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Recreating the Unrepeatable: *The Ethics of Recurrence in Performance Art*

Andrea Pagnes¹

Abstract

This article addresses reenactment as a bodily critique of the archive, a rupture of linear temporality, and a catalysing act of return that values both the unrepeatable and the enduring. It is also viewed as a tool for revisiting unresolved issues in performance practice and as an operation that reactivates political tensions, embodied memories, and historical resonances. Insights from Peggy Phelan, Rebecca Schneider, Diana Taylor, and Leda Martins frame reenactment as a process of transforming meaning through variations in bodies, spaces, and contexts, thereby generating new forms of knowledge production.

Keywords: Archive. Embodiment. Ethics of return. Temporality. Vis-critica.

Recrear lo irrepertible: *La ética de la recurrencia en el arte performativo*

Resumen

Este artículo aborda el reenactment como una crítica corporal del archivo, una ruptura con la temporalidad lineal, un acto catalizador de retorno que valora lo irrepertible y lo perdurable. Asimismo, se lo considera una herramienta para visitar cuestiones irresueltas de la práctica performativa y una operación que reactiva tensiones políticas, memorias encarnadas y resonancias históricas. Las reflexiones de Peggy Phelan, Rebecca Schneider, Diana Taylor y Leda Martins permiten enmarcar el reenactment como un proceso de transformación de significado mediante variaciones en los cuerpos, los espacios y los contextos, generando nuevas formas de producción de conocimiento.

Palabras clave: Archivo. Encarnación. Ética del retorno. Temporalidad. Vis-crítica.

Recriando o irrepertível: *A ética da recorrência na arte da performance*

Resumo

Este artigo aborda o reenactment como uma crítica corporal do arquivo, uma ruptura com a temporalidade linear, um ato catalizador de retorno que valoriza o irrepertível e o duradouro. Considera também o reenactment como uma ferramenta para visitar questões não resolvidas na prática da performance e uma operação que reativa tensões políticas, memórias corporificadas e ressonâncias históricas. As reflexões de Peggy Phelan, Rebecca Schneider, Diana Taylor e Leda Martins permitem enquadrar a reencenação como um processo de transformação de significado por meio de variações em corpos, espaços e contextos, gerando novas formas de produção de conhecimento.

Palavras-chave: Arquivo. Corporeidade. Ética do retorno. Temporalidade. Vis-crítica.

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Introduction, or when a performance returns in a different light

In my classes on the theory and practice of performance art, I introduce ‘re-enactment’ to my students as a method for unlearning and imagining new futures by re-creating a past action or event.

To explain my position in greater detail, I begin with simple definitions. If the English verb ‘to enact’ means to do, carry out or perform something, then ‘re-enactment’ refers to the act of doing the same thing again. If we were to adopt a strictly literal understanding, re-enactment could be understood as a new version of a previous event, close to its original form, or as a restaging of a previous performance.

Outside the realm of performance art, the term ‘re-enactment’—as in factual reconstructions of historical events—aims to faithfully replicate past events to bring them back to life. However, if I were to draw on expressions closely related to the concept of re-enactment in performance art (or action art), I would suggest terms such as ‘reactivation’, ‘performative return’, ‘reappearance’, ‘re-creation’ and ‘reworking’ to explore further possibilities.

In performance art, re-enactment usually involves creating a new work based on a previous work by another artist or by the artist themselves, as an autonomous reproduction. This may involve new versions of previous actions and appropriations that transform the originals.

In performance art, the discourse on re-enactment owes much to Marina Abramović’s *Seven Easy Pieces*. The Serbian artist presented this series of performances from 9 to 15 November 2005 at the Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum in New York. The series was dedicated to her late friend, the American writer Susan Sontag (Abramović, 2007).

Over seven days, Abramović re-enacted five seminal works from the 1960s and 1970s and two of her own, reigniting debates about the preservation, documentation and transmission of performance art, which is, by its very nature, ephemeral (Mangolte, 2010).

The main contribution of Marina Abramović's *Seven Easy Pieces* is that re-enactment is, above all, an act of dialogue: with past performances and their creators, as well as with the history of performance art, the repertoire and the archival record of the 'immaterial'—a prerogative of time-based art. This dialogue is not merely creative, interpretative and formal. It is also procedural, thereby avoiding misappropriation whilst emphasising the value of these earlier works and honouring them.

To perform her re-enactments, Marina Abramović adhered to precise protocols. She sought formal permission from the original artists or their heirs. The works she re-enacted were Bruce Nauman's *Body Pressure* (1974), Vito Acconci's *Seedbed* (1972), Valie Export's *Action Pants: Genital Panic* (1969), Gina Pane's *The Conditioning* (1973), and Joseph Beuys's *How to Explain Pictures to a Dead Hare* (1965).

Figure 1 – Joseph Beuys. *How to Explain Pictures to a Dead Hare*, 1965.
Alfred Schmela Gallery, Düsseldorf. Photo: Ute Klophaus. CC BY 4.0.



Figure 2 – Marina Abramović performing Joseph Beuys's *How to Explain Pictures to a Dead Hare*, 2005. Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum, New York. Photo: Attilio Maranzano.
Courtesy of Marina Abramović, MAI and the artist's archive.



The only new work Abramović performed in *Seven Easy Pieces* was *Entering the Other Side* (2005), in which she stood on a large structure wearing a voluminous blue dress and acted as a living sculpture. *Lips of Thomas* (1975) was a re-performance of her own work, involving self-flagellation, cutting a five-pointed star into her stomach, and lying naked on ice. Over time, it has become a seminal piece in her oeuvre.

Another noteworthy example of re-enacting an earlier performance piece is the video *Two Scenes With Warhol And Eminem* by Alex Da Corte and Jørgen Leth. Da Corte stepped into Eminem's shoes as part of his year-long art project *TRUE LIFE* (2013). He recreated the scene in which Andy Warhol eats a hamburger from Leth's documentary *66 Scenes From America* (1982), but he replaced the hamburger with milk and cornflakes (Da Corte and Leth, 2016).

Figure 3 – Jørgen Leth and Alex Da Corte. Warhol and Eminem. Still from the video shown in the background during the talk by artists Leth and Da Corte.
Courtesy of the museum and the Louisiana Channel, 2016.



The re-enactment of other artists' performative works "raises issues of authenticity, authorship and medium in performance, documentation and re-performance" (Santone, 2008, p. 147). In particular, *Seven Easy Pieces* can be analysed as a performative strategy "to document the past through the manipulation of repetition and temporality" (Santone, 2008, p. 147).

Such re-enactments, if interpreted as embodied documents of the past works that inspired Abramović, "can provide useful insights and promote critical thought about conservation strategies for time-based art" (Santone, 2008, p. 147).

I always stress to my students that they must cite the source when re-enacting, drawing on, or borrowing from another artist's work or an action. Failure

to do so may constitute misappropriation. As Abramović did, artists must cite the source, credit appropriately, and obtain permission before reinterpreting another's work. This demonstrates respect, transparency, and ethical responsibility.

For example, I crawled across shards of glass on my chest as the final action of the performance *DYAD VII (Full & Empty)* at the Arnolfini Centre for Contemporary Art in Bristol in 2014. I repeated this later in the performance operas *After the Fear (HOME III)* at KPGT in Belgrade (2017) and *No More Idols: All and None (Home X)* at the Riga Sculpture Quadrennial (2019). Before doing so, I sought permission from the late Chris Burden. My action was inspired by his performance *Through the Night Softly* (1973), captured in a 10-second clip in which he crawled, bare-chested, across a car park covered in broken glass, with his hands behind his back (Burden, 2000).

Figure 4 – Chris Burden. “Through the Night Softly”. *The television advert, 1973–1977*. Still from the video, 2000. Courtesy of Electronic Arts Intermix (EAI).



Figure 5 – VestAndPage. *DYAD VII (Full & Empty)*, Arnolfini, Bristol, 2014. Still from the video.



If a re-enactment is intended primarily as a revival of a past work, it can be regarded as an artistic transmission that generates a renewed experience of the original work. It also enters current debates concerning the legitimacy of such transmissions and the conditions that shape the re-enacted performance.

In this article, I use the term ‘re-enactment’ to refer to practices of revisiting, returning to, reinterpreting, and recontextualising earlier performances. For strategies of appropriation—such as the quotation and camouflage of previous works—I reserve the term ‘re-performance’.

However, discussing re-enactment as a creative practice and artistic form within performance art is often complex. For example, from philosophical and psychological perspectives, it is important to recognise that memory itself is unstable. Therefore, to describe re-enactment is simply as a repetition of the past is insufficient.

Re-enactment in performance art can best be understood as a way of returning to a past open to transformation, since the performer (and the reality into which they enter) is subject to constant change, making each re-enactment an opportunity to reshape meaning. Via metaphor, I like to think of a re-enactment as a measured, slow, deep breath drawn into the lungs. Yet it is slightly different



from the preceding inhalation, because each breath's air volume is unique. Thus, even when re-enacting past performances, actions may appear identical; their ethical stakes shift in the present and across contexts: a performance created in one specific context, when re-enacted, enters a new landscape shaped by personal, political, and socio-cultural change.

The debate surrounding re-enactment in performance art also stems from the idea that every action is, in some way, unrepeatable. Indeed, when a performance occurs only once, it disappears, leaving few traces that endure as after-effects — sensations rather than documents. Even so, some performance artists wish to return to that very action or repeat it. Their aim is not merely to restore or repeat what was lost, but to reopen important questions that resurface when a performance is recalled.

If we consider a re-enacted gesture an encounter with difference rather than sameness, re-enactment becomes an invitation to confront our former self as a stranger—recognisable yet new—because the re-enactment rekindles questions that never truly faded.

My reasoning is grounded not in archival fidelity but in a desire to critically understand the embodied, historical, and political conditions that shaped the original performance, whether by the author of the original performance themselves or by other artists who re-enact it. The performer who carries out a re-enactment allows a past creation to resonate as a rupture. Therefore, re-enactment is not a replica but a somatic, philosophical and ethical re-entry that unsettles both the past and the present. Building on this, I regard re-enactment as a vis-critical practice: a return imbued with force (vis), resistance and ethical exposure. To re-enact is to expose oneself once more to the risk of becoming; it is to delve into a wound that has never fully healed. It means recognising that a performance's afterlife may require greater care under altered conditions, in new contexts and at another time.

The problem of repetition in performance art

Performance art has long resisted repeatability. In the 1960s and 1970s, artists

and theorists embraced ephemerality as an aesthetic, stylistic and political stance of rebellion. As Peggy Phelan famously put it: “performance’s only life is in the present” (Phelan, 1993, p. 146). This statement was not merely descriptive but protective. It framed disappearance as autonomy: a rejection of art’s commodification and consumerism, a liberation from institutional capture, and a break with the representational logic of theatre and visual arts markets. For Phelan, however, a performance can be restaged. She explains: “Performance occurs over a time which will not be repeated. It can be performed again, but this repetition itself marks it as different. The document of a performance then is only a spur to memory, an encouragement of memory to become present” (Phelan, 1993, p. 146).

Later, Rebecca Schneider expands on Phelan’s argument, analysing what remains of a performed piece and what disappears from it. She observes that this disappearance is neither unconditional nor absolute: a performance does not dissolve completely. Even so, it persists through what she describes as “remains” (Schneider, 2011, p. 87), which leave traces that exceed documentation. Carefully considering the question of re-enactment from Schneider’s perspective involves an ethics of return. It is, however, a return that does not restore but rather preserves and disrupts; a ‘returning’ to remember, reinvent, and recreate, which, in performance art, is precisely the power of re-enacting.

In doing so, the re-enactment of a performance exposes the original work’s temporal instability. At the same time, it compels the performer’s body into a continuous negotiation with the residues left by the original performance. These residues are not fixed objects. They are embodied, affective and relational. They circulate across individual, collective and cultural memory: unfinished after-effects and aftermaths subject to transformation. Thus, the opposition—presence versus disappearance (and, therefore, absence)—begins to crumble, as the performance does not vanish but rather returns and reappears in altered conditions, eventually filtering and leaking through time.

Whilst theatrical replicas tend to rely on fidelity to the script and/or staging, re-enactments of earlier performance art pieces thrive on instability, as they are rarely literal. Even when artists attempt to recreate past actions, conditions resist uniformity and are never quite the same. Physical capabilities have changed.

Political climates have changed. Materials behave differently. Places bear new wounds and scars.

This implies that the re-enacted gesture does not presuppose the stability of an origin; rather, it foregrounds and reveals its unstable nature, since the original performance from which it departs was never fully fixed but always contingent, conditioned by relations, encounters, affects, perspectives, and thought processes. Therefore, re-enacting a performative work from the past means confronting the impossibility of replication and engaging with the productive friction that such an attempt generates.

Furthermore, because re-enactment in performance art generates precisely this tension and probes these conceptual fissures, it helps refute the purist claim that performance must reject repetition while resisting the museological impulse to restage performances as if they were choreographic scores or theatrical scripts.

Porous temporalities, seeping archives and the body as a living repertoire

Traditional archives of performance art—photographs, texts, scores, videos—seek to freeze the ephemeral, thereby promising a certain stability. Diana Taylor’s analysis, which distinguishes between the ‘archive’ and the ‘repertoire’, is fundamental in this regard. For Taylor, re-enactment in performance art operates within the tension between the archive and the repertoire, the latter being the realm in which embodied knowledge exceeds what can be documented or preserved. It engages with the archival traces of the original work—images, texts, memories—whilst recognising that these traces cannot fully capture what took place. It helps us recognise the limits of relying solely on documentation. As she writes: “The repertoire, on the other hand, enacts embodied memory: performance, gestures, orality, movement, dance, singing—in short, all those acts usually thought of as ephemeral, nonreproducible knowledge” (Taylor, 2003, p. 20).

Therefore, for Taylor, whilst the archive preserves objects, the repertoire preserves embodied knowledge: actions, affections, relationships, breath, silence. Furthermore, the repertoire cannot dictate what will happen when the gesture returns.

If we consider the re-enactment of a performance through the lens of Taylor's study of the archive and the repertoire, it is not a mere repetition of something transitory that once was and then irretrievably vanished. It is an operation that lets us experience memory as filtration, overflow, and spillover.

The body that re-enacts, therefore, does not reclaim the past intact as it was, nor does it strive to recover it, since it encounters fragments, faces obstacles and resistance, and, in doing so, experiences ruptures and detachments. This means that it is not a vault of frozen meanings, neatly packaged and preserved, but a vessel in which memories stored in the bones, muscles, nerves and flesh circulate in unpredictable and varied ways.

This stance draws on the philosophical principle of the ancestral. Leda Maria Martins clarifies this through her concept of *tempo espiralar* (spiral temporality), thereby adding complexity to the discourse on re-enactment. For Martins, time unfolds non-linearly through recursive transformation. Spiral temporality therefore breaks with linearity and inscribes return as change. It is “a time that is curved, recurrent, and ringed—a spiral time that returns, reestablishes, transforms, and which bears upon all things. It is a time ontologically experienced as contiguous and simultaneous movements of retroaction, prospection, and reversibility; of dilation, expansion, and containment; of contraction and release; and of a synchronicity of moments composed of present, past, and future” (Martins, 2021, p. 42, our translation).

Reflecting on Martins' theory of spiral temporality, we can imagine re-enactment as folded, cyclical and relational, allowing different temporal layers to merge and nourish one another. In other words, the past returns through the performer's body as they re-enact a previous action, which in turn transforms the present and allows it to extend into the future.

Martins' notion of spiral temporality may help explain why re-enactment can feel both familiar and strange. The gesture belongs to a past self, yet the present body performs it differently. The past seeps into the present, distorted, enriched and destabilised. Re-enactment, in this sense, is not repetition but reconfiguration: a continuous folding of temporalities within the body.

Ultimately, the relationship between spiral temporality and the porous body emphasises that re-enactment is not a return to the past but a recognition that the past has not ended with us. Consequently, the repertoire is enriched, spilling over to redefine what has been in a new light.

Re-enactment as a vis-critical operation: force, exposure, unlearning

If re-enactment in performance art neither implies nor is driven by historical fidelity, the question it raises is: what motivates a performer to re-enact a past performance piece?

From my perspective, interpreting re-enactment as an ethics of return makes sense when it functions as a vis-critical act: an intervention driven by force (*vis*), critical reflection and ethical exposure. The term *vis* here echoes ancient philosophical notions of vitality and inner potency: a movement that disrupts, a force that reopens, a pressure that demands a response. When applied to re-enactment, it signifies an artistic return not out of nostalgia but out of necessity, volition, and “a will to re-enact” a previous performance, as André Lepecki wrote regarding the afterlife of dance (2010, p. 28).

Drawing on Lepecki, re-enactment can be understood not as a return to sameness or a mimetic repetition, but as a catalytic operation—somatic, poetic, relational, political. It becomes vis-critical when it exposes the socio-cultural and ontological conditions embedded in the original work; reveals what could not previously be fully seen or articulated; questions the ethics of the original gesture; reorients the performer in relation to the past and the present; and activates forces that transcend documentation (Lepecki, 2006).

If reactivating a previous performance involves the performer’s intentional re-exposure to the original conditions in which it took place, it can also shed light on the invisible framework that shaped it: political tensions, personal crises, social movements, risks, and implicit motivations.

In other words, whilst the original performance took place under specific historical and socio-political pressures, the re-enactment can make these more visible—not by explaining them, but by causing the body to re-enter that zone of

exposure, thereby-producing a new ontological shift in the affective realm (Greiner, 2023).

At this point, a distinction is needed: whilst much of the debate on restaging in theatre and dance centres on reconstructing scores, choreographies, or documents, re-enactments in performance art rarely defer to archival authority. On the contrary, they challenge that authority.

Amelia Jones argues that documentation inevitably reduces the archive's relational complexity, flattening performance and reducing its relational richness to static images. As she suggests, the body constitutes a privileged site of meaning-making in body-based art practices. She situates it "as the locus of a disintegrated or dispersed self, as elusive marker of the subject's place in the social, as a hinge between nature and culture" (Jones, 1998, p. 13) and, quoting Bryan Turner, "as an instrument, an environment, a singularity and a multiplicity" (1984, p. 8).

By contrast, the re-enacting body reclaims the event's complexity and challenges archival fixity, positioning itself as a privileged site of knowledge production rather than reducing itself to a document or institutional memory. Re-enactment can, therefore, function as a somatic critique of the archive, insofar as the re-enacting body produces living, dynamic knowledge that images or records cannot fully capture.

Furthermore, re-enacting a performance confronts the archive with embodied experience, because the archive never preserves everything that happened, and who I am now is not who I was then. In this sense, I agree with Ciane Fernandes and Eleonora Fabião in highlighting performance as a field of experiential invention rather than representational, derivative, mimetic reproduction.

Fernandes observes that repetition in performance is, in itself, a transformation. Analysing Pina Bausch's creative process, she writes: "Repetition becomes a creative tool through which dancers reconstruct, destabilise and transform their aesthetic and social background." (Fernandes, 2001, p. 26).

In describing his series *Ações Cariocas*, Fabião shows how life and art converge, so that performance does not merely represent reality but dynamically

produces it: “This is the mode of production, and it generates a specific aesthetic. [...] Everyone, consciously or not, resists certain forces and aligns themselves with others, and this defines the aesthetics and ethics of work” (Fabião, 2015, p. 41, our translation).

Within this framework, I also view re-enactment in performance art as a practice of unlearning—a form of liberation—that destabilises accumulated meanings and allows the gesture to reconfigure itself under new conditions. Hence, re-enactment becomes a means of shedding assumptions accumulated over time.

From this perspective, re-enactment enables an earlier performance to transform rather than ossify, allowing the performer to reconnect with the very actions and gestures that structured the original performances with renewed vigour, while remaining open to vulnerability.

Thus, vis-critical re-enactment is not a return to prior knowledge but to the generative, reviving conditions of knowing: a philosophical reopening.

When the body returns: mutable identity, risk and vulnerability

In performance art, the body is rarely described as anything more than a metaphor: a place, a medium, a landscape, an archive. It is the raw material through which transformation occurs. When a performer re-enacts a previous work (whether from their own repertoire or others'), their body becomes a living document of temporal change. The body, therefore, is not a fixed object but a field of forces in constant transformation: “Speaking, for example, becomes an action because the object of words is found in the spaces of the body—and it is the body as a whole, in its metamorphosis, that receives the message and conforms to it. It becomes the field of action that the story uses” (Gil, 1998, p. 142).

Re-enactment brings this mutability to light. The body that returns is not the same as the one that acted on another occasion: it is, in itself, a transformed field defined by time, experience and relations. Furthermore, identity has changed; scars have thickened; new wounds have opened; muscles have weakened or strengthened; psychological landscapes have deepened.

As the re-enactment can expose the limits of the body—not as a failure, but

as a material index of its historicity and transformation—when the body refuses to perform what the archive expects, age, illness and grief mark the new body as a temporal witness. Thus, re-enacting a past performance brings its temporalities—biological, socio-political, ecological, and collective—into view, so the re-enactment becomes a form of embodied historiography.

By bearing witness to the temporal distance between what happened then and what is happening now, the body reveals its vulnerability not as a weakness but as a mode of knowledge that arises from its fragility and its willingness to be affected, thus becoming an epistemic device for confronting the past and the uncertainty of the present.

Returning to the unresolved or re-enacting against erasure

In performance art, re-enactment can serve as a political device, particularly during periods of global instability, war, displacement, and ecological collapse. In such situations, returning to a specific action is not an artistic whim but a political necessity. Certain performances may require reactivation because the wounds they address persist or worsen. In this sense, re-enactment becomes a space for resistance, remembrance, and denunciation. Indeed, history is replete with attempts to silence traumatic events caused by environmental destruction and the atrocities perpetrated by state violence and authoritarianism at the expense of innocent people. By insisting on presence and positioning, performance art provides an antidote to this erasure, whilst re-enactment intensifies it, acting as a counterforce.

For example, the collective readings of the *New Gaza Monologues*, curated by the ASHTAR Theatre (2024) and held in various countries, are a narrative re-enactment of testimonial accounts of the Israeli occupation and the ongoing mass violence and genocide in Gaza. Read in different languages, they resonate as acts of political survival and resilience, countering propagandistic narratives that seek to silence the dramatic lived experiences of those who live in the Gaza Strip.

Re-enacting these poetic chronicles of our time, even if only verbally, helps amplify marginalised voices by affirming that the past cannot be sealed away. Returning to such acts of testimony reactivates them, intensifying them by



poetically declaring that deliberate injustice is still spreading and that it is important not to forget, and to continue denouncing crimes against humanity and the suppression of the human rights of the Palestinian people.

Consequently, the performative body, which reinterprets and embodies the reading of the monologues, now returns not only with greater experience, but with heightened political awareness and altered by the weight of participating in the pain of people affected by war crimes—their landscapes destroyed and their rights violated while, one hopes, contributing to solidarity and sustaining resistance.

In such a scenario, the re-enactment can be read as a form of political ‘corporeography’: a map of the political forces inscribed in the flesh. It is a renewed cry for justice that arises from politically tense or socially charged environments, ecological threats, cultural contraction, and community displacement. It is a powerful reflection on forms of belonging that ~~ne~~ hegemonic interventions seek to erode or nullify. Re-enactment therefore intensifies the political resonance of these contexts, enabling the body to respond anew and to stage new forms of confrontation.

Spatial memory and environmental agency: re-enactment as the poetics of relationships

In my collaborative performance practice with Verena Stenke as the artistic duo VestAndPage—which we have termed the Poetics of Relations—we tend to prioritise presence and situation over representation. We bring to the fore the encounter between bodies, space and time as a dynamic, evolving constellation. Consequently, the way we recreate/re-enact the performative actions in our repertoire is rarely neutral about venues and places. Whatever site our performances and re-enactments take place in, we do not treat it as a passive container or a backdrop. We engage with it as an active agent, a collaborator, and a reservoir of memory; in doing so, we respond. When a performance returns to a place—or to one that echoes the first—the environment shapes the re-enactment just as profoundly as the performer.

We perform from a posthuman perspective, drawing on studies in the environmental humanities, new materialism and material feminism, which have

opposed the notion of physical places as passive spaces: ruined buildings, abandoned hospitals, public squares, forests, cave systems and coastlines all contain temporal densities. Authors who inspire us are Stacy Alaimo, Astrida Neimanis, and Timothy Morton, who argue that environments act as non-human agents capable of preserving material and affective vestiges of events. Alaimo (2010) emphasises the persistence of biological and chemical traces that influence our practices of memory; Morton (2010) argues that they are neither passive nor static but deeply interconnected with human brain activity; and Neimanis proposes a “collaborative inquiry” (2017, p. 171) capable of challenging dominant historical narratives and opening other forms of relation with places and their memories to revive genuinely meaningful stories.

As in Karen Barad’s quantum ontology, which offers a new perspective on relationality, radioactive and contaminated sites, as well as those with other traumatic histories, physically retain traces of their past. Through continuous exposure and material transformation, these ‘intra-acted’ memories reconfigure the world performatively (De Freitas, 2017).

For Barad, “the past is never finished” (Barad, 2007, p. ix); it consists of “repetitions within repetitions” (Barad, 2007, p. 14), but these “are not a replay of a string of moments, but an enlivening and reconfiguring of past and future” (Barad, 2007, p. ix). At the same time, bodies and phenomena “are made and remade” (Barad, 2007, p. 376), a technical formulation that is particularly productive for thinking about re-enactment.

For example, our film trilogy based on the performance *sin∞fin* (VestAndPage, 2012) was set in extreme landscapes: Patagonia, India and Antarctica. We filmed the performative actions in real time, often exposing ourselves to harsh weather in these extreme environments. We never rehearsed these performances for the camera. They arose directly from our encounters with specific places and the relationships we cultivated with them while dwelling there.

Through the prism of Barad’s theoretical framework, these places altered the meaning of our re-enacted actions and gestures, unfolding as a choreography of mutual becoming and a poetic meditation on what remains when we re-read

history through material decomposition—a form of environmental archaeology. The re-enacted actions did not restore the past to an ideal normality, nor could they. Nevertheless, they revealed the ongoing collapse of the haunted present, which struggles to hold itself together so that the future may be (VestAndPage, 2021).

Years later, similar gestures were re-enacted in the performance-based feature film *STRATA* (VestAndPage, 2025a), which we produced in the Swabian Jura cave system, and in the short film *Deserts Black and Blue* (currently in post-production), made during our artist residency in the Svalbard archipelago within the Arctic Circle in 2025.

These works were not intended to recreate the scenes from *sin∞fin*. The re-enactments of performative actions—such as submerging our bodies in icy water, burying parts of our bodies in mud, or balancing on crevasses—were intended to reveal ecological drift (melting ice, shifting tides, rising pollution and toxicity), physical mutation (age, fatigue, strength), philosophical shift (an altered relationship with risk), and political reconfiguration (a heightened awareness of the climate crisis). In other words, in our performance-based films, re-enactment gives rise to ecological and existential reflections.

When we create site-specific and site-responsive work, our bodies are not the only agents: they are in constant dialogue with the environment and the non-human agents/co-performers that shape it. Ice may break unexpectedly because it behaves differently when temperatures change abruptly. Tides are rising due to climate change. Unforeseen winds make it harder to maintain balance. Warmer or colder air alters how humans breathe. Gravity constantly exerts its pull.

In other words, landscapes, places and materials always assert their agency. A 2025 re-enactment of our performance with meltwater in Svalbard cannot replicate the one we carried out amongst melting icebergs on the Antarctic Peninsula in 2012. In Svalbard, the permafrost has melted even further, as global warming affects that area four times more than elsewhere on the planet. The climate crisis has intensified, and the ethical weight of staging vulnerability in frozen landscapes has shifted. In this sense, the re-enactment reveals an

ecological temporality: the changing life of the planet's materials.

Within our VestAndPage site-sensitive-responsive practice, re-enactment is not merely a reproduction of earlier actions. It is a critical reactivation of a previous idea, in which we recognise something of profound significance for the present and the future. From this standpoint, when we re-enact a historical performance, we do so in response to the urgent needs of a specific place and moment.

For example, during our artistic research in Svalbard, we revisited and re-enacted the seminal performance by the late Serbian artist Raša Todosijević, *Was ist Kunst, Marinela Koželj?* (What is Art, Marinela Koželj?) (1978), transforming it into the German *Hast du Kohle, Andrea?* (Do you have coal, Andrea?), an idiomatic expression meaning “Do you have any money, Andrea?” that also evokes access to power.

The subtle distinction between Todosijević's original work—conceived to expose and critique the ideological structures that legitimise what is considered art—and our re-enactment lies in the fact that, whilst drawing inspiration from his seminal performance, we redirected its critical interrogation towards extractivism, ecological collapse, and the political economy of survival in the Arctic archipelago.

The re-enactment responded to the closure of the coal mines in Svalbard and the social and ecological consequences of the post-extractivist transition, shifting Todosijević's question from aesthetic legitimisation to the material conditions of survival. Substituting coal for Todosijević's black paint, which he applied frantically to his co-performer's face, we made a piece of coal half-stuck in my mouth not merely a symbol; it functioned as a performative archive of compressed geological time, colonial labour, fossil dependency, and environmental grief.

By re-enacting Todosijević's performance and re-situating it within a landscape of meltwater, increasingly muddy and unstable permafrost, and industrial abandonment, our action emerged not only as a tribute to a pioneering performance artist we admire, but also as an act of situated critique: a way of making the past respond to the present and of allowing the history of performance itself to become porous and accountable in the face of planetary change.

Furthermore, in our re-enactment we subverted the relentless intrusion of Todosijević's hand in his original performance. This hand disturbs, manipulates and smudges the static, passive face of his co-performer, his wife Marinela Koželj, whilst accompanying his insistent and increasingly intense vocal delivery as he asks, 'What is art?', so that the urgency of the question resembles a parody of the repressive tone of a police interrogation until his voice fails him.

Whilst the performance critiques authoritarian behaviour, "the literal meaning of the question was confronted with the absence of its impact in the performance (there is no answer) by way of repetition, indefinite recurrence of the same question which in Todosijević's despotic speech stood for a (elocutionary) verbal act related to the question which, however, exceeded its limits" (MG+MSUM, 2024, n.p.).

By replacing Todosijević's male hand with the female hand of my wife and art partner, Verena Stenke—with whom I have worked as the artist duo VestAndPage since 2006—, as it shakes my male face, we made an explicit reference to an affirmation of women's agency in decision-making, freely questioning and challenging rather than succumbing to the patriarchal structures and social pressures that have historically limited women's autonomy and that the original performance, viewed from a contemporary perspective, appears to expose.

Figure 6 – Raša Todosijević. "Was ist Kunst?", 1978. From the exhibition catalogue *Thank You, Raša Todosijević*. Pictured: part of the performance documentation, p. 38–39.



Figure 7 – Raša Todosijević. *Was ist Kunst, Marinela Koželj?*
 Video stills, colour, sound, 16:20, 1978. © Kontakt Collection, Vienna.



Figure 8 – VestAndPage. *Hast du Kohle, Andrea? Svalbard*, 2025. Still image.



In this sense, I propose understanding re-enactment—often regarded as retrospective or backwards-looking—as participating in the making of futures, however uncertain, hypothetical, and contestable they may be, and therefore as not oriented exclusively towards the past.

When I reflect on the performative practice I have developed with Verena Stenke as VestAndPage over the past twenty years, I am inclined to think that re-enacting entails taking responsibility for the repercussions and reverberations of one's own actions and gestures. I also recognise this as one of the most ethically charged aspects of vis-critical re-enactment: when we return to a gesture that once challenged, hurt, exposed or affected us, we confront the ethical implications of what the performance did—and continues to do—within the concrete reality we inhabit, even if it is a limited reality.

I believe that re-enactment, in any case, raises questions about the relational consequences of the performance we re-enact and about whether these consequences remain justifiable. I mean the following: what ethical framework now applies to similar works being revived, as they return? Has the reality we inhabit and observe changed so markedly that the performance we are about to re-enact requires readjustment? What new responsibilities arise from the revival of these actions and gestures?

In our VestAndPage performance practice, where our bodies are exposed to risk—whether through glass, ice, suspension, nudity or fire—re-enactment demands heightened ethical sensitivity. The body that once performed may no longer consent to the same risks. Audience expectations and the political significance of vulnerability may have shifted. For example, an action that at the time conveyed personal vulnerability, such as bloodletting, may, years later, take on political resonance by addressing issues such as gender-based violence, social division or ecological devastation. Each re-enactment can therefore become an act of unlearning and, at the same time, a new experiential and ethical inquiry.

Somatic critique is particularly evident in performative works that address risk-taking or precariousness. For example, in the performance cycle *Balada Corporal* (2010–2011), our two bodies remained in vulnerable positions for extended periods. We were attached to a large sheet of glass by transparent fishing lines, with small hooks piercing our skin: our physical condition was inseparable from the conceptual intention and the sheet's instability. These precarious bodily positions—such as leaning against fragile structures, like human-sized sheets of glass, and surrendering to gravity—served as metaphors for human fragility.

Figure 9 – VestAndPage. *BALADA CORPORAL Part I: Solid Body – Emotional Body*.
Homero Massena Gallery, Vitoria, 2011. Photo: Sérgio Prucoli.



Returning to similar states years later in *No More Idols: All and None* (2019) and the performance cycle *19 Monologue* (2021–ongoing) revealed dimensions that documentary archives cannot capture on their own: the trembling of muscles, the negotiation between the body and gravity, ~~and~~ and the internal psychological landscapes triggered by vulnerability. Re-enactment makes it possible to access these dimensions again under altered conditions. In this way, the living, performing body destabilises the idea that documentation can contain the original or exhaust the work's meaning.

In *19 Monologue*, we emphasised the significance of bodily fragility and

precariousness. The re-enacted actions that once symbolised strength and resistance in *Balada Corporal* became a meditation on the ailing body. The body no longer demonstrated its capacity for resilience but confessed its fragility, allowing the re-enactment to become a reflection on mortality and the finitude of human existence.

Figure 10 – VestAndPage. *19 Monologue*. Quarterhouse, Folkestone, 2021. Photo: Chelsey Browne.



In some of our live works, such as the collective opera cycle *HOME* (2017–2020)—which focused on themes of belonging and uprooting to explore how performance art can put community care into practice or provoke a rupture—recurring performative actions, such as intertwining bodies within restrictive performance settings, did not amount to mere repetition. In 2020, during the

pandemic and the protracted Syrian refugee crisis, these actions took on new meanings linked to displacement, the fragility of home, and shared physical vulnerability, and were deployed as a relational, generative, creative force (VestAndPage, 2025b).

In this light, within our performance practice, re-enactment becomes a speculative practice—one that relates not only to memory but also to potentiality—in order to reflect on the hardening of the political climate and the erosion of the social fabric. This is also what we do in our live performances, when we use instruments to draw our own blood and employ it as a symbolic, performative and organic tool: a fluid, bodily ink with which to write poetic ~~and~~ texts relating to the theme of the performance and to current political scenarios. In this sense, re-enactment can reveal how time alters the meaning of a gesture, often making visible what the initial iteration could neither articulate nor foresee.

Indeed, within the body that recreates and re-enacts, emotional traces, residues of psychological struggles and relational echoes persist, but not as one might expect in a traditional archive. Memory filters through the body, modulated by its current state. A re-enacted action—for example, stepping barefoot onto the thin ice of an Arctic fjord, which can crack, cut and burn the skin—precariously bears the weight of accumulated life, pain, political and ecological consciousness, physical limitations and new forms of courage, just as stepping barefoot onto the floor of a Venetian palace filled with glass shards does.

Figure 11 – VestAndPage. *Bone-cracking Frost*. Still image, Svalbard, 2025.



Figure 12 – VestAndPage. *Traversal #10*. Still image, Venice, 2019. Video by daz disley.



A final note

Ultimately, within performance art, I propose understanding re-enactment—when approached and reflected upon from a vis-critical perspective—not as a nostalgic restoration or a watered-down replica of a past performance, but as an ethical tension and a philosophical operation that presents re-creation as a necessary return. This return does not restore a stable origin: it disrupts rather than consolidates or reinforces, reopens a relationship between bodies, gestures, contexts and memories, and, in doing so, transforms both the original performance being revisited and the performer who reactivates it.

Rebecca Schneider's idea of 'remains' proves useful here: remnants are neither inert residues of the past nor relics that have survived a previous time. They are seeds for future acts of recreation and capable of entering into new relations. For Schneider, this process unfolds across multiple asynchronous temporalities in which, during the performance, the past and the present collapse into one another, turning history into a living, ongoing encounter, partially displaced and active.

In this sense, the notion of spiral temporality described by Leda Martins is equally valuable, as it allows re-enactment to disturb the linear flow of time,



creating space for what ~~is~~ has not yet taken form, the uncertain horizon, and a temporal rupture that invites new rationalities, even when reality hardens, and despair looms. Therefore, re-enactment can also be understood as an ethic of hope. This hope does not spring from naïve optimism but from a disposition to remain with that which calls for care, critique and reimagination.

Therefore, proposing re-enactment in performance art as a critical force—shaped by fleeting, porous temporalities, rooted in embodied knowledge, politically committed to countering erasure, and oriented towards the future and towards possibilities not yet imagined—reminds us that nothing in performance truly disappears. Rather than asserting that ‘nothing disappears’, re-enactment enables us to ask what persists, how it persists, and under what altered conditions it becomes legible again.

In other words, what is unrepeatable neither fades away nor returns intact but instead mutates, endures and insists. It re-emerges as affection, a document, a trace, bodily memory, a remnant or a possibility of reconfiguration. These forms of persistence may reopen wounds that still challenge us because the past is not over; it continues to haunt us. The body remains unstable, and presence is in perpetual flux. All this demands constant renegotiation as we navigate the fragile space of existence and the luminous terrain of creativity — not to repeat, but to listen and learn.

As a more visceral and conclusive comment—more poetic than academic—I wish to add that re-staging a past performance requires, first and foremost, asking myself whether I can bear it, since some of the most challenging compositions are among them, such as those Abramović re-performed in her series *Seven Easy Pieces*. These performances are not only technically demanding but also involve a situated ethical negotiation and can prove emotionally devastating and physically harmful, whilst simultaneously channelling pain, anger, reflection and beauty. Yet recreating them exactly as they were originally staged is almost impossible, as though their original conditions seem to remain intact.

Even so, the decision to re-enact a past performance should be made to express something new. What matters is what you convey. Although I may possess

technical skill, my emotional intelligence must be present in every gesture that shapes my re-enactment, conveying emotion and meaning. There must be a depth of understanding that suggests I have not merely re-proposed a past performance, but have, in some way, lived through the experience I am recreating, allowing for physical, intellectual, and emotional integration with it.

Thus, re-enactment is not merely a reproduction of the original performance. It means expanding upon it, building on it, thereby exploring the creative possibilities the original left unresolved: sometimes as gentle as a whisper or a silent tear, at other times as aggressive as a scream, yet expressed with such clarity and control that it seems to alter one's perception of reality. In fact, every re-enactment should function as a critical conversation with the original, so that every movement is economical, every gesture serves a purpose, and it becomes one with the original, exploring new meaning without cancelling provenance, without negating its origins, ultimately channelling something greater than what I, the performer re-enacting it, could achieve on my own.

In re-enacting a past performance, I redefine and negotiate its limits and complexities in real time. In other words, I can make actions and gestures of a past performance ~~entirely~~ my own whilst continuing to honour the original performance and its creator: a fusion of reverence and innovation, humility and professional confidence, and empathy and anticipation, perhaps acting in languages that have no words, but rather in fluid precision, discovering other gestures that once seemed impossible but now feel inevitable — gestures that suggest beauty might arise from destruction, transforming, for example, suffering into something transcendent.

Indeed, the question is not whether a past performance can be faithfully reproduced, but rather what risks, responsibilities and meanings its return takes on in another body, another moment and another context. Technical competence and performative skills are useful and play a part in this process. Still, they do not exhaust it: embodied memory, attention, experience, and the relationship with the environment also contribute to meaning-making. That is, re-enacting may involve acknowledging vulnerability rather than emulating a previous performance. It can also function as a critical dialogue with that earlier performance, exploring what it

might come to mean under different conditions and opening reflection on artistic hierarchy, technique, temporality, and responsibility.

However, re-enactment does not serve as a conduit to a pre-existing truth awaiting discovery. Rather, it produces situated, provisional knowledge that emerges from the encounter among bodies, memories, spaces, materials and times. Returning, then, does not mean reaching definitive truth but listening to what persists, stays and continues, attending to what has changed, and recognising the critical, relational and future possibilities that may open up in the very act of returning.

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