

Arm Dances

The debate that sometimes appears about whether certain materials are objects or things, probably does not anticipate a large giant arm to categorize. In Niels Weijer's work *Arm Dances*, the piece offers something almost unexpected. After the initial hit of seeing a giant sculptural arm, the focus goes to the small arms of the dancers and the subtle, even delicate shiftings of wrists and slight touches the multiple living arms offer. The attention rests not on the material of the arm, whether object or thing, but on the material of movement. The large arm evokes images of Greek marble statues or model figurines in art class—but the living bodies, holding and moving the familiar form, begin to carve space, and hold our curiosity. What seems surreal is more familiar than actually obscure. An arm shapes our very beginnings. Our caregivers pick us up as infants and we are held by this well-known arm. Now five people are needed to move one limb—the roles are reversed. The arm is held.

The dancers develop a language of peculiar carrying and positioning, allowing the arm to shape them as they shape the arm— a mutuality where they co-create each other. Two languages can be watched simultaneously: the gesturing arm that feels familiar, and the dancers organizing themselves that is fluid, virtuosic, intimate and statuesque. The dancers visually listen to each other, knowing when to step in, rejoin and casually know when to surrender. It becomes clear the practice is not about moving the arm, but the audience is pulled into the dancer's sense-making practice. *Situationships* unfold moment to moment.

Our arms, hands, and fingers are sensitive, containing many nerve endings. The presence of Weijer's large sculptural arm is constantly making us aware of our own tactility and being touched. The arm appears alive and therefore fires our own sensory responses as we watch it move. We assume the arm is heavy, yet it moves sometimes with ease, as the dancers orchestrate its joints, and in turn tumble over each other, get left behind and gather again in new positions. Like Greek and Roman statues, the dancers' bodies seem to inadvertently find themselves in reclining positions, virtuosic poses like fallen angels or soldiers in war. No narrative needs to develop because the changing imagery captivates. The large arm conceals bodies, leaving disproportioned severed legs and pushes our imagination—like Venus de Milo's missing arms. We fill in the blanks. Bizarre moments appear where dancers suddenly find themselves struggling to manipulate the arm that now controls them, as material and flesh navigate gravity through movement.

It is thought that gestures orchestrate speech, but like dance, bodily movements can have their own meaning. While watching the wrist and elbow in the arm statue, one can ponder the way these simple joints provide so much meaning as humans. The geometry of emotions can be understood through spatial motifs where bodies simply contract or extend toward or away from others and themselves. De Rivera (1977) points out that four basic emotions are understood with the wrist and elbow joints: when palms face us and arms are extended, we are giving and

happy, but when arms contract toward us with palms facing us, we long for something and feel sad. When palms face outward and arms contract, it's a state of fear, and when arms extend with the palms outward it is in moments of anger. The two options of extending and contracting with changing palm orientations provide a rich landscape of meaning and emotion that we not only recognize in others, but act out in our gestures and motions within ourselves daily. When watching the dancers move the arm around, these shifts of orientations awaken our meaning-making mind and we understand all that is said without words. Even more so, besides the object arm, the five dancers have ten arms and wrists themselves, that when watched closely, provide the same moments of meaning on a smaller, but more abundant scale. In Weijer's *Arm Dances*, the sculpture acts as a sleight of hand, drawing focus—but the arm dances at play are found actually within the five dancers. They mirror and complement each other. As enjoyable as it is to see the large arm move around, and the feeling we get in the audience as the static finger points toward us, our eyes hone in on the small gestures of the dancers, touching each other and the arm as if its alive.

Tim Ingold (2010) claims "Following materials and copying gestures both call for observation" (308). Ingold argues that this type of observation is not passive to see what is "out there" but is to *watch what is going on* (ibid.). This space is where we can see audience and performers meet. As we are invited to actively watch what is unfolding, so too are the dancers, as they must stay attuned to the improvised and changing circumstances of the performance. As the fingers of the arm inscribe and draw in space, it teaches our eyes from the outside how to also draw with our perception. We watch the dancers be bound *with* the object and not by it—in a practice of *togethering*. Ingold references Torsten Hägerstrand's (1976, 332) "principle of togetherness," who states this does not mean "just *resting* together. It is also *movement* and *encounter*." The participatory act of togethering is made visible between the material, movements, and observations of the dancers as they encounter new forms and forces, and listen to the words of Deleuze and Guattari in that "this matter-flow can only be *followed*" (2004, 451).

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