



ARCHIVE

INTERVIEW WITH ARKADI ZAIDES

This new creation is based on the project of an Israeli Human Rights Organisation, B'Tselem. Could you explain to us about B'Tselem and what inspired you in this project?

Arkadi Zaidés: B'Tselem is an Israeli organisation, known for regularly shedding light on abuses of the rights of Palestinians by the army, the settlers, the justice system and the government. It was founded in 1989 and "endeavours to document and educate the Israeli public and policymakers about human rights violations in the Occupied Territories, combat the phenomenon of denial prevalent among the Israeli public, and help create a human rights culture in Israel." In 2007, B'Tselem inaugurated a new form of action by giving away video cameras to Palestinians living in the Occupied Territories, so that they could document the persecution to which they are subjected. The production of those testimonies has become an important act of resistance. It is through social networks that I've discovered those videos, which constitute both the starting point and the material of my performance. The first thing that struck me was the power of those countless sequences. That led to my selecting and archiving those sequences I found most interesting, that provided the most fodder for reflection.

How are those images relevant as the basis of a choreographic creation?

They allow me to continue the questioning that has been at the heart of my work as an artist for the past five years: how can the body become a medium through which one can grasp and question the political situation in Israel? In one of my previous creations, *Quiet*, four performers, Jews and Arabs, shared the stage in an atmosphere of extreme tension. For this new creation, I wanted to go deeper into the root of this violence. The footage shot in the context of the B'Tselem Camera Project constitutes a very specific kind of document. These images' initial purpose is to serve as evidence. They are, first and foremost, a testimony. I wondered whether they could provide me with something more, using the medium of my body. I watched them, immersed myself in them, and tried to turn them into another kind of material. How can my outlook, influenced by my personal experience and expressed through my body, extract from those archives a kind of living multi layered testimony? How to amplify their power, or create a shift in the way they're perceived? That is what I am trying to do in the piece.

You are dancing halfway between the audience and the screen on which the footage is projected. How would you define your positioning, your relationship to that footage?

The basic dramatic idea of the show is to start in a position of an observer, one who also acknowledges his responsibility and partaking in this situation, and then slowly integrate into my body elements seen, or expected, on the screen. It is at first glance a fixed system, but it is constantly being questioned and disturbed. Sometimes I learn and repeat a movement I see on the screen, sometimes I predict those to come, as if announcing their future appearance to the audience. Once this relationality is clear, I try to alter my relation to the footage. I voluntarily change my position within the installation. The space is split into three areas: the screen onto which the footage is projected, the audience sitting in front of it, and me, standing in the middle. Sometimes I stand with the audience watching the film, sometimes with the person filming, sometimes with the person being filmed. And then sometimes I'm just myself, standing in the middle of it all. What can my body add to the perception of these images? This is the question that motivates my moving around the stage, adopting those different positions. I try to be a sort of intermediary, to act sometimes as a filter, sometimes as an obstacle. My body changes the way these images are perceived, puts some elements in sharper focus, puts things in a different perspective.

By mimicking the postures of the different actors of those sequences, are you also not trying to find your own place?

I never cease to question and challenge my own position in this conflict, both as a citizen and an artist. Even though I am showing evidence, filmed by B'Tselem volunteers whose movement, voice and point of view are highly present, the Palestinians in the clips I chose remain behind the camera. In the piece I bring into focus the bodies of Israelis. In doing so, I am trying to reflect on the society I belong to and by that on my position in this situation. Moreover, although this footage is strongly connected to a specific locality, I think violence manifests itself in similar ways in other conflict situations. A threat on the land has always had an impact on people, and particularly on the human body. Beyond the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, I want to stress the question of violence in a more universal sense.

The footage shows many children throwing rocks at Palestinians or threatening them. Why do you think it is important to insist on those images?

Children are like vessels, a medium through which we can understand adults, but also more largely what is happening to a society as a whole. To see children, that we would in principle consider innocent, in such a state of violence and savagery, is of course very shocking. What matters most to me, though, is that their presence and behaviour highlights the absurdity of the situation. This dimension of the conflict, that takes hold of both body and mind at a very young age, is not something we usually get to see in traditional media. Yet those are images that are likely to provoke a strong reaction, and that ask fundamental questions of our societies.

The actors of the conflict we see on screen speak either Hebrew or Arab. Why did you choose not to translate what they are saying?

Every member of the audience reacts to those images in their own way, based on their own history, their own references, their own position. We all have different perceptions, different readings of the situation. I was afraid that translating what is being said would lead to a flattening of those reactions, as everyone would have understood the same thing. What I think is most interesting isn't really to know what a child is screaming but the intensity of that scream, the violence in his voice, the general tension and aggressiveness present in the moment. I'm interested in the difference in reaction there can be between a member of the audience who speaks Hebrew and thus understands what the Israeli settlers are saying, another who speaks Arabic and understands the Palestinians, and one who speaks neither of these languages, who is an outside observer. We all have a different relationship to those images. I hope these different modes of reception will be an opportunity to talk about what we feel when watching that footage, but also more simply an opportunity to wonder who the person sitting next to us is.

You also do a lot of work on sound, based on live experimentation with your own voice during the show. Why do that when the audience can already hear the sound of the footage?

It is first and foremost a response to my desire to feel, in my own body, the violence of those voices, then to reproduce it. I try to become a living archive, to record not only physicality, but also sonic information. I record my voice, and then play it on loop. By playing with sound live that way, I am able to create, using superimposition and accumulation, a mix of voices, echoes, and add them to the accumulation of gestures in my body. My aim is to create, through the use of concrete elements, an abstract form, a language, which constitutes of a multitude.

Several Israeli dancers and choreographers deal with the Israeli-Palestinian conflict in their work. Is dance perceived as a place of resistance and political criticism in Israel?

I actually think most Israeli dancers and choreographers aren't involved enough, politically speaking. Dance in Israel is very powerful, one that implies an important physical commitment, and I would claim it's also full of characteristics of control. One might wonder where that power, that strength, comes from, and what it can mean. It's as if our society's violence had contaminated our gestures, our movements. I wonder today if this form of dancing isn't just another way to continue the occupation. In my latest works, I have tried to question this relationship between the political context we live in and the particular form of dancing we produce. In the future, I would like to be able to let go of it, to free myself from gestures of violence.

Interview by Renan Benyamina.

