

## **Memory, Dance And Archive: How An Archived Performance Inspired The Creation Of The Dancefilm *Does The Dancing Have To Stop?***

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### **Abstract**

The aim of this article is to delve into memory and dance, and to show how the archive can contribute to definitions of dance. It offers a personal journey into the records of my dance career, where I revisit and reclaim the past framed through the perspective of a mature dancer now aged in my sixties. Using the medium of dancefilm, my position is of observer, dancer, recaller, and bearer of my archive. I experiment with traces of the past, overlaid with the present, to introduce a dialogue about how this investigation can address the aging body as a site of archive. Through my research, I assert that as a dancer, my archive is housed within my body. I am using my dance history and my memories as the vehicle to address the issue of aging from a Western dance context.

**Keywords:** archive, the body as archive, embodied memory, time, re-enactment, past

The tradition of the African griot is to be the voice, the storyteller, who recounts archived histories. As Chiji Akoma describes, the griot is “a traditional raconteur, and chronicler of history”.<sup>1</sup> As the custodian of my danced memory, I use a similar authoritative narrative from a Western perspective to re-tell my embodied archived history. As an older dancer, I house and document many danced memories within my body, and I demonstrate that these danced memories are also “sheltered,” and concealed within. I am the guardian of this history of dance physically filed within me,<sup>2</sup> and this embodied dance archive has become an unexpected asset to my research of the aging dancer. Thus, my body has become an experimental site from which to discuss aging. Performance studies scholar André Lepecki observes that for some dancers, this physical archive has become intrinsic to their choreographic works, stating “that dancers ... are increasingly turning back on their dance history’s tracks in order to find the ‘object of their quest.’”<sup>3</sup> Whereas, visual and performance studies scholar Mark Franko questions the relevance of returning to past works as a way of critiquing or addressing issues that are current.<sup>4</sup> I would argue that contrary to Franko’s thinking the revisiting of past work has proved timely and relevant for my research, enabling the merging of old with the new to discuss the issues of aging within the culture of dance, by looking

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at the old (my archive), I can create new work.

It is necessary for me to revisit the dancer of my past and recall her performances in order to create a positive concept of dance and age. Through editing processes assisted by analog and new digital technologies, I step back into my archive to represent these past works in the dancefilm *Does the Dancing Have to Stop?* (2013).<sup>5</sup> It centers on one dancer (myself), her physical representation, and her dance through time. My archived memory of a dance solo inspired a re-enactment of—or, as art critic Hal Foster suggests, “an idiosyncratic probing” into—my danced history.<sup>6</sup> Performance studies scholar Juliane Tomann advocates such probing has provoked a re-enactment of “living history ... bringing to life and appropriating the past,” and a danced archive is no exception.<sup>7</sup> From a performative aspect, Tomann depicts this re-enacting as “bodily practices of memory.”<sup>8</sup> Indeed, this “probing” involves a memory of a dance and two filmed performances employing choreographic re-enactments and re-remembering, all featuring myself as performer at different times of my life. These are my archives; through them—and assisted by digital technology—I can show authentic representations of my personal aging through the lens of a dancefilm.

As part of this investigation, I have delved into how my memory of a dance solo that I created in 1988, titled *Tristesse*, might influence my current research and practice. I created the original work as a 30-year-old dancer in London. It was a different time, country, and stage of life, and as such, it is a danced history. For *Does the Dancing Have to Stop?* I married the archival experience of my dance performances with my investigative research into how older professional dancers navigate exclusion due to the bias surrounding aging within Western dance culture. As proposed by Franko, the linking of the original solo with further filmed re-enactments influences the impact of the dance film, becoming more than “an historical artifact.”<sup>9</sup> The context for this body of work was to show the transitional changes that aging brings to a dancer. It was also to address, as Roberta Galler puts forward in her essay “The Myth of the Perfect Body,” that the aging body could be seen as a “symbolic threat”, that their bodies pose to the reigning ideologies of beauty, health, and femininity in order to disrupt those oppressive ideals.<sup>10</sup> Decline continues to have a negative connotation within Western dance culture and society. Derrida speaks of a “topology,” which I see as an embodied network that houses a dancer’s (in this case my) archived performances.<sup>11</sup> This topology intersects to bring together material housed within an older body enabling discussion on aging via a new dance film. The technical challenge was to use pre-digital archival film footage overlaid with new digital footage from the present, as an embodied narrative featuring an older dancer (myself), so as to highlight aging, aesthetics, and a dancer’s “dance-by-date.”<sup>12</sup> Indeed, Franko suggests that “seeing the new in the old ... can be called reinvention.”<sup>13</sup> My aim therefore was to produce a film that would engage the issue of aging through movement, not word,

and to invite, as performance studies scholar Diana Taylor suggests, “expressive embodied culture,” as opposed to written culture.<sup>14</sup>

I revisited my archive, using *Tristesse* as the starting point. There was scant documentation of the making of the 1988 solo other than drawings (see Images 1 & 2) and some journal entries (see Image 3), and I proposed that my memory alone would be the guide. Performance studies scholar Rebecca Schneider suggests, “if it [the performance] is not visible, or given to documentation or sonic recording, or otherwise ‘houseable’ within an archive, it is lost, disappeared.”<sup>15</sup> Through the making of dancefilms in 1992, 2007, and 2013, I argue that my 1988 performance is not lost, but transmuted. Though it was not visually recorded on film, it is housed within my embodied archive, visible as an essence of the choreography held within the relationship of my mental memory to my embodied memory. Similarly, Taylor asserts the remembering of movements made is an embodied practice, which “offers a way of knowing.”<sup>16</sup> However, feminist Peggy Phelan believes, “performance cannot be saved, recorded, documented, or otherwise participate in the circulation of representations: once it does so it becomes something other than performance.”<sup>17</sup> Naturally, no performance/re-enactment of the same work can be identical; while the choreography is still absolute, the intentions of the dancer change each time the work is performed, so in essence Phelan is correct. What I demonstrate is that although the original 1988 performance was ephemeral, the choreography and intent are remembered by myself (the performer), when re-enacted, the performance evolves and matures into an “archivally informed performance,” just as I re-experience the choreography as I mature as a dancer. As philosopher Søren Kierkegaard states, “the very fact that it has been makes the repetition into something new.”<sup>18</sup>

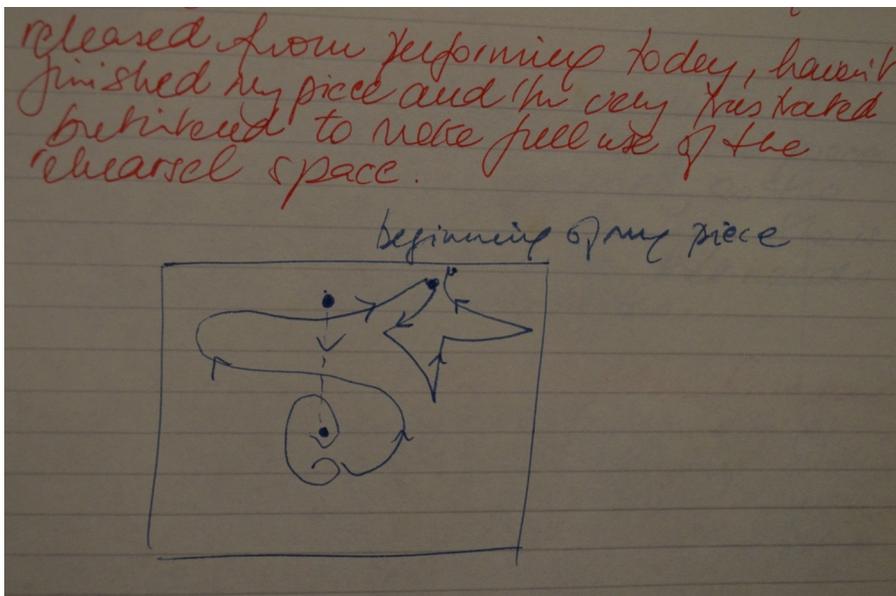


Image 1 drawing from author's Laban journal 1988, Sonia York-Pryce

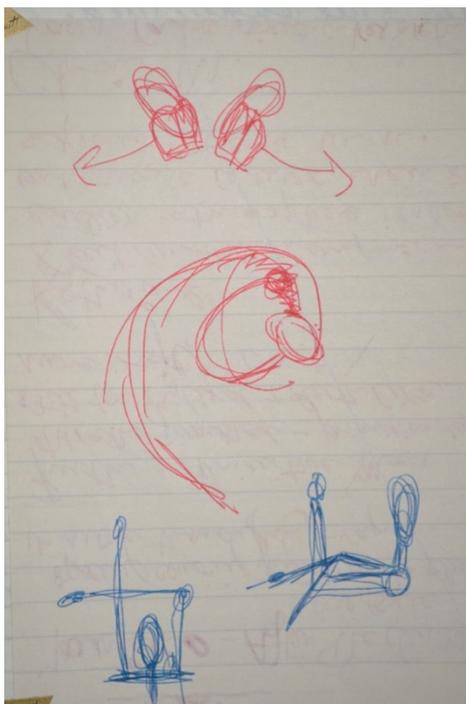


Image 2 drawing from author's Laban journal 1988, Sonia York-Pryce.

The concept behind creating the dancefilm *Does the Dancing Have to Stop?* was to experiment with juxtaposing youth versus aging, so as to provoke a response about the older dancer. I envisaged filming myself dancing with my “other,” the younger me, by projecting recorded video performances of myself reprising *Tristesse* in 1992 and 2007 onto my body in real time. Thus, the remembering process for the new film work was assisted by the inclusion of this archival memory from these two other performances, which fortunately were captured on video tape, and their existence became integral to the creation of the new digital work in 2013.<sup>19</sup> By showing three stages of life danced by the same woman, the film could act as a catalyst to open discussion addressing Western dance culture’s agism and to focus attention on discrimination experienced by older female dancers.

As Ann Cooper Albright observes, “the [aging] body is currently a site of much critical debate,” the devaluation of lived experience is a cultural and social issue, as is no different in the dance world.<sup>20</sup> It is worth comparing the work of two female artists whose intentions are to destabilize the aesthetics within Western dance culture and society, as well as to represent an invisible demographic. *Vanitas* (2017), by Brazilian multidisciplinary artist Vinícius Cardoso, features a naked elderly woman gracefully dancing with a young nude woman. Skin on skin, there is a juxtaposition of youth tempered with impending mortality.<sup>21</sup> The sensitive im-

agery and soft lighting focus on the older dancer's mature physicality as the camera follows her form. This imagery is the antithesis of the cultured norm. This is a body that provokes and yet Cardoso treats her subjectivity with tenderness while drawing attention to her advanced physique, particularly as she moves alongside the firm form of the much younger woman. There is a different sensuality to this ancient "other." By contrast, in *A Corpo Libero*, Italian choreographer and performer Silvia Gribaudo's comical performance plays with the grotesque, provoking the viewer to gaze at her forty-something body gyrating in a public square.<sup>22</sup> Gribaudo plays with Western cultural stereotypes by objectifying her mature form to demonstrate that the middle-aged body is not mainstream either; as with the aged, it is generally preferred invisible. She uses her provocative performance to objectify her mature unconventional dancer's body, to draw attention to culture's bias to accept that a woman of her age and physicality can and should have permission to behave in such a manner. This still draws a negative rather quizzical reception; it's an unwanted visibility—youth trumps aging. Again, older women are expected "to act their age."

*Does the Dancing Have to Stop?* was a place to address bias, identity, the subjectivity of an older dancer, and the objectivity of the aging body, but not to concentrate on decline in a negative way. A dancer's identity is enveloped in who they are as both person and performer. If they are invisible, no longer seen to be performing, then they are erased from society and the stage. Film is a way of prolonging their presence in a culture that does not encourage dancers to extend their careers or value their embodied knowledge.

It is not unusual for dancers to remember movement sequences long after performances finish. For myself, dances remain as if tattooed onto my body and into my psyche – a nod to Derrida's text-based archive. Routine, Repetition, and Repertoire are the three Rs of a dancer's life. Kierkegaard observes that while "repetition might be considered a small work, it is in fact the recurrence of an experience."<sup>23</sup> As Kierkegaard suggests, my memory of the movements from 1988 are recalled with the blink of an eye, despite so much time having elapsed. It is my task/role to decide through recall and repetition whether the work had held or lost any of its resonance. Indeed, as suggested by artist Astrid von Rosen regarding the archive, "what happens if we fail to acknowledge the challenges posed by the so-called ephemeral heritage and its traces?"<sup>24</sup> Recalling the "traces" of choreography signals a recapturing of the past and a re-presenting of it in the now.

Taylor asks, "how can we think about performance in historical terms, when the archive cannot capture and store the live event?"<sup>25</sup> Dance is a non-verbal artform and text does not recall the performance as readily as a dancer performing the choreography or a film documenting the work. The original performance was indeed not "captured" as such; nevertheless, it is "archived" within my body. *Tristesse* began as a work in progress in January 1988 for my Choreography Level

2 studies at The Laban Centre for Movement and Dance, London. At the age of 30, I was already considered an older dancer. For my musical accompaniment, I had chosen an aria from Puccini's *Tosca*, Act 2, "Vissi d'Arte" ("Love and Music"), a particularly emotive recording performed by Maria Callas. The premise of *Tristesse* was centered on how I could convey through the choreography a sense of grief that I was experiencing at the time. From my choreography notes of January 28, 1988, the critique from fellow students states, "don't over interpret the music, try minimalism, or go with my emotions."<sup>26</sup>

Later, on February 1, 1988, I wrote, "watch use of the head and eyes. Transition from fall onto the floor. Watch phrasing and over interpretation."<sup>27</sup> These small details hardly convey the choreography, but, as the dancer and choreographer, I understand the deeper significance of the language and its interpretation. As Taylor suggests, the value of embodied memory carries real substance, despite dance being understood as "ephemeral, nonreproducible knowledge."<sup>28</sup>

My journal entry of February 11, 1988 (see Image 3) details, "[I] Spent 2 hours [re]listening to my music and brushing cobwebs out of my head. Determined to fill the gaps and stop worrying."<sup>29</sup> The sharing with my fellow students at Laban that day had provided the opportunity to give a "live" performance of the work and to invite critique. Some reviewers indicated I needed to "give more"—to "stop holding back emotionally and to take more risks."<sup>30</sup> Rebecca Schneider suggests: "first, that performance disappears, ... second, that live performance is not a recording; and third, that the 'live' takes place in a 'now' understood as singular, immediate, and vanishing."<sup>31</sup> I argue the importance of this "live" performance at Laban, its temporality, resonated deeply with me; there was no opening to perform the work in public, or to visually record the event, but the choreography over time has remained embodied to this day.

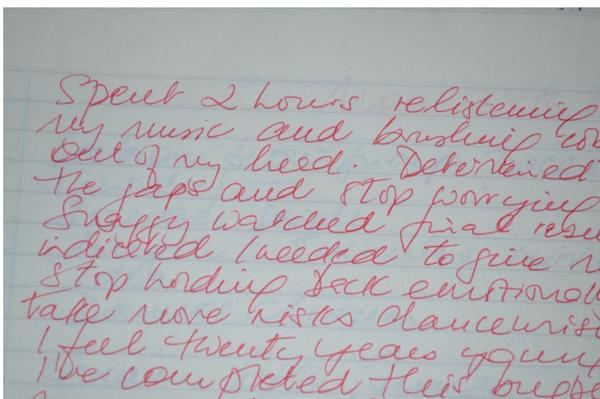


Image 3 Author's notes from Laban journal 1988, Sonia York-Pryce.

On November 6, 1992, I was asked to reprise *Tristesse* in a sharing of works in a theater in Inverness, Scotland. Having not danced the solo since 1988, it was an

instinctive decision to re-enact the work despite there being no filmed recording and limited notated documentation of the work, with only my memory as guide. This re-enactment became an example of what philosopher Henri Bergson recognizes as the benefit “of studying a lesson [dance] in order to learn it by heart ... that it is imprinted on my memory.”<sup>32</sup> For me this is true; it is mirrored by the embodied memory of the choreography, and stands out before my mind as a definitive event in my danced history.<sup>33</sup> By simply closing my eyes, I could recall the movements, and hear the music; even though several years had passed, reprising the performance did not seem impossible to achieve. Franko suggests that through re-enactment “corporeality and space ... highlights and brings urgently to our attention in the present moment.”<sup>34</sup> Indeed, performance scholar Martin Nachbar acknowledges the untapped possibilities a dance archive presents, when considering that “stored movement knowledge meets embodied movement knowledge.”<sup>35</sup> This “stored” knowledge has influenced my practice; four years on from its first performance, the work felt more evocative, and the revisiting brought excitement—an opportunity to re-perform, to re-live it, to engage a different audience, and to give the work its first theater sharing. As Franko suggests, my re-enactment of *Tristesse*, “treat[ed] the past dance as something that exists in the present.”<sup>36</sup>

This second performance/re-enactment was documented, filmed “live” from a static camera placed in the auditorium, with the focus framing the stage proscenium. The choreography remained the same, and this archived analog reproduction of the “live” performance was recorded on VHS videotape and stands as the visual documentation of the time, place, and performance. It is frozen in time. As performance studies scholar Philip Auslander suggests, “the event is staged primarily for an immediately present audience and ... the documentation is a secondary, supplementary record of an event.”<sup>37</sup> While this is true of the performance, it is the archival value that is of importance to me. I have one photographic still (see Image 4) as a static documentation of the performance, time, and place. Screenshots taken from the recording would later act as snapshots of the choreography. Hence, this analog recording became my visual guide to re-enacting the work.



Image 4 the author performing *tristesse*, linda sime, 1992.



Image 5 screenshot of the author performing *tristesse*, 1992.

In 2007, aged 49, and living in Australia. I returned once again to the archival solo *Tristesse* (1988) as well as to the 1992 *Tristesse* recorded performance video recording to create a new solo *Au Revoir to All That* (2007) (see Image 6).<sup>38</sup> Filmed in a theater in Queensland, it featured the original choreographic elements and a part re-enactment of the 1988 work with a different soundtrack. As before, it was documented with a static video camera, recorded on VHS video tape. Therefore,

the two archive dancefilm recordings (1992 and 2007) were recorded as documentation of two “live performances,” produced in different countries, filmed in two different theater spaces, captured with similar technology, reproduced on VHS video tape.<sup>39</sup> While performance theorist Richard Schechner suggests that no notation, reconstruction, film or videotape recording can keep a performance original,<sup>40</sup> what I aim to demonstrate is that I have “kept” this embodied memory of the 1988 performance in these two recorded performances. It has reappeared, been re-enacted and is now visible, embedded in the later dancefilms.



Image 6 Screenshot of the author performing *Au Revoir to All That*, 2007.

Seeing the possibilities of these archived films by editing them into a new dancefilm *Does the Dancing Have to Stop?* gave me the opportunity to experiment with the archive, by bringing the past and the present together. Performance studies scholar Steve Dixon observes that film and the digital become a “permanent kinetic flux ... a technological model for the contemporary experience of time.”<sup>41</sup> I am dancing with time. My archive exists because of technical reproduction; the discussed videos of 1992 and 2007 validate those live performances which hold new resonance, transferring my identity from past to the present. Indeed, as suggested by multidisciplinary artist Marisa C. Hayes, the genre of screendance allows one to play with time, “to push the boundaries,”<sup>42</sup> enabling this new work to bring together my archived danced performances and to merge them with the present.

Dancer and filmmaker Sue Healey’s work concentrates on aging by focusing on Australian senior dance artists, “celebrating the incredible wealth of danced knowledge ... and to ensure that they are not forgotten.”<sup>43</sup> Healey’s *On View: Icons* (2015), a montage featuring former prima ballerina Lucette Aldous, weaves archive performance footage merged with the present.<sup>44</sup> The sensitive imagery brings attention to Aldous’s sinewy but still balletic body, beautifully poised as she pays tribute to her younger self, as a projection of a filmed performance is reflected onto her body and a wall. She is shown performing a pas de deux with

Rudolf Nureyev from the ballet *Don Quixote* (1973). We see a body that has significantly aged, juxtaposed against her youthful agile self, celebrating her virtuosity. She signifies a dancer embodied with a lifetime of dance, an image that is not mainstream.

As in Healey's film, threading the past with the present to highlight aging was an important exercise to include in my research. When making the 2013 film, I found the quality of the archived live performance video recordings from 1992 was blurry, distorted, showing that over time the quality of the video had aged too. In essence, the 1992 and 2007 filmed performances depict a dancer held frozen in time, recorded, aged 34 and 49, marked by age. From this point, the premise was to project the films onto a wall in a studio, and as I danced, the projections from my past would pass over my body (see Image 7). As suggested by Tomann, it was "present day bodies combining with behaviors of past bodies."<sup>45</sup> By using my own body as the subject to symbolize the invisible and disenfranchised older professional female dancer, the film addressed how aging could be seen in a positive way. More importantly, the film revealed the aging body as a site of archive—or, as dance scholar Mark Edward suggests, "a living archive."<sup>46</sup>

These projected films acted as layering of time, with the past sharing the stage with the present—my filmed younger self and my digital double, both projected onto my 57-year-old body as I moved. The juxtaposition of the once youthful dancer performing with the mature dancer signified the passage of time and allowed the presence of the marginalized older dancer (see Image 7). As suggested by Dixon, "the double coexists with the live performer."<sup>47</sup> It was a danced dialogue about aging. Dance scholar Linda Caruso Haviland suggests that the body and the archive become "a sentient archive," embodied knowledge fused with cognition and memory.<sup>48</sup> This work becomes a melee of memory, lived danced choreography, and time, an archive of movement which acts like a palimpsest, holding traces of these past performances. While that rendering of the work has disappeared forever except in my memory, re-experiencing, repetition, or re-living a solo created in 1988 was for me an easy concept; it released the bodily recall of the choreography embedded in my memory and embodied in my limbs. Of course, as this original "live" performance was not recorded on film, witnessed only by my handwritten notes to authenticate the event, it is up to the reader to believe this event happened.



Image 7 Screenshot of author performing in *Does the Dancing have to Stop?* 2013.

*Does the Dancing Have to Stop?* was produced for the screen with the intention to be shown as a projection in an art gallery. Of greater importance was to discover how the audience experienced and engaged with this “live” digital recording projected in large-scale format on a gallery wall in what Philip Auslander reveals are “real-time operations.”<sup>49</sup> Interestingly, my use of digital technology to convey the issue surrounding dance and aging is viewed by Dixon as follows: “the medium is not the message ... the performer is.”<sup>50</sup> The footage exposed in the making of *Does the Dancing Have to Stop?* stands for a merging of time, depicting a feeling of loss as a woman dances with her younger self, revealing an older woman who internally feels the same, but the footage demonstrates otherwise. Again, Dixon suggests, “it operates as an index, as another trace and representation of the always already [younger] physical body.”<sup>51</sup> The point of highlighting aging through a dancefilm is to understand how an older female dancer’s body is viewed, not only from a Western dance standpoint but also within society. Corporeal politics are at play. As sociologist Elizabeth W. Markson suggests, “the portrayal of the female body in this medium provides a kind of everyday politics of emotion and feeling that contour spectators’ real, lived, emotional experiences.”<sup>52</sup> Merging these past dance archives with the present-day dancer (to produce an emotive dancefilm) challenged the stereotypical dancer by celebrating the older. As Markson contends, “the postmenopausal body ... does not fit into contemporary cultural discourses about ‘ideal’ feminine beauty.”<sup>53</sup> Western dance continues to champion youth and agility. From the reviews I have gathered in response to my dancefilm, the audience engaged positively with the subjectivity of the film, seeing artistry, rather than the negativity of aging.

Realizing the significance of using these two filmed performances in the context of age, these archives became intrinsic to the dancefilm and to the politics of corporeality, asking if the aging body has a presence. Some of the original video sections highlight the lack of superior quality footage where clarity is taken for

granted in the age of digital technology. This is due to the age of the video and becomes a visual metaphor for the fading of the past and the aging of the dancer. Franko states that “the re-enactor [myself] assumes closeness to the past through the body itself as archive”.<sup>54</sup> As has been described in the process of creating a film in the present using archive footage, as implied by Derrida, involves “translating [danced] marks” from my past to weave a theme about aging provided an opportunity to give older dancers agency.<sup>55</sup> Using embodied knowledge encased within the older body reveals the taboo of dancers performing beyond a standard time, an aesthetic engrained within Western dance culture. I am, as Derrida suggests, the “guardian [of these archives] and a localisation” is embodied within.<sup>56</sup> It could be suggested that *Does the Dancing Have to Stop?* becomes an archive within an archive; the dance is no longer ephemeral but lives on forever in the digital space.



Image 8 The author performing in *Does the Dancing have to Stop?* 2013.

Since the making of *Does the Dancing Have to Stop?* my research into the dancer’s archive has gone on to inspire further filmography exploration into personal embodied memory, from analog through to digital technology, investigating how, over time, a different “presence” emerges from the same dancer.<sup>57</sup>

### **Biography**

Sonia York-Pryce, Dr. of Visual Arts, B.A.. Digital Media, Honours; (Griffith University), B.A.. Visual Arts (Southern Cross University), dancer, interdisciplinary artist. From the 1960s to the present-day Sonia has trained and danced extensively in ballet and contemporary dance, initially in the UK, then settling in Australia in 1994. For her doctoral research she examined how senior professional dancers still performing aged over 40, navigate the bias of ageing and discrimination, and the affect it has on their practice. She interviewed numerous

dancers, in Australia and internationally, including founder members of NDT3 and Berlin's Dance On Ensemble demonstrating, "how their embodied practice rather than their age defines them."

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  - 14 Taylor, 17.
  - 15 Schneider, 101.
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  - 17 Phelan, 146.
  - 18 Kierkegaard, 103.
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46 Edward, 36.  
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48 Havaland, 2.  
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50 Dixon, 215.  
51 Ibid.  
52 Markson, 79.  
53 Ibid., 80.  
54 Franko, 2017, 10.  
55 Derrida, 16.  
56 Ibid., 10.  
57 See *Interprète/Inappropriate Behaviour* <https://vimeo.com/136466421>; *Utterly (In)Appropriate* <https://vimeo.com/233604194>.