

THRUMMING WITH KNOWLEDGE *

by Irit Rogoff
for the Keir Foundation publication, 2024

My subject is the conjunction of ‘research’, ‘knowledge production’ and ‘creative practice’ as we are seeing it unfold today across so many art forms. To try and capture the synchronicity of embodied processes of knowledge production, of how research is lived out rather than utilised, I address the work of dancer and choreographer, Arkadi Zaides. In a series of recent works emerging from collaborations with NGOs, Zaides simultaneously focuses on urgencies afflicting our world as well as recognises NGOs as important knowledge producers. The notion of thrumming I am in search of is both epistemic and embodied. It’s a form of ‘Being with Knowledge’ that does not reach conclusions or seal it off temporally.

One of my main interests is with a notion of ‘Research’ that has become particularly slippery. The practice of research is quite different from its definition as being borne out via its results. It entwines itself around intentions to find out, to observe, to investigate, to analyse, to prove, to exhibit and to illuminate. In the commercial world, ‘research’ holds the promise of veracity and the assurance of a trustworthiness, ensuring confident profit. But in parallel to a necessary suspiciousness of the term, we should admit that the term ‘research’ also holds out a promise – perhaps less the promise of being deeply and commandingly informed as the promise of some potential transformation taking place through its operations. Much has happened to research in recent decades. It has encountered practice and been reshaped by it. It has encountered militant civic agents and been reoriented by these.

Research in the hands of new social movements and emergent identities, in the face of harrowing circumstances, is less an operation of formal knowledge and more an insistence on living out a condition while being informed about it. It is constantly putting in place a new, imaginative terminology that ensures that knowledge be perceived as a multi-dimensional experience that encounters facts, subjectivities, atmospheres, narratives and fictions in equal measure.

I should confess this writing is driven by a desire to understand research as a form of ‘surrender’ to the cataclysmic forces that constantly shake up and recast how and where we know from – it is driven by a long battle with the notion of ‘frontality’ within the operations of knowledge production. By ‘frontality’ I mean the self-assurance that we know what the problem we are addressing is. That we know how to approach it, its significance in the world, that we have dedicated tools with which to address it and that we have predetermined the interpretative communities who will have the capacity to receive it. Within the halls of neoliberal knowledge, we have become used to questions about potential readership and target audiences. At the other end of this chain, metric, quantified analysis fixes the value of research and its delivery, creating systems of evaluation that in turn deliver funding, resources and reputation. Grant applications, book proposals, research evaluations depend completely on such ‘frontality’ as does so much of the apparatus of criticism, the projection of a set of values that depend on the binaries of ‘original’ or ‘derivative’ – ‘profound’ or ‘superficial’ – ‘informed’ or ‘frivolous’- to gain conviction and authority. Not only is this form of fixed evaluation simplistic and reductivist but importantly it is incommensurate with the operations of knowledge as we experience them today. No matter what good cause, what righteous objective this work supports, if it does not sow doubt and uncertainty, does not denote struggle, it is delivering goods rather than doing the work. The very enunciation of research needs to denote struggle, not opinions and manifestos –research needs to be able to perform the tensions between the drive behind it, the purposes it might serve beyond our knowledge, and its potential uses in the world. Research needs to support the flourishing of many different methodologies, not as agents of ‘proof’, but as indicative of the struggles and transitions that we go through in order to gain insight into conditions, circumstances, mindsets, imaginaries and actions. Now that we have experienced annals of research that operate through sliding signifiers, have encountered scientific arguments which colloquially operate like ‘thrumming’, species determined out of narrative voices, wars reimagined as individuated phantasmatic tales or technology contaminated by traces of flawed subjectivity – we understand differently. We understand that our investment is in the operations, in the struggles for encountering and communicating and in the vigilance towards what use it will be put towards. Not the thing itself but its operations – and perhaps most importantly how we circulate in these operations.

My battles with ‘frontality’ have led me to understand that the old-fashioned term, ‘knowingness’, cannot be completely discarded but perhaps needs to be rearticulated. It also led me to recognise the detrimental force of ‘assurance’ in the face of knowledge. Some years ago I was tasked with writing an essay on “What is a Theorist?” and started off by determining that I thought that a theorist is “one who is undone by theory”¹. Theory is a form of knowledge that undoes one, employs doubt and uncertainty as its tools, and consequently theoretical research, demands a certain surrender to the forces that shape a field of subjectivity.

Rather than the single directionality of a ‘frontal’ approach, I would posit the possibility of ‘thrumming with knowledge’. Here it is the multi-directionality of sound and vibration, experienced indirectly through walls and other surfaces, dispersed and affecting things in its wake. Water trembles, walls vibrate, spaces leak into one another, a shared condition flooding them all. Discussing the concept of thrumming with a friend recently they said – “but thrumming is always ominous – something has gone wrong somewhere, - an engine has stalled, a dam has broken, a high wire buzzes and one’s mind is filled with potential disaster, things are awry”. I agree and this makes the concept even more appealing, for we are fully aware that we are currently broken, that we are living out so many disasters, that so much around us in governance and in the natural world has collapsed and we are left in their wake haunted by their absence – a constant, omnipresent, pitched thrum.

Recently we, The Advanced Practices PhD program at Goldsmiths, had a visit from the Choreographer and performer, Arkadi Zaidis. He took us through three of his projects in detail and here I found both of my preoccupations – rethinking research and embodying the omnipresent Thrum of everything having gone awry. The projects that Zaidis navigated us through begin with a collaboration with an NGO, which in itself is important in that he affects a recognition that these are knowledge producers and not simply a mechanism for intervention and, perhaps more significantly, this serves as a point of entry for debate – always a troublesome problem. While I am writing about a series of performed dance works,

¹ “What is a Theorist?” in *Was ist Ein Kunsteler* ed. Katharina Sykora. 2007.

I am not sure how to title this – whether Zaides is a dancer, choreographer, a performance artist, a conceptual artist.

In this sense, I am not thinking so much about NGOs' ability to function and do the work of rescue at the liminal edge, where extreme conditions really do dictate how they can operate. Rather, I am thinking about a different model of the NGO, influenced by the writing of Michel Feher and his work on nongovernmental politics.² In Feher's thought there is an attempt to excavate from NGOs' material and procedural practices an argument in which it is the governed that govern, not through the bureaucratic mechanisms of political systems, but through imaginative protocols and life-affirming gestures and engagements enabled and necessitated by work on the ground. Posing the NGO as a model for contemporary emergent art institutions is largely driven by the acknowledgment that an NGO always begins its involvement with the recognition of a problem: not of a target audience, niche market, or leisure economy, but of an urgency in the world. NGOs, which are both highly structured and of a looser type, well organized and ad hoc, operate somewhere between society and non-aligned coalitions. They are animated and driven by recognising problems rather than by the desire to be legitimated, gaining their identity by immersing themselves in a problem rather than by their membership.

Beyond the recognition of a problem, there is little preoccupation with either allocating the blame for who created it or who is blocking the possibilities of resolving it, and instead, an active network of micro-gestures begins to reshape the landscape. NGOs instantiate one of our most cherished principles: the right to start in the middle. Not to rehearse the entire structure of the argument and its history, but to go along with it and make it operate differently, operate in *our* time. 'Starting in the middle' does not dismiss previous knowledge but contemporises it, making it a subject of contemporary engagements and imperatives. If, in a conventional cultural institution, historical exhibitions attest to that which took place by documenting and exposing it, in emergent cultural institutions that operate similarly to NGOs, the effort to work with past archives might start from present issues: the demise of

² Michel Feher "The Politics of the Governed" in *Non Governmental Politics*, 2007, MIT.

funding structures that were available, urban spaces that could be inhabited, or political communities that were active.³

Zaides works under the rubric of “Documentary Choreography”.⁴ This term refers to a type of choreographic work that incorporates documents (such as interviews, testimonies, video materials, archival information, etc.) as sources of factual information which can be used to question and intervene in social and political realities. By integrating these documents with embodied practices, documentary choreography aims to transcend the boundaries of the artistic field and engage with the actual political realm.⁵



Arkadi Zaides, *The Cloud* 2024, photo: Giuseppe Follacchio

³ Irit Rogoff, “Starting in the Middle: NGOs and Emergent Forms for Cultural Institutions” in *Public Servants, Art and the Crisis of the Common Good*, eds. Jackson, Burton and Willisdon, MIT, 2015.

⁴ “Towards Documentary Choreography - Intermedial Approaches in Working with Extra-Aesthetic Materials” is the title of Arkadi Zaides’ PhD.

⁵ <https://arkadizaides.com/>

The Cloud (2024) focuses on the clean-up of the toxic nuclear waste cloud that descended on the region of Chernobyl after the explosion of the nuclear power reactor there in 1986. At its heart is footage taken of the actual clean-up squad, ill-equipped with shoddy PPE, a lack of knowledge of the actual dangers and consequences of what they were engaging in, and the eventual death of the entire squad from radiation poisoning. The materials of the piece weave together some of Zaides' own history having been born there, connection to old school friends and family members who, unlike him, remained. The men who have been recruited and so ill-equipped are compensated with valiant rhetoric of their heroism and how valued they are by the State. The first-hand testimonials by friends and family reveal the shocking circumstances of asking people to knowingly sacrifice their lives without ensuring their safety all the while placating them with meaningless heroic rhetoric. The personal memories of life there and the insights provided in conversations with old friends made more poignant by their cautious and careful tones and the full recognition of complicity. The found footage of the clean-up squad and their commanders is then run through an AI program that distorts and twists the images giving them the sense of underwater ballet. The actual meltdown that we know was what happened in Chernobyl now takes place before our eyes through the program. As Zaides says, "*This process of contemporary technological irradiation initiates a chain reaction of uncontrollable symbolic mutations that uncannily resembles another process that marks a critical point in the unfolding of modernity: the emergence of nuclear energy*". It's a devastating work. Not so much because we know the fate of the protagonists but because we understand the folly of political rhetoric, its lures, its betrayals. We have all experienced it. The documentary footage is full, of seeing through something and of choosing to stick with it. An entire emotional range of growing up with a fervent political ideology, accepting it or rejecting it maps out on the landscape of the nuclear disaster and its aftermath. This is research as affective resonance, which can tell a historical narrative and personal struggles and can set up sadness as concrete, as the documentation of many layers of loss.

Even more invested in an investigation of gestural codes, and not just rhetoric, is *Archive* (2014), a work in collaboration with 'B'Tselem: Israeli Information Center for Human Rights in the Occupied Territories' who, since 2007, have distributed cameras to Palestinians living

on the occupied West Bank to document human rights violations against them. Zaides projects these films on the wall of the gallery or the theatre space and then emulates some of the body language and gestures of the perpetrators of these atrocities. He studies gestural codes of violence, emulating them, probing the certainties of being swept up in some self-



Arkadi Zaides, *Archive*, 2014, photo: Gadi Dagon

justifying narrative that elicits such terrorising violence.⁶ We are aware of the political facts: of the violence of the settlers, of the IDF army turning a blind eye, of the judicial system which shamefully caters to their demands and bows to their deterministic and messianic political rhetoric. But having it unpacked in front of our eyes as gestural codes moves it beyond what we know, beyond the economies of human rights violations and their adjudication. It begins to excavate what has been worrying the critics of occupation and

⁶ The project has two iterations, “Capture Practice”, a video installation and “Archive” a live performance. Both works stem from the same research and premiered in 2014.

<https://arkadizaides.com/capture-practice>

<https://arkadizaides.com/archive>

militarism in Israel for decades – regarding how exactly the corrupting power of domination operates and spreads. It brings to mind settlers with sub-machine guns at their feet sitting in cafes in the main cities, of strutting officials and symbolic ceremonies – the casual inscription of these gestural codes into every facet of daily life among the Israeli population. Framed by a gallery space that magnifies every minute movement into a symbolic tapestry which we might interpret – its ominous potential is equally magnified. The balletic extraction of partial moves making one realise that we haven't been paying attention to how others move around us, haven't done the work of reading our surroundings.

While Zaides terms his work 'Documentary Choreography', the more I saw the more it seemed to be about an initial collaboration with other bodies only to realise how short such documentation falls of establishing the deep meanings, the constancy of the heritages, the gestures in our lives. This is I think a form of 'Thrumming with Knowledge' – an invocation that knows how to start and then rather than summarise leaves us in a state of inhabiting, immersed in a problematic space.

The final project I want to mention is *Necropolis* for which Zaides has won several prizes and is probably best known. Again, it is a collaboration with an NGO: "*Since 1993, UNITED for Intercultural Action, a network of hundreds of anti-racist organizations from all over Europe, has been compiling a list of refugees and migrants who lost their lives on their way to the continent. As of June 2024, when the latest updated version was released, the list included information on 60,620 reported deaths. The total toll is certainly much higher, as many people are neither found nor registered. When scrolling through the many pages of the list one cannot ignore the fact that only a very small number of the deceased are mentioned by name, leaving the vast majority without identifying details.*"⁷

⁷ <https://arkadizaides.com/necropolis>



Arkadi Zaides, *Necropolis*, 2021, photo: Institut des Croisements

Zaides and his team have taken on a forensic methodology to bring together as much of the known information on the bodies of this battalion of the dead that hovers at the gates of Europe. They identify locations of burial sites when these are on land and embark on pilgrimage to these, using GPS to track movement and determine burial sites and collating details of disaster sites where migrants have died while approaching the continent. They have not only developed investigative protocols for naming some few of these, identifying and locating the dead, but also for exhibiting the simulacra of a body, immersed in water, that is exhibited where the work is shown. What arises is a shift from a population rallied by fear of being invaded, of being besieged by those who do not have the inherent right to be there, to one that is haunted by those whose desire to be there has been silenced.

These projects inhabit the ‘aftermaths’ of official criminality, the ones that do not release us, that demand that we know differently. That shed the metrics of data as proof to create

the thick, textured ‘atmospheres’ of our daily lives that thrum with knowledges beneath the surface. Bruno Latour who coined the term ‘Atmospheres of Democracy’ has credited philosopher Peter Sloterdijk with its articulation: “In a series of daring books, the German Philosopher Peter Sloterdijk has taken a new approach by stressing the importance of atmospheric conditions on our lives. In what amounts to a sort of expanded meteorology, he argues that philosophers have been far too obsessed with objects and subjects and not enough with air conditioning. Envelopes, spheres, skins, ambiences: these are the real ‘conditions of possibility’ that philosophy has vainly attempted to dig out of totally inaccessible infrastructures”⁸

Zaides has given me a new understanding of what “Thrumming with Knowledge” can be: affective residues that change an atmosphere and in which we swim against water, distinguishing hums and vibrations, not spinning back to their source but marking their constant presence. It has shown me the degree to which research can start with the facts and move on to other promising registers. In practice-based research across its entire range, knowledge actualises rather than clarifies. And we emerge as far less limited than we think – we inhabit everything.

*Asking my friend Adrian Heathfield if Thrumming was spelt with 1 or 2 Ms, he replied ‘wouldn’t it be fabulous if it were 3 Ms?’ and so now it is.

⁸ Bruno Latour, [chrome-extension://efaidnbmnnnibpcajpcgiclfndmkaj/https://cast.b-ap.net/wp-content/uploads/sites/18/2009/09/Latour.pdf](https://cast.b-ap.net/wp-content/uploads/sites/18/2009/09/Latour.pdf). page 1.