

Introduction: Archiving Performance

Peter Dickinson

It seems entirely appropriate to launch a new online journal in Performance Studies with a special issue devoted to the question of performance archives. For what is the World Wide Web if not the archival machine *par excellence*, the digital equivalent of Freud's Mystic Writing-Pad? The Internet is, paradigmatically, that external "place of consignment" whose specific "technique[s] of repetition"—in Derrida's famous take on Freud—at once allow us to forget and, in the enactment of their inherent "archiviolithic force" (whether as comment threads, memes, or retweets), remind us that in cyberspace, especially, nothing ever disappears completely (Derrida 1998, 11, 13–14; emphasis in original; see also Freud 2008 [1925]). The "record" and "archive" buttons in the Open Journal Systems software are ones I've used repeatedly in putting together this issue, both in terms of keeping track of various revisions to the pieces that follow and in "domiciling" submissions that, for different reasons, could not be included. As editor of this journal, I am acutely aware of performing the role of Derridean *archon*, that is, of securing the content remains of this issue by means of what, after Rebecca Schneider, we might call the retroactive loss of other, equally knowing histories (2011, 103–104). At the same time, I hope that, again following Schneider (104), the "taking place" of this ritual of scholarly exchange via a mode of access that is freely available and in the public domain will lead to a rethinking of Performance Studies' self-archivization as a discipline—one whose institutional genealogy has, after all, been largely coterminous with the life of the Internet.

Peggy Phelan, whose privileging of performance's disappearance (duly cited by several of the contributors to this special issue) might, paradoxically, be said to have inaugurated PS's de facto *anarchivic* turn (see Phelan 1993, 146–66), also—and with characteristic perspicacity—foresaw some of the consequences of this networked futurity. In the introduction to *The Ends of Performance*, she writes:

Performance studies, precisely because it has struggled so rigorously with the perils of preservation and the treacheries of transmission, is alert to the Net's potential to flatten and screen that which we might want most to remember, to love, to learn. We have created and studied a discipline based on that which disappears, art that cannot be preserved or posted. And we know that performance knows things worth knowing. As the electronic paradigm moves into the center of universities, corporations, and other systems of power-knowledge, the "knowing" that cannot be preserved or posted may well generate a mourning that transcends the current lite Luddite resistance to technology. (1998, 8)

Part of the work of that mourning, I would contend, is a more nuanced understanding of the ways in which the performance of performance documentation, as facilitated by new media technologies, need not foreclose on the materiality or embodied (cross-)temporality of the objects—and subjects—of its analysis. To this end, Johanna Drucker, drawing on and extending the work of Matthew Kirshenbaum (2008), reminds us that digital media are material, and in fundamentally performative ways: "what something *is* has to be understood in terms of what it *does*, how it works within machinic, systemic, and cultural domains" (Drucker 2013, para. 4; emphasis in original). In such a model, according to Drucker, both the "forensic" evidence related to a document's production and subsequent archival storage—be it ink on watermarked paper or encrypted binary

code uploaded to a secure server—and its “formal” organization and presentation to a reader-user (from a library collection’s cataloguing system to a website’s design interface) “serve as a provocation for the creation of a reading as a constitutive interpretative act. The specific structures and forms, substrates and organizational features, are *probability conditions* for production of an interpretation. Knowledge creates the objects of its discourses, it does not ‘discover’ them” (para. 17; emphasis in original). Echoing Schneider’s argument in *Performing Remains* on the “discursive oratorio” of repertory (re)citations that plays out in the “*live* space of . . . encounter” with archival texts (2011, 106), Drucker notes that the:

Material conditions [of digital media] provide an inscriptional base, a score, a point of departure, a provocation, from which a work is produced as an event. The materiality of the system, no matter how stable, bears only a probabilistic relation to the event of production, which always occurs only in real time and is distinct in each instance. (Drucker 2013, para. 8)¹

It is thus instructive, given Diana Taylor’s influential account of performance’s repertory challenge to the hegemony of the written archive in *The Archive and the Repertoire* (2003), that so much of the work of the Hemispheric Institute of Performance and Politics takes place in the form of electronic documentation, from its *E-Misférica* online journal to its extensive digital video library of performances from across the Americas. Likewise, in positing the virtual archive of the Internet as a productive “live” repository for the ethnographer’s field notes, Johannes Fabian suggests that it also facilitates the performance of a new genre of ethnographic writing. Fabian labels this genre “commentary,” a necessarily belated practice of writing that, in juxtaposing or making co-present the ethnographic text (e.g., one’s field notes) *and* the analysis of that text, exposes what Dwight Conquergood (2002) lamented as the “scriptocentrism” of so much ethnographic scholarship as a mere “protocol of a performance”: “a text’s presence signals the absence of the event it documents. . . . Commentary . . . is writing in the face of that tension (Fabian 2008, 11). One thinks as well, in this regard, of the increasingly popular phenomenon of live tweeting theatre productions, this bid to make the technically impoverished and lumpily prosaic work of the stage more stimulating to a wired generation giving new meaning to Philip Auslander’s claim, *contra* Phelan, that performance becomes itself not through its disappearance but through its (in this case, virtually instantaneous) documentation (see Auslander 2006).

If what Nik Wakefield, in his review of the literature on performance documentation in this issue, refers to as “time-specificity” is fundamentally what binds performance to its archives, then it bears commenting on the confluence of the current mania for “reperformance” in live art with the latest “archival turn” in Performance Studies. As Amelia Jones has argued, both forms of cultural expression are tied to the marketplace—of art objects and ideas—in late capitalism (Jones 2011, 20, 42). Thus, one might judge the near simultaneous appearance of two recent weighty anthologies in the field—Jones and Heathfield’s *Perform, Repeat, Record* (2012) and Borggreen and Gade’s *Performing Archives/ Archives of Performance* (2013)—as an attempt to secure “in history” not just the “eventness” of certain iconic performance works, but also a dominant ideological interpretation of those works. However, as Jones herself argues in her critique of “presentness” in relation to the reperformances of Marina Abramović (2011), and as Schneider has demonstrated in her account of the historical institutionalization of “ephemerality” in Performance Studies criticism at NYU (2011, 94–96), both impulses can only ever be productive failures: the “now” of an event can never fully be grasped, only subjectively retrieved as a future “then.” Another way of saying this, to return to Drucker, is that

performance archives become interesting less for what is in them, than for what one does with them.

It is this (re)doing of (and with) archival remains that forms the main connective thread of the articles included in this special issue. In “Modelling What Cannot: Performance’s Return to its Archives in Bodies in Flight’s *Do The Wild Thing! Redux*,” Simon Jones offers a nuanced and theoretically sophisticated exploration of the technological—as in, via Heidegger, technical *and* knowledge-based—relationship between performance and its documents, and especially what this has to say about mixed-mediality in the digital age. Focusing on his own and his (non-)collaborators’ installation-based return to the archive of a previously co-created work, Jones advances a theory of performance and its documentation as a relation of relations, a being in-between: of materials/objects; viewers/participants; creators/collaborators; inside/outside; past/present. In so doing, Jones demonstrates how practice as research becomes a means to en flesh textually the memorial remains of the original performance, by in his case writing toward rather than away from his object-muse. At the same time, this technique of the archive exposes performance’s relationship to its documentary remains as fundamentally processual rather than supercessional. Neither can claim definitively to *be*—or to stand in for—the art work, according to Jones; rather, together they become the site of that work’s ongoing collaborative reencounter.

A similar principle is at the heart of Lucas Ihlein and Louise Curham’s “Reaching Through to the Object: Reenacting Malcolm Le Grice’s *Horror Film 1*.” The authors draw on their own artistic practice *and* archival/academic training to discuss the process that resulted in their collective, Teaching and Learning Cinema (TLC), reperforming in 2014 a key work of Expanded Cinema from one of the leading figures of the London Film-Makers’ Co-op in the 1970s. In the course of this discussion, Ihlein and Curham advance a cross-temporal and activist theory of “tending the archive” that not only makes such hybrid performance works available to contemporary audiences, but that also sheds new light on the original socio-cultural and aesthetic contexts of their creation and performance—what Ihlein and Curham refer to as “reaching through to the object.” Rich in descriptive detail regarding the authors’ work both *in the archive* and with Le Grice’s film as an *archival object*, these two threads of analysis coalesce in a fascinating account of TLC’s thinking about which of its members would reenact Le Grice’s film and, as crucially, in what state of undress. As Ihlein and Curham note, such decisions remind us that the “object” being reached for here is at once the performance itself *and* the body performing it—which, in this case, necessarily brings up both the politics of aging and the politics of gender.

Artists’ gendered relationships with their performance archives is the point of departure for Alison Bory’s “Dancing Archives of Experience: Surfacing Histories, Staging Subjectivities.” Drawing on an extensive body of scholarship related to dance reenactment, as well as feminist autobiography studies, Bory focuses on the recent “choreographic returns” of three contemporary dance artists: Jennifer Monson, Jennifer Lacey, and Meredith Monk. By revisiting and reinventing previous work in these returns—and, in the case of Monson, by insisting on the primacy of the “live dancing archive” over and above her own role as performer—these artists are, according to Bory, not trying to fix with any degree of authority key pieces from their repertoires *in time*. Rather, danced reenactment is here posited as only ever relative to—and performative of—the fluidity and contingency of time. As such, these pieces, in their expressly autobiographical focus, enact what Bory calls “archives of experience,” in which the body becomes its own source of kineasthetic documentation—but in ways that, following from André Lepecki (2010), are generative and recreative rather than static and nostalgic.

Part of my interest in launching this journal with an issue focused on archives was in order to showcase some of the exciting performance research being conducted by colleagues here at Simon Fraser University, several of them members of the editorial consortium of *Performance Matters*. In a special Forum section entitled “In the Archives,” Joy Palacios, Sasha Colby, and Dara Culhane reflect on the live space of encounter with performance’s remains, as well as the different—and often deeply sensuous—repertory acts that space gives rise to. For Palacios this means describing the human and interpersonal relationships she has formed with the priestly “*archon-actants*” charged with overseeing the collections of the Société de Saint-Suplice in Paris, as well as how the imminent digitization of these and other dying “analogue” archives paradoxically imbues them with more life. For Colby, consulting the papers of the modernist poet and visual artist Mina Loy, housed at the Beinecke Rare Book and Manuscript Library at Yale, induces something akin to what Carolyn Steedman, in *Dust* (2002), has famously described as “archive fever proper” (in Colby’s case, a mix of boredom, anxiety, and dread); but it also yields the crucial document discovery that provides the spark for the dramatization of Loy’s life that Colby has undertaken as a result of her work in the archives. And for Culhane, the archives of the National Library of Ireland in Galway, while doing their best to discipline her embodied research of the papers of her grandmother, also form part of a wider sensorium, one in which the auditory cues emanating from outside its walls are just as important and sense-making as the visual and haptic ones inside.

How we perform the body’s consequential and felt relationships to its multiple archives is brought out, in different ways, by the pieces collected in the Materials section. For example, in describing her participation in the improvisatory jazz and poetry scenes of Cologne, artist Tanya Ury also excavates a parallel archive of her own and Germany’s relationships to past and present histories. Photographer Patrick Moraescu contributes a selection of portraits from his *Performers* series, an ongoing project in which he documents a range of international performance artists immediately after their programmed appearances at different festivals; whether we see, along with Auslander, the documentary portrait as securing the authenticity of the performance, or vice versa, has much to do—as Moraescu implies in his introductory note—with how we interpret the relationship between temporal figure and spatial ground. Drawing on recent debates in comparative ethnic studies, Mario Obando juxtaposes different performance scripts—poetry, song lyrics, found image and text—to think through the “collision” of both documented and undocumented archives. Finally, Angela Latham materializes archival knowing as what Schneider would call the ritual repetition of “body-to-body transmission” (2011, 104) by staging an intimate encounter with a specific sartorial artifact.

This issue concludes with a review by Nik Wakefield of much of the scholarly literature on performance documentation. In his survey of the field from early debates about disappearance and liveness through to the recent turn toward the new materialisms, Wakefield makes an argument for thinking about the multiple and necessarily intersecting temporalities of performance and documentation in durational terms, with memory itself becoming a performative event, at once backward and future-oriented. In a similar way, I hope that, whatever may happen over the course of its to-be-recorded history, the appearance of this journal will remain as part of a larger performance archive marking *what will have been* a significant moment of transformation in our field.

Notes

1. My thanks to Nico Dicecco for drawing my attention to Drucker’s essay, and to the materiality of media more generally.

References

- Auslander, Philip. 2006. "The Performativity of Performance Documentation." *PAJ: A Journal of Performance and Art* 84: 1–10.
- Borggreen, Gunhild, and Rune Gade, eds. 2013. *Performing Archives/ Archives of Performance*. Copenhagen: Museum Tusulanum Press.
- Conquergood, Dwight. 2002. "Performance Studies: Interventions and Radical Research." *TDR: The Drama Review* 46 (2): 145–156.
- Derrida, Jacques. 1998. *Archive Fever: A Freudian Impression*. Translated by Eric Prenowitz. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
- Drucker, Johanna. 2013. "Performative Materiality and Theoretical Approaches to Interface." *Digital Humanities Quarterly* 7 (1): n.p.
<http://www.digitalhumanities.org/dhq/vol/7/1/000143/000143.html>.
- Fabian, Johannes. 2008. *Ethnography as Commentary: Writing from the Virtual Archive*. Durham: Duke University Press.
- Freud, Sigmund. 2008 [1925]. "A Note upon the 'Mystic Writing-Pad.'" In *General Psychological Theory: Papers on Metapsychology*, edited by Philip Reiff, 211–216. New York: Simon and Schuster.
- Jones, Amelia. 2011. "'The Artist is Present': Artistic Re-enactments and the Impossibility of Presence." *TDR: The Drama Review* 55 (1): 16–45.
- Jones, Amelia, and Adrian Heathfield, eds. 2012. *Perform, Repeat, Record: Live Art in History*. Bristol: Intellect.
- Kirschenbaum, Matthew. 2008. *Mechanisms: New Media and the Forensic Imagination*. Cambridge, MA: MIT University Press.
- Lepecki, André. 2010. "The Body as Archive: Will to Re-Enact and the Afterlives of Dance." *Dance Research Journal* 42 (2): 28–48.
- Phelan, Peggy. 1993. *Unmarked: The Politics of Performance*. New York: Routledge.
- . 1998. "Introduction: The Ends of Performance." In *The Ends of Performance*, edited by Peggy Phelan and Jill Lane, 1–19. New York: New York University Press.
- Schneider, Rebecca. 2011. *Performing Remains: Art and War in Times of Theatrical Reenactment*. New York: Routledge.
- Steedman, Carolyn. 2002. *Dust: The Archive and Cultural History*. New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press.
- Taylor, Diana. 2003. *The Archive and the Repertoire: Performing Cultural Memory in the Americas*. Durham: Duke University Press.