

*Routledge Advances in Theatre & Performance Studies*

# PERFORMANCE

## THE ETHICS AND THE POLITICS OF CONSERVATION AND CARE, VOLUME II

Edited by

Hanna B. Hölling, Jules Pelta Feldman,  
and Emilie Magnin



# Performance

Representing the output of the research project “Performance: Conservation, Materiality, Knowledge,” this volume brings together diverse voices, methods, and formats in the discussion and practice of performance conservation.

Conservators, artists, curators, and scholars explore the ontology of performance art through its creation and institutionalization into an astonishing range of methods and approaches for keeping performance alive and well, whether inside museum collections or through folk traditions. Anchored in the disciplines of contemporary art conservation, art history, and performance studies, the contributions range far beyond these to include perspectives from anthropology, musicology, dance, law, heritage studies, and other fields. While its focus is on performance as understood in the context of contemporary art, the book’s notion of performance is much wider, including other media such as music, theater, and dance as well as an open-ended concept of performance as a vital force across culture(s).

While providing cutting-edge research on an emerging and important topic, this volume remains accessible to all interested readers, allowing it to serve as a singularly valuable resource for museum professionals, scholars, students, and practitioners.

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# **Performance**

The Ethics and the Politics of Conservation  
and Care, Volume II

**Edited by Hanna B. Hölling,  
Jules Pelta Feldman, and  
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# Contents

<i>List of Contributors</i>	<i>viii</i>
Introduction: Sustaining care for performance HANNA B. HÖLLING, JULES PELTA FELDMAN, AND EMILIE MAGNIN	1
<b>PART 1</b>	
<b>Expanding scholarly approaches to the longevity of performance</b>	<b>25</b>
1 “Once upon a time”: Performative ultra-conceptualism and storytelling as conservation—Florence Jung HANNA B. HÖLLING	27
2 Contesting heritage: Artistic and cultural (re)appropriations of Apulian tarantism MICHAELA SCHÄUBLE	51
3 Can we conserve music? THOMAS GARTMANN	79
4 Curating performance as conservation? Thoughts on <i>Queer Communion: Ron Athey</i> AMELIA JONES	100
5 Philip Auslander: Can we conserve performance? A CONVERSATION WITH HANNA B. HÖLLING, JULES PELTA FELDMAN, AND EMILIE MAGNIN	126

**PART 2**

**Confronting institutions** 139

- 6 Performance in the museum: Shifting roles in performance art stewardship 141

EMILIE MAGNIN

- 7 Reviving culture: Puawai Cairns's vision for dynamic museums and performance conservation 162

A CONVERSATION WITH JULES PELTA FELDMAN

- 8 Valinda Carroll, Kayla Henry-Griffin, Nylah Byrd, and Ariana Makau of Black Art Conservators on Black objects, performance, and the future of conservation 173

A CONVERSATION WITH HANNA B. HÖLLING, JULES PELTA FELDMAN, AND EMILIE MAGNIN

- 9 Brandie Macdonald: Conserving "Us": Caring for living heritage, oral tradition, and Indigenous knowledge 186

A CONVERSATION WITH EMILIE MAGNIN

- 10 Copyright implications of the preservation of performance art 199

SANDRA SYKORA

**PART 3**

**Conservation through artistic and embodied practice** 225

- 11 Davide-Christelle Sanvee's *La performance des performances* as critical conservation 227

JULES PELTA FELDMAN

- 12 Rosanna Raymond on Conser.Vā.Tion 247

A CONVERSATION WITH HANNA B. HÖLLING, JULES PELTA FELDMAN, AND EMILIE MAGNIN

- 13 Urmimala Sarkar Munsri: Dance, embodied preservation, and unlearning in India 263

A CONVERSATION WITH HANNA B. HÖLLING, JULES PELTA FELDMAN, AND EMILIE MAGNIN

14	<i>RYXPER1126AE, 2018</i>	278
	DOROTA GAWĘDA AND EGLĖ KULBOKAITĖ	
15	Gisela Hochuli: <i>In Strange Hands</i>	281
	A CONVERSATION WITH HANNA B. HÖLLING, JULES PELTA FELDMAN, AND EMILIE MAGNIN	
16	Joanna Leśnierowska: Performance conservation as a political act	293
	A CONVERSATION WITH HANNA B. HÖLLING	
17	Towards conservative performance: A manifesto	305
	IDO FEDER	
	<i>Index</i>	310



# Contributors

**Philip Auslander's** primary research interest is in performance, especially in relation to art, music, media, and technology. He has authored nine books and edited two collections, exploring diverse forms of aesthetic and cultural performances, such as theater, film acting, performance art, music, stand-up comedy, robotic performance, and courtroom procedures. Some of his notable works include *In Concert: Performing Musical Persona* (2021), *Reactivations: Essays on Performance and Its Documentation* (2018), *Performing Glam Rock: Gender and Theatricality in Popular Music* (2006), and the third edition of *Liveness: Performance in a Mediatized Culture* (2023). Apart from his research on performance, Auslander has also contributed art criticism to publications such as *Artforum* and written catalogue essays for museums and galleries in several countries, and he serves as the editor of *The Art Section: An Online Journal of Art and Cultural Commentary*. In addition, Auslander is an active screen actor with credits listed on the Internet Movie Database.

**Nylah Byrd** is Assistant Conservator of Objects and Programs Assistant at the Balboa Art Conservation Center, and a founding member of the Black Art Conservators group. She received her BA with Honors in Archaeology from Stanford University in 2018 and her MS in Art Conservation from the Winterthur/University of Delaware Program in Art Conservation in 2022, specializing in Objects and Library & Archives Conservation. Her research interests include equity and inclusion in conservation, preserving ephemera, and fabrication of inorganic objects. She is particularly passionate about increasing public awareness of and access to the fields of art conservation and cultural heritage preservation in the United States. Her long-term career goal is to practice people-centered conservation by offering her conservation skillset to marginalized communities (especially if Black and/or Indigenous) for the preservation and continuation of their culture through caring for objects and materials.

**Puawai Cairns** is of Māori descent from Tauranga Moana and belongs to the Ngāti Pūkenga, Ngāi Te Rangi, and Ngāti Ranginui tribes. She has worked in the museum and culture sector for twenty years and presently

works as Director of Audience and Insight at Te Papa Tongarewa, where she oversees the audience-facing work of the national museum. Puawai has a curatorial and research background and previously was the head of Mātauranga Māori for Te Papa, where she specialized in contemporary social history research and collecting to reflect the stories of Māori communities. Puawai co-wrote a book on the material culture of protest (Stephanie Gibson, Matariki Williams, and Puawai Cairns, *Protest Tau-tohetohe: Objects of Resistance, Persistence and Defiance*, 2019), which won the 2019 Ockham book award for best illustrated non-fiction, and has recently completed co-writing a book about the Gallipoli exhibition at Te Papa (Puawai Cairns, Christopher Pugsley, Michael Keith, and Richard Taylor, *Gallipoli: The Scale of our War*, 2022). Puawai serves on numerous boards across Aotearoa, including Heritage New Zealand, Māori Heritage Council, and Atamira Dance Company, among others. She advises nationally and internationally on museum practices, advocating for greater Indigenous participation and leadership in the heritage sector. Puawai lives in Wellington with her daughter and partner.

**Valinda Carroll** is the Paper Conservator for the Indiana Historical Society. Her private practice clients have included the Indiana State Library, the Hirshhorn Museum and Sculpture Garden (Smithsonian Institution), and the George Floyd Global Memorial. She was the Paper Conservator for the Smithsonian's National Museum of African American History and Culture (NMAAHC), following a decade at the Harvey Library at Hampton University. Her early career experience includes academic libraries (University of California, Berkeley and Princeton University), nonprofit regional centers (Williamstown Art Conservation Center and Conservation Center for Art and Historic Artifacts), and museums (National Portrait Gallery [Smithsonian Institution] and Colonial Williamsburg Foundation). She has been an elected officer in the Washington Conservation Guild (WCG) and the Virginia Conservation Association (VCA). Through participation in the NMAAHC's "Save Our African American Treasures" and community archiving programs, as well as outreach programs from Your Neighborhood Museum, the WCG, and other organizations, she has demonstrated her commitment to empowering communities to preserve their own collections.

**Ido Feder**, born in 1985 in Jerusalem, is a choreographer, performance curator, and artistic director whose work explores extended choreography, gang formation, and performative ceremonies. He is the artistic director of *Diver Festival: Contemporary Dance in Tel Aviv-Jaffa*, as well as a founder of the dance platform *Tights: Dance and Thought*. Feder has presented his works on all major stages in Israel, as well as internationally. Feder, who has also studied philosophy, investigates and invents performative concepts and ideas, which intersect, guide, and illuminate his curatorial and artistic practice. In 2020, for example, Feder envisioned the conservation

of the performativity of ‘making a festival’ during the pandemic. When meeting the audience was an impossibility, the actuality of the voyage of a band of artists amid the collapse of cultural institutions became the mythos of company. The very real lived experience of artists, free from the grasp of cultural interpretation and modification, became “mythosofcompany.com,” an idiosyncratic online exhibition format.

**Thomas Gartmann** (born 1961 in Chur) earned his doctorate in musicology at the University of Zurich with a thesis on the compositional processes of Luciano Berio. He has worked as a lecturer at the universities of Zurich and Bern and the music academies of Lucerne, Basel, and Bern; as a music journalist (NZZ and Radio DRS); and as an orchestral and freelance violin player; and has also been responsible for music promotion at the Swiss Arts Council Pro Helvetia. Today he is Head of Research at the Bern Academy of the Arts HKB and the doctoral program Studies in the Arts, which is run jointly with the University of Bern. He conducts research into contemporary music; music and politics; opera libretti; jazz and improvisation; church music; Paul Klee and music; self-playing pianos; performance practice; and the medieval string instrument the *rabab*, among other topics.

**Dorota Gawęda** and **Eglė Kulbokaitė** work collaboratively across a range of media, extending from painting and sculpture to performance and video, and even into fragrance, reaching the point “where language breaks down and one genre morphs into many.” Their artistic research weaves together ecology and technology, science, and magic. Gawęda, born in Poland in 1986, and Kulbokaitė, born in Lithuania in 1987, both graduated from the Royal College of Art in London in 2012; today, they live and work in Basel. Gawęda and Kulbokaitė have had recent solo exhibitions at Palermo’s Istituto Svizzero; Sofia’s Swimming Pool Projects; the Julia Stoschek Collection in Düsseldorf; Fri Art–Centre d’Art de Fribourg; Futura in Prague; and London’s Cell Project Space, among several galleries and art centers. In 2022, they received the Allegro Prize as well as CERN’s Collide Residency Award. They are also the founders of YOUNG GIRL READING GROUP (2013–21). Gawęda and Kulbokaitė’s multifaceted approach to performance is exemplified by their creation and use of RYX-PER1126AE, a fragrance that synthesizes odor compounds captured during their 2018 performance YGRG159: *SULK*. The artists subsequently incorporated this fragrance into new sculptural works, thus concretizing the ephemeral into a stable molecular structure while dissipating the performing body into an invisible, amorphous cloud.

**Kayla Henry-Griffin** (they/them) is Media Collection Specialist for the Audio-visual Media Preservation Initiative (AVMPI) at Smithsonian Libraries and Archives. They attended New York University’s Moving Image Archiving and Preservation (MIAP) program, where they studied preservation

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**Gisela Hochuli** is a performance artist and lives in Switzerland (Bern and Ruppoldsried). She studied economics and sociology at the University of Bern (1989–96) and fine arts at the Zurich University of the Arts (2001–5). Since 2002 she has shown her solo performances in museums and galleries, and at national and international performance festivals in Asia, South and North America, North Africa, and Europe. She also works in collaboration with various (inter)national artists. She organizes performance events, teaches performance art, and interviews performance artists. In 2014 she won the Swiss Performance Art Award. She is a member of the Performance Art Network CH (PANCH).

**Hanna B. Hölling** is a Research Professor at the HKB Bern Academy of the Arts, where she leads research projects funded by the Swiss National Science Foundation. She is also an Honorary Fellow in the Department of History of Art at University College London (UCL). Prior to her current roles, Hanna was Associate Professor in the Department of History of Art at UCL and served as Mellon Visiting Professor for Cultures of Conservation at the Bard Graduate Center in New York. She has also held the position of Head of Conservation at the ZKM Center for Art and Media in Karlsruhe, Germany. Her research has been supported by the Swiss National Science Foundation, the Terra Foundation for American Art, the Getty Foundation, the Mellon Foundation, the Dutch Research Council, and UCL. Hanna is the author of *Paik's Virtual Archive: On Time, Change, and Materiality in Media Art* (2017) and *Revisions—Zen for Film* (2015). Amongst her edited collections are *The Explicit Material: Inquiries on the Intersection of Curatorial and Conservation Cultures* (with Francesca Bewer and Katharina Ammann; 2017), *Landscape* (with Johannes Hedinger; 2020), *Object—Event—Performance: Art and Materiality since the 1960s* (2022), and *Performance: The Ethics and the Politics of Conservation and Care*, volume I (with Jules Pelta Feldman and Emilie Magnin; Routledge, 2023).

**Amelia Jones** is Robert A. Day Professor at Roski School of Art and Design, University of Southern California. Recent publications include *In Between Subjects: A Critical Genealogy of Queer Performance* (2021), and, co-edited with Jane Chin Davidson, *A Companion to Contemporary Art in a Global Framework* (2024). She is currently curating an exhibition of the work of Ken Gonzales-Day and writing a book entitled *Cultural Capitalism*, which explores the structural racism and neoliberalism of the art world and university.

**Joanna Leśniewska** is an independent choreography curator, visual dramaturge, and composer of light and space. As one of the first dance critics in Poland, she has contributed prolifically to the discourse on Polish choreography both nationally and internationally. From 2004 to 2020, Joanna was the driving force behind the performance program at the Art Stations Foundation in Poznań, a pioneering institution that marked Poland's first regular dance space and choreographic development center. During her tenure, she spearheaded numerous international collaboration projects, fostering an exchange of artistic ideas. Her latest project is *Acziun Susch*, a program dedicated to choreographic reflection and research at Muzeum Susch in Engadin, Switzerland, which she oversaw from 2019 to 2023. In her most recent anthology, *Choreography: Strategies* (co-edited with Marta Keil; 2021), Joanna offers a profound exploration of the current state and future potential of choreographic and performance art. Joanna is currently involved as a consultant at the Observatory of Culture, the first-ever dance space in Warsaw, and acts as an artistic collaborator in the Swiss National Science Foundation-funded research project "Performance: Conservation, Materiality, Knowledge" at Bern Academy of the Arts. [www.lesniewska.com](http://www.lesniewska.com).

**Brandie Macdonald** (she/her) is a citizen of the Chickasaw Nation with ancestral ties to the Choctaw Nation. She is an Indigenous museum professional, a writer, active freelance museum consultant, and future ancestor. Currently, she is Executive Director at the Indiana University Museum of Archaeology and Anthropology. Prior to this position, she served as Senior Director of Decolonizing Initiatives at the Museum of Us, located on Kumeyaay Nation territory in San Diego, California. Brandie's work focuses on systemic change in museums through the implementation of anti-colonial and decolonial theory-in-practice, which centers truth-telling, accountability, and tangible change to redress colonial harm. Her more than a decade-long work in nonprofits has been concerned with transformative policy, repatriation, and education. Macdonald holds an MEd in International Higher Education from Loyola University–Chicago, and a BA in Applied Anthropology from University of North Carolina–Charlotte. She serves as the Secretary for the International Council of Museums (ICOM) Committee for Collecting (COMCOL) board, and is also an education studies PhD fellow at the University of California, San Diego; a Salzburg Global Seminar Fellow; an American Alliance of Museums' Nancy Hanks Award for Professional Excellence recipient; and a Smithsonian Affiliate Fellow at the National Museum of the American Indian.

**Emilie Magnin** is a PhD candidate at Bern University and a member of the research project "Performance: Conservation, Materiality, Knowledge," which is funded by the Swiss National Science Foundation at Bern Academy of the Arts. Her research focuses on the institutional changes prompted by the increasing acquisition of performance artworks in museums, and the

role and influence of conservators in this process. Emilie completed a master's degree in conservation-restoration with a specialization in modern materials and media and holds the position of Conservator for Media Art and Installations at the Kunstmuseum Bern. She has previously worked as a Conservation Fellow at the Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum in New York, as a contemporary art conservator for private practices, and as a moving image archivist for the Swiss Archive of the Performing Arts and the University Library of Fribourg.

**Ariana Makau** is the founder and principal conservator of Nzilani Glass Conservation, and current Interim Collections C.A.R.E. Director of Destination Crenshaw. She holds an MA in stained glass conservation from the Victoria and Albert Museum/Royal College of Art in London, and has been involved in preservation for thirty years. She has worked at numerous museums in the United States and abroad, including the Victoria and Albert Museum, the Metropolitan Museum of Art, San Francisco Museum of Modern Art, and the Getty Museum. Ariana has served on the board of the Stained Glass Association of America (SGAA) and is a fellow of the American Institute for Conservation (AIC) and current board member of the Western Chapter of the Association of Preservation Technology (APT). Makau's work is most fulfilling when at the intersection of equity, preservation, and art.

**Jules Pelta Feldman** is Assistant Researcher in the Department of History of Art at the University of California, Berkeley. They were previously Postdoctoral Research Fellow for the project "Performance: Conservation, Materiality, Knowledge," sponsored by the Swiss National Science Foundation and hosted by the Institute for Materiality in Arts and Culture at Bern Academy of the Arts. Pelta Feldman received their doctorate in art history from the Institute of Fine Arts, New York University, and has worked at the Museum of Modern Art, New York; the Whitney Museum of American Art; and the Grey Art Museum, New York University. Pelta Feldman writes criticism for publications in Switzerland, Germany, and the United States. Their forthcoming monograph, *Charles Simonds and the Seventies*, will be published by Hatje Cantz in 2025.

**Rosanna Raymond**, born in Aotearoa (New Zealand) in 1967, has a multifaceted practice that encompasses performance, institutional critique, fashion, writing, curation, and pedagogy. Her work mediates Pacific Islander culture between museum and living tradition, academy and nightclub. Raymond received the Arts Pasifika's 2018 Senior Pacific Artist Award and is a member of the New Zealand Order of Merit. She has exhibited and presented her work in many institutions and communities around the world. Raymond's performances—interventions into museum storerooms and crowded sidewalks—not only expose and critique the colonialism of traditional Western museum practices of conservation, collecting, and

display, but also propose other methods for keeping culture alive, through inherited tradition, personal innovation, and embodiment. Her work, both independently and as a member of the Pacific Sisters collective, honors and extends the traditions she has inherited from her ancestors—Raymond has Sāmoan, Tuvaluan, Irish, and French heritage—while insisting on Pacific Islander culture as modern, dynamic, hybrid, and individual. Her 2021 master’s thesis, “Conser.VĀ.tion | Acti.VĀ.tion: Museums, the Body and Indigenous Moana Art Practice,” addresses both practical and theoretical models for conserving Pacific Islander heritage in museums through performance.

**Urmimala Sarkar Munsi** is a scholar with expertise in social anthropology, dance studies, and choreography. As Professor and the current Dean at the School of Arts and Aesthetics of Jawaharlal Nehru University, New Delhi, she teaches and researches on various aspects of dance, including its potential to aid survivors of sexual violence. Her work centers around the intersection of gender, sexuality, and dance, and she has contributed significantly to the field of performance studies. As a dancer, Sarkar Munsi has performed extensively both in India and abroad. Her recent projects include a co-choreographed (with her 2022–23 MA cohort), practice-led research project on ensemble practice. Her research focuses on the politics of performance and its relationship with social issues. She has conducted groundbreaking research on dance and affect, cultural unlearning, and auto-ethnographic approaches in dance. Sarkar Munsi also serves on the board of directors at Kolkata Sanved, which provides dance and movement therapy to individuals who have experienced trauma.

**Michaela Schäuble** is a Professor of Social Anthropology with a focus on media anthropology at the University of Bern. She also trained as a documentary filmmaker and regularly curates film programs for exhibitions and festivals. From 2013 to 2014 she was a lecturer at the Granada Centre for Visual Anthropology (GCVA) at Manchester University, and from 2008 to 2013 she taught at the Institute for Social Anthropology at the University of Halle-Wittenberg. In 2009 she completed her PhD with a dissertation on nationalism, gender dynamics, and the politics of commemoration in postwar Croatia. Her current research focuses on ecstatic religious cults and saint veneration in the Mediterranean. As head of the SNSF Agora project “Tarantism Revisited,” she, in collaboration with Anja Dreschke, uses film and photography as a research tool in investigating reenactment and (religious) performances as sites of revitalizing and negotiating tradition, heritage, and cultural identity in Southern Italy.

**Sandra Sykora** is a lawyer and art historian, with a doctorate in law and an MA from the University of Zurich. She is a Lecturer in Art Law at the law faculty of the University of Basel and has further teaching appointments at the Bern University of Applied Sciences and the Swiss Institute

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# Introduction

## Sustaining care for performance

*Hanna B. Hölling, Jules Pelta Feldman,  
and Emilie Magnin*

When we ask about how to conserve performance-based art, what are we asking? If we think of performance as itself a mode of conservation, what are we thinking? What is at stake in conserving changeability?

Rebecca Schneider and Hanna B. Hölling<sup>1</sup>

These contemplations profoundly influenced the trajectory of the research project “Performance: Conservation, Materiality, Knowledge,” a transformative four-year endeavor that placed performance and conservation as the focal points of its interdisciplinary investigation.<sup>2</sup> The project approached performance as a complex socio-material assemblage, emphasizing both the affective and effective dimensions of conservation and care efforts. Among the central themes of the project was a reevaluation of the very notion of the ‘object’ of conservation. It prompted reflection on the distinction between documentation and conservation, challenging the malleability of time and the complexities associated with terms like ‘ephemeral.’ The project also explored the concept of performance itself as a mode of conservation and advocated for a reformation of institutions, encouraging thinking beyond them towards communities, cultures, families, and more. Moreover, the project extended its inquiry to encompass performance conservation practices that reached beyond the realms of conservation and art, particularly focusing on embodied practices such as ritual, dance, and music. It considered artists’ performance practices as potential models for conservation strategies, viewing performance not as a ‘poor’ medium but as one that both exhausts and transcends other media it interacts with. Additionally, the project expanded the understanding of ‘performance’ as a term that could be applied to reevaluate more ‘traditional’ art objects, fostering a comprehensive and holistic exploration of conservation and its intersections with the world of performance. Throughout its duration, the project was consistently guided by the central notions of care and care ethics.

The first volume, *Performance: The Ethics and the Politics of Conservation and Care* (2023), aimed at mapping the field, always collaboratively, as a way of thinking-with (others, our subjects, and ‘objects’). It provided

## 2 *Performance*

glimpses of the answers to our initial queries and painted a vivid picture of the dimensions that would unfold in response to the questions that remained. Most importantly, however, it pursued a global view of performance conservation, not only drawing from Western (often institutional) perspectives, but also sub-Saharan performance of heritage, issues of racial justice, political conservation in the shadow of the state, and contemporary Black performance. In our project and this volume, artists' and makers' views on performance conservation have been of central importance.

Performance-based works are often identified by their elusive qualities: they are transient, responsive to their surroundings, and intricately connected to the artist's body. Consequently, they have traditionally fallen beyond the purview of conventional conservation and restoration practices, which, at least until recent decades, concentrated on static objects rather than dynamic, moving expressions. In our investigations throughout the project's duration, the juxtaposition of conservation and performance presented an intriguing avenue for both theoretical and practical exploration. Through the lens of conservation, performance took on a new definition, prompting us to question its nature and behavior. Concurrently, this novel perspective offered insights into conservation itself.

When we viewed performance through a conservation framework, we began to unravel aspects of its nature that are often overlooked or even disparaged in museums, conservation laboratories, and art-historical discourse. Simultaneously, through our investigations, conservation became an ever-changing practical-theoretical paradigm, capable of bringing objects and experiences into our conscious awareness. By extending the concept of conservation to encompass performances, the definition of what might be preserved and sustained evolves—a fact that finds evidence in the contributions to our project's second and final volume.

Thus volume II builds upon the theoretical framework established in volume I, which proposes that integrating conservation and performance can offer new insights into both fields. Even more, it provides an innovative methodology for performance's possibilities in the realms of art, conservation, museums, and beyond. The second volume encompasses diverse disciplinary and artistic perspectives from various geographical, thematic, and philosophical angles. It presents an ambitious and multifaceted view of what performance conservation can and should entail. The book delves into areas such as ritual, music, community traditions, contemporary museum practices on different continents, and experimental art forms like fragrance.

The volume serves as the culmination of the editors' research project, offering readers access to the results, including chapters written by project team members Hanna B. Hölling, Jules Pelta Feldman, and Emilie Magnin. Alongside our own contributions are chapters from interlocutors, advisors, and friends of the project, which explore performance conservation in the context of diverse cultural and artistic practices.

## Performing care ethics

Our project centered on the development of networks designed for knowledge building, dissemination, and exchange. Within these networks, we embraced the concept of ‘care’ as a guiding principle, a notion that influenced both the actors involved and the objects under investigation. In this collection of essays, each author has their own relationship to care (for performance), and it is therefore worth taking a moment to discuss definitions.

Although the term ‘care’ is frequently used in conservation-related discussions, a systematic definition or approach to it in the context of conserving contemporary art is lacking. In practice, and drawing parallels from observations in medical science, care holds a dual significance as a psychological attitude of concern and the practical actions that stem from such concerns. For instance, when a conservator cares for an artwork, this involves both attentive and empathetic qualities, as well as tangible actions like planning and recommending a treatment.<sup>3</sup> However, unlike in medical science and related care discourses, prevailing discussions on care in conservation often tend to overly emphasize its role as mere practical activity, overshadowing its profound emotional and intellectual dimensions.

A thesaurus offers several alternatives or synonyms for the concept of ‘care,’ such as ‘attending,’ ‘cherishing,’ ‘fostering,’ and ‘watching over.’<sup>4</sup> Etymologically, the noun ‘care’ also carries connotations of sorrow, distress, or concern, which are still preserved in its present meanings (as in ‘careworn’).<sup>5</sup> Ethics delves into the logical foundation underlying our moral assessments, exploring concepts of what is right or wrong, just or unjust. It extends its scope to encompass human relationships with nature and other beings, contemplating aspects such as freedom, responsibility, and justice.

The terms ‘care’ and ‘ethics’ have undergone critical reevaluation in recent times, in particular through the lens of social and political feminist philosophers, such as Virginia Held, Eva Feder Kittay, and Joan C. Tronto. Held advocates for the uniqueness of care ethics as a moral framework, setting it apart from Kantian, utilitarian, and virtue ethics. She argues that care plays a foundational role in human institutions and behaviors and is essential for our very existence.<sup>6</sup> Kittay looks at care from the vantage point of disability studies, combining it with feminist philosophy, ethics, and social and political theory. Kittay’s key contributions lie in emphasizing the inescapability of human interdependence and the need to integrate dependency and dependency work into ethical and political theories, with a particular focus on cognitive disability in the emerging field of philosophy of disability.<sup>7</sup>

The ‘ethics of care’ proposed by political scientist Joan C. Tronto further deepens our understanding of these concepts.<sup>8</sup> Tronto and Bernice Fisher define care as “everything we do to maintain, continue, and repair our world so that we may live in it as well as possible.”<sup>9</sup> In their analysis, they identify attentiveness, responsibility, competence, and responsiveness as the four ethical elements integral to care.<sup>10</sup> Drawing on this scholarship, Anna Woodham,

#### 4 *Performance*

Rhianedd Smith, and Alison Hess interpret care as the collective activities we engage in to uphold, sustain, and mend our world. This notion encompasses care for our bodies, ourselves, and our environment, which includes the material objects that shape our understanding of the world.<sup>11</sup> In general terms, care operates on a principle of reciprocity, where all human beings both require and receive care, variously assuming roles as both caregivers and recipients of care. This underlying logic challenges the power dynamics within personal relationships, groups, and organizations that may not recognize their role in either needing or offering care.<sup>12</sup>

One perspective on care involves viewing it as a type of labor (either in health care or in domestic care) where an individual or a collective takes responsibility for and supports another. As architectural theorist Kim Trogal points out, in the realm of care, we encounter interconnected relationships in which the question of “who is caring for whom?” becomes a significant political inquiry. Following Tronto, this is because the provision of care in human societies has frequently led to the establishment of rigid hierarchies (such as castes or classes) where some individuals can demand the services of others, resulting in care often being disregarded by those in positions of authority.<sup>13</sup> The exclusion of care from political discourse stems from a reluctance to examine care in its own right. Care is a multifaceted process that ultimately mirrors power structures, economic systems, the division between public and private spheres, and our conceptions of autonomy and equality.<sup>14</sup> According to Trogal, we bring to light these hierarchies, dependencies, and exclusions when we place “who is caring for whom?” at the center.<sup>15</sup>

Returning to the concept of caring viewed as a species activity that sustains our world, we might ponder the notion of “thinking care-fully,” an imperative for co-habitation with other beings as proposed by Bernhard Stiegler—and present in the introduction to our first volume<sup>16</sup>—or “care-thinking” as proposed by Renée van de Vall.<sup>17</sup> For van de Vall, who draws on Tronto and other feminist care theorists, care ethics highlights the interdependency of people and all beings, emphasizing their reliance on relational webs for existence and meaning. In conservation, care ethics and care-thinking translate into a practical and situated approach. Rather than formulating rigid ethical rules, the focus shifts to understanding how care is practiced in unique and concrete situations. The affective and sensory aspects of care play a crucial role in the conservation process. We will say nothing new if we contend that emotions, encompassing both positive and negative feelings—such as whether we have a fondness or even a deep affection for the object under our care, or if it is a source of dislike or even repulsion—come into play during decision-making and practical actions. (And yet, while well known in conservation practice, these aspects have been overseen in conservation discourse.) For van de Vall, care ethics also extends beyond the micro-level of caring for individual artworks to encompass society as a whole. The philosopher calls on communities to look beyond established practices and engage with neglected artistic legacies, address under-explored problems, and work

in open-ended collaborations with other fields and groups. Attending to one another and fostering mutual resonance become essential to bind the conservation community together in its shared task of caring for the world.

In museums, care has evolved into ‘collection care,’ a concept that encompasses a range of practices involving conservation, registration, collection management, and curation. With the exception of the public display of objects that *nota bene* constitutes just a fraction of a museum’s holdings, this care primarily takes place behind the scenes and involves the protection and preservation of objects within the collections, done on behalf of the public.<sup>18</sup> Under the umbrella of ‘collection conservation,’ care encompasses a spectrum that spans from merely ‘looking after’—the latter term encompassing a less affective or invested mode of attending to things—to genuinely ‘caring for’ the works entrusted to the care of museum professionals.<sup>19</sup> Connoting the emotional dimension of caring, this distinction between caring and looking after has been drawn by Trogal, who builds on economic injustices in social relations in claiming that care itself is in the stasis of crisis.<sup>20</sup>

Museum professionals, including conservators, curators, and collections managers, have traditionally been responsible for caring for museum objects, and, more recently, for works that entail elements of performance or installation. While such care generally remains behind the scenes—indeed, museums are often loathe to make public any information about the condition or restoration of objects in their collections—volunteers, communities, and external specialists are nonetheless increasingly involved in the care and stewardship of museum artifacts.<sup>21</sup> The concept of shared guardianship has attracted attention as museums move away from being sole stewards and instead foster collaborative relationships with external groups and individuals—an aspect addressed by Emilie Magnin in Chapter 6 of this volume. This approach to caring for collections prioritizes the connections and relationships that the objects foster, embracing diverse perspectives and expertise.

Indeed, museums are often perceived as organizations primarily concerned with the care of objects in their collections, which tends to overshadow the care of the people who interact with these institutions. However, in the context of performance conservation, the concept of care necessarily encompasses living bodies—artists, producers, and performers—and their environments. Care, in this context, must become an embodied principle that acknowledges the interconnectedness of the artworks with the individuals involved in their creation and presentation. It must recognize the physical and emotional well-being of the artists and performers, ensuring that their health, safety, and creative needs are met throughout the production and preservation process. We expand on these ideas below in the section “Caring for performers and personhood.”

The caring relations within museums, even in well-funded institutions, often rely on under-remunerated—or, even worse, unremunerated—staff and are disproportionately dependent on volunteers and assistants.<sup>22</sup> Though they generally take their mandate to care for objects quite seriously, museums are

## 6 Performance

more reluctant to claim responsibility for the wellbeing of their workers—as was made clear in the United States by a recent spate of unionization drives among museum workers and the sometimes shockingly callous retaliation of management.<sup>23</sup> The bitter irony of the art world’s notoriously low salaries is that staff are expected to ‘do it for love’—that is, to *care* so much about their work as to render the question of compensation irrelevant. Yet this form of care, when neither reciprocated nor appropriately paid, is exploitation. Caring for performance therefore teaches us that caring for people is not an optional or extraneous aspect of the contemporary art world. Developing a more comprehensive understanding of care within museums requires acknowledging the inequitable distribution of power and resources. This reality is reflected in the conditions under which delegated performance occurs, utilizing human resources subjected to undercompensated labor or degrading work conditions.<sup>24</sup> An inclusive and ethically informed approach to care is urgently needed to foster a deeper understanding of the roles played by various stakeholders, both within and outside museums. This entails valuing and supporting the labor of all museum staff, providing fair compensation, and ensuring that care extends to the wellbeing of those who contribute their time and expertise to these cultural institutions. Here, art, artists, and cultural practices from beyond the West can suggest new relations of care in their disruptions of standard museum practices.

Caring is undoubtedly a complex political process that entails identifying, understanding, interpreting, and addressing specific needs—a process inherently tied to unequal access to power.<sup>25</sup> On the other hand, care is primarily hindered, not by a failure to identify what is needed, but rather by indifference or callousness. In museums as elsewhere, the *will* to care becomes crucial.

Caring for works of art can be both inclusive and exclusive. Selecting a material object or a performance for preservation is a political act, requiring human and technological effort. However, this selection leaves other works unattended—works, perhaps, with limited public appeal and unrecognized significance.<sup>26</sup> For every preserved work, thousands have vanished. Due to their characteristics—short temporal frame or limited duration—being incompatible with collection care systems and thus having less representation in physical collections, performance and performance-based works are particularly sensitive to ‘disappearance,’ despite their power to return and remain.

Preservation (collection care) and historicization (intellectual care) are intertwined in the process of canon formation. This means that material considerations are by no means the only threat to an artwork’s longevity: works by artists from marginalized groups, as well as works that are (through content or form) resistant to the mechanisms and dominant narratives of art history, are likely to fall away regardless of their materiality. (Both of these characteristics apply to the art of Ron Athey, whose archives Amelia Jones plumbed for the retrospective she discusses in this volume.) In other words,

loss occurs not only due to the failures of collection care but also through failures of historicization, often due to sexism, racism, anti-queer biases, and other forms of discrimination.<sup>27</sup>

Care is not always synonymous with conservation (if conservation denotes an attempt to keep things intact), and conservation does not always encompass care—which is why we chose to include both notions in the title of this anthology. The acceptance of the impermanence of vital matter—vanishing, degradation, decay—should not immediately be linked to a lack of care, nor even, necessarily, to loss. Certain items should not be kept preserved according to Western museums’ standards when the culture or individual that created them sees such preservation as inappropriate. In other cases, this may be because there is a positive value in transformation, as a work is released into other states and conditions.<sup>28</sup> Moreover, an acceptance of impermanence might be seen in innumerable examples of performance—such as those discussed by Urmimala Sarkar Munsi in Chapter 13 or by Hölling, Magnin, and Pelta Feldman in Chapters 1, 6, and 11 respectively—in which no iteration resembles the other, but rather is, as Schneider puts it, “reconstituted in and through relation, in and through the negative spaces that preserve the condition for encounter.”<sup>29</sup> By paying attention to a work’s emerging, rather than preordained, character (Tim Ingold) and embracing the precarious nature of material changes as the positivity of the *changing same* (Schneider, after Amiri Baraka), the work is cared for and sustained in its infinite potential.<sup>30</sup>

Lastly, care—whether embodied in ‘thinking care-fully’ or ‘care-thinking’—cannot be limited to the Western modalities that often dominate conservation and museum practices. Vocabularies of ‘preventive conservation,’ ‘conservation science,’ and ‘restoration’ often imply a social-technological perspective rooted in Western epistemology, reinforcing subject/object binaries and ignoring or suppressing other paradigms. Drawing from Maria Puig de la Bellacasa’s speculative philosophy of care, we must consider care as an obligation that transcends the nature/culture divide, avoiding the reestablishment of binaries and anthropocentric moralism. Engaging with care can help us rethink ethical “obligations” within human-decentered cosmologies.<sup>31</sup>

### Respecting performance

Michael Slote has pointed out that respect is often seen as separate or even opposed to the notion of care: “Concern for wellbeing and respect are often thought to clash when issues of paternalism arise.” Such clashes can be resolved, he argues, by recourse to empathy:

There is a lack of empathy in most, if not all, cases where a putative concern for wellbeing is accompanied by a failure of respect, and if we enrich the notion of caring so as to make it include empathy, then the ethics of caring will be in a position to account for respect.<sup>32</sup>



## 8 *Performance*

The Kantian concept of respect means respect for the autonomy of others; what might it mean to respect the autonomy of, and even to extend empathy to, performance? If respect is indeed part of care, then caring for performance means respecting its form *as* performance, its fundamental autonomy from other mediums, even those that are often used to define it. If we fail to respect performance's autonomy, we will tend to see its fundamental characteristics—its particular relationship to time (its so-called 'ephemerality'), its adherence to bodies rather than what are often deemed inanimate objects (its so-called 'immateriality')—as problems to be fixed. Indeed, the conservation of performance too often consists of quite literally 'fixing' it in place, as one pins a winged insect. These are precisely the solutions that pioneering performance scholar Peggy Phelan rejected as incompatible with—we might say, borrowing Slotte, disrespectful of—performance's needs.<sup>33</sup>

The premise of our project is that performance can be conserved; here, we may go so far as to suggest that this is a statement not only of possibility but also of ethics: any treatment of performance not only can but should proceed from the assumption that performance has the power to endure. To ignore performance's strengths, often out of a well-intentioned effort to counteract its perceived weaknesses, is actually to misapprehend the medium entirely, casting it as a faulty object—perhaps an unsatisfactory video piece, a folder of digital photographs, a defective sculpture—instead of celebrating and exploiting its failure—better, its refusal—to be captured in these forms.

Respecting performance does not entail dismissing its complex relationships to other mediums, but it suggests caution in approaching them, lest they become excuses for dispatching performance's difficulties by turning it into an object. Throughout the project, we have been fortunate to interrogate these relationships in our conversations with the many interlocutors—artists, conservators, and curators, as well as scholars of art history, anthropology, music, and theater—who have shared their time and ideas with us. When we spoke with Marilyn Arsem, an experienced practitioner and teacher of performance, she expressed her categorical wariness of the documentation that has become standard, perhaps even mandatory, in contemporary performance art. While we are well familiar with distrust of photographs and films—an old topic in performance discussed in the introduction to our first book, as well as in the conversation with Philip Auslander in this one (Chapter 5)—Arsem's perspective presented a new wrinkle that cannot be ironed away. As soon as an effort is made to document a performance, Arsem noted, "suddenly that work is for someone in the future, for a future audience," a shift in perspective that "takes it away from the immediacy of the situation."<sup>34</sup>

Phelan has similarly argued that "the spectator's response cannot alter the pre-recorded or remotely transmitted performance, and in this fundamental sense, these representations are indifferent to the response of the other." Live performance uniquely allows "the potential for the event to be transformed by those participating in it."<sup>35</sup> Indeed, Arsem's belief that documenting a performance transforms it into something else echoes Phelan's defining

argument, that to turn a performance into a photograph or video is to lose it. Phelan's perspective is that performance is always destined to be lost, and she argued influentially that preservation is anathema to it.<sup>36</sup> Though many theorists and thinkers have opposed this view since Phelan first outlined it, its skepticism of attempts to capture and fix that which wants to be mutable and mobile remains trenchant and important. In particular, Phelan saw such attempts as compromising performance's radical power to resist commodification.<sup>37</sup> It is therefore not surprising that performance has most often entered museum collections in the guise of documents. While we necessarily disagree that performance is destined to disappear—our fundamental position, following Rebecca Schneider, is that “performance remains”<sup>38</sup>—we firmly believe that conservation ‘treatments’ of performances must go far beyond converting them into documentation or other (more or less) static, material traces, instead marveling at performance's own power to conserve. We also challenge the assumption that caring for performance is the sole province of museum professionals.

Art historian Heike Roms and conservator Amy Brost shared with us their dissatisfaction at the way sound—a crucial aspect of performance—is distorted by or even absent from historical accounts and many forms of documentation. Both Roms and Brost are working to develop new tools that will allow scholars and museum professionals to better care about and for sound.<sup>39</sup> (In Chapter 3, musicologist Thomas Gartmann explores an abundance of methods and instruments that have been used to conserve music and that suggest a wealth of untapped techniques for performance art.) In conversation with anthropologist Rivka Eisner, we gained the insight that overreliance on recording media can obscure or devalue the body's own capacities for preservation. For Eisner, memory itself is a medium, the body its playback device.<sup>40</sup> Anthropologist Kate Hennessy's concept of “anarchival materiality,” developed together with Trudi Lynn Smith, allows the physical failures and decay of archival media—loss of color, fidelity, data—to remind us of the archive's biases and limits.<sup>41</sup> Hennessy and Smith pay attention to a document's form and physical substance as a way to identify and conceptualize the implicit gaps and losses in the document's content and meaning. In particular, anarchival materiality is a tool for questioning the authority and durability of the forms of documentation that have long underlaid both the field of anthropology and art history's conception of performance's afterlife.

As this volume and its predecessor testify, writing, too, can contribute to performance's longevity and care. Phelan's concept of “performative writing” eschews the clinical and specious objectivity of ethnological description, instead seeking to perpetuate the feelings that a performance inspires: “Rather than describing the performance event in ‘direct signification,’ a task I believe to be impossible and not terrifically interesting, I want this writing to enact the affective force of the performance event again.”<sup>42</sup> The contributors to this book ask an astonishing array of cultural techniques to bear witness to performance and to bear its weight into the future.

**Perpetual care**

It is clear that performance demands different approaches and tools from those typically employed by conservators. Yet this does not always mean inventing new methods. In fact, emphasizing performance's newness as an art medium not only dismisses the depth of performance traditions in various cultures—which are rarely so irrelevant to contemporary performance art practices as the art world tends to assume—but also ignores an abundance of tools and techniques for preserving performance that have long been in operation.<sup>43</sup> We are inspired by efforts to connect the conservation of contemporary art to that of so-called 'ethnographic collections'; as Stephanie E. Hornbeck has observed, "the ethnographic object conservator's wide knowledge of materials, tendency toward minimal intervention, and a philosophical approach—which seeks to preserve, though not restore, original materials—can contribute to the debates and decisions affecting the conservation of contemporary art."<sup>44</sup> Yet the knowledge and philosophies of the people who made such objects, or perhaps their descendants, may be more valuable still. When it comes to performance, what counts as unfamiliar or avant-garde in the disciplines of conservation and museology can often be found in traditions that reach back decades, centuries, even millennia.<sup>45</sup> As we have learned, performance has been conserved both by means and in spite of religious dance traditions (as in our conversation here with dancer and anthropologist Sarkar Munsi, Chapter 13, and our discussion with archaeological scientist Shadreck Chirikure in Chapter 5 of the first volume); in the renewal of history found in critical artistic practice (see the contributions by Kongo Astronauts [Eléonore Hellio and Michel Ekeba] and Dread Scott in our first volume); and through the bonds of friendship that inspire a community to rally around the archives of an artist whose work has been neglected by institutions (as in Jones's account of curating Ron Athey, Chapter 4).

It is important to note that performance has been both supported and wounded by the 'safeguarding' efforts of museums and official preservation bodies such as UNESCO, which struggle to reconcile their existing tools—indeed, their very concepts of culture—with the dynamic realities of performance traditions both very old and very new (sometimes at the same time—as in the example of Rosanna Raymond, who discusses her contemporary approach to her ancestors' culture in Chapter 12). There are risks to intervening on behalf of performance, as is made clear by Michaela Schäuble's and Sarkar Munsi's contributions (Chapters 2 and 13): what can be transmitted and revitalized can also be distorted, commercialized, and propagandized. And yet while performance's inherent fluidity and contingency may sometimes facilitate such exploitation, these also help to ensure its durability. While intervening in objects can cause irreversible changes—however much conservators strive to avoid them—performance allows for potentially unlimited new versions that might exist in conversation with each other, obviating the need for finality.

### Caring for performers and personhood

Conservators are often wary of too-pat metaphors drawn from medicine. Such comparisons not only distort the stakes of conservation treatments but may also misleadingly tie an artwork's vulnerabilities and capacities to those of the human body.<sup>46</sup> Even fragile materials may last much longer than a human life; conversely, most artworks cannot heal the way a person can. Yet the relationship between the vulnerable body and the fragile artwork leaves the realm of metaphor when we seek to care for performance. Briefly put, meaningfully caring for performance demands caring for performers—the people who create, hold, and transmit the work and are thus also necessarily involved in its care. Art-historical discourses that tend to consider performance a 'dematerialized' practice not only deny the insistent materiality of the body, but also undermine the body's need for care. Understanding performance's longevity through the framework of conservation, with its long-standing focus on the material, can perhaps help us tether the performance work back to its corporeal home.

At the same time, performance's uniquely contingent materiality—the way it jumps from body to body, inheres in different items and formats—helps us understand conservation as care beyond the object. Salvador Muñoz-Viñas has argued that “the ultimate goal of conservation as a whole is not to conserve” the physical substrate of an object, “but to retain or improve the meaning it has for people,”<sup>47</sup> an idea also championed by Miriam Clavir, Jane Henderson, and many other conservators. Nina Owczarek further notes that, while ethics has always been central to conservation practice, it is sometimes too narrowly applied to the treatment of artifacts.<sup>48</sup> She instead urges conservators to “approach our concept of ethics from a human-centered perspective, rather than one that focuses on the object,” so that “we are no longer bound by the physical object, and we can connect our work to its impact on people and beyond our narrow field.”<sup>49</sup> Most conservators and other museum professionals are not used to providing care for people in the context of their professional practice. But this is not only indispensable for performance's survival; it should also, as Owczarek proposes, be folded into the ethics of conservation. Therefore, caring for performance can help us reconsider whether the care of human beings should not play a greater role in the conservation of other types of artwork or cultural heritage.

This work is already happening. Puawai Cairns, Brandie Macdonald, and Kelli Morgan (Chapters 7 and 9 in this volume; Chapter 9 in the first) have pushed museums to treat their responsibilities to living communities as seriously as their efforts to maintain their collections. These efforts seek justice for marginalized groups, who may have had their heritage stolen from them, just as much as they support conservation, by helping sustain the living traditions that created museums' collections and keep them meaningful. Such efforts are slow to reach art museums—Cairns and Macdonald both work

## 12 *Performance*

in historical/anthropological museums—but perhaps performance can help mediate these approaches. As Virginia Held has noted,

There can be care without justice: There has historically been little justice in the family, but care and life have gone on without it. There can be no justice without care, however, for without care no child would survive and there would be no persons to respect.<sup>50</sup>

It is possible to care for performances without caring for the people and communities responsible for their instigation and/or continued existence—indeed, this is still how most museums that own performance works approach their conservation—but Held’s logic indicates that it cannot be done justly.

Through performance, we can trouble the “Cartesian ontology” that insists on strictly separating the animate from the inanimate.<sup>51</sup> Anthropologist Aaron Glass reminds us that

for many Indigenous people, objects—or at least certain objects and materials—have never been thought of as static in the first place, but rather as both active subjects and as subject to interconnecting webs of animating force and relationality.<sup>52</sup>

Perhaps the Greek notion of metaphor, analogizing artwork and body, may be an inappropriate framework for describing the types of care needed by items from non-Western cultures and contexts. While items crafted by human hands usually require different types of care from the craftspeople themselves, in many cultures, special items like masks and sacred statues may be imbued with personhood. Glass recounts what happened when collections care staff at Seattle’s Burke Museum learned that an ‘object’ in their collection, Stone T’xwelátse, was actually a living ancestor who had been turned into granite. After consulting with his descendants among the Stó:lō people, museum staff began a protocol “of putting him to bed every night and waking him up every morning by speaking to him and covering and uncovering him with a muslin blanket.”<sup>53</sup> Acknowledging the difficulty of reconciling this particular Stó:lō perspective with the beliefs and practices of other cultures caring for Stone T’xwelátse, Glass looks to “anchor notions of cultural alterity not in abstract essentialisms but rather in concrete ‘infrastructures’ (like museums and conservation labs as sites and social fields) that mediate ontological difference in actual moments of social and material transaction.”<sup>54</sup> This approach, at once pragmatic and ontologically expansive, suggests optimistic possibilities for performance’s conservation in multiple modalities.

While Indigenous traditions provide important guidance for the care of artworks that involve both human and non-human elements—and thus frequently challenge Western museums’ collection care strategies—it would be a mistake to assume that such discourses are foreign to Western cultures. In his essay “The Cultural Biography of Things: Commoditization as Process,”

often cited in contemporary conservation discourse, anthropologist Igor Kopytoff cautions against the commonly held assumption that ‘person’ and ‘thing’ are clearly distinguishable, non-overlapping categories.<sup>55</sup> He notes that “one can draw an analogy between the way societies construct individuals and the way they construct things,” and asks: “How secure are the Western cultural ramparts that defend the human sphere against commoditization?”<sup>56</sup> Indeed, this aspect of Kopytoff’s argument, which has been less emphasized in conservators’ discussions of it, is particularly relevant in considering the practicalities of caring for performance in art settings. Museums and other spaces for art are often ill-equipped to care for the human beings that are indispensable ‘parts’ of performance works, unable or unwilling to offer performers and other collaborators (designers of costumes, lighting, and sound, for example) fair compensation or sometimes even appropriate working conditions. (Dancers, for example, are increasingly asked to perform in museum spaces, but there is no ‘backstage’ for them to prepare and rest; they are not infrequently directed to use public bathrooms for these purposes.)

Particularly in the context of contemporary art conservation, performance may constitute an extreme example of the necessity to care for people as part of a conservation practice. But once it is accepted that such care is essential for performance’s preservation—as noted, museums continue to struggle with or simply reject both the ethics and pragmatics of this fact—it becomes difficult to justify why caring for people should not also be relevant to other holdings in museums’ collections. Just as we have seen performance transformed through the lens of conservation, we also see performance’s potential to change conservation itself.

## Chapter overview

Following the idea that caring for performance also encompasses caring as knowledge building, dissemination, and exchange, our project facilitated four colloquia, along with various research seminars and project meetings. During these events, artists, scholars, and practitioners came together to engage in thoughtful discussions about performance conservation. These inspiring encounters have shaped both the content and format of this second volume, which includes not only scholarly essays, but also a diversity of interviews and performative formats such as conversations, manifestos, and artistic statements.

To help the reader navigate the variety of contributions, we have arranged them around three main topics: “Expanding scholarly approaches to the longevity of performance,” “Confronting institutions,” and “Conservation through artistic and embodied practice.”

The first part of this volume looks at various approaches to the perpetuation and longevity of performance that stem from various horizons and fields of study and reflect the transdisciplinary nature of our ongoing research. Here, and similarly to the methodological and disciplinary diversity represented in

the approaches to performance conservation, the very notion of performance ranges from ultra-conceptual works of recent art through the performance of rituals and live art to the performance of music.

Opening this part, Hanna B. Hölling delves into the artistic project of Florence Jung. Deliberately avoiding personal presence in her works, Jung creates situations that embody uncertainty and instability. Her works often lack tangible elements and documentation, blurring the lines between staged events and reality, which leads to narratives and rumors becoming the primary means by which Jung's work exists. This raises questions about how to handle Jung's performative ultra-conceptualism, which often operates in the realm of thoughts, shifting contexts, and oral transmission. Ultimately, Hölling argues that Jung's conceptual works can be conveyed through storytelling, rumors, and tales, providing a unique way to experience and safeguard them.

In another take on heritage transmission and reinterpretation, socio-anthropologist Michaela Schäuble examines the revival of the centuries-old spider possession rituals of Apulian tarantism in Southern Italy. She analyzes select examples of artistic interventions and cultural (re-)appropriations engaging with past audiovisual documentation of tarantism, arguing that they promote a stylized iconicization and often contribute to an essentialized "heritagization" of ritualized performance. Her essay raises questions about conserving cultural meaning versus contemporary reinterpretations, the ethics of transforming historically marginalized rituals into heritage for celebration, and issues of cultural ownership over representing intangible heritage.

Moving from the performance of heritage to the performance of music, in "Can we conserve music?" musicologist Thomas Gartmann describes the inherent challenges in conserving musical performance across different genres, from classical to improvisational and conceptual music. Gartmann questions assumptions that musical works reside solely in scores, arguing that performances add ephemeral but essential interpretive dimensions. Recordings also pose their dilemmas, freezing improvisational processes and performance contexts, while strict adherence to documentation risks distorting the radical openness of conceptual works like John Cage's *4'33*". This chapter emphasizes the importance of preserving musical works in a balanced and genre-specific manner that respects music's various forms and contexts.

Following the idea of interpretation into the realm of curatorial practice, Amelia Jones reflects on curating a retrospective of performance artist Ron Athey as a form of conservation. She argues that live art can never be fully represented or 'conserved' in an exhibition, but that curatorial practice can be a place to experiment with alternative ways of historicizing live art. Acknowledging her personal investment as Athey's friend, Jones describes living with Athey's messy, incomplete archive in her home for years before curating his retrospective. She aimed not to "contain" Athey's queer, communal performance practice, but to suggest its complexity by displaying materials from different creative queer communities he helped nurture. Jones argues

that the show acted as conservation by caring for Athey's legacy across generations and mediums.

The significance of documentation is maintained in the final chapter of this part. Performance scholar Philip Auslander argues in conversation with the editors that documentation can enable the reactivation and conservation of performance but is not interchangeable with the work itself. In line with Amelia Jones, he sees conservation as using documentation to recreate an experiential sense of the performance for audiences (even if only in imagination).

The book's second part, "Confronting institutions," critically examines conservation care in the institutional context as well as in the broader social context in which conservation operates. Here, performance and performative practices are often invoked as vectors of change and as a critical part of cultural heritage continuity that should not be severed from objects and documents held in museums.

Opening this part, Emilie Magnin's essay explores how live performance resists the standard processes of musealization upon entering institutional collections. For her, performance art calls for alternative models of care that include collective stewardship and a shift from museums' usual cycle of storage and exhibition to allow regular activations. To illustrate how performance could be cared for collectively and to suggest how this art form could endure differently, Magnin uses the image of mycelium: a distributed, resilient, and living system that can survive and expand in various ways, much like performance itself.

If mycelium can be grasped as an eternal biological network of sustenance, its image persists in the next chapter of this book in the form of communities of care and support. In conversation with Jules Pelta Feldman, Puawai Cairns, Director of Audience and Insights at Te Papa Tongarewa (Wellington), shares insights on how museums struggle to represent and sustain Indigenous culture. She stresses that culture should come from the people that sustain a museum, not just the objects within it, and that the way forward is to increase Indigenous representation within museum staff and leadership to ensure museums truly serve their communities. Cairns advocates for collection access enabling ceremonial use, prioritizing cultural continuity over material integrity. In this sense, she contends that performance creates new moments, reconnecting objects to living heritage and empowering communities to become participants in cultural preservation.

Community-centered approaches are also valued by conservators Valinda Carroll, Kayla Henry-Griffin, Nylah Byrd, and Ariana Makau, who come together under the auspices of the group Black Art Conservators, which was founded in 2020 in response to the Black Lives Matter movement. Together, they discuss challenges around preserving Black art, including the lack of institutional resources and art-historical biases that overlook contributions of Black artists. They advocate for emotional connections and oral traditions, which may convey aspects of performance or cultural heritage not



present in documentation. Like Cairns, the conservators urge the inclusion of specialists from associated cultures for equitable, contextualized preservation embracing diverse perspectives.

Sustaining discussion of decolonization and decentering Western preservation discourses, Brandie Macdonald argues in a conversational chapter with Magnin that museums should not be experts on communities' cultures but should collaborate to shape conservation practices aligned with their values. Reflecting on her work as Senior Director of Decolonizing Initiatives at the Museum of Us (San Diego), Macdonald discusses strategies for decolonizing museum conservation to foreground Indigenous epistemologies, ethics, and ontologies. She envisions museums evolving into spaces hosting cultural practices, with conservation adaptively respecting communities' needs. Macdonald also urges obtaining consent before documenting knowledge meant to be transmitted orally, and expands on the role of oral traditions and storytelling both in culture transmission and for her own practice.

Lastly, and offering a twist to the geographically and conceptually diverse forms of institutionalization of performance, the essay by lawyer and art historian Sandra Sykora offers an introduction to international copyright law relating to performance art. Sykora examines the permissibility of common strategies for conserving and disseminating performance artworks employed by art institutions. She argues that performance poses particular challenges due to its unfixed and various forms and unpacks the complex copyright implications of different conservation strategies, including documentation, dissemination, and the preservation of relics. Enriched by many concrete examples, her contribution advises gathering information from artists to guide conservation and avoid legal concerns.

The essays in the third part, "Conservation through artistic and embodied practice," suggest that (re-)performance, (re)interpretation, or other creative forms of artistic intervention—such as olfactory documentation of an ephemeral moment—belong to an expanded definition of conservation practices.

Jules Pelta Feldman discusses the work of Davide-Christelle Sanvee, who re-performs and reinterprets past works by Swiss artists as a living archive and as a way to insert her own perspective and presence into the history of performance art. Pelta Feldman argues that rather than simply reviving past works, Sanvee's re-performances transform them through her own body and identity as a Black woman, questioning notions of authenticity and origin. Sanvee is presented here as an active historian who conserves past works not through strict reproduction but by making them her own, embodying a form of "living preservation" that keeps ephemeral artworks alive through reinterpretation.

In an interview which resonates with the claims made in Part 2 (Cairns, Chapter 7; Macdonald, Chapter 9), New Zealand-born artist Rosanna Raymond narrates how she engages with her Pacific cultural heritage through contemporary performance. Raymond aims to bring stories, deities, and ancestral connections alive through "visual storytelling" and sharing embodied space

with the past. She describes challenges in conveying the essence of her performance to Western institutions fixated on objects and physical remains, and she offers strategies for conserving intangible elements, using her idea of the “*Vā* Body” as a way to create tangible experiences of intangible heritage. Above all, Raymond argues that relationships must be central in cultural conservation—what she calls putting the “*vā* in conser.VĀ.tion.”

The thread regarding the erasure of specific histories persists in the narrative provided by social anthropologist and dancer Urmimala Sarkar Munsi. In a lively conversation with this book’s editors, Sarkar Munsi delves into the complexities surrounding the preservation of Indian dance traditions, particularly when these traditions involve marginalized communities. Sarkar Munsi underscores how institutional preservation efforts can lead to the erasure of certain histories, and therefore advocates for an ethical, context-sensitive documentation respectful of practitioners’ perspectives. She expresses the importance of understanding and preserving dance history while respecting the evolution of the art form. Resonating with Raymond’s account of Pacific performance, Sarkar Munsi also delves into the importance of embodied preservation, where the continuity of dance is transmitted across generations within human bodies. From one generation to another, as social norms differ, the performance changes. Sarkar Munsi emphasizes the need for unlearning traditional norms and perspectives, encouraging a critical evaluation of cultural constructs and gendering over time.

The transitory nature of performance resurfaces in an artistic contribution in Chapter 14, authored by the artist duo Dorota Gawęda and Eglė Kulbokaitė, although now through the fragile aspect of scent. The artwork documented in *RYXPER1126AE* is a fragrance created by Gawęda and Kulbokaitė. This is the synthetic molecular recreation of the scent that could be experienced during their performance *SULK* (2018) at the 6th Athens Biennial. This olfactory creation serves as a poetic memory of shared collective experiences and explores smell as a method of documenting performance and space. As an artistic “conservation intervention,” *RYXPER1126AE* raises questions about the transition from the virtual to the real and the evanescent nature of scent, which influences our perception and memory in ways that elude easy explanation.

As if wanting to tackle performance’s fleeting character by sharing the responsibility of its creation, performance artist Gisela Hochuli returns in Chapter 15 to the necessity of creating and keeping performance documentation. In conversation with the editors, Hochuli dissects her series of performances *In Strange Hands*, for which she enacts instructions from others (including registrants to the project’s annual colloquia). She explains how instructions offer the possibility of different executions and authorships, which sparked her interest in incorporating them into her work. In this context, Hochuli also emphasizes documentation’s importance for understanding diverse approaches and inspiring future reinterpretations, as also seen in Sanvee’s work (Chapter 11).

Like Hochuli, Joanna Leśnierowska, the author of the conversational Chapter 16 (with Hölling), engages practically with the sustenance of performance. As a choreographer, visual dramaturge, and light and space composer, with a majority of her work devoted to the sustenance of performance in Poland and in the former ‘East,’ Leśnierowska underscores the political nature of performance preservation and curators’ and artists’ responsibility to select what to preserve and what to omit. Leśnierowska highlights the significance of preserving dance traditions and gestures to reclaim them from political agendas and return them to the realm of the body. She also describes how her work as a choreographer revolves around reactivating and layering performances, fostering an ongoing artistic lineage rather than aiming for static preservation.

Confirming our belief that performance conservation is not static—in fact, it cannot ever be—this part, and our volume, ends with a manifesto by artist Ido Feder, calling for “ex-spectacle events” that imagine alternatives to art’s absorption into capitalist spectacle. Feder critiques art that serves neoliberal agendas and fails to address urgent social and environmental crises. He advocates instead for “conservative performance” that returns art to a mythical social function. Feder argues that performance focused only on individual experience severs artists’ private vision (*privilogos*) from service to a community (*mythos*). Through “ex-spectacle events,” artists can create “conservative” art worlds that foster collaboration toward shared futures, conserving human imagination rather than objects, as an evocation of an extreme form of changeability.

The tendency towards change, flexibility, and flux, addressed so often in this volume, reflects the greater web of invaluable thoughts, reflections, and exchanges that have animated our research these past few years. In this vein, neither our project, nor this book, present themselves as inflexible documents; rather, they acknowledge their own temporality and, already, their historicity, anticipating implications that may surface in the future.

## Notes

- 1 Rebecca Schneider and Hanna B. Hölling, “Not, Yet: When Our Art Is in Our Hands,” in *Performance: The Ethics and the Politics of Conservation and Care*, vol. I, ed. Hanna B. Hölling, Jules Pelta Feldman, and Emilie Magnin (London: Routledge, 2023), 50–69, <https://doi.org/10.4324/9781003309987>. Quotation from the abstract.
- 2 “Performance: Conservation, Materiality, Knowledge” (2020–24) has been funded by the Swiss National Science Foundation research grant no. 189245.
- 3 Joan C. Tronto, “An Ethic of Care,” *Generations: Journal of the American Society on Aging*, special issue on “Ethics and Aging: Bringing the Issues Home,” 22, no. 3 (Fall 1998): 16, drawing on Richard Hugman, *Power in Caring Professions* (London: Macmillan, 1991).
- 4 “Care,” Thesaurus.com, accessed October 7, 2023, [www.thesaurus.com/browse/caring%20for](http://www.thesaurus.com/browse/caring%20for).

- 5 Merriam-Webster Dictionary, “Care.” Merriam-Webster (website), accessed July 26, 2023, [www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/care](http://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/care). Heidegger’s notion of *Sorge* encompasses both; for him, care is the ontological structure that underlies and makes possible Dasein’s existence. Care is not simply worry or concern, but rather the foundational way that Dasein is oriented toward its own being. Martin Heidegger, *Being and Time*, trans. John Macquarrie and Edward Robinson (Malden: Blackwell, 2007), 225–44.
- 6 See, for instance, Virginia Held, *The Ethics of Care: Personal, Political, and Global* (Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 2006).
- 7 Eva Feder Kittay, “The Ethics of Care, Dependence, and Disability,” *Ratio Juris* 24, no. 1 (March 2011): 49–58, <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1467-9337.2010.00473.x>.
- 8 Joan C. Tronto, *Who Cares? How to Reshape a Democratic Politics* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2015); Joan C. Tronto, *Caring Democracy: Markets, Equality and Justice* (New York: NYU Press, 2013); Joan C. Tronto, “A Discussion of Care—Interview with Professor Joan C. Tronto” (Access Minnesota, The Minnesota Broadcasters Association, July 15, 2014), YouTube, accessed July 28, 2023, [www.youtube.com/watch?v=H-utAjZ\\_obc&t=102s&ab\\_channel=minnesotabroadcaster](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=H-utAjZ_obc&t=102s&ab_channel=minnesotabroadcaster).
- 9 The authors continue: “That world includes our bodies, ourselves, and our environment, all of which we seek to interweave in a complex, life-sustaining web.” Bernice Fisher and Joan C. Tronto, “Toward a Feminist Theory of Caring,” in *Circles of Care*, ed. Emily Abel and Margaret Nelson (Albany, NY: SUNY Press, 1990), 40.
- 10 Tronto, “An Ethic of Care,” 18.
- 11 Anna Woodham and Shane Kelleher, “What’s in a Name? The Ethics of Care and an ‘Unloved’ Collection,” in *Exploring Emotion, Care, and Enthusiasm in “Unloved” Museum Collections*, ed. Anna Woodham, Rhianedd Smith, and Alison Hess (Leeds: ARC Humanities Press, 2020), 65.
- 12 Woodham and Kelleher, “What’s in a Name?,” 66.
- 13 Joan Tronto, *Caring for Democracy: A Feminist Vision* (Utrecht: Universiteit voor Humanistiek, 1995), 12, quoted in Trogal.
- 14 Tronto, *Caring for Democracy*, 12.
- 15 Kim Trogal, “Caring: Making Commons, Making Connections,” in *The Social (Re)Production of Architecture: Politics, Values and Actions in Contemporary Practice*, ed. Doina Petrescu and Kim Trogal (London: Routledge, 2017), 160.
- 16 Hanna B. Hölling, Jules Pelta Feldman, and Emilie Magnin, “Introduction: Caring for Performance,” in *Performance: The Ethics and the Politics of Conservation and Care*, vol. I, ed. Hanna B. Hölling, Jules Pelta Feldman, and Emilie Magnin (London: Routledge, 2023), 3–4.
- 17 Renée van de Vall, “Caring for Contemporary Art: Reflections on Ethics and Aesthetics in Precarious Times,” unpublished lecture, Maastricht University, 2023.
- 18 This notion of the ‘public’ or ‘society’ has been put under pressure by ICOM’s recent efforts to redefine ‘museum.’ International Council of Museums, “Museum Definition,” ICOM (website), <https://icom.museum/en/resources/standards-guidelines/museum-definition/>, accessed July 30, 2023. For the critique, see “What Is a Museum?” (Museum Association), YouTube, accessed July 30, 2023, [www.youtube.com/watch?v=eGvE9IrusAI&ab\\_channel=MuseumsAssociation](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=eGvE9IrusAI&ab_channel=MuseumsAssociation).
- 19 While scientific conservation might involve an emotional relationship with an object of analysis, collection care’s general connotation of custodianship does not pair well with scientific enquiry.
- 20 Kim Trogal, “Crisis and Care: Ethics in Changing Times” (Theory Forum, Sheffield School of Architecture, 2013), YouTube, [www.youtube.com/watch?v=BjvkP-Qezrs&ab\\_channel=SheffieldSchoolofArchitecture](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=BjvkP-Qezrs&ab_channel=SheffieldSchoolofArchitecture).

20 *Performance*

- 21 Woodham and Kelleher, "What's in a Name?," 65–66.
- 22 This has itself been addressed by artists who use conceptual and performative projects to intervene in the art world's labor systems, for example A. L. Steiner or Maria Eichhorn. See Jules Pelta Feldman, "Activist and Action Painter: On Politics in or as Art," *Texte Zur Kunst*, no. 130 (2023): 100–9.
- 23 Tom Seymour, "State of the Unions: Why US Museum Workers Are Mobilising Against Their Employers," *The Art Newspaper*, February 2, 2022, [www.theartnewspaper.com/2022/02/02/state-of-the-unions-a-new-renaissance-at-us-museums](http://www.theartnewspaper.com/2022/02/02/state-of-the-unions-a-new-renaissance-at-us-museums); Zachary Small, "U.S. Museums See Rise in Unions Even as Labor Movement Slumps," *The New York Times*, February 21, 2022. For a historic take on this issue, see Lawrence Alloway, "Museums and Unionization," *Artforum* 13, no. 6 (February 1975): 46–48.
- 24 See, for instance, Dorothy Dubrue, "What I'm Doing When I'm Selling Out," Open Space/SFMOMA (website), April 25, 2019, <https://openspace.sfmoma.org/2019/04/what-im-doing-when-im-selling-out/>; and Sarah Wookey, "Open Letter to Artists from Sarah Wookey," The Performance Club (website), accessed March 1, 2024, <http://theperformanceclub.org/2011/11/open-letter-to-artists/>.
- 25 As Tronto explains, we often mistakenly view the domains of care and politics as disconnected, wrongly assuming that care is solely about compassion and kindness, while politics is seen as a ruthless arena of competition. Tronto, *Caring for Democracy*.
- 26 On this subject, see also the UK Arts and Humanities Research Council-funded initiative "Who Cares? Interventions in 'Unloved' Museum Collections," and a conference held in 2015 at the Dana Research Centre, Science Museum, London.
- 27 MoMA's 2022 exhibition related to the JAM Gallery (Just Above Midtown) focused on experimental Black artists' fragile and performative pieces. Having caused a sensation, the museum subsequently acquired JAM's archives—thus canonizing a gallery that only few in the art world had previously heard of. Alex Greenberger, "MoMA Establishes Just Above Midtown Archive Through Mellon Foundation Grant," *Artnews*, February 22, 2023, [www.artnews.com/art-news/news/moma-just-above-midtown-archive-linda-goode-bryant-1234658521/](http://www.artnews.com/art-news/news/moma-just-above-midtown-archive-linda-goode-bryant-1234658521/).
- 28 On the positive value of decay, see Caitlin DeSilvey, *Curated Decay: Heritage Beyond Saving* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2017); Caitlin DeSilvey, "Observed Decay: Telling Stories with Movable Things," *Journal of Material Culture* 11, no. 3 (2006): 311–32; and Hanna B. Hölling, "Notation and Eternity in Symphonie No. 5 and Liberation Sonata for Fish," in *Nam June Paik: I Expose the Music*, ed. Rudolf Frieeling (Leipzig: Spector Books, 2023), 113–14.
- 29 Schneider and Hölling, "Not, Yet: When Our Art Is in Our Hands," 62.
- 30 Tim Ingold, *The Perception of the Environment: Essays on Liveliness, Dwelling and Skill* (London: Routledge, 2000), 113; Schneider and Hölling, "Not, Yet: When Our Art Is in Our Hands," 57.
- 31 Maria Puig de la Bellacasa, *Matters of Care: Speculative Ethics in More than Human Worlds* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2017), 13.
- 32 Michael Slote, *The Ethics of Care and Empathy* (London: Routledge, 2007), 55–56.
- 33 Peggy Phelan, *Unmarked: The Politics of Performance* (London: Routledge, 1993).
- 34 Conversation with Marilyn Arsem, June 15, 2021.
- 35 Peggy Phelan, "Performance, Live Culture and Things of the Heart," *Journal of Visual Culture* 2, no. 3 (December 2003): 295, <https://doi.org/10.1177/1470412903002003002>.
- 36 Phelan, *Unmarked*.

- 37 Peggy Phelan, "Marina Abramović: Witnessing Shadows," *Theatre Journal* 56, no. 4 (2004): 569–77, <https://doi.org/10.1353/tj.2004.0178>.
- 38 Rebecca Schneider, *Performing Remains: Art and War in Times of Theatrical Reenactment* (London: Routledge, 2011).
- 39 Conversation with Heike Roms, January 27, 2022; Amy Brost, "A Documentation Framework for Sound in Time-Based Media Installation Art," *Journal of the American Institute for Conservation* 60, no. 2–3 (2021): 210–24, <https://doi.org/10.1080/01971360.2021.1919372>.
- 40 See Rivka Syd Eisner, "Living Archives as Interventions in Ea Sola's Forgotten Fields," in *Performing Archives/Archives of Performance*, ed. Gunhild Borggreen and Rune Gade (Copenhagen: Museum Tusulanum Press, 2013), 27–42.
- 41 Trudi Lynn Smith and Kate Hennessy, "Anarchival Materiality in Film Archives: Toward an Anthropology of the Multimodal," *Visual Anthropology Review* 36, no. 1 (2020): 113–36, <https://doi.org/10.1111/var.12196>.
- 42 Peggy Phelan, *Mourning Sex: Performing Public Memories* (London: Routledge, 2009), 11–12.
- 43 Jules Pelta Feldman, "Notes on Conserving Rituals: Reconsidering the Past and Future of Performance Art," under review; Hanna B. Hölling, Jules Pelta Feldman, and Emilie Magnin, "Performance Conservation: A Condition Report, or a Para-Ethnography in Three Acts," in *Revolving Documents: Narrations of Beginnings, Recent Methods and Cross-Mappings of Performance Art*, ed. Sabine Gebhardt Fink and Andrej Mirčev (Zurich: Diaphanes, 2024), 167–69.
- 44 Stephanie E. Hornbeck, "Intersecting Conservation Approaches to Ethnographic and Contemporary Art: Ephemeral Art at the National Museum of African Art," *Objects Specialty Group Postprints* 20 (2013): 224.
- 45 Pelta Feldman, "Notes on Conserving Rituals." See also Renata F. Peters, "The Parallel Paths of Conservation of Contemporary Art and Indigenous Collections," *Studies in Conservation* 61, no. 2 (December 2016): 183–87, <https://doi.org/10.1080/00393630.2016.1200839>.
- 46 For counterexamples, see Rachel Rivenc and Kendra Roth, eds., *Living Matter: The Preservation of Biological Materials in Contemporary Art* (Los Angeles: Getty Publications, 2022).
- 47 Salvador Muñoz-Viñas, *Contemporary Theory of Conservation* (Burlington, MA: Elsevier Butterworth-Heinemann, 2005), 213.
- 48 Nina Owczarek, "Introduction: Purpose and Theory of Human-Centered Ethics in Conservation," in *Prioritizing People in Ethical Decision-Making and Caring for Cultural Heritage Collections*, ed. Nina Owczarek (London: Routledge, 2023), 15.
- 49 Owczarek, "Introduction," 16.
- 50 Held, *The Ethics of Care*, 17.
- 51 Aaron Glass, "What Are Indigenous Ontologies?," in *Conserving Active Matter*, Bard Graduate Center (website), 2022, <https://exhibitions.bgc.bard.edu/cam/>. On the expansion of care and conservation by non-Western epistemes, see the edited collection *Museums & Social Issues: Contested Conservation*, ed. Noémie Etienne and Lotte Arndt, forthcoming.
- 52 Aaron Glass, "For the Lives of Things—Indigenous Ontologies of Active Matter," in *Conserving Active Matter*, ed. Peter N. Miller and Soon Kai Poh (New York: Bard Graduate Center, 2022), 225.
- 53 Glass, "For the Lives of Things," 222. For more about Stone T'xwelátse, see the website for the 2011 exhibition "Man Turned to Stone: T'xwelátse," accessed October 20, 2023, [www.srrmcentre.com/StoneT'xwelatse/07Introduction.html](http://www.srrmcentre.com/StoneT'xwelatse/07Introduction.html).
- 54 Glass, "What Are Indigenous Ontologies?"
- 55 Igor Kopytoff, "The Cultural Biography of Things: Commoditization as a Process," in *The Social Life of Things*, ed. Arjun Appadurai (Cambridge: Cambridge

University Press, 1986), 64–91. Kopytoff offers the example of human organs and ova, which may be transferred or even sold. The cryopreservation of embryos, an even blurrier example and one that is the subject of furious social and legislative debate, was mostly still experimental at the time Kopytoff published his essay.

56 Kopytoff, “The Cultural Biography of Things,” 89, 85.

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## 24 *Performance*

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Part 1

**Expanding scholarly  
approaches to the longevity  
of performance**



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# 1 “Once upon a time”

## Performative ultra-conceptualism and storytelling as conservation— Florence Jung

*Hanna B. Hölling*

You might have heard about Florence Jung. Her identity as a performance artist is notably elusive, to the point where some may argue that she is barely recognizable as an artist at all. It is difficult to spot her, but stories spread about her work in a disproportional relation to the accounts of her physical presence. Not entirely averse to her art being called ‘performance art’—though she abstains from using this term herself—Jung actively avoids personal presence and instead seeks to cultivate ‘situations’ (the term that she uses frequently in her work) that embody qualities of uncertainty and instability. Jung states:

I don’t feel addressed by performance art. I want to simplify things. I want to know what happens when you consciously exclude the object—the visible part and also the documentation—and maybe even the presence of the artist. I am influenced much more by minimalism than by most performance artists, with the exception of Andy Kaufman perhaps. I don’t see this as an aesthetic decision, but rather as a way to develop a corpus of works that are light, reduced, unstable, and uncertain. My true material is more about situations. I create staged situations for real life.<sup>1</sup>

Jung approaches her situations—in which “no facts, no evidence, no visual documentation exists”<sup>2</sup>—with the intention of fostering inclusivity, enabling everyone to engage in and become a part of the experiences she creates. Given that a significant portion of her works are intangible or necessitate keen attention to detail and contextual knowledge in order to recognize them, it becomes challenging to distinguish what elements are staged and what actually exists in reality or in the realm of everyday life. Moreover, her works’ experiential dimensions shift during each manifestation. Consequently, the dissemination of narratives and, at times, rumors, becomes the primary means by which her works exist and endure, occasionally causing the artist herself to question what truly constitutes her own creation and what is carried out by external forces, performers, and viewers. Jung posits: “My work has increasingly evolved into a form of storytelling. I also enjoy

hearing different narratives about my works; sometimes, I even have doubts myself about what the actual piece was.”<sup>3</sup>

In this essay, I take up Jung’s performative ultra-conceptualism and the prevalent choice of non-documenting to develop the idea of storytelling as a way of survival for these radically contextual works. From her first work, created for the graduate exhibition at Zurich University of the Arts (2013), to her subsequent invitation to major exhibitions such as Manifesta 11, in 2016, and awards such as the Swiss Performance Prize, in 2013, Jung’s work has attracted international attention. With her consequential refusal to self-document and depict—a remarkable achievement in times of the overwhelming visual saturation of public media—Jung virtuously plays the medium of experience. Resonating with a post-Fluxus register, and comparable to George Brecht’s granting of permission for the work to take place in the interpreter’s imagination, she precisely drafts her strategies of material and media refusal, both to dethrone the model of the artist as a sole creator and to dismantle the dominance of visuality. What to do about a work which takes place in a North Korean hotel room that consists of a thought not to be thought about (*Jung43*, 2015)? How to handle an exhibition in which each viewer, in order to experience the work, is requested to sign a legal document through which, in the course of a perceptual shift, they become a performer in it (*Jung59*, 2017)? How to handle a work that takes place via a changed circumstance and thus a shifting mental condition, such as through the knowledge acquired at the museum’s counter, where the visitor to an exhibition, once they consent to purchase a ticket, learns that it is co-curated by Jung (*Jung52*, 2017)? How to grapple with a social experiment in which exhibition visitors are hijacked and taken five hours away from the venue, to spend a night in a barn at a remote location, entertaining themselves (*Jung&Scheidegger*, 2014)? What to do about works of which the only evidence is conveyed through oral transmission, at times written down by a critic or a curator? How can we avoid despair when we think about these works’ afterlives and even their conservation?

This essay argues that Jung’s hyper-conceptual works, which inherently play with states of performative invisibility and intangibility as well as mental conditions and situational contexts, can be conveyed and transmitted by the very means that constitute them: storytelling, rumors, and tales. As in other modes of conservation, in which one of the physical mediums of the affected work is used to restore a deteriorated image or form (such as the use of paint retouching in painting conservation or wood chip putty in the conservation of wooden sculpture), the ‘restorative medium’ of this work is inherent in the work as one of its constitutive substrates. This is not to say that storytelling is Jung’s medium—an assumption she clearly objects to—nor that it occurs in her works as their only inherent element. It is to say that, indeed, storytelling offers a space in which we experience Jung’s art as works, and it is simultaneously a condition of possibility of their preservation. My first argument is aligned with Amelia Jones and Philip Auslander, who have claimed, each in their distinct ways, that photographic documentation is the space in which performance

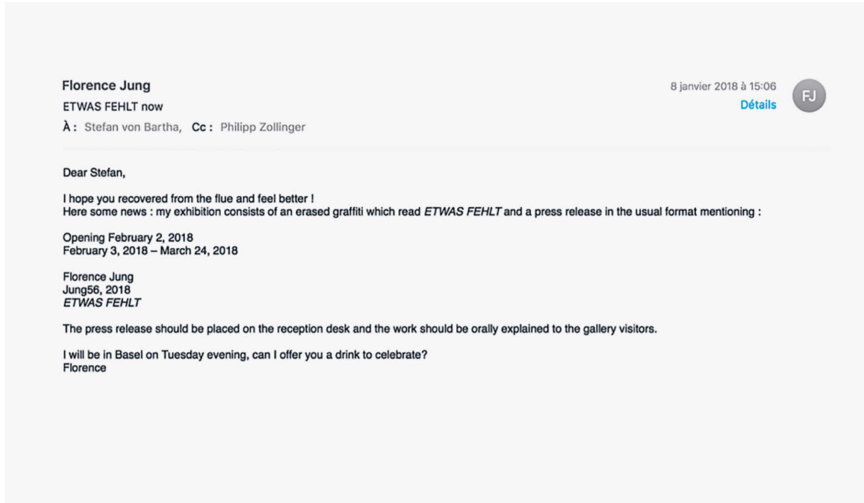
can be experienced<sup>4</sup>—an idea that I redirect to a different medium. I argue that Jung’s conceptualism exposes us to a particular form of orality—and textuality—that constitutes her creative project. Indeed, both orality and textuality create a space for experiencing Jung’s works. In line with my second argument, I suggest that they can be effectively conveyed through stories transmitted orally or via written accounts drawn from the subjective, elusive, and subversive memories of each individual remembering them. Rumors, just as tales, play an important part in this form of cultural transmission.

### *Something is Missing*

Rumors have spread about Jung’s diversely named work *Something is Missing/Etwas Fehlt* from 2017 (the official title, *Jung56*, follows Jung’s numeric scheme). On the gray morning of January 6, 2018, upon their arrival at Basel’s von Bartha gallery, located in the former shop of a gas station, the personnel discovered a large graffiti tag spread across the façade: “Etwas Fehlt” (“something is missing”). They were not amused by this discovery and immediately shared it with Stefan von Bartha, the owner of the gallery. The message reached von Bartha on his travels and upset him immensely.<sup>5</sup> Who could have dared to do this? Why did the Basel police fail to be more attentive in preventing such vandalism? Von Bartha shared the image on Instagram, along with his expression of discontent (Figure 1.1).<sup>6</sup> Two days passed before he had the tag erased.<sup>7</sup>



Figure 1.1 “Etwas Fehlt” tag on the gallery window, a part of the work: Florence Jung, *Jung56*, 2018 (*Something is Missing/Etwas Fehlt*). Image posted by Stefan von Bartha on his Instagram account on January 6, 2018. [www.instagram.com/p/BdnSTfFBSaq/](http://www.instagram.com/p/BdnSTfFBSaq/). Courtesy Florence Jung and von Bartha, Basel & Copenhagen.



*Figure 1.2* Florence Jung: “ETWAS FEHLT now.” Email to Stefan von Bartha and Philipp Zollinger, January 8, 2018. From *Von Bartha Report*, no. 12 (2018): 20. Courtesy Florence Jung and von Bartha, Basel & Copenhagen.

A few months before the infamous tag appeared on Basel’s established art venue, Jung had accepted an invitation to a solo show at von Bartha gallery. Her consent was conditional upon one factor: the gallerist would remain uninformed about the work until it occurred—or, more accurately, until it disappeared. Five years after the event, Jung tells me in a conversation that she assured the gallerist that he would recognize the artwork as soon as it was there.<sup>8</sup> She then hired a befriended graffiti maker to spray the phrase overnight.<sup>9</sup> Unfortunately, the message neither arrived well, nor was it glimpsed behind its surface as the artist intended.<sup>10</sup> For the work’s full coming into the world, an act of annihilation, an erasure, needed to occur. Relief was brought by the artist’s email of January 8, 2018 (Figure 1.2), that suggested the artwork’s conclusion:

*Dear Stefan, . . . Here some news: my exhibition consists of an erased graffiti which read ETWAS FEHLT and a press release in the usual format . . .*

I had heard stories about this work. However, for the majority of my research time for this essay, I was unable to retrieve any visual evidence of the tag. The von Bartha gallery’s Instagram featured a black square in place of an image (Figure 1.3). Nonetheless, I have had a rather clear sense of what happened on the glass façade of a low building concealed behind the gas pumps of an Avia gas station in Basel. I have not been there physically, and yet I felt that I had experienced the piece as it unfolded its many layers in my consciousness, posing most arduous questions: Can a work exist in the world

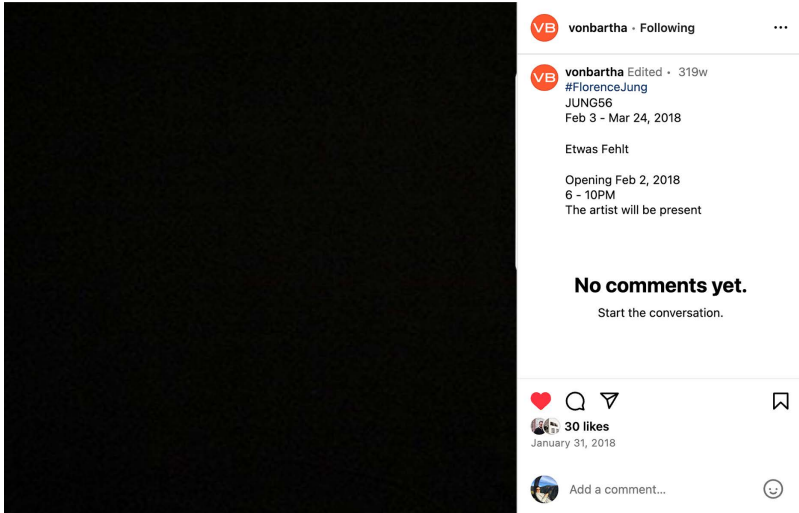


Figure 1.3 Instagram von Bartha gallery announcing “Etwas Fehlt” by Florence Jung. January 31, 2018, [www.instagram.com/p/Ben08N9hNWl/?hl=en](http://www.instagram.com/p/Ben08N9hNWl/?hl=en). Courtesy Florence Jung and von Bartha, Basel & Copenhagen.

solely as a change of circumstance, a psychological shift, or a mental picture? Can a work *be told in a story*?

My attempts to find a visual trace of the tag online remained without success—a status quo that increased my bafflement and curiosity. How, in our mediatized age, did an act of vandalism like this fail to leave a tangible trace?

If there is something that is ‘typical Jung,’ then this situation might qualify as such. Amongst her most staggeringly conceptual works, not only does the artist consider this artwork complete only after its intermittent sign (the tag) is removed, but she also submits to the void surrounding her persona on popular media—a result of her non-image policy. If we were to analyze the work within a performative paradigm—the act of executing the work overnight as a performance and the tag as both a physical leftover and an object that stands in for the performance in its absence, as it were<sup>11</sup>—then the removal of the tag doubles the performance’s disappearance. The work’s subversive potential might thus be seen in its ability to create an uncomfortable void, uninviting of people and traces—one that can only be filled, and contained, by a narrative.

Again and again, it is the multilayered, intermittent disappearance—even that inflicted *ex post facto* on social media (remember the black square in Figure 1.3)—that creates the work and the thin line between reality and fiction that we, as receivers of Jung’s message, need to come to terms with. Has the work really been there, or have we imagined it, and how might this



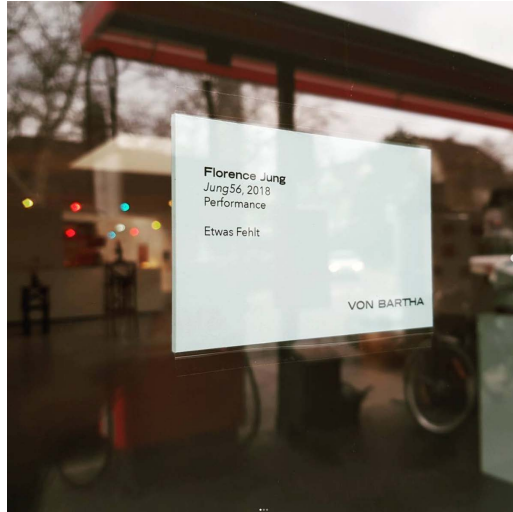


Figure 1.4 Gallery caption: Florence Jung, *Jung56*, 2018. Performance, *Etwas Fehlt*, von Bartha. [www.instagram.com/p/BesyO6vhEmt/?hl=en&img\\_index=1](https://www.instagram.com/p/BesyO6vhEmt/?hl=en&img_index=1). Courtesy Florence Jung and von Bartha, Basel & Copenhagen.

matter for our mental experience of it? What role does memory play, and what role does the audience play?

The artist considers the work's audience not as those experiencing the tag, but as those that witnessed its disappearance.<sup>12</sup> She states:

I am interested in everything which exceeds the two usual categories of reality and fiction . . . the things that were true one day and vanished the next, the things that do not exist but will in the future, the false memory of things which were never there, when something is forgotten and yet palpably present.

In the gallery space, the viewer is asked to look for clues: a vague press release laid out on the counter, or a label. Gallery employees provide information about the artwork when asked, and there is a caption (Figure 1.4) and an interview (Figure 1.5). These scattered, fringe elements create a deliberate lack of an official version, allowing multiple potentially conflicting interpretations to emerge. The artwork functions “like open-source software,”<sup>13</sup> with each contribution potentially altering the piece's meaning, inscribing a new possibility on the previous one.

Since its inception and as of the time of my research for this essay (spring–fall 2023), *Something is Missing/Etwas Fehlt* has been executed three times that could not be more different from one another, not least because they appeared in the languages specific to their sites. The first iteration took place

**SY:** Let's go back to reality, in concrete terms what is presented in the gallery space? How does the visitor learn about your work?

**FJ:** By looking for clues. I left a vague press release on the gallery counter and there is a regular label. Then there are the employees of the gallery who tell you about the piece in their own way, but only when they are asked about it. Obviously, there is also Stefan von Bartha's Instagram post. And eventually this discussion. All these elements are peripheral and scattered, but that's all that is available. I do take a lot of care in not creating an official version, or rather in letting many and possibly contradictory pseudo-official versions emerge. My pieces work somehow like an open source software. Each record or image adds to the others, at the risk of totally changing the situation and make the piece disappear again.

*Figure 1.5* Excerpt from Sophie Yerly, “When You Realize It, It Is Too Late/Wenn du es realisierst, ist es zu spät: Florence Jung,” *Von Bartha Report*, no. 12 (2018): 20–21. Courtesy Florence Jung and von Bartha, Basel & Copenhagen.

at a gallery in Paris where, in the course of the same night that a graffiti maker applied the tag on a door under the cover of night, an attempted burglary occurred. The gallerist appeared to believe that the two were connected.<sup>14</sup> In fact, there was no way of finding out whether it was the performer who did a little more than the commission. On the small Aegean island of Anafi, on the occasion of the Phenomenon 3 biennial in 2019 (where Jung realized three scenarios), the large-scale tag was applied on a construction site, well visible from a school house in which the exhibition took place.<sup>15</sup> Rashly overpainted by the biennial's assistant due to an unintended connotation with the simultaneous passing of a person on the island, the tag's leftovers are still reported by present-day visitors as transpiring through the material strata up to the surface of the overpainted area. What comes to mind are the traces left behind after authorities erased from public spaces several artworks by Harald Naegeli (born 1939), the infamous graffiti artist of Zurich. Their persistence, whether as washed-out shapes or as mental images, cannot be undone to those who have seen them.

The deliberate, well-thought-out evocation of negative space through erasure, the work that inhabits a liminal territory between being noticed and being overlooked, and the potential for a conflation of the ephemeral and

the physical in the palimpsestic overlays of many different presents, all draw attention to Jung's works. However, they are simultaneously most challenging in terms of their compliance with social norms and behaviors, their reliance on chance, susceptibility to error, and their contumacy with standard forms of cultural transmission. Namely, how can a work that evades physical presence—often on multiple levels—be made to endure? Is it the concept in Jung's scenarios that makes the work? Jung posits:

My medium consists of not having one. In my works, most of the time, there are no objects, no spectacle, and sometimes even an audience is missing. I am interested in triggering invisibility, in the discreet, in the economy of means.<sup>16</sup>

Rumors and stories occur on the horizon as plausible holders of meaning. Jung insists:

In the situations I create, there are no facts, no evidence, and no visual documentation . . . there are rumors about such situations. However, I wouldn't consider these rumors as my medium; they are simply what remains in the end because my voice shouldn't be louder than that of other people.<sup>17</sup>

Regardless of whether they are seen as ends in themselves or as a means to an end, it is, I argue, these rumors, and, by extension, the storytelling, that offer an ultimate sphere for her works' experience.

### **Radical openness, or who makes the work of art?**

Jung provides clear and detailed instructions to performers for all her works, guiding them in conducting the actions before they are officially performed/materialized. In this regard, her work during the planning and rehearsal stages is meticulously—or “thickly”—described and prepared.<sup>18</sup> From this phase on, however, Jung's work is exposed to an extreme form of openness. Jung says, “What people experience and what performers do are just as much a part of the piece as my concept for it. Anyone can claim a part of it for themselves.”<sup>19</sup> Not only does the artist prefer to be absent during the materialization of her concepts, whether public or private, but she accepts the contingencies and indeterminacies of the results. The decision not to be there at the moment when her works become materially manifested through social bodies, institutional systems, and spatial circumstances is a pragmatic one, as her presence might limit the endless potential of the work in its unfolding. Jung releases the work into the world by escaping the limitation of these determinative scenarios.

When Jung precisely instructs her friend to spray a tag on a gallery window or a door, she imagines what can happen in the work's realization. Controlling certain parts of the work, such as the instruction and selection of the performer-collaborators, Jung prescribes the work's general frame, leaving

open what happens on the other side of the intentional model, when the work leaves her ‘hand.’ Welcoming chance and misunderstanding and integrating them into the work, Jung references Duchamp’s eternal query: “Who makes the work, the artist or the beholder?” She answers it by adding to the mix the performers, critics, curators, and other participants.

Inviting others to participate in such an idiom calls for spectators who, in Jacques Rancière’s words, “are active interpreters, who render their own translation, who appropriate the story for themselves, and who ultimately make their own story out of it.”<sup>20</sup> Rancière adds: “An emancipated community is in fact a community of *storytellers and translators*.”<sup>21</sup> Inviting others makes art more socially responsive, as Suzi Gablik has proposed;<sup>22</sup> Jung seems to affirm a social relatedness devoid of monocentric mythology. Having left behind the modernist ideals of uniqueness and freedom, the new relationships that Jung creates foster a mindset distinct from isolated, solitary, and self-centered, self-contained, and self-referential individualism. Jung’s vision of the self, as proposed by her artwork, is ecological. The self is no longer solitary and self-sufficient. Instead, it is interconnected and interdependent.

Bringing in Félix Guattari’s concept of ‘transversality,’ which roughly signifies the overcoming of old, sedimented structures and routines in well-established practices, might be useful here.<sup>23</sup> Although Guattari uses it with reference to the transformation of institutions (such as psychiatric hospitals), the term has become a part of the ongoing genealogies of new materialisms.<sup>24</sup> Transversality, as the term implies, contrasts with both verticality (referring to hierarchies and leadership) and horizontality (relating to groups organizing within specific sections or compartments), much like the way one creates a line while writing by hand. In the art world, the maker-beholder connection, the relation between the performer and the score, and the claim that a work is realized upon the completion of a creative act, are results of such established hierarchical systems. Jung’s works, however, by leaving the authority of the execution with the performer or the viewer/participant (remember, for instance, the kidnapping piece *Jung & Scheidegger*, 2014), proclaim mental realization as a valid form of completion of an artwork (in contrast to the belief that, in visual art, a mental concept is followed by the physical realization of a work). By erasing a work’s material traces (thus opposing the commodity-driven art world), they not only prompt what Brian Massumi calls “a perception of perception,” a kind of “thinking-feeling,”<sup>25</sup> but also open up otherwise closed logics and hierarchies. No doubt, by deterritorializing roles, questioning competencies, and challenging art institutions, Jung’s works generate new potent assemblages and alliances.

### The impossibility of absence

So far, I have established that disappearance and the interstices between reality and fiction are at the center of Jung’s interests. But there is a fine nuance to the absent and the (in)visible that needs to be addressed to better understand Jung’s work’s sophisticated inner mechanisms.

As indicated, the erasure of the artwork is never truly final; instead, the work persists as a palimpsestic accumulation of traces. Consider the graffiti on the gallery window: *Something is Missing/Etwas Fehlt* still lingers therein as an afterimage etched into the memory of those who witnessed it. In other words (and as with Naegeli), for those who saw it, the wall is forever marked by the tag (and then by its absence/presence). In the case of the Anafi biennial, the tag, as the story goes, has endured within the layer of paint applied to conceal it. This palimpsest of what should otherwise be missing holds potent symbolism. It does not unveil reality but rather inhabits the terrain between the given and the other world/realm—partially erased yet never entirely obliterated. Between now-and-here and there-and-then, the artwork lingers in people’s recollections, not entirely present but not quite suppressed either. To preserve such a work would, paradoxically, be to safeguard the absence in all its nuance, not as a *fait accompli* but as an ongoing *process of absencing*, a spatiotemporal movement between here and there and now and then, as a condition necessary for the existence of this artwork—with a noted difference between being and disappearance and being and concealment. While emergence and disappearance might be grasped as the continually resumed act of life getting rid of itself, concealment is an intentional act of keeping things in secrecy that might involve deception, reticence, and non-acknowledgement.<sup>26</sup>

At this point, we owe one more glimpse into the distinct perceptual context of *Something is Missing/Etwas Fehlt*. When we say, “something is missing,” we may observe that absence is inexistent since “something” is present within this phrase. In other words, as soon as “something” is uttered, it occupies mental and physical space. Language reaches its limits. Essentially, there is no such thing as absolute absence (“Je sais bien mais quand même”; “I know very well but just the same”), a fact that I will shortly address when inscribing a solid space to the work in the realm of cultural preservation.

### Levels of visibility

As we have observed, *Something is Missing/Etwas Fehlt* exists on different levels of visibility, where absence is a dynamic rather than a static concept. These levels are reflected in the work’s textuality. Just as in all of Jung’s works, in *Something is Missing/Etwas Fehlt* text occurs prior to the work’s realization as a form of instruction protocol, which can be improved upon after its initial installation. This is outlined in the ‘Certificate,’ which provides all the necessary information when a work requires restaging or becomes part of a collection. As in other Jung works destined for acquisition, the *Something is Missing/Etwas Fehlt* protocol involves an A3 paper document folded in the center, containing a cover sheet featuring the work’s title on page one, a scenario describing the situation on page two, an activation protocol for the scenario on page three, and the terms and conditions on page four. But like the Coca-Cola recipe, the certificate is not meant for public eyes. Deliberately concealed, or visible only for those allowed into the arcane sphere of

the work’s inner functioning, my insistence on depicting it in this essay was politely, yet firmly, rejected.

But not all text in Jung’s works, otherwise so essential to the works’ discrete behind-the-scenes operations in museums or events, remains concealed. Her artworks’ textual spheres exhibit three levels of visibility: the title of the work is usually shared with the public; however, the scenario must remain confidential and should only be used for internal communication with curators. It should never be disclosed before the work is completed, as its related actions rely on the participants being unaware of being drawn into a plot (remember *Something is Missing/Etwas Fehlt*, in which the gallery owner was left in the dark). In the case of a one-off exhibition, Jung activates the work herself to avoid sharing the activation protocol. In the case of a work’s acquisition, the activation protocol, which is intended solely for internal use by the collectors who need to be able to activate the work in Jung’s absence, is shared together with the legal note.

Documents such as activation protocols play a crucial role when a performative or conceptual work enters an institution. These documents—usually contracts or agreements—assign artists a more prominent role when transitioning a performative work into a collection than has often been the case with object-oriented works.<sup>27</sup> This standard contract for her scenarios has become a part of Jung’s proactive strategy since 2017. Having been awarded CHF 20,000 on the occasion of the Swiss Art Awards (2017), Jung engaged a lawyer to assist her in developing a contractual document that she could use in the future for all her works entering collections. Jung believes that granting flexibility in shaping the scenarios and leaving details of the work to be fixed by the museum is crucial. What happens, as Rachel Mader puts it in her discussion of three of Jung’s works in the Aargauer Kunsthaus/Bundesamt für Kultur collection (BAK, Swiss Federal Office of Culture), is a redistribution and a reconceptualization of responsibilities between the museum and the artist.<sup>28</sup> So where, amidst all of this, can we position conservation?

### **Potential images: Permission to document**

Dominated by documents and images, the practice of contemporary conservation might at first appear unsuited to accommodating Jung’s works. At the level of primary resources, the artist’s aversion to (self-)documentation leaves her work mostly absent from the internet, art magazines, and other forms of popular documentation. As I have established, her works’ proclivity toward the missing suggests that what is absent might actually be more powerful than what is present. Jung posits:

This is a very pragmatic decision. It also has to do with the fact that my work can hardly be documented. It’s not about images here, but about constructing situations and the personal experience of the participating audience. There is no adequate image of what is visible, and even less so of what is not visible.<sup>29</sup>

What people experience and what performers do are just as much a part of the piece as my concept for it. Anyone can claim a part of it for themselves. For this reason, I don't document my pieces.<sup>30</sup>

But unlike Tino Sehgal's prohibition of documentation—so popularly metabolized in conservation literature—in which the artist questions the regulative system of institutions and displays, Jung's decision as to whether or not she sanctions documentation is contingent on the affordances of a singular work. Although the audience is free to take snapshots of her works, their history shows that, in the majority of cases, the visual documentation is missing, opening space for imagination and speculation, and, not least, storytelling. Jung also applies this rationale to the publication of photographs of her persona. She prefers to hide behind established personalities holding her name, or include them in the play of identities, to represent her in the media. The biographical, she claims, detours the message.<sup>31</sup>

Yet there is a light on the horizon for conservation: unlike Sehgal, who forbids the recording of his works and insists that the acquisition process be done entirely orally, Jung clearly opens her works to be documented by others.<sup>32</sup> To leave the decision to others is to allow a production of *potential* rather than determined, closed images. A smart choice: rather than dominating the work and its world with her own view, these snapshots, made in the era of smartphones, represent the gaze of the beholder, or the spectator, of her work. Again, authority is replaced with relationality and interdependency, enabling the work rather than constraining it through norms and regulations. Before too long, these potential images will create a transversal archive of visual documentation—not her own.

Yet there is another form of archive that accumulates in a fleeting, transitory, and transversal way, and it is being told.

### Storytelling as cultural preservation

We need stories to understand ourselves. We are the only creature that does this unusual thing, of telling each other stories in order to try to understand the kind of creature that we are. When a child is born, the first thing [it] requires is safety and love. The next thing that the child asks for is, "Tell me a story."<sup>33</sup>

Salman Rushdie steps into a long tradition of human storytelling. Long before the advent of writing, storytelling played a pivotal role in disseminating cultural traditions and values. In the Western philosophical tradition, Plato held that storytelling was vital to preparing Guardians to perform their duties in the ideal state. For Walter R. Fisher, known for introducing the narrative paradigm to communication theory, human beings are natural storytellers. Moreover, a good story is more valuable than a good argument. Individuals naturally engage with their environment through narratives: "In the beginning

was the word *or*, more accurately, the *logos*. And in the beginning, ‘*logos*’ meant story, reason, rationale, conception, discourse, thought.”<sup>34</sup> According to Fisher, it was only with the pre-Socratic philosophers that *logos* and *mythos* were dissociated.<sup>35</sup>

As an age-old practice, storytelling not only harnesses the power of narratives and serves as a tool employed for the purposes of education, cultural conservation, entertainment, and the inculcation of moral principles, but also shapes our experience of the world. Stories serve as a fundamental mechanism for human memory, as we tend to retain information more effectively through narrative than mere bullet points or lists.<sup>36</sup> With the capacity to transmit cultural information from one generation to the next, storytelling is not only a key element in the creation and propagation of culture,<sup>37</sup> but it also serves as a recursive and dynamic process of cultural preservation. Each story told adds to a collective archive, enriching and influencing other narratives. (We may remind ourselves of Rancière’s notion of spectatorship as an emancipated community of storytellers and translators.)

When I refer to storytelling, I am specifically addressing it in a direct sense. However, objects, too, can convey stories of their material making, the technological advancements through which they came to the world, and of the form and content they represent. Performative objects tell stories of their interrelations with meanings and actions. On the level of visibility, photographs are often regarded as powerful storytellers, with the ability to convey stories that surpass mere words.

Because, in storytelling, the emphasis lies less on factual accuracy and more on cultural cohesion, not all stories are bound by truth; many perpetuate myths, fables, or legends that serve a distinct purpose within a given culture. Among numerous Native American tribes, oral storytelling has been instrumental in preserving history and imparting wisdom to younger generations. Similarly, the sub-Saharan and West African regions boast a rich tradition of storytelling.<sup>38</sup>

Considered a more equal, sustainable, and just method of preserving traditions and cultures, storytelling is a powerful tool that brings attention to individuals often excluded or marginalized in traditional historical accounts. By giving voice and agency to the storyteller, it challenges prevailing cultural narratives.<sup>39</sup> Regarding non-Western approaches to preserving cultural heritage, and according to her vision of an indigenized museum, Puawai Cairns advocates that the main function of museums should be to transmit stories—museums should become hubs for people to share their stories and to reflect on and interpret histories (see Chapter 7 in this volume). Artist Rosanna Raymond, of the collective Pacific Sisters, sources storytelling as both a contemporary performing art and a living tradition.<sup>40</sup> She maintains that through storytelling, we are never in the past, but rather we become our ancestors—we are enacting and conserving them (see Chapter 12).<sup>41</sup> The Black tradition prides itself on powerful stories and the oral passing of traditions, customs, and rites that survived with and through their tellers despite the enslavement



and dispossession of their lands, origins, and material culture.<sup>42</sup> As a form of continuation of this rich tradition, some of the members of the Black Art Conservators association (Chapter 8) turn away from writing as an expression of the dominant white culture toward modes of oral story conveyance in conservation.

### Storytelling: Space of experience

My first encounter with *Etwas Fehlt/Something is Missing* was through a story. During the subsequent research, various stories—including but not limited to those conveyed to me by the artist and the gallerist—accumulated into a mini-archive that I was able to activate at my leisure. Oftentimes, the stories diverged, representing opposing or even conflicting views. For instance, von Bartha recalls that the graffiti was erased very quickly from the window of his gallery, while Jung recalls that she waited days until she could announce the work's completion. As with the Rashomon effect so effectively used by television drama *The Affair* (2014–19), in which the same event is presented from varying viewpoints and perspectives, I was exposed to the worlds of *Something is Missing/Etwas Fehlt* as they unfolded through the telling of subjective experiences.<sup>43</sup> Regardless of truthfulness and attachment to facts, I felt that, in these stories, I was offered a space for a genuine experience. Although in a state nearing obsession to find visual evidence of the tag, I needed neither a physical object, nor a proof of existence of the work to experience it in my imagination.

Philosopher John Dewey's perspective on experience is that it is an intrinsic aspect of the human species, deeply ingrained in our evolutionary development. Experience refers to the manner in which living organisms engage with their surroundings, and in the case of humans, this environment encompasses the social, cultural, and political aspects of our existence. To reframe our perceptions of what is fundamental and distinctive in the artistic process, Dewey directs our attention to the entire artistic process instead of focusing solely on the tangible outcomes embodied in what he calls the "expressive object."<sup>44</sup>

For Dewey, and as the contemporary Deweyan Richard Shusterman explains, we need to privilege the aesthetic process over the product, such that art is defined as "a quality of experience" rather than a collection of objects.<sup>45</sup> The processes of commodification and fetishization in which conservation actively partakes<sup>46</sup> should not lure us into thinking that art is limited to the objecthood of a physical artifact alone. Rather, for Dewey, art lies in the experiential activity through which it is created and perceived. Far from a dismissal of objectification—denouncing the object altogether—Dewey insists that an object is, in fact, necessary to structure the aesthetic experience: just as creative ideas need to be embodied in an object, the aesthetic experience has to be "fused with the matter of the object."<sup>47</sup>

Such an understanding of an artwork as a bundle of experiential activity allows the space created by the story into, and as, the realm of the work’s experience. In the post-Deweyan sense, in Jung’s case, the aesthetic process lifts the work further from the physical object-referent, as the work is constructed and transmitted by oral narratives and experienced in the imagination. One could even say that it is no less malleable or formable in comparison with the experience of a physical object.

The idea of storytelling offering a space for the work’s experience is far from a theoretical, passively received, or imparted assumption. Rather, it springs from the doing of this artwork—receiving and telling the story—by individuals deeply engaged in its working (on the ‘cutting table,’ at the gallery, and as an object of study).

### **Griot: An agent of preservation**

The storytelling considering *Something is Missing/Etwas Fehlt* reveals several individuals contributing to the archive of stories. There is, however, also my telling of a story about these stories—a reflexive second-degree story, a form of interpretation and translation (Rancière), that is self-reflective of its own formation.<sup>48</sup>

As such, I might step back and examine where I stand within the broader context of this study, as an individual whose power lies in reiterating the story and passing it on, whether actively via word of mouth or, *ex post facto*, passively through this essay’s printed form (*ex post facto* because no longer actively amending the story, as happens in live transmission). In the process of knowledge formation, have I evolved beyond being merely a researcher? (Or should such research, as an active form of knowledge formation, be conceptualized itself as a mode of storytelling?) Have I become a conveyor of the intangible archive, and, in a Derridean sense, an archon of this story?<sup>49</sup>

Here, the figure of the griot, associated with the craft of storytelling, comes in handy. The griot is considered a “scholar of its African nation”<sup>50</sup> and an individual serving as a troubadour and storyteller, as well as, historically, a counselor to kings.<sup>51</sup> Born into specialized family groups, griots played multiple roles in traditional West African societies, their role encompassing genealogy and historiography. Griots served as praise-singers, musicians, social intermediaries, counselors, and even dancers and acrobats. Closely tied to the nobility, griots attended to kings, warlords, and Islamic scholars. Beyond their social duties, griots held vital cultural responsibilities, preserving history, genealogies, sayings, songs, and music through oral traditions in a largely non-literate society. In return for their services, griots received sustenance, clothing, livestock, jewelry, and even land. However, the rise of Islam, colonialism, and modernization eroded their roles and rewards, rendering the “Master of the Word” less relevant in changing social and political landscapes.<sup>52</sup>

Returning to our context, could I—or any contemporary custodian of this work for that matter—assume the position of a present-day griot in transmitting the story to their social network and ensuring its movement across time? Could a story transmitted in this way offer a possibility of experience of an artistic work? I argue, and am convinced, that it could.

### **The performance of memory and recollection**

Storytelling and oral history revolve around the process of remembering and their attending notions of memory types (among others, individual, collective, public, official, and flashbulb memories) and how they contribute to human recollection.

Memory is a dynamic process of creating meaning. For the historian Lynn Abrams, memory, as the fragmentary remains of experiences that are transposed into autobiographic narratives that endure over time, involves recalling stories, images, experiences, and emotions.<sup>53</sup> Thus, remembering is an ongoing and imperfect endeavor. Importantly, memories are not confined to the past; they also pertain to the present. For Annette Kuhn, memory is an account shaped by discourse and language; “[memory] is neither pure experience nor pure event.”<sup>54</sup> While memories recovered through oral narratives and storytelling lack objective reliability and measurability, they hold a personal truth for the individual recollecting them—a sense I gained from my conversation with everyone that experienced Jung’s work.

Remembering is inextricably linked with forgetting, with losing memory. Jung seems to be clearly aware of this fact, as well as how it shapes her work. “Forgetting or disappearing is the DNA of the work—one cannot fight against it. It is about accepting it and allowing it to leave on.”<sup>55</sup> As with the paradigm of loss in object-based conservation, which has (too) often been assigned a negative value resulting from assumptions of the perpetual function of objects in cultural institutions and collections, here, forgetting is not an inherent vice, but rather an intrinsic (rather than extrinsic) change inscribed into the work.<sup>56</sup> Thus storytelling as a method for these works’ survival is less concerned with the accuracy of the conveyed meanings, which will obviously lack external validation, than with the subjectively shaped liveness and vitality of the story that is passed on. After all, the robustness of the work lies less in its material presence and more in its ability to be transmitted—it is an ongoing performance of memory and recollection.

### **Storytelling: A different kind of knowledge**

In his examination of knowledge in the postmodern era, in which he defines postmodernity as incredulity towards metanarratives, the post-structuralist philosopher Jean-François Lyotard (1924–98) initially distinguishes between two types of knowledge: “narrative” and “scientific” (*The Postmodern Condition*, 1984).<sup>57</sup> Narrative knowledge characterizes “primitive” or

“traditional” societies and is rooted in storytelling often conveyed through rituals, music, and dance. For Lyotard, this type of knowledge lacks external validation; its legitimacy is inherent within the narrative itself and is sustained by the timeless continuity of the tradition. It is passed down from those who heard it in the past to those who will share it in the future. Questioning the authenticity of narrative knowledge is not a consideration. In fact, Lyotard proposes that there exists an inherent incongruity between the concept of legitimization and the authority of narrative knowledge.<sup>58</sup> This proves helpful in situating this form of knowledge in conservation.

As I have argued elsewhere, conservation is an epistemic practice and knowledge-generating activity, which itself sources various forms of knowledge.<sup>59</sup> Storytelling as a narrative knowledge that lacks external validation does not seem to pair up well with several other forms of knowledge dominant in conservation, such as those ascribed a level of objectivity, often generated as a result of scientific analysis and technical investigation. It is, therefore, not overly surprising that these conservation methods, which have been concerned with tangible, object-based artifacts, have frequently overlooked the intangible elements of heritage preservation. These include the transfer of memory, expertise, techniques, and knowledge, which are vital for sustaining various forms of non-object-based practices, including less object-centered forms of contemporary art. In fact, Western institutions in the realm of art and culture have historically downplayed or even suppressed practices like orality, direct physical transmission, and ritual inheritance, all of which play a fundamental role in ensuring the longevity of object-less and body-based forms of expression.<sup>60</sup>

One should not be blinded by this status quo, however: a shift is currently taking place in conservation scholarship towards the incorporation of alternative and non-Western forms of knowledge conveyance.<sup>61</sup> Also, under the veil of object-oriented methodologies and their seemingly ‘safe’ attachment to science, both conservation science and object-based conservation boast a wealth of narrative knowledge that has been expressed in what I term ‘conservation narratives.’ In conservation practice, in narrated documentation—in the objects’ descriptions and narrations of treatments—conservators tell stories about works and the people that make and mend them.<sup>62</sup> Fantasy and recollection play just as important roles in these stories as the desire to stay truthful to the artist or their work. As in Paul Ricoeur’s narrative theory, which mediates between phenomenological time and cosmic time to reconcile them through language,<sup>63</sup> the narrative mode of conservation enables conservators and cultural stakeholders to grasp the divergence between acts of salvage and the progress of entropy and decay. Conservation narratives tell stories that mediate between these otherwise irreconcilable poles by allowing us to better understand the sense of doing conservation.

The meaningful emplotment is manifest not only in conservation’s documentation, however. Oral narrative, the artwork’s biography, and the genre of artists’ interviews mediate—and thus make more graspable—various constituencies and temporalities of the works, their worlds, and associated actors.

More recently, and rightfully decentering one-man genealogies submitting to a narrow model of artistic genius, conservators have begun listening to stories told by artists' assistants, technicians, and a broader ecology of cultural workers invested in artworks over their lifespan. Often, this knowledge is related to techniques and methods—to “how the artists would do it”—and is challenging to articulate because it resides within the realm of the implicit and non-verbal. Finally, we tell stories about conservation itself, creating its identity as an ongoing epistemic body of expertise and experience.

### **Coda: A retrospective in Bordeaux**

My research for this essay found its conclusion in the last moments of my conversation with Jung, which focused on her retrospective that was about to open in Bordeaux.<sup>64</sup> In this large-scale project, and yet intimate and contained as with all Jung's projects, she invited twelve local small shop owners from different neighborhoods of Bordeaux, from a hairstylist to an Indian food seller, with no links to the visual arts whatsoever, to listen to the story of one of her works, and retell it to those who would ask. The series was initially conceived as a form of delegated labor: Jung wished to retrieve twelve human “carriers” of her works' stories so that they would relate them to the shop owners, only later to personally transmit them due to financial constraints. A compilation of twelve cards with the shop names and addresses featured on a poster served as the only material evidence of her retrospective taking place at Frac MÉCA.

When Jung speaks of the retrospective, I feel confirmed: not only is the idea of storytelling as cultural conservation viscerally present in Jung's artistic project, but the artist turns it into the very medium of her retrospective. In an extreme form of openness to change and chance Jung entrusts her work's stories to strangers with the intention for them to pass it on. In an interconnected, interdependent, and ecological manner, the work—which consists in an activation of twelve of her historical works—spans across individual and collective minds and is told by word of mouth.

Submitting to a story, we willingly open ourselves to the potential of deception. In doing so, we acknowledge the likelihood that not every narrative is grounded in truth and that some may indeed be products of pure fiction. What if the store owners embellish the work and present their version of the tale in a manner distinct from the account given by Jung? Would such a divergence lessen the artwork's appreciation? What if it is all a construct of imagination—an ongoing performance of the work in the people's minds, memories, and recollections, in the shops and the streets of Bordeaux, the entire tapestry? Regardless, I feel compelled to listen.

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## Notes

- 1 Florence Jung and Dominikus Müller, “Ich weiss nicht, ob das, was ich tue, Performance ist: Die Künstlerin Florence Jung im Gespräch mit Dominikus Müller,” *Performance Process* (website), December 1, 2017, accessed June 18, 2023, <http://performanceprocessbasel.ch/journal/new-entry>. Translation from German by the author.
- 2 Jung and Müller, “Ich weiss nicht.”
- 3 Jung and Müller.
- 4 Philip Auslander, “The Performativity of Performance Documentation,” *PAJ: A Journal of Performance and Art* 28, no. 3 (September 2006): 1–10, <https://doi.org/10.1162/pajj.2006.28.3.1>; Amelia Jones, “‘Presence’ in Absentia: Experiencing Performance as Documentation,” *Art Journal* 56, no. 4 (1997): 11–18.
- 5 Stefan von Bartha, in conversation with the author, October 20, 2023.
- 6 The Instagram message reads: “New window design as a surprise this morning @vonbartha/lucky we can fix it but no respect for these idiots destroying windows, spaces, walls and more. This is no art, just stupid. Even if I am a big fan of graffiti, this ain’t it! #hatersgonnahate #basel #destroy #window #gallery #culture#stupid #switzerland #kantonspolizeibasel @kantonspolizei\_baselstadt #dosomething #stopthisshit.” [www.instagram.com/p/BdnSTfFBsaq/](http://www.instagram.com/p/BdnSTfFBsaq/).
- 7 Sophie Yerly, “When You Realize It, It Is Too Late/Wenn du es realisierst, ist es zu spät: Florence Jung,” *Von Bartha Report*, no. 12 (2018): 20–21.
- 8 Florence Jung in conversation with the author, August 23, 2023.
- 9 Florence Jung, *Etwas Fehlt*, von Bartha, Basel, February 3–March 24, 2018, [www.vonbartha.com/exhibitions/florence-jung/](http://www.vonbartha.com/exhibitions/florence-jung/), accessed August 25, 2023.
- 10 Von Bartha recalls suspecting various subversive artists and, in a fit of anger, remembering that the gallery had been tagged before, though never so blatantly and directly. However, when the police were called to the “crime scene” to file a protocol, they recommended that the staff clean the graffiti, which proved to be easily achievable. Von Bartha, in conversation.
- 11 I venture into this when exploring the idea of “the aesthetics of disappearance” in performative works in which the work’s transience generates the urge to preserve and collect, expanding the all-accumulating material archive. Hanna B. Hölling, *Revisions: Zen for Film* (New York: Bard Graduate Center, 2015), 80–81.
- 12 Yerly, “When You Realize It,” 21.
- 13 Jung, in Yerly, 21.
- 14 Another consequence was that the gallerist wished to keep the graffiti preserved. Jung in conversation.
- 15 Phenomenon (website), accessed October 20, 2023, [www.phenomenon.fr/uploads/2/5/5/2/5555543/program\\_final.pdf](http://www.phenomenon.fr/uploads/2/5/5/2/5555543/program_final.pdf). My research has also revealed a presence of the work in another exhibition, whose tag features the name of the artists and the work’s title and year, followed by a text: “Somewhere nearby, there is a graffiti stating, ‘Something is Missing.’ It is awaiting to be erased.” “Florence Jung: *Jung80* (2021), *Jung69* (2019), *Jung56* (2017), 2021, 2019, 2017,” Artsy (website), accessed October 6, 2023, [www.artsy.net/artwork/florence-jung-jung80-2021-jung69-2019-jung56-2017](http://www.artsy.net/artwork/florence-jung-jung80-2021-jung69-2019-jung56-2017).

- 16 Florence Jung and Heinz Schütz, "Florence Jung: Ist die Türe abgesperrt? Ein Gespräch von Heinz Schütz," *Kunstforum International*, no. 264 (2019): 126. Translation from German by the author.
- 17 Jung and Müller, "Ich weiss nicht." Translation from German by the author.
- 18 Philosopher David Davies employs the descriptors "thin" and "thick" to denote the extent to which a composer has specified performance details via work-determinative directives. These directives encompass the composer's guidance in the score and supplementary instructions concerning instrumentation. David Davies, *Art as Performance* (Oxford: Blackwell, 2004), 26–27.
- 19 Jung and Müller, "Ich weiss nicht."
- 20 Jacques Rancière, "The Emancipated Spectator," *Artforum* 45, no. 7 (March 2007), accessed March 1, 2024, [www.artforum.com/features/the-emancipated-spectator-175248/](http://www.artforum.com/features/the-emancipated-spectator-175248/).
- 21 Rancière, "The Emancipated Spectator," emphasis my own.
- 22 Suzi Gablik, "Connective Aesthetics," *American Art* 6, no. 2 (Spring 1992): 2–7.
- 23 Félix Guattari, *Psychoanalysis and Transversality: Texts and Interviews 1955–1971*, trans. Ames Hodges, intro. Gilles Deleuze (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, [1972] 2015).
- 24 Helen Palmer and Stanimir Panayotov, "Transversality," *New Materialism* (website), September 13, 2016, accessed October 6, 2023, <https://newmaterialism.eu/almanac/t/transversality.html>.
- 25 Brian Massumi, "The Thinking-Feeling of What Happens: A Semblance of a Conversation," *Inflexions: A Journal for Research Creation* 1, no. 1 (May 2008), accessed March 2, 2024, [www.inflexions.org](http://www.inflexions.org). On theories of perception, see Janneke Wesseling, *The Perfect Spectator: The Experience of the Art Work and Reception Aesthetics* (Amsterdam: Valiz, 2017).
- 26 For Martin Heidegger, for instance, and especially characteristic of his later thought, being is in the process of self-concealing. On the idea of concealment as reticence and non-acknowledgement, see Thomas Nagel, "Concealment and Exposure," *Philosophy & Public Affairs* 27, no. 1 (Winter 1998): 3–30.
- 27 Rachel Mader, "Aggregatzustände von Performances und die Statik des Museums," in *Aargauer Kunsthaus: Mit Gegenwartskunst umgehen*, ed. Simona Ciuccio, Katrin Weilenmann, and Katharina Ammann (Zurich: Scheidegger & Spiess), 188–97. See also Emilie Magnin's study of Rizzo's acquisition by the Stedelijk, Chapter 6 in this volume.
- 28 Mader draws this conclusion in connection with Jung's works *Jung53* (2017), *Jung69* (2019), and *Jung75* (2020). Mader, "Aggregatzustände."
- 29 Jung and Schütz, "Florence Jung," 128.
- 30 Jung and Müller, "Ich weiss nicht." Translation from German by the author.
- 31 Jung and Schütz, "Florence Jung," 128.
- 32 "I like it when people document my work as much as they want. Why not? I don't document it myself, but that doesn't mean others can't do it differently. In fact, I love it when people do because instead of official images, you get possible images. And in a few years, hopefully, there will be a series of images of my work, although they won't be my images. It will solely be the perspective of the audience. That's one of the crucial freedoms of the smartphone age: you capture the image you want. I also don't believe in preventing people from doing so. I want my perspective to be one among many, not the dominant one." Jung uses the words *mögliche Bilder* rather than *potentielle Bilder*. Jung, "Ich weiss nicht," 4. Translation by the author.
- 33 Salman Rushdie, "Storytelling and Writing: Masterclass," 2020, YouTube, accessed March 1, 2024, [www.youtube.com/watch?v=RPDOioWeByo&ab\\_channel=MasterClass](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=RPDOioWeByo&ab_channel=MasterClass).

- 34 Walter R. Fisher, *Human Communication as Narration: Toward a Philosophy of Reason, Value, and Action* (Columbia, SC: University of South Carolina Press, 1989), 5.
- 35 Fisher, *Human Communication as Narration*.
- 36 In the realm of business, storytelling finds a practical application in enhancing persuasion techniques. It serves as a conduit for intertwining knowledge and emotions, captivating audiences through surprising twists, suspenseful elements, and the impetus to act.
- 37 Lucas Bietti, Otilie Tilston, and Andrian Bangerter, “Storytelling as Adaptive Collective Sensemaking,” *Topics in Cognitive Science* 11, no. 4 (2019): 710–32, <https://doi.org/10.1111/tops.12358>.
- 38 So for instance, in present-day Ghana, an Akan folk tale of the mischievous spider Anansi, preserved for centuries as part of an exclusively oral tradition, serves as a prime example of a story that has been passed down through generations. Storytelling did not survive everywhere in its centuries-long spur. In Benin, traditional storytelling was suppressed by the colonial education system, economic demise, and urbanization. Raouf Mama, “To Make Our World a Gentler, More Compassionate World,” in *Traditional Storytelling Today: An International Sourcebook*, ed. Margaret Read MacDonald (New York: Routledge, 1999), 9–12.
- 39 Questioning whether storytelling should be classified as a fine or performing art, or as a folk art or craft, Hannah Blevins Harvey and Joseph Daniel Sobol examine storytelling as a contemporary performing art, exploring its presence in various community and fine art settings, including theaters, festivals, schools, libraries, and more. Hannah Blevins Harvey and Joseph Daniel Sobol, “Storytelling as Contemporary Performing Art: Introduction to the Special Issue,” *Storytelling, Self, Society*, special issue on “Storytelling as Contemporary Performing Art,” 4, no. 2 (May–August 2008): 61–63, <https://doi.org/10.1080/15505340802000735>.
- 40 “Rosanna Raymond in Discussion,” interview with Hanna B. Hölling, Jules Pelta Feldman, and Emilie Magnin, May 17, 2023, *Performance: Conservation, Materiality, Knowledge*, YouTube, accessed January 21, 2024, [www.youtube.com/watch?v=nNNKncD6xrU&ab\\_channel=SNSFPerformanceConservation](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=nNNKncD6xrU&ab_channel=SNSFPerformanceConservation).
- 41 In the research project “Activating Fluxus,” Aga Wielocha, Josephine Ellis, and this author embrace storytelling as a powerful tool for revitalizing and activating 1960s and 1970s art and culture. In particular, Wielocha gathers stories about specific Fluxus artworks in a podcast, thereby engaging in a process that counteracts dominant art histories. “Radio Fluxus: Stories from the Fluxus Archives” (podcast), Activating Fluxus (website), accessed June 17, 2023, <https://activating-fluxus.com/radio-fluxus-2/>.
- 42 Black storytelling is powerfully utilized as an onto-epistemological tool to elevate Black imaginations, uplift Black dreams, and consider how Afrofuturity is qualitative futurity. Black Studies elevates the ethical obligation of researchers to prioritize the voices of their participants, viewing these as more than just a tool for comprehending our past and present realities. Instead, researchers ought to emphasize the significance of using these voices to enhance the positioning of inquiry in relation to both the future world and future research endeavors.
- 43 *The Affair*, an American series created by Sarah Treem and Hagai Levi, and starring Dominic West, Ruth Wilson, Maura Tierney, and Joshua Jackson, delves into the emotional consequences of extramarital relationships. The term ‘Rashomon’ derives from the eponymous Japanese film from 1950, in which it is used to describe the unreliability of eyewitnesses.
- 44 John Dewey, *The Latter Works, 1925–1953: Vol. 10—Art as Experience*, ed. Jo Ann Boydstone (Carbondale, IL: Southern Illinois University Press, [1934] 1987), 88, 91, 95.



- 45 Richard Shusterman, “Pragmatism: Dewey,” in *The Routledge Companion to Aesthetics*, ed. Berys Gaut and Dominic McIver Lopes (London: Routledge, 2020), 97–106.
- 46 Hanna B. Hölling, “Conservation, Desire and Affect: Fluxus Fetish,” in *Activating Fluxus, Expanding Conservation*, ed. Hanna B. Hölling, Aga Wielocha, and Josephine Ellis (London and New York: Routledge, forthcoming).
- 47 Dewey, *The Latter Works, 1925–1953*, 280. See also Tom Leddy and Kalle Puolakka, “Dewey’s Aesthetics,” in *The Stanford Encyclopaedia of Philosophy* (Fall 2021), accessed October 26, 2023, <https://plato.stanford.edu/archives/fall2021/entries/dewey-aesthetics/>.
- 48 On the concept of translation applied to contemporary art, see Zoë Miller, “Practitioner (In)visibility in the Conservation of Contemporary Art,” *Journal of the American Institute for Conservation* 60, no. 2–3 (2021): 197–209, <https://doi.org/10.1080/01971360.2021.1951550>.
- 49 The word ‘archive’ has roots in the Greek words *archeon*, meaning a government house, a house of archons or magistrates—and *archē*, or ‘magistracy,’ ‘rule,’ or ‘government.’ These roots were the point of departure for the French philosopher Jacques Derrida’s concept of the archive. Jacques Derrida, *Archive Fever: A Freudian Impression* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1996), 9–10.
- 50 S. R. Toliver, *Recovering Black Storytelling in Qualitative Research: Endarkened Storywork* (London: Routledge, 2022). Bietti, Tilston, and Bangerter, “Storytelling as Adaptive Collective Sensemaking.”
- 51 Similarities (and differences) might be seen between the griot and other living repositories of cultures such as the Vikings’ skalds, the bards of Irish and Scottish culture, and the scopos of Anglo-Saxon lore.
- 52 In the present-day Westernized culture of Senegal, the Wolof griots still practice their hereditary tradition, whether or not it is adapted to new circumstances. Cornelia Panzacchi, “The Livelihoods of Traditional Griots in Modern Senegal,” *Africa* 64, no. 2 (April 1994): 190–210, <https://doi.org/10.2307/1160979>.
- 53 Lynn Abrams, *Oral History Theory* (London: Routledge, 2009), 78–79.
- 54 Annette Kuhn cited in Abrams, *Oral History Theory*, 79.
- 55 Jung, in conversation.
- 56 On the notions of intrinsic and extrinsic change, see Hanna B. Hölling, *Paik’s Virtual Archive: Time, Changeability, and Materiality in Media Art* (Oakland: University of California Press, 2017), 98. On the criticism of loss as negative property, see Gala Porras-Kim, “Getty Artist-in-Residence Gala Porras-Kim on the Spiritual Lives of Objects in Museum Collections,” recording of a lecture at the Getty Research Institute, Los Angeles, YouTube, accessed March 2, 2024, [www.youtube.com/watch?v=h-WBkHEWgbY&ab\\_channel=GettyResearchInstitute](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=h-WBkHEWgbY&ab_channel=GettyResearchInstitute).
- 57 Jean-François Lyotard, *The Postmodern Condition* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1984); Ashley Woodward, “Jean-François Lyotard (1924–1998),” *Internet Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, accessed September 24, 2023, <https://iep.utm.edu/lyotard/>.
- 58 Woodward, “Jean-François Lyotard.”
- 59 Hanna B. Hölling, “The *Technique* of Conservation: On Realms of Theory and Cultures of Practice,” *Journal of the Institute of Conservation* 40, no. 2 (2017): 87–96, <https://doi.org/10.1080/19455224.2017.1322114>.
- 60 As if confirming this trend, in his recent book *A Theory of Cultural Heritage: Beyond the Intangible* (London and New York: Routledge, 2022), Salvador Muñoz-Viñas assigns oral storytelling—craftsmanship and cooking alike—a metaphysical quality, one that locates it in the realm of inherent mutability (p. 141).
- 61 See, for instance, Rebecca Gordon, “Indigenous Storywork as an Ethical Guide for Caring with Social Practice Artists,” in *Prioritizing People in Ethical Decision-Making and Caring for Cultural Heritage Collections*, ed. Nina Owczarek (London and New York: Routledge, 2023), 24–41.

- 62 I develop the concept of the ‘conservation narrative’ in Hölling, *Paik’s Virtual Archive*, 132–33.
- 63 Paul Ricoeur, *Time and Narrative*, trans. Kathleen McLaughlin and David Pellauer (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1984).
- 64 Florence Jung, *Retrospective*, Frac MÈCA, October 14, 2023–March 3, 2024, Festival International des Arts de Bordeaux Métropole (website), accessed September 27, 2023, [https://fab.festivalbordeaux.com/wp-content/uploads/2023/07/FAB2023\\_DOUBLE.pdf](https://fab.festivalbordeaux.com/wp-content/uploads/2023/07/FAB2023_DOUBLE.pdf).

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## 2 Contesting heritage

### Artistic and cultural (re)appropriations of Apulian tarantism

*Michaela Schäuble*

#### “A way of transcending oneself”: Apulian tarantism as a form of communal utopia

When, in the summer of 2020 in a gigantic stage show, the French fashion house Dior presented their Cruise Collection for the following 2021 season on the theme of tarantism in the Apulian town of Lecce, I expected an outcry, from both local interest groups and internationally. For one, I had been working on the phenomenon of tarantism for several years at that point and knew the iconic yet ambiguous and contested significance that the ‘spider possession cult’ holds in Puglia. Simultaneously, as an anthropologist, I thought I was familiar with the discourses and sensitivities regarding the cultural appropriation, commercialization, and folklorization of Indigenous and/or local cultural elements by the global fashion industry. But I was mistaken: there were only very few voices that found the borrowing from local craftsmanship and motifs in the fashion designs morally reprehensible, or criticized the scenography and music of the show, which was clearly reminiscent of local Catholic saints’ feasts and the ancient rite of tarantism. Much of the local population saw the theatrical stage show as an appreciation and celebration of Apulian cultural heritage; and the international fashion world applauded the work of Dior’s creative director, Maria Grazia Chiuri, as a ‘cultural project.’ On Dior’s official website, the presentation of the Cruise Collection 2021 is not only described as combining “the extraordinary power of rhythms and rituals, music and dance,” but also as “a way of transcending oneself,” of evoking a sense of community.<sup>1</sup> But which community? In what sense and context?

The phenomenon of Apulian tarantism, or *tarantismo* in Italian, is a centuries-old practice, and the study of this ritual draws upon more than seven hundred years of (more or less scientific) writings. It is commonly performed to cure a person presumed to have been bitten by the tarantula spider—*la taranta*.<sup>2</sup> The person bitten is usually female (sg. *tarantata*, pl. *tarantate*), and the reported symptoms include nausea, loss of appetite, sweating, irregular pulse and breathing, delirium, trembling, spasms and convulsions, headaches, lethargy, paralysis, and/or fainting.<sup>3</sup> It is believed that the spider transfers its

particular attributes to the behavior of the victim (i.e., melancholic, aggressive, erotic), and it is therefore an integral part of the healing ritual to identify the specific type of spider by determining which musical chords, colors, smells, etc. the afflicted person reacts to. If one or more of these symptoms occur, musicians who play *pizzica* (pl. *pizziche*), a popular traditional Salentine musical genre, are called. The musicians try out different melodies and rhythms, thus testing which type of song the patient responds to. The same goes for bright colors (especially red, green, and yellow) and strong scents (i.e., rosemary, mint, thyme, or citron). Once the musicians have established the type of spider/melody/rhythm, the tone rises and the afflicted begins to dance. This ritual can last for several days, and the person ‘possessed’ by the spider dances in hopping, skipping, and circling movements, sometimes collapsing, and sometimes seemingly emulating or alternatively trampling on the (imaginary) spider.

In the course of its long history, which some scholars date to as far back as the cult of the ancient Greek God of wine and festivity, Dionysus, the phenomenon has been incorporated and reshaped by the Catholic Church into the cult of St. Paul. On his journey to Rome, by way of Malta, where he eradicated all snakes, St. Paul had allegedly landed in the small town of Galatina, where he bestowed upon two local Christian sisters the power to heal those bitten by venomous animals.<sup>4</sup> St. Paul symbolically merged with the pre-Christian myth of the tarantula spider and therefore became an agent and simultaneously the cure of the affliction. In other words, he was believed to be able to cause the symptoms as an act of punishment, but also heal the afflicted by granting them *la grazia*, ‘grace,’ through divine intervention.<sup>5</sup> It was sometimes even believed that the tarantuled persons were possessed by St. Paul; the female ‘patients’ would wear white dresses, usually nightgowns that were reminiscent of wedding dresses, and call themselves *spose di San Paolo*, “brides of St. Paul.”<sup>6</sup> Every year, during the feast day of St. Paul at the end of June, afflicted people were (and on rare occasion still are) brought to the chapel of St. Paul in Galatina to attract the saint’s attention and frantically plea for healing.

Due to the inexplicable symptoms, ecstatic behavior, and uncontrollable trance dancing of the afflicted, this spider possession cult has posed a conundrum and also exerted an unbroken fascination on scientists, artists, and travelers for centuries. However, tarantism only became a ‘mass media phenomenon’ after the publication of the ethnographic monograph *La terra del rimorso* (*The Land of Remorse: A Study of Southern Italian Tarantism*) in 1961. In this book, which became an instant classic, Italian anthropologist and historian of religion Ernesto de Martino traces the historic roots of the cult of Apulian tarantism and presents the findings of an interdisciplinary research trip to Puglia two years earlier. Above all, the photos, sound recordings, and films that were produced in the course of this and ensuing ‘research expeditions’ are widely known throughout Italy today and have shaped the

image and imaginations of the Mezzogiorno (Southern Italy). As iconic representations of a rural Southern lifestyle and folk religiosity, they evoke a certain proletarian exoticism, even though De Martino had explicitly warned against an exoticization of peasant lifeworlds and argued for a better contextualization of seemingly irrational magico-religious practices and ideas.<sup>7</sup>

The majority of those afflicted by tarantism are women at the socio-economic margins, whom Antonio Gramsci termed ‘subalterns’ due to their lack of agency and voices in the hierarchy of power: often landless farmhands, unskilled workers without access to formal education, or unmarried and/or childless women without inheritance.<sup>8</sup> De Martino interpreted the ecstatic ritual practices of *tarantismo* as manifestations of historicized cultural patterns that helped subalterns to deal with existential crises and to express their feeling of not belonging to the world—a state that he referred to as *crisi della presenza*, the ‘loss’ or ‘crisis of presence.’<sup>9</sup>

This is a very rough and brief outline of the ethnographic context of Apulian tarantism and popularized Southern Italian folklore that the Dior show alluded to in the summer of 2020. The initiators of the show and, above all, Dior’s Italian-born creative director Maria Grazia Chiuri, not only refer to this history through their fashion and set designs, but directly reference the writings of Ernesto de Martino on their website and quote his research as inspiration.<sup>10</sup> “Puglia and its different energies, where magical beliefs such as Tarantism live on, have become in this particular context a concrete form of utopia, a new reading of the world,”<sup>11</sup> writes Chiuri in a romanticizing manner. Considering that *tarantismo* was a ritualized expression of the suffering of the marginalized, exploited rural population, this invocation of a religious tradition as a utopian form of communion by an haute couture label seems like a parody.

Since the ethnographic ‘expeditions’ in the 1960s and until the Dior fashion show sixty years later, tarantism has not just ‘lived on,’ as Chiuri’s commentary would have one believe. The phenomenon has changed considerably and nowadays has become primarily a tourist attraction and a trademark of Salento. For a long time, tarantism was considered a stigma—an expression of peasant misery that also revealed the oppression of subaltern women—but today it has been reinterpreted as cultural heritage, and the spider, or rather the spider’s bite and the music that goes with it, have become a symbol of local patriotism. In the piazzas of Salento, dance and music workshops are offered, and there are numerous folklore associations and artist residencies, all of which deal with tarantism in an attempt to (re)appropriate and reevaluate the phenomenon as a local asset. The small Apulian town of Melpignano, for example, hosts the world-famous music festival *La Notte della Taranta*, the ‘Night of the Tarantula,’ which attracts tens of thousands of visitors every year and has contributed significantly to the revival and popularization of the folk music tradition of *tarantella* and *pizzica* within the world music scene internationally. In Galatina, where I have been researching modes of

remediation of the audiovisual, multimodal archive of De Martino's expeditions, *tarantismo* has taken on yet another form.<sup>12</sup> A local CLUB UNESCO, which aims to inscribe *tarantismo* into the list of intangible cultural heritage, organizes annual historic reenactments (*rievocazioni storiche*). In front of the historic chapel of St. Paul, local actresses/dancers dressed in white nightgowns perform for public audiences the affliction described by Ernesto de Martino and many other scholars. These performances and attempts to conserve a ritual by way of reconstruction are highly controversial. While some perceive them as legitimate and valuable cultural reappropriations and/or attempts to turn a formerly stigmatized practice into a socio-political and economic asset, others argue that the actual suffering of marginalized subalterns should not be staged in public or commercialized but commemorated otherwise.

It is safe to say that the De Martinian audiovisual archive is being widely revived and (re)appropriated today, not just on site in Galatina, but by several visual artists, musicians, performers, collectives, citizen scientists, folklore companies, and many other interest groups. This chapter focuses on the heritagization and artistic (re)appropriations of the sonic and visual traces of tarantism. The four different artistic and/or cultural interventions that I present and analyze in the following include the photography series *Parallel Eyes* by Alessia Rollo (2019–ongoing), a multimedia installation entitled *Tanz Sediment: Self-Portrait of Madness* by Alessandra Eramo (2019), as well as the release of a double LP and accompanying book publication, *Tarantismo: Odyssey of an Italian Ritual* (2019), by the artist collective FLEE Project. The fourth example differs in scope and approach in the sense that it covers the aforementioned Dior Cruise 2021, the presentation of the fashion house's couture collection on the theme of tarantism. In all four cases, the artists/creative directors/editors claim their own Apulian origin as the main source of inspiration and explicitly draw on the ethnographic works of anthropologist and historian of religion Ernesto de Martino as a kind of 'cultural heritage' that they intend to perpetuate, extend, and/or to contest.

### ***Parallel Eyes: overwriting iconic images***

Visual artist Alessia Rollo engages with the archive and visual materials connected to anthropologist Ernesto de Martino's research expeditions by challenging photographic images as tools of representation. In 2019, she initiated a photograph series entitled *Parallel Eyes*, in which she paints directly over or perforates iconic images taken by photographers such as Chiara Samugheo, Franco Pinna, and ethnomusicologist Diego Carpitella, who had accompanied De Martino on his journeys to the Italian South in the 1960s. She literally overwrites the explorers' images and thus attempts to reappropriate the themes and motifs depicted in the photographs. She conceptualizes her approach as artistic research through which she approaches her 'own culture'

via her critical engagement with the anthropologists' archival images. In her artist statement on her website, she writes:

*Parallel Eyes* is my personal research about the culture I belong [to]: my aim is to offer a more complex analysis of South Italian culture and to re-consider in visual, historical and sociological terms the construction of the identity of our culture. In between 1950 and 1960 South Italy, the place I am coming from, has been visually studied, classified and judged by a group of anthropologists, filmmakers and photographers. This process started by the famous ethnographer Ernesto De Martino had as result the conviction of our culture as backward, ignorant and completely dominated by the irrationality and religion. This multimedia project includes two main bodies of work: one consists in the manipulation of archive materials produced around the '50[s] and '60[s] of the past century by the photographers and videomakers belonging [to] the "scientific expeditions" of De Martino.<sup>13</sup> [*sic*]

This statement reveals the artist's inclination to reinterpret the writing of a history and the creation of images that she experiences as disparaging and misrepresentative. She—like many people in Salento today—feels that her "culture" had been portrayed as "backward, ignorant and completely dominated by . . . irrationality and religion" in Ernesto de Martino's work and the associated audiovisual materials. In my view, however, this assessment is based less on De Martino's actual work and its ensuing reception than on the notorious historical north–south divide in Italy. In the introduction to her seminal work on *Italy's "Southern Question"* (1998), anthropologist Jane Schneider proclaims that "Italy was certainly affected by Orientalism."<sup>14</sup> While clearly not referring to classic Orientalist constellations and imaginaries as famously outlined by Edward Said, the Orientalism Schneider evokes instead resembles a "neo-Orientalist discourse *within* Italy itself."<sup>15</sup> After the Risorgimento, the movement for Italian unification (1815–1871), the perception that an impoverished, backward South was holding the modernized North back, increasingly gained momentum. This divergence, which advanced from the 1870s and continued throughout the twentieth century, was also heavily racialized, positioning Southern Italians as inferior due to their "dubious African and Oriental histories and cultures."<sup>16</sup> The essentialisms inherent in the 'Southern Question' live on to this day and have also influenced the discourse around tarantism in the past. According to dance scholar Jerri Daboo,

[t]he idea that the North was the place of learning, culture, industrialization and modernity, whereas the South was the land of poverty, the rural peasant, corruption, the Mafia, and a world filled with superstition and magic, has contributed to some of the ways in which the practice of tarantism has been discussed.<sup>17</sup>



De Martino, of course, was acutely aware of these discourses and preconceptions and tried to create awareness of the rich folk-religious traditions of the South. He considered tarantism (along with Lucanian funeral laments) as a living relic from ancient Greece and rather feared that the precious religious practices he was studying were being transformed or disappearing. In his salvage endeavor to document and conserve them, he had initially intended to create a systematically prepared ‘cinematographic encyclopedia,’ but in the end it was never realized due to financial constraints. But I argue that De Martino’s expeditions to Southern Italy were part of his project later termed ‘ethnographic humanism’ (*l’umanesimo etnografico*),<sup>18</sup> in the context of which he intended to use film and photography to propagate his ‘critical ethnocentrism’ and to foster understanding of Southern Italian magico-religious rituals as strategies of empowerment for the subjugated and marginalized rural population. For De Martino, the fascination with Southern Italian peasant culture and religious practices was closely linked to a political mission informed by historical materialism and the educational notion of a ‘progressive folklore.’ In a short homonymous article published in the Communist Party newspaper *L’Unità* in 1951, De Martino—with reference to Karl Marx and Antonio Gramsci—developed the concept of a ‘progressive folklore’ in the sense of a progressive cultural change.<sup>19</sup> He conceptualized folklore (including magico-religious practices and tarantism) as an initially conservative force and as an instrument to suppress the working class and peasantry. But unlike Gramsci, for whom revolutionary change resembled a process, in the course of which ‘popular mentalities’ and behavior are transformed and folkloric thinking abandoned, De Martino saw the potential of a ‘progressive folklore’ in the gradual opening up to change of traditional forms of popular culture. He even argued that the workers’ movement was providing the momentum for a new kind of folklore with a progressive message that would eventually replace self-defeating superstitious beliefs and enable the subaltern classes to ‘enter into history.’ In this sense, he had a very pragmatic yet dynamic understanding of magico-religious practices, and to claim that he portrayed religious practices in the South as irrational or ignorant is based on a misunderstanding of his actual writings.

Five years before De Martino had traveled to Galatina to study tarantism, Italian photojournalist Chiara Samugheo photographed *tarantate* in the chapel at Galatina. In 1954 she published the images in a documentary photo reportage entitled *Le Invasate (The Possessed)*. In these photographs, the afflicted women can be seen with distorted faces, writhing on the floor, or climbing on the altar in the church. The title, *The Possessed*, refers to their transgressive, alienating behavior. When De Martino traveled to Galatina with his interdisciplinary team in 1959, he must have been familiar with Samugheo’s photos, though he does not mention them. Instead, the photos of the photographers who accompanied him as part of the research team, foremost those by Franco Pinna, are nowadays considered the first and most iconic images of tarantism. Today, these historical photos are often criticized

by locals and artists alike as an affront to the dignity of the women depicted. Alessia Rollo, in her artistic work, consciously protects the anonymity of those afflicted by rendering them unrecognizable, thus indirectly criticizing the historic depictions (Figures 2.1 and 2.2).

When describing her technique of altering the archival images, Alessia Rollo argues that De Martino's scientific approach not only dehumanized those he studied, but also erased the 'magic' in the ritual practices:

by using photographic techniques like digital and analog manipulation, painting of negatives or perforating them: my aim is to introduce back in the images the magical and ritual aspect erased by the scientific approach of the photographers. On the other side I am documenting through my camera rituals that still exist in South Italy.<sup>20</sup>

By portraying herself as an alternative chronicler of ritual practices, Rollo rejects De Martino's approach, which she perceives as paternalistic. Her comment that these rituals "still exist," however, maintains the same continuity as Chiuri's statement that tarantism 'lives on.' And it is exactly this allegedly



*Figure 2.1* Chiara Samugheo, photo from the series *Le Invasate* (1954). Samugheo had traveled to Galatina to document the phenomenon of tarantism five years before it caught the attention of anthropologist Ernesto de Martino and his entourage. These are the very first photos that exist of tarantism. Image courtesy of Giuliana Campanale.



Figure 2.2 Alessia Rollo, “In Trance” from the series *Parallel Eyes* (2019). Rollo uses Samugheo’s original photo in reverse. The faces of the afflicted are made unrecognizable by the artistic intervention. Image courtesy of the artist.

unbroken persistence of the cult that risks (self-)essentializing and romanticizing religious practices and potentially contributes to the neo-Orientalism of the Italian South highlighted by Schneider. With her artworks, Alessia Rollo attempts to provide an alternative narrative on the basis of which a “new imaginary” for the future can emerge through the reassessment of the past. This endeavor, however, puts her in line with De Martino, whose intention was to expose the progressive, emancipatory, and forward-looking potential of these rituals.

Overall, Rollo’s artist statement is clearly formulated as a reappropriation of scientific (anthropology) and visual (filmmaking and photography) representations of Apulian tarantism. With her technique to literally draw/write over the iconic images, she intends to reintroduce them into a magical sphere that has supposedly been “erased by the scientific approach.” Rollo claims her own “culture” as the main reason and motivation for setting previous misleading representations straight. With this she actually speaks for a great many Southern Italians, who to this day feel misunderstood and misrepresented by anthropologists from the North. Unfortunately, the problem remains that by invoking an ‘authentic’ ritualist approach and by ignoring the multifaceted remediation that *tarantismo* has gone through over the past decades (and arguably centuries), essentialist conceptions of ‘Southern Italian culture’ and ‘identity’ are reproduced—albeit celebrated and revalued (Figures 2.3 and 2.4).



Figure 2.3 Photo by Diego Carpitella (1959), depicting the violinist Luigi Stifani playing the *pizzica* during a so-called home therapy. Image courtesy of Fondazione Accademia Nazionale di Santa Cecilia, Rome.

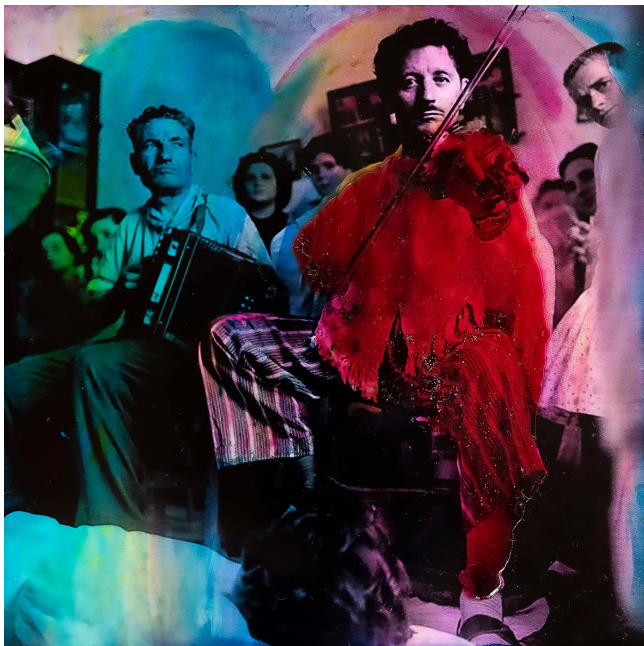


Figure 2.4 Alessia Rollo, “The Rhythm of the Spider” from the series *Parallel Eyes* (2019). Here, the local musicians are still recognizable. Image courtesy of the artist.

***Tanz Sediment: “I sing an oppression and I’m free again”***

Another female Italian artist who engages with scientific research and writings on tarantism is Alessandra Eramo. In her work *Tanz Sediment: Self-Portrait of Madness*, she mainly addresses the performative elements and embodied techniques of the ritual, focusing on its therapeutic capacities through music and dance. Originally commissioned by Deutschlandfunk Kultur as a radiophonic work,<sup>21</sup> *Tanz Sediment* materialized as a multimedia installation presented at SAVVY Contemporary in the group exhibition *Ultrasanity. On Madness, Sanitation, Antipsychiatry and Resistance* (2019) in Berlin.<sup>22</sup> The subtitle *Self-Portrait of Madness* on the one hand points to Eramo’s autobiographical or autoethnographic approach to the subject matter; simultaneously, she traces the roots of tarantism back to the Dionysian Mysteries of ancient Greece and positions tarantism in the historic tradition of choreomania.

In geology, sediments are fragments of solid material that have been broken down, moved, and deposited in a new location through the process of erosion. Calling her own approach to tarantism a ‘dance sediment,’ she traces, metaphorically speaking, fragments or relics of the frenetic dancing and singing of the maenads/bacchantes across time, and relocates them through her own embodied practice. In her artist statement she summarizes her inspiration and her personal approach to the topic, employing trance-inducing techniques such as dance and singing:

Dancing bacchantes/unrestrained and free movements of body and voice/healing ritual through dance and music/tarantella music and tarantism ritual/liberated body/a space of freedom/being born and raised in Taranto, a very difficult place in Puglia, Southern Italy/body knowledge and memory

Tarantism is a form of disease, inner agitation and “madness” that was common in Puglia in Southern Italy until the 1960s, resulting from the bite of the tarantula spider, often occurring to women. The women organized healing rituals to free their bodies from the symbolic spider poison through frenetic Tarantella music and dance, giving voice to suffering and repression, as a form of rebellion and autonomy of the illiterate subaltern community in one of the most disadvantaged parts of Italy.<sup>23</sup>

By referring to Puglia as “one of the most disadvantaged parts of Italy,” Eramo not only alludes to the socio-economic and political context of the *Questione Meridionale* (“Southern Question”), but also acknowledges the history of the women (believed to be) bitten by the tarantula spider as subalterns in the Gramscian sense. In this context, she interprets *tarantismo* as a form of female self-expression and agency that she embraces in her own artistic practice. Unlike Rollo and Chiuri, however, she asserts that the ‘authentic ritual’

of *tarantismo* is extinct, which, in turn, informs her desire to commemorate and revive it by creating her own ritual and reliving tarantism's ritual traces through her body, and her own voice.

Tarantism is extinct but it remains in my consciousness through the experience and memory of songs. In amazement, I've been observing my body through videos or photos taken while I sing, my deformed face, gestures, grimaces, postures, breath, with the mouth wide open. My singing body becomes a visual trace of a sonic event, an inscribed memory. I sing an oppression and I'm free again.

Interestingly, it is with medializations that Eramo commemorates (through song) and observes (through videos and photos) the traces or sediments of *tarantismo* in her own body. A website documents the installation as it was presented at SAVVY Contemporary:

TANZ SEDIMENT (Self-Portrait of Madness)

Installation, 2019

sound, video—stereo, HD, 6'38" loop

drawings—graphite on paper, dimensions variable

The sound piece consists of a collage that includes extended solo voice and the polyphonic singing of a female choir, glossolalia and breathing experiments, frame drum, a women's work song called "Fimmene Fimmene" from Puglia, a Sicilian song, and a text excerpt read in ancient Greek from Euripides's tragedy *The Bacchantes*, alongside field recordings from a deserted industrial area in Berlin.<sup>24</sup> On the visual level, a mid-shot of Eramo's face, which, as she herself describes, distorts as she sings and breathes frenetically, opens the loop. She is wrapped in a white cloth, which she occasionally pulls over her head, rocking back and forth as if performing a funerary lament. She also performs paradigmatic gestures associated with funerary laments as well as postures and gestures commonly associated with 'hysterics' of the Salpêtrière—the Parisian psychiatric institution where neurologist Jean-Martin Charcot established the clinical definition of 'hysteria' at the turn of the last century. Incorporating and acting out the suffering of the afflicted women becomes a liberating experience for the artist, although she never self-identifies as a contemporary *tarantata*.

In the installation, the video with its sound recording is projected onto the concrete wall in a small, barren room that is reminiscent of a prison cell or hospital/psychiatry ward. Under the projection is a white mattress on which charcoal drawings of spiders lie scattered. More drawings of spiders and lines hang on the opposite walls. Eramo writes: "My drawings are abstract, gestural lines and surfaces, as a graphic score, they are the trace of a frenetic dance and singing." She describes how the handmade paper she chose has a texture similar to cotton fabric. "This paper evokes the white sheet I've been



Figure 2.5 Alessandra Eramo, *Tanz Sediment*, Installation view at SAVVY Contemporary in the group exhibition *Ultrasanity* (2019) in Berlin. Photo by Hannes Wiedemann. Image courtesy of the artist.

using in the video and in the installation.” The white sheets are reminiscent of those used in the so-called ‘home therapies’ (*terapie domiciliare*) during which the *tarantate* were cured through *pizzica* music and trance dancing. A second projection, closer to the ground, shows a close-up of Eramo’s feet dancing a *tarantella* on a white sheet, symbolically trampling the spider (Figure 2.5).

Although Alessandra Eramo does not refer to De Martino’s research and his audiovisual archive directly by name, she is clearly aware of the discourses and iconographies involved. On her website, she combines the photos and videos of her installation with archival photos of the Salpêtrière and with photos of *tarantate* taken in the chapel at Galatina in the late 1950s/early 1960s in the course of De Martino’s research. These are arranged next to images of reliefs of dancing maenads from the Musei Capitolini and Museo Barracco in Rome (none of them credited or titled). Eramo thus establishes an iconographic connection between tarantism, the ‘hysterics’ of the Salpêtrière, and the maenads/bacchantes of ancient Greece by studying and comparing paradigmatic gestures of (embodied) expressions of suffering and mental turmoil. In addition, and with reference to the exhibition’s title, *Ultrasanity*, she writes:

I have been observing and reflecting on the visual archive material such as the images from *Iconography of the Salpêtrière* and the *Tarantate* women photos taken in Puglia in the 60s by anthropologists and

ethnomusicologists: in “Tanz Sediment” I don’t want to re-present that iconography of the “hysterical” women. I don’t want to reproduce in any way that iconography made by anthropologists or doctors. . . . In “Tanz Sediment” I’m rather interested in performing a timeless ritual, my own ritual.

Here, Eramo refers to anthropologist Ernesto de Martino and other (also female) anthropologists in his research team, as well as to ethnomusicologist Diego Carpitella. Not directly naming the members of the research team can be read as a subtle way to diminish their influence and power of interpretation over the images. Eramo consciously does not place herself in their tradition but develops her own ritual independently of their sphere of influence on the topic of tarantism. In her performance, she wants to avoid reproducing a pathologizing iconography and uses her own body as the main medium of iconographic and choreographic reproduction by way of reenacting and imitating the postures, gestures, and voices of historic *tarantate* and ‘hysterics’ in a staged setting.

However, it is very difficult to undo or reverse the iconographic power of these images. Much has been written about the photographic iconography of seemingly possessed women and the representational parallels between ‘hysterics’ and *tarantate*.<sup>25</sup> De Martino himself had already drawn attention to similarities between tarantism and hysterical symptoms, yet always maintained that tarantism should not be denoted to an illness.<sup>26</sup> Ethnographic depictions of the phenomenon of Apulian tarantism clearly draw on turn-of-the-century scientific paradigms, such as the experimental use of photography to detect choreographic patterns of ecstatic episodes. It is the spectacular visibility of somatic expressions that make both nineteenth-century concepts of hysteria and Apulian tarantism “theatrical illnesses,”<sup>27</sup> and it is part of their “expressive codes”<sup>28</sup> that they are reproducible. In an earlier work, I have argued that states of ecstasy and trance dancing such as *tarantismo* consist of performative as well as mimetic qualities, and that the visual representation of these states is (almost) always achieved through artificial evocation and reconstruction. Trance possession and ecstatic states do not occur without audiences, which make them ideal situations in which to experiment with staging and reconstruction in collaboration with those ‘afflicted.’<sup>29</sup> With her performance, Eramo inevitably inscribes herself in this tradition, even if she consciously attempts to undermine it by (re-)creating her own ritual.

Along these lines, De Martino himself made use of reconstructions and reenactments, recognizing that all ‘authentic rituals’ are performances; he did not see it as falsification or distortion to ask his informants to stage certain poses, trances, and dances for the purpose of audiovisual and photographic recording and to study choreographic patterns in detail. He also enacted some of the gestures and postures himself to better understand the choreographies and ‘expressive codes’ involved (Figure 2.6). He acknowledged *tarantismo* as a





Figure 2.6 Photo by Franco Pinna (1959). Anthropologist Ernesto de Martino emulating the posture of a tarantula when studying the choreographic patterns and cycles of tarantism. Image courtesy of Fondo Franco Pinna, Rome.

way of creatively coping with socio-economic misery and personal crises. Yet despite using reenactments and self-immersion as experimental ethnographic research methods, he did not conceive of his work as artistic research. Unlike Eramo, he did not try to experience the liberating power through his own embodied practice, nor did he intend to “create a space of freedom.”

Interestingly, Eramo also refers to her Southern Italian origin—in this case Taranto, a “difficult place in Puglia”—as motivation for her artistic engagement with tarantism and, like fellow artist Alessia Rollo, she rejects the ‘scientific’ approach to tarantism, under which she subsumes anthropologists and doctors. In her attempts to bypass the scientific (medical and male) gaze, and by transferring tarantism from a quasi-religious setting to an artistic space, she detaches the phenomenon from its previous sphere of meaning, yet still firmly locates it in the Mezzogiorno and relates it to her own Southern Italian origin. *Tanz Sediment: Self-Portrait of Madness* can thus be read as a feminist attempt to artistically reappropriate and experimentally reevaluate a

traditional cultural pattern that nonetheless (or consequently) risks promoting a potentially essentializing heritagization.

### *Tarantismo: Odyssey of an Italian Ritual*

With an even stronger focus on the musical component, the artist collective FLEE Project fuses tarantism with contemporary artistic approaches in an attempt to document the modern history of the ritual. Starting from archival sound recordings by renowned ethnomusicologists Diego Carpitella<sup>30</sup> and Alan Lomax<sup>31</sup> from the 1950s, FLEE commissioned seven international artists and music producers to revisit the archives, mixing the historic recordings with their own respective artistic and musical practices. In conjunction with a musical compilation, FLEE released a bilingual (Italian/English) edited volume featuring nine essays from different contemporary perspectives on the phenomenon of tarantism. The FLEE Project describe their methodological approach as follows:

FLEE is a cultural engineering platform dedicated to the documentation and enhancement of hybrid cultures. Functioning as a record label, publishing house and exhibition organizer, it was founded by Alan Marzo, Olivier Duport and Carl Åhnebrink. For each issue, FLEE will release a vinyl record along with a printed magazine helping its audience to fully grasp the essence of the movements highlighted.<sup>32</sup>

In 2019 they engaged with Apulian tarantism, their second release, and entitled it *Tarantismo: Odyssey of an Italian Ritual*,

a tribute to pizzica, an antique music used to heal people suffering from a mysterious disease. This vinyl and its associated publication represent a contemporary attempt to reflect on this extraordinary phenomenon involving frenetic rhythms and maniac dancing, through a trans-disciplinary artistic approach.<sup>33</sup>

FLEE directly and consciously refer to the writings of Ernesto de Martino and the audiovisual recordings made during his ethnographic journeys as the starting point of their engagement with tarantism. The double LP thus features six original recordings, *pizziche tarantelle*, four of which were recorded by Diego Carpitella during the famous expedition with Ernesto de Martino in 1969, featuring women's songs dedicated to San Paolo and music played during home therapies. Another is an earlier recording from 1954, captured during a journey with Alan Lomax, and a last one was recorded in 1960.<sup>34</sup> The original recordings were then presented to contemporary DJs and music producers Bjorn Torske & Trym Søvdsnes (Norway),<sup>35</sup> LNS (Canada),<sup>36</sup> Uffe (Denmark),<sup>37</sup> Don't DJ (Germany),<sup>38</sup> and Bottin (Italy),<sup>39</sup> as well as to field and sound artist KMRU (Kenya),<sup>40</sup> who each reworked the tracks according

to their respective House, Electro, Breaks, Reggae-esk, and/or Acid styles. The remixes are unique reworkings, some of which break and loop the vocals and add electronic sounds while others keep the original vocals, creating a new rhythm around the chanting. The accompanying edited volume, a beautifully designed hardcover with a cloth binding, assembles short statements by each sound artist alongside nine original written contributions, touching on different aspects of tarantism, such as Christianization and the myth of Saint Paul, the revival of *pizzica* music from the 1970s to the rave and world music festival *La Notte della Taranta*, as well as the reinvention of tarantism as cultural heritage. Unlike Rollo and Eramo, however, FLEE do not reject scientific approaches, but allow for different readings of the phenomenon from different perspectives.

In their introduction, FLEE describe tarantism equally as a “symptom of Southern Italy, where misery, peasant alienation and patriarchal domination reigned,” and as a “simulacrum.”<sup>41</sup> It is indeed a telling diagnosis to unravel tarantism as simultaneously symptom and simulacrum, particularly when defining ‘simulacrum’ as an imitative representation without the depreciatory meaning it received in the late nineteenth century, when it was reinterpreted as vulgar imitation of an original. Understood in a Deleuzian sense as something that through simulation becomes or acquires a truth in its own right, leaving the ‘authentic original’ unlocatable, *tarantismo* is indeed a simulacrum—and in this context FLEE’s approach could be read as a creative attempt to deconstruct the ‘originals’ in order to conserve and perpetuate the established order of representations, models, and copies.

The book also features black-and-white photographs by Chiara Samugheo and what is probably the last interview with her.<sup>42</sup> Samugheo had photographed *tarantate* in the chapel at Galatina in 1954, five years before De Martino had traveled there and published them in a documentary photo reportage entitled *Le Invasate (The Possessed)*. Her photos are the very first photographic records of Apulian tarantism, and she asserts that “[i]t was precisely the work of photography and cinema that stimulated intellectual curiosity and transformed Salento into a pilgrimage and study destination between 1952 and 1964.”<sup>43</sup> She herself made an indelible contribution to the iconography of tarantism, and although neither De Martino nor the photographers in his team ever explicitly referred to her work, it is highly unlikely that they were unaware of it. FLEE therefore not only provide a kaleidoscopic overview of contemporary issues related to tarantism, but also trace and revive the memory of the beginnings of the iconic images of it and partly contest its genesis.

They proceed in a similar way with the sound recordings in the sense that the archive is not ‘overwritten,’ but an approach is adopted that does justice to the original historical recordings and playfully expands on them. Comparable to De Martino, Carpitella’s and Lomax’s political agenda in the 1950s was to use recording technologies—sound and photography—not only to preserve but also to revitalize regional musical styles and folklore. They both



Figure 2.7 FLEE, *Tarantismo: Odyssey of an Italian Ritual* (FLEE 002, 2019), record cover. Image courtesy of FLEE.

saw folklore as a form of creativity, and in their recordings they highlighted the poetic quality of the musical performances. Critics agree that Lomax's work contributed to a renewed sensibility toward Italy's Southern Question in the early 1950s. By creatively engaging with and remixing the original *pizzica tarantata* recordings, the sound artists arguably revitalize and extend the genre while drawing attention to its contested origins, yet without reappropriating it as cultural heritage (Figure 2.7).

Their artistic statement advocates this agenda:

by asking contemporary artists to revisit songs from various periods and genres, we hope to transcend the trend of unproductive nostalgia, which purely romanticises the past. In addition to gaining and giving insights into what we feel are both rich and important subjects, we also see FLEE as an opportunity to initiate a broader audience to little known cultural phenomena, by inviting them to join an exciting journey through timeframes and spaces of different nature.<sup>44</sup> [sic]

Although co-founder Alan Marzo is originally from Puglia, FLEE do not reclaim or reappropriate tarantism solely on the basis of geographical origin or simplistic identity politics, but rather open the phenomenon up to a wider public by “inviting” the audience to familiarize themselves with it and its contemporary variations. FLEE are acutely aware of the ethical dilemma that accompanies the mobilization of cultural heritage for artistic creation, and by naming and exposing the “unproductive nostalgia” and “romanticization” of other artistic (re)appropriations as such, they themselves address and actively oppose the unimpeded patrimonialization of the phenomenon.<sup>45</sup>

### The Dior fashion *défilé*

Finally, I would like to come back to the Dior show mentioned at the beginning of this chapter and assess it from the point of view of heritagization and folkloristic cultural appropriation. The dramatic showcase of the forthcoming year's collection took place on the Piazza del Duomo, in the heart of Lecce at the height of the coronavirus pandemic, and was live screened on July 22, 2020; a video of it was later uploaded on the official Dior website.<sup>46</sup> The actual collection is dominated by floral styles, and most outfits include long, flowing skirts or dresses and starched white blouses (or blouse collars), and carry elements of lace, tulle, embroidered ornaments, woven fabrics, and tassels. Often, a leather corset or wide belt is worn over the blouses or dresses, and almost all models wear the region's typical handkerchief (*fazzoletto*) as headgear. Italian *Vanity Fair* even titled their review of the show "La collezione Dior Cruise 2021 fra pizziche, fazzoletti e taranta" ("The Dior Cruise 2021 Collection amid *Pizziche*, Handkerchiefs and *Taranta*").<sup>47</sup> The reference to *pizzica* music and the *taranta*, or tarantula, as emblematic elements of Apulian popular culture and folk traditions is complemented by the mention of the handkerchief. The prestigious daily newspaper *La Repubblica* also specifically takes up the motif of the *fazzoletto*, with journalist Anna Puricella referring to the handkerchief as

a source of pride that reaches out to the Salento grandmothers who toiled in the fields, thus sheltering themselves from the sun and at the same time hiding their autonomy as women. It is the same vein of sacrifice, pain, and dedication that the Orchestra of the Notte della taranta translated into music, accompanying the entire parade with pieces that, rather than the folklore that attracts tourists, aimed straight at the heart of women. Thus, Ernesto de Martino's "land of remorse" reemerged, creating an imaginary line that led from the *tarantate*—considered repressed and hysterical because their needs and femininity were totally ignored—directly to the models. It is up to the latter to bring those suffering and distant sisters to the present day, to make them feel proud.<sup>48</sup>

This interpretation of Dior's take on Apulian folkloristic elements is striking insofar as it clearly states the borrowing from local practices—here mainly related to clothing and music—but does not conceptualize it in terms of cultural appropriation or commodification. Instead, the author draws an "imaginary line" that links the suffering of the historic *tarantate* and hard-working peasant women to the oppression of women today. With female suffering as a unifying element, the reviewer interprets the show as a feminist manifesto, at the center of which is pride in one's cultural heritage and with it the reinterpretation and revalidation of a former stigma (*tarantismo*). According to the journalist, the parading of this heritage in the Dior *défilé* goes far beyond folkloristic—and consequently touristic—elements and aims "straight at the

heart of women.” Absurdly, in this reading, it would be the task of the models as modern *tarantate* to awaken pride in the cultural heritage of Apulia and in femininity alike. However, the observation that the show evokes De Martino’s work is interesting insofar as his writings are still considered the main reference point for all knowledge about tarantism, including for the makers of the collection and the show. What is rather uncommon, to my knowledge, is that a fashion empire as prestigious as the house of Dior explicitly refers to anthropological sources. “Texts by the anthropologist Ernesto De Martino dedicated to the region’s traditions—which have influenced authors [such as] Georges Didi-Huberman—led [creative director Maria Grazia Chiuri] to explore their roots,”<sup>49</sup> states the official Dior website. The reference to Didi-Huberman, who is probably more familiar than Ernesto de Martino to a broad French audience, hints at his research on the invention of hysteria and the parallels he draws between the patients of Charcot and the Italian *tarantate* that De Martino had written about.<sup>50</sup> This reference to the sorrowful history and pathologizing of women that artist Alessandra Eramo had also elaborated in her work is clearly taken up by the reviewer of *La Repubblica*. The reference to scientific sources seems like a declaration that Dior is familiar with the history and cultural heritage of Puglia and, above all, with the phenomenon and manifestations of tarantism.

Reading the Dior show as an emancipatory celebration of female empowerment and pride is also underlined by the elaborate installation of *luminarie* that dominated the scenography and choreography. *Luminarie* are wooden frames and arches equipped with hundreds of colored lights that are traditionally placed in the public squares of Apulian villages and towns during the feasts of patron saints. For the Dior show, the illuminations were specifically designed and crafted to complement the choreography of the *défilé*. On the website, the staging is described as follows:

Spanning fashion, traditional craftsmanship and committed contemporary art, the silhouettes appeared amid a spellbinding scenography illuminated by the mesmerizing glimmer of Luminarie, fanciful traditional light installations reinterpreted here by Marinella Senatore.<sup>51</sup>

Senatore added feminist slogans in French and Italian to the *luminarie* such as “Le désir est révolutionnaire car il cherche ce qui ne se voit pas” (“Desire is revolutionary because it seeks what cannot be seen”), “We rise by lifting ♀thers,” “La différence pour les femmes est des millénaires d’absence de l’histoire” (“The difference for women is millennia of absence from history”), or “Be a builder ♀f unguilt.” These messages underline that a world-famous fashion house such as Dior cannot sail the slipstream of staged historical suffering of women by borrowing the visual language and choreographies of tarantism. Instead, they have to invert and reevaluate it by propagating feminist values such as solidarity, emancipation, and equality. French psychoanalyst Jacques Lacan once playfully lamented, “Where have

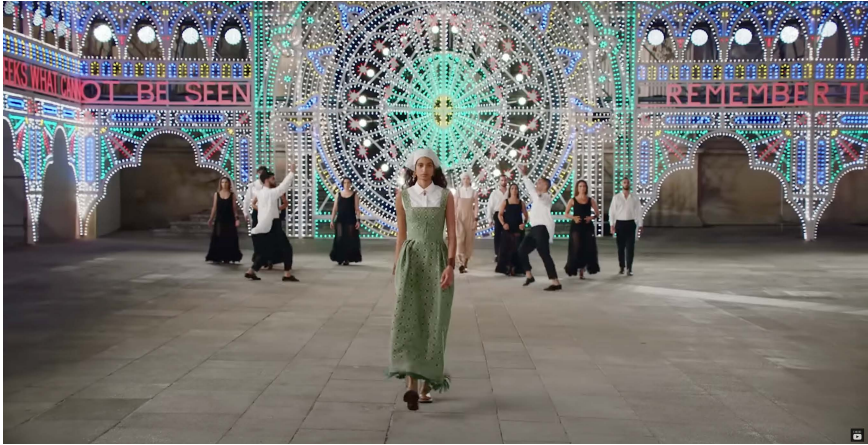


Figure 2.8 The designs, performances, and the setting of the Christian Dior 2021 Cruise show, held at the Piazza del Duomo in Lecce in Puglia, was inspired by the theme of tarantism. Still image from the live broadcast.

they gone, the hysterics of yesteryear . . . those amazing women,”<sup>52</sup> to which feminist literary critic Elaine Showalter replied that the despised hysterics of yesteryear have been replaced by the feminist radicals of today.<sup>53</sup> This riposte from the 1990s is now thirty years old, and although the demands of the radical feminists of the 1990s are far from being fulfilled, the slogans in the Dior show seem strangely tame and somewhat outdated. Nevertheless, it is remarkable that the platform of a fashion show is used for an emancipatory message intended to empower women with reference to a regional as well as global history of oppression and marginalization (Figure 2.8).

Like the phenomenon of tarantism, the show itself eventually turns into a spectacle: the stage is dark, only the colorful lettering of the *luminarie* is lit up, and between the dancers’ heavy breathing and implied fainting, the tambourine begins to play. Composed by Paolo Buonvino, performed by the La Notte della Taranta Foundation, and choreographed by Sharon Eyal, the choreutic performance turns the actual *défilé* into an artistic reenactment of tarantism. The individual designs even recede somewhat into the background in view of this staging.

But on closer inspection, one becomes aware that it is not only the *luminarie*, the performative elements, or even the fashion creations themselves, but above all the fabrics, patterns, and materials that are anchored in Apulian craftsmanship and manual labor. On Dior’s website, the collection’s use of materials is referred to as a celebration of artisans and local handicrafts such as embroidery, lace making, spinning, and weaving. In various video clips these handicrafts are introduced alongside family businesses, ateliers, and individual artisans who closely collaborated with Dior for this collection. Copying is pervasive in the global fashion industry, and it is not at all uncommon that designers and brands would appropriate different local designs,

styles, and imagery without attribution. Fashion magazines are bursting with pictures of clothing and accessories bearing a distinctively ‘ethnic’ flair.<sup>54</sup> According to the principles of the World Intellectual Property Organization (WIPO) on “The Protection of Traditional Cultural Expressions,” the use of local/native/Indigenous motifs and designs is acceptable as long as “social, cultural, spiritual, economic, scientific, intellectual, commercial and educational values” are acknowledged and respected.<sup>55</sup> In the case of Dior, these principles have apparently been adhered to, and the extent to which local designs, artisanry, and crafts have been commercialized, and to which local actors have been exploited, is difficult to determine. On their website, Dior extend their sincere gratitude to the Archbishop of Lecce, as well as the City of Lecce, for the great opportunity to hold this event in the region of Puglia. “Our House is both delighted and honored, more than ever, to be able to collaborate with all of these talented artisans and local artists.”<sup>56</sup> They seem to have followed a practice of collaboration with local partners, and consequently the Dior show has succeeded in being publicly perceived and discussed as having made the history of Puglia more meaningful, rather than having diluted the region’s cultural expressions and practices. In other words, Dior managed to transform a potential act of cultural appropriation into a showcase of cultural appreciation.

### Critical acts of repetition? Retracings as performative efficacy

One aspect that is prevalent in (almost) all works discussed are the motifs of healing and (female) empowerment. With the exception of FLEE, whose work somehow evades the feminist agenda, the contemporary artistic (re) appropriations and engagements with tarantism highlight the emancipatory and liberatory potential of the ritual. The fact that subalterns, including many marginalized women, publicly addressed their crises and brought their suffering to such powerful performances in public squares continues to exert a strong appeal, and to the present day invites diverse (artist) positions to link their own agendas to it. These concerns vary and can range from attempting to (re)appropriate and reinterpret audiovisual archival materials; conserving and reviving cultural heritage, artisanry, and handicrafts; to addressing and acting out actual social tensions or individual crises. The aspect of healing or regenerative self-cure through music and trance dancing has always been inherent in tarantism and is strongly linked to female resistance to patriarchal and authoritarian society—that the curative aim and subversive potential of the ritual are taken up in current adaptations should therefore not come as a surprise.

While many (local) artists reclaim the power of interpretation or (re) appropriation over the archival materials and scientific analyses of tarantism, the phenomenon itself has experienced a kind of multifaceted revival on a folk-religious and/or popular-cultural level. This folk renaissance of tarantism not only comprises the annual historic reenactments (*rievocazioni storice*) in Galatina in the context of the efforts to add tarantism to the UNESCO



Intangible Heritage list, the notorious mega-event *La Notte della Taranta* in Melpignano, or countless *tarantella* workshops throughout Puglia, but also refers to the so-called neo-tarantism or *neo-tarantismo*. This term denotes a movement that, from the 1990s, has reevaluated cathartic popular music beyond the traditional historical connotations associated with suffering and shame.<sup>57</sup> It is an expression of local(ized) pride and is often considered a response to globalization and the loss of cultural diversity. This reappropriation of *tarantismo* goes hand in hand with a reinterpretation and, above all, a revaluation (and also a commodification and commercialization) of the phenomenon. Today, the spider, spider webs, and the tambourine have been vindicated as symbols for tarantism and *pizzica* music in Salento that have a positive connotation.

In her analysis of the exoneration of tarantism in contemporary Italian popular culture, musicologist Annunziata Dellisanti writes:

These new generations vindicate, as one of their own specific characteristics, the feelings their parents and grandparents used to consider shameful, a symptom of superstition, illness, hysteria, lack of equilibrium, madness, or weakness, but also a therapy from an almost exclusively female universe linked to the problems of women's condition in society and within the family. This cultural change, "the repossession of identity" and globalisation make it possible for young people to revive this ancient therapeutic ritual that has become an expression of innovation, energy, celebration, joy, positive energy and strength.<sup>58</sup>

Both the artistic and cultural engagements with Apulian tarantism are retracing the centuries-old phenomenon, claiming to culturally appreciate rather than culturally appropriate it. The importance of all these retracings lies in their present, performative efficacy: the ritual that is repeatedly restaged in varying contexts and that, through diverse media formats, takes on new meanings. In this way, the phenomenon is continued, or, in the context of conservation, preserved—not as a static artifact frozen in time but as a living 'organism.' FLEE describe tarantism as a challenge to religion, scientific discourse, historical materialism, and modern anthropology—"at best an extravagant competitor, at worst a practice questioning their own hegemonic vision on the functioning of the world."<sup>59</sup> It is this subversive potential inherent in tarantism that is preserved and (re)mobilized in every performance or artistic engagement with the phenomenon.

## Notes

- 1 "Dior Cruise 2021 Collection," *Dior*, accessed April 2, 2024, [www.dior.com/en\\_gb/fashion/womens-fashion/ready-to-wear-shows/cruise-2021-collection](http://www.dior.com/en_gb/fashion/womens-fashion/ready-to-wear-shows/cruise-2021-collection). Please visit the UK site when redirected; alternatively, the show can be seen at [www.youtube.com/watch?v=T5pBRKED0Bc](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=T5pBRKED0Bc), accessed April 2, 2024.

- 2 In Salentine dialect, the expression *la taranta* not only refers to the tarantula spider, but any type of spider, scorpion, ant, snake, or viper that inflicts a painful and venomous bite.
- 3 Johann Heinrich Zedler, *Grosses vollständiges Universal=Lexicon aller Wissenschaften und Künste, Band 41, 1801–1804* (Leipzig, Halle: Zedler, 1744); Ernst Conrad Wicke, *Versuch einer Monographie des grossen Veitstanzes und der unwillkürlichen Muskelbewegung nebst Bemerkungen über den Taranteltanz und die Beriberi* (Brockhaus: Leipzig, 1844), 226; Wilhelm Katner, “Das Rätsel des Tarentismus [*sic*]: Eine Ätiologie der italienischen Tanzkrankheit,” *Nova Acta Leopoldina, Abhandlung der deutschen Akademie der Naturforscher (Leopoldina)*, N.F. 18, no. 124 (1956): 5–115. See also Jerri Daboo, *Ritual, Rapture and Remorse: A Study of Tarantism and Pizzica in Salento* (New York and Bern: Peter Lang, 2010), 2.
- 4 Nicola Caputo, *De tarantulae anatome et Morsu [Anatomia et morso tarantola]* (Tricase: Edizione Dell’Iride, [1741] 2001), 210; Gino Di Mitri, “Le radici orfiche e l’innesto paolino sul tronco del tarantismo: Ipotesi e indizi per un’archeologia del sapere,” in *Scritti di storia pugliese in onore de Felicinano Argentina*, ed. Michele Paone (Galatina: Editrice Salentina, 1996), 11–28; Karen Lüdtkke, “Tarantism in Contemporary Italy: The Tarantula’s Dance Reviewed and Revived,” in *Music as Medicine: The History of Music Therapy since Antiquity*, ed. Peregrine Horden (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2000), 309, fn11; David Gentilcore, “Ritualized Illness and Music Therapy: Views of Tarantism in the Kingdom of Naples,” in *Music as Medicine: The History of Music Therapy since Antiquity*, ed. Peregrine Horden (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2000), 267.
- 5 Cultural theorist Jerri Daboo has rightly argued that the incorporation of St. Paul into the cult of tarantism is twofold. While, on the one hand, the saint became encultured into a much older ritual and tarantism was thus gradually Christianized, the eroticization of a Catholic saint, on the other hand, also constituted a “subversion of the hegemonic control of Christianity.” Daboo, *Ritual, Rapture and Remorse*, 151.
- 6 Andromache Karanika, “Ecstasy in Healing: Practices in Southern Italy and Greece from Antiquity to the Present,” in *Performing Ecstasies: Music, Dance, and Ritual in the Mediterranean*, vol. LXII/7, ed. Luisa Del Giudice and Nancy Van Deusen, *Claremont Cultural Studies* (Ottawa: The Institute of Medieval Music, 2005), 25–36, 29.
- 7 Michaela Schäuble, “Images of Ecstasy and Affliction: The Camera as Instrument for Researching and Reproducing Choreographies of Deviance in a Southern Italian Spider Possession Cult,” *AnthroVision—Vaneasa Online Journal* 4, no. 2 (2016), accessed August 14, 2024, <https://journals.openedition.org/anthrovision/2409>.
- 8 Antonio Gramsci, *Selections from the Prison Notebooks* (New York: International Publishers, 1971 [1929–1935]).
- 9 Ernesto de Martino, “Inchiesta di ‘Quarto Stato’ sul mezzogiorno: Terra di Bari (in collaborazione con M. Potenza),” *Quarto Stato* 25–26 (1947): 32–36. For De Martino, the term ‘presence’ refers to a “secured” and “certain” form of being-in-the-world, which is also the starting point for the ways in which humans adapt to and shape the world. However, in situations of crisis—for example, through the loss of a loved one, poverty, hunger, or natural disasters—this presence may relapse into indeterminacy. From this threat then emerges a dialectic of crisis and reappropriation of presence; the “securing” of presence is understood as something that requires specific techniques. In other words, knowing about the fragility of presence and being threatened by its inevitable crisis, humans strive to escape concrete history by performing acts (i.e., rituals) that give them access to a meta-historical level. Michaela Schäuble, “Performing and Re-Enacting Lament

- in the Mediterranean: Ritual Mourning and the Migration of Images in Rural Southern Italy,” *Zeitschrift für Ethnologie/Journal of Social and Cultural Anthropology*, no. 146 (2021): 53–74.
- 10 “Dior Cruise 2021 Collection.”
  - 11 “Dior Cruise 2021 Collection.”
  - 12 Schäuble, “Images of Ecstasy and Affliction”; Michaela Schäuble, “Ecstasy, Choreography, and Re-Enactment: Aesthetic and Political Dimensions of Filming States of Trance and Spirit Possession in Post-War Italy,” *Visual Anthropology* 32, no. 1 (2019): 33–55, <https://doi.org/10.1080/08949468.2019.1568112>; Schäuble, “Performing and Re-Enacting Lament in the Mediterranean.”
  - 13 “Parallel Eyes,” Alessia Rollo (website), accessed October 13, 2023, [www.alesiarollo.it/portfolio/parallel-eyes/](http://www.alesiarollo.it/portfolio/parallel-eyes/). The filmmakers shot on 16mm film, not video.
  - 14 Jane Schneider, ed., *Italy’s “Southern Question”: Orientalism in One Country* (Oxford and New York: Berg, 1998), 5.
  - 15 Schneider, *Italy’s “Southern Question”*, 8.
  - 16 Joseph Pugliese, “Whiteness and the Blackening of Italy: La Guerra Cafona, Extracommunitari and Provisional Street Justice,” *Portal* 5, no. 2 (2008): 3, <https://doi.org/10.5130/portal.v5i2.702>; see also Cesare Lombroso, *Criminal Man* (New York and London: G. P. Putnam’s Sons, [1876] 1911), 28. Pugliese argues that the *Questione Meridionale* (‘Southern Question’) was marked by hierarchies of whiteness according to a geopolitical fault line that split Italy along a black/white axis, encoding a set of racialized presuppositions that have been “constitutive in the formation of hegemonic Italian identity, politics and culture” (Pugliese, “Whiteness and the Blackening of Italy,” 32). Apart from the racial aspects highlighted by the criminologists of the time, the north–south dichotomy also had a gendered dimension; Guglielmo Ferrero, a supporter of Cesare Lombroso, for example, suggested that Southern Italian men were more prone to chasing women and more sexually precocious than Northerners, and consequently less socially engaged and economically productive (see Schneider, *Italy’s “Southern Question”*, 10f).
  - 17 Daboo, *Ritual, Rapture and Remorse*, 20.
  - 18 Ernesto de Martino, “L’umanesimo etnografico,” in *La fine del mondo. Contributo all’analisi delle apocalissi culturali*, ed. Clara Gallini (Turin: Einaudi, [1977] 2002), 389–94.
  - 19 Ernesto de Martino, “Il folklore progressive: Note Lucane,” in *Il dibattito sul folklore in Italia*, ed. Pietro Clemente, Maria Luisa Meoni, and Massimo Squillacioti (Milano: Edizioni di Cultura Popolare, [1951] 1976), 123–24.
  - 20 “Parallel Eyes.”
  - 21 “Hörstück über das Ritual der Tarantella. Tanz Sediment,” audio piece with a German-speaking introduction, accessed April 2, 2024, [www.hoerspielundfeature.de/hoerstueck-ueber-das-ritual-der-tarantella-tanz-sediment-100.html](http://www.hoerspielundfeature.de/hoerstueck-ueber-das-ritual-der-tarantella-tanz-sediment-100.html).
  - 22 “Ultrasanity,” SAVVY Contemporary (website), accessed October 13, 2023, <https://savvy-contemporary.com/en/projects/2019/ultrasanity/>. The artist would like to thank Kamila Metwaly, Kelly Krugman, Elena Agudio, and Bonaventure Soh Bejeng Ndikung, in conversation with whom she developed the concept for her work.
  - 23 “Self-Portrait of Madness,” Alessandra Eramo (website), accessed October 13, 2023, [www.ezramo.com/works/tanz%20sediment/about.html](http://www.ezramo.com/works/tanz%20sediment/about.html). All quotes from the artist are taken from this website.
  - 24 “Tanz Sediment,” Vimeo, accessed October 13, 2023, <https://vimeo.com/384490621>.
  - 25 Georges Didi-Huberman, *Invention of Hysteria: Charcot and the Photographic Iconography of the Salpêtrière* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, [1982] 2003); Jasmine Pisapia, “Archives of Pathos: Image and Survival in Ernesto De Martino’s

- Interdisciplinary Ethnography,” *Visual Ethnography* 2, no. 1 (2013): 1–26, <http://doi.org/10.12835/ve2013.1-0012>; Schäuble, “Images of Ecstasy and Affliction.”
- 26 Ernesto de Martino, *The Land of Remorse* [*La terra del rimorso. Contributo a una storia religiosa del Sud*] (London: Free Association Books, [1961] 2005), 22.
- 27 Asti Hustvedt, *Medical Muses: Hysteria in Nineteenth-Century Paris* (London: Bloomsbury, 2011).
- 28 Clara Gallini, “Percorsi, Immagini, Scritture,” in *I viaggi nel Sud di Ernesto de Martino*, ed. Clara Gallini and Francesco Faeta (Turin: Bollati Boringhieri, 1999), 18.
- 29 Schäuble, “Images of Ecstasy and Affliction.”
- 30 Diego Carpitella was an Italian ethnomusicologist, anthropologist, photographer, and filmmaker. He is considered one of the leading scholars of Italian popular music and one of the founders of scientific ethnomusicology in Italy; between 1952 and 1958 he collected more than five thousand Italian folk songs. From the beginning of the 1950s, Carpitella was part of several of the interdisciplinary teams led by Ernesto de Martino which, in changing constellations, conducted research on funerary rituals in Lucania and on tarantism in Salento. He collected musical material and made field recordings, took photographs, and occasionally also filmed. His film *Meloterapia del tarantismo* (1960)—100 meters of 16mm film—is considered to be the first Italian document of visual ethnomusicology. In 1953/1954 he also collaborated with the American ethnomusicologist Alan Lomax.
- 31 To a certain extent, Alan Lomax can be seen as a precursor to De Martino in the sense that he saw Italian folk culture—religious practices and beliefs, tales, proverbs, and musical expressions (including funeral laments) as well as material culture—as a prolific ‘counterculture’ to urban Italian high culture (i.e., opera and literature), thus linking oral traditions of Italian peasant life to the soundscapes of pre-Christian influences of the ancient Mediterranean. Recording peasants, fishermen, shepherds, and dockworkers, among others, he was interested in how their respective songs resonated different historical and cultural influences (i.e., medieval Byzantium, Greek antiquity, Islamic legacies, etc.), but also how their music reflected their current social conditions.
- 32 “About,” FLEE (website), accessed October 13, 2023, <https://fleeproject.com/about>.
- 33 Alan Marzo, Olivier Duport, and Carl Åhnebrink, *Tarantismo: Odyssey of an Italian Ritual* (FLEE 002, 2019).
- 34 Between the journeys with De Martino, Diego Carpitella had traveled to Salento together with American field collector of folk music Alan Lomax, who was to become one of the most influential ethnomusicologists of the twentieth century. In one week, from 12 to 17 August, 1954, Lomax and Carpitella produced 170 field recordings and took seventy black-and-white photographs in the Salento. Their survey of Italian folk music constitutes one of the most representative folk song collections worldwide and includes vocal and instrumental dance music; funeral laments; lullabies; folk operas for the coming of May; epic story songs; songs of protest; wedding songs; Carnival and Christmas songs; work, love, satirical, and narrative songs; as well as liturgical pieces from the folk tradition.
- 35 “Bjørn Torske & Trym Søvdsnes—Pizzica Tarantata n.026 rework,” YouTube, accessed October 13, 2023, [www.youtube.com/watch?v=xp3JcmiSfBU](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=xp3JcmiSfBU).
- 36 “LNS—Pizzica Tarantata n.014 Rework,” YouTube, accessed October 13, 2023, [www.youtube.com/watch?v=s4X1O-kWoCQ](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=s4X1O-kWoCQ).
- 37 “Uffe—Pizzica Tarantata n.015 Rework,” YouTube, accessed October 13, 2023, [www.youtube.com/watch?v=PDHXzr3D5Ic](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=PDHXzr3D5Ic).

- 38 “Don’t DJ—Pizzica Tarantata n.014 rework,” YouTube, accessed October 13, 2023, [www.youtube.com/watch?v=jKIGam31Nlg](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=jKIGam31Nlg).
- 39 “Bottin—Santa Paolu meu de Galatina (rework),” YouTube, accessed October 13, 2023, [www.youtube.com/watch?v=H1wzpXqlygQ](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=H1wzpXqlygQ).
- 40 “KMRU—Pizzica Tarantata n030 (rework),” Bandcamp, accessed October 13, 2023, <https://flee.bandcamp.com/track/pizzica-tarantata-n030-rework>.
- 41 Marzo, Duport, and Àhnebrink, *Tarantismo*, 20–21.
- 42 Chiara Samugheo, frequently referred to as ‘photographer of the stars,’ died shortly after the publication of the book.
- 43 Marzo, Duport, and Àhnebrink, *Tarantismo*, 49.
- 44 “About,” FLEE (website), accessed October 13, 2023, <https://fleeproject.com/about>.
- 45 Marzo, Duport, and Àhnebrink, *Tarantismo*, 22.
- 46 “Dior Cruise 2021 Collection.”
- 47 The writer of the article remembers her grandmother and mother having worn a *fazzoletto* during work in the tobacco fields. See [www.vanityfair.it/fashion/news-fashion/2020/07/23/christian-dior-cruise-2021-sfilata-lecce-foto-collezione](http://www.vanityfair.it/fashion/news-fashion/2020/07/23/christian-dior-cruise-2021-sfilata-lecce-foto-collezione).
- 48 “Dior a Lecce,” *la Repubblica*, accessed October 13, 2023, [https://bari.repubblica.it/cronaca/2020/07/23/foto/dior\\_a\\_lecce\\_abiti\\_modelle-262684344/1/](https://bari.repubblica.it/cronaca/2020/07/23/foto/dior_a_lecce_abiti_modelle-262684344/1/).
- 49 “Dior Cruise 2021 Collection.”
- 50 Didi-Huberman’s 1982 monograph *Invention de l’hystérie. Charcot et l’Iconographie photographique de la Salpêtrière* has been translated into English and published as *Invention of Hysteria: Charcot and the Photographic Iconography of the Salpêtrière*, trans. Alisa Hartz (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2004).
- 51 “Set Design,” accessed April 2, 2024, [www.dior.com/en\\_ch/fashion/womens-fashion/ready-to-wear-shows/cruise-2021-collection](http://www.dior.com/en_ch/fashion/womens-fashion/ready-to-wear-shows/cruise-2021-collection).
- 52 Jacques Lacan, “Propos sur l’hystérie,” *Quarto*, no. 2 (1977): 5.
- 53 Elaine Showalter, “Hysteria, Feminism, and Gender,” in *Hysteria Beyond Freud*, ed. Sander L. Gilman et al. (Berkeley, Los Angeles, and London: University of California Press, 1993), 286–344.
- 54 For example, in 2013, American sportswear company Nike printed patterns from the traditional Samoan male tattoo called *pe’a* on women’s workout leggings. Following a public outcry denouncing the disparaging and offensive use of *pe’a*, Nike withdrew the leggings. Or, more famously, in 2015, UK fashion label KTZ copied a traditional Inuit parka design onto a men’s sweater. After protest, KTZ removed the sweater from sale but did not offer any monetary compensation to the Inuit community that had developed the traditional parka design. See *WIPO Magazine*, August 2019, accessed October 13, 2023, [www.wipo.int/wipo\\_magazine/en/2019/04/article\\_0002.html](http://www.wipo.int/wipo_magazine/en/2019/04/article_0002.html).
- 55 “The Protection of Traditional Cultural Expressions: Draft Articles,” accessed October 13, 2023, [www.wipo.int/edocs/mdocs/tk/en/wipo\\_grtkf\\_ic\\_22/wipo\\_grtkf\\_ic\\_22\\_ref\\_facilitators\\_text.pdf](http://www.wipo.int/edocs/mdocs/tk/en/wipo_grtkf_ic_22/wipo_grtkf_ic_22_ref_facilitators_text.pdf).
- 56 “An Opportunity for Reinvention,” *Slimi Magazine*, accessed April 2, 2024, <https://slimimagazine.com/lifestyle/dior-cruise-2021-collection>.
- 57 Anna Nacci, *Tarantismo e neotarantismo: Musica, danza, transe* (Lecce: Salento Books, 2001).
- 58 Annunziata Dellisanti, “The Taranta—Dances of the Sacred Spider,” in *Music in Motion: Diversity and Dialogue in Europe. Study in the frame of the “ExTra! Exchange Traditions” Project*, ed. Bernd Clausen et al. (Bielefeld: transcript Verlag, 2009), 281.
- 59 Marzo, Duport, and Àhnebrink, *Tarantismo*, 23.

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### 3 Can we conserve music?

*Thomas Gartmann*

All music is ephemeral; music is an art of time. When the sound has gone, the music is over. This dilemma has long been lamented; at the same time, there is a longing for the moment to be captured and to last forever, as expressed in Goethe's *Faust*: "Beautiful moment! Do not pass away!" How can we overcome this paradox; how can we conserve music? Can music be preserved at all? If so, which parts of it?

Using a wide variety of examples, I will try to explain the challenges that arise in this process of conserving music—or at least of documenting music—and the equally diverse attempts at solutions they have provoked. In doing so, I shall focus on case studies that I have already dealt with in other contexts. A typology of music as works of art will be sketched out roughly here, and we shall endeavor to discuss the term 'work of art.'

Let us look at three different genres or, rather, categories of music, offering samples of each, though their different starting conditions and so also different characteristics mean that the problem in each case is completely different.

- A. Traditional classical music
- B. Musical improvisation
- C. Conceptual music

This classification is made for pragmatic reasons, in the knowledge that many genres are excluded here—popular music and traditional folk music in particular, which in turn obey their own laws. These categories have been chosen because each presents different problems, and therefore different solutions, to the question of how to conserve music. Music as text is not important in either genre, as it is for some of the types of music I will discuss here, but other questions play a major role, such as the division of labor in the production process, the relationship between live and streaming culture, the handling of cover versions, etc. These questions naturally also have major repercussions for the problem of conservation; in the case of traditional music on the other hand, there are also questions about oral traditions and various regional and local manifestations. We shall also exclude here any type of music whose functionality, depending on the genre, is both stylistically and ontologically



so decisive that if we neglect the context, then only a part of the music can be captured anyway.

In type A, traditional classical music, the score *is* the musical work. Music is the text. For example, a Beethoven piano sonata is documented in its notation by the composer. But is this really the musical work or not? I will discuss this later.

In type B, the case of musical improvisation, my starting example is the *Köln Concert* by the jazz pianist Keith Jarrett. Here, the documentation is a recording on vinyl (and its transformation to CD). It is a documentation of a specific concert, a unique performance given on January 24, 1975<sup>1</sup> (which, incidentally, is the top-selling jazz recording ever made, as well as the top-selling solo piano recording).

In type C, conceptual music, documentation is possible thanks to written explanations by the composer. In *4'33"* (1952), John Cage gives us the rules of the game, the rules of how to perform it, which means that the instructions both reflect the musical work and quite possibly constitute the work itself.

### **Type A: traditional classical music**

What is the musical work? This question is a very old one that has been discussed for centuries by both philosophers and musicologists.<sup>2</sup> The traditional answer in musicology is the score. But this simple answer fails to tell us which score should be authoritative. The original, handwritten score (if it is known *and* available) and any printed version(s) might differ from each other. And after the establishment of an initial version, others may follow—there might not only be a series of different editions, but might even be different versions of the same manuscript.

Revised versions—discrete, later versions by the composer—are not always ‘better.’ Today, music critics and conductors often prefer the first version (the *Urfassung*) of some symphonies by Robert Schumann or Anton Bruckner, instead of the later versions that the composers wrote in the wake of hostile reactions from the critics or bad performances, and after they had themselves acquired a negative aural impression of their work. Some composers have also tried to follow well-meaning advice from friendly musicians by trying to smooth out their music or make it easier to play. This has provoked controversy down to the present day about the merits and drawbacks of certain versions. Tastes can change a lot over the decades, from invoking the ‘last will and testament’ of a composer to promoting a cult of genius around the first product of their inspiration. But such assessments can also vary substantially depending on the composer. In the case of Johannes Brahms, for example, everybody seems to be happy about the revisions to which he submitted his works.

But even if the ‘correct’ score can be identified, is it only the score that constitutes the musical work? *Beyond the Score* is the programmatic title of an important book about performance by Nicholas Cook.<sup>3</sup> “Interpretation

als Kunstwerk” (“Interpretation as an Artwork”) is the title of a PhD thesis by Hermann Gottschewski.<sup>4</sup> Both epitomize the interpretive turn of recent decades. Since 1993, this programmatic, paradigmatic change marks the moment when performance studies came of age within music. It has become highly fashionable to describe, analyze, discuss, and compare different interpretations of the same composition and to construct specific interpretive concepts, schools, and networks. This was initially undertaken by journalists in music magazines, later also by the musicological community. In the world of classical music commerce, too, we can observe a turn from the composer to the interpreter that was triggered by these qualifying comparisons. From the 1970s onwards, the sleeves of LP records first mention the name of the pianist, and only then the composer’s name; alternatively, the pianist’s name is written in capital letters. The message is clear: we are here dealing with Maurizio Pollini’s Beethoven (versus, say, Alfred Brendel’s). The focus has thus shifted: the recording is the documentation of a certain *interpretation*, no matter whether it is available on CD, vinyl, shellac, magnetic tape, or any other medium.

This possibility of preserving an interpretation on a sound storage medium was not appreciated by everybody. The Romanian conductor Sergiu Celibidache, Furtwängler’s successor as head of the Berlin Philharmonic in the late 1940s, was very skeptical of recording—but also of the score. He liked to quote Gustav Mahler: “What’s written in the score? Everything except the essentials!” Celibidache went on to explain: “The score is an aid through which you can arrive at a reality that can only reveal itself through the sound. The score is only an instruction manual, a symbolic recording of values that cannot be recorded per se.”<sup>5</sup>

It is astonishing that Mahler, in particular, adopted a skeptical attitude toward the score, since he was notorious for how precisely, meticulously, and subtly he marked the individual parts in his scores with regard to expression, articulation, volume, and even the balance between various instruments. But Mahler was also one of the leading conductors of his time, the director of the Vienna State Opera and a dictatorial chief conductor in the United States. So he knew only too well how relative and inadequate any notational solution was going to be.

This was even truer in earlier times when scores had not yet become so overloaded with performance instructions. If we go back in music history to the beginning of Baroque opera, we find only a skeleton of the music—just the singing voice and the accompanying bass line, sometimes expanded by means of figures indicating the harmonies to be filled out. For each stage production, the conductor and/or the concert master (today often a musicological advisor) had to work out the instrumentation and the harmonization. Later on in history, music notation became more and more explicit and thus also more complex. This tendency also reflects the separation between composers and their performers (or between composer and performance). But the score still cannot provide information on all the parameters implied

by the music, explicitly or implicitly. Thus, for Celibidache, the score is *not* the work. But nor can it preserve an individual concert, because this is by its nature volatile. It was for this very reason that Celibidache was also skeptical of recordings, of both live and studio productions. He argued that a recording can deliver only clones of a performance, neglecting the acoustics of the concert hall, the concert atmosphere, and the tension of the very moment. This attitude resembles the essentially Romantic criticism of Walter Benjamin: “What atrophies in the age of the technical reproducibility of the work of art is its aura.”<sup>6</sup>

The position of Canadian pianist Glenn Gould (1932–1982) stands in complete contrast to that of Celibidache. Exactly in the middle of his life, at the age of just twenty-five, he decided that he would no longer communicate with his audience through live concerts, but only through recordings. He resigned from the stage and became a ‘studio freak,’ experimenting with sound manipulation and new editing techniques, exploring all the possibilities that the studio offered him. His arguments for this ‘retirement’ were that he could never play so perfectly on stage as he could in the studio and that the latter allowed him to ‘construct’ his interpretations by combining various recordings, also in a manner that would never be possible in a live situation.

Although there are fascinating television documentaries featuring Gould, he usually contented himself with making sound recordings—in other words, he reduced the concert experience to what was audible. In his video productions, he shaped the music through sweeping, emotive gestures, while clearly revealing its polyphony. On his sound recordings, however, he indulged in exaggeration, including excessive tempi and accents. He also employed his own voice on his recordings. He engaged in the kind of audible humming that we find with other, usually older musicians, and at times he even sang along in a kind of melodic counterpoint that one could in fact transcribe.

Reference works of the classical music canon, such as Ludwig Beethoven’s late *Diabelli Variations* or his *Fifth Symphony*, have each been recorded in over a hundred possible (and at times musically impossible) realizations. Thomas Glaser,<sup>7</sup> Lars E. Laubhold,<sup>8</sup> and other authors have analyzed these interpretations, discussing their similarities, differences, and interdependencies, categorizing them and using them to elucidate certain traditions and even schools of performance. Their contributions make clear just how much recordings can influence other interpretations and exert a style-forming impact. Or, as a young junior high school student exclaimed to me, summing up the different interpretations that I presented in class: “So a conductor can really destroy a musical work!”

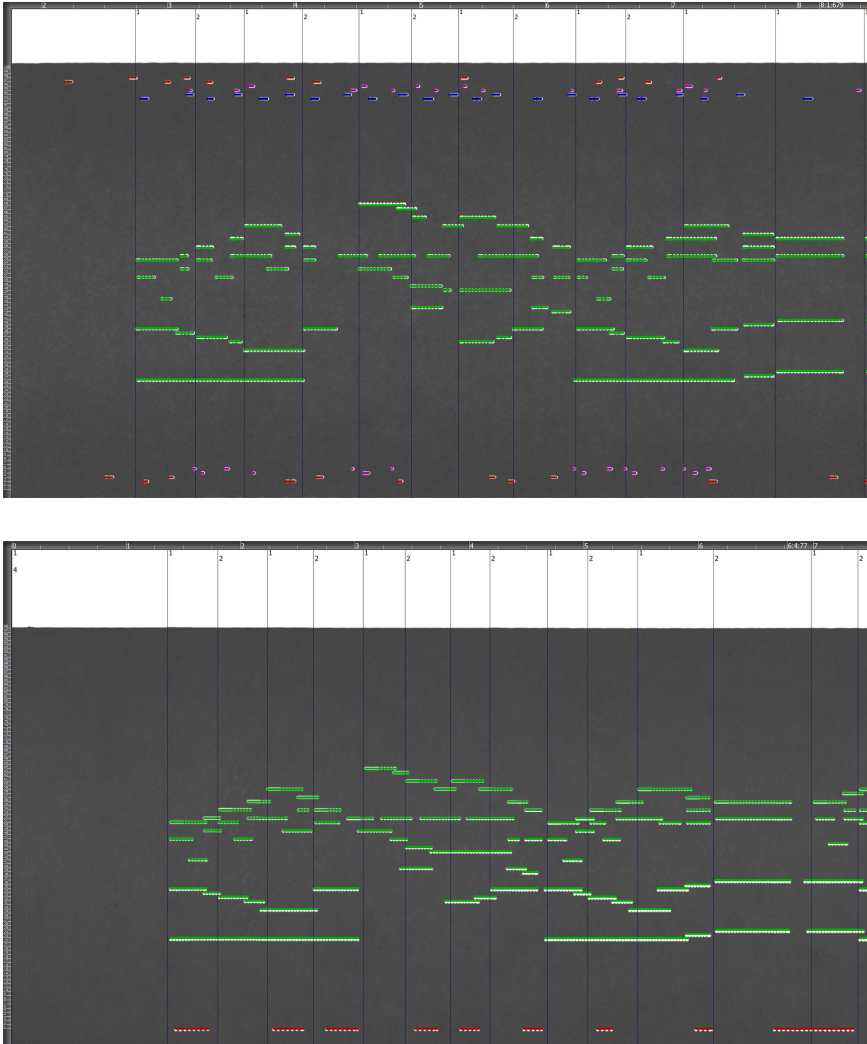
Thanks to the interpretive turn and also to new technological features, performance studies has recently cast a backward glance on a very old recording system that is also in a way highly modern: piano rolls used in so-called ‘player pianos.’ These paper rolls capture, as it were, the fingerprints of the great pianists, whose interpretations were recorded using a complex piano reproduction system a hundred years ago. All the musical information is to be found in

a quasi-digital, 0–1 system of holes punched in a long roll of paper. A pneumatic motor is employed for the playback process, and the perforations in the paper determine all the parameters of the music played on the piano. Both the playback technology and the music storage medium of these reproducing pianos make them early precursors of today's digital musical instruments. Music reproduction using digital technology may finally have lost its aura, but automatic pianos can bring it back, especially when one sees how the piano keys move up and down, almost as if they were being played by a ghost.<sup>9</sup>

A project series that began seventeen years ago is enabling us to digitize these music rolls, to analyze them, and even to allow for different 're-enactments' that can let us feel different pianistic interpretations with our own fingers. Thanks to a MIDI interface, this new digital feature even allows for different kinds of embodied experience. For example, one can play along with one's favorite great pianist or composer of the past, using just one's left or right hand (with the pianist from the past playing the other hand). One can also experiment with different versions of certain bars, including one's own interpretation, exploring the range of opportunities available. Experimenting with this interactive mode can broaden one's horizons, helping one to find a new freedom of interpretation and to sense the spirit of past traditions. These have often been completely obscured by the later pianistic mainstream, which arose in the 1950s, in which most people endeavor to emulate certain 'benchmark' recordings, whether in an entrance examination for a music academy or an international piano competition. This process of assimilation brings with it a loss of the individuality that had so strongly characterized piano playing a hundred years earlier.

The digitalization of piano rolls can also enable us to adopt new approaches to analyzing performances both old and new by measuring them, as Heinz Loesch has shown in his book *Gemessene Interpretation. Computergestützte Aufführungsanalyse im Kreuzverhör der Disziplinen* (*Measured Interpretation: Computer-Aided Performance Analysis in a Cross-Examination of the Disciplines*).<sup>10</sup> Loesch's individual contributions mostly deal with the quantitative aspect of the music—which here, not surprisingly, primarily means the tempo, its fluctuations, and proportions. MIDI editing software often offers the ability to represent the music not only as an audio file but also graphically, i.e., as a visual reproduction of the paper rolls, including their punched holes. If we can see what we hear, then we can analyze it in our own time, just as we would with a score (a listening analysis, by contrast, is usually at a disadvantage because the music just keeps playing).

But what can we really hear, and what is the impression it makes (Figure 3.1)? Listening to these paper rolls for the first time is an adventure. Initially, it is difficult to believe the validity of the results because the interpretation we hear may have characteristics far removed from what we regard as mainstream performance style. For this reason, musicologists, journalists, and, later, music lovers too have long been skeptical of the reliability and usefulness of piano rolls as historical sources.



*Figure 3.1* A synopsis of two interpretations of the opening of the first movement of Beethoven's *Sonata op. 101*. The differences can be discerned very easily: at the top we can see the interpretation by Eugen d'Albert on a Welte roll. The dynamic control tracks (in red and magenta at the top of this image) can be recognized clearly, as can the differentiated pedal application (blue) and a plausible fingering articulation. The Hupfeld system of the Frederic Lamond recording shown below, on the other hand, cannot represent dynamics, so the application of the pedal is only schematically reproduced here. The articulation of individual notes, i.e., their attack and duration, differs visibly between the two recordings. (Please note that the color coding is available in the digital edition of this volume.)<sup>11</sup>

48

Figure 3.2 Reinecke's new, revised edition of 1880 of the *Adagio* from Mozart's *Piano Concerto K. 488*, measures 89–99.

But if one triangulates these rolls with other contemporary sources, such as practical editions, annotations by leading artists of the time, and acoustic shellac recordings of the same pianists, then one begins to believe in their reliability. And one finds that a greater range of possible interpretations existed over a hundred years ago than one could ever have expected.

Listening to the German pianist Carl Reinecke, for example, we can open the door wide, back into the early nineteenth century: Reinecke was born in 1824, when Franz Schubert and Ludwig van Beethoven were still composing their late piano pieces. In 1835, Felix Mendelssohn heard Reinecke during his first European concert tour as a child prodigy and described him as a very gracious Mozart player. Later on, Reinecke became a professor for piano and composition and the director of the Leipzig Conservatory, the leading German institution for tertiary education in music. He was thus one of the most influential personalities on the European music scene. In 1905, he recorded the *Larghetto* from Mozart's *Piano Concerto K. 537*<sup>12</sup> and the *Adagio* from *K. 488* (Figure 3.2).<sup>13</sup> Here, in these personally notated versions and his recordings, we encounter characteristic features of nineteenth-century piano playing, with spread chords, the dislocation of the hands, and freely improvised ornaments. His performance is very playful, light, even teasing. This interpretation runs utterly counter to today's mainstream performances of Mozart (and the mainstream manner of teaching his music today), where we mostly only hear what is written in the score.

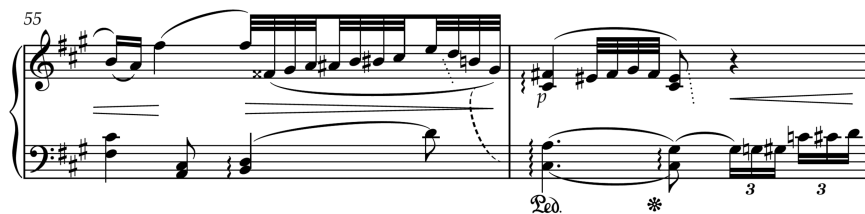


Figure 3.3 Transcription by Neal Peres Da Costa of Reinecke’s performance of the *Andante* [originally: “Adagio”], measures 55–56.

For educational purposes, Reinecke also notated a version of his richly ornamented playing.

In his printed edition, Reinecke adds pedal markings, sweeping transitions between the melodic peaks, chordal accompaniments, trills, etc., evoking a cadenza accompanied by the orchestra. In his piano roll recording, he went even further. The contemporary Australian pianist Neal Peres Da Costa has published a transcription of the version played by Reinecke, annotating the dynamics he adds, the arpeggios, the agogic accents through the extension of certain notes, the chromatic features, and the tiny ornamental notes.<sup>14</sup> Peres Da Costa has also recorded his own reenactment of Reinecke’s piano roll version, but now together with an orchestra (Figure 3.3).<sup>15</sup>

Occasions when composers play their own works can offer even greater insights. For example, Claude Debussy plays his valse *La plus que lente* on a piano roll recording of 1913<sup>16</sup> absolutely freely, as we can hear on a YouTube transfer. On a micro-level, we hear the dislocation of his hands (chords are arpeggiated, and the left hand is usually played slightly ahead of the right) and the varied agogics (the left hand is mostly played on the beat, while the right hand is more fluid, pushing forward and braking again, as described in the correspondence of Mozart and Chopin; for example, the second beat is always late, giving the music a certain frenetic, waltz-like character). And on a macro-level, the composer omits not only single notes but also some eight-bars. As a result, we are here confronted with an elegant manner of playing that is easier to listen to than to describe, along with a certain non-chalance. The music sounds fluent, sometimes hasty, occasionally fleeting, restless, even naughty. Or just: *molto rubato con morbidezza*, as Debussy himself wrote in his expression note.

One might reasonably protest here that these features are mere errors of a nervous musician lacking in concentration. But we can find comparable contradictions between the written score and its recorded version in the case of the composer-pianist Ferruccio Busoni. These ‘misinterpretations’ occur not just once, but consistently in different recordings over a space of twenty years. This naturally raises the open question: why didn’t the composer just make a new edition and change his printed score?

Let us go to the opposite scenario and have a look at a typus where the musicians did not at all have in mind to conserve an interpretation. On the contrary, it is the listener who wants to conserve his or her personal and unique impression. Let us here consider a special case where extant recordings had neither been intended nor officially permitted, and thus embody a certain authenticity that remains unrepresented by other recordings. In recent years, much interest has been devoted to ‘bootlegs,’ unauthorized, secret live recordings made by someone in the audience, for example by hiding a tape recorder under their seat. These are not official documents that have been controlled by the artists or their producers. They are unofficial, with all the concomitant technical, ethical, and legal problems entailed. But they bring us very close to the reality of daily artistic life, and such bootlegs enable us to follow and research the career of a certain singer in their good moments and bad moments, or the evolution of performance practice and preferences at a particular opera house. These bootlegs have undergone no post-production or technical manipulation and can provide us with an aesthetic testimony of a specific night at the opera. They also feature elements that recordings usually aim to avoid, such as the sound of people walking on stage, the audience’s reactions, applause, even comments spoken by the bootlegger to their neighbor in the next seat. But the sound quality can also be deficient, and sometimes it is almost impossible to recognize acoustic details. What counts here is the atmosphere of a special event. Preserving this memory is one of the main reasons why bootleggers do what they do. Another is their desire to capture as much as they can of a singer they idolize and to have the chance to repeat at will all the ‘divine’ moments they have experienced, again and again. Perhaps even more importantly, bootlegging allows these unique moments to be kept alive for the bootlegger alone and no one else—or to share clandestinely only with his or her friends.

### **Type B: improvisation**

Big questions also arise in type B. As we have seen with Reinecke’s quasi-improvised interpolations, committing to paper these presumably more-or-less spontaneously invented passages has a special appeal and value precisely because they are unique and relate to a specific performance or recording. This is naturally even more pronounced in music where improvisation is essential, where the unexpected and the surprising become programmatic, and such spontaneity is the main attraction.

But what is an improvisation? Is an improvisation repeatable, or is every repetition of an improvisation a paradox? And what is the ontological status of a recorded improvisation?

The recording of an improvisation signifies the potential repetition of the unrepeatable. One might call such recordings ‘frozen’ versions because they are a documentation of the performance, not of the interactive improvisational



process. Yet the process is also the aim of improvisation. Is it nevertheless possible to capture it? Or at least to get an insight into what is actually going on?

It is very rare for the process of an improvisation to be documented in two different versions with a different approach at the same time, on CD and DVD.<sup>17</sup> Elsewhere,<sup>18</sup> I discuss one exceptionally original project of this kind by the Swiss improvising trio Koch-Schütz-Studer, entitled *Play it again, 30 times differently*, which explores the paradox of recording freely improvised music, given that every performance is at once unique and yet simultaneously represents the same ongoing improvisational process. That is to say, this project dramatizes the fact that the trio's music is infinitely repeatable (as long as they continue to play together) and yet always new. It is an experiment about and against the dogmatic proscription of repetition in free improvisation.

To illustrate the phenomenon of improvisation and its challenges, I like to use a comparison that may seem strange at first glance. A musical improviser faces the same dilemma as the young boy in Heinrich Kleist's romantic novella *Das Marionettentheater* (*The Puppet Theater*): he elegantly pulls a thorn out of his foot, but as soon as the movement in the mirror seems so graceful to him that he wants to repeat it, he loses spontaneity and therefore innocence and naturalness. What Kleist demands of the marionette player also applies to the improviser: will and consciousness must be switched off because they act as a censoring instance.<sup>19</sup>

The prohibition of repetition is one of the most important dogmas of free improvisation. It is explained by the paradox that improvising means inventing something out of the moment, and that this 'something' is possible only once. This is especially true if one wants to repeat both the moment itself and the associated experience of happiness attained through the flow—both for the musicians and the audience.

A recording of an improvisation aims to achieve the repeatability of something that is unique and unrepeatable. Improvisations cannot be 'recorded' in the true sense of the word because each recording only fixes the sonic result that has been captured, rather than the ongoing practice that produced it. Curated CDs, on the other hand, are not mere images of the past, but carefully designed reflections on it: new versions of concert events, created by a process of selection and montage, which obey the individual dramaturgy of a CD production. Unlike Walter Benjamin's dictum that a work of art loses its aura through technological reproducibility, it is in fact only through this transformation that audio carriers, which can now be replayed at will, acquire the status of artworks. In some cases, as with Keith Jarrett's *Köln Concert*, they can even attain a cult character. The album has been a bestseller for half a century. Many legends are told around it, Jarrett became a pop star because of it, and the recording became the epitome of improvisation, but also background music and acoustic wallpaper in numerous novels—and the personification of the 'New Age' of the mid-1970s.

The sonic result is as fleeting as the interactive process of the musicians that led to it. To what extent can this aspect of improvisation be traced, reconstructed, and documented? In the audio-only recording of CDs you have only the product but no conservation of the dynamic process. Only film might offer an adequate reflection of an improvisation concert, precisely because it tells its own story and can penetrate to the core of the improvisation with radical interventions in editing and condensation. In Peter Liechti's video version of *Play it again*,<sup>20</sup> one can gain many insights into the workings of the improvisation trio thanks to the radical editing process to which the recorded audiovisual material was subjected, together with short examples of the improvisational process, statements from the musicians involved, and recordings of their discussions. The film takes the live experience and creates the paradox of composed improvisation. In this way, it does not only present the sonic results in documented form, i.e., improvisation as sound, for they are transformed into a work of art *sui generis* through montage and post-production. The film thus reflects not just the product of an improvisation, but also the essence of improvisation: the interaction, the process.

### Type C: conceptual music

As we have seen, music achieves its effect very much by way of the unpredictable, through the personal ideas of the performers. In other words, even though its essence may appear to be the unchanging, written score, music—either composed or improvised—depends on the special moment, the 'here and now.' Making this experience repeatable, even though it actually contradicts the essence of the art of music, has long been the desire of many musicians and of the music industry. The latter has to satisfy the appetite of the audience, including those who cannot attend live concerts for financial, geographical, or social reasons, or do not want to. In addition, certain musicians have a kind of obsession with making themselves and their own interpretations immortal. The star conductor Herbert von Karajan (1908–1989), for example, was particularly prone to this tendency, re-recording his interpretations of key works from his symphonic repertoire on every newly invented medium. He was also one of the most important ambassadors for Sony when it introduced the compact disc. And because he also wanted to control his own visual identity, even into the last years of his life, von Karajan organized yet another recording cycle on what was the newest medium of the time, the laser disc, where he literally put himself in the best light each time. The sheer quantity of his recordings means that cultural TV broadcasters such as Mezzo still draw on them, even though von Karajan himself has long since lost his leading status among critics and audiences, and his autocratic style of interpretation seems outdated today. The proof can be found not least in the considerable slump in the sales of his recordings.

Karajan might have been a control freak who wanted to impose his own readings on the warhorses of classical music long after his death, but composers like Max Reger also overloaded their scores with the most nuanced performance instructions, despite knowing that every authoritarian effort is ultimately in vain as soon as one hands over the notes to the performer. The conceptual composer John Cage, on the other hand, was situated at the opposite pole and acted with the utmost conceivable restraint by making his musical idea of four minutes and thirty-three seconds of silence available as an inspiration for one's own actions, so that we might do something with it ourselves.

Any attempt to preserve, conserve, and document a performance of this work would contradict the very essence of it, for the compositional intention here is not to ensure its repeatability and thus its best possible dissemination (as would be the case with a 'traditional' work). It lies instead in its modest, open offer of the greatest possible variability: of setting, instrumentation, musical design (or even theatrical design), and even duration—though practically all realizations of the work orient themselves on the indication given in its title, 4'33", as we shall see in a moment.

In his "Lecture on Nothing," published for the first time in Luciano Berio's contemporary music journal *incontri musicali* in August 1959, Cage formulated a general critique of any recording, his reasons being bound up with the notion of creativity:

A lady from Texas said: I live in Texas. We have no music in Texas. The reason they've no music in Texas is because they have recordings in Texas. Remove the records from Texas and someone will learn to sing.<sup>21</sup>

The question of for whom a performance of Cage's 4'33" could or should be preserved must thus be answered here in a fundamentally different way than for the other genres previously discussed. It would be addressed to scholars who wished to investigate the range of all possible interpretations, or the respective reactions of the audience (who are, after all, part of the work's realization). And as for historians who would like to document the unique event—what wouldn't we give to see the stoic calm with which pianist and composer David Tudor celebrated its world premiere, the amazement and increasing restlessness of the audience, and probably also the serene Buddha-like smile of Cage himself, with which he acknowledged each performance of his concepts! Indeed, there might be more to see than to hear! Finally, there is probably another tiny target group: musicians who want to be inspired by earlier performances because they themselves can barely figure out what to do with the concept of the work (though they should perhaps leave it well alone because they clearly have not understood the essence of it). Be that as it may, in all these cases, any purely acoustic documentation would by nature be a completely inaccessible object—just imagine a CD track with 4'33" of silence (abstracting from possible noises during the performance).

But audiovisual documentation of the work can be found in abundance, including easily accessible videos on YouTube.

In *4'33"* (1952), which was composed exactly in the middle of Cage's life (1912–1992), the first notated score comprises only the expression 'tacet,' printed in words three times, once each for its three movements. An explanatory note offers performers complete freedom of instrumentation and records the key information about its world premiere as one possibility for its performance (Figure 3.4):

The title of this work is the total length in minutes and seconds of its performance. At Woodstock, N.Y., August 29, 1952, the title was 4'33" and the three parts were 33", 2' 40", and 1' 20". It was performed by David Tudor, pianist, who indicated the beginnings of parts by closing, the endings by opening, the keyboard lid. However, the work may be performed by any instrumentalist or combination of instrumentalists and last any length of time.

This last indication is of special interest because all later performances in fact took this description of the premiere as their model and copied the act of demonstratively closing and opening the instrument. The duration specified in the title also remained an untouchable taboo, even though Cage made it absolutely optional in his instructions.

In earlier versions of the piece, the music was not described verbally, but in a more musical form of notation, with staves and rests in proportional notation indicating adequate spaces for every movement. The effect of this difference seems mostly psychological: when given the later, and more open version, I suppose, musicians seem to feel freer and more relaxed, according to my observations and the answers I found from the flutists concerning our next example.

We observe the same phenomenon when studying the two different versions of Luciano Berio's *Sequenza* for flute solo. The first<sup>22</sup> is notated in space notation and was used by the Italian semiotics professor Umberto Eco as a paradigm of his concept of the 'open work' (*opera aperta*),<sup>23</sup> where the musician has to 'fulfill' the work (Figure 3.5). Here again, musicians tend to prefer the more open version in (rhythmic) space notation to the later, more explicit, exactly measured notation, although for the composer himself it was the other way around. Berio, after having attended several performances of the work and before the first recording by the famous Swiss flutist Aurèle Nicolet, claimed that those performing his piece in a too-open manner (as had been suggested by Umberto Eco) were victims of a misunderstanding. In a letter to Nicolet that was later copied by generations of flutists and their students, Berio transcribed the very beginning of the composition in a rhythmically exact (but mathematically ambiguous) manner and announced that he was planning a completely new edition, when he had the time to do it. This second version was published several decades later by Universal Edition<sup>24</sup> in

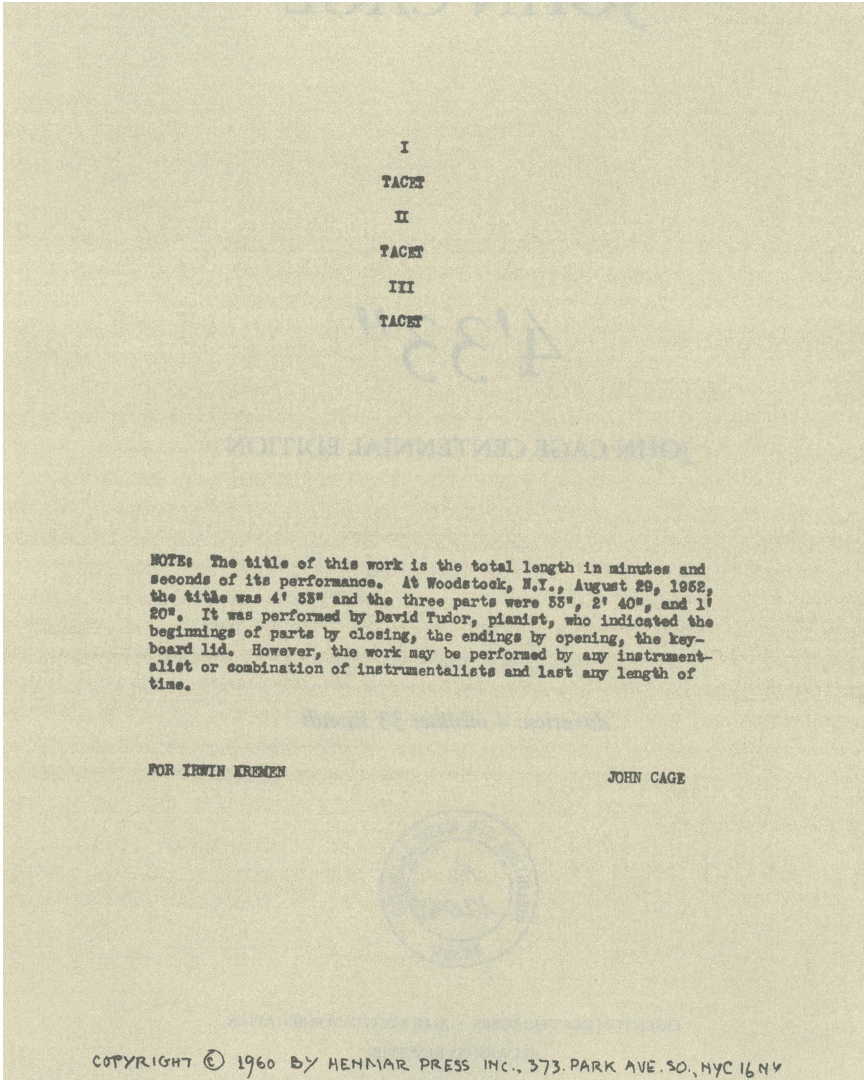


Figure 3.4 John Cage, 4'33". 'Verbal Version' from 1965, indicating three movements, dedicated to American artist Irwin Kremen, with composer's note and signature. Kind permission by Peters Edition.

order for flutists to avoid the misunderstanding Berio spoke about. But as we can see, there are two stylistic traditions for performing this work in concert, each with its own notated version.<sup>25</sup> Here is Berio's letter to Nicolet:

Dear Aurèle, [...] about *Sequenza*, I thank you, first of all, for your recording which is very virtuosissimo and very surprising. But let me make some remarks. This piece has been recorded several times and,

Vergleicht man nun diese „Nicolet-Fassung“ mit der Edition bei Suvini Zerboni (SZ), wird rasch klar, worum es Berio geht:



Notenspiel 1: Fassung für Aurèle Nicolet I.



Notenspiel 2: Edition Suvini Zerboni, Z. 1.



Notenspiel 3: Universal Edition, Z. 1.

Figure 3.5 Luciano Berio, *Sequenza* (1), beginning. Synopsis of (a) *Notenspiel 1*, version in Berio's letter to Nicolet; (b) *Notenspiel 2*, original version printed in 1958; (c) later edition of 1992.

unfortunately, always in a rather imprecise way. This time I have the chance to intervene before the record is printed and I have the privilege to have a recording made by an artist like you. I don't want to lose the opportunity to have a performance that can serve as a model and reference to other performers. In your recording there is a misunderstanding: it is with regard to the proportions of the times and speed. It is not so much a question of a faster or slower tempo but—once the tempo has been chosen—of the proportions of the durations. It happens, as a consequence, that it is also necessary to choose a tempo (I have indicated MM 70, which must be interpreted in a flexible way) which allows one to respect these proportions of duration. It is true that these proportions, because of the type of notation adopted, will always be a bit approximate. But I have chosen this 'proportional' notation only to allow a certain accommodation on the part of the

interpreter, in the extremely dense and fast passages. Each flutist can therefore adapt the degree of speed, but always keeping the proportions indicated. For example, the beginning of the piece can be considered like this:

(see Figure 3.5a)

This is not meant to be a criticism but simply a friendly discussion. I know that my note for *Sequenza*'s performer is too brief, and I understand very well how such a misunderstanding can take place.—Best regards, Luciano.<sup>26</sup>

This letter is clearly a statement about how to understand the musical notes correctly, claiming that *Sequenza* is not an *open* work at all, nor a conceptual one. But what should we do with musical concepts that contain such radically reduced information as Cage's, for example? How might we conserve them? We can collect them in their verbalized or graphic form, we can categorize them, and we can preserve them. This is the procedure adopted by a research project undertaken by the composer Urs Peter Schneider at HKB that resulted in an anthology of four hundred musical concepts.<sup>27</sup> Of course, this edition is especially important for works that have only survived in manuscript form and have never been printed.

If a Baroque opera gives us only the skeleton of the music, an abstract musical concept gives us only a sketch: the idea behind the work. But how can we give life to this concept? How might we interpret it? And how might we conserve our own interpretation of it? And what is gained by doing so?

Preserving the work here also means video documentation, listening to the reactions of the audience and performers as eyewitnesses. Nevertheless, even a concept with such openness does not offer *carte blanche* for an 'anything goes' approach. The Zurich Opera House staged Cage's *Europeras* in 1991—a work that is not as open as *4'33"*, but that offers a good deal of freedom to its participants. On this occasion, some of the musicians abused this freedom to such a degree that Cage felt it necessary to react with an angry letter, accusing them of destroying his work. In reply, they put a question mark after the word 'work' on the notice board of the Opera House.

Cage's *4'33"* is certainly the most radical work of art in the history of music because here the author's intention and creative will have been reduced to the smallest conceivable minimum, while chance, or rather the creative agency of the performers, is given the greatest possible freedom. Cage's piece and his philosophy were strongly influenced by the Zen master Suzuki Shunryū, and when he presented *4'33"* at the hotspot of advanced contemporary music in Darmstadt in 1958, it was as if a bomb had exploded. His way of thinking immediately aroused the great interest of Pierre Boulez, at the time the main representative of serial music with the greatest possible control of all musical parameters. This great contrast between total openness and equally total determination—two approaches whose aural results are in

fact not so different—led to a long correspondence between the two men, marked by mutual interest and friendship.<sup>28</sup>

In a 1974 conversation with Jeff Goldberg, Cage explained his intentions regarding his work:

I think perhaps my own best piece, at least the one I like the most, is the silent piece . . . I wanted my work to be free of my own likes and dislikes, because I think music should be free of the feelings and ideas of the composer. I have felt and hoped to have led other people to feel that the sounds of their environment constitute a music which is more interesting than the music which they would hear if they went into a concert hall.<sup>29</sup>

This radical statement against music (or arguably for it!) stakes out a position quite contrary to that of the authoritative composers and performers we encountered previously. In an earlier conversation, held in 1968 with John Kobler, Cage commented on his concept of silence. Here we find striking parallels to improvisation. He talks not just about “unintentional” music and the necessity to completely empty one’s head before playing (or composing), but also about the adventure of the unpredictable, and about the inclusion of the audience and its reactions:

They missed the point. There’s no such thing as silence. What they thought was silence [in 4’33”], because they didn’t know how to listen, was full of accidental sounds. You could hear the wind stirring outside during the first movement [in the premiere]. During the second, raindrops began patterning the roof, and during the third the people themselves made all kinds of interesting sounds as they talked or walked out.<sup>30</sup>

Almost proudly, thirty years after the premiere, he told Michael John White about the lasting effect of his most radical piece: “People began whispering to one another, and some people began to walk out. They didn’t laugh—they were irritated when they realized nothing was going to happen, and they haven’t forgotten it 30 years later: they’re still angry.”<sup>31</sup>

Even today, live in concert and on YouTube, one can encounter a huge variety of possible interpretations of Cage’s most famous piece. As a key piece of modern music history, 4’33” is often performed by many diverse ensembles and in diverse settings—and with many different audiences. Their reactions also depend on how the piece is framed and the expectations of the spectators and listeners. Especially when there is seemingly nothing to hear, one can listen to the noises of the environment (performances with open doors and windows can be especially attractive) and of the audience as a main co-player. In this musical concept, the audience is part of the game. This is a categorial difference: in the triangle composition–performance–reception, in type C there is an important shift to the last, to the audience, that fulfills



a work (as it is the interpreter of an open work). So an audio-only recording would be problematic, insofar as—depending on the recording design and its microphone settings—it may just catch more or less of the atmosphere and the reactions of the audience. But even then, similarly to type B, this cannot portray the musician’s actions but only the reactions. And, concerning this reaction to a unique performance, you have to respect another fact: this concept works for each listener only the first time. It is like Joseph Haydn’s *Surprise Symphony*: you can’t get the same surprise twice.

Can we conserve music? Yes, we can! As we have shown, since the age of technical reproducibility, it has been possible to preserve almost all kinds of musical performances. However, depending on the type, very different problems arise, and very different solutions are found. But as different as these solutions are, what they have in common is the challenge of having to deal with a paradox: conservation allows for the repetition of something unique, but this ‘same’ that is generated by these repetitions is always perceived anew.

## Notes

- 1 Keith Jarrett, *The Köln Concert* (Munich: ECM 1064/65, CD, 2 LPs).
- 2 See Carl Dahlhaus and Hans E. Eggebrecht, *Was ist Musik?* (Heinrichshofen: Heinrichshofen, 1985).
- 3 Nicholas Cook, *Beyond the Score: Music as Performance* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014).
- 4 Hermann Gottschewski, *Die Interpretation als Kunstwerk. Musikalische Zeitgestaltung und ihre Analyse am Beispiel von Welte-Mignon-Klavieraufnahmen aus dem Jahre 1905* (Laaber, Germany: Laaber, 1993).
- 5 “Gespräch mit dem Dirigenten Sergiu Celibidache,” *Süddeutsche Zeitung*, June 28–29, 1980. The original German runs: “Die Partitur ist ein Hilfsmittel, damit Sie zu einer Wirklichkeit kommen, die dann nur durch den Klang sich offenbaren kann. Die Partitur ist nur eine Gebrauchsanweisung, ein symbolisches Festhalten von Werten, die an sich gar nicht festzuhalten sind”; Mahler’s dictum in the original German is: “Was steht in der Partitur? Alles, nur das Wesentliche nicht!”
- 6 Walter Benjamin, *Das Kunstwerk im Zeitalter seiner technischen Reproduzierbarkeit* (1935), first published as *L’œuvre d’art à l’époque de sa reproduction mécanisée*, trans. and shortened by Pierre Klossowski in *Zeitschrift für Sozialforschung* 5, no. 1 (1936): 40–66.
- 7 Thomas Glaser, “Formgestaltung aus aufführungspraktischer Perspektive. Zur Interpretationsgeschichte von Beethovens 33 Veränderungen über einen Walzer von A. Diabelli op. 120” [“The Shaping of Form from a Practical Performance Perspective: The Performance History of Beethoven’s 33 Variations on a Waltz by A. Diabelli op. 120”], *Zeitschrift der Gesellschaft für Musiktheorie*, special issue, 18 (2021): 253–85, accessed February 8, 2023.
- 8 Lars E. Laubhold, *Von Nikisch bis Norrington. Beethovens 5. Sinfonie auf Tonträger. Ein Beitrag zur Geschichte der musikalischen Interpretation im Zeitalter ihrer technischen Reproduzierbarkeit* (Munich: Edition Text & Kritik, 2014).
- 9 This is why an outreach project of the Bern Academy of the Arts is called ‘Magic Piano.’ It offers workshops, concert lectures, master classes, videos, and a website featuring many piano rolls as well as the current state of knowledge about piano roll techniques and the results of performance studies. Magic Piano, website, accessed February 8, 2023, [www.magic-piano.ch/en/](http://www.magic-piano.ch/en/).

- 10 Heinz von Loesch and Stefan Weinzierl, eds., *Gemessene Interpretation. Computergestützte Aufführungsanalyse im Kreuzverhör der Disziplinen* (Mainz: Schott, 2011).
- 11 Manuel Bärtsch, “‘Interpretation’: Beethovens Sonate A-Dur op. 101 in der Sicht von Eugen d’Albert und Frederic Lamond,” in *Rund um Beethoven. Interpretationsforschung heute*, ed. Thomas Gartmann and Daniel Allenbach (Schliengen, Germany: Argus, 2019), 116–49, here 55. Author’s translation.
- 12 “Carl Reinecke (1824–1910): Mozart—Piano Concerto in D K.537—Larghetto,” YouTube, accessed February 10, 2023, [www.youtube.com/watch?v=NYEZir3HDJk&t=18s](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=NYEZir3HDJk&t=18s).
- 13 “Reinecke plays Mozart Piano Concertos 23 & 26 (Fragments) Roll recordings c. 1905,” YouTube, accessed February 10, 2023, [www.youtube.com/watch?v=C\\_ELXJNMIE8&t=6s](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=C_ELXJNMIE8&t=6s).
- 14 Neal Peres Da Costa, “Carl Reinecke’s Performance of His Arrangement of the Second Movement from Mozart’s *Piano Concerto* k. 488: Some Thoughts on Style and the Hidden Messages in Musical Notation,” in *Rund um Beethoven: Interpretationsforschung heute*, ed. Thomas Gartmann and Daniel Allenbach (Schliengen, Germany: Argus, 2019), 116–49.
- 15 “The Mozart K.488 Project with Neal Peres Da Costa,” Australian Romantic & Classical Orchestra (website), accessed February 1, 2023, [www.arco.org.au/the-k488-project](http://www.arco.org.au/the-k488-project).
- 16 “Claude Debussy Plays *La plus que lente* (Valse) in 1913,” YouTube, accessed February 1, 2023, [www.youtube.com/watch?v=mpng2qPV6HY&t=9s](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=mpng2qPV6HY&t=9s).
- 17 Koch-Schütz-Studer, *Tales from 30 Unintentional Nights*, Intakt CD 117 (2006); Koch-Schütz-Studer, *Hardcore Chambermusic—A Club for 30 Days*, film by Peter Liechti, 72 mins., Intakt DVD 131 (2007).
- 18 Thomas Gartmann, “Repeatability versus Unrepeatability in Free Improvisation,” in *The Routledge Handbook of Philosophy and Improvisation in the Arts: Routledge Handbooks in Philosophy*, ed. Alessandro Bertinetto and Alessandro Ruta (London: Routledge, 2021), 392–404, here 392, <https://doi.org/10.4324/9781003179443>.
- 19 This paragraph is a reworked version of the author’s German essay “Freie Improvisation zwischen romantischer Poetik und Avantgarde—10 Paradoxien,” *Kulturelemente 169: Zeitschrift für Kultur und aktuelle Fragen*, 2023, accessed March 29, 2023, <https://kulturelemente.org/2023/03/29/169-die-kunst-der-improvisation>.
- 20 Koch-Schütz-Studer, *Hardcore Chambermusic*.
- 21 John Cage, “Lecture on Nothing,” *Incontri Musicali* (August 1959): 109–26, here 126.
- 22 Luciano Berio, *Sequenza* (Milan: Suvini Zerboni, 1958).
- 23 Umberto Eco, *Opera aperta: Forma e indeterminazione nelle poetiche contemporanee* (Milan: Bompiani, 1962); published in English as: *The Open Work*, trans. Anna Cancogni (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1989).
- 24 Luciano Berio, *Sequenza I* (Vienna: Universal Edition, 1992).
- 25 For more details, see Thomas Gartmann, “Das offene Kunstwerk—neu erschlossen: Zu Luciano Berios Überarbeitung der Sequenza,” in *Musik denken. Ernst Lichtenbahn zur Emeritierung*, ed. Antonio Baldassarre (Bern: Peter Lang, 2000), 219–34; Thomas Gartmann, “Das neu erschlossene Offene Kunstwerk: Luciano Berios Überarbeitungen der Sequenza,” in *Musikkonzepte—Konzepte der Musikwissenschaft: Bericht des Kongresses—Halle 1998*, vol. 2, ed. Kathrin Eberl et al. (Kassel: Bärenreiter, 2000), 611–17.
- 26 Translated from French by the author, original in Gartmann, “Das neu erschlossene Offene Kunstwerk.”
- 27 Urs Peter Schneider, *Konzeptuelle Musik: Eine kommentierte Anthologie*, ed. Thomas Gartmann and Marc Kilchenmann (Bern: aart Verlag, 2016).

- 28 Robert Piencikowski, ed., *Pierre Boulez—John Cage: Correspondance et Documents*, 2nd ed. (Mainz: Schott, 2002).
- 29 Richard Kostelanetz, *Conversing with Cage*, 2nd ed. (New York and London: Routledge, 2003), 70.
- 30 Kostelanetz, *Conversing with Cage*, 70.
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## 4 Curating performance as conservation? Thoughts on *Queer Communion: Ron Athey*

*Amelia Jones*

The question of conservation haunts performance art. Most discourses around the medium dwell on its ephemerality, whereas conservation in the contexts of visual art and of archives tends to imply (rightly or not) the freezing or stabilizing of a work out of a desire to maintain its original form over time. Notoriously, in this regard, performance studies scholar Peggy Phelan wrote in 1993: “Performance’s only life is in the present. Performance cannot be saved, recorded, documented, or otherwise participate in the circulation of representations of representations: once it does so, it becomes something other than performance.”<sup>1</sup> But, while respecting the specificity of Phelan’s argument (after all, there is no point in arguing that a performance art event can be the same in a conserved or historicized form), I have long focused, rather, on the ways in which we *do* understand performances after they have been enacted.<sup>2</sup>

It was out of this research interest—how can we understand the complexities of a performance after the fact?<sup>2</sup>—that I developed the project I describe here.<sup>3</sup> These questions of how to present performance art so as to honor its vitality as a live form were foremost in my mind over the decade in which I researched, planned, and curated the exhibition *Queer Communion: Ron Athey*, which was presented in New York City and Los Angeles in 2021 (Figures 4.1 and 4.2).<sup>4</sup>

This project allowed me to explore how curatorial practice could be a place to experiment with alternative ways of productively historicizing and providing new ways of experiencing live art, after the fact of its live enactment. Rather than attempting to create a fixed or final representation of performance art works by ‘curating’ a show of an artist’s individual performances—which would be impossible since live art is not an object to be placed in a gallery—I specifically set out to explore how to honor the complexities of a *lived career of performance* through the formation of queer communities in and around the Los Angeles-based artist Ron Athey. The argument I put forth was that Athey’s work is better understood by an overall view of his lived creative modes, connected to the various communities and aesthetics he has engaged and elaborated in his work and life.



Figure 4.1 Installation view of *Queer Communion*: Ron Athey, Participant Inc, New York; February 2021; photograph by Daniel Kukla.



Figure 4.2 Installation view of *Queer Communion*: Ron Athey, Institute of Contemporary Art, Los Angeles, June 19–September 5, 2021; photograph by Jeff McLane/ICA LA.

To this end, *Queer Communion: Ron Athey* was NOT an exhibition of performance art per se (that would be impossible), nor a conservation of the work in the traditional sense noted earlier. It was, rather, an exhibition of a performance/creative life and career, structured around the framework of community. This logic was carried through in the catalogue (which I co-edited with Andy Campbell) as well, and it now remains (as with documentation of the exhibition and the experience of those who attended it) as a reminder of both Athey's career and the curatorial project. This essay explores both aspects of that project in an elaboration of my experience with Athey's work across two decades, another layer of the story that becomes in turn a mode of 'conservation,' and thus yet another echo of Athey's creative life, his performances, and his queer communities.

### "Curating" the live?

In my view, curating (in the conventional sense of organizing objects and/or putting things in spaces designated for visual art) can be a form of recalling performance, but not of 'correctly' conserving or representing it. This is because the museum was invented and designed by Europeans to contain and freeze objects as exemplars of groups of people: the art museum houses the high-status objects that Europeans make; the natural history museum houses the low-status objects produced by Indigenous and other 'others,' whose cultures and selves are rendered subhuman, obsolete, 'dead,' subsumed by this mode of presentation. These two forms of conservation have a dark history.<sup>5</sup>

Performance art, as I have argued persistently throughout my career, is not more or less authentic as a live practice than static visual art works are. That said, performance art works are ontologically specific and different from the latter.<sup>6</sup> (I will not address here the cases in which performance artists might test the boundaries of this ontology, sometimes through technologies of extending the 'live' body in time and space.) In most cases, performance art involves live bodies in physical spaces and takes place over time (the living body takes place over time; thus, even a living body sitting still is 'taking place' in a temporal way). If a live body is treated as an object in a space associated with the display of static art works—as with Marina Abramović's 2010 retrospective at the Museum of Modern Art, New York, *The Artist is Present*, where she sat still on a chair in a large atrium, across from visitors who filed in to sit staring at her one at a time—the body itself becomes reified.<sup>7</sup> This is what art museums *do*. Because Abramović doesn't question the status-giving powers of the art museum, she willingly submits herself to MoMA to transform her body into an object. Abramović's body thus did not turn MoMA into a theater or transform what the museum could be (although arguably it turned the whole situation into a spectacle).

With these thoughts in mind, I knew the premise of the show could not be that it would 'present' Athey's performances, which could only mean asking Athey to perform each one of dozens of different works again in the museum

spaces. This would have resulted in fatigue and ennui for both Athey and his audiences, as well as a false sense of accommodating the intensity and complexity of performance through reenactment, a topic I and others have written about elsewhere (among other things, performances were conceived and originally performed elsewhere, so it is still a conflicted project having them enacted again in the context of an exhibition, in a different time and place).<sup>8</sup> Nor was I planning to attempt to conserve them in the museological sense previously noted. That said, I had a unique and lived relationship to the materials relating to Athey's creative career. From 2015, when he was forced out of his long-term low-rent apartment, I was, as Athey's friend, safeguarding his entire archive (including paper files, flyers, photographs, diaries, notebooks with sketches, videotapes, slides, costumes, and props from a thirty-plus-year creative life of performance), which was from 2015 onward stored in my house in assorted boxes and bins (Figure 4.3).

For years I witnessed Athey's performances but also sifted through these myriad materials, sometimes handling the very costumes or props I would have seen Athey deploy in a live performance a few months before, or read through notes and sketchbooks in which he developed ideas, or looked at boxes of analogue photographs. Clearly these materials called out to play some role in the exhibition. At the same time, they just as clearly did not fully 'represent' individual performance art works. They indicated something about Athey's larger creative process and life. And this larger life work is what I decided needed to frame the show.



*Figure 4.3* Bins of Athey props in Amelia Jones's garage, 2016; photograph by Amelia Jones.



*Queer Communion: Ron Athey* thus represented the culmination of several intertwined interests of mine, all of which touch on the contexts of curating live art as well as on its ontology and how to understand or historicize performances after they have been performed. The act of caring for the archive and curating the show as well as the exhibition itself were intensely personal—hence I felt it was imperative to make my investment and my role clear (as I do here). Putting Athey’s life work on view is no easy task for the curator, but it had to have been excruciatingly difficult in some ways for the artist whose life was displayed. Ron never wavered in giving me the space to do this work, which thus involved personal relations as well as strictly curatorial ones. Generally speaking, I will designate the artist as ‘Ron’ when writing about him as a friend, and ‘Athey’ when pointing to his professional role as an artist, even though the two are most of the time overlapping and inseparable for me. And by ‘life work’ I mean to include his performances and all the friendships, collaborations, and networks connected to them via his living creative experience.

Furthermore, I am and was drawn to Athey’s work not only because of the terror and beauty of his BDSM performances (BDSM refers to sexual practices that include bondage, dominance [or discipline], sadism, and masochism [or submission]), but due to the motivations and vitality propelling them: they bring together networks of creative queers and allies to create and socialize. In this sense, Athey’s work could be said to participate in “queer worlding,” embracing the messiness and energies of queer alliances and sensorial experiences (which, as Martin Manalansan argues, can be the “building blocks for the creation of . . . emotional and affective regimes that inaugurate worlding as messy world-making and world-critique”).<sup>9</sup> This social and creative context of Athey’s performance practice was, I decided, to be the framing device of the exhibition. *Queer Communion: Ron Athey* sought to evoke the energies of his ‘queer communion,’ signaling both queer community and the ‘communion’ of Christian religious traditions that Athey, who was trained as a Pentecostal minister during his childhood amongst a fundamentalist working-class family in suburban Southern California, often symbolically taps through his range of embodied iconography.

By extension, the exhibition also performed a particular kind of conservation, but of process and community rather than singular objects. It specifically highlighted the contexts and conflicts in curating a performance art career in a gallery context; it did not seek to resolve these, but to provide one way of thinking about them by explicitly foregrounding context. Not only did the show include, for example, a cluster of snapshots of Athey and his friends and family, flyers (some with Athey’s scrawled notes), and music from his period as a punk and queer club performer in the early 1980s and early 1990s, it placed these within their various personal and social arenas, such as the AIDS crisis and the moment of the right-wing ‘culture wars’ of the mid-1990s, in which Athey’s work played a key role. I hoped to remind visitors of the larger cultural scenes of the work (in this case, with Republican

senators using Athey's image on the floor of the US Congress to whip up anxiety and opposition based on Athey's supposed 'perversity'). The exhibition and catalogue also contextualized Athey's work, as noted, within a range of movements, and of circles of collaborators and friends, each of whom socialize with Athey and many of whom also participate in performances and/or build props, make costumes, film and photograph the work, or otherwise facilitate the production of his performances and their documentation.

I curated *Queer Communion: Ron Athey* to put his work into history in a different way from its resonances through the bodies of those who have witnessed or participated in the live performances. As what I hoped would be experienced as queer worlding exercises themselves, the exhibition and catalogue were produced to delineate without presuming fully to narrate or to contain the vitality of a creative life, a career in performance art. But the project also functions as a meditation on curating (live art) in context—on conserving it in a dynamic, experiential way. Specifically, as a member of Ron's community, and as the momentary keeper of his archive, I hoped to mobilize curating as a form of *care* (which all good historical research and exhibition-making should provide).<sup>10</sup> After all, as the editors of this collection point out, conservation and curation share etymological roots and meanings, relating to caretaking, in different European contexts. I had great hopes that the exhibition and catalogue might provide an exciting and aesthetically as well as politically dynamic access to Athey's life, work, and queer worlding.<sup>11</sup>

Following, I first turn to my own lived experience as a way of delineating what a living, caring curatorial practice of live art might look like—such a turn is crucial if I am to make the point of curating live art as an act of care. My argument is that such work has to begin with the embodied experience of the curator/scholar, the artist, the archive, the performances. There are an infinite number of other ways it could look, but this is my offering.

### Live experience

After being introduced to Athey's work by my friends Sheree Rose and Bob Flanagan in 1994 (they took me to a live performance of Athey's *Deliverance* at 18th Street Arts Complex in Santa Monica), I moved from being put off by the emotionally challenging nature of his BDSM work to embracing it in a visceral way. The switch point was in the early 2000s, when my bourgeois life collapsed around me while living in England. By 2005, Ron had also moved to the United Kingdom (he was in London, I in Manchester). I began following his work in the United Kingdom and Europe, and—due to my own state of feeling eviscerated emotionally—the work suddenly spoke to me. I felt it in a deep, embodied way and wrote about that experience in 2006.<sup>12</sup> Following that, we coincidentally moved back to Los Angeles around the same time (2014–15).

In 2016, Ron got word that his Los Angeles rent-controlled apartment of twenty-five years, his affordable haven in an increasingly priced-out city, was

being sold—the owner having passed away. He began posting alarming messages on Facebook about throwing his long-accumulated archive of props, scripts, and miscellany out on the street and torching it all. . . . His rage at the carelessness, even violent refusal to care, of contemporary late capitalist societies was fully justifiable and understandable, but his posts put me on alert. As a scholar of past art and performance histories, I couldn't let the archive go up in a billowing plume of smoke—no doubt rank and poisonous, due to its range of blood-encrusted polyester, leather, and vinyl costumes, tapes (analogue and digital), and other noxious products involved in the costumes, props, and visual documentation. Along with others, my life partner Paul and I rushed over to help; we picked up the archive in several loads. We helped Ron scoop items from half-organized drawers into plastic bins; we assisted in carrying metal filing cabinets, paper files, and box after box of costumes and props (including the five-foot-high wooden Judas Cradle featured, with Ron impaling himself on it, in the 2004–5 performance *Judas Cradle*) to our house a few miles away (Figure 4.4).

This set us off on a path of caretaking—not fully planned but embraced—in which our embodied home spaces were filled with materials relating to Ron's life work.

From 2016 to 2023 (when the last of the archive found its way back to Ron), a full array of archival materials spilled out of the small closet in my home office, with the Judas Cradle and boxes and boxes of props filling part



*Figure 4.4* Ron Athey in his garage showing beaded curtain to Amelia Jones (with Judas Cradle stored in the background), 2015; photograph by Amelia Jones.

of the garage, and related artworks adorning the walls (Franko B.'s extraordinary needlepoint portrait and Lisa Teasley's gorgeous jewel-like painting of Ron). About a year into this situation I was alerted that the J. Paul Getty Research Institute had committed to acquire his paper archive (after months of correspondence with me and Ron and others involved). With a deadline, in a panic, I realized I had only two months to sift through everything and pull out all the items needed for the exhibition—otherwise, once the Getty acquires an archive, its components are forever swallowed into the cushy storage areas of one of the wealthiest museums and art history study centers in the world. I compiled a checklist (frantically, with little sleep, and building anxiety), re-boxed the already haphazardly organized materials, and finally handed off about half of the paper archive to the Getty. Tellingly, they would not take any of the props or costumes. They deal in paper, which can be filed away. Bodily stains, messy garments, chaotic objects (such as a group of gifts Athey had received from friends over the years) have no place in the exalted collections of the Getty.

I lived with the archive as I organized the show and wrote my essays in the catalogue: to my right was Franko's portrait, over in the office closet and in the garage were boxes of reorganized writings, notebooks, sketches, tapes, costumes, hundreds of photographs and snapshots (which peter out with the advent of digital imaging, around 2000), bric-a-brac, letters, and props. . . . To some degree, it felt as if I was living *with* Ron, although sometimes a few weeks would go by before I would actually see the person for one of his world-famous body-work sessions on my aching soul and flesh or at a performance or event.

Researching an artist can be—often is—an intensely intimate act. All the more so if you live with the detritus of fifty years of their life. All the more so when they have become a beloved friend. In this context research is an honor, a burden, a fearful yet joyous responsibility—an act of care.

### The curatorial project

The idea for the *Queer Communion* project was generated many years ago out of an impulse to honor the multifarious practice of an artist who has developed and perfected modes of embodied creative expression across theater, art, opera, music; poetic, diaristic, and prose writing; social media, performance programming, and more. It is worth stressing here that in living a life in which you are honored to follow artists' careers and work over decades—I am living that lucky life—one *learns from* the work one engages. That is, I have never worked by 'applying' an external idea about performance art to Ron Athey or any other artist whose work I follow. Rather, I consider my writing and curating of artists' works to be *in dialogue* with them via their work. My ideas about performance (and performance conservation) *come from* witnessing and engaging with Ron and his work over three decades.

That said, by introducing this essay with my personal experiences of Ron's work and archive, I make it clear that an authoritative 'art-historical' approach to the project would have been impossible as well as undesirable. In the case of an exhibition catalogue, such an approach would have excluded the very voices Andy Campbell (as my co-editor) and I hoped would amplify the subcultural energies of Athey's performance and life practices. To this end, this queer feminist 'personal is political' framework was extended through my decision with Campbell to solicit other catalogue contributions that would focus on the intimacies and intensities of 'queer communion' generated through Athey's performances and central role in Los Angeles's alternative art communities. And, finally, the dirty, messy, personal approach culminated in our decision to center the book (literally) on Athey's own writings—from previously unpublished hallucinatory diaristic rants to examples of his regular late 1990s column in *Honcho*.<sup>13</sup> We had Intellect Books print these as facsimiles on a different paper stock wedged into the center of the book to mark them out as highly personal and in-process sketches and documents (Figure 4.5).

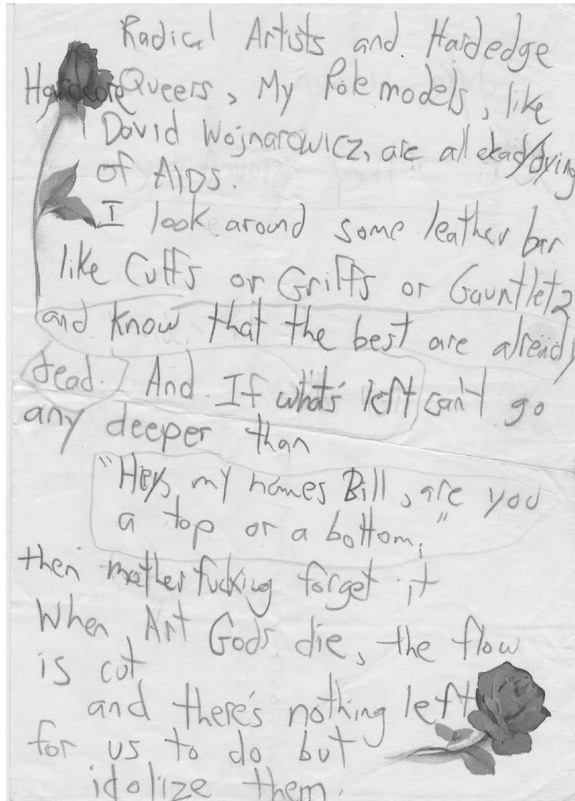
Beyond these inspirations, key questions remained. How does one curate an exhibition of the life work of a performance artist who resists institutionalization? How does one fully honor the vast and complex creative input of a cultural innovator who extends, transforms, or simply shatters previous forms of expression, an artist whose vast lifelong body of work nonetheless urgently demands some kind of historicization to preserve a sense of the energy and emotional impact of his work so that the vitality of it is not lost to history books or (worse yet) the clamor of the internet? How does one theorize Athey's role in forming, extending, and commenting on various queer subcultural communities without romanticizing and thus oversimplifying either the life work or the concept of queer community?

### **Queer communion/queer community**

From the moment of his escape as a teenager from his Pentecostal family in Pomona to the labs of the Salk Institute in La Jolla, where he was (not surprisingly, given his later penchant for BDSM practices) highly valued for his lack of squeamishness over the necessary execution of lab rats, and then the streets and punk clubs of Los Angeles, Ron Athey found ways to re-form himself powerfully in relation to the culture around him, often reshaping it in return. Studying the materials documenting his life as well as getting biographical information directly from him, I frequently found him moving very quickly to the center of the worlds he entered<sup>14</sup>—and by the time he was in his late teens, these worlds were explicitly queer. They hinged on (as Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick described such worlds) "a person's undertaking particular, performative acts of experimental self-perception and filiation."<sup>15</sup> Rather than being shaped by preexisting modes of gay male subjectivity or queer social space, Athey participated centrally in co-inventing whatever queer world he had entered, exploring and adopting some elements of them, transforming others.



"Radical Artists and Hurdedge Hardcore Queers... Dyke women, they ground me," c. 1992; handwritten diaristic musings on rose-embellished stationery



WRITING ATHEY / UNPUBLISHED

174

Figure 4.5 Ron Athey, “Radical Artists and Hurdedge Hardcore Queers . . . Dyke women, they ground me,” c. 1992; handwritten diaristic musings on rose-embellished stationery, as reproduced in facsimile in *Queer Communion: Ron Athey* catalogue, page 174.

Athey’s kind of queer aligns with what Lauren Berlant and Michael Warner have called “criminal intimacies”:

Queer and other insurgents have long striven . . . to cultivate what good folks used to call criminal intimacies. We have developed relations and narratives that are only recognized as intimate in queer culture. . . . Queer culture has learned not only how to sexualize these and

other relations, but also to use them as a context for witnessing intense and personal affect while elaborating a public world of belonging and transformation.<sup>16</sup>

These two slippery and multifarious definitions sum up what Athey's performing body/self does across various queer communities and spaces. They also articulate Athey's generosity and openness to a range of modes of intimacy, all linked via his performing body through pseudo-religious, ritualistic BDSM visuals, strategies, props, and metaphors to criminal intimacies otherwise shut down by mainstream American culture, including (perhaps especially) the art world until very recently.

The idea of queer community goes back at least to the lesbian feminist sociological work of Esther Newton and Gayle Rubin, who might not have explicitly mobilized the term 'queer' but whose work in the 1970s and early 1980s (such as Newton's influential 1972 ethnographic study of drag queen culture in US cities, *Mother Camp*, and Rubin's influential 1984 article "Thinking Sex") pivoted around what Heather Love has termed a "protoqueer model of collectivity" emphasizing "shared marginality" and "collective stigma," based on the material conditions of people excluded from social spaces on the basis of their sex/gender identifications.<sup>17</sup> But as queers of color from Cathy Cohen to Josh Chambers-Letson have pointed out, ideas about queer community can also veil a liberal universalism that is white and cis dominant and excludes otherwise minoritarian subjects from consideration or inclusion. Cohen rightly asserts that queer and other coalitional politics should align with "one's relation to power" and not "some homogenized identity." She continues: "I am talking about a politics where the nonnormative and marginal position of punks, bulldaggers, and welfare queens, . . . is the basis for progressive transformative coalition work."<sup>18</sup>

Athey's queer communities were and continue to be—emphatically and precisely—punks, bulldaggers, and welfare queens (as well as gay men, lesbians, and trans people of all identifications); they are comprised of bodies that are from all colors and classes of people and from around the world. In this context it is important to stress that Athey's navigation of the class system in the United States is nuanced and not aligned with the common educationally upper-middle-class cosmopolitan white male subjects Cohen is addressing. Athey himself grew up in a poor white family in a largely African American part of Pomona, a working-class town east of Los Angeles. And, while globally known among performance art aficionados, he continues to live at the far margins of capitalist society, always on the verge of being canceled out either by major art institutions or by landlords and tax collectors.<sup>19</sup> While queer community can be and often is claimed in a way that universalizes and excludes, a way that, per Lisa Duggan, is "homonormative" and, in Miranda Joseph's words, colludes with capitalism to "legitimate social hierarchies," it can also flourish organically out of

queer practices such as Athey's myriad performance works and performative ways of being in the world.<sup>20</sup>

My strong claim in *Queer Communion: Ron Athey* was that his queer communion consistently shifts and mutates, never residing in a singular site or way of being for queer subjects—and thus never acceding to the kinds of white-dominant, capitalized, and socially restrictive modes of community that Cohen, Duggan, and Joseph identify as a problem. For example, Athey might himself get married (for immigration purposes), but he has not agitated to normalize gay marriage (nor is he campaigning against it, ratifying a certain form of queer negativity and thereby judging those who choose to unite in the law).<sup>21</sup> His politics are in and through his work. Athey's queer communion activates what Cohen notes as “the radical potential of queer politics, or any liberatory movement, [which] rests on its ability to advance strategically oriented political identities arising from a more nuanced understanding of power.”<sup>22</sup> None of this, however, is explicitly intended as far as I can tell. It is Athey's instinct to expand and circulate within queer social spaces, exploring the role of ritual in scripting bodily pleasure and pain, bonding with those attending, and thereby forming new alliances and nodes of empowerment—this becomes a political move in the sense that he gives others (and most likely himself) hope through forming connections out of generosity and care.

### The mess of Ron Athey's archive

As Martin Manalansan has argued, queer lives are often compromised, messy, and deeply resistant to neat categorization. So, following these vicissitudes, are queer archives. The aforementioned description of Ron Athey's living space, books, and things—turned into an archive by the pressures of the harsh real estate market—makes these mutual states of messiness clear. And any scholar feels especially blessed when she encounters an archive before the archivists at highly capitalized institutions such as the Getty (wonderful as they are) get down to business and make sense of materials that were being lived with, in, and through—but might well not have had any logical organization at all in their lived state. Can we even call materials from someone's apartment an ‘archive’ if they have not been organized as such? The Getty will inevitably rationalize the archival materials and force them to make a kind of sense they in fact do not organically hold.

Certainly, this archive is messy and confusing, as well as radically incomplete (to cite one example, the masses of snapshots of Athey and his friends stop in the early 2000s with the advent of digital and smart phone photography; and the snapshots tend to be dominated by select friends who, one assumes, clearly respond to the camera, while other friends are absent or nearly so). These quirks speak to the particularity of queer communities as well as to those of shifting technologies. In Ann Cvetkovich's study of queer lives, *An Archive of Feelings*, she theorizes that “trauma challenges common



understandings of what constitutes an archive.”<sup>23</sup> In this case, the traumas that Athey mines in his performances are manifold: from the systematic abuse he faced and witnessed among family members as a child, to his radical fear and rage in navigating his HIV positive status and watching friends and lovers die, and the difficulty of continually working at the margins of the art world’s remunerative structures and being perennially on the verge of eviction.<sup>24</sup> Certainly, Athey has had little support to help him conserve his work—most of the archiving he has done himself on an ad hoc basis, and hence its vibrancy and messiness, a messiness that itself might be thought of as *queer*. This idea is expanded upon by Manalansan, who argues that it is precisely the messiness of the everyday lives of queers, who are so often living precariously, that aligns with the messiness of their living/lived archives of stuff—in the process of what he calls ‘queer worlding.’ Athey’s situation makes it clear how useless a romanticization of this lifestyle as ‘bohemian’ or ‘creative’ can be in the face of actual poverty and continual precarity—Manalansan acknowledges this paradox, and points to the way in which mess can “gesture to moments of vitality, pleasure, and fabulousness,” while also revealing serious struggles to survive.<sup>25</sup>

Such ideas, born of the relationship to queer trauma and queer archives in Cvetkovich’s and Manalansan’s work, find resonance across queer theory in ways that return us to the idea of queer community—for example, Lauren Berlant’s and Michael Warner’s interest in focusing on “forms of affective, erotic, and personal living that are public in the sense of accessible, available to memory, and sustained through collective activity.”<sup>26</sup> These theories, then, provide a way of mobilizing the concept of the archive in the service of understanding the hinge between an individual life (here, Athey’s) and the communities and collective activities relating to his life and work—which he has formed or helped constitute, and in which he has participated. As Cvetkovich and others have argued, shared suffering (or trauma) has often defined queer community—most obviously as precipitated by the AIDS crisis and societal homophobia, but in this case also through Athey’s own family upbringing and shared experience with others who have been subjected to religiously motivated and/or family abuse. Such trauma, in Cvetkovich’s argument, can bring people together and, in the most productive cases, through joined and complementary creative energies, can form alternative communities and publics that make a difference, sometimes between the possibility of survival and life and the otherwise inevitability of a harrowing hardscrabble existence at the margins and early death.

In fact, this dynamic very often takes place through *performance*, as Cvetkovich notes: “Queer performance creates publics by bringing together live bodies in space, and the theatrical experience is not just about what’s on stage but also about who’s in the audience creating community.”<sup>27</sup> José Esteban Muñoz explored this queer performative “worldmaking” as deeply connected to “queer evidence,” which is often of political necessity veiled or coded—such that “ephemera” often serves as evidence of queer acts in

history.<sup>28</sup> To his point, while Athey is arguably one of the best-known performance artists in the world among aficionados of the medium, few art historians have written about his practice, no one had ever exhibited the work in a large-scale retrospective until the exhibition in 2021, and his performance oeuvre has thus remained largely ignored by official histories of contemporary art (performance studies is another story, but even there his work has been somewhat marginalized).<sup>29</sup>

How can we ‘exhibit’ Athey’s work via archival elements without destroying its power as uncontrollable and uncommodifiable? Is it impossible? This question brings us back decisively to the question of conservation in relation to live art. By definition, any consideration of a live art work after its performance has been completed requires relying on acts of preservation (even if only through spectators’ memories, for those who experienced the work directly as it was performed). In this sense memory is *conserving* the performance and bringing it forward into the present. And of course texts on the performance and photographic or videographic documentation of it similarly play a key role. Writing about or exhibiting live art through its remains (texts, documents, videos) are inherently acts of conservation and must be understood as such. In fact, one could argue that live art exposes precisely the conservational impulse behind all curation and exhibiting practices in the visual arts.

In this light it is instructive to look at one of Athey’s most intense works, and the only one that has been explicitly relational (directly involving the audience in the action). *Incorruptible Flesh/Dissociative Sparkle* (c. 2006) is a durational performance involving the direct participation of audience members to soothe the artist as he lies naked and penetrated by a baseball bat for six hours, with his eyes pinned back such that he requires caretaking with eye drops (as directed or performed by gallery assistants; Figure 4.6). It cannot be displayed as such after it is over because, as Jennifer Doyle has argued, “[t]he real ‘show’ in this performance is not Athey’s body itself, but the spectacularization of our communal relationship to it.”<sup>30</sup>

Indeed, precisely because of the violence of his self-exposure and rendering of himself vulnerable to us as audience members, Athey exacerbates the ontological potential of live art to activate the *relationality of all interpretation*, wherein we are called upon to engage in the circuits of meaning and value around the work (which does not exist as a ‘thing’ outside of these circuits). This does not mean that the work is ‘authentic’ because it is live performance (whatever that means). It simply points to Athey’s capacity to render the live body specific in its coextensivity with emotions, thought, pleasures of the flesh, and selfhood, and *in relation to the bodies of others*—it is thus only by stroking his body or putting eye drops in his eyes in *Incorruptible Flesh/Dissociative Sparkle* that the performance takes place, making haptic engagement a hallmark of the interactive intimacy inherent to the work.<sup>31</sup> The lived experience of the work thus cannot be ‘conserved’—by definition, as Phelan asserted, this experience is ontologically



Figure 4.6 Ron Athey, *Incorruptible Flesh: Messianic Remains* at Grace Space, Bushwick, New York, July 2013; photograph by Slava Mogutin.

distinct from any remainders that are displayed to memorialize the performance. But the remainders from the performance (documentation, props, Athey's and his audience members' memories as expressed verbally and in writing) certainly can be, as my exhibition and its catalogue make clear. By attempting to display elements from Athey's career-long performance practice and queer creative life, almost all elements drawn from his archive with which I had been living, I sought both to trouble what the art museum or gallery sets itself out to *do* and to provide some access to representative elements of Athey's work, as complex and impossible to summarize or contain as it is (see Figure 4.7).

The archival bits point to the limits of the gallery's tolerance for the detritus of the live (its drive to turn the live artist's body into a fetish or commodity—per the Museum of Modern Art's reifying 2010 exhibition of the work of Abramović, noted earlier). The range of materials chosen for *Queer Communion: Ron Athey*, albeit in seriously redacted form since the spaces allotted are limited and performance materials have been damaged or



Figure 4.7 Installation view of *Queer Communion: Ron Athey*, showing vitrine with sketches and materials relating to Athey’s multimedia performance *Joyce* (2002) and his upbringing and interest in religious ritual; Institute of Contemporary Art, Los Angeles, June 19–September 5, 2021; photograph by Jeff McLane/ICA LA.

lost, pointed to the vast array of themes, symbolic regimes, and emotional registers activated in Athey’s work.

But, of course, the task of adequately ‘representing’ Athey’s career, his creative energy, or his queer life work is impossible. I could only suggest and make clear that the show represented only one way to imagine Athey’s life work. Muñoz understands the extent to which careers such as Athey’s produce ephemeral bits and pieces as historical ‘evidence’ of a complex queer life and creative project that challenges the Euro-American knowledge building process—whereby ‘great men’ produce large-scale singular ‘art’ objects that remain static through time, to be studied for the ‘truth’ of a culture and its histories and displayed in hallowed art museums or galleries. Athey’s practice, indeed, can be perfectly characterized per Muñoz’s notion of “*Queer acts*” that “*contest and rewrite the protocols of critical writing*,” and I would assert that the protocols of curatorial work and art-historical interpretation do so as well (and even more so). Hence my perhaps embarrassingly personal insertions in the catalogue echoed here. Since performances can only be remembered (conserved) as live events in the embodied experience of individuals who witnessed them, in exhibiting or historicizing performance, one should—in my view—make one’s perspective clear. This does not preclude exhibiting or historicizing performances one did not witness. It is to say that

such a project would just be different, having more to do with performance documentation than liveness.

In both cases, one is offering an interpretive framework, and one that itself changes the work. To this end, I take seriously Muñoz's proposal that—with creative life projects such as Athey's—we might better replace the idea of interpretation with the energy of “decipherment,” a term he borrows from Caribbean novelist and critic Sylvia Wynter. He cites Wynter's text as follows:

Rather than seeking to “rhetorically demystify,” a deciphering turn seeks to decipher what a process of rhetorical mystification *does*. It seeks to identify not what texts and their signifying practices can be interpreted to *mean* but what they can be deciphered to *do*, it also seeks to evaluate the “illocutionary force” and procedures with which they do what they do.<sup>32</sup>

With the case of Athey and the complex ephemeral evidence of his career-long exploration of a range of performative, creative projects, we are definitely well-advised to heed Wynter's idea of seeking to *decipher* the works, exploring the “‘illocutionary force’ and procedures with which they do what they do.”<sup>33</sup>

Rendering a life work based on performance in more-or-less static physical form through exhibition is an extremely complex and challenging project. This complexity is arguably intensified with the queer archive of a queer person who produces queer BDSM performances, all of which evoke intense desires and feelings. I found, for example, blood-, sweat-, and mucus-encrusted costumes and props and (per the Judas Cradle) torture devices in various states of cleanliness and repair among the remnants of these works. Some were old and had not been retrieved in some time. Others were (and are) continually re-used by Athey and his collaborators: while I was holding the archive, Athey would often come over to my house to retrieve one or another prop to be mobilized in a work; and during the run of the show in Los Angeles at the Institute for Contemporary Art he pulled some of the props out of the exhibition for a performance of *Acephalous Monster* down the road at Redcat (August 2021). So the archive was (and remains) still ‘living.’

These objects in their effects parallel the visceral emotional frisson produced by the handwritten texts in Athey's archive—some scrawled as early as his teenaged years or during the period in his mid-to-late twenties when he removed himself from the world to deal with a vicious drug addiction. Some will (and should) remain private, but others that point to themes in key performances Campbell and I chose to be printed in facsimile in the catalogue. Some of the writings and sketches, unpublished (in their original scrappy form) and published, appeared in their original form either framed or in vitrines in the exhibition (see Figure 4.7). There is nothing as wrenching as reading a text labeled “Angry Pain,” for example, which binds together spiritual ecstasy and pain with bodily pleasure and suffering, these two coupled darkly

with the searing emotion that tends to accompany both (“my soul torn and defecated [*sic*] on”).

Because Athey deploys BDSM strategies of cutting, bleeding, binding, and piercing throughout his works, the ephemerality of his performances is all the more glaringly evident as a gap in understanding that is inevitable to displaying their documents and remains. As Amber Musser argues in her lyrical study of the function of masochism in art, *Sensational Flesh*, masochism opens up the simultaneous internal/external effect (and affect) of sensation as related to power (after all, masochism is motivated by the desire to be dominated). She notes, in an observation particularly apt in relation to live performance, that an assumption that one’s sensation would be shared by others produces sensation as “both individual and impersonal; it occupies a sphere of multiplicity without being tethered to identity.”<sup>34</sup> Artists deploying BDSM explicitly refuse the structures of authentication that function in art institutions to *pin down* the artist as *identified*. While we all may think we know that Ron Athey is a white gay male artist who is HIV positive, witnessing a performance will expose the limits of attaching these labels to a commodifiable quantity (to an art world ‘identity’ that can be mobilized easily within the late capitalist circuits of the gallery and its related institutions). This unknowability exacerbates the complexity of people as humans (rather than author functions, as Michel Foucault would have put it): in my case, I have known Ron for years, have lived his archive, and yet I hardly know him at all.<sup>35</sup> Carla Freccero calls forth this poignant complexity in relation to queer lives:

teleology is so crucial to our imaginings of time: we’re born and then at the end, yup, we die. / When I desire . . . I struggle against the brutal hegemony of the visual’s conceptualization of the body—overwhelmingly, in this culture anyway, structured by linear time—for what might otherwise be a far queerer experience of the body’s persistence in time.<sup>36</sup>

In the end, bleeding on stage cannot be contained or marketed with the same ease as the acts and materials associated with a performance such as Abramović’s offering of herself (her body contained, unmoving, and contemplative) as an object in her 2010 retrospective *The Artist is Present*. Feelings and desires are evoked and are unpredictable, individual, changing over time and through memory or misremembering.

### The catalogue as conservation? Honoring queer time

I have admitted my partiality, my personal investment in Ron Athey’s career, my over-proximity to his archive, my inability to distance myself from his torn and shattered yet epically alive forms of embodiment. All of these nonetheless could not deter me from this attempt to “do queerness” (borrowing a term of Muñoz’s) through this attempt at mounting a retrospective of Athey’s

work.<sup>37</sup> Whether or not this successfully honored the queerness of Athey's life and work, such that others experienced aspects of it, will inevitably reside with the many who have experienced the exhibition and catalogue. The challenges are clear, and some of them outlined earlier. At the very least I hoped to honor queerness at least enough to produce curiosity and perhaps awe in visitors, instilling a desire to study and understand and encounter more of Athey's work in relational ways that inspire them to accept the potential queerness in themselves.

Because Athey's work specifically challenges our desire to make a singular subject of him (to *identify* him firmly), the best way forward in exhibiting or writing about (conserving) his work seemed to be to deploy a range of elements relating to past performances—the “ephemera as evidence” of which Muñoz writes so eloquently—and to place them in relation to the queer communities Athey has, since his teens, been a part of. This strategy maintained the double advantage of avoiding the pretense that we could ever fully document, exhibit, or understand his complex and relational performances, and of providing a model (one among many possible) for how to understand queer histories and BDSM performance art in particular (in this case *through* the work of Athey). Accordingly, the exhibition was divided into sections reflecting the communities Athey has helped form, circulated within, productively skirted, or otherwise engaged throughout his career—Religion/Family; Music/Queer Clubs; Performance Art; Culture Wars; Literature/Opera/Theater; and Communion (which included artworks by friends, including a series of portraits of Athey, as well as a rolling slide show of over one hundred photographs of Athey with friends from over the decades, mostly from the archive). The sections were arranged in a roughly chronological fashion, indicating the order within his life in which he began to participate in or to help form the community.<sup>38</sup> But the chronology was never intended to be neat and teleological; it was, rather, recursive and overlapping, mirroring the queer time of Athey's complex, multifaceted life work.

If anything, the queer time of Athey's work points to what Freccero has called “intergenerational quasi-relationality” (although here, it is worth noting that Athey and I are the exact same age; it was future viewers and scholars interested in his work whom I hoped to address through this evocation of queer temporalities).<sup>39</sup> Athey has long embraced multigenerational audiences and friends and collaborators. For example, by the early 1990s, when he moved out of the punk and club scenes and lifted himself beyond addiction and the therapeutic frameworks connected to that moment, Athey's work began directly bringing diverse generations of people together or cementing communities; he began acting with increasing confidence as solo artist, collaborator, creative director, producer, boss, mentor, inspiration, colleague, and/or friend or lover from this time. These bonds are actual and continue to this day—and they are relational and intergenerational. They mark Athey's increasingly wide circuits of friendships and fierce erotic and/or platonic love connections, but are also sometimes attenuated or sundered by death (often

from complications due to AIDS) or estrangement. They tie together creative people from a vast range of backgrounds, primarily in the United States, Canada, and Europe (but also Mexico and beyond).

Producing performances that enact communal imaginings of aesthetically yearning queer lives, Athey has always worked within and across generations of queer creatives in a way that makes life worth living for his compatriots at the subcultural margins of Euro-American culture—although this is pretty clearly not his key motivation (which has more to do with a burning curiosity and creative impulse, an inability to do otherwise). In this way, Athey activates the power of filiation that saves those who remain unembraced by (or who violently reject) the heteronormative structures of nuclear family that dominate Euro-American concepts of self as belonging. As we saw Sedgwick describe this situation, queer is less about “identity” and more about alignments through “performative acts of experimental self-perception and filiation.”<sup>40</sup> Filiation has the capacity to save us from isolation, even as we wend our way toward our inevitable ends (which are potentially so much closer for those diagnosed as HIV positive in the 1980s and 1990s, such as Athey). Existing relationally, those in this network of beloved Athey comrades refuse the radical isolation that an intolerant society forces upon the queer.

It was this consideration of the potential of Athey’s work to constitute networks of queer allies that guided the selection of authors in the catalogue as well. As co-editors, Andy Campbell and I, in fact, represent two different generations and approaches of historians/theorists committed to queer (and feminist) community, and we shared a concern to include authors from diverse generations, geographies, disciplinary points of view, family or cultural backgrounds, and manifested sex/gender identifications in selecting our choice of contributors. Nearly every thinker, friend, co-performer, documentarian/photographer, artist, curator, and historian to whom we sent an invitation replied with eagerness, exemplifying (as Andy put it to me) the intimate bonds Ron has cultivated throughout his life. We were forced to leave out dozens more. But the main goal was achieved: to include multiple views from different community members or allies from a range of generations, geographical locations, parts of Athey’s life/work, and professional positions (some are scholars, others are curators, friends or former collaborators, and admirers from afar). The essays are written in a range of voices—some are scholarly, others (most) are more diaristic and personal.

In addition to the noted facsimiles of Athey’s writings from the archive, the catalogue also includes a series of “Object Lessons”—short essays going deeply into the psychic and embodied experience of engaging one object from the archive and appearing in the exhibition (see Figure 4.8).<sup>41</sup>

Complementing the physical/material, phenomenological, emotional, and psychological experience of the show (which was in both venues installed to draw the visitor through the various communities/moments of Athey’s life work), Campbell and Ana Briz (an emerging scholar of performance art) also



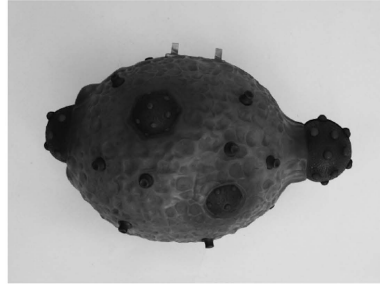
## HIV Lifecycle Model

ANDY CAMPBELL

The first thing I remember learning about HIV/AIDS is that you could *not* contract the virus from toilet seats. I was in the fifth grade and my teacher was engaged in dispelling common myths about HIV—it was not airborne like the flu; you could not get it from kissing, hugging, or holding hands. If sex or intravenous drugs were mentioned—and I don't believe they were—it would have gone over my head anyway.

The year was 1994, seven years after AZT (azidothymidine) received fast-tracked FDA approval, and was released into a general population by Burroughs Wellcome (now Glaxosmithkline). AZT and other retrovirals work by inhibiting a key part of the virus's process of replication without significantly affecting other non-infected cells. AZT's introduction was a watershed moment in HIV/AIDS treatment, complicated by the expense and slow pace of pharmacological innovation and federal approval.

This plastic anatomical model depicting the lifecycle of the Human Immunodeficiency Virus in Ron Athey's archives tracks the virus's attachment and its eventual replication and release from a T-cell.<sup>1</sup> Appearing like a craggy, milky football covered with green spheres—



Human Immunodeficiency (HIV) model (closed), stolen from a doctor's office by Ron Athey, c. 1990; photograph by Paul Donald



Human Immunodeficiency (HIV) model (open), stolen from a doctor's office by Ron Athey, c. 1990; photograph by Paul Donald

HIV LIFECYCLE MODEL

314

Figure 4.8 Andy Campbell's "Object Lesson" ("HIV Lifecycle Model") commenting on an object in Ron Athey's archive, as published in *Queer Communion: Ron Athey* catalogue, page 314.

produced a timeline for the catalogue, which includes key turning points in Athey's life and career as well as contextualizing local, global, and national milestones.<sup>42</sup>

In this way, the catalogue acts today as an extension of the exhibition beyond its two moments in New York and Los Angeles in 2021. The catalogue is thus itself an act of conservation: a 'document' of the exhibition, even as the many archival materials act as 'documents' or remainders of the performances. Needless to say, the entirety of the show—including the many different forms of video, textual, and photographic documentation, costumes, and other materials—can never be fully experienced beyond those 2021 moments, any more than Athey's performances could be 'represented' by an exhibition or catalogue. These elements of a creative life in performance art are incommensurate with 'conservation.' And yet we must try, lest entire careers be forgotten. The trying must be accompanied by extensive contextualization (like this essay), pointing out the moments of incommensurability and acknowledging the ontological difference between performing or experiencing a performance live and understanding it after the fact.

## Notes

- 1 Peggy Phelan, *Unmarked: The Politics of Performance* (London: Routledge, 1993), 146.
- 2 See my early assertions on this topic in Amelia Jones, "'Presence' in Absentia: Experiencing Performance as Documentation," *Art Journal* 56, no. 4 (Winter 1997–98): 11–18, <https://doi.org/10.1080/00043249.1997.10791844>.
- 3 Framed by a new introduction emphasizing questions of conservation, the following text is extensively reworked from my introductory essay (entitled "Introduction: *Queer Communion* and the Worlds of Ron Athey") for Amelia Jones and Andy Campbell, eds., *Queer Communion: Ron Athey* (Bristol: Intellect, 2020), 1–25.
- 4 At Participant Inc, New York City (February–April 2021), and Institute of Contemporary Art, Los Angeles (June–September 2021).
- 5 See Amelia Jones, "Ethnic Envy and Other Aggressions in the Contemporary 'Global' Art Complex," *NKA: Journal of Contemporary African Art*, special issue on Okwui Enwezor, ed. Jane Chin Davidson and Alpesh Patel, no. 48 (May 2021), <https://doi.org/10.1215/10757163-8971328>.
- 6 See Jones, "'Presence' in Absentia."
- 7 See Amelia Jones, "'The Artist Is Present': Artistic Re-Enactments and the Impossibility of Presence," *TDR: The Drama Review* 55, no. 1 (Spring 2011): 16–45, [https://doi.org/10.1162/DRAM\\_a\\_00046](https://doi.org/10.1162/DRAM_a_00046).
- 8 See Amelia Jones and Adrian Heathfield, eds., *Perform, Repeat, Record: Live Art in History* (Bristol: Intellect, 2012).
- 9 Martin Manalansan, "Queer Worldings: The Messy Art of Being Global in Manila and New York," *Antipode* 47, no. 3 (2015): 571, <https://doi.org/10.1111/anti.12061>.
- 10 Many have pointed out that 'curate' comes from the Latin word *cura*, which means 'care.'
- 11 The reviews of the show indicated that my hopes were met; see bibliography for these reviews.

- 12 See Amelia Jones, "Holy Body: Erotic Ethics in Ron Athey and Juliana Snapper's Judas Cradle," *TDR: The Drama Review* 50, no. 1 (Spring 2006), <https://doi.org/10.1162/dram.2006.50.1.159>.
- 13 See Amelia Jones, "Writing Athey," in *Queer Communion: Ron Athey*, ed. Jones and Campbell, 27–28.
- 14 On this early history, see Lisa Teasley, "The Alchemist: Ron Athey," in *Queer Communion: Ron Athey*, ed. Jones and Campbell, 219–23.
- 15 Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, *Tendencies* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1993), 9.
- 16 Lauren Berlant and Michael Warner, "Sex in Public," *Critical Inquiry* 24, no. 2 (Winter 1998): 558, <https://doi.org/10.1086/448884>.
- 17 Love (in "Reading the Social") is tracing the tendency to focus on "shared marginality" and "collective stigma" to the Chicago School of sociologists and deviance studies. Heather Love, "Reading the Social" (manuscript, 2014), 4 (I am grateful to Love for sharing this manuscript with me); Esther Newton, *Mother Camp: Female Impersonators in America* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1972); Gayle Rubin, "Thinking Sex" (1984), in *Deviations: A Gayle Rubin Reader* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2011).
- 18 Cathy J. Cohen, "Punks, Bulldaggers, and Welfare Queens: The Radical Potential of Queer Politics?" (1997), reprinted in *Black Queer Studies: A Critical Anthology*, ed. E. Patrick Johnson and Mae G. Henderson (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2005), 22.
- 19 Jack Smith famously asserted a queer argument against "landlordism," whereby capitalist property owners make it difficult if not impossible for "marginals" to survive and make politically sharp work that cannot be easily commodified; see Dominic Johnson, *Glorious Catastrophe: Jack Smith, Performance, and Visual Culture* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2012), 80–82.
- 20 Lisa Duggan, "The New Homonormativity: The Sexual Politics of Neoliberalism," in *Materializing Democracy: Toward a Revitalized Cultural Politics*, ed. Russ Castronovo and Dana D. Nelson (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2002); Miranda Joseph, *Against the Romance of Community* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2002), vii–xxxvi.
- 21 I address debates over queer negativity, for example between Lee Edelman and José Muñoz, in my *In Between Subjects: A Critical Genealogy of Queer Performance* (London: Routledge, 2021), 122–24.
- 22 She ends by noting, "[t]he process of movement building [should] be rooted not in our shared history or identity but in our shared marginal relationship to dominant power that normalizes, legitimizes, and privileges," in Cohen, "Punks, Bulldaggers, and Welfare Queens," 43.
- 23 Ann Cvetkovich, *An Archive of Feelings: Trauma, Sexuality, and Lesbian Public Cultures* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2003), 7.
- 24 For more on Athey's precarity in relation to other performance artists, see Lisa Newman, "Ron Athey Rolls Deep," in *Queer Communion: Ron Athey*, ed. Jones and Campbell, 253–60.
- 25 Martin Manalansan, "The 'Stuff' of Archives: Mess, Migration, and Queer Lives," *Radical History Review* 120 (Fall 2014): 100, <https://doi.org/10.1215/01636545-2703742>.
- 26 Berlant and Warner, "Sex in Public," 561–62.
- 27 Cvetkovich, *An Archive of Feelings*, 9. For an exhaustive and intelligent account of discussions around the queer archive, see Andy Campbell, *Bound Together: Leather, Sex, Archives, and Contemporary Art* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2020); and for a brilliant enactment of queer archives (specifically those of the ONE National Gay & Lesbian Archives at University of Southern California), see David Frantz and Mia Locks, eds., *Cruising the Archive: Queer Art and*

- Culture in Los Angeles, 1945–1980* (Los Angeles: ONE National Gay & Lesbian Archives, USC Libraries, 2011).
- 28 José Esteban Muñoz, “Ephemera as Evidence: Introductory Notes to Queer Acts,” *Women and Performance: A Journal of Feminist Theory*, special issue, 8, no. 2 (1996): 5–11, <https://doi.org/10.1080/07407709608571228>.
  - 29 Exceptions include most notably Dominic Johnson, whose edited volume *Pleading in the Blood* is a key inspiration for this project. See also Karen Gonzalez Rice, “The Faith Healings of Ron Athey,” in *Long Suffering: American Endurance Art as Prophetic Witness* (Ann Arbor, MI: University of Michigan Press, 2016), 59–88. Before the *Queer Communion: Ron Athey* show, no exhibition of any scale had occurred of Athey’s work in a gallery or museum context, aside from small shows of particular props at venues such as Western Projects (Los Angeles, 2006) and Invisible Exports (New York, 2012).
  - 30 Jennifer Doyle, “Ron Athey’s Dissociated Sparkle,” in *Cruising the Archive*, ed. Frantz and Locks, 145.
  - 31 Doyle, “Ron Athey’s Dissociated Sparkle.” Doyle was one of the assistants in the version of the piece at Artist’s Space, New York, in 2006. I discuss the relational potential of queer performance, and Athey’s work in this context, in my book *In Between Subjects*; see especially chapter three, “Relationality.”
  - 32 Muñoz, “Ephemera as Evidence,” 12, citing Sylvia Wynter, “Rethinking ‘Aesthetics’: Notes Towards a Deciphering Practice,” in *Ex-Iles: Essays on Caribbean Cinema*, ed. Mbye Cham (Trenton, NJ: African World Press, 1992), 266–67.
  - 33 Wynter, “Rethinking ‘Aesthetics’.”
  - 34 Amber Musser, *Sensational Flesh: Race, Power, and Masochism* (New York: NYU Press, 2014), 2.
  - 35 Michel Foucault, “What Is an Author?” (1969), trans. Donald F. Bouchard and Sherry Simon, in *Language, Counter-Memory, Practice*, ed. Donald F. Bouchard (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1977).
  - 36 Carla Freccero in Carolyn Dinshaw et al., “Theorizing Queer Temporalities: A Roundtable Discussion,” *GLQ* 13, no. 2–3 (2007): 193, <https://doi.org/10.1215/10642684-2006-030>.
  - 37 Muñoz, “Ephemera as Evidence,” 12.
  - 38 See the “General Checklist” illustrated in *Queer Communion: Ron Athey*, ed. Jones and Campbell, which gives a rough idea of what was displayed in the two venues of the exhibition (the ICA LA held a larger version of the show), 336–415.
  - 39 Freccero in Dinshaw et al., “Theorizing Queer Temporalities,” 187.
  - 40 Sedgwick, *Tendencies*, 9.
  - 41 See “Object Lessons,” in *Queer Communion: Ron Athey*, ed. Jones and Campbell, 310–35.
  - 42 See Ana Briz and Andy Campbell, “Ron Athey Timeline,” in *Queer Communion: Ron Athey*, ed. Jones and Campbell, 417–45. In addition, live events at each venue included, variously, new performance works by Athey, panels, papers, and works by artists inspired and/or mentored by Athey. On the live performance held at Participant Inc during the exhibition (and during the pandemic), see my article, “Queer Communion: Ron Athey,” *Turba* 1, no. 1 (Spring 2022): 168–71.

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## 5 Philip Auslander

### Can we conserve performance?

*A conversation with Hanna B. Hölling,  
Jules Pelta Feldman, and Emilie Magnin*

Philip Auslander's primary research interest is in performance, especially in relation to art, music, media, and technology. He has authored nine books and edited two collections, exploring diverse forms of aesthetic and cultural performances such as theater, film acting, performance art, music, stand-up comedy, robotic performance, and courtroom procedures. Some of his notable works include *In Concert: Performing Musical Persona* (2021), *Reactivations: Essays on Performance and Its Documentation* (2018), *Performing Glam Rock: Gender and Theatricality in Popular Music* (2006), and the third edition of *Liveness: Performance in a Mediatized Culture* (2023). Apart from his research on performance, Auslander has also contributed art criticism to publications like *Artforum* and has written catalogue essays for museums and galleries in several countries; he also serves as the editor of *The Art Section: An Online Journal of Art and Cultural Commentary*. In addition, Auslander is an active screen actor with credits listed on the Internet Movie Database.

**What does the concept of conserving performance entail from your unique perspective, and, while documentation may be a tool for conservation, why is it not necessarily interchangeable with the preservation of performance?**

I see documentation as the precondition for conservation. In other words, documentation provides the data from which performances can be conserved. In my book *Reactivations* (2018), I argue that a beholder can reactivate a performance imaginatively from its documentation.<sup>1</sup> This is the purpose of documentation—to make the performance accessible after the fact to an interested audience. I understand conservation to be an elaboration of this process, whereby the conservator reactivates the performance from its documentation and other archived materials for an audience. Conservation is thus a step beyond documenting and archiving documentation.

I should also say that by 'reactivation,' I do not mean only reenactment, but anything that gives an audience an experiential sense of the performance. Reenactment is thus a form of conservation, though it is not the only form. In this context, I often think of dance and the body-to-body transmission of

performance knowledge. As I understand it, this is how Marina Abramović works with the people who reenact her performances: she trains performers in the physical disciplines her work requires.<sup>2</sup> These reenactments certainly derive from documentation (including Abramović's memory), but her performances are also conserved in the bodies of the people who reenact them as well as her own. These physical memories constitute a kind of documentation, but they also preserve the embodied performance itself, which documentation does not necessarily do. Such practices extend well beyond the art world. For example, there is a rock band called the Dark Star Orchestra that reenacts specific past performances by the Grateful Dead.<sup>3</sup> This, too, is a way of conserving both specific performances and performance practices in the bodies of the musicians that also involves photographic and audio documentation.

**How can we differentiate between the practices of documentation, archiving, and conservation, and what is the interplay between these activities in preserving cultural heritage and knowledge for future generations?**

In short, to document is to create a record of a performance. To archive is to organize and preserve these records and other materials related to the performance, and to conserve is to use the archived documentation/information to make the performance accessible after its original iteration (whatever form that took).

**You say that you do not consider documentation to be synonymous with conservation but rather view it as a prerequisite for conservation. Furthermore, you suggest that documentation need not be limited to the pre-performance or performance stage but can also be generated retrospectively. In light of this, I am curious about the methods and techniques that can be employed to document performances retrospectively.**

In some cases, reenactment is a technique of retrospective documentation. For example, the photographic documentation of Vito Acconci's *Following Piece* (1969), for which he followed randomly chosen individuals through the streets of New York until they went inside, derived from his reenacting something he claimed to have done previously. In a more general sense, documentation is always retrospective, even when it is produced contemporaneously with the performance, because it references the future by making the performance accessible after its initial iteration. Chris Burden's documentary practices exemplify another kind of retrospective documentation, since the photos that depict his performances are modified from those of the performed event. For example, the most widely circulated image of Burden's *Trans-Fixed* (1974), for which he was crucified on a Volkswagen Beetle, is a grainy, atmospheric, black-and-white picture in which the figure and the car



occupy the whole frame and seem to emerge from darkness. Other images of the event are brighter, in color, and show the nondescript garage in which the car was parked. The whole effect of these images is far more prosaic. The performed event thus serves as raw material from which the documented performance is created through post-production. Babette Mangolte's film of Robert Morris's performances, *Four Pieces by Morris* (1993), could also be considered a kind of retrospective documentation, though I think the category of conservation might be more useful here since the films provide access to an experience of the performance derived from documentation and memory.<sup>4</sup>

**What is your perspective on conserving performances that only exist as photographic reality, despite never having taken place physically? I am curious about this in light of your statement that a performance can be considered real as long as it has been documented, regardless of whether it actually occurred in a physical space.**

I'm intrigued by this question, but I don't have a good response to it yet. I wonder whether, in such cases, documentation is co-extensive with conservation since the performance took place only in the space of the photograph. To preserve the photograph is thus to conserve the performance. In light of what I was saying earlier about reenactment as a means of conservation, I suggest that such reenactments should take the same form as the initial work. In other words, a reenactment of Yves Klein's famous *Leap into the Void* (1960), a photograph showing Klein leaping out of a second-story window, should be another photograph, not a live recreation of the action Klein's photo depicts.

**What about instances where a few photographs, or even a single image, come to be synonymous with the whole performance?**

The iconic image often represents a performance as a single picture that people associate with the entire event. The black-and-white image of Burden's *Trans-Fixed* that I mentioned earlier is an example. While a single image may not accurately reflect the whole experience of a performance, I don't believe it's merely reductive. For one thing, a still image can convey more than meets the eye, as it implies what happened just before and just after the moment captured. Additionally, I've conducted experiments where I showed a still image from *American Moon* (1960), a Happening by Robert Whitman, and then a film of the same moment. My audiences didn't necessarily feel they gained more information from the moving image. I think the still image or single image can have more power than we give it credit for, and it may convey more than just an isolated moment or a static representation of a dynamic event. For instance, Walter Murch, the celebrated film editor, used one image to represent each scene or significant moment in the films he worked on.<sup>5</sup> In short, while I acknowledge that the iconic image may not represent the entirety of a performance, I also believe that there is more to the still image

than is typically allowed for, and the representation of a performance in a single image may not necessarily be an ontological betrayal of the event. Nevertheless, one of the things the restoration of performance art could involve is the rebuilding of our understanding of what a performance was by putting the iconic image back into the context of the performance as a whole.

**What are your thoughts on the issue of authorship in performance documentation, particularly with regard to historical performances? It's common for the documentation of a performance to be displayed under the name of the performer rather than the photographer or videographer who recorded it. What do you think about this practice?**

I've been thinking about this for a while, especially in the context of historical performance art. In New York, there were photographers like Peter Moore and Babette Mangolte who made a name for themselves by documenting art performances. Moore was more active in the '60s while Mangolte was more prominent in the '70s. These photographers, and many others, became go-to sources for performers who wanted their work to be captured in photographs.

That performance art has been assimilated into the idea of the art object is evident from the ways photographers and videographers have documented performances over the years. At the start, the identity of the photographer was deemed less important than the work itself and the performer who created it, just as if they were photographing a static work, and this remains true in most cases. However, more recently, some artists have begun to use performance photography as material for their own work, which has led to a reassertion of authorship over this documentation. For instance, Mangolte has staged exhibitions using her performance photography as material, which has enabled her to use it in ways that go beyond its original function, such as her installation *Looking and Touching* (2007), in which viewers were invited to sort through and compare multiple images of the same performances. While the photographer's or videographer's role in documenting performances traditionally has been effaced, there are now instances where their identity as an artist in their own right is more prominently asserted. This could betoken a shift in the way we understand the documentation of performance art.

**Can you conceive of a performance that vanishes? While it is plausible for a performance to be forgettable or unremarkable, the idea that it vanishes is challenging, as it may still have some effect or sway on those who experienced it. Perhaps, after all, performance is more robust than its common understanding indicates.**

This question is inherently paradoxical. If there is no evidence that a performance ever took place, how can we know that it vanished? On the other hand, if there is evidence that it happened, then it hasn't vanished entirely. In essence, we cannot discuss the prospect of a performance disappearing

entirely because we have no examples to draw from. Even performances that are largely forgotten still leave behind some remnants, whether it's a trace of memory or a review in a magazine, which prevents them from vanishing entirely.

**With a multitude of ways in which performance can exist and be preserved, is it feasible to completely eradicate, destroy, or ruin it?**

In a world dominated by social media, in which everything seems to be captured in some form, it would require considerable effort to completely eradicate it! But there is a more subtle process of canonization at work that determines which performances are considered to be significant and, therefore, whose documentation and preservation are considered to be important. Non-canonical performances are less likely to be documented or preserved (or their documentation to receive this level of attention) than the canonical ones. As I point out in *Reactivations*, the process of canonization does not occur after the fact. We don't document every possible performance then decide later which ones belong in the canon. Rather, the performances we take care to document and preserve are those we deem to be canonical a priori.

**Are there aspects of performance art as a medium that inherently complicate the formation of a canon?**

To expand a bit on my previous response, canon formation in the context of the history of performance art begins with documentation: performances that are considered to be important are more likely to be thoroughly documented. The issue of which performances are considered to be worth documenting and preserving occurred to me while writing in *Reactivations* about theater scholar Michael Kirby and his editorship of the *Drama Review* during the crucial period from 1969 to 1986. Kirby believed that writing was the best way to document and preserve performances, that written descriptions were more valuable than photographs. He also believed that the purpose of documenting performances was to preserve them for future audiences. Kirby aimed for a future utopian audience who would understand advanced performances better than we can now. But in editing the journal, Kirby had to make decisions about which performances were worth documenting and preserving for this future audience, and the result of these decisions helped to define the canon of performance art. The irony is that Kirby couldn't possibly have known what the future audience would find interesting or understand, yet he made decisions about which performances would be available to them. The canon, therefore, is a product of past decisions about which performances are worth preserving, and what we have access to now is a result of those decisions. So the issue of which performances are considered to be worth documenting and preserving is an important one, as it shapes

our understanding of performance history and what is considered valuable in the field.

Not that long ago, performance art wasn't part of the art-historical canon at all, or barely so, because it was perceived as a practice that had no place in the art world, or only a very marginal place. And in a lot of instances—I'm thinking about the 1970s—some of what I would consider to be performance-based works were labeled as 'process art' or 'conceptual art.' For me, those kinds of distinctions are not necessarily that important. But even so, in a lot of cases, the work had to be assimilated to a standard art category, like sculpture, for example, in order to be considered as art at all. Performance art has only recently become a canonical category. And as we know, it's only very recently become institutionalized through museums, galleries, and festivals. Unresolved questions around how performance art fits into the cultural economy of visual art include: How is it saleable as art in the art market? How is it displayable as art in the realm of museums?

**Given that a performance can take many forms and repeat through different times, places, and mediums—not to mention bodies—how do you define a performance work?**

My approach to this question involves a fairly traditional notion of the work, namely, that a performance work employs performance as a key medium and has an identity and integrity. I do not limit performance works to live performances, and I tend to consider works that employ performance to be performances even in cases where others might think of them as films or photographs (Klein's *Leap into the Void* is an example). I believe that each iteration of the work, whether a new rendition in a different medium or a new staging or interpretation, sheds fresh light on it and can reveal what it means or how it functions in a variety of different contexts. These iterations have to retain the identity of the work and, at the same time, further that identity. Otherwise, the idea of their being iterations of a work becomes meaningless. Unless the work is completely open-ended, there has to be at some point an iteration that is so far off from what the work *is* that it is no longer considered an iteration of that work. Although I adhere to a notion of the work as something that has a continuous identity across its iterations, I don't consider the work to be deterministic of its iterations. Some pieces are structured to be more deterministic than others but, ultimately, I don't think the work determines its iterations.

As I've said, there are canonical performance works, but there are also canonical iterations of performance works. David Tudor playing John Cage's "4'33" (1952) is a canonical iteration. People have even said if you don't perform it the way David Tudor performed it, you're doing it wrong.<sup>6</sup> (They are referring to the gravity, focus, and elegance of gesture Tudor brought to the work.) I don't agree with that, but it represents an attitude that lies behind many of the objections to reperforming historical works. There's a kind of

privilege associated with the original performance—an Allan Kaprow Happening, for example—a supposition that it possesses some kind of aura that, the fear is, cannot be recreated through the reperformance. I think that's another aspect to consider—trying to avoid the trap of canonizing particular iterations of performances, let alone particular works.

Performance art, to a very large extent, started off as one-off events. Kaprow specifically said at one point that each Happening should be performed only once.<sup>7</sup> Fast-forward to where we are today. It's as if that notion of the unique performance or the one-off performance is lost in the dust. Ragnar Kjartansson, whose work I enjoy a great deal, is a good example of an artist who not only distributes his works across different platforms (live performance and video installation in particular) but who also repeats live events at different venues. His *An Die Musik* (2012) is a piece in which eight pairs of singers and pianists spread out in the performance space perform Schubert's song of that title simultaneously and repeatedly. It premiered at the Migros Museum für Gegenwartskunst in Zurich in 2012 and has also been performed at the London Contemporary Music Festival and the Reykjavik Art Museum, both in 2017. He is but one of many people whose performances are completely designed for reiteration and to be performed multiple times in different places. The question that I'm pondering right now is, how different is this from theater? Earlier on, and in the minds of some people still to this day, performance art was thought to be a kind of performance that isn't theater, even anti-theatrical. And I'm wondering if by now, it has become theater. Not entirely, because it's obviously not institutionalized as theater, it's institutionalized as visual art, but in terms of its processes and procedures and some of the assumptions behind it, performance seems to have become increasingly theatricalized.

**Are there any examples you have in mind of iterations of performance works that you think are so false to the identity of the work, however defined, that they ultimately don't count as the work?**

As you know, I wrote an essay about Cage's 4'33".<sup>8</sup> As a consequence, I watched a lot of performances of that piece. I'm not going to say that if you don't do it like David Tudor, you're not doing it right. But I will say that, over time, I think this piece has become very diluted, to the extent that any framing of four minutes and thirty-three seconds—and maybe throw in a musical instrument—becomes a performance of it. I think Cage would probably be okay with this, and I don't think it's a hideous violation of the work's integrity. But at the same time, we've reached the point where the substance of the work has gotten lost under the surface of the work, which is easy to replicate, while the deeper aspects of it, which have to do with the ideas of duration as the materiality of music and of the piece as an articulation of time in performance, are not. But I try to be open-minded about how performers

interpret their material. I can't think of a lot of examples of iterations of performances that betray the work because I'm not looking for them. As I said earlier, I do believe as a theoretical proposition that there is a limit past which an iteration is no longer an iteration of the work, but in terms of my experiencing things in the world, I'm not particularly hoping to find deviant interpretations to get upset about.

**A work might iterate in different iterations or reenactments, reperformances and so on, and each of those is somehow similar to the original act. But the work might also spread out into relics—objects—documents that are no longer performative iterations. The work becomes something else. In the case of Nam June Paik's *Zen for Film* (1962–64), the work becomes a filmic relic, no longer the projection. To keep a 16mm film in a film can and present it as such—a sacrosanct object prevented from performing its original function—seems to me close to a form of veneration familiar from religious objects. Perhaps we might speak of a relic of a filmic performance that documents certain aspects of the reality of a performance but that is no longer the performance itself.<sup>9</sup> How might that complicate the identity of a performance?**

*Zen for Film* is a really interesting example, and I find your commentary on it compelling. I might come at it from a different angle. It seems to me a curious case in which the historical trajectory from cult value to exhibition value, identified by Walter Benjamin, has been reversed. A filmic performance intended to be projected (performed, exhibited) has been transformed, as you say, into an inaccessible object. As Benjamin observes, "Today the cult value would seem to demand that the work of art remain hidden," and this is exactly what has happened with *Zen for Film*.<sup>10</sup> This reassertion of cult value, its implicit refusal of exhibition value and its implications are fascinating subjects I hope we can pursue in another conversation.

To me, the term 'relic' suggests objects used in performances such as props, settings, furniture, etc., that may be exhibited as works thereafter. I have difficulty in thinking of these as iterations of the performance itself, however. Chris Burden used the term 'relic' to describe artifacts he used in performances then spun off as sculptural objects, often presented in elegant vitrines. Given the mortification of the flesh that many of Burden's performances entailed, his use of a term with religious overtones is surely not accidental, though his relics are entirely given over to exhibition value. A relic of Burden's *Trans-Fixed* consists of two blood-stained nails, presumably the ones with which he was crucified to the Volkswagen, elegantly displayed on red velvet. These objects fulfill one of the functions of performance documentation: they provide evidence that the performance took place. They also make the viewer's reactivation of the performance more visceral: seeing bloody nails is not the same as imagining them. The fact that Burden always accompanied his relics with written texts in which he describes the

performance matter-of-factly in the first person suggests, however, that the relics do not convey enough information about the performance to serve as free-standing documents, but take on meaning only as concretions of an event described by other means.

**What role does intention play in performance, and what role might it play in performance conservation? I'm thinking here not only of the traditional authorial model, but also a model that involves a network of different people involved in performance, perhaps including actors that are asked to perform a 'delegated performance.'**

There are multiple levels of intention involved in performance, its documentation, and its preservation. Performance is always an intentional act, even if the intent is to allow for things to happen that are not predictable. Allowing for the unintentional to occur is necessarily intentional! Documenting performance is also an intentional act, particularly in the choice of documentary medium and how the medium is used. Both Peter Moore and Babette Mangolte, the two performance photographers I mentioned earlier, sought to subordinate their own presence as photographers to the intentions of the artists whose work they photographed.<sup>11</sup> The institutionalization of performance art has also been intentional. There is a deliberate effort to make performance into something that can be institutionalized as art. This is not happening spontaneously. It's driven by specific people—curators, gallerists, and artists themselves—with the fairly specific goal of trying to find a place for performance art in the structures of the art world and art market. The processes of documentation, archiving, restoration, conservation, and curation we've been talking about all contribute to the process of institutionalization. I am neither a curator nor a conservator, so I don't know to what degree the artist's intent is seen as important in these contexts. But I find Wimsatt's and Beardsley's critique of the 'intentional fallacy,' an old concept in literary criticism, persuasive. They raise the question of how one is to determine the artist's intent. If the artist did what they intended, one need only look at the work itself. If not, one has to look outside the work for something that is not actually an aspect of it.<sup>12</sup> If I am restoring, or even just cleaning, a painting, let alone conserving a performance work, does my understanding of what I should do come primarily from the work itself or from information external to it?

The question of intention in the case of 'delegated performance' is complex and requires a more extensive discussion than we can get into here. Going back to Happenings, Michael Kirby described the kind of performing he saw in them as task-based, and suggested that the performer need have no intention other than to execute a physical task, ascribing artistic intention to the artist who designed the event rather than the performer.<sup>13</sup> I recently interviewed Lyn Bentschik, a performance artist who reperformed some of Marina

Abramović's work for European museum shows.<sup>14</sup> Although we did not talk directly about intention, Bentschik's comments suggest that their intention was not to recreate Abramović's performances but to perform Abramović's pieces faithfully, but in their own way. In thinking about reperformance as a mode of conservation, the question of how intention is construed on all of the levels I've mentioned is worth examining.

**In some sense, even in a purely imaginative way, the internal experience of a performance has something to do with the spectatorship of a performance. How might that internal experience be transmitted and preserved?**

One of the biggest questions regarding preservation and conservation has to do with the audience experience. Maybe things are changing, but, conventionally and traditionally, what is preserved and documented from performance is what the artist does and not the audience's participation and reaction. This becomes obvious in the exclusion of the audience from documentation. For the most part, the documentation of performance has been much more in the fine art tradition of preserving the work than in the ethnographic tradition of gathering information about the event and all of its participants. I am not saying this as a criticism. I have thought a lot about audience over the course of my career, and I still find it difficult to imagine a good way of capturing or understanding the imponderability of audience experience, especially considering that each spectator may have a very different experience from every other.

In the last chapter of *Reactivations*, I talk about a concept that I call "karaoke performance art."<sup>15</sup> The chapter addresses one idea about how people respond to performance art or any kind of performance. I suggest that people watching a performance inevitably want to know how it *feels* to do what the performer is doing. This is a large part of what lies behind the appeal of video games like *Guitar Hero*: they give us the opportunity to share somewhat in the experience of performing. The appeal of this is to be able to take on the identity and physicality of a rock musician for a moment. For the most part, exhibition practices and performance documentation do not acknowledge this desire or encourage people to explore it as part of their potential relationship to the work. Of course, sometimes the performers are doing things you can't do, which is another very important part of performance—that you're watching people who are able and willing to do things you can't do. When I watch a performance, I'm always thinking, what would it be like to do that? Maybe I could do it or simulate doing it in a way that's enjoyable, through *Guitar Hero* or karaoke. Or maybe I can't; I have this image in my head right now of Matthew Barney crawling up the side of the proscenium in *Cremaster 5* (1997), and I can't do that, I've never been able to do that, and will never be able to do it.<sup>16</sup> But I can still look at him and think, well, what



would that be like? What is that about on a physical and experiential level? That's one of the appeals of endurance art. You will never do anything like it, but you can still imagine yourself performing for many hours or six months or a year. The tension between being able to imagine it while at the same time recognizing that this is an experience you will never have gives the idea of endurance its teeth. It is also what can make reperformance poignant. The fact that someone other than the artist can undertake the performance makes the experience seem more accessible.

The internal experience of the performer is also difficult to capture and include as part of the record. I've become interested in the phenomenology of performing and what it feels like from the performer's point of view, but it is extremely difficult to find information about it. So far, I've looked for such material primarily with respect to musicians, but it's very hard to find. You really need performers who are able to provide an account of what's going on inside them and can talk about it in a way that doesn't just fall into clichés or serve as a means of furthering their agenda.

That said, information about the internal experience of the performer or the audience is necessarily specific to a particular iteration of a particular performance. The experience of performing might be very different from occasion to occasion. Therefore, unless much data were gathered from multiple iterations, information about the performer's experience would tend to privilege the particular iteration from which it was gathered. And the task of gathering this kind of information from multiple iterations of a performance is a daunting one, just as it is for studying audiences.

*All questions were contributed by the interviewers. The question on authorship was contributed by Aga Wielocha.*

## Notes

- 1 Philip Auslander, *Reactivations: Essays on Performance and Its Documentation* (Ann Arbor, MI: University of Michigan Press, 2018), <https://doi.org/10.3998/mpub.9870761>.
- 2 Philip Auslander and Lyn Bentschik, "On Reperforming Abramović: Lyn Bentschik in Dialogue with Philip Auslander," *The Art Section: An Online Journal of Art and Cultural Commentary*, January 2023, accessed May 10, 2023, [www.theartsection.com/reperformancing](http://www.theartsection.com/reperformancing). It is noteworthy that Bentschik, who performed Abramović's works at European museum retrospectives of her work, prefers the term 'reperformance' to 'reenactment' because of the latter's seeming reference to acting.
- 3 See Dark Star Orchestra (website), accessed May 10, 2023, [www.darkstarorchestra.net/](http://www.darkstarorchestra.net/).
- 4 The film is a reconstitution of the performance work done by the sculptor Robert Morris in the 1960s. *Four Pieces by Morris*, directed by Babette Mangolte (1993), 16mm color film, 94 min.
- 5 Koral Ward, *Augenblick: The Concept of the "Decisive Moment" in 19th- and 20th-Century Western Philosophy* (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2008), 147.
- 6 On August 29, 1952, David Tudor premiered the three-movement piece "4'33" as part of a contemporary piano music recital at Maverick Concert Hall in Woodstock,

- New York, a venue for chamber music. The audience, which consisted mainly of connoisseurs of music and musicians, witnessed Tudor sitting at the piano and, to signify the start of the piece, closing the keyboard lid. This action was repeated for the second and third movements, with the lid being briefly opened to indicate the end of each movement. For a discussion of 4'33" from a performance perspective, see Philip Auslander, "John Cage's 4'33": A Performance Perspective," Naxos Musicology International (website), March 15, 2022, accessed May 12, 2023, [www.naxosmusicology.com/essays/john-cage-s-4-33-a-performance-perspective/](http://www.naxosmusicology.com/essays/john-cage-s-4-33-a-performance-perspective/).
- 7 "Perform the happening once only. Repeating it makes it stale, reminds you of theatre and does the same thing as rehearsing: it forces you to think that there is something to improve on." Allan Kaprow, *How to Make a Happening*, MassArt, 1966, vinyl record.
  - 8 Auslander, "John Cage's 4'33".
  - 9 Hanna B. Hölling, *Revisions: Zen for Film* (New York: Bard Graduate Center, 2015).
  - 10 Walter Benjamin, "The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction," trans. Harry Zohn, in *Illuminations*, ed. Hannah Arendt (New York: Schocken, 1969), 225.
  - 11 Auslander, *Reactivations*, 81–85.
  - 12 William K. Wimsatt and Monroe C. Beardsley, "The Intentional Fallacy," *The Sewanee Review* 54, no. 3 (1946): 469.
  - 13 Michael Kirby, "Introduction," in *Happenings: An Illustrated Anthology*, ed. Michael Kirby (New York: E. P. Dutton, 1965), 17.
  - 14 Auslander and Bentschik, "On Reperforming Abramović."
  - 15 Auslander, *Reactivations*, 97–108.
  - 16 *Cremaster 5* (1997) is the final part of *The Cremaster Cycle*, a series of five films completed by artist Matthew Barney between 1994 and 2002. In one scene, the character played by Barney scales the opera's proscenium arch. Matthew Barney, *Cremaster 5* (1997), 35mm color film with sound, 94 min.

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Part 2

# Confronting institutions



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## 6 Performance in the museum

### Shifting roles in performance art stewardship

*Emilie Magnin*

#### Introduction

According to sociologist Fernando Domínguez Rubio, museums' practices are made for docile, contained objects such as paintings, and not so much for unruly objects such as media artworks and complex installations.<sup>1</sup> When acquiring such works, museums apply their registration and documentation procedures (entry in the database structure, storage of physical elements in climatized, often remote facilities) to complex artworks and consequently tend to freeze the works and their behavior in order to make them fit within their existing infrastructure and mode of operation. This phenomenon also applies to performance art, an art form that has been increasingly collected by museums and other collecting institutions over the past two decades. Performance art, which brings living, breathing bodies, sound, movement, and unpredictability into the museum, might even represent the ultimate unruly art form. Its live nature challenges the conventional museum logic, where most artworks remain safely stored between periods of display while a few chosen, stable works from the collection (often paintings) remain on permanent exhibition. Performance, on the other hand, cannot be stored or hung on the wall but needs to be activated regularly to exist and preserve the knowledge necessary for its perpetuation.

Along with the surge of performance reenactments of the 2000s (notably illustrated by Marina Abramović's *Seven Easy Pieces* in 2005 at the Guggenheim Museum in New York), museums also started collecting live performance works. The vast majority of performances entering museum collections around this time constitute what art historian Claire Bishop has called "delegated performances," or works that can be performed by hired performers "on behalf of the artist," on the basis of instructions.<sup>2</sup> The format of the delegated performance has undoubtedly increased the genre's collectability for institutions because such performances are less tied to the artist's identity and can be repeated several times a day to fit museums' exhibition times.

As this chapter will further investigate, upon entering institutional collections, performance works often undergo change and transformation to fit

within museum workflows such as database logics or loan requirements. On the other hand, performance also pushes museums (and conservators in particular) to question their established practices and to find new strategies and ways of caring for so-called unruly artworks. In this light, recent conservation scholarship suggests that performance art (among other contemporary art forms) calls for other models of collecting, owning, and caring that enhance the reliance on external networks, knowledge, and memories.<sup>3</sup> For works that are supported by a large network of people, sustaining this network and its engagement with the work over time represents the greatest challenge for their future activation, and more broadly for their perpetuation.

Yet while numerous scholars and research efforts highlight this new direction, the reality remains obstructed by multiple difficulties. Established museum policies are not for contemporary art conservators alone to adapt; external practitioners and knowledge holders must be coordinated and retributed for their work, and the typical workload of museum staff doesn't afford them the time required for the increasingly complex care that these works demand over time. Conservation documentation procedures, for instance, are becoming more complex and require regular review and updates. Moreover, in the absence of the event, performance persists through a broad archive of texts (scores, instructions) and objects (costumes, props, leftovers), as well as video and photographic documentation, all items which also demand preservation measures.

This is a paradox of live performance, which entered museums under the promise of immateriality, yet brings with it a tendency to over-accumulate relics and documents, often through fear of missing an important aspect of the ephemeral moment. While the accumulation of physical material and recordings can create a sense of duty accomplished, the charge of ensuring the long-term archiving, accessibility, and comprehensibility of these records over time is too often underestimated. All the while, the world is facing ecological, financial, and social crises that make it hard to prioritize care for artworks—and to justify the accumulation of objects and documents in energy-consuming storage rooms or digital repositories.

To inspire novel ways of thinking about performance conservation and continuity, the last part of this chapter will offer an analogy between the networks of performance and the mycelium that supports the fruiting bodies of fungi. Akin to the subterranean mycelium supporting the growth of mushrooms, performance is also supported by a living network, consisting not only of existing documents and archives, but extending to performers, conservators, and other supporting individuals. Both these networks can remain dormant in unfavorable conditions and need to be nourished and to find a hospitable environment to flourish again (or to make new performances possible).

While this idea is not by itself a solution to the many challenges of performance conservation, I believe that linking ecological notions such as resilience, decay, and regrowth to art conservation can help us bridge nature and

art conservation thinking, thus overcoming the old Western nature versus culture dichotomy. Following Maria Puig de la Bellacasa's speculative ethics of care,<sup>4</sup> mycelium also brings forward the need to consider care for the larger social and ecological environment in which artworks exist in relationships with human beings. At a time when many have come to realize that the art world can no longer ignore the ecological imperative,<sup>5</sup> this perspective shall contribute to an expanded understanding of conservation that puts all living beings at its center.

### **How museums make performance art “docile”**

In his investigation of the institutional dynamics of an art museum, Domínguez Rubio describes how the museum functions as an “objectification machine” that transforms artworks into stabilized “museum objects” that can be preserved, displayed, and circulated.<sup>6</sup> The success of the musealization process depends on the material properties of the artworks and, specifically, on whether they behave as “docile” or “unruly” objects: docile artworks such as oil paintings, says Domínguez Rubio, are stable and defined objects whose material behavior is in concordance with the museum's established practices, as opposed to unruly objects—such as time-based media or performance art—which challenge existing policies and hierarchies.<sup>7</sup> A consequence of the increasing presence of unruly objects in museum collections is that their existence within the collection has to be regulated, in order to turn them into stabilized museum objects. Hence, to facilitate their navigation within museums' pre-established workflows and between phases of storage, display, or loan, museum professionals tend to contain the works within the limits of the existing logic of classification and organization.

Conservation activities play an important part in the larger apparatus put in place by museums to make objects docile and thus to reinforce the museum's narrative of control over the objects it owns. This situation highlights the problematic dichotomy of collecting practices: when an institution acquires an artwork, this act not only conveys a commitment to care for the work and preserve it, but also a claim of ownership and exclusive control over the work. Even before the work is acquired, during the pre-acquisition stage, conservators are asked to estimate the complexities and costs involved in maintaining it, already situating the work on a scale of complexity or unruliness. As conservator Jack McConchie points out, this constant need to provide “efficient, definitive answers” about an artwork's identity and behavior instills within conservators “an internalized desire towards establishing a permanent and stable final form for an artwork” that ultimately feeds the museum's controlling narrative.<sup>8</sup>

The nature of performance art makes these transformational processes even more visible, because institutions struggle to integrate live performance into museum procedures that are even more inadequate for representing live art than they are for object-based unruly artworks. For instance, museums



are forced to establish legal ownership in the absence of a physical object, resorting to certificates of authenticity, numbered editions, and loan agreements that may seem like artificial means of describing an immaterial work destined to be performed by living bodies. Added to the descriptive documentation produced or requested by conservators, this vast array of legal documents contributes to rendering performance more docile, sometimes unnecessarily transforming it or fixing it.

### ***HIGHER xtn. in the museum***

The recent acquisition of the performance *HIGHER xtn.* (2018) by the Stedelijk Museum Amsterdam sheds some light on these points of friction between performance and institutional practices. This example shows how the regular activation of a performance proves to be a difficult commitment for a museum to make, and how responsibilities and authority can be negotiated between the artist and the museum to facilitate current and future activations of the work. It also highlights some of the difficulties of transferring the knowledge necessary to support the work's future existence from the artist to the museum.

The Stedelijk acquired the performance *HIGHER xtn.* by Italian artist and choreographer Michele Rizzo in 2018. Based on the choreographic work *HIGHER* that Rizzo first created for theater in 2015, *HIGHER xtn.* was adapted for the museum context. The work in its museum version is about thirty-five minutes long and includes a variable number of dancers (including Rizzo) performing a repetitive yet demanding choreography based on techno music composed by Italian musician Lorenzo Senni. The dancers repeat the same steps in synchronicity with increasing speed, almost to the point of trance and exhaustion, all the while moving across the space (originally the Stedelijk's entrance hall) to generate encounters with each other (Figure 6.1).

The 2015 theatrical version of *HIGHER* continues to exist in parallel to the 2018 museum version and has been shown numerous times in various festival and theater venues. These two versions are defined as completely independent works because of their different contexts of activation. The modalities of production of the theatrical version are regulated directly by the artist and his production and distribution company,<sup>9</sup> while the Stedelijk is responsible for displaying *HIGHER xtn.* in institutional contexts, as the legal owner of the work.

In practice, when *HIGHER xtn.* is exhibited at the Stedelijk, the museum bears the responsibility for both the costs and logistical aspects of production. Meanwhile, Rizzo assumes the role of selecting and instructing dancers and participates as a performer himself. However, the scenario becomes more complex when the work is lent to other institutions: as the legal owner of the work, the museum logically retains the task of overseeing and approving the loan, providing all necessary instructions and elements. The borrowing



Figure 6.1 Michele Rizzo, *HIGHER xtn.*, 2018, performed at the Stedelijk Museum Amsterdam on February 3, 2019. Courtesy: the artist and Stedelijk Museum Amsterdam; photograph: Maarten Nauw.

institution assumes the costs and logistics, while the artist remains in charge of all aspects of the artistic direction.

Yet given the multitude of loan requests generated by the work's popularity, lending the artwork demands a significant allocation of time and resources, which could quickly strain the museum's capacity to effectively manage the requests. This highlights how regulating the circulation of artworks through loans is at odds with the nature of performance itself—a live occurrence with distinct production methods, budgets, and scheduling considerations that cannot compare to the transportation and hanging of traditional paintings. In such cases, making a performance work conform to the same loan processes as object-based artworks is not a sustainable solution. To overcome this issue, Rizzo and the Stedelijk devised a solution wherein the artist was given the liberty to show the work independently in other institutional contexts, limiting the museum's involvement to the work's activations within the Netherlands (in a similar manner to Rizzo and his production company remaining in charge of the theater version of the work from 2015). Formally, the acquisition took the form of a limited edition of 1/1, along with an "artist's proof" retained by Rizzo.<sup>10</sup> Originally derived from printmaking techniques, editioning has become a prevalent way to commodify not only prints but also other replicable art forms like photographs or videotapes. Nowadays artists use editions to sell digital artworks, installations, and even performances in limited editions, thus creating scarcity and increasing their

market value. In this context, artist's proofs are copies or versions of a work for the artist to keep and are not intended to be sold.<sup>11</sup> For performances which include extensive sets or props, these objects can be produced as many times as the edition count. But when the work is solely a scripted or choreographed action to be reperformed, the edition becomes above all a form of licensing that limits the number of times the work—conceived as a reproducible and collectible item—can be sold. Keeping an artist's proof should allow the artist to continue to show the work independently from the institutions that own it.

Applying the concept of editioning to performance art may appear artificial at first, a way of imposing constraints designed for different art forms to make performance more object-like and therefore more compliant with the art market regime. Indeed, the edition and artist's proof of a live performance appear to be the same work, simply distinguished to be sold several times and to guarantee the artist some control over the work even once it is sold.

Yet simultaneously, the existence of the artist's proof facilitates the artwork's evolution beyond the museum's walls, recognizing that the care of the work is linked to its ability to be performed regularly. This situation has far-reaching consequences, as it implies a form of collective stewardship of the performance, shared between the artist and the museum. It might also suggest a possible response to a broad concern of collecting institutions: like other recent art genres such as installation art and electronic media, performance requires regular activation as part of its responsible maintenance.<sup>12</sup> This, however, challenges museums' usual functioning, in which climate-controlled storage serves as a safe tool for preserving apparently stable artifacts, where artworks can undergo years of storage before being exhibited again.

From this perspective, the Stedelijk's—and other museums'—efforts to allow performance works to exist beyond their institutional control demands closer attention. In my opinion, it is important not to interpret this over-simplistically as the disengagement of institutions from the costs and responsibilities of regularly activating performance works. Instead, it highlights the urgent need for an alternative framework that enables institutions to steward performance art without retaining exclusive authority and control, allowing the work to exist and develop in different ways or contexts. This is crucial to ensure the viability of the artwork and its future modes of existence. Rather than resorting to the artificial versioning of performances, could this new approach potentially pave the way for collective ownership or shared custodianship agreements between museums and artists, or among multiple institutions?

### **Networks, ecosystems, memories: The dispersed knowledge of contemporary art**

Today the ownership regime within visual arts museums remains largely unchallenged. Only the rising expenses associated with the preservation of

contemporary art—as well as some museums’ recent openness to exploring innovative ownership models—has sparked a few experiments in co-ownership or co-stewardship among institutions, or between institutions, artists, and communities outside of the institutional sphere. Time-based media artworks in particular have become subjects of joint acquisitions, where multiple institutions collaborate not only to reduce purchase costs but also to collectively document and maintain the work. In 2013, for instance, SFMOMA and the Metropolitan Museum jointly acquired William Kentridge’s five-channel video installation *The Refusal of Time* (2012), a work deemed so complex that two major museums were not too many to preserve it.<sup>13</sup>

A few examples of recent museum acquisitions of performance also reflect this tendency and recognize that essential knowledge is held outside of the museum. This is the case for Trisha Brown’s choreographic work *Set Reset* (1983), which entered the Tate collection in 2018. The acquisition comprises a set of elements for the stage installation, costumes, music, and archival documentation of the performance. *Set Reset* can be displayed as an installation, but it also encompasses a license for the Trisha Brown Dance Company to perform the choreography. Concretely, this means Tate can mandate the company to show the choreographic work but does not legally own this element, which remains part of the company’s repertoire.<sup>14</sup> Even though Tate owns the set elements of the work, they still depend on the company’s knowledge to show and maintain its choreographic part.

The previous examples reflect a larger tendency within contemporary art conservation, wherein there is a growing acknowledgement of the intricate networks that enable artworks to exist over time and that are crucial to the long-term care and maintenance of complex artworks.<sup>15</sup> Emphasizing the collective and relational nature of artworks, these networks include a wide array of social and material agents, skills, and perspectives that all partake in what Vivian van Saaze has described as “doing artworks,” the collective labor of displaying installative or performative works.<sup>16</sup> Knowledge about a work of art is dispersed not only across physical locations within the museum’s archive, but it also lives in the bodies and memories of those involved with the work—what Hanna B. Hölling refers to as the “virtual archive.”<sup>17</sup> In the context of performance, Héliã Marçal has described in particular how the interpersonal exchange of experience and memories within these networks are essential aspects for the works’ preservation.<sup>18</sup> Tiziana Caianiello has underlined the importance of memory for preserving impermanent artworks and has described the roles of documentation and new activations, respectively, for consolidating individual and collective memories about these works.<sup>19</sup> But this knowledge is not permanently preserved: in her description of memory functions, Caianiello argues that “if a work is not regularly presented and does not become subject to consideration in some form . . . its memory cannot be consolidated.”<sup>20</sup>

Consequently, when a work is not exhibited, reperformed, or at least considered for extended periods of time, the natural tendency to forget knowledge

that is not in active use, along with staff turnover within the museum and dissolved relationships with external agents, all hinder the future existence of the work. For this reason, museums rely heavily on audiovisual and written documentation, which play a major role in consolidating memories and supporting knowledge transmission. Yet documentation cannot by itself replace the maintenance of personal relations.<sup>21</sup> The transmission of knowledge about a performance work to future performers or caregivers can be supported by documentation but is always mediated by human interaction, which builds further on embodied experience and memories.

Collecting institutions are facing a dilemma: they recognize that in order to sustain performance-based artworks, they need to create and maintain both an extensive documentation and an active network of people—which are in turn supported by regular activation—yet in practice they lack the time and resources to commit to frequent activations.<sup>22</sup> Generally speaking, putting on a live performance entails resorting to sets of skills that are novel for museums, and which contribute to the aforementioned prohibitive costs: performers must be fed, paid, insured and generally cared for, not only for the duration of the performance, but also during the preparatory phase.<sup>23</sup> Choreographic works in particular may require an extensive phase of preparation and professional expertise to cast and train new dancers. Besides, museums also need to engage specialized technicians for sound and light and implement adequate security.

### The challenges of transmission

To activate *HIGHER xtn.*, for instance, the Stedelijk relies on professional dancers possessing the technical skills and the embodied knowledge of the choreography necessary to reperform it. But the museum's objective is also to guarantee the long-term preservation of the artwork in its care: as the piece has entered the Stedelijk's collection, it has become the museum's duty to ensure its ongoing existence. In anticipation of the artist's absence, the museum must then prepare to undertake the transmission of the performance to future performers.

In this respect, the museum's approach to preservation over the long term is twofold: Firstly, it involves collecting documentation and materials such as recordings of past performances, several artist interviews, and a video tutorial created by the artist during rehearsals. Secondly, the strategy relies on a network of trusted dancers referred to by Rizzo as "experts," who have extensive experience performing the piece alongside the artist and have woven close collaborative relationships with him.<sup>24</sup> These experts will in turn become responsible for passing on their knowledge to a new generation of dancers, with the help of the existing documentation and tutorials.

In practice, however, Rizzo has pointed out the difficulties he has encountered in maintaining a large enough pool of dancers at the same technical level, given the complexity of the choreography, and the fact that the dancers

are not part of any official company run by him, and are therefore not always available to perform the work upon request. One major challenge, he explains, is that most institutions are cutting back on rehearsal time and budget in order to be able to show the work, forcing him to always select the best-prepared dancers and depriving the less trained of the opportunity to practice. This vicious circle widens the experience gap between dancers and ultimately diminishes the pool of dancers well qualified to execute and transmit the choreography.<sup>25</sup>

For traditional choreographic works, the transmission of repertoire is an established practice within dance companies. But for performance works specifically collected in art institutions, this particular form of immaterial transmission is difficult to maintain as museums lack both experience and specialized staff. Museums must learn how to rely on and support this maintenance of practice externally, as demonstrated by Tate's partnership with the Trisha Brown Dance Company to perform *Set Reset*. In the future, Rizzo might also establish his own company responsible for perpetuating the piece and thus make it possible to restage the performance at the museum when needed. Yet, currently, the Stedelijk already depends on the dancers trained by Rizzo as an external, dispersed entity keeping the work alive in their bodies. The museum therefore must have the capacity and willingness to support the existence of this external network in order to sustain the work's continued existence.

If museums excel at maintaining stable objects over extended periods, they lack the experience and frameworks required for sustaining the transmission of embodied knowledge across generations. The cyclical temporality of activations inherent to live performances, intertwined with the presence or absence of the people who make them, still stands in contrast to the museum's traditional model of a repository. For artists like Rizzo, who perform their creations themselves, it is also disconcerting to contemplate the fate of works so closely intertwined with their own life experiences, and, ultimately, their mortality. Posterity, or the need to create an estate for their artistic legacy, are evidently not yet the concerns of a choreographer under forty years old. The question remains: Can the traditional museum model truly adapt to the specific temporality of performance?

### Novel ways of caring and collecting

I believe that a current example of temporary custodianship offers a valuable inspiration: Tate recently engaged in a custodianship agreement involving the museum, the Guatemalan artist Edgar Calel, and the Kaqchikel people, a Maya community to which the artist belongs. The artwork, titled *The Echo of an Ancient Form of Knowledge (Ru k' ox k'ob'el jun ojer etemab'el)* (2021), entered the collection in 2021. It consists of an installation of several large stones arranged as altars, supporting offerings of fresh fruits—an homage to the land and ancestors—and encompasses a ritual part that is essential for its

installation. Stefan Benchoam, director of the gallery *Proyectos Ultravioleta*, who oversaw the transaction, describes the agreement as follows:

Tate has not acquired indefinite ownership of the work but rather accepts temporary custodianship for thirteen years, through which Calel offers an opportunity to learn from the lessons stored within the work, and the system of knowledge that it holds. After which time, the temporary custodianship can be extended for another thirteen years or sold to a different institution. If no new custodianship is agreed, the work can be disassembled and go back to its rightful owner: nature.<sup>26</sup>

Embracing custodianship of this artwork implies not only a commitment from Tate to preserve the piece, but also a dedication to share the knowledge it holds and to financially support the community from whose ritual it originates. This concept of custodianship, rooted in Mayan traditions, stands as a direct challenge to the conventional Western concept of perpetual ownership. Applied to performance, it could foster lasting collaborations that do not necessarily have to end up in the museum owning the piece for an infinite duration but would put an emphasis on the museum's duty to learn, share, and transmit knowledge about the work.

For performance works (especially those, like *HIGHER xtn.*, that include complex choreographic elements), one can argue that the museum, the artist, and the community of performers who make the work happen and hold knowledge about it are already, in fact, acting as co-custodians of the work. The notion of durational and renewable custodianship could therefore very well be considered further in the context of performance. The agreement could, for instance, be reviewed at regular time intervals or at decisive moments over the lifetime of the work. This would not only open up possibilities to amend contracts or instructions over time, as artists' careers, museums' missions, and society at large evolve, but also challenge the idea that artworks must live in museums 'forever' at all costs.<sup>27</sup>

For now, the legal framework (and mindset) to engage in diverse forms of co-custodianship—along with the appropriate handling of rights and responsibilities—is still missing. Yet, facing the pressing issues of sustainability and social responsibility, museums must consider the ethical implications of owning works for which they cannot guarantee continuous, substantial care over time. Under these circumstances, temporary custodianship could help to strike a balance between the importance of conserving performance art in our cultural memory through its institutionalization and the necessity to direct support and resources toward artists and performers in the present. If a temporary custodianship were defined between the Stedelijk Museum, Rizzo, and some trusted performers, it would offer more flexibility to redefine roles and responsibilities in the preservation of *HIGHER xtn.* It could reassure Rizzo about gradually letting go of his personal involvement with the work, while also putting less pressure on him to decide his options for

an undetermined, remote future. It might even leave the door open for the artist to decide that the piece in its current live form should end at a given point. Most importantly, the necessity to reevaluate the agreement periodically implies keeping the relationship between museum and artist open and ongoing, thus ensuring that the work's stewardship remains a collaborative and relational endeavor.

While many museums are still grappling with the idea of shifting from a traditional ownership concept to a more distributed and relational undertaking, some encouraging examples also demonstrate a willingness to evolve and adapt. In addition to the aforementioned examples of collective or temporary custodianship, Tate conservator Libby Ireland, for instance, proposes to “shift the relationship between museum and artwork towards that of host and guest,” a new framework that might help the museum to “take responsibility for the relationships it initiates” and to commit “as their host, to exhibit them.”<sup>28</sup> Elsewhere, Brian Castriota and Claire Walsh suggest redefining an artwork's acquisition as “an *extension* of ownership,” in which “the contents of an institution's collection and archive are affirmed as shared, common resources.”<sup>29</sup> Understanding the museum as the ‘host’ of common resources—which aligns with stewardship practices already emerging from the field of ethnographic collections<sup>30</sup>—would help recognize that artworks have lives and meanings that extend beyond the museum's walls, and that the museum should embrace their outside existence.

Ultimately, when institutions depend on external expertise and experience that they cannot ‘own’ in-house, this necessitates letting go of some control over the work, but also reimagining the role of the museum, especially as to how it can work with external parties in a truly supportive and reciprocal manner. So instead of aiming to make the work more docile and compliant with its closed system of recording and storing, the museum should embrace performance's inherent vitality as a powerful and generative resource located in many places, in diverse forms and bodies—truly a living and functioning network of information, somehow comparable to an underground mycelium.

### Caring for performance: Nurturing the mycelium

Whether we speak of networks, ecosystems, ecologies, environments, or meshwork,<sup>31</sup> the idea of an (invisible) interconnected system is central to the way contemporary conservation approaches complex artworks and performances. The life stories of the artworks themselves have been compared to rivers' trajectories, including their meanders, estuaries, and sources.<sup>32</sup> This analogy complexifies the notion of artworks' biographies by accounting for “different beginnings, itineraries, dynamics and endings.”<sup>33</sup> Building on these ideas, I propose to introduce mycelium as a metaphor for the complex systems and assemblages that support performance.

Mycelium is the vegetative part of a fungus, consisting of a vast network of thread-like structures called *hyphae*. It is vital to the life cycle of the fungus,



absorbing and distributing nutrients and supporting the formation of fungal structures (mushrooms). Mycelium's potential applications have recently gained much attention in pharmacology, agriculture, ecology, biotechnology, construction, and many other fields because of its sustainability and versatility: it can not only be used to decompose polymers and toxins, but also to produce new drugs, insulation material, or vegan leather. Its complex and mysterious nature has given rise to what anthropologist Anna Lowenhaupt Tsing names "mushroom fever":<sup>34</sup> Whether in the arts, in anthropology, or in psychology's renewed interest in psychedelics, mushrooms are becoming a utopic symbol to overcome capitalism, to foster kinship between humans and non-humans, and even to imagine cross-species communication.<sup>35</sup>

In the midst of this "mushroom fever," I believe that mycelium can also help us to grasp the complexity of performance: much akin to the complex neural connections within our brains, mycelium functions as a biological network, facilitating the exchange of information between trees and mushrooms in the forest ecosystem. Mycologist Paul Stamets even describes mycelium as "the Earth's natural Internet."<sup>36</sup> The robustness and vitality of this living system come from its capacity to continuously strengthen existing connections and create new ones, ensuring that information remains active and accessible. This structure is in many ways similar to the network of people, knowledge, and memories underlying the existence of performance, and the ongoing subterranean exchange of information and nutrients described by Stamets compares to the exchanges that take place among human (and non-human) agents to support performance.

Moreover, mycelium is alive and needs nutrients and an appropriate soil to grow, but it can also remain dormant over extended periods of time in unfavorable conditions. This resilience is evident in mushrooms' ability to endure in the harshest conditions, including in "capitalist ruins," in forests devastated by human exploitation.<sup>37</sup> Although mycelium is unique—each mushroom is therefore a manifestation of the same bodily entity—each individual mushroom, while retaining the characteristics of its species, can vary greatly in size, shape, and color, depending on the conditions in which it grows. Likewise, unlike inanimate objects, the vitality inherent in performance can always reappear, even unexpectedly and in various forms. In museums, performance works that are not activated typically remain in a "dormant state,"<sup>38</sup> which can last several years or even decades, but they retain their potential for return. When the work is in its "dormant state," its existence is mainly known through existing documentation and from the knowledge and memories accumulated in the network, until it emerges in a new manifestation. Like a mushroom popping up in the forest, each new activation of a performance then becomes a unique, visible manifestation of a more complex entity growing in all directions. To push the analogy further, the ecological niche in which a mycelium can thrive would represent the contextual circumstances under which a performance can (or cannot) happen. Sometimes these circumstances may be defined by the artist,<sup>39</sup> or else they are dictated by the

economic situation of a museum, by curatorial decisions or by art-historical moments (women artists and artists from minority backgrounds are now given more visibility in art institutions than in previous decades).

However, just as a dormant mycelium may never wake up, the dormant state of performance is not necessarily a neutral, stabilized state. As mentioned earlier, the ‘substrate’ of the network (its living members and memories) must be nurtured in order to survive. This means that even when a performance is not activated, its memory must be mobilized at regular intervals.

This risk can, nevertheless, also be mitigated by a third similarity between mycelium and performance: their versatility and ability to endure over time. Besides expanding their subterranean network, fungi can expand their reach by dispersing spores in the atmosphere, adding to the extraordinary versatility of their reign. Performance can operate in a similar manner, when its archive inspires new generations of artists to reference works from the past, allowing them to resurge and establish new connections with the present and future.<sup>40</sup> In this sense, the resilience of mycelium mirrors the spirit of performance, which, following Rebecca Schneider, “remains.”<sup>41</sup> Performance can live on not only in images and documents, but in the body as gestures and memories, through transmission, or even as reactivated only in the imagination from its documentation.<sup>42</sup> This shared resilience and potential for reappearance can inspire new ways to envisage the preservation of performance and can help us address crucial questions: How can we strike a balance between the imperative to generate and accumulate documentation in order to support performance’s transmission, and the urgent need to spare resources in a world increasingly impacted by climate change? How can we recenter art conservation’s focus toward the people who make art possible? How can collecting institutions not only respect performance’s inherent power of endurance, but also support and nurture it?

Going back to this intricate network of knowledge, objects, documents, and memories—the “virtual archive”<sup>43</sup> of performance, which could here be called the ‘performance mycelium’—trusting performance’s resilience means that we might place our faith in the endurance of this ‘performance mycelium,’ confident that if we nurture its existing network and diversify its possible modes of activation, the work will continue to assume new forms and adapt to new climates, ensuring its continued reemergence.

Translated to performance conservation, this means that while many museums will not be able to activate artworks on a very regular basis, they should make sure that at each activation of the work, the performers are guaranteed a safe and enriching experience.<sup>44</sup> It means allocating more resources to performers and staff in the present, all the while reevaluating conservation’s obsession with perfecting documentation procedures and creating colossal archives. Instead, museums should support different modes of performance continuation for the work to continue to exist elsewhere, and must let go of strict control over the work’s manifestations

to let performance spread beyond the museum's authority. For instance, in April 2015, the Guggenheim Museum chose to support the spontaneous and widespread activation of a performance work from their collection by Tania Bruguera, *Tatlin's Whisper #6 (Havana version)*. These reactivations, triggered by Bruguera's imprisonment in Cuba, were initiated by the artist's sister as a global show of solidarity and simultaneously held in multiple non-institutional locations, including New York's Times Square, London, and Rotterdam. The Guggenheim decided "not to treat this as a loan and to support the timely and global activation of the piece," even though the conditions for activation stipulated by the documentation of the work were not explicitly met.<sup>45</sup> These manifestations, which differed in many ways from a museum-sanctioned activation, actualized the work in response to immediate circumstances, which in turn contributed to enriching and expanding the work's meaning and outreach. Such parallel manifestations could be encouraged through facilitated loan procedures or shared stewardship.

Of course, trusting this resilience should by no means dispense museums from providing conservation care to the best of their ability. Simply, it means that performance can be preserved (and emerge again) in many different ways, not only in documentation and through reactivation, but also through traveling ideas, storytelling, and rumors.<sup>46</sup> Caring for performance, much like for mycelium, requires caring for a hospitable environment (in every sense we can give to this term), where the dormant mycelium and performance alike can awaken, flourish, and spread new spores. In this way, performance becomes an enduring force, capable of transcending challenges and nurturing creativity in ever-changing environments.

Returning one more time to *HIGHER xtn.*, the idea of nurturing the network in the present can help reimagine the use of documentation and memories by the museum. Transmission, for instance, does not only concern dancers but must also happen within the museum: knowledge and experience about the artwork and the collaborative working process with Rizzo must be shared and perpetuated among changing staff members, supported not only by existing documentation but also through oral transmission and firsthand participation in activations of the work. To do so it is important to deepen the museum's staff's relationship with the work, taking time during moments of activation to spend time with the performers, to observe and listen to how the work unfolds. Such relational working processes are currently developed by Stedelijk's time-based media conservator, Flaminia Fortunato, who, for instance, engages in a process of "active listening," in which she aims to register both verbal and non-verbal forms of communication during artist interviews and in moments of observation.<sup>47</sup> She has also built her own embodied knowledge by learning the steps along with new dancers during a rehearsal, with the aim to obtain a deeper understanding of the work beyond visual and verbal information.

## Conclusion

Taking as its point of departure the systemic difficulties faced by collecting institutions to accommodate performance works in their collections, this chapter has demonstrated how these works on the one hand undergo a process of ‘making docile’ upon entering collections, while, on the other, represent opportunities to develop a more collective understanding of what it means to own and care for performance art. Ownership, as I have argued, must not be necessarily exclusive and indefinite in time, as this situation tends to hinder performance’s own modalities of survival and endurance.

This chapter has drawn a parallel between performance and mycelium, highlighting their unique vitality and resilience as complex, living networks capable of thriving in unforeseen circumstances. By underscoring mycelium’s interconnectedness with its environment, this comparison aims to reframe conservation as an activity encompassing the broader environment of artworks within their socio-economic and cultural context. The bridge between art and nature conservation also serves as a reminder that care for human and non-human beings is intertwined with the imperative of preserving art in the first place, recognizing embodied experiences and memories as integral parts of a larger, biological archive. Eluding the division between docility and unruliness drawn by Domínguez Rubio, performance presents itself at times as alive and productive, and at other times dormant and awaiting nutrition.

In this spirit, one should imagine the ‘performance mycelium’ as a burgeoning entity which continues to grow, develop, and change.

Recognizing performance’s resilience can also encourage museums to recognize scarcity and spare resources in a society of over-consumption, slowing down the production and accumulation of largely unedited and unexploited audiovisual documents, and privileging the quality of documentation over its quantity. As the examples mentioned in this chapter suggest, it might even encourage museums to consider new forms of collecting, such as temporary or renewable custodianship, which are not only best suited for temporal and living art forms but additionally provide an alternative to the perpetual accumulation that engorges Western museums.

Ultimately, thinking of performance’s continuation as a cyclic, organic process similar to mycelium’s cycle of growth, flourishing, and decay, can allow us to part with conservation’s obsession with infinite material preservation, and accept that even “processes of decay and disintegration can be culturally (as well as ecologically) productive.”<sup>48</sup> Ecological studies and several non-Western ontologies emphasize the cyclical nature of life, suggesting that what goes back to the Earth is not severed from the continuation of life cycles. Recycling, upcycling, and composting might become more creative and sustainable forms of conservation that our generation will have to turn to—for the sake of sharing resources and preserving them for future generations. Following this idea, Noémie Etienne also states that “concepts

of instability and impermanence must continue to transform both object conservation and art history.”<sup>49</sup> In other words, embracing the impermanence, uncertainty, and potential endings of performance art can lead to unexpected growth and new artistic expressions. As brilliantly demonstrated by artists like Davide-Christelle Sanvee and Gisela Hochuli in this volume (see Chapters 11 and 15), new artistic creations can emerge from the remnants of past performances, if we cultivate a cultural environment where artists, performers, and everyone involved with performance care can be supported and inspired.

## Notes

- 1 Fernando Domínguez Rubio, “Preserving the Unpreservable: Docile and Unruly Objects at MoMA,” *Theory and Society* 43, no. 6 (2014): 617–45, <https://doi.org/10.1007/s11186-014-9233-4>.
- 2 Claire Bishop, *Artificial Hells: Participatory Art and the Politics of Spectatorship* (London and New York: Verso, 2012), 219. Hélia Marçal points out that this category should not be understood as strictly static, and that a given work can entail certain levels of delegation. A performance can, for instance, be performed by others but necessitate “the collaboration of the artist or a representative at each activation.” Hélia Marçal, “Ecologies of Memory in the Conservation of *Ten Years Alive on the Infinite Plain*,” in *Reshaping the Collectible: Tony Conrad, Ten Years Alive on the Infinite Plain*, Tate Research Publication, 2022, accessed October 27, 2023, [www.tate.org.uk/research/reshaping-the-collectible/conrad-ecologies-memory](http://www.tate.org.uk/research/reshaping-the-collectible/conrad-ecologies-memory).
- 3 See, for instance, Brian Castriota and Claire Walsh, “In the Shadow of the State: Collecting Performance at IMMA and Institutions of Care in the Irish Context,” in *Performance: The Ethics and the Politics of Conservation and Care*, vol. I, ed. Hanna B. Hölling, Jules Pelta Feldman, and Emilie Magnin (London: Routledge, 2023), 147–68, <https://doi.org/10.4324/9781003309987>; and Marçal, “Ecologies of Memory.”
- 4 Maria Puig de la Bellacasa, *Matters of Care: Speculative Ethics in More than Human Worlds* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2017), 13.
- 5 See, for instance, the SNSF research project “Mediating the Ecological Imperative: Formats and Modes of Engagement,” located at the Institutes of Art History, American Studies, and Social Anthropology at the University of Bern. See *Mediating the Ecological Imperative* (website), accessed September 20, 2023, <https://ecological-imperative.ch/>.
- 6 Domínguez Rubio, “Preserving the Unpreservable,” 621.
- 7 Of course, these categories are not fixed, but subject to change and revision. A given object can navigate a spectrum between docility and unruliness, given its state and institutional context. Domínguez Rubio, “Preserving the Unpreservable,” 621.
- 8 Jack McConchie, “‘Nothing Comes Without Its World’: Learning to Love the Unknown in the Conservation of Ima-Abasi Okon’s Artworks,” *Tate Papers*, no. 35 (2022).
- 9 Frascati Theater/Producties; ICK Dans Amsterdam; DANSCO.
- 10 As indicated on the Certificate of Authenticity, consulted by the author at the Stedelijk on March 1, 2022.
- 11 For instance, Tino Sehgal’s ‘constructed situation’ *This Progress* (2000) was sold as an edition of four, while Roman Ondak’s performance *Swap* (2011) was sold as an edition of five plus two artist’s proofs.

- 12 From a conservation perspective, performances—and other art forms that need to be installed, played back, or otherwise activated to be experienced—are works that can only be fully accessed (and therefore also documented, researched, and learned from) when they are in an activated state. Nevertheless, the pace of exhibition cycles and the expenses associated with producing live performances put pressure on the museum's resources and capacities. On this problematic, see Pip Laurenson and Vivian van Saaze, "Collecting Performance-Based Art: New Challenges and Shifting Perspectives," in *Performativity in the Gallery: Staging Interactive Encounters*, ed. Outi Remes, Laura McCulloch, and Marina Leino (Oxford: Peter Lang, 2013), 36–37.
- 13 "SFMOMA and Metropolitan Museum Jointly Acquire Major William Kentridge Installation," press release, SFMOMA (website), October 16, 2013, accessed August 30, 2024, <https://www.sfmoma.org/press/release/sfmoma-and-metropolitan-museum-jointly-acquire-ma/>.
- 14 Erin Brannigan and Louise Lawson, "Precarious Movements: Contemporary Dance as Contemporary Art—A Conversation Between Erin Brannigan and Louise Lawson," in *Performance: The Ethics and the Politics of Conservation and Care*, vol. I, ed. Hanna B. Hölling, Jules Pelta Feldman, and Emilie Magnin (London: Routledge, 2023), 278–92, <https://doi.org/10.4324/9781003309987>.
- 15 The importance of these networks for preserving time-based media art has been addressed in Laurenson, "Emerging Institutional Models and Notions of Expertise for the Conservation of Time-Based Media Works of Art," *Technè*, no. 37 (2013): 36–42, <https://doi.org/10.4000/technè.15198>. Annet Dekker explores the idea of a network of care for preserving digital arts in Dekker, *Collecting and Conserving Net Art* (London and New York: Routledge, 2018), <https://doi.org/10.4324/9781351208635>. Gabriella Giannachi suggests considering performance "as an environment comprising a range of viewpoints, including those involved in caring for the work over time," in Giannachi, "Conserving the Un-Conservable: Documenting Environmental Performance for the Twenty-First Century," in *Performance: The Ethics and the Politics of Conservation and Care*, vol. I, ed. Hanna B. Hölling, Jules Pelta Feldman, and Emilie Magnin (London: Routledge, 2023), 93–112, <https://doi.org/10.4324/9781003309987>.
- 16 Vivian van Saaze, *Installation Art and the Museum: Presentation and Conservation of Changing Artworks* (Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press, 2013), 185.
- 17 Hanna B. Hölling, *Paik's Virtual Archive: Time, Change, and Materiality in Media Art* (Oakland: University of California Press, 2017).
- 18 Marçal, "Ecologies of Memory."
- 19 Tiziana Caianiello, "(Re-)Constructing Memories: Some Thoughts About Conservation," *ArtMatters: International Journal for Technical Art History*, special issue (1) on "Expanding Notions of 'Making' for Contemporary Artworks" (2021): 1–11.
- 20 Caianiello, "(Re-)Constructing Memories," 3.
- 21 Describing the role of documentation in the maintenance of the "memory ecologies" around Tony Conrad's *Ten Years Alive on the Infinite Plain*, Marçal argues that, while some forms of transmission can be achieved through documentation, others are dependent on the relationships that develop between people involved in the process (including how close the relationship is between artists and those involved with preserving their work, or how often the same performers have performed together.) See Marçal, "Ecologies of Memory," 12, 15–16.
- 22 The organization of "remembrance meetings," reuniting the network of people involved with a performance at regular intervals to refresh their memories, is a strategy that has been discussed around the works of Tino Sehgal, which were among the first performances to enter museum collections. See Vivian van Saaze,

- “In the Absence of Documentation: Remembering Tino Sehgal’s Constructed Situations,” *Revista de História da Arte* 4 (2015): 55–63, 61. Since Sehgal notoriously banishes all forms of written or visual documentation, his works rely particularly on the personal memories of those involved. However, the organization of regular meetings conflicts with the existing workloads of most institutions, and my inquiries among museums owning works by Sehgal revealed that in practice no one has held (or even planned) such meetings on a regular basis.
- 23 Bishop mentions that contractual working fees for performers constitute “the largest outgoing expense in such shows, which operate with an inverse economy to that of installing more conventional art.” Bishop, *Artificial Hells*, 232.
  - 24 From comments made during a conversation between the author and the artist, February 12, 2022.
  - 25 From comments made during a conversation between the artist and Stedelijk staff members (Karen Archey, Flaminia Fortunato, Ankie van den Berg, Loulou Oudshoorn), September 22, 2022.
  - 26 Henry Broome, “Custodianship & Mayan Cosmovision: A Conversation with Stefan Benchoam,” *Flash Art*, November 23, 2021, <https://flash---art.com/2021/11/stefan-benchoam/>.
  - 27 Jane Henderson challenges the idea that keeping things for longer should be the ultimate goal of conservation. See Jane Henderson, “Beyond Lifetimes: Who Do We Exclude When We Keep Things for the Future?” *Journal of the Institute of Conservation* 43, no. 3 (2020): 195–212, <https://doi.org/10.1080/19455224.2020.1810729>.
  - 28 Libby Ireland, “Learning Through the Acquisition and Display of Works by Ima-Abasi Okon: Enacting Radical Hospitality Through Deliberate Slowness,” *Tate Papers*, no. 35 (2022), [www.tate.org.uk/research/tate-papers/35/learning-through-acquisition-display-works-by-ima-abasi-okon-enacting-radical-hospitality-through-deliberate-slowness](http://www.tate.org.uk/research/tate-papers/35/learning-through-acquisition-display-works-by-ima-abasi-okon-enacting-radical-hospitality-through-deliberate-slowness).
  - 29 Castriota and Walsh, “In the Shadow of the State,” 164, emphasis in the original.
  - 30 The Smithsonian Museum of the American Indian recently adopted a “Shared Stewardship and Ethical Returns Policy.” Smithsonian American Art Museum (website), accessed September 20, 2023, <https://americanindian.si.edu/explore/collections/shared-stewardship-and-ethical-returns>.
  - 31 On the notion of networks, see Annet Dekker, “Networks of Care: Types, Challenges and Potentialities,” in *Networks of Care*, ed. Anna Schäffler, Friederike Schäfer, and Nanne Buurman (Berlin: neue Gesellschaft für bildende Kunst, 2022), 27–29; on networks and ecosystems, see Laurenson, “Emerging Institutional Models”; on ecologies, see Marçal, “Ecologies of Memory”; on environments, see Giannachi, “Conserving the Un-Conservable”; on the idea of meshwork, see Hölling, “Exhausting Conservation: Object, Event, Performance in Franz Erhard Walther’s Werkstücke,” in *Object—Event—Performance: Art, Materiality and Continuity Since the 1960s*, ed. Hanna B. Hölling (New York: Bard Graduate Center, 2022); Marçal and Gordon, “Affirming Future(s): Towards a Posthumanist Conservation in Practice,” in *Posthumanism in Practice*, ed. Christine Daigle and Matthew Hayler (London: Bloomsbury, 2023), 165–78.
  - 32 Renée van de Vall et al., “Reflections on a Biographical Approach to Contemporary Art Conservation,” in *ICOM-CC 16th Triennial Conference Preprints*, Lisbon, September 19–23, 2011, ed. Janet Bridgland (Paris: International Council of Museums, 2011).
  - 33 van de Vall et al., “Reflections on a Biographical Approach.”
  - 34 Anna Lowenhaupt Tsing, *The Mushroom at the End of the World: On the Possibility of Life in Capitalist Ruins* (Princeton, NJ, and Oxford: Princeton University Press, 2015), viii.
  - 35 See, for instance, the exhibition *The Art of Mushrooms*, curated by Francesca Gavin at the Fundação de Serralves in Porto in 2022, which brought together

- over twenty mushroom-enthusiast artists. *The Art of Mushrooms*, Fundação de Serralves (website), accessed August 2023, [www.serralves.pt/ciclo-serralves/2206-exposicao-a-arte-dos-cogumelos/](http://www.serralves.pt/ciclo-serralves/2206-exposicao-a-arte-dos-cogumelos/). See also Lowenhaupt Tsing, *The Mushroom at the End of the World*; Merlin Sheldrake, *Entangled Life: How Fungi Make Our Worlds, Change Our Minds, and Shape Our Futures* (New York: Random House, 2020); and Paul Stamets, *Mycelium Running: How Mushrooms Can Help Save the World* (Berkeley: Ten Speed Press, 2005).
- 36 Stamets, *Mycelium Running*, 7.
- 37 Lowenhaupt Tsing, *The Mushroom at the End of the World*.
- 38 Louise Lawson et al., “Strategy and Glossary of Terms for the Documentation and Conservation of Performance,” Tate (website), 2021, accessed August 21, 2023, [www.tate.org.uk/about-us/projects/documentation-conservation-performance/strategy-and-glossary](http://www.tate.org.uk/about-us/projects/documentation-conservation-performance/strategy-and-glossary).
- 39 Cuban artist Tania Bruguera, for instance, requires that her performances are reactivated only in given socio-political situations or contexts. See Claire Bishop and Tania Bruguera, “Political Timing Specific Art,” in *Tania Bruguera in Conversation with Claire Bishop* (New York: Fundación Cisneros, 2020), 45–77.
- 40 See, for instance, the work of Swiss artist Davide-Christelle Sanvee, who engaged in a series of works (*La performance des performances*) in which she successively reenacted short extracts from past performances by other performers. See Jules Pelta Feldman, “Davide-Christelle Sanvee’s *La performance des performances* as critical conservation,” Chapter 11 in this volume.
- 41 Rebecca Schneider, *Performing Remains: Art and War in Times of Theatrical Reenactment* (New York: Routledge, 2011).
- 42 Philip Auslander, *Reactivations: Essays on Performance and Its Documentation* (Ann Arbor, MI: University of Michigan Press, 2018).
- 43 Hölling, *Paik’s Virtual Archive*.
- 44 Museums notoriously fail to provide safe and fair working conditions to hired performers. See, for instance, the appalling account of performer Dorothy Dubrule when performing Tino Sehgal’s *Selling Out*, 2002. Dorothy Dubrule, “What I’m Doing When I’m Selling Out,” Open Space/SFMOMA (website), April 25, 2019, accessed August 21, 2023, <https://openspace.sfmoma.org/2019/04/what-im-doing-when-im-selling-out/>.
- 45 Joanna Phillips and Lauren Hinkson, “Collecting Live Performance at the Guggenheim Museum,” Collecting and Conserving Performance Art Symposium, Wolfsburg, June 9–11, 2016, accessed September 8, 2023, [www.restauratoren.de/collecting-and-conserving-performance-art-videos/](http://www.restauratoren.de/collecting-and-conserving-performance-art-videos/).
- 46 Hanna B. Hölling, “Once upon a time: Performative ultra-conceptualism and storytelling as conservation—Florence Jung,” Chapter 1 in this volume.
- 47 From comments made during a conversation between the author and the conservator, February 28, 2022.
- 48 Caitlin DeSilvey, *Curated Decay: Heritage Beyond Saving* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2017), 4.
- 49 Noémie Etienne, “Can Conservation Be Decentered?” in *The Expanded Field of Conservation*, ed. Caroline O. Fowler and Alexander Nagel (Williamstown, MA: Clark Art Institute, 2022), 209.

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## 7 Reviving culture

### Puawai Cairns's vision for dynamic museums and performance conservation

#### *A conversation with Jules Pelta Feldman*

Puawai Cairns has worked in the museum and culture sector for twenty years and presently works as Director of Audience and Insights at Te Papa Tongarewa, Wellington, Aotearoa (New Zealand), where she oversees the audience-facing work of the national museum. She is of Māori descent from Tauranga Moana and belongs to the Ngāti Pūkenga, Ngāi Te Rangī, and Ngāti Ranginui tribes. In this conversation, Cairns responds to questions posed by Jules Pelta Feldman and the team members of “Performance: Conservation, Materiality, Knowledge” pertaining to performance, permanence, conservation, and keeping cultures alive in and outside museums.

*Jules Pelta Feldman:* What strategies do you use to help culture feel alive and dynamic in museum contexts?

*Puawai Cairns:* I'm a great believer in 'bringing culture' into a museum or enabling it to channel its way into the museum, and making sure it is nurtured and vibrant and real. That always starts with people from that culture, not with objects. It's funny, if you had asked me that question when I was working as a curator, I would have probably talked about the museum as a culture box. I wouldn't have talked about the box itself. I would have talked about it as a staging area, as a collecting vessel, and not implicated the museum itself, and the design and build of the museum and its workforce, as being part of that. But now, as Director of Audience and Insights at Te Papa Tongarewa, pretty much about ninety percent of my work is looking at the organization rather than the practices, which was my curatorial grounding.

Helping the museum work harder for Māori, by increasing the number of creatives who work in it and increasing the size of the Māori audience who are served by Te Papa, has been an important focus for me. Māori are already incredibly cultural. They are filled with communities of culture

makers, culture consumers, and cultural connoisseurs. We managed to achieve—maybe for the first time in the museum’s history, I’m not sure—nearly fifteen percent of the domestic visitation were Māori.

I’ve been focused on organizational design, contributing to the discussions about how we build and sustain our workforce in order to do the work that is set out in our institutional strategy. This has meant I’ve had lots of recruitment activity in my area. For a museum to be a place that is relevant to the groups it is trying to attract through the door, the workforce should have people that come from those groups: creatives and researchers with empathy and understanding of those groups, advocates for communities’ stories and community practices. Because if they do, you bring in more dynamism, you bring in more artists, you bring in more potential, more opportunities. When I was a curator, it would be about doing work that was about revealing an aspect of a community’s practice or something that was really important to them—bringing the community into the museum, bringing them with me so that the museum became a mirror for them, and they felt they were reflected, that they could see themselves. But I believe that you can’t have culture or dynamism unless you look at your workforce. You have to commit to bold organizational design—to make wise recruitment decisions so your workforce looks more like the cultures and communities you are trying to service. One cultural appointment is not enough. For Indigenous cultures to thrive in these environments, they need companions and allies and friends. Create teams, create space on your leadership teams, create seats at your governance level, so the culture thrives at all levels. Once you do that, you will begin to see culture manifest in your museum.

There’s a big belief that you can decolonize the museum as a space, as a practice. I have written that I don’t think that’s possible because they will always be colonial models.<sup>1</sup> No matter how many Māori I bring in here, no matter how many Māori work for me, or how many Māori projects I might greenlight, I fear that it will always be temporary. I liken it to creating a sort of utopic campsite. It’s going to be a campsite based on how long I stay here at Te Papa because Māori presence is not permanently assured. We get a new board, a new government, a new CEO, and the institution pivots with it. Our collected culture will be a long-term tenant in a museum, but our living culture is not permanently assured within a museum model. It has to be based on people bringing it in. It’s like we’re a transplanted kidney keeping the old body alive, but the old body continues to try to reject us because we’re not naturally born of it. And like a transplanted organ, you have to continuously work to prevent the body from rejecting it. There’s also a bit of a pushback within Māori communities; some people say, don’t bring too much of our conceptual thinking and our culture into colonial institutions because all they do is appropriate them and spit them back in our face. There is truth in that suspicion. The colonizer does not have a great record of ethical practice when it comes to its treatment of Indigenous people and their culture.

But I know that I'm always working against an erosion, a tense foreboding of rejection that I have to continue to spend energy on, anticipating, reading signs, staying ahead of the political winds. Museum organizations have an illusion of permanence. But when it comes to communities that do not look like the majority, our presence is very temporary. Māori like me have made changes, but I've seen many of those changes walked back, erased, only for a new generation to then try to rebuild what was taken away. In that vein, there is no such thing as a new idea when it comes to strengthening Indigenous presence in museums. Everything I have said in a public realm has already been thought of by many elders who came before me. It might be that, at this moment, I have been able to achieve some part of what their speculations were. But I think when I finally leave and am replaced by someone who thinks differently to me, it will be unbuilt.

In trying to understand performance conservation, there is a synchronicity with Māori practices. The most useful thing a museum can do for Māori is to be a place for storytelling, to understand culture in motion, not culture in stasis. There is a very famous essay by Mina McKenzie that I refer to over and over again called "A Challenge to Museums—Keeping the *Taonga* Warm."<sup>2</sup> Mina was the first Māori museum director in Aotearoa and a great thinker and writer. Her essay outlines a path that museums can follow to be of service to Māori, bringing Māori into the museum to work with the objects, creating spaces for elders to guide the staff, being part of the Māori desire to repair the threads that colonization severed:

There is an unbroken thread between the people and their past, present and future. When the people are alienated from their *taonga*, the thread is broken and the *taonga* are 'cold.'<sup>3</sup>

That unbroken thread can be woven throughout a museum in many different ways. Increasing the thinkers and doers in your ranks, as explained earlier, but also understanding what our management of the collection holdings can do to continue to uphold that unbroken thread. That means understanding that the use of a collection's objects by its communities means you may be contributing to the conservation of a culture, while taking risks with the object. I am not an advocate for blindly approving every single collection use request, but what is important is that, at the very least, a conversation is held where the institution has an open mind about what it is trying to protect in its decisions and understands the power it holds in that decision.

*Pelta Feldman:* So what would permanence, or preservation, mean in this kind of work?

*Cairns:* Not having a museum. There's a caveat to my belief that the museum can't be decolonized. It can: if you blow the museum up and you rebuild it from the sublevel up. The way that power is transmitted, the way things are funded,

the way things are decided on, the way people are trained up to take these positions, the names of the positions, the configurations of the positions, the values that inform them, the audiences that are targeted, the patrons that are lured in—all of these things are little ribs that help a structure maintain its robustness. But if every single one of those was questioned and queried and rebuilt, you probably wouldn't end up with the museum as you understand it now. But it might be doing the function of a museum, which is to transmit storytelling. To become a hub for people to tell their stories, to reflect and interpret histories. That may not be a museum in the end, if it's indigenized. But it will still be performing the same role.

There are some ways to create longevity within the museum system. You have to think about what are the things that endure through different staff, through trustees, through politicians, even through governments. A lot of that would be, for us, legislative enshrinement of things that have to be in the museum. We have the 1992 Museum of New Zealand Te Papa Tongarewa Act, which enshrines the responsibilities of the museum and its board, and stipulates that the museum

expresses and recognizes the mana and significance of Māori, European, and other major traditions and cultural heritages, and that the Museum provides the means for every such culture to contribute effectively to the Museum as a statement of New Zealand's identity.

But the legislation is very sensitive to the politics of the time it was formed, so it doesn't reference the importance of the 1840 Treaty of Waitangi, which basically established the fundamental rights of Māori as promised by the British Crown. So you could potentially decolonize if you rebuild every single little element of what makes a museum into something else. You would start with legislation, policies, procedural documents. That would hopefully endure past all of the changeable elements of the museum. But then you have to be really careful because museums also need to change. You can't enshrine everything in order to assure that it's going to be the better version of itself. Māori culture thirty-five years ago, when Te Papa was still an idea, is not reflective of Māori culture now. We've changed. Our priorities have changed, communities will change.

Transformation takes letting go of something. It takes a sacrifice of some sort. You have to leave something behind to turn into something else. Museums and other kinds of cultural organizations say that they want to transform, but they also want to stay exactly the same. You can't transform until you leave something behind. And what are you prepared to cut, sacrifice, to make that change?

*Pelta Feldman:* Do you think that performance can play a role in that transformation?

*Cairns:* Yes, I do. That relates to the discussion around the Kim Kardashian dress.<sup>4</sup> When she wore Marilyn Monroe's dress to the Met Gala in 2022, ICOM, the International Council of Museums, released a statement saying that internationally or nationally significant garments should never be worn. I'm not fixated on the dress; I know there's a lot of attachment and nostalgia about it, but the dress for me is not important. I challenged ICOM about their hardline position because I believe it's not as black and white as that.<sup>5</sup> Sometimes it's more important for culture to endure through an object being used. You may lose a bit of it, you may suffer some loss, but you always trade that off. And museums are always making that trade-off. The moment you pull a drawer out and you expose a garment to light, the moment someone handles it, the moment it gets put on a mannequin to go into a show, there is some loss.

It was an interesting few weeks when I critiqued the ICOM Costume Committee's stance across my social media platforms. I wasn't that interested in the dress's appearance on the red carpet; the dress being worn was never my reason for speaking out. But it was very interesting noting the difference in debates held by both me and my pākehā CEO Courtney Johnston. She noted that the level of vehemence against her on forums like LinkedIn was fairly slight compared to the anger aimed at me, given that she was repeating what I was saying on her page.<sup>6</sup>

I received a number of invitations and requests for papers after I took this stance, too. I haven't said yes to many of them; I've only said yes to those who I know are working in this same advocacy space from where I was launching my argument—that collection management practices can enable incredibly rich dialogues with communities who see museums as places to help continue relationships with their material culture, not to police or obstruct.

Coming back to our context here in Aotearoa: there are nearly four hundred finely woven cloaks in our collection. Weaving a fine cloak is the apex of weaving skill. It takes a long time to master; enormous effort goes into the gathering of the materials, and honing the graceful skills needed to construct an object of status, spirituality, and richness. But cloaks are made to be worn, and Māori have a belief that there is a *mauri*, an animate force, within everything—a rock, wood, a garment. These all have a *mauri*, a living force. And sometimes to use something is to reawaken a *mauri* or to acknowledge it. The process of wearing or using a *taonga*—especially one that has been handed down—can be about reconnecting back to that original master who made it, and to the original wearer. It's about honoring and respecting the birds whose feathers were used in that cloak, and the flax that was treated

and processed in order to create the foundation of the cloak. It's honoring the fact that it's endured this long. By wearing it, you are bringing its *mana* back. You are honoring its *mana*, its importance. That is the important part about a culture that's in motion. For our culture, anyway, we were not about conserving our objects. We were about using them for the way that they were intended. And when they can't be used anymore, you put them to sleep. There are all these cloaks in the collection. Some of them can never be worn again because they're so fragile, but some of them can. And so we're always in constant conversations with people who want to wear them. Just after that Kardashian drama, our curatorial team went into a very challenging conversation with members of the Māori community who wanted to wear some of our cloaks at a Māori new year ritual. And it was hard. It was tough, but the curatorial team managed to do it because it was about culture enduring through the act of using those objects.

When I was working as a curator, I worked with the Māori performing artist James Webster, and I collected his Māori instruments, but then we also commissioned him to do a performance so that I would always be able to show people in the future what his material would look like in performance (Figures 7.1 and 7.2). There are other examples of Māori musical instruments being played. I worked with artists at the museum, especially performance artists, who wanted to use some of the Māori instruments in our collection, especially stuff that James Cook collected. These are our oldest recorded or oldest documented objects. They're small flutes made of stone or longer flutes made of wood. Beautiful. Unplayed, because, as a conservator would tell you, when you use it, you're putting damp breath into a dry environment; you're creating a vibration, the woodwind interaction between the user and the instrument. Some of these Māori instruments are bound with flax fiber, and they're very dry and brittle. We discussed with our objects conservator, Nirmala Balram, what conservation strategies could be put in place so that these instruments can be played at least for a little while, so we can record them, because it would be a shame if they stayed silent. They were made to be played, and we had a lot of musicians who wanted to record them to use in their songs. We ended up bringing some highly skilled and renowned Māori instrumentalists into a studio, and took all of these instruments into the studio, with the collection manager and conservator there ready with cotton buds and various other conservation goodness. The Māori instrumentalists played every single one. Then the conservator came in and dried the instruments off and tried to minimize any damage. And now, we've at least got this recording; we can give it to any other musicians who want to use it. It's a question of what is important—the object or the sound of the object, the use of the object, documenting the use of the object, the ongoing sound being used in other performances. Even then it's quite limited because a different instrumentalist may have got different sounds out of it. We may be asked again to bring them out. I think we should always try to say yes because we should be about perpetuating culture, not just physically preserving it. That





*Figure 7.1* Artist Hinemoa Jones, onstage with two karetao-pūoro, for the original performance piece she composed with James Webster, *Tokotū* (CA001227; ‘Tokotū’ by Taowaru: Karetao-pūoro performance by James Webster and company; Webster, James; May 10, 2016). Courtesy Puawai Cairns. Copyright Te Papa 2017.

seems to be what performance conservation is about: helping culture endure, not just preserving it as a static moment.

‘Intangible collecting’ was such a big thing around about ten, fifteen years ago. It’s going to change the world, people thought. I was really interested in the Māori home, especially the Māori kitchen and the different practices within a Māori kitchen. There are a lot of different—we call them *tikanga*—beliefs, rituals, practices around certain things. Directly translated, *tikanga* just means ‘the right way.’ We’ve got *tikanga* around what to do with food and what to do with the body. A lot of things don’t mix. For example, our heads are our most sacred part. So things like hats and brushes and things to do with our heads don’t go anywhere near food. Things like tea towels that we use to dry our dishes—none of those are allowed to be washed with our clothes. Kind of like how Jewish people separate certain foods. Every Māori kitchen will have a tea towel bucket, and it will be marked ‘tea towels’ because nothing else is allowed to go in there. No mops, no undies, no nothing to do with bums or floors. There used to be a thing, a mid-century, early twentieth-century European thing, where they would put pictures of our



*Figure 7.2* Artist James Webster, onstage using customary Māori instrument, a kōwhiri, as part of an original performance he composed with Hinemoa Jones, called *Tokotū* (CA001227; ‘Tokotū’ by Taowaru: Karetāo-pūoro performance by James Webster and company; Webster, James; May 10, 2016). Courtesy Puawai Cairns. Copyright Te Papa 2017.

chiefs on tea towels—because pākehā like to get all nostalgic about Māori chiefs the same way that Americans used to get nostalgic about Sitting Bull and all that. People would buy the tea towels as souvenirs, but they wouldn’t use them on their food. They would put them up on their walls so they would become portraits, and so these tea towels would never ever be used as tea towels. They would be put up as an honored picture of the Māori king or revered ancestors.

In a museum context, I could recreate that—a materialization of the Māori kitchen that would indicate the ways that Māori live our lives, with the beliefs around what we eat and how we eat and the hygiene practices within our houses. You could do a diorama of my kitchen, but it would never be a Māori kitchen because it would never have the sounds, the smells, the talk, the singing, the conversation, the laughing. One of the thought experiments around the tension between intangible and tangible is that I could collect the food, I could collect the cooking vessels, the tea towels, the tea towel bucket,

the old stove, the worn wallpaper, the dining table—I could easily collect or fabricate all that, but I could never bring in what it is actually like to be in a Māori kitchen. Performance conservation for me is not just about the glam stuff around the cloaks and the Kardashians and all that. It is also about what culture looks like in the moment, how it sounds and smells.

It's trying to capture a whole four-dimensional reality. But because of the confinements and the constraints of how we practice in museums, we have to capture it in little slices. So we capture the material, we capture the metadata about the artist, and then we try to capture what it was like in the moment. But it's very difficult to recreate them, to bring those little cross sections back together for people to understand what it was actually like. The moment something is out of time, it will immediately take on a different resonance.

To take an object from a community, sever it, and place it into a museum will change that object and that community forever. Repairing the severed thread becomes a lifetime of work, but a part of me thinks it can never be the full recreation of what it was intended to be. An object returns, or is used in ritual; there will always be a sadness because it's out of time and context. Colonization has inserted itself in that thread. I think anything that we pull out of time and conserve, even if it slips out by an hour, will always be odd. We have to accept that. I don't know how we can recreate an environment, with all of those little cross sections, to be exactly as it was when it happened. Unless we invent a time machine.

*Pelta Feldman:* That's something we face in performance art, too—that you can't go back to the time and place of the performance; you can't return to that moment. But a question we ask ourselves, and perhaps it is relevant for your work too, is: Can you create a new moment?

*Cairns:* Yes, you can. You can create the new. The future of museums is when we change the power dynamic between the museum and the community. As a curator, I would take people into the collection stores, my own people, Māori, into the collection stores. They would often act as if they'd entered into some very reverential space. And I never knew what was going to happen at that moment, whether somebody was going to cry. I've had someone faint. I've had some people get a bit angry. I've had people express regret, feeling very sorry for the *taonga*. That's the moment that the museum has the most power over the community, because the things that are no longer in the community, the practices that are no longer in the community, are now held in this small room. It's a stark reminder about what they don't have. And why is it all here? And what does it all mean? Why don't I know what that object is, and what it's supposed to do?

What does a future look like? It's when the museum no longer has emotional power over my people when they are moving into their storage area. When they walk into collection storage and say, oh, yes, we use that item—they know exactly what that is. Oh, yes, we've got a couple of those items that are better than what you've got. So the rarity and mystery of what we hold has been disarmed. And that can only happen when more culture is happening in Māori communities than in museums. What museums can do is play more of an active role in helping to restore culture within communities outside of their doors. So you should be applying your commissioning money, your exhibition money, with the intent to help a community into the making of things. If you're going to spend 80,000 dollars on a cloak at an auction in the United Kingdom, why would you not spend 80,000 dollars on commissioning a cloak from a community that will understand where it came from, what it was made of, what it was intended for, rather than some salvage collecting that adds to the economy of another country? Why not use our institutional privilege to support the practice of making in the community itself? I prefer a model of museum practice where we are trying to let go of our power in holding the most precious and the most rare, and, instead, we will just hold the most mundane. You can create new relationships, new conservation practices, new moments. Redo it again? Yes, absolutely. But redo it in a way that might be more relevant for the community, not for the institution. I'm saying we have to cut off an arm to transform.

*This conversation took place on September 5, 2023. Questions were contributed by Hanna B. Hölling and Emilie Magnin.*

## Notes

- 1 Puawai Cairns, "Decolonisation: We Aren't Going to Save You," American Alliance of Museums: Center for the Future of Museums (blog), December 17, 2018, accessed April 15, 2024, [www.aam-us.org/2018/12/17/decolonisation-we-arent-going-to-save-you/](http://www.aam-us.org/2018/12/17/decolonisation-we-arent-going-to-save-you/).
- 2 Mina McKenzie, "A Challenge to Museums—Keeping the *Taonga* Warm," *Zeitschrift für Ethnologie* 118, no. 1 (1993): 79–85.
- 3 McKenzie, "A Challenge to Museums," 79.
- 4 "About the Use of a Historic Dress That Belonged to Marilyn Monroe." *ICOM Costume* (blog), May 11, 2022, accessed August 15, 2024, <https://costume.mini.icom.museum/about-the-use-of-a-historic-dress-that-belonged-to-marilyn-monroe/>; Charmaine Patterson and Julie Farin, "Historians Complain Kim Kardashian Endangered Marilyn Monroe's Iconic Dress: 'Putting It at Risk'," *People Magazine*, May 3, 2022, accessed August 15, 2024, <https://people.com/style/met-gala-2022-historians-complainkim-kardashian-endangered-marilyn-monroes-iconic-dressputting-it-at-risk/>; Helen Holmes, "Kim Kardashian Should Not Have Worn Marilyn Monroe Dress at Met Gala, Fashion Experts Say," *The Daily Beast*, May 3, 2022, accessed August 15, 2024, [www.thedailybeast.com/kim-kardashian-should-not-have-worn-marilyn-monroedress-at-met-gala-fashion-experts-say](http://www.thedailybeast.com/kim-kardashian-should-not-have-worn-marilyn-monroedress-at-met-gala-fashion-experts-say); Samantha Ibrahim, "Marilyn Monroe Experts Say Kim Kardashian Isn't Worthy: That Gown Is a

- 'National Treasure,'" *New York Post*, May 3, 2022, accessed August 15, 2024. <https://nypost.com/2022/05/03/marilyn-monroe-experts-say-kim-kardashian-isnt-worthy-that-gown-is-a-national-treasure/>; Jules Pelta Feldman, "Conserving Performance, Performing Conservation: Kim Kardashian x Marilyn Monroe," *Studies in Conservation* 69, no. 6 (2024): 369–87, <https://doi.org/10.1080/00393630.2023.2260628>.
- 5 "Some textiles in museums should be worn if they are of use in ritual ceremonies or continuing the connections between object and kin. Conservation is increasingly about becoming the bridge to enable that to happen, not the block." Puawai Cairns, Twitter, May 12, 2022, <https://twitter.com/PuawaiCairns/status/1524528643787354112>.
- 6 Cairns refers to her and Courtney Johnstone's LinkedIn pages.

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## 8 Valinda Carroll, Kayla Henry-Griffin, Nylah Byrd, and Ariana Makau of Black Art Conservators on Black objects, performance, and the future of conservation

*A conversation with Hanna B. Hölling, Jules Pelta Feldman, and Emilie Magnin*

The group Black Art Conservators was founded in 2020 to address racial injustice in conservation. Here, four members of the group—Valinda Carroll, Kayla Henry-Griffin, Nylah Byrd, and Ariana Makau—discuss the significance of conserving Black art and culture, highlighting the lack of resources in many institutions to properly preserve these artifacts. Their experiences as Black conservators allow them to bridge cultural gaps and better understand the context and value of artworks within their communities. The conservators advocate for people-centered conservation, where objects hold emotional and cultural significance, and they recognize the importance of oral traditions and body language in preserving performance art, which may not be adequately captured in written documentation. Regarding biases in conservation, the conservators argue for the inclusion of specialists from communities associated with the items to ensure a more equitable and contextual preservation process. They envision a future in conservation that embraces diverse cultural practices and perspectives, calling for more research and recognition of the work of Black artists, like Elizabeth Catlett, to better understand their contributions to the field. The conservators also discuss conserving emotionally charged artworks and the challenges of preserving objects that may have been used to oppress marginalized groups. They emphasize the need to approach such objects with sensitivity and to involve the community in decision-making processes.

*Valinda Carroll:* I'm a paper conservator in private practice right now, but I previously worked in libraries as well as in mostly history museums and regional centers. While Nylah and Kayla are both emerging conservators, I've been in the field for over twenty-five years. So I have a wide range of different experiences with different types

of collections and haven't really in my professional work encountered performance art, except when I was working at the Hirshhorn Museum as a contractor, because they did have some things that were the documentation or parts of performance-related works. It was interesting, what things were the tangible objects that belonged to the museum, as opposed to the things that had to be recreated each time the work was presented to an audience. What I was dealing with as a paper conservator in some cases was the contract from the artist, and in other cases was maybe a box that has a printed work, and then also a digital file on a disk or on a jump drive. It's really a wide range of things.

*Kayla Henry-Griffin:* I'm currently Media Collection Specialist for the Audiovisual Media Preservation Initiative (AVMPI) at Smithsonian Libraries and Archive. Formerly, I was a fellow at the Metropolitan Museum of Art, where I worked closely with the time-based media conservator. And as part of my practice, I'm also looking at performance artworks and how to preserve all or a bit of the performance. What makes the performance? What do we preserve, and what part of it? Is there anything tangible that we keep as part of the performance or is it more a—I don't want to say time-sensitive—very ephemeral piece of work? In time-based media, a lot of things are ephemeral.

*Nylah Byrd:* I'm specialized in object conservation and library/archives conservation. I graduated from the WUDPAC program in 2022 so I'm an early career professional. I am interested in conserving the ephemeral. There is the physical thing, but there is also what the thing is giving off, that's often ephemeral. Being able to conserve a document in ways that are outside of writing is really interesting to me and something I want to explore.

*Jules Pelta Feldman:* We would first like to ask you all: What does it mean to be a Black conservator today? And why is it important to you personally to be part of this association of Black Art Conservators?

*Byrd:* For me it definitely does mean something, but I feel I don't know if it should, in an ideal world. Today, it means having to carry a perspective that's different, to always be aware of that difference, thinking

of it and being ready to voice that because nobody else will. I think it's important because Black art and culture is also an underserved area in terms of preservation. Who's really going to have the cultural ties and understanding to be able to work with Black artifacts in their fullness, besides other Black people?

*Carroll:*

So many collecting institutions in the places where I've worked—in particular on the east coast, in Philadelphia, Virginia, and Washington, DC—that have the wealth to have conservation staff also tend to be those collections that don't emphasize African American culture and African American history. There are a lot of small organizations that do emphasize Black culture, but they lack resources to do conservation. I worked for thirteen years at a historically Black college, and I was the only full-time conservator. There are 107 historically Black colleges and universities in the United States, and most of them have never had a conservator on staff. Some of them are starting to have a preservation officer or conservator because they've been able to get grant money to support that. But for most of their history, they have not had access to those resources. So I think that being someone who bridges those two sides of the cultural heritage sector, being a Black conservator, makes me uniquely qualified to see where some of the gaps are in our practice.

*Henry-Griffin:*

I want to echo what Valinda and Nylah have both said. For me it's about filling in those gaps. We have a lot of artwork—in my case, time-based media artwork—where things get lost in translation due to the fact that someone may not be from our culture, or from that area of expertise or geographical region. It's not as if someone who isn't Black cannot do conservation work on an artwork made by Black artists. But I already have that knowledge and an idea of what that artist is doing with their video work. I don't need to think twice about the elements of the work that I'm identifying as significant.

I felt that I needed to join Black Art Conservators because I was going through a lot personally, with my professional life, and trying to understand my place within conservation. Recognizing and being aware that there are also other



Black conservators—I was very grateful for that. I'm still very grateful, but now there are other reasons why I'm part of the Black Art Conservators.

*Hanna B. Hölling:* And Nylah, how can we understand what the Black object is? You also mentioned that there are methods that you would like to employ that are not necessarily connected with writing. Could you elaborate on those two aspects?

*Byrd:* I was thinking about a colleague of ours, LaStarsha McGarity, who was working on a piece that involved mustard seeds.<sup>1</sup> And she already knew the cultural significance of that being used in an artwork, whereas someone else who wasn't Black might not have understood that, just because they didn't have that cultural background. Little things like that are expressions of Black culture, and a white person just probably wouldn't automatically be able to understand without having to do some research.

I don't necessarily have other established methods outside of writing. I feel like in conservation, the documentation generally involves just taking some pictures and writing a report. Beyond just taking pictures, how do we document something without writing it down? Because one of the symptoms of white supremacy is worship of the written word. Obviously writing is important, but I don't want it to be the only way. So that's where that's coming from. But realistically, I just write a report.

*Carroll:* I have a history of having done dance as a child and then, later, modern dance as a teenager. While there is dance notation, a lot of the transmission of dance takes place through the oral tradition and through watching and learning from your teacher. I'm a practitioner of Esoteric Buddhism, in which hand gestures are based on physical mimicry and learning through watching and doing—it is another form of transmitting performance information that isn't written.

*Henry-Griffin:* My best friend's friend had a dance performance last year, and he didn't want it recorded. And of course, as a conservator, I asked, how is it going to be preserved? But then it made me really think about his reasoning behind not having it recorded. And that reason was due to the fact that his dance performance was based on Black memory and having a Black paradise. Sometimes this Black paradise is only within our Black minds rather than through writing or through other forms. The continuity of this performance is basically me repeating what I've seen, whether that be I'm

dancing it myself, or just through word of mouth. I know a lot of people who are interested in performance art are thinking of oral traditions. But, as Nylah said, there's this big emphasis on writing. Why are we so dedicated to writing and less to body language and other forms of communication? It's essential to not only think about writing but also whether there are body movements that someone else can adapt.

*Pelta Feldman:* I'm wondering if you feel that there is a kind of performance or performative aspect to the work that you do, if performance does come into your work as a conservator, either from the side of the artworks that you're caring for or from your own activities as a conservator?

*Henry-Griffin:* I'm thinking of an example where I had to get documentation on this software-based artwork and writing a report was not going to work out because I would have missed out on so much information about it. What I ended up doing with my supervisor was to make a video recording that recorded the artwork's behaviors so that another conservator in the future will understand this behavior. In my experience, time-based media works are kind of performances; the artwork behaves in such a way that it stimulates my interaction with it. That is more than just doing a condition check or writing up documentation.

*Byrd:* As conservators, we sometimes perform cleanliness, especially when taking pictures for websites and social media, or when we host people: "Oh, my God, we got to clean up the lab." You have things out in a kind of stage where it's almost the way you would work on something. But in the picture, you've got a great posture, and you're holding your breath. When we had an open house, we had to clean the lab and organize the cabinets. And obviously it is nice to take time and clean up your space every once in a while. But the place isn't always in order, and that's okay.

*Pelta Feldman:* That also comes up often in critiques of performance documentation—that you might have a beautiful photograph of a performance that actually doesn't represent most of what that performance was like. In a similar way, if people in the future are wondering what early twenty-first century conservation was like, the photos Nylah is talking about might not actually give them a very accurate sense of things.

*Carroll:* From my perspective as a paper conservator, a lot of the techniques of how you roll or lift paper when you're handling it and how you apply a lining have been influenced by the Japanese tradition of scroll mounting, or *hyogu*. There's a

certain amount of knowledge that you can transmit in writing or through video, but a lot of it is being there and doing this physical act. You learn through repetition. You learn the texture of paste and how it's supposed to feel when you're making it after you've made multiple batches of paste, in a physical action. There is a physical performance associated with a lot of our conservation techniques.

*Emilie Magnin:* Traditional Western conservation is an object-oriented discipline. But objects are also carriers of other values, so that when we conserve an object, we're not only conserving its material aspects. I was wondering if you could think of practices of Black art conservation that could help conserve not just objects as items but also values or cultural relationships that are linked to them.

*Byrd:* I try to practice people-centered conservation, which means that objects are important because they're important to people. I think about a family heirloom that's been in your family for generations. Maybe it is a really expensive piece of jewelry. But you keep it because your grandma gave it to your mom, and then your mom gave it to you, and you're going to give it to your daughter. That's the practice. While it is still about the object, it's also about its meaning to people and the feelings and memories that it invokes for those who possess or connect to the object.

*Henry-Griffin:* What Nylah said reminds me of home movies. There are protocols that professional film preservationists follow, but not all are applicable to home movies. In home movies, it's more relevant whether a person can see their dad in the film. It's very interesting that just keeping people in your mind changes your perspective on conserving things.

*Carroll:* I worked on a project called Save Our African American Treasures (SOAAT), before the Smithsonian's National Museum of African American History and Culture opened in 2016.<sup>2</sup> I also worked on a community archiving project connected with the National Museum of African American History and Culture. These projects were directly related to people's own photo albums, home collections, scrapbooks, family Bibles, etc. What we can bring to the field is our ability to also look at the existing practices with traditional collections and tease out additional narratives. One example is the well-known sculptor and printmaker Elizabeth Catlett, whose work was oriented around civil rights and who was eventually blacklisted by the US government, acquiring Mexican citizenship. During my work at Hampton University, an archive of her documentation was acquired

from the artist and art historian Samella Lewis; Catlett was actually on the faculty there during the time when Lewis was a student. A letter from the archive describes a print series for which there was a decision to make two different print runs. One run would be printed on Arches paper, which, of course, is standard fine art paper. And then the second print run would be printed on less expensive paper to be sold as a fundraiser for *Freedomways*, which was a civil rights-oriented magazine. The choice of a less expensive paper was made in order for the prints to be accessible to a wider audience. They would make a larger number of prints and they could sell them at a lower price compared to the Arches paper, which is more expensive and was printed in a numbered limited edition. There was a conscious effort on the part of the artist to do this.

I see that the British Library is doing a two-day symposium on Da Vinci's papers, and I have a couple of books that Peter Bauer has written about J. M. W. Turner's watercolor papers. As far as I know, no one in the art conservation establishment has been doing any sort of exhaustive study of the papers of the prolific printmaker Elizabeth Catlett. Why do we not have a two-day symposium and a monograph on the topic of Catlett's choices for her papers?

*Pelta Feldman:* Conservators very often are not the loudest voice in the room, and sometimes their decisions don't carry the same weight that those of other museum professionals do. Still, do you think there are changes that can be made within conservation to make the symposium on Catlett's paper choices more likely? Or do you think that's something that has to come from the outside because you're already doing that work from the inside?

*Carroll:* Technical art history tends to privilege painting. There have been a few very notable African American easel painters, and that's where there's tons of research and lots of publications. There's a hierarchy; certain types of art are perceived as more prestigious than others. Breaking down this hierarchy creates space to study other kinds of work.

*Hölling:* Continuing the discussion of affect, I wonder, can we conserve emotionally charged artworks or artifacts that may not personally resonate with us or that evoke a different response? And, by extension, how do you approach the conservation of artworks that you have adverse feelings towards, perhaps works which you wouldn't treat as Black conservators?

- Byrd:* I don't need to be involved in preserving anything that was made in order to oppress me. Somebody else can do that.
- Carroll:* I take the opposite view. In my work, both at Hampton and at the National Museum of African American History and Culture, I have had to treat a lot of things that were pro slavery, pro segregation. Part of the research and understanding of those collections is that there's material of that type. And one case in particular is the racist series of prints, the *Darktown* comics series by Currier and Ives, a very popular, iconic American print company. The *Darktown* series was one of their most popular series, and a lot of people have forgotten that this series existed. I think it's really important to remind people how mainstream that level of racism was in society, because it's very easy to say that it was a long time ago, and it was just a fringe element. No, that wasn't on the fringes! This was very, very, very mainstream. So I did have to treat one of those virulently racist prints when I was at the National Museum of African American History and Culture. And then there were also materials from the KKK, and other similar materials. When people talk about the Holocaust, they say: "Never forget!" In that sense, I think it's important to preserve the memory of racism and make sure that people don't forget how mainstream that type of thought was in society.
- Henry-Griffin:* I haven't been in a situation yet where I feel uncomfortable doing conservation work for personal reasons. I've preserved artworks where I find myself to be not the best fit to preserve those artworks. When I was working at a university library, there were Indigenous works that I preserved to a degree, but I had a lot of questions: Am I the right person to do so? I don't have this knowledge and cultural competency to preserve this the way that it should be preserved. In those cases, I try to talk to someone who is part of that culture.
- Byrd:* I've had a similar experience and feeling working on African ethnographic works from a specific region. As an African American through and through, with disconnected family history, I don't have that kind of cultural knowledge of any specific place or culture in Africa. This could have been something that was related to me at some point, sometime way back down the line. I don't have the cultural competency to know the best way to conserve it. So I put that in the report: "This is what I did. I made this decision with this knowledge, hoping that it will stabilize the object."
- Pelta Feldman:* Given the different paradigms of conservation and the different cultural and personal perspectives you've all presented,

do you believe that performance can be conserved? And if so, how, and under what conditions? What constitutes performance conservation for you?

*Hölling:* And, by extension, is there a concept of Black performance and Black performance conservation?

*Byrd:* Yes, performance can be conserved, but with the caveat that you have to broaden your definition of conservation beyond doing treatment on a physical object. I feel that memory is conservation, both muscle memory and the things that your brain conjures up when you're recollecting something. If we're intentional about using our memory as conservation, it can be really powerful.

There definitely is such a thing as Black performance, and there are oral and performance traditions that come from Africa. But when I think Black, I have in mind African American. I feel that so much of our African American culture has been created through circumstance. I'm thinking about code switching, how you speak more colloquially with other Black people and how you speak professionally or on the phone so that maybe the customer service agent can't tell that you're Black. That's a performance that we do, but I feel it's only brought out through the necessity to assimilate.

*Henry-Griffin:* This might be controversial, but we have to realize as conservators that some things may be forgotten. We need to make peace with the fact that we will not be able to preserve everything. It's hard for me to say that, but if you can't preserve everything, preserve the things that are not just valuable for the object but valuable for people to understand its meaning and get it across. Maybe we need to preserve the object's history, but it may not mean that the object will be preserved. This goes back to not relying on just one mode of documentation.

*Byrd:* What gets conserved now tends to be because the object, or the person associated with the object, is very famous. But there needs to be a push for conserving mediocrity, for lack of a better word. When I first got introduced to textile conservation, I asked myself: The Forever 21 clothes that I have in my closet, are those going to end up in a museum someday? It's a very mainstream, cheap brand of clothing that a lot of people interact with. If we're talking about preserving our culture, that's what it is.

*Henry-Griffin:* Right! It goes back to the hierarchy that we were talking about earlier with Valinda and Hanna, that with conservation there's a lot more emphasis on paintings than on things that we see in our everyday lives, such as photographs or

paper. I would include time-based media as well because time-based media comes in as a thumb drive, and we see that every time we're in our office or in our homes.

*Hölling:* I'd like to ask about the future of the Black Art Conservators association. How do you envision it?

*Byrd:* I have a vision of the future. But I also feel like my vision of the future could be happening right now. We have the resources to do it. So I'm almost deliberately not answering your question, because I want the vision of the future to remain the biggest dream it can be.

*Henry-Griffin:* I agree with Nylah. How to improve and make conservation more equitable—it's my dream, but we can achieve so much more. But at present, what I would like to see is not necessarily having more Black art conservators, even if that would be wonderful. I would like to see other people, non-Black conservators, starting to take actions in terms of making conservation a more equitable field and conservation practices more open. By 'open' I mean not restrictive to certain protocols or practices but recognizing that different practices exist outside of Western knowledge, or even outside of Indigenous knowledge. I would love to do more research on how we can collectively ensure that whatever we work on, whether that be objects, paintings, paper, textiles, or time-based media, we're treating these works not just with an appreciation for their material but also with an appreciation for the cultures from which they originate.

**Ariana Makau in an email conversation with the PCMK project members**

*PCMK:* What does it mean to be a Black conservator in today's world, plagued by inequality and social injustice, and why is it important to you to be a part of the association of Black Art Conservators?

*Makau:* Unfortunately, it still is quite unique to be a Black conservator in 2023, which is why it's important to be part of an association of other conservators who understand and can commiserate with experiences that are unique to our situation of place, person, and perspective. As one of the people who has close to three decades of professional experience, it is invigorating to see how the newer conservators are entering the workforce. I also feel like I am contributing by sharing how I have navigated through, or parallel to, the system to carve my own path within the preservation field.

*PCMK:* Conservation—despite its claims of 'scientific objectivity'—is not neutral, and conservators come with their biases that will influence how 'conservation objects' are handled and treated. How, in your

perspective, can we overcome, or at least acknowledge, these biases in conservation practice?

*Makau:* First and foremost, by acknowledging what you just stated, that conservation is *not* neutral. Second, by seeking out specialists in the object that you are conserving . . . not necessarily in its preservation, but in its place in which, or for which, it was originally made. If you can't find a primary source, go to the community. There needs to be more inclusion—of all cultures. Think of it like a stool. Even a simple stool needs three legs to be stable. You can have experts who are conservators and curators, but if the context of community is missing, the stool is unstable and won't 'hold up' over time.

*PCMK:* What does Black conservation mean to you in the present moment? How do you envision this meaning unfolding in the future?

*Makau:* I was recently appointed the Interim Collections Care Director for the public art of Destination Crenshaw (an historic Black area in Southern California). One of the descriptors of 'D. C.' is that it is unapologetically Black; they are very intentional about who is preserving their work. By breaking down the perception that the only way to maintain the art is to cast far afield to find people skilled enough to do this work, they are exemplifying to the art world (and more importantly) to the Crenshaw community that folks right there are extremely competent to do it themselves.

*PCMK:* Are there works and objects and practices that lend themselves particularly well to Black conservation? Are there Black 'objects of conservation'?

*Makau:* As mentioned in the previous statement, there are works made by Black artists which would receive an additional type of care from a Black conservator. It might be intangible, but the thought process or contextualization might be inherent because of similar life experiences. That isn't to say that art care needs to be color-coded via skin color; that's an extremely dangerous path to take. But an understanding of place certainly plays a part.

*PCMK:* Traditional Western conservation has always been a very object-oriented discipline. Are there practices from 'Black conservation' that could help to conserve not just items, but also values, cultures, and relationships?

*Makau:* Yes! I recently stated that Black culture has been preserving work for generations; it just hasn't been acknowledged as official 'conservation.' When an elder tells a story of an area's history, it becomes a past and current historical event.

For example, I have been working with the Mount Zion Baptist Church Preservation Society, which is working to preserve and repurpose a church into a Black Culture Center for their community in Athens, Ohio. One of the board members, President Ada-Woodson Adams, who attended the church



as a child, is Baptist and was married in the church. Adams is a genealogist, local historian, community organizer, and civil rights activist. She advocates for historical preservation by recounting oral histories of underrepresented people and places. Ada-Woodson's involvement has been included in a video documentation series spearheaded by Trevellya 'Tee' Ford-Ahmed, PhD, Director of Communications and Media of MZBCPS. Tee has actively woven Mount Zion's significance into current events, such as integrating the series into school curricula. Highlighting the building preservation as a conduit for discourse about community inequities has drawn the attention of the National Trust for Historic Preservation, from which the MZBCPS has received a grant through the African American Cultural Heritage Action Fund.

*PCMK:* Are there works and objects and practices that you would rather not treat, and why?

*Makau:* That's a hard question. Working on something that oppressed people, depicted them in a demeaning way, or worse, would be difficult. But it could also be an empowering experience that the only way it could be preserved is by the expertise of a Black conservator. I think, in the latter case, I would have to insist upon the acknowledgement of a power shift (to the conservator) and also the understanding and support of colleagues and an institution, if that is where the work is happening.

*PCMK:* On the similar topic of feelings and emotions: How to conserve works which are emotionally charged but which aren't necessarily resonating with us, or which resonate on a different level?

*Makau:* To continue the earlier example, it's extremely important for those working around Black conservators to consider the emotional toll of working on specific objects.

*PCMK:* How can performance be conserved, from your particular perspective? What is specific about Black performance in the context of conservation?

*Makau:* Black performance can be conserved in multiple ways and mediums. Of course, digital and audio are currently what people think of in preserving a performance. But one can also think more about community involvement as a part of conservation. Consider line dancing. It has a few steps that are repeated, then one turns a quarter turn and the steps are repeated again. People of all ages can join in—the nuance and interpretation are what highlight the more accomplished from those who are just learning. It's by watching while engaging that the dance becomes ingrained in a new group of folks who then can disseminate it in new spaces and venues. It's by this action that the core dance is preserved.

## Notes

- 1 In the Christian Bible, Jesus makes reference to mustard seeds in describing faith's power to overcome adversity: "For truly I tell you, if you have faith the size of a mustard seed, you will say to this mountain, 'Move from here to there,' and it will move; and nothing will be impossible for you" (Matthew 17:20).
- 2 National Museum of African American History and Culture, "African American Treasures," accessed July 31, 2023, <https://nmaahc.si.edu/explore/initiatives/african-american-treasures>.

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## 9 Brandie Macdonald

### Conserving “Us”: Caring for living heritage, oral tradition, and Indigenous knowledge

#### *A conversation with Emilie Magnin*

In a conversation with Emilie Magnin, Brandie Macdonald, a citizen of the Chickasaw Nation and Executive Director at the Indiana University Museum of Archaeology and Anthropology, explores the complexities of caring for living heritage and Indigenous knowledge, including the preservation of oral tradition and spiritual performance.

*Emilie Magnin:* Dear Brandie, we are eager to hear your perspective on objects that come from past performances or that are involved in rituals and practices, to think about how performance is also preserved through objects, and how we can engage with these objects not only as museum holdings, but as part of a living, vibrant heritage. To initiate our conversation, could you tell us about your experience working at the Museum of Us? We’re particularly interested in learning about the obstacles you’ve encountered and the encouraging transformations you’ve witnessed in this context.

*Brandie Macdonald:* Until recently, I held the position of Senior Director of Decolonizing Initiatives at the Museum of Us, San Diego.<sup>1</sup> As a member of the Chickasaw Nation with ancestral ties to the Choctaw Nation, and having a Scottish biological father, my Indigenous heritage is rooted in my maternal lineage. Reflecting on my time at the Museum of Us, I’ve witnessed remarkable growth, both during my tenure and throughout the museum’s evolution. Initially, our efforts were concentrated within a single department, but we have since expanded our focus to drive systemic transformation, as it became evident that there was a collective desire within the organization to engage in this work. My primary endeavor has revolved around establishing a fluid, adaptable, and nonlinear framework that

advances the practice of decolonization—because we’re not going to achieve full decolonization, probably not in my lifetime. Our journey is centered on ongoing decolonization efforts, recognizing that strategies that were relevant five or six years ago might not align with the current needs of our communities. My role involved conceptualizing structural change and implementing it across the entire organization. This included contemplating the implications for various spheres, such as human resources and cultural resources. Our collaborative efforts aimed to cultivate spaces for change both within the institution and in our society, in our local and global communities. On the one hand, we were committed to effecting change within our own organization. But simultaneously, we were thinking about how we can also hold the broader field accountable and set a standard that inspires others to build upon our achievements, to use our successes as a foundation for change within their own contexts.

*Magnin:*

There is currently a lot of discussion about decolonizing museums,<sup>2</sup> but I assume there is also some resistance to these efforts. I even suspect that it sometimes comes from conservators, who are not always the most prone to change.

*Macdonald:*

And change is hard, right? Indeed, the process of change can be scary, for many people. One of the challenges my team and I faced in our work is that museums are slow. This is largely rooted in the deeply ingrained patterns of Euro-American-centric and colonial practices that have historically defined these institutions. These practices have been imposed upon non-Euro-American communities and traditions that are being oppressed. Our mission is to create bridges and dismantle that colonial space to help recognize Indigenous authority and autonomy. This requires acknowledging and valuing different ways of knowing and thinking, of knowing and being, that exist outside the confines of the binary thinking that museums tend to adhere to. The cyclical dimensions of Indigenous epistemology and ontology, for instance, contrast with the linear structure commonly employed by museums, a model that doesn’t readily accommodate these multidimensional concepts.

Personally, my Indigenous heritage is firmly rooted in nonlinear practices, characterized by cyclical interconnectedness that transcends temporal boundaries. I'm connected to my past, just like I'm connected to my future. This perspective contrasts with the conventional mindset of museums, which typically follow linear temporal structures. So the challenge we faced lay in effectively communicating this perspective and instigating change within a system deeply rooted in linear thinking. This encompasses various aspects: reshaping our development practices, reevaluating financial allocations, reconsidering how our team approaches and touches items, transforming the manner in which we document, and how we interact with folks. An additional aspect worth considering is how to navigate communication with funders.

Another significant challenge that I've experienced during my tenure is what comes after the enthusiasm our team initially displayed for decolonization efforts. There was a genuine eagerness to align with ethical principles and do what is right and ethical, without causing harm. Both our team and our board shared this commitment. But when it comes to actually enacting tangible change and confronting the implications of historical actions, a certain level of resistance can emerge. It's defensiveness. A reluctance to accept any responsibility for past actions. The pushback can manifest as statements like, "I wasn't involved in that," and a defensive posture that hinders progress. For instance, discussions around repatriation might be met with skepticism and questions like, "Why should we repatriate this object?" "What purpose does this repatriation serve?" This presents a complex challenge that we are actively grappling with. There were instances where we engaged with board members who expressed genuine support for Indigenous communities and the work we do. They readily offered financial backing for our initiatives. Yet when the conversation delved into the topic of addressing colonial harm and the necessity of restorative actions, a noticeable shift occurred. Some board members questioned the need for such actions, leading to conversations that required a delicate balance of education, advocacy, and patience. Negotiating this space demands a strategic approach to bridge the gap between intent and action.

*Magnin:* Can you tell us about the significant change of name of your institution, from 'Museum of Man' to 'Museum of Us'?

*Macdonald:* I didn't pick the name, but I appreciate that it's different, and the new name has garnered positive reception. Shifting away from the Museum of Man was important to me as it held layers of celebration tied to the pioneers, the patriarchy.<sup>3</sup> The awareness about the Museum of Man and the ways in which it has harmed Indigenous people, Black people, and peoples of color has been with me since I entered the museum sphere about a decade ago. And so this shift was crucial. Our process involved extensive data gathering rather than a unilateral decision. We included historical information, even from the 1970s, as people

had expressed the need for change over time. We organized small focus groups, engaging with our museum community and external voices to understand their wishes. We also had a cube inside the museum for people coming in, and post-its to crowdsource ideas for the new name. We compiled all of this data and identified some of the recurring and unique name suggestions, or the ones that we felt really resonated with what we are. These options were put forth in a survey to our staff, board members, funders, and community. The final decision, ultimately made by our CEO, was informed by this collective wealth of information. We initially planned on doing it in 2023, but the pandemic prompted us to realize that the time was now because we don’t know the future, and our organization really valued the power of action. Decolonization is a verb. It’s about putting these concepts into practice, which is why we decided to take action.

*Magnin:* I notice also your use of the terms ‘ancestors’ and ‘relatives.’ It signifies a more profound and meaningful level of relationship compared to the terminology typically employed by museums, such as ‘objects’ or ‘human remains.’ Is this shift in language something that has arisen from this recent policy change as well?

*Macdonald:* Absolutely. We realized that language was one of the first areas where change was needed. The language we use can perpetuate harm over and over again, and also sets the cultural climate within our organization. It articulates our intentions and our approach; it shapes our practice. Early on, we made a shift away from terms like ‘collections’ because that conveys a sense of collecting others, of detachment from the community. Instead, we now refer to these as ‘cultural resources,’ since everything, whether it’s art, textiles, or historical items, holds significance as a resource to the cultural community, representing their material culture. We’ve also moved away from terms like ‘artifacts’ to simply ‘items,’ and from ‘objects’ to ‘belongings.’ When discussing what were previously termed ‘human specimens,’ we now say ‘ancestral human remains’ or simply ‘ancestors.’ We also deliberately replaced terms like ‘storage rooms’ with ‘sanctuary spaces,’ where these items live, where they’re cared for, or where our ancestors reside until they can return home. This transformation intentionally reflects our commitment to minimal disturbance and the understanding that each item is not an inanimate object. Everything is so much more, unless we’re told otherwise. We encountered a few European communities with whom we were collaborating, and who explained, “This is just an object!” So we wrote it down: “Great. It’s just a bowl!” If that’s their interpretation, we respect it. However, for the vast

majority of other communities we engage with, it's not just a bowl; it carries deeper cultural significance. Our general practice of not committing any harm is to make sure we understand that it's more than just a bowl, unless explicitly told otherwise.

A further challenge we faced was our cultural resources collection, which represents a diversity of communities, each deserving of our responsibility. These communities have different knowledge systems, ways of existence, distinct priorities, and they've suffered different impacts of colonization. Museums also have done terrible things differently to each of them. In our practice toward decolonization, our approach to conservation, we had a general baseline. But within that baseline, our team had to remain adaptable. Maybe some communities want their ancestors talked to on a regular basis. Maybe some folks want their ancestors to stay in the box and never be touched until they go home. The consideration extends to our stewardship of cultural resources—questioning whether display is appropriate or if repatriation is the rightful path. The team has to stay flexible; they can't get in a static state because it constantly changes. The museum approach must align with the evolving needs and wishes of the communities it serves.

*Magnin:* It must be complex to account for all these Indigenous knowledge systems in the process of preservation. I suppose that even inside one community, there is not a single point of view or a single perspective. So how can you responsibly present Indigenous practices and knowledges in a museum? Are museums always suited to welcome these practices, or are there forms of Indigenous preservation that must take place outside of the museum?

*Macdonald:* I believe that a responsible approach within the museum context involves actively listening to and recognizing the voices of communities—specifically, Black, Indigenous, and communities of color that exist outside of the museum. Museums are not the experts. Museums shouldn't be the experts on people's culture, traditional practices, and on what conservation means to them. It is important to acknowledge this because museums often become obsessed with the idea of preservation: "We've got to save it, it has to be frozen in time and perfect so that it lasts five hundred years." But for the community that created the item, it was never meant to last five hundred years. Many items were created with a specific cultural context and lifespan in mind. This distinction is immensely important. Responsible conservation is intertwined with ethical considerations. Museums do not hold sole ownership over these objects or their creation. So who are we to decide?

The community should be the ones to decide if an item needs to go back in the ground or go back to the Earth. To me, that’s conservation. Because these objects are more than just inanimate objects; for many communities, they are connections to our past, our present, and our future. They’re living beings, they’re entities, they have spirits inside of them. That’s how we talk to our ancestors. That’s how we talk to our future generations. Embracing conservation in this way of knowing and being involves preserving its vitality and inherent purpose. Even as it returns to the Earth, it’s still living, and it’s still being preserved in its intended purpose within this cyclical space.

In the context of performance, conservation takes on a unique form. For instance, when dealing with artifacts like Mayan ocarinas (little flutes), which hold cultural significance, preservation involves ensuring their continued use in alignment with their intended purpose, which means they need to be played by Maya people. We’ve been working with Maya consultants for an exhibit, and these consultants played the ocarinas—items possibly hundreds of years old, maybe even thousands. They picked them up and played them for the first time in decades, in the museum, next to all their resources and relatives, revitalizing their connection to Maya heritage. In essence, the conservation here lies in the act of touching their ancestors and playing their music once again.

Following this idea, conservation involves acknowledging specific requirements. This might entail storing a rattle with a particular plant material, tending to an item periodically, or providing water and sunlight in specific ways because it needs to continue to know that the outside is there. This active care is an integral part of conservation, extending beyond mere acid-free box storage and telling people not to touch.

*Magnin:* I’d love also to hear you talk about the living culture that is behind these objects. Can we think of these objects as, in a way, tools for preserving something else that they are attached to? For instance, to preserve oral traditions, performances, or dances? What roles can museums play in that kind of preservation?

*Macdonald:* Here I can speak from my perspective as an Indigenous person. So many dances within North American Indigenous communities are often intricately connected to a specific tribe, individual, or clan (an exception is pow-wow, which embodies Pan-Indianism). However, there are stories and narratives that unite these dances, guided by protocols. When contemplating these spaces, adhering to these protocols is crucial. Should you want to record it, then there needs to be consent, as it pertains to intellectual property. Our endeavor at the Museum of Us involved understanding intellectual property in both its tangible and intangible forms. Conventional American or Euro-American-centric perspectives typically view intellectual



property as mere objects—it's just this glass. In contrast, for Indigenous people, it encompasses songs, words, oral traditions, dance, movement. It embraces the protocols that go along with it. These protocols are not merely guidelines: a protocol is a spiritual performance, a form of practice, our commitment to our ancestors and to our future. Should we decide to transcribe this knowledge, we need consent, and we need to ascertain the desired usage—whether documenting it is acceptable, if storage is appropriate, and whether public access is suitable.

This is an issue that museums are currently struggling with, and Indigenous communities in both the United States and Canada are asserting themselves. The problem arises from the numerous song recordings that were acquired through unethical means, stolen with hidden microphones. These recordings are now being considered for public release, prompting a reevaluation of copyright laws. But from the Indigenous perspective, these recordings should never be made public. They are meant to be heard only within specific contexts, such as during certain seasons.

Museums need to step up and need to implement policies and assume responsibilities to only conserve with consent. They need to hear and prioritize what the communities want, and adjust their policies to grant them autonomy and control over their cultural materials. And maybe the role of museums might evolve into that of custodians, safeguarding these materials for future generations of Indigenous people. But even in the role of a custodian, the idea of researchers extracting and utilizing these materials without restraint raises concerns. Museums must embrace the responsibility of collaboratively building access policies with Indigenous communities.

*Magnin:* The conventional Western perspective would be to say that we can record performances and keep artifacts within museums. But for these dances or songs to continue to happen, it's imperative to also safeguard the environment in which they are meant to occur. There's a shift currently happening in conservation, as there's a growing recognition of the interconnectedness between the environment, social aspects, and museums themselves. Merely preserving objects is insufficient; the source and context of these objects must also be cared for. It's obviously taking a lot of time for such change to happen, but, nevertheless, I see an opportunity for museums to evolve beyond being mere repositories and to become genuine partners in the preservation and continuation of cultural practices.

*Macdonald:* You're absolutely right, museums shouldn't be mere storage facilities. Within the space that I'm familiar with, in the United States, there have been shifts driven by Indigenous practices and demands. This has led to the transformation of these spaces

into real cultural resource centers. They provide both prayer spaces, where you can have a fire or smudging ceremonies, but there are also large rooms where you could bring items into performance, songs, and dance. Notably, the National Museum of the American Indian and many other Indigenous-led museums have adopted this approach. The Museum of Us is figuring out how to do that, but the challenge lies in financing such initiatives, as the necessary resources aren’t available. They have other spaces, existing rooms that were repurposed to accommodate cultural resources. But it remains crucial to envision how an entire building designed with these pockets of spaces would enable communities to engage in performances either inside or outdoors. This, I believe, represents the future of museums, because, as you rightly suggest, it should transcend the concept of the storage facility.

*Magnin:* This would be a transformation for conservators, too, because we traditionally live in the basement. And I think this disconnection between conservation and the public has also been harmful because we are not trained to speak up. Conservators have this privileged connection with the objects that we care for, and we need to learn that in order to care for them in the best way, we have to talk to the people who are intimately involved with these objects.

*Macdonald:* That shift, too, needs to happen! Could this be the reason behind the belief that objects are not supposed to see the sunlight? Because, as Indigenous objects, they must remain connected to the outside world. The Museum of Us has in its possession items passed down by our ancestors or entrusted to it by the community that need to be by a window, otherwise they’re going to die. What is inside of them will die if they’re deprived of sunlight. Consequently, we’ve taken them out of the cardboard boxes, because these objects are also our folks, and it’s our responsibility to ensure they experience sunlight. This is a new mindset. Our responsibility is to change the concept of conservation. It’s sunlight and fresh air instead of acid-free containers—an evolved form of conservation.

Here’s another example: at the Museum of Us, we collaborated with a Maya muralist artist for the Maya exhibit reframing.<sup>4</sup> In this process, we were striving for a decolonized approach, as claiming ownership in situations where it’s not warranted reflects colonial practices. We worked with the artist to craft a contract agreement about the mural that respects the share of cultural knowledge. We funded the mural (Figure 9.1), but the artist retains ownership, departing from the conventional model where a museum commissions and claims ownership of an artwork. Instead, she maintains



Figure 9.1 Artist Alicia María Siu paints a mural on the walls of the Museum of Us as part of the exhibit *Maya Peoples: Heart of the Sky, Heart of the Earth*, June 2022. Photograph: Brandie Macdonald.

intellectual and cultural authority over her creation, while the museum serves as a catalyst, as a supportive platform. This mirrors how the museum now handles other objects—we are essentially the people that steward them. This approach pushes back colonial concepts of ownership and recognizes that the items are (and have always been) the community's, even though the museum legally owns them. The legal team sometimes raised concerns, but the CEO, who is also a lawyer, supported this perspective.

I believe that the path forward in terms of ethics is through this decolonized lens. This perspective will remain fluid and adaptable, as its relevance will vary based on the community, artists, and societal context. However, it's possible to set some flexible parameters, like guiding principles around decolonizing initiatives, while acknowledging, at the core of this approach, that museum staff are not the experts. Granted, we certainly possess scientific

knowledge about chemicals, temperatures, and environmental conditions. But the community also holds knowledge about ways of understanding and creating—how it was created. So we need to create a space for us to grow together and to privilege and honor those communities' voices and ways of being. This will lead to a shared understanding and agreement.

To give you a tangible example: at the Museum of Us we had cultural resources and we were taking care of them as stewards. These items were stored in acid-free boxes, and we monitored the humidity levels. The community had also requested that we attend to the spirits inside of them, feeding them with ground meat, corn, and water, as these objects are believed to house hungry spirits. And maybe they need some plant materials placed next to them to maintain a connection with the prairies. The museum operates in a hundred-year-old building, with a variety of creatures everywhere, such as critters, rats, bugs, fungus, mold—though at the time, our nemeses were mice. And so we had to find a balance between fulfilling the wants and needs of the community and sticking to our commitment, but also accommodating the constraints of the building and materials we were working with. Our commitment revolved around finding the most effective means to serve those in need. We deliberated over decisions like whether to leave food out overnight, and we proposed to limit this to an hour, all the while explaining the reasons why to the community.

Similarly, we strived to house all the Ancestral Pueblo items together because we wanted to keep relatives together. These seemingly mundane objects, like a simple bowl, they're not just a bowl; they are bound by relationships and connections that echo through generations. However, if the environmental conditions within the space do not allow us to provide such support, then we need to find a way to ensure that enough of their kin are relocated to be alongside their ancestors, so they're not alone. Throughout this process, we always communicated the underlying reason and clarified our actions with statements like: "Our intention wasn't to separate community members, but in these circumstances, we had to. Nonetheless, we're still dedicated to applying the community's directives, including the use of muslin shields and other measures that the community has requested." As we contemplated the way ahead, we sometimes found ourselves constrained by the space we had to operate in. But we can blend these paths together because they don't have to be mutually exclusive; this journey is a collaborative endeavor. The Museum of Us is a vast institution, housing thousands and even hundreds of thousands of items and ancestors. Conservation extends beyond individual items, it involves communicating with communities at large, and recognizing that you are part of a whole society and a whole world. This commitment to transparency and effective communication is of great importance.

To me and my team, this was both a performance and a profoundly important statement and practice. Across all our engagements with external communities, Indigenous and non-Indigenous, particularly during consultation

processes with communities' representatives, we remained very transparent about the provenance of the resources, of the ancestors within our digital archive. We openly discussed the journey that got them here and linked that with pivotal moments in the process of colonization. For instance, during our consultations with Mayan community members, we encountered cultural resources that had been removed from their place of origin and taken into our archives. The documentation reveals a story where a man employed at the Chiclet factory went swimming in a lake and discovered three pots at the bottom of the lake. Astonished that someone had thrown them there, he proceeded to take them. Perhaps unknowingly, he stole things from a spiritual lake, and this act constituted a colonial pathway.

It was essential for us to convey this origin narrative to the Mayan community, in addition to acknowledging the impacts of genocide linked to the Chiclet chewing gum factory on their land. Transparency was at the heart of our approach. It's not merely a matter of accepting a donation; it goes beyond that: How did we get it? What happened in that time period? How can we trace its history? And when we didn't know, then we admitted we didn't know. Furthermore, we were apologizing for our involvement in this chain of events, acknowledging our role in profiting from the consequences of colonization and perpetuating harm by holding these cultural artifacts apart from their land of origin and from the communities they belong to. I think these are practices and actions that should be embraced by all museums, whether art museums or anthropology museums.

Provenance research is something the Museum of Us was dedicated to expanding further. We were collaborating closely with both the cultural resources department and the exhibits department to develop informational panels around the provenance of objects and the historical connection to colonial harm. This initiative started with the Maya exhibit, and our objective was to have these panels throughout the museum. Visitors need to know how these items arrived here, and the reasons behind their presence within the collections, including aspects such as their association with individuals linked to white supremacy or colonial regimes.

*Magnin:* Museums tend to prioritize documentation and written records for whatever posterity we are thinking about. However, we know that a lot of knowledge is transmitted orally, both outside and inside museums. For instance, many of the insights and anecdotes about the objects we handle are shared among conservators but might not find their way into writing. How do you approach this aspect of knowledge transmission?

*Macdonald:* At the Museum of Us we didn't always write everything down, which presents a significant challenge in museums, primarily because it revolves around consent. There are different conversations when community members engage with us, different things that are okay to write down and not. Our foremost

commitment was to honor those boundaries. Much of this knowledge is likely rooted in oral traditions, and not necessarily meant to be written down. If the community wanted it to be conserved in that manner, then we respected that choice. When we considered conservation options, our approach involved ensuring the oral transmission and remembering of this knowledge, as it is a piece of ancestral practices.

For example, during a consultation with a Masai community member, he shared all these fantastic stories, and the cultural resources team’s hands were itching. They wanted to immediately start writing it down because it was so compelling. However, there’s an important lesson here—you have to get consent first. We’ve been working on training our team not to instinctively grab their pencils and paper and start sketching, but instead to ask first: “Is it acceptable if we write this story?” Or, to refrain from interrupting and, instead, inquire afterward: “Would it be alright if we documented this story so that it becomes a part of our cultural resources? And if you’re comfortable with us writing it down, do you consent to it being accessible to the general public, or would you prefer it to be accessible only to descendants when they visit to see this cultural resource?”

Even within the context of consultations, we were careful to set those boundaries, because not all information is meant for a broad museum audience. Sometimes, it’s intended solely for the museum to keep it alongside that cultural resource for the benefit of the next Masai community member. This is how we can safeguard oral tradition while recognizing the responsibility to pass it down because that was the customary practice.

As an Indigenous person, storytelling plays a huge role in my work. It’s through tangible examples and stories that I convey complex ideas and theories in practice. It’s different from some of my colleagues who may be more inclined to record and write things down, as our cultural approaches stem from distinct spaces.

*This conversation took place on February 18, 2022. Questions contributed by Hanna B. Hölling and Jules Pelta Feldman.*

## Notes

- 1 As of the publication of this interview, Macdonald has shifted her professional focus to work as Executive Director at the Indiana University Museum of Archaeology and Anthropology.
- 2 See, for instance, German Museums Association, *Guidelines on Dealing with Collections from Colonial Contexts*, 3rd ed. (Berlin: German Museums Association, 2021); Brandie Macdonald, “Pausing, Reflection, and Action: Decolonizing Museum Practices,” *Journal of Museum Education* 47, no. 1 (2022): 8–17, <https://doi.org/10.1080/10598650.2021.1986668>; Brandie Macdonald and Micah Parzen, “Decolonizing Initiatives in Action: From Theory to Practice at the Museum of Us,” in *Race and Sociocultural Inclusion in Science Communication: Innovation, Decolonisation, and Transformation*, ed. Elizabeth Rasekoala (Bristol: Bristol

- University Press, 2023); and Dean Sully, ed., *Decolonising Conservation: Caring for Maori Meeting Houses outside New Zealand* (Walnut Creek, CA: Left Coast Press, 2007).
- 3 In 2020, after forty years as the ‘Museum of Man,’ the anthropological museum in San Diego’s Balboa Park changed its name to the ‘Museum of Us,’ reflecting a broader effort to redefine its role in the community and address gender-related concerns amid the Black Lives Matter protests and national rebranding efforts by companies. See John Wilkens, “As It Moves Forward with Decolonizing, Museum of Man Gets a New Name,” *The San Diego Union Tribune*, August 2, 2020.
  - 4 Alicia María Siu, a Nawat-Pipil/Maya from her mother’s side and of Cantonese descent from her father, is an artist and muralist featured in the permanent exhibition *Maya Peoples: Heart of Sky, Heart of Earth* at the Museum of Us. The collectively built exhibit celebrates Maya continuity. See “Maya Peoples: Heart of Sky, Heart of Earth,” Museum of Us (website), accessed August 30, 2023, <https://museumofus.org/exhibits/maya-peoples-heart-of-sky-heart-of-earth>.

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# 10 Copyright implications of the preservation of performance art

*Sandra Sykora*

## Introduction

A museum curator is always in a state of uneasiness. At least, if one considers the etymological origin of the term ‘curator,’ which stems from the Latin term *cura*,<sup>1</sup> meaning ‘anxiety,’ ‘worry,’ ‘concern,’ or “the devotion of care or attention to a thing,” among others.<sup>2</sup> One couldn’t think of better words to describe what is needed if an institution acquires an ephemeral work of art, specifically a performance, and wants to ensure that the work is kept ‘alive’ for generations to come, that is, that it can be looked at, watched, heard, iterated, reperformed, or exhibited.

Without such actions of ‘care,’ the volatility of the work means that it would, after some time, fade without a trace from collective memory and would be forgotten. In the extreme case, the institution would lose the ‘substance’ of its work, which would then be memorable as an inventory entry only, perhaps leaving behind a few relics to which no one could assign any meaning.

Therefore, a museum may want to take measures to ensure that a physical and digital trace of the performance work is maintained. Obviously, the performance work could be photographed and filmed; documents created by the artist and relating to the performance, like drawings, sketches, or scores, could be reproduced. Props and remainders of the performance would be preserved, as is customary for objects in museum care, or they could be newly fabricated for a reperformance, if needed. After some time, changing social, political, environmental, or museological requirements may even necessitate adjustments to the content of the performance artwork.

The aforementioned measures, however, could infringe on the artist’s copyrights regarding the performance artwork, since they may violate the artist’s exclusive right to reproduce the work or have its integrity respected, among others. Thus, this chapter explores the potential copyright implications of preservation measures in connection with performance art. It will single out common strategies for preserving and perpetuating performance art employed in institutions worldwide, paying particular attention to so-called



‘performance relics.’ First, however, a short introduction to international copyright law is given to set the legal stage.

## The basics of international copyright

### *The territoriality principle*

Copyright law follows the ‘territoriality principle.’ This notion holds that a state has no competence to prescribe legal rules to govern activities that occur outside its national borders.<sup>3</sup> In somewhat simpler terms, this means that copyright law only applies within the borders of a single country. In order for this essay to be useful in as many countries as possible, it must be written from the perspective of international copyright law. Given the constraints of this essay, this can naturally only be done in an extremely abbreviated form.

To be precise, there

is no ‘international copyright’ in the sense of a right which is one and the same throughout the world and can be claimed everywhere, so that a judgment concerning the right in one country will be automatically effective in all other countries.<sup>4</sup>

On the other hand, national laws on copyright share much in common because of widespread adherence to various international treaties.<sup>5</sup> Among others, the Revised Berne Convention for the Protection of Literary and Artistic Works (‘Berne Convention’), which has been ratified by 176 countries, sets internationally valid minimum standards for the protection of authors.<sup>6</sup> Perhaps even more importantly, the Agreement on Trade-Related Aspects of Intellectual Property Rights (TRIPS)<sup>7</sup> is an international legal agreement between all the member states of the World Trade Organization (WTO)—164 adherents to date—which has brought national law into more immediate compliance with the Berne Convention.<sup>8</sup> Still, it is important to keep in mind that it is essential to always check the admissibility of a planned preservation measure according to the applicable national copyright law, as the national laws differ mainly in the details.

### *The protection of ‘artistic works’ under international copyright law*

When writing a regulation, it is indispensable to determine the subject matter to which it applies. To this end, a set of definitions is usually provided. Since the Berne Convention seeks to protect “literary and artistic works,” it needs to address the question of what is meant by these expressions. As with any regulation, a fine balance must be struck when attempting a definition. On the one hand, a great degree of abstraction is needed in order to be able to capture an infinite number of cases with the wording; on the other hand, it has to be specific enough to ensure that the addressee of the regulation still understands what is actually covered by it. The Berne Convention tries this

balancing act in Art. 2 para. 1, first with a general wording, stating that the term “literary and artistic works” includes “every production in the literary, scientific and artistic domain, whatever may be the mode or form of its expression,” followed by a list of examples. This enumeration is introduced by the phrase “such as,” thus demonstrating that it is exemplary rather than conclusive; or, putting it the other way around, that a certain artistic expression is not included in Art. 2 para 1 of the Berne Convention does not mean that it can’t be ‘artistic work.’

Anyone who has ever tried to define ‘art’ knows that this is an almost impossible endeavor. It is therefore understandable that the Berne Convention lists numerous categories that are traditionally considered as art forms, including books; dramatic or dramatico-musical work; choreographic and cinematographic work; fine art, like drawing, painting, and sculpture; and photographic works as well as illustrations; although, to be precise, a ‘book’ is not usually an art form itself, but is a physical object that may contain a written form of one, for example, a novel. The definition in Art. 2 para. 1 of the Berne Convention therefore clearly has its weaknesses. It is also outdated, having last been updated in 1979, obviously at a time when today’s technical capabilities were unimaginable. Consequently, it misses out on many contemporary artistic practices, for instance, art that involves time-based media; though, honestly, this probably applies to most copyright laws.

‘Performance art’ is also not mentioned in the Berne Convention, but this is not really surprising when you keep in mind that an infinite diversity of possible artistic expressions is subsumed under this term. It’s possible that a specific performance could be perceived as a ‘choreography,’ as listed in Art. 2 para 1 of the Berne Convention, but if that’s not the case, the work could simply be covered by the general term ‘artistic work’ and still be protected. The same could be the case with time-based media art or other practices that were unknown at the time of the Berne Convention’s conception and its revisions, and that were therefore not included.

However, it is important to note that the Berne Convention is not limited to classic ‘artistic’ expressions, but also covers maps, plans, sketches, and three-dimensional works related to geography, topography, architecture, and science. Therefore, it could be said that around the world, the “literary and artistic works” protected by copyright range from high art, such as poems and paintings, to purely informational products,<sup>9</sup> like sales brochures. To protect them, copyright grants exclusive rights to the ‘author’ of the work, who will now be discussed in more detail.

### *The author and other involved individuals*

The author of a work is usually identified as the natural person (i.e., an individual, as opposed to a corporation or other ‘legal entity’) who conceived and executed the work.<sup>10</sup> Often, however, more than one individual is involved in creating a piece of art. If two or more authors have contributed to the

development, or, more precisely, the artistic content of the work, legislation in most countries will treat them as co-authors and co-owners,<sup>11</sup> or ‘joint authors.’<sup>12</sup> But the piece may also involve individuals who are not authors. They could be nonprofessionals or specialists in other fields who are hired to undertake the job of being present and performing at a particular time and a particular place on behalf of the artist, and following his or her instructions in a “delegated performance.”<sup>13</sup> It may come as a surprise to learn that while ‘performance art’ is not mentioned in the Berne Convention, “performers,” which are defined as “actors, singers, musicians, dancers, and other persons who act, sing, deliver, declaim, play in, interpret, or otherwise perform literary or artistic works or expressions of folklore,”<sup>14</sup> are granted economic and moral rights apart from the authors. These rights are called ‘neighboring rights,’ and the respective individuals’ contributions are “thought to fall outside the domain of literary and artistic works and to lack the authorial creativity required for admission into the cathedral of authors’ rights.”<sup>15</sup> Neighboring rights mainly regulate the recording of performances and their distribution<sup>16</sup> and need to be observed (though they are not the focus of this essay).

If the copyrights are not the subject of a testamentary disposition to the contrary or have already been transferred by the author to other persons during his or her lifetime, in many countries they are inherited by the author’s legal successor(s) after his or her death. These may be heirs such as children or spouses, but also legal persons who are appointed as successors by testamentary dispositions, e.g., a foundation. Any necessary consents must then be obtained from these right holders. In cases where there is more than one heir, care should be taken to ensure that the required consent is given by all heirs or by an heir who can effectively represent the other right holders. If the work is ‘orphaned,’ that is, if the author or present right holders or their whereabouts are unknown, the work usually cannot be used unless local law expressly provides for a licensing system for the exploitation of orphaned works. This means that, for example, if the author is unknown, a painting cannot simply be reproduced and the resulting digital image uploaded to the internet; a text cannot be put into a new publication or a play performed in public—unless we can deduce from various indices that its author must have died a long time ago,<sup>17</sup> say, if a text was first published in the middle of the nineteenth century.

Also, in many countries, artists’ collecting (or rights) societies have been established, which represent many artists or their legal successors regarding their copyright.<sup>18</sup> If a specific artist is indeed represented by an artists’ rights association, negotiations on the use of a work generally must be conducted with the respective association.

### *Economic and moral rights*

Common law, which emerged in Anglo-Saxon countries, and civil law, which is mainly found in Central Europe, have developed different rights for the

author. Many modern laws still reflect these historical roots. Common law is the source of the utilitarian notion that production of the widest possible variety of creative goods should be stimulated at the lowest possible price,<sup>19</sup> and that this can best be achieved if authors have the right to decide whether copies of their work can be made. This was further developed into today's 'economic rights.' The most important one is the right of reproduction, which was introduced into the Berne Convention in 1967. Art. 9 para. 1 reads: "Authors of literary and artistic works protected by this Convention shall have the exclusive right of authorizing the reproduction of these works, in any manner or form."

Other economic rights are less universally endorsed and may vary from country to country. The most common comprise the author's right of distribution, that is, "the right to control dissemination of physical copies of the work";<sup>20</sup> the right of adaptation, which refers to the author's right to decide about the "transformation of their work into another type of presentation, for instance by translation, by changing a novel into a film script or by transcribing a musical work for piano into one for full orchestra";<sup>21</sup> and communication. The last includes a wide field of activities, such as—and most relevant for our context—to perform a work in the presence of the public and to relay it beyond the physical site where it originally took place, which traditionally would involve radio or television transmission. In a court case in Hong Kong it was held that 'distribution' nowadays also includes the internet.<sup>22</sup>

In civil law countries, on the other hand, the idea of a 'droit moral' was able to gain initial acceptance and is now recognized worldwide.<sup>23</sup> Moral rights relate to the protection of the personality of the author and the integrity of the work.<sup>24</sup> Among others, the right of paternity (also called 'right of attribution') is the right of an author to be associated or identified with his or her own work,<sup>25</sup> but also to publish anonymously or pseudonymously.<sup>26</sup> The author can also determine when, by whom, whether, in what form, and on what terms a work will be made available to the public for the first time ('right of disclosure').<sup>27</sup> The author can also object to any distortion, mutilation, or other unauthorized modification of the work in order to preserve the work in the form in which it was created,<sup>28</sup> since it is traditionally assumed that the author has an artistic and personal interest in the unchanged preservation of his or her work.<sup>29</sup> However, it is recognized that the extent of this right of the author depends on the art genre. For example, a tacit consent of the author may be assumed regarding minor changes and adjustments of a letter to the editor in a newspaper, or of a play by the director,<sup>30</sup> whereas inserting a different color in a painting may not be acceptable.

In summary, international copyright law gives authors extensive rights to decide how and by whom their works may be published, reproduced, or modified, or, in short, exploited. From the perspective of a 'user,' that is, someone who, as an example, intends to upload an image to the internet or reproduce small 3D versions of a sculpture to sell, this means that—at least

in principle—these actions require authorization on the part of the author. There are, however, some exceptions to this rule, which will shortly be discussed in the following section.

### *Restrictions of copyright*

Whenever the law gives a specific interest a special legal position, it attempts to strike a balance with other interests. In the case of copyright, this is attempted with specific restrictions that allow certain users to utilize works without the author's consent and compensation.<sup>31</sup> These limitations on copyright are aimed at various user groups, especially memory institutions, which are important mediators of works in the service of society. For example, in many countries, museums may reproduce works for a museum catalogue or for the purpose of a work's preservation. Their need to display works through means of digital technology is recognized and supported by the law of some countries, as is the use of copyrighted works whose author or rights holder is unknown or unlocatable ('orphan works').<sup>32</sup> Other countries grant the right to use protected works in citations or for scientific purposes.

However, with regard to copyright limitations, local law varies even more than in the case of authors' rights: "Limitations and exceptions on copyright have never been harmonised at the international level."<sup>33</sup> Therefore, it is essential to always check the applicable law prior to any intended use of a copyrighted work.

In the second part of this chapter, the knowledge gained will now be applied to the specifics of performance art.

### **Performance art and its legal protection**

When assessing whether a specific preservation measure is compatible with copyright law, several steps should be taken.<sup>34</sup> First, it is necessary to check whether the artistic creation is copyrighted; if that's the case, one must identify what exactly is planned, whether the measure infringes on the author's rights, and whether limitations may apply which allow taking the desirable measure without the artist's approval and remuneration. If the planned measure requires the author's approval, it is necessary to identify and approach the right person or group of persons (see above, under 'The author and other involved individuals'). Finally, the work must always be connected with the author's name.

### *Copyright for performances?*

In recent decades, performance art has gained increasing importance for artists, collectors, institutions, fairs, and the art-savvy public alike. However, this is not reflected in legal regulations, in which performance art is markedly absent. As already mentioned, it is not mentioned in Art. 2 para. 1 of

the Berne Convention's classifications of art forms. Indeed, in view of the multitude of possible artistic forms of creation referred to as 'performance art,' it seems impossible to subsume it under a specific classical art form, since performances may consist of, involve, or make use of drawing, painting, sculpture, photography, video, works of applied art, illustrations, maps, plans, sketches, speech, or music, among others; and numerous performances are closely related to choreographic works.<sup>35</sup> Pieces of performance art therefore often defy an easy classification<sup>36</sup> and, at the same time, draw heavily on other art forms.

From a legal point of view, it is irrelevant whether a piece of performance leans more toward one form of 'classic' artistic work than toward another, or towards any at all; yet, on the other hand, rooting a performance in traditional art forms does not automatically make it a copyright-protected work in its own right.

When assessing the copyright protection of a particular work, three aspects common to many pieces of performance art can significantly complicate matters.

One, classical art forms usually produce works that are physically well defined or whose scope can be easily determined—for instance, a painting or a novel. They 'embody' the artistic creation protected and, apart from signs of wear in the case of physical objects, do not tend to change significantly over time. With performances, it's not always simple to determine what actually constitutes the work. The exact form and the dimensions or manner in which it needs to be performed are sometimes not precisely fixed or outlined, so that they cannot be implemented without any doubt or room for interpretation. Performances have this problem in common with art forms that use living materials and which therefore represent a challenging phenomenon for the practice of conservation: "What is the essence of artworks that are constantly changing and eventually may die?"<sup>37</sup> From a legal point of view, in describing the subject matter of protection, it is equally necessary to identify precisely what it is that is to be protected.<sup>38</sup> This is a challenge for artists, curators, and conservators alike.

The second issue is the aspect of 'originality' or 'creativity.' While the Berne Convention does not require, as a condition of protection, that a work should be 'original' or result from a creative endeavor in order to be protected, it is generally accepted that a work must be classified as fulfilling the criterion of originality or creativity in order to be covered by the categories of protection which are within the scope of the Convention.<sup>39</sup> Countries following the common law tradition (the United States and Great Britain, among others) generally require 'originality' of a work to connote that it originated with the author and no one else; civil law countries (for example, most countries in Central Europe) usually look for some imprint of the author's personality. The work must be the "author's own intellectual creation."<sup>40</sup>

While it seems self-evident at first glance that a piece of performance art will always be the result of a creative process, its outcome is not necessarily

‘original’ in the sense that another individual couldn’t also create the same form.<sup>41</sup> This poses a legal challenge for pieces that consist of everyday courses of action, like normal step sequences or ordinary human interactions, which happen millions of times every day.<sup>42</sup> For instance, the US dancer, choreographer, and filmmaker Yvonne Rainer (born November 24, 1934) incorporated everyday movements into her early works. In her 1968 piece *Horses*, which she showed at the Anderson Theater in New York City, six dancers “run across the stage. They move from one corner to the other and back, like a herd of animals.” The dancers were shown against a backdrop photograph of Thomson’s gazelles moving in an orderly fashion, thus likening the humans to the gazelles and giving a “sense of embodied order in the social life of animals.”<sup>43</sup> While the running itself cannot be copyrighted, the copyright status of the whole piece would need to be determined. Court cases dealing with these issues are rare. Therefore, a Swiss case dealing with a carnival performance is particularly interesting. The cantonal court in St. Gallen ruled in 2002:

Whether a work has individuality is judged by the overall impression; details are not to be considered separately. For the assessment of individuality, indications such as surprise effect and novelty, otherness, freedom of purpose as well as popularity and success of the creation can be taken into account.<sup>44</sup>

Other everyday occurrences also clearly belong to the public realm and cannot be protected by copyright per se. For instance, sleeping, bathing, sitting, lounging, and interacting with spectators through visual contact were the main occupations of performance artist Marina Abramović for the twelve days that she spent on a three-part raised platform in her piece *The House with the Ocean View*, in a New York gallery in 2002.<sup>45</sup> The three rooms, stark in their clean design, with their wooden furniture and ladders boasting knives as rungs, may exhibit the ‘originality’ required for copyright protection, while the artist’s individual activities are everyday human actions and thus do not. Therefore, it would infringe on the artist’s copyright to reproduce the backdrop to her performance without her permission (if she authored the scenery), but not Abramović’s acts, which are repeated by most of us every day and cannot be copyrighted. This separation of setting and actions may seem artificial and does not do justice to the performance as such, since only their combination results in this specific piece. Still, it is important to note that a performance may consist of various elements, some of which may be protected by copyright, while others may not. This is especially important if an object stemming from the performance is marketed as a separate entity and the question arises as to whether it is copyrighted.

Related to the aforementioned facet is a third aspect, the criterion of configuration: “Most laws require, either specifically or by implication, that the work must have a certain form in order to be protected”; common law states,

especially, in general require that the work must be fixed in some material form in order to receive copyright protection.<sup>46</sup> ‘Fixing’ would require an actual painting on a canvas, writing down a composition on musical sheets, or describing a performance in detailed writing or by providing sketches. Hence, a pianist’s free improvisation or a piece of performance art that is not described or written down in a ‘score,’ which may, for example, consist of annotations, sketches, texts, or plans, would be without protection. In sharp contrast, civil law countries allow protection for creations that are not fixed. Switzerland, for example, expressly states in Art. 29 para. 1 of its Federal Act on Copyright and Related Rights: “A work is protected by copyright as soon as it is created, irrespective of whether it has been fixed on a physical medium.”

These aspects show how much the laws of individual countries can differ despite the international convention framework, and how important it is to know the legal situation in the country in which a specific measure to preserve a performance is planned.

### *What has been planned?*

If it is established that the work—or components or documentation related to the piece—are in copyright, it needs to be examined whether the planned measure would infringe on the copyright and whether limitations on the copyright could permit taking the action without involving the artist (or more precisely, the copyright holder). It is obviously not possible to describe all the procedures that can be carried out to restore or conserve a work of art, its components, or the associated documentation. Therefore, three groups of cases are formed for the purposes of this essay, in order to make some basic statements: measures to reproduce via photographing, filming, scanning, or similar methods; dissemination on site or via the internet; and treatment of performance relics. Surely many more groups could be added.

### **Reproduction**

Photographing and filming a piece of performance art are amongst the most widely used techniques of preserving a performance. While documenting a work by photographing and filming may seem the obvious solutions to preserve at least certain aspects of its activation, and may be seen to be in both the collection’s and the artist’s interest, doing so generally requires the author’s consent; however, there may be exceptions to this rule (see in the following). As mentioned above, authors of literary and artistic works protected by the Berne Convention have the exclusive right of authorizing the reproduction of their works, in any manner or form. It is stated that the “words ‘in any manner or form’ are wide enough to cover all methods of reproduction: design, engraving, lithography, offset and all other printing processes, typewriting, photocopying, xerox, mechanical or magnetic recording (discs, cassettes, magnetic tape, films, microfilms, etc.).”<sup>47</sup>



This guide or commentary, which was written in 1978, clearly shows some signs of ageing, as most procedures are no longer in regular use; but, on the other hand, it is open to future technical developments, as it is explicitly stated that the definition of “reproduction” includes also “all other processes known or yet to be discovered. It is simply a matter of fixing the work in some material form. It clearly includes the recording of both sounds and images.”<sup>48</sup> This guide is obviously intended to make artists aware of the various existing and future technical possibilities for fixing their works, thus enabling artists to exploit them, especially in countries that recognize copyright protection only when a work is fixed.

Therefore, in general, any digitizing of a performance, or of sketches, drawings, scores, or other documents, by way of photographing, filming, scanning, etc., infringes on the respective author’s or authors’ right (and, not to be forgotten, the additional rights of performers, musicians, etc.). It should also be noted that in many countries, photographs and films made for the purpose of reproducing works of performance art are protected as separate works.<sup>49</sup> Their use may require the consent of two authors: the one who created the artwork, and the one who photographed it. Take, for instance, photographer Manfred Tischer (1925–2008), who famously photographed the artistic action *Das Schweigen von Marcel Duchamp wird überbewertet*, organized by Joseph Beuys, who was assisted by his student at the time, Norbert Tadeusz, on December 11, 1964, in the state studio of Zweites Deutsches Fernsehen (one of Germany’s main public service broadcasting corporations) in Düsseldorf. The exhibition of unpublished photographs of that action in Museum Schloss Moyland in 2009 was taken to court by Beuys’s widow Eva, who claimed that the action was ‘changed’ by Tischer’s photographs. The German Federal Court (Bundesgerichtshof) did not decide whether Beuys’s action was a protected work or whether it was ‘changed’ by photographing it, but it did hold that the photographing of such an action would be a reproduction of the action.<sup>50</sup> Tischer’s photographs, on the other hand, are protected by German copyright law.

However, certain limitations may be applicable that permit the use of a copyrighted work by photographing, filming, etc., without first obtaining the author’s consent. Museums

must ensure that they have an accurate inventory of the objects in their collection and that these objects do not deteriorate, get lost or become obsolete. Making reproductions of works in their collection can therefore become necessary. Digital technology appears as the ideal means to preserve or restore their collections.<sup>51</sup>

Because of this rationale, the right to reproduce is recognized in many countries’ copyright regulations. However, its exact content varies considerably—even within the European Union, although Article 5(2)(c) of the Europe Directive 2001/29/EC on Copyright in the Information Society<sup>52</sup> allows member

states to adopt limitations in respect of specific acts of reproduction made by publicly accessible libraries, educational establishments, or museums, or by archives, which are not for direct or indirect economic or commercial advantage.<sup>53</sup> Therefore, museums and photographers alike must either make sure that they act within the ramifications of applicable copyright limitations or obtain the author's consent for the reproduction.

### **Dissemination**

It is obvious that once a piece of performance art is documented, the wish may arise to make this documentation available to the public—that is, to disseminate it. This can happen in multiple ways. Historically, a museum or collection would print a catalogue or publish other printed media. Today, however, art

is going online. You can now view hundreds of thousands (and counting) of famous works of art from anywhere with an Internet connection. It's not just the big museums that are digitizing their collections, either. Galleries, artists, and collectors are putting their pieces online in increasing numbers.<sup>54</sup>

And this holds true for performance art, too. Countless videos of performance art pieces can be watched online.

The communication of protected works to the public clearly infringes the right holders' rights to control the reproduction and dissemination of their works. However, multiple countries allow the use of reproductions of copyrighted works in printed museum catalogues and even for "the purpose of advertising the public exhibition or sale of artistic works, to the extent necessary to promote the event, excluding any other commercial use."<sup>55</sup>

Dissemination via the internet, on the other hand, is a different matter entirely. Making works available online normally involves digital reproduction of the work and the communication of the work to the public,<sup>56</sup> both of which are author's rights. It is noted that with

the significant technical and social changes brought about by the advent of information technologies, museums are now forced to adapt their ways and to consider digitizing and disseminating their collection via the Internet, if they wish to remain socially and culturally relevant in the 21st century.<sup>57</sup>

However, limitations that allow the use of copyrighted works on the internet without authors' consent and remuneration are hard to find.<sup>58</sup> If they exist, they allow only the publication of small-format images or short excerpts of films and videos in an inventory.<sup>59</sup> Therefore, dissemination via the internet, including via social media, frequently requires multiple licenses from rights holders or collecting societies.<sup>60</sup>

**Treatment of relics ('remains,' 'remnants')**

When performing, artists often use, create, modify, or leave behind a variety of objects and materials: "From common household items to gently decomposing organic matter to swept-up debris,"<sup>61</sup> the remnants of performance art are as multifaceted as the art itself. Their perception also varies greatly. They may be recognized as documents<sup>62</sup> of the performance piece, as Joseph Beuys expressed in 1984:

Such an installation is ultimately the documentation of something in which imaginary movements—the actual form of action—is long gone. It occurred at a specific time, and in the end, what really still exists is just a monument that testifies to what once happened in the documentary sense.<sup>63</sup>

On other occasions, the same artist determined that the remains of performances were to be considered works of art in their own right. For instance, the installation *Richtkräfte einer neuen Gesellschaft*, of 1974–77,

is considered to be the first work of art in which Beuys assembled relics from previous performances or actions into a fixed artwork. . . . The core of the installation is made up of 100 school blackboards covered with chalk drawings and texts, as well as three easels and a lightbox arranged on a wooden platform.<sup>64</sup>

Beuys had previously used the chalkboards on various occasions. Also, the purpose of relics may be "to create a moment of reflection rather than being art in itself . . . to celebrate life by being a reminder of the actual art."<sup>65</sup> Others perceive relics as "objects, which are results of the transformation from states of 'mere' material to 'autonomous' artworks created or used during performance art."<sup>66</sup> Whether or not artists consider performance relics to be autonomous works of art, that is, regardless of their status or the function ascribed to them, performance relics have a long history as collectibles and have attracted interest as exhibits worthy of display and publication.<sup>67</sup>

Objects that are used, created, or left behind by an artist or performer in a piece of performance art may roughly be divided into groups according to the differing intensity of the creative process invested by the artist to create them. The rationale behind this categorization is that this artistic process could give us an indication as to whether the relic might be an 'artistic work' possessing 'originality' or 'individuality,' and would therefore be eligible for copyright protection in various countries. Whether or not the relics would be perceived by the artist (or by art history) as art in their own right, or would be considered collectible by institutions or the art market, is not decisive, though not necessarily irrelevant, in this context. I fully acknowledge, being a lawyer as well as an art historian myself, that this can be extremely confusing, but it's

a good example of the many clashes between art history and the law in the assessment of works of art.

Five of these categories are distinguished below, followed by a discussion of legal implications that focuses on the legal status of the relic as a distinct work, leaving aside the work of performance art itself. Again, the separation of relic and performance may seem artificial, but it is crucial to determine the relic's copyright status in the event that it is separated from the performance piece, such as when relics appear as stand-alone objects on the art market, or in institutions, outside of the performance art context.

- a. Objects that are prefabricated by a third party (for instance, a manufacturer) and used in a performance without being manipulated by the artist.

In many pieces of performance art, everyday objects like chairs, tables, or clothes, and technical equipment like projectors, microphones, speakers, etc., are part of the scene as props,<sup>68</sup> or are used in other ways without them being modified. For instance, one hundred women wore nothing but flesh-colored nylon leggings in Vanessa Beecroft's *VB 55*, which was performed in the Neue Nationalgalerie, Berlin, in 2005;<sup>69</sup> and Christian Rizzo had his dancers wear hoodies in the piece *Mon Amour*, which, through "garments considered appropriate for young people," gave the performers the appearance of "strange totemic figures."<sup>70</sup> These prefabricated objects may be of vital importance for the performance; nevertheless, they would not be considered copyrighted solely because they were used in such a fashion. Of course, if the hoodies used by Rizzo were designed in an unusual way, they could be protected by copyright for that reason; however, it would not be Rizzo who could claim this copyright protection, but the hoodies' designer.

- b. Objects that are prefabricated by a third party (for instance, a manufacturer) and used in a performance, and which are manipulated or remodeled by the artist, performers, or other individuals.

Whether an artist smashes a piano, as occurred in a performance by Ralph Ortiz at MOCA, Los Angeles, in 1989;<sup>71</sup> has gallery visitors paint a wooden crib, as Yoko Ono did in *Add Colour Piece. Add all colours of hope*, in 1994;<sup>72</sup> or sets fire to a tablecloth and dishes, as did Elena Kovylnina in her piece *Would you like a Cup of Coffee*, 2010,<sup>73</sup> artists' actions can have a huge effect on objects and may have extraordinary outcomes, which may make them highly collectible and considered 'art' by the art world. However, artists' interventions do not necessarily entail copyright protection for such objects. Whether or not they would be recognized as copyrighted works will depend on a specific country's law. In Switzerland, for example, copyright protection requires an "individual character,"<sup>74</sup> and smashing things or setting fire to them arguably may not be sufficient.

- c. Objects which are created by the artist him- or herself, or according to his/her instructions, prior to or during a performance. They may be manipulated or remodeled by the artist during the performance.

Many artists create intricate objects that set the stage for their performance, for example Monster Chetwynd's huge installation made of cardboard, paper, glue, PVC tubes, plastic bags, and spotlights, which served as scenery for her piece *The Fall of Man, A Puppet Extravaganza*, in 2006;<sup>75</sup> or they invent mutable costumes, like Carlos Amorales's carapace resembling reptile, robot, insect, and bird, in the piece *Spider Galaxy*, which was shown on a stage made of four hundred wooden blocks arranged in an intricate spider's web pattern at the Atrium, New York, in 2007.<sup>76</sup> These highly inventive objects would probably be recognized in most countries as works protected by copyright.

In summary, we can say that the less the artist relies on prefabricated materials, and the more she or he invents, creates, or shapes an object in his or her own artistic way, the more likely the relics or remains are individual creations, 'artistic works' that may be protected by copyright—regardless of whether the performance art work itself is copyrighted or not. On the other hand, even if prefabricated materials or commonplace objects are used, they may be important for the performance to actually take place. They may not be copyrighted as works of art in themselves but may still form an integral part of a piece of performance art, with specific meanings attached to them, and may therefore be irreplaceable for the piece. Consequently, they may be part of the copyrighted piece of performance art itself.

Complex challenges may arise in deciding whether these materials should be included in collections and museums, and how they should be treated, preserved, and exhibited. In any case, a curator would probably wish to include in the collection objects that have been worked on or created by the artist, regardless of their copyright status. With everyday objects, she would probably consider whether all the objects required for a performance can or must be taken into the depot, or whether they can be easily retrieved for a new performance in each case, which might save a lot of space and, in the long run, money. Thus, detailed questions must be asked: Which relics are really to be considered part of the piece, and which could be disregarded? Did they take on a specific meaning or significance by having been used in the performance, or are the objects interchangeable? If so, do they have to correspond in detail to the objects that the artist originally worked with? Would it be sufficient to include certain *types* of commonplace objects (for example, any Eames lounge chair in black), or is the specific object actually used in the performance 'irreplaceable'? How should the objects be stored? Could they be exhibited in the museum without reperforming the piece? These questions are for the artist to answer (and, depending on the answers, for the institution to determine whether the actual piece of performance art is worth the effort from its point of view). It would therefore be advisable for the curator

to retrieve as much information as possible from the artist or his or her studio about the work, possibly by means of an interview,<sup>77</sup> to determine the institution's measures going forward.

If the piece of performance art or the relic is copyrighted, every restoration intervention must be checked to see whether it leads to an alteration of the work, because changing the work could violate the author's "right of integrity," which is an important part of the author's moral right, and "enables the author to object to any distortion, mutilation or other unauthorized modification of the work, and any derogatory action in relation to the work, so as to preserve the work in the form in which it was created."<sup>78</sup> As always, the form that the moral right of work integrity may take varies greatly from country to country.

Having said that, again, there is a noted difference between curatorial and art-historical perceptions of 'alteration,' and legal ones. While an art historian may argue that every measure of restoration—for instance, refreshing the top layer of a coat of paint—will 'alter' a work, whereas a measure of preservation like adding a sheet of glass to a frame to keep dust from accumulating, will not, the law may see things very differently. In some countries' copyright law, state-of-the-art measures of restoration would not be considered alterations of a work, even though it is naturally recognized that a restored object cannot ever completely match the condition of the object before the measure was taken.<sup>79</sup> Of particular interest is the regulation of restoration measures in US law, namely in § 1006A(a)(3)(C)(2) of the Visual Rights Act ('VARA')<sup>80</sup> of 1990. This stipulates that the modification of a work resulting from restoration measures or from the presentation of a work, including lighting and placement, is not a violation of the right of integrity unless the modification is caused by gross negligence. Similarly, modifications of a work resulting from the mere passage of time or from the inherent nature of the materials used are not considered alterations (see § 1006A(a)(3)(C)(1)).<sup>81</sup> Since VARA does not protect all types of works, but only paintings, drawings, prints, sculptures, and photographs produced for exhibition purposes and in fewer than two hundred copies, these regulations would obviously not apply if an object cannot be assigned to these work categories.<sup>82</sup>

Measures of preservation, on the other hand, may very much result in an alteration. If, for instance, an artist had made a work out of perishable goods, especially food, and had determined that it should be left to deteriorate, any measure that would slow down the deterioration process, like cooling, or that would even stop it altogether, may be considered an alteration or even a distortion of the work, which would infringe on the artist's right.<sup>83</sup>

Not only measures of conservation and preservation, but also everyday museum life, with its challenges due to the concrete spatial situation and the crowds of visitors, can make changes to a work necessary. Take, for example, Canadian multidisciplinary artist, lecturer, writer, and independent curator Jamelie Hassan's 1981 work *Los Desaparecidos*, which is

made up of 74 porcelain pieces that are displayed on the floor, along with a photocopied dossier containing information about missing Argentinians, who are believed to have been murdered by the military junta in power from 1976 to 1981. After the National Gallery of Canada acquired and exhibited the work, the artist wrote to a curator to supply instructions for installation, since she had found the initial installation to be “somewhat cramped.” . . . The new instructions sent by the artist included both text and a drawing . . . ; in particular, she indicated that the pieces of porcelain should be placed so as to allow “enough room [for visitors] to move around and throughout the pieces.”<sup>84</sup>

The museum’s conservator, however, drew up a different installation plan, which advocated “placing the flatter porcelain pieces around the perimeter of the installation” and

allowing less space between the pieces precisely to discourage viewer access to the interior of the work. It is clear that the work installed in accordance with the conservator’s instructions will be aesthetically different from the work installed in accordance with the artist’s instructions and diagram.<sup>85</sup>

While the artist intended a display in which “viewers can immerse themselves, and with which they can interact intimately,” in the version of the work installed according to the museum’s instructions, the

viewer experiences herself as distanced from the piece rather than immersed in it. The piece does not invite her to enter and immerse herself within it; instead, its very configuration becomes a subtle expression of the institutional conventions that serve to control viewers by creating a buffer zone that discourages contact.<sup>86</sup>

Such ‘adaptations’ may also result in copyright infringement. However, in such cases, it may be necessary to balance the interests of the author and the owner.<sup>87</sup> If, for instance, the museum would argue that the ‘immersive’ nature of the piece bears the danger of breakage, and thus of viewers being hurt and pieces of the installation being irrevocably destroyed, the owner’s (that is, museum’s) interest may outweigh the artistic intentions. As it’s almost impossible to find a satisfactory solution to these conflicting interests solely on a legal basis, it is advisable to collect as much information as possible and to maintain a close cooperative relationship between artist and museum or collection.

This enumeration of categories of relics would not be complete without mention of additional groups of objects that elude normal art genres.

#### d. Relics of bioart.

Fluids, cells, hair: in some artistic practices relics bear witness to the physical presence of the artist or of animals’ bodies used in performances.<sup>88</sup> From the

blood-stained clothes stemming from Hermann Nitsch's orgiastic rituals<sup>89</sup> to the flesh and fat left from ORLAN's *Opération chirurgicale-performances dite Omniprésence*, in which she underwent a series of plastic surgeries to transform her face according to beauty ideals drawn from art history,<sup>90</sup> there exists "a broad range of artistic practices that employ living/biological materials and bio(techno)logical tools as media and/or subject matter,"<sup>91</sup> which is referred to as 'bioart.' While using these materials, performance artists confront us in the most direct way possible with our physical existence and its transience. Their public display and exhibition may raise complex ethical questions<sup>92</sup> and even legal issues. For example, the artist Xiao Yu, born in Inner Mongolia in 1965, combined various dead small animals into "new, hybrid creatures" for the six-part installation *Ruan*, from 1999. Kunstmuseum Bern, where *Ruan*'s work was on view in 2005 as part of the show *Mahjong* (of the collection of Uli Sigg), even felt compelled to warn: "The head of a fetus is integrated into one of the six assemblages (Chinese taxidermy from the 1960s)."<sup>93</sup> That specific object, a combination of the body of a seagull to which the head of a human fetus fitted with rabbit eyes was affixed, prompted a visitor to file a complaint against the museum for "disturbance of the peace of the dead, depiction of violence and violation of the animal protection law." The object was temporarily removed from the exhibition.<sup>94</sup>

However, from a copyright point of view, it could be argued that the specific material used by artists in 'bioart' does not warrant a category of its own. It could simply be treated as any other matter to be worked on in an artistic process of any kind, which may or may not result in a copyrighted work, depending on the artist's ingenuity (and local law). To get into the gruesome details: if blood accidentally splashes on the artist's clothes as a result of his or her actions, or the artist's T-shirt is stained by his or her sweat, the resulting pattern would most probably not be considered an 'artistic work,' however collectible. On the other hand, the highly individual human-animal combination of *Ruan*, which could be perceived as offensive by some visitors and may even be illegal in some countries, may be copyrighted, depending on local law.

e. Objects that are presented as performance relics by others.

Sometimes, the remains of a work of performance art are the result not only of the artist's actions, but those of another person or institution. For example, "the 'leftovers' of the 1976 performance work by Carolee Schneemann, *Up to and Including Her Limits*, were brought together into one installation work by the museum without the artist's knowledge."<sup>95</sup> The sound installation *Ausfegen* contains the remnants of an action by Joseph Beuys, including a broom and swept-up street trash (flyers, Coke cans, cigarette packets, leaves, dust, etc.), which had been presented several times during his lifetime. Beuys's former gallerist, René Block, himself fixed the arrangement in a glass showcase in 1985, describing it as a "protective space" for the original installation form. He argued that Beuys had planned to place the objects, fixed



with wax, in a showcase, but this did not happen due to the artist's serious illness and his death in the spring of 1986. Beuys's widow Eva opposed the "fetishization" of the artist's action relics and did not accept the object's status as an authentic piece of art by Beuys.<sup>96</sup>

It is understandable that museums and art market players are interested in the preservation of such remains. However, if the remnants are not authentic works of art authorized by the artist, this fact must be carefully communicated in each individual case, so that the remnants do not enter the art market or art history under false pretenses. It may come as a surprise, however, that most countries have *not* included the author's right to object to false attributions of works to their oeuvre (so-called 'droit de non-paternité') in their copyright acts. Great Britain is one of the few that maintain that a person should have the right not to have a literary, dramatic, musical, or artistic work falsely attributed to them as an author.<sup>97</sup> Therefore, in many countries it would not be considered an infringement of copyright to present the remains of a piece of performance art (or any other kind of work) against the alleged author's wishes—it may, however, be considered a violation of the right of personality<sup>98</sup> or other laws.

## Conclusion

The protection of performance art is not explicitly mentioned in the international treaties on copyright protection, but this does not preclude a work of performance art from enjoying copyright protection. However, the ephemeral nature of this art form may prevent protection, in particular, if the work is not 'fixed': applicable copyright law often does not protect a volatile piece of art. Relics of performance art may enjoy independent copyright protection, especially if they themselves represent artistic creations. It is therefore essential to consult the applicable law when enacting measures for preservation and restoration.

## Notes

- 1 "In modern usage 'curator' is applied chiefly to the keeper of a museum, art collection, public gallery, &c." Hugh Chisholm, ed., "Curator," in *Encyclopædia Britannica*, vol. 7, 11th ed. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1911), 636.
- 2 P. G. W. Glare, *Oxford Latin Dictionary* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1968), 'cura,' 473–74.
- 3 Paul Goldstein and Bernt Hugenholtz, *International Copyright: Principles, Law, and Practice*, 4th ed. (New York: Oxford University Press, 2019), 87.
- 4 John Adrian Lawrence Sterling, *World Copyright Law: Protection of Authors' Works, Performances, Phonograms, Films, Video, Broadcasts and Published Editions in National, International and Regional Law*, 3rd ed. (London: Sweet & Maxwell, 2008), 129.
- 5 Goldstein and Hugenholtz, *International Copyright*, 3.
- 6 Berne Convention for the Protection of Literary and Artistic Works (as amended on September 28, 1979), World Intellectual Property Organization (WIPO) (website), accessed August 20, 2023, [www.wipo.int/wipolex/en/treaties/textdetails/12214](http://www.wipo.int/wipolex/en/treaties/textdetails/12214).

- 7 Agreement on Trade-Related Aspects of Intellectual Property Rights (unamended), “Annex 1C of the Marrakesh Agreement Establishing the World Trade Organization, Signed in Marrakesh, Morocco on April 15, 1994,” World Trade Organization (website), accessed August 20, 2023, [www.wto.org/english/docs\\_e/legal\\_e/27-trips\\_01\\_e.htm](http://www.wto.org/english/docs_e/legal_e/27-trips_01_e.htm).
- 8 Goldstein and Hugenholtz, *International Copyright*, 3.
- 9 Goldstein and Hugenholtz, 3–4.
- 10 Goldstein and Hugenholtz, 229.
- 11 Goldstein and Hugenholtz, 232.
- 12 Joint authorship can result in complex issues, such as the separability of the authors’ contributions to the work, duration of protection, and the consent required from one author for the use of the work by the other author. See Sterling, *World Copyright Law*, 210.
- 13 Clare Bishop, “Delegated Performance: Outsourcing Authenticity,” *October* 140 (Spring 2012): 91, [https://doi.org/10.1162/OCTO\\_a\\_00091](https://doi.org/10.1162/OCTO_a_00091).
- 14 Art. 2 (a) WIPO Performances and Phonograms Treaty (WPPT). The “Rome Convention for the Protection of Performers, Producers of Phonograms and Broadcasting Organizations” extends the circle of beneficiaries to other participants, for example, conductors of an orchestra. See the World Intellectual Property Organization (WIPO), *Guide to the Rome Convention and to the Phonograms Convention* (Geneva: World Intellectual Property Organization, 1981), accessed August 20, 2023, <https://tind.wipo.int/record/28745>.
- 15 Goldstein and Hugenholtz, *International Copyright*, 215.
- 16 For a summary, see the World Intellectual Property Organization (WIPO), “Summary of the WIPO Performances and Phonograms Treaty (WPPT) (1996),” World Intellectual Property Organization (WIPO) (website), accessed August 20, 2023, [www.wipo.int/treaties/en/ip/wppt/summary\\_wppt.html](http://www.wipo.int/treaties/en/ip/wppt/summary_wppt.html).
- 17 According to Art. 7 para 1 of the Berne Convention, the “term of protection granted by this Convention shall be the life of the author and fifty years after his death.” For WTO member states, the term of the author’s life plus fifty years has become the general standard, although for EEA states (EU and Iceland, Liechtenstein, and Norway), the term is seventy years after an author’s death for EEA works. See John Adrian Lawrence Sterling, Patricia Akester, and Trevor Cook, eds., *Sterling on World Copyright Law*, 5th ed. (London: Sweet & Maxwell/Thomson Reuters, 2018), 537 (11.15).
- 18 For example, the UK’s Artist Collecting Society (<https://artistscollectingsociety.org>); the Artist Rights Society (ARS, <https://arsny.com>), in the US; VG Bild-Kunst in Germany ([www.bildkunst.de/homepage](http://www.bildkunst.de/homepage)); and the French ADAGP ([www.adagp.fr/fr](http://www.adagp.fr/fr)). For other countries, see [www.adagp.fr/en/adagp-role-and-missions/adagp-general-presentation/worldwide-network](http://www.adagp.fr/en/adagp-role-and-missions/adagp-general-presentation/worldwide-network). All websites accessed August 21, 2023.
- 19 Goldstein and Hugenholtz, *International Copyright*, 13.
- 20 Sterling, Akester, and Cook, *Sterling on World Copyright Law*, 395 (9.12).
- 21 Sterling, Akester, and Cook, 394 (9.11).
- 22 Sterling, Akester, and Cook, 402 (9.35).
- 23 Gillian Davies and Kevin Garnett, *Moral Rights*, 2nd ed. (London: Sweet & Maxwell, 2016), 3–4. This volume is a comprehensive presentation of moral rights, with detailed discussions considering the copyright legislation of many countries.
- 24 Sterling, *World Copyright Law*, 329 (8.01).
- 25 Davies and Garnett, *Moral Rights*, 5 (1–003).
- 26 Sterling, *World Copyright Law*, 395–96 (8.03).
- 27 Davies and Garnett, *Moral Rights*, 6 (1–005).
- 28 Davies and Garnett, 6 (1–004).
- 29 Sandra Sykora, *©wreschutz durch Urheberrecht: Zuschreibung und Abschreibung von Werken der Bildenden Kunst durch ihre Urheber und Eigentümer* (Zurich: Dike Verlag; Baden-Baden: Nomos Verlag; Vienna: Facultas Verlag, 2022), 83.

- 30 Sykora, *Euvreschutz durch Urheberrecht*, 85.
- 31 Jean-François Canat, Lucie Guibault, and Elisabeth Logeais, “Study in Copyright Limitations and Limitations for Museums,” WIPO Standing Committee on Copyright and Related Rights, Thirtieth Session, Geneva, June 29 to July 3, 2015, 13–14, accessed August 21, 2023, [www.wipo.int/export/sites/www/copyright/en/limitations/pdf/museum\\_study.pdf](http://www.wipo.int/export/sites/www/copyright/en/limitations/pdf/museum_study.pdf).
- 32 For a detailed overview of copyright restrictions, see the in-depth study by Canat, Guibault, and Logeais, “Study in Copyright Limitations.”
- 33 Canat, Guibault, and Logeais, 14.
- 34 For more information, see University of Geneva, IIC Digitization of Museum Collections project, “Policy Paper on the Digitization of Museum Collections,” accessed August 21, 2023, [www.digitizationpolicies.com](http://www.digitizationpolicies.com), specifically, “Museum Code of Conduct for a ‘Safe Harbor Right Statement,’” 32–34.
- 35 On the complex relation between performance art and dance, see RoseLee Goldberg, *Performance Now* (London: Thames & Hudson, 2018), 156–95.
- 36 It is argued that “our perception of the features of a work depends on our perception of the work’s properties of form and their variability or otherwise relative to their category.” See Justine Pila, “Copyright and Its Categories of Original Works,” *Oxford Journal of Legal Studies* 30, no. 2 (Summer 2010): 247, <https://doi.org/10.1093/ojls/gqq009>.
- 37 Sanneke Stigter, “The Artist Interview as a Conservation Tool for Process-Based Art by Sjoerd Buisman,” in *The Artist Interview: For Conservation and Presentation of Contemporary Art—Guidelines and Practice*, ed. Lydia Beerkens et al. (Heijningen, Netherlands: Jap Sam Books, 2012), 68.
- 38 Sterling, Akester, and Cook, *Sterling on World Copyright Law*, 224 (6.14).
- 39 Sterling, Akester, and Cook, 308 (7.44).
- 40 Goldstein and Hugenholz, *International Copyright*, 177. However, in Switzerland, the Federal Court has found that it is the individuality of the work that is relevant, not the individuality of the author. BGE 130 III 168 (“Bob Marley”).
- 41 The Swiss Federal Court holds that intellectual creations “which are taken from what is not known to him [i.e., the author], but which are so close to what is known that another person could also create the same form,” lack originality and individuality. BGE 110 IV 102, 105.
- 42 Sykora, *Euvreschutz durch Urheberrecht*, 78–79.
- 43 Lisa Moravec, “Dressage Performances as Infrastructural Critique: Mike Kelley and Yvonne Rainer’s Dancing Horses,” *Dance Chronicle* 45, no. 1 (2022): 57–79, 60–61, <https://doi.org/10.1080/01472526.2022.2027182>.
- 44 Cantonal court St. Gallen, ruling of June 19, 2002, “Mummenschanz,” *Zeitschrift für Immaterialgüter-, Informations- und Wettbewerbsrecht*, February 2003.
- 45 Goldberg, *Performance Now*, 38–39.
- 46 Sterling, Akester, and Cook, *Sterling on World Copyright Law*, 300 (7.07).
- 47 World Intellectual Property Organization (WIPO), *Guide to the Berne Convention for the Protection of Literary and Artistic Works (Paris Act, 1971)* (Geneva: World Intellectual Property Organization, 1975), accessed August 21, 2023, [www.wipo.int/edocs/pubdocs/en/copyright/615/wipo\\_pub\\_615.pdf](http://www.wipo.int/edocs/pubdocs/en/copyright/615/wipo_pub_615.pdf).
- 48 World Intellectual Property Organization (WIPO), *Guide to the Berne Convention*, 54.
- 49 For example, many EU countries recognize protection for non-individual photographs. See Andrea Pausa, “Der urheberrechtliche Lichtbildschutz im Rechtsvergleich” (PhD diss., University of Vienna, 2010), [http://othes.univie.ac.at/12887/1/2010-12-21\\_0305587.pdf](http://othes.univie.ac.at/12887/1/2010-12-21_0305587.pdf), who also examines the protection of photographs in Art. 2 para. 1 of the Berne Convention, which lists photographic works as ‘artistic works.’

- 50 Bundesgerichtshof (BGH), Ruling of May 16, 2013 – I ZR 28/12 – OLG Düsseldorf. The ruling contains eighteen photographs by Tischer of Beuys's action. See Bundesgerichtshof (website), accessed August 21, 2023, <https://juris.bundesgerichtshof.de/cgi-bin/rechtsprechung/document.py?Gericht=bgh&Art=en&Datum=2013-5-16&nr=66190&pos=12&anz=39&Blank=1.pdf>.
- 51 Canat, Guibault, and Logeais, "Study in Copyright Limitations," 22.
- 52 Directive 2001/29/EC of the European Parliament and of the Council of May 22, 2001, on the Harmonisation of Certain Aspects of Copyright and Related Rights in the Information Society, European Union (website), accessed August 22, 2023, <https://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/TXT/?uri=celex%3A32001L0029>.
- 53 Canat, Guibault, and Logeais, "Study in Copyright Limitations," 23.
- 54 "All for Art and Art for All: Art Accessibility in the Digital Age," ARTDEX (website), accessed July 23, 2023, [www.artdex.com/all-for-art-and-art-for-all-art-accessibility-in-the-digital-age/](http://www.artdex.com/all-for-art-and-art-for-all-art-accessibility-in-the-digital-age/).
- 55 Article 5(3) (j) of the Europe Directive 2001/29/EC on Copyright in the Information Society.
- 56 Sterling, Akester, and Cook, *Sterling on World Copyright Law*, 502 (10.81).
- 57 Canat, Guibault, and Logeais, "Study in Copyright Limitations," 1.
- 58 Canat, Guibault, and Logeais, 43–45.
- 59 See, for example, Art. 24 e Swiss Copyright Act.
- 60 See Goldstein and Hugenholz, *International Copyright*, 315, for the case of making a work available online in more than one country of the European Community.
- 61 Sharon Hoyer describes the numerous relics that document nine years of performance art and exhibitions at Chicago's Defibrillator Gallery. Sharon Hoyer, "Inspiration from the Archive: Over Two Dozen Artists Respond to Performance Art Relics in 'What Remains' at Defibrillator Gallery," *New City Stage*, February 1, 2020, accessed August 22, 2023. [www.newcitystage.com/2020/02/01/inspiration-from-the-archive-over-two-dozen-artists-respond-to-performance-art-relics-in-what-remains-at-defibrillator-gallery/](http://www.newcitystage.com/2020/02/01/inspiration-from-the-archive-over-two-dozen-artists-respond-to-performance-art-relics-in-what-remains-at-defibrillator-gallery/).
- 62 Tancredi Gusman, "Exhibited, Recorded, Collected: Performance Art and Documentation in documenta 5 and 6," *Forum Modernes Theater* 32, no. 2 (2021): 264, <https://doi.org/10.1353/fmt.2021.0023>.
- 63 Joseph Beuys, 1984, quoted according to Eva Rieß, Carolin Bohlmann, and Ina Hausmann, "From Action to Object: On the Preservation of Performance-Based Installations by Joseph Beuys," *Journal of the Institute of Conservation* 42 (2019): 79, <https://doi.org/10.1080/19455224.2019.1604397>.
- 64 Rieß, Bohlmann, and Hausmann, "From Action to Object," 80, 82.
- 65 Selin Karaman, "On Relics, Hermann Nitsch and the Creation of Value in Art," *Journal of Extreme Anthropology* 1, no. 2 (2017): 68–69, <https://doi.org/10.5617/jea.4901>.
- 66 Adrian Tan, "Curatorship/Conservation Policy (A Selection of Performance Art Relics)," *Adrian Tan* (blog), September 18, 2018, accessed July 23, 2023, <https://oss.adm.ntu.edu.sg/pengchai001/curatorship-conservation-policy-a-selection-of-performance-art-relics/>.
- 67 See, for example, Harry Ruhé, *Art, No-Art & Anti-Art: A Collection of Relics* (Amsterdam: Galerie A, 2019); Eric Mangion and Marie de Brugerolle, eds., *Not to Play with Dead Things* (Zurich: JRP/Ringier, 2010); and the exhibitions *What Remains: On the Sacred, the Lost, and the Forgotten Relics of Live Art*, Defibrillator Gallery, Chicago (February 7–28, 2020); and *Residual: Performance Art Relics and Ephemera*, curated by Dave Dyment, Melody Jacobson, and Michael Coolidge at the Calgary Center for Performing Arts, Calgary, Alberta (October 7–31, 2005).
- 68 See Patrizia Brignone, "So Specific Objects," in *Not to Play with Dead Things*, ed. Mangion and de Brugerolle, 60–73.

- 69 Goldberg, *Performance Now*, 18–19.
- 70 Brignone, “So Specific Objects,” 64.
- 71 Ruhé, *Art, No-Art & Anti-Art*, 93.
- 72 Ruhé, 92.
- 73 Goldberg, *Performance Now*, 87.
- 74 Art. 2 para 1 Swiss Copyright Act (CopA).
- 75 Mangion and de Brugerolle, eds., *Not to Play with Dead Things*, 106–9; 200. The installation is now part of the collection of the Migros Museum für Gegenwartskunst, Zurich.
- 76 Goldberg, *Performance Now*, 90.
- 77 Stigter, “The Artist Interview.”
- 78 Davies and Garnett, *Moral Rights*, 6 (1–004), and 231–73 for specifics.
- 79 See Sykora, *Œuvreschutz durch Urheberrecht*, 88.
- 80 Title 17 of the US Code.
- 81 See Sykora, *Œuvreschutz durch Urheberrecht*, 92.
- 82 See Davies and Garnett, *Moral Rights*, 1059–60.
- 83 Sykora, *Œuvreschutz durch Urheberrecht*, 90.
- 84 Sherri Irvin, “Museums and the Shaping of Contemporary Artworks,” *Museum Management and Curatorship* 21, no. 2 (2006): 147, <https://doi.org/10.1080/09647770600602102>.
- 85 Irvin, “Museums and the Shaping of Contemporary Artworks,” 149.
- 86 Irvin, 149.
- 87 For Swiss law, see Sykora, *Œuvreschutz durch Urheberrecht*, 100.
- 88 Monika Wagner’s *Das Material in der Kunst* dedicates two chapters to organic matter and the human body as materials in the arts. See Monika Wagner, *Das Material in der Kunst: Eine andere Geschichte der Moderne* (Munich: C. H. Beck, 2001).
- 89 See Karaman, “On Relics, Hermann Nitsch and the Creation of Value in Art,” 67–70; and Hermann Nitsch and Michael Karrer, *Hermann Nitsch: Das Gesamtkunstwerk des Orgien Mysterien Theaters* (Cologne: Walther König, 2015).
- 90 Susanne Foellmer, “Series and Relics: On the Presence of Reminders in Performance’s Museums,” in *Art and Dance in Dialogue: Body, Space, Object*, ed. Sarah Whatley et al. (Cham, Switzerland: Palgrave Macmillan, 2020), 148, <https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-030-44085-5>.
- 91 Adele Senior, “Relics of Bioart: Ethics and Messianic Aesthetics in Performance Documentation,” *Theatre Journal* 66, no. 2 (May 2014): 184, <https://doi.org/10.1353/tj.2014.0046>. See also Klaus Spiess and Lucie Strecker, “In/valuable Hare’s Blood: Performing with Living Relics of Animals,” *Performance Research: A Journal of the Performing Arts* 22 (2017): 115–22, <https://doi.org/10.1080/13528165.2017.1315989>.
- 92 Adele Senior describes the use of human tissue by Australia-based artists Oron Catts and Ionat Zurr, who collaborated with the performance artist Stelarc on *Extra Ear ¼ Scale* (2003), which was rejected by the National Gallery of Victoria. The artists had to use animal tissue instead. Senior, “Relics of Bioart,” 183.
- 93 See Sykora, *Kunsturheberrecht. Ein Praxisleitfaden für Sammler, Kunstexperten, Kuratoren, Restauratoren und Juristen* (Zurich and Sulgen: Dike and Benteli, 2011), 119.
- 94 Thomas Wagner, “Monsterkopf: Chinesische Kunst erhitzt Berner Gemüter,” *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung*, August 11, 2005, accessed August 22, 2023, [www.faz.net/aktuell/feuilleton/kunstmuseum-bern-monsterkopf-chinesische-kunst-erhitzt-berner-gemueter-1252677.html](http://www.faz.net/aktuell/feuilleton/kunstmuseum-bern-monsterkopf-chinesische-kunst-erhitzt-berner-gemueter-1252677.html).
- 95 Rieß, Bohlmann, and Hausmann, “From Action to Object,” 80.
- 96 For more details, see Sykora, *Kunsturheberrecht*, 91–92.

- 97 Sect. 84 (1) (a) of the Copyright, Designs and Patents Act 1988. See Davies and Garnett, *Moral Rights*, 214 (7–162).
- 98 Art. 28 and 29 Swiss Civil Code, and § 823 Abs. 1 German Civil Code. See Sykora, *Euvreschutz durch Urheberrecht*, 177–78.

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Part 3

# Conservation through artistic and embodied practice



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# 11 Davide-Christelle Sanvee's *La performance des performances as critical conservation*

*Jules Pelta Feldman*

## **Introduction: I want to say something**

If conservation is unavoidably a creative act—if the conservator, for all her professional diffidence, ultimately signs her own name alongside that of the artist (even if she does so in the accompanying documentation, rather than on the artwork itself)—then conservators can scarcely avoid participating in the ongoing creation of the artwork. And if conservation creates, it seems logical that creation might also conserve—that there may be circumstances under which artists' own practices might qualify as, or perhaps contribute to, conservation. This idea has followed me throughout my research into performance conservation, but it acquired a new potency as performance artist Davide-Christelle Sanvee spent what felt like, and was certainly much less than, a full minute screaming directly into my face, her mobile features contorted with blank rage. “I WANT TO SAY SOMETHING,” she howled over and over, a phrase that announces what seems to be a perpetually frustrated intention (whatever the something might be, who or what is preventing the artist from saying it?). When Sanvee paused in front of me, the words broke down into fragments that altered their meaning, a rhythmic repetition of “SAY! SOMETHING!”—a demand, or perhaps a challenge (Figure 11.1).

In that moment, I felt uncertain of whether I was truly being addressed—was Sanvee insisting that I respond, or warning me against interruption?—but I was also not sure who was doing the addressing. The screams came from Sanvee's own throat, and they seemed to emerge from a much deeper place within her, but in another sense, they were not hers. This piece, *I WANT TO SAY SOMETHING*, is by Martina-Sofie Wildberger, and was originally performed by her in 2017, several years before I was faced so intimately with Sanvee's 2022 reperformance of it (Figure 11.2). It is a screed without a subject, an insistent yet obscure announcement that, like much of Wildberger's work, uses language to communicate language's limits. It is the cry of one who has been trying to make herself heard for so long that this effort is the content of every message. In this sense, Wildberger's piece is a feminist manifesto reduced to five words and fury.



Figure 11.1 Davide-Christelle Sanvee performs *I WANT TO SAY SOMETHING* (2017) by Martina-Sofie Wildberger as part of *La performance des performances*, 2022. Photograph by Markus Goessi.



Figure 11.2 Martina-Sofie Wildberger, *I WANT TO SAY SOMETHING*, 2017/2018, performance with Tobias Bienz and Denise Halser, Alte Fabrik, Rapperswil, 2018. Photograph by Hannes Sturzenegger.

Sanvee's increasingly ragged voice and bulging eyes conveyed anger and frustration that resonated with Wildberger's original project, but they also announced its translation into Sanvee's own. Sanvee's reperformance, or perhaps reembodiment, of Wildberger's provocation implicates me in structures of oppression that she battles as a Black woman artist and immigrant. Simply by choosing to perform this work, Sanvee recenters and evolves Wildberger's critique, which thereby becomes a reaction and a challenge to the exclusions of white feminist anger. This affective confrontation relies on Sanvee's reanimation and reinterpretation of the original's vitality. One might conclude that Sanvee's radical recontextualization into her own body and person instrumentalize and thus diminish Wildberger's work, subordinating it to Sanvee's own statement. Instead, I argue that her act of sustaining and reframing an ephemeral polemic through reperformance serves to keep it alive—not despite but because of its transformation into a new work.

The point is not unique to Wildberger's case. *I WANT TO SAY SOMETHING* is just one of fifteen works that Sanvee reperformed, reembodied, and reinterpreted as part of *La performance des performances* (2022), a single performance piece that, in under an hour, comprised a studious and critical survey of the past two decades of performance art in French-speaking Switzerland, also known as the Romandie. As Sanvee brought each of these performances to life, she inevitably transformed them into her own unique work. Yet far from depleting or overriding the originals, Sanvee's creative reinterpretation also performs the work of conservation. In what follows, I wish to argue that Sanvee's *La performance des performances* both writes and critically comments upon the recent history of performance art in the Romandie, by productively restaging, reembodying, and reinterpreting it. While some view the practice of 'reperformance' as an inadequate imitation that diminishes the original, I argue that Sanvee's vital reimaginations keep these works alive by creating something new from them, at once revealing and challenging assumptions in the source material. Her representations assert her centrality in shaping histories that might otherwise marginalize her. In one fell swoop, Sanvee assembles and then dismantles a canon of Swiss French performance, preserving for posterity both an archive of works and her commentary upon them. I argue that Sanvee strategically employs reperformance to honor, appropriate, and revise—ultimately, to *critically conserve*—Swiss performance history from her own subjectivity.

### Performance as conservation

Traditionally, change has been considered the enemy of art conservation; it has meant fading, cracking, crumbling, decay—in short, damage and loss. Works of performance art do not crack or crumble; indeed, it is commonly accepted that they do not exist long enough to do so. As Rebecca Schneider has observed, "Too often, the equation of performance with disappearance reiterates performance as necessarily a matter of loss, even annihilation."<sup>1</sup>

Curatorial, museum, and conservation practices still mostly assume that a performance can only survive beyond the moment of its creation through translation into another medium, perhaps as artifacts or ‘relics’ left behind, which can be cared for by a conservator of objects, or as a video recording, which might then be safeguarded against damage and loss via the techniques developed to preserve audiovisual media. Paintings can be restored with brush and paint, sculptures repaired with new pieces of the wood, stone, or metal that comprise them. Analogue and digital video, too, can be transferred to new tapes, hard drives, or other data carriers. While most mediums are brought to bear in their own repair, performance is assumed to disappear unless it can become something other than performance.<sup>2</sup> Unlike other mediums, therefore, performance is assumed to lack any inherent mechanisms of self-preservation. But in fact, just like painting, sculpture, or other media more familiar to conservators, performance inherently possesses the means to preserve itself. In the case of Sanvee’s performance, new stagings of past performances sustain the liveness, contingency, and embodiment considered essential to performance and that are lost with traditional forms of documentation.

To recognize performance as a medium of preservation, however, means to reevaluate the assumption, as Schneider does, that change is equivalent to loss: “If we consider performance as of disappearance, of an ephemerality read as vanishment and loss, are we perhaps limiting ourselves to an understanding of performance predetermined by our cultural habituation to the logic of the archive?”<sup>3</sup> If we limit our understanding of performance’s “archive” to its material traces, we strip performance of its unique capacities for endurance, capacities that rely on change. Schneider’s use of the term here invokes Diana Taylor’s opposition of the *archive*—formal documentation, often imposed from above, which is usually privileged in Western cultures—to the historically marginalized *repertoire*, which allows any individual or group to preserve cultural practices through embodied transmission.<sup>4</sup> Just as Taylor seeks to upend the binary that equates performance with loss and durable material traces with survival, Hanna B. Hölling identifies a “virtual archive” that is essential to any artwork’s continuity, even as that continuity is based on the reality of and need for change:

The archive—as a physical repository and a virtual sphere—constitutes what the artwork is in the present and determines its potential for a future realization. . . . Not only does each new actualization emerge on the basis of the archive, but every new actualization of a work enriches its archival potentiality and generates subsequent realizations. So the archive, far from being a static and distant entity, merges with the work, becomes part of it—so much so that, in certain works, the archive itself becomes an artwork.<sup>5</sup>

In Sanvee’s case, the artwork explicitly takes the form of an archive, elaborating on Hölling’s notion of the virtual into real time and space. Critically, in

its preservation function, the archive enables and testifies to change, instead of serving as a safeguard against it.

Conservation's understanding of change has evolved significantly over the past few decades, as conservators have come to acknowledge and sometimes even embrace the inevitability of change—and, not incidentally, as artists have pushed the volatility of their materials and techniques ever further.<sup>6</sup> But what if change itself were understood as both a method of preservation and a technique of critical engagement—a creative and analytical investigation of performance's past? What if those aspects of performance that supposedly render it resistant to preservation—the specificity of the performer's body and identity, the particular time and place of occurrence, the alchemical uniqueness of each performance—were approached instead as tools for measuring the distance between then and now, and mobilized to comment critically on that distance? If we insist on (traditional) archival methods as performance's only possibility for preservation, we ignore its own powers of endurance. As I shall argue, the provocative reinterpretations that constitute *La performance des performances* demonstrate how critical acts of reimagination can be a generative form of preserving and sustaining 'ephemeral' works of performance. As an alternative to static documentation, Sanvee's strategic reperformance practice transmits works by productively reembodying them from her own subject position, establishing a rich 'archive' in the expanded sense proposed by Taylor and Hölling.

### Staging Swiss performance history

On a Saturday night in June 2022, I took a front-row seat in the open lobby gallery of Basel's Museum Tinguely, awaiting the start of a performance by Davide-Christelle Sanvee—though it was not, properly speaking, a seat at all, but one of several brightly colored, horizontally laid 'trees,' repurposed there as furniture from the stage set of *Alte Tiere Hochgestapelt*, a performance/opera/musical revue by Swiss performance veterans Les Reines Prochaines that played at the Theater Basel in 2021. This recycling and refashioning of Swiss performance would prove to be just one of many in evidence that night.

I had come to the Tinguely for an evening of performances that were part of an exuberant, summer-long program attached to the exhibition *BANG BANG: translocal histories of performance art*, which sought to reckon with the history of performance art in Switzerland. One might well have been surprised that the Tinguely devoted itself to the history of performance art in Switzerland so soon after its equally ambitious *Performance Process: An Approach to Swiss Performance Art from 1960 to the Present*, which took place in 2017–18 as a collaboration with other local institutions of contemporary art and performance cultures, Basel's Kaserne and Kunsthalle Basel. Art histories are always multiple, but the prospect of historicizing Switzerland's performance scene is complicated by the country's inherent multiplicity. Switzerland's four official languages—German, French, Italian,



and Romansh, in descending order of number of speakers—demarcate four mostly regionally divided populations of differing customs, politics, and institutions, and which may not easily communicate with one another. It is possible, for example, that an artist who has a high profile in the French-speaking Romandie may be relatively unknown in what is called the Deutschschweiz.

Therefore, though this is nowhere made explicit, *BANG BANG* might well be interpreted as a response to *Performance Process*, since many (especially German-speaking) artists felt left out of the story it told—particularly those based in Basel, which boasts not only a strong performance art tradition, but also, through the scrupulous efforts of the group Performance Chronik Basel, meticulous documentation of that tradition.<sup>7</sup> The ambiguous plural of the exhibition's subtitle—*hi:stories* in English, *Geschichte:n* in German—is thus a reminder that performance has a different history depending on whom you ask and where you look. The performance communities, university programs, and lineages of influence developed differently on each side of what we might call the artistic *Röstigraben*, which describes the cultural, political, and geographic division between Switzerland's two largest language groups.<sup>8</sup> In addition to the Tinguely's own Séverine Fromaigeat, who was born and educated in Geneva, *BANG BANG* was curated by artists Lena Eriksson, Muda Mathis, Chris Regn, and Andrea Saemann of Performance Chronik Basel. Though the latter are firmly based in German-speaking Switzerland, they made a deliberate effort to include artists, art spaces, and scenes from throughout the country. (They proposed to Sanvee that she focus on the Romandie.)

In the Tinguely's lobby gallery, where Sanvee's performance took place, clusters of monitors displayed a dizzying collection of interviews with performance artists and video documentation of their works. The exhibition also took an active role in supporting Swiss performance's further propagation and historicization, including through artists' projects. For example, for her series *Die Abnengalerie* (the title conjures a hall of ancestral portraits), photographer Elaine Rutishauser offered portrait sessions with Swiss performance artists at the museum during the exhibition's run, hoping to provide an even fuller picture of the contemporary scene. The exhibition also recognized that photographs, videos, and interviews—typical archival fodder—fail to capture or translate many aspects of performance. The artist-curators of *BANG BANG* therefore took an experimental approach. In addition to professional photographers, there were also people sketching, writing, and molding clay as they watched, trying to leave traces of the pieces in another, more interpretive medium (Figure 11.3).

The exhibition thus sought to grapple with the inevitable question of what it means to study and exhibit performance art, a medium said to defy such static documents, to be always in flux, always in the process of disappearing. These questions have become increasingly pressing as works of performance art become canonized by art history and enter museum collections, and they are at the heart of the scholarship that has led my colleagues, our

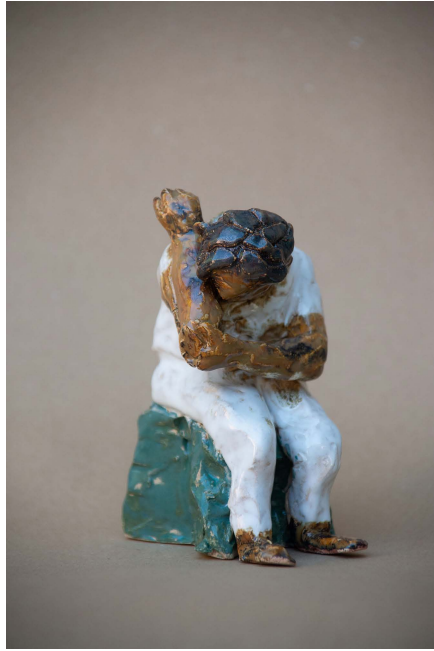


Figure 11.3 Ceramic documentation of Davide-Christelle Sanvee performing Yann Marussich's 2004 *morsure*, "Echo und Verstärkung," *BANG BANG*, 2022. Photograph by Markus Goessi.

contributors, and myself to produce the present volume. Art conservation has traditionally focused on maintaining the material integrity of objects made of canvas, wood, stone, metal, or anything else. But how does one conserve an artwork made of moving bodies and living breath? Some pieces of performance art lend themselves to reproduction via script, score, or choreography, as in theater, music, and dance, but many do not. Their power, many artists, scholars, and viewers feel, is in their singularity and ephemerality. Are such performances condemned to eternal purgatory in the material archive? Or might we conceive of a living form of preservation, one that uses performance itself as a tool of conservation?

### Reperformance as conservation

One answer may be found in the controversial practice of 'reperformance,' most closely associated with Marina Abramović. She has used this principle of revisiting past performances in the present to perform works by other artists (*Seven Easy Pieces*, 2005), and in turn allows her works to be re-performed by others, notably in her 2010 retrospective at the Museum of Modern Art in New York. Critics and scholars have often complained that these

new versions lack the authenticity and historical specificity of the originals. For Hannah Higgins, however careful the reconstruction, a reperformance always runs the risk of giving the audience the false impression that they have personally experienced a work; indeed, the more precise and detailed the actualization, the more a viewer may be convinced that “now I have seen it.”<sup>9</sup> And, as exemplified by curator Alessandra Barbuto’s worry that “in the instance of artists whose actions are strongly characterized by their personality, it is hardly conceivable that the re-enactment of their work should result in anything other than a pale copy (or indeed a parody) of the original,”<sup>10</sup> Abramović is often perceived as too forceful a personality to delegate (Claire Bishop’s term) her performances to others.<sup>11</sup>

Another common concern is the loss of criticality and the commodification of a formerly anti-institutional, ‘immaterial’ art form, inevitably undermining the political efficacy and thus the meaning of the historical performance. Branislav Jakovljević asserts that reperformance “serves to produce more documents, but of a different kind—photographs, video recordings, books—returning us to the good old economy of commodity production.”<sup>12</sup> Amelia Jones is concerned that while

all of these re-staging gestures have interesting critical potential, they also have the potential to flatten out or aestheticize the act (precisely by evacuating the act of its original political specificity) and thus to reduce or erase the act’s potential for provoking awareness or for transformation or change.<sup>13</sup>

Reperformance thus risks fossilizing artworks prized for their vibrancy, or fetishizing performances deeply tied to a particular political context.

Critics of reperformance worry that, rather than extending a performance’s life and meaning, reperformance empties it, turning it into a “zombie” version of itself.<sup>14</sup> It is therefore provocative to consider these works as a potential form of conservation, allowing vanished performances to live on—albeit in a new form. Like a translation, a reperformance is inevitably a new work of art. Yet it allows contemporary artists and audiences to build a living relationship with art from the past. On these grounds, despite its risks, reperformance’s critical and conservational potential has been given serious critical treatment by scholars.<sup>15</sup> (It is also often called ‘reenactment’; I generally prefer the art-specific term ‘reperformance’ to distinguish it from other practices such as historical reenactment.) Gabriella Giannachi argues that reenactments and reinterpretations “constitute fundamental strategies for preservation,” by which she refers not to “the conservation of something that occurred in the past, but rather a claim to its ‘living’ quality in the present.”<sup>16</sup> That is to say, performance’s much-trumpeted immediacy and presentness may be the very keys to its survival. In her understanding,

Re-enactment and re-interpretation occupy a privileged position within other repetitive forms in that they offer another version, or unfolding, of a work: a past possibility of a work that we can only see in the present, as the yet un-lived becoming live(d) because of its re-interpretation and re-enactment.<sup>17</sup>

Far from negating or flattening the original, Giannachi sees the interpretive “unfolding” of a performance through reperformance as an aspect of its continued existence, much like Hölling’s extended virtual archive.

Similarly, discussing Julie Tolentino’s ongoing performance project *THE SKY REMAINS THE SAME* (2008–), André Lepecki suggests that Tolentino’s work

considers and reveals how re-enacting is an affective mode of historicity that harnesses futurities by releasing pastness away from its many archival ‘domiciliations’—and particularly from that major force in a work’s forced domiciliation: the author’s intention as commanding authority over a work’s afterlives.<sup>18</sup>

Instead of failing to return us to the past, a successful reperformance creates a new present. Reproduction’s political and critical potential lies in its capacity—for Lepecki, its imperative—

not only to reinvent, not only to point out that the present is different from the past, but to invent, to create—because of returning—something that is new and yet participates fully in the virtual cloud surrounding the originating work itself.<sup>19</sup>

An effective reperformance is at once a version of the old, a comment thereon, and a new work in its own right.

Regardless of its status among performance scholars, reenactment has become a familiar artistic and curatorial strategy in the contemporary art world. In recent years, both museums and galleries have demonstrated a strong appetite for historicizing the early decades of performance, and staging or restaging performances from the 1960s and 1970s is often an appealing alternative to static displays of documentation. Further, Abramović is hardly the only artist to consider reperformance’s possibilities for revisiting the past in the present, thereby extending a performance work’s life into the future. Revisiting personal, political, and artistic histories has become a common preoccupation for contemporary artists, and this form of artistic research frequently involves performing or embodying something gleaned from the past. So common, in fact, are artists’ reperformances of other artists’ projects that we may find plenty of examples in Basel during the summer of 2022, when Sanvee’s performance took place.

That year's Art Basel Parours, the public section of the art fair, included a film by Manon de Boer, *Persona* (2022), in which dancer Latifa Laâbissi reconstructs the famous—and almost entirely lost—*Witch Dance* (1926) of early modernist dancer Mary Wigman. Parours also presented a performance by the artist known as Puppies Puppies (Jade Guanaro Kuriki-Olivo), who restaged Ana Mendieta's 1973 performance *Untitled (Rape Scene)*—itself a reconstruction of the scene of the rape and murder of a woman named Sarah Ann Ottens. At the Museum Tinguely, during a conference on performance history a few days before Sanvee's performance, my colleague, performance artist and professor Valerian Maly, revisited his own work *Untitled (GLAS STERN)* (2000), done in collaboration with his partner Klara Schilliger. In a lecture-performance about this work and his changing relationship to it, Maly demonstrated his carefully developed technique of fracturing thin panes of glass in a particular pattern by balancing them on wooden pellets and walking upon them with practiced movements. Further, on the very same evening of Sanvee's performance, the Bern-based artist Gisela Hochuli performed *In touch with some P's*, which incorporated gestures, props, and quotations from other Swiss performance artists. Clearly, whatever concerns critics and scholars may voice about reperformance, the strategy has been embraced by many contemporary artists.

For some, reperformance is about revivifying one's own past (Abramović) or communing with lost ancestors (Laâbissi and Kuriki-Olivo); for others, it may be an homage to teachers and friends, a way of figuring one's place within a community. The theme of that evening's performance program was 'Saga'; the performers—in addition to Hochuli and Sanvee, there were Paul Maheke and DARTS Collective, represented by Claudia Grimm—had been invited to consider the role of history in their present. The concept of 'Saga' was chosen to acknowledge both the past and future of performance. As the curators noted, "although performance is a young medium, it already has plenty of stories to look back on." They asked: "How might this legacy be made productive?"<sup>20</sup> Perhaps critical reperformance offers an answer.

### *La performance des performances*

Sanvee's *La performance des performances* comprises a kind of anthology of recent performance pieces from artists in the Romandie. (Similar 'archival' works by Sanvee that investigate performance history have used other selection criteria.) Sanvee chose fifteen works by a variety of artists, which she performed—or rather, reperformed—in chronological order, from Yan Duyvendak's *My name is Neo (for fifteen minutes)*, from 2000, to Philippe Wicht's *Freakshow*, which Wicht performed in May 2022, just weeks before Sanvee's performance. Over the sound system, a recording of Sanvee's voice announced the artist, title, and year of each performance, to which Sanvee devoted herself for a few minutes until a businesslike 'ding!' announced that

it was time to move on to the next. All told, the performance lasted about forty-five minutes—a rather accelerated tour of the past twenty-two years.

The relatively recent span of time draws a continuous line from near history to the here and now of tonight. It also acknowledges the rapid ageing of performance works: while a painting from twenty years ago might still be considered new, a performance is sometimes considered lost to history the moment it concludes. Sanvee's choice of relatively recent works, then, is less precipitous than perceptive, reflecting the understanding that these pieces are already in danger of being forgotten. They include works by artists she admires as her forerunners, such as Duyvendak, Marussich, and Maria La Ribot, as well as other performances that Sanvee views more critically, such as Nagi Gianni's *Hunters* (2018) or Simon Senn's *Be Arielle F* (2020). Though she occasionally donned articles of clothing specific to a given performance, throughout her piece, Sanvee wore a tan jumpsuit that seemed to advertise its own businesslike neutrality, suggesting the artist's ability to slip into any role.

Nonetheless, Sanvee as an individual did not disappear. Her performances never took on the character of an anonymous copy. Instead, *La performance des performances* immediately and repeatedly upended expectations surrounding identity. In Duyvendak's *My name is Neo (for fifteen minutes)*, a fight scene from *The Matrix* (1999) plays on a small screen as the artist, who wears black clothing and sunglasses, attempts with humorous inadequacy to mimic Keanu Reeves's special-effects-assisted movements (Figure 11.4).

Though Duyvendak's timing is perfect, his medium—that of live performance—has no hope of replicating the efforts of a Hollywood studio. In Sanvee's performance, Duyvendak's moves are themselves subject to reinterpretation—and to failure: Sanvee cannot become Duyvendak any more than Duyvendak can become Neo. Like the original, Sanvee's take provoked laughter, but it also introduced a complex layering of embodiment and appropriation: Sanvee, a Black woman (wearing a trench coat and sunglasses over her jumpsuit), takes on the role of a white male artist copying the moves of a character who learns that his identity, his very body, is a mere illusion—and whose enemy, the ubiquitous Agent Smith, can occupy the body of anyone he chooses (Figure 11.5). As in Duyvendak's original performance, the point is not for the performer to vanish into a role, but to lay bare the mechanisms of transmission.

It is worth pausing to note here that the documentation of this performance is strikingly bad. This is no fault of the photographer (Markus Goessi, whose photographs illustrate this chapter, is himself a performance artist). The busy space of the lobby gallery, with its clustered screens and colorfully upholstered tree-benches, distracts the viewer's eye, as do the various props that Sanvee has used already in her performance and simply left in place as she rushes to the next. I might have expected as much, but I was shocked when



*Figure 11.4* Yan Duyvendak, *My name is Neo (for fifteen minutes)*, 2000 (performance from 2009). Photograph by Nicolas Suhler.



*Figure 11.5* Sanvee performs *My name is Neo (for fifteen minutes)* (2000) by Yan Duyvendak as part of *La performance des performances*, 2022. Photograph by Markus Goessi.

I saw the photographs. While I watched the performance, it seemed impossible to pay attention to anything but Sanvee's magnetic presence and disciplined yet explosive energy. Of course, this is a truism of performance—that you had to be there—but this is precisely what *La performance des performances* calls into question. Nonetheless, photographs can recall visual details that I failed to notice while I was watching the performance itself. For example, while Duyvendak wore a black outfit that recalled Neo's late-1990s looks in the film, in the photograph of Sanvee, we see that she threw a beige trench coat and pale-rimmed sunglasses over the tan jumpsuit. This detail matters because in the film, Neo and his love interest, Trinity, have ghostly pale skin that contrasts with their dark garments; here, Sanvee reverses this, becoming a negative image of these Hollywood hackers. Her appearance contrasts not only with Duyvendak's, but also with his source material.

A similar contrast is visible—or rather, invisible—in Sanvee's version of Yann Marussich's *morsure* (2004). For this work, two performers—women in simple dresses—bite into sponges soaked in blue liquid and then clamp their teeth repeatedly into the artist's bare flesh. Swaying slightly, as if in a trance, Marussich passively accepts the bites, which leave his pale skin increasingly reddened by the women's teeth and marked with bruise-like blue stains. In Sanvee's reperformance of *morsure*, it is her own teeth that bite and her own flesh that is marked. She huddles in a seated position, trying to color the soft skin of her forearm blue and red. The blue stain is visible on her teeth and gums, and the bites look like they hurt, but however much pigment—however much pain—her skin fails to react as Marussich's did. This is reflected not only in photographs, but also in a small ceramic statuette that was molded during Sanvee's performance and glazed later, after its initial bisque firing (Figure 11.3). Its anonymous makers seem to have struggled to address the question of color: unlike dark skin, white ceramic can take on any color, but should it be made to? To which version of this performance should this documentary sculpture bear witness? There are darker spots on the figurine's brown-glazed arms, but these look more like natural unevenness in the glaze than attempts at red or blue blotches. The invisibility of these colors on Sanvee's skin makes Marussich's whiteness suddenly come into focus, and the reperformance testifies to forms of suffering that may leave no visible mark.

Sometimes, Sanvee's own identity and her presentation of it reveal disturbing elements in the performances she presents. In Nagi Gianni's *Hunters*, performed at the Tinguely in 2018 on the occasion of the Swiss Performance Art Award, one performer, arrayed in a blue jumpsuit and red-painted face, cavorted in an animalistic fashion both silly and uncomfortable: she flapped her arms like a bird's wings and pretended to eat lice picked from her body. Meanwhile, she was stalked by a hunter in head-to-toe camouflage, who peered at her—and the audience—from behind a mirrored hunting blind. In Sanvee's reinterpretation of this piece, she is both hunter and hunted. She inspects the audience through a pair of binoculars and performs bestial



behaviors, raising her leg to mime urinating on a microphone stand. Though ridiculous—many in the audience are laughing—I find the performance disturbing: Sanvee’s movements and her wide, frozen grin recall racist depictions of dark-skinned people as animal-like, subhuman. We viewers are transformed into voyeurs, forced to confront our expectations of how a performance artist should look and act. Laughter, Sanvee has told me, can help an audience approach the more challenging aspects of her work. It also forces revealing comparisons between Gianni’s work and Sanvee’s reperformance of it, taking the measure of differences that change the performance’s meaning.

Except for choreographer YoungSoon Cho Jacquet’s 2013 *Hit me hard*, a face-off between two dancers and two drummers—here rendered by Sanvee as a solo—each performance that Sanvee included is by a white artist; about half of them are men. Replacing each artist with her own bodily presence and interpretation, Sanvee was able to explore new facets of these works and reimagine their references. At the same time, Sanvee’s performance displayed an extraordinary flexibility—what might, in the medium of acting, be called ‘range’—as she jumped from challenging feats of endurance (Anne Rochat, *Blumer*, 2010) to satirically sexy posing (Julie Monot, *Wodwo*, 2016), to aggressive shouting at the audience—to be specific, at me, during Wildberger’s confrontational *I WANT TO SAY SOMETHING*. I wondered if I was being asked to respond, to emerge from my role as passive viewer and take responsibility for my own identity.

This performance is unique in Sanvee’s oeuvre, and will not be repeated, though she has used a similar format several times, based on archival research and conversations with the artists whose works she reperforms. For a 2019 performance on the occasion of the Swiss Performance Art Award, which was established in 2011, Sanvee assembled an abecedarium of past participants, choosing twenty-six performers with last names from A to Z and reperforming a brief one-minute excerpt of the performance each presented. (She won the award that year with a different piece. In 2023, Sanvee was asked to serve on the jury of the award, thus extending her critical analysis and canonization of Swiss performance into a more official realm.) In *La performance des performances*, each of the fifteen works is given more time and space to unfold. Research is both process and product of these works: Sanvee digs into archives in order to create them, but the performance that results is itself, as Lepecki suggests, its own archive. In that sense, it is at once a primary and a secondary source: ‘primary’ (original material) when viewed as a performance piece by Sanvee, but ‘secondary’ (interpretive commentary) if understood as a historically and critically informed analysis of her source materials. (It is tempting to suggest that the work might also serve a tertiary function, in its compendium-like assembly of other works—a critical and subjective encyclopedia of performance practices.) Indeed, the present text makes use of *La performance des performances* from both sides, considering its contribution not only to contemporary performance art but also to the historicization and interpretation thereof.

When Sanvee discusses the work with me in English, she first uses the verb 'imitate.' I ask her if she might use a different word in her native French, and she speaks of *incarner*—'embodying,' rather than 'copying,' these fifteen performances. In taking on *La performance des performances*, Sanvee understands her body as a "living archive," absorbing and transmitting the gestures, actions, and words of other artists. In the process, their performances become her own, inflected with her own physical presence, experiences, and ideas. They live on through and are also transformed by her.

Sanvee was born in Togo in 1993 and moved to Switzerland at the age of seven, when her father's job brought the family to Geneva. From an early age, she used art—near-compulsive painting and drawing—to help her process the experience of exchanging one home for a less-than-welcoming new one, and the never-ending struggle of integrating into Swiss society. When she discovered performance at art school, Sanvee felt she had found the medium that would allow her to express the complexities of identity, territory, and social relationships that animated her artistic exploration—as well as her interest in defining and responding to interior and exterior spaces, for which she later received a master's degree at Amsterdam's Studio for Immediate Spaces, an experimental architecture program. Growing up, Sanvee's mother urged her to keep quiet about her experiences of racism and ostracism, hoping to ease their family's entry into a sometimes hostile and suspicious Swiss society. Instead, Sanvee's art makes those experiences tangible and present for audiences to whom they are otherwise invisible. For her final exam at Geneva's Haute école d'art et de design (HEAD) in 2016, Sanvee subjected the jury to a version of the Swiss naturalization exam in the form of an obstacle course, proctored by performers who, like herself, had once passed that exam. Not one member of the white, Swiss-born jury succeeded.

Critics of reperformance lament that a new version can never authentically repeat the lost, singular original. But part of the strength of Sanvee's performance is that she ignores any strict definition of authenticity, instead underlining the impossibility of achieving it. In fact, she had considered more precise reenactments, including replicas of the original scenery and props, but ultimately decided to keep her "reincarnations" of the earlier performances "in the body": *La performance des performances* would emerge not primarily from the materials used in the earlier performances, but from Sanvee's careful study, embodiment, and resurrection of the movements, gestures, and attitudes of the original performers.

Still, props and prosthetics sometimes play an important role, such as in the monstrous 360-degree wig—at once hilarious and terrifying—of Monot's 2016 *Wodwo*, which she lent to Sanvee for this performance. Virtual reality gear was necessary to allow male artist Simon Senn to inhabit the virtual body of a woman in *Be Arielle F* (2020), and thus is used here by Sanvee as well. In his performance, Senn applies make-up and describes his feelings of bodily dysphoria and his search for a female avatar that might approximate his own male body. He then describes the intoxicating feeling of inhabiting that



Figure 11.6 Simon Senn, *Be Arielle F*, 2020. Photograph by Elisa Larvego.

body and performs in it: the headless, floating form of a naked white woman appears on a screen, moving her limbs when Senn moves his (Figure 11.6).

While developing this project, Senn sought out the living woman over whose digital double he now seemed to have complete control, and incorporated their ongoing dialogue (or triologue?) into his live performance. For *La performance des performances*, Sanvee inserted yet another body, and another voice, into the conversation. She took on Senn's role, repeating his monologue, donning similar VR gear, and inhabiting the avatar he had purchased, but the real 'Arielle F.' (an assumed name) is not present, nor is Senn—unless we consider that, in this moment, Sanvee's body serves as a living avatar of his. Whose body is it—and how is identity transformed by being reinterpreted, reinhabited, and reperfomed? Once more, Sanvee's choice of material crystallizes, sharpens, and reframes questions raised by the original, prompting the viewer to reflect upon who has the right to 'use' another's body this way. The shift is also an expansion, extending a performance not only into new times, places, and bodies, but also meanings. Unlike the flattening effects of typical documents, which—in transforming performance into a new medium—recall the pixelated, lossy compression of a merely digital body, Sanvee's critical conservation via reperformance augments Senn's piece, making it bigger, not smaller.

### Performance as critical conservation

Differences between Sanvee and the artists she 'incarnates' do not only underline the impossibility of precise repetition in reperformance. They also point

to a radical reimagining of performance history—in this case, specifically Swiss performance history—in which Sanvee, as a Black woman artist, plays a central role, rather than accepting the one she is so often assigned, that of an *étrangère*. In making these performances her own, she productively appropriates them, relocating their movements and their meanings into her own body, as well as her own subjectivity—for Sanvee here is no passive vessel for Swiss performance history, but rather a historian of it, writing it from her own perspective and asserting the validity of her own body, background, and vision as both repository for and agent of that history. Sanvee's approach to reperformance therefore insists on *change* as an agent of preservation. In short, *La Performance des performances* both represents and argues for the possibility of creative, critical conservation through performance itself.

Through close examination of these moments in *La performance des performances* and their source material, we see how Sanvee's reinterpretations denaturalize the perspective of the original works she takes on, offering a model of preservation-as-critique. Sanvee's reimaginings reveal and destabilize assumptions baked into her source materials, confronting the viewer with aspects of identity, embodiment, and context that were overlooked or invisible in the originals. This act of sustaining ephemeral works by reperforming them through a critical perspective generates new resonances and meanings, expanding their archives. Insisting on performance's own power to conserve even as it transforms and creates anew, Sanvee writes herself into the history of Swiss performance through performance itself. Her strategic acts of reinterpretation and appropriation establish, critique, and revise performance history from her own subject position as a Black woman and immigrant. In short, Sanvee's critical reperformances provide a compelling act of preservation-as-reinterpretation. Her practice demonstrates how transmitting living art through ongoing reembodiment can reinvigorate rather than damage ephemeral works, reactivating rather than ossifying art across generations—letting change serve the cause of preservation. *La performance des performances* proves, performs, and actualizes the vital possibilities of critical reperformance as conservation practice.

## Notes

- 1 Rebecca Schneider, *Performing Remains: Art and War in Times of Theatrical Reenactment* (London: Routledge, 2011), 98.
- 2 This argument was influentially advanced by Peggy Phelan in her book *Unmarked: The Politics of Performance* (London: Routledge, 1993).
- 3 Schneider, *Performing Remains*, 98.
- 4 Diana Taylor, *The Archive and the Repertoire: Performing Cultural Memory in the Americas* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2003).
- 5 Hanna B. Hölling, *Paik's Virtual Archive: Time, Change, and Materiality in Media Art* (Oakland: University of California Press, 2017), 154.
- 6 Miriam Clavir, *Preserving What Is Valued* (Vancouver: UBC Press, 2002); Caitlin DeSilvey, *Curated Decay: Heritage Beyond Saving* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2017); Hölling, *Paik's Virtual Archive*; Pip Laurenson,

- “Authenticity, Change and Loss in the Conservation of Time-Based Media Installations,” *Tate Papers*, no. 6 (2006); Vivian van Saaze, *Installation Art and the Museum: Presentation and Conservation of Changing Artworks* (Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press, 2013); Alison Wain and Asti Sherring, “Changeability, Variability, and Malleability: Sharing Perspectives on the Role of Change in Time-Based Art and Utilitarian Machinery Conservation,” *Studies in Conservation* 66, no. 8 (2021): 449–62, <https://doi.org/10.1080/00393630.2020.1860672>.
- 7 Muda Mathis, Margarit von Büren, and Sabine Gebhardt Fink, eds., *Floating Gaps: Performance Chronik Basel (1968–1986)* (Zurich: Diaphanes, 2011).
  - 8 Röstli, a potato pancake that originated in Bern, is typical of German-speaking Switzerland.
  - 9 Hannah B. Higgins, “Reperformance: A Typology,” lecture delivered at “Revisions: Object—Event—Performance since the 1960s,” Bard Graduate Center, September 21, 2015, [www.youtube.com/watch?v=W\\_ViObHFWXs](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=W_ViObHFWXs).
  - 10 Alessandra Barbuto, “Museums and Their Role in Preserving, Documenting, and Acquiring Performance Art,” in *Performing Documentation in the Conservation of Contemporary Art*, ed. Lúcia Almeida Matos, Rita Macedo, and Gunnar Heydenreich (Lisbon: Instituto de História da Arte, 2013), 160.
  - 11 Claire Bishop, “Delegated Performance: Outsourcing Authenticity,” *October* 140 (Spring 2012): 91–112, [https://doi.org/10.1162/OCTO\\_a\\_00091](https://doi.org/10.1162/OCTO_a_00091).
  - 12 Branislav Jakovljević, “On Performance Forensics: The Political Economy of Reenactments,” *Art Journal* 70, no. 3 (2011): 51, <https://doi.org/10.1080/00043249.2011.10791051>. Jakovljević does not mention Abramović in his article, but, given that *The Artist Is Present* had taken place the previous year, this very absence might be interpreted as criticism of her project.
  - 13 Amelia Jones, “‘The Artist Is Present’: Artistic Re-Enactments and the Impossibility of Presence,” *TDR: The Drama Review* 55, no. 1 (Spring 2011): 25, [https://doi.org/10.1162/DRAM\\_a\\_00046](https://doi.org/10.1162/DRAM_a_00046).
  - 14 Higgins, “Reperformance.”
  - 15 Cristina Baldacci, Clio Nicastro, and Arianna Sforzini, eds., *Over and Over and Over Again: Reenactment Strategies in Contemporary Arts and Theory*, Cultural Inquiry, vol. 21 (Berlin: ICI Berlin Press, 2022), <https://doi.org/10.37050/ci-21>; Robert Blackson, “Once More . . . with Feeling: Reenactment in Contemporary Art and Culture,” *Art Journal* 66, no. 1 (2007): 28–40, <https://doi.org/10.1080/00043249.2007.10791237>; Sophie Nikoleit et al., *Performance zwischen den Zeiten* (Bielefeld: transcript Verlag, 2019); André Lepecki, “The Body as Archive: Will to Re-Enact and the Afterlives of Dances,” *Dance Research Journal* 43, no. 1 (2010): 28–48, <https://doi.org/10.1017/S0149767700001029>; Sven Lütticken, ed., *Life, Once More: Forms of Reenactment in Contemporary Art* (Rotterdam: Witte de With Center for Contemporary Art, 2005); Hélia Marçal and Daniela Salazar, “‘Political-Timing-Specific’ Performance Art in the Realm of the Museum: The Potential of Reenactment as Practice of Memorialization,” in *Over and Over and Over Again: Reenactment Strategies in Contemporary Arts and Theory*, ed. Cristina Baldacci, Clio Nicastro, and Arianna Sforzini, Cultural Inquiry, vol. 21 (Berlin: ICI Berlin Press, 2022), 239–54; Schneider, *Performing Remains*.
  - 16 Gabriella Giannachi, “At the Edge of the ‘Living Present’: Re-Enactments and Re-Interpretations as Strategies for the Preservation of Performance and New Media Art,” in *Histories of Performance Documentation*, ed. Gabriella Giannachi and Jonah Westerman (New York: Routledge, 2018), 115.
  - 17 Giannachi, “At the Edge of the ‘Living Present’,” 129.
  - 18 Lepecki, “The Body as Archive,” 35.
  - 19 Lepecki, 35.
  - 20 Curators Lena Eriksson, Muda Mathis, Chris Regn, Andrea Saemann (Performance Chronik Basel), and Séverine Fromaigeat (Museum Tinguely), “Saga

(Looking Back),” Museum Tinguely (website), accessed August 29, 2024, www.tinguely.ch/en/exhibitions/exhibitions/2022/bangbang/saga.html.

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## 12 Rosanna Raymond on Conser.Vā.Tion

*A conversation with Hanna B. Hölling,  
Jules Pelta Feldman, and Emilie Magnin*

Following her presentation at the colloquium “Performance Conservation: Artists Speak” (May 16, 2023), artist, performer, and educator Rosanna Raymond (Figure 12.1) discusses preserving Pacific heritage through performance. As a member of the Pacific Sisters collective and founder of the SaVĀge K‘lub, Raymond aims to engage Pacific traditions through contemporary practices, using her body as a link between past and present. In this conversation, Raymond speaks about her artistic path and the concept of the Vā Body as a relational space that binds people and things to create a tangible experience of intangible cultural heritage. Raymond also reveals the challenges of her work in and with Western museums, and discusses how cultural health and safety, including setting out intentions and asking for permission from ancestors, is essential in preserving and sharing cultural heritage through performances.

*Hanna B. Hölling:* Rosanna, as a member of both the Pacific Sisters and SaVĀge K‘lub, which are renowned within the Pacific art scene, you actively engage with performance rooted in a longstanding heritage. Your performance practice consistently challenges conventional systems, beliefs, and norms associated with museums and traditional conservation. Could you share where your interest originated and what motivates you?

*Rosanna Raymond:* The Pacific Sisters collective has been going for thirty years now. So definitely my art practice started with the Pacific Sisters and with us wanting to tell our stories from the Pacific, the stories that were starting to fade away. By telling the stories, we started to visualize what our gods and goddesses would look like, because a lot of them are in the carvings and the buildings and the houses. We’ve grown up with a lot of visual storytelling, but we were taking it onto the body. So we started to make these beautiful . . . I’m going to use the word ‘costume,’ but it’s really problematic because



when you say ‘costume,’ you have associations with something like costume jewelry, something not real, just fake. All these terminologies that we started to find problematic. We didn’t make costumes. We made beautiful *taonga* treasures, cultural treasures—cultural belongings that helped tell the story. Everything that we made was like another visual cue to telling the story, but definitely in a modern way, in an urban setting that made sense to us.

A lot of ‘performance’ in the way we experienced it growing up was usually at cultural festivals. There was a particular time and place that you did your ‘performance’ and then you took your costume off and put it away as you put your culture away. We were interested in finding ways that we could make our cultural practice everyday. Something that fitted in our urban environment. Looking at our own culture, there’s a lot of personification, like the personification of rain, and this would be a goddess. The personification of a rock, and this would be another goddess. We were looking at all the women that were missing in the stories, and we started to personify these beautiful goddesses through our bodies.

As I kept working with these beautiful storytelling notions, I realized that I’m not really personifying them. So I started to look at the body as a



*Figure 12.1* Artist Rosanna Raymond photographed by Rebecca Zephyr Thomas. Courtesy Rosanna Raymond.

way of sharing space, the same space, with these goddesses. I wasn't being Hine-nui-te-pō, who's one of our great goddesses of the night, but I was sharing a space with her through my body. I was bringing her into the now rather than just her being in the past. I was working with her, alongside her. And by doing that, I started to look at what a Polynesian body is and what it does. Because through that lens, we realize that it's very different to a Western body in the way it looks and how it inhabits space, and the expectations placed on it. We had to deconstruct our own bodies to reconstruct them into something that we felt was appropriate for twenty-first-century Pacific Sistering.

At the end of 1999, I moved to England, which has a great performance and theatrical history, where I had to find my place. I did this through storytelling, through the sharing of stories—old stories, you know, not just new stories—but then by retelling them we made them new. Living in England taught me a lot, especially being outside a particular cultural context, but then finding histories that we shared. In England, a lot of body movements are different. The way we adorn our bodies is different, and I found there was a sort of exoticism (left over from Orientalism). I noticed that Western audiences really couldn't tell the difference between entertainment and ceremony because of the language barriers. This was another really big issue that I started to ponder, as this puts our performance in the past or in some kind of quaint cultural arena that has remained unchanged.

Through that experience in England, I started to look at performance very differently, to look at some of our own cultural concepts and how they affected my body. I started to think about this body and what I'm doing with it, sharing space with the ancestral past rather than just reenacting it. Seeing the body as the space that cohabitates with the past, present, and future, so the same space could be in different times with those stories, bringing them into the now, effecting the future. That's when I started to understand the *vā* and developed the term 'acti.VĀ.tion.'<sup>1</sup> My experience of the *vā* comes through the Sāmoan lens, but you will find this concept all through the Pacific. Japan and other places, too, have a term for this relational space that you develop and that must be sustained and maintained. For such a little word, *vā* has so many dimensions and forms. There's the social *vā*, there's the *vā* between the creator and the created . . . And the concept started to be used in an urban environment, so it has a different form than in the village. But some concepts transcend their places of origin, especially within an active community.

I started to ask, what would a *Vā* Body look like? Because *vā* was a body-less concept, and since I do a lot of performance-based body art, I felt the need to bring a body to the *vā*, which surprised a lot of my contemporaries. But for me, it really solidifies the difference between a performance and the moments when I'm acti.VĀ.ting a space: one is entertainment; the other is connecting to the ancestral past. I do great performances, and I can be incredibly entertaining, but when I'm activating a space, entertainment is not what I'm doing. When I'm doing spoken word, it's more relaxed and urban. But

when I'm creating these spaces to be close to my ancestral past, it's a very different side of the performative experience.

*Jules Pelta Feldman:* Could you tell us more about the *Vā* Body?

*Raymond:* The *Vā* Body has come about through my being exposed to some of the great thinkers back in Aotearoa, especially Albert Wendt [born 1939], who's known in Aotearoa as a writer, poet, and a great intellect. He's one of our great granddaddies of urban Pacific thinking. Wendt wrote a paper in the 1990s on the decolonized body.<sup>2</sup> It's the most pertinent paper that we've read, in terms of my practice—all roads lead back to this paper. I read this at a time when the *tatau* [the Sāmoan word for 'tattoo'] was starting to go through a renaissance; it lost its shame. People, especially New Zealand-born Pacific Islanders, were reaching back to the past as a way of expressing their Pacific bodies, and the *tatau* was part of this. Wendt was thinking through what a decolonized body would look like, and he started to paint a picture of this body. He explained the *vā* in this paper for the first time outside the village setting. In the village, you just know it's there. You don't say it. Wendt framed it for us in terms of a relational space that binds together people and things, and that just stuck inside me. A lot of my own behavior started to make sense in terms of how I act when elders are in the room: where to sit and even just how you host people—these responsibilities that come with relationships. Wendt also talked about the body, but he didn't actually say the words '*Vā* Body.'

Then there is an incredible Sāmoan performer, Lemi Ponifasio [born 1962], who has worked a lot in Germany and has a company called 'MAU.' Lemi is a great philosopher as well as choreographer, and he has talked about his performers working in the *vā* as ceremonial bodies. The third piece of the puzzle is Albert Refiti, who's another of our great Sāmoan thinkers. He has talked about the body as a gene-archaeological, enacted body.<sup>3</sup> He explains the body as the gene-archaeological matter of the past. I thought: like a *Vā* Body. I started to see the *vā* as the central pillar of my practice . . . literally. I put the *vā* in 'conser.VĀ.tion,' I put the *vā* in 'acti.VĀ.tion,' and I found the *vā* in the 'sa.VĀ.ge.'<sup>4</sup> By putting the *vā* at the center of these words, I put the actual relationship first, rather than the spectacle. People forget a lot of the work that goes into creating these visual performative works. They forget that there's a lot of people and relationships you have to deal with, and then your responsibility to them afterwards as well.

I was working in museums at the time, and, in that situation, there are some people you meet and then you never meet them again. For us in the Pacific, that's rude. At the same time, I was thinking about how museums conserve the physicality of the 'objects' they house. Meeting these cultural treasures, I remember my whole ancestral past opened up. I felt the presence of my ancestors; they were standing there with me through the shared time and space—this *vā* is called the *vā tapuia*, which connects us to the creator (Tagaloa) and all things created. Through this body of time, space, and genealogical matter, the past is in the present. I had one of those eureka moments.

When I work within the museum space, it's different than if I'm creating a work in a theater or gallery space. Our ancestors created certain rituals or ceremonies—I call it 'cultural health and safety'—to ensure that the past remains in the past and that your life here is for the present. If you have a *Vā Body* that is sensitive to this genealogical past, you (and your ancestral past) take that shared experience—the time/space you spend together—into the future. We would ask for certain things to happen, like to say *karakia*, which a lot of people have mistaken for prayer, but it is about formally setting out intentions and acknowledging the *atua*—the gods and goddesses associated with the activity at large. In the setting of the museum, we are asking permission from the ancestors to ensure that you're culturally safe. But, of course, I've experienced a lot of eye rolling in terms of institutions trying to cope with these 'demands' of Indigenous peoples. I found that sharing Moana Indigenous epistemologies has helped institutions understand that these weren't just performances. For sure there is performativity—they might have encountered song or movement—but it wasn't a performance of the culture in the Western sense.

The museum space hugely impacted the work I was doing with my body. When I was working in the back of the museums' storerooms, I would play music for the ancestors and talk to them. They were, for lack of a better word, my audience; I was really redefining my audience. I realized that's what the museum staff were missing when we were rendering ceremonies in these spaces. We were creating safe spaces to connect with the ancestral past. They were thinking we were performing for them or their chosen audience, often the public, but actually the main audience was all our cultural belongings. The *Vā Body* is mediating the activation of the *mauli*—a cosmological life force or essence found in all things created. Often it is felt as an emotion, or maybe the prickling of the skin, thus rendering tangible what is not seen, only felt. The so-called inanimate objects' *mauli* is acti.VĀ.ted through the *Vā Body* and the ceremony that creates the space as *vā*, as we share both time and space.

The other part of my upbringing is urban street culture. I've come from the streets; a lot of my knowledge base has not come through Western higher education institutions. It's come from sitting at the feet of a tattoo practitioner. It's come from listening to the aunties while we're all sitting there making things. It's come from hip-hop gigs; it's come from drum and bass,

jungle, from spoken word, slam poetry. I was marrying up my lived experience of an urban kid that's traveled the world to finding a way to make the past present for me, so my cultural heritage is not something that you just visit in a museum then walk away, or where you put it on show then you put it away. That really changed the way that I thought: What is a performance, and who am I performing for?

*Pelta Feldman:* You mentioned that you use the word 'costume' reluctantly, as it is associated with artificiality and theater—something you put on and then you put away.

*Raymond:* It's like cultural drag.

*Pelta Feldman:* I'd like to ask you about your relationship to fashion. Fashion is something you put on, but you might put it on to become your authentic self rather than to put on a false identity. I wonder if fashion has been a tool for you to bring tradition and the past meaningfully into the present, so that it isn't just an artificial layer?

*Raymond:* Well, it's interesting that you mention fashion. This body of mine has often been mediated by a lens of how others have seen me, not how I've expressed myself. I was a very young fashion model in New Zealand in the 1980s, and I traveled to Italy and Germany and did a little bit in London, a little bit in Australia. But that particular body was really uncomfortable in that experience. I think this is because of my Pacific upbringing, where respect for elders was a big thing, and big bodies were seen in a really different light. To my Sāmoan family, I was way too skinny. I wasn't considered beautiful to them. And yet, in this Western sense, I measured up. I was fine-featured, with lighter skin, just dusky enough. I became the coat hanger. It didn't matter what I thought. There's quite a bit of performativity in modeling, but I was really young and still finding my own body. I had a distinct uncomfortableness with that industry.

When I went back to New Zealand, after I got told that I was too old—I was nineteen—I started to look at all these amazing Pacific bodies on the streets, which weren't being reflected in the magazines. That made me create our own platforms through creating fashion shows with the Pacific Sisters and through a magazine called *Planet Magazine*, which was an urban street magazine that I was a part of, started by two young guys [Phillip Campbell and David Teehan] that had an office next door to where I lived. We walked the streets with a Polaroid camera, taking pictures of people, as these bodies were not to be found in mainstream modeling agencies. We did fashion shoots with diverse bodies. We used to do crazy fashion shows—part art, part performance, and part cultural, and usually late at night at warehouse parties put on by our friends.

Culturally, our dance and our storytelling are connected through the body. These stories can be sung, danced, lamented, chanted. Hula used to be the original form of prayer—it wasn't entertainment. As Moana Pacific bodies, we're used to moving to tell a story. It was natural to us to use certain movements even while walking down a catwalk, which became a much more theatrical space. First, we were doing shows in nightclubs, then we started to get invited to cultural festivals. At the time there was only one platform, where only traditional moves were allowed, so there was a totally separate stage for these contemporary forms.

In those early performance days, that's where I cut my teeth on how to merge the two together, so that it could be both street culture and 'traditional' culture. It didn't have to be put away in a little box. But as a performer, I still find myself falling into that trap of thinking that I'm too old to perform now. The Western construct is telling me that. I still have to fight it in my head, telling myself that I've still got some stories to tell. And this is how I tell them, through the body, through movement. But then people ask: Are you a dancer? I've never quite found the right box to sit in, in terms of the Western concept of performance, even live art.

*Hölling:* Can we discuss the concept of attire and body decoration? Your studio's photographs display a captivating array of textiles and colors. While considering the conservability of events, performances, and intangible traditions, physical elements still hold significance. I'm curious about your approach to costumes (again, for the lack of a better word), whether they are retained or remade for each performance or festival. How do you handle the physicality of the stuff that you wear?

*Raymond:* Originally, when you're using natural fibers—and this runs throughout the Moana and a lot of Indigenous cultures—when you're bringing onto your body these aspects from the natural world, you're not just embodying them, but becoming one with them. If I'm wearing a tusk, that's bringing on the power and the *mana* of the boar. Or if I'm wearing flowers, I'm bringing on their scent and acknowledging the forests and the natural world. The natural world was a very important part of how we communicated with our surroundings. Once you are finished with the natural materials, they can just go back into the earth and continue that cycle. But in an urban situation, when we don't have access to a lot of the natural materials, they become more precious. Some of the materials are long-lasting, that you will hand down over generations, like the pigs' tusks and shark teeth, and some, like the flowers and hibiscus fibers, are disposable. In New Zealand, where we're starting to use a lot of materials that are not going to biodegrade, we need to face our responsibilities with plastics and other materials.

In the images of my studio, you might have seen a big shark's jaw. The shark is an important ancestor, so there's a special connection in wearing the—well, that's where I came up with the *niu aitu*, because you can't say, 'costume.' His name is I Malie I Uta, Shark of the Land. They've all got names; they really have their own charisma, their own persona, and when I wear them, I'm sharing space with our ancestral past. We descended from sharks. And now through overfishing, it's getting harder and harder to find the resources we once used to honor, and it makes me so sad.

To come back to materiality: over the years I've developed all these *niu aitu*, and they do show wear and tear. Back in the day they would dissolve back into the earth. But now I don't want to chuck them out. That's when I started to look at the museum as a really useful space—a retirement home for my *niu aitu*. But I won't let a museum purchase them. Instead, we have an arrangement where the museum becomes the *kaitiaki*, the guardian of them. There's definitely a commodity exchange which helps me as an artist. When I retire the *niu aitu* into the museum space, I would make a replacement. I started to think of the concept of the avatar. I realized that I created avatars for my *niu aitu* because they are reincarnations of the same stories I embedded in them; they're holding that same space, just in a different time.

I will sell museums remains or residues of my performances. But I will not sell them the *mauli* [life essence]—that can't be bought. I created a handover ceremony for my *niu aitu* so that the intangible *mauli* can be exchanged. *Mauli* is contained in the avatars I create: it is the same *niu aitu* but in a different time and space. To me, by creating the *niu aitu* avatar I can conserve the story and the *mauli*. The museum can conserve the physicality of the remains, and hopefully one day they may come into contact with another body again, and the *mauli* can be reactivated because there's a bit of residue in there.

*Emilie Magnin:* Can we come back to this notion of conser.VĀ.tion? Could you explain to us what puts the *vā* in the conservation?

*Raymond:* The concept started to develop when I was looking at the responsibilities that come with relationships, and how some relationships come and go in your life. For me, the museum space (and the whole GLAM system: galleries, libraries, archives, and museums), is so focused on the physical materiality that they forget about the actual living essence and relationships that are embedded with the living descendants of their collections. Often they're dealing with cultural belongings that don't have living connections anymore—maybe the artist has passed—and the relationship just stops. They don't have a relationship with their families, with the living descendants. We need to start acknowledging that these relationships are central to the collections. You can't pull them apart from the actual physical thing.

The physical thing is attached to a human body, a Vā Body that has all these ancestral ties, and ties that you develop as you're working with an artist or a performer.

For me, putting the *vā* in the conser.VĀ.tion means ensuring that the relationship is at the center of what you're trying to conserve. I think museums and archives hold responsibilities to living communities. It should be something that's naturally there, and until it's acknowledged as a vital part of conservation, we're not going to move forward. I've seen things change dramatically in the last fifteen years; you'll find a really good example of practice in one museum and in the same city, two museums down the road, nothing. This is an uneven platform that we're constantly working with, and the artists or the communities are doing a lot of the legwork and emotional work; they're creating the frameworks. And yet the power base is still in the institution.

We need to have ways of measuring and qualifying Indigenous ways of knowing and doing inside the institution. People like yourselves, when you go into other places, you're taking these ideas and you're being able to manifest them inside the structure of the institution. And that's hard work, right?

*Magnin:* You mentioned the disappearance of natural resources, and in the Western sense, even if we use the same word, nature conservation and art conservation are still two very separate realms. So I wonder if your notion of conser.VĀ.tion is something that can link them both together instead of seeing them as separate problems?

*Raymond:* I would love that to happen. It's interesting that there's this other way to look into conservation and that, just by highlighting these two little alphabet letters in it, we start to see the value in sharing the time and space together. That's just starting to happen at an institutional level. But when we're talking about natural resources, we're fighting multimillion-dollar companies that have no desire or need to listen to the small fry like us at the moment. The Cook Islands have just sold a whole lot of licenses for under-seabed mining, and apparently four are being sold around Aotearoa. I think the world's starting to understand we are in a climate emergency, not just a climate change. Indigenous people have been trying to let the world know how the natural environment has been suffering, fighting for their land rights for generations and generations and generations.

*Pelta Feldman:* Can I pull on some threads about your use of natural and traditional materials as part of your coming into yourself as a young person and a young artist? My sense is that these





*Figure 12.2* Rosanna Raymond, *Backhand Maiden*, 2017 (performance still), Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York. Photograph: Richard Wade. Courtesy Rosanna Raymond.

materials and traditions helped you get a new relationship to fashion, costume, garments, things that are put onto the body. But how might that fit or not fit into the museum? *G'nang G'near* (1995–97; Figure 12.3), for example—an outfit that you made by combining denim jeans and jacket



Figure 12.3 Rosanna Raymond, *G'nang G'near* (1995–97). Photograph: Greg Semu. Courtesy Rosanna Raymond.

with scraps of traditional barkcloth. I read that *G'nang G'near* did enter an institution, it does live in a box, but also that you were able to visit the museum with a sister of yours, who was able to wear it?

*Raymond:* Oh, that was because I don't fit in it anymore! It was interesting because it was the first time I sold something to anybody. There's a lot going on in *G'nang G'near*. The word is part of the queer talk of the 1950s and 1960s, which some of our sisters—some of our *g'nirls*—passed down to the Pacific Sisters. We didn't realize it was a real coded queer slang, even though the people that were passing it down to us were queer. Also, at the time, gangs like the Mongrel Mob had a huge presence at home, amidst this marginalized loss of culture, loss of land, loss of language. The gangs really became families for a lot of our people.

According to legend, the Mongrel Mob got their name back in the 1960s when a judge dismissed them as nothing but mongrels. I was brought up being called a mongrel, too, so that resonated with me. Wearing patches was an important part of their identity, and I noticed especially how they'd patch

up all their jeans, because they couldn't afford to buy another pair. Barkcloth is a precious commodity that was hard to get in New Zealand; when it became worn or damaged, the Pacific Islanders would throw it out. Back then the council would have organic collections three times a year. We used to find big tapa cloths out on the street, and I started to cut out all the good pieces and sew them together on these jeans. Patchwork is something that the missionaries taught the island ladies, to show them how civil and how industrious they could be. So I started to patchwork a pair of jeans with some of the tapa scraps I had found. They really were quite a statement; it was my way of forming my own gang, but it wasn't a scary gang. I was playing with ideas about my own identity as a mongrel, exploring what happens when you create something whole out of a lot of different scraps of material. It may be all mismatched and patched, but it makes a complete garment.

They've had their whole adventure, those jeans. In fact, they even went missing for two years. They just went off in the nightclub one night and never came back. When they came back, they had a few more outings. I would repatch them as they wore and tore; they're so heavy, in the end I could hardly wear them. The National Gallery of Victoria in Melbourne was interested in purchasing them after they saw them in an exhibition. They'd done their time, and I was ready to release them. This was the genesis of my thinking about how to engage with institutions, because I couldn't just sell them to the museum. I made a little handwritten piece of paper saying that they could now come and live at this museum, that I expected visitation rights, and that bodies needed to be in them every now and again. It got forgotten for years until one year I was in Melbourne with two of my friends, Léuli Eshrāghi and Angela Tiatia, and I asked the gallery if we could see them, and the next minute they were on bodies. It was like a coup. I had asked before, and they'd said, "Oh, no, no, no, you can't do that!" But when you're actually standing there, again, that's when relationship comes in. By then, I had developed a good relationship with the curators, and the conservator finally understood that I was not going to harm something that I had made.

It was wonderful. The museum people gasped when they saw *G'nang G'near* on a body. I said, that is what you're missing. The question is, what are you trying to conserve? Are you trying to conserve the physicality of the garment or a moving, breathing embodied experience, seeing it move and seeing how it rounds around the body and how the oils from your body relax it? It really changed the curator's way of looking at care—what is care and what is condition.

But at the end of the day, as performers, we've got to make a living, and a lot of times, performance is a very hard commodity to buy. I've got photographs or video or garments, those sorts of performance residue. The remains are interesting for me, this physical residue that could be the commodity. It's about a basic level of survival as an art practitioner, conserving my longevity as a performer.

It's important to talk about how we conserve performance. A lot of the performers are either trying to survive or we're developing or making a work. And then you're expected to think about what's going to happen to the work afterwards. Do we have to think of everything? I can reflect back because I've had a thirty-year practice now, and I'm glad I kept a lot of those tangible things. But it's not the actual experience, that particular time and space. There is this essence that can't be purchased, even if we've developed clever ways of reenacting and reviving performances.

Performance has been around for centuries, thousands of years. But in terms of Western art, we're still quite young. Museums know what to do with photography; they know what to do with painting. They even know what to do with costumes. But how do we actually capture the essence of a performance? For me, it was through developing avatars of my *niu aitu*. I did *G'nang G'near* in the 1990s, when they got retired, and I missed him so much that I started to make another pair; then another museum wanted to commission another pair, so I sold the second pair, *Genealogy*. In hindsight I realized it was too early.<sup>5</sup> It was like taking a baby off the breast too soon. I had weaned them too early. They weren't charged with all that *mauli* and the *mana*. Materials and techniques have their own *fāgogo* (stories), their own *gafa* (genealogical histories) linking all life to the gods, their own *mana* (power, authority), which surge through my hands in the act of making. When I've seen them exhibited, I can see that they're not quite charged enough. I profusely apologized to *Genealogy* and promised I'd be back later. Then I made a third pair, and the third pair is now living in a museum as well. When I wrote my thesis, I realized what I'd been doing, creating these avatars charged up with the *mauli* (life force or life essence). And the *mauli* is something that can't be sold.

To me, when my creations are housed in the museum, it's like they enter into a state of suspended animation. They're not fully deceased because the next time a body—and it doesn't even have to be my body—gets inside it, that relationship and the conser.Vā.tion process is acti.Vā.ted, because we're conserving the *mauli* and the *mana* of the garment, not just its physicality. Now it's become a real methodology that I can write about, and I hope that it will be helpful in some form.

*Pelta Feldman:* How do you decide which aspects of your heritage to take with you, and which aspects to change?

*Raymond:* For my father's generation, my grandmother's generation, my great-grandmother's generation, and my great-great-grandmother's generation, maybe even one more, they did not have the ability to make educated choices about what they could bring on board in terms of their cultural practices. They got told. They got beaten. They had their natural environment changed. My father and I were born in New Zealand; we are uninvited guests on Māori land that was

never ceded. I'm part of the Sāmoan diaspora, part of an urban Moana (my preferred term for 'Pacific') transnational experience. I was the one that kept asking questions, the one that kept not being satisfied with the answers from my elders. I was part of the protest movements, inspired by the generation of Māori and Pacific activists who challenged us to question what we took on board, what we bought, what we put on our bodies—questioning the way we were educated. And so I asked myself, where could I find the answers to these questions? I asked my Sāmoan grandmother, and she said: What do you want to know that for? It's not going to be of any use to you. Some of my family are so indoctrinated into the Christian world that they used to call me 'the Pagan.' My grandmother wouldn't even tell us our Sāmoan surname, until she realized that I was really working in a Pacific community. I remember the day she just looked at me and told me, our Sāmoan surname was Alai'asā, from the village of Falefa; our mountain was Vailima. That was so big for me. Until I had that information, I couldn't fully



Figure 12.4 Rosanna Raymond and Dan Taulapapa McMullin, *acti.V.Ā.tion of Aue Away*, 2017, Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York. Courtesy Rosanna Raymond and Dan Taulapapa McMullin.

partake in my Pacific cultural heritage, because Pacific people place you by your mountain, by your waters, your village; they do this so they can make connections.

When my family couldn't or wouldn't share my cultural heritage with me, I went looking, and found many answers in the deep past. The Western canon calls them 'mythologies,' implying that they're not real, that they're fantasies and fairy tales. But they hold immense truths. That's where I got insight into pre-contact minds, especially those of women. Most people think of a Pacific Island woman as a dusky maiden with long hair, who's perhaps selling you a holiday to Hawaii and shaking her hips. Passive, yet sexually available. But when I started looking into our mythologies, I found Nafanua, a warrior born of a blood clot. She developed her own weapons, which are still important today. I found Taema and Tilafaiga. They were men killers; they had several husbands with multiple children. They also brought the art of the *tatau* to Sāmoa. And Sina, she slept with gods. She discovered new lands. Her friends were the sharks. She was industrious, well educated, and powerful. In these tales, I found insights into my deep past, helping me to understand my past self, in the world I live in.

I'm grateful that those stories were conserved, some of them orally, but a lot of them mediated through the missionaries. You learn how to unpack them, like the tale of Sina and the eel. Sina and the eel, they were 'friends,' and in a young mind you can relate to that, but as you get older you realize, "Oh, they were friends, but friends with benefits!" It was like that with the aunties; sometimes they'd let their guard down and they would tell you some of the more intimate details, like that he tickled her with his tail. Their laughter gave me an idea of how!

Now it's our responsibility to keep these stories alive in the imagination of the next generations. I've done this successfully with my son, transmitted to him the love of his cultural heritage. It's funny; sometimes I hear my own stories coming out of his mouth, and to me that's conservation at its best because the next generation is solid and has grounding—that's one of my best conservation projects.

But that's such a valid question—how do you know what to keep? There are aspects of our culture that we did not need to keep. We did not need to keep public defloration of high-born women. But we maybe needed to keep the technique of the special mat that they wore. This information at least has been stored in books by anthropologists. It's a delicate dance, but I think when they're fully acted, they can come off the page or out of those archives and into the hands of artists who then reimagine them. That's some beautiful conservation. It might not have any relationship to what the actual archive looked like. And that, to me, is exciting.

*This is an abbreviated transcript of a conversation that took place on May 20, 2023, in Basel.*

## Notes

- 1 On this concept, see Tevita O. Ka'ili, 'Ōkusitino Māhina, and Ping-Ann Addo, eds., *Pacific Studies*, special issue on "Tā-Vā (Time-Space) Theory of Reality," 40, no. 1–2 (2017); and I'uogafa Tuagalu, "Heuristics of the Vā," *AlterNative: An International Journal of Indigenous Peoples* 4, no. 1 (2008), <https://doi.org/10.1177/117718010800400110>.
- 2 Albert Wendt, "Tatauing the Post-Colonial Body," in *Inside Out: Literature, Cultural Politics, and Identity in the New Pacific*, ed. Rob Wilson and Vilsoni Hereniko (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield, 1999), 399–412.
- 3 Albert Refiti, "Being Social," Critiquing Pasifika Education in the University Inaugural Conference, University AUT Ngawai o Horotiu Marae, Auckland, 2007.
- 4 'Conser.VĀ.tion,' 'acti.VĀ.tion,' and 'sa.VĀ.ge' belong to Raymond's intrinsic vocabulary, considering the continuity of ancestral culture. See Rosanna Raymond, "Conser.VĀ.Tion | Acti.VĀ.Tion: Museums, the Body and Indigenous Moana Art Practice" (MA thesis, Auckland University of Technology, School of Design, 2021).
- 5 Tony Eccles, "Rosanna Raymond's *Genealogy* (2007): Notes on a New Addition to the World Cultures Collection at the Royal Albert Memorial Museum, Exeter," *Journal of Museum Ethnography*, no. 20 (2008): 120–27.

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## 13 Urmimala Sarkar Munsî

### Dance, embodied preservation, and unlearning in India

*A conversation with Hanna B. Hölling,  
Jules Pelta Feldman, and Emilie Magnin*

Urmimala Sarkar Munsî is a multifaceted scholar with expertise in social anthropology, dance studies, and choreography. As Professor at the School of Arts and Aesthetics and Dean of Jawaharlal Nehru University, New Delhi, she teaches and researches various aspects of dance, including its potential to aid survivors of sexual violence. Her work centers around the intersection of gender, sexuality, and dance, and she has contributed significantly to the field of performance studies.

As a dancer, Sarkar Munsî has performed extensively both in India and abroad. Her research focuses on the politics of performance and its relationship with social issues. She has conducted groundbreaking research on dance and affect, cultural unlearning, and auto-ethnographic approaches in dance. Sarkar Munsî also serves on the board of directors at Kolkata Sanved, which provides dance and movement therapy to individuals who have experienced trauma. In her role as academic advisor for the diploma offered by the Tata Institute of Social Sciences and Kolkata Sanved, she works tirelessly to promote the use of dance as a tool for healing and recovery. Her extensive contributions to the field of dance and her commitment to using dance to promote healing and social justice make her an important figure in both academia and the dance community.

*Hanna B. Hölling:* Dear Professor Sarkar Munsî, it has been a great pleasure to engage with your scholarship and worldview. Thank you for generously sharing your knowledge with us.<sup>1</sup> I would like to begin by asking you about your perspective on the conservation of dance and performance. There are issues with the terminology and the hegemony and truth claims implied in certain approaches to conservation. In the Western world of museums and conservation, performance is often seen as ephemeral and fugitive, accessible only through documentation. Are there specific methodologies that you employ in performance preservation, and how do they differ from other preservation practices in India and beyond?



*Urmimala  
Sarkar Munsri:*

In India, we have been working very hard on the preservation of traditions, and that includes dance. Emphasis has been put on the preservation of dance in its own cultural context, but, at the same time, as something that is aesthetically pure and authentic. These problematic words go against the concept of performance as an ephemeral form, one that is embodied differently by different bodies, in different spaces and times.

In India, there is anxiety about this authenticity and the preservation of antiquity—and the weight of the references to antiquity structures its present relation with performance cultures. The arts are a way for India to claim history as a precolonial space. This has led to an emphasis on dance and performance being preserved as they were in precolonial times.

Now, if there is something that lives on through time, in terms of performance, it lives on in human bodies. Human bodies preserve or deal with the changes that happen to human performances. Over the years, we have had a continuous debate about whether to freeze performance in time and space, where the preservation of dance is equivalent with documentation that freezes it in time. Performance is vulnerable to different kinds of truth claims, of course, but also to the well-meaning effort of preserving the aesthetic and the best form. These factors have made the preservation of performance very challenging in India.

On the other hand, in the communities of practice, performance has been carried on from one generation to another. This is another kind of preservation, but it is still subject to the changes that are specific to time and space. For instance, if there is a population or community which has experienced a large-scale migration to an industrial area and then returns to its own original community for a festival, performance elements are carried back and forth between these two spaces. Which is the authentic and preservable performance? And what is this *thing* untainted by time and space?

Performance preservation has been seen, in academia, as something that can take place in a variety of manners. One way is to specifically relate it to a community, a space, and a time. A different way has been seen in other spaces, such as for the classical dances of India. Classical citation tries to freeze the grammar, aesthetic, and basic skills to a certain point where it is called ‘the classical.’ At that point a museumized structure is given to each of the classical dances and that is then considered the ideally preserved, culturally authentic performance.

Classical dances in India have evolved through complex negotiations between governmental agencies and the stakeholders from within the communities that were originally the holders of the knowledge traditions in different regional dance/ritual performance practices. These forms have been through restructuring, while their regional histories have been assimilated

into the national history to make these regional practices more relevant to the nationalist history. With the reforms altering the history and the structure of the dances, the community from which the dance originated has often had little to do with its ultimate form. Often the reformers have been people from outside the communities. Even when the ideas of reform and canonization came from the community itself, they were influenced by the ideas generated by the urban cultural capital, coming from upper castes and classes of people. It's a complicated terrain of power dynamics operating to establish the state as the principal patron of arts, where different claims have warred against each other: truth claims, identity claims, vernacular versus postcolonial claims around authentic Indic traditions, among others.

Let me give you more detail about how these claims work. Bharatanatyam is a dance form that is recognized since the 1940s to be the classical dance of the state of Tamil Nadu. This was a practice of certain hereditary practitioners who performed at the temples and also for a larger group of patrons in Tamil Nadu and its neighboring states. Traditionally, these practitioners were dedicated performers in the temples. They were women, mostly, accompanied by male musicians. Most of the teaching was done orally. It was passed on from body to body. These women carried the embodied knowledge and also were known for their expertise as artists, singers, dancers, and knowledge-bearers within the temple traditions. They were a part of the temple's ritual process and also a very important part of the ritual calendar. But temple patronage slowly decreased, and the performers started losing their space within the temples.

On the other hand—and ironically in the year India received its independence—an act was signed, the Tamil Nadu Devadasis (Prevention of Dedication) Act, which forbade women from dancing in the Hindu temples. As a result, these women were criminalized and seen as polluting society with their form of practice, often accused of working as sex workers. This claim privileged the so-called urban practitioners who learned from the hereditary practitioners, and then in order to avoid being grouped together with the temple dancers. The upper caste reformers who saw themselves as the rescuers of the artistic practice traditionally named 'Sadir,' renamed as 'Bharatanatyam,' were hailed for having rescued the art from the women temple dancers known as *devadasi*, who were accused of being prostitutes. Thus the generational knowledge was appropriated from the bodies of the hereditary performers dancing in the temple, and there was then a takeover by some upper caste Brahmin women and men. The dance got appropriated by the urban audience and students, who started learning the dance that was now cleansed of and distanced from the problematic histories and association with the devadasi women. The new dancers were distanced from the 'polluted bodies.' So the act helped the upper castes to distance the dance from its originating community by stopping the temple women performers from carrying on the activity. Instead, it was carried on by urban women who

cleansed its structures of the nuances and gestures that had made it enticing. Instead, the dance was to be a completely devotional performance.

The cleansing of the dance form was in itself an anti-archival endeavor—creating a distance between what was an archive embodied in devadasi bodies and what became the cleansed pedagogy of the same dance, now named ‘Bharatanatyam.’ The devadasi women were often dedicated to the gods through a ceremony that pronounced them to be married to the gods of the temples they were attached to. The reforms and the change of the name also enabled the higher caste reformers to make changes to words and dance movements that they thought were from the proscenium space because of their erotic and often sensual and sexual content. Direct references to ‘Sringara’ or mimetic reference to love between a woman and a man in the dance were replaced by songs, movements, and mimes depicting *bhakti*, or dedication/love for the god to whom the dances were dedicated to. According to Amrit Srinivasan, “the changed orientation of the dance from an inferior ‘community’ to a superior ‘individual’ practice helped these changes to acquire legitimacy.”<sup>2</sup> The marginalization and wiping out of devadasi history is seen as an act of rescuing, whereas to a trained archivist this is an ultimately anti-archival act.<sup>3</sup>

You may now understand that when you read the history of Bharatanatyam, it is the appropriated and manipulated history of a dance named ‘Sadir’ that is preserved under a different name, technique, and history from the same state. The history of the temple dancers is remembered by few people, and most of the dancers who have learned Bharatanatyam in the later years do not even know its origin. So preservation in our country has also meant erasure of histories, and this you can find in many writings on Bharatanatyam, especially in the book *Unfinished Gestures* by Davesh Soneji.<sup>4</sup> The book follows the story of the dance as it changed, as the laws changed, as the act came into place, and how this takeover happened. It is also a story of how the body is remembered and how the history allows us to remember.

Preservation became something else completely, and this has been a problem with most of the dances where, when you change hands, you change the dance and the way it is preserved. If dance forms are susceptible and vulnerable to changes, as mentioned earlier, and if their histories get rewritten according to the patrons’ wishes, social aspirations, powers, and intentions, as has repeatedly happened in the Indian context, the archives also reflect such power plays and undergo reorganizations as per the representations forced by the patrons. In India these appropriations have been justified as acts of creating a national culture that enhances India’s image as a country with high cultural capital. These changes impact the history of the women dancers, their social position, and their artistic path—impacting the way they are remembered as a part of the cultural history of the nation.

I'll give you another example that I think is important, about a type of dance that is very different from Bharatanatyam. When I learned Kathak, it was taught with two kinds of movement practices. One was from the women practitioners who employed gestures from Islamic culture. The gesture was Salaam.<sup>5</sup> We would also use dedicated gestures related to offering in Sanskritic cultures. As I grew up and graduated from school, I slowly started to notice that the same master teachers stopped teaching the Islamic Salaam. That was stopped. What was practiced instead was only the offering of flowers as a gesture of dedication (*anjani*) to God and at the feet of the audience. And now, we hear claims—openly, in print—that we have managed to erase the history of the Mughal culture and the Tawaif women that polluted Indian history.<sup>6</sup> This wish to rewrite history is directly going to affect what the social anthropologist Pallabi Chakravorty calls “the multiple genealogies of Kathak dance [that] articulate a complex intersection of regional histories.” She writes:

This dance style from North India is an amalgam of the folk and formalized court dances popular between the sixteenth and nineteenth centuries in India. The Bhakti and Sufi religious movements that swept India, along with the entertainment-oriented performances patronized by the royal courts, shaped the repertoire of this dance. . . . It is largely accepted that the dance we are today familiar with as Kathak flourished in the Mughal and Hindu courts of Lucknow and Benares in Uttar Pradesh, Jaipur in Rajasthan and Raigarh in Madhya Pradesh and these locations now exemplify the gharana tradition of Kathak.<sup>7</sup>

What this active intervention means in the practice of everyday life is that the children who are born, say, in 2018–19, shall grow up learning a different history. So where does preservation stand then? And if it's in the hands of a very powerful government mechanism then the preserved data can vanish. Of course, given that, all over the world, documentation of the past exists, hopefully we have more than what can vanish. Fortunately, scholars had written about Kathak before. One of the critical-analytical but also beautifully written books that addresses this subject is [the previously cited] *Bells of Change: Kathak Dance, Women and Modernity in India* by Chakravorty (2008).<sup>8</sup>

I teach and am very passionate about preservation. But preservation is a double-edged sword. While in an ideal situation it preserves specific histories for the generations to come, it is also vulnerable as a political tool used by those in power (mostly the state), who often manipulate histories for political assertions and gains. Under different political manipulations of different dispensations, histories are rewritten. It has been seen in the past in many countries, and in the current post-truth times such interpretations are often being used for establishing divisive and fundamentalist histories through social media and even other textbooks. It is therefore our duty, and my passion, to

teach students to observe and document extensively what they research, and to create documentation which can be analyzed by people in the future for what it is. We have a larger responsibility now than ever before.

*Jules Pelta Feldman:* You've already said a lot about the different ways that the past can be brought into the present, sometimes in potentially harmful ways, sometimes in ways that you see as more productive. How do you decide what parts of the tradition you want to take with you, and what parts should change? Where should some core of continuity be maintained?

*Sarkar Munsfi:* This is a very important question for me, and I agonize over it. When I was asked to structure a course on research methodology, to include performance documentation and documentation for research,<sup>9</sup> I decided to ask the students to create an archive which has a link to research and a story to tell. These aspects are not disconnected. Because I was trained as a social anthropologist, I thought that I have no right to decide what to document and what not to document within a particular structure of a ritual. I can't ask people to do something differently so it will look nicer. I cannot be the judge in this place. This was inspired by an experience I had at the Indira Gandhi National Center for the Arts (IGNCA, a research institute in New Delhi), which was established to create extensive documentation. The center has a wonderful library and a lot of documentation from different parts of India concerning artistic practices, mostly performing arts. I went with my students from the course, which had just started, and I was very enthusiastic because the master's degree students were to assist as interns for the documentation process. When we arrived, we saw that there was a cement platform outside, with big cameras and high-end recording equipment already positioned. There was one standard cement stage where all the documentation of performances from different parts of India was going to be recorded. The cameras were intimidating and larger than life. The artists were asked to get ready in small rooms and come out on the stage. These were performers coming from remote regions of India. Some were practitioners of living traditions and others were ritual practitioners whose ritual practice consisted of singing, dancing, reciting, and also playing different musical instruments. Some

of the ritual practitioners (monks) began to pray as they got on to the stage. Suddenly, someone shouted: “Close it, close it! The sun is exactly right, now you have to start performing!” Halfway through a ritual, the performers were so flustered that they could not get up. The person who directed this ‘perfect movie’ kept on shouting. I came up and stood in front of the director with my students and said: “Here the students have come as interns, but I’m asking them to learn what they should never do instead of what they should do.” Of course, that was the end of our research internships, because there was a communication gap between understanding the priorities—essentially the process and the product. But this is not preservation. Are you choosing the performance or the perfect light and perfect film? If the artist or the performer cannot feel the devotion, is it a genuine performance that we are preserving? To be respectful of traditions is to travel to that place, be discreet and take whatever comes. From this experience I learned that I should teach how *not* to be this extractor, that is, a person who sees and dictates the terms of how performance is preserved.

In India, there are ways of clamping down on artists because artists are needy people who don’t make a great living. So you can say, “Create something, then we will document you!” The IGNCA documentation captures the epic Ramayana performances performed by communities that never in their lives practiced Ramayana. We have introduced them to Ramayana. While this isn’t itself a problem, it is not an authentic practice performed during rituals. So what is this ‘authentic’? Is what is being preserved in a government academy, or allowed into a government archive, authentic? Or is it something that is already engineered?

My students and I spend days respectfully watching—this is their first class. First you learn how to watch ethically, how to be the person who is ready to learn. You don’t record; you cannot interrupt a ritual circle. You have to work in their time, give them their space, get them to co-design and co-direct the documentation. We teach the ethics first, and, even then, there are violations. Every day there is a debriefing. I think some of the students come back with a lot of respect, understanding that the practice has to be looked at and understood from the way the practitioners see it, the way they want it recorded.

As preservationists—and I have seen this also in my department—when we go to a site, we have a sense of what will be good documentation. “Oh my god, this is a beautiful moment!” I might see that moment as beautifully

choreographed, but it might just be something extra. I might miss the ritual because I am taking a film of that moment. These are things that have been problematic for me. With my colleagues, too, I've had discussions asking: What is a visual ethnography of performance practices? What is the power that you have when you hold a camera? And what is this power that you give yourself because you write? You can get away with a lot because the person who you are documenting in most cases will not even be able to read what you have written. So we have a duty and responsibility toward them. You cannot disrespect people, take these kinds of liberties, and emerge as good documenters, good archivists.

*Emilie Magnin:* The story that you just told us comes from your perspective as a scholar and teacher of anthropology but also as a dancer. From your perspective as a dancer, I wonder if you see dance itself as a form of conservation? And how do you see this relationship between your body and the people who performed the same movements in the past and will perform them in the future, especially with dances that have initial social connotations and meanings that may shift over time?

*Sarkar Munsri:* I'll give you two examples. Since I started my research for my book, *Uday Shankar and His Transcultural Experimentations: Dancing Modernity* (2022),<sup>10</sup> I have been trying to understand the process of creative engagement that Uday Shankar had developed in his dance. It is curious that one sees the first images of what ultimately became his dance form (as preserved in his film *Kalpana*).<sup>11</sup> I feel that there is a particular trajectory of how he begins by experimenting with his idea of Indian dance and then slowly empowers himself to embody the essence of what he thought could be an ideal representation of an embodied aesthetic of Indian dance traditions. Bodies are trained in dance forms, but the dance grammar becomes part of the body's history and becomes the repertoire that always remains as the embodied memory, even while there are constant additions to that very repertoire from everyday experiences and learnings. I often joke that when I die, when I'm being taken to the cremation ground, if I hear those past musical compositions from our dances, I'll get up and dance for a while, and then I'll continue on my journey to being cremated. They are so ingrained, those movements.

Dance changes; movements change. It's inevitable because one's experience is superimposed by living in a different space, in a different time, and also in a country away from the community that practiced that particular form of dance for a long time. One's way of remembering may become problematic

because, in between, one may have started other dances, forms of practice, and physical activities, which change the way of performing that initial dance. But the cumulative experience is what the body has and, because of that change, is the most consistent thing in performance. I performed the role of Ram as a dancer of the Uday Shankar India Culture Centre performing troupe. When I reflect on the past enactment, I wish I had reflected more on the way I was performing the role. In today's politicized space around the Hindutva-based appropriation of Ramayana and the character of Ram, my body and mind reject the idea of mindless political appropriation of the epic. As a result, while I remember every music, every moment of the role, my rejection of the image is complete, and I am saddened that the events turned the past into such a contested one.<sup>12</sup>

From one generation to another, the performance changes. Social norms differ and that makes us perform movements according to what we think is acceptable today, because of the automatic intervention of the choices that we make and that our bodies make.

But if you look at the more isolated spaces—where there is no dance institution—the community still carries and transfers embodied memories from one generation to the next. Among Adivasi<sup>13</sup> and other relatively isolated communities, most ritual, performative, and social rites are dependent on socialization processes where participatory and embodied learning is still a tool. In those spaces, there is a preservation which is much more current, but it is a vulnerable, embodied preservation, open to constant outside impulses. In India, Bollywood influences most dance/movement aesthetics today. Now, there is an effort to demonstrate hypermasculinity, hyperfemininity, or the most recent popular dance gestures from the latest releases. Bollywood has infiltrated every form. Spaces where one would find dance are spread across ritual practices; the assertion and projection of specific regional, national, and religious identities; popular cinematic entertainment; erotic professional dances (sometimes also associated with sex work); and professional to exceptionally skilled proscenium-based classical, modern, and contemporary performances. Just trying to understand the variety of audiences in such spaces can be a life's research.

In today's India, we don't speak the same language, but we all have smartphones. People come to see performances but forget to look up to see what is being danced. Instead, they start recording. This recording creates a certain overrepresentation and oversharing. Of course, in this way, performance is more accessible, but it also makes it vulnerable to changes. Perhaps the question is: When is it ideal to record a performance? Is it when a creative process has been completed and a new performance is staged? But what about the cultures of the past—are we going to claim that the present moment is the perfect moment for their preservation? I don't think so. So we have to document in transition; our documentation is always a process in transition which is catching the performance somewhere along the way between the past and the future. If we don't go on doing that, then we will not have any idea of what a particular performance was a few years back.



Let me talk about another example, that of Kullu Dussehra, a festival that stretches over seven days in October in Himachal Pradesh.<sup>14</sup> A mother goddess is prayed to along with all the gods of the valley, and Dussehra is also a harvest festival for the northern part of India. The valley is surrounded by huge mountains; every mountain has several villages, which are almost inaccessible for six months of the year. In October, the snow is gone, things are nice and pretty, and people bring their gods down to meet each other. This is not a meet and greet of humans; the people who are bringing the gods are actually the hands and legs of the gods; they are being directed because gods want to meet each other. This is the story. The place of the meeting is called 'Devabhoomi,' the land of the gods. By calling it the land of the gods, they refused to pay taxes to the British, subverting the system of power. This made the festival very important. The story of the festival is complex, and I will not go into it in detail. It holds, in brief, that one king would collect taxes in the name of Raghunath (another name of Ram), the head of the gods. His temple stands within the area owned by this king. The king (whose principality is, in actuality, long since a part of the sovereign democracy named 'India') holds on to a formal position of importance, with his family, in the events around the annual fair. The fair invites all the gods and goddesses of the valley to congregate at the fairground. The gods come in their own palanquins, which are carried by the dedicated carriers for whom the government provides tents and travel money. The size of the tents and the visibility of the gods are according to their hierarchy in the local mytho-history. These gods and goddesses are believed to be present at the annual occasion to meet each other, quarrel, and resolve local issues and disputes, such as the sharing of water, the condition of roads, and the general wellbeing of the subjects. Often, such conversations and confrontations are performative and carried out by the carriers, while they act as though they are under the spell and control of the gods they are carrying on their shoulders.

This was a small fair before. Slowly, it has become a tourist attraction and an international dance festival. The event is featured in the *Guinness Book of World Records*,<sup>15</sup> for the largest group of women dancers performing the traditional Nati dance.<sup>16</sup> Now, people don't dance Nati anymore, but because it was the *Guinness Book of World Records*, everyone had to come together. They wore their wedding dresses, or the youngsters borrowed dresses, and there were 15,000 women dancing together to make a human chain, making the largest congregation of women dancers.

Since then, the whole fair has changed its quality. I have documented the festival for the last fifteen years, and the before and after are two different stories. Which is the truth? Both are. In the story of the 15,000 women dancing together, they created the slogan 'beti Bachao, beti padhao,' which means 'save the girl child, educate the girl child,' which is not necessarily bad, but it was created by the state's propaganda machinery. Now, because people become bored if the theme of the festival is repeated, every year there is

something else cooked up. It is less about the meeting of the gods. It became an international dance festival. To document this event is a complex affair. Years ago, I was just filming one place. Now, there are five places to film simultaneously and everything is performative.

*Hölling:* During your visit to our project a few months ago, our conversation touched upon the idea of historical sources such as temple paintings, carvings, and drawings, and how they may document performance. I am interested in your critical view on this idea, and how these sources can provide information about historical dancers.

*Sarkar Munsî:* I have grown up looking at cave paintings and sculptures in the temples of Khajuraho (Madhya Pradesh), Chidambaram and Mamallapuram (Tamil Nadu), and Puri and Konark (Odisha), which are important sites of past documentation of dancing bodies by unknown artists. It is through Yashadatta S. Alone's work, and by visiting the Ajanta caves over the last few years with him while he conducted fieldwork with our master's, MPhil, and PhD students, that I have understood the need to unlearn my stereotypical readings of sculpted bodies. The scholar Yashadatta S. Alone, who has worked on the Ajanta caves, is one of the prominent authors on Buddhist cave sculptures and paintings.<sup>17</sup> As I look at these bodies as everyday bodies, it becomes clearer that these aesthetically framed static bodies imply a certain moment 'on the move.' Our notions of what is dance frame these bodies as dancing bodies, while there are arguments regarding whether these were always carved as dancing bodies at all. It also brings some questions to mind regarding the generations of sculptors who were carving these artistic masterpieces, as a temple doesn't get finished in a short span of time, during the time of one generation of sculptors or even patrons. Neither the patrons nor the sculptors were necessarily dancers. What was their reference point for such detailed representation of human bodies on the move—possibly dancing intricate skilled movement sequences? Because all these bodies are perfect in their balance, their center of gravity, the way they hold themselves, such questions lead to the specific expertise that guided the sculptors. Were there human bodies standing in front of them? Or were the sculptors given a sketch or a chart made on the stones? All in all, how did these sculptors create? It fascinated me from the very beginning that so much dance was imagined in the heads of these artists, putting even the people who are manning doorways in dancing postures. These questions could be specific to a dancer and dance documenter, and an

ongoing project of joint exploration between Professor Alone and me has come out of such multidisciplinary research.

I feel that it worked both ways: when we started to reconstruct our classical dance history, the dancers borrowed very heavily from these dancing bodies. These sculptures are proof that dance existed. Certainly, the movement range was acknowledged in these bodies. But I think that range must also have come into the sculptures from people who were dancing in real life. In Chidambaram, which is known as ‘the temple city,’ you will see sculptures displaying 108 synchronized movements that bring together specific actions of hands and feet (Karanas). I sometimes feel that, in a time when there was no camera, the sculptures and carvings were the best notation system possible, and these carvings have contributed a lot to the movement patterns that today we refer to as ‘classical.’ You see, along with social history, these movement histories are something that we can depend on in terms of documented bodies of the past.

I feel fascinated by how much unlearning I still have to do. Our cultural constructs, our understanding of gendering, and the ways in which dancers are taught what is a good and correct movement, need to be critically assessed. If you visit these sculptures in the temple, you have to constantly unlearn, because there are things that we would never do in real life: the movements, dresses, ornaments, and the way in which sexualities are transgressed.

Temple cultures sometimes appear much more contemporary and modern than our socially structured, normative functioning in urban societies. We think we have become very contemporary and have freed ourselves from problematic viewing, and stereotypes born out of what, in our mind, is an acceptable kind of body and attire, and sense of beauty, but these sculptures tell us something else. When we go with our students on field trips, even in the community practices as well as in these kinds of spaces of antiquity, I actually feel that we need to expose our students to a rigorous debate as to how to not carry clichés born out of our socialization by class, caste, region, religion, signifiers of sexuality, gender-based notions, and urban/rural binaries, to mention a few. The fieldwork then becomes a way to create a (more) free and accepting mindset for unlearning. Documenters have to be accepting, they cannot judge: “This is not important, this is good, this is bad, this is not worth recording.” Sometimes so-called skilled dancers trained in advanced classical forms express judgements such as “Oh, there is nothing to see in that dance, it’s very simple”; or “there’s no dance in it”; “that is not dance enough!” So I feel ‘unlearning’ is one of the very big words that one must carry and practice with/for oneself, and as a part of the documentation training that we provide.

*Hölling:* So would unlearning be a part of the ideal preservation system for dancers in India?

*Sarkar Munsî:* I think so, because bodies need to unlearn as well. When dancers come out of classical training, they are confused. I feel sorry for them. They feel angry with themselves because they have invested so many years and feel disappointed that they have not reached the pinnacle of success that their teachers have. But it's the system that one must understand. It is a system that remains largely dependent on public and private patronage, and the survival of any dancer depends on the patronage s/he receives. Such a system makes you subservient to your teacher, and the teacher will never want you to surpass her.

It's a question of understanding the structure so that you can escape at a time when skill is enough, and a trainee is ready to take a chance of breaking off from the self-perpetuating systems of control of the *guru* (master teacher) over the *shishya* (trainee). But often this servitude stands in the way, so that one can't think on one's own. What we face, often, is a state of confusion in many master's degree students who come to take up higher studies in arts and aesthetics. They understand that if one has to respect the dance form one has learned and danced so far, and start to learn to document, research, and critically analyze it, one also has to free oneself from the cultural control and gaze of the teacher looking over the shoulder, wanting to surveil what is said. When our students start to learn about these contestations in dance history, some of them get angry because these histories are so different from what the students-turned-scholars have learned during their training in classical dance forms: "Why are you even saying this? I have never heard this!" And I understand it, because they invested so much from childhood in one discourse, and then they suddenly find out that there are some complex processes of control involved in the dissemination and documentation of the historically preserved patterns of learning and embodying dance. As a result, for us it remains an ongoing challenge to create an acceptance to infuse criticality into the process of unlearning the form and established frames of a preserved pattern.

*This conversation took place on June 20, 2023. Editorial assistance: Electra D'Emilio.*

## Notes

- 1 An earlier discussion between Sarkar Munsî and the authors has been documented on the website of Performance: Conservation, Materiality, Knowledge. See Hanna B. Hölling, "Urmimala Sarkar Munsî: On Dance and Preservation in India," Performance: Conservation, Materiality, Knowledge (website), accessed July 4, 2023, <https://performanceconservationmaterialityknowledge.com/2023/05/07/urmimala-sarkar-munsi-on-dance-and-preservation-in-india/>.
- 2 Amrit Srinivasan, "Reform and Revival: The Devadasi and Her Dance," *Economic and Political Weekly* 20, no. 44 (November 2, 1985): 1875.

- 3 “From Sadir Attam to Bharatanatyam,” *Indian Culture: Discover, Learn, Immerse, Connect*, accessed July 3, 2023, <https://indianculture.gov.in/stories/sadir-attam-bharatanatyam>.
- 4 Daveshe Soneji, *Unfinished Gestures: Devadasis, Memory, and Modernity in South India* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2012).
- 5 Kathak is one of the principal forms of Indian classical dance, originating in Uttar Pradesh. Kathak’s origins are traditionally associated with the itinerant storytellers of northern India, known as ‘Kathakars.’ Kathak dancers tell stories through their hand and body movements and extensive facial expressions.
- 6 Pallabi Chakravorty, *Bells of Change: Kathak Dance, Women and Modernity in India* (Kolkata: Seagull Books, 2008).
- 7 Chakravorty, *Bells of Change*, 26.
- 8 Chakravorty.
- 9 While often entailing the same process, the two different functions of the documentation may sometimes lead to certain differences in the way the documentation and preservation is understood and achieved. Performance documentation usually focuses on different aspects of the performance, i.e., text, context, creative processes, the end product, the audience, and the afterlife, in the sense of reviews and restructuring. Documentation for research may be led by the specific research questions.
- 10 Urmimala Sarkar Munsri, *Uday Shankar and His Transcultural Experimentations: Dancing Modernity* (Cham, Switzerland: Palgrave Macmillan, 2022), <https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-030-93224-4>.
- 11 See *Kalpana* (1948), YouTube, accessed September 12, 2023, [www.youtube.com/watch?v=HhsO\\_q1Y7kM](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=HhsO_q1Y7kM).
- 12 See Urmimala Sarkar Munsri, “Revisiting ‘Being Ram’: Playing a God in Changing Times,” in *Performing the Ramayana Tradition: Enactments, Interpretations, and Arguments*, ed. Paula Richman and Rustom Bharucha (New York: Oxford University Press, 2021), 281–97, <https://doi.org/10.1093/oso/9780197552506.001.0001>.
- 13 The word *Adivasi* (meaning ‘original inhabitants’ in Hindi) is used to refer to various ethnic groups considered to be the original inhabitants of the Indian subcontinent.
- 14 Kullu Dussehra, celebrated in the month of October in the northern Indian state of Himachal Pradesh, is a widely recognized, international Dussehra festival.
- 15 See “Himachal’s Kullu Natti Dussehra Dance Enters Guinness,” *The Quint*, [www.thequint.com/news/india/himachals-kullu-natti-dussehra-dance-enters-guinness](http://www.thequint.com/news/india/himachals-kullu-natti-dussehra-dance-enters-guinness), accessed August 9, 2023.
- 16 Nati is a dance from the upper Himachal area, which tells stories narrated through songs. The dance is performed in groups by dancers dressed in traditional colorful dresses, accompanied by popular music instruments, such as Dhol, Nagara, Shehnai, Karnal, and Narsinghe. Today’s Nati encompasses a variety of forms.
- 17 The Ajanta caves in the Aurangabad district of Maharashtra include twenty-nine Buddhist monuments that were carved into the rock between the second century BCE and 480 CE. On archaeological remains found in caves and architectural structures of ancient origin, see, for instance, Yashadatta S. Alone, “Buddhist Monuments & Society: A Case Study of Western Indian Buddhist Caves,” in *Art of Ancient India: Contextualizing Social Relations*, ed. Shivaji K. Panikkar and Abha Sheth (Baroda: Maharaja Sayajirao University of Baroda Press, 2004), 48–53. These sites were inhabited and carved by different guilds of artists over the centuries, leaving behind a unique resource of material culture that can be seen as visual ‘scores’ to some extent. The depicted bodies, which represent diversity and religious terms across several centuries, almost always assume dance postures, rather than natural human postures, even in depictions of everyday life.

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## 14 *RYXPER1126AE*, 2018

*Dorota Gawęda and Eglė Kulbokaitė*

Titled after its laboratory production name, Dorota Gawęda and Eglė Kulbokaitė's fragrance work *RYXPER1126AE* (Figure 14.1) is a synthetic molecular replica of the smell generated during the *SULK* performance (Figure 14.2) presented at ANTI—the 6th Athens Biennial, in 2018. It was produced in collaboration with a chemist, perfumer, and smell designer from International Flavors and Fragrances Inc., on the basis of the air samples captured on site with the use of headspace technology. *RYXPER1126AE* bears a poetic sign or memory of belonging to a collective experience, a sentiment of a shared moment. The work displays the artists' interest in treating smell as an olfactory method of documenting both performance and space, as well as the parallels this could offer in observing the passage from the virtual to the real. Scent is nomadic and volatile; when it is released it cannot be fully recaptured, fully undone. Smell is positioned outside of foregrounded awareness, navigating and activating our internal spaces according to procedures that defy easy explanation. Its molecules enter spaces, cavities, and receptors, and make bodies move a certain way, make them orient towards each other. *RYXPER1126AE* is exhibited in multiple ways, through industrial aroma diffusers, a *Censer* sculpture of polished steel (Figure 14.3), and surrounded by ghostly installations of *Leave No Trace* that bear the imagery of the same performance series (Figures 14.2 and Figure 14.4).



*Figure 14.1* Dorota Gawęda and Eglė Kulbokaitė, *RYXPER1126AE 02:60*, 2019. Industrial aroma diffuser mechanism, programmed at 02:60 interval, stainless steel, *RYXPER1126AE* fragrance (produced in collaboration with International Flavors and Fragrances Inc.). Photo: *RYXPER1126AE* exhibition, Trafo Gallery, Budapest. Courtesy of the artists.



*Figure 14.2* Dorota Gawęda and Eglė Kulbokaitė, *Leave No Trace (Milan) I–VI*, 2021. Aluminum, wood, digital print on chiffon. Photo: Fred Dott, *Magazine* exhibition, Kunstverein Hamburg. Courtesy of the artists.





*Figure 14.3* Dorota Gawęda and Eglė Kulbokaitė *Censer I*, 2023. Brushed aluminum; nebulizing mechanism; *RYXPER1126AE*, 2019 fragrance produced in collaboration with International Flavors and Fragrances Inc. Photo: *Marvelous Demons* exhibition, Centre Georges Pompidou, Paris. Courtesy of the artists.



*Figure 14.4* Dorota Gawęda and Eglė Kulbokaitė, *SULK* installation view. Photo: Herve Veronese, *Marvelous Demons* exhibition, Centre Georges Pompidou, Paris. Courtesy of the artists.

## 15 Gisela Hochuli

### *In Strange Hands*

*A conversation with Hanna B. Hölling,  
Jules Pelta Feldman, and Emilie Magnin*

Following two colloquia in the “Performance: Conservation, Materiality, Knowledge” research project, the team (Hanna B. Hölling, Jules Pelta Feldman, and Emilie Magnin) met with Swiss-based performance artist Gisela Hochuli. For each of these occasions, Hochuli crafted a unique performance. Hochuli’s practice centers around performance-based work, encompassing its activation, teaching, and collaboration with fellow artists. She embraces working with readily available elements such as her body, space, audience, and site-specific materials. Hochuli’s interests lie in investigating objects, focusing on specific elements, viewing objects as partners, embracing simplicity and its diversity, exploring everyday life, revealing the extraordinary within the ordinary, exploring transformations, and adopting a subversive perspective.

*Hanna B. Hölling:* Gisela, you presented your performance, *In Strange Hands I*, at our inaugural colloquium on May 30, 2021 (Figures 15.1 and 15.2).<sup>1</sup> The performance consisted of a live moment and a preparation phase in which you invited participants to send performance instructions to you. I’m curious about the thinking behind this performance and what inspired you to bring it to life. How did you come up with the idea of soliciting instructions from the participants?

*Gisela Hochuli:* Performance instructions are akin to cooking instructions or recipes. I have been working with performance instructions for several years because they offer the possibility of being executed differently each time by different individuals. The way an action is carried out or something is expressed, the timing, the bodily movements—everything varies from person to person. A performance instruction is essentially a written expression of an individual, and therefore possesses authorship. Intrigued by all of this, in 2017, I began collecting performance instructions from artists. I requested that

the artists not only provide written instructions but also record them in audio form, allowing the participants to hear the artist's voice as they speak the instructions. This adds a personal and artistic touch to the instructions. A selection of these spoken performance instructions has also been showcased in exhibitions. They are played as audio through headphones, and visitors have the opportunity to listen to these instructions. Some instructions can be enacted, while others may not be feasible due to certain material factors or surreal elements. They can be short poems, lyrical compositions, or simple neutral actions. They may also involve actions that go beyond the capabilities of our bodies or our human abilities. I find the diversity of these instructions fascinating.

In 2019, I was invited for the first time to create a performance based on these instructions and present it at the art venue Akku in Emmenbrücke, near Lucerne, during the exhibition opening. Within the exhibition, visitors could listen to the performance instructions through three sets of headphones. The performance lasted for forty minutes and was inspired by fifteen performance instructions from different artists. Although a set of instructions prescribes something, during the creation of the performance, I discovered that I still had to make decisions, as each set of instructions



Figure 15.1 Gisela Hochuli, *In Strange Hands I*, May 30, 2021. Leftover scores, “Conserve this performance.”



Figure 15.2 Gisela Hochuli, *In Strange Hands I*, May 30, 2021. Leftover scores, “Conserve this performance,” scattered on the steps of Kunstmuseum Bern.

allowed room for interpretation. I titled this work *In Strange Hands* because the instructions were not mine, but rather belonged to others and were now in my possession, so to speak. This is how the *In Strange Hands* series came about, in which each performance is interpreted by me using instructions that are foreign—originating from others. The title is indeed very fitting, as the authorship of the instructions lies not with me but with someone else. I take them into my hands, interpret them, and bring them to life, incorporating them into the space with my body—whatever is necessary to interpret them. In collaboration together, we came up with the idea of involving the colloquium participants in a participatory manner by having them contribute performance instructions. It then becomes my task to perform these instructions.

*Hölling:* You presented your work *In Strange Hands* at both of our colloquia, titling them *In Strange Hands I* (May 30, 2021) and *In Strange Hands II* (September 30, 2022, Figures 15.3, 15.4, and 15.5).<sup>2</sup> How did your thinking evolve in terms of conception and execution?

*Hochuli:* The first time, there were only a few instructions, specifically three: one from you, Hanna, one from Jules, and one from Valerian Maly and Klara Schilliger. With a twenty-minute performance, I had ample time to devote to each instruction. This was, of course, a completely different approach compared to the second version, where I worked with twenty performance instructions.

Initially, we were all a bit disappointed that only those three instructions were received. However, during our discussions—Hanna, Jules, Emilie, Valerian, and myself—we came up with the idea of making it a requirement for colloquium participants to submit an instruction. This introduced some pressure or compulsion for participants to come up with an instruction for the colloquium. As a result, we received around sixty entries, with approximately fifty instructions and the remainder consisting of comments like “Sorry, I am unable to provide this,” or “unclear to me.” So, in total, we had about fifty instructions, which was a huge number. Now you have a great pool of instructions to draw from. That’s fantastic. I then reviewed the fifty instructions and selected those that were feasible, that fit within the framework of the colloquium, and excluded those that were too complicated or didn’t appeal to me personally, or weren’t interesting in this context. Eventually, I settled on about twenty instructions, which is quite a lot for a twenty-minute performance—approximately one instruction per minute. Given the number of instructions and the time constraints, I decided to perform a table-based performance. This allowed me to set up all the materials on the table and perform behind or around it. There was this beautiful instruction, “Kiss your friend’s eyes,” which prompted me to step away from the table and kiss Jules’s eyelid. But apart from that, everything took place either on or behind the table. I made the decision to condense the entire performance. Table performances are almost a separate genre within performance art, often practiced by older performance artists who may not want to move around as much anymore.

The first performance with the three instructions, in May 2021, during your first colloquium, had a more immersive presence in the room. There was this wonderful phrase from Jules, “conserve this performance,” and your instruction, Hanna, to “rain.” I threw 30,000 pieces of paper printed with “conserve this performance” out of the window of the PROGR in Bern. There was a strong wind, and it became a spectacular sight as the slips of paper scattered through the air, creating a long rain of “conserve this performance” towards the Kunstmuseum Bern. It was truly impressive. At that moment, when I released the slips of paper, it was beyond my control. There were other forces at play. In the second performance, there was hardly any of that natural momentum, that interplay of other forces. Everything was essentially determined by me. Perhaps the egg I cooked had its own distinct momentum. But overall, you could say it was more of a typical action or sequential performance, one action following another.



*Figure 15.3* Gisela Hochuli, *In Strange Hands II*, September 30, 2022. “Please perform an action that you could not do in front of a live audience.”



*Figure 15.4* Gisela Hochuli, *In Strange Hands II*, September 30, 2022. “1. Project a shadow over the other side of this page 2. Observe the boundary between the shadow and the lighted part 3. Become the boundary line.”



Figure 15.5 Gisela Hochuli, *In Strange Hands II*, September 30, 2022. “Kiss your friend’s eyes (literally or metaphorically).”

*Jules Pelta Feldman:* You just mentioned something very intriguing: “other forces.” It seems that other forces are particularly significant in the *In Strange Hands* performances. It appears important for you to engage in a performance where you don’t have complete control and where you may not know exactly what will happen.

*Hochuli:* I believe it happens when I delve deeper or spend more time exploring something. It can occur because of external forces like nature, the wind, or even the audience. There can be a certain momentum in the interaction with the audience. In performance, repetition or even elements of ritual are sometimes employed to bring the artist into a different state of energy. That’s when uncontrolled things can happen. It depends on the artist’s intention. I can surrender myself completely to an intuitive, open flow, or I can maintain control by executing exactly what I had planned, but sometimes it just becomes uncontrolled [laughs], or it’s a mixture of both. It also spills over to the audience. This can also happen with religious rituals. The atmosphere changes, the energy shifts, and, as a spectator, I undergo a transformation, too. I experience something, and I am a different person after the performance. This is often the case with ritualistic or repetitive performances, even if they are not always identical.

*Pelta Feldman:*

On one hand, it could be said that these are instructions from others and that you relinquish control to others. However, you are still the one interpreting these instructions and ultimately deciding how things unfold and how they are to be understood. This was particularly evident with the poetic instructions you mentioned—some of them were more like poems. Even with something as simple as “ten” or “seven”—numbers that were probably included because someone didn’t want to write instructions—the decision is still yours on how to handle them.

*Hochuli:*

I found those numbers and letters interesting because they remind me of a type of performance direction that is also prevalent in Spain and France. It has different names: *poésie sonore*, *poesia acción*. This kind of performance goes beyond mere verbal performance and incorporates playing with numbers and letters. It’s fascinating to see that some people didn’t want to or couldn’t write complex instructions, so they simply typed a zero or the letter Y to fill in that field and continue with the registration. I incorporated these letters and numbers into my performance by cutting them out on cardboard and displaying them as visual elements around the room. Another noteworthy example is the instruction “Eat a whole lemon.” Many performance artists have attempted this, as there are performance directions that focus on exploring the limits of the body. A well-known example is Marina Abramović, who ate an onion. In my case, I chose to bite into the lemon instead of consuming it whole. If I had eaten the entire lemon, it would have taken around ten minutes and completely changed my facial expression because it’s so sour. It certainly would have been interesting, but considering the numerous other instructions, I decided to bite into the lemon every once in a while, and then place it on the table as a sculpture.

*Emilie Magnin:*

I must say, it was also very impressive for me last year when those “conserve this performance” papers descended and drifted towards the Kunstmuseum Bern, where I work as a conservator. This naturally raises questions about how you understand the preservation of your own performance. What should be conserved and what shouldn’t? How do you see your role in this process, as well as the role of others, such as the museum, institutions, or the audience?



*Hochuli:*

As a young performer, I was highly interested in the work of older performance artists. During my studies in fine art at ZHdK in Zurich from 2001 to 2005, I specialized in performance art. For my final thesis, I conducted interviews with three performance artists. I had role models like Marina Abramović, whose catalog I owned, and I had visited her exhibition at the Kunstmuseum Bern in the late 1990s. I had access to documents of well-known performance movements like Viennese Actionism. However, I found very little information about performance artists in my immediate environment. This prompted me to interview three individuals for my thesis: Barbara Sturm from Basel, who was active at that time and around my age; Muda Mathis from Basel; and Norbert Klassen from Bern. Through these interviews, I learned a lot about the nature of performance art. The project became a video work, which I titled *The Essence of Performance Art* (2005), and which included interviews and excerpts from performances by these three artists. I found it incredibly interesting to hear about their work, sources of inspiration, and preparations for performances.

At that time, there was a scarcity of documentation available. This is why I am delighted with the progress that has been made in archiving performances nowadays. Norbert Klassen was particularly influential to me as a performer and as a person. We often had tea together, and our discussions played a significant role in the development of my work during that time. Norbert passed away in 2011. I conducted another interview with him in 2010. I also conducted interviews with the members of Black Market International and collaborated with Christopher Hewitt on a DVD edition published in 2012. The DVD featured interviews and excerpts from their group performances from 2007. I had to generate my own material because there was a dearth of information about how artists work and why they work that way. Of course, I also witnessed live performances by Black Market International, Norbert Klassen, and my colleagues. However, documentation is crucial for reflection, further contemplation, and the analysis of performance art. Therefore, I strongly advocate for the archiving of performances.

Documented performances are essential for me as an artist to comprehend and appreciate the varied approaches within the field. Observing how others work differently from me, discovering similarities with certain artists, and realizing unexplored possibilities all contribute to my growth. It prompts me to question why someone does something in a particular manner. Therefore, performance art documentation helps me organize, reflect on, and further my own work. It also holds significance for young students, who can gain

insight into the accomplishments of artists like Norbert Klassen, Janet Hauffer, Ruedi Schill, and others. Since these artists are no longer alive, students cannot witness their performances firsthand. Scripts, videos, photographs, and other forms of documentation offer a window into the history of performance art and help in understanding the work of earlier artists. These artists have always been important role models for me as well.

Documenting my own performance work is also important to me. I strive to maintain order on my hard drives, particularly during the winter when I have more time to label and organize photos and videos. Although this task involves spending numerous hours at the computer, reviewing the images and footage stimulates the development of my work.

*Hölling:* An instruction inherently possesses the potential for repetition and reenactment. By executing the instruction, you give the performance a certain authority and create a realization that can be of interest to others in the future, or serve as material for reenactment.

*Hochuli:* Absolutely, it is indeed possible for someone else to reenact the performance exactly as I did it. The instructions can serve as a basis for someone else to develop their own interpretation and create a performance. Now that there is a pool of sixty instructions, it opens up the potential for action. It's an invitation that should be utilized.

*Pelta Feldman:* Gisela, what role does video play for you? You mentioned its importance in documenting your work. What do you learn from watching the recordings? Are there aspects that cannot be captured on video?

*Hochuli:* I believe it varies significantly depending on the individual who uses it. During a performance, I have an internal viewpoint. As I mentioned before, each performance affects me personally. Presenting my performance is a gift because it allows me to give shape to my artistic expression. There is an audience watching, and I can feel the energy that arises between the audience and myself. That's why it's often beneficial for me to know the number of people who will be present, whether it's three or 120, because it influences how I use my energy and presence. When I perform, it's both wonderful and fragile. I expose myself to the audience, and, while performing, I tap into both strength and vulnerability. That's why I can't watch the video immediately after the performance. I need time to transition back to my normal everyday life and establish a certain distance. Then I'm very glad to watch the video.

For me, video is a tool for work. I understand that the perspective offered by the video is not the same as that experienced by the live

audience. It provides a different viewpoint, and the energy captured is often more subdued. However, what the medium does offer is an external perspective on my work. I use it to identify aspects I like, aspects I like less, and moments of surprise in my performance. It allows me to see where I can continue and explore further, and it reveals new, interesting approaches. Additionally, it enables me to observe the spatial composition and aesthetics, both of which are important aspects of my work.

When I watch others' performances on video, I find it intriguing to observe how other artists work. If I couldn't attend a live performance, watching it on video gives me the opportunity to experience it. But I must admit that I don't do this often because the live moment is irreplaceable. The exception is performances by artists who have already passed away. Some people argue that photos are superior to videos. I'm somewhat conflicted about this because a photo is often a work of art in its own right, transcending mere documentation. With video, the camera accompanies the performance, while photography captures a moment in an image. I appreciate analyzing the composition of photos, including factors like the golden ratio, color schemes, and the interplay of materials. As a visually oriented person, I'm fascinated by well-composed images, but they can sometimes shift the focus away from the performance itself.

*This conversation took place in October 2022.*

—  
***In Strange Hands II: Instructions submitted by the participants ahead of the colloquium Performance Conservation: Interdisciplinary Perspectives in September 2022.***

To think a thought

I don't have specific preference

Interpret Mieko Shiomi's Fluxus score: *Shadow Piece II*, 1964

1. Project a shadow over the other side of this page
2. Observe the boundary between the shadow and the lighted part
3. Become the boundary line

Bring Your Own Light.

Bring Your Own Body.

Bring Your Own Animal.

Bring Your Own Liquid.

Bring Your Own Breath.

Bring Your Own CO<sub>2</sub>.

Bring Your Own Illusion.

Think of a dream you had when you were a child.

den moment atmen

take a moment to care for the body; rest, drink water, breathe.

Crack egg

Y

Breathe deeply and yawn

I refuse to create situations instead of the artists

find urgency in your relationship with flowers and plants. what does it mean (bodily and imaginatively) to build human–non-human companionship around urgency?

0

I move to see, I move to pause

7

kiss your friend's eyes (literally or metaphorically)

Will email later

10

Scratch behind the left ear twice.

Sorry, I am unable to provide this.

Find the elegance in an awkward gesture.

Verstehe nicht, was damit gemeint ist

Meditate

Threshold. Damnation.

Stand on one foot and speak a sentence about silence.

Schneide deine Fussnägel und bilde daraus eine Skulptur.

Eat a whole lemon.

Count backwards from 51 to 43

trage bitte einen gleichbleibenden vokal durch den raum

Close first the left eye and then the right eye, think for an arbitrarily long moment you are in a forest and experience all seasons in this moment. Open first the right eye, then the left eye

Say: "Tenderness is everything"

Breathe in deeply, close your eyes, choose a pleasing sound around you

Count your heartbeats.

use a light source (or absence of a light source) to obscure your image in the zoom window

Look.

washing dishes

Discriminate to reach equity.

Draw a snowflake and smile.

Press mute. Then tell a secret.

in the morning there is meaning

Dream that your dead ancestors walk by your side once again

Performance instruction: Find a surface in your close environs. Breathe into it. Breathe with it.

Phone a friend.

Repeat what you remember doing from the same interval of time in your previous day

Allow silence to breathe.

Your thoughts about gesture and silent film?

a unique way of eye blinking

Show with your hands how happy you are with the colloquium so far!:)

Select an object of great personal significance to you. Show the object or a representation of the object to the audience. Describe it visually. Describe how you came to be the guardian of the object that you shepherd through time, and why it is significant to you. Reflect, in words or bodily action, how the object makes you feel. Meditate on its destruction. Reflect, in words or bodily action, how its destruction could make you feel (note: If that becomes too painful, remember that it will not be destroyed today).

Authenticity

unclear to me

Jump!

Follow a line.

Mieko Shiomi

< portrait piece >

1963

transpose lines of a poem or a sentence into a different (non-verbal) human or non-human language—means for example being expressed through gestures, or body language in general or whining or howling or anything else . . .

Please perform an action that you could not do in front of a live audience

## Notes

- 1 “Performance Interlude: Gisela Hochuli, *In Strange Hands*,” first annual colloquium, Performance: The Ethics and the Politics of Care, May 30, 2021, SNSF Performance Conservation (YouTube channel), accessed February 19, 2024, <https://youtu.be/LQAIJ0DM59E?t=6499>.
- 2 “Gisela Hochuli—*In Strange Hands II*, 2022,” live performance on the occasion of Performance Conservation: Interdisciplinary Perspectives, second annual colloquium, SNSF Performance Conservation (YouTube channel), accessed February 19, 2024, [www.youtube.com/watch?v=0d7AU-mfGC8&ab\\_channel=SNSFPerformanceConservation](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=0d7AU-mfGC8&ab_channel=SNSFPerformanceConservation).

## 16 Joanna Leśnierowska

### Performance conservation as a political act

#### *A conversation with Hanna B. Hölling*

Joanna Leśnierowska, an independent choreographer, curator, visual dramaturge, and light and space composer, met with Hanna B. Hölling to explore the possibility and various forms of conserving performance. Leśnierowska, one of the first dance critics in Poland, has extensive international experience in lecturing on Polish choreography. She brings a unique perspective, combining her insights into performance and choreography with her vast knowledge of their preservation. With her role as a founder and curator of the Old Brewery New Dance, a choreographic development program at Art Station Foundation in Poznań, and the Aciun Susch performance program at the Museum Susch, Leśnierowska has now shifted her focus to critically examine the afterlives and longevity of performance and dance within the research project “Performance: Conservation, Materiality, Knowledge.”

*Hanna B. Hölling:* Joanna, you have been a member of our project “Performance: Conservation, Materiality, Knowledge” since 2023. Yet there is one essential question I have yet to ask you: Can performance be conserved, in your view?

*Joanna Leśnierowska:* I’ll begin with a confession: I have reservations about the terms ‘conservation’ and ‘preservation.’ To me, these words conjure associations with biological laboratories and medical studies where we encounter preserved fetuses and body parts in large jars. It’s an image that has always struck me as somewhat unsettling, as it implies that something that was once alive has now been rendered lifeless, forever encased in an unusual form and colors. When I hear terms like ‘performance conservation’ or ‘performance preservation,’ it sends a shiver down my spine. Instead, I’d propose we seek an alternative term for something so vital. What I truly believe in is the idea of extending the life of a performance, of keeping it vibrant and alive. The central question for me is: How can we

ensure that a performance, and choreography, continues to thrive and endure? Can the tools traditionally associated with conservation and preservation achieve this?

For me, the paramount question centers on how we can sustain the vitality of performance and whether, through the tools of conservation, we can achieve this. Can we transform an inherently transient art form like performance or choreography into something with a longer lifespan? Moreover, what does this extended life signify? These are profound questions.

In my heart, the term ‘cultivation’ holds a special place. This is because cultivation embodies the act of nurturing and tending to something, much like caring for a garden or tending to precious plants in our homes. It reflects the commitment to keeping something fresh, vibrant, and enduring. Therefore, I would propose the replacement of ‘conservation’ and ‘preservation’ with the word ‘cultivation.’ This shift immediately brings forth the concept of conservation as an expression of care. This perspective carries significant importance for me, particularly in light of my professional journey, especially the initial seventeen years I devoted to operating a choreography development center in Poland, within Art Stations Foundation/Old Brewery New Dance program in Poznań.<sup>1</sup> During this time, I worked tirelessly to introduce a new generation of dance makers to the world and to ensure that the discourse surrounding choreography and the artworks themselves continued to thrive and grow.

This is essentially a form of permaculture that has always captivated me. It’s what excites me when we delve into discussions about crafting ephemeral art that’s not just profoundly poetic but remains palpably concrete and grounded in the body, live and alive. The goal is to keep it alive, far beyond what many, especially those outside professional performance and choreography, might deem possible.

So to answer your question, I firmly believe that performance can be cultivated, not only the actual performance pieces but also the ongoing life of performance as a whole. This encompasses taking care of the people involved in creating performance. By extending our care to artists and the individuals connected to performance production, we can ensure the longevity and growth of this art form, surpassing our expectations. During my seventeen years of leading a choreographic development center, I often pondered how to etch the works of choreography that I deemed highly significant into the memory of audiences and the annals of history. Their importance transcends mere artistic success, whatever that term may entail (and let’s not venture into this topic).

And still, within the seventeen-year curriculum of the choreographic center, there have undeniably been works that have played a seminal role in the development of choreography in our country [Poland]. It’s heart-wrenching to witness these works being performed only a handful of times, or, at best, receiving international exposure on a limited scale, often not extending far

beyond the field of choreography or contemporary dance. It's compounded by the restricted access that audiences have to these significant works. The perennial question remains: How can we ensure that these vital, seminal works can reach broader audiences and leave an enduring mark on our collective consciousness? How can they persist beyond a single season? This question is intrinsically tied to the broader inquiry about whether performance can be preserved, and it underscores the significance of conserving, preserving, and cultivating performance as a means to ensure that historically significant and relevant works endure. This is crucial in regions with underdeveloped dance histories and infrastructure, such as Poland and many other Eastern European countries. In these contexts, the cultivation and preservation of choreographic and performance works become crucial political tasks for establishing a historical archive and legacy. It's not just a matter of art; it's a matter of a nation's cultural identity and heritage.

The goal is to ignite the imaginations of countless artists and audiences, providing them with something memorable. It's about helping them build their own identities within the art form and creating a lineage of works that they can connect with, engage in a dialogue with, and draw from as a well-spring of communal memory. This repository becomes a resource we can always turn to, especially in the challenging moments when we strive to sustain the art form.

In my view, one of the most crucial aspects of performance cultivation and preservation is the establishment of archives and the documentation of the history of an art form that may not be as widely recognized in its home country.

Of course, the question of how to cultivate, preserve, and conserve performance could be discussed at length, spanning hours, days, and months. In fact, you've been engaging in this endeavor for nearly four years [in the project "Performance: Conservation, Materiality, Knowledge"], and it's a journey that continues to unfold. What makes it so exciting is that the natural inclination for preserving performance often begins with documentation. This includes capturing choreography on video, recording the works, creating photographic archives, and collecting comprehensive background information about the creative process. So these documents from the creative process, as well as the remnants and artifacts from the practices that contributed to the performance's creation, are undoubtedly essential. However, I must confess that this kind of archiving sometimes evokes a medical approach to preservation for me. It's important to acknowledge that, even with thorough documentation and an extensive collection of materials, our access to the true essence of the performance remains limited. I've always questioned whether these well-established, traditional methods are truly the most suitable means of preserving and ensuring a lasting memory and understanding of the seminal performance we aim to protect.

My belief is that choreography and, by extension, performance art, is an encounter between an artist and an emancipated spectator.<sup>2</sup> It's a platform



for the exchange of ideas, demanding responses from the audience. Spectators bring their individual backgrounds, sensitivities, and perspectives to the performance, thereby creating a dialogue between the stage and the audience.

So the real question becomes: What should we genuinely preserve and what should we focus on when discussing the conservation and cultivation of performance? Is it primarily the tangible aspects of the performance, such as the concrete steps and the specific notes from the choreographer that led to its creation? Or should we also consider the audience's experience, how they received the performance? This encompasses their private lives, but more importantly, the social, political, and critical historical context that lent meaning and relevance to the performance. It's crucial to contemplate whether we can replicate these conditions to ensure that the performance's impact will be similarly relevant for the next generation of audiences that will encounter it.

Indeed, this discussion leads us to a fundamental question: Should we strive to reconstruct performances exactly as they were originally created, or should we focus on reactivating them by examining what was truly relevant to the reception of the performance? This approach allows us to restage and reproduce similar effects, but with an understanding that the audience encountering the work may come from entirely different social, political, and historical backgrounds. To illustrate this point, let's consider the recent example of the pandemic. I am convinced that audiences before and after the pandemic will interpret performances in profoundly different ways, shaped by their personal experiences during this global crisis. As long as we are aware of this, the practice of performance preservation extends far beyond archiving and documenting the physical artifact. It becomes intricately connected to the specific moment when the performance was first created and shared with its audience.

*Hölling:* Thank you, Joanna. I can't help but reflect on the fact that you and I are currently on two different continents—you in Berlin and me in Brasilia, in the heart of Brazil. You've worked on the Polish choreographer and dancer Yanka Rudzka, who, while born in Poland, was highly active in Brazil. You closely tracked her career and artistic endeavors here and embarked on a remarkable project involving an experimental reconstruction of her work.<sup>3</sup> Could you please share more about this project?

*Leśnierowska:* In 2013, I visited VIVADANÇA, a dance festival in Salvador, Bahia, Brazil, to learn more about the local dance scene. Totally unexpectedly, I stumbled upon what turned out to be my own dance history and learned about a choreographer named Yanka Rudzka [1916–2008] who had left Poland after World War II, only to become one of the most prominent

figures in modern dance in the Bahia region. It was astonishing that in contemporary Poland, virtually no one had ever heard of Rudzka. This discovery immediately ignited my interest and led to a project that symbolically brought Yanka Rudzka back home and secured her a place in the history books. It also inspired an artistic journey to explore the roots of traditional, non-stylized culture and beyond.

One of the most challenging aspects of this project was the realization that there are very few remnants of Yanka Rudzka's artistic work in Bahia. She had been active there in the late 1950s, a time when there were no video recordings of performances and modern dance had limited presence in the press. But the memory of her work has continued to live through a few artists and individuals, now in their seventies and eighties, who recall working with her or witnessing her performances firsthand. Additionally, there are photographs taken by a photographer, Silvio Robatto, who fell in love with one of Rudzka's principal dancers, Lia Robatto (later an amazing choreographer herself). Driven by this affection, Silvio documented the company, leaving behind a valuable collection of performance photographs. Thanks to this love affair, we gain a precious glimpse into some of Rudzka's works.

Rudzka came to Salvador to establish the first-ever higher education program in dance in Brazil, at the Federal University of Bahia. What made her work particularly significant was, on the one hand, her unwavering belief that the education of a dancer needs to be far more complex than one may traditionally imagine. She introduced a comprehensive approach, inspired by the principles of the Bauhaus in Europe, insisting that dance artists should delve into theater, literature, poetry, and the visual arts, in addition to modern expressionistic dance. But even more importantly, she was deeply fascinated by Afro-Brazilian traditional culture, which was at the time very unappreciated and which is still closely tied to the Candomblé religion introduced to Brazil by enslaved Africans. With a rich pantheon of deities known as 'Orixas' and a fascinating musical tradition (it is said that every Orixá has its own samba), Rudzka examined its rituals and dances, incorporating them into her stage work. She truly believed that contemporary art could never truly develop without an understanding of its complex history and without drawing from these traditional sources.

When I made the decision to dedicate a significant portion of my professional life to researching Yanka Rudzka, it raised the question of whether I could effectively reconstruct her work from the scarce remnants of her practice and performances that I had managed to unearth. I soon realized that my primary interest lay not in replicating her work verbatim but in reconstructing and following her profound engagement with traditional culture. Following Rudzka's gesture of humble examination of local folk tradition, and then bold artistic weaving of its elements into her artistic work, had the remarkable effect of enabling me to reconnect contemporary artists with

their own roots and traditional cultures, and to question their relevance to contemporary practice. Thus, my focus shifted towards preserving her interest in traditional culture rather than focusing on the literal steps of Yanka's performances (Figures 16.1, 16.2, 16.3, and 16.4).



*Figure 16.1* The Yanka Rudzka Project: Leavening, presentation within Old Brewery New Dance at Malta Festival, Poznań, 2017. Photograph by Jakub Wittchen, courtesy of Art Stations Foundation.



*Figure 16.2* The Yanka Rudzka Project: Leavening, presentation within Old Brewery New Dance at Malta Festival, Poznań, 2017. Photograph by Jakub Wittchen, courtesy of Art Stations Foundation.



*Figure 16.3* The Yanka Rudzka Project: Polyphonies (2018), Studio Słodownia +3, Poznań. Photograph by Katarzyna Kłudczyńska, courtesy of Art Stations Foundation.



*Figure 16.4* The Yanka Rudzka Project: Polyphonies (2018), Studio Słodownia +3, Poznań. Photograph by Maciej Zakrzewski, courtesy of Art Stations Foundation.

Instead of attempting to reproduce exactly what Yanka did on stage in the 1950s, which I recognized would be more of a confabulation, a distortion and misappropriation of the limited elements I had encountered, my aim was to recreate a process that evoked the spirit of her work. In this case, I had no interest in speculating how her works might have appeared, although

I acknowledge that speculation and exploring alternative versions of history can be a captivating means of preserving performance and igniting the imagination of both audiences and artists.

This realization brings up an interesting facet of performance conservation and preservation, one that primarily centers on the transmission of knowledge from one body to another, as is often seen in folk culture. It revolves around how we can pass down the knowledge and embodied experiences through generations by sharing gestures, traditions, rituals, and distinct practices devised by those who have come before us, enabling the transfer of this knowledge to a new generation.

This is also why I'm thrilled to be a part of a research project [Performance: Conservation, Materiality, Knowledge] that is currently deeply engaged in this expanded understanding of preservation. It's incredibly exciting to contribute to this reflection, drawing not only from my own professional journey but also from my knowledge of numerous dance artists who dedicate their lives to historical practices, bringing them into the present as a living legacy. In this way, they inspire countless young artists with the information, gestures, and practices of their artistic predecessors, their dance ancestors, mothers, fathers, and grandparents. They establish a vibrant and enduring lineage, reinforcing the belief that we are not alone in the world. There is a history, a past, and where there is a past taken into the present, there is undoubtedly also a future for the art form itself.

*Hölling:* You mentioned something quite intriguing—the idea that speculation might play a role in the persistence of performance through change. Could you expand on this concept?

*Leśnierowska:* We are acutely aware that in the contemporary world, many regions still grapple with a dearth of infrastructure, adequate funding, promotion, and, perhaps most significantly, a lack of knowledge about the history of choreography, dance, and performance. In such contexts, what can we preserve when we have limited access to what transpired before us, or when we struggle to connect with the history of choreography or performance in our countries?

This is where speculation assumes a vital role. Used as a tool, it empowers us to creatively invent alternative versions of history, sometimes rooted in the fossils of information and, sometimes, drawing from our desires and dreams of the artistic lineage we wish to be a part of. Speculation allows us to define our identity and propel it into the future.

In this context, I'd like to highlight a fascinating project I witnessed in the Polish context. Curated by Edyta Kozak, Janusz Marek, and Sabine Gehm, it unfolded in 2005 during a Polish-German cultural exchange year, which brought together artists from various locations in Poland and Germany. The project's concept was to transport these artists to a mountainous

retreat, providing a serene and secluded environment amidst the beauty of the landscape. Here, they could get to know each other, collaborate, and create collectively, harnessing the silence and safety of the mountains. The initial phase of this meeting commenced on a rather somber note, with artists discovering that they had very little in common in terms of their artistic backgrounds and trajectories. Faced with this realization and the challenge of initiating a collaboration, the artists decided to pivot by preparing a dinner and sharing some drinks. From this lengthy night of deliberation and camaraderie, a creative idea emerged: What if they were to imagine a figure in their shared history who could unify their communities and connect their diverse backgrounds?

And so this group of artists gave life to Veronika Blumstein, a fictional choreographer.<sup>4</sup> Veronika became a symbolic bridge between different communities and histories, representing a Jewish artist born in Krakow but deeply intertwined with the German Expressionist tradition. She served as a unifying force, bringing together Jews, Poles, and Germans within one artistic persona. Together, the artists embarked on reconstructing the works of Veronika Blumstein. This endeavor allowed them to realize that history could have taken entirely different paths and inspired them to search for more commonalities that could unite German, Polish, and Jewish artists. This collaborative effort led to a reimagining of history in a positive and empowering manner, encouraging artists to explore bold investigations and foster collaborations.

In this surge of imagination, not only did Veronika Blumstein come to life, but also a new approach to thinking about choreographic history was born. I firmly believe that it is our responsibility as artists, particularly considering how modern dance has often been misappropriated by various ideologies and political powers, to reclaim our gestures, choreographies, and artists. We must rescue them from the clutches of political propaganda and restore them to their rightful place—within the bodies of artists, the bodies of people, and the collective consciousness of nations and societies.

Dance, as an art form, has frequently been manipulated for political agendas—to mention only the most well-known examples, of the Nazis in Germany using *Ausdruckstanz* (expressive dance) as a propaganda tool, and, after the war, how the folk dances of Eastern European countries were co-opted by nationalistic and communist governments for political propaganda. In this regard, preserving traditional movements and dances by contemporary artists and scholars is a profoundly political gesture. It is an act of reclaiming traditions and reinstating them as a testament to their original purpose—the building of communities, the fostering of harmony through organized movement, and understanding them as a living legacy of a society that stands apart from the political agendas of tyrannies and ideologies that aim to control and subdue our bodies, both individually and collectively.

In this context, speculation and reactivation of traditional gestures and choreographies play a crucial role. These actions are particularly relevant for communities grappling with gaps in their dance history or those that have

experienced misappropriation of their dances in the past. Revising the history of dance holds immense significance for the future, influencing an entire generation of artists and audiences. As we all inhabit bodies, and as it is essential for us to reconnect with our bodies, I strongly believe that we would be a profoundly different community—a different society—if we all embraced the understanding that we are sensing, feeling, and thinking bodies.

So I am perpetually intrigued by this dimension of performance preservation, conservation, and cultivation. It extends beyond ensuring that certain artists' names remain in history and that specific works and practices are preserved as pivotal for the future. What's truly at stake is the future of entire communities, not just artists but also societies as a whole.

*Hölling:* If we consider conservation and cultivation as a form of political gesture, you're right on point. On the one hand, you've highlighted how certain political systems, particularly in the former East, perpetuated specific forms of dance and performance while also misappropriating them. On the other hand, the act of selecting what to preserve is inherently political, as for every performance that is preserved, numerous others are left out of the historical narrative. This underscores the highly political nature of preservation.

*Leśnierowska:* History is akin to a vast net and, as we fish through it, many items inevitably slip through the holes. It is, indeed, a deeply political process. Every choice we make, every decision about what to highlight and make visible, inherently involves politics. We are determining what to place in the spotlight and what to leave in the shadows. Consequently, I believe that those of us engaged in archiving, documenting, and shaping the history of art bear a significant responsibility on a political level. It is our duty to consider the implications of our choices and how they influence the futures of our communities and societies.

*Hölling:* I'd like to explore a personal dimension here. You wear many hats—you're a choreographer, a dancer, and a dramaturge. How does cultivation feel as a lived experience? How does it resonate with you in your personal life? How do you feel that you embody the principles of conservation and cultivation through your practice, especially when considering your role as a creator and a dancer, rather than from a curatorial standpoint?

*Leśnierowska:* That's a compelling question because my art practice is closely intertwined with my interest in visual arts. As a visual dramaturge and light designer, I am profoundly invested in the creation and composition of images. When creating light for performances, I am particularly intrigued by the ephemerality

of images, a concept I also explore by dwelling in and examining areas of shadow and liminal shifts of visibility—nuances that cannot be effectively captured through photography or video. While we often discuss the challenges of conserving the ephemeral art of performance, just imagine the level of ephemerality when it comes to the choreography of light!

Throughout my career, I've grappled with the challenge of documenting my performances. It often feels as though my works only truly exist through the embodied experience of the moment when they are presented and watched. Recently, I've come to realize that I am more interested in reactivation and building upon each subsequent performance with the next work in line, which I frequently do. This also relates to the discussion about breaking the vicious circle of overproduction and the constant search for 'new' materials. Instead, it's a call for a zero-waste policy within the field of performance. My approach to conservation and preservation involves the development of creative strategies and practices of recycling and upcycling movement materials. That leads to an insistence on extending their lifespan beyond a single creation and building choreography on the previously developed movement and visual vocabularies. This way, the performance evolves into a sort of palimpsest or self-palimpsest, preserving all the layers.

That leads me to the concept of traditional conservation tools that you once shared with me, particularly the use of X-rays in painting conservation. I found this methodology quite intriguing as it allows conservators to examine the layers of paintings, revealing how the work has evolved and been layered over different moments during its creation and existence. I apply this idea to my own work, imagining what an X-ray of my recent performances would show. It would undoubtedly unveil the necessary layers that have accumulated from the very inception of my journey in stage work.

Thinking about archiving and documentation, I find it far more captivating to seek visual representations of my performances that stimulate imagination, rather than attempting to preserve something that is intangible and ungraspable even to the naked eye, not to mention cameras and video recordings. My focus is on creating visual representations that bring audiences closer to an essence of performance, which is, I believe, to stir emotion and awaken association rather than just offering a glimpse into what once existed but is now gone. I remember that this practice was already in place when I used to write about dance. I used to question various modes of performance description as part of a process aimed at evoking images, allowing the reader to imagine how the performance was presented on stage, as well as the meanings and impressions it triggered for the audience.

In this context, I am immensely intrigued by the potential of preserving performances through the art of comics. I see a parallel between choreography and comics in the way they both rely on the viewer's active engagement to connect sequential images or frames. Just as comics require a reader to



bridge the gap between frames and activate the story—and directly its movement—choreography needs an audience to come alive and acquire meaning through embodied perception. I anticipate experimenting with documenting my performances using the language of comics in the future.

I'm also enthusiastic about the idea of passing on my work to a new generation of artists, allowing them to take my choreography and translate it into their own interpretations. I understand that their version will not replicate the original performance but will be another iteration, shaped by the performers themselves and the audiences. This dynamic process, rich with new meanings and responses, excites me, and I look forward to witnessing how it resonates with the present times.

*This conversation took place in Brasilia and Berlin on October 13, 2023.*

## Notes

- 1 The Art Stations Foundation by Grażyna Kulczyk was established in 2004, as the Kulczyk Foundation. Archives of its performance program, Old Brewery New Dance, can be found on the website: The Art Stations Foundation, accessed October 29, 2023, <https://artstationsfoundation.pl/en/performative-programme/>.
- 2 The 'emancipated spectator' is a concept introduced by Jacques Rancière. Challenging the notion of the spectator's passivity and emphasizing the political nature of spectating and aesthetic experience, Rancière argues against the traditional view of the spectator as a passive, ignorant voyeur. Instead, the spectator is an active and creative participant in the art experience—someone with the ability to interpret and translate the images presented to them, rejecting the idea of a one-way transmission of knowledge from the artist. Jacques Rancière, *The Emancipated Spectator* (London: Verso, 2011), 1–23.
- 3 Joanna Leśnierowska, "The Yanka Rudzka Project: Leavening," in *Polish Dance Avant-Garde Artists: Stories and Reconstructions*, ed. Joanna Szymajda (Warsaw: Institute of Music and Dance, 2017), 450–69. Joanna Leśnierowska, Maciej Rożalski, and Anna Legierska, "Každy bóg ma swoją sambę," interview with Joanna Leśnierowska and Maciej Rożalski by Anna Legierska, *Culture.pl*, accessed October 28, 2023, <https://culture.pl/pl/artykul/kazdy-bog-ma-swoja-sambe-wywiad> (in Polish).
- 4 Karen Schaffman, "Veronika Blumstein: Platform for Performance of Alternate Histories and Identities," *Contact Quarterly* 32, no. 2 (Summer/Fall 2007): 39–41.

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# 17 Towards conservative performance

## A manifesto

*Ido Feder*

1. In our day and age, declaring ‘no to spectacle’ seems like a false notion, a kind of deluded privilege, misconstrued resistance, or anachronistic notion of agency. Art is not exempt from this critique. On the contrary, art’s performativity delineates the spectacle as it became its sovereign logic. Thus, I name (the) art of the spectacle—*privilogos*.
2. *Privilogos* is the performative conatus of artists, the authority and prerogative they have activated unto their private (*privi*) logos since the dawn of time, not without cost and usually with very little reward. *Privilogos* is the singular act of an artist, a performance between fiction and reality, appearing throughout history, catering to epistemological and social changes, through aesthetic and experiential modifications. Yet, the authority of the *privilogos*, which the singular artist enacts, was and should again be controlled and summoned through what I term *mythos*: a kind of fictional objectivity that exists outside of the self. Something to believe in, to dream about. As such, the individual performativity of the artistic act—*privilogos*—is contextualized, spiritually and ceremonially applied in and for a community, through a mythical engagement that taps into the pre-individual sources of the common. Therefore, art was and should again be the *mythos of privilogos*: a specific human function that holds great respect for the singular mind, but only insofar as it touches, reciprocates, and utters collective sociality and belief.
3. Spectacle, specifically because of its affinity with the regime of images (*spectre*), was able to sever *privilogos* from *mythos*. Unencumbered, the artist’s private point of view and magical singular performativity—*privilogos*—was instrumentalized into becoming the spectacle’s epistemic mode of control. Through a performative world of images, the *privilogos* is coding, enchanting, and seducing the human mind. Thus, *privilogos sans mythos* is the key instrument of dissemination and interpellation of the spectacle’s ideology. This abuse of art’s performative spectatorship is embedded in the figure of the liberal agent, for which art serves as the ideal type. This has resulted in a lingering misconception that has turned individuality into the regulative tool of subjectivity,

under which we are all, supposedly, creative individuals. We aim to feel better about ourselves, but as we are in fact just severed from *mythos*, we are simply chasing individual privileges until the apocalypse comes. Sadly, we are unable to curtail the demise of our planet and our species, despite knowing that we must. The objectivity of the fictionality of *mythos* is lost, and once we pretend it's all up to us, the *privilogos* is just a maddening epistemic cage wherein our self-realization stands in direct opposition to our survival as a species.

4. *Privilogos*, separated from *mythos*, is a violent and viral performative logic, a senseless and free-floating power ravenously severing individuality from sociality. It transforms individuality into something 'to have' while instating the spectacle's illusion of freedom and creativity, and camouflaging the uniformity, emptiness, deceit, and destruction of the notion of progress it proclaims. Thus, we find art forced into the promotion of liberal democracy, personal expression, radical individualism, education policy, identity politics, politically corrective representations, American dreams, and utopian politics. Such indoctrinations, promotional tasks, and gullible beliefs are spread as a shell of morality covering the truth of the spectacle. *Privilogos sans mythos* is jeopardizing the legitimacy of art and its world, diminishing both into a mere presentist spectacle of moralist ideologies. Nonetheless, we naturally don't want to fully disengage from liberal and democratic values and retreat to previous or new communal indoctrinations. Also, individuality—in its truthful form—is to our liking. But, again, it must maintain *mythos* and its pre-individual sources of the common, as its limit and enhancement. We must protect and reinvent individuality so that it will no longer be a consumptive and regulative ideal in service of spectacle. Art has a big role to play in this task.
5. It seems that art as *privilogos sans mythos* became messianic in cementing the pact between democracy and capital: creating 'pop culture' as an all-consuming alternative to *mythos*, for example. Or the art world itself, which pretends to take part in the market, trying to hold on to its status and ability to instate value, while in practice it serves as a moralistic money-laundering machine for the powers that be. Or supposed Hollywood leftists, who desire equal representation, yet cannot but seem absurd: the rich, yet radically diverse, find refuge in Noah's ark, while the rest of us drown and perish. Or we, a participatory audience, supposedly allowed to perform, for example on TikTok. All these spectacular creations reveal that art's performative magic was stolen, making it impossible to divorce the spectacle. It seems that if censorship and aestheticization were the early twentieth-century fascist apparatus of enlisting art, then *privilogos sans mythos* is the late modernist all-consuming populist ideology. The transformation of *privilogos* into the spectacle's ultimate mode of control is the avant-gardist's nightmare:

- the façade of autonomy is spilling over and going rogue, offering us an epistemic cage, a new kind of post-democratic intuition for all.
6. Back to the avant-gardist's dream, I proclaim that art must maintain the fictional objectivity of *mythos* that gifts it a capacity for creating worlds, all the while slipping into and out of reality. Performative world-making that serves *mythos* is an apparatus that remains loyal to the history of art as *mythos of privilegos*. Even when art gladly slips into everyday life, or even when it seems to go against it, it maintains performativity's deployment of power in service of the spirit, sociality, and beauty embedded in *mythos*. Performativity for its own sake—*privilegos sans mythos*—is the illusion of autonomy accessed by all, like a little black hole threatening to suck everything in. Thus, *mythos* is not just the important reminder of the necessary objectivity of fiction, but a feeling of heteronomous obligation, of recruitment.
  7. Through the abused performativity of *privilegos*, the being-inside-the-spectacle, without *mythos*, has exponentially deepened, a *society of inspect-acle* has arisen. Thus, *with-in-spectacle* we *inspect* and are *inspected*. We *inspect* ourselves and our peers, and then the morality of our representations. As we are constantly being *inspected*, even our *self-inspection* is under the scrutiny of monetization, presentation, and surveillance. The 'holy' triad of abstraction—democracy—capital—art—has reached maximal governance through the *inspect-acle*. *Inspection* is fully realized as a mode of spectatorship. Thus, again, simply saying 'no to spectacle' doesn't suffice, and seems to be an impotent scholastic operation of criticism; its once noble attempts to 'politicize the aesthetic' became co-opting and legitimizing forces promoting the morality of privileged *inspect-acle* representations. We are in the depth of the spectacle; there is nothing left but to deep dive into immanent complicity.
  8. "Art basically addresses death, it's about re-presentation, using doubling as a defense against the fear of death," Mike Kelley once said. But something is different now. Under the unifying force of the spectacle and with different degrees of reflexivity, we all know death is coming—we are *expecting it*. So, what happens when the *presentation of inspection* turns into the *re-presentation of expectation*?
  9. The expectation of extinction *with-in-spectacle*—the fall of democracy, global warming, third world war, civilizational collapse—operates as the actual bind of the being-inside. The more we *inspect*, the more we *expect*. Meaning there is a desire or a calling for a *big exit*, which is defining the borders of our theatrical participation in the show of the *inspect-acle*. Reiterating the fall of distinction between audience and actor, the unstoppable sensationalist *inspection* of one's own participation and complicity reveals that our extinction will be televised, and indeed not the revolution. Therefore, we want to expose another modality for spectatorship *with-inspect-acle*.

10. What are we to do with our complicit, yet critical, *inspection*? Amid *exciting expectations*, how can we expose an alternative route? What is the performative resistance possible under the regime of *privilogos*? I suggest performing an *ex-spectacle event*, which is the artistic summoning of the afterlife of the spectacle. The *ex-spectacle event* is thus a palliative methodology of art's survival as a human operation and influence: *expecting* death, re-presenting it, performing the imagination of the radical change of the spectacle, wholly diving into the reality of the unexpected, armed with objective fiction, attempting to recuperate the *mythos of privilogos*. The *ex-spectacle event* is, thus, appearing in dramaturgies of contemporaneous crisis. Art, as *ex-spectacle event*, treats the ontology of event not necessarily as the gift of *nowness*, but rather as an obligation for the search for a way out (*ex*) of the now. At the same time, it's a total re-entry into the *mythos of privilogos*: a recruitment of the epistemic totality, abused by contemporary regimes, for the creation of a docu-fictional reality of an art world. Institutions, individuals, and actions, entering the *mythos*, operating *with-in-spectacle* through *expecting*, *experiencing*, *explicating*, *exaggerating*. Committing to being inside, as they craft the reclaiming, if you will, of life as art, as they use artistic events to 'immanently exit' the spectacle.
11. Despite ongoing denials by the left, performed by the promotion of progressive futures, the basso continuo of survival persists. It's the same old economy of death that distinguishes us from the animal. As extinction approaches and is viscerally and collectively *expected*, and while *inspection* rules the day, a new feeling of suppression arises. Technology and death are thus still aligned, but their *modus operandi* has changed. If mortality was the beating heart of technology, a constant desire to inscribe existence into the frail body, now the all-consuming presence of the *expectation of extinction* has created a hole, a lacuna, in the technology of humanity. There, we must go beyond individuality and *conserve* something together. Even if, at first, it's only the *conservation* of our fear. This palliative task rejuvenates the performative origin of art as a survivalist human function, rooted in the pre-individual sources of the common.
12. Hopefully, not only will individual and communal trauma outlast us, but so too the mythical performativity acting out our species' collaborative-palliative task, as it resuscitates art's eternal human function: its survivalist imperative to *perform conservation* as something in service of the 'human.' The *ex-spectacle event* is thus a trans-individual puncture *with-inspect-acle*, an artistic event with an affective vitality of modes of collaboration, where individuals armed with *privilogos*—aka artists—imagine and perform futurity and survival. It's the onto-political fact of agency *with-in-spectacle*, indicating the call for a 'deep adaptation' to what some people term 'what comes after the human.' But I'd

rather think of this as an *ex-spectacle event*, where the drive to survive allows for the human to quit its consumption of selfhood, and let individuality actively become a technology of recruitment. Thus, the *ex-spectacle event* is a performance of a newfound fidelity of art for the future.

13. The *ex-spectacle event* is the actual operation instating *mythos of privilegos* as a realm, where we are calling and summoning the entities of art to operate in ceremonial service of a world-within-a-world, released from the dogmas of moralistic inspections, but nonetheless spiritually recruited through the ontology of event. Thus, it's not just the total acceptance of presence and nowness for the sake of self-sensation, but the puncturing of being-inside, as one employs rationality, reflexivity, criticality, and creativity to sensate the spectacle from the outside. It's the desire to go out as you dive deeper in. Thus, 'event' is an artistic docu-fictional methodology teaching us to be at two places at the same time, to reinstate the objectivity of fiction.
14. The accumulation of *ex-spectacle events* will help us reimagine the art world as the *muse-ocracy*—the rule of the muses, championing the *performance of conservation* over the conservation of objects. It's a recruitment to a docu-fictional realm and a being at two places at the same time, where complicity becomes fidelity, and performance becomes conservation. Objects may still go there to die, but there will be a musing world of palliative care performed around them.
15. The *muse-ocracy* is the worldliness of the art world that we need to re-invent. A kind that artists always knew how to instigate amongst themselves when loyal to *mythos*. *Conservation* will therefore be not only an objectal proof of our false progress, but also an ephemeral docu-fictional event of *conservation* of the human. It's where the *mythos of privilegos* must acquire a *conservative performative* logic. Yes, please hear the double entendre. It's what will help us humans survive individuality and its *privilegical* discontents. It's a call for a kind of art world, a kind of togetherness, a dream-like memory, a kind of black mountain. It's the assembly of many *ex-spectacle events*, which will succeed in being notated as *mythos of privilegos*—like on the mountain. It's a guiding ethos for generations to come, an encapsulation of inspirations assembled as *muse-ocracy*, a worldliness to protect and preserve.
16. In our day and age, we artists want to think of our own worldliness and invest in *ex-spectacle events* that serve and reconstruct *conservative performance* as a radical engagement in the present: a *conservative performance* of the art world itself. So that we can free it from participating in the moralistic laundry machine of culture, and slowly exit the spectacle, by offering ceremony, palliative care, and beauty. *Performing conservation* is thus an entry into an economy of hearts, a climate of collaborative signatures and a diving into the temporality of an ongoing festival.

# Index

- Abramović, Marina 102, 117, 127, 135, 141, 206, 233–6, 287–8
- Abrams, Lynn 42
- absence: in performance 31, 142, 144, 148–9; process of 35–6
- abstract 12, 61, 94, 200, 307
- Acconci, Vito 127
- acquisition 36–8, 144–5, 147, 151
- activation 249–50
- activation protocol 36–7, 142, 144–6, 148, 154, 207, 251
- active listening 154
- Adams, Ada-Woodson 183–4
- Adivasi (original inhabitant) 270
- advocates 3, 15, 17–18, 39, 163–4, 173, 184, 214, 288
- aesthetic: experience 27, 40–1, 87, 100, 105, 264, 305; performance 126, 214, 234, 264, 270–1, 273, 290
- African American: culture/history 175, 179–81; *see also* National Museum of
- African American Cultural Heritage Action Fund 184
- Ahnebrink, Carl 65
- Alone, Yashadatta S. 273–4
- Amorales, Carlos 212
- anarchival materiality 9
- Anderson Theater 206
- anger 166, 229
- anthropology 8–9, 58, 72, 152, 196, 263, 270
- antiquity 264, 274
- Aotearoa, New Zealand 162, 164, 166, 250, 255
- Apulian tarantism (ancient rite) 14, 51–3, 58, 63, 65–6, 68, 72
- archive 9; audiovisual 54–5, 62, 71, 230; documentation 38, 40–1, 91, 147–8, 155; living 16, 241; *see also* virtual archive
- Arsem, Marilyn 8
- art: criticism 126; fetishization 40, 114, 216, 234; forms 2, 15, 141–2, 145–6, 155, 201, 205, 216, 234, 294–5, 300; fragile 11, 17, 167, 289; genre 146, 203, 214; history 6, 8–9, 107, 156, 179, 210–11, 215–16, 232; installation art 61, 146, 214; limited edition 145, 179; longevity 6, 43, 165, 294 (*see also* performance); market 131, 134, 146, 210–11, 216; market value 146; museum 11, 102, 114–15, 143, 196 (*see also* museum); ownership 143–4, 146–7, 150–1, 190, 193–4; performance-based 1, 148; replicable 145; venue 30, 282; visual 35, 44, 54, 100, 102, 113, 131–2, 146, 297, 302
- Art Basel Parcours 236
- artifacts 5, 11, 72, 133, 146, 173, 179, 189, 191, 196, 230, 295
- artist: artist's proof 145–6; Black 15, 173, 175, 183; performance 5, 14, 27, 102, 108, 113, 134, 215, 227, 232, 237, 281, 288; well-being 5
- artistic research 54, 64, 235
- artwork: completion 30–1, 35–6; connection 5, 16, 35, 191; identity 143, 145; performance 16, 151, 174, 199; software-based 177; storage 15, 107, 141–2, 146, 171, 191–3; texture of 37, 61, 178
- Athey, Ron: catalogue 121; chronology 118–119; *Deliverance* 105; *Incorruptible Flesh!* *Dissociative Sparkle* 113; Judas Cradle 106, 106, 116; *Queen*

- Communion: Ron Athey* 6, 10, 14–15, 100, 101, 102–5  
 attentiveness 3, 29  
 audience: experience 135, 162, 165, 234  
 audiovisual 14, 54–5, 62–3, 71, 89, 91, 148, 155, 230  
 Audiovisual Media Preservation Initiative (AVMPI) 174  
 Auslander, Philip: *Reactivations* 126, 130, 135; works of 8, 15, 28, 126  
 authenticity 16, 43, 87, 144, 216, 234, 241, 264  
 author 68, 201–4  
 authorship 129, 136, 281, 283  
 autonomy 4, 8, 60, 68, 187, 192, 307  
 avatar 241–2, 254, 259  
  
 Balram, Nirmala 167  
 BANG BANG: *translocal hi:stories of performance art* 231–2, 233  
 Barbuto, Alessandra 234  
 Barney, Matthew: *Cremaster 5* 135  
 Bauer, Peter 179  
 Beardsley, Monroe C. 134  
 Beethoven, Ludwig van 80–2, 85  
 Benchoam, Stefan 150  
 Benjamin, Walter 82, 88, 133  
 Bentschik, Lyn 134–5  
 Berio, Luciano 90–2, 93  
 Berlant, Lauren 109, 112  
 Berlin Philharmonic 81  
 Bern Academy of the Arts 45  
 Berne Convention 200–3, 205, 207  
 Beuys, Joseph 208, 210, 215–16  
 Bharatanatyam 265–7  
 bias 7, 9, 15, 173, 182  
 biennial 33, 36  
 bioart 214–15  
 Black: conservation 183; culture 175–6, 183; performance 2, 181, 184; woman 16, 229, 237, 243  
 Black Art Conservators 15, 40, 173–76, 182  
 Black Lives Matter 15  
 Block, René 215  
 Blumstein, Veronika (fictional) 301  
 body movement 177, 249  
 Bollywood 271  
 Bordeaux 44  
 Boulez, Pierre 94  
 Brazil 296–7  
 Brecht, George 28  
 Briz, Ana 119  
  
 Brost, Amy 9  
 Brown, Trisha: *Set Reset* 147, 149  
 Bruckner, Anton 80  
 Bruguera, Tania *Latlin's Whisper #6 (Havana version)* 153  
 Buonvino, Paolo 70  
 Burden, Chris: *Trans-Fixed* 127–8, 133  
 Burke Museum, Seattle 12  
 Busoni, Ferruccio 86  
 Byrd, Nylah 15, 172–4, 176–8, 180–2  
  
 Cage, John: 4'33" 14, 80, 90–1, 92, 94–5, 131–2  
 Caianiello, Tiziana 147  
 Cairns, Puawai: Director of Audience and Insights at Te Papa Tongarewa 11, 15–16, 39, 162, 164, 166, 170  
 Calel, Edgar: *The Echo of an Ancient Form of Knowledge (Ru k' ox k'ob'el jun ojer etemab'el)* 149–50  
 Campbell, Andy 102, 108, 116, 119, 120  
 canon: canonization 130, 232, 240, 265; formation 6, 130–1  
 care: care-thinking 4, 7; collection care 5–7; concept of 3, 5, 7; intellectual 6; interpretation as 4; for performer and person 11; perpetual 10  
 Carpitella, Diego 54, 59, 63, 65–6  
 Carroll, Valinda 15, 173, 175–80  
 Castriota, Brian 151  
 Catholic Church 52  
 Catlett, Elizabeth 173, 178–9  
 cave paintings/sculptures 273  
 Celibidache, Sergui 81–2  
 Chakravorty, Pallabi: *Bells of Change: Kathak Dance, Women and Modernity in India* 267  
 Chambers-Letson, Josh 110  
 changing same 7  
 Charcot, Jean-Martin 61, 69  
 charisma 254  
 Chetwynd, Monster 212  
 Chickasaw Nation 186  
 Chiclet chewing gum 196  
 Chirikure, Shadreck 10  
 Chiuri, Maria Grazia 51, 53, 60, 69  
 Chopin, Frédéric 86  
 choreography 69, 144, 147–9, 201, 233, 263, 293–5, 300, 303–4  
 civil: law 202–3, 205, 207; rights 178–9, 184  
 clash/clashes 7, 211



- Clavir, Mirian 11  
 cloak weaving 166–7, 170–1  
 Coca-Cola 36  
 Cohen, Cathy 110–11  
 collaboration 5, 18, 63, 71, 104, 150, 231, 236, 278, 281, 301  
 colonial: concepts/practices 41, 193–4; harm 188, 196; institutions 163, 187  
 color: bright/vivid 52, 69–70, 128, 231, 237; loss of 9; persons of 110, 183, 211, 239  
 common law 205–6  
 Communism 56  
 community: members 119, 195–7; queer 104, 108, 110, 112; traditions 2, 51  
 competence 3, 183, 200  
 conservation: Black 183–4; creative act 35, 227; critical 227, 242–3; framework 2–3, 11, 102, 149–51, 207, 255; object of 1  
 conservator: Black 173–6, 179, 182–4; as creative partner 227; of objects 230 (*see also* museum); paper (Japanese) 173–4, 177  
 contemporary art: conservation 6, 10, 13, 142, 234–6; ownership 146–7; ritual 65, 67, 69  
 Cook Islands 255  
 Cook, James 167  
 Cook, Nicholas: *Beyond the Score* 80  
 copyright law 200; author/legal entity 201, 204–5, 213–14; bioart 214–15; dissemination 203, 207, 209, 275, 305; European Union 208; German 208; individual character protection 211; infringement 214; limitations 207; neighboring rights 202; prefabricated materials 212; protection 207; regarding relics/remains/remnants 210; reproduction 207; restrictions 204  
 costumes 103, 105–7, 116, 121, 142, 147, 248, 252, 254, 259  
 criminal intimacies 109–10  
 cult: character 88; spider possession 51–2; value 133  
 cultivation 294–6, 302  
 cultural heritage: ethnic 175, 184–5, 261; intangible 247; performance 15–16, 51, 54, 66–8; preservation 39, 127  
 culture: Black 175–6, 183; festivals 248, 253; health and safety 247; minorities 110, 153, 164; preservation of 10, 162, 257; treasures (taonga) 164, 166, 170, 248  
 custodianship 146, 149–51, 155  
 Cvetkovich, Ann 111–12  
 Daboo, Jerri 55  
 Da Costa, Neal Peres 86, 86  
 dance: *devadasi* 265–6; instruction 144  
 dance/dancing 60; classical 264–5, 271, 274; for healing/recovery 263; Kathak 267; sexual content 265; traditional 272; trance dancing 52, 60, 62–3, 71, 144, 239  
 Dark Star Orchestra 127  
 data, preservation of 9, 126, 136, 142, 170, 188–9, 230, 267  
 de Boer, Manon: *Persona* (film) 236  
 Debussy, Claude 86  
 decay 7, 9, 43, 142, 155, 229  
 decipherment 116  
 decolonization 16, 164, 187–8, 190  
 degradation 6–7  
 de Martino, Ernesto 52–5, 57, 63, 64, 65, 68–9  
 Derrida, Jacques 41  
 Destination Crenshaw (D.C.) 183  
 detail, attention to 27  
 Deutschlandfunk Kultur (radio station) 60  
 Dewey, John 40  
 digital: art 145; data collection 174; imaging 107, 202; photographs 8  
 Dionysus (Greek God) 52  
 Dior, Christian (French fashion house): Cruise collection 68, 70; cultural project 51, 70–1; folklore 53, 68–9  
 disappearance 6, 31–2, 35–6, 229–30, 255  
 discrimination 7  
 dissemination 3, 13, 16, 27, 90, 203, 207, 209, 275, 305  
 diversity 13, 72, 190, 201, 281–2  
 Dobrusskin, Sebastian 45  
 documentation: archive 127, 134, 230; photographic 28, 54, 57, 66, 121, 127, 142; retrospective 127–8

- documents: accumulation 142;  
 audiovisual 155; cultural heritage 15;  
 display of 117, 121; free-standing  
 133–4; legal 37, 87, 144, 165;  
 preservation of 199, 208, 210
- Domínguez Rubio, Fernando 141,  
 143, 155
- Don't DJ 65
- Duggan, Lisa 110–11
- Duport, Olivier 65
- Duyvendak, Yan: *My name is Neo*  
 236–7, 238, 239
- Eco, Umberto 91
- ecosystems 146, 151–2
- Eisner, Rivka 9
- Ellis, Josephine 45
- empathy 7–8, 163
- endurance art 136
- environmental condition 18, 195, 199
- equality 4, 69, 182
- Eramo, Alessandra: *Tanz Sediment:  
 Self-Portrait of Madness* 54, 60–1,  
 62, 62–4, 66, 69
- ethics: care ethics 3–4, 7, 145; concept  
 of 11, 13, 194, 269
- Etienne, Noémie 155
- exchange 3, 13, 18, 147, 152, 254,  
 296, 300
- exclusion 4, 135, 229
- exhibition: catalogue 105, 108, 118;  
 context of 103; of performance 102;  
 value 133; visitors 28
- experimental art forms 2, 63–4, 108,  
 119, 232, 241, 296
- expression: artistic 156, 201, 289;  
 cultural 71; facial 287
- Eyal, Sharon 70
- fashion industry 51, 70
- Feder, Eva 3
- Feder, Ido 18
- Federal Act on Copyright and Related  
 Rights 207
- Federal University of Bahia, Brazil 297
- feminist: agenda 71, 108, 110, 227;  
 philosophy 3–4, 64
- festivals: *La Notte della Taranta* (Night  
 of the Tarantula) 53, 66, 70, 72
- fiction 31–2, 35, 44, 305, 307–8;  
 docu-fictional 308–9
- fidelity 9, 309
- filiation 108, 119
- Fisher, Bernice 3
- Fisher, Walter R. 38–9
- Flanagan, Bob 105
- FLEE Project: *Tarantismo: Odyssey of  
 an Italian Ritual* 54, 65–7, 67, 71–2
- flexibility 18, 37, 150, 240
- flute 91, 167, 191
- folklore 53–4, 56, 66–8, 202
- Ford-Ahmed, Trevellya 184
- Fortunato, Flaminia 154
- Foucault, Michel 117
- fragrance work: *RYXPER1126AE* 2,  
 17, 278, 279–280
- Freccero, Carla 117–18
- fundamental: autonomy 8–9, 165;  
 perceptions 39–40, 43; preservation  
 90, 234, 296
- fungi 142, 151, 153, 195
- Furtwängler, Wilhelm 81
- Gablik, Suzi 35
- Galatina, Italy 52–4, 56, 57, 62, 66, 71
- Gartmann, Thomas 9, 14, 45
- Gawęda, Dorota 17, 278, 279–80
- gay marriage 111
- Gehm, Sabine 300
- Giannachi, Gabriella 234–5
- Gianni, Nagi: *Hunters* 237, 239–40
- Glaser, Thomas 82
- Glass, Aaron 12
- Goldberg, Jeff 95
- Gottschewski, Hermann 81
- Gould, Glenn 82
- graffiti 29–30, 33, 36, 40
- Gramsci, Antonio 53, 56, 60
- Grateful Dead 127
- Grimm, Claudia 236
- Guattari, Félix 35
- guest 151, 259
- Guggenheim Museum, Solomon R.  
 141, 154
- Guinness Book of World  
 Records* 272
- Guitar Hero* (video game) 135
- guru 275
- Hampton University 178, 180
- Hassan, Jamelie 213
- Haufler, Janet 289
- Held, Virginia 3, 12
- Henderson, Jane 11

- Hennessy, Kate 9  
 Henry-Griffin, Kayla 15, 172–8, 180–2  
 heritage: cultural (*see* cultural heritage);  
 living 15, 186  
 Hess, Alison 4  
 Hewitt, Christopher 288  
 hierarchies 4, 35, 110, 143  
 Higgins, Hannah 234  
 Hirshhorn Museum 174  
 historic reenactments 54, 71  
 HIV/AIDS 104, 112, 117, 119  
 Hochuli, Gisela: *The Essence of Performance Art* 288; *In Strange Hands* 17–18, 156, 236, 281, 282–3, 285–6, 286–7, 289  
 Hölling, Hanna B. 2, 7, 14, 176, 179, 181–82, 197, 230–31, 235, 247, 253, 263, 273–74, 281, 283, 289, 293, 296, 300, 302; virtual archive 147  
 home therapy (terapie domiciliare) 59, 62  
 Hornbeck, Stephanie E. 10  
 host 151, 177, 250  
 human: behavior 3, 34, 52; interdependency 4, 38; resources 6, 187  
 hysteria 61, 63, 69, 72  
 images: composition 53, 302, 305 (*see also* photography); iconic 54, 56, 58, 66  
 immateriality 8, 142  
 impermanence 7, 156  
 inclusive 6, 16, 27, 95, 110, 173, 183  
 India: performance/dance 263–4, 267–9, 271–2; temples/culture 266, 272–3  
 Indiana University Museum of Archaeology and Anthropology 186  
 Indigenous: authority 187; culture 15, 163, 191, 253; heritage 15, 186, 188; knowledge 182, 186, 190; people 12, 162–3, 188, 192, 251, 255; Pacific Islanders 250, 258, 261; perspectives 192  
 Indira Gandhi National Center for the Arts (IGNCA) 268–9  
 individualism 35, 306  
 instability 14, 27, 156  
 Instagram 29–30, 31  
 Institute for Contemporary Art, Los Angeles 116  
 instruction: performance 81, 90, 281–3; protocol 17, 34, 36, 80  
 instrumentalist 91, 167  
 intellectual property 191  
 International Council of Museums (ICOM) 166  
 International Flavors and Fragrances Inc. 278  
 interpretation: conservation of 81, 87; notion of 14, 116; power 63, 71  
 Ireland, Libby 151  
 iteration 7, 32; canonical 131–2; original 127, 131; of performance 132–3, 136, 304  
 itinerary 151  
 J. Paul Getty Research Institute 107, 111  
 Jakovljević, Branislav 234  
 Jarrett, Keith: *Köln Concert* 80, 88  
 Johnston, Courtney 166  
 Jones, Amelia 6, 10, 14–15, 28, 103, 106, 234  
 Joseph, Miranda 110  
 Jung, Florence: *Something is Missing / Etwas Fehlt* 29, 30, 31, 32, 36–7, 40–1, 44  
 Kardashian, Kim 166–7, 170  
 Kaufman, Andy 27  
 Kentridge, William 147  
 Kirby, Michael 130, 134  
 Kittay, Eva Feder 3  
 Kjartansson, Ragnar 132  
 Klassen, Norbert 288–9  
 Klein, Yves: *Leap into the Void* 128, 131  
 Kleist, Heinrich 88  
 KMRU (sound artist) 65  
 knowledge: building 3, 13, 115; narrative 42–3  
 Kobler, John 95  
 Koch-Schütz-Studer 88  
 Kolkata Sanved 263  
 Kopytoff, Igor 13  
 Kovylyna, Elena 211  
 Kozak, Edyta 300  
 Kuhn, Annette 42  
 Kulbokaitė, Eglė 17, 278, 279–80  
 Kullu Dussehra (festival) 272  
 labor 4, 6, 70, 79, 147  
 laboratory 2, 278, 293  
 Lacan, Jacques 69  
 language: body 173, 177, 292; use of 36, 43, 157, 227; visual 69  
*La Repubblica* (daily newspaper) 69

- La Ribot, Maria 237  
 Laubhold, Lars E. 82  
 legacy 15, 149, 236, 295, 300–1  
 Leipzig Conservatory 85  
 Lepecki, André 235, 240  
 Leśnierowska, Joanna 18, 293, 296,  
 300, 302  
 Liechti, Peter 89  
 LinkedIn 166  
 live performance 15, 103, 105, 113,  
 117, 131–2, 141–3, 148–9, 237,  
 288, 290  
 LNS (music producer) 65  
 loan requests 142–5, 154  
 Loesch, Heinz 83  
 logos/mythos 39  
 Lomax, Alan 65–7  
 London Contemporary Music  
 Festival 132  
 Love, Heather 110  
 Lowenhaupt Tsing, Anna 152  
 Lyotard, Jean-François 42–3
- Macdonald, Brandie 11, 16,  
 186–93, 196  
 Mader, Rachel 37  
 Magnin, Emilie 2, 5, 7, 15–16, 45, 178,  
 186–93, 196, 256–5, 270, 281, 287  
 Mahler, Gustav 81  
 Makau, Ariana 15, 173, 182–4  
 Maly, Valerian 236, 283  
 mana (importance) 165, 167, 253, 259  
 Manalansan, Martin 104, 111–12  
 Mangolte, Babette: *Looking and  
 Touching* 128–9, 134  
 Māori: chiefs 169; communities 163,  
 167, 171; cultural beliefs 166;  
 kitchen 168–70; musical instruments  
 167; taonga 164, 166, 170, 248;  
 tikanga 168  
 Marçal, Hélia 147  
 Marek, Janusz 300  
 Marussich, Yann: *morsure* 237, 239  
 Marx, Karl 56  
 Marzo, Alan 65, 67  
 Massumi, Brian 35  
 materiality 6, 9, 11, 132, 254  
 Mathis, Muda 232, 288  
 maui (life force) 251, 254, 259  
 Mayan: community 196; musical  
 instrument 191; traditions 150  
 McKenzie, Mina 164  
 medium: physical 28, 207; storage  
 81, 83  
 memory: as a medium 9, 17; role of 32,  
 42, 147  
 Mendelssohn, Felix 85  
 Mendieta, Ana 236  
 mental: concept 35; condition 28, 62  
 (*see also* hysteria); realization 35  
 metaphor 11–12, 60, 110, 151, 286  
 MIDI (Musical Instrument Digital  
 Interface) 83  
 Migros Museum für  
 Gegenwartskunst 132  
 MOCA (Museum of Contemporary  
 Art) 211  
 Monroe, Marilyn 166  
 Moore, Peter 129, 134  
 moral rights 202, 213  
 Morgan, Kelli 11  
 Morris, Robert 128  
 motif 51, 54, 68, 71  
 Mount Zion Baptist Church  
 Preservation Society (MZBCPS)  
 183–4  
 movement: artistic 60; body 177, 192,  
 249, 288; musical 72, 84, 141;  
 spacial 36, 55, 88, 91  
 Mozart, Wolfgang Amadeus 85, 85–86  
 Munoz-Vinas, Salvador 11  
 Munoz, Esteban 112, 115, 118  
 mural 193, 194  
 Murch, Walter 128  
 museum 2; acquisitions 36–7, 147, 151;  
 curator 5, 163, 199; function of 5,  
 10, 39, 142, 170–1, 192–3; priorities  
 190, 196; relevant 13, 163, 170–1,  
 209–10; space (GLAM) 13, 251,  
 254; terminology 189  
 Museum of Man 188  
 Museum of Modern Art (MoMA),  
 New York 102, 114, 174, 233  
 Museum of Modern Art (MoMA), San  
 Francisco 147  
 Museum of Us, San Diego 16, 186, 188,  
 191, 193, 194, 195–6  
 Museum Tinguely, Basel 231, 236  
 mushrooms (psychedelic) 142, 152  
 music: abstract concept 94; bootlegs  
 87; CD (compact disk) 81, 88–90;  
 classical 79–82, 90; composers 80–1,  
 83, 86, 90–1, 92, 94–5; conceptual  
 (Type C) 14, 80, 89; digitalization  
 83; education 85; genre 2, 52, 66,  
 81; history 81, 95; improvisation  
 (Type B) 84, 88; interpretation  
 81, 86; musicians 41, 52, 80, 82,

- 89–91, 94, 127, 135, 167, 202, 265;  
 performance reenactment 127, 141;  
 producers 65, 86; score 80–1, 83, 85,  
 89, 91; shellac 81, 85; techno 144;  
 traditional (Type A) 80; vinyl 65,  
 80–1
- Musser, Amber 117  
 mycelium 15, 142–3, 151–5  
 mythology 35, 261
- Naegeli, Harald 33  
 narrative 17, 31, 43, 58, 143,  
 196, 302
- National Gallery of Victoria 258  
 National Gallery of Canada 214  
 Native American 39  
 negative space 33  
 Netherlands 145  
 network: external 142, 149; social  
 42, 147
- Newton, Esther 110  
 Nicolet, Aurele 91–2, 93  
 Nitsch, Hermann 215  
*niu aitu* (costume) 254, 259  
 nostalgia 67, 166
- object: artist created 10, 156, 167, 174,  
 212; conservation 174; inanimate 8,  
 12, 152, 189, 191, 251; integrity 15,  
 131–2, 233; prefabricated 211–12;  
 preservation 192; tangible 43, 174;  
 third party 211
- Ono, Yoko 211  
 opera 107; Baroque 81, 94; house 87  
 oppression 53, 60–1, 68, 70, 229  
 oral tradition 15–16, 41, 79, 173,  
 176–7, 186, 191–2, 197
- Orientalism 55, 58, 249  
 Ortiz, Ralph 211  
 Owczarek, Nina 11
- Pacific Sisters 39, 247, 252, 257  
 Paik, June: *Zen for Film* 133  
 paintings 141, 143, 145, 181–2, 201,  
 213, 273, 303  
 pākehā 166, 169  
 PCMK project 182–4
- Pelta Feldman, Jules 2, 7, 15–16, 162,  
 164, 166, 170, 174, 177, 179–80,  
 197, 250, 252, 255, 259, 268, 281,  
 286–7, 289
- performance: BDSM (sexual practices)  
 104–5, 108, 110, 116–18; conser.  
 VÅ.tion 17, 250, 254–5, 259;  
 conservation 2, 5, 13, 18, 107, 134,  
 142, 153, 162, 181, 191, 227, 293,  
 300; critical conservation 242–3;  
 destined to be lost 9; direction 287;  
 documentation 17, 116, 129, 133,  
 135, 177, 268; dormant 152–5;  
 efficacy 71–2, 234; experience of  
 29, 135–6; fragrance/scent 17,  
 278, 279–80; genuine 192, 269,  
 296; instructions 81, 90, 281–3,  
 289; laughter 237, 240, 261; legacy  
 15, 149, 236, 295, 300–1; live 15,  
 103, 105, 113, 131–2, 141–3, 146,  
 148–9, 237, 242, 288, 290; longevity  
 9, 11, 13, 43, 258, 293; object-like  
 146; politics of 263; practices 1,  
 127, 240, 264, 270; respect for  
 7–8; Swiss 231–2, 236, 240, 243;  
 ultra-conceptualism 14, 27–8; works  
 12–13, 111, 131–2, 141, 146,  
 149–50, 152, 155, 237, 295
- performance art: copyrights 199–200  
 (see also copyright law); legal  
 protection 204; originality/creativity  
 205–6, 210
- Performance Chronik Basel 232  
*Performance Process: An Approach to  
 Swiss Performance Art* 231–2
- performers: artistic reappropriation 54,  
 81, 89, 91, 93–5; caring for 5, 13,  
 27; and copyright 211; instructions  
 34–5, 38; interpretation 133–4, 136;  
 performance transmission 148, 150,  
 153, 156; traditions 265, 268–9
- permanence 162, 164  
 permission 28, 206, 247, 251
- Phelan, Peggy 8–9, 100, 113
- photography 9; black and white  
 66, 127–28; photographic  
 documentation 28, 56, 121, 127,  
 142; professional photographer 232;  
 publication 38, 52, 54, 65, 179, 202;  
 techniques 57
- pianist 80–83, 85–6, 90–1, 207
- Pinna, Franco 54, 56, 64
- Planet Magazine* 252
- Plato 38
- Poland 18, 293–7, 300
- political: agenda 18, 66, 301;  
 conservation 2; efficacy 234;  
 environment 199; manipulation 267;  
 process 6, 302; propaganda 301;  
 theory 3
- Pollini, Maurizio 81

- Ponifasio, Lemi 250  
 posterity, preservation of 148, 196, 229  
 power: dynamics 4, 71, 119, 153;  
   hierarchy 6, 53, 111, 265, 307; of  
   image 63; narrative 39; ritual 51  
 presence: material 42; personal 14, 27  
 preservation: cultural 15, 36, 38–9; of  
   performance 18, 263–4, 293, 296, 302  
 preservationists 178, 269  
 private vision (*privilogos*) 18, 305–9  
*privilogos* see private vision  
 production: process 5, 79; studio 82  
 progressive folklore 56  
 props 105–7, 110, 116; preservation  
   199; prosthetics 241; as seating for  
   performance 231; see also costume  
 psychology 152  
 Puglia, Italy 51–3, 60–2, 64, 67, 69, 71–2  
 Puig de la Bellacasa, María 7, 143  
 Puppies Puppies (Kuriki-Olivo, Jadee  
   Guanaro) 236  
 Puricella, Anna 68
- queer: bias 7; communion 111;  
 community 108; isolation 119;  
 performance 112; sex/gender  
 identification 110
- racial justice 2  
 racism 7, 180, 241  
 radical: art work 94; feminist 70;  
   intervention 89; openness 14, 34;  
   performance 9; queer politics 111–12  
 Rainer, Yvonne 206  
 Ranciere, Jacques 35, 39  
 Raymond, Rosanna 10, 16–17, 39, 247,  
   248, 250, 252–5, 256–7, 257, 259,  
   260; Pacific Sisters collective 39, 247,  
   252, 257; see also *Conser.Vā.Tion*  
 Raymond, Rosanna: *G'nang G'near*  
   (costume) 256–9  
 reality 14, 27, 31–2, 36, 87, 128, 133,  
   142, 170, 230, 305, 307  
 realization 34–6, 82, 90, 230, 289, 297,  
   300–1, 306  
 reciprocity 4  
 reconceptualization 37  
 recycling/upcycling 155, 231, 303  
 redistribution 37  
 reenactment: artistic 63–4, 70, 103,  
   126, 241, 289; historic 54, 71, 234–5  
 Reeves, Keanu 237  
 Reger, Max 90  
 Regn, Chris 232  
 reincarnation 241, 254  
 Reinecke, Carl 85, 85–7  
 reinterpretation 14, 16–17, 68, 72, 229,  
   231, 234, 237, 243  
 relationships: collaborative 5, 148;  
   complex 8; cultural 178, 183; human  
   3; responsibility 254; social 241, 250  
 religiosity 53  
 reperformance: as conservation 233–5;  
   critics 241, 243  
 repertoire 89, 147, 149, 230, 267, 270  
 repetition 71, 87–8, 96, 144, 178, 227,  
   235, 242, 286, 289  
 reproduction 16, 63, 82–3, 203,  
   207–9, 233  
 research: methodology 64, 268; project  
   “Performance: Conservation,  
   Materiality, Knowledge” 1, 281,  
   293  
 resilience 142, 152–5  
 resources: human 6, 187; shared and  
   common 151; spare 153, 155  
 respect: for elders 252; failure of 7–8,  
   12; for performance 136, 153,  
   189, 275  
 responsibility: artist 3–4, 6, 17;  
   social 150  
 responsiveness 3  
 restaging 36, 229, 235  
 restoration 2, 5, 7, 129, 134, 213, 216  
 Reykjavik Art Museum 132  
 Ricoeur, Paul 43  
 ritual: authentic 58, 60, 63; healing 53;  
   performance 14, 264, 271; practice  
   53–5, 57–8, 63, 72; religious 56,  
   110, 115, 286  
 Rizzo, Christian 211  
 Rizzo, Michele: *HIGHER xtn* 144–5,  
   145, 148–50, 154  
 Robatto, Lia 297  
 Robatto, Silvio 297  
 Roberts, Bill 45  
 Rollo, Alessia: *Parallel Eyes* 54, 57–8,  
   58–59, 60, 64, 66  
 Romandie 229, 232, 236  
 romanticization 53, 58, 67, 88,  
   108, 112  
 Roms, Heike 9  
 Rose, Sheree 105  
 Rubin, Gayle 110  
 Rudzka, Yanka 298–9  
 rumors 14, 27–8, 34, 154  
 Rushdie, Salman 38  
 Rutishauser, Elaine 232

- Saemann, Andrea 232  
 Said, Edward 55  
 Salento, Italy 53, 55, 66, 68, 72  
 Salk Institute 108  
 Samugheo, Shiara 54, 56, 57–8, 66  
 Sanvee, Davide-Christelle: artist incarnation 242; Haute école d'art et de design (HEAD) 241; *La performance des performances* 16–17, 156, 227, 228, 229–32, 235–7, 238, 239–43  
 Sarkar Munsî, Urmimāla: *Uday Shankar and His Transcultural Experimentations: Dancing Modernity* 270–1  
 Sarker Munsî, Urmimāla 7, 10, 17, 263–4, 268, 270, 273, 275  
 SaVÅge K'lub 247  
 Save Our African American Treasures (SOAAT) 178  
 SAVVY Contemporary 61; *Ultrasanity. On Madness, Sanitation, Antipsychiatry and Resistance* 60, 62, 62  
 Schäuble, Michaela 10, 14  
 Schiliger, Klara 236, 283  
 Schill, Ruedi 289  
 Schneemann, Carolee 215  
 Schneider, Jane 55, 58  
 Schneider, Rebecca 7, 9, 153, 229–30  
 Schneider, Urs Peter 94  
 Schubert, Franz 85, 132  
 Schumann, Robert 80  
 Sehgal, Tino 38  
 self-perception 108, 119  
 Senatore, Marinella 69  
 Senn, Simon: *Be Arielle F* 237, 241–2, 242  
 Senni, Lorenzo 144  
 sexuality 104, 109, 261, 263, 266, 274  
 shishya (trainee) 275  
 Showalter, Elaine 70  
 Shunryū, Susuki (Zen Master) 94  
 Shusterman, Richard 40  
 silence 90, 95, 291, 301  
 Siu, Alicia Maria 194  
 sketchbook 103, 107–8, 115, 116, 197, 199, 205, 207, 232, 273  
 Slote, Michael 7–8  
 Smith, Rhianedd 4  
 Smith, Trudi Lynn 9  
 Smithsonian Libraries and Archive 174  
 Smithsonian National Museum of African American History and Culture 178  
 social: media 31, 107, 130, 166, 177, 209, 267; tension 71  
 solidarity 69, 154  
 Soneji, Daesh: *Unfinished Gestures* 265  
 sound: artists 65–7; as crucial to performance 9; recordings 52, 61, 65–6, 82, 86, 236  
 Sövdnes, Trym 65  
 spectator: emancipated 35, 295, 304n2; response 8  
 spider possession ritual 14, 51–2  
 spiritual performance 186, 192  
 Srinivasan, Amrit 265  
 stage installation 147  
 staged performance 14, 27, 54, 63, 69, 94, 129, 271  
 Stamets, Paul 152  
 Stedelijk Museum Amsterdam 144–5, 145, 146, 148–50, 154  
 Stiegler, Bernhard 4  
 Stó:lō people 12  
 storytelling: culture 39, 41, 44; griot 41–2; as conservation 27–45; as means of survival 28, 155, 258; reliable 42; visual 16, 247  
 studio production 82, 167, 237, 254  
 SULK 17, 278, 280  
 superstition 55, 72  
 Swiss Art Awards 37  
 Swiss National Science Foundation 45  
 Sykora, Sandra 16  
 synchronicity 144, 165  
 T'xwelátse 12  
 Tadeusz, Norbert 208  
 Tata Institute of Social Sciences 263  
 Tate collection 147  
 Taylor, Diana 230–1  
 Te Papa Tongarewa, Museum of New Zealand 15, 162, 165  
 Teasley, Lisa 107  
 Tischer, Manfred 208  
 Tolentino, Julie 235  
 Toronto, Joan C. 3–4  
 Torske, Bjorn 65  
 Trade-Related Aspects of Intellectual Property Rights (TRIPS) 200  
 tradition: Black 39; historic 60; oral 15–16, 28, 41, 79, 172, 176–7, 186,

- 191–2, 197; performance 10, 181;  
religious 53, 56, 104  
transmission: challenges 148; cultural  
38; oral 14, 28, 154, 197  
trauma 111–12, 263, 308  
Trisha Brown Dance Company 147, 149  
Trogal, Kim 4–5  
truth/truthfulness 39–40, 42–4, 66, 115,  
163, 261, 263–5, 267, 306  
Tudor, David 90–1, 131–2
- Uffe (DJ) 65  
UNESCO (United Nations Educational,  
Scientific and Cultural Organization)  
10, 54, 71  
United Kingdom 105, 171  
utopia 51, 53, 130, 306
- Vā Body 17, 247, 249–51, 255  
van de Vall, Renée 4  
van Saaze, Vivian 147  
vanish/vanished 6–7, 32, 129–30, 230,  
234, 237, 267  
*Vanity Fair* (magazine) 68  
venue 28, 30, 119, 132, 144, 184, 282  
video: installation 61–2, 132, 147;  
videomaker 55, 82, 129; videotapes  
9, 70, 89, 94, 103, 145, 184, 232  
Vienna State Opera 81  
virtual archive 147, 153, 230, 235  
visibility 36–7, 153, 272, 303  
visual: documentation 27–8, 30–1,  
34, 38, 91, 106, 113, 155  
(*see also* photography); storytelling  
(dramaturge) 16, 18, 39, 247, 293,  
302–3  
Visual Rights Act (VARA) 213  
Volkswagen 127, 133
- volunteers 5  
Von Bartha, Stephen 29–30, 31–33,  
40, 44  
von Karajan, Herbert 89–90
- Walsh, Claire 151  
Warner, Michael 109, 112  
Webster, James 167, 168–169  
white: culture 40, 110; feminist 229;  
garments 52, 54, 61, 68; person  
110, 117, 176, 237, 240, 242; sheets  
61–2; supremacy 176, 196  
White, Michael John 95  
Whitman, Robert: *American Moon* 128  
Wicht, Philippe: *Freakshow* 236  
Wielocha, Aga 45, 136  
Wigman, Mary 236  
Wildberger, Martina-Sofie: I WANT  
TO SAY SOMETHING 227, 228,  
229, 240  
Wimsatt, William K. 134  
Woodham, Anna 3  
workshops 53, 72  
World Intellectual Property  
Organization (WIPO) 71  
World Trade Organization (WTO) 200  
WUDPAC (Winterthur/University  
of Delaware Program in Art  
Conservation) 174
- X-ray 303
- Yerly, Sophie 33  
YouTube 86, 91, 95  
Yu, Xiao 215
- Zurich Opera House 94  
Zurich University of the Arts 28