REPERFORMANCE, REENACTMENT, SIMULATION

NOTES ON THE CONSERVATION OF PERFORMANCE ART

Jules Pelta Feldman

21: INQUIRIES INTO ART, HISTORY, AND THE VISUAL
#4-2023, pp. 675–711

https://doi.org/10.11588/xxi.2023.4.100738

ABSTRACT

The conservation of performance art has become a pressing issue as museums increasingly commission, exhibit, and even collect works of performance art. While documentation might give us a schematic understanding of the original performance and its circumstances, and "reperformance" claims to reproduce the original live experience, neither of these can tell us what it was like to really be there, back then. Uniting curatorial and conservation methodologies, this paper proposes simulation as a tool for "mimetically documenting" the historical context and experience of performance works. Focusing on works by Marina Abramović and their representations in popular media, this article assesses historical reenactment, film and television, and ultimately video games as forms of simulation, arguing that these effectively transmit aspects of performance works that are otherwise difficult or impossible to conserve.

KEYWORDS

Simulation; Performance art; Conservation; Restoration; Conservation of contemporary art.

I. Restoring Performance

Art conservation has traditionally been considered to encompass two types of activities: restoration and preservation. Restorative measures – known as "interventions" – repair damage or undesirable changes. In the case of a traditional art object, this might mean replacing paint that has detached from its support, reassembling fragments of a shattered vase, or cleaning rust from metal. Preservative measures are intended to prevent such damage – usually, to minimize changes.[1] Preservation avoids intervening in the object itself, and includes measures like climate control, protection from ultraviolet rays, proper storage and handling, and the velvet ropes that keep museum visitors from getting too close. It also includes documentation, which, though long essential to conservation, has become an increasingly important part of conservators' work in recent decades.

While seemingly conventional artworks frequently present conservation quandaries, performance art's challenge to the discipline approaches the existential. In the case of performance, which has often been considered too different from paintings, sculptures, or even electronic media to be conserved, conservation strategies may be similar or even identical to curatorial ones: documents like photographs and videos are the most common way of "exhibiting" historical performance. And in the absence of an authoritative object, the division of conservation activities into restoration and preservation seems difficult to apply. A performance's traces – its various documents and relics – can be conserved, but how can one do more than document a performance? And beyond maintaining extant materials, what might a conservation intervention – an attempt to restore something already lost or damaged – look like?

One answer to this question might be found in the practice known as "reperformance", through which artists revisit works of historical performance by presenting them live. Yet reperformance has been widely criticized by scholars of performance. For while it allows for live transmission of certain aspects of a given work, such as interaction between performer and audience, reperformance neglects other qualities that scholars tend to consider vital to its meaning, even if these characteristics are not part of the work itself, such as historical context or geographical site. In short, reperform-

1 The definition provided here is only a schematic one. For example, since 2008, the Committee for Conservation of the International Council of Museums has recognized "remedial conservation" as a third fundamental activity, defining this as "all actions directly applied to an item or a group of items aimed at arresting current damaging processes or reinforcing their structure. [...] Examples of remedial conservation are disinfestation of textiles, desalination of ceramics, de-acidification of paper, dehydration of wet archaeological materials, stabilisation of corroded metals, consolidation of mural paintings, removing weeds from mosaics". ICOM-CC, *Terminology for Conservation – ICOM-CC*, The International Council of Museums – Committee for Conservation (November 16, 2023). Remedial conservation, then, refers to interventions done not to address damage that has already occurred but to prevent potential damage that is imminent or likely.

ance as a conservation strategy focuses on aesthetic fidelity at the expense of historical fidelity.

In what follows, I propose to separate these two important but conflicting perspectives, imagining the possibilities of a historically sited form of preservation that is, unlike documentation, nonetheless grounded in the viewer's own experience. Using the work of Marina Abramović, reperformance's most influential and controversial practitioner, I present simulation – the real-time imitation or modeling of a process, system, or event – as a viable approach to the conservation of performance that circumvents the key criticisms leveled at reperformance. Simulation can be described as "mimetic documentation" – a reconstruction of a performance that may claim to conserve it by recouping aspects that would otherwise be, or already have been, lost. To make this argument, I will first discuss the limits and critique of reperformance, and then turn to simulation as an alternative approach, instances of which may be found in historical reenactment, cinema and television, and video games. Each suggests other mediations of performance that hold the potential to preserve, present, and convey aspects of performance art – even embodied experience – that are otherwise unavailable in traditional forms of documentation or existing conservation approaches.

II. The Limits of Reperformance

In the past few decades, reperformance has emerged as a means for both the preservation and the presentation of historical performance art. The practice has been largely pioneered by artists, most notably Abramović, who performed other artists' works for *Seven Easy Pieces* (2007) at the Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum in New York and made extensive use of reperformance for her 2010 retrospective at New York's Museum of Modern Art, "The Artist Is Present".[2] Reperformances of some of her pivotal works have since become a regular feature of the artist's exhibitions worldwide. While for Abramović, reperformance is explicitly tied to preservation, critics of the practice insist that a reperformance cannot be considered a document of a past performance, as a photograph might. In the logic of conservation, reperformance is not a straightforward preservation measure; nevertheless, we might with some justification see it as a form of restoration – a potentially hazardous attempt to restore something that has been lost. When restoring a painting or sculpture, conservators risk further damage. Intervention also risks privileging an earlier state of the work over its current incarnation. But when done responsibly, restoration is not only the product of extensive research but also itself a source

[2] Other notable examples of historical reperformance include Babette Mangolte's *Four Pieces by Morris* (1993), a filmic reconstruction of 1962 performances by Robert Morris, and the restaging of Allan Kaprow's *18 Happenings in 6 Parts* (1959) in 2006 at Munich's Haus der Kunst. For the latter, see: *Allan Kaprow. 18 Happenings in 6 Parts* (exh. cat. Munich, Haus der Kunst), ed. by Endré Lepecki and Barry Rosen, Göttingen 2007.

for new research: the new version of the artwork allows for new interpretations. Reperformance may arguably be used in the same way: a thoughtfully considered reconstruction can reveal aspects of the original performance that existing documentation has not preserved. However, this potential may be obscured or overridden by what reperformance cannot do.

Reperformance presents several problems to traditional and still-influential approaches to performance, which Jennie Goldstein summarizes thus: "In the performance/live art mythos of the visual arts, the audience is key to the meaning of the work. In order for an action or event to actually 'be' a performance, an audience has to be there, the performance has to be unique, and it has to take place just once."[3] Reperformance emphasizes audience in the general sense, disavowing the notion that any particular audience – the one present at that singular, unique performance – is necessary to the work. Even further, it relies on the assumption not only that a given work of performance can be repeated, but also that it can be removed from its original context (temporal, historical, spatial, cultural, corporeal) without losing its identity. In this, it moves art performance closer to other live media – theater, dance, and music – which can be reproduced without being copied.[4]

Both criticisms – audience specificity and context sensitivity – have also been leveled against Abramović's reperformance practice in different variations. For Hannah Higgins, however careful the reconstruction, a reperformance always runs the risk of giving the audience the false impression that they have personally experienced a work; indeed, the more precise and detailed the actualization, the more a viewer may be convinced that "Now I have seen it", just as it was back then.[5] And as exemplified by curator Alessandra Barbuto's worry that, "In the instance of artists whose actions are strongly characterized by their personality, it is hardly conceivable that the re-enactment of their work should result in anything other than a pale copy (or indeed a parody) of the original",[6] Abramović is often perceived as too forceful a personality to delegate

3
Jennie Klein, Re Re Re. The Originality of Performance and Other (Post)Modernist Myths, in: *PAJ – Journal of Performance and Art* 2/35, 2013, 108–116, here 108.

4
This distinction was explicated by Nelson Goodman, who influentially distinguished between singular, "autographic" media like painting from (often) performance-based, "allographic" media. Nelson Goodman, *Languages of Art. An Approach to a Theory of Symbols*, Indianapolis 1968, 99–126.

5
Hannah Higgins, *Reperformance. A Typology*, lecture delivered at Revisions: Object – Event – Performance since the 1960s, Bard Graduate Center, September 21, 2015 (February 2, 2022).

6
Alessandra Barbuto, Museums and Their Role in Preserving, Documenting, and Acquiring Performance Art, in: Lúcia Almeida Matos, Rita Macedo, and Gunnar Heydenreich (eds.), *Performing Documentation in the Conservation of Contemporary Art*, Lisbon 2013, 158–167, here 160.

(in Claire Bishop's term) her performances to others.[7] Another common concern is the loss of criticality and commodification of a formerly anti-institutional, immaterial art form, inevitably undermining the political efficacy and thus the meaning of the historical performance. Reflecting on the problem of performance documentation, Branislav Jakovljević asserts that reperformance also "serves to produce more documents, but of a different kind – photographs, video recordings, books – returning us to the good old economy of commodity production".[8] Amelia Jones is concerned that while

> all of these re-staging gestures have interesting critical potential, they also have the potential to flatten out or aestheticize the act (precisely by evacuating the act of its original political specificity) and thus to reduce or erase the act's potential for provoking awareness or for transformation or change.[9]

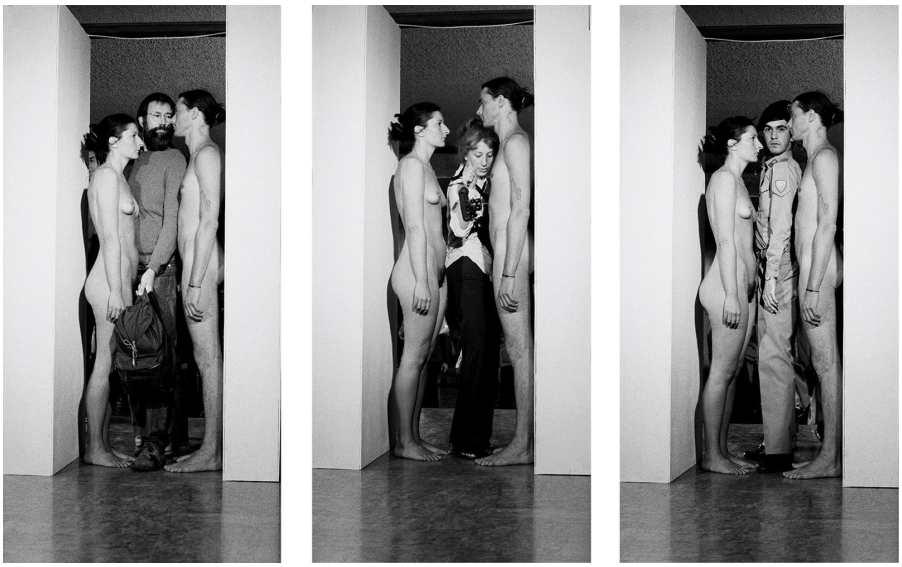
For Diana Taylor, Abramović's *Imponderabilia* (1977) exemplifies reperformance's failure to translate historically contingent aspects of an original performance, political and otherwise, into a contemporary situation. *Imponderabilia* was originally performed by Abramović and her partner Ulay (Frank Uwe Laysiepen) in 1977 at the Galleria Communale d'Arte Moderna in Bologna [Fig. 1]. For this work, the two performers stood facing each other in the museum's entrance, obliging visitors to push between their naked bodies if they wished to enter. In 1977, their public nudity alone was enough to shock, and they were arrested as provocateurs after 90 minutes – thus establishing the work's avant-garde *bona fides*. Since the 2010 MoMA retrospective, reperformances have been less confrontational: visitors can choose to walk between two performers – who are further apart than Abramović and Ulay had been, thus leading to less physical impact between audience and work – or to avoid them altogether [Fig. 2]. But more significant than such changes to the work's staging are shifts in its context and reception. Contemporary art audiences scarcely blink at nude performers, and as the subject of major retrospectives worldwide, Abramović can no longer be seen as a subversive rebel.

Taylor is very specific, even programmatic, in her assessment of *Imponderabilia*'s meaning: "The idea activating the performance was that artists, not museums, are the guardians of art, and both

7
Claire Bishop, Delegated Performance. Outsourcing Authenticity, in: *October* 140, 2012, 91–112.

8
Branislav Jakovljević, On Performance Forensics. The Political Economy of Reenactments, in: *Art Journal* 70/3, 2011, 50–54, here 51. Jakovljević does not mention Abramović in his article, but, given that *The Artist Is Present* had taken place the previous year, this very absence might be interpreted as criticism of her project.

9
Amelia Jones, 'The Artist Is Present'. Artistic Re-enactments and the Impossibility of Presence, in: *TDR. The Drama Review* 55/1, 2011, 16–45, here 25.



[Fig. 1]
Documentation of Marina Abramović and Ulay (Frank Uwe Laysiepen), Imponderabilia, 1977, Bologna, Galleria Communale d'Arte Moderna, courtesy of the Marina Abramović Archives © Marina Abramović and Ulay.

[Fig. 2]
Gallery view of the Marina Abramović exhibition at the Royal Academy of Arts, London, from September 23, 2023 – January 1, 2024, showing Imponderabilia, 1977/2023, live performance by Rowena Gander and Kieram Corrin Mitchell, 60 minutes, courtesy of the Marina Abramović Archives © Marina Abramović, photo © Royal Academy of Arts, London/David Parry.

artists and visitors have to negotiate the challenging and at times awkward relationship with them" – whereas in the reperformed version, artists "were no longer guardians of anything special".[10] Even if Abramović and Ulay were to reperform the work themselves, the historical and cultural circumstances would be too different. Amelia Jones agrees:

> The power of the works she redoes initially came from the various ways in which they surprised, confused, pressured, or otherwise destabilized gallery visitors or (in the case of pieces done in public) unsuspecting members of the general public. All such potential to provoke a productive feeling of unease in viewers is, of course, lost in re-enactments such as those of *Seven Easy Pieces*, which are accompanied (if not largely driven) by large-scale public relations campaigns proclaiming their own importance, and which themselves take place in large and fully sanctioned art institutions.[11]

That is to say, presenting the work "live" is not sufficient to bring its crucial audience relationship back to life. The specific historical circumstances of the original depended on the performance being sited – literally, yes, but especially conceptually – outside the sanctioned realm of the official art world. For Taylor and other critics, this historical caesura renders reperformance ineffective as a means of transmitting crucial attributes of the original work.

III. Distinguishing a Performance's Aesthetic Authenticity from Its Historical Fidelity

Given the limits of both traditional documentation and reperformance, is there any approach to the conservation of performance works that might retain or at least acknowledge such nuanced and contingent meanings? In order to address this question, it will be helpful to introduce a more abstract vocabulary to conceptualize the arguments for and against reperformance, revealing an emphasis on what I call historical versus aesthetic fidelity. Fidelity, in turn, may be divided into aspects of accuracy and authenticity, each of which may be available to the two umbrella terms to different degrees.

Historical accuracy aims at the historical facts: the who, what, when, and where of the past. I define historical authenticity, on the other hand, as the plausibility of a depiction in its historical context. Thus, while historiography is more concerned with accuracy, historical fiction strives for authenticity: a fictional protagonist cannot be historically accurate, since this person did not exist, but the

[10] Diana Taylor, Saving the 'Live'? Re-Performance and Intangible Cultural Heritage, in: *Études Anglaises* 69/2, 2016, 149–161, here 156.

[11] Jones, The Artist Is Present, 40.

character can nonetheless be seen as authentic if they are portrayed in a manner consistent with their historical circumstances.[12] When we speak of what a particular queen wore to a particular ball on a particular day, the question is one of accuracy; when we imagine what other anonymous celebrants might have worn there, we inquire into authenticity. Though authenticity is rarely addressed in historical scholarship, it nonetheless has a place there. For example, it is important for a curator assembling a period room in a historical museum to determine whether or not the selection and arrangement of objects is authentic, i.e., whether it is a plausible approximation of what a room from that time, place, and milieu would have looked like. Yet a period room need not be accurate – a facsimile of an actual room. Both of these meanings are important to my notion of historical fidelity, which encompasses both the specific fact of historical events and the general plausibility of their details.

When moving from historical to art historical discourses, the familiarity of the two terms is reversed: while aesthetic authenticity is a well-developed discourse in art, important to practices of connoisseurship and conservation,[13] accuracy is a seldom-used concept having to do with the external identity between two objects. Generally, we speak of an "authentic" painting when the work's material integrity is preserved and its status as an "original" is secured. Of course, as Sherri Irvin has noted, the term becomes more problematic in the context of contemporary art.[14] Pip Laurenson influentially adopted the notion of the score for time-based installations, allowing for repeatability and change around a core of "work-determinative features".[15] An authentic installation in Laurenson's schema is thus one that respects these features. Yet reperformance

12
There is relatively little discussion of the term "authenticity" among historians, despite its importance for popular culture. In 2009, the journal *History and Theory* devoted a special issue to the question of "Historical Representation and Historical Truth", but though "authenticity" was frequently used by the contributors, it was not defined. See: Christoph Classen and Wulf Kansteiner, Truth and Authenticity in Contemporary Historical Culture, in: *History* 48/2, 2009, 1–4. Laura Saxton approaches these terms directly in a discussion of historical fiction, but her definition of authenticity strikes me as at odds with conventional usage: "Accuracy is, to a degree, measurable because we can compare the details found in novels to details that have been uncovered by historical research", whereas "Authenticity refers to the experience of consuming an historical text and [...] is the impression that a text is accurate, even if it is not." Laura Saxton, A True Story. Defining Accuracy and Authenticity in Historical Fiction, in: *Rethinking History* 24/2, 2020, 127–144, here 128. To my mind, it seems clear that something can *feel* authentic without *being* authentic. (Accuracy, on the other hand, has no explicit relationship to feeling.) My use of these terms is therefore based not on their present use in scholarship, but rather in their deployment in popular culture: for present purposes, both accuracy and authenticity are "measurable", but the second is nonetheless still fictional.

13
See: Ivan Gaskell and Salim Kemal (eds.), *Performance and Authenticity in the Arts*, Cambridge 1999; Erma Hermens and Tina Fiske (eds.), *Art Conservation and Authenticities. Material, Concept, Context*, London 2009.

14
Sherri Irvin, Authenticity, Misunderstanding, and Institutional Responsibility in Contemporary Art, in: *British Journal of Aesthetics* 59/3, 2019, 273–288, here 275.

15
Pip Laurenson, Authenticity, Change and Loss in the Conservation of Time-Based Media Installations, in: *Tate Papers* 6, 2006 (November 16, 2023).

as a preservation strategy has arisen as a means of addressing works that, while similarly ephemeral, resist repetition and cannot be scored. In the case of performance, it may be especially difficult to determine the parameters of an "authentic" performance, though this is often what is at issue in criticisms of reperformance. Yet aesthetic authenticity is precisely what Abramović claims to recapture in reperforming the "essence" of an historical work.

Aesthetic accuracy is a less intuitive term. It is possible to imagine, however, what this might mean in the case of a traditional art object. A copy of a painting is inauthentic – it is a facsimile of the original object – but we might nonetheless call it an accurate copy if it is very well done, faithfully reproducing the appearance of the original. An accurate duplicate, then, is one that could be mistaken for the original. In performance, such accuracy is not possible because of performance's temporal as well as its contextual embeddedness, which is impossible to recreate in its entirety (aside from in documentation, which can be forged like any other image).

Reperformance may thus theoretically achieve a degree of historical fidelity – the approximation both of accuracy in the depiction of real events and authenticity in plausible ones – but of necessity eludes aesthetic accuracy. It thus relies on aesthetic authenticity, which is the principle through which Abramović claims that reperformance functions to summon an original performance. On the other hand, Abramović freely ignores historical fidelity in her reperformances. She is concerned neither with the general situation of the original performance (historical authenticity) nor necessarily with the precise movements, actions, costumes, and verbal speech that originally constituted it (historical accuracy). While reperforming in 2005 Joseph Beuys's *How to Explain Pictures to a Dead Hare* (1965), she not only covered her face in gold leaf and honey but also chose to don a version of Beuys's outfit, apparently considering the original performer's clothing essential to the work. This was not the case, however, for her reperformances of other works, such as Gina Pane's 1973 *The Conditioning* (though it may be significant here that photographic documentation of Pane's performance is scarce). Instead, then, of pursuing historical fidelity through what would essentially be a reenactment, Abramović claims to achieve aesthetic authenticity – to provide her audience with access to an experience of what the original performance conveyed.

From such a perspective, while reperformance may allow new audiences – and new performers – to experience a live work that would otherwise exist only as historical data, and thus remain aesthetically inaccessible, it does so by obliterating the original work's identity as a historical event, one which can be excised only with violence from the precise details, both intentional and incidental, that are indispensable to its meaning. In short: reperformance may potentially offer aesthetic authenticity – a question that cannot be settled in the present text – but even if it can, it does so at the expense of historical fidelity. But it is a daunting if not impossible task to unite historical fidelity and aesthetic authenticity in the same

conservation "treatment". While the aesthetic authenticity of a performance may demand unpredictability and surprise, perhaps even shock, pursuit of historical fidelity requires a careful reconstruction of events. Let us then separate the pursuit of historical fidelity from that of aesthetic authenticity. In what follows, I will examine three possible paths to a historically faithful conservation of performance: reenactment, cinema and television, and video games, each of which may be understood as a type of simulation.

IV. Reenactment

What new knowledge and conservation possibilities might unfold if we seek to focus on the historical specificity of a performance, to allow ourselves to let go of the authentic liveness unique to performance in exchange for a historical vividness greater than what any reperformance can achieve? If we wish to understand how it was "back then" – not only what took place, but the complex context in which it happened; if we value the embodied perspective that is so often excluded from the flattening of photographs, film, and written histories; and if we are willing to separate aesthetic authenticity from historical fidelity, then we may find a potential pathway to conservation in historical reenactment.

Though scholars and critics have sometimes used the two terms interchangeably, reperformance must be distinguished from reenactment. While reenactment seeks to faithfully reconstruct and recreate a specific historical event (historical fidelity), reperformance's goal is usually the re-presentation of a specific act of performance under new circumstances, and often by a new performer (aesthetic authenticity). Reperformance is only exceptionally concerned with the historical specifics of the original work, in contrast to the meticulous costumes and antiquated vocabularies that characterize the field of historical reenactment, which is variously seen as a hobby, educational tool, or form of entertainment. Reperformance has emerged recently, from the field of art, whereas reenactment, which often considers itself to belong to historical inquiry, can trace its origins to the seventeenth century, if not earlier.[16] Reenactment becomes an artistic strategy only when artists appropriate it as such.[17]

16
Naval battles were known to have been staged in ancient Roman amphitheaters, but the modern notion of historical reenactment is generally dated to the seventeenth century. Reenactment grew popular in England in the nineteenth century, an outgrowth of Romanticism. See Stephen Gapps, *Performing the Past. A Cultural History of Historical Reenactments*, Sydney 2002.

17
Artists' reenactments of historical events, while related to the present discussion, seem to me a distinct phenomenon with different roots and aspirations. See in particular: Louis van den Hengel, Archives of Affect. Performance, Reenactment, and the Becoming of Memory, in: *Materializing Memory in Art and Popular Culture*, London/New York 2017, 125–142; Sven Lütticken (ed.), *Life. Once More Forms of Reenactment in Contemporary Art*, Rotterdam 2005; Rebecca Schneider, *Performing Remains. Art and War in Times of Theatrical Reenactment*, London 2011; Robert Blackson, Once More … with Feeling. Reenactment in Contemporary Art and Culture, in: *Art Journal* 66/1, 2007, 28–40; Adam Czirak, Sophie

The term "history" refers both to the events of the past and the attempt to make sense of those events. By reconstructing real events with painstaking detail, reenactment attempts to bring the two together. Battles are popular, but any historical event recorded in sufficient detail is suitable. "Historical reenactors", as they call themselves, scour the written historical record for precise information about battle plans, language, and costume. Historical fidelity – the synthesis of accuracy and authenticity – is essential for them. Accuracy is important in the representation of real figures (such as a general), whereas authenticity is sufficient for general, anonymous types (such as an infantryman). Many reenactors insist on props and costumes made of the same materials used in the past, even if less expensive imitations in polyester and plastic look identical.

Though it may in some respects resemble dramatic performance, reenactment differs not only in its attention to historical detail over narrative, but also in its purposes. Rather than being put on for an audience, a reenactment is a collaborative exercise aimed not at merely demonstrating history but understanding it – even "experiencing" it – from the inside.[18] Though generally disdained by historians, some scholars have addressed reenactment as a cultural phenomenon, and even considered its potential for providing historical insight. The following account of reenactment, which stresses its differences from theater, was written by a scholar of education:

> The realistic reliving of an event itself, rather than simply a dramatized plotted story line, is the goal. Sequence is more important than suspense and dramatic tension. Most important, the major thrust is not to perform before an audience of nonparticipants but to develop empathetic comprehension, the feel of "being there", for audiences of participants who are totally immersed in the flow of events.[19]

Reenactment is thus – like restoration itself – simultaneously the product of extensive research and a source text for further research. Minute historical details are important in that they may generate embodied knowledge that is otherwise lost to history – for example,

Nikoleit, Friederike Oberkrome, Verena Straub, Robert Walter-Jochum, and Michael Wetzels (eds.), *Performance zwischen den Zeiten. Reenactments und Preenactments in Kunst und Wissenschaft*, Bielefeld 2019. Notable historical reenactment projects by artists include Ant Farm's *The Eternal Frame* (1975), a restating of John F. Kennedy's assassination; Jeremy Deller's *The Battle of Orgreave* (2001); Dread Scott's *Slave Rebellion* (2019); and Rod Dickinson's *The Jonestown Reenactment* (2000), *The Milgram Re-enactment* (2002), and *The Waco Re-enactment* (2004).

18
Reenactors do sometimes perform for an audience, a practice known as "living history". It is most commonly practiced at historical sites, such as "Colonial Williamsburg" in Virginia, which is "populated" by costumed characters of the eighteenth century. See: David Dean, Living History, in: Vanessa Agnew, Jonathan Lamb, and Juliane Tomann (eds.), *The Routledge Handbook of Reenactment Studies*, London 2020, 120–124.

19
Thomas N. Turner, Historical Reenactment. Can It Work as a Standard Tool of the Social Studies?, in: *The Social Studies* 76/5, 1985, 220–223, here 220.

that a heavy woolen uniform might hamper soldiers' ability to fight on a hot summer day. Thus, while reenactment must be informed by history, it also makes a claim to uncovering it. As historian Vanessa Agnew explains, "Embodying the role through disciplining the body is not just good method acting; it is considered a means of knowing history from the inside, and the emaciated or myopic infantryman has a compelling basis on which to testify what it was like to have 'gone back'."[20] Authentic uniforms are especially emphasized because the goal is an embodied understanding of history. Agnew argues that, "[w]hile many scholars would prefer to ignore or dismiss it", reenactment's "broad appeal, its implicit charge to democratise historical knowledge, and its capacity to find new and inventive modes of historical representation suggest that it also has a contribution to make to academic historiography".[21] Of course, reenactors cannot truly resurrect or experience historical events. But reenactment might well offer novel strategies for understanding aspects of historical events that otherwise escape history's – or art history's – grasp.

Let us then consider reenactment as a conservation strategy. This would entail pursuing not the aesthetic authenticity sought by reperformance, but the historical fidelity claimed by mimetic reproduction. The notion of reenactment, or at least something like it, offers access to knowledge that other forms of research cannot, and that reperformance in particular elides.

Freed from the responsibility of maintaining aesthetic authenticity, reenactment has the potential to provide the historical, cultural, and even personal context that neither reperformance nor traditional forms of documentation can provide. Abramović's early performances can be located once more in Yugoslavia – and in the 1970s. Specific architectural elements and stylistic codes can be replicated. And perhaps most importantly, these elements can be experienced "from within". Agnew explains that "As a form of affective history – i.e. historical representation that both takes affect as its object and attempts to elicit affect – reenactment is less concerned with events, processes or structures than with the individual's physical and psychological experience."[22] What kind of "experience" is available here, to "performer" or "viewer" (since each individual taking part in a reenactment would be both at once)? What aspects of a performance could be "documented" by such a mimetic reconstruction? Certain elements of Abramović's own reperformance efforts shed light on the possibilities.

20
Vanessa Agnew, What Is Reenactment?, in: *Criticism* 46/3, 2004, 327–339, here 331.

21
Ibid., 335.

22
Vanessa Agnew, History's Affective Turn. Historical Reenactment and Its Work in the Present, in: *Rethinking History* 11/3, 2007, 299–312, here 301.

Jessica Santone, borrowing a term from Nikki Cesare and Jenn Joy, sees reperformances as a form of "embodied documentation" of the originals.[23] Her primary claim, while intriguing, is elusive: "Intensely focused on documentation as preservation in her performance series [*Seven Easy Pieces*], Marina Abramović produced a work that uses repetition to generate documentation."[24] How might we begin to understand reperformance itself as documentation, rather than a careful product thereof? How might a reperformance "document" aspects of a performance that have not been, perhaps never could be, captured by other documentary forms such as photographs, video, and oral accounts? Santone's argument begins to take shape in concert with Lara Shalson's observations of Abramović's reperformance, in *Seven Easy Pieces*, of Joseph Beuys's *How to Explain Pictures to a Dead Hare* (1965). Shalson notes that the dead hare, initially stiff, became soft and malleable over time as it warmed in Abramović's arms, allowing her to manipulate its limbs, making it seem more alive.[25] This is a simple yet powerful example of what can be "documented" by reenactment. Shalson's experience also supports Rebecca Schneider's contention that "When we approach performance not as that which disappears (as the archive expects), but as both the *act* of remaining and a means of reappearance (though not a metaphysics of presence) we almost immediately are forced to admit that remains do not have to be isolated to the document."[26] In short, reenactment offers the possibility not of reperforming, but of simulating historical performance. It can be considered "mimetic documentation", a living, breathing copy that, in its very fiction, allows performer/audience access to forms and types of information that are otherwise beyond our grasp.

V. Simulation

I am proposing here that what I call mimetic documentation – a form of documentation that is concerned primarily or exclusively with historical fidelity rather than aesthetic authenticity, and can plausibly claim to give information about a performance work by essentially copying that work – might serve to assist in the conservation of performance works by simulating them. The term "simulation" describes key concepts in a number of rather disparate

23 Jessica Santone, Marina Abramović's "Seven Easy Pieces". Critical Documentation Strategies for Preserving Art's History, in: *Leonardo* 41/2, 2008, 147–152, here 148. Santone borrows the term "embodied documentation" from: T. Nikki Cesare and Jenn Joy, Performa/(Re)Performa, in: *TDR. The Drama Review* 50/1, 2006, 170–177.

24 Santone, Seven Easy Pieces, 152.

25 Lara Shalson, Enduring Documents. Re-Documentation in Marina Abramović's Seven Easy Pieces, in: *Contemporary Theatre Review* 23/3, 2013, 432–441, here 440.

26 Rebecca Schneider, Performance Remains, in: *Performance Research* 6/2, 2001, 100–108, here 103.

fields. These different definitions, while they share certain fundamental points, are by no means interchangeable, and my argument relies on a specific notion of simulation. The root of the word has to do with the notion of a copy or fake, and all definitions include this idea in some way, but from there they diverge. In psychology, for example, "simulation theory" posits a person's ability to imagine what another is thinking or feeling by "simulating" that person's thoughts in their own mind. For many philosophers and theorists, simulation is difficult to disentangle from the ideas of Jean Baudrillard, for whom it is a central aspect of postmodern culture.[27] In Baudrillard's system, a simulacrum is what results when a given sign seems or pretends to refer to a profound reality, but no longer does so. Simulation is the next stage of this scheme, in which the reality underneath the sign is wholly severed, and signs refer only to other signs. For Baudrillard, this is the condition of postmodern culture – a simulation of reality that is no longer tethered to it, may even proceed it, and thus shapes rather than reflects it.

My own notion of simulation stems from the term's general use within the natural and social sciences, wherein to simulate is generally to model a process.[28] Simulation is not the repetition of a known sequence, but the modeling of a dynamic system in order to discover something new; its outcome is not fixed from the start, but emerges as a result of the simulation being run. Simulation is by necessity reductive, leaving out certain pieces of reality and simplifying others in order to focus on the most relevant elements under investigation. It is not a perfect copy but a schematic representation.[29] Therefore, simulation's primary weakness – its oversimplification of complex situations – is also the source of its utility.

Understood this way, we might think of historical reenactment as a form of simulation, as does historian of reenactment Annette Vowinckel. She maintains this even though reenactment does not generally allow for the possibility of dynamic change – i.e., something other than a fixed outcome – which Vowinckel herself insists upon as a feature of simulation.[30] In the sciences, computer simulations are often used to form predictions about real-world processes; the results of the simulation cannot be known beforehand. As a

27
Jean Baudrillard, *Simulacra and Simulation*, trans. by Sheila Faria Glaser, Ann Arbor, MI 1994.

28
See: Eric Winsberg, Computer Simulations in Science, in: *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy Archive. Winter 2019 Edition*, September 26, 2019, ed. by Edward N. Zalta (April 20, 2021); Louise Sauvé, Lise Renaud, David Kaufman, and Jean-Simon Marquis, Distinguishing between Games and Simulations. A Systematic Review, in: *Educational Technology and Society* 10/3, 2007, 247–256, here 251.

29
John R. Searle, Minds, Brains, and Programs, in: *Behavioral and Brain Sciences* 3/3, 1980, 417–424, here 423.

30
Annette Vowinckel, Past Futures. From Re-enactment to the Simulation of History in Computer Games, in: *Historical Social Research / Historische Sozialforschung* 34/2, 2009, 322–332, here 328.

strategy for performance conservation, simulation may not necessarily provide new "hard data" about a performance, but it might yield new experiences of the work that provide crucial information about it. A simulation carefully built from the already available data might mimetically document some aspect or aspects of the original work, which allows the viewer/participant to glean or infer insights that might not be available if those same data were presented in another, drier form. Therefore, even though reenactments are frequently foregone conclusions in terms of their succession of events, they may still function to provide new information from the initial data provided – affective data, experiences rather than the quantitative information that is usually the goal of computer simulation.

This definition of simulation – the simplified modeling of a dynamic system, generally used to gain knowledge about something in the real world, which may or may not be done with the assistance of computers – may be useful as applied to the conservation of performance art. Since a performance work's "system" includes the audience as well as the various contexts in which it took place and which shape it and which need to be simulated together with the work itself, reenactment could indeed be used to simulate performance works. Still, it also presents a number of obstacles and disadvantages. Since reenactment requires that all participants function as both performer and audience, a great deal of commitment and preparation is necessary to successfully execute it; it cannot be performed casually by, say, museum visitors who are merely curious about a given work. Beyond this, it requires a suspension of disbelief that is difficult to align with the types of experiences that are native to art spaces. While mimesis is of course commonly encountered in an art museum, the type of fiction demanded of successful reenactment would likely come across as theater, if not outright kitsch.

VI. Film and Television as Mimetic Documentation

There are other conditions, however, under which this type of simulation that I call mimetic documentation appears not as anachronistic kitsch, but as clearly legible mimesis. When watching a film or television show, viewers generally find it easy to suspend their disbelief and accept the reality of the world depicted, considering it natural that people who are their contemporaries – that is, actors – might wear clothes and use language from another time and place. Historical film is a popular and prestigious genre, and its potential relevance for the discipline of history has been acknowledged since Michael Ferro's book *Cinéma et Histoire* (1977). Robert Rosenstone has also opened a path for academic approaches to film as a form of history writing.[31] A film's version of history is not necessarily more constructed or artificial than the written accounts that we call

[31] Robert A. Rosenstone, *History on Film/Film on History*, Harlow 2006.

scholarship, though its aims may be different. As film scholar Tony Barta notes,

> Film theory has always been concerned with elaborating how film art creates a sense of reality; historiography is at last beginning on the same process. Historians have probably had to reflect on their distance from reality as much as any artist (pictorial or literary) and have always assembled their representations of the past from broader perspectives and interior close-ups.[32]

Like reenactment, both film and history aim to construct a convincing reality.

Indeed, historical cinema has occasionally turned its lens to art history, thereby reconstructing – essentially, simulating – important scenes from art's past. We might think, for instance, of Jackson Pollock (played by Ed Harris, who also directed) working athletically in his studio in the 2000 film. And if we can accept a simulated Pollock on film – Harris was nominated for an Academy Award for his performance – might we be able to imagine a reconstruction of Marina Abramović's performance? Conveniently, it is not necessary to imagine; such a filmed simulation already exists.

From November 15 to December 21, 2002, Abramović performed *House with the Ocean View* at Sean Kelly Gallery in Manhattan's Chelsea district [Fig. 3 and Fig. 4]. For this durational performance, the artist lived on permanent display on three room-like, sparely furnished platforms, drinking only water. Each platform was connected to the ground with a ladder whose rungs were knives. Though Abramović did not speak, she evidently formed a powerful connection with her viewers, some of whom stayed in the gallery for hours at a time. Foreshadowing the popularity and resonance of *The Artist Is Present* eight years later, *House with the Ocean View* caused a sensation beyond the art world that earned it a pop-cultural cameo. The following year, the television show *Sex and the City* asked Abramović to recreate her performance for its 86th episode, in which the protagonist, relationship columnist Carrie Bradshaw (Sarah Jessica Parker), becomes romantically involved with a (fictional) famous artist (played, surreally, by the dancer Mikhail Baryshnikov). Abramović declined to appear on the show, but allowed its producers to reconstruct – to simulate – her performance.[33]

Abramović treated the inquiry like a request for reperformance, allowing her work to be "redone" as long as her rights as author were respected and financially compensated – the same procedure that she herself would later follow with *Seven Easy Pieces*.

32 Tony Barta, Screening the Past. History since the Cinema, in: id. (ed.), *Screening the Past. Film and the Representation of History*, Westport, CT 2004, 1–18, here 12.

33 Marina Abramović and Laurie Anderson, Marina Abramovic and Laurie Anderson. Wise Women, *Modern Painters*, March 1, 2010 (February 2, 2022).

[Fig. 3]
Documentation of Marina Abramović, House with the Ocean View, 2002, New York, Sean Kelly, courtesy Sean Kelly, photo by Attilio Maranzano © Marina Abramović.

[Fig. 4]
Documentation of Marina Abramović, House with the Ocean View, 2002, New York, Sean Kelly, courtesy Sean Kelly, photo by Steven Harris © Marina Abramović.

For the scene in which Parker's and Baryshnikov's characters first meet, *Sex and the City* filmed at the Sean Kelly Gallery in Chelsea, apparently using the same "set" and "props" that Abramović had used for her actual performance [Fig. 5]. The artist herself was simulated by actress Beth Lapides. Though Lapides bears a tolerable resemblance to Abramović, her performance is not a faithful reenactment of the latter's: the actress's hair is disheveled, her eyes dark and vacant, as if suffering. She moves aimlessly through the set, avoiding the audience's gaze. Yet in photographs of *House with the Ocean View*, Abramović appears calm and centered, her long, smooth hair pulled back in a practical ponytail. Her behavior – particularly the sustained eye contact that would later inform *The Artist Is Present* – announced her willingness to engage with her viewers.

Nonetheless, the scene does provide some meaningful relation to the original performance that is unavailable in the deliberate documentation created of it by Abramović and her gallery. Though *Sex and the City*'s version of the gallery is mostly populated by the kind of solemn viewers one also finds in the work's official documentation, Carrie is unimpressed by the performance, and shares a laugh with her friend Charlotte (a former gallerist), though she is shushed by the others. Such irreverence belies the earnestness that Abramović sought to convey – and that is promoted in official photographs – but it is very much authentic to a typical art audience, which inevitably includes a range of perspectives (even if it cannot be historically *accurate*, since Carrie and Charlotte are fictional characters). The psychologically charged documentation produced by Abramović and her gallery is meant to represent and propagate the artist's own interpretation of the work, and thus fails to register (or perhaps deliberately omits) dissenting viewpoints.

VII. Video Games as Simulation

Though certain elements of Abramović's performance might be simulated by this scene from *Sex and the City*, the scene is ineffective as a simulation of the artist's practice (nor is that its intent). Yet even if it were a more faithful rendition, it would still be limited by the formal and structural constraints of its medium. What film and television lack is immersion, the feature that allows simulation to be experienced from within, rather than from a distanced, third-person perspective. Though film and television provide a form of mimetic documentation that is more stable and accessible than that offered by historical reenactment, they lack the crucial element of embodied perspective that transforms a viewer into a participant. While filmed scenes like that of *Sex and the City* may be considered a form of simulation according to the definition discussed above, they fail to incorporate the element of immersion that has proven so essential to reenactment as a form of mimetic documentation. For sociologist Sherri Turkle, "simulations want, even demand, immer-

[Fig. 5]
Still from *Sex and the City*, episode 86, first aired September 14, 2003, 34 min, 01:13 © Home Box Office.

sion".[34] Here, affective data – experiences – are key. A weather simulation might indicate in what direction a hurricane is heading, but it will tell you nothing about the experience of standing in its path.

For the purposes of conserving performance, a suitable form of simulation would incorporate film's potential for the suspension of disbelief in terms of time, place, and character, its capacity to synthesize a specific setting or environment, but add to this the capacity for immersion, ideally even for interaction and change, as in historical reenactment. It would allow the viewer to actually experience the work, or at least certain aspects of it, from the inside – ideally, to avoid the pitfalls of reperformance, without giving her the false impression that she was experiencing an authentic instance of the performance as art. The extant notion of simulation that comes closest to the version of it necessary for my purposes here is to be found in the small yet growing field of video game studies.

While gaming scholar Veli Matti Karhulahti notes that "Gaming has been closely tied to simulation since the latter's academic emergence" as early as 1960,[35] Chris Crawford points out that the difference between video games and simulations lies in their differing goals: "A simulation is created for computational or evaluative purposes", whereas a video game "is created for educational or entertainment purposes".[36] Yet these two goals may coincide in the simulation of a work of art. Karhulahti ultimately concludes that videogames "can and should be discussed as (computerized) simulations or simulators in cases where they can be given a functional role as a model of a valid reference system" – as in the case of historical events or performances.[37] His primary distinction is between games that model real referents – for example, medieval Europe – and those that are purely imaginary, such as a fanciful kingdom filled with dragons. Note that this distinction between reality and fiction is not strictly analogous to one between real events and irreal ones. Rather, the notion of "reality" here is closer to the concept of historical authenticity discussed above. This is a particularly important and useful distinction for the possibility of modeling performance, because it allows for a certain degree of interactivity, change, and openness in the modeling of a work of historical performance. That is, the participant/viewer – a role we can now identify with (if not quite as) the player of a game – has a certain degree of leeway (in German, *Spielraum*) to influence events in a manner that, if not

34
Sherry Turkle, *Simulation and Its Discontents*, Cambridge, MA 2009, 6.

35
Veli Matti Karhulahti, Do Videogames Simulate? Virtuality and Imitation in the Philosophy of Simulation, in: *Simulation and Gaming* 46/6, 2015, 838–856, here 842.

36
Chris Crawford, *The Art of Computer Game Design*, New York 1997, 8.

37
Karhulahti, Do Videogames Simulate?, 847.

strictly consistent with what is known of the original performance, nonetheless represents an authentic engagement with it. Indeed, this is necessary to the concept of immersion in simulation, since the "player" is playing a role: that of an original viewer.

In some ways, video games combine useful aspects of both film and reenactment; Brian Rejack observes that "the experience of playing a video game has become increasingly similar to reenactment".[38] The nascent field of "historical game studies" defines itself as

> the study of games that in some way represent the past or relate to discourses about it, the potential applications of such games to different domains of activity and knowledge, and the practices, motivations and interpretations of players of these games and other stakeholders involved in their production or consumption.[39]

Historical games are "those games that in some way represent the past, relate to discussions about it, or stimulate practices related to history".[40]

Historical games tend to follow two distinct models: the simulation of a broad historical period and the reconstruction of a particular event. Most scholarship on historical games in education, history, and sociology tends to focus on the former category; in particular, the *Civilization* series by Sid Meier has received a great deal of attention.[41] Other well-known games that fall into this category are *The Oregon Trail* (originally developed in 1971 for educational purposes) and *Age of Empires* (a series of commercial games that freely mix historical details with fiction). Such games are generally much more concerned with historical authenticity than with accuracy; the player does not reenact specific historical events, but rather moves through a simulation of a historical reality. Other historical games

38
Brian Rejack, Toward a Virtual Reenactment of History. Video Games and the Recreation of the Past, *Rethinking History* 11/3, 2007, 411–425, here 413.

39
Adam Chapman, Anna Foka, and Jonathan Westin, What Is Historical Game Studies?, in: *Rethinking History* 21/3, 2016, 358–371, here 362.

40
Ibid., 367, fn. 1.

41
See: Matthew Wilhelm Kapell and Andrew B. R. Elliott (eds.), *Playing with the Past. Digital Games and the Simulation of History*, New York 2013; William Uricchio, Simulation, History, and Computer Games, in: Joost Raessens and Jeffrey H. Goldstein (eds.), *Handbook of Computer Game Studies*, Cambridge, MA 2005, 327–338; Jeremiah McCall, Teaching History with Digital Historical Games. An Introduction to the Field and Best Practices, in: *Simulation and Gaming* 47/4, 2016, 517–542; id., Navigating the Problem Space. The Medium of Simulation Games in the Teaching of History, in: *The History Teacher* 46/1, 2012, 9–28; Claudia Fogu, Digitalizing Historical Consciousness, in: *History and Theory* 48/2, 2009, 103–121; Karsten Weber, Erklärung Historischer Abläufe mit Computersimulationen, in: *Historische Sozialforschung* 32/4, 2007, 94–121. For a critique of the ideologies at work in *Civilization*, see Alexander R. Galloway, Playing the Code. Allegories of Control in Civilization, in: *Radical Philosophy* 128/5, 2004, 33–40.

are concerned with the simulation of a particular event, such as a battle. Yet unlike in historical reenactment, historical accuracy is almost necessarily forfeit here, as the very nature of the game requires that the outcome be determined by the player's actions and decisions. In a game, Rome might fend off the Huns, or Germany win the Second World War.

William Uricchio is right to note the value of a non-teleological approach to history[42] – those outcomes were never inevitable – but the very potential for interaction and agency that makes video games so vivid a form of simulation also threatens their value as mimetic documentation. The most productive historical games, therefore, exploit immersion and its contingency not to rewrite history, or to use it as a careless playground, but to provide a more personal, affective experience of it. *1979 Revolution. Black Friday* (2016), designed by Navid Khonsari, takes place during the Iranian revolution. The player's character is a young photojournalist, Reza Shirazi, a fictional character who takes part in real events. Though the character of Reza claims that his role as a journalist is to avoid choosing sides, the player finds it increasingly difficult to do so. As he meets people with different perspectives, and finds himself embroiled in increasingly tense and violent confrontations between the protest movement and the regime, the player is powerless to change history, but he is compelled to find his own place in it. The game thus makes fraught and personal the conflicts that often appear dry and inevitable in more conventional forms of history.

VIII. Simulating *The Artist Is Present*

As simulations, video games – or at least the technologies and visual conventions that are native to such games – have significant advantages over film, and even certain practical advantages over reenactment. They excel at providing mimetic documentation – an experience of immersion, a sort of virtual embodiment, that is at least potentially conducive to an unconventional yet meaningful engagement with history. But the question still remains whether a computer simulation in the form of a game might function as a form of conservation for live art.

Pippin Barr's parody game *The Artist Is Present* appeared on his website in 2011, not long after Abramović's exhibition and work of the same title had closed at MoMA.[43] For this work, which catapulted Abramović to a level of renown unprecedented for performance artists, the artist sat, unmoving, each day that the exhibition was open to the public, for a total of more than 750 hours. Across from her wooden chair at the center of MoMA's high-ceilinged atrium

42
Uricchio, Simulation, History, and Computer Games.

43
You may play the game yourself on Barr's website (during MoMA's 2011 opening hours, that is): Pippin Barr, *The Artist Is Present* (November 16, 2023).

was placed another chair, which visitors were invited to occupy, in order to make eye contact with Abramović and experience her "presence" for as long as they wished [Fig. 6]. Despite the disarming simplicity of this premise, demand to take part in the performance quickly grew, and soon, a massive queue formed outside the museum each morning. Because an individual might choose to sit for five minutes or five hours – some did stay for the entire day – it was impossible to calculate one's chances of taking part in the work.

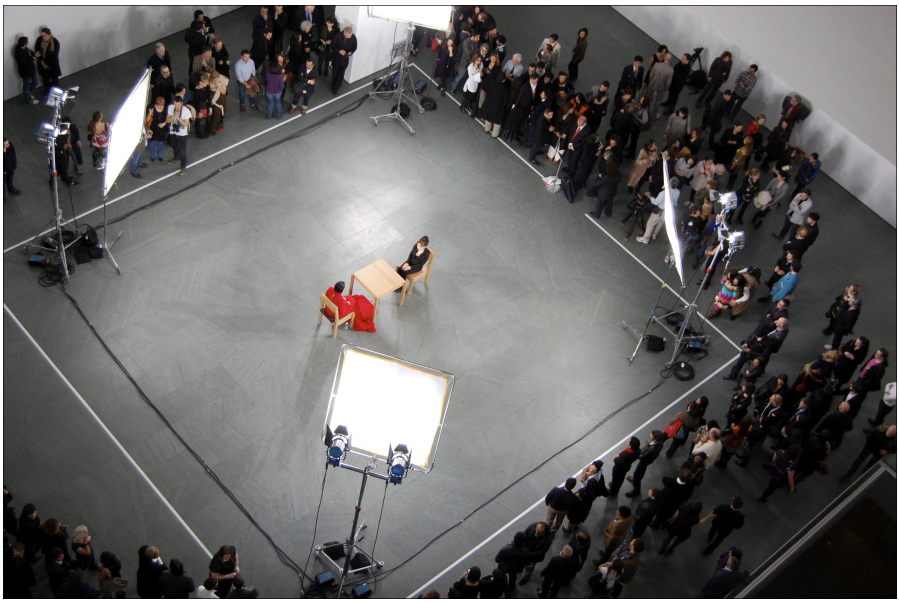
Barr, interested in the practical dynamics of this ostensibly spiritual experience, playfully simulated it. An assistant professor of computer science, he also designs web browser games that are generally very simple in their graphics and play. Their pared-down, pixel-drawn visuals mimic the blocky simplicity of classic 8-bit video games, or the slightly more sophisticated style of computer games that came standard with Windows operating systems in the 1990s.[44] *The Artist Is Present* borrows the graphics of the original *Police Quest*, an "adventure simulation" computer game partly designed by former police officers, which was originally released in 1987 by Sierra Games [Fig. 7].[45] In addition to their clear stylistic references, Barr's games often explore and subvert conventional game content and tropes.

When *The Artist Is Present* opens, you – the player – are standing on the sidewalk outside a schematic rendering of MoMA. Your avatar's skin, hair, clothing, and eyes (two solid squares) are randomly chosen, and may be any of a small set of colors. Text windows invite you to enter the museum's lobby – you navigate solely by pressing the arrow keys – where you must buy a ticket before you can enter the galleries [Fig. 8]. Once inside, you walk past a few pixelated masterpieces of the museum's collection until you encounter a long row of non-player characters [Fig. 9]. This is the infamous queue, where you may wait your turn to sit with Abramović – who also looks just like your avatar, save for her long black hair, pink skin, and long red dress. The line's length varies, but it may take dozens of patient attempts to sit with the pixelated Abramović.

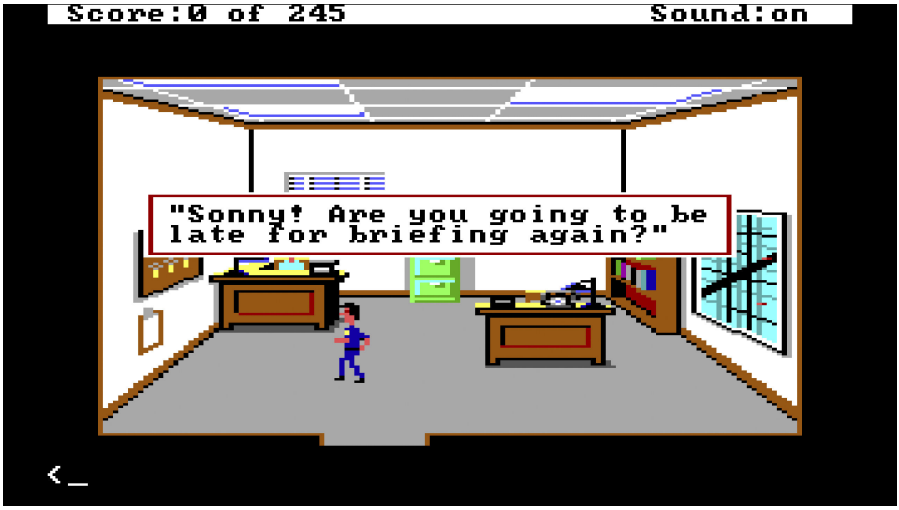
This disappointment, however, reflects the experience of most would-be participants. Indeed, though the game is extremely simple in its visuals, conception, and play mechanics, it still bears a meaningful relationship to the reality from which it is drawn. The game is playable only when the real MoMA is open; before 10:30 a.m. EST the avatar cannot enter, and at 5:30 p.m. it must leave. This use of real time effectively reproduces real constraints that structured

44
"8-bit" refers to the processors used in video game systems of the early 1980s (such as the Nintendo Entertainment System, or NES), the limitations of which gave rise to an enduring style that game designers like Barr, working with completely different technology, still make use of today.

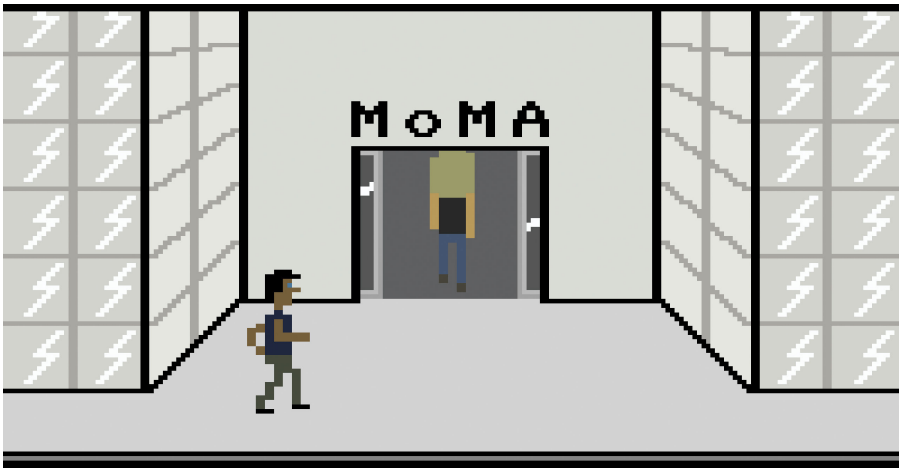
45
Wikipedia contributors, Police Quest, *Wikipedia, The Free Encyclopedia* (November 1, 2023). It is interesting that *Police Quest* thereby makes certain claims to, and a great deal of effort towards, being a faithful simulation of police work.



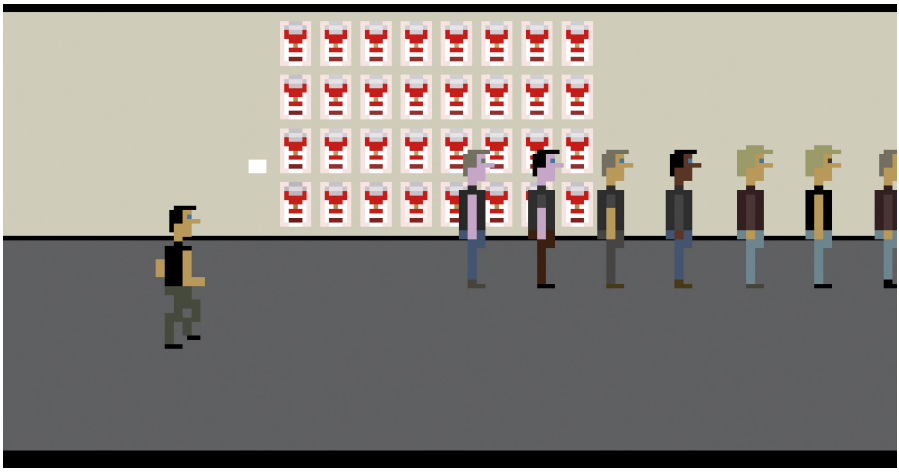
[Fig. 6]
Documentation of Marina Abramović, The Artist Is Present, 2010–2011, Wikimedia (November 16, 2023), photo by Andrew Russeth.



[Fig. 7]
Still from *Police Quest*, 1987 © Sierra Entertainment, Inc.



[Fig. 8]
Still from Pippin Barr, The Artist Is Present, 2011 © Pippin Barr.



[Fig. 9]
Still from Pippin Barr, The Artist Is Present, 2011 © Pippin Barr.

the original performance. The game foregrounds the experience of waiting in line and the uncertainty and frustration of that experience, elements that were neither part of the museum's publicity campaign nor effectively captured in official documentation sanctioned by the artist. Indeed, the best-known images of Abramović's *The Artist Is Present* are from a series of close-up portraits taken by photographer Marco Anelli of the artist along with everyone who sat with her, which have the effect of cropping out only the large crowds of would-be sitters but also the surrounding apparatus required to maintain the piece: studio lighting, stanchions, museum security officers tasked with keeping the public in line.[46] Similarly, the 2012 documentary film of the same name narrowly defined the performance in terms of the artist and individual participant, ignoring the institutional, architectural, social, and other factors that structured viewers' experiences.[47]

Reflecting on these two poles of experience, Barr considers his game to be

> a terrible remediation of [Abramović's] work which is all about human closeness [...] But for some of the people who reported back to me on the experience of playing, it did have resonance with the actual work in the intensity of the experience. [...] Sitting with her is not just about the fact that she's an intense person, but that you waited for eight hours to do it and very few people are going to have that experience.[48]

Whereas simulations in the form of theater or film may alter events in the service of plot or drama, games' structure is marked by the pursuit of one or more goals. On the face of it, this is a distortion of Abramović's performance, which instead emphasizes the simple, ambition-shunning notion of "presence"; this quasi-mystical quality was emphasized in the official photographs and film that claim to document the performance, and were criticized by a number of scholars. Carrie Lambert-Beatty called it "unabashed celebrity worship", arguing that "In a generative view of performance, the relation of performer and viewer is something to be continually manipulated and multiplied, not restricted to the model of co-presence".[49] By ignoring this notion of presence in favor of a more mundane

46
Marco Anelli, Klaus Biesenbach, and Chrissie Iles, *Portraits in the Presence of Marina Abramović*, Bologna 2021.

47
Marina Abramović. The Artist Is Present, directed by Matthew Akers and Jeff Dupre (Show of Force, 2012), 01:46.

48
Jesper Juul, Interview with Pippin Barr, January 24, 2018 (February 2, 2022).

49
Carrie Lambert-Beatty, Against Performance Art, in: *Artforum* 48/9, 2010, 208–213, here 212. See also Caroline A. Jones, Staged Presence, in: *Artforum* 48/9, 2010, 214–219; Jones, The Artist Is Present, 16–45.

one, Barr's game may have resembled the audience's experience of the performance more than its carefully curated "documents". The game even preserves certain incidental details of the original experience, such as MoMA's 2010 ticket price and the fact that the "museum" is closed on Tuesdays – a policy changed in recent years, and thus now documented by the game. Such details may seem trivial, but they suggest the medium's potential for preserving contextual information that is subsequently completely detached from the experience of a performance, if not lost altogether.

Games have no hope of simulating every aspect of a performance, or allowing the player the unlimited options that are, theoretically, available to a live audience member. In reality – unlike in my experience of Barr's game at the time of this writing – I was eventually able to sit across from Abramović and experience *The Artist Is Present*, though not by patiently waiting in line. Though I had tried many times – taken days off work, arrived at the museum by sunrise, and waited all day until closing – I never reached the front of the line. Yet by returning repeatedly to the performance – sometimes to wait, sometimes just to watch – I came to know several people who were often there, and one of them offered to wait in line for me on the last Friday of the exhibition, when the museum would be open late, so that he could bequeath his spot to me once I left work. The specificity of my experience with *The Artist Is Present* is not available in a simulation like Barr's. Yet understood as a form of mimetic documentation, a game simulation may offer a limited number of options that stand in for a much greater range. In Barr's *The Artist Is Present* the player cannot, for example, induce himself to vomit in front of Abramović, as one visitor infamously did, but he *can* cause enough of a disturbance to induce the security guards to kick him out of the museum (this is accomplished in the game by "jostling" people in line one too many times). Beyond this, the very poverty of the format, its drastic reduction, is an answer to scholars' concern that audiences might confuse a copy of an artwork with the original.

The game format also offers intriguing potential for the viewer/player to inhabit different perspectives and thus encounter different aspects of the performance. As Barr reports, Abramović told him that she herself played the game, but never made it to the front of the line – she got bored and stopped paying attention, and when her avatar failed to move forward in line, it was forcibly removed from the digital museum.[50] Her interaction with Barr's game is likely the closest Abramović has come to accessing her audience's experience of her work. The simulation of embodiment offered by video games – however disembodied it may be – is a powerful tool for considering the question of perspective in performance art.

Barr's work even opens up the possibility of considering the performer's own perspective; in 2020, he released *The Artist Is*

[50] Conversation with Pippin Barr, February 24, 2021.

Present 2, in which the player's avatar is no anonymous visitor, but Abramović herself. Barr's intention was to convey something of the artist's perspective: "You're subsuming your needs and any selfish desires you have for these little computer-generated people, who aren't real, but they need you to see them", he explained.[51] Your "goal" in the game involves waking up, taking a taxi to the museum, and taking your place in MoMA's atrium, where a crowd of authentically awestruck viewers – "It's her! I can't believe she's here!" – awaits you. Once you are seated and ready, you lift your head and lock eyes with the first visitor, remaining with them until they choose to leave [Fig. 10 and Fig. 11]. In that sense, you are entirely beholden to your viewers. As a simulation of Abramović's day, the game even has some documentary value: the apartment in which Abramović wakes up at the opening of the game is based on the one she stayed in during the exhibition's run.

In short, though Barr's *The Artist Is Present* does not claim to accurately simulate Abramović's performance, it nevertheless offers meaningful access to certain aspects of the original *The Artist Is Present* that are unavailable in more traditional forms of documentation. The game vividly demonstrates the surprising potential of video games to simulate and thereby conserve some of the most contingent and intangible aspects of live art.

In a consideration of video games as a potential preservation medium, however, it would be remiss to ignore the fact that video games themselves pose significant challenges to conservation. During the process of writing this text, the software giant Adobe discontinued support for Flash, a content-creation software and viewing application first released in 1996 that supported embedded audio and video along with vector, 3D, and raster graphics.[52] This situation is a reminder that any form of documentation is a new conservation object that must be cared for and maintained over time.

IX. Conservation Choices

Conservation entails difficult choices. When advanced technical imaging reveals another composition hidden beneath a painting's topmost layers – as in the recent case of Vermeer's *Girl Reading a Letter at an Open Window* (ca. 1657) – conservators may choose to keep the painting in its current state or to reveal the image beneath, but they cannot do both. In the case of the Vermeer, the Staatliche

51
Jessica Conditt, Some of the Best Video Game Ideas Come from a Twitter Philosopher, in: *Engadget*, October 23, 2019 (February 2, 2022). This notion is intriguing to me because of the possibilities it suggests for delegated performance. *Seven Easy Pieces* was not only an opportunity for new audiences to experience these historical works of performance, but also an opportunity for Abramović to gain embodied knowledge through performing them.

52
Flash's capabilities have been surpassed by newer technologies like HTML5. For more on Flash and its discontinuation, see: Richard C. Moss, The Rise and Fall of Adobe Flash, in: *Ars Tecnica*, July 7, 2020 (February 2, 2022). The version of Barr's game available on his website has been rebuilt to function without Flash, but many other games and animated videos have disappeared permanently.

[Fig. 10]
Still from Pippin Barr, The Artist Is Present 2, 2020 © Pippin Barr.

[Fig. 11]
Still from Pippin Barr, The Artist Is Present 2, 2020 © Pippin Barr.

Kunstsammlung Dresden chose to restore the painting – that is, irreversibly remove its upper layers of paint – after determining that the overpainting was done after Vermeer's death.[53] The restoration exposed a prominent painting of a golden-haired Cupid on what had seemed to be a blank wall, suggesting that despite her impassive expression, the young woman is reading a love letter. This choice brings us more knowledge of Vermeer's work, but it also changes what we understand this artwork to be, permanently intervening in its history.

In conserving performance, too, it is necessary to recognize that no approach can be found that will maintain every significant aspect of an artwork. Understood as a conservation strategy, reperformance privileges aesthetic authenticity, but it severs the work from the historical, social, and other contexts that were once partly constitutive of its meaning. The present discussion is an attempt to imagine the possibility of a "conservation treatment" that might be capable of addressing precisely those elements, which I understand as constituting the work's historical fidelity, without pretending to preserve its aesthetic authenticity. My proposal of computer simulation modeled on video games like Pippin Barr's is therefore not an attempt at a complete solution to the problem of conserving performance, but is rather predicated on the understanding that no such solution exists – that, as in the Vermeer, it is impossible to gaze simultaneously upon both aspects. Yet it is here that the conundrum of performance conservation, which seems to offer challenges beyond those of traditional art objects, opens up possibilities that were not available to the Vermeer's restorers: while neither Abramović's reperformances nor Barr's games can claim to fully document the original performances, the two models are not in competition. This is not to say that neither of these approaches entails any risks; there is much potential for misunderstanding and misinterpretation. But given that conservation seeks to manage risk, not to eliminate it entirely, the type of simulation proposed here – not in spite of, but rather because of, its limitations – might offer one path towards conserving artworks usually considered lost to history at the very moment of their creation.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENT

This article resulted from research undertaken within the Swiss National Science Foundation project "Performance: Conservation, Materiality, Knowledge" which is based at the Institute of Materiality in Arts and Culture at Bern Academy of the Arts, Bern University of Applied Sciences. For their support, comments, and ideas I would like to thank my colleagues in that project, Hanna Hölling (project lead), Emilie Magnin, and Valerian Maly. Earlier versions of this research were presented at the Institute of Culture and Aes-

53
Tessa Solomon, Restoration of Vermeer Painting in Germany Reveals Hidden Image of Cupid, in: *ARTNEWS*, August 24, 2021 (December 12, 2021).

thetics at the University of Lüneburg and the 2022 Swiss Congress for Art History; my thanks to all who provided feedback. Thanks are also due to Hannes Bajohr for his support and suggestions.

Jules Pelta Feldman is an art historian and critic. They are postdoctoral research fellow for the project "Performance: Conservation, Materiality, Knowledge", which is sponsored by the Swiss National Science Foundation and hosted by the Bern Academy of the Arts. Pelta Feldman received their doctorate in art history from the Institute of Fine Arts, New York University, and has worked at The Museum of Modern Art, New York, the Whitney Museum of American Art, and the Grey Art Gallery. Pelta Feldman writes criticism for publications in Switzerland, Germany, and the United States. Their forthcoming monograph, *Charles Simonds and the Seventies*, will be published by Hatje Cantz in 2024. They are also Director of Room & Board, an artist's residency and salon.