

Katja Heitmann

# Museum Motus Mori



13 September — 27 October 2019

*My mother passed away 12 years ago, my father last year. Nothing is left from them, no material stuff, no house, last will or goodbye letter. Sometimes I manage to create a hand gesture I know to be my mother's. Or my father's shoulder-head-pupil-chin-combination, a gesture that signaled that he was having a hard time. Sometimes I see an older man walk in the street and suddenly I think it is him. His tired body, which kept on going, rounded back, shoulder hanging front, while his head would try to look up. I often wish I would have observed them more carefully so I would be able to keep their movement-heritage alive.*

– Katja Heitmann, July 2019

German choreographer Katja Heitmann and ten dancers will create a museum for physical movements that face the threat of extinction. For six weeks, five hours a day, the dancers and the choreographer will take on the remarkable challenge of creating a new museum precisely for that purpose. *Museum Motus Mori* will sensitize visitors to the deep humanness hidden within the body.

In choreographic sculptures, Heitmann zooms in on details of human motricity to unravel it into patterns, specific sequences of structures, and seemingly eternal loops. A choreography for the collarbone, a dance of bellybutton, belly fat and ribcage, a phrase for the heartbeat and knee muscle arises. Body parts are isolated, mechanically brought into motion, the hips tilted, the leg lifted, driven across the space in a meticulously technical manner, every movement of which is deliberate. The fragments are constantly repositioned in time and in relation to one another, sharpening and questioning our perceptions.

*Museum Motus Mori* lets visitors experience what a museum of human movement can be. This does not happen only through experiencing the dancers: the exhibition also includes two interview spaces where visitors can 'donate' their personal movements to the museum. The score (notation) of those movements will be shown in the exhibition's archive room. This will lead to a full cycle of donation, notation and exhibition of a museum in which each muscle is an anatomic trigger that underscores the vulnerability of human existence.

The Anatomical Venus

The book *The Anatomical Venus* by Joanna Ebenstein (2016) features a series of historical sculptures of human anatomy. Unlike the cold, 'objective' models you'll find at a doctor's office, these sculptures depict the anatomy in a beautiful, romantic, even almost kitschy manner. The wax sculptures with intestines showing are staged like Greek statues: Venuses. The book shows a world in which art and science are still interwoven. The sculptures indicate that

apart from the clinical perspective, an artistic perspective also exists. A perspective that shows how much beauty is held within the human body.

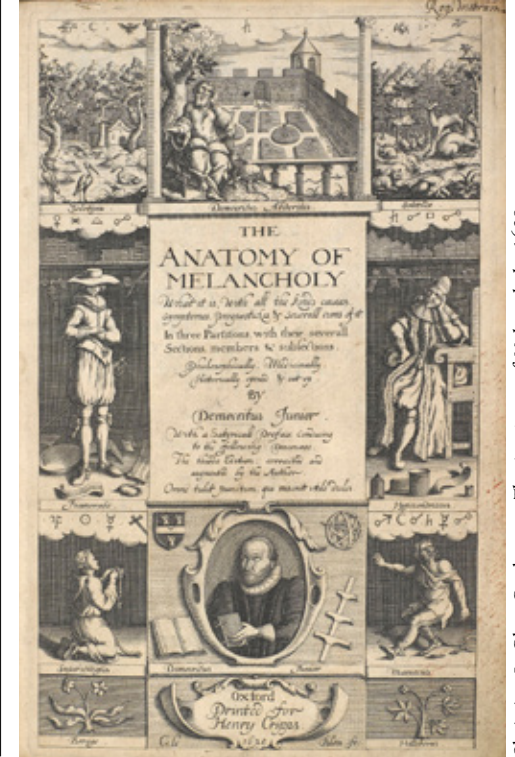
The Anatomy of Melancholy

*Melancholy... is the character of mortality*  
— Robert Burton, 1651

In *The Anatomy of Melancholy* (1621), English scientist Robert Burton describes melancholia as an essential personality trait. Nowadays we look at melancholia as an aberration, just like any form of depression. Happiness is the accepted norm in our society. We optimize our health using science and technology. Could we ever ban illness and old age from our lives? Will that cause melancholia, tragedy and misery to go extinct? What characterizes our humanity more strongly: our drive for self-improvement or our awareness of tragedy and mortality?



Anonymous, *Anatomical Venus*, produced by the workshop at La Specola, 1784-1788. Josephinum – Ethics, Collections and History of Medicine, MedUni Vienna © Alexander Ablogin / Josephinum



Christian Le Blon. Book cover *The Anatomy of Melancholy*, 1628. Collection British Library

Residenz im Realen

In Düsseldorf Katja Heitmann and her team spent three months working at *Residenz im Realen*, a residency of tanzhaus nrw. The residency took place at an activity center in the middle of the city. The choreographer worked with a group of diverse people between 65 and 84 years of age. The subject of their motor skills and movement led to an artistic route through the building and the adjacent park. The participants in the program, their bodily experience and the things they told about it inspired the detailed 'language of movement' shown by the dancers in *Museum Motus Mori*.



Participants Residenz im Realen

## II. READING AND WRITING MOVEMENT

An archive of human movement is actually a paradox. After all, you can't preserve human movement without losing it. In *Museum Motus Mori* an attempt is made at achieving that nonetheless. For the choreographer, the significance of the project is locked into this attempt. There is no static archive on display. The act of archiving – the process of its coming into existence – is also shown. Each day new people are invited for a 'movement interview', during which their personal motorics and movements are analyzed in full detail by the dancers.





### III. ARCHIVING MOVEMENT

The dancers translate and embody this 'personal repertoire of movement' – as Heitmann calls it – in the exhibition. This leads to an archive that is ever expanding and constantly in motion.



## INTERVIEW KATJA HEITMANN

Valentijn Byvanck  
September 2018 – July 2019

This interview is the result of a series of conversations with Katja Heitmann that took place between September 2018 and July 2019.

### Origins

I am a choreographer, although I don't really produce dance at all. My background is very physical, more anchored in movement. I grew up in my parents' dancing school. People learned ballroom dancing there, the cha-cha-cha, the Viennese waltz. I even ran that dancing school on my own for a year. In my parents' dancing school, dance was a medium for people to entertain themselves with together. My parents made their living from this, so it was important that customers had a good time. There was an element of etiquette in it as well, rules that dictate how to behave and talk to each other. The dancing school was a place where young people learned to interact with one another.

At the Tilburg dance academy I was looking for something entirely different. It wasn't about walking in step or following the rhythm. Much more important to me was looking at how the body can be used. I noticed that I was attracted to the theatrical art form of mime, in which the body is employed in order to express something rather than being pushed into a preconceived shape. I became a choreographer in order to have more agency in this; to create meaning through, and with, the body.

### A sudden turn

This project began when I was stopped in the street in downtown Tilburg. I had turned around while walking, perhaps I'd forgotten something or was hesitating about something, I hadn't even noticed doing it. The man who stopped me asked why I had done that. He turned out to be a policeman in plain clothes. He told me they were testing a new security system for the city center that week. The system was aimed at signaling suspicious behavior. My sudden turn was an example of such suspicious behavior. I found this interesting. A person is apparently supposed to

walk straight ahead. That's the norm. Would this imply that hesitant walking is going to disappear?

My work is about preserving exactly this type of involuntary human behavioral gestures. No one could make up the funny walk that caused the policeman to stop me. It's illogical. But should you stop it? I read a scientific article that proclaimed 'sitting' to be the new smoking. Apparently we should stop sitting down. The more you intervene, even if it is done with the best intentions, the more things will end up disappearing. Who decides what is correct behavior? Are there mathematical and technical calculations to determine this? I became fascinated with behavior that may be very clumsy or that makes life hard or difficult. Perhaps old age is a temporary affliction for which we'll eventually find a simple solution. But what is a human without flaws? Would that still be a human?

### Observation and training

We started a quest for involuntary movements. How do you find them, and how do you document them? We began looking intensively at not only subconscious, but also clumsy and unintended movements. How do they work, where do they come from? If you look at an audience waiting for a performance to begin, you'll find prime examples of such physical behavior. People are watching, listening, or engaging with something else. And you'll find postures that are extremely fascinating – especially in terms of detail – that you probably wouldn't copy in exactly that same way. Someone who is waiting doesn't stand up perfectly straight, but not exactly crooked either. How do you assume this posture as precisely as possible, without it becoming a caricature? We had to train very hard to achieve that. The training taught us that we had to reflect on the way you let dancers process input.

You need to take your sources very seriously. We began our investigations into movements by

conducting a participatory project with elderly people in Düsseldorf. For two months we worked with people aged 65 to 85 at an activity center. We ended up turning their movements into an 'art walk' in and around that center. In the exercises I did with them, I asked them to first stand up and then lie down. That transition from standing up to lying down gave rise to lots of forms. I learned that sitting is truly an act in itself, very fluid.

The aging body is a source of postures and behaviors that have developed over many years. That elderly body has grown in a certain way, think of the curvature of the spine for example. The body of a dancer is still unfamiliar with that growth process: the dancer needs to investigate how to manage that particular shape without their body assuming that shape on its own, automatically. You may think it's easy but it isn't. Only after detailed analysis, very careful viewing and loads of training a dancer can find the specific posture that we're looking for. It's precision work.

### The choreographer

In my previous works *Siri Loves Me* and *Pandora's DropBox* I tried to conjure up a world that is completely controlled, and everyone walks the streets exactly the way they're supposed to. For *Pandora's DropBox* we wondered how we can create strict rules that apply to each and every body. It was an experiment on the variation in forms that may or may not fit within that world. In *Siri*, even eye movement was regulated. I wanted all dancers to synchronize this. This made them tear up, a physical reaction that is triggered when the eyes are kept open and deep focus is held for too long. It has nothing to do with emotion. However, some did feel emotional in hindsight: it affects your body when tears run across your cheeks.

This project, in turn, attempts to retain that which *evades* control. I use the word humanity for this. It is locked into countless aspects, such



as intuition, distinctness and vulnerability. Where does movement display these characteristics? How can movement help us show the humanity of the body?

The individual body comes first. It makes me happy to be able to zoom in on one body and only after that on the surrounding space, instead of making a choreography for the space and filling it with bodies, as some other choreographers tend to do. It is important to devote much attention to persons. Close attention makes each person beautiful. An individual is more interesting than a group, each body is its own cosmos, each brain has its own way of processing the materials we've gathered.

#### A collection of movements

Together with our dancers we constantly work on an expanding catalogue of movements. In the past year we've done research in Düsseldorf, Tilburg and Eindhoven and worked with widely divergent groups of people. This principle of a constantly growing archive is also an important aspect of the project in Maastricht. Every day we will invite people from Maastricht for a 'movement interview'. During such an interview, our dancers very carefully study the guest's specific personal movements. These are often gestures and postures you're not even aware of yourself. The dancer will then interpret these movements and translate them for their own body. This means that all participants of the movement interviews will become part of the exhibition – they will each have their own kinetic portrait done, so to speak. This way new sculptures will arise each day and the exhibition will be in constant flux.

The lists that I compile of movements on the point of extinction contain concrete, but also very abstract expressions. The more you start reflecting on yourself, the more you become aware of your own subconscious movements. I, for example, am

quite aware of my facial mimicry. I know I can pull some very weird faces. I wasn't even aware of this for a long time, until people began to tell me, 'What a funny look you've got.' We found some lovely facial expressions in elderly people. Of course you keep discovering new things, small movements, and then wonder how to give shape to them.

#### The dancer

I need dancers who fully surrender to my work: physical monks. *Museum Motus Mori* is about more than just dancing a performance piece. The dancers need to have incredible intrinsic motivation. A physical mission to want to keep human movement preserved.

The dancer must take care of their body. That's their instrument. You need to keep on training in order to maintain a physical consciousness. Dancers need to be tough as well. Endurance, and sometimes even defying your pain threshold, can be part of that. Discipline also involves how long you maintain the patience to continue with a physical activity until you've really got it worked out. It's easy to notice who has the self-discipline for this and who less so, who really wants it and who just wants to get it done. Discipline is often a matter of repeating something a hundred times in order to really get to the core of it. The longer I work with someone, the more they begin to embody the work. They become the work. And then I sometimes have trouble accepting that they'll go home afterwards, leading lives of their own. Because after all it is my work walking away... You need to fall in love a little bit with what you've made. Oddly enough I had that with the elderly people as well. Towards the ending I was satisfied with all, but with some of them I really fell in love. I hadn't thought it would work that way. I think it's not so much about a certain aesthetic as it is about how

they were starting to commit and perform, and how I've shaped them.

I want dancers to stay critical. It's human nature to repeat yourself, of course, because that feels safe. On top of this you can't expect dancers to always create new combinations of as many as 500 distinct movements, for which they need to make a new choice every single moment. At some point your brain goes into lockdown. You just don't want to make any more choices. So how do you facilitate them in finding new inspiration all the time, in order to build a new sculpture? I'm excited about that daily attempt to preserve something, to recreate a movement as exactly as possible and then taking the next step. It's very different from a regular exhibition, of course.

How will these dancers deal with their (own) materials later on? We build it together, but it is their body and their world. A dancer is a human being too, everyone needs to drink sometimes. They're not closets. We need to elevate this constant movement to the status of a ritual. It's something we've come to realize through the concentration and preparations required to complete this. A lot needs to be done in order to execute this process. It is a kind of ritual that is performed daily, in order to eventually preserve – for example – that one particular sigh of that one lady. And each dancer does it in their own way, with the specifics of their own physique. Ribs, shoulder blades, skin – they're different for each dancer.

#### Emotion

Make no mistake: I don't ask dancers to involve themselves emotionally. They're not trying to *become* an elderly person or feel emotionally old. People often think of something like method acting, where actors fully immerse themselves in a character before they start playing the role. I don't think that's right for my work. I don't ask dancers to imagine something and then perform

it. I am fascinated by the sighs of some elderly people when they lift up their arms. That sigh can look very heavy, but that doesn't mean the dancer is emotionally involved. What is the physicality of that sigh? How can we maintain it physically? I try to dissect the sigh, let dancers activate their abdominal muscles and isolate the ribs. And once they've dissected that breath a few times, the tendency to sigh arises from within them. So empathy is not the point of departure: identification arises when the dancers place themselves in the same physical situation. That's an interesting investigation for me as well as for the dancers.

In the end it's not about how the dancer feels, but about what I want to communicate. If they physically reenact the crooked curve of 86-year-old Trudy's spine, they end up feeling old themselves. It's not that they identify with the age and then think, 'How will I walk when I'm an old woman?' For that we wouldn't even need to work with all these people in advance. Imagination alone is not enough. I notice that dancers who've worked with those elderly people and me for a long time come to find it much easier to invoke that physicality. Sometimes I notice that if you execute something in a clinical manner, with minimal emotion, the effect is very strong. It's an odd paradox: we know that people start to cry when they see other people crying. That's how our empathy works. If you see people in sadness you experience sadness yourself. But should the one who cries truly feel sad?

#### Marres

Marres provides a venue where we can build our own world. It's a unique opportunity. We've never had such a long duration and so much space. It's also a big challenge. It's all about the bodies. The house is in their service. The furniture, or lack of it, should allow the body to be present but also to disappear. Of course we realize that our

ambition to preserve movement is unattainable, because movement by definition isn't static. But that's exactly what makes it exciting. To me, the meaning lies exactly in that challenge. It's more about shaping the quest, and allowing visitors to follow that quest. They must be able to take their time, and to return as well. What I like about museums is that I can determine the amount of time I spend in each space. You can't do that in the theater, where you're expected to sit down when the room darkens and it is decided for you how long you get to watch something. At Marres, visitors can stay as long as they like.

Sound is an important part of *Museum Motus Mori*. It's very important to me that the sound accentuates the duration and intensity of the movement art. My artistic partner Sander van der Schaaf creates the music. He offers an emotional layer to visitors that contrasts my controlled language of movement. He does so by, among other things, using the warm sounds of old string instruments – he plays my deceased mother's mandoline, for example – that he then modifies electronically. You'll hardly recognize it, but there are traces of Bach compositions in there, as well as of philosopher and amateur composer Friedrich Nietzsche (*Das Fragment an sich*). It's very important for the dancers that the music offer them peace and stability on the one hand, and stimulation and inspiration to create further compositions with my movement language within their bodies on the other. The largest search with Sander is for balance and duration, because we want to offer the public a transcendental experience. So that you can lose yourself completely in the sounds, get lost in the soundscape.

Visitors aren't accustomed to watching moving bodies in an exhibition, of course. I can imagine them looking for something to hold onto. Maybe we'll divide them into smaller groups that receive a brief introduction outside before

entering the exhibition. I would find it amazing if people disappear into another world without worrying about how to behave. I also think that people should be able to sit down anywhere, so that they can really take time to 'zoom in'.

I'm very excited to find out how all this will develop, visitors watching dancers. Those bodies will become abstractions. And how do visitors enter, in what kind of context? I see the ballroom as a space that's really something of its own. And I consider the interview rooms to be spaces that we'll keep on molding. The main focus, however, will be on the dancers. We'll do this for six weeks on end. Two weeks of preparation at Marres and then six weeks of presentation, six days a week, five hours a day. That gives this project a ritual character. I've thought of taking a week off, but I believe that would go against the nature of the project. We want to achieve exactly that long duration and the repetition. That will give the dancers a chance to fully commit to this unique project. That means they'll be allowed to completely surrender to the mission, and to truly stay 'on the move'.





KATJA HEITMANN (1987, Germany) operates on the intersection of dance and visual arts, performance, and installation. In her work she investigates what moves humans in the current age. In 2016 Katja won the Dutch Dance Festival (Nederlandse Dansdagen) Award. Katja Heitmann's choreographic work consists of emphatic aesthetics that sharply contrast with human fallibility. Her radical-minimalist and hyper-elaborated visual language confronts viewers with a rugged ocean of insights – a force field that constantly returns in her work.

Katja works closely together with Sander van der Schaaf, who creates the landscapes of sound and light in which her works of art set themselves in motion. For each concept they depart from the question, 'Who or what moves humans?' They steadily develop into nomadic urban theater, performing in a versatile array of locations: at the museum, on the central city square, at the theater, or in church. [www.katjaheitmann.com](http://www.katjaheitmann.com)

#### THE FOLLOW PERSONS PARTICIPATE IN THE EXHIBITION:

Choreography & concept:  
Katja Heitmann

Sound design & concept:  
Sander van der Schaaf

Dancers/performers:  
Wies Berkhout  
Merle Schiebergen  
Manou Koreman  
Rebecca Collins  
Eleni Ploumi  
Anne Roeper  
Lea Christensen  
Leanne Hekkert  
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Dorothea Mende

Artistic consultation:  
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Christina Flick

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Hanneke Wetzler

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Marres  
House for Contemporary Culture

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Tuesday – Sunday  
12 – 5 pm

Marres is a House for Contemporary Culture located in the heart of the old town of Maastricht. Marres develops with artists, musicians, designers, chefs and perfumers, a new vocabulary for the senses. In addition to bringing a lively program of exhibitions, presentations and performances, Marres also features a beautiful garden and a wonderful restaurant.

#### COLOPHON

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