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SURFACING

Turning the Gestures of Everyday Life Into Art

The choreographer Katja Heitmann collects people's habits and mannerisms — how they walk, stand, kiss, sleep and fidget — for her ongoing dance project.

By Zoey Poll Photographs and Video by Melissa Schriek

TILBURG, the Netherlands — A few times each day, Mahat Arab, a 26-year-old Dutch spoken-word artist, cracks the knuckles of his left hand during tasks that make him feel anxious, like driving a car or talking on the phone. Karolien Wauters, a 23-year-old dancer, often tucks her hand into the waistband of her leggings. And Chandra Merx, a 41-year-old City Council official in Maastricht, raises her eyebrows, not only as an expression of surprise, but also as a reflex when she's rushing or lost in thought.

For Katja Heitmann, these kinds of movements — an unconscious routine, a tic, a distinctive gait — are core to each person's unique personality. A German choreographer based in Tilburg, Heitmann believes everyone has at least one gesture that is theirs alone. "If you pay close attention, you know that no two bodies move the same way," she said.

Heitmann, 35, has been collecting examples of these movements for the past three years. In 2019, she put out an open call for "donations," inviting people to contribute their own habits and mannerisms. Her collection now contains the movements of 1,023 individuals — how they walk, how they kiss, how they sleep, how they stand, how they fidget.

The project, called “Motus Mori” (meaning “movement that is dying out”), depends on a team of 10 dancers to keep these gestures alive. Nothing about the movements is photographed or filmed, or even recorded in writing, except for one minimalist note card per donor.

“In our current society, we are trying to capture humanity in data,” Heitmann said. “But we are losing something this way.”

Her inventory is analog and ephemeral: The dancers record the gestures in their muscle memory. They stage frequent, five-hour dance installations open to the public, where they act out the movements of hundreds of people. “The archive,” as one dancer put it, “is our bodies.”

The work fits with the longstanding practice of choreographers drawing on daily life, such as Pina Bausch, who took inspiration from her collaborators’ memories and emotions, and Twyla Tharp, who incorporates commonplace actions such as falling and skipping into her performances. But rather than observing from a distance, Heitmann and her dancers work directly with volunteers to figure out which of their movements are worth saving.

The interview process starts as soon as a volunteer walks through the door. One of Heitmann’s dancers discreetly shadows the person across the studio for an hour, asking about everyday activities like working or commuting, while mimicking the individual’s anatomy, from the curve of the spine to the turnout of the feet.

It’s tempting for the volunteers to sit up straighter than usual or perform an ideal version of one’s self. “I really wanted to do well,” admitted Karen Neervoort, 64, the dean of a local performing arts school who was an early gesture donor. But the dancers encourage candidness by sharing stories about their own bodies, or examples from other participants.

“I always thought people were generally reserved, but within the first few minutes they tell us so much,” said the dancer Wies Berkhout. “They trust us with their insecurities and trauma.”

It helps that the interviews are essentially private (only first names and ages), and take place amid luminous stagings and an ambient, slow-tempo soundtrack. “You’re entering a very specific space, an art installation, which already opens you up,” said one of the participants, Ranti Tjan, the 56-year-old director of the Royal Academy of Art in The Hague.

As in an earlier piece, “Pandora’s DropBox,” a dark meditation on the pursuit of perfection, Heitmann conceived of “Motus Mori” as a response to what she sees as a cultural bias toward homogeneity — evidence of which she finds in examples as varied as the urban planning in Tilburg and the uniform dental work of her students. (“When they smile at me, they all have the same teeth.”)

For Heitmann, there is no “good” or “bad” movement, as long as it’s authentic: an ordinary stretch (wrists, necks, toes) or scratch (two-fingered pinch, side-to-side skim) is as worthy of consideration as the sentimental (a hairline kiss, a childhood handshake) or complex (martial arts techniques, religious rituals).

There are also movements that accompany classical music (index finger conducting), television (hanging upside down on the sofa) and Instagram (duck faces). There are expressions of pain (wincing), boredom (thumb twirling), ecstasy (dancing), terror (paralysis), old age (pulling out dentures) and insomnia (pacing). For every movement imbued with meaning, there are just as many without, whether absent-minded habits (ring spinning) or bad habits (teeth grinding or fingernail biting).

After the interview concludes, the dancer reinterprets the donor’s movements in the slow, precise language of Heitmann’s choreography. Her performances, many of which are open to audience participation, address contemporary themes, such as identity and technology (“Siri Loves Me,” “For iTernity”), in a tense, minimalist, slow-motion style. The dancers visibly tremble and sweat, straining to hold their bodies still, even their eyelids. The volunteer’s originally natural and fluid gestures are broken down into isolated fragments; a wave or the act of crossing one ankle behind the other could go on for minutes, a deliberate aesthetic that keeps the movements at a distant, analytical remove.

“The gesture is the vocabulary and the choreography is the grammar,” Heitmann explained, adding that her choreography is meant to convey “a feeling of melancholy.”

Watching another person’s interpretation of your body can be revelatory, if not unsettling.

Stijn van den Broek, 33, who works in a secondhand shop near Tilburg, realized that his movements “looked less elegant” than he had imagined. Arab, the spoken-word artist who donated his so-called “anxiety hands,” said that the process gave him a newfound sense of ownership over his knuckle-cracking. “I feel like I’ve claimed it as mine,” he said.

Tjan, the director of the Royal Academy of Art in The Hague, realized that he tends to arrange his body so that it takes up less space. The dancer who interviewed him “discovered that I hide my thumbs,” he said, flattening them onto his palms. “I had never thought about that, but it was exactly right.”

As a result, he made a few adjustments in his professional life, starting with the acquisition of an eye-catching jacket. “It has this bright yellow color, so you can’t miss it, or you can’t miss me now,” he said.

The archive is ongoing and living, which means the dancers cannot clock in and out. “Your body needs to stay in training. If you stop, your artwork is gone,” Heitmann said. “I don’t want machines for dancers, but we have to try to preserve as much as we can.”

Other people’s motions occasionally seep into the dancers’ lives. Berkhout, who works full-time as custodian of the collection, noticed that forgotten gestures sometimes resurface unexpectedly. One morning, she woke up in a fetal position, hands clasped between her knees, although she usually sleeps with her limbs stretched out in a line. The pose belonged to a Ghanaian woman in her 40s whom she had interviewed the year before. “That’s Dora,” she thought.

There is no end date to the archive, which is largely funded by Dutch cultural institutions and various nonprofit foundations, as well as supported by residencies in various European museums and galleries. In theory, when a dancer retires, another will inherit the role and its associated gestures. This commitment makes the work especially valuable to people dealing with loss. Heitmann has received requests for interviews at hospice care centers and hospitals. After a young Belgian woman died, her mother and boyfriend donated movements on her behalf. Her family attended several performances, Heitmann recalled, “as a way of saying goodbye, or memorizing together.”

Heitmann also contributed secondhand movements that she associates with her father. After his death, he left behind only the bank statements and tax reports that the German government was required to keep on his behalf. It portrayed “a very one-sided picture,” she said.

The dancers now perform his movements like any other donor’s: the way Heitmann’s father, who was a dance teacher, would scratch his scalp, or how he instinctively pulled in his stomach when passing in front of a studio mirror.

The gestures weren’t particularly important, she noted, but neither were his tax filings. “It’s a more human memory,” she said.

Donors pictured: Mahat Arab, Marijne van Dam, Marianne Defesche, Ton Joore, Chandra Merx, Danii Merx, Karen Neervoort, Merijn van der Schaaf, Bernardie Schols, Yda Sinay, Marieke Smeets, Ranti Tjan and Frans van Vugt.

Dancers pictured: Wies Berkhout, Julia Drittij, Eleni Ploumi, Ornella Prieto and Karolien Wauters.

Surfacing is a column that explores the intersection of art and life, produced by Alicia DeSantis, Jolie Ruben, Tala Safie and Josephine Sedgwick.

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