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Exhibitions & “rights to memory”. Visibility and recognition issues in the Performing arts sector

Is there a “right” to memory in the performing art sector? What are the values invoked in its definition, and who is entitled to do so? When and where do the policies of memory meet the concerns and issues of visibility and recognition of performing arts artists and professionals? What are the legal, ethical, political and aesthetic issues at stake whenever their interests are divergent? How do the performing art heritage institutions deal with the fact that performing arts structures and artists are increasingly involved in heritage and memory strategies and practices, especially online? To discuss the concept of “right to memory”, this presentation will briefly focus on two very different case studies.

We will consider first an event that occurred in 2018, when the newly appointed directors of the festival “Paris Quartier d’été” denied the National Library in France (BnF) the rights for an exhibition dedicated to the festival in the “donor’s gallery”, after its former director and founder, Patrice Martinet, made a donation of its archive while he retired. At the same time, the online archives of the previous seasons disappear from the festival’s website. Patrice Martinet, in an open letter, protests against such a “damnatio memoriae”, in regards to the “rights of all those who had been the actors of an exceptional human adventure: the right to recognition, the right to memory [...] [of] those who had invented, led and carried out a mission of general interest on behalf of the public authorities”. Who « owns » a performing arts structure’s heritage & memory? Who is entitled to claim it, and who is accountable for it? What for? And how does it actually affect artists & professionals in that particular sector?

The second case study will reverse the question, and address the context and the consequences for living artists of the choices made for an exhibition devoted (partially) to contemporary companies. We will focus on puppet exhibitions, for which the questions are, for economic and political as well as aesthetic reasons, both crucial and quite easily investigated. How does the memory policies meet with political & economical issues of a both vulnerable and militant sector? What are the responsibilities that fall to the curators, and what are the interrelations between scientific choices and the artistic development of the sector? Why and how does the performing arts professional network get involved? What interest do artists see in this – and, particularly, when lending their “instrument” would force them to make a difficult choice between dedicating the puppets a former show to exhibition, and keeping it available for distribution? We will, of course, take into account the evolution observed and the political, aesthetic and ethical consequences of the pandemic.



Bio: associate professor in Theatre Studies, co-director of the Institute of Theatre Studies, and coordinator of the Contemporary Creation Memory Center at the Sorbonne Nouvelle University (Paris, France), and co-founder of TopoLogics, a performing arts studies research group focusing on performing arts venues (including museums and libraries). She is also a member of the executive committee of Sibmas. Her research combines museology and performance studies. In 2022, she is preparing an exhibition dedicated to the creation of puppets for the CNCS (Centre National du Costume de Scène), and a exhibition of puppetry stage photography for the Chartreuse in Villeneuve-lès-Avignon, with Joël Huthwolh (BnF).