



Between performance and archive: when the document is the artwork

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This essay is a fictionalised dialogue that, while adjusting to publishing guidelines, also takes liberties in favour of fluency and style. Laura and Paul are fictional characters who discuss the work *Goddesses: looking or looked at* in relation to the ontology of performance and its documentation. Laura's conclusion is that while curatorial practice and art history would dwell on the photographs alone, designating *Goddesses'* images as their intentional, activating agent, and reading them as static objects, performance studies would tend to discuss the visceral experience of the performative moment of enactment, dwelling on this experience as proof of our access to a body of action. Both tendencies seem inadequate to the kind of art being analysed; an art that is not only a final object, but that in its performativity, also involves a lasting materiality foregrounded with the process of artistic production.

The images belong to an exhibition that took place at Arts Connection in Miami, FL in January 2024. The performative writing is inspired by and pays homage to Peggy Phelan and Daniel Arasse.





Figure 1: Luis Fernández in *Goddesses*. 2016. Photo by Elaiza Irizarry. Reproduced with permission of the photographer.

Dialogue

Laura: Only in the present?

Paul: Yes, there you have it in black and white. Page 146, ‘performance’s only life is in the present’ (Phelan 1993: 146).

Laura: Okay. Now, let’s see, the present is not the past and is not the future, right?

Paul: Yes, the present only exists in the present. That’s obvious.

Laura: Not so fast. Performance studies, your academic field, is closer to American Pragmatism than to continental philosophy. Right?

Paul: Hmm. With nuances. There is a lot of poststructuralism as well. Not my cup of tea.

Laura: I am quoting John Dewey, ‘If existences are histories or events in the sense of becomings, then past-present-future are on the same level because all are phases of any event or becoming. Any becoming is from, to, through. Its fromness is its pastness; its towardness is its futurity; that through which the becoming passes is its presentness. The present has thus nothing privileged about it; it is as legitimate to speak of the present century or the present geological age as of the present “moment”’ (1926: 256).

Paul: Well, if you want to go there, let’s go. I will remind you though what Dewey thought of Herbert Mead, ‘a seminal mind of the very first order’ (1932: XL), and this is

what Mead said about the present, that reality ‘is always in a present [...] and that which marks a present is its becoming and its disappearing’ (1932: 35). So, yes, it is a becoming, but also a disappearing. As I was saying before, Phelan, if you read further down, says ‘performance’s being [...] becomes itself through disappearance’ (1993: 146).

Laura: Aha! Here we go. You’ve skipped part of the quote. The whole citation reads, ‘performance’s being, like the ontology of subjectivity proposed here, becomes itself through disappearance.’

Paul: So? Why is the ontology of subjectivity important for you in this line of argument?

Laura: Because we shouldn’t read Phelan out of context, or her intentions for writing *Unmarked*. She is Lacanian, influenced by Levinas’ ethics writing against the politics of visibility and reproduction in 1993, just three years after Judith Butler’s *Gender Trouble*, and the exacerbation of identity politics. In a reference to Levinas, Phelan contends that representation reproduces the Other as the Same. Her intention is to define performance as representation without reproduction so that reproduction of the Other as the Same is not assured.

Paul: She is still making an ontological claim about performance’s ephemerality.

Laura: It’s an ethical move, not ontological. Phelan explains that progressive cultural activists worked hard on boosting and widening the visibility of the marginalised in terms of identification, arguing that representational economies would make under-represented communities stronger. They assumed that by such identification, marginalised subjects would feel prouder to be a part of such a community, and others who are not members of that community will have a better appreciation of the power of those communities. However, she warns us that visibility is a trap. Phelan aspires to revalue a belief in subjectivity and identity which is not visibly representable by locating an unmarked subject inside the ideology of the visible (1993: 1–33).

Paul: Point well taken. I have read the entire book. Phelan even recognises her failure in the *Afterword: Notes on Hope* saying that, ‘The argument cannot be made in writing for in recording it I destroy precisely what I want to affirm. Fort. Da. The leap of the quantum. The undocumentable performance’ (1993: 171). So, in a sense, her book is a betrayal of her own performance ontology.

Laura: That’s correct. I’m glad I didn’t have to show you that.

Paul: The book is full of performance descriptions, photographs, and it sells at bookstores, which means it entered the logic of capitalism and circulation of representations.

Laura: I paid 17 dollars for a used copy in 1999.

Paul: However, in a footnote at the end of the *Afterword*, she reasserts her belief in the inaccessible real. Phelan says that '[w]hile Schechner refers positively to the power of performance to "invent" the real, I am arguing that actually performance admits and tries to face the impossibility of seizing/seeing the real anywhere anytime' (1993:192).

Laura: Is she referring to Lacan's Real?

Paul: Yes, she is, to that moment of being that cannot be saved. Similar to what Norman Bryson, referencing *sūnyatā* or radical impermanence, says about the present, 'The form of the seed is already turning into the form of the flower, and the flower is already becoming dust. The present state of the object appearing as the flower is inhabited by its past as seed and its future as dust, in a continuous motion of postponement, whose effect is that the flower is never presently there, any more than the seed or dust are there' (1988:99). See, I can agree with Dewey and Mead and still make the point with Phelan that performance only exists through its disappearance, which is its subversive force.

Laura: How is performance's disappearance subversive?

Paul: 'The ephemerality of performance seems critically important to me precisely because it resists commodification. Live art's ephemerality [...] is a bulwark against the larger violence of late capitalism' (Phelan 2024: 8). However, I think we are digressing from the focus of our conversation, the exhibit *Goddesses* and whether performance's documents are performative works of art.



Figure 2: Ananda DeMello in *Goddesses*. 2016. Photo by Elaiza Irizarry. Reproduced with permission of the photographer.

Laura: I don't think it was a digression. If performance only exists through its disappearance, then how can it have an ontology? Perhaps Phelan meant it as a provocation. Will talk about it more later. But, yes, let us go back to the performance and its documentation. To recap, 'What has been at stake in this debate is the ability of performance art to resist commodification and challenge the supposedly fixed nature of social roles and identities. In other words, the underlying question has been whether performance art can maintain its subversive potential when transferred and mediated through documents' (Gusman 2019: 444).

Paul: So far. so good. Yes, that's what we're debating.

Laura: 'From this angle, it is possible to gain a deeper insight into the implications of the discussion around documentation and understand why, while productively side-stepping the ontological discourse, it still addresses the question of what performance art is. What is usually investigated, in fact, is the legitimacy of performance's reception through the medium of documentation, notably as something which can be inferred by the definition of what a performance is: a non-reproducible event for Phelan; a work of fine art for Auslander; or a form of bodily knowledge and transmission for Rebecca Schneider' (Gusman 2019:444). Oh! And an intersubjective experience for Jones, and a market materialization for Ayerbe. I propose that *Goddesses'* interaction between performance and its documentation is theatrical and performative, and not always following a linear timeline, which challenges the traditional concept of documentation as historical data, as archive. Because of this interaction, its documentation becomes a work of art.

Paul: First, let me address the concept of performance and the work of art. We must agree that a performance is an event and not a work of art, that is, an event is immaterial, an action, and a work of art is objectual, is bound to its materiality. You might contend that the performing body is material, yes, I agree, a body is bound to its materiality, but that does not mean that the actions performed by a material body are material. The whole situation of the action, its temporality and context, like the total speech act in the total speech situation, might perform art, an intentional symbolic action with aesthetic qualities and/or sociopolitical purposes, but '[j]ust as your voice only becomes your voice, ontologically, when it exits your body [...]' (Phelan 2024: 10), so the art/action only becomes as it leaves the body and disappears. In the case of performance, we are talking about behaviour; in the case of a work of art, we are talking about objects.

Laura: Hmm! Sounds very Greenbergian for performance studies. I thought that with the rise of conceptualism in the 1960s, we had agreed 'that art is not a "thing" but a process or a relationship' (Jones 2018:13). What I am trying to say is that *Goddesses'*

images display an interaction between the performance and its documentation that is theatrical and performative and therefore not just a document but a performance AND a work of art. I recognize that performance art ‘historically tended toward the transgressive: disrupting the performer/audience boundary, exceeding the limits of the body, unsettling gender norms and expectations, refusing the digestible temporality of entertainment, staking out oppositional politics, and operating with guerilla tactics [...] This elusive relationship to objecthood, and a penchant for the transgressive, managed to keep visual art performance out of museums—and art histories—for most of the 20th century’ (Bishop 2018: 27).

Paul: Yes, that’s right. And its transgression was grounded in its ephemerality.

Laura: However, it would be naïve to ignore that in the last 20 years or so, digital technology has contributed to popularise performance art through social media and celebrity culture. ‘Following this ever-increasing institutionalization of performance and its methods of display and mediation in the wider cultural sphere, [I] understand performance art as an institutional, cultural, and economic phenomenon rather than as a label, genre, or object’ (Ferdman (2020) 2023:5). It is within this larger context that I would like to place these images and rethink an ontology of temporality that is not reductionist. If nothing else, these images reject categorisation, they are relational.

Paul: Wow! There is a lot to digest there. I see what you mean by the institutionalisation of performance art. We are living in an experience and affect-driven economy and capitalism is the limitless realm of every possibility, but also the limit within itself, the displaced limit. Already in 1983, Deleuze cautioned that ‘[r]epresentation no longer relates to a distinct object, but to productive activity itself’ (1983: 263). To further complicate these questions, in the case of performance art we must acknowledge that it entered a system called art world, ‘the transnational economy of auction houses, dealers, collectors, international biennials, and trade publications that, together with curators, artists, and critics, reproduce the market, as well as the discourse that influences the appreciation and demand for highly valuable artworks’ (Sholette 2017:20). This means that it is immersed in the late-capitalist system of commodification and consumption.

Laura: Yes, and it’s a contradiction that doesn’t work in theory or in practice. Therefore, we must treat it differently from 70 years ago when it first started to manifest in the art world, and 30 years ago when Phelan was writing. Currently, we are faced with re-performance, digital creator economy, and documentation as commodity.

Paul: Allow me to recap. We must return to your Phelan provocation at some point. Then we have linear time, which I haven’t addressed, and lastly but certainly most

importantly, the theatrical-performative connection between performance and document. Let us return there and explain what you mean.

Laura: Gladly, I will, but please include in that list your slight mention of speech acts because, in a sense, it is related to the performative. What I see happening throughout *Goddesses* at the level of performance, painting, portrait, photography, and theatricality calls for a different type of enunciation because the layers merge onto a surface at the limit of the verb in the infinitive mode, to look. At the mechanical level, the partaker's dense body is incorporated into the background through a painterly gesture; this performance is captured by the photographer's camera and coded into 0–1 binary language. During the printing process, the register is decoded as a layer of pigment on a surface, technically a painting.

Paul: And a painting is an object.



Figure 3: Roberto Stopello in *Goddesses*. 2016. Photo by Elaiza Irizarry. Reproduced with permission of the photographer.

Laura: Yes, a painting is an object, but the interaction of the surfaces participating in the event—from the dense body's skin to the background's surface to the surface of the printed photographic register—requires a different logic to explain its presence, agency, and materiality. It requires a logic that can deal with the presence of incorporeal things, *une logique de l'inframince*, to quote Duchamp (1983: 10); a logic that assimilates the participant's agency who acts within the temporal-relational context that was created for the performance to take place; a logic that can describe the relational because an event cannot be treated solely as a material process stuck to a present framed by past

and future. 'An event is not bound to a particular space and time but may be experienced whenever and wherever it is actualized anew' (Fraser 2006: 130). In other words, it is the theatrical layering of different moments in time and space plastered onto a single surface. As I said, it does not denote linear time.

Paul: But you're still talking about an object. As you mentioned, it's the recording of an event, not the original performance. How is this performative or theatrical?

Laura: Good. Let's talk about the performative, and then I'll piggyback onto the theatrical. Performative and its cognate performativity are terms that caught. I mean, they moved from the very specific context of language to be more widely used on both sides of the Atlantic by analytic and continental philosophers. J. L. Austin's Harvard lectures differentiate in lecture V that statements are either constatives or performatives. Constatives can be false or true, while performatives do something.

Paul: I think we are all familiar with the distinction.

Laura: I'm beginning to think that most people just read up to lecture V, like Phelan's now famous page 146 from *Unmarked*. By Lecture XII, Austin has abandoned the notion of dichotomies and advocates that all statements are both locutionary and illocutionary, meaning that language performs, is performative (1955, 1962). Performative and performativity have come to denote the normative and transgressive aspects embedded in language iteration, 'a pervasive theatricality common to stage and world alike' (Parker-Kosofsky 1995:4). 'Performativity always entails being entangled within the power setups one seeks to disentangle' (McKenzie 2006:8). Diana Taylor proposes the use of performatic to differentiate the adjectival from the discursive realm of performance (2003: 6). In both cases, the performative and the performatic do something, it is an active relationship, an interaction.

Paul: Very well, so you are saying that this object, the digitally printed image, whether we read it as a discourse in the cultural studies sense, or as an action, closer to performance studies, is doing something. What is it doing?

Laura: In both cases, it does. In 1985, Schechner outlined his restored behaviour theory and asserted that '[h]ard as it may be for some scholars to swallow, performance originals disappear as fast as they are made. No notation, no reconstruction, no film or videotape recording can keep them. What they lose first and most importantly is their immediacy, their existence in a specific space and context' (1985:50).

Paul: Thank you for bringing this up. That's exactly my point.

Laura: Yes, but in 2002, Schechner said, '[t]o treat any object, work, or product "as" performance—a painting, a novel, a shoe, or anything at all—means to investigate what the object does, how it interacts with other objects or beings, and how it relates

to other objects or beings. Performances exist only as actions, interactions, and relationships' (2002: 24). In other words, as performance is relational; it is defined by the space between the object and the observer or user.

Paul: That is true. I have read the book. It's the broad spectrum, but please go on...



Figure 4: Ananda DeMello in *Goddesses*. 2016. Photo by Elaiza Irizarry. Reproduced with permission of the photographer.

Laura: At a discursive level, the *Goddesses*' images are embedded in the Western Art tradition of the reclining nude, which evokes centuries of categorizations through its narrative and figuration. I believe the *Goddesses*' artist practices a relational pragmatic (Emirbayer 1998). Relational pragmatics serves as a conceptual link between Phelan's ontological stance and the economic reality of art's commodification and consumption. In this context, work is not a fleeting, solitary event; rather, it is a dynamic system encompassing the artist, the viewer, and the broader social situation. Consequently, an object is redefined as a pattern of transactions rather than a fixed, material thing. To use Schechner's example, a shoe is more than its constituent leather; it is a physical site where labour relations, cultural trends, and the functional act of walking converge. By treating objects as processes-in-time, we recognise that they exist through the roles they perform within a larger network of relationships. Relational pragmatics also allows us to avoid essentialist dichotomies such as object-subject. In *Goddesses* there is no definition of roles according to an essence but according to changing relationships in the "as if" of the context. It opens a space to question categorizations through the range of the partakers' age and sex as well as the break with Western traditional canons of beauty. It questions genre categories because we interact with the image as painting,

as photograph, as portrait, and as performance then and now. Remember that there is no outside from which to make a critique, that challenging the processes of representation must be carried out by means of representation (Carlson 1996), like Phelan outlining her critique of representation through a representational medium.

Paul: If we concentrate solely on relational transactions, we risk erasing individuals' identities and viewing them only as products of their social ties. Yet, people are more than nodes in a network; they have inner emotions and self-awareness that exist apart from and before any social engagement. To investigate objects as performance, we must interrogate these interactions with performance questions. 'That is, questions of behaviour, enactment, and reception. Events, situations, and even objects need to be examined in terms of the behaviours that animate and/or surround them.' I don't think we should read events as one would read literary texts. '[...] On the contrary, we [...] need to pay closer attention to behaviours, to actions enacted, and of course to the complex social, political, ideological, and historical contexts not merely surrounding behaviour, but profoundly interacting with it. Meaning radiates from these interactions, from what happens among performers and between performers and performance contexts. There is no meaning inherent in objects or events treated as settled or finished "things." Meaning—and the bodies and objects and relations of which meaning is a function—is always unstable, shifting as circumstances and historical process shift. I think we need to attend more carefully and precisely than we have done to behaviours, events, and enactments [...]' (Schechner 2000: 4).

Laura: Point well taken. Let's look at behaviours and ask performance questions. When a captured moment of the original performance—although there is no original performance in restored behaviour—recomposes as a printed surface, it becomes a figurative representation of a reclining nude. Right?

Paul: Yes, that's right. It's a painting of a reclining nude.

Laura: Except that the original nude's surface was the partaker's skin, whose agency and subjectivity pierce the printed surface's two-dimensionality to become the displaced point of eternal repetition in the infinitive mode, to look, *el mirar*, *le regarder*, *il guardare*.

Paul: Why in the infinitive?

Laura: Because a frozen image denotes an action, but it does not happen, it's set in a continuous present state. The infinitive is atemporal, it keeps returning; it's a meaning and an event. The partaker's body, which bears the artist's hands traces, looked at the camera hence is now including the observer in a face-to-face relationship in both directions, present time-present person. The partaker is not objectified by the observer because the observer is in a performative interaction that only allows for a shared

experience, not an individual observation. The observer can take any attitude in front of the image, but cannot stop experiencing it once the gaze corresponds.

Paul: So, the photograph or printed surface, as you call it, looks back at the observer. Walter Benjamin?

Laura: Yes, in a sense, but if you allow me, I will cite Phelan in *Unmarked* again, ‘The art of the photographer resides in the staged confrontation with the surface of the print, and the art of modelling resides in the confrontation with one’s body, the surface image upon which subjectivity is visible to the camera’s eye [...] the performative emerges in the dual manipulation of the surface of the photographic image and the surface of the model’s body’ (1993:37). *Goddesses* takes this emergent performative a step further because the artist has intervened with the surface of the model’s body in an event where the relational defines the partaker as painting, the photographer as capturer, the artist as painter, and the observer as the site where product becomes process again, a performance.



Figure 5: Mimi Lazo in *Goddesses*. 2016. Photo by Elaiza Irizarry. Reproduced with permission of the photographer.

Paul: Very well. Schechner and Phelan agree that an object, a work of art or a photograph can be performative. But where is the performance, the behaviour?

Laura: We can agree that theatrical implies an action, right? After all, theatre is action. However, theatre without an observer is not theatre. When I was talking about the performative, and I mentioned that it’s ‘a pervasive theatricality common to stage and world alike’ (Parker-Kosofsky 1995: 4), I was referring to theatricality as a consciousness of the gaze, to look. The observer is made conscious of their own act of looking and their

role as receiver of the artwork. The artwork or performance addresses the audience, essentially acknowledging their presence and the intention behind the creation being observed. That is behaviour; that is performance; that is showing doing. That's what Josette Féral (2002:10–11) defines as the fundamental essence of theatricality, the cleavage, the framing. Theatricality is inextricably linked to a communication process by which an actor inscribes a framing onto an object or action to induce the observer to see it differently. Analogous to the expression/reception of space, which is liminal, every object or action is inscribed both in reality and in fiction; there is real action with bodies with agency, and the fictional action represented by the symbolic, by the transformation from ordinary to extraordinary or making special. In *Goddesses*, there is the photograph of a person, the real, and then that same image of a person as a painting, the fiction. There is always a tension in these dualities, expressed by the artist and perceived by the observer, which forces us to see differently, that is, to see through theatricality. A cautionary note: theatricality is relational; it is always interwoven with historical and social ways of understanding the world. In other words, theatricality is for the other; it is a relation. When we are looking at the images in *Goddesses*, we are engaging in theatricality, therefore in a performance, or behaviour as you prefer to call it. The images are framed by their making special, the participants' awareness of the gaze: the partaker looks at the painter; the painter looks at the painting (the partaker's body in context); the capturer looks at both the painting and the painter while they all acknowledge that the artwork will be observed by a public observer, the intention behind the creation.

Paul: That explains theatricality from a point of view, not all points of view. For other scholars, theatricality, which stems from theatrical, means pertaining to the theatre or being excessively dramatic. I don't disagree with either, but for my money, a painting is a painting and a performance is a performance. We can talk about communication processes and reception theories, the intention behind the creation of an artwork and how it's different from the intention in creating a performance. One will disappear while the other may last for centuries, which already places them in two different realms of existence. The reception of an artwork will change with time, and depending on the context it is presented will have different meanings. The reception of a performance depends on the presence and immediacy of the act in a particular context.

Laura: You're still referring to the performance as the original work of art and its documentation always as referring to something external; that the true work of art was the documented action. In the *Goddesses* case, there is no separation between the original and its document because the document stands in a liminal space between performance and artwork. A painting is not a performance, but also a painting is not-not a performance. The liminality is between a denial of being another (I am a painting)

and a denial of not being another (I am a performance). The power of *Goddesses* lies in its liminality—the space between genres where the work is “not-not” a performance. It’s not painting from a model; it’s painting the model. Materiality and action are mixed in a complex manner that’s only separable for analytic purposes. *Goddesses* epitomises a mode of expanded practices that draws on a legacy of performance, painting, portraiture, photography, and theatricality to render art experiences that are performative yet exist in various material forms, including that of the partakers’ labouring body. Such works show the limits of old methods of interpretation, whether art historical or curatorial, invested in final products; or based in performance studies’ tendency to emphasise process to claim authenticity for the performing body. It is worth looking closely at these images because they complicate both tendencies rendering them inadequate to analyse them. These images are not only a final object, but in their lasting materiality also involve a theatricality foregrounded with the process of artistic production (Jones 2015). This artwork should not be viewed as the product of an artist’s labour, rather, it’s a process completed by the observer. The object becomes a completion of the performance rather than just a product. The observer’s interaction is shaped by the context, an art gallery inserted in the art world system, and therefore their behaviour toward the image is of active participation through their art histories knowledge —or lack thereof— imagination, and social context necessary to recompose the “original” performance and acknowledge the partaker’s presence through a representational medium that stares back.



Figure 6: Glenys Irizarry in *Goddesses*. 2016. Photo by Elaiza Irizarry. Reproduced with permission of the photographer.

Paul: Hmm! Let me see if I understood you correctly. Works such as *Goddesses* challenge conventional interpretations by critiquing art history's emphasis on static objects and performance studies' prioritisation of live events. These works occupy a liminal space, bridging the gap between subject and medium. They require observer interaction to complete the performance, thereby transforming viewing into an act of active participation rather than passive consumption.

Laura: Thank you! I couldn't have done it better. Let's hear questions from our listeners.

Competing Interests

The author has no competing interests to declare.

Author Informations

Fernando Calzadilla is a theatre designer, visual artist, dramaturg, performance artist and scholar. He has been awarded 14 times best set, costumes, or lighting design. He has performed and exhibited in Caracas, New York, São Paulo, Miami, and Valencia. His work has received support from Knight Foundation, The Shubert Foundation, and National Endowment for the Arts. Fernando was a Fulbright Specialist 2017–2020 in theatre and was Guest Artist at Directors Lab West 2017. Between 2007–2017, he was Resident Artist for Miami Theater Center where he co-authored three original plays and four adaptations. He designed sets, lights, and costumes for all of them. His research is centered in the human body, colour, and light questioning the separation between process and product. He has a BFA in Theatre Design and a PhD in Performance Studies both from New York University.

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