

# INTERNATIONAL LEXICON OF AESTHETICS

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## GESTURE

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It. *Gesto*; Fr. *Geste*; Germ. *Geste*; Span. *Gesto*. Gestures can be defined as movements of the body, which, starting from an intention, create sense by expressing a meaning or by showing their constitution as body motions. The former is the case of gestures that accompany the speech, the second is that of artistic practices such as dance, painting, sculpture and writing or the most recent examples of performative arts (for example *happenings* and *flash mobs*). From an aesthetic point of view, gestures are forms of somatic representation and communication extendable to media and/or technical objects.

### THE CURRENT DEBATE

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#### GESTURE: A SHORT REVIEW IN THE HISTORY OF AESTHETICS AND HUMANITIES

The tradition of Western thought about gestures has ancient roots, beginning with Pseudo-Aristotle's *Physiognomics* (ca. 300 BC) passing through Cicero's *De oratore* (55 AD) and joining the book eleven of Quintilian's *Institutio oratoria* (90-96 AD), in which gestures are thematized in the field of the rhetoric of *actio*. Gestures are therefore objects of research for *physiognomics* and *rhetoric*, each one having a different conception: the first one focuses on states of mind and typologies of behaviour that gestures appear to express; the second one sees gestures as a support of the speech and as a non-grammatical, physical means to increase the persuasive power of speeches.

The rhetorical conception of gestures – after more or less explicit updates and revisions – brought to some formulations of the monastic rules in the Middle-Ages (cf. Schmitt 1990) as well as to the chiologies of Bulwer and Austin and the poetics of grace or of the *je ne sais quoi*. In *La scienza nuova* (1744), Giambattista

Vico took distance from the physiognomic-rhetorical tradition, developing a mythical archaeology of reason, in which the gestures ("cenni") represent a primordial form of rationality and communication, overlapping a purely somatic-ostensive relation between the human being and the world.

In *Lettre sur les sourds et muets* (1751), Diderot focused on gestures to explain how art could generate sense without the production of meaning. Discussing the conditions of possibility of judgment about recitation, Diderot observed in the *Lettre* that artistic gestures should be considered beyond the presence, in the same work, of logical-discursive structures in order to perceive the mediality of movements in its peculiarity.

Between the end of the 18<sup>th</sup> and throughout the 19<sup>th</sup> century, the reflection about gestures was included – first of all in art theory – in the project of idealisation of antiquity (Lessing, Winckelmann; cfr. Franzoni 2006) and also in the revived interest in physiognomics (from Lavater to the theorizations of the *fin de siècle*).

In the 20<sup>th</sup> century, Aby Warburg elaborated the notion of *Pathosformeln*, which arises from the study of the representations of gestural practices in the antiquity and their artistic survival. Many other attempts of theorization and artistic *mise en œuvre* of gestures on the part of writers (for example, Bertolt Brecht, Henri Michaux), visual artists (Jeff Wall), avant-gardes or other artistic movements (for instance, *tachisme* and in general *action painting*) took place in this century. In the last years the proliferation of artistic practices such as *happenings* and *flash mobs* has opened up the possibility to consider gestures as a form of dynamical aesthetic common sense, creating new forms of subjectivity.

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