A talk on archival practices, ghosts of remembrance, and the Western canon with Alex Hennig and Ismail Fayed
[Shortened and edited version of a Zoom talk from November 3rd, 2022]

As part of the cooperation of "*Encounters* meets *Archivkompliz*innen - Tanzarchive in Bewegung*" by Radialsystem and Tanzarchiv Berlin, dramaturg Alex Hennig (Frankfurt/GER) lead a conversation with dramaturg Ismail Fayed (Cairo/EGY) on the practice of archiving and the institution of the archive. This dialogical interview is a critical exchange from an international and intersectional perspective on examples of archival practice and the critique of colonialist-influenced systems of power inherent in the idea of the archive in the Western world.
In 2022, the project "Archiv-Kompliz*innen - Tanzarchive in Bewegung" (Archive Accomplices – Dance Archives on the Move) provided the framework for four artistic pilot projects that point the way to the self-image of a future dance archive for Berlin. The selected artists and institutions were given the task of critically examining questions of archive, canon, documentation, and historiography in dance, of tradition, narratives, and missing parts. The history of Berlin's dance institutions and their interconnections with each other played just as much a role as the individual academic or artistic practice.

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Alex Hennig Let me jump into our conversation with the following: I was born in 1989 in East Berlin, in the last days of the GDR. From the time of the fall of the Berlin Wall there is video footage of former Stasi *[the secret police of the GDR]* employees spending months, day and night, erasing documents that were collected in the Stasi-Archives. During the GDR's existence an enormous amount of information was collected and preserved there, and when the regime fell apart they were trying to erase as much as possible. I assume we always must consider a wider context of "the archive" not as a singularity but as a phenomenon that cannot be approached without the question of power dynamics, politics of representation, and embodied history. Who is archiving what for what purpose and how do we then deal with this information? And, of course, this can also be transferred to archives of dance or performing arts. I would be curious to hear your thoughts on that.

Ismail Fayed It's interesting to look at existing archives, because when it's not the state that is documenting or gathering archives, then it's usually the impulse to preserve something that is under threat of being erased or forgotten. But when it is the state that is collecting and documenting information, it's usually for the purpose of control. I don't think that any state-controlled archive is kept just out of the need to organize history. No, it has to do with controlling the narrative, the narrative about the nation, the story of that nation, especially in culture or the arts. And in Egypt we have some of the oldest archives in Africa,

in the Middle East, whether theater, dance, or the press, you name it. And I can't imagine any of it being seen or interpreted, even by the state itself, as anything other than an attempt to control and construct a particular narrative about the nation, about Egypt as a nation. The problem is that how archiving happens in state archives is a very bureaucratic process. There is no curating, so everything is documented. And this is where it becomes interesting, because then you have this multiplicity of voices. Things that are so different are put together in the same archive, under the same umbrella.

For example, the Fine Arts Sector has a website open to the public. It has PDF scans of all the catalogs for all the exhibitions that are done in state-owned galleries or art spaces going back to 2008. Anyone can go online and download those catalogs. But then there are no particular criteria. Every single exhibition that takes place on those premises will be documented. Everything. There is no hierarchy, there is no preference, there's no framework or paradigm by which those documents are organized. And to me, that makes it super interesting because then you have everything in that archive, but you have no story; you have no sense of it because it's everything that happened. At the same time, I'm always surprised at that obsessive desire to gather information. The same way the Stasi was obsessed with gathering information because there is always that sense that this piece of information might lead on to a potential clue, a potential conspiracy. And the same goes in Egypt. Everything is documented, not for the love of the arts, God forbid, but for the potential that “oh, this is the key to some kind of subversive action!” — which is not true at all, of course. There are no subversive actions taking place on state-sponsored or state-run art spaces. So it is that desire of control. That control that in a particular moment is happy to destroy all this information. Because it never really cared about the actual content.

AH In archival practices or dealing with archives there is the idea to be neutral and objective in collecting all that information and not constructing a hierarchy. But is it even possible to enter an archive neutrally or objectively? Clearly, I would say no. There is always a kind of curatorial momentum. It’s not possible just to collect something, to tell a story without your own involvement and your own interpretation of what happened. How do we deal with that?

IF That’s a very ongoing kind of process for me, I think. I don’t think you’re ever really resolved about how objective you are or if you set a certain criterion when you are trying to archive or when you're trying to write the story of a certain practice—for example, let's say performing arts or contemporary dance in Egypt in the last 20 years. I don't think you're ever able to have this absolutely transparent kind of position. I think you always come in with a particular vested interest and a particular desire. There is a certain, not necessarily pragmatic desire; it can also be a particular aesthetic desire. And it has to do with your own background, your own history, your own preference. I think what is important is that you practice that exercise of self-reflection. And when I am, let's say, looking at the practice of three or four dancers or choreographers that I've worked with in the past 15 years in Cairo — I give that example because that's an example I know — I then sort of implicate myself in that story and say that those particular practices speak to me in a certain way because they have worked on such and such. And once you implicate yourself in that story and why you're looking at it the way you are looking at it, you allow others either to identify with you or take a different position and say, “I'm not interested at all in that story.” And then they go, and they try to create counter-stories, counter-narratives, which I find to be the most interesting

thing about working with archives or working with materials of history, because you have those different ways of telling a story.

Disappearing and remaining

AH You wrote about disappearance, which is interesting. The theatre and dance philosopher Rebecca Schneider wrote that a performance always remains but that our Western sense of remaining or understanding of remaining is just different. How can we even say that performance remains in documents such as text, video, or other forms of documentation? Isn't performance and the theater the place where we can deal with absence, with traces, and ghosts and all those things?

IF When I wrote that text about disappearing, I really was thinking of it as a queer strategy of survival. Because there is a particular sense of the need to erase a particular experience, of life, of space, of social interactions that happen in a certain way. And it is a particular almost kind of cunning. In Arabic the word is تحايل , which is a beautiful word that I cannot find an exact translation of right now. It is a trick, but it also means to try and appease and to almost ingratiate yourself to someone so that they allow you to exist. So, it's a double sense of trickery, but it is also an appeasement where you try to find a way to communicate with someone, to appeal to their softer, tender side so that they accept you. I was thinking of those two things, that idea of cunning, that you're trying to do something that you should not be doing. And if you're caught the consequences can be severe; you could get killed. And I find that really the cornerstone of any queer experience, those twin processes. And you're right, what I meant by disappearing is not just that those stories or those experiences are forgotten, but that they remain within the fabric of people's memories. So, the most glaring example is the concert of Warda, the Egyptian-Algerian singer who was one of the Divas, an icon, of the 1960–70s of Arabic pop music. And she dressed like a drag queen. There's no way of putting it other than to say that this is a drag aesthetic. And she's a gay icon, of course. And she knew it; people knew it. That remains in people's imagination. That remains when people remember her performing and remember her presence. And the memories of the entire queer community of Warda remain; they leave traces everywhere. So, yes definitely, the traces remain.
Those experiences that we have of such phenomena as musical performance or dance don't disappear. It just takes another person experiencing or remembering it. And then it comes back to life. The major difference when it comes to Western notions of how to record, or dealing with absence or presence, is embodiment. I think up until now I've seen very few actual performing artists or dancers carry that sense of embodiment beyond their performance. And there is that black box of how do we document and preserve this? I think in body-based practices—and I am going to use belly dance because it's the practice I know the most—you embody, you internalize the music, the setting, the choreography, and you carry it with you. And so people remember through their bodies. This is how it's embodied. It's not that I went to a theater, and I sat and watched and then I stood up and left. You know, I went to a public arena. I saw someone dance and I danced with them. And I think that's one major difference when you're trying to understand what remains.
And by that, I don't mean that some performances don't live in your body. Of course, they do. Sometimes even through a second narration. I remember Adham Hafez told me a story about a performance, he saw, "one mysterious Thing, said e.e. cummings", by Vera Mantero, a piece about Josephine Baker. And because Adham is a dancer and

choreographer, he described it in such a moving way that I had the whole piece constructed in my head. I could really imagine myself in that sort of performing body of the dancer on stage. This, of course, can happen. But I don't feel that a lot of the audience have that position towards what they're seeing.

AH I think that is one of the most powerful and constructed arrangements in Western theater perceptions, especially in Germany, that you have this passiveness of the audience and that activeness on stage. There is this idea, especially in German culture and art, that there are the artists on one side and the other people on the other side having a more intellectual, meta-approach to what they see. And by my own writing experience I know this is not true. Because when I write about a piece I saw, I again enter the emotional and bodily state I was in when I was watching the show. And a good text, in my opinion, always brings to life what happened in the show, physically, for the reader. And that's also a very Western approach: If something is not written down afterwards, if you don't have a documentation of it like a kind of extra thing that proves something has happened, then it's quite under the radar of history and can easily disappear in that mainstream reception of art.

Archival practice – Mediums and transmission

AH And then with that in mind: What do we want people in the future to know about what happened? Because you must start somewhere and with something, also with the gap of knowing that you cannot “truly” tell a story, with knowing that a story has multiple layers and counter-narratives, as you said. So, how can the multiplicity of voices be heard and preserved? Does this mean the end of the document, the end of the paper? How do we archive dance and performance?

IF Yes, that's also a very important question because there is an impulse to have a digital form for it, because it's much more democratic and it can constantly evolve if it's a digital medium. But also, there is a desire to have a physical source where you can go and see and read. My guess is that it's going to be both. There is going to be a digital avatar, like a better version of it, and also a physical document. They are different, and they serve different purposes. But I think both are important.
I had the pleasure of working with Myriam Van Imschoot who was a dance dramaturg for many years and co-founder of SARMA (Laboratory for Discursive Practices and Expanded Publication), a lab and platform that rethinks modes of writing and publishing. She, along with others, initiated this platform called Oral Site, which gathers massive documents about contemporary dance, audio formats, text, and videos. I find this a very interesting approach. Because sometimes you want to hear the artist speak about their work in their own terms. And sometimes you want to read about how their contemporaries saw and received the work. And sometimes you want to see the artist move before your eyes. And having that sort of variety, whether you hear or watch or read, goes back to the point about what happens when you displace a certain practice in different mediums. Certain things then emerge, and I think this is the same thing for the archive. If you're trying to archive you must play with the medium: Certain things lend themselves better to audio, certain things are better seen like a moving image of the performer. I think that's key. But I also think that there should be a possibility to invite people to try to take on that score and perform it. So, part of the archive should be an actual set of instructions about how to perform that dance or that piece, which to me is super interesting as part of that story. Because then, if there's a

score for a choreography and you try to perform it, you understand a lot about the dancer or choreographer, instead of just hearing them speak or seeing them perform. Maybe that would also be something to throw into that process of archiving.
And a very interesting point when we're talking about how to archive dance or performance — and this is also linked to embodiment, and it's a very Arabic thing as well — is transmission. Teaching another generation of practitioners, a dance, a technique, or a style is an archival practice. I think people tend to overlook that as an essential part of archiving, because if you teach ten people a particular style of dance then this means their bodies become reservoirs for the entire history of that practice. And I think that is never given as much importance as documenting or filming. But the act of teaching or transmission is far more intimate and intersubjective and almost encapsulates the entire experience of archiving in that particular act of transmission.

Archives in Egypt – state regulation and democratic approaches

AH I would like to ask you about the situation of archives in Egypt, especially in Cairo, where, as you mentioned in the beginning, everything is getting recorded but the access to it is highly limited by the state. Could you tell a bit about that?

IF Sure. I would also build on what you said, how we are archiving right now, because this is a question that I'm very busy with. You need the experts, you need the historians, but also, how could this be a democratic process? And this is a question, of course, many of us were busy with during the revolution *[the Egyptian Revolution in 2011]*, because the whole idea was the voice of the people. How can you create archives that allow for the people to speak? Those questions endure, even ten years afterwards. So now when we are thinking about how to document contemporary art, we're asking the same questions. How could this be a collective process?
We have one of the oldest modern archives probably in the world, in Africa and the Middle East, the National Archives, which is quite an extensive archive. But, increasingly, especially since the 1970s, the National Archives became heavily securitized. You would need tons of permissions to access them and need to submit a full detailed proposal of what you intend to do with the information that you want to have access to. It's a very arduous process to get into the archive and get information out of it. They're archiving everything you can imagine, all the press, all the media, and even all the cultural events, whether theater or dance or music, are documented and filmed in other state-affiliated archives too (The TV & Broadcasting Union, The Supreme Council of Culture, etc.). And although these are very meticulous archives, you would still need a security permission to access the material. And God forbid you want to use the material, because that would never happen! A lot of historians — among them Khaled Fahmy who is the former Sultan Qaboos Academic Chair of Modern Arabic Studies at Cambridge University — took an initiative in 2011 with the revolution to try to open the National Archives, to democratize the archives. This was in the heyday of the revolution and a lot of historians got on the bandwagon. They went and met the head of the archives and said: We need to digitize the archives and make them open to the public! This information belongs to the public! In parallel with those conversations Khaled and others were having with the National Archives there was also a conversation happening on the Tahrir Square itself with visual artists, journalists, photojournalists, videographers, people working in the media. They were also talking about how to document what is happening. And this gave birth to the idea of Tahrir Archives, one of several

independent media collectives that were present that time on Tahrir Square, trying to think of alternative ways to document and archive what's happening. Some of this material would later be transformed by the artist Lara Baladi into a very important project called "Vox Populi – The Voice of the People". Those collectives of artists kept thinking, how do we include non-artists, non-specialists into this process of collecting and gathering material? And this happened by using footage that was taken by mobile phones; people could just send their own material. This happened by using footage that was uploaded to Facebook and other social media platforms. This happened by creating a platform where anyone can post any photos they want. And this impulse to have a collective kind of approach to documenting or archiving an event where so much was at stake stayed with a lot of people, especially the artists. And fast forward ten years after the revolution, at a moment when the contemporary art scene in Egypt is also facing a lot of pressure and a lot of erasure — and I'm talking about the independent alternative art scene — we are confronted with the same question: What do we want to archive and how do we archive it? To me, it must continue in that spirit of artists, historians and experts being able to contribute to that process, but also audiences, the people themselves.

On the idea of canon

AH At the end of our talk I would like to raise a question that might be too big to be properly discussed now. However, I'm very keen to hear your point of view here. So, the question is concerning the so-called canon that we have in dance or performance history. What do you think about the canon within the archive?

IF Yes, it is a very big question! Well, it's very hard to think about canons without thinking about, again, authority: who defines the canon? What gets included in the canon? What gets excluded from the canon? There's that sort of immediate reaction when we think about canons, and, therefore, we cannot think about canons in the context of performing arts, theater or dance, or whatever, without thinking about the Western canon. It becomes very clear that modern and contemporary dance in the Western definition have very particular histories like Rudolf von Laban, Mary Wigman, Doris Humphrey, etc. I think there are some very, very clear reference points, as well as a very clear timeline in contemporary dance. The same with postmodern dance: you have The Judson Church, Trisha Brown, Lisa Nelson, Steve Paxton, and so on. That's a very specific set of reference points and an outline through which you can see a particular practice. Of course, anyone who wanted to learn contemporary dance or modern dance had to study that whether they're Egyptian or Lebanese or from Ouagadougou or anywhere else in Africa, the Middle East, or even Southeast Asia. Some went to the Graham School, some went to P.A.R.T.S., some to SNDO, and so on. What does that mean? It means that there is a constant question, once they go back to their contexts, whether it's Mumbai, Beirut, Cairo, Casablanca: What does it mean to then carry that particular tradition of movement, of choreography, those references, that aesthetics that is very specific? And that's another big question about canons: Is it really universal? Does it translate? What do audiences in Morocco, Egypt, India, or Pakistan understand when they watch Anne Teresa de Keersmaeker, or Pina Bausch? How does that speak to their own experience of body and dance and their definitions of dance? That's a very big, contested issue for many dancers in the region of Southeast Asia and North Africa.

It's a very big question because those regions already have traditions of dance and movement. Some were definitely influenced by modern dance, ballet, ballroom dancing, and Broadway musicals. And I just sent an email to Tümay Kılınçel showing her one of those examples of modernist interpretation of belly dance and folkloric dance that took place in the 1960s after independence. There is definitely mutual influence. And I'm not so naïve as to say, “No, our practices are completely isolated or native!” No, they're not. Especially dance and music are two forms that are very open to influence, incredibly porous. So, there is this issue that you do have a particular set of traditions developed in response to that so-called Western foreign influence and it did change a lot of it, and even belly dance changed dramatically from the 19th century onwards. And you do have traditions that evolved but did not evolve in the same way that postmodern dance or post-dramatic theater did. And that's one of the main points of tension when you talk about canons: The references that people in the region, for example, still find very relevant are completely out of fashion in Europe. Many theater makers in Egypt still find absurd theater, especially of the 1950s and 60s, very relevant to their reality. Eugène Ionesco and the whole crowd — that's the number one reference. Why? Because it speaks to a very specific social and political reality. My problem is that Western curators, dramaturgs, or directors come to Egypt or to Lebanon or Syria or go to Morocco or Tunisia and they always have the same comment: This is so old fashioned! This is so passé and so uninteresting! — And to me, that is not just ignorant and incredibly condescending, it shows complete lack of understanding about what translates, what gets to pass over those different cultural and historical barriers, and, to go back to what you said about Rebecca Schneider, what remains in people's consciousness and the collective imaginary that holds on to certain aspects or references of the canon because it makes sense to them. It makes sense to this audience to hold on to Martha Graham.

And the canon, the so-called universal canon, is always the Western canon. That's the problem for me. Because who said that Samia Gamal, an Egyptian belly dancer, is not as influential as Martha Graham? When she started incorporating diagonal movements, cutting space diagonally, in belly dance, that was a true revolution! Everyone after Samia Gamal owes her a debt because she broke into space, which is completely the antithesis of belly dance. This woman redefined belly dance singlehandedly. So why isn’t this in the canon, for example? And then if you do refer to Gamal as a point for you in the canon, they say: Who the fuck is this? Why is this important? — And then you must explain that this is important because it's the first time someone breaks into space diagonally and belly dance is very centered, etc. That lack of interest but also the burden of constantly having to defend your choices vis-a-vis what's in the canon I find is not just tedious but very disheartening. You are constantly fighting to be in conversation with the canon.
And it's not like people are curious; when I say Samia Gamal or Naima Akef, people are not like, “Who is that? We'd like to know the practice more! Why is this a reference for you? Tell me more!” — No, there is no curiosity, which is a huge problem because it's a very asymmetrical relationship. I have to know everything about Western dance and performance inside and out. I have to see tons of performances and be very fluent in that language. And then when I talk about my own practice, my own history of practice, if I mention any of those names, with the exception of people who know the practice or were involved in it, no one would know. And no one is interested to know.

AH Well, yes, nothing to add.
[Both laughing]