

# SIOBHAN DAVIES DANCE

## ***Notes on Gesture — I, II, III*** **26 February – 27 November**

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

*Notes on Gesture* is a three part exhibition which unfolds throughout the year, and will lead 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 in this exhibition too, and can be seen most notably on the first floor landing. Here, photographic reproductions from the photography library of the Warburg Institute — now part of the University of London — have been selected and displayed upon a hessian-covered board. The images all show figures wearing loose flowing robes or clothing, often dancers, or nymphs, a figure with which he was particularly obsessed; alongside these images — of classical statuary, or carved reliefs — are some from a quite different period, but which share many of the same characteristics. These

are index cards containing publicity photographs from Murray's Cabaret Club, a Soho establishment where, in the 1960s, the rich and famous (and infamous, too) enjoyed themselves, from the Kray Twins to Princess Margaret. The photographs selected show portraits of the club's dancing girls who took part in the elaborately choreographed floorshows, and here they are seen in costumes as diaphanously revealing as those to be found in the classical imagery shown alongside them. While such outfits were meant to suggest a certain freedom, there were hidden restrictions too; many of the women in Murray's worked as prostitutes, forced to use seductive poses and gestures to lure clients. Two of the dancers in the late 1950s and early 1960s were Mandy Rice-Davies and Christine Keeler, whose brief affair with the War Minister, John Profumo, led to one of the greatest scandals of post-war politics. If the Profumo Scandal was one of the defining events of the 1960s, its swirling mix of power, betrayal, and sexual temptation make it seem as archetypal as a pursued Greek nymph.

Power and eroticism can often be found in the sculptures of Rebecca Warren, and this is true of the strident example found in this exhibition, *OO* (2006), located on the ground floor stairwell. This is a dancer's body, too, her form kneaded and pummeled, and in scale and subject it brings to mind Edgar Degas' *Little Fourteen Year-Old Dancer* (c.1881). There is something rather abject about both works, neither possessing the elevating grace which one might associate with a dancer's body. Degas' dancer is flat- rather than fleet-footed, and Warren's is similarly lumpen. Indeed, it is as if Warren has taken the horrified response to Degas' sculpture and used it to initiate her own: 'With bestial effrontery she moves her face forward, or rather her little muzzle — and this word is completely correct because the little girl is the beginning of a rat,' wrote critic Paul Mantz, alluding to the nickname of 'petit rats' by which the adolescent corps de ballet of the Paris Opera were known. 'Why is she so ugly? Why is her forehead, half covered by her hair, marked already, like her lips, with a profoundly vicious character?' One suspects that the bow in the hair of Warren's dancer would do little to prevent a contemporary Mantz from coming to a similar conclusion. Yet, perhaps such a critic is looking for the young girl to possess a demureness that she can barely afford. In the corridors, and stage doors, of the Opera were often found men who were known as 'protectors', a euphemism which one might call ironic were it not so utterly horrific. This is a figure that bears the marks of another's making, and demonstrates its strength through them.

The body and its gestures can also be seen quite clearly in Paul Elliman's video *Untitled (September Magazine)* (2013) located on first floor balcony area, a work which also exists as a 600-page artist's book. Indeed, the book more closely replicates the artist's source materials — magazines, both fashion and pornographic. Over many years Elliman gathered from these publications images of the body which he cropped, often tightly, removing text and, often, context, too. We are uncertain as to what these bodies are doing — sometimes, even, which parts of the body they are — and we are left to wonder what their actions might mean. 'In photographed fragments, the body seems both to correspond to the shapes of letters and to assume writing's inanimate agency,' Elliman has remarked. 'Or maybe another spirit altogether is communicated by the perverse range of images, a secret map of the inner territory of language conducted by the body.' Perhaps in his search for this intimate, occluded language, Elliman's acts might be considered as a contemporary equivalent of Warburg's, who sometimes clipped fashion advertisements from his morning paper should a model's pose seem particularly expressive.

The body, photographed and cropped, appears too in Heather Phillipson's video, *Final Days: UNDERWEAR*, on the ground floor reception screen, although quite what the muscled, male torso of an underwear model expresses it is difficult to say. Phillipson attempts to do so, however, and her video is as much a poem as those published within her prize-winning collections. (The transformation of the poetic is apparent from the very beginning in Phillipson's video humming and whistling of Claude Debussy's *Clair de lune*, a piano suite itself inspired by a poem by Paul Verlaine of the same name.) 'You can tell a lot about the body by breathing it in,' she says, in voice-over, the white Jockey-clad crotch brought closer with each inhalation, and then there are images of real jockeys, and fake horses, accompanied by Hoagy Carmichael's *Moon Country*, music which shares little with Debussy's except the lunar title of its reference. Indeed, this is often how Phillipson's works seem to work: a word leading to an image and an image pointing to a word, a poem to music, notes

noted, a series of gestures, nods, directions and indirections, all material to be prodded and probed, like the wetly-masticated strawberry Chewits smeared across the model's crotch (and made all the more erotic for it). We might consider these the gestures which gestures make, rather than those made by us.

And what of those made by William Anastasi, in his small but powerful drawings? They may seem to possess the fierce expressiveness to be found in much mid-century drawing, but Anastasi — a close friend of the composer and artist John Cage — understood well the limitations of artistic intention. Like Cage, Anastasi is interested in what occurs when the body is liberated from intention, and is allowed to act without it, shaped by circumstance. In making the *Subway Drawings*, located on the first floor long wall, Anastasi places a piece of paper across his lap, and a pencil in each hand, their movements not subject to any psychological drives but rather the mechanical jolts of the New York transportation system as he travels to visit an exhibition. In the *Pocket Drawing*, similarly, a piece of paper is folded and placed into the artist's pocket, where he draws upon it without recourse to sight, or even much ease of manipulation. The actions are slight, hidden, furtive, even, and no doubt subject to misunderstanding, as are many of our gestures. It is in this that their frustration lies, and their success, also.

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

#### **SOCIAL MEDIA**

@SiobhanDavies @jeremy\_millar\_1 #NotesonGesture

#### **PARLOUR**

Installation of the *Mnemosyne Atlas* in the *Kulturwissenschaftliche Bibliothek Warburg*, Hamburg. (Warburg Cultural Library, Hamburg), c.1927–29  
Photographic prints  
Courtesy of Warburg Institute Photographic Collection, London.

#### **GROUND FLOOR LOBBY**

Heather Phillipson  
*FINAL DAYS: UNDERWEAR*, 2015  
HD Video, 5 mins.  
Courtesy of the artist.

#### **GROUND FLOOR STAIRWELL**

Rebecca Warren  
*00*, 2006  
Hand-painted bronze  
Artwork, 126 x 43 x 37cm  
Plinth, 57 x 28 x 28cm  
Courtesy of the artist and Maureen Paley, London

#### **FIRST FLOOR LANDING**

Index cards from Murray's Cabaret Club, c. 1960s  
Photographic prints on printed card.  
Courtesy of V&A Theatre and Performance Collection, Victoria and Albert Museum, London

Images from Warburg Institute Photographic Collection, London,  
Photographic prints on card.  
Courtesy of Warburg Institute Photographic Collection, London

### **FIRST FLOOR LONG WALL**

William Anastasi  
Pocket Drawing, 2000  
Pencil on paper (folded, 8 fields)  
21.7 x 27.9cm

Subway Drawing (11.3.99 17:12), 1999  
Pencil or crayon or silverpoint on paper  
22.7 x 31cm

Subway Drawing (9.24.99 19:10), 1999  
Pencil or crayon or silverpoint on paper  
22.7 x 31cm  
Courtesy of Thomas Rehbein Gallery, Cologne, Germany

### **FIRST FLOOR BALCONY WINDOW**

Paul Elliman  
*Untitled (September Magazine)*, 2013–15  
HD Video, 30mins 23 secs  
Courtesy of Carl Freedman Gallery

### **STUDIO WINDOWS**

Titles of sub-categories found within the category 'Gestures', Warburg Institute Photographic Collection, London.  
Vinyl lettering  
Courtesy of Warburg Institute Photographic Collection, London.



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