

## Collecting Choreographed Performances: “We acquired a work that carries the possibility of extinction”<sup>1</sup>

### Colecionando performances coreografadas: “Nós adquirimos uma obra que traz consigo a possibilidade de extinção”

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#### Resumo

Esse artigo aborda a aquisição de performances coreografadas e os desafios que provoca ao mundo dos museus. O museu há algum tempo é uma instituição destinada a colecionar arte tangível. Assim, eu estava interessada em descobrir como as instituições estão se adaptando à imaterialidade da dança adquirida por museus. Para tanto, me referi ao conceito de objetos de museu dóceis e indisciplinados e os conceitos coreográficos de Andre Lepecki: corporalidade, efemeridade, pontuação e performatividade. Sobre as abordagens desenvolvidas pelos museus para incluir performances coreografadas em suas coleções são apresentados dois casos: *Staging: solo* de Maria Hassabi, adquirida pelo Walker Art Center, em 2018; e *Punt.Point* de Sara Wookey em colaboração com Rennie Tang, adquirida pelo Van Abbemuseum, em 2018. Esta pesquisa investiga as estratégias de aquisição implementadas por museus, a fim de tornar dóceis as performances coreografadas indisciplinadas. Por meio do estudo do processo de institucionalização de duas performances coreografadas, o trabalho fornece uma nova compreensão do colecionamento de dança nos campos de estudos de museus e estudos da performance. Uma das principais conclusões foi que a maioria das estratégias aquisitivas implementadas pelas instituições se esforça para separar a obra de arte do artista, a fim de poder controlá-la melhor. Além disso, descobri que a personalidade e a identidade da instituição desempenham um papel vital na decisão de entrar no longo processo de aquisição de uma performance coreografada. Os esforços necessários para esta decisão são potencializados pela contradição inerente à aquisição de uma obra de arte sem substância material.

#### Palavras-chave

Performance. Performances Coreografadas. Coleção de Museu.

#### Abstract

This paper is about choreographed performances entering museum collections and the challenges this presents to the museum world. The museum has long been an institution meant to collect tangible art. Thus, I was keen to find out how institutions are adjusting to the immateriality of dance entering the museum. To that end, I referred to the concept of docile and unruly museum objects and derived from Andre Lepecki's choreographic concepts: corporeality, ephemerality, scoring and performativity. Inquiring about the approaches followed by museums in order to include choreographed performances in their permanent collections was done on the example of two cases: *Staging: solo* by Maria Hassabi, which was acquired by the Walker Art Center in 2018 and *Punt.Point* by Sara Wookey in collaboration with Rennie Tang, acquired by the Van Abbemuseum in 2018. This research inquiries about acquisition strategies that are implemented by museums, in order to make unruly choreographed performances docile. Through studying the institutionalisation process of two choreographed performances, it provides a new understanding of collecting dance in the fields of museum studies and performance studies. One of my main findings was that most strategies implemented by the acquiring institutions strive to separate the artwork from the artist, in order to be able to control it better. Furthermore, I found that the institution's character and identity play a vital role in the decision to enter the long process of acquiring a choreographed performance. The efforts required for this decision are enhanced by the inherent contradiction of acquiring an artwork with no material substance.

#### Keywords

Performance. Choreographed Performances. Museum Collection.

1 Phrase spoke by Pavel Pys, Curator at Walker Art Center, in a personal phone interview (2019, May 31st).

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## Modes of survival

In the spring of 2017, I was working for the exhibition department of documenta 14. The exhibition included a series of Kwakwaka'wakw indigenous masks made by Northwest Coast artist Beau Dick. The masks would be installed for permanent view and the artist would activate them at times for several scheduled performances. When the crates with the disassembled masks arrived, the installation and conservation team, due to their lack of knowledge around assembling Kwakwaka'wakw masks, put off their installation until the arrival of Beau Dick. When the curator announced Beau Dick's sudden death a few weeks before the opening of the exhibition, the team was not only saddened by the news, they were also left in the dark concerning the installation of the late artist's work.

This case is an indicative example of an artwork unable to exist without the artist's invaluable knowledge. In the case of Beau Dick, his legacy was only preserved through oral transmission of knowledge and was never documented in written form. When a museum acquires an artwork, their aim is to safeguard and preserve it in its original state in perpetuity (VERGO, 1989; DOMINGUEZ RUBIO, 2014). This task is challenged when there is no written information about the nature of the artwork. According to art historian Martha Buskirk (2003), traditionally, conservators would rely on the "internal evidence" (2003: 15) of a material object, in other words the information they could extract from it, in order to preserve it. However, modern, and contemporary artworks have become more conceptual and thus gained contingent qualities, which are difficult to identify and preserve (BUSKIRK, 2003). She thus argues that the material properties of an artwork are no longer sufficient to understanding how it was made and that the knowledge held by the artist is invaluable. Consequently, in order to preserve an artwork in its original form, it is extremely important to clearly document all the information held by the artist concerning the installation, display and preservation of their work. This way the survival of the artwork is separated from the body of its creator. Hence, one could argue that the museum strives to separate the artwork from the artist, in order to preserve it.

Applying the same logic on choreographed performance works in the museum, similar problems arise, since their survival depends on the embodied knowledge of the artists, to the point that they might even be inconceivable without it. The question that derives from this logic is what strategies are developed by museums, in order to extract and safeguard this knowledge. In this paper I will try to understand the processes of acquiring choreographed performances and finding ways of preserving the artist's knowledge, even postmortem.

In the last two decades there has been a rise of interest in choreographed performances entering permanent collections (VAN DEN HENGEL, 2017; WOOD, 2015; BISHOP, 2014b; JONES & HEATHFIELD, 2012 a.o.). Performance has long been considered unsuitable for the object-centered museum economy (LISTA, 2014; BRANNIGAN, 2015). It is thought to be uncollectable in its core, due to its fleeting nature, its time-based character, its vital dependence on the human body and its non-materiality (KAPROW, 1956; PHELAN, 1993; SCHECHNER, 2006 a.o.). The fact that dance is entering the museum, in spite of those characteristics, is indicative of a conceptual problem in the field of museum studies. How do choreographed performances, which are immaterial artworks, meet the object-centered conditions of museum collections? Are museums adapting in order to accommodate them, or are performances being adapted in order to gain object-like qualities?

## The unruliness of performance

The disciplinary overlap, caused by dance entering collection-based institutions (BISHOP, 2014b; LISTA, 2014; WOOKEY, 2015; JONES & HEATHFIELD, 2012 a.o.), has been the source of many discussions in the fields of museum studies and performance. Dance, as a discipline that relies on the artist's body (BRANNIGAN, 2015), is by definition a form of art that challenges the materiality and the authority of institutions (KAPROW 1956; SOFAER, 2018). One key argument here is Peggy Phelan's famous line of argumentation, which claims that performance is defined through disappearance, and thus resists preservation as a fleeting event (PHELAN, 1993). With that in mind, any attempt to collect and preserve choreographed performances is not only futile; it also goes against the very nature of the discipline.

Similarly, one can argue that the ephemeral character of performance does not allow it to enter the museum's object-centered economy. Art historian and curator Marcella Lista approaches the issue of performance entering the museum from this perspective, namely the art market. She argues that, unlike paintings or other material artworks, choreographed performances are not ideal museum objects, since they cannot continue their lives independently from their creators; as a result, they do not respond well to the economy of the art market (LISTA, 2014). According to Lista, the ontology of performance is the reason why it has until recently not been considered part of cultural heritage and, by extension, has not been included in the preservation methods implemented by museums so far (LISTA, 2014).

However, following Clare Bishop (2016), the museum has long been criticised for its mausoleal character. Referring to philosophers such as Nietzsche and Adorno, she presents the argument that museums, in their attempt to preserve cultural objects intact, appropriate qualities similar to those of a mausoleum. They are sterile and quiet and, arguably, “the place that art goes to die” (BISHOP, 2016: 7). Bishop sees the migration of dance to the museum as an effort to activate the space and reclaim it as a living place, where art not only survives, but also continues to co-exist with the public. A further supporter of dance in the museum is choreographer Boris Charmatz. His project *Musé e de la danse* (choreographic centre in Rennes, France) supports the idea that dance is a vital part of cultural heritage that has been ignored for a long time now. It is those exact non-material qualities that render dance inseparable from cultural heritage (CHARMATZ, 2014), as they shift the focus of cultural institutions away from the objects that are stored in the museum and towards the actions that take place there (SHELTON, 2013; BISHOP, 2014a).

Finally, as a response to Phelan's line of argumentation, performance and gender studies scholar Louis Van den Hengel (2017: 129) argues that performance “endures rather than disappears”. Van den Hengel (2017: 135) understands performance reenactment as a form of “archive...that enacts a body-to-body transmission of art-historical knowledge and aesthetic consciousness”. In that sense performance remains, because it is defined not as disappearance but rather as an active force that appears again and again carrying and transmitting knowledge and memory (VAN DEN HENGEL, 2017). This, for him, goes against Phelan's idea of the fleeting nature of performance that resists preservation, since he observes performances as constant materialisations of knowledge and skills. As a result, he claims that their ephemerality is not an obstacle but rather a precondition for their preservation, because it allows them to return again and again (VAN DEN HENGEL, 2017: 139).

Having said that, this research does not focus on whether or not choreographed performances belong to the museum, but rather on new museum practices that are currently being developed, in order to find out how the institutions are adapting to this “performative turn”. Accommodating dance in the museum is a demanding practice, which comes with certain issues related to infrastructure, labour and resources. Many of the spatial adjustments required for the display of dance may lie outside of the knowledge spectrum of a museum curator (WOOKEY, 2015). Being a discipline ontologically connected to the human body, and, by extension, to human labour, the curator needs to acquire human resources skills, in order to hire dancers, trainers, stage professionals and others (WOOD, 2017). Overall, when it comes to accommodating dance, input from professionals of different disciplines is necessary. Following museum studies professor Susanne Macleod (2001), museums are urged to become institutions that do not solely rely on the power of their collection, but actively seek new approaches, collaborations with practitioners and the development of new skills.

Traditionally, in order for performances to enter museum collections, they had to be materialised. In other words, performances would enter the museum in the form of documentation photographs, videos, instructions, or relics (LAURENSEN & VAN SAAZE, 2014). The acquisition of the right to re-enact a performance piece only began in the twenty-first century; the process of this type of acquisition depends on the kind of work, but usually re-enactments are based on scores or notes (LAURENSEN & VAN SAAZE, 2014). That means that there is no physical form for the museum to preserve. As a result, not only the museum’s role as conservator of the objects it owns is challenged, but also the mere notion of ownership is put to question. It may no longer be clear, what exactly the museum is acquiring, when purchasing an artwork (VAN SAAZE, 2013).

In his essay about docile and unruly museum objects sociologist Fernando Dominguez Rubio (2014) defines the museum objects, whose properties are well understood and whose future behaviour is easily predicted by museum professionals as docile. For example, today oil paintings are considered docile. However, when museums still lacked the necessary conditions to preserve oil paintings, such as air conditioning or humidity control, they would behave as unruly, since they would decay in an uncontrollable manner (DOMINGUEZ RUBIO, 2014). In a way, controlling the decay of the objects in its collection means that the museum can be considered a docile-maker of these objects. Under the light of this theory, I would describe performance pieces as unruly, since they are not considered to be ideal candidates for a museum’s collection, because of their immaterial properties.

Yet, the fact that more and more collection-based institutions are acquiring performances (BISHOP, 2014b) shows that museums are gradually adjusting to the needs of performances in the same way that adjustments were implemented in order to preserve oil paintings. For these reasons, performances fit under Rubio’s definition of unruly museum objects since they challenge the museum’s standard approaches. With the notions of preservation and ownership being challenged, the museum needs to adapt to the new circumstances, dictated by collecting performances. Museums need to be redefined as spaces that accommodate living processes that change and develop over time instead of “institutions designed to preserve cultural objects ad aeternam” (DOMINGUEZ RUBIO, 2014: 641).

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Flagship museums such as the MoMA and the Tate Modern have presented the will to include dance in their programming (BISHOP, 2014b). For example, in 2012 the Tate Modern introduced the Tanks, an expansion of the gallery meant exclusively for performances, in order to deal with the spatial issues of accommodating dance in the museum (BISHOP, 2014b). However successful these spaces may have been in displaying choreographed performances, they do so in a festival-format. A subtle indication that museums are identifying the need for specific guidelines for acquiring a choreographed performance is the research network “Collecting the performative”, initiated in 2012 by Dutch and British academic scholars and museum professionals with the goal of understanding the challenges of collecting and preserving performance art. This network compiled the *Tate live list* (2013)<sup>3</sup>, a document that includes the factors an institution is urged to consider, when collecting live art, such as understanding the parameters of the work, agreeing on the relationship with the museum, clarifying the production (hires, roles, props), discussing documentation methods and defining the role of the audience (Tate Live list, 2013). Yet, the question of how to permanently own a piece of performance art and to “present dance as part of a historical dialogue with visual art, not just as entertainment” (BISHOP, 2014b: 72) still remains unanswered.

### The cases

In April 2014, Para Site, a leading contemporary art centre in Hong Kong, organised a conference under the title *Is the Living Body the Last Thing Left Alive? The New Performance Turn, Its Histories and Its Institutions*. In his contribution to the publication that resulted from that conference, Andre Lepecki argues that this “performance turn” is not new at all, since performance and the visual arts have always been intertwined in one way or another (LEPECKI, 2017). According to Lepecki, what is indeed new in this performance turn is that it is “deeply informed by dance and choreography” (LEPECKI, 2017: 12). He goes on to describe five choreographic concepts, in other words five disciplinary characteristics of dance that render it an inseparable part of the contemporary art scene. These are corporeality, ephemerality, precariousness, scoring and performativity (LEPECKI, 2017).

Lepecki argues that in the contemporary economy labour is not focused on the end product, like it used to after the industrialisation period, but rather on performing learned skills (LEPECKI, 2017). Thus, he considers the economy corporeal since it is more connected to the actors and their behaviours than the material products. This corporeality has always been the case in dance. This is also supported by choreographer Xavier Le Roy, who sees contemporary work as a network of interpersonal relations and performing qualities instead of production of goods (LE ROY, 2017). The ephemeral character of dance (PHELAN, 1993) is, according to Lepecki, a perfect critique on the commodification of the arts. Their ephemerality makes them un-fit for the art market. Scoring is a term frequently used in choreography. Philosopher Stephen Davies describes scores as publicly recorded “work-determinative instructions” (DAVIES, 2001: 207); hence they are of ontological significance for performances. Additionally, following Goodman (1968), whose definitions of scores have been quoted by many contemporary scholars such as Hanna Hölling and Pip Laurenson, scores

3 The Tate live list (2013). Retrieved from: <<https://www.tate.org.uk/about-us/projects/collecting-performative/live-list-what-consider-when-collecting-live-works>>.

are produced by the artist and meant for the performers, in order to ensure the artistic integrity of the piece. By and large, Lepecki (2017: 18) understands scoring as “a system of commands” that assumes the existence of bodies that are technically fit to produce and re-produce staged images. And finally, performativity: Lepecki (2017: 19) argues that choreography is a form of contract between planning and executing of movement. For him performativity is dance’s ability to perform, disappear and re-perform, to return again and again in spite of its ephemeral qualities.

I take from Lepecki’s argumentation that these qualities render dance as a very relevant, contemporary practice. It seems to me that corporeality, ephemerality, scoring and performativity can be applied as looking glasses, in order to discuss choreographed performances and the ways they become docile parts of museum collections.

### **Maria Hassabi, *Staging: solo*, 2017 (Walker Art Center, 2018)**

*Staging: solo*<sup>4</sup> (2017) by choreographer Maria Hassabi was acquired by the Walker Art Center to be part of its permanent collection in 2018<sup>5</sup>. Hassabi’s performances and live installations are positioned in the intersection of dance and visual arts; she uses her body and/or the bodies of other dancers as a vessel to examine movement in various contexts<sup>6</sup>. *Staging: solo* is an adaptation of the artist’s original work *Staged?*, designed to fit in the context of the Walker art Center:

Image 1 - *Staging: solo* at the Walker Art Center, 2018.



Source: Retrieved from: <<http://mariahassabi.com/work/staging-solo/>>.

4 *Staging solo* (2017). Retrieved from: <<http://mariahassabi.com/work/staging-solo/>>.

5 The Walker Art Center (2018). Retrieved from: ><https://walkerart.org/press-releases/2018/walker-art-center-announces-acquisitions-of-interdisciplinary-artworks-by-maria-hassabi-and-jason-moran/>>.

6 HAIDU, Rachel (2017). Retrieved from: <<https://www.documenta14.de/en/artists/13493/maria-hassabi>>.

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Image 2 - Staging: solo at the Walker Art Center, 2018.



Source: Alessandro Sala (2018). Retrieved from: <http://mariahassabi.com/work/staging-solo/>.

Image 3 - Staging: solo at the Walker Art Center, 2018.



Source: Retrieved from: <http://mariahassabi.com/work/staging-solo/>.

As for the institution’s decision to acquire *Staging: solo*, according to Walker Art Center visual arts curator Pavel Pys, it derived from the institute’s long standing interest in performance, interdisciplinary art and body-to-body transmission of knowledge (PYS, 2019). The acquisition was commissioned with the support of a fund by the Andrew W. Mellon Foundation, which was awarded to the Walker in 2016, in order for it to inquire about documentation and preservation strategies for interdisciplinary arts (PYS, 2019). Hassabi developed three versions for the Walker: the first is the dance, which is timed in a loop that continues throughout the opening hours of the gallery space. The second is a sculptural version, consisting of paint and stacks of printed excerpts of the score for the piece and the third is what Pys calls “an archival version”, consisting of a costume on a mannequin, a video documentation of Maria and one more dancer performing the piece and a part of the score (PYS, 2019).

In terms of their corporeality, Hassabi’s choreographies are highly dependent on spatial features. As a result, her pieces are staged differently when shown on the theatre stage, in a big museum or in a small gallery. According to her, it is those features that dictate the adjustments undertaken in each edi-

tion. Yet, her choreographies are based on sets of binaries “still versus moving, animate versus inanimate, dance versus sculpture, theater versus gallery”<sup>7</sup>. Her dancers respond to the museum space in a horizontal way, contrary to the typical use of the museum space in a vertical way, through art hanging on the walls. “Rather than animating the space, [Hassabi’s work] formed a counterpoint composition of still bodies that underscored the sepulchral quality of the museum” (BISHOP, 2016). For the case of *Staging: solo*, this spatial dependence benefits a potential re-enactment of the work in the Walker Art Center; however, it can prove to be impractical in the case of a re-enactment in a different venue. Yet, the acquisition agreement includes the possibility for the work to be adjusted in different spaces, if necessary. These architectural details in the agreement can also serve the purpose of lending the work to other institutions. According to Pys, loans are possible, but the Walker is in charge of the fulfillment of all the requirements, as well as of the smooth and accurate staging of the performance in other venues.

Apart from their corporeality, the duration of the works is also adapted to the respective venue. For example, a show on the theatre stage has a limited duration and is hence planned in a faster pace<sup>8</sup>. However, a performance in the museum expands over a much longer period of time, namely the opening hours of the museum, and is accordingly “slowed down”<sup>9</sup>. Even though it is a choreographic work, it is expected to be present throughout the exhibition hours and to be visible or available for any visitor at any time. In order to succeed in that, it needs to appropriate object-like qualities. Choreographer Xavier Le Roy puts it as simply as this: “A performance work without a beginning, end or fixed duration ... uses the time and space conventions of the exhibition space. It is therefore an exhibited object” (LE ROY, 2017: 79).

Clearly the score on which *Staging: solo* is based is a crucial part of the piece. In many interviews Hassabi underlines how strictly the score describes the choreography, with the dancers synchronising their timers for training and rehearsing again and again, in order to reach complete synchronisation, even when there is no visual communication among them, as they are scattered across the museum spaces. Following the definition of “delegated performance” by Bishop, *Staging: solo* can fit under this category, since it can exist without the artist’s body. The technical knowledge can be transmitted from the body of the artist to the bodies of the other dancers through their training. However, in the context of the museum, achieving this independence from the artist’s body was not an easy task, according to Pys. Hassabi developed a script for the museum with instructions on how to restage her work. Much like the score of the performance that includes detailed instructions for performing the piece, the script that Hassabi developed for the museum contains extremely detailed instructions for the restaging of her work. The Walker is expected to hire a dance professional to run the auditions for the dancers, whose age and education is also specified by Hassabi.

Performativity for Lepecki is the quality that allows performances to return again and again despite their ephemerality. By extension, the performativity of *Staging: solo* is defined as its lifetime. After it has been acquired, and separated from its creator, how is the continuation of its existence ensured? In

7 JANEVSKI, Ana (2017). It Is Never Staged: Ana Janevski on Maria Hassabi. Retrieved from: <<https://walkerart.org/magazine/ana-janevski-maria-hassabi>>.

8 Idem.

9 Idem.



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order for the Walker Art Center to restage *Staging: solo* every time they want to display it, the acquisition overview includes detailed instructions. Hassabi does not need to teach the score to the performers herself; however she or one of her special trained “Licensed Teachers” or LTs need to come to the Walker before the opening of the exhibition to ensure that the performance is taught correctly and make final changes and adjustments (PYS, 2019). Interestingly, this extremely detailed contract does not include an agreement on the frequency of the restages. Knowing that Hassabi only wants her work to be shown as part of group shows (PYS, 2019), it makes sense not to anticipate the frequency and to allow this freedom to the discretion of the curators.

Furthermore, the agreement between Maria Hassabi and the Walker Art Center is “for life” (PYS, 2019). “For life” does not mean for the duration of the artist’s life, nor for the one of the institution’s life. It means eternally. In order to ensure that, Hassabi has pledged to train new dancers every five to seven years, who are significantly younger than her and who can then be in charge of controlling the integrity of the performance as Licensed Teachers (PYS, 2019). What would happen with the work, if after a long period of time there is neither an LT nor anyone who has ever performed it still alive? “The work expires: we have acquired a work that carries the possibility of extinction” says Pys. This statement carries an extreme significance for this new performative turn in the museum world. It suggests that the museum is making the immense commitment of investing in the acquisition and preservation of an artwork without the assurance that it will remain in their ownership *ad aeternum*.

In conclusion, there were two kinds of adaptations that took place, in order to accommodate the work in the Walker Art Center. The first are adaptations of the work that were made, in order for it to fulfill the museum conditions. The second adaptations are the ones undertaken by the museum, in order to display and preserve *Staging: solo*. The instructions that were put together by Hassabi include the need for the Walker to adapt to the needs of the acquired work. Finally, the fact that the museum is adjusting to the new requirements and developing new preservation strategies, even though there is no guarantee that these efforts will succeed in preserving the work *ad aeternam*, shows a commitment and an adaptation to the fact that its role as eternal conservators of cultural heritage is being challenged.

### **Sara Wookey in collaboration with Rennie Tang, *Punt.Point*, 2013 (Van Abbemuseum, 2018)**

The second case study is *Punt.Point*, a performative work by choreographer Sara Wookey, in collaboration with architect Rennie Tang with design and image support from Gabriella Baka and David Kelly. Wookey’s research and practice focus on issues of economy, labour and value in the arts and on sustainability in dance<sup>10</sup>, while Tang is interested in urban design and kinesthetic engagement. The artists call *Punt.Point* a “self-guided tour”<sup>11</sup> through the exhibition of the museum. The idea is to inspire alternative behaviours and movements in the museum space. The two artists were interested in the existing “human infrastructure”<sup>12</sup> within the museum, which includes the hosts, in other words the

10 This information is in: <http://sarawookey.com/about/>.

11 Architects Podcast (2019). Retrieved from: <http://www.xx-la.com/interview-with-rennie-tang-and-sara-wookey-xxla-episode-019/>.

12 Idem.

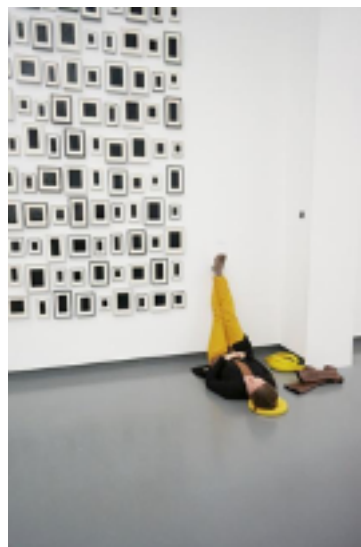
guards and staff, and the visitors as well as the “performance of the everyday”<sup>13</sup>, which for them includes the changes of the walking speed of people from the indoors to the outdoors, from the public to the private space, from isolation to the community. They consider all movements to be in a way choreographed, an idea which has been entertained before by scholars such as Andrew Hewitt (2005): “If the body I dance with and the body I work and walk with are one and the same, I must necessarily entertain the suspicion that all of my body’s movements are, to a greater or lesser extent, choreographed”.

Image 4 - Punt.Point at the Van Abbemuseum (2013), Installation view.



Source: Retrieved from: <<http://cargocollective.com/renspace/Punt-Point>>.

Image 5 - Punt.Point at the Van Abbemuseum (2013), performed by a member of the audience.

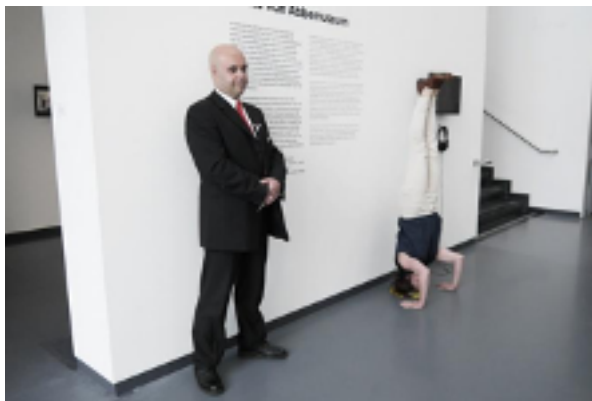


Source: Retrieved from: <<http://cargocollective.com/renspace/Punt-Point>>.

13 Idem.

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Image 6 - Punt.Point at the Van Abbemuseum (2013), performed by Sara Wookey.



Source: Punt.Point. Sara and Mohammad. Retrieved from: <<http://cargocollective.com/renspace/Punt-Point>>.

*Punt.Point* was the result of a two-week-long interdisciplinary residency at the van Abbemuseum in 2013. The agreement between the museum and the artists after the end of the residency defined a period of five years (2013-2017) as the duration of the work. Towards the end of this time period, in March 2017, Van Abbe curator Christiane Berndes approached Wookey with the idea of permanently acquiring *Punt.Point* for the museum's collection<sup>14</sup>.

*Punt.Point* may not be bound to the artist's body; it is, however, dependent on other bodies: those of the participating visitors. The work exists only through participation, which differentiates it from most performance works, including *Staging: solo* that was discussed above. As a result, the question of corporeality gains a different meaning in this case, since the work appears to be bound not to the body of the artist, but rather to that of the visitor. Yet it is a highly space-dependent work, because it was conceptualised specifically for the architecture of the Van Abbemuseum and specifically for the collection display in 2013. Upon returning to the museum a year after initiating *Punt.Point*, the artists discovered that the guards had incorporated the work in their routines. Wookey and Tang were satisfied with this development, because, for them, becoming part of the museum infrastructure is essentially fulfilling the work's purpose.

Similar to the notion of corporeality, *Punt.Point* is also not ephemeral in the traditional sense of a fleeting performance (see PHELAN a.o.), since it was available in the museum for the duration of the opening hours for five years. Following Le Roy (2017), *Punt.Point* uses the time and space conventions of the museum and in that sense, one could argue that it gained an object-like quality and became an integral part of the space. However, in this particular case, the availability of the work does not necessarily mean that it exists continually, since its existence depends on the visitors' participation. Hence, the question of ephemerality is merely an existential question: does the work stop when it is not being activated by an audience? Now, as part of the Van Abbemuseum's permanent collection, *Punt.Point* overcomes its ephemeral character by gaining a strong connection to the space of the museum.

Since the artists are not physically part of the performance, *Punt.Point* clearly depends on its score, which in this case comes in the form of a toolkit.

14 Punt.Point Folder (2018). Van Abbemuseum Archives (inventory number 3440). Van Abbemuseum Library, Eindhoven.

The toolkit functions like a “museological permission”<sup>15</sup> or an invitation to the visitors to participate. In order to ensure *Punt.Point*’s integrity in the event of a restage in the Van Abbemuseum, Wookey provided the museum with a “manual”, a document that includes the piece’s core values, background, instructions for use and practical details of restaging (Punt.Point Folder, 2018). The museum’s need for this document is made clear in the email correspondence between Berndes and Wookey, when discussing the acquisition requirements: “From my experience I learned that an involvement of the artist each time the work is re-installed or –as in this case- re-engaged, is practically not feasible, both for the artist and for the museum”<sup>16</sup>.

Here, Berndes refers to the difficulty of engaging the artist again and again, every time the museum needs to restage their work. Thinking about the example of Beau Dick as well, this is an important issue for museums acquiring a work that requires the artist’s involvement every time it is re-installed. This is often the case with what Buskirk previously called “contingent artworks” (BUSKIRK, 2003). Berndes’ quote demonstrates once again the urge of curators and, by extension, museums, to separate the artwork from the artist.

The instructions outline that the museum is obliged to hire one dancer, whose level of education is predetermined, who will collaborate with one curator and one guard, in order to position the work in the space, in the case that certain circumstances have changed since the original display (Punt.Point Folder, 2018). Here the concept of delegation (Bishop, 2012) is fulfilled through outsourcing. Thus, instead of demanding new skills from the curators and other museum workers, the agreement already anticipates the need to provide the new skills. While thinking of outsourcing in the contemporary museum in relation to the role of dance and choreography in the museum world, Lepecki (2017: 19) notes “we might think of the early performance scores by Bruce Nauman that invariably start with the...line: “Hire a dancer.”. Hence, outsourcing has been a common practice in performing arts, especially in the cases of merges between visual arts and performance.

*Punt.Point* had an original agreed-upon lifetime of five years, from 2013 until 2017. However, the Van Abbemuseum acquired it permanently in 2018, which creates new questions about its performativity, in other words the possibility for *Punt.Point* to continue its life as a choreographed performance and as an educational element of the museum’s architectural identity. Like in most cases of acquisitions of performances, there is no agreement on the number or frequency of restages of *Punt.Point* (WOOKEY, 2019). According to Catherine Wood, in most cases the decision to re-enact the performance is left in the museum’s discretion, since it depends on the museum’s identity (WOOD, 2017). For Wookey, it is more important for *Punt.Point* to relate to the respective exhibitions in the Van Abbe; hence she preferred to leave it to the curators’ discretion when to restage it (WOOKEY, 2019). However, she says that she will definitely discuss the number and frequency of restages in the case of a future museum acquisition of her work (WOOKEY, 2019). Like in the case of Hassabi, the case of *Punt.Point* was a new experience for Wookey, and thus a learning process.

Additionally, the possibility of loaning the work to other institutions seems like a smooth process at first glance, since no performers or extra equip-

15 Architects Podcast (2019). Retrieved from: <http://www.xx-la.com/interview-with-rennie-tang-and-sara-wookey-xxla-episode-019/>.

16 BERNDES, Christiane. (2018, March 26). Email from Christiane Berndes to Sara Wookey. Van Abbemuseum Archives (inventory number 3440). Van Abbemuseum Library, Eindhoven.

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ment, other than the toolkit, are necessary. However, the artists are uncertain, whether the work could successfully function in museums, since the Van Abbe encourages alternative approaches to its collection and premises, whereas in other museum contexts the museum workers would have to be educated adequately, so as to allow the work to flourish<sup>17</sup>.

Following the same logic as in the previous case, here too I identify two kinds of adaptations: one undertaken by the work *Punt.Point* and one by the Van Abbemuseum, in order to accommodate it; once again the museum needs to borrow practices from the field of dance, such as external hires and trainings.

## Docile-making strategies

### Scores

It is interesting to see the different ways scores are used in the case of *Staging: solo* and in that of *Punt.Point*. According to Goodman (1968), scores are produced by the artist and meant for the performers, in order to ensure the artistic integrity of the piece. This definition of score is the one most commonly used in performance and Maria Hassabi's *Staging: solo* is no exception. In *Staging: solo* the score includes the detailed choreography, as well as other side-instructions for the performers such as style, ways to deal with visitor reactions, timing and others. The score is not meant for public display. However, in the sculptural and archival version of the piece, excerpts of the score are displayed as well. In the absence of the performance, the score is used as a replacement to provide the visitor with an idea of what the performance would be like. The score as “work-determinative instructions” (DAVIES, 2001: 207) also applies in the case of Hassabi, if we consider the script she put together for the institution, in order to assure the integrity of the restages of her work. In the case of *Punt.Point* the score is meant for the audience and not for the artists, performers or museum workers; as a result, it differs from the one of *Staging: solo*. Yet, it can have a similar function, namely the fact that it can be used as an indication of what the performance would be like, even if it is not being performed.

### Agreements

Traditionally, when acquiring a work, the buyer institution signs a conditions-report that describes the piece and the conditions under which it is to be kept and displayed. Accordingly, in the case of performance acquisition there is the necessity for an agreement that will define the ways in which the work will be restaged. Those agreements are very important both for the ontology of the performance in question, and for the relationship between the artwork and the museum.

In the case of *Staging: solo*, this file is the acquisition overview and it includes the score of the piece, an instructional video of Hassabi with one of her dancers, digital copies and material samples of the costumes, in order to reproduce them if needed, appropriate language, approved by Hassabi, to describe the work and, finally, architectural instructions for the positioning of the work in space. Putting together this file was a challenge for both the artist and the institution, and the result of a particularly long process that lasted longer

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17 Idem.

than one year. Pys describes it as an educational process for both, since it was a unique case for the institution and a new and unfamiliar procedure for Hassabi. For *Punt.Point* the museum and the artist signed an agreement, similar to an acquisition document for a material artwork (Punt.Point Folder, 2018). Additionally, Sara Wookey provided the museum with the manual, which included some background information, as well as detailed instructions for an authentic restage of the work (Punt.Point Folder, 2018).

Nonetheless, despite the extensiveness of the agreements, neither of the cases managed to tackle the challenge of the performances' ephemeral character irreversibly. Thus, it seems to me that both institutions accept the fact that the work they acquired might one day cease to exist. The issue of a performance work becoming out of context and thus obsolete, because it derived from a very specific contemporary social context has been discussed by Laurenson and van Saaze in their contribution to the publication *Performativity in the Gallery* (2014). The idea of *Punt.Point* is based on a very particular social observation: Wookey and Tang observed the standard museum behaviour that is universally accepted in our times and tried to question and challenge it through their work. If their suggestions of alternative movements and behaviour in the museum become standardised sometime in the near or far future, then their work will either become obsolete or completely embedded in the museum's identity. As for *Staging: solo* at the Walker, many efforts were made and were included in the agreement trying to prevent the work from ceasing to exist. Hassabi is urged to train significantly younger dancers every few years and at any given time that anything should happen to her, there are Licensed Teachers available that can ensure the survival of the piece. Still, Pavel Pys underlines that the institution accepts that this work might not survive forever. The need to show that such an acquisition is possible, however, was apparently bigger than the risk of acquiring a piece with the possibility of extinction.

## Adaptations

In the case of Hassabi, a strategy to make *Staging: solo* docile was the development of three different versions. The sculptural and the archival version are clearly informed by a museological terminology and are provided by Hassabi, in order to fit her work under certain classification methods (DOMINGUEZ RUBIO, 2014; KENNEDY, 2009). It is interesting to note that, according to Pys, originally the museum considered only acquiring Hassabi's props, her lights, costumes a.o., but they soon realised that these are not the substance of her work. However, in their attempts to acquire dance, they could not help but fall into the pitfall of materiality, which, following Van Hantelmann (2010: 152) dictates that "only via the process of physical materialisation can nothing become something". In order to turn the immateriality of *Staging: solo* to "something", the three different versions were developed. The case of *Punt.Point* is understood as a more organic process, where the work both emerges from the museum's infrastructure and is gradually embedded in its identity. Here, the adaptation process that affects the trajectory of *Punt.Point* is not exclusively realised by the curator, like in the case of Hassabi, but also by the rest of the museum workers, such as guards and educators.

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## Delegation

After examining both *Punt.Point* and *Staging: solo*, a further strategy that seems to be of great importance is delegation. The fact that there is an individual other than the artist, in these cases a professional dancer, with the power to control, plan and execute the performance seems to be very important for the museum. It creates a “safety net” that allows the artwork to survive independently of the artist. And while outsourcing is an important and promising strategy, in both cases the curators would also rely extremely on the respective acquisition document (this has been referred to with different terms, such as manual, script, instructions, acquisition overview, but all these terms describe the same kind of document). Putting together a document that anticipates all the necessary prerequisites for its restage in extreme detail allows for it to survive outside the artist’s body.

## Loans

A further important outcome from the study of the cases is how the possibility of loaning the work informs its adaptation and strengthens the notion of ownership for the buyer institution. In both cases there is extensive information provided in the agreements about adapting the work to different architectural conditions. And while originally this information is provided for the purpose of restaging it in the same venue, it can also be used as conditions in the case of a loan. The fact that both *Staging: solo* and *Punt.Point* can be loaned to other institutions provides them with a certain materiality, since the concept of loans is rarely used in the context of performances. Tino Sehgal, for example, who is well-known for selling his performances to institutions as immaterial artworks, allows for his performances to be staged in different venues at the same time (VAN HANTEL MANN, 2010). It seems to me that the exclusivity that allows the buyer institutions to decide on the loaning of *Staging: solo* and *Punt.Point* is a quality highly appreciated by the Walker Art Center and the Van Abbemuseum, respectively.

## Conclusion

With regard to the conceptual issue of dance’s immateriality and the conflict this causes to the museum economy, the acquiring institutions are taking all kinds of measures to ensure the ownership of their acquisition. As indicated above, the fact that the acquisition agreement includes the possibility of loaning the work to other institutions is an attempt to materialise the performance. This way the performance gains object-like qualities, which allow for more clear ownership claims, and is thus more easily accepted in the museum economy.

Additionally, the trajectory of each performance, in other words the background of each acquisition is proven to be individual and important to investigate. It seems to me that not all performances are suitable for all museums; rather they are chosen because they match with the specific interests of the buyer institution. *Punt.Point* highlights the Van Abbemuseum’s alternative approaches to their collection and their interest in different uses of the museum space by the public. Maria Hassabi’s work is a great contemporary example of interdisciplinary art, which is a field embedded in the core identity of the Walker Art Center with its long history of supporting cross-disciplinary arts. Conse-

quently, it is safe to assume that the possibility for an artwork to be acquired or not does not depend on the work's intrinsic properties, but on the respective institution's conceptual interests. If a work fits under the museum's identity, then the museum will make any necessary adjustments, in order to accommodate it in their collection and finally make it docile, no matter how complicated that process might be.

It has become clear that the acquisition of a live work is a long and complicated process that requires patience, open-mindedness and adaptability from the buyer institution. As a result, in order to enter this procedure, the institution needs to meet certain levels of flexibility and openness, because more than anything else, it is an educational experience. According to Pys, both Hassabi and the Walker gained an incredible amount of knowledge through the acquisition process of *Staging: solo* (PYS, 2019). Even with the Walker's year-long experience with interdisciplinary practices, putting together the acquisition agreement was a challenge (PYS, 2019). More importantly, the same willingness, flexibility and openness will be required by the institution every time, no matter how much experience they gain from acquiring live works again and again. And this because, unlike tangible art, where one can find similarities in materials or processes, live artworks all differ from one another. Therefore, the buyer institution needs to go through the same long process every time individually. To quote Pys (2019): "I do not think that this acquisition [Staging: solo] will be an example for the future. Each work is unique." There are many kinds of choreographed performances, which means that there is an inherent limitation to this research since it explored only two cases. Still, the conclusions drawn from the case studies analysis form a significant contribution to this still very young research field of acquiring choreographed performances. Furthermore, there are alternative approaches a researcher could apply on the cases, for example looking more into the background of a work, the motivations of an institution to acquire it or the institutional changes performance can cause to the core idea of museums.

A key conclusion is thus the importance of the acquiring museum's identity. Through my research I have come to the conviction that the docile-maker museum follows a "where there is will there is power" mentality when it comes to performance acquisitions. If the work adds to the museum's identity and narrative, the museum will patiently and open mindedly find ways in order to make the work docile and include it in its collection.

All things considered, it appears that museums do everything in their power to separate the work from the body of the artist and to manage to sustain the work without them. Yet, there is a conceptual problem that emerges from this realisation. In focusing on making choreographed performances docile museum objects, there is the danger of disregarding their very nature of being flexible and contingent. One might inquire about the actual objective of the acquiring institution: Is it really to make all acquisitions docile or is this process a necessary step towards understanding that the museum cannot actually control the development of all the works it acquires? Having said that, it might be necessary for museums to accept the unruliness of certain artworks, since they can contribute to institutional developments. According to Dominguez Rubio (2014: 633) "Unruly objects can be described as vectors of institutional and cultural change: as elements that require creative adaptations and negotiations, and the shifting of positions and boundaries around them".

Furthermore, one could criticise the urge of the museum to separate the artwork from the artist as an authoritative, imperialist act. The notion of



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ownership that requires the full submission of the artwork to the museum conditions might in the end harm the artwork's integrity and the freedom of artistic expression. Owning a choreographed performance requires a certain amount of flexibility. When Bishop (2016) talks about the mausoleal character of museums, she uses Hassabi as an example of a performance that is capable of bringing the museum back to life. In making her works docile, the acquiring institution needs to make sure that their original intent of breaching the norms of museums remains intact.

Finally, it is necessary to mention, once again, the educational character of the acquisitions described here. The challenge of finding a way to present dance as part of cultural heritage (BISHOP, 2014b), is, in my view, in the process of being tackled. The efforts undertaken by museums discussed here, as well as the present research itself, are steps towards finding a way of presenting dance as an equal to the visual arts. The fact that both discussed institutions dedicate their time, workforce, and resources for the purpose of finding solutions shows that the museum world is beginning to face that challenge. This paper is hopefully a contribution to that end.

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