



# The Birth of Gesture. 'I'm not dancing alone'

CLAIRE VIONNET 

*\*Author affiliations can be found in the back matter of this article*

RESEARCH



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## ABSTRACT

As an anthropologist and dancer, I ask how gesture emerges within a dance production process. The reflection is based on the performance 'Shadow Dance', created in Scotland in 2017 together with 10 other artists. The three dimensions of time, collective and space each show an aspect of the creation of gesture. First, it emerges in resonance with past and future events, drawing on the memory of past dance performances and the projection/visualization of the coming show. Secondly, it embodies other (invisible) bodies, which left traces on the dancing body. I argue that a soloist never dances alone but with the shadow of other bodies (s)he danced with. Third, gesture resonates with the environment in which it was created: in this case, with the books, shelves, and carpets of the seven stories Duncan Rice Library of Aberdeen. The paper invites readers to reflect on the body as a living archive, in dialogue with the work of photographers – characters in the play – who captured traces of the event. The notion of archive is discussed through the lens of André Lepecki, Erin Manning, Susan Sontag and Diana Taylor. This experimental autoethnographical photo-essay emphasizes how choreographic creation offers a space for theoretical reflections. Research within choreographic processes generates knowledge, contributing to the theories of creativity, gesture and body.

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## KEYWORDS:

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Shadows of gesture @ A.  
Bécholey.

## COPYRIGHT PICTURES

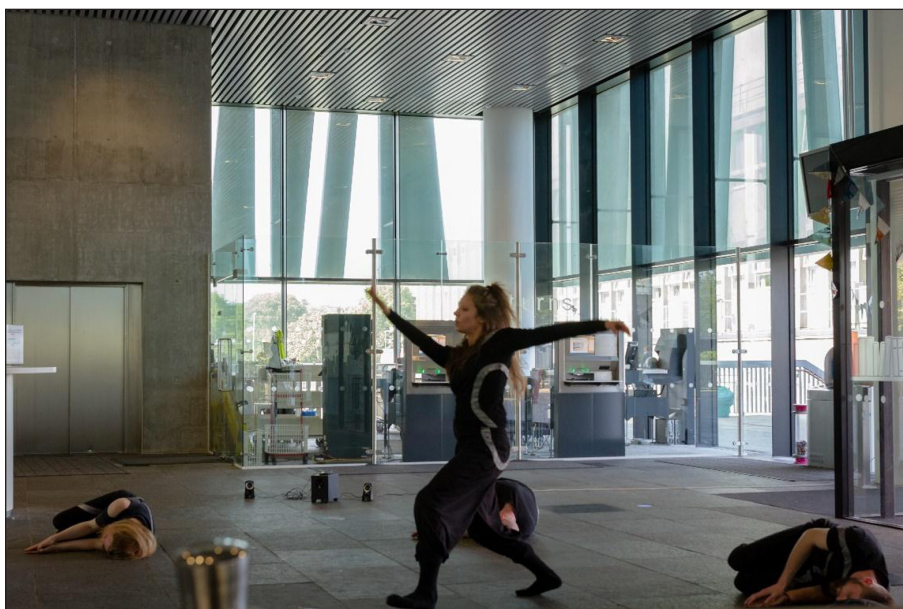
Alexandre Bécholey

featuring:

Claire Delhumeau, Claire Vionnet, Francisca Martin, Imogene Newland, Jen Clarke, Joseph J. Appel Méar, Paulina Dzianach, Peter Loovers, Sylvain Ka, Valeria Lembo (**dancers**)

Christelle Bécholey Besson, Jvan Yazdani (**Filmmakers**)

## DANCE GESTURES BETWEEN PAST AND FUTURE



I'm not dancing alone @ A.  
Bécholey.

Where does this gesture come from?  
Is it *my* body that generated this gesture?  
Who does this gesture belong to?  
Is it actually *my* gesture?

Of course, it is *my* gesture.

But I had to be trained in contemporary dance to be able to perform this gesture.  
I had to accept to be transformed by others.  
I had to let my dance teachers (re)shape my body.

I created this solo - *Shadow Dance* – reminiscent of Gerald’s training.  
I composed this sequence of movements as a kind of silent dialogue with my  
previous teacher. Gerald’s movements still shape my dance aesthetic.

Of course, *Shadow Dance* is my gesture,  
but a gesture made of others,  
a gesture composed of other’s gestures.

Maybe you see me alone on stage,  
but I am not dancing alone.

My body carries out the shadow of other bodies who left traces on my body.  
I’m dancing with invisible ‘others’,  
with invisible shadows.  
My gesture is a collective gesture, not only made of others,  
but also made of other times, other spaces, other stories.<sup>1</sup>

Anthropologist Brenda Farnell says that the past stays with us: not only in our words, but also in our gestures (Farnell, 1999: 353). The body is not only made of cognitive and emotional memories, but also of kinaesthetic ones.

*Shadow Dance* not only reminds us of the past, but also opens us up to a future event. I created the sequence for specific persons (mainly non-dancers), thinking of a choreography for their bodies and their movement aesthetic. Since the sequence was conceived for other dancers who would perform it, it already carried traces of a future event. *Shadow Dance* is therefore a silent dialogue with the past, meanwhile announcing the future.

We often claim the ephemerality and the vanishing of performances. Here, my assumption is that a performance never perishes, but opens up to new possibilities. Dance scholar André Lepecki wrote that the ‘performance does not disappear into the past but zooms into the all-encompassing field of the possible’ (Lepecki, 2010: 34).

As a ‘collector of bodies, pieces, affects, and movements’ (Lepecki, 2010: 34), a performance intertwines past, present and future elements. In this context, the ‘body becomes the living archive of what, one day, will come back around—as it passes away’ (Lepecki, 2010: 34).



Dancing with shadows @ A.  
Bécholey.

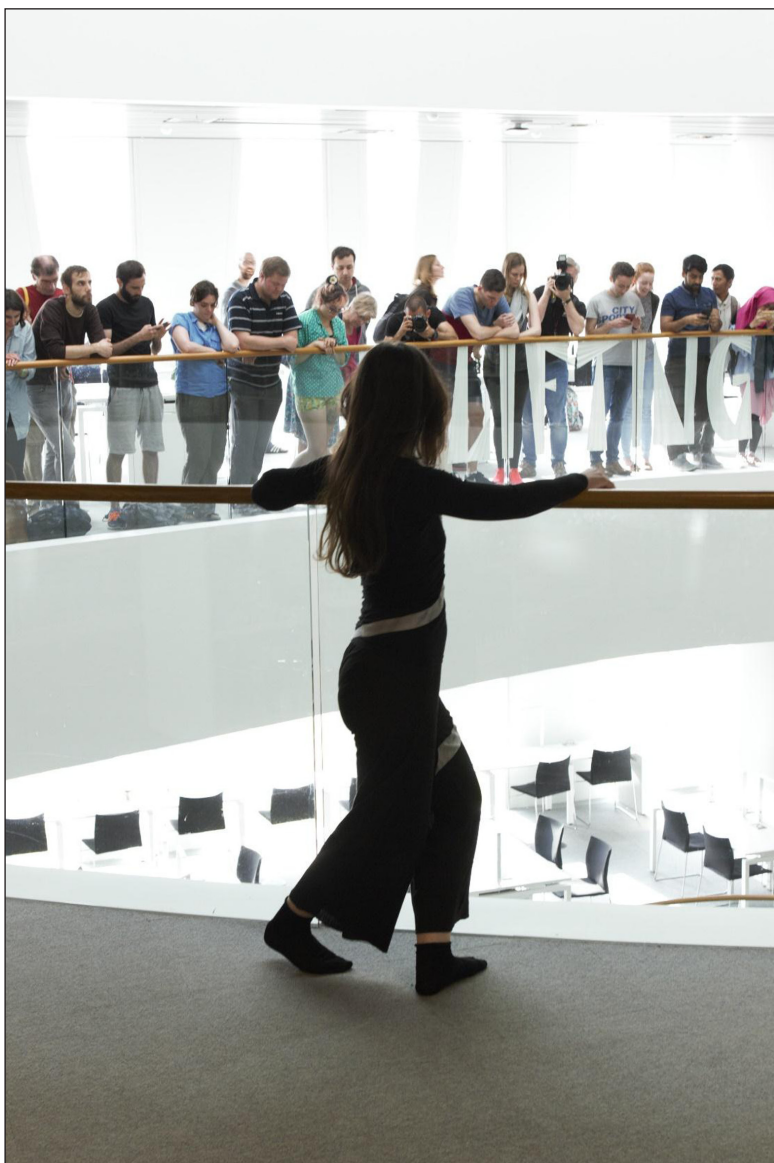
<sup>1</sup> As the choreographer of the performance *Shadow Dance*, I wrote this text after the show, as an impulse to reflect on the production process. This autoethnographical material was my starting point of the writing process. This helped anchoring the written text in the liveliness of the world.

When used in a dance and performing art context, the notion of *archive* is often associated to the phenomenon of *re-enactment*: contemporary choreographers re-perform past performances, as a method to re-activating history. According to André Lepecki, this ‘will to archive’ is a way of ‘returning to all those tracks and steps and bodies and gestures and sweat and images and words and sounds performed by past dancers’ (Lepecki, 2010: 29). The dance scholar argues that this trend has become ‘one of the most significant marks of contemporary experimental choreography’ (Lepecki, 2010: 29). He adds that this trend is less a question of nostalgia for cultural memory, than the feeling of a non-exhaustive past work which still entails creativity for present and future performances (Lepecki, 2010: 31).

However, the notion of archive shouldn’t be only linked to the past, but also with reference to the future. As Brian Massumi writes, each event is ‘a reactivation of the past in passage towards a changed future, cutting transversally across dimensions of time, between past and future, and between pasts of different orders’ (Massumi, 2015: 49). In *Shadow Dance*, we explored the way a dance performance generates encounters between different time frames:

It’s simply the idea that whenever something comes visibly or palpably to expression, it is emerging not out of nowhere, and not out of the structure of the past as fully determining, but out of a background activity that is inheriting from the past but also creating the conditions for what will come next that will supersede the past and perhaps change the nature of what comes of it. Activity is not grounded in substance or in essence. It’s grounded in prior activity, taking a new twist (Massumi, 2015: 154).

## ONE AND MANY



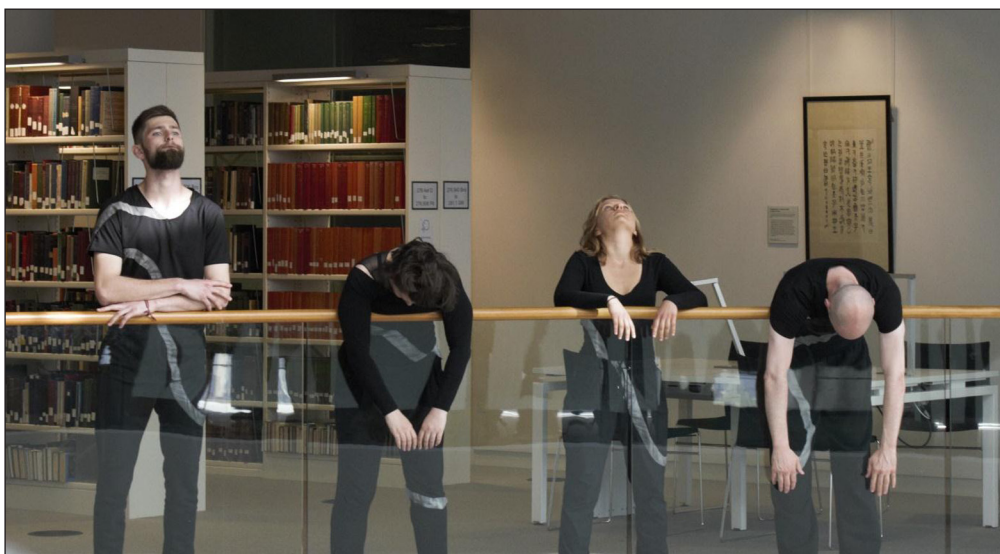
One and many @ A. Bécholey.

'Unities are emergent from pluralities', added philosopher Brian Massumi (2015: 186). Applied to dancing bodies, we can argue that the plural is always embedded in one single gesture. The inherent plural condition of humanness is beautifully expressed in philosopher Jean-Luc Nancy's books' title *Being Singular Plural* (Nancy 1996). In fact, the dancing body tells stories of encounters: when a soloist dances on stage, he is dancing with the shadows of all the other bodies he met, danced with, touched, was taught by (Vionnet 2018). Since it embodies past encounters with others, the dancing body is made of others and made by others. I presume that the body is a *living archive*: what appears in a dance is more than movement and choreography. I think that the whole biography of the dancer re-enacts through gestures: his stories of encounters, the places he visited and different moments of his life come out of the dance, although in an abstract way. This point of view stresses a conception of individuals as conceptualized by anthropologist Tim Ingold:

*the human being not as a composite entity made up of separable but complementary parts, such as body, mind and culture, but rather as a singular locus of creative growth within a continually unfolding field of relationships (Ingold, 2000: 4).*



<https://vimeo.com/451530493>  
(password: ShadowDance).



Singular Plural @ A. Bécholey.

## IN A LIBRARY

The *Shadow Dance* was a dance performed in a library.

Living bodies were playing around with the material available:

rolling on the carpets of the library,  
hanging over balconies,  
taking out books from the bookcases,  
lying on chairs,  
standing on tables,  
going up and down the building in the lifts.

The music was broadcast around the whole building, giving a sense of unity between the different actions happening at the different floors of the library. The music fulfilled a function of connection. It was the red thread connecting the dancers rolling around the different floors of the library and the audience members watching the performance from the balcony, on the top floor.



In resonance with others @ A.  
Bécholey.



Artwork Rachel Harkness @ A.  
Bécholey.

Large scale artwork, by the anthropologist Rachel Harkness, hung on the balcony of every floor emphasized the production process: BUILDING- LIFTING- DIGGING-GATHERING. The dancing bodies were underlying the structure, texture, and quality of the building. Our dance was a kind of performative architectural act embodying the social values claimed by the artwork: a gathering between strangers, an exchange of lifts, weights and supports, an exploration into bodies and minds, a harmonious community building within a library – the site of official and institutionalized knowledge.

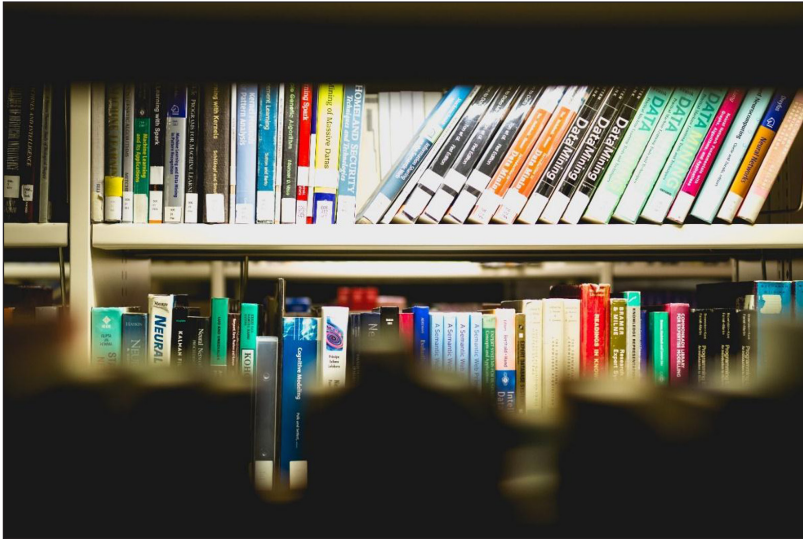
Our dance performance took place within a bigger event organized by the project *Knowing from the Inside* run by anthropologist Tim Ingold. The exhibition gathered anthropologists and artists to reflect on production processes and ways of learning and producing knowledge. We were interested in the outcomes of our research-creation: what did we learn through composing the choreography? Our methodology draws on the *SenseLab*, a 'laboratory for thought in motion' (Manning, 2004). Articulating theory and practice through live movement experimentations, the *SenseLab* focuses on philosophy as a creative practice. In a non-hierarchical transdisciplinary collaboration, its aim is 'thinking by doing, always with the understanding that concepts are made in and through the event' (Manning, 2004).



Lying on chairs @ A. Bécholey.

## BOOKS AS INSTITUTIONALIZED KNOWLEDGE

The dancer Valeria picked up a book on her way toward the audience, in the middle of the shelves' rows: *The Argonauts of the Western Pacific*. This book calls back the memory of a remote island at the beginning of the twentieth century. It narrates Malinowsky's fieldwork in Melanesian New Guinea. Valeria opened up the book and put it on the next shelf. She randomly picked up another essay: *L'existentialisme* of Jean-Paul Sartre. As soon as the title is mentioned, we have images bumping into our heads: in that case, the hectic political French postwar context. Meanwhile, the dancer Imogene was choosing another book at the upper level: *The Ethics* of Spinoza that brings us back to the Dutch philosophy of the 17<sup>th</sup> century and the whole body-mind question.



Knowledge and books @ A.  
Bécholey.

These books are called ‘knowledge.’ They are the historical sources we can rely on. They are the official *archives* of our modern history. Archives allow historians to restore facts and make history. Acknowledged as official knowledge, they produce our western history. But other cultures have other ways of producing knowledge (Gehm, Husemann and Von Wilcke, 2007). They have other ways of making history and creating memory.

Through the colonization process, western epistemology imposed its hegemony on other cultures: it pulverised other forms of knowledge production – like embodied practices – which were not considered with the same value. Diana Taylor wrote that embodied practices – as forms of history, identity, memory – were banished by colonizers (Taylor, 2003: 21). The written was opposed to the embodied and the oral. But Taylor argues: ‘modes of storing and transmitting knowledge are many and mixed’ (Taylor, 2003: 22). In her opinion, performances can play a role in keeping traditions, but globalisation has challenged alternative forms of knowledge.

Similar to Taylor, Lepecki claims the faculty of dancing bodies in embodying history and knowledge: ‘re-enacting is an affective mode of historicity’ (Lepecki 2010: 35). The dance scholar emphasises that embodied practices do not just imitate the past. On the contrary, performances show ‘that the present is different from the past’, by creating ‘something that is new and yet participates fully in the virtual cloud surrounding the originating work itself’ (Lepecki, 2010: 35).



Archives and knowledge @ A.  
Bécholey.



Diana Taylor frames embodied practices 'repertoire', differentiating the *archive* from the *repertoire*. The archive refers to materials (text, document, building, bones) and the repertoire is made of embodied practice, spoken language, dance, sports and rituals. Taylor says that the archive does not change compared to repertoire. It is static like bones (although also changing very slowly over the years in my opinion). On the other hand, the repertoire is only a matter of process, transformation and changes. Taylor writes that the stones (archive) might be the same, but the storytelling (repertoire) about the bones, may change. Taylor does not consider bodily practices as archives, but as repertoire, to distinguish the material from the immaterial (Taylor, 2003: 18-19).

## PHOTOGRAPHY AS ARCHIVING PROCESS



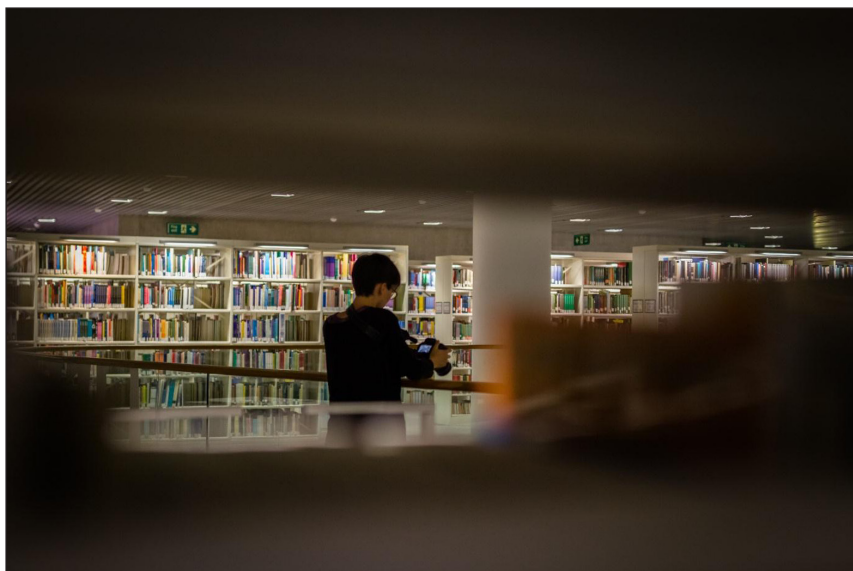
Memories of the event @ A. Bécholey.

During the dance play, we were filmed by a photographer and a filmmaker. Both were characters in the play. They followed us to capture movement, record traces of our dance. They had access to all seven floors, contrary to the audience who only had a bird perspective from the sixth and seventh floor.

The filmmaker and the photographer created memories of the event. They kept trace of this ephemeral event which would disappear after the 27<sup>th</sup> of May 2017.

The filmmaker and the photographer. Both producers of archives.

These visual archives allowed *Shadow Dance* to perpetuate after the live event perished. They played a role of re-enactment by means of another media.



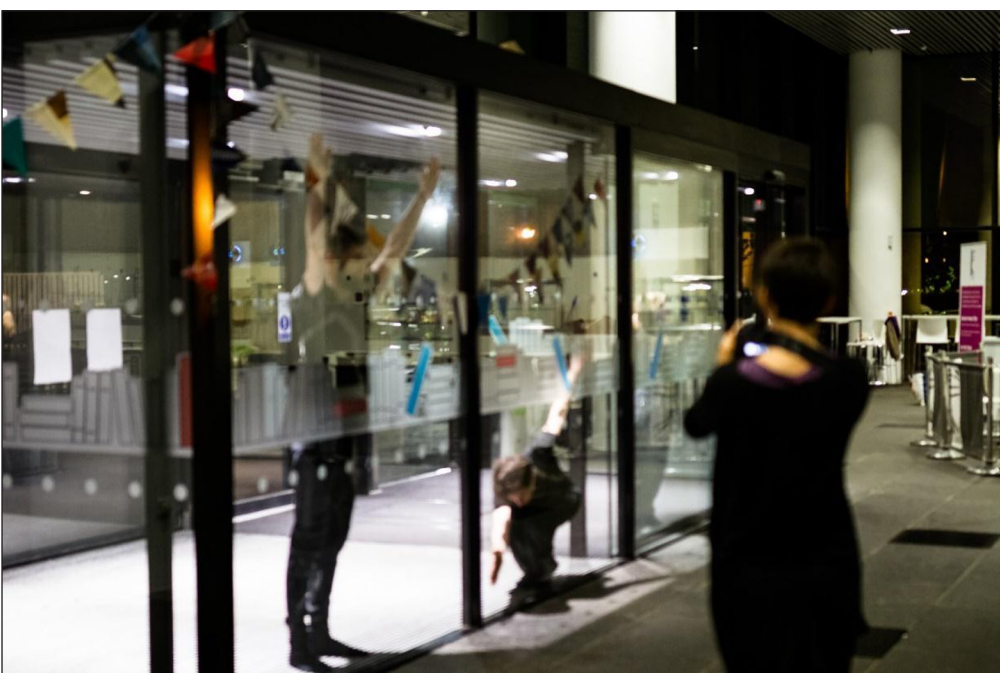
Pictures freeze bodies @ A. Bécholey.

Susan Sontag writes that photography ‘turns people into objects that can be symbolically possessed. Just as a camera is a sublimation of the gun, to photograph someone is a subliminal murder – a soft murder, appropriate to a sad, frightened time’ (Sontag, 1979: 11). In Sontag’s opinion, a photograph freezes the body. Photography is essentially related to the past, as the freezing of an action: ‘After the event has ended, the picture will still exist, conferring on the event a kind of immortality’ (Sontag, 1979: 11). But what if, when we take a photograph, we don’t only think about the past, but also about announcing the future? What if, when we think about photography, we consider it as an event under the lens of performativity?

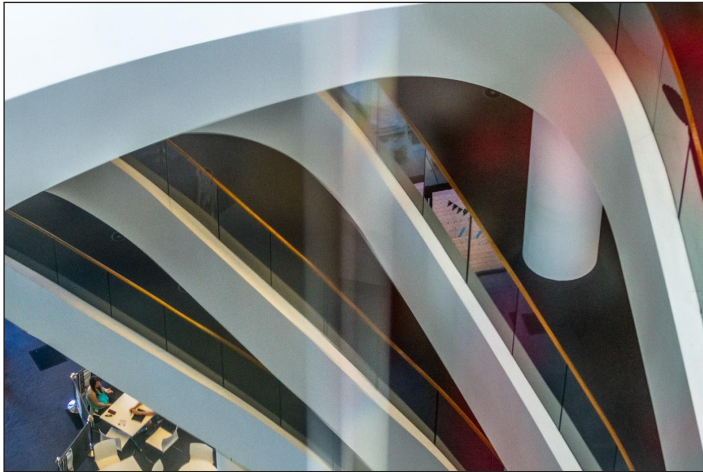
Although Diana Taylor does not use the notion of archive for the body, so does Lepecki. He writes that ‘the body as archive re-replaces and diverts notions of archive away from a documental deposit or a bureaucratic agency dedicated to the (mis)management of ‘the past’ (Lepecki 2010: 34). The dance scholar thinks that contemporary choreographers feel a need to restore past performances because they still entail opportunities for enacting. In Lepecki’s point of view, the notion of archive is not static but moving: ‘with her emphasis on body-archiving, an endless mobility emerges as constitutive of this particularly transformative, particularly performative archive’ (Lepecki 2010: 34).



A dance with a filmmaker @ A. Bécholey.



Movements in cascade @ A. Bécholey.



A dance in cascade @ A.  
Bécholey.

The *Shadow Dance* was performed by eight dancers spread across the different levels of the library: two dancers on the fifth floor, two on the fourth, one on the third, one on the second and three at the bottom. All the dancers were facing the same direction, but the space between them was different, according to the architecture of the library.

We were all performing the same sequence, but with a time delay. From the top to the bottom, each gesture was repeated a few seconds later.

This performative act resonated between bodies: the same gesture flowing from one body to another, falling from one balcony to the other. This action illustrated our attachment to others, our interdependency on others (Butler, 2004: 20). Subjectivities inherently belong to bigger collectives.

The *Shadow Dance* was passing from one balcony to another, from one body to another, reuniting the different dancers around the same movements. The gesture was travelling within the building, from one body to another. Gestures were individualistic each time, echoing a collective gesture.

The colour of the carpet reinforced this idea of a cascade, in the cascading shades of tones between the black carpet of the fifth floor and the light grey of the second floor. The physical bodies and the built structure of the library expressed the ideas of postponement, (de)gradation, resonance and cascade.

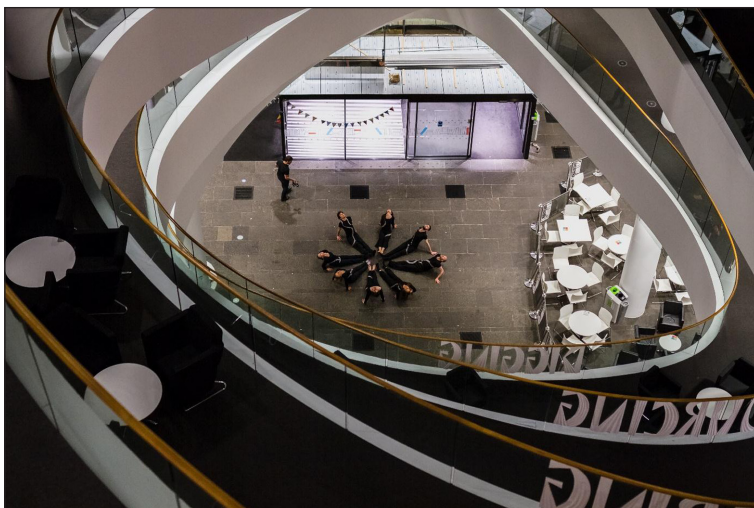


Cascading shades of tones @  
A. Bécholey.



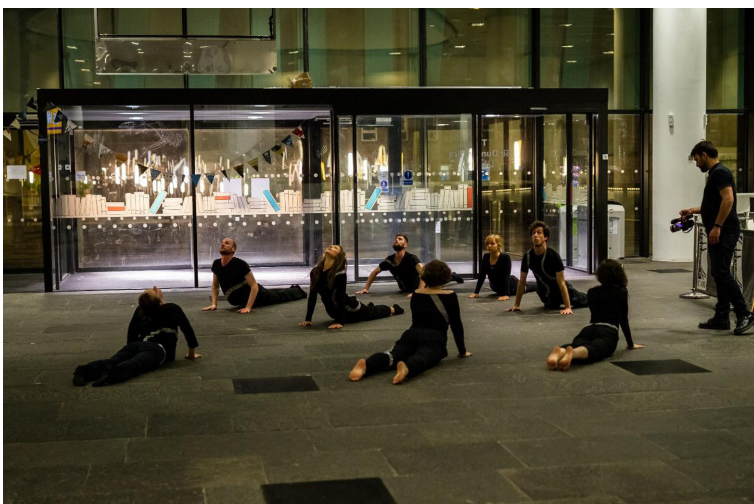
<https://vimeo.com/451532754>  
(password: ShadowDance).

## BODIES AS LIVING ARCHIVES



The flower dance @ A.  
Bécholey.

Later in the performance, we all gathered at the bottom floor and performed the *Shadow Dance* together: the same movements in the same flow, in the same breath. This expressed tension between the individual and the collective in another way than with the cascade of bodies. The same gesture was now performed by one and others at the same time in the same space. This collective act concretely expressed the idea that a dancer is never alone on stage but performs with the shadows of other bodies. A body is 'always more than one', wrote Erin Manning (2013).



In the same breath @ A.  
Bécholey.

Embodying other's presence, the body carries out the past. Can it be framed as a living archive? The issue with the notion of archive is its relatedness with the past exclusively. Therefore, Erin Manning prefers the notion of *anarchive* to emphasize the entanglement with the future. The philosopher relates the *anarchive* with event and performativity: Anarchive – a repertory of traces of events. The traces are not inert, but are carriers of potential. They are reactivatable, and their reactivation helps trigger a new event which continues the creative process from which they came, but in a new iteration (Manning, 2018). In Manning's opinion, the anarchive is a *repertory of traces* of a creative process – a collective research-creation – which reminds us of the past but mostly connects to possible future events.

The *anarchive* does not aim to document the event. Instead, it aims to remember what moved an event into taking form, in a way that might set the stage for a next event to occur (Manning, 2020). For this reason, Brian Massumi wrote:

«The event 'perishes'. The potentials it carried to expression are then ready for reactivation, either as conditions for a new emergence, or as captured potentials feeding a self-perpetuating structure that has found ways of reactivating itself across the perishings of events. Emergence and perishing are not opposites. They are pulses or phases in a process (Massumi, 2015: 154).

The reactivation of event @ A. Bécholey.



'The body is archive and archive a body', wrote Lepecki (2010: 31). Here, the notion of archive is not employed in the sense of dead repository, but in its capacity of being active, changing, growing, transforming, always becoming more. The body is a living archive that provides history, memory and knowledge, according to Diana Taylor (2003). It activates potential for a future event, according to Erin Manning (2020).

With this memorial function, the body recalls past experiences and transmits knowledge. The dancing body becomes then a living archive (Goodridge 2011: 120), as dance scholar Julia Wehren says: 'memory, archive and knowledge are embodied' (Wehren 2016: 15). Simultaneously to its function of memory, the living archive is an impulse for future experiences. It activates revivals and re-enactments (Wehren, 2016: 22).

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## COMPETING INTERESTS

The author has no competing interests to declare.

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