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SOMETHING ELSE ENTIRELY



some thoughts on moving bodies
in the recent works of Allison Hrabluik
by Pablo de Ocampo

at the same time



Allison Hrabluik's work first came to me in the mail. Well, that's not entirely true. It wasn't addressed to me specifically, but came to my office, addressed to a colleague. A plain brown manila envelope was delivered with the mail one day containing a large folded-up sheet of white paper, which bore the name of the addressee. After some time spent scratching our heads over its cryptic contents and worrying about whether it was from a stalker, a friend in the office next door came in with her own identical manila envelope, but bearing her name. Knowing this was of one edition of at least two didn't help much to explain the peculiar delivery, but at least it lessened the likelihood of it being the work of a crazed stalker.

I recall it being several weeks until we learned that this correspondence was a part of *PENELOPE!*, 2009, an off-site project for Artspeak by the Calgary-born, Vancouver-based artist Allison Hrabluik. The artist mailed out 435 of these letters on March 17, 2009. They were sent near and far, some to people the artist knew, others to people she had not met. For those of us encountering the work blindly, we had only the most minimal of details to study: the letters were mailed from Vancouver, the name was hand-drawn in all-caps. But this lack of detail forced a closer consideration of the work, and the more I looked, the more I appreciated idiosyncratic details like the peculiar balance of the letterforms—tall and skinny, a bit leggy like an awkward teenager that hasn't grown into their body yet.

My colleague's copy of *PENELOPE!* hung on the wall above our desks for the better part of a year. Even after I learned that it was an artist's project, I knew little of Hrabluik's work. So glancing up at the poster from time to time, I still approached it outside of the context of how or why it was made, and would always return to its visual and physical characteristics: thinking about the pattern of its fold, typography, or the shape of the hand-drawn lines.

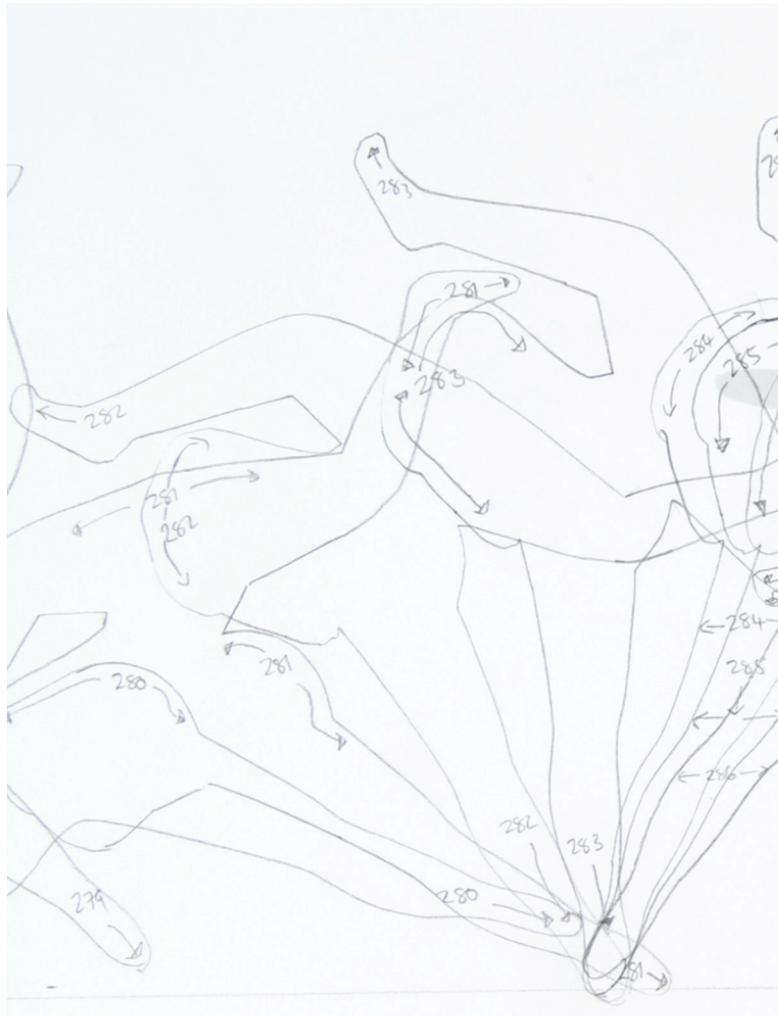
When I saw Allison Hrabluik's film *This is the Way They Make Us Bend*, 2013, some five years down the road, her name was now more familiar to me as that of an artist in Vancouver (a city I had recently moved to), but I didn't immediately connect it to *PENELOPE!* This should not be completely surprising, not simply because of my spotty ability to remember names, but because this film bears little resemblance to the work that came through the post beyond its tonal composition, consisting of black lines on white paper. *This is the Way They Make Us Bend* was a dance film.

As far as studies of movement go, I'd have to single out Babette Mangolte's 16mm film *Water Motor*, 1978, as the gold standard. This silent, black-and-white film documents the dance piece (of the same name) by artist Trisha Brown. The film is composed of two takes of Brown's solo, both of which capture the sequence of movements in one continuous shot. The first, lasting about two-and-a-half minutes, is filmed in real time. After a fade to black, the film fades back up on Brown at the dance's starting point, and we see her perform it again. In this second take, Mangolte captures the movement with the camera set at 48 frames per second, which, when the film is projected back at 24 frames per second, extends the duration of the second take to about five minutes, with Brown's movements slowed to half their original speed.¹

Mangolte, in writing about the process of making her film, says, "As a filmmaker I knew that dance doesn't work with cutting and that an unbroken camera movement was the way to film the four-minute solo. I had learned it by watching Fred Astaire and Gene Kelly's dance numbers. Somehow the film camera has to evoke the hypnotic look and total concentration of the mesmerized spectator..."² Though Mangolte points to the importance of these lessons from Astaire and Kelly, it is Mangolte's editing choices that contribute the most to the film. Here, in her use of repetition—or as Gertrude Stein would alternately distinguish as "insistence"³—Mangolte pushes the viewer to look, then look again, both as a mesmerized spectator, and as one seeing Brown's movement in a way not possible with just a single straight take.

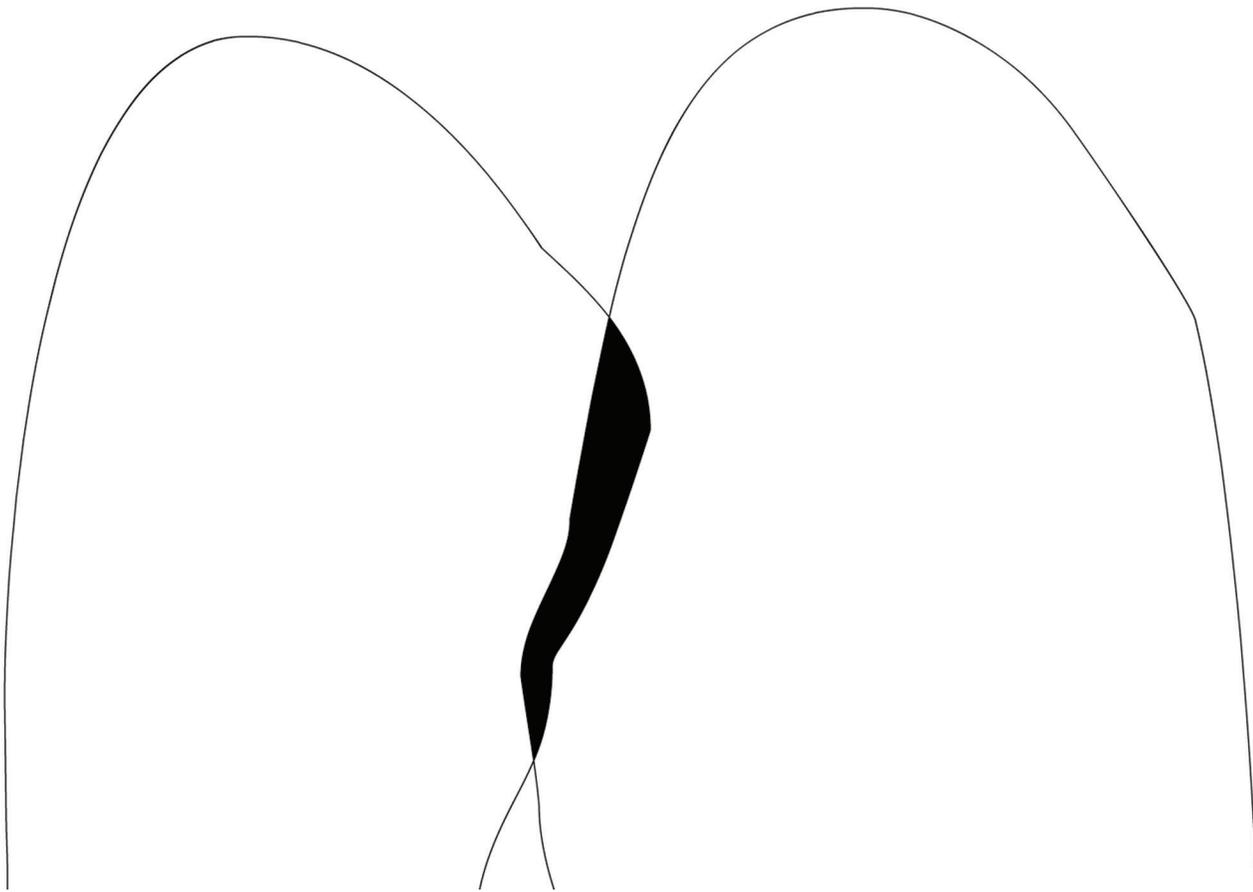
Like Mangolte's film, Allison Hrabluik's *This is the Way They Make Us Bend* is composed in such a way as to direct the viewer's gaze towards every little component of a choreographed movement. However, one is not looking at the choreographed movements of a dancer. Instead, the subject is an animated paper figure, human-like but abstracted. It's kind of like a set of conjoined twins: two torsos connected at the neck, one with a pair of legs, and the other with a single leg. The torso with two legs has a small rivet joining them at the hip, and for one of those legs, another rivet at the knee, allowing the figure to swing its limbs in multiple directions. The torso with the single leg has no such rivets, so its lone leg, which is extended in something approximating the ballet position *pointe tendue à la seconde*, always follows the movements of its attached torso.

This multi-limbed figure sits atop a sheet of white paper. Despite its general flatness, the layers of limbs and torsos stacked upon one another cast small shadows on the paper, giving it physicality, a presence. The paper is marked up with pencil outlines of the multi-limbed figure overlapping and covering the page. Each distinct silhouette contains



a number, counting up from two. After a few beats, the paper figure sets into motion, and from here, we see its body and limbs move across the paper, from left to right, hitting each of the numbered outlines in succession.

Hrabluik made this film in partnership with choreographer Claire French, asking her to make up a set of movements for this otherwise still object. Hrabluik approached this wondering if a character can be constructed simply through movement, rather than a narrative. Through the choreography, this inanimate paper prop takes on movements both human and absurd. At times these movements exude a gracefulness, the two forms intertwined, rolling or flipping as one joined body, at others,



a tension, as if one is dragging or carrying the weight of the other. Though the figures' cumulative movement takes it from a beginning to an end, it reverses motion at various points, further building some kind of push-and-pull. Peculiarly, the figure is moving from left to right, but it faces the opposite direction, its feet and chest pointing left. Is the figure moving backwards? Or is the film moving backwards, playing from the end to the beginning?

Hrabluik maps out the entire trajectory of movement in pencil marks on the paper backdrop. With this juxtaposition of the moving figure and notation for movement, time is broken down. Though, instead of seeing real time and expanded time one after another in two separate scenes as in Mangolte's film, Hrabluik explodes time, simultaneously showing the movement of the figure, and the traces marking future and past movement.

These traces of time recall chronophotography, an early proto-cinematic technique that allowed for a series of photographs of a moving subject to be taken at close intervals. Eadweard Muybridge and Étienne-Jules Marey used the process, though here I'm thinking specifically of Marey's work, which overlaid the multiple exposures into one photographic print (rather than arranging them serially like a storyboard or comic strip). In Marey's photos, multiple points in time are collapsed onto one another, allowing for motion to be read and analyzed through the overlaps and the gaps between one moment and the next.⁴ Yet in one of Marey's photographs, though many moments in time are presented at once, all of that time is collapsed into one instance that has already happened. In Hrabluik's film, the inclusion of the real-time movement of the figure establishes a temporal position from where one can see the present, along

with what has yet to come and what has already passed.

This is the Way They Make Us Bend is one of a trio of works from 2013, which also include, *A Mouth Trying to Drink From Me* and *Father & Daughter*. These recent works by Hrabluik are all rooted in representations of human bodies in motion, though none are really dance films. At least not in the sense that *Water Motor* is, where there is an austere, direct relationship between the cinematographer (Mangolte) and dancer (Brown) working toward a representation of a choreography. These works by Hrabluik sit somewhere between a space of dance, animation and something else entirely at the same time; in each of these, human locomotion is being studied, but the physical human body of a performer is not even present in the frame. This begs the question: what makes a dance film?

Though I led this piece by citing Babette Mangolte, I must admit *Water Motor* was not the first cinematic reference that came to mind when I encountered these recent works by Hrabluik. That distinction goes to the Fleischer Studio cartoon, *Minnie the Moocher*, 1932, a film which I believe to rival *Water Motor*'s status as the gold standard for studies of movement on film. Probably most known for their characters Betty Boop, Buster and Koko the Clown, the brothers Max and Dave Fleischer revolutionized film animation in the 1920s with the invention of rotoscoping. In this technique, the movements of an actor in a live action film would be traced to mimic the movement of an animated figure, giving that character more life-like qualities. *Minnie the Moocher* opens with a live-action sequence of Cab Calloway dancing while his orchestra plays in the background. From here, it switches to an animated narrative in which Betty Boop and her dog sidekick Bimbo run away from home, and end up in a cave

where they encounter a ghostly walrus, voiced by Cab Calloway. As this Calloway-voiced spectre slips and slides back and forth in the cave, the moves seem all too human, all too familiar. The footwork here is captured from Calloway's moves in the opening sequence through rotoscoping. The effect is uncanny, an eerily real representation of human movement in a hand-drawn form.⁵

Like these rotoscoped Fleischer cartoons, these recent films by Hrabluik use simple gestures in line and shape to build a character. With *This is the Way They Make Us Bend* that translation happens from a set of choreographic instructions, but in *A Mouth Trying to Drink From Me* and *Father & Daughter*, Hrabluik's drawings are composed directly from a moving image source like the Fleischers'. When the Fleischers transposed Calloway's movements into the body of a cartoon walrus, it distilled the otherworldly slides and swoops of his legs and arms into a body that exaggerated their otherworldly qualities. Hrabluik's animation removes the direct representation of the human body and places the abstractions and distillations of those movements into a new context. Here, detached from their source, the movement of these shapes are

allowed the space to define a new character.

In *A Mouth Trying to Drink From Me*, the base image is something found, perhaps a clip of an old VHS tape or a degraded video uploaded to the Internet somewhere. The undulating pleats of a theatre curtain are discernible in the background, as is the sheen of a stage. On top of this float two black orbs. These orbs float over the upper and lower halves of a figure, shifting shape as they circumscribe the area defined by the figure's arms and legs. The figure is only seen in fleeting glimpses, either when a limb extends beyond the boundaries of the orb, or as the upper and lower orbs cross each other, at which points the negative void of the orbs reveal the source image that lies beneath. Based on the slow sweeps of the arms and the glimpses of the clothes I could make out, I read the footage as being of a person practicing tai chi. It functions in much the same way as the Fleischers' rotoscoping: using live action footage as a source from which to make animations that can more fluidly and realistically capture movement. As these orbs shift and move about the screen, they manage to exude a gracefulness and fluidity that, contrasting the orbs' overall lack of figurative definition, give those movements a cartoon-like humour.

Figurative definition is even more stripped away in the two characters of *Father & Daughter*. Here, the shape of a body has been reduced to a black line that still somehow seems human (maybe in the sense that they recall the outlines of white-sheet-over-the-head style ghosts, but without the black circles for eyes). The figures begin next to each other, one on each side of the frame, and within the first few seconds briefly pass one in front of the other. As the lines

cross over one another, it produces a sort of Venn diagram effect where the overlapping areas of these outlined forms turn solid black. For the remaining 40 seconds of the video, the figures stand again next to each other, just close enough to ever so slightly touch. Watching this work loop over and over again, the movement builds a narrative tension that, like the shape of the line, is continually shifting. In one moment, I read the father and daughter as being



merely adjacent to each other, only ever bumping into one another but not having a real bond. In another loop, that same closeness is not adjacency but rather affection, a father and daughter continually right next to each other, sharing a closeness that only those two figures can know.

Hrabluik's most recent film *The Splits*, 2015, is not made of lines and shapes; rather, it is composed entirely of live action camera work with real people. The film opens in a room with three young women in a semi-circle watching on as a fourth skips rope at a furious pace. They are in a beige-toned interior with stacks of wooden folding chairs leaning against a wall. It's a warm yet institutional space, like a community center or a church assembly room from the early 20th century. From here, the film cuts to a Steadicam shot following a silhouetted figure through a hall to a stage in a gymnasium or cafeteria where they gyrate with a hula-hoop. A series of quick cuts introduce us to the rest of the cast, 14 individuals and groups in total, each set up in some space of this building, and each demonstrating some kind of skill. After the rope-jumpers and the hula-hooper, we meet a team of gymnasts, a mouth harpist, weightlifters, dog trainers, a hairdresser, an opera singer, a piano player, a prolific hot dog eater, a pizza maker, sausage makers, a tap dancing crew and a burlesque dancer. For 15 minutes, the camera follows this idiosyncratic cast of characters, cutting from one action to the next.

The Splits isn't making a narrative about any of these particular movements—hula hooping, or dog training, or eating hot dogs. As fascinating to watch as each of these performers and their talents are, *The Splits* is more simply about movement. I think again of *Water Motor* here, both for Mangolte's acute sense of looking at the details with her camera, but also for the choreography of Trisha Brown, who along with some of her contemporaries of the Judson Dance Theatre in the 1960s, often incorporated sequences and gestures of pedestrian movement into their dance work. In that sense, Hrabluik's role in the film is both that of a director, using the camera to appreciate the minutiae of these actions, as well as a choreographer, who builds a narrative out of this vocabulary of fantastic movements. Through that structure, an associative montage emerges as I focus on the quick wrists of the rope jumper, the opera singer's hand outstretched, palm down as they sing, the fingers of the sausage maker pushing into and stretching out the sausage casing. These seemingly unrelated bits build into a cohesive whole where the actions slip between absurdity and wonder. As this builds, I pay less and less attention to what any of these performers are doing as the movements and gestures of their actions take over.

HRABLUIK IS AN ARTIST

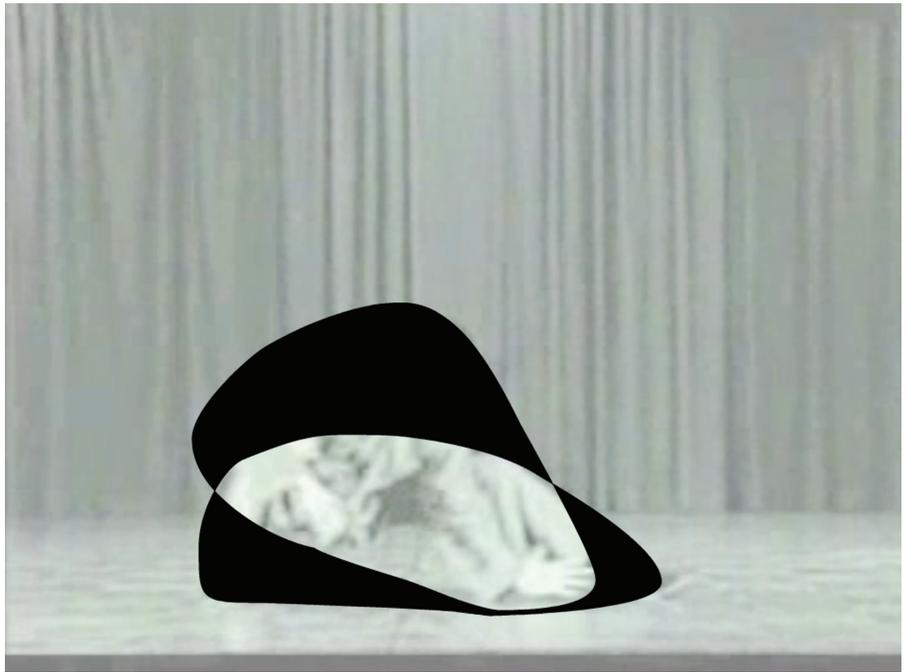
whose skill lies in being
an intuitive observer.

As the credits roll, I look at the cast list for *The Splits*, and think back to the 435 names in *PENELOPE!* I couldn't help but imagine that some of these people performing here were also recipients of a letter in 2009. I imagined from that simple piece of mail, a conversation developed which led to getting to know that person whose name was scrawled out in capital letters, which led to them being in this film.

Though the connections from *PENELOPE!* to *The Splits* eluded me at first, I keep thinking back on how a name scrawled across a big piece of paper kept pulling me in over weeks and months.

Hrabluik is an artist whose skill lies in being an intuitive observer. Through collecting and arranging, Hrabluik generates a narrative whole from miniscule, mundane, absurd and random moments. In focusing in on these particulars, Hrabluik's varied works compel us to notice the drama, humour, elegance and absurdity in movements and gestures we may not otherwise ever pay attention to.

Pablo de Ocampo is the Exhibitions Curator at Western Front in Vancouver.



Images:

Page 38-41: Allison Hrabluik and Claire French, *This is the way they make us bend choreographic tests, I & II*, 2013, graphite and pencil crayon on paper.

Page 42: Allison Hrabluik, *Father & Daughter*, 2013, Animated video, 00:48 min duration.

Page 43: Allison Hrabluik, *The Splits*, 2015, HD video, 15:00 min duration.

Page 44: Allison Hrabluik, *A Mouth Trying to Drink From Me*, 2013, Animated video, 01:54 min duration.

Notes:

1. A digitized version of *Water Motor* is viewable online at: www.ubu.com/film/brown_watermotor.html.

2. Babette Mangolte "On the Making of *Water Motor*, a dance by Trisha Brown filmed by Babette Mangolte," www.babettemangolte.org/maps2.html.

3. I'm thinking here of Gertrude Stein's positioning of "insistence" as something "always alive" in her essay "Portraits and Repetition" in *Lectures in America* (New York: Vintage Books, 1975), 165-206.

4. For a more detailed history and illustration of this, see *François Dagognet Etienne-Jules Marey: A Passion for the Trace* (Zone Books, 1992).

5. Minnie the Moocher is viewable online at: www.youtube.com/watch?v=B_jqJ-77xs&t=383s.

A rotoscoped Calloway dance sequence is also featured in *Betty Boop in Snow-White*, viewable here:

www.youtube.com/watch?v=wLHZruDCAA.