Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum
"Preserving the Immaterial": A Conference on Variable Media
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Session on Performative Artworks

REVIEW OF QUESTIONNAIRE: PERFORMATIVE BEHAVIORS

JON IPPOLITO: Hello, and welcome to the second Saturday session of the Preserving the Immaterial conference. I'm Jon Ippolito, and we're picking up from where we left off this morning, but looking at a very different kind of work.

This session is on performative artworks. "Performative" is one of those buzz words that you see crop up in art history dissertations, and occasionally outside, in describing works that fit in the space between performance and art. But today, we're gonna look at performative in a very practical sense, in a sense that describes artworks that need to have some aspect of their process documented if that behavior of the work is to be preserved.

And those of you who've been in yesterday, or the earlier session today, know that we're thinking about the Variable Media Initiative as a way to create guidelines for recreating works, if the artist so desires, in media that are different from the original, or in conditions that are different from the original, with the presumption that certain aspects of the expectations of works as built by artists are not necessarily gonna be preserved by the existing standards of museums and other collecting bodies.

So we've created this unusual new standard, embodied in this questionnaire you're looking at now on the screen, which describes work not in terms of media, but in terms of these sort of mutually compatible behaviors. Earlier, in the first workshop session, we looked at reproducible artworks; now we're going to look at performed artworks - but performed in the broad sense, as you'll see as we move through the discussion today.

And some of the aspects, I'm just going to mention briefly, appearing on the screen here, relate very specifically to theatrical performance, dance performance, the kind of performance we're used to thinking of as performance. What is the cast? Is it professional actors? It is musicians, museum staff, volunteers, or others? So the cast can vary widely. Are the props disposable or custom made, unique in some ways? The same with the set and costumes. What about the number of performers? What about the format of the instructions? Is it a paper score or script - which is the case with, obviously, traditional and classical music, as well as theatrical plays - or a digital transcript, a film, video, or animation, or some combination of the above? When are the instructions followed? During an installation, during the exhibition, during a de-installation? And how do you document each new performance? You know, video, film, textual documentation, so on.

In keeping with our paradigm, we also are looking at ways that this performance would need to change over time. So unfortunately, storage is not much help for most performances, unless there are specific, say, aspects of the set or props or costumes that are so integral to its presentation that they need to be stored over time. However, storing the documents, like the scores and diagrams and so forth, can be very important. In the area of music, what is the storage strategy mean, for say, classical music like Vivaldi? Well, it may mean to actually store an original period instrument that then is brought out to be played each time by the English Consort or another period instrument group.

Another strategy we've talked about throughout the common framework for our presentations, is emulation. That is, the idea of recreating the work using different means to achieve exactly the
same look, or as close to it as you can get. So in the case of props, should props, costumes, and set be remade to match the original specifications? That is, if there was a "princess" phone in the original production, then there'd be a princess phone in the year 2001, even though it's somewhat out of date.

In the process, should the performers imitate as closely as possible the actions of the original participants? Should they indeed look like the original participants? Is it acceptable to hire a tall Macbeth, if the previous Macbeth was short? Is it acceptable to hire a woman in the place of a man's role? Musical instrumentation: should the work be performed on simulations of period instruments? Again, the idea of this generalized notion of emulation is to try to recreate the same appearance or experience, but on a very different means. Yo-Yo Ma has a cello which is a fairly standard modern cello with baroque enhancements - a baroque bridge and gut strings - to recreate the sound of some of the original instruments.

Migration, a sort of parallel but different tack, is just to bring the thing up to date. Should the original props, costumes, and set be replaced with their contemporary equivalents? Ok, it's not a princess phone, it's a Nokia cell phone. Should the process be updated to suit new performance contexts, so the actors can look totally different? If an accountant looked one way in 1950, when you restage a play in 2001, maybe it's a woman accountant, even though that was not specified in the original play. Musical instruments: should the work be performed on the contemporary equivalents of period instruments? You know, the Berlin Philharmonic playing the Four Seasons.

And finally, reinterpretation, a fairly radical strategy for many artworks, but a rather common one for performed artworks. Should props, costumes, and set be reinterpreted to fit the performance context? Well, we've probably heard of Peter Sellers' production of Hamlet in a shoe store, and you know, very unusual resets of plays. The process: should the performers adapt the spirit of the score to a new performance context? There are cases in which performers will deviate drastically from the words written down in a score, in order to in some way, in their minds, capture the spirit of the original intent. Finally, musical instrumentation: can the work be performed on any instruments that capture the essence of the music? So that could range from Bach's Goldberg Variations on a piano to Switched-On Bach, where a synthesizer recreates a totally different timbre of the music, and yet keeps the melodies and harmonies intact.

Obviously, the presumption of our program is that different artists will answer this questionnaire in different ways. And what we've done today is bring together some artists who are exploring the realms, or have explored the realms of performance in a very broad sense. And I'm terrifically pleased to have them here.

Immediately to my right, Robert Morris probably needs no introduction, but of all the people I mentioned last night as inspiring in the variable media concept, he's certainly at the forefront of my thinking. Even just reading down the titles of some of his essays and works - Some Notes on the Phenomenology of Making, Antiform, Continuous Project Altered Daily - gives you a sense of the variety of ways that he has stretched our definition of the art object in the latter half of the 20th century.

He's been of pivotal importance in defining four of, to me, the most interesting movements of the last 40 years: task-oriented dance; minimalism, that is industrially refabricatable sculpture; process art; and earthworks. And I'm delighted to have him here.

To his right is Meg Webster, an artist who has created performative works that nevertheless don't necessarily fit in what we usually think of as performative. And we'll see more about that soon. She has an MFA from Yale, and has exhibited widely in galleries like Paula Cooper, most recently; also in exhibition spaces like P.S.1 Contemporary Art Center, the Guggenheim here, for a show called Material Imagination, and the 1989 Whitney Biennial. And I had the pleasure
of working with her in the Material Imagination, and we'll be talking more about a piece that we recreated for that.

We also have Carol Stringari, a Guggenheim conservator who I won't introduce, since she was on our previous session, but is a mainstay of our program here.

Ken Jacobs, the central figure of American avant-garde cinema - again, whose work we've seen in several contexts, and we'll be looking at it again today.

Jon Gartenberg, independent film curator and restoration specialist - again, continuing the dialogue he began this morning with Ken Jacobs.

And among our respondents, Stephen Vitiello, who again, you saw earlier: a media artist and curator, who here put, on his performance, and perhaps musical performance hat.

Susan Hapgood, Curator of Exhibitions at the American Federation of Arts, as well as a senior fellow at the Vera List Center for Art and Politics. She's been involved in performative aspects of contemporary art, including writing articles for Art in America specifically on the topic, as it relates to artworks from the sort of sixties and seventies, as well as curating projects on Fluxus and related movements, Flux Attitudes in '92, NeoDada: Redefining Art in '94.

And Bill Brand, who we saw earlier, filmmaker and restoration specialist, who will hopefully get engaged in a dialogue about Ken's work and how it expands to all these media.

And finally, at the left end, Tiffany Ludwig, producer of virtual and physical programs at Franklin Furnace; also an artist herself, visiting artist at Brooks College fine and performing arts program, at the Hoboken Charter Schools gallery program, and at Longwood's Cyber Residency program. And she represents an archive that is devoted to somehow capturing the legacy of performance, with particular emphasis on performance art, the kinds of hybrid, unusual formats that aren't usually captured in, say, the stage or dance worlds. So I'm delighted to have everybody here.

CASE STUDY: ROBERT MORRIS

I thought we would start off by looking at a work by Robert Morris, one of our eight case studies. In this case, a piece created in 1964, a performance called Site. And rather than go into a description of the work, I'd like to play an excerpt from a film that the artist created with director Babette Mangolte in 1993, on the occasion, and for demonstration in the artist's retrospective in 1994 here at the Guggenheim. So if we can cue that up, we'll just look at the very first few minutes of this film of the performance.

(Sounds of the film)

IPPOLITO: Might be a good point to stop. At the risk of cutting short the performance. But then again, that's what this symposium is all about, the question of whether we need to cut short performances. And Bob, tell us a little bit about how you got into this, where did the impetus for making a film version of this performance from 1964 originally come from?

ROBERT MORRIS: It came from Rosalind Krauss, who curated the show. She thought it would be an interesting idea to have these pieces shown on the ramps, like the other works, since they were in that period. So that was what got us started.

IPPOLITO: And what was the experience like for you of going through the process? Was it similar to the actual staging of the original performance, or very different?
MORRIS: No, it was extremely different. It was... it was totally boring and tedious. (Laughter) And took hours and hours of rehearsing and waiting. The whole process of filmmaking is just so utterly boring. (Laughter) For me it was, anyway. So the pleasure comes at the very end when you see it all together.

IPPOLITO: And these films were actually created for an occasion; that is, the retrospective in 1994. And they were displayed, as I remember, on the ramps, along with the sculpture and other works, in such a way as to interject this genre that otherwise might've been, in a sense, lost to a historical reading of your work, into the show, as you wound down the ramp.

MORRIS: Well, we could've restaged the performances, I suppose, maybe even here, but somehow that didn't happen; we decided to make them like objects on the ramp.

IPPOLITO: And how do you feel about the result, now that we're looking at it outside of the context of the exhibition, as this sort of not quite documentation, not quite restaging of the original performance?

MORRIS: Well, it was transmuted into a film. And the space of film is obviously very different than performance space, so I learned that process. And certainly, a great deal of this film, maybe the whole thing, is more Babette Mangolte than me, than Morris. But I think it's also a record. And so if the performances were ever restaged, we would be able to consult the film, and it would be a convenient way to restage them, if someone wanted to do that.

IPPOLITO: And would you sort of authorize, so to speak, that kind of restaging? How do you feel about them being restaged now?

MORRIS: Well, I don't think I'm not interested in it. I think that I wouldn't do it. But someone might. I'm saying that the film stands, in a way, as a record.

IPPOLITO: Has this performance, in some sense, entered the public domain? Now that there is a record that could be used to conceivably recreate it, is there any tie that you feel to the accuracy of the performance, in the way that you might feel to, for example, one of your sculptures that has been refabricated, that may or may not fit the original idea you had in mind and what the descriptions of the sculpture should be?

MORRIS: Well, as I said, it's not a performance, it's a film now. So that's very different from the intentions involved, my intentions involved in doing it. So in some sense, you could say well, it's a complete misrepresentation. But the same time, the same kinds of movements are going on. But certainly, you're not looking by yourself- your focus is extremely controlled by the filmmaker. So in many respects, it's a really quite different thing. But I've come to accept that.

IPPOLITO: There are a couple of elements in the performance that was recorded in the film that I'm just curious about, 'cause I was surprised by them, and I wondered if you had anything to do with that. One was that the panels themselves seemed to be made of foamcore. And I assume in '64, you weren't using foamcore. And so that makes a very different relationship to weight, in terms of the performance. And I just wonder how much you had to do with the actual performance that was recorded.

MORRIS: Well, they're not foamcore, they're plywood. But when I did the pieces in '64 or '65; I've forgotten the date - I used plywood. But one sheet of plywood lasted me for several performances. But they make plywood in such a lousy way now, (Laughter) We used a dozen sheets of plywood to get this film made. It doesn't have the same snap, it doesn't have the same look of wood; maybe that's why you thought it was foamcore. It's a different material. You can't get plywood the way they used to make it. They don't make it the same way. So that's already a change.
IPPOLITO: It just looked light, the way he was lifting it.

MORRIS: Hm?

IPPOLITO: It looked light. Maybe he's just very strong.

MORRIS: Well, he's athletic and... (Laughter)

IPPOLITO: One impression I had of looking at the film was that you were well known as a dancer during this time; yet it was a kind of dance that, in a way, was an admixture of dancerly attitudes with everyday kind of movements. And there is a kind of athleticism and finesse that the recreated, you know, performer has. And I wondered if that you think those sorts of things are somehow inevitable in restaging; that people try to do it as well as they can, and it maybe it wasn't done quite so well in the original version. I unfortunately wasn't there-

MORRIS: You're implying I was a worse performer than Andrew. (Laughter) Maybe. (Laughter)

IPPOLITO: It just makes me wonder about the process of the perfectionism, as Carol noted before, of the museum and the organs of preservation that are intent on making as good a copy of the original as possible. This kind of process that already exists in museum culture, of sort of ossifying a work, we've seen in other examples of your work that are perhaps not performances, but are performative. And the example that comes to mind most recently is a creation of your work Labyrinth, which I'll bring an image up.

SUSAN HAPGOOD: Jon, can I just ask a question about this piece before you go on to the next?

IPPOLITO: Sure.

HAPGOOD: I was gonna ask, when you were preparing to make the film, you were obviously thinking about the ramps of the Guggenheim, and your exhibition here. But were you thinking of this as becoming a record in perpetuity of that performance?

MORRIS: Yes, it would be the only one, other than my notes.

HAPGOOD: So you were thinking in terms of far beyond the immediate need for it.

MORRIS: Well, yeah. And also, Mangolte thought that it would be something she would want to show as a film. And it's titled like a film, her name appears, and so on. So it was a film for her. And I agreed with that. And so I knew that that would eventually happen, I mean, that would be the case. Presumably, this thing is gonna hang around for a while.

IPPOLITO: Following up on that question, would you ever think of perhaps augmenting the film with a description of, almost in a sense, your reaction to it, and perhaps some notation as to what is left out of the film, or what is different about the film, to remind people that a film is, in a sense, a very particular representation of the performance?

MORRIS: Only here. (Laughter)

IPPOLITO: Oh, ok. Let me bring up that other example, then.

This is an image from the Guggenheim Museum Bilbao, of Robert Morris' work Labyrinth, as seen in the show called Changing Perceptions, the Panza Collection show, in the year 2000. And this is a giant, amazing labyrinth, that is recreated each time it is built. It's rebuilt most or every time that it is exhibited, and built from plans. There is some degree of variability in the
plans.

But to recount an anecdote from my office, I, having worked a little bit on the retrospective and tour in 1994, was aware of your critique of the "well built", at least as evidenced in your writing at the time. And the kind of fetishistic attitude that seemed to encourage the commodification of artworks, where every single cigarette butt that may have been fallen off of a Jackson Pollock was meticulously resmoked and stuck back on. And at the time, I remember a conversation about which gray the works from this period should be painted... works that were not meant to be built in an incredibly fetishistic way. Maybe this would be a good point for you to help describe what you were thinking about, and how you came to terms with this kind of variability inherent in the construction and painting of sculpture of this period.

MORRIS: Well, I would respond to the options that were available. What were we going to make it out of? How could we reduce the cost? And there were some things that I didn't particularly want done. I didn't want that finish to look like a finished wall, like one of these walls in the auditorium. I was perfectly happy to have all the seams show. Although it's quite narrow, so I didn't want anything that would snag people as they brushed against it. Those are the decisions that I made. But I don't know how much you can control these things. When the smaller plywood pieces from this era were redone here for the Guggenheim retrospective, they were done by a craftsman that I thought would do a good job. I gave him plans. Then when I saw the pieces in the museum, I was appalled, because they were so meticulous; and my work was so much sloppier. And you could see the thickness of the plywood. But I couldn't ask him to do it worse. (Laughter)

So I didn't feel good about that, but I could've specified: Do it when you're drunk, or something, but- (Laughter) I never did that. So there's always something you're not going to think about in advance, and I don't see how you could control every aspect of it.

IPPOLITO: Well, one thing that this observation brings up is that notion of control and of the presumption among museums that there is a certain kind of control to be exerted, and that that's always good. I remember in our planning for the retrospective that you specified gray paint, and then when the finicky Guggenheim designers came back with, "Well, which Pantone color?," you said simply, "No, it's a neutral gray, to be determined by the people who construct it," and simply the act of picking the particular gray was important to you to leave up to the conditions of the individual recreations.

Then, in the year 2000, when this labyrinth was being built that you see on the screen, I overheard a conversation in a cubicle near me, in which someone was on the phone with Bilbao saying, "Well, I know you don't have Benjamin Moore 580-C, but that's what color it's got to be. And that's the paint chip that we found in the file." And I sort of went through my back of my mind, quickly surmised that some designer had taken the artist's advice at heart, gone out and picked what they felt was a neutral gray, and unfortunately without making any notations to the effect, left it in the file.

And because of the attitude, this ossification is that is part of museum culture, which is in some ways, a valid sort of conscientious attitude, the people who picked that paint chip out thought: Oh, this is the color it's got to be. And that kind of fixing of an artwork, despite the artist's intentions, goes on all the time in the world of museums. And it's only because Robert Morris has been so articulate in his writings against this notion of the "well built" for the works of this period, that I and other curators were able to reconstruct what happened and realize our mistake.

On the general theme of mistakes, I'd like to mention another work of yours that I think is very interesting to compare to the performance. In this case, a work called Untitled (Stadium), from 1967, which looks different in different photographs, for a very good reason. And Bob, if you
could give us a sense of what this work was about and what happened to it over time as it was collected.

MORRIS: Well, it was a piece that, as that diagram showed, was permuted every day, or every few days, during the exhibition; and not only permuted, but it had spare parts, or it had different parts that were brought in and substituted; so that it had a number of possible, or many, many possible positions, and no definitive position, or even any definitive set of forms. So that was carried out in this exhibition.

Then this work was bought by Panza, who transported it to Milan, and proceeded to chop holes in the sides of the ledges and bolt them together, because that's the way he liked 'em. And he destroyed the work; when we showed it here, it had to be rebuilt. But what can you do? I mean, in this country, art is property when somebody buys it, so they can do what they like. I don't know what the laws are in Italy, but...

So those things wash out. The same with the felt pieces. Most felt pieces had a number of different positions; but once they're collected, once they're in somebody's ownership, then whenever they're put up, they wanna do it exactly like the photograph.

IPPOLITO: I think your experience speaks volumes to the history and the cultures of museums. It's hard to avoid the well worn grooves of media, whereby a performance tends to be reperformed according to a score, rather than, say, to a video. And sculpture tends to have a certain fixity and maintain that position or that shape for the rest of its life. And these are really well worn paths that we've come to expect, and that institutions are in place to encourage.

And what I find fascinating about what you've done is really to work against those expectations, to give performance a sense of fixity by fixing it in the medium of film or video; to give sculpture a sense of variability by allowing, and indeed mandating, that it have this performative variability as it's installed in different configurations. So I think the danger of the existing kind of frameworks for collecting is brought out by these examples you mention.

We'll see that as we move on later to Ken Jacobs' work, where a work that is both film and performance fits comfortably into neither. To simply preserve the film stock would be to fall into one of the well worn grooves, but would completely ignore the performative aspect of his work. Carol, maybe you want to speak with Meg Webster about another case of a performative work that operates outside the grooves.

CASE STUDY: MEG WEBSTER

CAROL STRINGARI: What we're gonna look at here is an installation entitled Stick Spiral. It was first conceived in 1986 by Meg Webster, who's sitting at my left. And you can see it as it was presented in the Material Imagination show here at the Guggenheim. And what I'm gonna do is try and evoke a description of how Meg feels about the piece. Because as we spoke about this morning with Nam June Paik, there's an incredible amount of variability, and yet there are some fixed aspects of the work that are really important. So we're gonna try and define those now.

In terms of Jon's questionnaire and his strategy towards preserving the work - which of course, we don't store those sticks of the spiral - what is it that you would want us to store in our archives?

MEG WEBSTER: That's a good question. Do we have a picture of its first incarnation? Yeah. There were five works in a long space. And all were meant to be attended to with the body. You looked across a volume of water, you went into some air. And in this case, case you went into some sticks or branches, actually. And they were gathered from an estate where someone had
done some pruning, taken down some saplings and so forth. And that's why they look the way they do. I was just basically making forms out of the material that I found nearby.

And so it was subsequently bought and given to the museum. And it became a part of the museum's collection. So when I was invited to build it again, we had to find sticks. And it's not so easy to do. Sticks that could be laid out into a spiral. But what was really important was not only the search for material like this, but the fact that a storm came through and created these. All the branches you see came from an estate out on Long Island, where I'd done a work years before. So that we had this wealth of material that had been brought down by the storm.

And so that's what created this difference between the two. And the size of the space was much bigger. And this was the first time I'd recreated it, so I could see this piece being ten times bigger, if you had a lot bigger space and you had a lot more material. And I could see the piece being named differently now. You know: Stick Spiral: Waiting for a Storm, or something like that.

It began to be tied to the weather, which was very interesting to me. And the whole problem of an institution in a city, and the whole problem of moving these materials, which basically no one knew what to do with.

STRINGARI: I didn't actually work on the show myself, but I was around and hearing the whole story. And it was really exciting, because people were trying to find these branches, and everyone was worried about the right branches, and there's a performative quality about that, which is why we're here with this performance aspect.

WEBSTER: And it's also a kind of performance when you go into it.

STRINGARI: Right.

WEBSTER: The viewer becomes a performance, in a way, as well.

STRINGARI: So, what we have in our documentation is basically some sketches of yours, and communication between the curators and yourself. At this point, would you go back and write a score, for example?

WEBSTER: Actually, I should go back and think through what we learned, and add that to the box.

For these works that were sold, I put all the documentation into a nicely made box. There were several of them. So it began to be a way of containing that description of what this piece is, to be well documented. Now I would add video- photographs were always a part, but video would definitely be a part of the record.

STRINGARI: You'd videotape the actual installation as a definitive prescription.

WEBSTER: I'm not into the idea of using video that way, but probably as record of what happened. And I'm more interested now in the way that it might be built in the future, in a sense, how it might change, and what that adds to the work. So I kind of like the idea that it's open ended.

STRINGARI: We spoke about it earlier, but you're very ecologically minded, and these sticks have to be cut for some other purpose, or blown down from some other purpose. And in the event that we couldn't find branches to create the piece-

WEBSTER: You'd have to wait for the storm.
STRINGARI: We would wait. (Laughter) That could be a problem in an institution. Anyway—(Laughter)

WEBSTER: Well, no, that brings up a whole 'nother thing. You could have an institution that's just based on making works that are like that.

STRINGARI: Yeah. This has a very dynamic foliage that sticks out.

WEBSTER: This is a lot wilder, yeah. I like that about it.

STRINGARI: It has that storm quality, where the other one is very geometric, almost. And do you have a preference?

WEBSTER: I like this one better I think.

STRINGARI: You are available to be called in to participate in the performance-slash-installation; do you always want to be a part of it, or is that something that would vary?

WEBSTER: It would vary, I would think. If I'm around and I have time, then perhaps.

STRINGARI: But you would always wanna be contacted.

WEBSTER: Oh, yes, yes.

STRINGARI: So in terms of the documentation of the history of the piece, is it important for us to keep the documentation to know what kind of stick was used in the past?

WEBSTER: There should probably be a description of that.

STRINGARI: Right. But there's no mandate to use it again if it's in the same space or the same location, the same type of materials; it's what you can find at the time.

WEBSTER: Yeah, I think so. And have the work generate out of that, perhaps. But, you know, the idea that it's a spiral that one enters into is important, and at some points, you be able to see out of it. So at some point, I need to define what the parameters truly are.

STRINGARI: I mean, if you could only find sticks enough to make it knee level, it wouldn't work, right?

WEBSTER: Well, I don't know. Maybe it would. I'd have to try that. That would be something else; then you'd really see the spiral on the floor, so it'd become a whole different thing.

STRINGARI: So as you see, this brings up a number of issues in terms of performance and installation, and the museum's responsibility; we would now probably videotape the installation, just because that's what we're starting to do; but you wouldn't want, then, that videotape to become like those photographs of the felt pieces that are reinstalled the same way every time in the future. So I think within the videotape, there would have to be some description of that, (Webster: Yeah, I think so) but it remains variable.

Because everyone is afraid to make a mistake, that's why they go back to that installation photograph, and they arrange the piece exactly the way it was before, because no one has that information that the parameters are variable.
WEBSTER: And that's the question. Am I the only one that can decide that? That's a very important question. I could deem an institution: Well, you can do it anyway you want. That's an interesting question: what makes something, mine as opposed to someone else's.

STRINGARI: Would you be willing to fill in the questionnaire that we've been talking about? (Laughs)

WEBSTER: Oh, yes, I've sat down to do it and then something would always get in the way.

STRINGARI: I think the questionnaire is fabulous; it's just that I don't know how many artists are- We'll probably have to walk them through it, because it takes time.

IPPOLITO: This is the Rick Lazio approach. (Laughter) You have someone on the spot when you ask them.

WEBSTER: "Will you do it?" No, I meant to actually do it before I came, but I- (Laughter)

TIFFANY LUDWIG: If this were to become a permanent piece, would there be a timeframe it could exist in? Or could it not be a permanent piece?

WEBSTER: Well, the sticks do fall apart after a while; they deteriorate. And if it was done outside, that might be part of it. And then every year or two years, it becomes probably very rich, because the material decomposing would make richer ground. But I think it could be made as a living work, as well. Which would be very interesting.

STRINGARI: Meg, one of the problems that we had when we installed it here was obviously, we have traditional works in the collection that can't be exposed to any sort of organisms or animals or any type of thing. And we had to do a lot of looking into fumigating with the branches. Now, in terms of ecology-

WEBSTER: Were they fumigated?

IPPOLITO: We had five truckloads, (Laughter) and each truckload was treated differently.

We fumigated. Let's see- something like the first two fairly generously, because we had two weeks to find five giant truckloads of twigs in Manhattan. And if it hadn't been for this storm, I think we would've been doomed. But in the first few, we did a fairly diligent job of doing an intensive fumigation, and researched what would be the most ecological fumigation, which is a total contradiction in terms, but we tried.

And then, as for the ones that came from the storm, I believe we left them out long enough so that the vermin could basically-

WEBSTER: But we did have a mouse.

IPPOLITO: Yes, in the end, we still had a stowaway in the gallery.

STRINGARI: Well, the mouse is less a concern than certain types of spiders and bugs and things that would come into the museum and lay eggs- You know, that kind of thing. But it was a question, whether ecologically, we can do this with your work. Because there're very few methods of fumigation that are not chemical. Unless you do sort of an oxygen-free environment for weeks and weeks; and we didn't have the time to do that, so... How do you feel about that?

WEBSTER: It's a problem. It's nature versus culture... It's a complicated world out there, and we like things very clean and safe, so I don't know. I suppose I should have a clever answer,
but...

IPPOLITO: That's what the questionnaire's for. For every artist's work, we don't just rely on this sort of pat form; we also tailor questions particular to that work and that artist. So the fumigation question would be one for Meg. I thought of a couple other sort of difficult questions for you to answer, including things like: If we were to loan this piece to a museum in the desert, like Guggenheim Las Vegas, would a cactus qualify as a branch? If it was to be installed in the dead of winter, and there was no foliage, could you use branches that had no evidence that they were recently alive? If you were to install it on an island, would you have to go to the nearest branch, which might be thousands of miles away on some mainland?

So, clearly, there are issues that not every artwork, or not every artist would be prepared to answer, but they at least stimulate artists, hopefully, for works of this kind to clarify their intentions for us so that we can present them in the future. And we look forward to seeing your results.

So maybe now would be a good time to jump to continuing the conversation between Jon Gartenberg and Ken Jacobs about the performative aspect of their work.

CASE STUDY: KEN JACOBS (PERFORMATIVE ASPECT)

JON GARTENBERG: Thank you, Jon. I just wanted to start with a quick preamble, in terms of talking with Jon Ippolito about this whole issue of preservation of film, particularly of experimental and independent artists such as Ken. When Jon and I started to talk about this, we subsumed all of this work under the category of reproducible media. What struck me about that is that this description is really insufficient to describe the enterprise of artists such as Ken, next to me.

Because I believe that they are very significantly also concerned about the performance aspects, and the way that these films are presented, the environments that they're presented in. And without going into a lot of details, from my own decades of experience preserving experimental filmmakers' works and independent artists' works, the whole issue of dealing with the different versions, the different iterations of what it is that they created, beyond the issue of the film stock, it is: What version of what showing at what time is it that we're trying to account for?

And I think no one is more wonderfully paradigmatic of this example and engaged in this process than Ken Jacobs. So I thought we would start this afternoon by asking Ken a couple questions about the issues of the projection space and the projection environment. And I thought, Ken, maybe the first place we could start was with maybe if we talked a little bit about your shadow plays.

KEN JACOBS: Shadow plays need standard proscenium stages, they need darkness. And they're actually, for some years now, 3-D shadows. They're shadows that loom from the screen, come out into the audience, and they're lots of fun for me to do. I don't get a chance to do them as often as I'd like. I must say, you put me in mind about the environment. A little story? Ok?

I was invited to present my Nervous System works at the Beaubourg. And I figured on having a dark room. And no, the idea was that I would do it on this first floor level, ok? And I said, "Look, it's not a freak show. You know, it's not a place people'll come and say, 'Oh, yeah, it looks weird.' It really starts somewhere, it develops, it concludes. I don't wanna be part of, you know, of this flea market of art." And so I haven't performed at the Beaubourg.

GARTENBERG: Well, I think another one of your comments which was extraordinary - 'cause I'm looking at what the artists themselves say or write about their work - when you talked about an aspect of your creative enterprise as "a tension between the flat and deep, and something in
between, ripe for impossible changes, both subtle and violent, becomes available to sight." And so my question was yes, there are issues about the film image, such as we saw in Tom Tom, but I'm asking you if you could comment upon your intervention into the space, in terms of Nervous System performances, how that affects this kind of outlook?

JACOBS: Well, first of all, I'm always tangling with the subject. I don't feel, or rarely feel that I'm imposing something. I don't think I can impose anything. I think that the elements have to be there; that hopefully, I will be able to feel out, think out, take to a new place the Nervous System phenomena. I don't want to just do variations on what I've done. And different materials, you know, allow me to go different ways. In other words, to really create whole other space/time operations that I haven't seen before.

GARTENBERG: Well, I think it would be interesting to take a look now at what I understand is a tape of what you used for a grant application. Can you talk about that a little bit?

JACOBS: Well, what it does is demonstrate what I'm doing with the machines. How I perform.

JACOBS' VOICE ON VIDEO: One of the variations on my Nervous System apparatus is this- two 35 millimeter strip film projectors. And you can see the small amounts of film I'm working with. Actually, I'm only using a fraction of this film strip. This would be hours of programs. And the machines operate one frame at a time. And I just click them forward as I want to change frames...

The propeller up front works on a motor with a rheostat. And I just wanna get across some of the things that shift around as I'm working. Like, this can shift, this back and forth operates levers that shift the registration of the projectors. And also up and down. I change the position of the propeller. I interfere with the picture in various ways to make different things happen. I add all kinds of things to the front of the lenses, including filters and whatnot.

Well, this projector pretty much just runs, you know. This second projector plays against it. And it moves forward and back. It tilts to the side. It swings back and forth, and also tilts up and down, making different connections on screen with the image from the other projector...

So it's a very active operation, which I enjoy very much.

GARTENBERG: Thank you.
[VIDEO ENDS]

GARTENBERG: Yesterday, when I came here at ten a.m. to look at you set this up with Flo, I timed it. Just to get this right, the set up -must've been at least three or four hours. And the incredible precision that it takes just to get the apparatus established for you to create what you wanna do.

JACOBS: The precision is very seductive to me, and very assuring, I won't get what I'm after unless it's exactly right. I love it. If I go off, I'll get something else. I might like that something else, or I might wanna get away from it. But that at all times, there's a formula of all these operations.

If I hit on something in my rehearsals and I wanna get back to it, I have to know how to get back to it. I need to know that this has to be over there, that has to be over there, I have to do this. And so I'm very, very active back there at the projector.

GARTENBERG: And it was a wonderful experience for me, yesterday, to really plunge into that world again. I was a privileged viewer of having you run through a rehearsal of this, and being able to have this direct one-on-one experience, to be put, as I said this morning, between those
two dimensions and this three dimensions. Somewhere I'm still floating to try to absorb your work.

JACOBS: And you saw how my partner Flo was so integral to this, right?

GARTENBERG: Oh, completely. And I think that raises the next issue, which has to do with the next piece you've worked on, which is called Flo Rounds a Corner.

JACOBS: I'm only showing a two minute excerpt from that.

GARTENBERG: And you wanna say where it's gonna be shown?

JACOBS: At the Walter Reade Theater, tomorrow night at seven thirty, on a program of digital works that I believe are made by various artists who have been working with film, and now are also working with the computer and the digital camera.

[EXCERPT IS VIEWED.]

GARTENBERG: So could you tell us a little bit, Ken, about what moved you to go from the Nervous System performance structure to this way of presenting this work?

JACOBS: I was just caught in the tide. (Laughter)

IPPOLITO: Do you feel differently about this, versus the video of the performance that we saw?

JACOBS: Oh, yes.

IPPOLITO: -the rebroadcast? How is it different?

JACOBS: This is hard! And that's sloppy. Ok? This is determined in a way that I want it to be going. I can't determine people's responses to it, but I can say, "This is the way the thing fits together. This is carpentered correctly." I want that. At least for myself.

GARTENBERG: I think there's another extraordinary aspect to this, Ken, which is really quite remarkable, because you're just about the only artist I can think in this domain that I'm familiar with who's thought about this, is when you are not going to be present to be able to perform the Nervous System performances, how does that work continue into the future. And I think it's really an incredible testament to you that you're somebody really not abdicating that responsibility to the curators and conservators uniquely, but that you are very centrally interested in this issue. And was that a factor that played into your movement into this digital domain for how you could represent the Nervous performances?

JACOBS: Hm. I don't think I thought it through. I really think it was just an impulse to do it. But it's true, I do want to salvage or say maintain the Nervous System pieces. It's really very important to me. That's why Bruce Sterling's talk about how the dissipation of the pixel information really shook me up last night. I can't believe it can happen. Too much of the world economy depends on it.

You know, just business, banks, will not let this information dissipate. No matter what kind of changes take place in platforms or programs, a kind of universal, almost cryptography code will have to be created, that will incidentally also salvage these artworks, as well as the economy.

GARTENBERG: You've also been thinking about the next steps in terms of how to further your work with the Nervous System performances, in terms of something having to do with a sort of a player piano mode. Could you talk about that?
JACOBS: Because of you guys, it's got me into thinking about how this thing could be set up and be performance; would have many of the attributes of performance. But like the old player piano, which really does sound like Fats Waller. It got me thinking to ways it could be done so that a lot of information would be worked out, so that the machine could to the rest. Could be robotized.

And so it will never have errors. It will never have fortuitous gifts leaps that came up by chance. But it'll be something I wanna see.

GARTENBERG: And that'll require the money and the resources for that to move this into the next-

JACOBS: Yes, Jon, it will. (Laughter)

GARTENBERG: Hopefully, we'll figure out a way to support you in that.

IPPOLITO: I had a question about something you had mentioned before. (I'm bracketing, for now, the question of this sort of digital Disneyland you describe, where everything is gonna be preserved for the future because of banks.) I don't know if it's apparent to every viewer, but what Ken has done is not simply to take a digital video of one of his performances, but to recast the very mechanism of it in digital form, so that it's really a reinterpretation of the Nervous System performances, rather than a migration, for example.

The masking that you do physically, with your propeller in front of the 16 millimeter projector beams is performed in Flo Rounds a Corner with masks like you see in Photoshop. There're pixels being masked. The kinds of frame adjustments that you're making are not moving literally filmstrips back and forth, but adjustments of ones and zeroes.

JACOBS: Right.

IPPOLITO: This is a very deep level at which you have reinterpreted the performance.

JACOBS: Ok, but it started out on a superficial level. In a way, almost like new- Every new media comes in and it imitates a former media. Like wrought iron came in and it imitated vines and leaves, right? People made furniture that looked like wood out of iron.

And I began working with this, trying to simulate what I was doing with the apparatus, the Nervous System apparatus, film apparatus. And began to, gradually, empirically, began to move away to what was effective within this particular set up, the computer. But it did start out like that, trying to, in funny ways, imitate what I was doing with the projectors.

IPPOLITO: And tell us a little bit about how you've imagined ways that on, say, a DVD that would contain this recording, the kind of spontaneity or unpredictability of a performance could be captured.

JACOBS: Well, Flo says when she was a kid she had a record that had alternate tracks. And so you'd play this children's record, and never knew quite how the story was going to end. So I like the idea ... when I'm working, you sort of score on the projector. So I do work with scores very often. Or I want them there. Just as reassurance, but I'll do most of it through memory. Very often in the actual performance, because of this precision we spoke about, because of the perimeters of these formulas for getting particular effects, if you go off, you get something else. And sometimes the something else, as I said before, is very intriguing; I'll go with it. So while there will be an overall similarity, oh, of development from performance to performance of a specific work, there is always variations within, from performance to performance.
I thought I would like to have that, in the age of the... What the hell's it called? The DV-ROM, right? That's how much I know. To be able to either have a chance operation built into this, or let the viewer operate somewhat and veer off to eventually get to the end. But do it with different ways, different variations.

The fact is, even when you just look at this straight, if it was all actually fixed linear, you would be able to see it the same way two times; but I actually would like to go further, and actually have these circuitous byways built into it as alternate routes.

IPPOLITO: Fascinating.

ONLINE PERFORMANCE

One of the possibilities, when we talk about moving to the digital realm in terms of performance, is a performance that doesn't take place in one room, either for the viewers or even the performers. And one of our respondents today, Tiffany Ludwig, has worked with an artist who was mentioned earlier - Jack Waters, mentioned by Jon Gartenberg - to produce an online performance. Tiffany, if you wanna talk us through, just quickly, how that works and how it is different from the performance, even in the wide variety that we've just talked about in physical space.

Tiffany Ludwig: Ok, I think Jon's gonna pull it up on the screen here, also. This is Jack Waters' piece, Superschmoozio. And this screen capture was presented at the Kitchen in January. And what you're seeing here are avatars in the Palace, which is a graphical chat environment online. Each of the avatars you're looking at is in a different place around the country or the globe.

Superschmoozio is a piece about kissing up in the art market, and schmoozing your way through the art world. And it was originally conceived as a video game with a theatrical concept, where the players would have characters that they would embody. And instead of punching or stabbing to knock down your opponent, you would try to draw them to you by kissing and making sucking sounds and talking about your artwork. (Laughter)

Jack's background is in dance and choreography, so it's interesting; this work probably links most of the variable media descriptions that Jon's been talking about in his dropdown chart, because performance and networked art combine so many aspects of the temporal and the impermanent.

Since this is online, it's actually a migration of the original idea. Online, they deal less with rules and more with concepts. So instead of having a script that each person follows, there's an idea, and they have characters based on their avatars. And this is actually a virtual gallery setting. And if you're reading the text, they're bringing each other through to look at other artworks.

This was created, as I said, on the Palace software. The problem that we're gonna have for years to come, is that the developers of the software decided it wasn't a money making venture, and took their money out of it and went elsewhere. They, as far as I understand, dropped the URL, kept the servers and the usability of it; but a new user couldn't log on; he could not announce this to a public, for everyone to come and log on. You have to have a special registration key.

This has been solved, because I think it's back up online. But in dealing with that problem, we had talked about what he might want to do as a future incarnation of this work. And what he's done here is taken QuickTime screengrabs.
And Jack's feeling is that this actually needs to be emulated. This environment, this 2-D flat
environment, is what's important to this work, because it's his aesthetic choice to have it in this
place. If there was a newer 3-D chat place where you can upload all kinds of animated avatars
and things that had other functions than these do, it wouldn't really be acceptable, because this
is the time and space that this work and these kind of ideas are happening in.

GENERAL DISCUSSION

IPPOLITO: So you see a wide span of works that fit in the category of performative, from literal
performances, such as Robert Morris', through ephemeral installations, film, and even in the
online world. Any other questions from respondents about some of the things that we've talked
about?

HAPGOOD: I had some questions for Meg Webster and for Robert Morris. In particular, Robert
Morris, you seem to have an attitude that no matter how hard we try to do the best thing, or to
try to recreate, or to reconstruct something, that basically, you're never going to be able to do
it to your satisfaction. And you seem to have a certain acceptance of the fact that that's just the
way it is. And I'm just wondering how comfortable you feel with some of the initial discussions
of this whole initiative, allowing the museum to say what's authentic or not later on, according
to these plans. Is that still part of the initiative, or no? When something's recreated, say, after
your death, according to instructions, are you comfortable that they will be able to say whether
it's ok or whether it's the real thing?

MORRIS: No. (Laughter) But I don't think you have a choice.

HAPGOOD: So you are resolved to the fact that history's gonna do what it will with you, and
that's just the way it's gonna be?

MORRIS: Sure. I mean, you put up a fight. But... I think it was the philosopher Nelson
Goodman said there's two codes that we generally go by. When it comes to art, it's an analog
code. That means every difference makes a difference. In language, you have gaps. And what
you see is absences and differences. So any time you change any aspect of art, it has meaning
on it. It changes the meaning. And sometimes that's for better, or sometimes it's not for
better; it's worse.

HAPGOOD: Given the nature of the work we're dealing with, though, how much responsibility
does the artist have for having initiated something that, by its very nature, is difficult to
replicate?

MORRIS: Well, all you can do is control as much as you can control, or preconceive. With time,
everything changes. And past work is not what it was when it was first created. Most of art
history is about fragments, anyway. So I don't think there is any way to defeat entropy here, in
all of its subtle forms. You do the best you can.

HAPGOOD: So you value the effort, obviously. I think that what you're trying to do is so
wonderful; but I think that it's so difficult, in this initiative.

My other question I had for Meg pertained to the artists' role through time and through your life.
And I was wondering, just to cut to an example that would be clear, it doesn't sound like you've
changed your intention, but obviously, you've built your vision of your stick piece over time,
based on what's happened to it.

You may say, "Well, I would never do this" but if, say 20 years from now, after repeatedly
trying to gather the sticks, and you, being tired of having people tell you it's impossible, what if
you said at that point, "Ok, you can cut them and send them from somewhere else." I'm wondering, he importance that this whole system places on the artist's intentions, and allows them to change their vision through time, would that be ok? Or would the essential nature of the piece change in your eyes, if 20 years from now you said...

WEBSTER: Well, there's a couple of principles. And then maybe that's what needs to be outlined. I'm interested in how time and pressure and other institutions and other situations have broadened the work, or might broaden the work. I'm interested in the notion of what principles within each work might be maintained, and what the forces against that might be.

The world might- everybody-cut all the trees down, and where would you find any sticks? And then Stick Spiral becomes something of a relic from the past. God forbid. The opposite might happen, which is the whole built environment might become totally overgrown. And then it's something else, you see. So I don't know. That's not answering your question, exactly. But I like the idea that one can later go back and define what principles caused that work to be made in the first place, and how it might change, how you might define what the work really is.

HAPGOOD: I'm wondering whether the staff of the Guggenheim has any strong feelings about your role. Are your plans to just go with whatever the artist is saying, say 20 years from now? Or will you play a policing role at some point, of saying, "Well, wait a second, that's not what you said 20 years ago, and since we own this piece-"

WEBSTER: Yeah, how far could I push them? This is what you're asking?

HAPGOOD: Yeah, I'm sort of curious about the collaborative nature between the institution and the artist, too.

IPPOLITO: We discussed this in one of the workshops, particularly with Bill Brand, so I hope he'll chime in on this. There's this sort of monolith word intent that we trot out from time to time. But really, intent is a series of events or decisions in time, just as the artwork is becoming chain of events. There's the original intent, hypothetically, of the artist upon making the work. Then there's the retrospective intent. I don't know what Bob would have said about his piece being filmed in 1964, but I know what he thinks about it now.

And I think that it's important to document both of those versions of intent. And in a sense, they would be like filling out the questionnaire twice. But unlike, say a will and testament, I don't think the second would override the first. It might in the short term, while the artist is still alive; but there may be a point in the long term where historians go back and play the 1950s Glenn Gould recording of Goldberg Variations, rather than the 1980s one, even though he said the 1980s one was better. And it's valuable to me to have those on record.

Again, another analogy would be the TV Garden. I think it's nice to be able to update it, but also for any sort of historical show, like the period rooms at the Met, you might wanna trot out the wooden TV consoles from 1982 and build that version. But Bill came up with a wonderful phrase, the "public use" of the artwork.

Somewhere between the original intent and the retrospective intent, the work may have gathered other meanings that maybe the people in the museum are better equipped to understand or take into account than the artist. If certain people were influenced, for example, by the TV sets having this antique wooden casing rather than some futuristic flatscreen, well, maybe it's important for history to know that.

BILL BRAND: Well, there's a bit of this that's like being asked to sign the "do not resuscitate" form. (Laughter) You know, one fears that's one's asking for some terminal problem. And it's curious to me that the language of your rubric is filled with words like essential and original and
intention and authentic, whereas the very work that we did in the last 20 or 30 years as artists very much was involved with trying to problematize those very notions. And I wonder, from the artists here and from the curators, whether there's an unease that we're being asked, in some ways, in the light of flattery perhaps even, of being asked being acquired or whatever, to deproblematize that; of being coopted into agreeing in some way to solving that problem that we so readily created.

MORRIS: I don't think in some cases you have any choice. (Laughter) Let me use an example. Say a felt work that has all these possibilities; it doesn't have any unique state. Somebody acquires this work, and every time they put it up, they're gonna do it exactly like the photograph. Well, you're not around, you don't know about this. You can't control all those things that go out from your place, of what you've done. You're not able to revitalize those kinds of problemized things that we were dealing with. Because institutions take over. And they rigidify things.

BRAND: But do you think an effort like this actually contributes to keeping the problems alive? Or do you think it's just another layer of something that we can't control?

MORRIS: Well, everybody seems pretty concerned with authenticity here. How to preserve the original.

JACOBS: I think it's always going to remain a vital problem. And it will vary from situation to situation.

STRINGARI: Can I just bring a bit of the more traditional preservation aspect into this? Because I'm curious to hear what the curators here have to say. You know, they collect a piece from 1964. That's what they collected. And I come upon it in the year 2000 and this is more traditional work, a painting, a sculpture. I come upon it and it's discolored and things have happened to it that maybe the artist didn't intend originally.

So I go to the curator and I talk to the curator. We call in the artist, if the artist is there. I have had experiences where, number one, the artist is like, "I don't want anything to do with this, because I've got better things to do, and you worry about it." I've also had, "I'll redo that." And then we get a 2001 version of their work, which is nothing about what was collected in 1964. Or, I mean, there could be some variation of that scenario; those are the two extremes. But is this any different? And how is it different, if it is?

JACOBS: I think we have to get away from the idea that the institution is all stones, all, you know set; that the institutions are finally inhabited by people making decisions. There are all these different personalities answering to the problem in specific ways. So the institution, finally, is human society, with all its variabilities. And what you're gonna get are approximations, versions, and right and wrong- more or less, right and wrong- Just the way old music is played by, as you said before, new instruments and new mentalities. And still, it seems to be worth while to keep poking around and, you know, keep some of that past alive, or at least some kind of reference to point to us as we proceed in ongoing history.

IPPOLITO: Well, on that note, we're almost out of time, but if anyone from the audience- We might have time for a couple of questions.

JACOBS: Maybe they have answers.

(Applause)

IPPOLITO: Any of you that have answers, bring them up to us, and we'll pretend like we came up with them in the break.
(BREAK)

go to the next session