# From the Work to the Performance: Reflections on Performance Art in the Museum

Barbara Büscher, Franz Anton Cramer

This article investigates the fundamental question of how to define the characteristics that guarantee the identity of a work of performance art. In contrast to static and timeless concepts, the *performance* is understood as each individual presentation. The term emphasizes the nature of the event as its temporality, its dynamics and processual character. The term *performance-based arts* describes a broad-based development in the arts transcending (art) disciplines and focuses on the performance, presentation, enactment and process of generating the event. The emphasis on the processual nature of performance art has made the concept of 'work' dynamic. Difference gains central importance, rather than identity; not the materialization of an immutable object (the completed form of the work) but the inter-media networks and the temporality of such constellations and dramaturgies are the focal point. Museums, the authors argue, should avoid falling back to the notion of *Aufführung* in their collecting practice.

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In an essay from 2014, Pip Laurenson, Head of Collection Care Research at Tate Modern, and Vivian van Saaze, Managing Director of the Maastricht Centre for Arts and Culture, Conservation and Heritage (MACCH), described the tendency towards collecting *performances themselves* rather than their relics, archival traces or media transformations:

"In the past, live performances were considered uncollectable because of their intangible nature. When museums collected anything related to performance, they collected the material remains of performance, never the performance itself as a live event. Only since the early 2000s, museums have begun to collect live works by acquiring the means and rights to re-perform them."[1]

This development has made it necessary for museums to develop new strategies for preserving, presenting and even re-defining the concept of the work. It raises questions of how the 'performance' work differs from its live presentation; what kinds of performances are collectable and how are they preserved and (by whom they are) authenticated by means of e.g. re-enactment / re-performance:

[1] LAURENSON / VAN SAAZE 2014, p. 27

"The types of performance works which enter collections as live works can exist, at least theoretically, independent of the artist and can be repeated or re-activated in the future. In this sense they are durable and portable. Within current practice, artists are themselves finding formats that allow works which are not straightforward objects to be bought and sold, for example, by the use of scripts or instructions which enable others to perform and re-perform the work. (…) According to Claire Bishop, the repeatability of delegated performance (the hiring of non-professionals to do performances) is central to the economics of performance since the 1990s and has accelerated its institutionalization and collectability."[2]

The term *delegated performance* that Claire Bishop uses[3] denotes the concept of an emphatic presence transcending time, which shaped the action and performance art of the 1960s and the body art of the 1970s and changed artistic strategies. The distinctiveness (singularity) of the individual body, the identity of the author and the performer, and the uniqueness of the event, are no longer key elements of performance practices. Using changing players /performing bodies, performances have become repeatable. Thus there is a clearly observable tendency towards theatrical practices.

The most prominent of which, however, repeatability as a criterion of durability and a guarantee for the identity, or collectability of an artwork, can be put into question. In the context of our research, repeatablilty implies the re-appropriation of the work each time it is performed. Moreover, repetition in diverse forms – from duplication via serialization to medial reproduction – has itself become an artistic strategy, and therefore a component of the work.

## The (historical) concept of the work and time-based arts / performance art

Back in 2006, Pip Laurenson published a text discussing the conditions and requirements necessary for conserving "time-based media installations". In this context, she also addressed the differences between various work concepts. If the essential characteristics of the traditional artwork as collected by museums are "physical integrity"[4] and "material originality and completeness"[5], then we can state:

"With traditional fine art objects, material evidence is sought for authenticity, demonstrating the hand of the artist. In contemporary art, with the demise of the evidence of the hand of the artist, artists have found other means by which to maintain authority and control over their works via certificates and editions."[6]

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[2] LAURENSON / VAN SAAZE 2014, p. 33
[3] BISHOP 2012. In this essay, Bishop also considers the problematic nature of using such 'hired bodies' for the distribution of performance art.
[4] LAURENSON 2006, paragraph 3
[5] LAURENSON 2006, paragraph 15
[6] LAURENSON 2006, paragraph 18

To define and categorize these changes, Laurenson refers to Nelson Goodman's differentiation between autographic and allographic works[7]. The latter mainly comprise musical works, with the two distinct elements of the score and the performance. Applying this duality – via music-philosophical arguments – to the question of the "work-defining properties"[8] of time-based media installations, Laurenson shows that instructions for setting up installations relate to their realization in an exhibition context in the same way as scores relate to the music performance. Both carry a certain degree of uncertainty that broadens the scope for variation in each of the performance's or installation's new manifestations / objectivizations[9] but also changes the tasks of the conservators.

So, what do we gain from this reference to Goodman and musicological work concepts? Firstly, it points us towards making a categorical distinction between instructions recorded in writing (with artistically formed parts: the materials and sculptural elements of an installation, video tapes or films etc.) and the 'installation's 'performance' in a specific exhibition situation. Like the score in music, these instructions, combined with the signature of the artist, enable the work to be commercially traded and collected in a museum context (make them *durable and portable*). Laurenson and van Saaze apply this differentiation to performance art[10] by maintaining that the written instructions or contracts stipulating the conditions of a performance / re-performance are the collectable 'object'.

## The aporia of the work

If we take up the idea of describing performance art in a similar way to musical works – as allographic in the Goodman sense – we must at least briefly consider some of the conditions and requirements that Goodman's concept, and ultimately a by now historical conception of the work of art, are based upon. In combination with the artist's signature (and authorization), the material manifestation of the work as an integral, complete object guarantees originality and – at least ideally – enables forgeries to be identified. Hence forgery proofing is an important aspect of the way Goodman defines the relationship between the composition as documented in the score and its performance. The performance is regarded as an isolated case of *a musical work*, if it passes the test of fulfilling all the parameters laid down by the notation in the score. To do so, the score must follow a system of notation that meets various requirements[11]. It would be too complicated to go into them all here; let us simply note the criterion of unambiguity, as Goodman defines it:

[7] cf. Goodman 1976
[8] LAURENSON 2006, paragraph 33
[9] LAURENSON 2006, paragraph 50
[10] LAURENSON / VAN SAAZE 2014
[11] GOODMAN 1976, p. 130ff

"Not only must a score uniquely determine the class of performances belonging to the work, but the score (as a class of copies or inscriptions that so define the work) must be uniquely determined, given a performance and the notational system."[12]

As Goodman also sees written language as notation in this context[13], it would make sense to regard written instructions and directions for art performances in a similar way. However, in the relationship between notation (letter sequence) and performance, it is not the 'right spelling' that counts,[14] but only the realization of the semantic side of what is written. This fact might present the first drawback to applying this analytic concept to performance objects.[15]

Secondly, when asserting the authenticity and identity of an original work, we must distinguish between its notational / written manifestations and its performances as derivative manifestations. Yet the historical determinacy of this concept of the work not only lies in the adherence to the hierarchy of score / notation / writing and performance / realization, but also in the much-overlooked fact that the original is not only attended and complemented by the forgery but also by the legitimate copy. Medial reproducibility and artworks using media of (re-)production have brought this fact clearly to the fore. Thus, the distinction between the original and the copy is increasingly fading, or becoming obsolete. The copy is no longer seen as a "flawed derivative but as a complex phenomenon based on medial transformation and the accumulation of aesthetic values," as Annette Tietenberg found with respect to exhibition copies as well as in a general context.[16]

Thirdly and finally, faithfulness to the original (*Werktreue*) is another key concept in the hierarchical relationship between score and performance. The debate about faithfulness not only concerns musical works but also has a decisive bearing on the relationship between the dramatic text, or the libretto / composition, and the performance in (music and dance) theatre. Here, the idea of faithfulness, e.g. in a dramatic text, follows an understanding of the work as establishing a timeless, conclusive and definitive interpretation that remains unaffected by developments in art practice, general culture and public and critical reception alike. And this idea conceives of the dramatic text as a

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[12] GOODMAN 1976, p. 129/130

[13] see e.g. GOODMAN 1976, p. 115f.

[14] With respect to the forgery-proofing of literary works, Goodman cites the following argument: "All that matters is what may be called *sameness of spelling*: exact correspondence as sequences of letters, spaces, and punctuation marks." (GOODMAN 1976, p. 115).

[15] A drawback that Goodman himself refers to in some respects: In his discussion of dramatic texts, he distinguishes between the dialogue part of a drama, which he treats as a score, and the paratexts such as stage directions, scenery descriptions etc., which are not integral parts of the work. (GOODMAN 1976, p. 210-211).

[16] TIETENBERG 2015, p. 14. Tietenberg also refers to the conception of the extended sculpture as discussed by Rosalind Krauss in 1978, and stresses that "artistic practice is not defined by a certain medium but rather by logical operations with any number of cultural concepts, for which any medium (…) can be used." (TIETENBERG 2015, p. 13)

direct expression of the artist's intention, which allows the meaning to be permanently reproduced unchanged. Disclosing this meaning is the task of a faithful production.

Some of the parameters that have been put forward for the conservation of performance .art seem to us to follow a similar idea of the work and the artist's control over it, also via the exact documentation of all his or her decisions for the original production of the performance.[17]

However, such static concepts of the work are increasingly coming into question. Following the more general modification of artistic practices, the notion of artwork undergoes a shift towards the processual and the performative. This elicits from terminology now used in aesthetic theory as well as theatre and arts studies[18].

In this context, three questions concerning aspects of the work's concept must be addressed, which also touch on the museum's task of collecting performance art, and therefore the implicit concept of the work:

- Having established repeatability as a decisive criterion for collectible performance art, the next question is how the performances are notated – other than in basic instructions and written licenses/contracts. Today, graphic notations, unique diagrams and project linked scores are frequently included in artists' individual recording systems, and cannot be systematized in the Goodman sense. What does that imply for the relationship between the score and the performance? Are they not equally valuable realizations of artistic concepts, up to the point that they are indeed exhibited in a dual situation[19].
- Given that the performance is repeatable: Who decides that the re-performance corresponds with the model or the work as documented in writing? What about the control asserted by the author-artist, which is apparently regarded as a central aspect in the field of visual arts, and how could this make theatre and performance studies' understanding of the performance as the work fruitful for a new approach to collecting and conserving?
- Laurenson and van Saaze have established that specific knowledge of production strategies used in theatre and dance, e.g. concerning dramaturgy and spatial

[17] See e.g. Joanna Phillips in an interview on preparing the symposium "Collecting and Conserving Performance Art", 9-11 June 2016 in Wolfsburg: "Simple installation directions are not usually enough for buying a live performance. Even if the artist had clear ideas of what the work is and which work-defining characteristics are essential, many of the given parameters can still demand quite subjective decisions. (…) These evaluations, which define nothing less than the faithful, i.e. integral, realization of a performance, are made by the artist personally before the work is assumed into the collection." See: www.restauratoren.de/termine-details/2553-performance-tagung-in-wolfsburg.html (July 11, 2016; own translation).
[18] see e.g. PUDELEK 2005; BIRKENHAUER 2005; LÖHR 2003
[19] Büscher 2016, citing e.g. VALIE EXPORT

arrangement, can be necessary for the re-realization of a performance[20]. This raises the question of how curators / collectors and conservators will deal with works conceived in terms of more complex dramaturgies than can be fixed in simple scores or instructions.

All of this is linked to the fundamental question of how to define the characteristics to be repeated that guarantee the identity of the work, and what exactly the repetition appears to guarantee. The historical avant-garde of the early 20th century first used repetition as an artistic strategy, exploring the differences as well as the contemporaneity of each appropriation, and how these relate (critically) to their own (art-) history, thus highlighting their institutional regulation and the instability of signification processes in general[21].

## " 'Rétrospective' par Xavier Le Roy"

Among the many examples at hand from the research we have conducted, we would like to briefly discuss this issue with regards to a museum project titled " 'Retrospective' by Xavier Le Roy", first held in 2012 at the Fundació Antoni Tàpies (FAT) in Barcelona, and since touring museums worldwide.

Xavier Le Roy was invited to present his choreographic solo work in the main exhibition space of the FAT; its form, arrangement, and impact were totally open. The only condition was to respect the regular opening hours. Le Roy chose a decidedly 'performative' format in which he uses some iconic images of his dances; hires performers to directly address visitors, explaining to them their own vision of Le Roy's work as well as its significance; and, thirdly, inscribe these elements in a complex temporal scheme reactive to the arrival and presence of visitors. Thus, he essentially blended the paradigms of performance and exhibition.

By offering a retrospective not 'of' but 'by' or 'via' Xavier Le Roy, the artist relativizes the external view – that is, questions the historicizing perspective (taken by the artist himself or a curator).[22] This is not a presentation of 'works' in which certain elements can be discerned (comprising an 'evolution' or a 'personal style') but the configuration of a new 'work', drawing on familiar or at least recognizable elements. To achieve this, Le Roy applies another subversion: the monographic – that is, the isolated presentation of the work of one artist – is broken up within a group work, in which the works treated – the solo works of Xavier Le Roy – are transformed, extended and indeed multiplied.

This occurs because Xavier Le Roy himself is present during the entire duration of the exhibition, but gets others to present the 'works'. In this way, he introduces an alternative to the ideology of the unique and personalized as is commonly linked with works in the field of dance and performance art. Xavier Le Roy's solos are represented by 'other bodies', but neither reconstructed nor rehearsed or treated and presented as

[20] LAURENSON / VAN SAAZE 2014, p. 35
[21] see e.g. KALU, 2013; DAUR 2013; LORECK / OTT 2014; DÖHL / WÖHRER 2014
[22] On the linguistic shading distinguishing "of" from "by" or "via" Xavier Le Roy, see AMALVI 2012.

complete, integral works. It is only in the repetition and permanent re-performance within the exhibition dispositive that they gain their character; this changes and varies with every performer and is therefore visible as an iterative, not identical figure.

The 'exhibits' are movement sequences and routines, which are constantly updated within time frames set by the exhibition context. This updating takes place every time new visitors enter the exhibition space. When this occurs, the four actors promptly leave the room to return a short time later and announce and perform the aforementioned sequences. They are also commissioned to explain "their" retrospective, so in addition to showing excerpts of works, they also talk to the visitors about their own artistic projects, their personal situations in the year of the premiere, the affect the piece had on them when they first saw it, and other background information. When the performers welcome new visitors, they tell them they are presenting "their retrospective of the solo works of Xavier Le Roy". If another visitor enters the room, the conversation is stopped and the procedure starts anew. The conversation is finished by one of the dancers, who draws the visitors' attention to the documentary materials in the next room and stops moving until another visitor enters the hall.

The artist's (Xavier Le Roy's) "retrospective material" is radically subjectivized by the actors' appropriation in the process of their retrospective. Its design and conception, however, is very much "by" Xavier Le Roy. In this respect, then, " 'Rétrospective' par Xavier Le Roy" links the presentation format of "signature" work material, designed for the long term, with the process-based and iterative working methods of choreography. In this way, the retrospective becomes just as much a work format for other artists as it is a format for the artist himself, summarizing the results of almost 20 years of choreographic work.

## "Performance-based arts" ("*Aufführungskünste*") as new concept

In contrast to static and timeless concepts, the *performance* is therefore understood as each individual presentation. The term emphasizes the nature of the event and its temporality, its dynamics and processual character, as manifested in elements such as the individual dramaturgy, conceived of here in general terms as structure in time and space. One of the 'classic' definitions formulated in a theatre studies context is that by Erika Fischer-Lichte:

"By performance we mean an event that arises from the confrontation and interaction between two groups of people gathered in one place at the same time to live out a situation together in physical co-presence, sometimes switching roles between actor and viewer. What is shown in a performance always appears in the here and now and is perceived as a sui generis contemporary experience. (…) Performances do not possess fixable and tradable artefacts. As they take place between actors and viewers they are transient and transitory."[23]

[23] FISCHER-LICHTE 2005, p. 15-16; 18; own translation

This definition takes up the ideas of theatre theorist Max Herrmann, who asserted the autonomy of the performance as an artwork back in the early 20th century, thus providing a basis and justification for the entire academic discipline of theatre studies.[24] Just as the impetus for theatre studies came from changes in theatre practice around the turn of the 20th century, *making performance itself the central object of scientific analysis*, the development of action and performance art in the 1960s and 1970s provided the impetus for founding performance studies as an academic discipline, for example, on the initiative of Richard Schechner, Michael Kirby et al. at New York University in 1979-80.[25]

In the late 1990s, Hans-Thies Lehmann coined the term 'post-dramatic theatre' to describe artistic practices that detach staging and performance from the structural dominance of a dramatic text and so make the participating media available for re-combination[26]. This detachment occurs in phases of self-reflecting, decomposing and separating the elements, as Lehmann described: "It [the theatre] does not remain the institutional branch of the arts that it once was but becomes the name of a multi- or inter-media, deconstructive art practice involving a momentary event."[27] If we replace the term theatre, which is still associated with the form of the institution, with the term performance, we are approaching the work concept that we have called *performance-based arts*.[28]

*Performance-based arts* describe a broad-based development in the arts transcending (art) disciplines and focuses on the performance, presentation, enactment and process of generating the event. Theatre, dance, music, visual arts, literature and film, all observed, described and analysed in discrete academic disciplines, form new interfaces where performance appears as configurations and constellations of these arts. The emphasis on the processual nature of the performance has made the work concept itself dynamic and no longer places central importance on identity but on difference, not on the materialization of an immutable object (the completed form of the work) but on inter-media networks and the temporality of such constellations and dramaturgies.[29]

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[24] FISCHER-LICHTE 2005, p. 16-17. Fischer-Lichte repeatedly quotes Herrmann and concludes that "Thus it is stressed, that for the aesthetic experience in the performance, 'the most decisive aspect in a theatrical sense is sharing the experience of the real body and the real space' (Herrmann). The activity of the viewer is understood not only as an imaginative but also as a physical process." (FISCHER-LICHTE 2005, p. 17). On performance in general, see also FISCHER-LICHTE 2012.

[25] See: http://tisch.nyu.edu/performance-studies/about-ps, (July 16, 2016).

[26] LEHMANN 2005

[27] LEHMANN 2005, p. 141

[28] See the DFG project "Verzeichnungen. Medien und konstitutive Ordnungen von Archivprozessen der Aufführungskünste", Universität der Künste Berlin und Hochschule für Musik und Theater Leipzig.

[29] In the context of conservators' tasks in the field of performance arts, LAURENSON / VAN SAAZE also speak of a network surrounding the performance that must be preserved: "We have shown that it is not the problem of non-materiality that currently represents the greatest challenge for museums in collecting performance, but of maintaining – conceived of as a process of active

Museums follow a different logic in their collecting practice. As outlined above, they are pursuing a twofold loop, as it were, with respect to performance art. Previously, all media transformations were exhibited as artefacts and remains of past events, integrated into performances and exhibitions – overwriting the debate about disappearance as the central characteristic of performance. Now efforts are being made towards turning the performance itself into the work to be collected. This idea of collecting, however, clearly falls back, behind the notion that only the realization, the *Aufführung,* can be the key to performance.

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engagement – the networks which support the work. As this increasing dependency on social and political context, people, resources, and other transitory circumstances outside the museum goes against the museum's tendency of containment and control, this shift may cause a certain uneasiness and raises new questions." (LAURENSON / VAN SAAZE 2014, p. 39)

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