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Documentation and Conservation of the Media Arts

Guest Editors: Jean Gagnon and Alain Depocas

This special section of Leonardo documents the work of a vast research alliance headed by the Daniel Langlois Foundation for Art, Science, and Technology (Montreal, Canada) on the documentation and conservation of the media-arts heritage. This research project is funded by the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council of Canada and by the Daniel Langlois Foundation.
Marina Abramović’s *Seven Easy Pieces*: Critical Documentation Strategies for Preserving Art’s History

Jessica Santone

In his essay “An Archival Impulse,” Hal Foster describes a trend in contemporary art to produce works that resemble collections of data. He writes that archival art “not only draws on informal archives but produces them as well, and does so in a way that underscores the nature of all archival materials as found yet constructed, factual yet fictive, public yet private” [1]. Foster’s reading develops an analysis of works that “call out for human interpretation” as he emphasizes the processes of memorializing and history-making so important to early 21st-century culture [2]. While Foster’s “archival impulse” in contemporary art is easy to detect, I want to point instead to a variation on this trend—the drive to produce documentation.

Although similarly concerned with re-creating the past, artists interested in producing documentation have a sense not of the past as incomplete, as in Foster’s account of the archival impulse, but of history as incomplete. That is, these artists are not interested in adding contemporary ideas or structures to objects from the past; instead, they seek to contribute to the narrativized and/or mediated understandings of the past that already come after an originary moment. Their production of materials is not archival in the sense of creating an ordering or logic to a set or collection, but instead comprises work that repeats and multiplies an historical idea, inflecting its image through a nostalgic lens.

Documentation is here understood as a mode of production of contemporary art and a mode of critical interpretation; these practices mutually inform each other and should be brought to bear on one another [3]. Problems raised by the existing discourse on performance documentation provide the grounds for the present investigation and offer points of connection between artist-initiated, creative documentation practices and institutionally sponsored documentation of contemporary time-based media arts. Indeed, the ephemeral and interactivity (qualities also attributed to media arts) of performance art pose substantial problems for conservation and preservation. Likewise, time-based media arts are frequently preserved through some means of documentation that in turn is often described as performative—that is, something that must be replayed, reread or reinterpreted in order to be experienced. A theoretical exchange exists between performance, documentation, preservation and media art.

In the field of performance art studies, the problem of documentation is not a new issue. Having originated in a debate on the role of technology, specifically video, in a body-based practice and the possibility of reproduction by technological means [4], the prospect of experiencing a mediated performance has troubled performance art scholars for the past 15 years [5]. What is at stake is whether a performance produced solely for an electronic recording medium can be evaluated in the same way as a live event. As Amelia Jones so aptly pointed out in 1997, for young scholars today studying early performance art, we can only know historical performance through documentation—and, more importantly, “there is no possibility of an unmediated relationship to any kind of cultural product,” including performance art [6]. Whether one understands performance as always disappearing, endlessly mediated (technologically or socially), or perpetually repeating scenes of loss, the question of interpreting not the performance itself but its documentation continually comes to the fore [7]. With this reliance on documentation come attendant questions on the media of those documents.

Issues of authorship, medium and authenticity pose problems in discussions of performance art documentation. Each of these concerns stimulates the drive to produce, through repetition and multiplication, a host of materials related to a so-called “original.” Authorship comes into question because, like the archival impulse, the drive to produce documentation is also conditioned by a relation to materials that are both found and constructed—and thus by an individual who both manipulates existing documents and produces new documents. One must account not only for the perspective of the documenter (occasionally elided when the document is presumed to be objective), but also for his or her engagement with the performance and the degree of subjective selection apparent in the documentation.

Secondly, one must address the medium and style of the documentation. Although scholars such as Peggy Phelan suggest that the documentation properly “belongs” to the medium used and not the medium of what is documented, a broader approach addresses the variety of ways that documentation is only partly contingent on the technological medium selected [8]. In either case, the medium matters, demonstrating how artists and art professionals think about documenting as well.
as how they understand documentary style and its relevance to their practices [9]. The technology employed by this chosen medium consequently affects our understanding of how and what the work means.

Finally, the authenticity, reliability and sufficiency of documentation remain in question. The idea of a moment of pure presence set somewhere in the past structures and encourages the production of documentation towards recovering a mythic “original.” I will return to these three problems in more detail below, after first inflecting these questions through the specific example of an artist-created documentation project: Marina Abramović’s November 2005 performance series Seven Easy Pieces.

**ACTING OUT DOCUMENTATION**

Performed at the Guggenheim Museum in New York, Abramović’s *Seven Easy Pieces* appropriated five other artists’ performances from the 1960s and 1970s and included two of her own works—one old and one new [10]. For Abramović, the remaining documentation of Bruce Nauman’s *Body Pressure* (1974), Vito Acconci’s *Seedbed* (1972), VALIE EXPORT’s *Action Pants: Genital Panic* (1969), Gina Pane’s *The Conditioning* (1973), Joseph Beuys’s *How to Explain Pictures to a Dead Hare* (1965) and her own *Lips of Thomas* (1975) failed to accurately or fully convey the experience of the performance, motivating the artist to bring these works back to life [11]. Indeed, such documentation had become iconic in its continued reproduction as complex works were reduced to singular images, belying the essentially body-based actions that Abramović understood to be at the heart of these six works [12]. Her reinterpretations play with iconic images even as her manipulation of time, space and bodily presence works against the flattening of these works in art-historical memory. In the process of recuperating lost actions, Abramović engages not merely with the performances themselves, but more (as Abramović did not see the pieces performed by Nauman, Acconci, VALIE EXPORT, Pane or Beuys) with their documents. Thus, as an author of new, performative documents of these works, Abramović is equally a reader and an interpreter of other documents, staging her own role as researcher of performance art’s history.

These reinterpretations act as reverberations of single past moments rather than as full re-embodiments of the works in question. They offer a view of documentation that is caught up in a game of repetition and image reproduction. Authenticity in this case means copying the signifier of the original. Although digital preservation specialists define authenticity in terms of identity and integrity—a record’s archival bond to an original and its uncorruptedness—what is at stake in this case of documentation is more the *desire* for an original, expressed through a fragmentary piece that signifies a whole original [13]. Identity is not mandatory, prompting us to consider other factors that contribute to the impression of authenticity in re-presentation.

The medium of the documentation that Abramović produces, authorizes or uses is therefore part of a layered, knotted set of materials all hovering around the idea that some “original” precedes the current documentation. While her own re-performances work as documentation, providing a more embodied relationship with the audience than paper documents might offer [14], the works she re-creates are also spoken of (in publicity and gossip), videotaped and photographed by the Guggenheim Museum (replayed during the week of the performance on monitors in the museum atrium) and filmed by Babette Mangolte (as authorized by Marina Abramović for the purpose of creating a documentary of the event) [15]. Documentation of performance art’s history in this case is both performative—in the repetitive, ritualistic gestures staged by the artist each night—and a controlled, technologically augmented affair executed by both the museum and Abramović’s film crew. These layers of documenting encourage consideration of how different methods of documenting relate to recalled originals. The technologies chosen by Abramović convey a great deal about the artist’s assessment of what aspects of experience were essential to the works in question.

Here, I examine more closely two components of Abramović’s performance series, *Body Pressure* and *Action Pants*, which provide evidence of the extended repetition and embodied documentation that the artist stages. In both re-performances, the style and manner of the original performance bears on that of its documentation. In each case, the pertinent questions of authorship, medium and authenticity resurface. The constellation of documents that today surround these two works rehearse what is essential, while departing knowingly from the past’s mythic hold, permitting loss. As Johanna Burton suggests, Abramović accepts “the condition of attempting to experience histories as they disappear” [16]. In Jacques Derrida’s *Archive Fever*, he argues that an archive produces itself at the moment of its own forgetting, in the space of its own loss—an archive is creative, opening to additional reading and interpretation, and destructive, always at the point of disappearing or being forgotten [17]. Documents are the fragments of that archive—individual historical accounts of loss. To document is to emerge from and to continue to reproduce loss.

In its original instantiation, Nauman’s *Body Pressure* (1974) was an installation: a wall with an instructive-performative text attached, beckoning viewers to interact with the piece. The original piece was not so much performed by Nauman as it was a potential viewer-enacted performance investigated by Nauman [18]. Interestingly, what seemed to be crucial about Nauman’s work was the openness of his installation, which prompted viewers to physically engage with the wall by following his detailed and provocative instructions (Fig. 1). Abramović’s re-performance consisted instead of a singular embodiment of the action, per Nauman’s instructions. Pressing her body against a glass wall standing at the center of a raised circular platform in the Guggenheim atrium, Abramović responded to the commands that issued from her own pre-recorded voice reading the Nauman text. The performance repeated every 30 minutes for the duration of seven hours.

By repeating the gesture of the performance, the pressing of a body against a wall, Abramović sought to recapture the essence of the original performance—a certain relationship between body and architecture. In the process of reproducing the work repeatedly, on a 30-minute loop, the artist catalogued ways of pressing the body against a wall. Each repetition acted as a snapshot of one body’s engagement with Nauman’s instructions. Marina Abramović had specifically planned and built difference into the work, having recorded in her voiceover variations in her reading of the text. This repetition with variation reflects her interpretation of the openness of Nauman’s text. At the same time, her use of sound recording alters the environmental relationship of the viewers to the performance. The single-sensory audio recording both fragments (by breaking up the experience of the whole work) and multiplies the performance image, acting as yet another performative documentation of Nauman’s text, albeit un-
seen and displaced in time from what was visually present at the Guggenheim. Crucially, when presenting these multiple variations of Nauman’s text, Abramović primarily succeeds in moving the performance toward stability. In one of his later talks, Derrida described the condition of the book-cum-document as a “stabilizing immobility” [19]. Here, he expresses the document as engaged in the act of being saved, becoming fixed and institutionalized. Abramović’s performance works well here in relation to this idea; while her actions continue to vary, the insistent similarity of form of her repetitions—always signified by the same body—leaves a single (almost stable) impression of the work. Repetition acts as a controlling, stabilizing mechanism. Although her motions change according to a cycle, these movements are best understood as enduring, where Abramović slowly continues to fix “the image of pressing very hard” [20].

As with Body Pressure, Abramović’s version of VALIE EXPORT’s Action Pants: Genital Panic also reproduces the singularity of a performance concept. As this re-performance does not incorporate much repetition (Abramović occasionally stands up and sits down, but the slow rhythm of this movement is not repetitive), Action Pants (2005) is more an extended meditation on a single moment. Abramović sits, legs spread, in black leather jacket with the crotch of her pants cut away. Holding a machine gun, pointed indiscriminately, she looks directly at members of the audience, one at a time. The artist uses documentation, as opposed to the performance itself, as the source for her re-performance. Her costume and pose refer to a poster produced by VALIE EXPORT after the performance of Action Pants (1969) (Fig. 2). The re-performance-cum-documentation therefore stages a document of a document, neither of which fully reproduces the original performance action. Abramović’s use of the poster helps emphasize what was at stake in this re-performance: the gaze of the artist directed at the audience. In the original performance of Action Pants, VALIE EXPORT had walked through the aisles of an art-house cinema, demanding that cinemagoers view the “real thing” by encountering her exposed crotch instead of representations of the female body on-screen. The poster she made after the performance recalled the frontality of her own gaze upon these predominantly male viewers and asserted the potential of the woman to deflect the objectifying “male gaze” by looking back. Although VALIE EXPORT’s performance dates from a moment prior to the opening of discourse on the “male gaze” in film studies, the young Austrian performance artist was already prepared in the late 1960s to mark and respond to this objectifying gaze.

In her re-performance, Abramović employed a “forced look” as a signifying action referring back to the 1969 performance. In a public talk after the performance series, she recalled how important it was for her to “feel the public” in a work that was “so much about the gaze” [21]. During the course of the performance, Abramović and one young

Fig. 1. 07-30-06 1407 (Daniela, Michael and Nathan reading and performing Bruce Nauman’s Body Pressure [1974]), 2006. (Photo © Gordon Cieplak)
woman in the audience experienced an intense hour-long eye-locked encounter, an occurrence that generated much discussion after the performance. This discussion too is a substantial part of repeating the original, through rumors and word-of-mouth. Spectators and art critics have commented on this encounter as one of the most intense moments of the seven night series. Johanna Burton writes, for example, “those present were held captive by a nearly hour-long, wordless exchange between the artist and a young woman brave enough to inch up to the closely guarded platform. After both parties succumbed to tears, Abramovic released her gaze, the girl departed” [22]. The prose of this critical review reflects and multiplies the event of the encounter, making the performance available as a personal narrative that forms the performance, one arrives at a mise en abîme of the original idea of a woman facing us with a stony gaze and cocked gun per VALIE EXPORT’s poster. The seemingly endless multiplication of the image through various media is an effect of the desire to document the work. However, rather than reproduce the image on the wall of a museum or through an organized distribution, where a singularly authored work becomes available to multiple users or owners, Abramovic’s documentation of Action Pants allows the work to circulate from multiple points of authorship through a variety of stable and unstable technological media with the aim of re-creating authentic experience from the sum of fragments.

Layering Documentation: Hierarchies of Historical Evidence?

During a talk at the Guggenheim symposium Re-Presenting Performance, conservator Carol Stringari asked, “Is there a hierarchy of documentation?” [23] Stringari’s own practice being informed by archival studies of artworks in their afterlives, her question prompts an important connection between artistic and curatorial or conservation practices. Within studies of preservation and conservation, authenticity—the claim of the document, reproduction or emulation (computer driven or analog) to a strong relationship with an original—remains the goal of efforts to save the past [24]. What, however, does authenticity mean in the context of a re-performance project such as Seven Easy Pieces? How is authenticity complicated by variations in authorship and medium within the layers of documentation? Finally, how do these layers of documentation work together?

I would like to suggest that, in works like Seven Easy Pieces—and in other examples of artist-produced documentation projects—“authenticity” acts as a structuring mechanism. Each document organizes itself around the idea of an “original experience.” The drive to produce documentation stems from a need to produce a truer account of the past, a more complete history of what happened and how something was perceived. However, the layers of documentation around the idea of an original, around a fragment or single moment of the thing itself, cannot be thought of as nested hierarchically in terms of value. Each document touches at its root the idea of the original, and then moves out from there, diverging in various ways, connecting to
comes itself through messy and eruptive understood from archives. She valorizes kind of counter-memory—a different way Schneider discusses the historical repetitions in relation to the original is an appreciation for the specificity of authorship of each document. How and at which historical moment a document is produced influences the character of the document. To imagine a document that has authority over all other documents—because it entailed more research in its production or was closer to the time of the first instantiation of the work—restricts the memory of the work to a singular perspective, discounting the variety of ways it was and continues to be encountered. Instead, each individual document adds to the archive of the work. Although the multiplicity of authorship is clear in works such as Seven Easy Pieces, institutional producers and collectors of documentation must also account for the specificities of different authors of documents.

Like the specificity of the author of the document, the medium of documentation also factors into an understanding of the document’s “authenticity.” Here the threat of a hierarchy of documentation is most apparent; some media are thought to better capture the “experience” of a work of art. To record time-based artwork like performance in a static medium such as photography is widely regarded as insufficient. In some cases, such documentation is thought to work against the very essence of the performance itself [25]. Recording a performance in film or video, although substantially more successful at conveying the action of performance, also fails to capture the presence of the performer’s body and, more importantly, the interaction between audience and performer(s) that is crucial to, if not definitive, of contemporary performance art [26]. Mediating works of art—even for the purpose of documentation—is thought to create distance from the original; the more elaborate the mediation and the more different from the original in terms of temporality and spatiality, the less authentic the “reproduction.”

But one can imagine a different relationship to mediated artworks. Rebecca Schneider discusses the historical repetition of performance as producing a kind of counter-memory—a different way of knowing history than traditionally understood from archives. She valorizes repetition, writing that “performance becomes itself through messy and eruptive reappearance” [27]. Marina Abramovic’s re-performances work on this model, offering repetitions of fragments of the original performances as messy but fruitful reappearances of the historical works. Re-performance proposes a dynamic, living document as a solution to the past’s disappearance; it allows a re-experiencing of the work in a time-based, body-based, ephemeral medium and makes available new experiences of memory and the slipping of performance into loss.

However, the reliance on other documents, fragmentary and inconclusive, reiterates the fact of loss of the original. By producing more technologically mediated layers of documentation, artists or conservators recognize the potential for future loss and aim instead at an ever-stabilizing memory. One viewer of Seven Easy Pieces writes of the works as “consumed by their own documentation and memory; consequently, “in the remembering of the original events—I know them so well that I forget I didn’t actually see them myself”—the contradictions entwined in the (re)performance become the excuse not to watch, become permission to leave because an intact, documented memory will still exist” [28]. The presence of the film crew produces not just a record of the performance but an excuse not to watch with the comforting knowledge that someone (or something) else will watch for us.

**CONCLUSION: DOCUMENTATION AND PRESERVATION**

That’s such a delicate thing, how far you can go in the compromise without changing the meaning of the work, and how much living artists have to be aware of that and give as close instructions for preservation of that kind of work as possible. What is our responsibility once we are not there?

—Marina Abramovic [29]

Intensely focused on documentation as preservation in her performance series, Marina Abramovic produced a work that uses repetition to generate documentation. Variation and change within her repetitions signal not only unique authorship and creative interpretation, but also irretrievable loss. Through Abramovic’s play with repetition of a signifying mark and her mediations on single past moments, she points to the collaborative work of documents in remembering the past. How can one usefully compare this mode of documentation to the institutionally sponsored documentation practices at stake in contemporary projects like the Documentation and Conservation of Media Arts Heritage (DOCAM)?

**References and Notes**


2. Foster [1].

3. This analysis emerges from the research program Conservation and Documentation of Media Arts Heritage (DOCAM), sponsored by the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council of Canada and La Fondation Daniel Langlois pour l’art, la science et la technologie. This project aims to analyze and propose practical actions for preserving “new media art,” characterized here by a common reliance on 20th-century technological innovations that quickly become obsolete as well as by similarities in terms of instability, variability, ephemerality and multiplicity of form, formats and authors. One proposed solution is to develop a coherent, comprehensive strategy for documenting work before it becomes obsolete, including what is needed to record or capture these works of art. A more critical set of questions must be addressed concurrently: How does documentation change our relationship to the original work? What attributes can certain forms of documentation preserve and how? The discourses on media art preservation and performance art history both maintain loss and disappearance as their prime adversaries (or conspirators). To address the documentation and conservation issues at the core of the DOCAM research project, the DOCAM Alliance has created a seminar for M.A. and Ph.D. students, beginning in winter 2006. This seminar will continue until the project’s conclusion in 2009. DOCAM created the seminar with the aim of allowing partner universities in this project to develop it into a permanent component of their curricula.


8. Phelan [4].


10. I was able to witness live the opening night of Abramovic’s performance series. I viewed other nights’ performances, including the artist’s performance of *Abramovic’s Action Pants*, on video, courtesy of the Guggenheim Museum archives.


12. Marina Abramovic describes how *How to Explain Pictures to a Dead Hare* is envisaged as “like a 20th-century Pietà,” recalling the pose of its most reproduced photograph. To recapture the fullness of the performance action, Abramovic drew on video owned by Beuys’s widow, Adrian Dannatt, “Back to the Performance Action, Abramovic drew on video, courtesy of the owner by Beuys’s widow. Adrian Dannatt, “Back to the Classics [Interview with Marina Abramovic],” *Art Newspaper* 14, No. 163 (November 2005) p. 40.

13. The comparison to digital records is relevant considering the similar traits of ephemerality and time-based quality, as practices like emulation and migration are proposed to re-create works no longer available because of the obsolescence of their media or components. See Howard Besser, “Longevity of Electronic Art,” in David Bearman and Franca Garzotto, eds., *ICHIM01: International Cultural Heritage Informatics Meeting: Cultural Heritage and Technologies in the Third Millennium*, Vol. 1 (Pittsburgh, PA: Archives & Museum Informatics; Milan, Italy: Politecnico di Milano, 2001) pp. 263–275.

14. T. Nikki Cesare and Jeni Jey write that *Seven Easy Pieces* was “as much a means of remembering these pieces through an embodied documentation (a remembering, if you will) as it was a new work in itself.” T. Nikki Cesare and Jeni Jey, “Performa/(Re)Performance,” *TDR/The Drama Review* 50, No. 1, 170–177 (2006) p. 170.

15. Babette Mangolte’s film *Seven Easy Pieces by Marina Abramovic* premiered in February 2007. It was not available at the time of this writing, but must be accounted for in future analyses of this work. Babette Mangolte, *Seven Easy Pieces by Marina Abramovic*, script and performance by Marina Abramovic, HD Cam tape 5.1 sound, videorecording (95 min.), 2007.


18. Such a reading of Nauman’s work points to Abramovic’s role as archivist of these historical performances. For more on authentication in digital environments, see Heather MacNeil et al., “Authenticity in a Digital Environment (Washington, D.C.: Centor on Library and Information Resources, 2000).

19. Such a reading of Nauman’s work points to Abramovic’s role as archivist of these historical performances. For more on authentication in digital environments, see Heather MacNeil et al., “Authenticity in a Digital Environment (Washington, D.C.: Centor on Library and Information Resources, 2000).


26. Jones [6].


30. See Note [3].

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