

Documentation of (Mis)Representation: Towards An Archival Future of the Performative Photograph

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Documentation has continued to be an issue that plagues live art and ever since Peggy Phelan declared it a 'betrayal' of liveness it has been much debated academically if documentation can ever be representational. As we move further and further in the digital age, the issue of documentation has become a more prevalent and practical issue. With the ability to capture work on photo and film at cheaper and easier levels than in the 1990s and with the introduction of social media like YouTube, Twitter and Flickr, performance artists are expected to have a wealth of 'proof' that their work has existed before approaching a producer or potential funding partners. Applications from artists who choose not to document is often seen as low priority and occasionally discarded completely. This shift in the applications of documentation means that we must also be forward thinking in how we utilize it. That is why, in this article, I will argue that we move away from using photography as 'documentary' or to 'document-as-proof' and move towards a documentation of mise-en-scene – one that puts the intentions and messages of the performance into one moment. Drawing on Baudrillard's notion of simulation and the Lacanian order of self, as well as progressing the foundation of the argument of Auslander (2006), I will present the case for using photography as a conceptual medium for documentation, displayed through Valie Export's *Gential Panik* as an archived example, what we can learn about self-portraiture from Cindy Sherman and how today's performance artists are using publicity photography in this way.

When I first started researching the topic of documenting live art through photography, my primary position was to discredit it as a means of preserving its liveness. However, as I continued to research, I asked myself why – if we are so certain that we cannot ever accurately represent live performance through documentation – do we not use it to document the theatrical, imagined or 'Other' self we present in a performance space that more accurately scribes our intentions?

Walter Benjamin (in Arendt and Benjamin, 1999) stated that the value of art is in its unique and irreplaceable status, but for performance artists, this has always been a point of contention. Often after an action or work has taken place, there are very few traces or remains, unless it is the intention of the piece. Once the live moment has gone, performance cannot be recovered unless it is performed again, and even this reproduction takes place under a different set of circumstances, and therefore changes the liveness of the piece. Also, the mediatisation of our culture enables the performance to be captured very quickly and inexpensively. Benjamin spoke in a time where technology was limited and reproducibility was more in forgery than in film. Performance artists owe it not only to themselves, but also to the archive and scholars who will study their work to document their practice (Reason, 2006: pg 31).

As Amelia Jones (1997) so correctly highlights in her presence-in-absentia concept, it is very rare that any of us have experienced some timeless performances – I was never able to see Carolee Schneeman's 'Interior Scroll' as it took place eight years before I was born and even at that in a different country thousands of miles away. However, I feel like I have experienced some performative aspect of this through the documentation of her work. Her commitment to liveness is preserved and so is the memory of her work, through maintaining this relationship between the live and representing the symbolic intentions of the performance in her documentation. As we continue forward, the expectation that all artists embrace this increases from all forums challenging them to think about how one can preserve both the liveness of work and document effectively in order to commit a something tangible to the archive.

So now the practical issues of producing performance and archiving work have changed, so too should our view of documenting it. As Melzer (1995) notes, electronic representation of performance is an attempt to define and redefine a performance, with its transference to a digital medium making it a different work entirely and the audience are once removed from the original context. This is true, but once we scratch the surface of what performance is, worrying about the accuracy of the representation of it seems to be, in itself, a futile notion.

Lacan investigates our relationship to the self within the concept of symbolic orders, therefore if we consider life as a 'self', with the difference between the 'real' being the non-performative aspects of life and the 'mirror' or symbolic self of life to be that which is performed (as Lacan highlights the symbolic has a direct relationship with the mirror stage – that is to say life gazes at performance as its ego-ideal; its symbolic self), then if we document-as-proof we are trying to display the 'reality' of something that is in itself symbolic.

Furthermore, performance is a simulacrum of life, and to consider the authenticity of a copy of a simulacrum (i.e. documentation) then becomes a futile and pointless task. Instead, we should embrace the hyper-reality of the performed world and it is this that we should try to represent in our documents. In addition to this, if we also take into account that Baudrillard investigates life in itself as an illusion filled with simulacrum – that reality is in fact a copy to begin with – then authenticity becomes a questionable concept. In this perspective, performance then becomes a symbolic representation of a symbolic representation. How can we 'authentically' reproduce something that is a gesture, code or symbol that is merely a signifier of the real? If we accept this as a basis, the only thing we can do is to encapsulate the essence of the symbol we are trying to modulate.

Worrying about accuracy, or separating authenticity and simulacrum, is akin to worrying if photocopying a photocopy of a photocopy represents a 'real' document. The real question is does it effectively do what the document is intended to do. Accepting this belief that the human experience is a simulation of reality rather than a real experience, the performance or the aspect of live performance that we try to capture when we document must also 'simulate' that copied version of a simulacrum

of reality rather than replicate it exactly. In other words, the documentation that we produce must synthesise our thoughts and intentions to the viewer, rather than acting as proof that the event happened, in order to be effective as a both an archival document and an enticing depiction for potential funders and producers.

As Auslander (2006) quite rightly states:

“If we insist on authenticity to documentation, then we must also ask whether we believe the authenticity resides in the underlying circumstances of the photography”

(p. 7)

This means that the authenticity of the act has as much value as that we place onto it. Authenticity resides in the viewer's relationship to the documentation rather than the act itself. In the example Auslander uses in his paper of Yves Klein's 'Leap Into the Void', the viewer is asked to believe that Klein is actually falling from a wall and we willingly believe that as the picture captures the elusive moment between standing, falling and landing that gives the impression of leaping into space. Whether Klein is or not is in 'reality' is irrelevant: photography has a unique power that allows the artist to stage the moment perfectly in order to create this illusion – to draw upon an aspect that appears to make the photograph perform, to conjure its own narrative and to have a perfectly staged conceptual intention. A photograph has the strength to form the same emotional connection an audience member makes during a live performance, allowing artists to bring them closer to the crux of their work.

In essence, if the argument against documentation has been its lack of connection to the audience and the live experience, then we must draw upon the Barthesian notions of the *punctum* and *studium* in producing photography to document our work. The image that represents the whole performance must convey its underlying naturalistic truths (e.g. the message of the work) while still piercing the viewer with its visual impact (the image's *punctum*) and simultaneously enable the viewer to develop their own personal relationship with it, as they would connect individually with a live work (the *studium*). Thus documents start to develop their own performativity, which can be of immense use to practitioners in the way they choose to document. The document can bring the performance to life by pinpointing essential messages and meanings and transmitting these in visual cues and signifiers, rather than a lifeless 'documentary' photography which may not transmit the performance aspect of your work that could be vital in conveying your idea to someone is studying in an academic context or in light of a producer considering one's work.

A good example of this practice of documenting is of Valie Export's representation of the piece 'Gential Panik'. The image has been hung by itself in galleries such as the Tate Modern, but is merely a representation. However, the document serves both as documentation of performance and as a performative document, which means it has worked effectively as a conceptual photograph in itself. The actual performance took place in the aisles of a cinema wearing crotchless trousers and asking the men in the

audience to experience the 'real thing' (her genitalia) instead of watching the objectified woman on screen. In the photo, she sits aggressively with a gun and the aggressive intentions of the piece deflect your intention away from her crotch – the realization becomes an afterthought, simulating the experience of surprise that audience members in the cinema would have felt.



Figure 1 – Valie Export, *Action Pants: Genital Panic*, 1969 © Valie Export

A film of Export's original performance may not have conveyed the surprise and confrontation she was trying to investigate in her challenging piece. Therefore, making documentation via video was less successful in reproducing the work's messages. It would not have increased or simulated the original piece and so by presenting it to us in this manner, Export hits on her intentions exactly. She deflects our gaze back at us whilst openly and unashamedly displaying her crotch – dictated by the relaxed yet strong pose of her leg on the chair next to her. The gun adds impact to the violent intention of the statement, and she challenges us to look, and yet forces us to look away. She prevents herself from objectification and yet gives us what we want – 'the real thing'. Thus, this performance is 're-performed' every time we look at this photo.

What is lost from this photograph is the real experience of being confronted by Export – to be invited to touch her in an intimate way and the confrontational gaze that inverts the objectified-objectifier relationship. However, she combats this by presenting the object (herself, her genitalia) and by using her gaze to reflect the viewer's objectification back at the viewer, asking them to question what their eye is drawn to in the photo and why.

Interestingly enough, this particular example was re-performed by Marina Abramovic as part of *Seven Easy Pieces* at the Guggenheim Museum in New York. The aspect to note is that Abramovic performs the *photo*, she does not re-perform the performance (Santone, 2008). Abramovic's photo was taken in liveness, is not staged, and we can see it has lost some impact. Her gaze is not focused at the audience and thus the relationship and question that Export raises in her documentation of the work (and I refer solely to the difference between Abramovic's and Export's



Figure 2 – Marina Abramovic's *Performance of Genital Panic* as part of *Seven Easy Pieces*, Guggenheim Museum, 2005 ©Marina Abramovic

documentation) of objectification appears to waver. Here we also miss the live experience and the confrontational aspect of Abramovic's re-performance and as the performance re-performs the photo and the subsequent photo documentation does not aim to capture the image, but a representation of the reality of her recreation, it detracts from the impact of the staged Export photo.

Though this also supports the counter argument, that leaving a document such as Export's in the archive can leave it open to misinterpretation, we must also consider that re-performance invites re-documentation, and the 'ownership' of the piece is lost. The context is lost not from the photograph, but from the time and space in which it occurs. As this is the case, then we must conclude that Export's photo does capture an element of liveness that would not be apparent from other mediums.

Erickson (1999) argues that documentation is merely a supplement to performance; a reminder. Photography can offer an insight with black and white photography serving a function without trying to represent the lavish, culturally interesting and perhaps even digitally enhanced forum that colour photography can create. Nonetheless, we also have to recognise there may be no distinction between 'photographing performance' and 'performance photography'.



Figure 3 - Cindy Sherman: *Untitled Film Still #14*, 1978 © Cindy Sherman

However, we can also learn a thing or two from performance photographers like Cindy Sherman who, arguably, has roots in work that is a kind of performance photography – evident in her 'Untitled Film Stills'. Removing any suggestion of narrative, including the removal of a title for her pieces, Sherman invites us to comment and suggest a story for her and so the photograph performs its own account,

playing on the *studium* and our relationship between the visual and the performative. However, if there were a live element to her work, the story behind the image would be lost and the mystery of the piece negated. Therefore, Sherman uses the performativity of photography to her advantage: she employs it as a subtle and invocative signifier that plays on people's perceptions of the visual in order to create a whole story.

Here, the emphasis is not on the authenticity of the act, but how we can take this modern perspective on the 'self portrait' forward and what we can learn from Cindy's performance of self. We can use documentation as conceptualists, and in particular utilize photography as a canon for performative identity (Dalton et al, 2000) and defining the symbolism of our performances along with the world we create. It allows us to concentrate on the *mise-en-scene* of the piece, deconstruct it into its quintessential messages, think about the objects or gestures crucial to its communication and reflect it back as one conceptual visualisation.

One forum where the notion of performative photographs has been readily absorbed is publicity photography, and some of you may have already noted that I begin with documentation's increasingly pragmatic use. Publicity photography for performance has become increasingly worthy as a document as its engagement with the viewer is the initial point of contact for the performance. Thus, if it becomes the one moment people remember from a live work, its value as documentation starts to increase. The reason I state this point is because publicity often precludes performance and so the audience member already comes to the performance space with an expectation of seeing this image realized in some way, shape or form. As the image is already imprinted on their mind before the event, it is likely to be something they can hold onto afterwards. It serves both as an indicative taster and as a visual souvenir; an enduring imprint representative of the whole event. Though there is no certainty in what people remember, the power of the lens is such that if a performance is captured so completely in one image, it serves as a reference point that people keep coming back to before and after the performance has occurred.

Auslander (1994) touches on this notion: as we present work within a capitalist framework, it is hard to live in idealistic ignorance of the consumer age, and those who do so, citing 'artistic integrity' as a key factor for not documenting, ignore the fact that many performances still sell tickets to make money back, or sell the traces left by performance. Thus it is a framework in which we 'fight from within': we use consumer culture as a tool to capture audiences by selling them the hyper-reality of our performance – as any TV commercial would – rather than the 'proof' of the event.

Let's take Uninvited Guests imagery for their recent performance 'Love Letters from the Heart'. Here we see two figures holding records up to their faces. Note that they are vinyls, instantly invoking a sense of nostalgia and memory. The image represents a performance in which 'requests' are taken from the audience and dedicated to loved ones. The stories are then retold by Uninvited Guests live, along with accompanying music. In the image, the records cover their faces, as the identities of the company are obsolete – the stories told belong to other people and are told through the music they play. Ergo, the essential performative elements are brought together: memory, human presence, metamorphic identity and music. Though the live performance may not look anything like the photograph, they serve as two separate beasts: the performance is the main event; a happening that cannot be replicated. The photograph is a memento encompassing the themes of the production, one that instantly conjures up the concepts and subject matter, which then might consequently invoke a memory of the real performance post-event. This duality means as promotional material, it is indicative of what an audience member



Figure 4 - Uninvited Guests: *Love Letters Straight From Your Heart*, 2008
Photo: Jonathan Bewley

might expect. Post-performance, it is a document that serves as a cue to lead a viewer to reflect on its content. Thus it performs effectively as both an advert for the performance and documentation of the event.



Figure 5 – Bobby Baker: *How To Live*, 2007
© Bobby Baker's Daily Life Ltd

In contrast, Bobby Baker is an artist who portrays the imagined performance through the symbolic, performative self. Images of her very often say little about the performance, but this kind of publicity is based on selling you the performance through Baker's personality. In documenting this way, she commits to the archive a more general sense of her performances – eccentric, scatty and surprised by life, while simultaneously managing to be endearing, upfront and

seemingly unpretentious about what she has to say. She warmly invites the viewer to come and meet Bobby Baker as a person, rather than to come and see this specific performance or exhibition.

One of the underlying points to consider is that, as performance artists, we do not aim to accurately represent the real through our work, so the question of whether or not we can capture liveness is redundant. Instead, we must shift our thinking of documentation as a powerful tool in communicating the implicit messages of performance, capturing our 'performative' or imagined self and invoke the mysterious presence-in-absentia. As Auslander refers to in his original document, a photograph becomes performative in its subtexts and transmissions to the viewer.

Photography certainly cannot capture work as a whole, or aim to illustrate durational work. It should also be noted that this is not a call to distort or fudge the truth by manipulating photography to the extent that it becomes something beyond our meanings and sense, and this perspective does not argue that liveness is not essential as it will always be treasured to the live artist. What we need to question is whether we are actually trying to transcribe 'proof' when we capture performance digitally, either by photo or film, or if it is better to capture a trace of the performance as a performative document. Why is accuracy important if it reveals the core aspect of the work that we are trying to represent? If our photo-documentation can perform for us, then we have more precisely preserved our work for posterity than if we try and use it to represent what really happened.

In conclusion, if our work is inherently conceptual, then it seems almost absurd to try and use documentation as some sort of proof: our practices are creative, so why not be creative with the ways in which we aim to capture it visually? By invoking the innate qualities of a performance piece, the more successful it is in convincing producers to showcase work, in transmitting an element of liveness to students and in preserving its true nature for the archive.

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Allan Taylor is a performance artist who works across theatrical performance, installation and live art. His work integrates ideological theories on the construction of identity, the struggle between the imagined and 'Other' self and the dialectic of performance as an argument between physical truth and imagination. His research interests include using absurdity to deconstruct illusory concepts of success such as love and beauty, as well as documentation and its connection to live art, cyber-performance and the relationship between self-actualisation and performance. He is one of a limited number of emerging UK artists to be selected to perform at the inaugural Stockholm Fringe Festival this October. **Error! Hyperlink reference not valid.**

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