

The Rumor Underneath: A Feminist Approach to Performance-Based Art Conservation

Irene Pipicelli

The conservation studies and practices for performance-based artworks represent an interdisciplinary field that emerged in the last two decades after some important cultural institutions and museums began acquiring performance-based works. It emerged driven by the need of these institutions to create ad hoc protocols to preserve these troubling *objects*: It embodies a profoundly practice-based field, just as feminist thought has to hold theory and practice together.

More traditional conservation studies, performance studies, critical-heritage studies, and cultural studies represent some of the disciplines contributing to this new field. I am convinced, however, that feminist thinking could favor its theoretical grounding. Highlighting the contribution of performance studies to the field of conservation, I want to trace a line from Peggy Phelan, the foremother of performance studies, to Amelia Jones and Rebecca Schneider. I will then proceed further to Hélia Marçal, Elke Krasny and Lucy Bayley, to name a few of the researchers/conservators engaged in crossing conservation studies and feminist thinking in the present time. I find it crucial to stress the genealogy of feminist thought and to trace the contributions that authors integrating a feminist perspective have made to a discipline, relating them to each other, because the production of genealogies and canons, as we know, is never neutral. On the contrary, it is still based on fundamentally patriarchal exclusionary norms that overlook the contribution of marginalized subjects. As pointed out by Krasny, the interest in looking at feminism is “the politics of feminist thought with regard to historiography, epistemology, and chronopolitics” (Krasny 2015, 51).

What is most interesting in the conservation of performance-based artworks is that even as a series of new practices is being systematized and tested at the intersection of theories and practices, the encounter between conservation and performance studies is producing original spillovers into these fields. When paired with a feminist materialist perspective, these spillovers become even more interesting, as we will see later.

Until recently, conservation has been configured as practical knowledge. Before the last thirty years, it referred exclusively to the visual arts, but its boundaries began to blur as it encountered installation art, encompassing new media and digital arts.¹ The emergence of these practices led to a reconsideration and consequent transformation of some of the key concepts in traditional conservation such as work, authorship, and authenticity (van Saaze 2013). Moreover, the encounter with these objects and practices produced a series of theoretical and practical thrusts that progressively altered the static nature of the theoretical and actual objects conservation deals with. Moving toward the inclusion of performance-based artwork, the field of conservation is going through a great transformation. And, more interestingly this shift is not only affecting conservation and its operational concepts, as we already pointed out. It is also deeply affecting the understanding of performance-based artworks themselves. It imposes to critically consider some of the most significant concepts concerning performance, such as intangibility, materiality, temporality, contemporaneity, presence, and survival, to name a few. I believe this represents a significant epistemological paradigm shift, and I would like to explore how feminist thinking, and especially feminist materialism can contribute to this shift, building on the entanglements of feminism and performance studies.

The pioneering institution of this preservation renewal was Tate Modern, where Pip Laurenson founded the preservation department dedicated to time-based media first and where later a series of projects dedicated explicitly to performance and dance followed, the latest of which is *Reshaping the Collectible* (2018-2022). The profoundly practice-based path that the creation of this knowledge has taken from the beginning has *de facto* meant less emphasis on theoretical and methodological analysis, something that theorists and researchers (Marçal 2018), and research projects with a methodological focus, such as *Performance: Conservation, Materiality, Knowledge* (2020-2024), already pointed out.

As mentioned, the interdisciplinary field emerged connecting, on one hand, all the knowledge and practices accumulated around conserving

¹ These transformations are rooted in a broader process of rethinking conservation practices around *troubling* objects, artworks, and materialities. As briefly said, it began much earlier with another kind of artwork, especially installations, time-based artworks, and digital and internet art. Some of the most important projects, always practice-led around “problematic” artworks are *The Variable Media Network*; *Capturing Unstable Media*; *Inside Installations: Preservation and Presentation of Installation Art*. See Marçal 2018; Laurenson 2006; van Saaze 2009; van Saaze 2013; Dekker 2018.

The Rumor Underneath

troubling and *precarious* art objects, paired with the interest in time-based artworks that drew attention to the performative side of nonperformance artworks. On the other hand, museums and cultural institutions were beginning to acquire not only performance artworks but also performing and dance “objects,” what we call performance-based artworks (Laurenson and van Saaze 2014). Doing so led to a need to develop specific knowhow in conservation dealing with flesh, organic and ephemeral matter, relationship, situatedness, time, and space. I adopted this terminology because it is consistent with the conceptual tools and methodologies I apply, and I am convinced that it can highlight the most relevant features in this major paradigm shift that conservation is traversing.

Reconsidering the immaterial, relational, ephemeral, affective, and subtle aspects of performative works has led to a realisation of these aspects’ relevance even when we speak of more traditional works of art: By questioning the concepts of authorship, originality, and value as monolithic we move toward a more democratic and horizontal understanding. This conception indicates that the museum is no longer the sole custodian of the value and original meaning of a work and its interpretation, but rather something that guarantees access to a work, exerting itself to keep the social network of agents that make possible the continuous re-signification in the work, the continuation of its biography (Laurenson and van Saaze 2014).² Another important influence of this shift is that the museum’s acquisition and preservation of performance-based artworks necessarily broadens the idea of the collection as some sort of stable heritage and the aim of the museum as an institution. The concept of an artwork’s social network, itself, and the centrality of its preservation for the survival of performance-based artworks can contribute to the critique of the cultural and power regimes that museums produced through history.

² Another interesting but derivative aspect of the renewed interest in performance-based artworks is their instrumental use within museums, seen as exceptional locations. In recent years, performance and dance festivals within museums have been flourishing, but these are very often decorative and entertaining uses of choreographic practices: They are “hosted” by the museum, which becomes an exceptional location and is a reason to attract the public, but they are not thought of as elements proper to the museum, as has been highlighted by theorist and dancer Sara Wookey (2021).

1. Between Grounding and Transformation: Feminist Epistemology As the Theoretical Backbone for Conservation

The lack of a solid theoretical structure is at once what allows the field to be so receptive to these practices, yet, at the same time, it is what threatens in some way the possibility of grounding these same practices within a broader heuristic context. The challenge is now to provide an epistemological frame permeable and interdisciplinary enough to give structure to the field while, at the same time, supporting changes and adjustments.

I follow the conservator and researcher Helia Marçal in suggesting feminist epistemologies as the most suitable for this aim (Marçal 2018; 2021, *oRelational Ontology*). Whenever feminism is approached not as a “topic” or a genre but as a methodology, it produces concepts and theoretical tools that can be useful in giving structure to a discipline and redefining a critical stance within it. Starting at this turning point, we can then consider three focal points where feminist thinking affects the preservation of performance-based works:

1. The radical transformation of the dualism ephemerality/materiality and the afterlives of performance-based works.
2. The unprecedented relevance the body assumes, not only as the object of theory but also as the site of knowledge production.
3. Notions of care and vulnerability as the pillars for radical conservation practices in contemporary institutions.

As highlighted by Marçal, to develop a critical and ethical account for conservation practices, a materialist feminist perspective could be crucial for the possibility of keeping different impulses together. This is no proof of concept: Proposing such a perspective, as Haraway suggested in 1988, allows us to escape from a lack of responsibility for the consequences of our actions in a postmodernist world. To free ourselves from relativist cynicism through the exercise of response-ability (Haraway 2016; Barad 2012). A feminist perspective allows us to do so by proposing a critical epistemology capable of holding together the *situatedness* of those who produce knowledge and, at the same time, the attempt to give rise to a heuristic process aiming to last after who produces it, in dialogue with an engaged community. This is what Haraway refers to with the concept of *situated knowledge* (Haraway 1988; Marçal, 2021, *Situated Knowledges*): To recognize one’s own biographical, subjective and partial positioning not as an impediment

The Rumor Underneath

to objectivity, but as an essential and integral part of the process of knowledge and the production of meaning.

Our body manifested in its material, cognitive, and affective expression is precisely what we start from to be traversed by the world and to produce meaning from what traverses us. Systematizing Haraway's conceptual tracks, the philosopher and physicist Karen Barad conceives an ethical-onto-epistemology. The heuristic process involves our subjectivity so intimately that it calls into question its matter: The matter we consist of actively responds to our environment, to the organic and inorganic bodies we come in contact with, which we voluntarily contact so that they can reveal their profound nature to us.

I will try to highlight why the conservation of performance-based artworks paired with feminist thinking manages not to betray, or maybe betray only partially, the need expressed by Peggy Phelan in her ontology of performance to resist commodification. Can performance-based artworks endure in a way that continues to convey that same resistance to the canon? That same political will to image the world otherwise?

2. Back and Forth through Genealogies and Disappearance: Performance Studies, Feminism, and the Permanence of the Impermanent

As we know, performance theorists have spent a great deal of energy emancipating performance from the idea of the work for reasons both political and theoretical, relating to the desire to maintain a critique of the art market and, on the other hand, from the need to create an autonomous and specific status for performance art. This status has hinged on the idea of ephemerality (Phelan 1993) but has always come down against the possibility of producing a work that stands the test of time. Within this ontology, the pivotal element of performance is the presence of the living, acting body in front of other living, acting bodies. But different genealogies of performance studies allow us to imagine another ontology, reappraising temporary nature, ephemerality, and disappearance *as* consistent ways for performance to cling to other times and spaces (Jones 1997; Schneider 2011).

Moreover, feminist materialism can come to the rescue in thinking differently about the complex intertwining of presence, meaning and permanence. The creation through feminism of a feminist subjectivity involving women, but also all other subjectivities expressing minoritized gender identities, provides an anti-canonical subject which had the effect of a disruption in the history of art. The emergence of this subjectivity has

had repercussions on how we understand history and memory, as well as the canon and the archive.

Performance art as a feminist practice undermines the idea that there is only one way of relating to time and space. Performance, born and theorized as an impermanent object, by surviving, reimagines itself as that which persists differently. Through disappearance. Through witnessing, through ways of capturing volatile aspects of the materiality that constitutes a work made up of bodies and the relationships between them. Starting with the political refusal to consider the survival of performance as a strategy for rejecting the market as theorized by Peggy Phelan, theorists proceeded by constructing an already participated mode of performance survival, including several types of actors, bodies, and objects in the process of preservation. Through the thought of Amelia Jones, it is possible to recover the materiality of the documentary bodies of performance as a crucial part of what guarantees access, always partial, to the artwork from other temporalities. Through the thought of Rebecca Schneider, we can reformulate the idea of temporality in nonlinear and progressive terms, even identifying methodologies specific to performative practices to make history and memory, such as re-enactment or re-performance.

3. Strange Materialities: The Body As Object of Theory and Source of Knowledge

As Adrienne Rich argued, through feminism we find one of the most radical accesses to the body because it forces us to consider the material-semiotic complexity of corporeality as subject/object—to take into consideration its intimate and carnal materiality and, at the same time, to see the body as that space of projection and refraction of the cultural, social, economic, and affective tensions in which it is immersed. The body is reconfigured both as the object of theory and site of knowledge production, the expression of situatedness (including biographical aspects), as an agential and transformative entity, and a catalyst of processes and events. Its ability to resist and subvert norms and oppressions is highlighted.

The reconfiguration of the idea of the work from a material/materialist perspective in performance studies (because there is, on the one hand, a materialist positioning and, on the other hand, a renewed interest in the matter as an agent substrate) has been a fundamental contribution of both Rebecca Schneider's work concerning the idea of performative remains and Amelia Jones's work in rewriting the materiality of bodies that participate in a performance or undergo it, in dialogue with the contributions of the feminist materialism. In particular, Jones rewrites the role of objects

The Rumor Underneath

that participate in or are the direct result of a score of performative actions as the operational memory of performance (Jones 2015). The reworking of the concept of matter/materiality originates also from a new rearrangement of perception and sensibility: From gaze and writing to touch and hearing, from distance, objectivity and control to proximity, subjectivity and compromise.³

Although the words ‘material’ and ‘materiality’ carry ambivalent meanings in English, I understand materiality here as a social and temporal construct framing the existence of artworks and artefacts across different temporal and spatial contexts. In the context of conservation, we speak of the non-material aspects of materiality including the artwork’s concept, temporality, and spatiality. For the physical matter connoted with materiality that assumes potential from its association with non-physical matter. (Hölling 2017, 94.)

Conservators confronting performance-based artworks begin to emphasize the need to move from the focus on the matter of the work (related precisely to traditional concepts such as authenticity, minimal intervention, and strict preservation of original materials) to its broader *materiality*. An approach that “acknowledges artworks as cultural products, dynamic entities, the materiality of which can only be identified in such an entangled network of relations and under the consideration of social and temporal aspects” (Hölling 2017, 90). So, for preservation, it is necessary to think of works within a network of actors, knowledge, objects, and resources that ensure their survival over time. This network, this ecology, includes human and nonhuman actors, institutions, the public, and the communities created or previously existing around the work. Taking these aspects into account radically for conservation practices means rewriting the idea of object, matter and materiality, context, authenticity and survival. Taking care of the survival of an artwork based on bodies and the relationship between bodies means taking care of the ongoing process of materialization of those bodies and relations. The performative work reformulates itself as a matrix from which events, bodies, objects and practices originate, including performative acts, context, documentation, future lives, re-enactments, and so forth.

³ One of the most known examples of this change of perspective is Tino Sehgal’s ban on photo or video documentation and written documents, even for acquisition and conservation purposes. Museums imagined many different strategies to deal with this ban, rediscovering oral transmission and memory and the relevance of embodied knowledge to preserve information essential to the survival of the work. See van Saaze 2015.

The conservation field is particularly fascinating because it adamantly embodies an interconnection of practice and theory. Even in the dialogue with performance studies, this aspect has been crucial in bringing certain dichotomies to provisional resolution and providing practical feedback to apparent insoluble ontological problems. Only a materialist and feminist approach to preservation, however, can bring to its fullest consequences this situated characteristic of preservation and the fertility of the proximity and permeability between practice and theory. The main advantage of considering performance-based practices to rethink materiality is that it represents the discipline for which the connection to materiality is most ambiguous, when the rewriting of the body and corporeality is at the moment strongest and most significant. Performance-based practices, culturally and historically situated, represent an observatory of the body, its potential, and the imagination that revolves around it: A point of maximum density of the processes of materialization of corporeity.

Through the expansion of preservation practices, the museum itself, cleared of its dispositional peculiarities, can act as a more permeable and less controlling entity. How? New preservation practices go toward expanding the concept of care and the possibility of understanding the museum as an ecology of objects, actors, knowledge, and resources in constant interaction. These new conservation practices have to be understood as critical, ecological, open, distributed, and situated.⁴

4. Care and Vulnerability: More Feminist Notions for an Ethics of Conservation

If these two previous points are already operative within conservation practices and performance studies, albeit still in a unsystematic and structural way, I would like to take the argumentation a little further with the third point, by proposing to reflect on two concepts that are part of the semantic field of both conservation and feminist thought, contaminating their meanings. These concepts are care and vulnerability.

Care in the feminist sphere represents a broad and dense topic. As far as we are concerned here, I would like to emphasize just a few aspects. Care labor has been one of the fundamental and identity-shaping tasks of female subjectivity in its representation in Western societies. Feminist theorists have reappropriated the idea of care as an essential practice for ensuring the continuation of life:

⁴ To give an impression of what conservation practices informed by feminist thinking could look like, see Castriota and Walsh 2023.

The Rumor Underneath

On the most general level, we suggest that caring be viewed as a species activity that includes everything that we do to maintain, continue, and repair our “world” so that we can live as well as possible. That world includes our bodies, ourselves, and our environment, all of which we seek to interweave in a complex, life-sustaining web. (Tronto and Fisher 1990, 40.)

Care is then a space for redefining feminist subjectivity and building political and conscious practices. Care has to do with maintaining the material conditions of subsistence of humans and nonhumans in cultural institutions and museums, too, which makes it a political issue. It is a practice that deals with the material survival of objects, but it also influences the epistemic and interpretative regime within which these objects are located (Krasny 2017; Bayley 2019). To take care into account means to accept radically that bodies and objects are exposed to the world and depend on their networks of care.

And this entails vulnerability: The feminist contribution to the idea of vulnerability comes mainly from the dialogue between Adriana Cavarero and Judith Butler (Cavarero 2016; Butler 2012). To take on vulnerability is to radically embrace the idea that every subjectivity is “inclined” outward, toward others, in a position of both openness and necessity, in that we are dependent on mutual care. The dependence, however, is not interpreted as a lack of an imperative that renders us incapable and defenceless against the world but instead must be combined with the ever-present possibility of self-determination. This inclination is meant to disrupt the verticality, hierarchy, and rigor of a power structure. To conceive artworks as vulnerable, and then permeable, means to revisit radically the thinking by which artworks should be autonomous and provide a stable meaning for themselves. Linking this notion with the precedent of situatedness, we see how this ability to be permeable leads the artworks to cooperate with conservators and all the other actors in charge of their care network to actively maintain themselves as significant for whoever encounters them from any temporality. They are not simply re-affirming their cultural value and their noble legacy—they are constantly participating in their being relevant and significant in the present resonating with them. Vulnerability recalls materiality and finitude (of living beings):

la vulnerabilidad [...] remitiendo a la idea de estar expuestx al mundo de una forma radical [...] es la potencialidad de ser afectada y a su vez la de afectar al mundo, y por tanto, la propuesta que nos hacen Butler y Cavarero consiste en entender la existencia humana como *interdependiente*. (Zapata Hidalgo 2023, 30.)

This idea of vulnerability can be integrated with thrilling results in conservation practices: Artworks are vulnerable subjects/objects whose survival depends directly on the networks of care that are activated and maintained around them. At the same time, vulnerability expresses the processual character of this ongoing conservation, whose peculiarities are also dictated by the work, and how it expresses its vulnerability, suggesting some care and conservation practices as possible and inhibiting others. Thinking about a work of art from its vulnerability, that is, from its predisposition to being modified and more broadly affected by the conditions and transitions of its environment, means considering the relational dimension that accompanies us in the continuous production of meaning.

Moreover, having a theoretical framework that includes the need for ethics supports the practice of conservation as it unfolds in practice. As pointed out, the subjectivity of the conservator is often implicated in decision-making processes: Being able to draw on an ethical framework integral to one's discipline when making decisions involving subjectivity is essential. A critical and ethical positioning makes it possible to partially resolve the contradiction, always renewing its necessity, to work with and against the museum and its logic. Or at least opposing the drives concerning canonization, profit, extractivism, and the systematic exclusion of minorities.

4. A Partial Conclusion

Coming to a partial conclusion in feminist thinking impels us to understand conservation practices today as distributed, open-ended, dynamic, and collective networks of care, involving different kinds of bodies (human, organic, and inorganic), involving documents, media, institutions, and communities. Networks able to enhance the agency of the elements constituting them, to welcome their vulnerability and ambiguous materiality, where the bodies participating are less hierarchically distributed and more critically aware of the context in which they are participating. Feminist materialism, paired with other important perspectives – such as critical-heritage studies – could fruitfully support conservators, communities, and agents involved in developing a critical and, most importantly, ethical practice for preservation.

The Rumor Underneath

Works Cited

- Barad, Karen. 2012. "On Touching – the Inhuman That Therefore I Am." *differences* 23, no. 3: 206–223.
- _____. 2003. "Posthumanist Performativity: Toward an Understanding of How Matter Comes to Matter." *Signs: Journal of Women in Culture and Society* 28, no. 3: 801–831.
- Bayley, Lucy. 2019. "Curating and Collecting." Published as part of the research project *Reshaping the Collectible: When Artworks Live in the Museum*, Tate. Accessed February 27, 2024. <https://www.tate.org.uk/research/reshaping-the-collectible/research-approach-curating-collecting-museology>.
- Butler, Judith. 2012. "Precarious Life, Vulnerability, and the Ethics of Cohabitation." *The Journal of Speculative Philosophy* 26, no. 2: 134–151.
- Castriota, Brian, and Claire Walsh. 2023. "In the Shadow of the State. Collecting Performance at IMMA and Institutions of Care in the Irish Context." In *Performance: The Ethics and the Politics of Conservation and Care*, edited by Hanna B. Hölling, Jules Pelta Feldman, and Emilie Magnin, 147–168. Oxon: Routledge.
- Cavarero, Adriana. 2016. *Inclinations*. Translated by Amanda Minervini and Adam Sitze. Stanford: Stanford University Press.
- Dekker, Annet. 2018. *Collecting and Conserving Net Art*. London and New York: Routledge.
- Haraway, Donna. 2016. *Staying with the Trouble: Making Kin in the Chthulucene*. Durham: Duke University Press.
- _____. 1988 "Situated Knowledges: The Science Question in Feminism and the Privilege of Partial Perspective." *Feminist Studies: FS* 14, no. 3 (Fall): 575–599.
- Hölling, Hanna. 2017. "The *Technique* of Conservation: On Realms of Theory and Cultures of Practice." *Journal of the Institute of Conservation* 40, no. 2: 87–96.
- Hölling, Hanna B., Jules Pelta Feldman, and Emilie Magnin. 2023. *Performance: The Ethics and the Politics of Conservation and Care*. Oxon: Routledge.
- Jones, Amelia. 2015. "Material Traces. Performativity, Artistic 'Work,' and New Concepts of Agency." *TDR: The Drama Review* 59, no. 4: 18–35.
- _____. 1997. "'Presence' in Absentia. Experiencing Performance as Documentation." *Art Journal* 56, no. 4: 11–18.
- Krasny, Elke. 2015. "Feminist Thought and Curating: On Method." *OnCurating* 26: 53–71.
- _____. 2017. "Caring Activism, Assembly, Collection and the Museum." In *Collecting in Time*, edited by Vera Lauf and Franziska Zólyom. Leipzig: Museum for Contemporary Art Leipzig. Accessed February 27, 2024. <http://collecting-in-time.gfzk.de/en>.
- Marçal, Hélia. 2021. "Situated Knowledges and Materiality in the Conservation of

- Performance Art.” *ArtMatters: International Journal for Technical Art History*, no. 1 (September): 55–62.
- _____. 2021. “Towards a Relational Ontology of Conservation.” In *In Transcending Boundaries: Integrated Approaches to Conservation. ICOM-CC 9th Triennial Conference Preprints, Beijing, 17–21 May 2021*, edited by Janet Bridgland. Paris: International Council of Museums.
- _____. 2018. “From intangibility to materiality and back again: preserving Portuguese performance art-works from the 1970s.” PhD thesis, Universidade Nova de Lisboa, .
- Laurenson, Pip. 2006. “Authenticity, Change and Loss in the Conservation of Time-Based Media Installations.” *Tate Papers*, no. Accessed March 1, 2024. <https://www.tate.org.uk/research/tate-papers/06/authenticity-change-and-loss-conservation-of-time-based-media-installations>.
- Laurenson, Pip, and Vivian van Saaze. 2014. “Collecting Performance-Based Art: New Challenges and Shifting Perspectives.” In *Performativity in the Gallery: Staging Interactive Encounters*, edited by Outi Remes, Laura MacCulloch and Marika Leino, 27–41. Oxford: Peter Lang.
- Phelan, Peggy. 1993. *Unmarked: The Politics of Performance*, London: Routledge.
- Schneider, Rebecca. 2011. *Performing Remains: Art and War in Times of Theatrical Reenactment*. Oxon: Routledge.
- Tronto, Joan C., and Berenice Fisher. 1990. “Toward a Feminist Theory of Caring.” In *Circles of Care*, edited by Emily K. Abel and Margaret K. Nelson, 35–62. New York: University of New York Press.
- van Saaze, Vivian. 2013. *Installation Art and the Museum: Presentation and Conservation of Changing Artworks*. Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press.
- _____. 2009. “Authenticity in Practice: An Ethnographic Study into the Preservation of *One Candle* by Nam June Paik.” In *Art Conservation and Authenticities. Material, Concept, Context*, edited by Erma Hermens and Tina Fiske, 190–98. London: Archetype Publications.
- Wooley, Sara. 2021. “Spatial relations dance in the museum.” PhD thesis, Coventry University.
- Zapata Hidalgo, María. 2023. “La fortaleza de la vulnerabilidad.” In *Posología. Microdosis transfeministas para la salud*. Edited by María Zapata Hidalgo and Caro Novella Centellas, 27–40. Tafalla, Spain: Txalaparta.