

ARTISTIC CONTRIBUTION

"Learning to Imitate in Absentia"

Script for performance and documentary images, 2011

Yael Davids

NL

info@mahku.nl

Introduction

Yael Davids's practice is situated between installation and performance, often developing at the intersection of the private and political spheres. The body is central to her work, becoming a site of reception and activation. Her installations manifest a constant engagement with performance in their attempt to give shape to the ephemeral and the ambiguity of place as presence and absence. Here she presents a script for a performance entitled *Learning to Imitate in Absentia* (2011), together with documentation of its live performance at Kunsthalle Basel (2011) and related sculptural elements. The performance physically inscribes the artist's body into the gallery space, mapping her use of language and revisiting the object and the space as an act of speech.



Yael Davids, *Learning to imitate in Absentia*, 2011 (performance with installation, Kunsthalle Basel).
Photo: Eva Flury. Courtesy the artist and Kunsthalle Basel.



Yael Davids, Learning to imitate in Absentia, 2011 (performance with installation, Kunsthalle Basel).
Photo: Eva Flury. Courtesy the artist and Kunsthalle Basel.

Learning to Imitate in Absentia

The piece is performed in a space in which the audience, a single performer, and several objects are situated.

The objects are:

A small wooden podium (36 × 30 × 15 cm)

A wooden staircase

A wooden flip chart

A small monitor resting on trestle legs

Color photos of the scattered ruins of Bayt Thul, Jerusalem District, and of the ruins of Suba. The photos lie on the floor, image sides facing down.

Five sheets of glass (120 × 240 cm) leaning against other elements in different locations

One large white surface (360 × 360 cm) built from acoustic panels (120 × 120 cm each), leaning against the wall

Two squares of black pigment (200 × 200 cm) plastered on the wall

A rope hanging from the ceiling construction. Part of the glass ceiling is removed for the rope to pass through.

The floor is marked with tape indicating the choreography.

The audience sits on the floor.

The performer—Y—walks alongside the walls. She recites text mostly with eyes closed and acts in relation to the objects she is performing with.

In an adjacent exhibition space another large acoustic screen (360 × 360 cm) lies on the floor before it is tilted by performers into a vertical standing position.

Y stands on the wooden podium and recites the text with eyes closed.

As I come to terms with the end of one performance and its residue in space, in things, and in me, I wonder if the idea of documentation and notation came about to enable the restaging and celebration of dance or performance? Or rather as an expression of a constant searching, for the one who moved, the one who is erased, for the one who is undone.

(Small pause)

Y walks to stand close to the monitor.

I repeat my previous performance. It is now a score and I follow my own footsteps step by step—detecting the moments and things that were not named.

I am the background. I am the stage. I am the story. I am a repetition.

I am a repetition.

In Trisha Brown's dance piece *Accumulation with Talking*, she said: "While I was making the dance my father died somewhere between these two movements."

And somewhere between this and my previous performance, my mother died.

Y lifts the monitor and switches it on. It shows a sequence from Accumulation with Talking by Trisha Brown (1973).

Y walks and stands close to the flip chart. She recites the text with eyes closed.

It has been recounted how, in the seventeenth century, the dance masters of the French Baroque were shut in a room with paper and a writing desk to compose choreography. These academic choreographers of the Baroque were bound to use the notation method of Raoul-Auger Feuillet. With this notation, dance could be created without the moving body. The written choreographies were then sent to the Paris Academy to be

judged and classified, and only after all that came the practical test—the execution. The space made for the writing of the dance was a preface to the performance. In these notations, writing is dancing.

Y flips the pages on the flip chart and shows some of Feuillet's (1653–1709) notations.

Around that time, a restless tension and a separation between body and text began to appear. Theorists recognized that within movement, all presence is haunted by disappearance and absence. The sensation that movement is always stepping into invisibility created a new nervousness within the writing of dance. Dance had begun to formulate itself as loss and temporal paradox. Choreography had been moulded into mourning.

Pierre Rameau's manual *Dancing Master* is structured around a systematic fragmentation of both body and movement, down to their smallest components. The book is divided into short chapters with titles like:

"Of the Manner of Holding the Body," "Of the Manner of Taking One's Hat off and Putting it on Again," "On the Manner of Moving the Wrist," "A Discourse on the Arms and the Importance of Knowing How to Move Them Gracefully," and so forth.

Y flips the pages on the flip chart which show images and drawings from Rameau's Dancing Master (1725).

Despite the amount of detail in his writing and his breaking down of movements into gestures, steps, and body parts, Rameau's book indicates a distrust in the capacity of writing to convey movement. *Dancing Master* is a book hovering between the inadequacy of language and the inaccuracy of vision.

It is interesting to notice that in a painting, an appearance can function as a note, a sign, a trace. The art historian Giovanni Morelli (1816–91) developed a new system to analyze visual art. Like a detective, he tried to recognize the "hand" of the artist through a consideration of small details in the work. Morelli noted that museums were full of paintings without exact attributions. It is difficult to trace every work to their "real" creator: we are frequently dealing with unsigned work, work which may have been touched up in the past, or might be in quite poor condition. To be able to distinguish an original from a copy, Morelli emphasized that we should not depend, as is often the case, on the most conspicuous characteristics of a painting. Eyes raised towards heaven in the figures of Perugino, the smile in a Leonardo: these are the obvious parts to imitate. We should instead examine the most trivial details—like the earlobes, the fingernails, the shapes of fingers and of toes. Morelli considered these marginal areas to be the most revealing, as they were the parts where the self-control of the artist, who was tied to cultural traditions, could be relaxed and yield to purely individual touches.

Y uses the flip chart to show images from La Galleria Morelli in Bergamo by Gustavo Frizzoni (1892).

Morelli's methods have been compared to those of the fictional detective Sherlock Holmes as well as being of importance to Sigmund Freud. The art connoisseur resembles the detective who discovers the perpetrator of a crime on the basis of evidence hardly noticeable to other people. Freud is known to have read Morelli's books and to have been inspired by the idea that interpretation based on discarded information, on marginal data, could be considered significant.

There are parallels between the methods of Morelli, Holmes, and Freud. In each case, tiny traces permit the comprehension of a deeper, otherwise unattainable reality. More precisely, these traces are symptoms in the case of Freud, clues in the case of Holmes, and pictorial marks in the case of Morelli. In each of these, the paradigm of medical semiotics is evident: the diagnosis of diseases which are inaccessible to direct observation, based on superficial symptoms. Freud was a physician, Morelli held a medical degree and Arthur Conan Doyle practiced medicine before turning to literature.

This method could be called "reasoning backwards"—the structure of the clues allows us to reason back in time. The traces that are left can reveal a history.

Y walks and stands close to the photos that lie on the floor. She recites the texts with eyes closed.

It is known that the places where Palestinian villages used to be can be located by the scattered traces of fig and olive trees, cacti and ruins. These ruins are now on the verge of erasure. They have become an almost organic part of the Israeli landscape, a part of nature, so that reading them, seeing their residue, is denied.

Y picks up and displays the photos of the scattered ruins of Bayt Thul, Jerusalem District.

Y reads texts from a small sheet of paper.

In the landscape where I grew up homes have turned to stone, villages have become landscape.

Zvad—Zvat

Tveriya—Tveira

Bisan—Beit Shean

A-Nazra—Nazerat

Yafa—Yafo

Ramle—Ramle

El Kads—Jerushaleyim

Br Al Sabha—Beer Seva

Suba—Tzuba

Y picks up and displays a photo of the ruins of Suba.

Y walks and stands in front of the staircase and begins to walk up the stairs, with eyes closed, while reciting a part of the text.

I grew up in Kibbutz Tzuba—downhill from the beautiful ruins of the old Arab village Suba. We called it "the Arab Tzuba," not fully realizing what that meant. We loved walking there as kids. It was a beautiful place with a beautiful view—this was nature.

Later I understood that what we had been told about the history of these ruins was not the whole story. Suba had been a Palestinian village that was attacked by the Palmach army on July 13, 1948. 602 Palestinians were expelled and a Zionist settlement, Kibbutz Tzuba, was established. I grew up somewhere between these two places, Suba and Tzuba.

Y stands in front of the staircase and reads text from a small sheet of paper.

Carl Andre once said: "My idea of a piece of sculpture is a road. That is, a road doesn't reveal itself at any particular point or from any particular point. Roads appear and disappear. We either have to travel on them or beside them. But we don't have a single point of view for a road at all, except a moving one, moving along it."

Y stands close to the leaning glass plates, and a reflection of her body appears in the glass. Y recites the text with eyes closed.

In April 1625, a two-headed calf was born in the outskirts of Rome. The naturalists of the Roman Lincean Academy became interested in the case. It was a topic of conversation in the Vatican gardens. The first question that was asked was whether the bicephalous calf was one or two animals? For physicians, it was the brain that distinguished the individual; for Aristotelians, it was the heart.

I say: it takes more than one to be one.

(Small pause)

The figure can move from figure on background to background on background.

Y demonstrates this by holding paper in front of her face.

In animal mimicry, the insect becomes the double of its background. For example, the wings of a moth imitate shrivelled leaves and the caterpillar's body can't be distinguished from arching twigs. One can see this as a psychotic yielding to the call of "space." It is the confusion of the boundary between inside and outside, between figure and ground. It is the decline of contours, of self-possession. The body collapses, diffuses, in order to be possessed by its own surroundings. This possession produces a double that is in effect an effacement of the figure. The figure is background on background.

An animal's natural geometry is horizontal.

Y demonstrates a horizontal position with a wooden stick on her back.

For an animal, the mouth is a "prow," like the silhouette of a ship at sea. Mouth/anus. A horizontal line that every other animal knows how to read. By standing up, the human being abandons that simple geometry and assumes, in her verticality, a more confusing form. The top of the head, the "prow," is now a non-signifying element of the body. The eye is the evocative element of human architecture. It has relegated the mouth into obscurity. Yet this architecture of the human will transform in the moment of greatest pain or greatest pleasure. The subject will tense her or his neck and throw the head back fully. In that position, the mouth is on top of the spine. From this newly projecting, newly expressive member, the cry will ring out.

Y tilts the monitor which displays a sequence from Andy Warhol's Blow Job (1964).

Y slowly wraps the rope around her legs and hangs upside down, suspended by it. She reads text from a small piece of paper that was in her pocket.

One has to accept awareness of the "maniacally charged present" announcing itself at the very moment when presence forces itself into disappearance. Peggy Phelan suggests that dance's "representational frame" works from within the tension between presence, disappearance, and representation.

"... the moving body is always fading before our eyes. Historical bodies and bodies on stage fascinated us because they fade. The exuberant present of performance masks a real absence. By definition transient, performance is immediate yet quickly becomes history."

Y stands in front of the rope and recites the text with eyes closed.

My mum told me a while ago about an article by David Rieff, Susan Sontag's son, that ended with: "She screamed out in surprise and terror. 'But this means I'm dying.'"

Eight months later I heard my mother pronouncing similar words.

(Small pause)

True stories are told backwards in time, while novels can be told forwards, into the future. The hunting stories of the Ilongot people from the Philippines are different. They are true stories told as fiction that the hunters tell on their return from the hunt. They document the act of hunting, they recollect past experience and create new experiences through storytelling. The stories the hunting men tell about themselves both reflect what actually happened and define the kind of experiences they will be looking forward to in the future. The past is celebrated in the story that at the same time becomes a script for the future hunt. And so, when responding to a physical challenge with speed and imagination, the Ilongot huntsman experiences himself as the main character of his story.

Y picks up and shows a photo of mended ceramics from the sixteenth century.

Y lies in front of the stairs and recites the text with eyes closed.

Kibbutz Tzuba was established as a pioneering socialist society. Its livelihood relied upon agriculture and animal farming: peaches, apples, cherries, plums, as well as chickens and livestock. Changes at the kibbutz can be traced in part to the year 1979, when its factory, Oran Safety Glass, was established. During this time, there was a shift from agriculture to industrial production in many kibbutzim. This shift was the result of economic changes that made it impossible to depend on agriculture alone. Initially, the Oran factory had ten to twelve workers who were members of the kibbutz and made windshields. The glass sheets they produced were around two to three millimeters thick.

In the late 1980s, during the First Intifada (the Palestinian uprising against Israeli occupation of Palestinian territories), there was a demand for bullet-resistant glass. The Israel Defence Force requested a new type of glass, followed by another request in 2000 during the Second Intifada. This second Intifada was militarily more sophisticated and the opponents of the IDF were more heavily armed.

In 2001, the US Army went to war in Afghanistan, and in 2003, in Iraq. Oran Safety Glass designed a new type of glass for the US Army to use in these countries. The chronology of developments in safety glass goes hand in hand with these historical military developments:

15–20 mm glass: resistant to Kalashnikovs, M249 light machine guns, and any other assault rifles

50–60 mm glass: resistant to armour-piercing rockets

130–200 mm glass: resistant to Bazookas, RPGs, and any other luminous rockets

Today, Oran Safety Glass employs around three hundred workers. Most of them are from Russia and Ethiopia, often arriving from Kiryat Gat, a city with a large immigrant population, around one hour away from the kibbutz.

(Small pause)

"The viewing process of the Warhol film evokes a loss of presence, when the image is faded out to a blank light screen—and such a loss induces not just fear, but an awareness of being within such an on-going process of attrition. Whilst light is metaphysically not an absence ... from a purely technical point of view, extreme light can create an absence of image. Note the conventional fallacy in respect of the blind of whom we think only see black, but who insist they see white. Obliteration through light as much as through darkness."

Y tilts the monitor and shows a sequence from Andy Warhol's Blow Job (1964).

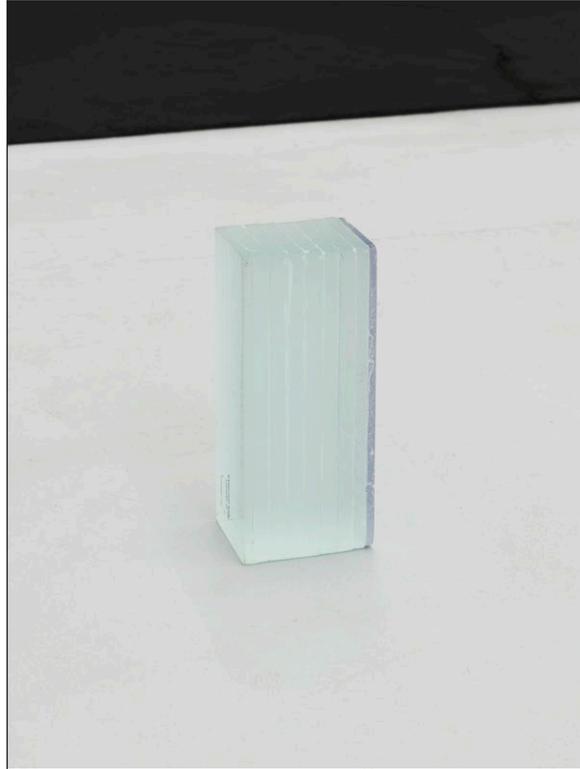
"Everything went white" say those whose blood pressure drops, about the instant before they faint. Don't the survivors of near-death experiences mention white light? This white light is often understood to represent a higher power, or evidence of an afterlife. It may also indicate a lack of oxygen, when blood flow to the brain decreases. When internal bleeding becomes critical, patients often reports that "all the colour drained out."

The ancient Greeks believed they could define the body by the amount of heat it emitted, from very cold to very hot—from very female to very male. Heat within the body gave the power to see, to listen, to act and react, and to speak. It was also thought that the eye perceived warming rays from a body or an object. Using this logic, Aristotle argued that even the experience of transparency or empty space was a physical experience. Bodies as well as objects as well as empty spaces all carry heat.

Performance script by Yael Davids, edited by Catherine Nichols and Eva Wilson.



Yael Davids, *Learning to imitate in Absentia*, 2011 (detail of installation, Kunsthalle Basel). Photo: Eva Flury. Courtesy the artist and Kunsthalle Basel.



Yael Davids, Learning to imitate in Absentia, 2011 (detail of installation, Kunsthalle Basel). Photo: Eva Flury. Courtesy the artist and Kunsthalle Basel.



Yael Davids, Learning to imitate in Absentia, 2011 (performance, Kunsthalle Basel). Photo: Eva Flury. Courtesy the artist and Kunsthalle Basel.

Competing Interests

The artist has no competing interests to declare.

Artist Biography

Yael Davids (Kibbutz Tzuba, Israel, 1968) has exhibited and performed her work internationally. Solo exhibitions include, most recently, Museo Tamayo, Mexico City (2018), as well as *The Distance between V and W* at Laboratoires d'Aubervilliers, Aubervilliers (2015); *A Reading That Writes—A Physical Act II* at Redcat, Los Angeles (2013), *Obliterating an Image*, Galerie Diana Stigter, Amsterdam (2013), Museum M, Leuven (2012) and *Various Stages* at Kunsthaus Dresden (2012). *A Reading That Loves—A Physical Act* (2017) was shown in documenta 14, Kassel and Athens (2017). Other selected group exhibitions include Kunstverein Hamburger Bahnhof, Hamburg (2013); Universidad di Tella, Buenos Aires (2013), Circus, Berlin (2012), Kunsthalle Basel (2011), *Picture This*, Bristol (2010), Objectif Exhibitions, Antwerp (2008), Tate Modern, London (2008) and the ICA, London (2007). Davids studied Fine Art at Gerrit Rietveld Academy, Amsterdam, sculpture at Pratt Institute, New York and dance pedagogy at Remscheid Academy, Remscheid. She is currently undertaking a Creator Doctus (CrD) with the Gerrit Rietveld Academy and the Van Abbe Museum, Eindhoven.

Bibliography

- Andre, C** 2005 *Cuts: Texts 1959–2004*, Meyer, J (ed.). Cambridge, MA: MIT Press.
- Cavarero, A** 2000 *Relating Narratives: Storytelling and Selfhood*. London: Routledge.
- Didion, J** 2006 *The Year of Magical Thinking*. London: Harper Perennial.
- Frizzoni, G** 1892 *La Galleria Morelli in Bergamo: descritta ed illustrata con 24 tavole fototipiche*. Bergamo: Bolis.
- Gidal, P** 2008 *Andy Warhol: Blow Job*. London: Afterall Books.
- Ginzburg, C** 1989 *Clues, Myths, and the Historical Method*. Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press.
- Krauss, R** 1994 *The Optical Unconscious*. Cambridge, MA: MIT Press.
- Phelan, P** 2004 quoted from André Lepecki's essay "Inscribing Dance Form." In: *Of the Presence of the Body: Essays on Dance and Performance Theory*, Lepecki, A (ed.). Middletown: Wesleyan University Press.
- Rieff, D** 2008 *Swimming in a Sea of Death: A Son's Memoir*. London: Granta Publications. David Rieff is also quoted from an article in *The Observer*, Sunday May 18, 2008.
- Sennett, R** 1996 *Flesh and Stone: The Body and the City in Western Civilization*. New York: Norton & Co.
- Turner, V** and **Bruner, E** 1986 *The Anthropology of Experience*. Champaign: University of Illinois Press.

How to cite this article: Davids, Y 2017 "Learning to Imitate in Absentia". *MaHKUscript: Journal of Fine Art Research*, 2(1): 14, pp. 1–10, DOI: <https://doi.org/10.5334/mjfar.31>

Published: 14 March 2018

Copyright: © 2017 The Author(s). This is an open-access article distributed under the terms of the Creative Commons Attribution 4.0 International License (CC-BY 4.0), which permits unrestricted use, distribution, and reproduction in any medium, provided the original author and source are credited. See <http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/>.

 *MaHKUscript: Journal of Fine Art Research* is a peer-reviewed open access journal published by Ubiquity Press.

OPEN ACCESS 