



# SITUATED KNOWLEDGES AND MATERIALITY IN THE CONSERVATION OF PERFORMANCE ART

Hélia Marçal

**ABSTRACT** In which ways is conservation expanding to allow for an ethical care of performance artworks? This article draws on feminist epistemologies – primarily Donna Haraway’s ‘situated knowledges’ – to develop a critical enquiry on the politics and ethics in the conservation of performance artworks. Beginning by rehearsing those feminist perspectives in the context of the conservation of contemporary art, through the exploration of the activist performance artwork *Música Negativa (Negative Music)*, created by the Portuguese artist E.M. de Melo e Castro in 1965, the article then looks at the situated knowledges that are part of the process of mapping the material history of performance art.

## Introduction

Conservation’s realm has arguably been expanding since the development of the profession in the early 1950s. Changes in artistic practice have been a driver in that expansion – not only in dilating the overarching aims of conservation, but also in widening the spheres in which conservation operates. One example lies in the conservation of contemporary art, in which its practices more and more rely on social interactions.<sup>1</sup> Reflecting on the changing nature of time-based media artworks and performance art is particularly useful when studying not only how conservation activities adapt to new forms of artistic creation, but also how changes in the understanding of conservation impact the way we address the possible futures of these artworks. Conservation activities operate within semiotic technologies like concepts of change, alteration, damage, loss, or material apparatus – such as instrumentation methods. Both are essential in making sense of reality, and frame forms of practice and the ways in which we observe and interact with matter. These notions, however, are understood and practised differently in the case of performance artworks, which challenge our understanding of change, loss or even condition – after all, what is the condition of something that is always changing during its realisation, and ceases to have a tangible expression immediately

thereafter? Artworks that exhibit performative behaviours can, therefore, help us rethink not only what conservation is but also the ethical ramifications of a particular way of practising conservation and what it does in the world. In other words, these artworks allow us to reframe the limits of the subjective imaginary of conservation and how it impacts perspectives on the ethics of this knowledge production activity.

This article contributes to this debate by exploring the ways in which knowledge-making activities are situated, and how processes of re-situatedness can foster new practices in the conservation, and, ultimately, making of performance art. It draws on the notion of situated knowledges, which has been put forward by the new materialist, feminist scholar Donna Haraway (1988) and further developed by the physicist and feminist philosopher Karen Barad in 2007.

In the essay ‘Situated knowledges: the science question in feminism and the privilege of partial perspective’, Haraway explores the social construction of scientific knowledge through feminist perspectives on knowledge hierarchies, power and the edification of ethico-political scientific ways of seeing.<sup>2</sup> Her main critique concerns the acclamation of objectivity and the influence of biased, male and western-centric modes of operating in the construction of science. This seminal text has become a fundamental ground in feminist scholarship, and, in particular, philosophy of science.

The notion of situatedness as an onto-epistemological, ethical and political positioning has influenced scholars such as Lorraine Code, Elizabeth A. Grosz, Rosi Braidotti and Karen Barad, being one of the most important concepts in the fields of posthumanist thinking, across many fields, including science and technology studies, education and cultural studies. In this article I draw on this notion to reflect on the process of documenting performance artworks with the aim of promoting intergenerational knowledge transmission. I do so by exploring the conservation process of an activist performance artwork called *Música Negativa (Negative Music)*, created by the Portuguese artist E.M. de Melo e Castro (1932–2020) in 1965.

*Negative Music* consists of a set of actions performed by the artist on three clappers. The performance starts with the three clappers resting on a pedestal. The artist proceeds to strike in the air, shake or strike while the three clappers, resting on the pedestal, were still. Those clappers were, however, modified so they did not clap while being moved or shaken. The stick used to strike the clapper is also imaginary, which implies that the prominent deep sound of two metals violently hitting each other is unheard at each gesture. The striking silence of the clappers made visible the loss of the spoken and written word, the loss of the natural capacity to make a sound. This artwork was a direct reference to the growing limitations to artistic and individual expression that were prevalent during Portugal's right-wing dictatorial regime (1926–1974). This period in Portuguese history was characterised by severe attacks on civil liberties, prosecution of politically engaged opposition to the regime, and a sticking censorship machine.

The artwork also had a pioneering role in the history of performance art in Portugal. It was first performed in the so-called first Portuguese *happening*, which took place in January 1965 at Galeria Divulgação. Going beyond the limits of the written word, a group of artists grounded in experimental music and poetry produced and performed in this ground-breaking event of musical and embodied creativity.<sup>3</sup> A public discussion held between the artist and composer Jorge Peixinho and the art critic Manuel de Lima at the *Jornal de Letras e Artes* newspaper brought details of this event to light, while the first-hand testimony of the artist Ernesto de Melo e Castro in his book *In-Novar*,<sup>4</sup> consolidated this happening in cultural history.

The process of transmitting this artwork – and to do so more than 50 years after its first instantiation – demands an expanded understanding of the work and its materiality. What is the material history of the work? How does this artwork operate within history, time, affect? How is the work made through conservation? What are the material-discursive conditions that need to be in place for the artwork to continue to act with the public sphere?<sup>5</sup>

This article is structured in two sections. The first section is dedicated to reflecting on conservation as a knowledge-making, situated, practice. It will open inquiries regarding the subjectivity of conservation as practice, the agency of objects and bodies, and some of the ways in which *intra-active* relationships between bodies, discourses, time,

objects and infrastructures can lead to discussions on ethics in conservation. In this section, I am mainly interested in laying out the ground for thinking about conservation of performance as a form of observing, describing and selecting certain material manifestations on a field of virtual multiple, and potentially infinite, possibilities.<sup>6</sup> The value of a conscious process of situating oneself will then be related to these processes of decision-making, building the foundations for the study of *Negative Music*. The second section pertains to the exploration of *Negative Music* as a case study. The material history of this work is described alongside a reflection of the contingencies of research, which is inevitably situated. It will raise the topics of documentation and embodiment, highlight the possibilities of the score, and reflect on the process of documentation and re-enactment as a process of making.<sup>7</sup> The article concludes with a discussion on the ethics of positioning and the importance of practices of relocation in conservation.

### Situated knowledges in modes of inquiry

Conservation, like any knowledge production activity, provides a framework with which to see the world, one that acknowledges and shapes the material nature of objects and develops theories concerning their past, present and future makings. This framework comprises agents – structures, media, technology (i.e. ‘apparatuses’<sup>8</sup>) – that allow for a given understanding of those objects in a given context. The impact of social contexts in conservation activities has led to its recognition as a social constructed activity,<sup>9</sup> while the influence of the epistemic cultures that contribute to what conservation is and what it can be has been defined, among other things, as technique.<sup>10</sup> And the technique of conservation can vary. For example, professional structures – from institutions where conservation is practised to cultural structures of knowledge that underpin our own assumptions about the profession – influence the ways we perceive actions in relation to objects and their transmission over time. It is possible to argue they even influence the ways we see a given object and develop our ethical frameworks pertaining to their care.<sup>11</sup> Recent studies in the role of people, nature and technology – or human and non-human actors – in changing artworks have highlighted the lifecycle of artworks inside and outside the museum,<sup>12</sup> and have made visible how change does not simply happen to artworks. Rather, it is a product of the relations of many agents that impact artworks in various ways, and in different moments in their ‘trajectory’.<sup>13</sup> Artworks’ materiality can then be framed as a product of the relations among the many agents that are in some way involved with the artwork at any given time, consolidating the idea that conservation is neither neutral nor objective.

A critique of objectivity is at the core of the analysis developed by Haraway in ‘Situated knowledges’.<sup>14</sup> In recognising the work of social constructivists in exposing the fallacy of arguments that claimed to provide a universal way of seeing the world, an objective truth, a single account of reality, Haraway actually highlights that arguments against

the possibility of objectivity include, for example, the existence of cognitive and social biases, different cultures of knowledge, and the different material conditions in which knowledge production activities take place. In arguing for a feminist approach to empiricism, however, Haraway posits that ‘radical constructivisms’ could produce forms of relativism that could contribute for the deniability, for example, of scientific facts, or forms of operating in the world. Donna Haraway tells us that both forms of categorising inquiries – as purely objective or purely relativist – fall into the abyss of universality:

Relativism is a way of being nowhere while claiming to be everywhere equally. The ‘equality’ of positioning is a denial of responsibility and critical inquiry. Relativism is the perfect mirror twin of totalization in the ideologies of objectivity; both deny the stakes in location, embodiment, and partial perspective; both make it impossible to see well.<sup>15</sup>

While radical relativisms are quite rare in the field of conservation, this seems to be an important take to understand the thresholds of relativism with respect to conservation and the ways it operates in the world. For Haraway, the major issues in exploring the ways we understand the world and how we perform knowledge activities through our interactions, come together precisely in trying to get to that threshold:

I think my problem, and ‘our’ problem, is how to have *simultaneously* an account of radical historical contingency for all knowledge claims and knowing subjects, a critical practice for recognizing our own ‘semiotic technologies’ for making meanings, *and* a no-nonsense commitment to faithful of accounts of a ‘real’ world, one that can be partially shared and that is friendly to earthwide projects of finite freedom, adequate material abundance, modest meaning in suffering, and limited happiness.<sup>16</sup>

Her suggestion to address this conundrum resides in the notion of ‘situated knowledges’. Haraway proposes that if all knowledge is contingent, partial, and, according to the author, ‘locatable’,<sup>17</sup> recognising one’s critical and situated perspective allows for an understanding of knowledge as relational. Moreover, in recognising knowledge as inherently partial, it is also possible to make visible what Haraway calls the ‘critical knowledges sustaining the possibility of webs of connections’.<sup>18</sup> As we will see, this perspective has important ramifications in terms of the agency of objects, or the ethical responsibility of engaging in knowledge production.

#### *Agency of objects and bodies, and the ethics of positioning*

In her essay, Donna Haraway assertively positioned the object’s agency at the same level as the subjects and their

technologies of knowledge (eyes, instruments, etc.), stating that the ‘codes of the world are not still, waiting to be read ... the world encountered in knowledge projects is an active entity’.<sup>19</sup> She contends that objects, inasmuch as people, transform the whole social setting in which research takes place. This is particularly relevant in conservation if we take into account the inherent vice of objects and the prevalence usually afforded to representations of artistic intention. Or, alternatively, to forms of displaying material remains of performance art, which relinquish a given way of looking at their materiality and status. This focus on materiality and agency, according to conservator and theorist Hanna Hölling, allows us to rethink conservation beyond the idea of ‘prolong[ing] its objects’ material lives into the future’, so that that the field ‘is now also seen as an engagement with materiality, rather than material – that is, engagement with the many specific factors that determine how objects’ identity and meaning are entangled with the aspects of time and space, the environment, ruling values, politics, economy, conventions, and culture’.<sup>20</sup> Connecting conservation activities with the materiality of artworks and objects leads to a wider recognition of the context where conservation takes place, or its *situatedness*, and, therefore, the actions that make some materialities more explicit than others.

In expanding agency to a manifold of others, Haraway also opens the door to a recognition of apparatus of knowledge making that refuse methodologies, sources, or techniques with the potential to relocate the researcher and afford different forms of inquiry. Drawing on Katie King’s notion of ‘apparatus of literary production’,<sup>21</sup> Haraway refers to the body as paradigm of such relocation:

Like ‘poems’, which are sites of literary production where language too is an actor independent of intentions and authors, bodies as objects of knowledge are material-semiotic generative nodes. Their *boundaries* materialise in social interaction.<sup>22</sup>

In negating the subjugation of objects to the gaze of humans, and reiterating the body’s potential to engage in productive knowledge activities, Haraway here takes a political stand that resonates ethically. The self-consciousness of our own positioning is, for Haraway, essential in understanding what we are seeing: looking at an object from a perspective of a conservator, for example, will include and exclude forms of materialisation. For the author, it is also an ethical standpoint that needs to be explicitly asserted:

A commitment to mobile positioning and to passionate detachment is dependent on the impossibility of entertaining innocent ‘identity’ politics and epistemologies as strategies for seeing from the standpoints of the subjugated in order to see well. ... Also, one cannot relocate in any possible vantage point without being accountable for that movement.<sup>23</sup>

In this sense, with situatedness comes the partiality of a place,<sup>24</sup> but also the capacity to relocate; the subjectivity of

a position, but also the possibility to gather other perspectives; the awareness of being in a contained process of inquiry, but also the joy of engaging in connected social conversations with humans, objects, infrastructures and nature – to use the possibilities of *thinking-together* while apart,<sup>25</sup> instead of *thinking of*.

In the next section I argue that situatedness and practices of relocation are essential in reframing conservation for an ethical care of performance artworks, which can be characterised by their radical (spatiotemporal) situatedness. I start, however, by describing *Negative Music* and the process that unfolded in the research about this work and its possible futures.

### ***Negative Music*: situated practices in conservation**

I first encountered *Negative Music* when I began doing art historical research into early forms of performance art in Portugal. The lack of scholarly studies on Portuguese performance art was clear at the beginning of the second decade of the new millennium. It was during this process that I came to realise that, with a historiographic practice mostly led by artists, such as E.M. de Melo e Castro and Manoel Barbosa,<sup>26</sup> the lack of inscription of early performative artworks would also come to characterise official art historiographies until the period of the 2000s.<sup>27</sup> There are many reasons for the absence of this period of the avant-garde from official art history, and most of them are related to the Portuguese political situation in the 1970s, when tension was at its highest point. Many of the works produced in Portugal up until the mid-1980s dealt with societal issues – including themes inherent in the Revolution of 1974, the Estado Novo (1933–1974), and the Portuguese Colonial War (1961–1975) – a factor that cannot be ignored when thinking about the absence of records and documentation that led to their early invisibility.<sup>28</sup> Their peripheral position in the overarching artistic context explains, or is confirmed by, the lack of systematic collecting efforts from public art institutions,<sup>29</sup> or the active de-contextualisation of traces – which is a consequence, for example, of the dismantling of relevant personal archives.<sup>30</sup>

In investigating the material history of this work<sup>31</sup> I came across various ‘sites of memory’, to use Pierre Nora’s expression, which seems particularly relevant in a situated account of a conservation process. Sites of memory are places of public engagement with history, with the potential of bringing a shared collective knowledge of the past to the fore.<sup>32</sup> Institutional and personal archives were relevant but thin in the information they held. The most detailed account of the artist’s oeuvre was part of a project on experimental poetry called Arquivo Digital da PO.EX (Experimental Poetry Digital Archive). This led me to understand *Negative Music* from a different lens, one that looked at this artistic manifestation as an extended form of poetry.<sup>33</sup> On the same website I found details of the work and a manifold of sites of memory that included a recording of a performance of *Negative Music*, a digitisation of a 3’56” film, filmed by

the artist Ana Hatherly and dated 1977. In this video Melo e Castro rehearses the absence of sound by enunciating the sonic qualities of the silent film right in the beginning of the footage. The score of the performance was also included in this online resource, which allowed me to map the performative practice with symbols (im)printed on a yellow-looking sheet of paper, with no additional considerations about *tempo* or any other performance specificities: the squared symbol indicated the act of striking in the air, the triangular symbol triggered the shaking in the air, while the rounded symbol referred to the act of striking the clap while it rested on the pedestal.

I remember that at the time I was particularly concerned with understanding how the score had been and could be materialised. Given the activist stance brought by the artwork, I was also interested in seeing how the artwork effectively acted and continued to act in the public sphere.

#### *On the material history of the work*

This initial information gave me enough material to proceed with an artist interview, which took place in August 2015 via Skype as Melo e Castro was then residing in São Paulo, Brazil. Instead of proceeding with a semi-structured interview with a thematic scope, this interview was brought together by rehearsing the history of the work. I asked the artist to provide me with material descriptions of the work including what he did and where, what he felt, how was the process of making and rehearsing the work, and what led to the creation of a film version of the work. The process of going back in time and re-situating myself and the artist in different spatiotemporal contexts led to the emergence of various micro-histories of the work that make visible not only the textual dimensions of the work but also the potential of generating memories that this work entails.

In describing the history of the work, the artist started by referring to its inaugural manifestation – the performance at Galeria Divulgação (Porto).<sup>34</sup> He confirmed the purpose behind making political noise while making no sound at all, while also reiterating the important connection to poetry that he found in that performance. The artist then referred back to a time before 1977, where he performed the artwork again, on three more occasions. He actively engaged with his work in each of those occasions, re-situating the performative interpretation of the score to the contexts of its reprisal. The artwork also developed meanings that were, at the time, unforeseen by the artist, and where the agency of the objects used brought a new form of situated practice to the work. Indeed, the flexibility of the text of the performance is as fixed as the interpretation of any text,<sup>35</sup> and that the apparatus provided by the score brings about various forms of possibility that – in the realisation of the performance itself – create forms of commemorating or dismantling memories.

When asked about the reasons behind making the film, Melo e Castro mentioned the flexibility of the medium. For

him, this medium allowed his work to move around independently of his body. This perspective gained even more traction when the digitised version of the film was made available online, and distributed via YouTube. My interpretation of his words while writing this text is that this form of media diversity and distribution (which gained another dimension with the creation of Web 2.0) is also a way in which his practice is being relocated: intra-media and beyond social, bodily, and geographical borders.<sup>36</sup> In other words, in diffracting the way it was materialised, the artwork ended up acting in different spheres, most of them public. These forms of relocation, as we will see in the section below, also provides the means to rethink the way we approach the conservation of the work.

### *Embodiment and documentation*

My research led me through various paths, often intertwined with other works and forms of artistic practice, allowing me to partially relocate my focus, and thinking works from the dictatorship period *together-apart*. One of the findings that clearly emerged from relocating myself when working with other artworks created by Portuguese artists during the dictatorship and revolutionary periods was that the lack of historical inscription of these works was not due to their material disappearance.<sup>37</sup> Indeed, the qualities that make them so frugal and fugitive, are also the ones that bring their generative potential to the fore.<sup>38</sup>

My understanding of *Negative Music* in 2015 was that of a work that, besides all contingencies, had been historicised. The film documenting the performance was acquired by Serralves Museum (Porto) in 2007, and material traces of the work could be found in various places.<sup>39</sup> When I was documenting the work for its preservation, however, it struck me that the variation – the material possibilities of the work afforded by its previous relocations and forms of decentering both performance and its interpretations – had no resonance in its material remains.

One part of the interview stuck with me for a period of time. After mentioning in detail each rendition of the work, how he purposefully changed it, and how it transformed itself through the interactions with audiences and materials, the artist said there was a way of performing the work that no one had never tried.<sup>40</sup> The score presents an alternative route, one that replaces specific physical actions with poetic aesthetic representations of ‘searching for someone’s eyes right in the middle of the street’ (square), ‘being utterly alone’ (triangle) or ‘the restlessness’ (circle). And, according to the artist, this alternative script can be interpreted and performed, with one or more performers, at any given time – a truly allographic version of the work. I asked him how to perform it and who could perform it. Like a poem, he said, everyone could do it.<sup>41</sup> This meant, of course, that even I could do it.

After writing up the documentation for the work I decided to pursue the re-enactment of the work for research

purposes, displacing the artwork from its archetype formulation, and positioning it in a new configuration. In doing so, I ended up situating myself into a new role – that of a director. I asked three actors to collaborate with me in rehearsing and performing (and, in many ways, remaking) the artwork. The rendition would have no public life – it would serve as an experiment on the bodily processes involved in performing the work. Each actor brought their experiences to the performance of the work, which allowed us to *think together-apart* about the possibilities of the work. From the first moment of reading the script *together-apart*, gaps in my understanding of the work and in the related documentation written just the week before became apparent. The four of us could not agree on how to interpret prompts such as ‘the restlessness’, or how to make visible the feeling of being ‘utterly alone’. The artist’s interview provided me with little to no clues about how to materialise those gestures. One’s experience, in this case, would of course be important, but so was the audience’s capacity to interpret what was happening. We had to define bodily practices that aimed at representing a given sensation. Other aspects such as the time needed to sync the *tempo*, how to communicate rhythm, the situated embodiment of performers, and my reflections on how to direct performers were added to the produced documentation, with new fields emerging and being consolidated by dense autoethnographic descriptions of the process.<sup>42</sup> The process of re-situating myself, taking on a new role, also made apparent some aspects of my previous documentation that were not engaging with the diversity promoted by the artwork and its creator. The categories, the discursive form and content of the documentation produced was very tightly specified, which seemed to be at odds with the simplicity of the score. Moreover, I had to question if a description of the artwork’s properties was even needed, when the artist’s score seemed to already make those properties clear. Drawing on my past work documenting artworks created between the 1960s and 1980s in Portugal and my experience re-enacting this work, I was also able to revise fields such as the ‘Aim of Documentation’ and ‘Documentation of Absence’,<sup>43</sup> to reflect further on the absences that were made more and more evident through processes of displacement, relocation, and conversational encounter with other entities, bodies, and forms of interaction with the work.<sup>44</sup>

The sections above show the possibilities afforded by practices of relocating artworks and processes, and situating research and researchers in difference. This perspective is in line with Haraway’s account on the value of bridging subjective understandings of the world and its making with a process of conversational encounter among others, or even oneself. Serendipitous encounters are those that reveal dimensions that were not apparent. And *Negative Music* provides here an example of how an artwork’s historicisation and conservation can be brought together through instances of otherness. This is particularly relevant in the case of performance artworks that are said to refuse forms of documentation,<sup>45</sup> or are understood as being permanently situated in a given context, never to be relocated.

## Conclusion: The ethics of difference

The year after I ended this research I encountered an event at one of Lisbon's prominent galleries – Galeria Zé dos Bois (ZDB) – that mentioned a commemoration of the first Portuguese happening, part of a curatorial programme featuring many works of experimental poetry called VERBIVOCOVISUAL. The opening of the exhibition on 12 February 2017 featured a re-enactment of the happening, which included a rendition of *Negative Music*. The re-enactment brought the carefully choreographed performance to the present in the body of Natxo Checa, carrying with it a whole set of vibrant potentialities in itself. On 22 July 2019, *Negative Music* was performed again, this time by the Grupo de Estudos em Música Contemporânea of Universidade Federal de Ouro Preto, which comprises teachers, students, former students and collaborators from the Brazilian university. Performed with a director and three performers, this other rendition follows the visual cues of the score, and yet with a completely different material instantiation.<sup>46</sup> But how do the possibilities of otherness, of difference, relate with the aims and possibilities in/of the conservation of performance?

Performance artworks exist in a condition of liminality.<sup>47</sup> This article shows that their material undefinition is not an impediment to its conservation, but a form of bringing to the fore different perspectives about the artwork and the things it can do to the world.

The process of documenting *Negative Music* highlighted the various re-positionings that artworks, their material-discursive manifestations, and conservation processes undertake in the making of the work. The absence of performative discourses that meet the discursive proposition enunciated by Melo e Castro in 1965 is not accidental. Nor are the creative and mnemonic affordances that the process of unveiling such proposition promotes – which, in turn, bring to the fore the artwork's capacity to continue to (en)act memories of resistance in various ways. The mnemonic possibilities of the work come from the absence of an imaginary place for performing the artwork in that way, which, when imagined, opens the door to a new way of seeing the work. Perhaps more introspective, but nonetheless embodied, this small detail of an artwork with such a history is a clear example of the fluid potential that can emerge from the cracks, and of what gets excluded through systematic recurrences of curated remains.

The practice of relocating the performance of the work in its discursive proposition brings an alternative interpretation of the political affordances of sites of memory, which, to use Jay Winter's words, lies on 'the multivocal character of remembrance and the potential for new groups with new causes to appropriate older sites of memory'.<sup>48</sup> In a different way, that also happens in the performative renditions of the work in ZDB in Lisbon, and at the Universidade Federal de Ouro Preto, in Brazil. Through displacement and encounter, it is possible to multiply the instances of memory formation about the work, and its ultimate making, as multiple interpretations are brought to life through its materialisation.

These practices of relocation, however, have ethical repercussions in the care of these works. In her analysis of the ethics involved in relocation, Haraway introduces the notion of *account-ability*, or one's capacity of account for their own actions and identities, and to critically analyse how power dynamics were destabilised and re-framed through practices of relocation.<sup>49</sup> The introduced documentation fields do account for some of those aspects: namely, the explicit enunciation of conversational encounters in the document, the critical reflection on the aims of the documentation process figuring the situatedness of the process itself, and the development of a field that accounts for known absences in the process.

The inevitable disappearance and reappearance of the work stretches the possibilities for creating difference in the ways it is continually made. While the thresholds for relativism regarding the artwork's future are wider with performance artworks, perspectives on *account-ability* and conversational encounters seem particularly relevant in understanding ethics in conservation. The possibility of critically describing in which ways a conservator's position impacts on the decision-making process, or how the situatedness in a given institutional setting influences the care of artworks seems to be paramount in guaranteeing an overarching ethical approach to conservation. In a similar way, so does the possibility of bringing other voices in to discuss aspects that otherwise will remain invisible. While collaboration is undoubtedly already part of conservation activities, these processes of encounter have to engage with a critical *account-ability* – that is, an individual or collaborative reflection on the power dynamics that allow people to speak, and, equally important, allow people to be heard. That, too, is part of the ethics of conservation.

## Acknowledgements

I extend many thanks to the artist E.M. de Melo e Castro for his immense generosity and kindness (which I will always remember) and to Rita Macedo and Cláudia Madeira for all the meaningful and intellectual exchanges. This research would not be possible without them. The last draft of this paper was completed during my current work at Tate. I was very inspired by my colleagues and by the possibilities the Andrew W. Mellon Foundation-funded project 'Reshaping the Collectible: When Artworks Live in the Museum', has brought to my thinking and writing. Finally, this fieldwork research that led to writing this paper and my PhD dissertation was supported by the Fundação para a Ciência e Tecnologia (SFRH/BD/90040/2012).

## Notes

1. See Lawson et al. 2019.
2. Haraway 1988.
3. Metello 2007.
4. Melo e Castro 1977.
5. The use of this term here purposely refers to the term coined by Jürgen Habermas in 1964, and re-thought by the lens of

- post-Marxist feminist theory by authors such as Nancy Fraser. Perspectives about making and remaking of artworks in the public sphere are indebted to these revisions of the notion of the public sphere. See Fraser 1990 for more context on how this term is used in reflections developed in this lineage of thought.
6. This perspective is related to that explored by scholars and artists connected to the performance studies field and inspired or influenced by the so-called new materialisms. See Lepecki 2010 and Van den Hengel 2017.
  7. I use the term re-enactment here (and not, for example, reperformance, activation, instantiation) as a recognition of the historical drag of this term and how it has been used by other scholars aligned with the new materialisms such as Rebecca Schneider (2011) and Louis van den Hengel (2017). Re-enactment is also used as a way of potentiating the use of the prefix 're-', exploring its possibilities in the fabric of making as a process of rehearsing potential narratives for performance artworks. Moreover, to paraphrase Rebecca Schneider, 're-' can work as a form of return, not necessarily to go back in time, but as a way of taking another turn and promoting difference in such processes (Schneider 2011).
  8. Barad 2007.
  9. Avrami 2009; Clavir 1994, 2009.
  10. Hölling 2017.
  11. Marçal et al. 2014.
  12. For example Van de Vall et al 2011; Wharton 2015. The importance of the museum ecosystem, its policies and procedures, and the knowledge cultures that underpin practice in shaping those trajectories was made visible, for example, by Van Saaze et al. (2018), and through the development of research projects such as the 'Marie Skłodowska-Curie Innovative Training Network New Approaches in the Conservation of Contemporary Art' (2016–2019), led by Maastricht University and the Andrew W. Mellon-funded project 'Reshaping the Collectible: When Artworks Live in the Museum' (2018–2021), led by Tate, London. Both projects are strongly influenced by social sciences perspectives on 'practice theory', which reflect the dynamic relationship between humans and structures in the creation of social worlds. Although both projects articulate perspectives that link to overall research on practice theory, it is important to mention that NACCA does so through the writings of Theodore Schatzki (see, for example, Schatzki 2002), while 'Reshaping the Collectible' develops its approach through Knorr-Cetina's work on epistemic cultures (Knorr-Cetina 1999).
  13. Van de Vall et al. 2011. Based on the notion of cultural biography of objects (via Gosden and Marshall 1999, Hoskins 2006 and Kopytoff 1986), understanding an artwork's biography means to accept the artwork's changeability and acknowledging that such change can happen both over time and be induced by the interaction between the artwork and multiple agencies.
  14. Haraway 1988.
  15. Haraway 1988: 584.
  16. Haraway 1988: 589.
  17. Haraway 1988: 584.
  18. Ibid.
  19. Haraway 1988: 593.
  20. Hölling 2017: 89.
  21. King 1987 cited in Haraway 1988.
  22. Haraway 1988: 595.
  23. Haraway 1988: 585.
  24. See Castriota and Marçal 2021.
  25. Barad 2007.
  26. The first attempt (known to me) to historicise this genre in Portugal came from the artist Manoel Barbosa, who wrote what he called 'an essential chronology' in 1985.
  27. Madeira 2007, 2016, 2017; Metello 2007.
  28. Madeira 2007, 2012, 2016, 2017; Madeira et al. 2018.
  29. Madeira et al. 2018.
  30. See Marçal 2019. The scattered nature of these records might be a concern for future scholars aiming at studying this artistic genre. Most of the documents and material traces needed to produce these histories belong to personal archives that are yet to be mapped and catalogued. This also increases the risk of losing the integrity of those archives, as they are more prone to be sold and dismantled.
  31. Hélia Marçal, 'Documentation Tool: Material History'. Available at: <https://www.tate.org.uk/about-us/projects/documentation-conservation-performance/material-history>.
  32. See Nora 1984–1992.
  33. See <https://po-ex.net/taxonomia/materialidades/videograficas/e-m-de-melocastro-musica-negativa/> (accessed 18 June 2019).
  34. E.M. de Melo e Castro, interview with Hélia Marçal via Skype, 14 August 2015 and 8 February 2017.
  35. See Barthes [1967] 1974.
  36. For an exploration of the political potential of digital media, but also the challenges posed to objectivity or relativity assertions, see Stalder 2017.
  37. Marçal 2017.
  38. Marçal 2019.
  39. An instance of this work can be found on YouTube. See <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Yf7-9zvWVjM> (accessed 8 December 2019).
  40. E.M. de Melo e Castro, interview with Hélia Marçal via Skype, 14 August 2015 and 8 February 2017.
  41. Ibid.
  42. For more on autoethnographic methods applied to conservation see Stigter 2016.
  43. See Marçal 2017.
  44. The notion of documentation of absence is indebted to Amelia Jones (1997) and Bigotte Vieira (2016).
  45. After Phelan 1993.
  46. For video documentation of the event see <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=dqrrn4oS2Sw> (accessed 8 December 2019).
  47. After Turner's definition of liminal and liminoid (1969, 1974). See also Marçal 2021.
  48. Winter 2010: 317.
  49. Haraway 1988.

## References

- Avrami, E. 2009. 'Heritage, values, and sustainability', in *Conservation: Principles, Dilemmas and Uncomfortable Truths*, A. Richmond and A. Bracker (eds), 184–96. Oxford, London: Butterworth-Heinemann, Victoria and Albert Museum.
- Barad, K. 2007. *Meeting the Universe Halfway: Quantum Physics and the Entanglement of Matter and Meaning*. Durham, NC: Duke University Press.
- Barthes, R. [1967] 1974. 'The Death of the Author', R. Miller (trans). S/Z. New York: Hill and Wang.
- Bigotte Vieira, A. 2016. *No Aleph para um olhar sobre o Serviço ACARTE da Fundação Calouste Gulbenkian entre 1984 e 1989*, PhD dissertation, Nova University of Lisbon.
- Castriota, B. and Marçal, H. 2021. 'Always already fragment: integrity, deferral, and possibility in the conservation of cultural heritage', in *The Fragment in the Digital Age: Possibilities and Risks of New Conservation Techniques. Proceedings of the Interdisciplinary Conference of the HAWK University of Applied Sciences and Arts in Cooperation with ICOMOS and the VDR, 6–8 May 2021 in Hildesheim*, U. Schädler-Saub and A. Weyer (eds), 63–78. Petersberg: Michael Imhof Verlag.

- Clavir, M. 1994. 'Preserving conceptual integrity: ethics and theory in preventive conservation', in *Preprints of the IIC Congress, Preventive Conservation: Practice, Theory and Research, 12–16 September 1994*, 53–7.
- Clavir, M. 2009. 'Conservation and cultural significance', in *Conservation: Principles, Dilemmas and Uncomfortable Truths*, A. Richmond and A. Bracker (eds), 139–149. Oxford: Elsevier/Butterworth-Heinemann in association with the Victoria and Albert Museum London.
- Fraser, N. 1990. 'Rethinking the public sphere: a contribution to the critique of actually existing democracy', *Social Text* 25/26: 56–80, doi:10.2307/466240.
- Gosden, C. and Marshall, Y. 1999. 'The cultural biography of objects', *World Archaeology* 31(2): 169–78.
- Haraway, D. 1988. 'Situated knowledges: the science question in feminism and the privilege of partial perspective', *Feminist Studies* 14(3): 575–99.
- Hölling, H.B. 2017. 'The technique of conservation: on realms of theory and cultures of practice', *Journal of the Institute of Conservation* 40(2): 87–96, doi: 10.1080/19455224.2017.1322114
- Hoskins, J. 2006. 'Agency, biography and objects', in *Handbook of Material Culture*, C. Tilley, W. Keane, S. Kuechler-Fogden, M. Rowlands and P. Spyer (eds), 74–84 London: SAGE Publications.
- Jones, A. 1997. 'Presence in absentia', *Art Journal* 56(4): 11–18, doi: 10.1080/00043249.1997.10791844.
- King, K. 1987. Prospectus for 'The Passing Dreams of Choice... Once Before and After: Audre Lorde and the Apparatus of Literary Production'. MS, Maryland: University of Maryland.
- Knorr-Cetina, K. 1999. *Epistemic Cultures: How the Sciences Make Knowledge*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.
- Kopytoff, I. 1986. 'The cultural biography of things: commoditization as a process', in *The Social Life of Things: Commodities in Cultural Perspective*, A. Appadurai (ed.), 64–91. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Lawson, L., Finbow, A. and Marçal, H. 2019. 'Developing a strategy for the conservation of performance-based artworks at Tate', *Journal of the Institute of Conservation* 42(2): 114–34. Available at: <https://doi.org/10.1080/19455224.2019.1604396>.
- Lepecki, A. 2010. 'The body as archive: will to re-enact and the afterlives of dances', *Dance Research Journal* 42(2): 28–48. Available at: <http://www.jstor.org/stable/23266897> (accessed 25 November 2020).
- Madeira, C. 2007. *O hibridismo nas artes performativas em Portugal*, PhD dissertation, Faculdade de Ciências Sociais e Humanas, Universidade Nova de Lisboa. Available at: <http://hdl.handle.net/10451/322> (accessed 27 October 2015).
- Madeira, C. 2012. 'The "return" of performance art from a glocal perspective', *Cadernos de Arte e Antropologia* 1(2): 87–102.
- Madeira, C. 2016. 'Transgenealogies of Portuguese performance art', *Performance Research* 21(5): 37–46, doi:10.1080/13528165.2016.1223446.
- Madeira, C. 2017. 'The "performative" and "speculative" history of Portuguese performance art', *Revista de História da Arte, W, 6: Portuguese Performance Art*, C. Madeira, H. Marçal and F.M. Oliveira (eds), 107–19. Lisbon: Instituto de História da Arte.
- Madeira, C., Marçal, H. and Salazar, D. 2018. 'Performance art temporalities: relationships between museum, university, and theatre', *Museum Management and Curatorship* 22(1): 79–95, doi: 10.1080/09647775.2017.1419828.
- Marçal, H. 2017. 'Conservation in the era of participation', *Journal of the Institute of Conservation* 40(2): 97–104, doi: 10.1080/19455224.2017.1319872.
- Marçal, H. 2019. 'Diffracting histories of performance: participatory practices in the historicization of political performance art', *Performance Research – On Disappearance* 24(7): 39–46, doi: 10.1080/13528165.2019.1717863.
- Marçal, H. 2021. 'Becoming difference: on the ethics of conserving the in-between', *Studies in Conservation* (forthcoming).
- Marçal, H., Macedo, R. and Duarte, A.M. 2014. 'The inevitable subjective nature of conservation: psychological insights on the process of decision-making', in *Preprints of the ICOM-CC 17th Triennial Conference*, J. Bridgland (ed.), art. 1904. Paris: International Council of Museums.
- Melo e Castro, E.M. 1977. *In-Novar*. Lisbon: Plánar Editora.
- Metello, V. 2007. *Focos de intensidade/linhas de abertura: activação do mecanismo performance 1961–1979*, MA dissertation, Faculdade de Ciências Sociais e Humanas: Universidade Nova de Lisboa.
- Nora, P. (ed.) 1984–1992. *Les lieux de mémoire*. Paris: Gallimard.
- Phelan, P. 1993. *Unmarked: Politics of Performance*. London: Routledge.
- Schatzki, T.R. 2002. *The Site of the Social: A Philosophical Account of the Constitution of Social Life and Change*. Pennsylvania, PA: Penn State University Press.
- Schneider, R. 2011. *Performing Remains: Art and War in Times of Theatrical Reenactment*. London and New York: Routledge.
- Stalder, F. 2017. *The Digital Condition*. Cambridge: Polity.
- Stigter, D. 2016. 'Autoethnography as a new approach in conservation', *Studies in Conservation* 61(sup2): 227–32. Available at: <https://doi.org/10.1080/00393630.2016.1183104>.
- Turner, V. 1969. *The Ritual Process: Structure and Anti-structure*. Chicago: Aldine Pub.
- Turner, V. 1974. 'Liminal to liminoid in play, flow, and ritual: an essay in comparative symbology', *Rice University Studies* 60(3).
- Van de Vall, R., Hölling, H., Scholte, T. and Stigter, S. 2011. 'Reflections on a biographical approach to contemporary art conservation', in *Preprints of the ICOM-CC 16th Triennial Conference*, J. Bridgland (ed.), 8 pp. Almada: Critério.
- Van den Hengel, L. 2017. 'Archives of affect: performance, reenactment, and the becoming of memory', in *Materializing Memory in Art and Popular Culture*, L. Muntean, L. Plate and A. Smelik (eds), 125–42. London and New York: Routledge/Taylor & Francis Group.
- Van Saaze, V., Wharton, G. and Reisman, L. 2018. 'Adaptive institutional change: managing digital works at the Museum of Modern Art', *Museum & Society* 16(2): 220–39. Available at: <https://doi.org/10.29311/mas.v16i2.2774>.
- Wharton, G. 2015. 'Public access in the age of documented art', *Revista de História da Arte, W, 4: Performing Documentation in the Conservation of Contemporary Art*, L.A. Matos, R. Macedo, and G. Heydenreich (eds), 180–91. Lisbon: Instituto de História da Arte. Available at: <http://revistaharte.fsh.unl.pt/rhaw4/RHAW4.pdf> (accessed 21 May 2021).
- Winter, J. 2010. 'Sites of memory', in *Memory: Histories, Theories, Debates*, S. Radstone and B. Schwarz (eds), 312–24. New York: Fordham University. Available at: [www.jstor.org/stable/j.ctt1c999bq.25](http://www.jstor.org/stable/j.ctt1c999bq.25).

## Biography

Dr Hélia Marçal is Lecturer in History of Art, Materials and Technology at UCL. Before this appointment, she was the Fellow in Contemporary Art Conservation and Research of the research project 'Reshaping the Collectible: When Artworks Live in the Museum', at Tate, London (2018–2020). She has held the position of the Theory, History and Ethics of Conservation Working Group Coordinator for the Committee for Conservation of the International Council of Museums (ICOM-CC) since 2016.