



Documenting the Ephemeral: reconsidering the idea of presence in discussions on performance

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ABSTRACT – Documenting the Ephemeral: reconsidering the idea of presence in discussions on performance – The category of presence plays a major role in the most accepted definitions of performance art. This centrality of the ephemeral presence of the artist's body has prevented an appreciation of performance documentation in all its importance. Taking Peggy Phelan's position as representative of the prevailing paradigm, this article presents its main objections and intends to broaden the concept of presence in its application to performance to accommodate the documentation processes.

Keywords: **Performance. Presence. Ephemeral. Documentation. Materiality.**

RÉSUMÉ – Documenter l'Éphémère: vers une extension de la catégorie de présence dans les discussions sur la performance – La présence, en tant que catégorie, joue un rôle majeur parmi les plus acceptées des définitions de l'art de la performance. Le caractère central que prend la présence éphémère du corps de l'artiste a empêché que l'on puisse apprécier la documentation de la performance à sa juste valeur. En prenant l'approche de Peggy Phelan autour de la documentation de la performance en tant que représentant du paradigme dominant, cet article présente les principales objections et propose d'élargir l'usage fait du concept de présence dans la performance, afin de tenir compte du processus de documentation.

Mots-clés: **Performance. Présence. Éphémère. Documentation. Materialité.**

RESUMEN – Documentando lo Efímero: reconsideración de la idea de presencia en los debates sobre la *performance* – La categoría de presencia desempeña un papel crucial en las más aceptadas definiciones del arte de *performance*. Esta centralidad de la presencia efímera del cuerpo del artista ha impedido que se aprecie, en toda su importancia, la documentación de la *performance*. Tomando el planteamiento de Peggy Phelan en torno a la documentación de la *performance* como representativo del paradigma predominante, se presentarán las principales objeciones que se le pueden oponer y se propondrá ampliar el concepto de presencia en su aplicación a la *performance* para dar cabida a los procesos de documentación.

Palabras-clave: **Performance. Presencia. Efímero. Documentación. Materialidad.**

The history of performance art is that of a permissive, open-ended medium with interminable variables, used by artists who had lost their patience with the limitations of the more established art forms and decided to take their art directly to the public¹. This was the understanding offered by RoseLee Goldberg in her classic essay, which remains a must-have reference within the literature on performance art, especially in the English-speaking world. According to Goldberg, performance art, by its very nature, escapes an exact or simple definition beyond the mere declaration that it is 'live' art, that is, it requires the presence of artists (Goldberg, 1996). The necessary reference to the physical presence of the performer is a constant in the most widely accepted definitions of this art medium, as well as in those advocated in the reference works in the Latin American debate on performance art (Glusberg, 2007; Gómez-Peña, 2005). It is also worth noting the efforts that have been made in studies on presence to accommodate and delimit the scope of performance art (Icle, 2011).

This article will review the main theoretical definitions of performance art constructed around the category of presence and will bring to light the problems they face when dealing with the relations between performance art and documentation. Specifically, Peggy Phelan's approach to documenting performance art will be adopted as a representative of the prevailing paradigm and the main objections raised will be presented. Finally, a case will be made for the need to rethink presence and widen its limits to do justice to the phenomenological complexity of performance art. This paper is consistent with the intention underlying some of the most pertinent reflections on the issue in recent Latin American debates such as those raised by Melim (2008) and Blanca (2016).

Defining Performance Art From a Presence Perspective

Historically, performance art has been considered to have expanded the limits of art to circumscribe and focus on the artist's own action, presence, and subjectivity (Williamson, 2003). In addition, it has been assumed that performance art involves a more complex construction of the public than the traditional arts, which has allowed it to be expanded to include all those present at the time of the action as active subjects in generating the work's very meaning (Williamson, 2003). Moreover, as

Shannon Jackson added, performance art broke the boundaries of traditional art, not only by including the people present as active subjects, but also by making viewers aware of the change in their own aesthetic experience (Jackson, 2008). Likewise, performance art has been considered to reduce the distance between the performer and the viewer, since both the audience and the performer were experiencing the work simultaneously (Goldberg, 1996).

Therefore, the accepted definition of performance art is based on the physical and temporal (ephemeral) co-presence of the performers and the public (Auslander, 2008): the essence of live performance is unmediated contact between performers and audience, which demands physical co-presence (Wilson; Goldfarb, 1999). According to this point of view, performances are always carried out for someone, for and before an audience that recognizes them and often even gives them meaning: 'Performance is always performance for someone, some audience that recognizes and validates it as performance' (Carlson, 1996, p. 6).

Based on the need for such physical and temporal co-presence, for Erika Fischer-Lichte performances are works of art with special qualities, because 'they open up the possibility of experiencing changes during their course, that is, of transforming all those who participate in them: both artists and the public' (Fischer-Lichte, 2004a, p. 84). Their goal is to transform everyone who participates in them and, for this to happen, a physical and temporal co-presence is necessary. For Fischer-Lichte this centrality of co-presence leads not only to a reconsideration of the traditional aesthetics and of the forms of analysis associated with it, but, more profoundly, of the very concept of the autonomy of art. In her view, performative realizations transcend the boundaries of that previously considered aesthetic. This means that the opposition between the aesthetic and the non-aesthetic can no longer be maintained, because in them it can be seen that the aesthetic is at the same time social, political and ethical (Fischer-Lichte, 2004a).

According to Guy Brett, performance art was not only evidence of the desire of the viewer to know through their experience, the particular story, the identity and the subjectivity created by the performance, but it was also an embodiment of the artist's desire to rescue the vitality of communication

in an artistic system increasingly fascinated by a temporary product (Brett, 2012). Thus, performance art was defined as the art form in which the body itself was the producer of artefacts in a given place and time in front of an audience (Stiles, 2012), and an exceptional vehicle for the promotion of a peculiar type of perception in which “a made object is a projection of the human body” (Scarry, 1985, p. 281). In this vein, the numerous contributions made by various Latin American authors about the body of the performer cannot be overlooked (some examples include Diniz, 2017; Lopes Duenha; Meyer Nunes, 2017; Negrisolli, 2012; Sedeño-Valdellós, 2013).

It can be said that this ephemeral presence originated the ontological status of performance art from the 1960s (Clarke; Warren, 2009). Two of the great defenders of the definition of performance art based on something which, due to its ephemeral presence, disappears as soon as it is created, namely Richard Schechner and his disciple Peggy Phelan, have positioned performance as something unsuitable to be stored (Blocker, 1999) in recordings, documents or files. Schechner stated that ‘performances are actions’, and therefore behavior itself must be the ‘object’ of study (Schechner, 2006, p. 1). That is, what should be considered are practices, events or behaviors, in other words, temporary elements, not objects or things. This quality of *liveness* (‘live’) is, according to Schechner, the center of performance art (Schechner, 2006).

The different definitions analyzed so far which defend the same traditional point of view can be summarized in the following four points (Fischer-Lichte, 2004b):

1. A performance comes into being by the bodily co-presence of actors and spectators, by their encounter and interaction.
2. What happens in performances is transitory and ephemeral. None the less, whatever appears in its course, comes into being *hic et nunc* and is experienced as present in a particularly intense way.
3. A performance does not transmit pre-given meanings. Rather, it is the performance, which brings forth the meanings that come into being during its course.
4. Performances are characterized by their eventness.

This brief enumeration by Fischer-Lichte aptly summarizes how the most established definitions of performance have been constructed from an ontological point of view based on its ephemeral presence. Next, I will study what the implications of this position have been for understanding the object residue of the performance.

The Ephemeral Presence and The Impossibility of Documenting It

Peggy Phelan, in her well-known book *Unmarked. The Politics of Performance* (1993), is the author who has most rigorously extracted the consequences of the kind of definitions of *performance art* that has been discussed above on the question of documentation. Phelan synthesized them in the following solemn formula: 'its only life is in the present' (Phelan, 1993, p. 146). In this way, she conceives performance art as a presence in constant disappearance, which prevents it from being documented.

Peggy Phelan inherited the discourse of the theories on the theatre developed by Richard Schechner around the categories of loss, disappearance and death, and associated them with the field of the visual arts, specifically to *performance art*.² When performance studies arose in American universities in the 1980s, the ideas developed around theatre and dance were transferred to the field of performance art, bringing different approaches to the permanence / absence dialectic inherent to action. In 1985, Schechner stated:

Performance originals disappear as fast as they are made. No notation, no reconstruction, no film or videotape recording can keep them [...] One of the chief jobs challenging performance scholars is the making of a vocabulary and a methodology that deal with performance in its immediacy and evanescence (Schechner apud Schneider, 2010).

In this way, immateriality, disappearance and impermanence became key ideas around performance art. In 1993, Phelan published the book *Unmarked. Politics of Performance*, which would become a vindication of performance art's inability to become an object. As we shall see below, Phelan based her theory on the temporary nature of the performance, on its quality of being an action in the present and in its inability of being recorded:

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. To the degree that performance attempts to enter the economy of reproduction it betrays and lessens the promise of its own ontology. Performance's being... becomes itself through disappearance (Phelan, 1993, p. 146).

In this way, Phelan attributed authenticity and subversion to 'live' artistic actions. She argued that in a culture that is totally commodified and subjected to the media, performance art is the last fortress from which to resist the market and the media, and with them, the dominant culture. Thus, according to Phelan, 'performance art clogs the smooth machinery of reproductive representation necessary to the circulation of capital' (Phelan 1993).

Only in performances can the remains of an 'authentic' culture emerge; however, this culture cannot be saved from disappearance, since the performance relayed by technological means is a commodified product and represents the interests of the market. Thus, it is also not reproducible either, which has made it the weakest link in contemporary art (Phelan, 1993). Therefore, it states that "performance's only life is in the present" (Phelan, 1993, p. 146).

In addition, Phelan stated that '(the performance) can be performed again, but this repetition itself marks it as "different". The document of a performance then is... an encouragement of memory to become present' (Phelan, 1993, p. 146). That is, Phelan claims that performance is not 'redeemable' afterwards. Any attempt to capture it in an artefact by means of a recording is doomed to failure, and only highlights the insurmountable abyss between an action and a fixable or even reproducible artefact. That is to say, for Phelan, viewers must take everything with them, since there can be no residue of the action. This implies that the performance disappears into memory, into the realm of invisibility and the subconscious, where it eludes regulation and control (Phelan, 1993). Performance resists the balanced circulations of finance, as it saves nothing; it only spends (Phelan, 1993).

By way of summary, it could be said that Phelan's position is based on the fact that performance rejects the market exchange system and resists the

circulation of the economy based on it. In contrast, 'performance refuses this system of exchange and resists the circulatory economy fundamental to it. Performance honors the idea that limited number of people in a specific time/space frame can have an experience of value which leaves no visible trace afterward. Writing about it necessarily cancels the "tracelessness" inaugurated within this performative promise. Performance's independence from mass reproduction, technologically, economically, and linguistically, is its greatest strength'. And its independence from mass reproduction, technologically, economically, and linguistically, is its greatest strength (Phelan, 1993). Based on this approach, Phelan concluded that performance should lead to a change in institutions (museums), which have been focused on preserving and storing objects, and inventing a non-conservation economy but one based on meeting the demands of presence (Phelan, 1993).

Documentation in the History of Performance Art

As has been seen, Phelan's position on documentation is the logical consequence of the predominant definitions of performance based on the category of presence: performance is a presence in continuous disappearance and, strictly speaking, cannot be documented. Indeed, throughout the history of performance art, direct experience was what artists valued most in their attempt to be outside the standards of the commercial art system (on this point they agreed with the majority of *land art* artists, those with site-specific works and some conceptual artists). Their desire was to protest the objectification and commercialization of their work and, as Dennis Oppenheim once stated, they wanted to stretch the limits of what could be done and show others that art was not just making objects to display in galleries (Sayre, 1989, p. 213). Many artists spoke of 'intervening' in real life and promoting a more egalitarian exchange between the presence of the artist and the viewer.

However, it cannot be overlooked that performance artists quickly developed different motivations that led them to consider the traces that survived the actions themselves. Some considered them a way to spread their ideas and actions to a wider audience, to communicate and to begin an open dialogue. Others found it useful to be able to see, analyze and

perhaps review their work after the actions. Some other artists, such as Chris Burden, Marina Abramović³ and Vito Acconci, favored the use of black and white photographs, video, maps or instructions, and textual descriptions to document their actions and write their own story (Irvine, n.d.).

Although in the late 1950s the idea of documenting performance art generated some skepticism, this attitude quickly changed. Some examples were Fluxus artists, who promoted methods in which they combined the presence of performance actions with recordings or documentation. From the beginning, they were aware that they were writing their own stories. In addition, Fluxus artists had a great interest in collaborative actions, so they published regularly and ensured that their scores or instructions and the documentation of their performances was circulated around Europe, America and Japan (Home, 2002).

Similarly, the veneration of the artefact and the presence of documentation were always present in the actions carried out in the European contexts of Viennese Actionism, *arte povera* and New Realism, as in the works by Hermann Nitsch, Piero Manzoni or Yves Klein. Examples of this are Pistolletto's performance art pieces *Mappamondo (Globe)* (1966-68), whose resulting product (a ball of pressed newspapers) has recently been exhibited at the Philadelphia Museum of Art, and the celebrated photograph of Klein's action *Leap into the Void* (1960).

In the performance artworks that began to use the body as an object, often even leading it to extreme situations, such as *Shoot* (1971) by Chris Burden, *Escale non-anesthésie (Climbing without anesthesia)* (1971) by Gina Pane and any of the works analyzed by Paul McCarthy, the documentation of the action became essential simply to demonstrate that they had been able to carry it out, since in fact the main objective was to alter the history of the representation of these themes forever (Goldberg, 1996).

The recording of performance art pieces became key in those actions that tried to meddle in day-to-day affairs as a subversion, as in the works of Adrian Piper. Documenting personal experiences, whether individual or collective, became paramount. These types of performance artworks were not usually announced, but were performed spontaneously in public places, which usually meant that people, or alleged viewers, were not aware of the

action. In these cases, the documentation became essential to bear witness to the performance art piece (which went unnoticed while it was being carried out).

In the contexts in which turbulence, human rights struggles, and social and political demands became constant, the power to resort to the media – in many cases with a clear manipulative intention – became essential in order to bring to light certain experiences that had been repressed (or had gone unnoticed) up to that point. Thus, artists such as Laurie Anderson, Joan Jonas and Yvonne Rainer explored the social dimension of technological media. They began to use technologies such as Super-8 film, Portapak video and magnetic audio recording tape to record their actions and to be able to give them a greater diffusion. Rainer's work, for example, aptly analyzed this relationship between performance art and technological mediation, and questioned subjects such as authorship, mediation, temporality and the desire to share the perceptual experience of the time, either 'live' through the act itself or through its documentation (Lambert-Beatty, 2008).

In conclusion, since the very beginnings of performance art, artists incorporated documentation into their actions for many distinct reasons. A position as radical as that held by Phelan, therefore, is difficult to maintain, which is why it has been subject to revision from various theoretical approaches surrounding performance art. Presented next are three main avenues to question Phelan's stance that can be summarized as follows: the ephemeral nature of performance art does not preclude its documentation; irreproducibility must be rethought in a mediatized context such as the present one; and the failure of the documentary object can be conceived as being productive.

The Complex Materiality of the Ephemeral

Erika Fischer-Lichte agreed with Phelan that performance art pieces are not fixed or transmissible material; according to her, they are fleeting, transitory and exhausted in their own actuality, that is, in their continuous becoming and vanishing (Fischer-Lichte, 2004a). For Fischer-Lichte, performance art produces materiality as it happens in the present, which is destroyed as it is created. She based the analysis of the present materiality of

performance art on four fundamental traits: corporeality, spatiality, tonality and temporality (Fischer-Lichte, 2004a).

However, Fischer-Lichte added a new variable and contradicted Phelan by stating that this definition of performance art does not exclude the fact that some material objects have their function and that there are objects that can be preserved as vestiges of it and displayed in a theatrical museum or in an art museum (which is the right place when it comes to the art of action and performance art) (Fischer-Lichte, 2004a).

She also disagreed with Phelan in that, in her view, any attempt to capture a performance into an artefact by recording it is doomed to failure, and only highlights the insurmountable chasm between performance and a fixable, or even reproducible artefact, since for Fischer-Lichte 'Such documentations rather create the conditions of possibility to speak about past performances at all'. In fact, the vast majority of what is produced around performance art is based on the study of documents and objects resulting from actions. John Erickson in his text *Goldberg Variations: Performing Distinctions* made a very enlightening critique of the classic text by RoseLee Goldberg, bringing to light the use of documentation for developing the history of performance art by the Goldberg (Erickson, 1999).

It is precisely the tension between the fleetingness of *performance* and the constant attempts to document it on video, films, photographs or descriptions which highlights its unmistakable ephemeral and unique character (Fischer-Lichte, 2004a). It is a very distinctive quality of this artistic medium:

The discourse about performance bears witness to a void, a loss. It only becomes an accessible object, an object that we can refer to, which we can discuss or make judgements about, if the price of its disappearance is paid; this is an experience that presupposes the recognition of impossible conditions [...] Performance art should not be questioned regarding its artistic programme or by the subjective experience of the artist-body, but rather in connection with the distance between presentation and perception, articulated in the documents and testimonies written by observers (Bormann; Brandstetter, 1999, p. 46).

Therefore, for Fischer-Lichte, although documentation has unequivocal value and allows for residual objects to exist, the specific

materiality of performance art ends when its staging, that is, its presence, ends. This means that part of what happened is inaccessible from the documentation. Kristine Stiles also argued that the temporary moment of the performance disappears at the moment of production, that is, when the presence ceases; but she advocated, as Fischer-Lichte did, that the objects that were used in that action and made it up, remain (Stiles, 2012). Thus, while Stiles also argued that performance art is characterized by its ephemeral presence, she recognized that *performance* does not mature through disappearance, since the demands of social communication and memory require an objective form (Stiles, 2012, p. 35). This form can be materialized through the residual objects of the action or through the documentation generated during the act. For Stiles, objects contain traces of the history of past action (life) through the present and with a view to the future (Stiles, 2012).

The other way for the performance defended by Stiles to mature is achieved by documenting the actions. She stated that documentation is kept not only by the collector and the museum but, more importantly, by artists themselves. Even artists who have been bent on avoiding the transformation of their events into consumer products have kept photographic negatives, catalogues, artist books, and other forms of documentation that are connected to their work (Stiles, 2012, p. 35).

So far, I have shown some considerations that base the definition of performance on its ephemeral presence, although with certain variables, since Fischer-Lichte and Stiles both have recognized the possibility of having objects and the documentation resulting from the actions, something that Phelan vehemently opposed. In contrast with these ephemeral positions, one of the most consistent theses is that by Rebecca Schneider. For her, to define performance art as something that disappears is to see it in negative, reductionist terms. She responded to Phelan's assertion that performance becomes itself by disappearance:

In privileging an understanding of *performance* as a refusal to remain, do we ignore other ways of knowing, other modes of remembering, that might be situated precisely in the ways in which performance remains, but remains differently –appears, but appears differently? (Schneider, 2001, p. 101).

In contrast, Schneider proposed to go beyond ephemeral presence by stating that the performance art piece remains in a different way, in various forms such as text, testimonies, oral, photographic, filmic, archival, or re-enactments (Schneider, 2001). Schneider also contradicted Phelan's theory in relation to archiving – understood as recordings, objects and documents of events and bodies. Phelan suggested that performance art resists archiving because of its disappearance, but Schneider pointed out instead that 'it is one of the primary insights of poststructuralism that disappearance is that which marks *all* documents, *all* records, and *all* material remains. Indeed, remains become themselves through disappearance as well' (Schneider, 2001, p. 104). For Schneider, performance and its archiving show their disappearance differently, such that the archive itself becomes a social performance of retroaction (Schneider, 2001). In this way, it enables artists and institutions to keep the history of performance art alive, to ensure that it will not disappear, as would be concluded from Phelan's theory.

Regarding Irreproducibility

For Phelan, the fact that performance art is bound for total disappearance is based on her conviction that 'Performance in a strict ontological sense is nonreproductive' (Phelan, 1993, p. 148). Moreover, according to her, the inability to reproduce or repeat a performance is the strength of performance art, because it resists the economy of reproduction and it remains without trace in the capitalist system.

This idea of irreproducibility has been contradicted by Philip Auslander, among others. He questioned this binary opposition of performance and its reproduction, not because he rejects the value of live art, but because, according to him, the status of what constitutes 'live art' has changed substantially, as the cultural context is strongly mediatized today. Auslander advocates deconstructing the opposition formulated by the distinction between 'live' and 'mediatized' cultural forms. He argues therefore that both should be studied from the prism of culture economy and his proposal is to "[...] investigate that relationship as historical and contingent, not as ontologically given or technologically determined' (Auslander, 1999, p. 51).

In a context in which the increasing medialization of culture in the 1990s brought about a change in the conditions of live art/performance, Auslander pointed out that:

‘The possibility of electronic documentation of performances alone gives meaning to the term ‘live performance’. Today all types of performance events can simply be broadcast and made accessible to millions of people through their mediatization – be it theatre and performance art; rock concerts; political performances such as funeral or papal blessing *urbi et orbi*; or sporting events such as the Olympic Games’ (Auslander, 1999, p. 32).

Auslander has argued that live performance is an effect of that which is mediatized (and not the opposite), because recording technologies have made it possible to think of representations as live (Auslander, 1999). With this, a new dichotomy is born beyond the traditional one in which the bodies of the actors and the public coexist; a dichotomy is born in which production and reception coexist. For Auslander, therefore, Phelan’s position, which gives performance a sense of authenticity and subversion and defines it as the only mode of resistance to the mediatized dominant culture, must today be understood as having been surpassed:

Whatever distinction we may have supposed there to be between live and mediatized events is collapsing because live events are becoming more and more identical with mediatized ones... Ironically, intimacy and immediacy are precisely the qualities attributed to television that enabled it to displace live performance (Auslander, 1999, p. 32).

Auslander’s willingness to be deconstructive, which points to some of the most established presuppositions around performance, has also inspired, among Latin American authors, an interesting critique of how those assumptions are committed to various domination logics such as colonialism and or gender normativity, against which the art of action of peripheral countries (Agra, 2014) and the procedures for their documentation (Blanca, 2016; Lozano, 2014) rebel.

The Failure of the Object

Returning to the idea of failure that Phelan linked to the documentation of performance art pieces by their ontological incapacity to be reproduced, it has also been rejected by approaches that have defended

this failure as something productive (G. Butt, 2002; Lambert-Beatty, 2000). An example of this is the position of Jane Blocker in her text *What the Body Cost* (2004). In it she argued that the desire for presence is always part of written history, and in this sense documentation should be used more rigorously to compensate for the loss that occurs in the performance. Thus, far from viewing documentation as a pure failure, she placed it in a position of absolute desire (Blocker, 2004). Any writing on *performance*, for Blocker, is a commitment to the desire for the presence of the event. She defined documentation as a mediator between the loss of the performance and the permanent desire of the viewer to have access to the performance. A desire born out of the time lapse between one and the other. In addition, Blocker defended the productive possibility of failure, by stating that rendering documentation as a failed representation, as Phelan did, involves negating its capabilities.

This capacity of documentation of which Blocker speaks has been a central subject in the study of the survival of performance art. As early as 1989, Henry Sayre, in his reference text *The Object of Performance*, privileged performative documents that are 'undecidable', that is, those that allow viewers to construct meaning for themselves: 'Its meanings are explosive, ricocheting and fragmenting throughout its audience. The work becomes a situation, full of suggestive potentialities, rather than a self-contained whole, determined and final' (Sayre, 1989, p. 7). Kristine Stiles agrees with Sayre on 'the contingency of the document not only to a former action but also to the construction of a wholly fictive space' (Stiles, 1990, p. 40-41). For Sayre, the performance artwork is indeterminate, since it is completed at the whim of the viewer, which more broadly suggests that the work is in process, it is not static. Furthermore, some of the documents analyzed by Sayre in his text are completely fictional, such as Rudolf Schwarzkogler's *Amputation piece* (1972), something the author himself seems to attach little importance to. This position has sometimes been attacked by over-privileging the viewer's interpretation, apparently rejecting the validity of the authentic document. But as he offered his own defense, his position is a critical response to the history of modern art and to the value of the autonomy of the artefact in the mid-twentieth century (Sayre, 1989).

Along the same lines, authors such as Philip Auslander, Martha Buskirk, Amelia Jones and Rebecca Schneider have stated that the document requires our participation or collaboration to create meaning, and therefore they have highlighted the role of the viewer. From different perspectives, Auslander (Auslander, 2006) argued that the documentation offers the viewer a phenomenological encounter with the performance art piece; Martha Buskirk (Buskirk, 2003) made a materialistic assessment; Jones (Jones, 1998) defined it as intersubjective; and Schneider defined it as testimonial (Schneider, 2001).

Auslander argued that the act of documenting the performance artwork is what constitutes it (Auslander, 2006). He added that it is only through documentation that the audience is able to understand the performance act, regardless of whether or not they were present at the event. For Auslander, the audience is irrelevant, because what is really of interest to be captured is the work of the performance in itself and not the relationship with the audience. He introduced two categories: the documentary, which provides evidence of the event, and the theatrical, where the record is the performance itself. Auslander's theory seems to be always more concerned with upholding performance as an action of the artist to be recorded where the audience is irrelevant for the action.

Along similar lines, Martha Buskirk approached the problem of documentation through the work *Following Piece* (1969) by Vito Acconci (the performance consisted in the artist following unknown people in the streets of New York until they entered a private space). In this piece, the performance is received via the documentation of the action. In this respect, she said:

There is in fact a question of when, within a progression of choices, the document may be transformed from secondary object to something identical with the work itself, either because the emphasis has tipped toward the material realization or, at the extreme, because the work itself is defined as a conceptual idea only partially and temporally manifest in any specific physical embodiment (Buskirk, 2003, p. 223).

Based on this reflection, it follows that in works like the one by Acconci (in Auslander's categories it would be theatrical), Buskirk would assign the same meaning to the both materiality of the action and the

documentation. This somewhat distances her from Auslander's position, since the latter argues that certain performance artworks, such as that by Acconci, exist only in the 'space of the document' (completely omitting the moment of the action itself), without which performances like this would never be known (Auslander, 2006). The document, then, is what makes a performance art piece exist as such. Auslander privilege the documentation because he believes that the context and the viewers of the act do not influence this type of performances and cannot interfere with the document of the artist's work. In any case, both Buskirk and Auslander shift the act of performance, recognizing the document or object (archive) as the primary source of meaning.

Amelia Jones also pleaded for the inevitable mediatization of performance art: 'There is no possibility of an unmediated relationship to any kind of cultural product, including body art' (Jones, 1997), but moved away from Auslander and Buskirk's materialism by giving some consideration to the audience who experience the live performance. It is true that, although she showed respect for the experience of witnessing the performances live, she argued that its specificity should not be considered superior to the knowledge experienced through the traces created by the action itself. Jones advocated that the viewer of a live performance, while seeming to enjoy certain privileges to understand its context, has difficulty understanding the story / narrative / process experienced until later (Jones, 1997, p. 12). And the only way to engage in this exercise is through documentary traces created by the performance (Jones, 1997). Consistently with Jones, Rebecca Schneider proposed that the document behaves as a testimony, articulating the event as something that has already happened (Schneider, 2005).

In this type of creations of the performance's history, it seems that the presence of the act remains inaccessibly in the past, and that documents are continually challenged as to their veracity. Inevitably, this has often led to calling into question the concept of the authenticity of documentation. But the object of study regarding the consideration of authenticity is whether the documentation comes directly from the performance, as a trace of what happened. This argument holds that documentation is a representation of the live event, although the subjectivity of the interpretation inevitably

must be added. The authenticity of the performance documentation is evaluated by its repository capacity, regardless of who created the documents or how they were created (Plantinga, 2005). That is, it is rarely questioned who the author of these documents was, while emphasis is always placed on the authorship of the performance, that is, on the artist's name. Moreover, even the person behind the camera is not always recognized as being part of the document.

What is truly expected of the document is for it to work as a trace of what happened during the performance, although as has been seen in the theories of Auslander, Buskirk, Jones and Schneider, the documentation of performance, rather than being a record of what happened at the time of its realization, is a producer of the presence of the performance. That is to say, the performance does not only imply the presence of the body, it is not only the bodily event, but also what is derived from it acquires presence.

Conclusions

As has been seen, the category of presence has played a crucial role in defining performance art. The most established theoretical approaches have argued that the nature of performance art piece revolves around the ephemeral co-presence of the body of the artist and the public. The insistence on this ephemeral presence has led to a radical stance on the documentation of performance art that, as expressed in the work of Peggy Phelan, is considered to be somewhat impossible. A quick review of the history of performance art, however, demands doing justice to the fact that from very early on, artists have sought to record their actions. Thus, a theoretical revision of Phelan's approach to documentation is required, which ultimately leads to a rethinking of the place of the category of presence in the definition of performance. The arguments of several authors along three main avenues to question Phelan's position have been summarized: the ephemeral nature of performance art does not preclude its documentation; irreproducibility must be rethought in a mediatized context such as the current one; and the failure of the documentary object can be conceived as being productive.

After presenting the most relevant milestones of this theoretical dialogue around the documentation of performance art, it can be concluded

that the category of presence remains crucial in defining performance art; however, this is only the case to the extent that it is not conceived as being exclusively limited to the ephemeral presence of the artist's body and that its field of application is expanded in order to accommodate the physical records of performance art as well. After all, through the presence of documents, viewers are allowed to construct meaning for themselves; a meaning that is equally legitimate if it is permeated by the permanent desire of the viewer to have access to the performance that the records are based on. Thus presence, rather than being understood as an exclusive feature of the ephemeral eventuality of a body, should be conceived as the category that accounts for the audience's encounter with performance art in its various forms and mediums.

Notes

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- ² Schechner developed a theory on theatre as an interweaving of the permanent (drama) and the ephemeral (representation), giving priority to the ephemeral and stating that theatre cannot have 'originals'. For more detail, see: Schechner R. 'Foreword: Fundamentals of Performance Studies, 'in *Teaching Performance Studies*, Southern Illinois University Press, Illinois, 2002.
- ³ For more information on the direct experience of Marina Abramović's work, see: *The Artist is Present: as artimanhas do visível* by Matteo Bonfitto (2014).

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