

# FIVE GESTURES

from Niels Weijer's *arm dances*

I was delighted to accept choreographer Niels Weijer's invitation to write about his most recent work *arm dances* (2022). Inspired by his previous performance *The Quality of Being in Colour*, I wrote the text *Dissolutions*, an experimental form of narrative collage, that was published on Stream in 2020.

Niels Weijer's performative sculpture *arm dances* consists of a large sculptural arm that is moved by a group of five dancers. It was first performed in Berlin in October 2022 in the Kiezkapelle chapel, on the rooftop of Lobe Block and in the Uferstudios courtyard. As the artist states, it is inspired by the physicality and drama found in Renaissance sculptures.

In this text my impressions of the performance are interwoven with an interview with Niels Weijer, which took place over Zoom in November 2022. Locking into my loose ends, the questions and answers from this conversation act as new strings that slide in, interrupt, and embellish a growing tapestry of thoughts and reflections.

Text commissioned by the artist.

## TO HOLD

It's a crisp October evening in Berlin. In the chilly autumn air, I find myself at Uferstudios, in Wedding, where the Hof is filled with people gathered together for the evening's events. At the centre of the courtyard lies a giant arm. A white sculpture, mimicking a somewhat languorous gesture. Unmistakably a reference to classical Greek sculpture, it had an air of grandeur and authority. As a well-proportioned, magnified element of the human body, it seemed somewhat out of place, yet at the same time completely at ease, as if it had always been there. Emerging from the edges of the courtyard, two performers move towards the arm as if an invisible pull is attracting them to it. They reach it together, and with a confident grace, they lift it up. One by one, three more performers arrive, joining the action and holding the arm high above their heads.

B: Where did the idea, to dance with a large sculptural arm, come from?

N: The idea originated from a feeling I had. I was feeling lost in this big city and I had the need for a gigantic arm to come along and hold me. I imagined holding this big arm and becoming very tiny in its presence. I then imagined a group of people moving together, taking care of this arm. By moving together and being connected as a group, they had it move like a natural, functioning arm. To me, this connects to sculpture and the act of sculpting; I consider dancing, too, to be a form of sculpting the body through movement.

B: A group moving a big arm. It's a clear image, a clear starting point. But what happened when this image came true? Did it reach your expectations? Or was the reality different to how you imagined it?

N: It took a big chunk of time before the arm was made. Once the arm was there, and we started rehearsing, I thought this was going to be very difficult. So I thought: let's try, with all of us, to find out how to move this arm in

an organic way. But within 15 minutes of rehearsal, we had already figured it out. One rehearsal later and it felt like we could already show this to people. So, what I thought was going to be a very long process was instantly there. From there we started to find different methods of moving. I didn't want to tell a story; I wanted to keep it open and focused on anatomic movement. Too easily it could become: "the arm came to life and started to interact with people, and then it freed itself from humankind..." and so on. I didn't want to create a narrative. But as we started working, we found various movement methods and structures - we called them situations and tools - and stories came to life by themselves.

## **TO CATCH**

The performers started by moving slowly. Together they carried the arm, pulling it this way and that, gently listening to each other and, without speech, agreeing on speed and direction. Alternating roles, they followed its fingers or caught its weight at the crease of its smooth elbow. Clearly, it is a team effort to keep the arm aloft: when one person leaves, another slots in, giving the impression of a wave, or an organically moving entity. An entity with many arms, like a centipede. Soon patterns emerged and the play with this image continued; a multitude of arms that hold a single arm and catch it when it falls.

B: Were the movement patterns you created set or improvised?

N: Well, we allowed ourselves a starting sequence. We found there was a natural progression in dynamics that we kept coming back to: it started slow, then became a bit quicker, then it moved into an active dynamic, and then it slowed down again or became almost still. After this starting point we opened it up; when we felt like we should go somewhere else, or we should stop doing what we were doing, we would go with it. This gave rise to a

loose structure; it was about sculpting in the moment of movement. And listening. Trust was one of the important words in our process; we had to trust the others and know they would be there when needed. Also, many natural hand gestures came up as we worked together; gestures of giving, taking, handing something over... Our movement is interwoven with these, too.

B: Is the arm manipulating you, or are you manipulating it?

N: It's a bit of both. There are moments, especially when it gets very fast, the arm takes over. If you don't jump in, the arm will hit the floor or a person. Then it clearly isn't us deciding any more. So our intention was to follow it, to follow the material as well as the other dancers and movements in the room. With the way the arm is built, one thing affects the next: by pressing the elbow up, the hand moves down. This extends to the group; through an action by one person the arm is affecting the others. The question arises – who is moving who?

B: Like being part of an organism?

N: Yes, exactly. We connected to the idea of being parts of an organism that moves as one. Like when I keep moving my own arm – it is a part of my body, and if I move it for long enough then eventually my whole body will get tired.

## **TO REACH**

As the floating dance continues, the relationship with the arm becomes more turbulent. With speed, the arm takes over: the performers squirm under its magnificent palm, arriving just in time to stop it from crash-landing. Now and again, it hits the ground, or bounces back – its movements are never completely predictable. Like a moving painting, or a dynamic series of tableau vivants; the arm comes to life, then it's a dead weight. Sometimes the performers find shelter, hiding under it and finding a temporary nest that shields them

from the elements, or from their onlookers. Other times they are almost squashed by it, stuck under its fat, unmoving fingers. Is this a ruling hand? Like the authoritative pointing of an almighty king or an ancient Greek philosopher? Or does it simply represent a lazy moment of passing beauty, like the delicately poised fingers of an Oscar Wilde character?

B: Which references were you working with?

N: The arm is modelled after Michelangelo's statue of David, currently located in Florence. The story of David is from the bible – in it, he defeats the giant Goliath. The statue was made in Verona, which at the time was the biggest city after Rome. Verona fought against the oppressive power of Rome, and this statue serves as a reminder of this civil tension. So rather than symbolizing the oppressor, the arm in fact symbolizes the oppressed. And its colour – white – is a reference to the Renaissance. During the Renaissance they mistakenly made all the sculptures, based on the Roman and Greek originals, white. But the originals were painted. With time, the paint wore off. Today, this is one of the reasons why art galleries are white.

B: For me, the arm also represents patriarchy. It's clearly a male arm, and so I wonder – did gender play a role for you?

N: The arm is indeed modelled after a male sculpture. It's also partly modelled after the arm of the object maker, who is male. But for me, it could've been a female arm. I know this topic is present, but I wasn't working with male dominance, and I didn't wish to emphasise the patriarchal link. So in the movement, the performers don't perform male or female persons. Rather, we are fluid, and we can act however we feel within that fluidity.

## TO TOUCH

From a distance, the arm plays games with the site. An invisible body emerges: the tower at the end of the Uferstudios courtyard becomes a spine, with the arm protruding from its belly, the walls. The site is enlivened by this limb, like a monster, or an alien species. Up close, an encounter with the performers unravels: I sense their commitment to their task, their dedication to bringing this arm on its journey, to guide it along a path that is only configured in the moment. I feel their desire to protect us from being hit by this massive limb, yet also to let us feel it, almost touch it: to let us experience the magnitude of a body part that we, too, possess.

B: I am interested in the settings you have chosen for the performance: a chapel, a courtyard, a rooftop. Could you imagine bringing it into public space?

N: Yes, definitely! What would it do to people if we'd bring the arm to a park? The piece is obviously performative, but it also has this quality of being able to disappear into the background. Like the sculptures you find in parks - they are there, they become part of the park. I imagine it in a public space where nobody notices it because it's a subtle appearance, and it doesn't draw attention to itself. How can you make a ripple in water without making too much noise? It's the kind of work that has this quality, and that can give something back to the site it finds itself in.

B: Previously you worked with light sculptures, rings of changing LEDs that acted as partners to your dancers. In hindsight, do you see any parallels between this work and the ring piece, *The Quality of Being in Colour*?

N: There is a lot of indirect connection. Both works have one foot in the visual arts and one in dance or performative art. However, what I wanted to achieve with them was completely opposite. The ring performance was about the abstract effect of colours and sound: it was based on how colours can change our emotions and was

very scientific and architectural. With this work I wanted to find a way into the body. What would be my way of touching, of interacting, through an object? I wanted to introduce a layer of body and a layer of emotion, which is more human and less abstract. One came out of the other. I felt I was experiencing increasing distance between me and my work and I wanted to be closer. I wanted it to be more personal, while still maintaining a similar way of working with objects; I continued to look at what they do and embrace the strange or beautiful images they evoke.

B: Apart from working with objects, is there more overlap, a red thread that connects these works?

N: Yes, if there is something that connects the different pieces that I've made, it's that they all have something to do with a form of touch. A physical or an abstract form of touch. There are many theories how we can touch through our hands, our skin, our eyes – directly or indirectly. How can we touch each other through an object? *arm dances* is the most concrete expression of touch that I have delved into so far.

## **TO BE GIVEN**

As the giant arm was danced across the courtyard, floating idly above the ground, I noticed the performance was full of moments of giving. Giving weight, giving energy, giving support. Filling in the gaps where an extra push or pull was needed, using the body to lighten the collective workload. Being fully present in offering support, in lending a hand. And through extending this gesture beyond the body, it, in turn, was transformed by external forces. Forces bigger than every individual member of the group. Forces perhaps even bigger than all members combined. The performer's starting gestures were returned to them - sometimes as a heavy blow, sometimes as a gentle caress, always with an element of surprise. To receive the unexpected; to hold and to be held, to catch and to be caught, to give and to be given, all at once.