

# PERFORMANCE

## THE ETHICS AND THE POLITICS OF CONSERVATION AND CARE (VOL. 1 AND 2)

*Edited by Hanna B. Hölling, Jules Pelta  
Feldman and Emilie Magnin  
Routledge (2023) and (2025)  
Vol 1. 312 pages / Vol 2. 319 pages*

Reviewed by Nicole Savoy

**P**erformance: *The Ethics and the Politics of Conservation and Care*, Volumes 1 (2023) and 2 (2025), present a collection of research writings and dialogues by leading conservators, curators, scholars, and practitioners specialising in the diverse fields of the performative arts. The two books are the outcome of the research project [Performance: Conservation, Materiality, Knowledge \(PCMK\)](#) funded by the Swiss National Science Foundation at the Bern Academy of the Arts (2020–2025).

This multi-year research project was conceived in response to the recognition that the conservation of performance remains undertheorised and that established frameworks and traditional methodologies do not account for performativity—an omission that requires reconsideration as the number of performative works entering arts institutions and private collections continues to grow.

The project aimed to advance and simultaneously consolidate

pioneering theoretical and practical frameworks for performance conservation through research, colloquia, and workshops conducted within the interdisciplinary and global network of contributors. The books compile and contextualise the resulting discourse.

Both volumes begin with an introduction by the editors and are divided into three sections. Each section, focusing on a different theme, comprises five to seven essays, research reports, and discussions.





Untitled [-5], 2021-2022, *SCrashed\_Capital.exe* series (digital photograph) © Kongo Astronauts, courtesy of Axis Gallery, New York.

In Volume 1, Part I “Care: Theoretical Entanglements” lays a theoretical foundation for rethinking conservation through the combined lenses of performance and care; Part II “The Politics and Institutions of Care” evaluates how performance challenges established museum practices; and Part III “Living Conservation” frames conservation as a dynamic relational process driven by collective artistic engagement and embodied practices. In Volume 2, Part I “Expanding Scholarly Approaches to the

Longevity of Performance” examines storytelling, ritual, music, curation, and documentation as models for sustaining performance; Part II “Confronting Institutions” investigates how institutions and legal systems need to adapt to environmental, indigenous, and racial justice perspectives to ethically sustain performance; and Part III “Conservation through Artistic and Embodied Practice” highlights how artists and museum practitioners enact conservation strategies that embrace change through

embodied knowledge, re-performance, and critical interventions.

A thorough summary of each chapter is unrealistic given the range of perspectives and approaches covered across the two volumes; however, some fascinating common threads reappear throughout. Theoretical considerations spurred by the very concept of conserving performance reflect a current paradigm shift in conservation towards new materialisms, embracing non-

Western perspectives such as the non-dualistic nature of reality, post-anthropocentrism, and non-linear understandings of time.

Performance as an object of conservation has instigated a re-evaluation of the meaning of the 'object' (of conservation) by challenging the traditional Cartesian ontological framework upon which institutional memory practices were built. In the introduction to Volume 2, the editors quote anthropologist Aaron Glass's research regarding indigenous cultures, for many of whom, "...objects—or at least certain objects and materials—have never been thought of as static in the first place, but rather as both active subjects and as subject to interconnecting webs of animating force and relationality" (p. 12).

This ontological shift, initiated by the influx of time-based media and performance art in collecting institutions in the last decade—and their often unclear object boundaries and durational nature—leads to questioning the imposition of linearity and staticity on objects in conservation practices, the origins of those practices, and how those histories impact broader global issues.

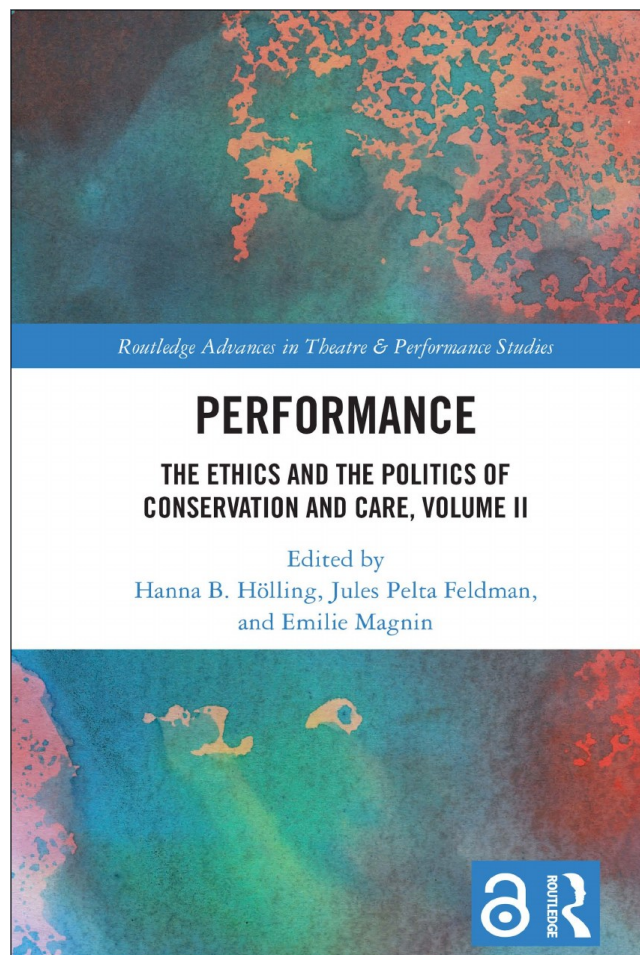
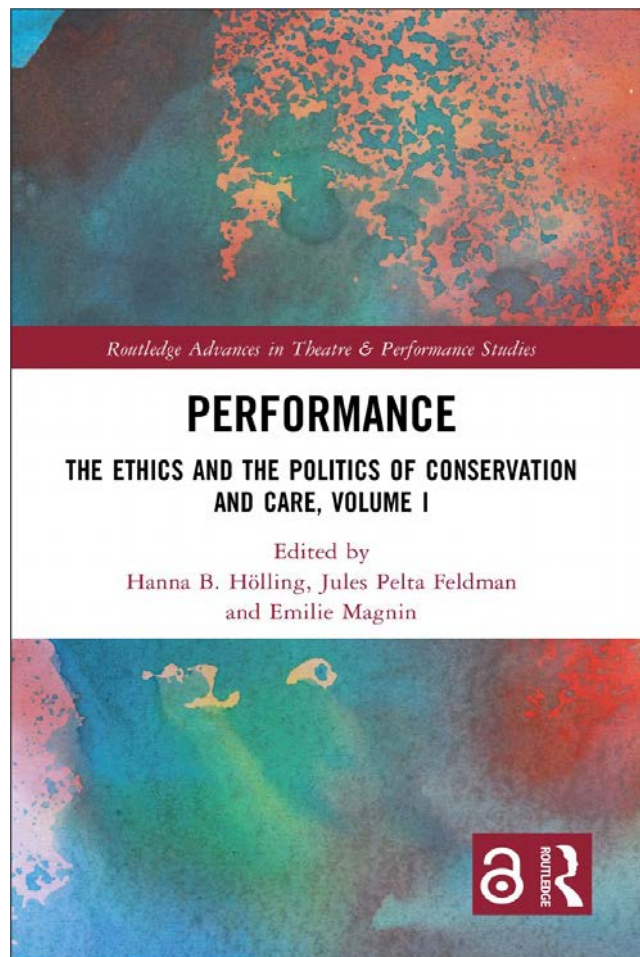
Several chapters demonstrate how performance itself can act as a form of cultural or critical conservation. For example, in Chapter 10 "Performing the 'Mask: Kongo Astronauts (Eléonore Hellio and Michel Ekeba) on Postcolonial Entanglements" (Vol.1), the collective Kongo Astronauts describe how they create costumes from reappropriated Western e-waste. These works critically reflect on the exploitation and mineral extraction of Congolese land while simultaneously reclaiming and preserving cultural practices in which the use of costumes in ritual has been suppressed.

Conservation, as a discipline situated in the public sphere, reflects the social, political, economic, and class systems embodied in the institutions where it takes place. These hierarchical structures were cleverly exposed by the artist Mierle Laderman Ukeles through her work, *Transfer: The Maintenance of the Art Object: with the Maintenance Man, the Maintenance Artist, and the Museum Conservator* (1973). In Chapter 12, "Conserving a Performance about Conservation: Care and Preservation in Mierle Laderman Ukeles's

*"performance itself can act as a form of cultural or critical conservation."*

Maintenance Art" (Vol. 1), Karolina Wilczyńska describes how, by repeating the cleaning of a glass vitrine in a museum carried out by a maintenance worker, stamping it as art, and then handing it over to the museum's conservator to repeat the gesture as an act of conservation, Ukeles exposed how the meaning of a gesture shifts depending on who performs it within the institutional system of a museum. On a broader scale, the history of Western museum practices cannot be disentangled from their colonialist roots, which continue to shape perceptions of cultural heritage today.

Shifting perspectives occurring in performance conservation have led some museums to reorient their position from that of ownership to co-ownership, collective stewardship, or temporary custodianship. With this rebalancing of power comes the acknowledgment of the communities and networks that performative works need in order to continue, as well as the use of non-traditional measures of preservation.



Above and below: Book covers for Volume I and II of *Performance: the ethics and the politics of conservation and care*. Images courtesy of Routledge

Many of the performance works discussed in the books exhibit modes of conservation inherent in their practice, such as the transfer of embodied knowledge and storytelling. Adopting these alternative conservation practices requires the cultivation of communities that support performance, as well as embracing notions of change and transformation as integral to the process of conservation and continuation. In Chapter 13 “Living Materials Ethics and Principles for Embodied Stewardship” (Vol. 1), Cori Olinghouse and Megan Metcalf stress the importance of supporting an artwork’s network as well as involving “embodied practitioners in acquisition, documentation and conservation processes” (p. 272).

In Chapter 6 “Performance in the Museum: Shifting Roles in Performance Art Stewardship” (Vol. 2), Emilie Magnin draws a connection between environmental and performance conservation approaching both from a holistic perspective that recognises the interconnectedness of performance; the communities that make, perform, and care for it; and the environments in which it unfolds. Just as conserving biodiverse ecosystems is essential to sustaining the species they support, so too is it necessary to “cultivate”—a term Joanna Leśnierowska proposes in place of “conserve” in Chapter 16 “Performance Conservation as a Political Act”, Vol. 2—the cultural



environments upon which performative works depend.

The two volumes do not seek to provide clear-cut guidelines for conserving performance; rather, they highlight its complexity and present models from which such guidelines might eventually emerge. They also demonstrate how conservators occupy a unique position to reimagine both the field and their roles within it. The disruption to museum systems triggered by the presence of performance has exposed the underlying structures of control that performance itself actively resists. With the growing presence of performance and time-based artworks in museums—together with interdisciplinary dialogue across other performative cultural heritage studies and performing communities—conservation is gradually extending its scope beyond institutions to a broader ethics of care.

*Performance: The Ethics and the Politics of Conservation and Care* is aimed at academics and professionals working in the field of performance and contemporary art conservation. The two volumes are open access and available via [www.taylorfrancis.com](http://www.taylorfrancis.com). [Vol. 1](#) and [Vol. 2](#) are supported by the Swiss National Science Foundation Book Publication Grant, with hard copies available here: [Vol. 1](#) & [Vol. 2](#). Colour versions of some images printed in black and white are accessible in the open-access editions.



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