

## Camille Rojas, System of a Gesture, Critical Distance Centre for Curators, Toronto

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### Camille Rojas

*System of a Gesture*, performance, Artscape Youngplace, Toronto, 2019.

Performers: Camille Rojas, Sarah Koekoek & Paul-John Elisha.

Photo: Setti Kidane, courtesy of the artist

## Camille Rojas

### *System of a Gesture*

Children’s hand clapping games form the foundation of Camille Rojas’ *System of a Gesture* (2017–2019), included in the group exhibition *An Archive, But Not An Atlas* presented at the Critical Distance Centre for Curators (CDCC). Curated by Liz Ikiriko, the exhibition sought to “explore personal and social histories as they are unearthed through movement, gesture, language, and land,” while challenging the “incompleteness of the archive.” Rojas, whose background in classical ballet informs her multidisciplinary practice, choreographed the work, which was performed by her and two other dancers. The work’s first iteration, shown on a monitor in the gallery, is a three-channel video originally recorded on 16mm film. The dancers’ movements focused on their hands, which mimicked the actions of the children’s games, and these gestures gradually expanded to the rest of their bodies. The gentle and sensual motions of their hands and intertwining bodies made for a stark contrast to the institutional architecture of the public school behind them. Yet, this space of learning provided a fitting backdrop because it is in the schoolyard, outside of the institutional constraints of the classroom, that some of the most important moments of learning takes place; it is where one learns about one’s body, about physical communication, and where our socialized selves begin to take shape.

The live performance of *System of a Gesture* took place outside of the Artscape Youngplace building, where the CDCC is located—the building is a former school, and the dancers implicated it directly. The two-hour performance, a revised iteration of the film, began with each dancer facing the building as they traced its outer surface with their fingers; their eyes followed their hands intently as they studied its facade. Eventually the dancers began to move backwards, very slowly, while continuing to trace the building with their arms in the air, before coming together in a sinuous mix of lyrical and pedestrian movements. In one of the most beautiful recurring

sequences, the dancers formed a triangle with their backs to one another, where they simultaneously melted to the ground without touching. Despite their seeming autonomy, a feeling of intercorporeality was palpable; they communicated silently through an awareness of each other’s bodies.

The bodily gestures in the live performance were much more sophisticated, confident, and situated than in the video. The hand clapping games served as a point of departure, becoming the root of each dancer’s repertoire. Performance studies scholar Diana Taylor reminds us that the repertoire “enacts embodied memory... [it is] a treasury, an inventory.” Embodied practices contrast with Western educational systems where writing, reading, and state-sanctioned archival documents form the foundation of learning and truth. *System of a Gesture* challenges this through the articulation of site-specificity via movement, and by turning away from reading and writing to embrace the performative. Rojas’ choreography foregrounds the body’s ability to study its surroundings, to learn and communicate within them, echoing Taylor’s claim that, “by taking performance seriously as a system of learning, storing, and transmitting knowledge, performance studies allows us to expand what we understand by ‘knowledge.’”

Heather Rigg

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*An Archive, But Not an Atlas*, Critical Distance Centre for Curators, Toronto, April 27–June 2, 2019