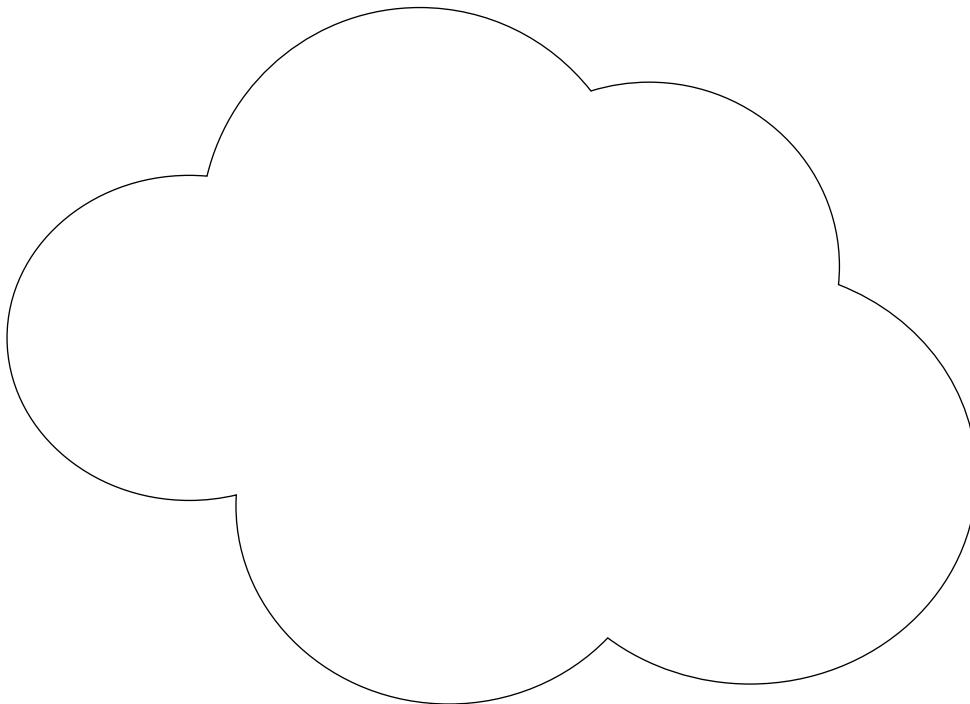


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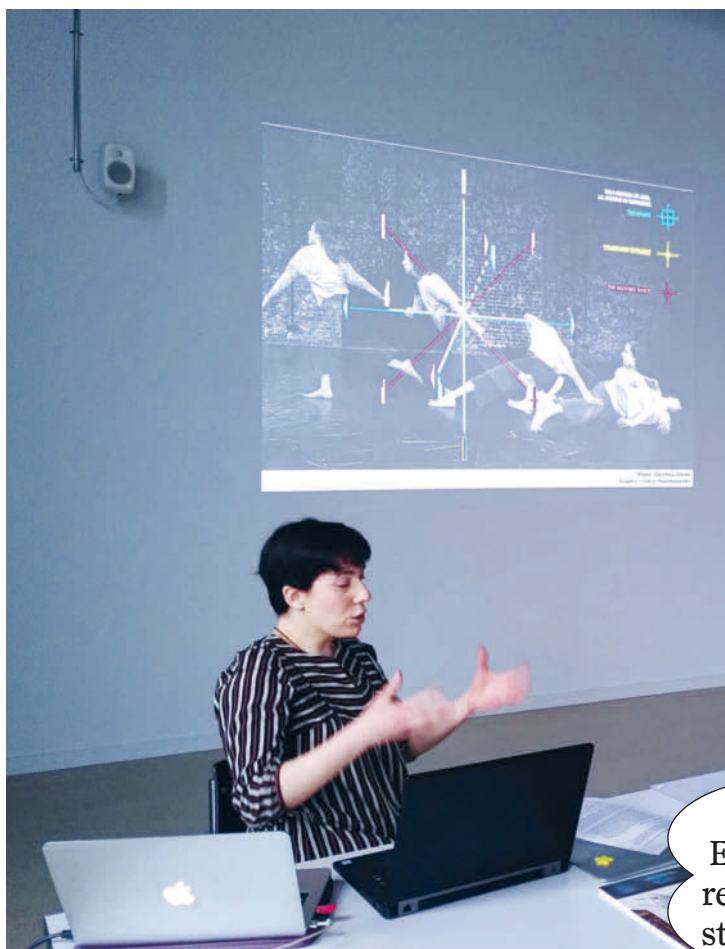
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We Know Where We're Going but We're Not Sure Yet How to Get There

Exploratory Strategies in our SNSF Project «Collecting the Ephemeral»

Wolfgang Brückle and Rachel Mader



↑ Fig. 1 Dancer and choreographer Foteini Papadopoulou gives a paper at our workshop «Einüben, Ausüben. Notationspraktiken in der zeitbasierten

Kunst», Lucerne School of Art and Design, Emmenbrücke, 18 March 2022, photographed by Wolfgang Brückle

Finding a meaningful definition of explorative research is no easy task: In one way or another, all researchers claim to be exploring new terrain; ideally, they hope they will be able to produce results that may surprise even themselves. In fact, there are difficulties with determining the very meaning of the phrase: after all, the verbs «to explore» and «to research» are rather similar semantically. Some methodological discussions even content themselves with equating explorative research to qualitative – rather than quantitative – data collection.¹

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But then the humanities are concerned almost exclusively with qualitative methods anyway. And the conception of artistic research, for instance, rests on the fact that a wide variety of very

different explorative practices are all considered research even though they are not located in the scientific community. So, are we merely dealing with redundancy here? It might appear so in the literal sense, but in substance this is not the case. Explorative research can stand for the integration of theory and praxis and was therefore recently introduced as a key competence in the training of students at the Lucerne School of Art and Design. In the following, we consider this competence by describing a research project currently underway at our institution.² In this project we are focusing on a topic largely neglected by research

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so far, and we respect the fact that applying unconventional methods is a requirement for our extraordinary strand of investigation. In line with a great deal of the research performed at our institution, this project is praxis-oriented; this alone distinguishes it from most of the approaches common in the academic disciplines which are generally believed to be relevant for our subject. Granted, so many other approaches have claims to be explorative as well. But we honour these claims in a different way.

In our project, we investigate performance art, yet without a main focus on art-historical analysis. In fact, we devote our efforts to a change in this field

of aesthetic practice that has only recently come to the fore: Even though performance art has enjoyed an increase in attention over the last decade, with important awards and retrospectives granted to artworks and artists, performance pieces are hardly ever purchased for public or private collections. Granted, some institutions, mainly in Great Britain and the US, have started to integrate live performances into their portfolio. But this new tendency is still in its infancy. In Switzerland especially, it has hardly begun. This has as much to do with the traditional self-conceptions of performance artists, who have long considered their own involvement –

and indeed resistance to longevity – as a central aspect of their intents, as it does with the prescriptions of the collections and the competences currently available. On the curatorial, conservational and legal levels, other fundamental difficulties result from the impermanent nature of the works. These problems, in part conceptual but also very practical, came to be our starting point.³ Our objective is to develop principles and strategies for the conservation of live performances in art collections while accounting for the unique constitutive parameters of the art form – presence or the experience of authenticity, the form's own performative character or ephemerality. In providing concepts, best-practice descriptions, and guidelines for practitioners in the field, we hope this project will be helpful in making live performance art desirable to collectors.

As understandable as the motivation for collecting live performance artworks is today, it would have appeared quite senseless a few decades ago. One example: In 1961, Simone Forti performed *Five Dance*

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Some might have said: Yes, of course the work should sink into the past, as the irretrievability of the work is the point of all performative art!



↑ Fig. 2 Sound specialist Rüdiger Wenk a.k.a. Phonoschrank directs a practical exercise in the context of our workshop «Einüben, Ausüben. Notationspraktiken in der zeitbasierten Kunst», Lucerne School of Art and Design, 17 March 2022, photographed by Wolfgang Brückle

Constructions and Some Other Things, an experimental investigation of body movements, in front of an audience gathered in Yoko Ono's New York loft. It was difficult to say whether the spectators were witnessing dance, sculpture or perhaps something else. At that time nobody was talking about performance art as a genre in its own right. What was clear, however, was that they were watching something entirely new. Should we be deprived of this work? Sixty years ago, most people would probably have shrugged their shoulders and asked: What would be a plausible alternative? Some might have said: Yes, of course the work should sink into the past, as the irretrievability of the work is the point of all performative art! Decades later, this was still the view of influential theorist of performance art Peggy Phelan.⁴ Yet repeat performances are day-to-day routine in theatre and dance, where Forti's works have their roots. Also, if most early performance artists did not pose the question as to whether their works should, and how they could survive, this was above all due to the fact that thinking into the future does not necessarily occur to you when you perform an experiment for what is possibly a rather small audience in a private space. And this is perhaps how we should think about the first performance of Forti's *Dance Constructions* – as an exploration of uncharted territory. But today the piece is considered a key work of the genre.

There are several reasons for preserving key works of performance art. First, they can still provide impulses for artistic explorations and aesthetic experience. Second, some of them never entered the canon of art history because of their ephemerality. Drawing them back into memory helps correct our historiographic narrative and destabilises the existing canon – in the case of performance art, this also means: restoring outstanding female artists to their place in art history. Third, museums are facing the necessity to expand their scope of



↑ **Fig. 3** Artist Benjamin Sunarjo performs a draft version of his work-in-process performance contribution to our project at the workshop «International Experiences, Institutional and Curatorial», Lucerne School of Art and Design, Emmenbrücke, 23 April 2021, photographed by Wolfgang Brückle

↓ **Fig. 4** Artist Sarina Scheidegger explains the score of her performance contribution to our project on the occasion of a meeting with our artists, Lucerne School of Art and Design, Emmenbrücke, 6 Dec 2021, filmed by Thy My Lien Nguyen

responsibilities and tasks. Some of them see dealing with performance art as a possibility to position themselves as a forum for events rather than a mere storehouse for history. Fourth, it helps destabilise the myth that «authentic» art events are irretrievable. Younger artists develop modalities for making their works reperformable, occasionally even taking into consideration the time after their death. The so-called delegated performance is preparing the ground for this approach. But reactivations under ever-changing conditions have been around from the start: Ono first performed her famed *Cut Piece* in New York in 1964 and then repeatedly over the next 40 years. And that is not all. Curator Jill McDermid, once an art student herself, told us that there was a time when repeating Ono's work was considered standard practice among her classmates.⁵ The work has obviously already taken on a life of its own in a sort of «terrain vague».

We frequently hear similar stories in our qualitative interviews with specialists from various branches of the art sector. We talk with gallerists, curators, conservators, producers and archivists in Switzerland and abroad. Over and over again, they face the same conceptual and organizational difficulties. Nevertheless, one of the answers to our question is usually: Every case is different. As a consequence, it is crucial to develop parameters that are as flexible as possible in order to create a method that can be successfully implemented. After the high acclaim of its retrospective on performance artist Marina Abramović in 2010, the Museum of Modern Art in New York expanded its Department of Media by adding «and Performance Art» to its name. Three years later, Forti's *Dance*

We assume that utilising this pluralistic expertise will enable us to develop perspectives that are not only innovative but also integrate practicability concerns.

Constructions were added to the collection as one of its first live performances; by now it is one of the institution's most-frequently loaned artworks. The foundations for this success story were laid in cooperation with the artist. Copyright issues had to be negotiated, new instructions written, criteria for casting discussed, fees and conditions for the transfer of experience determined in regular workshops.⁶ Nothing similar had ever been achieved anywhere else. And the Department's curator Ana Janevski states: «What's nice is that you can't control everything in the agreement.»⁷ Which leaves open the question as to whether only large institutions can afford to collect such works or whether smaller galleries might even enjoy more latitude, and whether the complexity of the process can be reduced to the point where purchasing live performance artworks seems an attractive option even with fewer resources.

The team of «Collecting the Ephemeral» deals with this question using mixed methods, which we strive to constantly adapt as new insights emerge. We perform historiographical archive work in the search for little-noticed practices that could enable us to understand live performances in a different way than we know from Phelan, or indeed some of the «heroes» of early performance art. We collect success stories from contemporary praxis. We review varying patterns in agreements and contracts. And we constantly exchange ideas and information with our project partners, who represent several Swiss museums and one commercial gallery.⁸ They participate in our events, they report from their own praxis and they are involved in our discussions. Their concerns and experiences – in other areas of time-based art as well – serves as the standard for our objectives. We assume that utilising this pluralistic expertise will enable us to develop perspectives that are not only innovative but also integrate practicability concerns.⁹ In 2022, we held a workshop to examine scores in collaboration with practitioners from the related areas of sound art and dance (figs. 1–2). The purpose was to encourage sensitivity among our team and our partners to characteristics of aesthetic expe-



rience which are difficult to determine and convey, especially in ephemeral art. According to Paul Feyerabend, theory is impossible to understand without understanding the examples used in the process of developing it.¹⁰ In this respect, even the obstacles in our conversations with guests and partners proved revealing.

We also incorporate praxis into our theory development in a different way. As associated partners in our project, we were able to enlist several Swiss-based artists. They have agreed to develop over the course of the project a live performance which can be sold and reactivated – a first for all of them. Their preliminary work is taking place in consultation with our team; this enriches our perspectives with concrete problem cases (figs. 3–5). Hence, we are pursuing action-based research, the roots of which extend back to Kurt Lewin’s attempt to abolish the division between theory and praxis. In other words: We are using the experiment as a search engine, as Hans-Jörg Rheinberger described the promise of a radically explorative approach.¹¹ This approach is essential for the success of our project. It presents an opportunity to escape methodological constraints. Our research is initially explorative in the way we obtain our knowledge. While this, as stated above, is fairly old hat in the humanities, we are confronted with an unusual necessity to redefine the field of particular experiences and individual approaches, for instance, in continual conversations with a wide variety of actors. Our research is also explorative in our procedural methods and approaches, which themselves are under scrutiny here, in our practice-oriented overall objectives, and in our concurrent treatment of the fundamental theoretical problems that inform this practice.



We talk with gallerists, curators, conservators, producers and archivists in Switzerland and abroad.

We are using the experiment as a search engine.

↑ Fig. 5 A glimpse at the score of Sarina Scheidegger’s work-in-progress performance piece, presented in the context of a meeting with our artists, Lucerne School of Art and Design, Emmenbrücke, 6 Dec 2021, filmed by Thy My Lien Nguyen

- 1 See John W. Creswell, *Research Design. Qualitative and Quantitative Approaches*, Los Angeles 1994, p. 21 and p. 79, as well as the increased attention to the issue in idem., *Research Design. Qualitative, Quantitative, and Mixed Methods Approaches*, Los Angeles 2014, p. 16, pp. 110ff.; cf. Astrid Dickinger, *Perceived Quality of Mobile Services. A Segment-Specific Analysis*, Frankfurt a. M. 2007, p. 9.
- 2 Members of the team: the authors, plus Philipp Bergmann, Clemens Fellmann, Linda Luv, Siri Peyer and Sandra Sykora.
- 3 For a preliminary appraisal of the problem in German, cf. Rachel Mader’s comments in <https://youtu.be/i6BV0U8LVM?t=13> from 5 Dec 2019 and in Valeria Heintges, «Wie sammelt man eine Performance?», *HSLU News & Stories*, 16 Dec 2019, <https://news.hslu.ch/fluechtiges-sammeln/> (retrieved 1 Sept 2022).
- 4 Cf. Peggy Phelan, *Unmarked. The Politics of Performance*, London 1993, p. 146.
- 5 Conversation with the authors on 17 Aug 2022, Rosekill, Kingston, NY.
- 6 Details in Athena Christa Holbrook, «Second-Generation «Huddle». A Communal Approach to Collecting and Conserving Simone Forti’s «Dance Constructions» at the Museum of Modern Art», in: *Beiträge zur Erhaltung von Kunst- und Kulturgut* 1 (2018), pp. 124–132, and Catherine Wagley, «How MoMA Rewrote the Rules to Collect», in: *artnet news* of 19 Sept 2018, <https://news.artnet.com/art-world/moma-rewrote-rules-collect-choreographer-simone-fortis-convention-defying-dance-constructions-1350626> (retrieved 1 Sept 2022).
- 7 Conversation with the authors on 8 Aug 2022, New York City, Museum of Modern Art.
- 8 Video statements of 2022 at <https://blog.hslu.ch/collecting-the-ephemeral/documentation/> (retrieved 1 Sept 2022).
- 9 Following Helga Nowotny, «Democratising Expertise and Socially Robust Knowledge», in: *Science and Public Policy* 30 (2003), No. 3, pp. 151–156.
- 10 Paul Feyerabend, *Against Method. Outline of an Anarchist Theory of Knowledge*, London 1975, pp. 250f., see also pp. 302ff.
- 11 Hans-Jörg Rheinberger, «Über Serendipität. Forschen und Finden», in: *Imagination. Suchen und Finden*, eds. Orlando Budelacci et al., Paderborn 2014, pp. 233–243, p. 234; cf. also idem., «The Art of Exploring the Unknown. Views on Contemporary Research in the Life Sciences», in: *Cultures and Politics of Research from the Early Modern Period to the Age of Extremes*, eds. Moritz Epple and Klaus Zittel, Berlin 2010, pp. 141–151, esp. p. 141.