

Nothing Can Be Repeated

Joanna Zielińska in conversation with Dora García

Joanna Zielińska: You realized one of your first performances when you lived in Brussels. What was the connection between your early works and your early performances?

Dora García: I started my work as an artist doing sculpture, then sculpture became performance, and then film. Performance began at the point I realized I did not need to perform myself, and that the performance did not need an audience or at least not a called-for audience. I have always done delegated performance and durational performance (even before those terms appeared). Since my performances did not have a public, at least in the conventional sense of the word, the issue of how to communicate these performances was immediately raised—and so the narrative of performance became central, feeding back into the type of performance itself, and this narrative of performance often adopted the form of video performance, video performance of the surveillance-camera type. From there came the first films: *The Glass Wall* (2002), *Burning Post-its* (2005), *Sleep* (2000).

JZ: Which of your performance works was the first to be sold to a public collection? Maybe you can speak about the acquisition and this moment in your practice.

DG: The first time I ever sold a performance was in 2001, it was titled *Proxy/Coma*. It was sold following an exhibition in Barcelona at a place that doesn't exist anymore, Sala Montcada, and curated by Chus Martínez. Someone who was to be very important in my professional life, Béatrice Josse, then the director of FRAC Lorraine, saw the exhibition and then contacted me because she was interested in acquiring *Proxy/Coma*, which is in fact two performances in one. And I was surprised because I didn't consider this performance something that could be sold and so it was with her that I found out how to do this. The collection of FRAC Lorraine is famous because it literally fits in a folder, in a *classeur*—it is just papers with instructions. Béatrice focused on acquiring works by female artists (a terminology I hate, but to clarify) and immaterial works—so it was very fitting, this collection. Yet, at that time it was also completely new to me as I did not know what it was that you sold when you sell a performance. I was familiar with the practice of selling photographs, or else, videos of the performance, and really learned with her what the protocol was—or what she called “protocol.” In fact, it is a sort of score, something that would allow an institution to *repeat* the performance whenever they want.

JZ: Can you explain what the performance was about, and how this work was modified to fit institutional protocol?

DG: Actually, there were no modifications to the performance to fit the protocol: the protocol fit the performance. The question was how *Proxy/Coma* could be repeated, thus happen again, and how it could be transmitted to future generations, surviving me, and surviving Béatrice Josse. The performance *Proxy/Coma* consists of two elements. One is the presence of a female, a woman (I have great difficulties with these terms), of my age at the time, because she is supposed to substitute for me. She has to be in the exhibition space for as long as the exhibition space is open to the public. A camera determines the area where she can stay, meaning she has to stay within the territory or the scope that the camera could film. She cannot be off-camera, she mustn't step out of the camera. At the time this was created, two VHS tapes were recorded for four hours each, and the tapes were stored in what was called *Coma*—the archive of *Proxy*. Therefore, you had an image of the performance, projected or on a monitor, and an archive of all the days that the performance had been presented. And there was no way you could know whether the image on the projection or on the monitor of the *Coma* archive was live or was recorded. That was the idea of “Coma” at the time. So that's what the performance was, and the protocol described is more or

less exactly what I just told you, but expressed in a clearer manner. The protocol was signed by me and this was delivered to the institution, as a way of transmitting and preserving the piece.

JZ: You are referring to an exciting moment in contemporary art, the emerging moment of collecting live art. As you said, performance was entering collections mostly through the documentation but, at the beginning of the 2000s, or the end of the 1990s, choreography and other forms of performance art were presented in institutional spaces. Artists had to somehow adapt to the existing institutional framework. How has the process of acquiring performance work changed since then? Institutions have their own discourse, and there is an ongoing academic debate on collecting performance, but I wonder whether artists also benefit from the experience of other artists. Do you see any development, and changes in the institutional approach, when institutions ask you to sell?

DG: Well, I have often given advice to other artists who sold performances and didn't know how to tackle this. The 2000s was also the time when videos or films started to be sold as artworks to collections. I think it took after the idea of *editions* so that you would often make editions. It took me a long time to make editions of the performance because at the beginning I always considered them unique pieces, but it was more practical for me to make editions because this allowed me to lower the price of the performance. It also allowed me a bit of freedom because I ran into quite some trouble with, for instance, loans from collections, from performances—which was a contradiction in terms because when you loan a performance you don't loan anything, there is nothing physical, so you can perfectly well loan the same performance to five places at the same time—exactly the same as with films—so it took some time for the institutions to understand that this was possible. And I often discussed with other artists how to do this. But ultimately it did not change that much from the discussion I had with Béatrice Josse. When I sell performance (and I sell, for my standards, quite a large number of performances) it is always the same. It is this certificate that is basically me saying they are the owners of this performance. Because of course, anyone can do the performance anytime. It's a kind of contract—it is a contract with the collector, by which I declare that they own this performance. Then there is a little booklet, the protocol, in which I explain what the performance consists of. Often the protocol must be updated because of a new practice of the performance, or new developments. For instance, the practice of recording on VHS I mentioned before. Technologies change performances, so you have to update protocols; this is actually quite a fascinating thing to do.

JZ: Do institutions ask you to update these protocols?

GD: They don't ask me, but they ought to [laughs]. Sometimes it's painful, sometimes it's very painful because there are some institutions—I won't say any names—who buy a performance and never show it because they consider it too complicated to show but, of course, there are people who will ask to exhibit it. And the institution has no idea what they need to instruct, so they write me, and then I have to say to whoever wants to show it, what exactly this performance consists of because maybe it was sold ten years ago and many elements have changed (for instance, if there are some computer elements or if there are some telephone elements). So, in ten years they're just not the same anymore. So, I have no idea ... this should be the job of the institution, as it is the job of the institutions to update video formats or to update a lot of other things. They should also take care of updating performance protocols.

JZ: This is very interesting. It's unlike sculptures and paintings. It's a different approach toward conservation.

GD: Yes, but it's not that different from big installations, or any installation ... there are a lot of technical elements that become obsolete and eventually cease to exist. Most things don't work after five years, so you have to update the technical aspects.

JZ: What does it mean to work with a body and a performer in the context of the institution and the exhibition? What kind of care is required to have a performance in the museum, and is care practice included in the protocols?

GD: I always had the conviction that everything was *collectible* ... you can collect anything, there is no such thing as a work that can't be collected. This is one thing. Another thing occurred when many artist-choreographers started to work in the visual arts: how to keep taking care of the work over time. But, you know, what is funny is that in theater and dance, there are some parameters of care as well as labor that are already well established. So, in that sphere, there is no discussion about fees and payments. Fees are well established because theaters have unions: it is so much for rehearsals; it is so much for the presentation. But, of course, the theater and dance system is different from the visual arts institution because nobody owns a theater play, nobody owns a dance performance. In this case, when you enter the world of the visual arts, an institution owns the piece and there is no tradition and there is no roadmap and there are no performers' unions. In the 2000s, and even in the 2010s, it was really chaotic. At the Venice Biennale between 2005 and 2015, for instance, some performers were paid four euros per hour—not my performers! But others' performers. They were paid extremely badly. And, I have to say, they were paid in undeclared money, and there was no insurance for accidents, it was really bad. The performers were mostly students coming from art schools, etcetera.

Eventually, this became untenable. First, the performers acquired a kind of class consciousness; second, the institutions became ashamed, because there were accidents and stuff, and you could not maintain this. I think probably in the 2010s a serious discussion started—not so much on care—but on labor rights for performers and the idea to determine—establish—paying money for rehearsals, to pay for all this. But, I have had an enormous amount of trouble with this because most of the institutions and museums cannot directly hire performers due to their own labor structure—they cannot that easily hire people temporarily just for a project. They delegate to another structure, I don't really know the official names of these structures, but they were employment agencies, and they were the ones who were going to pay the social security and insurance of these performers. And, in the end, because it must be done through this mediation, there is not so much money left for the performers themselves. This has created a lot of trouble for me. Now I always say how much money the performers need to receive—and if these funds don't exist then there is no performance. But this is only when people contact me directly. I know, however, of a performance of mine being loaned to a museum by another institution, and its performers, again, are getting paid very badly. It is hard for an artist to control it, but there must be a raised awareness of the fact that labor and care must be regulated. Because of course next to labor rights, you also have basic care needs, you also need to have a place where you can rest. You also need to have pauses between performances. All these kinds of things!

JZ: When I started to work with performance, I didn't think about many of those factors. By now I know how important it is to create resting spaces and the possibility that the performers can feel comfortable. But I also had some problems in the past with the invigilating of the space. Museum guards might not be aware of the character of a performer's work, so they often need to be trained. In the exhibition space, the audience can get really close to the performance artist, so it could happen that someone crosses a boundary. There are certain potential accidents that are less likely to happen in a theater space where the audience and the stage are more separate.

DG: Yeah, but you do find this problem in experimental theater, too.

JZ: Let's say, people who join these kinds of experimental theater performances belong to a specific type of audience...

DG: That's right.

JZ: It's interesting to bring different notions of care that need to be developed at an institutional level.

DG: Yes, but I think that there is no turning back—only forward. Presenting performances in museums and visual art institutions is complex. It requires considering a lot of things. One of them is that the artist needs to have a conversation with everyone, from the cleaning ladies (or cleaning *messieurs*) to the guards, everybody who is going to be in the space: they need to be briefed on what is going to happen. But there is no turning back in the sense that there is no alternative such as: “Maybe it's better not to present performances in art institutions.” Because performance is there to stay—people really love performances, so much so that they seem to be very disappointed when nothing happens in an exhibition space.

[Laughter] “That's all? Like, those paintings and that's it?!” So, like photography, like film, performance is a format that has entered this institutional space and it cannot be pushed out. So it's the institution that has to adapt to it.

JZ: Performance work is changing the experience the of exhibition space. I like the idea of space that is in a state of constant transformation. How does this dynamic influence your own practice? How has a performative approach changed your way of working and the way you see an artwork as something that's in progress?

DG: Well, I could say that I started working with performance as a sort of revolt against the idea of the white cube: white cube art had to be understood by everybody independently of their background, independently of their class, gender, race (that's also not an accurate word but, you know what I mean): independent of the intersectional frameworks that shape who you are; and, as something that didn't change with time; and, as something that was somehow abstracted from the real world, so that once you enter the museum it's as though the real world is suspended, and then when you go back into the street... there was all this absurd talk of taking art to the streets, etcetera.

This is absurd because the truth is that reality doesn't stop at the museum door and there are very heavy, real conflicts inside the museum concerning everyday reality: concerning class, and concerning labor situations, and concerning money, etcetera. And everyone who comes into the museum is different, everyone sees a different play, a different artwork, depending on where they come from. It was very clear that by the way museums were organized, they addressed a very specific segment of the population and they were leaving out a lot of the population. Therefore, I started to do performance as a response to this, indicating that actually, what is interesting is everything that happens *around, despite, and because of* the white cube situation, everything that breaks the white cube situation. *Proxy* is exactly that: bringing the idea of duration and gender into the white cube.

In considering the performances, sometimes come very close to installation, to permanent or frozen situations, *tableaux*, or images. And sometimes they come very close to street theater. There is a wide variety of situations that have to do with this notion that nothing is permanent, that everything changes, and almost in Marxist terms, that everything is subject to history and to the conditions of materialism.

JZ: In that sense, your work is very complex. Making films is connected to performance work, the same as using printed matter and drawing. All these elements are linked through the idea of the performative gesture. For me, performance has this potential: of creating different kinds of spaces inside the dead white cube spaces where bodies are choreographed in different ways and,

sometimes, they might be taken out of their comfort zones. Do you believe in the transformative potential of performance?

DG: I don't think performance in general has transformative power. Some performances do and some others don't. What does that mean? Let's say live events that happen in an art institutional frame (or outside of it, or around it), having as important identity marks the notions of presence and duration, we use that to define performance. Of course, performance questions these very things, like for instance the notion of duration: what is it to be present inside/outside/around an institution? Also, the question of "address" is very important: to whom are you talking, to whom are you addressing yourself, and by whom do you want to be seen? This is already changing something. But it's not going to change the art system, performance per se, in the sense that it can stay very much within the limits of this system: it starts now, it ends then, this is the person who is performing, you are safe as a visitor if you don't get too close. The fourth wall can be very much present in a visual arts institution.

So, I would say that, of course, performance has the capacity to put many things into question. It's probably more flexible than other formats—but you need the will to transform the institution. It's not enough to have the format, you need the *will* to transform the institution. And, in what sense do you want to transform the institution? I believe performance has changed institutions, for instance, the notion of the situated museum, which we are discussing now as a confrontation with the classical museum. This is Manolo Borja Vilel's classification of museums: the corporate museum, the classical museum, and then the situated museum.¹ I think this notion of the situated museum has a lot to do with performance. And when I say performance, it also has a lot to do with the notion of audience and how you deal with the territory you're in. It has to do with duration, as something you present one time as a sort of spectacle or show. But it's really dealing with a specific situation of that institution, of the specific community in which that institution operates, and the specific publics: not only public as spectators but the public in the sense of being public, that this institution has to do with. I would establish that they certainly align; performance as I understand it cannot be presented identically in different places, cannot be generic, cannot rely on universal understandings; it has to work its way through the specific circumstances of the place where it is presented, taking very much into account the political, social, historic situation, and who are the people that are bound to engage with the performance.

JZ: It also has to do with this idea of the audience as performers when the audience becomes a part of performances. You work with different groups and communities, and these communities are included in various processes. The idea of the site-specificity of performance is fascinating because it depends on the context and clearly connects to the widely-discussed idea of situated knowledge and the situated museum. It's interesting to reflect on this: whether the site-specificity has to do with the places in which you are showing the performances. Some performances might not fit certain contexts. Do you have this problem?

DG: Yes, of course. As I said, there is a spectrum from works that are not completely site-specific to works that are extremely site-specific and there are some performances that can never happen anywhere else, for instance, the performance of *The Beggar's Opera* (2007), which was made for Skulptur Projekte in Munster and could never happen anywhere else, nor in any other time. But, it has generated a second performance, which is called *Best Regards from Charles Filch*, as its spinoff. "Spinoff" is a sitcom term that I like because it refers to the possibility that one of the characters of one show has a second life somewhere else, like Frasier from *Cheers*, for instance. Charles Filch from *The Beggar's Opera*, has a second life in *Best Regards from Charles Filch*, but *The Beggar's Opera* will only happen in the context of Munster and the context of Munster's Skulptur Projekte. It was the same with a piece called *Die Klau Mich Show* (2012)

¹ Manuel Borja Vilel, *Campos magnéticos: Escritos de arte y política* (Barcelona: Editorial Arcàdia, 2020).

for Documenta 13. That one was really a (very entertaining) institutional critique precisely of this exhibition happening at that time and in that place in 2012. It's not always the case, but there are a few others that are strictly site-specific. *Translation/Exile* (2017), for instance, is a performance that was made for an island in Amalfi, for a very specific commission by very specific collectors for a very specific situation. I thought it could never happen anywhere else. And yet, it has been possible to adapt it to other situations.

So, 100 percent of site-specific works do exist, but they are the minority.

JZ: How is this idea attached to a specific body or performer? You work with a group of people that it's maybe closer to a theater production. How flexible is this idea of developing performances with a specific performer?

DG: The performer is central in the work I do. It would never be a good performance if the performer wasn't good, but then you have to define what "good" means, and actually it's not a very common criterion for me to work with. For instance, I've had very bad experiences with professional actors, and I often work with artists—people who have their own practice. And we have a certain relationship: their production and my production have a certain affinity. I don't do castings. I find casting a horrible practice, really embarrassing for everybody, so I prefer to do it through a certain network that I have managed to weave, and we widen this net through recommendations that are really based on personal affinity. That's how it works because you know in my performances the performer has a lot of agency and has to make—take on—a lot of decisions. And, for instance, from very early on, already in *The Beggar's Opera*, the rehearsals are never really rehearsals. They are conversations on what the work is, why the work makes sense, and what kind of situations might come up. Rehearsals become a practice of brainstorming on a very simple idea and it's really given shape *with* the performers—it does not pre-exist. Many performances are, when first presented, almost half-cooked—they only become mature and full when the performer practices them, for a certain amount of time, drives them, runs them, and tests them. The performance at the beginning is a very simple idea, and then you just perform, and so the performance takes shape through the feedback that the performer gives. This is how it works. Sometimes I do work with professional actors, but this is the exception. These kinds of actors I do work with are exceptional people—Geoffrey Carey, and James Borniche, for instance. What I mean is that it's not that I say: I don't work with actors. There are some actors I've worked with for many years, and they have almost *become* the performance in the sense that if I present that performance I will always do it with that actor because I can't really imagine it performed by someone else.

JZ: So how does this connect with the idea of collecting your performances?

DG: Well, it only makes it more difficult. [Laughter] But in the end, you know, you deliver the protocol—let's call it the protocol. I also want to say that it's a special type of collector who collects performances, and my performances, certainly. I think everything can be sold, but not to everybody. Especially private collectors, or private people, who have bought performances. They are very close to me and in that sense, I would say they have an idea of what kind of performer could do this. I encountered this recently in Lisbon, where we performed *Little object a* (2021), with performers who I didn't know at all (with one exception, João dos Santos Martins). But I felt at ease because I trusted the judgment of the collector in the sense that I knew that they had spent time with the work, and they understood what the work was. So, I hope that a responsible person from the collection will solve that question.

JZ: The notion of repetition and rehearsal has a special meaning in your work. How does this change the way the work is created and presented?

DG: It has importance in my work in a negative way, my whole interest in the subject comes from one of the eleven rules Allan Kaprow lists in *How to Make a Happening*:

Perform the happening once only. Repeating it makes it stale, reminds you of theatre, and does the same thing as rehearsing: it forces you to think that there is something to improve on. Sometimes it'd be nearly impossible to repeat anyway—imagine trying to get copies of your old love letters, in order to see the rain wash off those tender thoughts. Why bother?²

The texts of Allan Kaprow have had a big influence on my work and in my teaching, and I fully agree you cannot repeat not only a happening but nothing, nothing can be repeated. Going into psychoanalytic mode and quoting the Argentinian psychoanalyst Jorge Jinkis: “Whoever is familiar with the temporality of trauma and the theory of repression, knows that in psychoanalysis the second time is, in fact, the first.”³ So, for me, repetition has importance in relation to performance (how one thing happens always anew, following certain parameters/score/rules, which are what is repeated, not the happening—but not even these things are repeated as they also constantly acquire new meanings) in relation to psychoanalysis (see Freud’s “Repeating, Remembering and Working Through”⁴) and in relation, above all to history, the idea of a cycle, and how the repetition happens but it is never the same, and how each new repetition changes all the preceding ones. Nothing is new, and everything is new.

JZ: The act of drawing and “writing in the space” becomes part of your practice. Can you explain this special relationship you have with drawing also in the context of Jacques Lacan, Jacques Derrida, and Robert Walser?

DG: The origin of my drawings in space has a very anecdotal origin: my friend and curator Guillaume Désanges once told me that in my artistic work, only a small part of my research and practice was visible and that this was a pity. So, I started to draw diagrams that connected all the different parts and paths of the work and I loved them and thought they were the best drawings I had ever made. So I started to develop this, and now it is a super important part of my practice. But of course, it is also part of my enormous interest in graphomania, or, compulsive writing, and how this compulsive writing in fact is not really addressed to anyone; it does not want to transmit a message, to say something, but on the contrary is about the act of writing itself, what is important is the act, the practice of writing—and drawing is a form of writing, an incision in the surface, poking through the surface. Here we can find Artaud, Lacan, and Walser, the latter with his micrograms, made to escape self-censorship, his voices; Derrida, I have not really read. We also find Heidegger—I know, not a very popular figure—but his text “Language” (*Die Sprache*, 1950) with the sentence: “No one speaks, Language speaks,” is a marvel.⁵ Gloria Anzaldúa—who is the one giving the name to the exhibition *She has many names* at the Museum of Contemporary Art in Antwerp—is a very important figure as well, in this writing-on-walls adventure.

JZ: One theme in your work is particularly intriguing: chalk circles. The classic geometric shape speaks of the traditions of theater and performance, inner and public space, in/out situations, and the notion of movement and gesture. It is very Brechtian in that it relates to the concept of “defamiliarization.”

DG: Yes, in the chalk circle we find Brecht indeed, but also Ian Wilson, and this story:

² Allan Kaprow, *How to Make a Happening*, rule No. 10 (lecture from 1968), see transcript published at ubu.com/historical/kaprow/Kaprow-Allan_How-To-Make-a-Happening.pdf.

³ Jorge Jinkis, “An Intellectual Passion,” in Dora García, *Segunda Vez: How Masotta Was Repeated* (Oslo: The National Academy of the Arts and Torpedo Press, 2018).

⁴ Sigmund Freud, “Weitere Ratschläge zur Technik der Psychoanalyse (II): Erinnern, Wiederholen und Durcharbeiten,” *Internationale Zeitschrift für Psychoanalyse* 2/6 (1914): 485–91. English translation: “Further Recommendations in the Technique of PsychoAnalysis: Recollection, Repetition, and Working-Through,” trans. Joan Riviere, c.P. 2 (1924): 366–76.

⁵ “Language speaks” [in the German original, “die Sprache spricht”] was a saying by Martin Heidegger. Heidegger first formulated it in his 1950 lecture “Language” (“Die Sprache”), and frequently repeated it in later works. The lecture was first published in Heidegger, *Untermwegs zur Sprache* (Tübingen: Verlag Günther Neske Pfullingen, 1959).

In 168 B.C., the Seleucide King Antiochos IV Epiphan marched on Alexandria with his troops. The Roman senator Gaius Popilius Laenas goes to meet him and enjoins him to leave Egypt. With his stick, he traces around Antiochos a circle in the sand, “a closed cut”: “You will not get out of this circle, as long as you have not responded by yes or no to my injunction to leave Egypt.” The episode ends with the retreat of Antiochos.

This story is told by Lacan somewhere, I cannot remember where exactly⁶, to explain how symbolic limits can be as impenetrable as the hardest physical barriers. I use my chalk circles as a way of marking territory symbolically, marking territory for the performance, almost like on a football field or tennis court. I also found lately this wonderful poem by Brecht written on the occasion of the death of Walter Benjamin:

After eight years of exile, observing the rise of the enemy
Then at last, brought up against an impassable frontier
You passed, they say, a passable one.⁷

JZ: What is the role of language in your work? Your practice is situated at the intersection of visual arts, theater, and literature. What does it mean?

DG: I consider there is nothing outside language and that language is really the only way we have to understand the world—it is a system. And, of course, it is much more than verbal language, much more than speech. I am completely fascinated by this paraphrasing of Lacan’s philosophy: “The subconscious is structured like a language, but it is the language of someone else, imposed on us.” This is the idea around which all my work turns—by wanting to understand how this imposition works, who really speaks (language speaks), how language permeates all of our waking and subconscious life, how slips of the tongue work, how power is exerted through language, and how language transforms reality (the old text of J.L. Austin, *How to Do Things with Words*). I do not think the work I do is situated on the intersection of visual arts, theater, and literature, it is visual arts, in the sense that it functions in the visual arts circuit. I do not think disciplines are determined by their materiality, but by their distribution circuits.

JZ: What does it mean that your practice is a study?

DG: It means exactly what it says: my everyday activity as an artist consists of studying. I read, I take notes, I make diagrams, I explain things and I am explained things, I analyze, I synthesize, I write summaries and develop summaries into bullet points, I recite, I memorize, I paraphrase, I quote ... all things related to study. Also, the more I learn, the happier I am with my work.

⁶ Jacques Lacan, *The Object of Psychoanalysis, 1965–1966*, lectures as found at lacaninireland.com/web/wp-content/uploads/2010/06/13-The-Object-of-Psychoanalysis1.pdf (see p. 65).

⁷ Bertolt Brecht, “Zum Freitod des Flüchtlings W.B.” (1941), in *Gedichte – Werke, Große kommentierte Berliner und Frankfurter Ausgabe: Gedichte und Gedichtfragmente 1940–1956*, ed. Klaus-Detlef Müller, Jan Knopf, Werner Hechte, and Werner Mittenzwei (Frankfurt: Suhrkamp 1993);