

Bodies as Evidence

Arkadi Zaides on his research, people on the move, and brutally closed borders

Interview: Sandra Noeth



“NECROPOLIS”, city of the dead, is the title of Arkadi Zaides’ new work. With this research-based performance, the Belarus-born Israeli choreographer once again looks at the role played by bodies in current crises – from the movements of migrants and borders to debates around state violence. Between artistic, activist and deeply personal perspectives, Zaides deals with the blind spots and gaps in our own and collective narratives, and with how choreography can be effective outside the theatre as a documentary and symbolic practice.

Sandra Noeth: You often work in networks with artists and experts from different fields. How was this with “NECROPOLIS”?

Arkadi Zaides: Many of my projects start without an already fixed group and develop over an extended period of time. A friend brings a friend, as a Hebrew saying goes. I initiated “NECROPOLIS”, and the first person I invited to collaborate with me was the dramaturge Igor Dobricic, who then invited the choreographer and researcher Emma Gioia. The working process continually throws up new aspects, and together we think about who to bring in next. This way of working is also a critical response to the field of art itself, where funding applications sometimes expect anticipated results. I have a lot of resistance to this kind of approach, especially when we’re dealing with a subject matter in which a large role is played by indications and assumptions, in which you immerse yourself in the material and gradually develop a specific kind of experience.

SN: “NECROPOLIS” is both an artistic and a political, activist project. Why is it important

to continue to locate the work in the field of contemporary dance and choreography?

AZ: That’s an important question, and it’s a challenge that was also there in “Talos”. Movement is the primary starting point of the research – movements of people who are systematically and brutally stopped by border policies. This is about thousands of bodies that are absent, silenced, drowned. It’s about a collective body, haunting us. Another aspect lies in the material itself, in a gesture performed by all of us involved in the project “NECROPOLIS”, and I’d like to call this a choreographic gesture. Wherever we are, we scroll through the list put out by UNITED for Intercultural Action – a network of hundreds of anti-racist organisations in Europe, and one of our central sources of data – and there or nearby, like now in Berlin, we try to find the burial places of migrants and undocumented asylum-seekers who couldn’t reach Europe alive.

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It’s a long and demanding process, as this information is usually difficult to access. Once we have found out where the bodies were disposed of, we visit the graves and perform a ritual according to a fixed choreographic protocol. This is documented and becomes part of a virtual map that is coming about as a part of “NECROPOLIS”. So various levels come together here: the idea of a ‘danse macabre’, a dance of the dead; the choreography of the researchers, who seek and walk, sometimes carrying out very personal rituals; and that of the audience in the theatre, whose gaze is choreographed and who themselves become part of a tragedy by looking at it. It’s also about influencing the field of choreography itself, bringing in concepts and ways of thinking and working from other areas. And other kinds of perception, and also a

certain vulnerability that emerges when you’re involved with ritual. It also raises questions too: who has the privilege of doing this kind of work, and who has the opportunity to see it?

How can I work with such material without being completely overwhelmed by its complexity?

SN: A complex field of tension between art, human-rights activism and the culture of remembrance is opened up in the attempt to achieve a social aim from within the field of art. In your earlier works – “Archive”, for example – embodiment and empathy played an important role in actively involving the audience in your research, and also as a challenge.

AZ: At the moment we’re thinking a lot about the role of the audience, particularly because the choreographic aspect of “NECROPOLIS” can perhaps only be experienced through participation in the project. The credits already contain a long list of names – people who have carried out the ritual themselves and have therefore extended our archive and started to think along with the project and act. The aim is to make a symbolic protocol available to the audience, without being moralistic or judgmental – as Igor was always saying. The crucial moment is the decision to carry out a symbolic gesture. Of course, this doesn’t bring the dead back to life, but it’s a movement towards the ones who lost their lives. But the question of empathy also concerns me very directly: how can I work with such material without being completely overwhelmed by its complexity? And at the same time: ‘how can I leave it as it is?’

SN: This form of jointly dealing with questions of responsibility recalls the Greek theatre as a public forum where politics were discussed and formed. And central to your earlier projects, such as “Talos” or “Violence of Inscriptions”, was the question of how marginalised and structurally excluded bodies and voices

could be seen and experienced through artistic practice.

AZ: In those projects I looked at the real experiences of violence and borders, and brought it into the field of art. In “NECROPOLIS” we’re extending that and trying to give something back to reality: to the audience, perhaps to families looking for relatives. The question is how artistic work can be effective outside the economy of the theatre.

SN: *What are we going to see at Tanz im August 2020?*

AZ: In this performance we activate and share our archive – the various materials we have collected and compiled – live and online: data, maps, videos, gestures, film and satellite photographs, documentation of the walks to the graves and other performance elements that all affect one another and perhaps break conventions. They express the horror of the missing bodies. Bodies that were lost at sea for weeks, dead bodies, body parts...

SN: *Where does the role of the artist and research reach its limits?*

AZ: The question of the value of a symbolic gesture is always coming up. And the question of the temporality of “NECROPOLIS”. The project has no clear beginning or end. There are always local cases in the various places we visit and work. Every performance will be different and will update the research and the archive. It doesn’t stop, because this kind of killing doesn’t stop and will probably escalate. 🗡️

Translated from German by Michael Turnbull.

Arkadi Zaides | Meet the Artist
NECROPOLIS | performance | work in progress
 26.8., 20:30 | 60min | Online
 → Followed by Artist Talk

