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Chapter 23

Editors' Note: Hélia Marçal is a lecturer in History of Art, Materials and Technology at the University College of London. Among other topics, her research explores ethics and performativity of cultural heritage and the conservation of time-based media and performance art. With her brief chapter, Marçal *reflects on the intersection between time-based media and live performance art,* providing an overview and outlook on the state of emerging practice and research in the collection and conservation of performance art.

A Word about Performance Art

Hélia Marçal

23.1 Introduction

As a form of artistic practice where the materiality is understood to be in perpetual unfolding, time-based media art was introduced in contemporary art museums through the acquisition of audiovisual and electronic media. The genre of time-based media art, however, incorporates in its expanded meaning other artistic manifestations that are not necessarily associated with audiovisual and electronic media, such as performance art.

Long gone are the days when live performance art seemed to be, by its very nature, in direct contrast with collecting and conservation practices. It is not that performance art was kept out of collections and museum spaces; indeed, traces of performance artworks have inhabited the Museum and its various structures since the emergence of the genre in the 1950s (Calonje 2014 , Phillips and Hinkson 2018). Collecting institutions have, however, restrained themselves from collecting performance art as a live, repeatable action up until 2005, when the first live performance artwork was acquired by Tate (London). Since then, we have witnessed performance entering art collections at a rapid pace. In 2021, the Monoskop website identified more than sixty live performance artworks as being part of art collections in Europe and North America (Monoskop 2021). The list is, however, not exhaustive, and many more have entered museum collections throughout the world. But what are the challenges that performance artworks – as living forms of artmaking - pose to collecting institutions, and in which ways can performance artworks be conserved?

This chapter aims to reflect on the conservation of performance art and how it has evolved in the last fifteen years. It will focus on the parallels between conserving time-based media and performance art, the emerging and changing practices of collecting live art in museums, and the intertwining of conservation and curatorial practices in museums. In providing an overview of research initiatives on both theory and practice and reflecting on the role of performance art in the development of the conservation field, this chapter will also discuss the challenges and possibilities that we can foresee in the future.

The chapter is divided into four sections. The first section explores the intersections of performance art and other time-based media artworks. The second section approaches the different performance art types one can find in museum collections, reflecting both on collecting trends and the reasons why some kinds of performance art are yet to be collected. The third section highlights the expertise that has been developed in both collecting institutions and universities, focusing not only on how much of it is contingent on the collection and context of operation but also on the possibilities afforded by emerging tools and frameworks. The fourth and last section discusses the challenges performance art is bringing to the future of conservation, and how we can create opportunities for the development of practice in museums and other institutions.

23.2 **Time-based media and performance art**

Performance art - which, in some academic and museum circles is also called *live art* (with the term claiming a specific theoretical lineage - cf. Heathfield 2004) - is usually recognised as an artistic movement that emerged around the 1950s and was later adopted as a genre by visual artists in the 1960s (Jones 2012). The emergence of this genre, however, is neither visually nor geographically contained. Under the overarching notion of art as bodily action, performance art developed in multiple directions, reframing the idea of motion and bodies in the process. And, indeed, although the published chronologies are undoubtedly inclined towards the contexts in North America and Europe (mainly Anglo-Saxon cultures), the movement has been adopted beyond these contexts with renowned artists and groups emerging around the world - such as, for example, the Japanese collective Gutai, which was particularly active in the 1950s and 1960s, Rirkrit Tiravanija (b. 1961, Argentina), or Cildo Meireles (b. 1948, Brazil) - with many of these only now being recognised by the canons of history of art (as is the case of artists from Eastern Europe, whose pioneering practices were only recently mapped - Bryzgel 2017).

Materially speaking, performance art is characterised by a set of actions that take place during a limited time. Both human and nonhuman bodies can perform those actions: the artwork *Tatlin's Whisper #5*, created by the Cuban-born artist Tania Bruguera (b. 1968) in 2008, for example, is a performance artwork that includes actions by both mounted police and horses; digital performance, as another example, often implies the performance of people through digital media (such as the social media durational performances by Amalia Ulman (b. 1989, Argentina)). The actions performed usually follow a sequence, which can be minimally pre-determined, just be triggered by an overarching idea, or be somewhere in the middle of these scenarios. The time limit for these actions also varies greatly: John Cage's (1912-1992, U.S.A.) *ORGAN2/ASLSP* (1987), for example, which is at the intersection of music and performance art, is being performed for 639 years in Halberstadt; Tehching Hsieh's (b. 1950, Taiwan) *One Year Performances* (1978–1979, 1980–1981, 1981–1982, 1983-1984, 1985–1986) or his *Thirteen Year Plan* (1986-1999), are also examples of an action being dilated in time; in contrast, the Austria-born artist Erwin Wurm (b. 1954) has created *One-Minute Sculptures* (since 1988) that are activated by the public during 60 seconds. In considering performance art's relation with time – particularly when we are discussing its conservation – one needs to account not so much for the duration of performance artworks, but rather how they change with time. Similarly to other time-based media artworks, performance not only materially during their institutional lifecycle, but also those changes are a fundamental part of what makes these artworks what they are.

As one can see through reading the various chapters that comprise this handbook, changes in time-based media artworks – whether as part of the process of displaying them or just keeping them safe and accessible – are both triggered by an ecology of practices that makes them particularly prone to obsolescence and burgeoned by conservation's aims to keep them alive, functioning for present and future generations. That is also the case with performance artworks that are to be preserved and displayed as live-action – efforts for keeping them alive are intrinsically linked to the degrees to which we can change them. Both types of artworks (or, indeed, all artworks) can be said to operate in a range of performativity, in which the most performative artworks would account for more material changes from activation to activation, while at the other end of the spectrum artworks would seem to be more self-contained. Another characteristic that is shared by time-based artworks - and is not medium-specific - pertains to the information-based materiality of these artworks. Indeed, time-based media artworks rely on more than their separate components in order to be realised in contexts of display - information is not only an integral part of the formal materiality of some of these works (Kirschenbaum 2008), but it is only what allows them to be displayed, activated, and performed when installed. In looking to preserve both the possibilities of change and the information-based materiality as much as the artwork itself, the conservation of time-based media and performance art looks for a balance that is quite hard to get: how can we foster different iterations of a given artwork while keeping it the same artwork? And, in which ways can performance artworks thrive in museums?

23.3 **Performance art and the Museum**

There are many reasons behind the decision to collect a specific form of artistic practice. In the particular case of performance art, relevant literature has shown that live performance is not exactly new in museums – it is only new to its collections (see Calonje 2014 , Lawson, Finbow & Marçal 2019). It is possible to say, however, that it has taken quite some time for museums to start acquiring performance art. One of the reasons is that performance art (and, may I say, particularly artworks created in the 1960s and 1970s – cf. Bishop 2012) was considered uncollectible due to the stance that such artworks were unrepeatable, impossible to document, and prone to an inevitable disappearance (Phelan 1993). As the field of Performance Studies took off in the 1990s (Davis 2008), new perspectives on performance documentation – namely some that contested this initial position – started to appear (see, for example, Auslander 2008, 2006; or Jones 1997). The new millennium led to several re-enactment projects that, according to the scholar Jessica Santone, answer to a turn to nostalgia (Santone 2008). Not only did reenactment projects like Marina Abramovic's (b. 1946, Servia) *Seven Easy Pieces*, commissioned and presented at the Guggenheim Museum in New York in 2005, unveil the possibility of repetition for performance art in museums, but they have also fostered a critical mass of scholars and artists that helped redefine the possible futures of performance. This period coincided with the time the first performance artworks were acquired by museums (Monoskop 2021). *Good Feelings, Good Times*, created by Roman Ondak (b. 1966, Slovakia) in 2003, was acquired by Tate in 2005, quickly followed by *This is Propaganda* (2002), by Tino Sehgal (b. 1976, United Kingdom), and David Lamelas' (b. 1946, Argentina) *Time* (1970). The Stedelijk Museum (Amsterdam) collected Sehgal's *Instead of allowing something to rise up to your face dancing bruce and dan and other things* (2000) also in 2005, and the Van Abbe Museum (Rotterdam) acquired *This is Exchange* (2002) by the same artist in 2006. In the United States, the Museum of Modern Art in New York was the first museum to acquire a live performance – *Kiss* (2003), also by Sehgal – in 2008.

More than the Z*eitgeist*, however, it was the material conditions of these works that led them to be collected in the first place. Up until very recently (see Marçal forthcoming), all of the artworks that entered museum collections shared characteristics that make them relatively more collectible than performances created in the 1970s. These artworks are what the art historian Claire Bishop has called 'delegated artworks' . This notion can be used to describe performance artworks that are executed by others than the artist, or, in Bishop's words,

> "[T]he act of hiring non-professionals or specialists in other fields to undertake the job of being present and performing at a particular time and a particular place on behalf of the artist, and following his/her instructions." (Bishop 2012, 219)

Delegated performances are, therefore, not so closely associated with the body of the artist who created them. Nor is there such emphasis on the idea that performance ought to be considered as a single event, never to be repeated or reproduced in any way, as were many artworks created during the 1960s and 1970s. Designed to be performed by someone other than the artist, mechanisms for the conservation of delegated performances are usually devised by the artists during the process of their creation. These artworks are additionally often acquired (or even shown) as a set of instructions that can be followed by hired performers or members of the audience. The delivery of such instructions can vary significantly: while some instructions are supplied during the acquisition of the artwork, such as in the case of Roman Ondak's *Good Feelings, Good Times* (see Marçal, Lawson, and Ribeiro forthcoming), others, as in the case of Tino Sehgal's artworks, are conveyed through a network of trusted collaborators (see Laurenson and van Saaze 2014). And while gathering and fostering such networks is a challenge in itself (Laurenson and van Saaze 2014) – and one that museums need to grapple with for many other reasons – delegated performances such as Tino Sehgal's artworks still thrive in contemporary museums.

Besides this form of delegation, other mechanisms of transmission have started to inhabit museums. That is the case, for example, of performance artworks acquired with an alternative mode of display - for example, artworks that can be shown both as a live performance or an installation that includes performance documentation. That potential option accounts for a time in which the performance can no longer be presented as a live option due, for example, to the degradation of unique objects that are essential for the performance to take place. There are artworks in which the role of the main performer – such as the artist – is conscientiously and intentionally delegated to a person or a group of people who are tasked to perform the artwork in a regime of quasi-co-authorship (see Marçal 2017, for an example). Devising the material limits and possibilities of a given performance artwork is, therefore, a crucial task for the conservators that are bringing the artwork to a collection. Documentation (see Chapter 11) and collaboration with artists and other stakeholders (see Chapter 17) are two essential strategies in negotiating the material needs of the artwork, not only during the acquisition process but also throughout the lifecycle of the work in the collection. The next section will highlight some of the research efforts in both theory and practice in the conservation of performance art that have been developed in the last years.

23.4 **Perspectives on the Conservation of Performance art**

Studies on the conservation of performance art go as far back as the Guggenheim-based *Variable Media Initiative* (1999-2004, see Depocas et al. 2003) who, already in 2001, introduced Robert Morris' (1931-2018, United States) *Site*, created in 1964, as a case-study. The most prominent initiative to reflect on the conservation of performance after this pioneering effort of *The Variable Media Network*, was the project *Collecting the Performative: A research network examining emerging practice for collecting and conserving performance-based art*, which took place from 2012 to 2014 (Tate 2014a). This project was based at Tate and developed in collaboration with Maastricht University. Outputs from this collective and international effort include essays by the curator Catherine Wood (Wood 2014), and by Pip Laurenson and Vivian van Saaze (Laurenson and van Saaze 2014), and a resource for professionals interested in collecting performance, named *The Live List: What to Consider When Collecting Live Works* (Laurenson et al. 2014). This resource is designed as a prompt to help promote thinking about the things required when bringing a live performance into a collection. The *Live List* has some similarities with the *Variable Media Questionnaire* (Variable Media Network 2004) but goes beyond the realm of the artist and summarises aspects to consider when acquiring performance artworks, both concerning the nature of these works and the politics and procedures of the institution (Laurenson et al. 2014).

Research and practice in the conservation of performance art were furthered around the time *Collecting the Performative* took place, with publications focusing on performance art starting to appear across all spectrums of the conservation field (see Giguère 2012, 2014; Finbow 2018; Marçal et al. 2013, 2016; van Saaze 2015; Wharton 2016). Some of these publications (and, in general, the field) were influenced by the seminal paper 'Reflections on a biographical approach to contemporary art conservation,' published by Renée van de Vall and co-authors in the preprints of the ICOM-CC 16th Triennial Conference (van de Vall et al. 2011). This cohort of authors was also involved in the Marie Sklodowska-Curie Innovative Training Network *New Approaches in the Conservation of Contemporary Art* (NACCA), which, in 2014, launched 15 PhD projects, one of which was dedicated to the preservation of performance art (see Goldie-Scot 2021; for more information see Tate 2019).

The opening of the field to the study of the conservation of performance art was also propelled by conferences emerging from conservation projects and associations. The first conference – *Performing documentation in the Conservation of Contemporary Art* took place in Lisbon, in 2013. Part of the research network NeCCAR (*Network for Conservation of Contemporary Art Research*, see Tate 2014b), this conference joined conservators and researchers in discussing the role of documentation in the conservation of contemporary art and, in particular, performance-based art (for the proceedings see

Matos, Macedo & Heydenreich 2015). The first conference that exclusively focused on the conservation of performance art happened in 2016. Organised by the German Association of Conservator-Restorers (VDR) and the Kunstmuseum Wolfsburg, “Collecting and Conserving Performance Art” (June 9-11, 2016) brought together international scholars and practising conservators to discuss the lives of performance art in the museum. The videos of the conference are available online (Verband der Restauratoren 2017), and the VDR journal *Beiträge zum Erhalt von Kunst- und Kulturgut* published the majority of contributions across two Volumes (VDR 2017 and VDR 2018).

Significant expansions of theory and practice in the conservation of performance art occurred after 2016, with previous initiatives drawing on this progress. The year 2016 marked the beginning of the project *Documentation and Conservation of Performance* at Tate, and the consequent development of a strategy specially dedicated to the care of these works (see Lawson, Finbow & Marçal 2019, and Tate 2021). The years that followed led to the publication of the book *Histories of Performance Documentation: Museum, Artistic, and Scholarly Practices* (Giannachi and Westerman 2018), as well as various publications centred on the practices of conserving performance art (e.g. Borges & Inês 2018; Lane & Wdowin-McGregor 2016; Lawson & Potter 2017; Lawson, Finbow & Marçal 2019; Marçal 2017 , 2021b and 2021c; Nogueira, Macedo & Pires 2016), or raising the profile of the theory being developed at the intersection of performance art and conservation (see, for example, Castriota 2021, Hölling 2021; Marçal 2019, 2021a, 2021b, 2021c, Rieß, Bohlmann, and Hausmann 2019; van den Hengel 2017). One of the latest seminal research efforts to look into the theory and practice of the conservation of contemporary art with a focus on performance art, is the Andrew W. Mellon-funded project *Reshaping the Collectible: When Artworks Live in the Museum* (2018-2021), led by the Head of Collection Care Research at Tate, Pip Laurenson. Intending to understand the ways in which artworks that challenge traditional categories or practices can reshape museums, this project has highlighted conservation as a social activity that goes beyond the walls of the museum (see the project’s website (Tate 2018); for the conservation-related state-of-the-art report see Marçal 2019). The end of 2020 saw the beginning of a new project - Performance: Conservation, Materiality, Knowledge, led by Hanna B. Hölling. Based at the University of Bern, this four-year project aims to study the conservation of performance art at the intersection of theory and practice (Performance: Conservation, Materiality, Knowledge 2021). The first colloquium (2021) focused on discussing the ethics and the politics of care, and a publication is forthcoming.

The currently published body of literature explores five topics in particular, (1) the need to account for implicit knowledge in the documentation of performance, (2) the importance of body-to-body transmission, (3) the role of audiences and performance participants, (4) conservation as a social activity, and (5) the role of documentation in transmitting performance artworks from iteration to iteration. Among the documentation tools developed for the conservation of performance (or for time-based media artworks that share some of its characteristics), one can find the identity and iteration reports developed by Joanna Phillips and her team at the Guggenheim (see, for example, Phillips 2015 and Phillips & Hinkson 2018), and the tools and workflows developed by the time-based media team at Tate, led by Louise Lawson (see Lawson, Finbow & Marçal 2019; Lawson & Marçal 2021; Lawson et al. 2021). Other documentation tools – particularly the ones that recognise objects that require change – could be applied to the conservation of performance; although this could lead to the reformulation of some aspects of the templates, this exercise in itself can be useful to rethink the categories that we use in understanding and conserving artworks.

23.5 **Conclusion: From emerging Practice to sustained Development**

This chapter explored the emergence of performance art as both an artistic practice and an operator in the makings of conservation in collecting institutions. I have argued that although performance art helped destabilise some of the practices of museums, the potential for further change is as significant as the ambition to continue to collect performance art. It is only a matter of time until artworks that defy intentions of delegated authority, such as non-delegated or activist performance, or that make us revise our notion of what is performance art, such as digital performance, start being acquired by collecting institutions. As I've argued elsewhere (Marçal forthcoming), not only has the acquisition of non-delegated artworks already started but it is also one of the ways in which museums have been looking to expand. The acquisition of activist performance art will further impact museum practices as well as the understanding of what it means to conserve performance in museums. The consolidation of the practice around the conservation of performance – and, in particular, of artworks that not only depend upon but also create social networks - will contribute to revising models of documentation (including digital preservation and collaborative categorisation – see, for example, Chapter 10), creating opportunities for the development of practice in museums and other institutions in the form of collaborative networks, and shared tools and frameworks (like in the project *Matters in Media Art* - see Matters in Media Art 2015). One of the first steps is, however, to normalise the care of performance art within conservation departments and as part of a conservation strategy. Moreover, in creating the conditions for the various types of performance art to thrive in museums, it will be inevitable for conservation and other departments within museums to become ever more collaborative as active participants in the ecology of these works and to underwrite their preservation.

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