On Reenactment: Concepts, Methodologies, Tools

edited by
Cristina Baldacci
Susanne Franco



This book brings together dance and visual arts scholars to investigate the key methodological and theoretical issues concerning reenactment. Along with becoming an effective and widespread contemporary artistic strategy, reenactment is taking shape as a new anti-positivist approach to the history of dance and art, undermining the notion of linear time and suggesting new temporal encounters between past, present, and future. As such, reenactment has contributed to a move towards different forms of historical thinking and understanding that embrace cultural studies – especially intertwining gender, postcolonial, and environmental issues – in the redefinition of knowledge, historical discourses, and memory. This approach also involves questioning canons and genealogies by destabilising authorship and challenging both institutional and direct forms of transmission.

The structure of the book playfully recalls that of a theatrical performance, with both an *overture* and *prelude*, to provide space for a series of theoretical and practice-based insights – the *solos* – and conversations – the *duets* – by artists, critics, curators, and theorists who have dealt with reenactment. The main purpose of this book is to demonstrate how reenactment as a strategy of appropriation, circulation, translation, and transmission can contribute to understanding history both in its perpetual becoming and as a process of reinvention, renarration, and resignification from an interdisciplinary perspective.

Mimesis Journal Books
collana di «Mimesis Journal. Scritture della performance»
ISSN 2283-8783

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*A special thank you to Acatia Finbow
for her precious contribution*

This publication has received funding from the
SPIN 2018 Mnemedance Research Project - Ca' Foscari University of Venice
(Department of Philosophy and Cultural Heritage)



© 2022
Accademia University Press
via Carlo Alberto 55
I-10123 Torino



first published in December 2022
isbn 9791255000181
digital editions www.aAccademia.it/on-reenactement
http://books.openedition.org/aaccademia/179

book design boffetta.com

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OUVERTURE

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Represencing Performance, Dance, and Visual Art

Cristina Baldacci, Susanne Franco

This book brings together scholars and curators from the visual arts and dance studies to investigate the methodological and theoretical issues related to the act of reenacting impermanent or unfinished artworks, pivotal or unrealized exhibitions, choreographies and gestures, and inaccessible, noninclusive or forgotten archives, which are to be put into question in the present. In addition to having become an effective and widespread contemporary artistic strategy, reenactment is taking shape as a new anti-positivist approach to the history of dance and art, which undermines the notion of linear time, suggesting new temporal encounters between past, present and future.

As such, reenactment has contributed to a move towards different forms of historical thinking and understanding that embrace cultural studies – especially intertwining gender, postcolonial, and environmental issues – in the redefinition of knowledge, historical discourses and memory. Acting in the present, reenactment brings to the fore the multiple temporalities involved in the relationship with the past and introduces immersive (personal and/or collective) experiences of previous "events" as a counter-practice which unsettles predetermined representations of

history. By reactivating and represencing the past in the present, history becomes meaningful again.

The essays (*solos*) and conversations (*duets*) collected in this book are the outcome of the two-day online conference held at Ca' Foscari University of Venice (19-20 November 2020), which was organised in the frame of the international research project Mnemedance – "Memory in Motion. Re-Membering Dance History". Starting from the idea that memory is always active in dance and that dance is *not* a form of ephemeral and non-reproducible knowledge, Mnemedance investigates the (dancing) body as a tool for remembering and archiving experiences, cultures and movements, and as a strategy for preserving and transforming meaning. This approach to dance and its histories also involves questioning canons and genealogies by destabilising authorship and challenging both institutional and direct forms of transmission. Reenactment is a central practice in this respect, as it engages artists and scholars in reconsidering how dance can have a central role in reevaluating invisible legacies, marginal repertoires, and, more generally, the kinaesthetic dimensions of cultural heritage. For these reasons, it has also contributed to making dance studies an inspiring reference for adjacent areas of the arts and humanities.

The structure of the book, which playfully recalls that of a theatrical performance, is designed to provide space for a series of theoretical and practice-based insights – the *solos* – and conversations – the *duets* – by artists, scholars, critics and curators, who have dealt in various manners with reenactment in the performing and visual arts. The *duets* are preceded by a *prelude* in which Stefano Mudu presents each conversation and traces the theoretical framework of the different perspectives examined, together with the issues they raise for future research work. In *Under the Sign of Reenactment*, he also questions the notion of reenactment by suggesting a terminological shift from "reenactment" to "enactment" studies. The suppression (and consequent interchangeability) of the prefix "re-" gives rise to a whole set of new meanings.

The *solos* open with an essay in which Gabriella Giannachi explores the use of reenactments and the role of the audience as a strategy for preservation, taking as a

case-study Dan Graham's seminal work *Audience/Performer/Mirror* (1977). She carries out her analysis by referencing the work's reenactments that took place in 2020 in the context of UNFOLD, a research project and collaborative, international research network of the platform for media art LIMA, based in Amsterdam. In *UNFOLD: Dan Graham's 'Audience/Performer/Mirror' Reenacted*, Giannachi explains how, by looking at a work through its reenactments, it is possible to both identify different qualities in the "original" and make the work future-proof, to preserve it for posterity. Her study also shows the extent to which performances and artworks can build meaning over time thanks to their ontological and epistemological qualities and relational capacities.

The second *solo* by Timmy De Laet expresses the need for dance scholars to take advantage of reenactment as a quintessentially collaborative mode of bringing history into practice. In *(Re)Making Dance History Together: Working Towards a Collaborative Historiography of Dance*, De Laet considers which forms of collaborative research can be successfully adopted within dance studies and how they can be applied to dance historiography. This is a crucial point, since dance historiography is currently undergoing a shift towards transnational or global approaches. This development puts pressure on the traditional assumption that historical research is a largely solitary endeavour. As De Laet suggests, choreographic reenactment shows how collaboration can be used as a methodological principle that might expand not only the scope of dance history but also its impact and forms of output.

With Susanne Foellmer's contribution, the attention moves again to a specific case-study. In *Watching Dances from the Past: Considering Performance Analysis in the Realm of Reenactments*, Foellmer focuses on *New*, a dance piece by the Berlin-based collective Lupita Pulpo, which consists exclusively of multilayered references to contemporary dance deriving from the performance memories of its three interpreters. The dense web of references in the reenacted piece complicates the relationship with the audience members, who do not always have the knowledge necessary to immediately recognize and make sense of the layers of gestures that the performers' bodies reevoke. Raising both

methodological and interpretative questions and discussing the limits of an analysis based on semiotics and phenomenology, Foellmer proposes a different approach in which performance methodology takes a cue from reenactment and its questioning of diachronic historical relations.

Likewise, Aurore Després takes as a starting point for her argument a dance piece, namely *Sacre#2* (2014), which constitutes the reenactment by Dominique Brun of Vaslav Nijinsky's *The Rite of Spring* (1913). In her essay *Five Conceptual Actions for a Sensible Archaeology of the Gesture in Dominique Brun's 'Sacre #2'*, Després explores Julie Salgues's interpretation of *The Chosen One* and questions to what extent the dichotomy between reconstruction and reinvention can be productive. From her point of view, gestures generated in the present make the past and the future swirl together to such an extent that they end up reconstituting and renewing themselves. Consequently, she emphasises the primacy of gestures over memory images and archival documentation, and posits reinvention as a collective, situated and multitemporal action.

With her essay *The Matter of Reenactment: A Materialist Inquiry into Cambodia's Contemporary Monumental Practices,* Stéphanie Benzaquen-Gautier also proposes a methodological shift in reenactment studies. Through exploring a set of performances, artworks, movies and projects she questions the open-ended dimension of the act of reenacting, the apparatuses through which reenactment appears, the transcorporeal practices it engages and the relations it produces, focusing on Cambodia, a country that for decades has been shaped by war, genocide, and social injustice. By asking herself if one can speak of a "Cambodian reenactment", she aims to contribute to laying the foundations for a "new materialist" approach to reenactment outside the (Western) theoretical frameworks of representation and mediation. Benzaquen-Gautier's non-canonical, non-normative, even non-human rereading of "Cambodia's Arts of Memory", through the lens of New Materialism, explicitly brings to the fore the political aspect of reenactment.

Benzaquen-Gautier's analysis confirms that every reenactment intended as a revisiting process, that is, every repetition seen as an improvement of the past *in* the present

for the future, is beyond doubt a political gesture, never a neutral one, whether it is the reactivation of an archive or the restaging of an artwork, an exhibition or a choreography. Three example images – a small and non-exhaustive selection – from the conference resonate with this.

The first image is a still from Rabih Mroué's short video *Old House* (2006), which is evoked by Matteo Lucchetti in his conversation with Gabi Ngcobo. The image shows a bombed house in Lebanon that seems to be falling apart. Yet, instead of crashing to the ground, it keeps getting back on its feet, over and over again, reconstructing/reenacting itself. This is a metaphor for the complex and often traumatic relationship between remembering and forgetting, between the tension of looking both backward and forward in time. Mroué uses it to reflect on how memory works. People, facts, and gestures that one remembers are de facto the result of an elaboration, of a translation, that implies a constant "working-through" process – or rather a reinvention of what one has actually forgotten.

The second example also belongs to the moving image. In his film *Sandlines. The Story of History* (2018-2020), Francis Alÿs uses reenactment as a way to reinterpret the past by conceiving parallel histories that rehabilitate "the absent ones", namely, those that have been left out of History. The film's protagonists are a group of children of a mountain village in Iraq, who reenact a century of history of their country. In so doing, they revisit their past to understand their present, inducing the viewer to reflect on the relationship between History and storytelling. As the film starts, one of the children tells the viewer: "Once upon a time, history existed as a series of stories that people would pass on from generation to generation. The stories would often contradict one another but there was always some truth in each story. There was no inside and no outside, no beginning and no ending, until the day oil came out of the Land". At the very moment when power meets history, Alÿs brings to light a fundamental question: which history or truth, and especially for whom, has to be told? When referring to a story, or to a work of art, an exhibition, a gesture or a dance movement which is being reenacted, the intricate and often misleading notions of an origin and of an "original" have to be carefully considered.

The third and final image is Marzia Migliora's *Stilleven* (2015), which was chosen as the conference cover image. It is an installation view of the mise-en-scène that Migliora presented in the Italian pavilion at the 2015 Venice Biennale as a reenactment of a photograph she took almost twenty years before. In showing an expanse of corn cobs, with the artist's body curled up at the centre reflected in the mirrored surface of a wardrobe, the work refers to the visual memory of the Italian rural world; that is, Migliora's familiar background and cultural heritage. As such, it is a remediation that addresses the practice of reenactment as reembodiment, where the human body becomes the key medium in reactivating the past and represencing the present.

Artistic reenactment as a strategy of appropriation, circulation, translation, and transmission contributes to understanding history both in its perpetual becoming and as a process of reinvention, renarration and resignification from an interdisciplinary perspective. *On Reenactment: Concepts, Methodologies, Tools* is intended to be a contribution in this direction.

SOLOS

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UNFOLD: Dan Graham's Audience/Performer/Mirror Reenacted

Gabriella Giannachi

This chapter explores the use of reenactments, and the role of the audience, as a strategy for preservation. Some of the reenactments discussed are historical, and LIMA especially commissioned others through an Arts and Humanities Research Council (AHRC) funded project, "Documenting Digital Art" (2019-22), developed in collaboration with the curators and media studies scholars Annet Dekker, Katrina Sluis and Francesca Franco, in partnership with Gaby Wijers, Director of LIMA, Amsterdam.

The aim of the overall workshop within which the reenactments took place on 14-15 January 2020 intended to build on the findings from the one-year project "UNFOLD: Mediation by Re-Interpretation" organised in 2016 by Wijers and Lara Garcia at LIMA.[1] UNFOLD reflected on

1. Gaby Wijers and Lara Garcia Diaz, "UNFOLD: Mediation by Re-interpretation Annual Project Review Report" (March 2016-March 2017), Amsterdam, LIMA. See also Gaby Wijers, "UNFOLD: the Strategic Importance of Re-interpretation for Media Art Mediation and Conservation", in *Mémoire_Vives: from Nam June Paik to Sliders_Lab*, ed. Jean-Marie Dallet (Tielt: Nannoo, 2019): 96-101; and Gaby Wijers, "UNFOLD: the Strategic Importance of Reinterpretation for Media Art Mediation and Conservation" in *Over and Over and Over Again: Re-enactment Strategies in Contemporary Arts and Theory*, ed. Cristina Baldacci, Clio

the affinities and differences between terms such as remediation, reenactment, reinterpretation, reappropriation, homage, emulation, and arrangement in the context of the conservation of media arts. At the 2016 "UNFOLD workshop", I suggested that these practices constitute fundamental preservation strategies, by which I did not so much mean the preservation of something that occurred in the past but a claim to the identification of its living quality in the present. By identifying its living quality, I maintained that the work would be able to survive historically through different periods in time.

I further developed this argument in *Histories of Performance Documentation*.[2] Here, I suggested that reenactments are crucial for preservation as they generate new iterations of a specific work. Subsequently, Wijers and I became increasingly interested in establishing the role of the audience in these reenactments. At the LIMA workshop in 2020, the first public event of the "Documenting Digital Art" project, a number of artists and researchers were hence asked to offer a reenactment of Graham's work based on the historical documentation of it by asking themselves the following questions elaborated by Wijers: what is the core and production method of a work? Which techniques are used in which context? How do we translate this artistic legacy, practice and knowledge to the next generation? How do we reflect and learn from different interdisciplinary practises? And how do we engage with audiences in this context?

Before analyzing the specific case study for this chapter, its historical reenactments and the reenactments carried out during the workshop at LIMA, it is worth refreshing our memory about how reenactments tend to operate by unpacking the distinctive features of both artistic and historical reenactments. It is worth starting by noting how reenactments have attracted the attention of scholars in a range of disciplines spanning performance studies, art

Nicastro and Arianna Sforzini (Cultural Enquiry, 21, Berlin: ICI Berlin Press): 193-203.

2. Gabriella Giannachi and Jonah Westerman, eds., *Histories of Performance Documentation* (London and New York: Routledge, 2017): 116.

history, history, new media, archaeology, and preservation studies.

As art historian Amelia Jones suggested,[3] historical reenactments have become increasingly popular after 1946, when the historian and archaeologist Robin George Collingwood published *The Idea of History,* which argued that history constitutes a form of reenactment.[4] Historical reenactments are known to often entail a "distortion in scale".[5] It was, for example, the case in Peter Watkins's *Diary of an Unknown Soldier* (1959), where First World War trenches were "filmed in a cast member's backyard after a two-and-a-half meter plot had been dug up and hosed down with water". In *Forgotten Faces* (1956), also by Watkins, the Hungarian Revolution was filmed "in a cul-de-sac in Canterbury".[6] Historical reenactments also often play with canonical conventions regarding the relationship between performers and the audience. Art historian Sven Lütticken notes that they tend to eliminate "the safe distance between performers and audience to create ambiguous, mixed states".[7] Moreover, as the curator and new media theorist Inke Arns showed, historical reenactments often do not constitute exact reproductions of the past, but rather privilege an engagement with the "present".[8]

These considerations position reenactment, as the curator in photography and contemporary art Anke Bangma suggests, as a "framing concept"[9] through which to look at the immediacy of a work. Finally, early 20th century historical pageants, like Louis Napoleon Parker's pageants, offered a given community "an image of itself",[10] generating

3. Amelia Jones, "'The Artist is Present': Artistic Re-enactments and the Impossibility of Presence", *The Drama Review,* 55, no. 1 (2011): 16-45.

4. Robin George Collingwood, *The Idea of History* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1994).

5. Anke Bangma, Stephen Rushton, and Florian Wüst, *Experience, Memory, Re-Enactment* (Rotterdam: Piet Zwart Institute, 2005): 6.

6. Ibid., 7.

7. Sven Lütticken, Jennifer Allen, and Peggy Phelan, eds., *Life, Once More: Forms of Re-enactment in Contemporary Art* (Rotterdam: Witte de With, 2005): 27.

8. Inke Arns and Gabriele Horn, *History Will Repeat Itself* (Dortmund: Hartware Medien Kunstverein and Berlin: KW Institute for Contemporary Art, 2008): 2.

9. Bangma, et al., 14.

10. Lütticken, et al., 33.