

## 6. The Political Lives of Performance

*Diana Taylor*

doi.org/10.3280/oa-637-6

Everything about performance is political – from its definition, to its artistic practice, to its broader intervention into social and communal life as a form of protest or manifestation, to its archiving and study. This essay explores the complexities of the many aspects and lives of performance by focusing on the Hemispheric Institute of Performance and Politics (Hemi) that came into existence to address several challenges facing researchers, artists, and activists committed to social justice in the Americas.

Given the colonial infrastructure still operative in the Americas, the multiple parts of the “periphery” pass through the cultural, financial “center” of empire, like spokes of a wheel, without having direct interactions with each other. Those of us working in various national and regional parts of the hemisphere did not usually know each other. We had few ways of accessing information and the scholarly and artistic materials we needed about the work being created in other parts of the hemisphere. How could we learn, research, teach, and create in any socially relevant manner when we knew so little about what was happening around us? How could we build communities of care, collaboration, and shared practice in support of progressive politics of rights, equality, and inclusion? In 1998 when I founded Hemi in collaboration with colleagues in Brazil and Mexico, the goal was to create new avenues for collaboration and action by researching politically engaged performance and amplifying it through gatherings, courses, publications, and archives. Our fundamental belief was that «artistic practice, performance, and critical reflection can spark lasting cultural change».

But there were many problems we needed to address at the same time.

The Americas are deeply interdependent, sharing brutal and rapacious histories of conquest, colonisation, imperialism, and neoliberalism characterized by genocide, slavery, occupation, annexation, and extractivist politics that continue to threaten any hopes of equality and self-determination into the present. The United States, where Hemi is funded and administered, sits in the heart of empire, in the very belly of the murderous beast. How could we begin to earn the trust that is essential to all collaborative projects without interrogating the dynamics and extensiveness of the power differentials generated by empire?

Secondly, artists, scholars, and activists across the Americas rarely worked together and, more rarely, collaborated across national, linguistic, ethnic, and disciplinary realms. Our methodologies and practices differ, even when we share similar goals – say, for example, claim justice and equal rights? What kinds of gatherings could we imagine in which we all started to get to know each other and build working relations across all these divides?



Image 1 – Credit: Diana Raznovich

Moreover, few people in the Americas agreed on what “performance” meant in the late 1990s (Image 1) whether it referred strictly to “performance art” or whether it was a useless and/or imperialist concept. “Performance”, some said, was an Anglo word, imposed from the North, to signal a self-centered, a-political practice on artists long committed to a Marxist, collective form of art making known as *creación colectiva* or collective creation. I argued for a broad meaning of performance that included a wide range of practices. These ranged from artistic forms of embodied practice, to the “social dramas” of anthropology (Turner, 1974, pp. 38-42), to the ritualistic processual activities such as church services, funerals, baptisms and so on, to events such as sports, political protests and manifestations, concerts and theatre that rely on conventional rules and behaviors (Taylor, 2016). They included political

scenarios and events that give communities «simultaneously connote[ed] a process, a praxis, an episteme, a mode of transmission, an accomplishment, and a means of intervening in the world» (Taylor, 2003, p. 15). Some, like me, emphasized the urgency of recognising, sharing, and studying embodied, expressive culture especially in the Americas where knowledge, memory, and notions of identity did not pass through print culture, *la ciudad letrada*, in Angel Rama's term, the written technologies so privileged in the west. But how to share performed or embodied practices without being there, part of the transmission? The Hemi *Encuentros* which brought together five to eight hundred artists, scholars, and activists from the Americas together every year, then every two years, gave us one way of collaborating face to face that helped build up the trust, shared interests, and collegiality needed to develop ongoing working relations. But they did not address the archival and scholarly needs of understanding performance across space and time. If you did not see the performance, there was not much to go on.

In the late 1990s, emergent digital technologies offered us at Hemi a partial solution to sharing and archiving performance online. Why not upload the videos Hemi had taken, and those artists had offered us of their work? It had never been done. With the help of NYU Libraries and the Andrew Mellon Foundation, Hemi created the first digital video library, Hemispheric Institute Digital Video Library or HIDVL<sup>23</sup> (Image 2).

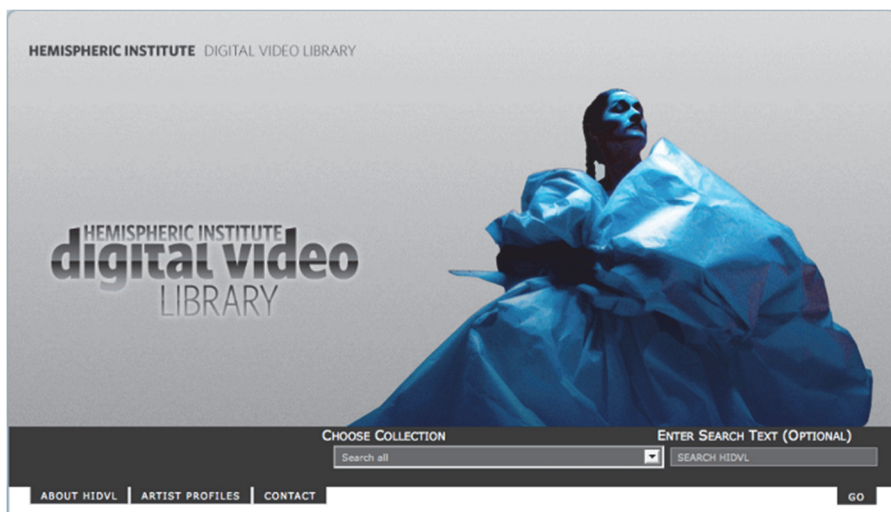


Image 2

<sup>23</sup> <http://www.hemisphericinstitute.org/hemi/en/hidvl>

The initial practical debates had to do with ownership: who should hold the copyright to the materials online? Mellon wanted their foundation or NYU to own the copyright. I insisted artists and the cultural authors or producers of the materials needed to retain their rights. Two years and many lawyers later, Mellon agreed that the original rights owners could conserve their rights to the materials online while Hemi retained the non-exclusive right to show the works in non-downloadable, streaming formats through our website into perpetuity. HIDVL prioritized open access and long-term preservation. If anyone wants to buy the rights to reproduce or use the materials, they must contact the rights holders whose information accompanies the videos. This arrangement with Mellon and NYU led Hemi into adventures in archiving video performance and creating digital masters that live in deep in the ground of Iron Mountain along with U.S. government documents, Disney films, MGM archives, Twitter and Snapchat collections and other materials destined to survive nuclear fallout and other catastrophes. Archiving performance also created theoretical challenges. “Performance”, embodied, expressive behaviors and acts are usually considered ephemeral, taking place in the now, usually in communication with others. In other words, the antithesis of digital archives. The ubiquitous/unlocatable nature of the virtual gave a whole new twist to discussions of archives and repertoires, enduring and ephemeral materiality, presence, distance, and time. Like traditional archives, digital web archives seem built to last. I personally am heavily invested in that supposition, and the Hemispheric Institute works hard to curate, catalogue, and upload performance materials. Yet, I have never experienced ephemerality to the degree I did when our website was hacked the first time – all I had was a printed brochure that described our vanished archival project. Yet, magically it seems, the digital remains, much as I claim the repertoire does, (almost) always there though not always available to vision. The illusion of spontaneity and fleetingness we get from our email exchanges is only an illusion. The deleted email, it seems, can always come back to haunt us. So will a song, or a saying, or a culturally coded gesture get handed down from generation to generation. And what about embodiment? Embodiment as in “having a body”, thinking, working, remembering, and expressing through our bodies, is central to performance studies where we focus mainly (though certainly not exclusively) on incorporated behaviors and practices. Archives don’t have bodies – the living author, as creator of a literary work, for example, becomes a literary corpus in the library (their pun, not mine). Online, of course, the blurring becomes more intense. Pure personas, unencumbered by our persons, have full play. «On the Internet,» as one *New Yorker* cartoon reminded us in the 1990s, «nobody knows you’re a dog» (Steiner, 1993).

These questions are not only the matter of theoretical discussion among scholars. Artists want to know how their performances will change when they are available online through streaming video. As political performer Reverend Billy put it, «You go forward and it [the video of the work] is still there. People take it into their lives in the present tense» (Reverend Billy, 2006) (Image 3). «Looking at the collection of his work in the archive, he said: I'm not sure if that's dead and I'm alive, or if that's alive and I'm dead». Performance, clearly, has many lives.



Image 3 – Courtesy of the Hemispheric Institute

The first life of performance, for many, centers on the body of the performer in the here and now (Image 4) in direct connection with the audience. Artists and activists invest in the present to make a clear artistic and/or political intervention. They find their audience and create a community of spectators/participants, to communicate pressing concerns. This is the urgent moment of communication and solidarity that artists Marcelo Denny and Marcos Bulhões from Brazil create at Hemi, with CEGOS, as part of their alter globalisation project (Image 5) or in their recent *Banho de Descarrego* anti-fascist project (Image 6). These performances call attention to the economic and political crisis populations are experiencing not just in Brazil at the moment, but in the world. Their force lies in their immediacy, their urgency.

The second life of performance, for some artists, might be the edited, commercial version of work available for sale on DVDs or video. These lack the element of presence, but they are still marketed to specific audiences. Artists control the quality of the performance through editing and other processes. Artists, such as Cuban Ana Mendieta, do not always want to perform for a live audience – often they perform for the camera. The photograph performs, and their work circulates without them being present. Artists such as Anna Deavere Smith develop highly staged and edited versions of their live performances, now performed for large television audiences.

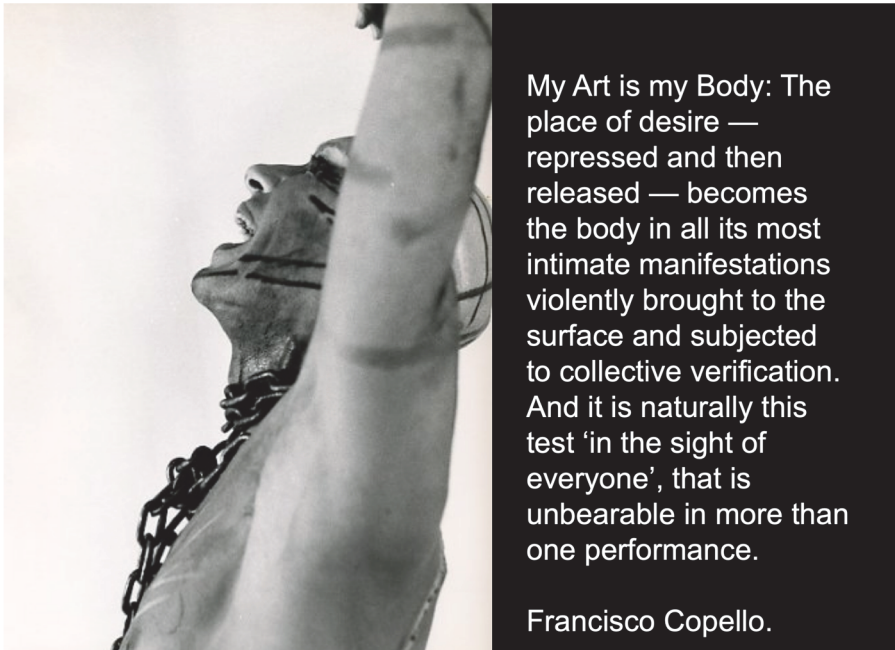


Image 4

The third life of performance – the archival life of online streaming video – takes the long, historical view: *Preserving Performance for 500 Years*<sup>24</sup>. While the video will not change, the experience of the spectator might well alter over time, rendering the performance dated or even incomprehensible. In order to situate the creators in their historical, geographic, and political

<sup>24</sup> See Apple’s articles on HIDVL by Bija Guttoff, “Expanding the Stage for Political Theater” and “Preserving for 500 years”. <http://www.hemisphericinstitute.org/hemi/en/hidvl>





Image 5 – Cegos 2016



Image 6 – Banho de Descarrego 2019

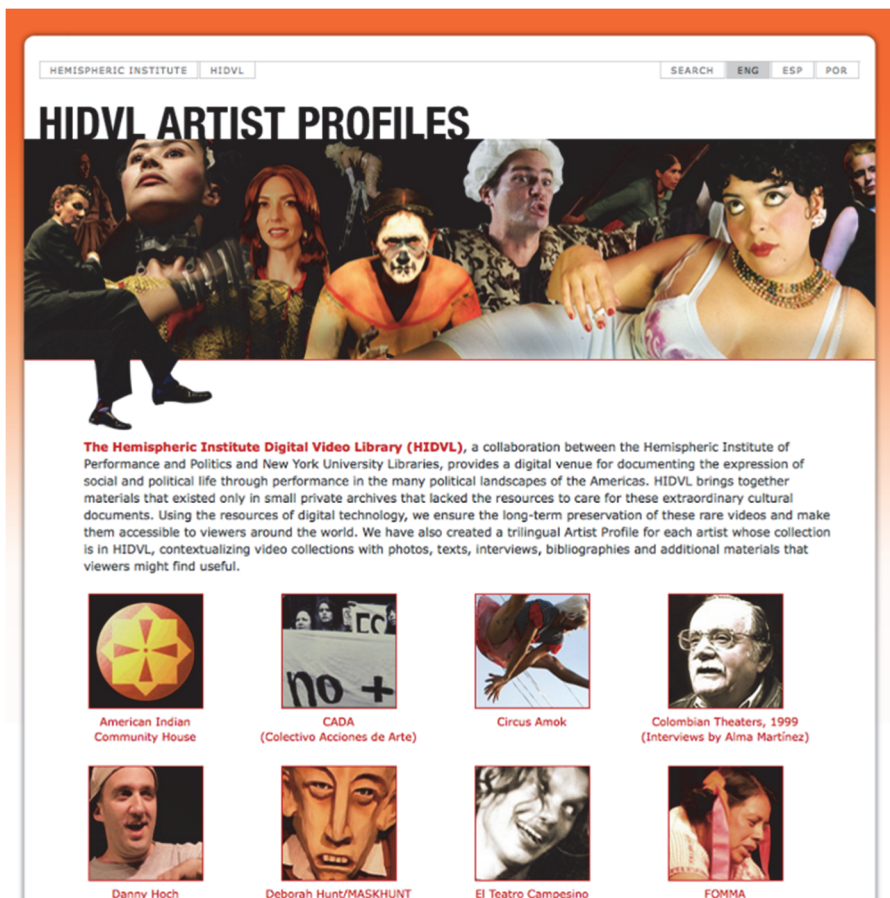


Image 7

moment, Hemi needed to create Artist Profiles<sup>25</sup> (Image 7) that brought together photos, essays, interviews, ephemera, and other related materials to contextualize the work. At this stage, we were embarked on a more scholarly project. How can we understand Chicano theatre in the U.S., or popular theatre movements, without having access to the collections of El Teatro Campesino? These collections include not just the glossy productions – in fact the HIDVL preserves only the original materials – no edited or commercial products.

Hemi soon started to commission artists to create works that could be archived, and to create performances in born-digital platforms, that never had

<sup>25</sup> <https://hemisphericinstitute.org/en/hidvl-collections>



a “live”, “embodied” character. Some performances, for example, stage the archive, presenting revivals based in part on old scripts and videos. Others are re-performances, a new iteration of an earlier work, now considered “the original”. A famous example of re-performance was Marina Abramović’s blockbuster show, *The Artist is Present* at MoMA in 2010 (Images 8 and 9). MoMA’s website stated the intention of the re-performances: «to transmit the presence of the artist and make her historical performances accessible to a larger audience». Notions of authenticity, originality, historicity, the accurate re-do of great signature works, and broad accessibility underlie re-performance.



Image 8 – *Imponderabilia*, MoMA 2010 – Courtesy of Abigail Levine

If we remember the 1960s and 1970s, when Abramović’s work was all about the ephemeral, the daring, the unauthorized, then this retrospective was a surprising bid for the sustainability of performance by an artist in her 60s who knows that film or video or photos or other recordings may document the work and keep it visible but cannot keep it alive. The logic of the archive controls the repertoire, demanding the live, even as it insists that the live behave as one more artifact. The living body is treated as script. The point, it seems is to create the record – the photo, video, notation, score – and then re-perform it. But even this contradictory and impossible drive to keep a

specific, “authored” performance alive which animates Abramović seems deeply at odds with MoMA’s investment – the powerful institution, annulled, rather than preserved, the earlier Abramović performances. The re of re-performance, in this case, proved the re of repetition and reiteration yet drained of the works’ life force. The re-performances by the artists had approximately the same form but the new framework and context evacuated the meaning. Re-performance, understood within the logic of cultural and economic circulation and preservation, might not be, then, the future of performance, but rather its MoMAfication.

Re-performance, then, might be antithetical to performance, which as Richard Schechner argues never had an original; it is by nature re-iterative, «twice-behaved behavior» and «never for the first time» (Schechner, 1985, p. 36). Other performances are better known as video than as live solo work. Some performances become themselves only through the process of documentation; for example, for example, a Guillermo Gómez-Peña piece staged for the camera and known only through photographs or video. We have born digital materials that never had an “original” in another medium and hybrid work in which archived videos of performances provoked new “live” and online performances. These materials give rise to new scholarly thinking about the many lives of performance (past and present), allow us access to work and traditions that we cannot see live, and encourage us to reflect on what happens to “live” events that rely so heavily on context and audience when shown to people from very different contexts. I would love to speculate what viewers in 500 years will make of Rev. Billy and the Church of Stop Shopping, but this is not the time. By now, the lines between online and offline, live and digital became so blurred that we needed to develop newer theories and approaches to “saving” or preserving the “live”. Instead of thinking of archives as stable, and performance as ephemeral, we began thinking of archives, as Marianne Hirsch and I note in our *Editorial Comments* to the issue of *E-misférica* we co-edited:

as engines of circulation, as archival acts or practices that both mobilize different media and are mobilized by them. Instead of valuing notions of originality, fixity, authenticity, and legitimacy, we look at the archive as the site of potentiality, provisionality, and contingency (Hirsch and Taylor, 2012).

The so-called “live” and the archived continue to interact in many forms of again-ness. Any given performance may be ephemeral, exceeding the archive’s capacity to capture the “live”. A photograph or video of a performance is not the performance. But this does not mean that the archive is “dead” or holds lifeless materials. The holdings in the archive – the videos

that we see displayed, the photos, artifacts, and so on – can spring back to life. They convey a sense of what the performances meant in their specific context and moment, and what they might mean now – re-activated by the artists or transmitted through HIDVL. Beyond their documentary function, the videos at times form part of new performances. Sometimes, the artists themselves (re)animate the archive, as we invited Carmelita Tropicana, Arthur Aviles, and Lois Weaver and Peggy Shaw of Split Britches to do in our *Performing the Archive* event. We of course again archive what they do.

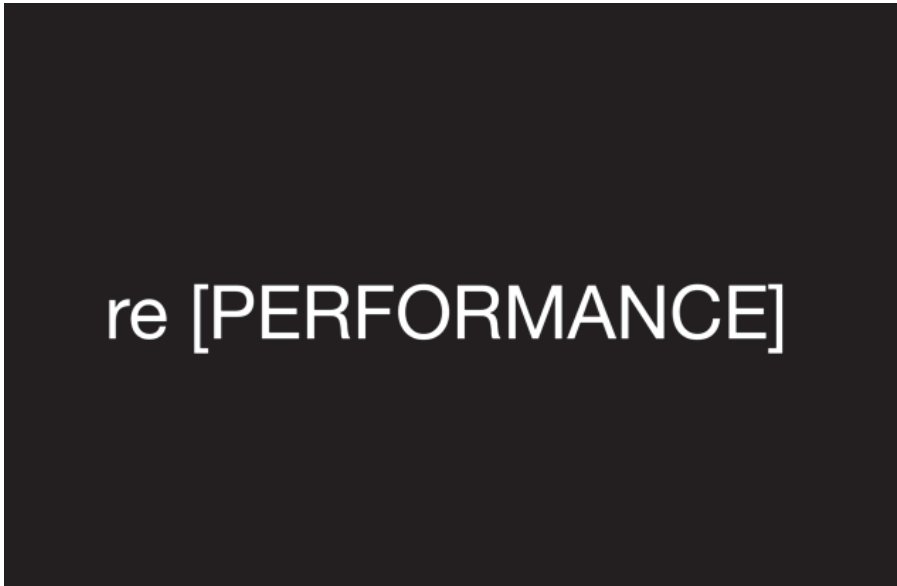


Image 9

The Hemispheric Institute’s archives, which include HIDVL with its 900 plus hours of streaming video as well as a physical archive with print documentation, props, and other ephemera, were developed not to resolve the contradictions that come from trying to archive the “live” but to prompt more conversations and interactions about and between the many lives of performance.