

## **Body becoming archive. Archive becoming body.**

### **Mobile memories and interlaced stories in *Archive* by Arkadi Zaides**

*Alice Ciresola*

This article aims to explore how archival material belonging to a specific time and place, in this case The Occupied Territories in Palestine, is activated through performance and dance in the work *Archive* by Arkadi Zaides. [1]

In 2007, the organization B'Tselem (The Israeli Information Center for Human Rights in the Occupied Territories) began distributing video cameras to the Palestinian population, allowing them to document the daily violations of human rights in the Occupied Territories. The video material is now available on the organization's website under the name Camera Project [2], which constitutes a document of the conflict from a Palestinian perspective.

In 2014, on the occasion of the Festival d'Avignon, Arkadi Zaides presented *Archive*, a solo performance for which he selected video material [3] from Camera Project and used it as a special choreographic score. The performance is based on the imitation, repetition and appropriation of figures and sounds of violence, taken from the footage projected on a big screen behind him. Zaides only imitates the perpetrators, while the viewer's point of view is aligned with the Palestinians', whose voices and movements remain perceivable behind the camera.

Arkadi Zaides is not the first to work with the reinterpretation of pre-existing archives; in recent years – with some early attempts in the 1990s – an increasing number of artists have been engaging with archives, museum collections, as well as material and immaterial heritage through their bodies.

What is the potential of such a gesture? What does this transmedia operation bring to the archive itself? What happens when an archive becomes a body, and a body becomes an archive?

The relationship between performance and the archive has been extensively developed in a book published in 2013, *Performing Archives/Archives of Performance*. An anthology of essays covering points of convergence between the archive and performance practices, it also explores new directions and documentation strategies in relation to personal and collective processes of memory.

The authors start from an important premise; they emphasize how, although in the past the archive and performance were considered as opposites, and in some ways incompatible, recently the notion of archive has expanded “from the idea of a physical storage space that preserves objects and documents to virtual archives of data collection accessed through computer screens, collective memory engaged in reinterpretations of history, or political dimensions of archives invested with issues of accessibility and power” (Borggreen & Gade, 2013).

According to Diana Taylor, performance studies allow us to consider the repertoire of *embodied practices* as an important system of knowledge production and transmission. Performance – and with this term Taylor means not only performance art, dance and theatre, but also more broadly collective rituals – works as an agent of memory transmission and helps to maintain, if not define, a sense of identity (Taylor, 2003). So what other possibilities arise from the dialogue between the archive and performance? What are the consequences of this meeting?

If it is true that archives, with their lasting documents and objects, are effective in the transmission of memory and memories from generation to generation, in this sense working as agents of temporal extension of knowledge (Foote, 1990), then the immateriality and dynamics intrinsic to performance contribute to its translation and interpretation, expanding the archives in a geographical sense, thus making it comprehensible beyond the boundaries of where the archive was produced and preserved. This issue is precisely what this text sets out to explore.

Similarly to what happens in a museum context when dance and performance interact with permanent collections, when these disciplines are in dialogue with an archive they are likely to have the effect of creating echoes and connections in regards to the documents and to

the personal and collective memories not made visible neither by the archive nor the performance, but rather linked to the viewer's imagination and biography. The archive, perceived as immobile in contact with the moving body, is subject to different interpretations, opening up to the possibility of unveiling not just one, but multiple narratives.

With their bodies, choreographers, dancers and performers have challenged the pure repository function associated with the archive, shedding light on the possibility of multiplying the narratives and meanings of the documents. Archives contain many more narratives than the unique, dominant one to which they have always been associated. Each dominant narrative will necessarily correspond to others that have been silenced, censored or not yet interpreted.

In the case of Arkadi Zaides' *Archive*, the content of the archive materials, namely the violence perpetrated against the Palestinian population in the Occupied Territories, is a matter that requires some additional attention and inquiry.

Like with other performances, there is the ethical question of the reactivation of archives documenting acts of violence, which according to some scholars, when brought into an aesthetic (choreographic) dimension, only duplicate the violence itself. In fact, as Emma Willis argues, the performative responses to this type of archives emancipate them from an idea of univocal truth, in order to uncover a malleable matter from which to extract new interpretations. More importantly, the ephemeral nature of performative practices allows silent and silenced voices to emerge, making their absence visible (Willis, 2013).

Mimesis and embodiment are for Zaides knowledge tools, instruments of interpretation of a matter which, although it belongs to his culture, needs to be critically studied in order to be understood.

During the performance, Zaides has a remote control that stops and starts the images: in this way he spends time studying the scenes and figures of violence from various angles and making them his own, painfully finding space in his body for memories that are not really his, but may well be. Time to embody the executioners, leaving an empty, physical and metaphorical space around him for the thousands of invisible victims of his violent gestures who are not able to react.

There are moments in which particular elements lead the viewer straight into the heart of the Israeli–Palestinian conflict: the faces and clothes of the people in the videos and the captions describing the episodes. At other times the video is off, the captions disappear and the audience sees a body – which no longer has nationality, sex, religion – in a completely neutral theatrical space. On these bare walls the viewer can project home settings where violent parents and companions wander around, prison walls or public spaces taken over by protest marches where clashes happen between those who are armed and those who are not.

The viewer discovers that the body and voice of violence are surprisingly universal, and that its victims wander around it, helplessly and silently like ghosts. While watching *Archive*, by temporarily shifting their gaze from the video and focusing only on the moving body, viewers are able to connect gestures and figures to a number of stories of violence, of wars near and far, of witnessed conflicts and episodes of urban or domestic violence, finding in an archive at first sight foreign to their lives a living matter closer and more comprehensible than they could have imagined.

In an interview with Renan Benyamina, Zaides states that the initial images projected behind him serve as evidence, testimony. Taking them for granted is the initial condition for the exploration of the potential of the body as a medium: by immersing himself in the images, embodying them, he tries to transform them or, better said, interpret them through another kind of material. Zaides questions how his biography and the medium can extract from the archive “a kind of living multi-layered testimony”, a living testimony made up of multiple layers [4].

Zaides studies images relentlessly, positioning himself continuously in different ways in relation to the screen, stopping the footage, slowing it down, turning the audio on and off, thus verifying what his body can add to the images, and how movement can become a mediator for the audience. Gestures of embodied violence which, according to Goran Petrović-Lotina, allow the audience to identify with the excluded and absent body of the oppressed, but at the same time offer the possibility of taking action (Petrović-Lotina, 2017).

Zaides explains that although the images are connected to a specific geographical and temporal reality, violence can also manifest similarly in other contexts. What he presents to us, despite being based on images related to the Israeli–Palestinian conflict, is a universal vocabulary of figures and voices of violence.

In the interview, the fact that the body is the bearer of a biography, memories and a very particular sensibility is mentioned several times by Zaides. And not only in reference to his body, but also in reference to the spectators' bodies.

If it is true that through this performance Zaides puts the audience in an uncomfortable and passive position, rendering them immobile in front of the scenes of violence without the possibility of reacting physically to what is happening, then the choreographer knows that – as Jacques Rancière would say – each member of the audience reacts to those images in their own way, according to their own story and their own position. Each of them elaborates different perspectives and readings of the same situation. It is precisely for this reason that Zaides decided not to translate the original voices in the footage, in order to leave more room for the viewers' interpretation, “who play the role of active interpreters, who develop their own translation in order to appropriate the ‘story’ and make their own ‘story’” (Rancière, 2009).

Rancière reminds us that an *emancipated spectator*, although sitting still in their chair, has the intellectual capacity to narrate and translate, to appropriate a story and make it their own.

In my opinion, Zaides' performance recreates a situation similar to the ones where a performance or a dance piece interacts with a museum collection, in other words, where a phenomenon of resonance happens. Resonance which, as Tiina Roppola [5] argues, does not mean mere compatibility, but rather “a tendency toward wholeness. Resonance is about fragments coming together to form greater wholes” (Roppola, 2012). In *Archive*, the choreographer's body begins to tell the very story of that archive through embodiment, but, while appropriating it and reproducing it for the public, ends up telling others. Or at least acts as a filter that enables the audience to actively formulate a series of thoughts around the

performance itself, linking it to violence seen – and maybe lived – in completely different contexts.

Although we can't really talk about a transmedia operation, since the archive project and the performance are the products of two different authors who didn't intend to tell the same story using different means of communication, it seems to me that the passage from video to choreography doesn't limit itself to telling the same story with another medium, but – taking up the concept of resonance mentioned above – rather completes it by adding different perspectives.

One cannot but think of Zaides as a *storylistener* who collects stories and fragments from the world around him, and at the same time as a *storyteller* who organizes this material in the form of potential new narratives, who therefore uses choreography as a means of mediation. The viewer thus realizes how many layers the archive documents are made up of and finds space for her own personal interpretation.

As Michael Rothberg says in *Multidirectional Memory. Remembering the Holocaust in the Age of Decolonization*, what, at first glance, seems to belong to us, turns out to be a loan or an adaptation of an apparently foreign or distant story (Rothberg, 2009). And I think the opposite is also true, namely that what at first glance seems foreign and distant, actually nourishes, mixes, merges with memories that belong to us personally.

The last chapter of Rothberg is partly dedicated to the Israeli–Palestinian conflict, and the conclusion of his text states that, although we try to put borders and walls around stories, it is not possible to do so, because “memories are mobile; histories are implicated in each other. Thus, finally, understanding political conflict entails understanding the interlacing of memories in the force field of public space. The only way forward is through their entanglement” (Rothberg, 2009). Understanding a conflict means going through the interlacing of multiple memories, which are not in competition with each other, but necessarily imbricated.

*Archive* – like many performative reinterpretations of archives – is in my opinion a mirror of at least three stories: of the society that produced it, of the choreographer who reinterpreted

and mediated it, and of the spectator who recognizes fragments of personal and collective memories in these documents.

## Notes

[1] Arkadi Zaides is an independent Israeli choreographer. He was born in 1979 in Bielorrussia, then emigrated to Israel in 1990. Today he lives in France and performs internationally.

[2] The archive is available at the following address: <https://www.btselem.org/video-channel/camera-project>

[3] The materials selected by Arkadi Zaides were filmed by Iman Sufan, Mu'az Sufan, Bilal Tamimi, Udai 'Aqel, Awani D'ana, Bassam J'abri, Abu 'Ayesha, Qassem Saleh, Mustafa Elkam, Raed Abu Ermeileh, Abu Sa'ifan, Oren Yakobovich, Nayel Najjar.

[4] The interview given by Zaides to Renan Benyamina can be accessed on the website of Kunstenfestivaldesarts (Brussels, Belgium), where Archive was presented in 2015: <http://www.kfda.be/index.php/en/program/archive>

[5] Although Tiina Roppola talks about resonance in exhibition contexts, it doesn't seem far-fetched to refer to the use she makes of it in this context, since the viewer's experience in front of the series of videos submitted to their gaze in *Archive* is not dissimilar to a visitor's experience in front of a museum collection.

## References

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