Unfolding interactions in the preservation of performance art at Tate

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Abstract

The conservation of performance-based artworks has been evolving and at Tate includes a Strategy for the Documentation and Conservation of Performance, developed within the museum's time-based media conservation team. This strategy emerged from the need to provide access to performance works both in their activated state and throughout their lifecycle. Drawing on practices used in the conservation and documentation of performance art, this article proposes that mapping the artworks' interactions is a way to promote the early detection of risks for their transmission and activation. It explores the use of a documentation tool, the *Map of Interactions*, to examine how different contexts along with the human and nonhuman agents that constitute the artwork trigger new paths in its biography. Two case studies within Tate's collection, *Time* by David Lamelas (1970) and *Tatlin's Whisper #5* by Tania Bruguera (2008), illustrate the mapping of networks and interactions.

Keywords: performance art, conservation, Tate, networks, interactions, new materialism, Tania Bruguera, David Lamelas

Introduction

This article explores the development of a tool that maps the interactions between performance artworks and multiple actors inside and outside the museum. This tool, the *Map of Interactions*, is part of the Strategy for the Documentation and Conservation of Performance, which incorporates advances in conservation theory relevant to time-based media art generated within Tate. In discussing the development of the *Map of Interactions* and the theoretical perspectives underpinning this effort, this article also examines the tool through two case-studies from Tate's collection and how its use relates to the ongoing strategy.

The current strategy for the conservation of performance artworks at Tate includes the definition of terminology, the creation of three documentation tools (*Performance Specification*, *Activation Report* and *Map of Interactions*), three workflows (acquisition, exhibition & displays and loans) and a review of the status of the documents gathered in the process (Lawson et al. 2019). The development of this strategy, part of a research project created within the time-based media conservation team – Documentation and Conservation of Performance (2016–2021)[1]– emerged from the need to provide access to performance works in their activated state and throughout their lifecycle. Conserving these works in Tate's

structural system requires that they be traceable, trackable and accessible so that they can be activated now and in the future.

In their institutional lifecycle, performance works, in resemblance to installation art and other types of time-based media artworks, are always partially present and partially absent. When in storage, and thus fragmented in several elements that include documentation, props and other objects, they are mostly absent, known only to the people who either are or were involved in their preservation and display. Their life as documentation is characterised by dormancy, in which the work quietly manifests itself both to a limited group of people and objects and in a restricted context. Yet the situation changes when these works are acquired or put on display.

The moment of acquisition sets the primary requirements for displaying the work (Figure 1). These requirements, or the material conditions for the artwork's activation, only become fully evident the first time the artwork is displayed. The conditions for the display are context- and site-adaptable, which enhances the complexity of dealing with the production of these works. Along with acquisition and display, important interactions between conservation activities and the artwork occur mostly through three processes: the acquisition of similar artworks by the artist, the display of works in and outside the institution, and interactions with the artist or her or his collaborators. These three processes require reflection on an artwork's modes of operation, which often bring new information to the fore or require a reframing of the activation of the performance work. Indeed, while active, the performance creates new interactions not only with people, but also with spaces, socio-economic contexts, material infrastructures and objects.

In the case of performance artworks (and arguably all artworks; see Marçal 2019a), they materialise through interactions between people, nature, infrastructure and technology. Differences in context may lead to different interpretations of the work, but they might also change a given way of performing a specific action at a moment in time. Documenting a specific activation, as another form of interacting with the work, might impact how the work is documented and captured the next time it is activated. Changes in the use of technology can bring new forms of performing an idea, leading to substantial material reformulations of how the artwork is to be manifested in the present.

With the goal of analysing the networks that are created in these works' lifecycles and how they impact their conservation, we explore the possibilities of the *Map of Interactions* for managing and mapping the performance art's structures that support performance in the museum. The structures are made of networks, which consist of the interactions between people, objects and technology that together generate the social and technological conditions for performance art to be created and preserved. We focus our argument on the relevance of the *Map of Interactions* in relation to other, similar documentation tools, while discussing how it can reveal areas of vulnerability and the implications of that process for the artwork's ongoing care.

Networks of meaning: Performance art and conservation

Performance art is said to typically resist acts of containment or representation. The distinction between the performative event and what remains of it, whether documentation or relics (Phelan 1993, Reason 2006), has been at the core of discussions in the field of Performance Studies. The imaginary of performance artworks lies in-between what is and

what has been, and curatorial and conservation decisions are essential to determine the materiality of performance art before, during and after the event.

Difficulties in managing performance art's idiosyncratic relationship with time in part explains why performance art has only been collected in more recent times. The first live art event held at Tate was in 1968 and featured Stuart Brisley and Peter Sedgley in the process of making a polyurethane sculpture in real time. However, it was only in 2005 that Tate began to acquire performance art in its collection, a nearly forty-year gap. Roman Ondak's *Good Feelings, Good Times* (2003), David Lamelas' *Time* (1970) and Tino Sehgal's *This is propaganda* (2002) were the first three performance artworks acquired. This flagged the beginning of a collecting trend that is now seen in contemporary art collections across the world.[2]

At first glance, conservation's forward-looking aims seem to be in opposition to the nature of performance artworks. Recent developments in the conservation field, led mostly by efforts linked to the care of ethnographic and contemporary art collections,[3] have, however, reframed conservation as an overarching activity concerned with the preservation of the cultural heritage values on par with their material manifestations (Clavir 1994, Avrami et al. 2000, Avrami 2009, Peters 2016). This social turn (Muñoz-Viñas 2005) implicates conservators in activities that are usually associated with other forms of operation within the institution. Broadening the scope of conservation activities has also allowed for the recognition of stakeholders other than artists, scholars and curators in conservation processes.

The Head of Collection Care Research at Tate, Pip Laurenson, and the cultural studies scholar and Professor at the University of Maastricht, Vivian van Saaze, suggested in 2014 that the biggest challenge underpinning the practice of conservation of performance art was related to the management and care of the social networks needed to activate these works (Laurenson and van Saaze 2014). Performance studies scholar Gabriella Giannachi has contributed to this view by referring to the role of audience interactions in the making of performance works in the museum (Giannachi 2018). These perspectives are in line with literature in the field of the conservation of contemporary art, which has shown how interactions between actors contribute to an artwork's biography (van de Vall et al. 2011) and how artworks can themselves be agents of change in museum structures (van Saaze et al. 2018).[4] Studies stemming from new materialism (e.g. Barad 2007) have also put forward an understanding of the nature of things through their interactions. In the field of conservation, this framework has been used by Marçal (2019b) to discuss the ways in which performance art and conservation are related and mutually constitutive. The focus on how objects interact instead of how they are materially represented at a given time is particularly relevant in the case of performance art, as the materiality of these works is usually reframed and often contested. As noted above, performance artworks resist explicit material acts, remaining dormant during much of their lifecycle and only appearing in a material form during specific moments in time generated by their activation. These moments highlight how the material making of these works is distributed but in a way that sometimes is not as explicit in other art forms.

Performance artworks such as those in Tate's collection belong to a category that has been described as *delegated performances* (see Bishop 2012), executed by people other than the artist. Thus, delegated performances transfer decision-making centres to others, such as hired performers but also the public. By pushing the boundaries within the institution, performance art can help conservators to develop strategies on how to support networks and define the

sometimes fragile social dependencies of artworks. It can also frame conservation activities within the realm of social practice. The *Map of Interactions* is a first step in acknowledging the dependency of these artworks on social interactions and then mapping them in the institutional context. It allows for networks and relationships to become visible such that vulnerabilities in both can be considered and reflected upon.

Map of Interactions [heading]

The *Map of Interactions* is a tool that articulates the networks that exist and which are critical in supporting the institution's ability to activate performance artworks. These networks are identified so that those involved in the care of the artworks can assess areas of vulnerability around each one and work to address any potential risk to activation and transmission. This tool is part of an integrated approach that includes two other tools: *Performance Specification* and *Activation Reports*. *Performance Specification* was created to assist in the identification of the core aspects that must be transmitted when activating the performance. This document is in permanent revision, with changes being triggered by new information emerging from *Activation Reports.* The latter captures new information in each instance that the artwork is brought from its dormant state through to its activated state. Its aim is to preserve the characteristics of the activated artwork at least once during the period in which it is installed while acknowledging moments of change and the decision-making dynamics in the activation of the work. These two documents feed into the construction of the *Map of Interactions*.

The *Map* is built on information gathered from the previous activations of the work as well as the activations that have occurred since the artwork entered Tate's collection. It always refers to a moment in time. Interactions needed for activating the work might change, not only because those interactions impact the way the artwork is materialised, but also because some of the actors that are part of them, including artists, collaborators or technology, might cease to participate in the making of the work. By focusing on interactions instead of the specific characteristics of the work, the map allows a deeper understanding of what it took for the artwork to be materialised in the past, thus highlighting possible future conditions for its activation. This map therefore considers not only human actors, including artists, curators and conservators, but also the role of the technologies specifically related to the artwork's materialisation (and not technological infrastructures per se).

In the following, the challenges and possibilities of using the *Map of Interactions* are explored through two case-studies from Tate's collection: *Time,* by David Lamelas and *Tatlin's Whisper #5* by Tania Bruguera. The last two activations of these works occurred as part of their having been loaned, which in both cases considerably changed the ways in which the artworks were materialised.

Time, *David Lamelas (1970)* [subheading]

This is a performance that starts with several participants standing side by side along one side of a line that is marked on the floor (Figure 2). A participant, who is a member of the public rather than a paid performer, begins the performance at one end of the line by telling the time to the participant standing next to her/him. After waiting 60 seconds, the second participant tells the time to the next participant. When the end of the line is reached, the last participant announces the time in the language of her/his choice. There are several varying factors around this work, as it greatly depends on the number of participants, the time the

performance starts and the context of execution, which may influence the choice of language used by the last participant to announce the time. Changes in the contexts of an activation, however, sometimes take unexpected routes.

The map in Figure 3 represents the interactions that led to the production of *Time* in 2018, when it was on loan to Art by Translation (for simultaneous performance in Angers, France and Los Angeles). The separation of internal and external actors in the middle line of the figure is useful to understand the internal and external dependencies of the work. In this case, the artist is placed as a focal point within the work's network, as his influence changes according to the context. It reflects the artist voice, whether present or absent, as a constant element that will remain with the work throughout its life. This approach to centring the artist does not necessarily mean that the lives of artworks are dependent on the artist's involvement; rather, it sees the artist as an agent who impacts the artwork's manifestations both at Tate and beyond, as exemplified in the two most recent activations, in 2016 (Tate) and 2018. In this case, the map shows that the artist became central to the activation of *Time* in 2018, enhancing his sphere of influence by initiating the performance and by proposing material changes that truly impacted the artwork's dependencies.

The *Map* captures all actors involved in the activation, including conservators, conservation technicians and curators, as well as visitor experience, etc., to highlight instances in which the institutional memory of the work was documented. As the public is both participant and observer, this repositions the 'public' in the network, producing an additional layer of complexity. The issue around the 'public' of this performance was amplified during the 2018 activation, when the artwork had a digital component added through the incorporation of live video to attempt synchronisation between the two geographically distinct time-zones of the groups of participants. The simultaneously showings of the work and the introduction of live video added an additional layer to the understanding of what the work is and the role of the artist as this work continues to unfold. This change required updating information regarding the artwork. The *Map* was used as the tool to mediate and capture this change to reflect the expanding network and associated interactions.

Changes in the way the artwork interacts with the media were also visible in the case of Tania Bruguera's *Tatlin's Whisper #5* (2008).

Tatlin's Whisper #5, *Tania Bruguera (2008)* [subheading]

This performance involves two mounted policemen in uniform (one on a white horse and one on a black horse) that are brought into the exhibition space (Figure 4). They patrol the space, guiding and controlling the public by using a minimum of six crowd control techniques. These include actions closing off the gallery entrance or entrances, pushing the audience forward with lateral movements of the horses, manipulating the audience into a single group and encircling it to tighten the group, frontal confrontation with the horse and breaking up the audience into two distinct groups. In the context of its performance at Tate Modern in 2008, the action also revealed additional characteristics, including the use of humour by the British police as another method of keeping the public under control. This was intersected with more direct commands and actions to the public as outlined. The *Map* once again places the artist in the centre of the work, but the primary network is that of the Mounted Police and the actors of the Police Officers and Horses (Figure 5). This forms a key condition of how the work needs to be experienced, with Bruguera keen to ensure that the context of the exhibition space does not dilute the strength of the piece. *Tatlin's Whisper #5* exists on this strong

reliance on this network. In a recent interview, the artist highlighted that 'it's important to make sure that the people who are doing the piece, first of all don't do it too much. The same way we don't want people to get used to the horses, so they have the impact. You want the police not to get used of performing it. So, they still have this, kind of, rarity relationship'.[5] The *Map* allows the rarity of the interaction to be captured and for these networks and the relationships to the artwork to be maintained. The rarity presents a challenge for conservation with respect to ensuring that the knowledge of such networks is monitored, understood and preserved given the infrequency of the activation. When the work was lent in 2017, this made visible the importance of having a white horse performing the work, as the artist describes the colour of the horses as 'a symbolic element' of the work. The inability to source a white horse spoke to this rarity and led to a shift in what was requested to be shown, with a request for video documentation. The video documentation produced by Tate for internal purposes was used within a timeline, to show 'what the artist has done', and was presented alongside four other videos of her work. This was the first time documentation was shown, and the artist made it clear that this was only in the context of a chronological representation of her *oeuvre*. Documentation was not intended as a replacement of the work, but as an index of the artist's practice. This change, nonetheless, created new dependencies in the artwork's network (Figure 6) and might influence how the artwork will be displayed in the future.

When asked if documentation could replace the artwork at some point, Bruguera mentioned that she was keen to keep it live, performed through the bodies of mounted policemen.[6] The need to remain in a dialogue with the artist regarding the work is paramount to our ongoing understanding of it. While the participation of the artist has facilitated an expansion of our knowledge, changes in the way the artwork can be materialised lead us to question its future transmission. In our approach, although the artwork cannot be replaced by its video documentation, the latter opens the door to other display possibilities (namely, didactic displays) for when mounted policemen and the meaning they bring to their intervention cease to be relevant in a given context. These multiple moments of reflection have allowed us to consider the new elements that form what the work is and how it can generate new forms of display as part of its biography. This case study also makes explicit the potential of loans in destabilising networks of interactions, which, in turn, might reveal possible futures of the work and multiply the instances of its activation.

Conclusion

Our practices regarding the conservation and documentation of performance art have been applied to map an artwork's interactions as one way to promote the early detection of risks associated with the transmission and activation of performance-based artworks. They also build on the knowledge of how different contexts along with the human and non-human agents within those contexts triggers new paths in an artwork's biography. The *Map of Interactions* is a visual aid to understand where change is likely to take place; as an editable document, it also affords a method to help track how relationships evolve and how this affects the artwork within the collection. Beyond the realm of performance art, this map could be useful within an institution for tracking interactions not only of installation art and other types of time-based media artworks but also of artworks deemed as being more traditional, such as paintings and sculptures.

Acknowledgements

Notes

1 For more on this, see the project's website at www.tate.org.uk/about-us/projects/documentation-conservation-performance (accessed 28 October 2019).

2 Reports indicate that at least the following museums have performance artworks in their collections: Tate, London; Stedelijk, Amsterdam; Van Abbe, Rotterdam; Serralves, Porto; Beyeler, Basel; MoMa and Guggenheim, New York; MFA, Boston; Walker Art Centre, Minneapolis; Cleveland Museum of Art, Cleveland, Ohio; Hirschhorn, Washington, DC. For a list of these works please see: https://monoskop.org/Performance_art#Performance_documentation (accessed 25 October 2019).

3 The growing acknowledgement of the role and importance of the intangible in conservation has been especially visible in the conservation of objects from world cultures (see Clavir 1994 and 2002, Peters 2016).

4 This perspective stems from a tendency to understand conservation considering practice theory. The writings of Theodore Schatzki (see, for example, Schatzki 2002) and Knorr-Cetina's work on epistemic cultures (Knorr-Cetina 1999) have been particularly influential in recent projects, namely the Marie Skłodowska-Curie Innovative Training *Network New Approaches in the Conservation of Contemporary Art* (2016–2019), and the Andrew W. Mellon-funded project *Reshaping the Collectible: When Artworks Live in the Museum* (2018–2021).

5 Personal communication, Tate Internal Artist Interview with Tania Bruguera, 22February 2019 (transcription dated 5 March 2019).

6 Ibid.

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Figure 1. Moments of visibility of the material conditions to activate a performance artwork across its lifecycle

Figure 2. *Time*, David Lamelas, 1970. © David Lamelas

Figure 3. Map of Interactions for the 2018 activation of David Lamelas' *Time* (1970)

Figure 4. *Tatlin's Whisper #5*, Tania Bruguera, 2008. © Tania Bruguera

Figure 5. *Map of Interactions* for the 2016 activation of Tania Bruguera's *Tatlin's Whisper #5* (2008), at Tate

Figure 6. *Map of Interactions* for the 2017 activation of Tania Bruguera's *Tatlin's Whisper #5* (2008), in the context of a loan