

2 Collecting Performance-Based Art: New Challenges and Shifting Perspectives

Historically, performance or live works seem to have been perceived by artists, theoreticians and curators as a form of practice which defies absorption into an art system dependent on the currency of objects. Being non-material, performance art has long been considered at odds with well-established systems and processes for managing art as a material object.¹ In the past, live performances were considered uncollectable because of their intangible nature. When museums collected anything related to performance, they collected the material remains of the performance, never the performance itself as a live event. Only since the early 2000s, museums have begun to collect live works, by acquiring the means and the rights to re-perform them. These circumstances prompt questions about the extent that the challenges for collecting and conservation which have been raised historically with regard to performance art are still relevant for today's collecting practices?

Through an exploration of examples from Tate's collection, this chapter claims that the main challenge to the museum currently is not the non-materiality or even the liveness of these works, but rather what they demand to maintain their memory, the skills needed for their enactment, or perhaps even their currency. Thus, whilst the non-materiality and liveness of performance may seem inherently challenging to the concept of a museum collection, this chapter examines this assumption and explores where the points of friction actually arise.

The first part of this chapter considers two main reasons why live performance has historically been considered uncollectable: first, due to

1 In this text non-material and intangible will be used as synonymous terms.

the attachment of the museum, the market and conservation practice to the material object, and second, the perception of performance as being conceptually bound to the live ephemeral event. The second section considers the forms in which live performance is entering museum collections and the new challenges that this presents for the museum.²

Historically, why has it been considered problematic to collect live performance? This section will explore why performance art, as live and non-material, was considered to be uncollectable, and suggests that this question should be addressed from two angles: the object-bound focus of museums and the art market, and the key features attributed to live performance. However, before entering the field of performance, we will first look at some of the fundamental ideas underpinning the notions of the museum object and the conservation object; for example, materiality, durability and portability.

Museums, objects and the market

Traditionally, museums are seen as places which collect, display and study objects. Until recently only tangible objects were seen as collectable and able to persist through time. In his book *Museum Memories: History, Technology, Art*, Didier Maleuvre has argued that the museum manufactures history

2 The chapter is informed by research conducted as part of the network *Collecting the Performative: A Research Network Examining Emerging Practice for Collecting and Conserving Performance-based Art* (2012–13). This interdisciplinary network draws on a range of practitioners, academics, artists and professionals to examine emerging models for the conservation and documentation of artists' performance, drawing upon the practices of dance, theatre and activism in order to identify parallels in the concept of a work and related notions of authorship, authenticity, autonomy, documentation, memory, continuity and liveness. It examines the conceptual and practical challenges related to collecting and conserving artists' performance. The project website is: <<http://www.tate.org.uk/about/projects/collecting-performative>>.

through the selection and preservation of objects. By salvaging objects from history:

the museum conveys upon artifacts the sanctity of an eternal judgement: how they look here is how they always have looked and how they always should look ... History is no longer the ground, air and substance of existence; it is the *object* of intellectual observation and social experiment. As an object, a piece of reification, it can be put away, stored, held in reserve, managed. In short, it can be placed in a museum ... History is what escapes the material forces at work in history.³

Objects salvaged from history are conceived of as repositories for values and identity and as symbols of stability, they also enable an objective view of history.⁴ The core attribute of the museum object is that it persists and in so doing it fixes an historical moment. “Collecting” works is primarily about preserving and protecting them, presenting them for the public.⁵ The museum and the market have traditionally demanded that artworks are material, durable and portable. However, as we will explore, this notion of a museum object is under pressure within the contemporary art museum.

Only recently has the market place expanded to include intangible articles.⁶ Whilst some artists in the 1960s and 70s were explicitly using intangibility as a way of defying the commoditization of their work, others were pushing the boundaries of what might be considered collectable or saleable. For example, in the case of Sol LeWitt’s wall drawing *A Wall Divided Vertically into Fifteen Equal Parts, Each with a Different Line Direction and Colour, and All Combinations* (1970), a certificate is the only thing that changes hands when the work is purchased.⁷ Forms of art

3 Didier Maleuvre, *Museum Memories: History, Technology, Art* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1999), 13–14.

4 Maleuvre, *Museum Memories: History, Technology, Art*, 14.

5 Joan Rothfuss quoted in Susannah Schouweiler, ‘Cataloguing performance: Who owns what?’ <<http://blogs.walkerart.org/performingarts/2011/11/17/cataloguing-performance-who-owns-what/>> accessed 15 January 2013.

6 Noah Horowitz, *Art of the Deal: Contemporary Art in a Global Financial Market* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2011), 11.

7 Ronald Alley, *Catalogue of the Tate Gallery’s Collection of Modern Art other than Works by British Artists*, Tate Gallery and Sotheby Parke-Bernet, London 1981, 427–9.

such as conceptual art paved the way for non-material artworks to enter the museum and market. Within the history of contemporary art, works whose primary form is non-material have entered collections by being made tangible, for example as instructions, film, video, photography, props or installations (sometimes in a form that references an archive).

Tangibility and the conservation object

Although it is common for conservators to pay attention to the ‘intangible meanings of objects’, this is distinct from conserving objects that do not exist in a material form.⁸ As a profession, conservation has traditionally been steadfastly linked to the idea that ‘conservators work on tangible objects.’⁹ A wide range of objects are considered conservation objects, from works of art to objects of social history, however, the conservation theorist, Salvador Muñoz Viñas, draws the line at intangible heritage, excluding this from the class of conservation objects.¹⁰ This, it seems, is not because intangible heritage does not fulfil his criteria of significance, but because of how he defines the limits to the activities which fall within the expertise of conservators, namely those associated with practical skills, based on an explicit and tacit understanding of the materials from which objects are made. However, contemporary art conservators are increasingly being asked to engage in the conservation of works which constitute live

reproduced 427 <<http://www.tate.org.uk/art/artworks/le Witt-a-wall-divided-vertically-into-fifteen-equal-parts-each-with-a-different-line-to1766/text-catalogue-entry>> accessed 16 January 2013.

8 Elizabeth Pye, ‘Archaeological Conservation: Scientific Practice or Social Process?’, in Alison Richmond and Alison Bracker, eds, *Conservation Principles, Dilemmas and Uncomfortable Truths* (Oxford: Butterworth-Heinemann, 2009), 136.

9 Salvador Muñoz Viñas, *Contemporary Theory of Conservation* (London: Taylor & Francis 2005), 41.

10 Muñoz Viñas, *Contemporary Theory of Conservation*, 41.

performances. This demonstrates that the categories of what can be considered a conservation object and what are legitimate areas of conservation expertise continue to expand. As the museum, art market and conservation traditionally work on the presumption that art objects will be material, there are also key features considered central to live performance that are undermined by collection, commodification and ideas of conservation.

Presence and absence

For live performance works their authenticity has been linked to ephemerality and, given that collectable objects are required to be durable, collecting live performance has been considered to contradict the very nature of liveness. Authenticity in performance is connected to the live and linked specifically to a particular moment and person as performer, which is experienced and valued as a form of 'presence'. Unlike material objects, the live artwork only exists in the moment of its activation. For most performance artworks, being absent can be considered their default state. As Tina Fiske points out in her essay 'White Walls' there is something rightly troubling about works which are absent between activations. Fiske evokes the notion of 'tethering' derived from Derrida: 'tethering secures the work-in-absentia, disarming absence as a condition that could threaten the viability of the work, and rendering it essentially benign'.¹¹ The understanding of performance as being ephemeral and articulated in terms of its disappearance can be traced back to the work of Peggy Phelan and her now famous words:

11 Tina Fiske, 'White Walls: Installations, Absence, Iteration and Difference', in Alison Richmond and Alison Bracker, eds, *Conservation: Principles, Dilemmas, and Uncomfortable Truths* (Oxford: Butterworth-Heinemann 2009), 233. In terms of the conservation of performance, documentation can be seen as an act of disarming the absence of performance.

Performance cannot be saved, recorded, documented, or otherwise participate in the circulation of representations *of* representations: once it does so it becomes something other than performance.¹²

For Phelan the only life of performance is in the presence, and its disappearance is at the heart of its ontology. Phelan continues:

Performance in a strict ontological sense is non-reproductive. It is this quality which makes performance the runt of the litter of contemporary art. Performance clogs the smooth machinery of reproductive representation necessary to the circulation of capital.¹³

Phelan voices a view about performance art that is no longer true for all performance works. The difference is that some artists are using performance not to defy the market system and commoditization but for different ends and have hence found ways to format their works which allows re-production in the sense of the ability to produce the work again in a different space at a different time, independent of the artist, reasserting the autonomy of the art object.

In her critique on the performance retrospective Marina Abramović's *The Artist Is Present*, Amelia Jones argues that the mediatized liveness of the performance effectively destroyed its presence.¹⁴ Jones refers to her experience of sitting with Abramović as participating in a spectacle, a simulation of anything but real. According to Jones, *The Artist Is Present*:

[...] exemplifies what is lost when performance is institutionalized, objectified, and, by extension, commodified under the guise of somehow capturing the ephemeral. You can't 'curate', plan in advance, or otherwise *present* 'presence'; it is something that *happens* of its own accord through interpersonal encounters.¹⁵

12 Peggy Phelan, *Unmarked: The Politics of Performance* (London/New York: Routledge, 1993), 146.

13 Phelan, *Unmarked: The Politics of Performance*, 148.

14 Museum of Modern Art, New York, 14 March–31 May, 2010.

15 Amelia Jones, 'Temporal anxiety/ 'Presence' in *Absentia*. Experiencing performance as documentation' in Gabriella Giannachi, Nick Kaye, Michael Shanks, eds, *Archaeologies of the Presence* (London/New York: Routledge, 2012), 198.

Jones claims that 'the very energy and unpredictability of the body-to-body exchange potential to live performance' is lost when historicized and commodified through curatorial and collecting activities.¹⁶ Jones' critique, like that of Phelan in her 1993 chapter, voices an often heard concern towards the objectification of 'the live' and echoes a conception of performance as being uncollectable.

Collecting the live: Re-performance and repeatability

Despite the institutional and conceptual barriers outlined above, the traditional breach between the museum and the non-material, rooted in the museum's assertion of the primacy of the object, is challenged by the increase in the acquisition of live works into collections.

The types of performance works which enter collections as live works can exist, at least theoretically, independent of the artist and can be repeated or re-activated in the future. In this sense they are durable and portable. Within current practice, artists are themselves finding formats that allow works which are not straightforward objects to be bought and sold, for example, by the use of scripts or instructions which enable others to perform and re-perform the work. Unlike many performances from the 1960s and 70s, recent performance artworks often no longer privilege the live moment or the artist's own body. According to Claire Bishop, the repeatability of delegated performance (the hiring of non-professionals to do performances) is central to the economics of performance since the 1990s and has accelerated its institutionalization and collectability.¹⁷

16 Jones, 'Temporal anxiety/ 'Presence' in *Absentia*. Experiencing performance as documentation', 198.

17 Claire Bishop, 'Delegated Performance: Outsourcing Authenticity', *October Magazine* 140 (2012), 91–112.

An example of a live work that does not depend on the artist's presence is *Good Feelings in Good Times* (2003) by Roman Ondák. Acquired by Tate in 2005, this work was sold as an edition of two with one artist's proof. The work is made up of a queue of eight to twelve people, which is re-enacted throughout the day, typically for forty minutes at a time. Ondák explains his interest in the practice of queuing in the following way:

I became interested in the phenomenon of the queue because it is very unstable, but on the other hand it shows a very strong sense of participation ... even if you are not queuing, you are participating as you are facing your memories of queues in the past. There is no description of the queue – it is about feelings, about desire and your decision to be in it, and I like this ambiguity of the queue in our society. Also, on your own you think about your time – what I call 'real time' – which has its own value; but when you go in the queue, you slow down and the time is different.¹⁸

This work draws on ideas of ephemerality, expressed here as instability, however through the use of instructions the work is made durable and repeatable.

Current challenges in collecting live performance

What new skills and approaches are demanded by bringing live performance into museum collections? In the first meeting of the research network *Collecting the Performative* it became clear that the skills that were used by dance transmitters were based on many years of experience as dancers as well as working intensively on particular choreographers' works. It is also clear from the museum's experience of displaying performance-based works that skills associated with the production of live events are different from those associated with standard curatorial practice; for example, the need to

18 Ondák in conversation with Evi Baniotopoulou, quoted in the Summary <<http://www.tate.org.uk/art/artworks/ondak-good-feelings-in-good-times-t11940/text-summary>> 16 October 2004. Accessed 17 January 2013.

audition, rehearse, direct, and negotiate around issues of health and safety. The re-execution of other works may rely on a manner of remembrance informed by a degree of knowledge and understanding of the performing arts; of dramaturgy and the occupation of space. As Bishop has noted of a certain type of performance-based work, which she terms 'delegated performance', displaying the work becomes about negotiating qualifications, shifts and contracts, in short the work of a human resources manager.¹⁹

Tino Sehgal's *This is Propaganda* (2002) is perhaps one of the most challenging live works to enter Tate's collection.²⁰ The work is not only a live work but the artist also does not allow the work to be documented. Motivated by a desire to resist his works being replaced by a photograph or a video, Sehgal insists on the complete disavowal of material remains. The conservation of this work depends on memory and body to body transmission, a notion drawn from dance. To describe *This is Propaganda* (2002) it is best to do so from the perspective of a gallery visitor encountering the work. Whilst walking through the museum galleries the sound of a woman's voice can be heard singing. On entering the gallery where the sound is coming from, a female gallery assistant turns and faces the wall and the singing begins again 'This is propaganda, you know you know, This is propaganda you know'. Only when she slowly turns to face the visitor on the last 'This is propaganda' is it clear that she is singing and that it is live and not a recording. At the end of the refrain the title of the work and the name of the artist is spoken, along with the date of the work and when it was acquired, simulating a wall text. The visitor may ask a question, and a discussion may ensue until someone else enters the gallery and the work begins again.

19 Claire Bishop, *Artificial Hells: Participatory Art and the Politics of Spectatorship* (London/New York: Verso, 2012), 231.

20 Pip Laurenson, 'Tino Sehgal, This is Propaganda, 2002', in Tatja Scholte and Paulien 't Hoen, eds, *Inside Installations* (Amsterdam: Foundation for the Conservation of Contemporary Art / Netherlands Institute for Cultural Heritage, 2007) 30. The artist objects to the label 'performance' and instead refers to his works as 'living sculptures' and 'constructed situations' or 'constructed experiences'.

Interestingly, it is mainly the non-material aspect of Sehgal's work and his farewell to the object that are generally highlighted as specific to his pieces. But rather than simply remaining steadfastly non-material, it can be argued that his practice shows a more complex relation towards material objecthood. Dorothea von Hantelmann, art historian and curator, notes:

As art Sehgal's works fulfil all of the parameters of a visual artwork except an essential one, its inanimate materiality. While James Coleman and Buren start from an object, which they lend an event-like quality, Sehgal starts from an ephemeral event, like singing, moving or speaking, lending it an object-like quality.²¹

Rather than going against the traditional way of dealing with artefacts within a museum structure, Sehgal's works take on many of the forms of a material object. *This is Propaganda*, for example, must be active during opening hours for the duration of any display or exhibition of which it is part and there is a minimum display period of one month. Moreover, Sehgal's works always come in a limited edition and in that sense also copy the strategies of material artworks. By referencing older models, Sehgal was able to expand what was possible in terms of the forms by which live works might enter into museum collections. Unlike those who used performance to defy commodification; Sehgal finds ways in which these works can become collectable. In the development of collecting practices in the museum such emerging models are highly influential and provide new ways in which artists, both contemporary and from an earlier context, can frame their works in ways in which they might be collected and also for the museum in ways in which they can be integrated into existing structures.

The maintenance of the network of relationships necessary to support performance-based artworks, especially those relying on memory such as Tino Sehgal's *This is Propaganda*, is best served by the cycle of display, or loan or regular preservation management that are already ingrained in the rhythm of the museum. However, there is a disconnect between the frequency of the cycles that exist currently within the museum and

21 Dorothea von Hantelmann, *How to Do Things with Art* (Dijon: Les Presses du Réel, 2010), 130–1.

the frequency of the refresh cycles that are required to maintain certain types of performance-based works. Performance-based artworks are not unique in this regard, as this sense of expanding demands on the museum is also echoed in the care and management of new forms of time-based media works of art and technologies. Here, whereas video might have required maintenance by migration every seven to nine years, these cycles are becoming shorter in the 'born digital' domain, with some software-based artworks demanding constant monitoring whereas others might require yearly reviews. This repeated revisiting of these works may in some cases be less about maintaining sameness than relationships with a social or historical context.

Tina Fiske in her paper 'White walls: Installations, Absence, Iterations and Difference' introduces the prospect of conservation practice that might go beyond an attachment to notions of the 'original' and see its role as equally responsible for the 'refreshing' of the work each time it is performed. Here she draws not on a sense of sameness in repetition but on the idea of 'translation' to a current time or context.²² With works which are linked to and dependent on a particular social and historical context, this provides a key to the conservation of these works. Take, for example, Tania Bruguera's *Tatlin's Whispers #5*. This work requires Tate to secure the services of mounted policemen and their horses. Two mounted policemen and two horses (one white, one black) enact the work for a maximum of twenty minutes at a time. To do this they control the crowd in a museum space using manoeuvres that are common in the control of crowds in situations where there is the potential for civil unrest. This work is only to be displayed in contexts where this practice has resonance; for example, where there have been recent examples of the use of horses in such way. Although not explicit in her contract it is also essential to Tate's ability to be able to continue to show this work that the police continue to use horses for crowd control in this way. Once this practice ceases it will be necessary to work with the artist to re-define it for a different social and historical context. This points to the possibility of seeing a work as 'refreshed' and repeatedly

22 Fiske, 'White Walls: Installations, Absence, Iteration and Difference', 229–40.

re-interpreted for a new audience and new time each time it is performed within the life of the work (see Plate 2.1).

Performance also puts the museum under other types of resource pressure, as the display of performance is often expensive, requiring performers, and sometimes producers, to be hired for the duration of a show, such as in the case of Tino Sehgal's works.

Levels of engagement

While there are works such as Roman Ondák's *Good Feelings in Good Times* (2003) that do not require a high level of skill or resource to display and conserve, there are a thread of works where the artist demands a far deeper level of engagement from the museum – testing the degree to which they can co-opt, or even perhaps instrumentalize, the museum in the extended production of their work. These artists are uninterested in the notion of an object finished in the studio and sold to the museum, instead works are less bounded and may be designed to evolve over time. They may involve a number of contributors, be produced by a team or demand that the museum 'activates' situations which involves significant effort, commitment and sometimes risk. For this reason, although in some areas skills may be an issue, the resource to support artists and their works with the depth of individual attention is just as problematic. This echoes a concept which was expressed by the artist Tania Bruguera in a recent lecture where she talked about the difference between long and short term projects.²³ Similarly, museums may need to distinguish between long and short acquisitions and set an explicit limit to the degree of engagement it is possible for the museum to have, negotiating what is necessary for the maintenance of the work.

23 Keynote lecture by Tania Bruguera held at the Van Abbemuseum, Eindhoven on 7 March 2013 organized as part of the research network *Collecting the Performative*.

Conclusion

In this chapter we have shown that it is not the problem of non-materiality that currently represents the greatest challenge for museums in collecting performance, but of maintaining – conceived of as a process of active engagement – the networks which support the work. As this increasing dependency on social and political context, people, resources, and other transitory circumstances outside the museum goes against the museum's tendency of containment and control, this shift may cause a certain uneasiness and raises new questions. What, for example, does it mean for a museum to depend on external memory holders to be able to re-execute a work from its own collection? How does the museum navigate the reality of this expanded notion of (distributed) responsibility?

This chapter has looked at historical barriers to collecting live performances and identified ways in which live works which have been acquired into Tate's collection have found forms in which they can exist over time and, in principle, independent of the artist. In considering three live works in Tate's collection this chapter has also identified ways in which the advent of collecting live performance has presented new challenges. Three challenges emerge as the most significant: the first concerns the ways in which works such as Tino Sehgal's *This is Propaganda* require new skills, networks and mechanism to ensure their legacy. The second concerns how some works depend for their enactment on specific social or historical conditions remaining constant; or beyond this moment for the museum to be open to adapting the work to conserve its points of reference beyond the 'original' form. Finally the resources demanded by some of these works throughout their life in the museum. The chapter suggests that there is a shift in the stress point between the artist and the museum from concerns over the lack of materiality, or the intangible nature of live performance, to a concern around the roles and responsibilities of the artist and the museum. Whilst this point of tension may not be confined to live works alone, these performance-based works push the museum into new territories. This is evidenced, in part, by the view expressed by museum staff

that they should be able to expand their skills and capacities to fulfil the expectations of artists but that doing so is increasingly difficult, given the depth and nature of the engagement demanded. Although in their infancy, indications are emerging which point to new forms of museum practice which are being developed in response to collecting performance-based artworks. By providing a point of reflection and focus the research network *Collecting the Performative* aims to help identify and critique these new forms and practices as they emerge.

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