

CHAPTER 11

THINKING THROUGH MICROPRACTICE: AN EMBODIED INTERROGATION OF THE ARCHIVE

By Alan Parker

INTRODUCTION

I stumbled into my doctoral research through my practice as a choreographer and a performer. While teaching part-time at several universities between 2009 and 2015, I had been inspired in much of my creative practice by the interrelationship between performance and the archive. I had created several performance works, sometimes alone and sometimes with collaborators, exploring different strategies and approaches for re-imagining specific works from the archive of contemporary dance in South Africa. In these early experiments, I was exploring ways to re-imagine these past dances, originally created by a range of seminal South African artists and choreographers, in order to create something new – distinct and idiosyncratic performances that are created in dialogue with their earlier iterations or historical origins. From this basis, I also began to delve deeper into some of the existing theories and discourses, written on the archive, more generally, as well as its positionality in post- and decolonial contexts, and the role played by the archive in debates concerning the ontology of performance (Phelan, 1993), the nature of liveness (Auslander, 1999) and the complex relationship between the body and the archive (Lepecki, 2010; Mbembe, 2002 & 2015; Schneider, 2011; Taylor, 2003). From these initial practice-based investigations and through the groundwork of a broad theoretical overview, I began my formal doctoral studies in 2016.

The title of my doctoral project was *Anarchival dance: choreographic archives and the disruption of knowledge*. This was a practice-led investigation of the archive through the creation of several choreographic and performed archives. The project was located, broadly, in the field of archive studies with a particular focus on the relationship between performance and the archive, considered from a decolonial perspective. As a point of departure, the research recognised (after Taylor, 2003) the historical rift established through colonialism between the body and the archive, and between logocentric, document-biased epistemologies and embodied, performative ways of knowing. By engaging with the archive, critically, through performance and the body, the research sought to explore this historical rift and surface some of the ways in which an “anarchival”²⁸ (Massumi, 2016) approach to the archive might

28 The notion of the anarchival is extensively conceptualised in *The go-to how-to book of anarchiving* (Murphie, 2016) as an embodied encounter with the archive and its traces that is guided by a desire to create new expressions and thinking, emerging from the traces of the past. The anarchival is presented as an embodied methodology for the reconsideration of dominant or hegemonic epistemologies and a means

initiate a different kind of thinking about the past, its archival traces and the effect of these traces when engaged with, creatively, through the body.

The research was conducted over a period of five years, between 2015 and 2019, and occurred in, with and through my own body. During the research project, three distinct but interrelated creative processes were explored, each resulting in a solo performance, choreographed and performed by myself as the researcher. The works created were *Detritus for one* (2015, Video 11.1), *Sacre for one* (2016, Video 11.2) and *Ghostdance for one* (2017, Video 11.3). Importantly, both the choreographic process of creating each individual work, as well as its sharing through public performance, informed and underpinned the thinking of the project. Alongside the creative practice, a parallel process of reflective writing, theoretical research and the analysis of selected performances by other South African artists and

practitioners occurred, as a means to layer, complement and develop the thinking emerging from the embodied research. As such, the findings of the project were presented in both products emerging from the research: the digital recordings of the three performance works, available online, and in an in-depth written explication, which was ultimately presented for examination.



Video 11.1: *Detritus for one*, 2015, video recording – [here](#). Videography by Dex Goodman, courtesy of the National Arts Festival.



Video 11.2: *Sacre for one*, 2016, video recording – [here](#). Embedded video at page number in ebook. Videography by Dex Goodman, courtesy of the Cape Town Fringe Festival.



Video 11.3: *Ghostdance*, 2017, video recording. Vimeo link – [here](#). Embedded video at page number in ebook. Videography by Dex Goodman, courtesy if the National Arts Festival.

METHODOLOGICAL FRAMING

From the start of the project the initial methodological framing for the research was conceived as comprising two parallel and integrated layers – embodied creative practice running alongside critical theoretical reading and reflective writing. Resonating with Robin Nelson’s notion of “intelligent practice”, where “theory and practice are rather imbricated within each other as praxis” (2013:62), the project’s research design thus framed the thinking-through of embodied investigation (occurring in rehearsal and performance spaces) in a dialogical and concurrent relationship with a second layer of embodied practice, occurring differently through the embodied acts of writing, theorising, reflecting and analysing (occurring on the computer screen and the page). As Erin Manning, in *The minor gesture* (2016) warns:

to conceive of, and explore, new ways of living and being in the world (Massumi, 2016:7).

“Thought must not be mapped onto practice: it is an emergent, incipient tendency to be discovered in the field of activation of practices co-composing” (2016:41). As such, in the project, the practices of making and writing were understood as symbiotic and dialogical, where both practices co-compose with each other, giving thought and clarity to the other, positioning the practice of writing about embodied creative practice as “an act, alive with the rhythms of uncertainty and the openings of speculative pragmatism” (2016:42). This particular framing of practice within the project recognises that thought emerges, and thinking occurs, within both layers of practice – the making and the writing – as well as in their combining.

In conducting the first layer of practice (performance-making), three different creative research processes were explored, each departing from a different understanding of an archival remain. These categories of archival trace were inspired by Rebecca Schneider’s assertion that archival remains occur in different forms, as “material evidence, haunting trace, reiterative gesture” (2011:37). The creation and performance of each solo work was therefore conceived as a distinct interrogation of a particular encounter between the body of the researcher and one conception of how archives remain, but connected to each other by an overarching question, or “choreographic problem” (Cvejić, 2015): *how might the traces of the archive be re-actualised, differently, through the body?* In the first creative process, *Detritus for one*, memory (understood as being nascent within material archival objects) was explored as an archival trace, where traces of past encounters with specific objects are seen to remain, virtually, within those objects (Figure 11.1). The second process, *Sacre for one*, positioned the trace as an embodied and reiterative gesture – as the remembered physical intensities from past actions which continue to remain, corporeally, in the body (Figure 11.2). The final process, *Ghostdance for one*, framed the ghosts of the dead as hauntological traces, existing in both archival objects as well as the body and its learned behaviours and inherited actions (Figure 11.3). Each creative process was then re-engaged through the second layer of practice (writing) as a means to consider the thinking of each work, differently, in relation to existing theories and discourses, or in comparison to other related performance works by other South African artists.²⁹

All three creative processes were also framed methodologically as “body-centred research” (Parker-Starbuck, 2011:210) where the body of the researcher is recognised as “the means of understanding how performance operates and makes meaning” (2011:210), and where the body is understood as “interpretable and flexible, yet materially and culturally specific” (2011:211). By locating the research in the body of the solo researcher, the analytical, interpretivist and data-collecting tools of the researcher are expanded to also include faculties of somatic, cognitive and sensory experience, thereby placing importance on the affective sensations and feelings felt in the body within the research process. This experiential body within body-centred research remains, importantly,

29 The written thesis analyses performance and installation works by a wide range of local and international artists. South African artists whose works are examined in detail include: Steven Cohen, Dineo Seshee Bopape, Nelisiwe Xaba, Gavin Krastin, Sello Pesa and Igshaan Adams.



Figure 11.1: *Detritus for one* (2015) Dance Umbrella 2017. Photograph by Suzy Bernstein, courtesy of the artist.



Figure 11.2: *Sacre for one* (2016) Cape Town Fringe Festival. Photograph by Betalife Productions, courtesy of the artist.



Figure 11.3 *Ghostdance for one* (2017) National Arts Festival. Photograph by Mia van der Merwe.

“materially and culturally specific” (2011:211), and as such, the subjectivities, politics and representations written in and on the body constitute a significant layer in the research process, where somatic experience emerging from the research is understood as being linked to the specific body (as subject and object) within which the research occurs.

MICROPRACTICE AS METHOD

Inspired by Claire Rousell’s work with the theorisation of Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari, Alan Parker has developed a method of micropractice as embodied research. Micropractice starts with a navigation of the self where personal and subjective experiences, in the form of memories or embodied traces, became departure points for initial research processes. The processes are guided by a conscious desire to constantly displace, minimise or move beyond the self as a centrality, to find ways in which to engage with the archive outside of yourself and your own personal experiences.

TOWARDS MICROPRACTICE

Since the body of the solo choreographer-researcher was positioned as the entry and departure point for the creative research, it became necessary to develop a methodological approach that would encourage pathways within the practice that might move away from the subjective, known and familiar experiences of the lived body toward other spaces, or new territories, but without negating the subjecthood and identity of the researcher altogether. Towards this end, I began to develop an approach to the practical research that attempted to open an in-between space for creative exploration where the body is liminally positioned between subject and object, as both self and not-self. Christoph Brunner (2016:69) identifies this liminal understanding of the body as a crucial component in immersive, anarchival research where the researcher must surrender ‘the self’ rather than *one’s* self. Methodologically, this distinction infers that in order to submerge oneself within an embodied research process, the self of the researcher needs to be decentralised within the process while still acknowledging that the affective experience of process emerges from, and is particular to, the specific body through which the creative research occurs. As such, each of the creative research processes explored in the project, required a similar navigation of the self where personal and subjective experiences, in the form of memories or embodied traces, became departure points for initial research processes but where the processes themselves were guided by a conscious desire to constantly displace, minimise or move beyond the self as a centrality, to find ways in which to engage with the archive outside of myself and my own personal experiences.

During the first creative practice in 2015, this desire to decentre my own personal experience, while still using these felt experiences as departure points for the research, was an intention that was nascent in the practice but not necessarily a methodological approach I was consciously aware of and actively implementing in the practice. While working on

the second creative process, in 2016, I came across the writing of South African performance artist and academic, Claire Rousell, who identifies and describes “micropractice” (Rousell, 2016:9) as one potential approach to conducting anarchival research. Rousell’s instructions for micropractice, drawn from Deleuze and Guattari (1987), became helpful in providing a framework to reconsider the approach I had already been exploring in my creative research and to better understand the benefits and opportunities that such an approach could contribute to the research design, moving forward.

Using Deleuze and Guattari’s guidelines for deterritorialising, Rousell articulates micropractice as a practical strategy for situating the researcher within anarchival research processes (Figure 11.4). Rousell synthesises Deleuze and Guattari as described in the following paragraph.

Instructions for a micropractice

Lodge yourself on a stratum

Experiment with the opportunities it offers

Find an advantageous place on it

Find potential movements of
deterritorialisation, possible lines of flight,
experience them.

Produce flow conjunctions here and there, try
out continuums of intensities segment by
segment

Have a small plot of new land at all times

From A Thousand Plateaus,
Gilles Deleuze & Felix Guattari 1987

Figure 11.4: Image depicting Deleuze and Guattari’s Instructions for a micropractice, from Rousell (2016:9).

The intention of micropractice, Rousell argues, is to provide “a tool, a technique, a set of practices for deterritorialising” (2016:9). By deterritorialising, Rousell refers to Deleuze and Guattari’s theory of deterritorialisation, delineated in *Anti-Oedipus* (1977/ 1972) and *A thousand plateaus* (1987/ 1980). Deterritorialisation refers to the literal and metaphoric removal of oneself from one territory through a line of flight in order to critically locate oneself from the vantage point of another, now reterritorialised, territory. In a practical sense, this understanding of micropractice necessitates situating oneself on a particular “stratum” or within a particular process or territory (in my case, within a particular encounter with a form of archival trace). From this point the researcher experiments with the unique “opportunities” (Rousell, 2016:9) this position or process offers, with an intention of finding potential lines of flight or pathways that can lead the researcher into other territories and other processes. Micropractice thus becomes a useful and effective practical research methodology because it necessitates the location of the subjective researcher within the research but is ultimately focused on the deterritorialising of this position and of this subjectivity in favour of finding other territories, processes and experiences resulting from the initial point of departure. In this way the subjectivity of the researcher is decentred within micropractice even

though it is immersed and inculcated within the research. As such, Rousell proposes that deterritorialising through micropractice presents a strategy through which to question how we “understand our own received positions and shift them” and ask ourselves “can these microshifts in perception create shifts within social movements” (2016:9) beyond our individual, subjective frames of reference?

In the project, micropractice was explored as a uniquely anarchival creative research strategy and was conceptualised through four fundamental principles. The first of these was the recognition that micropractice is not necessarily small (in relation to a larger practice) nor is it a singular component comprising a larger, overarching macro-practice. Micropractice, instead, is understood as a series of multiple, ongoing, inseparable, overlapping, and entangled practices of a qualitatively different kind. A micropractice in this sense could refer to a lengthy, multifaceted process culminating in the sharing of an evening-length performance (such as the overarching process of creating *Sacre for one*), or alternatively, a series of short, relational explorations producing small vignettes, fragments of action or physical images, which come together within the performance (several distinct processes explored during the making of *Sacre for one*). In this way, the three solo performance works comprising the research project are each understood as individual micropractices. Each of these, however, is also understood as emerging from several other diverse micropractices. Secondly, micropractice is essentially an embodied research strategy, occurring at the micropolitical level of the body and its ability to engage with, feel and co-compose with the virtual traces nascent within the archive. Although micropractice occurs in and through the body it also necessitates and encourages, as its third feature, a desubjectivising of the researcher through submersion within research processes. Lastly, the intention and aim of micropractice is always rooted in deterritorialising and the desire to find movement and flow away from one territory (whether a concept, a memory, a feeling or a past dance) to another, but through the unique opportunities of the territory itself, rather than the subjective desires of the researcher.

ON PERFORMANCES THAT THINK

While the application of micropractice was initially seen as a useful means of decentring the researcher and de-subjectivising of the researcher's body, what began to emerge while reflecting and thinking-through these creative processes, as the research progressed, was the significant role this methodology played in making vital space in the research for knowledge and thinking to emerge through the practice itself, beyond the specific intentions and desires of the researcher. This capacity of performance and the body to think and produce thought, positioned the research project within the interrelated fields of performance-philosophy and affect theory (as it relates to philosophy) and served to widen the potential contribution of the research beyond the field of archive studies and the originating intentions of the researcher. Laura Cull describes performance-philosophy as an emerging field of study that is grounded in the understanding that performance constitutes “its own kind of thinking” (2012:3). Cull distinguishes this from more commonplace intersections between performance practice, performance studies and philosophy, where performance is used analytically to illustrate or exemplify philosophical

concepts, or where philosophical concepts are directly applied to performance practice. Performance-philosophy, Cull contends, recognises the ability of performance and all of its (nonhuman) elements to think in and of themselves, and in ways that can sometimes be separate and distinct from the research intentions of the artist-researcher (2012:3).

Through the application of micropractice as an overarching methodology for the project and its insistence on the decentring of the researcher's subjectivities and desires in the research encounter, more space was created within the project for each of the performances to think in their own unique ways. At times this necessitated a markedly different approach to composition and a repositioning of the conventional role of the performer or choreographer within the creative process. This included often stepping back, as the 'author' of the performance, to instead allow the work to find its own form or to take its own shape, rather than trying to form or shape the work according to my own tendencies or compositional preferences. This was vital to the research and during the second layer of the research, the thinking-through of the practice through writing, I began to become more and more aware of thinking in the research that was occurring at the level of form, and of particular disruptions to knowledge conventions that were emerging through the taking-form of the individual performances and their sharing with an audience. The subjective distancing of my self, afforded by micropractice, even though the research was occurring within my own body, enabled me to see and then think-through the research that emerged in the gaps, unintentionally, beyond my own initiating desires, aims and goals.

Since completing my doctoral research in 2020, I have continued to both teach and employ micropractice as a methodological approach to creative and embodied research. While my particular engagement with this methodology was firmly located in relation to the archive and archival disruption, the characteristics and parameters of micropractice are useful, I would suggest, to other contexts and instances of body-based research occurring in other forms and fields as well. Through its focus on immersing the body of the researcher within their specific research territory or field, but underscored by a desire to desubjectify the self in exploring what that unique territory offers, micropractice provides a framework that can be very helpful for artists and researchers who desire to use personal experiences, memories and feelings as departure points for critical investigation, but who also desire to move beyond the personal and the familiar, in order to discover unthought-of places and other territories adjacent, parallel or underneath those selected for exploration. This is what occurred in my explorations, where the disruptions to archival knowledge that I sought to understand, emerged in ways that I could not easily see at the time as the performer performing, but that became more visible and more apparent when I was able to step back and think-through what happened, consider what emerged and continue to grapple with the thinking I actively sought and which emerged through the doing.

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