

Exhibition Reviews



rehearsal/performance. AME HENDERSON. Mounted at the Art Gallery of Ontario, Toronto. 27 August, 10 and 24 September, 2 and 4–5 October 2014.

Ame Henderson's durational performance entitled *rehearsal/performance* concerns histories of performance as presented in institutional archives and enacted in encounters with archival records. The performance, which took place on five days in various spaces in the Art Gallery of Ontario (AGO), comprised a series of five open rehearsals that lasted from two to twelve hours apiece. During each rehearsal, Henderson and her collaborators worked with archival records hand-picked by Henderson from the AGO's archive to simultaneously stage both the process of archival research and the artistic and administrative acts in the institution's history. The overnight, twelve-hour rehearsal on 4–5 October, which is the focus of this review, spanned three adjacent chambers through which the participants and audience could freely navigate. In the first chamber, archival records pertaining to the AGO's history of performance lay in a grid of neat piles on a table; various participants in the performance surveyed, sorted through, and organized this collection, all the while encouraging audience members to peruse and ask questions regarding the documents at hand. Beyond this chamber, which served as the participants' archive, a wrapping balcony overlooked a cavernous space designated as the event's main stage, and offered a view through a full-window wall into an elevated studio. In both of these chambers, other participants embodied select documents through poses and in voice; for instance, they copied photographs by creating living tableaux and read administrative records aloud. In the meantime, still others scrutinized individual documents to work out the set for any given past performance event, intermittently soliciting or offering feedback and conversing among themselves.

In the words of one of the performers, the elaborate choreography of *rehearsal/performance* relied on archival documents as a "score" to stage the AGO's history of performance events. Scores encompass a wide array of documentary genres, including classical and graphic notations for musical

performance, idiosyncratic and standardized dance notation schemes, as well as verbal scores, such as those predominant in certain strands of conceptual art; likewise, they express a breadth of modalities, from the prescriptive to the relatively open-ended interrogative.¹ Henderson's distinctive treatment of archival records as a score therefore merits close consideration, especially with regard to its implications for archival theory and practice. As discussed below, *rehearsal/performance* proposes an alternate form of theory for archival practice, namely, a performative form of theory; in other words, *rehearsal/performance* dispenses with the writing of theory in favour of a practice that itself presents a theory of archival encounters.

While performance studies scholar Rebecca Schneider refers to documents of performances as scores or scripts for re-enactments of archived events, the manner in which Henderson and her collaborators rehearsed their archival score fell short of producing a full re-enactment.² Far from expressively and dynamically re-animating past events based on the available documentary traces, she and the other participants refused to supplement the records with any additional movement. In contrast, they painstakingly transliterated each archival record into a language composed with still and seemingly impassive bodies; beside projections and hard copies of select archival records, which continuously circulated from the archive to the other chambers and back again, the performers reduplicated photographs by posing for long periods, and, through almost clinical recitations, mechanically reproduced program notes and artists' correspondence, among other texts. The rehearsal process, with all of its characteristic changeability and interactivity, enveloped each pose and utterance, allowing the participants to linger on the difference between each record and its innumerable potential enactments. Rather than reincarnate past acts, they presented a multitude of possible relations between the score, composed of archival documents, and its eventual performance. Archival theorists have written about archives as sites for the convergence of multiple relations and meanings; *rehearsal/performance*, through practice alone, gestured toward a multiplicity intrinsic to each archival encounter.³

- 1 For examples of experimental music notation, see John Cage, *Notations* (New York: Something Else Press, 1969) and Theresa Sauer, *Notations 21* (New York: Mark Batty Publishers, 2009). For a history of dance notation, see Ann Hutchinson Guest, *Dance Notation: The Process of Recording Movement on Paper* (New York: Dance Horizons, 1984). A wide range of verbal scores are collected in John Lely and James Saunders, eds., *Word Events: Perspectives on Verbal Notation* (New York: Continuum, 2012).
- 2 Rebecca Schneider, *Performing Remains: Art and War in Times of Theatrical Reenactment* (New York: Routledge, 2011), 28.
- 3 For multiplicity with regard to original order(s), see Heather MacNeil, "Archivalterity: Rethinking Original Order," *Archivaria* 66 (Fall 2008): 1–24. For a recent overview of archival efforts to forge practices that encompass multiple cultural and historical perspectives, see Terry Cook, "Evidence, Memory, Identity, and Community: Four Shifting Archival Paradigms," *Archival Science* 13, no. 2–3 (2013): 95–120.

One particular moment in *rehearsal/performance* stood out for its vivid presentation of the plurality that unfolds in the act of encountering an archival record. In that moment, the archival document in question portrayed a figure photographed from behind; pictured on an incline, with arms outstretched and head bowed, this figure cut a diagonal line across one of the walls in the studio, where a projector had pitched it for display. When the performer who was attempting to mimic the photograph stepped into the light of the projector, and, having approached the image, patiently and precisely assumed the same stance as the figure, her own shadow was cast beside the projection. From the perspective of the balcony, where the audience congregated, three silhouettes, all alike, appeared: the outlines of the figure in the projected image, the participant's body, and the shadow on the gallery wall. As the participant held her pose, her shadow seemed to belong alternately to the image and to her own body, as if it were an index of the temporal difference not only between the event documented in the photograph and the participant's pose, but also, more generally, between the archival document and any past or future enactment. The replication of the archival photograph across multiple medial surfaces (i.e., as a projected image, a body, and a shadow on the gallery wall) thus seemed to signal an abundance of past and prospective interlocutors. While archivists have advocated for description and documentation practices that account for histories of archival interventions, in this instance the participant's act of assuming the pose presented in an archival photograph, that is, of enacting the archive as a score, announced the profusion of eyes and bodies across time that would continue to trace the contours of the act documented in the specific archival record at hand.⁴

The manner in which Henderson and her collaborators rehearsed archival documents as a score therefore invited both the participants and audience to spend time with the countless possibilities inherent in each archival encounter; the rehearsal process demonstrated each moment and every act as but a fragment of a potential whole. Indeed, *rehearsal/performance* structurally foregrounds incompleteness in several respects. First, taking a cue, perhaps, from artist Yvonne Rainer's pieces *Performance Demonstration* and *Continuous Project-Altered Daily*, which similarly troubled the distinction between rehearsal and performance, *rehearsal/performance* transpires in the absence of an end; it stages a practice of ongoing archival encounters rather than a process of production marked by an outcome.⁵ As opposed to culminating the rehearsal process in a final event, the participants sustained

4 Laura Millar offers an example of such a theoretical endeavour. See Laura Millar, "The Death of the Fonds and the Resurrection of Provenance," *Archivaria* 53 (Spring 2002): 1–15.

5 For documentation of these performances, see Yvonne Rainer, *Work, 1961–73* (Halifax, NS: Press of the Nova Scotia College of Art and Design, 1974), 109–58.

it as a means of indefinitely engaging with their score, and, correlatively, histories of performance in the AGO. In addition, certain elements obstinately remained out of sight throughout *rehearsal/performance*, thwarting any attempt on the part of the participants or spectators to comprehend the work in its entirety. Each of the three zones in the overnight rehearsal, for example, was located outside the sightlines of one or more of the others. Microphones hooked up to a central sound system allowed the participants to communicate across these spaces, such that the voices resounding in any given chamber often issued from a blind spot. Much like the shadow described above, these voices appeared to belong neither to the visible participants in one chamber, nor to the unseen speakers in another; rather, they hovered in an equivocal space between these separate scenes. At times, the murmuring and shuffling of the audience also occupied this in-between space, nearly muffling the voices of the participants. Since the audience in any given chamber changed dramatically from moment to moment, this crowd of voices and sounds alluded not only to the present encounters with each documentary enactment, but also to the spectators in the other rehearsals and venues who had and will have added their sonic acts to the performance. Exceeding a determinate time span, and overflowing a measurable expanse, *rehearsal/performance* affirms the incomplete, inexhaustible character of the collection of archival records that make up its score.

By taking up archival documents as a score, Henderson maps a choreography of archival acts that relates performers and audience alike to a constitutively plural and partial archive of performance histories. The participants in *rehearsal/performance* rehearsed these histories precisely as they appear in archival documents, thereby presenting the manifold potential realizations of every archival record, as opposed to re-presenting past events. From an archival perspective, the rehearsals therefore raise crucial concerns regarding the theoretical constructs, ethical codes, and discursive practices that archival practitioners might take as scores. How do the precepts of archival theory tend toward the actualization of certain archival practices to the exclusion of others? How might archivists evaluate the merits and weaknesses of resisting the manner in which these scores script performance, and what theoretical and practical consequences might follow from such a challenge? Finally, if multiplicity does indeed unfold in archival acts, then how might archivists choreograph practices of arrangement and description so as to experience and invite others to partake in this plural character? With regard to archival studies, the key strength of *rehearsal/performance* is therefore not its immediate applicability, but the proposition it enacts; by casting archival documents as a score, Henderson shifts the rules and codes that preside over practice from a general body of theoretical prescriptions and regulatory practices to the specificities of each archival document, taken on a case-by-case basis. She thereby offers a mode of archival engagement that destabilizes

the relationship between the generalities of applied theory and the specificities of archival acts, and provokes reflection on the forms that theories of and for the archive might take.

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