

A woman with dark hair, wearing a white long-sleeved sweater, is focused on her work at a table. She is holding a thin object, possibly a wire or a tool, and appears to be working on a small, intricate object on the table. The table is covered with various items, including a round, flat object and some small containers. In the background, there is a mannequin and some other objects, suggesting a workshop or a studio setting. The entire image is overlaid with large, bold, blue text that reads "PERFORMING COLLECTIONS".

PERFORMING  
COLLECTIONS

'internationale

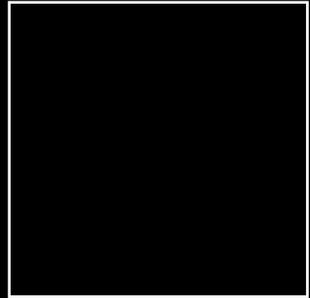




# PERFORMING COLLECTIONS

l'internationale

# PERFORMING COLLECTIONS



## INTRODUCTION ◀

08 *PERFORMING COLLECTIONS*  
Joanna Zielińska

24 WHAT DOES IT MEAN TO HAVE PERFORMANCE  
IN THE COLLECTION?  
A Conversation between Joanna Zielińska  
and Bojana Kunst

50 COLLECTING DANCE  
A Conversation between Lola Hinojosa and La Ribot

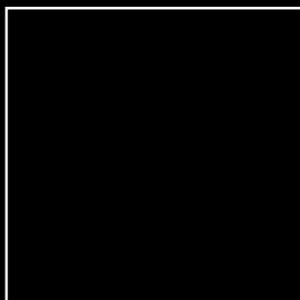
68 ENIGMATIC DEBRIS  
Clémentine Deliss

## CASE STUDIES ◀

102 ARCHIVING LIVE PERFORMANCE ART:  
THE CASE OF OTOBONG NKANGA  
Lotte Bode

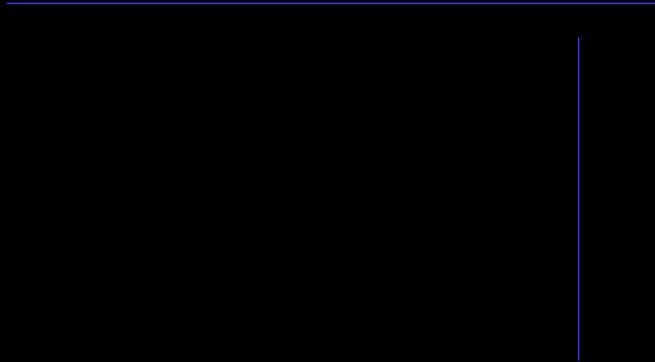
122 SOME THINGS LAST A LONG TIME: THE CASE OF  
THE *GREETINGS FROM JERUSALEM AVENUE*  
BY JOANNA RAJKOWSKA FROM THE  
COLLECTION OF THE MUSEUM OF MODERN ART  
IN WARSAW  
Zofia Czartoryska

- 150 TRANSFER OF RESPONSIBILITY AND KNOWLEDGE  
[Chantal Kleinmeulman](#)
- 178 HOW TO DESCRIBE WHAT A MIRROR LOOKS LIKE?  
ON RIA PACQUÉE'S *MADAME AND IT*  
[Persis Bekkering](#)
- 200 (DIS)APPEARING WITHOUT A TRACE:  
A CASE STUDY OF MARÍA TERESA HINCAPIÉ  
[Claudia Segura](#)
- 222 WHAT A MUSEUM CAN (NOT) DO: PERFORMING  
COLLECTIVE METHODOLOGIES WITH CIRCO  
INTERIOR BRUTO  
[Myriam Rubio](#)
- 250 *VARIATION ON THE UNACCOUNTED: A TRIPTYCH,*  
BY MAPA TEATRO  
[José A. Sánchez](#)
- 276 FRAGMENTS OF A CO-OP FESTIVAL  
[Amira Akbıyıkoglu](#)
- 298 OHO – BETWEEN THE MAGIC OF DIGITISATION  
AND FINANCIAL LITERACY  
[Igor Španjol](#)
- 314 [GLOSSARY OF TERMS](#)
- 324 [ABOUT THE AUTHORS](#)





# INTRODUCTION



# *PERFORMING COLLECTIONS*

Joanna Zielińska

---

In recent decades, the visual arts have witnessed an unprecedented development of performative practices. This has brought about both a heated academic and institutional debate about the notion of performance and the phenomenon of performativity – in relation both to ways of presenting performance in the exhibition space and to the problem of creating museum collections made up of performance works.

The issue of *how to collect performance* is at the heart of this publication. Another important question the authors of the study address and aim to answer is *why museums should collect performance*.

### **What is the content of the book?**

The publication *Performing Collections*, compiled in three parts, brings together the results of the many years of research work of the collection curators and performance scholars associated with the museum confederation L'Internationale.

The first part of the book contains introductory texts on the subject of collecting contemporary performance, written from a broad research perspective, situating the phenomenon in a historical context, in relation to a museum genealogy, and also situating it at the interface of other disciplines such as theatre, the performing arts, contemporary choreography, anthropology and film. This section of the book presents a variety of research perspectives spanning diverse geographical

areas. Although the publication aims at diversity, it does not aspire to global mapping of collecting practices, constituting rather a presentation of specific interests and research practices within the area of confederation.

The second part of the publication includes case studies resulting from the long-term museological research conducted on contemporary collections within the confederation L'Internationale. The selection of case studies was based on interviews with artists and the heated discussions and encounters that took place, among others, during a symposium organised in 2019 in Istanbul in relation to collecting performance by our partner institution SALT.

The research criteria for the case studies are the diversity and complexity of the individual practices, which in extreme cases make it impossible to include them in collections on a traditional basis. The aim of the research was not only to analyse specific performances but also to look at how it is possible to incorporate selected works into museum resources respecting their contextuality, complexity and need for activation, which frequently refer to the notion of a specific body as a repository of memory. Some artists have left clear instructions for handling the work, and, in some cases, expert knowledge is needed to create an appropriate protocol. The information gathered in relation to these specifics provided some important clues as to how our working method could evolve.

The third part of the publication – Glossary of Terms – is an attempt to provide a handy reference list of interesting phenomena and terms describing the methodology of working on archives and collections of performative works cited in specific case studies. Here, the authors look at general cultural phenomena and philosophical concepts such as Modernisation or Ideology, or selected terms describing individual artistic practices such as the Breathing Archive, Anatolian Kitsch or Prototype. The definitions collected in the Glossary of Terms make up a handy go-to source to help map publications in terms of language.

Indeed, one of the major conclusions of this publication is that there is an evident need for a new language and adequate way of describing performative practices that continually elude traditional strategies of collecting and preserving artworks.

### **When did it all start?**

One important reference point for *Performing Collections* is the temporal caesura of the 1990s. The decade of the 1990s and the beginning of the twentieth century in the visual arts are variously described by scholars of the subject as: the performative turn (after Bishop 2019), the relational turn (after Bourriaud 2002) or the experiential turn (after Hantelmann 2014). Whatever the terminology, this was a formative watershed for performative practices, which influenced their contemporary development in the visual arts. The philosopher Boris Groys explicitly refers to this phenomenon as the theatricalisation of the exhibition space:

Nowadays, one speaks time and again about the theatricalization of the museum. Indeed, in our time people come to exhibition openings in the same way as they went to opera and theatre premieres in the past. This theatricalization of the museum is often criticised because it might be seen as a sign of the museum's involvement in the contemporary entertainment industry. However, there is a crucial difference between the installation space and the theatrical space. In the theatre, spectators remain in an outside position vis-à-vis the stage, but in the museum, they enter the stage and find themselves inside the spectacle. Thus, the contemporary museum realises the modernist dream that the theatre itself was never able to fully realise – of a theatre in which there is no clear boundary between the stage and the space of the audience. (Groys 2013)

A significant event at the turn of the 1990s was the arrival of contemporary choreography and conceptual dance in the space of institutional art. Let us remember that the development of new artistic practices was a natural consequence of the transformations taking place in the decades preceding the 1990s, where the notions of artwork, exhibition space and the audience had been systematically redefined. These processes ultimately led to the hybridisation of forms, the phenomenon of the post-medium condition in the visual arts (Krauss 1999) and the proliferation of practices opening up art institutions to the phenomenon of performativity. Performance researcher, philosopher and playwright Bojana Kunst, in her talk “What Does It Mean To Have Performance In The Collection?”, draws attention to the highly significant phenomenon of internationalism, which, after the fall of the Berlin Wall, redefined the ways in which performance practices were produced and exchanged in the context of the broadly conceived East and West. Kunst writes:

Suddenly there is a ‘discovery’ of different ‘contemporary histories’ in Europe. The rise of co-production platforms, networks, co-production festivals and the internationalisation of performance production in general are related to this widening of common European cultural space, and to the flows of capital through which the models of European cultural production have also changed considerably.

## **Performance and Performativity**

Performativity itself extends the notion of performance. It is a feature that stimulates a response and can be attributed to an object or phenomenon regardless of whether it is actually a performance. As Dorothea von Hantelmann writes in her essay on the experiential turn:

To speak about the performative in relation to art is not about defining a new class of artworks. Rather, it involves outlining a specific level of the production of meaning that basically exists in every artwork, although it is not always consciously shaped or dealt with, namely, its reality-producing dimension. In this sense, a specific methodological orientation goes along with the performative, creating a different perspective on what produces meaning in an artwork. What the notion of the performative puts in perspective is the contingent and elusive realm of impact and effect that art brings about both situationally – that is, in a given spatial and discursive context – and relationally, that is, as regards the viewer or the public. It recognizes the productive, reality-producing dimension of artworks and brings them into the discourse. Consequently, we can ask: What kind of situation does an artwork produce? How does it situate its viewers? What kind of values, conventions, ideologies, and meanings are inscribed into this situation? (Hantelmann 2014)

From this perspective, then, what seems important is not so much the artwork itself, but the context in which it was created and the reactions it evoked when activated. In Amelia Jones' take, the concept of performativity also contributes to the openness of the interpretation of an artwork understood as a process. Performativity enables the reinterpretation and revision of discourses, artistic practices and artworks. A critical strategy developed through multiple readings of a single work introduces into contemporary art discourse the phenomena of ambivalence, confusion and subversion and a non-normative interpretation of artworks, collections and archives (Jones 1999). Performativity can also be understood directly as a curatorial method and as a concept capable of introducing specific research threads into museum curatorial work.

The use of the term ‘performance’ in the book is itself ambiguous and multidimensional, consistently reflecting the fluid nature of the phenomenon. It reflects an attempt to understand performance from a transdisciplinary perspective – at the intersection of the performing arts, theatre, literature, film and anthropology. The authors of the individual texts, often coming from different disciplines in the humanities, refer to various genealogies of performance, as well as to various historical approaches to the topic. Bojana Kunst speaks of performance as a process, and the ‘work of many’, something that ‘belongs to the many’.

When I talk about performance, I refer to the whole series of practices, collective and collaborative methods, economies and dispositives of rehearsals, production modes, contextualisations and disseminations of performance, to the whole biospheres of working, which constitute the event of the performance. In this way, performance lingers in-between all this – embodied work, rehearsals, economies of collaboration and working methods, dramaturgical framing and economies of dissemination. At the same time, performance is entangled with reception; it belongs to the scene, and performance is also a situation.

## Contextuality

The publication *Performing Collections* is intended to broaden the research field on the phenomenon of collecting performance while developing the language of discourse with which we can describe new phenomena in art that do not fit the traditional definition of a museum. Boris Groys writes critically about the traditional museum as a kind of time capsule:

Traditionally, the main occupation of art was to resist the flow of time. Public art museums and big private art collections were

created to select certain objects – the artworks, take them out of private and public use, and therefore immunise them against the destructive force of time. Thus, our art museums became huge garbage cans of history in which things were kept and exhibited that had no use anymore in real life: sacral images of past religions or status objects of past lifestyles. (Groys 2013)

The work on the book has revealed the dispersion and lack of systematic museum research about the phenomenon of collecting performance. Many performance works that are part of the collections of institutions affiliated with L'Internationale have an extremely complex history, often waiting to be newly qualified, described and supplemented by additional documentation and interviews with artists and witnesses. In a restrictive and non-inclusive collecting policy, there is often a lack of openness and the goodwill to include performative works in collections, as their ephemeral nature often escapes the logic of a museum.

The most heated debate around performance collecting began when Western art institutions that have collections became aware of the deficiencies that exist in historical collections. The consistent exclusion of performance works from collections or their inclusion in an incomplete form led to the phenomenon of incompleteness. Museum collections also have to deal with institutional constraints in the context of collecting art that requires a different kind of work, care and attention. Moreover, performative works are not easily 'isolated' from their environment and context; they are often socially and politically linked to specific communities and places. The question of the contextuality and site-specific nature of performance is fundamental to understanding performative work. The issue of performance linked to a specific body or group of bodies, to a specific time, place or situation appears in virtually all the texts cited in this publication. The choreographer and visual artist La Ribot in a conversation titled "Collecting Dance"

describes her experience of working in white cube and black box spaces, drawing attention to the complex concept of the ‘roaming context’ and the body as archive. La Ribot refers to the idea of the ‘original body’ being equivalent to the primary form. One answer to the question of why institutions should collect performance is therefore a question of enriching the collection with context, which enhances the sense of community that plays a key role in understanding the role of the contemporary museum.

### **Breathing and Oxygenation or the Metabolism of the Contemporary Collection**

In describing her artistic practice and vision of the institution of the future, visual artist Otobong Nkanga repeatedly talks about the idea of oxygenating collections and the breathing archive. Clémentine Deliss proposes a vision of a metabolic museum finding its continuation in the latest Metabolic Museum-University project. The researcher draws attention to the energetic potential of the museum as an institution in process, producing new taxonomies, engaged in processes of decolonisation, constantly in dialogue with artists and professionals from different disciplines.

Bojana Kunst also links performative practices to decolonising strategies.

Many discussions today concern the role of the museums in the history of imperial plunder. Ariella Azoulay writes how museums are part of the construction of imperial citizenship, where preservation of the past is part of the vast enterprise of destruction conducted at the expense of the destroyed world. In the process of preservation, the past consists of discrete documents and objects, and this methodology of separation and extraction is one of the imperial operations of power executed over

the objects belonging to the living world. That the museum is now open to being a space of live performances can also be approached from this perspective – with how art institutions in the West themselves confront their own past, with their own entanglement in violent history. Every collection is embroiled in a multiplicity of living worlds. From this perspective, the arrival of the performance (and the body) in the museum can challenge the institution's isolation from the living world and dedicate itself rather to the entanglements of living kinship and genealogies, to embodied experiences and poetics of communities, to invisible and contradictory histories. Otherwise, it is only another continuation of imperial methods.

Collecting is more than just a way of transmitting knowledge; it is also a strategy for recording history. The common perception is that practices excluded from museum collections and archives are doomed to be erased. The collecting of performance brings new qualities to museum practices in the same way that it transforms institutions' artistic programmes by placing emphasis on the relationship with the audience and educational processes; in doing so, it develops imagination, drawing on experience (situated knowledge) and encouraging empathy as well as enhancing democratisation.

Contemporary museums are at an inflection point of transformation. From a static model focused on the preservation and conservation of individual objects, often carefully isolated from their context, they are having to transform themselves into performing institutions, nurturing an extended relationship with their audiences and surroundings. Technological developments combined with the digitisation of collections have brought further changes in the museum paradigm. The way in which the collective body – the audience, the artists and the performers – functions in the space of the technologised museum has changed. The new type of institution requires a different engagement

from all these participants and compels a different economy of work and production.

Naturally, in a changing institution, the approach to collecting must also change, which involves a different understanding of the concept of ownership, the role of documentation, digitisation processes and conservation processes in general.

In the context of this new type of institution, Bojana Kunst asks:

What labour is needed to have a performance collection? Should we – besides the restorers – also employ performers? How do we transport a performance collection? Should we develop kinships between different biospheres and scenes where the works are shared? How to keep performance alive as a relational field, not as a nostalgic repetition? All these questions we can also ask about objects, and that is why a performance collection is so interesting. And how to keep these collections in such a way that they would belong to all, and would continuously change in order not to succumb to exclusionary authorship? Especially if we keep in mind that the performance is a process and work of many; it belongs to the many.

### **Where Is the Work, or a New Working Methodology?**

In times of transformation, a fundamental question remains to be solved: how to archive the processes and oxygenate the works, bearing in mind that there is never a single objective history.

What form should a new methodology for working on a collection of performative works take? The case studies described in the publication *Performing Collections* propose different approaches to the subject, suggesting several systemic solutions.

It is certainly not possible to create a single standardised protocol of conduct; nevertheless, collaboration with artists and witnesses

of events is crucial to the development of the final shape of the work, which in some cases requires activation and work with the audience.

From a museological point of view, the case of re-performing historical material is fascinating. In some cases, however, where the historical process and context determined the form of the work, a simple digitised form feels like the best fit for archival material. Examples of this are the phenomena described in the essays “Fragments of a Co-Op Festival” by Amira Akbıyıkoglu and “OHO – Between the Magic of Digitisation and Financial Literacy” by Igor Španjol. In this context, it becomes crucial to include in the archive the oral accounts of witnesses and to develop the broadest possible context for the phenomenon. What these cases have in common is the notion of collective work, often with the whole community involved in the creative process. In the context of the 1990s, one concept frequently mentioned is the notion of the laboratory, developed by the artist María Teresa Hincapié, whose complex case is described in Claudia Segura’s essay: “(Dis)Appearing Without a Trace: A Case Study of María Teresa Hincapié”. The question arises whether it is possible to create a laboratory within an archival space. Hincapié did not think that her works could be re-performed by other bodies, but inspired by the practice of Jerzy Grotowski, she dreamt of a laboratory and a place for the exchange of knowledge. Myriam Rubio, in her essay “What a Museum Can (Not) Do: Welcome to the Circo Interior Bruto”, also invokes the concept of the collective work and the laboratory, which at times becomes an attempt to describe a performative work that is by its nature a non-material, ephemeral process. José A. Sánchez, in “Variation on the Unaccounted: A Triptych, by Mapa Teatro”, attempts to create a museum protocol which could be employed to reproduce the works of the Bogotá-based theatre group Mapa Teatro. Here, the author raises the important theme of re-performing the work in different forms outside the historical and social context related to themes of violence and trauma. The essays “Some Things Last a Long Time ...” by Zofia Czartoryska and

“Transfer of Responsibility and Knowledge” by Chantal Kleinmeulman bring in the concept of the prop, the actor-object, the non-human performer. In turn, Joanna Rajkowska’s sculpture of a palm tree in the public space of Warsaw can be considered an active object that is the subject of many spontaneous actions in the urban space. Here, the public – or rather the users of the urban space – play a crucial role in the creation of the performance and the archive itself. The way that the object is used can, however, sometimes go against the recommendations of the conservator, as is the case with the installation *1. Werksatz* (1963–69) by Franz Erhard Walther, described by Kleinmeulman. The artist even produced a ‘storage form’ of the artwork, although in its original form, it was activated by the public. In this case, with the involvement of a number of skilled professionals, it was possible to create a prop that allows the work to be activated without risking damage. The author of the text emphasises the important role of museum educators in the process. The transfer of knowledge from body to body seems to be one of the essential practices in the process of collecting performance and becomes a prerequisite for keeping a performance work alive. For these purposes, Otobong Nkanga has developed the concept of the breathing archive. The artist considers orality and body memory necessary conditions for the existence of an artwork. Through ‘oxygenation’, the exchange of bodies, histories and knowledge, the artwork can come into being in the museum collection.

This kind of fluidity makes it possible to maintain a link between past and present. Oral transmission, which is an essential part of the whole process, is also a form of ‘preservation’ of the work. One cannot overestimate here the role of fiction, the transmission of a witness to an event. Persis Bekkering, in her ficto-critical essay “How to Describe What a Mirror Looks Like? On Ria Pacquee’s *Madame and It*”, describes the case of the performer Ria Pacquee building a singular relationship between witness accounts (often documenting her performances), fiction and documentation. Another important issue addressed in many

of the texts published in the book is the question of disappearance, documentation and visual translation, i.e. the transcription of the performative act into a photographic, film or installation record. The collected case studies form an unusually complex picture that helps in understanding the nature of collections consisting of performances. Nevertheless, it is not possible to create serious performance art collections without institutional changes.

## Conclusions

The traditional, static model of the Western museum reproduces colonial strategies of isolating and preserving objects. Performances are alive. They combine the local and the geographically distant. They have intimacy and emotion, and are sensitive to temperature and time of day, but in a very different way to traditional art objects. How can a museum go about collecting such sensitive, ephemeral works?

Who will be responsible for the hierarchy of such a living, time-changing collection and how can it stand the test of time? A new type of 'breathing' institution needs to develop an entirely new methodology based on the concept of embodied knowledge – involving an understanding of the power of the performative work. It is imperative to engage with places and people, caring practices and indigenous knowledge based on oral transmissions. In this context, an educational and mediating role is also essential, while maintaining the continuity of research. The fluidity and evolution of the performative work must be contrasted with the staid solemnity of the traditional collection. The book *Performing Collections* not only provides guidance on how to handle living works, it also hints at what form the art institution should take in the future.

## REFERENCE LIST

- Bishop, C. 2019, “The Black Box, White Cube, Gray Zone: Dance Exhibitions and Audience Attention”, in *Performance Works*, Mousse Publishing, U-jazdowski, Warsaw, pp. 36–67.
- Bourriaud, N. 2002, *Relational Aesthetics*, Documents sur l’art, Les Presses du réel 2002, viewed 2 August 2022, <https://kvelv.files.wordpress.com/2013/10/bourriaud-nicolas-relational-aesthetics-kap-space-time-exchange-factors.pdf>.
- Groys, B. 2013, “Entering the Flow: Museum between Archive and Gesamtkunstwerk”, *e-flux*, December, viewed 2 August 2022, <https://www.e-flux.com/journal/50/59974/entering-the-flow-museum-between-archive-and-gesamtkunstwerk/>.
- Hantelmann von, D. 2014, “The Experiential Turn”, Walker Art Center, Minneapolis, web log post, viewed 2 August 2022, <https://walkerart.org/collections/publications/performativity/experiential-turn/>.
- Jones, A. and Stephenson, A. 1999, “Stuff: a Performance”, in *Performing the Body/Performing the Text*, Taylor & Francis, New York.
- Krauss, R. 1999, *Voyage on the North Sea: Art in the Age of the Post/medium Condition*, Thames & Hudson, New York.



WHAT DOES  
IT MEAN TO  
HAVE PERFOR –  
MANCE  
IN THE  
COLLECTION?

A Conversation between  
Joanna Zielińska and Bojana Kunst

---

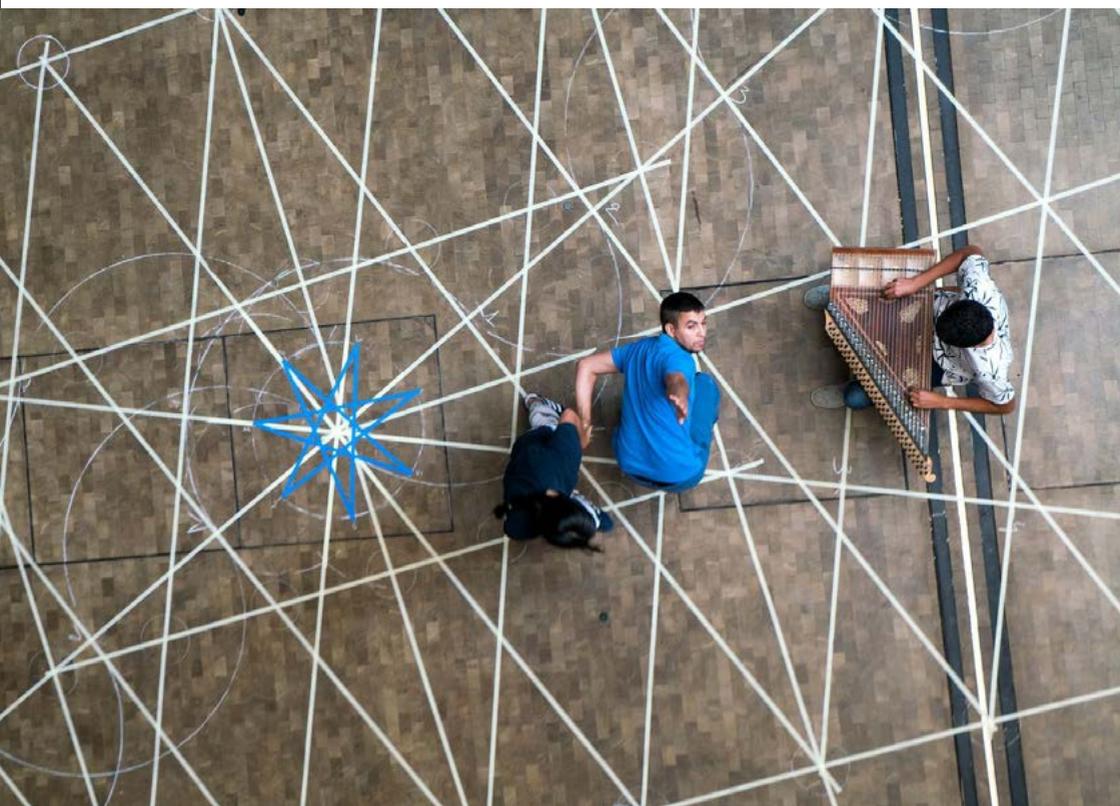
**Joanna Zielińska: How did performance change in the 1990s and what influenced the emergence of new performative forms, and the transformation of performance into more nomadic forms?**

**Bojana Kunst:** There is no coincidence that we are starting this talk about the transformation of performance into a more nomadic form at the beginning of the 1990s. I would like to connect this to the specific historical conditions around the fall of the Berlin Wall, more precisely with the end of communism, which strongly influenced the development of European cultural politics in the 1990s. At the same time, this opening to the ‘East’ is expanding the processes that started already in the late 1980s when southern Europe joined the European Union, like Portugal and Spain (1986), which together with the Flemish wave influenced the development of the performance scene in Europe – suddenly there is a ‘discovery’ of different ‘contemporary histories’ in Europe. The rise of co-production platforms, networks, co-production festivals and the internationalisation of performance production in general are related to this widening of common European cultural space, and to the flows of capital through which the models of European cultural production also changed considerably. I remember an anecdote from André Lepecki, who was at that time a dramaturge of Vera

Mantero, a choreographer from Portugal. Somewhere at the beginning of the 1990s, a consortium of three European producers approached Mantero about making a group piece and asked her to work with a dramaturge from the north. ‘Why do I need a dramaturge and why should she or he be from the north of Europe?’ Mantero asked them (deLahunta 2000). This anecdote tells us not only about the heightened need for mediation which influenced the establishment of the dramaturge and later also curator in performance, but also about a complex political and economic dimension of privilege of knowledge which goes together with the development of new forms of production and internationalisation, as well as with the new flows of capital in the European Union. The dramaturge from the north (we can also say from the west) stood there as a kind of ‘guarantee’ for a successful production, for a fruitful entrance into the market from the outskirts of Europe, and maybe also to be a guarantee that the work will not be a delayed repetition of work already seen in the ‘progressive west’, that it will receive proper contextualisation and that there will be a cultural value added to the common social market – a guarantee for the work becoming public in an international sense. However, this anecdote also expresses some real difficulties and complexities of the mediation at that time, where the joy of discovery of the European East was fast replaced with the disappointment of *déjà-vu*, or the lack of the contemporaneity of the works. Nomadic internationalisation of performance has had ambivalent consequences: on one side, it has opened the potential for the new forms of production, more possibility for intercultural exchange, influencing the democratisation and opening of performance practices, and in this sense contributed to the experimental character of many works. But, on the other side, there was a problem of recognising different histories and values, and very little understanding of the speci-

ficity of questions and localities where and how the performances were made. This was by example also part of discussions in the IETM (International Network for Contemporary Performing Arts), which was an important co-production network at that time, but laden with cultural prejudices about others, with misunderstandings and yearnings for the discovery of the new. I'm speaking especially about the first half of the 1990s, which were also strongly marked with the war in the former Yugoslavia.

In the 1990s, more elaborate and numerous co-production networks among European theatres started to form, but interestingly, only a few authors stayed with this common market when initial interest in the East faded, and it seems that the cultural field is still marked by the misunderstandings of what is going on in between Western and Eastern Europe. The developments in European cultural politics were supporting the creation of many different networks, which were not seen only as possibilities for production but also as discursive and even political platforms sometimes. But this internationalisation also brought a specific professionalisation to the production modes. All the organisations developed the same modes of production and distribution of the performance they had to further professionalise themselves, and only in this way could they be eligible for EU monetary support and be part of the flow of cultural exchange; they had to succumb to the same model of management. Mladen Stilinović addressed this in his distinctive way in his well-known text from 1992 'In Praise of Laziness', where he claims that art in the West cannot exist because artists from the West are not lazy. The artists on the East, he writes, could be lazy because the whole system of insignificant factors did not exist, they had time to do their art, and on the other side the artists from the West are rather producers of something. This provocative text discloses all the symptoms of the situation, with which



Radouan Mriziga, 7, 2018.  
Courtesy of Marc Damage  
and Something Great

we are also confronted today: precarity of production, continuous acceleration and nomadism, the culture of creating projects. At the same time, it is provocatively re-affirming a rich history of collaboration and making of art in the East, which was not the focus in the 1990s, because the desires and promises of new economies were much stronger.

**JZ: How did the idea of internationalisation and the idea of work-in-progress actually change performative strategies? Do you think it influenced the nature of performances and somehow challenged the idea of staged performance and different production modes? Maybe some performances have become less connected to the body of the artist?**

**BK:** I think it had a strong influence, which, however, was only detected in reverse, but also sometimes reflected inside the performances (for example, the performance of Saša Asentić: *My Private Bio-politics* from 2011). I'm speaking here especially about the independent production of performances, which is made as part of the non-governmental sector and is economically dependent on public subsidies and international co-production budgets (cultural networks, foundations, etc.). What is interesting for me is how this embrace of democratisation in performance, experimentation and plurality of working processes, paradoxically goes hand in hand with specific economic forms of production, which in opposition to the openness of artistic form are more and more becoming similar. The common feeling of *everything is possible* (in relation of experimentation and working process), which was the feeling at the start of the 1990s, was at the end of the decade already transformed into the preparation of project applications, organised through economic parameters, but still somehow paradoxically hiding the promise of the future, attracting young players on the field to

compete for a public money. At the same time, internationalisation demanded a specific mode of production, where the economy (the budget) is conditioning its internationalisation, how the work is done and circulated. I remember a joke among colleagues about solo works in dance, that solos are a perfect form of dance because they are cheap to tour and can be shared on the international market. But it is true, the most nomadic are the smaller works, which are easier to tour and present; they are suited to the festival form, but this on the other side again contributes to the neoliberal understanding of freedom, which is mostly individualised and atomised, circulating around examples and repetitions of the self. So, in a way, new flows of money and economy of production, which came as part of international production, were not only offering possibilities for internationalisation and exchange, but also limiting the very possibilities of performance. BADco., for example, is a performance collective from Zagreb, who was very aware of the paradoxes of such a performance economy, insisting on the collective structure of performance, which was always developed with the dense and engaged relation to the locality of the space.<sup>1</sup> Another system is a network of residencies, through which the artists and sometimes groups (but not so often) could work in different environments, even co-produce the performance through the network of residencies. This has many positive sides: the artists can be in constant exchange, work internationally; but on the other side, it gives priority to the nomadic life and travel, which can fast become an economic form of survival, especially with rising precarity among artists and the difficulties in continuing their practice, not to mention how at the same time the whole field became very unsustainable in the ecological sense. In a way, internationalisation even strengthens the border between smaller non-governmental organisations and institutionally strong the-

atres (like national institutions, big theatre companies), which are still working inside the framework of state representation or gestures of state or private capital supporting international exchange. I'm not sure if the performances are less connected to the body of the artists; I would say quite the opposite happened. Nowadays dance performances are the most numerous inside the flow of nomadic internationalisation. At the same time, often, the body of the performance worker becomes the body of a nomadic and precarious labourer behind the practice, an invisible working and labouring force of production, dissemination, application and showing, a body which has to master many appearances and due to the demands of its economy, a lonely body, rarely as a collective body. Not to mention that this kind of production is unsustainable and privileges mostly able bodies.

**JZ: The idea of nomadic performance is not so much connected to the exhibition space and institutional programming, but to the format of festivals, and is also embedded in the tradition of performance art from the 1960s and 1970s, if we are talking about solo performances which rely strongly on the body of a performance artist. So, I wanted to ask you how this transformed into something which was more connected to the exhibition space and durational performances happening inside of the institutions?**

**BK:** The first approach to this question would maybe to go back to dance performances and the way in which they entered institutions, which was very widely discussed in the last decade. Besides many theoretical questions, which are also circulating around performativity of the exhibition space, the status of the museum as a place of live encounter, the intermediality which challenges the established forms of presentation and the duration and temporality of the museum, there was also something



Aydın Teker, *aKabî*, 2008. Courtesy of Levent Öget and Something Great



else at work, which is related to the production and economy of those performances. Let's say some of these works overcome the solo condition exactly with their entrance to the museum – with this they became the work of many, almost a serial interconnected work which is only possible through the relations between different histories and practices. I'm thinking here about Boris Charmatz work of *20 Dancers for the 20th Century* and his whole speculative proposal about the dance museum, Xavier Le Roy's *Retrospective*, but also about the work of Mateja Bučar, Keith Hennessy, or Okwumi Okwapisili; all these works entered the museum as a space of discovering series of genealogies and interconnections. These genealogies and interconnections are conditions of the live event, reconnecting the specific histories and expressions (like in the case of dance performances), and destabilising the very meanings of histories and continuations around which specific institutions were organised and established (like decolonial works, parallel narrations). This is a different situation than from the 1960s and 1970s, when the question of the artist's body in performance art was destabilising the relationship between object and subject, but not unsettling the social, economic and political relations outside the institution itself. This can be well seen in the gradual disempowerment of institutional critique and museums' capitalisation of it. It is of course difficult to say how this will develop and for sure it is a danger that the performance in the museum will only strengthen the capitalisation of its liveness, but I have some hope here. It is impossible to overlook the reality of bodies today, immense inequalities and dispossession of bodies, the way in which bodies stand for other bodies, how they are entangled with others in their vulnerability.

But there is also another answer to your question and has something to do with the 1990s and with the fact that we

started this talk with the discussion about the East and West. Speaking from the perspective of the former East, the shift happens throughout the 1990s, which brought institutions from visual art and performance practices in proximity, since they were both resisting and fighting the danger of the erasure of the 'Eastern' histories of contemporary art forms and movements, fighting against their de-politicisation, de-contextualisation and division from the social and economic context and material conditions. In a way, the historicisation of your own practice, the interconnectedness of your own practice with the practice of others, became an important artistic and theoretical practice in visual art institutions, but also in performances, and this happened approximately at the same time. This was for example the focus of many performance magazines in ex-Yugoslavian space (*Maska*, *Frakcija*, *Teorija koja hoda*), but also visual art institutions, like key exhibitions of Zdenka Badovinac in Moderna galerija in Ljubljana ("Body and the East," "Seven Sins," "Interrupted Histories"). The institutions in the visual art field and performances (done mostly in the non-governmental sector) in that way developed around the same political urgency and interest, which was the resistance towards oblivion and erasure, and politicisation of memory; they were actually doing the work of decolonisation. They were exhibiting, producing works and establishing discursive platforms to challenge the ideologically problematic transition to capitalism, wild privatisation and erasure of the varieties of emancipatory past in these environments. At the same time, they detected how the acceleration and generalisation of the mode of production erased established collaborative forms, modes of work and labouring practices of collectivity, collaboration and communal work. I think that what brought them together was an articulation of a political interest, which resisted a simple understanding

of their contemporaneity and demanded re-politicisation of their past. This opens the space for the more radical experimentation with the aesthetic forms but also with the institutional contexts of showing, staging and exhibiting.

I can finish this answer with a concrete example. Rok Vevar, Slovenian performance theoretician and dance historian, collected for more than a decade the documents from the history of Slovenian contemporary dance and created an immense archive in his living room, collecting for many years an archive of practices, which would otherwise disappear. His archive found its home in +MSUM (Museum of Contemporary Art Metelkova) in 2018 (and not in SLOGI, Slovenian Theatre Institute – Museum, which would be at the first sight more suitable in this case).<sup>2</sup> This is not coincidence, but an expression of the common political interest for the emancipatory and living politics of memory, working inside networks of genealogies and alliances. One such alliance is by example the next project of this collection, the establishment of the Balkan digital dance base under the umbrella of Nomad Dance Academy. But a room with the dance collection in the museum is also a kind of durational performance; it is to be seen in the future how it will be used as space for experimentation, contributing to the possibility of a different approach to the collection in general.

**JZ: I looked into the collections of different museums, through our L'Internationale network, and I find out that these collections don't really represent the history of performance, especially if we are thinking about more experimental ways of collecting performance – not only by means of photography and video documentation. You can barely find any examples in the major collections in Europe of what I would call relevant examples of what we're talking about right now: the 1990s transformation, and how performance became institutionalised**



Rok Vevar, the Temporary Slovene Dance Archive, 2012. Courtesy of Moderna galerija, Ljubljana, Dejan Habicht



Rok Vevar, the Temporary Slovene Dance Archive, 2012. Courtesy of Moderna galerija, Ljubljana, Dejan Habicht



**in the 2000s. So, I would be curious to know your take on the idea of collecting performance. How to collect ephemeral art and, moreover, how to include it in the museum collection?**

**BZ:** Maybe we have to first start with the question of what do we mean when we talk about performance, and then go to the practice of collecting. When I speak about it, I don't necessarily link it to the genealogy of performance art, where questions of documentation were part of it from its start, and in an interesting way unsettled the relationships between the very act and its repetition; this would be one line of discussion, which is already elaborated in visual arts. When I talk about performance, I refer to the whole series of practices, collective and collaborative methods, economies and dispositive of rehearsals, production modes, contextualisations and disseminations of performance, to the whole biospheres of working, which constitute the event of the performance. In this way, performance is lingering in-between all this – embodied work, rehearsals, economies of collaboration and working methods, dramaturgical framing and economies of dissemination. At the same time, performance is entangled with reception, it belongs to the scene, and performance is also a situation. Why is this distinction important? I don't want to say that there are not a lot of similarities and crossings between visual art genealogy of performance art and performance. But this observation helps us to link performance to the specific labouring practices and experiences, to the set of economies and dispositives, which can have a different articulation and different materiality from the live event in visual art. Intermediality is not so much an aesthetic question, but the transition and mutual influence of working processes and practices of collaboration, which is also changing the way in which the institutional environment is organised.

So, the ephemerality of performance is paradoxical; performance is ephemeral because it is embodied and material, because it is made as series of alliances and relationalities with the human and more than human agents, and collecting has to somehow be prepared to dive into these entanglements, not to be satisfied with the enlistment and preservation of that what stays after the event. What stays afterwards is namely often framed with the institutional power of visibility. Performance is a particular situation (together with the audience), entangled with the specific environment, which spills over such visibility. Much more interesting is what stays in opacity, half or non-visible, as a rumour or noise, silent, obscure, sticky. Here, different methods coming from the performance process can be very helpful: from imagination, speculation, collective re-articulation, collective narration, practices of embodiment, bodily archives, collective repetition, etc.

When the dance performance entered the museum and became part of the exhibition, this was not just any dance. It was a dance performance which was unsettling its own procedures of making and its own media specificity, changing its ways of collaborating, producing and working. At the same time, when a museum is becoming a space of performance, this unsettles its own economic, labouring and working procedures, unsettling the very procedures of how it is producing value and how it belongs to the environment. Only from this perspective, does the question about the collection of performance become interesting, not only because it questions the very notion of the collection, but also because it changes the procedures and modes of working, shifting its practices of making a collection.

**JZ: We should also mention that digitisation has become an important phenomenon in the 1990s.**



**BK:** Yes, but I think there is still much work to do with it. The visual art field has many difficulties in exhibiting and archiving digital art that developed in the last decades, from addressing the fast obsolescence of technology to the misunderstanding of structural, processual and labouring methods in this field – how to grasp collective processes and their alternative politics of use and how to exhibit them. It is interesting that we have the same problem with ephemerality in digital art, where it arises from the technological obsolescence, and in performance and theatre, where it belongs to the immediate disappearance of the condensed time of event. In both cases, there is a danger that this will be transformed into the melancholic impulse for repetition and invariability. At the same time, the repetition of the theatre and dance repertoire is also a kind of melancholic collection, which serves often as a normative confirmation of what should constitute dance and performance in a particular cultural environment. This is a collection structured around hierarchy, which originates from the established institutional procedures of separation and exclusion. But all institutions in their core are imaginary, in the sense that they are all invented, they are not given for once and for all. Institutions are invented as social arrangements also to retell specific histories. In this way the collection, if taken seriously, is shaking, unsettling exactly this imaginary core – what does it mean to be an institution, a museum, an archive, what does it mean to retell and repeat. If the digitalisation of collections is participating in melancholic repetition, then it does not really change the ways collecting can be done, it does not open up different, multiple and diverse alliances with the past.

In theatre there are already many institutions of collecting, mostly theatre museums. The theatre museum in Ljubljana is collecting documents and programmes of all the

performances happening in state and city theatres, preparing yearbooks, organising exhibitions (about actors, directors, etc.) and organising symposiums, etc. However, at the same time, the private dance collection I spoke about found its place in the museum for contemporary art, and many of the performances made outside state institutions are not part of these collections. Some of the most important re-enactments and attempts to rethink the historical past in Slovenia were done outside of this theatre museum (like a series of re-enactments done by *Maska* from 2010). On the other side, when the Flemish wave of performance started in the 1980s, the Flemish theatre institute became an important part of it, participating with alternative practices of collecting, building discursive formats and expressions.<sup>3</sup> The same goes for the theatre magazines dedicated to contemporary production, which exist in the post-Yugoslavian territory, continuously experimenting and trying out methods of historicisation, archiving and collecting. So, there is a whole field of practice and knowledge already existing which has to be taken into consideration when we would like to develop the collections of performances in the museums.

At the same time, the interest in collecting performance comes not only because of interest in the disappearing past, but because of the need for the continuation of the present.

### **JZ: What do you mean by that?**

BK: It is not only ephemerality which causes the difficulty to collect the performances, but also their economy, how performances are made and produced. With the internationalisation of the performance market and acceleration of the economy of production, performances are even more rapidly replaced with

the new ones; there is always a demand from the market for the new works to be shown. Rare is the situation that performance can last for a year and rare are the artists who have the privilege (and economy) to repeat their works. Therefore, performance collection can also be approached from this perspective, as a way to develop alliances with the close and actually not so distant time, with the time in which we are still living and remembering as fellow passengers, as contemporary. Here, again, we have this collection of more than one, being many, and through collections maybe it is then possible to disclose how the practices and modes of working are related with the fellow passengers from the past. Here, it is especially important to recognise how different economies and unequal geopolitical visibilities influence the disappearance of performance, and how there is an obligation to always leave the collection radically open for the practices of kinship between invisible articulations; only in this way can a collection be diverse and non-hierarchically organised.

I was recently speaking with Julia Asperska, who works as a collection manager in the Something Great organisation.<sup>4</sup> They are now involved together with several universities into a larger research project on performance collecting. For me, it is interesting that Asperska poses this question as a producer, based on her experience in the international field, where works are disappearing with speed and there is always demand for a new production. They are now trying to form a performance collection of older works, especially those who have had a special significance for the context where they were done, and searching for ways this collection can be made visible. They are building the collection of past performances and offer it to museums, theatres and festivals as a chance to show the work or part of the work, offering the possibility to the artists to restage, to keep the props. They are developing a network of practices of

how it is possible to continue with the present, and not with the past, since these experiences are mostly not older than a decade. In this way, they are somehow decelerating the time of their loss, which I find a very interesting proposal, and somehow in agreement with the ecological thinking about extinction and the way to build more sustainable production. At the same time, we know that the loss of performance is not only ontological, but it is also happening due to political and economic reasons: some works are lost faster than the others, some scenes disappear faster and more violently than others, because of the political circumstances, the unequal distribution of sources, privatisation, etc. A performance collection should focus exactly on such dimensions of performance disappearance.

**JZ: It's interesting to speak about this, because we have to think about what it means for museums to collect. Museum collecting strategies are still based on the idea of preservation.**

**BK: I agree.**

**JZ: We have to consider whether this idea of preservation makes sense nowadays, when we have digital art and everything that is happening beyond the physicality of objects. There is a question as to whether it is still possible to follow up this strategy of preservation. In my opinion, it has become obsolete. Can we think of alternative and more sustainable ways of collecting performance? The cause is the character of this ephemeral art: we cannot look at performance the way that we might look at objects and other collectible material items. It is also interesting from the perspective of a collection to consider how museums can challenge these strategies, right now. Basically, to invent many kinds of collections or maybe a different format of institution.**

**BK:** To reinvent a collection it is necessary to unsettle the very institution itself, to unsettle the organisation of its values. In this sense, performance collection should not be just an addition, but a reinvention of the very structure of the institution and its value production. Many discussions today concern the role of the museums in the history of imperial plunder. Ariella Azoulay writes how museums are part of the construction of imperial citizenship, where preservation of the past is part of the vast enterprise of destruction conducted at the expense of the destroyed world. In the process of preservation, the past consists of discrete documents and objects, and this methodology of separation and extraction is one of the imperial operations of power executed over the objects belonging to the living world. That the museum is now open to being a space of live performances can also be approached from this perspective – with how art institutions in the West are also confronting themselves with their own past, with their own entanglement in violent history. Every collection is entangled with the multiplicity of living worlds. From this perspective the entrance of the performance (and the body) in the museum can challenge the isolation from the living world, and dedicate itself rather to the entanglements of living kinship and genealogies, to embodied experiences and poetics of communities, to invisible and contradictory histories. Otherwise, it is only another continuation of imperial methods. Performance also helps us to recognise how all the objects of a collection are part of unequal and multiple living histories (past or present). A collection is a mesh of interconnections which has to be shared, and not a distinct preservation which has to be maintained.

From this perspective, a performance collection is an interesting problem, because it can contribute to creating various and multi-layered values, under the condition that of course it

unsettles its own condition – separation, preservation and exclusion. At the same time, performance collection demands different knowledge and labour, a rethinking of what it means to restore performance, how to work with a living and temporal archive, how to take care of the durational practices, etc.

What labour is needed to have a performance collection? Should we, besides the restaurateurs, employ performers? How do we transport a performance collection, and should we develop kinships between different biospheres and scenes where the works are shared? How to keep performance alive as a relational field, not as a nostalgic repetition? All these questions we can also ask about objects, and that is why a performance collection is so interesting. And how to keep these collections in the way that they would belong to all, and will continuously change so that they would not succumb to exclusionary authorship, especially if we keep in mind that the performance is a process and work of many; it belongs to the many.

**JZ:** In my research, I'm trying to look for different ways of collecting performance; for example, I'm introducing narrative fiction that can serve the idea of archiving performances, including emotions and reactions of witnesses. The search for an experiential way of archiving is linked to the idea of creating a new type of archive. What do you think about the idea of a performance museum? Does this idea not take the practice of collecting ephemeral art and process-based art to another level? Maybe we can actually use a body, a physical body, a human body, to preserve these performative works – to keep performance alive.

**BK:** We return to the problem of what it means to keep performances alive with your question. The problem is that the need to keep them alive does not always serve the best intention,

and the history of theatre is full of these attempts, to keep performance the same, to repeat it in the nostalgic and melancholic way. Nevertheless, when it is not understood as a preservation of value but as a space of experimentation and imagination with the living archives and embodied histories, where attention is given to what stays outside of the power of visibility, then it can become interesting. What would this space be, where past biospheres of the performance could live again? Maybe the museum would then be more like a permaculture garden, exploring processes of reciprocity and renewal, lost in the exuberant growth of memory and forgetting.

**JZ: I realised that while we develop various performance strategies, we need to develop a different vocabulary around collecting, and maybe completely rethink the idea of museums.**

**BK:** ... and the notion of labour. This is often forgotten, the fact that there is a specific history of labour in performance and theatre, and that this labour is different from the labour in the museum. The labour of collecting performance needs different skills and we can find them also in the practice of performers.

## ENDNOTES

- 1 See the website <http://badco.hr/en/home/>.
- 2 More about the collection at <https://www.mg-lj.si/en/exhibitions/2288/zspa/>.
- 3 Flemish theatre institute is now existing as Flemish art institute, <https://www.kunsten.be/en/>.
- 4 See the website <https://somethinggreat.de/Something-Great-Collection>.

## REFERENCE LIST

Azoulay, A. 2019, “Potential History, Unlearning Imperialism”, Verso, London.

deLahunta, S. 2000, “Dance Dramaturgy: Speculations and Reflections”.

*Dance Theatre Journal*, vol. 16, pp. 20–5.

Stilinović, M. 2014, *The Praise of Laziness*. Gato Negro Ediciones, Mexico City.

# COLLECTING DANCE

A Conversation with  
La Ribot by Lola Hinojosa

---

**Lola Hinojosa:** You were trained in classical, modern and contemporary dance; you were part of various companies and dance groups until you began making solo work as La Ribot, where you do practically everything from costumes and lighting to choreography. Do you consider yourself a dancer, a choreographer, a visual artist, a performer or does interdisciplinary work such as yours rather resist these categories?

**La Ribot:** At the age of fourteen I began my training as a classical dancer and at 18 I decided that I wanted to dedicate myself professionally to dance. I went to study at the Rosella Hightower School in the South of France and immediately realised that it was not what I wanted to do at all, but I was still interested in ballet, dance and everything related to staging, the body and movement. Later, I studied modern American dance (for example Martha Graham and José Limón techniques), and travelled around Europe doing workshops and encountering other techniques, teachers and schools. After a stint in New York, I came back to Madrid in 1983 and continued studying. I started doing my own thing as an author, and I started choreographing. I worked with various collectives and groups until I met Blanca Calvo in 1986, and we founded a company called Bocanada Danza, with friends who were dancers, musicians,

scriptwriters and light technicians. It was an incredible moment of experimentation.

In the 1990s, these practices ceased to be so interesting to me and I began working alone in the studio and solo on stage. I changed my name to La Ribot, which between the figures of 'La Carmen' and 'La Garbo' was a divinely popular name. At that time, I began developing ways of working that stem from the visual arts. I was writing, drawing and working alone. I applied visual arts techniques to the body and movement: I used cutting, pasting, colouring, assembling, installing, juxtaposing or fragmenting, as opposed to practices that were typical to dance, such as repeating, copying or spinning. Then something began to happen in that it became as dance-like as it was visual arts-like, and a compact whole began to emerge. What I was doing stopped depending only on music and theatre. The body, which is a vehicle of movement and choreographic language, began to be a plastic and conceptual object – a political and poetic object. This was the origin of the work *Piezas distinguidas* (Distinguished Pieces).

### **LH: Tell us about the *Piezas distinguidas* series.**

**La Ribot:** The *Piezas distinguidas* were and are short or very short pieces. They could be thought of as mobile poems, *tableaux vivants* or haikus. I organise them into a fixed and scored series and the series constitutes a show. At the start of the process, I proposed to make 100 pieces throughout my life. Today, in November 2021, I'm still working, and I am currently on *Pieza distinguida No 57*. There are to date six series or shows, with a few exceptions. There are some distinguished pieces, for example, that lie outside the 'short' norm, since they are long, or outside the 'live' norm because they are videos. They are all pieces

that proposed an alternative to what was being done in contemporary dance at the time: they propose a fragmented, conceptual, choreographic and plastic discourse. For that reason, I speak of ‘presenting’ instead of representing, and of ‘exposing’ *Piezas distinguidas*, not of dancing them. ‘The dance is thought not felt’ I would say.

The first stage of the *Piezas distinguidas* is influenced by the plastic arts. I encountered references, like the sculptor Marisa Merz for example, that are so personal, or Piero Mazoni, with their certificates and works like *Artist’s Shit* (1961), or the monochromes. In general, I am influenced by the twentieth-century avant-gardes: Duchamp and his ready-mades; Joan Brossa, who is always so funny and poetic; and 1960s and 1970s Conceptual Art, especially the New York countercultures. In the 1980s I began to be interested in Cindy Sherman and her dismembered bodies and apparatuses of terror. At that time, and in the field of dance, I was interested in Pina Bausch’s use and extensions of time with all those dancers, who seemed so old to me.

**LH: You worked on *Piezas distinguidas* for ten years, from 1993 to 2003, and then you took a hiatus for ten years, picking it up again after that. The first pieces were conceived for the space of the theatre; that is, they were produced with the front-facing gaze of the spectator in mind, with all the choreographic resources and lighting techniques typical of the genre. Then, around the year 1998, you reconfigured *Más distinguidas* (More Distinguished) so it could be adapted to very different spaces, departing this time from the viewer’s relationship with the wider space. It is in 2000, with *Still Distinguished*, that another staging device emerges. Tell us about this transition, about dismantling the hierarchies of the stage theatre.**

**La Ribot:** The *Piezas distinguidas* that marked my career and became so well known were concentrated with the first three series in the 1990s. The first series, *13 Piezas distinguidas* (1993–94), is the most theatrical. At that time, I was still defining how things are interrelated: the objectual with the theatrical, the choreographic, the staging, the space, the spectator, etc. In 1997, I made a second series entitled *Más distinguidas* (More Distinguished), which was more plastic, cinematic and theatrical, still using lights with a front-facing stage. Around this time, the Kunstmuseum in Lucerne invited me to show them, but we couldn't use lights. So, I presented them without lights and with the audience in front of me sitting on chairs scattered across the space. I discovered that the audience shifts their gaze as the context changes. From then on, I created general lighting and maintained two versions of *Más distinguidas*: one for theatres with a black background, and another, white version, for exhibition halls, museums or garages. Both versions are conceived for a front-facing audience and have a general plane of light.

From 1997 to 2001, at the same time, Blanca and I were planning *Desviaciones* (Deviations), a festival programme organised with José A Sánchez and by UVI-La Inesperada, a collective of six choreographers from Madrid: Mónica Valenciano, Olga Mesa, Elena Córdoba, Blanca Calvo, Ana Buitrago and La Ribot. Together, we conceived of projects where we could all present our work, exchange ideas, findings, questions and issues, get to know each other and organise everything we lacked: programmes, invitations to artists from Europe who did not pass-through Madrid. We generated our own economy of knowledge, money, debates and archive. In this context, we created a space that was not only front-facing and theatrical, but in which one could wander.

At the same time, I was doing *Still Distinguished*, the third series of *Piezas distinguidas*. During this period, I was reflecting on the hierarchies of power between spectator, artist and actor. For *Still Distinguished*, I developed a staging device that was a kind of white horizontal surface where the viewer is always with me, wandering around with me, following me and sharing the space – power hierarchies are flattened out. The spectator is able to see things they cannot see from their seating in the theatre and above all they take responsibility for what they are seeing, and this gaze has an effect on the work. The place in space and its movement are also part of the work and have value for me.

On the other hand, as of 2002, I began working on choreography projects with large groups, multitudes of people, such as *40 Espontaneos* (40 Spontaneous). I also made videos and video installations, such as *Despliegue* (Unfolding, 2001) and films such as *Mariachi 17* (2009). By 2010, I had more resources and the works were more ambitious. However, I maintained my aesthetic, such as a human scale and a poverty of materials – handmade objects, folding chairs, strong colours and written texts – as well as the presence of women on stage and real or mythical animals like mermaids.

While living in London, Lois Keidan invited me to present the three *Piezas distinguidas* series together for the first time for Live Culture at the Tate Modern, using the same staging device as *Still Distinguished*. This was a key event. In 2003, we did it, and I presented *Panoramix*, with all the pieces in a row, which lasted for three hours. *Panoramix* (1993–2003) is a multidisciplinary manifesto: a compilation of ten years of work and a statement on dance and contemporary art. I assumed that with this the *Distinguished Pieces* project would end, because I did not want to continue, but ten years later I returned to the theatre



La Ribot, *Panoramix*, 1993–2003.  
Installation view at Museo Reina Sofía, Madrid.  
Photo: Museo Reina Sofía

La Ribot, *Panoramix*, 1993–2003, 2003.  
Installation view at Museo Reina Sofía, Madrid.  
Photo: Museo Reina Sofía

---



with *PARAdistinguidas* (Beyond Distinguished, 2011), a series with five dancers, Ruth Childs and Anna Williams among us, and twenty amateur extras. I am currently continuing with the project, actually in 2017 – for the T.I.A retrospective in Berlin and the Portrait at the Festival d'Automne in Paris in 2019 – I had to restage *Panoramix* exactly as I performed it at the Reina Sofía Museum and the Tate Modern in 2003: so, me by myself, naked for the full three hours with all those people around me ...

**LH: The presence of your naked body has always been a staple in your work in general, but especially in these short pieces. In most of these works this body is presented to us on a flat surface, on the ground. It is a body, we could say, that is scattered, disarmed, knocked over.**

**La Ribot:** I have conceived several bodies: the *intelligent body*, *contemporary body*, *operator body*.

The *operator body* is the body of all my video work. I always use a long sequence shot (the closest thing to live action) and have the camera in hand as close to the body as possible. This way of filming creates a vision that is sometimes objective and at other times subjective. There is no hierarchy or fixed order, and this allows me to change the perception of a space, but also to transfer the experience of dance to the viewer. I share this term with the choreographer Olga Mesa.

The *contemporary body* levels dance with contemporary art. It was the name I gave to contemporary dance at the Geneva school HEAD in 2004, because my students did not want to come to my dance classes.

The *intelligent body* is the name I give to the body of all those who do not have specific training in dance. This concept has allowed me to extend access to contemporary dance to extras, people of all capacities, ages, those with very different ed-

educational backgrounds and to all my students. The *intelligent body*, which we all have, measures danger, looks for possibilities and has memory – it knows how to repeat. It is wonderful and must be recovered!

I can see this fragmented and disarmed body that you mention, and it is important if it is equated with that of the viewer. What happened in the *Still Distinguished* series is that the horizontality was constructed in it, and so were the fragmented, broken, scattered, thrown and, above all, installed bodies. The horizontality was the surface of the ground where bodies and objects, both mine and those of the spectator, are at the same level. Everything can continue in motion as long as we are all concentrated and connected in that limitless horizontality.

**LH:** From early on, almost at the beginning of the *Piezas distinguidas* project, the concept of the ‘distinguished owner’ appeared. You had the idea of selling works for which there is no art market, precisely because they are ephemeral pieces devoid of any objectual dimensions and can only be staged. Was this a symbolic gesture or was there a real attempt to enter the art market? What questions did this idea of ownership provoke for you at the time?

**La Ribot:** Well, that was related to changes to the Bocanada group and the loneliness of the artist that I was becoming out of necessity. In 1993, when I first planned to produce 100 *Distinguished Pieces*, it may have seemed like a symbolic gesture, but it wasn’t. These economic transactions allowed me to keep making, producing and continuing to work on a small but real scale. There was obviously no market though. Who were the first owners? People close to me: friends, choreographers like Olga Mesa, Mathilde Monnier, Ion Munduate, Jérôme Bel and Juan Domínguez and painters, singers, art



La Ribot, *S-Liquid*, 2000, 2003.  
Installation view at Museo Reina Sofía, Madrid.  
Photo: Museo Reina Sofía

lovers and my gallerist at the time, Soledad Lorenzo. After a while I couldn't keep going. By the year 2000, I'd created thirty-four *Distinguished Pieces* and there were twenty-seven 'distinguished proprietors'. I had learnt a few things throughout this process. I didn't want to perform them, and I stopped selling them. The 'distinguished proprietors' became like angels. Angels who argued about the ephemeral, the nature of the possible object, what belonged to them or not and what they could do with this 'property'.

During those years, the ephemeral as a possible object was a fun, interesting, strange and new question, on a very small scale and without a market. Later, there were artists like Tino Sehgal, and Marie Cool and Fabio Balducci who knew the *Distinguished Pieces*, because they were colleagues of mine or friends at the time and they developed this for the art market, finding new ways to 'preserve' or talk about the live and give it value. Wonderful!

**LH: Regarding the pieces that are part of the Reina Sofía Museum's Performing Arts Collection, *Another pá amb tomaquet* (2002) is a work produced with the camera, which generates a materiality. This is the classic format by which museums have collected dance pieces and, ultimately, all live arts. However, *S Liquide* (2000) is totally different: there is no materiality or objectivity whatsoever to store. The museum as an institution not only collects, but also conserves for future generations. In the instructions for *S Liquide*, you have established the dancers who can interpret this piece: La Ribot, Anna Williams and Ruth Childs, but I was wondering if you imagine that the piece might be preserved through transmission to other bodies. Here, we delve into the debate of the body as an archive. Could the museum preserve these pieces beyond these people, perhaps through oral transmission or written instructions, or should the piece simply cease to exist?**





*Laughing Hole*, 2006, 2013.  
Installation view at Ruhrtriennale, Essen.  
Courtesy of La Ribot. Photo: Ursula Kaufmann

**La Ribot:** The Reina Sofía Museum is the first and only museum that has a *Pieza distinguida*. That is exceptional because there will be no other. In the case of *S liquide*, other people could perform it, but I prefer it if those who have been close to me perform it, because it has to do with that notion. My body: I am original. Anna Williams is original. Ruth Childs is original. Everyone who could do it would also be original. How to preserve the original live? How to make that an archive? What is an archive? Why do we archive it? What is choreographic writing? The archive of what I do are the dancers, performers and extras. That is, they are all the bodies with whom I work. The most powerful archive is the one that acts and the one that persists through memory. It is energy and concentration. Anna Williams and Ruth Childs have both worked with me; therefore, it is natural and instinctive to me that they would be the archives, as I am the archive.

What lives, dies; it is ephemeral. So how to preserve that archive? It is a question that is not resolved. Although *S liquide* belongs to the Museum and the Museum is a 'distinguished owner', the issue is not resolved. The acquisition opens up this question. I would like to give value to dancing bodies. This is my dance vindication.

**LH:** *Laughing Hole* is a work of yours that is perhaps most committed to the historical-political context in which it was created. Yet there is something timeless about it. The version in Castilian Spanish emerged from an invitation from *Mapa teatro: Laboratorio de artistas* to take it to its space in Colombia. This is a space that is very well known for its relationship with expanded theatre works that speak of the violence in Colombia. Would you say that *Laughing Hole* established a relationship or dialogue with the context where it was staged and therefore acquired new layers of meaning, or rather that the work escapes any attempt to contextualise it?



La Ribot, *Laughing Hole*, 2006.  
Installation view at Galerie Barbara Weiss, Berlin.  
Courtesy of La Ribot

**La Ribot:** It contextualises itself; some of the words that populate the posters in the piece appear and are added for a specific moment or they remain forever; it depends. There are three versions: one in English, one in Japanese and one in Spanish. I translated the Spanish version in Bogotá on the invitation of Mapa Teatro. *Laughing Hole* in Bogotá had a huge impact on us. This was obviously related to the context in which we found ourselves. We also made it last for eight hours and it was brutal to feel and see how the words resonated in the bodies and in the city. For the translation I spent a week there prior to performing. I sat down at 'La Casa', and the first person that passed by helped me to translate. Words from the Colombian context were gradually incorporated in this way, which was a very interesting process. For example: *estrato* (stratum). A stratum is a way of dividing the city into social classes, they call it *estratos*. Depending on what stratum you are in, life happens one way or another, socially and politically speaking.

Then they invited us to Japan, to the Aichi Triennale, where we decided to translate the entire work. New words with a social and political relevance in Japan thus appeared in the translation. For example: 'peeping', which means spying through a hole; spying on your neighbours. It's something the Japanese do; I had no idea. Fantastic. So 'peeping' becomes a native word, which I conjugated with all the others.

The work is full of life, very vivid and moving, in movement. Some of those native words have appeared or disappeared over the seventeen years that the work has toured around the world. It has a life that is impossible to fix. There have been words in Catalan, Zulu and German. All the languages and words that appeared in this work have remained in my heart, in my memory and across my retina.

**LH:** What do you think has changed since the early 1990s regarding issues such as collecting the performative, dance as an archive or the ideas around transmission and repetition? Are there younger artists and dancers who take these concepts for granted, or has the issue not changed so much in the last thirty years?

**La Ribot:** This question is always pertinent. Are we changing our perception or our view of things with what we do? Do we change something or allow something to remain the same? Contemporary dance is a contemporary art and it has become more accessible over the last thirty years. Contemporary dance is now present in art schools, universities, museums, galleries and it also remains in theatres. Education programmes have been created; Master's that accept or incorporate dance, theatrical writing, visual arts assemblage and performance or video art. It is all more porous now.

How we understand and treat the body has also changed. Dance and the body were something people related with music and theatre. Now the body as such is being questioned: the political body, identity, gender, sexuality. We talk about disciplines, transversality and issues that arise in our contemporary society. Is everything more performative? Yes. There is much in historical *performance art* and contemporary performance studies. Art and dance have expanded, and they are becoming a territory of research, reflection, manifestos, militancy, poetry and, above all, a territory that is expanding, is becoming less formalist and more conceptual, if that makes sense.

Do the new generations take it for granted? The roads open up and new generations walk them, that's how it goes, and sometimes without knowing how they were built.

# ENIGMATIC DEBRIS

Clémentine Deliss

---

## 1. Scene of the Crime

A large gleaming liver lies on a table, cut to the diagrammatic shape of the Etruscan liver of Piacenza.<sup>1</sup> Next to this viscous lump of flesh sits a multi-tonal mop of hair. It's a brush made from woven strands cut from the heads of thirty-six people in the room. Recently removed from living bodies, both animal and human, these organs effect a forensic fascination, as if they constituted live DNA at the scene of a crime. Scattered around the smudge of blood are other things: a rat trap woven out of reed; a clock with one hand; a label for an object that is not there; some pieces of coloured paper with printed texts; two small flickering light boxes by Jenny Holzer; and a painted Virgin Mary made of synthetic plaster around thirty centimetres high. Together, these different agent-objects act within a Debating Chamber organised by the Metabolic Museum-University (MM-U) at KW in November 2021.<sup>2</sup> Placed in different constellations to one another, they become 'participative devices', connecting people to things, words and ideas and forecasting new meanings and interpretations (Korsby & Stavrianakis 2020, p. 95). Transitional, inquiry-led and semi-private, this three-hour-long 'contingent exhibition' offers a curatorial conduit for us to momentarily explore and understand how we can come together as a circle of colleagues. The situation is vulnerable. The Stenographer types:



MM-U Debating Chamber, 2021 at KW  
with BLESS hairbrush and cow's liver.  
Image-work: Eva Stenram

People slowly arrive. Everyone's wearing a mask. There are refreshments at one corner of the room by the stairs leading down through the gallery, across four floors. Guests are handed a collection of four slim pamphlets in various colours, bound together with a thin brown paper band. In the centre of the room stands a table, divided into numbered segments. It looks like a rudimentary city map, the numbers indicating the different neighbourhoods. There are some green-coloured segments, too, that look a bit like parks. Black plastic chairs with metal legs are arranged around the table in a circle, interrupted by a white lectern with a microphone on it and a large digital clock. Across the table from the lectern stands another tall table, behind which a man – the lawyer – wearing a checked scarf is seated. There are various spotlights arranged around the table, as well as people with film and still cameras. Off to one side of the central table is a second table, decked out with objects. Underneath it there are some shelves with various artefacts placed on them. In the back corner sits a technician who speaks French. Most people are speaking English. I'm sat to the left of the lectern on one of the same black chairs as form the circle around the table and am typing on a laptop on a small, squat table. It's just gone 3 p.m. and things are about to begin. A strange, repeated sound plays on the PA. A man steps up to the lectern to welcome us and remind us that the gallery is state funded. Clémentine then welcomes us all to the MM-U.<sup>3</sup>

With its graphic design and five metres in length, the ovoid table could be in a casino or a war room.<sup>4</sup> The thick red lines and black numbers painted on the surface demarcate forty sectors. In the original Babylonian context, these zones would have referred to the pantheon of gods. Today the grid presages the dangers of categorical thinking and what one can or cannot do, be this in art, curatorial practice

MM-U Debating Chamber, 2021 at KW, various prototypes and ominous objects. Image-work: Eva Stenram





or related fields of inquiry. There is always an organisation to be put to the test and dismantled in this decolonial exercise of ‘academic iconoclasm’.

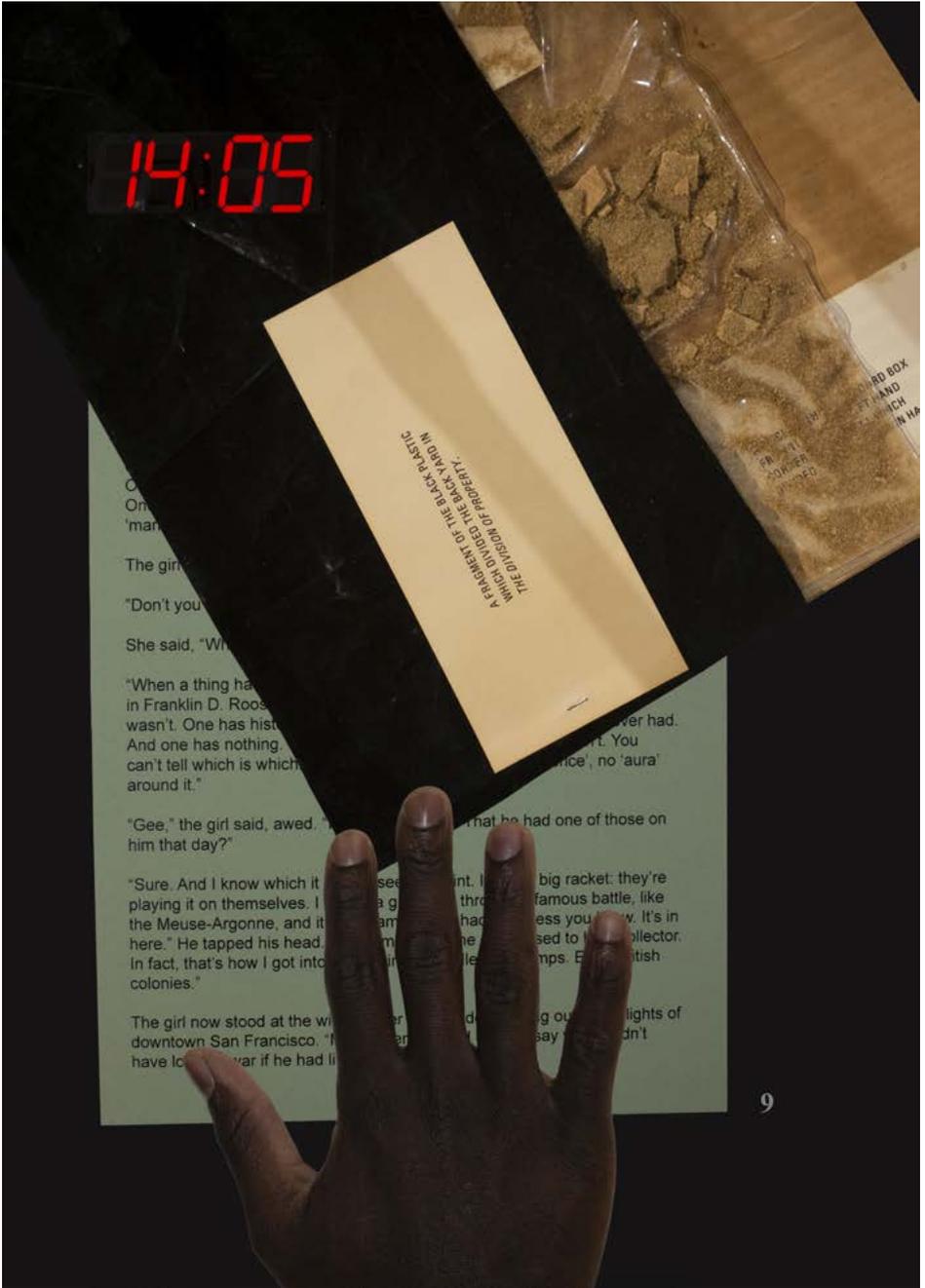
The Debating Chamber commences. Guests are seated, still, and waiting, as if for an art conference to begin with a recognisable discursive format.<sup>5</sup> Then a mirroring occurs between the need to negotiate our presence together and the incongruous grouping of objects on the table. Identified as ‘prototypes’ or ‘ominous objects’, they mediate core expressions of individual ways of thinking and, like omens, articulate current concerns in the conditional tense, the ‘what if?’ necessary to future readings.<sup>6</sup> In the design of life, prototypes defy archival death. They contain the potential to transform, even when surpassed or forgotten by research and design.<sup>7</sup> Like a revenant, a prototype is there to be re-energised, or risk falling into oblivion. In *Eupalinos or the Architect* (1921), French poet Paul Valéry describes the morphological and semantic ambiguities of an object that Socrates finds on the beach:

It was made from its own form, doubtful matter. Was it a fish bone, bizarrely worn down by fine sand? Or ivory carved by a craftsman beyond the waves for what purpose I do not know? Was it a divine existence that perished in the same vessel for which it had been made to prevent its sinking? Who was its author? A mortal who followed a concept, who used their hands to form an object different to the raw material, carving and etching, cutting, and joining; stopping and looking; then finally letting go of their work – because something told them it was complete. Or perhaps it was not the work of a living body but made without self-awareness, shaped out of its own substance, blindly forming organs and armatures, shell, bones, and protection, feeding and pulsating by itself, and taking part in its own mysterious construction for time unknown. Or maybe it was just the fruit of infinite time? ... For a while, I considered it from all

its dimensions. I asked questions without waiting for answers. This ambiguous object was the work of life, or art, or time, or a game of nature. I could not tell the difference, so I threw it back into the sea (Valéry, 1921).

When positioned in adjacency to one another, prototypes can function like a contrast medium, highlighting differences and providing both a critique of former systems of classification and evaluation, as well as motivating questions, meanings and technicities.<sup>8</sup> In their unfinished and intermediate status, these artefacts, images, words, sounds and texts trigger observations and conversations, and underpin the foundation for a transversal methodology.<sup>9</sup> Their divergent values, reflected by authored as well as anonymous or undocumented artists, locate them outside of the art market. Research collections made from the ‘enigmatic debris’ (Valéry 1921) of an artist’s work are not sold at auction or in fairs. Private galleries, if they own the estates of artists, are not particularly engaged in collating and selling these individual archives as artworks. Yet these are far from being the biographic addendum to an oeuvre. They have a prelusive quality that is significant and generative.

The start of this inquiry takes place a few months earlier at an MM-U online meeting or ‘Bureau d’Esprit’. Just as the ‘situation designers’ BLESS begin to present their digital archive to the group, our doorbells ring. Unexpectedly, each of us is handed a parcel containing a BLESS prototype. I receive ‘Fur Wig 00’ (1996), one of their very first designs; Matthias Bruhn is given the folding stool made of cowhide, Krista Belle Stewart the mini treadmill, Tom McCarthy a pair of sunglasses with gold chains dangling over the lens like in a lap-dancing club, and Margareta von Oswald a long knobby walking stick with a wine glass for a handle. Through this action, BLESS have broken the strictures of our virtual conversation. For rather than show us their prototypes online, they have literally sent them out to us by messenger at a time



when we are confined to our homes by the pandemic.<sup>10</sup> Later, when we realise that this action is a performative moment without any transaction of ownership, a particular conjecture remains: What if BLESS had gifted one of their prototypes to the MM-U? Could this act of radical generosity form the basis for a polysemic collection made from our individual research materials? Might one produce symbolic capital from this ideational aggregate or ‘holding for inquiry’ that reflects our individual identities and aesthetic affiliations?

However, by extracting key designs and placing them into another archival context, that of a research collection, one is fracturing professional biographies and quite possibly giving away both quasiartworks and codes of production. Such academic iconoclasm refutes the validity of an ‘original context’ and the sanctity of named authorship in favour of an experimental, unfinished archive with its own idiosyncratic style of ordering, naming and documenting. It reverses the common anthropological process in which another culture’s artistic ingenuity is appropriated and reframed within a logos of ethnos. With the MM-U, we are doing it to ourselves, fracturing our own bodies of work, propagating re-readings and re-design, devising alternative terminologies and seeking to produce a venue that can reflect this transgressive paradigm.

In his final publication, Paul Rabinow searches for methods and terms to convey venues in which ‘thinking and invention’ can take place collaboratively (Korsby & Stavrianakis 2020, p. 95). He states, ‘The challenge – and this could be pedagogic too – is what to do with multiplicity? How do you assemble multiplicity into an assemblage that’s dynamic, preserves the heterogeneous character of the parts, but brings them into some relationship with each other that’s unexpected and good for everybody?’ (Rabinow 2014). At the University of California, at Berkeley, he sets up the ‘Labinar’, a workspace for sharing materials, talking about ‘empirical instances’, and noting how different groupings can provide terms of analysis and synthesis. ‘The aim’, he writes, is ‘to avoid the reduction of the seminar space to

a proxy zone for merely advancing in one's thesis research. Simply put, we wished to try and think together about things that we had not yet thought about' (Korsby & Stavrianakis 2020, p. 82). At one point, his collaborators describe the increasingly repetitive tone of the meetings and how they decide to introduce a fresh animal liver into the Labinar, surprising their colleagues who pass it around noting the tactile quality and incongruity of the organ within the university setting.<sup>11</sup> This physical intervention dislodges the stasis felt in the group and creates an unexpected moment of collectivity. Referring to the work of Pedersen and Nielson, the agency of the liver is described as a 'trans-temporal hinge' (Pedersen & Nielson 2013), a theoretical tool for understanding situations or phenomena in which different temporalities (certain past, present and future events) are momentarily assembled.<sup>12</sup>

## 2. Same Words, Same Ills<sup>13</sup>

The three-hour Debating Chamber at KW follows eighteen months of pandemic-induced isolation. The procedure for the day is planned by Tom McCarthy and Matthias Bruhn with rhetorical and performative prompts along the lines of a parliamentary assembly.<sup>14</sup> This is combined with oracular protocols, which are equally political. The gathering opens with a 'Calling to Order', a sonic intervention composed by Augustin Maurs in which a shrill voice cries out 'Die Welt ... die Welt ...' (the world ... the world ...). Guest Assyriologist, Netanel Anor, pronounces a prayer to the Babylonian sun god Shamesh in ancient Akkadian. Later, Anor will close the session by reading the prognostics of the liver and interpreting the ritual of pouring oil into a bowl of water.<sup>15</sup> In the short interval between the acts, a shuffling of chairs enables a switch in positions. It is hard not to notice the generational divide in discourse, referentiality and stance. We are effectively as diverse and as interconnected as the artefacts laid out in front of us, both in turn reflecting the 'modern fiction of radical openness'.<sup>16</sup>



MM-U Debating Chamber, 2021 at KW, exercise in visual thinking. Image-work: Eva Stenram

After around thirty minutes, propositional groupings start to form. The rat trap, first placed upright on the table, mimicking a monument or high-rise, is laid on its side, 'ready to catch an edict'.<sup>17</sup> A plastic folder containing dust from a sawn-off beam and belonging to Geoffrey Hendrick's *Flux Divorce Box*<sup>18</sup> now neighbours the prefab souvenir of the Berlin Wall brought by Henrike Naumann. In between both lies a broken shard of reddish land made by artist Krista Belle Stewart and used to transport her heritage from Spaxomin in Canada to Europe. It works well next to the grey sheet of paper prepared by Elhadj Abdoulaye Sène that reads, 'The term FICTION as an instrument in law'.<sup>19</sup> Questions of land, partition and fractured relationships materialise between people, words and things. 'What is language and what is an object? Can we as actors become open to the point where we don't matter anymore? Do these objects play with us?' asks Kristian Vistrup Madsen, the designated Observer.<sup>20</sup>

The whole game is about language/symbolism, but only until it isn't any longer. Then it becomes a process of eroding the context that was established by the ritual (presenting the objects/prototypes; announcing them) and the table (the map, and mapping not as a way of producing knowledge, but changing it). But the objects are only open or closed within that context, otherwise, open to what? To language? In the end, there is something ironically stable about their openness; any combination seems possible. But where is the stopper, the limit; what would the last action be? To take care, in this case, seems to mean taking care not to end the game. Some participants are keen to end it, not by breaking rules, but re-establishing them: closing the vertigo openness of the objects.<sup>21</sup>

Several transgressions take place over the course of the three hours, actions which are defined by one participant as 'disruptive'.<sup>22</sup> The

first is the removal of human hair performed right at the start as people are finding their seats and taking in the situation. Once gathered, each lock is bound with thread and slipped through the rubber base of a brush. No one seems particularly bothered about this activity carried out by Hiro, the guest hairdresser, together with Ines and Desiree of BLESS, who sit in silence making this surreal and tautological object. A second disruption occurs when Matthias Bruhn picks up the statuette of the Virgin Mary and pushes her iconic face into the glutinous liver. Alluding to the blood of Christ, he veers precariously close to an act of art-historical and theological blasphemy. The Madonna is put back onto the table and told by Karl Holmqvist to ‘face the digital clock’. Sometimes a sense of humour and playfulness revs up the session. But the highlights remain moments when a disturbing action suspends current perceptions, like in that instance of fall and retrieval found in syn-copation.<sup>23</sup> Then, as if in chain reaction, Augustin Maurs performs an extensive rendition of the unpronounceable word, ‘ZZXJOANW’, Ruth Buchanan shoves all the objects to the far side, clearing the table as if to play a new set and Calum Bowden grabs the lamb’s liver from the plate, slapping it onto the white surface of the table and staining it red. At this point, Sam Parfitt the Stenographer notes:

Someone gets up and attempts to pronounce the unpronounceable word. He takes the page of text to the podium and makes ssss and zzzz sounds, then gargling sounds. It’s a long word, more of a poem. It ends quite dramatically, almost like an orgasm. Guests are then invited to throw whatever is in their pockets on the table. In a moment, the table is littered with used tissues, cigarette packets and train tickets. It is suggested to move all the objects to one end of the table. Suddenly, the wig, wine and Mary are all congregated together, at the far end of the table. Calum wants to take the liver out of the dish and onto the table, placing it on Nos. 30 and 24.

The wine bottle is removed. The hairbrush is dangerously close to the liver. People are gesticulating wildly around the table; tensions are running high.

Three curatorial principles inform the MM-U's Debating Chamber. The first is its insertion into an existing exhibition, momentarily jarring and expanding the canon of the host display; the second is the concern to create a mood of vulnerability in a semi-private environment with an invited set of participants; the third is the attempt to deviate from academically legitimised norms of evaluation and modes of transmission. The Debating Chamber has no breakdown of themes, list of speakers or titles of papers. With a set of heteroclit agent-objects, it throws confusion into expectations of context and documentation. Moreover, as a curatorial platform positioned backstage, it may not be permanent or visible to all. In fact, it is likely to discourage consensus and be dysfunctional regarding institutional structures. It is not meant to compete with an exhibition, but to act as a performative bypass, activating 'motion in thought' (Korsby & Stavrianakis 2020, p. 67), and pushing against disciplinary taxonomies. This aspect addresses the conceptual nature of the documentation produced both before, during and after the meeting. If artists develop a form of implicit communication between each other, beyond the glare of the media and wider public, then this exchange based on conceptual intimacy, when curated, necessitates a vector that will carry over their fragile, codified references.

To this purpose, I invite three artists to film and photograph the 'organisation of knowledge' of the Debating Chamber.<sup>24</sup> The results of the day are subsequently edited into a montage that relays an alternate version of our inquiry rather than merely recording it.<sup>25</sup> For example, works by Eva Stenram use the trope of the cut-up and collage to perform a meta-commentary on the photographic document, accentuating the framing of object photography with its directives and biases. Between the poetics of surrealist configurations and the presumed ob-

jectivity of museological imaging with its visual construction of taxonomies, her work translates the Debating Chamber into a photographic assemblage for future discussion. What happens that afternoon in November 2021 at KW is not represented through photographs of us all sitting in a circle looking at a group of things. Stenram is offering the reader a prototype model of visual thinking with collections.

### 3. Documenting Counter-Conduct

In what manner can a recording supersede its banality and presumed objectivity to convey a critical stance, both political and aesthetic? Is it possible to radically subjectivise the act of documentation and keep it private? How much pressure is placed on curators by the broadcasting requirements of public-funded institutions? What happens to the more initiate, tentative and obtuse expressions that are also part of artistic and curatorial practice and that often run against the grain of public-facing events? Does it constitute a form of counter-conduct to withhold information, to perform communicational abstinence as an instance of critique?<sup>26</sup>

Actionist photography, for example, devised its own channel of documentation, providing an image-concept (*Bildidee*) with a visual grammar of subjective reportage that retains fascination 50 years later (Gorsen 2008, p. 9). As an art student at the cusp of the 1980s, I caught the tail end of Viennese Actionism and witnessed remarkable performances by Vito Acconci, Abramović/Ulay, Gina Pane, VALIE EXPORT, Reindeer Werk, Stuart Brisley, General Idea and many more.<sup>27</sup> I remember nakedness, surfaces penetrated, punctured and bleeding, like rituals of transgression on the part of the artist. The materiality at hand was that of the human body as a heightened transmitter of conceptual propositions. In particular, I noted those artists who worked closely with the performers, entrusted to translate their presence through photography and film. Kurt Kren, Ernst Schmidt Jr., Heinz Cibulka and



The term FICTION as an instrument in law.

29, 26, 16, 39



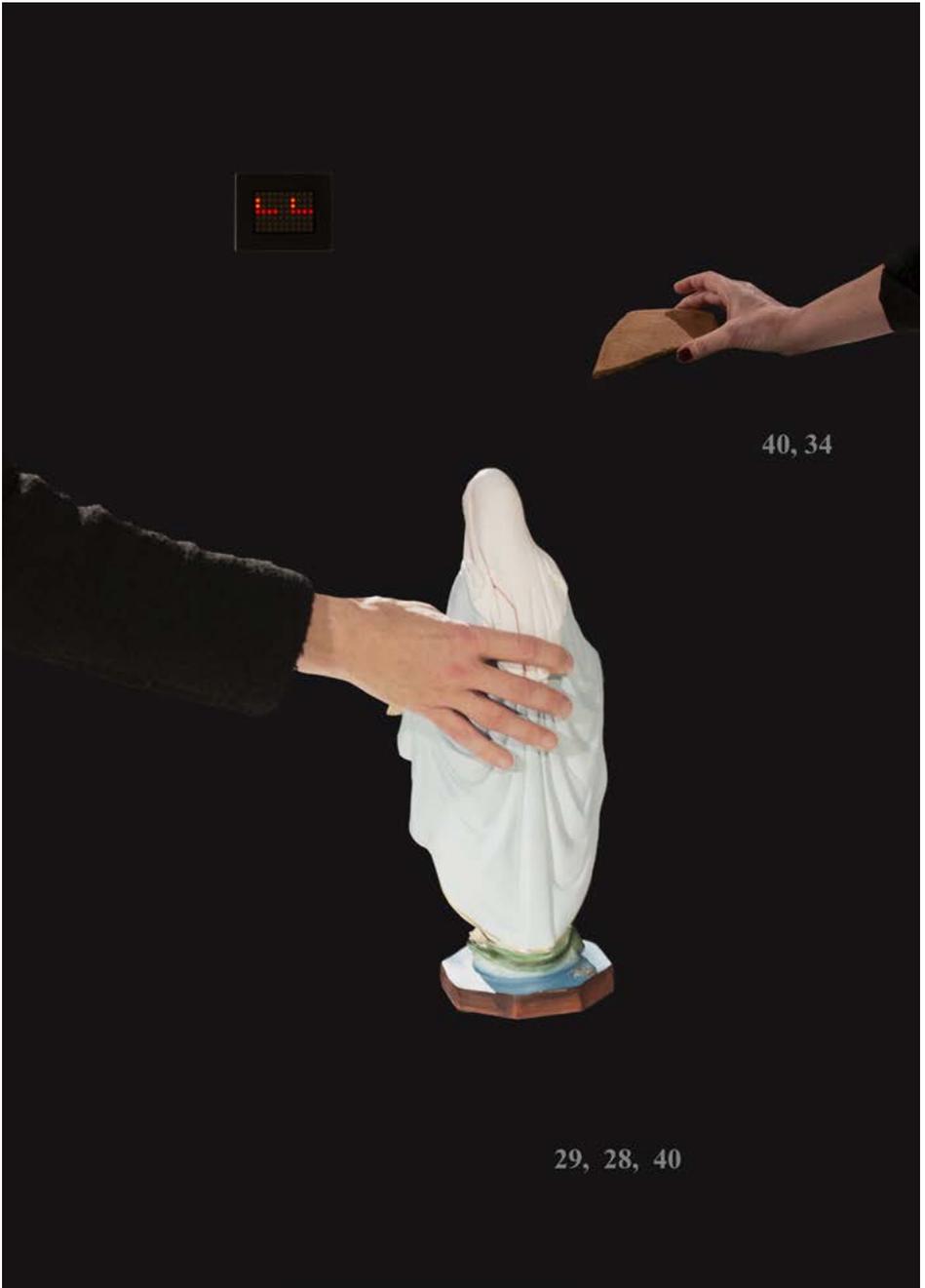
23

57

zwölf (tsvëlf), *G.* Twelve. **Z.-achteltakt** (äkh-tël-täkt). 12-8 time.  
**Z.-saiter** (zi-tër). "12-stringed"  
bissex.  
**zymbel** (tsëm'-bël), *G.* Vide CYMBAL.  
**zxxjoanw** (shaw). *Maori*. 1. Drum.  
2. Fife. 3. Conclusion.



24



Luigi Hoffenreich transported the artists' individual identities by inscribing their actions dialogically onto celluloid. Both artist and documenter were implicitly partners in an act of representation that necessitated an aesthetic break with post-war social and political ideologies. Cultural historian, Peter Gorsen, claims that the photography of Viennese Actionism was an 'obsessive form' of 'simultaneous translation', using the trope of 'psycho-physical naturalism'. He writes, 'The actor acts and becomes the material of the action, mumbling, stuttering, falling, sighing, vomiting, laughing, biting, shitting, and rolling within the materiality of these emissions' (Gorsen 2008, p. 9). This was 'revolutionary subjectivism ...', a work of '*Totalaktion*' on the 'material-body existence without categorisation'. Influenced by imaginative and reflexive ethnographers such as Gregory Bateson, Michel Leiris, Jean Rouch, Clifford Geertz, Hans-Peter Duerr and Michael Oppitz, this period of artist-led archival formation was not only emancipatory, but also simultaneously artwork *and* document.

In the second half of the 1980s in Europe and the US, things change. It is no longer hip to belong to a commune, take part in artists' workshops, or hand over the representation of one's work to another artist to define. Photographs of exhibits by Haim Steinbach or Jeff Koons, for example, taken at the time of production in the mid- to late 1980s, frame the image of the art object as manufactured, speculative capitalism.<sup>28</sup> These squeaky-clean sculptures contrast with the messy, organic expressions of earlier art actions and their quasi-ethnographic renderings. Photography is no longer 'in there', shooting corporeal presence (as in cinema vérité), but has a new role to play. By moving away from an understanding of the document as empathic and generated through artistic collaboration, these neo-conceptual artists and their galleries introduce a dispassionate focus on the individual work.

With 1989, and the expansionism of the art world beyond European and North American borders, the document changes once again. Now it veers towards increasing context-specificity, and with the

rise of cultural studies, affords another paradigm of quasi-ethnographic representation for artists working with referential practices of place, gender and community.<sup>29</sup> The work of Renée Green, the writings of Miwon Kwon, and the curatorial practice of Ute Meta Bauer are examples of this self-conscious site-specific stance.<sup>30</sup> In parallel, the journal *Texte zur Kunst*, launched in Germany in 1990, institutes a new narratology for critical transferral.<sup>31</sup> Alongside this textualised form of documentation, discursive formats in art spaces are no longer add-ons to exhibitions but central events, in turn becoming essential to the academic formalisation of artistic research. Today, the standardisation of terminologies that underpin identifications of people and subject matter in exhibition-making works to neuter the potential for a practice of counter-conduct that might confront normative formats for showing, discussing, documenting and disseminating art.

The Laboratoire Agit'Art in Dakar offers an alternative approach to this condition. In the 1990s, the transdisciplinary collective wrote manifestos when it sought to announce a cultural and political urgency in the country, for example deforestation or poverty. However, when it came to performances carried out by the group there was no script. Each member knew what they could bring to the table, and in the crossover between painting, performance, film and photography, roles were implicitly self-allocated. Bouna Médoune Sèye took photographs of the performances, Djibril Diop Mambéty was responsible for film, El Hadji Sy for costumes and scenography and the organ *Metronome*, which I first published in Dakar in 1996, provided an international platform for mediation between artists and writers. *Metronome* could transmit the code of the Laboratoire without handing over the keys to the house. Texts by Issa Samb, juxtaposed with those of Paul Virilio, Guy Brett or Édouard Glissant, remain consciously opaque.<sup>32</sup> Characters often appear under pseudonym, as if on stage. There's a military dictator, a radio host, an art dealer, deceased militants and opportunist artists. In Samb's narratives, the parameters of art practice are rendered



Proceedings of the Metabolic Museum–University,  
Metronome, no. 12, vols. I–IV, 2021.  
Image–work: Eva Stenram

to the outside reader in a prose that is neither contextual nor clearly informative, but dramaturgical and interventionist on several levels. Samb was a 'passeur' between the ministries and the street, the politicians and the paupers.

Aliou, I had no choice, or anyway, a difficult choice to make. Art is in fashion, in fact there's one sure sign: there are no more real civil servants, they've all become project-mongers. Look at the gentlemen on the screen to the left on Wall Street. These New York guys who've kindly set it all up for you, expecting to see the riches rain down on Mélanie<sup>33</sup> and its posterity. D'you get it? All these cocksure kids and childish artworks for sale on the Bamako market, to music by Bazoumana Sissoko. So, of course the military boys and the predators come flocking from all over when they see this stuff hanging on the picture rails. They run wild and open up the operating theatre to all those rats, collecting both the organs and the money. (Samb 1997, p. 50)

The Metabolic Museum-University requires a similarly encrypted style for transferring the dynamics between matter and thought. To this end, each participant is sent the *Proceedings of the Metabolic Museum-University* ahead of the Debating Chamber. Printed in Berlin on coloured government paper, the four small pamphlets contain the distillation of the Bureau d'Esprit meetings held by the MM-U over the course of 2020–21, and during which we shared our personal methodologies and dilemmas. The pamphlets, which relaunch *Metronome* after 15 years, are purposefully not online. It is the intimacy of their passing that counts, and the gesture of handing a booklet to another trusted interlocutor to read. In today's pandemic-induced immobility, these *Proceedings* respond to the need for a private, non-digitised circulation of unfinished and potentially sensitive inquiry. In one of the pamphlets, for example, Tarek Atoui describes sound recordings that he made in

Beirut's harbour the day before the explosions, and the difficult choices he now faces around their transmission. Concept-work of this nature effectively suspends dissemination to an arbitrary public in favour of distinct person-to-person communication. As Luke Willis Thompson, artist, and member of the MM-U, asks, 'How can the institution become a channel for artistic interference and classificatory transgression? Does digital hypervisibility serve the decolonial work we undertake?'<sup>34</sup>

#### 4. Parallel Taxonomies

Today's understanding of documentation in art is forensic, traceable and contractual. The impact of the blockchain and its protocols of acquisition, ownership and transferral is right on track with the new taxonomies currently being composed to deal with the evaluation of artworks illegitimately acquired during colonialism and lacking biographical data. If ethnological provenance studies are about filling in the lacunae of an object's background and its journey to Europe, this requires an extra booking technology to substantiate ownership (Reichert 2021, p. 11). With this digital inventory system, a new order of conservative historicism restores authority and veracity to ethnology's nineteenth-century focus on ritual and iconic 'masterpieces'. Engagement in provenance studies, parented by European foreign and cultural ministries, is laudable, but it remains closely tied to future exploitation, not to mention the continuity of the ethno-colonial museum at home and abroad (Deliss 2020). The most valorised ethnographic object is either one that has no intermediary dealer but has gone straight from source to museum, or one that has circulated between prestigious owners, gaining museological and art-historical credibility along the way. By producing proof of provenance, one effectively augments the value of the item on the global market.

There is a curious conjunction between the current fascination with tracking and tracing, and the digital ownership of prime works of

so-called ‘tribal art’. To this effect, museum anthropology revives its earlier morphological focus and deploys CT scanners to produce visual data for exploitation, all the while supporting restitution. Yet the ownership of this new downloadable object is in the hands of the museum that has the power to reproduce representations on any scale, in any medium and for whatever purpose. With the aid of the hospital scanner, the formerly unclassifiable object achieves ontological determinism. Ultimately, ethnology has produced a cult of possession, an obsessive focus on the inscription of ownership through disciplinary tropes of contextualisation.

Questions of ownership and audience (i.e., the need to balance access and restriction, to ‘quarantine’ a portion of our deliberations from the public, even as we plan to eventually enact them in some kind of public arena) have loomed large in our discussions, as have those of how to manage or accommodate the often unsettling backstories housed and stored up by containers of the sort we’re dealing with.

I think a vital axis for us here is ‘Tikanga’. For us, this would translate into the question: On whose authority are we operating? Under whose jurisdiction? Just as Count Dracula’s boxed earth passes through many legal territories en route to London (we get detailed records of the fees, taxes, bribes etc. paid to each regional authority), so the artefacts in Berlin’s many collections have seen their location, ownership or status morphing with the various shifts in geography or geo-politics or simply time that they have undergone.<sup>35</sup>

Both legal complexity, contention and ambiguity underlie the relationship between research collections of the past and their latent potential for future knowledge production. For the younger generation, there can be no in-depth remediation without the elaboration of a le-

gal language with which to redistribute rights. Nothing is open-source, and even less so if it is embargoed within the universal museum. Who has the right to produce derivatives based on objects in ethnological collections? Who controls the legitimacy of interpretation? To open the caskets of colonial museums in Europe is to deal with the complex ramifications of a new social responsibility built around the ethics of accessibility to this vast cultural heritage. Such engagement is about architectonics and methodology, reconfiguring physical space in museums for assemblages to be metabolised and rethought as interdependent of several narratologies, locations and systems of ownership.

The overarching twentieth-century formulation of ‘permanent’ and ‘temporary’ exhibitions is neither sustainable, nor does it correspond to the requirements of a decolonial art history formulated via the agency of collections. To this purpose one can begin to think of the exhibition as a moving, growing, flourishing and transitional plant, with artworks and artefacts in all media arriving, leaving, being placed into momentary constellations, taken down new routes of inquiry and documented in a multitude of different ways. To transgress the rhetorical systems of art history, anthropology and curatorial practice means working on situations that smuggle in complexity through channels and interfaces that cannot be made visible or marketed easily. Contingent exhibitions such as the ‘Debating Chamber’ at KW clearly stimulate turbulence.<sup>36</sup> Disquieting moments are there to question the mirage of curatorial clarity and push both organisation, reception and documentation into a subjective, vulnerable mode. They are exercises or rehearsals in academic iconoclasm that can help to construct new narratives and performative ways of exhibiting and documenting collections and ideas in the twenty-first century.

## ENDNOTES

- 1 The table is based on a diagram of the bronze model of a sheep's liver found in Piacenza, Italy, dating back to 400 BC, and drawn by Alessandro Morandi in 1991. It depicts sixteen sections that in turn represent astrological houses or dwelling places of individual deities. Strategists, often in war, would make their final decisions as a result of oracular protocols conducted by Babylonian haruspicians for which liver or entrails were read as 'ominous' objects.
- 2 The members of the Metabolic Museum-University (MM-U) in 2020–21 are BLESS (situation designers), Matthias Bruhn (art and media historian), Clémentine Deliss (curator of the MM-U, associate curator KW), Krist Gruijthuisen (curator, director KW), Iman Issa (artist), Augustin Maurs (composer, musician), Tom McCarthy (novelist), Henrike Naumann (artist), Azu Nwagbogu (curator), Margareta von Oswald (anthropologist), Manuel Raeder (designer), Elhadj Abdoulaye Sène (lawyer for investment and tax), Krista Belle Stewart (artist) and Luke Willis Thompson (artist). A first experiment with an assemblage of artefacts was conducted between members of the MM-U in July 2020. It took place within the exhibition of Hassan Sharif on a day when KW was closed to the public.
- 3 These are extracts from the report drafted by Sam Parfitt, anthropologist, and invigilator at KW, who was invited to take on the role of Stenographer of the Debating Chamber.
- 4 Artist Santiago Mostyn suggested the setting evoked the partitioning of Africa in Berlin in 1884.
- 5 Guest participants included Hubertus von Amelunxen (art historian, director Archivio Conz), Netanel Anor (Assyriologist), Dido Baxevanidis (psychotherapist), Calum Bowden (anthropologist and digital designer), Ruth Buchanan (artist), Shoufay Derz (artist), Sam Durant (artist), Olivier Guessele-Garai (artist), Paz Guevara (cultural theoretician), Anna Gritz (curator, KW), Hannes Hacke (cultural historian), Jakob Karpus (artist), Mariamargherita Maceli (art historian, Archivio Conz), Marc Hollenstein

(graphic designer), Karl Holmqvist (artist), Sofie Krogh Christensen (curator, KW), Léon Kruijswijk (curator, KW), Talya Lubinsky (artist), Kristian Vistrup Madsen (art critic and writer), Antje Majewski (artist), Santiago Mostyn (artist), Matt Mullican (artist), Tahani Nadim (sociologist of science), Thais Napomuceno (filmmaker), Ana Prvački (artist), Daniel Rosenberg (historian), Franka Schneider (cultural historian), Eva Stenram (artist, photographer), Sérgio Taborda (artist), Robin Watkins (artist), Ivo Wessel (collector).

- 6 List of prototypes and ominous objects: miniature concrete reproduction of a segment of the Berlin Wall; set of engraved wooden forks and spoons for a bride and groom; silk tie with embroidered dogs; wall clock with one hand (Henrike Naumann); bottle of red wine with SI on the label (Tom McCarthy); broken tile made from the land of Spaxomin (Krista Belle Stewart); Madonna made from plastic and used in an Italian TV programme (Matthias Bruhn); sealed cardboard box as a proxy for an object non-present; written description of the contents of the cardboard box, 'Rund, schwer, glatt, schmutzig grün' (Iman Issa); Fur Wig 00, 1996; hairbrush made during the Debating Chamber with strands of hair from all participants (BLESS); welded steel letters also used as birds' houses (Manuel Raeder); the term 'fiction' as an instrument in law (Elhadj Abdoulaye Sène); two black-and-white photographs of displays on 'Africa' exhibited at the Ethnological Museum in Berlin, Dahlem (Margareta von Oswald); the word that is unpronounceable, ZZXJOAWN (Augustin Maurs); conversation between Marcel Broodthaers and his cat (Krist Gruijthuisen); fresh liver; instrument for smoothing the shaft of boots, once belonging to Lothar Baumgarten; wooden shoe-making lasts, unchanged since 2002; rat trap made in rattan, Lusanga, Democratic Republic of Congo; registration form for antiquities, Nigeria, 1974; wood mould of a head for shaping performance costumes, Nigeria, 2021 (Clémentine Deliss); box of thirty-six coloured wooden cubes (Matt Mullican); extract from P. K. Dick, *The Man in the High Castle*, 1962 (Sergio Taborda); neolithic arrowhead and a coccyx bone (Ana Prvački); two light boxes by Jenny Holzer with 'Truisms' and 'Inflammatory Sentences', 1996; electronic digital clock (Ivo Wessel); three pieces from the 'Flux Divorce Box' by Geoffrey Hendricks, 1973; collage made from a handwritten letter,

- a shipping envelope and a book placed in a wooden box by Alison Knowles, 1997 (Archivio Conz).
- 7 The term prototype is used by Issa Samb, co-founder of the Laboratoire Agit'Art in Dakar, who reiterates that no object in a museum is 'useless'. See Clémentine Deliss (2020, p. 18).
  - 8 Adjacency 'sets in motion heterogeneous elements, practices and forms', implying that there are generative qualities harboured in collections that can support the flourishing of collaborative practices of concept-work. See Korsby and Stavrianakis (2020, p. 53).
  - 9 For details on the Prototype Collection see *Metronome* no. 12, vols. I–IV (2021), available only by post or directly in person from KW Institute for Contemporary Art, Auguststrasse 69, 10117 Berlin. Further examples of this concept can be found in Deliss 2011.
  - 10 BLESS had suggested the same operation take place before the Debating Chamber, and that we send one prototype to each of the guest participants in advance of the session, to live with it and understand it further. Unfortunately, this proposal could not be executed for reasons to do with timing and organisational capacity.
  - 11 Sheep or lamb's liver, freshly removed, is an ancient medium for strategic divination. Recognised as the key metabolic point in the body, the liver offers the imprint of a life once lived while signalling a future yet to be enacted.
  - 12 To quote Korsby and Stavrianakis, 'What we take from these collaborative moments, and what we hope to pass on to others with this account, is to offer an alternative perspective on what scholarly work in the university might look like' (2020, p. 84).
  - 13 'Mêmes mots, mêmes maux', artist and philosopher Issa Samb in a short text sent to the author in 2003.
  - 14 The procedure is elaborated by Tom McCarthy and Matthias Bruhn.
  - 15 Some drops of sesame oil into water act as an additional oracle. Anor's reading is auspicious.
  - 16 A comment made by Kristian Vistrup Madsen, designated Observer of the Debating Chamber.

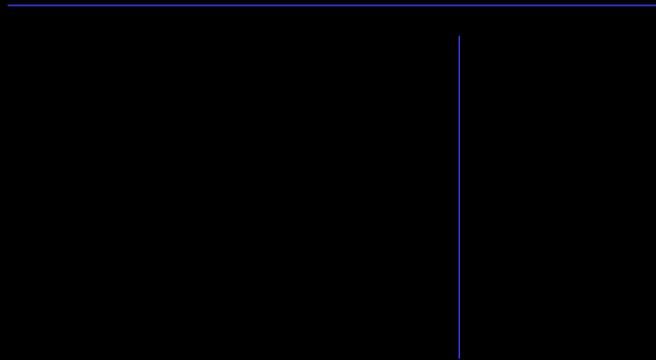
- 17 A comment made by Tom McCarthy during the Debating Chamber.
- 18 The works by Geoffrey Hendricks and Alison Knowles were kindly lent by Archivio Conz, Berlin.
- 19 This statement on the printed card was brought to the Debating Chamber by MM-U member and lawyer Elhadj Abdoulaye Sène. While this sentence has truly polysemantic reverberations, it also indicates the civic status of future residents of Germany. The government employs the unusual term of *Fiktionsbescheinigung* (Fictional Certificate) to represent the intermediary status of citizenship pending a residence permit.
- 20 An observation made by Kristian Vistrup Madsen.
- 21 Kristian Vistrup Madsen, notes.
- 22 The term is used by Léon Kruijswijk to designate significant ruptures in the Debating Chamber.
- 23 For an expanded discussion on syncopation, see *Metronome* no. 12, vol. II, 2021, 'Syncopathologies'.
- 24 See MacKenzie Wark.
- 25 The artists are Eva Stenram ([evastenram.net](http://evastenram.net)), Thais Nepomuceno ([thaisnepomuceno.art](http://thaisnepomuceno.art)) and Jakob Karpus, a former art student of mine at the HfBK (University of the Arts, Hamburg), who collaborated on [homemuseum.net](http://homemuseum.net) and set up the artists' research collective Birds of Knowledge.
- 26 See Foucault 2009.
- 27 Witnessed in 1978 at different galleries in Vienna (Galerie Nächst St. Stephan; Modern Art Galerie Grita Insam), and at the International Performance Festival Wien and Graz, organised by the Österreichische Kunstverein.
- 28 For an expanded curatorial model that brings the ethnological in dialogue with the neo-conceptual, see *Lotte or the Transformation of the Object*, curated by Clémentine Deliss for Styrian Autumn 1990, and Academy of Fine Arts, Vienna, 1991. Catalogue *Durch*, 1990, Akademische Druck und Verlagsanstalt, Graz (series produced by Peter Pakesch). Pakesch, P. (ed.). 1990. *Durch*, exh. cat. Academy of Fine Arts Vienna, Akademische Druck und Verlagsanstalt, Graz.

- 29 In 'The Artist as Ethnographer', published in 1995, Hal Foster states, '... rogue investigations of anthropology, like queer critiques of psychoanalysis, possess vanguard status today: it is along these lines that the critical edge is felt to cut most incisively.'
- 30 See Kwon 2002.
- 31 While visuals featured in the pages of *Texte zur Kunst*, its model was the American journal *October*, which was text-heavy.
- 32 *Metronome* issues nos. 1, 3 and 7 (1997–2001), available from the author on request. Not made for online circulation.
- 33 Mélanie is code for Senegal, referencing the pigment melanin.
- 34 In Deliss et al. 2021.
- 35 By referring to 'Tikanga', Tom McCarthy extends the proposition of Luke Willis Thompson that this Maori word is relevant to the constitution of the MM-U. Thompson states, 'The word is often mistranslated from Maori into English as protocol, but it's really a philosophy of law and a system of governance. I think the best translation is ritualized practices designed for survival.' In *Metronome* vol. III, no. 12, p. 3.
- 36 I am grateful to KW Institute for Contemporary Art for enabling me to hold the Debating Chamber, and to all members of the MM-U, the invited guests, and the team from KW for their support.

## REFERENCE LIST

- Deliss, C. 2020, *The Metabolic Museum*, Hatje Cantz, Berlin.
- Deliss, C. (ed.). 2021, "Proceedings of the Metabolic Museum-University", *Metronome* no.12, vols. I–IV, Berlin, KW Institute for Contemporary Art.
- Deliss, C. (ed.). 2011, *Object Atlas: Fieldwork in the Museum*, Kerber Verlag, Bielefeld.
- Foster, H. 1995, "The artist as ethnographer?", in G. Marcus and F. Myers (eds), *The Traffic in Culture: Refiguring Art and Anthropology*, University of California Press, Berkeley/Los Angeles/London.
- Foucault, M. 2009, *Security, Territory, Population: Lectures at the Collège de France, 1977–78*, trans. G. Burchell, Picador, London.
- Korsby, TM. and Stavrianakis, A. 2020, "Chapter Title", in Paul Rabinow (ed.), *The Privilege of Neglect: Science as a Vocation Revisited*, 3rd edition, ARC Anthropology of the Contemporary Research Collaboratory, Berkeley.
- Kwon, M. 2002, *One Place After Another: Site-Specific Art and Locational Identity*, MIT Press, Cambridge, MA.
- Pedersen, MA. and Morton Nielson, M. 2013, "Trans-Temporal Hinges: Reflections on an Ethnographic Study of Chinese Infrastructural Projects in Mozambique and Mongolia", *Social Analysis* vol. 57, no. 1, viewed 3 January 2022, <https://www.berghahnjournals.com/view/journals/social-analysis/57/1/sa570109.xml>.
- Rabinow, P. 2014, *Research Dialog with Paul Rabinow 10.11.2014*, online video, 29 December, viewed 9 January 2022, <https://vimeo.com/115589641>.
- Reichert, K. 2021, *Krypto-Kunst: Digitale Bildkulturen*, Verlag Klaus Wagenbach, Berlin.
- Samb, I. 1997. "And This Time That Chases after Us...", trans. C. Deliss, *Metronome*, no. 1, London.
- Valéry, P. 1921, *Eupalinos or the Architect*, trans. Clémentine Deliss.

# CASE STUDIES



ARCHIVING  
LIVE  
PERFORMANCE  
ART: THE CASE  
OF OTOBONG  
NKANGA

Lotte Bode

---

*When, in 2019, the Nigeria-born and Belgium-based visual and performance artist Otobong Nkanga reached out to the Museum of Contemporary Art Antwerp (M HKA) and the Flemish Centre for Art Archives (CKV) to examine how her performances could enter into the collection of the museum, she wanted to ensure their afterlife would still be 'alive'. Because artist and institution joined forces in creating new ways of thinking about archiving performance, this case became a pilot research project in the quest of the Flemish Centre for Art Archives (CKV) to research methodologies for archiving performance art.<sup>1</sup> This contribution will offer a compilation of three in-depth interviews and one group conversation with Nkanga. It reflects on the way her work asks for 'a breathing archive', a notion she introduces herself. Listening to the artist and starting from her own vocabulary, Nkanga's case can be a way to approach some problems of archiving live performance art in museums.<sup>2</sup>*

**L'Internationale's Our Many Europes-programme focuses on the 1990s, the period in which the world started turning into a 'global village', and for you the time in which you migrated from Nigeria to Europe. In this period, more and more artists started to interrogate the self-evidentiary claims of the archive by reading it against the grain (Foster 2004). Also among historians, literary critics and anthropologists, the archive was elevated to new analytic status with**

**distinct billing, worthy of scrutiny of its own. The archive started to shift from being approached as source to subject (Stoler 2009, pp. 44–6). What does the archive mean for your work?**

I like to think about the archive as a breathing entity. Breathing means the work has to have a life in response to the amount of oxygen there is in the space at the time. When it comes to archiving my performative work, a crucial principle will be the idea of evolvment, which points at a certain flexibility in the way of archiving while also allowing the archived materials to change over time. This approach is in contrast with the classic archivist point of view, which revolves around preservation and is more static. Evolvment is in line with the spirit of my work, since there are different ways in which it evolves: each time the work is different – unlike a theatre or dance piece that is rehearsed and follows the same scenario more or less.

Transmission can be for a younger generation or other groups and is not (or at least not necessarily) about arresting or fixing the transmitted. Griots from Senegal or Mali, for example, know the stories of families and know the socio-economic positioning within a family. This knowledge is stored in the mind, in memories, in objects, in places, etc. Through touch and smell the knowledge is transmitted to younger people. Someone can put the history back outside into a community and remind people of it. This is extremely breathable: there is a physical archive in the continuation of touching the earth, the material, knowing that this tree has to be planted here, in the cloth and in the symbols. It is not something that is locked up within an institution.

A crisis can occur in the case of war or the displacement of people: for example, in the form of slavery, it breaks the archive and the transmission. Within Western structures, you can

lock things down. In this context, the paradox is that cutting the oxygen is very crucial to make sure that it is kept alive.

**The notion of ‘the breathing archive’ also hints at the place your performances take within your oeuvre. You create installations, sculptures, textile pieces and drawings, and very often these material objects are ‘activated’ through live performance. In the performance *Taste of a Stone: Itiat esa Ufok* (2010), for example, you activated the installation *Taste of a Stone* (2010–ongoing). How did this activation work?**

I performed five to nine hours for a few days in a row. The setting for *Taste of a Stone: Itiat esa Ufok* considered the place – the courtyard of Bait Khalid Ibrahim Heritage Area in Sharjah – as a space of contemplation. I fell in love with the space when I first saw it, because of the trees in the middle and because you could hear birds chirping away [makes bird whistling noises]. I had already made the installation *Taste of a Stone* in Copenhagen, but without the performance and without the placing inside a museum. Immediately, I had a vision that the space would work if I made this installation with the stones and rocks.

We had white gravel in the space and twelve rocks taken from the Fujairah Mountain in the Emirates. I also printed about ten or twelve poems on stones and twelve photographic images on Galala stones. The images came from different places in the world: Curaçao, the Emirates, Nigeria, Senegal. ... Each image had a resonance to the Emirates, even though they were from different places. The water, the sea, made me feel like ‘oh my god, this reminds me of the île de Gorée in Senegal’, and the patched houses made me think of Curaçao. It made sense to be there.

When I was in the Emirates installing the work, I also found some tropical plants close to my own history and



Otobong Nkanga, *From Where I Stand: Glimmer*, 2015. Installation view at M HKA.  
Photo: Christine Clinckx



**Welcome**





memories. The papaya tree also grew in Festac [Town], the place where we lived in Nigeria, and the Queen of the Night, which you only smell at night, was part of my childhood. The papaya tree, the Queen of the Night and the mango tree became the plants that I performed with. I'd sit with the trees and perform with them when people came. I'd also ask people to vote whether they wanted a dance of the Queen of the Night, a song, a story close to home or something else. The Queen of the Night was mainly the plant on my head, but sometimes I would carry the papaya tree or the mango tree. Carrying the papaya tree was hardcore, because it was heavy and long [laughs]!

Because the Queen of the Night is also an important plant in Asia – other names are Hasna Hena or Raatraani – performing with it made me dance with my hands in the style of typical Asian or Indian movements [gestures with her hands]. The plant is evoking different histories. Even though the Queen of the Night originally comes from the Martinique area, it moved to different parts of the world. In the performance I talk about the movement from the islands into Asia. *Taste of a Stone: Itiat esa Ufok* also tells you about the histories of movements of materials, goods, plants, bodies, people.

The performance entailed stories that I'd researched, not only about the plants, but also about the printed plates. Sometimes I'd read the poems that I've written and tell the story of how the poems came to be. I would talk about the rocks from the Fujairah Mountain and what it meant for them to be there. I'd talk about the people that laboured to put the rocks there: mostly Indian or Pakistani people that have come in to work. You're not meant to talk about these kinds of labour issues. So, it's a subversive way to talk about labour, exploitation, but also things that are similar, similarities of other spaces, sweat. ... While I'm sweating under the heat of the sun during

my performance, the men that moved the stones also sweated. I'm telling the audience that they're sitting on a stone, put there by five men who laboured on it, withered from overwork and time, and not getting enough money to live and go back, and at the same time you're watching me sweat while I perform for you. You're making a connection, creating narratives.

From there the performance could break into a song, for example one that my mother taught me in a courtyard. You're shifting from a place of being conscious of the material you're on, labour, pain, tiredness, body, withering, into a moment of calming down your anxiousness, realising that we're under the blue sky which is the same everywhere. From a moment of water to a poem about someone that is stuck in between worlds at the crossroads. Those are the histories of many people who come to the Emirates to work: they don't have enough money to go back or to stay, and meanwhile their energy is being used and wasted without a future, because they're not growing. And then from growth, you can talk about the plant. This plant will grow under the sun if you give it water. Water gives the opportunity to talk about the sea. So, *Taste of a Stone* existed by connecting different keywords that allowed it to shift from places of criticism to places of soothing, growth, connectivity. That's how it could be nine hours long [laughs]!

**The way you describe this performance is telling of the way your performative practice develops in general. Your performances are continuously evolving themselves, but also part of a complex network. Can you illustrate this?**

There's a statue that has the image of Virgin Mary, but in the Candomblé religion it would represent an African deity, or Orisha, called Yemanjá.<sup>3</sup> It was a way to subvert the system.

Every person projects her or his own cultural background on the statue. It shows how certain works can shift and don't have to be stable. Different people read the statue differently.

In *Taste of Stone: Itiat esa Ufok* a lady from the audience, Patricia Falguières, referred to the caryatides. She is a researcher on museums, tombs and graveyards and those kinds of topics at École des hautes études en sciences sociales in Paris. The performance made her realise how the body functions as architecture and how the work is always shifting. I, myself, hadn't thought of the performance that way yet. I could take this image further into another work. Thus, due to the conversation with the woman and so much more, *Diaspore* (2014–ongoing) but also *Carved to Flow* (2017) became possible.

*Taste of A Stone* and *Diaspore* always come together and are difficult to see as separate events. ... The displacement of the body is central: people who are displaced like plants. Queen of the Night is a plant that connects *Taste of a Stone* and *Diaspore*. The connection doesn't come from the title of the work but from the elements. *Carved to Flow* takes up everything. The link with Queen of the Night is, however, not necessarily formal, but also conceptual.

**The classic Western adherence to one single 'original' work of art seems to be in conflict with the premises of your artistic practice.<sup>4</sup> How do you look at this?**

Some of my performances were not even recorded in the first place. Next to that, I don't remember exactly what I said in each performance. Some things are meant to be lost. Museums generally want to have everything, that are locked up and contained. The way I look at it, some things are just not meant to be there. Memory also plays a trick on us. Tangible materials exist

to make us know that something existed, but within those fragments there are gaps. What's interesting is to think about the gaps. They can be left as gaps or filled with other things.

Tangible attributes can leave a pattern of the existence of a performance, just like material patterns can also indicate customs or rituals. Lighting a candle in a Catholic monastery, for example, leaves candle wax on the altar. This way the next person knows where he or she should put the candle and a pattern is created. For me, documenting comes through accumulation. This principle of accumulation is a way of archiving performance, as it also involves actions and interactions that can be repeated again and again. It's a gesture that takes place constantly and shifts and stains the material or gives it another kind of pattern or feel.

**Your performance practice consists of material, digital, immaterial and spiritual elements. How do we render visible what is left of your performative practice?**

Just like in oral history, it's important for the core of the performance to stay the same. When someone tells me a story in oral traditions, it's not just meant for me, but it's meant to be given to the next person. And the precise form of the story doesn't have to stay intact, but the essence has to be kept. You can adjust the story as you like and add your own accents as long as the message is kept. I'm interested in the way things can collapse or shift if you look at oral history and transmission. It should breathe, but it has the essence, it has the core. For example, when a performance prescribes you to behave like a robot, to have a certain tension, it can be up to you however you take that gesture.<sup>5</sup>

Otobong Nkanga, *Taste of a Stone: Itiat Esa Ufok*, 2010.  
Installation view at Sharjah Biennial 11. Courtesy of  
the Sharjah Art Foundation





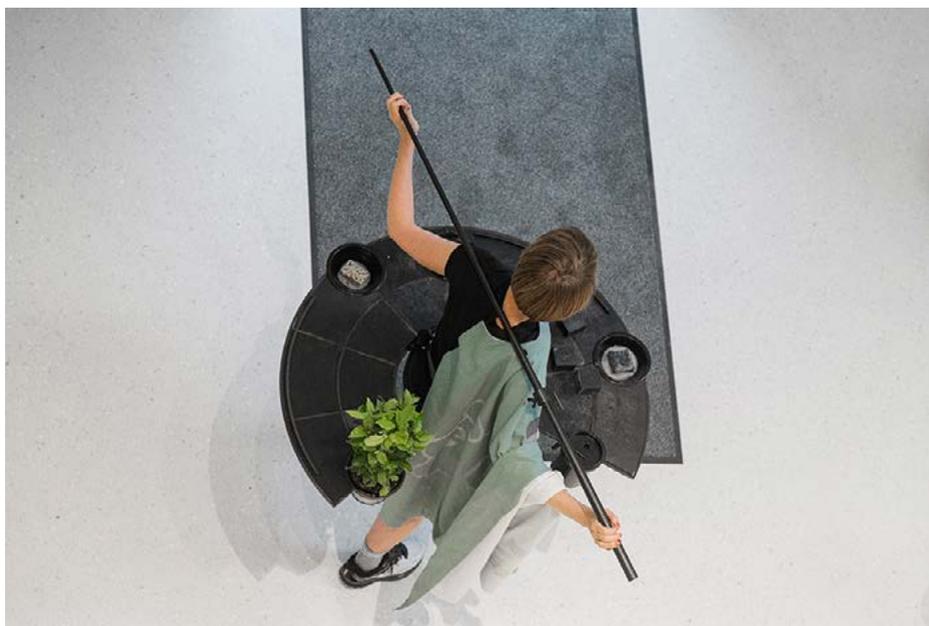
Otobong Nkanga, *Diaspore*, 2014.  
Installation view at 14 Rooms, Art Basel.  
Photo: Mark Niedermann

For some works there is a *prototype*, for some works there is a material archive. For example, *Diaspore* has prototypes: a digital file with the drawing of the floor, the costumes, explanations.<sup>6</sup> When the performance needs to be done, you know exactly which materials to get for it. And if one wants to keep the materials of a first performance, like the plant pots for example, then one can archive those and they can be used for another performance. But to start with, there is just the prototype, the kind of instructions. Because, I mean, each body will be different. So, you have to get a shirt for that person, you have to get pants for that person, you have to get shoes. You can't give someone else's size to another person who doesn't fit in it. Certain things, like the plants, will have to be given out for someone to take care of them. Unless the museum says: we plant *Queen of the Night*. Then I'm not sure it will be able to survive [laughs]!

**Your performances seem to ask for a modular system to which new items and connections in all possible directions can be added while users can decide how to navigate between different layers of information. How do you visualise this?**

I'm thinking of an online platform, a rhizomic flowchart in which you can see many clusters under one topic. I compare it with a world map with flight connections in which big conglomerates like New York, Paris, Shanghai or Beijing form heavy ports from which tonnes of tentacles depart and arrive. So, you see the tentacles of how one connects to another. Clusters connect with it each other, and keywords connect with each other.<sup>7</sup>

When you click on a keyword, it opens up more keywords and clusters of words. ... I think it's not just the title of



Otobong Nkanga, *Carved to Flow*, 2017.  
Installation view at documenta 14, Kassel.  
Photo: Fabian Fröhlich

the work, but key materials that allow for a thing to have tentacles. The core words could be 'labour', 'landscape', 'architecture', 'support structures' and so on. Some things will repeat themselves under all five or all ten structures. Then some are isolated within some. We have to find words that can be pregnant with many things.

**Since the personal input of your performers, co-creators, but also audience members – hence the example of the spectator mentioning the caryatides – feed your oeuvre, giving these actants a place in your archive could also be a way of expanding. Can people be part of the archive?**

It's an interesting way of thinking of archive in the sense that it's not only material, but it could be people – and they know they're part of it. I think this is quite unique in relation to how a lot of institutions think about archiving. When we talk about memory, it's not a static thing, and the ways people experience things differ so much. The way I think something went, might be totally different for someone else because it's seen from another perspective. I think it's interesting to get other ways of recording a story, to get several possibilities of understanding what a work means or how it's seen from another perspective. There could be a core group of people that we ask to be part of an archive as human beings.

Next to that, I think there should be an open source, link or place where people can add keywords, photographs, materials, texts, thoughts, references. If the contribution extends the geographies of a similarity – an aesthetic similarity or conceptual similarity – even if it wasn't originally part of my thinking, then it's important to add it [to the core structure]. The core comes from the place of thinking of the artist and

the structures that were placed at that time, but it doesn't exclude that there're other knowledges that could be references to the work.

## ENDNOTES

- 1 Currently, the CKV is reflecting on the presence of performance in the M HKA collection: What are the needs of artists associated with the M HKA? How can the museum meet these needs? The CKV wants to build up expertise on archiving performance in order to share methodologies and tools with other museums and archiving institutions in Flanders. Lotte Bode conducted the research from April 2021 until April 2022. See <https://ckv.muhka.be/en/in-de-praktijk/research-project-archiving-performance/>.
- 2 Museums have, since the 1990s, become increasingly interested in acquiring and preserving live performance art pieces – even if it confronts them with tantalising dilemmas. For a useful overview of the ongoing debates on the inclusion of live performance art in museum and archival collections, both from an institutional and scholarly point of view, see Giannachi and Westerman (2018).
- 3 Candomblé is a religious movement in South America, especially in Brazil, which developed among Afro-Brazilian communities amid the Atlantic slave trade of the sixteenth to nineteenth centuries. It arose through the blending of the traditional religions brought to Brazil by enslaved West and Central Africans, the majority of them Yoruba, Fon and Bantu, and the Roman Catholic teachings of the Portuguese colonialists who then controlled the area. Candomblé doesn't know a central authority and it involves the veneration of spirits known as *orixás*, deities whose names and attributes derive from traditional West African gods and who are equated with Roman Catholic saints. Yemanjá is a major water spirit from the Yoruba religion, who is often syncretised with either Our Lady of Regla in the Afro-Cuban diaspora or various other Virgin Mary figures of the Catholic Church. See 'Candomblé',

Wikipedia, 14 September 2021, <https://en.wikipedia.org/w/index.php?title=Candomblé&oldid=1044264854>; and ‘Yemoja’, Wikipedia, 14 September 2021, <https://en.wikipedia.org/w/index.php?title=Yemoja&oldid=1044205048>.

- 4 Archiving methods in the West are typically geared towards principles such as provenance, original order and cataloguing, which taken together ought to facilitate both the preservation and consultation of primary resources (see Millar 2017).
- 5 Nkanga also indicates to be inspired by Allan Kaprow and his view on Happenings. Kaprow created ‘scores’, texts that captured only the ‘central metaphor’ of his Happenings, in order for them to be ‘reinvented’ according to the changing circumstances. Nkanga herself reinvented Kaprow’s *Baggage* and called her version *Baggage 1972.2007/08*.
- 6 The performance *Diaspore* (2014–ongoing) has been performed in Basel, Shanghai and Berlin, each time by a different group of women with a Sub-Saharan African background. Moving through the white space with Queen of the Night plants on their heads, the women sing songs they associate with their individual African origins or tell stories about their own migration journeys. For this performance Nkanga also created a score.
- 7 Nkanga gives the example of the website: <https://visuwords.com/>.

## REFERENCE LIST

- Foster, H. 2004, "An Archival Impulse", *October* vol. 110, pp. 3–22.
- Giannachi, G. and Westerman, J. (eds), 2018, *Histories of Performance Documentation: Museum, Artistic, and Scholarly Practices*, Routledge, London/New York.
- Millar, L. 2017, *Archives: Principles and Practices*, 2nd edition, Facet Publishing, London.
- Stoler, A. 2009, *Along the Archival Grain: Epistemic Anxieties and Colonial Common Sense*, Princeton University Press, Princeton, NJ.
- Wikipedia, "Candomblé", viewed 14 September 2021, <https://en.wikipedia.org/w/index.php?title=Candomblé&oldid=1044264854>.
- Wikipedia, "Yemoja", viewed 14 September 2021, <https://en.wikipedia.org/w/index.php?title=Yem%E1%BB%8Dja&oldid=1044205048>.

# SOME THINGS LAST A LONG TIME.

The case of the *Greetings  
from Jerusalem Avenue*  
by Joanna Rajkowska  
from the collection of the  
Museum of Modern Art  
in Warsaw

Zofia Czartoryska

---

In 2002, the artist Joanna Rajkowska planted a life-sized artificial palm tree in the middle of the busy roundabout in the centre of Warsaw. It was supposed to stay there for a year. The art world was suspicious, and the general public was furious that the work took the spot of the traditional Christmas tree. The difficult Polish-Jewish past, evoked by its title, was a polarising issue as well. Some people argued that it is a ‘breach of decorum’ to locate such a piece on the landmark historic axis of the Royal Route and Jerusalem Avenue. Yet, *Greetings from Jerusalem Avenue* became the most iconic project in the public space in Poland after 1989. The work proved to have life of its own, constantly changing its shape, renewing and shuffling its meanings and triggering actions of many different constituents.

Part of the initial reluctance towards the work came from the fact that nobody really knew what it actually was, even the artist herself (Rajkowska 2012). A sculpture, an installation, a monument, a public art project or just a piece of urban design? What tradition can it be ascribed to? Is it kitsch or a post-conceptual masterpiece? Without a doubt, it was a complete stranger – both to the traditionalist majority and the critically driven artistic milieu at the turn of the millennia. It was only at about this time, that Rosalind Krauss coined the term ‘post-medium condition’ (Krauss 1999), to describe new hybrid forms of art that cannot be captured using traditional divides between the genres and disciplines.



Mock-up of Rajkowska's Palm Tree.  
Photo: Joanna Rajkowska.  
Courtesy of the artist and Museum  
of Modern Art in Warsaw

When we analyse two decades of the palm's history by looking at how it *acts* and not the way it *appears*, we start to see that it is a piece with a deeply performative nature. It can be well described as a potent non-human actor (or rather an actress), to borrow the term from Bruno Latour's actor-network theory, used to capture a specific agency of things that 'work' (i.e., have an impact on social, cultural and material reality) (Latour 2007). The double meaning of the word used by Latour is very accurate in this case, as it is an active object, which functions in a theatrical way. Its material presence frames the city as a stage – it is continuously used as both a prop and scenography for happenings, but it also performs in different roles as a commonly anthropomorphised persona.

Since 2014, *Greetings from Jerusalem Avenue* has been under care of the Museum of Modern Art in Warsaw, officially as a deposit in the collection. The distinct inner mechanics of the work require a matching institutional approach, as it is not a dead object with a fixed appearance and meaning. Its location in the strategic public space and vulnerable physicality are other factors that make its preservation challenging. In the first part of this case study, the work will be reinterpreted as a piece of performance art and put in the broader historical context of the Polish live arts. In the second part, the strategy of museum's 'custodianship' over this performative, ongoing project is discussed.

## Historical Context

Joanna Rajkowska (b. 1968 in Bydgoszcz, Poland) has created public projects, objects, films and installations, as well as ephemeral actions and non-gallery situations. She studied painting at the Academy of Fine Arts in Kraków (1988–93) and continued her education in the State University of New York (1994–95). In the 1990s, she was mainly preoccupied with relationship between the physicality and psychology of a human, frequently in reference to her own body. The iconic work of

this period is *Satisfaction Guaranteed* (2000), in which she canned her bodily fluids and marketed them as consumer goods.

In the next decade, her art evolved into what Piotr Piotrowski called the ‘agoraphilia’ of the artists working in the post-communist context. He defines that as: ‘the drive to enter the public space, the desire to participate in that space, to shape public life, to perform critical and design functions for the sake of and within the social space’ (Piotrowski 2012, p. 7). Before 1989, access to the public space was fully controlled and limited by the state, and thus Eastern Europe, even until today, ‘with its distinctive history of totalitarian regimes, creates specific ideological and political frames for public art or art in the public sphere’ (Piotrowski 2012, p. 68). Agoraphobic tendencies of the politicians as well as the expectations of the public proved to outlive the old system, which resulted in controversies around the works of public art in the following years of political transformation. *Greetings from Jerusalem Avenue* serves as a good example, as it was openly attacked and sabotaged by the conservative mayor of Warsaw, Lech Kaczyński (later president of Poland), who perceived it as a culturally foreign element. Each side of the conflict had a different idea of how democratic values should be understood and what has the status of civic space – a place of consensus on the one hand, and the agonistic agora where conflicts and dissent can be voiced on the other (Piotrowski 2012, p. 63).

Rajkowska’s works in general belong to the long tradition of performance art in the public space in Poland. Rajkowska’s palm tree history can be traced back to provocative, absurdist happenings of futurist poets Anatol Stern and Aleksander Wat in the streets of Warsaw in the 1920s. The actions of these people – like the earlier manifestations of their Italian predecessors – questioned the conventions of traditional theatre, and as such mark the beginning of what came to be called performance in the visual arts (Goldberg 2011). During communist times, most performance art took place in niche artistic venues or private spaces (Bryzgel 2017). Yet there were still artists interested in



*Greetings from Jerusalem Avenue.*  
Photo: Joanna Rajkowska.  
Courtesy of the artist and Museum  
of Modern Art in Warsaw

the potential of action in the (highly oppressive) public realm. The experimental theatrical group Akademia Ruchu (Movement Academy), founded in 1973, and who are known for their ‘theatre of gestures and visual narrative’, performed more than 200 actions in the urban context. They examined the way avant-garde gestures acquire meanings in everyday situations. In *Europe* (1976, part of the collection of MSN) a busy street was blocked by a lot of performers running with banners with absurd phrases from a poem by Anatol Stern, which in the context of workers’ strikes at the time served as ‘performative political allegories’ (Akademia Ruchu 2006). Interestingly, AR frequently chose the symbolically loaded Warsaw Royal Route (where the palm tree is located), as a site for their performances: for instance, *Happy Day* (Akademia Ruchu 2006). Rajkowska’s *Greetings from Jerusalem Avenue* owes a lot to the tradition of these anarchist, Dadaistic, humorous yet political and (anti)theatrical undertakings.

A different approach was represented by a pioneer feminist performer, Ewa Partum. Nataša Petrešin-Bachelez sees her art as an example of the ‘resilient practices’ (Petrešin-Bachelez 2014, p. 214) of artists in the Eastern bloc who used their body as a medium of dissent in the oppressive public sphere. One of her performances took place outside of the gallery next to the Royal Palace (the beginning of the Royal Route), where the naked artist was confronted with wedding guests waiting for a ceremony – an extreme example of a ‘breach of decorum’. Rajkowska notes that for her, the palm tree is a substitute for a female body, a sort of mannequin (a term she borrows from another Jewish-Polish avant-garde writer and artist, Bruno Schulz) (Schulz 2013) to which she delegates her performance. What these performances have in common (with AR actions as well) is that they offer ‘disruptions to the routine use of public space’ (Petrešin-Bachelez 2014, p. 217).

Above all, *Greetings from Jerusalem Avenue* springs directly from the rich performative context of the 1990s (like the rise of a delegated performance, characterised by the separation of the work from its char-

ismatic creator) though the work cannot be unproblematically ascribed to any of the tendencies. It can be situated at the intersection of relational aesthetics, which was aimed at creating a situation of encounter and kindness between the public,<sup>1</sup> and the key paradigm in Polish art at the time – the critical art. As the artist has said, ‘sometimes it is necessary to unite, at other times to divide’ (Rajkowska 2012). The most famous piece of relational art in Poland is Paweł Althamer’s *Bródno 2000*, when the artist convinced over 200 families in a block of flats to take part in the action of forming the number ‘2,000’ on the façade of the building by turning off and on the lights at a fixed time. Rajkowska seems to share an interest in such temporary communities, for example when she states: ‘I don’t want people to understand one another. That’s not possible. I want them to be next to each other under the palm’ (Rajkowska 2002). Her own later work *Oxygenator* (2006) – a pond with air-ozonating equipment and benches around it, designed to form a place of encounter in a site with a difficult history and conflicted present – is another iconic example of the tendency in Polish art.

On the other hand, the palm is not detached from the antagonistic approach of critical artists of the time, whose strategy was more akin to one of putting a cat amongst pigeons. Their works were often drastic and provocative, aimed at uncovering uncomfortable truths about society. At first sight, the surreal, absurd palm tree is nothing like that, yet the outrage of the general public could suggest otherwise. In a recent interview, Rajkowska admitted that at the beginning it was a sort of a symbolic ‘whip to smash those who deserved it’, namely Polish anti-Semites.<sup>2</sup> Yet, when asked if she feels part of the critical tradition, she replied: ‘I’ve never been in the position of the external observer, who can point the finger at something or somebody. I’ve always felt the part of this oppression; my body was reacting to it from the inside’ (Rajkowska 2021).

A good example of this non-distanced criticism is the artist’s performance *Mea Shearim* (2001), which is the name of the orthodox

Joanna Rajkowska, *Oxygenator*, 2007.  
Photo: Joanna Rajkowska.  
Courtesy of the artist





Joanna Rajkowska in Israel, 2001.  
Photo: Artur Żmijewski.  
Courtesy of the artist and Museum  
of Modern Art in Warsaw



*Greetings from Jerusalem Avenue,*  
12 August 2006. Photo: Konrad Pustola.  
Courtesy of the artist and Museum  
of Modern Art in Warsaw



quarter of Jerusalem, and where the artist laid herself down on the pavement in order to disrupt the stiff gender conventions in the community and see what the reaction to the vulnerable ‘other’ (in this case a non-orthodox woman) would be. The raised stick, captured by the artist Artur Żmijewski, who documented the piece, showed that such a disruption is fiercely rejected. It was the experience of the visit to Israel during the turbulent time of the Second Intifada that gave birth to the most seminal work of the artist to date: *Greetings from Jerusalem Avenue*.

### **The Palm Tree as a Spectacle**

Her stay in Israel made the artist realise the void left by the absence of the Jewish community in Poland (before the Second World War, Warsaw was the second biggest Jewish city in the world after New York). For the first time, she noticed that one of the main streets in the city centre, Jerusalem Avenue, refers directly to Jewish inhabitants.<sup>3</sup> The alien, surreal element of the Middle Eastern landscape was supposed to highlight and challenge the invisibility of the street’s name but also refer to the migrant communities that make up the contemporary vibrant metropolis. At the same time, she emphasised that the work is a Dadaist joke that is supposed to baffle the viewer: ‘The palm tree relates to the expression that (in the Polish language) we use to describe something unthinkable, something outside our way of comprehension, something – to put it simply – absurd’ (Rajkowska 2002).

Yet, the palm did not end up as a material symbol of a difficult past or Eastern European sense of humour. If the visual arts are traditionally the field of production of objects and the performing arts produce emotions and experiences, then the palm tree is definitely closer to the latter. The performing arts have a very long history of ‘activities without the end product’ (Jackson 2020) (like theatrical performances), and the tacky artificial tree is not an end product of Rajkowska’s initial idea. The palm’s poor and provisional execution de-

rives from the fact that it has the ‘materiality of a prop or scenography, which people are not even looking at, they impose their own idea of a palm on it’ (Rajkowska 2021). The work is thus not an object (a sculpture or installation) but an ongoing spectacle on the urban stage, for which it serves as a scenography, prop and the lead actress.

The palm is a site-specific work located in a very scenic site – the crossing of two important axes: Jerusalem Avenue and the so-called Royal Route (a protected historical landmark, packed with palaces, state institutions and monuments). Its location at the traffic island in the middle of a roundabout gives the impression of an exposed stage that can be viewed from 360 degrees. This impression is even more intense when the work is seen from the distant perspective of two crossing streets. Its urban surroundings create an effect of theatrical wings, with multiple compositional planes overlapping each other. Thus, it unveils the whole city as a scene of an ongoing urban spectacle. When one enters the central stage (illegally, apart from the time of registered manifestations when the traffic is blocked), he or she automatically becomes involved in a situation dictated by the scenography of the palm. For some, it’s freeing, for others, uncomfortable. The participant in the ultra-nationalist march who was passing by the palm, felt the need to ‘incense’ it with the flag of Christ the King of Poland, imitating a gesture of sanctification performed by the priest in the Catholic Church with a censer. The stage is more eagerly taken over by protesters from the liberal and left-wing side of the political spectrum, who make use of the ‘otherness’ and humour of this scenography. Good examples are the Lesbos Island-themed happening during the Pride Parade in 2018 and the choreographic piece performed during the Women’s Strike in 2020. Most common though, is an apolitical, spontaneous, creative use of the work – the palm is probably one of the most iconic spots for posed photographs in Warsaw, and the ideas range from weddings to *Miami Vice*-inspired photo sessions.

March of Independence, 2019.  
Photo: Joanna Rajkowska.  
Courtesy of the artist and  
Museum of Modern Art in  
Warsaw



Performance during the  
All-Poland Woman's Strike  
in Warsaw, October 2020.  
Photo: Robert Jaworski.  
Courtesy of the artist





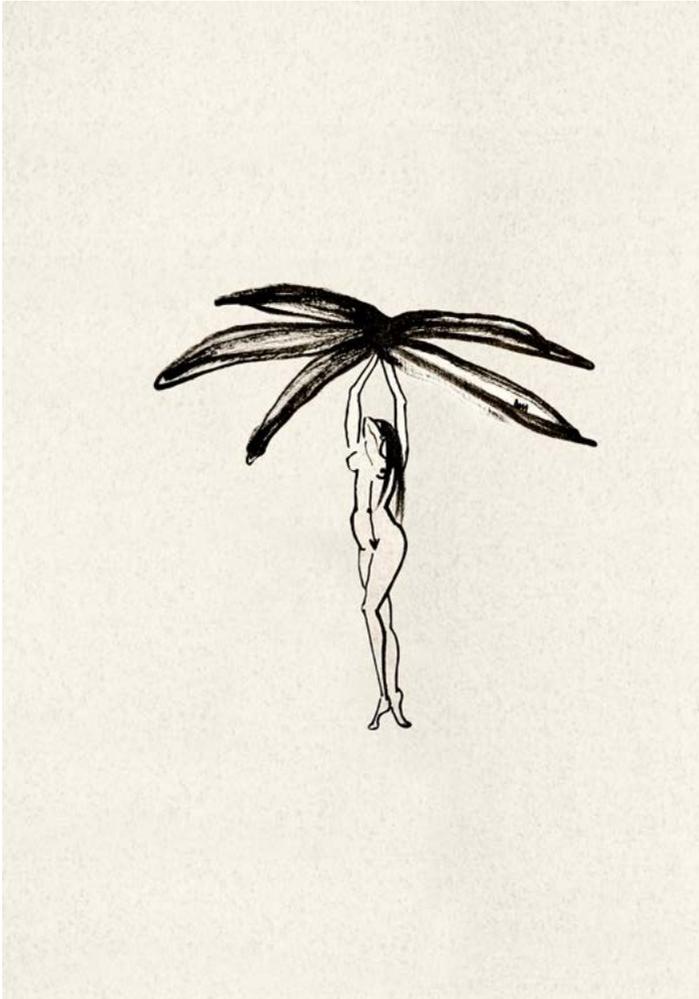
*Lesbos*, performance by Czarne Szmaty collective during Equality Parade, 2018. Photo: Pat Mic. Courtesy of the artists



*Greetings from Jerusalem Avenue.* Photo: Błażej Żuławski. Courtesy of the artist and Museum of Modern Art in Warsaw

As the artist stated in a recent interview: ‘She’s like a bold, promiscuous woman, coming from nowhere, without a family history. She’s giving herself to everybody, one after another’ (Rajkowska 2020). She refers to the fact that the object proved to be an open signifier, an empty frame that can bear very different meanings, given by numerous performers who use it as a prop in their own actions. The first notable action of this kind was when the gigantic nurse cap was attached to the top of scaffolding (during one of many renovations) as a sign of solidarity with striking female healthcare workers (inspired by the feminist philosopher Ewa Majewska). Other notable examples are the hanging of the keffiyeh during a pro-Palestinian support action (in 2011) and an anarchist protest ‘Bread Not Games’ during the 2012 European Football Championship. The palm served as a pole for the Ukrainian flag already twice – during the Euromaidan in 2014 and in 2022 after the Russian invasion of Ukraine. Claire Bishop notes that today activists prove to be the most radical political performers, and the fact that Rajkowska’s work is so eagerly used by them (with support of the artist) is a good example of that (Bishop 2020).

Quite early on, the palm started to be anthropomorphised in discourse, which helps to show that its specific agency is intuitively perceived by the public. During its recent ‘18th Birthday’ celebrations, its life cycle was described as follows: the first decade was childhood, when the tree inspired cheerful, celebratory happenings and (after the initial aversion vanished) became a symbol of a contemporary diverse metropolis. Around 2010, when the political situation got tense, the palm tree became a ‘palmitsan’<sup>4</sup> – a left-wing activist. In 2019, the most important happening on the palm tree so far took place. For the *Death of the Palm Tree* (commissioned by the UN agency for the World Environment Day), its green fake leaves got replaced with real dry leaves of a palm, which died due to climate anomalies in the south of France. The Brechtian ‘distancing effect’ (inherent to the concept of the palm) was reversed – suddenly the fake tree *died for real*. Its gruesome



Matylda Damięcka, *Untitled*, 2020. Courtesy of the artist and Museum of Modern Art in Warsaw



Palm tree as a nurse. Photo: Joanna Rajkowska.  
Courtesy of the artist and Museum of Modern Art  
in Warsaw

appearance was widely covered by the media, including the *New York Times*. It was a moment when an entirely new understanding of this exotic plant started to dominate the narrative – one of warning against a global catastrophe. The two recent delegated, poetic performances *Letters from the Palm Tree* (2020 and 2021, co-authored by the artist and Sebastian Cichocki) mark the period of the tree’s ‘maturity’. The first-person poetic manifestos are reminders for the public of the values of solidarity and responsibility for the other, phrased from the imagined perspective of a tree-sage. The first one referred to the climate crisis and the latter to the refugee crisis on the Polish-Belarusian border in 2021 (Rajkowska, Cichocki 2020).

These three main ways in which the palm tree functions – as a scenography, prop and actress – can be captured with the overarching term of ‘spectacle’. It points to the fact that it is a strictly time-based work, that can only be understood by following the action on the scene, both short term (during a single performance) and long term (with two decades of its constant evolution). Keeping in mind Latour’s idea that a thing is never simple – it is a hybrid network of human and non-human actors – it seems that this term comes closest to capturing the active, complex and *spectacular* character of this work. While appropriating the terms of theatre studies, it’s important to note that the piece is theatrical in a ‘postdramatic’ way, as defined by Hans-Thies Lehmann (Lehmann, 2016). He refers to the tendency in contemporary theatre that is centred not around text but rather around visual narratives and was strongly influenced by performance in visual arts (Dadaism, Fluxus, etc.). Hence, *Greetings from Jerusalem Avenue* is an excellent example of a post-medium work of art, which crosses boundaries between the disciplines.

### **‘Collecting’ the Palm Tree**

The palm tree was erected with support from the Ujazdowski Castle Centre for Contemporary Art and a private foundation, and it was



Keffiyeh on the Palm Tree (protest against joint meeting of the governments of Poland and Israel in occupied Jerusalem), 2011. Photo: Joanna Rajkowska. Courtesy of the artist and Museum of Modern Art in Warsaw



142

Palm tree during Euro 2012. Photo: Jan Gebert. Courtesy of the artist and Museum of Modern Art in Warsaw



Death of the Palm Tree, project commissioned by UNEP/GRID–Warsaw Centre and run by the artist Joanna Rajkowska in collaboration with Syrena Communications, supported by the Museum of Modern Art in Warsaw. Photo: Marek Szczepański. Courtesy of the artist



143

The Palm House. Photo: Sisi Cecylia. Courtesy of the artist and Museum of Modern Art in Warsaw

supposed to be dismantled after one year. After a protest action from notable figures of Polish culture (who acted under the name The Palm's Defence Committee) the work was kept, yet despite the offer to donate it to the city, it remained the private property of the artist (once a city official even called it 'her private problem' in a conversation). The fact that in the late 2000s the work became widely recognised and accepted, present in pop culture, and frequently covered by the media (even tabloids), didn't change its precarious situation. Rajkowska herself was fully legally liable for its highly problematic maintenance and funding. The turning point was a fierce controversy around the work in 2012.

During the Euro Football Championship in Poland, city officials installed a huge, inflated football on the roundabout with no consultation. Together with anarchists, Rajkowska conducted an action of protest against the corrupt organisation of this massive event: they decided to deface the palm by removing the majority of the leaves and placing the banner 'Bread Not Games' on the top of it (which police took down after a couple of hours). All the fans coming to see the games in Warsaw passed the ugly looking stump. 'In my eyes, you went a long way from an artist to a terrorist, not giving a damn about, contrary to what you say, the good of the city. ... The palm has become part of the Warsaw landscape and as such is no longer the property of an artist but belongs to the whole Warsaw community', read one of many letters that she received (Rajkowska 2013). It sparked a debate about the ownership of the work of art in the public space. Whose palm is it? Who should decide about how it looks and what it communicates? And who should pay for it? Rajkowska always wanted the palm to be a common good, yet at this point it was obvious that a work of such an importance cannot be in the hands of politicians nor a private collector or sponsor. In 2013, the Museum of Modern Art in Warsaw started to support the project and soon after signed a contract for deposit in the collection. It was agreed that the project will be jointly curated by the artist and the

museum. The relationship of the museum to this vulnerable work was tenderly called a ‘custodianship’, whereas the ownership remained with the artist. It came in line with the ongoing debates about collecting performance, which, as it was argued, should be more about ‘preserving and protecting them, presenting them for the public’ rather than making it a possession of a single institution (Schouweiler 2011).

Without a doubt, this canonical work of contemporary Polish art fits perfectly into the narrative and character of the collection of the Museum of Modern Art in Warsaw. Yet for the piece whose *raison d’être* is responding to the changing context and being used by active citizens, the institutional policies pose a challenge as well. Entering the public collection by acquisition would impose legal restrictions that could strongly affect the spontaneous use of the work in public space. Another issue that could affect its use could be a change of leadership in the institution, one with an abruptly different approach to art (i.e., an ‘agoraphobic’ one), which could result in turning it into a politically neutral dead object. Thus, the custodianship model allows flexibility that is well suited for this singular piece of art.

As a ‘foster parent’, the institution took over the tiresome bureaucratic processes around this ‘non-road object’ (its bizarrely named legal status), endless repairs of its fragile structure and shared the responsibility for more or less radical happenings that occur around it. Yet, more importantly, it engaged the instruments of the museum to preserve the rich (and ongoing) history of this urban object. In 2015, the museum digitalised and published online the extensive archive of the project gathered by the artist, including preparatory material, photographic documentation, documents and press clippings, which allowed the performative character of the work to be better appreciated.<sup>5</sup> Furthermore, the museum organised a public call to complement the archive with crowdsourced visual material. Today, it is continued via the Instagram profile @warszawskapalma, where pictures of users are reposted together with ‘official’ documentation.

Despite all these efforts, the work is still not widely acknowledged as a hybrid, performative work. Those who encountered the work at the roundabout, until recently had limited access to its rich history. A change occurred in 2020, when, for its widely celebrated '18th Birthday', the work gained an exhibition space in the vitrine of the nearby building, called 'the palm house'. The first exhibition presented memorabilia (like an empty nest that was found on the tree-top), the *Letter from the Palm* and a slideshow from the most seminal moments of its life, complemented with the written personal commentary of the artist. It was the artist's way of overcoming the challenge of a dead archive – a set of images that do not preserve the ideas, stories and emotions that are the most important components of such happenings. Though not planned as a Beuys-style 'social sculpture' that fosters creativity in the public, it has become a work of art that is co-authored by dozens of people who took and take part in this ongoing urban spectacle. It is their experience that should also be preserved in the collection in order to preserve *Greetings from Jerusalem Avenue* as a work of performance art. The next important step should be the creation of an archive of the oral history of actions involving the palm. The current ideas include a film documentary, an immersive walk/podcast series or cooperation with a storyteller who could preserve and transfer the stories further in a performative way.

The artist remains personally involved in the project, yet she claims she has no urge to control how the palm is being activated. Most of the actions happen spontaneously, without asking for permission anyway. After all, the palm is an 'adult' and has a whole life ahead.

## ENDNOTES

- 1 The necessity to unite was an important theme in the public debate around the civic society, social capital and democracy in the years of transformation. Sociologists were frequently quoting the condition of “sociological vacuum” (a term coined in 1979 by Stefan Nowak), which is still used to describe the lack of trust and sense of community in the Polish society.
- 2 It was the time of the fierce public debate over complicity of the Poles in the Holocaust, triggered by Jan Tomasz Gross book *Neighbours* (2000), about the mass murder in Jedwabne in 1941. Polish-Jewish relationships were important issue of the critical art in Poland.
- 3 It is named after the eighteenth century New Jerusalem – a Jewish merchant settlement, dismantled after the legal battle from their Christian competitors.
- 4 A term coined by the curator Sebastian Cichocki.
- 5 *Joanna Rajkowska, Greetings from Jerusalem Avenue* (section of the online catalogue of the Artists Archives), viewed 10 January 2022, <https://artmuseum.pl/en/archiwum/pozdrowienia-z-alej-jerozolimskich>.

## REFERENCE LIST

- Akademia Ruchu, "Europa" (entry in the online catalogue of the collection), Museum of Modern Art in Warsaw, viewed 10 January 2022, <https://artmuseum.pl/en/kolekcja/praca/akademia-ruchu-europa-egz-6-6-1-ap>.
- Akademia Ruchu, "Happy day" (entry in the online catalogue of the Film Archive), Museum of Modern Art in Warsaw, viewed 10 January 2022, <https://artmuseum.pl/pl/filmoteka/praca/akademia-ruchu-happy-day>.
- Bishop, C. *Czarne pudełko, biały sześcian, szara strefa* [Black Box, White Cube, Gray Zone], in: *Performans*, Centrum Sztuki Współczesnej Zamek Ujazdowski, 2020.
- Bryzgel, A. 2017, *Performance art in Eastern Europe since 1960*, Manchester University Press.
- "Palm Tree Urban Guerilla: Joanna Rajkowska in Conversation with Sebastian Cichocki", *Przekrój* magazine (2012), viewed 10 January 2022, <http://www.rajkowska.com/en/palmyzantka-miejska-sebastian-cichocki-rozmawia-z-joanna-rajkowska>.
- Goldberg, R. 2011, *Performance Art. From Futurism to the present*, Thames & Hudson, London.
- Jackson, S. 2020, "Performans: Jak to robimy teraz?" [The Way We Perform Now], in: J. Zielińska *Performans*, Centrum Sztuki Współczesnej Zamek Ujazdowski, Warsaw.
- Krauss, R. 1999, *Voyage on the North Sea: Art in the Age of the Post-Medium condition*, Thames & Hudson, London.
- Latour, B. 2007, *Reassembling the Social: An Introduction to Actor-Network-Theory*, Oxford University Press, Oxford.
- Lehmann, HT. 2016, "Postdramatic", in S. Jackson and P. Marincola (eds), *Terms of Performance* (online publication), <http://intermsperformance.site/keywords/postdramatic/hans-thies-lehmann>.
- Petresin-Bachelez, N. 2017, "Resilient practices, practices of affect: a few case studies on performances in public spaces and their controversies in the former Eastern Europe", in M. Dziewańska and A. Lepecki (eds), *Points of Convergence: Alternative Views on Performance*, Museum of Modern Art in Warsaw, Warsaw.

- Piotrowski, P. 2012, *Art and Democracy in Postcommunist Europe*, Reaktion Books, London.
- Rajkowska, J. 2013, *The Exclamation Tree*, in The National Public Art Council's annual catalogue, Stockholm, viewed 10 January 2022, <http://www.rajkowska.com/en/the-exclamation-tree-by-joanna-rajkowska/>.
- Rajkowska, J. and Cichocki S. 2020, "Letter from the Palm", viewed 10 January 2022, <https://artmuseum.pl/pl/doc/video-list-od-palmy>, 2020.
- Schouweiler, S., *Collecting performance*, 15.12.2011, <https://walkerart.org/magazine/collecting-performance>.(access: 10.01.2022)
- Schulz, B. 2013, *A Treatise on Mannequins, or, The Second Book of Genesis*, in: Rajkowska J. *Where the Beast is Buried*, Zero Books, UK.
- Stefańska, B. and Depczyński J. 2020, "Palma: Interview with Joanna Rajkowska", 12 December, Muzeum Na Fali, Radio Kapitał, viewed 10 January 2022, <https://radiokapital.pl/shows/muzeum-na-fali/13-palma/>.
- Unpublished interview with Joanna Rajkowska by the author, November 2021.
- Żmijewski, A. 2002, *Joanna Rajkowska in conversation with Artur Żmijewski*, <http://www.rajkowska.com/en/o-palmie-z-joanna-rajkowska-rozmawia-artur-zmijewski-w-2002/>. Originally published in: Żmijewski, A. 2008, *Drżące ciało. Rozmowy z artystami*, Wydawnictwo Krytyki Politycznej, Kronika, Warszawa-Bytom.

TRANSFER  
OF  
RESPONSIBILITY  
AND  
KNOWLEDGE

Chantal Kleinmeulman

---

‘Development has nothing to do with continuity, in the sense of an uninterrupted progression. On the contrary, there is a constant unfolding and folding, with certain things gaining new perspectives while others are being re-veiled. Development is the ceaseless attempt to balance the original with the present, which sometimes can only be accomplished by leaping forward. And this is where it happens, that a leap that is too broad, opens up unknown areas, that has to be secured again by looking back, because in the run-up nobody is really at home.’<sup>1</sup>

Gerhard Storck 1982

In 2013, artist Tania Bruguera initiated the Museum of Arte Útil at the Van Abbemuseum (VAM).<sup>2</sup> It proposed new uses for art within society, where artists were replaced with initiators and spectators replaced with users.<sup>3</sup> It also furthered VAM director Charles Esche’s vision of the museum as social powerplant, and, ever since, the VAM has cultivated these ideas, especially in how it approaches collection programming.<sup>4</sup> Under the direction of Jean Leering (1964–73), the VAM had a similar endeavour to underline the social relevance of art. Working towards the development of a general awareness of social processes, Leering viewed the museum as a platform for contemporary art and an educational institution where the visitor can learn to find his or her way around present-day culture (Van der Schoor 1979, pp. 26, 28).

A pivotal work that referenced these ideals is the *1. Werksatz* (1963–69) by Franz Erhard Walther. It consists of fifty-eight shaped canvas objects that function as ‘process instruments’: each is defined by its own framework of action developed by Walther and textile engineer Johanna Walther. These canvas objects are then handed, with a set of conditions, to the public, who are invited to produce the work. The textiles are the vehicle towards a particular awareness that is the artwork – the immaterial awareness you arrive at when using the textiles: ‘I was not simply interested in questioning the canons of genre and material but in the elementary question: what actually is a work’ (Köttering & Walther 2000, p. 27). In so doing, not dissimilar to Bruguera’s approach with art and use, Walther redefined the field of sculpture, whereby the artist initiates the work and the public becomes the producer of temporal, experience-shaping art forms.

A part of the *1. Werksatz* entered the collection in 1975 without any precursor to guide the institution on how to present non-static works.<sup>5</sup> Preparing the textiles for work-actions in 2018 raised questions about preserving the material and the ways it had been activated already. Although parts had been displayed, its activation was sporadic and undocumented. In line with our mission to critically look back at the museum’s history, I take time here to review how the work has been framed by city politics, museum policy, organisational climate, and zeitgeist over almost fifty years. I begin with Walther’s solo show in 1972, in which the artist was closely involved in the realisation of the work, to consider knowledge transfer, the effect of the work’s institutionalisation on artist and museum and how this can inform acquisition of similar works.

## Work-actions

‘The decisive fundamental idea was to build up an oeuvre from action.’<sup>6</sup>

Franz Erhard Walther 1984

The 1. *Werksatz* was the centrepiece of Franz Erhard Walther’s 1972 show, organised with the artist at VAM, then under the direction of Jean Leering. In advance, information meetings were held with groups interested in interactive artistic education: local colleges, high schools and art professionals from the museum’s network. To entice them to register for the workshops that comprised the work of the 1. *Werksatz*, a demonstration tape was shown to help visualise it. It showed Walther and staff working with his objects in a park close to the VAM. Students were often perplexed by the footage, as it was beyond their understanding of art.<sup>7</sup> The museum supplied teaching materials to each of the schools to prepare the students to join in the workshops, and staff provided an occasional guest lecture.<sup>8</sup>

Leering later realised how intensively the participants ‘need to be prepared by means of demonstration and training, in order to be able to effectuate the maximum possibilities of such a cultural offer’.<sup>9</sup> Walther regarded mediation and evaluation as essential tools to each activation of the work. He trained social science students to help him mediate his ideas and how to anticipate questions or comments from the audience that could disturb the concentration in the ongoing action.<sup>10</sup>

‘What significance will this work have for the museum in the future?’ Walther asked. ‘Two points will be important: instead of being receptive, the public will actually actively participate. The information is no longer provided by the object, but must be acquired while working. An extensive amount of information will then be collected at the place where people work, which can be organized and made accessible.’<sup>11</sup> The artist appreciated how Leering’s team prepared for the presentation



1. Werksatz, preparations and workshop,  
Van Abbemuseum, 1972. Photos: Hans Biezen

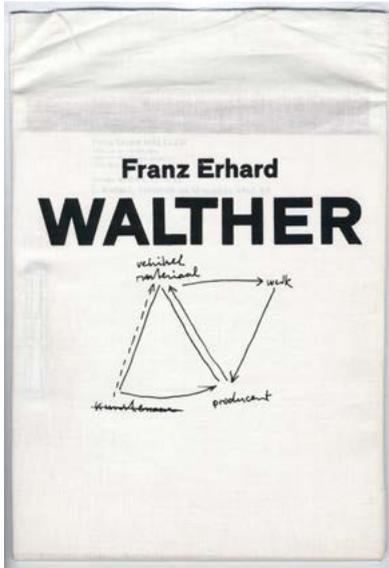


of his work,<sup>12</sup> and his feedback, along with that of staff and users, is collected in a canvas-sleeved documentary booklet that provides a rich account of all involved. Walther's action diagram appears as an imprint, giving it the appearance of an artist's book that could easily be overlooked as material for setting up future demonstrations.

At the time Walther felt that the public in Eindhoven was only interested in the experience as participants in the actions, not in the artistic dimensions of his work (Köttering & Walther 2000, p. 96). While there were things to improve upon, the museum and artist felt positive about the outcome of the 'work-actions'. As Leering wished to acquire an edition of the *1. Werksatz*, the feedback would help improve future workshops. Head of education Jerven Ober proceeded to work with the objects with Walther in Hamburg. In exchange, Walther was interested in Ober's notes from the workshops in Eindhoven, as it could help him modify his transfer of knowledge.<sup>13</sup>

While visual information is helpful, it can be viewed too simply, Walther points out.<sup>14</sup> Without mediation, the artist's early publications, with an artistic vocabulary, sketches and diagrams might have been hermetic to an unfamiliar audience. The purpose of mediation is not only to inform and guide people into the work, but also to offer tools to lead the discussions from the sensorial to the analytical, and therefore help them appropriate the work for themselves and establish a deeper connection, in which users turn into actors (Bationo-Tillon & Decortis 2016). 'I use words or language as my modelling clay to try to circumscribe what happens in the work-action,' said Walther (Köttering & Walther 2000, p. 28).

Before the municipality granted the acquisition, Leering left the museum, as city politics no longer supported his artistic programme (Albatros 1979, p. 74). This was unfortunate, as the changes in art making needed a progressive institutional vision like his to accommodate revolutionary works like the *1. Werksatz*. The function of the museum as either a responsive body, with an engaging and public-oriented



Canvas sleeve with action diagram imprint, exhibition catalogue, Van Abbemuseum, 1972



*Nr. 58, 1. Werksatz*, displayed as object, 'Summer Exhibition, Permanent Collection', Van Abbemuseum, 1980. Photo: Hans Biezen

stance contributing to social awareness, or an autonomous entity, within which art takes centre stage, was subject to lively debate in the Netherlands in the 1970s (Elshout 2016, p. 108). In response to progressive protests, the municipality appointed Rudi Fuchs as director (1975–87), according to whom ‘a museum is there to organize objects and show a state of affairs and not to be turned into a kind of psycho-technical institution’ (Fuchs 1976, p. 23). Leering concluded in 1999: ‘Participatory group work with the 1. *Werksatz* never came about, while that was precisely the essence of the work and the main reason for acquiring’ (Pingen 2005, p. 385). What’s left of its significance when the museum stops activating the *Werksatz* for decades, thereby precluding the creation of an archive?

‘The expansive and utopian feel that characterised the *Werksatzarbeiten* in the sixties, the optimistic faith in unlimited possibilities that were open to everyone – I increasingly wanted to retract all of this in the seventies, because it seemed to me that such ideas just didn’t work anymore’ (Köttering & Walther 2000, p. 34). Walther had certain requirements regarding space, time, and mediation that are rarely given within an institution.<sup>15</sup> There are themes in the work – as he has explained – that can only be enacted outdoors, or have conditions that ask for a much longer duration to be recognised, which is not provided in the museum in terms of time and space. These are only provided by the museum through documentation.<sup>16</sup> ‘Just because in a museum this is how it currently is, I cannot make work tailored to the museum.’<sup>17</sup>

By 1982, observing the history of the 1. *Werksatz*, Gerhard Storck, director of KWM Krefeld, observed: ‘The direct connection between artist and audience through the objects – that is, the direct participation of the audience in pre-planned creative processes – only rarely worked’ (Storck 1982, n.p.). For Walther, the *Werksatz* took on a retrospective character by the mid-1970s (Köttering & Walther 2000, p. 234). His ideas in art had shifted from building situations, to presenting

static ‘installations’ (Vogel 1977, p. 76). An illusion in art was shattered, noted Storck, when Walther preferred to see the instruments of his *1. Werksatz* unused and stored on a shelf, ‘withdrawn from the arbitrariness of any use and stored: wrapped up in themselves they rest, completely ready to be rediscovered in due time’ (Storck 1982, n.p.).

Relatedly, Dave Beech argues that institutions shoot themselves in the foot by displaying a work for its aesthetics while not addressing its critical origins. The work remains a critical one and an audience cannot be excluded from critically analysing this aesthetic presentation (Beech 2006). With Walther’s conscious and complete cessation of activity with the *1. Werksatz*, the subsequent ‘Storage Form’ could be viewed as his institutional critique.

## Information management

‘One has to have knowledge of the material / matter with which one has to deal.’<sup>18</sup>

Franz Erhard Walther 1973

In the 1990s, significant changes became apparent in society, technology and the arts. Dorothea von Hantelmann speaks in this respect of the ‘experiential turn’: ‘From the 1960s onwards, the creation and shaping of experiences have increasingly become an integral part of the artwork’s conception,’ which ‘corresponds to a general revaluation of experience in Western societies, in which “experience” has become a focus of social, economic and cultural activity’ (Von Hantelmann 2014). Here she references Gerhard Schulze’s (1992) *Die Erlebnisgesellschaft* (The Experience Society). When basic needs were met – due to increases in wealth since the late twentieth century – people became sensitive to the experience aspect of objects, activities, interaction and life itself. Experience became the primary essence of having a satisfying and fulfilling life; it also affected the art world. Artists increasingly

turned to action as a constituent part of their work, whereby Walther's enjoyed newly attention. Since the mid-1990s he re-engaged with the *1. Werksatz* by filming the actions with the objects – a plan from 1969. In 1997, when the director of MAMCO Geneva asked if Walther would like to demonstrate for the public the *1. Werksatz* that had been on display there in 'Storage Form' since 1994, he saw the work in a new light. The time felt right to unwrap the canvas objects and demonstrate the *Werksatz* for a newly susceptible generation (Köttering & Walther 2000, p. 234).

Digital technology exploded in the 1990s, introducing professional collection management and information systems. Parallel to this, material-technical and ethical conservation issues concerning modern art were professionally addressed. Platforms like SBMK (Foundation for the Conservation of Contemporary Art) were set up to approach these challenges through interdisciplinary research and symposia, whereby the VAM, along with other institutions and professionals, were closely involved. These initiatives help identify what transfer of responsibility and knowledge means when collecting art forms that came out of the 1960s, such as installations, performance and concept art. Meaningful changes in museum collection philosophies were set in motion by director Jan Debbaut (1988–2003). In his view, the museum is a platform of knowledge. The immaterial (information) management of the collection was considered a primary task, and he made use of automation to benefit scientific research.<sup>19</sup> With the new wing a large library was built, and the archive was now hosted in a climate-controlled vault. By the late 1990s, the municipal archives gave the museum access to legally ceded documents containing valuable information on past correspondence about acquisitions and exhibitions, along with general management documents, and which had been stored in the bicycle cellar under poor conditions (Franssen 2007).<sup>20</sup> The bulk of materials were processed into several sub-archives.



1. *Werksatz* displayed in 'Storage Form'. Collection Städtisches Kunstmuseum Bonn, Van Abbemuseum Eindhoven, 1983–84. Photo: Hans Biezen



From the Permanent Collection, *Franz Erhard Walther*, Van Abbemuseum, 1993–94. Photo: Peter Cox

Action-based arts depend on an efficient information infrastructure. Analogue sub-archives lack an interconnected structure, as they are focused on storing instead of using information. To cross reference the library, art and archives, you have to thoroughly know their interrelations to find items within them. This is a key problem in reconstructing how to activate Walther's *1. Werksatz*. As Agnieszka Wielocha writes: 'What we find is that in the museum, the identity of the contemporary artwork, distributed between physical objects and the stories which contextualise them, becomes divided between two institutional realms – the collection and the archive – which are governed by different rules and procedures.'<sup>21</sup> Her conclusion is certainly relevant for Walther's case: 'Whereas institutions invest in care for the objects in their collection, the documentation that may carry the bulk of an artwork's identity often receives less attention and resources' (Wielocha 2021, p. 354). Although the importance of information management was identified at the VAM in 1989, there was no experience in installation or live art documentation management, and access to archival holdings remained limited. The exhibition folder in 1993 stated: 'Now that the body, social reflection and interaction with the viewer are once again important issues in contemporary art, the Van Abbemuseum is to exhibit works by German artist Franz Erhard Walther (b. 1939) from its own collection.' Although it referenced activation and use, the formalist presentation was not looking like it would facilitate this. The description lacked embodied knowledge. Without such knowledge, there is no understanding of Walther's work.<sup>22</sup>

A shift occurred in 1999, when Leering was invited to make an exhibition with his acquisitions. While developing his presentation plan, he wrote a letter to the curator of collections: 'Due to Rudi's exhibition, I realised that in the earlier set up I made an omission to not make space for Walther's *Werksatz*. I would prefer to show a selection of it, in combination with the photos [that were made] while using the pieces (and not, like Rudi, who only demanded the visitor's attention for the



Critical analysis of allocated space and furniture looking back on the presentation of 2009.  
*Rien ne va plus*, exhibition view, Van Abbemuseum, 2009.  
Photo: Peter Cox



Exploring Nr. 36,  
1. Werksatz,  
Studio Van  
Abbemuseum,  
2018.  
Photo: Peter Cox,  
Eindhoven



work as an object).<sup>23</sup> All thirteen pieces were exhibited. One was displayed in the centre, to be used following the directions on the wall label. There was no active education and mediation program. The space – the museums assembly hall – was not visually documented. The lack of input from Leering’s original staff, who worked directly with Walther in his 1999 show, brought into sharp relief that a museum is an accumulation of knowledge and experience. The information on how the original demonstrations were set up in 1972 can only be found in the exhibition management file and the annual report – documents you would not usually consult.<sup>24</sup> A few more displays of the 1. *Werkstatt* followed in the 2000s, which now grew in contextual documentation.

The role of the collection as a cultural memory, whereby collection, library and archives are not separate islands, is something Charles Esche, director since 2005, encourages. In the group presentation *Rien ne vas plus* in 2009, during *Play Van Abbe, Part I, The Game and the Players*,<sup>25</sup> the focus was on artists who explore the boundaries of the museum context and challenge the visitor. The factsheet reads: ‘A performance or installation requires a completely different form of conservation and reuse than a painting or sculpture. An installation has to be set up again every time. Every room is different and offers different possibilities. That is why the curator works with the various potential meanings of the work of art, sometimes together with the artist and sometimes without him or her.’<sup>26</sup> The last part here is ambiguous with respect to knowing and representing the artist’s intentions. As Walther defined each object within its own framework of action, one should critically question space and furniture if a certain work deals with physical dynamics and endurance.

In 2018 Walther’s process material was activated in the collection display *The Way Beyond Art* (2017–21), a title taken from Alexander Dorner’s eponymous 1947 publication. Dorner’s argument – that a museum should become a driving force, whereby art is the engine for change, stimulating learning and action beyond the museum walls –







InternationalLocals constituency group exploring *Politisch*, Werksalon, 2018. Photo: Niek Tjisse Klasen



Ceremonial closing of the first Werksalon season, Van Abbe-museum Eindhoven, 2018. Photo: Dieuwke van den Heuvel

links comfortably with Esche's view of the museum as social power-plant. By creating active relations by programming a *Werksalon* in *The Way Beyond Art* display, inviting constituencies and stimulating interaction with certain artworks, visitors were able to use the museum and become actors. The constituency groups each discussed the topics of their concern and, with the outcomes, chose a work from the collection to explore those ideas. This way of mediation is an example of creating a deeper connection with art through appropriation.

Walther's objects are tools for actual, immaterial work, but they have been mostly presented as art objects and treated as references. Knowledge vanished when Leering left; the staff dissolved, and its successor closed down the education department. Activating *1. Werksatz* wasn't considered necessary to convey its meaning. As a result, there was no demand for information on how to activate it. Documentary photos made the work look deceptively simple and, in combination with a loose understanding, produced inadequate or limited activations. It was the first work in the collection that depended on an information infrastructure, embodied knowledge and a vision of mediation to live in a collection. Clearly, taking responsibility and transfer of knowledge go hand in hand. Success relies on the work being understood, supported and executed, all of which depends on the configuration and vision of the director and their staff.

## Practical Solutions

In different decades, the *1. Werksatz* has been approached from different perspectives by all parties, giving its activation and presentation of the work a constant actuality. In the early 1970s Leering was primarily concerned with the social objective<sup>27</sup>; Fuchs displayed it as historical documents frozen in time; the sensation-driven 1990s opened a window to the thrills of activation; in the 2000s the work was interpreted as an example of 'Slow Living'<sup>28</sup>; since the 2010s the work equals the

idea of Arte Útil and the visitor / activator as constituent element of the work; it also indicates a shift to the corporeal and multisensorial that logically comes from an inclusive approach of the function of the museum, which requires empathy. Learning and re-reading is an ongoing process and part of the transferral of responsibility and knowledge.

In preparation for activating Walther's canvas objects in 2018, our museum conservators became concerned about the extensive handling. Wearing gloves and surgical booties would affect the sensory experience. Moreover, the cleaning advice published in 1968 was considered to be too invasive (Walther 1968). As working with the textiles is vital in the work's understanding, the making of exhibition copies seemed a logical and not uncommon practice to preserve the originals. In an email to the author from October 17 2021, Susanne Walther detailed how she proposed this very idea back in 2009, to encourage collectors to enable activations as inherent. Since then the artist has allowed copies of certain elements under specific terms: they must be manufactured by textile engineer Johanna Walther, who co-developed the original *1. Werksatz*. Excluded from being copied are the elements with additional materials, like foam rubber or wood. The copies differ with intent from the originals in material and colour. A second generation of exhibition copies closer to the originals is currently being considered, as colour and material weight does matter in the experience.

From a(n) (im)material conservation perspective, training sessions with copies help one gain knowledge of the separate objects from the *1. Werksatz*, each with its own requirements, handling and meaning. The knowledge for correctly executing the *1. Werksatz* is lost in our museum and needs to be learned and taught. The Franz Erhard Walther Foundation sees its central role in passing on information on how the work activations should be handled. Solutions could entail workshops organised by the foundation in the right handling and situating of the objects, for instance. It is important to create ownership within and around our institutions, since performative art depends on

passionate people, in addition to ambassadors who have expertise, enthusiasm, ingenuity and a network. One must realise that ten years of inactivity means skipping a working generation. In order to prevent continuous loss of knowledge, regular activation keeps the thresholds and costs low and maintains contacts. It's worth maintaining the European network – developing a digital platform to stimulate collaboration, exchange information and mutual guidance on activations of performative works in our collections.

In imagining the archive otherwise, we can invest in the knowledge management of process-based art that meets the requirements of the end-users through rethinking a digital archive. For instance, taking a closer look at Sanneke Stigter's DIAL – Digital Index of an Artwork's Life could be a point of departure: 'The DIAL is developed as a practical tool that makes it clear that an artwork's character or behaviour is not object inherent but conception dependent' (Stigter 2019, pp. 289–95). Besides documenting and contextualising the past, assembling a digital toolkit for reactivation and providing online services for crowd sourced testimonials, we need to be reminded that even the best structured digital archives remain passive containers. Knowledge transfer is still a human-to-human interaction, as it depends on communicating instead of sending. Performative art provides a museum a unique opportunity to establish an active connection with its public, developing networks and reaching new audiences. Collecting performative art requires institutional ambition; instead of a continued existence, there should be a desire to keep the work alive.

## ENDNOTES

- 1 'Entwickeln hat ja nichts mit Kontinuität im Sinne eines ununterbrochenen Vorwärtsschreitens zu tun – so, als gäbe es einen Ausgangspunkt und ein Ziel. Vielmehr finden ständig Aus- und Einwicklungen statt, wobei bestimmten Dingen neue Seiten abgewonnen werden, während anderes neu verhüllt wird. Entwicklung ist der unaufhörliche Versuch, ursprüngliches mit Gegenwärtigem ins Gleichgewicht zu bringen, was manchmal nur noch durch einen Sprung nach vorne bewerkstelligt werden kann. Und hier passiert es dann, dass ein zu weiter Satz, der unbekannte Bereiche erschliesst, durch Rückblicke wieder abgesichert werden muss, weil dort im Vorfeld eigentlich noch niemand ganz zu Hause ist.' Gerhard Storck, "Wer Resultate erwartet, braucht erst gar nicht anzufangen", in Gerhard Storck and Marianne Stockebrand, "Franz Erhard Walther Werkzeichnungen", exh. cat. (Krefeld: Museum Haus Lange, Krefeld, 1982), n.p. All translations Chantal Kleinmeulman unless otherwise noted.
- 2 Developed with collaborative construction project based in Berlin, constructLab.
- 3 Arte Útil roughly translates into English as 'useful art', but in this context it proposes art as a tool or device. Criteria of Arte Útil are: Propose new uses for art within society; challenge the field within which it operates (civic, legislative, pedagogical, scientific, economic, etc.); be 'timing specific', responding to current urgencies; be implemented and function in real situations; replace authors with initiators and spectators with users; have practical, beneficial outcomes for its users; pursue sustainability whilst adapting to changing conditions; re-establish aesthetics as a system of transformation.
- 4 The collection presentation "The Way Beyond Art" (2017–21), including the 'Werksalon' as laboratory for diverse constituency groups using the collection, and the Arte Útil Archive was made accessible.
- 5 In consultation with the artist a representative selection of thirteen pieces were acquired of the 1. *Werksatz* (1963–69), no: 13, 23, 26, 28, 35, 36, 42, 45, 46, 51, 52, 55, and 58.

- 6 Franz Erhard Walther, “The other concept of oeuvre”, in Rudi Fuchs and Franz Erhard Walther, “Franz Erhard Walther : Works 1978-1984”, exh. cat. (Eindhoven: Van Abbemuseum, Eindhoven, 1984), n.p.
- 7 Lit, P. van (n.d.). *Mr. P. van Lit to Jerven Ober, undated* [Letter]. VAM Exhibition Archive, inv.nr. 271. Box 76. Transcription with typo in letterhead [Jeroen: read Jerven] published in: Jean Leering, Jerven Ober and Franz Erhard Walther, “Franz Erhard Walther, Verslag van de tentoonstelling in het Van Abbemuseum 13.10.72 tm 29.10.72. Vroege werken, 1955-’63, 1. Werksatz, bestaande uit 58 stukken, 1963-’69”, Eindhoven, 1972, n.p. (§ 6.2).
- 8 “Commissie van Toezicht: Jaarverslag 1972. Van Abbemuseum”, Management Archive [Beheersarchief] RHC A-1104 576 Periode: 1972.
- 9 Hoe intensief de deelnemers “door middel van demonstratie en training voorbereid dienen te worden om de maximale mogelijkheden van een dergelijk cultureel aanbod te kunnen effectueren.” Leering, Ober and Walther, (§ 1.2).
- 10 VAM Exhibition Archive, inv.nr. 271. Box 76.
- 11 Leering, Ober and Walther, (§ 5.3).
- 12 Ibid.
- 13 Walther, F.E. (1972, 6 November). *Franz Erhard Walther to Jerven Ober, November 6, 1972* [Letter]. VAM Exhibition Archive, inv.nr. 271. Box 76.
- 14 Walther referring to video and photographs in conversation with the staff. Leering, Ober and Walther, (§ 2.1).
- 15 ‘Ort hat Bedeutung. Der Ort, an dem ich bin. Der Ort, den ich erwähle. Das Ort, von dem aus ich mich ausdehne. Das hat durchaus existentielle Bedeutung. ... Museum kann ein Ort sein. Aber entscheidend ist doch: dass man Ort frei wählt: weil eine Idee damit zusammenhängt. Wenn ein Ort vorgegeben ist, habe ich diese Freiheit ja nicht, in der Regel nicht. Mit diesem Widerspruch muss ich fertig werden, wenn ich mit Museumssituationen zu tun habe.’ Vogel, C. 1977, “Dialog George Jappe – Franz Erhard Walther”, in D. Ronte and E. Weiss, *Franz Erhard Walther: 2. Werksatz. Skulpturen. Zeichnungen*, exh. cat. Museum Ludwig, Cologne, 61–62, 75–76.

- 16 'Dann gibt es Arbeiten ... die Verhältnisse darin sind nicht unmittelbar erkennbar, man müsste sich länger damit befassen, was im Museum zeitlich und räumlich nicht gegeben ist.' Ibid., 62.
- 17 'Ich meine, nur weil das Museum heute so ist, kann ich ja nicht Arbeiten machen, die auf das Museum zugeschnitten ist.' Ibid.
- 18 Walther, F.E. & Nolte, G., "Part of 1 Werksatz", exh.cat., Vanier College / Vehicule Art Inc., Montreal, 1973, unpag.
- 19 "Ondernemingsplan Van Abbemuseum. Nota naar aanleiding van de bestuurlijke opdracht dd. 23 januari 1989", VAM Beheersarchief, RHC A-1105 036 Periode: 1989-1989.
- 20 The handing over of the management archive by the municipality back to the museum coincides with the building of the large modern extension. The museum space increased enormously with proper space to house its own archive in a modern equipped library. It was the focal point for Debbaudt's approach of the museum as knowledge centre, modernising the registration systems.
- 21 See VAM Exhibition Documentation Archive inv. 33. Doos 1993. It was probably inspired by the *1. Werksatz* from the Städtisches Kunstmuseum Bonn, which was shown in Storage Form at the VAM in the 1983-84 collection exchange display, see "Verzameling Städtisches Kunstmuseum Bonn = Collection Städtisches Kunstmuseum Bonn", 1983 and VAM Exhibition Management Archive inv. 454; Box 148.
- 22 'Ja, maar het moest eerst de ervaring opdoen, het moet werkelijke ervaringen daarmee krijgen en dan kan men pas van een eerste begrijpen spreken, dan weet het waarover ik spreek. [Yes, but the [public] must first gain the experience, it must get real experience with it, and only then can one speak of an initial understanding, then it knows what I am talking about].' Walther in interview with staff of the Van Abbemuseum. Leering, Ober and Walther, § 2.1.
- 23 Leering, J. (1999, 7 July). *Jean Leering to Christiane Berndes, July 7, 1999* [Letter]. VAM Exhibition management archive, inv. 82; Box 1999.
- 24 Only the general Management Archive (Beheersarchief) from 1936-89 was digitised and made accessible online in 2014. The 72nd annual report can be

accessed there. The specific exhibition management file is a separate sub-archive that has not been digitised. The exhibition's public information is accessible via Vubis. It is not connected to the collection registration system TMS; a cross search is not possible.

- 25 Summary: 'An 18-month program *Play Van Abbe*. The program is divided into four parts, each with its own theme, and includes exhibitions, projects, performances, lectures and discussions, centred around the museum's collection. *Part 1, The game and the players* has as main parts: *Repetition: Summer arrangement 1983, the reconstruction of a collection exhibition from 1983; Strange and Close*, a presentation of recent purchases; the exhibition *Rien ne va plus* and the *Edition III – Masquerade* project. In this first part of *Play Van Abbe*, the museum focuses on the stories of artists and exhibition makers. Who are the "players" within a museum and what stories do they tell? What did a collection presentation look like in 1983 and what in 2009? It is about the positioning of an art museum - now and in the past - and rethinking this position; both a productive environment in which stories are told and a presentation space in which things can be seen.' VAM Exhibition Documentation Archive, inv. 87, 88; Box 2009-5-6; Collection Presentations
- 26 "Factsheet *Rien ne va Plus*", VAM Exhibition Documentation Archive, inv. 87, 88 ; Box 2009-5-6; Collection Presentations.
- 27 'on the newly evolved concept of collective creativity. It became primarily concerned with the social objective of increasing the educative and cultural function which the museum can exercise for a large, broadly-based public.' (Van der Schoor 1979, p. 34).
- 28 The term 'slow living' ('onthaasten' in Dutch) was a popular notion at the time in response to the fast pace of modern life, and used in reviewing Walther's work (Steevensz 2002, p. 136). It may have been influenced by Jean Leering attributing a didactic and therapeutic value to art: 'Together with its equivalent disciplines such as philosophy, science, technology, ethics, etc., art plays a major role in the formation of lexical and visual concepts and the concrete shapes based on them, in which man can find ways of orientating himself in relation to his past and future and identifying himself with

the present. Without such landmarks man is alienated from his own reality, and in this sense cultural activity, including the work of the museum, should be seen as one aspect of preventive mental health care' (Van der Schoor 1979, p. 30). According to Pingen, staff meeting minutes in 1972, noted that it was advised for users of Walther's *Werksatz*, who after the experience wanted to explore more in this field, to join a local sensitivity centre for awareness training (Pingen 2005, p. 297).

## REFERENCE LIST

- Albatros, W., 1979, "Interview with Jean Leering", in C. Blotkamp et al. (eds), *Museum in Motion?*, Staatsuitgeverij, The Hague.
- Bationo-Tillon, A. and Decortis, F. 2016, "Understanding Museum Activity to Contribute to the Design of Tools for Cultural Mediation: New Dimensions of Activity?", *Le travail humain*, vol. 79, no. 1, pp. 53–70, <https://doi.org/10.3917/th.791.0053>.
- Beech, D. 2006, "Institutionalisation for All – Dave Beech tackles an old taboo", *Art Monthly*, vol. 294, March 2006, <http://www.artmonthly.co.uk/magazine/site/article/institutionalisation-for-all-by-dave-beech-march-2006>.
- Elshout, D.J. 2016, "De moderne museumwereld in Nederland: Sociale dynamiek in beleid, erfgoed, markt, wetenschap en media", PhD dissertation, University of Amsterdam.
- Franssen, D. 2007, "Van boekenplank naar kennisproductie De geschiedenis van de bibliotheek van het Van Abbemuseum 1936–2007", in R. Koot, M. Nijhoff and S. Scheltjens, *Kunstabibliotheken in Nederland. Tien korte schetsen*, Primavera Pers, Leiden.
- Fuchs, R. 1976, "Wat Leering beweert is onaanvaardbaar", *Hollands Diep*, vol. 2, no. 2.
- Köttering, M. and Walther, S. 2000, *Franz Erhard Walther: Sites of Origin – Sites of Influence: Exhibitions 1962–2000*, exh. cat. Städtische Galerie Nordhorn.

- Leering, J. 1970, “De funktie van het museum”, *Museumjournaal*, vol. 15, no. 4 (1970), p. 7.
- Leering, J., Ober, J. and Walther, FE., “Franz Erhard Walther, Verslag van de tentoonstelling in het Van Abbemuseum 13.10.72 tm 29.10.72. Vroege werken, 1955–63, 1. Werksatz, bestaande uit 58 stukken, 1963–69”, Eindhoven, 1972.
- Pingen, R. 2005, “Dat museum is een mijnheer: De geschiedenis van het Van Abbemuseum 1936–2003”, PhD dissertation, Free University Amsterdam.
- Steevensz, B. 2002, “XXI”, in J. Debbaut and M. Verhulst (eds), *Van Abbemuseum: Het collectieboek*, Stedelijk Van Abbemuseum, Eindhoven.
- Stigter, S. 2019, “Towards Process-Based Research in Conservation: DIAL for Complex Artworks”, in L. Guisti and N. Ricciardi, *Museums at the Post-Digital Turn*, Mousse Publishing, Milan.
- Storck, G. and Stockebrand, M. 1982, *Franz Erhard Walther Werkzeichnungen*, exh. cat. Museum Haus Lange, Krefeld.
- Storck, G. 2000, “Wer Resultate erwartet, braucht erst gar nicht anzufangen”, in G. Storck and M. Stockebrand (eds), *Franz Erhard Walther Werkzeichnungen*, exh. cat. Museum Haus Lange, Krefeld.
- Van der Schoor, F. 1979, “The Van Abbemuseum 1964-1973: The ideas”, in C. Blotkamp et al. (ed.), *Museum in Motion?*, Staatsuitgeverij, The Hague.
- Walther, FE. 1968, *Objekte, benutzen*, Verlag Gebr. König, Cologne.
- Walther, FE. and Nolte, G., 1973, *Part of 1 Werksatz*, exh. cat., Vanier College / Vehicule Art Inc., Montreal.
- Vogel, C. 1977, “Dialog George Jappe—Franz Erhard Walther”, in D. Ronte and E. Weiss (catalogue), and C. Vogel (text), *Franz Erhard Walther: 2. Werksatz. Skulpturen. Zeichnungen*, exh. cat. Museum Ludwig, Cologne.
- Wielocha, AB. 2021, “Collecting Archives of Objects and Stories: On the lives and futures of contemporary art at the museum”, PhD dissertation, University of Amsterdam.

HOW TO  
DESCRIBE  
WHAT A  
MIRROR LOOKS  
LIKE? ON  
RIA PACQUÉE'S  
*MADAME*  
AND *IT*

Persis Bekkering

---

This is one way to tell a story: by telling another one. To speak of something fractured, complex, one could make up the fiction of the one who fell in love.

Love is always a good vehicle for stories, in the way we have been taught to understand Love as an Event. Something with a before and an after: with a beginning, a middle and inevitably always an end. For a writer, letting a character fall in love is a great scaffolding known as the Inciting Incident, to add the texture of eventness to the chaos and non-linearity of the world. In classic narratology, the Inciting Incident sets the character in motion and drives him towards his goal. It's the origin of the plot, the invisible hand.

But let's not write a story about stories. I will invent a lover because I want to write about *Madame* and *It*, alter egos of Antwerp-based artist Ria Pacquée (b. 1954). They are best described as performance projects, two consecutive series that appeared in Pacquée's work during the 1980s and 1990s, exhibited in the form of photographs and small installations. The *Madame* series are amateurish snapshots, often mounted on cheap canvas; in contrast, the performances of *It* are captured by a professional photographer and printed in black and white.

These are their material outlines. But it doesn't reveal anything about their truth. To tell of *Madame* and *It*, then, a lover will be my prosthesis.

The lover functions as a prosthetic device to chase the shadows, not letting these artworks escape me. I call them artworks, but they are not events. They are disappearances. Sometimes I think of them as mirrors. How does one describe what a mirror looks like? Our precepts only have the frame in common. *Madame* (1982–91) and *It* (1991–95) are two characters that appeared without notice and without continuity in the work (and life) of Ria Pacquée. They are disappearances. They are also among Pacquée’s most well-known works, which is a funny way to describe things that have never been there. All that is left are some photos, many of them uncredited, a few props, an archive containing cut-outs of foxed reviews with good and bad ideas. I might be exaggerating, but, if I am, it’s for the sake of the story.

This will be a story of a failure, then. But a good one. In Pacquée’s universe, there is a lot of space for failure. When I first met the artist, she told me that in the next life, she would like to return as a singer. A good singer, she said, with bad songs.

So, I imagine someone falling in love with Madame. The One Who Fell in Love. Who is this person? A man, of course, a man would be the perfect other to Madame. Madame is the norm, after all. She must be heterosexual. Madame is so much the norm, it’s as if the complete book of norms is written on her body, the pages rushing towards her like a black hole indiscriminately attracting mass. Madame is the black hole of normative life, the empty yet heavy epicentre of white Western culture, and therefore it is impossible to comprehend her. We know her well. She is the absolute average, the vanishing point of our desires. Part of us wants to be her. We all feel inclined to touch her, but we don’t want to lose ourselves. We reach out in the same way that we are interested in feeling the heat of the flame, without wanting to burn a finger. A flame that we’ve only heard about, but that we haven’t seen. Madame attracts so much mass, she is like a black hole. Even light she absorbs, and therefore we cannot see her. But our poor lover doesn’t know this yet.



Ria Pacquée, *Madame*, 1982, Montevideo, Antwerp.  
Photographer unknown

Our lover has seen her, or so he thinks. He remembers the Inciting Incident as a thing of Chance, and in his vivid, tenacious memory – a memory that doesn't account for failure – the incident has thickened into an Encounter.

He remembers seeing her and immediately losing his heart. It was as if she invited him. Yes, he felt called by her, he heard her mute cry and he wanted to be what she needed. To be the answer to the question that was expressed in her (dis)appearance. He didn't ask himself whether his interpellation was justified. He saw a woman that needed to be freed. She was devastatingly alone, but she wasn't free. The frame was holding her captive. The frames around Madame were like the well-wrought floral garlands around the dusted mirrors in that hotel in Venice, as Joseph Brodsky wrote: 'More coherent than their contents, straining, as it were, to keep them from spreading over the wall' (Brodsky 1992, pp. 54, 55).

In fact, our lover has seen her before, but he doesn't realise it. It was long before he first saw her. He stared at her in 1982, shivering in an art space in Antwerp. This wasn't yet the Inciting Incident, it couldn't have been; she appalled him. She didn't have a name, wasn't yet baptised Madame, the black hole. She was too distinct to be his mirror, too strange. She was stinky. She chain-smoked and audibly sipped tepid Stella Artois. In her makeshift little brick house that was constructed inside Montevideo, surrounded by rickety furniture, she appeared drowsy and aloof. Her mind was plugged in to another frequency, surfing the slow waves of Valium, her favourite downer. A dark pair of glasses completed the look, a failed attempt to hint at glamour and distant cool. Instead, they added to her murkiness. As Aldous Huxley (cited in Virilio 2009, p. 60) put it in *The Art of Seeing*: 'One can acquire an addiction to goggles, just as one can acquire an addiction to tobacco or alcohol.'

Surprisingly, her nylon tights were intact. But the television she was looking at was broken. She didn't seem to bother, as it didn't bother her that the house smelled so strongly of piss and chicken shit. Quietly she sat there, gulping beer.

Yes, it was really her sitting there, her ash-blond hair slightly rising above the back of the chair, an elbow leaning over the armrest. But she wasn't actually there. She was more like a puppet. A stand-in for something or someone else. The puppet didn't show a lot of life.

Our lover was in a strange mood that night and didn't stay very long. It was cold inside, he kept his coat and hat on. The space was about 2,000 square metres, and though it exhibited art, no one was interested in making money, so there was no means to heat up the space. That was not what bothered him.

His friends passed around a bottle of aquavit. They had come to see Minus Delta T, the performance group from Zurich that played at Montevideo that night, but for some reason they'd just missed it. The friends in the little makeshift house acted boisterously, making bad jokes, as guys do when they see a woman behaving like she shouldn't, being all smelly and unpleasant and unaccommodating even though her tights were intact. At least they made sure she didn't hear what they said.

Our lover tried to catch a glimpse of the person inhabiting the body. He needed to see proof of her anima. Inside his own body, he became as still as she appeared on the outside. The self-abandonment this woman was enacting bothered him. Suddenly, he felt a yearning to collapse the space, to cover all the filthy layers of absence with his own. She didn't acknowledge his presence. She didn't seem as vulnerable as he was. 'The wearer of dark glasses knows that the protectors-propagators of bodies and images are loaded weapons,' Paul Virilio commented on Huxley's naïve observations on sunglasses, two years before our lover stood face to face with the woman who came to be known as Madame (Virilio 2009, p. 61).

He never saw her again, forgot about her the next day. The aquavit diligently washed away the images. The show left but a trace of anxiety in him, of something uncomfortable. It would take some years before he would meet her again for the first time. As one makes up the



*Waiting for My Man Who Lost the War*, 1983,  
Streets of Antwerp. Photographer unknown

story of the Inciting Incident only in retrospect, connecting moments in time until the coherence of form is artificially achieved (we all know the warm embrace of coherent form), the conflict between truth, consciousness and time is resolved through fiction.

One year later, he didn't see her in his hometown of Antwerp. Our lover was lying in someone else's arms that day, a few streets away, the arms of a very possessive woman; he liked to feel important to someone. Meanwhile, Madame had constructed a red wooden house. Madame likes to build little houses. On the façade, she had sprayed in English: 'Waiting for my man who lost the war.' It was summer, she was wearing a baby-pink t-shirt that made her look modern. From within her little booth on the Meir, she stared at passers-by. No dark glasses this time, not even the thick round glasses that would become her trademark, no glasses at all. Her retinas bare and exposed to the gaze of everyone. Her man has lost the war, she is unarmed.

Would anyone have asked which war it was the man had lost in 1983? I wonder. She tried her best to stand out, in the red wooden house in a busy street in Antwerp. There is a picture of her with a man in a grey suit walking by, almost disappearing in the urban surroundings of the same shade of grey. He looks at her or looks through her.

Would anyone have grasped the mystery of those words? I wonder. The slogan is playing on the cultural trope of the woman left behind by her spouse for an important cause. Heroic Odysseus fighting wars and saving the honour of a people. We imagine her looking out over sea, dressed in the wings of chastity and devout persistence. But the hero has lost. And she is still waiting. Why? Will he ever come back? If he lost the war, what has she lost in its wake?

The woman doesn't have a name. She is not yet known as Madame. No one thanked her for waiting. No one will compensate her for her husband's loss. He lost, and so did she. History will be written by those who won, and she will have been forgotten.



*Souvenirs of the Men I've Loved*, 1985,  
Hof ter Cauwerschueren, Brussels.  
Photographer unknown

Two years later. It's 1985, and the lover has grown a moustache, which he will keep for the next fifteen years. Madame has found her defining look, too: the thick glasses with a brown frame and the timeless fashion items of a decent woman, a woman who could be a teacher or an office clerk or an aunt and who deserves our respect. Trench coat, low heels, impeccable nylons.

It's two years later and Madame has come forward. The only self-destruction she allows herself from now on is smoking cigarettes. She has matured. She's not passively waiting for a loser anymore, she's taking action. On the table in front of her, a collection of familiar looking objects: pictures, a miniature Eiffel tower, prize cups, a tape recorder, a razor, goggles, a snorkel. 'Souvenirs of the Men I've Loved', a wooden panel says. Another one: 'À Vendre', for sale. The bold gesture will be noted: at the end of the day she's sold almost everything. Maybe people really needed the goggles, maybe people just wanted to support the broken-hearted garage sale.

What appears at first to be a tragicomic intervention – a sad woman selling the remainders of her past affairs, exposing the equipment of the domestic sphere on the streets of Brussels in a humorous act of vengeance – gains depth over time. The objects on the table, displaced from their habitat, their fate of domestic invisibility undone, are unbearably normal. Her men could have been everyone and anyone. Her men: mass figures. They buy souvenirs in Paris, they frame a reclining nude, they win the billiard cup. The objects bear witness to Madame's evolution into becoming the black hole. The book of norms is being studied and guarded here. Later, Madame would stop intervening in the world. She would fit in, up to the extent of disappearing. Yet the aesthetics of the generic are already here.

Only now, while trying to compose a story, resolving conflicts in time, consciousness and truth, I notice the paradoxical references in the composition. The prize cups: her men, who are now split up into a multitude, were winners after all. They lost a war, but won another.

Madame exposes an economy of love, an economy we now understand to be gendered – of a world ruled by the logics of winning and losing, acquiring and disposing. For Madame, the permanence of objects is winning it from the eventness of love.

All these moments the lover could have seen the woman he would fall in love with. He failed. Maybe she tried too hard to be seen. Maybe that's why she would soon stop trying. At that moment she became visible to him, our lover. Her withdrawal incited the Incident.

He finally saw her. She wasn't there. Truth be told, he only saw her dress. It was her wedding dress he saw, draped over a chair, surrounded by the traditional, generic props of marriage, stand-ins for the regime of the family (the smallest unit of capitalist privatisation). A white bag, white heels, white veil, all abandoned by her presence. Objects that only make sense in their interchangeability. Madame put them there on the chair, neither neatly nor chaotically, the composition suggesting only a minimum of care – just enough care to be visible as such. In many ways, Madame is in between. She is the either/or that is the black hole, the one that defies linear temporality. This sounds impressive; no wonder he fell in love.

The empty dress attracted his attention. Once, a body had been inside of the garment, he thought, plucking his moustache. Finding someone's clothes is such a strange event. An auratic sensation. Absence intensified, made palpable like a shrine. Somewhere, someday a woman got undressed, her nylon covered legs caressing the silk lining. Displaced from its traditional embedding in the couple, and from the couple, the family, from the family, society, the dress seemed the loneliest thing the lover had ever seen. He could sense the aura emanating from it, the aura of a woman who needed to be saved. He, too, was never asked to marry. He was her, he was the naked body that unfurled the itchy, cheap chiffon. The familiar loneliness the scenario exuded burned a hole in his chest. He had so much to give to the world.

Then his gaze moved along the walls of the gallery, he noticed the photographs mounted on canvas, like the family portraits in the living rooms of his now settled-down friends. How on earth did he end up here? Why had he come alone? With a sudden sense of social failure, he beheld the vestiges of Madame's lonely wedding day. Madame posing in front of the town hall, her face not showing any emotions. Madame on the back seat of a simple white Mercedes, wearing white gloves, staring in the lens of the camera with the same blank expression. So blank and so vulnerable. Madame kneeling in front of the altar, alone. Enough, the lover couldn't stand it anymore. His heart was about to explode. Where was this lonely woman? Could he still offer her his hand, kneeling beside her as her long-awaited bride, a stand-in for Jesus?

He ran outside, turned a corner. Panting, he leaned with his hands on his knees. Drizzle seemed to wet him from all sides, as if he was standing in a cloud of still water drops. A white Mercedes drove by, but he knew he was too late. The face of Madame was still with him. Afterimages of the Inciting Incident, like these black-and-white drawings that make you see the face of Jesus after staring at it for a minute. Not that he could describe her, if anyone had asked. Her face was like a black hole, and he could project on it everything that he wanted. She didn't seem sad about it. She didn't seem sad at all. Walking home in his brown leather shoes, the shoes of the everyday man, he knew it had happened – he had fallen in love.

Being in love made him happy and sad. He wanted to have her for himself, but in the small, flourishing artistic milieu of Antwerp, she had become quite well known. Madame had evolved from a generic title to a proper name. Madame Going on a Pilgrimage to Lourdes. Madame at a Carnival in Cologne. Madame Visiting the Open-Air Museum Bokrijk. Her name evoked tender smiles on people's faces. Some people described her as lonely, others a goofy aunt. Some said she was embodying a present that was already antiquated, some thought she was exposing our society's death drive, or the hypocrisy of



*Toilet Madame*, 1986, Vooruit, Ghent.  
Photographer unknown



*Madame Visiting the Open-Air-Museum Bokrijk*, 1989,  
Bokrijk. Photo: Philippe Chasseur



*Madame Going on a Pilgrimage to Lourdes,*  
1989, Lourdes, France.  
Photo: Philippe Chasseur

the art world, or the book of norms, or the dialectics between community and individuality. Sometimes, when his inquiries revealed a more than ordinary concern, when his faltering voice betrayed his yearning, he was met with low-key scorn. Why, a gallerist with a soft voice and the softest cashmere cardigan once told him. Don't you know she is discontinuous? Don't you know she only exists when we're not there? All we get are traces, proofs of her existence, but never existence itself. You are in love with a black hole.

Over the years however, he started to enjoy the hunt for Madame. It made him laugh to hear she had cleaned the toilet at a party he'd attended at de Vooruit in Ghent. She had been sitting in plain sight. He must have given her a few coins, he thought happily, maybe she had sold him a cigarette. He had become a tracker, and it pleased him to realise that the journey, the tracking had become more important than the goal. That's the lie he told himself, eyeing Madame Visiting Mini-Europe, his beloved standing tall next to the Tower of Pisa, tiny under the Atomium. His heart swelled in his chest. How perfect she was. How flawlessly she blended into her environment. The only thing salient about her was her loneliness, her stillness, her vulnerable blankness, and that's where he came in. He loved how important she made him feel. So important he disappeared to himself, sucked in by the black hole. The more people looked at her, the less he understood himself. Maybe Madame was like a mirror. Like the hotel mirror Brodsky wrote about, 'dulled by having seen so many. What they return to you is not your identity but your anonymity.' (Brodsky 1992, p. 22.)

It's just a performance, a man on his right whispered, betting his sweating forehead.

But who is the audience, our lover replied. Is it us? Or the people in the picture?

The man shrugged. Not us. Not you.

Rumours had reached the lover. Madame had eloped, like a character jumping off the page. Madame, sucked up by the black hole

that she herself had become. Collapse. As Pacquée says, she had become too good, too much in control. In performance, one must balance the fine line between catastrophe and perfection. Catastrophe adds too much visibility. It puts the spotlight on the shadow that is the artist, revealing the character's double. Perfection leads to the receding of art, like a character escaping the book. The mechanical equals the disappearance of meaning.

This could have been a good ending for our hero, then. We have offered him a good deal, a line of flight. He could have been saved from the two tragic endings that were always already contained in his story: catastrophe or perfection. But he was persistent. He must have sensed something. Endowed with as much hubris his existence as a protagonist could afford him. Give me another chance, he said. Don't let me go. Hold me in the warm embrace of coherent form.

Not being able to resist, I decided to let him have his pleasure and watch. He is now the voyeur of this text. He is quietly witnessing me looking at the project Ria Pacquée started in the year she abandoned *Madame* because she had become too good at it. From the lonely mass lady-figure, she wanted to create a character without character. Someone like the ambivalent figure on the painting she had bought at a flea market, a figure that was supposed to be a mother but looked more like a priest: a failed painting. That was what incited *It*, a good failure.

In 1991, *It* travelled to the City district of London, the heart of capitalist accumulation that doesn't need a less generic name. It was not attracted to leisurely activities like his predecessor. It loved seeing people work. Rush and work. It was a worker himself, pushing a cart through town loaded with scrap wood (in *The Car*), or collecting stones in the Swiss mountains (in *The Collector of Stones*). In London, *It* wanted to make a point. It carried a big placard he wanted the businessmen to see. 'Listen! As offender and victim prisoners of ourselves looking at our shadow deep inside, he who has left but one moment to live has nothing to hide anymore,' the big placard said.



*The Car*, 1992, Streets of Antwerp.  
Photo: Philippe Chasseur

Ria Pacquée, *The Collector of Stones*, 1992, Furka, Switzerland. Photo: Patrick Van Den Eynde





*Have You Accepted That Whatever Seems to Be is Not, and That That Which Seems Not to Be, Is?*, 1991, London.  
Photo: Virginia Nimarkoh

People rushed by. No one stopped to read the text. Capital had to flow. Capital doesn't pause. Only the cops cared to have a little chat with It. You can only stand on the same spot for three minutes, they told It. Then you must flow again.

So It flowed. It was a maverick, but not a criminal. The title of the series that resulted from this trip reads like a negation of Parmenides, the first philosopher of Western history: *Have You Accepted That Whatever Seems to Be Is Not, and That That Which Seems Not to Be, Is?* I don't know if this makes sense. It is not about sense, maybe. Stepping into Its universe, we must accept Its logics. Whatever seems to be is not. Appearance is disappearance.

Like me, the lover suddenly interjects. I seem not to be, yet I am. Just like Madame, I tell him. Together you live in disappearance.

It was ungendered – today It would be thought of as non-binary. This ambivalence felt close to Pacquée herself, she told me, because she often got misgendered. But gender was not what It was about, she added. It was not about Pacquée herself at all. Where Madame was the black hole, the lonely book of norms, It was an outsider. Madame joined everybody and anyone and blended into the environment. It had his weird little projects. It didn't care about what other people did. It intervened clumsily in the world, where Madame was the world's passive reflection, dulled by having seen so many. Where Madame returned to us our anonymity, It was nobody himself.

But who is Its audience, our lover asks, plucking his moustache? Not us, I said. Not us.

## REFERENCE LIST

Brodsky, J. 1992, *Watermark: An Essay on Venice*, Penguin Modern Classics, New York City.

Interview with Ria Pacquée by Persis Bekkering and Joanna Zielińska, September 21, 2021.

Interview with Annie Gentils by Persis Bekkering, September 23, 2021.

Matthé, J. (ed.), 2018, *Ria Pacquée: Slamm, Ramble, Perform: A Monograph*, Occasional Papers, London.

M HKA archives

Virilio, P. 2009, *Aesthetics of Disappearance*, trans. P. Beitchman, Semiotext(e), Los Angeles.



(DIS)APPEARING  
WITHOUT  
A TRACE:  
A CASE STUDY  
OF MARÍA  
TERESA  
HINCAPIÉ

Claudia Segura

---

## \*A Common Future

In 1990, María Teresa Hincapié (1954–2008) received First Prize at the XXXIII National Salon of Artists in Colombia for her long-duration performance *Una cosa es una cosa* (*A Thing Is a Thing*), the first time this prize was awarded to an ephemeral, non-object work. The action consisted of placing all of the things that the artist possessed in her home in the exhibition space over several weeks and during eight continuous hours per day, creating a dance with her body while rearranging the different elements according to changing criteria. She received this distinction again in 1996 with *Divina proporción* (*Divine Proportion*), in which she inhabited the exhibition space for days while walking very slowly, as well as planting and watering grass and soil in the concrete floor of the industrial space.

Hincapié was born in Armenia, Colombia and died aged fifty-four after a long illness. She became a key figure in the development of performance art in the 1980s and 1990s in Colombia and was a thoughtful voice that explored this genre. She specialised in what we could call the *poetics of the domestic in performance*, bringing the domestic into the art realm. The exploration of ordinary everyday life and the transformation of routine actions into symbolic acts created a methodology for her practice. Art became the guide for her existence,



María Teresa Hincapié,  
*Divina proporción* (Divine  
Proportion), 1995  
Prize-winner at the 36th  
Salon of Colombian Artists,  
1996. Courtesy of Santiago  
Zuluaga, Casas Riegner,  
Bogotá, and 1 Mira Madrid,  
Madrid



María Teresa Hincapié, *Una cosa es una cosa*  
(A Thing Is a Thing), 1990  
First prize at the 33rd Salon of Colombian Artists,  
Corferías, Bogotá. Courtesy of Santiago Zuluaga,  
Casas Riegner, Bogotá, and 1 Mira Madrid, Madrid

not only providing a framework for her creativity but also influencing her ethics and understanding of politics.

In 1995, she began the ambitious project *Hacia lo sagrado* (Towards the Sacred) with a walk from Bogotá to San Agustín, a journey lasting twenty-one days. During the walk she combined survival and ritualistic actions with mythical thought, which, from that moment on, became the fundamental nucleus of her poetics:

What I understand as Sacred, then, is any objective that consists in establishing harmony, balance, between the interior and the exterior, between the individual and the collective, between the microcosm and the macrocosm, between man and the universe. It has to do with what today's man calls ecology, a word that, as everyone knows, comes from the Greek *oikos*, house, and in some languages it also means school. So ecology includes a very precise brief, which is for man to learn to live with his habitat, his village, his city, his country, with the cosmos. To learn to study the interactions that unite us all thanks to a common future. (Bernal de Herrera 2001, p. 2).

Many questions arise when intending to exhibit her work in a museum that is willing both to show the importance of her practice as well as to present a new understanding of the body and its context within performance. How does one demonstrate this through archival documents, or works on paper? As the sole activator of the work, Hincapié's Estate initially discarded the idea of the re-enactments of her pieces. In an attempt to include the physicality, gesture, stillness, silence, movement and presence that her work emanates, and in attempting to avoid a re-enactment, the exhibition "María Teresa Hincapié: If This Were A Beginning of Infinity"<sup>1</sup> at MACBA (Museum of Contemporary Art of Barcelona) and at MAMM (Museum of Modern

Art of Medellín) seeks to combine diverse voices that engage in dialogue with Hincapié's practice.

Together with Emiliano Valdés (Chief Curator of MAMM, Museo de Arte Moderno de Medellín), co-curator of the exhibition, we have decided to invite three artists selected through their personal and professional connection, and shared interest in Hincapié's oeuvre, to develop new works based on her performative language. With the aim of establishing the potential of affect as a mechanism through which to interact with the deceased artist, we are seeking to reproduce an attitude associated with communal sharing, to which Hincapié adhered during her life and artistic career. At the end of the 1990s, she acquired land, which she called 'la Fruta', in the vicinity of the Sierra Nevada de Santa Marta. There she planned to establish an artist residency, 'Aldea-escuela' (Village-school), a project that she carried out until her final days. She believed that living in a collective was conducive to the production and transmission of knowledge. Additionally, this case study explores orality as a strategy for the preservation of ephemeral art and other associated historiographies. It also questions how to classify, exhibit, and collect durational performance materials when the process is, in and of itself, the artwork. Moreover, it becomes a platform for considerations regarding time: the time of work, the time of the performer, the time of the audience, the time between the original work and the response made by a new performer and eternal time.

## **\*\* Notes on the performative in María Teresa Hincapié**

Yes, what I did was rise above everything, I even picked up litter, screwed it up into a ball and hid it behind a shoe, behind the door. ... At that time I had no idea what performance was; all I knew was that it was a discipline that fascinated me and gave me the rigour to carry out very long works. I started working for twelve hours, I threw myself into that theatre. I'd get there

in the morning, with everything. ... The work where five people were there for three days, for me, it wasn't putting on a show, it was giving myself the chance to be able to work, to have a discipline, to have rigour and, at the same time, for people, someone who wanted to go in, could go in and, if they wanted to see my work, they could see it. It wasn't a spectacle or a work, it was a 'training', a laboratory project based on everyday life; very slow, because I've worked a lot with slowness; if I am going to pick up this glass, I take my time, I adopt a position, I can look at it, a lot of things can happen. From the moment I got up until I went to bed, I cooked, washed, swept, made breakfast, had lunch, put curlers in, put face packs on. ... You can't imagine all the things I did in twelve hours! (Bernal de Herrera 2001, p. 39)

Landing in the contemporary art circuit spontaneously and almost by chance, María Teresa Hincapié always had a very particular definition of the performative, which, despite being run through by the performing arts, resisted specific categorisation, instead oscillating between life, creation in movement and the search for the mystical. She left the world of theatre determined and exhausted by the game of representation that was unable to channel an expressive urgency allowed by other genres such as dance or accommodated by more hybrid spaces such as the exhibition. Even then, the purely dramatic genre, which she embraced for several years (from 1978 to 1985) as an actress in the group Acto Latino,<sup>2</sup> gave her extreme control of her body. With her director, Juan Monsalve, she learned the practices of Eugenio Barba's theatre anthropology,<sup>3</sup> centring on handling the body according to the principles of dance and theatre of various cultures, especially eastern ones. For two years she did street theatre and followed closely the precepts of poor theatre as theorised by Jerzy Grotowski. She especially explored the spiritual side that he accorded to the actor, described as follows:

The actor makes a total gift of himself. This is a technique of the 'trance' and of the integration of all the actor's psychic and bodily powers which emerge from the most intimate layers of his being and his instinct, springing forth in a sort of 'trans-lumination' (Grotowski 2002).

María Teresa Hincapié took this rigour to the limit. She thus initiated a path towards long duration in which she had already dwelt for years in rehearsals with her company and which she followed perseveringly because it connected her with what was most essential in her life: the everyday. She said so herself on various occasions:

I am a theatre actress because, with theatre, I came back to life. I learned to walk, to sit down, to get dressed, to speak, to sing, to dance, to look through everything. To awaken the invisible (Monsalve 2010, p. 171).

For Hincapié, then, artistic practice immediately becomes a guide to life, a way of inhabiting the world that becomes aware of a body through which ideas and wills materialise:

I'm not interested in dead art. I think that life is art and my body is my living art. My body is one that has to move, that is watching, that is tired, that is exhausted. This is my proposal (Serna 2010, p. 97).

For María Teresa Hincapié, the body is a sign<sup>4</sup> that makes itself present in a certain space and time, although it conjures up many other places and times because there is an invisible dimension that connects its matter with the entire universe. 'Making' art is the vehicle through which one can connect holistically with the world. It thereby becomes a corporeal ritual that makes itself present, that knows how to be, that is.



María Teresa Hincapié, *Ondina* (Undine),  
dance version, 1986  
Acto Latino and Álvaro Restrepo.  
Teatro Colsubsidio, Bogotá, Colombia.  
Photo: Ernesto Monsalve. Courtesy of  
Santiago Zuluaga, Casas Riegner, Bogotá,  
and 1 Mira Madrid, Madrid



María Teresa Hincapié, *Tú eres santo* (You Are Holy) from the project *Hacia Lo Sagrado* (Towards the Sacred), 1995

Photo: Óscar Monsalve, MAMBO Archive.  
Courtesy of Museo de Arte Moderno de Bogotá, MAMBO, Bogotá

Performer with a capital letter is a man of action. He is not somebody who plays another. He is a doer, a priest, a warrior. He is outside aesthetic genres. Ritual is performance, an accomplished action, an act. Performer is a state of being. To Performer, knowledge stands as duty and knowledge is a matter of doing (Grotowski 1992).

In her creative conception, Hincapié conceives her actions as exercises – tools to better decipher the reality that surrounds her. In fact, it was not until later, sometimes even to validate herself to the art circuit itself, that she used the word ‘performance’, always accompanied by an explanation that made it elastic and placed it in a space of becoming:

I frequently insist on the need to work, not so much for the work in itself as for the revelation involved in its process. Body, time, space, action. These are important motivations in my work: *Una cosa es una cosa* is a kind of distillation of this entire process (Bernal de Herrera 2001).

This idea of training ultimately pinpoints something that is in transition, developing, that never ends: ‘I believe in a mutant being, a being that constantly changes.’<sup>5</sup> The body configures the work itself, determining and modifying it according to its relation with the moment and the place through sensory skills. This constant changing explains the fact that many of Hincapié’s works repeat the same actions and continue to vary over time. Elements are added, or removed, or the title changes, but follow similar patterns of movement. Constant mutation is clearly opposed to the notion of permanence – a key concept for art historiographies – and to producing some *thing* that remains.

I'm interested in making an art that cannot be photographed, that cannot be recorded, that resists being consumed like all the media products that globalization imposes on us every day. I want to produce an image that remains in people's minds (Hincapié 2010, p. 12).

It is obviously necessary to rethink the lexicon we use when looking at practices in hybrid categories, as the tools provided by museum conservation and curatorial teams are castrating. We must turn imagination into political potential that, with its new formulas and grammars, distils other ways of addressing such central issues as acquisition, ownership, preservation and durability.

One of María Teresa Hincapié's conceptual references was Suzi Gablik, especially as regards the idea that art should follow an ecological imperative and be a gateway to a revitalising spirituality. Somehow, art should stand apart from social alienation and commodification, becoming empathetic and generous. To give form to this desire, Maria Teresa Hincapié wrote a quotation from US-American art critic Lewis Hyde on the floor of the exhibition space for her piece *Tu eres santo*:

A work of art is a gift, not a commodity. ... every modern artist who has chosen to labour with a gift must sooner or later wonder how he or she is to survive in a society dominated by market exchange. And if the fruits of a gift are gifts themselves, how is the artist to nourish himself spiritually and materially, in an age whose values are market values and whose commerce exists almost exclusively in the purchase and sale of commodities? (Hyde 2007)

In the practice of María Teresa Hincapié there is an explicit, persevering will not to produce; it is a constant strategy of resistance to



María Teresa Hincapié, *Vitrina*, 1989  
Long-duration performance in commercial  
premises in a building on Avenida Jiménez/  
Carrera 4.a, Bogotá. Courtesy of Santiago  
Zuluaga and Museo de Arte Moderno de  
Bogotá, MAMBO, Bogotá



the commercial world that surrounds it. She imagines alternative values to those of a society that has to generate products, where productivity is the great social objective to the detriment of nature and the relation that we human beings can have with it. In Hincapié, then, the performative permeates any creative act in the artist's life: a pilgrimage to another city, clearing a beach of plastics, sharing food with the Huichols, inhabiting a museum, occupying a gallery for a ritual, being silent, reading, cleaning, organizing – it cannot be reduced to a tangible object.

Indeed, the search for the sacred, as a metaphor for union with the universe, is vital to understanding 'the performative' in Hincapié's practice. It is not insignificant that this allusion leads us once more to her beginnings in the theatre world, and particularly to Grotowski, whom she always followed very closely. As Daniel Fermani writes:

It is necessary to understand that Grotowski was a man in search of spirituality, and theatre had given him the possibility of undertaking that search through the physical, through man's relationship first with the world, then with the other and with himself. ... This work therefore exceeds the limits of a theatrical technique proper and immerses itself in the dense, personal, almost mystical experience of a man who plunges into the intimate possibilities of the spirit by taking the path of the body. Thanks to these conditions, that are almost a kind of mysticism, it is paradoxical to call oneself a 'follower' of Grotowski, or to speak of Grotowskian theatre, since a true follower of the Polish master should be a spiritual seeker rather than a theatre artist. (Fermani 2007)

This is a very close approximation to Hincapié's 2004 definition of 'performance': 'What I call performance is a life experience that does not necessarily have to be the protagonist of anything, that does not have to become a spectacle. For me, performance is purer, it's like what

God must see as an attitude, an inner attitude, of the human being, and doesn't need to say it ... for me, they are silent acts of love' (Bernal de Herrera 2001).

How, then, to represent the creative practice, which out of conceptual necessity is ephemeral, in an exhibition full of records (documents, personal archives, interviews, oral testimonies, recordings of actions and photographs), while remaining faithful to the spirit of the artist?

### **\*\*\**My desire is to speak with you: the cognitive legacy***

To represent this memory of the ephemeral and underline the inherent political resistance of a voluntarily outdated practice, I borrow the definition of the term 'exhibition' that Mathieu Copeland offers in his essay "Choreographing Exhibitions: An Exhibition Happening Everywhere, at All Times, with and for Everyone":<sup>6</sup> "To consider the word "exhibition", and its French translation "exposition", is to assert the possibility of both an exhibition stripped bare of all content – as in exposed – and the idea of an "ex-position" – a position that was, but is no more, that moves on; a position that is yet to happen' (Copeland 2017).

The curatorial approach of the exhibition, then, treats it as the start of a continuum of imagination and making by means of records of the practice of an artist who believed in the transmission of knowledge as a mechanism for living together. These records comprise not only those in the archive, but also future records constructed in the exhibition itself. All of them, whether archival or newly created, piece together a dialogue that aims to be expansive, that seeks to reach the other and so on in time.

This age requires us to turn our lives into works of art. ... And to speak of a 'work of art' in our times is highly debatable. My desire is to speak with you (Monsalve 2010, p. 166).



María Teresa Hincapié on her property, La Fruta, in Quebrada Valencia, Sierra de Santa Marta in Colombia, starting work on her 'Aldea School' (Village) project of experimental artist communities (c.1997). Courtesy of Santiago Zuluaga, Casas Riegner, Bogotá, and 1 Mira Madrid, Madrid



Communication between different parties is essential to understanding the production of knowledge in the transfer of information, and the exhibition sees orality as a strategy to preserve the ephemeral and other historiographies. In *Phenomenology of Perception* (2013), Maurice Merleau-Ponty attributes a corporeal dimension to language. For Merleau-Ponty, the word and, therefore, speech always happen not only through but in the body, which is the source of communication. In this proposal, then, the polyphony of voices (understanding voices not only as the new works created specially for the exhibition but also as the diverse, heterogeneous archive materials) is seen as the driving force that generates knowledge and the key to access the performative in making together and sharing collectively.

We have to return to a more humane, supportive community world. We need to support each other. In La Sierra I think it is possible to live in community. To regain peace, we have to learn to renounce things, which is why I don't want a business, I want to be with beings who are willing to create a spiritual revolution (Monsalve 2010, p. 168).

To clarify how we will deal with archival material in this exhibition, I borrow the words of Myriam Van Imschoot when she contrasts Peggy Phelan and Rebecca Schneider's theories on the performative:

Whereas Phelan prioritizes performance as disappearance, since it happens once and only once before it enters the mnemonic field of memory, Schneider speaks of performance *as* memory. And rather than underscoring uniqueness, she points at body-to-body transmissions and to the way they are deeply characterized by a practice of repetition. In doing so, Schneider does not so much want to escape the archive; rather, she seeks to expand its scope, so as to emphasize the value not only of the

bones, but also of the *flesh*. Flesh – not as a passive matter, but as a physicalized relational field of interaction, intensities, techniques, histories, traces, and relicts of experienced information. Flesh – with its own history and genealogy (Van Imschoot 2017).

The archive is, then, also woven of the very flesh that the body presents. It enables a series of intertexts and connections that go beyond the expired temporality of a moment. Considering the exhibition as a possible future allows the understanding of its forms to come, thereby proclaiming its openness to a plurality of constantly mutating voices. As Isidoro Valcárcel Medina said: ‘A work of art is only precisely that when it generates other works of art...’<sup>7</sup> This exhibition also aims to be transitory: a platform structured by affects and the recognition that coexistence between pasts and what is still to be built can be imagined. To bring it closer to the notion of home proposed by Suely Rolnik:

To build an ‘at home’ nowadays depends on operations that are rather inactive in modern Western subjectivity, but familiar to the anthropophagous mode in its most active actualization: to be in tune with the transfigurations within the body, resulting from the new connections of flows; to surf the events that such transfigurations trigger; to experience concrete arrangements of existence that incarnate these palpable mutations; to invent new life possibilities (Rolnik 1998, p. 137).

In conclusion, if we understand the Hincapié’s performative practice from this perspective, then surely the transmission of knowing and knowledge is the necessary seed for the performative to continue its articulation, whether in a home or in a school or in a way of living together. For this reason, the exhibition “María Teresa Hincapié: If This Were A Beginning of Infinity” aims to establish a knowledge base

on which to continue building and exploring not just the artist's practice, but also the understanding of and the nuances inherent in the performative.

## ENDNOTES

- 1 "María Teresa Hincapié: If This Were A Beginning of Infinity", exhibition co-curated by Claudia Segura (MACBA, Barcelona, Spain) and Emiliano Valdés (MAMM, Medellín, Colombia) from 16 March to 12 June 2022 at the MAMM and from 20 October 2022 to 26 February 2023 at the MACBA.
- 2 *Acto Latino* was directed by Juan Monsalve from 1967 to 1989.
- 3 The International School of Theatre Anthropology (ISTA) was founded in 1979 by Eugenio Barba and is based in Holstebro (Denmark). This multicultural network of artists and experts gives life to an itinerant university and its main field of study is theatre anthropology, researching the fundamental principles that generate the actor/dancer's 'presence' or 'scenic life'. It is an interdisciplinary group, its principles based on an analysis of different theatrical forms from the most diverse traditions, Eastern as well as Western, ancient as well as contemporary, that focus on the way the actor handles their body.
- 4 María Teresa Hincapié, "El objeto como signo. El cuerpo como signo" on the work *Punto de fuga*, Museo de la Universidad Nacional de Bogotá, 1989.
- 5 Interview with María Teresa Hincapié, 1990 – *Una cosa es una cosa*, Colcultura video.
- 6 Mathieu Copeland, *Coreografiar exposiciones*, Oficina de Cultura y Turismo – Dirección General de Promoción Cultural de la Comunidad de Madrid on the occasion of the exhibition "Una exposición coreografiada" presented at the Centro Arte Dos de Mayo, CA2M, 2017.
- 7 Interview with Isidoro Valcárcel Medina by Maite Garbayo in the publication for the exhibition "Antes que todo" curated by Aimar Arriola and Manuela Moscoso, at the CA2M, 2010.

## REFERENCE LIST

- Bernal de Herrera, M. 2001, *El anzuelo y el salmón. María Teresa Hincapié: “Caminar hacia lo sagrado”*, unpublished Master’s thesis, Universidad Nacional de Colombia, Arts Faculty, Bogotá campus.
- Copeland, M. 2017, *Coreografiar exposiciones*, Centro de Arte Dos de Mayo, Móstoles.
- Fermani, D. 2007, “El teatro como vehículo en Grotowski”, *La Vorágine Revista de Crítica Cultural y Teoría Teatral*, no. 11.
- Grotowski, J. 1992, “El Performer”, *Revista Máscara*, vol. 3, nos. 11–12.
- Grotowski, J. 2002, *Towards A Poor Theatre*, Routledge, New York City.
- Hincapié, M.T. 2010, “El espacio se mueve despacio”, in J. Serna, N. Gómez and F. González (eds), *Elemental, vida y obra de María Teresa Hincapié*, Laguna Libros, Bogotá.
- Gablik, S. 1985, *Has Modernism Failed?*, Thames and Hudson, London.
- Hyde, L. 2007, *The Gift: Creativity and the Artist in the Modern World*, Vintage, New York City.
- Merleau-Ponty, M. 2013, *Phenomenology of Perception*, Routledge, New York City.
- Monsalve, J. 2010, “Mi deseo es hablar contigo”, in J. Serna, N. Gómez, and F. González (eds.), *Elemental, vida y obra de María Teresa Hincapié*, Laguna Libros, Bogotá.
- Palladini, G. 2019, “On Coexisting, Mending and Imagining: Notes on the Domestic of Performance”, in A. Vujanovic and LA. Piazza (eds), *A Live Gathering: Performance and Politics in Contemporary Europe*, B-Books Verlag, Berlin.
- Rolnik, S. 1998, “Anthropophagic Subjectivity”, in *Arte Contemporânea Brasileira: Um e/entre Outros*, Fundação Bienal de São Paulo, São Paulo.
- Serna, J. 2010, “Hacia lo sagrado”, in J. Serna, N. Gómez and F. González (eds), *Elemental, vida y obra de María Teresa Hincapié*, Laguna Libros, Bogotá.
- Van Imschoot, M. 2017, “Rests in Pieces: On Scores, Notation and Trace in Dance”, in M. Copeland (ed.), *Coreografiar exposiciones*, Centro Arte Dos de Mayo, Móstoles.

WHAT

A MUSEUM  
CAN (NOT) DO

Performing collective  
methodologies with Circo  
Interior Bruto

Myriam Rubio

---

How do we recall things? How do we remember signs of affection?

Do what has never been done, do what doesn't know how to be done.

Yes, but in company; alone it's more difficult.

The first net is in place: what matters is collective action.

How we face the absence of the other in a community of affections, how we bear this pain. We humans are always making nets, we always work with nets, because otherwise, the pain is unbearable. If you fall to the ground and don't have a net, we know what happens. This net allows us to bear what we have lived.

The second net, superposed on the first: the archive.

The archive allows us to bear the past. The obvious allows us to see things face to face: this is supported thanks to a support, and the support allows you to support it, it's that elementary, what's to be done.

These words are taken from Jaime Vallaura's performance about The Past at the third in-house congress of the artist collective Circo Interior Bruto (CIB, Madrid, 1999). We had invited this collective to form part of the exhibition "Action: A Provisional History of the 90s" (MACBA, July 2020 – February 2021), comprising mainly documentary



Presentation of *Circo Interior Bruto*, June 1999.  
Courtesy of Circo Interior Bruto

archives, photography and video. The exhibition historicises a generation of artists who, in the early 1990s, recovered the action practices begun in Spain in the 1960s and 1970s.

In response to the invitation, CIB initially suggested publishing a book to document its track record. A book, it was argued, could function as a portable, permanent, accessible, handleable pocket file device. Moreover, the collective realised that a documentary exhibition would distort and aestheticise its past work in a specific time and space. But at the museum's insistence, the group proposed *El Futuro* (The Future) as an alternative, an eight-month-long project in which, as a case study, it would present its methodology of collective creation.

The project staged the construction of the artistic experience – usually hidden in the workshop – framing this process as a challenge to the artist. It thus made uncoded, fugitive ways of living available to the observer, in the sense of Barthes' concept of idiorhythmia (Lepecki 2018, p. 15). Play, decision-making, complicities, error, desires, contradictions – all these form part of the common learning process.

The short quote that begins Vallaure's reflection on the CIB's past outlines relevant aspects developed in this text, which observes the singularity of this group of artists to draw some useful conclusions from its performative practice and collective methodology.

So, according to the CIB, how do we recall things? How do we remember signs of affection?

The CIB's practice is set in a tradition of artistic attitudes that, throughout the twentieth century, has to varying degrees resisted being 'collected' by the museum. As Vallaure indicates, this resistance has offered a springboard for Institutional Critique since the 1960s. It has enabled a face-to-face confrontation with the museum's conflictual role as preserver of those other practices focuses on the process of creation and the collective life experience. It also permits other temporalities that go beyond the idea of useful, finished form. This is an old dilemma: we need a device to support memory,



Third congress of the CIB. In the image, Teresa del Pozo, Paula Morón and Belen Cueto. Courtesy of Myriam Rubio

the net beneath the trapeze artist in the circus. Indeed, the collection department's function is to find the metric fit that enables these attitudes to form part of its museum's logic. As a preservation machine, it investigates methods for ordering temporary works, the archive and documentation and the possible protocols of reactivation. Stubbornly, however, some artists' works insist on occupy a space of discomfort as their proper 'place'. But why do they decide to position themselves on that fringe?

This question has no single answer. Jimmie Durham sees this as *false* problem, as something possibly lost in translation, a short-sightedness in the Western vision of the universal: 'On a broader level, it seems a naiveté to me that so many Europeans assume that their languages adequately explain or reflect the world. It is a kind of denial of history, also; especially with words like "art"' (Durham 2015, p. 252). I recall an email exchange between the Argentinian Colectivo Etcétera and Chilean researcher and artist Nancy Garín, which brought up some other nuances. Garín recommends situating oneself in the *flight from work to doing*<sup>1</sup>. 'The museum that allows itself the desire to preserve certain practices linked to the body, time and the immaterial should introduce the idea of indiscipline into its structure. A way of making that is inherent to these practices, in constant flight from the normative frameworks of the disciplines in the visual arts.' Etcétera, meanwhile, points out that there is an intention behind that which defines itself as performance in terms of discipline. We don't do that. In terms of discipline we define ourselves as artists. But we work using many other disciplines: music, theatre, poetry. For us, performance is a language and a tool, not a discipline. It is important to realise that it is as precarious as poetry, for example, but even more complex, because it does not find a place.

The exhibition set out to find a place in the museum for collective, performance-based works like CIB's, drawing reference to Jonah

Westerman's premises: 'Performance is not a form unto itself, a special and different kind of art that must be isolated or quarantined but is instead an integral and crucial component of contemporary art history.' In other words, as a practice performance exceeds its own definition ('any one form or mode of production') and looks at art's relationship to audiences and to the social world at large, as well as the way in which 'we comprehend and exhibit the history of contemporary art' (Westerman 2016). With this in mind, the question moves from artistic practice towards the limits that define what a museum can (not) do. The museum needs to be transformed to adopt that which is left out: works that do not meet the requisites, which do not occupy or fit, which have no body because they are multiple, which do not have a place. An undisciplined knowledge: 'That which has never been done, does not know how to be done.' A circus, for example.

Expanding the language of the museum enables space for undisciplined works. Instead of 'purchase' or 'collect', for example, one can use the verb 'adopt', a term that contains the idea of care, the sum of different knowledge, accepting that which is foreign. It presupposes not a previous temporality, but a link. It conceives of linking a disappearing work to the history of the institution. Finally, it sparks thinking about archive curation not just through the items an archive contains but also through the works that have affected it – as often happens with family trees or with chosen families. A proposal to see the collection as a community.

## **The Circus As Method**

The model of the circus was – is – an extremely rich reference for rethinking performative wandering; for creating an easily moveable collective structure that makes it easier to combine efforts and interests. A structure that keeps alive the idiosyncrasy of each of its components and in which, at the same time, the

Circo Interior Bruto, *The Creation of the World  
in Eleven Shows: Camping at 300 Metres:  
The Holidays*. Courtesy of Circo Interior Bruto



sum of them constitutes a unity of a higher order. A circus is at once the trapeze artist and the big top, the lion and the wagons, the individual and the collective (Vallaure 2006).

In 1999, after other collective experiences, a dozen artists set up Circo Interior Bruto in a rented space in the Lavapiés district of Madrid to pursue artistic research. The name is a play on PIB (*Producto Interno Bruto*, the Spanish acronym for Gross Domestic Product, or GDP) and could be translated as Gross Inner Circus. The collective is currently made up of Jesús Acevedo, Belén Cueto, Marta de Gonzalo, Rafael Lamata, Publio Pérez Prieto, Rafael Suárez, Jaime Vallaure and François Wimberg. Previously it also included Paula Morón, Luis Naranjo, Eduardo Navarro, Kamen Nedev and the ever-present Teresa del Pozo.

This generation of artists is part of the tradition of Institutional Critique. The art-historical thread of its work weaves together Dadaist parties and Cabaret Voltaire with absurd humour and the aphoristic *greguería*. It also touches upon the methodologies of the Bauhaus, the affiliation of Oskar Schlemmer and Fluxus with conceptual art. It combines Situationist drift and Lettrism with the playful approach of Robert Filliou, the pedagogical practices of Beuys with the call for a process-based art that extends to the body through dance and to video through experimental film.

The particularity of their practice derives from three main decisions. The first was to adopt a position on the fringes of the artistic, creating a balance between the formats of popular culture and the references of contemporary art, with an alert attitude to any gesture that could be co-opted by high culture.

The second was to centralise research and the process as objects in themselves – artistic experiences in which ‘the process of doing’ and ‘doing with others’ acquire their ultimate meaning. Though antagonistic in form and tone, Jorge Oteiza’s conceptual approach offers one frame of reference in the recent historical context: his writing, his

experimental laboratory as methodology, along with his ethical position, withdrawing from the art scene in 1959 to continue with other poetic, pedagogical and social pursuits. In the first decades of the twenty-first century, the CIB explored this path intensely, integrating research as a fundamental part of its artistic projects and attributing other roles to artists such as educator, mediator and curator.

The third decision was to characterise the work of collective authorship as an artistic project. Here are some personal notes about the CIB's method, written during preparatory meetings:

A work system in permanent crisis. Being in balance. Being available, to art, to conceptual love. A vertiginous way of working, to the limits. No conditions. Situating oneself in rehearsal time as work. Economy of means. A stage structure that is possible because everything is self-managed. Scene-changing movements as action. Affective role relationships, like in a big family: yielding as a methodology, giving up perfection to obtain harmony. You'll never manage it on your own.

In its first stage, from 1999 to 2005, the CIB developed a working methodology with the aim of maturing into a coherent collective. In those six years, CIB's activity was organised into three main thematic blocks. The first, *La creación del mundo en once funciones* (The Creation of the World in Eleven Shows, 1999–2001), consisted of eleven independent works addressing human social organisation in the cosmos (Vallaure 2006).<sup>2</sup> The second block, *Mercado de futuros* (Futures Market, 2002), accentuated the experimental nature of the staging. The research concentrated on the idea of reality and its repercussions for human beings. For this purpose, the collective chose four apparently low-value, everyday formats: bingo as a system of chance, the technological conference, the rock/pop concert and the end-of-term school play. A second congress was organised, in which exhaustion and



*The Creation of the World in Eleven Shows:  
The Andromeda Strain I. Atmospheric Phenomena,  
Cabanyal–Canyamelar, Valencia, 11 December 1999.  
Courtesy of Circo Interior Bruto*



*The Creation of  
the World in Eleven  
Shows: Camping  
at 300 Metres: The  
Holidays, May 2000.  
Courtesy of Circo  
Interior Bruto*



Circo Interior Bruto, *Future Market 1/4: I Don't Understand Anything: Bingo*, January 2002.  
Courtesy of Myriam Rubio

disparity of criteria caused some members to leave the group. Finally, the third block thematised trust, a decisive factor for the collective. The structure was supported by a third conceptual scaffolding: *La triología de la revolución* (The Trilogy of Revolution, 2005), a concept which, in members' own words, 'allowed them to reflect on the impossible with the energy required to build a barricade'. The revolution was left with just two parts when the group silently dissolved after six years of continuous work.

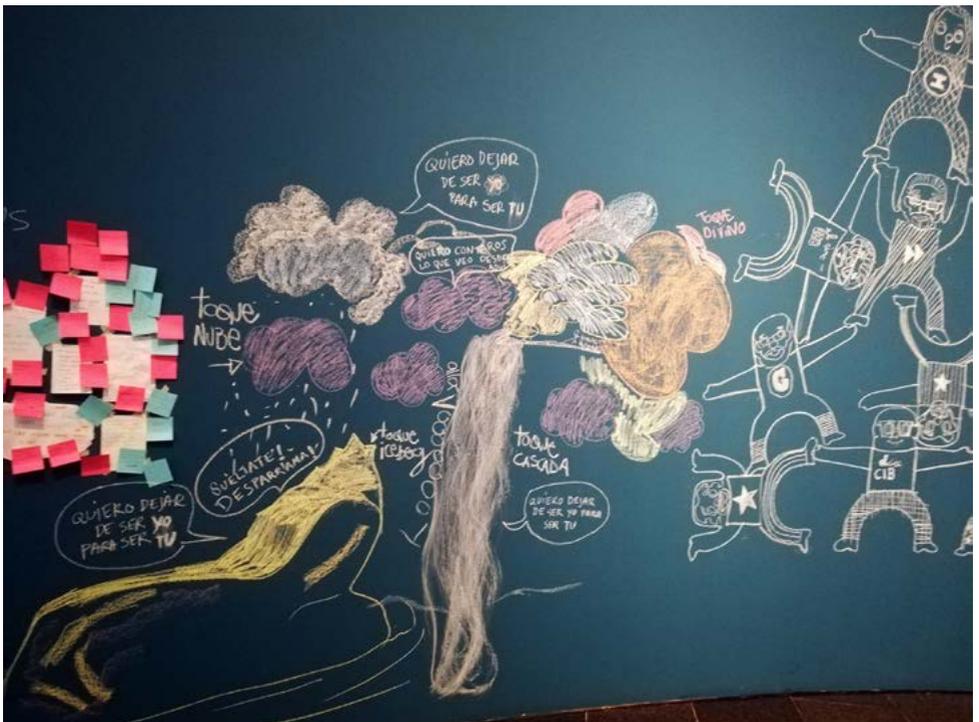
Between each block, there was a period of reflection in the form of an in-house congress. These allowed the members, using a system of experimental presentations, to analyse the current situation and the future of the group. Indeed, the collective prioritised a horizontal structure with no assigned roles and an equitable distribution of creation, organisation and maintenance duties. Initially, collective work was the sum of individual and group work, approved and ratified at the permanent assembly. However, with time, the assembly developed into an autonomous, organic entity, 'something that escapes, unique, unrepeatable, something born of control yet absolutely uncontrolled' (Vallaure 2006). In this sense, perhaps the most subversive aspect of CIB's organisation is the continuous containment of individual egos.

In the words of one of its members, Belén Cueto, 'The CIB was a place of personal, creative and political dissidence.' Each investigation began with an experimental approach to social and conceptual issues. Research in the workshop or laboratory lasted approximately two months. Normally, the process ended with a single presentation or 'show' synthesising the laboratory work, incorporating performance, paratheatre, absurd humour, visual-phonetic poetry and play. Each presentation was attended by 100 'observers'. There was no rehearsal, so there was no repeat.

A small community of dozens of people attended the shows in the workshop. Thereafter, memory began to take shape – the I-was-there, the blurred photos, the fragmented memory of the members



*The Creation of the World in Eleven Shows*, stage for *National Geographic: Homeland*, November 2000. Courtesy of Circo Interior Bruto



Wall of the MACBA after Belen Cueto's activation carried out by the accomplices, November 2020. Courtesy of Myriam Rubio

and the large audience that affectively accompanied the project. The rumour.

## The Future

A rumour that persists. After a break of ten years, the collective met again in 2017. Without a workshop, they adapted *Prometeo encadenado* (Prometheus Bound, 2017) and *Así habló Zarathustra* (Thus Spoke Zarathustra, 2018) to stage spaces.

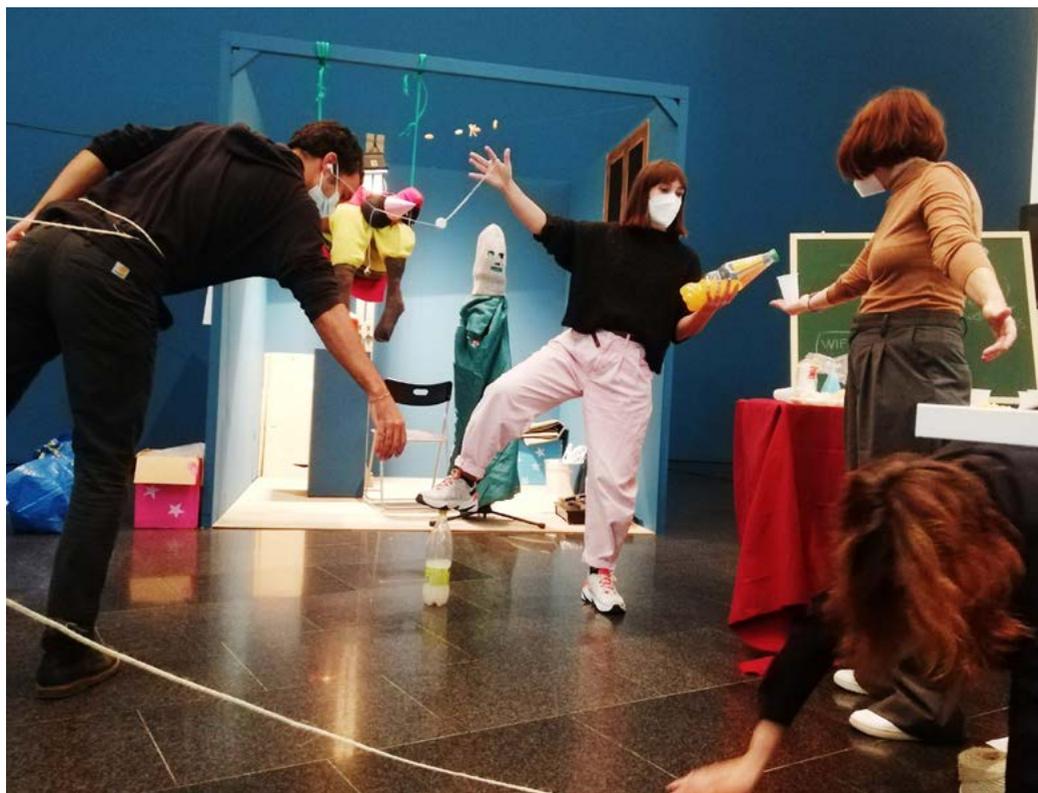
The MACBA's invitation was titled *El futuro* (The Future, 2020–21). The project repeated the CIB's methodology and began with a period of preparation, from July to September, due to the outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic. The circular space that housed it contained the basic structures of the circus: the original workshop's blue-painted walls, a habitable model with symbolic objects, a gas cylinder, a swing, an empty stand occupying the place of the audience and a large projection of a series of video pieces documenting the group's in-house meetings to discuss the project's pros and cons.

The almost empty space was the product of sedimentation of the relationships that accumulated and transformed within it. As such, it acquired content depending on the internal conditions to which it was subjected. Such conditions adapt to COVID-19 guidelines: cancellations and little probability of travelling, touching, hugging or kissing other non-cohabiting bodies.

September saw the third in-house congress (19–20 September 2020), which was the only presence-based event and became the driving force of the project. Starting with questions about memory, the group began to review what was essential to its practice to determine an appropriate form to exhibit itself in the museum and to move towards the future. It used performance to disrupt collective thinking much like a conversation, based on exchange and the sum of the multiple partial and subjective elaborations of other group



The gallery at the start and end of the third congress, 19–20 September 2020. Courtesy of Myriam Rubio



Laboratory: exercises of the accomplices in the activations of Marta Gonzalo and Publio Pérez Prieto, and Belen Cueto, October and November 2020. Courtesy of Myriam Rubio

members. Each member gave two presentations; sixteen hours of listening occurred over two days. The performative congress was theorised as a device, opposed to the documentary exhibition of the archive. Oral presentation became a means for building historiography – orality as memory, but expanded orality, memory by sedimentation, like a beach.

Thus, the gallery became a creation lab until December 2020. Then came the second wave of COVID-19. It was decided to activate the gallery by means of remote encounters, using projections on the wall screen. An artist activated it by Zoom from another city, but lacked an audience. It was then decided to form a mirror group in the exhibition gallery, made up of young artists who had been working in the museum prior to the pandemic. This vitally important group, entrusted with carrying out different exercises and reflections in the exhibition space, gradually became known as *Los Cómplices* (The Accomplices). The name drew on an idea of complicity that Gesa Ziemer understands as the ‘quality of doing with’ (*Mittäterschaft*), and which defined in criminal law as participation in any of ‘an act’s three steps of resolution, planning and execution’ (Ziemer 2012).

This ‘complicity’ created an intergenerational space of enormous generosity and exchange of knowledge between the artists. It added new live content in galleries with videos recorded by a webcam acting as a space-time connector. In some cases, the accomplices acted as remote members of the circus, contributing their particular skills and playing with the established rules. In others, a member of the circus unilaterally decided, in an anti-art gesture, to remove all the remaining previous interventions and leave the gallery empty again.<sup>3</sup> All decisions and their consequences – some, like this last, difficult for the institution to absorb – were respected as the sum of the collective experience. The final show, *El futuro* (The Future), consisted of a web series in which each of the eight chapters reflected on what had happened during those months. The first chapter of the series, *El trabajo colectivo*



Laboratory: the activations of Fran Winberg and Jaime Vallaura, November and December 2020. Courtesy of Myriam Rubio

(Collective Work), includes material from all the activations carried out with the accomplices.<sup>4</sup>

## Collective Work

Collective work is ideological work in the world of art and in the normal world outside of art. Our economic, social and political system is not interested in the slightest. When we created the CIB we were interested in the creative capacity and the surprise and enthusiasm of dealing with expressive challenges. That was before. That no longer exists. Now, it's something else. But some ideas from then may be useful now, even if only not to repeat them. Or to understand the value of dialogue. Or to question the different forms of ego that dominate us and to continue investigating human creativity. This is very necessary. ... And to think about what we have in mind for constructing our next show. Excerpt from the performative presentation by Rafael Lamata about *El pasado* (The Past, 19 September 2020).<sup>5</sup>

In the 1990s, in the Spanish historical context, performance emerged as a practice that intervened directly in contemporary criticism of the commodification of art and the structures that make daily life precarious. It developed from artists' critical reflections on the issues precipitating the formalisation of their work, such as market relationships, the work's conceptual inseparability from social class consciousness and the artist's personal response to both. These issues, exacerbated by the neoliberal economic policies of the latter decades of the twentieth century, affect the attainable visibility for certain works in the art market and in institutions. Accordingly, they touch on issues that are key to living today more generally.

In this context, what is the relevance of artists working collectively – that is, accepting collective authorship for the ethical,



UNA IDEA

MI IDEA – TU IDEA

EL PRIMER CONFLICTO:  
¿CÓMO SE DISFRUTA O SOPORTA LA IDEA  
DE LOS/AS OTROS/AS?

- |                    |                    |
|--------------------|--------------------|
| IDEA BUENA         | IDEA MALA          |
| IDEA TONTA         | IDEA LISTA         |
| IDEA FRÁGIL        | IDEA GORDA         |
| IDEA PESADA        | IDEA LIGERA        |
| IDEA POLÍTICA      | IDEA JUGUETONA     |
| IDEA DESNUDA       | IDEA VESTIDA       |
| IDEA COPIADA       | IDEA ORIGINAL      |
| IDEA VIEJA         | IDEA NUEVA         |
| IDEA DE ACTUALIDAD | IDEA TRASCENDENTAL |

TERESA

Rafael Lamata's performative talk about *The Past*, 19 September 2020. Courtesy of Myriam Rubio

conceptual and formal decisions about the production and presentation of a project?

In her text “Collectivity? You Mean Collaboration”, Bojana Cvejić contrasts the word ‘collaboration’, often used today in the fields of dance and performance, with the word ‘collective’, regarded in many settings as negative and obsolete (2005). Cvejić ironically asserts that ‘we should thank historical collectives from the sixties for providing food for liberal individualism today.’ She refers to the failed politics of emancipation of the collective in theatrical and performative practices in the 1960s as a form of depoliticised libertarian thought. Then as now, the abstract idea of individual freedom prevails, embraced by the author-artist at the expense of collective work. The discomfort surrounding the term collectivity is, then, another symptom of the politics of neoliberal individualism in the arts.

In reflecting more deeply on the idea of the collective in art, one can draw on Richard Sennett’s work on the social and political history of forms of production in the figure of the artisan. Sennett argues that the craftsman’s knowledge, autonomy and slow production time constitute a practice that promotes democratic attitudes (Sennett 2009). These ‘lie in the capacities on which human beings draw to develop skills: the universality of play, the basic capabilities to specify, question and open up. These are widely diffused among human beings rather than restricted to an elite’ (Sennett 2009). In point of fact, the CIB’s members, most with further artistic training, were working full-time in other jobs. As a habit, they would go to the workshop after work to engage in doing things together over six years, the time it takes a craftsman to perfect a skill. Their experiment was put on hold as new life commitments emerged – their first children. But when the children were older, they convened once more. At that time, many continued with other artistic work as well.

The irresolvable questions about art in a context of modernity are still linked to the artists’ stance on the concept of work. In the case

of the CIB, separating paid employment and art was, of course, necessary to pay the bills, but it was also a deliberate ethical choice. The idea of the non-productive reconciled the material conditions of their work – ephemeral, immaterial, with no remains – and their ethical stance on the market and on life. What emerges is an ecological way of viewing the relationship between lack and want: a balance between the determination to not increase and the need to maintain a degree of productive activity.

To this effect, I cite a recent interview in which Franco ‘Bifo’ Berardi introduces the concept of the frugal: ‘When we started to define reality as an exchange value rather than a use value, we started on the road to capitalism, inequity and poverty. Frugal means that pleasure lies not in accumulation but in the time of enjoyment’ (Berardi 2022). In turn, the notion of the frugal links some of the force fields of art and activism of the 1990s with the urgencies highlighted during the pandemic – the interdependent, ecofeminist ‘good life’ and the shrinking economies necessary for a post-capitalist world.

Sennett, moreover, refers to Plato’s concept of the artisan, which comes from the root *poiein*, or making, with the addition of *arete*, or excellence or virtue. Thus, the craftsman embodies the specifically human condition of commitment to the past and the present, by doing his job well for the simple purpose of doing it well (Sennett 2009). Craftsmanship, as formulated in classical texts, unites skill with community. When the CIB was set up, it was out of the desire to occupy the workshop. A *place* – what performance lacks in the museum – is the centripetal force of the community. Sennett regards the workshop as a social institution, the place of specialised work, like the scientific laboratory. The social history of craft workshops illustrates the effort to resolve ‘the modern, perhaps unresolvable conflict between autonomy and authority’. For the author, in the laboratory, as in the circus, ‘inequalities of skill and experience become face-to-face issues’ (Bojana Cvejić 2005).



Workshop of the CIB, 1999–2005.  
Courtesy of Circo Interior Bruto



Model of the workshop  
after Rafael Suarez's  
activation at the MACBA  
exhibition, December  
2020. Courtesy of  
Myriam Rubio

In this vein, the CIB stands out for its autonomy in economic exchange. They charge for time invested, for the result of the work, but not for the sale of objects derived from their performance. In other words, they use non-speculative economic models. In the workshop, the shows had an admission price, and a bar was set up to defray the costs of rent and materials. Meanwhile, the museum established production budget and fees for the activation and the final show, inspired by the economic parameters of theatres and subject to collective agreements. This arrangement emerged not because it is stage work, but because of the precarious working conditions of the individual artists due to their lack of economic autonomy. From this perspective, collective authorship and its relationship with work, as in the guilds, takes on a new meaning today.

At the end of her text, Bojana Cvejić lists some of the necessary conditions for collective artistic work to remain critically relevant. She raises various issues, such as the interaction that results from working outside market requirements; equal authorship in a work's content, framework, production and presentation; the relevance of the number of artists in a collective, since it increases the complexity of the interactions; that 'taking-place' means contact with the heterogeneity and singularity of the participants rather than the homogenisation of the author; that the museum institution should offer these artists space for production and experimentation as opposed to presentation.

Finally, for the utopian collective that Cvejić envisions, she makes the following observations:

Perhaps, redefining the 'working-with' frame, taking this condition rather than the autonomous self-validating concepts by individual author, has the power of becoming a starting point for experimental collaboration – a collaboration between authors. One thinks that such collectivity would better be called *collection*, if it is defined by a 'number of working-with-one-another

ones without an essence'. A question would be how a collection of authors-performers without one author-initiator comes together. It's not merely a technical question, as it puts forward a more important concern. What might be worth doing together in dance and performance vis-à-vis society today? (Bojana Cvejić 2005).

The CIB embodied this vision in the late 1990s. For this reason, CIB is one of a kind: in its work disguised as anachronism, as expert artisans of being together. Its methodological proposal, unattainable and yet contingent, is still valid, especially in its careful disregard for art, which allows it to disregard the role of the artist and the art market, but not the consciousness between the two. Working artists – by day teachers, civil servants, chefs, designers – seasonally, until they disappear, to return.

This text is written in what was, then, a future, turned into another present that passes – subject to indeterminacy. Welcome to the circus.

## ENDNOTES

- 1 This is an idea taken from the catalogue of the exhibition “Pasos para huir del trabajo al hacer. Interzona”, Museum Ludwig, Cologne (Germany), 2004, p. 3. <http://www.deartesy pasiones.com.ar/03/doctrans/trabajo%204.pdf>: “La fuga del trabajo al hacer/The flight from work to doing” is a terminology that comes from John Holloway, a Scottish theoretician based in Mexico. It means, firstly, the flight of capital ... the disappearance of labour in its traditional model of generating value and surplus value. ... But, as paradoxical as this may sound, “fleeing from labour to action” implies the need for new and different forms of social articulation. In this sense, the escape from traditional labour can materialise in searches that free up a creative potential, which,

further, can also be reversed in an artistic production that is outside the institutions and the market.'

- 2 A note on *La creación del mundo en once funciones*: 'It starts out from nothing to eventually reach a utopian world, the circus universe, a meta-referential space where the inner circus and the official circus combine their obverse and reverse. Along the way, they have reflected on the appearance of objects, on the relationship with the other, on sex, politics, social problems, cleaning and holidays. In an attempt to analyse increasingly complex environments, the circus explores stagings that are substantially different from each other. There is an urge to start from scratch in the transition from one project to another, which sometimes means moving between extremes.'
- 3 Excerpt from the letter from Rafael Suarez to the other members, December 2020: 'For the general theme we're working on (the future), I wanted to include in the general process the idea of the accident, the unexpected, even the cataclysm, the empty board, the erased hard drive. An event that wipes the past clean, submerged Atlantis. And from here on ... I trust that what can, apparently, be interpreted as a deactivation of space, thanks to the loop of our logics, will become another model of activation.'

I think that in the phase of the process in which we find ourselves, we need a revulsive to reactivate us. I may have been wrong, but I think sometimes it's good to do the acrobatics without the net.

I'm also confident that this action can help to draw us together in the work process and activate communication. Hugs to all, I love you all very much.'

- 4 Chapter 1 of the series *El futuro. El trabajo colectivo* (The Future. Collective Work) <https://futurocib.blogspot.com/2021/02/capitulo-1-el-trabajo-colectivo.html>.
- 5 Third in-house congress of the CIB. <https://www.macba.cat/es/exposiciones-actividades/actividades/congreso-circo-interior-bruto>  
CIB blog at <https://futurocib.blogspot.com/>.

## REFERENCE LIST

- Cvejić, B. 2005, “Collectivity? You Mean Collaboration”, in *Republicart: Artists as Producers* (website), <https://transversal.at/transversal/1204/cvejic/en>.
- Durham, J. 2014, *Waiting to Be Interrupted: Selected Writings, 1993–2012*, Mousse Publishing, Milan.
- Lepecki, A. 2018, *Idiorítmia o en l’esdeveniment d’una trobada*, Arcadia, MACBA, Barcelona.
- Sennett, R. 2009, *The Craftsman*, Yale University Press, New Haven.
- Tomás, N. 2022, “Franco ‘Bifo’ Berardi: ‘No Podemos negar que España es hoy el país más civilizado de Europa’”, *El Diario*, February 16, [https://www.eldiario.es/catalunya/cultura/franco-bifo-berardi-no-negar-espana-hoy-pais-civilizado-europa\\_128\\_8750958.html](https://www.eldiario.es/catalunya/cultura/franco-bifo-berardi-no-negar-espana-hoy-pais-civilizado-europa_128_8750958.html).
- Vallaure, J. 2006, “CIB: de la carpa mental al teatro nacional”, unpublished lecture.
- Westerman, J. 2016, “Project Overview”, in *Performance at Tate: Into the Space of Art*, Tate Gallery of Modern Art, London.
- Ziener, G. 2012, “Komplizenschaft: Eine kollektive Kunst- und Alltagspraxis”, in R. Mader (ed.), *Kollektive Autorschaft in der Kunst: Alternatives Handeln und Denkmodell*, Peter Lang, Bern.

VARIATION  
ON THE  
UNACCOUNTED:  
A TRIPTYCH,  
BY  
MAPA TEATRO

José A. Sánchez

---

Die un- /  
bestatteten, un gezählt, droben,  
die Kinder,  
sind absprungbereit.

– Paul Celan (1999, p. 244)

The un- /  
buried, unaccounted, up there,  
the children,  
are ready to jump.

Unaccounted, or *incontados*, does not exist as a noun in Spanish. And its very inexistence performatively reflects not only the absence of the disappeared and murdered, but also the silence of witnesses and survivors, the victims that cannot be accounted for, who were never given a voice to tell their story. ‘The Unaccounted’ expresses the difficulty of representing violence, while also denouncing the reasons for which certain facts are declared irrepresentable, thus justifying censorship or waiving the responsibility of representation.

Heidi and Rolf Abderhalden rose to the challenge, as artists, taking on the role of active witnesses of conflict (Celan 1999, p. 235). In the *Anatomy of Violence* trilogy, paramilitary violence, narco violence and guerrilla violence were poetically confronted in three successive performances: *The Holy Innocents* (2010), *Discourse of a Decent Man* (2012) and *The Farewell* (2017). The idea was to chart an historic period that roughly coincided with the biographic timeline of the Mapa Teatro

founders. Hence, it comes as no surprise that *The Holy Innocents* superimposes the birthday celebration of Heidi Abderhalden (as a watching body) on the carnivalesque delirium of the dancing bodies in Guapi. And that *The Unaccounted: A Triptych*, a synthesis of the trilogy, begins with a *tableau vivant* that reinterprets *A Ventriloquist at a Birthday Party in October 1947* (1990), by Jeff Wall.

*Variation on The Unaccounted: A Triptych* was presented in the Pavilion of the 31st São Paulo Biennial in September 2014 and acquired by the Reina Sofía Museum. It translates the staged work *The Unaccounted: A Triptych*, first performed at the Festival Iberoamericano de Teatro de Bogotá in April of 2014 in the home of Mapa Teatro, into installation. The staged work lasts approximately an hour and includes five actors, a magician, three musicians and eight children from a school in Bogotá. Structurally, the installation is almost identical to the staging of the piece, while on the inside the children are replaced with automatons and the actions of actors and guests are replaced with mechanical devices to create a unique and complex Baroque magic box that includes video screenings, sound and a music band, lighting and smoke; it is made up of three wooden cubes (as well as the one reserved for spectators), which in turn contain three spaces, one for each part of the trilogy, now transformed into visible plastic layers: the house, the street, the jungle.

When presenting this *Variation* as part of the exhibition titled “Apparatus 92: Can History Be Rewound?”, from the Reina Sofía Museum’s permanent collection, we asked ourselves how to emphasise the dual nature of the work and therefore the memory of the live event.

## The Fiesta

Tell him not to make any noise. ... To stand firm in the face of the enemy and not to move. Tell him that if he doesn’t move, they’ll disappear by magic. And to be cheerful. Because the revolution is a *fiesta*. ...



Jeff Wall, *A Ventriloquist at a Birthday Party in October 1947*, 1990, transparency in lightbox, 229 × 352.4 cm. Courtesy of the artist



Mapa Teatro, *The Unaccounted: A Triptych*.  
Bogotá, 2014. Courtesy of Mapa Teatro

These are the words heard in the first part of *The Unaccounted*, emerging through the smoke and the tricks performed by the magician (who replaces the ventriloquist) for the expectant children who make up the ‘war band’ (frequent in the working-class schools of Colombia). The voice represents that of Camilo Torres Restrepo (1929–1966), a priest who championed the best option for the poor, by “Liberation Theology”, who took part in the foundation of the Frente Unido del Pueblo and died in his first military action against the army in 1966, the same year the Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia (FARC) was created. At this time, the choice of violence to destabilise power and aspire to social justice was enjoying newfound justification in the anti-colonial fight, supported by the recent Cuban revolution. The guerrilla *fiesta* lasted over fifty years and this first part is dedicated to it, the part that unfolds in the house and is subsequently further elaborated in *The Farewell*.<sup>1</sup>

The second *fiesta* refers to the celebration of a peculiar carnival held every 28 December (the feast of the Holy Innocents) in Guapi, an essentially Afro-Colombian town located close to the Pacific Ocean. On this day, the young men dress up as women and hide behind rubber masks to go out onto the streets and whip their neighbours in memory of the punishment doled out in times of slavery – a ritual that subverts racial and class domination, gender identity and religious belief. Superimposed over this remembrance of violence is the most recent outbreak triggered by the Autodefensas Unidas de Colombia, a paramilitary group created in the early 1980s (with the tolerance or connivance of the state) to illegally fight the guerrillas who, like the latter, turned to drug trafficking for financing. Evil is singled out in the figure of HH, ‘Hernán Hernández’, ‘El Mono Veloza’, active from the mid-1990s, who has confessed to committing over 3,000 crimes, many against farmers, indigenous people, trade unionists and community leaders.

The alias *patrón del mal* (master of evil), however, is reserved for Pablo Escobar, the most celebrated drug trafficking boss, who



Mapa Teatro, *The Unaccounted: A Triptych*.  
Bogotá, 2014. Courtesy of Mapa Teatro



Mapa Teatro, *The Unaccounted: A Triptych*.  
Bogotá, 2014. Courtesy of Mapa Teatro



Mapa Teatro, *The Unaccounted: A Triptych*.  
Bogotá, 2014. Courtesy of Mapa Teatro

went so far as to become a senator and even dreamed of being president of the republic. His intended inauguration ‘speech’, supposedly found in his shirt pocket when he was riddled with bullets on a rooftop in Medellín in 1993, provides the title of the trilogy’s second part, set in the third space of the installation, dominated by tropical vegetation. The elaboration of the discourse shows clear use of the ‘ethno-fiction’ resource, central to the latest projects by Mapa.<sup>2</sup> The *fiesta* (which could equally be a birthday) is reminiscent of the celebrations organised by Escobar in Hacienda Nápoles, his luxurious pad spread over 3,000 hectares in Puerto Triunfo, a municipality of Antioquia. At this *fiesta* the coca plant is a living character, natural and poor, demanding its rights from those who profit from trafficking and corruption at the expense of so many deaths.

As per usual at parties, there is music; it is provided by Danilo Jiménez, the leader of a band that survived a failed attempt on Escobar’s life, but in which his wife died and he lost his hearing, in addition to other serious injuries. In *The Holy Innocents*, it was provided by Don Genaro, a marimba player who is both musician and witness. There is no music in the first space, just voices, and magic, performed by Santiago Nemirowski (a figure reminiscent of Rolf and Heidi’s friend, Hernando Pizarro Leongómez, who led a secret life as commander of the National Liberation Army, ELN. And like in all parties, there are also guests: the children and ghosts of the past from the first space, the celebrants of the Guapi ritual (visible only in the video) and Jeihhco Caminante, a rapper from Medellín who founded the hip-hop group La Élite in 2002 to promote a culture of peace and non-violence. They all share the space with the figures created by the actors, who embody the fun and occasionally humorous dimension: Heidi as a coca plant and playing herself, Agnes Brekke as a TV presenter (in reference to Virginia Vallejo, Escobar’s lover), Santiago Sepúlveda and Andrés Castañeda as participants at the *fiesta* and Julián Díaz as the syncretic figure of the masked man who voices Maiakovski’s dream (imagined

by Antonio Tabucchi): a witness obsessed with washing his hands. The clean and tidy space of the house, copied from a middle-class interior photographed by Jeff Wall, has been invaded by the chaos of the carnivalesque street and the kitsch exuberance of the tropical hacienda and the jungle. When the *fiesta* ends, the ruins are left.

## Theatre and the Live Arts

In 1984, the Mapa Teatro founding coincided with the start of one of the most violent phases of Colombia's armed conflict. The successive storming of the Palace of Justice by M-19 and the brutal reprisals (1985), the terror and massacres in rural areas at the hands of the different armed groups (guerrillas, drug traffickers, paramilitary and army), the political attacks and assassinations, the kidnappings and torture all once again abolished the very idea of human dignity and fundamental rights (Hylton 2003). It was a decade that saw an escalation of the conflict that would not subside until the mid-1990s, following the execution of Pablo Escobar.

In these years, violence could not be represented because it penetrated the bodies, precluding any distance. During the rehearsals of *De Mortibus: Requiem para Samuel Beckett* (1990), the sound of bombs exploding was recurrent in Bogotá. On stage, bodies said as much as words, in a performance exercise that manifested the experience of violence without representing it. The Beckett model urged theatre to use figures rather than characters and non-representative acting enabled an approximation to reality without resorting to interposed fiction, unfolding instead through work with the bodies and the materials. In subsequent projects, this allowed for figures played by professional actors to be played by people unconnected to the world of the arts, as guests, experts or witnesses. This happened in *Horacio*, by Heiner Müller (1994), directed by Heidi Abderhalden in the Penitenciaría Central la Picota and subsequently presented in the Camarín del



Mapa Teatro, *De Mortibus: Réquiem for Samuel Beckett*. Bogotá, 1990. Photo: Ettore Gaffurri



Mapa Teatro, *Horacio*. Bogotá, 1994

Carmen in Bogotá. The violence that was happening on the streets and in the fields of Colombia was rendered present on stage without resorting to virtuous representation techniques, in such a way that the bodies of criminals, invaded by violence, became poetic bodies accepting their vulnerability as actors.

Heidi and Rolf Abderhalden were very close to the artist Doris Salcedo, who was working on her furniture trapped in cement series in the early 1990s, the same material Mapa chose to steep the costumes of *De Mortibus* in, thus conferring its figures with a semi-fossilised appearance and a movement slowed by the weight of the garments. And they lived alongside José Alejandro Restrepo and María Teresa Hincapié, who produced their first collaborations, combining video, installation and live action. The members of Mapa allowed themselves to be influenced by these new practices and were very mindful of the way the stage medium was being redefined on the global scene in the final decades of the last century, which marked the group's trajectory in the second half of the 1990s, resulting in the project *C'úndua* (2001–05). The will to experience the formats is present in the heart of the Mapa Teatro foundation itself and has translated into works conceived for museum exhibitions created in parallel to the stage productions. The video installations *Camino* (1997) and *Dormitorio* (1998) and *Lo demás es silencio* (1999), by Rolf Abderhalden, pre-empt research into this medium, which was integrated into his works in multiple ways in the decade of two thousand, but also gave rise to successive museum versions of the staged works themselves, which Mapa has termed *Variations*.

When, in 2010, Rolf and Heidi Abderhalden (along with Ximena Vargas, Adriana Urrea and José Alejandro Restrepo) decided to open a specialised course at the Universidad Nacional de Colombia (using the University Museum in Bogotá as one of the workspaces and as a location for the presentation of the final degree projects), they called it a Master's Degree in Theatre and Live Arts. The 'live arts' category does not replace that of 'theatre', which continues to be Mapa's core

medium, but extends the conception of theatre in an exercise of constant delocalisation. As Rolf himself states in his essay “Live Arts?” that this is a ‘non-category’ that asserts the centrality of the ‘laboratories of bodies, voices, texts and textures, images and sounds’ in the production of ‘poetic events’; the human bodies, not necessarily present or visible, do not constitute the privileged means of expression, but are rather conceived as ‘the live matter of thinking and the live thinking of matter’ (Abderhalden 2018, pp. 801–4). Underlying this proposal is the idea of ‘life’ as a central value in the political thinking of Suely Rolnik, who conceives micropolitical action as a will to assert and preserve the ‘creative power of life’, in all of its multiplicity and complexity, as opposed to the current forms and values that smother desire, but also materially attack mere survival (Abderhalden 2018, p.20). Thus, the adjective ‘live’ goes far beyond the idea of what happens live or in a situation of co-presence and must be interpreted in the context of the physical and symbolic acts of violence that continue to mark our global everyday existence and history, in addition to the persistence of a deeply rooted narco-power implemented in Latin America’s state forces, armed groups and organised crime.

### **The Gesture and the Trace**

In its interpretation of live arts production, Mapa uses the term ‘gesture’ to refer to the live action or performance and the term ‘trace’ to refer to the material memory of this gesture, which may have different formats: installation, story, publication, etc. The space pertaining to ‘trace’ indicates that ‘something happened here’. Like other *Variations* by Mapa, *The Unaccounted: A Triptych* constitutes both a trace of the staged piece and an autonomous work in the shape of an animated installation. This dual dimension stems from the expanded concept of theatre generated by the *live arts*: the work of theatre is one of the formats that momentarily fixes the live flow that unfolds in every open

laboratory around an interest or an affect (Rolnik 2018b, p. 20), and each *variation* is not merely a trace, but another possible formal materialisation, which offers an independent account of processes that also converge in the performance.

A unique characteristic of this *Variation* is that the work of theatre did not precede the installation, but rather occurred parallel to it. In fact, the point of departure for *The Uncounted: A Triptych* was the set design consisting of three cubes, which gave rise to the idea of the ‘triptych’, and the photograph by Jeff Wall, which became first a *tableau vivant* and later a stage. Moreover, the potential of that material as a visual installation was detected before the elaboration of the drama, and the invitation to present it independently at the São Paulo Biennial was received at a very early stage of the creative process. The activation of the installation as a ‘trace’ of the ‘gesture’ that was the performance to some degree implies the conception of a ‘variation on the variation’, a new layer of sensitive material to continue the poetic unfurling of the materials, insisting on the project’s live core.

One of the key images to inspire *Variation on The Unaccounted: A Triptych* was the reflection of the audience at the end of the performance on the proscenium glass that separates spectators from the space of action (which is kept the same in the installation). The bodies of the spectators are virtually incorporated into the stage space through their reflection on the glass. The integration of the installation visitors into the work itself is one of the first means of activation, a first sign of latency. An idea already implemented by Mapa in the presentation of *Variation on Witness to the Ruins* in the Museo Reina Sofía in 2016. For the spectators of the installation, a ‘trace’ is provided by the physical bodies of the other visitors who are figures that evoke the latency of the live bodies that at other times make the ‘gesture’; each visitor is therefore both spectator and vicarious figure, inhabitant of the ‘trace’ and inhabitant, through evocation, of the ‘gesture’.

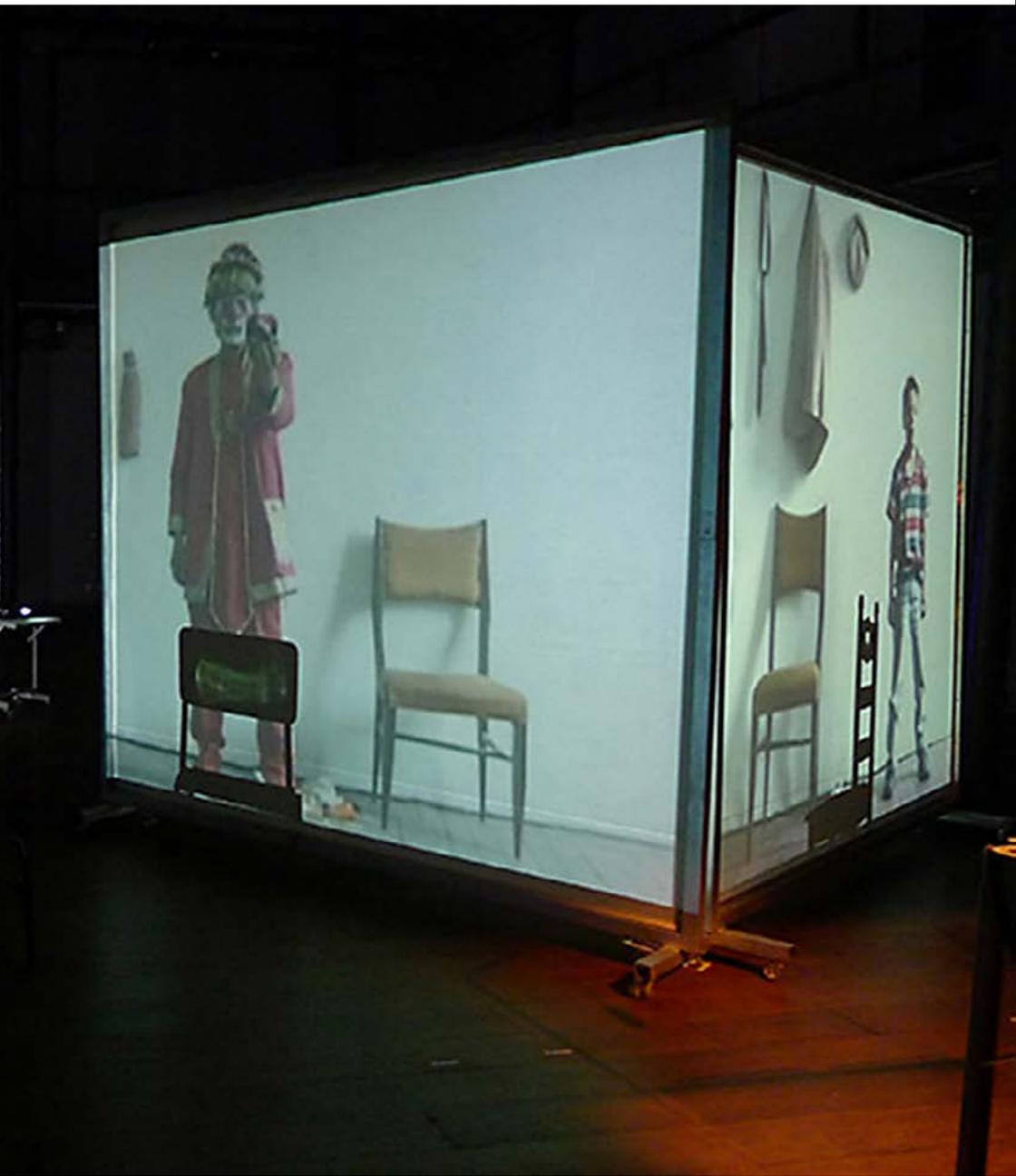
## Variations<sup>3</sup>

To think about the presentation of *Variation on The Unaccounted: A Triptych* in its dual dimension implies an intention to preserve the poetic gesture that was the staged piece. The multiplicity of mediums that Mapa Teatro has worked with and the specific reflection on how to translate the event and the gesture for the museum setting provide a basis to understand this challenge.

- a) 'Variations' are translations of the poetic gesture into the installation format. This is what Mapa did when it produced the *Variation*. Hence an independent presentation of the same would be sufficient.
- b) 'Gestures' are partial activations of the materials. Mapa has produced some installation proposals with the presence of actors, such as the *Variation on the Holy Innocents* in the 2011 Prague Biennale, which isolates the action of 'whipping' and had a mechanical version in the Museo de Antioquia in 2015; or *La balsada* (Zurich 2021), which salvages an unused material also from the research for this same work. In both cases, they are enormously powerful productions in the style of *tableaux vivants*. But they present a problem: they mobilise only part of the triptych's representative complexity and, as mentioned above, also result in independent works, not merely traces.
- c) 'Archives' are presentations of the materials used to construct the piece in an exhibition format, rendering them independent from their representative function. This is what was done in *Des/Montaje: Variation #2 on Discourse of a Decent Man* (Medellín, 2016), where, along with other materials, the image and text of the discourse itself were highlighted, offering visitors the possibility of intervening in the installation by reading the same from a radio booth.



Mapa Teatro, *Variation on Witness to the Ruins*.  
Museo Reina Sofía, Madrid (Exhibition "Fictions  
and territories"), 2019



d) 'Live Archives' are performative lectures that reconfigure the materials used in one of various previous works. In *Live Archive* (based on *Witness to the Ruins*, San Francisco, 2011) in addition to Heidi and Rolf Abderhalden, Antanas Mokus (former mayor of Bogotá) and Juana Ramírez (resident of El Cartucho; the demolition of this neighbourhood motivated the project) also participated. In *Live Museum* (based on *The Farewell* and *Of Lunatics or Those Lacking Sanity*, 2019) the actors Andrés Castañeda and Santiago Sepúlveda and the miner Rubén Darío Rotavista participated in addition to the directors.

The options we took into consideration were b) 'Gestures' and c) 'Archives'. Mapa made some proposals in relation to the same:

1. Production of a series of *tableaux vivants* or short sequences on the different spaces of the installation performed by the actors from the original work: Heidi Abderhalden, Julián Díaz, Agnes Brekke, Andrés Castañeda and Santiago Sepúlveda. Would a transmission be acceptable? What criteria would be used to select the actors to whom these sequences would be transmitted? On the other hand, the guests are, in principle, irreplaceable: the children (who are no longer children), Don Danilo (the musician), Jeihhco (the hip-hop activist), Santiago (the magician). But does the same not apply to the actors themselves in their role as active witnesses and not merely figures? And does this reintroduction of the human not contradict the function conferred on the spectators themselves?
2. Exhibition of archives parallel to the presentation of the *Variation*. These would be materials projected on the actual staging. They could be recordings of the work represented, documents or materials that form part of the process or that were relevant during the creation process. The possible materials to be used



Mapa Teatro, *The Unaccounted: A Triptych*.  
Bogotá, 2014



Mapa Teatro, *Variation on The Unaccounted*, 2021  
Museo Reina Sofía, Permanent collection



Mapa Teatro, *Variation on The Unaccounted*, 2021  
Museo Reina Sofía, Permanent collection

would include: Pablo Escobar's speech, the documentary video on the Guapi carnival, fragments of the video recording of the performance in Athens, images of the live statues from *The Farewell*.

New questions arise: How do we show the dual nature of *The Unaccounted* when the activations are not happening? Would it suffice to tell this story through an independent audio-visual method, perhaps offered through a QR code? Would it be possible to consider a more extensive archive, including the documentation from the process, work notebooks, etc.? Would it make sense to gather witness accounts from the other participants in the staged work or people close to the process?

And a concern, raised by Rosario Peiró, emerges: the representation of historical violence referred to in *The Unaccounted* is more intensely expressed in the work of theatre than in the installation. Should the work of the representation not be directed in this direction?

### **Representing *The Unaccounted*<sup>4</sup>**

The challenge would lie in activating the affects that the performance generated but which are not generated in the same way in the visit to the *Variation*. Would it be possible to introduce new presences or documents capable of mobilising without altering the poetic gesture that the *Variation* itself comprises?

The representation of violence in the staged work was rendered effective through the use of different materials and actions, two of which do not unfold with same intensity in the installation.

1. The action of the festive bodies which, by exiting themselves (through the masking, the dance and the pleasure), make themselves present in their vulnerability, evoking the actual victims,

but also as an echo of those other bodies outside themselves seen to be carried away by the delirium of violence to become the perpetrators of massacres and destruction (however abstract and rational these strategies may seem).

2. Textual fragments, visual documents and oral tales that make it possible to position the different sequences explicitly in relation to Colombia's history of political and criminal violence of the last fifty years, as well as the traces of other acts of violence.

On the other hand, it would also be worth recovering the witness experience of the most intense years of violence, in the early 1990s, and reviewing the poetic responses presented in *De Mortibus* and *Horacio* in relation to performance, representation, musicality and visual art. Taking these reflections into consideration and, on the basis of the ideas already expounded, two more specific proposals were made:

1. Execution of a *tableau vivant* in each one of the three spaces. The recording of the *tableaux* could be projected onto the actual installation, now converted into a stage, during the pauses in the *loop* programmed for the activation of the device.
2. Installation of three monitors, containing the following materials:
  - a) Recording of the first scene of *The Unaccounted: A Triptych* in Athens (2018), in which the children listen in silence to the text of Camilo Torres on a radio broadcast that justifies and urges armed conflict.
  - b) Documentary of the Guapi carnival filmed by Heidi Abderhalden. It is, after all, these festive bodies who take unto themselves the colonial violence, the capitalist violence and the paramilitary violence.
  - c) Pablo Escobar's speech in the logograph by Camilo Uribe. This document condenses the delirium of violence in Colombia and

reveals the ‘ethno-fiction’ method, which combines fiction and reality to mirror the combination of reality and fiction that constitutes Colombia’s social and political history.

These proposals would not exclude other activations or singular gestures. Nonetheless, at one point in the conversation, a question that has accompanied us from the start of the process and throughout this text was raised: Would it not be redundant to try and dramatise what in itself is already dramatic? Is it not obvious to anyone visiting the *Variation on the Unaccounted: A Triptych* that they are entering a theatre contained in a museum?

This question could be answered by evoking the participation of Cacique Juárez Munduruku at a round table that followed the last work by Mapa, *The Moon Is in the Amazon* (2021), in Kaserne, Basel.<sup>5</sup> Cacique, who had sat in silence for almost two hours, asked to be given the last word and, after taking off his feathered headpiece (as a gesture of respect), expressed his perplexity about the term used to refer to what they had just witnessed: ‘Stück’ / ‘piece’. ‘¿Peça?’, he asked in surprise. For him a ‘peça’ is a material object with a specific function, and what they had just seen was something very different, an event which he felt faithfully reflected his reality and his experience in the Amazon. The visual and verbal references to the border, the credibility of the videos and the tales of destruction of what he recognised as his territory had particularly affected him: that succession of texts, images and material choreographies very effectively represented what he knew and what mattered to him. ‘But to me this is not a piece,’ said Cacique. His complaint could have been diluted by the translation process, but Rolf wanted to know more and asked him: ‘And what would you call it in your language? If it is not a piece, then what is it?’ Without any hesitation, Cacique: ‘Theatre! This is theatre.’

## ENDNOTES

- 1 Jaime Bateman, leader of M-19, who brought to Caribbean culture V.I. Lenin's philosophy that revolution is a party: '[La revolución es una fiesta](#)'.
- 2 [Project 24](#) (2018), at LACMA, Los Angeles, or [Of Lunatics, or Those Lacking Sanity](#) (2019), Museo Reina Sofía, Madrid.
- 3 Based on a digital conversation with Heidi and Rolf Abderhalden and Ximena Vargas (Mapa Teatro), the following people from the Collections Department of the Museo Reina Sofía: Rosario Peiró (head of collections), Lola Hinojosa (head of performing and intermedia arts) and Carolina Bustamante (permanent exhibition coordination) and José A. Sánchez on 4 March 2021.
- 4 Based on a conversation with Heidi and Rolf Abderhalden on 12 October 2021.
- 5 The [round table took place on 30 September 2021](#) with the participation of Rahel Leupin, Alessandra Korap Munduruku, Daniel Maselli and Rolf Abderhalden.

## REFERENCE LIST

- Abderhalden, R. 2018, "Live Arts?", in M. Rodríguez (ed.), *Mapa Teatro: el escenario expandido*, UNAC, Bogotá.
- Celan, P. 1999, "Cambio de aliento" [Atemwende, 1967], in JLR. Palazón (trans.), *Obras completas*, Trotta, Madrid.
- Hylton, F. 2003, "An Evil Hour: Uribe's Colombia in Historical Perspective", *New Left Review*, vol. 23, pp. 51–93.
- Rolnik, S. 2018a, *Esferas de la insurrección*, Tinta Limón, Buenos Aires.
- Rolnik, S. 2018b, "Mapa Teatro: Creating from an Affect", in *Mapa Teatro: Of Lunatics, or Those Lacking Sanity*, Museo Reina Sofía, Madrid.

# FRAGMENTS OF A CO-OP FESTIVAL

Amira Akbıyıkoglu

---

I was abroad when I received a call from Hüseyin Katircioğlu in the summer of 1995. He gave me the news about an international performance arts festival he was organising in Assos and asked me to take part in it. The festival aimed to bring together people who were seeking to develop subjective languages through either practising dance, theatre, puppetry, design, plastic and visual arts, or through collaborating with individuals or groups with relevant interests. There were no specifications at all regarding where the performances were planned to take place. In the end, performances occurred in various spots around the local environment. There was a possibility to stay in Assos for three weeks to rehearse. This way, they aimed to situate the surroundings as part of the performances that would add new layers to the works. The ultimate goal was to achieve site-specificity as much as possible (Teker 2008, p. 22).

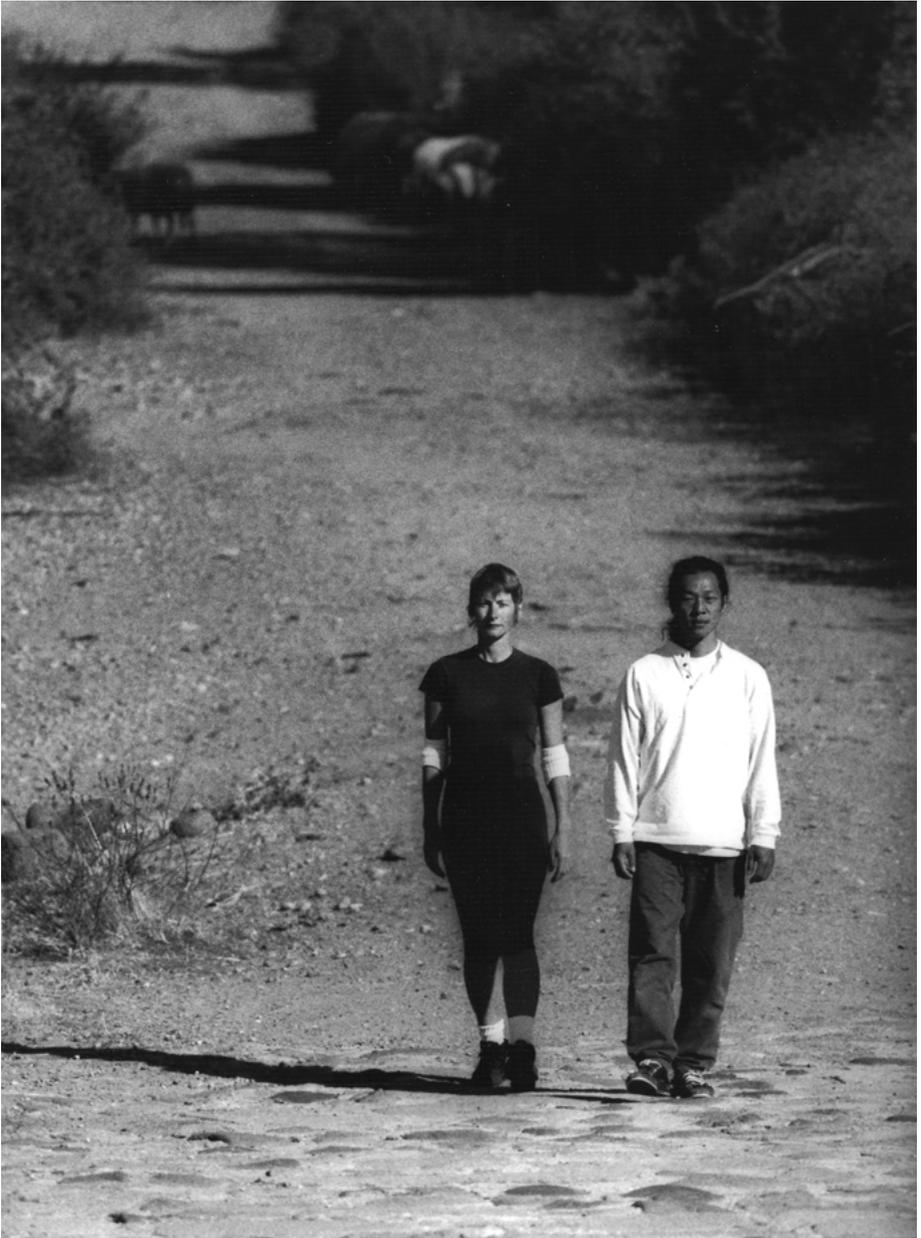
Choreographer, dancer and educator Aydın Teker was among the participants of the first Assos Performing Arts Festival held between October 5–7 in 1995. Written by Teker, the above introduction is an excerpt from a posthumous article dedicated to Hüseyin Katircioğlu (1953–1999) in the contemporary performing arts magazine *gist*<sup>1</sup> (2008–09).

Organised under the direction and facilitation of Katırcıoğlu, the Assos Performing Arts Festival was carried on until 1999. Thanks to this, the village of Behramkale and the ancient city of Assos located in Çanakkale became a significant site in the field of arts and culture, and the collective memory of Turkey. This article recollects the story of the festival – which was a ‘farfetched endeavour’<sup>2</sup> considering the timely circumstances – through press clippings, interviews, reviews and memoirs. It offers a brief overview of Turkey’s art scene in the 1990s, a period in which people from different disciplines started organising to form platforms facilitating socialisation and exchange of knowledge among cultural producers.

First of all, it would make sense to recall the events that had taken place during the decade to comprehend the history of the festival as well as the challenges ahead. In the early 1990s, Istanbul had a unique atmosphere that was both uplifting and encouraging for the people visiting or returning home from abroad.<sup>3</sup>

There were no historical establishments in the fields of art, culture, performance, or entertainment in the city. The boundaries were getting redefined in a positive sense in terms of liberty. Globalisation was constantly reshaping the city through waves of migration. There was a search towards one’s own cultural expression. During this period, the emergence of a different local creative industry was making itself greatly visible.<sup>4</sup>

While institutionalisation was not yet in progress, during the latter half of the decade, a young group of artists set out to generate an idiosyncratic discourse through a sequence of events (Kosova & Kortun 2014, p. 101). The exhibition series titled “Genç Etkinlik” (Youth Action) was committed to displaying anybody’s work as long as they filed an application. There were no requirements or prerequisites. Thus, it was both a crucial opportunity and a turning point for young artists



Aydın Teker, *Assos Yolu* (Road to Assos)  
(feat. Aydın Teker, Erica Bilder, Perry Yung), 1995  
Assos International Performing Arts Festival, Turkey  
Photo: Levent Öget

to make a name for themselves. From 1995 to 1998, the exhibition was organised according to a conceptual frame, subtitled as “Borders and Beyond”, “Territory-Deterritorialisation” and “Chaos” in chronological order. The exhibition that had taken place in 1999 was organised without a conceptual frame. All editions received significant attention and participation.

Furthermore, in 1996, a band of young artists gathered around the idea that ‘timely art should employ aesthetics as an object of information just as how it sources from other fields of knowledge and disciplines’ (Inal 1997).<sup>5</sup> This common perspective served as a point of departure for the foundation of DAGS Interdisciplinary Young Artists Association. The first notable undertaking of this group was the “Performance Days”, held in the same year in Atatürk Cultural Centre’s [Atatürk Kültür Merkezi] Room A. In the four-day-long event were familiar names who previously took part at the exhibitions such as “Genç Etkinlik”, “Öteki” (The Other), “Ah Güzel İstanbul” (Oh, Beautiful Istanbul), and Hüseyin Katırcıoğlu performed a piece titled *Sofra Sanatı* (Culinary Arts). The second edition of the “Performance Days” had taken place in the historical Darphane building with a public programme including two panels titled “Performance Art” and “Interdisciplinarity in Art”.

The Assos Performing Arts Festival served as an important milestone in the latter half of this decade. Moreover, it earned a significant place in the history of non-profit collective organisations as an initiative of artists daring enough to operate outside Istanbul, cultivating knowledge exchange and cooperation amongst themselves. It is most unfortunate that regardless of the Festival’s significance, the archival activities were undertaken by individual efforts. Any structural art-historical survey is, thus, yet to take place apart from talks, interviews given by its community, or workshops conducted by former participants. The only research that paid justice to the festival was Özgül Akıncı’s postgraduate thesis in the field of cultural studies: “Remembering the

Assos International Arts Festival through the Iconic Memory of Hüseyin Katircioğlu: Reading the rural-urban divide through gender, humour and reflexive ethnography” (2008).

### *Seeds and Principles*

**‘It’s useless to whine about the discontents of the field. If you want to turn things around you have to do it yourself.’<sup>6</sup>**

**‘Based, spontaneous and risky’**

Katircioğlu described the programme on the festival’s statement text along with several interviews by employing adjectives such as based, spontaneous and risky (Koyuncuoğlu 2000, p. 14). The quotes below shed light on his subjectivity and idiosyncratic use of these words.

In his 1996 essay published in the theatre magazine *Tiyatro... tiyatro*, Katircioğlu referred to the authentic representation that he observed in most theatres of the time as ‘Anadolu Kitsch’. He noted that, unless approached critically, plays based on the geography of Anatolia, its mythologies and poets might fall into addressing ‘desultory sentiments’. In his opinion, dealing with these subjects requires keen observation and craftiness to reshape the past and add a relevant dimension to the present to create contemplative opportunities. And yet, most of the works in this genre, naively or for the sake of convenience, fall short in this regard because of an inclination towards kitsch that stems from ‘the burden of common emotions sought to be conveyed’ (Katircioğlu 1996, p. 24). Opposition to such a sense of locality is in line with curator Vasif Kortun’s thought and criticism, which outlines an understanding of art that doesn’t go beyond ‘regurgitating traditional regional archeology (“Anatolian civilizations”) through substitutive forms and means’ (Kortun 2014, p. 26).

Keeping these in mind, it might be useful to turn back to the starting point of the festival. In an interview dating back to 1995, Katircioğlu expressed his disappointment regarding a previous edition



Rehearsal for *Simurg* (Simurgh), 1995.  
Assos International Performing Arts Festival, Turkey.  
Photo: Levent Öget



*Simurg* (Simurgh), 1995.

Assos International Performing Arts Festival, Turkey.

Photo: Levent Öget



Rehearsals at Assos were photographed by Levent Öget

of the ‘Istanbul Festival’ (known as Istanbul Theatre Festival). A sub-festival (or section) to include alternative plays was in the works, and director Dikmen Gürün<sup>7</sup> was the only participant from the committee to participate in the play titled İzmir’e doğru (Towards İzmir) presented by Katircioğlu. Despite Gürün’s efforts, the so-called alt-fest could not make much of an impact, as it followed conventions and usual patterns by the book. In the same year, Katircioğlu participated in a programme on national television (TRT 2) named *Gündemde Sanat Var* (Art on the Agenda) for an interview with professor and curator Ali Akay, sharing how the festival was put into motion with *Truva Öyküsü* (Troy Story) (1993), a play he directed himself. In the ruins of the ancient city of Troy, the temple of Cybele and the play staged around it<sup>8</sup> attained an experimental quality in their relationships with its surroundings and the audience. The village youth, actors from Istanbul Municipal Theatres and local and foreign dancers and actors were all part of the show. This time, the narrative, for centuries centred around the lives of male heroes, was being told through the perspective of envious Goddesses and mourning widows.

Nadi Güler elaborates about significant events that had taken place earlier on:

In 1992, at the International Theater Institute’s meeting held in Turkey, several important foreign theatre actors conducted workshops. Ellen Stewart’s work on Yunus Emre was among these, which was later on performed at Hagia Irene and brought to Ellen Stewart’s famous theatre La MaMa E.T.C. (Experimental Theater Club) in New York. The cast comprised Ayla and Beklan Algan, Erol Keskin, Hüseyin Katircioğlu, Mustafa Avkiran, Levent Güner, Kaan Erten, Zişan Uğurlu, Aslı Öngören and Nadi Güler alongside international actors. The show was presented to the American audience in a two-week programme following a rehearsal period that lasted for



*Truva Öyküsü* (Story of Troy), 1993. Photo: Levent Öget

a month. After getting critically acclaimed by the *Village Voice* and the *New York Times* as ‘the most beautiful oriental tale we have seen since Scheherazade’, the cast of this sold-out play performed another show titled *Troy Story* in the ancient city of Troy in Çanakkale the following year. Hüseyin Katircioğlu had a house in Behramkale, Assos for many years. After this production came to an end, he started organising the Assos International Performing Arts Festival (Güler 2008, p. 30).

In turn, Katircioğlu attaches importance to generating a language that disavows practices of sheer imitation, both in the festival and in his independent productions. Even though his primary goal was to create an experimental space, he sought out common principles and qualities in the works and practitioners. For instance, a certain level of professionalism was required from all parties: ‘First of all, works should not consist of verblatness alone. When the whole thing runs through words, the audience (and the artist) becomes constrained within that form. Second, the artists should attempt to transcend the limitations of space. In fact, the contemporary theatre is currently proceeding through this trajectory.’<sup>9</sup>

Focusing on the development process rather than the final work, local and foreign participants settled in Behramkale three weeks in advance. Some of the participants came with an idea in their mind, while some works were developed later on in practice. They set out to thoroughly observe their surroundings to get acquainted and negotiate with the people of the village. Once the selection of the venues and spots was done, they set off with the rehearsals right away. At this point, the following excerpts are critical to accurately describe the dynamic nature – stemming from collectivity – of this work.

Many women from the village sewed the costumes in their homes, others made lunch, props were produced in the el-

ementary school while actors were rehearsing in their own places. The elderly from the village would correct the performers according to the traditional folk dance *Harmandali*. Japanese musicians with Yamaha keyboards would have a hard time catching the off-beat rhythm of the original score while finger-counting the notes and complaining about the impossibility of pulling it off. The production van would go back and forth between sites to solve the practical issues. When it was finally time to call it a day with the rehearsals, we would visit the livestock to feed them with Süreyya, one of our helping hands from the village. ... Aydın Teker working on her project with a shepherd and herd of sheep on the old arched bridge at the entrance of the village, Mustafa Kaplan trying to find his balance with an Indian dancer on a seesaw on a big boat, theatre company Kumpanya making yet another version of *Everest My Lord* in an abandoned cabin on the hill afar from the residential area, Sabine Jamet having her take on *The Little Prince* with puppets alongside children from the village (Güler 2008, p. 31).

Excitement grows as the festival weekend approaches. I, on the other hand, am feeling rather blue. Because the sensation that fulfilled me the most was the process after all. This is something unique to Assos. For three weeks, an American director becomes an actor in the play of a Turkish director, a French dancer is running projects with the village children, a shepherd passes by the stage and thus becomes part of the play. There are even some directors who have completely revised their predeveloped projects after getting here. ... And the traces of all these processes could be found in costumes and decorations which were produced here on the site in a matter of three weeks (Cengiz 2008, p. 42).



Hüseyin Bahri Alptekin with Arhan Kaya, *Küresel Depresyon ve Donald Duck Sendromu* (Global Depression & Donald Duck Syndrome), 1997. Assos International Performing Arts Festival, Turkey. Courtesy of SALT Research, Hüseyin Bahri Alptekin Archives



When it was finally time to perform in front of the audience, the common aim was to bring all these efforts to life:

The festival should not be about attending a show for a determined timeframe and then simply returning to daily concerns of life. ... The thing is that you should be invigorated throughout the day by the work, not only during the performance but also before and after the show while walking on the street. We achieved this in Assos. During those three days, everyone – artists, locals, guests – shared this experience. People were rushing from one event to another to not miss a single minute of it and to catch up with the other before one ends.<sup>10</sup>

His wife and foremost collaborator, Dilek Katırcıoğlu, described the festival in the most accurate way possible:

He brought the audience and the participating artists to where these stories originated. ... In such an environment, so rich both in terms of nature and history, it was possible to perform works at any given open-air site. People from the village were not only helping and sharing their resources but also took part in performances. Actors from various different countries and disciplines met and influenced one another over the course. Local materials were sourced to produce props, decors, and costumes. Even though nobody made any money out of it, everyone was so hyped to work together as if they were mesmerised by the euphoria of collectivity (Katırcıoğlu 2008, p. 51).

## Constituents

**'Assos Festival was not like any other festival that we have grown used to, it was rather a celebration that was brought out from thin air through the collective efforts of a band of art militants' (Keskinsoy 1996).**

The festival in Behramkale was produced with collective efforts, in ways that are in contrast with contemporary production processes. The festival crew, led by Hüseyin and Dilek Katircioğlu, comprised artists, designers, architects and actors who were also well acquainted with one another, coming together in social contexts and exchanging thoughts frequently. Collectives, dancers and musicians hailing from abroad also adapted to this work method very quickly. Asiye Cengiz took responsibility in the organisation and in the plays as a volunteer every year. Selçuk Gürışık and Çağla Ormanlar were in charge of the decor and costume designs. Alongside Nadi Güler, Şule Ateş, Zişan Uğurlu and Levent Öget, as well as Katircioğlu's father, mother and neighbours, the primary component of the process lay in the local people. They all took part in the performance site spanning the village from the harbour called İskele to the Temple of Athena on the hilltop, as well as behind the scenes: 'Everyone chipped in by any means they could: carpenter Ahmet Emin saved the day whenever needed, grocer Hasan supplied essential goods, İnci let us use her restaurant as if it was the festival canteen. From the excavation professor to village women coming from Paşaköy to sew the costumes day by day, everyone was memorable and crucial' to make things possible (Cengiz 2008, pp. 41–2).

One of the most substantial supporters was Hilmi Selimoğlu, the owner of the hotels Eden Beach and Eden Gardens. The festival was made possible thanks to his generous contribution in covering the food and accommodation needs of the participating artists during the entire programme.

Thanks to the efforts of the artist, dramaturgist and critic Emre Koyuncuoğlu, there was even a critical daily publication about

the festival titled *Neo-Athena*. Gatherings were held after dark, and Koyuncuoğlu edited and proofread the collectively written reviews. ... Dilek (Katircioğlu) was putting the pages together as the first thing in the morning and sending it to a nearby village called Ayvacık with a copy machine. She would return before midday to fold the pages with Hüseyin, his mother and father. Then we would hand these out wherever the daily activities were planned to begin (Koyuncuoğlu 2000, p. 14).

### **The End of Assos Performing Arts Festival**

As there were no bodies to apply for funding or sponsorship to sustain the activities during that time, the festival had to start from scratch every year financially. It was realised with extraordinary efforts. Katircioğlu underlined this lack in the first festival, as a festival cannot carry on only with the support of the region and artists; it also needs producers.

In the second year's programme announcement published in *Tiyatro... tiyatro* magazine, Katircioğlu mentioned that 'despite the difficulties in finding financial resources due to the ongoing political and economic uncertainties', the programme was barely realised at the last moment with the support of some companies and individuals.

At the beginning of its third cycle, it was finally possible to consider the festival 'rather as an established organisation that has a promising future'.<sup>11</sup> However, in an interview published in the daily newspaper *Cumhuriyet* a few weeks later, Katircioğlu stated that the struggle for Assos was to continue until its fifth year despite the circumstances; this timeframe would be enough to tell whether it would be possible to settle or not.<sup>12</sup> Indeed, the festival was organised uninterruptedly in the following years, exactly as planned, and came to a conclusion 'before it would become neither a tourist attraction nor a self-destructing activity' (Koyuncuoğlu 2000, p. 13).

### ***In Memory of Hüseyin Katırcioğlu and the Festival***

**‘Before anything else, Hüseyin Katırcioğlu was a constructor. He built houses, relationships, performances, and an unforgettable life’ (Uğurlu 2008, p. 20).**

After the festival came to an end, Katırcioğlu focused on new works and projects. He realised a solo performance named *Sünnetli* (Circumcised) (1998–99) in the newly opened Babylon, which later became Istanbul’s staple arts and cultural events centre and concert hall. In the following months, he performed the work in many cities across Europe. At the same time, he was undertaking another project to transform the old Kasımpaşa Flour Mill in Istanbul into a performance centre. Most unfortunately and unexpectedly, he fell off of a roof he was repairing and passed away.

This text will come to an end with a work by Naz Erayda, who participated in the second year of the festival as part of the theatre company Kumpanya with a performance titled *Everest My Lord’dan Kısa Bir Bölüm* (An Excerpt from Everest My Lord). The work, titled *Three Hours for Hüseyin Katırcioğlu (the play of timetable)*, takes the collective production that occurred in Assos as a point of departure and is dedicated to Katırcioğlu’s memory.

\*\*\*

### **On *Three Hours for Hüseyin Katırcioğlu (the play of timetable)* by Naz Erayda**

I wrote, *Three Hours for Hüseyin Katırcioğlu (the play of timetable)*, inspired by his death.

This play of timetable is a conceptual play. The text of the play that I think is staged, not the play to be staged.

<b>COSTUMES</b>	BEADED CHIFFON BLOUSE, LONG CHIFFON SKIRT	VELVET BLOUSE WITH SATIN FALSE-TUCKS AND A LOW-CUT BACK, PUFFED-UP TAFFETA SKIRT	TROUSERS ORNAMENTED WITH CLITTERING STONES, KASHMIR SHAWL	PULLOVER, TROUSERS, MOODED RAINCOAT OF OILCLOTH, BOOTS	TUXEDOS, PAILETTED ROBES, SILVER-THREADED SILK FOUULARD	FULL SUIT OF CLOTHES, GLASSES
<b>ACCESSORIES</b>	WRISTWATCH, ANKLET WITH SMALL BELLS, FEATHERED HAT	WRISTWATCH, ANKLET WITH SMALL BELLS, OSTRICH FEATHERS	WRISTWATCH, ANKLET WITH SMALL BELLS, GLASSES	WRISTWATCH	WRISTWATCH, HATS	WRISTWATCH, MARKING FLARE, MEGAPHONE
<b>MAKE-UP</b>	WHITE FACE POWDER, SCARLET LIPSTICK, BLACK EYE-LINE	WHITE FACE POWDER, SCARLET LIPSTICK, BLACK EYE-LINE	WHITE FACE POWDER, SCARLET LIPSTICK, BLACK EYE-LINE	WHITE FACE POWDER	WHITE FACE POWDER	WHITE FACE POWDER
<b>NATURE OF MOVEMENT</b>	TENSE, IN MOTION	TENSE, IN MOTION	TENSE, IN MOTION	TENDER, SLOWLY	TENDER, SLOWLY	TENSE, SLOWLY
<b>NATURE OF VOICE</b>	OWN VOICE	OWN VOICE	OWN VOICE	OWN VOICE	OWN VOICE	OWN VOICE
	<b>1. PLAYER</b>	<b>2. PLAYER</b>	<b>3. PLAYER</b>	<b>FISHERMEN</b>	<b>VILLAGERS</b>	<b>CHORUSLEADER</b>
<b>SETTING</b>	PATH DOWN THE HILL TO THE SEA	PATH DOWN THE HILL TO THE SEA	PATH DOWN THE HILL TO THE SEA	3.RAY AFTER THE BREAKWATER	VILLAGE COFFEE-HOUSE	BREAKWATER
<b>SOUND</b>	SOUNDS OF THE WIND, SMALL BELLS	SOUNDS OF THE WIND, SMALL BELLS	SOUNDS OF THE WIND, SMALL BELLS	SOUNDS OF BOATS, THE SEA, BIRDS, THE WIND	SOUNDS OF CUTLERY, SOUNDS OF THE RADIO	SOUNDS OF WAVES, BIRDS, THE WIND
<b>LIGHTING</b>	CANDLES	CANDLES	CANDLES	LIGHTHOUSES	OIL-LAMPS	TWILIGHT
<b>05.00</b>	AWAITING, STANDS AT THE MARKED START-LINE	AWAITING, STANDS AT THE MARKED START-LINE	AWAITING, STANDS AT THE MARKED START-LINE	TAKE OFF IN THEIR BOATS	SIT AT THE TABLE	SITS BENEATH THE LIGHTHOUSE, HOLDS A MARKING FLARE IN HAND
<b>05.05</b>	STARTS TO WALK	STARTS TO WALK	LYING DOWN, SINGS AN AIR*	SINGS FOLK SONGS*	STARTS TO EAT	THROWS THE MARKING FLARE UP IN THE AIR
<b>05.10</b>	WALKS	WALKS	CONTINUES SINGING AIRS	ONE THROWS HIS FISHING LINE INTO THE SEA	PREPARE THEIR DRINKS	TELLS THE TIME THROUGH THE MEGAPHONE
<b>05.15</b>	SPEEDS UP	SLOWS DOWN	KNEELS	THE OTHER PULLS HIS FISHING LINE OUT	EAT AND DRINK	TELLS WHERE EVERYONE IS
<b>05.20</b>	SLOWS DOWN	LIES DOWN	STANDS UP	ANOTHER THROWS HIS FISHING LINE INTO THE SEA	SPEAK	TELLS THE TIME THROUGH THE MEGAPHONE
<b>05.25</b>	RAISES HANDS UP AND DOWN	STARTS TO SING AN AIR	STARTS TO WALK	SING FOLKSONGS	EAT AND DRINK	TELLS THE NAME OF THE AIR WHICH THE 2.PLAYER SINGS
<b>05.30</b>	LYING DOWN, SINGS AN AIR	KNEELS	WALKS	ONE OF THEM SHOUTS	ONE OF THEM SINGS A FOLKSONG	TELLS THE TIME THROUGH THE MEGAPHONE
<b>05.35</b>	SINGS AN AIR	STANDS UP	SPEEDS UP	THE OTHER SHOUTS	SING A FOLKSONG	TELLS THE NAME OF THE FOLKSONG WHICH THE VILLAGERS SING
<b>05.40</b>	KNEELS	MOVES HEAD UP AND DOWN	SPEEDS UP	ANOTHER ONE SHOUTS	SEE THE INCOMING MINIBUSES	TELLS THE TIME THROUGH THE MEGAPHONE
<b>05.45</b>	STANDS UP	WALKS	RUNS	ONE THROWS HIS FISHING LINE INTO THE SEA	GET UP	TELLS THE TIME THROUGH THE MEGAPHONE
<b>05.50</b>	WALKS	SLOWS DOWN	RUNS	THE OTHER PULLS UP HIS FISHING LINE	WALK	TELLS THE TIME THROUGH THE MEGAPHONE
<b>05.55</b>	STOPS	STOPS	STOPS, SCREAMING	ANOTHER ONE SHOUTS	GET ON THE MINIBUSES	SAYS THAT THE 3.PLAYER HAS STOPPED, SCREAMING
<b>SETTING</b>	3.JUNCTION ON THE PATH DOWN THE HILL TO THE SEA	3.JUNCTION ON THE PATH DOWN THE HILL TO THE SEA	3.JUNCTION ON THE PATH DOWN THE HILL TO THE SEA	2.RAY AFTER THE BREAKWATER	MINIBUSES	BREAKWATER
<b>SOUND</b>	SOUND OF THE SMALL BELLS, SOUND OF THE WIND	SOUND OF THE SMALL BELLS, SOUND OF THE WIND	SOUND OF THE SMALL BELLS, SOUND OF THE WIND	SOUNDS OF BOATS, THE SEA, BIRDS, THE WIND	SOUNDS OF CAR DOORS AND ENGINES, HUMMING	SOUNDS OF THE WIND, WAVES, BOATS, BIRDS
<b>LIGHTING</b>	DAYLIGHT	DAYLIGHT	DAYLIGHT	DAYLIGHT	DAYLIGHT	DAYLIGHT
<b>06.00</b>	STARTS TO SPEAK	STARTS TO SPEAK	STARTS TO SPEAK	TAKE OFF IN BOATS	TAKE OFF IN MINIBUSES	TELLS THE TIME THROUGH THE MEGAPHONE

	1. PLAYER	2. PLAYER	3. PLAYER	FISHERMEN	VILLAGERS	CHORUSLEADER
06.05	SPEAKS*	SPEAKS*	SPEAKS*	THROW THEIR FISHING LINES INTO THE SEA	PROCEED VERY SLOWLY	TELLS THROUGH THE MEGAPHONE THAT THEY SPEAK
06.10	SPEAKS*	SPEAKS*	SPEAKS*	SPEAK, SHOUTING	SPEAK	TELLS THE TIME THROUGH THE MEGAPHONE
06.15	WALKS, SPEAKING	WALKS, SPEAKING	WALKS, SPEAKING	SPEAK, SHOUTING	GO QUIET	TELLS THE TIME THROUGH THE MEGAPHONE
06.20	GOES QUIET AND STANDS STILL	LOOKING BACK, SPEAKS AND WALKS	GOES QUIET AND RUNS	THROW THEIR FISHING LINES INTO THE SEA	SING A FOLKSONG	TELLS THE TIME THROUGH THE MEGAPHONE
06.25	WALKS	GOES QUIET AND STOPS	RUNS	THROW THEIR FISHING LINES INTO THE SEA	SING A FOLKSONG	TELLS THE TIME THROUGH THE MEGAPHONE
06.30	RUNS	LOOKING BACK, SPEAKS AND WALKS	RUNS	SPEAK, SHOUTING	SING A FOLKSONG	TELLS THE TIME THROUGH THE MEGAPHONE
06.35	RUNS	SPEAKS, WALKING	SPEAKS, RUNNING	SPEAK, SHOUTING	COME BY THE SHORE	TELLS WHAT THE 2. AND THE 3. PLAYERS SPEAK ABOUT
06.40	SPEAKS, RUNNING	SPEAKS, RUNNING	SPEAKS, RUNNING	PULL UP THE FISHING LINES	GET OFF THE MINIBUSES	TELLS WHERE EVERYONE IS
06.45	STOPS, SINGS AN AIR	STOPS, SINGS AN AIR	STOPS, SINGS AN AIR	COME CLOSE BY THE SHORE	WALK	TELLS THE NAME OF THE AIR WHICH THE 1. 2. 3. PLAYERS SING
06.50	STANDS STILL	STANDS STILL	STANDS STILL	TIE UP THE BOATS	STAND STILL	TELLS THAT EVERYONE STANDS STILL
06.55	STANDS STILL	STANDS STILL	STANDS STILL	STAND STILL	STAND STILL	TELLS THE TIME THROUGH THE MEGAPHONE
SETTING	BREAKWATER	BREAKWATER	BREAKWATER	BREAKWATER	BREAKWATER	BREAKWATER
SOUND	SOUNDS OF THE SEA, THE WIND, BIRDS	SOUNDS OF THE SEA, THE WIND, BIRDS	SOUNDS OF THE SEA, THE WIND, BIRDS	SOUNDS OF THE SEA, THE WIND, BIRDS	SOUNDS OF THE SEA, THE WIND, BIRDS	SOUNDS OF THE SEA, THE WIND, BIRDS
LIGHTING	DAYLIGHT	DAYLIGHT	DAYLIGHT	DAYLIGHT	DAYLIGHT	DAYLIGHT
07.00	WALKS FROM THE SHORE TO THE BREAKWATER	WALKS FROM THE SHORE TO THE BREAKWATER	WALKS FROM THE SHORE TO THE BREAKWATER	WALK FROM THE SHORE TO THE BREAKWATER	WALK FROM THE SHORE TO THE BREAKWATER	WALKS FROM THE SHORE TO THE BREAKWATER
07.05	WALKS AND MURMURS	WALKS AND MURMURS	WALKS AND MURMURS	WALK AND MURMURS	WALK AND MURMURS	WALKS AND MURMURS
07.10	STOPS AND MURMURS	STOPS AND MURMURS	STOPS AND MURMURS	STOP AND MURMURS	STOP AND MURMURS	TELLS THE TIME THROUGH THE MEGAPHONE
07.15	GOES QUIET	GOES QUIET	GOES QUIET	GO QUIET	GO QUIET	STANDS UP, FACES THE SUN
07.20	SQUATS	SQUATS	SQUATS	SQUAT	SQUAT	SQUATS
07.25	PLACES FACE AND HANDS ON THE GROUND	PLACES FACE AND HANDS ON THE GROUND	PLACES FACE AND HANDS ON THE GROUND	PLACE FACE AND HANDS ON THE GROUND	PLACE FACE AND HANDS ON THE GROUND	PLACES FACE AND HANDS ON THE GROUND
07.30	SQUATS	SQUATS	SQUATS	SQUAT	SQUAT	SQUATS
07.35	STANDS UP	STANDS UP	STANDS UP	STAND UP	STAND UP	STANDS UP
07.40	TURNS HEAD CLOCKWISE	TURNS HEAD CLOCKWISE	TURNS HEAD CLOCKWISE	TURN HEAD CLOCKWISE	TURN HEAD CLOCKWISE	TURNS HEAD CLOCKWISE
07.45	QUIVERS	QUIVERS	QUIVERS	QUIVER	QUIVER	STANDS STILL
07.50	STANDS STILL	STANDS STILL	STANDS STILL	STAND STILL	STAND STILL	STANDS STILL
07.55	STANDS STILL	STANDS STILL	STANDS STILL	STAND STILL	STAND STILL	STANDS STILL
08.00	STANDS STILL	STANDS STILL	STANDS STILL	STAND STILL	STAND STILL	TELLS THAT THE PLAY HAS ENDED

\* MONOLOGUES AND DIALOGUES, AIRS AND FOLKSONGS ARE DETERMINED BY THE JOINT DECISION OF THE CHORUSLEADER, THE PLAYERS, THE FISHERMEN AND THE VILLAGERS.

This timetable consists of descriptions for all elements, processes and the relationship between these that are necessary for a play to actualise.

The costumes that all the actors will wear, the props they will use, the make-up they will do, the use of sound; the spaces each actor will be present in, with which ambient sound, and with which sense of light, can all be read in this timetable.

Descriptions of when and what the players will do in very short time intervals (for example, every five minutes), their movements, behaviour, words and sound in these time units are included in the timetable.

I present the play of timetable as a conceptual theatre to the reader/audience. It's up to them to transform the play from the conceptual and turn it into reality.

## ENDNOTES

- 1 Gist was a semi-annual magazine aiming to create a trace of works and artists who adopted an innovative, creative and alternative understanding that stretches imagination across the field of contemporary performing arts (theatre, dance and performance). Although its founding members were already closely acquainted with each other since the early 1990s, it wasn't until 2008 that their dream came true. Yet, it could only last for three editions, following the first issue published in January 2008. The magazine was published by Garageistanbul and edited by Naz Erayda from the theatre company *Kumpanya*.
- 2 Hüseyin Katircioğlu, "Assos'un taşı toprağı sahne", interview by Sevil Özkan, *Pazar Radikal*, 17 August 1997.
- 3 Katircioğlu returned to Istanbul from London in 1991, and established the theatre YA DA, where artists from different countries would come together during each show. YA DA's first play was *İsmene* by Yannis Ritsos, in which he worked with Zişan Uğurlu and Şule Ateş, and was staged at a local discotheque called Taxim Night Park.

- 4 Vasıf Kortun, SALT's MANASTIR web project translated by translated by Ezgi Yurteri, <https://saltonline.org/projects/manastir/>.
- 5 İnel İnal, "Performans Günlerine Dair", 2. *Performans Günleri* exhibition booklet, ed. Nadi Güler, 1997.
- 6 Hüseyin Katircioğlu, "Komedisiz trajedi olmaz", interview by Nilüfer Kuyaş, *Milliyet*, 17 February 1997, 20.
- 7 Gürün would continue to follow the Assos Festival in the coming years and invite several groups to present their works as part of the İstanbul Theatre Festival.
- 8 "İşlerinden bazıları," *göst*, July – December 2008, 48.
- 9 Hüseyin Katircioğlu, "Tarih, kültür ve sanat Assos'ta", interview by Aziz Çağlar, *Hürriyet Gösteri*, September 1996, 46–7.
- 10 *Hürriyet Gösteri*, 46-47.
- 11 Hüseyin Katircioğlu, "Assos'un taşı toprağı sahne", interview by Sevil Özkan, *Pazar Radikal*, 17 August 1997.
- 12 Hüseyin Katircioğlu, "Beklentiler arttı, olanaklar aynı", interview by Gül Erçetin, *Cumhuriyet*, 2 Septepmber 1997.

## REFERENCE LIST

- Cengiz, A. 2008, "Festival mutfağından sesler", *göst*, July–December.
- Katircioğlu, D. 2008, "Dili aramak", *göst*, July–December.
- Katircioğlu, H. 1996, "Anadolu Kitsch", *Tiyatro... tiyatro*, August–September.
- Kosova, E. and Kortun, V. 2014, "Siyaset", in *Ofsayt ama Gol*, SALT, İstanbul.
- Koyuncuoğlu, E. 2000, "Hüseyin Katircioğlu Demek 'Alternatif'i Üretmek Demektir", *Tiyatro... tiyatro*, January.
- Keskinsoy, E. 1996, "Görsel Nane Ruh...", *Express*, 9 September.
- Kortun, V. 2014, "Yörüngeden Çıkan: Bir Başka Beriki" in 10, İstanbul: SALT, 2014, 26.
- Teker, A. 2008, "Assos Yolu", *göst*, July–December.
- Uğurlu, Z. 2008, "Hüseyin Katircioğlu ve yaşamı üzerine düşünmek", *göst*, July–December.

OHO –  
BETWEEN THE  
MAGIC OF  
DIGITISATION  
AND  
FINANCIAL  
LITERACY

Igor Španjol

---

Although contemporary art grows old very quickly and is constantly changing, Jacques Rancière's statement that art is not merely a product of history, but also a historical category in itself, is applicable to recent developments and trends evolving in the here and now. This means that art only exists within a special order of identification that allows us to observe objects and performances as part of a unique experience, not in terms of the reception of a work of art, but as the actual making of the experience within which a work of art originates, a making that involves institutions, venues of exhibiting and performing, ways of making the works publicly accessible or reproducing them, as well as modes of perception and affective experience, concepts, narratives and debates that identify a work and give it meaning. In short, art is not some timeless activity, but a historical structure (Rancière 2015).

In the past two decades, we have witnessed two major social changes that seem contrasting at first glance. The first is the global financial crisis; the saving of the banking sector that the crisis sparked has seriously undermined the welfare state and wrought havoc in the public sector in Slovenia and some other countries. Those public cultural institutions and artists that have survived the budget cuts have been forced to identify and pursue new survival tactics between market populism and ruin. While this change is all about shortages and austerity measures, the other change advocates prosperity, offering up innovations and giving the appearance of being the better option.

We are talking about the magic of technology, the imperative of across-the-board digitisation and general online accessibility. The neoliberal politics of austerity has made the digital paradigm all the more attractive, while any refusal of technological innovations is considered almost tantamount to resisting the ideals of the Enlightenment. The story of the technological turn has overshadowed the more depressive story of the political and economic downslide, while in reality the two phenomena are very much intertwined. Almost like the new COVID-19 pandemic with the transition to teleworking on the one hand and the ecological and energy crisis on the other.

Rather than start off with a full-formed idea of the final projects beforehand, cultural politics usually structured institutional projects as they evolved, collecting and composing everything technologically possible that seemed potentially useful. Their activities are thus mostly based on the more or less creative uses of technological and other resources, which led them to the view that an integrated functioning of all of the technical components (various machines, computers and electronic devices) is the most decisive factor for a project in achieving the desired effect. This is, in a way, a phenomenon that reaches beyond the specifics of geography and time and cannot simply be defined qualitatively. Thus, on the one hand, Nam June Paik realised an important segment of his early production precisely by testing all of the technological possibilities available to the audio-visual reproduction industry developed at the time, while the formerly momentous Ars Electronica Festival in Linz transformed over time into an amusing test site for the latest technological developments.

For example, during the renovation of the Moderna galerija building in 2008 and 2009, the Ministry of Culture of the Republic of Slovenia provided no suitable replacement exhibition spaces and practically ceased its funding of the museum's public programme; it did, however, (co-)finance the digitisation of museum collections and archives as a priority task. Prior to that, with the help of significant financial sup-

port from a private Swiss foundation, Moderna galerija digitised a valuable donation in the archives of Marko Pogačnik,<sup>1</sup> a founding member of the OHO Group, the most interesting and important neo-avant-garde art movement in Slovenia in the 1960s (Zabel 2007).<sup>2</sup> This overtaking of private initiative will prove prophetic a little later.

In 1965, Tomaž Šalamun<sup>3</sup> initiated the idea that the young generation around OHO should consolidate and confirm itself by publishing a book, an anthology. The book, titled *EVA* and edited by Iztok Geister Plamen<sup>4</sup> and Marko Pogačnik, was published in 1966 and included experimental, visual and concrete poetry and other texts by Pogačnik, Geister, Šalamun, Franci Zagoričnik,<sup>5</sup> Braco Rotar<sup>6</sup> and Taras Kermauner.<sup>7</sup> They collected part of the necessary money from important representatives of art and culture, who were asked for contributions. *EVA* was the first in the extremely important series of OHO books and perhaps the first strong collective statement of a new artistic generation. It was also important as a proof of new optimism and energy in a depressing cultural and political situation.

Perhaps the most interesting achievement of this early period was the specific OHO book, which followed the basic demands of re-ism (Zabel 2007, p. 107).<sup>8</sup> A book is usually understood as a mere vehicle for a text and, so to say, disappears when we read it; an OHO book, on the other hand, is designed in such a way that the text does not have a privileged position (some of the books, as Pogačnik's *Item Book*, one of the most beautiful of all OHO works, have no text at all); the text is only one of the elements of which the book consists, and it is the book itself which is now the object of our attention. For example, with the so-called book on the ring we notice only the mere appearance of pages and letters, while the text is completely dispersed and can be reconstructed only with difficulty. In the so-called topographic series ('topographic poetry' was, at that time, a synonym for visual poetry), the book became completely independent, and the text cannot be separated from it at all.



Marko Pogačnik, Iztok Geister, Book OHO, 1966.  
Courtesy of Moderna galerija, Ljubljana

The OHO books appeared as a part of the so-called Edition OHO. This series started in 1966 with Pogačnik's *Item Book* and Pogačnik's and Geister's *OHO*. Most books were published in 1967 and 1968. Edition OHO included books of a very different nature. Some of them were quite usual collections of poetry with illustrations; in others, the relations of texts, images and pages became more complex. In later editions, we can follow a strong tendency towards deconstruction of the text. The so-called book on the ring presents only one or two letters of the text on a single page. Some books have no text at all. Edition OHO continued with the 'topographic series' and the series of small boxes that, in most cases, contain a number of paper cards with texts, images, imprints of different objects, etc. A very interesting case is Pogačnik's box that includes a number of different paper circles. On each of them, one letter from a poem by Geister is printed. Besides books and boxes, Edition OHO also included other items, such as a tape with two songs by Naško Križnar,<sup>9</sup> Milenko Matanović<sup>10</sup> and Geister, several series of matchbox labels, etc. In the summer of 1966, the Municipality of Ljubljana granted the Edition OHO a public sales area under the arcades next to Zvezda (Star) Park in Ljubljana. There, it was possible, usually on Tuesdays and Friday afternoons, to buy books and other self-published series and products at the OHO sales desk.

Quite often, the beginning of OHO is connected to the publication of the book *OHO* by Geister and Pogačnik and to the untitled text they wrote at that occasion, and which is now often called "The OHO Manifesto" (Zabel 2007, p. 107).<sup>11</sup> Geister's and Pogačnik's book *OHO* (the work which gave the name to the entire movement) has a rather complicated structure; the reader leaves through it, turns it around, opens it left and right, unfolds it, all the time discovering texts and illustrations. Within the principles of reism, the book moves away from the classical book structure because it abolishes certain perceptual mechanisms. It is designed multidimensionally, as it does not consider a linear structure but a circular one. The book thus has no real beginning and no

end. It allows the viewer to rhythmically scroll through the pages that open and reveal; the scrolling process is designed to be endless. The book intertwines the relationship between the drawings by Pogačnik, poems by Geister and the space embodied in the form of the book.

The original edition of the book series is unknown; only a few copies have survived. When one of the L'Internationale<sup>12</sup> partner museums showed interest in buying the book, given its rarity and uniqueness, the gallerist consultant from whom we asked for advice valued it quite highly, at 12,000 euros. The gap between the market's valuation and the museum's understanding of the book as archival material and not as a work of art has proven to be insurmountable. Despite the efforts of all the partners involved at the time, the book never ended up in the Barcelona Museum of Contemporary Art (MACBA) collection. The unfortunate story was recently concluded by Pogačnik himself, when he reprinted the book in numerous copies in cooperation with a local exhibition centre. However, this seemingly unusual move cannot be blamed for inconsistencies in terms of original OHO logic: it is by multiplying objects of the same kind that makes us aware of their completely individual nature.

We could, of course, count the books of the Edition OHO among the so-called artists' books, and recently they have indeed been presented in such a context, and not without reason. The OHO artists were not without information about the movements in contemporary art, where artists started to produce books and other prints as a particular artistic medium. The Fluxus artists have been particularly important in this respect. On the other hand, the books produced by Ed Ruscha since 1963 have been recognised as pioneering work in the field of artists' books. We could therefore take the OHO books to coincide with the pioneering efforts of artists working with books and prints.<sup>13</sup> Already in the late 1960s and early 1970s, such printed matter was been recognised as a particular art form, called *book art*, and later, after the title of a 1973 exhibition in Philadelphia, *artists' books*, a term that has

since then been generally used. However, we should keep in mind that the books and other editions from Edition OHO were not meant as an attempt to develop a new art form (e.g., *book art*). Rather, they were developed independently, and as a result of the application of the reistic theory on the traditional medium of the book, putting the medium in the place of the subject of the work. In a sense, the OHO book could also be understood as an expansion of the idea of the visual and concrete poetry from a single text to the book as a whole.

The OHO films must also be mentioned when we talk about the market, editions, digitisation and the relationship between public and private interests. Films were present in all periods of OHO's work. The list of OHO films, compiled by Naško Križnar, includes (besides documentation of OHO's actions and projects) around forty short films that were shot from 1964 to 1970. They were shot mainly by Križnar (who also documented several OHO projects, Happenings, etc.) and Marjan Ciglič,<sup>14</sup> but Geister, Pogačnik, David Nez,<sup>15</sup> Matanović and others also worked occasionally with film. Similar to literature, we can trace two complementary tendencies here. The film camera often functions as a representative of the reist attentive eye, which notes and contemplates things; some of these works demand quite a lot of discipline from the audience. On the other side, OHO films also explored the interior possibilities and the nature of the medium itself; films of this kind are not 'transparent' anymore, nor do they represent the eye, but instead become 'things' themselves. Some of Križnar's films, for example, have a severe rational structure (some of them even consist only of written texts) and are thus 'things' in a similar sense to that of a 'topographic' poem. We should also mention the projects – among them, Križnar's film *White People* (*Beli ljudje*, 1970) is certainly the most characteristic – that could be understood as a kind of film equivalent to a Happening. As for the documentary films, it is important to say that they are often more than just a document. The film camera often offers the only possibility to transmit an action to the audience (the action would be

otherwise limited only to its participants and would lose the dimension of communication essential for art); sometimes such a project even includes the camera as its integral part (this is certainly the case with some conceptual projects from the 1970s).

Moderna galerija financed the restoration and digitisation of Križnar's 8 and 16 mm films of the OHO period. As part of the project, we offered the author a fee for one series of films from the digital edition of four, while keeping the originals himself. In this case, the remaining three editions could be sold to other interested museums. Some museums showed an increasingly serious interest in the OHO production, after the Moderna galerija appropriately valorised and intensively presented it at numerous solo and group exhibitions of individual members of the group, as well as at thematic exhibitions and exhibitions from our collections.

After the digitisation was finished, under the pressure of a private collector from abroad, the author changed his mind and withdrew from the agreement. He decided to sell the original films and the remaining digital copies to a private collector, leaving us our edition for educational and exhibition use. The purchase was part of the collector's wider march through the heritage of the post-war avant-garde in the countries of the former Yugoslavia. The fetishism of possessing originals and all possible remaining editions of the films, in stark contrast to the contemporary ethical customs and professional standards of the art system, also contradicts the original OHO idea of the democratisation of artistic production. Moderna galerija continuously provides access to the films to visitors of the exhibitions, festivals and academic researchers of the OHO production, while at prestigious international exhibitions such as 2019 Venice Biennale, the films appear as works from the private collection. Symptomatically, on this occasion, two miniature documentary photographs of David Nez's *Environment Realized with Rolls of Toilet Paper in the Woods* were digitally enlarged and printed to spectacular size. Nez made an ephemeral environment with very



David Nez (OHO), *Environment Realized with Rolls of Toilet Paper in the Woods*, 1969. Courtesy of Moderna galerija, Ljubljana

simple means – by throwing rolls of toilet paper over bushes and trees. This is clearly a process work and could from that point of view be compared to Richard Serra's splashing of lead – using, of course, a totally different context, referential background and relation to the surroundings. This temporary intervention, based on the idea of Land Art, was made within the so-called Summer Projects of 1969, which fully developed a shift from mere fascination with materials to relations and processes. With these projects, the OHO artists left the gallery space and started to work in the open air, first in the city and then in the landscape. The Summer Projects introduced or fully developed a number of new, important aspects in OHO's work. One of them was the new importance of documentation: many of these projects were not only very short-lived, but also attained by very small groups of people, mostly by the group members and a few of their close friends, so documentary photographs, drawings and explanatory texts became the only possibility to present such works to public. Nez made several projects in the landscape using mirrors. He was interested in reflection, in the idea of a material object that visually almost disappears and, at the same time, causes a disturbance in our perception. This idea was best formulated in a project where he used three vertical mirrors installed in a field. The real form of this work is, in fact, the documentary photograph. On it, the mirrors create a puzzling rhythm of actual views and reflections.

The main part of the discourse that has been developing alongside the use of digital and new media technologies in artists' archives refers to the problems of the gallery display of conceptual art or performative practices. On the surface, these problems may seem to be merely new or not so new manifestations of the old issue of the museum representation of avant-garde art practices, but at least in case of the OHO art, the discourse seems to entail something more: communication between protagonists was an essential feature and component part of the art practice. Since OHO art was not as much about later institutionalisation as direct blending with the art system, the

critical-theoretical consideration of the medium in relation to art history and its contemporary institutional instruments, which accompanied the birth and growth of the OHO movement, represents a specific quality and a constitutive element of this art practice.

Contemporary artists' archives demand a series of changes at the symbolic level and at the level of signification. In more traditional institutions, the curators are expected to select works in the conventional way, thereby saving the visitors time and facilitating orientation in and navigation through the infinite number of documents, which include secondary material and irrelevant testimonies that are often declared art. The curator should be a producer who, based on his or her theoretical findings, develops new display formats in the museum, which are not possible in traditional archives and libraries. Most of the artworks in history are locally bound, which means the spectator and the artwork itself share the same space. Even with contemporary artworks this is important – in an installation you share the same space. For the first time with digital platforms, the spectator and the work are dislocated, separate; they don't share the same space. Therefore, it is important to look for works and the criteria that are appropriate to this condition. In short, the issue for curators is no longer whether to exhibit artists' documentation or not, but how to do this. From the museum's point of view, the issue of the intimate nature of the archive does not seem to be an obstacle for the collective experience and spectacle of a gallery display or inclusion in a permanent museum collection. When they first emerged, museums were intended for the research and presentation of art and, to be honest, they were never meant to abide by the demands of artists. Although they still try to dictate what art is, contemporary art museums follow current art production and become involved more and more often in that production. New digital technologies, archives and collections invariably influence practically all museum activities. Usually, there is a renegade in every major museum, whose interests make him or her focus on documentary material. To guard

against the tendency of the museum towards the mausoleum – or temple for acolytes only – we need to figure out how to make the digital space as interactive, multimodal, associative and responsive (intelligent) as walking into an exhibition space that contains the real things.

Media technologies are not only a tool and material, and there the online context is often understood as part of the content of an artwork. In addition, artists invariably emphasise the importance of the intimacy of the connection with the archival material, which is unique and therefore unsuitable for the exhibition context. Such work's natural home is not the internet, and for this reason a great deal is lost, particularly from those works which are not in close affinity to the above-mentioned digital trends, when they are captured in the somewhat artificial digital medium and then, bereft of their original context, are exhibited as an artefact in a gallery space. But on the other hand, due to the supreme and prestigious status of the art institution and its valorised archives (according to the theory of Boris Groys), an art museum display remains a completely relevant form of conceptual and performative art presentation (particularly of its documentary side). Naturally, the institution must accept the truth of what is taking place in contemporary art trends, which means that the white cube must in a certain sense open up and redefine itself as an educational and inclusive centre of contemporary art. This entails the introduction of the necessary hardware and communication links which would facilitate a suitable presentation, life and enactment of contemporary art from the second half of the last century.

## ENDNOTES

- 1 Marko Pogačnik (b. 1944) is a sculptor, dedicated to the expanded field of art. In 1971, he co-founded the agricultural and art community known as The Šempas Family. Since 1979, he has been developing projects dedicated to Earth healing. He developed the method of healing called 'lithopuncture', its key manifestation being the signs called 'cosmograms'. After 2004, he developed the concept of 'geopuncture circles', the extensive megalith compositions created together with his partners at different points of the world. Since 2016, he has been active as a UNESCO Artist for Peace.
- 2 The history of OHO is not very long, but it is extremely rich and complex. OHO has gone through many phases of development. Practically all the essential aspects of its work have changed or modified: members, ideas, principles of organisation and artistic practice.
- 3 Tomaž Šalamun (1941–2014) was a Slovenian poet who was a leading figure of post-war neo-avant-garde poetry in Central Europe and internationally acclaimed absurdist.
- 4 Iztok Geister (b. 1945) is a Slovenian writer, poet, essayist and ornithologist. He is best known for his avant-garde poetry from the mid-1960s and 1970s.
- 5 Franci Zagoričnik (1933–1997) was a poet and essayist, one of the major exponents of the Slovene literary avant-garde of the sixties and is considered one of the pioneers of concrete and visual poetry.
- 6 Drago (Braco) Rotar (1942) is a Slovenian sociologist, poet and essayist.
- 7 Taras Kermauner (1930–2008) was a Slovenian literary historian, critic, philosopher, essayist, playwright and translator.
- 8 The notion, based on the Latin word *res* (thing), was coined by Kermauner, who first used it in an essay on Šalamun's poetry. The idea of reism was then further developed especially by Geister and Pogačnik, who became the main 'ideologists' of the OHO reism. They accepted the notion not only as the name for a new artistic movement, but as the designation of a complex, theoretically based system which does not only define a specific aesthetic and approach in art, but also affects even the smallest details of everyday life.

- 9 Naško Križnar (b. 1943) is an ethnologist and archaeologist. He was a member of the OHO movement and founder and head of the Audio-Visual Laboratory at the Scientific Research Centre of the Slovenian Academy of Sciences and Arts (1982).
- 10 Mienko Matanović (b. 1947) is an artist with a lifelong practice of collaboration. He was a founding member of the OHO. In 1986, he founded the Pomegranate Center near Seattle, Washington, where he lives, on similar principles.
- 11 Along with the OHO Book, “The OHO Manifesto” was published in 1966 in the student newspaper *Tribuna*. The “OHO Manifesto” is not a manifesto in the usual sense of the word. It does not declare the beginning of a new movement nor its main aims and principles. It is very important for the understanding the ideas of the OHO members, but it was not intended as a declaration of a programme. The appearance of the book *OHO* and the publication of the “OHO Manifesto” were not radically new steps, but rather a continuation of a rich and interesting activity that had started already in 1965, in some respects even earlier, and has clearly reached the form of a connected, albeit plural and heterogeneous movement.
- 12 *L’Internationale* is a confederation of modern and contemporary art institutions focused on a non-hierarchical and decentralised internationalism.
- 13 For example, Ed Ruscha published his famous work *Every Building on the Sunset Strip* in 1966.
- 14 Marjan Ciglič (b. 1944) is film and television director.
- 15 David Nez (b. 1949) is an artist, writer, astrologer and ritual magician. He was a founding member of the OHO.

## REFERENCE LIST

- Rancière, J. 2015, "Skopje: Time, Narrative, and Politics", *Identities: Journal for Politics, Gender and Culture*, vol. 11, pp. 7–18, viewed 3 December 2021, <http://www.identitiesjournal.edu.mk/index.php/IJPGC/article/view/291/203>.
- Zabel, I. 2007, "A Short History of OHO", in Igor Španjol (ed.), *OHO*, Moderna galerija, Ljubljana.

# GLOSSARY OF TERMS

---

**ANATOLIAN KITSCH**, in artist and director Hüseyin Katircioğlu's terms, referred to plays (and performances), which use old conventions that appeal to excessively sentimental or melodramatic emotions while narrating Anatolia's stories, legends and tales. According to old formulae, a typical theatrical kitsch would be based on overly familiar stories and be designed from the beginning with one purpose only: to provoke superficial feelings and to offer something for anyone, targeting the 'second' (collective) tear Milan Kundera points out in *The Unbearable Lightness of Being*. In that sense, the Anatolian plateau is full of inspiration that can count as a blessing and/or a curse for a storyteller. According to Katircioğlu, it only appears as a blessing if the director (the artist) would like to use the material in a way to enrich, refresh or renew worn-out perspectives. (AA)

---

**ANARCHIVE** would be a useful and respectful term to collect in the museum of those performative, processual or relational artistic practices that were not conceived with the idea of being preserved, including those that are developed in the expanded field of pedagogies and activism. The anarchiving defined by Nancy Garin (Anarchivo Sida) would be 'a way of subverting the archive on these practices that resist oblivion, but also the order, administration and normalising management of circulation, generating active, affected and affective archives, archives localised, precarious and dissident archives, that do not draw continuous lines, that admit gaps, silences, absences, that respect the impossibility of archiving that these practices contain in themselves'. On the other hand, Toni Serra, in his reflections on the OVNI Archive, maintains that another of the tools provided by the anarchiving is its subjective intentionality and its collective nature.

Unlike large archives, there is no purchase of funds, nor extractive will, but a deposit that is created and self-managed in collaboration. A place for consultation, meeting and discussion – ‘Not as a result of an external gaze that fixes an object of study and analyses and classifies it, but as a rhizome of intertwined memories, which emanates from the community and the ties it has established’.

**References:**

Nancy Garin is part of Anarchive Sida (AS). The definition is an extract of a personal conversation from April 2022. Toni Serra (Abu Ali) was an artist and founder of OVNI (Unidentified Video Observatory), [www.desorg.org](http://www.desorg.org). The quotes are from the article ‘Open the Vision’, *Anarchivos*, p. 13, Duar Msuar, September 2016. (MR)

---

**BREATHING ARCHIVE** is a term introduced by visual and performance artist Otobong Nkanga to describe an archive in which the conserved live performance works evolve over time. In a breathing archive, the works are not deprived of the air that keeps them breathing, as Nkanga states, but have a life and shift in response to the amount of oxygen there is in the space at the time. The breathing archive is a living entity that always needs active care, as the archived materials should be allowed to change as well. From this perspective, archiving does not mean taking the works out of circulation, leaving behind only a series of tangible relics to be consulted once and in a while. Instead, the rhizomatic web of which these works were already a part should be acknowledged and reinforced, expanding the connections between material forms and embodied (re)activations. (LB)

---

**CUSTODIANSHIP** is a way of supporting the long-term, ongoing performative project by the art institution, without acquiring it for the collection. It allows the involvement of the artist in the process of curatorial

and practical maintenance and preservation of the work and thus offers a more flexible model than ownership. It is appropriate for the open-ended projects which are activated by the artist and/or involve the use of the work by constituents. It is especially well suited for supporting vulnerable works, for example those in the public space, with complicated legal status, within a dissonant political environment or costly maintenance. A good example of such a relationship between the artist and the institution is the custodianship over the iconic work of Polish public art *Greetings from Jerusalem Avenue* by Joanna Rajkowska. (ZC)

---

**FRUGALITY** could be proposed to describe an ideological position of certain artistic practices, among which performance is often found. We can address frugal as a term that updates the critique of the use value – of the material in the ‘povera’ concept – by including the relationship between utility, desire and pleasure. We take this term from the perspective opened by Franco Berardi when he says that ‘frugality means focusing on the concrete usefulness (and pleasure) of things and bodies. Capitalism is based on the transformation of objects and bodies into signs of abstract value: the commodity. Consequently, things and bodies are signs of value and we must consume more and more to confirm our purchasing power. If social activity is aimed at the accumulation of abstract value, satisfaction becomes impossible. If we focus our attention on need and desire, we can create (frugal) conditions of production aimed at satisfaction.’ (MR)

---

**GESTURE** in Mapa Teatro’s terms can be understood as the ‘artistic gesture’ or ‘poetic gesture’ that highlights the live dimension that underlies the production of a work, be it material, audio-visual, conceptual or performative. It takes into account whether it is the result of a complex process of elaboration or a specific action inscribed in a particular context. The ‘gesture’ hinges on the commitment of the artist

as an initiator or mobiliser of the sensible and of meaning. It might be the individual gesture, the body's gesture, or it might be a collective gesture, a communal gesture made by several bodies or more. In this sense, this is about multiple singularities becoming involved, deriving from the flesh but also from memory and thought, in the elaboration of a poetic response to a reality that affects them and that must be subjected to displacements so that it may also affect others, so that gestures can continue to be produced. The concept of gesture has various genealogies. It refers to the everyday gestures through which we express ourselves without words and which are ephemeral and require co-presence. It refers to the action as a mute-sign, as it appears, for example, in the work of Samuel Beckett. Finally, it refers to the affective gesture, that sense that allows us to qualify our actions as a 'gesture of honesty', a 'gesture of generosity' or a 'gesture of resistance'. (JAS)

---

**IDEOLOGY** is a form of social consciousness. In the context of a bipolar world, both modernism and socialist realism laid a claim to being universally valid. Eva Cockroft describes how innovative eastern art was used to strengthen the position of the West, regardless of the actual role and significance it had in its original context. During the Cold War, Western art proclaimed itself a universal value, while modernist artists in the East were considered representatives of a general artistic approach; the particular contexts, meanings, and traditions in their work were deemed unimportant. This stance was far from neutral: it was closely bound to the ideologies of, and the power relations between, the two systems, as is evidenced by the cases of politics becoming directly involved in art. Thus, technology produces pure ideology in artistic use, while in other uses it produces something else as well. Rastko Močnik points out that this 'something else' is actually ideology in its purest form precisely because it looks natural and self-evident. Also, the concept of the white cube in museum archi-

ecture is related to creating a specific atmosphere and an invisible ideology which used to represent the noblest and most progressive aspects of modernism. Its basic ideological functions and aesthetic effects still work. (IS)

---

**KNOWLEDGE MANAGEMENT** is a term that helps in understanding Franz Erhard Walther's case. The (re)activation of action-based arts requires information and knowledge. An institution wants to capture that. The challenging part is that knowledge cannot be reduced to information. Information is the what, knowledge is the how and why, the human abilities. Mathieu Weggeman (2000) introduced the formula  $K = f(I * E S A)$ : Knowledge is the sum of Information (times Experience, Skills and Attitude), to show information only becomes knowledge when it has been processed with experience, skill and attitude. It is not information systems or books, but people who are the greatest sources of knowledge in organisations. The knowledge gained in practice and from experience can often not be captured in a system. Information management is about data, and ICT solutions contain data. Mikis de Winter observes that managers like to focus on systems and processes as things are easier to deal with than people. His advice on how to tap more effectively into that knowledge would be to connect with the person through dialogue – about their lessons from previous experiences, personal skills and attitude. Sincere questions make knowledge come to life and flow. (CK)

**Reference:**

2009, 'Kennis, daar zitten twee benen onder: In gesprek met Mikis de Winter', in D. Depassé and E. La Roi, (eds), *15 praktijkverhalen over kennismanagement*, Rotterdam, Essentials Media, 2009, in which they reference Weggeman, M. 2000, *Kennismanagement; de praktijk*, Schiedam, Scriptum.

---

**MODERNITY** is an analytical concept and normative idea, globally dominant and closely linked to the ethos of aesthetic modernism. In the cabinets of curiosities, the time of human creation and the time of nature are identical and collected into some sort of fragmentary encyclopaedia. It is this very incompleteness which made possible the many layers of different world views, not governed by the rules of scientific historiography. Supposedly, our world is inhabited by abstract signs that no longer refer to some tangible reality, or, as Douglas Crimp put it, we only experience reality through images. Due to the dynamic nature of the political and economic systems and the accelerated flow of information, it is no longer possible to uphold the rough division between an intellectual, chronological order of the measurable world and the subconscious, subjective and emotional nature of the creative process. Today more than ever before, art is a productive part of social and economic exchange. (IS)

---

**MULTISENSORY** is a term that relates to a series of questions. How sounds and words can make the hairs on the back of the neck stand on end and put you in a state of alert; how a scent can evoke someone's presence and appeal to deep-seated emotions and even spread chemical signals; how fingertips are stimulated by the sight of a photo of tree bark – this network of (un)conscious information is triggered by sensory stimuli that makes new connections or rewrites existing ones. The more connections, the more comprehensive the impression, the more value this experience can have and the greater it can influence thinking and behaviour. If this knowledge is applied to the museum as a social powerhouse, a multisensory presentation of artworks can act as a catalyst for the intended transformative power of art. By providing multiple entrances to an artwork, you help visitors with special physical or sensory characteristics, as well as others, to engage with the artwork. Displaying a finished object

outside its original context can be hermetic for the visitor. By providing a sensory context, that barrier can be dissolved. By activating art multisensorially, art activates the visitor. (CK)

---

**NON-HUMAN ACTOR** is a term borrowed from Bruno Latour's actor network theory, which he uses to describe the specific agency of things that have an impact on their surroundings. For him objects are in fact complex networks of material, symbolic and social entities, not mere tools or props in the hands of humans. It is well suited to describing artistic objects in the collections that unveil their performative nature by the way they provoke active spectatorship. The theatrical metaphor used by the sociologist catches the double meaning of both being *active* and *acting* – playing changing roles, rather than sticking to the artist's initial idea. It can be useful for reinterpreting the collections from the perspective of performance studies and finding the proper methodology to preserve evolving works such as public or community art projects or post-artistic practices (relating to the concept of 'arte util'). (ZC)

---

**POETICS IN THE DOMESTIC** in performance art means bringing the art realm into the domestic. The exploration of ordinary everyday life and the transformation of routine actions into symbolic acts created a methodology for María Teresa Hincapié practice. Art became the guide for her existence, not only providing a framework for the artist's creativity but also influencing her ethics and understanding of politics. Moreover, María Teresa Hincapié understood the planet as a home, therefore the poetics of the domestic affect the relationship between nature and humans. The planet is an extension of what is intimate and needs to be taken care of. (CS)

---

**PROTOTYPE** is used by visual and performance artist Otobong Nkanga to refer to archival materials belonging to live performance works that can

evolve over time and space, according to changing political, climatic, social or personal circumstances. A prototype is an archival material or prop that is not fixed but can be reproduced, recycled, adapted or reworked according to the variable performer or changing context. Prototypes can be material relics but can also be digital information or digitised material that serves as instructions for imagining past performances, for reinventing a work in a renewed context, or for being informative in itself. (LB)

---

**TRAINING** is a term used by a Colombian artist María Teresa Hincapié, who was active in the 1980s and 1990s. She had a very particular definition of the performative which she used to call: ‘training’. Hincapié was coming from the poorly finance theatre and was an actress at Acto Latino (from 1978 to 1985), which she abandoned, exhausted by the game of representation that was unable to channel her expressive urgency – which is allowed by other genres such as dance or accommodated by more hybrid spaces such as the exhibition. María Teresa Hincapié developed an artistic practice which resisted specific categorisation, instead, oscillating between life, creation in movement and the search for the mystical. (CS)

---

**VARIATION** is a term used by Mapa Teatro from a music context. A musical variation is a composition consisting of several associated parts where the same theme is repeated in different forms, as sub-themes or variations, but maintains the same harmonic pattern. Mapa Teatro’s processes of creation are not chronological, sequential or linear. Each project may be taken up years after it was initiated, even if it seems the project has been fully formalised or closed. This occurs when new archives, images or narrating bodies are found, which reactivate the artistic powers of the project in another way, as if a new musical tone, or variation, were emerging. In this sense, it is about establishing a relationship with time, with the times required

by the material found and produced. This spiral-like creative process allows new works to be developed while previous ones are taken up again and updated or amplified through new resonances. This is done through dynamic and organic forms, such as a live body that continues to grow, producing mutations, vibrations and variations. A previous stage work might become a radio piece, a work of cinematography or an installation; and an installation can be activated live afterwards. The entirety produces something like an orchestration, full of theatricality. (LH)

# ABOUT THE AUTHORS

**AMIRA AKBIYIKOĞLU** is since 2008 a programmer at SALT in Istanbul. In 2019, she co-curated *Our Blissful Souvenirs*, the most comprehensive exhibition of Nur Koçak. In 2021, she contributed to the Ipek Duben retrospective *The Skin, Body and I*, together with Vasıf Kortun, Farah Aksoy (SALT) and Sezin Romi (SALT). She is currently working on a research project focusing on performance art history in Turkey beginning with the late 1980s and going through the 1990s.

**PERSIS BEKKERING** is a writer. Her recent publications and projects include essays, art criticism and fiction in Dutch and English. Her debut novel *Een heldenleven* (The Life of a Hero), published in 2018 with Prometheus, was shortlisted for the ANV Debutantenprijs. In 2021, her second novel *Exces* followed, of which an excerpt is published in English translation by the Jan Van Eyck Academy in Maastricht, titled *Last Utopia*. She teaches creative writing at ArtEZ University of the Arts in Arnhem (NL).

**LOTTE BODE** is a researcher and journalist. She conducts research on archiving performance art within an institutional framework at the Flemish Centre for Art Archives (CKV), an organisation working autonomously at the Museum of Contemporary Art Antwerp (M HKA). She has published in *Performance Research* journal. Bode holds a master's in theatre and film studies and a master's in journalism. She also works as cultural journalist at the Flemish public broadcast station VRT, for which she creates content on the Flemish literary scene, prepares and provides interviews and background stories on the Flemish arts scene and co-creates video series about artists.

**ZOFIA CZARTORYSKA** is a curator, researcher and international projects manager at the Museum of Modern Art in Warsaw. She graduated with a degree in arts management from Maastricht University, and in art history and sociology at the University of Warsaw. She is a co-curator of the critically acclaimed exhibitions *Why We Have Wars: The Art of Modern-day Outsiders* at MSN, Warsaw and *I'm No Longer the Dog* at the Silesian Museum in Katowice, among others. She was part of the research project *Lifting the Curtain: Central European Architectural Networks*, presented at the 14th Venice Architecture Biennale. In the past, she worked as a broadcast journalist for Polish Radio. She is a recipient of the Huyghens Scholarship of the Dutch Government and the Prize of the Gessel Foundation.

**CLÉMENTINE DELISS** is Global Humanities Professor of History of Art at the University of Cambridge and an associate curator at KW – Institute for Contemporary Art in Berlin, where she directs the Metabolic Museum-University. Her practice crosses the borders of contemporary art, curatorial experimentation and critical anthropology. Between 2010–15, she directed the Weltkulturen Museum in Frankfurt, instituting a new lab for post-ethnographic research. She was a Fellow of the Institute of Advanced Study Berlin and has taught art theory and curatorial practice at the École nationale supérieure d'arts de Paris-Cergy, Karlsruhe University of Arts and Design and the Hamburg University of the Arts. Her book *The Metabolic Museum* was published by Hatje Cantz in co-production with KW (2020), and in Russian translation with Garage Publishing (2021).

**LOLA HINOJOSA** has been Head of the Performing and Intermedia Arts Collection at the Reina Sofía Museum since 2014. She joined that institution in 2006 to participate in the creation of the Film and Video Collection. Her main fields of research are performance art,

moving image and gender theory, on which she has published numerous articles. She has curated exhibitions such as *Fictions and Territories: Art to Think the New Reason for the World* (co-curator, Museo Reina Sofía and MUNTREF Buenos Aires, 2016–17); *Secret Lives: The Author through Objects* (Community of Madrid, 2018) and *Ignacio Gómez de Liaño: Forsaking Writing* (Museo Reina Sofía, 2019–20).

**CHANTAL KLEINMEULMAN** works at the Department of Collections, Library & Archives in Van Abbemuseum. She is closely involved in the acquisition process of the art collection, recording artwork information and making it available to the public. She's currently working on digitising the collection archive and researching accessibility and functionality of performance documentation. She researched and co-wrote the catalogue raisonné *Ian Wilson: The Discussions* (2008) and has contributed to collection publications.

**BOJANA KUNST** is a philosopher, dramaturge and performance theoretician. She works as a professor at the Institute for Applied Theatre Studies in Justus Liebig University Giessen, where she is leading an international master's programme in Choreography and Performance. She worked as a researcher at the University of Ljubljana and University of Antwerp (until 2009) and later as a guest professor at the University of Hamburg (2009–12). She has lectured and organised seminars, workshops and laboratories in different academic institutions, theatres and artistic organisations across Europe, and has worked continuously with the independent artistic initiatives, artists, groups and activists. Her research interest is in contemporary performance and dance, art theory and philosophy of contemporary art. She has published *Artist at Work, Proximity of Art and Capitalism* (2015) and *The Life of Art: Transversal Lines of Care* (2021).

**JOSÉ A. SÁNCHEZ** is an essayist and professor at the University of Castilla-La Mancha (UCLM, Cuenca, Spain). He is author of *Brecht y el expresionismo* (Brecht and the Expressionism, 1992), *Dramaturgias de la imagen* (Dramaturgies of Images, 1994), *Prácticas de lo real* (2007; Eng., *Practicing the Real* [2014]), *Ética de la representación* (2016; Eng., *The Bodies of Others* [2022]). He is a founder of the ARTEA, and the master's in Performance Practice and Visual Culture (UCLM and Museo Reina Sofía). He curated projects such as *Desviaciones* (Madrid, 2001, together with Blanca Calvo and La Ribot), *Situaciones* (Cuenca, 1999–2002), *Jerusalem Show* (Palestine, 2011, together with Lara Khaldi). He directed the performance *The Words of Others, of León Ferrari*, together with Ruth Estévez and Juan Ernesto Díaz (Los Angeles, 2017). <http://blog.uclm.es/joseasanchez/>.

**CLAUDIA SEGURA** is a curator and cultural producer based in Barcelona, where she is a curator of exhibitions and collections at MACBA (Museu d'Art Contemporani de Barcelona) since 2019. She was director and chief curator of NC-arte in Bogotá, Colombia (2015–19); a coordinator of cultural initiatives at the Fundació 'la Caixa', Barcelona (2010–12); and an external curator of the Mardin Biennial, Turkey (2014–15). She was mentor of the Sala d'Art Jove, Barcelona (2014) and at the Cano Laboratory at the Art Museum of the National University of Colombia (2018). She was editorial coordinator of *Florae 2015*, the magazine of *Flora ars + natura*, Bogotá, and she writes regularly for diverse specialised arts platforms. Segura is part of various research platforms including *De vuelta y vuelta* and *Para abrir boca*.

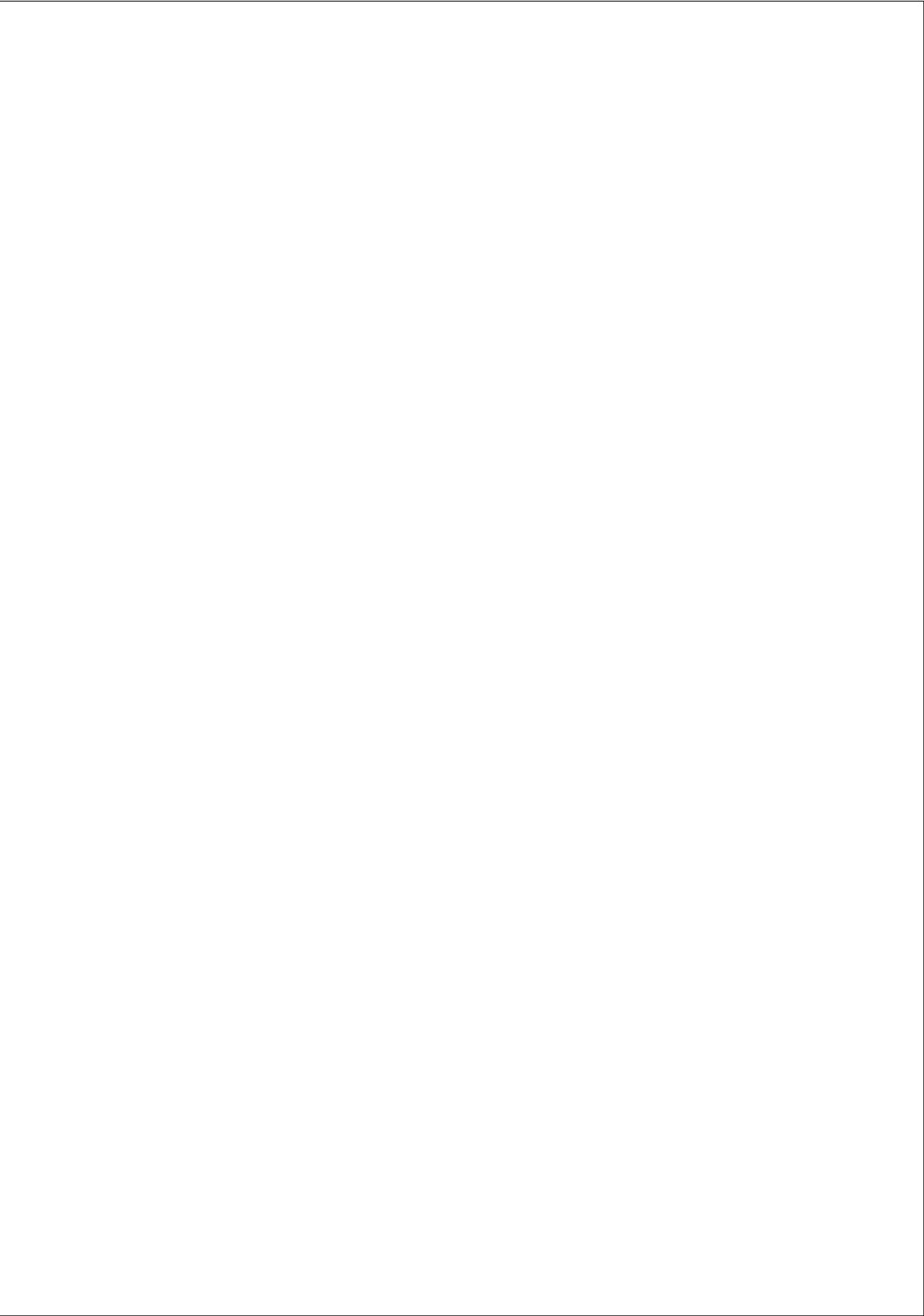
**IGOR ŠPANJOL** studied sociology of culture and art history at the Faculty of Arts, University in Ljubljana. He has been working as a curator at Moderna galerija in Ljubljana since 1999. Significant

projects include a trilogy of *Slovenian art from 1975–2005* (with Igor Zabel), an exhibition of the collection of the Museum of Contemporary Art Metelkova (with Zdenka Badovinac and Bojana Piškur), *Crises and New Beginnings: Art in Slovenia 2005–2015* (with Bojana Piškur and Vladimir Vidmar) and retrospectives by Tomaž Lavrič, Marko Peljhan, Marko Pogačnik, Tadej Pogačar, Vadim Fishkin and Tobias Putrih. He was a curator of the Slovenian Pavilion at the Venice Biennale 2019.

**MYRIAM RUBIO** studied visual arts at the University of Barcelona and at the Winchester School of Arts, University of Southampton, as well as a postgraduate degree in aesthetics and art theory at the Instituto de Estética de Madrid (UAM). Her research interest focuses on performance, processual art and collective methodologies in contemporary art. She currently works as a curator of academic programmes and assistant researcher at the Museum of Contemporary Art of Barcelona (MACBA) where she has worked in different roles. She was a coordinator of Exhibitions and Collection Departments (2019–21), and academic coordinator of the Independent Studies Program (PEI, 2011–18), under the direction of Xavier Antich, Paul B. Preciado, Marcelo Expósito and Pablo Martínez. She previously worked in Public Programs (2000–11) with Jorge Ribalta in the programming, production and diffusion of projects related to public programmes, exhibitions, cinema and education.

**JOANNA ZIELIŃSKA** is an art historian and performance curator. The ideas of performative exhibition and performative artwork are fundamental in her curatorial research. Her practice is centred around theatre, performance, performative literature and the visual arts. She is also interested in stirring a discussion on the identity and activity of twenty-first-century museums. This approach is less bounded by a physical space than by the idea of community,

the influence of new media and the public sphere. Currently, she is working as senior curator at M HKA Antwerp. In 2015–20, she was the head of the Performing Arts Department at the Ujazdowski Castle Centre for Contemporary Art in Warsaw. She is also the former chief curator at Cricoteka, the Centre for the Documentation of the Art of Tadeusz Kantor in Kraków, Poland and the former artistic director at the Znaki Czasu Centre of Contemporary Art (CoCA) in Toruń, Poland. Since 2011, she has been working on a long-term research project on the artist's novel, in collaboration with Spanish artist David Maroto. Its central question is how a literary genre such as the novel becomes a medium in the visual arts.



# PERFORMING COLLECTIONS

eBook publication

## Published by

L'Internationale Online

[www.internationaleonline.org](http://www.internationaleonline.org)

2022

ISBN 978-91-527-1341-9

## Managing Editor:

Joanna Zielińska

## Authors:

Amira Akbıykoğlu

Persis Bekkering

Lotte Bode

Zofia Czaratoryska

Clémentine Deliss

Lola Hinojosa

Chantal Kleinmeulman

Bojana Kunst

Myriam Rubio

José A. Sánchez

Claudia Segura

Igor Španjol

Joanna Zielińska

## Artists:

The Circo Interior Bruto

Co-Op Festival

Mapa Teatro

María Teresa Hincapié

Otobong Nkanga

OHO

Ria Pacquée

Joanna Rajkowska

La Ribot

Franz Erhard Walther

Among others

## Project Leader:

L'Internationale

## Project Manager:

Sara Buraya Boned

## Project and Financial

### Coordinator:

Maria Mallol Gonzalez

## Graphic Design:

Fontarte / Artur Frankowski,

Magdalena Frankowska

## Copy-Editing:

Aaron Bogart

## Coordination:

Aleksandra Urbańska

## Translations:

Sandra F. Kileen (translation from Spanish of the text "Variation on the Unaccounted: A Triptych by Mapa Teatro")

Elaine Fradley (translation from Spanish of the text "(Dis)appearing without a Trace: A Case Study of María Teresa Hincapié" and "What a Museum Can (Not) Do")

Anda Macbride

## Cover Photo:

Courtesy of Otobong Nkanga,

*From Where I Stand: Glimmer*,

2015. Installation view at M HKA.

Photo: Christine Clinckx

## Special Thanks:

Katia Szczeka

The publisher would like to thank all those who have kindly given their permission for the reproduction of material for this book. Every effort has been made to obtain permission to reproduce

the images and texts in this catalogue. However, as is standard editorial policy, the publisher is at the disposal of copyright holders and undertakes to correct any omissions or errors in future editions.

This publication extends the discussions begun during a number of physical and online meetings held with the members of the collection workgroup of the project *Our Many Europes* (2018–2022). We would like to acknowledge their contribution to this publication of: Amira Akbıykoğlu, Tanya Barson, Zofia Czaratoryska, Sebastian Cichocki, Lola Hinojosa, Agar Ledo, Chantal Kleinmeulman, Isabel de Naverán, Rosario Peiró, Bojana Piškur, Myriam Rubio, José Antonio Sánchez, Claudia Segura, Igor Španjol, Katia Szczeka, Aleksandra Urbańska, Jan de Vree and Joanna Zielińska.

## With support of the Creative Europe Programme of the European Union

Co-funded by the  
Creative Europe Programme  
of the European Union



The European Commission's support for the production of this publication does not constitute an endorsement of the contents, which reflects the views only of the authors, and the Commission cannot be held responsible for any use which may be made of the information contained therein.

# L'internationale OUR MANY EUROPEES

Co-funded by the  
Creative Europe Programme  
of the European Union



L'Internationale is a confederation of seven modern and contemporary art institutions. L'Internationale proposes a space for art within a non-hierarchical and decentralised internationalism, based on the values of difference and horizontal exchange among a constellation of cultural agents, locally rooted and globally connected.

L'Internationale brings together seven major European art institutions: Moderna galerija (MG+MSUM, Ljubljana, Slovenia); Museo Reina Sofía (Madrid, Spain); MACBA, Museu d'Art Contemporani de

Barcelona (Spain); Museum van Hedendaagse Kunst Antwerpen (M HKA, Antwerp, Belgium); Muzeum Sztuki Nowoczesnej w Warszawie (Warsaw, Poland), SALT (Istanbul and Ankara, Turkey) and Van Abbemuseum (VAM, Eindhoven, the Netherlands). L'Internationale works with complementary partners such as HDK-Valand Academy of Art and Design (HDK-Valand, Gothenburg, Sweden) and the National College of Art and Design (NCAD, Dublin, Ireland) and together with them is presenting the programme Our Many Europes.



**Attribution –  
NonCommercialShareAlike  
CC BY-NC-SA**

This license lets others remix, tweak and build upon your work non-commercially, as long as they credit you and license their new creations under the identical terms.

