

GESTURE BECOMES A DESTINY

George W. Bush's quip about his gait – 'Some folks look at me and see a certain swagger, which in Texas is called "walking"' – was a kind of declaration of war on human gesture.¹ Some two centuries earlier Heinrich von Kleist had a dancer in his short story 'On The Marionette Theatre' (1810) expound the theory that human beings are incapable of the 'natural grace' of a puppet: 'Grace appears most purely in that human form which either has no consciousness or an infinite consciousness.'² We might speculate where George Bush would fall on that graduated scale; but he is the product of an epoch in which kinesics have increasingly displaced rhetoric and made an anthropologist of every television viewer. It is well over a century since Gilles de la Tourette published his *Clinical and Physiological Studies on the Gait* (1886), and no one should imagine by now that there is anything straightforward about putting one foot in front of another – not least for a politician. As Giorgio Agamben puts it: 'An age that has lost its gestures is, for this reason, obsessed by them.'³

Andrea Bowers and George Bush have at least one thing in common: they recognise the umbilical connection between body language and the body politic. Bowers is not an anthropologist, quite; she is rather an ethnographer, in minor key, less interested in taxonomy and more in misshapes, mishaps. 'I have tried,' she said recently, 'to search for actions that express individuality where unexpected behaviour occurs or expected behaviour fails to occur.'⁴ This embraces a broad spectrum of people stepping out of line, from a naked male stalker being tackled by security in *Intimate Strangers: Olympic Soccer Fan* (2000), to female protestors being dragged away by invisible hands in *Go Perfectly Limp and Be Carried Away* (2004).

Whether the subject is violent exhibitionism or peaceful protest, Bowers has been interested consistently in people making a spectacle of themselves, even where they are notionally spectators. Her real subject often seems to be the invisible dynamic between the individual and the crowd, the medium we call the mass. The people in her photo-real drawings float invariably in pictorial limbo; in proportion to the picture space as a whole they are so small that they are forever being reproduced as 'details', when in fact they themselves are already details of an event, faces in a crowd. On their own, the drawings are like history paintings in which the whole milieu has been scrubbed out to leave only some marginal character, an observer to the real action, preserved in an enigmatic pose. It is a kind of portraiture by default, everything else having been subtracted.

In fact, the drawings are almost never on their own – they, too, are details. Bowers work is not processual in a radical sense, but it is dispersed and accumulative. The drawings often relate to videos, which are exhibited alongside them. In the earlier work, these videos are deliberately sketchy and self-effacing, simply pleased to soak up all the details: her first major body of work, *Spectacular Appearances*, comprised a series of videos of audiences at public events (horse races, a baseball game, an air show, etc.) and drawings of individuals picked out from them – their neighbours, characteristically, voided. In one video from that series, *Touch of Class* (1998),

1
From George W. Bush's acceptance speech for his second term, 2 September 2004, at the Republican National Convention in New York

2
Heinrich von Kleist, 'On the Marionette Theatre', in Idris Parry, *Hand to Mouth and Other Essays*, Manchester: Carcanet New Press, 1981, p.18

3
Giorgio Agamben, 'Notes on Gesture', *Means Without Ends: Notes on Politics*, Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2000, p.53

4
Andrea Bowers, 'Magic Politics – Feast or Fasting', *Cakewalk*, no.6, 2004, p.23

two young cheerleaders have a kind of impromptu, hip-wiggling dance-off to an off-screen drumbeat. Rather than being repelled by crowds, Bowers is a seeker after such eddies in the collective current, gaps in rehearsed routine and regimented behaviour – the points where gestures become spasmodic and ecstatic, at once expressive and contagious.

The philosophy of gesture, as in Kleist's story, tends towards the melancholic. Authentic gesture is something unconscious and pre-lapsarian; the rationalisation of gesture is seen as going hand in hand with its mass-(re)production – which, for the likes of Theodor Adorno, simultaneously means the production of the masses, down to their very tics: universal stereotypy. Bowers's work, by contrast, is antinomian in outlook: grace glimmers in even familiar gestures, whenever they are linked to excess, intimacy or, above all, participation. Individuality adheres; people fail to be examples. Referring to her *Intimate Strangers* series, where the drawings – a banner being held up ('MAKE SOME NOISE!'); hands aloft giving different species of bird; a woman's bared bottom with tattoo, etc. – are set against gold-foil backgrounds, she said: 'The actions of my drawn figures contradict the Platonic idealism often represented in classical imagery. Instead they are meant to approximate the gestures of resistance that defined the Punk movement of the late 1970s. The gold ground is a representation of my faith in the power of these actions as genuine self-expression.'⁵

'Faith' is not an accidental term when female flashing or the gesticulations of a gig's audience are given the gold treatment. In *Intimate Strangers*, the mounting of the drawings puts punky exuberance into a continuum with mediaeval religious icons. It is not just a spirit of adolescent iconoclasm on the part of either the artist or her subjects which means that most of the behaviour is outré, beyond the pale. Rather, gesture itself, when it is still expressive, is inherently excessive; only sober, purposeful activity is proportionate. A gesture, in the broadest sense, is never simply an action, let alone an intention; it is an aspiration rather than an accomplishment, pointing towards something that is deferred with a kind of exhibitionist optimism.

ECONOMIES OF MOVEMENT

In fact, the shiny gold foil Bowers employed in the *Intimate Strangers* pictures pays a different kind of tribute too: it is the decal material used to make t-shirts. T-shirts are a sort of running thread in Bowers's work, and after a while they start to seem like supporting characters, from the 'LIVE IN DENIAL' scrawled on the back of a racetrack punter in the video *The Track* (1998), to the Superman shirt on the serious Vietnamese girl practicing her dance moves in *This is a story of a girl who... (DDR 2)* (2001), or the 'SAVE THE TREE' slogan sported by treetop protestor John Quigley in the documentary *Vieja Gloria* (2004). As part of *Intimate Strangers* Bowers even made a short video, *Aunt Dee's T-Shirt Shop* (2000), a portrait of the titular owner where she explains how she selects her stock and displays some favourites (golfing t-shirt: 'I hit two good balls today / I stepped on a rake').

Bowers is attracted to those wearing their hearts on their sleeves, or their chests. She is interested in how incongruity bends even the blandest iconography out of shape. Rather than lamenting the way identities are increasingly absorbed into processes of consumption and worn off-the-peg, Bowers is preoccupied with the process of identification itself; if she has any interest in the psychology of gesture, it is this. The subjects of her work are not simply non-conformists. Sometimes, in fact, she seems to be pursuing a Zizek-like irony by which the very desire to conform, or to live up to an image from outside, is the background against which genuine individuality emerges. It is this sense of rubbing gestures against the grain that means, inevitably, the work can occasionally misfire and seem like a sneer. For Bowers, the motley collection of karaoke singers in the video *I Love You Fuckin' People* (2000) seem to be a kind of shorthand for the magic that is possible when people fail to fill their shoes. But the snatched, informal quality of her footage seems somehow, finally, to undermine them – whereas, for example, the studied formality of Phil Collins's recent *The World Won't Listen* (2005) granted the Colombian Smiths fans, performing songs to a static camera in a staged setting, a peculiar dignity.

Nonviolent Civil
Disobedience Drawing,
Go Perfectly Limp
and Be Carried Away,
2004, graphite
on paper, triptych,
each 51.43 x 38.73cm
(detail)

5
Artist's statement,
press material from
Susanne Vielmetter
Los Angeles Projects



In fact, it is noticeable that Bowers's work has gradually invested more unqualified faith in its subjects. In *Democracy's Body ~ Dance Dance Revolution* (2001), Bowers documented, through video footage and drawings, young Californians in out-of-town arcades playing the then-latest generation of video games which involved bodily participation. Playing alone or in pairs, they have to dance steps set by the game, moving their feet across a grid of pads in response to on-screen prompts. The results vary from 'freestyle' flamboyance, sometimes involving costumes, to affectless virtuosity in which, puppet-like, the players' feet blur across the pads while their upper body and face remain composed; other players, meanwhile, form the audience. Somehow the technical nature of the challenge, its formalities, seems to free its participants of the self-consciousness they might have felt dancing in different circumstances; Bowers records them as a transient collective, brought together through ritual and suspended somewhere between suburbia and a virtual space of their aspirations.

If *Intimate Strangers* deliberately drew on a vulgar lexicon of familiar forms, proffered polemically for reappraisal, *Democracy's Body* seems sincerely hopeful about its subjects' expressive potential. For all the elements of clowning, there is a precocious gravity in the bearing of these young bodies, which, as Bowers noted, 'were anything but the traditional dance bodies'.⁶ She makes the connection to the Judson Dance Theater, images of which featured in the scrapbook displayed in the exhibition, with its interest 'in creating a dance that highlights pedestrian

6

Ibid.



I love you fucking people, 2000, laser disk and player, 3 monitors, 3 karaoke stands, amplifier, speakers and stage, dimensions variable

movements through repetition and collaboration'.⁷ Pedestrian might mean prosaic, trivial or literally just the movements of a body in space, from A to B – what in Texas they still call walking.

7

Ibid.

GENDER IS ALL OVER THE PLACE

In the two-channel video *Nonviolent Civil Disobedience Training* (2004) a group of – mostly female – classically trained dancers are given a seminar on non-violent resistance by two activists in a church hall. One screen shows the seminar in progress with explanations of 'plough-sharing' (the destruction of equipment at nuclear bases), the principles of consensus decision-making, and techniques and tactics for activists; the other screen shows the dancers putting their lessons into practice, alternating roles as activists and police. In this awkward choreography the dancers become valuable as passive impediments rather than athletic bodies; the 'activists' form a knot of bodies, while the 'police' pull them apart and drag limp figures across the floor.

Politics, as it increasingly enters Bowers's work as subject matter, is symbolic, collective and *corporeal*. Even in *Vieja Gloria*, in many ways a relatively straightforward documentary, the tree-sitting activist John Quigley emphasises the 'economy of movement' needed to keep his perch – democracy devolves once again to the question of bodies. The odd, perhaps tautological homology that *Nonviolent Civil Disobedience Training* suggests between the histories of direct action, on the one hand, and of experimental dance such as Judson Dance Theater, on the other, is based on their common reliance on a cooperative of bodies performing a set of public gestures within collectively-agreed parameters.

Bowers's own interpretation of the development in her work is that 'it was just a matter of time before documenting people's actions turned into documenting people's activism'.⁸ But, interestingly, unlike her early first-hand observational work, many more recent images are drawn from a mediated past, particularly images of protestors from the 1970s. The peculiar transaction that takes place in her work at this point is that, without abandoning her formal resources or severing her minimal-conceptual ties, Bowers looks to activism itself for a model of political aesthetics. During the most inventive protests of the 1970s, she noted how 'the visual and the political coexisted', whereas 'in the art world over the last 10 to 15 years there seems to be an ideological split between aesthetics and politics, presenting them as polemically opposed'.⁹ In fact, the equally polemical collision of the terms in Bowers's work – for example, the use of decorative floral motifs in recent works which deal with the legacy of 1970s abortion activism – seems sometimes

8

From an interview with Sam Durant and Monica Bonvicini, *Neue Review*, December 2003, p.5

9

Interview with Sam Durant and Monica Bonvicini, *op. cit.*, p.4



Gravity and Grace, 2001, video, 4:36 min loop (still). Part of *Democracy's Body* – Dance Dance Revolution

to perversely preserve their opposition. The dynamic of her most recent work often seems to derive from this tension: the desire to explore political gestures without abandoning gesture's inherent ambiguities.

For the series entitled *Magical Politics*, Bowers drew on research into hybrid direct-action groups in the US in the 1970s and early 80s, which came from a confluence of feminism, environmentalism and heterodox spiritualities, ranging from left-wing Catholics to feminist Pagans and witches. The result was a series of drawings made from photographic records of protests, along with a 'soft blockade' of cloth, embroidered with a web pattern, that divided the gallery in two. This work pivots on the ambiguity of barricades and meshes: the chain-link fence which interposes itself in front of the protestors in the drawing *Diabloblockade, Diablo Nuclear Power Plant, Abalone Alliance, 1981* (2003) is echoed by the crisscross of threads in another, in which a group of women had woven the doors of the Pentagon shut. Just as in *Vieja Gloria*, the security fence erected around the tree became a shrine-like focus for protest, covered in slogans and drawings; the barrier itself in these actions becomes a model, for Bowers, of 'soft' networked strength: chain link opposed by

linked arms. The targets of the protest never appear; the pictures' focus is the protestors and the creativity of their resistance – the power of politicised, *female* bodies.

Even Bowers's immaculate pencil-work takes on a subtly different character in the light of *Magical Politics*'s subject matter, and seems to draw her closer to some of her contemporaries. The attempt to recover a political past through faithful recreation recalls Sharon Hayes's *Symbionese Liberation Army (SLA) Screeds #13, 16, 20 & 29* (2003), in which she reads transcripts of Patty Hearst's messages from underground by memory, or Elisabeth Subrin's shot-by-shot recreation of a documentary about radical feminist Shulamith Firestone in *Shulie* (1997). The virtuosity required to invoke the past verbatim, as well as the inevitable stumblings, is itself an act of identification which is, in all three cases, somehow shocking – and seems to indict the contemporary, however mutely. And just as gestures cannot be judged by their intentions, often drawing their power from inadvertence, Bowers herself recognises that it is partly the fallibility of her copies that makes the past eloquent:

10

From an interview with Cara Baldwin at interReview.org, www.interreview.org/CBonAB.html. Last accessed 31 July 2006

11

See G. Agamben, *op. cit.*, pp.56–57



*In these copying processes, there are always mistakes or failures in accuracy no matter how attentive I am to detail. Those mistakes become sites of invention. I see this model in opposition to the modernist goal of always making it new.*¹⁰

Memento of Infinite Space, 2002, graphite on paper, diptych, 35.5 x 55.9cm

The act of copying makes itself apparent, and in so doing begs the question as to why these images need to be made visible again, now. As with Hayes's and Subrin's work, we might begin to answer by suggesting that feminism's unfinished business means that there is no harm in a little repetition: *perhaps you didn't hear us the first time.*

THE PAST IS A PROMISE

Bowers herself casts this recent work as moving from the field of actions to that of activism – but this is perhaps too precipitate. As I have tried to suggest, her work

12

Barbara Epstein, *Political Protest & Cultural Revolution: Nonviolent Direct*

Action in the 1970s and 1980s, Berkeley: University of California Press, 1993, p.16

13
Ibid., p.192

14
Claire Bishop,
'The Social Turn:
Collaboration and its
Discontents', *Artforum*,
February 2006, p.183

seems to deal with gesture, which is never strictly reducible to action; and it is for its gestural spirit rather than for its efficacy that she seems to prize 'magical politics'.¹¹ Barbara Epstein, the historian whose book *Political Protest & Cultural Revolution* is the source for much of this material, is clear that the movement was characterised by a 'prefigurative, utopian approach to politics'.¹² It was 'magical' because, even apart from its spiritual investments, it was an invocation, a set of exemplary rituals which acted as a promise, and a community of intent whose ethos was as important as its actions. For Epstein, herself a veteran of some of the actions, this was ultimately a limit to its potential, because 'community building and politics in fact are not the same thing'.¹³

Bowers seems to remain agnostic. There is a kind of adolescent quality to forms of protest which seem to be directed as much to a self-image as a goal, as well as a kind of solipsism: when Quigley was finally cut from his tree, he 'just tried to think of it as a victory'. Although *Vieja Gloria* was apparently given out to activist groups to use for promotion, it is noticeable that Bowers otherwise seems to believe that art cannot currently be collapsed into political action. The value of 'magical politics'



Nonviolent Protest Training: Abalone Alliance Camp, Diablo Canyon Nuclear Power Plant, 1981 and San Luis Obispo County Telegraph-Tribune, September 14, 1981, 2004, graphite on paper and newspaper page, diptych, 96.52 x 126.36cm (detail)

for Bowers seems to be as much as a corrective to the visual arts as a model for activism.

Claire Bishop recently described relational aesthetics as the attempt to efface the aesthetic in favour of the ethical, leading to a series of 'exemplary (but relatively ineffective) gestures'.¹⁴ What is fascinatingly unresolved in Andrea Bowers's work is that she has remained aloof from the trends toward relational and participatory practice in art, while at the same time it has increasingly become her subject matter. Her work remains firmly iconographic, even if its disarticulated form increasingly seems a way of mitigating that (notably in the way that the scrapbooks provide a set of contexts). She resists any utopian diffusion or political theatre: activism remains a source for art, rather than the other way round. In this way, exemplarity is itself proposed as an enigma. But then how could it be otherwise, if mistakes – political or artistic – are to remain a source of invention?