



Balkan Baroque, created
and performed by Marina
Abramović, Venice
Biennale, 1997. Courtesy
of Sean Kelly Gallery

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THEATER IS MEDIA

Some Principles for a Digital Historiography of Performance

All history is media. Perhaps a more familiar statement would be that all history is mediated, the product of a negotiation between historiographic practices and past events. History is always at some remove, mediated by reports, interpretations, stories, opinions that are rendered into various documents to be translated back into knowledge of the event later. This methodology is familiar to most of us in theater and performance studies and is ably summarized by Thomas Postlewait in his *Cambridge Introduction to Theatre Historiography*: “By distinguishing between available documents and identifiable facts,” he writes, “historians proceed from ‘history-as-record,’ which exists in the sources . . . to ‘history-as-event,’ which no longer exists.”¹

However, recent documentation and digital technologies have complicated this seemingly straightforward historicizing procedure by altering the processes by which we locate the available documents, how we reconstruct the event from historical evidence, and the very characteristics of the documents themselves. Theater and performance historians increasingly use digital databases to store, search, and retrieve all kinds of historical data accessible from anywhere in the world (as opposed to a single archive) and to create digital reconstructions, such as the digital performance projects Paul Kaiser and Shelley Eshkar’s *Ghostcatching* (1999), David Saltz’s *Virtual Vaudeville* (2002–4), and Joanne Tompkins’s virtual reality reconstructions of the Rose Theatre (2009–present), to name only a few.² In light of historical sources that include digitized records as well as video and film documentation, the ephemeral “history-as-event” and the methodology by which one reconstructs it clearly have changed.³ Our approaches to performance history both as a record and as an event are increasingly situated not only within historical sources but also within the media we use to access those sources. As Michel de Certeau wrote, history inevitably contains both practices and discourses, and “while these discourses speak *of* history, they are already situated *in* history.”⁴ Similarly, while we might argue that contemporary historiography may speak *of* media, historiographic practices are also situated *within* media. Thus, our performance dis-

courses must inevitably be perceived within media history. History, and as I argue here most especially *performance history*, is deeply and inextricably rooted within media.

A recent example may provide some context for understanding the shifts that digital media bring to contemporary performance historiography. Much has been written about Marina Abramović's 2010 retrospective at MOMA, *The Artist Is Present*, and her explicit attempts to preserve and historicize performance. Although a contemporary example (the artist is still alive and so are audiences from her early work), the stated aims of Abramović's recent work in performance history and her emphasis on performance, documentation, and performance as documentation make her work a useful point of departure. The majority of the criticism of her recent exhibition focused on the live reenactments by trained performers and Abramović's own durational performance, *The Artist Is Present*, in the museum's atrium.⁵ Less noted, but as significant, are the ways this particular show, among Abramović's other reperformances, highlight the tensions among performance history, live reenactments, and digital documentation as confluences of past occurrences and present events. More specifically for my purposes here, Abramović's work demonstrates the ways in which digital media affect performance histories and thus suggests principles by which contemporary and future historiography might adapt to this changing performance landscape.

Like the oft-cited bodily metaphor in theater and performance studies, the desire to protect performance from death was the expressed motivation for Abramović's recent foray into what she calls "re-performance." "Re-performance is the new concept, the new idea!" she exclaimed in a *New York Times* article on March 10, 2010. "Otherwise it will be dead as an art form."⁶ Part preservation, part new performance, Abramović began her reenactments with iconic 1970s performance art in the 2007 Guggenheim show *Seven Easy Pieces* and later in her 2010 MOMA retrospective, *The Artist Is Present*. Following her own directive to keep it "alive," Abramović's retrospective included both her own new durational performance in the museum's atrium (she sat silently for the entirety of the museum's open hours, inviting viewers to sit opposite her for as long as they chose) and live reperformances of her own work by performers Abramović trained specifically for that purpose. Despite the critical emphasis on the reenactments—both in mainstream publication and specialized academic journals—the show was largely devoted not to live reperformances but to digital records from Abramović's own past performances. Although the exhibition featured material objects such as the items audiences used on Abramović's body in *Rhythm O* (1974) and the bus Ulay drove in circles for *Relation in Movement* (1977), the majority of the gallery space was filled with screens and projections. In some instances, still photographs were digitized and loaded into LCD frames, such as those that flashed images of Abramović's cutting performance *Rhythm 10* (1973). Hung just below eye level, these digital boxes glittered with grainy digitized images of Abramović repeatedly stabbing at her left hand with a series of differently sized blades. The flickering of the images in the frames echoed the rhythmic repetition of the original performance and created a sensation of moving images,

although this documentation contained neither video nor reperformances. Video projectors replayed performances on the walls and on screens suspended in the center of the space. Even Abramović's own live reenactments from the Guggenheim's *Seven Easy Pieces* were available on a series of video monitors (an ironic choice given that the reperformance was designed to compensate for a lack of documentation and to keep performance art "alive").

REPERFORMANCE, REENACTMENTS, AND DOCUMENTATION

These ubiquitous digital displays invited direct comparison with the live reenactments. Viewing a digital video or photograph of the original performance, I couldn't help reading the live reenactors within the context of the mass of digital documents and almost always finding that the live versions emerged as pale imitations of the documentation. Take, for example, *Point of Contact* (1980), a joint performance with Ulay in which the similarly dressed artists faced each other with fingers pointing, close but never touching. The documentation for this performance captured Abramović and Ulay's intense connection to one another, much more so than the two reenactors, who gamely imitated the original poses but dropped their fingers a bit, wavered, and struggled to maintain the pose. (The documentation of the reperformance published in the MOMA catalog [a Butlerian copy of a copy?] corrected these imperfections, producing a series of "good" reperformances.)⁷

Similarly, the infamous *Imponderabilia* (1977) video contrasted the stakes of the original with the reenactment. Within the video, Abramović and Ulay, both naked, intensely stare at each other in the narrow doorway of a gallery. In the original performance, would-be art viewers had to push past the artists to enter the performance itself. The scale of the video—almost life-size and projected high on the wall—contributed to its dominance over the viewer. Its scale also made the details of these encounters visible. Watching the digital projection, one saw the intensity of the artists' gaze, their physical determination, and the discomfort of the gallery visitors who pushed through the doorway, often displacing Abramović's and Ulay's bodies. It was a rough give-and-take between the spectators' efforts to see a performance and the artists' willingness to obstruct and make demands upon their audience. The live reenactment, by comparison, was little more than a gimmick. Positioned in a wider doorway, the game for spectators often became one of crossing through and *not* touching one of the naked reenactors. Neither viewers nor performers had anything particularly at stake in this performance. Spectators could easily continue through the exhibition at the other end of the wall, and, if anything, the performers seemed a bit annoyed at the viewers who tended to pass through them more than once. (One of the women audibly complained that particular male viewers tended to repeat the performance a bit too often.) Throughout the exhibition, the digital documentation repeatedly emphasized the intensity and physicality of Abramović's original works in contrast to shockingly static live reenactments.

Some of this stasis was no doubt an effect created by restaging the live performances from the photographs and other documentation. The backdrop of *Point of Contact*, for example, was a dark photographer's backdrop that mimicked the art photograph and video running alongside the live version. Most striking was *Relation in Time* (1977), a performance that originally had little audience. As defined by Abramović, "In a pre-defined space. Without audience. We sit back-to-back, our hair tied together, motionless. Then the audience comes. We remain seated there for a further hour."⁸ In the MOMA reenactment, the performers were placed in a wall cutout, designed to frame the reperformers exactly like the photograph that hung alongside. What we observed was not a reenactment of a performance, but a reperformance of a photograph.

ABRAMOVIĆ AND DIGITAL DOCUMENTATION

Abramović's exhibition raises a number of questions regarding the role of digital documentation in relation to live performance. On the one hand, she based her work on the oft-cited claim that performance is ephemeral, lost, and dead apart from a live performing body. She supported this claim with the insertion of live reenactors as *documentation* themselves. As described in the promotional materials for *Seven Easy Pieces*, "The project is premised on the fact that little documentation exists for most performances from this critical early period; one often has to rely upon testimonies from witnesses or photographs that show only portions of any given piece. *Seven Easy Pieces* examines the possibility of redoing and preserving an art form that is, by nature, ephemeral" (italics added).⁹ And yet, simultaneously, she placed the bulk of her faith (or at least the majority of her retrospective) on digital documentation, which displaced the primacy of the live performing bodies or, at the very least, called their primacy into question. Viewing both simultaneously, it was impossible to ignore the extent to which these live reenactments were copies, imitations, and echoes of not just original performances but also imitations of *the digital documentation*. In doing so, Abramović perhaps unintentionally challenged the pervasive binary that has dominated theater and performance historiography: the live event versus its dissociated "dead" document. Rather than dismissing the digital record in favor of reperformances (or as Vito Acconci dismissed them in Abramović's profile in the *New Yorker*, "theatre"), Abramović retained and relied on the digital to provide the fullest account of each performance event.¹⁰

Although historical in a relatively limited sense, we might productively use Abramović's work to understand the implications for performance historiography more generally and to formulate an approach to the digital historiography. To wit, Abramović's juxtaposition of the static live performance and its dynamic documentation complicates some of the distinctions posed by Diana Taylor in her *Archive and the Repertoire* (2003). "The live performance," she writes,

can never be captured or transmitted through the archive. A video of a performance is not a performance, though it often comes to replace the performance as a *thing* in itself (the video is part of the archive; what it represents is part of the repertoire). Embodied memory, because it is live, exceeds the archive's ability to capture it. But that does not mean that performance—as ritualized, formalized, or reiterative behavior—disappears.¹¹

Considering the Abramović reenactments, one would expect them to demonstrate exactly what Taylor outlines: ritualized, formalized behavior embodied in live performance, witnessed and preserved by viewers who are copresent with the performers. Just as Abramović relies on reenactment to keep performance alive, Taylor argues that performance requires presence. In practice, however, Abramović's digital documentation, the familiar patterns of reception conditioned by media, and the calculated staging of the reenactors as the mediated documentation all tended to favor the digital documentation *as* presence. How, then, to proceed historiographically? Without ignoring the potential for digital records to function as documents within a fixed archive, it is necessary to articulate a more nuanced consideration of the roles that such records play not only in the documentation of performance but also as performative fragments themselves.

Cultural historian Lisa Gitelman provides context for such consideration. In her book *Scripts, Grooves, and Writing Machines* (2000), Gitelman attempted to correct previous historical narratives of technological advancement that failed “to explore technology as plural, decentered, indeterminate, and the reciprocal product of textual practices, rather than just a causal agent of change.”¹² In her more recent work, *Always Already New: Media, History and the Data of Culture* (2008), and not unlike de Certeau, she expands upon this plural formulation of technology by positing the historiography of media as always and already embedded within a mediated history:

Cleaning the Mirror #1, created and performed by Marina Abramović, Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum, New York, 1995. Courtesy of Sean Kelly Gallery



This means that media are reflexive historical subjects. Inscriptive media in particular are so bound up in the operations of history that historicizing *them* is devilishly difficult. There's no getting all of the way "outside" them to perform the work of historical description or analysis. Our sense of history—of facticity in relation to the past—is inextricable from our experience of inscription, or writing, print, photography, sound recording, cinema, and now (one must wonder) digital media that save text, image, and sound.¹³

Gitelman is not alone in her concern for the ways in which technologies saturate and inform our daily and scholarly experiences. Jay David Bolter, Richard Grusin, Mark Hansen, and Lev Manovich have similarly argued that our modes of knowledge are inextricably affected by the technologies we use to capture, store, and disseminate information.¹⁴ Manovich's influential *The Language of New Media* (2001) argues for the database as the conceptual paradigm for a contemporary, "computerized society." Describing the database as "a cultural form of its own," he refers to it as "a new symbolic form of the computer age. . . , a new way to structure our experience of ourselves and the world."¹⁵ Tellingly, Manovich turns to the organization of historical documents as evidence for the pervasiveness of the database mentality, citing multimedia encyclopedias, CD-ROMs (Manovich wrote in 2001, after all), and "virtual museums." The significance of this is that the database, unlike the analog collection or archive, is inherently anarchic. Reliant on algorithms, all of the parts of the database are equally accessible and navigable. As archives and libraries digitize their historical documents, the traditional paths and processes of scholarship inevitably shift from discovery to creation—the reperformance of documentation.

So too, I argue, are our notions of theater, dance, and performance history influenced by digital processes of recording, storing, writing, retrieving, and performing historical documents of performance. Digital access to documentation via computers (searching library databases, viewing digitized documents, scanning photographs, and most significant, sharing these within digital networks) affects

the ways in which we approach and organize performance history. They are more dispersed, more democratic, more regulated by invisible algorithms. At the same time, our participation within digital media—through social networking sites, blogs, and phone-based communication—constitute forms of performance. When we reenact, record, and circulate these performances through digital media, we participate in a kind of mediated exchange that takes on all of the hallmarks of theatrical performance, including careful attention to scripts, costumes, and audience response. That is, we perform our historical evidence as a kind of assembling dance through the data. As my title suggests, I am increasingly convinced of the need to posit theater and performance history within—not independent from—these categories of media. If we think of perfor-



Still from *Balkan Baroque*, 1997.
Courtesy of Sean Kelly Gallery

mance as a medium, then we can subject it to a similar form of scrutiny posed by Gitelman, that is, as a reflexive historical subject. This would mean that the tools of analysis and historiography must be located within a larger media-annotated ecology.

Consider a less overtly mediated example than Abramović's digitized retrospective. Last spring, I attended the Donmar Warehouse's production of *King Lear* at the Brooklyn Academy of Music (BAM). Though innovative in certain respects, this was hardly a media-saturated spectacle. The storm, for instance, drew from relatively familiar conventions of lighting and sound effects with the perhaps unexpected addition of Derek Jacobi's amplified whisper as he invoked Lear's directive to "Blow winds and crack your cheeks." And yet, although this production lacked the spectacle of projections, the performance itself, my reception, and my recirculation of salient elements were all deeply embedded within mediated contexts. To begin, I learned of the production through the e-mail newsletter that I (and thousands of others) regularly receive from BAM. I also "like" BAM on Facebook and follow several news media aggregates on Twitter that update me on its forthcoming productions. My first exposure to this performance was through the theater's website that not only showcased images from the production but also highlighted presentations associated with the performance, including the artist talk with Adam Phillips on "Acting Madness" and a lecture by Stephen Greenblatt on *King Lear*. Because the production had premiered in London, I read (online) reviews from the London papers as well as various blog posts. I also visited the National Theatre Live website, where images of both the rehearsal and production were available (and still are as of this writing). Had I access to the right cinema, I could have viewed this same production on the big screen, much like the Met in HD series brings opera to my local multiplex. After seeing the production, I was curious about a few of the textual changes in the production, so I consulted the 1623 first folio edition through the Electronic Text Center at the University of Virginia Library and read scanned facsimiles. During the intermission, I briefly tweeted about the play and later posted some notes on the production to my blog. Because of the durability of these sites, I was able to recreate this process more or less as I have written it here.

This process is somewhat akin to Marvin Carlson's notion of the stage haunted by the memories, recycling, and ghosting of performances past. And yet, my process of seeing this production of *King Lear* was not a passive recall of memories connecting past productions of the play to this current incarnation. I was not the Hamlet that Carlson cites, who wonders aloud, "What, has this thing appeared again tonight?"¹⁶ The performance did not appear as the trigger for my associations and my engagement with the play. My not unusual viewing practice was largely activated by and within mediated networks as part of an extended engagement with the play unbounded by the duration of the performance in BAM's Harvey Theater. Within the context of mediated conversations, visual and textual resources, and references, the performance for *King Lear* was not a privileged site of temporary encounter but instead yet another form of mediated interaction with the text, contexts, and artifacts. This process might suggest a fundamental shift in how theater historiography conceives its connection to performance as



King Lear,
directed by Michael
Grandage, BAM,
New York, 2011.
Photo: Jonas Persson

a singular event to appear and disappear. For me, at least, historicizing this *King Lear* could not take place independent from or ignorant of the ways in which the text, bodies (both recorded and in person), and spaces of the production circulated through and *emerged from* mediated networks. How, then, might we proceed?

In response, I offer the following key principles that would support this consideration of theater and performance within media networks. Taking up my earlier proposal to shift the rhetoric of theater and performance studies away from the language of the body—living, dying, ghosted—to that of a network or ecology, the following principles further signal a way to navigate contemporary theater and performance historiography in light of digital media.¹⁷ If media ecology is “the study of media environments, the idea that technology and techniques, modes of information and codes of communication play a leading role in human affairs,” then performance is clearly within this domain as a technology, a technique, a mode of information, and the site of numerous codes of communication within human culture.¹⁸

PRINCIPLES FOR DIGITAL HISTORIOGRAPHY OF PERFORMANCE

1. Performance Is Primarily a Mode, Rather Than an Event

Following the logic of Manovich's database, it might be useful to think of performance less as a discrete event and more as a mode, that is, according to the *Oxford English Dictionary*, "A way or manner in which something is done or takes place; a method of proceeding in any activity, business, etc."¹⁹ This, of course, follows from the fundamental principles of performance studies, as the critical framing of a given phenomenon as performance.²⁰ However, the emphasis here is slightly different. Rather than framing a phenomenon *as* performance, it proposes to adopt performance *as the mode* through which we assess phenomena, including digital documentation. We might characterize performance as the medium through which we perceive a series of interrelated events. That is, performance itself functions not as a discrete event but as a network of interrelated components, both on- and offline, both overtly mediated and immediate to various and dispersed recipients. What we encounter in performance (and what we may seek to historicize later) is a network of constitutive parts.

To return to the Abramović exhibition, any historical account of this show—whether attended or not—would need to include the live reenactments, the digital documentation, individual participation within the larger performance event, and the myriad digital transmissions to begin to assess the fullness of the performance event. During the show, audiences could participate both in person and online. Like Abramović's unmoving presence in the museum's atrium, the performance did not begin and end concretely (or at least within view), nor did it exist separate from its documentation. Given that viewers were taking pictures on cell phones (although reprimanded by guards) and could also access images simultaneously from the *New York Times* and other online news outlets, the experience of attending the exhibition could not possibly be considered or experienced from one fixed perspective. Even the show's central performance—Abramović's continuous presence in the atrium—streamed in real-time via the MOMA website. Instead of existing as a discrete event, performance—that is, the viewing, watching, moving, sitting still for extended periods of time—was the mode through which viewers engaged with multiple forms of enactment and documentation simultaneously, navigating the various elements individually and idiosyncratically according to access (e.g., owning a phone with Internet access or a camera) and choice (e.g., a willingness to break the rules of the exhibition). Thus, like a database, network, or ecological system, the Abramović performance was a multivalent, simultaneous phenomenon accessible and recordable in multiple ways through both time and space.

2. As Such, Performance Does Not Disappear (nor Does It Ever Appear Per Se)

If performance is a mode, then it is a continuous process that one may enter or not, navigate as one chooses, and leave (usually) when desirable. Obviously, one might argue that more traditional theater experience contradicts this. The show starts at a

particular time, one attends, witnesses the performance, applauds, and leaves according to a particular set of social and cultural conventions. We can also point to myriad contemporary examples of variations on compelled attentions, such as work by Forced Entertainment or even Abramović herself.²¹ However, as Carlson argues in *The Haunted Stage*, these attendances at the theater are informed by memories of earlier performances,²² and Amelia Jones elaborates upon this point in her analysis of Abramović and reenactments:

History and even memory are themselves *re-enactments*, scriptings of the past (based on relics, documents, remainders) into the (always already over) present. Crucially, re-enactments remind us that all present experience, including (as Kant recognized) the apprehension of things called “art” or acts called “performance,” is only ever available through subjective perception, itself based on memory and previous experience. . . . We are always already in the “now,” which can never be grasped, and yet all experience is mediated, representational.²³

So, even a theatrical production, if divorced from the notion of a discrete individualized body, becomes a multivalent, simultaneous experience that is shaped and constructed by the individual experiences, choices, and negotiations of the individual audience members within a connected network of information, sensations, and varying access points. What Jones does not point out, but that Abramović clearly capitalizes on in the double logic of live reenactment and simultaneous digital transfers, is the extent to which this ever-expanding “now” is one mediated not only by memory but also by digital technology, devices that serve to substitute for text and memory. As in my example of *King Lear*, my experience with this production began long before the performance began and extends to this day. Locating the performance as one element among many pertaining to Warehouse’s *King Lear*, I continue to dip in and out of the production, shifting my own memory in relation to the digital records and playing both my own record (notes, posts, tweets, memories) in and with the memories and records of others (fellow bloggers, journalists, online communications).

3. The Distinction between the Performance and Its Digital Record Is Negligible; or, Rather, They Are Both Mutually Dependent and Constitutive Parts of a Larger Network

Within Abramović’s MOMA exhibition, it would be overly simplistic to dismiss the live reenactments as “good” or “bad” echoes of the original, or too — as I suggested earlier — to dismiss them in light of the more dynamic digital documentation. The exhibition demonstrated that live reperformances are but one form of media among others. The gallery was a highly mediated space that relied both on the living bodies and the documentation and, to extend the analogy even further, on the viewing bodies and *their* (which is also to say *our*) performance as documentation. Despite Abramović’s

claim that without reperformance performance art is “dead,” her emphasis on documentation—both at the time of the original performances and since—and the vast amount of resources devoted reveal a deep mutual dependency of performance on its documentation.

As the quality of presence erodes under the weight of digital documentation and circulation, I do not think it coincidental that this ubiquitous presence of digital media in and of performance has prompted the language of “ghosting” and “hauntology” among theater and performance scholars. Describing one form of performance documentation, photography, Peggy Phelan notes, “While performance enacts the fragile and ephemeral nature of each moment and frames its passing, photography’s ubiquity and relentless reproducibility undercuts the vitality of the drive to be present to the present tense.”²⁴ In the context of digital recording and circulation the performance, as captured in photography and video, never really dies. Although photography may challenge the “vitality” of performance, the recorded images continue to linger over our notions of the live event. (Perhaps this is also why Abramović dedicated her *Seven Easy Pieces* to cultural critic and champion of photography Susan Sontag.) Rather than posit these as opposite, it is more productive to consider them as mutually constitutive. The digital document plays an integral part in the formation of the performance itself as the actions and gestures experienced in space and time. Performance for more than one hundred and fifty years has responded to the effects of recording, first in photography, then cinema, and now digital recording and circulation. The lingering effects of these technologies inform both aesthetic choices and our reception of them. Our historiographic methods should account for the digital as performance as much as we recognize that the performance event mediates.

This notion of a digital record as integral to performance does not exempt theater history that predates photographic records, for the means by which scholars access these records is increasingly (and, I think, will be fully) realized through digital means. That is, when we locate documents via databases, view historical images in digitized forms, write papers on computers, consult with colleagues via social media, teach with PowerPoint, we engage within a digital network by which our research is mediated. This digitization affects everything from access (e.g., which institutions can afford and provide access to expensive historical databases) to how we search, locate, and organize historical information. The experience of researching in the archive has changed profoundly over the past half century. In practical material terms, more of us can access more data, more quickly, through digital resources than when we traveled in person, used paper finding guides, and sorted through boxes of paper documents. Although this type of historical research has not and probably will not disappear completely, the digital both diversifies the access points and the ways in which we receive the material. The digital, in short, transforms the archive into the type of network described by sociologist Bruno Latour’s actor-network theory, that is, a dynamic, evolving network of relations among material objects and people—all of which are defined as actors—who

jointly perform, and thereby constitute, the network.²⁵ To fully understand and appreciate performance in this context, we need to be cognizant of the ways in which we receive, process, and create performance in and through digital documentation. For the same reason that Modern Language Association references include the dates accessed for Internet citations, we need to take note and clearly articulate how we engage and mutually constitute digital resources. Our digital tools are not transparent guides but actively participate as coactors (to paraphrase Latour) to shape our findings within them and thus become part of the performance itself.

*4. Performance Historiography within Media Ecology Considers
Performance at the Nexus of Always and Inescapably Mediated Exchanges,
Some of Which Are Accessible and Some of Which Are Not*

Theater and performance are always the process of connecting systems, not the unified (however briefly constituted) form of those systems. This distinction is significant because while bodies (arguably networks unto themselves) evolve in unconscious relation to their environments and each other, networks reveal more conspicuous constructions, deliberate connections, and explicit divisions. How are digital records compiled? By whom? What are the framing devices employed? How is our access shaped, diverted, and potentially manipulated? To return again to my example of *King Lear*, we might ask who chose the images for the National Theatre Live website. Several of the images read as publicity shots rather than production photographs; for whom are these images intended? What do they communicate about the show itself, and how does an awareness of these images either before or after the performance influence our reception of the performance itself?

Amid the dynamic networks of digital exchanges—including electronic communication, social media, image capture, recordings, viewings, and remixing—performance and historiography emerge as products of diverse mediated exchanges that can be examined but never fully understood. As Gitelman outlines in her critique of writing mediated history from within and through media, so too do such projects highlight the ways in which our experiences of performance and media are themselves occurring within mediated and performative systems. Like Gitelman, we are fundamentally unable to get outside the performance we seek to historicize. In the digital context, the distinction between the archive, which inevitably posits itself as an outside from historical events, and the repertoire, the recurrence of performance history as performance, blurs past the point of distinction. Consideration of either documentation or performance in this context requires careful attention not only to the multiple parts of the performance as such but also to the ways in which the performances, documentations, and receptions are mediated through smartphones, websites, images, and the myriad social media exchanges, including e-mails, blog posts, video streaming, and so on. These are all “the” performance as well as its history. Surrounding any discrete action is a series of data transmissions that shift, intersect, and converge. Of course,



this is not unlike other artifacts of theater history, such as letters, prompt scripts, first-hand accounts, and other records of production. Indeed, the similarities are so strong that digital historiography with its concern for “dead media” and digital ephemera have much to gain from theater and performance historiography more broadly. The difference is perhaps only that, in the case of media, these exchanges of information and data are occurring much faster and more visibly than previous print iterations. This is where attention to theater historiography as a study of networks, newly facilitated by digital media, can benefit theater history in the widest sense.

Indeed, the emphasis on digital systems is clearly related to what Tracy Davis has called “The Context Problem.” In her essay of the same title, Davis argued that “feminist theory helps us understand how performance research—including audience research—is built upon particular foundations and how these, along with femi-

The Artist Is Present,
created and performed
by Marina Abramović,
MoMA, New York,
2010. Courtesy of
Sean Kelly Gallery

nism itself, are cultural-institutional complexes and therefore implicitly perspectival,” acknowledging that awareness of “context” is always “doomed to incompleteness.”²⁶ At the conclusion of that essay, she queried, “Given that we cannot escape the problem, can we provide innovative approaches to it?”²⁷ As we attend to the networks and patterns of theater and performance within larger social, cultural, historical, and intermedially constituted systems, we might recognize the ways in which digital structures, such as Manovich’s database and Latour’s network, provide responses to Davis. Situating theater and performance history within a media ecology moves our historical investigations beyond the binary of the live and recorded, beyond the question of authenticity and presence (perhaps beyond the “liveness problem” itself) to a model of performance history in which the goal is neither to recount what “really happened” nor to reconstruct an event as a “ghostly” substitute for the performance that no longer exists. The project of digital historiography will be to actively attend to the processes by which a performance constitutes, mediates, and is mediated by networks of digital exchange and to trace our own engagement within those networks. It is in these digital, transitory exchanges that the art, artist, and documentation will be present, and we will too.

NOTES

1. Thomas Postlewait, *The Cambridge Introduction to Theatre Historiography* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009), 27.
2. See Paul Kaiser and Shelley Eshkar’s *Ghostcatching* (1999), <http://openendedgroup.com/index.php/artworks/ghostcatching>; David Z. Saltz, “Virtual Vaudeville: A Digital Simulation of Historical Theatre,” *Performing Arts Resources* 24 (2004): 30–37, www.drama.uga.edu/~saltz/VirtualVaudeville/CNIPresentation.ppt; Joanne Tompkins, “Virtual Recreations of Historical Theatres: How VR Meets Theatre History” (paper presented at eResearch Australasia, Gold Coast, Australia, November 8–12, 2010), www.eresearch.edu.au/tompkins2009. For an overview of digital technologies as performance archives, see also Maaïke Bleeker, “What If This Were an Archive?” *RTRSCH* 2, no. 2 (2010): 2–6.
3. For a relevant historical example of recording technologies and theatrical performance, see Laurence Senelick, “Early Photographic Attempts to Record Performance Sequence,” *Theatre Research International* 22, no. 3 (1997): 255–64.
4. Michel de Certeau, *The Writing of History*, trans. Tom Conley (New York: Columbia University Press, 1988), 20.
5. See, for example, Amelia Jones, “‘The Artist Is Present’: Artistic Re-enactments and the Impossibility of Presence,” *TDR* 55, no. 1 (2011): 16–45.
6. For further consideration on this point, see Rebecca Schneider, *Performing Remains: Art and War in Times of Theatrical Reenactment* (New York: Routledge, 2011), particularly chap. 1, “Reenactment and Relative Pain.”
7. Klaus Biesenbach, ed., *Marina Abramović: The Artist Is Present* (New York: Museum of Modern Art, 2010).

8. Biesenbach, *Marina Abramović*, 108.
9. Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum, "Guggenheim Past Exhibitions," <http://pastexhibitions.guggenheim.org/abramovic> (accessed July 11, 2011).
10. Vito Acconci's full quote, "Marina now seems to want to make performance teachable and repeatable, but then I don't understand what separates it from theatre," appears in Judith Thurman, "Walking through Walls," *New Yorker*, March 8, 2010, 29.
11. Diana Taylor, *The Archive and the Repertoire: Performing Cultural Memory in the Americas* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2003), 20.
12. Lisa Gitelman, *Scripts, Grooves, and Writing Machines: Representing Technology in the Edison Era* (Palo Alto, CA: Stanford University Press, 2000), 2.
13. Lisa Gitelman, *Always Already New: Media, History and the Data of Culture* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2008), 20–21.
14. See Jay David Bolter and Richard Grusin, *Remediation: Understanding New Media* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1999), and Mark B. N. Hansen, *New Philosophy for New Media* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2004).
15. Lev Manovich, *The Language of New Media* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2001), 219.
16. Marvin Carlson, *The Haunted Stage: The Theatre as Memory Machine* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2003), 7.
17. See Sarah Bay-Cheng and Amy Strahler Holzapfel, "The Living Theatre: A Brief History of a Bodily Metaphor," *Journal of Dramatic Theory and Criticism* 25, no. 1 (2010): 9–27.
18. Lance Strate, "Understanding MEA," *In Medias Res* 1, no. 1 (October 1999), www.media-ecology.org/publications/In_Medias_Res/imrv1n1.html.
19. *Oxford English Dictionary Online*. "Mode." Oxford University Press, www.oed.com (accessed August 20, 2011).
20. See Richard Schechner, *Performance Studies: An Introduction*, 2nd ed. (New York: Routledge, 2006).
21. Jones in her essay "The Artist Is Present" describes *Marina Abramović Presents* (2009). According to Jones, visitors to the gallery "were told in advance in no uncertain terms that they had to stay for the entire four-hour duration of the evening" (37).
22. Carlson, *The Haunted Stage*, 15.
23. Jones, "The Artist Is Present," 42.
24. Peggy Phelan, "Haunted Stages: Performance and the Photographic Effect," in *Haunted: Contemporary Photography/Video/Performance*, ed. Jennifer Blessing (New York: Guggenheim Museum Publications, 2009), 51.
25. A deeper discussion of actor-network theory is beyond the scope of this essay; for more information, see Bruno Latour, *Reassembling the Social: An Introduction to Actor-Network Theory* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005), and for more on the use of this theory in intermedia performance analysis, see Meike Wagner and Wolf-Dieter Ernst, "Networking," in *Mapping Intermediality in Performance*, ed. Sarah Bay-Cheng, Chiel Kattenbelt, Andy Lavender, and Robin Nelson (Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press, 2010), 173–83.
26. Tracy C. Davis, "The Context Problem," *Theatre Survey* 45, no. 2 (2004): 206.
27. Davis, "The Context Problem," 209.