

*Performing Archives/ Archives of Performance*  
edited by Gunhild Borggreen and Rune Gade

University of Copenhagen: Museum Tusulanum Press, 2013  
(ISBN: 978-87-635-3750-6), 480 pp.

Laura Helyer (University of Glasgow)

*Performing Archives/ Archives of Performance* is a comprehensive, interdisciplinary, critical and creative anthology examining the relationship between changing conceptions of the archive and ontologies of performance. Theatre and performance theory have been greatly influenced by the work of Peggy Phelan and her understanding of the performance event as being inevitably ephemeral and unique: 'Performance cannot be saved [...] Performance's being [...] becomes itself through disappearance' (1993, p.146). This is the ontology of performance and it would appear to be diametrically opposed to everything we associate with the permanence and fixity of the archive and its related institutions (p.9). The editors of this anthology seek to address this dilemma, for they understand that performance needs preservation, that there is a 'continuous and pressing relevance of the archive for performance studies' (p.11).

Gunhild Borggreen, a professor of visual culture, and Rune Gade, a professor of art history, both at the University of Copenhagen, intend the anthology to be a 'critical history of the field and a renewal of it' (p.29). Phelan's now classic 'ontology of performance' is a refrain which seems to haunt and provoke most of the analysis in this collection. Thus, the reader has a confident sense of the anthology's value as continuing and enlarging a debate and emerging tradition of

performance writing. Borggreen and Gade argue in their introduction that:

New ways of understanding archives, history, and memory emerge and address theories of enactment and intervention, while concepts of performance constantly proliferate and enable a critical focus on archival residue (p.9-10).

Therefore, one of the priorities of the volume is to examine the intersection of archives and performance through practices of documentation and reproduction. This inevitably involves addressing issues of preservation, mediatisation and transformation. Indeed, this focus on documentation is identified by the editors as a key concern of the Performance Studies International (PSi) network, whose conference in 2008 informs the priorities of the collection:

... how and why should a performance be documented, described or stored as archival material – is it even possible within the ontology of performance? (p.11).

As such, the essays in this book engagingly offer new ways of understanding notions of recordness, presence and liveness. Heike Roms' provocative opening piece on 'archiving legacies' and 'archival practices' creates a helpful framework through which to consider the anthology because of the way it addresses the question of how an archive can 'care for performance's legacy/ies?' (p.36) and how such legacies are shaped by the various individuals 'caring for its remains' (p.37-38).

The anthology, consisting of twenty-five essays, is well structured into three sections (Ontologies, Archives of Performance, Performing Archives). Section one is concerned with ongoing critical debate around 'performance, and its disappearance, of the ephemeral and its reproduction, of archives and mediated recordings of liveness' (p.15). Section two focuses on 'art projects that question and challenge the archive from within' (p.21) and the last grouping is

concerned with ‘the moment or situation where the archive is transformed into a dynamic and self-reflective medium that intervenes in and challenges its own ontology’ (p.25-6). The introduction includes a brief summary of each essay which is helpful, given the eclectic and challenging range of material included. However, there is no index, which can make navigation of this substantial volume frustrating at times.

The contributions question what kinds of documenting of performance are possible and explore ways of performing an archive. This is achieved through an emphasis on valuing practice-based research and blending scholarly and creative approaches. One of the major strengths of the book then is the variety of, often hybrid, ‘recording technologies’(p.14) which it demonstrates are available to the scholar-researcher, artist and archivist, for example, beyond more conventional academic discourse. This is important because capturing and writing about performance means one is also striving to sympathetically reproduce it. This seems to require an adaptive, perhaps more subjective and creative approach which other strictly academic methodologies might not be able to provide. Indeed, citing the influence of the performance studies scholar, ethnographer and activist, Dwight Conquergood, the editors seek to explore and expand ‘performance as a form of scholarly representation’ (p.12), as well as assessing documentary forms as a mode of agency and intervention. As a creative writer and trainee archivist, I found this to be an original and relevant approach, particularly as archivists are as much concerned with access as they are preservation. Archivists and heritage managers, as custodians of records, are increasingly encouraged to write about their collections through social media platforms, digitization projects and virtual exhibitions. The more innovative contributions by

practitioners here offer refreshing insights into the possibilities for archivists to create new frameworks for access, as well as the potential for collaborating with artists and audiences. In the digital age, archivists are constantly made aware of the ways in which acts of digital curation and preservation ‘perform’ and reproduce the archive. This anthology demonstrates how archival repositories could facilitate and support other forms of participatory performance and dialogue through installations/ exhibitions. Annelis Kulmann’s contribution is particularly illuminating in this regard, by describing an artistic project at the Danish National Archive which sought to enable ‘the visitor to encounter the archive in a performative way’ (p.296), as well as striving to make the archivist’s work felt as a controlling, classifying presence – ‘to make these usually invisible specialists visible as hosts of the archive’ (p.298).

All the essays are unified by a strong philosophical underpinning rooted in seminal texts in archival/ performance studies, such as those by Derrida, Foucault, Schneider, Schechner and Taylor, for example. They are well-illustrated, diverse and global in focus. Particularly interesting perspectives in this respect include three essays focused on dance (especially Sarah Whatley’s piece on digital dance archives) and politics (Laura Luise Schultz’s ‘reframing political events as theatre’), two addressing family archives and secrets (Mette Sandbye’s ‘Performing and Deforming the Family Archive’ and Gunhild Borggreen’s ‘Archives of Secrecy: Yoshiko Shimada’s Art Project Bones in Tansu’). Other powerful contributions to the collection introduce a focus on gender issues, memory, and the body as archive (for example, Margherita Sprio’s ‘a queer archival performance’, Martha Wilson’s ‘Staging the Self’ and particularly Rivka Syd

Eisner's essay on 'Living Archives as Interventions in Ea Sola's Forgotten Fields').

Although the anthology is both eclectic and original in its range, I would have welcomed a discussion of performance poetry. The perspective of the editors is shaped, they claim, by a legacy of critical interest not particularly in performance art, but from a curiosity in how 'performance theory can also be applied to more conventional and "stable" art objects such as painting and sculpture' (p.10). It also strives to develop these ideas further by focusing on the concept of 'in-betweenness' and the 'process of transformation, the gap between the performance and its recording or reproduction' (p.11). Such a conceptual heritage may have benefited from a contribution employing phenomenological perspectives and techniques on the objects of performance, and performance as an object of memory. Overall though, as a result of the variety of backgrounds amongst its contributors, I feel this innovative anthology would appeal to a wide readership, including artists, activists, archivists, curators, writers, critics and dancers, as well as finding an academic audience in the disciplines of theatre, film and performance studies, art history, gender and cultural studies, for example. It also represents an interesting discussion of how artists continue to create innovative encounters and transformative interventions in archival institutions or sites/ collections of power.

That said, several of the essays do feel quite unified theoretically in tone and reference. As a consequence, the density of such critical material makes it a challenging ongoing read; it is more likely to be read selectively. However, by doing so, the reader will inevitably lose the sense of the book as a curated project of resonances and ongoing conversations and concerns. Nevertheless, it would function well as a

comprehensive course anthology representing current criticism and thinking in the field. There are many subtle observations across the essays and the volume certainly represents a dynamic contribution to ongoing debates around authenticity and provenance in the archive profession. This is particularly apt in this era of the mass digitisation of archival resources, when the ethical issues around the re-use and re-purposing of archival material becomes apparent and the supposed power, objectivity and integrity of the archive are repeatedly undermined.

### **Bibliography**

Phelan, Peggy. 1993. The Ontology of Performance: Representation Without Reproduction. In *Unmarked: The Politics of Performance*. London and New York: Routledge.