International Workshop on Visual History & Theory, 15-16 October 2025

Under the impulse of a Dream, 2023
Inkjet print on cotton rag paper. 64 x 90 cm. ©Lebohang Kganye, courtesy the Artist

GESTURE, MOVEMENT, FREEDOM: ON THE MICRO

The 2025 International Workshop on Visual History & Theory takes as its starting point the notion of **gesture**, which operates across a range of literal and conceptual levels. Nothing could be more suggestive here than Lebohang Kganye's emblematic work *Under the Influence of a Dream* (2023), reproduced here courtesy of the artist. Part of the series 'Two Stories of (Hi)stories, 2023' that undertook the cutting, repositioning, reframing and re-illuminating of images from the colonial collections of the Rautenstrauch-Joest Museum in Cologne, it sets many things into motion. It exemplifies the links between gesture, movement and freedom, or the desire for such through the (micro)gestures of care, repair, reclamation.

The movement towards freedom often starts with a simple gesture.

> Rising up is a gesture. Before even attempting to carry out a voluntary and shared 'action' we rise up with a simple gesture that suddenly overturns the burden that submission had, until then, placed upon us … To rise up means to throw off the burden weighing down on our shoulders, keeping us from moving. It is to break a certain present …

This quotation from *Uprisings* by Georges Didi-Huberman (2016, 66) suggests many potential openings that we invite workshop participants to consider:

1. **Temporal**: in its 'break[ing] from a certain present,' a rebellion or protest against what is, means that to 'rise up' is to disrupt a linear or horizontal timeline and open up the possibility of other

directions and postures of being. Can this offer us a route out of being stuck in eternal states of 'post' (–apartheid, –colonial)?

2. **Movement:** this can be a shift in state or status, even if infinitesimal. Valeria Guzmán Verri has noted how even line-making, a gouging of a straight line in a rock, is a kind of gesture against what is, an attempt to make it other (2025). For those of us working with images, the tracking of physical gesture as it surfaces in photographs, artmaking and cinema invites us to consider their potential import. According to Agamben, gesture is not the same as action (1992, 6), though it might prepare the way for it. In addition, whether they are conscious or instinctual, gestures often carry a repetitiveness or return from the past that is unwittingly referenced, leading us into questions of restitution and reparation. Sometimes gesture starts in one situation and is completed in another, elsewhere. It carries suggestibility. Kass Banning for example has shown that the open palm gesture is a one of invitation, and that a lateral panning of the camera in cinema can lead us to lateral thinking (2025).
3. **Ethical**: Agamben asserts that gesture is not a means to an end, it is 'means as such.' This carries ethical and **political** implications. It opens up a vast space to contemplate the potential for new interpretations (and further gestures) that are not weighed by immediate outcomes, that might be insubstantial, minor, even inconsequential – what we are thinking of here as the 'micro,' as in micropolitics, microhistories, microscopic, microfilm, and so on. The micro is also related to the minor/minority, which Mufti explores as 'a place of disruption' (2007, 13). 'Images are always singular,' writes Didi-Huberman, 'local, incomplete, in short, insubstantial – micrological, in so many words' (2017, 260).
4. **Insubstantial**: Sojourner Truth's 1864/5 photographic self-portrait offers the dictum, 'I sell the shadow to support the substance.' What is the substance of the insubstance? Or in other words, the substance of that which is deemed 'empty.' Here we could look to the **forensic** as a practice which seeks to find substance in the insubstantial.
5. **Carrying**: the term gesture comes from *gesto*, to carry. Etymologically linked to the term gestation, it signifies the need for a certain passage of time or growth before things may come to pass. We are in the zone of detail, process, memory, and less determinate outcomes with 'gesture as a crystal of historical memory' at its centre. Importantly, thought co-operates or arises with gesture. This brings us back to the work of the hand in particular, the manouevre (from medieval Latin *manuoperare* - Latin *manus* 'hand' + *operari* 'to work'), and how things are set in motion through gesture. This might involve touch, contact, tools and materials which have their critical and philosophical parallels in the work of sifting and conceptualizing. Indeed, thinking with gesture helps to transcend dualisms because of the 'dynamic, processual and embodied character of knowledge' (Maddalena 2021, 4).

Workshop participants are invited to consider these and other openings around notions of the micro-, and gesture, movement and freedom in relation to images and other media. Please send abstracts (maximum 400 words) to phayes@uwc.ac.za by **7 August 2025**.

Workshop date: 15-16 October 2025,
Venue: Iyatsiba Lab, Centre for Humanities Research, University of the Western Cape
Contact: Patricia Hayes, SARChI Chair in Visual History & Theory, phayes@uwc.ac.za

References

Giorgio Agamben, 'Notes on Gesture' in *Infancy and History* (London: Verso, 1992).
Kass Banning, 'Stillness in Motion: Temporality and the Enactment of Gesture,' presentation 'Gesture & Affect' Atelier, Nantes, April 2025.
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Georges Didi-Huberman, 'Critical Image/Imaging Critique,' *Oxford Art Journal* 40/2, 2017.
Giovanni Maddalena et al, *Gestures. Approaches, Uses, and Developments* (Berlin: de Gruyter, 2024).
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Valeria Guzmán Verri, 'Sidelong Glances,' presentation 'Gesture & Affect' Atelier, Nantes, April 2025.