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Dance as Documentary: Conflictual Images in the Choreographic Mirror

(On *Archive* by Arkadi Zaidés)

Frédéric Pouillaude

Abstract

In a solo performance entitled *Archive* (2014), the Israeli choreographer Arkadi Zaidés offers a physical and choreographic interpretation of videos collected by the Israeli non-governmental organization *B'Tselem* within the frame of an operation called “Camera Project”. The footage projected on stage shows only Israelis, but the viewpoint is Palestinian. Starting from this material, Arkadi Zaidés performs, by extraction, imitation, and repetition, a (self-)analysis of the contemporary Israeli body, following a procedure reminiscent of Avi Mograbi’s for film. What is the specific nature of these images, whose very mode of capture emblemizes the conflict situation? In the face of them, what might be the contribution of an approach that puts the dancer’s kinesthetic knowledge to work? How far does this offering force us to think about the “documentary” potential of dance performance, which is too often brushed aside or played down?

Keywords:

Arkadi Zaidés, *Archive*, B'Tselem, Israeli-Palestinian conflict, documentary dance and performance, *verbatim* practices.

For almost twenty years, contemporary dance has been engaged in a necessary process of conceptual and self-reflexive experimentation, investigating the nature and boundaries of performance, challenging its own conventions and exploring the various ways of “making dance” in such an expanded field. This self-reflexive moment has been largely commented on (see, for instance, Lepecki 2006) and, by analyzing the new reflexivity, I have also been among the commentators (see Pouillaude 2007). This conceptual trend, which in its time was necessary and fruitful, seems to be moving toward a more direct relationship to “extra-choreographic” realities. Here and there appear some attempts to open the choreographic stage to a direct presentation of historical and social events, generally violent or even tragic, in order to articulate the kinesthetic knowledge and the choreographic procedures with our contemporary political existence: *Samedi Détente* by Dorothee Munyaneza (2013) offers a danced testimony of her tragic experience of the Rwanda genocide as a survivor child; *Wagons Libres* by Sandra Iché (2012) investigates the representations of the Lebanese political situation after the assassination of the historian and journalist Samir Kassir, founder and editor of *L'Orient-express*; *Monument 0: Haunted by Wars (1913-2013)* by Eszter Salamon (2014) reenacts some popular and tribal dances of the twentieth century, originally performed in war contexts and for bellicose purposes. All these attempts involve a relation to their subject that might be qualified as “documentary”. Not only do they rely on accurate documentary sources and materials, which can be presented (or not) during the performance, but they also consider themselves as kinds of documents or, at least, as ways of presenting documents and experimenting with them in performance.

Paradoxically, this new “documentary trend” of contemporary dance partially derives from the “conceptual trend” itself. *Histoire(s)* by Olga de Soto (2004), projecting filmed interviews of spectators who attended the premiere of *Le Jeune Homme et la Mort* by Roland Petit at the Théâtre des Champs-Élysées in 1946, was perhaps the first “documentary video-

performance” (as Olga de Soto qualifies her own work in its subtitle) created in the dance field; providing an investigation of the traces left in some spectators’ minds by that emblematic work of European postwar choreography, de Soto interrogated the ontological status of a dance work through probing in this way the work’s specific ways of surviving within the subjective and bodily memory of spectatorship. Another way of making dance “documentary” was to concentrate on dancers themselves, an approach initiated by Jérôme Bel’s series of (auto-)biographical solos: *Véronique Doisneau* (2004), its Brazilian version *Isabel Torres* (2005), or *Cédric Andrieu* (2009). In all these three solos, despite the absence of documentary materials (there is no video, photography or recording), the documentary aspect emerged from the way the performer told us her own story, showing some dance excerpts as documentary evidence of what she was narrating about her life, about the dance institution or about working as a dancer. But, in both cases (de Soto and Bel), if dance was able to become “documentary”, this was only because dance was still dealing with itself. Dance could document nothing but itself, and its documentary potential would strictly derive from its “reflexive turn”, as a side-effect or, maybe, as an unintentional consequence.

The shift I would like to point out with works like *Samedi Détente*, *Wagons libres* or *Monument 0: Haunted by Wars* is that the documentary potential of dance is nowadays applied to extra-choreographic realities, and that this opening toward the “outside” can also be read as a 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. Nevertheless, it is obvious that documentary and reflexive purposes are still interwoven in contemporary performance: first, some choreographers are explicitly working on both sides of the equation, like Eszter Salamon whose latest work, *Monument 0.1: Valda & Gus* (2015), seems to rejoin the genre inaugurated by Bel and consists in an (auto-)biographical performance in which Valda Setterfield and Gus Solomons Jr., legendary figures of Modern

and Postmodern dance, are narrating on stage some fragments of their own life; second, by facing the very limits of dance as a medium, any documentary attempt in the dance field is also automatically a reflexive exploration of what that medium can and cannot do. In this essay, I will analyze a work I consider to be one of the most radical and provocative attempts of “documentary dance” up until now: *Archive* by Arkadi Zaides (2014).

An Israeli embodying gestures of the Israeli occupation seen through Palestinian cameras

Archive was premiered by Zaides in Avignon in 2014.¹ This solo piece consists mainly in the physical imitation on stage of some bodily movements extracted from a series of videos. The videos, which are screened during the performance, come from the archive of the Israeli non-governmental organization *B'Tselem*, whose full English name is “The Israeli Information Center for Human Rights in the Occupied Territories” and whose objectives are to “document and educate the Israeli public and policymakers about human rights violations in the Occupied Territories, combat the phenomenon of denial prevalent in the Israeli public, and help create a human rights culture in Israel”.² This video archive has been collected by B'Tselem within the frame of an operation called “Camera Project”, begun in 2007 and still active. By distributing video cameras to Palestinian volunteers living in the Occupied Territories, and by collecting and archiving the videos, the organization has built up a considerable – and still growing – body of documentation on human rights violations and everyday conflicts in the West Bank. These videos (a selection of them can be seen on the organization’s website)³ have at least three aims: 1) to provide evidence, for either prosecution or defense, in possible lawsuits; 2) to alert a national or international public to daily human rights violations generally ignored or underestimated; 3) to lower the level of violence through the mere presence of a camera, which quite often causes the people involved

in the conflict to behave (relatively) moderately. Proof, information and dissuasion, these would be the main goals of this micro-politics of the images governing the "Camera Project". All this is explained to the audience through informational projections at the start of the piece.

Zaides is certainly not the first artist to have used the video footage collected by B'Tselem.⁴ But he is the first choreographer to use them in a dance performance, to present them to an audience, and to construct a whole piece out of the bodily imitation of their kinesthetic content. For an Israeli choreographer, living and working in Tel Aviv for fifteen years, this choice in and of itself constitutes a political act. Whereas *Archive* has widely toured throughout Europe and U.S.A. (more than 70 performances since the premiere), in Israel, the work has been shown only in Tel Aviv, on a few occasions at the Tmuna Theater (4-5 September 2014, 8-9 January 2015, 11-12 June 2015). On this occasion, "the Ministry of Culture and Sport requested that Zaides remove its logo from the performance's list of sponsors, with the justification that it should not appear alongside B'Tselem's, an organization it perceives as defamatory of Israel's policy in the West Bank" (Abeliovich 2016, 165). During the summer 2014, right-wing activists asked the Petach Tikva Museum of Art in Tel Aviv, which was hosting the installation version of *Archive* (installation with two screens entitled *Capture Practice*), to shut down the exhibition. "Though the activists say that they succeeded in shutting it down, a spokeswoman for the museum said that Zaides' show continued without interruption until its prescheduled closing" (Zaveloff, 2015). The protestation against *Archive* became even more violent in Jerusalem, where an art talk, in which Zaides was presenting some excerpts of the work, was interrupted in November 2014 by right-wing demonstrators yelling from the outside various obscenities like "You Nazis, we'll make soap of you" or "You fuckers, you leftists", attacking some participants and finally shutting off power to the building in which the art talk was taking place (Amir & Eidelman, 2014). Even in France, where the work has toured widely, the Parisian

performances took place in a context of very high tension around the Théâtre National de Chaillot. As Gérard Mayen wrote, “it is under the close protection of the police that the first Parisian representation of the piece *Archive*, by the Israeli choreographer Arkadi Zaides, took place. A Zionist extreme-right group had addressed very direct threats to the direction of the Théâtre national de Chaillot in order to cancel the performance” (Mayen, 2015, my translation). Another French dance critic, Raphael de Gubernatis, concluded his column in a rather angelic and self-deceptive way: “[This work] has only one merit: to show that Israeli society constitutes an authentic democracy, the only one in that region of the world, since it is possible there to defend the opposite side” (De Gubernatis, 2015, my translation). Given the violent demonstrations around the piece in Israel and the reaction of the Ministry of Culture and Sport, de Gubernatis’s optimistic statement about the democratic virtues of Israeli society may retrospectively be questioned (I will come back later to the very negative evaluation of the work by de Gubernatis).

Two previous works by Zaides had already addressed the Israeli-Palestinian issue, but in a less direct and frontal way. *Quiet* (2010) had four Jew and Arab Israelis dancing together, exploring the blockages, but also the potentialities, of communication and interaction, and searching constantly “for a place which is able to contain all conflicted layers – a place which is quiet” (Zaides’s website). *Land-Research* (2012) echoed the Israeli-Palestinian conflict through another question, that of the relation between body and land, investigating various ways of symbolic appropriation and physical embodiment of a given territory, with panoramic photos of landscapes at the back of the stage. None of these works created a polemic equivalent to that of *Archive*. The denunciation of the colonization remained implicit, buried in symbolic and metaphorical meaning in *Land-Research*, and lightened by the hope of a peaceful coexistence as effectively performed and practiced in *Quiet*. All these mediations and (perhaps optimistic) hopes are abandoned in *Archive*. What remains is only the gestural

violence of the visual documents and their capture and reproduction in turn by the dancing body.



Archive by Arkadi Zaides, © Ronen Guter

Structure of the work: from the literal to the symbolic

What is most striking about *Archive* is its simplicity, the bareness and the literalness of its structure and process⁵. From the beginning, a very simple way of addressing the audience is adopted. Zaides steps forward dressed in street clothes, faces the audience and speaks the following words:

Good evening. Thank you for coming. My name is Arkadi Zaides. I am a choreographer. I am Israeli. For the last fifteen years, I have been living in Tel Aviv. The West Bank is twenty kilometers away from Tel Aviv. The materials you are about to watch were filmed in the West Bank. All the people you will see in these clips are Israeli, like myself. The clips were selected from a video archive of an organization called B'Tselem.

After these few introductory words, Zaides withdraws to the edge of the stage, leaving it empty except for two large screens at the back: at right-hand, a white screen for the videos; at left-hand, set back and smaller, a black screen for the information and captions. The black

screen is the first to be activated, providing some written details about B'Tselem, along with a reminder that the footage to be shown features Israelis only (section 1).

This verbal introduction sets up a receptive framework that, for quite a long time, reduces the living body to its *literal* identity: that is, principally a social and extra-theatrical one. The person we will see working with the videos in the next sections will remain the same one who spoke these words "My name is Arkadi Zaides. I am a choreographer. I am Israeli, etc.", and the same one whom we could meet outside the theater after the performance. These few words forbid any process of theatrical make-believe and any possibility of playing a "part", be it abstract or symbolic. This persistence of social identity – the one of identity cards and daily interactions – rules out, at least for the first two thirds of the performance, any figurative, metaphoric, or fictional reading of what will occur. The body we see in no way embodies a character; neither is it a gestural symbol or emblem. From the place that is his own, choreographer and dancer, he will offer us a bodily "analysis" of the footage: that is, he will choose certain gestural sequences from amongst the often blurry images shakily recorded and re-perform these repeatedly, thus subjecting them to analysis by transforming them into performable movement segments.

The first series of videos is then projected on the right-hand screen. For each clip, the following information is provided on the left-hand screen: archive serial number, name of the camera operator, date, place, and finally, as factually as possible, a brief description of the scene, furnished by B'Tselem. The first four clips are very confusing and we hardly recognize anything in the images. According to the left-hand screen, these clips record attacks by Israeli settlers on a Palestinian house in Nablus, in 2009, 2010 and 2012.⁶ In each video, the camera operator (Imam Sufan or a member of his family) is so caught up in the general confusion and violence that it seems impossible to get a steady shot, the only recognizable elements being provided by the soundtrack (but requiring an understanding of Arabic). The fifth clip, also

filmed by Imam Sufan in Nablus in 2010,⁷ creates a strong contrast with the previous videos. Filmed from very far away, zooming in and out, it is the first clip that is visually sharp; it offers a general view of one of the settlements in Nablus, on the other side of the hill, and constitutes, in that regard, the formal counterpoint and the geographical reverse shot of the previous clips. What is managed in that section is a slow move from confusion to pictorial clarity and legibility. In this way, it is also emphasized that the pictorial clarity of these videos is not a permanent feature, but strongly depends on the practical requirements of personal security and tranquility that are not always met – far from it.

The effect of *literalness* characterizing the verbal presentation also characterizes the way in which the images are presented and constantly contextualized by the captions accompanying them. The will to systematically name the source and the reference of the footages screened on stage is so rare in the field of performing arts that it deserves mention. Here, too, it prevents any reading of the videos that could be too hastily carried out on a metaphoric or symbolic level. Rather than being emblems or icons – of the occupation, of oppression, of injustice –, these images are, above all, recordings and traces of the singular events that produced them, *indexical* images that, by their very existence, refer directly and non-metaphorically to the events that generated them. But this indexical status of the images, if it is to serve the function of identification, must be accompanied by a persistent act of naming. In order to prevent the images from being perceived too quickly as general icons or symbols, it is necessary to name and identify the singular events of which they are the visual traces. The first videos, which are visually unrecognizable and thus force us to read the captions, put forward the potential hiatus between iconicity and indexicality (these clips undoubtedly refer to something, although we are unable to visually recognize what it is) and constitute, via the collapse of iconicity, the most radical example of this cognitive need for naming which is requisite for any indexical image.

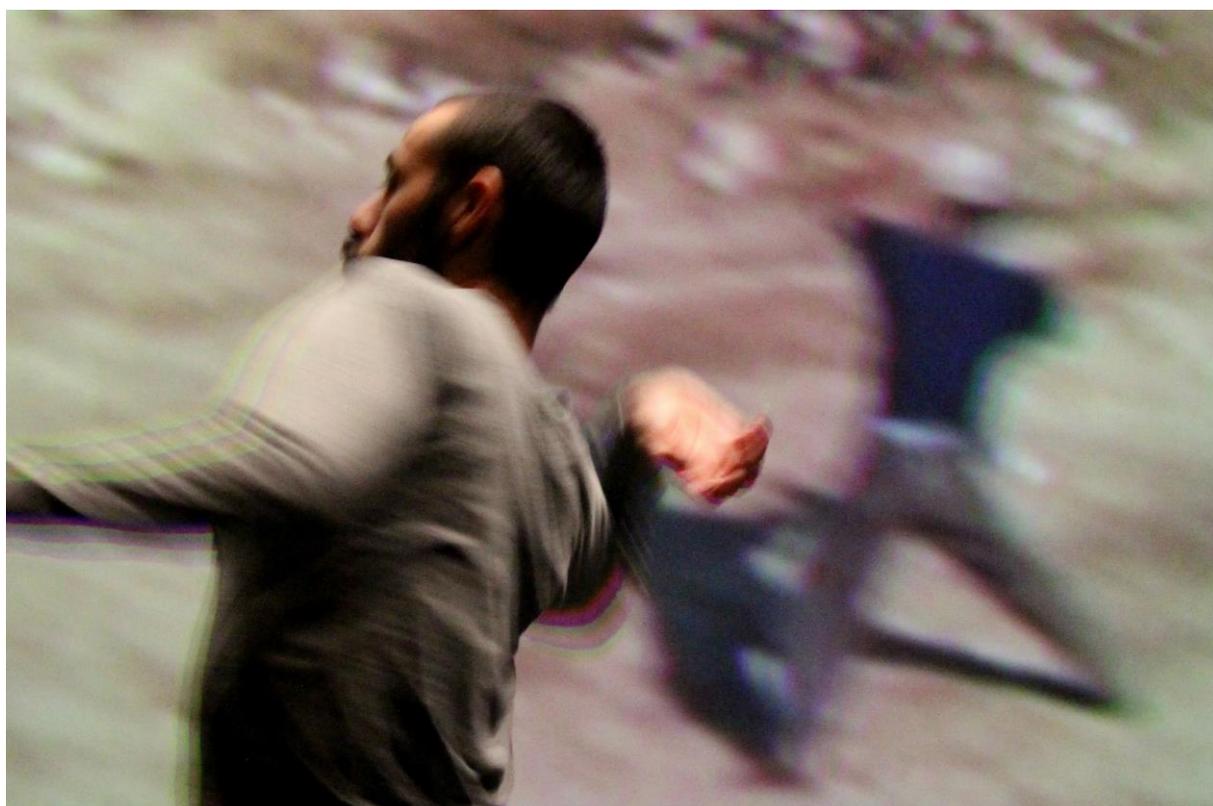
In the middle of the following video (a demonstration in Ramallah in 2010),⁸ Zaides crosses the stage and positions himself in front of the screen. Now begins the physical work on the videos. Very minimal at first, it is reduced to the (simple?) act of watching. Gradually enhanced by the possibilities of agency afforded by the remote-control (not only switching from one video to another, but also stopping, rewinding, or replaying), it leads to a physical act of imitation in which the performing body follows the actions filmed and reproduces some of their gestural components. Fourteen clips are screened in this section, and it is only from the fifth one that the mimetic process becomes obvious ("Settlers fighting against the border police," Hebron, 2007).⁹ Thanks to the freeze-frame, Zaides isolates a pose from the clip (a soldier seen from behind, pulling along a chair, left leg bent, right leg tensed) and repeats it in the middle of the stage, first with his back to us (reproducing the camera viewpoint), then facing us, and finally on the ground, rather like mimicking a high-angle shot. The following videos lead to other movements or poses isolated for replication: someone shouting toward a balcony, right arm stretched up; someone masked by a T-Shirt, naked torso, hands on his hips; a soldier lunging forward to aim an assault rifle; a teenager running to give added force to the rock he is throwing; a settler scaring sheep and making them escape (with this video, Zaides introduces a vocal mimeticism in addition to kinesthetic mimeticism). By bodily echoing chosen gestural sequences within these images, Zaides achieves two things at once. First, he highlights certain elements of the videos, amplifying some dynamic properties; and, he acts as a mediator of perception for the spectator, helping us to perceive – also through kinesthetic empathy – what is captured on camera. Second, as a user of the images rather than a simple mediator, he makes an initial selection and collection of movements and poses, which, by force of repetition, will constitute a sort of vocabulary or choreographic lexicon. This tension between being a user and being a mediator already manifests how ambiguous the relationship to the images is, and it serves to interrogate the possibilities of departing from the videos

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within the imitation process itself. That is, the very process of selection situates the actions in a forcibly new context where they can be re-mobilized to different ends: such is the power of the choreographic to institute a sort of freedom from the source (section 3).



Archive by Arkadi Zaides, © Ronen Guter



Archive by Arkadi Zaidés, © Jean Couturier

In section 4, the same elements of vocabulary are performed again, but without the videos, i.e. without the overall context that gave the movements their pragmatic meaning and function. In silence and as soberly as possible, Zaidés articulates the different poses picked out in the preceding section and creates a series of still images rather than a choreographic phrase, strictly speaking. It is important to note, however, that the correspondence between the repeated poses and the set of movements previously selected is neither complete nor systematic. The most dynamic movements from section 3 are not taken up again in section 4 but reserved for section 6. But, two poses from section 4 derive from videos that will not be shown before section 5. So, the link between section 3 and section 4, between “learning from the videos” and “performing without them”, is not purely mechanical. Despite the obviousness and the efficiency of the general apparatus, some gaps already appear within it, echoing and amplifying the issue of freedom implicitly at stake in section 3.

Sections 5 and 6 follow the same procedure of learning from the videos and performing without them. The movements contained in the videos shown in section 5 are distinctly more dynamic, even quite violent. This more dynamic content also characterizes section 6, which sources its gestural material in section 5 as well as in section 3. For the first time, by composing the various elements of vocabulary already gathered, section 6 offers the spectator the beginnings of a choreographic phrase. Nevertheless, Zaidés stops the process of choreographic transformation very soon, giving us the anticipation of a phrase rather than the phrase itself. Through this halting of composition, all the possible transfigurations (and sublimations) offered by artistry seem to be denied, as if it were impossible that all these materials lead to a “dance” only, to “just a dance”, that is: much more and much less than the precise kinesthetic and political content of the documents.



Archive by Arkadi Zaidés, © Ronen Guter.

Up until now, the performance remains firmly grounded in literalness, the literalness of the performing body that personifies nothing but itself, and the literalness of the images that represent nothing but the events that generated them. This ground of literalness is strongly shaken in the last third of the performance. Sections 7 and 8 apply the “learning/performing” structure to 6 new clips, and focus on voices and sound content. In section 8, the vocal reproduction of sounds gathered in section 7 works via a sampling system, whereby Zaidés records his own voice and lays down different tracks, creating a superposition of various rhythmic and melodic lines: shouts, orders, or verbal abuse, captured on a musical loop that is both concrete and political. This reproduction, which takes the form of a repetitive accumulation, leads to a trance-like state that is the true culmination of the performance, in terms of sensitive intensity, physical engagement and emotional state. This trance state, generated by the litany of shouts and abuse, creates an obvious breach in the apparatus of

literal reproduction, and allows the spectator, for the first time, to project on to the body of the performer something like a “character”, even if it is a vague or an abstract one. For the first time, the body of the performer appears to move autonomously, not as a mirror of the content of the videos. But this autonomy is a very dark and precarious one: both possessed and released, moving for himself, but overwhelmed by voices and haunted by gestures, Zaides’s body sketches an abstract “character” that can equally be read as the mere physical effect of repetition and accumulation. For, rather than a narrative figure (a soldier, a settler, a citizen, etc.), it is the bodily consequences of the whole series of repetitions that are staged here, amplified and, in a sense, overdetermined. This series is precisely a condensed sample of all the gestures that constitutes the ordinary course of colonization, so that the devastating effects of its insidious repetition can be seen as a physical figure of all the damages produced by colonization on the Israeli collective body. So the symbolic load is fraught here. Nevertheless, this symbolic culmination remains firmly anchored in the literal procedure that created it, and it is precisely because the imaginary and the symbolic have been for so long held in reserve that their explosion can be so powerful and so violent in that moment.

The performance ends with two videos, projected on their own. Just as the previous section had opened a breach in the literal status of the performing body, these videos clearly break with the indexical status of the preceding clips. With their fraught symbolic load and their extreme legibility, they are more icons than indices. The first one, where settlers’ children from Hebron try to blind the camera with mirrors¹⁰, can appear as a *mise en abyme* of the “Camera Project” and of the performance itself. *Archive* and the “Camera Project” are, in a sense, mirrors held up to Israeli society. Both are facing its categorical refusal to recognize itself in them and coming up against the different “counter-mirrors” it generates in response: mirrors against mirrors, necessity and yet impossibility of self-recognition in the image held by the other... As for the last video, it reminds us, abruptly and directly, that the link between

the one who films and the one who is filmed is here, above all, a dominated/dominant relationship. The video represents an Israeli soldier, filmed from below through a wire fence, who looks scornfully at the camera operator and will soon throw a stone at him (the moment when the soldier throws the stone is not shown during the performance, but indicated by the captions).¹¹ This final video is obviously an iconic emblem of domination, a weak and self-destructive domination, in which the master demeans himself as he oppresses. Nevertheless, in both of these videos, the symbolic force stems paradoxically from the way it stays anchored in reference to particular events. It is precisely because such an effort has been made throughout the performance to retain the reference behind the images, to name them as particular and to maintain their documentary status, that their symbolic power can be finally unveiled. These images, endowed with names and dates, having taken place somewhere, are both facts and symbols, and their specific efficiency as symbols derives precisely from their factuality.

The table below provides a summary of these structural elements.

	Description	Relationship between live body and videos	Section length and number of videos screened
Section 1	Presentation and contextualization	Live body only (+ information)	2 min
Section 2	First videos	Videos only ¹²	3 min – 5 video clips
Section 3	Collection and learning of gestures I	Both videos and live body	15 min – 14 video clips
Section 4	Reproduction of gestures I	Live body only	3 min
Section 5	Collection and learning of gestures II	Both videos and live body	13 min – 7 video clips

Section 6	Reproduction of gestures II	Live body only	7 min
Section 7	Collection and learning of gestures III (and sounds)	Both videos and live body	12 min – 6 video clips
Section 8	Reproduction of gestures (and sounds) III	Live body only	8 min
Section 9	Two images	Videos only ¹²	2 min – 2 video clips

Antagonistic images

Before analyzing in more detail the choreographic use of the videos, it is appropriate to look at the way they were edited for the performance. All these videos demonstrate a relationship between filmer and filmed that might be called antagonistic. The decision to only retain clips showing Israelis filmed by Palestinians only intensifies a tendency that is already present in the archive itself. This antagonistic relationship – political, physical and cinematographic at the same time – takes different forms according to whether or not the camera operator is physically involved in the scene. When the operator is filming from very close a confrontation in which he or she is personally involved, the images present a set of formal properties that, despite the (very probable) non-aesthetic intentions of the filmmaker, could be associated to a specific cinematographic aesthetic: absence of tripod, extremely mobile camera, blurring and camera shake, difficulties with framing and focusing, etc. The first videos screened during the performance are an extreme example of such an “aesthetic”, where the legibility of the image seems to be in inverse proportion to the physical involvement of the operator and where the low visual quality appears as a guarantee of authenticity and an evidence of urgency. In *The Pixelated Revolution* (2012), a performance-lecture devoted to the amateur videos filmed during the first Syrian demonstrations against Assad in 2011, the Lebanese artist Rabih Mroué draws a provocative parallel between the

formal properties of that kind of footage and the aesthetic manifesto issued by Lars von Trier and Thomas Vinterberg under the label of "Dogma 95", as if the avant-garde desire to escape all the usual artifice of the movie industry could share something with the urgency of recording and testifying in the middle of a confrontation (see Mroué 2012, 26).¹³ In fact, both situations share at least one thing: a set of formal properties characterizing the images they produce.

But, that kind of images where the operator is directly engaged in the action is far from constituting the only possible relationship between filmer and filmed. Other videos demonstrate a completely different point of view. Filmed at a distance, most often from above, from the shelter of an apartment, terrace or hill, they shoot their subject without the operator needing to fear for his safety or for that of his relatives. In this case, the image becomes more stable, better framed, and less urgent, the only sign of non-professionalism being the continual use of the zoom. The crucial question, then, is whether the person who is filmed (that is, an Israeli here) is or is not aware of being filmed. On the basis of a video content only, it is always difficult to state with absolute certainty that someone is filmed while being unaware of the camera, since he or she may always be pretending to ignore it. However, in certain videos, this unawareness is more than likely the case: for instance, in section 3, with "teenagers practicing throwing stones"¹⁴ and, in section 5, with the "settler arrested by soldiers"¹⁵. In both cases, the videos, filmed by the same operator, were shot at a distance, from above, using a side view, probably from an apartment block. In contrast, other videos, still recorded from a distance, show subjects who not only are perfectly aware of being filmed but also address the camera directly, and sometimes violently. This is the case, in section 3, with the "settlers outside a house shouting 'She's up there, on the balcony. Throw things at her'"¹⁶ and, in section 5, with the "settlers throwing stones"¹⁷; it is also true, in the last section, for the "children blinding the camera with mirrors" and the final image of the soldier

filmed from below through a wire fence. In all these clips, the frontality of the image becomes that of a distant confrontation, a reciprocal and violent, yet asymmetrical, encounter: camera against shouting and verbal abuse, camera against mirrors, camera against stones. Mroué’s lecture, in the section entitled “Double shooting”, offers a radical, tragic and (in the philosophical sense) sublime amplification of this lethal relationship: a camera against a rifle, a camera aiming at a gunman who himself is aiming at the camera operator – and pulls the trigger (see Mroué 2012, 29) ... Although far from such an extremity, all the videos screened during Zaides’s performance give us access to an implicit typology of filmic antagonism. Whether it be through the instability of the moving camera, the distance of a clandestine shot, or the frontal nature of a direct confrontation, on each occasion a spatial, formal and political variant of the antagonism between filmer and filmed is underlined.



Archive by Arkadi Zaides, © Ronen Guter.

However, if these videos really are all about antagonism, the level of violence in the chosen clips remains relatively low or moderate, far from the extreme images that we have become

used to in the media and contemporary history. Stones thrown, verbal abuse, shouting, settlers arrested by the police or the army, settlers preparing to attack a village, chopping down olive trees, or throwing out activists, this is the type of violence that is shown: day-to-day, low-impact violence, not sensational enough to be shown on television, but repeated often enough to creep into the body and to constitute a sort of common set of movements. What is more, a large number of the clips tend to contradict or overturn the usual iconography of the conflict: here, Israelis *too* throw stones, Israelis *too* put on masks, thus appropriating for themselves some codes and gestures of the *Intifada*. In a recent article, Ruthie Abeliovich has pointed out how much the T-Shirts covering the settlers’ faces resembled “the shape of a Palestinian *keffiyeh*, a well-known symbol of the Palestinian national resistance” (Abeliovich 2016, 169). Such an agonistic mimicry, occurring for instance in section 5 with the video entitled “group of face-covered settlers with slings to throw stones”,¹⁸ turns our own iconic stereotypes upside down and makes it absolutely necessary to start off by mentioning that only Israelis appear in the frame. Much of the worth of Zaides’s work lies in making possible the viewing of such images, unspectacular, counter-intuitive, and often ambiguous or under-defined.

Extract, imitate, repeat: *gestuatim*

From the Living Newspapers of the 1930s Federal Theater Project or *The Investigation* by Peter Weiss (*Die Ermittlung*, 1965) to *Hate Radio* by Milo Rau (2011), documentary theater has historically been built on the practice of the *verbatim*, of quoting on stage words uttered elsewhere, stemming from non-theatrical contexts, and whose traces, textual or recorded, may be accessed by everyone. What Zaides offers in *Archive* is a transposition of the *verbatim* to the sphere of movement and choreography: a practice, in short, of the *gestuatim*, made possible by the present-day ubiquity of video images. This application of the

verbatim to the sphere of movement, however, demands substantial modifications to the theatrical model from which it stems.

For there to be *gestuatim*, the audience first of all needs access to the original movement, or rather a recording of it, and from there to the overall context that gives the movement its meaning and turns it into an action (herding sheep, and not just thrusting your arms forward and shouting; throwing a stone, and not just twisting yourself round using your right arm). Along with extracting and learning the movements, the prime function of sections 3, 5, and 7 is to operate this presentation of the sources and contexts. Every repetition is an act of abstraction. Learning a gesture through mimetic repetition means starting from a particular event and isolating what should or should not be repeated. This negative or subtractive dimension of repetition is already at work in the three learning sections and it is precisely this dimension that turns the performing body into a tool for analysis and an aid for the spectator's gaze. Nevertheless, it is in the moments of autonomous performance that this negative dimension becomes so striking: in the series of poses in section 4, in the dynamic succession of gestures and movements in section 6, and finally in the trance, complete with shouting, orders, and abuse, of section 8. Each time, what makes itself felt without the videos is the movement (or the shout) "without" something: without its original context, without its environment, without the obvious meaning that the image conferred. But this "without" and the strangeness that stems from it also allow us to see "more": to see the movements for what they are in themselves and not only for the part they play in the world, to perceive their inherent violence, their postural and dynamic similarities, and finally to detect the recurrence of a body image where, beyond the singularities, something like a collective body becomes apparent. These are the – mostly austere and negative – powers of the *gestuatim*: to make movement *strange*, and to make this strangeness the very site of referential knowledge.



Archive by Arkadi Zaides, © Ronen Guter.



Archive by Arkadi Zaides, © Ronen Guter.

We still need to note the different stages and methods involved in this *estrangement*, which, by repeating the same gesture, continuously combines a referential anchor point with a distancing procedure.¹⁹ First of all, it is a matter of *identifying* a target movement in the video footage. There is nothing obvious or trivial about such a process of identification, and it

necessarily involves choices. If some of the moves reproduced by Zaides constitute the central, explicit subject of the videos (“practicing throwing stones,” “herding sheep,” etc.), others clearly appear to be more marginal, taking place alongside the main event and lacking a strong link with it. Choosing to reproduce these peripheral movements already implies taking a step away from the – more or less explicit – intentions of the video, attempting to read in the recording something that escapes the too immediate evidence provided by its reading. To this interest in the peripheral elements is added the fact that many of the poses taken up by Zaides are mere artifacts created by the remote control and use of the freeze-frame (this is particularly true of the first gesture: the soldier pulling along a chair). Identifying the target movement or pose thus implies a possible distancing from what constitutes the meaning and overall subject of the video: either via modification of the focus (interest in peripheral movements), or via cutting and artificial selection (freeze-frame).

Once the target movement has been identified, what does it mean to *extract* it and then to further act it out or reenact it on stage? In the videos, we see people acting, doing things, in complex situations and specific environments. At the same time, on stage, we see Zaides carrying out the *same* movements and the *same* poses, alone, in a rarefied stage environment, devoid of any elements of scenery or costume. If we suppose that they are, effectively, the *same* movements, the target movement and its reenactment during the performance still remain very different pragmatically: in one case, there is an action, even a tiny or negative one; in the other, a body movement devoid of all contextual support, a movement become abstract – or let us say, properly “choreographic” now that it calls attention to its own formal rather than contextual elements. It is this regression of an action to a simple movement that I propose calling “extraction.” However, for this extraction to actually be perceptible, the target movement and its original context must be presented at the very time that the “extracted movement” is performed. In the learning sections (3, 5, and 7), it is always the video with its

own timeframe that dictates how the movement is performed, the target movement projected on screen operating not only as a mimetic source but also as the moving force behind the "extracted movement." So if Zaides wants to repeat, for learning purposes, a movement that has already been performed on stage, he can only do so by also repeating the relevant projection of the video, until the movement is deemed to have been sufficiently incorporated into his own body. By the way, a distinction should be made here between two types of repetition: "transitive" repetition, in which *x* seeks to imitate and recreate what *y* has done, and "intransitive" or "reflexive" repetition, in which *x* reiterates what he himself has already done. The whole performance is based on the constant interweaving of these two forms of repetition: the (external) imitation of another's movements and the (internal) – forceful, even haunting – reiteration of this transitive act of imitation.

The extraction operation, via its internal procedures of repetition and via the continual association of the target movement and the extracted movement, is what allows the setting up and preservation of the reference to the original action and context. The extracted movement, then, appears as essentially double: on the one hand, an abstract movement unfurled out of context on the stage; on the other, a sign of a recorded action, a sign which is kinesthetic, iconic and indexical all at the same time. Thus, it is a true lexicon – both syntactic and semantic – that is put in place in these learning sections: identified and discrete entities (syntax), and cross-references to a meaning that transcends these entities (semantics).

Once this vocabulary has been established, the phase of autonomous performance can begin (sections 4, 6, and 8). It is section 6 that presents the highest level of choreographic complexity, section 4 being limited to a sequence of poses, and section 8 stretching the procedure of imitation beyond itself, towards trance and physico-emotional overload. In this section, Zaides completes two essential operations of *condensation* and *composition*. During the 7-minute sequence, a good dozen target movements are reactivated, some of them

repeated insistently at different points within the section. What was shown in the videos in linear but also broken-up fashion (one action, then another, then yet another, etc.) is condensed, within this brief period of time, into a multiple unit in which Zaides's body seems to be possessed, or indeed colonized, by the set of movements it has encountered. The process of condensing in time, then, amounts to the same thing as undergoing the concentrated physical ordeal of performing a multiplicity of gestures that, even though they seem sparse and discrete in empirical reality, nevertheless come to constitute, through accumulation, diffusion, and social imitation, a collective body that the sequence in question aims to make us experience. To this process of condensing in time, a composition procedure must be added. In fact, what is at stake lies entirely in the linking together of a series of movements and in the possible transitions that allow the passage from one to the other. Finding a kinetic transition between "making sheep escape" "throwing a stone," and "shouting towards the balcony" would mean demonstrating, from a specifically choreographic point of view, a unity or a bond which is necessarily ignored by descriptions in terms of action. If that is indeed the case, it sheds light on the analytic productivity of choreographic composition. However, it is important here to stress Zaides's great reserve and very low level of interventionism. A choreographic unit seems effectively to emerge at the start of the sequence ("making sheep escape" / "shouting towards the balcony" from a standing position / "shouting towards the balcony" from the ground), forming a fulcrum to which the dancer regularly returns, and letting us glimpse the possible transformation of the body movement material into a "dance module." But this unit, which brilliantly demonstrates the skill of the choreographer, is very rapidly abandoned in favor of a simple linking together of a series of movements. What is shown in this kind of renouncement is a definitive refusal to allow the choreographic metamorphosis of the material, the transfiguration, through the power of composition, of the pitifully ordinary gestures of colonization. From this stems the intentional weakness of the

composition, which, at the same time, is subtle enough to allow us to glimpse what it completely rejects: the transformation of the material into a simple element of dance vocabulary. The double operation of retaining the uniqueness of the material, while also multiplying the distancing procedures that make its viewing possible, is what makes *Archive* such a tour de force. De Gubernatis has fiercely and arrogantly disdained what he considers to be the lack of “choreographic invention” in this work (de Gubernatis 2015). This is another way to say that he has understood nothing about Zaides’s artistic and political gesture.



Archive by Arkadi Zaides, © Ronen Guter.

“Apparatus of capture” and mirror effect

Is Zaides that which he is imitating? As an Israeli citizen, he gazes at other Israeli citizens in the unflattering mirror held up by the “Camera Project”. The physical imitation of the videos pushes to its ultimate degree this figure of the mirror and, at the same time, via the very process of repetition, reverses it into its exact opposite, producing distance, criticism, and condemnation. In this sense, imitating would mean above all separating oneself off from, or dis-identifying oneself with, what one is imitating. However, the great power of the work lies

in deliberately maintaining a more complex ambiguity. As an accompaniment to the last video (the one showing the soldier filmed from below), Zaides completes two complementary actions: he half-begins a final mimetic gesture, reflecting the pose and the gaze of the soldier, and he gives it up, coming back to face the audience, to present himself for the last time. With this double movement, he intensifies the instability that runs through the whole performance, and tells us, at one and the same time, “I am” and “I am not” the soldier that I denounce. By that, he powerfully addresses the issue of collective responsibility, a responsibility that is also *ours*.

As already said, the installation version of *Archive*, designed for museums and galleries, is entitled *Capture Practice*²⁰ and, indeed, Zaides’s practice is all about capture: capturing some fragments of reality through video-recordings, letting oneself be captured by the gestures they depict, and organizing an apparatus capable of showing this double movement of capture. In her comments on *Archive*, Abeliovich refers in a very pertinent way to André Lepecki’s article “Choreography as apparatus of capture” (Lepecki 2006) and points out clearly that “Zaides’s choreography operates as an ‘apparatus of capture’” (Abeliovich 2016, 167). Nevertheless, by following Lepecki’s statement contrasting the oppressive powers of choreography as apparatus with the potential emancipatory movements of dance as breaking the apparatus – a statement inspired by Deleuze and Guattari (1980) and pursued in another Lepecki’s article (2013) –, she mainly focuses on the moments when “[Zaides] intervenes in this system of power by diverging from the score that the video archive imposes” (Abeliovich 2016, 168). These moments certainly do exist. But, as already indicated, they are either relatively rare (for instance, the discrepancies between sections 3 and 4) or, as in the trance state of section 8, frankly dark and nihilistic, approaching possession and psychosis. So, rather than looking for “movements of freedom” that, in my opinion, cannot be considered as a reading key to the work, it seems better to accept that *Archive* is in itself the staging of an

apparatus of capture, allowing us to see the double movement of capturing the real and being captured by it. Zaides’s hopeless rigor precisely consists in not departing from this apparatus of power and in letting it progress toward its most violent and unacceptable consequences. There is obviously something gloomy and desperate in that kind of gesture, perhaps similar to the hopelessness of the political situation in the area. This way of “staying glued to the facts” is not necessarily present in every “documentary dance approach”. For instance, Iché’s *Wagons libres* is much more open to fiction, imagination and counterfactual methodologies, using the shifting and displacing powers of dance to investigate what the real could be as much as what it is. However, Zaides’s desperate factualism is also, and eminently, a political act. *Archive* only performs kinesthetic facts, gestures that were also real events, and, by the cruelty of its apparatus, forbids us to look away.

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List of Photos

Photo 1: *Archive* by Arkadi Zaidés, © Ronen Guter

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Photo 6: *Archive* by Arkadi Zaidés, © Ronen Guter

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Photo 8: *Archive* by Arkadi Zaidés, © Ronen Guter

Notes

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¹ *Archive*, concept, choreography and interpretation: Arkadi Zaidés, created July 2014, Avignon Festival. See <http://www.arkadizaidés.com/archive>, accessed 01/15/2016.

² B’Tselem website: http://www.btselem.org/about_btselem, accessed 01/14/2016.

³ <http://www.btselem.org/video/channels>, accessed 01/14/2016.

⁴ As part of the collaborative exhibition “Suspended Spaces # 1, from Famagusta,” Köken Erkun and Michael Zupraner presented in 2010 a video installation entitled *B’Tselem Archive Project*. See *Suspended Spaces # 1 / Famagusta*, Paris, Black Jack Editions, 2011, pp. 278-279. I thank Françoise Parfait for the reference.

⁵ The following descriptions and analyses are based on a video recording of the performance from the Théâtre national de Chaillot on January 29, 2015. I thank Arkadi Zaidés for giving me access to it.

⁶ For each of the videos mentioned in this article, I shall provide in footnote the name of the camera operator, the place, the date, and the description supplied by B'Tselem. For the first four videos these are as follows: Iman Sufan, Nablus, 11/12/2009, "Nablus, Burin – settlers attacking a family's house (shot unclear)"; Iman Sufan, Nablus, 07/26/2010, "Burin – women talking during a settlers' attack (shot unclear)"; Mu'az Sufan, Nablus, 03/07/2012, "settlers attacking Sufan family and destroying their olive trees. Footage exclusive for BBC until they publish"; Iman Sufan, Nablus, 03/07/2012, "settlers attacking Sufan family."

⁷ Iman Sufan, Nablus, 10/19/2010, "Burin – general view of settlement."

⁸ Bilal Tamini, Ramallah, 04/02/2010, "A-nabi saleh – demonstration."

⁹ Awani D'awa, Hebron, 04/21/2007, "Clip 40 – settlers fight border policemen."

¹⁰ Abu Ayesha, Hebron, 11/03/2007, "Settlers' children blinding camera with mirrors."

¹¹ Raad Abu Ismah, 11/12/2011, "Soldier throws a stone at Raad."

¹² It is important to note, however, that throughout these sections Arkadi Zaides remains on stage, watching the videos. In the last section, he even half-performs another final imitation of the soldier's pose.

¹³ See also Mroué's analyze of the absence (or presence) of the tripod (Mroué 2012, 31-32).

¹⁴ Issa Amia, Hebron, 07/17/2008, "Hebron – two settler teens practicing throwing stones."

¹⁵ Issa Amia, Hebron, 05/04/2008, "Settlers return to Hazon David outpost after the eviction and attack Palestinians."

¹⁶ Abu Ayesha, Hebron, 11/03/2007, "Many settlers outside a house: 'She is upstairs! Throw things at her on the balcony.'"

¹⁷ Abu Sa'ifan, Hebron, 01/12/2008, "Settlers continue to throw stones."

¹⁸ "Clip 7 – group of face-covered settlers with slings to throw stones", operator unknown, 11/10/2009. The fact that the settlers now wear masks whenever there are confrontations or attacks is a direct consequence of the "Camera Project" and of the chance of being filmed

(personal communication from Effi Weiss and Amir Borenstein, video consultants for the performance).

¹⁹ “Estrangement” is one of the possible translations for the Russian term “ostranenie,” put forward by Viktor Shklovski in his article “Art as Device” [1917], 1965.

²⁰ The installation is made of two synchronized screens. On the left one, B’Tselem’s videos are shown, on the right one, we see a footage of Zaides performing in a studio. See Zaides’s website, <http://www.arkadizaides.com/capture-practice>. Accessed 04/25/2016.