



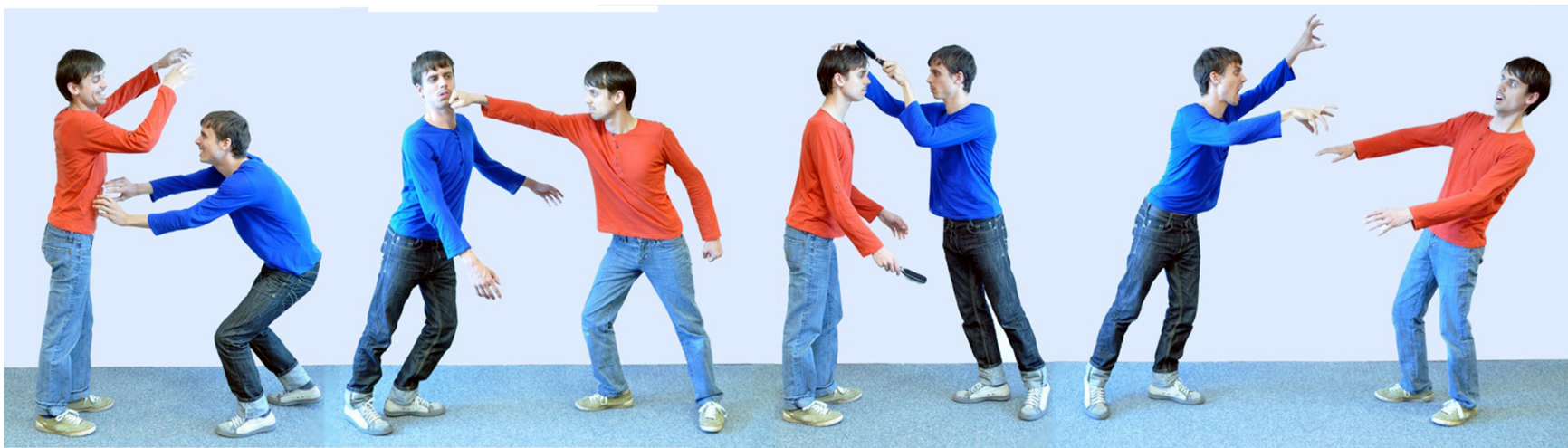
## move |moōv|

noun

- 1 *Physics*: An instance of alteration in place, position, or state.
- 2 *Choreography*: A specific manner or style of dancing.
- 3 *Real estate*: A change of residence or business premises.
- 4 *Games*: An act of transferring a piece from one position to another; a player's turn to make such a change.
- 5 *Relations*: An action or maneuver taken that initiates or advances a process or plan.

## 8 moves

Tap, Slap, Push, Pull, Kick, Cover, Brush and Bite are the 8 Moves used by an actual neuroscience experiment at the University of Pennsylvania. While being devised by research psychologists, performed by hired actors, and then shown to test subjects, the 8 Moves began to take on a life of their own, usurping the place of sports and entertainment, punctuating everyday interactions between friends, coworkers, or lovers, and highlighting the nature of who are the actors and whom are the acted-upon, not just on stage or in an MRI, but in every facet of the human (and non-human) world.





It was an odd afternoon. I spent most of it standing three feet from Adam. Half the time we faced each other, half the time one of us faced the other's back. We did just eight things, or we tried our best to. I'd reach out and bite Adam's arm, and then he'd bite mine. Adam would brush my hair three times, and I'd brush his. But whenever we slapped each other's faces, we'd veer off script and bust out laughing.

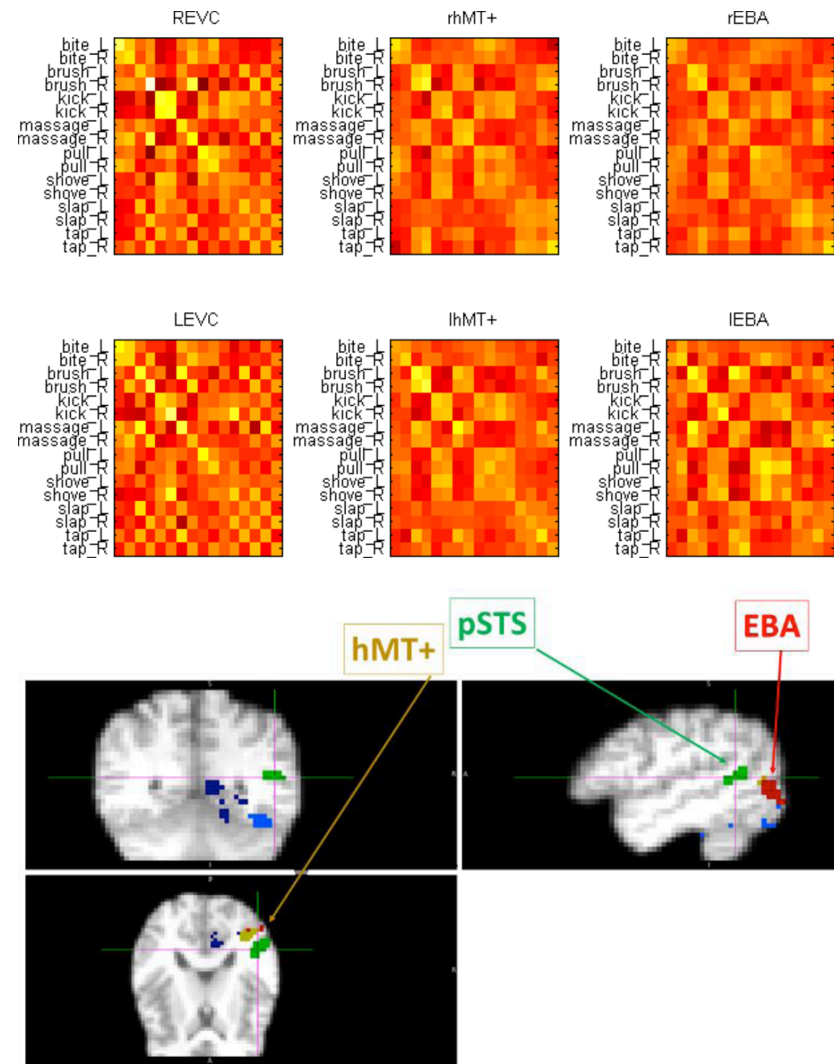


Stills from Alon Hafri's video footage of Adam Kerbel and me, 2014.

These Eight Moves—Bite, Brush, Kick, Pull, Shove, Slap, Tap, and Towel—were the brainchild of Alon Hafri, a budding neuroscientist at UPenn. Alon had hired Adam and me as actors to perform the moves in three-second increments, which he filmed over and over again until we perfected each one. We switched roles and swapped positions, so that each move was performed in four different ways. After hundreds of takes, we'd relocate to another room to shoot everything again in front of some blasé background: an off-white wall, a beige Venetian blind, a dry erase board, or a pull-down projection screen.



All these scenes were for the viewing pleasure of subjects laying inside of an MRI machine. In just three seconds, how would the subconscious and conscious mind perceive an event? Who was the actor and who was being acted upon? And does the brain notice the difference between a tap on the shoulder and a slap in the face? I've been an MRI subject in a well-known brain study that looked at perceptions of emotion through facial expression. Now I was on the other end, as the bedraggled actor/actee destined for a tiny screen. After several hours of biting, brushing, and hitting each other, we were set free from Penn's psych unit. But when we stepped into the outside world, something seemed different, like Adam and I were now changed men who'd been reprogrammed to greet people by pulling their arms and throwing towels over their shoulders, and then expect them to come back to neutral in under three seconds. A lexicon of eight gestures had suddenly attained new meaning, yet we were the only people on the planet who knew of this vocabulary. Or so we thought.



MRI data and brain scans derived from subjects being shown Alon Hafri's footage, 2014.

One day at my job someone asked me, “Hey, were you in a film? You and another guy?” She’d been at a café and glanced over to see Hafri’s footage being screened on a nearby laptop. Me on left, Adam on right: Kick. Adam on left, me on right: Shove. What was happening? Were these Eight Moves going viral? I felt like I was immersed in a Jorge Luis Borges story, the one called “Tlön, Uqbar, Orbis Tertius,” where a cabal of intellectuals uproot the doxa of world societies by circulating an encyclopedia for a fictitious country. In the story, Borges describes two languages that are devoid of nouns, and that people begin to adopt them, and then how the invented Tlönish and Uqbarian cultures eventually supplant everyone else’s. I remember reading this story for the first time, and at the end it said, “Translated by J. E.,” as if the author’s world had been swallowed by the fabricated one and I was reading that last pages leftover from a vanquished history.

So why not? If Borges’ century could be engulfed by a fiction of culture and languages of only verbs and adjectives, why not imagine our century stripped down to Eight Moves? I hatched a plot involving the actual psych study authored by Alon Hafri. In my story, Hafri’s Moves—made for the sole purpose of learning about the human mind—get coopted by artists who remake them into sculpture, theatre, dance, ritual. Children pick up the Moves and no longer play tag or baseball or soccer, and when they come of age, the Olympics have been paired down to just the Eight Moves. The Eight Moves gradually seep into every facet of life—work, education, dating, family—and no one questions their presence, function, or design. It’s as if they’d always been there, and always would be. On top of this, my story circles back to the original question: In any event, how do we perceive actor and actee? Subject and object? And when something isn’t intended to be art, when does it become art?

In 2014 I taught the Eight Moves to pairs of actors and then asked them to improvise scenes. Every scene had to lean toward logical reasons for one person giving the other a Bite on the arm, a Kick in the leg, a Slap in the face, a Tap on the back, a Push and a Pull, a Towel over the shoulders, and a Brush of the hair. No scene was complete until all Eight Moves had been performed between the two characters. That generated scenes like a barbershop where the Towel, Brush, and Slap would be normal parts of the standard shave-and-haircut ritual, and even things like the Kick could be worked in as a friendly gag between friends on the way out. Other scenes were more absurd, involving demonic hallucinations and romantic fetishes. I didn't get as far into developing my story as Borges did his, perhaps because I chose the path of devised theatre involving other actors. But knowing those Eight Moves, they will be back, evolving a life of their own.

Of these two images, one is from Alon Hafri's experiment and one is from an 8 Moves workshop. Which is which?

