MUSEOLOGY OF PERFORMANCE

This special edition of THEMMA grew out of an international symposium organized at the Musée de la civilisation on October 9-10, 2014, as part of the 27th Entretiens Jacques Cartier, a series of annual events aimed at bringing together international perspectives on current issues in the arts, sciences and technologies, namely by comparing views from Québec and France. With the generous support of the Centre Jacques Cartier, the Musée de la civilisation organized and hosted “Musées, création spectacle”, a two-day event in partnership with Université du Québec à Montréal, Bibliothèque et Archives nationales du Québec, Université Paris 8, and the recently inaugurated Musée des Confluences in Lyon.

The aim of the symposium was twofold: one the one hand, to reflect on and share new perspectives for best practices in the conservation and curation of the performing arts in museums and, on the other hand, to highlight the social role of heritage institutions, most notably their role in sustaining the performing arts and encouraging creativity in their communities. The event emerged out of a need to address existing gaps in safeguarding the related heritage in the performing arts, particularly the need for better tools to preserve the memory of performative works. Contrary to other parts of the world, such as Europe or the USA, there are no heritage institutions in Québec or in France specifically dedicated to the safeguarding of the intangible dimensions of performing arts. In Québec, there has been a growing need and interest to preserve and disseminate the memory of generations of artists, authors, painters, scenographers and performers, not only from the perspective of the tangible traces they produced during their careers, but also, and perhaps more urgently, their acquired knowhow as well as many of their creations which, with the advent of digital technologies, have become increasingly dematerialized, intangible and ephemeral, and thus perhaps inevitably forgotten.

Among the reasons for this situation, it may be argued, is a gap separating the heritage and performance sectors. Museums are traditionally well equipped and prepared to preserve and create meaning from the heritage related to the performing arts (musical scores, photographs, videos, costumes, decors, props, interviews with artists, and so forth). In fact, museums may perhaps be better suited to curating the tangible heritage related to the gestures and bodily actions that are involved in any kind of performance – not only theatre, music or art happenings, but also rituals or public commemorations. The entertainment and performing arts sectors, on the other hand, are naturally organised and managed in such a way that they are perhaps better positioned to ensure sustained and continuous re-enactments of past performances, and therefore contribute to preserving and sustaining their memory. However, and until just recently, the performing arts shared little of the heritage preservation preoccupations and methods established and practiced by museums and other heritage institutions, nor the costs involved in the building and management of collections. Museums likewise seldom dispose of adequate resources.
or knowledge, technical or otherwise, to re-enact works related to the performing arts. As an example, the Musées de la civilisation (MCQ) holds in its permanent collections many artefacts relating to Québec’s entertainment heritage, including the costumes of many of the programs broadcast on national television (Société Radio-Canada). And yet, like a majority of Canadian and Québec museums, the MCQ has neither the proper funding, mandate, nor even the reflex to collect the actual broadcasts on video or digital supports. Perhaps more importantly, it is ill-equipped to provide the means for in situ physical re-enactment. Finally, there is also the matter of knowledge sharing and exchange. Currently, there is little cohesion and no centralized database in Canada to document and bridge the performing arts and entertainment sectors and museums. This means that their respective intangible cultural heritage is never fully dealt with, documented, or curated by either sector.

“Musées, création, spectacle” was inspired by and organized around the unveiling of Rebel Bodies, a participatory exhibition dedicated to and co-curated with members of the international contemporary dance community. The project was meant to address the abovementioned gaps between heritage and the performing arts, and explore possible avenues for best practices in safeguarding the performing arts, namely through co-creation and active dialogue between a museum institution and members from the performing arts community. Unfortunately, a month before inauguration, a fire broke out on the roof of the Museum’s west wing. While none of the personnel was hurt and no collections were damaged, this meant the closing of all west galleries for months of renovations, including that in which Rebel Bodies was due to be presented – a situation which in itself generated a whole new set of performances, with MCQ professionals and artists swiftly reorganising production calendars and postponing performances scheduled for the inauguration and at various moments during the exhibition’s lifespan. For the symposium, now left without its main event, this meant a fair amount of last minute improvisation, including work with artists who kindly agreed to create – and re-create – performances during the symposium in replacement of the originally planned activities for Rebel Bodies; an entire set of new activities that we thought was fitting, given that all agreed that a symposium on the place of performance and creativity in museums should begin with and include performances throughout.

Performances by artists presented at various moments during the symposium raised a certain number of issues which, in turn, have structured the present issue of THEMA. Most notably, the presence of artists at the Museum served to highlight the symposium’s, as well as this publication’s, larger goal to open new channels of communication between disciplines and sectors. Symposium participants were not only theorists and academics from fields such as museum studies, art history and anthropology, but also came from the performing arts and entertainment industries. While we all were fascinated by the artists’ performances, these also served as a reminder of boundaries yet subsisting in museums, which are perhaps best described as the limits to identifying and sharing creative spaces in museums.

Since the ‘participatory turn’ in museum practice, the role of curatorship has often been conferred upon members of the artistic community in an effort to democratize and generate new readings of museum collections as well as to promote meaningful shared experiences in the museum. In a majority of cases, artists were encouraged to create site-specific and/or to reorganize and reinterpret collected artefacts. And yet, in many of these projects, museum staff and guest artists often end up working either independently or contributing to very distinct areas of the final installation or exhibition – or this case, the symposium. Full shared curatorship remains a challenge in the museum context, particularly in finding optimal ways to encourage collaboration between artists and museum staff (curators, educators, designers, etc.), rather than a museum institution simply lending its spaces to creators. There is a need to reflect on the social role that museums can play in sustaining the performing arts through co-curatorship: on the boundary between performer and exhibition space, artists and staff, and between individual and the collective in the curatorial and creative processes.
The present issue is therefore grounded on the premise that museums are dynamic loci for societal change and can actively contribute to the promotion – and not only conservation – of the performing arts. Contributors highlight the multiple ways performance in museums engages and responds to some of the contemporary imperatives that museums have been facing, which include decolonization, democratization, shared histories, empowerment, expression and interactivity, contestation and extroversion. Each author approaches performance from a different, albeit compatible and interconnected perspective, helping to bridge the gap between museums and creators – which, ultimately, is all about contributing to the challenging task of bringing museums and communities together. Dance and bodily action are major themes underlying this issue, seen as genres of performance encompassing a broad range of human and creative agency. Dance involves a set of movements that embody social memory, and such forms have presented emerging challenges for curatorship but also many possibilities for museums. Accordingly, the issue approaches performance not only as a mode of communication and meaning-making but, more specifically, and through its sub-genres of dance and bodily expression, as an instrument for social action.

Performance in the museum highlights the central role of the visitors’ actions and interactions amongst themselves as well as in relation to other performances by either performance artists or by members of given communities invited to perform (for instance) a ceremony or collective dance in dedicated museum spaces. Digital technologies, interactive media and intricate sound and light installations, now well integrated in museums, all help facilitate and enhance these encounters and performances. It is this complex web of interconnectedness between all of these elements that establishes the basis for a museology of performance. Contributors to this issue underscore its general framework, which naturally encapsulates various elements borrowed from museum studies (visitor studies, museum theatre, scenography and exhibition design, etc.), alongside advances in other disciplines in the social sciences that hold performance as an underlying principle and approach to understanding past and present processes and dynamics relating to the construction of meaning.

Performance is key to restoring important links and missing contexts related to the uses of objects and artefacts, particularly those in museum collections originating from source communities. It is this essential point and argument put forward by Ruth B. Phillips that launches and frames the present issue of THEMA. Through her examination of African and Indigenous North American arts, she develops her approach toward a ‘transitive museology’, arguing performance as a holistic strategy that allows for the building of not only sustainable dialogues between groups of people, but likewise important frameworks through which to achieve the ethical imperatives of decolonization.

Monique Jeudy-Ballini’s study of the Sulka masks of Papua New Guinea further highlights the performative dimensions of ethnographic objects. Through her analysis of the various dance performances involving Sulka masks, she argues that the creative process and social relations to which these objects were the mediators should not only impact on the nature of museography, but be front and centre to any exhibition design. This is an effort to move away from symbolic and formalistic approaches to museum objects and toward a better appreciation by the museum-goer of the full intricacies of the cultural and social underpinnings of creative agency and embodied practices in terms of the intended affect and aesthetic emotion of objects in their original settings.

Looking at performance art as an artistic practice of creativity and expression through bodily performance, a now well established and defined discipline within art history, Anne Bénichou explores different approaches to exhibition-making by highlighting the performance arts as a vehicle of historical discourse and memory, but also the role of performance artists in generating and contributing to the development of historiographical thinking.
In the (newly renamed) Insights section, Marc Boivin and Lise Gagnon take a closer look at some of the initiatives by members of the performing arts community to preserve and disseminate the memory of choreographic works, in this case of a body of work left by the late choreographer Jean-Pierre Perreault. The authors, who are respectively president and executive director of the Fondation Jean-Pierre Perreault, share the organization’s methods and recently developed tools to ensure the transmission of Perreault’s intangible cultural heritage, through an all-important balance between re-enactment and digitization.

In the Gallery section, Julie-Anne Côté reviews the exhibition Rebel Bodies, the centrepiece of the symposium finally inaugurated in March 2015. A project exclusively dedicated to contemporary dance, the exhibition transcends the conventional museum-going experience, becoming a participatory onsite work-in-progress and a catalyst for inquiry on matters of performance and intangible cultural heritage; it addresses the invisible and ephemeral nature of contemporary dance, seen as a vehicle of social memory.

Finally, Martial Poirson, close collaborator in the organization of the symposium, and guest member of THEMA’s editorial board, highlights some of the underlying themes and ideas of this volume. He does so while examining them from the point of view of advances made in France toward the heritagization of performance.

Mathieu Viau-Courville
Editor

NOTES
1 Musée de la civilisation is part of the museum complex of the Musées de la civilisation (MCQ), which also includes the Musée de l’Amérique francophone, the Musée de la Place-Royale, the Maison historique Chevalier, and the Centre national de conservation et d’études des collections.


3 Performance has integrated a number of disciplines such as archaeology, anthropology of art and material culture studies. To name but a few recent examples: Archaeology of Performance: Theaters of Power, Community, and Politics, edited by Takeshi Inomata and Laurence S. Cohen, (AltaMira Press, 2006), Yannis Hamilaki’s book Archaeology and the Senses: Human Experience, Memory, and Affect (Cambridge University Press, 2013), various contributors to the Handbook of Material Culture edited by Chris Tilley and his colleagues (SAGE, 2006), and Alfred Gell’s approach to art in performative terms in his Art and Agency (Clanderon Press, 1998), which many authors have since built upon, as published in the recent volume Distributed Objects: Meaning and Mattering after Alfred Gell (Berghahn, 2013), edited by Liana Chua and Mark Elliot.