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Dance's Posthumous Frequentations in times of compulsive enlivenment

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Dance's Posthumous Frequentations

in times of compulsive enlivenment

Paula Caspão 2020

in *Práticas de arquivo em artes performativas*. Coimbra: Imprensa da Universidade de Coimbra, 2020, pp. 149-170.

Even upon taking leave of my flesh and bones, I want to continue dancing as a ghost.

Kazuo Ohno

What kind of archive safeguards or keeps company with or “summons”, to use Chimurenga Library’s words, a past that the present hasn’t yet caught up with?

Avery F. Gordon

Something is different here than simply remembering, or a simple negotiation with “a time gone by”. Thinking through “mutually disruptive energy” implies that the bygone is not entirely gone by and the dead not completely disappeared nor lost, but also, and perhaps more complexly, the living are not entirely (or not only) live.

Rebecca Schneider

Why do we acknowledge only our textual sources but not the ground we walk, the ever-changing skies, mountains and rivers, rocks and trees, the houses we inhabit and the tools we use, not to mention the innumerable companions, both non-human animals and fellow humans, with which and with whom we share our lives?

Tim Ingold

I am preoccupied not with the virtues of getting it right but with the ethical chance that may lie within getting it wrong. What does it mean to mistake a memory, to remember by mistake, or even to remember a mistake?

Tavia Nyong’o

This piece of theory-fiction is composed of two writing-intervals between two different pictures standing for the intriguing paradoxes of “inter(in)animation”, a befriended concept that has been keeping me company since 2013, first met in *Performing Remains* (2011) by Rebecca Schneider, who traced it back to John Donne’s love poem “The Exstasie” (1633), after having first encountered it in Fred Moten’s *In the Break* (2003), and re-complicated its senses. Each writing-interval has been triggered by a piece of digitally archived work currently accessible online: 1) *Toute la Mémoire du Monde*, a well-known documentary short film by Alain Resnais (1956); 2) a semi-improvised lecture by Boris Charmatz, presented in the frame of *Storytelling in the Archives*, a Performance Forum at MoMA Live in New York (2015).

Fast Forward Rewind

Archives. Dances.

Dances And Archives. Dances Of Archives. Dances With Archives. Dances In Archives. Dances For Archives. Dances Across Archives. Dances From Archives. Dances As Archives. Dances After Archives. Dances On Archives. Dances Around Archives. Dances About Archives. Dances In Spite Of Archives. Dances Under Archives. Dances Throughout Archives. Dances Among Archives. Dances Re-thinking Archives.¹

And vice versa, all the way forward to the past, to its b-sides.

When it comes to discursive acts intended to make dances and archives twist together, the first thing that comes to mind is the way in which both fields have been changing their ways of practising and understanding themselves along a many-sided “performative turn”, which started taking place not only in the arts and in the social and human sciences, but also in the political and economic realms since the mid-twentieth century. In the meantime, a whole “performativity vocabulary” seems to have taken hold of every living (and non-living) thing on earth. Fact seems to be that archives and dances, both made of utterly conjectural activities, matters and regimes of production; both utterly collective and social (even when they are announced as deeply personal, private or solo), seem indeed to have many sites, operative agents, infrastructures and apparatus of knowledge production in common, all crucial for their entangled practices, of which: memories, movements, documents, logistics, memory-aids, study, bodies, electricity, scripts, scores, protocols, maintenance, undersea cable networks, remains, cultures, re-enactments, institutions, many pieces of research, grounds, discourses, passions, improvisations, numerous sets of furniture, desires, labour, air, “interpublic coordinations”, architectures, styles, catalogues and technologies of many kinds, to name a few.² Of late, both archive and dance have gained new theoretical and

¹ This is a warm-up exercise inspired by Rebecca Schneider’s opening of the book *Theatre & History* (2014), in which she asserts that the order of the terms matter way less than the position of mutual implication in which the “coordination conjunction” puts them, as it “falls in the middle”. According to Schneider, it is “in the middle that things often get interesting”, but it is also where things can get “sticky” and “complicated”, “awkward or confusing”, more often than not leading to “all sorts of family disputes.”

² I am referring to Shannon Jackson’s understanding of performance as an art of “interpublic coordination”, in the sense that “no one can ever fully go it alone”; rather, performance always inter-dependes on the support of a myriad of

performative status, and both have been acknowledged as relevant cross-critical sites of epistemological experimentation and potential social change. All gone through their own performative turns, all time-based, all live now. Now what?

Dead or alive, think by the middle.

Re-member, said she, it's all about "how to work the trap one is inevitably in".³

organisational infrastructures, including state institutions of management and governance (*Social Works: Performing Arts, Supporting Publics*, 2011: 9).

³ Quoting Judith Butler, as quoted by Maggie Nelson, in her genre-bending "autotheory" memoir, *The Argonauts* (2015).



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Inter(in)animation #1: A posthumous encounter between Alain Resnais and Rebecca Schneider, with a large team of assistants.

Go to: *Toute la Mémoire du Monde*, by Alain Resnais (1956).

Here: <https://www.criterion.com/current/posts/2787-alain-resnais-toute-la-m-moire-du-monde>

Inter(in)animation #1 is a posthumous encounter between the somewhat science-fictional dramatization of the archive conveyed in the documentary *Toute la mémoire du monde* (1956) and the “performative bases of the archive” that Rebecca Schneider so compellingly articulated in *Performing Remains* (2011), aka the archive’s best kept “social secret” (Schneider, 2011: 106).⁴ That archives partake in the common performative condition that

⁴ *Toute la mémoire du monde* is a short documentary film about the Bibliothèque Nationale in Paris. Alan Resnais’ script counted with literary collaborator Remo Forlani, who noted in his memoir that the script was largely rewritten by another cool guy: Chris Marker (Paris: Denoël, 2003: 289-290). Marker appears as “Chris and Magic Marker” in the credits, don’t miss it. To know more about the emergence of the project, its conditions of production and the controversy about the

concerns every living and dead thing in this world – i.e. the condition of being continuously and inescapably implicated in paradoxical quasi-choreographic social forces of co-constitution and co-mobilisation, of cultural location and dislocation (to name a few) – should come as no surprise these days. Not least because there is burning evidence we are living in the “age of performance”, if we acknowledge the expanding “performance ethos” that predominates in the contemporary artistic and cultural landscape, one in which all parts are encouraged to act, experience, try out, invent, embody and perform their most creative and (you wish!) participatory selves and behaviours (Lepecki, 2016; Jackson, 2014; Kunst, 2015). Not least because a major epistemological shift that came to be historicized as “performative turn” has now settled in many human and social sciences, most significantly in critical theory, cultural and postcolonial studies, but also in science studies. Yet the constitutive performativity of the archive I am trying to reach toward here, as I watch and re-watch the performative tangle(s) of the archive that *Toute la mémoire du monde* cinematographically enacts, appears to me as considerably older and more relevant to rethink the labour of historicity at stake in my performative self, one that may be calling for response-abilities other than the ones demanded by the aforementioned performative turn and its ambivalent full bloom into the age and ethos of performance.

It’s only at a very distracted first sight that *Toute la mémoire du monde* would seem to comply with the self-laudatory agenda of this kind of institutional films. With camera movements drifting across the theatricality of the very architecture of the Bibliothèque Nationale de France in Paris, it takes us into the daily swarm of microscopic archival work in the making, with all the social *noise* it entails. In ironic oscillation between macroscopic planes of speculation on the utopia of total memory (by means of total knowledge, key to universal happiness, if only), the film opens with the very gaze of the camera, then the ears of the sound recorder directed at the spectator. The appearance of the two (then) technological memory supports par excellence immediately engages the spectator into the theatricality of the very documentary. A complicity carefully arranged between the daily drama of archival domiciliation it depicts and the contagious musical drama it acts out: two

result, see Alain Carou, *Toute la mémoire du monde: entre la commande et l’utopie* (2007), online: <https://journals.openedition.org/1895/1062> (accessed in February 2020).

theatricalities in the making, explicitly and promiscuously exchanging frequencies, frequentations and in-fluencies.

In this, *Toute la mémoire du monde* appears to me as a critical cinematographic meditation both on the diversity of knowledge(s) and affects implicated in the making of archives and in the uses of (the encounters with) documents. For it clearly approaches the national archive in case not as a site of unproblematic knowledge preservation and retrieval or as a mere monument of the imperial state apparatus it belongs to. Staging the peculiar devices and gestures of placement, circulation, and encounter at the core of the Bibliothèque Nationale de France, it approaches it first and foremost as a slippery site of collective knowledge production, showing that it also constitutes a privileged site for critical state ethnographies, admitted that imperial archives are “in their own right, technologies that bolstered the production of those states themselves” (Stoler, 2002: 87-98).

Let’s take a look at *Toute la mémoire du monde*. Or rather, let’s also lend a closer ear to its soundscapes (soundtrack music by Maurice Jarre and Delerue; voice off by Jacques Dumesnil). First together, then separately. I recommend that you watch it at least three times before (or after) you have read the following lines: the first one just as it is; the second one listening to the sound only; the third one with no sound, only image.

Now let’s go back to sound and stick with Jacques Dumesnil at three different moments of his vocal performance (albeit by means of interposed transcribed excerpts):

1

Faced with these bulging repositories, men fear being engulfed by this multitude of writings, by this crowd of words. To safeguard their freedom, they build fortresses.

In Paris, it’s at the National Library that words are imprisoned. [...] An ever-changing show takes place in the periodicals reading room.

The suspending constellation performed and ritualized by the archive on the pretext of protecting the citizens from overspill and loss is not only made to protect them from the continuous performative erring of the archive; it’s also made to protect them from their past, to ensure that the past stays past. This is the place where crowds of words are

imprisoned, the voice off says. This *sentence* opens onto an imagery of Sing Sing that will resonate for the whole duration of the film, along with the implicit caricature of the place as a kind of “*Grand Magasin des Connaissances humaines*” or “*distributeur automatique de connaissance*”, an idea that inspired Resnais, but was less dear to the institution, whose administrator tried to dissuade him from exploring the nuance (Carou, 2007: 125, 133). The Bibliothèque Nationale is an archive is a library is a museum is a prison is a store is a prison is a store is a prison is a store is a store is a store. In all cases, the paradox comes to the fore: it’s a place of quasi-choreographically regulated exchange and value production, nevertheless doomed to miss many points, fail many missions, misfire many performances. As the documentary suggests later on, words (or any other supposedly stable entities for that matter) are exactly that which never stays given, placed or put, never exactly where they have been nominated to take place and remain.⁵ Rather, they move and leak into and out of one another, into and out of many places, even when only across the hyper ruled trans-generational encounters that most institutional archives allow for.

Resnais cinematographic documentary features the archive as “a slow battle”, a problematic store and prison, both process and subject in its own right. A practice rather than a thing; a practice rather than the house of a retrievable past. A wink to the performativity of culture, and to the performativity of archived and archival knowledge in particular, in the sense that it portrays them as both objects and subjects of a “gradual, compelling formation of acts”, a lively circumstance “taking shape in the crossroads of real life”, as a social process rather than as a stable identity, one that is “not finished yet” (Bala, 2013: 12-21), one that will never be finished. In this, *Toute la mémoire* incites to re-configure the conceptions and uses of the archive, as it does not bypass its conventions but accurately dramatizes the concrete practices that “make up its unspoken order, its rubrics of organization, its rules of placement and reference” (Stoler, 2002: 103). It pre-figures what Foucault will have warned in a ground-breaking manner back (and forward) in the 1970s, and many authors have

⁵ I am implicitly waving at Rebecca Schneider’s reminder, that in *Archive Fever* (1995) Derrida was concerned to emphasize that what is given to the archive is not the usual distinction between supposedly stable entities as discursive documents and less stable supposedly disappearing embodied matters, but “a matter of ‘topology’, by which he means placedness, givenness, *nomination* to remain. That which is *not* so nominated, not given to the archive to remain is – *whether discursive or not* – given to disappear by virtue of a social mandate. It is not discursivity on the one hand and performance on the other that constructs the privilege of the archive, but, for Derrida, ‘*patriarchic*’ habits of nomination and consignment [domiciliation, house arrest] that police ways of knowing.” (2011: 107). Heike Roms (2014) also refers to the archive as a set of particular modes of locating, rather than a location.

extensively echoed throughout the past decades (Stoler, 2002; Lepecki, 2010; Azoulay, 2012 – to name the few assisting me here so far): that the archive is neither the total sum of all texts that a culture preserves nor the institutions that provide their preservation, but rather the “system of statements” entailing a set of “rules of practice” that shape the formation of the specific regularities, the zones of more or less sedimentation of what can and cannot be said, in a specific time and place (Foucault, 1972: 79-134).

Va savoir pourquoi, our discursive and iconographic imaginaries of the archive (the ones that still surreptitiously rule the ways we think we know what we know about it) keep on privileging bodiless aseptic universes based upon the reductive equation of preservation and cancellation. Ariella Azoulay pinpoints the fact that much of the elaborate literature that has been written on archives (and, to a certain extent, goes on tripping the tongues of many) often resorts to the concept of *Aufhebung* to convey archival endeavours, or rather to do away with “archival work”.⁶ To this abstract chimera, Azoulay opposes a material understanding of archives that convokes both the presence of those who make it and of those who use it (“those who come to leaf through”). Since anyone who has ever followed the steps, gestures and dilemmas of those who spend many hours of their lives working and studying in archives, occupying positions that give them different powers and responsibilities, which both authorize and commit them to the hard labour of preserving and exposing materials, she observes, will “immediately note that the series of actions, situations and emotions experienced thereby cannot be exhausted by the opposition between keeping and putting away, preservation and cancellation” (Azoulay 2012).

The impressive gesture of *Toute la mémoire du monde* is not only, to my mind, the fact of entering the archive as it does, passing through and across so many doors and thresholds, pausing at each single part and piece of the process. It is also the fact that it depicts both the practices and the human and non-human agents implicated in the “ever-changing show” it constitutes day by day and night – an experience long enough prevented by the “archons of

⁶ Azoulay gives an example of this discursive trope taken from an essay by Ignaz Cassar: “To archive is to put away, to shelter, to keep [...] The modality of *Aufhebung*, conventionally translated into English as ‘sublation’, ushers us into the spaces of the archive. The polysemic of the *Aufhebung* implies both preservation and cancellation.” (“Photoworks”, *Philosophy of Photography*. Vol. 1, no. 2, 2010: 202). As for the iconographic side of the trope, Azoulay gives the example of a picture by Patrick Tournéboeuf (Archives Nationales, Paris, 2004), emblematic of the tendency to perpetuate the depiction of archives as empty “spaces devoid of humans that converge into a vanishing point in eternity” (Azoulay, 2012).

the archive” – and in so doing points to the archive’s own theatrical and choreographic nuances. Having been shot back in the 1950s, it appears as an outstanding pre-figuration of the conjunction between the archival and the performative turns that have been unfolding throughout the last two decades in the arts and in archives alike. This circumstance started to allow new archival contracts, encounters and all sorts of provisional deals and “claims to practice” the archive “as a particular kind of location where complex subjectivities and working relationships are created through the act of researching” (Roms, 2014), different from “the classical habitus of a historian tracing the past” (Azoulay, 2012). Brought in by researchers and artists alike, often at the crossroads of artistic practices with critical theory, performance and science studies, black and post-colonial studies, women and gender studies, the claim to practice has also been fostered by passionate archivists and conservators themselves. These new experimental forms of dealing with archives, which include individual initiatives to invent non-existent or missing archives, are helping to stir new senses of the entanglements of historicity and interdependency we are made of.⁷

Interestingly, Azoulay calls attention to the fact that the “material archive” – the one I see at work in *Toute la mémoire du monde* – is the one in which citizen Derrida couldn’t really enter in *Mal d’Archive* (1995). Trapped outside by the law of the archive’s sentries he critically addresses, despite having re-conceptualized the archive in a way that significantly rewires its logic as the very theatrical trouble of a “a contract *across* time” (Schneider, 2011: 109): “a question of the future, the question of the future itself, the question of a response, of a promise and of a responsibility for tomorrow” (Derrida, 1995: 36).

2

But while this slow battle against death goes on, requests go out. Messages dart endlessly through the maze of these storehouses [“magasins”, whose literal translation would be

⁷ To give only one example out of many, I am thinking of Chimurenga Library (started in 2009), “an ongoing invention into knowledge production and the archive that seeks to re-imagine the library as a laboratory for extended curiosity, new adventures, critical thinking, daydreaming, socio-political involvement, partying and random perusal. Curated by Chimurenga, it offers an opportunity to investigate the library and the archive as conceptual and physical spaces in which memories are preserved and history decided, and to reactivate them”. Chimurenga Library was brought to my attention through Avery F. Gordon’s book *The Hawthorn Archive: Letters from the Utopian Margins* (2018). To know more about Gordon’s Hawthorn project, see the online interview with Krystian Woznicki, “Unshrinking the World” (2019): <https://transversal.at/blog/unshrinking-the-world> (accessed in February 2020).

“shops”, is the world employed in French]. Once the book is found, a piece of paper takes its place – its ghost. [the book goes a long way, from its assigned place to the reading room where it will encounter its reader] One last control to check the identity of the book against the request ticket. And now the book marches on toward an imaginary boundary, more significant in its life than passing through the looking glass. It’s no longer the same book. Just a while ago, it was part of a universal, abstract, indifferent memory, where all the books were equal, together basked in attention as tenderly distant as that shown by God to men. And all of a sudden it’s been chosen, picked out and preferred over others, indispensable to its reader, torn from its galaxy to feed these paper-crunching pseudo-insects, irreparably different from the true insects in that each of them is bound to its own distinct concern.

In the reading room of Bibliothèque Nationale de France in Paris, the scene of the highly scripted encounter between the (choreographed) free visitors and the (choreographed) imprisoned books is clearly a scene of “inter(in)animation of the live and the archived” (Schneider, 2011: 108). Pushing the inter(in)animation further into the room I am sitting in now, the reading room of *Toute la mémoire du monde* has awoken an excerpt from the novel *History of the Siege of Lisbon*, by Saramago (1989), which specifically refers to the radical historicity of books and their (mis)encounters with readers:

Anyway, until that day arrives, the books are here like a pulsating galaxy, and the words inside them are another cosmic dust floating around, waiting for the gaze that will fix them in one sense or search for a new meaning in them, because just as the explanations of the universe change, so too the sentence that had previously seemed immutable forever suddenly offers another interpretation, the possibility of a latent contradiction, the evidence of its own error (Saramago, 1989: 26).

An excerpt that poetically resonates with the concept of genealogy outlined by Foucault (1971), which refigures interpretation as a deferring theatrical event of “(re)production”, always “staged, enacted, re-enacted”, that constitutes the very “stage of historical process” (Schneider, 2011: 18). As it meticulously and inexhaustibly operates “on a field of patient entangled and confused parchments, on documents that have been scratched over and recopied many times”, genealogy and the (always collective) trans-formation of senses it produces is what we have as documentary form of any process of historical making (Foucault, 1977: 139).

The reading room, the moments when the prisoners get to be visited by the paper chewers (and reciprocally get to visit their visitor-chewers' specific concerns and fields of knowledge) is where we see there can be "no fixity, no complete arrest, even in the gentlest bed of the archive". Since "texts too, take place in the deferred *live* space of their encounter" (Schneider, 2011: 106). As such, the archive can never be, has never been "a place of dead letters" (Azoulay, 2012) but a place of affect, and of "affect *as* inquiry" (Schneider *ibid.*: 2). Think of how "architectures of access (the physical aspects of books, bookcases, glass display cases, or even the request desk at an archive) place us in particular experiential relations to knowledge" that necessarily also "affect the knowledge imparted" (Schneider, *ibid.*: 104), but also of the "withheld rage, suffocation, nausea, anger, frustration, fright, horror and helplessness, no less than the hope or passion reported by those infected with archive fever" (Azoulay, 2012) that comes with experiencing the (still deeply embedded) colonialist politics of institutional archives and their archiving states, or the persistent ways in which archives keep on concealing their performances of cancellation of the past as past, or at the way the performances of access they provide are scripted as real choreographies of obstacles. It is important to take note that if the archive can and has to be resituated "as *also* part of an embodied repertoire", that is to say as "a set of live practices of access, given to take place in a house (the literal archive), built for live encounter with privileged remains", it cannot be ignored that in the archive the architectures and protocols that regulate the logistics of bodily encounters paradoxically script the body as constantly disappearing: it has to go (or be erased), even if it is to return again and again (Schneider, 2011: 108). So the right to access the archive that has always been scripted in its very logic goes hand in hand with the mechanisms that determine the rhythms and the kinds of intermediating aids with the double function of assisting and supporting the visitors' visit, but also to keep them at a certain distance from what they want to visit – common silent rooms, catalogues and cards, indexes, tables, lamps, timetables, computers, photographic and recording devices, sometimes masks, gloves or "even sponges over which crumbling papers must be placed", as Azoulay reminds us. What we see in the reading room of *Toute la mémoire du monde* is exactly that sort of governance and supervision of the visitors' bodily movements and positions. The way "the archive places obstacles in our way" expresses,

according to Azoulay, “the clear recognition of the fact that our right as citizens to that which is stored therein exceeds the limited access we are allowed”.

Now if books and documents themselves, even the ones that may have been dulled by the dust of forgotten or locked storehouses for long periods of time, “necessarily meet bodies” one day or another, even if for limited and surveilled amounts of time, they must be taken as radically engaged “in the repetition and revision, the citing and becoming that is *also* choreography, orature, song” (Schneider, 2011: 106). For they too, from place to place and hand to hand, “take place in the deferred *live* space of their encounter”, given to all sorts of errors of re-writing, re-punctuation, re-pronunciation. The dislocations and re-placements that archives, texts, documents and bodies are inevitably entangled in expose the social secret carefully and strategically propped by the imperial patriarchic archive, namely that “the distinction [between archive and performance] is bogus” (Schneider, *ibid.*), and “that archives too are houses of the theatrical slip and slide, the error-riddled tendencies of the live” (*ibid.*).

Yet an error can be an “ethical chance”, as Tavia Nyong’o pointed out (Nyong’o, 2009: 136). A kind of “counter-memory” (Schneider, 2011: 105) as the one we can find in *History of the Siege of Lisbon*. In this novel, proof-reader of history books Raimundo, a trusted rigorous professional, wittily described as a real “expert in *deleaturs*”, listened to the ethical fever that came over him and gave him the courage to act out an experimental gesture of re-writing the officialised narrative of a supposedly given (cancelled) past – as if by mistake. As the narrator ironically concludes, proven it came to be, “that the proof-reader was mistaken, that if he was not mistaken he was confused, if he was not confused he was imagining things, but let them who have never erred, been confused or imagined things, throw the first stone”. After all, “to err” is what humans do, lest they are not human (Saramago, 1989: 24, 25).

I have just realized another posthumous encounter seems to have been arranged in the temporal folds of these pages, this time between Saramago, Schneider and Nyong’o. Since this is where we have landed, I would like to extend the conversation to Fred Moten, who writes about “the internal and external sociality of things-in-themselveslessness”, not

exactly because there wouldn't be "such a thing as things-in-themselves", but because whatever they may be, things are always "other than themselves" (Moten, 2015: X). For Schneider's conversation about "the trip of the eyes" in the process of reading, and of "the trip of the tongue as it mouths" (Schneider, 2011: 106) to humidify the words it tastes, not only resonates back and forward and to the sides with Resnais' scene of book chewers in *Toute la mémoire du monde*; it also makes me recall and recompose a moment of the spring 2018, when I heard Fred Moten mention the interest there may be in some practices of "re-vision" (scribbled in my notebook of that period). Not exactly as a conventional expert in *deleaturs* would practice it, i.e. the one that practices correction as a return to what is generally understood as "the right way to be" in a given circumstance, the one that is proud to be able to put things back on their right tracks and assigned places; rather, like feverish citizens reclaiming their right to experiment with the capacities of *deleaturs*, like Raimundo. Re-vision then as something we can practice when the tongue or foot or hand trips and turns, allowing us to find the accident (or be found by it) in any ongoing (hi)story: re-vision not as correction then, but as a practice of wronging the "wrong" to its limits, a detoured queered *deleatur*. To explore the capacities of what may (only) arrive by mistake.⁸

⁸ Fred Moten, *The Universal Machine (consent not to be a single being)*, Durham and London: Duke University Press, 2015. The lines about "re-vision" as a "wronging practice" are an extension (with what it may entail of misinterpretation) of Fred Moten's comments in a Spring seminar on the performances of reading and writing, that I attended as a visiting scholar in the department of Performance Studies, NYU, New York (April 2018).



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Inter(in)animation #2: Post-Dance embraces Post-Museum. Badminton match between Boris Charmatz and Boris Charmatz.

Go to: Semi-improvised lecture by Boris Charmatz, *Storytelling in the Archives*, Performance Forum MoMA Live, New York (2015).

Here: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=eYqKSTDpjrY> [40:31']

Despite my growing disbelief regarding the promises of recent museum programmes involving dancing bodies, I have reasons to keep imagining it is possible to re-vision, re-enact, re-attend, and study dances in (cohabitation with) museums, in ways that can refigure history, research, and allied archival institutions as radically conjectural practices of *re-commoning*, in ways that embrace the hard socio-choreographic labour required of (dancing or non-dancing) citizens to maintain the past incomplete.⁹

⁹ I am appropriating the notion of “re-commoning” in an explicitly (historical and new not new) materialist sense, as I read it in an interview with Adrian Heathfield and Branislava Kuburovic, regarding the possibility of “re-commoning history” offered by curatorial projects critically enacting relations between dance and museums (Kuburovic & Heathfield, “Being With Emergence”, *Perform, Experience, Re-Live*; London: Tate Public Programmes, 2016, 202-203). I am also making a reference to the politically responsible act articulated by Ariella Azoulay (2012), i.e. the act of stopping to conceive and use

Let's take a look at the mini-marathon semi-improvised lecture that Boris Charmatz gave in the frame of *Storytelling in the Archives*, a Performance Forum at MoMA Live in New York (2015), in which he tried to chew and spit out as much information as he could about *Musée de la Danse* in 10 minutes.¹⁰ As it was the case for *Toute la mémoire du monde* some pages ago, I recommend that you watch it at least three times before (or after) you have read the following lines: the first one just as it is; the second one listening to the sound only; the third one with no sound, only image. You might want to give it a fourth go with sound and image back together to see what happens.

Now let's go back to sound and stick with three different moments of Charmatz's vocal performance (albeit by means of interposed transcribed excerpts):

1

Improvisation could be the perfect tool to work on one's own archaeology, history, education, culture. Improvisation could be the right tool to work on memory and the history of dance, presented on an experimental clinical table. Not that nothing could be invented here, but nothing could be perceived as coming from the gods [or did he say "guts"?]. Improvisation defined as a historical tool would be a good place to deal with (to curate) the archive. This improvisation archaeology could unveil [or did he say "convey"?] the historicities at work. There's no work of art without historicities at stake and therefore no work of art without a strong embodied link to the past and the archive.

Reclaiming a museum for dance and asserting a dance that has an archaeology tool of its own to deal with history (not even only dance history, but one's history *tout court*, I figure)

the past as past, and archives as mere repositories of closed matters: "instead of regarding the archive as an institution that preserves the past as though its contents do not directly impact us, I propose to see archives as a shared place, a place that enables one to maintain the past incomplete, or to preserve what Walter Benjamin referred to as the 'incompleteness of the past'."

¹⁰ *Musée de la Danse* is the project that Charmatz started in 2009 as he was appointed choreographic director of Centre Chorégraphique de Rennes, in France. He then issued a manifesto articulating his intentions and objectives to found a *Musée de la danse*, in which he claims that "We are at a time in history, where a museum can modify BOTH preconceived ideas about museums AND one's ideas about dance. Because we haven't the slightest intention of creating a dead museum, it will be a living museum of dance. The dead will have their place, but among the living." Boris Charmatz, "Manifesto for a Dance Museum", p.2-3:

http://www.museedeladanse.org/system/article/attachments/documents/593/original_manifesto-dancing-museum100401-1512057026.pdf (accessed in January 2020).

sounds like a bold and promising venture. By proposing improvisation as a dance history tool, Charmatz also claims that “fragility” is what he is most interested in about the archive; that the archive is not what it is (supposedly) known for, but a “burning” matter, a “set of practices” that can only be cast as a “battle field” in “constant uncertain transformation”. That is the very reason, he claims, he believes that connecting improvisation with history makes sense, despite the fact that they have usually been cast as opposites – with improvisation more often than not related to “pure presence”, pure “invention from scratch”, the means by which one looks for “the never heard before and the never seen before”. In short, with improvisation conceived in opposition to the past, to historical research and to the archive. It comes out the most personal creation as well as the most seemingly evanescent gestures are historical, interdependent on shared pasts and on the way one takes to share them. Once this has been acknowledged, it follows that archival work appears all of a sudden as a paramount research, imagination, and intervention site for the expanded field of dance Charmatz dwells in. Clearly, the gesture of “inventing” a dance museum entails reconfiguring the ways in which one can, as a dance worker, study the ethic and political implications of *feeling historical* and the ways in which one is to reclaim or institute supplementary spaces to experiment with one’s historical response-abilities. To be sure, what is at stake here is both a claim to the acknowledgment of the practices of dance as capable of producing historical knowledge of and on their own, and to a re-understanding of historical research and knowledge as radically experimental endeavours. And yet, the phantasm of knowledge and experimentation as something one does “on a clinical table” (one of the epitomes of all things scientific) is present in Charmatz’s discourse; I cannot avoid interpreting it as an implicit desire to be acknowledged as part of the almighty scientific knowledge cathedral, that the project of *Musée de la Danse* nevertheless contributes to interrogate. Perhaps a sign that the “‘laboratory’ paradigm” is present, as is often the case in similar curatorial practices of “project-based works-in-progress and artists-in-residence” which almost unavoidably “begin to dovetail with an individualistic self-performing ‘experience economy’” (Bishop, 2004: 52).¹¹

¹¹ For a critique of the practice-and-research turn and its particular relation to *on the spot* improvisation paradigms in the age of neoliberalist performance, see Caspão, “Letters to Imagine Some Ends to *This World*”; part of the cycle *EXPANDED PRACTICES All Over: re-practicing multispecies story-telling in times of neoliberal performativity* (Copenhagen, 2019).

Whether or not falling prey to mainstream tendencies in the contemporary cultural industry, Charmatz's stance is emblematic of a series of aesthetic and epistemological shifts both in dance and in curatorial practices in the archive and museum, which have been in the making at least since the 1990s. I am slightly embarrassed to make such a generalizing claim, it feels lazy and convenient, I know, but it's a hard one to dismiss. Dance's coming of age around the 1990s can be (hopefully not too reductively) summarized as dance in displacement regarding its usual stereotypes; dance reaching out towards its b-sides and somewhere-elses: text and writing, screens, objects, stillness, dramaturgy, theory, and ultimately history, archives, libraries and museums (Huschka, 2017).¹² In short, dance's coming of age is dance acknowledging and reclaiming its mental capacities and infrastructural implications, a major shift in dance which was by far not only aesthetic, but amounted to increased awareness of its own conditions of production.

On the side of curatorial practice and theory in contemporary art, in the past fifteen years there has been a significant shift as well, with research project headlines like "Curating the ephemeral" (Heathfield, 2014-16) and symposium titles like "Curation as Collaboration" (Gaines, Lepecki, Weiss, 2018), advanced signs of a turn which has unleashed a stimulating (re)problematization of the frontiers between object-oriented art institutions and process-oriented art works. Within this tendency, there has been an increasing interest in the critical intersection between collection-display institutions and dance performance. While it has enabled invaluable dialogue between dance agents/works and several museums and archives, independent curatorial projects, and education programmes (Bobin, 2012; Copeland, 2013; Franko, 2014; Leahy, 2012; Larkin, 2015), critiques have pointed out that the "current love affair between museums and dance" has seldom honoured its promises (Bishop, 2014: 72). If it is undeniable that this renewed association signals an acknowledgement of the long history of dance's relationship with visual arts (starting in the late 1930s and 1940s, to be readdressed in the late 1960s and 1970s), dance is nevertheless seldom curated in a way "that allows it to become a historically significant presence", since it is hardly ever presented as "part of a historical dialogue with visual art" or as a serious agent

¹² On the "besides" of contemporary dance and dance studies, see for instance Noémie Solomon (ed.), "Inside/Beside Dance Studies: A Conversation Mellon Dance Studies in/and the Humanities". With Michelle Clayton, Mark Franko, Nadine George-Graves, André Lepecki, Susan Manning, Janice Ross, Rebecca Schneider, Noémie Solomon, Stefanie Miller, *Dance Research Journal*, Volume 45, Number 3, December 2013, pp. 3-28.

of its own institutional history-making and collection-display apparatus. In short, it mostly appears in museums and archives either “in the form of film or video” or, more often than promised, as entertaining “presentist spectacle” (Bishop, 2014: 72) – a gracefully sensual bodily supplement (Cvejic, 2014, 2015) fulfilling the demands of a cultural industry increasingly aligned with anthropophagic pro-performance experience and gig economies (Tolentino, 2017).

Now the grounds that enabled the aforementioned curatorial shift are multifaceted. On the side of the performing arts and performance and dance studies proper there has been a significant paradigm change regarding performance ontology, with both artistic creation and critical theory now more focused on the persistence of performance than on its disappearance. From the status of ephemeral anti-archival art *par excellence* (the predominant paradigm in the field since the 1980s), performance has been re-evaluated as an “increasingly documented, archived, institutionally incorporated, and globally disseminated” circumstance, its “ephemerality” recast as a feature that necessarily binds it to its many recurrences and “returns, mediations and afterlives” (Heathfield & Lepecki, 2015). Hence, performance re-appears as also a “recording machine” of sorts, its paradoxical temporality as a matter that requires attention to the specific modes of remaining in less obvious places and even in bodies, where it may linger and either be ignored or preserved, translated, remediated, re-accessed, re-discussed (Schneider, 2011). Charmatz’ *Musée de la Danse* project and his insistence in situating dance in historicity and recasting “the body as museum” (Charmatz, 2012, 2016) can be situated in the lineage of new insights and significant displacements of the relations between archival institutions and embodied practices, that have powerfully converged in Diana Taylor’s work *The Archive and the Repertoire*, critically taken further by Rebecca Schneider later on (Taylor, 2003; Schneider, 2011). Like Charmatz, many artists, researchers, and scholars have recently recast the “body as archive” and the archive as a radically choreographic, and unavoidably *sentient* “critical point” of transformation (De Soto, 2004, 2015; Lepecki, 2010; Edvardsen, 2013; Bissel & Haviland, 2018).

Such directions of past/present, creation and historicity are mixed up; they are important for *Musée de la Danse*. *Musée de la Danse* would not primarily focus on saving gestures from the past, maintained and solidified but interrogate the past in the present, invent a museum, dream of a museum for the art that is needed today and tomorrow. *Musée de la Danse* has set a general precept in its exhibition and research that it shall be improvised, more than constructed. The foundations of *Musée de la Danse* are open and permeable to let moments circulate from texts to art rooms to public spaces from archives to brains and back again; from transmission to professional performance, from participatory and social movements to singular acts; from dance to be visited to dance visiting you. *Musée de la Danse* is trying to make up a new kind of public space where theory and practice would like each other [...]

Much has been accurately said about the poetic stakes of *Musée de la Danse*, so I am not going to say much more today.¹³ I will only say, again, that Charmatz is not alone in this, and perhaps it is not such a bad idea to take a while here to have *Musée de la Danse* resonating with recent significant changes in the ontology of the museum proper, one marked by the inclusion, in museum history and theory, of contemporary “heritage practices” that had long been “regarded by academic sceptics as a corrupted form of history” (Karp & Kratz, 2006: 17). Paving the way for new uses of museological institutions, there were two main focus changes in the field of Museum Studies (in the lineage of an earlier “historical turn” significantly nurtured by postcolonial scholarship in the 1990s): from an emphasis on representation within the museum, to the acknowledgment of its often ramified multi-sited cultural production, entailing a “methodological attention to social actors in different sites, relations and fields of production, as well as their collaborations and complicities” (Myers, 2006: 506). In a word, with a noticeable general turn towards process and participation (Heathfield, 2015, 2016), a re-mapping of museum uses and poetics has been under way, which often makes them appear as laboratories for public debate, contested epistemological sites to be aligned with performance practices. This shift could be resumed as a passage from the “exhibitionary complex” (Bennett, 1995) to an “experiential complex” (Hall, 2006:

¹³ For the broader cultural context that informs the emergence of choreography within the museum, and a critical comprehensive approach of the kind of experimental research fostered by *Musée de la Danse*, see Timmy De Laet, “Moving (in) the museum: Re-enactment as research into the musealization of dance”, *Muséologies*, 8 (1), 2015, 55-70.

70-101), with museums appearing as places where objects and people alike are constantly re-socialized (Bennett, 2005; Von Hantelmann, 2014).

Mind-blowing. But what kinds of re-socialization(s) are at stake in *Musée de la Danse* and similar conjunctions of dances with museums? Sabine Breitwieser (2013) and Bojana Cvejic (2015, 2017), to name a few, have abundantly remarked that the audience-oriented approach that came with these shifts in curatorial practice and with the participation of dance in museums often comes down to providing a service “within a feel-good, event-oriented culture” (Breitwieser, 2013: 9).

As for myself, I remain sceptically interested.

3

[*Musée de la Danse* as]... a space where dance could be experienced in its wider spectrum. To be read, seen, written, visited, gusted, performed, forgotten or even erased sometimes. I did myself a work called *Flipbook* that could be seen as an example of such processes. It was presented here at MoMA [...] a mixture between improvisation and archive, performance and memory, the stillness of the photographs and the movements of the bodies and vice-versa; the movement of the pictures and the stillness of the performers and vice-versa. An homage to the photographic art of dance as a repertoire of movements and not only stillnesses. We are doing this to get free from our own systems, contemporary modes of thinking, to get a refresh on how energy may come, not from the usual oral tradition of dance but from a book teaching us how to perform. The absence of the choreographer could even be productive.

I am interested in the fact that on top of refiguring “history as body-to-body transmission” (Schneider, 2011:104), Charmatz also insists that the refiguring of history by means of improvisation can sometimes imply transmission modes that don’t necessarily happen between bodies only, and not necessarily under the directions of a human choreographer. Rather, history’s embodied acts of transmission are definitely a matter of many kinds of “inter(in)animation”. Implying we do not only visit dances, we are visited by dances, and that they can arrive (happen) to us by means other than only human. So just as archives appear to be not only about a past (dead) past, dancers are not only (live) dancing. Rather, they are supported by a myriad of inanimate (not always physically present) matters they move with-

in and across. I am touched by the fact that Charmatz's discourse on *Musée de la Danse* implicitly claims we are all partly past and dead in so many ways, sites of historical inter-remediation, for no one does anything alone or comes from nothing (read: no one comes from no colonialist present-pasts).

Yet I still think we need to clarify the "intermedial use of performative vocabulary in contemporary art discourse", admitted it has become "a catch-all" within a "wide range of expanded, cross-media practices that we find ourselves encountering in museums, on stages, and in the streets", for which it would be important to "develop a more precise and varied vocabulary for what they might be doing" (Jackson, 2014). Like Jackson, I don't mean, "what they might be doing" in the aesthetic sphere only, but also and most importantly in the social and economic sphere they respond to and co-produce. Like many of us these days, I am concerned about the (im)material work and life conditions, and particularly the rhythms, that the expansion of the vocabularies of practice and performativity in the arts, in the archive, in the museum, in research, correspond to and call for.

Run Charmatz run, you'll get there. You will have taken every-body with you.

As the rhythm of your performance intensifies, a slip and trip of perception comes over me and I lose control; I am swished into a hallucinatory play of associations. Delirium unleashed Inc. Mesmerized, I am watching your critically dramatized struggle to say everything you need to say in 10 minutes give way to your own excruciatingly enthusiastic struggle to get to show how deeply performative *Musée de la Danse* has been in the last years, how much it has achieved. Run Charmatz run. In my perceptive delirium, the performance performed by Charmatz the artist is now imbued with Charmatz "entrepreneurial stamina" (Cvéjic, 2017). The drama of your salesman attitude as you start to tell about the marvels of *Musée de la Danse* starts to echo with Resnais' documentary main fiction (without the irony): aren't we all heading to total happiness one day soon, thanks to our wonderful Grand Magasin des Connaissances Humaines.

Tarot Epilogue

In 2016, Malik Gaines provided a teasingly accurate tarot insight into some currently predominant uses of the term “performativity” (Jackson & Marincola, 2016). Reflecting the proliferation of the term in the art world’s press releases, its increasing success in the art markets and the corporate worlds alike, and the consequent imminent hardening of its critical forces into “memorialized consecration”, Gaines tarot reading of “performativity” not only confirmed the concept’s well-known ambivalence: the paradoxical (always social and hyper-contextual) conjunction it lives by and with, constantly thorn between normative stabilization and experimentation, between repetition and change (more often than not all at once). The tarot insight in case also suggested “we should be on guard against the misuse of this particularly flexible term”. For one thing, on the day Gaines laid the cards for “performativity” it came out covered by the Queen of Wands. It is important to recall that the Queen of Wands sits on a throne sided by two lions facing opposite directions, usually taken as a symbol of fire and strength, but also implying a split constitution. The sunflowers in her left hand, on her crown and behind the Queen (as if they were sprouting right out of her shoulders) symbolise life, fertility, joy and fulfilment. Much in the same vein, her right hand holds a wand with tiny sprouts just springing to life. Yet at her feet there is a cat, a sign that although this Queen is lively and alive, inspired, open-minded, brave and sociable, she is also in touch with her shady self, the mysterious, unpredictable, less-known, yet most probably subtly seductive and prone to seduction, tricky side of her being.¹⁴

PS: call me in a month for a re-packaged version.

¹⁴ Following the illustration of the Rider Waite cards.

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