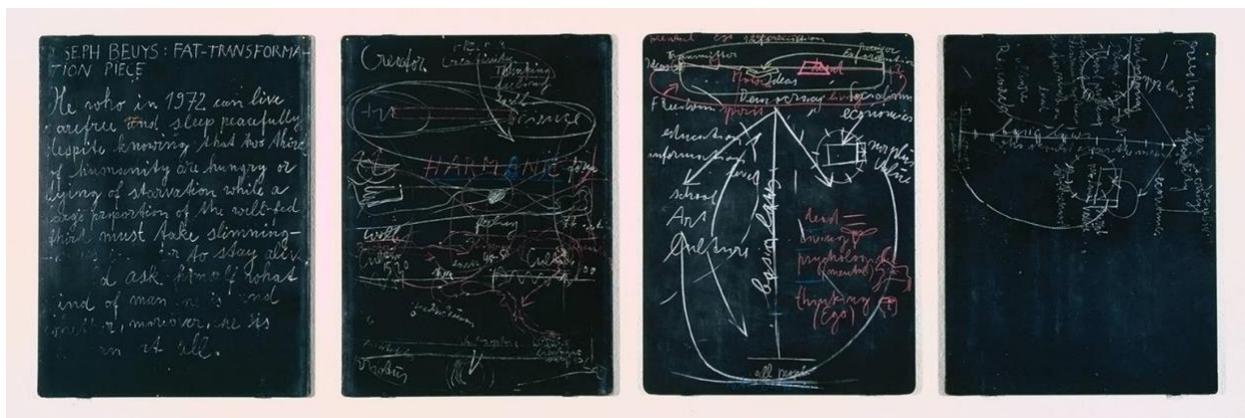


Between Ephemerality and the Archive: Integrating Performance Art Into a Collection

The author, Nick Nguyen, is a second-year MA student at the Institute of Fine Arts, New York University, with a focus in modern and contemporary art. He is particularly interested in dialogues concerning participation and collaboration in postwar art practices.

In a recent lecture at the Institute of Fine Arts, "Performance Art and the Problem of Medium: Definitions and Documentation in Practice," Jonah Westerman - Assistant Professor in Art History at Purchase College, State University of New York - discussed the larger implications surrounding the documentation of performance art and the life of the work once it is integrated within a collection. With an argument that represented his strong grasp on the questions surrounding performance art, coupled with Westerman's experience as a postdoctoral researcher at the Tate Modern in London, this lecture was an illuminating discussion for both time-based media conservators and art historians alike on the implications of a performance and its documentation.



Joseph Beuys, *Ohne Titel (Four Blackboards)*, 1972; 4 works on blackboard, chalk, 1216 x 914 x 18 mm; collection Tate, transferred from the archive 1983; © DACS, 2018.

Leading the discussion through previous ideas developed by performance scholars Peggy Phelan and Philip Auslander, along with early examples documenting performance in the

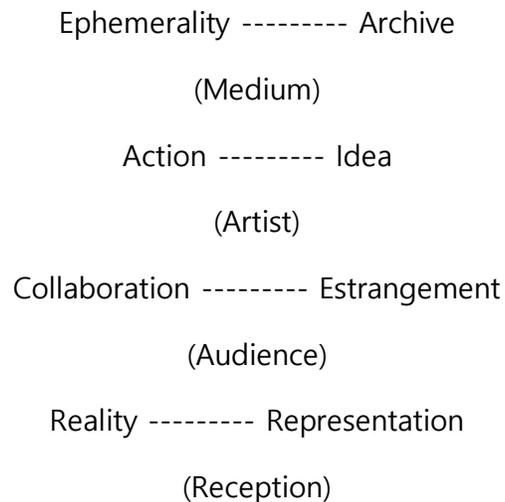
late 70s through magazines such as *High Performance*, *Performance*, or *Live*, Westerman sought to break through the authoritarian models in place concerning a presence model of performance. If presence, or liveness, is what constitutes the essence of a performance, it sets up definitive binaries between presence and absence, which binds the work to its moment of origin (thus complicating a re-staging or re-performance), implying "liveness as everything."

A major point of consideration for Westerman was Auslander's concern with claims that the true moment of creation gets lost forever once the performance concludes. These models posit documentation of performance in the same way, in that it only works to become, or make true, the original event. For Westerman, a document of a performance, and the presentation of these documents within a museum collection, posit a search for the "meaning" of the work as a situation found between mediacy and mediation, and furthermore between ephemerality and the archive.



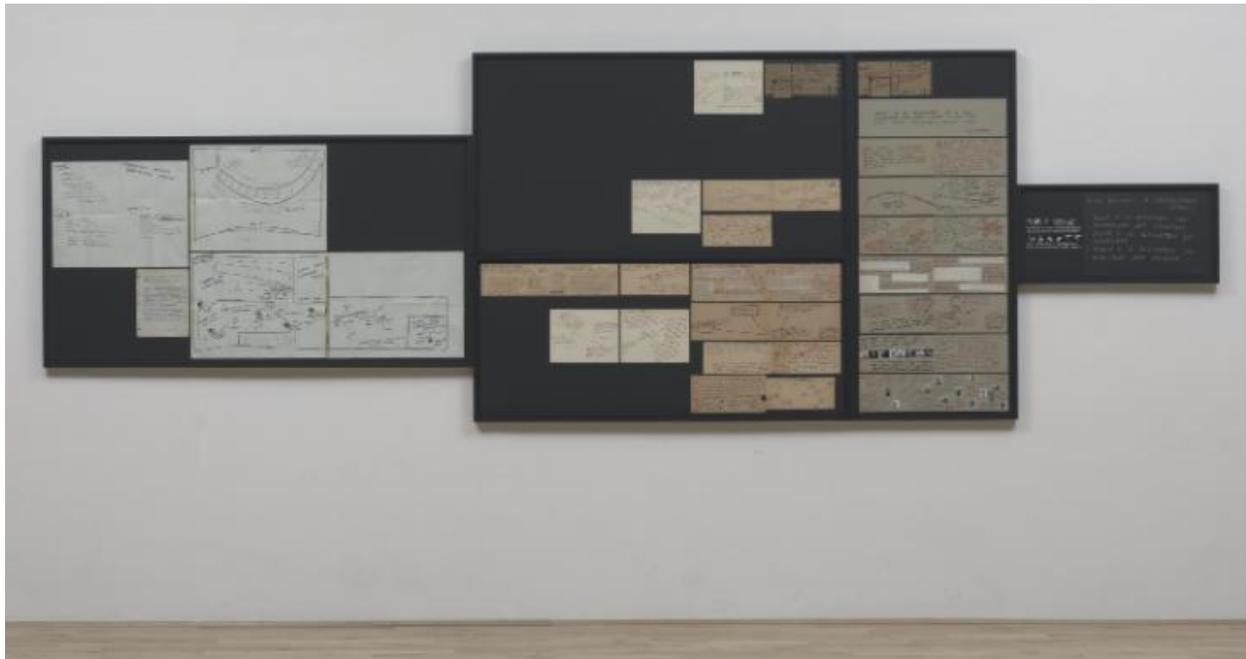
Tania Bruguera, *Tatlin's Whisper #5*, 2008; Performance, 2 people and 2 horses; Purchased with funds provided by Alin Ryan von Buch, 2009; © Tania Bruguera.

Westerman created a visual component in order to demonstrate what he considers as the four key binaries in performance. They were as followed:



Using the first axis (medium) as the central point for the rest of his discussion, Westerman used three examples he came into contact with during his time as a postdoctoral research fellow at the Tate Modern in London, which represent complications of ephemerality and the archive. Westerman's first example, Joseph Beuys' *Four Blackboards* (1972), represented what he calls "obsessing over what is inaccessible." The work acts as a retrospective of different performances, and the boards act as a mold that holds the performances together, but is more of a document of the end of a performance rather than a record of what took place during the performance. His second example, Tania Bruguera's *Tatlin's Whisper #5* (2008), was representative of what conditions need to be met in order for a performance to be considered an authentic work. Bruguera's documents surrounding the performance and its potential reperformance state that the artwork is only authentic when it is actually happening, and when specific conditions are met. It is in this way that the work, with some of the conditions being politically-specific, becomes representative of something that can be time-bound versus time-specific. The final work, accessioned in 2009 as a total work of art, is an archival synthesis of some of Vito Acconci's performances, titled *Sonnabend Show Jan*

72 (1972). These documents, which are displayed together and within a specific manner, are representative of the archive as the work of art, wherein the text and image shape the viewer even if there is no live performance occurring. Using these three examples, Westerman displayed some uses of performance documents, which provide their own form of performance as it engages between ephemerality and the archive.



Vito Acconci, *Sonnabend Show Jan 72: Archives*, 1972; 5 works on paper, photographs, ink and printed papers; support: 940 x 1747 mm; presented by the Billstone Foundation, 2009; © Vito Acconci.

In total, the talk was an illuminating example of issues that must be considered when dealing with performance art conservation. It is important to note that this talk was not conceived from the perspective of a conservator of performance art, but from that of an art historian. The talk did not deal with specific issues surrounding the actual conservation and preservation of performance, but led towards the theoretical bounds that complicate performance and the archive, and the many parties of the art world that are involved in these issues. In this way, a key strength of Westerman's discussion was his inference of the collaborative approaches that occur within the documentation and conservation of performance art, which is still a relatively young and expanding field. It is important to

consider at all times what changes when a performance is displayed within a specific manner, and how the reception of that work changes based on the myriad of decisions that complicate the ephemeral and the archive, and the essence of the performance medium.

For further reading, please consider some of the following:

Auslander, Philip. *Liveness: Performance in a Mediatized Culture*. New York: Routledge, 1999.

Giannachi, Gabriella, and Jonah Westerman. *Histories of Performance Documentation: Museum, Artistic, and Scholarly Practices*. London: Taylor and Francis, 2018.

Goldberg, RoseLee. *Performance now*. London: Thames and Hudson Ltd., 2018.

Phelan, Peggy. *Unmarked: The Politics of Performance*. New York: Routledge, 1993.

Wood, Catherine. *Performance in Contemporary Art*. London: Tate Publishing, 2018.