

The digitisation of performance art

Cait Burgoyne

Performance art is an artform separate from that of the materials-based practice of traditional art such as painting and drawing and artefacts. The sensory explorations observed in performance art require an independent digitisation approach. Conservators should not only be regarded as guardians of art and artefacts but the preservers of memory and experience. The rising number in acquisitions of conceptual artworks by art institutions has given rise to the difficult task of digitising the emotional response of experiential encounters from a necessity to conserve the ephemeral and impermanent nature often inherent in these works. Without a more sympathetic approach to digitising performance art, significant works are at great risk of misinterpretation in the future. It is fundamental to the conservation practice to transcend the parameters of materials-based conservation and to embark on the preservation of the ethereality of experience and sensory interpretation. Although this philosophical perspective may seem idealistic considering the practicalities of digitisation in art institutions today, there is, however, a means in which to utilise existing databases and to lay the foundations for more radical approaches in avenues such as social network websites and online forums. This philosophy also raises awareness of this issue and addresses the need to create a unique database designed for the preservation of performance-based art sensibilities.

Keywords

performance art, digitisation, preservation, online forum, social network site

Introduction

Performance art was initially conceived by the avant-garde artists' movement and is usually associated and built on the theories of audience response and reaction. Seen as inherently ephemeral works, it can be said that the digitisation of this artform needs only to concentrate on a collection of data in terms of props, locality and duration, as well as several still images of the performance. The metadata of *in situ* performance art held within the archives of many institutions often fails to preserve the artist's conception of the work and it risks a misrepresentation of its significance. Furthermore, as these institutions continue to follow the standardised digitisation procedures, which do not allow for a more publicly inclusive, expressionistic and descriptive approach via an online forum, this inimitable artform is in danger of becoming increasingly de-contextualised and undervalued. Before considering digitisation strategies, it is necessary to re-evaluate where performance art stands in comparison to traditional artforms and artefacts. Like artefacts, traditional art, such as painting and sculpture, exists as material-based and static

entities. The recording of the cultural and historical significance behind these traditional forms has been the imperative for the conservator. As such, the capture and collection of metadata in terms of performance art should also be approached in the same way. Traditional art may be defined as the production of form driven by imagination and reality; a creation of beauty, concept or expression, or an amalgamation of all these (Hanks 1971, p. 119). It is this material-based medium that is comparable to the objectivity of artefacts.

Performance art was developed in the 1950s and explores the possibilities and limitations associated with the human body. Performance artists may stage an event that engages with an audience. It is the emotional exchange and response of the viewer that holds the most important key to the event's conception (the-artists.org 2011). It is the intangibility and focus of the relational that sets performance art, most distinctly, apart from traditional art and artefacts. Performance art holds an important place in recent art history for its exploration of ethereality. From a preservation point of view, performance art demands a transfiguration within the digitisation standards to accommodate its artform. The use of performance, audience participation and impermanent material, as well as using elements, materials and mediums that challenge the authority and singularity of traditional artwork, have now become common practice in the visual arts. The margins are

blurred between objects as art, and the surroundings in which the objects (or performances) take place (Powell 2007, p. 9). The act of digitisation is one of homogenisation. This means condensing all the material that is captured from the artwork into the same or similar format appropriate to the tactility of traditional art and artefacts. However, performance art demands a more concerted effort to preserve and communicate the sensory reactions of viewers. With the rapid continuation of advancements in technology, this more concerted effort to properly digitise performance art may not be such a futuristic aspiration. A simple low-tech solution may prove to be the better solution. Laymen's perspectives and points of view combined with sophisticated technical language are required when developing a database of perceptions and opinions. This must be achieved without neglecting the importance of still images in the documentation of material objects used in the performance (Powell 2007, p. 35).

Traditional art and performance art

An artefact is an object. Art is a way of knowing and understanding the world through skilful material interactions. Art is not the success or failure of a crafted attempt to achieve a desired outcome in the world, but the revelation or insight such success or failure may generate. In this way, performance works are art manifest. The task of understanding and preserving performance works is of the greatest importance due to the self-reflexive focus it places on generating responses. Collecting and organising information about viewers' revelations or insights relating to performance art is then a critical task for preserving these kinds of works. A hypothetical database or archive for these works would need to be dynamic, resembling a forum where revelations and insights can unfold, emerge and be re-enacted. Traditional works of art, including paintings, drawings, sculpture and printmaking, are relegated to the domain of the artefact. Although there are specific considerations when addressing the manner in which both art and artefact are exhibited, there is no critical difference when it comes to their preservation because the point of reference is static (Farr 1988, p. 78).

Digitisation is the conversion of sense data into a digital form. As such, it does not degenerate. However, it can alter the perception of the work by its migration through differing digital formats. Through digitisation, artworks can be categorised and easily accessed through the metadata. This process of conversion, and the organisation of this data or information, is integral to the preservation of a work of art. Presently, art institutions document performance art within their archives like they would traditional artworks or artefacts: as a still image accessioned and labelled accordingly. Usually this documentation is accompanied by metadata that extends this information to exhibition catalogues, journals and interviews (Robertson 2010). This system enables an easily accessible link to the artwork. However, the digitising of performance art in such a cut-and-dried manner may

misrepresent the work beyond recognition. The very process of archiving these types of works creates a degree of de-contextualisation. Performance art is dependent and relational towards the response of its viewers. This relationship between performer and audience is the essence of the subject as well as the material of performance works. More sophisticated tactics need to be employed to conserve these responses in the process of archiving the works (Weyer and Schädler-Saub 2010, p. 28).

In 1974, in response to a lack of support for the need to acquire ephemeral art for performance-based art by larger institutions, artist Martha Wilson founded the Manhattan gallery Franklin Furnace from her own studio. Franklin Furnace was one of the first organisations to support and advocate for artists' books, which are still largely unacknowledged by significant art institutions. Artists' books provide key insights into the working processes of artists in often personal and detailed diaries and portfolios. Franklin Furnace was later reborn and now stands as a virtual institution and database that contains fundamental information about every performance artwork, temporary installation, exhibition, and benefit event that was presented or funded by Franklin Furnace. This institution developed an interactive interface that allows anyone, including artists, audience members, scholars, cataloguers, and the general public, to add information and comments. In 2009 the Franklin Furnace website created an online database, preserving information of all the artists represented. The database plays an essential role in the jobs of the cataloguers, digitisers, artists, general public and researchers. They are able to reach the records relating to the collections on a transnational basis. Within the database, the digitiser uses a sophisticated language that surpasses the present standards of practice for information logging. Another example of an online forum and database where conceptual, although more specifically, digital-based art is housed, is within the Rhizome database. Like Franklin Furnace, Rhizome is a database that allows members of the public to contribute to and spin a web of information in which a specific artwork is supported. With an interactive online interface, Rhizome is a database housing thousands of digital-based artworks, which advocates the awareness of the preservation of digital-based artworks being neither controlled by the artists nor the art institution, but more by the technology in which it is exemplified. Once an era of technology becomes obsolete so too does the digital-based artwork. The notion of the eventual demise of current technology rendering digital artwork inaccessible provides sound reasoning for a more technically simple means in which to digitise performance art such as an online public forum.

The potential and pitfalls of simulation

The project of performance art is to do away with the clarity and closure of traditional works of art and to consciously request notice and focus from the viewer. It is with this recognition that conservators and digitisers will begin to work not only symbiotically with contemporary artists, but also when deciding upon the most appropriate approach in which to digitise performance-based art. Institution professionals will be forward thinking and will plan for imminent challenges inherent in the digitisation of ephemera. The creation of virtual simulation is an irrefutable example of conservators as futurists, transcending the stigma of a purely materials-based profession.

Due to the fixed nature of artefacts, virtual simulation programs have been developed to create an augmented reality in which a cultural object is recreated in 3D through advanced technologies (Patel et al. 2003). Simulation has many benefits for museums and other cultural institutions. It eliminates the risks involved with exhibiting and displaying the artefact through an accurate visual simulation. Although the digital capture of a 3D object may be beneficial for the longevity of a fragile historical cultural object or traditional artwork, at this point in time it is not a suitable digitisation method for performance art. To simulate, or recreate a performance is to risk the artistic content and concept of the work by the formation, through digitisation, of an entirely new work, one which will be interpreted by a new generation of viewer. This raises several ethical issues that concern censorship, propriety and copyright.

Computer-generated 3D objects, and the environment in which they originated, may present the future of museums. However, considering that a performance is staged with the intention of creating art, the subliminal connotations formed by the viewer could be lost. Much like entering a gallery, when a viewer is confronted with a performance piece, the work will be a spectacle considered under spatial, environmental, and time factors. It is important to consider how simulation may affect this detrimentally. A visual recording, much like a simulated interpretation of the performance, would lead to a possible misrepresentation of a performance piece. The instantaneous and impermanent art must be understood to be virtually untranslatable. Footage of a staging offers a singularly obscured perspective. Performance art, like all art, exists because of the viewer. Without a voyeur, art is merely an entity, an empty vessel without context or concept. Millions of artists may be performing at this moment but, without this event being witnessed by an audience, only those who are performing it know of its existence and impact. Furthermore, for many performance artists, theorising the temporal and spatial environment in which a performance is staged is extremely significant to the overall conception and meaning of their work.

An interactive forum – creating a platform for inter-subjective data

With the digitisation of performance art comes a multitude of multifarious issues. One such example includes the amount of detail that goes into the descriptive information held within the metadata. The very nature of performance art, essentially an interactive encounter with an audience response, requires more sophisticated language to translate such introspective concerns. Apart from date, location and brief, almost instructional, notes on the performance, documentation would benefit from the transcribed conversations of curators. This storage strategy must be treated like an artwork, artefact or significant object as a thing that requires continual monitoring and conservation (Kissel and Faber 2003, p. 209). Currently, many art institutions are documenting relational art within their archives like they would any other artwork or artefact – as a still image accessioned and labelled accordingly, with metadata extending this information to exhibition catalogues, journals and interviews (Robertson 2010). Although this system works in creating a traceable link to the artwork, digitising performance art in such a way can, as stated above, de-contextualise the work beyond recognition.

Archiving is a process of encoding and decoding information. Performance art is often centred on ideas of a scene and situation. It is these impermanent subject matters that require a more sophisticated descriptive language in which to articulate their conceptual motivations (Weyer and Schädler-Saub 2010, p. 28). Although standardised frameworks may be appropriated for describing locality, spatiality and time, it is unrealistic to assume a specific criterion may be put in place when transcribing theorised relational experiences of performance art (V2_Organisation 2004). It is only with a collaborative interdisciplinary approach that an accurate explorative translation of the work can be realised. Performance art is a sensory experience, one that transgresses paradigms of form and materiality, and epitomises the interpretation of artistic content (Sontag, 2001). The future standard of archiving is aimed towards the '6,4,3' model – six copies are made of the data, which is stored in four locations, and in three separate forms – which ensures a sense of security in the conservation and maintenance of a particular piece of art. This methodology necessitates a large amount of file space. It also stipulates the inclusion of future data to migrate to its databanks, particularly with the recommended strategy of including more supporting documentation to accompany the metadata of relational art. It is pivotal to the preservation of performance art to move away from creating a single, anterior and didactic image, and towards the collating of impressions.

Social networks: the contemporary pedagogue for further interpretations

With the increase of web pages dedicated to the promotion of performance art, conceptual artists and conceptual art, as well as the emergence of online databases, social network platforms, like Facebook, have become inextricably linked to the world of conceptual art. Developed by two American college students in 2004 and with more than 900 million users, Facebook is the most popular online social networking site in the world (Ellison, Steinfield & Lampe 2007). The Facebook symbol has become a part of millions of websites. It enables a user to personally 'Like' a webpage that refers back to his/her profile page to share within their community. The rapid flow of shared knowledge and information combined with a previously unimagined online database of material is now openly available to a majority of the world's population. It represents a very exciting time for the exchange and attainment of information for a wide variety of topics, including that of performance-based artworks. This new type of communication enables an ease of knowledge transfer and makes connections to other social networking sites and online forums that are able to air opinions and ideas about a subject. This represents a new framework for performance art interpretation.

The California-based company YouTube was created in 2005 as a means to share homemade and other videos with users of the World Wide Web. This website streams video footage without the need for downloading and has opened up the possibility of instantaneous viewing of rare and significant performance art footage. YouTube has inadvertently become an archive and an online database storing highly significant and immeasurable digital data. Like Facebook, YouTube provides a contribution to the preservation of the experiential ethereality of performance art through an opinion-based forum. YouTube enables a user to upload moving images, and a viewer may observe a new perspective of the work of a performance artist; furthermore, the same performance may have many video clips relating to it, challenging and informing many interpretations of the same work.

Facebook and YouTube are used by millions of people globally. With this in mind these social and media networking sites play an important role in the archiving of performance art in a cross-cultural pedagogy. Although it is essential that art institutions facilitate independent archives of such material so a level of standardised control is maintained, a publicly accessed database separate to that of an institution may lend itself to enriching already existing archives, containing information relevant to conceptual and performance art only. Audience interpretation of performance-based art holds key conceptual importance, and with Facebook centred largely around the communication of ideas and opinions of users this may be a resource from

which the individual specialised silos of conservators, curators and digitisers may draw to understand a dynamic, cross-cultural contemporary perspective through symbiotic conversation.

Conclusion

As with the preservation of traditional art and artefacts, the digitisation of performance art is the preservation of history. However, the strategies that are needed to most appropriately and accurately digitise performance art require an interactive interface where multiple interdisciplinary voices can contribute to the shaping of a dynamic understanding of the concept behind the work. Currently simulation runs the risk of distorting and misrepresenting performance art because it follows the standardised archiving methods used for conserving traditional artforms. However, future technological advancements may see this technique become suitable for the digital archiving process. Social networking has become the most significant contributor to the accurate digitisation of performance-based art. These sites have allowed an ease of access to many significant conceptual art websites. With the documentation of performance art located in various online databases, be it a social networking site or an official art institution's site, the demise of a single definitive archive is unmistakable. The emergence of a more cross-cultural and interdisciplinary process of archiving is the only logical future for the digitising of performance-based art. There is a need to move away from the single, anterior and didactic image, and towards the collating of impressions, feelings and kinaesthetic experiences.

References

- Bauman, R, 1975, 'Verbal art as performance', *American Anthropologist*, Vol. 77, No. 2, Blackwell Publishing
- Ellison, N, Steinfield, C, and Lampe, C, 2007, 'The benefits of Facebook "friends": Social capital and college students' use of online social network sites', *Journal of Computer – Mediated Communication*, Volume 12, Issue 4, pp. 1143–1168
- Farr, F, 1988, 'Artefact: African art in anthropology collections', *African Arts* Vol. 21, No. 4, UCLA James S Coleman African Studies Center
- Hanks, P, 1971, *Encyclopaedic World Dictionary*, Hamlyn
- Kissel, L, and Faber, C, 2003, *Lost, found and remade: an interview with archivist and filmmaker Carolyn Faber*, Indiana University Press
- Kraus, K, 2011, 'When data disappears', *The New York Times*, <www.nytimes.com> Viewed on 11/8/11 and <http://www.nytimes.com/2011/08/07/opinion/sunday/when-data-disappears.html?_r2&partner=rssnyt&emc=rss> Viewed on 18/08/11

Patel, M, White, M, Walczak, K, and Sayd, P, 2003, 'Digitisation to presentation – building virtual museum exhibitions' in P Hall and P Willis (eds) *Vision, Video and Graphics*, conference, Bath, pp. 1–8

Powell, DJ, 2007, *Preserving the unpreservable: a study of destruction art in the contemporary museum*, MA Museum Studies, University of Leicester

Rhizome, <<http://rhizome.org/artbase/artwork/41590/>> Viewed on 18/08/11

Robertson, J, 'Collections Council of Australia LTD' *Digitising collections in the galleries domain Part 1* (2010) Accessed 30 Jul 2012 <<http://www.collectionscouncil.com.au/speaker+presentations+and+papers.aspx?>> Website no longer available, refer <<http://www.arts.gov.au/collections/collections-council-of-australia>

Sloggett, R, 1998, 'Beyond the material: idea, concept, process, and their function in the conservation of the conceptual art of Mike Parr', *Journal of the American Institute of Conservation* 37(3), pp. 316–333

Sontag, S, 2001, *Against interpretation*, Picador

Weyer, A, Schädler-Saub, U, 2010, *Theory and practice in the conservation of modern and contemporary art: reflections on the roots and the perspectives*, Proceedings of the International Symposium held 13-14 January 2009 at the University of Applied Sciences and Arts, Faculty Preservation of Cultural Heritage, Hildesheim, London, p. 28

V2_Organisation, 2004, *Capturing unstable media*, <<http://capturing.projects.v2.nl/recomm.html>> Viewed on 20/08/11

Author biography

Cait Burgoyne has recently graduated from the University of Melbourne with a Masters of Conservation of Cultural Material, specialising in paper. She is currently employed at the Museum of Old and New Art in Tasmania.

Contact details

CAIT BURGOYNE
Collections
Museum of Old and New Art
Email: caitburgoyne@gmail.com

Notes