

Live Art in Scotland: Farah Saleh

This interview was conducted online via Zoom on 1st September 2021 as part of the Live Art in Scotland research project at the University of Glasgow.

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Stephen Greer (SG): A question I could maybe start with: I think I read an interview with you talking about how you had trained in ballet as a child in a few different contexts but then had come to contemporary dance because of the greater possibilities that were afforded for you. That was partly to do with being able to work with more pedestrian and uncodified forms of movement. I don't if that's a good place to come into talking about the body as an archive, but does that still hold true? Is that what drew you to contemporary dance?

Farah Saleh (FS): Yes, very much. I started ballet because my parents saw that I was interested in movement in general. At parties, I was just moving so they thought maybe she needs ballet. After a few years of training, I felt that was very much limiting my ways of moving. Then we moved from Jordan to Palestine through the Oslo agreement and there there was no ballet, so I didn't know what to do. I wasn't interested in Dabke, the Palestinian traditional dance because it's another coded dance which is very much related to historical gestures and movements that Palestinian farmers and peasants were performing in their work. It works in an interesting way as a reappropriation of our culture, history, and narrative that was appropriated by Israel, but it's not for me. I know some great artists working with it but it's another coded, narrow language, so slowly, slowly contemporary dance started developing in Palestine and I was part of that movement. Then I went to study in Italy, Linguistic and Cultural Mediation, I did my contemporary dance studies there. From there, I just continued [laughs].

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SG: [Laughs]. Okay, great. I'm interested in the thread that seems to run through a lot of your work, which is to do with embodied memory and the way in which you seem to be working with different kinds of sometimes quite pedestrian, ordinary gestures which are translated or transformed through the register of choreography or the register of dance. I don't know whether one of the ways of dipping into some of your work is talking about that process of working with a particular repertoire of gestures and movements which isn't fixed and using that as a starting place for your work.

FS: Yes, from 2014, I started this research titled the Archive of Gestures and that's very specific about working with the body as archive to unearth Palestinian narratives that were oppressed by Israeli occupation. It is part of a much bigger archive movement in Palestine where people work with food and reappropriate the narrative of food, or photography that was looted is now being collected again, or texts or drawings that were stolen. For me, it's really the body, although there is a much bigger movement around the archive, which is a decolonial movement to reappropriate how we represent ourselves as Palestinians and I approach it with the body because I feel that the body has more layers than physical archives. There's an affective one, a personal collective one, so an individual connected to a collectiveness, there's cognitive, so a lot of bodymind that I don't find in physical archives, but I have nothing against them because they're great. When I find material that was looted and now they are reincorporated, that's great. It's closer to me. That started in 2014 and it somehow generated five different works or narratives let's call them. Some are interactive video dance installations and some are live participatory or interactive live performances and they are all under this umbrella of the Archive of Gestures. In 2017, I started a practice-based PhD around the same research at Edinburgh College of Art. I continued the research, which was even more informed by theory, but I was already doing that a little bit before the PhD. There is a cluster of my performance around that, maybe that's what you noticed going between my work and some other works are not strictly inside this research, but of course there are elements of it.

SG: I guess something like the project called *Free Advice* I can see has parallel logic but is maybe not part of that cluster of works. There is one work where you are in the street in Ramallah, Vienna, and Budapest and one other place.

FS: Providence.

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SG: That was a process by which you were encountering or taking part in dialogues and then taking those back into the studio as material which was generating performance. Am I right in thinking the first two in the Archive of Gestures series are *Cells of Illegal Education* in 2014 and –

FS: *A Fidayee Son in Moscow*.

SG: Thank you. Both of those have a life as video works or as interactive video dance installations. Can you tell me a little about that form, about using video dance in your practice? I get the sense it is both the expression of deliberate artistic choices and also the expression of working with a different set of constraints or conditions and particularly when you're working internationally.

FS: Yes. For me, a very important element is looking at how gestures can be transmitted and disseminated as archive material. It's not only about me re-enacting or unearthing hidden gestures through the hidden narratives, but it's a lot about transmitting these gestures to other people so that they will have an afterlife in other people's bodies. That's why, for me, video is one way to do it. Funnily enough, *A Fidayee Son in Moscow* was transformed into live performance, so I'd really like to experiment with both. *A Fidayee Son in Moscow* was really the first narrative. I was trying to experiment with this interactive part with the audience where you don't stand about touching the video and something happens, instead, it's me giving instructions to the audience members. At the original installation in Ramallah at the YAYA awards event, there were four different, small classrooms that we created in space with the setting of a classroom, so really recreating a little bit while transforming and deforming the setting of the school and having elements of imagination, but really letting the bodies enter the setting and then me with the videos talking to the audience members and asking them to try some of gestures in the form of a teacher teaching a class. One of the times they had to write a letter to their parents imagining that they were students in the school. For me, it's really a medium. It's whatever medium I need to test or experiment with in this specific narrative and this specific way of transmitting the gestures.

SG: I'm conscious that those instructions or invitations in the video are mirrored in live encounters. I was rewatching some of the documentation of your work this morning and I'm conscious of the ways in which you sometimes invite your live audiences to, I think you say to follow me. I wonder about your experience of the responsiveness of audiences. This is

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partly informed by my sense of how people can be very hesitant and will stand back and just be like, I just want to watch, and that breaking the seal and becoming a participant in a work can be shaped by so many different factors. What's your experience of that invitation? Do you have a sense of how or why people will actually choose to follow?

FS: Yes, it's a lot about the invitation as you say, so it's how you frame it and how much you can be assertive so it's also the character. In the school I was really interested in this character of the teacher that I got from my brother when I was talking to him about the school because he was one of the students there. I was interested in giving orders more than invitation. When it was transformed into a live performance, the character of order remained. Of course people had the choice to follow in an installation but they didn't have any choice in the live performance so you would see a hundred people in a theatre space rising and doing the gestures which is a little bit intimidating. It makes you think of regimes and masses doing what they're told to do. Specifically, there, it wasn't an invitation, it was an order. In other narratives, it often became more of an invitation because of the context and the narrative and why I got people to feel as if it's an exchange rather than a transmission of gestures and narratives and stories. For instance, with *Cells of Illegal Education*, there is a set-up of a kitchen and audience members have instructions, so less than orders [laughs] but more than an invitation, but they can choose. This was transformed into a live performance where in the instructions I say, enter one by one and leave twenty seconds between you because that's how students used to enter because otherwise Israeli military would catch them and put them in prisons as cells of illegal education. Then, audience members are invited to have a fruit and many people were having fruit all the time, it was a very familiar setting of popular education. They had to take care when entering the space because I usually put obstacles there to reflect the context of how people would arrive at a setting where they would learn. The last was to exit from a different space, so to enter and exit at different points. They were easy instructions and most people were following them happily and not feeling pressure or that it was an order, so it really depends on the narrative.

SG: I'm thinking that sometimes in invoking that sense of control or order is part of the dynamic of the work. I'm thinking here about *Gesturing Refugees* where, if I've understood the work, there is a dynamic of questioning which is mirroring or bringing up the process of

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interrogation that refugees are routinely exposed to and that the invitation there is not an invitation for a reason. It's to do with articulating a particular power structure, I guess.

FS: Yes, which is also tricky in the sense that it's multi-layered. The intention is not really to have a power structure but to perform typical gestures around refugees to undo them in the performative space. The progression part where we are outside of the performance space is really to prepare the audience to become future refugees, but it's really a joke [laughs]. People take it seriously, but for me it's really making fun of the stereotypical gestures that refugees do and the ones they see on tv.

SG: The narrative of passive victimhood if you like?

FS: Passive victim, but also these repetitive things, the sorrow and torture. Poor refugees. I'm really happy to reproduce that with them in order to undo that with real gestures of refugee artists inside the performance space. That's what they experience afterwards depending on their answers on the landing cards. Again, with very stupid, ironic questions like what the size of your boxer is or what's your favourite shampoo, and depending on your answers, you see the performance. You're divided into groups which happens to refugees and all the stupid questions that they ask you. If you make a mistake, then you're refused asylum, the process is longer, or they call you to an office and it's all very arbitrary.

SG: I hadn't really captured the arbitrariness of that process as being what's brought to light there. I was watching some of the documentation of the development process for *Gesturing Refugees* and you were working in Dance Base in Edinburgh and collaborating with other artists working remotely and that sort of practice has become quite commonplace over the last year. I had to really remind myself that that was in 2017 or 2018 and that was a process that you had developed there and then for that project because your collaborators were unable to travel or unable to come to Scotland. Can you tell me a little bit about that process and how it evolved through the act of it?

FS: Yes, so a week before we started the residency the visas were denied for both of them and we were like oh, what shall we do. The decision was to work anyway. There was no Zoom, I think, so we worked with Skype and Messenger and we experimented with which form we liked more. There wasn't an idea to have it as a participatory performance with me and the video artists, it was just about working together. That was the first idea, the first

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residency. It was about finding a format that could work for the three of us. I needed an extra router in the studio at Dance Base, so it was really basic. It was really about us exchanging our personal stories of refugeehood, including funny ones and not so funny ones, and to work with re-enactment and transmission between us as a group of peers. That was the first period and then it became a choice to see what we could do with that. Video as mediation and then remediation with live digital platforms and to see how we could re-enact and transform each other's gestures and find ways to transmit that to audiences. From the second residency in 2018, there was the idea of creating this completely interactive/participatory performance from the beginning to the end with them pre-recorded on screen and with me and a video artist who is also a performer in the space.

SG: Were those artists that you'd worked with before? I'm always interested in how collaborative relationships come together.

FS: Which ones do you mean?

SG: In *Gesturing Refugees*, I haven't got a note of their names in front of me, but the other artists that you worked with. How did that relationship come about?

FS: Fadi and Hamza, yes. So, I knew Hamza from Palestine from different projects. Fadi I got in touch with for this specific project, but then we worked together again in *PAST-inuous*, the last project that I recreated also over digital platform.

SG: Was that imagined in the first instance as a digital collaboration?

FS: Yes, very much before the covid thing happened. Then we did it during covid, which worked well. I have no problem with that, everyone is working in this way, which is good. When lots of us have similar embodied knowledge and experience, we can connect with things differently, the famous affect or empathy. It's the same with *What My Body Can/t Remember*. It's a live performance where I really try to remember and sometimes I cannot remember what my body was doing in 2002 under Israeli invasion in the West Bank Ramallah curfew. Of course, curfew and lockdown are not the same thing, there are no bombings in lockdown and there is water and electricity and food, but there is confinement. Lots of people here and in the lockdown all over the world went back to their bodies in artistic practice. For me it's interesting for people to experience *What My Body Can/t Remember* during the pandemic and kinesthetic empathy, how their body would react and

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how they go into their own personal archives and remember things themselves because it's a lot of dialogue between me and the audience. It's a promenade performance. I remember and then I talk to them about memory, body, archive and I ask them to dig into their own memories. I think after this experience, they might live it differently.

SG: Yes, they might come to the work with a different frame. Am I right in thinking *What My Body Can/t Remember* is with another video artist, Owa Barua, and that the work itself does incorporate live film?

FS: Yes.

SG: There is a sort of process of archiving or documentation which happens within the work. I read a review which said there was a sort of deliberate gesture of deleting that footage at the end of the performance, can you tell me a little bit about that dynamic?

FS: Yes, so while I remember the rooms in my house in Ramallah and the people follow me through the space, I talk to them a lot about memory and archive. Towards the end, I ask them to dig into their own memory and remember a memory that's important to them and to try to remember how they were moving with their eyes closed and I continue to give instructions or a task with their eyes closed for two or three minutes. The video artist, Owa, is very much with me through the whole performance. While I'm remembering, he captures that because this is our practice, he is always with me while I'm doing it so we're sharing a practice of remembering with the audience. Towards the end I ask them to close their eyes and he films them with their eyes closed remembering these movements and gestures. Then I ask them to open their eyes and remember with their eyes open and then he puts the footage on the screen, and they see themselves remembering with their eyes closed and open, which is about three minutes. Then I ask them to participate in the process of remembering and digging into their personal archives which is the practice that I was doing and then we just delete it, which reflects the power of the archive and who decides what remains and what doesn't. There are ethical questions about people having their eyes closed and being filmed, so it's a chance to reflect on many different things together, but for me it's a lot about the archive and which gestures are there. Then of course we are in Europe and it's about ethics, which we faced a lot in *Gesturing Refugees*. This was of course raised by people who have not experienced refugeehood. I don't know if you saw the video of *Gesturing Refugees*, but there is a part where I re-enact gestures of a dancer, a Syrian

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refugee in Lebanon who committed suicide in 2018. Before telling the story, I ask the audience to re-enact like myself because for me it's to bring his gestures out of Lebanon and that's why I invite them to do it. I tell them this after they re-enact and for some people, especially people who have not experienced any impediment to their movement or their wishes, it is very problematic and unethical. That's another big question but I don't want to resolve it. To re-enact the gestures of a dead person, I wonder why he died, colonial powers making war in Syria.

SG: I think about that dynamic of anxiety of those people who enacted that gesture and then became uncomfortable when they discovered what it was and what that discomfort is standing in for, like what are not discomforted by in this narrative or in this context.

FS: When they talked to me after the performance, some of them were angry because I didn't ask permission from the person. Did you ask permission for him to become a refugee when all the European powers decided to make a mess in Syria? No [laughs]. I did ask his family and friends though. I did ask permission for the footage. I asked his family if I could use his footage and talk about his story. I did that because I wanted to because that's how things are done. I understand to a certain extent, but I can't completely understand it.

SG: As you said, it feels like there is a real desire to present a situation or a dynamic, not give an audience a tidy answer. You said you don't actually want to resolve that, you would rather it be a site of complication.

FS: Yes, because even in *What My Body Can't Remember* people really enjoyed that bit. It's silent, there is no sound, you see gestures and people really trying to remember. You see how the body becomes when the body is trying to remember. When they start gesturing or doing these little movements, it's amazing. You see the process for three or four minutes. Then that disappears and they're like you really deleted it, why.

SG: Yes. The other thing I was interested in asking you about knowing a little bit about the international scope of your work is the context and the festivals and dance spaces which are making space for this kind of practice. I'm conscious that as in theatre and lots of other arts practices, many institutions are set up to support the kind of formalised arts practice that we were talking about at the beginning of our conversation and then there are places like Dance Base or The Work Room which have an approach to dance or choreography which

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seems, from the outside as a non-practitioner, to have a deliberately broad sense of what dance might involve and the questions it might be capable of asking and answering. I don't know if you can speak to your sense of what characterises that kind of approach?

FS: Yes, I think slowly slowly things are opening up. As you said, there are lots of practitioners starting to work in gallery spaces or different spaces, open spaces and who don't want a black box to perform in, or their work isn't created for that. I think the venues reacted to that and it wasn't their intention, which is great. It's normal that artists drive the change. The Fruitmarket Gallery noticed that and they are giving space every now and then for performance. The Work Room is a space where you can create work and lots of the work created there, some of it goes onstage and some not. Now with the pandemic there is a lot of stuff being developed for outside. We've developed in the studio but also in a lot of open-air, site-specific places etcetera. Dance Base is open to whatever form from burlesque to breakdance to dance installations, they're just open to whatever you call dance or choreography which is great. There is also the CCA in Glasgow. I performed *Gesturing Refugees* at the CCA and that was really great, and also *Brexit means Brexit!* It's not part of this research but it has elements of it. So, I think venues are responding. Next week I'm coming to Glasgow for a meeting with GoMA because I taught a workshop there and then interest in collaboration started and so I might present something although their spaces are very specific. They want performance in their building, they just don't know what performance needs. We're doing an ABC discussion which is great. It's great that there is some kind of change. I had a meeting yesterday with the Talbot Rice Gallery here in Edinburgh and they still don't get it [laughs]. I was proposing as part of my viva, hopefully at the end of next year, that I'd like to bring the five works together in the same space over three days and have discussions and workshops as the Archive of Gestures. They were like yes; we can give you this small room. You put all your installations there. I was like do you know the concept of the Archive of Gestures, it's live performance. I think they are interested, but it's really about telling them what that entails. There is still a bit of a gap.

SG: A gap between an interest or a desire and them understanding what a work needs.

FS: Yes and especially because they are the gallery of the University so my supervisor said of course, they have to give you the space and then I went to talk to them and I'll probably

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need to talk to The Fruitmarket Gallery or CCA or somewhere else to do my viva because the gallery of the University has no clue what performance entails.

SG: So, it has expertise, but it's really tightly focussed. It doesn't mean they're not interested in other things, but their focus means they are not set up to be able to accommodate or welcome other kinds of practice.

FS: Their space is fantastic; it could work very well for performance like live art or dance. They do have the tech and the space; they just don't know how it works. I don't know if they want to know a lot about it. Some other venues are really working on learning more.

SG: Yes. One of the things that I keep running into in this project is a little bit of a sense of.. amnesia isn't quite the right word, but a sense that there is progress with these conversations with spaces and with venues of different kinds, but also that they keep happening. There is knowledge that gets built up and then lost and so you might go through a period where there are curators or programmers who have a sense of how live art might work in their building or how dance or choreographic practice can sit within their framework but then that person moves to a different job or leaves and then that knowledge dissipates and that building falls back to the default setting of what an art gallery is supposed to be. I keep wondering about how you sustain that knowledge without codifying it.

FS: Yes, even Tramway has great spaces but for some reason they have a curator and programmer for visual arts and a curator and programmer for performing arts and it's very difficult to cross over. I have been begging them to present *PAST-inuous* as a live performance, because I'm transforming it into a live performance, in one of the galleries. Not the huge one, the smaller one because it works much better than in T4 which is like a black box. It's like we can't have the gallery, it's for the visual arts programmer. I'm like why is it two different worlds. So I have to go to T4 and empty it and not have seats, but that's where performing arts or live art has to go [laughs].