DEFYING DISTANCE

Farah Saleh
The University of Edinburgh
Edinburgh College of Art
farah.saleh@ed.ac.uk

In 2018 as part of my long-term project the *Archive of Gestures*, I created a participatory dance performance with three Palestinian artist refugees entitled *Gesturing Refugees*. The performance faced many obstacles during the creation period related to UK visa denial to the artists, which resulted in the creation process taking place digitally, as an attempt to defy the physical distance among the artists and later also between the artists and the audience. To insist on this formal and political choice, in 2020 I developed *Past-inuous*, an interactive dance video, created over a digital platform with eleven Palestinian dancers, most third generation refugees, some living in the diaspora and others in Palestine. Through the work, I investigated ways of defying distance between third generation Palestinian refugees, which was created by Israel's regime of dispossession. I did that by experimenting with how a digital platform can be remediated into a creative space for rehearsal, creation and transmission of bodily archives, through an interactive dance video with the viewers. But also by reflecting on the technical issues and delays caused by specific political conditions of disadvantage which arise during such a process, and exploring ways of using these issues in the video itself, so as to reflect the creation process and involve the viewers, especially now that during the pandemic, working at distance through online platforms has become a collective global experience.

In 2014 I started a long-term practice based reseach –the *Archive of Gestures*– that aims at unearthing latent narratives from the Palestinian history, dealing with the body as the main form and source of archive. I conceive an archive as an archeological practice that allows discourse to emerge, through enabling statements to both survive and transform (Foucault, 1972). I treat the body as a privileged site of archive, because differently than other kinds of archive, it involves multiple levels: the affective, the political and the aesthetic (Lepecki, 2016). In my choreographies, I unfold the bodily archives by reenacting, transforming and deforming the gestures of the narratives in my body and the bodies of the other artists who work with me, and by transmitting them to the bodies of audience members through interactive artistic work. My long-term research is resulting into a series of artistic works. One of the lastest is an interactive video dance performance entitled *Gesturing Refugees*. This performance was created between 2017 and 2018 to unearth alternative narratives and gestures of refugeehood, including my own (Figure 1). The creative process faced many obstacles related to visa denial to the refugee artists and the impossibility of our physical encounter in Edinburgh, where the first artistic residency was supposed to take place in Spring 2017. The visas of the dancers were denied by UK authorities and we decided to work over online platforms –*Skype* and *Messenger*– which added new formal and political layers to the performance. The impossibility of physical encounter and the distance imposed on us by the discriminatory international regime of migrations opened up the question of how gestures can be archived and shared remotely, via a digital platform, and how accepting to work remotely, each appearing physically in a different space and time zone, can still constitute a form of collective political and artistic action.

Can media help to defy distance and its political conditions? In *Notes Towards a Performative Theory of Assembly* Judith Butler (2015) argues that also the bodies of people who don't appear in public space because of a physical impossibility
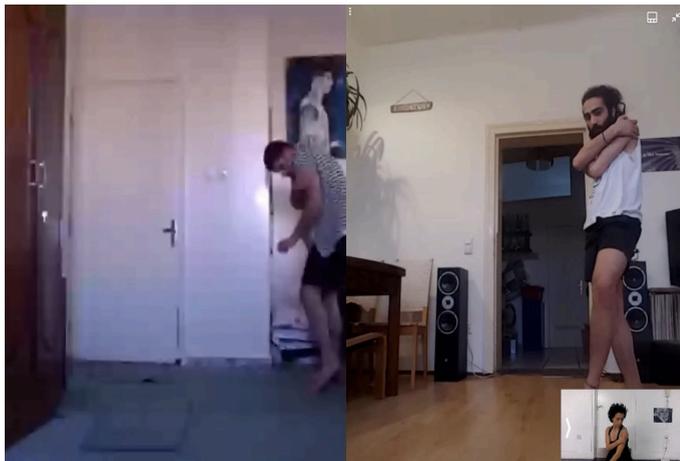
of appearing, can still be still be considered as political bodies that exist, have rights and reclaim the right to appear and act in concert. According to Judith Butler, performativity involves both necessity and agency, so that even when people act because of embodied necessity –for example the need for food, shelter, freedom of movement etc.– they still can act for freedom and channel their necessity towards performativity and appearance. Building on Judith Butler's theory of assembly, in *Gesturing Refugees* (Figure 2) I investigate how vulnerable subjects who choose to perform certain gestures as

a result of their condition of oppression and dispossession, can realize through their performance –in their houses or in front of a computer– the condition of collective vulnerability and interdependence and generate forms of rejection, resistance, and solidarity. I do that by transforming the distance that we had to work with into proximity with the audience members, inviting them to a participatory performance where they can witness and re-enact the stories and gestures of my colleagues through recorded video calls, and witness and re-enact my story and gesture live in the space. Where I also encourage them to embody my colleagues' gestures and mediate between the screen recorded time and the present time.

In that sense in *Gesturing Refugees*, I experiment with how participatory performance can defy distance, and contribute towards the interchange between subjectivities, the creation of future responsibility and the potential of action after the event. An event where the audience is invited to feel-think together, and to experience alternative stories and gestures of refugeehood through video calls and live performance by reenacting, transforming and deforming them in their bodies and carrying them beyond the performance space. In this way, what I created for and with them is an afterlife of the event that could materialize in different degrees and forms.

To insist on this formal and political choice, in Autumn 2020, I started developing *PAST-inuous*, another narrative of the *Archive of Gestures*, in the form of an interactive dance video, created over a digital platform with eleven Palestinian dancers, most third generation refugees, some living in the diaspora and others in Palestine: two in Edinburgh, two in Berlin, four in Gaza and three in Nablus and in collaboration with four video artists –one in each location– a composer and a set and costume designer. The idea was conceived in November 2019 –before the pandemic– to reflect on the ongoing Palestinian refugee problem created in 1948 by the creation of Israel on Palestinian land and the expulsion of Palestinians all around the world, now estimated to be five million (United Nations Relief and Works Agency for

Palestine Refugees in The Near East, 2020). The work deals with the bodies of the eleven artists as living archives. It attempts to dig into these archives to find connections between the artists daily gestures in the now and the gestures of their expelled families in the past. By doing that, it aspires to reflect on the future of the Palestinian refugee cause in particular and its connection to the current global refugee condition in general.

Before starting the creation process, I asked all the dancers to collect stories that they remember from their grandparents daily lives before they were forced out of their land by Israeli militias in 1948, to investigate the remanence of their daily gestures in our bodies and to our daily gestures in the present. I also asked them to bring archive material from their family archives, such as pictures, objects or recordings, which some did. We exchanged these stories and their archive material during the first day of the creation residency over *Zoom*, which lasted for two weeks. We decided to use *Zoom* this time, rather than *Skype* and *Messenger*, as it was widely used during the pandemic, due to its better quality and multiple functions. Suddenly political and pandemic distances overlapped in this project.

The experience of that first exchange had a strong impact on me personally, but also on the other dancers, as reported by them. Everyone was curious and asking questions when one of us was recounting a story and showing some of its gestures. It felts as if the stories were familiar, but still had some novelty. They were romanticized, at the same time realistic. They were personal, but at the same time collective. The whole exchange felt like a long-awaited encounter between grandchildren of Palestinian refugees, taking place over a digital platform because of the imposed physical distance by the same regime of Israeli dispossession.

Zoom encounters, chats and rehearsals brought us spatially closer. It helped us to bridge the physical distance between us at times. As Walter Benjamin explains, technical reproduction of art aspires at modulating physical and

human distances, by bringing the distance closer (Benjamin, 1936). But this wasn't always the case during the production process of *PAST-inuous*. Sometimes, when we became keen to meet and work together in person, or when we were experiencing regular internet problems especially in certain locations, often due to political reasons –for instance in Gaza, where the Israeli siege has reduced the available daily electricity to four hours– meeting over a digital media marked the distances even more.

Jay Bolter and Richard Grusin (Bolter & Gruisin, 1999) define as remediation the repurposing of older media into new media, to answer the needs of society for experiencing the real or the mediation of the real. They propose that remediation functions through two types of media, first through transparent media, such as TV, immersive installation or video calls, which aims at erasing the media they are using, and give the viewer the sense of immediate contact with the image. Second, through hypermedia, such as applications and multimedia programs, which reference other media and contents all the time, without wanting to erase them.

Fig. 3 From top left to bottom right Farah Saleh, Jamal Bajali, Fadi Waked, Duaa Sabbagh, Abood Damra, Amir Sabra, Hamza Damra, Dima Kurraz, Mohanad A. Smama, Yasmeen Koheil and Mohammed Emrany. Still from *Zoom* recording August, 2020.
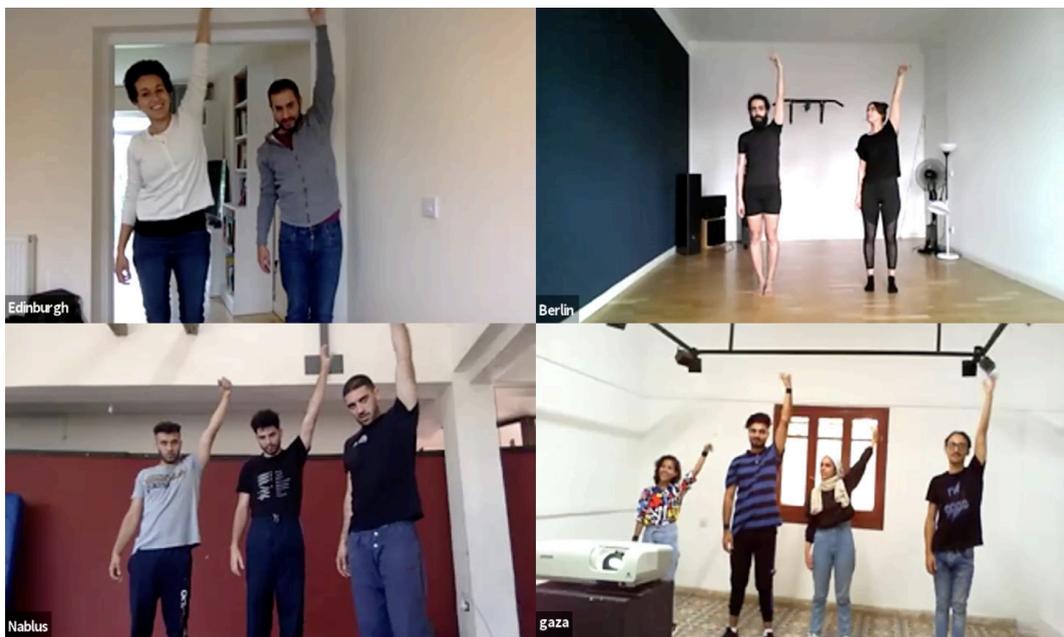
Both transparent media and hypermedia strive for a real and authentic experience of the viewer, one that would evoke an authentic, immediate and emotional response. Building on Richard Grusin and Jay Bolter, I conceive the act of meeting, rehearsing and creating a work of art over a media that was originally created for work meetings –in sum the process of creation of *PAST-inuous*– as an act of remediation (Figure 3).

During the creation period of *PAST-inuous* through *Zoom*, we dealt with both transparent media and hypermedia. When we were warming up and exchanging stories and gestures over *Zoom* as a video call, we all felt the authentic experience of working together on an artistic project, and even for short period of times, forgot that it was mediated through a screen over distance. But as soon as there were cuts and delays in the communication and we had to text each other to know what's going on, to send voice messages or pictures via email or WhatsApp, the media we were using became very present again. While still allowing us to live immediate and emotional response to the exchange, the distance was widely felt.

Fig. 4 Dancer Duaa Sabbagh re-enacting her grandmother's gesture. Still from *Speaker View Zoom* recording August, 2020.
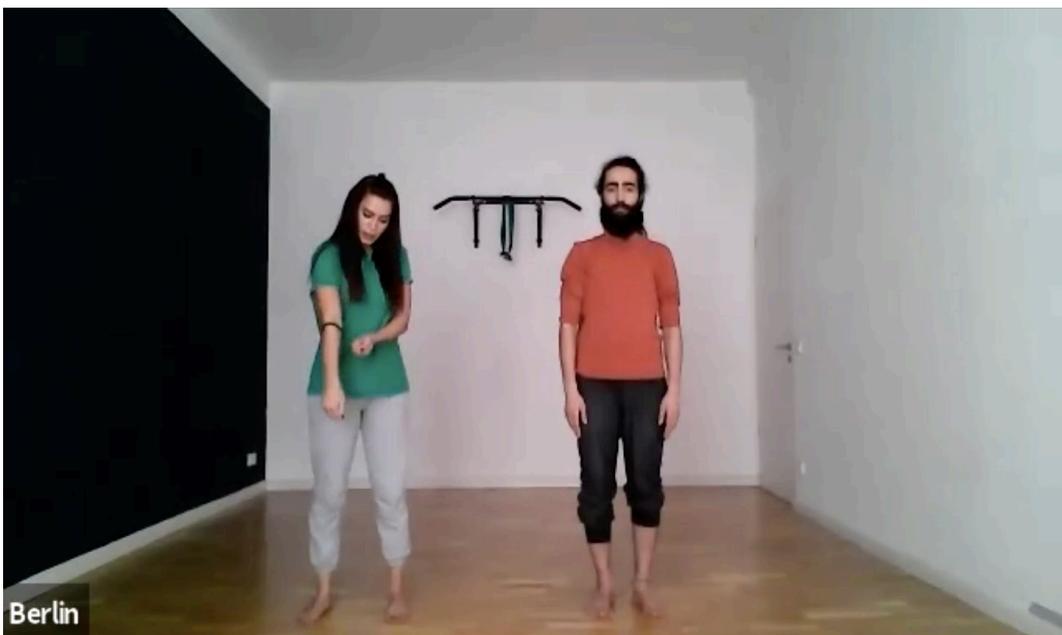
This digitally mediated encounter and exchange of stories and gestures resulted in a three-part dance video. The first part consists of a two-minute introduction using *Speaker View* on *Zoom* (Figure 4), in which for dancers, one from each location, explain a gesture and invite the viewers to do it when they see it performed in the choreography. For example, Duaa Sabbagh, a dancer based in Berlin, born and raised in Al Yarmouk Palestinian refugee camp in Syria, shows and explains the gesture of her grandmother hand washing clothes in Al Tantura village in Palestine before 1948. Another dancer, Amir Sabra, born and raised in Balata Refugee camp in Nablus re-enacts his grandfather's gesture of honing knifes that he used to do daily before he was forced out of the Palestinian city of Al Lud. The aim of explaining some of the gestures to the viewers at the beginning of the video –including the context in which they were produced, then asking them to re-enact the gestures when they spot them in the video– is to transmit some of our bodily archives to the bodies of the viewers, allowing for our personal and collective archives before being expelled from Palestine to disseminate into the viewers bodily archives. As André Lepecki explains in *Singularities: Dance in the Age of Performance* (Lepecki, 2016), re-enacting gestures from the past, allows us to invent something new, by suspending the economies of authorship over the gestures, disseminating them and giving them an afterlife. In the second part, which consists of a seven-minute choreography of gestures by all eleven dancers, in which each dancer contributes with her/his family story and gestures before 1948, reflecting on whether the gestures have remanence in their bodies and are connected to their daily gestures of today. For examples, dancer Mohanad A. Smama from Gaza, re-enacts a technique of fishing that was used before 1948 in Gaza and is still used today by fishermen, including himself. While I share the gesture of protest my grandfather used to perform during workers strikes against the British Mandate in Palestine during the 1930s, which is a gesture I still practice when I go to demonstrations against

the Israeli military occupation in Palestine, or is used against other repressive regimes in the world.

During the choreography, the viewers can witness and sometimes re-enact the archive of gestures unfolding by the dancers. This archive that collects fragments of the gestures present in all the stories the dancers recounted and is in dialogue with the three constituting parameters Jacques Derrida suggests an archive should have: a certain exteriority, a technique of repetition and a place of consignation (Derrida & Prenowitz, 1995). In fact, the dancers re-enact and explain the gesture to the viewers before asking them to re-enact them. They repeat them, change their speed, distance from the floor and position in relation to the camera. Finally, they archive the gestures in their bodies and invite the viewers to do the same. In the choreography part we use *Zoom Gallery View* (Figure 5), thus the screen is divided into four video calls, with dancers in each city –Gaza, Nablus, Edinburgh and Berlin– present in the same calls, whenever possible. The screen functions as a stage and the choreography aims at orchestrating the attention of the viewers by using

Fig. 5 Dancers in Nablus, Edinburgh and Gaza witnessing the archive of Berlin dancers unfolding. Still from *Zoom Gallery View* recording September, 2020.
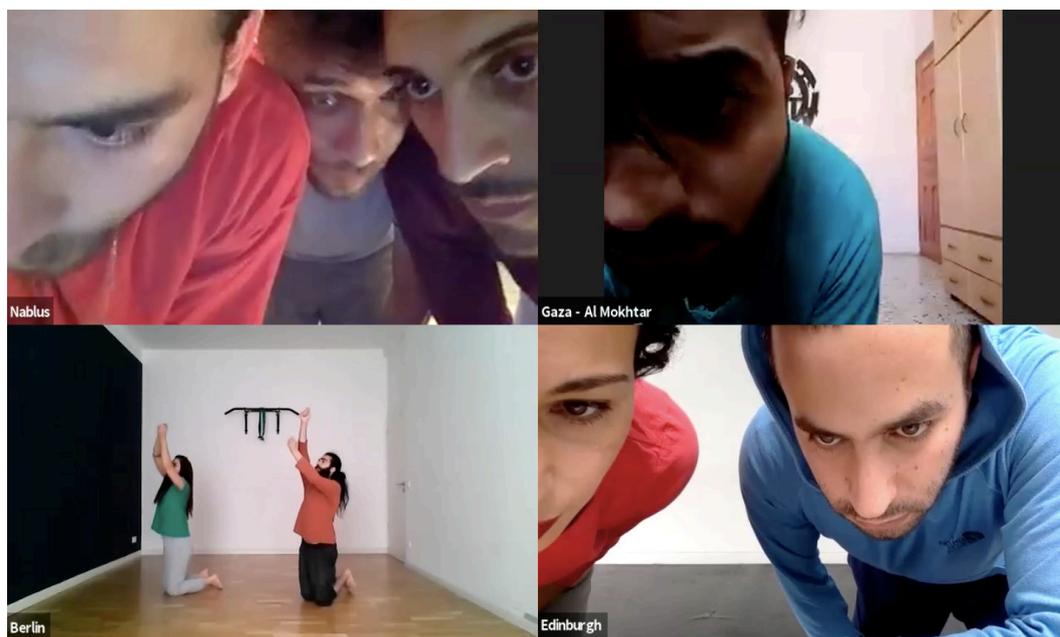
choreography tools, such as having the dancers move in synch, leave the stage or stand still, repeat a gesture or come very close to the camera. In the first days of rehearsal it was possible to have all the dancers in the same location on one screen, but then a lockdown was imposed in Gaza because of Covid-19, and the dancers there had to work from home with limited electricity due to the Israeli siege. We had to find ingenious solutions in order not to have more than for screens at once, since the image becomes too small and the gestures become difficult to see and re-enact. Therefore, the seven-minute choreography was divided into three sub-sections.

In the first sub-section there are four screens with Edinburgh, Nablus, Berlin dancers and only one dancer from Gaza. In the second sub-section, we zoom into Gaza with only the four dancers in Gaza appearing on the four screens, finally the last sub-section brings back four screens from all four locations with a different dancer now joining from Gaza and with the virtual background element introduced. We use the virtual background as an ironic comment on the fictional way we are trying to be all together in one place, and where

Fig. 6 Experimenting with virtual background, designed by Zephyr Liddell for the project and used in the choreography part. Still from *Zoom* recording September, 2020.
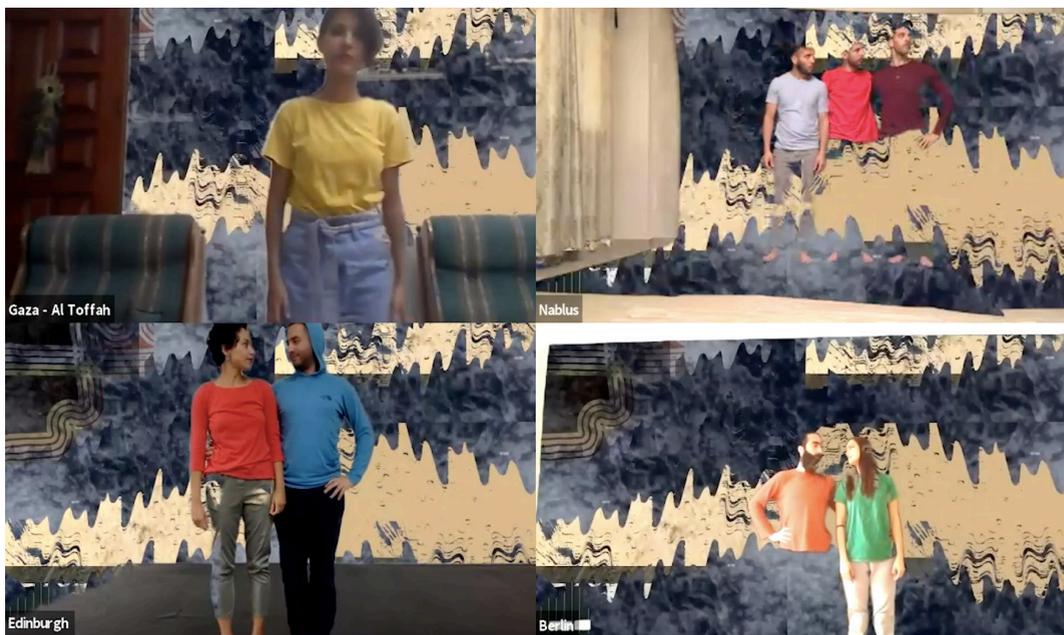
one can easily notice that the virtual background doesn't work well, because of the impossibility of having green screens in the for locations. In fact, in the virtual background we created, one can only see fragments of our bodies and gestures, just like the fragments of our archives in the choreography (Figure 6). The virtual background we use is designed by our set and costume designer Zephyr Liddell and is inspired by the archive material the group provided: pictures, stories and objects. The full choreography was created, rehearsed, performed and recorded through *Zoom* with all the dancers present at the same time, as if it's a live performance, with very small edits being allowed to the recording. The choice of filming the choreography in one shot was taken also to include the creation process in the artwork itself. Working digitally in different geographical areas because of the political situation —and now also because of the risks related to the pandemic— raises technical issues such as low-quality videos recorded from computer cameras and internet delays. To leave these technical issues intact in the final video would very much reflect the daily creative process and would allow the viewers to relate more to both the content and form of the work, since most people now around the world are working remotely and are faced with similar technical issues.

In the last part of the video, dancer Amir Sabra, asks the viewers to think and reenact in their own way a few gestures that were performed by the dancers in the choreography and that they felt were close to their own personal archives. He also asks them to film themselves while doing these gestures, then post their video on a private social media group, where all the artists involved in the project can see and try the gestures of the audience member, so that there would be an exchange between the viewers and the dancers daily gestures. In this way, the viewers will experience the work and share their own bodily archives, rather than just see and try the dancers' gestures and personal archives, which also makes the work interactive, and possibly allows for an afterlife of the gestures in the bodies and minds of both the viewers and the artists.

To enhance the experience for the viewers, two instructions will be given to them before starting the video. First, to watch the video on a laptop on top of a table, so not using a tablet or a phone or putting the laptop on the floor for instance, since the artists were working from their raised laptops. Second, to clear the wall behind them from most objects, just like the artists were asked to do, in order not to reflect a domestic background, but more of a neutral background, were the gestures can be fully visible. With this interactive approach, the aim is to allow the viewer, just like the artists during the creation process, to experience a twofold relationship with the medium. To both establish an authentic connection with the artists and their gestures denying the mediation of the video, but also to experience immediacy through acknowledging the multiple media at stake, such as filming oneself and sending the video to a social media platform.

CONCLUSIONS

In this article, I interrogated ways of defying distance between Palestinian refugees created by Israel's regime of dispossession. I did that by experimenting with how a digital platform can be remediated into a creative space for rehearsal, creation and transmission of bodily archives through an interactive dance video with the viewers. But also by reflecting on the technical issues and delays caused by specific political conditions of disadvantage that arise during such a process and exploring ways of using these issues in the video itself to reflect the creation process and involve the viewers, especially now that working at distance has become a collective global experience.

As Walter Benjamin suggests in *The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction* (Benjamin, 1936), it's easy to fall into *l'art pour l'art* –the art for the sake of art– in a world changed by technology, where people look for experiences of pure pleasure, sometimes even accepting to be distracted viewers.

To challenge that, he urges artists to respond through politicizing art and engaging the viewers in the work of art. The media we use to remediate the distance of our political or pandemic exiles make no exception.

REFERENCES

Benjamin, W. (1936). *The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction*. New York, NY: Random House.

Bolter, J., & Grusin, R. (1999). *Remediation: Understanding New Media*. Cambridge, MA: MIT Press.

Butler, J. (2015). *Notes Toward a Performative Theory of Assembly*. Cambridge, UK: Harvard University Press.

Derrida, J., & Prenowitz, E. (1995). Archive fever: a Freudian impression. *Diacritics, 25*(2), 9-63.

Foucault, M. (1972). *The archeology of knowledge and the discourse on language*. New York, NY: Pantheon Books.

Lepecki, A. (2016). *Singularities: Dance in the Age of Performance*. New York, NY: Routledge.

United Nations Relief and Works Agency for Palestine Refugees in The Near East. *Where We Work*. Retrieved September 29, 2020 from https://www.unrwa.org/where-we-work