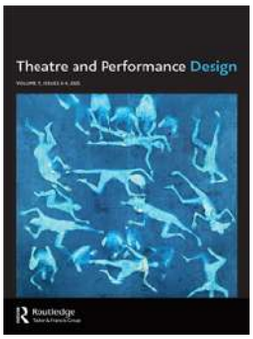

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Yana Meerzon

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Building a Counter-Archive: Performing the Lost Histories of Migration and Exile

Yana Meerzon

Professeure titulaire| Full Professor, Directrice des études théâtrales | Director of Theatre Studies, Département de théâtre | Department of Theatre, Université d'Ottawa | University of Ottawa, 135 Séraphin-Marion, bureau 304B, Ottawa (ON), Canada, K1N 6N5

ABSTRACT

In *Archive Fever: A Freudian Impression* (1995), Jacques Derrida redefines the archive as a site where memory, power, and law intersect. Far from neutral, the archive operates through inclusion and exclusion—determining what is preserved or erased. Building on Derrida's insights, this article examines how artists Doris Salcedo, Arkadi Zaides, and Marina Davydova confront the violence of disappearance and the politics of erasure within the context of forced migration and exile. Through close analysis of Salcedo's *Palimpsest* (2013–2017), Zaides' *Necropolis* (2019), and Davydova's *Museum of Uncounted Voices* (2023), the article explores how each work reimagines the archive as an embodied, performative space. Drawing on Heiner Goebbels' concept of the aesthetics of absence, it argues that these artists construct meaning not through presence, but through erasure, silence, and trace. Human actors are replaced by non-human agents—objects, sounds, and data—that evoke the missing and ungrieved. The article situates these works at the intersection of performance studies, memory theory, and migration studies, showing how performative practices illuminate the spectral dimensions of historical violence. Together, these artists offer a counter-archive —one that resists institutional authority, foregrounds absence as an ethical space, and restores the disappeared to collective memory through acts of performative remembrance.

Introduction

In his influential essay, *Archive Fever: A Freudian Impression* (1995), Jacques Derrida defines the archive not only as a site for preserving history but also as a structure of power that determines what is remembered and what is forgotten. For Derrida, the function of the archive is both revolutionary and traditional. It is an economic institution—derived from *oikos*, meaning house—that not only stores and safeguards information but also produces law and order; it holds a nomological power (*nomos*) to establish norms, legitimize authority, and manipulate discourses (Derrida 1995, 12-13). This dual function of the archive means that it serves as a site of memory, institutional continuity, and legal force, while also operating through exclusion, erasure, and haunting (13). Those individuals or

CONTACT Yana Meerzon ymeerzon@uottawa.ca

facts of history deemed unworthy of record may never enter the archive. Yet their absence lingers, haunting the archive as a spectral presence and exposing its inability to fully contain the historical record.

Nowhere is this logic more visible—or more devastating—than in the context of forced migration. In recent decades, thousands of refugees fleeing war, persecution, or ecological devastation have died during their journeys across borders and seas. Many of their bodies remain unidentified or unrecovered, their names unrecorded, and their stories omitted from official accounts. These individuals have been erased not only physically but also administratively and culturally: they remain absent from public records, state archives, and formal memorials. In these migratory stories, the violence of displacement is deepened by the violence of disappearance; it turns into a double erasure that challenges traditional practices of mourning, witnessing, and historical representation.

This article brings Derrida's theory of the archive into dialogue with contemporary performative practices that aspire to respond to the crisis of undocumented migration. Using three case studies, it examines how theatre and performance installations can intervene in this process of double erasure and thus can create counter-archives of global migration. In these case studies, objects, space, and intermedial design foreground absence, invisibility, and the ethical responsibility of witnessing, demonstrating how scenographic practices can challenge official histories, highlight systemic erasure, and articulate loss through material and spatial means.

The first case study is **Doris Salcedo's *Palimpsest* (2013-2017).** Salcedo, a Colombian artist born in Bogotá, has long focused on commemorating victims of political violence and forced displacement. *Palimpsest* is a walk-through art installation consisting of sixty-six stone slabs engraved with the names of over 300 refugees and migrants who died at sea (Leutenegger, 2022). Through the interplay of objects, space, and water, Salcedo stages absence as a formal and ethical act, inviting viewers into a contemplative encounter with the loss of life.

The second case study is **Arkadi Zaides' *Necropolis* (2019).** Zaides, an Israeli choreographer and performance artist of Belarusian descent, who works now in Europe, focuses on the intersection of dance, visual art, and forensic investigation. *Necropolis* is a multimedia performance: it merges methods of forensic research, investigative journalism, and choreography to trace the anonymous graves of refugees who perished on their way to Europe. By choreographing forensic records of refugee deaths, he confronts the audience with the tension between institutional forgetting and the ethical imperative to witness and remember the undocumented dead.

The third case study is Marina Davydova's ***Museum of Uncounted Voices* (2023).** Davydova is a theatre critic, researcher, festival curator, and artist whose work explores memory, displacement, and post-imperial histories. *Museum of Uncounted Voices* is a live museum installation and multimedia performance that foregrounds those marginalized by Soviet history. Structured through the dramaturgy of museum storytelling, it guides spectators through a series of rooms that give voice to those silenced by official Soviet narratives. Through its performative design—where objects, space, and scenography actively stage absence—it enacts a counter-archive that engages audiences ethically and emotionally, offering a model for how theatre can render invisible histories materially and experientially present.

Heiner Goebbels' aesthetics of absence (2015) serves as a useful frame to discuss these works: it helps explain how the spatialized staging of absence produces meaning and ethical reflection, making invisible histories present. Goebbels argues that meaning in theatre does not necessarily depend on the actor's stage presence; it can emerge through scenography, sound, objects, and space rather than through embodied narrative or character (Goebbels 2015, 4-5). Absence, in this framework, becomes a generative force: what is not shown can be as meaningful as what is, with the audience made responsible for creating meaning. Goebbels' aesthetic offers a formal strategy for thinking through absence and disappearance not as a lack of meaning but as a deliberate structure of attention—one that resists spectacle, substitution, or resolution. Hence, in this article, I explore how such aesthetic choices, which Goebbels identifies as a theatre of the crisis of representation (43), can serve as critical responses to the politics of erasure and as a framework for restoring the lost and the disappeared to history.

My discussion of the chosen case studies is grounded in what I would describe as an *allegiant critical position*—a stance that acknowledges both the ethical commitments and aesthetic intentions articulated by the artists themselves. While my engagement with Doris Salcedo's practice is based on research and documentation rather than direct exchange, I have had the privilege of discussing *Necropolis* and *Museum of Uncounted Voices* with Arkadi Zaides and Marina Davydova. I am grateful for their insights, particularly as I was unable to travel to Europe to experience these performances live and instead accessed them through archival and video documentation. This proximity to the artists' own reflections inevitably informs my reading of their works. At the same time, I remain aware of the methodological limits of such allegiance: while it allows for a nuanced understanding of the artists' intentions and processes, it also requires maintaining analytical distance and situating their practices within broader theoretical debates on performance design, the politics of absence, and the ethics of representation.

Derrida's and Goebbels' theories provide the critical vocabulary for understanding what I examine as a particular strand of exilic theatre: specifically, works that neither bring the refugee body on stage nor attempt to fill in the gaps left by state neglect, but instead foreground those gaps, index those absences, and stage the conditions of loss. Rather than making the missing visible, these performances present traces of this loss, such as lists of refugees' names, topographies of disaster, discarded objects, and incomplete data sets, through which the dead are evoked without being re-embodied. In doing so, they aim to construct what one might call *a counter-archive*: a performative practice that resists the logic of archival completion and instead mourns through fragmentation, silence, and formal withdrawal.

The Disappearance of the Actor: The Aesthetics of Absence, Derrida's Archive, and Political Performance

Heiner Goebbels' aesthetics of absence emerges from contemporary theatre practices that decentre the actor and shift narrative authority to media such as sound, light, space, and movement. Rather than conveying a unified message, this approach invites the audience into an active interpretive role, allowing meaning to arise through fragmentation, ambiguity, and sensory dissonance. In doing so, Goebbels' theatre critiques the

politics of representation and becomes a space to engage with memory, loss, and erasure. The deliberate withdrawal of the actor and refusal of fixed narrative forms foreground larger societal absences: Goebbels' approach gestures toward those who have been forcibly disappeared, excluded from historical memory, and erased from public consciousness.

Applied to a theatre that explores migration and wishes to bring stories of migrants into the spotlight, Goebbels' method takes on political and ethical weight. By avoiding character-driven plots and sentimental identification, performance resists the objectification of refugees and instead mirrors the instability, invisibility, and silencing that define the condition of displacement. In these practices, absence turns into a generative force that allows the works to address the politics of disappearance. By centring what is missing, the aesthetics of absence offers a space to reckon with erasure and to engage ethically with the unseen and the forgotten.

Goebbels' approach resonates with Jacques Derrida's conception of the archive as a site where memory and erasure coexist. Absence, for Derrida, is not a void but a structuring principle of how history is recorded and remembered (Derrida 1995, 15). Read side by side, Goebbels' and Derrida's theories articulate an archive of absence that demands ethical attention, urging the viewer to confront what is missing not through representation, but through witnessing and remembrance.

In the next section of this article, I examine each case study through the dual lens of Heiner Goebbels' aesthetics of absence and Jacques Derrida's theory of the archive. I aim to demonstrate that, in these works, the absence of the human performer functions not merely as a storytelling device but as a political and ethical response to global migration. These works expose the systemic violence behind forced displacement and reimagine the archive as a site of rupture, where absence becomes an active and meaningful presence. I argue that the works also articulate an ethics of remembrance—one that confronts the impossibility of closure, the fragility of record-keeping, and the moral imperative to name and grieve those rendered invisible by the intersecting forces of nationalism, bureaucracy, and geopolitical neglect. Ultimately, these performances construct new archives of migration and invite spectators to participate in acts of remembrance and bearing witness.

Visualizing Disappearance in Contemporary Performance

Staging Disappearance: Doris Salcedo's *Palimpsest* (2013—2017)

Bogotá-based sculptor Doris Salcedo mobilizes Goebbels' aesthetics of absence through museum installations that provoke deep affective responses and intimate encounters between object and viewer. Emerging from Colombia—where violence and disappearance are 'viewed as an element of national identity' (Enriquez 2017, 15)—her work also speaks to global histories of displacement, political violence, and mourning. Rejecting figural representation, Salcedo transforms domestic objects into sites of mourning, cataloguing human loss through damaged materials: shattered furniture, embedded wardrobes, and impaled clothing serve as metonyms for interrupted lives.

Functioning as a melancholic archive (Lauzon 2015, 201), her installations do not depict victims but present the aftermath of disaster. Here, absence becomes a site of

meaning, as domestic objects 'index a body that has been absented by violence' (204). In *Untitled* (1989), which responds to the massacres of banana plantation workers in Colombia, eleven plaster-soaked white shirts pierced by steel bars evoke both funerary and workwear clothing, creating an anti-archive where absence 'demands acknowledgment and remembrance' (204).

Through this transformation, Salcedo's objects begin to act as hyper-historians (Rokem 2000): like actors in a history play, Salcedo's objects connect 'the historical past and the "fictional" performed here and now of the theatrical event' (13). In *Plegaria Muda* (2008–2010), a composition of inverted tables with grass growing between them commemorates victims of gang violence in Los Angeles. The living grass, like engraved names of Holocaust victims, marks the work as 'an open wound […] contingent, fragmented, and ephemeral' (Lauzon 2015, 201).

This strategy extends to other installations in which objects are rendered dysfunctional and inert. Wardrobes filled with concrete, fused chairs, and pierced tables evoke violent silencing. Torn from their original contexts and stripped of function, these cemented, stitched, and cracked forms perform trauma, embodying human suffering while resisting identification. In *Atrabiliarios* (1991–1996), worn shoes placed in tomb-like niches and veiled with cow bladder recall the Holocaust's remnants—clothing, suitcases, personal objects—that gesture toward absent bodies.

By underscoring absence, Salcedo's work denies the viewer the comfort of catharsis. Built on 'estranged ordinary objects' (Moreno 2010, 101), her installations unsettle the spectators through familiarity and provoke ethical witnessing rather than consolation. Like Goebbels' theatre, they stage collisions of time and meaning, and thus they position the viewer as both an outsider of the work and an activator of its meaning. This affective structure is intensified through a dramaturgy of walking: as spectators move through the space of the exhibit, their steps slow and meaning unfolds gradually (Moreno 2010, 101). The delayed recognition produces a double alienation—displacement from self and estrangement from nation (Torrance and Trèves 1979, 180)—turning spectatorship into an ethical act. *Untitled* (2003), Salcedo's Istanbul Biennial installation, stacks 1,550 worn chairs between derelict buildings, evoking mass graves and genocide. The chairs serve as metonyms for displaced bodies and trace a global cartography of forced migration; while *Shibboleth* (2007), a 167-metre crack in the Tate Modern floor, evokes borders, segregation, and the migrant's experience of entering Europe's centre (Salcedo 2007).

Salcedo's 2013-2017 installation, *Palimpsest*, offers a culmination of these aesthetic and ethical strategies. Dedicated to migrants who drowned crossing the Mediterranean and Atlantic, the work comprises of sixty-six stone slabs inscribed with names in sand and water.

> In *Palimpsest* stone slabs are arranged in a grid that covers the entire floor of the museum's seventh room. The installation functions like a mausoleum: the slabs are inlaid with the names of refugees and migrants who drowned attempting dangerous journeys across the Mediterranean Sea and Atlantic Ocean over the last two decades. Each name is inscribed into the stone and overwritten by further names formed by drops of water that gradually seep away. The tone of the work is by turns unsparing – hydraulic equipment, ground marble, resin and sand comprise the majority of its materials – and poetic, acknowledging an ongoing crisis that is viewed by many from afar with horror. Salcedo presents the names of these victims as evidence; only then can they provide their testimony. (Cheale 2023)

The names of those who died before 2010 are embedded in stone with colored sand inlays, while the names of those who died between 2011 and 2016 appear above them as droplets of water that form letters before sinking back into the surface—a continuous cycle of inscription and erasure. This gesture stages mourning and forgetting in scenographic form. As Salcedo notes, the title *Palimpsest* "refers to manuscript pages that were reused several times over the course of antiquity and the Middle Ages. The traces of the original sentences remained partly visible under the new script, which made the transmission of the old texts possible in the first place." (2023) The installation evokes this historical practice to critique society's incapacity to mourn and to expose how migrants are erased from collective memory.

Echoing Derrida's notion of the archive as both trace and erasure, *Palimpsest* stages a fragile, unstable memory, resisting closure. It embodies the paradox of memorialization: to name is to preserve, yet each name dissolves into oblivion. This disappearance is not neutral. As Salcedo makes it clear, the act of naming and erasing is political: a dramatization of how refugees are made invisible. The viewer is warned not to step on the names, amplifying the reverent tone of the installation and implicating the spectator in the ethics of witnessing. The installation does not console—it unsettles, disorients, and makes visible the systems that disappear the dead.

Heiner Goebbels' theory of absence resonates deeply with this strategy. Like Goebbels'music theatre compositions, *Palimpsest* relies not on representation but on what is not shown. Rather than presenting the dead, Salcedo stages their vanishing, making their disappearance an aesthetic and political event. The installation itself turns into a performative archive—fragmentary, affective, unstable; it demands not only memory, but also reckoning. Through *Palimpsest*, viewers are asked to bear witness to erasure itself, to inhabit the space of the disappeared, and to consider their own entanglement with the violence of forgetting.

Mapping the Invisible: *Necropolis* (2019) and the Forensic Memory of Europe

Necropolis is a multimedia project grounded in academic research and creative practice that together identify, document, and bring to visibility a new European city—the city of dead refugees and migrant people. It was initiated by the Institut des Croisements, a non-profit association supported by the French Ministry of Culture (DRAC Auvergne Rhône-Alpes), and conceptualized and directed by Arkadi Zaides, an Israeli choreographer of Belarusian descent living in France, with dramaturgy, text, and voice by Igor Dobričić, and contributions from a team of international artists and technicians. It was co-produced by major European institutions including Théâtre de la Ville, Montpellier Danse, Charleroi Danse, and others, with residency support from venues such as STUK, PACT Zollverein, and Workspacebrussels.

Conceptualized to 'reactivate the archetype of an invisible, suppressed "community of the dead" that challenges and obligates us as a community of the living' (Zaides 2021, 346), *Necropolis* engages with our 'mythological imagination', in which 'necropolis' appears 'not as a specific location but a meta-structure' (347). It casts a shadow on contemporary Europe, and demonstrates that without giving much attention, 'Europe's citizens are slowly surrounded by all those who have not been admitted, who are physical

corpses of people, who are ghosts that are not taken into account. These dead also evoke the concept of "the other", that part by which one is haunted and which one excludes' (347).

Necropolis used as its point of departure a list of refugees and migrant people who perished on their way to Europe or were already on the continent. The list was compiled by United for Intercultural Action, a network of 550 anti-racist organizations across 48 countries, which began collecting this data back in 1993, starting with Kimpua Nsimba, a 24-year-old refugee from Zaire, who died in a UK detention centre (Needham 2018). *The Guardian* published the 2018 version of this list, which served as inspiration for Zaides' project. In 2024, the group listed 44,746 people who perished on their way to Europe (The Fatal 2024).

Most entries on the list lack basic identifying information such as name, age, gender, or origin, and are marked as N.N which stands for *nomen nescio*—a Latin expression "I do not know the name". The objective of Zaides's project was to restore dignity to the dead and to address the injustice of their bureaucratic erasure. Because the list is incomplete and can never be complete, the artists' objective was to fill as many gaps as they could through their own artistic effort.

To create *Necropolis*, Zaides used a hybrid methodology of performance making: the team employed geo-localization and virtual mapping technologies to locate the graves of refugees who drowned or died from systemic neglect—such as police violence, lack of medical care, and malnutrition—while trying to reach Europe. Furthermore, the team merged devices of research, investigative journalism, data analysis, mapping, and a choreographic approach to make visible an alternative geography of Europe. In doing so, they aimed to transform loss into presence and turn the act of witnessing into a political and ethical imperative.

Through ritualized performances at burial sites, the company turns documentary evidence into a forensic *danse macabre* (Stalpaert 2021, 102–111), bringing audiences face-to-face with migration, death, and exclusion. Zaides describes this choreography as a 'dance of the dead,' in which the researchers' movements—searching, walking, and performing personal rituals—are placed in parallel with the work of the audience. The viewers' gaze is choreographed through the performance itself; by looking at the tragedy of the dead, they become part of that tragedy. In Zaides' view, this intertwining of the researchers' labor and the choreography of spectatorship has the potential to reshape the field of choreography (Zaides quoted in Noeth 2020, 50–53).

Building on this affective and ethical entanglement, *Necropolis* invites viewers to reconsider their relationship to borders and to the hidden histories of those who remain uncounted in Europe's territories. Zaides' work embodies Derrida's conception of the archive not as a static repository of the past, but as a dynamic site of absence, where the archiving of bodies and memories is always incomplete, erased, or lost. His exploration of memory in motion echoes Derrida's assertion that the archive is never fully accessible—always marked by a gap between the document and its meaning.

Conceptualized as a long-duration project, *Necropolis* changes its content from one location to the next. Every time the team travels to a new location, it begins its research by contacting 'local authorities, hospitals, archives and experts. […] The grave-location searchers register the visit, following a fixed choreographic protocol, and these images not only become part of the ever-expanding archive of the long durational performance

project, but they are also integrated in the research-based performance of Necropolis' (Stalpaert 2021, 110).

The burial site of Emanuel Thomas Taut (Essen, Germany), a 23-year-old refugee from Sudan who died in 1993 in a detention centre, was the first grave the company located (Zaides 2021, 348). The process of walking through the cemetery, locating the grave, and becoming familiar with the site has become the foundation of the ritual practices that the company has been using since that time. This ritual, however, can also be a traumatizing experience for the researcher—but it remains a necessary part of the forensic and artistic process (349).

Presented on stage as a 2D projection of its forensic discoveries and as a choreographic work, *Necropolis* functions as a virtual visit of the city of the dead, enacted for theatre audiences:

> After collecting data in different cemeteries, we return to our workspace and enter the coordinates taken at the graves into Google Earth. From the image of the planet Earth floating in space, we can gradually zoom into this virtual representation of geography until we recognize the cemeteries that we have visited, and then 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 video documentation of our walks toward the graves, allowing us to get even closer to them from an eye level perspective. (Zaides 2021, 350)

Zaides acknowledges the colonial origins of the technologies he uses: Google Earth and Google Maps belong to both the institutions of surveillance and power of the European nation-states and to the migrants, who use these technologies on their journeys. His intention, he explains, is to insert the coordinates of the unmarked graves into these systems so to 'hijack those platforms with information about the ultimate immobility – the deaths of those whose patterns of movement are both marked and produced as a disruption, a danger, delinquency' (Zaides 2021, 350).

Necropolis speaks directly to the focus of Zaides' political activism. For years, the artist has been investigating the conflict between the state and the people, and "the notion of the border", 'both literally (focusing on specific geographical border areas, and identifying particular choreography that emerges in those spaces) and metaphorically (exposing different types of discourse and apparatus at work in relation to the figure of 'the other')' (Zaides 2021, 337). In his 2014 solo performance *Archive*, inspired by B'Tselem's Camera Project, Zaides uses video footage recorded by Palestinians in the West Bank to expose the dehumanizing nature of state surveillance. Reviewing over 4,500 hours of material, Zaides selected clips, which he projected during the performance and physically re-enacted on stage. Through these embodied gestures—drawn from Israeli soldiers and settlers—he constructs a choreography that confronts the violence embedded in his own community and challenges its normalization in public discourse (Petrović-Lotin 2021, 74). The question 'what happens when movements of violating human rights function as a choreographing system?' (Petrović-Lotin 2021, 73) motivates the artistic and political strategies of Zaides' work. To Zaides, documentary choreography is the figurative language of both political oppression and political activism.

While documentary theatre often engages with verbal archives and written documents, Zaides' documentary choreography (Zaides 2025) operates through a broader range of documentary materials. Rather than merely drawing inspiration from them, his

works incorporate the documents themselves—whether visual, textual, or performative—into the artistic process. As Zaides explains, this approach 'focuses on movement, highlighting the choreography that occurs in the social sphere, while observing, analyzing, and intervening in it' (Zaides 2021, 337).

In his staged work, one can find traces of this evidence, including archival documents and footage, which at the same time can be 'tampered and interfered with, altered and modified in order to highlight their physical and choreographic qualities' (337). According to Christel Stalpaert, the research questions Zaides often asks are: 'How is/are the movement(s) of people geared along national boundaries, along notions of citizenship and statelessness? How are bodies allowed to (be) move(d) in territory wars, or during religious and political occupation? What is the choreographic pattern of social (im)mobility in global migration, also in the context of environmental displacement and ecological grief?' (2021, 103) This way, in Zaides' work, dance and politics, activism and choreography are closely intertwined.

Speaking of the politics that underlines *Necropolis*, Zaides explains: 'movement is the primary starting point of the research – movements of people who are systematically and brutally stopped by border policies. This is about thousands of bodies that are absent, silenced, drowned. It's about a collective body, haunting us' (Zaides quoted in Noeth 2020, 50). These are the bodies of 'undocumented asylum-seekers who couldn't reach Europe alive'; the bodies of migrant people who lose their identity in the unmarked mass graves (51). Zaides connects his research to Hannah Arendt's famous statement on refugees and their 'right to have rights'—those who, as stateless persons or non-citizens, are deprived of both human rights and legal protection (Zaides 2021, 340). To Zaides, the role of the artist is to call European states to accept their ethical responsibility for the fate of these anonymous dead and to acknowledge Arendt's claim that 'even upon death, one cannot escape […] the territorially based sovereign state system' (341).

At the same time, *Necropolis* functions as a project of mourning. Once the grave of a deceased migrant is located, the company visits the site and carries out a ritual following a set choreographic protocol. Each of these acts is documented and integrated into a virtual map that collectively forms the evolving structure of *Necropolis*. Anchoring his artistic work in the long and extensive research of migrants' deaths – 'as this information is usually difficult to access' – Zaides focuses *Necropolis* on 'the choreographic gestures of care' and newly invented rituals of commemoration (Zaides quoted in Noeth 2020, 51).

On stage, there is a large screen that covers the entire back-stage area; a long table is placed at the front of the stage with two seated artists, who face the screen, the same way as the audience. The placement of the table creates another visual metaphor: it serves 'to cut the space in two, creating a border between the audience and the large void of the space, that is left empty'(Zaides 2021, 359). The performers sit with their backs to the audience and navigate Google Earth, which allows them to zoom in on different locations where the mass graves are concealed (Figure 1). As they identify new locations, the performers mark them in red placemarks, thus effectively remapping Europe as the continent of the hidden cemeteries.

A second aim of *Necropolis* is to 'give back' to families of the deceased, prompting Zaides to ask how artistic work can function 'outside the economy of the theatre' (Zaides quoted in Noeth 2020, 51). For the project to be meaningful, he argues, spectators must take an active role, as its choreography is 'experienced through participation' (51).

Figure 1. Arkadi Zaides *Necropolis* (2019), at Mousonturm, Frankfurt am Main, Germany, February 2023. Arkadi Zaides and Emma Gioia are seated with their backs to the audience, facing Google Earth, where the graves of deceased refugees and migrants are geolocated. Photo: Eike Walkenhorst.

While the researchers have already 'carried out the ritual themselves,' the audience is offered a symbolic protocol—non-moralistic and non-judgmental—that invites empathy toward the nameless dead (51). Though it cannot restore life, it enables individual stories to resurface through acts of extraction and deep mapping. For example, sites like Lampedusa become more than geographic coordinates; they store specific refugee tragedies (Stalpaert 2021, 105). The value of *Necropolis* lies in its navigation between the singularity of migrant lives, the abstraction of big data, and the limits of cartographic representation, ultimately exposing 'the unmappability of the singular narratives' in global systems (107).

This focus on mapping and symbolic witnessing transitions on stage into a material engagement: in the final section of *Necropolis,* Zaides and Emma Gioia bring objects resembling human body parts into the performance space (Figure 2). These objects are Moran Senderovich's sculpted body parts and Jean Hubert's avatars: these objects' onstage appearance makes the traces of once-living bodies physically present. Zaides and Gioia handle these hyperreal fragments of human bodies—skin, hair, limbs—with utmost care and focus (Figure 3). They slowly examine and reassemble these disjointed parts on a forensic table. Their attention remains fully on the remains; the audience is excluded from their gaze. This ritual of resurgence blends commemoration with an act of symbolic reanimation, but without suggesting full restoration or closure. Instead, it offers what Stalpaert calls a tragic hope (2021, 110-111): one that acknowledges despair without collapsing into it, and resists the illusions of easy consolation.

Figure 2. Arkadi Zaides *Necropolis* (2019), at Mousonturm, Frankfurt am Main, Germany, February 2023. Arkadi Zaides. Photo: Eike Walkenhorst.

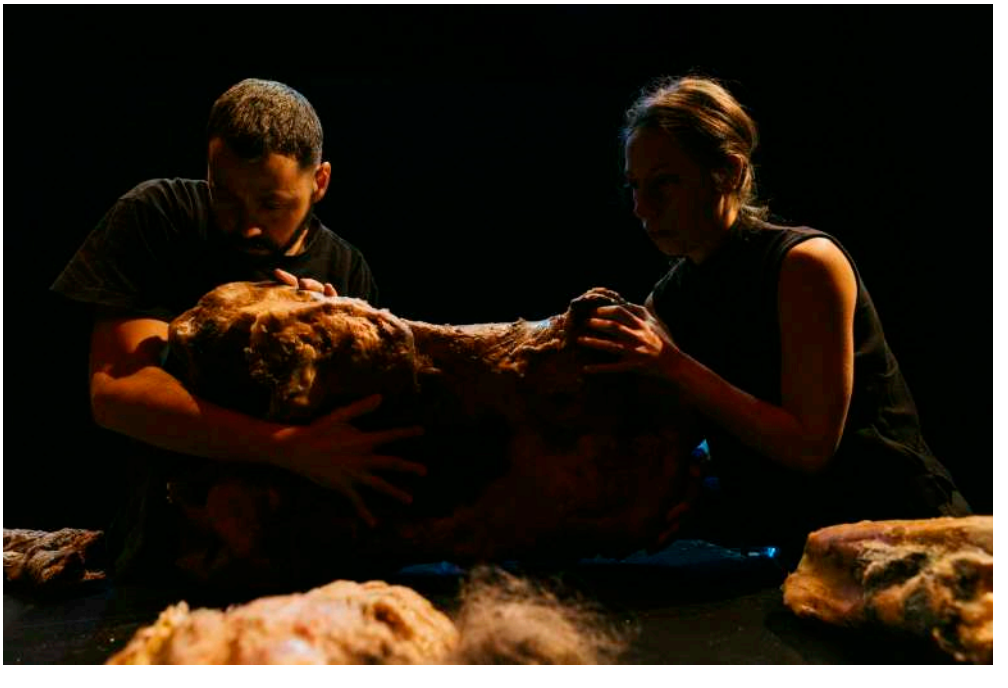

Figure 3. Arkadi Zaides *Necropolis* (2019), at Mousonturm, Frankfurt am Main, Germany, February 2023. Arkadi Zaides. Photo: Eike Walkenhorst.

This gesture echoes Derrida's concept of the archive as shaped by both preservation and erasure, where the return of the lost is always partial and haunted. It also aligns with Goebbels' aesthetics of absence born from the crisis of representation, where disappearance is not resolved but staged, and the unspeakable is given form through aesthetic means.

Post-Imperial Memory and the Ethics of Absence: Marina Davydova's *Museum of Uncounted Voices* (2023)

Marina Davydova's *Museum of Uncounted Voices* (2023) is a multimedia performance that examines the erasure of marginal histories and the silencing of individual voices when the official national narrative and discourse are made. Marking the 100th anniversary of the founding of the Soviet Union at the Bolshoi Theatre in 1922, the project reflects on how the USSR shaped its internal national borders and cultural identities - borders that continue to produce political tensions and conflict today, especially considering Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine.

The uncounted voices of the title refer to those excluded from Soviet historiography and memory: victims of state repression, ethnic cleansing, forced assimilation, and ideological censorship - individuals whose lives were not simply forgotten but never officially recorded or recognized. In her performance, Davydova constructs a counter-archive of such history, aiming to make absence legible not through restoration, but through exposure. In this objective, Davydova's work aligns with Derrida's critique of the archive as a site of both memory and suppression. Davydova engages this paradox by staging absence not as a void, but as an active, structuring force within the nation's collective memory. Her work foregrounds what the archive cannot contain; what remains uncounted and yet continues to speak.

Inspired by the performativity of a museum space, *Museum of Uncounted Voices* was designed to resemble an ethnographic exhibit. Yet from the moment the performance begins, it destabilizes this expectation through the manipulation of spectators' placement within its space. Upon entering the theatre, spectators are not allowed to take their seats. Instead, they are guided onto the stage itself, where they stand for several minutes inside an elaborate scenographic environment designed by Zinovy Margolin. Around them, fragments of conversations, archival recordings, and ambient sounds unfold through the loudspeakers, while projected maps, clothing, and historical artifacts animate the background. This initial displacement—being denied the comfort of seating—incorporates the audience members as active components of the installation, in which projected museum artifacts seem to breathe and disembodied voices argue, contradict, and overlap in a polyphony of memory.

When the spectators are finally permitted to sit, the museum's environment begins to mutate - walls slide, objects dissolve, and new projected images appear. Davydova describes this scenographic structure as 'very intricate,' designed to create an illusion of changing rooms and spectators moving through the layers of history (Davydova quoted in Bykov 2025). This idea, she explains further, grew from her long fascination with the latent theatricality of museums: 'I always felt a powerful, unarticulated performative energy in those places. It seemed that at any moment the objects around me might come alive, that the voices of history would begin to speak—and perhaps argue with me

as well' (Davydova quoted in Bykov 2025). In *Museum of Uncounted Voices*, this fantasy becomes literal. The objects do speak; the archive does argue. The spectators, caught between display and dialogue, become part of the performative mechanism of history itself.

Artistically and thematically, the project builds on Davydova's earlier work *Eternal Russia* (2017), created with scenographer Vera Martynov and composer Vladimir Rannev for Berlin's HAU. *Eternal Russia* was also designated as a performative museum installation, tracing the rise and collapse of the Soviet utopia across four interlinked spaces. As one critic described it, *Eternal Russia* resembled 'a ghostly historical museum the audience took away as a cherished relic' (Kolyazin 2023).

Museum of Uncounted Voices continues and deepens this spatial investigation. It develops what can be described as Davydova's forensic dramaturgy—a spatial and temporal excavation of erased histories. Like Heiner Goebbels' aesthetics of absence, Davydova's approach rejects linear narrative in favour of discontinuity, contradiction, and layering. For example, in one of the sections of the performance, five voices heard from the loudspeakers represent countries that were part of the original USSR. These voices are trapped in a cycle of conflict and contradiction, each asserting competing claims rooted in shared histories of oppression: degradation, deportation, state terror, and famine. As a result, what emerges is not a coherent historical account, but a polyphony of unresolved conflicts and a cacophony of dissonant counter-histories. As Davydova explains, 'these voices of the national outskirts of the empire are, of course, opposed to the voice of the empire itself, but they are also opposed to each other. And they are all opposed to the voices of the "victims of history" who place themselves in certain national, social, and other frames. In general, it is such a negation of negation of negation of negation … ' (Davydova quoted in Kolyazin 2023). That is why history can emerge only through gaps and silences, through what remains invisible or unspoken. To this extent, *Museum of Uncounted Voices* does not attempt to complete the historical record; rather, it exposes its fractures and insists on their visibility. In doing so, Davydova transforms theatrical space into an ethical one: a counter-archive in which spectators confront the limits of knowledge and the violence of forgetting.

The same principles characterize the dramaturgical composition of *Museum of Uncounted Voices*. As critic Vladimir Kolyazin suggests, Davydova was likely inspired by Dmitri Shostakovich's music and Ilya Kabakov's conceptual installations, particularly in their combination of 'painterly elements with musical-rhythmic structures and object-symbolic forms' (Kolyazin 2023), so montage becomes the foundational structure of her theatrical museum.

As the performance moves forward, it reveals the major shift in its internal structure – the gaps of history can be sewn only through personal stories, so the action of the performance moves from the institutional voice of the archive toward the personal, the fragmented, and the unresolved of an individual. A single performer, a kind of museum guide, is present on the stage from the beginning of the action. Yet, she remains silent through the first four sections of the play, which trace the official story of Russia, beginning with the grandeur of the Russian Empire and ending in the fractured ruins of the Soviet project. The performer walks from one projected exhibit to the next, as if she were guiding visitors through the shifting museum rooms. She silently listens to the changing narratives of the history of her country played by the loudspeakers and watches the spectators watching

the play. The recorded voices of history—imperial and anti-imperial—debate endlessly, each one interrupting or undermining the last. Their speech is abstracted and de-personalized, producing a discursive war of ghosts.

Yet, there is no place for personhood in this war of narratives. To restore the place of the forgotten or marginalized, theatre must return to the experience of a single person, because, as Davydova believes, 'only the voice of one person, the voice of the individual, can be the true measure of history' (Davydova quoted in Kolyazin 2023). To stage this argument, Davydova constructs a world in which dead objects and voices interact with the body of the living actor, so the production turns into the site where discourses and memories intersect, and where the archive is reimagined as a space of ethical responsibility. Davydova's work 'allows us to grasp—on a visceral level, and both directly and indirectly—the vastness of misfortune and the tragedy of contemporary Russia, which lies in the absence of a spiritual guide, whether secular or religious' (Kolyazin 2023).

Museum of Uncounted Voices connects deeply to the theme of migration: its "underlying theme is the loss of homeland—both geographic and cultural" (Kolyazin 2023), and how this loss reverberates through the post-2022 Russophone diaspora and for Davydova personally. Davydova's personal story of loss and displacement is encoded in the final monologue of the museum employee. This speech 'describes the stages of Davydova's own wandering, of coming to terms with herself as a migrant—a person without a homeland, passport, or nationality—due to the collapse and fragmentation of the former Soviet republics' (Kolyazin 2023). Her confessional voice—autobiographical, fragmented, and intimate—emerges as the most urgent in the larger chorus of erased and disappeared lives.

Born in Baku to an Armenian father and Russian mother, Davydova was forced to flee her apartment during the pogroms of 1990. In Armenia, she was treated as a suspicious outsider; in Azerbaijan, her birth certificate has been erased; and in Putin's Russia, where she built her career as a theatre critic, editor of the *Teatr* journal, and curator of international festivals, she has now been branded a traitor. In March 2022, her Moscow apartment was vandalized with the militarist "Z," and she was formally accused of discrediting the Russian army. This experience of being dispossessed repeatedly—across different national contexts and historical ruptures—underscores the play's deeper concern: not only with exile and identity, but with the systemic violence through which the state erases the person. Even outside the stage, this story of dispossession continues. While the journal *Teatr* still updates its website and Telegram channel, the print edition has been shut down. The Union of Theatre Workers, the journal's official publisher, was pressured by authorities and froze the project. Yet Davydova and her colleagues continue to operate informally, without an editor-in-chief, without funding.

Two very different actresses, Marina Weis and Chulpan Khamatova, share the stage of *Museum of Uncounted Voices*. They play the role of the museum guide on alternative nights, each bringing their own stories of displacement and the histories of their families' erasure to the performance.

Marina Weis (born in 1967) is a German-based actress of Russian and Soviet heritage whose career bridges Moscow and Germany. Fluent in both Russian and German and proficient in English, Weis brings a multilingual and multicultural sensibility to her work. In *Museum of Uncounted Voices*, Weis performs as the live actor amidst a chorus

of disembodied voices, making her monologue deliberately ambiguous and spatially attentive (Figure 4). For much of the performance, she remains silent while moving across the stage. When she begins her monologue, she turns into a mediator between audience, archive, and installation, bridging human presence with the material and vocal components of the piece. Her body becomes an operative element of the museum-space, anchoring its scenography and enabling spectators to navigate the shifting dynamics of subject, object, and archive. Weis's work in *Museum of Uncounted Voices* foregrounds the tensions of memory, absence, and post-Soviet subjectivity, destabilizing conventional spectator positioning while amplifying the spatial and dramaturgical logic of the installation.

Figure 4. Marina Davydova, *Museum of Uncounted Voices* (2023), at HAU. Berlin, Germany. Maria Weis as Narrator. Photo: Victoria Nazarova.

Chulpan Khamatova (b. 1975, Kazan), a renowned Russian stage and film actress, People's Artist of the Russian Federation (2012), and laureate of two State Prizes of Russia (2004, 2014) also plays the role of Davydova's theatrical alter-ego. Davydova's story of internal migration – from Baku to Moscow; and of political exile – from Moscow to Berlin, speaks to Khamatova's own post-2022 journey. From 1998 to 2022, Khamatova was one of the leading actors of Moscow's Sovremennik Theatre, and a co-founder of the charitable foundation *Podari Zhizn'* (*Gift of Life*). In February 2022, Khamatova publicly opposed Russia's invasion of Ukraine and subsequently left Russia for Latvia, where she continues to live in exile. Her participation in Davydova's *Museum of Uncounted Voices* lends the project a powerful autobiographical dimension: as both performer and political exile, Khamatova embodies the dislocation, moral courage, and silenced histories that the piece seeks to illuminate (Figures 5 and 6).

Figure 5. Marina Davydova, *Museum of Uncounted Voices* (2023), at HAU. Berlin, Germany. Chulpan Khamatova as Narrator. Photo: Victoria Nazarova.

Figure 6. Marina Davydova, *Museum of Uncounted Voices* (2023), at HAU. Berlin, Germany. Chulpan Khamatova as Narrator. Photo: Victoria Nazarova.

Davydova continued to investigate the themes of *Museum of Uncounted Voices* in her 2024 play *Land of No Return*, presented in Berlin at the festival *Voices* and then at the Salzburg Festival in 2025. This play brings her philosophical and political reflections into personal focus, tracing nearly forty years of her life against the backdrop of post-Soviet history. Opening in the late 1980s and ending with the war in Ukraine in 2022, the play begins with the 1990 Baku pogroms—seen as the first rupture in the Soviet empire—and follows Davydova, a female intellectual in exile, from Baku to Moscow and then to Germany. As the action unfolds, the protagonist observes figures from her past—but they are not ghosts; they are real people with individual responses to shared trauma.

Together, *Museum of Uncounted Voices* and *Land of No Return* exemplify what Derrida calls archive fever (1995, 19) - the compulsion to recover and preserve, even while recognizing that no archive can fully contain the past. Davydova does not try to complete the record but stages its gaps and ghosts. Her museum is built on what is missing, what has been silenced, and what cannot be restored. This is precisely where her work presents an aesthetics of absence: meaning is not fixed but deferred, and presence is always shadowed by erasure. In this dramaturgy, absence becomes not merely the content but the condition of remembering, producing an ethics of testimony for the uncounted and the unnamed.

Conclusion

The performances and installations examined in this article demonstrate how the aesthetics of absence operates as a potent ethical and political strategy for confronting the erasures produced by forced migration. Drawing on Derrida's conception of the archive as a site of haunting—structured as much by what it excludes as by what it preserves—and Heiner Goebbels' theatre of absence, which privileges silence, fragmentation, and rupture over narrative closure, these works disrupt conventional forms of remembrance. They do not seek to represent disappearance, but to stage its affective and epistemic weight, compelling audiences to witness what official histories fail—or refuse—to name.

Doris Salcedo's *Palimpsest* transforms stone and water into a fragile medium of mourning, where names appear and disappear in an ongoing ritual of remembrance and forgetting. Arkadi Zaides' *Necropolis* reanimates archival data into embodied cartography, translating bureaucratic anonymity into choreographed acts of forensic recognition. Marina Davydova's *Museum of Uncounted Voices* confronts the collapse of Soviet imperial identity through exilic memory, assembling an archival scenography of loss that destabilizes both historical continuity and national belonging.

These works reframe disappearance not as a singular historical tragedy but as an ongoing mechanism of geopolitical control - an active process of erasing bodies, names, and narratives from public discourse. By mobilizing an aesthetics of absence, they replace representation with invocation; by challenging Derrida's contradiction of the archive, they stage the return of the erased and forgotten.

In these performances, the spectator is never consoled but placed in a position of ethical discomfort, estranged and implicated, as well as called upon to bear witness rather than consume meaning. These works resist the archival impulse to fix and complete; instead, they open the archive to rupture, affect, and spectrality. In so doing,

they offer a counter-archive:an unfinished, unsettling space where absence becomes a presence that cannot be dismissed. Ultimately, these performative installations not only commemorate the disappeared but insist on mourning as an ethical act,a form of resistance against erasure and a tool for reshaping collective memory in an age marked by displacement, statelessness, and silence. They call us not to resolve the past, but to inhabit its fractures.

Conflicts of interest

This article presents no conflict of interest

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Notes on contributor

Yana Meerzon is Professor of Theatre Studies at the University of Ottawa, Canada. She is the author of five books, including *Performance, Subjectivity, Cosmopolitanism* (Palgrave Macmillan, 2020) and, most recently, with Mikhail Kaluzhsky, *Performing Censorship: The Russian Case* (Palgrave Macmillan, 2025). She also co-edited nine collections of articles, including *Palgrave Handbook on Theatre and Migration* with Steve Wilmer (Palgrave 2023). Former President of Canadian Association for Theatre Research (CATR), she is now a co-editor of the book series *Palgrave Studies in Performance and Migration.*

ORCID

Yana Meerzon http://orcid.org/0000-0001-6917-789X

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