

# Stay Still: Past, Present, and Practice of the Tableau Vivant

Mélanie Boucher, Ery Contogouris

The study of the tableau vivant raises issues on a number of levels—theatrical, narrative, spatial, pictorial, and temporal—and provides insight into questions of sexuality, gender, race, social class, and the relationship of the individual to the material world. As a collectible and exhibited object, it is part of the history of traditional museological practices, but also raises issues related to present practices of conservation and presentation. Its recent occurrences as an art form come into dialogue with other forms of appropriation<sup>1</sup>—which are particularly popular in contemporary art and in other artistic and cultural fields—such as re-enactment, remake, citation, and *bricolage*. What distinguishes it from these other forms of appropriation is its use of immobility, which raises a specific set of questions. This thematic issue of *RACAR* brings together authors whose research and practices relate to a variety of periods and disciplines in order to expand our understanding of the history and practice of the tableau vivant. Recent studies on the tableau vivant, most of which have been published over the last ten years, are primarily concerned with recognizing its historical importance in Europe and the United States in the areas of photography, film, and contemporary art. Its contribution to the theatre, outlined in Kirsten Gram Holström’s pioneering study,<sup>2</sup> needs to be further examined. More research is also needed to inscribe it in the history of art and to measure its impact beyond Europe and the United States. It is to these domains that we hope this special issue of *RACAR* will contribute.

The origin of this issue is the two-day conference *Stay Still, Translate: Performance, Presentation, Conservation of the Tableau Vivant in Canada* that was

held in 2017 at the Musée d’art contemporain de Montréal.<sup>3</sup> The symposium, which was organized by Mélanie Boucher and in which we both presented papers, and the present publication were opportunities to build on our work together for the special issue of the journal *Espace* entitled “Statue Play,” which focused on the immobility of the performing body in contemporary art.<sup>4</sup> While this collaboration between a “contemporanéiste” and a “dix-huit/dix-neuviémiste” may stem in part from elective affinities, it can also be explained by the subject under consideration, which transcends eras and disciplines, and the complementarity of our research and approaches became apparent as we worked on this issue. The articles brought together here combine a variety of viewpoints: specific case studies, articles that aim to further theorize the tableau vivant, and accounts by contemporary artists and curators. They also present a range of practices, from the seventeenth century to today, and from three different continents. Through these studies, a number of things become apparent. One is that scholarship has only begun to scratch the surface of this protean art form. Moreover, as the research presented here shows, unknown manifestations (historical and contemporary) of tableaux vivants continue to be discovered, and, as importantly, there is still a vast amount of theorizing to be done to understand this practice. Because the tableau vivant has always been practiced by both amateurs and professionals, has appeared in a variety of settings (triumphal entries, religious holidays, plays, private homes, etc.), and has intersected with a number of other art forms (literature, theatre, photography, cinema, etc.), it is an object of study whose fluidity

and indefinability make it sometimes frustrating, but also endlessly fascinating. The intermediality at its very core renders the tableau vivant difficult to define, and we did not want to constrain the authors with our own (sometimes differing) understandings of the practice. In instances where the link to tableaux vivants appeared perhaps a little tangential, we encouraged authors to define how they considered it. We believe this helps further expand and understand this practice.

Despite the polyphony, there are a number of issues that cut across different articles. Cultural transfers, as a defining feature of the tableau vivant, are addressed in most, if not all, of the articles, as is intermediality. A number of pieces also show the various ways in which the tableau vivant has been used as a tool for educational or research purposes, for fundraising, or simply as aristocratic entertainment. A number of articles also analyze performances of gender, a central question of the practice since the nineteenth century, along with class. The tension between movement and stillness as one of the central features of the tableau vivant also recurs throughout the issue. And the different ways in which the tableau vivant can be part of a process of research and reflection are examined in a number of contributions. These characteristics are all rooted in the very history of the tableau vivant.

In its most common characterization—that is to say, a scene in which figures pose to imitate a work of art—the first tableau vivant was presented in the theatre in 1761. Jean-Baptiste Greuze's *L'Accordée de village*, which was exhibited that year in the Salon, was reproduced in a scene of the *Noces d'Arlequin*. If we widen the definition, however, and consider instances in which human beings maintained a pose for figurative purposes, the origins of the tableau vivant can be traced back to antiquity, with pantomime and *schemata*, which Plato described in *Cratylus* as sequences of stereotyped movements. The medieval living nativities and royal entries can also be viewed as tableaux vivants, and these, according to Émile Mâle, inspired the “most exquisite masters,” including Van Eyck, Fouquet, Memling, Dürer.<sup>5</sup> Mâle here establishes a link between painting and the theatre, which was consolidated in the second half of the eighteenth

century. In paintings, pictorial compositions wherein the elements contribute to the expression of a pregnant moment in which the characters are fully engaged became increasingly prevalent,<sup>6</sup> while in the theatre, pictorial problems were transposed onto the scenic space (substitution of dramatic paintings for theatrical moves, the fourth wall).<sup>7</sup> As Michael Fried put it, “Diderot’s evocations of Chardin’s still lifes in the *Salon of 1765* may be read as directions for staging them as tableaux vivants,”<sup>8</sup> thus bringing us back to the tableau vivant and its intersection with the theatre. At the turn of the nineteenth century, Goethe described the tableau vivant as a hermaphrodite between painting and the theatre,<sup>9</sup> and it is also around these same years that the paintings of Jacques-Louis David became popular on stage. In her memoirs, the Comtesse de Genlis recalled that David took “great pleasure in bringing together [the] fugitive tableaux” that she suggested as part of the education of the children of the Duc d’Orléans.<sup>10</sup>

The combination of painting and the theatre favoured the development of practices related to the tableau vivant: pantomimes and Rousseau’s monodramas, shadow theatre and silhouettes, Emma Hamilton’s *Attitudes* and the dioramas of Daguerre and Bouton, pageants and panoramas. These practices, which were long reduced to proto-cinematographic experiments,<sup>11</sup> draw from both the theatre and painting to animate the still image by using an approach that is referential, intermedial, and often tied to literature.<sup>12</sup> Many novels of the nineteenth century present descriptions of tableaux vivants (Johann Wolfgang von Goethe, Émile Zola, Charlotte Brontë, Edith Wharton) and painted or sculpted characters that come to life (E.T.A. Hoffmann, Alexander Pushkin, Théophile Gautier, Edgar Allan Poe, Wilhelm Jensen). According to Martin Meisel, the theatre, painting, and literature of this period are all narrative and pictorial. He writes that “pictures are given to storytelling and novels unfold through and with pictures,”<sup>13</sup> which favours the creation of a style, and specifically of a popular style.

The tableau vivant, which was first presented in the theatre, then practiced in private homes for the pleasure of the aristocracy and the bourgeoisie, as well as for charity and educational purposes, was

mostly practiced by women. It also became somewhat *risqué*: Victor Hugo described a London show that was all the rage in Paris and that he attended in 1841 in terms of corporeal beauty, poverty, naïveté, and corruption.<sup>14</sup> The tableau vivant was quickly exported to other parts of the world and became particularly popular in the United States<sup>15</sup> as well as in Canada, a practice that has remained largely undocumented. In this issue, we also go beyond the better-known European and North American instances with Catherine Stuer's article, which shows that the tableau vivant was practiced in China at the turn of the twentieth century.

The tableau vivant marked early photography, which required the model to stay immobile for long periods. Staged photography then developed, a sort of close parent of the tableau vivant, wherein costumed individuals were posed in front of a set for pictorial purposes.<sup>16</sup> Roland Barthes likened the tableau vivant to photography because of the way the two practices present themselves as "figuration[s] of the motionless and made-up face beneath which we see the dead."<sup>17</sup> The tableau vivant was also fundamental to the pictorialism of early cinema—the films of Georges Méliès and the scenes of passions attest to it<sup>18</sup>—as Éric Méchoulan and Marion Froger also discuss in the interview published in this special issue.<sup>19</sup> Although literature, photography, and the cinema retained major traces from this historical and popular genre, the interest in the immediacy and realism of photographic and cinematographic images contributed to its relative disappearance from the artistic field in the first half of the twentieth century.

The tableau vivant reappeared explicitly in the cinema in the 1960s and 1970s. Federico Fellini's films, for instance, have remarkable pictorial qualities, and Luis Buñuel, Pier Paolo Pasolini, Éric Rohmer, and Jean-Luc Godard incorporated tableaux vivants into their movies, as did Derek Jarman, Peter Greenaway, and others. In contemporary art, it is also in the 1960s that stillness began to be used for pictorial ends (Andy Warhol, Ben Vautier, Yoko Ono, Gilbert and George, Bruce McLean), perhaps even the 1950s (Viennese Actionists, Meret Oppenheim). Although Cindy Sherman's *Untitled Film Stills* (1977–80) have been called the first tableaux vivants in contemporary art,<sup>20</sup>

these (like the works of Jeff Wall and Rodney Graham) are closer to staged photographs, since they are created strictly for the camera, without a public and without the artist maintaining a pose for a significant amount of time. The porous boundaries between tableaux vivants and staged photographs are also explored by Catherine Stuer and Anne-Elisabeth Vallée in this issue.<sup>21</sup>

The term tableau vivant to designate performances in contemporary art then became commonplace in the mid-1990s—no doubt related to interest in Vanessa Beecroft's practice, which assembles performers' bodies like compositions in traditional paintings.<sup>22</sup> The 1998 *CounterPoses* exhibition curated by Jim Drobnick and Jennifer Fisher, which presented the work of twelve artists and artist collectives for three days in Montreal, also served to redefine the tableau vivant in light of contemporary art.<sup>23</sup>

At the turn of the new millennium, then, the tableau vivant began to raise specific issues in the fields of performance art and museology. Some performances, including tableaux vivants, that are designed to be reproduced, presented over long periods of time, and enacted by different performers, can more easily be presented in galleries and collected, and have thus contributed to profound changes in museum practices.<sup>24</sup> We find exhibitions of tableaux vivants<sup>25</sup> and of archives that document them,<sup>26</sup> as well as acquisitions of tableaux vivants and their inclusion within other exhibitions. One of the first exhibitions of this kind, *The Physical Self* (1992), curated by filmmaker Peter Greenaway, included four naked and motionless individuals put on display in a presentation of the collections of the Boymans-van Beuningen Museum centred on the theme of the physical body.

It is in dialogue with these academic writings, artistic practices, and curatorial expressions that we conceived of this issue of RACAR. The issue is broadly divided into three sections, to which two theoretical pieces serve as bookends. The first section focuses on tableaux vivants in Canada, which attests both to the origin of this issue and to the lack of specific scholarship on Canadian practices. The second addresses different geographies of the tableau vivant. And the final section groups four

accounts of contemporary practices from different points of view: an artist, a museum curator, an exhibition curator, and researchers and amateur performers.

Carole Halimi's "Tableau vivant et postmodernité: quelles affinités?" addresses a number of the concerns in the special issue. Halimi tackles head-on the question of intermediality and of the tableau vivant's changing fortunes from the nineteenth to the twenty-first century. She shows that, while it was at first critiqued by modernism, it then became a tool to critique modernism, and she identifies Robert Morris's *Site* (1964) as a turning point in this process.

The section on tableaux vivants in Canada begins with Laurier Lacroix's "L'image faite corps. Dix figures sur la pratique du tableau vivant au Québec avant 1920," which traces the history of the notion of tableau vivant and of its practice in New France and Quebec. Lacroix uncovers the first mention of the expression tableau vivant in a Canadian text, which dates, surprisingly perhaps, to 1641. In this first history to be written of the tableau vivant in Canada, he also identifies its intersection with mediums and practices such as silhouettes and photography, and shows its social function as pedagogical or cultural entertainment reliant on shared knowledge. In "Le 'tableau vivant' dans la genèse du projet de décor de la cathédrale de Saint-Hyacinthe de Napoléon Bourassa," Anne-Élisabeth Vallée addresses the series of photographs staged by the Quebec painter Napoléon Bourassa in relation to his decorative program of the cathedral of Saint-Hyacinthe in the 1880s and 1890s. Vallée shows that this was not the first time Bourassa had been involved with tableaux vivants and that he had been commissioned to stage religious tableaux on different occasions in previous decades. The section closes with Ery Contogouris's "Gender, Race, and Nation in *Tableau Representing Great Britain and Her Colonies*," in which she examines a photograph of an amateur performance in Dawson, Yukon, in 1900, at an event organized to raise money for the widows and orphans of the South African War. She shows how this tableau vivant, performed at the time of the gold rush, participated in settler colonialism and nation building, and investigates the role that

women (in the tableau and in Dawson) played in this process.

The second section looks further afield. It begins with Stijn Bussels's "Staging Tableaux Vivants in the Theatre of the Dutch Golden Age." Returning to the close links between the theatre and the tableau vivant, Bussels shows that as the role of tableaux in plays shifted from educating to shocking over the course of the seventeenth century, the staging of cruelty became ever more explicit. With Hannah Jordan's "Hidden Life: Reanimating Victorian Tableaux Vivants in the Rutland Gate Album," we move to Britain in the late nineteenth century. Through her analysis of a previously unresearched charity performance of tableaux vivants at the London home of Lady Winifred Howard in 1869, she argues for these performances as a platform for social and sartorial experiment, an opportunity for elite performers to enter the bohemian artworlds of the early aesthetic Victorian period, and a key site for shifting categories of class inclusion. Alice Cazzola's "Les tableaux vivants à Venise au tournant du xx<sup>e</sup> siècle: l'histoire d'un passe-temps mondain retracée dans le journal de Lady Layard" takes us from London to Venice, specifically to Ca' Capello, the home of the British aristocrat Enid Layard, who hosted ten events featuring tableaux vivants between 1888 and 1910. She considers the social function of the tableaux vivants as a cultural bond in the elite Anglo-US community living in Venice, as well as the opportunities and limitations that the staging of these performances afforded upper-class women. In the concluding article of this section, Catherine Stuer analyzes the earliest dated photographs of Nanjing in Southeast China, which she reads as non-Western forms of tableau vivant photography. In "Staging Real Sites: Tableau Vivant Photography in Nineteenth-Century China," Stuer expands our understanding of tableau vivant practices by reassessing working assumptions about photographic image-making in both local and global contexts.

The last section of this issue gathers four stories of contemporary practices by artists and curators as well as academics and amateur performers. The interview conducted by Jennifer Fisher and Jim Drobnick with Ann Hamilton, "Attending

to Presence,” considers the artist’s performances in which individuals (called “attendees”) are led to take simple, repetitive actions over long periods of time, set within vast environments. The production and the role of the performers are discussed, which highlights the contribution of the bodily, relational, and temporal vectors in the tableau vivant. This section continues with Lesley Johnstone, curator and head of exhibitions and education at the Musée d’art contemporain de Montréal, who in 2013 curated an exhibition of works by Tino Sehgal. Her text, entitled “La particularité du tableau vivant dans les situations construites de Tino Sehgal” raises specific questions related to the presentation and acquisition of performative works. The third piece is about the Canadian artist Adad Hannah, whose practice has contributed significantly to the revival of tableaux vivants in contemporary art. While some of the artist’s photos and videos feature famous works, the vast majority of them do not interpret historical scenes, specific artistic events, or styles. In “Adad Hannah: Reflets et réflexions de l’art ‘vivant’,” Lynn Bannon returns to Hannah’s retrospective exhibition, which she curated at the Musée d’art de Joliette, to consider how the artist captured the movement of the participants who never fully managed to hold the pose. The section ends with an interview with Éric Méchoulan and Marion Froger, conducted by Ery Contogouris, entitled “Pour voir le passé d’un tableau: les tableaux vivants de l’*Allégorie du ministre parfait* d’Eustache Le Sueur (1653) dans le film *Une disparition* (2017).” Produced in an academic context, the film reflects on the painting by Le Sueur by presenting it in various forms, among which, tableaux vivants.

Mélanie Boucher’s “Facteurs d’inquiétante étrangeté dans les tableaux vivants de l’art contemporain. L’apport du récit littéraire” concludes this special issue. Here, Boucher borrows the notion of the uncanny developed by Freud to consider the imperfect immobility of tableau vivant performances. She compares historical and contemporary practices through the lens of literary texts in which tableaux are staged to further reflect on the ways in which the uncanny is exploited and amplified in the tableaux vivants of contemporary art.

Brought together, the thirteen pieces in this issue illustrate the range of tableau vivant practices. The image we chose for the cover, Robert Morris’s *Site*, points to many of the issues addressed in these pages. Wearing a mask of his own face made by Jasper Johns, Morris moves sheets of plywood to reveal the performance artist Carolee Schneemann who is posed, naked, in the manner of Édouard Manet’s *Olympia* (1863). Morris’s critique of gender polarity prefigures the important ways in which reconstitution, repetition, and stillness would become mainstays of performance art. At a time when performance art was considered to be an un-reproducible action, *Site* foreshadowed the resurgence of the past in the visual arts and thus of the tableau vivant. ¶

Mélanie Boucher is Associate Professor of museology and art history at the École multidisciplinaire de l’image of the Université du Québec en Outaouais. —melanie.boucher@uqo.ca

Ery Contogouris is Assistant Professor of art history at the Université de Montréal. —ery.contogouris@umontreal.ca

1. On these forms of appropriation, see Carole Halimi, “Le tableau vivant de Diderot à Artaud, et son esthétique dans les arts visuels contemporains (xx<sup>e</sup>-xxi<sup>e</sup> siècles),” PhD diss., Paris, University Paris 1, 2011.

2. Kirsten Gram Holström, *Monodrama, Attitudes, Tableaux Vivants: Studies on Some Trends of Theatrical Fashion 1770–1815* (Stockholm: Almqvist and Wiksell, 1967).

3. Mélanie Boucher, *Stay Still, Translate: Performance, Presentation, Conservation of the Tableau Vivant in Canada*, 2017, 3, [https://macm.org/app/uploads/2016/12/StayStillTranslate\\_Programme\\_EN.pdf](https://macm.org/app/uploads/2016/12/StayStillTranslate_Programme_EN.pdf).

4. Mélanie Boucher and André-Louis Paré (eds.), “Faire Statue/Statue Play,” *Espace art actuel/pratiques et perspectives* 115 (Winter 2017).

5. Émile Mâle, quoted in Rose-Marie Ferré, “L’art des tableaux vivants au Moyen Âge: Rappel de la question et enjeux,” in Julie Ramos with the collaboration of Léonard Pouy, ed., *Le tableau vivant ou l’image performée* (Paris: Institut national d’histoire de l’art and mare & martin, 2014), 36. Our translation.

6. What Michael Fried calls “absorption” in *Absorption and Theatricality: Painting and Beholder in the Age of Diderot* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1990).

7. Pierre Frantz, *L’esthétique du tableau dans le théâtre du xviii<sup>e</sup> siècle* (Paris: Presses universitaires de France, coll. puf/Perspectives littéraires, 1998); Caroline van Eck and Stijn Bussels (ed.), *Theatricality in Early Modern Art and Architecture* (Malden: Wiley-Blackwell, 2011).

8. Fried, *Absorption and Theatricality*, 82.

9. Johann Wolfgang von Goethe, quoted in Julie Ramos, “Affinités électives du tableau et du vivant: Une ouverture, dans les pas de Goethe,” in Ramos and Pouy (ed.), *Le tableau vivant ou l’image performée*, 13.

10. Stéphanie Félicité Genlis, *Mémoires inédits de madame la Comtesse de Genlis, sur le dix-huitième siècle et la révolution française depuis 1756 jusqu’à nos jours*. Tome troisième, 2nd ed. (Paris: Ladvocat, 1825) 156, <https://gallica.bnf.fr/ark:/12148/bpt6k480234w.textelimage>. Our translation.

11. Arnaud Rykner argues that pantomimes and tableaux vivants are a symptom of modernity. *Corps obscènes: Pantomime, tableau vivant et autres images pas sages suivi de Note sur le dispositif* (Paris: Orizons, 2014), 12.

12. Bernard Vouilloux considers the crossings of the verbal and visual worlds in *Le tableau vivant: Phryné, l’orateur et le peintre* (Paris,

Flammarion, coll. Idées et recherches, 2002).

13. Martin Meisel, *Realizations: Narrative, Pictorial, and Theatrical Arts in Nineteenth-Century England* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1983), 3. Peter M. McIsaac writes about the “gendered, high/low cultural divide” in “Rethinking Tableaux Vivants and Triviality in the Writings of Johann Wolfgang von Goethe, Johanna Schopenhauer, and Fanny Lewald,” *Monatshefte* 99, no. 2 (2007): 152–76.

14. Victor Hugo, *Choses vues. Carnets, albums, journaux* (Paris: Éditions rencontre, 1968 [1887, 1900]), 481–83. Brenda Assael considers the role that the tableau vivant played in the failure of morality in “Art or Indecency? Tableaux Vivants on the London Stage and the Failure of Late Victorian Moral Reform,” *Journal of British Studies* 45 (October 2006): 744–58.

15. Mary Chapman, “Living Pictures: Women and Tableaux Vivants in Nineteenth-Century American Fiction and Culture,” *Wide Angle* 18, no. 3 (July 1996): 22–52; Grace Ann Hovet (with Theodore R. Hovet Sr.), *Tableaux Vivants. Female Identity Development through Everyday Performance* (Xlibris Corporation, 2009).

16. Lori Pauli, Curator of photographs at the National Gallery of Canada, has produced two retrospective exhibitions accompanied by important catalogues on staged photography. *Acting the Part: Photography as Theatre* (2006) traced the history of this practice until today, and *Oscar G Rejlander: Artist Photographer* (2018–19) showed a first retrospective of Rejlander’s work.

17. Roland Barthes, *Camera Lucida: Reflections on Photography*, trans. Richard Howard (New York: Hill and Wang, 1981), 32.

18. Alain Boillat and Valentine Robert trace the representation of the passions in tableaux vivants in “Vie et Passion de Jésus Christ (Pathé, 1902–1905) hétérogénéité des ‘tableaux’, déclinaison des motifs,” 1895. *Revue de l’association française de recherche sur l’histoire du cinéma* 60 (2010): 32–63.

19. On this subject, see also Valentine Robert, “L’origine picturale du cinéma: Le tableau vivant, une esthétique du film des premiers temps,” PhD diss., Lausanne, Lausanne University, 2016.

20. This series does not reproduce scenes of films, as Rosalind Krauss notes, nor does it immobilize (still) movements. Krauss, “Cindy Sherman 1975–1993,” in *Cindy Sherman* (New York: Rizzoli, 1993). Regarding the importance given to photography in contem-

porary art, see in particular the collected volume edited by Christine Buisine and Arnaud Rykner, *Entre code et corps: Tableau vivant et photographie mise en scène* (Pau: Presses universitaires de Pau et des Pays de l’Adour, 2012), as well as the work of Carole Halimi.

21. See also Buisine and Rykner, *Entre code et corps*.

22. Mélanie Boucher, “Performative Art follows Painting’s Footsteps: The Case of Vanessa Beecroft,” *esse arts+opinions*, special issue “L’idée de la peinture,” 76 (Fall 2012): 49–50.

23. “A cultural and para-artistic practice of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, the tableau vivant was a cross between a parlor game and a form of spectacle. In *CounterPoses*, it abandons its edifying and moralizing aims without, however, relinquishing its right to play freely upon the incredible epistemological richness (history, religion, gender studies, ethnology, technology, etc.) that constituted its complex genealogy.” Johanne Lamoureux, “Reviving the Dead,” *PA: A Journal of Performance and Art* 22, no. 3 (2000): 66–71. A catalogue was published in 2002 by Oboro and DisplayCult.

24. Two articles by Mélanie Boucher consider the contribution of the tableau vivant to the museification of performance: “Pour une histoire du corps muséifié,” *Culture et Musées* 29 (2017): 81–96; “L’exposition de la performance, à l’entre reenactment et tableau vivant: les cas de Marina Abramovic ainsi que d’Alexandra Pirici et Manuel Pelmus,” *Muséologies: Les cahiers d’études supérieures*, ed. Carmela Cucuzzella, 8, no. 1 (2015): 73–89.

25. See, for example, the series *La nuit des tableaux vivants*, begun in 2009 at Musée des Augustins by Christian Bernard and Jean-Max Colard.

26. See, for example, *Tableaux vivants: Fantaisies photographiques victorienne (1840–1880)* in 1999 at the Musée d’Orsay, curated by Quentin Bajac.