



Final Brochure*

“Between Evidence and Representation: History of Performance Art Documentation from 1970 to 1977”

Project Outline

In recent years, interest in performance art has grown both in the contemporary art field and in academic research, and special attention has been devoted to the objects and images that mediate its history: photographs, videos, films, and material remains. The project “Between Evidence and Representation: History of Performance Art Documentation from 1970 to 1977” offers an innovative approach to the study of this history and its vehicles. Performance documentation is here conceived and employed as a tool with which to scrutinise the formation of paradigms for the exhibition, conservation, and collection of this art form within the visual arts.

Hosted by the Institute of Theatre Studies and the International Research Center “Interweaving Performance Cultures” of Freie Universität Berlin, the project was conducted by Dr. Tancredi Gusman under the supervision of Professor Erika Fischer-Lichte, one of the world’s leading scholars and author of milestone publications in the field of performance and theatre studies. The Partner Organisation of the project was the Migros Museum of Contemporary Art in Zurich. The results of the project offer a contribution not only to academic enquiries but also to art professionals and institutions dealing with performance art and documentation. The knowledge produced may also be exploited in art educational programmes, encouraging reflections on the different ways of understanding, transmitting and representing past (art) events.

Overall objectives of the training and research project were:

- To enhance the recognised profile of the experienced researcher by expanding his expertise into new areas. To this end converged the acquisition of new theoretical and historiographical tools; scientific exchanges with international leading scholars holding a variety of perspectives on performance art history and documentation; as well as the acquisition of key competencies in designing and leading research projects and devising outreach activities concerning the communication of their findings.
- To outline a novel and original contribution to the history of performance art and its documentation, introducing an unprecedented methodological approach capable of making visible the dynamics involved in the containment of performance within the traditional framework of visual arts.

* Disclaimer

The information and views set out here reflect only those of the authors and the Research Executive Agency (REA) and the European Commission (EC) are not responsible for any use that may be made of the information contained therein.

Activities

Several activities structured the project: substantial research in archives and libraries, which allowed for the examination of crucial sources for the history of performance art and its documentation; presentation and discussion of its ongoing results at prestigious international conferences, symposia, and research groups; participation in the activities of the International Research Center “Interweaving Performance Cultures”; and steady scientific exchange with the members of the Institute of Theatre Studies.

Key international scholars and artists participated in the two symposia organised within the project’s framework: “Re-Constructing Performance Art” (Freie Universität Berlin, 30.11.–1.12.2018) and “Performance Art: Who Cares?” (Migros Museum, Zurich, 22.03.2019). In collaboration with the Migros Museum, moreover, a series of outreach activities targeting different audiences were carried out. Interviews with artists, recorded in the course of the research, are available on the project’s weblog.

Pursuing this path, the project achieved:

- the elaboration of an innovative historiographical and methodological approach to performance art history that accounts for the entanglements of discursive and non-discursive dynamics in the disciplinary formation of this genre;
- the production, through the approach mentioned above, of new knowledge contributing to the reconstruction of the histories of performance-based art in the twentieth century;
- the collection, through artists’ interviews, of invaluable sources to reconstruct strategies of documenting and archiving performance art;
- the objective of designing and sharing replicable workshop-formats for younger generations.

The dissemination means of the project’s result were:

2 symposia organised, 8 papers at international conferences, 2 workshops and 6 lectures and presentations in colloquia and seminars in different countries;

3 articles published or submitted for publication in double-blind peer-reviewed journals and books;

a multimedia weblog containing video reports, artists’ interviews, brochures, and other related materials;

1 monograph and 1 edited volume are currently in development.

Outcomes

The project “Between Evidence and Representation” offers an innovative contribution to the following areas of research:

The historiography of performance art

From its beginnings in the 1970s, the historiography of “performance art” has been confronted, time and time again, with the difficulty of clearly defining its object as well as its boundaries. The only feature apparently shared by the complex of artistic practices gathered under this label is their ability to escape any conclusive conceptual delimitation. The project proposes a radical shift in approaching this category and its historical domain: This label’s unity is not considered as the product of an intrinsic quality possessed by all performance

artworks, but rather as the result of discursive and non-discursive processes that determined the canon of the heterogeneous whole we now call “performance art”. Such processes, the project argues, correspond to those underpinning the disciplinary formation of performance art within the field of visual arts.

Performance art documentation

From the early 1990s to date, performance art documentation has stimulated a wide range of theoretical and historiographical interests. After focussing, for a long time, on the nature of performance and the relationship between ephemerality and documentation, the scholarly debate has recently shifted its attention toward issues arising from practices of conserving and archiving performance art, thus underlining the plurality of possible relationships between performance and its documents. The project, while upholding this new interest, offers an innovative and original perspective regarding the study of performance art documentation. Documentation is here understood as a device within which different strategies of re-presentation and conservation of performance are embedded and by means of which they can be observed. The history of performance art documentation becomes, therefore, an instrument of investigation into the establishment of models for the production and reception of performance art.

The project has developed a new methodology for studying the history of performance art and its documentation, engaging with four fields of investigation: 1) the artistic intention behind the production of documentation; 2) the conservation of performance art documentation in art and theatre archives; 3) the (re-)presentation of performance art through art press and art exhibitions; and 4) the economics of performance art and documentation.

These results stimulate new research and offer innovative instruments for analysing the disciplinary history of performance art, a field that still requires further exploration. The project also provides tools and knowledge to professionals and institutions engaged in conservation, exhibition, and collection of past performances.