Towards Documentary Choreography

Intermedial Approaches when Working with Extra-aesthetic Materials

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Towards Documentary Choreography:
Intermedial Approaches when Working with Extra-aesthetic Materials

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For the children of Gaza

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[1] The phrase is generally attributed to Konstantin Stanislavski (1863–1938), co-founder of the Moscow Art Theatre, though its precise origin remains debated within Russian theatre circles.

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Summary

In this artistic doctoral research, I explore how choreography might respond to today's societal urgencies and topical issues. I develop a documentary approach to dance and embodied practices, where, unlike in theatre, film, or the visual arts, the use of historical facts and documentary sources is only now beginning to emerge. More specifically, I examine how, through various formats, documents can be reimagined choreographically to reveal divergent - and at times conflicting - ways of engaging with society and the arts, particularly in times of crisis.

The research unfolds through three major projects: ***Necropolis***, ***Necropolis-United***, and ***The Cloud***, each exemplifying distinct strategies of societal engagement and intermedial experimentation. ***Necropolis*** confronts the deadly consequences of migration through choreographic and cartographic protocols that trace the burial locations of people who have died on migration routes, while cooperating with communities and institutions to bring dignity to these deceased individuals. This work extends into ***Necropolis-United: Integrated Data-Platform of Dead and Missing Migrants in Europe (FWO I005522N, UGent, 2022–2026),*** an interdisciplinary project supported by the Research Foundation - Flanders. This project brings together artists, scholars, technologists, and activists in the collaborative construction of commemorative information systems honoring dead migrant people and questioning the dissemination of sensitive data in an ethical and sustainable way. ***The Cloud*** expands the issue of migration to environmental terrains, investigating the pervasive algorithmic "cloud" of artificial intelligence within the context of ecological crisis. It focuses specifically on the Chernobyl catastrophe in an endeavor to explore the entanglement of human and non-human agency as well as material and immaterial infrastructures.

The dissertation is composed of seven chapters, each offering insight into one or more components of the aforementioned projects. Several of the included texts are co-authored, reflecting the inherently collaborative and interdisciplinary nature of my research. Together, they provide an overview of the multifaceted inquiry conducted within this doctoral trajectory.

Chapter 1: "Blurry Manifestos: *The Eshkol-Wachman Movement Notation* and its Militarized Applications" examines how choreographic tools and artistic research can become entangled with regimes of power, focusing on the collaboration between Noa Eshkol and Avraham Wachman and the development of the Eshkol-Wachman Movement Notation within the context of the Israeli state project. Through a critical revisitation of their work, the chapter exposes how artistic practices can be co-opted by militarized and colonial logics, foregrounding the ethical responsibilities of artists operating within systems of domination. **Chapter 2: "*Necropolis*: Walking through a List of Deaths"**: Focusing on the first part of the *Necropolis* project, this chapter analyzes the practice of grave-location search as a choreographic and forensic methodology that responds to the systematic exclusion of migrant deaths from European legal and commemorative frameworks. Drawing on Judith

Butler's concept of grievability, it demonstrates how the activation of the *List of Refugee Deaths* enables a ritual of commemoration that challenges the political structures rendering these deaths invisible. **Chapter 3: "Tentacular Thinking in Storied Places"** is a multivocal essay that consolidates reflections from *NecropolisLAB*, a transdisciplinary think tank exploring the development of a digital system for commemorating migrant deaths, which later became *Necropolis-United*. Drawing on cartographic practices such as deep-mapping and cartographic heterotopia, it frames mapping as a performative and ethical act that weaves art, science, and activism into a collective choreography of remembrance. **Chapter 4: "Haunting Spectres and Spectating Ghosts"**: Structured as a dialogue with performance scholar Livia Andrea Piazza, this chapter examines the second part of *Necropolis*, where forensic procedures are reenacted on stage to disrupt distanced, data-driven spectatorship. It argues that haunting operates as an aesthetic and ethical strategy that transforms statistical abstraction into embodied confrontation, implicating the audience in an ongoing catastrophe of loss and erasure. **Chapter 5: "*Necropolis-United*: Hyphenated Infrastructure of Mourning, Memory, and Activism"** traces the emergence of *Necropolis-United* as a research infrastructure that connects art, activism, cartography, and data practices in the collective documentation of migrant deaths. Drawing on concepts such as "hyphenated thinking" and "choreographing remembrance", it proposes a relational alternative to reductive lists, while foregrounding collective grief, resistance, and ongoing processes of witnessing. **Chapter 6: "Beyond the List: Ecologies of Mourning and Resistance to Fortress Europe's Border Violence"** is co-written as a polyphonic assemblage. It reflects the communal and participatory nature of the *Necropolis-United* project by foregrounding the voices, practices, and affects of its contributors. Rather than documenting an integrated data-platform alone, it emphasizes the emergence of a community engaged in democratic knowledge production and resistance to Fortress Europe's border violence. **Chapter 7: "*The Cloud*: Choreographing Hyperobjects"** examines the performance *The Cloud* as a choreographic inquiry into the entanglement of the Chernobyl disaster and artificial intelligence, approached as hyperobjects that exceed human perception and control. Through testimony, archival material, AI-generated text, and dance, it explores meltdown as a generative condition, positioning AI as a co-creator that opens new epistemic and choreographic modes of engaging with the Anthropocene. Finally, in the conclusion to this dissertation, I propose twelve principles for engaging with documentary materials through choreography. Rather than offering a definitive summary, the conclusion distills reflections, methodologies, and findings from the preceding chapters into an operative framework. These principles are not intended as a fixed list, but as an open invitation: guidelines that can inform and inspire both artistic and scholarly practices within the evolving field of documentary choreography.

Introduction

0.1 As I Begin

As I begin, I must acknowledge that these words are written under the weight of two ongoing and devastating catastrophes, both of which are deeply entangled with my personal history and central to my artistic and activist work. The full-scale invasion of Ukraine by the Russian Federation, which began in February 2022, continues to unfold, leading to brutal consequences for civilian life, territorial sovereignty, and geopolitical stability. Whole swaths of cities have been devastated, neighborhoods have been reduced to rubble, millions have been displaced within and beyond the country's borders, and the cultural fabric of Ukraine is under systematic assault. Simultaneously, the genocide in Gaza has reached an unprecedented level of destruction, fueled by decades of Israeli occupation and siege and escalating after Hamas' deadly attack on October 7th, 2023. Tens of thousands of Palestinian lives have been lost, infrastructures have been decimated, and the very conditions for viability are under direct assault, through deliberate starvation and denial of basic medical care. Meanwhile, in the West Bank, a relentless surge of settlement expansion, land confiscations, forced displacements, ad-hoc pogroms and killings continues to fragment Palestinian territory and reinforce the machinery of annexation.

This prolonged state of violence coincides with an intensifying crackdown on the arts, and more broadly on cultural institutions. In many Western contexts, these institutions are pressured to remain silent or to conform to dominant narratives. Artists who speak out - particularly those who express solidarity with Palestine - are increasingly subjected to censorship, loss of funding, blacklisting, and even personal threats. These dynamics threaten not only the autonomy of artistic expression, but also the fundamental conditions under which art can be created, shared, and discussed. In such a climate, the act of sustaining a conversation, especially one that insists on naming and addressing structural violence, becomes crucial, as it is a refusal to surrender the cultural sphere to the logic of disposability, detachment, and complicity, and an insistence that art remain a site where uncomfortable truths can surface, where collective memory is contested, and where alternative futures can still be imagined.

I was born in Belarus near the Ukrainian border in 1979, and spent my early childhood amid the collapse of the Soviet regime. In the wake of the fall of the Iron Curtain, I immigrated, grew up, and spent most of my adulthood in Israel/Palestine. I became politically aware rather late, only in my late twenties. This awakening was shaped by the violent realities I witnessed, particularly the first large-scale assault on Gaza in 2008, known as *Operation Cast Lead*, which marked the beginning of a relentless sequence of military operations in the Strip that have continued ever since, culminating in the current assault - the deadliest to date.

Two years earlier, in 2006, I had co-initiated a series of workshops at the Oyoun youth theatre group in the Druze village of Majd al-Shams in the Golan Heights and at the Rabeh Murkus Danse Studio in the Palestinian village of Kafr Yasif in the Galilee, both located within the 1967 borders of Israel. These were my first eye-to-eye encounters with Palestinian and Druze citizens of the state. Although I had always lived in proximity to these communities after migrating as a child to Israel/Palestine, my connection to them had remained distant, filtered through structural separation, social conditioning, and the normalized "enemy-making" narrative embedded in Israeli society. These workshops marked a turning point in my understanding of the country's political realities and allowed me to begin forming deeper personal connections with communities which had been systematically kept apart. They revealed how artistic practice could open alternative channels of encounter. Working collaboratively with members of these groups - mostly children of different ages - created temporary spaces of exchange where participants could share their memories, dreams and desires. The very process of making art gave birth to connections that bypassed societal separations, giving form narratives that were otherwise fragmented or silenced.

This emerging proximity and sense of shared experience with members of these groups took on new significance during the aforementioned *Operation Cast Lead* in 2008 (also referred to as the "Gaza Massacre" or "Massacre in Gaza"), which resulted in the deaths of around 1,300 Palestinians and 13 Israelis. By that time, I had established strong links through the workshops I conducted, enabling me to witness the aftermath of this event from both sides. While on the Israeli side life returned to normal almost immediately, on the Palestinian and Druze sides, the sense of devastation and trauma endured long after that attack had ended. Within the field of art, collaborations that had previously been possible between Israeli and Palestinian institutions, particularly those in the West Bank, gradually came to a halt. The Boycott, Divestment and Sanctions (BDS) movement gained greater momentum, urging international cultural workers to sever ties with Israeli state-funded institutions, and this began to profoundly reshape the landscape of artistic exchange and cooperation in the region.

It was in that context that I made a vow to myself: for as long as I continued to live in Israel and benefit from its funding for my artistic work, I would devote my practice solely to questions related to the Israeli-Palestinian situation. This commitment gave rise to three major artistic projects. The first two works, *Quiet* (2010) and *Land-Research* (2012), are ensemble pieces created with a mixed team of Israeli and Palestinian '48ers (Palestinians living within the borders of Israel). The third, *Archive* (2014), is a solo performance based on footage filmed by Palestinians in the West Bank, documenting their continuous exposure to violence by settlers. Together, these three works trace the intensifying fragmentation and polarization in the region - particularly in the deteriorating relations between Israelis and Palestinians. From structural oppression to ongoing military aggression, the evolving political landscape shaped both the thematic focus and the methodology of these artistic responses. In my search for ways these works could directly respond to the local political climate, these projects,

and specifically *Archive*, also revealed a growing necessity: to incorporate extra-aesthetic documents - documents that represent the arts' "social and cultural outside"[2] - into the works themselves.

0.2 The Documentary Turn in Contemporary Choreography

In recent years, there has been a growing interest in incorporating documentary materials within choreographic practices. Increasingly, choreographers are exploring ways to integrate elements such as photographs, videos, testimonies, and archival texts, not only as sources of inspiration but as constitutive components of the performances themselves. This shift signals a significant expansion in the field, as the boundaries between fiction and reality, aesthetics and evidence, theatricality and truth are not fixed but continuously negotiated. Sandra Iché, Farah Saleh, Ligia Lewis, Faustin Linyekula, or Eszter Salamon are just a few artists whose works demonstrate how choreography can engage directly with political and social issues, allowing factual materials to shape, disrupt, and create dialogue with embodied practices. Through various intermedial strategies, these practitioners challenge the conventions of both documentary as genre and dance as discipline, opening space for new forms of critical engagement and intervention. By using choreography as a site for inquiry, these artists affirm the medium's potential to both reflect and reshape the way we relate to the past and its traces in the present.

The notions of the "document" and the "archive" have been explored from various perspectives within the choreographic field. The dancing body has often been conceived as a living archive - one shaped by its encounters with social, political, and aesthetic contexts. As dance scholar Timmy De Laet observes, attempts to align the body with the archive tend to divide critical discourse into two camps.[3] On one side, performance scholar and curator André Lepecki asserts that "a body may have always already been nothing other than an archive"[4]; on the other, dance theoretician and practitioner Stephan Brinkmann rejects such metaphor as "misleading because it seems to give 'remembrance in dance a *site![einen Ort]*, which it does not have.'"[5] These divergent - if not entirely antithetical - positions illustrate the growing prominence of archival and documentary concerns within contemporary dance scholarship. For performance philosopher Christel Stalpaert, the body-as-archive includes "the corporeal memory of the performer" and "the living archive of the performer's body"

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[2] Juliane Rebentisch, "Realism Today: Art, Politics, and the Critique of Representation", *Thinking, Resisting, Reading the Political*, eds. Anya Esch-van Kan, Sean Packard, and Peter Schulte (Berlin: Diaphanes, 2013), https://www.diaphanes.net/titel/realism-today-art-politics-and-the-critique-of-representation-2231, accessed August 2, 2025.
[3] Timmy De Laet, "The Anarchive of Contemporary Dance: Towards a Topographic Understanding of Choreography", *The Routledge Companion to Dance Studies*, eds. Helen Thomas, Stacey Prickett (London: Routledge, 2019), 177.
[4] André Lepecki, "The Body as Archive: Will to Re-Enact and the Afterlives of Dances", *Dance Research Journal* 42, no. 2 (Winter 2010): 34.
[5] Stephan Brinkmann, quoted in Timmy De Laet, "The Anarchive of Contemporary Dance", 178.

which is "in perpetual modulation".[6] The performer's body constantly gathers techniques, movements, and pieces of repertoire that are stored for later use, but it also stores personal habits, tics, and the experience of the dancer's physicality and gender.[7] Dance scholar Susan Leigh Foster calls this the "knowledge bone-deep in the dancer's physicality - the product of years of dedicated practice to specific aesthetic and social values."[8]

Drawing on these insights, over the past two decades numerous choreographic projects have explored and staged embodied histories.[9] Among the most notable are a series of works by Jérôme Bel, in which he collaborates with dance practitioners to perform their own personal narratives. *Véronique Doisneau* (2004) features a Paris Opera Ballet dancer recounting her memories and experiences at the end of her career, while *Cédric Andrieux* (2009) presents a former dancer at the Merce Cunningham Dance Company reflecting on his experience working with the iconic choreographer. Similarly, in *I Am a Demon* (2005), Thai performance artist Pichet Klunchun revives and reinterprets the traditional Thai dance form *khon* from a contemporary perspective, challenging colonial legacies and exploring the complex relationship between tradition, modernity, and decolonization in contemporary art.[10] In the same vein, in *Product of Circumstances* (1999), choreographer Xavier Le Roy - formerly a researcher in molecular biology - uses autobiography and scientific training to perform his own transformation from scientist to dancer.

Alongside this tendency, stage works have increasingly been treated as documents in themselves, spurring a growing interest in the re-enactment and re-staging of dance pieces - often infused with contemporary interpretations and critical reflections. Building on this shift, Timmy De Laet distinguishes between three different types of procedures: first, enacting the original choreographic work, or what he terms "memory performed"[11] - the idea that every choreography is already an enactment of memory, embodied and executed through the dancers' bodies; second, reconstructions, or what he describes as "memory performed twice" - in which a choreography from the past is re-learned and performed as is, at a temporal distance from its original creation; and finally, a third modality, which he proposes to name "metamemories", conceived in line with W. J. T. Mitchell's notion of "metapictures". Rather than simply replicating the past, metamemories deploy

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[6] Christel Stalpaert, "Reenacting Modernity: Fabian Barba's A Mary Wigman Dance Evening (2009)", *Dance Research Journal* 43, no. 1 (Summer 2011): 91.
[7] Ibid., 95.
[8] Susan Leigh Foster, *Choreographing Empathy: Kinesthesia in Performance* (London and New York: Routledge, 2010), 216.
[9] While much of the discourse on the relation between choreography and the archive emerges from Western contemporary dance traditions, parallel and equally significant reflections exist beyond this canon. Practices such as oral history, indigenous knowledge systems, and the epistemic potential of embodied memory in non-Western contexts offer critical counterpoints and expansions to Western frameworks. For relevant discussions, see Diana Taylor, *The Archive and the Repertoire: Performing Cultural Memory in the Americas* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2003).
[10] Although coming from a non-Western context, Klunchun's collaboration with Jérôme Bel in *Pichet Klunchun & Myself* (2004) may have informed the development of this work.
[11] Timmy De Laet, "Dancing Metamemories", *Performance Research* 17, no. 3 (2012): 102.

reconstruction and re-enactment as critical tools (what De Laet calls "strategies of re-enactment") to interrogate how dance is transmitted, preserved, and transformed across time.[12]

This latter approach can be seen in works such as *20 Dances for the XX Century* (2012) by Boris Charmatz, a performance that functions as a living archive of canonical choreographic works. It brings together dancers from multiple generations to perform, reinterpret, contextualize, and transmit excerpts from landmark 20th-century solo works, originally created and performed by key figures in the field. Another example is *Histoire(s)* (2004) by Olga de Soto, a research-based performance that centers on *Le jeune homme et la mort* (1946) by Roland Petit. Rather than reenacting the choreography itself, de Soto constructs a performative archive through interviews with audience members who witnessed the original production decades earlier.

While the aforementioned trends are essential for consolidating dance's own history and legacy, there is, as philosopher of aesthetics Frédéric Pouillaude points out, an increasing "desire to escape from the self-indulgent dimensions of the 'reflexive turn' and to engage dance in a more direct and frontal relationship to the real and the political."[13] Pouillaude identifies a counter-movement towards the "extra-choreographic",[14] where works extend beyond disciplinary boundaries to confront urgent social, political, and ethical realities while using documentary materials.

Philosopher and theorist Jacques Rancière has long challenged the binary distinction between political art and art for art's sake, insisting that all art is political; not necessarily because of its content, but because of how it configures what can be seen, said, and thought, in what he calls the "distribution of the sensible, the system of self-evident facts of sense perception that simultaneously discloses the existence of something in common and the delimitations that define the respective parts and positions within it."[15] Recognizing this does not reduce the artist's political or ethical responsibility - if anything, it intensifies it. Once we understand that any artistic gesture participates in shaping the field of perception, we can no longer claim neutrality. We are responsible for the forms of visibility we enable or obscure, the silences we preserve, and the positions from which we speak.

It is within this framework that my own work aligns with the extra-choreographic impulse. Coming of age artistically and politically within the contested landscape of Israel/Palestine, I was struck by how often Israeli choreographers - including those aligned with the political left - retreated into what Pouillaude might describe as the self-indulgent dimensions of contemporary dance: aesthetic formalism, self-referential introspection, and disengaged experimentation that remain detached from political and historical context. That silence became a political statement in itself. In contrast, Palestinian artists working under occupation are denied the luxury of abstraction; their practices are

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[12] Ibid.
[13] Frédéric Pouillaude, "Dance as Documentary: Conflictual Images in the Choreographic Mirror", *Dance Research Journal* 48, no. 2 (August 2016): 81.
[14] Ibid.
[15] Jacques Rancière, *The Politics of Aesthetics*, *The Distribution of the Sensible* (London, New York: Continuum, 2006), 12.

shaped by the urgency of survival and resistance. This asymmetry sharpened my sense of ethical obligation: to account for one's position, to acknowledge the histories and violences that shape both body and context, and to treat choreography not as an escape or aesthetic indulgence, but as deliberate intervention - an embodied practice that can confront, reveal, and intervene in the realities with which it engages. In this sense, my choice while still living in Israel/Palestine was not to use the privilege of turning away, but rather to devote my work to that context itself - a terrain many Israeli choreographers preferred to avoid. Rather than treating these contradictions as obstacles, I engage them as the very ground from which my choreographic practice can refract and complicate inherited narratives.

0.3 The Intersection of Choreographic and Documentary Practices

In this Ph.D. research, I set out to explore the potential of choreography at the intersection of documentary practices to engage with pressing contemporary issues. To do so, I introduce the term "documentary choreography" to designate and frame this inquiry. Rather than treating it as an established category, I use the research process itself - shaped across a range of projects - to interrogate and test what such a notion might entail. This enables me to deepen, formalize, and share an intuitively developed artistic methodology that confronts reality through the critical reuse of facts. This trajectory led me to formulate a central research question: How can choreography operate at the borders of different media to create a hybrid language and experience that critically interrogates the presumed reality represented by documents? Through its various projects, I seek to demonstrate the potential of choreography as an intermedial practice capable of addressing today's societal urgencies - particularly the migration and environmental crises. Furthermore, I ask how such a hybrid form of documentary choreography might offer new insights and experiences to the communities affected by the realities in question as well as to wider audiences.

Accordingly, through this inquiry I demonstrate my growing interest in "intermediality" as a space of artistic experimentation that challenges and transgresses medial boundaries.[16] In this regard, I am particularly drawn to what intermediality theorist Irina O. Rajewsky calls "media combination": "a combining of at least two conventionally distinct media or medial forms of articulation",[17] or what professor of theatre and performance studies Chiel Kattenbelt defines as "multimediality", understood as "the presence of many media in one and the same object".[18] Building on this, I am especially

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[16] For broader discussions of intermediality, see Susanne Foellmer, Maria Katharina Schmidt, Cornelia Schmitz, eds., *Performing Arts in Transition: Moving Between Media* (London/New York: Routledge, 2019); Nele Wynants, ed., *Media Archaeology and Intermedial Performance: Deep Time of the Theatre* (Cham: Palgrave Macmillan, 2019); and Jørgen Bruhn, Asunción López-Varela Azcárate, João Dionísio de Paiva Vieira, eds., *The Palgrave Handbook of Intermediality* (Cham: Palgrave Macmillan, 2024).

[17] Irina O. Rajewsky, "Intermediality, Intertextuality, and Remediation: A Literary Perspective on Intermediality", *Intermédialités / Intermediality*, no. 6 (2005): 51.

[18] Chiel Kattenbelt, "Intermediality in Theatre and Performance: Definitions, Perceptions and Medial Relationships", *Culture, Language and Representation*, vol. 6 (2008): 20.

interested in the resulting "co-relation … in the sense of mutual influences between media."[19] Kattenbelt emphasizes that intermediality in theatre should not be understood as the simple layering of media, but rather as a dynamic field where media interact and reshape one another. This process, he argues, "result[s] in new forms of representation … new ways of positioning performing bodies in time and space; of creating time-space relationships; of developing new modes of perception; and of generating new cultural, social and psychological meanings."[20] I am particularly compelled by Kattenbelt's notion of theatre as a "hypermedium"[21] - a space capable of absorbing and reconfiguring diverse media[22] - but also by the possibility of extending choreographic practice beyond the theatre into other domains, such as documentary, digital, spatial, or forensic, thereby opening new trajectories for both choreographic practice and critical inquiry.

My research crystallizes around two thematic poles, which give concrete expression to the theoretical concerns discussed above. The first addresses the ongoing deadly migration crisis at Europe's borders and originates from the performance project *Necropolis* (2020). Although this work began prior to the formal start of the Ph.D. research, it occupies a central position within. Moreover, through the course of this inquiry, it evolved into the research project *Necropolis-United* (2022–2026), an initiative that brings together artists, scholars, cartographers, software developers, and civil society organizations to create a digital information system commemorating the many thousands of people who have lost their lives as a result of Europe's border policies, while also recognizing those who continue to live under conditions of precarity and systemic marginalization. The second thematic pole addresses the environmental crisis through the development of *The Cloud* (2024), a stage performance centered on one of the most significant ecological disasters of the twentieth century: the Chernobyl catastrophe. Through the entanglement of personal testimony, archival traces, and AI-generated media, *The Cloud* examines how choreography can navigate the invisible yet pervasive residues of disaster - radioactive, digital, and ecological - while questioning the limits of representation and collective memory.

Before introducing these projects, I would also like to revisit two earlier works that served as precursors and laid the conceptual and methodological foundations for this research: *Archive* (2014) and *Talos* (2017). These works marked an important stage in the evolution of my artistic practice, foregrounding this dissertation's key concept - documentary choreography - by experimenting with

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[19] Ibid., 21.
[20] Ibid.
[21] Ibid., 23.
[22] Kattenbelt builds on Jay David Bolter and Richard Grusin's concept of "hypermediacy", a media strategy that foregrounds the presence of the medium itself by juxtaposing and layering multiple forms of representation, thereby drawing attention to mediation rather than concealing it. In *Remediation: Understanding New Media*, Bolter and Grusin also introduce the notion of "immediacy", rooted in the cultural desire to erase all traces of mediation and present the medium as transparent, as if offering the viewer unmediated access to reality (a concept less relevant to my inquiry). Finally, they propose "remediation" as an overarching logic through which new media refashion and repurpose older media, simultaneously striving toward both immediacy and hypermediacy; Jay David Bolter and Richard Grusin, *Remediation: Understanding New Media* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1999), 21–50.

how choreographic strategies might engage with real-world events, public archives, and geopolitical crises. Through them I began to articulate a range of gestures, practices, and intermedial techniques that would later form the backbone of this practice-based doctoral inquiry. Rather than establishing a fixed method, they posed questions and developed procedures that continue to reverberate in subsequent projects. In this sense, they prefigured a working approach grounded in documentary materials and critical engagement with archives - an approach that has been expanded and reconfigured in the later projects central to this dissertation: *Necropolis*, *Necropolis-United*, and *The Cloud*, where the stakes of memory, testimony, and collective witnessing are pushed into new aesthetic and political terrains.

Building on these early experiments, the following discussion considers all of these projects, old and new, and how they remain responsive and situated in relation to contemporary social and political events. This responsiveness reinforces a notion of choreography that is not fixed but continuously activated; it is open to the world, and willing to inhabit moments of conflict, friction, or discomfort within its structure. In this perspective, choreography is less about presenting a finished product than about sustaining a process that unfolds alongside and within social turmoil. Ultimately, these projects collectively exemplify a choreography that documents: tracing, recording, and making visible fragments of reality that might otherwise remain unseen.

0.4 *Archive*: Repeating Gestures

Archive (2014) takes as its point of departure the video archive of B'Tselem - The Israeli Information Center for Human Rights in the Occupied Territories. In 2007, the organization began distributing handheld camcorders to Palestinians living in high-conflict areas of the West Bank, with the aim of documenting and providing evidence of human rights violations committed by Israelis, and of contributing to public debate on these wrongdoings, both within Israel and internationally. By 2012, with thousands of hours of footage already accumulated, I was granted access to this archive. Over the subsequent two years, extensive research within it resulted in the stage performance *Archive* and its related video installation *Capture Practice*, which both premiered in 2014.

Oscillating between the headquarters of B'Tselem and the dance studio, my engagement with the materials shaped both the artistic process and the final outcome. From the outset, it was evident that the archival footage would become an integral part of the work. Shot by Palestinian camera operators who are not distant, "neutral" observers but often direct targets of the violence they document, the footage possesses a strikingly embodied quality. The camera is shaky, functioning as an extension of the cameraperson's body and offering visceral testimony to the distress and brutality of the moment. Although such embodied footage is now common in the age of ubiquitous phone cameras and live-streamed violence, at that time, before smartphones and social media made such documentation widely accessible, it carried a rare and urgent immediacy. It not only bore witness to

events often erased or misrepresented by mainstream narratives, but also inscribed the vulnerability and resistance of those behind the camera directly into the image itself. Following the distribution of cameras to Palestinian activists by B'Tselem, settlers and the Israeli army began producing images themselves. What followed was the emergence of a new battlefield: one fought through competing recordings, where each side sought to weaponize the so-called qualities of immediacy, authenticity, and real time in order to advance its own narrative. It is precisely this transformation of the camera into both a weapon and a shield - an apparatus of testimony and counter-testimony - that resonates with artistic inquiries into the politics of image production.

In his lecture-performance *The Pixelated Revolution* (2012), Rabih Mroué examined another phenomenon emerging from handheld cameras - this time, phone cameras - used in highly volatile contexts. He focused on footage captured by Syrian protesters during the early years of the Syrian Revolution, in which they continued filming even as Assad's troops aimed guns at them. Mroué argues that this behaviour stemmed from the brain's difficulty in immediately interpreting what the eye perceives on the tiny screen of a mobile device. The mobile phone, which, around that period had only just entered the battlefield as an extension of the protesters' bodies, a kind of prosthetic eye, was not yet trained to recognise that a gun pointed toward the camera's lens was aimed directly at the person holding it. While the fate of many of the camerapersons remains unknown after the shot occurs - some may have been killed, others injured, others escaped - this takes place off camera. For Mroué, the resulting footage became a form of testimony-writing and a means of inscribing the history of the Syrian Revolution, offering crucial insight into the physical and psychological state of the protesters in the moments before they were shot. Similarly, in the B'Tselem recordings, the movement within the image is a direct reflection of the physical and psychological state of the Palestinian cameraperson holding the device, resulting in a distinct embodied quality in the captured material. One could say that the movement of the body is inscribed in the footage itself. This intertwining of body, media, and testimony reveals not only the urgency of witnessing but also the impossibility of separating the document from the embodied experience of those who create it - an entanglement that profoundly informs my approach, the kinds of materials I choose to engage with, and the practices that are then developed in order to work with those materials.

Another layer of movement in the B'Tselem footage comes from the subjects being filmed. In the dance studio, I deliberately chose to work with videos depicting Israeli settlers and soldiers - the perpetrators of violence. Across different times and locations, the footage reveals a recurring pattern: scenes of stone-throwing, aiming and firing weapons, setting fields ablaze, or destroying orchards. These repeated gestures form a kind of physical vocabulary that echoes what theorist Andrew Hewitt terms "social choreography",[23] a collectively internalized repertoire of bodily behaviors and movements that both express and reinforce a particular ideological framework - in this case, the logic

[23] Andrew Hewitt, *Social Choreography: Ideology as Performance in Dance and Everyday Movement* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2005).

of settler colonialism that underpins and justifies the Israeli occupation. As Hewitt explains, social choreography is also "a tradition of thinking about social order that derives its form from the aesthetic world and seeks to instill that order directly at the level of the body."[24] On stage, as the footage is projected, I concentrate on extracting the postures, gestures, and movements seen on screen and reiterating them, movement by movement, through my own body (fig. 0.2 and fig. 0.3). In replaying these gestures, I aim to expose a practice, a social choreography that is produced, sustained, and normalized by a collective to which I belong.

Other aspects of the B'Tselem Camera Project - and the very process of navigating its archive - have deeply influenced the artistic work. Each item in the B'Tselem archive is accompanied by metadata such as the clip number, the name of the person who filmed it, the date and location, and a brief description. On stage, I stand before two screens: one showing the footage, the other displaying this metadata, which reinforces the factual grounding of the events and underlines their continuity across time and place. Holding a remote control, I scroll through the clips, with the ability to pause, skip, or loop them. As the figures of Israeli settlers and soldiers appear on screen, I first adopt their positions, then mimic their gestures, allowing them to accumulate in my own body. At times, I stop the footage to rehearse and combine these gestures, gradually forming an embodied archive of violence. Later, using a sound looper, I construct a landscape of shouts and cries drawn from the same footage. The repetition and intensification of these violent scenes - looped on screen, reiterated in my body, and amplified through sound - evokes a sense of an unending cycle, culminating in a kind of performative rave where the accumulated gestures of violence from my own community are transformed into a charged, almost ecstatic dance.

It so happened that the premiere of *Archive* at the Festival d'Avignon on July 8th, 2014, took place on the very same day that Israel launched yet another Israeli military operation against Gaza,[25] which resulted in the deaths of over 2,000 Palestinians and 72 Israelis. Until that moment, B'Tselem had cooperated with the Israeli army by sharing its materials for investigative purposes. However, after concluding that its archive of evidence was not only disregarded but instrumentalized to create a façade of accountability, the organization chose to end this cooperation. Furthermore, leveraging its international visibility, B'Tselem publicly declared that Israel was committing war crimes in Gaza. This statement triggered a relentless campaign of attacks against B'Tselem and other human rights organizations, as well as increased targeting of artists who voiced narratives challenging those of the regime. Because of my collaboration with B'Tselem, I too became a target: politicians sought, at times successfully, to block my funding, while right-wing groups attempted to cancel performances and disrupt any public event to which I was invited.[26] Even some fellow artists who identified as

[24] Ibid., 3.
[25] The escalation followed the killing of three Israeli teenagers, subsequent Israeli raids in the West Bank, and renewed rocket fire from Gaza after an airstrike killed a Hamas militant.
[26] Yonatan Amir and Ronen Eidelman, "Right-Wing Protesters Attack Art Talk in Jerusalem", *Hyperallergic*, November 17, 2014, https://hyperallergic.com/162495/right-wing-protesters-attack-art-talk-in-jerusalem/, accessed August 5, 2025.

Fig. 0.2
Arkadi Zaides, *Archive* (2014), mimicking gestures depicted on screen.
Metadata: Clip: 1527f - 0_33_57_00_A. Photographer: Abu 'Ayesha.
Location: Hebron. Date: 04/03/2007. Description: Purim - 1) Parade preparations; 2) Drunk kids attacking house afterwards.
Image credit: Ronen Guter

Fig. 0.3
Arkadi Zaides, *Archive* (2014), mimicking gestures depicted on screen.
Metadata: Clip: RA-1005-009 - 0_09_11_19. Photographer: Mustafa Elkam. Location: A-nabi Saleh in zone - Ramallah. Date: 16/04/2010. Description: A-Nabi Saleh - soldier shoots tear gas at protesters.
Image credit: Ronen Guter

left-leaning withdrew from collaborations, effectively self-censoring and by extension, censoring me - thereby aligning with the same forces that sought to suppress critical voices like my own. I mention these repercussions not to elicit pity, but to underscore how the work of *Archive* extended beyond the theatre, generating tangible actions and backlash within the political sphere.

In addition, the emotional impact of repeatedly watching the B'Tselem archives, and of embodying, in each and every performance, the gestures of violence they document, combined with the aftermath I faced, gradually led me to understand that remaining in that physical context would mean becoming complicit in the very violence I sought to expose. In 2015, I decided to relocate to Europe, at the very moment when the so-called "refugee crisis" was unfolding at its borders. It was exactly at that time that Europe intensified the progressive fortification of those borders, often through agreements with neighboring continents aimed at preventing people from reaching its territory. This shift, driven by technological infrastructures of surveillance and control, became the focus of my next project: *Talos*. If *Archive* interrogated the politics of witnessing and testimony, *Talos* marked a turn toward examining the technological infrastructures that mediate, regulate, and discipline bodies at the border. Importantly, this meant a shift in my choreographic strategy: while *Archive* proposed a mode of exact reiteration of gestures from the social sphere, *Talos* instead engaged reenactment on a different register, staging the spectacle of a European "securitisation" consortium showcasing its technologies of border surveillance. In this sense, the project constituted a crucial step in the trajectory that would later lead to *Necropolis, Necropolis-United,* and *The Cloud*, the central projects of this inquiry. In these projects there was a convergence of questions of technology, narrativization, and disappearance, of people and discourses alike.

0.5 *Talos*: Technologies of Surveillance and the Spectacle of Ideology

Talos (2017) reenacts an event that took place at a military training facility on the outskirts of Wrocław, Poland. During this event, a consortium of fourteen partner institutions from seven EU member states (Poland, France, Belgium, Greece, Romania, Finland, and Estonia) and two partner countries (Turkey and Israel) showcased the results of their research: a land-based drone system designed to replace human border guards in patrolling missions along Europe's frontiers. Over the course of four years, the original T.A.L.O.S. project (an acronym for Transportable Autonomous patrol for Land bOrder Surveillance) explored not only the technical feasibility of such devices but also the legal frameworks that could enable their deployment in Europe and beyond.

It was no surprise that a leading Israeli technology company was involved in such a project. Israel Aerospace Industries, one of Israel's largest weapons manufacturers, was a key partner in the T.A.L.O.S. consortium. It is also the company that developed similar drone systems for patrol missions used by the Israeli Army around Gaza for several consecutive years since 2006. Such links underscore the deep entanglement between the European Union's border regime and Israel's military-industrial

complex, where technological "innovations" in the realm of security are often conceived and tested through mechanisms of occupation and control, only to be later exported to other geographies under the guise of surveillance efficiency - part of a wider international demand for Israeli systems that have been marketed as "field-proven" through the occupation of Palestinian territory. My interest in T.A.L.O.S. was therefore three-pronged. First, it exposed the trajectory of militarized knowledge and weaponry flowing from Israel to Europe, a trajectory that was an uncanny mirror of my own relocation. Second, it offered a lens to examine how technology choreographs nonhuman bodies, raising questions about the new forms of embodiment that emerge at the nexus of security and automation. Finally, it laid the conceptual groundwork for an imaginary dystopia in which Europe's fortified borders become a stage where the logic of surveillance is enacted through the choreography of humans and machines.

Ultimately, T.A.L.O.S. technology was never deployed along Europe's borders - at least not in the form originally envisioned by the consortium. Yet, as dramaturgs Jonas Rutgeerts and Nienke Scholts (who participated in our research process) point out: "The ultimate outcome of the T.A.L.O.S. project should not simply be measured against the actual production of an automated vehicle, but also against the production of a specific discourse, a singular vision that shapes our imagination of the future."[27] Building on this observation and working closely with Rutgeerts, Scholts, and other artists, namely choreographer and researcher Claire Buisson, dramaturg Youness Anzane, and interdisciplinary duo Effi & Amir, we began tracing the fault lines of this discourse, attending to what it rendered visible and what it refused to name. Our inquiry included interviews with experts in robotics, securitization, and EU policy, later complementing these with in-depth research into documents released by the T.A.L.O.S. consortium and a conversation with the project coordinator at the Warsaw-based robotics institute which had led the original project. As we uncovered blind spots in the consortium's documentation, our research broadened to include additional materials that could address these gaps. For instance, we began to speculate on how an actual interaction between a person and a machine at a border might unfold, a scenario which was absent from the original project's documentation. This speculative exercise was not merely technical but deeply dramaturgical, compelling us to consider the affective, political, and choreographic dimensions embedded in such encounters. This reflection led us in turn to explore fields such as crowd analysis and humanoid robotics, where questions of surveillance, control, and human-machine relations are actively rehearsed. In parallel, we compiled an archive of drone footage from Europe's borders - images that had only begun to emerge in the media - which presented a dehumanizing, bird's-eye perspective on the events unfolding along these fortified frontiers.

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[27] Jonas Rutgeerts and Nienke Scholts, "TALOS/Talos. What Sort of Future do we Want to See Performed?" *FORUM+* (Summer 2018), https://www.forum-online.be/en/issues/zomer-2018/talos-talos-wat-voor-toekomst-willen-we-ons-voorstellen, accessed August 26, 2025.

It was at this juncture that our research began to shift. The project was no longer about reconstructing what the original T.A.L.O.S. project had been, but about anticipating which of the technologies it introduced might yet come into being. With the initial idea of re-enacting the promotional event that took place at a remote military training ground in Poland, our approach moved closer to what philosopher and political theorist Oliver Marchart, in *Conflictual Aesthetics: Artistic Activism and the Public Sphere* (2019), theorizes as pre-enactment. Unlike re-enactment, which repeats a historical moment through its restaging, pre-enactment refers to artistic practices that agitate spectators through "artistic anticipation of a political event".[28] Grounded in political theorist Chantal Mouffe's theory of antagonism, which insists that conflict is constitutive of the political rather than a deviation from it, Marchart positions pre-enactment as an artistic strategy that foregrounds this irreducible dimension of conflict. By anticipating rather than recalling events, such works stage politics as contingent, contested, and still to come. Building on this conceptual framework and combining documentary materials, speculation, and pre-enactment, we translated *Talos* into a tightly scripted presentation, where a speaker (myself) promotes the T.A.L.O.S. technology to the wider audience, accompanied by a sleek, meticulously designed, PowerPoint-like visual display (fig. 0.4).

Four teleprompters are positioned at the corners of the theatre (two embedded among the audience and two at the back of the stage, fully visible to spectators) making it explicit that every aspect of the speaker's delivery is pre-written, governed by a strict protocol, and executed with calculated precision. To the right of the stage, two operators sit in full view of the audience, controlling both the teleprompters and the visual projections unfolding behind the speaker, ensuring the seamless operation of the presentation. The text is delivered in a detached, practical, and at times, slightly enthusiastic tone, moving from outlining the shortcomings of current border protection systems (based on human-led patrols) to emphasizing the supposed advantages of replacing them with mobile autonomous systems. The projections cycle through a hyper-stylized sequence of bullet-point lists, diagrams, schematically animated border simulations, and videos of animal-like and humanoid devices being tested in laboratories for optimal performance. As the performance progresses, the speaker's discourse grows increasingly militarized, culminating in a set of if/then algorithmic instructions detailing how a machine might respond when encountering persons at a border. Gradually, the animated simulations are stripped away, revealing drone footage of actual border crossings in Europe, where large groups of people attempt to traverse fortified landscapes.

This highly controlled, product-promotion-like presentation, which deliberately avoids the staging of dance, underscores one of the central questions posed by *Talos*: How can one dance in a context where technologies are explicitly designed to restrict movement, particularly the movement of people across borders? *Talos* attempted to avoid a certain fetishizing or cathartic tendency inherent to the field of dance while addressing systems in which bodies are reduced to threats, data points, or

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[28] Oliver Marchart, *Conflictual Aesthetics: Artistic Activism and the Public Sphere* (Berlin: Sternberg Press, 2019), 177.

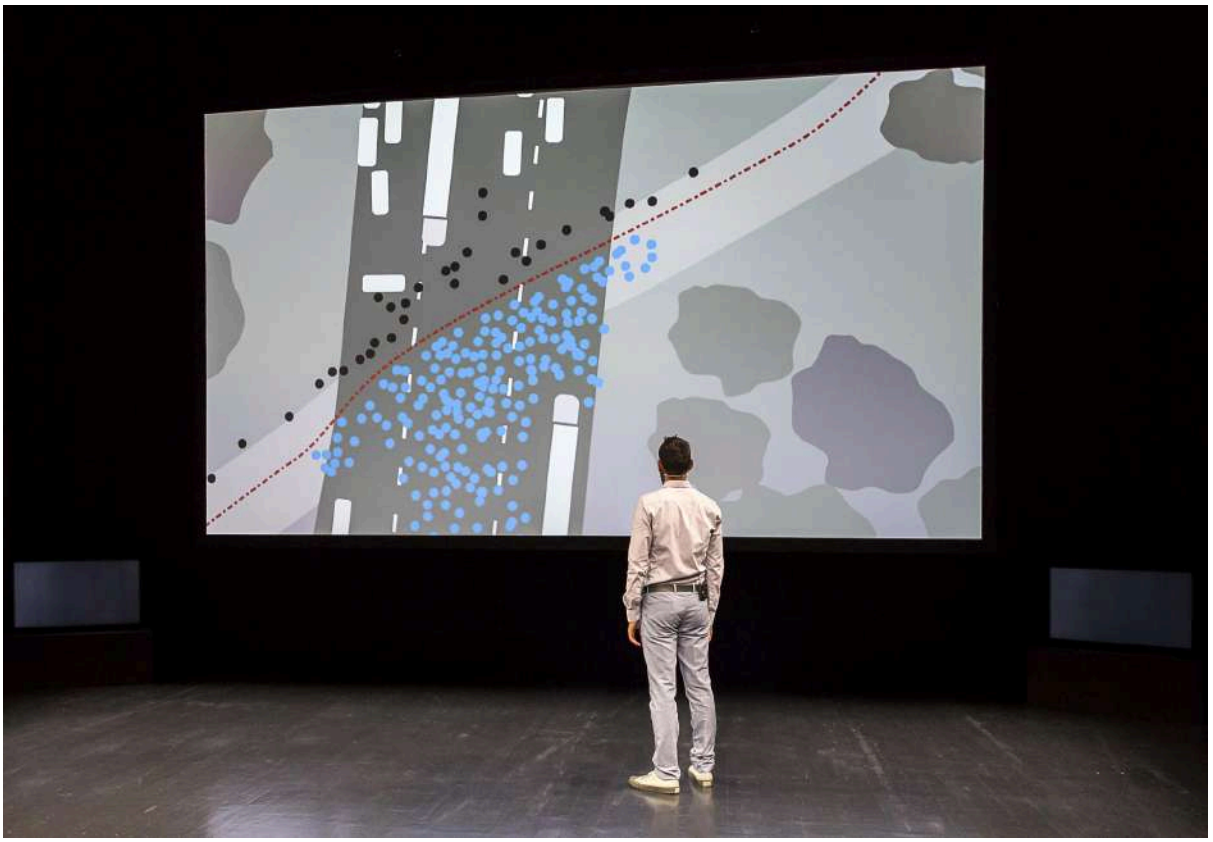

Fig. 0.4
Arkadi Zaides, *Talos* (2017). Projection portraying schematically animated border simulations as the speaker observing them.
Image credit: Dajana Lothert

obstacles to be managed. As body theorist and dramaturg Sandra Noeth and sociologist and scholar Gurur Ertem observe, “the focus on the body (of the migrant, of the refugee) had almost become a curatorial trend in the artistic field”,[29] prompting their question: “How can we put in perspective the continued structural violence on our bodies without falling into the trap of naive assumptions about authenticity, the unmediated immediacy of bodies - beyond taking bodies as self-evident, beyond their attributed representational qualities?”[30] In *Talos*, this meant that instead of foregrounding individual expression or physical virtuosity, we turned our attention to the architectures of control themselves. Rather than choreographing bodies, we choreographed systems: systems of power, surveillance, automation, and control, seeking to trace how these systems choreograph us in return. Building on this approach, *Necropolis,* the work I developed next, similarly refrains from staging dancing bodies while confronting the lethal consequences of Europe’s increasingly fortified borders.

Taken together, *Archive* and *Talos* already operate within what I aim to define as documentary choreography: a practice that treats choreography as a mode of investigation, documentation, and re- or pre-performance of political realities. When embarking on the artistic process of developing *Necropolis*, it became clear that this is not a coincidental interest: rather, my work consistently demonstrates a deliberate and sustained concern with the documentary dimension of choreography, where the stage becomes a site of witnessing, evidence, and political engagement. With the subsequent projects I will shortly introduce - *Necropolis*, *Necropolis-United*, and *The Cloud* - I move toward the projects most fully explored in this doctoral inquiry, which constitute its core.

0.6 *Necropolis*: The Geographies of Mourning

Necropolis (2018) emerged from the discovery of the *UNITED List of Refugee Deaths*, meticulously compiled by UNITED for Intercultural Action, a network of hundreds of anti-racist organizations across Europe. Since 1993, the network members have assembled one of the most comprehensive documentations to date of the many thousands of individuals who have lost their lives on migratory routes towards Europe over the past decades. *Necropolis* centers on commemorating and mourning these lives - a collective whose presence has increasingly faded from public discourse since the onset of the refugee crisis, even as deaths and disappearances on migratory routes have continued to rise.

Necropolis is an ongoing research project that unfolds primarily outside the theatre space, with the performance serving as an interim report within a wider effort to map the morbid architecture of this emerging city of the dead. Central to this inquiry is the practice of grave location search*,* the precise geo-localization of graves belonging to people who lost their lives along migratory routes toward Europe. This practice involves a combination of archival research and site-specific investigation conducted in collaboration with local communities. Each presentation of the project in a

[29] Sandra Noeth, Gurur Ertem, eds. *Bodies of Evidence. Ethics, Aesthetics, and Politics of Movement,* (Vienna: Passagen Publishers, 2018), 21.
[30] Ibid., 21.

new location expands the growing archive of documented graves, transforming it into a cartography of absence and erasure that challenges the invisibility of these deaths and disappearances within official narratives. This is carried out through dedicated workshops and collaborations with art institutions, human rights organizations, and activists at each location the project reaches. The resulting ever-evolving archive constructed through these encounters not only records the locations of graves but also brings to light the bureaucratic, political, and technological infrastructures that determine who is mourned, remembered, or left unmarked. Consequently, by bringing this documentation into public view, *Necropolis* attempts to weave together acts of testimony, remembrance, and resistance, turning the stage into a temporary forum for reckoning with the violence inscribed by the European border regime.

The stage performance of *Necropolis* unfolds in two parts, each exploring a different dimension of forensics. The first part focuses on the forensics of the landscape, a cartographic practice that reimagines European territory by mapping the burial sites of those who perished while attempting to reach it. Projected on stage as pins over a Google Earth interface, these graves are not mere coordinates but markers of systemic failure, forming an unofficial map of Europe shaped not by geopolitical borders but by fatal thresholds. This act of mapping resists the erasure of these lives from public memory, making visible a geography that remains absent from official discourse yet painfully present in lived experience. The second part shifts to the forensics of the body, staging a simulated forensic examination that follows a precise choreography of the identification process. In contrast to the cartographic abstraction of the first part, this section draws the audience into intimate proximity with the physical consequences of border violence by assembling objects that, piece by piece, resemble a human corpse. Here, the performance seeks to restore dignity, focusing attention on bodies routinely neglected by institutional systems and deprived of the very process of identification. Where no autopsy is performed and no name is recorded, this act offers a symbolic substitute: a theatrical enactment of a ritual that was denied to these individuals in real life.

Taken together, these two axes - the forensics of the landscape and that of the body - interrogate the epistemic frameworks that determine which lives and deaths are rendered visible or obscured. *Necropolis* disrupts the bureaucratic machinery of disappearance through what philosopher Paul Jaussen calls a "forensic poetics", which does not simply seek to document and represent violence; instead, it extends into alternative forums in which violence can appear, resonate, and be evaluated as part of a poetic - and, critically, public - encounter.[31] This formulation resonates with the core dynamics of *Necropolis*, which stages documents, gestures, and absence as embodied evidence. In a post-performance discussion, interdisciplinary artist and researcher Ariadne Mikou referred to this approach as "forensic choreography".[32] Positioned at the intersection of performance, forensic

[31] Paul Jaussen, "Forensic Poetics", *Criticism* 65, no. 1 (Winter 2023): 29–54.
[32] Ariadne Mikou, post-performance discussion following the presentation of *The Cloud*, Teatro Spazio Rossellini, as part of an event organized by Orbita | Spellbound National Center for Dance Production in Rome, Italy, November 21, 2024.

investigation, and activism, the work treats choreography not merely as movement through space but as an ethical and political arrangement of attention, one that confronts erasure, contests legibility, and reclaims the act of witnessing as an active and poetic mode of engagement.

This commitment to both evidentiary rigor and ethical remembrance extends beyond the stage and into the project's material entanglements with civil society and its archival efforts. Central to this is the reciprocal relationship developed with the UNITED network, which enables a continuous exchange of information. Any new data uncovered through the grave location research (names, origins, or burial records) that are missing from the *UNITED List of Refugee Deaths* is shared with the organization, contributing to the maintenance and expansion of their critical archive. In turn, UNITED provides any information it receives regarding burial sites of the deceased, further informing our mapping efforts. To date, we have been able to locate more than 1,200 graves across Europe. Yet it is crucial to remember that only a fraction of those who perish on migratory routes are ever found, let alone buried. Many are lost at sea, in deserts, or remote border zones, and often remain unfound. The act of grave searching, then, is not merely an exercise in geolocation, but a form of counter-mapping - a gesture of recognition that makes visible a shadow geography of absence, mourning, and structural neglect across the continent.

0.7 *Necropolis-United*: Toward a Non-Extractive Practice of Commemoration

Necropolis employed specific aesthetics and tone designed to confront a primarily Western European audience with the consequences of policies enacted in their name and by their governments. The involvement of migrant communities in the conception of the work was limited - a deliberate decision made to avoid exposing individuals directly affected by border violence to material that could retraumatize or cause emotional distress. There were brief occasions during the search for graves at various site-specific locations, on which individuals directly affected by this tragedy were able to actively contribute to the information we sought. These contributions, though vital, remained peripheral to the core authorship and dramaturgical decisions guiding the performance. Having this in mind, it became increasingly urgent to broaden the scope of the project and to reimagine its structure so that it could more meaningfully incorporate the perspectives and knowledge of those most directly affected.

In line with the initial Ph.D. proposal, one year into this trajectory I began working with a network of academic, activist, and artistic collaborators to develop *Necropolis-United* (2022–2026).[33]

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[33] *Necropolis-United: Integrated Data-Platform of Dead and Missing Migrants in Europe (I005522N, UGent, 2022–2026)* is a research infrastructure project supported by the Research Foundation - Flanders (FWO); the research infrastructure proposal was written and submitted by Christel Stalpaert, with the artistic practice of *Necropolis* as the driving force behind the investigation into an integrated data platform documenting dead and missing migrants in Europe. It was developed in close collaboration with Julie Vanderhaeghen of Atelier Cartographique, focusing on a non-extractive information system architecture and the technological framework for public-specific interactions.

The project's aim is to create an information system that both honors and mourns those who have died or disappeared along migration routes, while also acknowledging and dignifying the lives of individuals living in precarious conditions due to migration processes. Through a series of what came to be known as *Multilingual Encounters*, we seek to bring together diverse forms of knowledge - ranging from activism and artistic practice to software development, academic research, and the lived experiences of people directly affected by border violence. This collaborative and multivocal framework has become the driving force of the *Necropolis-United* project, continuously reshaping its perspectives, goals, and aesthetics by placing the voices of those most impacted at its core.

While the initial aim of the project was to build an integrated database commemorating people who lost their lives on migration routes, these *Multilingual Encounters* revealed that a static repository would not fully respond to the urgent, shifting realities faced by the communities involved. The focus therefore shifted toward the development of a set of technological tools designed to serve both activist and commemorative needs; tools that could support acts of remembrance, as well as advocacy and resistance against border violence. Both the conception and realization of these tools are carried out in a profoundly collective manner, with the group actively shaping every stage of decision-making. This process not only questions who holds the authority to produce or manage knowledge but also redefines the archive at hand - not as a neutral collection of data, but as a living, collaborative infrastructure for solidarity, mourning, and political action.

Building this collaboration demands a deep investment in building trust, especially with undocumented individuals and their respective communities, who are often approached by academic or artistic projects seeking testimony or symbolic presence without offering reciprocal benefit or sustained engagement. The question 'What is in it for us?' was repeatedly raised by these individuals. This question is neither rhetorical nor cynical; it is an urgent and legitimate starting point that continues to shape the project's direction. The project strives to engage meaningfully with people whose lives are shaped by structural precarity, fear of exposure, and histories of institutional betrayal. Trust is not presumed but carefully cultivated, through repeated encounters, a willingness to listen, to be listened to, and an ethics of shared vulnerability. The project does not claim to offer definitive answers, but aims to acknowledge its own limits, remain honest in moments of uncertainty, and ensure that participation extends beyond the needs of the project itself. Ideally, it becomes a space for political visibility, mutual support, and community self-determination.

A key dimension of this collaborative ethic involves the fair distribution of resources. Beyond symbolic inclusion, we strive to ensure that labor, time, and knowledge - often extracted without compensation from those in precarious conditions - are recognized and remunerated. This requires challenging existing administrative and legal frameworks at the UGent university infrastructure as well as with our cultural partners. Together, we work to create mechanisms that allow undocumented people to be acknowledged as legitimate collaborators and compensated for their contributions. This process is slow and often met with institutional resistance, exposing the handicaps of academia and

cultural institutions in dealing with precarious forms of labor and presence. Yet it has also become a crucial step in aligning the project's values with its operational reality: resisting extractive logics and insisting on material forms of recognition for those whose knowledge and lived experiences form the foundation of the project.

From my personal perspective, participating in this research project demands a profound shift in my position as an artist and researcher. I am continuously unlearning ingrained modes of authorship and control, relinquishing the ownership I often occupy when directing or choreographing my own artistic projects. While all my projects are rooted in collaboration, *Necropolis-United* brings this to another level, where authority and ownership are constantly (re)distributed and continuously negotiated. This shift is not only methodological but also ethical: a recognition that the strength and legitimacy of the project depend on the voices of those most directly impacted by the crisis it addresses. It requires one to listen rather than lead, adapt rather than assert, and to recognize that the power of the project lies not in a singular artistic vision, but in the collective capacity for decision-making.

0.8 *The Cloud*: Testimony between Memory and Algorithm

The performance project *The Cloud* investigates the radioactive cloud released by the Chernobyl catastrophe, approaching it as a multifaceted, multilayered document. Having grown up a short distance from the site of the disaster (which occurred when I was six years old) the project is also a return to the geopolitical and environmental conditions that shaped the earliest years of my life. The work gained renewed urgency during this Ph.D. research, particularly following the Russian invasion of Ukraine and the occupation of the Chernobyl site on the very first day of the war. This event reactivated the site's presence in the global imagination, reframing it as an ongoing threat rather than a closed historical episode.

It is from within this charged present that *The Cloud* also engages with Artificial Intelligence (AI) - a technology with decades of history that only became widely accessible through generative tools during the rehearsal process. Equally central is the conceptual and practical dialogue between AI and the Chernobyl cloud, exploring how both function as pervasive, invisible forces that shape contemporary life and histories. Both clouds - the radioactive and the algorithmic - are invisible yet omnipresent, dispersed across borders and timelines, and marked by delayed and often unpredictable consequences. The analogy extends to their mutative nature: radiation alters biological systems, while AI continuously reshapes data structures and language models. Moreover, each carries profound geopolitical and environmental implications, as both challenge the boundaries of what can be seen, known, or controlled.

In *The Cloud* performance, the document is not treated as a fixed artifact but as a dynamic process shaped by the interplay of human memory, algorithmic prediction, and historical traces. Rather

than aiming to present a singular truth, the work examines the inherent instability of evidence: how documents are continuously rewritten, erased, or fabricated by technological and political forces. Archival materials and personal recollections are not positioned as authoritative sources but as mutable layers, where each act of documentation is simultaneously an act of interpretation, and often of omission. Choreography, in this sense, becomes a means of staging this instability: arranging bodies, images, and voices in ways that expose the forces - technological, political, and affective - that choreograph us in return. *The Cloud* is therefore less concerned with representing history "as it was" than with investigating how histories are constructed, contested, and distorted, particularly when mediated by AI systems capable of generating and reshaping memory.

While *Necropolis* engages with documentary choreography through the commemoration and mapping of lives lost at Europe's borders, and *Necropolis-United* extends these commemorative gestures to concerned communities, *The Cloud* foregrounds the instability of evidence itself. Where *Necropolis* seeks to make made-absent bodies visible, *The Cloud* interrogates the very mechanisms through which documents, memories, and testimonies are produced, interpreted, and mutated. In this work, documentary choreography is not anchored in the faithful reenactment or presentation of archival facts, but in the orchestration of human and algorithmic processes that generate, distort, and recombine evidence in real time. The stage becomes a laboratory for tracing the creation of historiography, exposing how historical narratives are contingent, mediated, and constantly in flux, especially under the influence of AI-driven systems.

The conceptual approach of the performance emerges precisely through this juxtaposition of the two clouds: the historical, lingering omnipresence of Chernobyl's radioactive fallout and the algorithmic processes of AI. While attempting to narrate the Chernobyl catastrophe, the performance does not present AI as a neutral processor of information but as an active collaborator in shaping narrative, memory, and meaning. This raises critical questions about the status of the document in the age of algorithmic mediation: What remains of a document when filtered through predictive models? Can AI-generated content hold evidentiary value? And how might machinic distortions of memory mirror larger processes of historical erasure or rewriting? These questions are central to the performance's inquiry; they aim not to affirm fixed truths, but to expose and stage their inherent instability, and to connect deeply with my broader research into documentary practices, their pitfalls, and the resulting choreography throughout this Ph.D. in the arts.

The elusive nature of memory comes into sharp focus through one of the performance's central threads: testimony - not simply as a recounting of past events, but as a complex form of evidence that bridges the political and the personal domains. In legal contexts, testimony is often treated as a form of proof, bound by protocols of verifiability, coherence, and cross-examination. Yet it inevitably carries a subjective charge: it is shaped by memory, emotion, trauma, and positionality. Rather than offering a stable account, testimony often exposes the very limits of what can be remembered, articulated, or shared. This elusiveness - the partial, fragmented, and sometimes contradictory nature of memory -

was a vital component of the inquiry we pursued in *The Cloud*. It gained renewed relevance in a context increasingly shaped by algorithmic systems that mutate data, where the border between reality and fiction grows ever thinner.

0.9 *Towards Documentary Choreography*: Encounters Bridging Practice and Scholarship

Beyond the creation of performances such as *Necropolis* and *The Cloud*, or the participatory research project *Necropolis-United*, this Ph.D. has been equally shaped by the organization of two international symposiums that served as critical laboratories for encounter, thinking, and dialogue: *Towards Documentary Choreography Encounter #1* (Dec. 2023) and *Towards Documentary Choreography Encounter #2* (Apr. 2025). Both events were conceived not as adjuncts to the artistic work but as integral components of the research process: spaces where the boundaries between practice and scholarship could be questioned, challenged, and redefined, and where a temporary yet meaningful community of shared interests could emerge. To point, participants were invited to engage with ongoing or in-progress research, creating meaningful opportunities to exchange perspectives on the conditions and challenges of using a documentary approach in performance, the elements that informed decision-making, and the uncertainties that framed these practices. Film projections were followed by after-talks, which provided in-depth insights into the working processes of these works, presented in their complete form. This shift, from presenting "results" to cultivating a working community, embodied a mode of immanent trust and a collaborative environment. Carefully curated, the symposiums staged concepts, methodologies, and voices in relation to one another, with the same attention to dramaturgy, sequencing, and resonance that guides my performance-making. Bringing together artists, scholars, curators, and activists, they were structured around the central concerns of this Ph.D., particularly the intermediality of documentary choreography, its capacity to activate archival and testimonial materials, and its engagement with contemporary urgencies. Conceived not as static presentations but as experimental platforms, the symposiums tested how dialogue and performance could co-produce new modes of knowledge, creating spaces where theoretical frameworks met embodied practice.

The first symposium was held at Beursschouwburg theatre in central Brussels, with generous support from Ghent University, Antwerp University, and the University of the Arts in Berlin. The second symposium expanded both in scope and location, and took across three venues in the city - Beursschouwburg, Les Grands Carmes, and KVS theatre, while adding KU Leuven to the list of supporting institutions. The guest list brought together a wide range of voices, including established theoreticians, scholars, and curators as well as activists and experimental independent makers and performers, with participants coming from Belgium and across Europe and beyond. Reflecting this diversity, contributors were invited to choose their preferred mode of intervention without pre-imposed frameworks, which resulted in a variety of formats, including academic presentations, film screenings,

workshops, performative lectures, and work-in-progress tryouts. Together, the events brought to the fore diverse strategies for working with documentary materials, highlighting themes that are central to this research and to the brouder debate on the political, aesthetic, and ethical dimensions of documentary choreography.

From these encounters, I identified several key insights that further shaped and propelled my work, guiding the questions I pursued and refining the methodologies I developed. From Irit Rogoff's intervention, my intuitive interest in working with documents produced by non-governmental organisations solidified through her concept of "ThruMmming with Knowledge".[34] Rogoff prompted me to recognise that NGOs themselves generate a distinct form of knowledge: one shaped in the immediacy of political struggle and humanitarian urgency.[35] This type of knowledge brings into circulation insights that emerge directly from the frontlines of activism, advocacy, and resistance, a mode of engagement I explored particularly in the *Archive*, *Necropolis* and *Necropolis-United* projects. Through Christel Stalpaert's contribution, the act of sabotaging the university framework (an approach that emerged as central to the *Necropolis-United* project) became more legible as a generative strategy, one that unsettles rigid institutional logics and opens space for alternative, collective modes of knowledge production. In this context, meeting and navigating institutional boundaries - a practice that undocumented people must negotiate on a daily basis - was transformed into a collective endeavour, in which those with papers became implicated in the struggle, taking on a shared responsibility for confronting and reshaping institutional limits. From Timmy De Laet's intervention on spectatorship in documentary performance it became evident that the presence of documents compels audiences to adopt an ethical stance toward the socio-political and embodied realities presented, transforming them from passive observers into active witnesses. This insight was deepened through the notion of 'visceral realism', introduced by Frédéric Pouillaude and inspired by the writings of Roberto Bolaño, which demonstrates how the viscerality of documents - when carefully processed and staged - lands directly in the guts of spectators. Together, these perspectives revealed that the factual never arrives as neutral evidence: it collides with audiences' interiorities - their memories, anxieties, and imaginative capacities - so that ethical witnessing and visceral impact operate as intertwined dimensions of documentary performance. I also came to solidify my conviction that documentary practice must contend with the silences and violences embedded in the archive, and that it can reclaim what has been systematically effaced through inventive modes of narration. I recognized that absence and uncertainty are not obstacles to overcome but rather material to work with, as they make visible the limits of knowledge and the fractures within dominant narratives. This understanding was sharpened by postcolonial perspectives, particularly the work of scholar, writer and theorist

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[34] Irit Rogoff, "ThruMmming With Knowledge", in *Competing Choreographies: 10 Years of the Keir Choreographic Award*, ed. Angela Conquet and Philipa Rothfield (Sydney: The Keir Foundation, 2024), https://arkadizaides.com/media/document/trummming-with-knowledge-irit-rogoff-66964d01d8f6a.pdf, accessed 20 August, 2025.
[35] Ibid., 2.

Saidiya Hartman, introduced through the interventions of choreographers Carolina Mendonça and Ligia Lewis. Hartman's reflections on "critical fabulation"[36] revealed that the absence of documents is never a void, but rather an opening that demands a more nuanced engagement with silence, speculation, and imagination. This insight was further deepened and reaffirmed by scholar and performance artist Mlondi Zondi, who addressed historical violence and the violence of History through the lens of African pessimism in his reading of Faustin Linyekula's *My Body, My Archive* (2023). In this work, the choreographer embarks on a journey through his artistic oeuvre and family history, focusing particularly on the stories of women which were often absent from the genealogy of his family. Finally, through interventions and conversations between Martín Zícari, Sandra Noeth, Bojana Cvejić, and Igor Dobričić, the social sphere was once again reaffirmed as a space where human rights reveal their pitfalls and gaps, and where social movements, activist practices, and collective initiatives intervene to challenge systemic inequities, generate alternative forms of accountability, and envision futures that are more just. At the same time, the performative interventions of Alphonse Eklou Uwantege, Emma Gioia, Mark Mushiva, and Esther Siddiquie demonstrated how artists translate these urgent social and political questions into embodied, experiential forms, showing the potential of performance to make visible, confront, and provoke reflection on structural violence, collective memory, and ethical responsibility.

What became increasingly evident during the symposium was not only the theoretical richness of the discussions but also the urgency of the moment in which they took place. Against the backdrop of escalating political and social turmoil, I sensed a real need for coming together; less as an academic exercise, more as a form of collective orientation. The notion of documentary choreography was not approached as an abstract category but as a tool to ask: how can we respond, here and now, through our practices?

In retrospect, these two events functioned as choreographic gestures in their own right: carefully composed constellations of knowledge-sharing, conversation, and performance that tested the porous boundaries between research and creation, as well as between documentary and embodied practices. They deepened my reflections on the central questions that run through this doctoral research while demonstrating how such gatherings can cultivate temporary yet meaningful communities of shared thought - spaces where artists, researchers, and activists collectively interrogate the ethics and responsibilities of representation. Most importantly, these symposiums revealed a genuine and growing interest within the community, in documentary-based research in performance - an interest that feels particularly urgent in times when truth and memory are increasingly contested, and when democratic values are under constant pressure from forces that seek to rewrite or obscure histories. In this context, choreography emerges as a vital space for rethinking how evidence can be embodied,

[36] Saidiya Hartman, "Venus in Two Acts", *Small Axe: A Caribbean Journal of Criticism* 12, no. 2 (June 2008): 1–14.

how testimonies can be presented without exploitation, and how collective practices of remembrance and resistance can be sustained.

0.10 Dissertation Structure

The projects and initiatives outlined above, together with the strategies and practices developed within them, form the foundational framework of this work. Some sections revisit previously published articles and book chapters, while others present new texts written specifically for this dissertation, each marking a key milestone in the process of articulating reflections, theoretical frameworks, methodologies, aesthetic choices, and findings. The materials are organized thematically, tracing the conceptual and artistic trajectories of the projects rather than following the chronological order of earlier publications. This approach allows for new and meaningful connections between the texts. Additionally, the inclusion of newly written materials ensures that all projects are represented, even when prior publications were partial. Overall, this arrangement encourages a reading experience guided by a specific dramaturgy and logic.

Several of the included texts were co-authored, reflecting the inherently collaborative and interdisciplinary nature of the research. My artistic work develops through ongoing dialogue with artists, scholars, activists, and experts across diverse fields. Co-writing with collaborators throughout this Ph.D. has become a natural extension of this artistic approach, emphasizing the dialogical and cross-disciplinary dimensions of my work. Consequently, throughout the dissertation, there are fluid transitions between different forms of address: “I” appears in some reflections, “we” emerges in co-authored sections or when I wish to acknowledge shared decision-making, and certain chapters adopt a more detached academic voice. This interplay of registers allows for the coexistence of multiple perspectives and analytical approaches.

I have chosen not to merge these articles into a single unified text, but to preserve their integrity while making only minor updates - primarily to figures, evolving political contexts, and small cuts to reduce repetition applied to the previously published materials. Consequently, the chapters demonstrate a range of formats and styles of writing - a complex and dense texture, interacting, interweaving, and piercing one another. I ask readers to bear with this approach until the conclusion, where I offer a synthesis of these texts by articulating twelve core principles. This final section is the result of a modest yet thorough reflection on the interrelations between the chapters, providing a considered engagement with the central research focus: the practice of documentary choreography.

Next, I offer a brief snapshot of each chapter and its content:

Chapter 1: Blurry Manifestos: The *Eshkol-Wachman Movement Notation* and Its Militarized Applications, addresses an important question that hovered over this research: how do artists position themselves in relation to regimes of power? Although not directly tied to my own artistic work, it provides a necessary historical framework for understanding how choreographic tools and research

can be co-opted by political agendas and militarized logics - particularly within the Israeli-Palestinian context, which, as previously noted, is fundamental to my artistic and political formation. The chapter examines the collaboration between Israeli choreographer Noa Eshkol and Israeli architect Avraham Wachman, whose cooperation in the 1970s led to one of the most celebrated movement notations of our time. While offering an in-depth overview of their groundbreaking partnership within the context of a newly forming State of Israel, the article raises several critical questions, particularly regarding some of the outcomes of their research. These include Eshkol's notation of Palestinian dances under the guise of preservation - while ignoring the overtly colonial implications of such efforts - and Wachman's active role in proposing plans for the securitization of the State of Israel, most notably the so-called *Double Column Plan*, which introduced strategies for partitioning and annexing Palestinian territories in the Occupied West Bank.

My study of Eshkol and Wachman's work is thus crucial to include in this dissertation, as it serves as a critical reflection on artists who, I argue, were complicit in the colonial structures underpinning the Israeli state project. In my aforementioned project *Archive*, I sought to challenge that same state power, ultimately to the point of being pursued and censored by its officials. Revisiting the Eshkol-Wachman collaboration from a critical perspective not only exposes the entanglements between aesthetic production and state ideology but also opens up a broader inquiry into the ethical responsibilities of artists operating within - and in relation to - systems of domination. The chapter thus sets the stage for the political stakes that animate this doctoral research, positioning artistic practice as both a potential instrument of power and a site of resistance.

Chapter 2: *Necropolis*, Walking through a List of Deaths, switches to the European context and moves directly into the creation process of *Necropolis*, focusing on the performance's first part and the practice of grave-site location developed as a central methodology within the performance project. Beginning with recent legal advancements in Europe concerning the rights of the deceased and their families, specifically in the aftermath of local conflicts, this chapter examines how, over the past decade, individuals who lost their lives along migratory routes to and within Europe have been systematically excluded from these legal frameworks. Not recognized as citizens, their exclusion reveals a broader failure to acknowledge their humanity. Drawing on critical theorist and gender scholar Judith Butler's concept of "grievability",[37] the chapter further investigates how the refusal to recognize these deaths and disappearances exposes the uneven distribution of the capacity to be mourned, which determines whose lives are deemed valuable within dominant societal and political norms. Finally, it discusses how, as part of our artistic project, we developed a protocol to trace and document the numerous dead and disappeared in the ongoing catastrophe on the shores of Europe,

[37] Judith Butler, *Frames of War: When Is Life Grievable?* (London, New York: Verso, 2009), 1–32; also in Judith Butler, *Precarious Life: The Powers of Mourning and Violence* (London: Verso, 2004), 18–49.

proposing a ritual of commemoration and respect, directly challenging the structures that render these deaths invisible.

Chapter 3: Tentacular Thinking in Storied Places: A Deep-Mapping of an Art-Science-Activist Worlding in *Necropolis*, is a multivocal text that brings together the voices of a think tank of cartographers, researchers, artists, and activists I initiated during the Covid-19 pandemic, titled *NecropolisLAB*. Gathered alongside the premiere of the *Necropolis* project, this group explored the further development of a digital information system designed to commemorate the deaths and disappearances of those who died along migration routes toward Europe. The group's meetings later laid the foundation for the *Necropolis-United* project, presented within this inquiry. This chapter examines the choreographic journey offered to spectators in the theatre as part of the *Necropolis* performance: an experience emerging from a cartographic effort to trace the precise burial site locations of those who perished on migratory routes. Drawn from cartographic practices and engaging with concepts such as deep-mapping[38] and the notion of cartographic heterotopia,[39] both developed by Christel Stalpaaert, it shows how these frameworks are activated within *Necropolis* to create a ritual of commemoration. This ritual seeks to resurface and honor forgotten lives and stories, drawing them up from both the metaphorical and literal underworld. Inspired by feminist scholar Donna Haraway's thinking, which urges the intertwining of art, science, and activism, the chapter explores how mapping becomes a performative and ethical act, situating the forgotten dead within a spatial and social narrative that challenges dominant discourses of exclusion and invisibility, while also consolidating a living community of individuals committed to searching for and remembering them.

Chapter 4: Haunting Spectres and Spectating Ghosts: A Conversation about *Necropolis*, examines the second part of the *Necropolis* performance through a dialogue with performance scholar Livia Andrea Piazza. The discussion highlights how the work challenges the clinical detachment often associated with forensic methodologies, marking a shift from a forensics of the landscape to a forensics of the body. This radical dramaturgical shift disrupts conventional narratives around migration, reframing the deaths and disappearances of people on migratory routes from statistical abstractions into intimate, affective, and visceral confrontations with loss. By theatricalizing a forensic procedure (an investigation systematically denied to most people who die on migratory routes), the performance illuminates the tension between visibility and invisibility, individual loss and collective

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[38] Christel Stalpaert, "Choreographic Gestures of Resurgence and Repair: Arkadi Zaides's research-based performance project: *Necropolis*", *Performance Research* 25 (2022): 106; Concept initiated by Stalpaert following Jean-Marc Besse, "Cartographic Fiction", in Anders Engberg-Pedersen ed., *Literature and Cartography: Theories, histories, genres* (Cambridge: The MIT Press, 2017), 21–43; and Robert Macfarlane, *Underland: A deep time journey* (Milton Keynes: Penguin, 2019).

[39] Stalpaert, "Choreographic Gestures of Resurgence and Repair", 109. The concept of Cartographic Heterotopia of the Dead initiated by Stalpaert responding to Jean-Marc Besse, "Cartographic Fiction", *Literature and Cartography: Theories, Histories, Genres*, Anders Engberg-Pedersen ed. (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2017), 21–42; as well as Michel Foucault, "Des espaces autres" [Of Other Spaces], *Architecture / Mouvement / Continuité*, no. 5 (1984): 46–49. Originally presented as a reading in 1967.

responsibility. Ultimately, the chapter questions how a haunting experience could be proposed on stage as an aesthetic and ethical strategy that unsettles spectatorship, shifting the audience from passive witnesses to implicated participants in an ongoing, ever-evolving catastrophe.

Chapter 5: *Necropolis-United*: Hyphenated Infrastructure of Mourning, Memory, and Activism, outlines the main trajectories of the *Necropolis-United* project, which emerged from the aforementioned *NecropolisLAB* meetings and became a research infrastructure project, hosted by Ghent University, but co-conducted by many collaborators. This research project gathers artists, academics, cartographers, and migrant persons communities who seek to develop an information system to honor and document the deaths and disappearances of people on migration routes while confronting systemic marginalization and necropolitics.[40] Initially conceived as an effort to consolidate existing refugee death lists into a centralized database, the project gradually evolved through multilingual and cross-disciplinary encounters into a living platform for political imagination, solidarity, and memory. The chapter critically examines the political and affective dimensions of "the list", as a document used in the *Necropolis* performance, recognizing it as both a vital tool for accountability and a potential mechanism of dehumanization. As an alternative, the project instead proposes a relational archive that connects grassroots initiatives with institutional efforts. Drawing on Christel Stalpaert's notion of "hyphenated thinking"[41] and the scholar and producer Martín Zícari's notion of "choreographing remembrance", this chapter demonstrates how the project bridges disciplines and communities, creating connections between artistic research, activism, and data practices. Rather than aiming for definitive narratives or closure, the project embraces a space where collective grief and resistance coexist with ongoing processes of remembering and witnessing. A further focus is placed on the precarious labor of undocumented collaborators, whose involvement exposes systemic barriers to fair compensation and calls for structural reforms grounded in care, reciprocity, and decolonial ethics.

Chapter 6: Beyond the List: Ecologies of Mourning and Resistance to Fortress Europe's Border Violence, reflects the multivoiced and multicultural nature of the *Necropolis-United* project. Co-written as an assemblage of perspectives, reflections, and poetic and critical interventions by members of the group, it combines notes accumulated through the various meetings among participants who came together around the shared desire to design an information system through democratic means. More than simply a record of the platform's development, the chapter foregrounds the community that emerged through this collaborative process, comprising diverse stakeholders, each of whom contributed distinct practices and forms of activism and expression. In doing so, it highlights the social and political entanglements at the heart of the project, while further emphasizing its

[40] Achille Mbembe, "Necropolitics", *Public Culture* 15, no. 1 (Winter 2003): 11–40.

[41] Christel Stalpaert, "De slagkracht van de verbindingsstreepjes", *Collateral*, no. 25 (June 2020), thematic issue on *Traag Geweld: kan Kunst het Klimaat redden?*, eds. Stef Craps, Mahlu Mertens, https://collateral-journal.com/index.php?collision=traaggeweld, accessed 16 August 2025.

polyphonic, participatory mode of knowledge production. Furthermore, like chapters 3 and 4, it exemplifies my deliberate withdrawal from a singular authorial position in order to acknowledge the inherently collaborative nature of this project and my research in general.

Chapter 7: *The Cloud*: Choreographing Hyperobjects, examines the conceptual and creative process of *The Cloud* performance which explores the entanglement of the Chernobyl disaster and artificial intelligence as two "hyperobjects"[42]: vast, distributed entities that, as described by philosopher and ecologist Timothy Morton, are massively scaled in time and space and exceed the grasp of individual perception or understanding. Through the interplay of personal testimony, AI-generated speculative monologues, archival footage, and embodied performance, the chapter shows how the work stages an unstable terrain where memory, history, and erasure intersect. It further demonstrates how meltdown - both nuclear and digital - is approached in the work as a generative state, where containment fails and representation dissolves into mutating forms. Furthermore, the chapter demonstrates how AI is deployed in the project not as a neutral tool but as a co-creator, whose unpredictable outputs mirror the diffuse and persistent nature of radioactive contamination and open epistemic fissures that generate new ways of perceiving and choreographing hyperobjects in the Anthropocene era.

The **Conclusion** to this dissertation proposes twelve principles for engaging with documentary materials through choreography. Rather than offering a definitive summary, this part distills reflections, methodologies, and findings from the preceding chapters into an operative framework. These principles are not intended as a fixed list, but as an open invitation - guidelines that can inform and inspire both artistic and scholarly practices within the evolving field of documentary choreography. Drawing on my long-lasting engagement with extra-aesthetic materials, this section articulates the complexity and specificity of this practice, emphasizing its intermedial nature, where video, sound, text, digital tools, and movement intersect to create multilayered fields of meaning and spectatorship. At the same time, it foregrounds the necessity of cross-disciplinary dialogue with fields such as history, law, forensics, and technology, which deepen the investigation of documentary materials and their contexts. These principles also address the challenges posed by partial or fragmented archives, acknowledging how the politics of visibility, memorialization, and erasure shape the ways evidence is produced, perceived, or silenced. The Conclusion also reflects on how emerging technologies, including AI, are reshaping the very notion of evidence, calling for a documentary choreography that responds critically and imaginatively to these transformations. Finally, ethical responsibility remains central, particularly in navigating the use of sensitive materials and ensuring that artistic processes resist extractive or exploitative dynamics.

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[42] Timothy Morton, *Hyperobjects: Philosophy and Ecology after the End of the World* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2013).

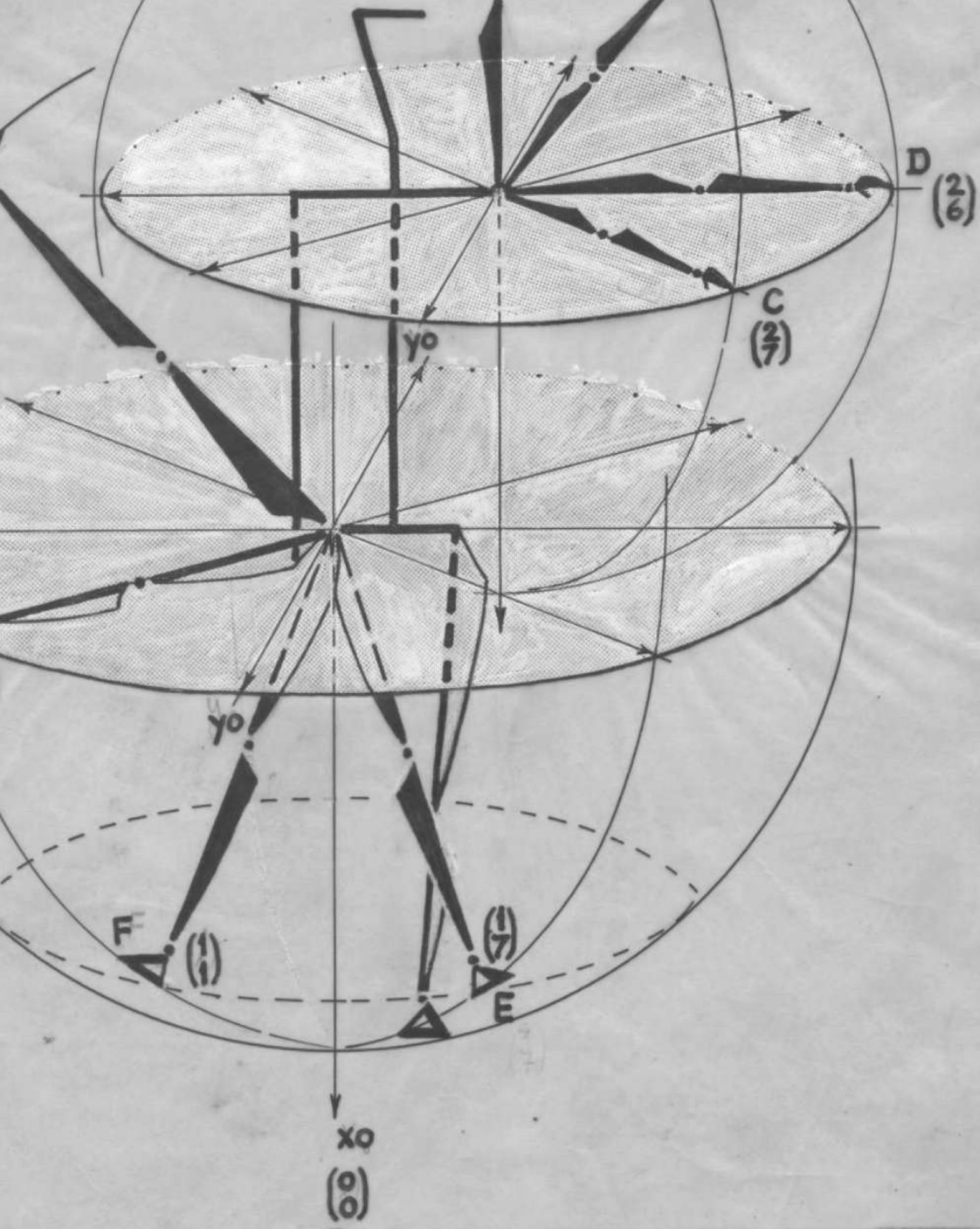

FIG 30 (Ch.8)

Chapter 1
Blurry Manifestos: The Eshkol-Wachman Movement Notation and its Militarized Applications[43]

There are many historical examples of the interconnection between dance, choreography, and war. Dances are practiced before battles, unifying and preparing the fighters to overcome the hardship of the battlefield. From early ages, the so-called "weapon dances", for example, were used to simulate, recall, or reenact combats. Dances are also practiced mid-battle to boost morale, or in the aftermath of wars - whether to mark victory or to acknowledge defeat or loss. The establishment of the nation-state and the institutionalization of armies have led to the development of military training methods. In addition to the obstacle courses that strengthen soldiers' bodies and familiarize them with the type of tactical movement they will use on the battlefield, combat training also entails movements in unison, such as marching or saluting, and this type of choreography is often performed in front of their comrades or an audience. The battlefield itself might be perceived as a mass choreography, where the two combating sides negotiate their space through the use of force. Finally, tactical thinking determines how not only humans but also war machines move in coordination and synchronization on land, on water, and in the air.

There is a limited scope of literature that discusses the complex relationship between choreography and modern warfare. The book *Choreographies of 21st Century Wars*, edited by Gay Morris and Jens Richard Giersdorf, is arguably the first study to focus specifically on this interrelation. By looking at diverse aesthetic and various geopolitical contexts, Morris and Giersdorf point out the more amorphous and shifting quality of modern conflicts and warfare and the more ambiguous boundaries between war and peace. Furthermore, they question whether "choreography also changed its character and objective"[44] within the gray zones of modern warfare and address the need to reconsider its ontological state within the complexity of modern conflicts and war.

I was initially interested in the joint work of Israeli dancer, choreographer, and theoretician Noa Eshkol and her student and later professor of architecture Avraham Wachman because their approach questions the notion of "document". The two, often referred to as avant-gardists,[45] are renowned for inventing one of the most simple and applicable systems that enable the precise notation of movement

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[43] This chapter was previously published as: Arkadi Zaides, "Blurry Manifestos: Eshkol-Wachman Movement Notation and Its Militarised Applications", *War and Aesthetics: Art, Technology, and the Futures of Warfare*, eds. Jens Bjering, Anders Engberg-Pedersen, Solveig Gade, Christine Strandmose Toft (Cambridge, London: The MIT Press, 2024), 123–150.

[44] Gay Morris, Jens Richard Giersdorf, eds., *Choreographies of 21st Century Wars* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2016), 12.

[45] Daniela Zyman, "Who Am I, Dancing Body?" *Lockhart | Noa Eshkol*, eds. Eva Wilson, Daniela Zyman (Berlin: Sternberg Press, December 2012), 27; Ifat Finkelman, "Space, Orbits, and the Apollo Program Eshkol-Wachman Movement Notation and the Systemization of Human Motion", *Lockhart | Noa Eshkol*, eds. Eva Wilson, Daniela Zyman (Berlin: Sternberg Press, December 2012), 105.

patterns.[46] However, when I embarked on my historical investigation, I was captivated by the way their system has transcended the artistic field to perform outside of its primary frameworks. Moreover, I was intrigued by the ambiguity around several of the extra-choreographic projects in which Eshkol and Wachman's findings have been implemented, which are, in my view, manifestations of the ontological shift evoked by Morris and Giersdorf in their aforementioned book.

The early twentieth century avant-garde movements have often been politically ambiguous and were thus seen as a threat by the ideological systems in which they operated. As dramaturge, curator, and writer Eda Čufer rightly argues, the consideration of the work of avant-garde artists from a contemporary perspective has to address "their structural-aesthetical as well as historico-political features".[47] Moreover, for her, it should be observed within a larger international context fueled by the tensions of the Cold War era.[48] Following Čufer's observation, I wish to look at the Israeli as well as the broader international social and political contexts within which the Eshkol-Wachman notation system was conceived and practiced. I would also like to examine how it came to be associated with structures of power, to the point of being used in militarized contexts. Ultimately, I wish to question the ideological implications of their taxonomy of gesture, their attempt at classifying and schematizing the movement of the human body.

This chapter covers an era spanning from the early 1950s to the late 1970s and situates Eshkol and Wachman's work with contextual references to the early twentieth century, which corresponds to the most fruitful years of their cooperation. Between the Declaration of Independence in 1948 and the late 1970s, the young State of Israel was involved in a series of wars with neighboring countries Lebanon, Syria, Jordan, and Egypt, as well as with the local Palestinian population. These include, in chronological order, the War of Independence (as it is called by Israelis) or the Naqba - the "catastrophe" - as it is referred to by the Palestinians (1948–1949), the Sinai War (1956), the Six-Day War (1967), the War of Attrition (1968–1970), and the Yom Kippur War (1973). Over these decades, Israel's outer borders underwent dramatic change[49] as the state defined its own (body) image. The tension between the body of the state and the human body as well as the ideology binding them together are an undercurrent in this chapter. With this interconnectedness as a guiding line, I wish to demonstrate: (a) how Eshkol and Wachman's aesthetic attempt to create a system of mapping bodily movement was ideologically linked to the mission of building the new State of Israel, (b) how it is linked to its militarized nature, and (c) how it was subsequently used to map out its political territory.

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[46] Zvi Yanai, "Notation for Liberation of Movement", *Contact Quarterly* 7, no. 2 (Winter 1982): 5–15.
[47] Eda Čufer, "Art System and Post-WWII Avant-Garde Art", *Springerin* 1 (2011), https://www.springerin.at/en/2011/1/systematische-kluft/, accessed August 26, 2025.
[48] Ibid.
[49] The return of the Sinai Peninsula to Egypt in 1978 marked the end of this process. Nonetheless, another slower and more gradual movement of the borders is still taking place inside the occupied territories of the West Bank. Although Israel claims to have returned Gaza, it has, since disengagement, retained control over all access points - land, air, and sea - imposing a blockade that restricts the movement of goods, people, and resources. This ongoing siege, alongside periodic military assaults and the bolstering of Hamas (in part through indirect Israeli support), culminated in the October 7th Hamas attack and the current genocide of Palestinians in Gaza.

1.1 Notation System for the Creation of Dances

Eshkol-Wachman Movement Notation (EWMN) was first outlined by Noa Eshkol and Avraham Wachman in a book published in 1958 and titled simply "Movement Notation". Eshkol was looking for a "theoretical basis which would allow the representation of all movements by means of numerical values".[50] For Wachman, the movement notation system was intended to serve as a language designed for interaction and communication "based on a set of rules" that are "capable of producing the unpredictable or unplanned, in an infinite and unlimited number of combinations and configurations."[51] EWMN is based on an abstract and schematic figure of the human body - a "man without qualities"[52] - with joints acting as the connecting points (fig. 1.2). Eshkol devised the system after noticing that each axis, or body part, connects to the fixed point of the joint and can therefore move within a sphere. Wachman, who had a specific interest in morphology, proposed an added layout system combining the different spheres created by the different body parts. He also outlined an initial index of signs to indicate direction, range, trajectory, duration, and speed (fig. 1.3).[53] On a grid, the different body parts and the body's weight and direction are registered on a vertical axis, while the horizontal axis allows the division of time into units. A series of simple symbols and numbers can document the exact position, the weight distribution, and the motions of the body parts in space at any given moment. Eshkol herself wrote, "It is a significant fact that despite the large number of names associated with attempts to formulate methods of notation for movement and dance, to this day there exists no serious literature of the dance. That is to say, no body of work composed in notation and generally available."[54] While other movement notations (Labanotation, Benesh Movement Notation, and others) were created mostly to document and archive existing choreographies staged by their inventors, the EWMN system was invented in order to create dances. Its primary attempt was to outline the possibilities of the human body, focusing on the connections between the various body parts, and their simultaneous coordinative movement potential. It generated new radical physical discoveries and allowed for abstract and rationalized thinking about movement, detached from any aesthetic preconception.

Consequently, Eshkol's own dances were first written using movement notation, and only then would her dancers execute them. With no warm-up and no preparation, rehearsals would consist of executing the notes as precisely as possible. Once a month, the group would open their process to others, with intimate performances. Eshkol rejected all forms of stage design, and movement was the

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[50] Yanai, "Notation for Liberation of Movement", 11.
[51] Avraham Wachman in Ifat Finkelman, *An Anatomy of Space and Body, the 'Eshkol-Wachman Movement Notation' (EWMN) in the Context of Post-War Architectural Culture*, MSc thesis, Heb., 2010, 82.
[52] Noa Eshkol in Ifat Finkelman, *An Anatomy of Space and Body, the 'Eshkol–Wachman Movement Notation' (EWMN) in the Context of Post-War Architectural Culture,* MSc thesis, Heb., 2010, 17.
[53] Ifat Finkelman, *An Anatomy of Space and Body, the 'Eshkol–Wachman Movement Notation' (EWMN) in the Context of Post-War Architectural Culture*, MSc thesis, Heb., 2010, 11.
[54] Noa Eshkol, "Preface", in *Noa Eshkol, Right Angled Curves (Dance Suite)* (Holon and Tel Aviv: The Movement Notation Society and Tel Aviv University, 1975), 5–6.

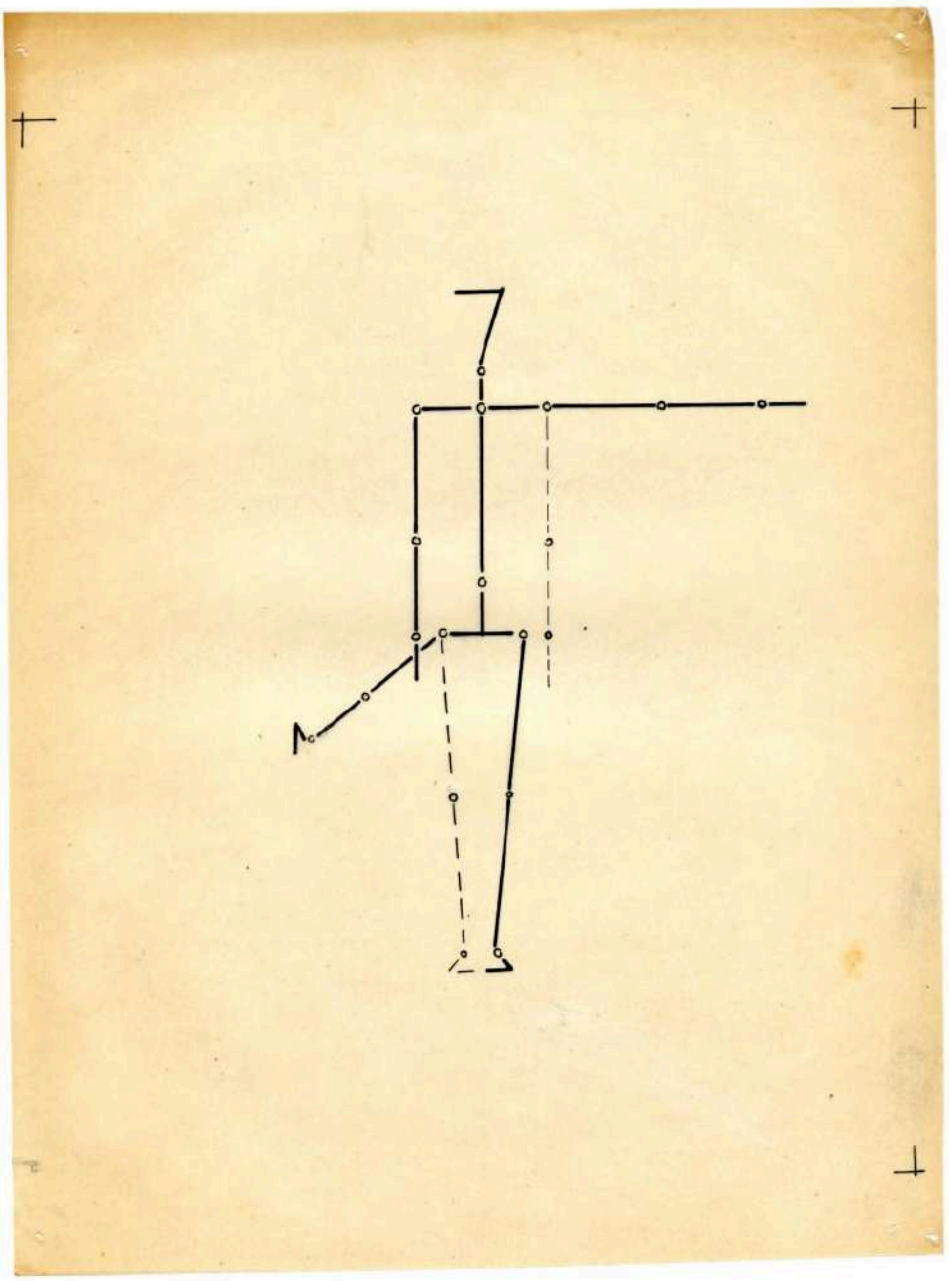

Fig. 1.2
Stick figures with changes of position (movements).
The body as a system of axes. Drawings (illustrations)
for the first book, 1958. Avraham Wachman, 1956–1958.
Illustration, ink on parchment, 21 cm Å~ 28 cm.
Courtesy of the Noa Eshkol Archive for Movement Notation

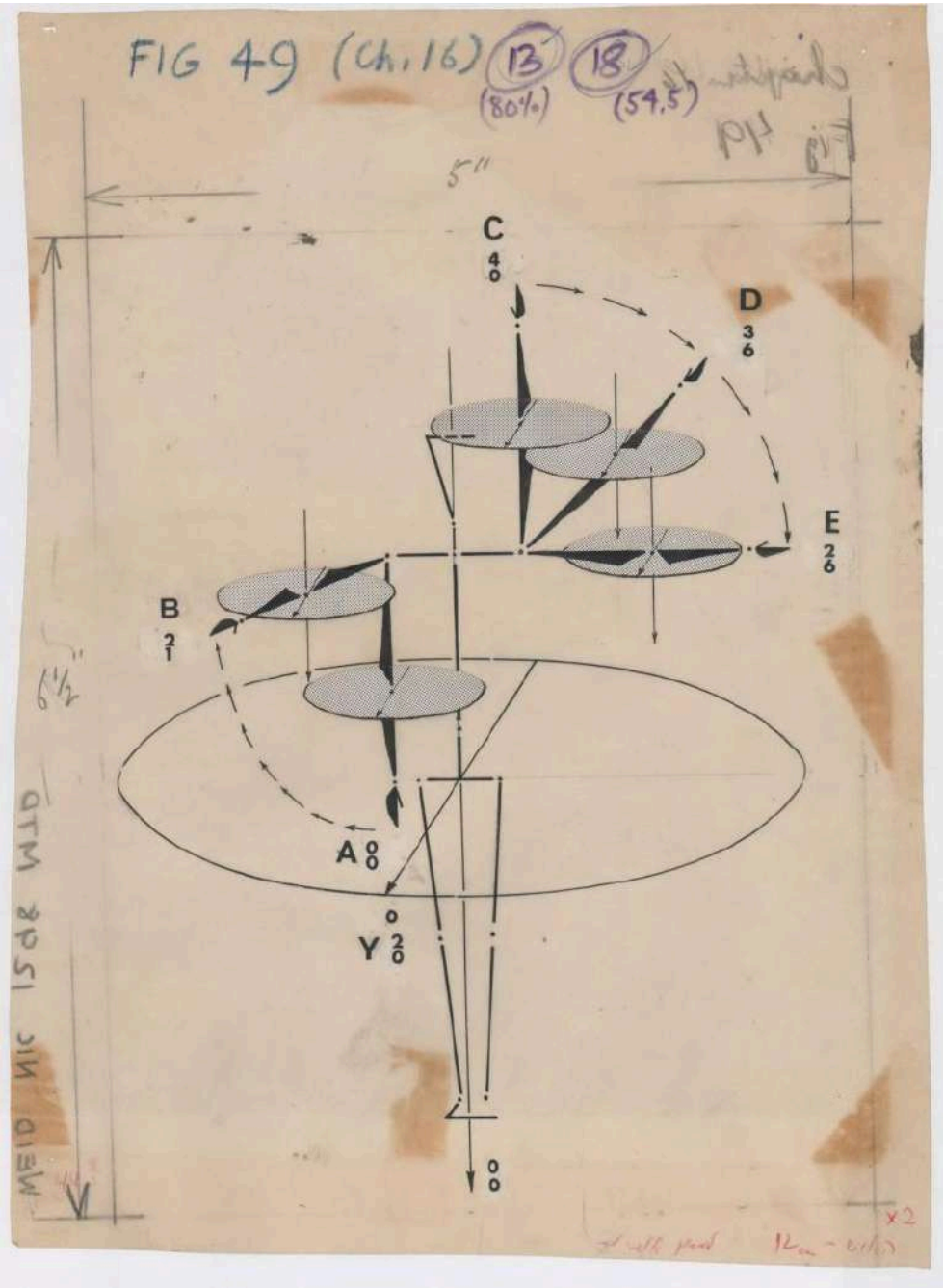

Fig. 1.3
A change of relation of a “light” limb to the system of reference, caused only by the movement of a “heavy” limb. Avraham Wachman, 1956–1958. Illustration. Courtesy of the Noa Eshkol Archive for Movement Notation.

sole focus of her investigation. The stage or the studio space remained empty and devoid of any set, while the group of performers wore similar and neutral clothes and moved to the monotonous sound of a metronome. The choreography was often in strict synchronicity, which would momentarily break into individual movement sequences and then come back to unified movement (fig. 1.4–fig. 1.6). At the end of Eshkol's performances, the performers would simply leave the stage without bowing, as it was an action that Eshkol viewed to be at odds with her movement explorations.

Due to its rather simple, functional, pared-down, and effective approach, EWMN can be used to document all types of movement. In parallel to composing and practicing her dances, Eshkol tested the system in order to examine this applicability. She and her group issued a series of books in which they resorted to the notation system to record various dance types - from folklore to ballet, martial arts, movement therapy, sports education and training, sign language, and more. Her followers further worked with the system to notate the movement of animals, to diagnose autistic movement patterns in babies, and to help overcome learning disabilities. EWMN is still taught today at various academic institutions around Israel.

1.2 Zionism: The Architecture of the Body

Eshkol was born at Kibbutz Degania Bet in Mandatory Palestine[55] in 1924. Her parents were among the founding members of the kibbutz, and her father, Levi Eshkol, would later become Israel's third prime minister. After her parents' divorce, Noa and her mother moved to the city of Holon, and Eshkol embarked on her studies of dance and body culture in neighboring Tel Aviv. Having studied music from an early age, when Noa studied dance she soon felt the need for a system of dance notation similar to the one used for music. Her teacher, Tile Rössler, introduced her to the work of dance artist and theorist Rudolf von Laban, who had developed a dance notation system known as Labanotation. Following Rössler's advice, Eshkol moved to England in 1946 to attend classes at the Art of Movement Studio founded by Laban in Manchester, and she later went to a school established by Laban's student, the German dancer, choreographer, and teacher Sigurd Leeder, in London. In 1951, she returned to Holon and began to teach dance at various institutions.

Wachman was born in 1931 in Lublin, Poland, and immigrated to Mandatory Palestine with his parents in his early childhood. He grew up in Tel Aviv, and as a teenager he studied performing arts and played the violin. Along with some of Israeli theatre's founding figures, he was a member of the first class of the Cameri Theatre School, where Eshkol taught, and their collaboration began.

Both Eshkol and Wachman were brought up in an environment in which the utopian socialist ideologies of the kibbutz movement prevailed. This environment was based on the promotion of

[55] Following the fall of the Ottoman Empire, between 1920 and 1948, the mandate to rule over the Palestinian territory was given to Great Britain by the League of Nations, the first intergovernmental organization responsible for maintaining world peace. During the course of this mandate, and following the Balfour Declaration (1917), the British government promoted the establishment of a national home for Jews, back then a small minority in the region, in Palestine.

Fig. 1.4
"Autumn," duet from the suite The Four Seasons,
The Chamber Dance Quartet (Ensemble 1), performed by
Noa Eshkol and Naomi Polani. Dance composition by Noa
Eshkol, 1954–1956. Photograph, black-and-white print.
Courtesy of the Noa Eshkol Archive for Movement Notation.
Image Credit: T. Brauner

Fig. 1.5
“Aviv” by Noa Eshkol, The Chamber Dance
Quartet (Ensemble 1), Front: Noa Eshkol. Back (left to right):
John G. Harris, Mirhal’a Sharon, and Naomi Polani.
Noa Eshkol, 1954–1956. Photograph 22.7 cm Å~ 18.3 cm,
black-and-white print. Courtesy of the Noa Eshkol Archive
for Movement Notation. Image credit: T. Brauner

Fig. 1.6
“Etude” by Naomi Polani. The Chamber Dance Quartet (Ensemble 1) From left to right: Noa Eshkol, Naomi Polani, John G. Harries, and Mirhal’a Sharon. Naomi Polani, 1954–1956. Photograph 22.7 cm Å~ 18.3 cm, black-and-white print. Courtesy of the Noa Eshkol Archive for Movement Notation. Image credit: T. Brauner

equality, communal living, and the working of land on the one hand, and the modernist visionary mission of building a modern Jewish state on the other. "Wherever the moderns appear with our inventions, we transform the desert into a garden",[56] wrote Theodore Herzl, the father of modern Zionism, in his book *The Jewish State*. One of the main aspirations of the Zionist movement was to "heal" the Jewish nation through the creation of a new Jewish body, transforming the weak, deformed, and exiled body that leant over books into a strong body that owns and plows its land. "At last, we are allowed space for our bodies to live again",[57] wrote Max Nordau, a physician, writer, and Zionist leader, who also coined the term Muskeljudentum ("Muscular Judaism"). "Let us take up our oldest traditions; let us once more become deep-chested, sturdy, sharp-eyed men."[58] Constructing a "new body" also involved the abandoning of old terminologies and aesthetics. The making of this new body image was reflected in the dances the Zionists practiced, which corresponded to their different origins and backgrounds while always giving them a local interpretation. The first newcomers arriving from Russia at the end of the nineteenth century performed the social dances they were used to in their homeland. Later on, choreographers immigrating from Eastern and Western Europe brought a professional approach with classic and expressionist aesthetics. Eshkol, on the contrary, was more interested in the functionalities of the human body and its movement rather than in any particular style or any form of expressionism in dance. "The term 'dance'", wrote Eshkol and Wachman in the preface to their first book, "voices, in every period, a certain range of movements expressing the choice of a composer and dancer and fulfilling the demands of a particular society in a certain epoch." "Movement," on the other hand, "includes in its meaning all the possibilities of movement of the human body in their various manifestations".[59]

As constructing the new emancipated body was closely linked to the process of constructing a modern and sovereign state, it also involved the abandonment of old terminologies and aesthetics. Jewish migrants who escaped increasing hostility from their communities in Europe brought new approaches and aesthetics to Palestine. The 1920s and 1930s saw the planning and construction of Tel Aviv, also called the "White City". It consisted of more than four thousand buildings that were erected by architects following the international style that developed in Europe between the two world wars. The Bauhaus movement was thriving, and its ideas of simplicity, functionality, and adaptability captivated the Zionists. The establishment of the State of Israel in 1948 accelerated this process, and architectural innovation was at its core. Simultaneously with his cooperation with Eshkol, Wachman graduated from the Faculty of Architecture and Urban Planning at the Technion (the Israeli Institute of

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[56] Theodore Herzl, *Der Judenstaat (The Jewish State)*, MidEastWeb, http://mideastweb.org/jewishstate.pdf, accessed August 27, 2025.
[57] Max Simon Nordau, *Zionistische Schriften "II. Kongressrede"* (Cologne: Juedischer Verlag, 1909), 379–380, translated by Umland Joshua with the help of Shneer David. Cited in Joshua Umland, *Max Nordau and the Making of Racial Zionism* (Boulder: University of Colorado Boulder, 2013), 5.
[58] Ibid.
[59] Noa Eshkol and Avraham Wachman, "Introduction", in second draft of *Movement Notation*, type-written and handwritten booklet, 1956, 2.

Technology in Haifa), and his dissertation focused on round and orthogonal buildings. He began to teach morphology, one of his main fields of interest, at that institution. Morphological architecture, a paradigm developed within the walls of the Technion, increasingly gained national and international interest. It strived to include three-dimensional patterns extracted from the molecular world within architectural practice. Architect and scholar Ifat Finkelman, who conducted an extensive interview with Wachman, reports that while some of the professors at the Technion were interested in morphology to determine the final and defined shape of a building, Wachman and some other colleagues were interested in a general blurring of the boundaries of the field of architecture with other fields of knowledge. They prioritized the dynamic interconnectedness between humans and the spaces they inhabit, detached from any defined aesthetics. As Finkelman points out, the invention of EWMN was instrumental to Wachman's vision and innovative approach within his own field of research. It derived the focus from the "fixed, the stable and the known aspects of architecture toward its shifting qualities."[60]

1.3 Movement Notations as Templates of Body Politics

The encounter between the two thinkers revealed that Eshkol's quest to schematize the movement of the body and Wachman's functional approach to shape and space could be complementary. For Iris Lana, a dance researcher, lecturer, and director of archival projects in the field of dance in Israel, practicing EWMN allowed for "a form of total submission which liberates the body on one hand and polices it on the other."[61] It offers a decoded language that needs to be executed, mostly collectively, following a very precise script. I would suggest that its very strict protocol-like quality and the standardized aesthetics it offers resonate with the local Israeli body politic and with the processes of narrative and identity building that took place in the newly established state. Its development cannot be dissociated from the specific social and political order out of which it emerged. "Dance, like science, participates in a large web of ethical, social and political entanglements, while also constructing models of the moving body",[62] writes dance historian Susanne Franco. Historically, dance practitioners have often found themselves resisting but also complying with structures of social, economic, and political power through their artistic practice. Several Western dance practitioners resorted to the creation of movement notations, which often became embedded in larger societal transitions and complicit within structures of political and class power.

The earliest movement notation was commissioned for the court of Louis XIV to help the king memorize his famous dance performances. It was published in 1700 by the king's *maître de danse*

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[60] Finkelman, *An Anatomy of Space and Body*, 2.
[61] Online interview I conducted with Iris Lana on July 10, 2021.
[62] Susanne Franco, "Energy, Eukinetics, and Effort: Rudolf Laban's Vision of Work and Dance", *Energy and Forces as Aesthetic Interventions*, eds. Sabine Huschka, Barbara Gronau (Bielefeld: Transcript Verlag, 2019), 155–174.

Raoul-Auger Feuillet in a book titled *Chorégraphie* (Writing Dance).[63] The Beauchamp-Feuillet[64] notation documented a set of basic physical positions laid out on top of a diagram documenting the dancers' movements in space. It formed the fundamentals of the construction of ballet as we know it today. As argued by Gay Morris and Jens Richard Giersdorf, this notation attempted to mirror the manners of the upper-class elite through the process of registration of movement. It established "terminology and practice of choreography [that] functioned as a textual organisation that works primarily to reinforce a particular kind of order in society."[65] Over the course of two centuries, according to Morris and Giersdorf, it gradually widened the gap between social dance and theatrical dance. Moreover, the growing codification and theatricalization of the dancing body on the aristocratic social stage set an example for the emerging bourgeois social class to emulate.

In the twentieth century, when ballet had become a status symbol and the most highbrow form of Western dance, the mathematician Rudolf Benesh introduced Benesh Movement Notation (BMN), or choreology, co-developed with his wife Joan Benesh, a soloist with the Sadler's Wells Ballet in London. In 1965, BMN inspired the establishment of the Institute of Choreology by the British Ministry of the Arts. The institutionalization of the term has led to the establishment of another more debatable field of ethno-choreology. While choreology is mostly used to annotate classical or neoclassical choreographies, ethno-choreology focuses on folklore and non-Western body practices. As such, it has deepened the gap between so-called high and low art in dance and between professionalism and amateurism. Furthermore, it has contributed to a long colonial tradition of analyses and to the classification and categorization of foreign and indigenous practices according to Western terms and standards.

Labanotation, or Kinetography, was a notation system outlined by Rudolf von Laban, one of the founding fathers of expressionist dance - a modern type of dance that emerged in Europe at the beginning of the twentieth century. This Hungarian-born dance theorist's notation first appeared in print in Berlin in 1928 in a book named *Schrifttanz* (Written Dance). It is based on a series of abstract geometrical symbols that define the direction and range of the movements as well as their duration and dynamic quality. Within the Weimar Republic, Laban established a network of schools that taught his notation system, and he successfully brought together professional and nonprofessional performers around the art of dance. Labanotation "enjoyed wide popularity in the Weimar Republic because its handy and easily reproducible tools simplified the staging of choreography for large groups",[66] as dance scholar Evelyn Dörr observes. Von Laban remains an ambiguous figure in the eyes of many

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[63] Raoul-Auger Feuillet, *Chorégraphie, ou l'art de décrire la danse par caractères, figures et signes démonstratifs* (Paris, 1700); translated as Choreography: Or the Art of Describing the Dance by Characters, Figures, and Demonstrative Signs; The attempt to document dance outlined in the book paved the path toward the modern use of the term "choreography".
[64] Another *maître de danse*, Pierre Beauchamp, later claimed to be the original inventor of this notation system.
[65] Morris and Giersdorf, *Choreographies of 21st Century Wars*, 8.
[66] Evelyn Dörr, "Rudolf von Laban: The 'Founding Father' of Expressionist Dance", *Dance Chronicle* 26, no. 1 (2006): 19.

historians, and suspicions were raised with regard to his adherence to Nazi ideology. When Hitler was sworn in as chancellor in 1933, Von Laban was appointed as the director of the Deutsche Tanzbühne (German Dance Theatre). He held this position until 1936 and, while in office, was responsible for shaping the face of German dance. One of his biggest artistic achievements, the choreography of *Of the Warm Wind and the New Joy*, was supposed to be performed at the Berlin Olympics (1936), deployed by thousands of performers from all over Germany who were taught the movement via the Labanotation. The work was eventually banned by Hitler, who labeled it too intellectual. This "failure" forced von Laban to leave Germany and settle in England. During World War II, he applied his notation system to another initiative, this time on the side of the Allied forces, concentrating on maximizing industrial efficiency in wartime factories. In his book *Effort* (1947), von Laban developed his project to improve the efficiency of work by optimizing motion sequences while still maintaining an acceptable level of worker satisfaction.

1.4 EWMN as a Modernist Project

As for EWMN, it was devised in opposition to Labanotation, which is described as "arbitrary" by Israeli civil servant and author Zvi Yanai, who served as head of Israel's Ministry of Science in the 1990s. According to Yanai, Labanotation "treats movement as a 'transition' more or less taken for granted, as though there was one way between two points - the most 'natural' one."[67] Furthermore, it is "literary", as it attaches verbal terms (strong, light, free, bound, etc.) to symbols, leading to a subjective interpretation of the notation.[68] Noa Eshkol, who made her formation partly at the Laban school, criticized this arbitrariness, claiming that the proper notation of movement should rely on the highest level of scientific-like precision and leave no room for subjective reading or interpretation, to be "free of verbal terminology and the emotional charges which accompany it."[69] Scientific approach and innovation were also at the heart of the newly established State of Israel; the country itself did not develop organically but rather was engineered in its entirety within a short period of time. The Zionist project as a whole was about decoding the existing paradigms and offering new codes for the emerging state and its people. The Hebrew language itself was reinvented, from the sacred language of the Bible to a spoken and written language fit for colloquial use. According to dance historian Ramsay Burt, "with its abstract, formal concerns and its aim of creating a new dance aesthetic, Eshkol's [and Wachman's] project was a modernist one",[70] and "modernism, as an aesthetic form, was for much of the twentieth century associated with ideologies of progress that have become increasingly problematic".[71] Modernism not only dismissed the past but also literally destroyed old and existing

[67] Yanai, "Notation for Liberation of Movement", 4.
[68] Ibid.
[69] Ibid., 11.
[70] Ramsay Burt, "Living Archives: Sharon Lockhart's Collaboration with Noa Eshkol", *Sharon Lockhart | Noa Eshkol*, eds. Daniela Zyman, Eva Wilson, Thyssen-Bornemisza (Berlin: Sternberg Press, 2012), 56.
[71] Ibid., 57.

structures in order to impose new ones in their stead. In the Israeli context, the famous phrase cited among the Zionists, "A land without a people for a people without a land", dismissed local communities residing in Palestine, an approach that led to the destruction of their habitat and to the killing or eviction of hundreds of thousands of people from their homeland in order to make room for the Jewish people, assuring the demographic superiority of the Jews over the Palestinians who remained. The Israeli project of modernization through the occupation of Palestine also made sure Israelis gained access to a certain global elite. It is no surprise, then, that the utopian desire of creating a notation system of universal value has led international researchers to take interest in Eshkol and Wachman's findings so that they were applied in various unexpected contexts. One should also not dismiss the fact that Noa Eshkol was Levi Eshkol's daughter. Her father served as Prime Minister of the young State of Israel from 1963 to 1969, at the time when her work was drawing increased international attention. Wachman, on his part, became a leading professor in his faculty and would later on serve as its dean. Ten years after the publication of their first book, Eshkol and Wachman's research and movement notation was implemented in some of the most innovative scientific projects of their time. While their professional achievements and the validity of their movement notation remain exceptional, I would like to question the intersections between their practice, which emerged from an aesthetic field, and its application in fields related to processes of militarization after World War II.

1.5 EWMN and its Militarized Applications

The neutral and scientific approach of EWMN and the very precise simulation of human motion it offers have increasingly gained national and international interest. This was the case when NASA scientists sought to create the perfect spacesuit that would allow astronauts to move optimally in the outer sphere as part of Project Apollo (1968–1972). The researchers had to look into the perfect equation between different engineering properties of the suit, such as weight, mechanical complexity, and leak rate, while simultaneously ensuring maximized mobility. While other parameters could be measured with precise existing equations, NASA researchers were missing "measurement techniques and specifications for suit mobility",[72] as reported by John A. Roebuck Jr., leading engineer and project manager for the Apollo program, in his article titled "A System of Notation and Measurement for Space Suit Mobility Evaluation". NASA scientists delved into research in the humanities and the arts, looking for approaches and measurement techniques related to the movement of the human body. Upon discovering the Eshkol and Wachman movement notation, they found it the most useful for this purpose, specifically as it "presented the notion of a unique directional description of limb position earth-bound conceptions and a spatial coordinate system common to all body

[72] John A. Roebuck Jr., "A System of Notation and Measurement for Space Suit Mobility Evaluation", *Human Factors: The Journal of the Human Factors and Ergonomics Society* 10, no. 1 (1968): 80.

elements."[73] In the sketches produced by NASA scientists, one could recognize Eshkol and Wachman's way of mapping and notating the human body, as well as the same logic of measuring its mobility (fig. 1.7).

Yet, Project Apollo did not emerge in a vacuum. It set out to accomplish the goal of landing a man on the moon in the midst of a global ideological conflict between the United States and the Soviet Union. The U.S. had already lost a battle to its rival - the battle to be the first nation to send a spaceship to space and to enable a human being to orbit Earth. The Space Race, however, has often been interpreted as a display of technological and strategic power, a way for both superpowers to showcase their military potential. The technologies involved in conquering space were therefore also meant to be translated into warfare. Engineering the launch of spaceships allowed the United States to make instrumental progress and to catch up with the USSR in the development of long-range missile programs. Furthermore, after World War II, the colonial empires began a process of dismantling the colonies that had been established throughout the world prior to World War I. Consequently, outer space became a new territory to be conquered; a new frontier in the competition of global powers.[74] Like a scenario that had already been played out in science fiction, Project Apollo was crucial in making space colonization part of an increasingly likely future. Moreover, the possibility of translating human motion outside of the atmosphere of the Earth, to which EWMN contributed, has led, I would argue, to a paradigmatic shift in relation to the body and the very politics of movement. It literally opened up the possibility of man stepping on and eventually settling on and colonizing new lands beyond planet Earth. It is perhaps quite a big leap to think about the direct link between the development of a dance notation system such as EWMN and the nuclear arms race or the potential colonization of space, but as Gay Morris and Jens Richard Giersdorf remind us, systematic neutrality does not exist, and choreography "can enable, or at least be complicit with colonial, postcolonial, and economically globalizing projects, as much as it can resist such projects."[75]

In the late 1960s, Eshkol and Wachman were directly involved in another groundbreaking project. Upon invitation by the Austrian-American scientist Heinz von Foerster, Eshkol (as visiting research professor) and Wachman (as consultant), together with a group of Eshkol's dancers, worked on the Notation Movement project within the Biological Computer Laboratory (BCL) at the University of Illinois. Founded by Von Foerster with support from the Pentagon and funded by the US Air Force, the US Navy, and NASA among others, this laboratory examined the possibility of implementing biological processes within computing systems. Von Foerster, who worked in the field of cybernetics, was interested in the reconception of this science within the limits of complexity and unpredictability. The success of EWMN in mapping the movement of both humans and animals was of obvious value

[73] Roebuck Jr., "A System of Notation", 80.
[74] Before discovering the Americas, their potential existence was already thought of as an outer space, and their potential inhabitants were thought of as aliens. It is also not a surprise that the European Space Agency's space lab is called Columbus, hinting to the new extraterrestrial frontiers to be explored and conquered.
[75] Morris and Giersdorf, *Choreographies of 21st Century Wars*, 7–8.

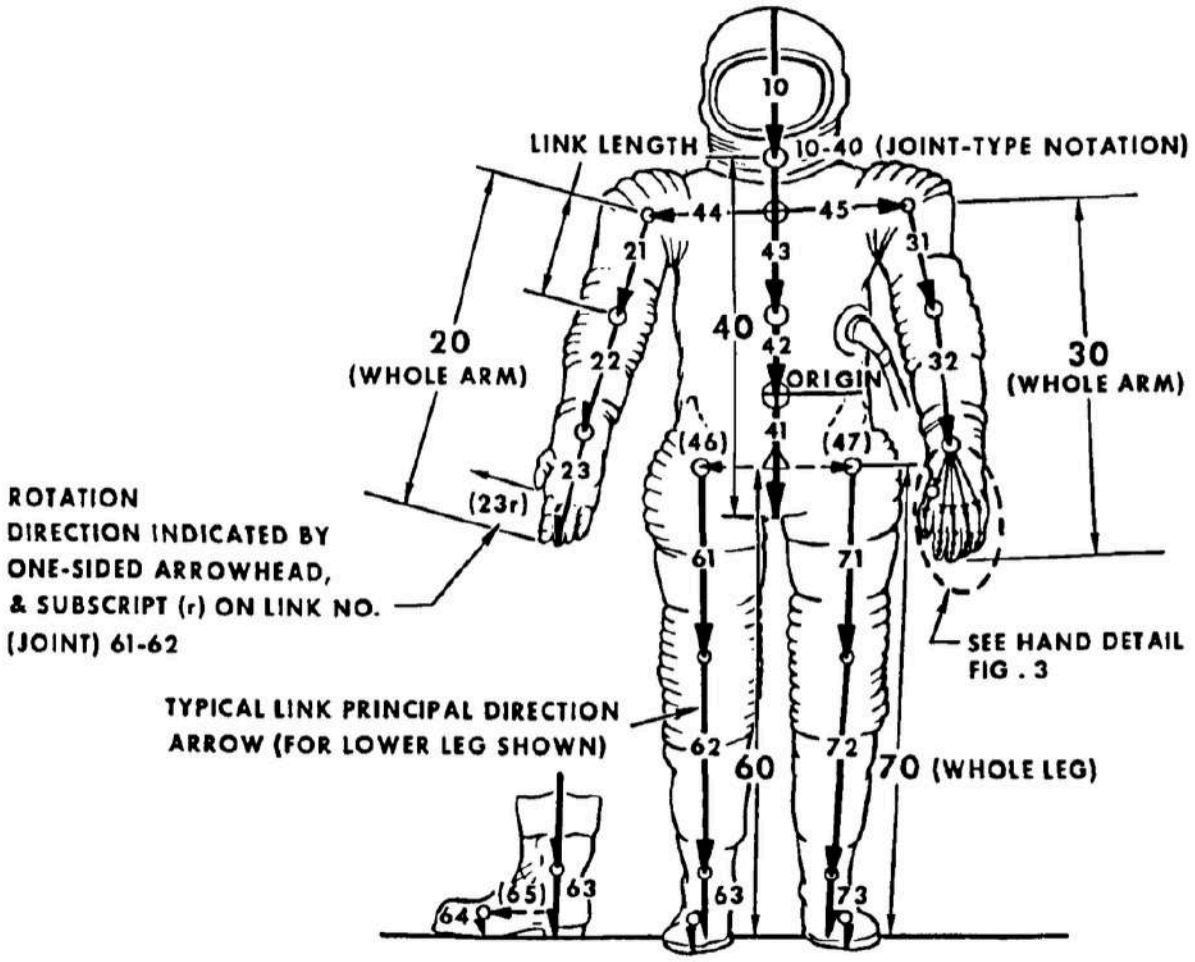

Fig. 1.7
Sketch of the Extravehicular Mobility Unit (EMU) with a link diagram and numerical notation system inspired by the EWMN system. John A. Roebuck Jr., from “A System of Notation and Measurement for Space Suit Mobility Evaluation”, Human Factors 10, no. 1 (1968): 83.

for him. Applying his ideas to complex systems "enabled von Foerster to use and extend the [EWM] notation as a control unit for the movement of autonomous robots."[76] During this research, which was funded by the US Army's research department, a computer program was written based on EWMN. In addition, the researchers developed numerous implementations that exemplified how an algorithm could be used to generate actual movement based on symbolic commands. The final report of the project, in which Eshkol and Wachman outlined all the basics of their movement notation, concludes that EWMN "would be of considerable value … by its immediate applicability to the construction of anthropomorphic automata which are to perform in environments inaccessible or hostile to a human operator, and with which communication is maintained via channels of capacities orders of magnitude below those needed for continuous surveillance and without the benefits inherent in the redundancies of symbolic discourse."[77] Such early experimentations paved the way, I would argue, for the use of automated remote-controlled devices in military and surveillance contexts. Recent implementation of such technologies in the battlefield have further complexified the interconnection between choreography and the military.[78] Operators now sit at screens, remotely directing the movement and the performance of machines on hostile terrain.

Although von Foerster was unwilling to link his research to military work and now represents the "soft" side of cybernetics, his work entailed an ethical dimension that could not simply be overlooked. Information system researchers Magnus Ramage and Chris Bissell contend that cyberneticists have a moral responsibility toward the military implications of their work. For Ramage and Bissell, "An attempt to ignore the [these] ethical concerns all too often leads to the privileging of those in positions of power."[79] There are no clear records as to whether Eshkol and Wachman were busy with the ambiguous, often militarized, nature of the field of cybernetics in general and the BCL in particular. One can wonder why they never publicly mentioned or discussed their contribution to Project Apollo. To them, the application of their findings as part of Project Apollo was rather marginal.[80] This in itself is rather surprising, given the importance of Project Apollo from a scientific point of view and since it is the third most expensive space program in history. To Eshkol and Wachman, the movement notation system was a work in progress, meant to be implemented and tested in various contexts. But can these implementations of EWMN be observed separately from the larger social and political context of the projects within which they were implemented? And even if

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[76] Joana Chicau, https://joanachicau.x-temporary.org/, accessed October 4, 2022.
[77] "Notation of Movement", final report, covering the period March 1, 1968–August 31, 1969, grant DA-ARO-D-31–124-G998, sponsored by US Army Office-Durham, Department of Electrical Engineering, University of Illinois, Urbana, Illinois, 61801, February 15, 1970, Preface, v.
[78] In *Talos*, I explored the entanglement of military technologies and movement through critical engagement with the T.A.L.O.S. initiative to develop land-based drones intended to replace human border guards in Europe.
[79] Magnus Ramage and Christopher Bissell, "Cyberneticist at War and Peace: Wrestling with Ethical Dilemmas of Information", *The Difference That Makes a Difference* (DTMD 2015), Vienna University of Technology, Austria, June 5, 2015, 4.
[80] No archival records are found in Noa Eshkol's archive that could indicate any contract or economic engagement between NASA and Eshkol and Wachman as indicated to me by Michal Shoshani, the director of Noa Eshkol's archive in Holon.

unbeknownst to them (which might be the case in Project Apollo), how should an artist or a researcher react when discovering that their findings have been instrumentalized for purposes they had never envisioned?

"The war and the military always played an ambiguous role in Eshkol's work",[81] writer and curator Eva Wilson points out. One of Eshkol's greatest supporters throughout her life was Shalhevet Freier. After the establishment of the State of Israel, he led the Mossad's operations in France and was responsible for the implementation of a nuclear pact between the two countries. Later, he was appointed by David Ben Gurion, then Israeli Prime Minister and Minister of Defense, to take over the Ministry of Defense's Department of Planning and Research. This institution, later known as Rafael, remains to this day one of Israel's primary weapons manufacturers. Freier also served as the chairman of the Israeli Atomic Energy Committee in the 1980s. As a big supporter of experimentation at the intersection between the sciences and the arts, he was instrumental in the international dissemination of Eshkol and Wachman's book and also supported Eshkol's group activities abroad. Consequently, it is impossible to separate Eshkol and Wachman's work from the ever-militarized Israeli society.

Naomi Polani, a dancer in Eshkol's group in the mid-1950s, later became the artistic director of the first IDF Entertainment troupes. She choreographed and set the tone for all the army's cultural activities performed for the Israeli soldiers during their service. Representatives of the Israeli Defense Forces were also interested in Eshkol and Wachman's findings. Michal Shoshani, the director of Noa Eshkol's archive in Holon, recalls a series of meetings between Eshkol and a brigadier general from the Israeli Air Force, in which the two discussed the possibilities of EWMN being used for the analysis of documented aerial battles.

1.6 Movement Notation as a Template for Documenting the Dances of the Othered

Israel's history is deeply embroiled in militarized conflicts, through which the country was also able to practice its colonial abilities. As religion historian Daniel Boyarin points out, the ultimate "emancipation" of the Jewish people is "functionally akin to colonisation."[82] As an outcome of the Six-Day War in 1967, Israel's territory expanded tremendously, leading to the occupation of the Gaza Strip, the Golan Heights, the West Bank, and the Sinai Peninsula, the latter being the only territory to be eventually later returned to Egypt. In 1974, Eshkol's group released one of their notation books, this time notating twenty-four Palestinian Dabke dances as well as Israeli folk dances that appropriated this folklore. The dances were collected by Eshkol's dancer Shmuel Seidel, who traveled between Palestinian villages and notated the different versions of Dabke (fig. 1.8). His notations were then brought to the group's studio in Holon and practiced by the other dancers to assess the precision of

[81] Eva Wilson, "Une Esp.ce de Sympathie: Eshkol's Spheres and Lockhart's Loxodromes", *Sharon Lockhart | Noa Eshkol*, eds. Daniela Zyman, Eva Wilson, Thyssen-Bornemisza (Berlin: Sternberg Press, 2012), 63.
[82] Daniel Boyarin, "The Colonial Drag: Zionism, Gender, Mimicry", *The Pre-occupation of Postcolonial Studies*, eds. Fawzia Afzal-Khan and Kalpana Seshadri-Crooks (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2000), 238.

their notation. “Our hope”, wrote Eshkol in the preface of “Debka: Arab and Israeli Folk Dance”, the book that compiled their findings, “is that the present collection will go some way towards preserving a record of the traditional dance style of a culture which is in grave danger of disappearing, as social circumstances change and technological advances reach the Arab villages.”[83] While avoiding the very circumstances imposed by the State of Israel and its active part in that same disappearance, she was dismissive of the imprecise work of anthropologists and ethnologists who “use such excessively generalised terms as ‘clapping,’ ‘stamping,’ ‘waving arms,’ or ‘swaying hips,’ and try to convey movement qualities by vague expressions like ‘soft’ or ‘wild.’”[84] Instead, she assured “that the formal character of the [Dabke] dances and the qualities inseparable from the form are in fact preserved”.[85] The detailed documentation of all dimensions of life and nature is a process deeply embedded in the colonial project. “The anthropologist who conducts fieldwork in a colonial setting provides that documentation of differences which functions to support continued subjugation of the group he studies”,[86] wrote architect and professor Diane Lewis around the same time. By applying the movement notation - in Eshkol’s view, a more precise methodology than the ones used by anthropologists and ethnologists - to annotate the dances of the indigenous community in Palestine, EWMN played a role not only in the way the movement of the Palestinian bodies was documented and analyzed but also in how it was subsequently controlled and colonized.

Ironically, as Eshkol herself remarked, the Yom Kippur War in 1973, in which a coalition of Arab countries attempted to invade Israel,[87] interrupted the process of working on this book. Shmuel Seidel was called to service on the Syrian front, to fight against the people who danced the same dances he was notating in Palestine. As Eshkol feared she would lose Seidel to a war to which she objected, and as she felt incapable of composing dances, another practice emerged. This was a sudden turning point and a radical shift in Eshkol’s professional trajectory and career. From that day on and for over thirty years, Eshkol - together with members of her group - produced more than 1,800 wall carpets made from pieces of fabric. This new practice followed a strict set of rules: the pieces were never purchased, only found, they were used without alterations and never cut, none of the fabric patterns included animal or human figures, and no prioritization of forms or colors was allowed. These pure creations of compositions sewed onto fabric became the choreographer’s main occupation. She

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[83] Noa Eshkol, *Debka: Arab and Israeli Folk Dance* (Holon and Tel Aviv: The Movement Notation Society and Tel Aviv University, 1974), 5.
[84] Ibid.
[85] Ibid.
[86] Diane Lewis, “Anthropology and Colonialism”, *Current Anthropology* 14, no. 5 (December 1973): 584.
[87] In the early stages of the Yom Kippur War, when Israel feared losing due to the surprise attack from the neighboring Arab countries, the then Israeli Minister of Defense Moshe Dayan proposed to the then Prime Minister Golda Meir to examine the option of launching an atom bomb against the Arab armies. Shalhevet Frier was called to the office to discuss the consequences of this option. The discussion eventually didn’t take place, as Golda Meir rejected this option. In 1977, during the discussions leading to the peace agreements between Israel and Egypt, when questioned about the reasons for the Egyptian army to abort the attack on Israel during the Yom Kippur War, one of the members of the Egyptian delegation mentioned, “Don’t think that we don’t know ... you have an atom bomb”.

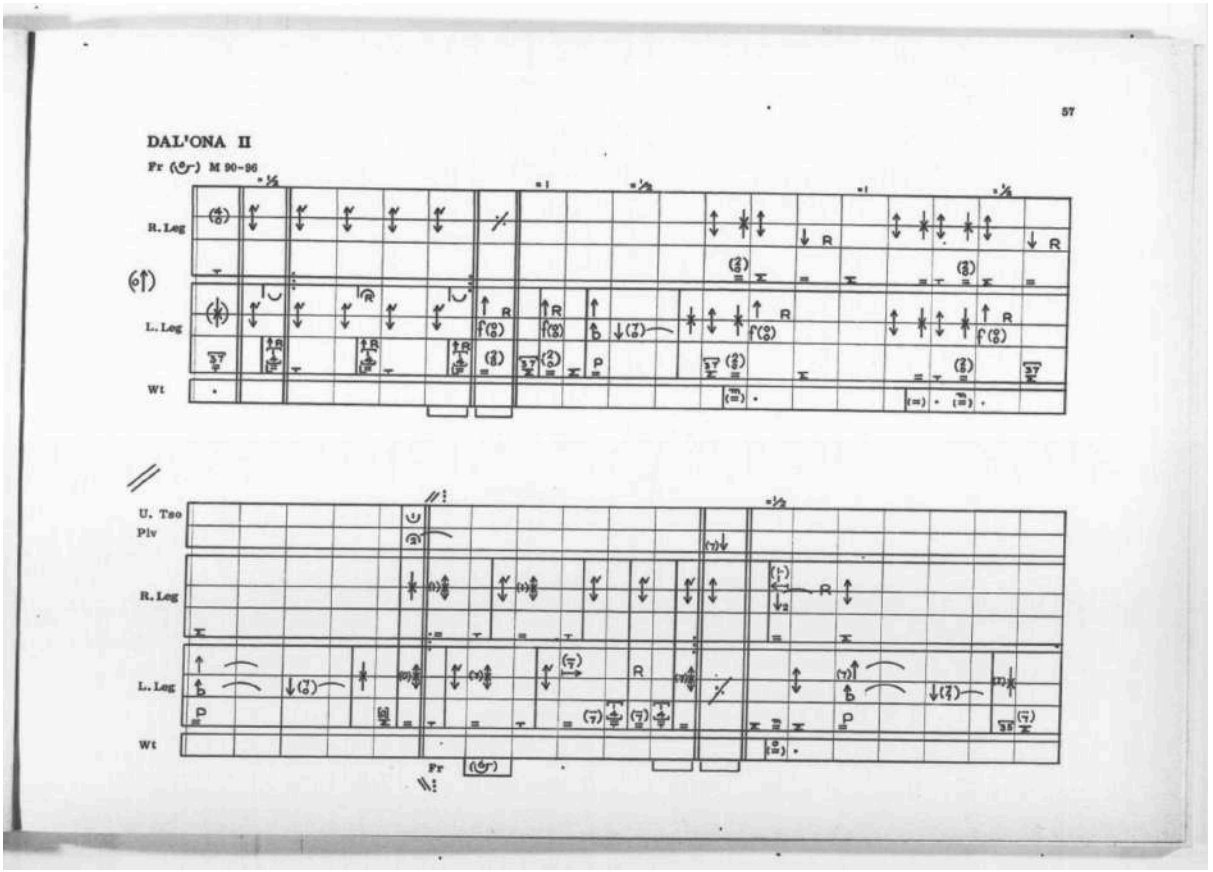

Fig. 1.8
Dal'one II (from Debka: Arab and Israeli Folk Dance, 57). Noa Eshkol with Shmuel Seidel, 1974, movement score. Courtesy of the Noa Eshkol Archive for Movement Notation

gradually stopped most of her international activity and continued working at her home studio in Holon with a small core group of followers who stayed by her side. Until her death, she remained isolated from institutions. She concentrated on the revision and preservation of EWMN and became increasingly protective about its alteration or distribution.

1.7 Defining the "Body Image" of the State

As opposed to the feeling of victory and general euphoria prevailing in Israeli society following the Six-Day War in 1967, the Yom Kippur War in 1973, which endangered the entire Zionist project, was followed by major mistrust toward and criticism of the Israeli government. Israeli citizens reproached their leaders for failing to predict the attack from the Arab allied forces. Perhaps it was this disenchantment that also led to a new endeavor in Wachman's work. Ten years after the occupation of the West Bank, when the Israeli settlement project was still in its early stages, Wachman cooperated with Prime Minister Yitzhak Rabin's security advisor, Ariel Sharon, in the creation of the *Double-Column Plan*. The plan, which Wachman believed would pave the way for the "restoration of the Zionist consciousness",[88] was aimed at addressing the strategically weak geography and dispersion of the Israeli population in the middle of the country, which at the time was no wider than a thin ten-kilometer "column" along the Mediterranean Sea. Wachman saw the occupation of the West Bank as an opportunity to better secure Israeli territory by creating another "column" of Israeli cities and settlements along the Jordanian border (fig. 1.9). According to Wachman (nicknamed "the architect of dance notation"[89] by architect and founder of Forensic Architecture agency Eyal Weizman in his work *Hollow Land),* blocks of settlements were to be created, connecting smaller rural units with larger urban industrial ones. It also stressed the development of road networks and sought to isolate the mountain areas populated by Palestinians by inserting Israeli traffic corridors that cut across the Palestinian transportation routes.[90] The plan promoted a one-sided approach and urged Israeli authorities to "take a stand, prepare a comprehensive plan and dictate a geopolitical solution."[91] Wachman believed that only unconditional steps that did "not depend in advance on the consent of the other side"[92] (i.e., the Palestinians) could release Israel from its doomed choreography of violence. The *Double-Column Plan* was not accepted by Rabin, but Ariel Sharon, who was appointed that year as Minister of Agriculture, actively promoted the formation of Israeli settlements in the West Bank. The *Double-Column Plan* was and still is continuously referred to as the best plan ever designed for the proper securitization of the State of Israel.[93] In the late 1980s, just before the Oslo Accords, its

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[88] The Double-Column Plan association booklet, March 1990, 15. This document is stored in the National Library of Israel. It is a second edition of the booklet originally printed in the 1970s.
[89] Eyal Weizman, *Hollow Land, Israel's Architecture of Occupation* (London: Verso, 2007), 80.
[90] Ibid., 80–81.
[91] The Double-Column Plan association booklet, 7.
[92] Ibid., 7–8.
[93] See, for example, an article by Amir Yosi, "Perception of Settlement - The Double Column Plan", *Jokopost*, January 21, 2022, https://jokopost.com/thoughts/36355/, accessed March 8, 2022.

Fig. 1.9
Cover image of the Double-Column Plan association booklet, 1990. From the collection of the National Library of Israel

proponents, including Wachman, founded an association to implement its agenda. The Oslo Accords (1993–1995) de facto fractured the Palestinian territory by endorsing the spread of the already-existing

Israeli settlements and the presence of thousands of Israeli settlers on Palestinian land. This same fractionalization was at the heart of the *Double-Column Plan*, as it proposed "a network superimposed upon another, the pre-existing living Palestinian spaces … to split and paralyze the Palestinian one. The result would be several isolated Palestinian cantons, each around a major city, with the connections controlled by Israel."[94]

In an article titled "Israel Must Draw Lines for a Future", published in the Los Angeles Times in 1988, Wachman hinted at the interconnectedness of his practice of mapping the movement of the human body and his architectural practice when mapping the territory of the State of Israel as part of his Double-Column Plan. "Moral strength", he wrote, "will no longer work without definite territorial clarity. Israelis, especially the young generation, must have a 'body image' of their land",[95] provoking an almost pathological relation of (young) Israelis toward their own (incomplete) body of territory. In a morphological analysis of the "solution", Wachman proposed schemes of uni-column, double-column, and multicolumn examples, claiming that the double-column or multicolumn structures "have higher degree of resilience and are superior in terms of interactions within the tissue during peacetime, and are more resistant to the danger of detachment in wartime."[96] The morphologist whose detailed examinations had led to the creation of one of the most celebrated movement notation systems was now analyzing the stability of the Israeli state and presenting a new solution for its (in his eyes incomplete) body, leading to the fractured movement of the Palestinian population through a territorial divide. Wachman moved from a very concrete notation system for dance, exploited in militarized contexts, to a different kind of grammar or notation system, which was supposed to restructure the State of Israel and to create its perfect body politic. Through the construction of a more solid territorial grip, Wachman hoped to counter the moral and economic deterioration that had, in his opinion, taken over Israeli society. He also hoped to bring new sense to the Zionist movement which, in his view, had lost its direction.

1.8 Blurry Manifestos

"We live within political systems that have an increasing interest in physical movement, or perhaps just an increasingly effective control over it",[97] wrote Israeli political theorist Hagar Kotef. In her book *Movement and The Ordering of Freedom*, she focuses on movement as a concept not only for the liberation and emancipation of a modern subject, but also through which control of one's rights can be limited or entirely taken away. Not only has the taxonomy of gesture in human mobility (as demonstrated within EWMN) contributed to the modernist and contemporary aspiration of

[94] Eyal Weizman, *Hollow Land*, 81.
[95] Avraham Wachman, "Israel Must Draw Lines for a Future", *Los Angeles Times*, April 17, 1988, https://www.latimes.com/archives/la-xpm-1988-04-17-op-1954-story.html, accessed August 31, 2025.
[96] Avraham Wachman, "The Double-Column Plan, An Outline for a Territorial Solution and an Overall Physical Plan", *Horizons in Geography* 3 (1977): 48–49.
[97] Hagar Kotef, *Movement and the Ordering of Freedom, On Liberal Governance of Mobility* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2015), 1.

optimization of human and nonhuman mobility (Project Apollo and BCL, respectively), but its co-creator Wachman also attempted to harness his expertise to the reshaping of his state's occupation apparatus, which would consequently lead to the limitation of people's freedom of movement. Moreover, these extra-choreographic articulations of EWMN attempted, in one way or another, to intervene in a certain vision of the future. But exactly what type of future do they lead us to envision?

Eshkol and Wachman's genuine attempt to map out bodily movement within an aesthetic field of dance has created a template or a tool that can be used and further developed for militarized purposes. Jacques Rancière's concept of "the distribution of the sensible" is grounded on such a porosity between the "aesthetic" avant-garde and the "political" avant-garde. For him, "the notion of the avant-garde defines the type of subject suitable to the modernist vision and appropriate, according to this vision, for connecting the aesthetic to the political."[98] It is at work when groundbreaking ideas transcend the artistic field and actively operate and make a shift in the political sphere through innovation. As author and poet Hans Magnus Enzensberger reminds us, "avant-garde" - the very concept that connects to groundbreaking experimental, radical, or unorthodox thinking within the arts - is derived from a French term referring particularly to that part of an army that goes ahead of the rest: the main body and the "arrière-garde". It has emerged historically in relation to revolutionary movements and ideologies and often expresses an aspiration to freedom gained through resistance. But, as Enzensberger points out, "it remains vague and blurry just what freedom the manifestos of the artistic avant-garde have in mind and what the world revolution, frequently though it may appear in them, is supposed to mean there."[99] Modern warfare is a laboratory where aesthetically innovative tools are continuously appropriated for the creation of innovative technologies used for new forms of military experimentations.[100] The aforementioned examples also suggest that body-related knowledge is much more significant to the development of modern warfare than what classical historical readings would have us think. Wars and conflicts have always been at the forefront for some of the most groundbreaking inventions, constructive and destructive alike, and it seems that it is through the arts - literature, music, fine arts, and why not choreography - that some of these tools are imagined and, at times, actualized.

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[98] Rancière, *The Politics of Aesthetics*, 29–30.
[99] Hans Magnus Enzensberger, "The Aporias of the Avant-Garde", *Modern Occasions*, ed. Philip Rahv (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1966), 88.
[100] Anders Engberg-Pedersen, "Technologies of Experience: Harun Farocki's Serious Games and Military Aesthetics", *Boundary* 2 44, no. 4 (2017): 162.


TOLT
* 1970 SUDAN
† 23.12.1993 HERNE

Chapter 2
Necropolis: Walking through a List of Deaths

The previous chapter outlined, from a historical perspective, the potential dangers of artistic practice being instrumentalized by military agendas and ideology-driven state projects, particularly in the context of the State of Israel. While still based in Israel, my works, which were explicitly critical of the Israeli regime, were widely presented and well received on international stages, especially in Europe. This reception, however, was not without its contradictions. I began to sense how European institutions and audiences, while celebrating critical voices from elsewhere, often did so in ways that allowed them to deflect attention from their own complicities. From an ethical perspective, this risked shifting attention from the violence enacted within and by one's own community by inviting critical voices from the outside. I realized that critical art could also be co-opted to appear ethical or progressive, giving the impression of moral engagement without actually addressing underlying injustices. It could serve as a form of symbolic capital, allowing cultural institutions to appear politically progressive while leaving the violence enacted in their own territories and by their own governments and people unexamined.

With this awareness in mind, I ultimately decided to migrate from Israel, moving from one geopolitical context, where the performance of violence is explicit and palpable, to another, where it is more diffuse, often mediated or outsourced, and hidden behind bureaucracies and policies. The so-called "refugee crisis" exposed the fractures within the European project, revealing new sites of exclusion, power dynamics, and dehumanization. Over the years, Europe's border regimes had become increasingly lethal, with bureaucratic and militarized controls contributing to the deaths and disappearances of thousands who attempted to cross. In this new environment, the imperative to address what was happening felt simultaneously ethical and urgent. This led to the creation of the *Necropolis* project, my attempt to confront the consequences of this tragedy at Europe's borders. This chapter examines the first part of the *Necropolis* performance, which responded to this deadly reality.[101]

2.1 Opening The Archives, Means for Locating Missing Persons

In post-WWII Europe there were massive efforts to search for missing soldiers and citizens, many of which remained unresolved for decades. Only in the early 1990s, after Gorbachev's perestroika, were Soviet archives opened, finally allowing access to information about millions of German prisoners of war who had been previously untraceable. Since 2004, the German Red Cross has digitized from these

[101] This chapter was previously published as: Arkadi Zaides, "*Necropolis*, Walking Through a List of Deaths", in *(W)Archives*, eds. Daniela Agostinho, Solveig Gade, Nanna Bonde Thylstrup, Kristin Veel, (Berlin: Sternberg Press, 2020), 337–364.

archives two million prisoner files, belonging to missing German soldiers and civilians, to create a database containing personal information and details about their fates.[102] Germany has not been the only country to undertake such efforts. Approximately thirteen thousand Finnish soldiers went missing on Soviet territory during World War II. Following an agreement between Finland and the Russian Federation, in 1992 there began a search funded by the Finnish Ministry of Education and the Association for the Memorialization of Casualties of War. This search led to the location and repatriation of the remains of about a thousand soldiers. The forensic investigation included anthropological and mitochondrial DNA analyses of bone samples collected from soldiers and reference samples from putative maternal relatives.[103]

In the same vein, the Spanish Association for the Recovery of Historical Memory was founded in 2000 following a meeting of a small group of people at the site of one of the Spanish Civil War's bloodiest civilian massacres. More than two hundred thousand men and women were killed in extrajudicial executions as well as at prisons and concentration camps during and after the war. This organization's goal is to collect verbal and written testimonies and to excavate and identify bodies, which were often dumped in mass graves during Franco's dictatorship. Since its foundation, volunteers have dug up over 150 mass graves throughout Spain, establishing the identity of more than 1,400 exhumed bodies.[104]

Additionally, after the end of the civil war in Yugoslavia (1991–2001), about forty thousand persons - mostly civilians not involved in the fighting - were reported missing. This led to the creation of The International Criminal Tribunal for the former Yugoslavia, in response to the large-scale atrocities committed by armed forces. Mass-scale forensic investigations were conducted, including DNA sampling from relatives of missing persons and matching to thousands of bodies retrieved from mass graves. Consequently, twenty-four years of investigations and prosecutions delivered 161 high-profile indictments. Ninety individuals have been sentenced for genocide, crimes against humanity, and additional crimes. The subsequent processes have led to the establishment of permanent organizations such as the International Criminal Court (2002),[105] legislative action such as the Law on Missing Persons (2004),[106] as well as international instruments such as the International Convention

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[102] "Files from Moscow", Deutsches Rotes Kreuz, https://www.drk-suchdienst.de/en/how-we-help/tracing/second-world-war, accessed August 31, 2025.
[103] "Repatriation and Identification of Finnish World War II Soldiers", NCBI The National Center for Biotechnology Information, https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC2080560/, accessed August 31, 2025.
[104] "What Is the Association for the Recovery of Historical Memory (ARMH)", La Asociación para la Recuperación de la Memoria Histórica (ARMH), https://memoriahistorica.org.es/who-are-we/, accessed August 31, 2025.
[105] The International Criminal Tribunal for Rwanda, created following the Rwandan genocide, was another special judicial body established in response to mass atrocities, highlighting the United Nations' recognition of the necessity for such a permanent court.
[106] The Law on Missing Persons created in 2004 establishes the principles for improving the tracing process, the definition of a missing person, the method of managing the central records, realization of social and other rights of family members of missing persons, and other issues related to tracing missing persons from/in Bosnia and Herzegovina or the Missing Persons Institute of Bosnia and Herzegovina (MPI) that has an obligation to find

for the Protection of All Persons from Enforced Disappearance (2006)[107] - all in an effort to ensure the right of missing persons to be sought and identified, and to uphold the rights of the deceased's families during such search processes.[108]

All the aforementioned serve to demonstrate increasing progress made in recent decades regarding the proper handling of casualties of armed conflicts, enforced disappearances, and other forms of violence in Europe. These processes are the result of years of labor on part of human rights and humanitarian organizations, activists, families of the dead and disappeared, as well as state institutions. However, in recent years, this progress has been challenged by the flawed handling of deaths and disappearances that take place on the shores of and inside the European Union.[109] These are the perishing of "noncitizens" that occur outside of the protection of the nation, as a result of the "refugee crisis" (or "crisis for refugees", as Gurminder K. Bhambra more aptly calls it to remove any doubt as to who is actually suffering).[110] These fleeing individuals find themselves devoid of rights - not only during their lives but also after death. Forensic procedures essential to the future identification of these dead and missing persons are carried out improperly, and many bodies are buried without any documentation.

2.2 Nationless and Nameless, even after Death

In her discussion of "the right to have rights" in her 1951 book *The Origins of Totalitarianism*, Hannah Arendt was concerned with the direct link between the formulation of human rights and the fact that these rights were to be preserved in the context of the nation-state. According to Arendt, as long as these two concepts are linked, there will always be people who are left stateless and thus lacking

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missing persons without discrimination and establish the Central Record of the Missing Persons (CEN), thereby restoring dignity to victims and responding to their families, and contributing to the satisfaction of justice and the implementation of the reconciliation process.

[107] The legal term "enforced disappearance" refers to the arrest, detention, or abduction of individuals by state agents or with the authorization, support, or acquiescence of the state, followed by a refusal to acknowledge the deprivation of liberty or concealment of the fate or whereabouts of the person, placing them outside the protection of the law. For an authoritative definition, see United Nations, *International Convention for the Protection of All Persons from Enforced Disappearance*, adopted 20 December 2006, https://www.ohchr.org/en/instruments-mechanisms/instruments/international-convention-protection-all-persons-enforced-disappearance, accessed August 27, 2025.

[108] The ICRC (The International Committee of the Red Cross) Policy Paper with recommendations to policy-makers in cases of missing migrants acknowledges the specific needs of families of missing migrants including the need to "lift any specific administrative and legal barriers that families of missing migrants may face in the exercise of their rights, or in accessing existing services and benefits, including clarifying the legal status of a "missing person" in the national legal framework, or ensuring that the existing legal framework on missing persons covers the situation of families of missing migrants".

[109] While "enforced disappearance" presupposes a clearly identifiable state or political organization as responsible, it proves inadequate for describing situations in which people die or go missing at the borders of Europe. Here, the tens of thousands of disappearances result from the deliberate operation of national border regimes, EU migration policies, and private actors, reinforced by the legacies of colonial domination, which together create a system that obscures responsibility and allows the EU to shift blame elsewhere, making accountability diffuse or effectively impossible.

[110] Gurminder K. Bhambra, "The Current Crisis of Europe: Refugees, Colonialism, and the Limits of Cosmopolitanism", *European Law Journal* 23, no. 5 (2017): 399.

rights: “We became aware of the existence of a right to have rights … and a right to belong to some kind of organized community, only when millions of people emerged who had lost and could not regain these rights because of the new global political situation.”[111]

By contrast with enforced disappearances in Yugoslavia or Spain, there are many diverse reasons for the current mass migration into Europe, ranging from war and conflict to poverty, climate change, and persecution based on political belief or sexual orientation. The fact that some of these missing persons are classified as “voluntary” refugees, in contrast with those forced to disappear by military or totalitarian regimes, makes it harder to address them as victims of crime and therefore as demanding that the necessary measures be taken. The structural reasons leading to these migrations (civil war, authoritarian regimes, etc.) fall less easily within the existing international treaties that hold European states accountable for such losses. These ambiguous circumstances make it very convenient for European countries to avoid ethical responsibility. As a result, the motivation to establish the identities of these dead and disappeared migrant people (the very same individuals that Europe tries so desperately to keep out of its territory), as well as any sense of responsibility, are diminished. Even upon death, one cannot escape the paradox at the heart of the territorially based sovereign-state system that Arendt addressed. She argued that “only with a completely organized humanity could the loss of home and political status become identical with expulsion from humanity altogether.”[112]

For over a quarter of a century, UNITED for Intercultural Action, a network of hundreds of anti-racist organizations from all around Europe, has been compiling a list of refugees and migrant people who lost their lives on their way to Europe. As of June 2025, the list contains information on 66,519 deaths and disappearances, spanning one hundred and sixteen pages densely filled with a long table, each row registering one death or group of related deaths or disappearances, sometimes hundreds. The table breaks each death down into six columns: the date of the reported death(s); the number of bodies found in that specific case (from one person to 1,100 persons in the deadliest case reported); the deceased's name, gender, and age; their origin; the cause of death (drowning, suicide, police violence, poor access to medical care, etc.); and the source(s) who reported the case. Although the list dates back to 1993, over 95 percent of the deaths and disappearances listed occurred after 2013. And it contains only those whose loss has been reported. The toll in all is certainly much higher.[113] When scrolling through the many pages of the list, one cannot ignore the fact that row by row, under the “name” column, the entry “N.N.” is repeated, standing for “*nomen nescio*”, which is Latin for “I do not know the name”. Consequently, the age, gender, and origins of these deceased and disappeared are also absent from the list. A closer look reveals that only a very small percent of the dead are mentioned by name, leaving the vast majority without any identifying details.

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[111] Hannah Arendt, *The Origins of Totalitarianism* (New York: Schocken Books, 2004), 376.
[112] Ibid., 377.
[113] According to an estimate by a spokesperson for the International Committee of the Red Cross in an interview with our team, the number of victims would probably double if one were to take into account everyone whose body has not been found and who is therefore not included on the current list.

2.3 The Right to be Analyzed and Institutionalized is not a given

In modern-day European countries, the discovery of a dead body launches a standardized institutional procedure. Pathologists and forensic experts are deployed to collect medical and biological data from bodies and from living relatives in order to enable identification. However, this procedure has not been followed for most of the victims of the current crisis for refugees at the gates of Europe. "The humanitarian community recognizes that proper handling of the dead is a key component in disaster response,"[114] but nevertheless, the majority of migrants' bodies are insufficiently processed, rendering their future identification impossible. As more deaths and disappearances occur and the list continues to grow, Europe's extreme neglect of this reality becomes clear, as it denies victims the most basic of human dignities. As the area of science able to establish the identity of a person, forensics also plays an important role in claiming a person's humanity. The right to legality, to inclusion and protection under the law, and one's ability to become a subject of forensic investigation and subsequently to be properly registered and buried, are linked to the ways in which bodies are represented, and also to how they are aestheticized, imagined, and given agency. This dynamic between visibility and invisibility, anonymity and identity, or affirmation and disempowerment, has implications that are highly political.

When active withdrawal, neglect, and invisibilization becomes the official procedure with regard to the community of dead and missing migrant people, any proper forensic registration of these bodies becomes a form of "counter-forensics", as Thomas Keenan calls it, that proposes a mode of resistance to the status quo. "To dig", Keenan writes, "is to climb into the grave with the dead, to share a space with them, and to confront the fact of their death, not in order to undo what has happened (that cannot be done) but to transform their silence and disappearance into names, stories, and claims."[115] The attempts at counter-forensics applied to those documented in UNITED's list are made partly by isolated initiatives on the part of scientists and humanitarian organizations. Among them is Dr. Pavlos Pavlidis from Democritus University Hospital in Alexandroupolis. After being retrieved from the nearby Evros River, which is one of the main inland routes between Turkey and Greece, bodies in varying states of decomposition arrive in plastic bags at Pavlidis's laboratory. Sometimes the corpses are stored, refrigerated for months until all other avenues of investigation are exhausted. If the deceased's name and origin are impossible to determine, the numbered bodies are buried after the collection of DNA. In his office, Pavlidis keeps hundreds of items found on the bodies, which often remain the only leads for identifying personal histories or reconstructing circumstances of death.

Another key figure committed to the proper and dignified documentation of the community of dead and disappeared migrant people is Cristina Cattaneo. In her laboratory at the University of Milan, this forensic pathologist and anthropologist investigates some of the most lethal cases that have occurred in the Mediterranean. Along with a team of researchers and volunteers, Cattaneo set out to

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[114] *Management of Dead Bodies after Disasters: A Field Manual for First Responders, Second (revised) Edition.* (Washington, DC: PAHO, 2016), 3.
[115] Thomas Keenan, "Counter-Forensics and Photography", *Grey Room*, no. 55 (2014): 73.

collect postmortem evidence from and complete genetic profiles for hundreds of dead migrant people. One case investigated by Cattaneo took place on April 19, 2015, when an overcrowded boat carrying over a thousand migrant people from Libya to Europe sank to the bottom of the sea as a result of a collision with a Portuguese ship that was trying to help. A year later, the Italian navy used a complicated pulley system to raise the wreck to the surface. The hundreds of decomposed bodies were so tightly compressed under the deck that it took Cattaneo and her team several years to separate them.

Yet the aforementioned examples are like needles in a haystack. The vast majority of dead bodies are not retrieved from the sea, and most of those that are retrieved are buried without proper documentation. It seems almost as if proper forensic investigation is for the fortunate, while those who are not so lucky are left unaccounted for, their corpses buried without any investigation of who they were or where they came from. This mass grave scenario resonates with other moments in history and other geopolitical realities. A profoundly morbid condition related to injustice is thus overlooked, and a mass crime is not thoroughly investigated. Moreover, thousands of family members of these dead and disappeared are kept in a cruel limbo, as their missing relatives are officially neither dead nor alive. Until they are proven, with no grave site for relatives to attend and no death certificate to show to the authorities, thousands of stories of disappearance cannot achieve closure.

2.4 Artists' Responses: Formulating Civilian Responsibility toward the Nameless Dead

In *Return to the Postcolony: Specters of Colonialism in Contemporary Art*, art historian T. J. Demos follows the work of five contemporary artists who embark on a kind of "reverse migration" and "return to the postcolony to seek answers to urgent questions regarding the causes and histories behind the desires of multitudes to travel northwards".[116] Demos acknowledges a "fundamental spectro-ontology - or birthplace of ghosts - of the postcolony", claiming that "the colonial past still haunts us because it is a past that has not really past."[117] In order to "acknowledge the ghosts, to open up the repressed histories, to admit the colonial present, and to commence this politics of memory in partnership with the dead in struggle",[118] it seems one need not travel far. By attempting to document all the people who lose their lives on their way to Europe, UNITED's list points to the deadly outcomes of the northward migration movement to which Demos refers. The mass of decomposed bodies and body parts at the bottom of the Mediterranean, inside Europe or on its shores, tells the story of a collective whose ghost hovers over the territory.

Several artists have already engaged with UNITED's list. Turkish artist Banu Cennetoğlu, for example, has been working with the list since 2007. Collaborating with curators, artists, and institutions, she has distributed updated versions of the list to newspapers as well as posted it in public

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[116] T. J. Demos, *Return to the Postcolony: Spectres of Colonialism in Contemporary Art* (Berlin: Sternberg Press, 2013), 10.
[117] Ibid., 12.
[118] Ibid., 18.

spaces such as billboards and transportation networks in cities including Berlin, Istanbul, Basel, and Athens. In mid-July 2018, as a result of a collaboration between Cennetoğlu and the Liverpool Biennial of Contemporary Art, the list was installed on a 280-meter blackboard on a central city street. Two weeks after the opening of the biennial, the list was torn down by unknown vandals. The list was then reinstalled by the organizers but was repeatedly damaged until guards were hired to secure the site. The vandals were never found.

In his 2019 lecture "Against Empathy: The Case for Rational Compassion", psychologist and author Paul Bloom argues that we should abandon empathy and acknowledge that our emotions "can lead us astray" when we relate to the suffering of others.[119] For him, empathy is like "a spotlight, it zooms you in on people you are then more likely to help. But like a spotlight we can point it at the wrong places and like a spotlight it is insensitive to numbers."[120] Paul Slovic, an expert on the effect of numbers and statistics on empathy (or the lack thereof), similarly argues that the response to two people in danger is not twice the response to one, because with the mere addition of one person we already begin to lose empathy.[121] One can only speculate that even if those who vandalized Cennetoğlu's installation might have shown empathy in the presence of a single "other", perhaps the way the list was displayed, handled, and presented to the larger public played a role in the set of emotions it produced.

When dramaturg Igor Dobričić and I discovered the UNITED list in June 2018, and the community of the dead and disappeared it documents, it became our obsession. We asked ourselves, how do we as artists, as citizens, respond to the mass deaths and disappearances taking place around us? How are we to position ourselves and take responsibility? Thinking about all these bodies as a mostly unidentified collective scattered throughout Europe and in the surrounding sea, we began to wonder what kind of gesture, even symbolic, could acknowledge this vast community of people. How could we collect, archive, and use evidence? Inspired by strategies of counter-forensics, we wondered how the list could be further investigated as a body of data, and what practice could be articulated that would resonate with this process of dealing with the remains and with the evidence - in this case, relating directly to dead and disappeared bodies.

Members of the Forensic Architecture Agency apply different forensic practices and produce documents that counter official state narratives. The team, which comprises architects, software developers, filmmakers, investigative journalists, artists, scientists, and lawyers, not only investigates various state and corporate acts of violence, human rights violations, and environmental destruction, but is also constantly occupied with how to communicate its findings to a wider audience. It uses public forums such as international courtrooms, parliamentary inquiries, United Nations (UN)

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[119] Paul Bloom, *Against Empathy: The Case of Rational Compassion*, lecture, December 19, 2016, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=yhCGmDJQRpc&t=18s, accessed August 27, 2025.
[120] Ibid.
[121] Thanks to Mushon Zer-Aviv for referring me to Bloom's and Slovic's work.

assemblies, citizens' tribunals, truth commissions as well as seminars, publications, and exhibitions in art and cultural institutions to share its findings and to make its research processes transparent to viewers.[122] Through various multidisciplinary mediums such as participatory workshops, exhibitions, and installations, Forensic Architecture invites audiences to become acquainted with the process of counter-forensic research. This sharing of various investigation strategies as well as their findings democratizes the field of forensics.

Influenced by this, and joined by choreographer and researcher Emma Gioia, we returned to that mass grave (the list of deaths and disappearances) with the question of how we could conduct an investigation that would give a body to this highly abstracted database while simultaneously constructing a performance event that would not only provide spectators with information but also question their own implication in this catastrophe. What mediums could be used to confront ourselves with the excluded and the undocumented, those who are not alive in all extreme senses of the word - physically and bureaucratically? How could we make the theatrical stage a place where the invisible (or those rendered invisible) become visible? By confronting the dichotomy between the living and the dead[123] through a documentary approach to the contemporary geopolitical reality of migration, we began to imagine an immersive theatrical and choreographic experience that would allow spectators to feel literally implicated, and hopefully to recover their own sense of accountability. We thought of an experience that would allow spectators to "get closer" to individual deaths as well as to reveal a more complex structure, a place, a territory: an architecture of death we began to call *Necropolis*.

2.5 Imagining *Necropolis*: Rationale and Methodology

The title of the project ostensibly refers to an ancient term for a burial ground: Necropolis, the city of the dead. On a symbolic level, it strives to reactivate the archetype of an invisible, suppressed "community of the dead" that challenges and obligates us as a community of the living. Furthermore, it appropriates the literal effectiveness of the mythological imagination that NECROPOLIS[124] conjures up as a topos - a concrete metaphysical space. As a city, it is not a specific location but a meta-structure - the cemetery of cemeteries - that casts its shadow over the contemporary history and geography of Europe. Like the corpses buried in it, the city of the dead obviously has no body other than the body of data, an ever-expanding archive of what is meticulously extracted from the rotting remains of its dead. This growing database defines the layout of NECROPOLIS, stretching in all directions across the space-time continuum, interconnecting the mythologies, histories, geographies,

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[122] Forensic Architecture, *About Agency,* https://forensic-architecture.org/about/agency, accessed August 27, 2025.

[123] In *Unburied Bodies: Subversive Corpses and the Authority of the Dead* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2018), James Martel, writing from the perspective of anarchist philosophy, challenges the dichotomy between dead and living bodies and describes the transformative potential of what he calls "unburied bodies" in their resistance to state and authoritarian power.

[124] Please notice the difference in writing of *Necropolis* (the performance) and NECROPOLIS (the city of the dead).

and anatomies of thousands of people. Without giving it much attention, Europe's citizens are slowly surrounded by all those who were not admitted, who are physical corpses of people, who are ghosts that are not taken into account. These dead and disappeared also evoke the concept of "the other", that part by which one is haunted and which one excludes.

During the artistic process, we strived to get closer to individual deaths and disappearances mentioned on the list and to find more information regarding their whereabouts. We were asked to lead a series of short workshops in Stockholm, Sweden, each with a different group of participants. We spent several hours with each group collectively investigating one specific case of death that had occurred in Stockholm and its surroundings, which we highlighted from the list. Using personal computers and smartphones, participants collected information from the Internet related to these individual deaths. Several cases were thus somehow reopened, revealing in more detail the stories and narratives of the deceased. The physical proximity of the cases to the actual location of the workshop brought the list and the phenomenon it documents closer to the participants, who were unaware that such deaths took place in their city. The search through fragmented and unorganized scraps of information (newspaper articles, official police reports, human rights organization reports) unearthed the structural violence leading to those deaths.

But a question continued to haunt us, the same question we believe also weighs on the minds of thousands of relatives of the deceased and disappeared on UNITED's list: where is the body? Where are the actual remains of all these bodies? In what physical space may these individuals, this entire community of people, be grieved, mourned, and paid their last respects? In her lecture "Bodies That Still Matter", Judith Butler questions why some populations are regarded as more "grievable" than others. "To grieve another is to stand in relation to that other. It is a social relation, one between people, but," she points out, "it is also one that is mediated by cultural and political modes of representation." For her, "depending on the public sphere in which the loss takes place it can be registered with great lamentation, great sorrow or, it can be dismissed or covered over as if it were no loss." Butler argues that when populations are eradicated in war or other forms of violence, when these deaths and disappearances could have been avoided, "the public acknowledgment of loss is crucial to the act of protest."[125] In addition to this acknowledgment, the space of personal and collective grieving requires a geographical location; a physical space where one can visit and perform rituals in accordance with cultural norms.

At a later residency at PACT Zollverein Artists' Center in Essen, Germany, we further focused our search to resonate with the aforementioned necessity for a physical location of mourning. After an extensive online investigation regarding several deaths that occurred in the Ruhr area in proximity to our residency, we focused on one article that specifically pointed out a cemetery, where Emanuel Thomas Tout, a twenty-three-year-old refugee from Sudan, was buried. Tout died in 1993 from injuries

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[125] Judith Butler, *Bodies That Still Matter,* lecture, University of Tokyo, December 8, 2018, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=xiG0w1nfOsU&feature=emb_title, accessed August 27, 2025.

as a result of attempted suicide at a detention center in the small town of Herne. The article mentioned a memorial ceremony that had taken place in a cemetery ten years after his death. Upon discovering the name of the cemetery in which Tout was buried, we decided to visit his grave. The journey to the cemetery took several hours. When we arrived, we asked local personnel to help us find the exact location of the grave by looking at hand-drawn plans pulled from their archives. One of the workers could remember Tout's funeral about twenty-five years earlier, as well as the small memorial service of which we had read, which took place ten years later. "This was a famous case, the first of its kind in the region", he noted. "It stirred a lot of public debate, something that would not happen today", he added.

2.6 Building NECROPOLIS: The Procedure

Visiting a cemetery always evokes a particular set of emotions. Visiting the grave of a person one is investigating but does not know personally is even more peculiar. Walking toward the actual place where the body was buried is a very disturbing experience. A person who, until that moment has been just a name on a list - sometimes only a data entry or a statistic in a long list of over sixty-six thousand - now gradually gains a physical location. Arriving at the grave of Emanuel Thomas Tout, we each made a gesture of respect. We also decided to register the coordinates of the grave's location by measuring its longitude and latitude on our smartphones. We then made a short video documenting the walk from the cemetery gate to the grave, holding the smartphone in front of us as we walked. Since then, we have consistently documented the locations of graves in the vicinity of any place where we arrive, gradually mapping our NECROPOLIS.

Deeper inside the European continent, most of the graves of deceased migrants and asylum seekers are identified, as in the case of Emanuel Thomas Tout. These individuals have already been registered and processed through border systems that determine their names and identities. However, the vast majority of the casualties mentioned on UNITED's list died at sea, and the graves of those retrieved are usually unidentified. Most are located in the three main gateways into Europe: southern Spain, Italy, and Greece. Our first encounter with this aspect of the catastrophe was made possible through a connection with Giorgia Mirto, a Sicilian-based researcher and activist. Since 2011, Mirto has devoted herself to the issue of missing migrant people and deaths at the borders, and she currently holds an updated archive of "border death" casualties buried in Italy. Most of the cemeteries in Sicily contain graves of dead and disappeared migrant people - often hundreds at the same location. On our first visit to Sicily, we visited seven cemeteries in one week, and identified almost six hundred graves out of what Mirto estimates as approximately three thousand on the island.

After collecting data from different cemeteries, we return to our workspace and enter the coordinates taken at the graves into Google Earth. From the image of planet Earth floating in space, we can gradually zoom into this virtual representation of geography until we recognize the cemeteries

we have visited, and then further into the paths we have walked while searching for the graves, to discover the particular architecture of the graveyard from above. We can zoom further into the exact points where the graves are located, and hover above them. We also have the video documentation of our walks toward the graves, allowing us to get even closer to them from an eye-level perspective.

While facilitating global orientation and navigation for end users, including migrants and asylum seekers, technologies like Google Earth and Google Maps also inherit a legacy of maps, aerial photography, and surveillance tools originally developed for the strategic control of territory. They originated at the time of European colonial projects - the same projects whose contemporary victims are documented on UNITED's list. These platforms carry within them the history of racialization and dehumanization. Our intention when inserting the coordinates of the graves of migrant people is to hijack those platforms with information about the ultimate immobility - the deaths and disappearances of people whose patterns of movement are labeled as risky, disruptive, or unlawful.

Donna Haraway calls "for politics and epistemologies of location, positioning, and situating, where partiality and not universality is the condition of being heard to make rational knowledge claims. These are claims on people's lives; the view from a body, always a complex, contradictory, structuring and structured body, versus the view from above, from nowhere, from simplicity."[126] Our visit to the cemetery and our walk toward the grave, as well as being a respectful gesture to each grave identified - which only moments before had been just part of a big and abstracted database - strives to articulate an embodied investigation such as Haraway proposes. Moreover, the entanglement and confrontation of these two perspectives - the "gaze from above" with its colonial roots and the embodied knowledge proposed by Haraway - are crucial, and pave the way toward a liminal space that interrelates the geographies, mythologies, histories, movements, and anatomies of individuals who lost their lives on the way to Europe.

2.7 *Necropolis* as Performance: Activating the Virtual Space

The performance uses a rather monastic setup. A huge projection screen covers the back of the stage. A long table is placed at the front of the stage, as if to cut the space in two, creating a border between the audience and the large void of the stage, which is left empty. The table is full of technical equipment including computers as well as sound, light, and video-operating devices. An audio introduction accompanied by text on the screen invites the audience to enter the city of the dead: NECROPOLIS. Emma Gioia and myself enter the stage and sit silently at the table, with our backs to the audience. Using Google Earth projected onto the large screen, we first zoom into the location of the theatre. Then we zoom out to reveal a mark similar to those that indicate one's destination when using Google Maps, and zoom back in toward the mark, which turns out to be a grave at a cemetery. We zoom out to reveal many more red marks, which form a complex architecture. Some of the marks

[126] Donna Haraway, "Situated Knowledges: The Science Question in Feminism and the Privilege of Partial Perspective", *Feminist Studies* 14, no. 3 (1988): 589.

are accompanied by names; others only have numbers. Thus we continue to zoom in and out, to and from cemeteries and tombs, creating a virtual visual journey, until we reach the shores of Europe where the land meets the Mediterranean, and hover over hundreds more graves marked on the shores.

We are both seated, facing the same direction as the audience - all gaze at the screens. The action of scrolling through data and geographical terrain via a digital platform, and the repetitive action of zooming in and out, are reminiscent of actions that often take place in surveillance control rooms, thus resonating with surveillance practices to which the deceased may have been subjected while still alive. It emphasizes and replicates the divide between those who research and study and those who are studied, perhaps against their will. "How things are ordered racially by way of surveillance", writes scholar and theorist Simone Browne, "most often upholds negating strategies that first accompanied European colonial expansion and transatlantic slavery that sought to structure social relations and institutions in ways that privilege whiteness."[127] Browne uses the term "dark surveillance" in order to "situate the tactics employed to render one's self out of sight" and as an "imaginative place from which to mobilize a critique of racializing surveillance".[128] The ethical implications of the performed procedure is thus brought forward, highlighting the unbridgeable gap between the collective that have the privilege to watch from a distance, to analyze and investigate, and the collective that lost their lives on the way toward the very territory from within which they are watched.

Whenever the application zooms in on a grave, additional information appears on the screen, revealing the exact coordinates of that location, the name (if known) of the person buried there, and the date and cause of death. At times there is a video capturing the walk from the cemetery gate toward that grave. The camera is held in front of the body at chest level, making it impossible to determine who holds it. It is a simple, silent walk toward a grave, toward many different graves at many different locations, always at the same pace, performed as if attempting to connect all these individual cases through one single repetitive gesture (fig. 2.2–fig. 2.19). While UNITED's list links all the cases by embedding them in one abstract document, these walks attempt to connect them through a gesture - a choreographic one. A series of such walks conveys an embodied practice to the spectators, and also alludes to the thousands of graves that are yet to be located; to the thousands of walks that are still to be performed.

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[127] Simone Browne, *Dark Matters: On the Surveillance of Blackness* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2015), 17.
[128] Browne, *Dark Matters*, 21.

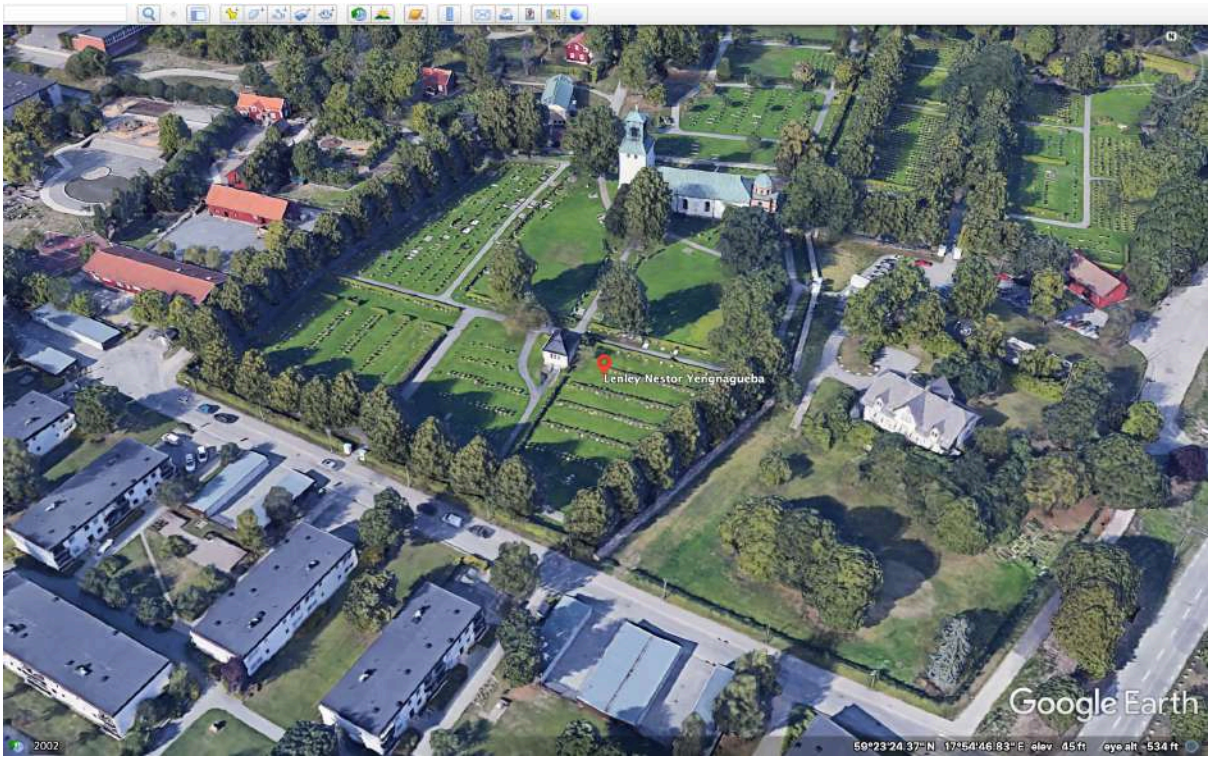

Fig. 2.2 & Fig. 2.3
Found dead 06/08/1996. Name, gender, age: Lenley Nestor Yengnagueba (M, 25). Region of origin: Togo. Cause of death: Jumped out of a window of his home in Stockholm (SE) after immigration police rang the doorbell. Source: Svenska Dagbladet/ Dagens Nyheter/FARR. Grave location search: Sunniva Vikør Egenes, Benjamin Pohlig, Arkadi Zaides. Grave localization and documentation: Gabriel Smeets, Arkadi Zaides Image credit: Google Earth/Arkadi Zaides

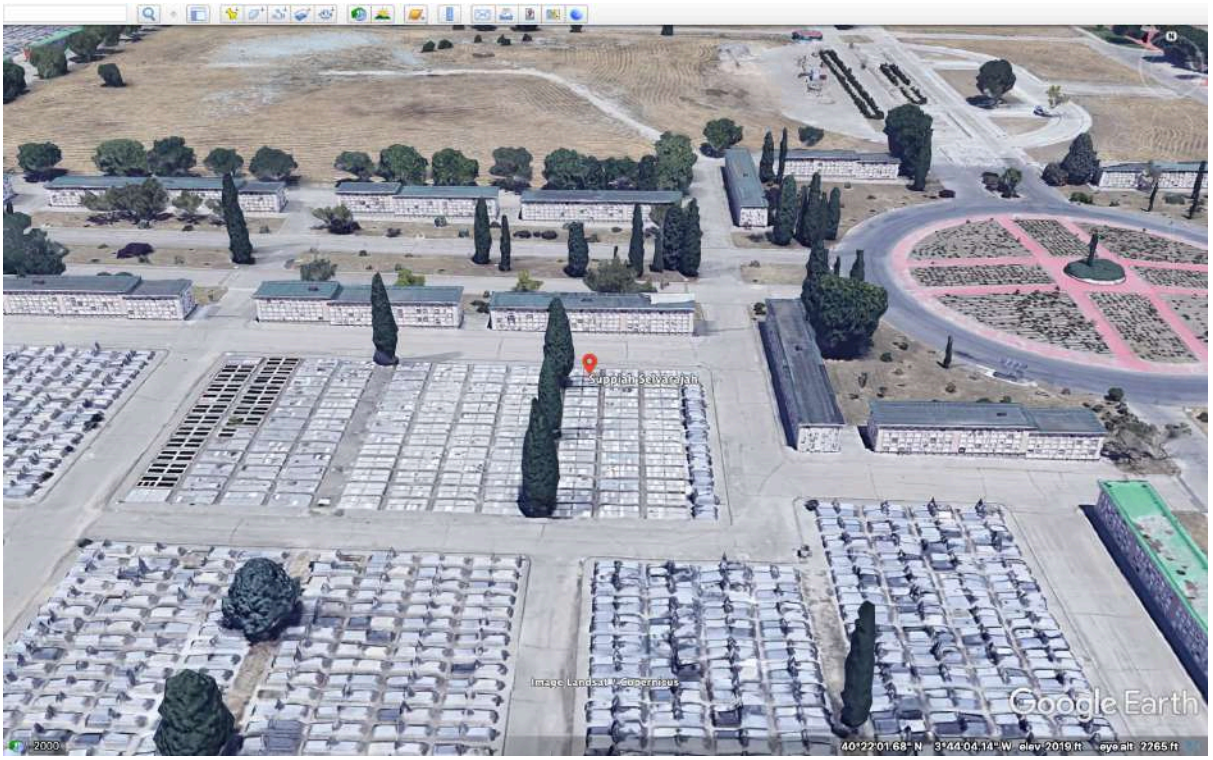

Fig. 2.4 & Fig. 2.5
Found dead: 14/06/1995. Name, gender, age: Suppiah Selvarajah (M, 31). Region of origin: Sri Lanka. Cause of death: Suffocated during a fire at his shanty in Madrid (ES). Source: Egin/DiarioVasco. Grave location search: Simge Gücük. Grave localization and documentation: Arkadi Zaides
Image credit: Google Earth/Arkadi Zaides

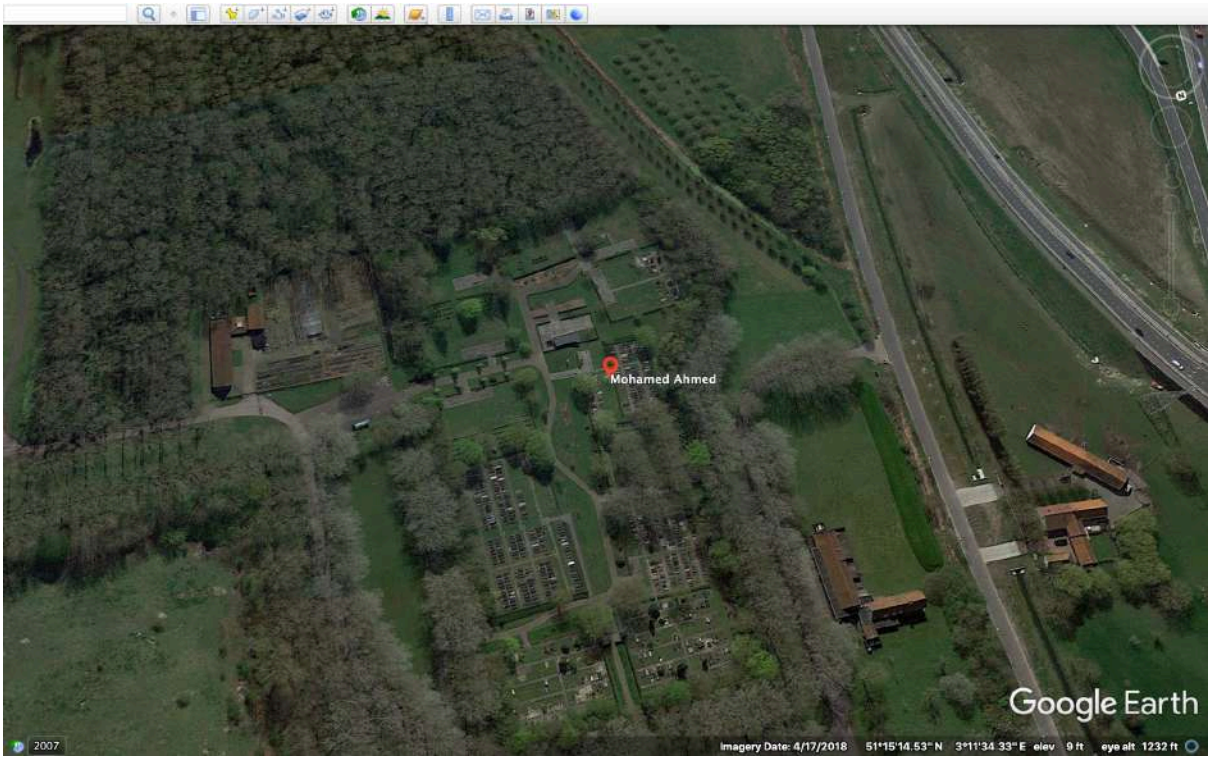

Fig. 2.6 & Fig. 2.7
Found dead: 29/01/2018. Name, gender, age: Mohamed Ahmed (M, 39/40).
Region of origin: Ethiopia. Cause of death: Killed by a passing vehicle while escaping from the police next to Jabbeke (BE). Source: KW. Grave location search: Myriam Van Imschoot. Grave localization and documentation: Myriam Van Imschoot, Joris Van Imschoot, Doreen Kutzke, Arkadi Zaides.
Image credit: Google Earth/Arkadi Zaides

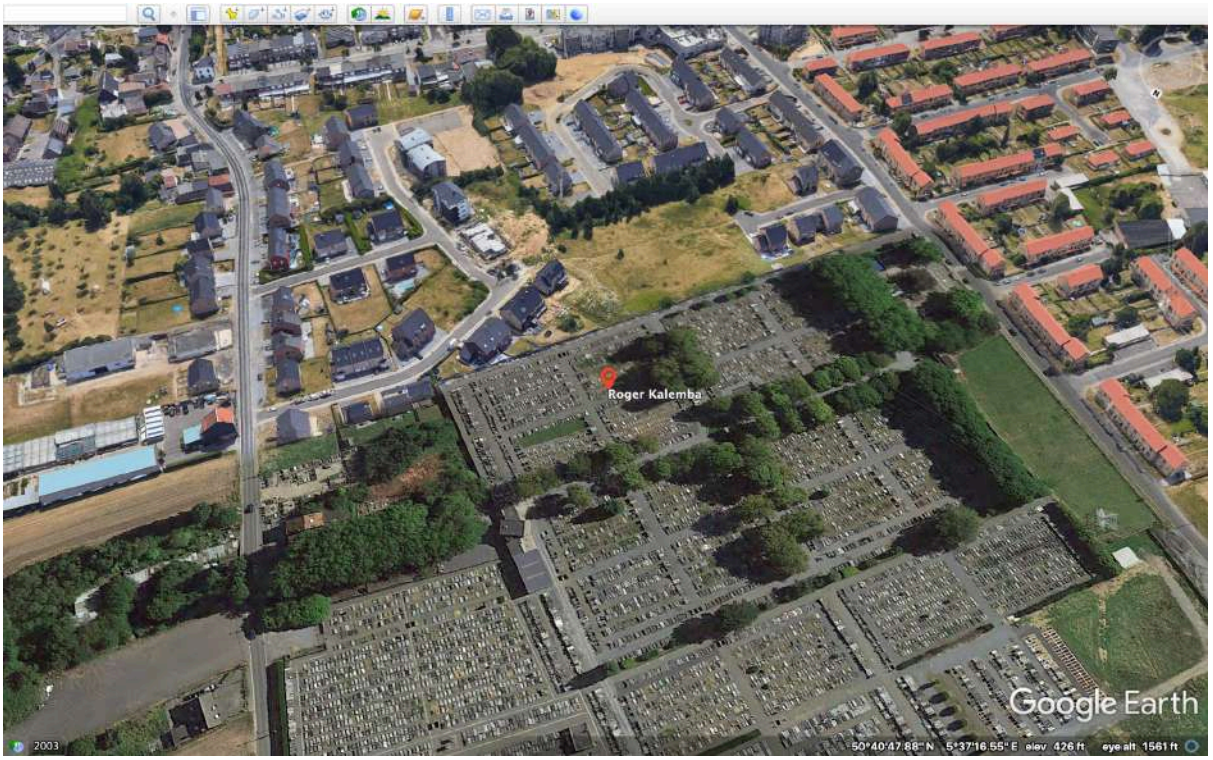

Fig. 2.8 & Fig. 2.9
Found dead: 19/12/2015. Name, gender, age: Roger Kalemba (M, 50). Region of origin: Congo. Cause of death: Comitted suicide in a detention center Vottem (BE) the evening before his second deportation attempt. Source: JRS ! B News. Grave location search: Emma Gioia. Grave Localization and documentation Emma Gioia, Igor Dobričić, Arkadi Zaides
Image credit: Google Earth/Arkadi Zaides

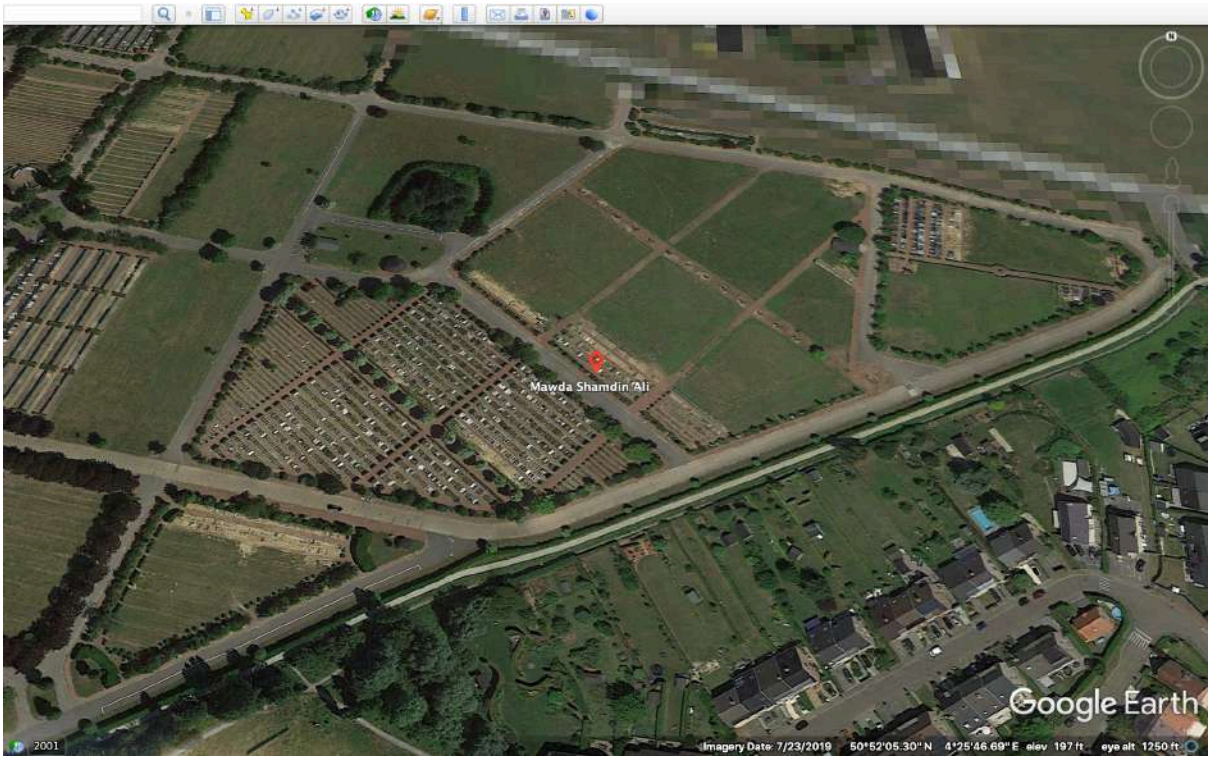

Fig. 2.10 & Fig. 2.11
Found dead: 17/05/2018. Name, gender, age: Mawda Shamdin Ali (F, 2). Region of origin: Iraq/Kurdistan. Cause of death: Killed by runaway police bullet near Mons (BE) in wild pursuit of a migrant vehicle headed for the UK. Source: AD/RTBF/RTLbe/DH/ Sputnik/IOMZambia/EastAfrican. Grave location search: Arkadi Zaides. Grave localization and documentation; Myriam Van Imschoot, Sarah Leo, Arkadi Zaides. Image credit: Google Earth/Arkadi Zaides

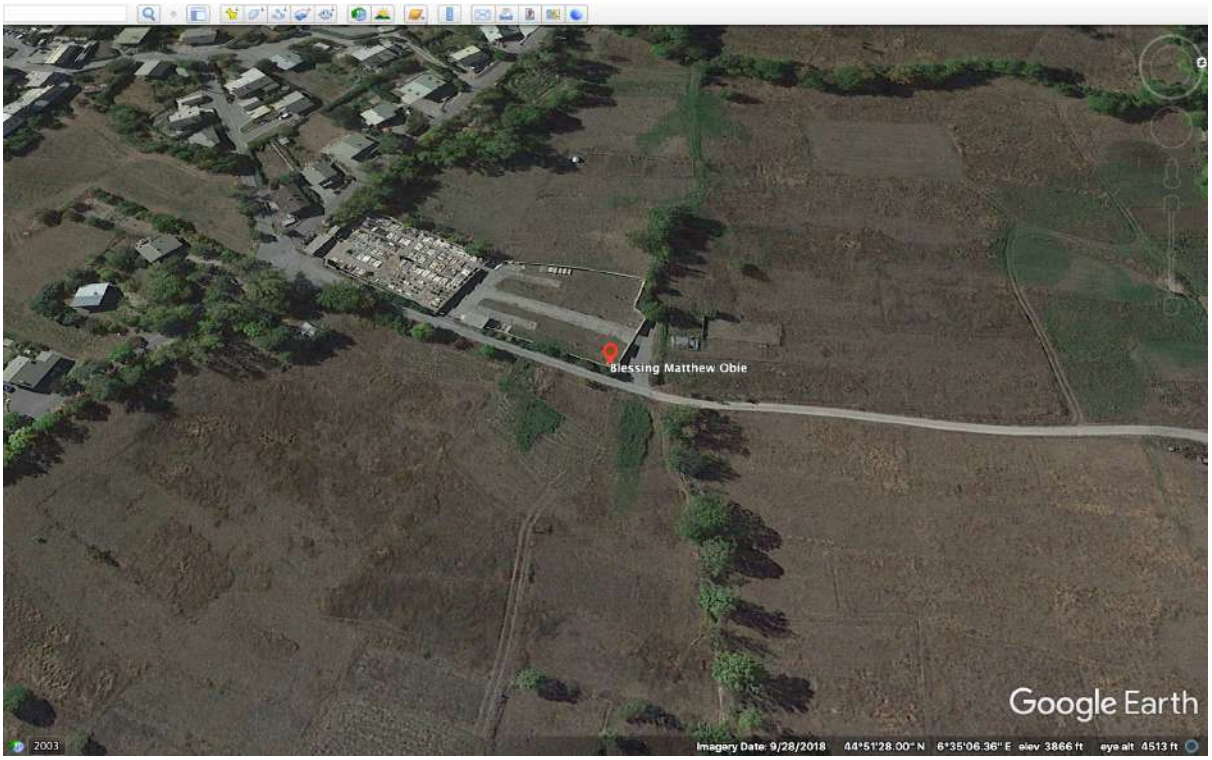

Fig. 2.12 & Fig. 2.13
Found dead: 07/05/2018. Name, gender, age: Blessing Matthew Obie (F, 21). Region of origin: Nigeria. Cause of death: Drowned in Durance river near Briançon (Alps, French/Italian border) while fleeing the police. Source:Vivre/CDS/Francetvinfo/20MFR/IOM/DICI/Liberation. Grave location search: Yari Stilo. Grave localization and documentation: Yari Stilo
Image credit: Google Earth/Yari Stilo

Fig. 2.14 & Fig. 2.15
Found dead: 03/10/2013. Name, gender, age: 9 N.N., Milan Mahari, Delina Mahari, Esrom Mahari. Region of origin: Africa. Cause of death: 365 drowned after a boat from Libya caught fire and sank off the coast of Lampedusa (IT), 155 rescued. Source: VK/NRC/ANP/AiN/Presse/NYTimes/BBC/Guardian. Grave location search: Giorgia Mirto. Grave localization and documentation: Giorgia Mirto, Arkadi Zaides. Image credit: Google Earth/Arkadi Zaides

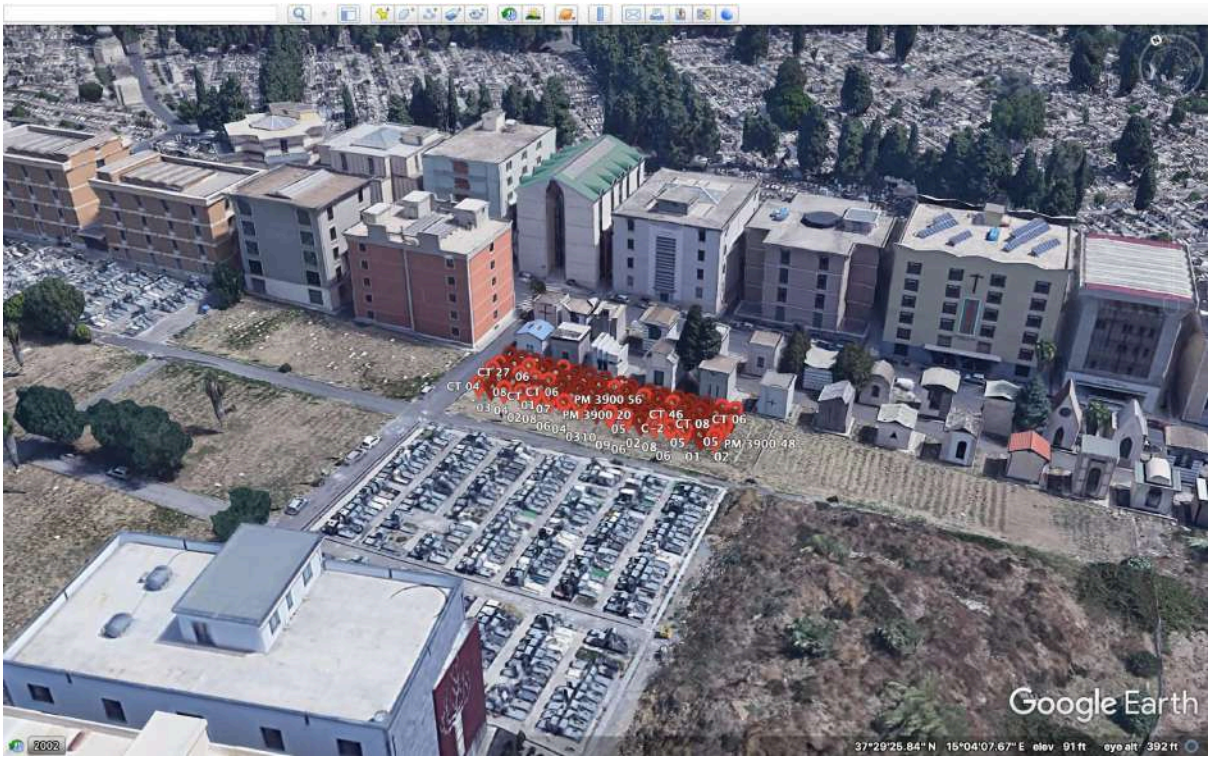

Fig. 2.16 & Fig. 2.17
Found dead: 222 bodies, numerous dates. Name, gender, age:
216 N.N., Muyasar Bashtawi, Touray Kebba, Malik Abdel,
Romini Hossain, Kelle Osman, Mustafa Jumaa. Region of origin: various.
Cause of death: died while crossing the Mediterranean Sea. Grave location
search: Giorgia Mirto. Grave localization and documentation: Arkadi Zaides.
Image credit: Google Earth/Arkadi Zaides

Fig. 2.18 & Fig. 2.19
Found dead: 25 bodies, various dates, kept in container next to the offices of the forensic pathologist Pavlos Pavlidis for approximately 4–6 months, if no claims for the bodies are being reported the bodies are buried at the Sidiro Muslim Cemetery. Name, gender, age: N.N. Region of origin: Various. Cause of death: Died while crossing the Evros River on the Turkish Greek border. Grave location search: Tilemachos Tsolis. Grave localization and documentation: Tilemachos Tsolis, Arkadi Zaides. Image credit: Google Earth/Arkadi Zaides

2.8 The Future of NECROPOLIS: The Invitation

We are mapping the invisible city of the dead - NECROPOLIS - that consists of the marked and unmarked graves of people who did not manage to reach their final destinations in Europe alive. To this end we use a list compiled by the UNITED network, containing tens of thousands of deaths and disappearances of migrant people. We scan the list to identify the places where deaths occurred in proximity to our current location. Using the information available and relevant to the particular local case, we begin online research in an attempt to identify the exact burial location. If online research is not enough, we contact local institutions (city hall archives, detention centers, nongovernmental organizations, local cemeteries, etc.) that might help us to obtain information about a specific case. If our research yields results, we visit the location where the body is buried. Once at the exact location of the grave in question, we identify its geographical coordinates by using Google Maps on our smartphones. If several graves are found at the same location, we measure the coordinates of each grave. We then take a photo of the grave and register all its information. Using the video camera on the smartphone, we also document the walk from the gate of the cemetery to the grave. Finally, when back at our workspace, we enter the graves' coordinates into Google Earth and mark the grave on the map, linking all traces of our research to it (articles, URLs, photos, videos, and maps). This process has resulted in the gradual construction of NECROPOLIS. The cornerstones of this city are the graves of thousands of migrant people still to be found and located.

We embarked on the impossible task of locating the graves of all those on the list. As we are a very small team, we invite others to carry out the same procedure and expand the architecture of the city of the dead. This is our invitation to you.

How can you join our search?

- *Contact us, mentioning your interest in partaking in the search and specifying the location(s) where you would like to conduct it.*
- *We send you information related to the death cases that occurred in the area, drawn from the UNITED list.*
- *You launch online research in an effort to identify the exact location(s) where one or several deceased are buried. If online research is not sufficient, you contact local institutions (city halls, archives, NGOs, detention centers, local cemeteries) that might provide information about the specific case(s).*
- *If your research yields results, you visit the location(s) where the body(ies) has (have) been disposed of.*
- *Once at the exact location of the grave, you identify its geographical coordinates with your smartphone. If several graves are found, you register the coordinates of each grave.*

- *Holding your smartphone horizontally at chest level, you film your way while walking from the entrance of the cemetery to the identified grave(s).*
- *You send us all the gathered information. After adding it to our database a new location in the city of the dead will be established.*

The *Necropolis* team

Chapter 3
Tentacular Thinking in Storied Places: A Deep-Mapping of an Art-Science-Activist Worlding in *Necropolis*

The following chapter continues to address the first part of the *Necropolis* performance, focusing on the practice of grave-location search developed within it, and the notion of the (digital) map, which is central to its conceptualization and stage setup. Instead of offering an analysis of this part, the chapter testifies to a multivocal co-production of knowledge from within this research-based, long-durational project. Rather than writing "about" an art-practice, this text came into being in collaboration *with* an art-practice. As another process of knowledge production is at stake, this text is not single-authored, but rather presents a hybrid constellation of different voices from within the collaborative process itself. At times, it also follows the logic of side thoughts, signaled in footnotes.[129]

The text incorporates contributions from experts in various fields who teamed up with me in the *NecropolisLAB*,[130] investigating from a multi-disciplinary perspective possibilities for posthumous dignity for people who lose their life while crossing borders. In the *NecropolisLAB*, the collaborative practice of the long-term performance project *Necropolis* expanded with an "art-science-activist worlding"[131] of artists, performance scholars, human rights scholars, activists, anthropologists, and specialists in cartography and information systems design. The members met remotely and online on a regular basis and came together physically for research residences, workshops and public presentations in various locations around Europe.

In spring of 2021, *NecropolisLAB* was supposed to be in residence on the island of Lesvos and in the Evros river region in Greece, where a significant part of the research was to take place, but was postponed due to COVID-19. Instead, the *NecropolisLAB* members met remotely and online every two weeks. In March 2021, a workshop on *Necropolis* took place at Ghent University, in collaboration with the research centre S:PAM, several members of the *NecropolisLAB*, and students from diverse fields of study. In June 2021, a workshop took place as part of the Montpellier Danse Festival, again involving several members of the *NecropolisLAB*. In November 2021, an additional research residency and

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[129] This chapter, with significant modifications, was previously published as: Igor Dobričić, Michel Lussault, Philippe Rekacewicz, Christel Stalpaert, Arkadi Zaides, Atelier Cartographique. "Tentacular Thinking in Storied Places: A Deep-Mapping of an Art-Science-Activist Worlding in *Necropolis*", in *Collaborative Research in Theatre and Performance Studies*, Issue 4.2 of *GPS (Global Performance Studies)*, 2021.

[130] The full list of participants in the *NecropolisLAB* included forensic expert Jose Pablo Baraybar Do Carmo, members of Atelier Cartographique Pacôme Beru and Pierre Marchand, activist and scholar Cristina Del Biaggio, producer and curator Simge Gücük, geographer and scholar Michel Lussault, geographer and activist Philippe Rekacewicz, scholar Christel Stalpaert, scholar and dramaturg Kristof van Baarle, and myself.

[131] In her book *Staying with the Trouble*, Donna Haraway proposes the vital model of art-science-activist worldings as a way of staying with the trouble. She highlights the world-making potential of a coalition between art, science, and activism in the struggle for a partial resurgence within a damaged world. This world-making potential is what Haraway refers to as worlding.; Donna J. Haraway, *Staying with the Trouble: Making Kin in the Chthulucene* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2016), 76, 79.

workshop took place in Lyon, in collaboration with the École Urbaine de Lyon of the University of Lyon.

LEGEND (in order of appearance)

NecropolisLAB (representing all contributors to this chapter)

Arkadi Zaides (myself)

Christel Stalpaert (performance scholar at Ghent University)

66.519 registered deaths of refugees or migrants since 1993 (as documented in the *UNITED List of Refugee Deaths* by UNITED for Intercultural Action, June 2025)

Igor Dobričić (dramaturg; voice-over in *Necropolis*)

Philippe Rekacewicz (cartographer, geographer and journalist)

Pacôme Béru, Pierre Marchand, Julie Vanderhaeghen (members of the Brussels-based worker cooperative of cartographic practices Atelier Cartographique)

Michel Lussault (geographer, director of the École Urbaine de Lyon)

Özge Atmış, Sixtine Bérard, Sophie Dedroog, Lore Duvivier, Rojda Gülüzar Karakuş, Amirsalar Kavoosi, Alma Kennedy, Jordy Minne, Daphne Stremus and Ilka Van Bijlen (students at Ghent University that participated in a workshop by the *NecropolisLAB*)

The different voices in this text are marked by different color codes, rendering transparent, from the onset, attribution of authorship within the networked thinking. However, this legend of voices and color codes moves beyond its ostensible neutral and scientific-based use in cartography. In "traditional" cartography, a map is usually provided with a legend, explaining the symbols that appear on it. It permits a better understanding of the symbols used and is an important tool in communicating the meaning of a map in an unambiguous way. In this chapter, however, the legend points at the impossibility of unambiguous thought-ownership. Thinking is never individual. The production of knowledge is always collaborative and never solely a product of the individual. Moreover, as writer Adrien Turel observed, most new ideas are to be found in the past, not in the present or the near future.[132]

Necropolis addresses the *"movements of people who are systematically and brutally stopped by border policies",*[133] *highlighting the choreography that occurs in the social sphere.* The project entails a *"documentary approach to the contemporary geopolitical reality of migration".*[134] Every performance of *Necropolis* is *a preliminary culmination point* in the many-faceted and long-term process, *placing the body and choreography (in its most expansive sense) as key attention points. It*

[132] Adrien Turel, quoted in Arjen Mulder, *Successtaker: Adrien Turel en de wortels van de creativiteit* (Amsterdam: Uitgeverij Duizend & Een, 2016), 18.
[133] Sandra Noeth, "Bodies as Evidence. Arkadi Zaides on his Research, People on the Move, and Brutally Closed Borders", *TIA Magazine,* 2020, 51.
[134] Arkadi Zaides, "NECROPOLIS. Walking Through a List of Deaths", *(W)ARCHIVES: Archival Imaginaries, War, and Contemporary Art*, eds. Daniela Agostinho, Solveig Gade, Nanna Bonde Thylstrup, Kristin Veel, (Berlin: Sternberg Press, 2021), 346.

confronts the local (European) audiences with the deaths of people who perish on the continent's shores by mapping their place of death, performing a grave location search and a walk towards a grave of a migrant person.

The *NecropolisLAB* gathered to imagine another type of movement; the virtual movement of the deceased's loved ones to burial grounds they might never be able to visit physically. A key element on which *NecropolisLAB* members reflected thoroughly is how to acknowledge and document this *vast community of people*. How do we visualize the dead back into the social order with respect for ethical concerns? How do we enable individual and collective mourning over and "with" the dead? How do we activate social and legal shifts from anonymity to identity, from invisibility to visibility, from disempowerment to affirmation? And finally, *how can we use a virtual space and technology to imagine spaces of communal mourning, resurgence and repair,*[135] *not only as a funerary ritual for the family of the dead, but also as a site of commemoration for public acknowledgement of the numerous deaths of migrant people?*

In their participatory research, the members of *NecropolisLAB* engaged and collaborated in a relational way of doing research, researching issues that also affect them. This relational thinking does not allow them to proceed in confidence; rather they consistently cultivate a tolerance for ambiguity. Their thoughts are entangled with their (sometimes conflicting) experiences as spectators during numerous performances of *Necropolis*, with their activist engagement in humanitarian action, their particular scientific and data oriented research and with human rights advocacy. In fact, none of the authors mentioned in the legend can actually be reduced to the words indicated by one color. Rather, these colors are points of connection in the hyphenated thinking of the art-science-activist worlding at work in the co-creative and collaborative praxis of the many-faceted *Necropolis* project. As such, this legend does not represent a consensus of multiple voices in multi-disciplinary thinking. It testifies on the experience of participating in a heterogeneous connection of entities, in a hyphenated thinking, allowing for dissensus to pop up, also within one entity.[136]

The students who participated in the workshop of *Necropolis* (8–19 March 2021) at Ghent University are also part of this art-science-activist worlding and are hence also attributed a color code in the legend. During the workshop, there was more at stake than mere transfer of knowledge. Coached by *NecropolisLAB*-members Pacôme Béru, Christel Stalpaert, Julie Vanderhaeghen and Arkadi Zaides, the workshop setting deliberately challenged a vertical epistemology and reshuffled the hierarchical relation between experts standing "above" - having knowledge of and access to appropriate methods and techniques - and lay persons "below". The students were engaged as active participatory researchers, pressing on ethical issues, and bringing critical issues to the fore from diverse fields.

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[135] Christel Stalpaert, "Choreographic Gestures of Resurgence and Repair: Arkadi Zaides's research-based performance project *Necropolis*", *Performance Research* 26, no. 6 (2022): 102–111, thematic issue "On Repair".
[136] For further discussion on the term "hyphenated", introduced by Christel Stalpaert in the context of her concept of *hyphenated thinking*, see subchapters 3.5 and 5.6.

As the reader might have noticed, the legend that goes with this text not only features multiple authors and their affiliation. It also features the presence of the dead and disappeared migrant people haunting the performance project of *Necropolis.* The reference in the legend to *66,519 registered deaths of refugees or migrants since 1993* points to the main documentary material; the open-source database maintained by UNITED for Intercultural Action network. As of June 2025, when the latest updated version was released, the list included data of *66,519 reported "migrant deaths": refugees and migrants who lost their lives on their way to the continent and in their quest for European citizenship. Most probably, thousands more are never reported. The N.N. in the UNITED list refers to the growing number of dead and disappeared* labeled as nomen nescio, which, as noted in subchapter 2.2, designates a person whose identity has not been determined.

An important aspect of the performance *Necropolis* lies in the choreographic gestures of attending to this community, performed by everything[137] and everyone involved in the research-based performance. Each choreographic journey on stage starts from the very point where the theatre venue is located, and embarks on a navigational choreography with the dead and disappeared, mapping *local cases of migrant border deaths that are mentioned in the list*. The local research preceding every performance is done in close collaboration with local institutions. As such, every reiteration of the performance entails an ever-expanding collaborative practice of *deep-mapping*, generating a "form of jointly dealing with questions of responsibility".[138] As research precedes every performance, data continuously feeds the work, but each staging also updates the research and the list of UNITED. *The haunting presence of these people's dying and disappearance* resonates in the ever-expanding heterotopic space of NECROPOLIS that the performance project generates: the body of data collected, the physical and choreographic movements of bodies - human and more-than-human - *the voice-over by dramaturge Igor Dobričić*, amplifying the *accounts of the dead and disappeared, sometimes retrieved from oblivion, most of the time anonymised and made forgotten … .*

Placed alongside this deep-mapping of the ever-evolving heterotopia of NECROPOLIS, the legend also functions as an ironic rem(a)inder of *the resolutely flat perspective to which we have become habituated when mapping the earth and its inhabitants. As the British geographer Stephen Graham explained in his book Vertical, this flat perspective holds a perceptual as well as a political failure, "for it disinclines us to attend the sunken networks of extraction, exploitation and disposal that support the surface world."*[139] Reflecting on the entanglement of human and nonhuman matter opens up a new perspective on what "dead" matter evokes, allowing missing bodies, dead bodies, body parts, and the mass of decomposed bodies to be recognized. This text hence also testifies to a thinking

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[137] We consider the choreographic gestures in *Necropolis* as human-bound and more-than-human-bound. After all, posthuman theory has challenged and rearticulated what the human is, how it moves and how it becomes-with matter, also in performance studies (Stalpaert, van Baarle and Karreman, 2021).
[138] Noeth, "Bodies as Evidence", 51.
[139] Cited in Robert Macfarlane, *Underland: A Deep Time Journey* (Penguin Books, 2019), 13.

together in the storied place of NECROPOLIS, the city of the dead that erupts along the performance project, where traces of deceased migrants reverberate from beneath the surface of European territory.

Any text reduces the deep-listening in conversation and the networked thinking-with-things to sequential words on a flat surface. Interruptions, hesitations, silences, the breath-taking in between, … all of these are absent in this line-up of words. A linear text ruins relationality. It converts the interchange of human and more-than-human connectivity to brief, stilted fragments of individual thought. And yet, despite the unmappability of thought, this text engages in a deep-mapping of the art-science-activist worlding at work in the heterotopia of NECROPOLIS. Voices respond in different but interrelated formats: words, quotes, critical maps, visuals, and the blank spaces in between. In the deep-mapping of a heterotopia, thinking operates as a relational engagement. Knowledge is produced in co-creative uncertainty, cultivating response-ability. It is an engagement with what Donna Haraway called "tentacular thinking".[140] Four concepts - deep-mapping, storied places, tentacular-thinking-with-things, and art-science-activist worlding - provide an orientation device in the meandering tracks of these thoughts.

Who owns these thoughts then?

Instead of proceeding confidently to one conclusion or a set of instructions to follow, this text hopes to connect ideas to particular artistic, social and cultural practices and to engage in response-ability. It attempts to generate a cloud of thought work, in which it is hard to distinguish oneself from the mesh.

3.1 *Necropolis* as Heterotopia

The starting point for every performance of *Necropolis* is an aforementioned *list of registered deaths and disappearances of people who lost their lives on their way to Europe*. Arkadi Zaides and his team delve into the practice of *deep-mapping*, *counter-forensics*[141] and *deathrights* to retrieve the remains of those dead and disappeared which remain to this day mostly unacknowledged. Wherever Zaides and his team are in residence with their long-term and research-based performance project, the list is scrolled through. Local research begins from that particular location, in close collaboration with staff from local art institutions and/or volunteers who assist in approaching authorities, hospitals, archives and local experts, in order to gather further information on the names, gender, age, and origin of the deceased, the place and circumstances of his, her or their death, and the location of his, her or their burial place. A growing community of grave location searchers team up to identify the exact burial locations, they visit the locations where the bodies are buried, pay respect to the graves and perform small rituals. On location, the exact geolocalisation of each grave is registered and a walk to the location is filmed, following a pre-set protocol. These data continuously feed the performance. As

[140] Haraway, *Staying with the Trouble*, 31–34.
[141] See also Arkadi Zaides, "*Necropolis* - Counter Forensic Practices for Mourning the Othered Dead", *Rekto:Verso* (Ghent) 2022, thematic issue "Post Mortem".

such, the archive of *Necropolis* is ever-expanding and continuously growing, since with every performance, another part of the invisible city of NECROPOLIS is retrieved. Every research-based performance of *Necropolis* is a public presentation within the long-term performance project. *Necropolis* does not terminate when the curtains are closed. *"The project has no clear beginning or end. … It doesn't stop, because this kind of killing doesn't stop and will probably escalate."*[142]

The dead and disappeared, *the very same people that Europe tries so desperately to keep out of its territory*, haunt *an ever-expanding counteremplacement, as an inverted reality of European Utopia*. On the basis of their *deathright*,[143] the dead and disappeared migrant people are granted citizenship[144] of NECROPOLIS, the city of the dead. Eventually, in the course of the research-based performance project *Necropolis*, a whole invisible city resurges from the underland. It houses tens of thousands of bodies that are absent, *neglected*, silenced, *invisibilized*, drowned, *left unaccounted for, buried without proper documentation*, … and it is expanding constantly. As the voice-over in the performance recounts about NECROPOLIS:

> *We are rebuilding it out of what and whom we choose to remember. We are maintaining it by sharing our memories with others and we are letting it crumble into disrepair by which we individually and collectively forget.*

NECROPOLIS resurges as a Foucauldian heterotopia of neglected bodies that can be imaginatively thought and remembered. This heterotopian affirmation is not about displaying a non-existent reality, but about displaying a hidden dimension of reality that can be imagined and that disturbs our superficial or indifferent thoughts. The continuously growing list of 66,519 registered deaths and disappearances of people assembled by UNITED for Intercultural Action is the starting point for displaying *this hidden dimension of reality, and with every performance, this heterotopic space expands. Throughout the performance project, we are engaged in mapping an invisible city of the dead, the ever-expanding heterotopia we call NECROPOLIS.*

> *This map, which is the territory, is stretching in all directions in the space-time interrelation mythologies, histories, geographies, and anatomies of those to whom we have granted entrance.*

In that sense, NECROPOLIS is also what geographer Jean-Marc Besse called a "cartographic heterotopia": a concrete, metaphysical spatial rendering of a hidden dimension of reality. It is the act

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[142] Noeth, "Bodies as Evidence", 52.
[143] The term "deathright" used by Igor Dobričić in the voiceover of the performance deliberately echoes "birthright", suggesting a claim or entitlement conferred not at the start of life but at its end. It foregrounds the ethical and political imperative to recognize the dignity, identity, and presence of those whose deaths are rendered invisible by systems of border control, displacement, and bureaucratic erasure. In this sense, deathright operates both as a critical concept and as a practical orientation: it demands acknowledgment, memorialization, and the active reclamation of rights for the deceased.
[144] Christel Stalpaert (12:40 PM Feb 18) Amade M'Charek and Sara Casartelli suggested establishing relational citizenship for these unacknowledged dead migrants or refugees through forensic care.

of deep-mapping that "makes visible the unknown that nestles in the real",[145] *exploring "the stories of places that lie beneath the surface."*[146] *This practice of deep-mapping differs from the "flat tradition" of geography and cartography, and the largely horizontal worldview that has resulted from it. The cartographic heterotopia that comes with the deep-mapping practice unsettles the boundaries between nations and territories, also rendering less clear the boundaries between life and not-life. It is from this heterotopic space that voices call upon us and haunt us as a collective body.*

> *A dark, warm, damp network of underground passages interrelating decomposing left-overs, assembling all the corpses, hundreds, thousands of them, into a sprawling landscape made of hardened cartilage and leathered skin into a rising architecture built on bones. One shared organism. A promise of an eternal life as exuberant and exhilarating as a violent death at sea.*

3.2 Deep-Mapping

During the first part of the performance of *Necropolis* Arkadi Zaides, together with choreographer and researcher Emma Gioia, navigate through Google Earth on stage. *With their backs to the audience, they use the technical equipment displayed on the table before them: computers as well as sound, light, and video operating devices. Google Earth is projected onto a large screen at the back of the stage. Zooming in on a red marker, similar to those that indicate one's destination on Google Maps, the two operators/performers reveal the location of a grave in a cemetery* (fig. 3.2)*. Slides disclose archival information, including the exact geographical coordinates of the grave, the name, age, and country of origin of the deceased (if known), and the cause of death. At times, spectators visit the graves through video recordings made by those who located them. As Google Earth zooms out farther and farther, more red markers appear, gradually filling the territory hovered above. In this way, it is as if the names of deceased migrants are extracted from the underworld and surface from the satellite images. The performers/operators on stage relate the names from the list to a real space via localization on Google Maps. They locate the places where migrating bodies ceased moving and reveal them as crime scenes to the audience. Zooming out and in, again and again, the data is materialized in words and numbers on the screen. The repeatedly zooming out and in on new locations becomes a repetitive choreographic phrase, assembling the names of the list in what a voice-over during the performance calls a "growing funerary encyclopedia".*

As geographer and critical cartographer Jeremy W. Crampton has argued, methods of gathering data for map-making have changed considerably. Technological advances have re-valued the spatial project of mapping. *Platforms such as Google Earth and Google Maps are primarily associated with*

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[145] Jean-Marc Besse, "Cartographic Fiction", in *Literature and Cartography: Theories, Histories, Genres*, ed. Anders Engberg-Pedersen (Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press, 2017), 31.
[146] Macfarlane, *Underland*, 18.

Fig. 3.2
Necropolis (2018 ongoing) by Arkadi Zaides.
A whole invisible city resurges from the underland.
Image credit: Institut des Croisements

the acceleration of mobility, allowing users to orient themselves and navigate almost[147] *anywhere on the globe. Many migrant people who embark on dangerous routes towards Europe also use these platforms to orient themselves during their journeys. At the same time, these platforms inherit the legacy of maps and surveillance technologies originally designed for military and territorial control.*[148] Yet, as Crampton equally observes, the use of maps as an instrument of power, as a means of conveying and controlling geographical space, has not changed. "Mapping is involved in *what* we choose to represent, *how* we choose to represent objects such as people and things, and *what* decisions are made with those representations. In other words, mapping is in and of itself a political process."[149]

Methods of mapping *were formalized and widely deployed at the time of European colonial and imperial projects.* The spatial project of Christopher Columbus, for example, is "a classic episode in the history of cartography and colonialism."[150] It is a project that actually neglected and erased the presence of existing indigenous people and places: "By reinscribing new identities on these places, and specifically Western Christian names, Columbus effectively created a new space that was compliant with Western beliefs, and which permitted it to be governed and controlled."[151] Despite opportunities for counter-mapping practices, seeking to contest dominant relations of power, current technologically advanced methods of mapping such as Google Earth and Google Maps still operate in accordance with the colonial project to discover, claim, and name space. *Inserting the coordinates of the graves of people who perish on migratory routes on these devices is a counter-mapping strategy that seeks to hijack them with information about the ultimate immobility - the deaths of those whose patterns of movement are "endangering" European colonial foundations. However, it is also not a coincidence that the action of the two performers/operators, as they scroll through data and geographical terrain via a digital platform, as well as the repetitive action of zooming in and out, are also reminiscent of actions that often take place in surveillance control rooms, thus resonating with surveillance practices to which the deceased may have been subjected while still alive. Hagar Kotef observes the divide between "(1) the citizen, as a figure of 'good,' 'purposeful,' even 'rational,' and often 'progressive' mobility that should be maximized; and (2) other(ed) groups, whose patterns of movement are both marked and produced as a disruption, a danger, a delinquency."*[152] *She demonstrates how concepts of freedom, security, and violence take form and find justification via different and differentiated regimes of movement, also in mapping strategies.*

Seeing more deeply, we detect the blind spots in cartography. There is no such thing as an innocent map. For instance, *the first map of France was commissioned by the King of France.* It was

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[147] Arkadi Zaides (4:35 PM Feb 15) Palestine was not labelled on the mapping service of Google Maps. See also https://www.theguardian.com/technology/2016/aug/10/google-maps-accused-remove-palestine, accessed August 20, 2025.
[148] Zaides, "NECROPOLIS. Walking Through a List of Deaths", 350.
[149] Jeremy W. Crampton, *Mapping: A Critical Introduction to Cartography and GIS* (Chichester: Wiley-Blackwell, 2010), 25.
[150] Ibid., 48.
[151] Ibid., 47–48.
[152] Kotef, *Movement and the Ordering of Freedom*, 63.

an expression of power rather than a neutral depiction. *A map is an intellectual construction rather than a faithful representation of reality. The map's promise of comprehension is misleading, its mimetic relation with reality is deceptive. There is more to spatial, social, or symbolic realities - among others - than the map represents. One could say that the performers/operators extract the bodies' origin and ancestry from the body of data available, but, whereas extraction is usually connected with the deathly processes of colonial capitalism, extracting labor from bodies, minerals and oil from the ground, trees and water from the land, and fish from the sea, this mode of extraction generates factual knowledge and is an invitation to rethink the place of ethic and dignity within (geographical) information systems.*

This deep-mapping practice is a kind of "radical cartography" (known also as "counter-cartography", affiliated also with "critical cartography").[153] *What we call "traditional cartography" claims to be an exact science based on reliable data, and mapmakers pride themselves on creating a neutral and faithful image of reality. This approach ignores the political and social uses of maps and their role in propaganda or protest. "Radical cartography" could be described as a rich combination of sensitivity, art, sciences, geography, politics and social activism and militancy. It is a very committed and resolute mapping that serves the struggle for social and spatial justice and to denounce questionable economic and political practices* (fig. 3.3).

For decades, traditional cartography had two assumptions: it claimed to be an exact science, based on reliable and scientific data, and also claimed to give a "neutral" and "faithful" image of the world, of reality. We know, and critical cartographers have shown on many occasions, that this was simply an illusion - even if it has nourished the belief for generations of geographers, cartographers and other map producers along the modern and contemporary historical periods. Either they help a powerful king to behold the full extension of his kingdom and colonies in order to keep control of it, or they simply help to locate people and elements of the geography. They were answering the question "where are we" but avoided addressing the question "how the world really functions".

Deep-mapping as a radical cartographic practice also "challenges epistemological trends ... and the 'flattening' of knowledge systems".[154] *As an epistemological concept, deep-mapping has been conceived of by French philosophers Bruno Latour, Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari, and is manifest in speculative realism. In her article Going Deeper or Flatter: Connecting Deep-Mapping, Flat Ontologies and the Democratizing of Knowledge, the artist-researcher Selina Springett explores the opportunities of deep-mapping as "a methodology and aesthetic choice" which relates to a cross-boundary approach to place.*[155] *In fact, deep-mapping inscribes itself within diverse consciously*

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[153] Critical cartographers, such as John B. Harley, Denis Cosgrove, Jeremy W. Crampton, André L. Mesquita, Chris Perkins and Rob Kitchin, a.o., investigate in a critical manner the ways in which maps reflect and perpetuate relations of power, usually in favor of a society's dominant group.
[154] Selina Springett, "Going Deeper or Flatter: Connecting Deep-Mapping, Flat Ontologies and the Democratizing of Knowledge", *Humanities* 4, no. 4 (2015): 623.
[155] Ibid., 624.

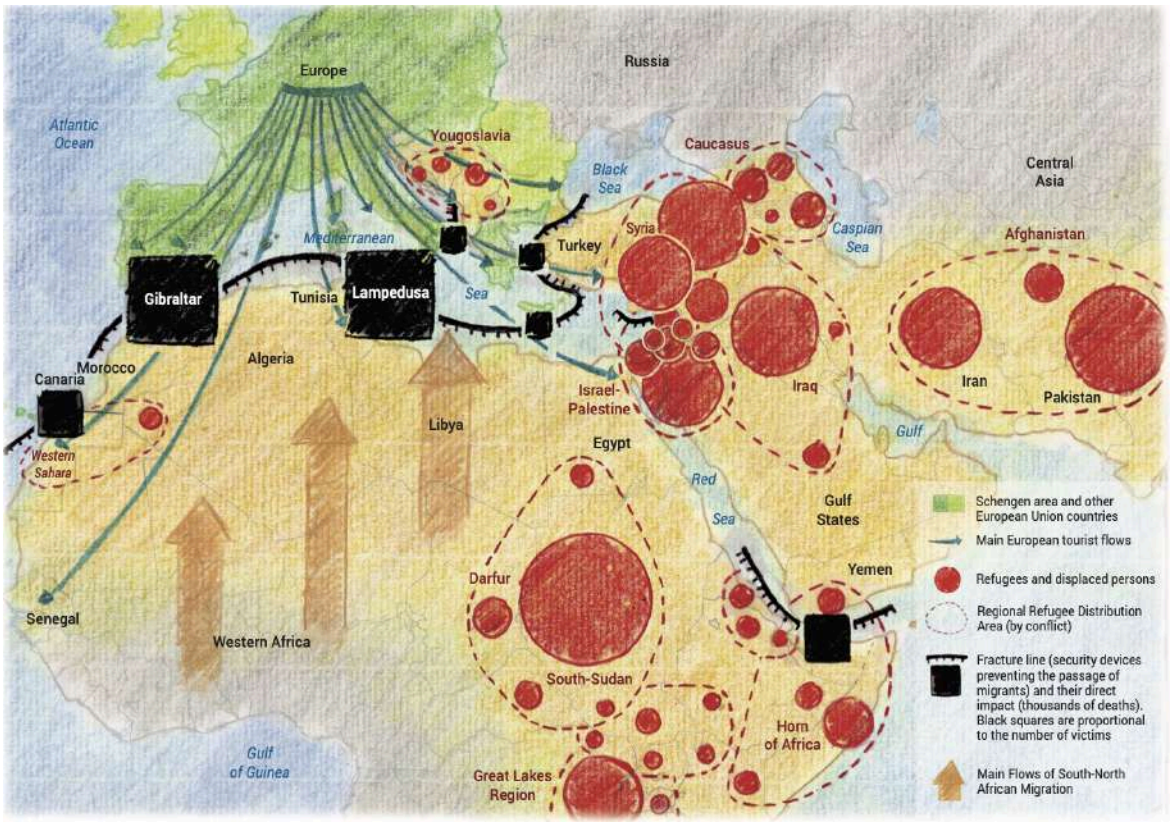

Fig. 3.3
Guerres, réfugiés, migrants… Et touristes (2016).
Image credit: Philippe Rekacewicz

performative acts[156] *to counter traditional mapping strategies. Creating a deep map of NECROPOLIS is in that sense "an act of undoing, a performative act that connects diverse disciplinary modes of enquiry and production, and blends ethics with aesthetics."*[157]

Moving along the performers'/operators' navigational choreography with Google Earth, we realize and recognize that "as twenty-first-century people, we are products of a map-saturated culture that privileges that spatiality of the grid."[158] *With the arrival of digital maps, we are even used to a navigational use of maps, rather than the old-school mimetic use.* The information that the deep- and counter-mapping reveals, namely the ultimate immobility of the deceased migrant people, is in sharp contrast with our *swift navigational movements, along vast areas of green, blue, brown and yellow zones, leaving even country borders aside. We acknowledge the misleading nature in the consistency of a represented unity of a whole world. This suggestion of a "whole world" is in sharp contrast with the gates, walls, borders and fences the migrant people face in Fortress Europe.*

Bruno Latour calls the zoom effect of Google Earth "an assemblage as artificial as a fake perspective in a stage set."[159] *Indeed, the slider tool of Google Earth simulates a smooth and continuous process of zooming in and out on the Earth's surface. This unified continuum is misleading, however, as the "zoom" is in fact an illusion composed of editing techniques such as fades, blends, and morphs. No human eye could maintain such a steady view across these different focal length scales. The engine provides the impression of a smooth and "neutral" optical transition between micro- and macro levels, with only the pixels becoming increasingly small. However, as Latour aptly observed, the zoom effect also masks its spatial politics. The visual formula of the zooming device follows the same principle as cartography, and is "similarly founded on the concept of a range of data whose projection depends entirely on the metric selected." Besides, the continuous fluidity in changing focal lengths is given from a fixed position and indicated with the cursor, simulating a detached vision, neglecting any ecological or political context. The fluid and slick experience of this "montage effect"*[160] *in Google Earth makes us forget the specific agenda of Alphabet Inc., its parent company. Like prestidigitators use the public fascination to discreetly set up their tricks in plain light, those kinds of tools embed in their conception and their context of production intentions that are not initially displayed. Often related to data-mining and profiling toward an economic profit, they target and impact bodies and territories, if not always physically, at least in their representations, and at a large scale.*

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[156] Les Roberts, "Deep Mapping and Spatial Anthropology", *Humanities* 5, no. 1 (2016): 1–7; Springett, "Going Deeper or Flatter".
[157] Springett, "Going Deeper or Flatter", 629.
[158] Ricardo Padrón, "Hybrid Maps: Cartography and Literature in Spanish Imperial Expansion, Sixteenth Century", *Literature and Cartography: Theories, Histories, Genres*, ed. Anders Engberg-Pedersen (Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press, 2017), 208.
[159] Bruno Latour, "Anti-Zoom", *Olafur Eliasson: Contact*, ed. Suzanne Pagé et al. (Paris: Flammarion, 2014), 121, http://www.bruno-latour.fr/sites/default/files/P-170-ELIASSON-GBpdf.pdf, accessed December 2, 2025.
[160] Ibid., 121.

Latour suggests that "good artists do not believe in zoom effects."[161] *Likewise, in Necropolis, while navigating Google Earth, the voice-over reminds us:*

> *As we keep moving above, around and through NECROPOLIS, let's not forget that everything we see in this landscape of death is made of ourselves. ... From the North a glacier of border regulations and bureaucratic classification. From the West a narrow gorge of falsified history of conquest and enslavement, of abuse and exploitation, of greed and betrayal.*

The voice-over in Necropolis testifies of the barbaric flip side of the map as a tool of civilization and its entanglement with the colonial project to discover, claim, and name. "There is no document of civilization which is not at the same time a document of barbarism", the voice-over says, quoting Walter Benjamin's *Seventh Thesis on the Philosophy of History*, *in which he states that "civilization is a crime scene".*[162] *As such, the deep mapping during the navigational choreography with Google Earth also reveals how the territorial map not only hides its representational strategies, but also its own genesis: the conquest of territory and the violent history of European expansionism, colonialism and imperialism. Mapping deeply, we encounter the name places on Google Earth as vexed places, being disturbed and burdened*[163] *with the barbaric flipside of the Western history of civilization. "Refuse to investigate the crime,"* the voice-over continues, *"and barbarism will return to haunt you. It is important to acknowledge that this most obvious truth about history is the one you are most inclined to forget."*

But how can one investigate this crime? How do we counter the politics of the zoom effect? How do we connect rather than detach? *Following Latour, a potential antidote to the reductive situated view of the zoom effect, is the technique of layering and "connectivity" without reduction.*[164] *Connectivity, Latour says, sidesteps the visual reduction by reintegrating "the matter of space-time; a route or trajectory."*[165] *Connecting through a particularly traced path counters the reductive zoom-tool interaction. In other words, deep-mapping not only generates a critique of "flattening" and racializing knowledge systems. As an aesthetic tool, it also provides alternative cartographies, crossing and connecting temporal, spatial and disciplinary boundaries. Flat Earth becomes a storeyed or multilayered place, which associates rather than reduces situated views. It not only reveals the specific reductive politics of the zoom-effect, but it also provides an alternative of storied places. Narrative plays a central role here. In the book Terra Forma, Frédérique Aït-Touati, Alexandra Arènes and Axelle Grégoire explore these "potential cartographies". They propose to invent cartography from the "point of life", rather than from the "point of view". Proceeding from the blank*

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[161] Ibid.
[162] Walter Benjamin, *Illuminations*, trans. Harry Zohn (New York: Schocken Books, 2007), 256.
[163] Haraway, *Staying with the Trouble*, 133.
[164] Latour, "Anti-Zoom", 124.
[165] Ibid., 123.

spaces in maps, their adventure constitutes "a new creative imagination of dwelling", generating a subversive geo-aesthetics of the Anthropocene.[166]

Connecting the routes or trajectories of migrant people with occidental expansion in the past, Necropolis detects a political failure in our expansive, horizontal world-view that is also part of the history of cartography. We become aware of the violence with which map-making is intertwined. This is "the principle of ruin and destruction" that lies "at the heart of the cartographic drive", as illustrated by writer Jorge Luis Borges in On Exactitude in Science (1946).[167] *Borges pushes the utopian ideal of cartographic representation to the absurd limit of copying and imitating an already existing territory in an absolute map on a scale of one to one. In this short story, the utopian idea of Empire is the "production of a whole new hallucinatory reality".*[168] *What resurges in the blank spaces on the Euclidian fields of the territorial map are the corpses haunting these spaces, and with them resurge storeyed and storied places.*

3.3 Storeyed and Storied Space

"When confronted by such surfacings it can be hard to look away, seized by the obscenity of the intrusion", says the British writer and walker Robert Macfarlane.[169] *Indeed, seeing and listening deeply, through the cracks caused by the deep-mapping practices in Necropolis, and from the storeyed places laid bare, the migrant persons' individual stories resurge.*[170] *The storeyed place becomes a storied place. Following environmental philosopher and anthropologist Thom Van Dooren, the understanding of a place as storied highlights "the way in which places are interwoven with and embedded in broader histories and systems of meaning through ongoing, embodied, and inter-subjective practices of 'place-making.'"*[171] *The cracks revealed by deep-mapping allow for individual stories to resurge and emerge* (fig. 3.4)*. The topographic names of Jabbeke, Merksplas, Vottem, Lampedusa, LeNiamh, Dattilo have become more than objective spatial locations on a map.*

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[166] Michel Lussault, "'Dessiner une terre inconnue', une géoesthétique de l'Anthropocène" (*"Drawing an Unknown Land": A Geo-aesthetics of the Anthropocene*), *AOC - Analyse Opinion Critique*, July 17, 2019 (article in French), https://aoc.media/critique/2019/07/17/dessiner-une-terre-inconnue-une-geoesthetique-de-lanthropocene/, accessed December 2, 2025.

[167] Jorge Luis Borges, "On Exactitude in Science", *Collected Fictions*, trans. H. Hurley (London: Penguin Books, 1998), 325.

[168] Bruno Bosteels, "From Text to Territory", *Deleuze and Guattari: New Mappings in Politics, Philosophy, and Culture*, eds. Eleanor Kaufman, Kevin Jon Heller (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1988), 132.

[169] Robert Macfarlane, *Underland*, 14.

[170] Christel Stalpaert (5:34 PM Feb 18) The notion of resurgence attributes the faculty of repairing to 'dead' material. The verb 'to repair' might still be considered an all too human-centred action. We borrow the concept "resurgence" from anthropologist Anna Tsing (179–192) who describes "persistent resurgence" as "regeneration" (179). To resurge is an intransitive verb: it is characterized by not having or containing a direct object. One can only undergo a resurgence. We deliberately (mis)use the verb 'to resurge' in an active way, acknowledging agency in interconnected matter, also in processes of resurgence that are at stake in *Necropolis*.

[171] Thom Van Dooren, *Flight Ways: Life at the Edge of Extinction* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2014), 67.

Fig. 3.4
Arkadi Zaides at the Sidiro Muslim Cemetery (Greece).
In this graveyard, hundreds of bodies found at the Evros River crossing from Turkey to Greece were buried without any record of their exact resting place. The gravestones - most of them empty - were added later and correspond neither to the number of buried bodies nor to their actual locations. Image credit: Tilemachos Tsolis

From the disturbed underland, the tragedy of transmigrants at the refugee tent camp stories[172] *the vexed place of Jabbeke. The shipwreck on 03/10/2013 stories the vexed place of Lampedusa; the shipwreck on 8/8/2015 stories the vexed place of LeNiamh, the shipwreck on 11/7/2015 stories the vexed place of Dattilo, … Beneath the seemingly flat surface of the vast mass of green, brown, yellow and blue on Google Earth, at the bottom of the sea, on the shores, and inland, a mass of decomposed bodies and body parts stories European territory. Vexed places become storied places.*

In a sense, this resurgence is also an emergence: by bringing "hidden facts" to light, it transforms them by this action. The graves, bodies and displacements that appear on maps are not analogous to what they are or were; they are changed by this appearance, they are transformed both as debatable facts and as supports for narratives and interpretations. The UNITED list is not only a point of departure or inspiration in Necropolis: it remains present in the final work, but it is also transformed and reworked in order to highlight its morbid choreographic qualities - the lives that came to an end it seeks to document. This process - transforming documents into embodied gestures - directly engages the dichotomy between the dead and the living within the contemporary geopolitical reality of migration. In doing so, Necropolis implicates spectators in this confrontation, urging them to recover their own sense of accountability.

3.4 Tentacular Thinking

Acknowledging storied places means thinking-with these corpses and re-thinking-through their singular narratives. It is an exercise in thinking together in a thick presence and a deep time, with tentacles[173] *extending towards a troubled past and a precarious future. In this tentacular thinking, all our senses are engaged: we hear the stories of the hopes of migrant persons when secretly boarding lorries heading for the UK by ferry, of them undertaking extremely dangerous journeys in the hope of reaching the UK, often at the instigation of gangs of human traffickers, and of them experiencing critically low temperatures and oxygen levels in the lorries during their journey to the UK, … Van Dooren would call this deep-listening "a powerful attunement to storying"*[174] *through the cracks in the seemingly promised land of Europe. This tentacular thinking is also tentative thinking, in the sense of speculative thinking. As Haraway put it, the myriad of tentacles in tentacular thinking "weave paths and consequences, but not determinisms; they are both open and knotted in some ways and not others."*[175]

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[172] Christel Stalpaert (8:20 PM Feb 18) We deliberately use the verb 'to story' here, instead of 'to narrate', as Haraway's concept of a vexed place is building on Thom van Dooren's theory of storytelling, developing "a nonanthropomorphic, nonanthropocentric sense of storied place" (in Haraway, "Staying with the trouble" 39; see also Van Dooren 63–86.).

[173] The Latin *tentare* refers to the verb to feel. The etymology of the word 'tentacle' hence also refers to a tacit 'production' of knowledge. The Latin *tentaculum* refers to 'feeler', indicating that the tentacular are not disembodied figures.

[174] Van Dooren, *Flight Ways,* 63–86.

[175] Haraway, *Staying with the Trouble*, 31.

From the Google Earth image of our planet floating in space, the performers/operators gradually zoom in to this virtual representation of geography until one can recognize the cemeteries that grave location searchers have outlined. They zoom in further, to discover the particular architecture of the graveyard from above. They can zoom further into the exact points where the graves are located, and hover above them. Poststructuralist anthropologist Tim Ingold called this hovering, god-like perspective the Global view of the environment. He characterizes these global views as opaque, massive, objective, detached, distant, centripetal, confrontative, visual and total. "Images like these of the Earth", Bruno Latour says, "from out in space led us to believe that we humans live on the surface of a globe."[176] *Ingold valorizes the alternative of a spherical view, which is transparent, soft, subjective, close, surrounding, centrifugal, acoustic, and experienced.*[177]

At times, the Global gaze from above is downscaled by such a spherical view in Necropolis. A video capturing the walk of the grave location searchers from the cemetery gate towards that same grave appears on the screen. This embodied practice - though also mediated - is in sharp contrast with the surveillance device of Google Earth, zooming in on a grave from above. The video documentation of the walks to the graves allows us to get closer to the remains of the deceased, both in a literal and a figurative sense of the word, from a human-eye perspective. The visit to the cemetery, and the walk towards the grave, as respectful gestures to each grave identified, strive to articulate an embodied investigation.

Moreover, the entanglement and confrontation of these two perspectives - the "gaze from above" with its imperial roots and the embodied, situated knowledge proposed by Haraway - are crucial, and pave the way toward a liminal space that interrelates the mythologies, histories, geographies and anatomies of individuals who lost their lives on the way to Europe. Ingold would call this "a dialectic of engagement and detachment".[178] *Latour would call this an "interface between the deep earth below and the vast expanse of space above. … It has a topography very different from that of a planet viewed from space. The result is this enigmatic and idiosyncratic figure some scientists have called Gaia, inside which all beings are enmeshed."*[179] *Thinking through the entanglement of human and more-than-human matter in Necropolis opens up a new perspective on what "dead" things evoke, allowing missing bodies, dead bodies, body parts, and the mass of decomposed bodies to matter. It is a "mode of thought in which discrete boundaries are sensed as permeable."*[180] *This tentacular thinking-with-things is also a tacit production of knowledge; it is "a hugely consequential, mind-and-body-altering sort of commitment."*[181]

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[176] Bruno Latour, *Critical Zones*, an Exhibition at ZKM Karlsruhe 2020, https://zkm.de/en/bruno-latour-on-critical-zones, accessed August 31, 2025.
[177] Tim Ingold, "Globes and Spheres. The Topology of Environmentalism", *Environmentalism. The View From Anthropology,* ed. K. Milton, London: Routledge, (1993), 209–218.
[178] Ingold, "Globes and Spheres", 269.
[179] Latour, "Critical Zones".
[180] David Bohm, *On Dialogue* (London: Routledge, 1996), xvi.
[181] Haraway, *Staying with the Trouble*, 34.

3.5 Art-Science-Activist Worlding

Donna Haraway's concept of tentacular thinking does not pretend to emerge from one source of thinking. A myriad of tentacles is needed, with many appendages. It is a co-creative thinking-with and thinking-through bodies and things. In fact, the concept of deep-mapping, as an aesthetic tool enabling a reflection of epistemologies, crosses not only individual, but also and preferably disciplinary boundaries.[182] *We could say that the long-term research-based performance project of Necropolis is involved in what Haraway calls an art-science-activist worlding that generates a mode of thought in which the discrete boundaries between disciplines and research domains are permeable. The art project renders an understanding, an imagination, but also the creation of a world teaming up with science and activism. This* "art-science-activist worlding"[183] *transcends mere interdisciplinary scientific research, as another production of knowledge is at stake. The hyphens in Haraway's concept indicate that these worldings produce knowledge in relationality. Knowledge is not produced in one of the fields of the "arts", "science" or "activism", with the other field functioning as an auxiliary science. It is exactly in the connecting hyphens that knowledge resurges.*

This particular production of knowledge from a hyphenated position was experienced in the workshop of *Necropolis* conducted at Ghent University from 8–19 March 2021. The workshop gathered *NecropolisLAB* members and *an interdisciplinary group of students* who worked on a joint project together. The workshop was initiated by *Christel Stalpaert* and *Arkadi Zaides*. In one session, *Julie Vanderhaeghen and Pierre Marchand from Atelier Cartographique contributed their expertise.* Embedded in Professor and human rights defender Eva Brems's university-wide[184] optional course "Human Rights: Multidisciplinary Perspectives", the artistic practice of *Necropolis* was brought into the human rights framework. Together, we investigated opportunities for posthumous dignity for border-related migrant deaths. The points of discussion we embarked on were the following: *How do we imagine alternative platforms for individual and collective mourning? What are the rights of one's death to be investigated and do the same rights apply to the community of the undocumented dead? What are the legal and ethical concerns when revealing information about deceased migrant people and making it part of the public domain? And can a work of art transgress and challenge these conceptions?*

The hyphenated position of everyone and everything involved was clear from the start. Not only was the research in the workshop conceptualized and realized through diverse fields (art, science and

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[182] Springett, "Going Deeper or Flatter", 623–636.
[183] Michel Lussault (10:47 AM Feb. 13) To enrich the references, we could also mention the series of exhibitions in Karlsruhe, where Bruno Latour devoted three projects to this question of the staging of thought connected to things (and vice versa). In cooperation with the philosopher Frédérique Ait Touati, he also conceived the conference-performance *Viral*, where the authors attempt to show on stage the intertwining of humans, non-humans, the living and the dead, things, etc… https://nanterre-amandiers.com/en/evenement/viral-bruno-latour-frederique-ait-touati/, accessed August 27, 2025.
[184] This meant that students from across the entire university could register for this course, as well as international exchange students.

activism) and diverse disciplines such as Law, Conflict and Development Studies, Performance Studies, Human Rights Studies, Public Administration and Management, and Communication Sciences, but our position as student, teacher, artist, researcher, software developer, also shape-shifted throughout the workshop. Our mind-set was recalibrated repeatedly, as our thinking unfolded in a network of interconnectivity.

Thinking through our hyphenated position, we experienced the internal conflict between ethical issues of privacy and our urge to acknowledge and document *this vast community of people, of migrant deaths,* the urge to activate social and legal shifts from anonymity to identity, from invisibility to visibility, from disempowerment to affirmation. When collecting personal data, privacy rights and confidentiality should be respected, with a view to ensuring the safety and security of the migrant people whose information is collected and shared, as well as that of their family members. In collecting and handling information containing these persons' personal details, searchers need to act in accordance with applicable law and standards on individual data protection and privacy.[185] A legal expert consulted during the process emphasized that consent itself cannot be given by the dead. *In this sense, the research unearthed a grey zone: on one side, there is the imperative to dig, identify, and document, while on the other side there is the impossibility to obtain informed consent from those whose bodies and traces are being addressed. This ethical and legal tension emphasises why transparency and dissemination of information are crucial for those engaged in activism, linking documentation to broader social and political change. For activists with whom we came in contact, sharing information about migrant people's grave locations remains essential, as public access to this data can shift debate and influence public opinion.*

While as participants in the workshop we were never pushed into activism, we gradually became engaged as grave location searchers, activated by the knowledge generated during the art-science-activist worlding of the workshop. Thinking through the lack of European jurisdiction for systematic forensic investigation, the diversity of death management systems for migrants, and burial rituals as humanitarian mechanisms, we found ourselves entangled in a thinking-with-the-dead. During the workshop, *some anonymous deaths in the UNITED list* were identified and some graves localized. We intervened directly in the *data of the UNITED list, correcting entries, reporting missing information back to the UNITED network, and locating graves.* Retrieving the identity of someone previously recorded as *N.N.* became an act of attending to the dead, and we began to refer to these migrant deaths by their given names rather than as cases, thus creating an intimate connection. This process revealed the fundamental nonseparateness of humans from the more-than-living world and highlighted the inescapable interdependencies and shared contingencies - the fragile, uncertain conditions that bind the living to the tens of thousands of migrant border deaths.

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[185] See: https://fra.europa.eu/en/eu-charter/article/8-protection-personal-data, accessed August 27, 2025.

> *The city of the dead is this city, and this city is theirs. As you walk out onto the street, remember. Every blade of grass pushing its way through the pavement is growing from their rotten flesh. Living trees are their tombstones. The air that you breathe is their sigh. You inhale and they are inside you. You exhale and the wind blowing through the branches speaks in their voice. Please, listen.*

Necropolis brings into focus the suppressed "community of the dead", confronting us with our obligations as a community of the living. As such, Necropolis reclaims what forensic anthropologists M'charek and Casartelli called the deceased migrant's "relational citizenship".[186] *The citizenship that Necropolis articulates goes beyond state governance. It acknowledges people "as part of a human community" and is "bounded by ideas about humanity".*[187] *Here the living are accountable for the dead: "bodies become people, individuals who belong to the community, rather than objects or waste to be disposed of."*[188] *Feeding the data with local cases and performing these serene acts of commemoration enabled us to be implicated, recovering a sense of accountability. The "students" among us have decided that the migration narrative would not be part of our workshop report, because it is not our story. To be graded for that story would be at odds with the intimate relation that we maintained with these dead during the workshop.*

Allowing the migrant people entrance into the city of the dead, and making them members of the community of NECROPOLIS, we put into practice the concept of relational citizenship. In connecting with the collaborative long-term performance project of Necropolis we unfolded a practice of "speaking resurgence to despair".[189] *When we performed our rituals of commemoration as temporary grave location searchers, we teamed up with "cold" data and bodies, activating "processes of resurgence" and creating "conditions for ongoingness".*[190] *These are of unquantifiable value in the scorched, parched, drowned and infected landscape we currently inhabit.*

These ever-expanding collaborative practices, this "form of jointly dealing with questions of responsibility",[191] did not guarantee an instant result. *When the report and subsequent grading system were uncoupled from the migration narrative, from a neo-liberal perspective, time seemed to be "wasted". However, it was this non-gradable and non-quantifiable production of knowledge that had a profound impact on our ability to see and listen differently.* While we are used to scientific thought effectively moving forward, this participatory thought seemed to unfold slowly but insistently,

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[186] Amade M'charek, Sara Casartelli, "Identifying Dead Migrants: Forensic Care Work and Relational Citizenship", *Citizenship Studies* 23, no. 7 (2019), 738.
[187] Ibid.
[188] Ibid.
[189] In her New Materialist rendering of Anna Tsing's concept of resurgence, Donna Haraway values art for its "practices for resurgence" (Haraway, *Staying with the Trouble*, 82), and its "speaking resurgence to despair … in the face of extermination" (Haraway, *Staying with the Trouble*, 71, 76).
[190] Haraway, *Staying with the Trouble*, 37.
[191] Noeth, "Bodies as Evidence", 51.

"staying with the trouble, yearning toward resurgence,"[192] sticking to the thickness of the present. "In a time of accelerating abstractions and seamless digital representations, it is this insistence on facing the inconvenient messiness of daily, corporeal experience that is perhaps most radical of all."[193]

And this participatory thought does have an accumulated effect. An ever-growing number of migrant persons' border deaths are acknowledged as part of the human community of NECROPOLIS. At this moment, NECROPOLIS, the city of the dead which is constructed through the *Necropolis* project, houses *over one thousand and two hundred citizens*. This means that *more than 1200 graves have been located and visited to become part of the Necropolis project's growing archive. The community of grave location searchers continues to expand, cultivating conditions for* continuity. Much as *Necropolis* does not stop when the curtains of the theatre are closed, *thinking does not stop when a text is written. We can not recompose the dead in Necropolis, but we can attend to them, honor them, and let their stories insist upon us. In our intimate connection with the counteremplacement of NECROPOLIS, their narratives resurface, pressing into our awareness. What is at stake, then, is a persistent resurgence of the dead in this barren landscape we inhabit - a presence that remains active, insistent, and irreducible, demanding recognition, memory, and responsibility.*

> *Necropolis, its map and its body are made out of dead data that we collect and memorize. We are rebuilding it out of what and whom we choose to remember. We are maintaining it by sharing our memories with others and we are letting it crumble into disrepair by which we individually and collectively forget.*
> *About the others, those still alive outside, we know nothing.*

[192] Haraway, *Staying with the Trouble*, 89.
[193] David Bohm, *On Dialogue*, xi.

Chapter 4
Haunting Spectres and Spectating Ghosts: A conversation about *Necropolis*

The *Necropolis* performance is composed of two parts in a juxtaposition. The first consists of a journey into NECROPOLIS, the city of the dead, discussed in detail in chapters 2 and 3. In the second part, onstage together with Emma Gioia, we simulate a forensic ritual with sculptures resembling human remains, while the audience sees a figure - a composite body - rising and gazing at them from the projection screen.

This chapter unfolds as a conversation in two voices about this figure, investigating the specific spectrality it performs - both from my own perspective as a maker and performer and that of the spectator, whose role is represented by performance scholar Livia Andrea Piazza. The conversation originated within the framework of the course *Replicas and Resurrections*, proposed by Piazza at the Institute for Applied Theatre Studies in Giessen, where I was invited by the students to explore with them the question of how to perform a document. Livia Andrea Piazza's current research focuses on narratives of returning from the dead and artistic strategies that reframe the notion of resurrection. Embarking on this exchange with her thus felt natural, as it not only deepened the conceptual framing of *Necropolis*, but also proved mutually instrumental to the development of our respective research trajectories.[194]

Livia Andrea Piazza: I find it interesting that we are writing about *Necropolis* and about ghosts, but we are not focusing on the first part of the show, which is full of ghosts. Perhaps we should address them first.

Arkadi Zaides: Indeed, the first part of the performance is in the presence of countless ghosts because 99 percent of the individuals on the UNITED list are mentioned without identifying details, neither dead nor alive.[195] This, I would argue, traps them in a ghostly state. The trap appears when one observes the ways individuals die systematically and disappear at all stages of their attempted journeys into the European continent. Also, once in Europe, individuals die as a result of police persecution, lack of access to healthcare, or suicide, among other causes. This growing community of people subjected to traumatic deaths and disappearances of various kinds are a ghostly collective whose spirit should haunt the European continent. The list compiled by UNITED is incomplete, primarily gathering data through news clippings that often focus only on the incident of death, such as a shipwreck

[194] This chapter was previously published as: Livia Andrea Piazza, Arkadi Zaides. *Haunting Spectres and Spectating Ghosts - A Conversation about Necropolis*, in *Performance Research*, Vol. 29, no. 7: *On Ghosts*. Forthcoming from Abingdon: Taylor & Francis (2025).
[195] The last updated version issued in June 2025 lists 66,519 victims who died at the borders of Europe since 1993.

carrying hundreds of people, for example. Some of the identifications emerge much after the death itself, and forensic investigations are often not carried out properly, leaving many in a state of anonymity. Our field research seeks to locate the graves of these individuals and, when possible, to uncover details about their death. Moreover, people surviving the journey risk becoming like the 'living dead' in the analysis of political theorist and philosopher Achille Mbembe.[196] This condition has been described to us by people who are now residing in Europe without papers (our collaborators in the *Necropolis-United* project) who have testified that they feel like they are dead while being alive.[197] Consequently, people who die at the European borders could be perceived as 'deader than dead', to quote the title of one of the works by choreographer and performer Ligia Lewis.[198] The bodies of those who perish - whether their deaths and disappearances are ignored, erased or rendered invisible - continue to live in a state of absence, denied both recognition and the ability to haunt.

LAP: This aspect raises a question: what conditions are necessary to make haunting possible in the frame of the theatre? The deep-mapping practice[199] of the first part of *Necropolis* makes the deceased and their burial grounds visible, so that the audience realizes that they are - or that we all are - living among these dead (fig. 4.2). Notwithstanding this, we cannot encounter them, because we are living. This aspect is well analysed in a thesis I read recently, which uses "Of Other Spaces" by Foucault to analyse *Necropolis*: the cemetery, according to Foucault, as a public space is freely accessible, but as visitors, we, the living, will always be excluded from it, because its temporal dimension belongs to the dead. The spectators of *Necropolis* seem to be invited into a similar gap, also finding themselves in a cemetery as living visitors[200].

AZ: Generally, as Foucault described, the trajectory of Western culture has been to gradually move the cemetery from the city centre towards the periphery[201], pushing its own dead out of sight, and in a way also depriving us of proximity with them. The deaths and disappearances of people on migratory routes are even more marginalized and made less noticeable. As a society, we are complicit in their marginalization, and we must confront our collective responsibility in making the dead disappear from our sight and our memory. So, "what needs to get done", in Lewis's words, "is to set up another

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[196] Achille Mbembe, "Life, Sovereignty, and Terror in the Fiction of Amos Tutuola", *Research in African Literatures* 34, no. 4 (2003): 1.
[197] The *Necropolis-United* research project (2022–2026) is outlined in detail in chapters 5 and 6.
[198] Ligia Lewis, *deader than dead* (2022), dir. Ligia Lewis, perf. Ligia Lewis, Jasper Marsalis, Jasmine Orpilla, Austyn Rich. Premiere: Contemporary Art Library, Cordova, November 2022.
[199] See chapter 3; Igor Dobričić, Michel Lussault, Philippe Rekacewicz, Christel Stalpaert, Arkadi Zaides, and Atelier Cartographique, "Tentacular Thinking in Storied Places: A Deep-Mapping of an Art-Science-Activist Worlding in *Necropolis* (2017 Onward)", *Global Performance Studies* 4, no. 2 (2021).
[200] Linda Gao-Lenders, *In dieser Totenstadt Zum Verhältnis heterotopischer Räume und unbetrauerbarem Leben in der Performance Necropolis von Arkadi Zaides*, BA thesis, Unpublished (2024).
[201] Michel Foucault, "Of Other Spaces: Utopias and Heterotopias", trans. Jay Miskowiec, *Architecture / Mouvement / Continuité* (1984 [1967]), 6.

Fig. 4.2
Arkadi Zaides, *Necropolis* (2018 ongoing). Emma Gioia and Arkadi Zaides navigating through Google Earth.
Image credit: Eike Walkenhorst

relation to these communities of the dead."[202] The challenge is not only to mourn them, as Lewis points out, but to actively engage in re-establishing a relationship with them, ensuring that their suffering does not remain confined to the periphery, but demands presence and acknowledgement in the heart of our shared humanity.

LAP: How do you set up the relation with the dead in *Necropolis*? And what kind of relation is possible, in the theatre, with this specific community of the dead?

AZ: Ghosts are figures of the undead. In sociologist and writer Avery Gordon's understanding, they "appear when the trouble they represent and symptomize is no longer being contained or repressed or blocked from view."[203] In the first part of the performance, their presence emerges vividly, as Christel Stalpaert describes in her article "Choreographic Gestures of Resurgence and Repair". She highlights how the process of uncovering graves (continuously obscured by the familiar landscapes of Google Earth) creates a ruptured space where the unacknowledged is brought to light.[204] In the second part of *Necropolis*, the undead find a material form, brought on stage as a disassembled corpse. On the empty part of the table, sculptures recalling human remains are meticulously placed, to be subsequently projected onto the large screen behind.[205] This is our way to perform a forensic ritual, a homage to the many migrants who died at Europe's borders and never received such rites. This figure - conjuring the cadaver and the spectre - sets a very particular state of being in relative proximity with the dead. This is also a radical dramaturgical shift that breaks with the cold navigation through the digital landscapes of Google Earth that takes place in the first part of the performance.

LAP: May I describe this moment from the point of view of someone sitting in the audience? The last graveyard to which the audience is brought is a mass grave in Sicily, where numerous buried individuals are marked with small - and sometimes absent - paper sheets. On the screen, the city of the dead fades out on this image. You stand up and leave the stage to re-enter, bringing in a chart containing body parts, and put the first piece, resembling a knee, on the empty part of the table. This object is doubled on screen, where it is projected from four different perspectives. Emma Gioia joins, and both of you move the rest of the body parts, one by one, from the chart to the table. The pieces present different shapes, sizes and consistencies: some appear to have gone through fire and some to have been in the sea water for a long time. There are moss, plastic, flesh, bones, tissue, hair and algae. Both of you are very focused and handle the pieces with care. From the outside, you seem to be following the logic of an archive: each piece is laid on the table to be observed and received, before

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[202] Ligia Lewis, *Choreographies of the Archipelago: Artists in Conversation*, a conversation with Ligia Lewis and Arkadi Zaides, Institute for Curatorial Practice in Performance (ICPP) at Wesleyan University, December 5, 2020.
[203] Avery Gordon, *Ghostly Matters: Haunting and the Sociological Imagination* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1997), 16.
[204] Stalpaert, "Choreographic Gestures of Resurgence and Repair", 102–111.
[205] The sculptures are crafted by performance artist and sculptor Moran Senderovich, https://moran.sanderovich.com/, accessed August 27, 2025.

thinking about what it might be and what its position would be in a human body. In this way, you and Gioia seem to act coherently with the forensic representation offered for every body part on the screen, yet your gaze does something different: it appears to be bearing witness to the remains you handle.

In the 'Afterthought' to his book *Singularities*, André Lepecki reflects on Eyal Weizman's observations about forensic aesthetics replacing the centrality of the witness' position; and convenes on the fact that the two terms are "essentially incompatible" as the affective detachment inherent to forensics can only coincide with the demise of the figure of the witness: "it is less an aesthetics than an anaesthetics,"[206] writes Lepecki. I think, in *Necropolis*, the figure of the witness finds a body in the two performers making a hole, so to speak, in the aesthetics of forensic. How you assemble the remains of the body, staying silent, looking at every piece, never looking at each other or the audience: You look to remember.

AZ: We simulate the process of scanning the body parts but, as opposed to what forensic experts do as part of their investigation, we touch them with our bare hands (fig. 4.3). In this choice, there is a break from classical forensics and a transition from the representation of such investigation towards theatricalisation. For the artists and researchers at Forensic Architecture, counter-forensics represents a civic practice.[207] It aims at reversing the institutionalized forensic gaze, enabling individuals and organisations to take control of evidence production. However, with forensic architecture's methodologies, when presented in the visual arts context, spectators, I would argue, fall into the illusion of becoming masters of the data, and as such, they can hardly be haunted by it. In the first part of *Necropolis*, this illusion is interrupted by the walks, which we film at every cemetery and then project on the screen on stage. The embodied aspect of filming from a first-person perspective - holding the smartphone at chest level and walking towards the graves - breaks the detached spectatorship usually proposed by forensic architecture installations, and forces the audience to virtually visit those graves that most of them would otherwise never visit, and to do so collectively.

Moreover, we navigate Google Earth in a way by which one literally loses the north. Spectators testify that this type of navigation creates a slight feeling of nausea. Then we collectively land into this body, into this flesh, touching and moving it**.** In this way, the detachment from the data is disrupted, and the analytical gaze is collapsed even further into a visceral experience.

In her article *Information Overload,* art historian and critic Claire Bishop emphasizes the necessity of processing information through the body of the maker, thereby enabling its questioning and recontextualization through embodiment. She writes: "the richest possibilities for research-based installation emerge when pre-existing information is not simply cut and pasted, aggregated, and dropped in a vitrine but metabolized by an idiosyncratic thinker who feels their way through the

[206] André Lepecki, *Singularities: Dance in the Age of Performance*, (New York: Routledge, 2016), 171.
[207] Forensic Architecture, *Counter Forensics*, https://www.ica.art/counter-forensics, accessed August 31, 2025.

Fig. 4.3
Arkadi Zaides, *Necropolis* (2018 ongoing). Emma Gioia and Arkadi Zaides piecing together the body parts.
Image credit: Eike Walkenhorst

world."[208] We move slowly and reorganize the sculpted parts, gradually assembling something that could look like a body (fig. 4.4). Through this body, I can think together with the notion of "spectral infrastructure", a term coined by the freethought collective, as a complementary lens to forensics.[209] If the aesthetics of forensics is about making visible - so visible that the one who watches has an overview - in the aesthetics of a spectral infrastructure the spectator is no longer positioned in the comfort of the analysis; rather, they might be unsettled. If we follow the temporary definition by cultural theorist Irit Rogoff, a member of freethought collective, it has to do with "how to follow the less visible", an infrastructure "so invisible, intangible, and at the same time, having a haunting presence one cannot get away from."[210]

LAP: As you attend to the body parts, I see you "following the less visible" and, by doing so, you are establishing a form of address that differs from the one reserved for the ghosts in the first part of *Necropolis* and seems to be enabled by the corpse being composed on stage. In *Arriving Too Late for Resurrection*, Jalal Toufic writes about addressing the dead in a scene of *Death Sentence* by Maurice Blanchot, where a cadaver is being called. In the novel, the reader sees the cadaver through the perspective of the narrator, who, having arrived too late at the deathbed of J., utters her name. In Toufic's imagination, the call of the narrator interrupts J.'s indefinite fall, which is inherent in the notion of cadaver: "from *cadere*, to fall, die" - this fall is the dead's grave (felicitously, the French *tombe* means grave but is also the indicative present tense of the verb *tomber*, to fall)."[211] Unlike the living, who are called implicitly when their name is uttered - for instance, by mentioning them, in Toufic's perspective, the dead can only be called explicitly. He pictures the scene from the perspective of the cadaver being called: "How strange, wonderful to be called again, to be treated other than an object."[212] Toufic understands this form of addressing the dead as a possibility of encountering them: J. will shortly be resurrected by the narrator in the novel by Blanchot, because he can look into the eyes of the corpse, not shutting them immediately "in dread of the reflection of the undeath realm in them".[213] Yet, in *Necropolis*, you cannot call most of the dead, you cannot utter the name of someone whose identity is not determined. So, I wonder if what you and Gioia perform - what is left for you to perform with regards to these dead - has to do with answering "the impersonal call of both the event and of those who will have not been there"[214] as transitory ears and mouths, in Lepecki's

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[208] Claire Bishop, "Information Overload", in *Artforum* 61, no. 8 (2023), https://www.artforum.com/features/claire-bishop-on-the-superabundance-of-research-based-art-252571/, accessed December 24, 2024.
[209] freethought collective is composed by Irit Rogoff, Stefano Harney, Adrian Heathfield, Massimiliano Mollona, Louis Moreno and Nora Sternfeld, http://freethought-collective.net/, accessed August 31, 2025.
[210] Irit Rogoff, Massimiliano Mollona, "Irit Rogoff and Massimiliano Mao Mollona on freethought collective and 'spectral infrastructure'", *BAK basis voor actuele kunst*, April 16, 2021, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=8Lg9Jvyb0CU, accessed July 30, 2024.
[211] Jalal Toufic, *Vampires, An Uneasy Essay on the Undead in Film* (Sausalito: The Post-Apollo Press, 1993), 218.
[212] Ibid.
[213] Ibid., 221.
[214] André Lepecki, *Singularities*, 175.

Fig. 4.4
Arkadi Zaides, *Necropolis* (2018 ongoing). Emma Gioia and Arkadi Zaides piecing together the body parts.
Image credit: Eike Walkenhorst

understanding of witnessing.

AZ: It is a body made of bodies, and this has something to do with the impersonal: it is distorted, deformed, and no clear features can be seen, but still it is perceived as a human body. As such, it also evokes the state of uncanniness, of something familiar and similar to us but not exactly us. Then, the falling cadaver stands up. When we finish assembling the body on the table, the latter is translated digitally and, through avatar technology, appears to be moving on the screen (fig. 4.5). At first, the audience sees a close-up and the perspective zooms out, so that the assembled body is seen in its entirety. At the same time, Igor Dobričić's voice comes back to guide the audience towards the end of their journey in the city of the dead and says: *Let me assume you stayed to meet them.* On the screen, the hands and the feet move slightly, the figure turns to lie on its side and then onwards until it slowly gets up. It's not immediately a successful attempt. There is a lot of stumbling and dangling: it needs to use an arm as leverage. Frédéric Pouillaude describes this scene through a quote by Tatsumi Hijikata: "a corpse standing up at the risk of its own life."[215] Hijikata was describing Butoh, and Pouillaude sees in the movement quality of the figure rising at the end of *Necropolis* something recalling it. Then the figure rises up from its back to stand, and turns and looks at the audience. Dobričić speaks his last line just before the figure disappears from the screen: *They brought you to this barren land depression at its very heart, to ask you a question: how did we end up here?*

In a way, over the course of *Necropolis*, we travel from the notion of ghost to that of spectre by assembling this corpse. In the first part, the undead populating NECROPOLIS are spirits rather than bodies. They are ghosts whose presence is suggested by graves, which usually mark an absence. The cadaver brings to the stage a different materiality, shifting the focus to the spectre as a figure of appearance, linked to vision and perception. This is the form through which the audience meets the inhabitants of NECROPOLIS in the theatre, as a spectre who, at the end, takes upon itself to rise "at the risk of its own life" and to gaze at the audience from its empty eye sockets.

LAP: As in 'spectre' coming from *spectrum*, from the Latin *specĕre*, 'to look', whose root is also in *spectāre*, at the origin of 'spectator'. The spectre can look back, actively establishing a relationship with the audience. I remember the look from the empty eye sockets: as spectators, we cannot simply look back into the spectre's eyes. When I did, my gaze plunged into them. Moreover, it's interesting to think about this figure through the lens of Butoh, because I perceived the figure as an aggregate, striving to compose itself in a form and resisting it at the same time. While I was watching it stumble and rise, it was difficult for me to ascribe a definite meaning to it, and this created an interruption, especially considering that, until that moment, these dead are a ghostly presence, and this is the first body connected to the topos of the stranger that appears in the performance. This suspension of

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[215] Tatsumi Hijikata cited in Frédéric Pouillaude, "A Choreographic Move Towards Real Visceralism", lecture, *Towards Documentary Choreography - Encounter #1,* symposium, Beursschouwburg, December 7, 2023.

Fig. 4.5
Necropolis (2018 ongoing) by Arkadi Zaides. While the body is being examined, its scan - rendered through avatar technology - appears on the screen behind. Image credit: Eike Walkenhorst

meaning is powerful, when juxtaposed to the public debates constructing the migrant as a figure: In *Strange Encounters*, Sara Ahmed remarked that no matter whether right-wing or liberal, these narratives always "take for granted the stranger's status as a figure that contains or has meaning."[216] And if we focus on the current European news, this meaning is quite specific: the stranger is made visible either "as a threat or as a tragedy".[217]

AZ: This figure is essential to push us out of the domain of cerebral analysis and to enable a place of haunting. It embodies all those bodies which are still to be found, all the identities that are still to be determined. It is disjointed and fractured, and as such, it offers a space for many to look at the audience. In this sense, the corpse shifts the representation from the individual ghosts to a spectre made of many.

LAP: In *Necropolis*, you decided to represent the victim through this impersonal form. This gesture differs from the way you worked in *Archive*, where violence is represented only through the actions of the perpetrators, as you archive them in your body. In that piece, only the violent actions of the settlers in the West Bank are represented on stage, not their effect on the Palestinian population.

AZ: In *Archive*, my focus of investigation is on the perpetrators - Israeli settlers and soldiers - and their daily management of the occupation. In her article *Palestine as Symptom, Palestine as Hope: Revising human rights discourse,* the theorist and filmmaker Ariella Aïsha Azoulay analyzes a series of visual campaigns that accompanied the declaration of human rights, designed to 'educate' the public on how to recognize these rights. Emphasizing how photography and visual archives are deeply entwined with histories of imperial violence, Azoulay critiques the narrow framing of rights violations and proposes broadening the scope. She argues that we should include not only the rights of victims but also the rights of perpetrators not to be indoctrinated into committing these violations, as well as the rights of onlookers to understand and witness these events without the selective filters imposed by those in power.[218]

In *Necropolis*, the focus shifts primarily to the victims and spectators (including the audience in the theatre, myself, and Gioia) to forge a relationship between these two groups. First, by unearthing the victims who should haunt our collective consciousness, and then by constructing the composite body of the dead. This extends the unearthing effort into a choreographic gesture, enabling a new kind of relationship with the spectators, and this encounter transforms the theatre into a space of haunting.

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[216] Sara Ahmed, *Strange Encounters: Embodied Others in Post-Coloniality* (New York: Routledge, 2000), 4.
[217] Esther Peeren, "Fantasmi a perdere. Le vite spettrali dei migranti", *Ritorni spettrali: Storie e teorie della spettralità senza fantasmi*, eds. Ezio Puglia, Massimo Fusillo, Stefano Lazzarin, Angelo M. Mangini (Bologna: Il Mulino, 2018), 83–99, translation by Piazza.
[218] Ariella Aïsha Azoulay, "Palestine as Symptom, Palestine as Hope: Revising Human Rights Discourse", *Around 1948: Interdisciplinary Approaches to Global Transformation*, ed. Leela Gandhi and Deborah L. Nelson, Critical Inquiry 40, no. 4 (2014): 332–364.

LAP: This moment is marked by a temporal shift, which supports the conditions for this encounter. In the first part of the performance, the audience is presented with events that have already happened; it is always an after-the-fact spectatorship. The actions you and Gioia perform, such as navigating the map or assembling the corpse, are all related to past events. When the spectre rises, the audience witnesses something happening before their eyes, in the theatre where they are and in the present time.

As the living, we are still and will always be excluded from NECROPOLIS. Yet, the representation of a rising spectre in *Necropolis* opens up a temporality to imagine a relation with the dead. In a reflection on the necessary conditions for haunting, cultural theory scholar Esther Peeren writes that "the *hantise* is not something every spectre performs on their own, it is something fundamentally relational."[219] I like to think of the empty eye sockets and loosely jointed body parts of the spectre in *Necropolis* calling for more than one relation as the root for the specific kind of haunting it might perform.

AZ: The process of composing this collective body resonates with the ancient legend of the Golem and the modern tale of Frankenstein - stories that grapple with humanity's overreach in attempting to create life-like figures. Yet, as in both the Golem and Frankenstein narratives, the act of creation carries an inherent tension: the figure ultimately surpasses and confronts its creators. Similarly, in *Necropolis*, it is this no-body - this haunting body of countless bodies made dead and disappeared - that we strive to animate.

LAP: And because it is made of the bodies of those who died on their journey to Europe, this gesture in *Necropolis* has two irreconcilable effects. Because the spectre is impersonal, as spectators, we cannot fall into any sentimentality trap[220] as that described by Laurent Berlant, in which emotions take the place of responsibility. At the same time, because it is an assemblage of decomposing body parts, we cannot not perceive its affect.

AZ: In his lecture *A Choreographic Move towards Visceral Realism*, Frederic Pouillaude speculates on the possible meaning of the term 'visceral realism' introduced by Roberto Bolaño in his novel *The Savage Detectives.* Pouillaude reflects on the uncomfortable conjunction of fact and emotion it suggests - an oxymoron that evokes a longing for an impossible fusion. He proposes that "the artistic desire for an accurate representation of certain facts never separated from the presentation of the guts that receive them, ... the factual, always appears melted with the swarming blur of our interiorities, thoughts, possibilities and moves."[221]

By constructing the dismembered, decomposed body and allowing it to rise from its continuous fall to gaze back at the audience, we confront spectators with the raw interiority of the body itself,

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[219] Peeren, "Fantasmi a perdere", 84.
[220] Lauren Berlant, "The Subject of True Feeling: Pain, Privacy, and Politics", *Cultural Pluralism, Identity Politics, and the Law*, eds. Austin Sarat, Thomas R. Kearns (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2001), 49–84.
[221] Pouillaude, "A Choreographic Move towards Real Visceralism".

forcing this ongoing catastrophe to land directly in their guts. Happening at the very end of the performance, this confrontation produces a moment of hesitation in the audience - uncertainty about how to respond, accompanied by a pervasive sense of disquietude, with no applause. The presence of the “ghosts” of those presented in the work becomes visceral and tangible, disrupting conventional codes of theatrical reception, resonating with a broader Western European tendency toward dissociation from the dead, and extending the idea of visceral realism into a collective, affective experience.

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Chapter 5
Necropolis-United: Hyphenated Infrastructure of Mourning, Memory, and Activism

Stemming from the *Necropolis* performance (see chapters 2–4), the *Necropolis-United* project continues the struggle to confront the silence surrounding migrant deaths and disappearances at Europe's borders; a silence produced not only by the sea, the desert, or detention camps, but also by bureaucracies that render these lives invisible. The project is a collective effort to build an information infrastructure that does more than record and register: it seeks to mourn, honor, and dignify both the deceased and the disappeared, as well as those who continue to live in conditions of systemic marginalization and administrative limbo. At its core, *Necropolis-United* treats archiving as a form of response against necropolitical mechanisms that produce death - through systemic violence, institutional erasure, or symbolic exclusion. As Achille Mbembe has argued, such mechanisms culminate in "the maximum destruction of persons and the creation of death-worlds, new and unique forms of social existence in which vast populations are subjected to conditions of life conferring upon them the status of living dead."[222]

The foundations of this project were laid in the *NecropolisLAB,* a series of workshops and gatherings where artists, scholars, students, human rights activists, and forensic experts came together to confront the ongoing tragedy of deaths and disappearances at Europe's borders. Their reflections are outlined in detail in chapter 3. A few years later, this early momentum crystallized into a formal alliance with several key partners. These included S:PAM (Studies in Performing Arts and Media) at Ghent University, led by Prof. Dr. Christel Stalpaert, which provided the project's academic anchoring; UNITED for Intercultural Action, the European anti-fascist network represented by Geert Ates, which maintains the *UNITED List of Refugee Deaths* - the dataset that forms the backbone of the *Necropolis* performance; Atelier Cartographique, represented by Pacôme Béru, Pierre Marchand and Julie Vanderhaeghen, whose expertise in software development and user-centered design served as the project's technological anchoring; as well as third parties: University of Lyon, represented by the geographer Michel Lussault, and the artistic structure Institut des Croisements, represented by myself. In alignment with my doctoral research proposal, and with the artistic practice developed within the *Necropolis* project as the driving force behind the proposal, these collaborations enabled the securing of structural support from the Research Foundation - Flanders (FWO) for the research infrastructure project *Necropolis-United: Integrated Data-Platform of Dead and Missing Migrants in Europe (I005522N, 2022–2026).* What follows is an attempt to illuminate both the solidarities, innovations, and methodological openings that emerged through the group's encounters, as well as the tensions and ethical frictions shaping the project's development.

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[222] Mbembe, "Necropolitics", 11–40.

5.1 Digital Activism and Memory Practice

Necropolis-United began with the goal of consolidating a digital archive of deaths and disappearances at Europe's borders, drawing on the *UNITED List of Refugee Deaths* and related databases. Over time, it expanded into a broader inquiry into cartography, testimony, and collective thinking, shaped through conversations among concerned communities. The project became as much about how we remember as about what we choose to commemorate. Along the way, debates around vocabulary, equitable resource allocation, authorship, and institutional complicity became central ethical and methodological concerns.

Scholar and independent producer Martín Zícari, who soon became the project coordinator, demonstrates in his Ph.D. dissertation how digital activism is deeply intertwined with on-the-ground protest practices, forming a complex ecology of resistance. Examining the activist actions following the 2014 enforced disappearance of 43 students in Ayotzinapa, Mexico, he shows how affective memory circulates across digital platforms, demonstrations, and artistic expressions to create what he calls "choreographies of remembrance", "a multidisciplinary tool to turn attention towards the mnemonic processes that human rights activism puts forward, especially through the unarchiving of past repertoires and their affects."[223] For Zícari, the public's multifaceted response to the Ayotzinapa disappearances - through digital media, demonstrations, and artistic expression rooted in a long lineage of protests since the late 1960s - illustrates how memory becomes an active force of resistance. This interplay between digital platforms and embodied protest practices not only amplifies visibility but also facilitates a transmedia memory politics capable of subverting state narratives and mobilizing solidarity across space and time.

In line with Zícari's reflections, the *Necropolis-United* project's evolving methodology treats the work of remembrance and political intervention as interdisciplinary, embodied, and ecologically distributed. The creation of a digital data platform is not conceived as a fixed repository but as a living, participatory "infrastructure of remembrance". In this sense, *Necropolis-United* also aligns with cultural studies scholar Silvana Mandolessi's emphasis on dynamic archives and mnemonic assemblages in the digital era, which comprise "persons, things, artefacts, spaces, discourses, behaviours and expressions in dynamic relatedness."[224] This approach to infrastructure enables collaborators, technologies, and situated practices to continually refine the project's core commemorative goals, extending *Necropolis-United's* conceptual and ethical concerns into the digital space.

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[223] Martín Zicari, *Choreographing Remembrance, Digital contention and street action against human rights abuses in Mexico (1968–2014)*, PhD diss., KU Leuven, (2021), 22.
[224] Silvana Mandolessi, "The Digital Turn in Memory Studies", *Memory Studies* 16, no. 6 (2023): 1515.

5.2 Infrastructure of Remembrance

During the project's initial year, the first series of meetings between the project's key partners included collective text readings, in-depth interviews with those around the table, and dialogues with external guests from various fields, such as journalist and activist Maël Galisson, writer Fran Kourouma, academic and activist Joachim Ben Yakoub, academic, psychologist and child therapist Sofie de Smet, as well as Geert Ates and Dorien Oxenaar, activists initiating and updating the *UNITED List of Refugee Deaths*. The discussions evolved around diverse practices of commemoration, articulated needs of affected communities and the issues of personal data protection. They also critically examined the often problematic occidental approach to working with people from migration backgrounds - interrogating the underlying power structures, epistemic hierarchies, and ethical challenges embedded in such engagements. In particular, we explored how dominant narratives shape public perception and policy, often reducing people who have lived through difficult migration journeys to tacit subjects of crisis rather than active agents of knowledge and cultural production. The group's primary concern centered on the understanding that an information system is inherently powerful and complex, and its architecture and structure cannot be determined by a limited set of stakeholders, as so often happens. This raised critical questions about participation: who has a voice in shaping such systems, and who, conversely, is at risk of being excluded or overlooked? We reached a shared commitment to developing alternative methodologies that move beyond extractive or paternalistic frameworks, emphasizing co-authorship, reciprocal learning, and shared agency.

Building on these reflections, we turned to theoretical perspectives that could help strengthen inquiry into the social and political dimensions of data platforms. Our interest with the word "infrastructure" comes from cultural theory scholar Lauren Berlant's notion of it as "not identical to system or structure … because infrastructure is defined by the movement or patterning of social form. It is the living mediation of what organizes life: the lifeword of structure" defined by its use and movement.[225] It is also informed by the notion of "spectral infrastructure" as conceptualised by freethought collective as "the hidden and invisible textures that sustain an undefinable and disruptive quality in an otherwise efficient-seeming organism,"[226] highlighting the lingering emotional and political traces that remain even after official systems have been taken apart. The focus on infrastructures, rather than on a "database", "repository", "platform", or "system", helped us shift away from the liberal vocabulary and methodology of software and information system design, turning our attention instead to the social forms that both generate the problem and enable possible alternatives.

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[225] Lauren Berlant, "The Commons: Infrastructures for Troubling Times", *Environment and Planning D: Society and Space* 34, no. 4 (2016): 393.
[226] freethoughtcollective, *Spectral Infrastructure*, BAK, Basis for Contemporary Art, Utrecht (2020–2022), https://archive2.bakonline.org/long-term-project/spectral-infrastructure/, accessed August 6, 2025.

The shift meant that the initial aim of the joint venture - to consolidate the *UNITED List of Refugee Deaths* into a sustainable, interactive platform - evolved into a broader inquiry into how data, archives, and communities of solidarity might intersect. This led to the second phase of *Necropolis-United*, prompted by the need to further challenge the project in dialogue with grassroots actors and directly affected communities, culminating in the so-called *Multilingual Encounters:* a methodological framework designed to keep the infrastructure grounded in lived and embodied experience rather than abstracted data. This phase crystallized through our involvement following the tragic death of M.H., a young Syrian asylum seeker, in a metro collision in Brussels in April 2023. Through an email from advocates at Morts de la Rue (an organization committed to dignified funerary practices for individuals dying on the streets of Brussels, which we had visited in our preliminary interviews), our research became directly involved in gathering information and responding to urgent local concerns around commemoration, accountability, and the ethical handling of M.H.'s precarious death. As with *Necropolis* and its first grave location search, this immediate need for response marked a turning point for *Necropolis-United*, highlighting the urgency of engaging directly with the lived struggles, grief, and resistance of local networks already working at the intersections of precarity, migration, and border violence.

Welcoming the poet, activist, and coordinator of non-profit initiatives Milady Renoir to our group, we began a series of one-on-one conversations with various activists and organizations to establish trust, exchange perspectives, and clarify our respective commitments to the work of memory and advocacy. Facilitated through Renoir's extended networks, these dialogues culminated in the organization of our first *Multilingual Encounter* held in February 2024.[227] The event brought together a range of local organizations, including Comité des Femmes Sans Papiers, La Voix des Sans Papiers de Bruxelles, Getting the Voice Out, Agir pour la Paix, Abolish Frontex, Collectif Mort·es de la Rue, IWW Belgium, Santé en Lutte, Réseau Salariat, as well as artists and researchers from across Brussels and beyond who had long been engaged with these issues, both locally and transnationally. What emerged was not the beginning of something new but the recognition of an already vibrant and ongoing field of struggle. Through exchanges with this extended group, it became clear that our original goal - expanding the *UNITED List of Refugee Deaths* into a sustainable, centralized, interactive platform - was insufficient. The data platform needed to be reimagined not merely as an archive of border deaths and disappearances, but as a site of situated contestation: a living infrastructure that, while enabling commemorative practices in virtual space, also amplifies the efforts of those living in precarity and resists the bureaucratic erasure of their lives.

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[227] This first *Multilingual Encounter* took place at La Loge during the exhibition *Holding Rehearsals/ hold on to her.* The exhibition weaved together testimonies from undocumented and documented activists in a collective hearing on the killing of Mawda Shawri - a two-year-old child who was fatally shot while her family fled police, fearing arrest and deportation. Mawda's grave was also one of the first graves localized as part of the grave location search for the *Necropolis* project.

This reframing was shaped through sustained dialogues with Thierno Dia, Mamadou Taslim Diallo, Alberto Isifin Tchama, Halidou Wuandaougo, Leticia Assemien (La Voix des Sans Papiers de Bruxelles), Henriette Essami-Khaullot, Aïsta (Aissata) Bah (Comité des Femmes Sans Papiers de Bruxelles), Florence Servais, Christophe Bletard (Morts de la Rue), Céline De Vos (Abolish Frontex), as well as activist Faïza Hirach and writer Fran Kourouma, who have since become key participants of the project. Their practices, critiques, and refusals reoriented *Necropolis-United* into what it is today: an infrastructure of remembrance, a platform of mourning and resistance, and a process of political coming together. Far from merely documenting deaths and disappearances, the project positions itself within the broader struggle for visibility, dignity, and collective agency, contributing to a transnational conversation on migration, borders, and the ethics of commemoration.

5.3 *Multilingual Encounters* as Method

Following the initial Multilingual Encounter, the project continued to unfold through a series of subsequent gatherings that persist to this day. From the outset, multilinguality was understood not as the simple celebration or inclusion of multiple spoken languages, but as an inquiry into the infrastructures of different languages: the language of activism, both grassroots and institutional; the language of artistic practice, software development, and academia; the language of memory - of the living and the dead; the language of urgent resistance and of intimate commemoration. Multilinguality thus became both a methodological and ethical principle. Rather than functioning as a neutral "consultation" (the initial role implicitly assigned to concerned communities within the project), these encounters challenged the very notion of consultation: to listen meant to defer authority, to reframe assumptions, and to disinvest from the privilege of expertise. Over time, this process transformed the project, turning multilinguality into a mode of epistemic and political redistribution - one that allowed the work to be reconstituted by those whose realities and histories it sought to represent, while resisting the extractivist tendencies that often accompany artistic and academic engagements with undocumented life and death.

The meetings first took place in various cultural venues across Brussels, such as Pianofabriek and Maison de la Paix, before moving into the occupation site of *La Voix des Sans Papiers Fritz Toussaint* (VSP) in a space specifically dedicated to the project. This shift marked a decisive turn: the space became our laboratory; a site where the project gained material form through collaborative documentation. Over time, the walls were filled with post-its, hand-drawn maps, conceptual diagrams, counter-terminology, annotated books, and flyers announcing related events and mobilizations. A small clay hand-made statue of a guardian woman greeted visitors at the entrance to the adjoined commemoration room.

These traces embodied our shared labor of mourning, the refusal of silence, and the everyday practices of collective memory-making. It was at this point that the project began to de-center. It

ceased to belong to any single author and became a shared, contested commons. Following Berlant's infrastructuralist approach, the commons here are not a fact but something worked out in real time.[228] She argues that the current academic use of the word "commons" has become something of a "false performative"[229] presented as a "solution to the problem of psychic or structural social antagonism" or as a "visionary motive for toppling the state and capital" or as a "synonym for belonging better and social healing."[230] For these reasons, the terms should be subjected to suspicion. Against the idea of the commons as an incontestable positive aim, or a confirming affective experience, the commons in our methodology are considered, following Berlant, "more as a tool, and often a weapon, for unlearning the world, which is key to not reproducing it."[231]

With shared time came shared responsibility, and with responsibility, a demand for rights: the right to co-own the platform, the tools, and the knowledge it generates. To sustain and circulate the materials emerging from these collective sessions, and in response to preliminary discussions among the core group members, Atelier Cartographique proposed a non-digital platform: a modest, internally distributed fanzine (fig. 5.2). Its design was deliberately simple, built from A4 sheets divided into six post-it-sized squares with a clear numbering system. Through this analog format, notes were typed, post-its scanned, images downloaded, quotes transcribed, and fragments of text cut and pasted. Each new session began with a printed fanzine summarizing the previous discussions, allowing participants to track the process in a physical and tangible form. Beyond functioning as a tool of archiving, the fanzine became a shared space for consolidating our mutual goals and collectively articulating the specificities of the information system we aimed to develop. It acted as both record and proposition, holding the evolving contours of a project grounded in collaboration, memory, and resistance.

In the next phase of the process, the group divided into smaller subgroups, each focusing on four central thematics that had emerged during our sessions: Lexique, Manifest, Commemoration, and Constellation. These subgroups deepened and focused our shared inquiries, further grounding them into clear directions for collective action and reflection. Through sustained dialogue, we were able to articulate our priorities more clearly: from demands for visible and dignified commemoration to the rejection of bureaucratic language and the erasures it enforces; from strategies for grassroots advocacy to the exploration of alternative knowledge systems that resist institutional frameworks. The insights from these subgroups directly informed the work of Atelier Cartographique, with each subgroup tasked to formulate a clear request that the Atelier would then conceptually and technologically design. Rather than leading the development, the Atelier Cartographique team facilitated a reciprocal process, ensuring that the development of the tools themselves reflected the collective's political and artistic orientations. Each step of development was evaluated by all members of the group, reinforcing the project's collaborative nature. This process redefined the role of the software engineers -

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[228] Lauren Berlant, *On the Inconvenience of Other People* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2022), 77.
[229] Ibid., 81.
[230] Ibid., 77.
[231] Ibid., 80.

Fig. 5.2
The Hyphen-ated fanzine.
Design credit: Atelier Cartographique.
Image credit: Atelier Cartographique

translating our collective reflections into tools - a process I will now describe in more detail.

In the **Lexique subgroup**, vocabulary itself became a contested and generative terrain. We asked: How does one translate “sans papiers” into languages that lack its precise political resonance? Is “migrant” too reductive? Is “refugee” too legalistic? Can “necropolitics” be reclaimed from academic abstraction? Divergence, we came to see, was not a weakness but a form of strength. The absence of a singular vocabulary became a deliberate political stance; a refusal to flatten complex, heterogeneous histories into a false consensus. By critically examining the language of both advocacy and policy, we sought to understand how words shape public perception, influence law, and either empower or marginalize entire communities. To support this process, Atelier Cartographique responded with a design for a digital tool for tracing the genealogy of language. This tool enables users to research the shifting meanings of key terms - such as “illegal”, “refugee”, or “border” - across multiple data sources, including media reports, legal texts, institutional communications, and personal testimonies. By linking and annotating this material, the tool transforms vocabulary into a site of careful attention: a field where dominant narratives can be interrogated, and alternative vocabularies can emerge.

In connection with the work of the Lexique subgroup, the **Manifest subgroup** translated its findings into practice by working toward the articulation of the group’s manifesto. Aware of the pitfalls embedded in language itself, we sought to align our voices, visions, and goals, aiming to produce a text that would serve as a declaration of intentions. This involved responding to a set of fundamental questions: Who are we? What brings us together? What are we building collectively? Which mechanisms do we refuse to reproduce? The process demanded continual negotiation, as diverse experiences, practices, and worldviews converged on the page. The manifesto is not conceived as a fixed declaration but as a living document - capable of holding tensions, contradictions, and evolving ideas without imposing premature unity. It constitutes a shared ground for ongoing articulation, reformulation, and adaptation of our goals as a group, shaped through collective writing and reading sessions. Rather than aiming for consensus, the process values dissonance and dialogue, allowing space for divergence and unfinished thoughts. In this way, the manifesto becomes both a tool and a terrain for collective political imagination.

The **Commemoration subgroup** concentrated on recognizing and amplifying acts of commemoration that honor those who have lost their lives on migration routes. We grappled with fundamental questions: can mourning take place through a digital platform, or does the act of commemoration necessitate a live, embodied event in order to be meaningful? How can commemoration transcend symbolism and become an active gesture of refusal, dignity, and collective memory-making in the face of systemic erasure? How can digital acts of commemoration avoid reproducing the same structures of surveillance or exclusion that contributed to the deaths not being remembered? How do we commemorate lives that have been rendered untraceable - disappeared,

anonymized, or deliberately excluded from records? These reflections had led Atelier Cartographique to propose a timeline platform: a living archive that collects and organizes both past and upcoming acts of remembrance for those who have died along migratory routes. The platform resists the privileging of highly visible, institutionalized memorials by also acknowledging more intimate gestures: private vigils, ephemeral interventions, and oral testimonies shared within families or local communities. Events like “commemoractions” held at multiple locations across Europe and beyond to honor those who die at borders; or more intimate testimonies of close friends lost to structural violence - each of these instances was entered into the timeline. Together, they constitute a vision for a plural, decentralized memory space, in which private and collective stories converge and where remembrance could become a distributed, participatory practice. Rather than relying on singular, authoritative narratives, this tool embraces fragmentation, multiplicity, and situated knowledge. It enables users (individuals, communities, and organizations) to not only consult but actively contribute to the archive, inserting their own commemorative gestures and testimonies. In doing so, the tool functions not merely as a record of loss, but as a site for reclaiming visibility, asserting presence, and facilitating transnational solidarities.

The **Constellation subgroup** sought to map responsibility - not as a linear chain of cause and effect, but as a relational web of actors and institutions. We attempted to chart the entangled systems behind border deaths and disappearances: state agencies, private contractors, legal frameworks, security technologies, and the affective economies that sustain them. The notion of a constellation allowed us to hold this complexity without reducing it to a single narrative of culpability. Our task was not merely to trace harm but to name complicity, and to begin imagining new forms of accountability. The reflections of the Constellation subgroup are ongoing, focusing primarily on how vulnerable communities can denounce those responsible for the atrocities occurring at EU borders while ensuring their own safety and safeguarding their continuing efforts toward legislative change. As part of this inquiry, we connected with a network of allies (individuals and organizations already engaged with these issues) such as Technopolice, a Brussels-based collective that critically tracks and maps the spread of surveillance technologies, providing public resources, digital self-defense workshops, and surveillance-mapping walks to empower resistance against technocratic control of urban spaces.

5.4 *The List of Lists*: Toward a Relational Archive

As mentioned above, the initial impulse behind *Necropolis-United* was to reimagine the *UNITED List of Refugee Deaths* - not merely as a technical repository but as a living, collective archive of resistance. The project began with a practical question: how might this list, which has long stood as one of the few public records of deaths and disappearances at Europe’s borders, be consolidated and expanded into a more sustainable, centralized, and interactive platform? Our early discussions revolved around integrating other major datasets, such as the Missing Migrants Project of the

International Organization for Migration (IOM) - which has recorded over 76,253 deaths since 2014 - and the Deaths at the Border Database from the Free University of Amsterdam, which documented 3,188 cases between 1990 and 2013 into its corpus. However, as the work evolved, the very notion of "the list" became a point of friction. Some members of the group frequently questioned the act of listing itself, pointing to its proximity to bureaucratic technologies of control. The same tools used to commemorate, they reminded us, can also register, track, and dehumanize people of precarious status, reducing them to anonymous data points within systems of surveillance and exclusion. By focusing solely on death, these systems can also obscure the lives, desires, hopes, and unfinished projects of those they record. Others, particularly from activist circles, countered that these lists remain among the few tools available to expose systemic violence and demand accountability. For them, naming the dead is a necessary act of defiance against institutional erasure.

This question became concrete during the first *Multilingual Encounter*, in which a social worker, who regularly assists families searching for missing or deceased relatives, reminded us that beyond political symbolism or archival form, there is also a deeply practical and human need: the need to know where someone is buried, how they died, and whether their grave is cared for. At that moment it became clear that the list is never neutral. It is simultaneously an archive of violence, a site of grief, and a fragile gesture of recognition: an attempt, however partial and insufficient, to resist the systematic erasure of lives lost along migratory routes.

As our research deepened, we encountered a landscape of smaller-scale, often grassroots documentation initiatives that complemented the larger datasets. Among them are the list of deaths and disappearances along the Balkan routes compiled by local researchers and activists Marijana Hameršak and Ivana Ljuština, and the register maintained by activist Maël Galisson, which documents deaths and disappearances along the Pas de Calais - the narrowest point of the English Channel and one of Europe's most militarized migration corridors. In Catania, Sicily, a citizen-led collective works tirelessly to restore the names and dignity of those buried in unmarked graves in the city's cemetery. With no institutional support, they piece together fragments - survivors' testimonies, forensic reports, municipal records - tracing families and preserving memory in the absence of state care. Reflecting on such initiatives, researchers and anthropologists Carolina Kobelinsky and Filippo Furri state that they aim "to take these 'bodies of no importance' out of anonymity and statistical mass."[232] For sociologist Paola Díaz and lawyer Anna Rahel Fischer, such initiatives reaffirm "the human value of these people and their families, of their lives and their deaths".[233] For all four, these initiatives, though often

[232] Carolina Kobelinsky, Filippo Furri, *Relier les rives: Sur les traces des morts en Méditerranée*, https://lmsi.net/Relier-les-rives, accessed December 2, 2025; Original French: "sortir ces 'corps sans importance' de l'anonymat et de la masse statistique", my own translation.
[233] Paola Díaz, Anna Rahel Fischer, "Établir les faits de mort et de disparition de migrants aux frontières du Nord global", *Institut Convergences Migrations*, n. 38 (Juin 2024), https://www.icmigrations.cnrs.fr/2024/06/13/defacto-038-01/, accessed December 2, 2025. Original French: "Ces récits ne se satisfont pas de simplement signifier les morts et les disparus des frontières : ils revendiquent la valeur humaine de ces personnes et de leurs familles, de leurs vies et de leurs morts", my own translation.

precarious and under-resourced, challenge the anonymity imposed on migrant deaths and disappearances and offer powerful acts of resistance against institutional erasure.

These findings and reflections raised a crucial question for the group's coming together: was there truly a need to create yet another list? Wouldn't a new centralized database risk replicating the very fragmentation and saturation we sought to overcome? Atelier Cartographique responded by proposing an alternative approach: to build a digital infrastructure capable of aggregating, cross-referencing, and contextualizing existing databases, while preserving the singularity of each initiative and its specific context as part of the metadata. Rather than absorbing these efforts into a monolithic archive, our aim became one of interconnection: creating a living network where dispersed acts of documentation and listing could converse with one another, generating both collective memory and political accountability. Through this shift, the project continued to rethink what an archive can be. No longer imagined as a unified repository of names and dates, the archive became a dynamic space of co-authorship - a field where mourning, resistance, and knowledge-making converge, and where fragments of information can be connected, and missing links detected through a dedicated search engine. This evolving framework prioritizes openness and responsiveness, enabling these attempts to gather information to exist in relation to each other, grounded in responsibility, justice, and solidarity. In this sense, *Necropolis-United* seeks to assure the living quality of an archive, and its choreography; a space where remembrance is not an act of closure but an ongoing practice of vigilance and collective presence.

5.5 Economies of Participation: The Question of Money

While addressing the political and ethical dimensions of the archive - how lives are named, remembered, and how information becomes interrelated, we were simultaneously confronted with questions of economy, labor, and responsibility. The creation of such a platform demanded not only technical and conceptual work but also an ongoing negotiation of the conditions under which this work was made possible, and of how the contributions of some of our colleagues who are in different states of regularisation could be recognized and sustained. Undocumented people are often invited into artistic and academic projects as contributors of time, knowledge, and lived experience without receiving fair compensation, legal protection, or meaningful follow-up. This extractive mode of engagement risks reproducing the very conditions of precarity and invisibility that such projects claim to challenge. Too often, "inclusion" is framed as an act of solidarity, while in practice it instrumentalizes undocumented participants as sources of "authentic" testimony, valorized for their vulnerability yet left unprotected by the very institutions that benefit from their stories. In these contexts, participation becomes a double bind: an opportunity for voice that also exposes individuals to risk, and a form of labor that is rarely acknowledged as such. The absence of clear protocols around remuneration, authorship, and accountability raises urgent questions: who benefits from these

exchanges of knowledge? How do symbolic economies - of empathy, representation, or recognition - mask the underlying structures of exploitation? And what does it mean when marginalized bodies are rendered visible only through their suffering, only insofar as they remain institutionally manageable? These were not abstract dilemmas. Testimonies from our peers (both undocumented and with legal status) repeatedly pointed to such patterns of exploitation, forcing us to place the question of economy at the very center of our conversations.

Within *Necropolis-United*, these concerns became tangible when the project's principles - collective authorship, cross-sectoral collaboration, and the inclusion of affected communities as co-creators - collided with the rigid financial and administrative frameworks of Ghent University. Institutional payment mechanisms were limited to two categories: reimbursement or invoice. Both excluded individuals without legal residence or bank accounts in Belgium, effectively marginalizing those whose participation was most vital to the project's ethical and epistemological core. This misalignment was not merely procedural; it exposed a deeper contradiction. How can a project grounded in decolonial, anti-extractive, and care-based methodologies operate within institutions whose infrastructures reproduce the very exclusions we seek to contest? How can we reimagine the institution itself as a site of responsibility rather than an agent of exclusion?

To address these contradictions, the *Necropolis-United* team began to search for cracks within the system: small, tactical interventions that might allow for more inclusive and dignified forms of engagement. One such approach involved experimenting with volunteer contracts, a legally recognized framework in Belgium that, while offering limited compensation through fixed-rate indemnities, still falls short of recognizing such contributions as formal labor. It was far from ideal: volunteerism risks re-inscribing the idea that undocumented contributions are "free", not labor deserving of pay. Yet, as a stopgap measure, it allowed collaborators to be formally acknowledged rather than rendered invisible. Simultaneously, the team consulted legal experts in intellectual property and labor law to explore alternative frameworks, such as "authors' rights", which would recognize the co-creation of the platform not as invisible or informal labor, but as intellectual work worthy of compensation. These efforts were less about finding perfect solutions than about reframing the status of undocumented collaborators, not as passive subjects to be "included", but as knowledge producers and co-authors shaping both the conceptual and technical architecture of the project.

These tactical experiments, however, were never sufficient. They revealed the necessity of structural change. In consultation with the project's front officer, Els Bourgeois; financial secretaries Petra Vereecken and Marleen Fornier; and principal investigator Christel Stalpaert; Martín Zícari authored a *Report on Payment Challenges for Undocumented and Precariously Positioned Collaborators in the Necropolis-United Project*. As a member of the Human Rights Research Consortium (led by Eva Brems), Christel Stalpaert was able to embed the report within the Consortium's Human Rights Memorandum to the incoming university board, following the appointment of Petra De Sutter as UGhent's new Chancellor.

The report advocates for precedents that would enable research institutions to engage ethically and sustainably with people living in various states of precarity. This is not only about finding workarounds, but about challenging a research institution to reimagine its infrastructures: to build systems that recognize the value of lived experience, situated expertise, and affective labor as more than symbolic gestures. What would it mean for a university to act not only as a host of a research project, but as a site of solidarity?

This commitment to redistribution extended beyond the university. A significant decision was made already while writing the research proposal: to allocate part of the project's resources to UNITED for Intercultural Action - specifically to support their long-standing initiative, *The List of Refugee Deaths*. For three decades, this list - one of the biggest public records of border deaths and disappearances in Europe - had been sustained by volunteer labor. By obtaining and providing structural funding for its maintenance and development over the four years of the project's duration, the *Necropolis-United* team sought to challenge this precarious model, acknowledging that the labor of data collection in view of memorialization is as valuable as any artistic or academic output. This move was not just financial; it was an ethical intervention, an attempt to transform isolated, under-recognized efforts into durable infrastructures of memory, stewardship, and political responsibility.

5.6 Hyphen-ated Infrastructure: What We Hold Together

While addressing the economic, ethical, and infrastructural challenges of *Necropolis-United*, it became increasingly clear that the project's stakes extended beyond questions of data and documentation. At its core, it is not simply about building a platform but about testing how a collective archive might hold both memory and resistance. What form can such an archive take if it refuses the neutrality of data? How can it remain porous enough to hold grief and collective responsibility, while also acting as a tool for political imagination? *Necropolis-United* is not a finished platform. It is an ongoing process; a durational, collaborative, and often messy endeavor. What holds it together is not consensus in goals or clarity in methodologies or tools, but a shared refusal to accept the invisibilization and disposability of undocumented life and death. What emerges is not a platform of representation, but of relation: held together by proximity, co-presence, shared grief, and co-authored resistance. It is a counter-archive, a digital repository, a tool of political imagination. It is also fragile, like the lives it aims to honor. Rather than seeking closure, the project embraces a rhythm of continuous formation. It invites those who enter it to not only witness but to shape, challenge, and transform the process of its creation. Its ownership is collective. Its future is contingent. Its ethics are grounded in refusal, presence, and solidarity. In this sense, *Necropolis-United* does not resolve tensions - it stays with them, carrying them forward as part of its very architecture.

To think through this entanglement of practices and disciplines, we have adopted the notion of "hyphenated infrastructure". The term "hyphenated" was introduced by Christel Stalpaert in the context of her concept of "hyphenated thinking", introduced earlier in dialogue with Donna Haraway's work. In *Staying with the Trouble: Making Kin in the Chthulucene*, Haraway proposes the vital model of "art-science-activist worldings", emphasizing the interconnectedness of these fields as a way of critically engaging with urgent contemporary issues and facilitating new modes of collaboration. This approach aligns with Haraway's broader concept of "staying with the trouble", which advocates for sustained engagement with complexity and entanglement rather than seeking simplistic solutions.[234] It emphasizes the collaborative creation of knowledge and solutions, challenging traditional disciplinary boundaries. By integrating diverse perspectives, Haraway proposes a more holistic and responsive engagement with pressing social and environmental issues.

While Haraway uses the term "art-science-activist worldings" both with and without hyphens, Stalpaert is particularly drawn to the hyphenated form, arguing that "it is precisely in the hyphens that non-conformist modes of knowledge production resurge."[235] Furthermore, she asserts that "taking into consideration decolonial urges for unlearning imperialism, colonialism, and racial and sexist capitalism, these hyphens also present an opportunity for rehearsing pluriversal, multispecies, and collaborative modes of knowledge production."[236] The hyphen, in this sense, becomes a minor form of acknowledgement of different voices coming together; of a refusal of the totalizing logic of single narratives.

Necropolis-United, constructed through the framework of *Multilingual Encounters*, is an attempt to practice such hyphenated thinking. It does not speak for communities with a migration background but works with them, not as subjects of research but as co-researchers and co-authors whose lived knowledge and political agency shape both the process and the outcomes of the project. It is less a platform than an ecology, bridging artistic practice, critical theory, technology, and grassroots activism, where research does not stand apart from the world but actively participates in its reshaping. Through iterative encounters, and the collective design of technological tools, *Necropolis-United* stages a plural epistemology rooted in shared authorship, ethical urgency, and the embodied memory of migration. It offers a working model of hyphenated worlding, one in which knowledge is not extracted but co-created, across disciplines, geographies, and positionalities.

Seen from this perspective, such an approach may also be described as a "hyphenated infrastructure of remembrance", drawing on Stalpaert's work on the hyphen - bringing together artistic, scientific, and activist perspectives - alongside the project's focus on infrastructures of remembrance. As an infrastructure, it emphasizes the material, technological, and social arrangements

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[234] Haraway, *Staying with the Trouble*, 76, 79.
[235] Christel Stalpaert, "Hyphenated Thinking in Performance Processes: Thinking Through Performance-pedagogical Entanglements with More-than-human Matter", *Performance Research Methods: Interdisciplinary Methods for Theatre, Dance and Performance Studies*, eds. Liesbeth Groot Nibbelink, Laura Karreman (Cambridge: Open Book Publishers, 2025): 420.
[236] Stalpaert, "Hyphenated Thinking in Performance Processes", 421.

that sustain practices of memory, while remaining attentive to the ethical and affective relations that bind them together. It might also be described as a "hyphenated choreography of remembrance".[237] It is choreography not only in the sense of bodily movement or theatrical staging, but as a relational, transdisciplinary practice that weaves together affective labor, political resistance, and infrastructural care. As Martín Zícari argues, "choreographies of remembrance" are not limited to bodily performance; they unfold across "physical artefacts, texts, performative interventions, and structures of affective sociality".[238] When situated within the multilingual, collaborative, and politically charged framework of *Necropolis-United*, these choreographies take on a specifically hyphenated character. Paired with Stalpaert's hyphenated thinking, Zícari's concept gives rise to a practice that resists singular authorship and linear causality. It becomes a mode of collective world-making through dispersed, interdependent gestures - a refusal of extractive documentation and a commitment to memory as a shared, situated, and ongoing choreography.

Rather than offering closure, *Necropolis-United* proposes an infrastructure of attention and relation, where the space of mourning is opened, and memory becomes a shared, situated choreography. Across *Multilingual Encounters*, entangled economies, and contested archives, the project forgoes neutrality in favor of co-authorship, fragility, and care. It does not seek to perfect a platform but to inhabit its contradictions: holding together grief and imagination, justice and doubt. What emerges is not a singular list but a living, hyphenated choreography of remembrance, shaped by the very tensions it refuses to resolve. In this way, *Necropolis-United* becomes a rehearsal for another kind of infrastructure: one that is always unfinished, but never unclaimed.

[237] Stalpaert, "Hyphenated Thinking in Performance Processes", Zicari, *Choreographing Remembrance*.
[238] Zicari, *Choreographing Remembrance*, 44.


SANS
PATS
PIEDS

Chapter 6
Beyond the List: Ecologies of Mourning and Resistance to Fortress Europe's Border Violence

What began as a collaborative engagement within the framework of *Necropolis-United's Multilingual Encounters* soon expanded into a constellation of interlinked activities, each a gesture of insistence against forgetting, against bureaucratic indifference, against the erasure of life at the margins of legality. These acts, initiated and carried out by various members of the group, were not supplementary to the research but central to its evolving methodology. They functioned as living interventions - at once commemorative, forensic, and performative - anchored in the political realities shaping migration, exile, and survival in contemporary Europe.

Together, we participated in commemorative ceremonies, such as the annual gathering of the collective *Morts de la Rue*, which honors homeless individuals who have died on the streets of Brussels (many of them without legal status), emphasising the need for public recognition and mourning of these deaths and disappearances. We organized and attended related film screenings, including *Hold On To Her* by Robin Vanbesien, which stages a public hearing around the police killing of two-year-old Mawda Shawri through a collective reading by people with and without legal status, with some members of La Voix des Sans Papiers de Bruxelles (VSP) lending their voices in the proceeding. We also facilitated city tours, such as one led by members of Abolish Frontex, which exposed how corporate actors in the EU quarter profit from and promote the militarization of European border policies.

Finally, together we participated in several public events engaging in collective readings of notes compiled throughout the project. These presentations included appearances at the *Ecologies of Architecture and Dance* conference at Ghent University; the symposium *Towards Documentary Choreography – Encounter #2* in Brussels; and *Exil.s et Création.s*, an event organized by the members of the VSP at K1 - a temporary venue of KANAL Centre Pompidou in Brussels. These readings extended beyond the dry academic presentation mode and included music and performative elements that emerged organically from the group's internal processes. For instance, during one of the early *Multilingual Encounters*, a participant began folding paper boats while a discussion unfolded, a gesture that, over time, evolved into a recurring collective practice. At the aforementioned public events, while one member read aloud, others folded boats and inscribed them with red-marker statements, creating a layered visual and symbolic presence within the space of the intervention.

These collective gestures - performed, recited, folded, sung - became essential components of the research's unfolding methodology. They allowed for the emergence of a shared language shaped by lived experience and mutual recognition, rather than by institutional or disciplinary frameworks. In this way, the research was not only about documenting or analyzing the effects of border regimes, but

about intervening in them, through aesthetic strategies, embodied rituals, and public acts of remembrance that make visible the structural violence otherwise rendered invisible.

The following chapter is one such gesture; this time in the form of collective writing. It brings together notes and reflections that emerged during our sessions, hyphenating the voices of Aïsta Bah, Pacôme Béru, Thierno Dia, Mamadou Taslim Diallo, Henriette Essami-Khaullot, Faïza Hirach, Fran Kourouma, Pierre Marchand, Milady Renoir, Christel Stalpaert, Alberto Isifin Tchama, Halidou Wuandaougo, Martín Zícari, and myself. It references ideas, actions, and gestures shared by companions engaged in mourning and in affirming the dignity of those who have died or disappeared during their migrations, while also giving space to the many projects and initiatives of the VSP in their mission toward regularization. Together, it weaves reflections on the expansion of choreographic gestures within ecologies of mourning, or what was defined in the previous chapter as a "hyphenated infrastructure of remembrance", or "hyphenated choreography of remembrance".[239]

It is important to emphasize that, in alignment with the work of the VSP, our group did not view death and disappearance as the sole fatal consequences of European border policies. Rather, we also considered the liminal state of migrant persons who, due to various administrative and bureaucratic classifications (refugee, asylum seeker, undocumented), have found their lives in their destination countries completely stalled, forced to endure extreme precarity. In response, the VSP proposed the concepts of *petite-mort* (small death) and *mort-vivant* (living dead) to describe this condition.

I

All (human) life is life.
It is true that one life comes into existence before another life,
But a life is not 'older,' more respectable than another life,
Just as one life is not superior to another life.
...
All life being life,
Any harm done to a life requires reparation.
Therefore,
Let no one attack his neighbor gratuitously,
Let no one harm his neighbor,
Let no one martyr his fellow man.
...
Let each one watch over his neighbor,

[239] This chapter was previously published as: Pacôme Béru, Thierno Dia, Mamadou Taslim Diallo, Faïza Hirach, Fran Kourouma, Pierre Marchand, Milady Renoir, Christel Stalpaert, Alberto Isifin Tchama, Halidou Wuandaougo, Arkadi Zaides, Martín Zícari, "Beyond the List: Ecologies of Mourning and Resistance to Fortress Europe's Border Violence", in *Slow Technology Reader: A Tool for Shaping Divergent Futures*, ed. Carolyn F. Strauss (Amsterdam: Valiz, 2025), 221–237.

Let everyone revere their parents,
Let everyone educate their children as they should,
Let everyone 'maintain,' provide for the needs of the members of their family.
...
Because any country, any land which would see men disappear from its surface
Would immediately become nostalgic.
People of old tell us:
'Man as an individual
Made of bone and flesh,
Of marrow and nerves,
Skin covered with hair,
Feeds on food and drinks;
But his 'soul,' his spirit lives on three things:
Seeing who he wants to see
Saying what he wants to say
And doing what he wants to do;
If even one of these things were to be lacking in the human soul,
It would suffer
And would surely wither.'
Consequently (...):
Everyone now has their own person,
Everyone is free to act,
Everyone now has the fruits of their labor.
This is the oath of the Manden[240]
To the ears of the whole world.

The Charter of Mandé[241] resonates in the Semira Adamu room at the building in Brussels occupied by La Voix des Sans Papiers (VSP) at the start of 2025. There, news of new shipwrecks and other pushbacks reaches the participants of *Necropolis-United* who share an easter cake and coffee while connecting the words of the Sages who advocate dignity and response.

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[240] Mandé: an ancestral kingdom of West Africa, a stronghold of resistance against slavery and colonization, and a space for the imagination of transformative prophecies. According to the griot Babou Condé, the name Mandén would mean 'child of the manatee'. In the French language, *Mandé* refers to someone who is summoned, notified, or ordered to come. *Mander* is synonymous with calling or summoning.

[241] The Manden Charter dates back to the early thirteenth century and is considered one of the oldest known declarations of human rights in the world. It was conceived (without foreign influence) during the completion of the Mali Empire under Sundiata Keita. This charter is addressed to the 'twelve parts of the world', and thus, according to its authors, it carries a universal purpose. It consists of seven statements, each serving as the heading of an article in the charter, which is also known by other names, such as *Donsolu Kalikan* (The Hunters' Oath), *Dunya Makilikan* (Admonition to the World), or more commonly *Manden Kalikan* (The Mandé Oath).

II

The *Necropolis-United* project seeks to explore how virtual space can become a site for commemoration, mourning, and action. It aims to develop an information system - an infrastructure of remembrance - that is democratic. With the rise of techno-fascism within countries across Europe, challenging concepts and values such as democracy, we can also name this information system as non-extractive.

Pacôme resists defining our work in negative terms - by what is not (in this case, extractive) - and instead proposes the concept of an information system that is self-organized. Taslim suggests that we focus on redefining what we mean by democratic, bringing new significance to the term. Faïza frames it under the concept of co-responsibility. Through all these perspectives, we aim to create an information system that is described and conceptualized by those who will use it, contributors and end users alike, in a direct and non-hierarchical relationship with those responsible for its technical development.

We believe that such an effort is a necessary foundation for designing a technological infrastructure that deals with deaths and disappearances through migration. Why? Because violence at the borders is a continuation of colonial violence, driven by an imperialist and supremacist agenda. Technocratic violence, facilitated by multinational corporations, is part of a long-standing fascist cybernetic project - one in which companies such as Google, Amazon, and Microsoft are deeply implicated. To prevent marginalized bodies from being subjected to cybernetic, colonial, and border violence, we shift our approach: rather than speaking “about”, we prioritize speaking “with”.

The methodology for designing and producing the system involves bringing together a group or community united by a common cause, prior to any software writing. Workshops are organized to allow stakeholders to collectively define the issues, objectives, uses, target audience, and aesthetic of the forthcoming information system.

Each participant's contributions are recognized as equally valuable, with respect given to expertise rooted in lived experiences, as well as professional, political, cultural, or social knowledge. The term ‘work’ is intentionally used to describe those contributions, emphasizing the importance of active engagement and fair remuneration for all participants.

This collective work establishes a distinct economic approach and timeline, fundamentally opposed to the production methods typically used in the software creation industry. The focus shifts from optimizing technical production flows to prioritizing relational quality and collective co-creation.

This shift repositions technically proficient individuals who must put their skills at the service of the common cause as well as future users who must actively participate in defining their technical needs. The attempt to create democratic software writing places questions of social and collective organization at the center of the software design process, reinforcing the long-term effort to develop a shared language and formulate a collective request.

III

In her book *Our Grateful Dead*, Vinciane Despret suggests that in order to be treated properly and with respect, the dead must be situated. They need to be given a place where they can guide, inspire, haunt, or demand care. Without a proper place or recognition, they remain in a kind of limbo, unable to 'complete' their purpose, whether that purpose is to be remembered, mourned, honored, or integrated into the ongoing lives of the living. This means establishing an ecology of mourning: a space made for them, where they can manifest their ways of being and where their effects can be felt by those who remain.[242]

Despret frames this care for the dead as an ecological issue. She examines and creates the conditions in which the dead can exist, asking, "what makes a dead person able to carry on? What is a dead person holding on to? What are the right conditions to make the dead enabled? What kinds of trials strengthen them, and what kinds put them in danger? What are they in need of? What do they ask for? What do they make other beings capable of? What makes for a good milieu for them and for those who have taken on the responsibility for their accomplishment?"[243] For Despret, these questions "stand apart from [those] that mainstream science typically focuses on," instead addressing "the needs that have to be respected in the continual creation of an association."[244]

IV

Taslim, spokesperson for La Voix de Sans Papiers, adds:
Don't wait until I'm dead…
Faïza replies:
to greet me...
Fran completes:
to bring me back to life
Thierno, also a spokesperson for VSP, bounces back:
to offer me heaven and earth beyond my lifetime
And then Aïsta and Halidou, Modou, Milady, ask themselves
who can restore, define or confiscate the DIGNITY of others,
and who holds it, and who loses it?
The group listens and VSP recounts their Odyssey[245]:
Once upon a time, there was an Elsewhere, not so far,
founded before, stretching from yesterday to today.
A land of births, of horizons,

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[242] Vinciane Despret, *Our Grateful Dead: Stories of Those Left Behind*, trans. by Stephen Muecke (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2021).
[243] Ibid., 9.
[244] Ibid.
[245] See: ep.cfsasbl.be/vsp-l-odyssee-des-sans-papiers, accessed August 27, 2025.

a breath of dreams and ambitions.
Journey. Crossing. Danger. Epic.
By plane, through tunnels, by train, by boat,
conquered lands never subjugated,
in bags and in cargo holds,
seeds of ideals and illusion.
Collision. Landing. Shipwreck. Arrival.
A polluted breeding ground, a disappointing environment,
which ferments with precarity and hypocrisy.
A swamp of state violence
Quicksands of suspicion,
winds of criminalization,
The breath of discrimination,
storms disrupting the breath, forming a giant hurricane:
Western mythification

V

The shipwreck that occurred on October 3, 2013 off the coast of Lampedusa could mark the beginning of the so-called "migration crisis".[246] Following the shipwreck, Italian Prime Minister Enrico Letta granted Italian citizenship to the 372 individuals who lost their lives in the disaster. Simultaneously, the 155 people rescued from the same ship were placed in a detention center without any rights.

We wish to expose the imperialist nature of what is called citizenship: Ariella Aïsha Azoulay refers to it as "the institution of citizenship as a set of rights against and at the expense of others."[247] What is omitted in these imperialist narratives of citizenship "proclaiming the progress of citizens' rights", she argues, "is the violence involved in defining citizenship as a constitutive element of belonging to the state rather than a shared trait among co-citizens concerned with a common world."[248] One can only belong to the state if one has the proper documents to present. This divides people into those who have the correct documents and those who do not, all in the name of progress. Imperial

[246] The term 'migration crisis' has been used in political and media agendas since the early 2000s. More than a migration crisis, it is, in Europe, a crisis of reception. Furthermore, the term 'crisis' is problematic, because it gives the impression of an unexpected, unmanageable phenomenon. This framing helps justify the reinforcement of external border controls. It benefits numerous actors involved in 'crisis management,' both public and private. We suggest avoiding the use of the word 'crisis.' Moreover, a whole semantic framework has developed in media and political discourses to create a distorted image of migratory movements as being overwhelming: flows, waves, tsunamis, etc. We propose refraining from using such terms that liken migration to liquids, as they are dehumanizing. Instead, we prefer terms like movements or displacement.
[247] Ariella Aïsha Azoulay, *Potential History: Unlearning Imperialism* (London: Verso Books, 2019), 16.
[248] Ibid., 39.

citizenship, Azoulay asserts, “dooms different people who share a world to not coincide in it ontologically or politically.”[249]

In keeping with Azoulay, we propose unlearning this type of imperial citizenship and instead proclaiming co-citizenship. Co-citizenship is an ongoing, ever-evolving composition of a common world; it is a set of assumptions and practices shared by different people as companions who oppose imperialism, colonialism, and racial capitalism.

VI

The *UNITED List of Refugee Deaths* is a database documenting the deaths and disappearances of people who have perished on migration routes toward Europe. The stage performance *Necropolis* takes this list as its point of departure. Rather than treating it as a neutral record or static archive, the project seeks to transform the list into what Mariam Ghani has called a form of “warm data”: information that carries with it the dense entanglement of personal, historical, and geopolitical context.[250] Unlike “cold” data - presented as raw, objective, and decontextualized - warm data foregrounds the human narratives, affective charges, and structural inequalities that infuse each entry. For Ghani, the archive is not merely a repository of facts, but a site where memory, identity, and disappearance converge.

In this context, the *Necropolis* team has developed a ritual that involves searching for and geolocating the graves of the deceased, thereby giving them a physical and geographic presence beyond the abstraction of the list. Through this practice, the project reanimates the data, transforming the names of the dead and disappeared into a narrative of recognition and remembrance. These acts challenge the audience to confront the structural forces that render victims of border violence invisible, not only in life, but also in death. At the same time, *Necropolis* draws attention to the absence of adequate forensic investigation in many of these cases. By tracing the spatial and corporeal traces of those who are unnamed or misidentified, the project raises urgent questions about identification, accountability, and the infrastructures of memory. In doing so, it repositions the database as a space not of closure, but of ethical and political engagement: a hyphenated choreography of remembrance that insists on the dignity of the dead and the unfinished labor of naming them.

VII

From these ill winds, a few mists infiltrate the promises:
the NGO-ization of cultural and educational places, academic extractivism,
the monopolization of stories and images
by artists and well-intentioned people paving hell with gold-plated tiles.

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[249] Ibid., 16.
[250] Mariam Ghani, Chitra Ganesh, “How Do You See the Disappeared? A Warm Database”, *Net Art Anthology* (2004), anthology.rhizome.org/how-do-you-see-the-disappeared-a-warm-database, accessed January 30, 2025.

When the varnish cracks,
the ‘weeds’ regain their power.
So the women and the men and the children
and the spirits went in search for Water,
the one which forms the vital strength,
the one which bypasses the mountains and the fires,
the one which engages the resistance.
All the waters flow in immensity,
connecting through a thousand streams, blood, saliva and sap.
In the gills, the chests and the hearts,
the air of dignity,
the oxygen of the ancestral struggles blows,
breathes the hope of inheritance.
Materials. Ferns. Anger.
In the holes that Europe has dug,
some stumble
others slip,
some gravitate,
others sink.

VIII

Stemming from colonial discourse, the term ‘origin’ is used by European bureaucracies to indicate the country, region, or place of birth of a person, their parents, or their grandparents (‘origin’ can also refer to a dual cultural background). This use of the term, among others like ‘roots’, ‘ancestry’, or ‘descent’, is problematic because it can imply that people - most of whom experience racism - are not considered to be European even if they were born there. Therefore, we suggest that when referring to a country where someone is from, it should be indicated as their country of birth, not their origin. We also propose that, in general, one should avoid mentioning the nationality of a person, as well as the country in which their family or ancestors lived before settling in the host society. These measures are proposed to circumvent the weaponization of the concept of ‘origin’ as part of any racist agenda.

XIX

As the disembodied voice at the opening of the *Necropolis* performance says:

> *In order to gain the right to live in Necropolis, one has to die in an attempt to enter it. Citizenship is granted posthumously to dismembered and decomposing corpses. Everyone else - those others who are still alive but without documents - are kept outside, left to die*

beyond the entry points. They need to arrive at the gates, dead, in order to be processed.[251]

X

European legislation establishes a clear distinction between criminal, natural, and accidental deaths, which determines how bodies are treated thereafter. The bodies of deceased migrants challenge this taxonomy. When the thousands of deaths and disappearances occurring at Europe's borders are classified as accidental, forensic procedures for collecting medical and biological data on the bodies are not mandatory. And when forensic investigations do occur, in most cases they are not conducted properly. The resulting loss of irreplaceable information prevents any future identification of the victims.

How can we mourn these migrant deaths and disappearances when crucial information is unavailable? How can we investigate and create the conditions in which these dead and disappeared can exist? What needs must be respected in the continuous creation of a co-citizenship, as prescribed by Azoulay? These are the questions we ask ourselves.

XI

In her book *Strangers I Know*, Claudia Durastanti writes: "When we die, maybe on our tombstone they'll write a loved one's name, what profession we had, a line from our favorite book. What won't be written on our tombstones is our distance from home."[252]

XII

Globalization has multiplied borders and reinforced them with walls, increasingly detailed regional and national regulations. These borders create legal categories of people whose rights are increasingly unequal. Many individuals are stranded at Europe's external borders, commonly referred to as Fortress Europe. The border is continuously reenacted. For some people, the experience of the border is everywhere - it is a central protagonist in their lives.

XIII

One could say that *Necropolis-United* seeks to build a spectral infrastructure that encapsulates "textures, rhythms, atmospheres, invocations, gestures, vernacular languages, and affects,"[253] introducing a disruption into what otherwise appears to be an efficient organism. A "spectral

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[251] Written and registered by the dramaturg of the *Necropolis* project, Igor Dobričić.
[252] Claudia Durastanti, *De vreemdelinge*. Translated by Manon Smits. De Bezige Bij, 2020, 173.
[253] Irit Rogoff, Stefano Harney, Adrian Heathfield, Massimiliano Mollona, Louis Moreno, and Nora Sternfeld, freethought collective, "freethought: Spectral Infrastructure", Wartenau Assembly #11. Public editorial meeting convened by freethought and BAK, Basis for Contemporary Art, Utrecht, in collaboration with Wartenau Art Education, HFBK Hamburg, Germany, June 14, (2022). Posted June 23, 2022, https://mediathek.hfbk.net/l2go/-/get/v/440, accessed January 30, 2025.

infrastructure"[254] is a haunting presence within a structural organism. We propose this spectral infrastructure as a method for reflecting on the countless deaths of migrants in Europe - those who died on their way to gaining access to Fortress Europe.

XIV

Around 2014 - and ever since - VSP
aka La Voix des Sans Papiers
sows, sows, sows, sows
kernels, seeds,
eggs, powers:
seeds of union and solidarity
between undocumented and documented
sprouts of resistance and ethics
between deaf ears and heard voices
seeds of self-organization
towards the grapes of great anger
Then the *Gouye*, the *Cabesera*, the *Mbuyu* are born,
the *Zirasun*, the *ɓokki*, بوباب, the *Cabda*, the *Kondebili*…
the Baobab (fig. 6.2)!

Over a decade as long as a millennium,
despite predations and corruption,
the Baobab takes root from all those uprooted
Deep in the ground, defying the barren loam
to anchor itself in fertile land.

Each foot is named:
A root of the family,
A compass in storms,
A root of the village,
fighting against hunger and war,
A root of resistance,
weighing the YES and AGAINST,
saying NO, we've had enough!!!

These roots pierce the City!

---

[254] Rogoff, Harney, Heathfield, Mollona, Moreno, Sternfeld, freethought collective, "freethought: Spectral Infrastructure".

Even if the tree catches fire,
like a snake that sheds its skin
the bark of the Baobab regenerates.

The Baobab of VSP,
with a proud and strong trunk stands
against white noise,
against underground parasites,
its trunk engraved with all the names
members of VSP
alive, dead and in between.

Each leaning against a solid trellis
of ethical relationships and self-teaching,
in autonomy and alliances,
the Baobab protects the popular university
against the cold of fear
and the fire of racism
The crown, the branches, the twigs
everything is on fire but nothing burns
'Ragal dou diam gouye'[255]

The branches extend the tree
with powerful reach,
welcoming good omens:
Pure dignity, VSP on the menu
tables of *attayas*, *thiakry*, *attiéké*.

Foods such as these are the fruits of the tree of life and nourish VSP's struggle towards rock solid cases for regularization, a book of recommendations and another of demands, alliances with collectives, networks, organizations from the most grassroots to the most institutional, resumption of studies and access to state-recognized trainings, the creation of 100PAP solidarity beer, and a forest house which proudly stands higher and higher in the canopy of resistances.

[255] Wolof Proverb: 'The fearful do not cut the Baobab'.

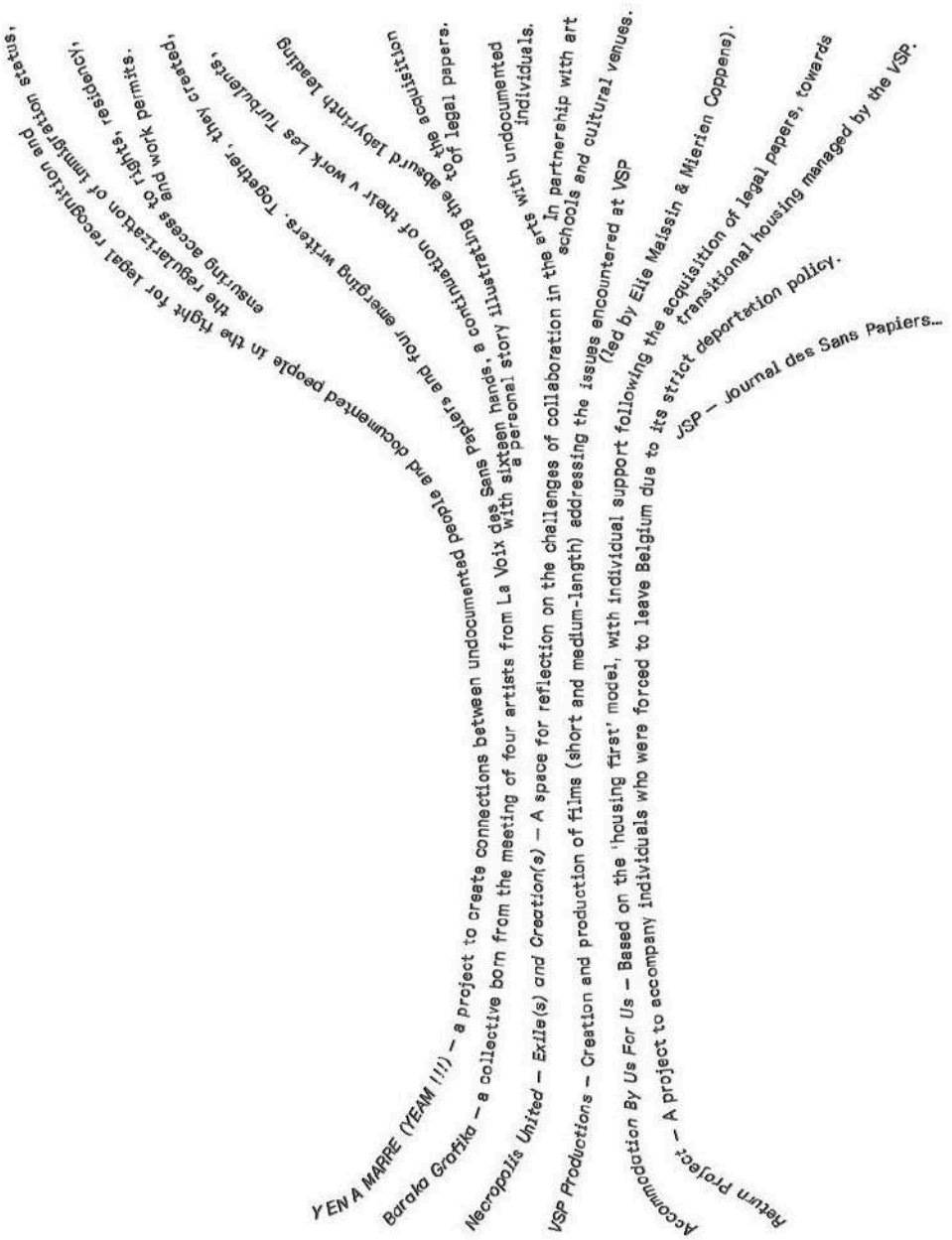

Fig. 6.2
Boubab tree with its trunk and branches outlining the
various projects VSP is engaged with in their struggle
for regularisation and dignification of people without documents.
Image credit: Sonja Haller, Pascal Brun of HallerBrun

Chapter 7
The Cloud: Choreographing Hyperobjects

After addressing the Israeli–Palestinian context in the first chapter of this dissertation and dedicating an extended portion of it to the *Necropolis* and *Necropolis-United* projects, this final chapter turns to *The Cloud,* a stage performance developed as a part of this Ph.D. research, in which I explore an ecological catastrophe to which I am personally connected: the 1986 Chernobyl disaster. Catastrophes such as this unfold across multiple scales - environmental, political, social, and bodily - and reveal the fragile and often inadequate systems that seek to contain them. Following the accident, hundreds of thousands of young men, known as "liquidators", were mobilized by the Soviet authorities to clean radioactive debris from the most hazardous zones surrounding the power plant. Their intervention, carried out under extreme conditions and with pore protective equipment, had devastating and often fatal consequences for their health and lives. The performance pays tribute to their sacrifice through a deeply emotional and physically embodied engagement with the (personal and collective) trauma of the event, while also drawing connections to contemporary anxieties surrounding war, ecological catastrophe, and systemic invisibility.

This chapter traces the conceptual and creative development of *The Cloud*, with particular attention to the dual presence of two phenomena - nuclear catastrophe (Chernobyl) and artificial intelligence (AI) - each vast, distributed, and impervious to complete comprehension. Drawing on philosopher and ecologist Timothy Morton's theory of the hyperobject, the testimonial poetics of writer Svetlana Alexievich, as well as on inspirations such as the work of conceptual artist Mark Lombardi, it explores how these forces shape the performance's aesthetics, dramaturgy, and epistemology. It also reflects on how, in this artistic work, AI - rather than being deployed for verification or the generative replication of information - is embraced as a co-creator, a collaborator in producing a shared field of uncertainty. Through real-time and pre-processed generative systems, AI operates here not as a so-called neutral tool, but as an active agent: one that contaminates, mutates, and amplifies the unstable nature of the testimony it processes.

For this creation, I collaborated with dramaturg Igor Dobričić, AI specialist and composer Axel Chemla--Romeu-Santos, performer Misha Demoustier, cinematographer Artur Castro Freire, and lighting designer Jan Mergaert. Together we constructed a performance in which my own testimony becomes an anchor point into broader questions of memory, radiation, and the evidentiary instability of documents in the post-truth era. *The Cloud* explores how testimony - especially when mediated through digital systems and generative AI - shifts from a fixed recounting of events to a site of performative reenactment, speculation, and embodied invocation. At its core, the work examines how a personal narrative, once processed through machinic logic, transforms into a volatile archive where fact, affect, and algorithmic association coalesce. By treating documents not simply as containers of

information but as mutable, responsive agents within the choreographic space, *The Cloud* proposes a rethinking of documentary practice as a live, situated inquiry; one that resists closure and embraces uncertainty as a generative force.

7.1 The Personal as Entry Point: Chernobyl and Embodied Testimony

The Chernobyl nuclear disaster on April 26, 1986, stands as one of the most catastrophic technological accidents in human history. The explosion of reactor no. 4 at the Chernobyl Nuclear Power Plant released massive amounts of radioactive material into the atmosphere, contaminating vast swathes of land across Ukraine, Belarus, Russia, and beyond. This event precipitated an ecological crisis of unprecedented scale, entangling human, environmental, and political spheres in a complex web of consequences that persist decades later. More than 300,000 people were displaced, and hundreds of towns and villages were evacuated and abandoned. The so-called “exclusion zone” became both a physical boundary and a symbolic scar; a constant reminder of the limits of human control over technological systems and nuclear energy. Long-term health consequences, including elevated rates of cancer, birth defects, and chronic illnesses, continue to affect the populations of the region.

In *The Cloud*, this historical event is brought forward through a personal entry point. I was born in Belarus (then a republic of the USSR) in the city of Gomel, located merely 130 kilometers from Chernobyl. I was six years old when the catastrophe occurred. In the aftermath, higher-than-normal levels of radiation were detected in my body, leading to a series of medical treatments and triggering a state of panic within my family. The years that followed were marked by the constant threat of an invisible enemy: radiation. The experience of undergoing a traumatic, barely understood event as a child - one that unfolded both inside and around my body - left traces that remain difficult to name. It is this ambiguity that continues to shape my relationship to the event. My personal history is therefore deeply intertwined with the Chernobyl disaster and the embedded structural violence surrounding it: its effects still reverberate in my body today.

Consequently, the performance itself developed over a rather long time span. The necessity for this project emerged already in 2016, following my first visit to Belarus since having left the country 26 years before in 1990. This visit made evident that, while my artistic work has consistently reflected and responded to the various geopolitical contexts I have inhabited (namely, the Israeli-Palestinian context in which I grew up and the European context in which I currently reside), the particular context of my early childhood, of a child growing up in the Soviet context, had remained largely overlooked. In retrospect, it seems that migrating at an early age may have contributed to my suppression of this part of my personal history, its traumatic nature making it the most difficult to open up and confront.

The politics of systematic silencing - both during and after the event - also did not help in acknowledging a personal relationship with the Chernobyl catastrophe. The Soviet Union was characterized by multiple layers of secrecy and systemic silencing, employed as deliberate strategies to

control the population and shape public consciousness. Information was tightly managed, and both individual expression and collective memory were subjected to censorship, denial, and ideological manipulation. Such apparatus of concealment was not merely bureaucratic; it operated as a deeply embedded cultural logic, shaping what could be known, said, or even imagined. This was no different in the nation's response to the Chernobyl disaster. In the immediate aftermath of the explosion, Soviet authorities delayed public acknowledgment of the accident, minimized its severity, and withheld critical information from both citizens and the international community. Evacuations were postponed, early warnings were suppressed, and state media maintained silence, even as radiation levels soared. Citizens in affected regions, including my hometown of Gomel, were left in the dark despite the clear danger to their health. This strategic suppression of information was not merely an attempt to avoid panic; it was a deeply ingrained practice of governance rooted in the preservation of state power and ideological control. The silencing extended beyond the event itself, shaping the narrative of Chernobyl for years to come. Those who spoke out - scientists, journalists, or survivors - often faced discreditation, isolation, or punishment. The trial that followed after the disaster was itself more of a staged event than an investigation. The proceedings were rushed, access for journalists was limited, and the entire process operated under tight state supervision. Rather than addressing the flaws in the RBMK (high-power channel-type) reactor design that exploded due to structural neglect that had probably enabled the disaster, the trial focused on scapegoating a few plant operators.

To this day, the act of speaking out critically in public remains limited in Russia due to years of state control and the suppression of free speech, including on issues such as Chernobyl. In this landscape, testimony offers one of the few ways to comprehend the true magnitude of what unfolded there. Voiced outside of state-sanctioned channels, such testimonies become a political act: not only a recounting of experience, but a form of resistance against erasure. It is precisely because of this political and ethical charge that the notion of testimony became a central element in *The Cloud* project - more prominently than in my previous works - and requires careful interrogation as both a form of (an unstable) "document" and "evidence".

In her book *The Ethics of Witnessing: A History of a Problem* political theorist Michal Givoni attempts to "retell the story of the rise of testimony from the perspective of its possible failure."[256] She highlights two contradictory tendencies in twentieth-century development of testimony: the promotion of "the authority of experience"[257] which grants victims', activists' and combatants' accounts a privileged moral and political status; alongside the recognition that experience itself is unstable and that the act of testifying "cannot rely solely on its spontaneous translation into a report or story."[258] Literary critic Shoshana Felman, drawing on her analysis of Holocaust testimony, stresses that

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[256] Michal Givoni, *The Ethics of Witnessing: A History of a Problem* (Jerusalem: Van Leer Institute Press and Hakibbutz Hameuchad, 2015), 12–13. Hebrew; my own translation.
[257] Ibid.
[258] Ibid.

testimony is not reducible to factual recounting; it is always a performative act. For her, testimony is less about transmitting information than about staging the impossibility of fully conveying traumatic experience. It is a form of speech that necessarily addresses another, creating a dialogical space where meaning is constituted in the act of reception as much as in the act of narration. In this sense, testimony is "a narrative performance which no statement (no report and no description) can replace",[259] precisely because it enacts a relation between witness and listener rather than merely delivering content. Philosopher and historian Hannah Arendt, on her part, argued that this very performative aspect of testimony makes it susceptible to instrumentalization, serving political agendas and narrative-building. In her book *Eichmann in Jerusalem*, *A Report on the Banality of Evil,* she underscored the theatricalization of the Eichmann trial, starting from the selection of the venue - a cultural center "with orchestra and gallery, with proscenium and stage…for the actors' entrance" - which was transformed into a courtroom literally set upon a stage. She observed that the proceedings had strayed from their juridical purpose of judging Eichmann, transforming instead into a state spectacle, "with the usher's marvelous shout at the beginning of each session producing the effect of the rising curtain."[260] To her, "it was precisely the play aspect of the trial that collapsed under the weight of the hair-raising atrocities"[261] recounted by survivors.

This tension around the instability of testimony has only intensified in decades since. The proliferation of mobile cameras has enabled testimony to shift from retrospective account to live transmission, where event and witnessing converge in the same instant. Yet, the parallel rise of open-source AI and the circulation of disinformation has destabilized this immediacy, making possible the fabrication of testimonies and the obscuring of facts with striking ease. Building on these reflections, one can see how testimony always hovers in a double bind: it bears an immense ethical and political weight yet remains vulnerable to appropriation, distortion, or fabrication. It is at once fragile and powerful; capable of giving voice to silenced experiences, but also exposed to being staged, framed, or subsumed by larger political narratives.

For the Belarusian investigative journalist and oral historian Svetlana Alexievich, "people are like the black boxes found in the debris of airplane crashes. Someone has to open them."[262] In this powerful metaphor, she evokes the act of listening to individual testimonies as a form of forensic recovery - an attempt to access the hidden memory data of historical catastrophes. Alexievich's method can be seen as an answer to the double bind described above: she acknowledges the impossibility of a transparent transmission of experience, yet stages testimony in a way that

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[259] Shoshana Felman and Dori Laub, *Testimony: Crises of Witnessing in Literature, Psychoanalysis, and History* (New York: Routledge, 1992), 255; cited by Timmy De Laet, "Between Conflict and Community: The Politics of Witnessing in Documentary Dance", *Towards Documentary Choreography - Encounter #1,* conference, Beursschouwburg, December 7, 2023.
[260] Hannah Arendt, *Eichmann in Jerusalem: A Report on the Banality of Evil* (New York: Viking Press, 1963; repr., London: Penguin Classics, 2006), 4.
[261] Ibid.*,* 8–9.
[262] Svetlana Alexievich, *Voices from Chernobyl: The Oral History of a Nuclear Disaster*, trans. Keith Gessen (New York: Picador, 2006), 23.

foregrounds its affective and dialogical force. In *Voices from Chernobyl: The Oral History of a Nuclear Disaster*, a book composed entirely of first-hand accounts from those directly affected by the 1986 nuclear accident, she develops a distinctive genre that blends oral history, literary montage, and an affective texture of remembrance. Rather than presenting a conventional, linear narrative of the Chernobyl catastrophe, she allows a polyphonic landscape of voices to emerge: survivors, widows, soldiers, doctors, engineers, and children - each bearing witness to a different fragment of this event. These testimonies are not raw transcripts, but carefully curated and composed monologues that foreground subjectivity, complexity, and affect. Through this method, Alexievich constructs a space where private pain and public disaster meet, producing what has been called "a history of emotions" or "a history of the soul".[263]

Alexievich's approach to testimony was instrumental in shaping the conceptual framework of *The Cloud*. By framing testimony as a form of forensic listening, she offered a way to engage with subjective memory not as mere recollection, but as a gateway into the deeper emotional and political dimensions of historical catastrophe. Her work revealed how the intimate and fragmented could speak to the collective and unspeakable. This insight became the starting point for my own process: the act of voicing what had long remained unspoken became a methodological backbone of the artistic project. Through the recalling of my own memories, I began to stitch together the ruptured threads of my personal story, which is intimately linked to the Chernobyl catastrophe, and the unresolved trauma it carries, recognizing testimony not simply as narrative tool, but as a form of recounting that opens a space for affective understanding of an event that in many ways eludes full grasp.

7.2 Against the Rhetoric of the Anthropocene: Hyperobjects, Clouds, and Critical Representation

The concept of the hyperobject, as developed by philosopher and ecologist Timothy Morton, was another constructive notion for the conception of *The Cloud*. Hyperobjects are entities so vast in temporal and spatial scale that they defy full human comprehension. They are "massively distributed in time and space",[264] meaning they cannot be experienced in their totality from a single vantage point or moment. Climate change, global warming, radioactive contamination, and the internet are among Morton's examples: they are everywhere and nowhere at once, moving through space and through time, exerting profound influence while remaining largely invisible or intangible. Hyperobjects, Morton argues, are not only symptoms of ecological crisis - they are also agents of it. They don't simply reflect global disasters; they help produce them. In this view, hyperobjects are responsible for

[263] Sara Danius, Permanent Secretary of the Swedish Academy, quoted in Susan Harris, "The 2015 Nobel Prize in Literature: It's Svetlana Alexievich", *Words Without Borders*, October 8, 2015, https://wordswithoutborders.org/read/article/2015-10/the-2015-nobel-prize-in-literature-its-svetlana-alexievich/, accessed August 18, 2025.
[264] Morton, *Hyperobjects*, 1.

what Morton calls “the end of the world”.[265] But, for Morton, this end is not a singular, dramatic event yet to come; rather, it is a condition we are already inhabiting; a slow-motion catastrophe unfolding in real time.

The Cloud traces the radioactive cloud of Chernobyl - one hyperobject - through its entanglement with a second: the data residing in “the Cloud” that fuels Artificial Intelligence. Though distinct in nature, both embody the defining qualities of hyperobjects as articulated by Morton. They are omnipresent yet difficult to localize - the radioactive cloud moves silently through the atmosphere, crossing borders and entering ecosystems, its presence marked by delayed symptoms and long-term contamination. Similarly, the AI cloud operates silently within data centers, code, and algorithms, shaping perception, behavior, and decision-making without direct visibility. Each causes effects that far exceed the scale of its immediate operations: one through the decay of isotopes, the other through the feedback loops of data. Both are also “viscous”,[266] in Morton’s terms - they cling to us. Radioactive particles (though invisible) bind to soil, water, food, and skin. Traces of AI, (though intangible) attach to language, behavior, and cognition. Once encountered, neither can be easily shed. They leave behind residues: material, affective, epistemic.

They are also “non-local”: we never perceive them in their entirety, only through local manifestations: a cancer diagnosis, a weather shift, a misclassified face, a broken translation. Only fragments are available to us; their totality remains beyond our grasp. Temporarily, they are “undulating”.[267] The Chernobyl fallout persists in geological time - some isotopes will remain active for thousands of years - while the AI cloud folds the past into the future through datasets, recursive training, and predictive automation. Both exist on time-scales that escape the human sensorium, making them uncanny presences: already here, yet still unfolding. Finally, both are profoundly “interobjective”:[268] composed of other objects and entangled with vast infrastructures - electrical grids, satellite systems, cooling towers, labor networks. No single location or artifact contains them. They exist through relation, through dispersal, through accumulation. To engage them is not to isolate a point, but to trace a network; not to observe a contour, but to navigate an atmosphere.

During the course of our artistic research, these two hyperobjects re-emerged into public consciousness. On February 24, 2022, the first day of Russia’s full-scale invasion of Ukraine, Russian forces occupied the Chernobyl Exclusion Zone. As their heavy vehicles moved through the contaminated area, they reportedly disturbed radioactive dust, raising radiation levels and reactivating a long-dormant danger. The tactical act of occupying Chernobyl made tangible the enduring presence of radioactive contamination, reminding the world that the catastrophe is not a closed chapter, but an ongoing condition that continues to leak into the present.

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[265] Ibid., 7.
[266] Ibid., 1–2, 39–40.
[267] Ibid., 70.
[268] Ibid., 40.

Nine months later, on November 30, 2022, the American artificial intelligence organization OpenAI released ChatGPT to the public as a freely accessible "research preview", marking a pivotal moment in the widespread adoption and visibility of artificial intelligence. Since then, generative AI has rapidly evolved from a background function in information systems into an active force shaping language, knowledge production, decision-making, and creative expression. No longer confined to the hidden spectral infrastructure of code and data centers, it now intervenes directly in education, media, and governance, becoming not just a tool, but a co-author of how meaning is produced, understood, and circulated.

The "visibility" of both hyperobjects - the Chernobyl catastrophe and AI - within this narrow historical window reveals not only their omnipresence but also their role in disclosing the defining conditions of the Anthropocene. These are not merely environmental or technological events; they are symptoms, agents, and signposts of a geological era defined by human-induced transformation of the Earth's systems. The Anthropocene is marked by out-of-site, large-scale forces - material transformation, fossil fuels, nuclear waste, etc. - that exceed human perception while transforming the surface of earth and its ecosystem. As Morton writes, "hyperobjects are not just products of the Anthropocene. They are the very mode in which the Anthropocene is made legible".[269] Chernobyl and AI thus function not merely as examples of ecological or technological crises, but as structures of intelligibility, revealing how contemporary planetary life is shaped by forces that are distributed, amplified, and sustained across vast scales. They make visible the systemic entanglements of modernity: the interplay of infrastructure, extractivism, computation, and catastrophe. In doing so, they anchor abstraction in material consequence and turn the invisible architectures of the Anthropocene into something we can, however partially, sense, name, and confront.

This idea of legibility is central to *The Cloud:* not as a search for clarity, but as a practice of making visible what is often obscured. In his book *Against the Anthropocene: Visual Culture and Environment Today*, art historian T.J. Demos critiques the dominant representations of ecological crisis, particularly satellite imagery and data visualizations, for their tendency to depoliticize, universalize, and aestheticize destruction. These images, he argues, "obscure the accountability behind the mounting eco-catastrophe and inadvertently make us all complicit in its destructive project."[270] What he calls the "Anthropocene rhetoric"[271] often operates as a mechanism of erasure, flattening difference and enabling the military-state-corporate apparatus to disavow responsibility for the differentiated impacts of climate change. In order to contrast this tendency, Demos calls for artistic interventions that are speculative, narrative-based, and imaginative - modes of representation that challenge dominant frames of perception and resist the flattening effects of technocratic visual culture. This includes testimonial and embodied accounts that document environmental violence, trace its

[269] Ibid., 130.
[270] T. J. Demos, *Against the Anthropocene: Visual Culture and Environment Today* (Berlin: Sternberg Press, 2017), 19.
[271] Ibid.

historical formation, and envision just futures. For Demos, what is needed are situated perspectives: voices and images that emerge from lived experience rather than from above.[272] These practices "insist on embedding experimental visual culture within societal engagements and collaborative social movements".[273] Demos' call resonates with Alexievich's testimonial method and with the orientation of *The Cloud*, which proposes such a situated perspective as its starting point.

On stage, I begin by reading from my notes: memories from a childhood shadowed by the Chernobyl catastrophe, alongside reflections from the creation process of *The Cloud,* into a microphone. A custom-made system, designed by Axel Chemla--Romeu-Santos, allows my speech to enter the cloud of artificial intelligence. My testimony is transcribed on the screens surrounding the stage, then transformed into prompts, and then proliferated into an ever-expanding diorama of images, sounds, and texts (fig. 7.2 and fig. 7.3). The constantly evolving diaporama resonates with the networked logic of conceptual artist Mark Lombardi's diagrammatic drawings, where relationships and flows are made visible through meticulously mapped connections. Lombardi's work, in exposing hidden financial and political networks, offers a model for visualizing complexity and the unseen structures that shape events - a logic echoed on stage through the AI's transformation of narrative fragments orchestrated in real time by Chemla--Romeu-Santos. In *The Cloud*, AI offers a transformation of these fragments into intricate webs that link personal, historical, and speculative dimensions. Images dissolve and blend into one another, while text is endlessly transcribed and reconfigured, generating an infinite array of possible versions. This real-time cooperation between myself, Chemla--Romeu-Santos, and AI does not aim to reproduce my narrative faithfully, but to contaminate it - unfolding the testimony into an unstable archive, where memory, speculation, and machine logic become entangled. As the AI generates outputs in response to fragments of my personal history, it exposes the mechanisms by which data is scraped, recombined, and repurposed, turning even the most intimate recollection of memories into raw material for computation. Rather than treating AI as a neutral tool, *The Cloud* positions it as a co-agent in the production of information; one whose logic is inherently shaped by the infrastructures, biases, and extractive operations from which it emerges. What unfolds on stage is less a performance of control than one of exposure: an encounter with the machinic processes that is increasingly revealed in front of the eyes of the spectators. In doing so, the work attempts to offer a situated, embodied perspective from within the Anthropocene, one that lets both hyperobjects gradually emerge through this ever mutating processing of information.

7.3 Testimony Beyond the Self: From Embodied Memory to Distributed Witnessing

Central to the State's immediate response to the Chernobyl disaster was one of the largest civil mobilizations in peacetime history, of the so-called "liquidators": between 600,000 and 800,000

[272] For further discussion of subverting the gaze from above, see earlier references in subchapters 2.6 and 3.5.
[273] Demos, *Against the Anthropocene,* 99.

Fig. 7.2
The Cloud (2024) by Arkadi Zaides.
Reading testimony while AI generated images appear on screen.
Image credit: Giuseppe Follacchio

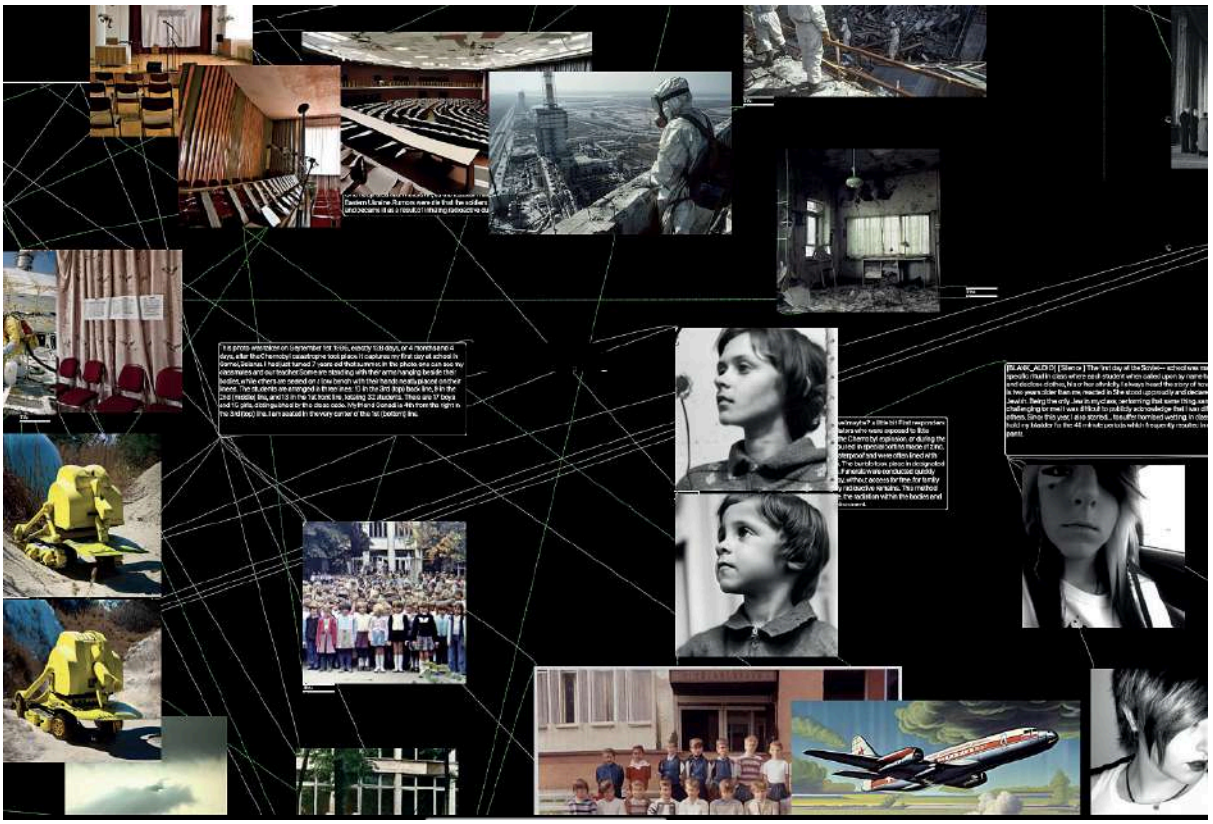

Fig. 7.3
The Cloud (2024) by Arkadi Zaides.
Customized AI interface during the proliferation.
Image credit: Axel Chemla--Romeu-Santos

predominantly young men were conscripted or coerced by Soviet authorities to contain and mitigate the radioactive fallout. These liquidators were tasked with hazardous duties such as decontaminating radioactive debris, constructing the sarcophagus around the destroyed reactor, and clearing the exclusion zone randomly outlined while radiation soared far beyond it. Operating under conditions of extreme danger and often with inadequate protective equipment, these men embodied the frontline of state-sanctioned sacrifice, as they were subjected to exposure to lethal radiation. Yet, despite the scale and significance of their involvement, the voices of the liquidators have remained largely absent from official historical accounts. Their testimonies, when they exist, often circulate in fragmented forms: oral memories, interviews, or second-hand reports. This absence is not coincidental; it reflects the broader Soviet strategy of censorship and information control: narratives of heroism were foregrounded while stories of suffering, dissent, or systemic failure were suppressed. The figure of the liquidator thus hovers between glory and erasure, caught in a space where history becomes unreliable and memory becomes obscure.

In the section following the one where I read my childhood memories, we sought to reinhabit this historical void - not through factual reconstruction, but through a form of speculative testimony. At that moment of our research, ChatGPT evolved into more than a conversational tool: connected to the vast corpus of data on the World Wide Web, it became capable not only of retrieving information, but of generating new content through associative synthesis. Using ChatGPT, we initiated a process in which the perspective of a liquidator could be imagined, voiced, and algorithmically co-constructed - not as verified documentation, but as poetic simulation. Through iterative exchanges, we developed a single speculative monologue, refining it across stages of questioning, scenario-building, and the integration of known historical fragments. The result was not the reproduction of an existing testimony, but an imagined voice bearing an uncanny emotional proximity to those many accounts that were never recorded. This co-authored process did not seek to reconstruct a singular truth but to illuminate the unstable terrain between history and erasure, where fact dissolves into probability, and memory emerges from the debris of collective silencing. As such, in *The Cloud*, rather than resolving the problem of absence of testimony, we reconfigured it, shifting the question from “what really happened?” to “which forms of expression are possible when the real has been systematically denied, forgotten, or distorted?” In this sense, the performance presents AI not as a neutral generator, but as a co-author and active shaper of collective memory. It exposes the layered processes through which knowledge is created, shaped, and transmitted in what has been coined “the age of the post-truth”. By drawing a speculative line between the silence surrounding the liquidators and the logic of artificial intelligence, *The Cloud* explores new forms of testimonial practice, rooted in embodiment yet exceeding the individual, unfolding at the intersection of personal memory, collective history, and machinic processes. Through this procedure, it enacts what might be called a *distributed witnessing*: a mode of testimony that exceeds the limits of personal experience by engaging algorithmic systems as speculative partners.

The Cloud thus stages a shift from embodied memory to what I call distributed witnessing. Testimony is no longer bound to the limits of a single body, but becomes a process of circulation, displacement, and reconfiguration across human and machinic registers. My spoken testimony, anchored in lived proximity to the Chernobyl disaster, does not end with its utterance; it reverberates through the AI system, where it is fragmented, transcribed, and algorithmically expanded into proliferating echoes of very diverse 'documents': images, texts, and sounds. Conversely, out of the dispersed archives of the Web, the AI reassembles another kind of testimony: a synthetic voice of the liquidator that condenses countless fragments into a singular utterance. What emerges is neither pure memory nor pure fiction, but a distributed field of witnessing in which the personal and the collective, the embodied and the machinic, converge. In this sense, *The Cloud* proposes testimony not as a fixed record of what happened, but as a generative act: inherently unstable, mediated, and shared across networks of voices - human and nonhuman alike.

7.4 The Liquidator and the Performer: Performing an Impossible Task

The second performer, 27-year-old Misha Demoustier, enters the stage as the speculative testimony plays through the sound system in an AI-generated male voice. He is tasked with an impossible responsibility: to embody and carry this digitally fabricated account. His body becomes a vessel for many - the collective of Chernobyl liquidators who were systematically silenced by the Soviet regime. The performer also takes on a paradoxical role. He is asked to embody a memory that is not his own - a collective memory dispersed across a vast and incomprehensible network of data - and to channel, through lip-syncing, the voice of an artificial intelligence that eerily mimics the human. His presence on stage collapses temporal and technological distances, bringing into the present what was never fully acknowledged in the past. This performative challenge mirrors the liquidators' own mission: to contain the fallout of a disaster born of systemic neglect, while operating under extreme (and fatal) conditions. What unfolds is not a literal reenactment of the liquidators' labor, but a conceptual parallel: another iteration of the impossible, a task that cannot be completed, only endured.

In this sense, performance does not overcome the impossibility of communication but unfolds precisely through its impossibility. The very difficulty of transmission - the stammer, the misalignment, the inevitable failure to fully embody - becomes a generative terrain. Each attempt to speak what resists articulation forces performer and audience alike to confront the gaps, the silences, the fractures that structure testimony itself. Demoustier's facial expressions strain toward articulation, his lips attempting to be in sync with the algorithmically generated voice, fully aware that he will inevitably fail to fully carry the voice and to fully embody the collective experience of the liquidators. Yet it is precisely this insistence on conveying the untransmittable, this persistent striving against failure, that becomes a generative force.

As the testimony continues, documentary footage appears on the screens around him. The visuals offer a glimpse into the most complex and hazardous mission assigned to the liquidators: cleaning the roof of reactor no. 4, where liquidators had to remove highly radioactive debris and graphite blocks, spending only ninety seconds at a time due to lethal levels of radiation. The footage shifts between indoor and outdoor scenes. Indoors, the liquidators are seen being briefed - standing in line, receiving rushed instructions from commanders using photographs and video monitors. A sense of urgency and disarray permeates the space. Makeshift protective gear is distributed. At one point, a piece of lead sheeting is hastily strapped to the back of a liquidator's head by another, using improvised elastic bands. Outdoors, the camera captures the exposed surface of the reactor roof, where shards of radioactive graphite are dispersed. In small groups, the men are sent out, each permitted only a fleeting moment to shovel debris before radiation exposure reaches lethal levels. Their movements are rapid, disoriented, occasionally stumbling. The grainy footage, partially blurred by the tremble of the handheld camera, seems to strain under the weight of what it records: a labor that is, inherently, fatal. A digital timeline is embedded in the footage, emphasizing both the passage of time within the film and the brutal time limits imposed on the liquidators during their deadly mission. Time feels compressed: each second carrying unbearable weight; each frame a stark reminder of the fragile boundary between life and lethal exposure.

Another impossibility with which Demoustier is confronted on stage is to compete with the affective power of this footage playing behind him. He struggles - almost pleads - for the audience's attention, but the contest is already lost. The screens commands the gaze; history arrives with visceral force. Like the liquidators scrambling to collect graphite fragments, the performer reaches for fragments seen on screen, trying to catch movements of liquidators appearing in the footage. His gestures attempt to mirror theirs: swift and abrupt, always arriving just a moment too late. In this moment, his labor echoes theirs - not in content, but in form. Both are entrusted with impossible tasks. Both perform under conditions where the body becomes an instrument of exposure: the liquidators to radioactive matter, the performer to the video material. Both, ultimately, are overwhelmed.

7.5 The Liquidator's Suit: Material Witnessing and the Tangibility of the Abstract

The embodied encounter with exposure in *The Cloud* is further materialized through the rubber protective suit and gas mask worn by the performer. The suit is an original Soviet-era Chernobyl protection suit, purchased from Ukraine via eBay, while the gas mask - of Israeli origin - was likewise sourced through eBay. Acquired in this way, they already testify to how such artifacts of disaster now circulate in a global marketplace, traded with the same logistical neutrality as everyday commodities. Both artifacts also link directly to my own personal history, marked by the persistent spectre of radioactive exposure. Though never used in the actual cleanup, the suit comes from the same stock issued to Chernobyl's liquidators - gear that, despite its official designation as protective, failed to

completely shield their bodies from radiation. It embodies a paradox: a relic of state intervention and simultaneously a symbol of its inadequacy. The suit retains the material trace of a system that attempted to contain catastrophe through insufficient means. The gas mask carries the same contradiction. A few months after I migrated from the Soviet Union to Israel/Palestine, the Gulf War broke out. When the sirens sounded to warn of incoming missile attacks from Iraq, we - like the rest of the population - would seal ourselves inside a room lined with plastic sheeting and wear government-issued gas masks,[274] fearing chemical warfare. In reality, no chemical or nuclear weapons were launched from Iraq, and most Israeli casualties during the war resulted from the improper use of the masks themselves. These two artifacts, retrieved from distinct geopolitical crises, become mnemonic devices, collapsing separate states of emergency into a shared continuum of exposure and vulnerability. On stage, their presence transforms the Demoustier's body into a site of layered temporalities, activating both personal memory and collective trauma through what artist and researcher Susan Schuppli has called "material witnessing".[275]

In *The Cloud*, the rubber suit and gas mask do not merely function as props or period references. They operate as what Schuppli defines as "material witnesses - nonhuman entities … that archive their complex interactions with the world, producing ontological transformations and informatic dispositions that can be forensically decoded and reassembled back into a history."[276] Their surfaces - the porous barrier of the Soviet suit that could not shield the liquidator's body; the Israeli gas mask that instilled safety yet caused death through misuse - bear witness not only to the historical events they were meant to mitigate but also to the epistemic ruptures those events engendered. These objects testify to the failed promises of containment, to state-sanctioned gestures of protection that, in practice, often amplified harm. As such, they are not simply evidence of an event but participants in the very processes through which evidence is materialized. "Material witness is, in effect", Schuppli writes, "a Möbius-like concept that continually twists between divulging 'evidence of the event' and exposing the 'event of evidence.'"[277] These artifacts - material and tangible - anchor the performance's complex abstractions in physical reality. While *The Cloud* deals with immense and often intangible forces (radiation, systemic failure, collective trauma, and the inscrutable operations of AI), the rubber suit and gas mask bring these vast, sometimes overwhelming concepts into direct, corporeal focus. They embody what might otherwise remain abstract: the invisible threat of radioactive contamination, the systemic failures of state protection, and the embodied vulnerability of those caught in ecological and geopolitical crises.

The suit also directly affects the performer's body: its rubber-like surface conditions the skin to a rapid increase in temperature and heightened production of sweat, amplifying physical strain and

[274] While Jewish citizens of Israel received the gas masks in advance, distribution to Palestinian citizens of Israel was slower and more limited, and Palestinians in the West Bank and Gaza were not provided with masks at all - a policy that reflected the structural inequalities of protection under Israeli control.
[275] Susan Schuppli, *Material Witness: Media, Forensics, Evidence* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2020), 3.
[276] Ibid.
[277] Ibid.

discomfort. Simultaneously, the gas mask restricts breathing and movement, imposing a claustrophobic limitation that intensifies sensations of suffocation and vulnerability. Together, the suit and mask shape the performer's physical presence, turning the body into a living site of tension between protection and exposure, control and collapse. By integrating the material constraints of both suit and mask, the performance transcends mere representation, offering a visceral enactment of containment's failure - the very failure these artifacts signify. Through this material embodiment, *The Cloud* invites the audience to engage not only intellectually but also materially with the legacies of disaster, highlighting the complex entanglements between human bodies, ecological threat, and environment.

7.6 System's Overload: Meltdown as a Generative State

This embodied experience of vulnerability and constraint, as enacted by the performer, spills over to the audience and resonates deeply with the concept of meltdown. Originally coined to describe the catastrophic failure of a nuclear reactor core, such as that at Chernobyl, "meltdown" also denotes the moment when a containment system collapses under overwhelming pressure, creating invisible and long-lasting harm. The exposure of some of the liquidators to lethal levels of radiation led to profound physical breakdown: an internal meltdown at the cellular level, with bodies deteriorating beyond repair. In parallel, the term "meltdown" has been extended metaphorically to artificial intelligence, where systems exceed their operational boundaries through misalignment or cognitive overload, leading to uncontrollable and diffuse breakdowns. Whether physical or digital, these meltdowns signify the moment when containment fails, when systems turn inward and their effects spill uncontrollably outward - fragmented, dispersed, and often unseen.

This breakdown of containment extends into the aesthetic domain as well. As Timothy Morton writes, "What we end up with is a situation in which it becomes impossible to maintain aesthetic distance. … Hyperobjects stick to our bodies, our sense-organs, our concepts - so that we can no longer stand back and look. We are immersed, entangled, and yet powerless to fully see or frame them".[278] The performer occupies precisely this condition. On stage, he is exposed to two hyperobjects at once - nuclear catastrophe and generative intelligence - each vast, distributed, and impossible to represent in full. The archival footage of Chernobyl behind him no longer functions as documentation but as emission: it radiates. The AI-generated text he recites resists coherence; it shifts, loops, and escapes intention. His body becomes the threshold where these forces meet: too fragile to contain them, too implicated to withdraw. Like the liquidators gathering radioactive debris, he reaches for fragments - gestures, phrases, temporal anchors - knowing the act is insufficient, but performing it nonetheless. This is not simply a representation of meltdown; it is its reenactment, distributed across media, memory, and flesh.

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[278] Morton, *Hyperobjects*, 28–29.

This process culminates in a pivotal section of the performance, where the idea of *melting down* reaches a peak both visually, in the projected screens, and corporeally, in the performer's physical task. In the projected materials, the actual (the document, the referent, the historical trace) dissolves under the pressure of AI processing. Footage capturing Chernobyl sourced from different moments in time is subjected to machinic inference, causing the factual to lose contour. Edges blur, chronology collapses, causality becomes unstable. What was once indexical becomes spectral. The reactor, the soldiers, the abandoned machinery - all appear as if seen through a contaminated lens, unstable and mutating. The AI does not replicate reality; it metabolizes it, digests it. In this process, history undergoes a kind of fission: legibility decays, and what remains is affective residue, pattern recognition, aesthetic fallout. The video does not show what happened; rather, it shows what remains when the image itself begins to disintegrate under the weight of too much memory.

On stage, the suit containing the performer's body is slightly oversized, hanging off his body like a delayed echo of the bodies it once enclosed. As the performance unfolds, it becomes a second skin that refuses to fit. The performer does not wear it so much as disappear into it (fig. 7.4). His movements are slow, viscous, suspended - as if occurring underwater or under sedation. He enters a state of controlled destabilization, a choreography of slow motion undoing. This movement language does not represent transformation; it *performs* it. Limbs extend and retract with difficulty, as if remembering a function that no longer belongs to the present tense. The body inside the suit seems to undergo continuous mutation: neither fully human nor fully dehumanized, caught between effort and residue, between gesture and collapse. There is no climax, only a recursive drifting; form folding in on itself. The performer becomes less a subject than a vessel: for historical radiation, for machinic hallucination, for the slow violence of being exposed to systems too large to hold. The suit rustles faintly with each motion, like a Geiger counter registering movement as contamination. Presence becomes unstable. This is not transformation as triumph, but as attrition, as a body pushed slowly beyond legibility.

Within this process, meltdown persists, not solely as a failure of containment, but as a rupture from which new formations emerge: unintended, unstable, generative. It is a paradoxical state arising from systemic excess, where body, image, sound, and language lose their footing and enter mutation, proliferation, reformation and resurgence. The breakdown of representational frames, the contamination of timelines, the saturation of sense: all create conditions in which alternative logics take root. The AI, in its overflow, does not produce coherent meaning but errant associations, speculative morphologies, hybrid temporalities. Likewise, the performer, disfigured by his protective skin and suspended in slowness, no longer enacts a stable identity, but becomes a site of haunted mutability.

Timothy Morton wonders, what, in the future, will a museum of hyperobjects look like?[279] A museum in which the work is on a scale "massively distributed in time and space relative to

[279] Ibid., 121.

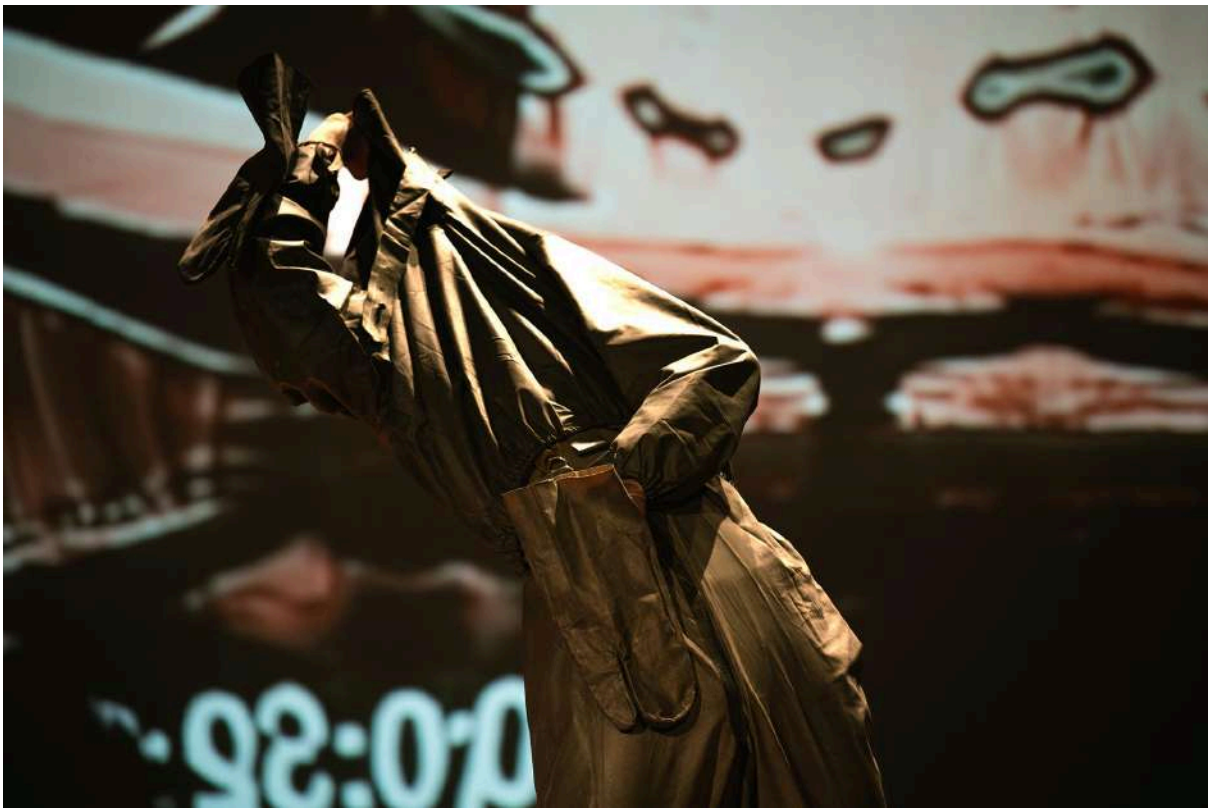

Fig. 7.4
The Cloud (2024) by Arkadi Zaides.
What remains when the image itself begins to disintegrate under the weight of too much memory, as the body pushed slowly beyond legibility. Image credit: Giuseppe Follacchio

humans?"[280] For Morton, "instead of burying nuclear waste, we might store it aboveground, in a visible place, where we can learn to take more responsibility for it - perhaps even building an aesthetically interesting enclosure."[281] In that sense, *The Cloud* attempts to offer such a temporary enclosure within the walls of the theatre - not a space of display, but of saturation; not of clarity, but of entanglement. What unfolds in this performance is not the exhibition of catastrophe, but its ambient presence. A meltdown not only witnessed, but inhabited, and experienced live on stage. This generative meltdown does not promise neat resolution or catharsis. Instead, it opens a space of ongoing metamorphosis, a threshold where new opportunities emerge through fragmentation and excess: meanings shift, histories refract, and the body transmutes. Far from mere collapse, it signals the unstable vitality of systems pushed beyond their limits, inviting us to reckon not only with failure, but with the fertile complexity born from it.

7.7 Embracing AI as Co-creator - Embracing Unpredictability

Every section in *The Cloud* is developed through a distinct engagement with AI, whether by linking to existing generative platforms or by employing custom tools created by Axel Chemla--Romeu-Santos, all accessed or activated live on stage. Thus, in this performance, AI is treated not as an instrument or a toolbox but as a co-creator of the performance and an active participant in its unfolding dramaturgy. Its presence permeates the body of the work, shaping its progression, aesthetics, and affective charge. Rather than controlling the outputs of these tools and systems, the work embraces the unpredictable logic, associative leaps, and semantic drift inherent to machine learning architectures. AI is not asked to replicate truth or simulate memory; it is invited to contaminate and to overwhelm. In this way, it mirrors the radioactive residues of Chernobyl itself: diffuse, often imperceptible, yet continuously contaminating their environment long after the initial event. To be overwhelmed by the machine's ceaseless, recursive production is to confront cognitive saturation - a field of proliferating signals without resolution. Like the aftermath of catastrophe, these machinic traces resist linear narration. They demand another mode of attention: partial, situated, and open to disorientation.

By giving up the illusion of control and staging artificial intelligence to co-inhabit the theatre space, *The Cloud* reconfigures how documentary materials are staged, especially in an era when machine learning increasingly governs perception, analysis, and decision-making. AI's presence transforms the performance into a porous field of feedback, where factual information, memory, affect, and association circulate in a dispersed manner, like particles of water intermingling within an airborne cloud. In this entangled terrain, the performers (Misha Demoustier and myself) act as both instigators and recipients: offering material for machinic manipulation while remaining responsive to its

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[280] Ibid., 1.
[281] Morgan Meis, "Timothy Morton's *Hyper-Pandemic*", *The New Yorker*, June 8, 2021, par. 6 (citing *Dark Ecology*), https://www.newyorker.com/culture/persons-of-interest/timothy-mortons-hyper-pandemic, accessed 18 August 2025.

boundless, ever-looping production of variations. Words, gestures, utterances, and silences on stage are caught in a loop of perpetual transformation - quoted, misremembered, distorted, transfigured, and looped by the presence of the machine.

This loop resists narrative closure. Instead, it intensifies epistemic instability, where the meaning of an event, testimony, or action remains unfixed; constantly deferred and recomposed. What emerges is not a clear storyline but a field of resonances: a choreography of signals, glitches, hesitations, and echoes. We, the human performers, do not assert mastery but move through uncertainty, improvising with and against the logics of automation. Our presence, inviting unpredictability, contamination, and machinic drift, acts as both method and ethic. It rejects the illusion of control over memory, history, and the future, opening a shared space of negotiation where testimony is unstable, agency distributed, and witnessing becomes a collective act across human and nonhuman domains. In this way, *The Cloud* stages not just a crisis of knowledge but a poetics of relational sensing, where knowing is enacted not through clarity but through affective attunement and embodied responsiveness.

Importantly, the unpredictable logic of AI is not aestheticized for spectacle, but operationalized as a method of unsettling representational stability. If the catastrophe of Chernobyl resists full representation due to its scale and slow violence, then *The Cloud* approaches it as one might choreograph a hyperobject: through distributed gestures, fractured narratives, and movements that exceed individual grasp. Here, AI, by producing misalignments, aporias, and aesthetic excess, becomes an unlikely ally in expressing what cannot be directly shown. Its generative indeterminacy becomes a dramaturgical force, one that allows the performance to hover in a tension between legibility and collapse. In this way, the machinic is neither an external threat nor a magical solution; it is an unstable collaborator whose failures and distortions carry epistemic value. These errors, like radiation leaks, are not accidental - they are symptomatic of the system’s inner logics pushed to their limits. They create fissures through which new perceptual formations might emerge. Through artificial intelligence, the performance becomes less about rehearsing a known narrative and more about navigating emergence in real time: a choreography not of certainty, but of exposure.


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Conclusion

Throughout these chapters, I have shown and revisited the many dimensions that documentary choreography can take, ranging from aesthetic strategies to ethical considerations. I have also shown how, through an intermedial approach, over nearly two decades my work has consistently engaged with diverse geopolitical contexts, evolving into increasingly complex, entangled, and experimental forms of documentary practice. What emerges is not a single methodology but a set of shifting operations through which documents are activated, reframed, and embodied. Together, these projects trace a trajectory in which the fluid and contested nature of documents intervenes in - and complicates - narratives that are often shaped and constrained by ruling ideological frameworks. This multifaceted inquiry highlights the complex interplay between subjectivity, evidence, and representation in the ongoing construction of meaning within politically brutal environments.

This final section does not attempt to conclude the discussion, but instead proposes a set of guiding principles drawn from my ongoing artistic research, and the reflections developed throughout this inquiry. Interwoven with insights from my own practice as it intersects with the different chapters, these principles are neither fixed nor prescriptive, nor have they developed in solitude. As demonstrated in this dissertation, they emerge from an ongoing process of making, thinking, and reflecting alongside colleagues, peers, and collaborators, some of whose voices and perspectives are directly woven into this text. Rather than outlining a definitive framework, this list of principles is deliberately meant to remain open and provisional: an invitation for others to challenge, expand, and reshape it in an ongoing dialogue, so that the discussion around documentary choreography remains alive, dynamic, and participatory. These principles address questions of how documents - whether archival or testimonial - can be reactivated through the body; how intermedial strategies can generate new, layered modes of spectatorship; and how choreography can confront broader political and ethical issues, from the politics of visibility and memorialization to the responsibilities of handling sensitive, fragmented, or contested evidence. They also reflect on the impact of emerging technologies and the shifting nature of archives, urging a critical, embodied approach to the evolving landscape of documentary practices within contemporary performance.

Documentary choreography emerges in dialogue with a longer lineage of documentary practices across theatre, film, and photography. It draws from traditions in documentary theatre that foreground the use of factual material as a vehicle for political and historical reflection. Likewise, it resonates with documentary film’s strategies of montage, testimony, and archival activation, as well as photography’s role in bearing witness and constructing visual evidence. What distinguishes documentary choreography within this broader constellation is its insistence on the live, sensing body as both a site

of inscription[282] and an agent of inquiry. It translates evidentiary logics and critical sensibilities from these adjacent forms into the temporal, spatial, and relational language of performance, offering not only a continuation but also a reconfiguration of documentary practices through the lens of movement.

In his 1968 essay "Notes on the Documentary Theatre", the German writer and dramaturg Peter Weiss identifies potential source materials that can be used within this genre. According to Weiss these sources could include "protocols, files, letters, statistical tables, stock market reports, financial statements of banking and industrial companies, government statements or statements by well-known personalities, speeches, interviews, newspaper and radio reports, photos, journal films, and other evidence of the present."[283] For Weiss, the engagement with such documents within a theatrical framework initiates a process of reckoning with what happened. As he writes, "it takes up authentic material and presents it from the stage - unaltered in content, but reworked in form",[284] thereby enabling historical events to be re-examined and critically mediated in the present. This process emphasizes the active role of the theatre not simply to present facts but to transform documents and archives into a living dialogue, where the past is continually reinterpreted and questioned through performance. Building on this tradition of document-based theatre, the first principle I would like to propose is the following.

#1

Documentary choreography operates in the gap between the archived event and the embodied present. A document, by nature, refers to a past - historical, political, or personal - while the performer's body, on stage, carries its own histories, memories, and sedimented gestures. It is within this disjunction that documentary choreography intervenes, staging a negotiation between these distinct temporalities. In doing so, it opens a space for reactivation, reinterpretation, and critical engagement with the documented past through the subjective and situated presence of the performing body.

Therefore, for documentary choreography to emerge, there must first be an event in the past - an occurrence that leaves a trace, or a document, attesting to it. The choreographic process begins with the document, yet it never treats it as neutral. Every document bears the imprint of the conditions under which it was produced (historical, political, technological), which shape not only what it

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[282] Between 2006 and 2008, together with scholar and body theorist Sandra Noeth, we curated a research project at HAU-Hebbel am Ufer titled *Violence of Inscriptions*, which focused on human bodies subjected to political and social violence. Based on the performativity and physicality that the body brings into the discussion, the project questioned the possibility of representing and critically reflecting on experiences of structural violence through artistic, discursive, and activist means.

[283] Peter Weiss, "Notizen zum dokumentarischen Theater [1968]", *Band 4: Deutsche Dramaturgie der Sechziger Jahre: Ausgewählte Texte*, eds. Helmut Kreuzer, Peter Seibert (Berlin; Boston: Max Niemeyer Verlag, 1974), 57. English translation by ChatGPT.

[284] Weiss, "Notizen zum dokumentarischen Theater", 57.

contains but how it can be subjectively read. This is the insight behind Donna Haraway's notion of "situated knowledges",[285] which rejects[286] the "God trick"[287]of disembodied objectivity and emphasizes the need for reflexivity in all forms of knowledge. For Haraway, all knowledge, including visual representations, data, and, by extension, documents, emerges from a particular standpoint. To work with a document is thus to engage with both its content and the perspective from which it speaks. A document is never fixed; it is a contingent artifact whose meaning shifts with the circumstances of its making, circulation, and reception. As such, it calls for a specific methodology attentive to its background, materiality, and context - capable of interrogating it critically and productively.

#2

Each document, be it visual, textual, sonic, digital, or other, demands its own choreographic approach. Such practice emerges from the specificity of the document's materiality, the socio-political context it conveys, and the questions it provokes. Central to this inquiry is the role of the body: both as it is inscribed within the document itself, and as a medium through which the document can be reactivated, interrogated, and made present again. Documentary choreography thus unfolds as a situated practice: one that develops in response to, and in dialogue with, the evidential, historical, and affective dimensions of each unique source.

My first experiments with this type of activation took place within the project *Archive*, which is briefly mentioned in the introduction and throughout this dissertation. During the performance, selected footage from the archives of B'Tselem (The Israeli Information Center for Human Rights in the Occupied Territories) is projected on a screen on stage, depicting the behaviors of Israeli settlers and soldiers. In response, I mimic the postures and gestures seen on screen, creating a precise choreographic mirroring of the violence captured on film. My body acts as a medium through which these archived gestures are reiterated and brought into the immediacy of the performance - a corporeal translation that bridges the archival past and the embodied present.

The process of selecting which documents to work with is never neutral. Each choice reflects the situatedness of the inquiry and the position from which it is conducted. Moreover, the specific nature of the selected material - its political charge, its framing of bodies, its power dynamics - directly shapes the gestural responses that can emerge. In this way, the act of selection prefigures the mode of

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[285] Haraway, "Situated Knowledges", 575–599.
[286] In this regard, it is also worth mentioning Sandra Harding's notion of *strong objectivity*, which argues that knowledge becomes more reliable and less biased when research explicitly accounts for the social positions, values, and interests of both the researcher and the subjects, rather than pretending to be neutral or adopting "the view from nowhere". Sandra Harding, *Whose Science? Whose Knowledge? Thinking from Women's Lives.* Cornell University Press, 1991; Harding develops this idea in part as a critique of Thomas Nagel's concept of completely objective, detached knowledge, articulated in *The View from Nowhere*; Thomas Nagel, The View from Nowhere (New York: Oxford University Press, 1986).
[287] Haraway, "Situated Knowledges", 581.

activation: determining which movements are reiterated, which are resisted, and how the live body engages with the document's gestures to interrogate and transform them on stage. These choices necessitate ethical considerations. Each decision - what to show, how to respond to gestures, which histories to foreground - is inseparable from questions of justice, accountability, the critical interrogation of power and complicity, as well as care for the victims of different forms of violence. By foregrounding the body as both medium and site of engagement, documentary choreography enacts an applied ethics, where each movement, gesture, and arrangement participates in a continual negotiation of representation, memory, and historicity.

In *Archive*, the acts of committing to work with B'Tselem archives, selecting footage portraying only Israeli settlers and soldiers, and reiterating their gestures myself as an Israeli choreographer, all bear witness to the entangled position I occupy within these histories, exposing the complicity, tensions, and fractures underpinning the embodied enactment of power. It foregrounds the necessity for methodologies that remain critically aware of how positionality shapes both choices of material and their activation on stage. The methodology developed in *Archive* is thus tailor-made, responding to my specific positionality as a maker as well as to the ethical stakes embedded in the archival material. It considers not only what is shown, but also how it is activated and by whom, shaping the gestures, rhythms, and interactions between the performer (myself) and the subjects appearing on screen.

In his analysis of *Archive*, Frédéric Pouillaude proposes the term "gestuatim"[288] to describe the primary operational logic of the performance: the isolation of movements and gestures performed in the social sphere and their precise reiteration on stage. The term draws inspiration from a common practice in so-called "verbatim theatre", a form of documentary theatre that literally restates or re-enacts documents *as they are* in ways that invite critical reflection on the real-world contexts they represent. Pouillaude further notes that "the application of verbatim to the sphere of movement demands substantial modifications to the theatrical model from which it stems."[289] While verbatim theatre, typically text-based, relies on the exact citation of documents as a sufficient mechanism, Pouillaude emphasizes that in the realm of movement, the presence of the initial document - such as the archival videos projected on stage in *Archive* - is crucial to preserving the work's evidential integrity. While Pouillaude's notion of *gestuatim* can be understood as one possible method of activating a document through the body, documentary choreography expands this premise.

#3

Documentary choreography embraces a broad spectrum of corporeal strategies which could be employed when seeking to activate a document. The embodied activation, whatever it might be, becomes crucial in making visible the material, affective, and ideological dimensions embedded within documentary traces. Through

[288] Pouillaude, "Dance as Documentary", 89.
[289] Ibid.

its temporal and affective presence, the body opens the archive to interpretation and embodied reactivation. In this expanded field, choreography does not simply reflect the document but opens it to inquiry and reinterpretation.

Pouillaude's reflections on *gestuatim* and the expanded range of bodily responses to archival materials, as they are present on stage, point to a more complex choreographic ecology in which documents themselves acquire equal agency. Evidential material cannot be relegated to mere inspiration or atmospheric background. Instead, it must be structurally integrated into the performance. This requires not only a methodological attentiveness to how bodies relate to documents, but also a compositional sensitivity to the dramaturgical and perceptual frameworks that shape their interplay. The live body and the archival trace must be held in productive tension, not to illustrate one another, but to construct a dynamic field in which evidence can emerge through their co-presence. As Timmy De Laet observed in his lecture "Between Conflict and Community: The Politics of Witnessing in Documentary Dance", such tension between the document and the body places ethical demands on spectators, drawing them into the act of witnessing. He argues that documentary choreography has the potential "to draw you into conflicts of which one at first would think they are not a part. It demonstrates how the position of the spectator as a witness can rapidly shift from a distanced observer to a committed citizen".[290] This shifting position of the audience - between seeing, interpreting, and being implicated - forms a crucial hinge between the choreographed body and the documentary source. It is precisely this tension, staged between presence and document, that underscores the fundamentally intermedial nature of documentary choreography and positions documentary material within the choreographic frame as an interlocutor in its own right.

#4

Documentary choreography integrates source material as an active agent within performance to secure a point of reference that resists abstraction. Rather than serving as background or inspiration, documents are structurally and conceptually embedded, shaping the choreographic process and outcome. The presence of documentary material alongside the body on stage initiates a triangulated process of spectatorship, wherein attention oscillates between the live performer, the archival trace, and the space of relation that emerges between them. In this setup, the body does not simply represent the document, nor does the document merely frame the body; instead, their simultaneity generates a field of tension and resonance that allows evidence to be experienced. This co-presence invites the viewer to witness not only what is being performed, but how the body and the document inform, disturb, or echo one another.

[290] Timmy De Laet, "Between Conflict and Community".

In this light, the interaction of different media on stage - video projections, sound installations, text in visual or spoken formats, and the body - becomes crucial. These elements do not operate in isolation; rather, they shape and transform one another, producing a field of reciprocal influence where the boundaries between media dissolve. As Chiel Kattenbelt reminds us, intermediality "emphasizes … the aspect of mutual influence (interaction)" between different media "that result in a redefinition of the media that are influencing each other, which in turn leads to a refreshed perception" ultimately changing "previously existing medium specific conventions".[291] Documentary choreography, then, does not simply incorporate media as illustrative tools - it stages the friction and dialogue between bodies, images, sounds, and new media in order to generate new meanings. The document is not merely shown but activated, becoming a dynamic interface between aesthetics and ethics.

#5

Documentary choreography unfolds as a fundamentally intermedial form. It juxtaposes diverse media - not as auxiliary elements, but as integral components of the performance. These media, with the body being one among equals alongside projections, sound, text, and archival materials, render the documentary sources accessible to the audience and are deliberately staged to reveal both content and process. This transparency foregrounds the construction of the shifting and performative quality of the selected document, allowing spectators to witness not only its content but also the process of its activation and transmission. In doing so, the work resists illusionism and asserts its status as a critical apparatus.

In *Archive*, the document appears explicitly on stage alongside the body that embodies it. On one screen, the original video clips from the B'Tselem archive are projected *as they are* on one screen, while a second screen provides contextual information, such as the date, location, the name of the Palestinian videographer, and a brief description of the recorded event - all also taken directly from the B'Tselem archive. However, within the frames of documentary choreography, documents can also be presented on stage in a form that has already been transformed.

This becomes clear in the first part of *Necropolis* which, as demonstrated in chapters 2 and 3, proposes an embodied activation of the *UNITED List of Refugee Deaths*, the initial document from which the work emerged, through a search for and geolocation of the graves of those who lost their lives as a direct consequence of Europe's border policies. The original document, a static PDF file, is not shown in its original form but is transformed through a cartographic and choreographic approach into a navigable landscape that appears onscreen, inviting spectators in the theatre to explore it as part of the performance. What the audience encounters on stage are not the raw data or the unmediated list, but the transfigured materials that emerge from the field research, presented as an immersive parcours

[291] Kattenbelt, "Intermediality in Theatre and Performance", 25.

across a digital landscape in Google Earth, where graves in various parts of Europe are marked and pinned. This tension between the original document (cited at the very beginning of the performance) and its transformed, mediated form on stage is crucial, as it foregrounds the act of translation and reconfiguration, making the audience aware of the processes through which raw data is turned into a performative and navigable landscape.

Christel Stalpaert further complicates the epistemic, ethical and political tension between the selected mediums, the transformation of the source material, and its re-presentation to the audience in this performance. As she points out, "the value of *Necropolis* lies not in charting a navigational relation with the world through digital maps, but in an exploration of the tension between the singularity of the narrative of people on migration routes, the coldness of big data, and the generality and fixity of cartographic means of representation."[292] For her, navigating through Google Earth confronts us with the fact that "we mostly encounter the *unmappability* of the singular narratives in abstract systems."[293]

A large part of the research process behind the making of *Necropolis* required becoming acquainted with the legal and forensic procedures that have led to a reality in which most of the dead at Europe's borders remain anonymous, without proper access to the processes that could establish their identity. The work is thus also situated within the field of forensics and advocates for the rights of those who died on migration routes toward Europe, arguing that they deserve the same dignity and recognition as deceased citizens, which is often not the case. While many of the bodies remain untraceable, unidentifiable, they are not entirely beyond recovery. Rather, they are forced into a condition of *unforensicability* - not due to an absence of evidence, but through the systemic withdrawal of forensic attention and political will. This imposed invisibility does not signal a lack of trace, but a refusal to read it. In response to this refusal, *Necropolis* turns to cartography and forensics as crucial investigative tools, demonstrating how the artistic process must engage with diverse disciplines when working with extra-aesthetic materials. Engagement with such fields is not an auxiliary concern, but a constitutive part of the choreographic inquiry itself.

#6

Documentary choreography necessitates engagement with other practices relevant to the materials under investigation. To meaningfully address the contexts from which documents emerge, the choreographic process extends beyond disciplinary boundaries, drawing on methodologies from other fields of research, such as forensic analysis, cartography, archival research, and others, as well as on theoretical frameworks such as critical theory and other areas of the Humanities. These inquiries, often pursued in parallel to or as part of studio work, are not external to

[292] Stalpaert, "Choreographic Gestures of Resurgence and Repair", 107.
[293] Ibid.

the artistic process; rather, they inform and transform it. Insights from such research influence the development of compositional strategies, movement vocabularies, and dramaturgical structures, embedding the expanded scope of inquiry within the choreography itself.

The expansion of documentary choreography into legal, technological, political, and theoretical domains does not merely diversify its references; it transforms its mode of operation. As the work traverses disciplines, it exposes the procedures through which knowledge is gathered, translated, and presented. What emerges, therefore, is not simply an interdisciplinary constellation, but a practice in which processes of research, selection, and mediation become perceptible. The question thus shifts from that of which materials are mobilized to how their mobilization is rendered visible.

In *Necropolis*, for example, spectators are introduced at the outset to the protocol of the grave-location search, as outlined in the invitation (see subchapter 2.8). As they traverse NECROPOLIS and encounter the graves of individuals who died along migratory routes, they become aware of the existence of the *UNITED List of Refugee Deaths* and witness how this document is translated into a navigable landscape of death. The performance does not simply reference the list; it stages its transformation.

#7

Documentary choreography renders its own processes visible. It does not conceal the procedures through which documents are selected, edited, translated, or reconfigured; rather, it stages these procedures as part of the performance and they become perceptible components of the choreographic event. In this sense, documentary choreography foregrounds the labor of investigation: the act of searching, the gaps encountered, the technological interfaces through which materials are accessed, and the interpretative decisions that shape their presentation. By exposing its own mechanisms, the work refuses to essentialize evidence. Instead, it invites spectators to witness not only the document, but the conditions under which it becomes legible. This reflexive transparency produces a double movement. On the one hand, it acknowledges the instability of documentary material and the situatedness of the choreographic intervention. On the other hand, it strengthens the evidentiary force of the work by making its operations accountable.

The *UNITED list of Refugee Deaths* is itself incomplete, as the deaths and disappearances of many people who perish on migration routes are never reported or recorded. It is within this void that *Necropolis* intervenes, using its grave-location research to unearth fragments of the missing information. This gap between the documented and the failures of documentation points to a wider

challenge faced by documentary choreography. As Saidiya Hartman reminds us, many historical events, particularly those tied to marginalized or oppressed communities, leave behind traces that are fragmentary or distorted, if existent at all. Writing of the archive of slavery and specifically on what is excluded from it, she observes that "the archive is" also "a death sentence, a tomb, a display of a violated body"[294] - a repository structured as much by erasure as by preservation. The absence or destruction of documents is not incidental, it is a well-known tactic in war, genocide, colonisation, and totalitarian regimes, shaping what is remembered and what is rendered forgotten. Hartman questions, "how might it be possible to generate a different set of descriptions from this archive? To imagine what could have been?"[295] Documentary choreography must often navigate such challenges, treating silences and erasures not as voids but as active components of the historical record. This means that the choreographic process does not only rely on existing evidence but also works critically with or against its gaps and biases, seeking ways to reimagine or re-inscribe what has been excluded from the historical record, collective memory, or archives through assemblage, fabulation, pre-enactment, and speculative futurity.

#8

Documentary choreography often operates in contexts where archives are partial, dispersed, or yet to be constructed. Rather than relying on fixed historical records, the choreographic process becomes one of assembling fragments - testimonies, images, texts, and other traces - into a provisional constellation. The body serves as both site and medium for this assembly, navigating between what is visible and what remains hidden or contested. In doing so, documentary choreography does not claim to verify or resolve a given context; rather, it engages in the construction of new documents and archives that shed light on the subject under investigation while exposing the tensions between presence and erasure, between fact and felt experience. It is within this unstable terrain that new scenic articulations emerge, offering an embodied inquiry into the limits of evidence and the politics of visibility.

Documentary choreography, therefore, does not simply work with existing traces; it navigates their gaps and points toward what has been excluded. Within this process, the body can be approached as a medium through which non-verbal, repressed, or fragmented experiences are accessed and made legible. In some cases, this may prompt the emergence of another form of document that transposes the experience into a different medium, to a written account for example. Thus, documentary choreography also serves as a site for the production of new documents, materializing the body's testimony in forms that can circulate and resist silencing or erasure. This dynamic was present in the

[294] Hartman, "Venus in Two Acts", 2.
[295] Ibid., 7.

making of *The Cloud*, where the absence of stable documentation operated on a more intimate register. In this case, the archive was not institutional but personal: a constellation of my childhood memories which were partially suppressed, fragmented, and shadowed by the experience of migration. These memories did not exist as fixed records to be retrieved, but as unstable traces - discontinuous images, sensations, and narrative gaps shaped by displacement and the passage of time. Through the recollection of these fragments and interviews with family members, a testimonial text was constructed, which is ultimately read aloud within the performance.

Such sustained movement across documents, media, and disciplinary frameworks inevitably raises a further question of whether dance, understood in its conventional sense, remains necessary within such a choreographic practice. Dance is absent from the stage in *Necropolis*, as well as in *Talos,* (a project briefly introduced above). *Talos* investigates an EU-funded project in the field of securitization that developed and field-tested land drones for border surveillance. Rather than staging dance, it seeks to expose and transmit the ideological framework through which dehumanizing technologies (such as those designed to restrict the movement of people) are promoted to the wider public, thereby producing what might be understood as a choreography of exclusion. *Necropolis* confronts its spectators with mass death and disappearance at the borders of Europe by proposing a virtual tour at the ever expanding city of the dead, as well as simulating a forensic investigation of a body on stage. Both *Talos* and *Necropolis* exemplify how the choreographic process can extend beyond conventional notions of dance, to engage with systems, infrastructures, and ideological apparatuses that shape contemporary life.

#9

Documentary choreography is not solely about embodying existing documents through dancing bodies; rather, it seeks to expand the range of possibilities beyond the confines of dance on stage. In doing so, it has the possibility to align with concepts such as "non-dance", "post-dance" or the more recent "dance in general",[296] which decenter the body from its hierarchical position within the field of contemporary dance and put it on equal footing with other media in both the creative process and the artistic output. However, movement and embodiment remain central to documentary choreography, whether in the documents selected for interrogation or in the specific practices developed to bring these documents to life.

Projects like *Necropolis* and *Talos* raise a critical question: can we still "dance" when the freedom of movement itself becomes the object of control? Movement is never neutral; it is regulated, monitored, and, at times, violently restricted. Borders, checkpoints, and bureaucratic systems dictate

[296] A type of choreography that also embraces posthumanist tendencies - what Rudi Laermans terms "post-humanist choreography"; Rudi Laermans, "'Dance in General' or Choreographing the Public, Making Assemblages", *Performance Research* 13, no. 1 (2008): 7–14.

who can move, where, and under which conditions. In this sense, documentary choreography does not simply stage movement; it questions its limitations and interrogates who is allowed to move freely and who is immobilized - whether by geopolitical barriers, social hierarchies, or legal constraints. The stage itself can function as a microcosm of these dynamics, highlighting the divide between those whose movement is accelerated and those whose movement is increasingly restricted. *Talos,* for instance, addresses the growing use of emerging technologies in the fortification of borders - a tendency that not only reshapes how we move through space but also challenges the very notion of movement itself. At the same time, technologies such as artificial intelligence destabilize conventional understandings of what constitutes a document, testimony, evidence, or even the body blurring the boundaries between fact and fiction, presence and absence, memory and erasure.

#10

Documentary choreography necessarily grapples with new technologies and new media because the terrain of factual information - its creation, circulation, and contestation - has become increasingly mediated, fragmented, and algorithmically distributed. Choreography, grounded in the physical body, enters into critical dialogue with these technologies, offering a site where disembodied data can be re-materialized and interrogated through embodied practice.

Such dialogue was central to the development of *The Cloud*, the last project presented in this inquiry, which questions how technological forces shape contemporary life, sometimes to the point of literal transformation and irreversible mutation. Nuclear energy, once heralded as a symbol of modern progress, led to the catastrophic Chernobyl disaster, leaving behind not only environmental devastation but also enduring biological and genetic consequences. In parallel, digital and algorithmic technologies (such as those driving artificial intelligence) are reshaping our informational, social, and political landscapes, challenging our very notions of evidence, memory, and truth. *The Cloud* explores this entanglement between the radioactive and the digital, investigating how invisible forces - whether nuclear radiation or the opaque logic of AI - permeate our bodies, environments, and ways of knowing.

This entanglement of seemingly transparent but omnipresent technological forces, whether radioactive or algorithmic, does not exist in a vacuum. Rather, it unfolds within broader systems of power and control that shape how bodies are governed, surveilled, and valued. As these forces intensify, they contribute to a worldview where the very definition of humanity is contested and fragmented. Within the climate of technofascism and technological warfare, where bodies are reduced to replaceable data points, the essence of what it means to be human is increasingly obscured. As these systems of control expand, they erode the very foundations of human dignity, rights, and autonomy. This transformation highlights the urgent need to renegotiate what it means to be human - particularly

for those who are racialized and systematically dehumanized within these regimes. It calls not only for a critical rethinking of personhood, agency, and value, but also for a reinvigoration and defense of the discourse of rights, which must be continually reasserted against structures that seek to erode it.

In her article "ThruMmming with Knowledge", Irit Rogoff emphasizes the importance of engaging not only with the structures of knowledge production but also with its affective registers. Referring to *Archive* and *Necropolis*, she observes how these projects involve a sustained engagement with human rights organizations and specifically with the documents they generate, recognizing them as autonomous producers of knowledge. Through her concept of "thruMmming", Rogoff proposes an epistemic and embodied mode of being with knowledge: one that remains attuned to the vibrations, contradictions, and resonances that arise when theory, activism, and lived experience converge. For Rogoff, "NGOs instantiate one of our most cherished principles: the right to start in the middle - not to rehearse the entire structure of the argument and its history, but to go along with it and make it operate differently, operate in our time."[297] In other words, for Rogoff, documents generated through the critical work of non-governmental organisations enable us to engage with knowledge not from a distant or abstract vantage point, but from within the continuously evolving 'now' - as they are documents produced through practice, action, and the embodied presence of activists on the ground.

Yet engagement with such documents cannot overlook the inherent tensions within human rights and humanitarian discourse itself—a discourse that, while vital, at times reinforces hierarchical relations between those positioned to offer aid or bear witness and those who suffer,[298] a power dynamic we carefully sought to avoid in *Necropolis-United*. Human rights and humanitarian discourse functions as a legal and ethical framework we have inherited, one that simultaneously enables protection and reproduces asymmetries of power. As the *Necropolis-United* project made all participants realize, even materials produced by human rights organizations are not immune to critique; they reflect particular narratives, political agendas, and forms of framing that must be continuously questioned. Documentary choreography, therefore, does not take these documents uncritically but treats them as contested terrains: sites where meaning, authority, and power are constantly negotiated. This calls for an approach that neither rejects such documents nor accepts them at face value, but instead situates them within a broader field of political, ethical, and aesthetic inquiry.

#11

Documentary choreography strives to engage with human rights issues. This engagement often involves working with the documents produced by NGOs, human

[297] Irit Rogoff, "ThruMmming With Knowledge", 4.
[298] In this regard, one might point to Renzo Martens' film *Enjoy Poverty* (2008), which so brilliantly exposes the gap between the documented reality of suffering and the political-economic structures that profit from its representation. By urging local communities in the Democratic Republic of Congo to claim "ownership" of their own poverty as an economic resource, the work lays bare the extractive logics of Western media and humanitarian industries, revealing how even the act of witnessing can be complicit in systems of exploitation.

rights institutions, and legal bodies - not as static representations, but as dynamic producers of knowledge. Documentary choreography approaches these materials as capable of vibrating across temporal, emotional, and political registers while resisting idealization. On stage, these documents are not simply cited or illustrated; they are recontextualized and reactivated, allowing their embedded tensions, silences, and urgencies to come to surface. The choreographic process thus becomes a site of mediation and transformation, foregrounding the affective, political, and epistemological dimensions of such documents and actively intervening in how evidence is framed, narratives are constructed, and responsibility is distributed.

The distribution of responsibility (or the sensible, to refer back to Jacques Rancière) becomes especially urgent when violations are presented within the space of the theatre. The comfortable distance afforded by the theatrical frame risks turning spectatorship into a form of voyeurism. Spectating itself cannot be taken for granted; this often privileged position must be critically acknowledged when addressing issues related to various types of abuses. In this context, the act of watching becomes ethically charged. To spectate is not merely to observe, but to participate in a system of distribution: of images, narratives, and power. When atrocity is framed aesthetically, there is a danger that horror becomes stylized and urgency diluted. The theatre may then function not as a site of reckoning, but as a mechanism for packaging violence into a readily consumable form.

Documentary choreography seeks to resist this tendency. Instead of offering closure or catharsis, it aims to make spectators aware of their own positions - not as an act of accusation or moralisation, but as a call to action. *Necropolis*, for instance, begins by inviting the audience to join the practice of searching for graves. It not only exposes the structural violence behind Europe's borders but also equips the audience with concrete tools and practical methods, transforming them from passive observers into potential contributors to the cause advocated by the project. Through this gesture, the work asks its viewers not only to witness but to consider what they might do with the knowledge and tools offered - how they might carry this encounter beyond the theatre. This approach exemplifies a more accountable mode of viewing: one that not only recognizes asymmetries of privilege and access but also proposes practical tools for action. It provides pathways for engagement, suggesting that witnessing alone is insufficient without the possibility of action. Such an ethic of engagement goes hand in hand with the responsibilities that come with working with documentary materials, especially those bearing witness to violence or injustice, which demand careful and ongoing ethical reflection also from the artists who chose to engage with such evidence in the first place. This is not only a matter of content but also of method: how these materials are handled, contextualized, and shared determines whether the artistic process becomes complicit in extractive dynamics or instead offers a critical counter-practice. Such concerns demand sustained ethical reflection, not only from audiences but from the artists themselves - those who choose to work with traces of violence, precarity, or

injustice. In this regard, the responsibility extends beyond what is shown to how it is shown and to whom, and with what possibilities for response.

#12

Documentary choreography seeks to activate a non-extractivist engagement with its source materials. While drawing on extra-aesthetic data, it critically reflects on the original intent and function of the documents it mobilizes. Attentive to the political, institutional, and social contexts in which these materials are produced, it seeks to propose ethical ways of reactivating them, both within the artistic context and beyond. It positions artistic practice not as a separate sphere, but as a potential agent within the broader realities these documents address.

A non-extractive approach transforms the theatrical space, with its paradoxical proximity and distance, into a contested terrain where responsibility is no longer a passive act of witnessing but an active, embodied confrontation with the conditions of knowledge and power, shared between makers and audience members. From there, it reaches beyond the insulated frame of the theatre or the art venue to engage with the world it seeks to repair. In *Archive*, this approach entailed bringing archival materials from B'Tselem generated by Palestinian activists to the public eye - making visible what was otherwise inaccessible, while confronting political opposition, right-wing attempts at censorship, and the withdrawal of funding. In *Talos*, it involved exposing questionable practices conducted by the EU under the veil of technological innovation, confronting spectators with both the fortification of their borders and the potential for ideological manipulation. In *Necropolis*, it took the form of tracing grave locations and collaborating with communities and institutions to render the *UNITED List of Refugee Deaths* more complete and accessible. Out of this labor emerged *Necropolis-United* - an extension of the project that invited concerned communities into the collective task of constructing a commemorative infrastructure. Finally, *The Cloud* extended this engagement into environmental and technological domains, investigating the pervasive and algorithmic "cloud" of AI amidst the enduring presence of ecological collapse. Together, these projects exemplify a practice that does not remain at the level of commentary but insists on concrete engagement, compelling both makers and spectators to take responsibility and allowing art to operate as an active force within contested social and political terrains.

Documentary choreography does not claim to resolve the tensions between fact and feeling, history and presence, archive and gesture - but rather to inhabit them. It proposes a critical mode of making and perceiving, one that acknowledges the document not as static proof but as a volatile site of transmission, negotiation, and transformation. In doing so, it affirms choreography as a practice of evidentiary investigation: capable of holding the fragmentary, the unspeakable, the erased, and the contested, and proposing tools for critical activation. In the interstices between document and body,

between the evidential and the affective, a new form of testimony emerges: one that does not merely stage reality, but re-choreographs our capacity to confront it.

A Final Comment

As a final comment with which I would like to conclude this enquiry, it is important for me to acknowledge that my specific trajectory, and the topics I have explored over almost two decades, which consequently shape this dissertation, may appear "heavy", often circling around themes that remain, to some extent, unpopular, uncomfortable, and difficult. I am equally aware, however, that documentary choreography does not need to be tied to such weighty concerns. It could just as well turn toward lighter subjects, allowing itself to be funny, humorous, or satirical; to engage with the insignificant, the minor, the playful, or the seemingly trivial.[299] Far from diminishing the form, such approaches could open new ways of thinking about how evidence, presence, and embodiment operate in less expected or less solemn contexts.

Yet my perspective, shaped by the histories I have traversed, the urgencies I have witnessed, and the observations I have accumulated, continues to pull me back into the eye of the storm. I cannot imagine doing otherwise when faced with the current state of the world and the fragile but persistent belief I still hold in the opportunities offered by the theatre, as a rare and intimate space of attention, where gestures, evidence, and bodies can converge to insist on what must not be ignored. For me, this space comes with an acute sense of responsibility: to engage with the pressing questions of our time, however "heavy" they may appear, while also recognizing that such heaviness is not only found in moments of spectacular crisis but is embedded in the everyday; in structural conditions; in what often remains unseen when we speak of war, conflict, or border regimes. My aim is to create a choreography that does not turn away from their weight but instead seeks to hold it, interrogate it, and transform it into a shared experience of thought and presence. In the end, documentary choreography may not lighten the weight of the world, but it offers a space where its fractures, silences, and urgencies can resonate; where bodies, documents, and gestures hold the darkness long enough for us to glimpse another way of seeing.

[299] I am thankful to Frédéric Pouillaud for pointing this out while reviewing this conclusion.

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