I am grateful to Christopher Bedford, Chief Curator of Exhibitions at the Wexner Center in Ohio, who initially sparked my interest in this project but was unable to contribute.

1. I have explored these issues at length in my introductions to Perform Repeat Record: Live Art in History, coedited with Adrian Heathfield (New York and London: Routledge, forthcoming), and in “The Artist is Present,” Abramović’s durational performance at the center of the show in the MoMA atrium (which is now of course “past”) aside, if the “artist is present,” then what were the vritmes of performance relics, rows of photographic documents, and video footage, not to mention the reenactments (also now “past”) by younger performers throughout the galleries, doing in relation to past performances?


Performance Art: Live or Dead

Amelia Jones

Introduction

Performance or live art provokes an encounter with history that art history as a discipline is unprepared to accommodate fully without distorting the very claims for the immediacy of the “live” which supposedly make performance art unique. This distortion is made clear in the recent retrospective of Marina Abramović’s performance career at the Museum of Modern Art, New York (MoMA), which trumpeted in its subtitle the most commonly purveyed (and paradoxical) belief about performance art: “The Artist is Present.” Abramović’s durational performance at the center of the show in the MoMA atrium (which is now of course “past”) aside, if the “artist is present,” then what were the vritmes of performance relics, rows of photographic documents, and video footage, not to mention the reenactments (also now “past”) by younger performers throughout the galleries, doing in relation to past performances?

Performance art, in the context of art history and its institutions, throws in question the most basic assumptions about how we “do” history in a field constitutionally attached to material things (such as artworks, buildings, archival documents).

While art history has of course shifted and mutated across the decades, the discipline in its deepest formations and assumptions is based on the capacity to “freeze” the object of study as paradigmatic of its kind and/or as a masterpiece. Kantian aesthetics, key to the establishment of the discipline and still foundational to the way we teach, exhibit, write about, and market art, demands a moment of encounter wherein the work of art can be apprehended and judged. The visual arts are the only form of culture linked directly to a global market that in turn depends upon the hierarchical disposition of “original” and “unique” objects to be bought and sold. Curatorial practice and the global art market in particular depend upon this freezing—after all, something tangible (whether a painting, plans for a Renaissance garden, a conceptual art statement, or a performance art document) must be evidenced in order for us to exhibit, describe, and market what we call art. Art history classes depend upon the projection of digitized images and/or (increasingly) film and video clips. And so on.

This need for things (the “present” artist and/or documents substantiating the past existence of the live event) is at odds with the common claim that performance is ephemeral and thus actual and immediate. In turn, if the artist were indubitably present, if the performance were always already immediate, there would be no need for objects, putting the lie to this claim so often made in art history and in performance studies texts on performance art histories. It is, in fact, for historians that these questions become the most acute and contested, since a performance as we are watching it can be said to be actual (whatever that means), but a performance as always already over must be known through other means. And this is the case even if we witnessed the performance firsthand. After all, memory is not a simple transcription of the real but (as Henri Bergson elaborated at the turn of the twentieth century) is itself a complex representational process of referring our body-mind complex to past experience in order to make sense of the present for the future.
Walter Benjamin’s ruminations on history and the relics of past events in his Theses on the Philosophy of History were written just before his own annihilation while escaping the Nazis in 1940. These ideas have had enormous weight and influence, and one that could argue to be the most seminal, over the past fifty years. Benjamin wrote: “The past can be seized only as an image which flashes up at the instant when it can be recognized and is never seen again. . . . To articulate the past historically does not mean to recognize it ‘the way it really was’ . . . . It means to seize hold of a memory as it flashes up at a moment of danger.”

In what I see as the best writing on live art (within art history and performance studies), performance has been thought of not as confirming presence but as provoking, precisely, “moments of danger” that flash up and (if we are open to it) open the possibility for acknowledging the impossible fields in time that defend every desire to write history in the old-fashioned, art-historical sense as a final and true choreography of objects processing over time. The evanescent nature of a live art remits that we cannot fully know or codify the past, whether it flashes up to us in the form of objects, text, speech, or what have you. In what I see as the weakest moments in performance art’s histories, the time has been ironed out. The art critic, or art or performance historian purports to deliver the performance as a final truth—whether through her own memories of a supposedly immediate encounter with the artist herself (as many of the visitors who sat across from the artist at the Abramovic have claimed) or via elaborations on a key icon’s document or set of documents. It is at such moments that performance art is often claimed to secure presence—and also to promise a particular kind of physically immediate, intense, and emotionally authentic experience that ensures aesthetic, personal, and/or political transformation. Ironically, as noted, this claim takes place inevitably through memories, documents, and other detritus from the act itself, which can never go on forever. I would suggest, in contrast, that the writing of histories about performance, carefully thought through, can be just as affecting and effective as the experience of performance itself.

In fact, as Bergson and others have made clear, the profound paradox of live events (such as, in our case, performance art) is that they are only accessible through human perception, even in the live “instant” (if we can imagine such a thing), we perceive and make sense of performances through bodily memory, itself impossible to pin down or retrieve in any full state. This is the paradox of live art—that it articulates the impossibility of securing presence (the grasping possibility of the “now,” as well as the immediacy of the artist) even as it claims to define itself on the basis of doing so. Performance art thus exposes the radical conundrum that continually bedevils human existence (not to mention performance and art theory): the impossibility of knowing, keeping, or anchoring the present (present experience) without it slipping away.

I have worked extensively in recent years on the problem of the live addressed from an art-historical perspective informed by performance studies. Briefly, I argue that both fields make different but equally impossible claims to paradigmatic art: a performance of the art of aesthetics, where (as Kant argued) things in the world become “art” because we can engage with them through a disinterested (monocular) capacity of appreciation, and thus they are to some degree fixed in their qualities, art history (and its attached marketplaces) demands that art be frozen in time, construed in the form of objects or images that can he accommodated by curatorial and representational practices (including Power Point presentations and class lectures, magazine spreads, and art exhibitions). While most contemporary art historians are aware of the paradox of eighteenth-century aesthetics, the deep logic of structures of knowledge about what we call art remains, as I have argued elsewhere elsewhere, bound to these earlier models.

Performance studies, drawing on the insights of theater studies, linguistic theory, cultural studies, anthropology, and other disciplines addressing temporal- ity, ritual, and movement, tends to apply notions of performativity broadly. Many performance studies scholars (as well as many art historians who study perfor- mance) claim that performance acts are special because they are temporal and seemingly immediate: they seem to present the body directly to viewers via actions and set-ups that are ephemeral. Within discourses around performance, such mystifying rhetoric is widespread—again, exemplified by the Abramovic show and the lack of criticality in the responses to it across popular and art media. These are equally impossible claims, as the content of memory, deixis, and impression are now being ironed out. The art critic, or art or performance historian purports to deliver the performance as a final truth—whether through her own memories of a supposedly immediate encounter with the artist herself (as many of the visitors who sat across from the artist at the Abramovic have claimed) or via elaborations on a key iconic document or set of documents. It is at such moments that performance art is often claimed to secure presence—and also to promise a particular kind of physically immediate, intense, and emotionally authentic experience that ensures aesthetic, personal, and/or political transformation. Ironically, as noted, this claim takes place inevitably through memories, documents, and other detritus from the act itself, which can never go on forever. I would suggest, in contrast, that the writing of histories about performance, carefully thought through, can be just as affecting and effective as the experience of performance itself.

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Yadong Hao here presents thoughts on her curatorial project NOTES on a stratum, wherein she commissioned younger artists to engage with previous performances at the Laing Art Gallery in Newcastle. Borrowing the French word melée for its double meaning when crossed over into English (“research,” and “quest” or “search”), Yadong Hao posits both the “originals” and the “redos” as simultaneously search and re-search (both “new/original” and always already redo). Reckitt’s equally thoughtful 2008 show at the Power Plant in Toronto, Not Quite How I Remember It, displayed works by, among others, whose work addresses past histories (of art, culture, and politics) and activates, precisely, the hinge between performance and history by engaging with time-based events in an art context. These are performative actions that were initially directed toward the gallery as a site of display. Here Reckitt ruminates on the current trend of reenactments, clearly part of this circuit of action and historical replay. Finally, academic scholarship on these issues is here represented by this contribution by myself (an art historian), and texts by Stev Lütticken (an indendent scholar working across art criticism and performance studies) and Branislav Jakovljević (a performance studies scholar). On a first glance, we apparently have it easier because we do not have to grapple directly with the dilemma of what to do with materiality (not “the things themselves,” because that would be to presume things preexist our apprehension of them, but the materiality that, as Bergson has said, can only be understood through human perception, which is embodied and shaped through processes of memory). We can spin out abstract theories, ideally touching base with specific examples from a “history” of live art known itself through material traces of acts from the past, and call it a day. Written scholarship is limited in its format and cannot activate the material results of past actions as directly as can curatorial practice. But with various insights of writers, we would be at a sorry pass, since scholars, through the very immateriality of the text, can explore the far edges of problems that cannot be directly tackled in museum display.

This is a deliberately polemical division I am making here. That, in fact, does not hold, since we scholars also curate, the artists also teach, and so on. But in making this forced separation I am attempting to highlight the way in which the different modes of expression and different practices relating to performance art demand or propose different structures of contemplation in relation to the very problems of representation in the world (through a hidden practice of projecting subjective critical criteria of space over time). How I Remember It addresses past histories (of art, culture, and politics) and activates, precisely, the hinge between performance and history by engaging with time-based events in an art context. These are performative actions that were initially directed toward the gallery as a site of display. Here Reckitt ruminates on the current trend of reenactments, clearly part of this circuit of action and historical replay.

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through structures like exhibitions and art history. The best we can do, as the powerful contributions in “Performance: Live or Dead?” suggest, is to be aware of the reciprocal interrelations between thinking and knowing, perceiving and expressing—between past performances and present modes of documentation, reenactment, and history writing. To keep the “moment of danger” that, as Benjamin argues, “flashes up” and becomes evident as historically important, active and in play.

I sent the contributors the following email in August to solicit their thoughts and interventions.

Dear XX,

I am writing to you with an invitation to participate in what I hope will be a groundbreaking dialogue on the very current phenomenon of documenting, reenacting, and/or exhibiting traces of past performances in art institutions such as galleries, museums, and mainstream art magazines. You have been central in developing a critical relationship to these practices and we hope very much you will be willing to participate in a brief email dialogue on the topic. . . .

The key question in this dialogue will be: What are the costs and benefits of the current move to institutionalize performance art by documenting it (often on websites or in archives), reenacting performances, and/or exhibiting performance art histories in galleries and art museums?

. . . .

Ron Athey

Getting It Right . . . Zooming Closer

Performance documentation, performance-for-the-camera, restaging the “iconic” performance image for the camera, to get it right—all are editing, retouching, mediating, specifying, forcing the gaze, and not the full experience, which can essentially lie, enhance, mislead.

Most of the performance work I have done is multiple images, scenes and actions, performed at various speeds from frantic to still, from solo to twenty-five persons involved.

In the 1980s and early 1990s, I only understood how a performance went off by how it felt during, and how it sat with me after Video and photo documentation showed me that and something more. . . . I had to adjust to the flattering. But something about what the camera person focused on actually made the represen-
This introduction of photographic documentation has the same effect on my work as another form of how the work resonates: the retelling of it in words. Always described and reviewed are the shock moments, the violation of the flesh, rarely ever text, humor, flow.

I have a churchy outlook on the role of audience: they serve as witnesses, and this is what is needed to make the experience possible. In order to justify performing for the camera, I have to imagine being a step away from that chemistry. In the ambitious project I made in 2006 with Catherine Opie, for which we shot thirteen large-format Polaroids in two days, I ran through a selection of scenes from my performance history, reposing them in costume (or look), without any form of set pieces except in three of them. None of these is true to the performance it is referencing, except possibly the St. Sebastian image, which was shot last. Working in a more minimalist way to cooperate with the style and vision of Opie, they are portraits, not performances for the camera. But they express the essence of suicide bed, solar anus, Sebastian suspended. This reduction becomes something else as, especially with the images of earlier performances, they are removed from the politics and issues of their time.

Most of the images I have shot with the photographer Manuel Vason, aside from the Sun card for the SPILL Festival tarot deck, were either taken as the performance setup was finished but before the audience was admitted, or restaged in an improvisational way after the performance. So, less stagey setup for him, but the final effect more perfected with his post-production cleanup techniques.

I don’t have too much to say about the institutionalization of performance work, as I don’t quite understand on what level it is happening. Is it really happening? My opinion of redux perf s, such as LACE’s eight Fridays of Yoko Ono’s Cut Piece, is, “whatever.” But are the space and production really going in the direction of old Fluxus directions of performance, when at that time the Fluxus artists hadn’t shown much new work in ages? It seems too easy. Marina’s Seven Easy Pieces was interesting in a bubble, but not interesting as a piece. If performance becomes as self-referential as, say, modern dance, it is too insider. Who gives a fuck about the institutionalization of performance, sometimes by others. This development would seem to indicate that, after all, we still long to experience the original event or some approximation thereof. If the most sophisticated performance scholarship has decisively abandoned the ontological privileging of the live performance over media representations that marked both historical performance art and performance studies, does this vague fashion for restaging performances indicate a relapse of sorts? The answer to this question is ambiguous; there is no denying that many such restagings hold the promise of getting closer to what the original event was really like, but at the same time the restagings will be based in different degrees on photos, videos, written descriptions, and memories that may in turn have been transformed,trimmately, by media representations. My 2006 exhibition project life, Once More: Forms of Reminiscence in Contemporary Art did not include a single live performance (if we except lectures). At that point, the tradition that privileged the live performance over any of the performance’s other media incarnations still seemed to be strong, and my exclusive focus on video, photography, slides, and language was an implicit polemic against certain theorists and artists. I wanted to emphasize the interdependence of media representation and remaking by creating a constellation of projects that problematize this interdependence in different ways.

One piece that does this in an exemplary way, but that was not included in life, Once More for the simple reason that I was not yet familiar with it, is Babette Mangolte’s 1993 film Poor Poor Byron, which restages four crucial dance/performance pieces from the period of Robert Morris’s involvement with the Judson Dance Theater. As Mangolte writes in a statement about this film:

Film is the medium of duration, but what we call duration is historically determined. Film spectatorship expectations greatly change in different generations. My biggest question was how to represent the sense of time of another generation. I gambled that if I could create a sense of heightened
One of the performances restaged by Mangolte, \( \text{21.3 film stills from Babette Mangolte, Four Pieces By Morris, 1993, 16mm, black and white and color, 94 min. (photographs © Babette Mangolte, all rights of reproduction reserved)} \)

presence of the performer on screen by restructuring the sound space of the image. I could use the disjunct time-duration of the Sixties to my advantage and emphasize the importance of the performer’s body. The film’s premises rest on maintaining the concept of art as displacement/art as a frame which I thought was at the center of the impact of the performances at the time when their making revolutionizes the new dance in the New York art scene of the early Sixties.\(^{14}\)

Today I would feel less inclined to ban live events from a project, as I think it is almost impossible to stay focused the whole time; one’s thoughts wander through personal history and beyond. The performance events in the art world also raises troubling questions for me—and in any new exhibition project dealing with these matters, such questions would have to be addressed. In the 1960s and 1970s, performances were often seen as challenges to an art world based on the production of commodity-objects. However, we are now well aware that the economy does not exclusively rely on such “classic” commodities, and the subsistence of an increasing number of people depends on some kind of performance.

The term performance, of course, is slippery even within relatively well-defined contexts. In today’s economy, it not only refers to the results one delivers, but also to one’s actual, quasi-theatrical self-presentation, one’s self-performance in an economy in which work has become more dependent on immaterial factors. There is the specific domain of performance art, but there is also what I would call an economic regime of generalized performance. How do the two interact, interfere with each other? How do remuneration function within our own temporal frame? The time in which performance begins to work differently as never-some-empty, pure present, especially if they take place in the context of festivals such as Performa, or as one-off events such as the all-night series of performances From Dark till Dawn, organized by the curatorial collective If I Can’t Dance, I Don’t Want to Be Part of Your Revolution, at the Van Abbemuseum (Eindhoven, Netherlands) in 2010, which included several re-enactments and free variations on historical pieces. In the case of a much-anticipated remuneration of a legendary historical performance, the performance itself becomes a mini-festival, a must-see and must-be-seen event. We may go to such events not just to inform ourselves, but also to perform ourselves and to network, however, since what Franco Berardi calls contemporary “cybertime” is marked by our feelings of insufficiency about never having enough of the damn thing (time) to accomplish all the things we should, it is marked by stress.\(^{15}\)

Some of the pieces we encounter may be marked by the loving exploration of the potentialities of time encapsulated by another former Judson participant, Deborah Hay, with her stated aim “to truly admit and celebrate the ephemeral nature of dance by learning to notice, and consciously embody, time passing.”\(^{16}\)

Her choreography for the 2010 piece \textit{No Time to Fly}, which occasioned this remark, is indeed marked by an almost bewildering profusion of temporal layers: her own history with the Judson group is no doubt present in the minds of many audience members, a history also evoked by Hay’s aged body in the here and now. Her movements sometimes recall moments from the history of dance, but also neumtic repetitions and religious rituals, however, they are evoked through precise negations, disappearing as soon as they start to appear. In her score for the piece, she evokes curious entities such as “an untraditional object in a 2,000-year-old marketplace,” which informs part of her choreography without being in any way apparent in the dance itself.\(^{17}\) At one point she sings a silent song, moving her hips without producing sound; more extremely than in Morris’s case, the text present is a montage of temporalities. There being no clear crescendo or climax, it is almost impossible to stay focused the whole time; one’s thoughts wander through personal history and beyond. The absence of music creates an uncomfortable awareness of the compulsions of one’s own body, for instance, the urge work precisely by exploring the interrelations between performance and media in the form of performances. However, the increasing importance of performance events in the art world also raises troubling questions for me—and in any new exhibition project dealing with these matters, such questions would have to be addressed. In the 1960s and 1970s, performances were often seen as challenges to an art world based on the production of commodity-objects. However, we are now well aware that the economy does not exclusively rely on such “classic” commodities, and the subsistence of an increasing number of people depends on some kind of performance.

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17. Deborah Hay, No Time to Fly, 2010. A Solo Dance Score Written by Deborah Hay, online at www.deborahhay.com/DHDC%20Website%20program=0&totalRows_rs_program=3&program

PDF/NTTF%20booklet.pdf. The phrase is from page 14.
to cough or sneeze, which suddenly erupts on the stage itself as Hay unleashes a furious, sneeze-like blast—a trained and disciplined eruption of symptomatic remainders that dance usually seeks to suppress. This is dance, this is performance at its best, in its manipulation of the audience’s sense of time, it articulates, however mutedly, some of the constraints under which both performer and audience members operate, and stages little liberations from them.

At a Dutch performance of No Time To Fly, I met one of the curators of If I Can’t Dance, who expressed her own amazement that she had essentially absconded from one of the biggest art-world opening weekends to attend this performance in a dance context. Even if the Judson Dance Theater stands for crossovers between dance and visual art, for her (and for me) this performance in a dance context is also blessedly free from the need to self-perform, though this was of course not necessarily the case for audience members who belonged to the dance community. It will be interesting to see if performance art can develop more pointed ways of reflecting on and perhaps to some extent disabling the temporal and economical constraints under which performance works come into being—the constraints of our culture of generalized performance. There is freedom to be found in not being present, in missing the event—an event one can then reconstruct and reconfigure from its media fallout, like historical performances. However, a more difficult but ultimately more rewarding freedom might be gained from working inside the event and turning cybertime against itself.

Sharon Hayes
The Not-Event

Amelia Jones, question framing this dialogue:
What are the costs and benefits of the current move to institutionalize performance art by documenting it (often on websites or in archives), reenacting performances, and/or exhibiting performance art histories in galleries and art museums?

Sharon Hayes:
On the one hand, I would be naive to disagree with the stated ground on which this question is formed—that performance, past and present, is enjoying a particular currency at the moment and that that currency relies upon the skillful and seductive materialization of performance(s) in and through various documentary materials: photographs, film, video or audio recordings.

On the other hand, I think it’s important to challenge the assumptions that come along with this assertion: 1) that performance has not heretofore been a part of the institution(s) of art, and 2) that the diverse and unstable field of performance practices (at least those of the twentieth and twenty-first centuries) has not always had a foundational relationship to documentation and documentary materials: written and spoken description, photographs, film, video, audio, etc.

For me a performance is not, and has never been, separable from what (even if refused or denied) carries on in place of the performance later, whether physi-
Sophia Yadong Hao

Memory Is Not Transparent

Something happens, but by the time we notice, it has begun without us. Thus our access to the beginning is necessarily incomplete, fragmentary.

—Peggy Phelan

The attempt and rejection of the institutionalization of performance artworks is an ongoing dialectic in which I am partially implicated. Between the event or aspects of it in some ways; they may capture some of the elements of the event, but, in doing so, they alter other elements. I’ve never been disturbed by this but rather have found the tension between what I call the event and what I call the not-event of the document to be productive place to work as an artist. Lately, I’ve been most interested in thinking about performance documentation in relation to Bertolt Brecht’s description of the demnominator. In Brecht’s revolutionary episodic theater, the actor is replaced by the demonstrator Brecht writes:

The demonstrator need not be an artist. The capacities he needs to achieve his aim are in effect universal. Suppose he cannot carry out some particular movement as quickly as the victim he is imitating; all he need do is to explain how to move three times as fast, and the demonstration neither suffers in essentials nor loses its point. On the contrary it is important that he should not be too perfect. His demonstration would be spoilt if the bystanders’ attention were drawn to his powers of transformation . . . . It is most important that one of the main features of the ordinary theater should be excluded from our street scene: the engendering of illusion. The street demonstrator’s performance is essentially repetitive. The event has taken place; what we see now is repeating a return.”

That this demonstration, this repetition, can circulate within the art institution(s) in a way in which a live act cannot is not a material condition to cause dismay but rather one, I think, that can be a field of deep investigation.

Sharon Hopkin’s work moves across multiple mediums—video, performance, installation—in an ongoing investigation into the interrelation among history, politics, and speech. She employs conceptual and methodological approaches borrowed from practices such as performance, theater, dance, anthropology, and journalism. Hopkin is an assistant professor at the Cooper Union. www.shnah.info.


NOTES on a return

Memory Is Not Transparent

Something happens, but by the time we notice, it has begun without us. Thus our access to the beginning is necessarily incomplete, fragmentary.

—Peggy Phelan

The attempt and rejection of the institutionalization of performance artworks is an ongoing dialectic in which I am partially implicated. Between 2008 and 2009 I curated an exhibition program, NOTES on a turn, which had at its core the desire to reflect upon how performance artworks could occupy the space of the institutions, as critical acts and as manifesting an intangible but acknowledged presence.

NOTES on a turn took as its primary material five live artworks made by Anne Bean, Rose English, Mona Hatoum, Bruce McLean, and Nigel Rolfe in 1986, 1987, and 1987 at the Laing Art Gallery in Newcastle upon-Tyne in the United Kingdom. Through my fortuitous discovery, while working there as curatorial fellow, of a single brochure among a collection of ephemera from the 1980s in the Laing’s archive, I realized that the presence of these five works within the institution was, after the passage of decades, largely marked by and reduced to an absence. It was this condition of absence which NOTES on a return sought to address: not through the construction (or reconstruction) of an archive suffused with material evidence, photographs, videos, or the like, but through staging a series of events that opened up a deliberate process of raising questions.

My intention was also not to address or to attempt to reveal the reasons for this void in art history and the history of the Laing, but rather to take this absence as an opportunity to formulate, critically examine, and enact a methodology of documentation or memory which maintains the live act after its demise as a live act, without retreating into the blind alley of insisting on the presentation of material evidence or remnant contexts. In this context memory operated as a mnemonic: a process of searching, rather than one of recuperation. This concept of memory was elaborated by Walter Benjamin, who translated Proust’s À la recherche et le temps perdu (In Search of Lost Time) into German. For Benjamin, this mnemonic was “a space of moments and discontinuities” rather than a sifting-through of chronologies of events. The mnemonic is the space of the performance: a space as void or absence.

To demonstrate how this conception of memory interrupts the current moves to institutionalize performance art through material- or image-based documentations, I wish to focus on artists whose approach to NOTES on a return developed a line of inquiry that fundamentally critiqued the act of remnant and its efficacy in the space of the gallery. NOTES on a return began its sede with a series of “archival” installations and audio installations. Each of the original artists was invited back and asked to use this archival space as an opportunity to initiate a creative dialogue with his or her memory of the performance. Bean, for example, undertook a physical and private restaging of the work itself as a mnemonic tool to trigger her “body-cell memories” of the original performance. As noted below, artists from a younger generation were also commissioned to respond to the original performances.

In addition to the artists’ own material, each installation consisted of facsimiles of letters between the artists, audience members, and the curators, notes and sketches made by artists and audience members, past reviews of the artworks. While this material referred to the performances, its origin did not lie in the actual moment of the live event, but in the periods before and after it. The primary elements in the archival installations were audio interviews with the artists themselves, in which they recounted the work. In tandem to this, audio interviews were made with specific audience members who witnessed each work. These interviews took all place in the (physical) space within the gallery where the works had originally been performed, even though that space has since changed beyond all recognition.

It was this material from before and after the original performances that provided the starting point for the new works by the artists from a younger generation. Each of these artists was paired with one of the artists who made the featured 1986 performances and given his or her contact details, in expectation that each younger artist would initiate a dialogue: Voja Yesilkay, who was paired with...
Viola Yeşiltaş, Adding Salt to the Sea, 2009, installation detail, NOTES on a return, Laing Art Gallery, 2009 (artwork © Viola Yeşiltaş, photograph by the artist)

Archival Exhibitions: Bruce McLean, 2009, installation detail, NOTES on a return, Laing Art Gallery, 2009 (artwork © Bruce McLean, photograph by the author)

Maxim

Writer John Dummett (right) with his work Memory Is Not Transparent, 2009 (artwork © John Dummett, photograph by Stephen Collins).

Dummett was one of three writers commissioned to make live writings in response to the NOTES on a return symposium and performance events.

Viola Yeşiltaş, a German artist based in New York, was one of the five artists commissioned by NOTES on a return to make new works; she responded to the recollections of Rose English’s 1985 performance Plato’s Chair.

The merge of photography and performance is the backbone of Yeşiltaş’s work. She also reenacted a number of performance pieces by Marina Abramović and Ulay, with Ulay’s son and other collaborators. Among these, the most significant was the reenactment of Abramović’s earlier performance with Ulay, Rest Energy, 1980, as a part of the project The Biography Remix, curated by Abramović and Michael Laub. The reenactment took place at Teatro Palladium, Rome, September 29–October 2, 2004, and later in Avignon in 2005.

In a statement for the project’s final publication, English speaks of being “unprepared for the forceful shock of recognition I experienced in seeing Viola Yeşiltaş’s installation, Adding Salt to the Sea . . . . This visceral response I myself had was, I remembered, something that I had read in reviews about my own work of the eighties which ‘left behind a dumbstruck audience thrown to the edge of some complex insight.’ . . . I found myself in turn dumbstruck, moved to tears and thrown to the edge of some complex insight—but of what?”

From only the recounting of an event, Yeşiltaş reconstructs a tangible and visceral presence for the new version of the work and demonstrates in her approach how this action of recounting grounds the meanings and specifically the insights offered by the live event. Moreover, Yeşiltaş discounts the necessity of attempting to replay or reenact an identified moment in time as the methodology to situate performance work inside the institution and art history. NOTES on a return operated as a present-tense staging of history. This present tense dispels the apparent certainties often purveyed within the discourses of the institution and art history when past performances are exhibited. NOTES on a return worked with the strategic notion of the event (or history itself) as an ongoing English, chose to not develop a dialogue with English, however, but instead focused exclusively on the audio recording of the interview with her. In a statement for the project’s final publication, English speaks of being “unprepared for the forceful shock of recognition I experienced in seeing Viola Yeşiltaş’s installation, Adding Salt to the Sea . . . . This visceral response I myself had was, I remembered, something that I had read in reviews about my own work of the eighties which ‘left behind a dumbstruck audience thrown to the edge of some complex insight.’ . . . I found myself in turn dumbstruck, moved to tears and thrown to the edge of some complex insight—but of what?”

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live process of debate and exchange. The work of this project, whether in the guise of the critical essays, installations, live performances, or scores it generated, is an open-ended foray into a space of memory that is not codified or reduced to the archive, but a real-time presence. The “postmodern” offer a new order of actuality: what once may have happened is made actual, that which was contingency turns into law.

Conventional capitalist economies make use of both efficacy and possibility. They seek to extend (and profit from) the promise of future repetitions of that which was once actualized and regularized. It seems that with performance art, this works differently. The history of attempts at restaging one-off experimental performances suggests that the reenactments always stop with the desire to actualize, to turn contingency into law.

In the late 1960s and early 1970s there was a series of stage revivals of the works of the pre-WWII era. For example, the Austrian dancer/scholar Jean Cocteau's and Pablo Picasso's The Family of the Sun never became standard parts of theater repertoires there was a series of stage revivals of the same incident in consideration of perfor-

The question concerning documentation, reenactment, and exhibiting of past performances points to the temporality of before and after, of temporality, endurance, and survival, of the materiality of traces and their permanence. It points also to the reversed order of writing in performance: the kind of “textual” pro-


27. In the 1980s, the attempt at performance reconstruction in theater and dance took place within the cultural moment that was marked, in the field of theory, by the idea of postmodernism, and in culture in general, by wide proliferation of new technologies of recording and dissemination of images, such as video and videotapes.


53 This method was subsequently used in a number of other disaster sites, such as Indonesia after the 2004 tsunami and New Orleans after Hurricane Katrina in 2005.

53 The Visit. What drives the interest in and approval of this kind of documentary work is not only the wonder of technological possibility of the total retrieval (reperformance) of the past, but an underlying ideological imperative of the universal redress and reparation of misdeeds from the past.

Last in this inventory of “re-” artworks that I want to address is the project Mathemes of Reassociation by Grupa Spomenik (Monument Group), a collective of artists and theoreticians from Belgrade in Serbia and Tuzla in Bosnia and Herzegovina. Established in 2002 in response to the Belgrade city government’s open call for proposals for a public monument dedicated to all victims of the Yugoslav wars of the 1990s, the group proclaimed the monument to be its public meetings in which participants debated this attempt at an ideologically blind take on the recent violent past in the former Yugoslavia. The group started its most significant project to date, Mathemes of Reassociation, on the occasion of Belgrade’s 49th October Salon in 2008. The work was presented as a series of public lectures that took place over the course of five days. In three of these lectures, the invited speakers were forensic anthropologists, forensic archaeologists, and DNA analysts from the International Commission of Missing Persons (ICMP) located in the Bosnian cities of Sarajevo, Tuzla, and Lukavac. ICMP was established in 1996, soon after the cessation of armed conflict in Bosnia and Herzegovina, in order to assist with the resolution of the large number of citizens who went missing in the armed conflicts in the former Yugoslavia from 1991 to 1995. In Bosnia and Herzegovina alone, the number of missing was over thirty thousand. Over time, the main project of ICMP became the identification of the remains of the 1995 genocide in the east Bosnian enclave of Srebrenica, in which some eight thousand men and boys had been summarily executed. In order to hide the crime, the perpetrators dug out the bodies and reburied them in secondary and tertiary graves, which called for the development of new and innovative methods of bone reassociation and DNA analysis.

In a lecture Grupa Spomenik organized as a part of Mathemes of Reassociation, the ICMP forensic anthropologist Admir Jugo explained that, as the result of reburials in the aftermath of the Srebrenica massacre, a single primary grave could be related to as many as thirteen known secondary graves, and that parts of the body of one individual were found in four different graves. In another lecture the DNA analyst Šejla Idrizbegović spoke about the process of matching of DNA samples harvested from the surviving relatives and extracted from the bones found in the mass graves. The lectures of scientists engaged by ICMP expounded on the two key phases in the process of identification of victims. The title Mathemes of Reassociation refers to these two phases. The first is the allocation of the bar code to each sample so that DNA analysts work with “blind samples.” According to ICMP, this temporary suppression of information about the victim’s ethnic identity guarantees the objectivity of the procedure of identification of the remains. The second phase, reassociation, refers to either physical matching of the crushed bones or grouping of the remains through DNA analysis. As Idrizbegović has pointed out, the ICMP and the families of the victims consider 75 percent of an individu-
al’s skeletal remains sufficient to carry out a burial. This reassociation of the pulverized body and its reintegration into its ethnic and religious community stands for the reintegration of the country devastated by war, albeit on ideological and political premises that caused the war in the first place.

It is precisely this politics of reassociation in terms of ethnic identity that the members of Grupa Spomenik want to bring into question. Apart from the scientists from ICMP, they organized a lecture for the young Bosnian writer Seja Šehabović, who gave a public reading of her story “Ruzveda.” In the story, a young Bosnian woman living in the United States comes back to Bosnia to give a blood sample for the identification of the remains of her missing grandfather; at the last moment she grabs the vial with her blood and storms out of the identification center. In his lecture “Gendering the Bone,” Damir Arsenijević, a Tuzla-based member of Grupa Spomenik, takes this instance from Šehabović’s story as a “moment which cuts through the symbolic” of the law.5 Her action refuses precisely the ideological coercion of the actuality of the moment implemented as the law that insists on the bringing back, reassembling and “reassociating” the body in what Arsenijević calls the “brute here and now.” As Arsenijević points out, the efficacy of this law depends on repressing the actual body, which remains “beyond the limits of law’s symbolization, revealing its finiteness, arbitrariness, revealing the limitation of its power, revealing it as incomplete.”

In her lecture “Towards an Emancipatory Politics of Witnessing,” another Tuzla-based member of Grupa Spomenik, Jasmina Husanović, describes this law as the law of Bosnia and Herzegovina, the state designed and administratively facilitated by international bodies such as the European Union and the United Nations. Husanović recognizes the medicalization (of the past), the mythologization (of the present), and the depoliticization (of the community) as the three main strategies of this state whose citizens are trapped in a state of postwar and postsocialist transition. This is the state in which, as Arsenijević points out, people rummage through dustbins because 25 percent of them live below the poverty line—a state that depends precisely on the production of reassembled bodies, on bringing the dead back into the present, on reperforming the trauma, because it furnishes the ideological operation according to which the “discourse of trauma displaces the discourse of hunger.”6 Yet, the bodies that are brought back and made the centerpiece of elaborate spectacles of return are only that refusal of this state’s economy of erasure. This erasure has material and ideological effects. I end with the words of Arsenijević, which he offered in response to a question from Milica Tomić, one of Grupa Spomenik’s founders, about “surplus bones,” the skeletal remains that remained unidentified and unburied: “If the unidentified bones are the result of genocide politics, then the politics of the society after the genocide is, in fact, the politics of [making an] ossuary of that remaining surplus of bones, that invisible full reintegration into this political economy of erasure. This erasure has material and ideological effects. I end with the words of Arsenijević, which he offered in response to a question from Milica Tomić, one of Grupa Spomenik’s founders, about “surplus bones,” the skeletal remains that remained unidentified and unburied. If the unidentified bones are the result of genocide politics, then the politics of the society after the genocide is, in fact, the politics of [making an] ossuary of that remaining surplus of bones, that invisible full reintegration into this political economy of erasure. This erasure has material and ideological effects.


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William Pope L.

Canary in the Coal Mine

0. Institutionalized art performance reenactment is about empying as much as it is about remembering. Memory is a smoke screen for a set of anxieties possessed by both the packrat and the king. Both, hoard to defend some unspoken, unrecognizable absence. Both use the myopia of repetition to pleasure their perspective and bestow upon their project an illusion of progress and community.

Warhol’s object production was an incredibly narrow, near-perfect bit of institutionalized art performance. If everything is an object then no one gets near, no one gets in, no one gets hurt. His performance created pleasure by reproducing a poor representation of a thing. The thing itself incited pleasure, a sense of safety in the familiar. The poverty of the objects signaled something lost. A poverty of liveness? Maybe the absence of real things and bodies helps us to keep afloat the fantasy that we are above being alive.

1. Karaoke is an example of performance reenactment in which participants derive pleasure by knowingly reperforming that which has been reperformed many times before. A poorly performed example can be a terrible example. Drinking alcohol, loud carousing, singing off-key late into the darkness collapse in a ritual oblitera-

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2. The recent attempts to institutionalize performance art by major museums and galleries mark a desire to make packaged objects of a form. Performance art as a form is unique because of its live character, its supposed unrepeatability, which has allowed it to slip and slide through the cracks of the market. Indeed, cultural
institutionalization usually involves strategies which maximize profit, use, or value by enabling the multiple consumption of a product. The ideal is to sell a single product as many times as possible. Unlike karaoke or Broadway, art performance typically secures its rep via very few performances; sometimes we only know of certain canonical performances via legend.

2.2 The collecting of performance objects, residues, props, scores, and zines laid the groundwork for the end of the idea of live performance as the final defense against the "sale." The advent of videotape was the penultimate nail in the coffin. Suddenly the vaunted unrepeatability of performance was in question. Even so, a videotape is not the thing itself. However, if an idea or a piece of music or a novel or a sports star can be sold, why not a performance? What is a performance but a bundle of ideas? Theater has been selling bundles of ideas for a few centuries.

2.3 Is resistance to the art market essential for performance art? Did its celebrated slippery resistance ever truly exist? Is resistance an obsolete concept for today’s consumers?

3. For my money, resistance to established power is always necessary, even if, especially if, the established power is radical, avant-garde, or subversive.

3. Or a gleaming castle on a hill that sells artworks, snacks, and central heating.

4. Yes, let’s set aside reenactment, performance art, liveness, and institutionalization for a moment and focus on bigger fish, like social responsibility.

4.1 Let’s put our foot down and state something significant: resistance itself is a product. What would real resistance look like? Real resistance always looks like betrayal cause it’s extremely difficult if not impossible to defeat an enemy and not become the enemy.

4.2 Let’s say live performance art is some kind of canary in the coal mine. What is its death trying to tell us? Or more interestingly, its middle years, what are they trying to tell us about a form that lives and dies on liveness? And what does it mean for artmaking not only as a practice but as a business?

5. After life, we, performance artists, should sell what? Tacos? Medical supplies for diabetes? Real estate in California? No, the real shit, the next shit, is the soul. I don’t know if it actually exists, but I know almost everybody wants one.

5.1 And in terms of marketing, if it doesn’t exist, that makes it even more special.
Something exciting accompanied the arrival, roughly a decade ago, of reenactments by artists such as Tania Bruguera, Jeremy Deller, Omer Fast, Felix Gonzalez-Torres, Pierre Huyghe, Tina Sehgal, and others. A ubiquitous trope, made banal through its use in community theater, historical pageants, and crime TV, suddenly acquired formal and critical punch. Perhaps it was the pervasiveness and obsession of reenactment that gave it this edge. After all, why stage an event or an artwork when, in our digital era, you can easily sample it online? Why do the temporal and material demands of reenactment make it such a compelling aesthetic device?

Exhibitions and performance series in Europe and North America fueled my curiosity about reenactment’s resurgence. Revisiting political, social, and cultural histories, artists participating in these programs turned repetition against itself to make the past anachronistically current. While under no illusion that they could faithfully reproduce bygone eras or revisit a coherent past, they sought to surpass mere citation by staging a present that profess to give them their belated due. Both the bodies of artists producing making a space for other artists within their work. Enacted narratives, seeming to process them through the bodies of the living.

To researchers and scholars, these projects offered fresh ways of experiencing, analyzing, and archiving time-based art. Informing by feminism and other counter-cultural positions that valued process above product, time-based art had often eluded conventional scholarly approaches and consequently was underrepresented and critically devalued. Perhaps reenactment could make ephemeral works that had previously been studied via photographic documentation or fast deteriorating video tangibly present. To facilitate that process, through individual performance reenactments or homages, artists have become historians themselves, making a space for other artists within their work.

In these projects artists acknowledge their creative precursors with gestures that profess to give them their belated due. Both the bodies of artists producing reenactments and those of other people that they involve in the realization of their reenactments become conduits between now and then. Embodied approaches to animating a pre-existing archive such as these present a nonlinear view of time in which past, present, and future coexist. They resonate with the literary critic Elizabeth Freeman’s conception of queer temporality as “a non-narrative history written with the body, in which the performer channels another body . . . making this body available to a context unforeseen in its bearer’s lived historical moment.”

While it takes about twenty-five years for fashion trends to become desirable “vintage”—witness the return of 1980s-style shoulder pads, leggings, and asymmetric haircuts today—to be able to gain perspective on the social and cultural past after approximately two generations have elapsed. As with fashion revivals, at this point our ideas about previous eras coalesce around stereotypes and generalizations. Promoting a speculative view of both current and former times, reenactment offers the possibility of a more complex view of history that acknowledges the effects of historical representation on art’s dissemination and reception. This form of “sideshadowing,” as the literary scholar Gary Saul Morson terms it, aims to open the past to reveal untold might-have-beens and might-bes, rather than following the preordained paths suggested by foreshadowing.

Intrigued by these fresh ways of revisiting history, in 2008 I organized Not Quite How I Remember It at the Power Plant in Toronto. As its title implies, the exhibition explored the space between an event and its recollection and memorialization. Many works built on earlier radical social and artistic projects in order to reflect upon the disparity between their utopian promise and our less idealistic times. Following Candice Breitz’s conception of artistic influence as a pattern of “call and response,” the physical act of copying another person’s work took on overtones of apprenticeship and learning, empathy and homage.

Can a living artist collaborate with a dead one? Or, as the artist Dario Robleto wondered of his piece “Remember It the Power Plant, Toronto,” can the prescriptive gesture begun by one artist be passed like a baton through the years to be continued or completed by another artist in another time so that it never has to end but fulfills Félix Gonzalez-Torres’s ambition to become ‘endless copies?’”


38. The exhibition featured works by Diane Borres, Gerhard Byrne, Nancy Davenport, Felix Gonzalez-Torres, Sharon Hayes, Mary Kelly, Nam June Paik, Michael Mandiberg, Olvia Pender, Vidal Road, Dario Robleto, Michael Stevenson, Kelley Walker, and Lee Wilson. An accompanying screening program, An (Re)playing Yourself!, presented films by John Baldessari, Mignon Bart, Bruce Conner, Ian Forth, and Jessica Pollack; Felix Gonzalez-Torres, Mike Kelley/Paul McCarthy, Jüri Gedron, Abisun S. H. Kabayeh, Ann Saks, Elizabeth Subrin, Zin Taylor, and T. R. Uthco and Ant Farm.
40. Dario Robleto, e-mail correspondence with the author, April 2008.
41. The exhibition featured work by Diane Borres, Gerhard Byrne, Nancy Davenport, Felix Gonzalez-Torres, Sharon Hayes, Mary Kelly, Nam June Paik, Michael Mandiberg, Olvia Pender, Vidal Road, Dario Robleto, Michael Stevenson, Kelley Walker, and Lee Wilson. An accompanying screening program, An (Re)playing Yourself!, presented films by John Baldessari, Mignon Bart, Bruce Conner, Ian Forth, and Jessica Pollack; Felix Gonzalez-Torres, Mike Kelley/Paul McCarthy, Jüri Gedron, Abisun S. H. Kabayeh, Ann Saks, Elizabeth Subrin, Zin Taylor, and T. R. Uthco and Ant Farm.

Robleto’s appreciation of the remake’s ability to generate new work has been amply illustrated by the creators of numerous recent artworks who “collaborate with other artists—living and dead, with and without their permission—through reme
acement. Yet where once I grieved news of such projects with anticipation, now a sense of ambivalence, even skepticism, mutes my response. Reme
acement, I fear, is in danger of becoming just another aesthetic trope, a backwards glance that fails to shed light on why and how we remember and represent the past.

For instance, despite its formal power, Marina Abramović’s Seven Easy Pieces of 2005 reifies already-familiar performance art.1 By turning time-based works into tableau events and drawing on well-known documentary photographs, Abramović failed to account for the differences of time and place, context and body between her source material and her restaging. Far from regaining the vitality of past works, her project undercuts reenactment’s limitations. For all the physical demands that they put on her, Abramović’s composed, pictorial set pieces seemed mauseoleum-like; they left the uncomfortable impression that, now that performance art’s time is passed, it can be codified and canonized as just another genre, devoid of its original meaning and impact.

To take another example, I recently learned of a remake of Yoko Ono’s Cut Piece, originally performed in 1964; the reprise was staged in 2009 as part of a North American museum show on the made.2 As an artist associated with Fluxus, which foregrounded the concept of art as a score to be interpreted, and one of the pio
neering female artists of the early 1960s, Ono was an understandable choice. But

The remake departed from her work in problematic ways. In the now-cele
brated original, Ono kneels calmly on stage with scissors that audience members used to cut away her clothes. Her emotionless expression and still body became blank screens upon which members of the public projected and acted out their fantasies. However, the remake by Julianne Barabas and Kristen Hutchinson did away with Ono’s mute inertia, Barabas, assuming Ono’s role, instead conversed with gallery visitors and encouraged their participation. When asked about this change, Barabas explained that the conservative nature of the museum and its public made her wary of alienating the audience.3 But this substitution of conviviality for aggression denuded Ono’s work of its criticality and its aim. After all, the response of audiences to Ono’s provocative passivity was part of its point:

While in Tokyo they were tentative, at the 1966 Destruction in Art Symposium in London the crowd’s aggression prompted security guards to offer Ono protection.4 Such restagings function largely as quotations. They serve to shore up their source’s reputation while gaining from their association with it. Reducing radical projects to images and brands, they ignore or accept uncritically the shifts in time, place, and context between the contemporary versions and their prece
dents. Despite their spirit of homage, these works often reduce rather than reflect the power and complexity of the art that they honor. “The ego wants to incorpo
rate this object into itself,” Freud wrote of early object relations, “and, in accor
dance with the oral and cannibalistic phase of libidinal development at which it is, it wants to do so by devouring it.”5 Similarly, these cavalier reprises consume their precursors in the process of appropriating them.

To be fair, anachronism and taxontology always grounded artistic remnactment, generating its powerful status as aesthetically dubious. Based in historical na
rative, figurative representation, literary references, and theatricality—those declared enemies of vanguard art that Michael Fried notoriously denounced in his influen
tial 1967 article “Art and Objecthood”—this work is out of step with the main
stream twentieth-century avant-garde.6 Certainly, reme
acement is not inherently radical, critical, or interesting—”we know, even the most audacious and chal
lenging art can coalesce quickly into a new aesthetic status quo. But such dilution is inevitable in reenactments that stay at the level of citation, where the processes of historical representation—what gets remembered, what gets forgotten, by whom and how—remain unexamined.

Several artists who work in a historically reflexive way have addressed some of these problems within their work. In the ongoing performance series begun in 2005, In the Near Future, Sharon Hayes stands on the street and holds placards bearing

41. These performances on seven consequent nights at the Guggenheim Museum in New York in which Abramović remenacted performance works were performed by Bruce Nauman, Vito Acconci, Vara Eastport, Cara Pen, and Joseph Beuys, followed by a two-day symposium and one new work. 42. Julianna Barabas, collaborative performance with Kristen Hutchinson, made in response to the exhibition Leaving Olympia at the Art Gallery of Alberta, Edmonton, Alberta, May 14, 2009.

United States law, as only thirty-three of the neces
sary thirty-eight states need to ratify it. 48. For instance, despite its formal power, Marina Abramović’s Seven Easy Pieces of 2005 reifies already-familiar performance art. 49. These performances on seven consequent nights at the Guggenheim Museum in New York in which Abramović remenacted performance works were performed by Bruce Nauman, Vito Acconci, Vara Eastport, Cara Pen, and Joseph Beuys, followed by a two-day symposium and one new work. 50. Julianna Barabas, collaborative performance with Kristen Hutchinson, made in response to the exhibition Leaving Olympia at the Art Gallery of Alberta, Edmonton, Alberta, May 14, 2009.
For the recent project I March In The Parade Of Liberty, But As Long As I Love You I’m Not Free, begun in New York in 2008, Hayes once again takes to the streets. Standing on various corners, again alone, she speaks into a megaphone as if to a longed-for lower. Combining chants from earlier political protests with more intimate forms of address (including the prison letter written by Oscar Wilde to Alfred Douglas that was published posthumously as “De Profundis”), Hayes calls out to a “you” who is at once a person and representative of a collective movement. Desperate to contact an elusive loved one, Hayes evokes the stages of erotic and political infatuation—the shared excitement and euphoria followed by disillusionment, resignation, and departure. Speaking of In the Near Future, Hayes has described her role as that of a placeholder. “I’m holding the place of a kind of address that had meaning and resonance and impact at a certain moment in time. And I’m thinking about the possibility that that resonance and impact could be present at a future time.”

Her anachronistic forms of public address make time “hover,” just as Walter Benjamin argued outmoded aesthetic objects could do. Operating in the tense of the future anterior—the time when our collective demands will have been successful and that Drucilla Cornell points as feminist time—Hayes reveals the past to be full of untraced possibility. Moreover, her art sharpens our awareness of historical place and perhaps prompts questions about how subsequent eras will represent our own.

Hayes’s work shares much with the concept of “temporal drag” that Walter Benjamin argued outmoded aesthetic objects could do. Operating in the tense of the future anterior, her work brings into the present moment the futurein terms of experiences that discourse has not yet caught up with, rather than as a legacy passed on between generations.”

Artists like Hayes and Subrin and writers like Freeman acknowledge our complex affiliations with countercultural projects that exceed our own historical times, and our efforts—however troubled, doomed, or flawed—to access them through reenactment. “Laying political desire and personal desire on top of one another,” as Hayes has described her work doing, these artists and thinkers suggest that we harness retrogression, delay, and the pull of the past upon the present.”

In her discussion of Elisabeth Subrin’s 1997 film Shulie, Freeman considers the prelife of radical feminism. An almost shot-by-shot remake of a 1967 film about the nascent feminist movement and author Shulamith Firestone, unlike most works that are revisited through reenactment, Shulie derives from source material that is hardly iconic. In fact this obscure student film was never distributed, partly because Firestone asked its makers not to release it. Far from erecting a feminist heroine, Shulie, Freeman argues, “partakes in the love of failure, the rescue of ephemera, that constitutes the most angst-ridden side of queer camp performance.”

Exploring the awkward immaturity of both Firestone and the women’s movement that she would help to lead, Freeman sees in the film an examination of feminism’s unrealized potential. “Shulie consistently undermines the idea that an intact political program has been handed down from older women to younger ones,” suggests Freeman. “The messy, transitional status of [Shulie’s] thinking asks us to imagine the future in terms of experiences that discourse has not yet caught up with, rather than as a legacy passed on between generations.”

Elizabeth Freeman uses to explain our powerful identifications with earlier activists and cultural projects. Evoking the appeal of movements and moments that are not just past but seemingly past, Freeman stresses the drag act’s immersion in “retrogression, delay, and the pull of the past upon the present.”

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