

Performance, Gesture, and Reflection

Syracuse University Art Museum Teaching Guide



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Introducing Performance Studies, Gesture, & Reflection

Performance Studies is an interdisciplinary field of study that explores the social, cultural, and political dimensions of performance in various forms, including theater, dance, rituals, everyday life, and media. It examines how performance—understood broadly as embodied action, spectacle, or behavior—shapes identity, power, memory, and social relations, while also investigating the ways in which performances reflect and challenge cultural norms, politics, and histories. Scholars in the field draw from anthropology, theatre studies, sociology, cultural studies, and feminist theory, among other disciplines, to analyze creative processes, creative products, and human experience using the lens of performance.



Barbara Morgan, *Martha Graham - Every Soul is a Circus-Solo*, 1940, SUAM, 1984.148

Most would agree that creative forms like theatre, music, and dance (such as the dance depicted in Barbara Morgan's photograph, *Martha Graham - Every Soul is a Circus-Solo*) are forms of performance. Yet in performance studies scholarship, "performance" is also used as a metaphor through which we might study human behavior *as* performance, including subjects, objects, and processes that would not traditionally be considered forms of performance. Art, culture, identity, politics, rituals, speech, play, relationships, and creative processes are a few of many everyday life phenomena that might be analyzed using the metaphor of performance and by focusing on past, present, and future human agency and action.

We might study Alicia McKim's *A Chicken in Every Pot* as performance by interrogating how it was made, the effect it has on viewers of various demographics, and the ideas and themes that emerge when considering the work in terms of action rather than as an object. For instance, while multiple layers obscure the image, the depiction of a woman's face on the right and the Statue of Liberty on the left are the most clear. The woman seems to be speaking or yelling, suggesting personal reaction/action in relation to U.S. politics (embodied by the Statue, an icon representing freedom, and also meant to celebrate the abolition of slavery following the U.S. Civil War). A closer look at the image reveals the words "It's a free country." However, the lettering is difficult to decipher, like a hidden message that is nearly impossible to read. The title of the work, meanwhile, seems to reference two texts. First, the phrase "a chicken in every pot" is historically tied to a 1928 campaign advertisement for U.S. presidential candidate Herbert Hoover and is meant to symbolize prosperity and the promise of a better standard of living for all citizens. Additionally, Tom Parsons' poem "A Chicken in Every



Alicia McKim, *A Chicken in Every Pot*, 2004, SUAM, 2004.0038.11

Pot,” explores tensions between idealized political promises and the lived reality of those promises. The poem comments on the gap between political rhetoric meant to inspire hope and the difficult, even harsh, lived realities of individuals from marginalized backgrounds who may not have access to the promised prosperity. Overall, considering the aesthetic elements of the image, along with the title’s reference to politics, history, and racial/class disparities in the U.S., the artwork performs an ongoing struggle, questioning the value of political promises, the nature of prosperity, and the inequality that can persist even under the guise of idealism. It is a reflection on how easily an ideal like “a chicken in every pot” can be distorted or fall short of real, tangible results for the people who need it most.

Drawing on performance studies theory and methods, this teaching guide introduces art in a way that foregrounds the frames of performance, gesture, and reflection. The art included in the guide includes examples of clear, obscured, and metaphorical gestures and reflections, exploring how art can prompt reflection, reflexivity, and catalyze future gestures and actions. Gesture plays a central role in performance studies, as it is a fundamental way in which nonverbal meaning is conveyed, both consciously and unconsciously, in both creative and everyday life performances. In performance studies, gesture is understood as the physical manifestation of not just emotion, but also identity, culture, privilege, oppression, power, and intention. Gestures are not just isolated movements in a single time and place. Rather, gestures are dynamic, culturally loaded, and ever-changing symbols that carry a wide range of social, political, and historical meanings that might be derived from the contexts of when, where, how, by whom, and why a gesture is made and also interpreted.

Indeed, a gesture is an example of what Richard Schechner terms *twice-behaved behavior*. Never for the first time, a gesture is always a re-performance, re-enactment, or re-presentation of some previously witnessed or learned behavior. Further, gestures may be transformed in style or meaning in a performative context (such as in ritual, theater, or other structured performances), even as they are being re-enacted in everyday life. Highlighting the performative nature of human behavior, Schechner’s notion of twice-behaved behavior emphasizes the distinction between some initial, spontaneous behavior and its many subsequent re-performances over time, where it can take on new meanings, structures, styles, and interpretations.

The man in Flo Ngala’s photograph, [*Black Lives Matter protest, man standing with his left fist raised*], for example, is (re)performing a gesture that has been imbued with meaning over many decades. He clenches his fist and extends his arm upward, a gesture that is widely recognized in the United States as a symbol of solidarity, resistance, and empowerment, particularly in the context of the current Black Lives Matter (BLM) movement and the fight against systemic racism and police violence. The gesture, which Ngala points out in the title of the work, has been used in protests, social media campaigns, public demonstrations, photographs, visual



Flo Ngala, [*Black Lives Matter protest, man standing with his left fist raised*], 2020, SUAM 2020.0019

artwork, advertising, and everyday life communication as a call to end police brutality, racial inequality, and oppression. Ngala's focus on this pose points to her own cultural and political stances, and also asks the viewer to reflect on their own.



Robert Rauschenberg, *Surface Series #54*, 1970, SUAM 1980.493

Reflection can refer to the reflective qualities of an object (literal reflection), the subjects, objects, topics, styles, and themes an artwork might reflect upon (symbolic reflection), and/or the process of thinking deeply about one's experiences, actions, and ideas to gain new understanding or insight (personal reflection). The symbolic reflection of the raised fist in Ngala's photograph can evoke personal reflection. The viewer may be inspired to evaluate their previous experiences, behaviors, decisions, thoughts, and beliefs in relation to the BLM movement, potentially learning from or making new sense of them. Meanwhile, a viewer reflecting on a more visually complex work, such as Robert Rauschenberg's *Surface Series #54*, might think about the layered images and text in the screenprint, what they learned or remembered during or after viewing it, new

thoughts or ideas the artwork inspired, and how they might view the artwork differently if they saw it again.

Both Ngala's and Rauschenberg's work may also prompt reflexivity for viewers. While personal reflection refers to how we review and learn from past experiences, reflexivity is concerned with the ways that identity, culture, and power relations impact the production of knowledge and its interpretation. Reflexivity asks viewers to critically analyze their own perspectives and positionalities, including how these might affect the way they interpret an artwork. Reflexive thinking recognizes that knowledge is not objective or neutral; rather, knowledge is shaped by factors like personal perspective, background, and social position. Reflexivity thus involves a deeper level of self-awareness and critical thinking about historical contexts, contemporary and historical power structures, and personal biases. Thinking reflexively about *Surface Series #54*, for example, would involve a consideration of how a viewer's personal identity, cultural background, beliefs, experiences, education, and positionality influences their interpretation. For example, what drew the viewer to Rauschenberg screenprint? What aspects of the work did they focus on? Which elements does their interpretation highlight? What might they be ignoring or overlooking? What is the context of their viewing? What do they know about the context, culture(s), politics, power relations, privileges, and social structures in the time and place Rauschenberg created the work? How might the knowledge of broader histories influence their understanding of the work?

Considering Rauschenberg's life and artistic style, a viewer may also think about *the gesture of the artist*, both physically and metaphorically. For example, what methods and physical gestures were necessary to create the work? Further, what cultural or sociopolitical gesture did Rauschenberg perform by creating the work? Indeed, Rauschenberg's *Currents* series (including the *Surface Series* works) reflects his own engagement with social, political, and environmental

issues during the 1960s and 1970s. The artworks also exemplify his ongoing experimentation with the relationship between art and the viewer. The textured surfaces of the work are meant to evoke sensory and emotional responses, suggesting art can be a dynamic, immersive experience that both reflects the world around it and inspires further reflection and reflexive thinking. Additionally, Rauschenberg's iconic technique of layering and combining different materials, as both a physical and metaphorical gesture, reinforces themes of change, movement, and the ongoing flow of cultural and political currents during the 1960s and 1970s.



Anna Huntington Hyatt, [*Hand of the artist*], 1935, SUAM 1965.0162

The ways that gestures are depicted in an artwork, along with knowledge about the processes and purposes of its artistic creation, can be a powerful tool for memory as well. Anna Hyatt Huntington's sculpture, [*Hand of the artist*], for example, (re)presents the shape, contours, and movements of her own hand in the act of artistic creation. Similar to themes in her other works, this sculpture explores human dignity, the role of the artist, and artistic labor. It is a self-reflective tribute to the artist's role in the world. By focusing on the hand, Huntington is celebrating the artist's labor while simultaneously symbolizing how art is created through physical effort: the hand is central to the production of culture. In *The Archive and The Repertoire*, Diana Taylor explores how cultural memory is preserved and transmitted through two primary forms: the archive, which consists of written documents, objects, and other tangible records, and the repertoire, which refers to embodied performances, oral traditions, and lived experiences passed down through generations. Taylor argues that while the archive captures static, recorded history, the repertoire brings history to life through active, performative engagement, highlighting the dynamic interplay between memory, history, and performance in shaping cultural identity. For instance, Rauschenberg's artistic methods, style, and creative choices in *Surface Series #54* would be considered part of his learned and living repertoire. His artwork, meanwhile, stands even after his death as a way of preserving specific memories, histories, and beliefs in physical form.

As one of many prints in *Surface Series* from *Currents* (1970), *Surface Series #54* might also be considered an archive in its own right. The work preserves history and public memory through many layers of newspaper titles, reports, images of events and historical figures, and

advertisements from 1970. The layers of newspaper content in *Surface Series #54*, as an archive, may evoke multiple meanings for viewers depending on the visual elements they focus on and connections they make between layers. Nothing in the title suggests there is an intended interpretation. Yet, the large, clenched fist Rauschenberg placed in the upper right corner of the image stands out in terms of size and visual clarity. Viewers who remember or know about the civil rights movement in the 1950s and 1960s would be hard-pressed to interpret this fist as anything other than a symbol of Black liberation and Black activism archived by news media. As a strong visual element, the gesture of the clenched fist also looms powerfully above other newspaper headlines, text, and images, affecting how the work as a whole may be interpreted. While the image of the raised fist is part of the archive, the person raising their fist was pulling this specific gesture and its symbolic meaning from the repertoire. Taylor examines how, through the repertoire, everyday life performances can be a means of resistance and survival, especially for marginalized communities whose histories are often excluded from official archives. The gesture of the raised fist—which is also the focus of Ngala’s photograph, taken 50 years later—is deeply rooted in a history of Black liberation movements, including the civil rights movement of the 1960s and the Black Panther Party. The raised fist symbolizes strength, unity, and defiance, conveying the message, over time and through multiple social movements, that Black lives and bodies are important and deserve justice.

This gesture, tied to a history of Black activism, has also been transformed into a symbol of not only the ongoing struggle for racial equality, but a more general resistance to perceived injustice. As the single gesture shifts in meaning and purpose over time, we might consider its ephemeral (re)performances in life and art as performances of reenactment. Performance studies scholar Rebeca Schneider emphasizes the ethical and generative possibilities of reenactment in her work, arguing that reenactment of history is not merely a theatrical gesture of replication or form of nostalgia, but is a *gesture of critical engagement*. Through reenactment, past events are brought into the present, not to “replay” them, but to respond to them—what she terms *gestural response-ability*. Schneider highlights how reenactment unsettles history through embodied actions that reactivate historical moments. Rather than merely replicating an original event, reenactment opens up space for new interpretations and responses. The idea of *response-ability* in this context challenges the assumption that history is a fixed narrative, and positions reenactment as a means of re-engaging and responding to the ethical demands of the past.



Rob Swainston and Zorawar Sidhu, *July 4, 2020, 2021*,
SUAM 2022.0008

Ethical or activist responses to historical events, meanwhile, become increasingly complicated when thinking about the many ways a gesture such as the raised fist, a raised object, or even a raised arm might be interpreted in everyday life and in art. Rob Swainston and Zorawar Sidhu's *July 4th, 2020*, captures this complexity in a single layered image, which confronts the viewer with images of America's political climate in 2020, the effects of the COVID-19 pandemic, environmental destruction, racial injustice, and gun violence. By layering many images seen on the news in one work, the artists show how media viewers can become numb to such problems. The work is part of their larger series, *Doomscrolling*, which refers to the everyday gesture of endlessly scrolling through negative news on our phones and other digital devices, which often results in anxiety or numbness.

While scrolling is a relatively passive gesture, printmaking is an active gesture, and prints have long been used for activism. Swainston and Sidhu's large-scale work forces the viewer to slow down, pay attention, and look closely for the complex intertextuality of the image to be intelligible. Like Rauschenberg's *Surface Series* from *Currents*, Swainston and Sidhu compress moments seen on the news into a single powerful image, giving the represented (or as Schneider would say, reenacted) gestures and issues that the images (re)present greater emotional depth. Further, to create the work, the artists used layers of graffitied plywood that had boarded up businesses in New York City during the pandemic. The metaphorical gesture of reusing items—which were meant to physically separate people and spaces during the pandemic—to layer images of important places and ephemeral gestures (including many raised arms and fists) made by people of various cultural and political perspectives, adds to the ambiguity and depth of the work.

Swainston and Sidhu's physical, artistic, performative, political, and activist gesture with this artwork also refers to the events on July 4, 2020. In many cities, groups gathered in public spaces to protest against police violence, racial inequality, systemic racism, and for the removal of Confederate monuments, sparking national debates about America's history and its treatment of Black Americans. In Richmond, VA, protestors focused specifically on the removal of the Robert E. Lee Monument, as the city continued to come to terms with its Confederate past. Richmond was at the forefront of the day's news, with activists and community members coming together to challenge the legacy of slavery and racial inequality in America. Further, the style of Swainston and Sidhu's artwork also alludes to the ways in which the Lee Monument had been defaced multiple times by protesters in the weeks leading up to July 4, 2020, including the painting of the words *Black Lives Matter*. On July 4, activists continued to paint and decorate the monument and its surrounding areas with large-scale murals, messages of racial justice, and calls to end systemic racism. The area around the Lee Monument had become a space for artistic expression and protest, symbolizing Richmond's larger reckoning with its Confederate past.

Just as it gestures to the complex interplay of the archive and the repertoire during a time of digital media, 24-hour news cycles, and doomscrolling, *July 4, 2020*, also brings to mind performance studies scholar Barbara Kirshenblatt-Gimblett's argument that archives are not just static collections of material but dynamic spaces of performance where cultural memory is preserved, curated, and activated over time. She uses the term *slow performance* to describe how the materials in the archive—such as objects, documents, and recordings—are engaged in a kind of ongoing, deliberate performance that unfolds gradually, rather than in a singular, momentary

event. This slow performance contrasts with immediate and ephemeral forms of performance, as it is a continual process of recollection, reflection, interpretation, and cultural transmission that can span generations. The concept emphasizes that the archive is a site of memory that only functions through the performative act of engagement with its contents over time. It is a place where cultural, social, and political practices and histories are both stored and also actively reconstructed through processes of revisiting, reinterpreting, reenacting, and/or reperforming the past.

A series of family photographs by Milton Rogovin exemplifies the idea of the slow archive. In terms of performance, gesture, and reflection, Annette Kuhn describes such photography as a key medium in the construction and transmission of memory in the context of family history. Kuhn explores how photographs are both evidence and absence. As material and artistic objects, they capture moments in time. Yet, photographs often fail to capture the complexity of human memory, emotion, and personal narrative. Kuhn notes that photographs are inherently ambiguous; they can evoke strong emotional responses and create a sense of continuity between generations, but they are also selective and shaped by the perspectives of those who take, exhibit, and view them.



Milton Rogovin, *Elsa & KeeKee, Buffalo, NY, 1972*, SUAM, 2022.0112.1



Milton Rogovin, *Elsa & KeeKee, Buffalo, NY, 1984*, SUAM, 2022.0112.2



Milton Rogovin, *Elsa & KeeKee, Buffalo, NY, 1992*, SUAM, 2022.0112.3



Milton Rogovin, *Elsa & KeeKee, Buffalo, NY, 2002*, SUAM, 2022.0112.4

Rogovin's four-photograph series of a mother and daughter, *Elsa & KeeKee Buffalo, NY*, illustrates this point. The photographs were taken in 1972, 1984, 1992, and 2002. The aesthetics and locations of popular family photography, including physical poses, fashionable attire, and familial gestures can be seen in each image. Over the decades, the mother and daughter always perform at least the hint of a smile—aside from the 2002 photograph, in which the mother is not visually present, and we are left to guess about why she is not pictured. Their poses are in line with conventional family photography in the U.S. at the time. The subjects are close to each other, standing or sitting, with one touching the shoulder or back of the other: a gesture of love or at the least *familiarity*. Familiarity, following Sarah Ahmed, refers to the emotional, relational, affective, and performative aspects of family life, including how family is not just a biological or legal structure but also a social and affective one. Ahmed describes how family relationships are structured around emotional attachments that are often linked to intimacy and exclusion and can thus create both belonging and otherness. The term asks us to notice everyday life and archived moments in which performances of kinship or family ties work to shape individual identity. The quadriptych of Elsa and KeeKee tells a decades-long story about a mother-daughter relationship that the viewer is barely privy to. The viewer may choose to fill in the blank narrative spaces, or to not care about the changes and connections between the photographs. The viewer might also

think about the privilege they have in viewing such family photographs in a public setting like a museum, the possible contexts for each photograph (considering the photographer's style, when and where the photograph was taken, and what the viewer knows about how mother-daughter relationships might *possibly* play out during various decades of their respective lives). Following this, a reflexive viewer would also try to better understand the series of photographs by questioning their interpretation, assumptions, biases, and sociopolitical leanings or beliefs.

Overall, performance studies allows viewers to understand visual art through the lens of *performance*, exploring how body, space, action, time, intertextuality, and context can shape interpretation. This way of thinking about art enhances traditional visual analysis by inviting explorations of embodiment, context, and narrative in terms of both the act of creating and the act of viewing. By examining both artistic processes and viewer experiences, performance studies also challenges the notion that art objects are static or fixed and opens up new possibilities for meaning-making and viewer engagement. Indeed, centering aspects such as gesture, movement, viewer interaction, and reflexivity can reveal how meaning is neither simply constructed by an artist nor inherent in an artwork, but rather develops over time through the relationships between the artist, the artwork, its audiences, and the contexts in which it is viewed.

Approaches to Observing & Discussing Art

Visual analysis is the foundational practice of the field of art history. Before investigating historic contexts, exploring cultural relevance, or doing biographical research on artists, it's best to begin thinking about a work of art with straightforward questions about its visual qualities, focusing on the art object itself and approaching it on its own terms.

Asa Simon Mittman's open access online textbook *Look At This!: An Introduction to Art Appreciation* provides guidelines for visual analysis as a two-step process: analyzing the [constitutive elements](#) of an artwork, and then considering how the [artwork's composition](#) brings those elements together. Mittman first suggests focusing on the following visual elements of an artwork:

1. **Line:** A path either represented or implied
2. **Shape:** The property of a two-dimensional form, usually defined by a line around it
3. **Color:** The light reflecting off objects, divided into hue, value and intensity
4. **Space:** Depth, real or represented, as well as the general area within a work
5. **Form:** The property of a three-dimensional object
6. **Texture:** The feeling of a surface, real or represented

During initial observations, consider how each element appears in the artwork. For example, are lines rigid or curved, narrow or thick? Are colors abundant, varied, and saturated, or muted and restrained? Does the space of the artwork appear vast or confined? Do these qualities appear in one way consistently throughout the artwork, or do they change from area to area? During this initial stage of visual analysis, focus on each element in as much isolation as possible to gain an understanding of how the artwork's individual components operate. We'll look at Ivan Forde's self-portrait *The Fall of Man* (2012) as an example.



Ivan Forde, *The Fall of Man*, SUAM, 2022.0028

Color: The image is in greyscale, with lighter colors at the bottom and top and darker colors in the center. The background of the image on the right and left sides is a lighter color. On the bottom right, there is a white button up shirt with small black polka dots. Collaged images of partial facial features in the center evoke the skin of a person of color, like that of a Black man with darker skin. The shading of the collaged facial features also indicates lighting from multiple angles. The whites and darker pupils of the eyes seem to look in multiple directions. The cloud-like shape that extends above the collaged facial features, to the top left and center, includes many shades of grey, white, and black that blend in and out of each other.

Line: Most of the lines are irregular curves, including some unusual angles and shapes. The only clear lines are at the bottom of the image, including the curved shoulders, collar, and round polka dots on a button up shirt. The most chaotic line arrangement is in the center of the image. Within the chaos, however, there are clearly delineated edges of many layered facial features. These features seem to be cut and pasted into a head-like shape that is packed with lines at the bottom and becomes sparse at the top. The lines closer to the top of the image are also layered but become softer, more shaded, curvy, and cloud-like.

Shape: There are three major shapes in this image. On the bottom right, there is a shoulders-up image of a button-up shirt. Above the collar, there is a deconstructed image of a face or faces. This is in the shape of a neck and head that seems to drift apart near where the nose, eyes, and forehead would be. The collaged images of cut up facial features burst from the neck of the shirt. While the facial features are layered, they are clearly distinguishable as eyes, noses, mouths, and ears of different sizes. There is a partially constructed left-facing profile of a face with one eye, a nose, and a smiling mouth with visible top teeth just above the left shoulder of the shirt. The collaged features extend up first in the shape of a head, and then in a funnel-like shape. The most packed layers are at the bottom of this shape, while there are fewer, more sparse layers near the top. There is a second partially constructed face (with two eyes, a nose, a broadly smiling mouth,

teeth and tongue) at the very top of this shape. Just behind this face, the third shape begins. The collaged facial features seem to dissipate into the shape of a thick cumulonimbus cloud, with multiple, puffy, well-defined layers. The cloud-like shape extends straight up and out to the top left corner of the image.

Space: There is a sense of depth to the image, like a photographic portrait. The size and shape of the shirt indicate that the shoulder on the bottom right is closer to where the camera would be than the other shoulder, which is smaller and less visible. Because the shirt begins at shoulder-level, there is a sense that a fully dressed and in-tact body is just below it. Behind the bottom half of the collaged facial features in the center of the image, there is a shadow cast onto the light background in a shape similar to a partial shadow of a person's head. The layered facial features in the center of the image create a different kind of depth, as nearly every unique feature is layered in front of and/or behind multiple other features. The shape at the top center and left of the image uses layers to depict a third type of depth, like the fluffiness of a thick cumulous cloud, that extends upward in a cauliflower-like pattern. The cloud does not have a top and seems to extend beyond the top border of the image. Negative space takes up a large portion of the right and left sides of the image.

Form: In this self-portrait, Forde's body plays an important role in shaping the image. Forde's body in the portrait is presented as a three-dimensional form, occupying real space within the artwork. The volume of the body is rendered by the light and shadow on the figure, which gives it physicality and substance. The shirt is a cotton or poly-cotton blend, smooth, and seems ironed. Forde's skin in the photographic fragments is smooth, but it is also layered and scattered in ways that make the shape of the head seem disjointed. The clouds above his head are thick and fluffy, like one might walk through them, but doing so but would impede both sight and breathing.

Texture: This artwork blends various materials, styles, and techniques to create visual depth and a tactile effect. The work is layered with a combination of smooth, glossy finishes and rough, almost sculpture-like elements. This mix of textures evokes a sense of disarray and discomfort: the bottom of the work appears smooth and photorealistic; the facial features in the center of the image—while still comprised of photographic images—are coarsely fragmented and layered, and the clouds at the top of the image create the thickest sense of depth through impervious, heavy layering. Overall, the multiple textures combined in this artwork draw attention to the physicality of the work.

After becoming familiar with the visual elements of an artwork, turn your attention to how those elements operate together to form a complete work. How do the various elements function together to create a sense of balance (or imbalance) or of pattern and rhythm? Do they evoke a feeling of movement? How do they relate to each other in terms of proportion and scale? What kind of emotional responses does the artwork prompt?

In Ivan Forde's self-portrait *The Fall of Man*, the interplay of color, line, shape, space, form, and texture create a powerful sense of imbalance, suggesting both internal and external conflict. The grayscale color scheme, with its gradient of light and dark tones, highlights how the bottom, center, and top of the image are both interconnected and fragmented. The deconstructed,

multiplied, and re-layered facial features in the center make the image appear disjointed, conveying a sense of disarray and controlled chaos. Additionally, the irregular, curving lines throughout the work—especially in the chaotic center where the facial features are layered—accentuate a feeling of dissection and breakdown. Meanwhile, the strategic, readable placement of two eyes, a nose, two ears, and a wide-smiling mouth at the top of the layered facial features reminds the viewer that these collaged fragments are a representation of a Black man's face. The placement and size of the enthusiastic, unrestrained, nearly hysterical smile, meanwhile, indicates a facial expression of strain and agitation, prompting feelings of apprehension and unease. Meanwhile, the softer, cloud-like shapes at the top of the image contrast this tension, evoking a sense of detachment or otherworldliness. The form of Forde's body, anchored at the bottom with a smooth, polished shirt, connects to the ethereal, almost surreal top portion of the image as the fragmented facial features seem to stem from the shirt collar and dissipate into the cloud-like mass. These contrasts in texture—the smoothness of the shirt versus the rough, fragmented quality of the face and thick layering of the clouds—create an additional sense of emotional discomfort. The overlapping layers of facial features, expansive and uncontained cloud-like forms, and large portions of negative space on the left and right sides creates a sense of complex depth that suggests both confinement and freedom. These elements, working together, evoke movement and transformation, as if the self is in a constant state of flux, caught between composure and disintegration. Overall, Forde's *The Fall of Man* encourages reflection on the fragmentation of identity and the complexities of personal and collective histories, particularly within the context of Black identities and experiences.

From here, adopting other contextual or disciplinary lenses can further focus your analysis and expand your discussion. For example, you might ask who made the artwork and why, how it was made, what it is made of, how a particular form of scholarship may interpret the art, how it reflects a particular historical moment, or how it communicates a set of cultural values. Below are several approaches accompanied by suggested groupings of artworks from the museum's collection that can help you explore ideas around gesture, reflection, and performance. You'll also find questions to help focus your engagement and discussion. The suggested groupings are only starting points; you are encouraged to further explore artists and artworks you find especially conducive to your discussion or relevant to your teaching.

Materials and Production

Materials (such as wood, clay, stone, and pigments) root artwork in time and place. Likewise, studying artists' processes and techniques can help to understand their motivations, choices, access to technology, and cultural traditions.

- What materials is the artwork made of, and what visual and physical qualities are unique to those materials? Were these materials readily available to the artist, or difficult to acquire?
- Is the process of creation for a given work of art clearly visible through observation alone? Or does the process seem unclear without conducting further research?
- Are the materials considered difficult to work with?
- Why would the artist choose to work in this specific medium?
- Does knowing the process or technique behind a work of art contribute to or change its meaning(s)?

- How might the artwork change over time? Was it made with permanence in mind? Do the materials deteriorate easily?
- Is there anything strange or unexpected about how this artwork appears to be assembled?
- When viewing art digitally (or viewing digital art): what elements of materiality can screens successfully communicate, and what limitations are there? How does digitization alter audiences' experiences with art?
- **Suggested Artwork**
 - Anna Hyatt Huntington, *[Hand of the artist]*, 1935, SUAM [1965.0162](#)
 - Eduardo Paolozzi, *Animals as Aliens*, 1970, SUAM [1978.087.26](#)
 - Peter Milton, *Interiors IV: Hotel Paradise Café*, 1987, SUAM [2023.20](#)
 - Gail Hoffman, *In the Living Room*, 2006, SUAM [2021.0057](#)
 - Gail Hoffman, *Funambulists*, 2009, SUAM [2009.0117](#)
 - Ivan Forde, *Erratic Eyes*, 2020, SUAM [2020.0029](#)
 - Mauro C. Martinez, *Terrestrial (study)*, 2024, SUAM [2024.158](#)

The Meaning(s) of a Gesture

Artworks can depict actions and poses related to political, personal, historical, and/or fictional events and contexts. For example, raised arms, fists, and hands might suggest politics, power relations, protest, community, tragedy, celebration, dance, ritual, and more. These gestures also indicate a self-consciousness in the moment of performing the gesture; the gesture is performed intentionally, for a reason, for a known or unknown audience.

- How do the artworks depicting raised arms, hands, and/or fists evoke a sense of action and/or motion?
- Some works depict subjects with one arm raised, while others show both arms raised. What are possible interpretations of a subject with one arm raised? How might these interpretations change when subjects are depicted with both arms raised?
- How have the meanings of a single gesture, such as the raised fist, changed over time? How is the gesture used differently within different cultural contexts?
- Which works show similar gestures with meanings that seem to have stayed the same over time? Which works show similar gestures with possible meanings that seem to differ?
- What role does power play in the interpretation of these gestures? How are power relations displayed or alluded to through raised arms, hands, and/or fists?
- What prior knowledge would help a viewer understand potential political and/or historical meanings of a gesture? How might prior knowledge about the artist inform how a viewer interprets the gesture in an artwork?
- How do the time and context of creation along with the time and context of viewing influence interpretations of a gesture's meaning? How might a viewer's beliefs about history and/or politics inform their interpretation of a gesture portrayed in an artwork?
- **Suggested Artwork:**
 - Anna Hyatt Huntington, *Diana of the Chase*, 1932, SUAM [0019.043](#)
 - Barbara Morgan, *Martha Graham - Every Soul is a Circus- Solo*, 1940, SUAM [1984.148](#)
 - Robert Rauschenberg, *Surface Series #54*, 1970, SUAM [1980.493](#)
 - Jaune Quick-to-See Smith, *Celebrate*, 1997, SUAM [2023.247](#)

- Flo Ngala, [*Black Lives Matter protest, man standing with his left fist raised*], 2020, SUAM [2020.0019](#)
- Braylen Dion, *Aria*, 2020, SUAM [2020.0018](#)
- Rob Swainston and Zorawar Sidhu, *July 4, 2020, 2021*, SUAM [2022.0008](#)

Embodied Knowledge

In performance studies, “embodied knowledge” is the understanding and skills that the physical body learns and knows through example, practice, and experience. It emphasizes how physical actions, movements, and sensations contribute to the way knowledge is acquired and expressed within cultures, suggesting that bodily experiences are integral to learning and performing. This concept highlights the idea that the body itself is a repository of knowledge. The body plays a crucial role in how we pass knowledge from generation to generation, and also influences how we understand and engage with the world.

- When thinking about the creation of the artwork, the artist, and the depicted subject, what forms of embodied knowledge are implied?
- What can the artwork teach us about embodiment and movement, such as the ways social norms related to posing for photographs has changed over time and/or how gestures and movements can change in meaning based on time and context?
- How does the artwork frame an ephemeral event? Can an artwork be both archival and a form of embodied knowledge at the same time?
- In relation to art, how do the notions of *gesture* and *reflection* help us imagine the ways that embodied knowledge might be passed down over generations?
- **Suggested Artwork:**
 - Harriet Whitney Frishmuth, *The Dancers*, 1921, SUAM [1987.081](#)
 - Barbara Morgan, *Martha Graham - Lamentation (double image)*, 1935, SUAM [1984.142](#)
 - Jacques Lowe, *Harold Alzana balancing on high wire, Ringling Brothers Circus*, circa 1955, SUAM [2021.0469](#)
 - Federico Castellón, *Walking a Tight Rope on...*, 1968, SUAM [1978.046](#)
 - Letterio Calapai, *The Circus Comes to Town*, 1986, SUAM [2023.68](#)
 - Gail Hoffman, *Circus Event*, no date, SUAM [2021.0056](#)
 - Quil Lemons, *Untitled (Brooke Bradley, Jade Lee + Brie Bradley, Zuri Self)*, 2018, printed 2024, SUAM [2024.178](#)

Literal and Figurative Reflection

Reflection is a potent device for both visual and conceptual exploration in art. Depictions of reflection and reflective surfaces often serve as metaphors for self-examination, illusion, identity, and the tension between appearance and reality. The use of reflective materials in an artwork, meanwhile, can invite viewer interaction, transform the viewing environment, and blur the boundaries between artwork, viewer, and space. While mirrors, polished metals, and glass might literally reflect the viewer, these materials also add symbolism, depth, complexity, and an element of surprise to the artwork and the viewer’s experience with it.

- How can the use of reflective surfaces in an artwork affect the viewing experience and/or viewer interpretations?
- What are some ways you have seen reflective materials used as symbolic or metaphorical visual elements in art?

- How might a work prompt self-reflection through the depiction or use of reflective surfaces and reflections?
- What elements does an artwork need to move viewers beyond self-reflection and into reflexivity, performance/gesture, and action?
- **Suggested Artwork:**
 - Unidentified artist, *[Woman at mirror]*, circa 1890, SUAM [1988.709](#)
 - Ludvik Durchanek, *The Asylum/The Institution*, 1961, SUAM [1968.088](#)
 - Federico Castellón, *Siege of Memory*, circa 1965, SUAM [1967.999](#)
 - Robert Heinecken, *Are You Rea #2*, 1964 – 1968, SUAM [2018.0253.02](#)
 - Letterio Calapai, *Reflection*, 1982, SUAM [2023.127](#)
 - Peter Milton, *Interiors I: Family Reunion*, 1984, SUAM [2023.18](#)
 - Jim Ridlon, *Secret Garden*, no date, SUAM [2018.0358](#)
 - Kreshonna Keane, *Reflection*, 2020, SUAM [2020.0017](#)

Layers and Legibility

Layering materials or visual elements within a work can add complexity, depth, texture, and engaging juxtapositions. Each layer encourages viewers to explore and uncover details. Layers that include clear and legible components might provide a sense of order and coherence, while layers that include or create illegible or obscured elements might create a sense of mystery, confusion, or tension. At the same time, illegible layers may prompt viewers to spend more time with an artwork in attempt to decipher its meaning(s).

- What thoughts and ideas are prompted by layering and the legibility of subjects in a work or series of works?
- How might visual illegibility in an artwork make its potential sociopolitical concerns clearer? What examples of this do you see in the artwork(s)?
- How might legibility or illegibility be related to connections between artworks and their contexts of creation?
- **Suggested Artwork:**
 - Barbara Morgan, *Martha Graham - Letter to the World (kick)*, 1940, SUAM [1984.703](#)
 - Robert Heinecken, *Are You Rea #20*, 1964-1968, SUAM [2018.0253.20](#)
 - Eduardo Paolozzi, *Decency and Decorum in Production*, 1965 - 70, published 1970, SUAM [1978.087.7](#)
 - Eduardo Paolozzi, *Pig or Person, it's the same, Fortune plays a funny game*, 1965 - 70, published 1970, SUAM [1978.087.33](#)
 - Robert Rauschenberg, *Surface Series #48*, 1970, SUAM [1980.496](#)
 - Alicia McKim, *A Chicken in Every Pot*, 2004, SUAM [2004.0038.11](#)
 - Wendy Red Star, *Four Generations: Iikua Biluxbakush (Self Reliant, Amy Bright Wings Red Star) Báakoosh Kawiiléete (Kind to Everybody, Wallace Red Star) Baaéitichish (One Who is Talented, Wendy Red Star) Apitebia (Sandhill Crane Woman, Beatrice Red Star Fletcher)*, 2021, SUAM [2021.0059](#)

Metaphor and Literary Allusion

When artists visually reference literary works, they add layers of meaning that draw on the themes, characters, or narratives of those texts, deepening the viewer's understanding by linking visual elements to a broader literary context. Literary allusions can imbue visual elements with symbolic significance. For instance, imagery related to a famous novel can evoke themes or emotions from the story, providing additional interpretive dimensions. Finally, literary allusions in artwork tap into shared cultural knowledge, providing a common reference point that can make the artwork more accessible or resonant for those familiar with the literary work.

- **Suggested Artwork:**

- Letterio Calapai, *de Profundis*, 1952, SUAM [2023.27](#)
- Letterio Calapai, *Fata Morgana*, 1966, SUAM [2023.67](#)
- Anthony Toney, [Sketch for "Man and His Universe"], no date SUAM [1967.323](#)
- Diane Milbauer, *Bad Dreams*, 1993, SUAM [1994.001.06](#)
- Ivan Forde, *The Fall of Man*, 2012, SUAM [2020.0028](#)

Additional Resources

Citations

- "A Chicken in Every Pot" political ad. Collection HH-HOOVH: Herbert Hoover Papers. *New York Times*, 30 October 1928.
<https://www.docsteach.org/documents/document/chicken-in-every-pot>
- Ahmed, Sara. *The Promise of Happiness*. Durham: Duke University Press, 2010.
- Hirsch, Marianne. *The Archive and the Repertoire: Performing Cultural Memory in the Americas* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2003). "Editor's Column: What's Wrong with These Terms? A Conversation with Barbara Kirshenblatt-Gimblett and Diana Taylor," vol. 120(5), 2005.
- Kirshenblatt-Gimblett, Barbara. "Intangible Heritage as Metacultural Production." *Museum International* 56(1-2), 2004: 52-65.
- Kuhn, Annette. *Family Secrets*. London: Verso, 2002
- Parson, Tom. *A chicken in every pot: Poem*. Seattle, WA: Wood Works, 1995.
- Schechner, Richard. *Performance Theory*. Rev. ed. New York: Routledge, 2003.
- Schneider, Rebecca. *Performing Remains: Art and War in Times of Theatrical Reenactment*. London: Routledge, 2011.
- Schneider, Rebecca and Lucia Ruprecht. "In Our Hands: An Ethics of Gestural Responsibility." *Performance Philosophy*, vol. 3(1), 2017.
- Taylor, Diana. *The Archive and the Repertoire: Performing Cultural Memory in the Americas*. Duke University Press, 2003.
- Taylor, Diana. *Performance*. 2nd ed., Palgrave Macmillan, 2016.

Further Reading

- **Ahmed, Sarah.** *The Cultural Politics of Emotion*. Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2004.
 - Engages with the role of emotion in cultural practices, including performance. Provides a critical analysis of how emotions are socially constructed and performed, linking them to issues of power, politics, and identity—key concerns in performance studies.
- **Bial, Henry, ed.** *The Performance Studies Reader*. 4th ed. London: Routledge, 2020.
 - This anthology is one of the most widely used and comprehensive texts in performance studies. It includes key writings by foundational thinkers like Richard Schechner, Victor Turner, Erving Goffman, Judith Butler, and Peggy Phelan, among others. In addition to classic texts on ritual, ethnography, and the body, the 4th edition expands the scope to include contemporary discussions on globalization, digital performance, queer theory, and post-colonialism.
- **Connors, April.** *Gesture Drawing: A Story-Based Approach*. CRC Press, 2017.
 - An instructional book for drawing gestures, particularly within visual narrative mediums. While not an interpretive study of artwork, this book provides valuable insight into the creative processes that produce representations of expressive bodies.
- **Crowther, Paul.** *What Drawing and Painting Really Mean: The Phenomenology of Image and Gesture*. Routledge, 2017.
 - A phenomenological study of gesture within the context of art production. Crowther argues that the *making* of artwork imbues it with forms of intrinsic meaning. This book is a *gestural* study about art production rather than a study of how art represents gestures.
- **Fried, Michael.** *Absorption and Theatricality: Painting and Beholder in the Age of Diderot*. University of Chicago Press, 1988.
 - A crucial text for art history, this book describes artwork that calls attention to its artificiality as “theatrical,” while works that pull viewers in and cause them to lose their sense of conscious interpretation are “absorbing.” According to Fried, different gestures and framing of gestures across artwork can result in either absorption or theatricality.
- **Kirshenblatt-Gimblett, Barbara.** “Intangible Heritage as Metacultural Production.” *Museum International* 56(1–2), 2004: 52–65.
 - Explores how “intangible heritage” (including rituals, gestures, and performances), is not simply preserved but actively produced by cultural communities. Kirshenblatt-Gimblett explores how these practices are framed, performed, and recognized within global and local contexts, shaping collective memory and identity.
- **Kuhn, Annette.** *Family Secrets*. London: Verso, 2002.
 - Examines how repressed or hidden memories shape personal and familial histories. Kuhn highlights the role of photography in revealing and preserving these secrets, exploring how images influence identity, narrative, and collective memory within families.

- **McKenzie, Jon. *Perform or Else: From Discipline to Performance*. Routledge, 2006.**
 - Explores how the concept of performance extends beyond theatre into politics, economics, and everyday life, analyzing how performance has become a tool for discipline, productivity, and identity in contemporary society.
- **Mirzoeff, Nicholas. *Bodyscape: Art, modernity and the ideal figure*. Routledge, 1995.**
 - This study of visual cultures of the body includes chapters analyzing bodily representation in photography and painting, approaching bodies as political constructs with a wide variety of cultural implications.
- **Schneider, Rebecca and Lucia Ruprecht. “In Our Hands: An Ethics of Gestural Response-ability.” *Performance Philosophy*, vol. 3(1), 2017.**
 - Explores how gestures (whether performed or encountered) carry ethical weight and a sense of relational responsibility. “Response-ability” is emphasized as being attuned to the impact one’s actions have on others. The essay asserts that gestures are not just expressions of agency but also key sites of care and accountability.
- **Taylor, Diana. *The Archive and the Repertoire: Performing Cultural Memory in the Americas*. Duke University Press, 2003.**
 - Examines two forms of cultural memory: the “archive” (written and material records) and the “repertoire” (embodied practices and performances). Taylor argues these modes are interdependent, with performance offering a dynamic, living counterpart to static archival knowledge. Taylor highlights how performance preserves and reshapes cultural memory, especially for marginalized communities, emphasizing its role in maintaining collective identity.
- **Taylor, Diana. *Performance*. Duke University Press, 2016.**
 - Examines how performance functions as form of knowledge production, and links it to social, political, and cultural practices. Taylor emphasizes that embodied performance is crucial for both preserving and challenging historical memory, and also addresses how performance shapes identities and power dynamics across multiple contexts.
- **Vannini, Phillip. *Body/Embodiment: Symbolic Interaction and the Sociology of the Body*. Routledge, 2006.**
 - This collection of essays on bodily expression covers a vast array of disciplines and perspectives. Part 2 addresses “The Dramaturgical Body: Body as Performance.” While not a text on art analysis, this book may contain useful frameworks for contextualizing art’s depiction of gesturing bodies.
- **Williams, David, ed. *The Body in Performance*. Palgrave Macmillan, 2004.**
 - Provides a comprehensive exploration of the centrality of the body in performance studies. It challenges readers to think beyond traditional notions of performance as merely a theatrical activity, offering a broader, more inclusive understanding of how bodies perform in everyday life and cultural practices.

Art History Resources

- **CAMEO (Conservation & Art Materials Encyclopedia Online):** This [online encyclopedia](#) contains a wealth of information on various art materials, as well as how they work and how to handle them.

- ***Look At This!: An Introduction to Art Appreciation***: This [online textbook](#), written by Asa Simon Mittman, provides an entry-level guide to visual analysis followed by extensive analyses of various artistic traditions.
- **Heilbrunn Timeline of Art History**: This [website](#) provides an extensive timeline of art production across global art cultures as well as well-researched essays.
- **SmartHistory**: This [website](#) provides accessible tools for studying art history, including peer reviewed lessons on various art forms written by over 800 contributing scholars.
- **The Getty Research Institute**: The Institute's [research website](#) includes an array of tools and databases covering a range of subject matter including [collecting and provenance research](#), [conservation](#), [art vocabularies](#), and more.
- **Syracuse University Library**: provides access to [39 databases](#) under the subject of Art, Design, and Photography, offering access to a wide variety of artwork itself alongside critical writing.
 - **ARTstor**: A vast archive providing images of artwork.
 - **Grove Art Online**: Contains introductory essays and bibliographies on various art topics, as well as encyclopedic information on key art terms.

Artwork Illustrated in Guide (in order of appearance)

- Rob Swainston (American, born 1970) and Zorawar Sidhu (Indian-American, born 1985), *July 4, 2020*, 2021. Multi-color woodblock, 57 1/2 × 42 1/4 in., Museum purchase, [2022.0008](#)
- Flo Ngala (American, born 1995), [*Black Lives Matter protest, man standing with his left fist raised*], 2020. Inkjet archival pigment print, 7 3/4 × 11 in.), Museum purchase, Robert B. Menschel '51, H'91 Photography Fund, [2020.0019](#)
- Barbara Morgan (American, 1900-1992), *Martha Graham - Every Soul is a Circus-Solo*, 1940. Gelatin silver print, 14 1/8 × 15 11/16 in. Gift of Jay Rudberg, [1984.148](#)
- Alicia McKim (American, born 1957), *A Chicken in Every Pot*, 2004. Color lithograph, 10 × 12 1/2 in. Gift of the Syracuse University Printmaking Program, [2004.0038.11](#)
- Robert Rauschenberg (American, 1925-2008), *Surface Series #54*, 1970. Screenprint, 35 × 35 in., Gift of John Marvin, [1980.493](#)
- Anna Hyatt Huntington (American, 1876 - 1973), [*Hand of the artist*], 1935. Aluminum, 2 1/2 × 12 3/4 × 4 in., Gift of the artist, [1965.0162](#)
- Milton Rogovin (American, 1909 - 2011), *Elsa & KeeKee, Buffalo, NY*, 1972. Gelatin silver print, 10 × 8 in., Gift of the Schoor Family, [2022.0112.1](#)
- Milton Rogovin (American, 1909 - 2011), *Elsa & KeeKee, Buffalo, NY*, 1984. Gelatin silver print, 10 × 8 in., Gift of the Schoor Family, [2022.0112.2](#)
- Milton Rogovin (American, 1909 - 2011), *Elsa & KeeKee, Buffalo, NY*, 1992. Gelatin silver print, 10 × 8 in., Gift of the Schoor Family, [2022.0112.3](#)
- Milton Rogovin (American, 1909 - 2011), *Elsa & KeeKee, Buffalo, NY*, 2002. Gelatin silver print, 10 × 8 in., Gift of the Schoor Family, [2022.0112.4](#)
- Ivan Forde (Guyanese-American, born 1990), *The Fall of Man*, 2012. Digital inkjet print collage, 18 9/16 × 15 3/4 in. Museum purchase, Robert Bradley Fritz '51 Fund [2020.0028](#)