



## Pointing at Things and Saying What They Are: An Interview with Oliver Zahn

### [00:00:19] INTRO

**Duška Radosavljević:** Hello, welcome to the Gallery!

Oliver Zahn is a German performance-maker whose short working career has nonetheless resulted in a string of hauntingly simple and interminably thought-provoking artworks. In 2015 Zahn graduated in Theatre and Opera Directing from the Bavarian Theatre Academy August Everding with a piece entitled *Situation with Outstretched Arm*. In it he examined the history of the legally banned Nazi salute in the form of a spoken word essay combined with an endurance act performed by actor Sara Tamburini. This was closely followed in 2016 by *Situation with Doppelgänger*, performed by Zahn himself with the Black German performer Julian Warner, and constituting a historical and embodied exploration of popular and folk dancing, minstrel shows and cultural appropriation. Once again, the format was an endurance performance accompanied by a spoken essay. This performance was shown at a postgraduate conference at the Royal Central School of Speech and Drama in October 2018.

In May 2020, Zahn was due to return to the UK and take part in the GIFT festival in Gateshead with his latest show *In Praise of Forgetting* in which he explores another controversial German topic – the oral cultures of the Germans expelled from the non-German lands following World War Two. Due to the Covid pandemic, the GIFT festival took place online and Zahn created a brand new off-shoot performance *In Praise of Forgetting Two*, designed specifically to be performed on Zoom and quickly becoming the festival favourite.

In this interview we find out the details of Zahn's artistic and intellectual journey and the process of making these performance artworks.

This conversation took place between Berlin and London on Zoom on 28<sup>th</sup> May 2020.

### [00:02:26] ATTEMPTS...

**Duška Radosavljević:** Okay, well, thank you again for agreeing to do this. I saw, I attended, I experienced *In Praise of Forgetting [Two]* as part of GIFT Festival, and also previously I had seen *Situation with a Doppelgänger* when it was on at Central. So the only one I was missing was your first piece, which thank you for sending me that. And also obviously there is *In Praise of Forgetting*, part one, which I don't quite know what form it took in the actual performance and we can maybe talk about that a little later. The main purpose of this conversation is to try and understand how your particular idiom as an artist has developed and how you've developed this way of working and this particular methodology and this particular interest in making theatre and performance in the way that you do. With the artists that we are interviewing, we try and revisit your formative steps – where you trained, how you trained, how you reacted against the training you received, what other formative influences were present in your development as an artist and your development of your methodology, your intellectual approach and your particular aesthetic. I just watched *Situation with Outstretched Arm* and from it I can infer that this was possibly your student piece. Was it a student piece of yours?

**Oliver Zahn:** Yes. So was *Doppelgänger*, actually.

**DR:** Right. Right. So was *Doppelgänger* too? Okay, very interesting. So do you want to tell us about where you studied, what you studied, how you chose, maybe, even if we rewind further back, how you chose to study whatever you studied that actually led you to making this work?

**OZ:** Okay. So I studied directing for opera and straight theatre at the Bavarian Theatre Academy, which is a very classical directors' course and it's the only one in Germany that does both opera and regular theatre, 'Sprechtheater' in German. I did not have any connection to opera at all when I applied for that. I kind of came to the whole idea of theatre in a somewhat roundabout way because I grew up in a pretty rural area in southwest Germany and there was no theatre basically there. So I didn't really have any connection to that growing up. I did eventually start making short films while I was at school



and from there I kind of like, after graduating, which was in 2009, that's when I really started getting into theatre. And so coming from like an amateur film-making background, applying for a directing course seemed to make the most sense. At that point I didn't know about any of the other courses even in the German-speaking area that I could have taken that would have taken me closer to a performance art context right away, you know, like Giessen and Hildesheim, like the more experimental schools, which is why I basically applied for regular directing courses and got accepted in Munich. And basically it was a very classical course that did have some freedom in developing the work but I had a very turbulent relationship with the school, which included me having like a burnout in the third year. It's a four-year course – I had a burnout in the third year and took a year off. That basically came from me trying to make theatre the way that the school, which prepares people to make work in state theatres, and me trying to make theatre the way the school and the state system wanted me to make theatre – and I kind of really wasn't able to do that at all!

**DR:** Could you illustrate that a little bit for us? How does a director train in a German academy context?

**OZ:** It depends. It's different from school to school because obviously I would say that there is no fixed way to become a theatre director, right? So I would say that every school is different in a way. I was – I would say that I was quite lucky that I got to that school, because there was a sense of: 'Okay, so there is no set way of doing things.' I think that other schools are way more rigid than the school that I went to. So we had acting, singing, piano, choreography classes, we had theatre, history of theatre and opera, dramaturgy classes. We did a lot of workshops, collaboration – collaboration with the stage design class at our school and the dramaturgy class – and from the beginning we always had these shorter, becoming bigger and bigger, like own pieces alongside that. And then obviously, directing courses, which consisted of working on concepts based on plays mostly, and staging scenes with actors and so on and so forth. A very hands-on, practical thing which for me – we did have a bunch of theory courses or seminars. But for me the theory part – I was the only one who thought that there wasn't enough theory – usually the complaint was that people wanted to have more practical opportunities. Also in addition it expected us to prepare the works that we were doing in our free time basically. And so the idea was that at the end of the first year you would do a short 20-minute piece to kind of prove whatever. Then in the second year you would do another piece, and then in the third and fourth year you would do three pieces. The fourth year being completely free of anything else. So you wouldn't have any courses in the fourth year. Now basically I completed the third year, had my burnout during that big production where I was basically letting myself be convinced to do like a regular theatre piece.

**DR:** A play text.

**OZ:** Yeah, yeah.

**DR:** Which one did you do?

**OZ:** It was *Attempts on Her Life* by Martin Crimp.

**DR:** Oh okay. Interesting.

**OZ:** Which is not a bad piece, right? But I kind of just overdid it and didn't get to a point where I was happy with it and just kind of like burnt out basically. Everyone in the course was very accepting of that, and then I took two semesters off and first thing that I did was basically not do any theatre at all and basically question whether this was actually what I wanted to do, if this was what it meant to do theatre. But I realised pretty quickly that I was interested in the performing arts but I was interested in a different kind of performing arts. And so what I ended up doing in that year after taking two or three months really off is I went to attend courses at the university in Munich, do like sociology and philosophy and gender studies and just get input basically. And I started working at various festivals, worked at Spielart in Munich, and at Theater der Welt, which happens every three years. So I started getting into the whole touring theatre performance, experimental art scene more. And then I came back and did my last two pieces within the framework of the school, which were *Situation with Outstretched Arm* and *Situation with Doppelgänger*. But there is this very big break, like I didn't really get anything done at all in those first three years, then I took a year of break and then I came back and did something that I'm still happy with now.



**[00:11:01] MAKING *SITUATION WITH OUTSTRETCHED ARM* (2015)**

**DR:** Great. And what was the impetus? Did you conceive of those pieces as companion pieces from the start or did you make one and then think of the other?

**OZ:** So it wasn't thought of as a 'duology' at first, I was only thinking about *Situation with Outstretched Arm*. I had the idea for that during the year that I had taken off. I'm very interested in history and memory politics and orality, obviously, and – I have to reconstruct it but – I think there were some new scandals by Jonathan Meese at the time and I kind of became interested in this gesture in itself... The first thing that was there was the idea of doing the gesture for as long as possible, in a kind of like, very classical endurance art thing that was something that I was interested in. But when I started researching, that's when I realised that the history of the gesture is actually very closely tied to the way that art and politics interact with each other and that was basically the point where I realised that it had to be two – like a double deconstruction basically: a deconstruction of the signifier, of the body, of the gesture, or the posture, and then of the symbol and its history. I mean, obviously, there is, you know, this whole Marina Abramović body endurance art thing behind that, which I was kind of interested in because it's obviously also what you're exposed to if you get a very cursory overview of the history of performance art and theatre, and that was something that I was interested in. And I had seen the *Twelve Rooms* exhibition, do you know it? I think it premiered as *Eleven Rooms* at the Manchester Festival as part of a live art exhibition?

**DR:** Ah yes, with Marina Abramović. That's right.

**OZ:** Exactly. And there was this one thing, there's this one performance of hers where she does the–

**DR:** Where she's sitting on the bicycle seat, right?

**OZ:** Exactly. So that was for sure something that I had in mind and other kinds of endurance work that I was really interested in at the time. And then the other I would say big influence at the time for me was more coming out of film than theatre, which was like essay films by Harun Farocki for example, if you know him? He passed away a couple of years ago, but he's a very influential German documentary filmmaker who did these very interesting film essays in the '70s and '80s mostly and kind of switched over into a more fine arts context in the late '90s and 2000s. That was something that I was quite interested in at the time. Those were influences that were I guess important to me at the time and formed the basis of what would eventually become *Situation with Outstretched Arm*. It was interesting in so far as it's a piece that was created very – I mean, basically, there was an idea and that was there pretty quickly and at the first rehearsal we could do a run-through, right? It was a very interesting way of rehearsing, which differed a lot from what I had been taught that rehearsals should be like, which was very cathartic for me in a way. So I basically just assembled a very, very small team of people that I really wanted to work with, which led to a big fight again with the school because they expect you to work with a stage designer, to work with a dramaturg, to work with the whole apparatus of theatre production, and I didn't want to do any of that. And so I ended up having to do more work because I didn't want people to do that work even though, you know, it's an empty stage and I wrote the text myself and so on. I also have to say that I knew that the topic and the form and the way that these two elements kind of interacted with each other was something that I was very interested in but I didn't know why at that time. I know that better now having done several pieces and, kind of like, realising where my interests lie and why but at that time I think it was very, it was still very much based on intuition even though it's a very intellectual piece. Not as a way of saying it's good or bad but just the way that it works.

**DR:** So you wrote the script, you worked with a performer, and you presumably had another performer who recorded the voice?

**OZ:** Yes.

**DR:** Okay. And then the performance was, as you say, ready in the first rehearsal in a way!

**OZ:** I mean I developed the text during the rehearsals still. I did the preparation, the research beforehand but the text was very specifically written so that it would work with the action on stage.



**DR:** Yes.

**OZ:** So I would always, kind of like, write a new chapter and then try it out with, kind of like, where the bits are that click with what you see at the time.

**DR:** The performer in it, would that have been an actor training at your academy or did you have a performer that came from a different training context?

**OZ:** She was actually an actor, like an acting student. So what I did is I tried it out myself at first, which is very interesting because I had and still have this huge block in my head of not being able to do this particular gesture, which is something I found very intriguing. And so I basically closed the curtains and closed all the doors and blinds and stuff and then was sitting in front of a mirror and tried it out myself to see how long I could do it and whether it was even viable as something that would happen in the context of theatre. But I've realised pretty quickly that when I do it it's very much the image that you have in mind when you think of the gesture because of me being a German man, a white German man. And so I decided pretty quickly that I didn't want to do it myself and so I basically asked everyone that I knew whether they could do it for me; and I did a lot of research rehearsals with 30 different people and I also tried out whether it makes sense to have several people doing it at once, which was very interesting but not what I was looking for eventually. And Sara [Tamburini] who was doing the performance was actually the first person I asked and she ended up being the person doing the performance because – for several reasons. One is that it's a very phallic gesture – it works very differently when she does it I think. And the other thing is that she just automatically basically did it with the right attitude I would say – because it's very easy in that case, especially with the whole disembodied voice thing, for the performer to slip into this position of a victim. And I always felt that she had a way of doing it that was more playful and more of a way of seeing it as a physical challenge.

**DR:** Yes.

**OZ:** She does yoga a lot so she's very used to these endurance things, I would say.

**DR:** As far as actors go she seemed very comfortable with being herself on stage, you know?

**OZ:** She had a very similar story – she had also, like a lot of trouble with the school, which is why I was, kind of, interested in her in the first place. She's not the typical actor that this school produces, I would say.

**DR:** Right, interesting.

**OZ:** I would say that she's very much an exception.

**[00:19:33 to 00:20:12] Excerpt from *Situation with Outstretched Arm* (2015)**

**[00:20:12] MAKING *SITUATION WITH DOPPELGÄNGER* (2016)**

**DR:** Conceptually then how did the *Doppelgänger* come about? This seems interesting to me that actually both pieces are, in a way, both dealing with controversial topics in German theatre, right? So the outstretched arm and the blackfacing, right?

**OZ:** Exactly. So the very simple thing was basically: 'Okay, now I've basically dealt with Nazi imagery', it was a bit after the big blackface scandals in German theatre. And so I was kind of interested to deal with another controversial symbol, I would say, but when I started researching it I pretty quickly became convinced that, unlike the Nazi salute, I don't think there's any merit to putting blackface on stage right now in the society that we live in. But I also realised that the minstrel show, which was obviously where blackface comes from, is very interesting and very, very complex – a very interesting topic that merits discussion and that is so influential to contemporary pop culture that, especially in German discourse, is just this big hole in social memory. So I was kind of getting more and more into basically the history of minstrel shows and these kinds of things. Julian [Warner] is actually someone that I knew from a bar in Munich where he was working as barkeeper and also doing – it is this very cool bar that does lectures and film screenings and stuff – and he did this series of lectures on Black popular culture in Germany. And so I kind of just talked to him about the piece at some point and about recommendations and what books to read and stuff, and he basically gave me a list of 50 books that I should definitely read and it became clear pretty quickly that it would just make sense for us to do the work together.





**DR:** What's the bar called?

**OZ:** Favorit Bar.

**DR:** Okay, great. And what was Julian's background? What was it that led him to do these lectures?

**OZ:** I think he studied Theatre Studies in Munich and he does a lot of music, and he's now doing his PhD in Cultural Anthropology. Yeah, and basically just ended up in Munich for studies and just had this incredible knowledge – especially also of the German relationship to minstrel shows, whereas most of the material that I could find was very closely tied to the American minstrel show, right?

**DR:** Right.

**OZ:** So basically we joined forces. Julian hadn't worked in theatre before but had done music stuff and some performance art I think. And yeah, we originally wanted to work as director and dramaturg with a cast of performers, and then it just became more and more evident as things progressed that it only made sense to do this if we put our own bodies on the line, basically. We were thinking about the way that we wanted to work with a topic in terms of the form and at some point we decided that since we were doing a piece about imitation and appropriation, we could also just imitate the form of the previous piece that I did, and also imitate the title... The thing is with *Situation with Outstretched Arm* I thought about the title for a long time because I didn't want to put 'Nazi salute' into the title because the whole point is obviously to trace the various names and meanings and the way that it kind of solidified into the Nazi salute – and so I basically came up with this whole weird construct of *Situation with Outstretched Arm*. And one thing that bothered me about it was that everyone just called it 'Situation' so I thought: 'Maybe, let's just give them another 'situation' so that they can't just abbreviate it like that'. [Laughter.] So that was just like a bit of trolling – yeah, but there was this explicit idea of copying my previous form for this new piece. It was also a productive way of dealing with our own incompetence in a way, right? Because we built ourselves a framework that allowed us to concentrate on just the dancing because that was hard enough as it was, right? So it's also very much developed out of the decision to perform ourselves because we just wouldn't have been able to do anything else.

**DR:** So, the *Situation with Outstretched Arm* is in its form one performer on stage holding their arm stretched out in Nazi salute while a voice is giving a series of historical vignettes – descriptions of particular moments from the history of art where a similar gesture is featured and kind of giving a history of that gesture. The endurance element is that for the duration of the piece – obviously the piece lasts about 40 minutes – the performer is tested, their endurance is tested throughout this piece. The *Situation with Doppelgänger* is a bit more complex because – well, it's a similar form in that you have a disembodied voice, as you've just called it, giving us a kind of essay about the history of minstrel shows – but I remember that there was a visual element there as well. Am I remembering – I'm not, so I totally–

**OZ:** It's interesting because a lot of people think that about both pieces!

**DR:** Right, interesting. Yeah, I was quite convinced that there was some sort of PowerPoint going on!

**OZ:** But there is, I mean, there is text–

**DR:** Just text, just text.

**OZ:** Yeah. There is – there's like, chapter titles.

**DR:** Right. Yeah, I noticed that with the performance that I just watched more recently. And you and Julian are basically a white man and a Black man dancing together. What are those moments–

**OZ:** Doing the same things at all times, yeah.

**DR:** Same things at all times but there are moments of difference?

**OZ:** The rules that we dance by are exactly the same, but the way that we dance the different choreographies is very different because our bodies are very different. There's one dance which is a couple dance originally, but other than that it's basically–

**DR:** There is an endurance element to this as well.

**OZ:** Yes. It's an indirect re-enactment of a dancing competition in the 19<sup>th</sup> century between a Black man and a white man about who was the better Black dancer, like a white minstrel performer and a



Black minstrel performer. And we were intrigued by this idea of the precarity of that set-up and also the absurdity of it obviously – so that’s kind of like the frame, the narrative frame that we work in. And so it becomes kind of this dancing marathon as well because it’s about an hour long, the piece, and except for very short breaks that we take in between the chapters, I think it’s ten chapters, we’re basically dancing the whole time, and it’s very physically demanding. We’re doing German folk dances, we’re twerking, we’re doing something that resembles an Irish jig, we’re doing a dance from the music video *Thriller* by Michael Jackson, we’re doing the cake walk, which is a sort of minstrel dance.

**DR:** And the notion of re-enactment here is based on research again that you have done but also to some extent it’s a reconstruction of what it might have been in the 19<sup>th</sup> century.

**OZ:** Yes, yeah.

**DR:** And you were entirely self-taught in terms of dancing? Or did you have some sort of choreography?

**OZ:** We had a coach, basically – a very good friend of mine Quindell Orton. She’s an Australian dancer based in Munich who’s just an amazing dancer, who was kind enough to teach us. So what we would do is usually a rehearsal day would be like I would write text in the morning, then we would meet up in the rehearsal space in the afternoon and work with the new text that I had written and the kinetic material that we already had. And then in the evening we would have one or two hours of Quin where she would basically teach us the dances that we wanted to dance. All the dances that we were performing in the piece were in some way recorded on video, so there is this element of reconstruction obviously, especially for the dances that are from like 1830, but especially the older dances they were all popular enough to still be around at the time where film was invented. So there are very short video clips of those dances that you can find when you know where to look. And so we based the reconstruction on that mostly but also on images and descriptions and scores. The piece is different from classical dance reconstruction pieces in that it doesn’t claim to be the thing itself. It doesn’t claim to replicate the exact choreography of a specific performance at a specific place in time. The way we get around that is by presenting a dance and comparing our performance of the dance to a different historical performance of the dance that happens somewhere else with different people and probably with a different set of exact movements.

**DR:** So then what was your next step?

**OZ:** There was a bunch of smaller things and then there was another big piece called *Zweiter Versuch über das Turnen*, ‘*Second Essay on Gymnastics*’, which was the next big piece which is also what we basically founded Hauptaktion for. Because from my perspective the image or concept of being a director that I was taught at school is a very, I would say, conservative image of the director, right? And so I wasn’t very comfortable with that, and after graduating I kind of looked for more collective ways of working at first. *Second Essay on Gymnastics* was basically a culmination of that. We were a group of eight people, the core of which was Julian, me and Hannah [Saar], another dramaturg, who worked on the piece together along with Quin as well. And that was, kind of like, a big piece with nine people on stage tracing the history of German citizenship, I would say, through the lens of mass gymnastics, starting today and going back all the way to when gymnastics as we know it today was invented. So that was something that took up a lot of time. And also the impetus – I was really not interested in this classic position of the director, but I also realised in that piece, great as it was, that I also wasn’t interested in this now also classical way of collective work, you know, like Forced Entertainment, Gob Squad, this generation of companies. That was also not something that I was interested in. And after that piece more or less naturally we all went our separate ways and it took a while for the company name that we had set up for the piece also to be–

**DR:** Dissolved.

**OZ:** Yeah, exactly. And we retrospectively called everything before that Hauptaktion, which is why some of the reviews and things that you can find online are still under that name. But so now we’re all scattered in the wind doing our own thing but also still collaborating from time to time.

#### **[00:33:40] WORKING WITH THE ARCHIVE: IN PRAISE OF FORGETTING (2019)**

**OZ:** And then I did more some smaller work and research stuff and soul searching and then the next



big piece was *In Praise of Forgetting*, part one, which premiered last December, which was the first time that I was on stage solo, so it's me performing it. And it's me interacting with the same archive that can be seen in *In Praise of Forgetting Two* but what I have on stage with me is a physical archive, or a copy – I made a copy of the physical archive, which consists of 1,239 magnetic tapes set up as a tower of tapes, which is two and a half metres tall. And then the piece itself, which also deals with forgetting as a social practice, is basically me interviewing that archive. So on stage, this tower of tapes and me, we're basically equal performers of the piece, and it's me asking questions to the archive, pulling out tapes from that tower and playing those tapes in answer to the questions that I ask with the tower obviously, eventually collapsing and scaring everyone in the audience.

**DR:** Can you say a few words about what the original archive was?

**OZ:** It's an ethnographic archive that consists of the voices of hundreds of German refugees and expellees from after World War Two. Obviously Germany lost a lot of territory after World War Two, especially territory that had always been contested between Germany and Poland – and Germany has a long history of, I would say colonising Eastern Europe. So there were about around 12 million people who thought of themselves as German, or were actually German citizens, ended up after World War Two in geographical areas that were not Germany anymore, or who had already been the German minority in different countries that were now being expelled after the crimes of the Nazi regime, which basically meant that then Western Germany and Eastern Germany had to, within three or four years, accept around 12 million new people. It's kind of a topic that is very touchy I would say, because historically it's obviously very closely tied to questions of revisionism – especially before 1968 – of conservative and right-wing politicians still claiming ownership of parts of Czechoslovakia at that point, parts of Poland. And it's very closely tied to a self-image of Germans as the victims of Hitler, which was very prevalent in the years after the war. And it's also touchy because there used to be a large overlap in the personnel of the associations of German refugees with extreme right-wing parties and organisations. It's a very – I mean, you can see how, or you can hear how carefully I try to talk about it.

**DR:** I was just wondering where this archive was and how you accessed it.

**OZ:** It's in Freiberg in southwest Germany, like all the way in the southwest, almost on the French border. There's an institute, in German it's called Institut für Volkskunde der Deutschen Osteuropas, which went through a lot of name changes but right now – I mean, the literal translation would be Institute for Anthropology of the Germans of Eastern Europe basically. And the archive was made by the founder of that institute over a period of around 50 years. It was continued after his death in the late '80s by his wife and his successors in the institute that he'd founded. And this person was also a very problematic character with a Nazi past and so on and so forth, but what he did was that right after World War Two he went around with a tape recorder – like a mobile tape recorder which at that point was still very new in a way – and he went into the refugee camps, and later into the refugee settlements, and talked with the different people because he realised that with all these people having to abandon their social structures that they had grown up in would also mean that a lot of dialects and practices and songs and stories would be lost. And so he went around and tried to record them for posterity.

**DR:** What was his name?

**OZ:** Johannes Künzig. At the start this was still at a point where the idea that Germany would accept its new Eastern border was still very much up in the air in the '50s and '60s. So it's – yeah, it's a very complex history of these archives as well. I kind of stumbled over it by accident, actually. I was looking for a different project, I was kind of looking for folk songs, and the German folk song archive is also in Freiberg and I just ended up googling 'folk songs in Freiberg' and going through the results and stumbling across this archive. My grandparents are expellees, or were expellees from Eastern Europe along with basically I would say around a quarter of the German population has this family background, but it's not something that is a relevant category today. And so that was actually what intrigued me. I went to Freiberg for this folk song archive and ended up going there as well, and this was like four or five years ago.

**DR:** So you found a personal connection there in an indirect way because of your own grandparents?

**OZ:** Yeah, exactly. The thing that struck me was that there was this whole, this material memory of a



generation that was supposed to be transmitted to me, like all the songs, just the archive itself was made to preserve this knowledge for future generations. And I was kind of interested in the fact that that hadn't happened. Like having dealt a lot with memory politics and historiography I kind of became very interested in the notion of forgetting as something productive as well, because obviously the academic discourse around memory politics is in a very different place than the discourse in the arts, I feel, or at least in the performing arts, certainly in the German-speaking area. And so I became quite interested in this idea of forgetting. And I also had been interested in this archive and in this topic for a while, but I was never able to find a way of thinking about it that I found productive because I didn't think that it was a blank spot that needed to be filled with something – it wasn't something that I would have been able to talk about in the context of memory or like counter-history, or filling in the blanks or something. That wasn't something that would have worked. And at the same time in order to think about forgetting in a concrete and not an abstract way, I was always lacking a thing to kind of analyse or to examine that would work as an example of forgetting as something positive, because obviously most of the time when you talk about history in the context of theatre, and especially theatre that has this progressive, experimental self-image, in a way, it's mostly about histories that are forgotten but shouldn't be, right? That's mostly what I've been doing as well, right? To think about the relationships between the American minstrel show and the German colonial past. I did a piece in an anthropological museum in Munich, a smaller one. The whole gymnastics thing was a way of re-telling German history, but that kind of didn't work – none of these discourses that I was usually drawn to work with this notion of forgetting. And so at some point I realised that those two elements were made for each other – that this problematic discourse I was very fascinated by kind of allowed me to talk about forgetting as a positive, and forgetting allowed me to talk about this discourse in a way that avoided the pitfalls of this topic, the reactionary provocation that comes with dealing with this topic on a German stage.

**DR:** Very interesting. So you made, you said you made a copy of that archive. You made a physical copy of all the tapes, which you use in your performance. Was that a problem in terms of obtaining permissions to do that or how did you–

**OZ:** I mean, the people at the archive, at the institute, they were very cooperative. The person in charge of the archive, Elizabet Fendl, was just very, very helpful from the start, she's just an amazing person, and Werner Mezger, who's the head of the institute, was also very, very cooperative and basically cleared all the bureaucratic hurdles for me, because the archive officially falls under the jurisdiction of the State Ministry of the Interior and he had to talk to them to obtain clearance for me to copy it and everything. So it was a very – there was a lot of back and forth between different institutions, and it took a couple of months. The whole 'rights' situation is very complex in any case. So yeah, it was a very tricky negotiation but eventually it kind of worked out for everyone.

**DR:** And what about the kind of questions that you use in your interview of the archive?

**OZ:** I thought a lot about the way to talk about this subject at all. And how to structure it, how to talk about it – like whether to talk about it chronologically, whether to talk about it topic by topic. And I ultimately decided that I would go with the most honest way of doing it, which was by structuring it along the questions that I had asked the archive. To just think about any interaction with an archive as not me finding something in the archive but me asking the archive something and the archive answering something. The things that I can find in the archives are obviously very closely tied to the questions that I can come up with, or the terms that I can come up to find things that I'm interested in. So I thought that would be the most honest and effective way would to just take that implicit process, which happened at my desktop with the register list and at the institute in Freiberg with me going through – they have these big what do you call them?

**DR:** Catalogues.

**OZ:** Yeah, catalogues. And, you know–

**DR:** With cards.

**OZ:** Yeah, like hundreds and hundreds of cards and registers.

**DR:** So is it a game of some kind? Is it a game structure that applies then? To what extent is it a script that you follow and to what extent is it an improvisation with the archive?





**OZ:** Well I mean, the questions that I ask are scripted. Having come to that point, to the point where I decided that I would structure it along my own interests, along the questions that I had, which started with: 'Why were there Germans in Eastern Europe? How did they get there? How long have they been there for?' to: 'How did they leave? How was their reception? How were they remembered?' and so on, right. Really structured alongside those very broad questions, but it's a scripted text. So I know the questions that I'm asking and I know the answers that I'm getting because I'm obviously pulling out the tapes from the tower, but at the same time – so that is very much fixed, but at the same time I'm basically playing Jenga with the archive, right? So I have this gigantic tower which weighs a ton and is two and a half metres tall and I'm pulling out tapes all the time to create new structures and maps and stuff on the stage, and eventually the tower starts shaking and swaying after a while and then at some point, obviously, it collapses. So it does have this game element to it, which – like all my pieces kind of have this chaotic element in a way, because I feel that the way that I work in general is that I make these very, very precise and very, very fixed concepts and I need some kind of disturbance in that.

**DR:** Danger.

**OZ:** Yeah, exactly. Yeah – for it to work there needs to be this kind of like chaos element.

**DR:** Are the tapes mostly songs or are there actual interviews in there too?

**OZ:** There are also interviews too, yeah. It's mainly songs, some stories and descriptions of practices and rituals and stuff, of religious practices and so on, but also accounts of how they left their houses and how they came to Germany. But it's very interesting which topics the archive has a lot to say about and where it's silent as well.

**DR:** And what was that discovery? What did you discover in that respect?

**OZ:** I mean it has a lot to say about German culture in Eastern Europe, and it also has a lot to say about the exploration itself, like the song for example, that I'm using *In Praise of Forgetting, Part Two*. But after that it doesn't have a lot to say about the process of integrating 12 million people, it doesn't have a lot to say about the non-German side of things of the whole process, it doesn't have anything to say about Nazis, or about Hitler, or about German deportations of Polish people or Jewish people from Germany. So there's a lot of gaps in there.

**DR:** And how do you deal with those in your piece?

**OZ:** Well sometimes the archive doesn't answer. The whole interview structure allows me to ask a suggestive question and have the archive be silent because it doesn't have anything in it. It also very closely – it's a West German archive, right? It also has almost nothing to say about the four million German expellees who ended up in what became the GDR. It's a West German archive of mostly those eight million people who ended up in West Germany as opposed to the 12 million people in total.

**[00:51:39 to 00:52:48] Excerpt from *In Praise of Forgetting* (2019) (archival recording courtesy of IVDE, Freiburg)**

**[00:52:48] *FUTUR GERMANIA AND IN PRAISE OF FORGETTING, PART TWO* (2020)**

**DR:** *In Praise of Forgetting Two* came about as a result of the lockdown, right?

**OZ:** Kind of, yeah.

**DR:** Yeah. When you were approached to actually take part in GIFT were you going to be bringing Part One to the original festival?

**OZ:** No. Actually no. I was supposed to have another premiere a month ago called *Futur Germania*, which is a performative museum of performativity, I would say. It's going to be – I mean, it's probably going to be a couple of months before it eventually premieres... It kind of works like Chinese whispers – so in each performance a new person encounters an existing set of performative artefacts and then manipulates that.

**DR:** What are the performative artefacts?

**OZ:** Well, it's anything that is the thing itself while being performed – like it could be a song or a dance or a story, but it couldn't be a re-enactment or a scene that represents something.



**DR:** Okay.

**OZ:** And then the point is it's basically a list of those artefacts and the first part of the performance is the performer from the last show performing the current version of the show, and the second part of the show is a new person editing, curating that archive, throwing some things out, bringing new things in, adapting things and so on, and then in the next show being the first person to present a current version of the exhibition or museum.

**DR:** How many people?

**OZ:** Always two. I almost only do solos in a way, and even the pieces where there's more than one person on stage they're still kind of solos, right? I mean, *Doppelgänger* is just a doubled, a copied solo, and the gymnastics piece that I did has eight people on stage but they're also moving in synchronisation the whole time. It's one old person and one new person but the role kind of changes so you're always first the new person then the old person in the next show, which would have been nice obviously because we would have brought someone from Germany to Gateshead to be the first person and then we would have had someone else come in and edit the archive and then travel with us to the next show, right?

**DR:** Wow, okay – so actually it's multiple people that are doing this.

**OZ:** Yeah it's always a new person. It works like a Wikipedia page with new people coming in and editing it and it's somehow ending up being this kind of like consensus-based thing, which is obviously exactly what – it's like exactly what you can't do right now, right? It's people meeting and travelling. The premiere was obviously postponed and the shows that we would have played are probably also going to happen probably some time next year. Then Kate Craddock, curator of GIFT asked whether I would be interested in doing something online because they decided to shift the whole programme of the festival into a digital space, which I found really interesting, but at the same time... I mean I'm not sure what the situation in the UK is, but in Germany there was right after the lockdown people started streaming like crazy and everyone did these weird adaptations of their work online, and all the theatres put old recordings of shows on their website and there was just this absolute overload of content. It always had this feeling of 'Band Aids', like things that you do but are only valid for a couple of weeks and when the pandemic is over at some point hopefully, they're not valid anymore as soon as you have a way of gathering and performing theatre again. So I was very interested because I'm at a point in my practice anyway where I'm really curious about things that transcend the context of theatre. I'm very, very interested in certain questions and topics and discourses more than in the building that they would happen in I would say. I'm quite curious to work on live art that isn't necessarily theatre, I'm quite interested in exploring other forms. So I was quite intrigued but also a bit cautious, I would say. And we first talked about whether – one of the first suggestions was whether there's anything about *Futur Germania*, the piece that we were originally supposed to show there, that we could have done online, but yeah, I'm pretty certain that that wouldn't work. The thing is that the whole archive that I used for *In Praise of Forgetting*, part one, exists as a digital conversion. And that's what I mostly used to make the piece obviously – I didn't for every bit put the magnetic tapes on the recorder and look through it, I mainly did it on my desktop but that's not something that the stage piece necessarily deals with in any detail. It doesn't not appear in there, but it's not the main focus. When I was working with a dramaturg on the piece last summer, we did talk about whether it makes more sense to put the physical archive on stage or whether to do a desktop performance. So that was something that we talked about and something that I had thought about several times actually in the past years but there was never an opportunity. And for the stage piece as well we pretty quickly decided that it makes a lot more sense to put the physical tapes in the physical space as an equal to me. But there was this interest in the digital archive and also in the form of the desktop piece and there there's obviously a whole discourse about forgetting and the internet that does not happen in the original piece because it doesn't happen on the internet, right?

**DR:** And did you still collaborate with a dramaturg on this new piece?

**OZ:** Yes. It's the same one actually [Felizitas Stilleke]. I mean, the first thing after I talked to Kate about doing something and after deciding that if I was going to do something it would have to be connected to *In Praise of Forgetting*, we also talked about whether it made sense to do an adaptation or a



continuation. I wasn't happy at all with the idea of doing an adaptation precisely because after the lockdown is over it wouldn't be valid anymore – there wouldn't be a reason to play the digital adaptation of a piece that I'm very happy with as a stage performance when there is no need for it anymore. And so I wanted to do something that stands on its own and is right exactly the way it is no matter what the context is.

**DR:** Yes. And so you conceived this second piece as being an investigation of archiving and forgetting digitally and there was only one song that you focus on from the original archive, if I remember, and some kind of footage around that. What was also very interesting was that there were this live commentary going on from you in text boxes on your desktop that the audience could see and that was the main means of relating or driving the actual content of the piece in its live form. Was there any precedent that you were aware of in this way that you were thinking about when you were considering how to do a digital performance based on this material?

**OZ:** Yes and no. The thing is I've never actually seen a desktop performance before but I'm aware of—

**DR:** When you say 'desktop performance' you are referring to something that, kind of, maybe exists as a genre or—?

**OZ:** Yeah, yeah. So, there's a Brussels-based choreographer called Bryana Fritz who did a desktop performance a couple of years ago, which I haven't actually seen but which I hear is very, very good. And then obviously there's I think a piece from 2004 by Edit Kaldor where she also only acts on her computer, which projects on a screen. Like I do feel that especially if you leave the sphere of theatre and performance art and go more into live art, net art context, then it's much more common than in theatre. So I would definitely say that the form is nothing new at all and I'm very aware of, I would say, the genealogy that I'm putting myself in. And at the same the pieces I'm aware of I actually haven't seen. So! [Laughter.]

**DR:** Okay, okay! That's probably advantageous in some ways as well. And so what's interesting about that piece, *In Praise of Forgetting Two*, is the way in which, actually, except for the song, all of it unfolds in silence. So there is no orality or aurality associated with it but actually there is maybe something we can think of in terms of digital aurality, in terms of the way in which you were actually having a conversation with the audience through the text boxes that you're using. And you have made work that you refer to as 'essay performances' because there is this element of the giving information to the audience in a structured way through the voice that's pre-recorded. So I'm just trying to think about how this element of sharing information with the audience manifests itself in this latest performance but without the oral and aural element.

**OZ:** Yeah. A friend of mine would say that my work is very much based on pointing at things and saying what it is, or what they are, which is also why, for example, I'm very interested in guided tours and just the idea for the commentary, right? I mean, I would say that the main tool that I'm using is commentary in various forms and that is in a way what I'm also doing here. I mean, one main reason why I ended up working only with written text is obviously because it creates an interesting contrast with using the song and having the song as the only point of reference. But it's also very much born out of two things: one is very, very current in that there's obviously this very specific aesthetic of the pandemic, right, which is what we're looking at right now, which is faces in front of bookshelves and somewhat grainy audio, right? And that's something that I really wanted to avoid. I mean, I was interested in the idea of doing a performance on the desktop before but the fact that just the omnipresence of this image of the face in front of the bookshelf is one of the reasons that really pushed me towards not using any recorded imagery at all and also, kind of, pushed me away from using any kind of audible commentary. And the other thing is that I'm always looking for the strongest possible form – strong, not in terms of the quality, but in terms of rigidity, I would say – which just kind of pushed me also in that direction. And then I would say that it's not only a desktop performance because I know that, for example, in the Edit Kaldor performance, she performs the piece on her desktop but the desktop is projected onto a screen, I think. And for this piece it's very important to watch it on your computer screen because the impression that you get, which is that things happen on your computer screen – this kind of like 'hauntedness' of your computer screen is very important for the piece, and creates a kind of intimacy that I wouldn't be able to create while talking – but not saying anything it also creates this impression



almost as if your screen had been hacked, as if your computer had been hacked, right? Like things happening on your computer – like the way that you experience a virus on your computer is also like windows popping up, advertising popping up and so on, right? It's kind of silent.

**DR:** This is a very banal question ever since I've seen the performance: I was really wondering what would the score for a performance like that look like? I mean how did you memorise the protocol?

**OZ:** I mean it's a mixture of rehearsal and probably things that only I can understand when looking at the text. I mean, I did the text – do I have it here somewhere? It is written in a way – there's a lot of line breaks and dot, dot, dots and little arrows and stuff, which I can, which for me kind of signify that here I have to delete something and rewrite it and stuff.

**DR:** Oh, I see, so it's all encoded in that way.

**OZ:** Yeah. So certain cues are in the text especially whether something happens in a new box or whether something is erased or inserted somewhere. That's in the text but then the placement and the rhythm and stuff is just through practice and obviously now I have videos of it and can rehearse with that–

**DR:** Amazing, yeah. That's really interesting – the rhythm of it is kind of linked to the actual video documentation.

**OZ:** Yeah. And also, I mean, the other thing is I did perform it a week and a half ago in German in a German theatre. Obviously I had to translate it and adapt it a bit. The rhythm is very closely tied to grammar and language, right, because the German language, obviously, works differently from English, and so it creates a different rhythm.

**DR:** Right. So, you conceived it in English but you then had to translate it.

**OZ:** Yeah, yeah.

**DR:** Very interesting. And what's next?

**OZ:** I mean, I'm going to perform *In Praise of Forgetting, Part Two* a bunch of times now because–

**DR:** Because it's so appropriate! What you described, you know, was exactly my experience; I saw a lot of livestream performances and then I saw this piece and this was like: 'Yeah, this is – I just want to be seeing pieces like this now, I don't want to see any livestream theatre anymore.'

**OZ:** Yeah. Exactly. And it kind of accidentally fell into this gap in what people were looking for and so I'm going to be – yeah, there's actually quite a bit of interest from festivals. So I'm going to be performing that and then, I mean, I'm supposed to have a premiere in December but who knows what happens in December! It's supposed to be here in Berlin at the HAU. It's called *Nekrologe*. Basically it's a start of what's supposed to be a longer running series of eulogies. It's not one piece but it's a collection of short eulogies in different formats. The idea is to start with six 'necrologues' in December and then just basically keep working. It's more a practice than it is a piece, I would say, but obviously right now it's still a bit unclear under what conditions we can play December. I might actually end up doing, I mean this is at the start, at least, supposed to be like a theatre practice with the option of it expanding into other formats as well because why can't it be a film or something else, right? But yeah, it's kind of like part of my trying to get out of this whole logic of 'the project' and more into a logic of practices that yield different results. The original idea was to start with it being performance-, theatre-based and then expanding different formats and, I mean, I might have to flip that around and start with formats that can be shown anyway even if it's online. But at the same time I feel like that with *In Praise of Forgetting, Part Two* I've also set myself a standard for what I consider to be valid online art for myself, for my own practice. And so I wouldn't want to fall below that. So yeah. But depending on how the pandemic develops there might either be some more online content in the fall or a big premiere in December.

**DR:** So thank you so much. That's really, really rich and stimulating, lots to think about and–

**OZ:** I hope it wasn't too 'rambly!'

**DR:** No, no, it was perfect. It was really perfect and I loved the idea of commentary actually. I haven't thought about this being commentary, that particular term, but you're absolutely right, that's what it is. And when you say 'guided tours' you're interested in, have you made a piece in that form yet?





**OZ:** I have. A couple of years ago, also, and then it kind of like dropped.

**DR:** What was that called and what was it about? What was it a guided tour to?

**OZ:** It was a guided tour through the Oceania exhibition of the Anthropological Museum in Munich.

**DR:** Okay!

**OZ:** It's kind of a longer story but I got a research grant from the Goethe Institute together with a British artist, who's mostly a singer, Phoebe Wright-Spinks – and we went to Papua New Guinea to look at the remnants and the continuations of the colonial past of that particular country because it used to be or the part that we went to, used to be a German colony and then came under British control after World War One, and then into Australian control. And so we looked at that and we talked to people and visited sites and so on. But we also went into different museums there and documented that. And then came back to Germany, were also joined by Julian at that point, my *Doppelgänger* collaborator, and then as a three-people team we did a guided tour through that museum after it closed. And the first part was a guided tour through the exhibition but what is being described is not what you see, but what is being described are rooms in museums in Papua New Guinea. Then the audience is directed through the archive of the museum to see all the things that didn't make it into the exhibition and it became this piece about how to write history and how to curate history. That's also something I'm really interested in, I have been really interested in for a long that time. That kind of – I did another shorter piece with Phoebe before that, which was also guided tour-based, which is also very much a researchy, like, both of them weren't finished pieces but these quick, yes scratch works, basically. And that's actually something that I'm looking to pursue more in the future, like the idea of the guided tour.

**DR:** Just going back to the beginning of this conversation when you were talking about how you had this formal education as a theatre director and then all of your work since then has been more in the category of live art and those theoretical issues that come up in performance theory, those problems of historiography and so on, and all of that has basically been something that you have pursued entirely on your own thereafter. That's really interesting. Great. Thank you so much!

**OZ:** Thank you!

Transcription by Tom Colley

### Clips Summary

[00:19:33 to 00:20:12] *Situation with Outstretched Arm* (2015)

[00:51:39 to 00:52:48] *In Praise of Forgetting* (2019) (archival recording courtesy of IVDE, Freiburg)

Audio available at <https://www.auralia.space/gallery5-oliverzahn/>.

To cite this material:

Radosavljević, Duška; Pitrolo, Flora; Bano, Tim; Zahn, Oliver (2021) LMYE Gallery #5: Oliver Zahn – Pointing at Things and Saying What They Are, *Auralia.Space*, Royal Central School of Speech and Drama, <https://doi.org/10.25389/rcssd.14061095.v1>.

