



Archiving the Unarchivable – Das Unarchivierbare archivieren

International conference by the documenta archiv
in preparation for the future documenta Institut

Thursday, 22 November – Saturday, 24 November 2018
documenta Halle, Kassel

Third Session

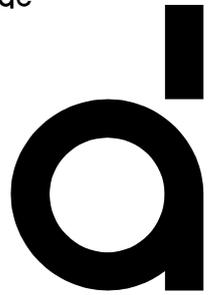
Time-based Media Art: Bearing the Challenges of Lifecycle Management

Saturday, 24 November 2018, 10:15 – 11:00

Jonah Westerman

Performance, Pragmatically: Truth Claims in Exhibition Practice

What do we expect from a performance's associated documentation? What are we trying to find when we research a work's past iterations and persistent forms? What do we imagine we demonstrate when we curate such objects out of the archive and into exhibitions (or even into collections)? In contrast to an earlier moment in performance scholarship that posited an insuperable categorical division between live action and its traces, it has become commonplace to see immediacy and mediation as integrally connected, equal elements that together produce the sum total of the artwork in question. Indeed, it is increasingly common for scholars, curators, and artists to reverse the earlier value system altogether — believing that the mode and form of a document function like clues pointing the way to a work's essential character and meaning. This paper argues, however, that this revaluation of documentation can be used to two divergent ends, depending on the model of truth at work. If our inquiries seek retrospectively to approach the truth of an event as it "really" was, if we expect documents to correspond in their present form to the shape of a past reality, we all but ensure that the artwork remains beyond our grasp, sealed off from future audiences. If, however, we engage a pragmatic notion of truth that sees verification as a prospective process whereby "truth happens to an idea. It becomes true, is made true by events" (William James, 1907), we can open the past to the future.



Jonah Westerman's research focuses on global histories of performance since the mid-20th century, especially contexts and expectations of reception. In 2016-17, he was the Chester Dale Senior Fellow in Art History at The Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York; from 2014-16 he was the Arts & Humanities Research Council Postdoctoral Researcher at Tate in London. Recent publications include the co-edited book *Histories of Performance Documentation: Museum, Artistic, and Scholarly Practices* (London 2018); essays in the Tate Research online publication *Performance at Tate: Into the Space of Art* (tate.org.uk, 2017), which he also co-designed and co-edited; as well as an essay about performance and museums in the forthcoming edited volume *The Bloomsbury Companion to Performance Art*.