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Performance conservation as a political act

A conversation with Hanna B. Hölling

Joanna Leśnierowska, an independent choreographer, curator, visual dramaturge, and light and space composer, met with Hanna B. Hölling to explore the possibility and various forms of conserving performance. Leśnierowska, one of the first dance critics in Poland, has extensive international experience in lecturing on Polish choreography. She brings a unique perspective, combining her insights into performance and choreography with her vast knowledge of their preservation. With her role as a founder and curator of the Old Brewery New Dance, a choreographic development program at Art Station Foundation in Poznań, and the Acziun Susch performance program at the Museum Susch, Leśnierowska has now shifted her focus to critically examine the afterlives and longevity of performance and dance within the research project “Performance: Conservation, Materiality, Knowledge.”

Hanna B. Hölling: Joanna, you have been a member of our project “Performance: Conservation, Materiality, Knowledge” since 2023. Yet there is one essential question I have yet to ask you: Can performance be conserved, in your view?

Joanna Leśnierowska: I’ll begin with a confession: I have reservations about the terms ‘conservation’ and ‘preservation.’ To me, these words conjure associations with biological laboratories and medical studies where we encounter preserved fetuses and body parts in large jars. It’s an image that has always struck me as somewhat unsettling, as it implies that something that was once alive has now been rendered lifeless, forever encased in an unusual form and colors. When I hear terms like ‘performance conservation’ or ‘performance preservation,’ it sends a shiver down my spine. Instead, I’d propose we seek an alternative term for something so vital. What I truly believe in is the idea of extending the life of a performance, of keeping it vibrant and alive. The central question for me is: How can we

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ensure that a performance, and choreography, continues to thrive and endure? Can the tools traditionally associated with conservation and preservation achieve this?

For me, the paramount question centers on how we can sustain the vitality of performance and whether, through the tools of conservation, we can achieve this. Can we transform an inherently transient art form like performance or choreography into something with a longer lifespan? Moreover, what does this extended life signify? These are profound questions.

In my heart, the term 'cultivation' holds a special place. This is because cultivation embodies the act of nurturing and tending to something, much like caring for a garden or tending to precious plants in our homes. It reflects the commitment to keeping something fresh, vibrant, and enduring. Therefore, I would propose the replacement of 'conservation' and 'preservation' with the word 'cultivation.' This shift immediately brings forth the concept of conservation as an expression of care. This perspective carries significant importance for me, particularly in light of my professional journey, especially the initial seventeen years I devoted to operating a choreography development center in Poland, within Art Stations Foundation/Old Brewery New Dance program in Poznań.¹ During this time, I worked tirelessly to introduce a new generation of dance makers to the world and to ensure that the discourse surrounding choreography and the artworks themselves continued to thrive and grow.

This is essentially a form of permaculture that has always captivated me. It's what excites me when we delve into discussions about crafting ephemeral art that's not just profoundly poetic but remains palpably concrete and grounded in the body, live and alive. The goal is to keep it alive, far beyond what many, especially those outside professional performance and choreography, might deem possible.

So to answer your question, I firmly believe that performance can be cultivated, not only the actual performance pieces but also the ongoing life of performance as a whole. This encompasses taking care of the people involved in creating performance. By extending our care to artists and the individuals connected to performance production, we can ensure the longevity and growth of this art form, surpassing our expectations. During my seventeen years of leading a choreographic development center, I often pondered how to etch the works of choreography that I deemed highly significant into the memory of audiences and the annals of history. Their importance transcends mere artistic success, whatever that term may entail (and let's not venture into this topic).

And still, within the seventeen-year curriculum of the choreographic center, there have undeniably been works that have played a seminal role in the development of choreography in our country [Poland]. It's heart-wrenching to witness these works being performed only a handful of times, or, at best, receiving international exposure on a limited scale, often not extending far

beyond the field of choreography or contemporary dance. It's compounded by the restricted access that audiences have to these significant works. The perennial question remains: How can we ensure that these vital, seminal works can reach broader audiences and leave an enduring mark on our collective consciousness? How can they persist beyond a single season? This question is intrinsically tied to the broader inquiry about whether performance can be preserved, and it underscores the significance of conserving, preserving, and cultivating performance as a means to ensure that historically significant and relevant works endure. This is crucial in regions with underdeveloped dance histories and infrastructure, such as Poland and many other Eastern European countries. In these contexts, the cultivation and preservation of choreographic and performance works become crucial political tasks for establishing a historical archive and legacy. It's not just a matter of art; it's a matter of a nation's cultural identity and heritage.

The goal is to ignite the imaginations of countless artists and audiences, providing them with something memorable. It's about helping them build their own identities within the art form and creating a lineage of works that they can connect with, engage in a dialogue with, and draw from as a well-spring of communal memory. This repository becomes a resource we can always turn to, especially in the challenging moments when we strive to sustain the art form.

In my view, one of the most crucial aspects of performance cultivation and preservation is the establishment of archives and the documentation of the history of an art form that may not be as widely recognized in its home country.

Of course, the question of how to cultivate, preserve, and conserve performance could be discussed at length, spanning hours, days, and months. In fact, you've been engaging in this endeavor for nearly four years [in the project "Performance: Conservation, Materiality, Knowledge"], and it's a journey that continues to unfold. What makes it so exciting is that the natural inclination for preserving performance often begins with documentation. This includes capturing choreography on video, recording the works, creating photographic archives, and collecting comprehensive background information about the creative process. So these documents from the creative process, as well as the remnants and artifacts from the practices that contributed to the performance's creation, are undoubtedly essential. However, I must confess that this kind of archiving sometimes evokes a medical approach to preservation for me. It's important to acknowledge that, even with thorough documentation and an extensive collection of materials, our access to the true essence of the performance remains limited. I've always questioned whether these well-established, traditional methods are truly the most suitable means of preserving and ensuring a lasting memory and understanding of the seminal performance we aim to protect.

My belief is that choreography and, by extension, performance art, is an encounter between an artist and an emancipated spectator.² It's a platform

for the exchange of ideas, demanding responses from the audience. Spectators bring their individual backgrounds, sensitivities, and perspectives to the performance, thereby creating a dialogue between the stage and the audience.

So the real question becomes: What should we genuinely preserve and what should we focus on when discussing the conservation and cultivation of performance? Is it primarily the tangible aspects of the performance, such as the concrete steps and the specific notes from the choreographer that led to its creation? Or should we also consider the audience's experience, how they received the performance? This encompasses their private lives, but more importantly, the social, political, and critical historical context that lent meaning and relevance to the performance. It's crucial to contemplate whether we can replicate these conditions to ensure that the performance's impact will be similarly relevant for the next generation of audiences that will encounter it.

Indeed, this discussion leads us to a fundamental question: Should we strive to reconstruct performances exactly as they were originally created, or should we focus on reactivating them by examining what was truly relevant to the reception of the performance? This approach allows us to restage and reproduce similar effects, but with an understanding that the audience encountering the work may come from entirely different social, political, and historical backgrounds. To illustrate this point, let's consider the recent example of the pandemic. I am convinced that audiences before and after the pandemic will interpret performances in profoundly different ways, shaped by their personal experiences during this global crisis. As long as we are aware of this, the practice of performance preservation extends far beyond archiving and documenting the physical artifact. It becomes intricately connected to the specific moment when the performance was first created and shared with its audience.

Hölling: Thank you, Joanna. I can't help but reflect on the fact that you and I are currently on two different continents—you in Berlin and me in Brasília, in the heart of Brazil. You've worked on the Polish choreographer and dancer Yanka Rudzka, who, while born in Poland, was highly active in Brazil. You closely tracked her career and artistic endeavors here and embarked on a remarkable project involving an experimental reconstruction of her work.³ Could you please share more about this project?

Leśnierowska: In 2013, I visited VIVADANÇA, a dance festival in Salvador, Bahia, Brazil, to learn more about the local dance scene. Totally unexpectedly, I stumbled upon what turned out to be my own dance history and learned about a choreographer named Yanka Rudzka [1916–2008] who had left Poland after World War II, only to become one of the most prominent

figures in modern dance in the Bahia region. It was astonishing that in contemporary Poland, virtually no one had ever heard of Rudzka. This discovery immediately ignited my interest and led to a project that symbolically brought Yanka Rudzka back home and secured her a place in the history books. It also inspired an artistic journey to explore the roots of traditional, non-stylized culture and beyond.

One of the most challenging aspects of this project was the realization that there are very few remnants of Yanka Rudzka's artistic work in Bahia. She had been active there in the late 1950s, a time when there were no video recordings of performances and modern dance had limited presence in the press. But the memory of her work has continued to live through a few artists and individuals, now in their seventies and eighties, who recall working with her or witnessing her performances firsthand. Additionally, there are photographs taken by a photographer, Silvio Robatto, who fell in love with one of Rudzka's principal dancers, Lia Robatto (later an amazing choreographer herself). Driven by this affection, Silvio documented the company, leaving behind a valuable collection of performance photographs. Thanks to this love affair, we gain a precious glimpse into some of Rudzka's works.

Rudzka came to Salvador to establish the first-ever higher education program in dance in Brazil, at the Federal University of Bahia. What made her work particularly significant was, on the one hand, her unwavering belief that the education of a dancer needs to be far more complex than one may traditionally imagine. She introduced a comprehensive approach, inspired by the principles of the Bauhaus in Europe, insisting that dance artists should delve into theater, literature, poetry, and the visual arts, in addition to modern expressionistic dance. But even more importantly, she was deeply fascinated by Afro-Brazilian traditional culture, which was at the time very unappreciated and which is still closely tied to the Candomblé religion introduced to Brazil by enslaved Africans. With a rich pantheon of deities known as 'Orixas' and a fascinating musical tradition (it is said that every Orixá has its own samba), Rudzka examined its rituals and dances, incorporating them into her stage work. She truly believed that contemporary art could never truly develop without an understanding of its complex history and without drawing from these traditional sources.

When I made the decision to dedicate a significant portion of my professional life to researching Yanka Rudzka, it raised the question of whether I could effectively reconstruct her work from the scarce remnants of her practice and performances that I had managed to unearth. I soon realized that my primary interest lay not in replicating her work verbatim but in reconstructing and following her profound engagement with traditional culture. Following Rudzka's gesture of humble examination of local folk tradition, and then bold artistic weaving of its elements into her artistic work, had the remarkable effect of enabling me to reconnect contemporary artists with

their own roots and traditional cultures, and to question their relevance to contemporary practice. Thus, my focus shifted towards preserving her interest in traditional culture rather than focusing on the literal steps of Yanka's performances (Figures 16.1, 16.2, 16.3, and 16.4).



Figure 16.1 The Yanka Rudzka Project: Leavening, presentation within Old Brewery New Dance at Malta Festival, Poznań, 2017. Photograph by Jakub Wittchen, courtesy of Art Stations Foundation.



Figure 16.2 The Yanka Rudzka Project: Leavening, presentation within Old Brewery New Dance at Malta Festival, Poznań, 2017. Photograph by Jakub Wittchen, courtesy of Art Stations Foundation.



Figure 16.3 The Yanka Rudzka Project: Polyphonies (2018), Studio Słodownia +3, Poznań. Photograph by Katarzyna Kłudczyńska, courtesy of Art Stations Foundation.



Figure 16.4 The Yanka Rudzka Project: Polyphonies (2018), Studio Słodownia +3, Poznań. Photograph by Maciej Zakrzewski, courtesy of Art Stations Foundation.

Instead of attempting to reproduce exactly what Yanka did on stage in the 1950s, which I recognized would be more of a confabulation, a distortion and misappropriation of the limited elements I had encountered, my aim was to recreate a process that evoked the spirit of her work. In this case, I had no interest in speculating how her works might have appeared, although

I acknowledge that speculation and exploring alternative versions of history can be a captivating means of preserving performance and igniting the imagination of both audiences and artists.

This realization brings up an interesting facet of performance conservation and preservation, one that primarily centers on the transmission of knowledge from one body to another, as is often seen in folk culture. It revolves around how we can pass down the knowledge and embodied experiences through generations by sharing gestures, traditions, rituals, and distinct practices devised by those who have come before us, enabling the transfer of this knowledge to a new generation.

This is also why I'm thrilled to be a part of a research project [Performance: Conservation, Materiality, Knowledge] that is currently deeply engaged in this expanded understanding of preservation. It's incredibly exciting to contribute to this reflection, drawing not only from my own professional journey but also from my knowledge of numerous dance artists who dedicate their lives to historical practices, bringing them into the present as a living legacy. In this way, they inspire countless young artists with the information, gestures, and practices of their artistic predecessors, their dance ancestors, mothers, fathers, and grandparents. They establish a vibrant and enduring lineage, reinforcing the belief that we are not alone in the world. There is a history, a past, and where there is a past taken into the present, there is undoubtedly also a future for the art form itself.

Hölling: You mentioned something quite intriguing—the idea that speculation might play a role in the persistence of performance through change. Could you expand on this concept?

Leśnierowska: We are acutely aware that in the contemporary world, many regions still grapple with a dearth of infrastructure, adequate funding, promotion, and, perhaps most significantly, a lack of knowledge about the history of choreography, dance, and performance. In such contexts, what can we preserve when we have limited access to what transpired before us, or when we struggle to connect with the history of choreography or performance in our countries?

This is where speculation assumes a vital role. Used as a tool, it empowers us to creatively invent alternative versions of history, sometimes rooted in the fossils of information and, sometimes, drawing from our desires and dreams of the artistic lineage we wish to be a part of. Speculation allows us to define our identity and propel it into the future.

In this context, I'd like to highlight a fascinating project I witnessed in the Polish context. Curated by Edyta Kozak, Janusz Marek, and Sabine Gehm, it unfolded in 2005 during a Polish-German cultural exchange year, which brought together artists from various locations in Poland and Germany. The project's concept was to transport these artists to a mountainous

retreat, providing a serene and secluded environment amidst the beauty of the landscape. Here, they could get to know each other, collaborate, and create collectively, harnessing the silence and safety of the mountains. The initial phase of this meeting commenced on a rather somber note, with artists discovering that they had very little in common in terms of their artistic backgrounds and trajectories. Faced with this realization and the challenge of initiating a collaboration, the artists decided to pivot by preparing a dinner and sharing some drinks. From this lengthy night of deliberation and camaraderie, a creative idea emerged: What if they were to imagine a figure in their shared history who could unify their communities and connect their diverse backgrounds?

And so this group of artists gave life to Veronika Blumstein, a fictional choreographer.⁴ Veronika became a symbolic bridge between different communities and histories, representing a Jewish artist born in Krakow but deeply intertwined with the German Expressionist tradition. She served as a unifying force, bringing together Jews, Poles, and Germans within one artistic persona. Together, the artists embarked on reconstructing the works of Veronika Blumstein. This endeavor allowed them to realize that history could have taken entirely different paths and inspired them to search for more commonalities that could unite German, Polish, and Jewish artists. This collaborative effort led to a reimagining of history in a positive and empowering manner, encouraging artists to explore bold investigations and foster collaborations.

In this surge of imagination, not only did Veronika Blumstein come to life, but also a new approach to thinking about choreographic history was born. I firmly believe that it is our responsibility as artists, particularly considering how modern dance has often been misappropriated by various ideologies and political powers, to reclaim our gestures, choreographies, and artists. We must rescue them from the clutches of political propaganda and restore them to their rightful place—within the bodies of artists, the bodies of people, and the collective consciousness of nations and societies.

Dance, as an art form, has frequently been manipulated for political agendas—to mention only the most well-known examples, of the Nazis in Germany using *Ausdruckstanz* (expressive dance) as a propaganda tool, and, after the war, how the folk dances of Eastern European countries were co-opted by nationalistic and communist governments for political propaganda. In this regard, preserving traditional movements and dances by contemporary artists and scholars is a profoundly political gesture. It is an act of reclaiming traditions and reinstating them as a testament to their original purpose—the building of communities, the fostering of harmony through organized movement, and understanding them as a living legacy of a society that stands apart from the political agendas of tyrannies and ideologies that aim to control and subdue our bodies, both individually and collectively.

In this context, speculation and reactivation of traditional gestures and choreographies play a crucial role. These actions are particularly relevant for communities grappling with gaps in their dance history or those that have

experienced misappropriation of their dances in the past. Revising the history of dance holds immense significance for the future, influencing an entire generation of artists and audiences. As we all inhabit bodies, and as it is essential for us to reconnect with our bodies, I strongly believe that we would be a profoundly different community—a different society—if we all embraced the understanding that we are sensing, feeling, and thinking bodies.

So I am perpetually intrigued by this dimension of performance preservation, conservation, and cultivation. It extends beyond ensuring that certain artists' names remain in history and that specific works and practices are preserved as pivotal for the future. What's truly at stake is the future of entire communities, not just artists but also societies as a whole.

Hölling: If we consider conservation and cultivation as a form of political gesture, you're right on point. On the one hand, you've highlighted how certain political systems, particularly in the former East, perpetuated specific forms of dance and performance while also misappropriating them. On the other hand, the act of selecting what to preserve is inherently political, as for every performance that is preserved, numerous others are left out of the historical narrative. This underscores the highly political nature of preservation.

Leśnierowska: History is akin to a vast net and, as we fish through it, many items inevitably slip through the holes. It is, indeed, a deeply political process. Every choice we make, every decision about what to highlight and make visible, inherently involves politics. We are determining what to place in the spotlight and what to leave in the shadows. Consequently, I believe that those of us engaged in archiving, documenting, and shaping the history of art bear a significant responsibility on a political level. It is our duty to consider the implications of our choices and how they influence the futures of our communities and societies.

Hölling: I'd like to explore a personal dimension here. You wear many hats—you're a choreographer, a dancer, and a dramaturge. How does cultivation feel as a lived experience? How does it resonate with you in your personal life? How do you feel that you embody the principles of conservation and cultivation through your practice, especially when considering your role as a creator and a dancer, rather than from a curatorial standpoint?

Leśnierowska: That's a compelling question because my art practice is closely intertwined with my interest in visual arts. As a visual dramaturge and light designer, I am profoundly invested in the creation and composition of images. When creating light for performances, I am particularly intrigued by the ephemerality

of images, a concept I also explore by dwelling in and examining areas of shadow and liminal shifts of visibility—nuances that cannot be effectively captured through photography or video. While we often discuss the challenges of conserving the ephemeral art of performance, just imagine the level of ephemerality when it comes to the choreography of light!

Throughout my career, I've grappled with the challenge of documenting my performances. It often feels as though my works only truly exist through the embodied experience of the moment when they are presented and watched. Recently, I've come to realize that I am more interested in reactivation and building upon each subsequent performance with the next work in line, which I frequently do. This also relates to the discussion about breaking the vicious circle of overproduction and the constant search for 'new' materials. Instead, it's a call for a zero-waste policy within the field of performance. My approach to conservation and preservation involves the development of creative strategies and practices of recycling and upcycling movement materials. That leads to an insistence on extending their lifespan beyond a single creation and building choreography on the previously developed movement and visual vocabularies. This way, the performance evolves into a sort of palimpsest or self-palimpsest, preserving all the layers.

That leads me to the concept of traditional conservation tools that you once shared with me, particularly the use of X-rays in painting conservation. I found this methodology quite intriguing as it allows conservators to examine the layers of paintings, revealing how the work has evolved and been layered over different moments during its creation and existence. I apply this idea to my own work, imagining what an X-ray of my recent performances would show. It would undoubtedly unveil the necessary layers that have accumulated from the very inception of my journey in stage work.

Thinking about archiving and documentation, I find it far more captivating to seek visual representations of my performances that stimulate imagination, rather than attempting to preserve something that is intangible and ungraspable even to the naked eye, not to mention cameras and video recordings. My focus is on creating visual representations that bring audiences closer to an essence of performance, which is, I believe, to stir emotion and awaken association rather than just offering a glimpse into what once existed but is now gone. I remember that this practice was already in place when I used to write about dance. I used to question various modes of performance description as part of a process aimed at evoking images, allowing the reader to imagine how the performance was presented on stage, as well as the meanings and impressions it triggered for the audience.

In this context, I am immensely intrigued by the potential of preserving performances through the art of comics. I see a parallel between choreography and comics in the way they both rely on the viewer's active engagement to connect sequential images or frames. Just as comics require a reader to

bridge the gap between frames and activate the story—and directly its movement—choreography needs an audience to come alive and acquire meaning through embodied perception. I anticipate experimenting with documenting my performances using the language of comics in the future.

I'm also enthusiastic about the idea of passing on my work to a new generation of artists, allowing them to take my choreography and translate it into their own interpretations. I understand that their version will not replicate the original performance but will be another iteration, shaped by the performers themselves and the audiences. This dynamic process, rich with new meanings and responses, excites me, and I look forward to witnessing how it resonates with the present times.

This conversation took place in Brasilia and Berlin on October 13, 2023.

Notes

- 1 The Art Stations Foundation by Grażyna Kulczyk was established in 2004, as the Kulczyk Foundation. Archives of its performance program, Old Brewery New Dance, can be found on the website: The Art Stations Foundation, accessed October 29, 2023, <https://artstationsfoundation.pl/en/performative-programme/>.
- 2 The 'emancipated spectator' is a concept introduced by Jacques Rancière. Challenging the notion of the spectator's passivity and emphasizing the political nature of spectating and aesthetic experience, Rancière argues against the traditional view of the spectator as a passive, ignorant voyeur. Instead, the spectator is an active and creative participant in the art experience—someone with the ability to interpret and translate the images presented to them, rejecting the idea of a one-way transmission of knowledge from the artist. Jacques Rancière, *The Emancipated Spectator* (London: Verso, 2011), 1–23.
- 3 Joanna Leśniewska, "The Yanka Rudzka Project: Leavening," in *Polish Dance Avant-Garde Artists: Stories and Reconstructions*, ed. Joanna Szymajda (Warsaw: Institute of Music and Dance, 2017), 450–69. Joanna Leśniewska, Maciej Rożański, and Anna Legierska, "Każdy bóg ma swoją sambę," interview with Joanna Leśniewska and Maciej Rożański by Anna Legierska, *Culture.pl*, accessed October 28, 2023, <https://culture.pl/pl/artykul/kazdy-bog-ma-swoja-sambe-wywiad> (in Polish).
- 4 Karen Schaffman, "Veronika Blumstein: Platform for Performance of Alternate Histories and Identities," *Contact Quarterly* 32, no. 2 (Summer/Fall 2007): 39–41.

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