

Artist–Activist–Archivist

On Multiple Dimensions of the *Temporary Slovene Dance Archive*

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Abstract

Rok Vevar is a dance historian and archivist who founded the *Temporary Slovene Dance Archive* (TSDA) in 2011. TSDA is a platform for documenting and historicizing modern and contemporary dance in Slovenia. He first opened the archive to the public in his private apartment in Ljubljana, Slovenia, and then in March 2018, he transferred it into the premises of the Museum of Contemporary Art Metelkova in Ljubljana. The material is now more accessible to its users who are at the same time witnesses of the development of this peculiar archive. TSDA has thus become a performative, time-specific and site-specific installation presenting the archive as a structure evolving over time and without end. It seems that by entering the institutional framework as an individual, the archivist has found material support and space while retaining his relative independence. In the introduction of his article, Aldo Milohnić presents the genealogy and the structure of TSDA and then, in the main part of the article, he analyses a specific complexity of the relation artist–activist–archivist, represented by TSDA's founder Rok Vevar.

Rok Vevar è uno storico della danza e archivista che ha fondato il *Temporary Slovenian Dance Archive* (TSDA) nel 2011. Il TSDA è una piattaforma per documentare e storicizzare la danza moderna e contemporanea in Slovenia. Dapprima, lo studioso ha aperto l'archivio al pubblico nel suo appartamento privato a Lubiana, in Slovenia, e poi nel marzo 2018 lo ha trasferito nei locali del Museo di Arte Contemporanea Metelkova a Lubiana. Il materiale risulta adesso più accessibile per i suoi utenti che sono allo stesso tempo testimoni dello sviluppo di questo peculiare archivio. Il TSDA è così diventato un'installazione performativa, *time-specific* e *site-specific*, che presenta l'archivio come una struttura in evoluzione nel tempo e senza fine. Sembra che entrando nel quadro istituzionale come individuo, l'archivista abbia trovato un supporto materiale e uno spazio pur conservando una sua relativa indipendenza. Nell'introduzione del suo articolo, Aldo Milohnić presenta la genealogia e la struttura del TSDA e poi, nella parte principale dell'articolo, analizza una specifica complessità circa il rapporto artista-attivista-archivista, rappresentata dal fondatore del TSDA Rok Vevar.

Parole chiave/Key Words

TSDA; Rok Vevar; living archive; dance archive; performative archive.

TSDS; Rok Vevar; archivio vivente; archivio di danza; archivio performativo.

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Rok Vevar is a dance historian and archivist who founded the *Temporary Slovene Dance Archive* (TSDA) in 2011. He first opened the archive to the public in his private apartment in Ljubljana, Slovenia; in 2018, TSDA moved to the Museum of Contemporary Art Metelkova in Ljubljana where it got a temporary domicile as an independent project with a special status within the institution. In this article I will, first, present the genealogy and the structure of TSDA (including a brief overview of the development of the contemporary dance in Slovenia) and, second, analyse a specific complexity of the relationship artist–activist–archivist, represented by its founder Rok Vevar, and the epistemological consequences of that constellation.

In 2006, Tanzquartier in Vienna hosted several theatre artists and researchers from the former Yugoslavia who came to the residency with an ambition to create a kind of manifesto for a laboratory they provisionally called “East – Dance – Academy”. A text with the same title, which was later published in several theatre journals and anthologies, might be the right place to start this narrative about a peculiar dance archive in Ljubljana. The authors of the manifesto remind us that there are hidden histories of the Eastern European art (including dance). On the other hand, performing arts production in Eastern European countries in the last few decades of the 20th century “incorporated not only material elements of dance but – and that is even more important – a mental operation of ‘thinking-through-dance’, which was not merely aesthetic, but also had important political implications.”¹ The main thesis of the manifesto is that in the political circumstances of the “Real Socialism” (Eastern/Soviet Bloc) as well as the “Self-governing Socialism” (Yugoslavia) dance could not find its own institutional status and was instead “piercing through” other performative media, such as visual arts, performance art, experimental music and theatre, etc. In other words, “in the Eastern context, dance and performance arts were produced in rather poor material conditions, in a spontaneous manner, and even on the edge of political or/and cultural incident.”²

¹ J. Janša, B. Kunst, A. Milohnić, G. S. Pristaš, *East – Dance – Academy*, in B. Cvejić and G. S. Pristaš (eds.), *Parallel Slalom: A Lexicon of Non-aligned Poetics*, Tkh and CDU, Belgrade – Zagreb 2013, p. 20.

² *Ibidem*, p. 22.

In Slovenia, in the late 1960s and early 1970s, neo-avant-garde groups such as OHO Group and the Pupilija Ferkeverk Theatre put on the agenda the issue of corporeality in theatre and performance. This concept was partly maintained in the early 1970s by the experimental theatres Glej, Pekarna and Nomenklatura, while in the late 1970s and early 1980s, it was revived in performances stimulated by the opening of the ŠKUC Gallery in Ljubljana (1978). Corporeality was only constituted in a developed and thus conceptualised form in the 1980s, not only when it was accepted and treated as such by theatre critics, but also thanks to the emerging contemporary dance scene. A turning-point in the history of Slovenian contemporary dance was the year 1984, when renowned Slovenian dancer and choreographer Ksenija Hribar founded Dance Theatre Ljubljana (Plesni Teater Ljubljana – PTL) as the first professional contemporary dance company in Slovenia. PTL was an integral part of the alternative cultural scene in Ljubljana³ and at the same time an important incubator of dancers and choreographers (Tanja Zgonc, Sabina Potočki, Andreja Obreza, Sinja Ožbolt, Mateja Rebolj, Sanja Nešković, Mare Mlačnik, Branko Završan, among others); many of them are today leaders of propulsive dance groups and/or cultural non-government organisations (Iztok Kovač – EN-KNAP, Matjaž Farič – Flota, Branko Potočan – Fourklor, Mateja Bučar – DUM, etc.). At the end of the 1990s, PTL opened the first permanent theatre venue for contemporary dance in Ljubljana, which became a place for production as well as rehearsal and dance education.

In the 1990s, the Slovenian contemporary dance scene was strongly influenced by a “new wave” of Flemish choreographers such as Jan Fabre, Anne Teresa De Keersmaeker, Jan Lauwers, Wim Vandekeybus ... A confirmation of that trend in Slovenia was the theatre festival called “Belgian Explosion” which took place in Ljubljana in 1990. A year after, PTL launched the Video-Dance Festival curated by Slovenian producer Miran Šušteršič and two guests from Belgium – Cis Bierinckx and Koen Van Daele. At that time, several Slovenian-trained dancers, mostly from the circle of PTL, went to Belgium and then, as returnees, brought back to Slovenia new knowledge, contacts and experience. An important achievement was also the establishment of the Contemporary Dance Association Slovenia

³ The contextualisation of PTL within the alternative culture in Ljubljana is elaborated in Vevar and Založnik 2017.

in 1994 (the Association of Ballet Artists of Slovenia was founded already in 1962). According to data collected by Rok Vevar, in the second half of the 1990s, the quantity of the contemporary dance production in Slovenia grew by over 50%.⁴

There is evident continuity in the development of contemporary dance in Slovenia from the 1980s until today and precisely that continuity is probably the biggest achievement of the non-governmental organisations in that field of art production and education. However, dancers and choreographers in Slovenia are still working in precarious conditions. In such circumstances, the freedom of the dance profession cannot be more than an illusionary substitute for poor working conditions and the struggle to survive. In 2002, when the new Exercising of the Public Interest in Culture Act, the most important national legal document in culture was being prepared by the Ministry of Culture, there were discussions about what to do with contemporary dance in Slovenia. The Ministry of Culture then stated in its working materials for the preparation of the culture act that if the state does not wish to deal with production, “then it has to ensure the right to access to public funds to all those who are prepared to assume this role in its behalf or have assumed it already in certain areas (e.g. contemporary dance).” The officials in charge at the Ministry of Culture did not really concern themselves with this, because at the time there was not a single public institution established in the contemporary dance area; moreover, establishing an institution was not their aim at all, as they thought it was more reasonable to support with more funds the functioning of the already existing non-governmental organisations in the field. Unfortunately, neither one nor the other has happened – neither the public institution nor the increase of funds for NGOs active in the field of dance.

This situation in Slovenian contemporary dance production was mirrored in its research and archiving. Although he lacked the basic conditions for normal work and had virtually no material or financial support (except several in-kind donations of documentary and archival materials), Rok Vevar founded the *Temporary Slovene Dance Archive* (TSDA) in 2011 in his private apartment in Ljubljana. At that time, theatre researchers, dance

⁴ R. Vevar, *The Story of the Slovenian Dance Precariat: On the Statuses of Self-employed Persons in the Field of Culture*, «Maska», vol. 29, no. 163–164 (2014), p. 91.

specialists and other users could access the material two days a week or by appointment. Since 2013, TSDA is also linked to the group of activist dance archivists, theorists and historians working on the project “Archiving Choreographic Practices in the Balkans,” initiated by the Nomad Dance Institute.⁵



Fig. 1. Rok Vevar in his *Temporary Slovene Dance Archive*
Photo: Nada Žgank, 2015

The materials in his archive – mainly donated by theatre institutions, cultural non-governmental organisations, artists, their relatives and other individuals – include a massive collection of newspaper clippings, dance festival catalogues and other printed materials, in-house process documents, correspondence, photographs, dance films, footage of

⁵ The regional network Nomad Dance Academy was established in 2005 by six organisations from Belgrade (Station), Ljubljana (Fičo Balet), Sarajevo (Tanzelarija), Skopje (Lokomotiva), Sofia (Brain Store Project) and Zagreb (Tala Dance Center) as a platform for collaboration, creation, promotion and education in the field of contemporary dance. By establishing the network, the partners responded to real and urgent needs to foster professionalisation of contemporary dance in the region, to develop education and research opportunities for dancers and choreographers, to improve production conditions in the sector, to develop the audience and to promote dance as a socially relevant art practice. The network activities resulted in many collaborative projects, among them several dance festivals and cultural advocacy projects.

performances, documentary films, and a variety of objects related to relevant artistic practices. TSDA is a platform for documenting and historicising modern and contemporary dance in Slovenia, i.e., the practices that are closely linked to modernism, historical avant-gardes, neo-avant-gardes, retro-gardes and contemporary art. For the most part, these performing arts practices are transpiring outside the cultural institutions, and as a consequence, have been left by the wayside as far as public institutional archives and records departments are concerned. In this respect, according to Vevar, TSDA is “an emancipatory, activist project aimed at making marginalized artistic practices more visible and providing study material for artists, theorists and historians.”⁶

Art and/as activism is usually perceived as artistic intervention into the political sphere, an artistic engagement in stimulating public discussion on burning social problems, in fostering political changes, in provoking resistance to existing social and political circumstances, etc. Vevar’s TSDA, however, is an initiative of a different type; it is an example of activism *within* the world of art. Although this project started in a spontaneous manner (i.e., collecting documentation for Vevar’s ongoing research of Slovenian dance histories),⁷ it turned out that there was a great and pressing need to establish a dance archive as an important source for further research of modern and contemporary dance as an important, yet fairly neglected, part of the history of Slovenian theatre production. Once launched as a grassroots initiative of an individual artist and researcher, TSDA needed sufficient public visibility as well as Vevar’s persistence in the long run. Now, when we are approaching first decade of its existence, it is obvious that he was quite successful in that strategy. Over the years of constant struggling for survival in rather precarious conditions, his “temporary” dance archive has been developed to an already respectful research infrastructure with a potential to convert its “temporariness” into permanent existence. In fact, the word “temporary” in the title of the project is a humorous wordplay – it is reminiscent of the notion of “contemporary dance”. According to Vevar, “the history of contemporary dance is a history of a constant temporariness.”⁸

⁶ Vevar, “The artist-archivist's statement”.

⁷ As Vevar explained in an interview I conducted with him on 27 March 2019 (digital recording of the interview in author’s documentation).

⁸ *Ibidem*.

In March 2018, TSDA was transferred into the premises of the Museum of Contemporary Art Metelkova (+MSUM) in Ljubljana. The invitation of +MSUM that TSDA move to its premises represented the first bona fide initiative on the part of a cultural institution in Slovenia to open its capacities to this type of cooperation. It seems that by entering the institutional framework as an individual, the archivist has found material support and space while retaining his relative independence. Prima vista, in this transfer from the semiprivate sphere of Vevar's apartment to a public institution one might recognise just another example of a "public-private partnership," a business model often exploited in the neoliberal economy.⁹ In my opinion, however, it would be an oversimplification of a project which has nothing to do with commercial interest as the typical motivation of private investors in big, especially infrastructural, public-private partnership projects. Vevar's motivation is of a completely different type; it could be described as "historiographic empathy," an attitude of a researcher (who is at the same time an artist, activist and archivist) dedicated to the preservation of different documents of the history of dance and offering them as a valuable resource to other researchers interested in that field.

Entering a public institution, TSDA's files are now more accessible to their users who are at the same time witnesses of the development of this peculiar archive. In a way they are also spectators of Vevar's permanent performance; he performs a live archive-in-progress by making visible the archiving procedure – from collecting and systematising to providing public accessibility. TSDA has thus become a performative, time-specific and site-specific installation presenting the archive as a structure evolving over time and without end. The performative aspect of TSDA deserves special attention – not only because of Vevar's vocation¹⁰ but even more because of conceptual reasons. Peggy Phelan's thesis from the early 1990s postulating that performance "becomes itself through disappearance"¹¹ opened a long discussion on the

⁹ It is being utilised especially in Great Britain but its popularity is also increasing in continental Europe, including public-private partnership projects in culture (see Kappeler and Nemoz 2010; Milohnić 2012).

¹⁰ Vevar studied world literature and theatre directing at the University of Ljubljana.

¹¹ «Performance cannot be saved, recorded, documented, or otherwise participate in the circulation of representations of representations: once it does so, it becomes something other than performance» (P. Phelan, *Unmarked: The Politics of Performance*, Routledge, London and New York 1993, p. 146).

performative aspect of the archive.¹² Philip Auslander, one of her most influential opponents, launched an early critique in his book *Liveness* and developed it later in subsequent articles. One of the most important articles for my argument here is “The Performativity of Performance Documentation”, in which he proposed to think about the ontological connection between performance and document through the perspective of the speech act theory of J. L. Austin. Distinguishing performative utterances from constative utterances, Austin argues that “to utter the sentence (in, of course, the appropriate circumstances) is not to *describe* my doing of what I should be said in so uttering to be doing or to state that I am doing it: it is to do it.”¹³ Auslander analogises images that document performances with Austin’s verbal utterances in order to demonstrate that the traditional view sees performance documents as constatives, that is, a kind of uttered artefacts that describe performances and testify that they occurred. On the other hand, Auslander suggests that performance documents are not analogous to constatives, but to performatives: “the act of documenting an event as a performance is what constitutes it as such.” In other words, “documentation does not simply generate image/statements that describe an autonomous performance and state that it occurred: it produces an event as a performance.”¹⁴ This thesis is radically different than Phelan’s sceptic position regarding any performative potential of saved or recorded documents (leftovers) of a performative event.

Following Auslander’s thesis and taking into account the constitutive power of the performative in constructing different kinds of social realities, it could be stipulated that the performativity of the archive is an inherent potential of its “liveness”.¹⁵ In daily communication, the power of a performative is somehow self-evident and accepted as

¹² As well as on the problem of the “missing object” of the performing arts archive, as it is summarised by Matthew Reason (2006, p. 36): “[M]useums can be primarily understood as repositories of historical objects [...] Similarly archives are collections of actual, original documents [...] Given the transience of live art, the live performance archive or museum is more problematic, as it by definition cannot contain actual performances – the thing itself is always absent.” In other words, the performing arts archive collects and catalogues different traces of past live events, but cannot preserve performances themselves.

¹³ J. Austin, *How to Do Things with Words*, Oxford University Press, London – Oxford – New York 1976, p. 6.

¹⁴ P. Auslander, *The Performativity of Performance Documentation*, in A. Jones, A. Heathfield (eds.), *Perform, Repeat, Record. Live Art in History*, Intellect, Bristol – Chicago 2012, p. 53.

¹⁵ See also an interview with Philip Auslander conducted by Daniela Hahn where he emphasises that an archival document «becomes a site of performance when it is activated as such by someone using it as a means of experiencing the performance» (D. Hahn, *Encountering Documents – Historicizing Performance Documentation. Interview with Philip Auslander*, «Maska», vol. 30, no. 172–174 (2015), p. 43).

such spontaneously if it is stated by those instances who are entitled to make such performative utterances. In the case of a self-proclaimed, activist and “temporary” dance archive, it might not be that obvious as in other social and cultural contexts.¹⁶ Hence Vevar’s persistent reiteration of different kinds of performative actions/statements proclaiming a vivid ferment of his archival project and questioning the usual prejudices of the theatre archive as a container of “dead events”. The “repertoire” of such statements is already fairly rich and is being complemented all the time: presentations of its collections in Slovenia and abroad, leading seminars on dance histories, mentoring students, giving interviews (including the format of “self-interview”¹⁷), publishing books¹⁸ based on his documenting and archival efforts, accepting artists and researchers as guests or interims, building networks (such as the one growing around the already mentioned project “Archiving Choreographic Practices in the Balkans”¹⁹), making all the archival and other procedures visible and accessible to anyone interested in them, etc. In a different epistemological tradition, that of Michel Foucault’s *The Archaeology of Knowledge*, such archivist’s statements would be close to Foucault’s provisional definition of the archive as “the general system of formation and transformation of statements.”²⁰ André Lepecki highlights this performative moment of the archive as a characteristic equivalent to choreography: “Similarly, choreography is also a dynamic system of transmission and of transformation, an archival-corporeal system that also turns *statements* [...] into corporeal events and kinetic things.”²¹

This story of an activist dance archivist from Ljubljana is probably not entirely unique and it is also not the main point of this paper. What is important, however, is the fact that

¹⁶ I discussed more extensively the status of the performative in theatre and a potential application of the speech acts theory in the history and theory of theatre in Milohnić 1996.

¹⁷ R. Vevar, *Waste Management. Self-Interview on the Temporary Slovenian Dance Archive*, «Maska», vol. 30, no. 172–174 (2015), pp. 100–107.

¹⁸ R. Vevar (ed.), *Dan, noč + človek = ritem: Antologija slovenske sodobnoplesne publicistike 1918–1960* [Day, Night + Man = Rhythm: Anthology of Slovenian Contemporary Dance Criticism 1918–1960], Maska, Ljubljana 2018.

¹⁹ First results of the project are documented in a special issue of *Maska* (“Autonomy to Dance: Case Studies of Contemporary Dance Practices in Former Yugoslavia”), vol. 32, no. 183–184 (2017).

²⁰ M. Foucault, *The Archaeology of Knowledge*, Pantheon, New York 1972, p. 130.

²¹ A. Lepecki, *The Body as Archive: Will to Re-Enact and the Afterlives of Dances*, «Dance Research Journal», vol. 42, no. 2 (2010), p. 37. Joanne Pearson (2002, p. 112) goes even further by stating that “it is not simply a question of whether dance is archivable, or how the dance archive has structured its archivable contents, but the reverse: how have certain dance forms questioned, undermined, restructured and reformed the archiving process?”

TSDA belongs to a paradigm of similar initiatives in other countries of the South-Eastern region where the archiving of modern and contemporary dance production has not yet been accomplished. It is a part of the same frustration with the constant lack of stable, continuous and efficient institutions that would deal with the systemic archiving and historical research of dance as one of the most vulnerable sectors of the theatre production in that part of Europe. There are still very basic questions that require concrete yet profound answers, as in the case of *A Tiger's Leap into the Past*, an alternative artistic and research project launched by Saša Asentić and Ana Vujanović in Serbia in 2006: "Why don't we have a local history of contemporary dance? Why wasn't it ever written?"²² If letters, manuscripts, notations, photographs, video recordings, etc. are not preserved, collected and catalogued in appropriate archives, dance performances will live only in the memory of their spectators and that memory is unfortunately short-lived. After all, one should not forget that the question of the archive is not (only) a question of the past, as it was stated by Jacques Derrida, "it is a question of the future [...], the question of a response, of a promise and of a responsibility for tomorrow."²³

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²² A. Vujanović, *History Reloaded: A Tiger's Leap into Local Dance's Past*, «Maska», vol. 23, no. 117–118 (2008), p. 64.

²³ J. Derrida, *Archive Fever: A Freudian Impression*, University of Chicago Press, Chicago 1995, p. 36.

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Aldo Milohnić, PhD, è professore associato di storia del teatro presso l'Accademia di teatro, radio, cinema e televisione dell'Università di Lubiana (Slovenia). È coautore di diversi libri, autore di numerosi articoli su riviste accademiche e autore delle monografie *Theories of Contemporary Theatre and Performance* (2009), *Art in Times of the Rule of Law and Capital* (2016) e *Theatre of Resistance* (2021). È membro del comitato editoriale delle riviste di arti performative *Amfiteater* e *European Journal of Theatre and Performance*, nonché membro del comitato scientifico della rivista *Connessioni remote*. È anche membro della International Federation for Theatre Research e dell'European Association for the Study of Theatre and Performance. I suoi interessi di ricerca includono la storia e la teoria del teatro, le pratiche performative contemporanee e la sociologia della cultura e delle arti.