

## **Choreographing Violence in Arkadi Zaides's *Archive***

by Ruthie Abeliovich

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Israeli choreographer Arkadi Zaides's solo dance performance *Archive* investigates the somatic impact of transgressions performed daily in the West Bank by Israeli fundamentalist settlers against Palestinians. The performance, which premiered at Festival d'Avignon in July 2014, activates the enduring habits of Israeli violence by weaving together two concurrent threads: video projections from an archive assembled by B'Tselem,<sup>1</sup> an organization that documents human rights violations in the occupied territories, and Zaides's live performance in which he embodies the physical and vocal gestures projected from the video in order to represent the Israeli aggressive position.<sup>2</sup> While *Archive* has been performed in different venues around the world,<sup>3</sup> it generates the most politically charged response when performed for an Israeli audience. The controversy around this work recently reached a peak when the Ministry of Culture and Sport requested from Zaides to remove its logo from the performance's list of sponsors, with the claim that it should not appear alongside B'Tselem's, an organization it perceives as defamatory of Israel's policy in the West Bank.<sup>4</sup>

The hour-long performance begins with Zaides casually situating the event:

My name is Arkadi Zaides. I am a choreographer. I'm Israeli. For the past fifteen years I've been living in Tel Aviv. The West Bank is 20km away from Tel Aviv. The materials you are about to watch were filmed in the West Bank. All the people you will see in the clips are Israeli. Like me. The video clips were selected from an archive of an organization named B'Tselem, the Israeli Information Center for Human Rights in the Occupied Territories.

The proximity of Tel Aviv to the West Bank underscores the apparent rupture between the ongoing violence happening in close vicinity to the performance venue, and the mediated position necessary for most Israelis to observe the conflict. As a result of movement restrictions and spatial separations imposed on Palestinians and Israelis, there is a tendency for uninvolved segments of Israeli society to belittle, or ignore human right violations occurring daily in the occupied territories. Zaides's performance challenges this position by embodying the Israeli violence in the videos and presenting it to his audience. By observing his body in performance, Israeli spectators sense the somatic impact of such actions and are asked to consider the

corporal resonance of this ongoing violence happening in close proximity.

The B'Tselem videos Zaides pre-selected for the performances were filmed by Palestinians and depict Israelis enacting violence against Palestinian people, lands, and property. They were assembled in the context of the project "Armed with Cameras," in which home-video cameras were distributed to Palestinians—none of them professional photographers—who volunteered to document their daily routines under the Israeli occupation. This archival project exposes the wide public to every-day human rights violations. The scenes depict the pastoral rural landscape around Nablus and Ramallah as battlefields, in which fundamentalist settlers execute acts such as burning farmlands, uprooting olive trees, vandalizing Palestinian property, incidents of harassment, and stone-throwing assaults. At times the documented violence is shown to be aimed at the border police forces that attempt to defend the Palestinians against acts of transgression. Such violence is used in order to reinforce Israeli settlements at the expense of the Palestinian capacity to develop socially and economically.

The political aspects of Zaides's performance resonate in the Hebrew word *b'tselem*, which literally means "in the image of." This word derives from the linguistic root ZLM (נלץ), which also refers to the act of photographing. The two aspects of the

word b'tselem are manifested in Zaides's performed imitations of the Israelis in the video images. He first establishes his staged choreography by systematically copying the perpetrators' gestures as filmed by the Palestinian camera operators. Standing in front of the screen and holding the video's remote control, Zaides regulates the changing stream of short clips. Often with his back to the audience, he rigorously observes the perpetrators in action in each new scene. Occasionally, he pauses the clips to scrutinize the poses shown in them, and rewinds them back and forth at different speeds to examine the details that form the perpetrators' actions. In one instance, he screens a scene of Israeli settlers fighting border police forces that prevent them from intruding the Palestinian village. Zaides freezes the clip at a particularly tenuous moment—when the policeman is dragging a settler by his arms toward his arrest. Zaides imitates the posture of the settler by standing with his legs spread apart and his right knee bent in order to balance in front of the screen, thus doubling the effect of the image. He then changes the perspective from which this body posture is seen by altering its angle: lying down, from the front, and from the back.

At other points in the performance Zaides turns off the video and moves onstage in a kind of kinetic resonance to the documented events just viewed. The effect is of further aligning

his presence with that of the perpetrators. At one point, a clip shows Israeli settlers scattering a flock of sheep in a rural landscape, dominated by the rhythmic ringing of bells tied to the animals. Within this soundscape, the Israeli settlers disperse the herd by moving in large, assertive steps, waving their arms and producing vocal interjections that encourage the sheep's movements. Onstage, Zaides imitates these acts in sync with the video projection, using the sounds from the video as a soundtrack to his live performance. Following this, he then shuts down the video clips and performs the movements he has extracted. Zaides lifts the movements from the screen and uses them to then choreograph his onstage movement. Detaching the sound from its visual anchor on the screen, the sounds of the perpetrators are being choreographed as an aural repository that insinuates the violence from which it was extracted.

The video clips thus provide a movement system that Zaides uses to develop his onstage choreography and sound score. He performs the vocal and physical images captured by the Palestinian camera operators as if they were an organized movement scheme; they become the repeated choreography of his performance. However, the perceptual discrepancy between the live acts onstage and their screened documentation emphasizes the multiple perspectives that are at play in this work: The Palestinian point of view that captured the events in the video;

Zaides's live imitation of the depicted perpetrators; and the audiences point of view that interweaves both the screened footage and Zaides's live interventions in the clips.

The configuration of these multiple perspectives in the performance is similar to the kinds of choreographic ordering and movement restrictions imposed by Israeli forces on Palestinians in the West Bank. While Zaides is moving freely on the stage, the audience, like Palestinians, is restricted by being confined to their seats. Further, the amateur quality of the video clips, and the spontaneous, jittery camera tilting offer a counter-position to Zaides's acts of imitation. While Zaides disciplines his movements by following the body gestures of the perpetrators captured in the video clips, the nonprofessional, nonprescriptive movements of the camera operators, together with the surrounding sounds they capture, simultaneously stage a gesture free of the performance's dictated imperatives.

By displaying the video archive as a gestural lexicon, and by embodying the body gestures from the videos, Zaides shows how social relations are articulated, and re-animated by combining corporeal knowledge and technological manipulation. This knowledge is produced by the tension between the live performance and the recorded documentations, the choreographed movements and the spontaneous camera tilting.

Much like the visual screening, the soundtrack designed by Tom Tlalim reflects the two modes of presence that are at play in this performance. The videos contain sounds captured by the Palestinian camera operators that insinuate their proximity to the documented incidents. When the camera operators stand far from the events they document, only the voices and sounds surrounding them are heard. These include colloquial speech, as well as screams, loud exclamations, animal yowls, and gunshots. Occasionally the camera captures both the voices of the perpetrators, and the sounds surrounding the camera operator.

Onstage, however, Zaides imitates only the voices of the Israeli perpetrators. Then, at a certain point in the performance, he begins to record his imitations of the perpetrators voices, and later on he samples these recorded voices into repetitive rhythmic patterns that accompany his stage performance.

The duplication of gestures—as live and the screened version from which they derive—portrays the archive as dynamic and constantly subjected to translation and thus to transformation by interpretation. Within this scheme, Zaides functions as an agent for change. He both imitates and animates the video documentation, bringing it into the realm of bodily knowledge. The two modes of presence in this performance—the video archive and the live embodied gestures—thus convey a

profound tension between controlling structures and ways of resisting them. The performance transforms this particular choreography of violence into a set of movements that proliferate beyond the political conditions in which they occurred.

### **Transforming the Archive**

The political framework of this performance makes clear how Zaides's choreography operates as an "apparatus of capture." André Lepecki explains that choreography as an apparatus of capture "foregrounds perception as always tied to modes of power that distribute and assign to things visibility or invisibility, significance or insignificance" (Lepecki 2007:120). Lepecki refers to the way choreography, as a set of predetermined steps and gestures, reflects political systems that pursue movement control. However, there are ways to oppose the implementation of control-based movement systems. Lepecki proposes that "danced techniques of freedom suggest choreography as technology for inventing movements of freedom" (Lepecki 2013:22). Thus, experimenting with given structures of programmed movement, and reconstructing them into multiple gestures enact forms of resistance to political affirmation.

While Zaides's dance practice manifests structures of movement that take form in Israel's occupation in the West Bank,

he also intervenes into this system of power by diverging from the score that the video archive imposes, and thus represents a different mode of participation in the political order of the occupation. Zaides experiments with the movements he imitates: he performs the poses by changing the position, and focus from which they are viewed; he enacts the gestures in different pace, and configures them into a variety of compositional sequences.

As Zaides takes control over the gestures' appearances and re-appearances during the performance, the movements he extracted from the archive are embodied and further subjected to his authority. The gestures from the clips become assimilated as an integral part of his body language and also his understanding of the archive of violence based in this political situation. The audience is further implicated in this archival revision; the performance requires them to address the choreography of the occupation rather than keep it at a distance.

For instance, in one video clip a group of settlers gather on a rural hill. Zaides focuses his attention on the physical attitude of one settler whose face is masked by his T-shirt, his upper torso exposed. Zaides imitates him by covering his face with his T-shirt, and placing his arms on his hips, balancing his body in order to match the projected video backdrop. By echoing the settler's body posture, Zaides follows the somatic features of the kinetic system of violence such acts of

aggression come to generate. This scene and others underscore the significance of the Palestinian point of view.

However, no imitated gesture should be taken at face value, and Zaides's acts are clearly different from their screened models. By embodying and manipulating the body positions of the perpetrators shown in the footage, imitation becomes political. While questions regarding the authenticity, reliability, or validity of B'Tselem's video archive are avoided in this performance, Zaides takes a clear stand regarding the human rights violations he screens onstage by positioning himself in the place of the aggressor, thus raising issues of accountability and responsibility. In the scene previously described, where the settlers mask their faces with their T-shirts, the masking resembles the shape of a Palestinian *keffiyeh*, a well-known symbol of the Palestinian national resistance. Zaides transforms this symbol through imitation when he masks his own face with his shirt in the same manner. Zaides's imitation of an imitation displaces the live act from the documented event and critiques it, thus complicating its purely documentary function. Such repeated acts of imitation inscribe their ontological essence upon his body.

In this sense, *Archive* is a performance that endeavors to go beyond mere artistic representation: Zaides transforms the video archive from a one-sided documentary into a live dialog

with multiple perspectives that bear the potential to evoke solidarity regarding the effects of the enduring conflict. He transforms the re-performed corporeal gestures to create his own political gestures in response to the violence projected from the screen.

During most of the performance, Zaides manages the archive by controlling and manipulating the stream of projected images. However, toward the end of the performance things start to spin out of his control. At these moments the video backdrop is turned off and the soundtrack formed by his sampled vocal imitations of the perpetrators continues to play at a higher volume. Zaides's onstage movements accelerate in speed and intensity as he strings together a selection from the gestures he previously performed into a repetitive cyclic loop of movements. Caught in a seemingly uncontrolled frenzy of vocal and physical gestures, Zaides contorts his body as though possessed by the aggressive kinetic language he has up until now carefully studied. He submits himself to the research of his embodiment, immersed in a trance of the appropriated violent movements that occupy his body.

Throughout the performance, the imperatives of Zaides's imitations are relocated from the video archive to his own body and come to control his stage presence. This, as Zaides demonstrates, is how an archive develops and transforms: it has

ramifications beyond the sites and the particular situations it documents. Archives are not mere records; they can be used to actively dismantle categories of victim and perpetrator, and affect the bodies of all participating subjects—willingly or not. Once Zaides assimilates the gestural lexicon of violence and transforms his body into an archive, he also can no longer remain singular in his perspective. Like the archive, he embodies multiple perspectives that reveal the social complexity of the events he performs.

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<sup>1</sup>For more information on B'Tselem's activity, see the organization's website: <http://www.btselem.org>

<sup>2</sup>The Archive materials in this performance were filmed by Iman Sufan, Mu'az Sufan, Bilal Tamimi, Udai 'Aqel, Awani D'ana, Bassam J'abri, Abu 'Ayesha, Qassem Saleh, Mustafa Elkam, Raed Abu Ermeileh, Abd al-Karim J'abri, Issa 'Amro, Ahmad Jundiye, Nasser Harizat, Abu Sa'ifan, Oren Yakobovich, and Nayel Najjar.

<sup>3</sup>*Archive* has been performed in venues such as: Festival d'Avignon, France, July 2014; Théâtre National de Chaillot, France, January 2015; CDC Toulouse, France, February 2015; CNDC Angers, France, February 2015; The Off Broadway Theater, Yale University, New Haven, USA, March 2015; MITsp, Itau Cultural, São Paulo, Brazil, March 2015; Kunstenfestivaldesarts, Brussels,

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Belgium, May 2015; Festival Transamériques, Montreal, Canada, May 2015; Potsdamer Tanztage, Fabrik Potsdam, Germany, May 2015.

<sup>4</sup>For a report on a right-wing extremist protest opposing Zaides's performances, see: <http://hyperallergic.com/162495/right-wing-protesters-attack-art-talk-in-jerusalem/>

### **References**

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