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Agency & Embodiment: Performing Gestures/Producing Culture

Agency & Embodiment: Performing Gestures/Producing Culture by Carrie Noland. 2009. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press. 264 pp. 23 visual illustrations, notes, index. \$47.50 cloth. doi:10.1017/S0149767711000416

Agency & Embodiment is an extraordinary text, full of unforeseen revelations and startling results. Its subject matter does not appear, at first glance, to be focused centrally on dance. Yet, it is a text whose every page is filled with theoretical moves that deal with issues of central importance to dance inquiry. It is so consistently and deeply concerned with what might be called the central choreographic problematic of all things modern and their progeny, that it leaves one wondering how such a dancerly work could have been produced on topics so seemingly "outside" the field of Dance Studies proper (digital poetry, photography, pseudo-calligraphy, video installations, cave painting, graffiti, even swimming). Yet, in page after page, in chapters focused on film, writing, philosophy, and even science, Carrie Noland delivers the same intellectual goods, and they are of an ilk dance scholars should find to be to their liking. They champion perspectives that move dance into the limelight of contemporary cultural theory. They give to dance, not only a

seat at the table of High Theory, but a position of leading significance and influence. Noland acknowledges this in her Introduction, declaring that her ultimate ambition is to seek new support for insights dance scholars "have been developing for decades" (5). There is no question that dance is leading the way in this particular interdisciplinary project, and that it has done so for quite some time.

The debate into which Noland enters through the various artists, philosophers, and scientists she interprets boils down to a debate between phenomenology (in the main a French phenomenological tradition, with Maurice Merleau-Ponty looming large) and constructivism (post-structuralism being the most prominently featured orientation in this larger philosophical camp). It is a well-established debate, over basic issues of command and autonomy in relation to human thought, expression, and experience. Its main issue might be reduced to a simple question: Who is in charge, philosophically speaking, when it comes to the creation and transmission of something—anything—humanly meaningful? Are societal and cultural institutions ultimately calling the shots (as the constructivists would have it)? Or do individual human beings have any decisive or instrumental role to play (the phenomenological position)?

This question of agency—of who or what possesses the ability, power, and freedom to make any kind of difference in the way human experience is made sense of—motivates each of Noland's various essays. The overall project to which each contributes is the articulation of a new model of human agency grounded in a phenomenon that Noland contends has been unduly neglected by both sides. That neglected phenomenon is human motility—a phenomenon that is seldom, if ever, neglected in dance. "The hypothesis I advance in this book," Noland writes, "is that kinesthetic experience, produced by acts of embodied gesturing, places pressure on the conditioning a body receives, encouraging variations in performance that account for larger innovations in cultural practice that cannot otherwise be explained" (2–3). Noland's focus on the knowable and knowing consequences of kinesthetic experience, on "kinesthesia," the human experience of movement *per se*, enables her to navigate the phenomenological–constructivist divide.

Her recognition of kinesthesia as the missing link in the debate also sheds light on why dance—the quintessential art of human movement—is accorded such a prominent place in Noland’s analytical and theoretical discussions.

Key to the success of Noland’s navigational exercise is the recognition that the “pressure” of kinesthetic experience is not simply a physical or mechanical phenomenon. Rather, intelligence inheres within it. Kinesthetic pressure produces kinds of awareness and understanding that are basic to learning what it means to be a human subject. “The knowledge obtained through kinesthesia,” Noland argues, “is ... *constitutive* of—not tangential to—the process of individuation” (4, emphasis in text). Kinesthesia, in other words, is individually enabling. “Subjects,” Noland asserts, taking up the ethnographic mantle of Marcel Mauss, “make *motor* decisions that challenge cultural meanings in profound ways” (3, 42; emphasis in text). In these challenges lie individual agency and freedom.

Agency & Embodiment, in this regard, might be characterized as an original, multi-art foray into human movement analysis. Noland seeks throughout the text to identify “the role of the moving body in the transmission and transformation of subjectivities, expressive practices, and bodily techniques” (4). Her book, in sum, explores the agency inherent in various examples of artistic, philosophical, and scientific movement—in Bill Viola’s video installation, *The Passions*; in Philippe Castellin’s digital poetry; in Henri Michaux’s scribal paintings; in anthropologist Marcel Mauss’ 1935 essay, “Techniques of the Body” (a must-read for dance scholars of any kind); and in the writings and research of paleoanthropologist André Leroi-Gourhan; philosopher Maurice Merleau-Ponty; and cultural theorists Judith Butler, Frantz Fanon, and Jacques Derrida.

Noland draws on a broad and diverse array of literature, from cognitive science, neuroanatomy, philosophy, anthropology, and art, performance, cultural, media, and dance studies, in order to come to terms with the phenomenon of human movement—or “gesture” as she refines and reconfigures the concept for the purposes of her project. “I treat gesture as the nodal point,” she explains, “where culture (the imposition of bodily techniques), neurobiology (the given mechanics of a human

sensorimotor apparatus), and embodied experience (the kinesthetic experience specific to an individual body) overlap and inform one another” (8). In her conceptual shift from “movement” to “gesture,” Noland’s own relation to the phenomenological–constructivist debate is, perhaps, most plainly revealed. There is much that she retains from both sides. Gesture maintains a two-dimensional character that its embodiers experience as such, and from which they learn what it is to be themselves. First, gesture is constituted by bodily movements that are registered proprioceptively or interoceptively, as well as affectively, by human neuro-skeleto-muscular systems. Second, gesture is informed by culturally coded patterning that endows it with thinkable, shareable significance. In gesture, Noland asserts, these two dimensions coexist experientially and may be simultaneously available to consciousness. Sensations of movement (the experience of one’s “motor body”) will thus invariably remain *in excess* of whatever predetermined cultural significance they might be conventionally assigned (2). In this way, culture, as it is manifest in gesture, always produces “more and other than it intends” (17). “Culture,” writes Noland, “both asserts and looses its grip on individual subjects” (3).

The number of chapters in *Agency & Embodiment* is relatively small, only five, not including an introduction and a brief conclusion. However, each chapter is a substantive stand-alone study, close to forty pages in length, rich in descriptive detail and interpretive analysis. Dance scholars may find the fifth chapter, which deals mainly with Judith Butler’s theory of performance, to be of especial interest. Noland’s critique of Butler follows logically from the model Noland establishes in her introduction, as she elaborates and illustrates it over the course of the four chapters preceding the one devoted to Butler. The text as a whole can be read, in this regard, as a series of overlapping theses, all of which serve to lead up to the ultimate critical discussion of Butler’s theory of gestural performatives. Noland draws in particular in this discussion on her own analysis of the painted mark clusters of Henri Michaux. Michaux’s paintings, in Noland’s view, stage gestural routines that dis-articulate the disciplines of written signage. They illuminate in so doing how writing and moving can overlap,

materializing the impulses of a signing body as it “unlearns how to write” (155). Michaux’s sign-like parodies, as they index a “performative self” actually “phenomenalized” (made individually, experimentally autonomous) by gestures of a specifically inscriptive character, are cited to illustrate in literally graphic detail how Butler’s theory of subject construction, in Noland’s view, needs to be rethought (167, 171).

Noland’s reading of Butler, characterized as a mere “tweaking” of Butler’s largely valid, suggestive formulations, is close and careful (192). Despite the modest rhetoric, however, the argument Noland makes against Butler does serious damage to Butler’s staunchly constructivist theory. Noland exposes how Butler conflates discursive and corporeal signs, failing to give due attention to the ways in which the kinesthetic agency of gesture supports, complicates, and exceeds in individual experience the cultural inscriptions that gesture also always reiterates. Butler’s ignorance of the fundamentally different relations that verbal and corporeal signs possess to the human body artificially inflates, from Noland’s vantage point, the explanatory power of Butler’s performative theory.

The general implications of Noland’s kinesthetically oriented theory of agency for dance inquiry are broad and deep. If Noland’s arguments are valid, individuals who embody danced creations, as well as those who compose them, must, by the very nature of what it is to be human, possess, exercise, and cultivate kinesthetic expertise enabling them to develop self-mastery in powerfully, nonconventionally conditioned, intelligent ways. Such mastery would give these individuals the ability to deal autonomously with (or, in Noland’s terms, put creative “pressure” on) societal and cultural processes of subject formation. Recognizing such agency as being generally at play in dance would open up a new field of inquiry, a field of kino-societal, or possibly bio-semiotic dance studies, identifying a level playing field on which individual and cultural dimensions of subjectivity might be observed as interrelating processually in dance and choreographic practice. Such a field would require new conceptual tools and methodological approaches for its exploration. The benefits, however, potentially would be considerable. Something like justice might finally be done to the uniquely individual forms of anatomical, physiological, and

kinesiological wisdom upon which the art of dance depends, and this could occur without diminishing the importance of the contribution that conventional disciplines of technique and culturally determined codes of performative interpretation also make to the rendering of dance as a meaningful social and cultural phenomenon. A whole new world of dance—in every sense of the term, “whole”—might conceivably come into view, one in which the possibilities for understanding through dance what it is to be human would expand exponentially.

Agency & Embodiment is not an easy text to peruse, although it is elegantly written and nicely illustrated. It is demanding in its density, multidisciplinary, theoretical complexity, and diversity of subject matter. It is not for undergraduate consumption, generally speaking. However, its rewards for more advanced readers are plentiful, unusual, and enduring. It would be an outstanding text for graduate study. Dance scholars concerned with theoretical work on gender, power, creativity, subjectivity, and representation will find it of especial significance as well. The book provides a rare opportunity to think outside the standard box of dance research on subjects whose relevance to dance theory have never been more clearly illuminated. The theoretical alignments evident in its interdisciplinary scholarship can be seen as well to bear the mark of an author whose respect and understanding for the subjects of dance have few rivals in the field of contemporary critical theory.

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Erotic Triangles: Sundanese Dance and Masculinity in West Java

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Male-focused social dance in Sunda (West Java) has gone by a number of names, among which *ketuk tilu*, *tayuban*, *tari kursus*, and *jaipongan* are the most common. However these forms relate to a much wider range of important