history that speaks of leaving your land to find better opportunities elsewhere, there is a need to forge the new while preserving the past. My great grandparents immigrated to Rio de Janeiro from Jerusalem during the Ottoman Empire in 1910, and the story of their sacrifice and our Jewish heritage has always informed my sense of self. Lastly, the preservation of identity gained new meaning for me in 2012, when I witnessed my mom lose her speech after suffering a stroke. Seeing her use gesture as a means to make herself heard intrigued me, and it pushed me think about the power of the body in the process of recovery, preservation, and creating new meaning.

The road to Figure 8: Before SFU

From the time I pursued my undergraduate degree in Dance at Bryn Mawr College in Pennsylvania, USA, to the moment I applied to the MFA at SFU in 2018, I transitioned from being primarily a contemporary dancer to becoming a choreographer. It was by dancing distinct movement styles in the United States and Brazil, however, that I came across discoveries that informed my creative practice.

In Brazil, for example, I worked with Grupo Corpo's former dancer and choreographer Cassi Abranches in the Rio 2016 Opening Ceremony of the Paralympic

Games and in a video dance campaign by a trendy fashion brand called FARM Rio. Although these projects were primarily commercial, they introduced me to a new and peculiar movement style, a fusion of contemporary dance and traditional Brazilian dances such as *samba*, *farró* and *axé*. This bridged the contemporary form I was exposed to in the United States with the folklore dances from Brazil, creating a conversation between what seemed like two distinct worlds.

In this fusion of styles, I became aware of how movement could expose my own feelings of a fragmented identity. When I had trouble doing a hip sway in one of the rehearsals, for example, the choreographer asked me to let go of the gringa in me and get back to being Brazilian. She was amused by my difficulty – while I, on the other hand, was internally panicking at the thought of having my identity as a carioca (a Rio de Janeiro native) fall through. Sway, charm and improvisation are staple Brazilian characteristics, something I had lost from living in the USA. But when we had to perform fast sharp movements that were more delimited by form, I had an easier experience than some of my Brazilian counterparts. Being versed in Horton technique and having experienced more rules in the American culture, I was more used to clear cut lines.

In my choreographic work, I explored the process of physical form and conditioning as seen in these dance forms, but through gestural idiosyncrasies, using humor and music as references for the social and cultural contexts. However, I wanted to understand even more about the relationship between codified movement styles in the North and South through gesture, which led me to apply to the MFA at SFU.

The context of Figure 8: At SFU

At SFU, I developed my practice-based research on gesture by focusing on ways of moving within an interdisciplinary structure, which culminated in *Figure 8*. There were three experiences that were vital in the process: 1) Studio, 2) Clown, and 3) the Spring Show.

- 1) Studio – In this course, I explored what happened to mimicry and gesture within a repetitive structure. I researched the reframing of certain social and/or cultural conventions by developing characters and then pulling apart their gestural patterns with repetition. The narrative context became less important than the unraveling of what was happening to the body when submitted to these parameters;

- 2) Clown – Clown took my experimental work from studio and positioned it within a set structure. Whereas in Studio I was exploring many ideas at once, Clown pushed me to pick a task that the body could submit to and allow the movement to follow through. By committing to the parameters and trusting the natural development that followed, there was a possibility to push, bend, pull, stretch, and shake the limits of social and/or cultural conventions. This created a generative space to reinvent or question them;
- 3) Spring Show - My Spring Show piece took my previous work with mimesis, gesture, repetition, and improvisation and pulled pop cultural references to explore issues of cultural displacement and identity. I worked with an exaggerated social performance inspired by an 80's conga song in a cyclical and rhythmic structure, which pushed the body into a state of exhaustion and entropy. I found that this collapse of the body into cathartic transformation could speak to a fatigue that might be involved in trying to uphold social and cultural standards.

From these experiments, I extracted three main elements for my research:

- 1) Gesture as the site of investigation;
- 2) Mimesis and repetition as modes of play with gesture;
- 3) Sound, space, costume, and objects as improvisational constraints to push gesture and invoke entropy.

The foundation of Figure 8: Theoretical and practical frameworks

There were various theories and artists that were extremely helpful in providing me ways to approach gesture and mimesis that supported my search in discovering alternate meanings.

Gesture as a means

Firstly, there's Giorgio Agamben's theory of gesture as mediality, which contrasted my initial notion of gesture as a symbolic unit or end point for meaning. He says:

What characterizes gesture is that in it nothing is being produced or acted, but rather something is being endured and supported. The gesture, in other words, opens up the sphere of ethos as the more proper sphere of that which is human. (Agamben 56)

Thinking of gesture “as means without becoming” (55-59) made me look at gesture as an active process of engagement (as opposed to a result), always negotiating between forces of push and pull. This intermediary position made an interesting parallel with my own processes of displacement and identity, such as being caught between cultures, remembering ancestral stories while building identity in the present, and my mom’s recovery in trying to regain her expressive ability while managing new constraints.

In the development of the work, this gave me the idea to study my family’s gestures, not as a physical vocabulary of communication (such as sign language), but rather as a parallel process to speech that was enduring or supporting meaning from unspoken processes. This especially made sense to me when reflecting on how my mom relied so much on gestures when her speech went away.

Another account of gesture that informed the work was Rick Kemp’s acknowledgement of gesture in voice. According to Kemp, gestural utterances can be seen in speech through the manipulation of the orofacial muscles such as the tongue, teeth, lungs, and the body (Kemp 189), and in language as a virtual projection of kinesthetic imagery (Kemp 7). This influenced me to interview my family members and use their voices as samples for the sound score.

An artist that shaped my work was Jeanine Durning and her practice of nonstopping in “inging” (the chocolate factory theater, “Jeanine Durning – inging”) and “to being” (the chocolate factory theater, “Jeanine Durning – To Being”). Durning provides an account of gesture that touches upon Agamben’s notion of mediality quite well. Allowing the flow of speech and movement to occur as a stream of consciousness, Durning considers the thought process as gesture, always in action, but never becoming, always moving, but never arriving, evoking the inability (or unwillingness) to allow thought to settle – “a force against the absolute, the nameable” (the chocolate factory theater, “Jeanine Durning – To Being”). To me, what was so impressive about Durning was her ability to sustain an active engagement with gesture, without knowing what would happen, in an improvisational structure, for over an hour. This showed me that with clear and set parameters, the gestural act as an improvisational practice could be fruitful in exploring modes of thinking and of being. As such, I developed an

improvisational talking and moving practice and worked on an improvisational movement score for *Figure 8*, with various sections being dictated by different tasks.

Gesture and mimesis

Throughout the process of my encounter with gesture I was very curious about imitation. This is something that I've always been good at since I was little¹. I also had an uncanny experience with mimicry in Clown and the Spring Show, where I used mimesis to imitate people or adhere to cultural and social conventions, only to then unpack them. But I was not sure what mimicry was actually doing. By looking at various accounts of mimesis I was intrigued by the fact that, while imitation can be seen through the lens of representation, it can also be observed through the angle of who does the imitating.

In my research, I began to study an account of mimesis that was viewed from the sensorial experience of the imitator, giving them agency. This made me think about social and cultural conventions not just as oppressive forces of power but of forces that could be conversed with or subverted. Stanton B. Garner, Jr., for example, conducts this shift from mimesis as an essentially aesthetic process – a rigid comparison between the copy and the original (from a detached, critical gaze) – to one that views it as an “enactive, intersubjective” phenomenon. Much like Agamben’s view of gesture, Stanton believes that the mimetic act also comes from a human disposition to “take the world in, make it one’s own, and perform it back” (28). When it came to looking at my family’s gestures, although representation was used as a resource, my main approach was to enact them via my own kinesthetic account.

Carry Noland provided me more helpful inputs of agency by explaining that kinesthetic feedback may allow the host to resist or subvert the embodiment of the gesture in an act of inflection (214). Through the act of repetition, gestures that are learned through mimicry, verbal manipulation, and experimentation are acquired as a form of skill (176), and therefore become inscribed with meaning and knowledge. As such, however, they can also undergo “deskilling” to encounter alternate forms of movement, which may also lead to alternate meanings. Noland sees “skilling and deskilling” as processes that are able to consider gesture as “part of a spectrum of

¹ At 10 years old you could be sure to find me making my family laugh by imitating an aunt or the fitness gurus on TV.

possible movements, none of which exhausts the body's potential to move" (214). In my work, I use this concept compositionally by setting up a structure where I conduct gesture as codified form, but then apply repetition and resources for deskilling (such as the use of distortion in the sound, space and objects) to try to discover these alternate meanings or hidden pieces of knowledge.

Finally, a piece that helped me to visualize these ideas was Akram Khan's "zero degrees" (Akram Khan Company). By sitting side-by-side, facing the audience, and telling the same story with the same gestures and in the same cadence, we see the two performers as almost identical beings. While we see this simultaneously mimicry, we get caught in an endless loop with no departure and no arrival, only becomings – it is not possible to pinpoint who is imitating whom. And while there is so much that is identical, it is in this sameness that we can notice the bits of difference that arise, and it is in this subtlety that we can see other parts "spilling" out. These parts, that perhaps didn't fit the mold, were extremely interesting to me, and I was curious about how to find them in my own gestural research.

Figuring out Figure 8: The development of the work

Figure 8 is a 35-min video recording of me moving through my home while inhabiting the gestures of eight family members in eight different locations². Split into five sections, my relationship to the gestures in each one changes, as influenced by the audio score, use of the objects, space, and costume³. The camera angles shift according to each section but preserve the same position each time they visit the same location. The video was filmed by my husband in one shot and the only editing it received was a fix to a minor glitch and adding the sound score to the video file.

To develop the work, I grappled with the following research question:

How can gesture mediate identity in matters of displacement and ancestry?

² To access the recording, please go to <https://figure8.netlify.app/>.

³ To read more details about my choices with regards to the audio score, use of the objects, space, and costume, please see Appendix C.

To work through this question I decided to study my family's gestures and hear their stories by conducting interviews with them in Brazil, which was possible through a Travel and Minor Research Award from the School for the Contemporary Arts.

The first person that I planned on interviewing for the work was my mother. In her process of recovery her gestural vocabulary became more precise and intense, and in some ways even changed, being marked by her new constraint. She was still mom, but a different version of mom. When I saw her body step in to compensate for her loss, I saw that it did something else. Similar to the "spilling out" in Akram Khan's "zero degrees", there was more to what her gestures could hold. Perhaps it was just the overbearing task of redeveloping her speech partly from scratch and partly from memory, but perhaps there was more. I wanted to understand what this "extra" portion in her gesturing was doing, and where it came from. Her case created so many questions, not just in this, but also medically-speaking, since her doctors admitted that they expected her movement ability to have been much more compromised.

Maybe it was her loss of speech and her new identity, or perhaps the fact that I was so far away from my family, but I felt the urge to investigate not only her story, but those of my ancestors. While I have been following in their footsteps by also immigrating and recreating my home in Canada, I've struggled with the fear of forgetting my heritage and not knowing how this will affect my identity.

With this in mind, in January 2020 I returned to Brazil after one year and a half (my first time since moving to Canada), and set out to interview eight family members who I felt held a vital role in my family, and in my life. They were my mom, dad, sister, paternal grandfather, paternal grandmother, maternal grand uncle (aged 98!), maternal cousin, and maternal aunt.

In the interviews, I was interested in learning about how they told their life story – which events they chose, and how ancestry played a part. But other than the simple questions "where do you come from?" and "how does family play a part in your identity?" I wasn't sure exactly what it was that I was looking for. When I think about it now, I believe that I was paying attention to the parts that were perhaps "spilling out" – an excess in the gestures that were not being accounted for in the words.

After returning to Canada, I began to go through the eight videotaped interviews and analyze the gestural utterances, both in speech and in movement. I found myself moving away from the content of the stories themselves (although these were intriguing) and focusing on what they did to each family member's gestures – what they were perhaps mediating.

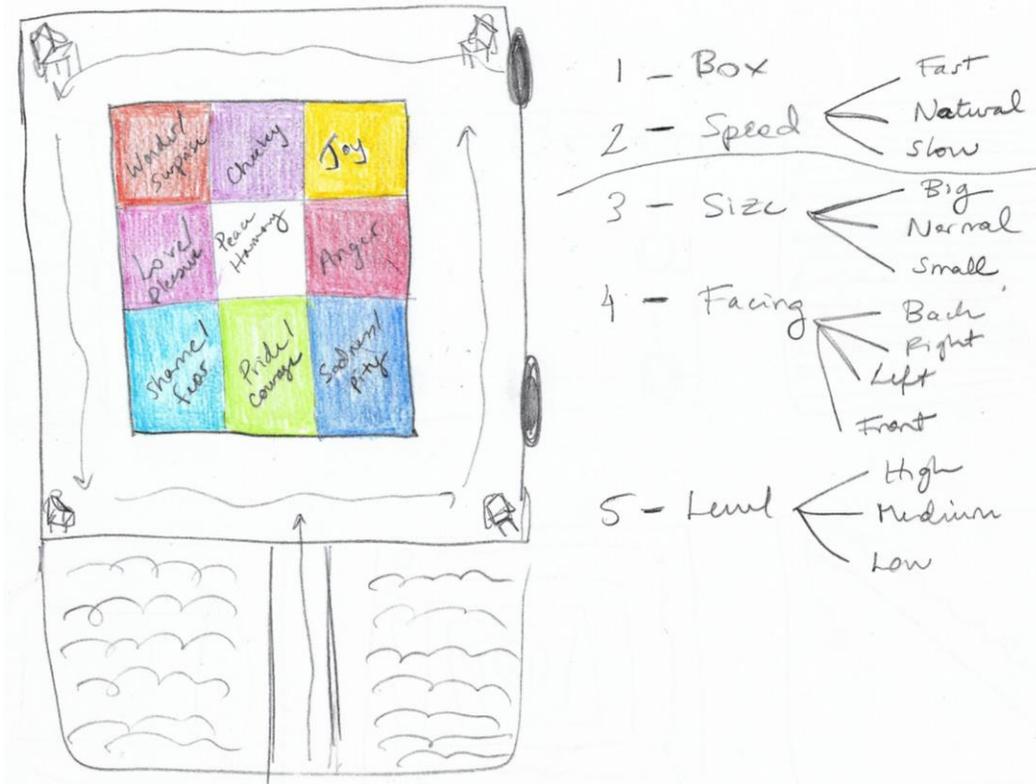
When I think about it, I was engaging with a mimetic process that used both representation and kinesthetic awareness within myself, by “looking” at them in the videos and in my memory, and simultaneously feeling my way into their gestures.

The use of space was inspired by the Rasa Boxes – a theatre exercise that splits the floor into nine squares in a 3 x 3 grid-like format. In the exercise, each square represents a different emotion/feeling, such as love, laughter, grief, anger, vigor, shame, disgust, and wonder, and performers have the task of acting and partaking in the emotion as they inhabit each square (Schechner 31). Additionally, in Rasaesthetics, performers access theatricality from the enteric nervous system, or “the snout-to-belly-to-bowel” scheme (27). According to Richard Schechner, this is the “where of intimacy, sharing of bodily substances, mixing the inside and the outside, emotional experiences, and gut feelings.” Whereas in Western theatre the eyes and the ears witness knowledge, in Indian Performance Theory this comes from the mouth and the nose (or taste and smell) (27).

Rasa Boxes shaped the development of my work by providing two starting points: first, I picked an emotion for each family member and used it as a source for inspiration. I thought about how I felt towards each of them and/or which emotions they had displayed during the interview, how the gestures could be filtered through this emotion, and which color was associated to it to compose each square; and secondly, I worked on the gestures from “the gut”. This made an interesting parallel with the remarks by Agamben and Garner of gesture as a process for “becoming” and as sensation. The gut processes the “becoming” of food into nutrients and into waste. It's also the place for the infallible “gut feeling”, where sensation is viewed as knowledge. In the rehearsal process I felt a lot of heaviness, pain, tightness and discomfort in my gut region, more than what I usually experience.

Rasa Boxes also influenced the layout of the work in the theatre. My objective was to create a live solo performance to be shown in Studio D, a large black box theatre space at the School for the Contemporary Arts at Simon Fraser University. The floor was going to be divided into nine equivalent squares (3 x 3) using light, with space on the outskirts of the squares to allow for mobility. The squares would be represented in the following manner:

- | | |
|---|--|
| <ul style="list-style-type: none"> 1) Yellow/joy
– maternal grand uncle, <i>Tio David</i>; 3) Orange/wonder
– maternal aunt, <i>Nena</i>; 5) Aqua/shame
– father, <i>Papi</i>; 7) Blue/sadness
– paternal grandpa, <i>Vovô Chiquinho</i>; | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> 2) Purple/cheeky
– maternal cousin, <i>Waldo</i>; 4) Pink/love
– mother, <i>Mami</i>; 6) Green/pride
– paternal grandma, <i>Vovó Regina</i>; 8) Red/anger
– sister, <i>Bela</i>; 9) White/harmony
– myself, <i>Luci</i>. |
|---|--|



Sketch of the stage design from a bird's eye view. Drawing: Luciana Fortes

From start to finish, I would move around from square to square, going through each gestural account. The audio-score would include excerpts from the interviews, which would serve as signals for my movement, such as changing quadrants, freezing, speeding up, and slowing down. For each performance, the signals would be randomized so as to raise the stakes and keep the gestures from “settling”. My objective wasn’t to master the gestures, but rather to allow them to evolve through repetition.

By the time March arrived, I had begun working with two SFU undergraduate sound artists as collaborators, Sam Meadahl and Daniel Blackie, and had gone through almost all of the interviews, selecting roughly 15-30 sound clips from each one. And then, COVID-19 hit.

Figuring out Figure 8 in the pandemic: When COVID-19 hit

When performing the show live became compromised because of the pandemic, I decided to transmit my work online and use my home as the stage. This made sense to me because: 1) the main form of contact with my family during my time in Canada has been through a screen, with endless calls filled with “saudade”⁴, 2) so much of home is associated with identity, and this became more intense as this was my first home independent from my family, and it was in a foreign country; 3) I was excited about the possibility of trying out this new type of work, reimagining the screen and the camera as collaborators; and 4) my family members would be able to witness the work.

With these new restrictions in mind I set out to transform the piece by reimagining how the squares would function within my home. I began to work with Casper Leerink, a software designer, to develop a website that would split the screen into the 3 x 3 grid and shift the video of the performance from square to square. Unfortunately, this format did not work because of technological complications and because the grid flattened the image and prioritized visuals over movement. Nevertheless, the Rasa Boxes were essential to the development of the work by locating

⁴ (especially with reference to songs or poetry) a feeling of longing, melancholy, or nostalgia that is supposedly characteristic of the Portuguese or Brazilian temperament. <https://www.lexico.com/definition/saudade>.

the gestures in place in the home, which was extremely important to exploring them via sensation and memory.

In tandem, I began to explore how to transmit the piece live via video. Unfortunately, setting up the live transmission was not feasible because of limitations with internet bandwidth, computer power, high-quality cameras, and other technological resources.

Finally, I decided to pre-record the piece and to maintain some of the liveness factor by showcasing the work at a set date and time. Although this was different than performing live, it allowed me to witness my family members witnessing the work, and to participate in the less familiar, but very important aspect of gathering in the online space.

Witnessing Figure 8: Manifestation of the live and the two screenings

In order to observe the reaction of my family members witnessing the work, I organized two screenings via Zoom with post-show socials: one with the eight family members on Friday, June 26th at 5:30pm (PST) , and another for the public on June 27th, at 2pm (PST). Because Zoom doesn't allow you to choose which videos you would like to appear on your screen, it was essential to hold a separate screening just for the family members so that all of their reactions could be seen at the same time.

In the Zoom screenings, participants watched the piece by looking at my Zoom screen, which was sharing the video of the performance. Although there were some technical difficulties and the transmission of the video wasn't as smooth as it was when watching on the computer, this contributed to the liveness of the work. After all, the glitches were particular to each showing, and represented the mini errors that every live performance is subject to. Additionally, each screening was characterized by the audience that was watching it. While on Friday it was an intimate setting, on Saturday it felt like a grand showcase, with close to 40 attendees from over seven countries. In a time where gathering was not allowed, this felt like a particularly special feat.

One of the best experiences for me as a performer was to, for the first time, watch my piece with everyone else, and watch them watch the piece. It was many levels of witnessing. Since perception is the basis for mimicry, this relation felt very fitting. In

particular, it was interesting to see the reactions of my family members, which exceeded my expectations. I was apprehensive about how they would receive the work, given that they were being so meticulously imitated, but they laughed, cried, and were engaged throughout the whole performance. Later, they expressed how well they could identify each member in the work. This was a brilliant aspect for me because it created a sense of mutual identification that could only exist by us witnessing it all together.

Questions in Figure 8: Reflections about the work

Wrestling with the gestures & considerations of care

One of the hardest parts of developing the work was trying to understand what constituted caricature or mockery in the imitation of the gestures. Although these angles were sometimes part of the comedic work, I didn't want them to be the only levels of interpretation. While the gestures were seen through my filter, I was aware that I still held a voice, life story, and way of moving of someone else, and this was a great responsibility. Therefore, I tried to work with mimesis in various ways so as to preserve the sensation of gesturing while managing considerations of care.

Trying to understand what this act of care means alongside unpacking mockery and caricatures is an ongoing process of discovery. However, I do think that in part I was able to accomplish this by going into the process without a set vision for the end result. I didn't know what the portrayals of my family members were going to look like. I just tried to experiment with the gestures in the improvisational structure and focus on remembering them through sensation – as if I felt them inside me. I wasn't trying to show them to a big audience or make them be seen to an outside viewer either – it was an internal process. The intimacy came from focusing on the smaller gestures and finding the subtlety in each family member. That way, I think that having the home setting and the camera as a witness enhanced this set up.

Another aspect that I believe kept the gestures from settling into representation were the compositional elements. The quick and fragmented improvisational structure didn't allow much time for me to stay in only one mode of gesture. Additionally, setting up a sound score that played with the audio in diverse ways and splitting the piece into five sections with different tasks stimulated the gestures, keeping them alive and

dynamic. In the audio, for example, there were clips of their raw voices with distortion and repetitive effects, as well as the playful influence of pop references. And while each character had moments of fixed gestures, instead of working with them as a set movement phrase, they served as vocabulary to be played with.

Fragmentation, exhaustion and entropy

In the second half of the piece, I grappled with vulnerability. The process of remembering my family was messy and obscure, and I felt lost many times while navigating the work. I wasn't sure where to place them, how to portray them, which gestures to enact, how to enact them, and where I was going. Being isolated at home, I was also literally living in the work, so it overwhelmed me. It was a constant process of revisiting memory, which made the recalls feel stretched, intensified, and fragmented. For these reasons, I chose to set up the gestural utterances as fragments in an interrupted and distorted continuum. Additionally, it was important, in Sections IV and I, to hold space for exhaustion and entropy because of how much the work had tired my body.

Reenacting your loved ones while being 11,000 km away, isolated at home during a pandemic, was an exhausting process, to say the least. I don't think I ever cried as much as I did in the last month of rehearsals. I was terrified about the task of remembering because it was a reminder of the distance between myself and my family members. Whenever I did remember, my body conjured up a strong, emotional outburst, that I felt like the recalls always brought an explosion and release of energy. In these moments, I saw myself as a little kid again, in need of approval and attention from her parents and family. In a way, this takes me back again to Clowning, in which so much of our unresolved traumas from childhood get to come back to play. By incorporating repetition and allowing the gestures to disintegrate into a state of entropy, I was able to find a release for this energy and at the same time become invigorated by it.

The question of energy and entropy is an interesting one which still needs further development. I am curious about where the body goes after entropy and what is the source for the energy. Is it a cyclical nature that regenerates itself? Or is it fed by the cultural and social forces around us, until it piles up again and gesture can no longer

hold them? To explore this, I would experiment with seeing where the body goes after the final moment of release.

Always becoming: identity and individuality

As part of the process, I was trying to figure out who I was through the lens of my family. As such, themes of identity and individuality arose very strongly in the work. By imitating an other, I was provoked to think about how we are both the same and different through sensation. I began to find that, the more I rehearsed the gestures performatively, the more I could feel them present in my everyday life. I couldn't tell whether I had always made a head tilt just like my mom or laughed just like my sister and was just noticing it more, or if I had begun to absorb their gestures as my own through my attempt of becoming them. It was uncanny. Was there even a way to separate them from me? Or me from them?

As these lines became blurrier and blurrier, they also created a gap for exploring, questioning, and recreating my relationship to them. It was a malleable space that could be played with. This made me think about the relationship between North/South, familiar/foreign, and home/public, and how it is also a flexible place, stretching and colliding depending on how I situated myself, always in the process of becoming.

While I started out this process by dissecting each part into a separable entity – gesture, person, square, color, identity – I was moved towards embracing the process of recovery of family and of self as a holistic being, sometimes overlapping, sometimes diverging, sometimes coexisting. By acknowledging that many of the gestures that lived in my world could have come from my family and still be mine, I could begin to see heritage as something that I take with me and can make my own. These histories and stories live in gestures and the way we move, and to carry ourselves is to keep this knowledge alive and ever evolving – always becoming.

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Appendix A.

Gestural Affordances in the Performative Acts of Interruption, Mimicry, and Metamorphosis

First, an anecdote...

On August 4th, 2012, I got a call from my older sister, Bela. Her voice was deeper and more strained than usual. “Luci, mom just had a stroke. Come home now.” All I could do was immediately pack up my belongings and drive straight home in complete silence – an unusual behavior, at least for me. At that time, I was in Brazil with my sister, but my mom was temporarily living in Canada with my father. They had just arrived in Calgary 3 weeks prior to the event, for my dad’s 2-year postdoctoral degree.

My mom lost all her speech (even the ability to gasp), but miraculously, except for some temporary freezing and pain on the right side of her face and arm, her movements were just as “fluent” as before (something the doctors averted in disbelief). Slowly she regained almost all her ability to talk, but what was most impressive in her recovery was not only her continuing capacity to move with no difficulty or constraint, but also her power to communicate just as expressively (if not more so) without language. With words out of the way, her gestures became the protagonist of her interaction with the world, and began to reveal something that went beyond a simple attempt to replace speech – they became a portal into a new form of knowledge.

Seeking to understand this alternative route in gesture has become the central quest in my research. Knowingly or not, my mother has inspired me to investigate some of the ways we understand the workings of gesture, how these notions have been conceptualized both in everyday practices and performance, and how we may push or rethink these current understandings to reveal other forms of knowledge in the body.

In my artistic work, my experimentations with clowning, failure, and my current talking-and-moving exercise have led to a practice that is expanding possible alternate routes for gesture in the studio setting. As with any contemporary art form, performance allows for the pushing of boundaries that, although initially manifesting in the conceptions of the form, also spill into theory and the everyday.

And so, with my mother in mind, my artistic practice at hand, and a hunch on gesture, my research question takes form by asking:

How does performance rethink the role of gesture through interruption, mimicry, and metamorphosis?

In this venture, I will be analyzing contemporary art pieces that invite a different outlook on gesture within these three categories and reveal other ways in which the body may produce meaning, shape thought, and express communication. They do so in the following ways:

- 1) Interruption – evidencing stuttering and non-stopping as an alternate form of thinking;
- 2) Mimicry – valuing gestural iteration and imitation over linguistic form;
- 3) Metamorphosis – transforming the body into a shapeshifting entity.

The artistic works that I will be referring to in order to investigate these concepts are Jeanine Durning’s “to being” and “inging”, Ralph Lemon’s “4Walls”, “zero degrees” by Akram Khan, Jonathan Burrow’s and Matteo Fargion’s “Speaking Dance (2006)”, “Le Sacre Du Printemps” and “Self Unfinished” by Xavier Le Roy, Erwin Wurm’s “One Minute Sculptures”, and Jan Hakon Erichsen’s balloon and tin foil structures.

This paper will begin by attempting to define what gesture is by working through different conceptions of the term. By looking at its etymology as well as various philosophical accounts, we will see that instead of trying to pinpoint what gesture is, it is perhaps more useful to pose the question of what gesture can do. Within this realm of action, we will look at the role of gesture in shaping thought, harnessing lived experience, expressing meaning in verbal and non-verbal systems of communication, and offering mediation between biological, cultural, social, and historical forces. These gestural affordances in the body will be analyzed within the concept of the embodied mind and through a phenomenological lens. These approaches allow us to understand the functions of kinesthetic resonance, empathy, and analysis in the development of new gestural technique, both in performance and everyday practices, and translates into different ways of knowing in the body. Finally, we will see how each of the artists have employed this kinesthetic knowledge differently by employing interruption, mimicry, and

metamorphosis to shift the position of gesture in our conceptions of meaning, thought, and communication.

The results of this research may reach both the performative realm as well as everyday practices. By putting the body at the forefront of meaning-making, debunking the mind-body dualism, and questioning the linguistically-focused mechanisms of communication, this paper may further the dialogue on the development and expression of thought in non-speech forms. It might allow us to find, within the realm of limitation, impairment, failure, constraint and gap, an opportunity for agency within the body, allowing for other means of expression to arise, ones which might be obscured or undervalued. With this comes a chance for the body to leverage oppressive forces, develop a new way of knowing, and evoke a differentiated politics of existence.

What is gesture?

What characterizes gesture is that in it nothing is being produced or acted, but rather something is being endured and supported. The gesture, in other words, opens up the sphere of ethos as the more proper sphere of that which is human.

–Giorgio Agamben, “Means Without End: Notes on Politics”

What is gesture? By looking at the etymology of gesture, we can get some insight into what it may entail. Firstly, gesture is both a noun and a verb, which indicates that it is both a unit of use and a doable action. The verb can mean to “make or use gestures”, “to gesticulate”, or to “express by gestures” (“gesture, v.”). This definition tells us that gestures can be created, or used, or both. It is also a form of expression. But what is created or used in the gesture itself?

Gesture as a noun comes from the medieval Latin “gestūra”, the noun of the action “gerere”, which means to carry (“gesture, n.”). Our current uses span both the literal and the figurative sense; in the literal sense it means “a movement of the body or any part of it” and “a movement expressive of thought or feeling”, while in the figurative sense it means “a move or course of action undertaken as an expression of feeling or as a formality” (“gesture, n.”). So gesture can be just a movement of the body, or a movement that contains an expressive component (not restricted to the body), while also potentially meaning that this expressive content can be just a formality.

Perhaps it is more useful to look at how the word first started to be used. In the 15th century, the word referred to carriage, or bearing, which both mean to “carry, sustain, bring forth the weight of anything while moving it from one place to another”. These definitions bring an interesting perspective, for they show how gestures are used in purpose of something else, as opposed to being that something else. They are also far away from being anything fixed. Because gestures seem hard to pinpoint, it might be more interesting to look at what they might be used for, or simply, what they can do.

To understand how this could manifest, I revisit the philosopher Giorgio Agamben and his remarks on gesture. In his book, *Means Without End: Notes on Politics*, in the chapter “Notes on Gesture”, Agamben gathers notions of gesture from scholars such as Gilles Deleuze, Varro and Aristotle to situate gesture within the realm of art (cinema) but also of pertaining to politics and ethics. And although he begins by asking the question: “what is a gesture?”, he goes on to work through not a definition of the term, but rather what a gesture can do.

Agamben intellectually forages the notion that gesture acts as a presence of a means without a transcendent purpose – as a “pure and endless mediality” (58). And while gesture functions within a sphere of action, in the act of “a doing” it does not “make” nor “act out”, but rather “acts in” carrying, supporting, and enduring. This power of gesture of “being a means” without “becoming” can be seen in art in the moving or still image, and in a work of dance, but also as the “gag” in language (55-59). Finally, Agamben situates gesture as an entity that belongs to the body as well as to the arts, but primarily to that which is human (57). But since we will be focusing on what gesture is with regards to the body, the question of what a gesture can do in the body still remains open. To elucidate this point, I turn to Ben Spatz, who begins to work through this problem by analyzing what bodies, generally, can do.

In his book, “What a Body Can Do”, Ben Spatz begins by defending the notion that we cannot provide a definite answer for the question “what can a body do?”, because we do not actually know what a body can do (4) (thus the medical doctors’ surprise in seeing what my mother’s body could do, after her brain had suffered significant damage). Rather, he proposes a holistic and phenomenological approach to looking at embodied practices in performance and the everyday, suggesting that this perspective can offer new forms technique. To Spatz, technique is conceived as “both

specialized and everyday practices in terms of their knowledge content” (7) and the space for discovery touches the realm of the physical, but also of the “mental, emotional, spiritual, vocal, somatic, interpersonal, expressive, and more” (11).

By looking at what bodies can do, as opposed to make or build, and by conceptualizing practice as an embodied act, Spatz offers up (perhaps knowingly, perhaps not) an alternate framework for thinking about gesture as both a practice that can do particular things, and as a type of knowledge that could be included in his search for new technique, which doesn’t attempt to generate new facts or information, but rather organizes the knowledge within practice in a previously unthought of way.

Together, my mother, Agamben and Spatz offer productive frameworks to think about gesture by suggesting that: 1) Gesture is a signifier of human experience that acts in supporting and carrying, 2) Within its broad scope of action, gesture is also a unit of the body, and 3) We do not know all that a body can do. Thus, we can say that we do not know all that a gesture can do (or support, or carry, or endure). And if gesture is not a single, fixed unit of the body, nor of art or humanity, but rather plays a mediation role, it can be assumed that the aspects it carries or endures can be dynamically reflective of the human race at a given time. Therefore, it can be a means of supporting alternate values, knowledge, and potentially, a different way of living.

With this in mind, in the following section I will lay out the various roles of support that gesture plays in the body, and investigate the potential it holds to expand these realms of action.

How does gesture constitute meaning through the body?

We humans are live creatures . . . Via the aesthetics of our bodily senses, the environment enters into the very shape of our thought, sculpting our most abstract reasoning out of our embodied interactions with the world.

—Mark Johnson, “The Meaning of The Body: Aesthetics of Human Understanding”

Because gesture emerges from the body, we must first understand how our bodies manage our interactions with the world, to then comprehend how this might influence the function of gesture.

In *The Meaning of The Body: Aesthetics of Human Understanding*, Mark Johnson places the body as the protagonist agent in our process of meaning-making. He debunks the mind-body dualism by stating that meaning and mind are embodied processes in the body, and that the meaning-making process begins in our bodies ever since we are babies, through our engagement with the world and others around us (51). By way of our sensorimotor activity, we begin to establish patterns of organism-environment interaction that allow for our survival, development, and grounding for meaning in the form of image schemas (136). In this way, Johnson places cognition as an embodied experience by showing how the “lower”- level capacities channel into the “higher” cognitive processes (145), acknowledging that “the structural features and relations that shape our encounters with aspects of our environment are preserved in our neural maps” (135).

Imbedded within this interaction with the environment is also our engagement with others and the information we extract from this relationality, or what Johnson likes to call our “body-based intersubjectivity” (51). This meaning-bearing schema constitutes our identity from the moment we enter the world, and takes place via “bodily expression, gesture, imitation, and interaction” (51). Infants are born with the ability to discriminate and imitate gestures from other human subjects, and it is through this bodily mimicry that meaning arises; they reproduce the gestures by recognizing patterns in their proprioception, or “felt sense of our bodily posture and our joint and limb positions” (38) and learn to interact with their surroundings through these bodily processes.

When we think about this position of the body and how it influences our structures of meaning-making not only when we are babies, but also persisting through adulthood, we gain a more profound perspective on how gesture might play a crucial part in our processes of understanding, conceptualization, and reasoning (33).

By acknowledging meaning-making and cognitive reasoning as embodied, we begin to understand the importance of the body beyond what we deem to be “just physical”. According to Johnson, to understand the body in its full capacity is to see it as

a biological organism, an ecological body (interacting on an on-going basis with the environment), a social body, a cultural body, and a phenomenological body, represented by our lived experience through moving, feeling, and sensing (278). Although pieced out to portray the different spheres of action the body partakes in, these various bodies are constantly at play, resulting in a holistic and intertwined meaning-making experience of ourselves with others and with our surroundings.

Understanding the implications of the body to meaning-making, and furthermore, to the development of thought, is paramount to comprehending the various spheres of influence of gesture. Next, we shall look at how gesture participates in some of the previously mentioned “bodies” as conceived by Johnson, in acts of communication, culture, and performance.

Gesture as (a form of) thought and expression

Gestures are an integral part of language as much as are words, phrases and sentences – gesture and language are one system.

–David McNeill, “Hand and Mind: What Gestures Reveal About Thought”

One of the most common ways we understand gesture is by considering the movements of the head and hand that accompany speech during communicative acts, which we consider to be idiosyncrasies of the talking subject. But this is actually a very limited view of what gestures are and of what gestures can do during communication.

The concept of gesture as non-verbal communication arose in the 1940s with the advancements of audio-visual technology (Kemp 22), which allowed for the recording and studying of movement as meaning. However, at the time, gesture was seen as a unit of communication that was concerned primarily with interpersonal relationship, while language was the only vehicle that could express complex and abstract ideas (23). It was only in 1992, after conducting 10 years of research on gesture and the mind, that the ground-breaking work of David McNeill in *Hand and Mind: What Gestures Reveal About Thought* came to expose new ideas about the workings on gesture (McNeill ix).

McNeill discovered that gesture and language are part of the same system of communication, but express thought in opposite ways. While words express meaning by segmenting, linearizing and creating a hierarchical organizational structure by grouping

and parceling out thought through time, gestures are multidimensional and can express complex thought in a global and synthetic way. Gestures aren't a translation of the verbal realm into a visual manifestation, but rather work as holistic symbols, among other ways (McNeill 2).

Rick Kemp and Stanton B. Garner, Jr. have taken McNeill's work to further push the remarks on gesture, by analyzing the importance of movement and how gestures manifest within the context of performance. Together, they expose how sensorimotor experience shapes the meanings conveyed in gesture and language, and how even speech can be a form of gestural utterance.

In *Embodied Acting: What neuroscience tells us about performance*, Kemp reveals how gestures operate reflexively by integrating expression, thought and feeling (22), and can be organized in approximately eight different types: emblems (specific and culturally defined), iconic gestures (describe physical, concrete items. Can be related to mimetic gestures, without speech), deictic gestures (point at significant objects), metaphoric gestures (related to concepts and can be abstract or specific), arbitrary gestures (such as sign language, in which a specific code has to be learned), regulators (indicate turn taking in conversation), affect displays (emotion), and beat gestures (creates emphasis on a piece of information) (33-35). While both gesture and language are shaped by physical experience and can express abstract ideas through metaphor (22), gestures can reveal the idiosyncrasies of the speaker because they don't have to follow a grammatical form. Additionally, when in conflict, gestures are more trusted than linguistic meaning, and can confirm, modify, or contradict the information in the words (25).

Curiously, speech also falls into the category of gesture when we consider its kinesthetic properties and how it is formed according to sensorimotor experiences. In *Kinesthetic Spectatorship in the Theatre: Phenomenology, Cognition, Movement*, Garner points to two different ways in which language embodies the sensorimotor intentions of gesture: 1) Speech requires the purposeful articulation of the orofacial muscles, such as the tongue, teeth, lungs, and body, which produce a certain physicality that carries meaning (189), and 2) Language is embedded with action and kinesthetic imagery that produces a virtual gesturality (7). Garner points to various interesting studies by cognitive scientists Friedemann Pulvermüller, Luciano Fadiga, and Véronique Boulenger

which show that the premotor and motor areas in the brain that are responsible for conducting an action are also activated when a person sees, hears or reads the action, even when language is using them abstractly or idiomatically (203). Furthermore, when these areas are impaired, the person's ability to process conceptual and linguistic knowledge is also compromised. Finally, because languages vary in their linguistic accounts of the world, so do the kinesthetic experiences of the cultures associated with them, which might indicate why we use gestures more so when learning a new language which doesn't adequately "translate" our experience of a certain event.

By looking at the differences between cultural experiences as originated in the kinesthetic realm, we begin to gain additional knowledge on how gestures might not only be a way to express one's specific thoughts and experience in the world, but also how they might function as means to harness knowledge from lived experience. Next, we shall see this phenomenon up close by examining the participation of gesture in acquiring culturally-specific knowledge.

Gesture as (cultural) inscription and inflection

Gesturing is a motor phenomenon and therefore part of the natural world; at the same time, a gesture is a unit of significant, visible shape, a quantity of employable force, and therefore part of the cultural world. It is by gesturing that bodies become inscribed with meanings in cultural environments, but it is also by gesturing that these inscribed meanings achieve embodiment and inflection.

–Carrie Noland, "Agency and Embodiment: Performing Gestures/Producing Culture"

We've seen that gesturing is a key component to how our actions acquire meaning, how we process thought, how we learn and express language, and how we communicate. But when it comes to culture, gestures perform an even more peculiar role. Before I continue, it's important to identify what is meant by "culture". Here, I am referring to all knowledge learned from living in a group, typically a society which shares specific values and customs.

In "Choreographing Empathy", Susan Leigh Foster gathers accounts from dance scholars such as Deidre Sklar, Randy Martin, and Lena Hammergren, as well as Pierre Bourdieu's concept of the habitus, to defend the idea that kinesthetic experience is

representative of specific cultural values and of political viewpoints, and thus constitute a way of knowing in a given cultural context. This knowledge constitutes a way of moving, but also is able to harness emotional and conceptual memory (8).

Like Foster, Carrie Noland is also interested in how gesture performs culture, and gathers accounts from multiple scholars and philosophers who have analyzed the subject. However, unlike Foster, Noland is able to decipher gesture in kinesthetic terms a bit deeper to show how gesture functions as a resisting force of culture. She begins by acknowledging how Marcel Mauss established the field of study of gesture as a biological, social, and psychological phenomenon with his work “Techniques of the Boy”, published in 1935. She credits him with observing how culture can inscribe the body in a particular way through gesture, but more interestingly, how the body has the potential to resist some of this inscription back. In her words:

As a close reading of “Techniques of the Body” demonstrates, . . . the performance of acquired social practices – involving kinesthetic feedback – may create forms of resistance that no inscription can entirely fix. (Noland 20)

According to Noland, the viewpoint of gesture as a way for the body to be interoceptively available to itself is one of the most valuable contributions from Mauss. Furthering her quest to discover the agency of gesture, she brings in Maurice Merleau-Ponty and his account of gesture as a form of embodied thought, and his intermediary take on gesture as that which mediates between the body’s biological predisposition and culture’s impositions (56). Through the work of paleoethnographer André Leroi-Gourhan, Noland includes the notion of tools and technology, and how machines have always been closely related to humankind and the gestures we produce – whether that be through the gestures we use to make the tools, or through the gestures that tools make us do – and how this differs according to the type of technique and technology (93-95). Then, she invites Judith Butler into the conversation to understand how repetition in gesture is related to producing and/or performing culture. She critiques Butler’s fixed notion of cultural inscription in the form of performed gender in that it does not allow for any kinesthetic agency in the act of gesturing (171-172). However, she celebrates Butler’s remarks on the importance of repetition for the successful performance of the social (cultural) gesture. Because it must be repeated, it must be acquired as a form of

skill, which is potentially learned through the act of mimicry, verbal manipulation, and experimentation (176).

Finally, and perhaps most significantly, Noland brings in Sally Ann Ness to show that even though gestures that take cultural and/or social form as habit can make permanent imprints on the body, these marks never alter the host material's "enduring character" (213). This kinetic agency is particularly interesting to Noland (and not so coincidentally, to us as well), since it opens up the possibility for the development of new ways of moving, being, and experiencing the world.

Approaching gesture through a kinesthetic lens is indeed productive, for it allows us to acknowledge the similar collective experience within a group, while also identifying the presence of the individual; in this way gesture, reaffirms its intermediary position, or better yet, its capacity for mediality (Agamben 58), by mediating which forces of pull or push that the body will carry on or endure. The result isn't an "either, or" situation, nor a linear cadence of events, but rather a holistic and complex amalgam.

To look closer at how this process occurs, I invite us to look at the implications of a gestural kinesthetic viewpoint in performance. The performing arts are useful for our discussion because not only do they entail a physical practice that requires training, they also function as a portrayal of a given kinesthetic knowledge that is showcased to others – an audience. According to Foster, dance practices have always been aligned with cultural and knowledge production, foregrounding the kinesthetic discipling within these structures. Further, she defends the idea that the delimitations of any given kinesthetic ability allow for an empathetic connection with another to emerge (13).

For Noland, it is precisely the bodies that succumb to practice – those in movement and in training – that have the ability to resist the cultural meanings that are projected onto them (175). She highlights the importance of the development of one's own kinesthetic awareness to understand where the cultural marks are being made, to then be able to use this strategically to make marks in places that aren't used to receiving them, as a way to use kinesthesia in a resisting fashion. More specifically, she raises the potential of skilling and deskillling as useful techniques in this process (214).

If we consider the remarks from our colleague Ben Spatz, which state that embodied practices pertain both to performance and the every day (4), then every body

is inherently a trainable body, and thus has the potential to make marks “elsewhere”. And as Garner affirmed, “as the lived inside of kinetic action, kinesthesia represents the dynamism of embodied self-experience” (146) – so to be alive, is to be pulsing with kinesthetic knowledge and the potential to resist.

In the next section, we will look at the ambiguous roles of empathy and dissonance that gesture can play through a kinesthetic analysis in performance, and look at how some performance pieces have taken on gesture in various of these forms.

Gesture as empathy and dissonance (in performance)

These changes (in the understanding of the human mind that have led to the concept of the embodied mind) reframe the debate about the nature of acting by going beyond dualities such as body/mind or emotion/reason or even truth/technique to describe acting in a holistic sense, a sense that recognizes the way that meaning is both made and expressed in movement as well as language in an environment defined by space and time.

–Rick Kemp, “Embodied Acting: what neuroscience tells us about performance”

Theatre and dance, like all other forms of performance, function as a “domain of spectatorship and embodiment” (Garner 1), and play an important role in making and communicating meaning (Garner 149, Kemp 20). The discovery of mirror neurons by neuroscientists in the 1990s (qtd. in Garner 1) were a huge contributor to our understanding of how we embody the movement of another, and to why we might undergo imitation, the development of language, and empathy (2). And because of the way that art lives in parallel to modern life, not only creating a reference for it but sometimes questioning these very same modes of living, the intense enactment of the performer and the corresponding engaged witnessing of the spectator creates a fruitful environment for the spreading of new ways of living (149).

The notions of kinesthetic empathy (or resonance or sympathy) and inner mimicry have been heavily present in dance since more than eighty years ago, when these terms were first introduced by the dance critic John Martin in the New York Times (3); the cognitive discoveries regarding mirror neurons have only worked to solidify these concepts. However, this has also been met with critique and counterproposals from more contemporary scholars such as Foster, who challenge the idea that embodying the experience of the other is a universally-accessible event, and rather propose that

embodiment is contingent upon historical, cultural, and individual experiences, as we have seen before. And although Martin called for audiences to “awaken the dead muscle sense” (qtd. in Garner 149) to be able to access physical experiences that may otherwise be new to them, understanding both the capacity and limits of embodiment is key to rethinking the role of gesture.

While there is clear “evidence” that sameness in embodiment can lead to a certain kinesthetic level of resonance between two individuals, the idea that difference can be also be resonant is not as obvious. But perhaps resonance is not the best word for our intents and purposes – perhaps we can shift our thinking to consider how an empathetic response in the embodiment of another’s actions can lead to newness and creating space, and how a response of difference or dissonance in embodiment can lead to convergence and connection. More interesting still is how both processes can be happening simultaneously in one witnessing body. Garner supports this idea by acknowledging that, both “phenomenologically and cognitively, we come to know others by navigating a perceptual field of commonalities and differences” (11).

The various cultural and historical conditions for embodiment, as previously mentioned by Foster, and the differences they may provoke raise the question of mediation within these multiple forces of sameness and difference. As Garner states: “The differences opened up by these variables raise difficult questions about accessibility, knowability, and identification, and they challenge any notion that empathy and kinesthetic engagement are automatic, total, or unmediated” (10). If we consider the mediality of gesture (Agamben 58), we gain once again more depth into how gesturing may negotiate these processes. To elucidate these concepts, I would like to bring in Carrie Noland and Stanton B. Garner, Jr. once more.

One of the greatest accounts of embodiment that Garner works through in his book, “Kinesthetic Spectatorship in the Theatre”, is his take on disability in the phenomenology of movement. He begins by critiquing most of the psychological, scientific, and phenomenological studies on movement by stating how these have primarily focused on “abled” bodies and constituted these forms as the norm, to which he raises two important implications: 1) It marginalizes those who do not fall under this category, and disconsiders the alternative forms of embodiment that these individuals might undertake (and thus the depths to which we understand embodiment), and 2) It

weakens the understanding of “normative” experiences by assuming that impairment and limitation do not belong to “abled” bodies. Essentially, for Garner, all “abled” bodies have some accounts of “disabledness”, while the opposite is also true (11).

Noland shares this belief as well when she constitutes the process of skill acquisition as marked with constraints, but also charged with possibility; while we experience physical resistance in the act of learning a new physical technique, we are also automatically immersed in the continuum of transcending (or at least, diminishing) our limitations. This happens not only when we learn a new bodily skill, but also when we attempt to reinvent or subvert a gesture we already know (214).

To be alive is to cope with limitation. To assume otherwise is to envision a reality of omnipotence. According to Garner, we are “born helpless into the world” and thus a “cannot” is always imbedded in an “I can” (89-90). Although varying tremendously in the degrees of impairment, the seed of disability is present in those who undergo neurological damage due to stroke, for example (such as my mother), but also in those who get the flu, fall out of practice from a once-mastered skill, or even those who feel internally disabled due to a cultural standard, such as an oppressive patriarchal regime (87). To face impediment is to be met with cultural, social, emotional, and psychological resistance as much as it is to be met with a physical one. To be clear, I am not in the slightest way suggesting that the experience of a compromised body with a significant disability is the same as that of someone who has no extensive accessibility needs, but rather implying that the latter is also not an all-powerful being.

Now that we understand the supporting and intermediary role that gesture can play in thought and expression, inscription and inflection, as well as empathy and dissonance, both in everyday life and performance, let us analyze some performative works in particular to see how they push these notions of gesture through the acts of interruption, mimicry, and metamorphosis.

Performative acts of interruption, mimicry, and metamorphosis

Interruption

Seeing interruption, or kinesthetic stuttering, in dance performances has been considered by some dance critics as a threat to dance, especially to those who regard it as a form that privileges “flow or continuum of movement” (Lepecki 1). But André Lepecki, in his book *Exhausting Dance: Performance and the Politics of Movement*, believes that this discomfort is productive, because it opens up the critical dialogue of the ontology of dance while reframing the body through a philosophical and political lens. This discussion opens up the possibility for choreographic strategies that are usually situated outside the form (and thus question the imposed boundaries on the category itself), and brings into questioning what is happening not only to bodies but to their relationship with “subjectivities, politics, and movement” (5). By bringing into the conversation philosophers such as Michel Foucault, Jacques Derrida, Gilles Deleuze, and Félix Guattari, Lepecki punctuates the importance of a differentiated philosophical account of the body, one that looks at the body “as an open and dynamic system of exchange, constantly producing modes of subjection and control, as well as of resistance and becomings” (5).

I would like to highlight two philosophical and political critiques that Lepecki makes with regards to expectations of the moving body in modernity, and how two artists – Jeanine Durning and Ralph Lemon – have offered alternative modes of moving that constitute acts of resistance. Firstly, Lepecki contextualizes the privileged body in modernity as one that is straight, white, and male, and which moves in continuous, effortless and self-sufficient flow (13). This body is always energized, always in balance, and never stuttering. Secondly, it moves in an opened-canvas terrain, ignoring all forms, gestures, and walks of life that existed before it. To Lepecki, this constitutes the phenomenon of the “kinetic spectacle of modernity” (14). By employing kinesthetic stuttering, or interruption, and kinesthetic stumbling, Jeanine Durning and Ralph Lemon seem to perform what Lepecki calls a resisting act of “Kinesthetic Politics”, defying the pre-assumed abilities and grounds for movement of the privileged modern body (13).

Jeanine Durning's performances of "inging" (the chocolate factory theater, "Jeanine Durning – inging") and "to being" (the chocolate factory theater, "Jeanine Durning – To Being") are both part of her practice of "nonstopping", evoked through different bodily gestures. While "inging" is a nonstopping of thought through gestural utterance in language, "to being" does the same by prioritizing the gestures of the arms, legs, head, neck, and torso in multidirectionality and displacement. Although the motion is nonstopping, in Durning's practice we can see the endless kinesthetic interruption and stuttering process of thought as gesture, always in action, but never becoming, always moving, but never arriving, evoking the inability (or unwillingness) to allow thought to settle – "a force against the absolute, the nameable" (the chocolate factory theater, "Jeanine Durning – To Being").

Durning's practice evokes Lepecki's notions of historical interrogation in performance and Nadia Seremetakis' concept of the "still act" (qtd. in Lepecki 15) – moments of agency where the subject interrogates the repressive cultural and political forces that are always trying to delimit, pinpoint, and categorize. These moments create suspension, or "a corporeally based interruption of modes of imposing flow" (15). In a way, Durning's nonstopping gesture is a form of inflecting not only the forms of speaking and moving, but the forms of thinking – as Noland suggested, it's a gestural resistance of sorts, with regards to thought itself. It proposes a way of thinking that is always dynamic, always evolving, always in transformation. The chocolate factory theater's account of Durning's practice offers an excellent insight into this open-ended thinking, always in co-creation between performer and audience:

. . . inging is a choreography of the mind, moving in the continuous present. It tracks the velocity of thought through a proprioceptive cascade of words. Both performer and audience are in perpetual disequilibrium, confronted with the limits of language as a paradigm for communication, knowledge and understanding. The body and its gesture emerge as the inevitable bridge between thought and language. ("Jeanine Durning – inging")

Finally, this reiterates the importance of sensorimotor experience to the development of thought, present as an embodied form in both the body and language. It also reminds us of Agamben's accounts of gesture as a means without transcendence, which in this case portrays gesture as a means for an alternative process of thinking – one that isn't worried about the thinking being coherent, or leading up to a clearly

defined objective, but shows the messy, dynamic, and wholistic process of thinking in a body that does not “move spectacularly in flow on flat terrain” (Lepecki 14).

Likewise, Ralph Lemon’s performance of “4Walls” (EMPAC @ Rensselaer) evokes a similar account of Kinesthetic interrogation by employing a form of kinesthetic stumbling, a gestural exhaustion that portrays a disorientation and constant failure of the body. The performers, composed of five black dancers, stumble and fall on top of each other as if unable to settle or arrive, much like Durning. In a “dance with no form” (creating another ontological inquiry) (EMPAC @ Rensselaer) they struggle to find their grounding in a space which seems to be a flat surface, but rather conjures a resistance against the invisible forces of “fixing the subject within overly prescribed pathways and steps, fixating movement within a certain politics of time and of place”(Lepecki 15).

The practice of kinesthetic stuttering or stumbling as gesture can reform our thought process and create provocative interruptions in the representation of the modern dancing body. However, so can the attempt to mimic representation itself. Next, we will look at how mimicry can be used as a form of gestural inflection.

Mimicry

Mimicry, or mimesis, according to Garner, has been traditionally used to describe “the act of imitation and a representational correspondence between a work of art and the world it depicts (typically a relationship of fidelity or exactitude)”. The imitation seeks to perform a faithful *representation* of the cultural, social, and aesthetic standards of a given historical moment, and therefore has conventionally sought to confirm gestural inscriptions, rather than defy them. But that depends on how mimicry is used.

In Akram Khan’s “zero degrees” (Akram Khan Company), Akram Khan and Sidi Larbi work through a subverted version of gestural mimesis, one which Garner would say functions with agency through the act of perceiving the gesture, taking it in, making it your own, and then performing it back. In a way, this echos Noland’s resisting act in gesture as well, because it increases the potency of the gesture to inflect the inscription it receives. In this case, the inscription isn’t explicitly culture, but rather the gesture of another. In “zero degrees”, this takes place through the constant reenactment of the

other, as both performers work through finding the middle (or reference) point of life's dualities (much like the intermediary position of gesture that Noland brings forth).

Akram Khan and Sidi Larbi begin by telling the same story, with the same gestures, at the same time, side by side (Akram Khan Company). It is a spectacular act of mimesis. In a way, it displays our mimetic abilities, and confirms the strength in our mimetic structures, which we use so much for learning how to interact with the world as babies. It reminds us again of the potency of our kinesthetic embodiment. However, as much as it is alike, it is also different, and at some levels it fails to be the exactly the same story and gestures, just by the fact that it is told by two different people, and that is enough to see the personal idiosyncrasies (gestural inflections) of each performer. It shows us how we are both abled and disabled at mimesis, and how we can both experience abledness and disabledness simultaneously.

Another interesting point is that, while the story is told through linguistic content, having both actors imitate each other potentializes the verbal and physical gestural utterances, drawing attention to the meaning in the cadence, intensity, inflection, and holistic use of gesture.

This has also been done in a similar way with Jonathan Burrow's and Matteo Fargion's "Speaking Dance (2006)" (Burrows), but using speech as gestural utterance and as a form of gestural mimicry. While both Burrow and Fargion just speak words (and move their heads and feet ever so slightly while they are sitting on their chairs), they do so in a way that reiterates the importance of gestural inflection in language. There is a specific emphasis on how each word is said, when it is said, how many times it is repeated, and who repeats it – and this gestural dance creates movement not only in terms of the gestural rhythm it propagates, but also in the way that it projects a virtual dance. In this way, they imitate a sort of representation, but not in the way that we are accustomed to it – they perform mimicry of a dance stage performance through the gestural cadence of speech and through the choice of action words. Knowing the strong neural connection between hearing a word and activating the corresponding motor regions, which are responsible for performing the action, it is as if they were imitating the dance for us, but in their own, agential way.

Finally, a similar phenomenon occurs with Xavier Le Roy in “Le Sacre Du Printemps” (Kaaitheater), but the mimicry works primarily through non-linguistic gesture. In this piece, Le Roy imitates an orchestra conductor conducting the famous Stravinsky piece. While he attempts to faithfully imitate the conductor at many times, in other moments he performs mimetic gestures that are informed by the effect of the music on him (as opposed to the other way around), not following the common gestural “conducting” material. In an interview, he said he did this because he noticed that a conductor is not needed by the musicians 100% of the time (Conectedance). In a way, conducting is also about performing the role of a conductor, or “imitating” the representation of what a conductor should look like. In this reflection, he noticed that at many times it is the music that is manipulating the conductor, instead of the opposite. His observation reframes the accounts of agency in the act of conduction itself, and poses it perhaps as a form of mimicry to the music.

At times we are imitating music, and at others, we are imitating a fellow human being. But sometimes, we imitate so deeply that we transform into things such as objects. Observing how gestural metamorphosis takes place is an interesting look into how the body can take various forms and reevaluate how we relate to our environment.

Metamorphosis

The neural patterning of proprioception informs the brain on the positioning of the body in space and can stimulate states of imagination and affect. This phenomenon participates not only in learning physical practices, but also influences one’s sense of self (Kemp 26). By understanding how our bodies influence our thought processes through our sensorimotor activity in the world, but also in where our body is positioned and which shapes they take form, their ability to shapeshift becomes a subversive gestural possibility.

For this section, I will bring back Xavier Le Roy to talk about his piece “Self-Unfinished (1998)” (The Thing About). In this work, Le Roy goes through various stages of metamorphosis, shapeshifting the body into fantastical creatures and aberrations, stretching out time and inducing the (dis)belief of how it is even possible. As Yvonne Rainer stated in an email to Le Roy:

. . . For me it alternated variously as insect, martian, chicken, watering can, caterpillar into pupa, et al. What saved it from being a Pilobolus - like entertainment (a crowd - pleasing American group that combines bodies to create biomorphic oddities) were the stillnesses and extended durations. We must sit with our attention riveted, waiting for the next stirring. (Rainer qtd. in "SELF UNFINISHED (1998)")

By carefully crafting different becomings as he travels through space, Le Roy reminds us of what the body can do not in terms of pushing the limits of the body, but by inviting alternative outlooks on how to engage with our surroundings (The Thing About). Because of the way our interaction with the environment shapes the way we embody meaning by informing our neural maps (Johnson 135), to flip the dynamics in these interactions is to invite new forms of meaning, as well as thought.

Gestural metamorphosis can be seen in dance, but also in visual art, among other media. As Lepecki mentioned, choreographic strategies can exist both in dance but also outside of it (5). Erwin Wurm and Jan Hakon Erichsen are two artists who work within this field. In "One Minute Sculptures" ("ONE MINUTE SCULPTURES"), Wurm crafts seemingly recognizable every day objects with a twist, and invites passers-by to engage with the objects in a specific way (there are instructions and diagrams) to make the sculpture complete. These are transitory, every-shifting, dynamic, sculptures, which "last" approximately around a minute (as you can imagine). These peculiar "sculptures" are everything but static, and blur the boundary between the animate and inanimate, morphing the body with the object.

Like Le Roy's work, these interactions invite an alternate way of moving about the world using the tools we are used to, but perhaps in a quirkier way, one which steps outside of their main functionality. By doing so, it invites us to think about what else exists apart from the dictated, framed, and categorized way we manipulate the world around us, much like Durning did with thought, and similarly to how Le Roy did with the conductor role.

Erichsen evokes another outlook on tools, too. In his bizarre tool creations (Erichsen), he morphs the body into a destruction machine, serving the objects, as opposed to the other way around. By taping knives to his head to puncture balloons or

rolling on top of tacos while wrapped in aluminum foil, he pushes our notions of what objects can do, but also of what bodies can be.

Through metamorphosis, these artists created ways to transform the body into a shapeshifting gestural entity that suggests an alternate pathway to looking at the world, bringing new meaning to common, every day objects, and amplifying the possibilities of being.

And finally, an open ending....

. . . the minor gesture is everywhere, all the time. Despite its precarity, it resurfaces punctually, claiming not space as such, but space-of-variation. The minor invents new forms of existence, and with them, in them, we come to be. These temporary forms of life travel across the everyday, making untimely existing political structures, activating new modes of perception, inventing languages that speak in the interstices of major tongues.

–Erin Manning, “The Minor Gesture”

The performative accounts of interruption, mimicry and metamorphosis that I have attempted to lay out in this paper are a quest to open up alternate forms of being through gesture, by looking in lesser-known places, hidden spots, and overlooked nooks. I am amazed at the endless possibilities afforded by gesture both in the preservation of ways of being, but also in thinking about new forms of thought, expression, movement, and values. I believe that Erin Manning captures this well in her book “The Minor Gesture”, in which the minor is a force that courses through the predetermined definitions of value, questioning the structural standards, inviting change, and functioning in an open-ended process of shifting. It is volatile, never settling – always searching (1). A gesture is perhaps, like Agamben said, that which pertains to the human because it is always searching, always trying to find ways to endure, to carry humanity onwards, and perhaps part of doing that is navigating the various ways of being.

In some capacity, my mother is the same before her stroke. In other capacities, she isn't, and gesturing is how I see that. But change is inevitable for the human race – we are always changing, always shifting between things that our body “can” do, and things it “cannot”. We get older, we learn a language, we lose sleep, we twist our ankle, we change mattresses, we meet new people – and through it, gestures are carrying us

through, negotiating between the different forces of pull, and finding openings of possibility where we didn't see them.

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Appendix B.

Video Documentation

Created and performed by Luciana Fortes

Sound Artists – Daniel Blackie and Sam Meadahl

Software Design – Casper Leerink

Videography – Leonardo Cordonis

Description:

The full 35-min video recording of *Figure 8*.

File Name:

figure8lucianafortes.mp4

Appendix C.

The Five Sections and Compositional Elements of *Figure 8*

Below is a break down of the five sections of the work, including details about the movement tasks and use of sound, space, and costume, as well as how the location for each family member was chosen.

Sections I, II, and III

The piece begins with a bird's eye view of me, positioned on top of my white coffee table in the center of my living room, resting on my knees, face down. The audio score makes a static noise, which indicates for me to stand up and prepare for the signal to go to the first family member. In this section, the audio score is comprised of 16-second audio clips that begin with the signature audio clip from a family member repeated 4 times, followed by a composition of various of their audio clips that includes fragments and sometimes repetition, and is interrupted by static at the end. This takes me around the house to each of them about 1-2 times and is an opportunity to "greet" them in my space.

Transitioning into each character functions in the following way: for each signature sound, there is a signature gesture that was pulled from the interviews, one that the family member repeated more emphatically. To "get into" the character, I repeat the gesture as I move towards their place in my house. Then, I inhabit their gestures in the space while lip-synching to their voices in the recording. As soon as the static interrupts the audio I am queued to let go of that family member. I close my eyes and drop my head, as if the subject has left my body, allowing the process of mimesis to temporarily dissolve. Then, the audio tunes into another signature sound and I am prompted to embody the next subject of impersonation and move on (literally) to them.

The physical displacement here manifests the process of transformation and encounter with each character, evoking the idea that I must travel to their specific place to be able to "meet" them. This resembles the literal scenario of taking a plane ride to

Brazil to be able to see them, all the way in the southern hemisphere – a long and tiring trip.

In transition to section two, the audio emits a windy sound that reminisces parts of the voices, very far away in the background. This repeats three times. The first time, I crawl to the center table and lay on it face down, clutching the rim with my hands. The second, I shift 90 degrees, and then again for the third time.

Sections II and III function in the same structure as section I, with the same transitions, except that the audio repeats the windy score only twice after Section II, and only once after Section III. The gestures also begin to expand and contract by receiving different stimuli from the music. In Section II, the signature sounds repeat only once or twice, and the voices in the audio clips suffer various effects, such as distortion and repetition. The clips are also longer in length, varying between 32-64 seconds. As the voices in the audio begin to warp and bend, so do my gestures.

In Section III, the sound clips become a bit longer, varying between 90 seconds and 2 minutes. In this phase, the audio also suffers various effects, but instead of distortion, they shift to match the beat and rhythm of various famous pop songs, such as “Girls Just Wanna have Fun”, by Cyndi Lauper, and “Thriller”, by Michael Jackson. The gestures once again reflect accordingly, expanding the personification of the family member to the catchy pop beats.

Section IV

This section is marked by a sound score with voices from all eight family members (and me), to the backdrop of *forró*, a popular musical (and dance) style from the northeast of Brazil characterized by the strong use of instruments such as the accordion, triangle and zabumba. In this section, I run around all eight locations to pick up the objects and relocate them, reconfiguring the notion of how they inhabit space. At the end, I attempt to pick all of them up and take them to the center table.

Section V

This section has two parts. In the first one, I step onto the table, and let go of all the items onto its surface, while the audio is in silence. Then, the sound score begins to play another musical mash-up of voice and a pop song (2min20secs long) – this time with my own voice (mainly laughter) to the backdrop of an Argentinian cumbia song. Throughout the duration of the song, I slowly take out my hair tie and remove the black jumpsuit with white polka dots, only to reveal another jumpsuit underneath, this time completely white. The camera goes slowly around me to complete one revolution and ends up in the same spot once the song is over.

For the second and last part of the performance, the longest audio piece plays (4 minutes). This sound score is also marked by my voice (all excerpts from the interviews I conducted) with sound effects such as distortion, repetition, speeding up, and pitch shifts. This score has a more sinister feel and includes other sounds such as ticking, static, and high-pitched electronic sounds. The movement is characterized by a revisit to the signature gestures from each family member in sequence, repeated in an endless loop. This phrase starts to evolve as it is repeated and becomes a revelatory site for entropy in the body. As the music calms down, I push the objects off the table and make my way to lying on top of it with my legs bent and body contorted, with my back to the table. The piece ends with eight repetitions of “*que que você mais puxou?*” in my voice, meaning “what did you get the most?”, as my body jolts slightly to the sound of each repetition.

The locations

Front door and coat rack – 1st square, Tio David – Lucid and joyful at 98 years old, this is the amazing patriarch of the family. Never have I seen him sad! He danced at my wedding and never misses an opportunity to get the family together. The parties he threw at his trendy apartment were legendary. I chose this location because the front door guards the house and also welcomes you into the home, just like this patriarch;

White shelf – 2nd square, Waldo – Waldo is one of my mom’s first cousins, and definitely the guy who knows our family’s heritage the most. A great pianist, at parties he is a sure bet to get everybody singing and sharing great stories about our ancestors in a

hysterical manner. Since he gave the interview alongside Tio David, I kept them close in my home. He can be also super cheeky, which is hilarious to witness;

Black bookshelf – 3rd square, Nena – Nena is my mom’s sister. Although 13 years apart in age, they are super close. Nena is one of the most expressive people in my family. When I was little, I used to imitate her, doing a bit where I kept pinching my nose and waving my arms, just as she did. Also a super connoisseur of our family’s history and a Jungian psychologist, Nena browsed through numerous books during our interview (and never seemed to run out of stories, hence our 2.5 hour interview). She gives the best gifts and I love to have her interpret my dreams;

Bedroom – 4th square, Mami – My mom is notorious for how she lays on the bed when she is watching movies. A former ballerina herself, flexibility and having a high comfort level with her body have never been a problem. With her legs perched on top of pillows (because you know, it’s good for circulation) in a relaxed, open stance, that’s the image I have in my head when I think of her. Also (and this only came to me later), she had two rather serious medical situations where she had to adopt a similar position: when she spent two months in bedrest due to herniated disks, and when she had a stroke;

Desk with computer – 5th square, Papi – My dad is an extremely responsible guy, who can usually be found working on his computer in his office at home (even on weekends). Since I can remember he has worked harder than anyone I know, working two jobs (he left the house at 7am and arrived back home at 11pm) to pay for my university education in the USA. When I conducted the interview with him, he was on his computer desk;

Dining table with tea – 6th square, Vovó Regina – My grandma is a lover of teas and of family, of course. Since I can remember she has hosted Sunday lunches at her house. It used to be my favorite thing – going to her house to play with my cousins, swim in the pool and watch Brazilian TV shows. On top of being classy and strict (she went to an all-girls French school with nuns, the *sacre-coeur*) she has also always been super cool, and I think (secretly) a feminist. She loves playing soccer and painting her nails super colorful colors (she’s so proud of it). My dad says we look and are so alike;

Sofa – 7th square, Vovô Chiquinho – My grandpa is a quiet, endearing, hard-working, and detail-oriented guy. He rose to the position of vice-president at a big multinational company by starting out from nothing. An economist and a painter, his painting and woodwork are impeccable. I remember one time when I was 12, I asked him to help me cover my schoolbook with contact paper (a requirement in Brazilian schools). I had never seen someone do such minute work – I think we were there for hours to get it perfectly straight;

Toy chest – 8th square, Bela – 7 years older than me and a child psychologist, I have always looked up to my older sister (although sometimes we would switch the older sister role). While I was always the rational one, calculating my every step and afraid to take risks, my sister (a tad more impulsive) would be pushing me to the world and telling me to have a little more fun. Being so different but also so close, we've always learned a lot from each other;

Center coffee table – 9th square, me – The place where the piece begins, where transitions occur, and when the piece ends. The 9th square is also a place where my own individuality receives a place for expression, a resting ground of sorts. It is a place to reveal the labor, effort and the vulnerability so inherent to the process of embodiment.

The costume

In the piece, I wore two different jumpsuits: black with white polka dots, and just white. The former, worn in sections I, II, and III, functioned in different ways. First, it was an apparel used in the detection of motion-capture, which I thought was fitting in portraying the “capture” of these gestures. Secondly, the black and white contrasted the colorful setting of my house and the idea of each square having a corresponding color. As a suit in grey scale, it fit the role of “neutral” body that could “take on” color. Lastly, the white polka dots served as a reminder of the fragmented account of the gestures. The latter, worn in sections IV and V, had the purpose of bringing a sense of unity and harmony. As white encompasses all colors, while also representing a blank slate, it felt fitting for the last section, in which all the gestures (including my own processing of them) can come together in a holistic manner.