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The Preservation of Performance Art

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The Preservation of Performance Art

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Abstract

This thesis examines the problems and benefits that arise from exhibiting and preserving performance art documentation. In performance art, the human body substitutes the object making this genre one of the most intense to experience. Performance art is the only genre that provides the audience with an opportunity to become part of the creative process of the artist. Sexuality, race, gender roles, and social status are some of the typical themes that dominate performance art.

While performance art documentation is essential for the survival of this genre, the documentation cannot capture the essence of performance art. This thesis will focus on the substitution of performance art with photography in museums. I will discuss the problems of displaying photography of performances as an introduction to visitors to the genre of performance art. I will state the elements missing from the photography of performance art that can only be experienced in a live performance.

The ephemeral nature of performance art challenges museums to adapt innovative methods of preservation for its survival in the future. The Guggenheim Museum of Art in New York is one institution that has taken over this task of preserving the documentation of performance art with the Variable Media Initiative. The success of this project lies with its flexibility to adapt its preservation methods to all media and the dialogue with the artist about the future preservation of his/her work.

In this thesis, I will also state the most favorable method of preservation for performance art, re-enactments. For this portion, I will use performance artist Marina Abramovic's project *Seven Easy Pieces* performed at the Guggenheim Museum in November of 2005. With this project, Abramovic raised awareness for the preservation

of performance art through the re-enactments of pieces from the beginning of performance art. The themes explored in Abramovic's *Seven Easy Pieces* are endurance, sexuality, erotic symbols, stubborn rationality, and body as artistic material.

I will conclude with the first performance art biennale *PERFORMA 05* which took place last November in New York City. This event founded by performance art historian RoseLee Goldberg also included re-enactments contributing to the ongoing effort of preserving performance art in its purest form.

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A special thanks to Professor Chu who pointed me in the right direction when it came time to choose a topic for my thesis. Her guidance and encouragement throughout the program were essential to endure my long commute to class and our trip to Paris changed my life. I now have an appetite to see the world and learn everything and anything possible.

To my family, mom and George who made me coffee for those late nights and encourage me to always do my best. To my sister Doreyda who read my thesis whenever I asked her to even though she had no idea what she was reading, she was always supportive. To my best friend Marisol and her husband Herminio the thesis police who gave me tough love throughout this whole process. To my friends at the William Trent House, Kathy, Walter, and Emanuel thank you for putting up with all my complaining and whining towards the end of the process.

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TABLE OF CONTENTS

Abstract	i
Acknowledgement	iii
Foreword	1
Introduction	4
Chapter I <i>Problems and Benefits in Performance Art Documentation</i>	11
Chapter II <i>The Variable Media Initiative: A New Approach on Preservation</i>	20
Chapter III <i>Preservation by Means of Re-Presentation: Re-Inventing the Past to Preserve the Future</i>	27
Chapter IV <i>The Future of Performance Art</i>	42
Bibliography	45
Appendix A <i>The Variable Media Initiative Questionnaire</i>	48

Foreword

As a future registrar, I find the preservation of performance art vital to art history. Unlike paintings and sculptures, performance art provides a unique experience that is impossible to capture in other media making its preservation a challenging one. I decided on this topic after considering the problems that come with preserving an ephemeral art especially one as controversial and dynamic as performance art. As a registrar, I found interesting to explore how museums are treating the obstacles that come with preserving an art that is supposed to be experienced live and how this problem affects the future history of performance art.

Soon after my initial research on its rich history, I was hooked and eager to see a live performance. This curiosity to be a spectator to a performance led me to the star of my thesis Marina Abramovic. I came across Abramovic in my readings and found her career and personal background extremely interesting. Her powerful performances of ritual, endurance, sexual exploration, and personal history inspired me to learn more about preserving this art for future generations. I attended the symposium titled *(Re)Presenting Performance* at the Guggenheim Museum in New York in April of 2005 and it was my first encounter with a panel of performance artists from the 1970's. The discussions at the symposium added to my interest and the information I gathered on the history of performance art made me realize that reading about performance art could not compare to watching performance art live.

Later on that year, in November, I attended Abramovic's presentation of her latest project *Seven Easy Pieces* at the Guggenheim. This project was followed by another symposium in which Abramovic shared her experiences on performing *Seven Easy*

Pieces and talked about what inspired her to start the project. I prolonged my writing because I realized that I could not write a thesis on performance art without actually seeing a performance.

I went to three of her seven performances and then to the symposium. To make the events more intriguing I brought people to the performances that had never even walked into a museum. The impact of the performances at first was indescribable and I found that my knowledge of art history did not prepare me for the experience of performance art. The experience was life changing and it challenged my perspective in diverse aspects of life, something that other artworks have never done for me. For this I began to look for ways in which museums, galleries, and individuals are preserving this type of art without damaging its ephemeral and interactive nature.

As challenging as it sounds the preservation of ephemeral artworks is possible as I learned in discussions on the Variable Media Initiative at the first symposium I attended in April 2005. This project led by Jon Ippolito, the Associate Curator of Media Arts at the Guggenheim, instantly became for me the most reasonable solution to the survival of performance art because it involved the artist. I will show how the Variable Media Initiative project is helping set a precedent for the preservation of contemporary art, more importantly performance art. The artist and his/her story are vital in the understanding of their work and this is why the Variable Media Initiative has captured the attention of performance artists like Marina Abramovic and Robert Morris.

My research led me to discover an amazing collaboration between the performance artists and Guggenheim Museum staff. The preservation of contemporary artworks is no longer left to the curatorial staff; with technology offering new ways to

preserve art, all departments at the Guggenheim are working together to ensure that all available methods are being explored to preserve the essence of contemporary artworks including those of ephemeral form.

With this thesis, I hope to contribute to the ongoing effort of raising awareness for the preservation of performance art in its purest form. I have chosen against the use of any photos of the performances discussed in this paper because I want to encourage the participatory aspect that performance art has to offer. Although my research has led me to identify various problems with the documentation of performance art, without this documentation, the future of performance art would be compromised.

Introduction

A table is set with 20 knives and 2 tape recorders. The artist spreads out her hand and stabs the knife between her fingers repeatedly while recording the sound of the knife until she cuts herself. She then puts that knife down, picks up another, and plays back the sound of her previous action while again piercing the spaces between her fingers with the knife.¹ The piece tests the limits of her body, the state of her consciousness, the potential of ritual and gesture by merging the past and present through sound. How should Marina Abramovic's *Rhythm 10* of 1973 be preserved?

Since its development during the 1960's, performance art has challenged the traditional concept of museums as places of worship. By substituting the human body for the object, performance art rejects the commodification process in which museums engage. By substituting the object with the human body, performance artists provide an unambiguous experience while giving the audience an opportunity to witness the creative artistic process that in other art genres generate an object. With performance art, the audience experiences the transformation process of the artist while also becoming part of the piece itself. Themes typical to performance art are sexuality, gender roles, race, violence, ethnic, heritage, and social status, among others.

Performance art arose from social and political upheavals such as the Vietnam War, Civil Rights Movement, and feminist movement. Many young people, in the U.S. and abroad, became distrustful of institutions, and participated in public protests, including anti-war and other demonstrations, which sometimes erupted in rioting. Young

¹ Marina Abramovic. "Rhythm 10", Media Art Net, 2004, <http://www.medienkunstnetz.de/works/rhythm-10-2/images/2/>.

artists began to target museums in their rebellion against authority and adapted some of the techniques of public protest into performances using the body. French artist Yves Klein articulated the philosophy that helped create performance art when he stated, “the artist only has to produce one work, himself constantly”².

While both men and women participate in performance art, it holds special meaning for feminists. Performance art provides female artists with the opportunity to challenge the traditional male driven art world. After being, sexually available bodies for the countless nudes painted over the centuries and serving as the subject for male desire, as performance artists women confronted the concept of the “male gaze” by taking control over their sexuality. Female performance artists Ana Mendieta, Carolee Schneemann, and Cindy Sherman challenge the “male gaze” by creating pieces that explore the diverse yet uniquely female experiences of rape, sexual mutilation, nudity, stereotypes, among others.

Performance art historian RoseLee Goldberg sets out the range of variables in which performance artists work.

The work may be presented solo or with a group, with lighting, music or visuals made by the performance artist him or herself, or in collaboration and performed in places ranging from an art gallery or museum to an ‘alternative space’, a theatre, café, bar or street corner. Unlike theatre, the performer is the artist, seldom a character like an actor, and the content rarely follows a traditional plot or narrative. The performance might be a series of intimate gestures or large-scale visual theatre lasting from a few minutes to many hours; it might be performed only once or

² Thomas McEvelley. “Performing the Present Tense” *Art in America* 91, iss.4 (April 2003):116.

repeated several times, with or without a prepared script, spontaneously improvised, or rehearsed over many months.³

As Goldberg implies, this type of art does not generate an object and objects cannot define performance art.

Although there is no object in performance art to worship, museums have found a way to commodify it through the display of its documentation. By exhibiting video, photography, props, and artists' notes, museums claim to acknowledge the importance of performance art and to represent the performance piece in the best way they can.

However, the representation of performance art through documentation in museums is problematic; it contradicts the work's ephemeral nature, which makes performance art unique. By displaying performance art documentation, museums mislead visitors to think that the documentation is the best substitution for watching a live performance.

With this thesis, I will identify the methods that institutions and individuals have devised to preserve performance art. I will particularly highlight issues of documentation with photography. I will argue that the documentation of performance art, which includes photos, video, film, props and artist's notes, is vital to the survival of this genre. But I will also assert that exhibiting these documents, in of themselves, is inappropriate, as they do not capture the environment, mood, or participatory experience of the performance. I will explain that documentary materials should not be exhibited but conserved in archives to be used by performance artists in re-enactment. Performance art documentation is vital to the process of re-enactment as it provides guidance to performance artists in re-interpreting the main concept of the piece.

³ RoseLee Goldberg. From Futurism to the Present (New York: Thames & Hudson, 2001)8.

The work of the Guggenheim Museum staff in the Variable Media Initiative project is one of the main inspirations for this topic. Jon Ippolito, Associate Curator of Media Arts at the Guggenheim initiated the Variable Media Initiative project in 1998. Its goal is to “establish a process and means to address artworks created across a variety of media and materials, to determine protocols and initiatives that will bring a flexible approach to the preservation of a range of creative practices.”⁴ The VMI is committed to exploring the problematics of exhibiting and preserving performance art and has established recommendations for interpretations.

While the Guggenheim has exhibited in the past documentary evidence of performance art, the VMI has helped the museum to create a new approach more conducive to preserving the integrity of such work. The staff of the VMI project keeps information about contemporary artworks including performance art in a database. This database contains specification about the artworks but more importantly information about the future preservation methods for each piece. The artists and/or their estates dictate these preservation methods whenever possible through the questionnaire. This dialogue with the artist is what makes the VMI project stand out because it prioritizes the preservation of the documentary evidence of performances as well as the concept for future interpretation through re-enactment. Through this policy, the VMI guides museums to rethink and often reject standard exhibition of performance art documentation in favor of representation by re-enactment. Through projects by Marina Abramovic, Robert Morris, and others, the Guggenheim has provided the necessary documentation model for representation through re-enactment.

⁴ John G. Hanhardt “Introduction” Permanence through Change: The Variable Media Approach Edited by Alain Depocas, Jon Ippolito, and Caitlin Jones. (Canada: Guggenheim Museum Publications and Daniel Langlois Foundation, 2003)7.

Another inspiration for this paper is innovative performance artist Marina Abramovic because she has provided leadership in preserving performance art through re-enactments of her own work and others'. I have focused on *Seven Easy Pieces*, which she performed at the Guggenheim Museum in 2005; in it, Abramovic re-enacts six performances from the 1960's that inspired her career in hopes of bringing awareness to the art community of the need for the preservation of performance art through re-enactments. She used archival materials and interviews with artists to demonstrate that re-enacting a performance from the past, while never duplicating an original piece, can convey the essence of the work in a powerful and innovative way that shows the inadequacy of exhibition through documentation.

My research was also shaped by the first performance art biennale in New York City in 2005, founded by RoseLee Goldberg, and titled *PERFORMA 05*. This event reinforced the importance of re-enactments as a form of preservation by having a roster of 90 performance artists re-enact performances from the past and perform new pieces for the biennale. Showcased in over 26 venues including galleries, non-profit organizations and two prominent institutions the Guggenheim Museum and the Museum for African Art, the biennale also offered a series of panel discussions titled *Not For Sale*. This series of panel discussions included performance artists Marina Abramovic, Tania Bruguera, Klaus Ottoman, and Debra Singer among others; issues addressed included conservation, collection, and preservation of ephemeral art.⁵ This phenomenon indicates that the direction that VMI and Abramovic advocates is being embraced by the larger performance art community, specifically by emerging performance artists, and has the potential to change museum and artistic practice.

⁵ www.performa-arts.org

In Chapter I, *Problems and Benefits in Performance Art Documentation*, I will discuss the controversies that arise when preserving and exhibiting performance art. In Part 1, I will discuss the problems of having performance art documentation, particularly photography substitute for the actual performance in museum and gallery displays. Can a live performance be captured in a photograph? What elements are missing from a photograph taken of a performance? Does displaying a photograph in place of a performance contradict its ephemeral nature? In Part 2, I will discuss the benefits that come from performance art documentation. I will explain that such documentation offers a great opportunity by providing needed information for future generation of performance artists developing re-enactments projects. I will also show that, while re-enactments are never going to be an exact replica of the original performance, and should not be, they are the most appropriate means of representation.

In Chapter II, *The Variable Media Initiative: A New Approach on Preservation*, I will discuss the founding of the Variable Media Initiative project, the motivation behind this project and its progress so far. How does the VMI project compare to other preservation methods? How does the involvement of such an institution like the Guggenheim Museum influence the performance art community and its future? I will state the reasons why this project, led by the Media Arts Department at the Guggenheim Museum, is one of the best efforts in the museum community to preserve valuable information for the future of contemporary artworks including performance art.

In Chapter III, *Preservation by Means of Re-Presentation: Re-Inventing the Past to Preserve the Future*, I will discuss Abramovic's project *Seven Easy Pieces* as means to demonstrate that re-enactments are an optimal way to preserve performance art. What

inspired Abramovic to create such a project like *Seven Easy Pieces*? Can she transport the audience back in time with her re-enactments or lose them with her interpretation? How does this project influence the new generation of performance artists? I will use resources of her performances and her conversation with the audience at the symposium held after *Seven Easy Pieces* to explore the preservation process from the artist's perspective.

In Chapter IV, *The Future of Performance Art*, I will describe the first performance art biennale *PERFORMA 05* that took place last November in New York City. There, performance artists paid tribute to past performance artists by performing re-enactments as a form of celebration and preservation for the future. Why does performance art have its own biennale? Does this biennale represent the mainstream acceptance of performance art? How does the biennale affect the performance art community? This event was testament of the current effort of preserving performance art using documentation as a resource and not a substitute.

Chapter I Problems and Benefits in Performance Art Documentation

Performance art is important to our society because it continues to provide us with new ways of thinking about our issues as a community, a global society and as human beings. Therefore, the documentation of performance art is essential for future generations of artists to keep those ideas and concepts alive through re-enactments.

Exhibiting the documentation of performance art lacks essential elements of performance art that makes this genre one of the most intense to experience. Photographs or videos of performances cannot recreate the experience of a performance and should therefore not substitute for it in any display. The elements that make performance art great and that are impossible to capture in film or photographs include: body, audience/artist interaction, and improvisations.

The body is one of the most important aspects of performance art since it substitutes for the object. Although the body is visible in a photograph, it is different than seeing the body live in a performance. The responsive nature of the body to the elements of the environment is essential to the innovative experience of performance art. Photography can only capture one moment of a performance, limiting the viewer to the movements and reactions of the body.

The audience plays a significant role in performance art because the reactions from and interactions within the audience and between the artists and viewer help make the experienced of performance art unique. During a performance, the audience can connect with the artist in a way impossible through any type of documentation. Being part of the audience means being part of the performance. The interaction within the

audience can affect the artist during the performance and this interaction can only be experienced live. This interaction leads to a connection between the artist and the audience that provides an insight into the motives of the artist and the message of the performance. These interactions are so complex and multifaceted that they cannot be fully captured with film or photography. During my visit to the Guggenheim Museum this past November to view Marina Abramovic's *Seven Easy Pieces*, I experienced this phenomenon Abramovic's during last performance *Entering the Other Side*. In this piece, Abramovic climbs under an enormous blue tent high above the floor and sits on top in a small platform. While she is on top of this structure, she gazes over the audience and moves around with her arms up in the air looking like a porcelain doll. Her gaze is intimidating at first but it is impossible to ignore, as she demands your attention at all times. This intimate interaction with the artist is impossible to capture on film or paper. Is it impossible to capture every gaze even if there are multiple cameras recording her every move? The connection that she makes with every person in the audience is unattainable to experience through a screen.

Improvisation is also a key part of performance art that cannot be adequately captured on film. Unpredictable situations during a performance can free the artist to improvise in order to adapt to new situations. Abramovic's re-enactment of *Action Pants: Genital Panic* exemplifies this chance element. During the performance, Abramovic posed with an automatic rifle, she wore leather pants with the crotch cut out to expose her genitals. She had two chairs on stage with her so that if she needed to rest during her performance she could pose while seated. While she was on one of the chairs, a man from the audience decided to climb onto the stage and take a seat next to her.

Security guards immediately removed the man but Abramovic was both shocked and pleased at the reaction. When asked about the incident during the symposium that followed her performances, Abramovic said she was glad she obtained a different reaction from the man than the rest of the audience. Documents cannot fully convey the element of surprise and the instantaneous regrouping that such an improvisation encompasses.

Documentation cannot canonize these aspects of performance art. Despite this fact, museums and galleries have displayed photographs and videos from performances aspiring to attract visitors to the world of performance art by providing a one-dimensional view to a multifaceted genre of art. The Guggenheim Museum provides us with an example of this situation. The museum has displayed a black and white photograph from Marina Abramovic's performance *Rhythm 5*. In *Rhythm 5* Abramovic created a five-rayed star out of wood and wood chips soaked in petroleum. She lit the star on fire and performed a ritual cleansing by cutting her hair and nails and throwing them into the star. Abramovic then threw herself into the middle of the star and lay down. Because of the lack of oxygen inside the star Abramovic lost consciousness and had to be rescued by a doctor in the audience that noticed she was in trouble. At the Guggenheim a black and white photograph of Abramovic, lying inside the burning star represents this gruesome and challenging performance. This photograph lacks the ritualistic element of the performance, one can only imagine the smell of the burning wood, and the suspense felt by the audience as Abramovic was eventually rescued from the burning star. The photograph is just a visual of a woman inside a burning star and should not be displayed as a representation of the complex performance.

The problematic nature of exhibiting performance art documentation has become an important topic over the last few years among curators and performance artists. In a 1999 interview in the *Art Journal* Abramovic comments on audience engagement with performance art documentation by stating that the only way to understand performance art documentation is to “have the attitude (about documentation) that it doesn’t represent the truth.”⁶ But if documentation does not represent the truth then what does it represent? The documentation is only a visual of a live performance and not an accurate representation of the events that took place. Abramovic’s photograph of *Rhythm 5* is a visual taken from the photographer’s point of view. Photographers, like any artist, look for certain elements when taking a picture that do not constitute the experience as a whole. Therefore, a photograph like that of *Rhythm 5* tells the viewer nothing about the context, concept, or the space of the performance, it is just a picture of a woman inside a star.

Video is also as a form of performance art documentation. The most obvious advantage of video recordings of performances over photography is the active presence of the body of the artist, the audience, and the space. Video recordings of performances can be useful when the artist creates the performance for video. This type of documentation becomes problematic, however, when the performance is documented without the input of the artist. It then becomes the work of the filmmaker and not the performance artist. Although camera movement can enhance a performance by providing different angles of the performer, the audience, or the space, it is impossible to capture the energy and spontaneity of the event. The documentation of the performance into a

⁶ Janet A. Kaplan. *Deeper and Deeper: Interview with Marina Abramovic*. *Art Journal* 58 iss.2 (1999)2.

photograph or video automatically strips the ephemeral and live features that make up performance art.

Another problematic aspect of documenting a performance is the issue of copyright of the documentation. *Imaging Her Erotics* by Carolee Schneemann is a great example of this situation. The original footage from this performance is in the possession of the documenter who refuses to relinquish it for publication or study.⁷ Not only is the performance transmuted into another type of artwork but the opportunity to use Schneemann's original footage from *Imaging Her Erotics* as an educational tool for upcoming performance artists is lost.

Performance documentation is problematic as an educational tool when is consider sufficient to stand alone in understanding the complexity of performance art. As I have learned throughout the research for this thesis reading about performance art is not enough. However, author of "*Presence*" in *Absentia: Experiencing Performance as Documentation*, Amelia Jones, argues that learning about performance art through its documentation is center in understanding this medium. She states "it is hard to identify the patterns of history while one is embedded in them"⁸ She explains for example, that no one can ever know the reason for an artist to create an artwork whether present or not during its creation. To further her argument on presence during a live performance, Jones uses Carolee Schneemann's *Interior Scroll* from 1975. In this performance, Schneemann pulls a coil of paper from her vagina and reads to her audience the text on the paper, which deals with the concept of the male gaze. Having access to the text on the paper and photographs from the performance do not compare to the opportunity to appreciate

⁷ Amelia Jones. "Presence in Absentia: Experiencing Performance as Documentation" *Art Journal* (1997)17.

⁸ (Jones 1997, 5)

the event live. Jones asks, "Would I have been able to experience her sexed subjectivity more "truthfully" had I been there (to smell and feel the heat of her body)?"⁹ Yes, to have smelled and to felt the sweat of Schneemann's body would have made all the difference because the purpose of performance art is to bring art to life and to provide the viewer with an experience that is multi-sensory. Performance art is the only art that guarantees the presence of the artist, how can you learn about this genre without experiencing the essence that is the artist?

Performance art documentation is only problematic when displayed to represent and to teach visitors about performance art. The documentation as proof or evidence that the performance took place is a valuable tool for preservation. Some performance artists have created video documentation to help themselves and other performances re-enact pieces in the future. One example discussed at the *(Re)Presenting Performance* symposium at the Guggenheim Museum last April is *Landscape for Fire* from 1972 by Anthony McCall. The sculpture performance consists of the lighting of a rectilinear grid of fires in a field. McCall filmed the 13-hour performance with a 16mm camera and drew a 9-point grid map as part of the necessary documentation for re-enacting the performance in the future. Any performance artist wishing to re-enact *Landscape for Fire* can easily recreate the grid by using the map left by the artist and view the set up of the grounds on the film made of the performance.

Another example of performance art documentation used for preservation purposes is Robert Morris' *Site* performance from 1964. Filmmaker Babette Mangolte created the project *Four Pieces by Morris* in 1993, which he restaged, and she filmed *Site, Arizona, 21.3* and *Waterman Switch* for possible re-enacting in the future.

⁹ (Jones 1997, 6)

Mangolte's work became one of the first case studies of emulation for the Variable Media Initiative project at the Guggenheim Museum, as will be discussed in Chapter II. Choreographed and performed by Morris and fellow performance artist Carolee Schneemann, the original piece was presented in front of a live audience at the Judson Dance Theatre in New York City. For *Four Pieces by Morris* the artist collaborated with Mangolte although he would have preferred to re-stage the performances rather than assuming the artificiality, that filmmaking entails. He states his experience on filming his performances in this excerpt from a 2001 interview.

I suppose we could have just restaged the performances but somehow that did not happen; it was transmuted into a film instead. And the space of film is obviously very different than performance space. The same kinds of movements are going on, but your focus is extremely controlled by the filmmaker. Unlike the staging of the original performance, the remake took hours and hours of rehearsing and waiting. The whole process of filmmaking is just so utterly boring-for me it was anyway.¹⁰

It is apparent from the quote that the documentation of performance art as an experience is also problematic for artists as well as for the public. The documentation process restricts the creative environment in which performances are created as we can see with Morris' *Site* performance. Despite this lost of control, in the documenting of *Site* Morris acknowledges the importance of having documentation of such works as part of the first step in the preservation process of performance art. The only records of his performance were photographs and his notes.

¹⁰ Interview with Robert Morris, <http://variablemedia.net/e/seeingdouble/>, New York City, March 31, 2001.

Other types of performance art documentation include props and artist's notes. These archival materials are also useful in the re-enactment process. Although they provide a more limited view of the performances the photography, film, notes and props are in some cases the only evidence left of early performance art. Abramovic relied on these two types of archival evidence to re-stage some of the performances in her project *Seven Easy Pieces* as I discuss in Chapter III.

The costs of preservation for performance art props, artist's notes, video, and photography are just as expensive as those for paintings and sculptures, if not more. As discussed, in the *(Re)Presenting Performance Art* symposium, filmmaker Babette Mangolte's reliance on various forms of recording technology is problematic since technology is always advancing. She stated the example of using DVD's because they are inexpensive compared to other forms of recording but emphasized the reliability problem of these through time. Most museums are forced to continue to upgrade their databases in order to keep up with the demand of preserving photos and videos.

Even though performance art documentation has proven to be a challenge for museums in terms of preservation and interpretation, it has brought museum staff to work together to ensure the longevity of these contemporary artworks. The task of preserving ephemeral art no longer lies solely within the curatorial realm but with all departments of the museum, including media, registration, and installation. The result of this group effort at the Guggenheim Museum is the Variable Media Initiative project, which has proven to be an important mold on preserving all types of contemporary art including performance.

The documentation of performance art provides the necessary proof to establish this art form's place in our history. Although museums have used this documentation in inappropriate ways to represent performance pieces to visitors, documentation ensures for use in archives the permanence of these materials to represent performance art through re-enactments.

Chapter II

The Variable Media Initiative: A New Approach on Preservation

The Guggenheim Museum of Art has taken steps to preserve all types of ephemeral art including performance art through the Variable Media Initiative. Jon Ippolito, Associate Curator of Media Arts at the Guggenheim, initiated the Variable Media Initiative project in 1998. The VMI began its explorations with the following case studies; Nam June Paik's *TV Garden*, Meg Webster's *Stick Spiral*, Ken Jacobs' *Bitemporal Vision: The Sea*, Felix Gonzalez-Torres' *Public Opinion*, Grahame Weinbren and Roberta Friedman's *The Erl King* and Mark Napier's *net.flag*.

In 2002, the Daniel Langlois Foundation for Art, Science, and Technology became involved as a sponsor and research partner. The Langlois Foundation is a private non-profit organization created in 1997 whose objective is "to further artistic and scientific knowledge by fostering the meeting of art and science".¹¹ The foundation is based in Montreal, Quebec, and one of its vital components is the Centre for Research and Documentation (CR&D). This center seeks to document the history of artworks and practices associated with electronic and digital media arts and to make this information available to researchers in an innovative manner through data communications.¹² The Langlois Foundation also collaborated with VMI to publish *Permanence through Change: The Variable Media Approach*¹³. It details the processes and conclusions of the early case studies of the Variable Media Initiative. In the preface Jean Gagnon, Executive Director of the Langlois Foundation, credits the success of the partnership to

¹¹ www.fondation-langlois.org

¹² www.fondation-langlois.org

¹³ The book is available for complete download on their website as part of their effort to share the research with the art community.

the common concern for the preservation of electronic and digital artworks. The book also highlights the collaborations of the Guggenheim staff, artists and their estates, and non-profit organizations that have joined the Variable Media Network in hopes of securing the future for ephemeral artworks. It includes too, interviews with artists and their estates, spotlighting the valuable questionnaire that makes the Variable Media Initiative a success in embracing instructions of contemporary artists for future conservation and interpretation needs.

One of the interviews found in the book deals with the conservation and future representation of Meg Webster's performance piece *Stick Spiral* from 1986. Webster is known for her boxes at the Guggenheim in which she includes written instructions, photographs, and other necessary documentation for the recreation of her works. As helpful, as her boxes are to the conservation process the VMI still requires an interview and the questionnaire addressing all possible issues for all her works. In the VMI questionnaire and interview with Carol Stringari, Senior Conservator at the Guggenheim, Webster states, her wishes to about every possible scenario that the museum might encounter with the piece. Webster was most concerned with the issues of the materials in *Stick Spiral*. Among the key elements of her piece are the branches she used Webster stipulated that they be "pruned for some reason other than the exhibition."¹⁴ When Stringari asked the artist about the possibility of not being able to find branches, she cleverly stated that the museum "would have to wait for a storm"¹⁵. The flexibility to

¹⁴ Carol Stringari "Accommodating the Unpredictable" Permanence Through Change The Variable Media Approach Edited by Alain Depocas, Jon Ippolito and Caitlin Jones (Canada: Guggenheim Museum Publications & Daniel Langlois Foundation, 2003)49.

¹⁵ Jon Gartenberg "*Bitemporal Vision*" Permanence Through Change: The Variable Media Approach Edited by Alain Depocas, Jon Ippolito and Caitlin Jones (Canada: Guggenheim Museum Publications & Daniel Langlois Foundation, 2003)81.

adapt the concept of preservation to each individual artist and his or her work is the element that makes the Variable Media Initiative a success.

In order to accommodate the data necessary for the preservation of contemporary art the VMI staff has devised eight categories to accommodate all: contained, installed, performed, interactive, reproduced, duplicated, encoded, and networked.¹⁶ The database program that holds all the information obtained from the questionnaire and interview is FileMaker Pro. By using these categories, VMI treats and preserves performance art to the best of the museum staff's abilities and lays the foundation for performance artists to dictate the future preservation of their work while still alive. The VMI staff has run into obstacles with artworks that fit more than one category, for example *Stick Spiral*. Webster's piece fits into two categories, performed and installed. These categories are defined according to the VMI index. Performed works are works that need to be re-enacted every time according to original instructions in a new context and installed in the VMI context means a work that changes every time there is an installation.¹⁷ Webster's piece falls into the performance category because she instructs the installers to "enact a kind of performance albeit one invisible to the public."¹⁸ *Stick Spiral* is also an installed piece because its installation is different every time it is on exhibition. Regardless of the complexity of the work, the VMI project facilitates the storage of all the information in the database for future use.

After categorizing the artwork, the questionnaire queries artists on storage, emulation, migration, and reinterpretation. Emulation according to the VMI means, "to create a facsimile of [the artwork] in a totally different medium" for example video, as in

¹⁶ See Appendix I for illustration of the Variable Media database categories.

¹⁷ (Stringari 2003,48)

¹⁸ (Stringari 2003,78)

Mangolte's project for Morris' *Site*. Migration is defined as the upgrade of the artwork to contemporary standards.¹⁹ The VMI index defines reinterpretation as the most radical preservation strategy where the work is re-created each time it is reinterpreted.²⁰ One example of a performance art case study is Robert Morris' *Site* performance from 1964. This was a scripted performance wherein performers follow a choreographed sequence of actions using costumes and props specified by the artist. As described on the Variable Media Initiative website, although it was scripted, it was anything but conventional. On stage, there was a sound of a jackhammer followed by a masked man dismantling a plywood construction that later reveals a woman lying on a mounted sofa in a similar manner to Manet's *Olympia*. The performance ends with a series of manipulations of plywood boards and the re-covering of the woman on the sofa.

Questions that the VMI post are specific to the artwork considered. According to the VMI website, the questions pose to Morris about this performance are as follows:

Storage: Should the instructions for re-staging this work take the form of a paper score or script, a digital transcript, a video, or some combination of these? What is the best means for safeguarding these instructions? Should each re-staging be documented, if so in what format?

Emulation: Should the performers imitate as closely as possible the look and actions of the original participants?

Migration: Should the performer's characteristics (e.g. hairstyles) look up to date?

¹⁹ (Stringari 2003,51)

²⁰ (Depocas, Ippolito, and Jones 2003,128)

Reinterpretation: Must the cast be limited to two people? A man and a woman? Is it permissible for the actors to switch gender roles? Is it permissible to imitate a painting other than *Olympia*?²¹

Addressing such questions is helpful in preserving and reinterpreting this performance in the future. In the film made of Morris' *Site* the performance was reinterpreted with the same amount of performers and their sex remained the same. The painting imitated for the performance also corresponded with that of *Olympia* from the original piece. It is helpful to museum staff and performance artists alike to understand the impact of the work. The questions stated above would also apply to the props used in the performance. In regards to the props, one important aspect to consider for interpretation is the possible substitution of props. In Morris' case, the major change in the substitution of props was the sheets of plywood. He states, "...when I did the piece in '64, one sheet of plywood lasted for several performances, but we had to use a dozen sheets to get this film made."²² It is fortunate that Morris was able to make the decision of using the plywood even if it was different from the one used in the original performance and it is this dialogue that demonstrates the success of the VMI.

The Variable Media Initiative format is easily transferable. For example, if I were a collections manager, I would post the following questions to Marina Abramovic about her wishes for future performance of *Lips of Thomas* a 1975 piece that she re-enacted in November of 2005 at the Guggenheim Museum. Abramovic first performed *Lips of Thomas* in Galerie Krinzinger in Vienna. The original performance lasted two hours. In the piece, a nude Abramovic eats 1 kilo of honey with a silver spoon, drinks 1 liter of red

²¹ www.guggenheim.org/variablemedia/variable_media_initiative.html

²² <http://variablemedia.net/e/seeingdouble/>

wine out of a crystal glass, breaks the glass with her right hand, and cuts a five-point star on her stomach with a razor blade. She then violently whips herself until she no longer feels pain and then lies down on a cross made out of ice blocks. While she lies on the ice block, a suspended space heater hangs from the ceiling pointed at the star she cut into her stomach. The heat causes the star to bleed and she ends the performance.

My questionnaire for Abramovic's *Lips of Thomas* would read as follow:

Storage: If there are written instructions for the re-enactment of this piece can they be kept as a computer file? If the performance has been documented by using an outdated recording device, should the piece be copied over to a reliable form of recorder?

Emulation: Does the performer have to be nude? Should the performer follow the exact same sequence as the original performance?

Migration: If the performance is re-enacted 20 years from now and a space heater is not available, can it be substituted?

Reinterpretation: Can the performer be a man instead of a woman? Can the razor blade be replaced with another sharp object? Can the quantities of honey and red wine be altered? Is it possible for the five-point star to be carved somewhere else in the body?

A questionnaire or set of instructions cannot encompass the characteristic of spontaneity found in performance art. Museums should not obsess about the "authenticity" of a performance because small details are not the things that make performance art provocative. Preserving the concept and the message of the artist and his/her work are key to a successful interpretation, one that is impossible without documentation.

Since its initiation in 1998, the Variable Media Initiative has established a diverse network of institutions and organizations that have taken advantage of the flexibility that the variable media preservation format offers. Network members include Berkeley Art Museum/Pacific Film Archives, Franklin Furnace Archive, Performance Art Festival+Archives, Rhizome.org, and Walker Art Center. These members, together with the Guggenheim Museum and the Langlois Foundation, share the information of all their case studies and technological advances with the art community to ensure the preservation of the documentation of ephemeral artworks for the future.

Chapter III

Preservation by Means of Re-Presentation: Re-Inventing the Past to Preserve the Future

The issue of preservation in all art genres including performance art has been a never-ending debate in the art community. Museums and galleries have always faced the challenge of preserving art using the latest technology available. By definition, technology is usually outdated by the time it has been implemented therefore our understanding of conservation changes constantly and mistakes of the past have shown that conservation is shaped by taste and fashion. The VMI is one example of how technology has made the documentation of artworks easier to store with database programs like FileMaker Pro and TMS. These databases now serve as the lifeline for museum collections everywhere. The VMI is a great example of how museums have accepted the changing tide of the technology wave while retaining the traditional mission of preserving the integrity of the object or in this case performance.

Unfortunately preserving the documentation of artworks especially of performance art is only one phase in the preservation process. Although the preservation of documentation may be sufficient for other artworks, the essence of performance art can only be preserved by re-interpreting the performances through re-enactments. Re-enactments preserve and introduce performance art to new audiences while paying tribute to the original artist. This re-interpretation process is impossible to enact without any documentation of performances. The documentation or archival evidence of such, provide the ideas, concepts, and context needed for re-interpreters to use in re-enactments. Re-enactments are ideal not just as a tribute for an artist whose work is

being re-enacted, but also for the artist performing the re-enactment. Although the ideas, concept, and context are already in place in re-enactments, the artist still has the opportunity to choose certain elements of the performance to re-enact in order to accommodate his/her own artistic style without compromising the initial message of the piece. The flexibility that exists within the re-enactment process is what makes this preservation method essential for an innovative art genre like performance art.

In this chapter, I will discuss the other phase in the preservation process of performance art, re-enactment, using Marina Abramovic's *Seven Easy Pieces* project at the Guggenheim as a model. As one of the few performance artists from the 1960's that still performs today, Abramovic has taken the initiative to promote the success of re-enactments as the most appropriate form of preservation for performance art. In *Seven Easy Pieces*, six re-enactments of performance pieces from the 1960's and 70's Abramovic encountered many difficulties from having poor documentation. Her goal for *Seven Easy Pieces* is to re-create the ideas behind the pieces and not their context, in order to provide audiences of today with an insight to early performance art while promoting its need for preservation. Her experience, which she discussed in a related symposium, has led her to champion the preserving of performance art documentation for re-enactments.

Marina Abramovic was born in Belgrade to a Serbian general and a Croatian museum director in 1946. Her inspiration to begin her career in performance art came from the principle laid by French artist Yves Klein "The artist only has to produce one work, himself, constantly."²³ She began her art career in 1972 at the Academy of Fine Arts in Croatia. From 1973 to 1975, she taught at the Academy of Fine Arts in Novi Sad

²³ Thomas McEvelley. "Performing the Present Tense". *Art in America* 91, iss.4 (April 2003) 114.

while working on her first performance piece *Rhythm 10*. In 1976, she moved to Amsterdam where she met fellow performance artist and partner Ulay.

Abramovic's career goals have focused on the journey of the transformation of her body through performances that have tested the limits of her body and mind while enduring exhaustion, pain and near death situations. This journey has resulted in one of the most diverse and versatile careers in performance art history. In her first performance piece *Rhythm 10* Abramovic set out to explore the elements of ritual and gesture by merging the past and present through sound. The year after *Rhythm 10*, she developed *Rhythm 5 Fire Star*, where she almost lost her life due to the lack of oxygen inside the star. In 1974, she continued testing the limits of her body with *Rhythm 2*, a two part performance where Abramovic took two pills, one meant for patients with catatonia and another meant for patients with depression. Her *Rhythm* series ended in 1974 with *Rhythm 0*, one of her most dangerous performances. The artists' body is the object in performance art and in *Rhythm 0* Abramovic put this concept to the ultimate test by allowing the interaction with the audience. In this piece, Abramovic explored the relationship of the performer and the audience by allowing the audience to use 72 objects against her, including scissors, knife, whip, and a gun with one bullet among others. The performance took place in Naples and lasted six hours. The rules of the performance were written on a card, "There are 72 objects on the table that one can use on me as desired. I am the object. During this period I take the full responsibility."²⁴ The performance lasted for 6 hours and ended abruptly when someone grabbed the gun and pointed at Abramovic's throat.

²⁴ David Joselit. "Between Objects and Actions" *Art in America* (California: Brant Publication Inc., 1998)3.

From 1976 to 1988, Abramovic's career intertwined with that of Ulay, creating an interesting partnership in which they explored gender roles. Together, they produced dynamic pieces that define the importance of showing their roles as individuals as well as the male and female roles in their performances as described in this excerpt from a 1978 interview.

Because we are two individuals, a male and a female, the physical and psychological nature of the performance can make greater demands on me than on Marina or vice versa. It is obvious that we do not want to demonstrate similarity. At that stage of less consciousness, which probably is the most important stage in a performance, you get to the point of confrontation with your own limitations and that point is different for Marina and me.²⁵

Gender role exploration led to various memorable performances, such as *Imponderabilia* in 1977. In this performance, the couple stood naked against the walls of the narrow entrance to the gallery facing each other. In order to enter, the public had to decide whether to turn to face him or her and thus choose his or her own gender subjectivity. Also in 1977, they performed *Breathing In/Breathing Out* in Belgrade. Attached by their mouths breathing in each other's air Abramovic and Ulay had microphones on their necks allowing the audience to listen to their pulses.²⁶ After numerous performances, testing each other's body limits and challenging gender roles in society, the couple ended their 12 year relationship with one last performance in 1988

²⁵ Kristine Stiles & Peter Setz. "Performance Art" Theories and Documents of Contemporary Art: A Sourcebook of Artist's Writings (Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1996)758.

²⁶ Katarzyna Michalak. "Performing Life, Living Art: Abramovic/Ulay and KwieKulik" Afterimage 27 iss.3 (1999)16.

Great Wall Walk. The performance lasted for three months while both artists walked the Great Wall of China in opposite directions until they met in the middle of the wall.

The end of the relationship with Ulay meant regaining artistic freedom for Abramovic. After the break up, Abramovic continued her *Rhythm* series testing the limitations of her body and her relationship with her audience. Over the course of the years following, the break up Abramovic won various awards for her work. In 1997, she won the Golden Lion Award for Best Artist in the Venice Biennale for her performance “Balkan Baroque”. In 2002, she won the New York Dance and Performance Award for Best Show in a Commercial Gallery from the International Association of Art Critics.²⁷ Known as the grandmother of performance art Abramovic teaches at the Academy of Fine Arts in Braunschweig, Germany.

Abramovic’s *Seven Easy Pieces* began 12 years ago as a project to preserve performance art through re-enacting performances from 1965 to 1975. Regardless of the original duration of the performances, Abramovic’s re-enactments lasted for seven hours everyday for seven days. She began her project by contacting those artists whose work had inspired her career. She chose to re-enact performances she had not seen before to reiterate the necessity of good documentation for re-enactments. Abramovic encountered difficulties with some of the artists no longer living and had to deal with their estate guardians and ask for permission to re-enact their performance. Some artists or their estate guardians refused to give her permission to use their work while others only contributed limited sources for Abramovic to use in her performances. For the re-enactment of *Action Pants: Genital Panic*, Abramovic only had as documentation a poster that was produced after the performance. This lack of documentation to use in

²⁷ Peggy Phelan. “Marina Abramovic: Witnessing Shadows” *Theatre Journal* 56 iss.4 (Dec. 2004)570.

planning her re-enactments, gave her more encouragement to continue with her project to ensure the preservation of these performances. For example for Gina Pane's *The Conditioning* Abramovic only had one image of the first of three phases of this performance, a photo of Pane laying on the bed of candles, and was allowed to only perform that phase. Although Abramovic encounter obstacles along her journey, she did come across never before seen documentation from Joseph Beuys' piece *How to Explain Pictures to a Dead Hare*. Beuys' wife provided Abramovic with the chance to view unauthorized photos of the original performance for her re-enactment.

I will describe each performance and the elements that Abramovic changed from each performance, in order to accommodate the artist's request or for Abramovic's own artistic sensibility. I will point out the ideas behind the performances and how re-enacting the pieces although taken out of context, never compromise the original message. The five ideas prominent with the six re-enactments are endurance, sexuality, erotic symbol, body as artistic material, and stubborn rationality. Although all of the performances focus on the body as artistic material, identifying them through these ideas illustrates the process of re-enactments as a method of preservation for this ephemeral art. Abramovic included one of her own works from her early career to re-enact, finishing the project of *Seven Easy Pieces* with a new performance.

In order to accommodate Abramovic's does seven day-long performances, the Guggenheim museum installed a round stage platform in the middle of its lobby on the main floor. This location gave the public diverse views of the performer from the lobby and upper floors of the museum's rotunda. It also provided a shocking impression for those visitors coming to see the *Russia* show and instead seeing Abramovic as soon as

they entered the doors. Abramovic planned the documentation of her project with Babette Mangolte, a filmmaker, and Nancy Spector, Curator of Contemporary Art at the Guggenheim. Babette Mangolte is to create a documentary of Abramovic's project. During all seven performances there were two cameras recording the seven hours of performance for Mangolte's documentary project, one camera at the same angle recording in surveillance style. Abramovic also made clear to Nancy Spector that she was not going to accept money for her piece at the museum and that there was to be no interference at any moment of her performances. Abramovic noted during the symposium that she did compensate those artists that gave her permission to re-enact their performances and that they would be getting a copy of the documentary of *Seven Easy Pieces*. She emphasized the importance of respecting the artist and his/her work during a re-enactment and shared with the audience her objection to using another artist's work without permission.

Endurance
Bruce Nauman's *Body Pressure*
1974

Abramovic, dressed in a blue suit, pressed her body against a glass wall in accordance with the instructions she heard over a speaker. These instructions were original writings from Nauman and, when first performed, printed instructions were available for the viewers to perform the actions if desired. Abramovic performed the actions for seven hours what follows is an excerpt from those instructions:

Press as much of the front surface of your body (palms in or out, left or right cheek) against the wall as possible. Press very hard and concentrate. Form an image of yourself (suppose you had just stepped forward) on the

opposite side of the wall pressing back against the wall
very hard. Press very hard and concentrate on the image
pressing very hard. (the image of pressing very hard)
Press your front surface, back surface toward each other,
and begin to ignore or block the thickness of the wall.
(remove the wall)²⁸

The audience received these instructions at the beginning of the performance, which played over speakers just like in the original performance. Gender is the major change in this performance and the seven-hour duration of this piece emphasizes the endurance factor of the piece. Abramovic performed the instructions exactly as heard over the speakers disregarding the pain and sweat of her body and submitting complete control of her actions. Abramovic was successful in portraying Nauman's message of pushing the body to its limits with her re-enactment. At midnight, the audience was escorted outside while Abramovic continued to perform on stage and she remained in performance until everyone was out of the museum. Abramovic explained that timelessness is essential in performance art and the audience should never see the performance end.²⁹

Sexuality
Vito Acconci's *Seedbed*
1972

The original duration was twice a week, six hours each day. In this performance, Abramovic masturbates under the stage floor for seven hours while visitors walk on top of the stage and hear Abramovic over a speaker that sat on top of the stage. Acconci's intent with *Seedbed* is to produce the seed under the stage while masturbating and clearly,

²⁸ Friedrich Christian Flick Collection. Excerpt from pamphlet distributed at *Seven Easy Pieces* show at Guggenheim Museum in New York.

²⁹ "About the public...I do not want the public to feel that they are spending time with the performance, I simply want them to forget about time"-Marina Abramovic.

Abramovic being a female cannot produce a seed during masturbation. Despite this change in the piece, Abramovic is successful in portraying the private sexual activity of masturbation while exploring her female sexuality in the process. For this re-enactment, Abramovic had photographs that were taken of Acconci without his permission while he laid under the stage and the writing from the text panel from the original performance in 1972 at the Sonnabend Gallery in New York. During the symposium, Abramovic had no comment about this performance stating it was self-explanatory.

Erotic Symbol

Valie Export's *Action Pants: Genital Panic*

1969

Abramovic wore a black leather jacket and leather pants with the crotch cut out them exposing her vagina area. From the video that was available to the audience from the previous nights I was able to see the audiences' reactions to Abramovic as soon as they entered the museum and were face with Abramovic. In one instance, a woman comes into the museum with her child and the small boy runs towards the stage to examine Abramovic while the woman rapidly takes the child away and covers his eye. For this performance, Abramovic had only a poster made of Export's performance and her description of the performance. No original photo or video exist of this performance. In a conversation between artist Valie Export and Nancy Spector the artist explains the purpose of her performance.

The performance took place in an art cinema in Munich, where I was invited with other filmmakers to show my films. I was dressed in a sweater and pants with the crotch completely cut away. I told the audience, 'What you see now is reality, and it is not in the screen, and everybody sees you watching this now.' I moved slowly up the aisle,

walking toward the people; they had my exposed crotch in front of their faces. I had no idea what the audience would do. As I moved from row to row, people silently got up and left the theater. Taken out of the film context, this was a totally different way for them to connect with a particular erotic symbol.³⁰

Abramovic adapted her own idea of clothing to represent the femme fatale symbol that Valie Export was portraying in her original performance. In the original performance Export wore a sweater with pants while Abramovic took the femme fatale concept a bit further and adopted the image that was portrayed after the performance, that of the leather jacket and machine gun. Although Abramovic was not putting her crotch in front of peoples' faces, the audience had the option to look or not and if they did look, everyone knew. The seven-hour duration of the re-enactment compared to the ten minutes of the original performance gave the audience a chance to evaluate the erotic symbol that Abramovic represented with her exposed genitals. This performance just like the original exposed the reality of an erotic symbol.

Body as Artistic Material
Gina Pane's *The Conditioning*
1973

Abramovic wore the same gray suit she wore during the first performance. She donned black boots and her hair was down. She lay on a metal bed and underneath stood about 15 candles. Abramovic arose after about 24 minutes and changed the candles. Her pain was obvious as she kept moving her hands slowly to the sides. During the symposium, she readily admitted that this performance was the hardest out of all seven,

³⁰ Valie Export in conversation with Nancy Spector, October 2005. Excerpt from pamphlet distributed at *Seven Easy Pieces* show at the Guggenheim Museum in New York.

not because of the candles but because she was facing the ceiling the entire time and could not see the audience. She explained how she gets her energy to endure the performances from the audience. She also shared that since the stage was close to the museum doors the draft kept moving the flames of the candle, therefore relieving the burning a bit. The original performance was approximately 30 minutes and Abramovic's seven hour re-enactment proved to the audience her determination to explore the limitations of her body and the use of it as her artistic material.

The original concept created by the artist was captured by Abramovic's performance. In 1973 after the original performance, Gina Pane stated the message she wanted to convey to her audience with her performance.

The public understood my suffering from the way I wrang my hands much more than from my face, so it was actually a very primitive mode of communication. But I feel I succeeded in making the public understand right off that my body is my artistic material. When, half an hour later, I was able to get up, I caressed my body very gently. There was no violence; my body hurt but I could still feel my touch.³¹

Abramovic was apprehensive in performing this piece because of the use of candles and the relation that people make with them and religion. She made it clear at the symposium that she does not wish to impose any religious message with her performances but used the candles because they were part of the original performance.

³¹ Gina Pane, Interview with Effie Stephano, "Performance of Concern" *Art and Artists* no.85 (London: April 1973)24.

Marina Abramovic's Lips of Thomas
1975

In the original performance, two hours long, Abramovic eats one kilo of honey with a silver spoon and drinks one liter of red wine out of a crystal glass. She then cuts a five-point star on her stomach with a razor blade. After cutting herself, she kneels and violently whips herself. After the whipping, she lies down on a cross-made of ice blocks and a suspended space heater makes the star on her stomach bleed.

Since she had to make this performance last seven hours, Abramovic added two elements to her performance to commemorate her Slavic heritage and her father's military background. She added slipping into her father's boots and hat while holding a stick with a white cloth, which had her blood, while the Slavic anthem played in the background. According to Abramovic, this performance was harder to endure than the 1975 piece. She admitted that she had a better understanding of the elements in the performance now, compared to 1975 when she was much younger. She also revealed to a much surprised Nancy Spector who was present at the symposium that during the *Lips of Thomas* performance she encountered a mishap with the spoon she was using to eat the honey. It turns out that the price tag was behind the spoon, which she realized shortly before eating the honey. Nancy Spector was embarrassed to say the least but Abramovic laughed it off saying improvisation is part of the performance. This performance was horrible to watch and after about an hour, I had to leave. Listening to the whip touch her sweaty naked body was too much to take and I was reluctant to see her last piece.

Lips of Thomas is a great example of Abramovic using her body as her artistic material to express her devotion to her heritage and family history while also testing the limits of her tolerance for pain. Re-enacting her own performance gave Abramovic a

chance to acknowledge her place as a young artist and to add on to the piece the experiences she has obtained since the first time she performed that piece.

Stubborn Rationality

Joseph Beuys' *How to Explain Pictures to a Dead Hare*

1965

For this re-enactment, Abramovic had only one photo from the original performance but Beuys' wife gave her access to unauthorized photos of the performance with the condition that she would not use the photos themselves in her performance. Abramovic followed Beuys original use of props, which included chalkboards, dustpan, felt-covered stool, and a jar of honey. Her clothes also matched the original's, including khaki pants and vest and her face was covered with pieces of gold leaf paper. For Abramovic's performance, the public was given an excerpt from Beuys' writings from his original performance. Beuys' message read:

I had to walk in this sole when I carried the hare round from picture to picture, so along with a strange limp came the clank of iron on the hard stone floor that was all that broke the silence, since my explanations were mute... This seems to have been the action that most captured people's imaginations. On one level this must be because everyone consciously or unconsciously recognizes the problem of explaining things, particularly where art and creative work are concerned, or anything that involves a certain mystery or questioning. The idea of explaining to an animal conveys a sense of the secrecy of the world and of existence that appeals to the imagination. Then, as I said,

even a dead animal preserves more powers of intuition than some human beings with their stubborn rationality.³²

During the symposium a man asked a question regarding the context of this performance and its original relation to WWII since Beuys was a veteran from that war. Abramovic explained that with all her re-enactments she was not trying to duplicate all the elements of the performances only those ideas that represented the original message of the performance. In this case that of stubborn rationality, which is a concept that can be applied to various current issues in our community today like abortion, gay marriage, and the war in Iraq. Abramovic maintained the idea that Beuys established without having to add anything to her re-enactment about WWII.

Entering the Other Side, a living installation, consisted of the circular stage converted into a tent raised about 16 feet above the floor all covered in shiny blue fabric. After making my way upstairs to glimpse the top of the structure, I saw a small bench inside the opening of the structure. Abramovic came out dressed in the same blue fabric as the structure and made her way inside and out the hole on top. She stood there with her arms to her side looking as radiant as a porcelain doll. After thirty minutes of the performance, audience members on the top floors moved to the main floor.

In the lobby behind the stage, there were six flat panel screens that each contained the surveillance footage from the previous performances of that week. This element of the installation gave the public an immense appreciation for Abramovic after seeing all that she had gone through she stood on top of the structure as graceful as a queen. It was

³² Joseph Beuys, "Wie man dem toten Hasen die Bilder erkart" (1965); reprinted in English as "Statement on How to Explain Pictures to a Dead Hare", translated by Caroline Tisdall (New York: Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum, 1979)105.

interesting to see myself on the screens of the performances that I attended, feeling like part of her work and history. Although there was no sound playing on the screens the sound, of that whip from the *Lips of Thomas* performance was hard to get out of my head as I watched that performance again on the screen.

Even though the six screens were available for the public to watch Abramovic's performances from earlier that week, it was hard to ignore her live performance just a few feet from the screens. Nothing else can compare to watching a live performance. Only a small chapter or sometimes a paragraph is devoted to this genre in art history books when in fact it provides everything there is to know about expression, passion, and creativity. No photo, video, or recounting can substitute for the performance and itself.

Seven Easy Pieces has proven that re-enactments even with a limited amount of documentation are possible and are the best way to preserve the essence of performance art. Abramovic has also shed light on the need for the VMI as an essential part of the preservation process of performance art. The VMI has made the documentation of performance art a priority for the future interpretation of this genre. Abramovic's *Seven Easy Pieces* has also shown the flexibility and commitment from such a prominent institution like the Guggenheim Museum. Such a complex and innovative project like *Seven Easy Pieces* would probably not have been possible a couple of years ago. The acceptance that performance art is gaining has come from the preservation needs of this genre but also from realization that performance art is important to our history.

Chapter IV Conclusion: The Future of Performance Art

The efforts of the VMI at the Guggenheim museum, the Daniel Langlois Foundation, and artist Marina Abramovic performance art have made an impact on the acceptance and preservation of performance art. One of the major signs of this preservation revolution comes from performance art historian RoseLee Goldberg who organized the first performance art biennale PERFORMA 05 this past November in New York City. As describe in her website PERFORMA is “a non-profit arts organization committed to the research, development, and presentation of performance by international visual artists.”³³ Goldberg prides herself in stating that the biennale developed without corporate sponsorship, institutional sponsorship or becoming an institution itself; she stated in an interview that, “the moment you create an institution then everything is going to look like that institution. Instead, the participating spaces bring together different influences and dialogues without fixing any one mood or idea. It’s the notion of the museum without walls.”³⁴ Participating venues included 18 non-profit organizations, 8 galleries, and 2 museums.

The biennale consisted of a combination of re-enactments and new performances. Goldberg commissioned a new piece from Jesper Just titled *True Love is Yet to Come* and the Museum for African Art presented *Re-Set*, a tribute to video performance artist Nam June Paik performed by Paul D. Miller who also re-staged a performance by Charlotte Moorman.³⁵ Abramovic’s *Seven Easy Pieces*, too, made the roster of re-enactments for the biennale. Goldberg also included in her biennale a lecture series like *Not For Sale*:

³³ www.performa-arts.org

³⁴ http://www.flashartonline.com/NEWS/24_10_interview.html

³⁵ Roberta Smith. *Performance Art Gets Its Biennial* The New York Times (New York: Nov. 4, 2005)2.

Curating and Writing Performance for the 21st Century where issues like preservation, re-enactment and the future of performance art were discussed. Goldberg's goals for the biennale were to educate the public and future performance artists about the history of performance art in order to secure its future preservation. In a 2003 statement from her website, she explains her plans for PERFORMA:

The goal of these workshops will be to develop a new definition of performance in the 21st century. It will reconsider performance of the past three decades, showing how aesthetic and conceptual threads from those years have been co-opted and reinterpreted by a younger generation of artists and academics and brought forward to express the particular ethos of the opening years of the new century.³⁶

Goldberg efforts to establish the first performance art biennale have proven effective in capturing the public's attention back to performance art and its importance. The next few years are critical to all the steps established to preserve the documentation of performance art and to promote the re-enactments of such as the ideal method of preservation. Would the biennale be a success the next time around?

However, the question that remains is will all these efforts be enough? After stating, the problems of displaying performance art documentation and emphasizing the importance of that documentation for future re-enactments with the help of the VMI one can only wonder if this process will last in the years to come. Will performance artists now consider the question of preservation through re-enactments more tentatively when

³⁶ RoseLee Goldberg. "Opening Statement" (<http://performa-arts.org/programs>).

creating their work? The creation of the Variable Media Network and the collaboration among institutions and performance artists in this task of preserving the ephemeral should serve as a testament that the art community works better when it works together.

Although the future is impossible to predict in the always-changing world of contemporary art the efforts of the Variable Media Network, the Guggenheim Museum and performance artist Marina Abramovic have made an impact on the preservation of this innovative art genre.

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Variable Media Questionnaire - Microsoft Internet Explorer

http://tree.org/ppolito/variablemedia/variablemedia_questionnaire_beta.html

variable media questionnaire

art-works that can be performed

For details, please refer to the following URL:

In its original version, this artwork could be... In later re-creations, this artwork could be...

interactive 1 reproduced 1

issue	current state	can vary	comments
	professional actors	greatly	
	disposable	greatly	
	disposable	greatly	
	disposable	greatly	
	one	greatly	
	paper score or script	greatly	
	during installation	greatly	
	video	greatly	
	video		
	film		
	textual		
	a combination of the above (explain)		
	not required		
	not applicable		

Variable Media...

Appendix A
Variable Media Questionnaire



Appendix A
Variable Media Questionnaire

Variable Media Questionnaire - Microsoft Internet Explorer

http://three.org/ppolo/variablemedia/var_questionnaire_beta.html

variable media questionnaire artworks that can be performed

by: Jacob
Robert M...
M...

In its original version, this artwork could be... In later re-creations, this artwork could be...

interactive ↑ reproduced ↑

issue	current state	can vary	comments
	professional actors	greatly	
	disposable	greatly	
	disposable	greatly	
	disposable	greatly	
	one	greatly	
	one	greatly	
	two to five	greatly	
	five to twenty	greatly	
	over twenty	greatly	
	indeterminate	greatly	
	not applicable	greatly	

Appendix A Variable Media Questionnaire

Variable Media Questionnaire - Microsoft Internet Explorer

http://www.org/ppolko/variablemedia/variable_media_questionnaire_beta.html

variable media questionnaire

artwork's that can be performed

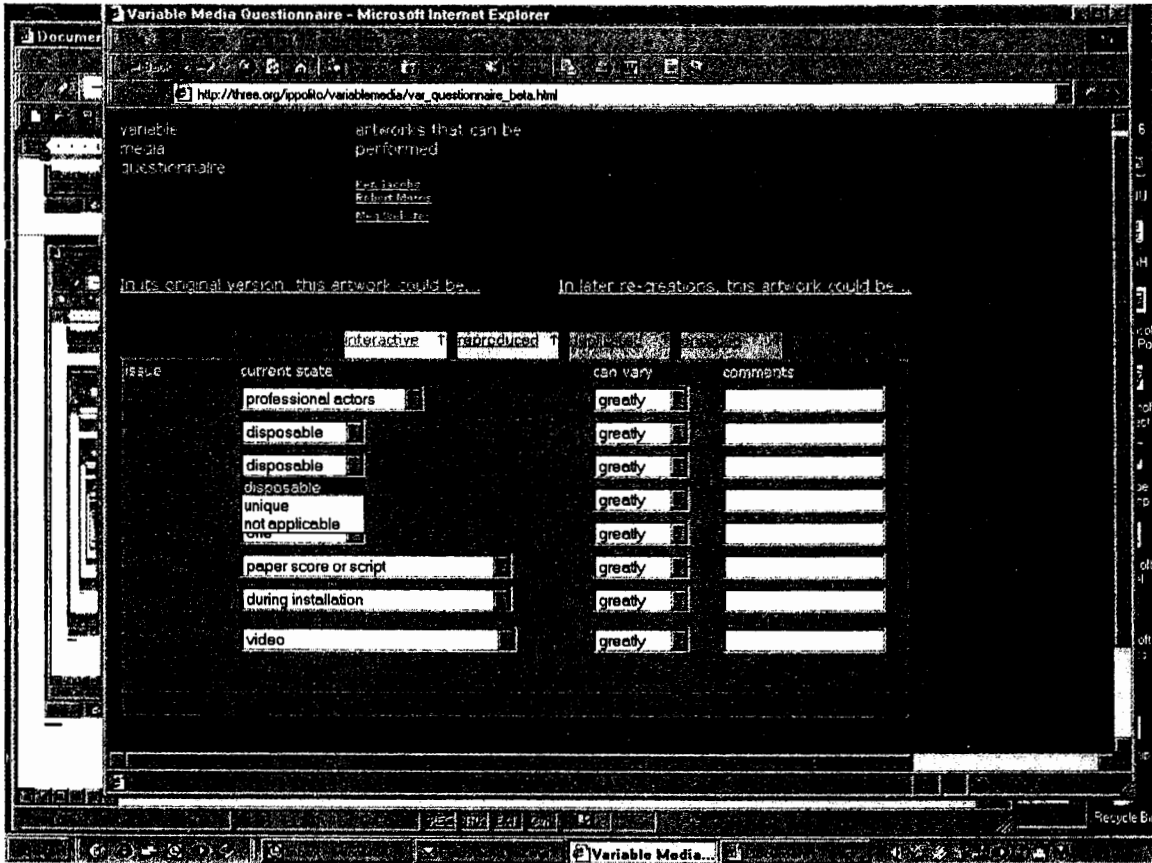
Ken Jacobs
Robert Mory
Michael...

In its original version, this artwork could be... In later re-creations, this artwork could be...

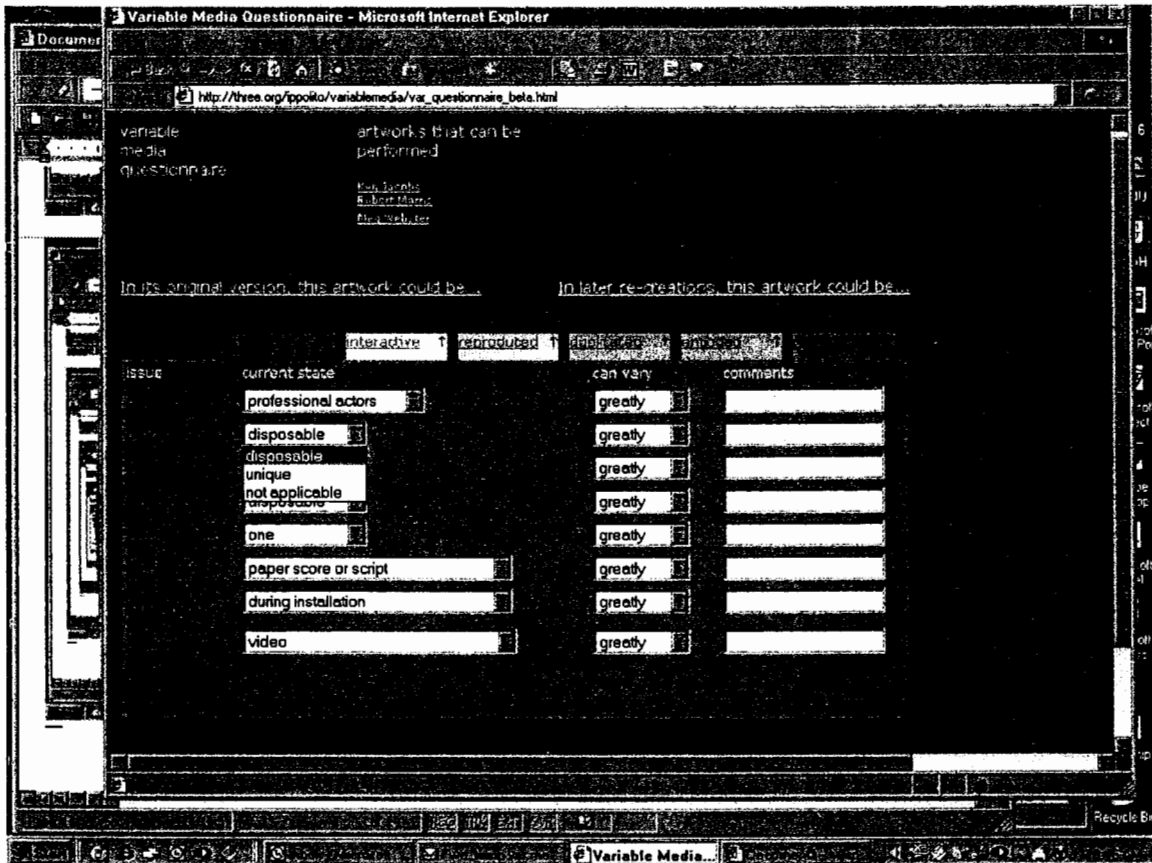
interactive reproduced duplicated

issue	current state	can vary	comments
	professional actors	greatly	
	disposable	greatly	
	disposable	greatly	
	disposable	greatly	
	disposable	greatly	
	unique	greatly	
	not applicable	greatly	
	paper score or script	greatly	
	during installation	greatly	
	video	greatly	

Appendix A
Variable Media Questionnaire



Appendix A Variable Media Questionnaire



Appendix A
Variable Media Questionnaire

Variable Media Questionnaire - Microsoft Internet Explorer

http://three.org/apollo/variablmedia/var_questionnaire_beta.html

variable media questionnaire

artworks that can be performed

Lee Jacobs
Robert Maza
Dina Schuba

In its original version, this artwork could be... In later re-creations, this artwork could be...

interactive ↑ reproduced ↑

issue	current state	can vary	comments
	professional actors	greatly	
	professional actors	greatly	
	professional musicians	greatly	
	museum staff	greatly	
	volunteers	greatly	
	other	greatly	
	not applicable	greatly	
	one	greatly	
	paper score or script	greatly	
	during installation	greatly	
	video	greatly	

Appendix A
Variable Media Questionnaire

