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IN CONVERSATION ABOUT ARCHIVES TO COME

SIOBHAN DAVIES
SCOTT DELAHUNTA

Abstract
This text is an edited version of a conversation between the authors that took place in Vienna in 2016. The focus of the talk is on tensions and possibilities that lie somewhere between the idea of the dance archive and the question of how an archive can contain the deeply embodied processes in dance. The conversation includes reflection on the challenges of creating a digital archive for dance and on the visual arts as a context for questioning dance’s relation to itself and its audiences. Some specific strategies for accessing past processes in the creation of new works are shared.
This conversation between Siobhan Davies and Scott deLahunta took place on 24 April 2016 as part of Archives to Come in the frame of the SCORES No. 11 symposium (21-24 April 2016) at the Tanzquartier Wien. Table of Contents, a live movement installation co-created by Siobhan Davies, Andrea Buckley, Helka Kaski, Rachel Krische, Charlie Morrissey and Matthias Sperling, was presented in the same context from 22 April to 24 April 2016 at the Tanzquartier Wien in co-operation with Leopold Museum. Some of those presenting workshops and performances in the symposium programme are mentioned in the following conversation including Martina Hochmuth, presenting a film based on the work of Boris Charmatz, and Claudia Bosse and Arkadi Zaides, both artists who work on with the concept of the body as archive. Replay is the name of a project that began in 2007 as the Siobhan Davies Archive. With funding from the UK’s Arts and Humanities Research Council, the project was a collaboration between Coventry University and Siobhan Davies Dance. The aim was to bring together all of the documentation associated with Davies’ choreographies into a single digital on-line collection. The first version of RePlay, published in 2009, is structured around nearly 50 performances and related projects. The idea was that it would continue to grow and develop as the company and Davies created new works.

Scott deLahunta
I would like to ask you to share a few observations about RePlay, what you had imagined and some of the realities of making this archive. I know RePlay was an opportunity that came along at a certain point in time when you were moving into the new building. A colleague of ours, Sarah Whatley (Director of Centre for Dance Research, Coventry University, UK), approached you about putting together a digital archive. Can you say something about how that initial meeting came about?

Siobhan Davies
I’ve known Sarah as an academic and a companion in appreciating how the academy sees choreography. So we had a long-standing relationship. And one day she said, they (Coventry University) would like to create a digital archive of my work. Sarah said this would be the first digital archive in dance and choreography, certainly in Britain. At that moment we were moving into the new building after ten years of preparation, moving was a
huge task so I was very occupied with that, and I simply said yes to the archive without thinking about what it actually might mean. At the time, it felt like a good opportunity to develop another platform for work, a chance to programme something new. In fact, Sarah and the University were offering me something with huge potential, but I didn’t appreciate that potential fully until later. Then the initial effort of actually making the archive turned out to be an enormous undertaking. Not technically, but finding all the material, getting all the permissions, and trying to filter all that material into a digital structure or back-end was something I didn’t grasp at the outset.

Scott deLahunta

On the first day of SCORES NO. 11, Lejla Mehanovic presented the Tanzquartier Wien Online Mediathek project and discussed some of the challenges when developing something of that scale, and you have just mentioned these too, finding the content you want to include, and making technical and practical decisions about the back-end or the content management system, which in the case of RePlay, was a proprietary system. Another decision to be made is what metadata system to use. Metadata helps make the material searchable by people, but also allows computers to automatically link to other related material on the network. There are lots of decisions that have to be made that are practical and technical and very resource-heavy, and at some point they can seem to take over a project. The challenges are unavoidable at a certain scale, and I think it is essential to draw attention to these challenges and the amount of sheer work involved. Also to understand that these are the kinds of decisions that once made are not easy to change.

Siobhan Davies

Imagining the archive without appreciating its parameters was swiftly taken over by the reality that involved taking a series of our choreographic ideas, our processes of making as well as the different ways of thinking and doing in the body and transporting all of this into a conceptual architecture for the archive. And as you said, how this architecture was technically organised meant that once built it was hard to adapt it to our evolving practice. The archive set up as it was could not adequately represent the layers of physical experience that contribute to both choreography and performance.
I became increasingly aware that we could not get close to what actually happens in both the making and what is finally made. Not being able to reach what I think matters in dance-making and performing ended up being somehow damaging. I don’t mean that as bad as it sounds; but the technical architecture of the archive produced a lot of hard limitations that, while understandable, also felt very constraining. There were limits on how we could rearrange and reorganise material, so when new connections revealed themselves, technically they were not possible to achieve. That said, the beauty and the potential of it is that we are entering into a digital age with different possibilities to present what I think of as the “mulch” of the work. The matter of it. Not necessarily the finite moment. What I mean is that a live work comes into being and it consists of a constellation of live decisions between something known and something invented. No moment is repeatable. So how can we honour that in such a way that a dance-based archive can be layered enough to reach the grist of each distinct work without coralling it into a fixed state? We should not need to borrow too heavily from visual art or written archives when we can explore the very different potentials of archiving performative work.

Scott deLahunta
It’s interesting how Table of Contents is a kind of response to what RePlay means to you. But before talking about Table of Contents in relation to the archive, there is another interesting connection to what Martina Hochmuth was presenting yesterday from Boris Charmatz’s work in the museums and the transgressing of certain borders when dance enters the visual arts space. You felt similarly compelled and have been going in that direction, starting perhaps with your background in visual arts? Can you say something about that?

Siobhan Davies
My family were modest collectors of post-war British art and I went to art school. The surge in the visual arts, design, music and theatre of that time was a subject of much conversation, which I listened to from a young age. I looked at our paintings on the walls for ages, but only recently have I understood the impact that might have had. I wonder if in my naive state at the beginning of studying dance I used what I had experienced studying art. I do remember enjoying that instead of being one stage removed from
what I was making, for example working on a drawing set on a table in front of me, something I could stand up and leave behind, while in a dance studio I was the drawing. And I attempted to arrange my actions and thoughts at once, similar to the act of drawing, but I was not aware of that until later. I gradually grew to utterly love the fact that working in dance meant the movement and the mind is in constant and immediate feedback. The more I worked the more I understood how questioning the complexity of thought, feeling, action and environment was the stuff of both dance and choreography. The dancers and I were constantly researching these connections while making the work, asking ourselves: “What is actually going on?” “Why are we moving?” “What am I feeling?” “What are we showing?” “What is the purpose?” And then finally we would put it on stage and to me it looked like bloody cinema. The magnificence of being on stage with the lighting and the production values and the space was all great, but I couldn’t see any of this thinking and the detail I had seen in the studio. I couldn’t see the matter of movement. So I had to unplug from the theatre, return to the studio and ask myself: “Where else would that kind of closeness to the audience and the idea of reciprocity between the audience and the doer/the performer happen?” The answer: in visual art spaces and in galleries. These places bring their own problems, but at least in these spaces it felt like I was in the same territory with the audience who were visiting. And they could see the detail, see the thinking and potentially talk to us.

Scott deLahunta
You told me once you are also interested in how the visual arts relationship with the idea of an archive might rub off on dance.

Siobhan Davies
Another reason I have felt compelled to move more into visual arts and galleries is to meet up with how their history works for them and find out what our relationship can be to how their work is documented and archived. With visual arts, there is always the potential of looking at all this work via its documentation through books or literature about the work, and often quite good copies of work would be available to study. All of that information is there within the visual arts and is a constant resource for discourse.
So the discourse that builds up around the art form from decade to decade, from century to century, it can change the art form as the work is presented in the different mediums over a period of time. Dance does not have that now. There'll be plenty of people who'd raise their hand and say, “Yes, there is an archive in dance,” but nowhere near to the scale or level of detail that I’m talking about. So, when introducing our practices into a conversation with visual art practices, dance has remarkably little discourse developed around documentation and archives, and visual arts has a lot. I needed to understand this difference more fully and, in part; *Table of Contents* was a beginning to address this. We did have our digital archive and a long history of dance practice. We wanted to meet a situation in which the curators, and probably the audience, had many more references to call upon and see if could we intrigue and inform them with ours, even though they come in such a different shape.
Scott deLahunta
Do you think bringing dance as the body or the corporeal into the art gallery is something that can shake things up and create transgressions there, in this more conceptual discursive space with their long history of documentation and archiving?

Siobhan Davies
In relation to the concept of archive, I think it gave us an opportunity to turn around and ask ourselves: if we make an archive of dance, what does our art form bring to the idea of an archive? What can be distinctive rather than borrowed? In dance, we are constantly in process, in movement, so should we not try to get the idea of movement, or even movement of thought to be somehow present within the archival architecture? How can we archive the substantiality of a choreographic thought even when it is translated by different performers, in different times and contexts? As I mentioned earlier, I think we have not been successful so far (with RePlay), but this should be the aspiration.
Scott deLahunta
Could you say something about how *Table of Contents* integrated the concept of an archive? You told me you brought together five performers / choreographers – Andrea Buckley, Charlie Morrissey, Matthias Sperling, Rachel Krische and Helka Kaski – went into an empty space and asked: “What do we have?”

Siobhan Davies
We started in this empty room, knowing we were going to perform in spaces that have visual art and performance work as part of their programme. So we looked at each other and said: “Why don’t we just be us in this room, nothing else, just us, no other art to refer to. Use what we are and draw upon our library of actions from the past. So what is it that we can be in that room?” We started our work this way, but after a few days we introduced ourselves to *RePlay*, asking ourselves shall we use that as some kind of trigger? Then Andrea, Matthias, Charlie, Rachel and Helka looked at the archive, but in some ways it had nothing to do with them as they were not in those works. And I think it partially comes down to the format of the archive, which made it hard for them to find connections initially. The question became ‘who were they?’ in relationship to how the work could be experienced via the archive, with the limits we have already discussed? And I understood that completely. Yes there are images, films and facts but, for me, these fall very short of a good appreciation of a live work. How can we translate the qualities and intelligences of process and liveness into archival material and how can future users immerse themselves usefully into that material. I would love my future digital archive to address so much of what we found out when dipping into the present one. Matthias, Helka and Rachel did find ways of connecting themselves to the *RePlay* archive and emerge from it with something wonderful to experience, but I think it was their artistry rather than my archive that produced the goods. But what they did come up with gave us all clues as to how we might structure our future archive. They extracted details rather than taking out whole works, and they discovered something like the DNA of the work in that detail. From my perspective this DNA offered much better access to what I was aiming for in the finished work. They then entwined that DNA into their own and came up with something that made sense in the present, for now. During this time I coined the word “compost”
because the broken down elements of the works were more informative and generative than the one or two films of a finished work. Andrea and Charlie decided to use the word “archive” as an impulse to conduct archaeology of their own library of past experiences. Andrea looked at the heart as a source of information for exploring movement, and Charlie explored the movement histories of evolution, from primates to now as well as the future bodies we might become.

Scott deLahunta
The body as archive has been a key theme for the last four days of this event here. Arkadi Zaides’ piece *Archive* last night, for example, explores the idea of the body transforming into a living archive. Claudia Bosse’s workshop, *The archive as a body, the body as an archive*, was also dealing with it explicitly. It seems for dance this is an accepted way of approaching the past. One of the things that I have wondered is what happens when you collapse history into a single body, a single subject, and you have this sense of struggling, trying to tease out these things that are not only your own past, and bring them into some certain friction, some sort of relation with other images and forms from the past? I think there is a potential when it gets collapsed all into one body, the body of a dancer for example, there might be a danger there.

Siobhan Davies
If I can return to the word compost; what I am trying to get to is the fermentation that is needed to make anything. Those conditions cannot be collapsed into one body, because all situations of making for me are about the many. It’s less about framing individual works and more about appreciating the works because of everyone who contributed to them. Each of them uses their individual histories, which brought them to that moment of making. I sense that all of us in that situation come away with nutrients for forming better questions and making the next works. These particles of learning can then travel in as many directions as the individual artists can connect with.

Scott deLahunta
Could you say something about the development of the three dancers who decided to work explicitly with the “scratch tapes” that reside in the *RePlay* database?
Siobhan Davies
The scratch tapes, mostly made during the 90s and early 2000s, were where individual dancers recorded phrases they were working on. Together we had decided on what might generate movement and then individually the artists came up with movement responses, recorded them and shared them with the others and me. They could be improvisations, or evolving repetitions in which the dancer was discovering movement through doing it and not having to remember them because the recorded tape would. The Table of Contents artists much preferred working with the scratch tapes because they are from the process part of making work rather than the finished dance piece. They are still in a state of becoming and for me they have become more important as part of the archive rather than the finished work, which traditionally takes a hierarchical precedence over the process.

Scott deLahunta
Can you say something about how Matthias worked with these scratch tapes? He described this to me once as “working with fragments.”

Siobhan Davies
What Matthias did, and Helka also actually, was take a fragment of one of the tapes that mattered to him in some way. Something he could explore without attempting to dance like the original dancer in the tape. Matthias would take this material and bring himself to it, so there was this friction and fluidity between his own practice and what he was taking from the scratch tape. Once he collected and learned these fragments using the joined up thinking between him and the recorded material, he could start his performance by asking, “What’s the right movement for now?” Not any other time but for now. Then he could begin. Sometimes he would maybe follow a fragment through, maybe do another one and then stop to ask the question again, “What’s the right thing right now?” Or he would sometimes stop in the middle of a fragment, and ask the question and pick up on another fragment or return to a previous one. So, with quick decision-making, in dialogue with himself and the material, and adding the choice of exactly which part of this space in the gallery to be in, he was bringing live thought to the use of a past practice as one of the tools in that decision-making. This is when an archive, like RePlay, begins to make sense to me as a living archive.
Scott deLahunta
Listening to you describe not only how influences and ideas are passed from body to body, for example in the work of Matthias, but also how to think of the composting of the processes and products of past works – in this sense the hard work of building the archive, the actual technical architecture, the intensive labour of collecting, digitising, organising, making searchable etc. – all this offers up the past as potential compost. I am reminded of the installation *Transforming Acts*\(^8\) upstairs. In the book that accompanies that project, Detlev Schneider writes that, “Remembering doesn’t simply just bring the object back the way it was recorded, but rather overwrites it.”\(^9\) That seems like quite a good way of describing the process of Matthias working with the scratch tapes.

Siobhan Davies
The archive needs to be generative because our art form chooses the movement of thought and action as materials rather than trying to find as near to a conclusion as possible in stillness. So we need to archive those things that are precise enough to be rigorous and generative along the lines of the original enquiry, but not so finite that a future artist or user of that archive can’t be moved or move with what they find. We would like more evidence of how we think, make and negotiate, fail and succeed to be more readily available to a far wider group of people. It can be isolating and self-referential if we can’t be tested and tempered by others, and I think far more people would be engaged with what we get up to if we use our future archives in the way we are beginning to question. I believe dance and choreography archives could look like nothing else archived and some of the particular values of these arts could become increasingly understood and assimilated.

Notes
\(^1\) [www.siobhandavies.com/work/table-contents.](www.siobhandavies.com/work/table-contents.)
\(^2\) Download the programme:
For more on the concept of museum in the context of the work of Charmatz: www.museedeladanse.org/en.

See Whatley “Archiving the dance: making Siobhan Davies RePlay.”

RePlay www.siobhandaviesreplay.com/ contains thousands of fully searchable digital records of the company's videos, images, audio and text.

Siobhan Davies Studios, developed in collaboration with Siobhan Davies Dance, were built in 2006 by British award-winning architect Sarah Wigglesworth. www.siobhandavies.com/history-of-the-building.

Penelope Wehrli’s and Detlev Schneider’s media installation Transforming Acts seeks to show the processes of inspiration and transformation within contemporary dance in Europe in the last three decades of the last century in pieces by exemplary protagonists: Pina Bausch, Laurent Chétouane, Jo Fabian, Jan Fabre, Johann Kresnik, Thomas Lehmen, Heiner Müller, Einar Schleef, Meg Stuart, Robert Wilson and The Wooster Group.


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Biographies

Siobhan Davies is a British choreographer who rose to prominence in the 1970s. She is currently Artistic Director of Siobhan Davies Dance where she applies choreography across a range of creative disciplines and works closely with collaborating artists to ensure their own artistic enquiry is part of the creative process.

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Scott deLahunta has worked as a writer, researcher and organiser on a range of international projects bringing performing arts with a focus on choreography into conjunction with other disciplines and practices. His current interest is in how to communicate embodied forms of knowing in the absence of the body.

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