Performance after performance: on the material legacies and their possibilities for transmission

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Abstract
What is the material legacy of performance artworks? What are the possibilities for those legacies, and how much of that depends on the artist’s involvement in the historicisation and institutionalisation of their own works? This paper will reflect on the legacies of performance art and its memories and on the ways the museum and the artist work in the co-production of their material manifestations. It will explore this theme through two complementary perspectives – one of a curator, and one of a conservator, also bringing together the agencies of artists, institutions, and objects themselves. In bridging the workings of the exhibition and the museum’s backstage, we aim to provoke an integral approach to the material lives of performance artworks and to the manifold of material manifestations of their legacies.

Keywords: Material legacy; Reenactment; Museum; Memory.

Performance after performance: on the material legacies of artists and their possibilities for transmission

In this paper, we will explore the material futures of performance artworks in the Deleuzian terms of their potentiality. The article focuses specifically on artworks that have the potential of being collected as performance, i.e. as a set of actions that are collected with the intention of being activated in the museum space, and that, so far, have resisted being collected by memory institutions. In this process, we will discuss the place of reenactment in the museum, and how reenactment practices can contribute to the memorialisation of artworks, the preservation of artists’ legacies, and the opening of potential futures for these artworks. In the context of this paper, we also expect to challenge perspectives about the legacies of performance art after the performance. Indeed, albeit self-evident that much of what a legacy entails has to do with the ways in which artists and their practice are memorialised, the notion of ‘material legacy’ seems to be somewhat troubled when we reenact practices of re-enactment in the collecting institutions, putting them at the centre of an inquiry on conservation and memory.

In focusing on performance art practices, so far, have not been collected, we will be able to discuss the place of memory in the public sphere, and to contextualise the museum, or the collection, as a practice of potential. Specifically, in the case of this paper, we will be illustrating our argument with two artworks by the artist Cildo Meireles (b. 1948, Brazil): Fiat Lux (1973-9), and Inserções em Circuitos Ideológicos: Projeto Cédula (1975).

While Meireles’ oeuvre encompasses one of the most representative themes of post-war Brazilian avant-garde art - the relationship between the sensorial and the cerebral, the body and the mind (Brett and Todolí 2008, 10), some of his artworks, including the two that are being explored in the context of this paper, address political and ethical paradigms, which are, at the same time, specific to the Brazilian culture and representative of practices of oppression and, in varying degrees, visible across various geographies. The activist nature of most of Cildo Meireles practice adds a layer of reflection to the analysis of the potential material futures of these artworks in dialogue with memory institutions.
A performance work that Cildo Meireles presented in Rio de Janeiro in 1979, in which 126,000 drawings were made use of existing circulation systems (in this case, the circulation of money in the economy) to make them move within a new underground circuit for the circulation of political statements. These works are a testament to the political potential of art, as they not only perform a critical function of challenging power but also create a temporary juncture where those in power do not have the upper hand. The works, which were created during a period of political instability in Brazil, demonstrate the ability of performance art to resist and subvert power structures.

The works, known as the Banknote Project, were created by Meireles and were intended to counteract the dominant forces of the Brazilian military dictatorship. They were created through a collaboration between the artist and a group of political activists, who worked together to produce the drawings and distribute them throughout the country. The drawings were created using a combination of methods, including painting, collage, and printmaking, and were then distributed throughout the community.

The Banknote Project was a response to the political climate of the time, which was marked by widespread political repression and violence. The works were intended to provide a form of resistance to the regime, and to serve as a means of传达 a political message. They were also intended to create a sense of community and solidarity among the people.

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stayed drawing for about five years. At that point, I was living in New York (1971–3) and went to see an exhibition of Matisse’s work at MoMA. My eyes welled up. I began to rethink the importance of art and to reflect on the role played by museums in the democratisation of culture. (Meireles and Morais 2008, n.p.)

The expression of Insertions into Ideological Circuits – Project Banknote is, therefore, intertwined with time while also unfolding both in significance and materiality as time goes by and the political landscape changes. The artist has revisited this work in 2012 and in 2019. In 2012, Meireles stamped the banknotes with sentences that read «Porque Celso Daniel foi assassinado?» [Why was Celso Daniel killed?] and «Porque Toninho do PF foi assassinado?» [Why was PF’s Toninho murdered?], echoing the deaths of these politicians linked to the scandal of Mensalão. In 2019, Meireles questioned the suspicious death of Marielle Franco in 2018. A stamp featuring Franco’s picture was also put side-by-side with the profile of a woman embodying the symbol of the republic, juxtaposing ideals of activism, struggle, and democracy itself.

The actualisation of Insertions by Meireles, on the one hand, responds to what Bruguera came to define as ‘political-timing specific’, with the artist’s legacy being intertwined with the multiple possible iterations of this work across time. On the other hand, in redefining the discursive prompts in this work, Meireles also reframes its aesthetic possibilities in the museum: how does the expanding life of Insertions relate with that of the remains of past actions that are now in museum collections? Can the legacy of this artwork exist in a given, static, format, or is its legacy intertwined with that of circulation devices, economic reproduction, and new agents in forms of political violence and oppression?

Collecting the political, or the legacies of performance

Part of the process of preserving artworks like Insertions into Ideological Circuits is to account for the changes in how the artworks change over time, and to accept that their materiality needs to convey a moment in time and a situation that keeps challenging any type of normativity. To give an example, Cildo Meireles’ banknotes that ask «Who killed Herzog?» provide a glimpse into a past political action, functioning almost as a historical document of a practice that no longer exists. The banknotes that ask «Who killed Marielle Franco?», on the other hand, are a site of political statement and protest, which gain ever more relevance in the context of the current ruling. In keeping with the form, but reframing temporality in the actual object, Meireles is bringing the artwork to a site of ongoing political action, activating it once more. Tania Bruguera also reflects on this dichotomy in her Art Forum article. In her own words:

form is defined in political-timing specific art by the political sensibility of the time and place for which it is made. Thus, political consequences become the artwork’s meaning and content. Form and content are interdependent, linked to the specificity of a political moment. Any political change requires a reevaluation of the form used to produce political art. (Bruguera 2019, n.p.n.)

We already see how art institutions sometimes struggle to acknowledge a work that, by the means of its production, needs to have its materiality revitalised and updated. When these artworks are incorporated in museum collections, with few exceptions, they are usually transformed into fixed and institutionalised entities, which do not respect liveness from the original context of creation (cf. Madeira, Salazar and Marcal, 2018). That is the case, when they are incorporated as installations, or when performance is presented as documentation (Calonje 2015, Madeira et al. 2018). In both cases, decisions are often made a priori, with, until recently, institutions struggling to consider reenactments as means for transmission, due to their association with the idea of fake or appropriation (Lepecki 2016). Whenever they are indeed acquired and shown as performance, issues relating to where and how the artwork can be activated, and what are the consequences of its activism/activation become ever more important. These works, as mentioned by Claire Bishop, function differently in different contexts and times, and some of the things they ought to activate simply do not exist in some parts of the world:

(...) there is a certain awkwardness to translating political timing specificity to our own milieu. It seems obvious that such interventions will look very different in Cuba, China, and Russia than in so-called liberal democracies, where culture is less micromanaged and dissent has (at least until recently) been viewed as healthy. This difference is manifest in the respective terminologies by which we label opposition: The dissident in authoritarian regimes is referred to here as an activist. Political timing specificity sits between these positions, dissident and activist, yet differs from both, because it seeks to expose contradiction rather than to express indignation or propose solutions (Bishop 2019).

Although the un-transposability of the milieu of activist practice to other temporal or spatial geographies would be particularly relevant when thinking about some political-timing specific artworks – such as Tatlin’s Whisper #6 (Havana Version), created by Tania Bruguera in 2009 and now part of the collection of the Guggenheim Museum – some artworks by Cildo Meireles contest this position. That is the case of the performance/installation Fiat Lux. This artwork operates through the ambiguity of being inserted in a museum or gallery space, which is deemed safe, clean, neutral, while also posing substantial danger, risk, and discomfort to everyone that enters such space. The sandpaper on the floor, which causes the visitor to create a scratch sound with each step, is juxtaposed with 126,000 matches that are placed right at the centre of the gallery. Sentences from the Sermon of the Mountain, induce an act of judgement about the righteous of audiences, who read these words while also looking to themselves in the mirrored surface. The performers, posing as security officers, not only restrain the movements of visitors by impact their fruition of the space of the matchboxes, but they also exert psychological pressure, making clear to anyone that steps into that space that they do not belong there, and that they are being watched, and will be restricted if need. This space, this artwork, is not for them.

Having been created in 1979, in the middle of the oppressive dictatorial regime in Brazil, this artwork emerged and developed in a very particular political context. Certainly, the feelings of fear, surveillance, risk are not comparable to the ones felt by the visitors who attended the inaugural event of Fiat Lux in Rio de Janeiro. But, while the temporal and emotional specificity of this work is at play in defining its possible material legacies, we argue that it should not be seen as an impediment to practices of memorialisation.

This artwork is currently absent from museum collection, having mostly been shown as ephemera and photographic documentation. Could the political context of the emergence of this
Reenactments differ from performance documents both at the time of their creation and in the way they are embodied. While documents tend to follow what is considered to be the traditional logic of the archive, the performative nature of reenactments means that they are less tangible and more performative in nature, requiring the active participation of the audience. The question of what to acquire and in which ways comes to the fore. Is it for museums to acquire artworks that are to be shown in places where they still work in that liminal space between theatre and in the way they are embodied. While documents tend to follow what is considered to be the traditional logic of the archive, the performative nature of reenactments means that they are less tangible and more performative in nature, requiring the active participation of the audience.

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contained in any single place but rather operates by way of affective interconnections or creative encounters” (van den Hengel 2017, 127). In this sense, as van den Hengel puts it, memory itself «works as a performative practice» (van den Hengel 2017, 127). It is, therefore, possible to think of reenactments as the potential to develop the ‘still non-exhausted creative fields of impalpable possibilities’ of the past performance artworks (Lepecki 2010, 31). But in which ways can reenactments be utilised to activate the performative momentum promoted by Insertions, or the political environment instigated by Fiat Lux? Moreover, how can re-enactments in museums participate in the construction of the legacy of ‘political-timing specific’ artworks inside and outside their collections?

Practices of memorialisation expressed through re-enactments indeed promote some of the possibilities that emerge from the process of going back and yet, being always in the present. This form of ‘chronopolitical action’, as Lepecki puts it, is also one that assists museums in reframing procedures of care around these political-timing specific artworks, contesting, in the process, the limits of the material legacy of performance art. There are, however, other aspects in museum practice that are not quite so explicit and that create structures of fixation that hamper the possibilities for these artworks to change. If we adapt a Foucaultian and Agambenian perspective about the museum, this project of re-enactment can directly oppose the prospect of these institutions as confinement devices. In this sense, the legacy of artworks such as Fiat Lux and Insertions into Ideological Circuits is inevitably prone to become static, self-contained, and controlled by the museum. On the other hand, museums and other memory institutions can continue the steps pioneered in the 20th century, and that led to the collection of installations, video art, or other performance-based artworks that directly contradistinct processes, procedures, and structures. Indeed, if museums, inasmuch as reenactments, suffer from an inherent anachronistic nature, existing in a liminal state between the past and the future, would not be the case that such intrinsic liminality could be actualised through forms of activism? Is the museum not already recognised as an inherently political place of experience? And, if so, can the purpose of experience in museum, which has, so far, been formatted around forms of curatorial practice that are somewhat intertwined with forms of economic growth and the creation of social capital, be reformatted to acknowledge the potential of memorialising activist practice in artist’s legacies?

Conclusions

The present essay intends to interpellate the concept of legacy through the multiple perspectives, not only in the way that the artist conceives the futures of these works, but also the way that these legacies are activated or transformed by both the institution and the artist. The works of Cildo Meireles bring to this discussion an important gaze through the dichotomies of the spaces of emergence of legacies of activist artistic practice in the museum as part of the public sphere.

In the way of trying to define what the artists legacies mean in the contemporary artistic practices pertaining to activism and performance, we intertwined the notion of legacy with that of survival; and such survival, we propose, is operated through reenactment. In this essay, we have explored the potential of reenactment for recovering counter-narratives of the legacy of performance art in museums, which are usually seen as contained and static spaces. Reenactments appear as memory practices, which, instead of repeating (oppressive and male- and Western-centric) historical narratives, diffraction history in different bodies, perspectives, and memories. In this sense, reenactments are forms of preservation that recall embodied andinscriptional archives, often resulting in interchanging spaces between conservation and curatorial practices. They are forms of constellation in themselves, therefore, they remember both the liminarity and insubordinate nature nurtured in the original event, and multiply the instances of political dissent, adapting the form of the performance to acknowledge various political circumstances. These elements comply and embody the possibility of an actualisation and (re)activation of these political and artistic legacies, while fostering their potential of transformation and interpellation with each exhibition context. The concept of legacy, therefore, rests here in a performative domain, one that embraces the constant mutation of the meanings of artworks, and engages with the idea that the original event is precisely that: the start of a life full of expected and unexpected transformations, of turning points that lead to unstable and successive acts of recreation.

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NOTES

1 Memory institutions are, in this context, a set of different places and discourses, which have the main goal of mediating these futures and the role of the memory in the transmission, actualisation and (re)activation processes of this artworks and his practices (in the case of Cildo Meireles). In this sense, the museum where his works are incorporated, but also the place of an exhibition, its archive and, also, the public sphere are memory repositories of their contexts, practices, materials and historical and cultural dissonances.

2 According to Bishop, Bruguera also actively reenacted works by Ana Mendieta during years after Mendieta’s death, actively inscribing her works in art history. See Bishop 2019.

3 In her essay, Claire Bishop identifies ‘political timing specific’ art as being characteristic of Latin American actions created during the recent periods of dictatorship. She provides examples such as Brazilian collective 3Nós3, the Chilean group Colectivo Acciones de Arte, or the Cuban collective Arte Calle.

4 Celso Augusto Daniel (1951-2002) was a Brazilian politician from the Workers political party (PT). He was the mayor of Santo André, and was murdered on the 18th of January of 2002. All of the witnesses of his kidnapping and murder died between 2002 and 2005. Antônio da Costa Santos (1952-2001), known as ‘Toninho do PT’ was a Brazilian politician from the Workers political party (PT), mayor of Campinas. He was murdered on the 10th of September of 2002.

5 Marielle Franco was a politician, activist, and outspoken critic of police brutality. She was murdered by two individuals, who shot her and her driver multiple times in the middle of a traffic jam.

6 If it is true that the practice of reenactment evokes other ways of thinking the museum practices by questioning its temporalities or the crystallized knowledge and histories, it is also responsible for reinforcing this tendency of a place of experiences that is growing in the museum institution, not just as a living place, but a place of this new ‘experience economy’. This topic falls beyond this essay’s scope. For more on this see Von Hantelmann (2014).