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Caring For Performance: Recent Debates

A Review of the Colloquium Performance: The Ethics and the Politics of Care, Bern University of the Arts, May 29-30, 2021

HANNA B. HÖLLING

Abstracts

English Français

Can performance art be conserved? If so, how, and if not, why not? Enhanced by short philosophical reflection surrounding conservation and its entanglement with the world, this essay reviews the debates that took place on the occasion of the international colloquium devoted to the conservation of performance, Performance: The Ethics and the Politics of Care. The colloquium was organized at Bern University of the Arts on May 29-30, 2021 within the research project Performance: Conservation, Materiality, Knowledge (Swiss National Science Foundation, 2020-24). The essay investigates the notion of performance through the lens of its conserveability and through a multidisciplinary perspective represented by a diversity of voices during the colloquium. It ultimately presents both performance and conservation as inherently unstable categories that require a careful and reflective approach.

La performance peut-elle être conservée? Si oui, comment et si non, pourquoi pas ? Enrichi par une courte réflexion philosophique autour de la conservation et de ses interrelations avec le monde, cet essai passe en revue les débats qui ont eu lieu lors du colloque international consacré à la conservation de la performance, Performance: The Ethics and the Politics of Care. Le colloque a été organisé à la Haute école des arts de Berne les 29 et 30 mai 2021 dans le cadre du projet de recherche Performance: Conservation, Materiality, Knowledge (Conservation, Matérialité, Connaissance ; Fonds national suisse, 2020-24). Cet essai explore la notion de performance à travers le prisme de sa conservabilité et dans une perspective multidisciplinaire, reflétée par une diversité de voix réunies au colloque. Il présente finalement la performance et la conservation comme des catégories intrinsèquement instables qui nécessitent une approche attentive et réfléchie.

Index terms



Keywords : performance, art de la performance, conservation, préservation, pérennité des œuvres d'art, actualisation

Keywords: performance, performance art, conservation, preservation, care, afterlife

Full text

Our sincere thanks to the speakers of the colloquium for their most inspiring and thought-provoking contributions. I heartily thank the research team of SNSF Performance: Conservation, Materiality, Knowledge: Jules Pelta Feldman, Emilie Magnin and Valerian Maly who have worked very hard to realize the event and its accompanying programs. I wish to acknowledge the Swiss National Science Foundation | SNSF for the generous support of our project, and the Department of Materiality in Art and Culture at Bern University of the Arts for offering our project an institutional home. Special thanks to Sebastian Dobrusskin, Head of the Department and Thomas Gartmann, Head of Research at Bern University of the Arts for all their support along the way.

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 Schneider¹

1 Contemporary discourses of care emergent from recent art and material culture have long left behind both the stasis of objects and the physical stabilisation of artefacts as dominant forces in conservation. Not only is the way we care considered in the larger picture of how we as humans relate to the world—of biological and non-biological bodies—but also how conservation is entangled in larger issues of ethical responsibility toward the Other.² The “Other” might signify the alterity, objects that differ from us and our expectations, but also those “others” who have long been excluded from, or denied access to, the prevalent Western practices of care. In the times of permanent state of emergency, systemic racial violence, global climate crisis and efforts to come to terms with colonial and imperial legacies in Western cultural institutions, conservation, too, ought to account for its situatedness in the world and how it is shaped by individual and collective knowledges, skills, techniques and factors such as education and cultural background.

2 This short philosophical digression into the conservation and its entanglement with the world is followed by a review of recent debates that took place in the context of two scholarly events devoted to the extended field of the performance conservation at Bern University of the Arts.

3 Every act of conservation involves the preservation and perpetuation of certain values generating axiological processes linked with acts of inclusion and exclusion. Conservation decisions are no doubt political. If we decide to keep a Picasso or a historic chair, we enter a lineage of production and distribution of this object and its world or an assemblage of actors and actants entangled in a network of mutual co-dependencies of objects and humans.³ To put it straightforwardly, an artwork is never an artwork only, but rather a world constituted by multiple objects and actions that are in the process of continuous creation and recreation and constitution and reconstitution of relations—a vibrant entanglement in the making. It is the *work* of this *artwork* in the world; or it is a work and its *con*-text (if we treat a work as a text).⁴ And the presence of this contextual world-involving swarm is perhaps the most challenging realisation of contemporary conservation.

4 The *working* of the artwork in the world has been most prominently put forward in the recent debates about the conservability of performance. As a non-discrete object, performance by its very nature explicates and makes apparent the many co-determinant factors that need to be considered when we think about care. Not only does it manifest in multiple materialisations, manifolds “re-s” (reperformance, reenactment, restaging, reactivation), documents, residues, records and memories, but it also cannot be separated from its surroundings—people and their institutions, things, situations and



the political, cultural and temporal circumstances (socially engaged and activist performance being prime examples of the latter). It might be said that by extension, performance, as a creature of its context, offers us a palette of concerns that inhere in all works of art, but that are most prominently articulated in performance.⁵

5 Performance also prompts us to think about what conservation is and what it does. Artworks are “strange tools,” a sort of useless, rather than merely functional, technology, according to the philosopher Alva Noë.⁶ They are, following Noë, modes of research and a method of investigating what makes us human. The conservation of performance—and by extension of all material and immaterial culture—offers us a methodology and an enticing way to enter the world of artworks as strange tools—as technologies repurposed under the impact of acts of care. But there is more: Conservation participates in the world of artmaking—in the entanglement in motion—through the conscious acts of maintenance and care. No longer confined to the backstage mending of precious pictures and to erasing the traces of its deeds, conservation bears authorial and creative power when it actualizes and interprets works using skill, memory, tacit and embodied knowledge (or what I call the virtual archive) as well as documents, residues and objects (the physical archive).⁷ Here, performance helps to redefine conservation—one that choreographs us as practitioners and theorists and prompts us to *reorganize* ourselves.⁸ To put it differently yet, we find ourselves as theorists of practice, and practitioners of theory, in a process of an ongoing reorganization. Because the conservation of performance disorganizes our habitual acts of care (such as the condition check, plan for consolidation, and physical mending of structural instabilities, among many others), it is a *reorganizational act*—it prompts practical and philosophical reorientations. These reorientations are productive by nature because they change the way we think and who we are as carers, and as human beings.⁹ To care for works never means to stay outside the carer and the cared-for relation. Rather, to care signifies to enter a transindividualizing relationship between the carer and the cared-for, a relational ethic of response-ability and a context-bound approach toward morality and decision-making.

6 This reformulation of the identity of carers—conservators’ and custodians’ and other participants in conservation as cultural practice—became evident during the colloquium Performance: The Ethics and the Politics of Care, organized at Bern University of the Arts on May 29-30, 2021 within the research project Performance: Conservation, Materiality, Knowledge (SNSF 2020-24).¹⁰ Two days of lectures and discussions, enhanced by an additional panel on June 10, made apparent the conservators’ entanglement with the world and the way in which the conservation’s cultural-technical practice is embedded in larger institutional and social systems. While re-enacting some motifs of performance conservation as an act of keeping the discourse alive while passing it on (in the sense of Rebecca Schneider’s proposition that re-enactment is an act of survival), the colloquium combined emic and etic approaches to the studies of the field (emic and etic are notions adapted from anthropology). Learning from the culture through the lens of the culture in the case of the emic approach and applying an observer perspective in the case of the etic approach, the colloquium demonstrated an unquestionable urgency of the topic in the times when cultural institutions increasingly collect performance, appreciating it not only for its momentary, short durational characteristics, but also for its ability to remain, differently, in collections. The voices represented in the colloquium and the panel also manifested how, through the lens of conservation, new light might be shed on the discourses of the actualizations, or afterlife, of performance.¹¹

7 In her opening keynote, Pip Laurenson addressed art performances as entities situated in the complex networks of human and non-human agents which are essential to their realisations. Laurenson evokes the idea of assemblage in the sense of Jane Bennett’s vibrant materiality as a construct of relations and a network in which objects and things¹² form relations and coexist with each other as a dynamic construct capable of expanding itself. Laurenson sees the museum not like an amoeba that swallows its prey, but rather as one of the many nodes that enter and expand the artwork’s existing



web of relations, adding its own curators, conservators, archivists and technicians to the already existing social structure of support that comes with the artwork upon its acquisition. On the example of Tony Conrad's *Ten Years Alive on the Infinite Plain* (1972), she discusses how artistic agency, which she analyses against the backdrop of, and in concordance with, concepts such as desire and charisma¹³ necessary to the efficiency of an assemblage, loses its exclusivity in the face of the larger agential assemblage. Decentring the artist's role entirely is however not her intention; rather, Laurenson aims at sensibilizing us to the concept of a work which is constituted by many hands and minds, and human and non-human agencies. She situates herself in a lineage of critical thought that has striven to revisit an important tenant of traditional conservation—and perhaps an elephant in the room—the artist's intention. This concept has been put under pressure in the conservation scholarship qua the notions of “expanded collaborations” and Umberto Eco's *Open Work* as well as via intentional fallacy and Roland Barthes's “Death of the Author,” among others. The weight accorded to artists' interviews in the conservation requires a reflective critique and categoric pronouncement in conservation scholarship. Not only does the interview tie an artwork to the intention of the artist, whether originary or indeed created after the work's initial appearance, but also it perpetuates gender specific roles. Responding to the crisis that is no doubt a common denominator of all collecting institutions at what their most prominent critic Dan Hicks names “the global juncture of the colonial past,”¹⁴ Laurenson proposes to situate the museum in a larger structure of care as an actor that carries the work forward but also as one that acknowledges the many voices and agencies involved in the life of an artwork beyond the claim of neutrality; an institution that supports the inherent fluidity and changeability of works as material and social beings. This is an acute objection to those theorists of the museum that consider it as enablers of “life stilled,” rather than “life unfolding.”¹⁵

8 Thinking about an artwork as a larger network of relation in which all individuals involved have a stake elegantly translates into the notion of vitality taken on by Helia Marçal. Operating in the contact zones¹⁶ between conservation, museum practice and new materialisms, Marçal posits vitality as an operative concept that might reconfigure both conservation and its object. Marçal acknowledges discussions surrounding the liveness of performance that arose at the end of the 20th century, such as Phelan (the disappearance of performance after the act), Auslander (liveness inheres in mediated, e.g. televisual and unmediated performance), Jones (documentation as a way of access to performance), Taylor (the archive and the repertoire), “the will to re-enact” (which in choreographic practice follows from “the will to archive” according to Andre Lepecki) and Schneider (re-enactment as an act of survival). Vitality, according to Marçal, might help us to revisit the debates around liveness in conservation. Vitality runs through recent discussions in new materialisms but its roots reach back as far as Spinoza and later Bergson and Deleuze. Most prominently, Bennett in her *Vibrant Matter* associates vitality with “the capacity of things —edibles, commodities, storms, metals — not only to impede or block the will and designs of humans but also to act as quasi agents or forces with trajectories, propensities, or tendencies of their own.”¹⁷ Congruent with a longer tradition of agential thinking, Marçal's take on vitalism posits artworks not as lumps of matter waiting to be engaged, but rather as having the power to change and develop conservation and museum practices. Situating artworks in an entanglement, conservation thus might need to be more conscious of its role in expanding or limiting the power of artworks. Finally, Marçal calls for constructing care as a collective responsibility that might be brought about by a distributed ethics of conservation – one that is better served by a collective imagination and one that might prompt us to rethink what it means to collect and own a work of art.

9 This rethinking is apparent in the work of Brian Castriota and Claire Walsh at the The Irish Museum of Modern Art (IMMA) in Dublin. In their colloquium presentation, Castriota and Walsh center their narrative around the work *Touching Contract* (2016) by Sarah Browne and Jesse Jones, which is a part of a larger project titled *In the Shadow of the State*. The idea of care is central not only to the work, which engages with



touch as a political gesture, but also to the mechanisms of its institutionalisation. Advocating for museums' shared responsibility, Castriota and Walsh put forward a model of cooperative authorship and collective ownership that might help to revise the authoritative machinery of institutionalization. IMMA comes in, again (see Laurenson), as a node in larger network of care that this work has already undergone. This new approach to care for collections (and resonating with the distributed ethics of care proposed above), foregrounds a process of an ongoing and collaborative exchange of resources and knowledge within and between institutions and stakeholders. If oral accounts, memories and recollections are gathered in a process of "slow collecting," (Laurenson) no longer must they be kept to one institution only. A museum is not a terminus building for works; rather, as became apparent here, a museum is a function and a dynamic site where works might live on. Jean Pierre Commetti once said that conservation philosophy modulates and adjusts its paradigms according to the new challenges that arise—objects, beliefs, patterns of thinking, knowledge and institutions.¹⁸ No doubt that the adjustments presented by Castriota and Walsh are warmly welcome by the museum community.

10 That every work of art calls for a critical approach, a consciousness that manifests itself in the reflexive analysis of the conceptual and practical means to be mobilized in each situation was evident in Louise Lawson's and Ana Ribeiro's dialogic contribution to the colloquium. The scrupulous way in which these conservators approach performance at Tate not only during the acquisition of an artwork but also pre- and post-acquisition shows the collaborative nature of performance institutionalisation, in which artists, their technicians, former activators, and current museum team, along with potential interpreters of the work, are involved. It also demonstrates that, in the current global cultural economy, the resources needed to accomplish such a project are available only to privileged players. Moreover, from Lawson's and Ribeiro's fascinating account it becomes more and more clear that museums such as Tate are just one amongst many potential nodes in the artwork's larger network. Lastly, every act of acquisition also unquestionably and dramatically impacts the work. Thus while listening to their presentation, a thought experiment comes to mind: Can the trajectory of an acquired performance work be ever undone? In other words, could a work be disentangled from a vast amount of data and meta data, protocols, recordings, interviews and condition reports produced during the acquisition—tools and processes that are never neutral, but that dramatically alter the artwork, whether dormant or activated.

11 The dormancy of an artwork, meaning the intervals in between its activations, brings attention to the modes of repeating inextricably linked to "iterability," as we learn from Rebecca Schneider. As with a gesturing hand, a call and response "that weaves past and future in intervallic resonance," bears also a "response-ability" calling "the past to appear for account" and of being called by "the past to respond with account."¹⁹ It is simple to be in love with the idea that performance refuses to vanish since its vanishing was one of the reasons why we enjoyed it in the 20th century when it refused commodification. But the liveness of performance is reiterative, it is a mode of remaining, a repertoire that is not the (colonial) archive—and Schneider is of the most prominent architects of that argument. Schneider's "call and response" formally and conceptually underpins her contribution, reflected in the formal choice to deliver her presentation in collaboration with this author. If conservation assumes the presence of an object, a performance object—say, a gesture—might be regarded as matter that coheres (consolidates or "sticks together") through time and is conserved through repetition. Iterability (of gesture) might thus become a kind of materiality, and share some qualities with other material objects that cohere. Such thinking necessitates an application of varying time scales to various iterative materials (that is, materials that are characterized by iterability). Along these lines—and as I proposed in my antiphonal responses to Schneider—we might think of an object as a slow performance, and performance as a quickly happening object that coheres and decays at different rates of resolution/dissolution. Objects and actions appear, again and again, as modulation and



condensation of matter that radiates/moves at a varying pace. But Schneider goes a step further and applies the aesthetic of antiphony, that is iterability and response-ability, as inherent to gesture to all objects and asks, how would the scene of conservation change if we understood its objects as iterant? To think about gesture is to imagine it being passed on through flesh and repetition and to understand its capacity to be reiterated as something always already citing, drawing from the past as essentially reemergent, but also opening out toward something coming. What needs to be asked here, however, is whether such a reemergence is a sufficient condition for conservation to be brought into the conversation? Is the capacity for (re)iteration, which is gesturing toward the past and toward the future, as in recursive “re-“ and “pro-“ enactment, a pronouncement of endurance of a different kind, that, for some readers, stands in for conservation, but it may not for others? A conservation-minded co-performance with an object, as Schneider puts it, must involve more than the preservation of material, and include “the preservation of the *conditions* for engagement with said object as performance, as gesture, as sculpture, as painting, that is, as reverberant actant in a playfield that is always wider than the object itself, both in time and in space.” We shall remember that a conservator’s performance participates in “the broader preservation of the conditions for and the (ritualized) cultural investment in conservation itself.” Schneider’s brilliant assertions remind us of the excitement of intersections, and bear promise that conservation might, in addition to its practical operations, be also practised as intellectual and rhetoric endeavour.

12 Shift in the institutions and, by extension, in the very notion of performance were at the heart of Barbara Büscher’s keynote which opened the second day of the colloquium. She emphasized the importance of the genealogy of performance on the intersection of visual arts and theatre/ performing arts: The apparatus or *dispositif* in the Foucauldian sense (as an ensemble of discourses, forms, regulatory decisions, laws, administrative measures, statements etc.) of a museum as an institution that historically collected visual arts manifest in physical objects is significantly different from the *dispositif* of theatre. Here, performance forms which emerged at the intersection of genres—as a form of intermedia— are subsumed into the operating procedures of visual arts institutions and their exhibition practices. It is not only that the white cube differs from the black box in their temporalization and structuring of the viewer’s experience and autonomy (according to Claire Bishop²⁰) but also in the way that performance poses a different modality of cultural gathering in the museum and theatre (individualized gathering and collective gathering if we follow Dorothea von Hantelmann). Moreover, the centres of cultural power with their incomparable human and material resources strive (rather successfully) to produce and determine what is being done, and how, in the field. But what happens with all those works that do not fall into the category of the institutionally “collectable”? Büscher calls for a revision of the operating habitus in today’s cultural economy: We shall empower artists by providing them with powerful tools of self-documentation.

13 This is an urgent idea, also since not all institutional ambitions to document performance come to fruition, as Iona Goldie-Scot demonstrates. Presenting the failed plans to “map the memory” of Ralf Lemon’s complex, multimedial *Scaffold Room* (2014) at the Walker Art Center in Minneapolis, Goldie-Scot exposes the behind-the-scenes of the experimental acquisition of Lemon’s work which was supposed to embody a large score supported by all-encompassing documentation. Walker’s first department devoted to contemporary performing arts was established in the 1970s, which sets the expectations high. But the museum structures that granted different conceptions of the work and its acquisition appear to have hindered the realization of the score and its accompanying record. A result of the “ethics of doing nothing” (which I freely adapted from Ashley Smith),²¹ the work exists somewhere under the surface, dormant, if not abandoned, awaiting the realization of the ambitious documentation. Goldie-Scot sees the reason for this status quo in a mismatch between the museum’s operational structure and Lemon’s work which simply cannot be put into storage, like traditional



works, for unlimited time. How can the failure that is doing little be squared with the culture of infallibility of the museum, and of conservation?²²

14 Several speakers shed light on the practicalities of keeping records, managing the information about the artwork and questions of access. Farris Wahbeh evoked the idea of the continuum and modes of creating, capturing, pluralising and organising records in the archival domain. As an archival specialist, Wahbeh is versed in archival theories such as the elaborate continuum model and the life-cycle model of record by Theodore Schellenberg and others, which has been the prominent model for North American archivists and records managers since the 1960s.²³ The practices of description and information architecture that make space not only for event records of a singular instance of a work but also for a record aggregate, as in the case of an exhibition, pose pressing questions as to who is authorized to access these records. In addition, the imposition on performance a certain logic of record might meet its limits, since not all performance events can be recorded (e.g. due to their sheer amassment during a festival). In response to the multiplicity and the recent pluralization of performance dictated by its ability to inhere in instantiations, a new post-custodial model of record has emerged which grants access to a rhizomatic network of records.²⁴ Again, it is the artwork that shapes the practice.

15 The affordance²⁵ of a performance work was thematized in Erin Brannigan and Louise Lawson's dialogic presentation "Precarious Movements: Contemporary Dance as Contemporary Art." In collaboration with the Precarious Movements: Choreography and the Museum research project funded by the Australia Research Council (2021-2024), the speakers defined precarity as a practice of resistance through its very operations, one that not only influences art practices through these conditions, but also one that has the capacity to alter both the preconceived ideas about museums and one's ideas about dance (referring to Boris Charmatz Manifesto for the Musée de la danse ²⁶). In dance studies, dance has been often described as unassertive, having a special relationship with failure and weakness and generative of unregulated knowledge and processes. Moreover, dance has long established itself as a part of contemporary art practice despite the many differences between choreographic works and traditional art, to name only the mode of display (temporary rather durational; oriented toward the floor rather than the gallery walls, shared space); embodied and transmitted knowledge; artistic labour that involves devising the actions and processes; and gallery conditions—the floor and shared space with audience. It is believed moreover that the pronounced lack of residue distinguishes dance from performance art—a distinction further aided by factors such as a usual lack of installations and scores; a dependence on corporeal copresence; a high degree of body work and specialised labour in some performances; and specific requirements of space. Dance emphasises once more the importance of networks of knowledge and knowledge transmission and multiplication as conservation measures that act against what Lawson describes as the work's "perceived inherent vulnerability." Brannigan and Lawson observe a shift in material practices of conservation towards models based on diversification and transmission. The project pursues dance as a form of precarity, a term which has been understood as both a social construct (Judith Butler and Hal Foster) asserting the instability of some due to power relations induced by others, and as a wilful act, a practice of resistance (Thomas Hirschhorn). The nature of choreographic works calls for primary research and learning from practice; it emphasises the impact of the social networks. A dance work, even if it evolves over time, cannot operate at a distance from the author. An ethical community-based practice that places the institution in a horizontal relationship with what is outside is a prerequisite for the conservation of dance, to which artists, curators, conservators, archivists and publishers contribute. When it comes to dance, the authors consider auditions and rehearsals and other moments of activation in the gallery as crucial moments for engagement and reflections for conservators who plan how the work might be translated into the conservation documentation. But are those structures of care the sole basis for the sustained life of performance?



16 A turn inward might reveal the supporting structures for choreographic and performance practices already existing at their core. Cori Olinghouse and Megan Metcalf began a dialogue in early 2020 about their shared experience working with choreographers and performance artists on documenting and archiving their projects for art institutions and other stakeholders. In a panel titled “Living Materials: Ethics and Principles for Embodied Stewardship,” organized on June 10, 2021, just a few days after the colloquium, Metcalf and Olinghouse combined the knowledge of a practitioner and theorist to identify underrecognized competencies and skills in academic discourse around performance preservation. In their conversation, Metcalf and Olinghouse propose to conceive the project of the preservation of performance as intersubjective, process-based, and artist-driven, one that pays attention to its audience. This project should be dialogic in the sense of listening to the work as well as the work’s community, including the artist. In their view, the embodied preservation of performance should demonstrate how conservation can operate through networks of people. To preserve performance is to recognize that diversified knowledge and intricate intelligences are already present in the bodies of the practitioners, and in those working in the institutions (including, next to the obvious professional groups, security guards, often working-class people of colour in the North-American contexts, who spend considerable time with works). Performances are made of social material, and thus the artworks’ larger community plays an important role in sustaining it. To keep performance alive is not only to establish new methods for its preservation derived from extant forms of collecting, but to acknowledge and draw from a model of generative performance stewardship that inheres in performance practice. Metcalf and Olinghouse maintain that “the active negotiation of form and lineage within particular communities is part of their continued survival and transmission; movements behave as mnemonic reserves that are passed and kept alive corporeally.” Listening, watching, and learning are key.

17 A number of authors thematized the institutional life of performance. In their paper “Interfrictions: The ‘Ephemeral’ Meets the ‘Static,’” Rachel Mader and Siri Peyer reported from an ongoing research project *Collecting the Ephemeral: Prerequisites and Possibilities for Making Performance Art Last* situated at the Lucern University of the Arts (SNSF, 2019-23). In cooperation with many actors involved in the field, Mader and Peyer investigate how performance endures as a collectible artform in smaller and medium-sized Swiss institutions. With its vibrant cultural and performance scene, and yet saved from the buzzing presence of the global players, Switzerland is an excellent arena in which to pose these questions. In addition, the project works with artist-partners whose work has remained outside the collecting institutions, leaving them open for various experimental approaches to how a performance might be rendered collectable. The institutionalisation of performance was dissected through the aspects of documentation, leftovers, or the transmission of knowledge, notions of a curator as a co-author, collaboration models of creation and museums as coproducers. Are the modes of acquisition applied to traditional object-based applicable to performance or should forms of continuity in dance or theatre offer a more viable alternative? The speakers also evoked the immense financial investment that re-enactments might pose to an institution: Not only the necessity to maintain and update an elaborate documentation record but also to ensure fees to the performers on each occasion the work is active. The lack of competencies not only in legal questions, but also in dance or contemporary performance complicates further the acquisition processes, which for decades relied on physical artefacts. The technicalities of acquisition pose intriguing questions about the work’s very nature: Is an iterant performance comparable with an edited work, can it produce exhibition copies and how would they play out in legal terms? Does a museum intervene in the creative process by imposing on the work its structures of care?²⁷

18 Intellectual Gifts: Case Studies in Collecting Performance was a presentation delivered by Lizzie Gorfaine, Ana Janevski, Martha Joseph and Kate Lewis of the Museum of Modern Art in New York. MoMA’s history with performance reaches back to the late 1930s where the Museum, only ten years after its funding, established the



Department of Theatre and Dance. Although the department closed in the late 1940s, the museum continued to present live events. The current Department of Media and Performance was founded in 2006 and has since accumulated over 30 live works presented in a robust event program in a dedicated space, “The Studio.”²⁸ Performance reveals the intricacies of the exhibition apparatus, challenge the institution and the relationship with the audience and collection, the economy of the institution, and reveals infrastructure. It necessitates a cross-departmental work, reflected in part in the build-up of the group of presenters, which combined curatorial, conservation and technical knowledge. The group presented works created by James Lee Byars, Tania Bruguera and Simone Forti (Forti was influential for minimal art and contemporary choreographic practice) and the complexities involved in sustaining their life on display. Addressed were issues of reinstallation, re-enactment, casting, the creation of public-facing and internal documentation, as well as oral histories—understood as forms of stewardship and an enhancement of work’s trajectory. The speakers advocated the perception that performance works are intellectual gifts that evoke a set of philosophical questions. While in the past conservation signified caring for an object, with performance works, the stewardship “extends to the body, and the ethics care for people, the artists and performers and the expanding communities, both present and future” (Lewis). The discussion of Forti and Bruguera reminds us that conservation happens through teaching—the oral, visual and bodily transmission of knowledge that take place during rehearsals and activations of their works.

19 Performance documentation constitutes a valid and indispensable form of conservation and might be conceived as a vehicle for conservation—a thesis explored by Gabriella Giannachi in her keynote “Conserving the un-conservable: documenting environmental performance for the 21st century.” Offering an exciting twist on the notion of performance, Giannachi expanded performance to environmental practices, a genre that, as she believes, still needs to be collected. Giannachi’s deeply researched overview of the practices of documenting performance ranged from Oskar Schlemmer’s Notes and Sketches for *Das Triadisches Ballett* (*The Triadic Ballett*, 1921-29) to the visual documentation created by photographers Peter Moore and Babette Mangolte in the 1960s and 70s. In a persuasive way, and while acknowledging the methods identified by museums for the documentation of performance, Giannachi puts forward three factors that need to be considered to render these methods more future-oriented: The role of the audience and audience-generated documentation; documentation that does not originate in the museum; and attention paid to the environment of the work. In the case of the last: How does a subject affect the environment when he/she is documenting it? Is documenting also co-creating and co-curating the work? One major takeaway from Giannachi’s most eloquent intervention is that it might be just as important to document the environment of the documentation and the context in which the work’s documentation is made, as to document the work itself. Documentation and conservation are interdependent. Without the one, we cannot have the other, says Giannachi.

20 Karolina Wilczyńska’s “Maintenance is Never Done: Care and Preservation in Mierle Laderman Ukeles’s Performances,” shed a different light on the practices of care for performance as socially engaged practice. Although the connection between conservation and socially engaged performance art (specific type of performance in its socio-political context) might at first seem paradoxical—how might an action designed with and for a particular community, relating to specific social problems, be kept?—Wilczyńska makes a convincing case for the opposite. Discussing Mierle Laderman Ukeles’s self-identification as a maintenance artist and a care worker in performing her daily chores (see Ukeles’s “Manifesto for Maintenance Art 1969!”), Wilczyńska asks how to care for performance art that is about care? Ukeles’s “Touch Sanitation Performance” (1979-80) in which she shook hands with 8,500 sanitation workers over the course of 11 months, exemplifies how the “object of conservation” might be continually negotiated in the “dynamic and sometimes incompatible relations between aesthetics, politics, art history narratives, art strategies, political activism and museum practices.” Because



images, gestures, bodies and objects “operate as transformative categories that collapse into one another,” the same work, accordingly, might “appear in time and place as an image, as a re-enactment, a material object, a narrative, a movie, a dance, a protest or workshops.” This viral ontology of performance, as Christopher Bedford would have it, attests not only to the sheer impossibility of performance’s disappearance, but also to a diversity that goes far beyond specific media that underpinned conservation in the past.

21 Diversification might also appear through the means of distribution. For “Festivalising Performance: Communication-Art Group (Un)archived,” Sooyoung Leam drew on largely unrecognised and previously unpublished archival records of the South Korean artistic collective known as Communication Art Group, which were active as performers and event organizers 1990-96. Foregrounding what she names the festivalisation of performance outside institutional settings in the early 1990s in Korea, Leam considered the records of these activities which had been disregarded as partial, unprofessional, and subjective not only as meaningful interpretations but as a means of these works’ preservation. What she and other speakers during the colloquium made clear is that we do not even come close to exhausting the many meanings of conservation, nor of performance, through our situated, subjective, and perspectival approaches. This is perhaps the most rewarding conclusion: The unconditioned futurity of performance, and of conservation, that crystalizes in the prolific contact zones and profuse inconclusions—a condition for unpredictable futures.

22 One aspect remains clear: Imagining performance *in* and *through* conservation as a cross-temporal engagement and a process that intervenes in *remaining* prompts reorganizational efforts. Thinking performance and conservation not only as a field of practice but as a new territory of discourse—a space for critical negotiation of axiological contingencies and of confrontation of various cultures of knowing in what has always been a transactional, rather than objective, practice of care—necessitates a new conception of the “object of conservation,” one of different spatial and temporal coherences. This new object and consciousness grant conservation access to a broader discourse taking place on the intersection of disciplines.

23 But there is, and should be, more. We ought to ask: could such a new object of conservation, its gesturing across chronologies and its existence among and between bodies, biological and of alternate materiality, as always already in relation, teach us something about who we are—as active carers, actors, actants and, not least, *performers*, in conservation?

24

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Notes

1 Rebecca Schneider, "Not, Yet: When Our Art is in our Hands. With Antiphonal Interludes by Hanna Hölling." Concluding keynote at the colloquium *Performance: The Ethics and the Politics of Care*, Bern, May 30, 2021.

2 Otherness in philosophy has been associated with the existence of the concept of the Self, thus requiring a constitutive Other to define the counterpart existence of the Self.

3 From Alfred Gell through Bruno Latour to Graham Harman and Jane Bennett, an understanding of the agency or animacy of objects has attempted to dissolve the human-thing boundary and position objects not as subordinate to humans but as equal partners in the collective of human and nonhumans.

4 In the folklore studies, context is a part of tripartite structure consisting of text, context, and texture. Context, however, is difficult to describe and can only be investigated from a variety of perspectives. For instance, when an item is investigated, the context is provided by the situation in which it is displayed or used. In conservation, context appears uncountable times in relation to our accounts about artworks, but its use is rarely explanatory.

5 My reflections do not seek to offer a comprehensive overview of significant scholarly work that has been done in the conservation of contemporary art and performance. For such overview, see Hélia Marçal, "Contemporary Art Conservation" published as part of the research project *Reshaping the Collectible: When Artworks Live in the Museum*, Tate, 2019, <https://www.tate.org.uk/research/reshaping-the-collectible/research-approach-conservation>; moreover, I acknowledge the important body of scholarship on this topic authored by the presenters quoted on the following pages.

6 For the notions of strange tools and art as a creature of its context, see Alva Noë, *Strange Tools: Art and Human Nature* (New York: Hill and Wang, 2016).



7 For the notions of the virtual and physical archive, see: Hanna B. Hölling, *Paik's Virtual Archive: Time, Change and Materiality in Media Art* (Oakland, California: University of California Press, 2017), 141-153.

8 Noë, *Strange Tools*.

9 Inspired by a conversation with Alva Noë. See Hölling, Hanna B. "Conserving Ourselves, Creating Ourselves: Thinking with the Philosopher Alva Noë," *Writings—Performance: Conservation, Materiality Knowledge* (December 2021), <https://performanceconservationmaterialityknowledge.com/2021/12/21/alva-noe/>.

10 Performance: Conservation, Materiality, Knowledge is a four-year collaborative research project funded by the Swiss National Foundation at the Bern University of the Arts. The project core members are Hanna B. Hölling (project lead), Valerian Maly (artistic collaborator), Julia Pelta Feldman (postdoctoral fellow), Emilie Magnin (doctoral candidate) and Electra D'Emilio (project assistant). <https://performanceconservationmaterialityknowledge.com/>

11 For the colloquium's program, see <https://performanceconservationmaterialityknowledgeart.files.wordpress.com/2021/04/>

performance-conservation-colloquium-2021.pdf. For the panel, see <https://performanceconservationmaterialityknowledge.com/events/livingmaterials/>

12 The distinction between object and things surfaces in critical theory. It gained prominence through the writings by Martin Heidegger and (later) Bill Brown. In his "Thing Theory," Brown, following Heidegger's concept of equipment, suggests that an object becomes a thing when it breaks and thus ceases to serve its habitual function and sheds its social value. Things, in other words, are object that become present to us through the suspension of habit. Brown, Bill. "Thing Theory," *Critical Inquiry* 28, no. 1 (Autumn 2001): 1–22.

13 When she speaks of desire as productive force that generates relationship through a synthesis of multiplicities, Laurenson references Goodchild, Muller and Schurr, and by extension, Deleuze. She proposes charisma as a relational property contingent on the perceiver and the context, one that manifests as the capability of those instigators to motivate others to join the assemblage.

14 In his book *The Brutish Museums*, Hicks goes as far as to say that museums are prolongations of violence, and white supremacy—a statement that we find in a chapter which opens with "The power of the museum begins with the skill of a conservator." Dan Hicks, *The Brutish Museums: The Benin Bronzes, Colonial Violence and Cultural Restitution* (London: Pluto Press, 2020). On the topic of unlearning imperialism, see Ariella Aïsha Azoulay *Potential History: Unlearning Imperialism* (London and New York: Verso 2019).

15 Dominguez Rubio, *Still Life: Ecologies of the Modern Imagination at the Art Museum* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2021).

This persuasively formulated book painstakingly circumvents any meaningful theorization of recent art that has been taking place within the conservation studies.

16 Mary Louise Pratt introduced the term contact zone "to refer to social spaces where cultures meet, clash and grapple with each other, often in contexts of highly asymmetrical relations of power, such as colonialism, slavery, or their aftermaths as they lived out in many parts of the world today." Mary Louise Pratt, "Arts of the Contact Zone," *Profession* (1991): 33–40.

17 Bennett, *Vibrant Matter: A Political Ecology of Things* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2009).

18 Jean Pierre Commetti, *Conserver-restaurer, l'œuvre d'art à l'époque de sa préservation technique* (Paris: Gallimard, « nrf essais », 2016).

19 See Rebecca Schneider, "Slough Media," in *Remain*, edited by Iona B. Jucan, Jussi Parikka, and Rebecca Schneider (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2019), 90; and Introduction to this volume by Iona B. Jucan. "Remain x Remain(s)," ix-xx.

20 On this topic, see, for instance, Bishop, "Black Box, White Cube, Gray Zone: Dance Exhibitions and Audience Attention," *TDR The Drama Review*, Vol. 62, No. 2 (Summer 2018):22-42. See also "Can Performance Art be Conserved? Claire Bishop in Conversation," *Performance: Conservation Materiality Knowledge*, event recording, <https://performanceconservationmaterialityknowledge.com/events/claire-bishop-in-conversation/>.

21 See Jonathan Ashely Smith's eponymous article from 2017 in which he discusses the ways in which ethical arguments are used to direct or deter interventive treatments. Ashley-Smith, "The Ethics of Doing Nothing," *Journal of the Institute of Conservation*, Vol. 46, No.1 (2018): <https://doi.org/10.1080/19455224.2017.1416650>.

22 For the notion of the "culture of infallibility" in relation to heritage, see Salvador Muñoz-Viñas, *The Transactional Nature of Heritage* (Amsterdam: Reinwardt Academy, 2017), 64.

23 Philip C. Bantin, "Strategies for Managing Electronic Records: A New Archival Paradigm? An Affirmation of Our Archival Traditions?" *Archival Issues* 23:1 (1998), p. 17–34.

24 What I mean by culturalization might also signify a process by which what belongs to art inherits properties of other cultural objects on an aesthetic, functional, or economic plain.



25 Coined in 1966 by James J. Gibson, affordance is a property of an object that links with its uses or characteristics, it is what the object, or the environment offers the individual. E.g., a doorknob allows us to open a door, a chair makes clear how we sit on it.

26 Boris Charmatz, “Musée de la Danse,” <https://www.borischarmatz.org/?musee-de-la-danse>.

27 According to Heidegger, even negligence implies a notion of care.

28 Although the Studio is a performance-dedicated space, it is worth to keep in mind that it also presents other arts and media, and MoMA has presented live performance also elsewhere, in its theatres and galleries.

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About the author

Hanna B. Hölling

Dr Hanna B. Hölling is Associate Professor in the Department of History of Art, University College London and Research Professor at Bern University of the Arts. Her research, publications and teaching focus mainly on the philosophy and theory of conservation and art and material culture since the 1960s.

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