

New Movement

West deck at Muir Beach overlook

One of the watershed innovations of postmodern dance was the liberation of movement from its symbolic and narrative functions. Freed also from the attendant expectation of having to be 'ideal', the dancing body began giving shape to the invisible forces of its own production. It traced a set of slowly perceptible conditions - such as the formal limitations of a movement 'score' - and borrowed movements from everyday life, opening up the art of dance to every kind of body. Movement became an "index"¹; a *measure* of something instead of an attempt at the thing itself, a way of knowing outside the limits of representation and mimesis.

New Movement, a group show curated by Helen Singh-Miller at The Cost Annex, Boston (June 7th 2019) builds and expands on this movement legacy. The ten artists featured in the show - who span the fields of painting, sculpture, dance, video, and sound - present movement in its collective, individual, appropriated, accepted, and even marginalized variations. All the works share a conviction in the power of movement to make us imagine, see, and embody the world *otherwise*.

¹ Rosalind E. Krauss, "Notes on the Index: Part 2," in *The Originality of the Avant-Garde and Other Modernist Myth*, (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1986), 211.

The two sound pieces in the exhibition highlight the power of disassociating movement from both vision and bodily presence. They invite the visitor to engage other senses and other modes of sense-making, priming us for the deconstruction and reconstruction of movement at play throughout the show. Originally created as a soundtrack to a dance work by K.J. Holmes, poet Julie Carr's *There Be Dragons* (2019) is displayed here for the first time as an audio-only installation. The piece begins with the recognizable - and normative - rhythm of counting, forcing us to bear witness to an invisible, and unknowable, action. Is the child learning her numbers? Are the adults counting objects, or steps? Are the voices keeping a rhythm, performing the function of a metronome, or rehearsing minimalist choreography? Carr's wry humor is apparent from the start: when asked about the opening section of *There Be Dragons*, the poet said that for her, counting has always been associated with death. The piece moves on to supplant the regularity it sets up by drawing us into aural situations that disrupt our expectations for patterns: we go in and out of public spaces, witness conversations, hear laughter and language uncannily repeated, a melody hummed. By the end of *There Be Dragons*, rhythm returns, with the sound of a stationary bike, windshield wipers, and/or a car turn signal keeping time to the sound of rain. Like a driver caught in a moment of unwanted stillness at a traffic light, we are primed to *anticipate* movement, and this anticipation is filled with possibility.

In *Music For Eyes* (2017), musician Nathan Liow re-imagines the movements of a visually impaired person as a set of near-abstract sounds and melodies. In this 20-minute noise piece and improvised piano work, Liow uses audio derived from social-practice artist Carmen Papilia's sonic mobility-cane. This specially-designed cane has a sensor at its tip that picks up textural and sonic information within the environment of its user, digitally manipulates and then amplifies it into the space around the user so that they can hear and respond to it. The cane's sonic outputs map movement non-visually, highlighting the augmented sense of hearing that non-visual learners rely on to navigate space. Much like sampling tracks in the recording studio, Liow overlays Papilia's movements in public space with melodic compositions on the piano. The result is a blending of functional and aesthetic approaches to sound, offering an immersive experience for the listener, who can hear - simultaneously - how space is sculpted by the movements of a non-visual learner and how a musician interprets that sculpting of space.

The juxtaposition of movement that is considered merely 'functional' - walking, breathing, talking - with movement that counts as 'aesthetic' - dancing, in particular - is a thread that runs throughout the exhibition. *New Movement* is especially successful in using such juxtapositions to call out the hollowness of terms typically employed to denote the opposite of movement, such as 'immobility' and 'disability'.

Will Johnson's video *Choreomania: Dance and Disorder* (2019) presents two very different registers of movement side by side: videos of the Harlem Shake dance and footage from a scientific study documenting movement disorders, both found on the popular site YouTube. The societal distinction that classifies the former as 'desirable' - the Harlem Shake was a viral sensation - and the latter as 'undesirable' movement is slowly chipped away by Johnson's reference to a little-known historical event: the Strasbourg dancing plague of 1518. In July of that year, residents of Strasbourg were overcome by a sudden and uncontrollable urge to dance. One popular revisionist theory is that some of the afflicted were having stress-induced epileptic fits and that others were dancing from a place of compassion. This interpretation of the dance plague shows movement as a vehicle of solidarity, but it also demonstrates the creative potential of lifting movement *out of its original*

context. Like the dance plague event, Johnson's video takes the movements of dance and disorder outside of the normative sociological framework through which they are typically understood. The result manages to draw less attention to the undeniable contrast between black/white, abled/disabled, and appropriated/marginalized bodies on display in the video, and focus more on the formal similarities between the bodies' movements. Working on an axis of estrangement/familiarity, the artist makes the slippage between disorder and dancing the subject of his work and asks: what is it to know another body, to embody their reality? Where should we draw the line in pursuit of that knowledge?

In Robert Moeller's *andaonetwothree* (2019), the artist confronts the societal and legal norms of accessibility represented by the International Symbol of Access (ISA), the so-called 'Handicapped Symbol'. A graphic that simultaneously protects and excludes the disabled, the ISA in Moeller's paintings gains a movement of its own both through the traces of the artist's gestures evident on the surface of the painting, and through the triptych's resemblance to a film or animation strip. Undermining the assumption of immobility associated with the wheelchair sign, Moeller's triptych embodies the unique vocabulary of movement produced by navigating the world in a wheelchair: at times the painting is red and rough, densely scratched, paralleling the jagged movements of a wheelchair as it hits the curb.

Despite society's investment in the normative value of stasis - from ordering children to 'sit still', to designating uncontrollable movement as a 'disorder', and tying the privilege of citizenship to those who are able to 'stay in one place' - movement permeates everything that we do, both as individuals and as a species. In fact, as curator Helen Singh-Miller points out, it is nearly impossible to locate "the stillness of a completed action," whether that happens on a micro-level (such as the simple act of breathing) or on a macro-level (such as the phenomenon of mass migration).

Wendy Jacob's *Three Minutes (red)* (1993) deals with one such micro-movement: breathing. In this piece, three forms - covered in blankets - rise and fall to the rhythm of breath. The breathing patterns used are based on three one minute segments taken from a chart of the artist's own breathing recorded during three hours of monitored sleep. While we may consider breathing the thing that distinguishes human beings from machines, it is the precision of the breathing pattern - enabled by an extremely accurate analog technology made in Switzerland - that makes the sculpture so uncannily anthropomorphic. The wool blankets give form and rhythm to the 'negative space' of breath, capturing the invisible actions that animate human life.

In Tramaine de Senna's collage works, on the other hand, movement is the undeniable - if spectral - glue that holds the components of the artist's compositions together. In *Imagination Creation* (2019), the combination of images alluding to movement - the escalator, the train, the skyscraper - gives the work a formal dynamism that complements the historical circumstances of migration and mobility that undergird de Senna's practice. de Senna weaves together a personal family history of migration and underground labor - her great-grandfather migrated to New York to work on the subway, while her father, an immigrant from China, works subterraneously in the Bay Area's BART system - with the feminist history of the first female mechanic of Vespa, Debby Tudor. The escalator is a poignant center-piece of de Senna's critique: it connects the towering skyscrapers - symbols of the economic success and cultural domination of the US - to the unseen toil and internalized violence underground that makes them. The principle of movement that collage

lends to visual art encourages a non-linear approach to cultural narratives and genealogies, which, as de Senna shows, is derived precisely from the combinatory possibilities of human movement.

Unlike language, which as a system of communication is heavily dependent on a pre-existing, shared code between interlocutors, movement lends itself to a much more flexible mode of meaning-making. A sequence of gestures, steps, or actions accrues meaning through an internal logic developed across time, and thus movement becomes accessible to the novice and the expert alike. The two film works in this exhibition - Helen Singh-Miller's *Grand Union* (2018) and Deniz Tortum and Carmine Grimaldi's *If Only There Were Peace* (2017) - show how movement creates its own vocabulary through iterative components, and how the process of *learning movement* unlocks affective and sensory connections that language alone may not.

In *Grand Union*, Singh-Miller invites her family back to the home where she and her siblings grew up for a special kind of (re)union. Singh-Miller spends a weekend teaching her parents, brothers, and sister excerpts from famous choreographies first developed in the context of postmodern dance groups such as Grand Union, which grew out of dancer Yvonne Rainer's *Continuous Project Altered Daily* (1970). At times disgruntled and frustrated, Singh-Miller's family members learn to find moments of enjoyment and discovery as they re-animate the 'everyday' movements of Judson Dance Theater and Grand Union into the 'everyday' space of the house. Movement is shown to be a powerful equalizer in the context of (patriarchal) family hierarchy. An emphasis on physical experience reverses the family dynamics of instruction: the parents become their child's students and collaborators. By the end of the film, a reciprocal process of learning, a back-and-forth give-and-take emerges where everyone in the family is equally valuable as a source of embodied knowledge and perspective.

Embodied knowledge is at the heart of the formal proposition of *If Only There Were Peace* as well. Grimaldi and Tortum's documentary follows a film production company - comprised of Turks, Kurds, Iraqi refugees and former soldiers of the Free Syrian Army - while shooting a melodrama about the Kurdish-Turkish conflict in the Turkish countryside. A film about a film, the documentary is not interested in conveying the narrative of the melodrama itself. It focuses instead on the unscripted movements that emerge on the margins of a film set - the gestures, facial expressions, and body language of the communal and repetitive activity of filmmaking - as an ad hoc choreography worthy of being documented. By making the 'meta' quality of their documentary the film's main subject matter, Grimaldi and Tortum expose the bleeding lines between rehearsal, re-enactment, and reality, helping us glean information about human relationships and forcing us to look for different forms and functions of artfulness, even in the context of war.

The movements of popular culture are also the subject of Joseph Pomp's *Manhattan Video* (ongoing). The video installation lines up scenes from movies shot in New York locations with a map of Manhattan, fusing cartographic and cinematic representations of the Big Apple. Using a logic of place borrowed from formalist films such as Thom Andersen's *Los Angeles Plays Itself* (2003), Pomp invites the viewer to "street walk onto a TV map". In the video "Sutton Place", which pays homage to the midtown-east Manhattan neighborhood bearing the same name, Pomp reveals the double effect of cinema's uncanny representation of reality. Each time it is featured in a movie scene, Sutton Place is both transformed *and* frozen in time. Despite owing its early novelty to *movement*, then, the cinema is always

playing catch up with the sprawling, ever-changing landscape of the city. Through keen selection and juxtaposition, Pomp estranges the familiar environment of New York as well as what we expect from a movie plot. His compilations highlight the internal design of the borrowed scenes but also achieve a rhythm of their own.

In another example of movement as a tool for estrangement and discovery, Helen Mirra's *Round Way* modulates the 'simple' act of turning into a score for a long-distance performance. For the duration of the exhibition, the Bay Area artist - "barefoot on west deck at muir beach overlook" - will be engaging in two separate actions: a 360° turn to the left, and a 360° turn to the right, each lasting forty five minutes. The work is a poignant reminder of the power of movement to 'sync up' spaces and people separated by geography and time. *Round Way* also invites renewed attention to the simplest tasks of movement by drawing out a single turn for an extended period of time, and by using scientific language to describe it. The terms 'dextrorotatory' and 'levorotatory', used to characterize compounds with the property of rotating the plane of a polarized light ray to the right or left, respectively, highlight the human body as a medium for physical transformation. This cements the relationship between culture, body, and nature that is a major theme in Mirra's practice. It also raises a question provoked by the show as a whole: how does movement illuminate our understandings of the limit between the artful and the natural?

Through Singh-Miller's syncretic curatorial approach, the exhibition performs the power of movement to "harness invisible forces (political, physical, affective) and make them visible through kinetic assemblages of bodies and matter."² Part of a wider investigation into the relevance of physical experience and the different realities - virtual, lived, or otherwise - it can alert us to, *New Movement* champions movement as an indispensable tool for artistic and social practices in our contemporary moment.

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² Andre Lepecki , "Zones of Resonance: Mutual Formations in Dance and the Visual Arts Since 1960," in *Move: Choreographing You: Art and Dance Since the 1960s*, Stephanie Rosenthal, ed. (London: Hayward Publishing, 2010), 157.