

LEYLA STEVENS

**Keep
your
shoulders
and
waist
strong**

INSTRUCTIONS FOR GESTURE

IN COLLABORATION WITH

MINKYOUNG KIM
KATHERINE KEEFE
GREER ROCHFORD

ESSAY BY

BROOKE CHROMAN

KEEP YOUR SHOULDERS AND WAIST STRONG

/ Instructions for Gesture

By Brooke Chroman

Milan Kundera's novel, *Immortality* (1991), opens with the narrator watching an elderly woman from afar as she wheezes through a swimming lesson. About to leave the lesson, the old woman walks around the pool, turns, smiles, and waves to her young swimming instructor. The narrator states:

She passed the lifeguard, and after she had gone some three or four steps beyond him, she turned her head smiled, and waved to him. At that instant I felt a pang in my heart! That smile and that gesture belonged to a twenty-year-old girl! Her arm rose with bewitching ease. It was as if she were playfully tossing a brightly colored ball to her lover. That smile and that gesture had charm and elegance, while the face and the body no longer had any charm. It was the charm of a gesture drowning in the charmlessness of the body. But the woman, though she must of course have realized that she was no longer beautiful, forgot that for the moment.¹

In this instant the elderly woman's identity is both established and transgressed through the gesture of her wave. She establishes her identity, not through abandoning the gravity of her failing flesh, but rather by transforming it through the animated youth of her gesture. Simultaneously, this gesture transgresses the visual signifiers of her age; the seemingly pathetic hope for youth conjured by the image of an ageing woman in the tight synthetic skin of a swimsuit is appropriated by the spirited wave of a young girl.

In the woman's almost instantaneous transformation from age to youth, identity is posited not as something fixed throughout time, but something more akin to an endlessly shifting gesture that alters, redefining itself with each movement. Yet Kundera implies that there is something recognizable—maybe immortal—in that “bewitching ease” of the wave. In Leyla Steven's “*Keep your shoulders and waist strong / Instructions for Gesture*”, the photographic works and texts suggest that the gesture's immortality exists, not as some sort of

transhistorical essence, but rather through the incessant migration of gestures between bodies. Gesture here, is posited as a performing of both individual and cultural identity.

Steven, who initiated the project in 2009, invited artists based in culturally and geographically disparate countries, to contribute photographs and text in response to specific gestures assigned to them. The exhibition at *First Draft Gallery* in Sydney, shows a selection from three contributing artists. Minkyong Kim (Seoul), Greer Rochford (Sydney) and Katherine Keefe (Guanajuato), who along with Steven, form a visual dialogue questioning the migration and individuation of gesture. These bodily expressions, ranging from heartbreak to courage, from solitude to seduction, create a visual index that is deferred and altered by the next contribution. Read against one another, these gestural indexes on the one hand, maintain the individual charter of their expression, but on the other, begin to form a collective language through the ways in which they overlap and differ.

For example, in Steven's “*Gesture of Seduction*”, a black and white photograph depicts a young seated female figure stoically facing a blank wall, hair wound into a knot, the back of her neck exposed. A small section of hair, fallen out of the knot, hangs down the figure's neck like an invitation or a thread of possibility. On the figure's right shoulder, a wound up bolt of thread balances with a hollow center. This tightly wound object sits vulnerably at a tipping point, only teasing at unfurling its restrained form. Seduction here is created through the muted restraint of turning away. Similarly, in Minkyong Kim's gesture of seduction, a Korean woman poses for a semi-erotic color snapshot, with the home-video aesthetic of an anonymous YouTube posting. Crawling through an open door towards a closed door in the background, the subject turns her head to look at the camera, her right shoulder obscuring the bottom portion of her face, the back of her clothed figure exposed to the camera.

In spite of the poised formality of Steven's photograph and the documentary quality of Kim's, the gesture of seduction is in both cases created through obscuring the front of the body, denying

full access to the image of the figure. Similarly, both artists allude to seduction as a restrained potentiality, embodied in the tight roll of string in Steven's photo and the closed door in Kim's. From the Japanese prints of *Hokusai*, which depict seduction only through revealing the white back of a Geisha's neck, and the gaze of Ingres' “*Grande Odalisque*” turning towards the viewer as her drawn out spine stretches over the canvas, it is evident that, even in multiplicity of meanings found in every action, gesture's migration can be traced through visual culture across the boundaries of place and time.

The potential for gesture to traverse geographical and cultural distance becomes a method of communication in the works of Greer Rochford. For a number of works, Rochford recorded still images from a skype video call between herself and her sister, whilst her sister was living overseas. In each image a doubling effect is played out where we witness two slightly different versions of the same bodily action. In Rochford's, “*Gesture of Dejection*”, one subject bows her head whilst the other covers her face in an equally despairing manner. This physical mimicry points to the ways in which gestures are exchanged constantly between people, where if someone offers an action, we respond with a mirrored image: a handshake for a handshake, a yawn for a yawn, or a shaking fist for a flipped finger. Rochford's images neatly capture this transference of gesture and how body language is a performed exchange between self and others.

In the works of Katherine Keefe, landscape becomes anthropomorphized through an awareness of the human gaze in the photograph. Her “*Gesture of Distraction*” reads as a photo taken from a car window. Its subject is not a landscape itself, but the gesture of bypassing a landscape through the technological speed of a car. The photo's blurred horizontality is created not from a movement in nature, but from a movement in the position of the viewer. Keefe's contributions suggest that the gaze itself is a gesture, a discrete movement that frames experience like a continuous photograph. Reinforcing the anthropomorphism of nature, Keefe's text for “*Gesture of Distraction*” instruct a subject to make a tiny mountainous landscape out

of the bleached, artificial white of granulated sugar. The miniature sugar landscape now becomes an artificial product or creation of a human gesture.

Steven's exhibition points to these overlaps as possible interstices in which the meanings of gestures are socially and culturally constructed. Simultaneously, in Steven's asking many artists to create indexes for the same gesture, she suggests that both words and images are capable of infinite signification. This plurality of signification (meaning) in Steven's indexes references conceptual work of the 1960's, from Joseph Kosuth's semiotic breakdown of a chair signaling the arbitrary nature of language, to the “*Event Scores*” of George Brecht's which give instructions for everyday actions inviting the viewer/participant to reenact the piece through the terms of their own body and vernacular experience. These works point to the impossibility of a universal experience—a universal gesture—while offering art as a possible place where individuations intersect in the space of representation, in the contagious cultural space of gesture.

Steven's project addresses the complex possibilities of “*universal gestures*” as virtual space bridges the distance between us, and the internationalization of culture proliferates with a global economy and the relative ease of modern traveling. Yet in spite of these looming changes, what seems most important in, “*Keep your shoulders and waist strong.*”, is the heavy flesh of an elderly woman dripping as she walks around a swimming pool; in the image of a woman raising her hand to wave like a girl, and in the project of the writer or artist who allow us to find something recognizable in the subjectivity of their gesture. What is recognizable is not universal, nor immortal, but rather it could be some point of intersection caught in the space between us—that space which is often called community. The young girl in the swimming suit doesn't simply just wave; she waves at you.

¹ Milan Kundera, *Immortality* (London: Faber and Faber, 1991), 3.