

The movement archive

Every day thousands of people die. But how did they move? How did they walk? How did they hold their cup of coffee? In the Netherlands, **Katja Heitmann, a German choreographer, has found the answer so that these movements are never forgotten. Her project is called **Motus Mori**, and it is the first living archive of human movement.**

When a relative dies, you may find yourself calling them over and over again just to land on their answerphone to hear the sound of their voice. It is one of the first things you forget. After which the facial features can slowly fade from your memory. Fortunately, photos and sound recordings help keep this memory alive. When her father died in 2016, Katja Heitmann had neither. *"It was a tragic end. There was nothing material left, just his debts. I had a real sense of emptiness."* However, one morning, while the Hamburg choreographer was preparing her breakfast, a memory of her father suddenly appeared. She realized she was making her coffee just like he did. Another day, while walking in the street, she saw in the distance a person whose step resembled that of her father. She also noticed that her brother reproduced some of her mannerisms. These everyday gestures, which once seemed so insignificant, became a way for her to remember and preserve her father's legacy. *"Except I was frustrated that there was no way to keep those gestures,"* she explains. Until the idea occurred to her: *"Actually, there was no need for a book or a photo album. Other people's bodies were enough!"*

A few weeks after this revelation, Katja Heitmann was walking through the center of Tilburg in the Netherlands. She knows the city well. It's where she studied and has lived for the past ten years. As she strolled, she noticed the new surveillance cameras installed everywhere. Feeling anxious, she suddenly turned around. But after only a few steps in the opposite direction, a policeman approached her. *"He checked my identity asking why I had made such a sudden U-turn."* Once convinced that Katja had done nothing wrong, the officer explained to her that these new cameras were part of an experiment carried out by the City. They were linked to software that was able to detect *"suspicious"* movements and alert officers in the field. Katja's sudden U-turn was, according to the system, a "suspicious" move. *"It was just me turning around! So we stop turning around? Is it forbidden to get lost, to retrace your steps? And even if it is not prohibited, by using this notion of movements that are out of the ordinary and therefore are supposed to be suspect, we eliminate all the individuality of beings and their bodies. We unwittingly bend to these standards."*

It was these two observations that inspired Katja Heitmann and her team to begin an artistic archival project *Motus Mori* ("the death of the movement", in Latin) in 2019. Along with ten dancers, Katja has tried to archive as many gestures as possible. They invite volunteers to come and meet them and have a "movement interview". For half an hour, a dancer will ask the person to walk, stand up and sit down, to show them in which position they sleep, to indicate their tics and gestural habits. Then, once the interview is over, the dancer creates what she calls a "movement portrait" that preserves the individual's gestures. In two and a half years, the gestures of more than 900 people have been archived. This means that each of the dancers now "hosts" between 50 and 200 bodies. *"I know the movements of about 160 people,"* testifies Léa, one of the dancers. *"I couldn't describe them all to you, but as soon as I start moving like them, it comes back to me. It is a bodily memory, not an intellectual one."* In addition to interviews, *Motus Mori* regularly produces performances where everyone can go

and observe these movements. The dancers are dressed only in underwear to highlight each gesture and the muscles necessary for its realization. Slow, repetitive music accompanies them. The project remains an artistic one. But the lines between art and archives are blurred. *“Normally, a dancer has only one responsibility: to entertain an audience during a show, explains Katja Heitmann. But here, they also have to maintain this archive.”*

Black Box

In recent years, several other similar projects have been launched. In Australia, a “black box” of humanity will soon be built, in which hard disks containing information about our time, especially in the context of global warming, will be placed. A way to keep a trace of the state of our world for future generations. In Austria, the Memory of Mankind project has been storing ceramic disks since 2012 in a disused salt mine on which part of our current knowledge is saved. But Motus Mori, which relies on mortal human beings, is inherently ephemeral, or at least unstable. So is it a real archive? For Lotte Hofstraat, a playwright and art historian whose thesis was based on Motus Mori and the concept of the archive, the answer is yes. *“Motus Mori certainly contains an element of subjectivity and is ephemeral. But for a large part of humanity, history and the archive have always been like that. Stories have long been told orally, from generation to generation. In doing so, they too evolved. Some parts, for example, disappeared from the collective narrative. Moreover, static 'traditional' archives are also possibly ephemeral: books can burn and a DVD can scratch. And even if they do not evolve, they are just as subjective, from their creation. A photo only contains what was in front of the lens, not what was behind.”*

After 900 archived people and a pandemic, the inevitable happened. One of the interviewees died. Her name was Anaïs, she was 32, lived in Düsseldorf and was fascinated by Katja Heitmann's project. She had "given" her movements to the archive, including a very peculiar nod. When she died, Katja and the team wondered what to do. There was now an almost solemn responsibility. The durability of Anaïs' gestures rested on the dancer who had interviewed her. The Motus Mori team has therefore established a rule: if an archived person dies, the dancer who interrogated them will transmit their movements to the entire team. A few months later, Anaïs' boyfriend, who admitted not having understood the concept very well, went to a performance of Motus Mori. He sat in the white room, lit up like a clinic, with these dancers moving slowly to the rhythm of the music. After a while, they began to move like Anaïs. It was there that he understood that it was much more than an artistic performance. Katja and the dancers did too. All visitors wore a mask. That of Anaïs' boyfriend was soaked in tears. –**Anton Stolper**