

# The ephemeral and its materialisations.

## Towards a redefinition of performance art

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### **Performance as an ephemeral art form** <sup>[1]</sup>

There is a broad consensus in the art world that performance can be defined as an action that takes place within a certain time and space. The new medium sought to avoid the subordination of art to the market that had been in place until then. By means of de-objectification, artists tried to undermine the processes of museification and collectionism that, according to them, threatened creative purity, condensing it into mere products with market value. Artists aspired to not produce objects, but to act against the art market system. This trend was part of a more general context that advocated ideas as opposed to material production. The rejection of the object that characterised performance art was not something isolated, but took place in the context of a broader movement. The aim was to defy domination by the art market by increasing the production of temporary and ephemeral works, for example in conceptual art. The art object came to be considered as yet another superfluous product in the market [Goldberg 1996: 152]. This led artists to give priority to ideas and production processes, and to look for new exhibition formats removed from institutional powers.

This idea of performance art as opposed to the art market has also been reflected in theory, specifically in the work of Peggy Phelan. She argues that in a culture that is totally commodified and subjected to the media, performance art is the last fortress from which to resist the market and the media, and with them, the dominant culture. Thus, according to Phelan, performance “clogs the smooth machinery of reproductive representation necessary to the circulation of capital” [Phelan 1993: 148]. It resists the circulation of the dominant economy.

To sum up, the established paradigm of performance has defined it as an action that takes place within a certain time and place, which is ephemeral by nature (since it disappears as it is being created), and occurs in the co-presence of the public. From this perspective, it is understood that performance arose to prevent art from being subordinated by the market. This definition also implies the impossibility of documenting performance art, since it would be contrary to its very *raison d'être*.

## **Contradictions within the established paradigm**

There is a very broad theoretical debate in regard to documenting performance art. Several theorists have argued that, thanks to documentation, one can talk about performances (Fischer-Lichte 2004). From this point of view, documents serve as testimony, articulating an event as something that has already happened [Schneider 2005]. Similarly, certain academics have recognised that objects resulting from a performance can be retained as remnants, since they contain traces of the history of action, and can be exhibited in a museum [Stiles 2012]. Thus, the idea that performance, in a strictly ontological sense, is not reproducible was rebutted [Phelan 1993]. Even more so, taking into account that at present all live events are mediated to the extent that, as stated by Auslander, what is live is an effect of mediation, precisely because it is recording technologies that have made it possible to think of performance as being live [Auslander 1999].

The position of the established paradigm on performance art documentation has been rebutted in practice on two fronts: on the one hand, that the very history of performance art is not consistent with constant disappearance; and, on the other hand, regarding how performance art is treated in contemporary art museums.

Performance art was eventually *museified* in the 1990s, completely adapting to the rules of the museum. In this way, performance art adapted to forms that were not exactly those of the established performance paradigm. It lost the essence of being an ephemeral action performed in a certain place at a specific time, and conformed to the opening times of the institution, so it was repeated again and again. In addition, this adaptation meant hiring professionals to carry out the performances which, until then, had been carried out by the artists themselves, or by close collaborators. This conformation, based on subcontracting and repeatability, was fundamental to the performance economy, since it allowed the sale of individual pieces. Thus, performances could be acquired by institutions (any museum or private collections) in the same way as the formalisation of any other artistic discipline, whether painting, video, or installation. With this in mind, it is difficult to continue interpreting performance as a fortress from which to resist the art market.

## **Insights into curatorial practice**

In order to explore in detail how performance art is treated in museums, interviews were conducted with the collection managers of three iconic Spanish museums of contemporary art: Guggenheim Museum of Bilbao, MACBA of Barcelona and Reina Sofía Museum of Madrid. These museums were selected among many other contemporary art institutions in Spain for two reasons. Firstly, they have their own art collection, which is not focused on one particular artist (like the prestigious Joan Miró or Tàpies foundations, for instance). Secondly, their curatorial practices have a high degree of public influence, since they are the three most visited contemporary art museums in Spain. In each case,

the interview was conducted with the person in charge of any decision related to collecting performance: Lola Hinojosa, Head of Performing and Intermedia Arts of the Collection Department of the Reina Sofía Museum (Madrid), Antònia Maria Perelló, Curator and Head of the MACBA Collection (Barcelona) and Petra Joos, Deputy Director for Museum Activities of the Guggenheim Museum (Bilbao).

The protocol of the semi-structured interview consisted of three different parts dealing with the presence of performance art in the collection, the type and nature of this presence and the status of the performance-related objects in the collection. The general approach taken was to consider performance as the work of art itself, while the ways of materialising are mere remnants that make it possible to recognise the performance as such. However, this reasoning was refuted by the interviewees' responses on how museum collections behave when acquiring a performance.

During the interviews, it became apparent that the collections of the Guggenheim Museum and the MACBA do not have performances as such, and that the presence of the performance is represented by the medium in which it survives. Several examples were provided, such as the video of the performance *Irrintzi* (2001–2002) by Itziar Okariz (Guggenheim), or photographs of actions by Vito Acconci (1973) (MACBA). Similarly, during the interviews it emerged that the Reina Sofía Museum had mainly acquired the material recording of performances, but also some live performances.

It can therefore be stated that, on the one hand, the interviewees assumed that a performance is different from its documentation: a performance is a temporary, ephemeral event, whereas the document is a mere later testimony. This position is consistent with the established paradigm: a performance is a work of art and the document its complement. On the other hand, however, performance art is mainly present in museum collections in its materialisation. That is, museums acquire material recordings of performances and treat them as a works of art.

This idea is shown in Antònia Maria Perelló's comments on the presence of the material recording of performances in the MACBA collection. As has been said, no live performances are included in their collection, but they have material recordings. Yet Perelló clarified that, strictly speaking, a performance's documentation should be filed in the museum's documentation centre. In practice, this is not the case because otherwise performance art would have no presence in the collection. Beyond this compelling reason, a certain discomfort could be detected about having to consider the documentation as the work of art itself.

Similarly, when Petra Joos detailed the performance-related pieces in the Guggenheim collection (it must be remembered that they do not have live performances), she avoided calling them documentation as such, and always defined them as "works with a creative process or works that have some performance elements in their background or their creative process". Thus, she refused to consider the documentation of a performance as a work of art.

In the case of the Reina Sofía Museum, Lola Hinojosa made more general comments in this regard. She stated that it is not relevant where a piece is stored, whether in the collection, or in the archives, since in her view, it has the same value. The only difference lies in the ways in which it is disseminated and publicised. But in terms of the museum's assets, she argued that there is no difference. She seemed to be willing to blur the boundaries between archive and collection, between document and work of art.

It can be seen that in all cases there was a certain resistance to call the material recording of a performance a work of art, despite the fact that it is kept in museum collections. Of course, my intention was not to denounce the interviewees' position as wrong, but rather to highlight the contradiction between the implied definition of performance they hold (characteristic of the established paradigm) and the reality of their own practice.

It can be concluded from their statements that, although they assume that the documentation of a performance is something different than the performance itself, in practice the material recording of a performance is treated as a work of art. It is what they acquire and keep in the contemporary art collections of their museums. Reality belies the foundations of the established paradigm.

The consequences that the established paradigm has for the documentation of performance, or more broadly, for its material recording, have been contested by theory and disproved in practice. In order to do justice to the relevance of materialisations in the history of performance art and in the practice of museums, the very definition of performance needs to be rethought.

### **Towards a redefinition of performance**

What follows is a review of the three features proposed by the established paradigm, after which I propose a redefinition of performance that takes its materialisation seriously: its ephemeral nature, the action and the co-presence of the public.

The first feature is that performance is defined as a concrete action that is ephemeral in nature. In my study, I do not deny that there is an ephemeral element in performance, but it is not a determining factor. The ontological dependence on its ephemeral nature has caused performance to be considered as something that disappears and remains unrecoverable. But as has been seen throughout this article, the performance does not disappear. It is in fact unusual that it might disappear: a performance that leaves no trace, as Sehgal would state, is the exception and not the rule. Therefore, the ephemeral status does not have the ontological ability to legitimise a performance as such.

The second feature that has defined performance is its status as an action. In fact, it would be more accurate to speak of objects that refer to an action. Auslander argues that it is documentation itself that creates the action: “the act of documenting an event as a performance is what constitutes it as such” [Auslander 2006: 5]. A pertinent question at this point could be: If it is really the materialisation that constitutes the performance, why continue to call it *performance materialisation*? Does this expression not convey the idea of a dependence of the object on a previous action (which would 'materialise' in it)? If the relationship of dependence goes in the opposite direction, what is the point of talking about materialisation?

In fact, although Auslander completely disproves the ontological dependence of performance on documentation, he still speaks of documentation. He continues to address it as something that refers to something else, even when it does not document anything real, as is the case of Yves Klein's *Leap into the Void*. In the phenomenological definition that he proposes, he affirms that the relationship between the represented event and the real event does not matter, but rather the relationship between the represented event and the public. What he does not question is that there must be a representation of an event, whether real or not.

This shows that the materialisation of a performance always refers to an action. In other words, it has the peculiarity of presenting itself as something that materialises something external – a trait that is not found, for example, in painting or sculpture. Moreover, the materialisation of a performance always refers to a performance as the true work of art. In doing so, such materialisation denies any claim of being a work of art in itself. However, this denied material record is precisely what enters the doors of the archive and thus constitutes a full work of art. The materialisation of the performance is always a work of art that denies being one, and refers to an action that is supposedly the true work of art. Hence, it is worth talking about *materialisation* to point to this constitutive tension.

This tension was perfectly reflected in the ideas of the interviewees, who treated the materialisation as a work of art in all respects, but never defined it as such. Instead, they considered the true work of art to be the action of the performance. In the three museums analysed, captions of performance materialisations always state that it is a documentation of an action performed at a certain time and place. The idea put forward in this thesis is thus reaffirmed: The materialisation of the performance is not referred to as a work of art in itself, but is characterised by referring to something external to it, that is, to the performance that is considered the true work of art. It is this reference to the external, however, that gives materialisation the status of a work of art. This paradox can be called the deictic nature of the materialisation of a performance.

The third feature that has characterised performance in the established paradigm is its relationship to the public. The physical co-presence of the artist and the public has been understood as key to its existence. But as was seen with Auslander's theory, what is relevant is not the presence of the public in the performance. This is, in fact, indifferent. What really matters is the encounter between the documentation and its public; Auslander defines this as a phenomenological relationship [Auslander 1999; 2006].

From a historical perspective, and based on the argument of the new and performative capacity of documentation, one could define performance art as the way certain artists choose to produce objects that enter the archive or cultural memory. From here it is possible to turn the original question around and ask: To what extent is performance used strategically for the production of new objects that can enter the archive? The relevant question is the value of this artistic practice as a new position through which performance artists have been able to create an unprecedented relationship between the concept of art and its formalisation through the materialisation of documents and residual objects. This understanding of performance art does not detract from it; on the contrary, it distinguishes it as a successful strategy capable of mobilising a previously unthinkable logic in the tradition of art practices.

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