

Repetition Island: Some Thoughts on Restaging, Reconstruction, Reenactment, Re-performance, Re-presentation, and Reconstruction in Dance

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Diana Vishneva dances Errand Into the Maze with Abdiel Jacobsen in New York. Photo by Lili Rosboch/Bloomberg.

Part I: Why Again?

How is a painting...or a sculpture...or a musical composition like, or different from, a dance? Except within the most general or contestable parameters, philosophers, art historians, cultural theorists, and cognitive scientists, among others, have found it impossible to categorize all of the arts in any one way that recognizes or imposes a unity of nature or definition. This task is made more difficult in an era that celebrates—once again—collaborations, mash-ups, hybridity, and cross-platform work within the arts and between the arts and other disciplines or practices.

Despite the ambiguity that marks the effort to define or categorize art works, some distinction might be made between art works that are instantiated in objects that have relatively fixed physical extension (e.g. a sculpture that is carved or constructed from a specifiable type of material, with measurable weight, dimension, possibly pigment, etc.), and art works that require human performance for their execution qua art works (i.e. dance, music, theater, performance art). Certainly, boundaries are blurred here as well. Still, a differentiating factor might be whether or not a work can be repeated, restaged, reenacted. So, for example, although one may question whether or not to repeat or reenact a specific dance work, the *practice* of repeating or reenacting a dance, or other sorts of works in which live performance is an important constituent of the work, extends back in history for as long as we have pictorial or text-based records. And while there is nothing unusual in at least considering whether or not to restage or reconstruct a dance work such as Balanchine's *Four Temperaments* or Rainer's *Trio A*, it does not even make sense to ask how art works like Michelangelo's *Pieta* or Picasso's *Demoiselles* might be reenacted. Even when such a visual artwork is revisited, such as Yue Minjun's reimagining of Delacroix's *The Massacre at Chios*, these are still taken as distinct and original works. On the other hand, it might make perfect sense to at least ask if and how an exhibition of art works might be restaged or reenacted and, indeed, this question has great vitality in the art world at the moment.

It is important to keep in mind that, despite the differences among these individual art actions, agents, performances, events, objects, or exhibitions when regarding problems or issues that arise in their re-presentation or re-enactment, there is one question that pertains to all. Although each art type or art work generates its own "how" with reference to re-presentation, they share the common question of "why." Why reconstruct or restage or reenact? "Can this be done?" is intimately linked philosophically and pragmatically with "Should this be done?"

The arguments run hot and heavy on both (or multiple) sides of these questions. When those arguments attend to works that necessitate the live, physical presence of a person or to works that otherwise label themselves as "performance," the cacophony only increases.

Although resisting the notion that performance is forever lost even as it exists, I confess to finding feminist and performance theorist Peggy Phelan's emphasis on the live-ness and unpredictability of performance and its aftermath both kinesthetically and sentimentally compelling:

There are no leftovers [...] Without a copy, live performance plunges into visibility—in a maniacally charged present—and disappears into memory, into the realm of invisibility and the unconscious where it eludes regulation and control..." (1)

Nevertheless, it is impossible to avoid the arguments—and their implications—offered by many others that challenge or question notions of live, performance, presence, erasure, memory, media, repeatability, capture, commodification, and just about every other element that might be thought to be causal, constitutive, or reverberatory *vis-à-vis* the act of performance as art.

Part II: Repeatable and Unrepeatable Dance

In Western cultural traditions, and in other cultures as well, there has been an assumption, embodied in practice, that many kinds of dance or performance forms were intended to be repeatable, even those that were considered one-of-a-kind original works, such as Marius Petipa's *Sleeping Beauty* or Martha Graham's *Errand into the Maze*. However, even as repeatability is expected or required, the very locus or means of that repeated performance—the human body—ensures that there can never be exact repetition. While this is true for all performed works, it is intensely true in dance and undermines, as well, the repeated attempts at developing schemes to notate or score dance. Theater, traditionally, has its text, and music has its score, and no matter the degree of interpretative conformity to or deviation from them, these original, identifying texts and scores are more precise in their denotative capabilities and can persist over time with a stubborn consistency. But given that dance, and some instances of performance art, are constituted primarily, if not exclusively, by their bodied performance, the possibility of preserving or fully notating the original with the same exactitude as word or musical note fades nearly as quickly as the performance itself. The notation systems for dance are often so cumbersome, complex, and expensive to utilize that even those dance works designed to be repeated are never scored but passed along, dancer to dancer, changing (even if minutely) the very content and nature of the original work each time. Even though new media platforms are being utilized to record and preserve dance, these are problematic in terms of recording dynamics and viewpoint and do not yet have the longevity of score or script. And what do they capture: A completely idiosyncratic and unique bodied gestural moment that will never have the repeatability or un-equivocalness of word or tone. The repeatability of the unrepeatable generates its own sorts of questions and problems.

The kinds of dances that are repeatable can range from dances that are continually re-presented in the repertoires of long-standing companies, whether or not the choreographer is still living, to dances that, for a variety of reasons, are plucked from the past or from a different cultural context and are reconstructed, restaged, or in some way re-performed. These works or performances are either amenable to reconstruction or the potential for repetition is, from the outset, built into the notion of its construction and performance. Even if the historical space between the original and its restaged or reconstructed counterpart is constituted in centuries, the legitimacy of its re-presentation lingers in the air, whether or not it is possible or desirable to present these works as originally conceived and performed or to fully grasp and convey their original function and status in culture.

There are, however, dance improvisational forms, such as Contact Improvisation, in which the improvisational structures may be, and often are, repeated but in which there is no intention or possibility of exact repetition. There are also particular dance works or dance-like events that were or are specifically designed as a single performance or for only a limited number of performances within a restricted time span. The notion of maintaining a piece in repertory might have been unimportant or abhorrent to its maker or commissioner; it might have been designed to mark a particular time or event and no other; or, like disappearing monuments or disintegrating artworks, the intention may have been for the work to exist and then abruptly or gradually disappear into memory or oblivion.

Part III: Impalpable Possibilities

But does the fact that a range of dance works were choreographed or notated with the intention of providing repeatability mean that they can be reconstructed or, importantly, that they should be? The impossibility of fully notating all of the elements of a dance, the amnesia of history and recall, and the personal idiosyncracies of each one's bodied-ness complicate the pursuit of reenactment. And the "why" of reconstruction, the motive and goals determining the sorts of research into and engagement with the work that the reconstructor undertakes, is intimately linked to the resulting form and re-performance of the work—not only with reference to very practical issues but also to the philosophical stance to reenactment.

Angelin Preljocaj, a noted European choreographer and artistic director of the Ballet Preljocaj, reflects the desire to preserve a dance work "as is." There is historical and cultural value to keeping the set choreography of a particular dance work alive within the repertoire. "I am," he says, "anxious to save my work. The works of every choreographer belong to the cultural heritage. If he (the choreographer) passes away, he has to give it to us. And we have to take care of each one's path. There is not even a questioning about that in the other arts."(2)

Others are more suspicious of or cautious about retrieving and re-presenting dance works from the archive. Although referring more broadly to performance art works, we have already seen that Phelan, for one, vociferously defends the necessary uniqueness of live performance: "Performance implicates the real through the presence of living bodies [...] Performance cannot be saved, recorded, documented, or otherwise participate in the circulation of representations of representations: once it does so, it becomes something other than performance."(3) André Lepecki, dance theorist, dramaturg, and curator, posits that the drive to recover past dance works might demonstrate the staying power of old Western intellectual paradigms that reflect our anxieties about this absence. He points as well to the drive to document and notate, this "optical-descriptive obsession" to fix a work in order to preserve it, that, ironically, disrupts the very "flow of [the body's] own materiality."(4) Nevertheless, he finds value in those current reenactments of dance performances or events that reflect what he calls a "will to archive" that "derives neither exclusively from 'a failure in cultural memory' nor from 'a nostalgic lens'" and that, instead, refers to a "capacity to identify in a past work still non-exhausted creative fields of 'impalpable possibilities.'"(5)

What characterizes these and many, but not all, of the more contemporary takes on restaging is a rejection of those sorts of reconstructions of dances and dance events that function primarily as attempts to counter the uncertainty, chaos, and cultural acceleration and anxiety that mark this early part of the 21st century—a recall of the past that is a recall of uncritically fantasized or dramatized aspects of the "once was" that will render the "now" more livable. These dance artists and theorists understand the social, cultural, and political forces on art and of which the art, itself, is capable. There are no reconstructions of the past in the present that are ideology-free and all reconstructions construct a picture of the past that equally reflects what was and who we, as reconstructors and recontexters, are. These notions of

reconstruction are also influenced by a range of commitments to the authority or intentions of the creator, or lack thereof. When one operates from this stance of critical reflexivity then it is impossible to avoid the questions that reveal the political and cultural pressures that decide what is archived or preserved, what is retrieved, why it is retrieved, how it is reconstituted and re-presented, and what it both meant and means.

Part IV: Impossible Palpabilities

The body, anybody's body, even under the pressure of years of discipline and training, is always volatile and unpredictable. Additionally, within the constraints levied by human physiology, the vast number of possible movements in space and their possible dynamic, temporal, or qualitative shadings guarantee that no movement could ever be exactly duplicated. And beyond, or beneath or within, physiology is the culturally and historically shaped life of bodied experience. Each person continually develops, builds on, or erases "positions and movements generated (not altogether consciously) by that person's use of his own body through the accumulated grooming of a continuous life."⁽⁶⁾ Bodies change over time—bodies of individuals, which are always at the same time cultural and historical bodies. Those who seek to re-present an artwork that requires the actual presence of a live human being must make their reenactment decisions based on the fact that no matter what the work or performance, and no matter what the intention of the creator or performers, exact duplication is impossible.

It would seem commonsensical to assume that the shorter the time between performance and re-performance, or the more accessible and reliable the notation and documentation, the more likely that the repetition would approach some degree of exactitude, providing that is the point of the reconstruction. But even if problems of transmission could be solved, both our own experiences and countless theoretical arguments point to the fact that "you can't go home again," much less return to someone else's home in either the recent or distant past. The social, historical, cultural milieu that produced the work can never be fully grasped in the now—experientially, emotionally, or kinesthetically and yet, this doesn't stop us from trying.

Part V: To Begin Again

Reconstruction

There are reasons to reconstruct or restage a work or event from the near or distant past. There is the practical issue of maintaining repertory. There is the larger issue of continuing to make available works that still have a profound effect on us. No one, at least in the present, would think to warehouse *Las Meninas* or *The Broken Column* after a few viewings or silence the *Brandenburg Concertos* or *Rite of Spring* after a decade of performance. But there is also the troubling question of history. No matter how we may critique its practice and purpose, our continuing interest in knowing about our past has not subsided and how and why we make

dance, or any other art, tells us something about who we were as human beings in different times and cultures even if there is no guarantee of perfect translation in the present. While dance may be a trace in Derrida's sense of erasure, dance is also a bodily writing that leaves traces in time and space, much like the photograph or footprint that archaeologist Michael Shanks describes as "a physical mark that witnesses the non-presence of the past but is also a vestige that is uncannily not-absent—[that is] present in the traces."⁽⁷⁾ Critically examining and, in some cases, re-materializing these traces while also examining ourselves as the reconstructors serves as a window, regardless of how opaque, into the past as well as the present.

This critical reflexivity is crucial—for if, in fact, the intention is to revive, as nearly as possible, the content, structure, and intention of a work, the dance reconstruction project may be seen merely as re-substantiating dance works from the distant or more recent past within present bodied-ness. Dance historian Mark Franko views this sort of reconstruction as a target for Hal Foster's critique of seeing "the old in the new," i.e., "reviving work in a way that retains its historical—or 'recuperative'—aspect, even as it loses its revolutionary—or 'redemptive'—aspect."⁽⁸⁾ Nevertheless, this sort of reconstruction may yet serve a purpose beyond a practical strategy for retaining a critical mass of important repertory or providing a genealogy, in the standard or Foucauldian sense, of a history of art practices. As dance historian Ramsay Burt argues, a reconstruction or reenactment before us may also "offer opportunities for becoming aware of what is unique and different within the present realization of a production or of choreography when it is compared with the past." We can take as our task the evaluation of "the ways in which these dance performances have cited history, and determin[e] to what extent they have accepted the limits set by history or used historical references to make sense of what is new and different about the way dancing bodies perform in the present" and, as well, the way in which they are perceived. ⁽⁹⁾ Burt favors, as Lepecki notes, an "active (rather than reactive) and generative (rather than imitative) approach to 'historical material.'"⁽¹⁰⁾

Re-invention

We could also take the process of reconstruction or restaging as an opportunity not only to use the friction between imagined past and constructed present as a source of information but also as a starting point for movement invention that is a re-making of a past making. Franko argues that as this process of research and remaking is always "poised between the apprehension of the object and the creation of the object, it can both serve cultural critique and foster new creativity."⁽¹¹⁾ Thus, in his re-creations of Baroque dance, the notational score, the content, the steps themselves are not sacrosanct. To reproduce these may not only be futile but also nostalgic and even pernicious. He looks, instead, at what he calls "the choreography's theoretical underpinnings" and the broader sweep of historical sources. What emerges from this process of "actively rethink[ing] historical sources" are not just steps but also, he says, the motional and structural impulses for the work, as well as the cultural and historical moments in which they are embedded. The motives, the impact, the effects of the past dance may even generate different steps; new steps that nevertheless convey the meaning and sense of the

dance. The resulting dance may not look like the original dance in terms of steps and gestures, but it will have the same qualitative impact and the same profound sense of the original experience. He rejects dance reconstruction's "historicist tendency [...] to evoke what no longer is, with the means of what is present." Instead, he opts for "a new choreographic project that can be called reinvention." He utilizes Guy Scarpetta's return "of" instead of return "to": "Guided by the reinterpretation of a period's most characteristic aesthetic preoccupations [...] reinvention sacrifices the reproduction of a work to the replication of its most powerful intended effects."(12)

Re-enactment

Lepecki also wants to trade in the word and the concept of reconstruction. He thinks it possible to avoid what he describes as the mournful need to archive, or Hal Foster's "archival impulse," and replace it with an active "will to archive"(13) that plays out in performances, "creative returns" that he calls re-enactments. (14) These do not derive from any sort of nostalgia for the past or from submission to authoriality. Instead, his "will to archive" is energized by the capacity to identify in a past work still non-exhausted creative fields and to enact these in a bodied way. In other words, the reenactor is not trying "to fix a past work in any singular (originating)" possibility, but instead, to release and "to actualize a work's many (virtual) possibilities, which the originating instantiation of the work kept in reserve." (15) All compatible and incompatible potential meanings—the "possibles" of the work—are always in that work, stored away, for a reenactment to activate. And because for Lepecki, all art is political, "the political-ethical imperative for re-enactments [is] not only to reinvent, not only to point out that the present is different from the past, but to invent, to create—because of returning—something that is new and yet participates fully in the virtual cloud surrounding the originating work itself."(16)

VI: What Again?

So what can/should we re-perform? Is it the "facts" of the dance that are accessible or available to us to retrieve? The steps? The "actual" dances? Perhaps only the original theme or narrative, in libretto or memory, remains. Do we look for the work in itself, or, given its origins in historical personal and cultural impulses and its reanimation in a new socio-political landscape, is there no such thing? Can we recover intention, in the psychological or aesthetic sense, of the maker's original motive or some broader notion of cultural or historical intention and do we want to? Do we retrieve, as has been suggested, the most characteristic aesthetic and, hence cultural, political, and historical, concerns at the moment of a work's origin? Do we seek to engage the multiple and endless possibilities of meaning that reside within a work, awaiting their tapping now and at some future moment? Is it possible that a dance might be reenacted or re-substantiated in a different form? Do we re-present the presence of the past performance as witness to itself and its socio-historical context as well as our own?

These are crucial questions, as in all of these historical round-trips we witness and consider the aesthetics of the dancing body, as well as its potential as both a site of meaning and of agency. Dance is not merely decorous or entertaining, not just an escape from the real into the beautiful and fantastic, although it can be that as well. Dance is bodied, it is live; performance is vital and a locus of meaning; it shapes and is shaped by culture...for better and for worse. Performance has power and it carries consequences then as now.

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Endnotes

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2. Philippe Le Moal, "La danse à l'épreuve de la mémoire – analyse d'un corpus d'écrits sur la mémoire de la danse," *la mémoire de la danse à la culture chorégraphique*, vol. 1 (Ministère de la Culture et de la Communication, Département des études et de la prospective, 1998), cited in Karin Hermes-Sunke, *Reconstruction/Recreation: Reflections, practice and esteem of repertoire* (ICKL International Council of Kinetography Laban/labnotation Proceedings, 1999), p. 1.
http://www.ickl.org/conf99_proceedings/sunke.pdf
3. Phelan, pp. 148, 146.
4. André Lepecki, "Inscribing Dance," *Of the Presence of the Body* (Middletown, CT: Wesleyan University Press, 2004), p. 133.
5. André Lepecki, "The Body as Archive: Will to Re-Enact and the Afterlives of Dances," *Dance Research Journal* 42, 2 (Winter 2010), p. 4. Note: Elsewhere Lepecki attributes the expression "impalpable possibilities" to Brian Massumi.
6. Joseph Margolis, "The Autographic Nature of the Dance," *The Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism* 39, 4 (Summer 1981), p. 421.
7. Michael Shanks, "Archaeology and Photography," <http://documents.stanford.edu/michaelshanks/82> (August 30, 2012) [last accessed September 25, 2013].
8. Hal Foster, *Recodings. Art, Spectacle, Cultural Politics* (Port Townsend, WA: Bay Press, 1985), p. 41. Cited in Mark Franko, "Repeatability, Reconstruction and Beyond," *Theatre Journal* 41, 1 (March 1989), pp. 57-58.
9. Ramsay Burt, "Memory, Repetition, and Critical Intervention: The Politics of Historical Reference in Recent European Dance Performance," *Performance Research* 8, 2 (2003), p. unknown.
10. Lepecki, p. 29.
11. Franko, p. 73.
12. *Ibid.*, p. 57-58.
13. *Ibid.*, p. 29.
14. *Ibid.*, p. 46.
15. *Ibid.*, p.31.
16. *Ibid.*, p.35.