

# RISD MUSEUM

## Julien Prévieux What Shall We Do Next? and Patterns of Life

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*Spalter New Media Gallery*



Julien Prévieux, *Patterns of Life*, 2015

Paris-based artist Julien Prévieux (b. 1974) reconsiders the gestures of contemporary everyday life. He critically addresses politics, economics, technology, and the culture of the workplace by incorporating and reinterpreting the physical behaviors and language specific to each, often with an exacting sense of humor. This exhibition brings together two videos by Prévieux — *What Shall We Do Next?* (Sequence #2) (2014) and *Patterns of Life* (2015) — that consider movement in the history of technology and innovation.

*What Shall We Do Next?* (Sequence #2) presents six monochromatically costumed dancers as they articulate, through fluid movements and a series of monologues, the evolving gestural language used to interact with machines and technological devices. The video specifically charts the recent history of physical gestures such as the swipe and the pinch-to-zoom, which have been patented by technology companies such as Apple and Samsung. The video begins with a series of close-up shots as the individual dancers make repetitive hand gestures while mechanically chanting years from the first decade of the 21st century — “2005, 2005, 2007, 2008.” Amidst these initial movements a flat, nearly toneless female voice — the narrator — emerges. The narrator weaves in and out of the video, between and over the actions of the dancers, within the first few minutes asking a central question: “Do I wave to my digital devices more frequently than to my friends?” Throughout *What Shall We Do Next?* (Sequence #2), questions like this are asked as the dancers vacillate between individual and synchronized gestures and speeches.

One innovation the video describes is a device that would translate tape drawing — a wall-based form of drawing used to design the long curves of car exteriors — directly into a computer program. As the figures draw a matrix of barely visible and elegantly arcing lines in white tape on a white wall,

one of the dancers stares directly into the camera’s lens as she recites information about the advantages and future promise of this device. Her description hints at the many potential machines and gestures that are patented each year and never widely used or manufactured, and this notion of future promise is an important point of emphasis for the entirety of *What Shall We Do Next?* (Sequence #2). Across academic, scientific, and corporate sectors, there are many failed or unfulfilled ideas that, in their own small ways, complicate and advance other innovations. For every realized gesture and movement pattern there are dozens of unrealized ones.

In the second work in the exhibition, *Patterns of Life*, Prévieux continues to examine the intricacies and manipulation of human behavior and physical movement. The video engages a similar style of theatrical choreography and essayistic narrative structure to explore how, since the 19th century, photography has recorded and measured movement, and how inventors and commercial enterprises have capitalized on this. In turn, Prévieux notes how each successful experiment contributed to the cooption of movement by economically minded inventors and commercial enterprises. The first vignette in *Patterns of Life* begins with the words of Jacques-Louis Soret, a 19th-century Swiss chemist: “In 1892, in the course of my research into aesthetics, I became interested in the physical properties of what we call grace. One of the most important characteristics of grace is that if we were to follow the body through space, its trajectory would form a line that has the essential aesthetic properties of continuity, symmetry, and regularity. I wanted to prove this with an experiment.” During this narrative, six dancers sinuously move through a darkened space in loose-fitting, starkly white jumpsuits that have glowing lights attached. The entirety of the video juxtaposes action and narrative to construct an arc that is direct yet elliptical, laced with half-complete conclusions that elicit more questions.



Julien Prévieux, *What Shall We Do Next? (Sequence #2)*, 2014

*Patterns of Life* and *What Shall We Do Next? (Sequence #2)* use similar strategies. In both, professional dancers perform on minimal sets to the soft, mechanical voice of a female narrator. However, in *Patterns of Life*, the narrator's voice is emphasized as the dancers' actions are presented in a more rhythmic and academic pacing, firmly placing this work in the essay-film genre. To construct the complex narrative, Prévieux worked with philosopher Grégoire Chamayou, bringing together an intriguing series of historical and contemporary documents to inform the composition. These sources include Frank B. Gilbreth's 1917 paper "Applied Motion Study," Jacques-Louis Soret's 1892 study "Des conditions physiques de la perception du beau," and a 2015 paper by Nicolas Salazar Sutil titled "Motion and Representation." While these studies aren't widely published, their inclusion in Prévieux and Chamayou's research has important implications for the depth and historical significance of the subject matter explored in *Patterns of Life*.

As *Patterns of Life* moves from one scene to the next and from one experiment to another, Prévieux's ability to deftly integrate disparate elements comes to the fore. The artist pulls together a philosophical and scientific narrative, the elegant and at times unexpectedly terse motions of dancers, monochromatic sets and costumes, and close-up shots and long documentary-like takes with a series of low hums, dings, buzzes, and the patter of softly resonant jazz drums and cymbals. Prévieux's strategy is stylistically engaging and intellectually evocative, and his compositional complexity is not simply manufactured, but necessary to describe his thought-provoking and challenging subject matter, which in turn opens various points of entry for viewers.

*Patterns of Life* and *What Shall We Do Next? (Sequence #2)* engage strategies and topics that a variety of emerging and established contemporary artists are approaching, including Xavier Cha, Daria Martin, Steffani Jemison, Chelsea Knight, and Wu Tsang. The tropes navigated and presented by

Prévieux and others are important issues in a contemporary landscape rife with overwhelming and at times inspiring technological and social change. There is something ineffable at play in the simultaneously physical and intellectually challenging new gestural language that some artists are investigating and describing, and Julien Prévieux is a leader among those working in this sphere.

While the two works in this exhibition convey an overarching criticality toward the use of motion and aesthetics for capital gain, Prévieux makes his study of these economic and technological practices for far more subtle reasons. The artist asks us to take a close look at the behaviors that we use to interact with machines, and to differentiate between those gestures and the ones we use with one another. Highlighting the elusive beauty that underlies many gestures and movements we take for granted every day, he asks us to contemplate where we learn such movements, and if these innovations determine behavior or if it is the other way around. Perhaps the answers to these questions lie somewhere within the impossibly intertwined hybrid of innovation and human gesture that advanced capitalism perpetuates. Above all, Prévieux's dynamic compositions revel in casual, seemingly natural, often overlooked actions—a swipe, a twirl, a wave, a walk, or a pinch—and how these actions proliferate, somehow, more rapidly than they can be identified.

Julien Prévieux (b. 1974) lives and works in Paris. His work has been exhibited in France (Musée d'Art Moderne de la Ville de Paris, FRAC Basse-Normandie, 2012; Galerie Jousse Entreprise, Paris; Galerie Edouard Manet, Gennevilliers), the Netherlands (Witte de With, Rotterdam), Austria (Kunsthalle Krems), Taiwan (Kaohsiung Museum of Fine Arts), Los Angeles (Los Angeles Municipal Art Gallery), and at the 10th Istanbul Biennale, Turkey. He was one of the nominees for the 2014 Prix Marcel Duchamp.

