

## Matthias Sperling - On the body as an archive in *Table of Contents*

A talk given at Whitechapel Gallery (London) on 27 January 2018, for 'Body as Archive' - a panel discussion with Harold Offeh, Tori Wranes and Matthias Sperling, chaired by Jane Scarth (programmed as part of the exhibition 'Commissions from Performa's Archives').

The best way for me to talk about this subject of 'body as archive' is through a collaborative work that I was involved in a few years ago, called *Table of Contents*, which focused directly on questions of archive in relation to the body and choreography. So I'm going to talk a bit about my contribution to that work and some thoughts that come up for me around that.

*Table of Contents* is a work from 2014. It was initiated by Siobhan Davies, who invited me and four other artists (Andrea Buckley, Helka Kaski, Rachel Krische and Charlie Morrissey) to collectively create and perform a work together. The six of us got together and as a group we decided that the shared area of interest that we wanted to focus on in this work was to address, in different ways, relationships between dance and archive.

We worked alongside each other to develop mostly individual contributions to the work, as well as in some cases working in pairs, and each of us developed our own quite different ways of understanding and approaching what we called 'performing archive'. I'm going to focus on talking about one of my contributions - a solo work, which I called *For Now*.

The whole work is made up of sixteen different chapters that are performed in overlapping succession in the gallery over the course of the day, each chapter created by the person/s who perform it. The work involves some tall wooden tables on which we'd use chalk to sketch out a kind of map of 'one round' of performances which would be made up of two or three of the chapters, and we'd do those performances and then invite the audience to rejoin us at the table to talk with us and then to sketch out the next round.

My solo performance *For Now* is really an ongoing performative task that I gave myself, and the task is to attempt to redeploy fragments of choreographic material from the archive of Siobhan Davies Dance in ways that might be 'the right thing for right now'.

I selected and learned about fifteen different fragments of choreographic material from the online archive of Siobhan Davies Dance (which is extensive and goes from the 1970s to the present). Then in performance, I gave myself the task of spontaneously applying these fragments to what I intuitively perceived as the needs and the opportunities of the immediate present that I found myself in, making moment-to-moment decisions about which material to deploy, and where and how to deploy it.

So it is a continually unfolding composition, and each time I introduced another piece of material, I would verbally name: the title of the work it came from, the year it was made, and the dancer who originally created and performed the material - and I always used the form of words "What if the right thing for right now is..." some material from this work, from this year, which was made and performed by this person.

Taken together, those are the elements that form the choreographic score of *For Now* and they define a kind of problem solving activity that generates an emergent composition in the moment of performance.

Although part of what I was trying to do was to be as faithful as possible to the material that I was inhabiting, *For Now* wasn't aimed at displaying a preserved version of those materials (in an under glass/traditional museological way) but was aiming to be a kind of laboratory for testing out if and how any of those past materials could be used flexibly, by me, as a resource for making something that is alive and meaningful *for the present moment*.

So rather than presenting a singular authoritative past, it aimed to continually negotiate the meeting of plural pasts and presents, all of which were implicit in the situation of this performance already. That includes:

- the past of the fragments of choreographic works that I had (very freely and unsystematically) selected from the Siobhan Davies Dance archival videos;
- the whole of my own past personal experience, which was influencing and supporting my decisions in the moment;
- my present state of being and my present perception of what might be 'the right thing for right now';
- and - how the present audience members were choosing to share the space with me in that moment, and what present feedback I received/intuited/projected as coming from them.

I describe it in terms of deploying past materials in ways that I - my whole bodymind - perceive to be relevant to the immediate present of the performance.

In the room, in this performance, there is always the archive of Siobhan Davies Dance, there is each audience member's archive of experience that they bring with them, and there is my own embodied archive of artistic experience and personal experience. And my activity in *For Now* is asking: what can I conjure with my body and my movement in the meeting of all of these negotiating archival currents?

I was asking the question 'What if the right thing for now is...' [...this material or that material] genuinely, but at the same time, one of the reasons that I chose that question was to acknowledge that, even though engaging with past material is rich and also inescapable, there's also a certain absurdity in an attempt to try to repeat an action from the past and expect it to be able to address and meet a present context that that action, in its making, had no direct perception of. This quality of absurdity is perhaps not so foregrounded in *For Now*, but I definitely consider it to be implicit in the activity, and this quality comes out more overtly in other works of mine...

I want to finish by briefly talking through a collection of thoughts that are important to me in relation to *For Now* and these questions:

- Overall, in *Table of Contents*, we found that two different broad approaches emerged among the works and the different artists in the group. They either focussed on *the body* as an archive or on *choreography* as archive - so overall, the collective work kept alternating between these two different lenses.

*For Now*, I would say, is a work that foregrounds choreography as archive because it brings attention to choreographic works (or fragments of choreographic works) and questions how they endure over time (or what we can do with them in the present).

The works that focused attention more on the body and its relationship to archive, included things like Charlie Morrissey's work, that looked at the archive of the whole evolutionary history of our bodies, from single celled organisms, evolving to apes, to our present bodies and projecting forward to what kinds of bodies our descendants might evolve in the future. And Andrea Buckley's work used the lens of a particular organ in the body, the heart, and looked at the archive of poetic and anatomical histories of the heart and how those connect with our present embodied experience. So the approach that I took with *For Now* was only one of several approaches that made up the whole of *Table of Contents*.

- When it came to trying to develop practical ways of working with the notion of performing archive, something simple that I found helped me was to just remind myself that I was at once repeating and discovering.

If I could have a handle on what I was repeating and what I was discovering and how I was relating those two things to each other, then I felt I was 'performing archive', and I had something that I could be interested in. I had the choreographic material from the Siobhan Davies Dance archive, and my reading of my present environment, and the discovery of the dialogue between them.

- 'Compost' is an idea that Siobhan Davies talked about that I really like and that was important to me in this work.

She and I were talking one day during the process about the difficulties that were coming up for all of us in finding satisfying ways of re-engaging with past material and she said: 'Maybe we can see the archive as our compost' - in the sense of the archive being the rich nourishment that allows us to grow new forms by using the stuff of past forms that have been decomposed and recomposed. What I find so useful about this metaphor is that it includes the idea that there's no need to try to exactly replicate a past form in order for its nourishment to be taken up and taken forward: a tomato of a certain shape can decompose and regrow as a tomato of a different shape, or it can also regrow as something else. And each thing can grow in a way that is responsive to its present environment, even though it's made up of the molecules of past matter that have been broken down and made useful again.

- That notion of compost was one of the things that helped me start to become clearer about thinking of a choreographic work as 'a continuity in a state of change' - something embodied that is specific and recognisable, it endures or recurs, and yet at the same time it is always in flux, by virtue of being embodied.

I like this as a way of thinking about what choreography is and also as a way of thinking about what an archive of choreography or an archive of performance needs to take into account and how it might do that. But I also think this idea touches on much larger questions that go beyond choreography, which I'm going to take a stab at describing.

- 'Body as archive = self' might sound like too grand a statement and may be half-baked, but there something in there that I'm really interested in it, so I'm just going to put it out there.

What I mean by 'the self' is the cultural artefact of our person-ness, which we are continually in the process of creating and reshaping throughout our lifetime. I'm thinking of the self in very broad terms as any aspect of our embodied being that extends and grows in a cultural dimension rather than in a biological dimension.

The point about this for me, of course, is that this embodied self is a continuity in a state of change. When we're looking at choreography and performance as cultural artefacts that are embodied, the same dynamics that we notice apply equally to the cultural artefact that we call the self.

So when we're talking about embodied choreography and archive; when we're talking about how a choreographic work can endure over time; how that embodied cultural entity, even though it can never be held still or repeated exactly, can be meaningfully transmitted between different people in different historical times and places - when we're talking about those things, we're also saying something about how we are constructed as embodied cultural beings, and we're asking larger questions about how any learning that we come to embody through our experience endures beyond ourselves and contributes to futures through processes of cultural transmission. Part of the reason I mention this is because quite a few audience members of Table of Contents mentioned that they found something surprisingly moving and poignant about this work on dance and archive, and I think it has something to do with this dynamic.

- Finally, I just want to briefly make a link with the notion of knowledge-generation, because this is the term that I'm looking at in my work now - I'm questioning the relationship between choreography and notions of embodied knowledge-generation.

I've enjoyed coming back to the term archive for this talk because it's helped me realise (the perhaps very obvious) connections between notions of embodied knowledge-generation and embodied archive: from my perspective, what they share is that they're both about the transmissibility of embodied cultural information.

Knowledge-generation at the collective and historical level depends on being able to share and re-access memory in order for a field of knowledge to evolve, so the archive is in a sense what makes knowledge-generation possible.

From my perspective, this is one of the reasons why addressing questions of archive remains important for dance and choreography, because of this simple but important duality that although it's a strength of the embodied that it evades capture, at the same time the field needs memory and compost to keep evolving.