

# Performance Art and its Relation to Archiving

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Let us first tackle some of the possible relations between performance art and its documentation. In general, performance art is a live event/action conceived as an art work and performed alive in front of the public to explore the performative in the context of visual arts. The physical presence of an artist is crucial, and this can also include mechanisms of modern technology and mass media. Unlike traditional art forms which result in producing objects, performance art is ephemeral, it exists solely in the present and sometimes only comes into life once. Believing that documentation cannot represent the power of live performances, some artists fail or even refuse to document their works. Nevertheless, archives include documentation of performances and since the 1970s the usage of video technology has become the prevailing form of documenting various ephemeral art forms. On the one hand, it is a time-based medium, it can reproduce movement and demonstrate a process, on the other hand it is easy to handle and control the recorded image. (**action video**: Jean-François Guiton, Coup de vent, 1990, Heure Exquise!)

However, the relation between the performance and the document is a complex one, ranging from a somewhat impartial camera, non-edited recordings in real time (as in the case of **political activism** that has led Kjartan Slettemark to react to the re-election of president Bush: Killing time, a world-political sewage cleaning, 2004, Filmform) to acts directed and performed for the camera only, as exemplified by High Heel Sisters who playfully investigate their physical abilities in **short gags** (Shoe piece, Swim piece, Tree piece, 2002, Filmform).

## Video as a document of performance art

Video equipment as a tool for registration can record a performance in its totality of time and space (**video-taped performance**: Lydia Schouten, I feel like boiled milk, 1980, NIMk). In such cases the usage of video is characterized by a static camera which records the event in real time, and shots from different angles or close-ups are quite exceptional. Even though a non-edited real-time recording is considered an objective document the usage of technological apparatus is never neutral. The point of view, the angle of shooting, the lighting, the cadre, the frame and the like already determine the recording and put forward an interpretation of the material – performance.

This supposedly objective document is often manipulated into an edited document, thus exposing the level of interpretation and subjectivity (**art-documentary video**: Maja Slavec who tested her power on a street of Ljubljana in Women Beauty Power Less, 2008, SCCA-Ljubljana). A documented performance performed live in front of the public or for the camera only can also be used as a basis for a video work (**video art**: Miha Vipotnik, Videogram 4, 1976/79; Ema Kugler, Taiga, 1996, SCCA-Ljubljana).

Particularly in recent years video documentation has become indispensable for long-term art researches and the formulation and transmission of social and political statements. It is the only public witness of a project and its product at the same time. This also holds for the registration of personal acts of psycho-geography or body research. Ulay leads us along the snowy streets of Berlin in the political action “the act of crime” with an **art document** (*Da ist eine kriminelle Berührung in der Kunst*, 1976, NIMk), in a similar way as Lilibeth Cuenca critically comments on the art system in the *Glyptoteket* in Copenhagen (*The Artist’s Song*, 2007, Filmform) and Rósa El-Hassan donates blood under the slogan »Arabic Blood for Hungary« (R. thinking/dreaming about overpopulation – *The Blood Donation Performance*, 2001-2002, C3).

### An active role of video in performance art

Let us now take another perspective and look at the situations when video is a transmitter of psychological and mental activities in front of the public (**behaviourist performance**: Dan Graham engages in an intense conversation with the audience in *Audience/Performer/Mirror*, 1977, NIMk) or when it carries out the function of a screen which makes the acceptance of the indirect action, despite its simultaneity, somewhat less painful (**mediated performance**: Marina Abramović challenges and transgresses physical and mental boundaries in *Rhythm 4*, 1974 and *Art must be Beautiful, Artist must be Beautiful*, 1975, NIMk). If video forms a constitutive part of a performance (in **video performance** Marko Kovačič uses cameras to disclose the background image of his body and its details on eight screens in *Casus Belli*, 1983, SCCA-Ljubljana), it can add an additional semantic or visual layer to a performance, increase the attention and intensify its spectacular function or it becomes a tool for (interactive) communication with the performers, participants or audience (**interactive performance**: In *Apparition*, 2004, Ars Electronica), a dance and media work by Klaus Obermaier, the overall interactive system is much more than simply an extension of the performer, it is a potential performing partner. Finally, a video camera itself plays an intricate role in a **ritualistic gesture** by Douglas Davis, who places the camera in a hole and buries it, suggesting that video art is apparently dead and must therefore be buried (*Burying a Camera*, 1974, NIMk).

### Musealization of performance

Here we should raise the issue of the video document and its usage including musealization: how can something performed live in front of an audience in real space and real time, involving a special relationship between the artist and the audience and the real duration –(in other words performance art as one of the most radical art practices) be presented with the available documentation? What does it lose and what can it gain? This open question cuts to the heart of the nucleus of (conceptualist) practices of this kind, the dematerialization of an art object with a potential market value and the performer’s resistance toward historization. The artist’s utopian effort to avoid the functions of the system of art and market mechanisms is an objective condemned to failure and which in retrospect appears only as a short-term, naive belief. However, this should not mean that such a standpoint does not form a significant platform for a certain sets of values and reflection. Nonetheless, it appears it was mostly video that made the commodification of what passed possible.