INTRODUCTION

Peggy Phelan famously claims, “Live performance and theatre (‘art with real bodies’) persist despite an economy of reproduction that makes them seem illogical and certainly a poor investment. [...] but it may well be that theatre and performance respond to a psychic need to rehearse for loss, and especially for death.”¹ This idea acts as a springboard for this essay. Not only is this statement theoretically potent, it is also highly politically charged, especially in the context of Western attitudes toward death. Beginning in the late nineteenth century and accelerating through the twentieth, death-denial has been an extensive cultural force that has given way to environmental harm, hostility toward aging and sick bodies, and general cultural discord.² Our relationship with death is the one unifying condition that imbues our very lives with meaning; death-denial inherently does violence to this relationship. Without death, there is no need to engage in meaningful relationships with one another, no need to strive toward utopian ends, no need to try to leave a legacy that will better the world for our descendants, familial and societal. The fact that life ends makes every action meaningful, and it is unhealthy to ignore that. And yet, there are a myriad of examples to account for ignoring death from debates about end-of-life medical care to concrete-lined caskets that are altering the substrata surfaces of the earth to preventing decomposition by injecting carcinogenic chemicals into the corpse. Death-denial hinders a society’s ability to grieve and mourn in a way that is generative. If performance is a rehearsal for death, then it is the most important rehearsal to have and it would do well to think about what comes after a performance and think of it in parallel to what comes after death. This project is undertaking performance art; thinking how to foster a better relationship with death through artistic and curatorial practices.
In another instance, Phelan states that performance’s ontology is its disappearance. She goes on to talk about the inherent “liveness” of performance, which links performance with life: the event is alive particularly because it will disappear. The documents that last beyond the end of a performance are said to be not the event itself, but its remains; these are akin to the remains of a dead body, all things that were once alive leave behind some trace of themselves that lasts much, much longer than the living organism. In living organisms, though, there is something that lies between life and dead remains: the decomposing corpse. In decomposition we find the moment where the dead organism is being transformed into new matter: nutrients and excrements of necrophagic organisms. Decay and rot are integral in replenishing the environment with bodily matter no longer needed by the dead organism. On the ontological spectrum, I suggest inserting reperformance in between the live event and the material remains—e.g. video recordings, audio recordings, photographs, textual documentation. I propose to define reperformance, ontologically, as that which is decomposing. To illustrate this point, I will present two works of performance art that were (re)performed and curated differently: Panoramix by choreographer Maria La Ribot, installed at the Tate Modern in 2003 and Office of Information by David Lamelas, installed at the Museum of Modern Art (MoMA) in 2015. The curatorial methodology used on each piece and the ways that they engage with reperformance as a documentary technology make them foils of each other. One acts as an example of decomposition, which I argue for, the other as one of zombification, which I argue against. These reperformances, accompanied by death metaphors to highlight the larger political charge of the essay, will illustrate the nuances of my ontology of reperformance and the subtle differences between decomposition and subliminal zombification. To further clarify my definition of
reperformance-as-decomposition, I will reperform an essay that I wrote previously on the matter as a performative addition to the discourse.

I have concentrated most of my academic efforts on the study of reperformance as an artistic and curatorial practice that has emerged in the early twenty-first century. I have also focused my personal political project toward the death acceptance movement, a movement led by morticians, artists, and scholars, which has been growing in the United States over the last five years. To take up the notion of performance as a rehearsal for death and to think of reperformance as a crucial step in the process of death and decay is the main purpose of this project. Here, I am returning to an essay I wrote in late 2015 regarding the implications of thinking of reperformance as decomposition. I will be reperforming this paper by annotating it, adding to and subtracting from it, allowing it to transform and decompose into a new piece of writing to demonstrate my asserted ontology of reperformance. What proceeds from here is a different kind of writing. It is thoughtful, but fragmented; familiar, but entirely new. It is a paper, reperformed and decomposed. Written in aphorisms, it resembles a corpse: fractured with some semblance of what it once was, but still transforming into something new.
CORPUS

Upon any second look, disappearance is not antithetical to remains... Indeed, remains become themselves through disappearance as well... We might think of it this way: death appears to result in the paradoxical production of both disappearance and remains.

—Rebecca Schneider

Death is the most important relationship you will ever have. It will not do to ignore it.

—Caitlin Doughty

1. Reperformance, an immaterial, performed documentation technology is a practice that began in the twenty-first century.

   a. Performance is being re-evaluated in the wake of its newest form of documentation: reperformance. Reperformance is a way of generating something new and different than the typical video or photo recording of the original event. The reperformance, or reenactment, is an apparatus that recalls a memory of the original, it ontologically resembles the original, and yet it remains differently, producing something new.

   b. A side-effect of reperformance is social capital. If you were not present for the original event, you better be there for the reperformance. The “liveness” of any performed event implies its uniqueness, and therefore, its value.

      i. Perhaps, though, reperformance can evade this new kind of economy by not being totally alive.

2. Since Peggy Phelan’s now infamous invocation of disappearance as the ontology of performance, theories of reperformance are polarized and fraught with debate.

   a. This is probably in part because of the idea of disappearance inherent in both performance and reperformance. Also, it has to do with grappling with disappearance and reappearance in the context of dramatic repetition. Usually
there is a line drawn that differentiates between theatre and performance art—sometimes. Theatre, while still a “live art” by virtue of being performed by live performers before a live audience, adheres to a script; it possesses reproduction through its repetition. Performance art, on the other hand, is “live art” not only because it is performed by live bodies, but because it can never be reproduced in the same way again; even its repetition in photo and video recordings is not an exact reproduction. But what of a performance piece’s script? If and when performance art becomes theatre through (scripted) reperformance, what does that mean for the ontology of the performance?

i. The distinction between performance art and theatre is interesting, though, because of how the two have come to resemble one another in the last few decades. Performance art had been, at its inception, a one-time event; a living, breathing entity that would definitely die with only fossilized documents remaining. Theatre, on the other hand, was a live event that also progressed into a future thanks to its ties to a script. Reperformance makes use of a script in much the same way. Furthermore, actors tend to make small changes in each performance, while still adhering to a script, which is what I am proposing (re)performance artists do as well.

b. “[Reperformance is] actually a form of sublimation: a purposeful forgetting of the initial intentions of an entire generation (Abramovic and her ego notwithstanding), and as well, a simulation of an anticommercial preconsumerist culture.”5 “[Reperformance] is distinctive in that it invites transformation through memory, theory, and history to generate unique and resonating results.”6
i. Here: two conflicting arguments from Jenni Sorkin and Robert Blackson to sum up the debate on reperformance and its place in performance art history. A notable contribution to the subject is Amelia Jones’s notion that proximity to a live event is not necessarily more desirable than viewing and analyzing the event’s recorded documentations. She states: “While the viewer of a live performance may seem to have certain advantages in understanding such a context, on a certain level she may find it more difficult to comprehend the histories/narratives/processes she is experiencing until later, when she too can look back and evaluate them with hindsight (the same might be said of the performer herself).”

1. What can be inferred from Jones, then, is that liveness makes no difference in terms of viewing and thinking critically about a work of performance art. So, reperformance is a technology of documentation that is neither better nor worse than photographs or videos.

ii. If performance is a rehearsal for death, then reperformance is a different kind of practice. The above two arguments (and all arguments on either side of the issue) could both be true in how a reperformance is prepared and curated—a death metaphor is useful here.

iii. A reperformance can be said to be alive, its documents can be said to be its remains. Reperformance, then, being somewhere in between the two, is the corpse that is decomposing—teeming with life (bacteria) but on the way to becoming remains. Death denial occurs when a corpse is
embalmed for no real reason other than to be “on view” at the mortuary and made to look “lifelike.” Morticians capitalize heavily on this denial. Death acceptance, on the other hand, is when the corpse is allowed to decay on its own, in a way that allows for the natural changes in the body to occur. The former example resembles how Sorkin explains the sublimating characteristic of reperformance, the latter resembles Blackson’s statement. Reperformance should be curated in a way such that it is not trying to reanimate the corpse.

3. Reperformance is a precarious (non)object that is at once a document and, since it is also a performance, something that “disappears.” I would like to expand this notion of reperformance as another document that disappears by positing its mode of remaining. I will examine how reperformance can be seen as the remains of a performance, and, furthermore, asking the question: How should an artist or curator approach the exhibition of reperformance?

   a. Interesting to think about here is the curator-artist relationship. The curator can be seen as a mortician, in some respects. While a mortician maintains control over the meticulous exercises of preparing a corpse, the curator does not have this same kind of control. The artist, if s/he is still alive to reperform, or see their work reperformed, has autonomy over how the work decomposes and remains after its original event. This poses a certain kind of problem because the curator does not have total control over the reperformance, the purview falls under the artist.

   b. There is an interesting tension here due to the fact that the performance itself is now gone. The curator, which literally means “caretaker,” is overseeing the work
now that it has been collected for exhibition. The artist, given that s/he is still alive at this moment, also still maintains full autonomy over their artwork. If the curator is likened to a mortician, might the artist, in this case, be a living last will and testament? This death metaphor, in certain ways, upends how we traditionally think of documents and living people in a dizzying logical spiral.

4. What are the stakes of a performance’s remains that are transforming in their act of remaining?
   
   a. Is this a contradiction? Can something remain and transform at the same time? It seems as though this is exactly what a putrefying organism does.

5. I use the term “liveness” in this essay with a very specific definition in mind. Firstly, I do acknowledge that there is a certain type of “liveness” that exists in performance art. Secondly, I am incorporating Peggy Phelan’s definition of the term that she gave in an interview with Marquard Smith in 2003 […]. Phelan speaks about the moments during a live performance that are charged with radical contingencies; she asserts that these moments are what set performance apart from other forms of art.
   
   a. Does liveness need to be preserved, and should it be preserved? For Phelan, no, because the property of liveness is exactly what evades a capitalist economy of reproduction in the first place.
   
   i. For others, such as Amelia Jones, presence, and liveness for that matter, is not real or can never be accessed, so the question of preserving it is moot. And, still, for others liveness inhabits all things, even remains. (I am largely drawing from Philip Auslander’s idea that even photographs and
audiovisual recordings disintegrate and find their ontology in
disappearance).

b. Phelan, in her ontology of performance, largely focuses on the ways in which live
events make meaning outside of and beyond capitalist systems of reproduction.
The crux of her argument is that a performance can never be repeated and its
evasion of reproduction is outside of capitalism. The same can be said for
reperformance, but only reperformance of a certain kind.

i. Reperformance as curatorial method could go in either of two directions: it
can reanimate the live event, or, it can transform and remain elusive.

ii. Reperformance must, if it wishes to be ontologically linked to
performance and if it wishes to seek the same goal as performance in
terms of getting outside of a capitalist regime, be allowed to function as a
decomposing (non)object.

iii. In her essay on theatrical labor, Rebecca Schneider discusses the issue of
performance as affective labor that potentially falls into the trap of
“zombie capitalism” by way of it being incorporated into the capitalist
system of reproduction. In her discussion, I find that Schneider touches on
precisely the same ideas of decay that I am enumerating here. We are both
in agreement that the zombification of theatrical, affective labor—that is,
performance—is not resistant to a capitalist economy of reproduction.
Rather, it is complicit with it. “Reanimation is then another word for work,
or for exchange. Reanimation is what resists ruin or decay—otherwise
known as the depreciation of capital. For remember that capital rots with
distance from liveness, or distance from labor considered to take place as time.”

iv. Capitalism seeks to always keep alive and resuscitate when necessary—and it is always necessary. As long as something is alive and circulating it can accrue value as well as put value back into the market, in this way liveness helps to keep capitalism in place. If decomposition can be equivocated with depreciation of value, then adopting it as a mode of being and incorporating decay into our daily lives is a way of side-stepping capitalism. And, is this not the original interpretation of the possibility of performance art? At least, this is what Phelan, among many others, has asserted. Performance art, by being mortal, evades an economy of reproduction, which is to say, it evades capitalism’s grip.

v. This means, then, that performance art’s integrity is its ability to search for a utopic space where capitalism ceases to exist because things are allowed to live and die without any resuscitation, without leeching them for all their worth. Now, as reperformance is coming onto the scene, we must tread carefully because by its very name reperformance keeps a part of performance art’s original characteristic. That part is liveness, which mortality follows; reperformance has life and death within, so we should resist reanimation. Giving in to reperformance’s decay allows the piece to get beyond capitalism even as it is still holding onto the original memory of the event.
c. Does a corpse need to be preserved by methods of carcinogenic embalming and being buried in a concrete-lined casket? No. Making a corpse appear lifelike for an open-casket viewing is the very same kind of sublimation as a reanimated reperformance. It is attempting to bring back the dead in order to label these funerary practices with a price. When the corpse is allowed to die and disappear in its own time, this, too, is evading the free-market system that preys on the families of the recently deceased.

i. Death practice in the United States has a complicated history. Ever since the Civil War, when droves of dead bodies needed to be returned to their families quickly, the embalming practice has been the normative mortuary method. Morticians have been selling embalming as a desirable corpse preparation for the last century and a half. The current movement promoting green burials is trying to combat this by suggesting that a more natural decomposition process will contribute to environmental health, and deny the death industry from profiting off of grieving families. Proponents of the death acceptance movement in North America are in favor of doing away with the unnecessary methods of reanimating the dead. How might this movement be galvanized beyond the death industry and reach a wider audience? By drawing parallels between death and cultural practices and understanding how to better approach them in a more death-positive way.

6. Reperformance is [an exceptional documentation method] because, in its practice, it attempts to answer [the aforementioned] questions. Moreover, for exhibition purposes, it is a very effective form of documentation because it possesses this unique trait of
“liveness.” A reperformance is a live act that gives a certain experience to the viewers. People walking around a museum gallery are intrigued by a live performer in the space, and they generally tend to linger in front of a performance for a longer period of time than they would while looking at an object. (This statement is general and I readily admit that I do not have statistical evidence to support this claim. I do, however, have my own empirical evidence, collected over the last three years, coming from spending time going to performances in several different museums in London, New York, and Chicago; from what I have observed, I am comfortable making a claim such as this, but I will not say that it is universally provable).

a. As a momentary aside, I would like to make this point in order to briefly advocate for reperformance and its liveness as defined by Phelan in 2003. Reperformance, by virtue of involving live performers and a live audience, possesses this element of liveness because of the moments of possible transformation that charge the piece. This is not what is in dispute here; rather, the way in which that liveness is preserved is my point of dissent.

7. Here is where a binary distinction between performance and its remains comes into play; usually, a performance is considered to be the living thing and its recorded documents are the dead remains. In the age of reperformance and determining its place in discourse it is important to consider it in its efficacy and how it is being used. I am proposing a tripartite distinction between performance, reperformance, and recorded documents. Through the insertion of reperformance in between liveness and the corpse, I am naming it as decomposition, or the decomposing corpse of the performance artwork.
8. In order to put this abstract theorization of the performative document into concrete terms, I will now introduce a case study of a reperformance that was mistakenly resuscitated—forced into becoming a zombified version of [itself].

   a. I will also introduce another case study that accomplishes what reperformance should aspire to be to offer up a critical comparison between the two. One case study is *Office of Information about the Vietnam War at Three Levels: The Visual Image, Text and Audio* by David Lamelas, first performed in 1968. The other piece I will discuss is *Panoramix* by Maria La Ribot, (re)performed in 2003. *Office of Information* took place at the Venice Biennale at the Finnish Pavilion, it was a landmark work for Lamelas as it was his European debut. The dawn of globalization and the subsequent, paradoxical feelings of disconnection is the subject matter for the piece, which involved a woman sitting in a transparent office reading news updates on the Vietnam War. These updates were provided by ANSA, an Italian news agency, which were being transmitted through a telex machine that updated automatically. Attached to the outside of the office was a telephone receiver that viewers could pick up and listen to to hear the updates being read in English, Italian, and French; the presence of these three languages was indicated by the words “Listen, Ascoltare di, Ecoutez” labeling the office. A viewer could tap on which language she or he wanted to hear and the performer would translate the news into that language. *Office of Information* was acquired by MoMA in 2012 and was installed/reperformed in the collection-centered exhibition *Transmissions: Art in Eastern Europe and Latin America, 1960 – 1980* organized by chief curator of Media and Performance Art Stuart Comer. This
reperformance strictly adhered to the script that came out of the 1968 performance with the performer/translator, Patrisia Tomassini, reading those news updates in English, Italian, and French. She was provided with the full transcript of the news updates that came out of the telex machine in 1968 and live-translated them. She was told to live-translate in order to stutter and pause and inflect the speech with um’s and uh’s; these utterances would simulate the sound of liveness, in other words, they would make the corpse appear more lifelike. This piece was reperformed once a week during the exhibition for two hours, viewers did not have the option to request which language would be read. When the performance was not in session, viewers only saw the office as a relic, and they were able to pick up the receiver and listen to a prerecorded translation by Patrisia.

9. This reperformance is the exact definition of the reconstituted corpse forced back to life that should be avoided.

a. When deciding on how to install/reperform *Office of Information*, Comer and Lamelas both decided to keep to the original script because the piece was so historical for Lamelas’s career. Their intention was to pay homage to the piece; additionally, the entire exhibition was about artists who have been excluded from Western art history and Western art institutions, so it was important to them to include the 1968 version in the prestigious (does prestigious here mean Western?) Museum. Comer also probably did not want to take over the piece so as not to infringe on Lamelas’s territory. It is important to maintain the historical integrity of the piece, but a reperformance that actively decomposes is not mutually exclusive from historicity, as was discussed previously. For example, the original
1968 performance was charged with liveness. The spectator-performer relationship is full of moments of possibilities and transformations in two ways: one is the way the spectator can speak with the performer by tapping on the glass and requesting the language, the other is the viewer was changed while hearing news information from the Vietnam War. In the reanimation of the piece at MoMA, there is no such possibility for such a relationship between performer and spectator. The only interaction that remains is the receiver that each spectator can pick up to hear what the translator is reading. Because the performer is reading from a script, the spectator has no choice in which language is read. This lack of variation means that the liveness that was once present is gone in the reanimation because of the desire for it to remain a particular way without decomposing.


a. The gesture of performance is done in futility because there are no moments of contingency. These moments are unique to performance art; that is to say, the thing that makes it alive, are absent. In their place is the hollow, zombified relic of the past. Not to say that historical relics have no place in the museum. Quite the opposite, actually, historical objects serve many purposes including acting as recalls to memory and as artifacts to perpetuate the narrative of history. But to transform a performance into a relic, to embalm it and prevent it from properly decaying, is to force it back into a lackluster circulation of social capital. The piece’s adherence to its accuracy is preventing the materiality of the performance, mediated through the performer, to decompose.
i. The same can be said of the American death industry. Disallowing the corpse from rotting leeches the grieving family of money because of the expenses of embalming and concrete-lined caskets and cemetery plots. A corpse that cannot decay, one that is buried without the ability to nourish and generate new life, also gives into a capitalist regime that continues to engineer poverty. An example: because of the way cemeteries are designed, there is no possibility for them to eventually be turned into land that could be built upon to house the millions of unsheltered people in the world.

11. The resurrected performance is also doing more harm than good to the overall meaning and message of the piece. One of Lamelas’s goals with the work was to make the experience of disconnection literally tangible through the use of the glass barrier between the viewer and performer. When the viewer touches the glass wall to communicate and request a language preference, the experience is one of mediated connection. This artistic action was prophetic of the effect of globalization would have on the world, that effect being receiving information from across the world through a mediated screen. This aspect of the artwork is particularly compelling and it is somewhat lost in the reperformance at MoMA.

   a. I readily admit that this experience of disconnection can be felt in the reanimation of *Office of Information*, but I will argue that this feeling is different in kind from the original. The magic of this piece was that viewers were able to access global, mediatized information. Experiencing this kind of disconnect was important to the original piece and since 2015’s viewers were not able to control this aspect of the
piece like the 1968 audience, they lose out on this aspect. Perhaps the piece could have been changed in such a way that it reflects how information comes at us now. Often, information is disrupted with sponsorship advertisement, or it is given in shorter, more compact sections in order to keep people’s ever-shortening attention spans. Perhaps the script could have been kept the same, but the way it was presented and performed could have been different from the original in a way that better represents how we hear news today. Or, maybe, the architecture of the installation could have been experimented with in order to affect the space in which the viewer was experiencing the work.

b. One slightly obvious and very controversial option for a reperformance of the piece is changing the news updates to reflect what is going on in the present time of the reperformance.

i. This option would actually be the easiest way to decompose the piece while still retaining its skeletal form, however, it could quickly become problematic. Martha Rosler, when writing about reperformance, contemplates this issue when she writes, “How will the historical context of the works be indicated and conveyed? There have regularly been efforts on television to revisit national or world historical moments through programs that frame the events in modern terms, laughably trapping us in the constant present.”

ii. On the one hand, changing the script to match a present global climate might unhinge all historicity. On the other, however, recontextualizing the piece to the present time could enact a queer history—a “temporal drag,”
as Julia Bryan-Wilson—would say by enabling separate temporalities to converse with one another.

12. In addition to postulating […] alternatives for Office of Information specifically, it would do well to consider [another example] of [reperformance] that was allowed to decompose properly within an institution. In the spring of 2003 at Tate Modern, Maria La Ribot performed Panoramix, a three-and-a-half-hour-long performance that consisted of thirty-four reperformances of her works that were a part of her series called Piezas Distinguidas (Distinguished Pieces 1993 – 2003). La Ribot is a dancer-choreographer who created these “distinguished pieces” over the course of ten years, between 1993 and 2003. La Ribot’s reperformance of these works is very much in line with [my ontology of reperformance-as-decomposition] I have put forward.

a. La Ribot, instead of presenting a traditional retrospective of her work with each performance being shown on its own, presents her oeuvre in one sweeping glance. “Panoramix is […] a sewn together patchwork of pieces from discrete places and times. In naming the work, La Ribot marks her action of re-collection as a meaningful contradiction. A panorama is singular, whilst a mix is irrefutably plural.”¹⁰

b. La Ribot’s reperformance sits comfortably in its ever-shifting decay by offering all of its parts somehow separately and all at once.

13. Performances die upon their nascence. La Ribot knew this and approached her revisitation with a creative openness to a decomposed reperformance. Instead of looking back in time and reaching for performances to bring back to life, she chose to let the viewer visualize her work and her process of creating it. Her reperformance of all of her
“distinguished pieces” was allowed to decompose and become new matter, that new matter was the durational compilation piece *Panoramix*.

a. *Panoramix* resists reanimation by being different from the original pieces, but it is also a reperformance of all of them. It is not totally distinct from *Piezas Distinguidas*. La Ribot, in showing a decomposing version of her past work, is forcing her audience—laymen, critics, and curators alike—to confront a reperformance that denies preservation. The reenactment is not a perfect tableau of what happened in the past, rather it is an idea, an object of memory. Like the corpse that is cremated with the ashes ground into a diamond, or buried in a mushroom suit to develop new ecosystems (all alternative death practices), *Panoramix* enacts a transformation.

14. The viewers were also given the chance to experience liveness through not only La Ribot’s presence, but also through her dramaturgical choices. The “distinguished pieces” were originally presented as La Ribot’s solos and they had been performed in theatrical spaces with a proscenium barrier between spectator and performer. In *Panoramix*, there was no such barrier as spectators were allowed to sit, or stand wherever they wanted in the gallery.

15. La Ribot’s physical presence among the viewers, as opposed to being separated from them in a proscenium space, allows both of them the possibility of affecting one another. As she flits from prop to prop (all strewn across the gallery), La Ribot leaves herself and the viewers to negotiate the space together, enacting gestures of liveness.

16. The theory of putrefaction is another area of discourse that is currently being fleshed out in the twenty-first century. Death is *the* fundamental truth that belongs to all living
matter; it could even be said that death belongs to inorganic matter as well, since nothing persists [in the same way into eternity].

a. With death and decay now established as the conditions of all matter everywhere, I suggest looking further into theories of decomposition and how those theories are politically potent.

i. Accelerationists such as Ben Woodard and Reza Negarestani see rot and decay as a political mode of being that allows for a new kind of mobility that gets beyond what is currently normal—because for them, normal is less than desirable; normal here means death-denial. These philosophers write on the political stakes of putrefaction and its performativity in a death-denying world that only sees decay as inherently negative.

Woodard, in his book *Ungrounded Earth*, uses decay as a tool to think through our currently problematic geophilosophy. In formulating a new philosophy of earth politics, he discusses the ways in which putrefaction allow us to get outside of our current, Western mode of reasoning. In dialogue with Reza Negarestani and Martin Hägglund, Woodard finds that decomposition is a dynamic process which upends the more mainstream notion that decay is something to be avoided. He concludes: “Rot cannot be seen as merely the undermining of bodies, as only a negative undoing completely separate from the formative processes of nature.”

Negarestani expounds on the dynamism of decay in his book *Cyclonopedia*. He finds decay to be a rebellious action that goes against regimes of power and control. Through a deep theoretical analysis of the
Middle East, he understands decay to be an “undercover softness” and describes it not as submission to death, but rather an exteriorization to the world. This kind of attunement toward death, says Negarestani, is what allows for decay to be generative rather than dissolving.¹² “In decay, the being survives by blurring into other beings, without losing all its ontological registers.”¹³ A putrefying organism does not have to resist inevitable fragmentation in order to remain. The process of rotting dismantles systems of power in its very being. “By degenerating all aspects of formation, decay ungrounds the very ground upon which power is conducted, distributed, and established. […] Decay neither brings power […] to erasure and utter eradication […] nor provides power with a structural and utilitarian ground.”¹⁴ Similar to Negarestani and Woodard is Eugene Thacker, another philosopher who thinks and writes extensively on the politics of rot. For Thacker, decomposition is anarchic and should be used for abolishing power. In his theorization of decay, he alludes to the multitudinous characteristic of decomposing organisms and how their fragments are empowering: “Eventually, the multitude prevails through sheer persistence, and all symbols of hierarchy fall.”¹⁵ He goes on to discuss the body politic in relation to decay and suggests that a withering multiplicity snatches power away from the sovereign. These ideas are useful to my exploration of reperformance as decay because they give a critical foundation to how decay operates beyond biological realms.
Decomposition belongs to everything because everything belongs to death.

ii. I would like to turn now, briefly, to the biological in order to further ground us in the positivity of decay. What is decay and its processes? Furthermore, why is it useful to the death industry? Decomposition serves an ecological service through the material fragmentation of the dead organism. The corpse breaks down, transforms into new matter, and replenishes the ecosystem in which it dies. A corpse is no longer autonomously working, its parts become elemental components of material and necrophages bolster the process of decaying transformation. Contemporary mortuary practices entirely halt this process. In the event that the corpse is not cremated—the funerary option most popular in the United Kingdom—the body is embalmed immediately with a decay-delaying fluid that is only used to make a corpse appear less like a corpse. Not only are contemporary death rituals making death obscene, the halting of the decomposition process does not allow for the necessary ecological cycles to take place. The new life once promised by the rotting corpse is denied.

iii. When I say “new life,” I of course mean the life that flourishes out of a new ecological transformation. But, I am not here to discuss that new life, I am still committed to the moment of decomposition, which neither problematically denies death nor does it cause the thing that has died to disappear altogether; the remains are still very present. This is what
Negarestani is saying when he claims that decaying beings blur into others while still maintaining its original “ontological registers.”

17. By this definition, reperformance is certainly a body in decay. A reperformance is not the same as the original, but it does maintain [some semblance of it]. Here, again, I am partially relying on Phelan’s theorization on reperformance: “[A performance] can be performed again, but this repetition itself marks it as ‘different.’ The document of a performance then is only a spur to memory, an encouragement of memory to become present.”16 It should be noted that I agree with Phelan on the fact that reperformance is different from the original piece, moreover, it should differ from the original; however, reperformance is not only for recall purposes. Reperformance has liveness because it involves a performer, spectator, and contingency. Not only does it recall something from the past, but it also serves the ecology of the museum because of its ability to alter the viewers coming into the space. [To enact transformation].

a. A reperformance still holds on to an ontology of performance because every reperformance also disappears upon its making.

18. A decomposing body is able to effect change on its environment without being resurrected. This is perhaps the most crucial part of my argument: reperformance need not be a zombified version of the original work.

a. A reperformance’s transformations are rendering the environment into something new according to the new elements that are coming out of the decaying corpse. A script need not be resurrected in order to be labeled authentic.

19. If a reperformed artwork becomes a reconstituted corpse in the institution, it enters into the economic system that performance art was supposed to have evaded. “[Reenacted]
[)]ive art/performance […] is in danger of becoming yet another commodity spectacle emptied of meaning or significance—an image, like many others, designed to lull the masses into complacency while giving them the fiction of viewing agency.” In becoming decomposition, a performance piece can maintain its historicity all the while evading commodification.

a. I harken back to Rebecca Schneider’s point about theatrical labor and neoliberalism here. If capitalism resists decay and depreciation, then reperformance, in order to avoid building up capital, must enact decomposition.

b. Let us not lose sight of the implications on the death industry. In American death rituals, capitalism literally resists decay, by putting a price on taking care of the deceased’s dead body, inflating the price of turning a corpse into what it is not at the cost of environmental health, and selling unnecessary accoutrements.

c. A work of reperformance, like a corpse, should continue to resist reaching commodity status. Resisting the reanimation, the “zombification,” of the corpse provides a momentary escape from capitalist systems of operation.

20. A decomposing document, reperformance, allows performance art to write its own history with its original anti-establishment affect because the ever-so-slightly changing reperformance is still resisting an economy of reproduction.

a. A note on historicity: the idea that reperformance should differ from an original piece is often met with uneasiness from curators. The reasons why are various, but most likely have to do with issues of preservation and the previously discussed relationship between curator and artist. The curator’s job is to be the caretaker of works of art and be a steward to their legacy. This often means
preserving the art so that it may contribute to history. Reperformance, decomposing reperformance, does not have to be an assault on the historicity of the artwork and its contexts. Reperformance functions both as decomposition—a politically charged advocate of decay—and as a recall to memory. A person who has died is not forgotten.

21. A resurrected performance that only seeks to repeat and, in its futility, makes a farcical, commodified, spectacularized document, does nothing for the furthering of the present. In fact, it takes away from the possibility of looking at the past and building from it in order to create a better present and future. When a reperformance is done with the intention of reinvention, it disrupts the domineering, singular, narrative-driven impulse of history. It is helpful here to return to Blackson’s optimistic definition of reperformance:

Drawing personal motivation from either your past or historical reference is the conventional element necessary to construct a reenactment. The degree to which performers empower themselves through layers of authenticity is secondary to their willingness to allow personal interpretation rather than verisimilitude to influence their actions. This openness to interpretation lends itself to another signature and often overlooked characteristic of reenactment: once undertaken, it need not follow the path provided by historical evidence [...] This shift in responsibility toward personal preference and away from prescriptions of the past continually shapes our regard for reenactment. 

a. Gilles Deleuze, in *Repetition and Difference*, enumerates how difference manifests in repetition. There are two types of repetition: simple and complex. A simple repetition is mechanical and static, no difference can be found here it is just representation, which lacks the depth and texture of the world. A complex repetition, however, is one that has layers of variability concealed
within it; complex repetition is dynamic and textural and lends itself to the eternal return of legacy and difference to the world.

b. Reperformance, any form of performance documentation, can be either of these kinds of repetition, just as a corpse can be either. The simple repetition of the live event is the photographic or videographic recording, a representation explicitly functioning as perseverance. A complex repetition would be reperformance, introducing difference, which is the reason the world has survived.

Simple repetition is the corpse made to be lifelike, while complex repetition is recognizing that the putrefied corpse should transform.

22. It is not my intention to deny the importance or value of recorded documentation in this essay, nor do I wish to pit one documentation method against the other. Rather, I am theorizing reperformance as a liminal document and asserting that it should be seen as a decomposing corpse, and rotting reperformance should be utilized as such.

a. The purpose of the museum, and its curators, is to preserve the artwork into perpetuity. People have come to expect the museum to be a place where objects go to die. But performance is not looking for this kind of preservation, it seeks something different. It is unfair to expect it to be embalmed, or reanimated.

b. Resuscitating a performance no longer imbued with liveness defiles the work because it traps it into a permanence that does not belong to it. In fact, resurrection through reperformance is
offensive to recorded documents as well, because permanence belongs to them, not performance or reperformance.

c. Allowing a performance to rot through its reperformance transmits the political force of decay to the performance genre. Reperformance must be allowed to historicize performance art in a way that respects its revolutionizing potency. The mobility in decay and reperformance grants it that political power.

André Lepecki, in a recent lecture given at New York University entitled “The Situation,” suggests that the praxis of curating performance has the potential to offer up a new logic, or mode of being to fight neoliberalism. It is true that to take on the challenging task of curating an artwork that relentlessly resists being collected, archived, or preserved is to run the risk of absorbing it back into a tradition of capitalist commodity circulation. But what if the curator could look at a piece of performance art as something once alive and now dead and dying? What if live art were allowed to live and die without the intervention of false preservation? Understanding mortality, and further, accepting it, allows for another logic to manifest in our day to day lives. The curator, by inviting the rotting corpse of a performance into the museum, inviting a new ecology to flourish within the walls of the institution, is side-stepping the neoliberalist agenda and practicing another mode of being. Likewise, the undertaker who understands that ushering the deceased’s body into decomposition is the job to be done is escaping from the grip of a capitalist death industry that only seeks monetary gain. Decomposition, of the body or of the image, enacts the
transgression of the current neoliberalist world order. In its elusion, it is power; in its transformation, it is progress.

ENDNOTES


2 Philippe Ariès, an expert historian on death in the West, writes: “During the long period we have covered, from the Early Middle Ages until the mid-nineteenth century, the attitude toward death changed, but so slowly that contemporaries did not even notice. In our day, in approximately a third of the century, we have witnessed a brutal revolution in traditional ideas and feelings, a revolution so brutal that social observers have not failed to be struck by it. It is really an absolutely unheard-of phenomenon. Death, so omnipresent in the past that it was familiar, would be effaced, would disappear. It would become shameful and forbidden.” Philippe Ariès, “Forbidden Death,” Western Attitudes Toward Death from the Middle Ages to the Present, trans. Patricia M. Ranum (Baltimore and London: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1974), 85.


13 Ibid.

14 Ibid., 182-3.


BIBLIOGRAPHY


Create. Make social videos in an instant: use custom templates to tell the right story for your business. For Hire. Post jobs, find pros, and collaborate commission-free in our professional marketplace. Enterprise. Get your team aligned with all the tools you need on one secure, reliable video platform. Stock. Browse and buy exceptional, royalty-free stock clips, handpicked by the best. Kazimir Malevich’s “Black Square” is the most recognizable symbol of the Russian avant-garde art school. The painting has given rise to a multitude of interpretations, arguments, and legends. Kazimir Malevich painted “The Black Suprematist Square” in 1915, in the heat of World War I, but he first conceived the idea 2 years ago in 1913. Initially, “The Black Square” was not intended to have any symbolic meaning: its purpose was to solve artistic problems. Kazimir Malevich (1879, Kiev - 1935 Leningrad, now St Petersburg). Source: RIA Novosti. However, as is often the case with masterpieces, the White Light, which was built by Simon Humphries, is presented on separate monitors run simultaneously to create an immersive video installation. The process of painting the white cube for the project (which will remain as a permanent installation) was performed by the artist, “battling with empty space through art historical references to painting practices and processes.” This project specifically “mimics” an atmosphere of a standard white cube gallery space’s sacred space of contemporary art. Apatina continues to redefine the idea of the profound in ever more intriguing ways. Put simply, she “The Borg Death Star is now the most unstoppable force in the galaxy. Over a million Borg drones are transported to the surface of the technological marvel Coruscant, the once center of the Empire is now the new Borg Homeworld. A world where every blade of grass has already been replaced by metal and technology. Anyways so Borg cube detects Death Star and Death Star is kinda detecting a Borg cube by reading an anomalous “thing” on its telemetry. The Borg see big juicy ball of assimilation potential, and the Imperial personnel are unknowingly trying to figure out what the hell that thing is because the cube uses subspace field(s) as a shield, which is a concept I do not think is even touched in Star Wars. Cue the Death Star trying to investigate with a tractor beam. I thought of death. Then I noticed that in the video, the body was surrounded by a festive group of gallery goers, sipping wine, taking pictures of the panting body. The scene was grotesque. I thought, Not again. Terence Koh recited the names of the Orlando victims in a meditative performance at Andrew Edlin gallery. Hank Willis Thomas posted a photo on his Instagram of an enormous flag made featuring some 13,000 stars—one for every victim of gun violence in the U.S. in 2015. In the conference, Biggers went on to share that “my work does live inside of white cubes, museums, galleries and so on, but I do have opportunities to take it out, because I think context adds to the theme of the piece.”