

Seminar: Collecting Performance

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Report by Rose Lejeune

Independent Curator and Researcher

In 2014, New Walk Museum & Art Gallery in Leicester acquired their first performance work, *Home Made Tasers* by Monster Chetwynd, supported jointly by Art Fund and the Contemporary Art Society. This was the first time one of Chetwynd's performance works had been acquired by a public institution in the UK and the first of two acquisitions by UK museums through the 'Testing Media' scheme. Five years later, this seminar held in collaboration with the Art Fund and The Gallery at De Montfort University brought together the architects of that scheme along with a group of curators, museum professionals and artists, including some of the curators and artists involved in the scheme, to assess their experience and to reflect on the challenges of and appetite for collecting performance in museums today.

The day started with a key note presentation from Dr Sabine Breitwieser. Breitwieser was the founding Artistic Director of the Generali Foundation in Vienna from 1991 through 2007 and was instrumental in expanding the collection to include conceptual and ephemeral art. In her presentation she charted some of the key performance acquisitions she oversaw during that time, including work by Gustav Metzger and Adrian Piper, who sells her performance work through the fabled Artist's Contract, a document developed by the legendary conceptual art dealer Seth Sieglaub in the 1960s.

In addition to these specific examples, Breitwieser's presentation highlighted the distinction between the museum as a site of preserving and disseminating art history through the ownership of objects in the collection, and of holding documents in the archive that relate to the interpretation of art. She stressed the uniqueness of any visual art object that has historically had a profound effect on our understanding of modes of ownership, circulation and distribution. Through repetition and re-enactment, any expansion to include performance art into museum collections complicates the very operation of the museum on a number of levels, both institutional and conceptual: by changing the package of rights (that is, what is transferred and what remains in the scope of the artist's direction after acquisition); by potentially blurring the boundaries between the unique work and its documentation; and by raising questions as to the balance of resources between storing, conserving and presenting art.

Two artist presentations, from Janice Kerbel and Paul Maheke respectively, followed some of these threads from the historic examples Breitwieser had offered into a more contemporary context. Kerbel's presentation focused on her commission *Sink*, a synchronised swimming routine for 24 women. The work was commissioned by The Common Guild as part of Festival 2018, the cultural programme for the Glasgow 2018 European Championships. Through a compelling description of the process, Kerbel highlighted the commitment and the resources that are necessary in creating such a complex performance work (synchronised swimming itself is perhaps the perfect metaphor for work whose effortless ephemerality belies intense individual and collective labour). Moreover, Kerbel offered an articulation of both the limits of the gallery as a site for performance and the possibility of re-enactment in such complex contexts. Through a series of prints that act as a score for – and record of – a performance, she alluded to the potential in the relationship between performance and other media that may be communicated and circulated in more traditional ways.

Drilling into the entanglement between performance, documentation, artistic intention and presentational ethics, Maheke next talked us through the process undertaken for his work *Seeking After the Fully-Grown Dancer* (2016) acquired by the Walker Art Museum, Liverpool in 2017. Maheke described the work which is based on the notion of the 'authentic dancer' in a process of expressive improvisational movement that requires of the performer to engage in free association of the body.

As such, though there are fixed parameters to the work, which are defined by the artist, but the exact content differs each time. To fit such a shape-shifting artwork into the collection required both that the artist create and stabilise the boundaries of the work both materially and conceptually. The museum acquired a video and costumes, as well as a contract that sets out requirements for the skills of the performer, instructions they must follow and stage set-up. Fees and working conditions, travel, accommodation, conditions and so on were also codified. Echoing Kerbel, Maheke emphasised that regardless of how simple a performance appears to be, in its live-ness it may still have been very complex to pin down the conditions and frameworks necessary in order to first present, then acquire and finally preserve it. Ending on the notion of care, Maheke brought in another important point of the day —that collecting performance goes beyond the conservation of materials and objects and towards a sense of duty and responsibility towards the integrity and ethics of the artistic intention itself.

Dr Lucy Bayley, Post-Doctoral Research Associate for the *Reshaping the Collectable* project at Tate spoke next. Tate is known as a global leader in the research and collecting of performance and holds works by Roman Ondak, Tino Seghal, David Lamelas, Tania Bruguera, Suzanne Lacy and others. Bayley pointed out several research projects Tate has convened in the last decade, including *Collecting the Performative* which resulted in *The Live List*, a 'set of prompts to consider when bringing a live work into a collection.'

Reshaping the Collectable looks at artworks that in some way challenge the structures of the museum. Artworks that, as opposed to the 'docile' painting, become 'unruly' when they meet its bureaucratic structures, since they can change the ecosystem of the museum itself and defy categorical distinctions by oscillating the between record, archive and artwork. In this case, we are talking about art works that are not static objects preserved exactly as they are when they

came into the collection, but artworks that have the potential to live, change and unfold over time and it becomes necessary to make those histories of change visible to audiences.

Through references to some of the key works in the Tate's collection and the initial case studies of *Reshaping the Collectable*, Bayley explored how this produces new challenges for the loan of works from the collection, and necessitates a new vocabulary, specific knowledge and training in the museum.

The comparison of works by Tino Seghal and Tania Bruguera proved a case in point. Seghal's *This is Propaganda*, acquired by Tate in 2005, is an editioned 'constructed situation' (Seghal himself refuses the word 'performance'). As with all of Seghal's works, there is no tangible object, no documentation or contract for the work. Instead it has been acquired verbally and what remains after any iteration of the work for an audience is solely the memory of work. This of course creates gaps for the museum and any discussion of the work relies on the individual memory of curators and their institutional responsibility as tacit knowledge.

Contrasting Seghal's insistence on the absolute ephemerality of his work is the work *Tatlin's Whisper #5* by Cuban artist Tania Bruguera. Purchased by Tate in 2008, *Tatlin's Whisper #5* does not 'represent' but recreates a political structure in a new context: during the performance two mounted policemen in uniform (one on a white horse and one on a black horse) are brought into the museum. Each time the work is shown the artist asks that documentation of the iteration be incorporated into the overall archive of the work, creating an ever-expanding space for the work within the museum's structures.

Showing *Tatlin's Whisper #5* creates new challenges for the museum internally and contextually. An exchange between Bayley and Melissa Hinkin from Artes Mundi, who commissioned it together with National Museum of Wales in Cardiff, disclosed how problems arise through the touring of such a work (For example, the Cardiff police force did not have a white horse, the museum's porous marble floor was not suitable for horses and so on). The work therefore relies on an ongoing dialogue with the artist and involves different levels of negotiation, flexibility and problem-solving from the museum both as lender and as host.

The final two presentations of the day focussed on the unique requirements of each individual performance work. Melissa Hinkin began by reading out elements of the contract for Ragnar Kjartansson's *The Sky in a Room staged at the National Museum Cardiff 2017/18*. A poetic description of the artist's requirements for the work gave a good sense of the care and attention that it required to create the work, but also belied the technical and logistical difficulties of organising the performance. Just to give one example: the contract determines that "the room is emptied of the works with which it is otherwise normally adorned" which Hinkin translated into how complex and expensive, it is to take down and store the entire contents (paintings, objects and decorative furniture) from the Museum's *Art in Britain 1700-1800* gallery for the length of the performance.

Hinkin pointed out both the benefits of performance for the museum infrastructure, its differing commitment to resources from object-based practice which can make its acquisition less challenging in the short term, but also re-iterated the care and ongoing dialogue with artists

necessary to keep live work in the collection. Finally, she pointed out the ways in which audiences have a different relationship to collections than with the temporary exhibitions programme. For example, people can get very attached to collections so when things are moved they can become upset. The strong response to this new work highlighted how valuable their collections were.

For the final contribution to the day, Hugo Worthy spoke about his experience of collecting Monster Chetwynd's work *Home Made Tasers* for the New Walk Museum in Leicester during his tenure as curator there. Worthy's presentation focussed on the issue of conservation as being interwoven with the integrity of the work during the performance. The costumes and props in Chetwynd's work are deliberately badly made and the work is conceptually structured in such a way that each aspect is temporary and everything can be re-staged and re-made over time. This means the contractual structure for the acquisition of the work needed to include the museum's ability to re-make the work.

Comparing this work with examples from earlier works that were mentioned in the course of the day, Worthy explored how some performances such as those by Roman Ondak and Tania Bruguera have fairly well-defined structures in reference to their articulation and archival methods. This contrasts with *Home Made Tasers*, for which the artist sets up a framework and performers have the autonomy to deliver the performance differently every time. Conservation beyond the materiality of the props comes from working with past participants through the model of person-to-person transmission to maintain meaningful and authentic re-stagings of the work over time. There is not only a toleration, but a celebration of interpretation around the work so that the contract and the score interweave with one another to create the ongoing integrity of the work.

Worthy reiterated several key points that had run through the day: the idea that each performance acquisition is fundamentally different from one another, so to try and shoehorn them into a standardised contractual format just doesn't work. Instead a flowchart of questions (such as Tate's Live List) that can be translated into a contract is a far more useful toolkit to begin an acquisition process. Secondly, the relationship between the work as a material object, its conservation, and the future of its presentational integrity is fundamentally different from the more stable object of the painting or sculpture; and finally, that respecting and protecting the artist's ideas in future presentations of the work, budgeting both for conservation and future presentations of acquired live works requires various curatorial skills, financial balance and different conservation approaches.

This description of the future iterations of the work prompted Ilaria Puri Purini from CAS to observe that, since Worthy left the museum to take up a new role at The Gallery at De Montfort University, *Home Made Tasers* has not been shown at New Walk. Of course, this is often the case and any acquisition comes through the passion and interests of a particular curator and once they leave the institution, the work runs the risk of languishing in storage. Puri Purini asked if this is exacerbated with performance works, given the specialised curatorial knowledge and relatively large budgets to needed to re-produce them.

This observation segued into a group discussion that would close the day with some important practical points. Firstly; whether a national infrastructure could help museums to re-stage performative works in their collection. Such a body might operate like an artist's estate whose purpose is both to preserve and keep alive artwork when the artist is deceased, and to provide practical and curatorial assistance in its dissemination. Such a mechanism might also act as a database and relationship broker to circulate knowledge of what performance works are housed in collections across the country as well as their logistical needs.

Secondly, the CAS and Art Fund's 'Testing Media' scheme was simply a funding mechanism for acquisition of works, but the organisations here highlighted the need for ongoing funds to present performance. One question raised was whether grants could be made available not only for acquisitions but also these ongoing costs (an additional grant to be spent in five years' time for example, or some kind of endowment fund).

Of course, it is useful to ask whether performance needs to be bought and circulated in this way in the first place. The very unruly-ness of performance is what makes it so exciting, but any institution that takes that on must also have a responsibility to not force it into the pre-existing boxes for the convenience of the museum's internal policy, or rely on the artist to such a heavy extent that they remain tethered to it in cumbersome ways. Not all performance can be collected and several ideas were shared around the group that might raise the profile of performance in museums beyond acquisitions. Though not explicitly discussed in the context of today's seminar, this ties in with broader conversations around collecting contemporary art within a context of an art market, which prices many public museums out of all but a limited number of acquisitions. It was even suggested that a performance deposit or registry – less about individual institutional ownership and instead a shared database to access works and share specific curatorial expertise – might be useful.

In conclusion, the day highlighted a number of significant challenges that curators interested in collecting performance face in traditional museum structures in the UK: the mismatch between the formulaic structures of historical museum collections and performance art's needs, the changing relationship of traditional conservation and archival methods to the needs of performance art, the challenges of lending performance art, and the ways in which performance upends the costs of conservation and storage in favour of ongoing presentation costs. It emphasised the limited curatorial knowledge and confidence that many institutions have when it comes to performance, and the ongoing financial challenges for acquisitions and temporary presentations.

Nevertheless, a clear message came out: that there are good reasons to collecting performance. Acquisition and 'museumification' are processes of support and legitimisation that benefit the artists both financially and in terms of visibility, secure a place for their work in art history, and provide long-term care of their work. Public museums offer a distinct space for supporting and preserving the broad spectrum of contemporary art. Finally, that collections retain a value to audiences through their permanence; creating forms of communal and public ownership and creating shared experiences and connections over time was deemed as relevant and important to offer for performance, live and ephemeral experiences as other contemporary art modes.