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Performance Anxiety: Performance Art in Twenty-First Century Catalogs and Archives
Christina Manzella and Alex Watkins

How does one document performance art, which is not an object but an interaction between artist and viewers? After the performance, the work is preserved in various videos, photographs, eyewitness accounts, and remaining artifacts. It is these remains that enter the archive and the catalog, and which must be described and interrelated to give an idea of the original performance. This article addresses several practical and philosophical concerns that are raised by this process of integration and their ramifications.

Introduction

Performance art, with its ties to both the fine and performing arts, exists in four dimensions and as a multisensory experience. By nature, it is an ephemeral activity, which, in a culture obsessed with materiality and posterity, proves problematic. It raises questions about how the librarian or archivist records art and can preserve an impression of it for future generations. Must performance art as part of its nature disappear? How can the immaterial, the fleeting, be captured and preserved, and does that in some way change it? Does performance art perhaps exist after the fact solely in its documentation to the extent that the documentation and the performance merge and become one in the same? These are difficult questions which cannot be easily answered or dismissed.

The Stakes of Performance Art Documentation

Documentation is often the only way that many people, even scholars, will ever interact with a work of performance art. Performance art and documentation need each other. “The body art event needs the photograph to confirm its having happened; the photograph needs the body art event as an ontological ‘anchor’ of its indexicality.”¹ This argument that Amelia Jones makes convincingly points to the key role good documentation plays in the understanding of past performances. There is no evidence of a performance ever having happened without documentation. Without the physical remnants, it is as if something never existed; the remains, unlike in societies with oral histories, are the great legitimizers.² Further, if that documentation cannot be found or is not well organized, the performance cannot be re-experienced. The stakes for performance art documentation are much higher than those for objective art, which exists independently of its evidence.

Memory’s legitimacy has decreased as available technologies have changed the way people record their experiences. It has become even more important to leave a legacy, to record “for posterity’s sake.” Memory alone is not sufficient in the West because it is seen as tainted by emotion and therefore fallible—unlike documentation, which, in name itself, implies fact. Memory too, like performance, is a “body-based practice,” making it impermanent.³ What then of performance art and its apparent refusal to remain other than in the memories of viewers?

The Performance Art Record

Performance art can be found mostly in visual resources collections and museum catalogs. A museum may stage the performance, collect an art object created during the performance, or acquire a video of the performance. In its catalog it would ideally link these items to the now vanished performance that generated them. However, the nature of performance art raises serious obstacles to its being cataloged. Here, organizing and documenting works of art can be a struggle at odds with performance art’s natural tendency to disappear. It can only be re-experienced through mediation by various media that capture some element of the performance. A complete set of documentation allows for a fuller understanding of the performance. Every piece of evidence makes each other piece function better, “each document touches at its root the idea of the original, and then moves out from there, diverging in various ways, connecting to other documents, and producing an accumulation that is best understood collectively.”⁴

The performance art record will by necessity consist of several interconnected records. The central record is that of the work—that is the idea, as described by the Functional Requirements for Bibliographic Records (FRBR), the entity-relationship metadata model developed by the International Federation of Library Associations and Institutions (IFLA) in 1998.⁵ Connected to this overarching artistic idea are expressions of the work. In the case of performance art this may be individual performances of the same performance piece. After this level FRBR proceeds to manifestations, physical items. Performance art does not exist in physical form; however, it can leave behind physical remains. Performance creates two main types of evidence, documentary and artifactual. Documentation includes still images, video recordings and/or audio recordings, which often become stand-ins for the performance itself. Artifacts include the props and products used and produced by a performance along with the ephemera that accompany a performance. All these items should be interconnected through the main work record. The chart in
Figure 1: Diagram of “FRBRized” performance records.

Figure 1 diagrams the performance records’ relationships and their locations in the FRBR model.

The first requirement to successfully catalog performance art is to determine what constitutes a work of performance art. A work in the FRBR model is “a distinct intellectual or artistic creation.” It is the idea that exists separately from different expressions of that same creation. The line between what is simply another expression and what constitutes a new work is negotiable and subjective. “Because the notion of a work is abstract, it is difficult to define precise boundaries for the entity. The concept of what constitutes a work and where the line of demarcation lies between one work and another may in fact be viewed differently...” To find this line for performance art, there must be negotiation between performance art’s ability to be restaged and each performance’s singularity.

A logical structure needs to be created to convey the information about a performance. This is especially true for famous performances that the original artist has re-performed many times, such as Yoko Ono’s Cut Piece. A work of performance art should be defined mainly using artist and title metadata. Several performances of the same work by the same artist can be considered expressions of one idea or work. Each individual expression needs to be differentiated by making use of date and location metadata elements and connected back to the main entry. Alternatively each performance can be independent, although this creates a less organized and less “FRBRized” structure. Re-performances by a new artist should be considered a new work, even if they are making use of the same idea. The new artist acts both as a performer and a creator, implicitly recreating the work in his or her own image. The body of the performer and the role of the artist are central to performance art. The new performances could be viewed, as described by Jessica Santone, as “reverberations of single past moments rather than as full re-embodiments of the works.” It is possible to relate these reinterpretations through work-to-work relationships.

**Image and Video of Performance Art**

In performance art, the evidence and performance are closely intertwined; therefore, clear relationships need to be made between work and image records. Image and video documentation should be closely linked to the performance, without supplanting performance as the work type. Performances are prone to reduction. Their complicated existence means they are often simplified, all too often to a single image. In several cases “such documentation [has] become iconic in its continued reproduction as complex works were reduced to singular images.” This phenomenon, all too common in representations of performance art, is exactly what a good catalog entry will prevent and a bad one will perpetuate.

**Cataloging Cultural Objects**, the data content standards initiative for the cultural heritage community developed by the Visual Resources Association, makes “clearly distinguishing between Work Records and Image Records” part of its key principles. This is never more important than with performance art because of the tendency for the representation to replace the event completely. The performance record should use metadata to make clear that the work of art is a performance event located at a specific place in time and space. The performance can also make use of measurement metadata element types such as duration, to more clearly locate the performance in time. Then the performance can be related to its documentation through relational metadata elements such as the VRA Core’s “Imagels” relation type or in multimedia environments through a video relation type (not part of VRA Core). Without these two separate entries it is often unclear if the record is of video art or performance art. This also serves to relate many images of one performance and perhaps its video, ensuring that performance art is not supplanted by a single iconic image and that the event has an autonomous existence.

**The Material Remains of Performance**

Besides documentation, a performance leaves behind objects, artifacts of the performance. Sometimes these cast-offs become art objects themselves, lasting evidence of an impermanent experience. “Certain collectible artifacts are produced or used, ephemera created or transformed through acts of performance.” Sometimes these objects are as large as an elaborate set piece a performance uses, or as small as props manipulated in the act of performance. These pieces are important to catalog and to connect to the performance from which they resulted. Sometimes these objects replace the performance as the main art object, displayed and cataloged as works in and of themselves. Matthew Barney’s Drawing Restraint 14, a performance in which the artist suspended himself from a bridge to create an image on the wall, has become an installation, not a performance—a drawing on the museum wall. Despite the tendency for products of a performance to supplant the event itself, they are important to the creation of complete records. “After the event these can serve a mnemonic function, triggering memories to be imagined, or act as ‘utopian traces,’ demanding multiple re-uses, both actually and virtually.” They help users imagine a work they never saw, and they provide a key physical connection to long-gone performances like a relic to a saint.

Creating records of props and products of a performance adds another layer of complexity but also richness to the catalog. Performances can be connected to their artifacts through rela-
tional metadata elements. Unfortunately, no clear relationship types exist in VRA Core. Relationships like “componentOf” or “designedFor” may be applicable to items created for a performance. For items that are produced by a performance, there is no standard relationship type that fits perfectly. The relationship between performance and its creations suggests new types such as “productOf” or “producedBy.” Creating good records helps sort and organize the performance and its various images, videos, props, and creations.

**Performance Ephemera**

Performances leave behind all variety of ephemera, including announcements, press releases, reviews, photographs, and correspondence. These objects are often preserved in artists’ files which are vital to researchers of local and lesser known artists who are not well represented in traditional resources. It can be challenging to link performance art records to an artist’s file that may be in a different catalog altogether. The favored method of access to an artist’s file is through the creation of a MARC record in the library’s catalog. This allows not only for increased description but also for greater consistency and the ability to share records among libraries. One such example of linking between performance art records and artist’s files can be found in the New York Museum of Modern Art’s (MoMA) collection database. A “Further Resources” link from the collection catalog record leads into a keyword search for an artist’s name in the library catalog; an artist’s file (if it exists) will show up in the results. This is clearly not the only use for the link, which also brings up books and other resources. A direct link to an artist’s file may be preferable, as it can more clearly relate ephemera to the performance.

**Performance Art in the Archive**

If an archive is a record comprised of material objects, it would seem then that an archive would reject performance art or that performance art, inherently, would reject being archived. However, an archive is, essentially, evidence of things past, of what has disappeared. Therefore, if performance art can be documented, then it can be archived.

In art conservation terms, performance art as a medium contains a kind of metaphorical inherent vice: its degradation from its original form is guaranteed. In archival terms, performance art “challenge[s] object status and seems to refuse the archive its privileged ‘savable’ original.” Both are correct yet not entirely accurate. Performance artists, like so many others, want their work and themselves to be remembered, as evidenced by their self-documentation and their repeat performances of past works. In her 2010 show The Artist Is Present, held at the Museum of Modern Art in New York, Marina Abramović recreated her *Nightsea Crossing* (with Ulay, 1982, 1985, 1986) and directed other performers in re-stagings of many of her other past works. This is in an attempt to introduce new people to her work, and to create new documentation and new memories, which will carry on her existence. She is not only concerned with her own work living on but with others’ as well. In her performance *Seven Easy Pieces* (2005) at the Guggenheim Museum in New York, Abramović brought back to life five performances by other artists, one by herself, and introduced a new piece of her own. She did these re-performances through available documentation—Bruce Nauman’s highly detailed instructions from his *Body Pressure* (1974) and a single poster along with written accounts of VALIE EXPORT’s *Action Pants: Genital Panic* (1969) for example. Museums and other cultural institutions also have a stake in creating lasting records of performances as they often record such events via film and video. For *The Artist Is Present*, MoMA photographed each person who sat across from Abramović. These portraits along with the date and length of time each person sat can still be viewed on the exhibition’s Web site.

![Figure 2: Marina Abramovic: The Artist is Present, at The Museum of Modern Art, 2010. © 2011 Marina Abramovic. Courtesy the artist and Sean Kelly Gallery/Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York. Photograph Alex Watkins.](image)

These documents, whether by the artist, the museum, or an audience member, bring up “issues of authorship, medium and authenticity.” First, it must be stated that, in the case of performance art, a document is not the original and, therefore, acts as a mediator. Secondly, the document, whether authored by the artist or another party, contains inherent bias, which is amplified by its medium. No one individual or medium can capture every aspect of a four-dimensional, multisensory event. Additionally, some recorders have an agenda to fulfill with their document creation, while others bring with them personal experience which colors the way in which they perceive a particular happening. These documents also bring up the issue of when something becomes a new work. Peggy Phelan argues that, “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.” 23 This is especially obvious in video recordings of performance pieces, in which the document can be “described as performative.” 24 To replay a recording of a performance is a new performance, one with a new author and medium. Instead, what seems more accurate in keeping to the integrity of the original and therefore more relevant to the archive is this idea of repeat- and re-performances.

The Living Archive

In repeating and directing re-stagings of her own performances and in re-performing others’ performances, Marina Abramović is, in essence, creating a living archive. Ritual and (ritual) repetition are ways in which oral histories and traditions of non-Western, typically tribal, cultures live on. For artists, “re-performance proposes a dynamic, living document as a solution to the past’s disappearance; it allows a re-experiencing of the work in a time-based, body-based, ephemeral medium and makes available new experiences of memory.” 25 This is a notion not implicit in the traditional archive, but rather one emerging with new technologies in much the same way that documentation is being changed by them. With the “stockpiling of recorded speech, image, gesture, the establishment of ‘oral archives,’ and the collection of ‘ethnotexts’ ... the recuperation of ‘lost histories’” is being accomplished. 26 With the West’s desire to retain everything, to amass “stuff,” especially stuff with cultural value, the archive has had to adapt to the changing ways of doing so.

If documentation is a collective effort in which multiple fragments by multiple authors come together to create an essence of the original whole, then the archive can successfully, at least as much as is possible, preserve performance art. If the archive is willing to accept not just material remains but physical (re)embodiments of performances, then performance art will not only allow itself to be archived but will expand the scope of the field. The two will not simply coexist but, in effect, will be able to elaborate their individual aims while informing society about their culturally specific desires.

Conclusion

The catalog and the archive can adapt to performance art to the benefit of both. They are vital for performances to continue, to live on. Performances do not have to disappear. Yes, the original can never be re-experienced, but the performance can carry on in its documents, extending its influence through time. The catalog and the archive are key in bringing together the documents and objects that let performance be re-experienced in the imagination. In preserving and making accessible the full range of experiences a performance offers in its afterlife, they can better continue the living memory of the performance. From its documentation, the performance can be studied, evaluated, reinterpreted, re-imagined, remembered, and re-performed. The performance carries on, as expressed eloquently by performance artist Kira O’Reilly:

The work continues to exist in its remains, memories and objects. The bloodied brandy glasses and table cloth. The now fading scars on my body. The stories the guests may or may not have told after the event; private anecdotal accounts they might have felt moved to speak. Perhaps. The body of this text is a residue, that which is left. An act of remembering and rewriting, and of retracing myself. 28

Notes

3. Ibid., 101.
5. FRBR (Functional Requirements for Bibliographic Records) is a 1998 recommendation of the International Federation of Library Associations and Institutions (IFLA) to restructure catalog databases to more closely reflect the conceptual structure of information resources. FRBR uses an entity-relationship model of metadata for information objects, instead of the single flat record concept underlying current cataloging standards. The FRBR model includes four levels of representation: work, expression, manifestation, and item. For additional information, see http://www.oclc.org/research/activities/past/orprojects/frbr/default.htm and http://www.ifla.org/publications/functional-requirements-for-bibliographic-records.
7. Ibid.
9. Ibid.
11. The VRA Core is a data standard for the cultural heritage community that consists of a metadata element set (units of information such as title, location, date, etc.), as well as an initial blueprint for how those elements can be hierarchically structured. The element set provides a categorial organization for the description of works of visual culture as well as the images that document them. See Library of Congress, “VRA Core 4.0 Element Description and Tagging Examples,” http://www.loc.gov/standards/vracore/schemas.html.
16. Ibid., 35.
22. Ibid., 151.
23. IFLA Study Group, “Functional Requirements.”
26. Ibid., 151.

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