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On Embodiment, Performance Art and Contemporary Museum Design

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Abstract
This paper considers the relationship between performance art, recent museological models focused on the centrality of the public, and the visitors' ontological status as embodied, cognitive and sentient beings. It discusses the shift from traditional curatorship towards a participatory model, curated *for the visitor* rather than *about objects*. It frames the thinking about the public as embodied/sentient entity, whose perceptual mechanisms need to be fully understood in order to design fully participatory, engaging and stimulating exhibitions. It surveys and addresses performance art as exemplary to understand the relationship between the space of the museum and the bodies of the artists and their public, and how these elements can generate new research questions. Through its analysis, it proposes curating the public's experience by adopting an interdisciplinary framework centered around the notion of embodiment, shared space and multisensory interaction.

Ephemeral Yet Interactive:
Performance Art and Its Digitalization

Before the 1960s, the term *performance* unequivocally indicated the live execution of a musical or dance piece in front of a public. Performance art emerged as a genre within the visual arts when a group of artists started thinking about their own body as an artistic medium and as a site of artistic experimentation. There are historical precedents that can provide meaningful examples of these expressive practices, specifically among Constructivists, Futurists and Dadaists artists, dating as early as 1910s. Some notable examples include Futurist performances of words-in-freedom poetry (readings and performed actions), sometimes accompanied by sound, smell or tactile effects (Bacci, 2010). These proto-performance artists did not name their work *performance art*, but instead related it to opera and theater, as a form of expression of *Gesamtkunstwerk* (total form of art) (Goldberg, 2001).

As a genre, performance art is characterized by ephemerality, interactivity and (at least originally) by a programmatic anti-institutional *ethos*. One of the most important traits of performance art, in fact, was that "many of the earlier events that have been claimed to constitute its canon were planned not to take place in, nor be recoverable by, orthodox museums and galleries [...]. Ironically [...] what perhaps they did share (at the level of intention and aim) was a principled rejection of *museum-ification*, institutionalisation, and commodification" (Harris, 2006, pp. 230-231).

An art which was made of experience, of a set of actions happening here and now in front of the public, was thought to be impossible to buy and sell, to collect, and to *musealize*. As soon as it gained popularity and wide public acclaim, though, institutions quickly found ways to display this intangible art form. Within ten years from its anti-institutional inception, one can already find a significant number of examples of early *musealization* of performance art's ephemera (Houdrouge, 2015). By the early 2000s, one can go as far as to say that performance art was firmly *in* the museum and on the market. In 2004, PERFORMA — a biennial that showcases performance as the central focus — came onto the art scene in New York City[1]. To accommodate this artistic genre, institutions had to redesign their spaces. "[The] Museum of Modern Art, Tate Modern, the Guggenheim and the Whitney Museum not only [had] to alter their internal structure by developing performance art departments with budgets dedicated to the acquisition and commission of performance, but also to transform their infrastructure to welcome the medium of performance, strengthen their links with the city and increase their social and cultural functions with society" (Houdrouge, 2015).

Born as a unique and unrepeatable event, when performance art was first exhibited in museums, it was not displayed *live* (as the actual event it was conceived to be), but rather exhibited through its documentation: video footage, photographs, objects, written accounts and audio recordings, together with the artist's script (if present) and planning notes. All these materials turned the performance from an ephemeral production meant to exist exclusively in the present, into an historical moment in time.

Analog audio and video-recordings and, later, their digital equivalents, became essential in documenting the live happenings. Museum curators and private patrons, who had begun sponsoring performances, needed assurance that they could count on a wide array of copyrighted audio and visual materials. Loaning them, selling rights to reproduce them, and exhibiting them regularly were and are common ways to ensure performance art's commodification into an asset that keeps generating revenue, while maintaining (or, ideally, increasing) its value through constant visibility. "To a certain extent, performances have become the means to produce the finished, carefully conceived and aesthetically appealing documentation" (Houdrouge, 2015). Arguably, the display of documents and objects represents nothing more than an embodiment of proof that the performance did occur. Anything beyond that must to be personally and socially constructed in the viewers' consciousness, much like memories (Ward, 2012).

Fig. 1
The Tanks, a repurposed post-industrial space utilized by TATE Modern as a performance art venue since 2016. With its brutalist architectural appearance, it presents itself as an imposing and strongly characterized environment, far from the white-cube neutral aesthetic so commonly found in museum galleries. Ph. Ana Gasston.

With the increasing success of this art form, museums started commissioning works to be performed within their walls, regularly staged in their programming at precise days/times, almost as if they were *pièce de théâtre*. In November 2005, Marina Abramovič produced *Seven Easy Pieces*, appropriating and re-performing five other artists' performances (dating from the 1960's and 1970's) plus two of her own works (Guggenheim Museum, NYC) (Ligniti, 2007; Nikki Cesare & Joy, 2006). This was the first-ever instance of institutional re-performance program, an idea first conceived by artist Allan Kaprow. Her manipulation of space, time and bodily presence functioned by activating the documentation on paper against the flattening of these works in art-historical memory (Santone, 2008). Today it is an established practice that, when museums acquire an actual performance, they buy the rights to re-perform the piece. Such performances are conceived in editions, developed based on the notion of being reproducible and thus collectable.

Interestingly, Marina Abramovič *re-performances* provide a form of *embodied* relationship with the public, which is much closer to the experience of the original performance with respect to the filmed and photographed documents. It is undeniable that "performance becomes itself through disappearance" (Phelan, 1993), and any attempt at conjuring up a performance from its inert documentation alters its nature. On the other hand, if one agrees that the essence of performance art lies in the relationship between performers and public, and their interactions in a specific space and time, then one can entertain the possibility of designing an (arguably) more philologically correct strategy for documentation, research, and museum display (MacDonald, 2009). This new approach could also inform and foster the creation of new works. To root this effort into a solid theoretical framework, i argue for the importance of considering notions of multisensory situatedness and embodiment.

Artist Versus Public, Personal Versus Shared, Real Versus Virtual: The Body in the Space of Performance Art

Both the performers and the public share a crucial factor: they have a body. Theories of embodied cognition claim that human cognitive processes are deeply rooted in the body's interactions with the world (for a review and essential bibliography, see Wilson, 2020). Performance art makes collectively constructed meaning by anchoring subjectivity in shared bodily experiences. The visceral feeling that performance art often evokes, that gut reaction that eludes definitions or translation into words, is motivated by our sensorimotor interactions mediated through our shared experience of being in a body. Issues of embodiment are central to the design of the performance experience in museums.

Understanding our reaction to performance art as a complex multisensory cognitive operation, as a continuous processing and renegotiation of the meaning of one's percept, poses interesting methodological challenges. During the experience of performance art, just as in other real-life situations, the brain receives a constant, analogue flow of information from our sensory receptors. This incoming stream of data needs to be organized into objects, events,

and scenes. Starting with this constant barrage of misaligned analog information, our brain samples and separates the input in distinct and coherent space-time entities. This process of construction of space-time provides the interface between perception and cognition, thus allowing the mind to interact effectively with the world, and with specific situations within it. Performance art determines its meaning in the course of its unfolding in the present time in the *here and now*.

Performance art is based on the relationship between body and space, but not just the body of the performers. In fact, it is also the body of the public which is crucial. The space is a shared element, it belongs equally to the two main actors — the performer and the public. It is in this space that the unfolding of the element of time, co-experienced by these two, brings the performance piece to completion. Therefore, it is worth discussing the quality of space, both physical and perceived.

A New Taxonomy of Space and the Body as Curatorial Paradigm

I propose the notion that, in performance, the ownership of space is a function of the agency of the performer's and of the public's bodies. Each happening entails a negotiation between public and artist, one that is often visualized by the ways in which these two protagonists occupy the space. The awareness of these spatial relations, determined by interactions unfolding over time, can help curators to design the experience of performance art not as one in which the public is passively looking (affording a relationship between observers and observed), but as an open-ended fluid space where all sorts of interchanges can develop.

The following taxonomy intends to foster curatorial research and an exhibition planning methodology based on a standardized assessment of the relationship between bodies and space in performance art. I propose to distinguish four main types of performances based on their public.

Passive: some works are very scripted, they use a specific fixed setting, which might have been built for the occasion; in these works, the space belongs solely to the performers, and the public/audience is a witness of the work being produced in front of their very eyes. I would define the public, in this case, as *passive participants*. In Anne Imhof's *Faust*, performed in the German Pavilion at the Venice Biennale in 2017, the public observed the happening, without interacting, throughout the main space.

Unintentionally active: in other instances, visitors are brought onto the forefront as protagonists of the performance, despite their initial lack of awareness followed by their sudden perception of being in an awkward and uncomfortable position; in this way the public becomes an *unintentional participant*. This happened in *Imponderabilia*, by Ulay and Marina Abramovič at Galleria Comunale d'Arte Moderna, Bologna, in 1977. The artists stood by each side of the main door, coercing the public to come in direct contact with their naked bodies to gain entry into the gallery. These exposed different personal attitudes towards nudity, sexuality and social conventions of modesty and privacy.

Fig. 2
A reperformance of Marina Abramovič' *Imponderabilia* (2018, Florence, exhibition *Marina Abramović. The Cleaner*). A visitor squeezes in between two naked performers to enter the gallery, thus becoming unintentionally part of the performance. © Francesco Pierantoni.

Prompted: other times, the public is explicitly invited to interact with the performer as co-protagonist. We can think of the visitor as a *prompted participant*. In Yoko Ono's *Cut Piece*, at Kyoto in 1977, the artist sat alone on the stage, with a pair of scissors besides her. The audience was informed that they could take turns using the scissors to cut off small pieces of her clothing — which happened at the hand of some bystanders with increasingly disturbing insistence, until the artist was left almost naked.

Yoko Ono performs her work CUT PIECE at Carnegie Hall

Concept-art, where you can be an Artist, goes further and involves the audience as in Ono's CUT PIECE, where each member of the audience is asked to come up on the stage one at a time and remove the performer's clothing with a large pair of tailor's shears. The performer sits motionless through the whole operation in a kneeling position until all the clothing has been removed or everybody has had a chance to cut, usually about an hour. In contrast to the rest of the concert which is usually filled with restlessness in the audience, this piece always takes place in complete silence, with periods of several minutes elapsing before the next performer (member of the audience) gets enough courage to come up on the stage. Usually only one third of the audience performs while the rest apparently consider the prospect.

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Performative/Proactive: finally, at times the onlookers volunteer to become the only actors/main performers on the stage, upon the artist's request; *de factu* such persons can be considered *performative/proactive participants* for their willingness in engaging and performing publicly according to the absent artist's instruction/ intention. Such is the case of Erwin Wurm's *One Minute Sculptures*, an ongoing series of performances, started over two decades ago, acted by the public rather than by the artist. Wurm instructed the participants to pose their body with an everyday object for one minute, by assuming a bizarre or ridiculous-looking relationship with the object.

Fig. 3 Different moments of Yoko Ono's *Cut Piece*, 1966, documented in the journal *Art and Artists*. Several individuals can be seen approaching Yoko Ono on the stage, responding to the artist's request to cut her clothes, thus joining her in enacting the performance as prompted (Cox, 1966).

Based on this taxonomy, I argue that institutions should invest in designing inconspicuous digital tools for the recording and tracking of these qualitative aspects, rather than just following the default practice of using photos and videos to document a happening as if it was a news event. Photography and video, while providing ample documentation and the historicizing of performance artworks, also disrupt the relationship between the public and the performer, by confining the public to specific and limited parts of the physical space and preventing spontaneous interactions with the performer. For example, during Marina Abramovič' performance *The Artist is Present*, in MoMA at New York City in 2010, the public reported a sense of uneasiness. The space in which the performances took place were obstructed by cables, cameras, and lights positioned to obtain *perfect* footage. These physical objects provided a clear and

unwelcome reminder of the *goal* of the display: producing tangible and beautiful proof of the event for the benefit of someone who was not physically there.

While in books and movies stories are linear, art performances and exhibitions commonly unfold in interactive, multi-dimensional environments. For this reason, from the point of view of architectural design, a neutral and fluid space that includes the possibility of changing shape and morphing into different environments, affords maximum expressive potential to museum performances. For example, the new Whitney Museum by Italian architect Renzo Piano has rooms designed specifically to accommodate performances, with an adjacent outdoor space, including a multimedia gallery featuring retractable seats that can be used during live events. The issue of space configurability and usability, its fluidity of purpose and of appearance is ever more relevant in the current economy, if considering performance art *vis-à-vis* with the rise of the *experience society*, the "broader social and cultural context within which we have to see art's transition from an aesthetic of the object to an aesthetic of experience" (von Hantelmann, 2014).

Re-Designing the Museum:
From a Traditional to a Participatory Model

Even if ideas such as *experience economy* and performance art were comparable and widespread in the cultural field, the contiguous concept of *participatory museum* was a Copernican revolution. It shook the field of museum planning and exhibition design by placing visitors at the center: museums shifted from regarding themselves as content providers, towards becoming platforms for the public to engage into meaning-making, to connect with content and co-produce interpretation (Simon, 2010). This also entailed a re-design of the museum's internal workflow. Previously, the authoritativeness of the curator's expertise was absolutely central to the traditional process of building an exhibition. It was commonly accepted that, within the numerous departments which cultural institutions house, the work begun once the curator had formed and illustrated his/her vision to the director and board of trustees first, and only then to the entire staff. The idea of *participatory museum* quickly gained momentum as a principle to inspire a new process of designing exhibition spaces, which were no longer based on accommodating a curated display of objects or happenings, but rather around the visitors' experiences: "designing for participation means enabling rather than scripting the outcomes. (…)" (Russo & Peacock, 2009, p. 5).
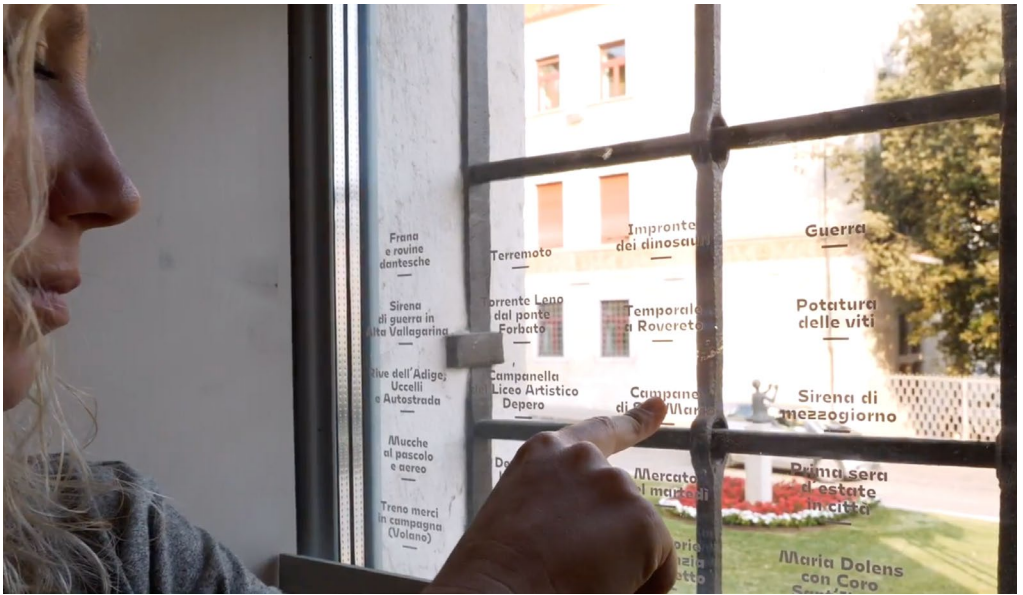
Nina Simon suggested a hierarchy of five different levels of engagement of the public, ranging from *individual receives content* all the way to *collective social interaction with content* (2007). Other authors have proposed alternative classifications also based on the level of participation, using criteria such as presence, exchange of conversation, direct contribution to knowledge-making or duration of the involvement (Hindmarsh et al., 2005; Kelly & Russo, 2008). One of the positive outcomes of the change in perspective from a traditional model of museum work to a participatory one is that curators are expected to imagine what kind of experience the visitors will have, by paying more attention to the overall story that objects may be able to form, when they encounter their public in carefully planned ways. Today curators concern themselves with planning the visitors' experience, which is imagined, predicted, and designed in much more intentional ways compared to traditional curatorial practices. In the case of performance art, the taxonomy proposed in this paper introduces the novelty of considering the public's negotiation of the performative space, thus allowing design to respond and intervene through a more targeted approach.

Fig. 5
An example of museum participation: a visitor experiments with an interactive installation. By touching on the sound descriptions on the glass, she can listen to minute-long auditory clips conveying the character of the city. City Museum, Rovereto (Italy), a project by Francesca Bacci, technology by RE:Lab. Ph. RE:Lab.

Performing Cultural Content:
Notes on Designing Future Museums With Intention

Performance art and participatory museum practices have the potential to transform the museum from a cold, *white cube* into a site of live action. This entails rising to the challenge of allowing performance art to occur in the most philologically correct form possible, i.e. without inappropriate interferences caused by obstructive and distracting documentation apparatuses, and in a space flexible enough to accommodate the vision of the artist with minimum effort. In designing dedicated spaces for performance art, planning

and installing inconspicuous technology should be prioritized. Such considerations point in the direction of engaging new and existing technological tools to achieve a deeper understanding of performance art. Different research questions (RQ), falling into two distinct macro-groups, could be effectively addressed through diverse design approaches (DA). Group 1: Relational. RQ: considering the notable multi-sensory turn in the humanities, how can a museum gather information about the public's reactions? DA: one could use an existing technology, such as hidden microphones scattered among the people in attendance, or one could disambiguate and understand the emotions of the public by utilizing algorithms for face emotion recognition. RQ: how should one keep track of the sensorimotor interactions between performers and public? DA: one could employ cameras placed above, combined with machine learning to produce interesting visualizations related to specific moments in time. Group 2: Art-historical/Critical/Curatorial. RQ: how should one evaluate and appreciate the differences between each *mise-en-scène*, in the case of multiple performances of the same piece? DA: a museum could use video tools designed to synchronize and compare the simultaneous parallel playing of video footage. Inspired by the artists' requests, some gallery owners are already asking a different set of questions: "[Abramovič'] recent performances have emphasized the energy of the audience and the audience's reactions. Consequently, Sean Kelly Gallery requested the audience to write down the experiences and emotions that they felt during *Generator*, 2014" (Houdrouge, 2015). As one can see from the examples just mentioned, all these questions can be most significantly formulated through innovative design stemming from interdisciplinary collaborations between artists, curators, scientists, and designers. These practices will lead to a deeper knowledge, new research directions, and result in the adoption of a shared paradigm of design, documentation and investigation of this artform.

In lieu of conclusions and recommendations for designers, I would like to end this paper by encouraging interdisciplinary practices which feature the convergent thinking of *participatory curators*, inquisitive artists and designers. Deploying the methodology of design as social practice and as knowledge-in-practice, these stakeholders can construct experiences that weave together spaces, actions and digital tools into seamless real-life interactions occurring in museums (Mason & Vavoula, 2021). Focusing on the relational value of collective meaning-making, and providing opportunities for sustained interaction within the museum and exhibition space, designers will enable the participants to creatively shape and configure their experience and that of others.

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