

Afterwards:
Arkadi Zaides
& Ligia Lewis

Institute for Curatorial Practice in Performance (ICPP)
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Alex J. Matthews: That was such an invigorating presentation, and so compelling to see each of you speak about your works and alongside one another. Where I want to start, or where I feel inclined to begin, is with the way you're each meditating on death, and yet going about it in really different ways. Arkadi you mentioned that you begin from the real, or with real documents, and Ligia described some skepticism of the real, a pushing against what you called "the conditions of bad facts." I want to start by asking each of you to talk more about what death, and this engagement or disengagement from the real, means to you in the context of your work.

Ligia Lewis: For me, in negotiating these questions around Black death, Black social death, I feel like when I say respect the dead, I mean to acknowledge my own limitations in terms of what's representable—which is to say that I'm very much alive when I work with these themes around death. In some ways, I am paying respect to death, although I'm throwing into question the conditions that keep reproducing a certain kind of death, as well as the conditions that don't allow for the appropriate kind of mourning, because that would necessitate another world. It's a little bit of a pessimistic take, but that's where I'm at.

Arkadi Zaides: Maybe I can continue and say that for me the term hauntology is very useful when thinking about these dreadful stories I am investigating. There is a great book by T. J. Demos called *Return to the Postcolony*, in which he analyses artworks of artists who go into the colonies in order to, somehow, bring back this haunting space to Europe. While reading this book in the midst of the migration crisis (or "crisis for refugees," as Gurminder K. Bhambra more aptly calls it to remove any doubt as to who is actually suffering), I was thinking to myself that actually we no longer need to go to the colonies in order to confront ourselves with this haunting past. The ghosts are already here. It would be

interesting to talk further with Ligia about this, specifically in relation to choreographic practice. The biggest challenge that I had when first approaching the list of deaths was how to talk about the absent bodies (or bodies made absent) in documents.¹ How can one translate this absence into choreography, which is essentially a medium that praises and perhaps even fetishizes the body? In *Necropolis* there is no choreography or dance, per se, instead the performance functions as a virtual parkour where audience members are invited to visit different locations where migrants' bodies are buried. To do so, we are alternating between two different types of material. One is Google Earth where we have geo-located and marked all the graves, and then there are the walks towards the graves that we document with our smartphones. Both types of material aim at bringing the audience members closer to the dead.

Ligia Lewis: That's really interesting. I was wondering about that, about how you define choreography, and is choreography inevitably a condition of capture. Because for me, it has always inevitably been that, a system of capture. I started to get suspicious of the term and, in the studio, started to use "action" and "activity" versus movement and choreography. I'd be very interested to better understand how you create a system of relations between the bodies that are absent and those that are present.

Arkadi Zaidis: For me, choreography is a way of gazing and observing reality, and not a matter of staging or performing. By clarifying this I feel released or given the permission to let go of the dancing body and to look at choreography as an expanded practice. The term "social choreography" had a big influence on my thinking. It transposes choreography from the theatrical space into the social space. I continuously ask myself: where do I acknowledge choreography? where do I see it? And then, which kinds of tools can I develop in order to react to that

choreography that is taking place in the social sphere? It's a constant process of pushing the boundaries of the choreographic medium, and acknowledging this type of gaze, rather than assuming the main protagonist is the dancing body. When I look at these documents, like the list of deaths, I see choreography—the choreography that they make emerges.

Ligia Lewis: Oh, right, clearly. I mean to say, it's not absent of power. It's not absent of a certain kind of, violent transparency, those numbers, what they come to mean.

Arkadi Zaides: It's the biggest catastrophe in Europe Since World War II, which is not acknowledged as such, and not looked at with the same care that other catastrophes are looked at—from the European perspective, at least.

Ligia Lewis: And what does that mean for you? I brought this up just after our conversation, about this question of acknowledgement. It's one that I'm curious to better understand what you mean by it. Do you think the state is even capable of that. What might that actually look like in relationship to what is happening?

Arkadi Zaides: Naming this situation a catastrophe is about acknowledging that it is actually happening and keeping this awareness at work. Covid-19 brings another twist to this story, it reveals the paradoxical reality in which some types of deaths are acknowledged while others are ignored and avoided.

Ligia Lewis: We talked about the role of the museum to become a site for commemorating, or it functioning as a symbolic memory of a certain kind of life, and I even wonder, then, if that is not also another form of distraction from what's really at stake. Is it not another ornament to escape? What potentially has to get done is that we need to set up another relation to these communities of the dead. Because they're quite particular, right? These are often conditions of

colonial legacies, this is the continuity of these really violent colonial legacies, and that's precisely why there can be 40,000 dead now.

Alex J. Matthews: And it doesn't seem like acknowledgement is a matter of resurrecting or keeping something alive, as you were saying, Arkadi, but it seems like it is more about allowing death to actually occur?

Arkadi Zaides: Attaching a name to a body is one of the tasks of a forensic procedure. This is also crucial for the family members who are experiencing a so-called "ambiguous loss," not knowing if their loved ones are dead or alive, which is the case for a lot of the families of people who are dying at the shores of Europe. It means that much larger communities of people are affected by this situation. It's a kind of necessary minimum, naming the dead, and yet it seems that there are not enough efforts by European authorities to do so.

Ligia Lewis: I understand. And it immediately implicates the state, absolutely. I guess the potential is that through this acknowledgement there would somehow be an acknowledging of what then would have to change in relationship to the places where these communities are traveling—that there would have to be a different relationship to them.

Alex J. Matthews: I'm curious how you're thinking about embodiment. Maybe this is linked to how are you thinking about choreography. But then also very literally, how are you thinking about the matter of your bodies, in relationship to this topic?

Ligia Lewis: For me, because I'm working much more metaphorically, I consider it in terms of storytelling. I try to be careful of the term "allegory" but I definitely am thinking about bodies in space and time to create this fiction to point toward a problem, potentially, or a question—but it's very

much a space of exploration, which is super important for me. In that sense, my work perhaps doesn't fulfill a clear political will or a clear political aim, but stays in the realm of, maybe, poetics. Maybe choreography is the space and time in which one can elaborate further on conceptual problems inside and within the field of representation. So, I'm always dealing with the stage and the aspect of being seen, which in itself is also not without some sort of violence.

Arkadi Zaides: I could pick up on that. Ligia, you mentioned representation, and for me it is important to cut this term in two: "re" and "presentation." I am inspired by the idea of staging a document, which has been present in documentary theater for around one hundred years already. Somehow the choreographic field is joining this "trend," let's say, very late. And this re-presentation is actually applying embodiment. In other words, I am questioning: how can one embody a document, or make a document feel embodied by someone else. This is the main question I also pose to the spectators: how can they get closer to a certain reality? And specifically for *Necropolis*: how do I create a dispositif that forces people to be in proximity with these deaths? All the stage work is actually to make, to force almost, a certain information into the bodies of the ones who come to the theater.

Ligia Lewis: I also like the haunting, which I understood as a provocation: How do you bring these haunting legacies into play? How do you bring bodies closer to these haunting legacies of the present, which are loaded? The present is always loaded. For me, it's more in a subconscious way, in the viewing.

Alex J. Matthews: This is maybe pivoting slightly, but I'm curious what it was like for you, or what it is like for you, especially with these two projects and the pieces that you highlighted today, to use a camera and what it feels like to

have the camera in the room or the camera in hand. And how do you feel about the process of actually going back and looking at the footage?

Ligia Lewis: With documenting performance, you're dealing with what feels like a certain kind of permanence, which is frightening, but also exciting. I've always had a contentious relationship to the image. I wanted to privilege a different way of viewing, feeling, sensing, making images. But there's an incredible amount of control that one suddenly has over a performance once it's documented—especially when you are responsible for the editing. What was interesting for me in editing the footage you mentioned was the possibility to have multiple perspectives, maybe against the single frame presentation in a proscenium stage. To be able to explore the limits of that inevitably brings me closer to the body, of course, in a lot of different ways.

Arkadi Zaides: I have had a big fascination with the medium of the moving image since the very beginning of my independent work as choreographer. But when I started to work on the more political content, it allowed me, first of all, to have a window to the outside, to bring information from the outside, which I tend to interrogate, into the theater space. But then there was also a continuous development in terms of the types of materials I use. In the beginning I used found footage. In *Necropolis* we produce the images by ourselves, it's an attempt to document what is not being documented. When there is no proper documentation, you have to invent the way of documenting, or the way of capturing. But I'm also really interested in this medium because we're now constantly locked into it, it becomes more and more part of our lives. How do we use this medium in order to question the way we consume information, how we are fed with information? So I am actually questioning: how can we interrogate the media by using the same medium?

Alex J. Matthews: It stood out to me too when you said, Ligia, that the dance field is trapped in formal renderings of the body. I'm wondering about that in the context of the predominance of the virtual right now and being kind of stuck or in this stasis with the virtual space. What do you feel is an urgency right now to rethink or, reconfigure?

Ligia Lewis: If I was convinced that this was really a full-on pause from production as usual, then I would be very excited about the potential to start over, to rethink the theater entirely or to rethink the site or how we create things together. But I'm not convinced that this has actually been that, because the economy has proven to be more important than people's lives. With this kind of virtual shift, without the needed, very needed, reality of touch and proximity and exchange, the inevitable mess that happens when bodies do get together in the real, whatever you want to call the real... I don't really have an answer. What was exciting was to go to protests in masks and the sudden anonymity, but also the beauty of that. Working in the virtual and how that's going to shift things... I mean, we were already well on our way to this kind of reality, right? We're shaped by it. I still have a love affair with the theater. I do. Despite the fact that making a little dance film was a lot of fun and I would love to—and probably will—continue to work in that way, it certainly doesn't replace that.

Arkadi Zaides: In my case, it's exactly the provocation that I'm trying to achieve, because in my theater, people are watching a screen, a huge screen, but they also watch two people sitting at computers and activating that screen. They are looking at the production of the images that they are consuming, so they are aware of the actual production process of what is being exposed to them. This is already making the mechanism transparent, because when we are watching TV, we're less aware of the people pushing the buttons and deciding what we're going to see, how much

we're going to see, and from which angle. In the dispositif of the performance, we are sitting with our backs to the audience while operating the screen. The audience members are aware of all our movements and actions. Moreover, we are seated with our backs to the audience, so actually it's, again, a provocation to question who is actually managing the properties, who is actually producing the situation that is unfolding on the screen.

Ligia Lewis: The engagement is different when you're already implicated by the social contract of being an audience, which is a very different experience than the, you know...

Arkadi Zaides: I agree. At the end of the show, there is a voice-over saying: "If we were at the theater...", by this we are suggesting that we're actually not in the theater, that we are actually located in another type of architecture, which is the city of the dead. Or perhaps we want to dismantle this shrine, let's say, in order to give space to another kind of architecture, a virtual one. But I totally agree with you Ligia—things should not exclusively happen online. The live event is irreplaceable in a sense.

Ligia Lewis: I like that you use this idea of locking the audience into this agreement and forcing them into this contract. It's different than the gaze inside of a museum, where the spectator has all the freedom in the world to move and to glance and so they determine their own relationship to space and time. Whereas in theater you very much do have them trapped.

Jamie Gahlon: I forget who actually said this, but one of you shared the idea of the work being in response to these injuries occurring without consequence. And it strikes me that that feels really apt for both pieces. I find myself wondering to what extent these works are themselves consequences of

the lack of response, of the lack of accountability, of the lack of reckoning. Could you talk about that?

Ligia Lewis: You now injure without consequences. It's one of the scores for *deader than dead*. It's a recurring kind of meditation where we are constructing these images of suffering, but very much clearly constructing them, and we run up against the wall. Like a throw and retreat, between injuries and stuff. I was thinking a lot about looking at Bruegel and his painting *The Triumph of Death*, and the danse macabre, and how medieval the modern world is. Strangely enough, and maybe you'll disagree with me, Arkadi, I think we do understand what we need to know in order for things to be different. We do. They were circulating the exact number of 40,000. I didn't know that, but the image of this young Kurdish boy—the two-year-old—we all know the image. These images are circulating. This condition of injuring without consequences, it's about certain bodies, right? That's another thing. The specificity or the particularity of the bodies that are rendered nobodies is a thing that makes me wonder a lot about the liberal institutions that are supposedly hosts to these conversations. It throws everything into question really, in a real way. And, for me the question of practicing otherwise, I'm hesitant to articulate that because it's like "Otherwise to what?" The reality is grim. It really is. And, maybe there was some hope that Covid could potentially function as an equalizer, but we all know it absolutely won't. Injure without consequences. That's the condition. And it's only really through nonsense, creating nonsensical renderings of the body, or performance, or leaning into that, that we can try to excavate this "otherwise"—but it also feels too simple to say that, because it's so much deeper than that.

Arkadi Zaides: I agree, totally, about the grim situation. To push this thought further we can think of an injury to a collective body. In *Necropolis* we were thinking about the

collective of the dead as a body, a body that needs to be investigated, but also as a territory that needs to be excavated. It's also a type of choreography, the investigation of the body of a collective.

Noémie Solomon: I don't know if I have a question, I just want to pick up on something that really resonates with me. Ligia, what you were just saying about the nonsensical, and about the relation to what we know, what we already know; about what we need to know and perhaps what we need to unknow. You also mentioned the problem with some liberal institutions that are tasked with doing "good" work as a kind of Western and colonial project. Both of your practices tell me what you see as the potential of choreography, perhaps as an imperative, or as a discipline, or as a field of knowledge. I really appreciate your reluctance, or your specificity in terms of how you relate to choreography, and how you point towards its impatience and its violence as well. You also point out that one important project might be to make people really feel the violence in an almost epidermic way.

Ligia Lewis: I also really appreciate bringing these two different landscapes or worlds together—one which is a very clear interrogation of the state and its violence and my project, which was just trying to instigate the violence of sight, even just seeing another body—just the sheer act of seeing in and of itself is violent in a way, regardless of whether it's on the stage or on the streets. Somehow our seeing has led us to so many illogical, really ridiculous understandings of what a body is, or who even deserves what is considered a body—who's a somebody versus a nobody. These practices are so embedded in our being, and I would almost argue essential to person- or subjecthood. What can be gleaned then from these kinds of communities that either refuse or would never be acknowledged as somebodies? And what does that mean in the realm of choreography or inside of the theater or in the frame of a video screen? For me, it's

still a matter of challenging seeing and sensing. For a long time, I was very interested in empathy and then I quickly understood that that was maybe “not it;” there was something more at stake than just empathy, and understanding the limits of that. It’s so challenging, and I literally don’t have... I never have answers. Every time I’m making something, I’m just getting myself deeper in a hole and deeper in the abyss. And this now calls for representation, here in Europe, they’re still slow; it’s such a lazy call for diversity. It’s the laziest. You’re just like, “Oh my God.” It’s the barest forms of diversity, and then even in that, you’re just like, “Oh my God”... this is really a hopeless project because diversity is a given, it’s like, “That’s the world,” but if we’re actually trying to construct a space for diversity, then we’re just totally fucked. So, these questions of how to bring people closer to the vulnerabilities of these communities then requires a deep critique of all of these Western epistemologies that determine what it is to be a subject, to be a human, to have rights. It is really absurd. It seems so archaic that you have to fight for a right to live, you fight to live. It’s so ridiculous. This interest in nonsense really comes out of this crazy convoluted world that’s been constructed and weirdly categorized, based on fake science and some awful racist mythologies. The idea of the loop, I just feel like it’s the condition that we’re in, and that I don’t know yet the way out of the loop. But I do know that my relationship to it has shifted. I used to be more hopeful and, as of late, I just felt that there’s a different kind of work that I can be doing because to make a demand matter is perhaps not the way to go. It’s very strange. I have such a complicated relationship to this political moment that we’re in now, but I still believe in all these different forms. I still believe in choreographic practice, or anti-choreography, or whatever—whatever one wants to call it, this organizing of bodies, assembling bodies to go through something together. For me, the process has always been the most rewarding part of making a piece,

setting up a series of questions for yourself to explore and investigate with others is always such a rewarding experience. I often feel guilty because it feels so selfish. I feel spoiled that I get to call that my work, or my job, or even working. I feel fortunate for that. But once that work meets an audience or meets an institution, I then get less and less hopeful. I think the potential is actually lost in the process of the making. I then just accept the work's fate once it meets the walls of an institution, which is a certain kind of death too.

Joshua Lubin-Levy: I want to be mindful of both of your time. Ligia and Arkadi, you've been talking about Deader than Dead and Necropolis, the exhausting and absurd fact of a daily, quotidian, struggle for Black life and the state and bureaucratic administration of over 40,000 dead migrants. It was not the intention that we would bring you two together to talk about those two registers, but it's been really powerful how you've both held these opposite ends and then showed us how they're basically the same ends of something. They hold something in common. I'm so grateful to both of you for spending time with us and allowing us to be part of that conversation with you.

Endnotes

1 <http://unitedagainstreugeedeaths.eu/wp-content/uploads/2014/06/ListofDeathsActual.pdf>

Choreographies of the Archipelago: Artists in Conversation, a series of online exchanges between artists who work across a variety of geopolitical and disciplinary contexts, was hosted by the Institute for Curatorial Practice in Performance, December 3-6, 2020. Artist pairings included Yasuko Yokoshi and mayfield brooks, Tanya Lukin Linklater and Okwui Okpokwasili, Arkadi Zaides and Ligia Lewis, as well as Eleonora Fabião and Jelili Atiku. The event was co-curated by Noémie Solomon and Joshua Lubin-Levy, and organized in collaboration with Rosemary Lennox. Generous support for this event has been provided by the Ford Foundation. Immediately following these public presentations, discussions continued through an invite-only forum.

Afterwards: Eleonora Fabião and Jelili Atiku is an edited transcript of a private conversation that took place over Zoom on December 6, 2020, between the named artists, ICPP students, faculty, staff, and alumni.

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