

## **Transcript**

### **Two Questions, Davide-Christelle Sanvee, April 5, 2023**

#### **Emilie Magnin**

It is my pleasure to meet with Davide-Christelle Sanvee. Davide-Christelle is a Swiss artist of Togolese origin who works and lives in Geneva. She studied art at the Geneva University of Art and Design (HEAD), where she discovered in performance art a means of expressing the complexity of the political and social issues that often animate her artistic exploration. She obtained her Bachelor's degree in Visual Arts with a major in Art/Action.

Her interest in the physicality of spaces took her to Amsterdam, where in 2019 she completed a Master of Interior Architecture at the Sandberg Institute's Studio for Immediate Spaces, an experimental architecture program. That same year, Davide-Christelle also received the Swiss Performance Award for her piece *Le ich dans nicht*. The following year, she was invited by the Swiss Performance Awards to present a new work, *intituled La performance des performances*. In this piece, she assembled a primer of past award participants, choosing 26 performers with last names from A to Z and presenting a quick one-minute excerpt from each one's work, using her body as a "living archive."

David-Christelle has performed in various European cultural venues, such as the Swiss Institute in Rome, the Théâtre de l'Usine in Geneva, as well as in Paris, Avignon or Amsterdam.

Welcome, David-Christelle, and thank you very much for accepting to answer my questions. Here are my two questions for you:

- 1) Can performance be conserved? If so, how? If not, why not?
- 2) What does it mean to conserve performance? Or, in your case, how might your own performances be conserved?

#### **Davide-Christelle Sanvee**

I think it's a yes. I remember very well when I was in my Bachelor's degree and one of our teachers came up with this subject, Archiving Performance, and the idea was really to push us to document our performances as much as possible.

Because it's true that when we talk about performance - from the beginnings of the history of performance with the Happenings - we are really into something live, it's the moment you live, it's the surprises of the live that you remember, and it's also what makes the strength of the performance. Then came the idea to record, to keep a trace of it and so came the photos and videos. Performances were documented more and more thanks to sound recording, photos, videos.

And then, there is another aspect of how we can archive performance that interests me a lot, and that is really the storytelling, the history, the testimony. It's another way of documenting, closer, I would say, to the ephemeral, and closer to the transformation, to the story that we tell. But I think that telling what you saw is really also a form of archiving, and so I count it in my list of ways of archiving performance.

So yes, that's a big yes!

#### **EM**

Just out of curiosity, who was that teacher who talked about archiving performance?

#### **DCS**

It was Dora Garcia, who also talked about publishing. It was not only Archiving Performance, but also Publishing Performance, and it was really about: How do we write and how do we relate the text and the image, what do we say about that, is it always true? Can the text also help us bring in fiction or add things that didn't really happen? I mean, there was a little bit of everything. This whole aspect was interesting, but it was also very conceptual, which really brought a new layer, a new form of art.

Before I started this performance [La performance des performances], I had tried other forms of performance where I wasn't necessarily there, and I was trying to play with the limits.

I had done a work called *Veillez m'en excuser*, where I had an engagement, for example to present my work for my jury at school, and, instead of going, I had a letter delivered to the jury explaining the reason for my absence. In these letters, I took advantage of being able to tell things that were essential to me, with these external causes where all my mind was, but that I could not necessarily realize. Or in which I could not really engage because I was still in school. A way for me to do the performance without being in it and to allow myself to do something else as well.

In fact, at the time, I was a volunteer at a migrant shelter. And so I listened to their stories, and I used their stories to bring them forward in that setting. It was mostly issues related to police searches, address issues, and administrative issues. It was very much related to administrative issues, which is something very problematic in Switzerland.

**EM**

If that's ok, we can move on to the second question: what does it mean to conserve a performance, or maybe one of your own performances?

**DCS**

I would say firstly, but it's a little bit sad at the same time, it's to communicate. At least, that's why I started documenting my performances. If I want to go and play here or I want to be invited by such and such institution, I have to document and archive my performance so that these people have access. But really, I would prefer that people access my work through live performance because I don't watch my videos very often.

I think I prefer photographs. At least in the portfolios, I tell myself that it gives less information and it still allows a projection, but without all the little bugs of the live. Because for me, that's also what performance is, being able to react in the moment and do something with it, and continue to go to the finish of the gesture. And sometimes, when people look at the videos, it's not relevant compared to the live performance. Then there are performative works, like Abramovic's pieces, which work very well in video, and there, I question it a little less. I think that if there is a real video work that is done, it's okay, but if it's just classical documentation, with a camera on a tripod, it really doesn't do justice to the work.

**EM**

When I think about your work, I also wonder if you, as a performer and artist, are contributing to the conservation, not of your performances directly, but also of pieces that existed before you?

**DCS**

What you're saying has a lot to do with this work, which is called, *La performance des performances*.

**EM**

Yes, but I also think about what you told me before, when you were collecting these stories of migrants and passing them on, where finally you also play this role you were describing earlier: telling the story, bearing witness.

**DCS**

It's true, I didn't even think about it, but well thought! It's true that since the beginning, when I started to make art, there is really this desire to leave a trace thanks to the memory. I had already done a lot of work, when I was still a young student, on embroidery, where I tried to engrave a lot of images of my memory of my country. Since I come from Togo and now I live in Switzerland, I try to always keep a trace of all my memories, to always remember the past. And even in my current pieces on architecture I always start from the basics, from what exists and what we do with it today.

This back and forth is very important to me, and that's why I did this piece, *La performance des performances*: to say: this is the performance of a few years ago, and this is what it is from my point of view, its freshness? I don't know how to transmit that, but it still exists, and yet it's the same gestures, but it's not the same person, it's not the same point of view, and sometimes, I also criticize it somewhat.

For the first version I did, I really focused on the documentation because it was for the 11th anniversary of the Swiss Performance Award, and I wanted to mark the occasion and highlight their archives on the site. So I was content with that, and then I did a second version at the Tinguely Museum, where I mixed it up a bit. I collected testimonies, and when I was able to meet the artists, I did so, and it was them who explained to me what the work was about.

I had the chance to talk with Anne Rochat, for instance, who was for me the most difficult performance to redo: the one with the chair where she takes a chair in her mouth, and she spins it. I said to myself: but how do you do it, what is it? What kind of chairs were these? How do you prepare? I took advantage of having her (still alive!) to ask her all these questions.

So yes, it was a real mix between the two methods. There are also artists that I asked to lend me material because it was something that I didn't necessarily want to reproduce, and I preferred to have the original object.

**EM**

How do you imagine the conservation of this piece? Can you imagine 30 years from now a young artist coming to you and saying: I would like to do this piece again?

**DCS**

It would be amazing, it would be like a *mise en abîme*! It would be fantastic, but I have the impression that it would be like Chinese whispers, the more we do it, the more it will be distorted.

Ideally, I would like to make a repertory of all the performances that have existed, and to do them live again. If I had a big project, it would be that. It would be like a performance over a week or a month. Something to come and see live with a list of crossed out works per day that you have to do again. I don't know if it would necessarily be, me or someone else performing it, or several people, but it would really be like a big reenactment.

**EM**

Perhaps an idea to discuss for our upcoming colloquium?

**DCS**

Yes, absolutely! I think that as long as there are bodies, as long as they are alive, we might as well use them to do something. There are also performances that we can't necessarily do, but that's where it gets interesting: how we can do it without the initial conditions being there, that also interests me a lot.