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# Choreographing Violence

## Arkadi Zaides's Archive

**Ruthie Abeliovich**

Israeli choreographer Arkadi Zaides's solo dance performance *Archive* investigates the somatic impact of transgressions performed daily in the West Bank by Israeli fundamentalist settlers against Palestinians. The performance, which premiered at Festival d'Avignon in July 2014, activates the enduring habits of Israeli violence by weaving together two concurrent threads: video projections from an archive assembled by B'Tselem,<sup>1</sup> an organization that documents human rights violations in the occupied territories, and Zaides's live performance in which he embodies the physical and vocal gestures in the video in order to re-present the Israeli aggressive position.<sup>2</sup> While *Archive* has been performed in different venues around the world,<sup>3</sup> it generates the most politically charged response when performed for an Israeli audience. The controversy around this work recently reached a peak when 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.<sup>4</sup>

The hour-long performance begins with Zaides casually situating the event:

My name is Arkadi Zaides. I am a choreographer. I'm Israeli. For the past fifteen years I've been living in Tel Aviv. The West Bank is 20km away from Tel Aviv. The materials you are about to watch were filmed in the West Bank. All the people you will see in the clips are Israeli. Like me. The video clips were selected from an archive of an organization named B'Tselem, the Israeli Information Center for Human Rights in the Occupied Territories. (Zaides 2015)

The proximity of Tel Aviv to the West Bank underscores the apparent rupture between the ongoing violence happening in close vicinity to the performance venue, and the mediated position necessary for most Israelis to observe the conflict. As a result of movement restrictions and spatial separations imposed on Palestinians and Israelis, there is a tendency for uninvolved segments of Israeli society to belittle or ignore human rights violations occurring daily in the occupied territories. Zaides's performance challenges this position by embodying the Israeli violence in the videos and presenting it to his audience. By observing his body in performance, Israeli spectators sense the somatic impact of such actions and are

1. For more information on B'Tselem's activity, see the organization's website: [www.btselem.org](http://www.btselem.org).

2. The *Archive* materials in this performance 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, Abd al-Karim J'abri, Issa 'Amro, Ahmad Jundiye, Nasser Harizat, Abu Sa'ifan, Oren Yakobovich, and Nayel Najjar.

3. *Archive* has been performed in venues such as: Festival d'Avignon, France, July 2014; Théâtre National de Chaillot, France, January 2015; CDC Toulouse, France, February 2015; CNDC Angers, France, February 2015; The Off Broadway Theater, Yale University, New Haven, USA, March 2015; MITsp, Itau Cultural, São Paulo, Brazil, March 2015; Kunstenfestivaldesarts, Brussels, Belgium, May 2015; Festival Transamériques, Montreal, Canada, May 2015; Potsdamer Tanztage, Fabrik Potsdam, Germany, May 2015.

4. For a report on a right-wing extremist protest opposing Zaides's performances, see Amir and Eidelman (2014).

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asked to consider the corporal resonance of this ongoing violence happening in close proximity.

The B'Tselem videos Zaides pre-selected for the performances were filmed by Palestinians and depict Israelis enacting violence against Palestinian people, lands, and property. They were assembled in the context of the project “Armed with Cameras,” in which home-video cameras were distributed to Palestinians—none of them professional photographers—who volunteered to document their daily routines under the Israeli occupation. This archival project exposes the wider public to everyday human rights violations. The scenes depict the pastoral rural landscape around Nablus and Ramallah as battlefields, in which fundamentalist settlers execute acts such as burning farmlands, uprooting olive trees, vandalizing Palestinian property, verbal harassment, and stone-throwing assaults. At times the documented violence is aimed at the border police forces that attempt to defend the Palestinians against acts of transgression. Such violence is used in order to reinforce Israeli settlements at the expense of the Palestinian capacity to develop socially and economically.

The political aspects of Zaides’s performance resonate in the Hebrew word *b’tselem*, which literally means “in the image of.” This word derives from the Hebrew root “zlm” (נָזַל), which also refers to the act of photographing. The two aspects of the word *b’tselem* are manifested in Zaides’s performed imita-

tions of the Israelis in the video images. He first establishes his staged choreography by systematically copying the perpetrators’ gestures as filmed by the Palestinian camera operators. Standing in front of the screen and holding the video’s remote control, Zaides regulates the changing stream of short clips. Often with his back to the audience, he stands still as he observes the perpetrators in action in each new scene. Occasionally, he pauses the clips to scrutinize the poses shown in them, rewinding them back and forth at different speeds to examine the details that form the perpetrators’ actions. In one instance, he screens a scene of Israeli settlers fighting border police forces that prevent the settlers from intruding on the Palestinian village. Zaides freezes the clip at a particularly tenuous moment—when the policeman is dragging a settler by his arms toward his arrest. Zaides imitates the posture of the offending settler by standing with his legs spread apart and his right knee bent in order to balance in front of the screen, thus doubling the effect of the image. He then changes the perspective from which this body posture is seen by altering its angle: lying down, from the front, and from the back.

At other points in the performance Zaides turns off the video and performs a sequence of movements in a kind of kinetic resonance to the documented events just viewed. The effect is of further aligning his presence with that of the perpetrators. At one point, a clip shows

Israeli settlers scattering a flock of sheep in a rural landscape, dominated by the rhythmically ringing bells tied to the animals. Within this soundscape, the Israeli settlers disperse the herd by moving in large, assertive steps, waving their arms and producing vocal interjections that encourage the sheep’s movements. Onstage, Zaides imitates these acts in sync with the video projection, using the sounds from the video as the soundtrack for his live performance. Following this, he shuts down the video clips but keeps the sound going and uses the movements he has extracted to choreograph his onstage actions.



Figure 1. Arkadi Zaides in his piece *Archive*, imitating a settler banging on a door, positioned from the perspective of the photographer. Tmuna Theatre, Tel Aviv, June 2015. (Photo by Ronen Guter)

With the images now turned off, the sounds of the perpetrators become an aural repository that insinuates the violence from which it was extracted.

The video clips thus provide a movement system that Zaides uses to develop his onstage choreography and sound score. He performs the vocal and physical images captured by the Palestinian camera operators as if they were an organized movement scheme; they become the repeated choreography of his performance. However, the perceptual discrepancy between his live acts onstage and their screened documentation emphasizes the multiple perspectives that are at play in this work: the Palestinian point of view that is captured in the video; Zaides's live imitation of the depicted perpetrators; and the audience point of view, which attempts to reconcile both the screened footage and Zaides's live interventions in the clips.

The configuration of these multiple perspectives in the performance brings to mind the kind of choreographic ordering and movement restrictions imposed by Israeli forces on Palestinians in the West Bank. While Zaides is moving freely on the stage, the audience members, like many Palestinians, are restricted: they are confined to their seats. Further, the amateur quality of the video clips, evident in the spontaneous, jittery, tilting camera, offer a counterposition to Zaides's acts of imitation. While Zaides disciplines his movements by following the body gestures of the perpetrators captured in the video clips, the nonprofessional, non-prescriptive movements of the camera operators, together with the surrounding sounds they coincidentally recorded, simultaneously stage a set of gestures free of the performance's dictated imperatives. By displaying the video archive as itself a gestural lexicon, and by embodying those bodily gestures, Zaides shows how social relations are articulated and re-animated by combining corporeal knowledge and technological manipulation. This knowledge is produced by the tension between the live performance and the recorded documentation, the choreographed movements and the spontaneous camera tilting.

Much like the visual screening, the soundtrack designed by Tom Tlalim reflects the two modes of presence that are at play in

this performance. The videos contain sounds recorded by the Palestinian camera operators that insinuate their proximity to the documented incidents. When the camera operators stand far from the events they document, only the voices and sounds surrounding them are heard. These include colloquial speech, as well as screams, loud exclamations, animal yowls, and gunshots. Occasionally the camera captures both the voices of the perpetrators and the sounds surrounding the camera operator.

Onstage, however, Zaides imitates only the voices of the Israeli perpetrators. Then, at a certain point in the performance, he begins to record his imitations of the perpetrators voices, and later on he samples these recorded voices into repetitive rhythmic patterns that accompany his stage performance. The duplication of gestures—both live and in the screened version from which they derive—portrays the archive as dynamic and constantly subject to translation and thus to transformation by interpretation. Within this scheme, Zaides functions as an agent for change. He both imitates and animates the video documentation, bringing it into the realm of bodily knowledge. The two modes of presence in this performance—the video archive and the live embodied gestures—thus convey a profound tension between controlling structures and ways of resisting them. The performance transforms this particular choreography of violence into a set of movements that proliferate beyond the political conditions in which they occurred.

## Transforming the Archive

The political framework of this performance makes clear how Zaides's choreography operates as an "apparatus of capture." André Lepecki explains that choreography as an apparatus of capture "foregrounds perception as always tied to modes of power that distribute and assign to things visibility or invisibility, significance or insignificance" (2007:120). Lepecki refers to the way choreography, as a set of predetermined steps and gestures, reflects political systems that pursue movement control. However, there are ways to oppose the implementation of control-based movement systems. Lepecki proposes that "danced techniques of freedom suggest choreography as



Figure 2. Onstage, Arkadi Zaides imitates the videoed actions of the settlers, wearing the keffiyeh he has fashioned from his shirt. *Tmuna Theatre, Tel Aviv, June 2015. (Photo by Ronen Guter)*

technology for inventing movements of freedom” (2013:22). Thus, experimenting with given structures of programmed movement and reconstructing them into multiple gestures enacts forms of resistance to political affirmation.

While Zaides’s dance practice manifests structures of movement that take form in Israel’s occupation of the West Bank, he also intervenes in this system of power by diverging from the score that the video archive imposes. By doing so he represents a different mode of participation in the political order of the occupation. Zaides experiments with the movements he imitates: he performs the poses by changing his position, and thus the perspective from which they are viewed; he also enacts the gestures at different paces, and configures them into a variety of compositional sequences. As Zaides takes control over the gestures’ appearances and re-appearances during the performance, the movements he has extracted from the archive are embodied and further subjected to his authority. The gestures from the clips become assimilated as an integral part of his body language and also his understanding of the archive of violence based in this political situation. The audience is further implicated in this archival revision; the performance requires them to address the choreography of the occupation rather than keep it at a distance.

For instance, in one video clip a group of settlers gather on a rural hill. Zaides focuses his attention on the physical attitude of one settler whose face is masked by his T-shirt. Zaides

imitates him by covering his face with his T-shirt, placing his arms on his hips, and balancing his body in order to match the projected video backdrop. By echoing the settler’s body posture, Zaides follows the somatic features of the kinetic system of violence such acts of aggression come to generate. This scene and others underscore the significance of the Palestinian point of view.

However, no imitated gesture should be taken at face value, and Zaides’s acts are clearly different from their screened models. By

embodying and manipulating the body positions of the perpetrators shown in the footage, imitation becomes political. While questions regarding the authenticity, reliability, or validity of B’Tselem’s video archive are avoided in this performance, Zaides takes a clear stand regarding the human rights violations he screens onstage by positioning himself in the place of



Figure 3. Arkadi Zaides facing the audience, wearing the keffiyeh he has fashioned from his shirt. *Tmuna Theatre, Tel Aviv, June 2015. (Photo by Ronen Guter)*





Figure 4. Arkadi Zaides wearing the keffiyeh he has fashioned from his shirt, with a group of settlers behind him on the screen. *Tmuna Theatre*, Tel Aviv, June 2015. (Photo by Ronen Guter)

the aggressor, thus raising issues of accountability and responsibility. The masking in the scene previously described, where the settlers cover their faces with their T-shirts, resembles the shape of a Palestinian *keffiyeh*, a well-known symbol of the Palestinian national resistance. Zaides transforms this symbol through imitation when he masks his own face with his shirt in the same manner. Zaides's imitation of an imitation displaces the live act from the documented event and critiques it, thus complicating its purely documentary function. Such repeated acts of imitation inscribe their ontological essence upon his body.

In this sense, *Archive* is a performance that endeavors to go beyond mere artistic representation: Zaides transforms the video archive from a one-sided documentary into a live dialog with multiple perspectives that carry the potential to evoke solidarity regarding the effects of the enduring conflict. He transforms the re-performed corporeal gestures to create his own political gestures in response to the violence projected on the screen.

During most of the performance, Zaides manages the archive by controlling and manipulating the stream of projected images. However, toward the end of the performance things seem to spin out of his control. At these

moments the video backdrop is turned off and the soundtrack formed by his sampled vocal imitations of the perpetrators continues to play at a higher volume. Zaides's onstage movements accelerate in speed and intensity as he strings together a selection from the gestures he previously performed into a repetitive cyclic loop of movements. Caught in a seemingly uncontrolled frenzy of vocal and physical gestures, Zaides contorts his body as though possessed by the aggressive kinetic language he has up until now carefully studied. He submits himself to his research, to the possible outcomes and consequences of embodying the perpetrators, immersed in a trance induced by the appropriated violent movements that occupy his body.

Throughout the performance, the imperatives of Zaides's imitations are relocated from the video archive to his own body and come to control his stage presence. This, as Zaides demonstrates, is how an archive develops and transforms: it has ramifications beyond the sites and the particular situations it documents. Archives are not mere records; they can be used to actively dismantle categories of victim and perpetrator, and affect the bodies of all participating subjects—willing or not. Once Zaides assimilates the gestural lexicon of violence and

transforms his body into an archive, he also can no longer remain singular in his perspective. Like the archive, he embodies multiple perspectives that reveal the social complexity of the events he performs.

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