

Between Remake and Reperformance: Emerging Narratives in Media Art

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No other term has worse connotation than the remake of an original film, inviting an unflattering comparison to the older original, a comparison it rarely survives. We immediately suspect a flawed and lukewarm aesthetic, and a dubious revisionist interest compromising whatever dear memory we might have of what only then becomes identified as the “original.” But prompted by media and contemporary art, this pattern has fallen apart. And maybe it was never true in the first place. The urge to go back to zero and do it again might be prompted by a much more complicated affair that emerges from the narratives of contemporary and media art.

In the past, a widely held belief positioned the genre of performance as antithetical to a collecting art institution. A strong motivation for historic performances had been precisely their anti-institutional drive. They remained a final bastion of originality, based on the presence of the artist. An analysis of the relationship between performance and document, however, sheds a different light on what is perceived now as a much more hybrid construction. As we know from the philosophical and political critique of the archive, no document exists that is not processed, categorized, formatted, in short produced by the archive. Maybe it is time now to stress the role of the museum in producing artworks. The debate that was generated by two performative museum shows in New York earlier this year, Marina Abramovic’s retrospective at MoMA and Tino Sehgal at the Guggenheim, underlined a fascinating conflict: in order to distinguish itself from the performing arts, “performance” needs to introduce a difference to the theatrical script or musical score. Sehgal thus detaches himself from the body-centered tradition of performance developing situative “interpretations”, whereas Marina Abramovic insists on the possibility of a remake, now called “reperformance”.

Looking at these more recent developments in contemporary art, we need to review two decades of symposia and workshops on the preservation of media art, which after all is performative in a fundamental way. One thing seems certain in the modern networked society: more and more people realize that ‘It’s complicated’ is by far the most realistic status update on any relationship, and that includes all relations between artist, institution, and the public. Our collecting art institutions need to embrace an open relationship and open up to debate and collaborative thinking. Models and systems will give way to emerging narratives that will capture the notion of experience in an unprecedented way.