

# SIOBHAN DAVIES DANCE

## ***Notes on Gesture — I, II, III*** **16 September – 27 November**

Closing event taking place 26 November

*'Each gesture is an event — one might even say a drama — in itself.'*  
— Walter Benjamin

*Notes on Gesture — I, II, III* is a three part exhibition which unfolds throughout the year, leading towards a major new dance work by Siobhan Davies Dance. The exhibition considers the status of a gesture — whether physical or spoken — as something either made or performed. Indeed, while gestures might seem to be immediate, each has a history, a choreography, and these are considered through artists' performance, film, photography, and spoken word, as well as archival material from national and international collections.

The exhibitions draw upon the art historian Aby Warburg's idea of the recurrence of certain gestures in different times and different places — the 'afterlife of images' — and so certain works will be included in more than one of the exhibitions. These shifting, recurring displays will create new combinations throughout the year, with works made familiar and unfamiliar in turn.

Aby Warburg was born in Hamburg in 1866, the eldest son and heir of one of Europe's richest banking families. However, at the age of 12 the young Aby made a deal with his younger brother, Max, saying that he would forego his birthright if Max agreed to buy him every book for which he might wish. Max readily agreed, unaware of the extent of the private library his elder sibling would eventually create.

Warburg was an unconventional art historian — he was an unconventional figure in many ways — and published very little. He spent his time and vast financial resources, amassing the materials that would form the basis for his studies, most notably the transmission of classical iconography in later periods, especially the Renaissance. He gathered not just rare books — sometimes unique ledgers showing Florentine trade, in the hope of identifying certain patrons — but also photographic reproductions of paintings, friezes, carved panels and funerary urns, at a time when such images were unavailable elsewhere. These images were later sorted into categories and subcategories, the titles of which, on the subject of 'Gesture', can be found scattered across the windows at the rear of Siobhan Davies Studios, a constellation of acts, or instructions, or even descriptions of that which is occurring in the space beyond.

Towards the very end of his life — he died in 1929 — Warburg worked on what has become, perhaps, his most influential project, the *Mnemosyne Atlas*, named after the Greek goddess of memory. For this, he would take these photographs, often of artworks separated by thousands of years and thousands of miles, and pin them onto large, hessian-covered boards, rearranging them in order to draw out unexpected affinities between them in form and content, how a gesture carved upon a classical tomb might reappear, for example, in a Florentine painting. Photographs of some of these arrangements from his library in Hamburg, can be seen downstairs in the parlour.

This method — and sensibility — has been adopted during the first two parts of this exhibition too, with photographic reproductions from the photography library of the Warburg Institute — now part of the University of London — selected and displayed upon a hessian-covered board on the first floor landing. Over the months of these exhibitions, the sun has bleached the

hessian not covered by the card-mounted images, and the shadows of these images remain upon the board, their representational forms now possessing an abstract 'afterlife'. Only one image has been placed for this exhibition, a photograph of one of Warburg's display in Hamburg, of anguished facial expressions.

Similar anguish can be found nearby, on the face of the celebrated Dutch artist Bas Jan Ader, caught in a series of three small black-and-white photographs taken in 1970–1. The title, *I'm too sad to tell you*, represents a larger body of works: these photographs, a silent three-minute film of the artist crying, and a postcard which Ader posted to friends, his cryptic, melancholic expression written upon the reverse. The viewer is never told the cause of Ader's distress, and indeed, we cannot tell if it is even genuine.

If Ader really was just borrowing his pose from previous works, one of them must surely be Carl Theodor Dreyer's extraordinarily powerful film, *The Passion of Joan of Arc*, made in 1928. The film is widely considered one of the greatest films ever made; the director Michael Mann has commented that it is, 'Human experience conveyed purely from the visualisation of the human face: no one else has composed and realised human beings quite like Dreyer.' The face we see most is that of the Renée Jeanne Falconetti, who played Joan. Dreyer forced her to kneel for hours on a hard stone floor, but to betray no discomfort, her performance then suggesting a powerful but suppressed inner pain. Filmed at great length, and almost entirely in close-up, Falconetti's expressions are edited by Dreyer in order to create an experience which is as nuanced as it is overwhelming.

During one scene in the film, the sun shines through Joan's Rouen cell, and casts a shadow of a cross — actually the window frame — upon the floor, which she sees as a sign from God, and a form of personal revelation. Both the action of the sun, and of revelation, can be seen in Anna Barriball's video *Daylight* (2013), even if we might not consider the action divine. Here we see the shadows of leaves cast against a yellow background, moving in the wind, and shifting in intensity, too, a fading which pulses in time with the artist's heartbeat. The actions of the sun, of the earth, and of our own bodies comes together in a moment of fragile beauty. In Barriball's other work, *Sunrise / Sunset XII* (2012), the artist has placed paper over a window light and, with a soft pencil, rubbed its graphic image onto the sheet. The resultant image is both dark and lustrous and, as the title suggest, one is uncertain whether it might herald a new dawn, or presage a further darkness. Its representation of a 'black sun', a phrase used by the philosopher and psychoanalyst Julia Kristeva to denote melancholia, does not necessarily inspire a powerful sense of hope.

Hopelessness can often lead to surrender, and this is what we find in our final work, and perhaps the first that the viewer sees, Graham Gussin's *Surrendering 3* (1994). Here we see the artist standing on what seems to be the viewing platform of an airport, his arms raised. Yet there is no sense of the 'terror', here, against which the West has been waging war for so long, indeed, no other action at all, nor anyone else present. To whom is he surrendering, and why, we do not know. In its starkness, its simplicity, the gesture — like Ader's crying — seems to be both particular and universal, part of the everyday human condition which we cannot avoid, and to which we must hold up our hands.

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*Notes on Gesture* is conceived by Jeremy Millar, an artist based in London and Ramsgate, senior tutor in Critical Practice, and tutor in Critical Writing in Art and Design the Royal College of Art, London.

## **SOCIAL MEDIA**

@SiobhanDavies @jeremy\_millar\_1 #NotesonGesture

## WORKS IN THE EXHIBITION

### Ground Floor Lobby

Graham Gussin

*Surrendering 1*, 1995

Black and white photograph

### Ground Floor Bottom of Stairs

Anna Barribal

*Daylight*, 2013

Video loop

Courtesy the artist and Frith Street Gallery

### Ground Floor Wall

Anna Barribal

*Sunrise / Sunset XII*, 2012

Pencil on paper

Courtesy the artist and Frith Street Gallery

### First Floor Landing

Image from Warburg Institute Photographic Collection

Photographic prints on card

Courtesy of Warburg Institute Photographic Collection, London

### First Floor Long Wall

Bas Jan Ader

*Study for I'm too sad to tell you (triptych)*, 1971

3 Silver Gelatin prints

Courtesy Simon Lee Gallery / Estate of Bas Jan Ader

### First Floor Balcony

Carl Theodore Dreyer

*The Passion of Joan of Arc*, 1928

82 minutes, black and white film

Courtesy Eureka Entertainment Ltd.



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