

GESTURING REFUGEES: PARTICIPATION, AFFECT, THEN ACTION?

FARAH SALEH

Gesturing Refugees: ¿participación, afecto, luego acción?

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Reception date: June 2, 2020. Acceptance date: October 6, 2020 Modification date: October 30, 2020

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.25025/hart08.2021.05>

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ABSTRACT:

In this article I analyze through practice-based research how unearthing alternative narratives of refugeehood using the bodies of artists and audience members in the participatory performance *Gesturing Refugees* can contribute towards an interchange between the subjectivities present in the space, the creation of future responsibility, and a potential for action after the performance. I explain how a performance can turn into an event through participation, where the audience is considered as a collective of singularities and is invited to feel-think together, through a series of microshocks. Moreover, I reflect on how the event enables the audience to experience alternative stories and gestures of refugeehood by reenacting, transforming, and deforming the gestures in their own bodies, carrying them beyond the performance space and creating an afterlife of the event that could materialize in different degrees and forms.

KEYWORDS:

refugeehood, archives, gestures, participation, affect, action

The article was originally produced as a chapter for the authors practice-based PhD on the Archive of Gestures, which she is currently undertaking at the Edinburgh College of Art.

Cite this:

Saleh, Farah. "Gesturing Refugees: Participation, Affect, then Action?" *H-ART. Revista de historia, teoría y crítica de arte*. n.º 8 (2021): 63-88. <https://doi.org/10.25025/hart08.2021.05>

RESUMEN:

En este artículo analizo, a partir de una investigación basada en la práctica, cómo la performance participativa *Gesturing Refugees*, que se propone desenterrar narrativas alternativas de refugiados utilizando los cuerpos de los artistas y miembros del público, contribuye al intercambio entre las subjetividades presentes en el espacio de la obra, a la creación de una responsabilidad futura y a la posibilidad de una acción después de la obra. Explico también cómo una performance puede convertirse en un evento a partir de la participación de un público compuesto por singularidades que forman un colectivo y a quienes se insta a sentir y pensar de manera conjunta, a través de una serie de micro shocks. Además, reflexiono sobre cómo el evento permite a la audiencia experimentar las historias y gestos alternativos de los refugiados al recrear, transformar y deformar esos gestos en sus propios cuerpos. Esto los lleva más allá del espacio de la performance y a crear una vida más allá del evento que podría materializarse de diferentes formas y en diferentes grados.

PALABRAS CLAVE:

refugiados, archivos, gestos, participación, afecto, acción

RESUMO:

Em este artigo analiso, desde uma pesquisa baseada na prática, como a performance participativa *Gesturing Refugees* —que se propõe desenterrar narrativas alternativas de refugiados a utilizar os corpos dos artistas e os membros do público— contribui ao intercambio entre as subjetividades presentes no espaço da obra, à criação de uma responsabilidade futura e à possibilidade de uma ação após a obra. Elucido mesmo como a performance pode se tornar num evento graças à participação de um público constituído por singularidades que conformam um coletivo e aos que se incita a sentir e pensar de forma conjunta por meio de uma série de micro choques. Além disso, reflito sobre como o evento permite à audiência experimentar as histórias e os gestos alternativos dos refugiados ao recriar, transformar e deformar os gestos em seus próprios corpos. Assim, a ação leva-os além do espaço da performance para criar uma vida longe do evento que se materializa de diferentes maneiras e em diferentes graus.

PALAVRAS CHAVE:

refugiados, espólios, gestos, participação, afeto ação.

In 2014 I started a practice-based research project entitled the *Archive of Gestures*, in which I investigate how artists can contribute to change by exploring and problematizing cultural and political memories. The project's objective is to unearth alternative narratives and gestures that have been left out of the Israeli and mainstream accounts of refugeehood by re-enacting, analysing, and commenting on the gestures and the contexts in which they were produced. Indeed, the research is an attempt to collect fragments of a gestural collective identity, and to construct an archive that the Israeli and the dominant Palestinian nationalist narratives have ignored and suppressed. I consider my research part of a wider Palestinian archive movement that has been taking place since the 1960s, which reflects on the power of archive and the preservation of memory. As Jacques Derrida argues, "there is no political power without control of the archive, if not of memory,"¹ suggesting that the preservation of memory is the responsibility of the present and the promise of the future.

The gestural archive I attempt to reconstruct retrieves stories related to my own biography as a refugee in the Palestinian diaspora, later as an occupied subject in Palestine, and now as a citizen of the world living in Europe. I construct the archive by engaging with private and informal archival material (videos, pictures, written documents), oral histories, and imagination, to explore different forms of using the body as archive and ways to unearth, as well as translate, the movements and gestures in the stories. In this article I will discuss the process of creating *Gesturing Refugees* (2018), the third unearthed narrative in the *Archive of Gestures*. The research so far has unearthed four other narratives: *A Fidayee Son in Moscow* (2014), an interactive video dance installation in which I reenact, transform, and deform the gestures of Palestinian children, one of whom is my brother, at a Communist international boarding school in the Soviet Union during the 1980s; *Cells of Illegal Education* (2016), an interactive video dance installation, in which I attempt to reconstruct the movements of Palestinian students during the First Intifada, when education was banned by the Israeli military; *What My Body Can't Remember* (2019), an interactive dance promenade that investigates what my body can or can't remember from performing daily gestures and dancing at home during the Israeli siege of the West Bank in 2002; And *PAST-inuous* (2020), an interactive dance video created over a digital platform with eleven Palestinian dancers, most of them third-generation refugees living in Palestine and in the diaspora, to reflect on the future of the Palestinian refugee cause and its connection to the current global refugee condition.

Gesturing Refugees is a participatory dance performance (45 minutes long), in which I experiment with ways of archiving latent stories of refugeehood using the bodies of refugee-artists—Hamza Damra, Fadi Waked, and myself—and the bodies of the audience as living archives, while also playing with physical

1. Jacques Derrida, "Archive Fever: A Freudian Impression." *Diacritics* vol. 25, n° 2 (1995): 27.

archive material, testimonies, and imagination. I chose to unearth archives that include past and present stories of refugeehood in order to interrogate collective responsibility towards the refugee question and search for bridges between past, present, and potential future refugees. Moreover, by creating embodied archives I intend to perform a political gesture of freedom towards the re-appropriation of the refugee narrative and developing a collective gestural identity that might challenge that of passive victimhood, a narrative to which refugees are often subjected since the so-called “refugee crisis” in Europe in 2015, when millions of people from Asia and Africa started crossing the Mediterranean Sea, or making their way overland through Southeastern European countries, to seek refuge in one of the European Union countries.

As a Palestinian born in a refugee camp in Syria and now resident in Europe I find the mainstream narrative of the “refugee crisis” shaped by the European media and politicians to be very problematic, not only because of my personal experience but also because of the Palestinian people’s collective experience even before my existence. The Palestinian issue is a refugee question par excellence: In 1948 Jewish Zionist militia expelled 750,000 Palestinians to neighboring Arab countries and other Palestinian cities in order to found the State of Israel and occupy 78% of the Palestinian land.² In 1967 Israel occupied the remaining 22% of the land (the West Bank and Gaza), expelling 350,000 more Palestinians.³ Today the estimated Palestinian diaspora is of 5 million, of which half a million used to live in Syria until the war started there in 2011. Since then, 300,000 of the Palestinians in Syria, second- and third-generation refugees, became refugees again inside Syria, in neighboring Arab countries, Europe, and North America, or lost their lives in the Mediterranean Sea, a trend considered to be part of the refugee crisis.⁴

Since I consider myself part of this community, and in my position as an artist, I felt the urgency to act by unfolding counternarratives of refugeehood and creating spaces of experiences and encounter similar to those that many artists around the world attempted to evoke in response to the crisis and the narrative created around it. As highlighted by Daniel Gorman and Rana Yazaji in *Everyone Wants a Refugee on Stage*, a thorough and comprehensive report they prepared for the International Network for Contemporary Performing Arts, in the past few years, while countries were putting money and energy into closing their borders, artists and the cultural sector were busy enhancing the inclusion of the newcomers, with at least 140 artistic projects and initiatives that aimed at creating new narratives about displacement.⁵ *Gesturing Refugees* is part of this trend. Its aim is the re-appropriation of the refugee narrative by refugees themselves, whose experiences have often been appropriated in multiple ways for cultural consumption. Moreover, the piece received production grants from art foundations in the

2. Edward Said, *The Question of Palestine* (New York: Vintage Books, 1980), xiii, 45.

3. Said, *The Question*, 115.

4. “Where We Work,” United Nations Relief and Works Agency for Palestine Refugees in The Near East, accessed August 4, 2020, <https://www.unrwa.org/where-we-work/syria>.

5. Daniel Gorman and Rana Yazadi, *Everybody Wants a Refugee on Stage: Conversations Around Contemporary Artistic Engagement with Migration* (Brussels: International Network for Contemporary Performing Arts, 2019), 5, 7, 10.

UK and the Arab World to support the artists' fees and production costs, and by that it contributed to a better livelihood for the participating artists, some of whom were going through difficult financial circumstances because of their refugee status and not being permitted to work in Europe.

In their report, Gorman and Yazaji discuss important projects implemented with refugees in the Arab World and Europe, giving recommendations based on the lessons learnt, one of which concerns terminology: they recommend using the notion of “refugeeness” or “refugee community” with caution, as it might give rise to the notion of “otherness” and to a community of refugees that think and act all in the same way. Although I understand their misgivings, here I openly write about working with artists from a refugee background or refugee artists, a decision that has been agreed upon with the artists involved in the project, as a political choice to keep the refugee label in order to preserve the Palestinian right of return to their lands, from which they were expelled as a result of the creation of the State of Israel. This is a right that has been maintained only on paper by the UN General Assembly Resolution 194, issued in 1948, which states that Palestinian refugees have the right to return to their home and receive compensation for the loss and damage of their property.

Another important recommendation in the report is related to the role of refugee artists in the artistic project, which they suggest should be central so as not to produce experiences where the refugees are framed merely as passive individuals who take part in pre-set projects or whose stories are used by others to create touching moments on big stages. I wholeheartedly agree with this recommendation and indeed *Gesturing Refugees* is initiated by myself—an artist from a refugee background—and developed in collaboration with other refugee artists who added their voice actively during the creative process and continue to do so by transmitting their narratives to the audience's bodies and intellects. The artists I collaborated with are Fadi Waked, a Palestinian born and raised in a refugee camp in Syria who is now a refugee for the second time in Germany since 2016; and Hamza Damra, a Palestinian born and raised in a refugee camp in Nablus, originally from Haifa, where his family was exiled in 1948. Both are professional dancers and they practice hip hop, breakdance, Dabkeh (Palestinian traditional dance), and contemporary dance.

In this article I will explore how *Gesturing Refugees*, a participatory performance that unearths alternative gestures of refugeehood, can act as a political gesture towards social change. First, I will describe the process of creating the performance over digital platforms, due to the impossibility of physical encounter among the artists, and explain how that process can be considered a political gesture of resistance. Second, I will engage with the literature on participatory performance by Nicolas Bourriaud, Claire Bishop, and Gareth White to outline

my own approach to participation, both during the creation process and the performance itself. Third, I will go through each part of the performance explaining how audience participation materializes, creates a tension with, and provokes actions by them. Finally, by way of conclusion, I will discuss Brian Massumi and Erin Manning's work on how thinking-moving together can lead to "the more than" of the event, and consider whether *Gesturing Refugees*, as an event, can have an afterlife in the bodies and intellects of audience members.

THE PROCESS

The creative process faced many obstacles stemming from the fact that the participating artists were denied visas by UK authorities, making it impossible for us to meet in person in Edinburgh, where the first artistic residency was supposed to take place in the autumn of 2017. This meant that we had to work over online platforms (Skype and Messenger), which added other formal and political layers to the performance. The impossibility of physical encounter opened up the question of how gestures can be archived and shared remotely through a digital platform and how it might still be possible to create a form of acting collectively towards freedom from a distance. Freedom from stereotypes, freedom of movement, and freedom of self-determination.

According to Hannah Arendt people can only exist in the full sense of the term, and have rights, if they can appear in public spaces to discuss with others through participatory democracy, creating "spaces of appearance" which can lead them to act in concert and generate change.⁶ Arendt maintains that people can only do so if they are free from any necessity. However, following Judith Butler, in *Gesturing Refugees* I explore how people who don't appear in public space, but who, being prevented from physically appearing, gesture in their houses in front of a computer, can still be political bodies that exist, have rights, and reclaim the right to appear and act in concert.⁷ For Butler, contrary to what Arendt suggests, performativity entails both necessity and agency, so that even when people act out of an 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 Butler's theory of assembly, I investigate how vulnerable subjects who choose to perform certain gestures as a result of their condition of oppression and dispossession, realize through their performance their condition of collective vulnerability and interdependence and can generate forms of rejection, resistance, and solidarity.

If fact, during our online time together we attempted to archive ordinary gestures in stories told by the artist-refugees ourselves, and in those of other refugees we know. These stories include Fadi making jokes with his friends during the

6. Hannah Arendt, *The Human Condition* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1958), 22-78.

7. Judith Butler, *Notes Toward a Performative Theory of Assembly* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2015), 8, 11, 76.

long journey to Europe, Hamza holding his brother's shoulder after being shot by an Israeli soldier, me calling an ambulance to take me to school under curfew, and Hassan Rabah, a refugee dancer friend from Syria, performing a complex choreography of gestures in his room in Beirut days before committing suicide. We archived these gestures by unfolding them, sharing them with each other and re-enacting them among ourselves. We first witnessed each other's stories and gestures, then we tried the gestures and, by repeating them, we transformed and deformed them in our own bodies, making them ours and adding them to our own bodily archives.

The following creation periods in November 2017 and May 2018 continued from afar, with me at Dance Base in Edinburgh and the dancers in their homes in Nablus and Berlin. At this point, we all embraced the decision to transform the physical distance among us, produced by the UK restrictions to free movement, into a possibility for a new form of archive-making and political resistance. In order to develop these new forms, I worked with a local video artist, Pedro Vaz Simoes, to record and connect the online videos, and then transform the whole narrative into a participatory performance with the audience, with me and Pedro performing live and the two dancers on pre-recorded videos.



Image 1. Experimenting with archiving gestures over the internet; me at Dance Base in Edinburgh, Hamza on the left in his bedroom in Nablus, and Fadi on the right in his sitting room in Berlin (May 2017). ©Maciej Czajka.

I decided to experiment with participatory performance—where the audience is invited to re-enact gestures of refugeehood and to take decisions during the performance—because I was keen to create an experience for the audience members in which they would also be actors, rather than mere observers, and in which they could be touched by affect, and at the same time touch one another. I conceived this as a process that would create inter-subjectivities and allow for an afterlife of the performance, possibly leading to change and action. Arendt argues that the central political activity is action and that action is realized by plural human beings capable of starting something new.⁸ She also suggests that action is the key to freedom and the way to overcome the gap between power and responsibility, arguing that humans have the capacity to thus move politically, although they do not yet know how, which poses a risk: that the “political” might vanish from our lives. The political, which Arendt understands as the movement towards freedom, requires a laborious and continuous commitment, and an inter-subjective action that is practiced, nurtured, repeated, and each time renewed.

According to André Lepecki, since Arendt sees the political as intrinsically linked to freedom, we may read her as telling us that “we don’t know—at least not yet—how to move freely,”⁹ and that the vanishing of the political in the world is the vanishing of the experience and practice of movement *as* freedom. Lepecki thus hears a provocation implicit in Arendt’s words, which leads to the injunction: “If we do not yet know how to move politically, then we had better find out how to do it.”¹⁰ He then proposes that dancers can contribute to our reimagining of a politics of movement through what he calls “a choreopolitics of freedom,” a task that takes on heightened significance at the present moment, as we experience a growing effort to curtail people’s freedom by politics. In that sense, I consider *Gesturing Refugees* a choreopolitical experiment that investigates how to learn, practice, and repeat moving politically with others during the creation process among the artists, in the performance space with the audience, and in social space after the performance ends.

PARTICIPATORY PERFORMANCE

Experiments with participation were undertaken since the beginning of the 20th century by artistic movements all over the world, including Dadaism, Surrealism, and Situationism. According to Nicolas Bourriaud these artists were eager to oppose the 18th century’s “modest and rational” version of the world, in which human relations were no longer experienced but replaced with their “spectacular” representation.¹¹ He explains that while in the 1960s artists were busy with defining art, in the 1990s they started experimenting with art’s capacities of resistance

8. Arendt, *The Human Condition*, 7-17.

9. André Lepecki, “Choreopolice and Choreopolitics, or, the Task of the Dancer.” *The Drama Review* vol. 57, n° 4 (2013): 14.

10. Lepecki, “Choreopolice and Choreopolitics,” 14.

11. Nicolas Bourriaud, *Relational Aesthetics* (Dijon: Les Presses du Réel, 2002), 4-7.

in social spaces, which led to the consolidation of what he terms relational art, an art of encounter that conjures new models of sociability as part of the creative process. This form of art-making leads to practices that are new, not only ideologically, but also formally: artworks can now be conceived as encounters, events, festivals, collaborations, and games, which allows for experiences that go beyond the mere aesthetic consumption of an artefact within a closed period of time and a confined space. In Bourriaud's account, relational art is not limited to one specific style, but is a practical and theoretical search for inter-human relations, which aims at linking individuals and groups together and to transform the beholder into an interlocutor.

Claire Bishop, one of the most important theorists of participation in performance art, argues that the most interesting aspect of the participatory arts that arose in the 1990s is their extension of the relationship with the audience during the performance.¹² According to Bishop, participation by spectators in performance became a central medium and material of the works produced, leading to a form of art that focused on the meaning produced through participation, rather than attending only to the process. For this reason, she considers participatory performance as a form of art that aimed at democratizing art and creating collectivities in an era of individualism and neoliberal world order, engaging both with the aesthetic and the social. In his own reading of such forms of participatory performance, Gareth White argues that participation, rather than process, is the crucial concept for understanding these works, which could then be said to center on "the participation of an audience, or an audience member, in the action of the performance,"¹³ by which the audience is encouraged to engage emotionally and intellectually with the work. My own work stems from a belief in a form of art that is participatory right from the very beginning of the process, an accessible art that is based on the art of the invitation and that aims at creating an encounter between the audience and the performers, and among the audience members themselves, where people affect each other emotionally and intellectually on matters that are of collective importance.

In this way, *Gesturing Refugees* is the result of a creative process that was participatory all the way through. All artists were invited to share the ordinary stories of refugeehood that each of them felt the urge to unearth, and then we all started researching ways of archiving the stories in our bodies by re-enacting, transforming, and deforming each other's gestures, and testing ways of transmitting them to other bodies, from one artist's body to another, but also to the audience's bodies. During the process I would propose methodologies for doing this to the artists and we would discuss them and try them out collectively to find the best solutions. Furthermore, after deciding to work remotely, I was also exchanging ideas with the local video artist to find ways of recording the

12. Claire Bishop, *Artificial Hells: Participatory Art and the Politics of Spectatorship* (London: Verso, 2012), 1-9.

13. Gareth White, *Audience Participation in Theatre: Esthetics of the Invitation* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2013), 4, 1-28.

archived gestures and narratives, documenting the process, and using the material to create an experience in the form of a participatory performance. Indeed, the form and content of the performance were handled with the same degree of care throughout the process. The fact that the piece is based on the interaction with the audience does not mean that it has no regard for form or artistic quality; much to the contrary, we focused on a new “aesthetic.”

In this respect, I agree with Bourriaud when he argues that relational art aims at creating spaces of sociability with the public, not only by creating an ideological work, but also by proposing new formal fields that are rooted in the relational character of the work, creating an experience over a period of time that reaches far beyond the limits of traditional art-viewing practices and bleeds into everyday life. In Bourriaud’s terms, when the aesthetic debate evolves, the form evolves with it and is embodied in different ways.¹⁴ Along similar lines, Bishop argues that Jacques Rancière made a key contribution to the debate on art and politics by redefining the term “aesthetic.” Under this new definition, the aesthetic corresponds to a specific type of experience that is structured by the effort to reconcile the autonomy of art with art’s relationship to social change. In Rancière’s account, the aesthetic dimension of art need not be sacrificed for the sake of a commitment to social change, because formal concerns already contain an ameliorative promise to the world. For Bishop, this meta-political vision of art re-directed some artists towards conservatism and the search for beauty, but allowed many others to work with the tension between the social and artistic functions of art, while always revising their ways of doing that. Bishop claims that such revision is important, quoting Felix Guattari’s invitation for artistic works to have a ‘double finality,’ being involved in the social debate and at the same time celebrating the artistic paradigm as such, while constantly testing and revising the criteria applied to both within the changing political and artistic circumstances.¹⁵

White, for his part, suggests that aesthetics, intended as the philosophy of art that probes potential definitions of art and its function, can be considered in participatory performance as the “aesthetics of the invitation,” where the actions and experiences of the audience are aesthetic material that produce certain dynamics and value in the performance. Here, then, the audience members themselves are the artist’s medium to compose the performance, and the subjectivity of each audience member determines the aesthetic consistency of the artwork. Thus, in participatory art there is no one criteria for the aesthetic. According to White, each artist would have their own implicit definition of what art is and how it would manifest within their own practice. For that reason, he argues that where classical aesthetics privileges beauty and the sublime, participatory aesthetics is interested in other effects, such as the unexpected and the

14. Bourriaud, *Relational Aesthetics*, 8.

15. Bishop, *Artificial Hells*, 273-274.

uncanny, which would provoke political and ethical thoughts and feelings in the audience.¹⁶

In that sense, *Gesturing Refugees* can be considered a participatory performance that aims at creating a social experience with the public, not only by creating a political work unearthing alternative narratives of refugeehood, but also by proposing a new aesthetic, navigating the tension between content and form, where the “aesthetics of the invitation” is at the core of the work, alongside more familiar aesthetic elements such as devised speech, choreographed gestures, edited videos, designed light, and scenography.

THE STRUCTURE OF THE PERFORMANCE

The performance begins in the foyer, intended as a small area found at the entrance of the main performance space, and first takes the form of a 5-7 minute preparation session for the audience before entering the main space, in which I guide them into becoming future refugees. In this preparation session I teach them some stereotypical gestures related to the refugee journey in the Mediterranean Sea towards Europe—a journey that Fadi had to go through when he left Damascus towards Berlin—, gestures that are constantly reproduced by mainstream media. For instance, I ask the audience members to hand in their ID cards to me, to take a last selfie at home, to put all their belongings in a plastic bag and have a cup of water to prepare for long days of thirst in the sea. The aim is to do all of these stereotypical gestures of refugees and then undo them along with the stereotypes connected to them during the performance, by watching and embodying alternative gestures of refugeehood. By alternative I mean gestures different from those one can find in the narratives produced by the mainstream media, which often represent refugees as passive suffering victims.

From the beginning, I prepare the audience for the idea that they will be active members in the performance, rather than mere observers, letting them know that they are entering an event, or a “social play” as Max Hermann calls it, where everyone is a player and co-creator.¹⁷ The audience members are asked to make decisions, to act or to refuse acting from the start; some of them give all their documents, others none; some refuse to put their belongings in a plastic bag, others put everything including their shoes; some drink the cup of water, others only smile. Hermann suggests that events create a social community out of all the singularities of those who are present in the space, who perceive and respond to the “play.” He further argues that performance has its rules, and that they correspond to the rules of a game, which are negotiated by all participants, performers and audience alike, followed and broken by all equally, interlinking the aesthetic, social, and political in the performance.

16. White, *Audience Participation*, 9-14.

17. Max Herrmann, “Ueber die Aufgaben eines theaterwissenschaftlichen Instituts,” in *Theaterwissenschaft im deutschsprachigen Raum*, edited by Helmar Klier (Darmstadt: Wissenschaftliche Buchgesellschaft, 1981), 15-24.

Erika Fischer-Lichte builds on Hermann's discourse and suggests that events combine the political and the aesthetic, which allows for processes of democratization to be negotiated and the relationships between the members of a community to be redefined.¹⁸ They do so by distributing power among participants, and most importantly by reversing the roles of empowered and disempowered traditionally assigned to artists and spectators, respectively, during the performance. Artists are thus led to abandon their powerful position as the sole creator of the performance, and come to share that authority, in various degrees, with the audience. Fischer-Lichte further argues that in order for the interplay to take place there should be a prior empowerment of the artists and disempowerment of the audience, where the audience is exposed to crisis or shock in such a way that they are prevented from taking on the position of distanced observers and are motivated to act. The preparation session in *Gesturing Refugees* plays the role of such a shock factor, so that, for example, audience members are asked before anything else to hand in their IDs, which many experience as intimidating and shocking, but by which they are also prepared to act and make decisions during the performance.

The preparation session does not purport to allow audience members a first-person experience of a refugee's life during their journey from home to their refuge destination. From the start it is clear to them that we are in a performance space, where a real-life situation is not being re-created, although elements of it are used to create a "social play." When the audience is allowed to the foyer of the gallery or theatre they find me smiling and standing next to a table with filled water cups organized in rows and plastic bags laying on top of each other. I then invite them to stand comfortably in a half circle. They are not being pushed into a boat and kept on it for hours without food or water, as some participatory performances that aim at recreating life situations would do. In that sense, my work is in conversation with artistic works produced in the Caribbean and Latin America between the 1960s and the 90s, which, as Deborah Cullen explains, aimed at provoking critical feelings through artistic interventions that tackled inequalities, without trying to re-create actual life experienced under real repression.¹⁹ It was clear in these practices that art didn't equate life, which is also the case with *Gesturing Refugees*.

After the preparation session I accompany the audience into the performance space, where they find the video artist distributing Landing Cards for them to fill in while seated on chairs at the center of the space, facing a TV that loops silent footage archiving our process on Skype, showing video archives of Fadi's journey to Berlin and one of Hassan's choreographies in Beirut. The Landing Cards address ironic questions to the audience—regarding, for instance, the minute and second of birth, the type of shampoo they use, and the size of their

18. Erika Fischer-Lichte, *The Transformative Power of Performance* (New York: Routledge, 2008), 32.

19. Deborah Cullen, "An Introduction to the Project," in *Arte No es Vida: Actions by Artists of the Americas, 1960-2000*, edited by Deborah Cullen (New York: El Museo Del Barrio, 2008), 12-15.

Landing Card for UK/non UK subjects

Hour and second of birth: ?

Color of your first bed sheet: white

Hair length now: ~~st~~ just above shoulder

Brand of shampoo you use most of the time: Aceda

Second choice:

Number of hours you sleep per night: 7

Date of the last time you saw your first, fourth and ninth love?

Are you wearing a boxer/underpants?
 Yes No

If yes, please specify the size: small

Image 2. A filled-in Landing Card by a member of the audience.

underpants and boxers—that amplify the very personal and absurd questions refugees have to answer in their paperwork for requesting a refugee status, but also in the UK visa forms that I had to fill in for the dancers to come to the UK and which were denied. The Landing Cards are printed on simple white A4 paper, each sheet is cut into three Landing Cards and the text is typed and organized in a simple font, without the use of a fancy design. This aesthetic choice for the cards reflects the dull quality of papers that refugees have to deal with continuously, but which are decisive for the future of their lives.

From that moment onwards, the audience experiences the performance based on their answers. For instance, the people who were born before midnight have to raise their arms, stick their tongues out, and follow Pedro to cross the Boxer Line (a physical line created in the space with a pair of boxer shorts hanging on it, echoing one of Fadi's stories and the personal questions in the Landing Cards), then watch and reenact funny stories of refugeehood at one end of the space. Those who were born after midnight instead have to follow me and watch and reenact Hassan's gestures, based on my instructions, on the opposite end of the space. As another example, I ask those who sleep for less than 6 hours per night to help me move the projector from one place to another, and those whose hair is longer than 5 cm to reenact part of Hassan's choreography.

As Fischer-Lichte suggests, the reversal of roles between artists and audience in decision-making through the aesthetic process of the performance sets in motion “a self-generating and ever-changing autopoietic feedback loop,”²⁰ which requires the participation of everyone. No participant on their own is able to plan, control, and produce the work, and artists and audience constitute elements of the feedback loop that allow the performance to come about, while staying unpredictable to certain extent. In fact, the performance would not come about if the audience members were not there and were not making decisions, or if we, the artists, were not shifting constantly between being the empowering and the empowered. For example, the performance could not continue, or at least not as “planned,” if no audience member would move the projector to the following designated place, as in that case the video would not be seen clearly, which puts the audience in an empowered position and me in a disempowered one.

As White explains, the term “autopoiesis” used by Fischer-Lichte was borrowed from the discourse of cellular biology, where it first designated the self-production of cells and was later used to define living organisms in general.²¹ The term evoked the autonomy of organisms inasmuch as they self-generate, although it should not be taken to imply that they are independent from their environment. According to White, Fischer-Lichte uses the term “autopoietic” to indicate that performance produces itself autonomously after being initiated by the creative work of the artists. In that sense, both the artists and the audience become the resources of the autopoietic system—the performance—to produce and reproduce itself. Fischer-Lichte suggests that all performances, even the more traditional and staged ones, establish a feedback loop between the artists and the audience, referring, for example, to cases in which the action on stage gains or loses intensity based on the audience’s reactions if they laugh or shout, and similarly the audience’s reactions can shift depending on how the artists approach them by standing closer to them or asking them to calm down. Nonetheless, what she calls the “autopoietic feedback loop” exists only in participatory performance that includes “role reversal, the creation of community, and mutual physical contact.”²²

In *Gesturing Refugees* we try to enhance the performance’s feedback loop by offering another role reversal moment: when the videos finish the two groups are asked to go back to their seats, close their eyes, and try to reenact the gestures they have just witnessed and experienced. The audience is thus given time to remember, repeat, and transform the gestures themselves, which allows them to create their own version of the gestures. As Lepecki explains, reenacting gestures from the past can also be a way of inventing something new, by suspending the economies of authorship over the gestures, disseminating them, and giving them an afterlife.²³ After a few minutes, the audience is asked to open their

20. Fischer-Lichte, *The Transformative Power*, 50.

21. White, Audience Participation, 161-164.

22. Fischer-Lichte, *The Transformative Power*, 40.

23. André Lepecki, *Singularities: Dance in the Age of Performance* (New York: Routledge, 2016), 121-146.

eyes and switch sides: now those who were born after midnight would stand up, lower their heads, put their hands behind their backs, and go listen to and reenact Fadi's funny stories, while the other group would experience Hassan's complex choreography of gestures. This time, however, both groups would see partially different videos and reenact different gestures in the stories. By this, the performance means to encourage reflection on how people create a point of view depending on the information that they receive and how they receive it, and how this can be influenced by us making our own decisions. Audience members continue to see and experience the performance based on the answers they choose to write on their Landing Cards at the beginning of the performance.

On both occasions I explain to the group that is witnessing and experiencing Hassan's story and gestures that he is not alive anymore and that he committed suicide in the summer of 2016 because he couldn't bear his refugee status in Lebanon. Then I thank them for embodying his gestures, because by doing so we hope to bring them out of Lebanon, where he wanted to be. This part is often unsettling for the audience and leads them to raise ethical questions about the piece. An audience member at the Avignon Festival in July 2018 felt that they were "tricked into performing gestures of a dead person" and "without



Image 3. The two groups switching videos during Avignon Festival (July 2018) ©Medhat Soody

asking the permission of that person,” as I only give the audience the information about Hassan’s death after I have asked those of them whose hair is longer than 5cm (first group), or those who do not use Caster Oil Organic Shampoo (second group), to reenact his gestures. I usually respond to the audience members who raise these concerns after the performance by saying that I took permission from Hassan’s family and friends, and that I see carrying his gestures in my body and the audience’s body around the world as a political action to counter that of closing borders, blocking the passage of bodies and gestures.

What I find most interesting is that this part of the performance did not raise an ethical issue for people who had experienced vulnerability in certain ways and who could identify with the reason behind my leading them to embody Hassan’s gestures. In fact, some of the audience members who came to talk to me after the performance to express how much they were touched by that part and to express how much they could relate to the reasons behind it, had themselves experienced a physical vulnerability similar to Hassan’s. Their bodies had to ask for permission and fight in order to cross borders as they left their home behind: an Egyptian migrant in Avignon, a Syrian refugee in Berlin, a Somalian refugee in Glasgow, a Lebanese migrant in Amsterdam, a Sudanese migrant in Tangier, and a Mexican migrant in Edinburgh. It is clear, then, that exposing physical vulnerability can generate conflicting reactions: it can produce rejection and a sense that the tragic experience of death is being “instrumentalized,” but it can also create a sense of recognition, especially among those who have gone through similar experiences. My intention with *Gesturing Refugees* is not to create a juxtaposition between those two reactions, but rather to make them emerge through the participatory act, to create a space to think, even through contrasting ethical and political feelings, the meaning of that vulnerability.

Judith Butler, who tackles physical vulnerability in her *Notes Towards a Performative Theory of Assembly*, suggests that to physically appear and perform, in public or private, means that you are exposing yourself to others, therefore becoming vulnerable.²⁴ By inviting the audience to perform and expose themselves to gestural archives, I attempt to make them realize their own vulnerability, and that of others, through interactivity and by living and realizing, physically and emotionally, that what is happening there could happen here, or may even be already happening here. It is through bodily vulnerability, as Butler explains, that activism starts—not so that I lose myself, but inasmuch as I accept to be transformed by the interdependency and vulnerability of others. When I consent to engage in this way, I begin to self-make and act in concert. For Bishop, who also takes discomfort and frustration to be crucial to any artwork and its impact on the audience, the concern of audience members and scholars over ethics in participatory performance is part of an “ethical turn” that she regards

24. Butler, *Notes*, 123-153.

as problematic.²⁵ In her view, the unease produced by a performance is key to its capacity to influence the audience, not only during the performance but also after its end. She suggests that ethical issues should of course be taken into account, but not by directly unveiling potentially upsetting parts of the performance, such as writing disclaimers or telling the audience beforehand about the content of sensitive moments, if not by censoring these parts altogether. Instead, Bishop bids us to acknowledge that the audience is more than capable of dealing with performances that offer a complicated access to social truth, however extreme, and that the ethics at stake in performance is to be found in the effects that it provokes on the audience and the society.

In a similar vein, Brian Massumi argues for a situational understanding of ethics, which locates the ethical value of an action in its capacity to transform a situation, and in what emerges out of that situation through the affect experienced in it.²⁶ Affect is here a dimension that is open to adventure and hardship, and concerned with the revaluation of values and with creating its own ethics. In that sense, Massumi regards ethics as experimental, since it is not about being right or wrong but about how people experience uncertainty together. When spectators experience situations where they need to act and make decisions, they share responsibility for the situation that they find themselves in, which shifts their safe positions and requires them to become co-participants in the action. In that sense, by creating extreme conditions, my intention is to call on the spectators' sense of responsibility and push them to act within the space of the performance and beyond.

In light of these ideas I see ethics in participatory performance as a force that is created through the intimacy of participation, through meeting the other in a situation, where affect acts on both spectators and artists alike, enhancing the encounter and showing us the limits of our autonomy, thus our responsibility to others. In that sense, ethics is where the aesthetic and political meet. Having said that, I always take ethical considerations that aim to ensure participation without imposing it on the audience. Firstly, I use the tone of an invitation for any action that is suggested, so as to obtain consent from the spectators. Secondly, most actions are performed in groups, so that the spectators will not feel embarrassed or targeted as an individual. Lastly, I only request audience members to follow actions that will not expose their body or life to any danger and can be performed by bodies with different abilities.

It is interesting to notice that Fadi's video, in which he recounts and reenacts three funny stories that happened to him during his journey from Damascus to Berlin, has never received any comments for being unethical, even though the stories are ironically funny precisely because they happen in extreme conditions, without actually being funny at all. At one point, for example, Fadi recounts how

25. Bishop, *Artificial Hells*, 18-26.

26. Brian Massumi, *The Politics of Affect* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2015), 11-16.

one of his best friends was rolling on a dangerous bridge in Macedonia and he couldn't help him because he couldn't stop laughing at how fast he was rolling. At another point, he tells the story of a pair of boxer shorts that he bought in Budapest imprinted with the image of a middle finger, in order to show it to the Hungarian police if he were to get caught, although when the police eventually caught him he was not able to show it to them, so that, as he puts it, it was the police that gave *him* the middle finger. Finally, he talks about his connection to Albert Einstein—himself a refugee—and to his gesture of sticking his tongue out, recalling how he documented his journey from Damascus to Berlin by always taking selfies with Einstein's gesture, and how he visited Einstein's house in Germany once he arrived there. Fadi also invites audience members to reenact some of the gestures in one of his stories, depending on which group is watching: the first is asked to reenact the gesture of giving the middle finger to the Hungarian police and the second the act of taking a selfie while performing Einstein's gesture.

In his discussion of the triggering of laughter by performances, White refers to Robert Provine's studies of funny moments, in which he suggests that laughter is an unconsciously intersubjective behavior shared by members of a group and signaling the sense of belonging to that group.²⁷ In White's view, in performance laughter is the most embodied state of emotion that is intersubjectively shared and that allows performers to read the feeling of the audience. Through laughter the audience goes from being a group of individuals to forming a crowd. In this new configuration, their responses are not always controlled consciously, as the experience of laughter allows them to feel that they are in a stress-free situation, and thus more open to accept an invitation to participate. Massumi also explores humour as an affective movement that conveys "singularities of experience" that are specific to each situation.²⁸ He argues that through humour we are able to experience the eventfulness and uniqueness of each situation, to navigate it and be immersed in it, instead of trying to control it. This explains why, as I see it, the group of people who watch Fadi's stories first have a very different experience of the performance as a whole, as intended by the piece, since the point is to create a unique experience for the collective of singularities that are present in the room, based on their choices and actions.

After both videos have been watched by the two different groups, everyone is invited to go back to their seats while still reenacting the gestures encountered in the stories they just witnessed. Then the video artist plays a video on the television screen that is located in the middle of the space, where all three of us (Fadi, Hamza, and myself) can be seen sharing a Skype screen. In the video, Hamza is remembering and reenacting the story of his brother getting shot by Israeli soldiers in a refugee camp in Nablus during the 1990s, while Fadi and I try

27. White, *Audience Participation*, 129-132.

28. Massumi, *The Politics*, 13-14.

to embody and archive the gestures of his story in our bodies. This part reflects on Skype as a medium that hosts and supports the bodily archive that we are creating, while also reflecting the process of transmitting personal memories to each other's bodies. Audience members can thus witness our process and take notice, among other things, of the poor quality of the image we were working with (often pixelated or delayed), and the unevenness of the three screens, with Hamza on the left and Fadi on the right within rectangles of a similar size, and me inside a smaller box, more distant, in the bottom right, which reflects the uneven conditions that prevail when one is working from a distance rather than in the same room.

After the video stops, I start calling the names on the ID cards that the audience members handed to me at the beginning of the performance and I ask them to reenact one gesture they can remember from the stories they experienced in order to get their ID back. After we hear everyone's name and we see everyone reenacting gestures, I introduce all the artists by their names, concluding with mine, which allows me to begin recounting and reenacting my personal ironically funny gestures of refugeehood. The gestures I present here were produced in critical situations and became funny by virtue of the context in which they



Image 4. Hamza in Nablus reenacting his brother's shooting scene, while Fadi in Berlin and Farah in Edinburgh embody his gestures over Skype.



Image 5. The closing circle where performers and audience reenact some of the gestures that they have experienced in the performance at Liverpool Arab Arts Festival 2019 ©Jazamin Sinclair.

were produced, as when I had to call an ambulance while under curfew in the West Bank in 2002 to take me to school to take my IB exam, or to get a ride to a friend's house when I was sick of staying home. By doing this I connect myself to the other refugee-artists in the piece and to the potential future refugees present in the room: the audience. After reenacting, transforming, and deforming my own gestures of refugeehood, I also repeat and ask the audience to repeat traces of gestures that were performed throughout the piece while we are all standing in a circle, to enhance the embodiment of the gestures and the affective and intellectual exchange produced by the act of feeling-thinking together in the space.

THE AFTERLIFE OF THE EVENT

In his work on affect and the “more than” that it produces, Massumi distinguishes between emotion and affect.²⁹ While emotion is the expression of what a person is feeling at a certain moment through gesture and language, structured by social convention and culture, affect is an unstructured and nonlinguistic bodily

29. Brian Massumi, *Parables for The Virtual: Movement, Affect, Sensation* (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 2002), 27-28.

sensation that exceeds what is actualized by language and gesture. Thus understood, affect stirs a sense that something is being experienced and initiates efforts to understand what was experienced and to find ways to express it. Building on Massumi's thought, Deborah Gould suggests that often when people try to grasp what they are feeling they draw meaning from their culture and personal habits.³⁰ In doing so, they express what they are feeling in an incomplete way that fails to represent the affective experience, in a mere approximation of what they are feeling obtained by reducing unrepresentable affective states into conventionally recognized emotions through fixed language and gestures. Gould further argues that the distinction between affect and emotions is not temporal, as though affect were something that comes first and then gives way to a fixed emotion. Rather, affect is always there, even if not actualized, and it is only through it that people may come to feel any emotion. She explains that for Massumi the non-fixity of affect provides enormous freedom, allowing it to be directed and mobilized in new ways. This entails that by diminishing affect into culturally conventional emotions we would be reducing its potential to go past the threshold and realizing "the more than" of what is actualized in social life.

In his account of the politics of affect Massumi himself elaborates on the potential of passing the threshold and experiencing a change through affect, explaining that during an event one is always both affected and affecting in return.³¹ Thus, Massumi views affect as transversal, as something that cuts across the subjective and the objective simultaneously, provoking a process of feeling that touches both the body and the mind. In affect the subjective qualities and the object that gives rise to them are equally involved, as are freedom and constraint: "you could say that sensation is the registering of affect... the passing awareness of being at a threshold—and that affect is thinking, bodily—consciously but vaguely, in the sense that it is not yet a fully formed thought. It's a movement of thought, or a thinking movement."³² Massumi suggests that when you affect something you are at the same time being affected, making you transition from where you were before, in however small a degree, by which you are led to step over a threshold and experience a change. Through affect, then, each situation is able to access its potential, and people are reminded of the fact that we don't live in isolation, that we are interdependent with others and with things around us, allowing for the fluidity of each person's subjectivity. According to Massumi an encounter should not be understood as creating intersubjectivities by melting two or several subjectivities into each other, as other affect scholars do. He argues that the notion of intersubjectivity is misleading inasmuch as it alludes to the established existence of pre-constituted subjects who come to experience the artwork. Following Guattari and Deleuze he claims that the subjects in the room are rather engaged in a constantly ongoing process of formation through

30. Deborah Gould, "On Affect and Protest," in *Political Emotions: New Agendas in Communication*, edited by Janet Staiger, Ann Svetkovich, and Ann Reynolds (New York: Routledge, 2010), 27-28.

31. Massumi, *The Politics*, 3-6.

32. Massumi, *The Politics*, 10.

which they reemerge and reconstitute continuously. To frame this process in terms of intersubjectivity would be to reduce it to an exchange between subjects, while it is actually more like a transversal exchange involving subjects as well as objects. Massumi thus prefers to describe the encounter as “the coming together of the world for experience,” a “bare activity,”³³ and an event each of whose elements affects the others. This exchange among fluid singularities is initiated by microshocks, interruptions or cuts that emerge in our everyday lives and offer a change in focus and microconceptions. These shocks may go unnoticed at the beginning, but they begin to enter conscious awareness as they unfold, causing us to pass a threshold and feel the change by which the “more than” of the event becomes manifest. Massumi suggests that such encounters lead to action in the future, depending on the past of the person and how they experience and perceive the microshocks in the present. For this reason he conceptualizes the event as micropolitical, where the prefix “micro-” should not be interpreted in the sense of “small,” but as denoting the way in which an event happens as it generates a moment of experience causing us to grasp the novelty and complexity of a situation and inspiring ways of going forward.

Massumi and Erin Manning have been exploring the connections between the micropolitical and the aesthetic-political in SenseLab, a series of events initiated by Manning in 2004 in Montréal and conceived as a space for the intersection of philosophy, art, and activism. SenseLab is a sort of “laboratory for thought in motion” where the event is not recognizable as a conference, an installation, or a workshop, and requires participants to experience it as undefined and in the process of forming along with them as they continuously self-constitute and transform. No one is asked to deliver a constituted work, and people are urged to bring into play the tendencies, techniques, obsessions, and inclinations that drive them in their processes and to take part in a constitutive work that is in the process of being created with the present group. With this approach to event-making, Massumi and Manning aim to break the expectations that confine the efficacy of the event and to extend the duration of the shock created by the unusual, allowing it to pass the threshold of perceptibility and become consciously felt as potential, stopping it from transforming into an automatic reaction to a stimulus. To do that they adapt hospitality as their model, thinking of spatial setups as “enabling constraints”³⁴ that would break expectations in a gentle and inviting way. They thus try to anticipate the obstacles that traditional events tend to confront, such as the difficulty of finding concrete ways to encourage different temporalities of entry so as to establish different kinds of dynamics. Working in this direction, they allow people to enter the space in different ways, and once they are inside, they are urged to engage in group dynamics by being divided into smaller groups where they will not feel intimidated to

33. Massumi, *The Politics*, 52.

34. Massumi, *The Politics*, 73.

participate, before moving into one big group. To achieve this they rely on what they call “techniques of relations,” which they devise specifically for each event. In one of the events, in order to divide the small groups they provide pieces of fabric with different textures and colours and ask people to pick the pieces that they find most attractive and interact with them; as this happens groups slowly begin to emerge, so that even before speaking a common experience will have been created. After people in each of these groups have spent some time working together, each group is asked to share its process with the bigger group, not by describing it from an outside perspective but by creating it and performing it again with the group as a whole. As Massumi explains:

It’s like the event’s content was becoming its form, or vice versa. Nothing was going to happen unless everyone helped make it happen. So everybody owned the results. Everyone was actively implicated in making the event. They didn’t deliver, and neither did we. Without the participants’ active involvement, nothing would have happened. Since there was nothing on offer, there was nothing to be had, except what the group collectively made happen.³⁵

According to Massumi, this is how in SenseLab the thinking-feeling continues to be in the process, never complete and resolved. The subject thus becomes engaged and contributes to the micropolitical, rather than merely judging the macropolitical. Indeed, people perceive the macro as situated at a higher-level from them allowing them to stand outside of the event and to judge from a position of purity and correctness. With this in mind, Massumi and Manning urge for the creation of micropolitical events, during which people are pushed into participating and facing constraints, rather than judging from outside. This way of doing things sets the conditions for an emergence of collectivities, thought, and change.

In her book *The Minor Gesture* Manning defines the microshocks mentioned by Massumi as a minor gesture, as the living variation of experience “that opens space for disturbances and new modes of expression,”³⁶ allowing new tendencies to emerge by placing emphasis on the process and transforming everything into an event. According to Manning the minor gesture is always political, because it awakens new ways of encounter and creates new ways of experiencing life-living, a “way of thinking life beyond the human” which allows us to perceive our lives as part of a bigger whole. She also argues that the minor gesture contributes to the creation of the *undercommons*, a concept developed by Fred Moten and Stefano Harney and explained by them as a collectivity that is born in the encounter and becomes a commons not simply through co-existence but mostly through an ecology of practices generated by the encounter.³⁷ These are

35. Massumi, *The Politics*, 76.

36. Erin Manning, *The Minor Gesture* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2016), 2.

37. Stefano Harney and Fred Moten, *The Undercommons: Fugitive Planning and Black Study* (New York: Minor Compositions, 2013), 109-110.

38 Lorna Irvine, "Gesturing Refugees," *The List*, March 30, 2020, <https://www.list.co.uk/article/109388-gesturing-refugees/>.

practices that aim at creating conditions through which to reveal ways of thinking and try to understand unsolvable problems. In that sense, Manning suggests that the minor gesture allows individuals who engage in an ongoing process of self-constitution to become researchers in the experience, led by intuition and moved by affect.

In *Gesturing Refugees* I experiment with the ways in which participatory performance, in the form of an event, can contribute towards the interchange between subjectivities, the creation of future responsibility, and the potential of action after the event. In that sense, the work aims to be an event in which the audience is considered as a collective of singularities and is invited to feel-think together, through a series of microshocks or minor gestures, and where they are led to experience alternative stories and gestures of refugeehood by reenacting, transforming, and deforming them in their bodies and carrying them beyond the performance space, creating an afterlife of the event that could materialize in different degrees and forms. This is made possible, for example, by allowing people to gain a more accurate understanding of the asylum-seeking process by having them fill in the ironic Landing Cards themselves and bringing them home, where they can look at them again and keep them as a physical trace of the experience. People are also urged to consider the mainstream media's depiction of refugees under a different light after taking their "last selfie at home" during the introductory section, which they can later find in their phones when they are back home. They are enabled to share and transmit these alternative stories and gestures of refugeehood with a friend, after archiving them in their own bodies during the performance, in a process that may lead them to eventually host a refugee at home or to contact their MP to advocate for a change in the asylum-seeking procedure.

As Lorna Irvine puts it in her review of a performance of *Gesturing Refugees at the Centre for Contemporary Arts* in Glasgow in June 2019:

It is an unforgettable piece, dedicated to refugees past, present and future, and hard to categorise: part performance lecture, part workshop, and fortified through these funny, sad, chilling testimonials from others, it pulses like a heartbeat and makes the skin prickle. It is a very special and transformative work, with love—and dance movement itself—as a true weapon of resistance. Gestures can be passed down as stories, never to be forgotten.³⁸



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