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KRASSIMIRA KRUSCHKOVA

## **Disappearing Dance, Dancing Disappearance**

On Arkadi Zaides's choreography *Archive*<sup>1</sup>

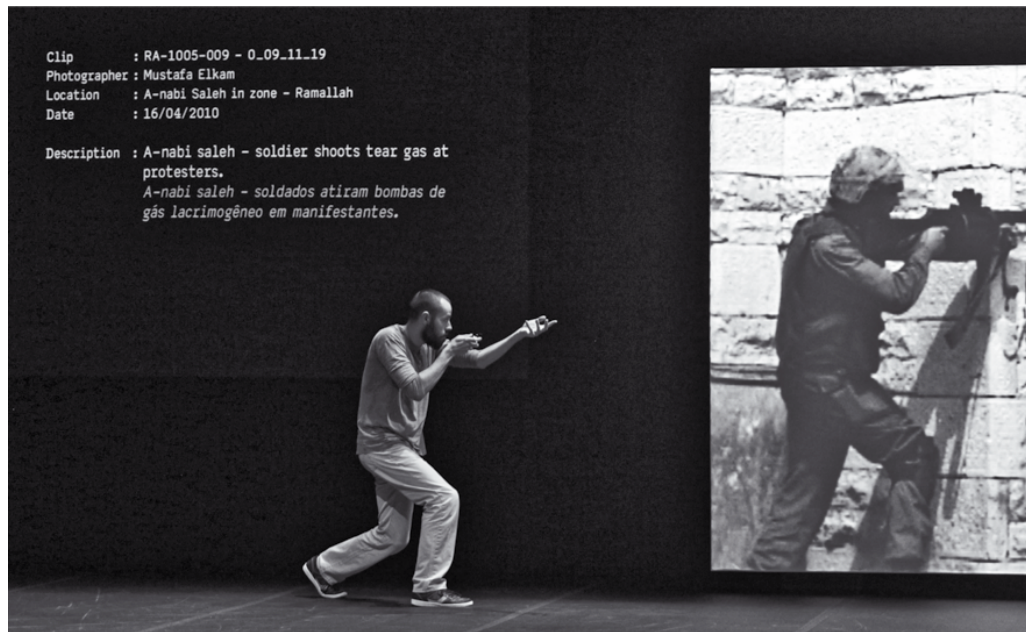
<sup>1</sup> My text is based on a video recording of the performance on 23 April 2016 in the framework of Tanzquartier Wien's artistic-theoretical parcours SCORES#11: *Archives to come*. I thank Arkadi Zaides for giving me access to it and to the photos (Photo 1, 3, 4: Ligia Jardim, Photo 2: Gadi Dagon, Photo 5: Ronen Guter.).

An almost empty stage, only two large screens in the background: a large white one on the right and a smaller black one on the left with a mixing desk in front of it.

Good evening. Thank you for coming. My name is Arkadi Zaides. I am a choreographer. I am Israeli. For the past fifteen years I have been living in Tel Aviv. The West Bank is 20 km 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.

With this introduction the choreographer Arkadi Zaides starts his solo performance *Archive* (premiered 2014 in Avignon). For these short introductory words a young man (working at Tanzquartier Vienna where *Archive* was presented in 2016) stands close to Zaides and translates simultaneously every single sentence – in an act of collective responsibility as we could think instantly hearing this text. In the mere act of translating into German the young man must say of course also that his name is Arkadi Zaides. Thus, in the very beginning choreographic problems of authorship appear.

This apostrophe-gesture, intra- choreographically well known in conceptual choreography (for example, in Jérôme Bels's *Last performance* transforming a starting 'I am Jérôme Bel' into 'I am not Jérôme Bel') is significant here also in an extra-choreographic sense, as it echoes the conflict between Israel and Palestine. It is an apostrophe in its double meaning: apostrophizing, addressing the audience and at the same time marking a kind of an apostrophe, an omission: I am the person that is co-responsible, but I am not the person(s) I pretend to re-present: an ambiguous detonation of denotation.



Clip : RA-1005-009 - 0\_09\_11\_19

Photographer : Mustafa Elkam

Location : A-nabi Saleh in zone - Ramallah

Date : 16/04/2010

Description : A-nabi saleh - soldier shoots tear gas at protesters.

A-nabi saleh - soldados atiram bombas de gás lacrimogêneo em manifestantes.

### **Arkadi Zaides: *Archive*.**

*Photo: Ligia Jardim*

Then we start reading on the black screen some information about B'Tselem and its Camera Project: since 2007 B'Tselem, the Israeli Information Centre for Human Rights in the Occupied Territories, has been operating the Camera Project, which distributes video cameras to Palestinians in high-conflict areas in the West Bank. The project aims to provide an ongoing documentation of human rights violations and to expose the reality of life under occupation to both the Israeli and the international public. The film material to be presented shows Israelis only; it is absolutely important that we remember this.

'This is also us' (Zaides 2016), the choreographer says in an artistic talk about remembering and membership structures in *Archive*. Arkadi Zaides works with and on a complex concept of 'us', of a community, addressing rather – as I would suggest with Georges Bataille – a 'community of those who belong to no community' (cited in Derrida 2002: 67). At issue are the communities of those who are mainly driven by non-affiliation, by disappearing contours, sharing temporary co-structures. Dance and performance today are significant as a probe and problematizing of *Inoperative Community* (Nancy 1983), *Unavowable Community* (Blanchot 1984), *Disavowed Community* (Nancy 2014), of *Coming Community* (Agamben 1993). Choreographic strategies of potentializing contours and borders, formulating again and again their disappearance, disfigure ideological phantasms of purity.

At issue is the contingency of cohesion, its unstable resistance that would rather not participate – exactly in order to be with. It is a mode of togetherness, of affiliation and testimony that does not require any given group or plural, which rather looks into its own inconvertibility, into its own unavailability, provided that the 'us' will always have been a temporary construct: in the precise vagueness and vulnerability of parallel worlds in which we belong together so strangely; without ignoring the empty spaces, the rifts, the fissures: mind the gap!

By screening on the large white screen during the performance documentary material from the Camera Project with the exact references to the images on the small black screen, Zaides comments and contaminates, infects, affects, afflicts and makes uncertain by the mere act of repetition (and not only by the pixelated faces) any individuality and thus also his own position. It is important to name the film images: with date, description, location of the event, and the name of the operator. The concrete reference is there, documented; what still remains ambiguous are the images themselves, mostly unspectacular although always violent.

The reviewed and selected material, filmed by Palestinians, shows persons from Israel in various confrontational situations. On stage Zaides examines the collected material, first trying and hesitating, then more and more resolutely extracting, isolating gestural sequences by the remote-control, stopping, replying, rewinding those sometimes very marginal movements in the frame of the clip, then re-enacting, recollecting, constantly re-configuring the gestures of the persons on the screen. Zaides's relation to what he imitates and to the act of imitation itself is ambiguous. Imitation becomes more precise with taking distance, not with identification. During the staging procedure the extracted movements 'intra-act' choreographically with one another in all their materiality (to quote a concept on 'intra- action' by Karen Barad on no pre-constituted relations (2007)) instead of just interacting as pre-established actions.

The Palestinians stay behind their cameras – they seem to disappear, but are exiled in such a way that they are all the more there. The movements of the operators, their camera movements, their voices and perspectives, their literal points of view are present, determining the viewer's perspective. The meaning of 'perspective' is here literal but exactly through the literacy of the movements they are always already figurative as a point of view. *Archive* is all about the mode of disappearance as a paradox of archive practice and – as this text suggests – as paradoxical artistic poetics that is political in the plural sense of a movement. Deterritorializing the filmed act with his factuality to a mere movement, Zaides problematizes referring in principle to an act of certainty.

*Archive* questions choreography as a critical pointing at the absence, disappointing any metaphysics of presence, as a gesture archive activated time and again, focusing on the aesthetic and political potential for disappearance. At stake is the choreographic procedure with the volunteers' clips as a political and aesthetic act, re-enacting and pausing poses and positions – very precise, literal and thus always already figurative, ambiguous positions. In never repeating the same, *Archive* repeats the difference itself.

Zaides extracts gestures and voices of the others, another's gestures and voices switching from one video to another, and appropriates, re-enacts them by transforming his body into a living archive or vocabulary. The complexity of the mimetic choreographic procedure questions different modes of identification, participation and responsibility. The choreographer critically embodies the movement material of his Israeli community as seen through the cameras of Palestinian citizens.

Arkadi Zaides performs gestures, voices and movement sequences of soldiers and settlers, firstly simultaneously with the film material and then separately, without the projection. As isolated choreographic material, the gestures re-transform into movements: in an ongoing act of abstraction. The choreographic abstraction causes the referential context to disappear by – paradoxically – extracting the mere violence of this context in its own kinaesthetic media: as a violent body movement. Frédéric Pouillaude precisely puts it as follows:

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. (Pouillaude 2016: 20)

Pouillaude concludes in a very pertinent way that Zaides’s ‘desperate factualism is also, and eminently, a political act’ (2016: 27). Zaides re-enacts and at once re-members, re-collects the context and tests it, rehearses it: once, twice, again and again. By repeating the difference itself, he performs the inconceivability, and thus un-presentability of the context. By cutting image and sound material, again and again, differentiating and examining lines of sight and perspectives, he develops his performative gesture archive also from another – and another’s – point of view. It is an archive focusing on the question of communities and their potential for violence, control and guilt, including the guilt of looking away that also concerns us. ‘*Archive* only performs kinesthetic facts, gestures that were also real events, and, by the cruelty of its apparatus, forbids us to look away’ (Pouillaude 2016: 27).

‘I’m guilty of looking away’, Davis Freeman shouts in a verbally and physically escalating recitative in Meg Stuart’s *Alibi*. And: ‘I’m guilty of being an American.’ The piece was premiered on 17 November 2001, shortly after 9/11, but had already been rehearsed since summer 2001 – thus the reference, the context remains open. The word ‘alibi’ is interesting here as a ‘proof of absence’, as evidence of no evidence, as escaping referential evidence – in the name of choreographic evidence, in order to literally work with the figurative.

Perhaps because the (contemporary dance) body is a Body Not Fit For Purpose – thus the title of a choreography by Jonathan Burrows and Matteo Fargion (premiered like *Archive* in 2014). It starts with mere arm movements, with a ‘dance called *the Arabic–Israel conflict*’, as Burrows comments his own movements. This ‘dance’ again anticipates – in a very different way – the uncertainty of the gesture when it comes to formulating references, intentions, grounds, but at the same time addresses the inherent radicalness of that attempt. So, once again the unstable. As if this body not fit for purpose was like Heinrich von Kleist’s marionette and like Kleist’s text itself losing again and again its purpose, its ground and being unstable. Just because of this we may call its movements ‘dance’. Dance deterritorializes, escapes stable grounds, as if it were good for nothing.

And this is *good enough* (as in the title of a choreography by Philipp Gehmacher, 2001), meaning ambivalent enough. *Good enough* was developed in the same year as Meg Stuart’s *Alibi*. In 2010, Meg Stuart and Philipp Gehmacher created with the video artist Vladimir Miller *the fault lines*.

Fault lines: rifts, fissures, rises, gaps, disappearance, emptiness. As if the imitated gestures in *Archive* are too big and too small at the same time. They are so small as if they couldn't refer anything. They are so big that they refer always to more than one thing, so big that they tear apart. As if they spoke more than one language, and at the same time no language any more, as 'plus d'une langue' (Jacques Derrida's briefest definition of deconstruction, (1988: 38)).

This gestures seem to tear apart exactly at 'the fault lines', these subterranean fissures in deep rock strata, which, as they say, are supposed to be responsible for our aggressions and depressions, for our intense distances, where we almost disappear in despair, without hold and withheld, in all our counter-moving inconsistency; as fault lines drawn between several bodies, but above all drawn within the bodies themselves, which makes them at times stunned. Within one of the complex situations on screen a settler holds his head – not wounded but almost exploding in hesitation on what is just going on, on what is to do now, stunned. Zaides imitates this gesture every so often, for a long while.

Deconstruction is interesting in *Archive* also as procedure of questioning the cause– effect linearity of a hi/story. Zaides twice takes a certain pose first, and only afterwards the video clip shows us this pose. Isolating images by using the freeze-frame and repeating them again and again Zaides changes the relation between his own body image and the copied ones, the distance, the positioning. Imitating a soldier with a tear gas gun in the hand Zaides holds the remote control in his hand. As if asking how much remoteness does control us choreographically, our hands, or tears.

Here Zaides first takes the physical perspective from the filmed soldier, and then turns his own body in a different direction – staying back to back with the filmed soldier, both looking in opposite directions. Then the choreographer changes his position again – directing the remote control against the virtual image of the soldier, a live body against body images, against the virtuality of a real conflict situation. Undoing positions again and again(st) Zaides sharpens our eye for the distances within the contact, for the zones of difference, the border zones. But how to undo the undoing, the ruin?

The choreographic event *takes place when it doesn't*, to quote an event-formula of Jacques Derrida (1981: 212f), the author of *Mal d'archive*, a formula that gave the title for an inventory *on dance and performance since 1989* (Hochmuth, Kruschkova and Schöllhammer 2006). Ever again failing to appear, the event makes us continue missing it and messing images up – very explicitly in *Archive*. But how to take responsibility for what doesn't appear, 'how to take responsibility for what is already there, even if we cannot yet see it?' (Mroué 2009: 226) Contemporary dance and performance are more impressed by the idea of vacancy than by cohesion through causality and calculation. Thus, choreography critically questions the metaphysics of presence by marking the empty spaces of the invisible Palestinian people with their cameras. *Archive* is also about our presence, which can only be archived and activated as a probe and problem, again and again, as vacancy. 'Performance is this vacant space', Rabih Mroué writes in turn: 'For absence is a promise of return and declaring the emptiness is a sign of the presence of the absent' (Mroué 2009: 226).



**Arakadi Zaidis: Archive.**

*(Photos top to bottom) (Photos Ligia Jardim, Gadi Dagon, Ligia Jardim, Ronen Guter.).*

Almost at the end Zaides's movements seem to potentialize themselves in a dance 'undancing' itself again and again, a dance at the vanishing point of reference, repeating the act of referring itself. It is the only movement sequence imitating to no single film image, or perhaps to all the sampled images simultaneously, disarticulating their language, bringing the singular body to move in several directions at once. In earlier sequences, Zaides imitates the gesture of 'throwing stones'. This gesture does not go in one direction as in the re-enacted clip but in many directions (although not simultaneously like in the 'undancing' dance), in desperate rotation: literal and figurative at the same time.

In a series of sampled shouting Zaides shoots acoustic images at once. He imitates the shouting of settlers displacing sheep. Displacing sheep, displacing people, exiling people as sheep. The sampled voices sum up to an animalistic chorus. This sampled shouting accompanies also the disappearing dance almost at the end. As if a dance of resistance resisting itself by the mere motion of flipping out, unable to articulate what was, no, what is just going on, refusing all too quick and easy understanding: uneasy going. We see what the mere imitation of violent movements does to a (collective) body. An exhausting dance in many possible directions and perspectives. At the very end Zaides stops moving and looks at us for a long while, as if requiring still another perspective.

*Archive* works on a liquidation of liquidity, problematizing undoubtful legibility and availability, thinking an archive as not just a mirror, as *not fit for purpose*, speaking in 'plus d'une langue', being critical just by escaping functionality, to use Roland Barthes (1973) idea of criticality. Zaides choreographs a body archive that is more than functional by referring to more than one ground and to no more at once, being just in this way groundlessly compelling. The anagrammatic principle of an ever-new arrangement of the material without previously established adherence 'deterritorializes' the choreographic narration.

This might be what Gilles Deleuze calls deterritorialization: 'Not to flee the territory, but to let it become porous' (Steinweg 2018: 62). Every singular clip reminds us of puzzle parts that never make a whole, porous but not transparent. The clips make a political reference and are at the same time choreographically opaque, 'ob?scene' (Kruschkova 2005) movements marking an absence, questioning their stage-ability, scene-ability or, again, this time with Paul Valéry's *La Feuille Blanche*: '*cette présence d'absence*'.

Thus, choreography – putatively paradoxical – becomes an appeal for nuance, difference, withdrawal, shadow, disappearance, beyond neo-liberal forced transparency and metaphysical ultimate reason imperatives, and beyond 'an illuminated 24/7 world without shadows as the final capitalist mirage of post-history, of an exorcism of the otherness' (Crary 2013: 9). Here we might also think of Giorgio Agamben's note on potentiality as a mode of disappearance:

darkness, we may therefore say, is in some way the color of potentiality ... *we see darkness* ... human beings can see shadows (*to skotos*), they can experience darkness: they have the *potential* not to see, the *possibility of privation*. (Agamben 2000: 180f.)



Our observing gazes go up the wall, up the white screen in *Archive*, and any stability disappears in the gaps, in the cuts between equally valid excerpts. It is a performance in which difference beckons from every angle, vainly trying to keep us from blinking. We are, like in Heiner Müller's *Bildbeschreibung* (Description of a Picture) searching for 'the gap in the course of events', 'the perhaps redeeming mistake', the distraction 'between gaze and gaze' – recurring kind of 'fear that the mistake might happen while blinking'.

There is a kind of choreographic exorcism in Zaides's doubling, copying, imitating. We might think here of Walid Raad's subtle ironic lecture-performance *Kicking the Dead* (2017). As if images could really disappear when facing their doppelganger, their copy. Nevertheless, all the copied images in *Archive* are real kinaesthetic facts and not an ironic oscillation factum/fiction. What is marked by uncertainty is often, explicitly, in the breathless handheld-camera movement of the clips, the legibility of the images. The responsibility of our gaze becomes the more compelling the more it hesitates – holding out in the aporia of undecidability, beyond absolute validities and claims to reference – precisely because of the factuality of the images.

In the repetition the mimesis always exposes itself to its cessation and is thus contractually stipulated exactly because of its gap. Mimesis unbearably misses the mimed – but this is where its contractual power lies. Mimesis has a weakness, a weakness *for* the potentiality of the other. Isn't every mimetic event and evidence connected with exactly this uncertainty – whether it actually was one? Only when it addresses its own disappearance, it appears in all its unavailability, with validity based on lack. As if it had always been phantom pain: a hurting nothingness – fully exposed to the other, like the cut, that is, the filmic nothingness in the gap between the clips into which our spectators' gaze tumbles.

We witness Zaides's being-with, his wit(h) nessing, his mimetic procedure questioning imitation. Mimesis and anagnorisis become problematic, they become on and of an imitation without imitated. The closer the gaze of the camera, the more ambiguous the filmed appears, almost like in Michelangelo Antonioni's *Blow up*. Distance here also means security for the volunteers with the cameras. 'Don't worry about the quality of the video ... What is important is to record the event as it takes place': This is one of the Internet instructions for volunteers filming the events in Syria 2011 quoted in Rabih Mroué's lecture-performance *Pixelated Revolution* (2012) – in all the ambivalence of a formula like 'an event as it takes place'. Does it then *take place when it doesn't*? 'The legibility of the image seems to be', as Frédéric Pouillaude writes about *Archive*, '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' (Pouillaude: 16).

The anagrammatic order of Zaides's isolated motion sequences becoming shorter and shorter (like in Xavier Le Roy's *Giszlelle*, 2001) focuses the abstraction, the disarticulation, the disorder of his choreographic re-enacting, re-remembering, at the same time being a member of a community and resigning as member, accumulating the material without strong articulation. It is another, contemporary choreographic decision for *weak dance strong questions* (so the title of a choreography by Jonathan Burrows and Jan Ritsema, premiered also in 2001 – to just open again an intra-choreographic context), refusing 'to allow the choreographic metamorphosis of the



material, the transfiguration, through the power of composition, of the pitifully ordinary gestures of colonization' (Pouillaude 2016: 24).

Zaides's re-enactment appropriates in order to dis-appropriate, collects gestures as a collapse of a collective body, works for disintegration of the situation in order to remain integer: remembering that a story 'repeated at least twice, is not simply individual' (Felman 2002: 52), remembering that 'in not being individual, the repetition of a story ... beyond survival, is singularity' (Lepecki 2016: 176). We re-member: 'My name is Arkadi Zaides', as the choreographer – himself a simultaneous translator of our singularity and collective responsibility – says at the beginning of *Archive*. Translating, re-enacting, repeating, re-remembering the difference itself, Zaides and we as audience members, are apart from the situation and only thereby become a part of it.

The law of touching is separation. And even more so, it is the heterogeneity of the surfaces that touch each other ... insofar as the actual strength of a body consists of its ability to touch another body or itself, which is nothing else but its de-finition as a body. (Nancy: 2000: 25).

Being defined and at the same time never finalized as a single body we constantly probe and problematize our 'inoperative', 'unavowable', 'disavowed', 'coming' communities. Thereby we potentialize instead of unconditionally realizing our extra-acting body archives and let them intra-act – as archives to come of a *communauté désœuvrée*.

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