

Conservation in an era of participation

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body-archive; conservation; documentation; participation; performance-based art; process

Introduction

Museums worldwide are invested on becoming participatory spaces.¹ This growing trend takes shape in various ways. Firstly, as an 'emergency response' to the presentation of performance based, interactive, participatory or socially-engaged artworks in the museum, as in, for example the year long Tino Seghal programme, held at the Stedelijk Museum, Amsterdam.² Secondly, in innovative public programmes that consistently challenging what participation in the museum really means. For example, in her seminal book *The Participatory Museum*, Nina Simon discusses the programme at the Wing Luke Asian Museum, in Seattle, USA, where anyone can propose an exhibition.³ Thirdly, in the new forms of interaction which take place on various social media platforms such as Twitter, Facebook, etc. And finally, in the evolving transparency these institutions are experiencing either through the development of new architectural devices, as in the case of the San Francisco Museum of Modern Art (SFMoMA) or Bonnefantenmuseum in Maastricht, The Netherlands, where conservation departments are visible to visitors⁴; digital tools, such as Google Art Project⁵ which open museums to virtual audiences; or through digital data sharing, such as in the project *Sharing is caring* from the National Gallery of Denmark (SMK)⁶

While these efforts towards increasing participation in museums are clearly being implemented in curatorial and public programme departments, the same is yet to happen in conservation practice albeit with some exceptions.⁷ The need for a more active participation in conservation processes has been explored elsewhere⁸, however, less familiar, and yet equally relevant, is the discussion about the changes this participatory trend will bring to the role of the conservator and to conservation practice. With this perspective in mind, it is important to understand the future of conservation in the era of participation and, in particular, in light of the burgeoning institutionalization of performance-based artworks.⁹

Indeed, despite performance art's originary stance against art commodification and institutionalization, performance artworks are slowly being historicized and preserved for future generations. This art genre can be broadly defined as consisting in unrepeatable events, specific in time and space, which partially remain in the memories of those who experienced them and/or in their documentation.

There is an obvious antagonism between the art form and its perpetuation over time. The main feature of this dichotomy lies in the different couplings these concepts have with time. If conservation's ultimate goal is to preserve cultural heritage for the future, then performance art is considered to exist only in the present, becoming, according to theorist Peggy Phelan, 'itself through disappearance'.¹⁰ If documentation aims at recording, preserving, and storing the intangible (and tangible) features of an artwork in its multiple representations, performance art is considered by some theorists as non-representable and indescribable in any form of language¹¹.

This paradoxical relationship has led to the development of many research projects both within and outside academia¹², including in museums, and among the many outcomes, the need of a systematic and yet flexible system of documentation that can inform conservation decisions has been identified.¹³ Moreover, there was a clear need for reviewing the 'long-accepted certainties'¹⁴, while ensuring that the artwork's own biography is fully assessed and used as an instrument for designing specific conservation strategies.¹⁵ New models, developed from concepts found in the social sciences, specially ethnography, were considered to be instrumental for the preservation of these works, not only as they provided the means to analyse the gathered documentation, but also because they were taken to promote the proper means of interaction with artists¹⁶ and audiences.¹⁷ Vivian van Saaze, for example, demonstrated that the interaction with the artist during an artist's interview could be exercise of observation-participation as defined by ethnography¹⁸. Similarly, Sanneke Stigter proposed 'autoethnography' - 'a self-reflexive qualitative research method from the social sciences which foregrounds the researcher's subjectivity' - as a method for practicing conservators that actively participate in the installation of complex artworks.¹⁹

In the case of performance art in general, and of participatory or collaborative performance artworks in particular, these frameworks seem to this author to be insufficient as they do not encompass the participatory nature of those works. This paper will argue for the need to involve

participatory conservation practices in the preservation of such works and, as such, the performance piece *Identificación*, created by the Portuguese artist Manoel Barbosa in 1975 will be explored as a starting point for the discussion.

***Identificación*, Manoel Barbosa, 1975**

The work *Identificación* is a performance artwork created by Barbosa in the midst of the 'Portuguese revolutionary process' (April 1974 – April 1976) and directly following **on from his participation** in the Portuguese Colonial War (1961-1974). Having been invited to participate in an art festival in Barcelona, then still under the dictatorship of General Franco, and coming directly from the civil war in Angola, Barbosa decided to show this happening as a gesture of identification with the Catalan people.²⁰

The artwork consisted of two parts. Outside the festival's building, the artist walked around in circles, producing a spiral with his movement, which started from the centre and continued onto the edges of the space. During the movement, he carried two tins of acrylic cobalt paint. Once the walk was over, the artist poured the paint from one tin to the other, repeating that action at least five times.²¹ After the last pouring, the artist walked into the festival building, followed by the audience. The second part of the performance started as he passed through the door. It consisted of four performers, two male and two female, walking on a straight line while performing mechanical gestures. These performers followed a very rigorous score prepared by the artist, which was aimed at recreating an atmosphere of oppression and aggression, as performed by the male performers, followed, in the last moments of the performance, by the cathartic expression of liberation by the female performers. This catharsis was embodied through a disruption in time and space – where before there was silence at the end of the performance the violence of crashing mirrors echoed around the room. This motif of violent liberation, which stood in sharp contrast the pacifist liberation from the then Portuguese regime, is a direct consequence of the artist's participation in the colonial war, which ended with the restoration of free speech. More than 40 years after its presentation, the context that led Barbosa to create *Identificación* as a gesture of identification with the Catalan people no longer exists in today's Iberia. Furthermore, there is an impossibility of reproduction of these works because, aside from the work's score, no material elements have survived.²²

When interviewed about the conservation of his work, Barbosa was not opposed to its documentation or to its future re-enactment.²³ Indeed, he was the first artist to collaborate with the choreographer Vânia Rovisco in her artistic project *REACTING TO TIME, The Portuguese in performance art*, tasked with transmitting Portuguese performance works to the future.

According to Rovisco:

'REACTING TO TIME wants to update the specific bodily memory of [Portuguese performance art] early experiments. Access the source of that information, update it, pass it on by direct experience and present it publicly: these are the goals of this project. It's about building a living archive embodied in the present'.²⁴

Drawing on the performance studies theorist André Lepecki's notion of *body-archive*,²⁵ Rovisco considers that people have an embodied knowledge and that ignoring such a source, 'which comes from a relation of accumulated reflexive cultural actions ... is a flaw in the recognition of a heritage that belongs to all of us'.²⁶ In the absence of the archive, Rovisco recovers artist's memories that are embedded in their words and in their performative practice (i.e. their bodies), in order to transmit them through her own body (see Figure 1). She argues she does this by 'transferring' this corporeal knowledge to an undetermined number of week-long workshop participants. These participants, who do not need any previous knowledge or dance practice, engage with this transmission by embodying the score and gestures so that, by the end of the week, they are able to present the performance work at a given venue. This process not only activates and transports memories of the original artwork into a contemporary context, through its 'actualization'²⁷ but, with the work's presentation, it purports to engage in a conversation between the artist's generation and present and future generations. According to Rovisco, she transmits more than the specific gestures that constitute the performance artwork, rather she trains the bodies of others to be sensible to the temporalities of the work, so that what is 'received' is not necessarily the artwork as it was, but the spirit it embodied.²⁸

From 2015 onwards, *Identificación* has been 'transmitted' five times in five different locations, with five different sets of workshop participants. Besides these transmissions Rovisco, together with her colleagues, have produced a large volume of photographic and video documentation, for circulation to present and future generations. In this sense, it is possible to consider that the various bodies involved, from Rovisco, the participants and the various audiences, serve as kinds

of repositories of memories. The interpretation by Rovisco of *Identificación*, according to Manoel Barbosa, comes from the collective artistic effort effected between him and Rovisco.²⁹ Barbosa's perspective is in line with recent theories of conservation that consider that artworks do not exist in a static state, but rather undertake a trajectory full of variations throughout their lives.³⁰ Rovisco's interpretation of *Identificación* can thus be seen as a versioning of the 1975 ordinary event which, at the same time, brings about unexpected repercussions as her participants are not only the vehicles conveying a particular moment of artistic expression but they also bring their own perspectives to the work's history and, somehow, representation. However, as the creative authority of this work is divided between Barbosa and Rovisco, and arguably with the workshop participants, how can such a so-fragile work, devoid of substantive materiality, be preserved? Who should be called on to decide the next future of *Identificación*?

A delegated affair

According to the art historian and theorist Claire Bishop, at the end of the 1980s, performance art practice underwent an important change. While artists in the 1960s or 1970s valorized their own body, performance artists from the 1990s-onwards started delegating their performances to others. Bishop calls the practice 'delegated-performances':

'The act of hiring non-professionals or specialists in other fields to undertake the job of being present and performing at a particular time and a particular place on behalf of the artist, and following his/her instructions. This strategy differs from a theatrical and cinematic tradition of employing people to act on the director's behalf in the following crucial respect: the artists ... tend to hire people to perform their own socio-economic category, be this on the basis of gender, class, ethnicity, age, disability, or (more rarely) a profession'.³¹

The delegation in the execution of *Identificación* - from Barbosa to the four performers in 1975, and from Barbosa to Rovisco, and then from Rovisco to the workshop participants in 2015 - is in line with what Bishop considers as 'participatory practice', as it is manifested in a 'gesture of ceding some or all authorial control'. Accordingly Bishop believes that this 'is conventionally regarded as more egalitarian and democratic than the creation of a work by a single artist, while shared production is also seen to entail the aesthetic benefits of greater risk and

unpredictability'.³² Due to the connection *authorship* usually has with *authenticity*³³, the giving-over of (some) authorial control clearly has some consequences in the way the authenticity is perceived. Although performance art authenticity is usually 'connected to the live and linked specifically to a particular moment and person as performer, which is experienced and valued as a form of "presence",³⁴ in the case of *Identificación* authenticity can be said to reside in its act of delegated authorship. Preserving *Identificación* therefore means, in some sense, enabling its participatory reenactment in the future.

On the documentation process of *Identificación*

When much of both the context and materials of an originary performance-based work has changed or disappeared the conservation process of such work usually begins with its documentation.³⁵ This documentation is often a process of archaeology, where documents from the originary event as well as other documents about the artwork are retrieved, and new documents, mostly based on testimonies from the artist and other people who experienced the artwork, are produced. In the case of *Identificación* documentation necessarily includes essential instructions for the development of the workshops and its re-enactment rights. In this case, conserving this work means not only documenting the (re)performance itself but also to provide means to maintain the work's social nature, which is manifestly where its variability resides.

The documentation of *Identificación* consisted of three integrated steps: documentation gathering, documentation production and final assessment.³⁶ Due to the lack of any available material that share an indexical relationship to the original event, this process was particularly challenging. Nonetheless, documentation production began with the conservator taking part in the performance as part of the documentation process which consisted of: active participation in Rovisco's first transmission and public presentation of the performance, followed by an autoethnographical account of the process; two interviews with the artist Manoel Barbosa about *Identificación* in 1975 and his later collaboration with Rovisco in the new performances of the work; observation of Rovisco's processes mainly through documentation produced by her colleagues; interviews with workshop participants and audience members and, finally, three interviews with Rovisco.

This process differs from previous participation efforts in the field of conservation as the conservator actively participates in the performance which directly influenced the documentation process. Furthermore, Vânia Rovisco's method, as 'authorized' by Barbosa, is still ongoing such that the works further 'transmission' is scheduled to take place in future events.

Although it might appear unorthodox to begin a process of documentation by directly participating in a performance, it is important to acknowledge that, in considering the perspective of the variations in an artwork's trajectory, as referred to above, Rovisco's interpretation of the work is an instantiation of *Identificación*. If so, then its spectators and participants, far from only being repositories for its memory, are the last pieces without which the work does not exist. Although it can be argued that this is true for every artistic manifestation,³⁷ in this case participation lies at the core of the Rovisco's intention. Furthermore, it allowed for the emergence of novel forms of documentation that usually do not figure in more conventional performance documentation due to the difficulties in interpolating performative elements from afar, such as the notation for the performance of a work and the description of complex movements undergone in a performance.³⁸ In trying to surmount this problem, an annotated version of the artist's score featuring all the details that emerged from the participatory experience of the conservator was added to the documentation, whilst at the same time, the documentation also included recordings of both spectators and participants. Incorporating these in the documentation helped reinforce the delegated nature of the work, which was at the core of Rovisco's intention to transfer 'authorial power' to the participants involved in the creation of the work.

This case study, besides provoking ideas about public participation in the creation and execution of performance works as 'participatory' or 'socially-engaged artworks', offers an alternative view to think about the continued transmission of the spirit of these works for present and future generations. Arguably Rovisco's techniques can be seen as a way to safeguard the future of *Identificación* and according to ICOM-CC's definition of conservation,³⁹ it can also be considered a way to conserve *Identificación*. Such participatory action further allows the creation of a form of embodied knowledge within the conservator themselves.

In a way this is reminiscent of the notion of 'godmothers' deployed by the Japanese artist Suchan Kinoshita, who trains individuals to take care and make decisions about her works and

their future trajectory.⁴⁰ The assertion here is that the conservator who engages in such performative practice might be better equipped to make nuanced decisions about an artwork's future reinterpretations. Indeed, following on the notion of *body-archive* introduced above, it is through participation in a performance that the body of the conservator becomes an archive of that performance's practices, which could not be transmitted so fully otherwise.

In the case of *Identificación*, the mechanical gesture that populates the entire performance can only be conveyed through understanding its execution in bodily practice. In order to answer to such a limitation a new field, 'documentation of absence', was inserted in *Identificación*'s final documentation. In this concluding field, the conservator annotated the extant score or relevant document with all the features that cannot be described or transmitted in words alone to indicate what is missing from the documentation, including their own inalienable experience.

To date, the transmission of *Identificación* is ongoing, and is sporadically presented in many different venues, and considered as such even in conversations or interactions that include workshop participants. Thus we might describe its conservation as 'processual'⁴¹ as each iteration of the work as it travels the globe means that various local communities engage in its process thereby multiplying the work's perspectives. Arguably, these multiple perspectives should be documented not only to inform future conservation decisions, but also to inscribe the work in a multitude of memories.

From participants to memory: sharing responsibilities in conservation

This paper has discussed one possible future for conservation in an era of participation. Participation can exist in various ways and we have focused on the preservation of performance artworks based on participatory practices and discussed a new role for the conservator as an active participant in these processes. A conservator could, in many instances, move beyond their traditional role as observer or as observer-participant, and engage directly with the performative practices that form many of the artistic works as entering the contemporary museum. This is especially important in adapting the practices of documentation in the face of the challenges presented by the increasing intangibility of many contemporary artworks. In this regard, conservators must go beyond producing purely technical documentation and be involved in constructing the narratives that surround the conservation of such artworks. In the case of

participatory performance artworks, this can be achieved through a careful documentation of the engagement process with involved communities, description the mechanisms of collaboration, and the critical reflection on their possibilities and challenges. It is through this active engagement, that it has been argued that it is possible to actively share the responsibility of preserving this common heritage.

As illustrated in the case study, a conservator's participation can happen in a multitude of ways: from interviewing the artist and others involved to being an active participant in the execution (or even future transmission) of the work. Indeed, as conservators already contribute to the work's archive by producing their documentation, they could contribute further by embodying that documentation. By this we mean that what appears as a rather intangible task can be materialized in the final documentation through the provision of autoethnographical and reflexive accounts about the participatory process, and include not only what was recovered but what got lost, or could not be recovered in that process. In this context, we have introduced a new field, 'documentation of absence' and we hope that this reflexive view of the conservation process is relevant not only for performance-based works but for every conservation effort, as it details the challenges and possibilities of the process itself.

Although the conservator's body cannot become an archive of all performance-based artworks that exist in a given institution, the issue of 'the body as a document', raised by Rovisco in her description of the project can be seen as at least one operative concept for the conservation of these and other aesthetic manifestations. The body of a conservator is already an archive of practices, accrued from peers, and such practices can be observed in the application of many methods in the conservation of other kinds of cultural heritage. However, in the case of the preservation of performance art, such an archive can only fully come about through the conservator's active participation.

Finally, thinking about conservation in the future necessarily means to rethink the ways in which the sense of an artwork or cultural expression might be transmitted between present and future generations. This implies a change of paradigm both in the duties and responsibilities of conservators, and also in terms of their skills. It might seem unimaginable to require conservators to add ethnographic and other social science practices to their already very interdisciplinary and broad skill set but this is in line with the role of the conservator as a mediator in the decision-

making process, which, in the future, promises to involve an even larger number of distinct stakeholders. An increased focus on practices in the social sciences seems to this author the only way to create the tools required to rethink what such new transmissions could involve.

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Abstract

Despite performance art's originary stance against art commodification and institutionalization, performance artworks are slowly being historicized and preserved for future generations. This art genre can be defined as consisting of unrepeatable events, specific in time and space, which may persist in some form in the memories of those who experienced them or in their documentation. The paradoxical relationship between performance art and its perpetuation in time has led to the development of many frameworks for its preservation. Artworks consisting of participatory practices present challenges that go beyond the work's preservation, as traditional documentation methods do not usually encompass their social dimension. Equally relevant is the discussion about what changes this participatory trend will bring to the role of the conservator and to conservation practice in general. With this in mind, it is important to understand the future of conservation in an era of participation, in particular, in light of the burgeoning institutionalization of performance-based artworks. This paper aims to discuss these issues while proposing the concept of *body-archive* of the conservator as an operative concept to re-evaluate the way documentation is currently executed. To illustrate this notion the work *Identificación* (1975) by the Portuguese artist Manoel Barbosa and the participatory practices involved in its documentation process will be discussed.