**Communication as Performance and the Performativity of Communication**

Bernhard Kils. "Aerial View of Münster." Wikimedia Commons. August 27, 2009. https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Muenster_Innenstadt.jpg

**Proceedings of the 2014 International Colloquium on Communication**

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# Contents

# Performativity and Performance – Thinking about Performativity in Performance

# Wandering through the Fields between Theater and Performance – Looking Backwards, Looking Sideways, Looking Forward

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**Abstract**

Looking at current theater, in particular the so-called post-dramatic theater, sometimes we may ask, if this kind of theater is still capable or willing to tell us intelligible stories about social life and human relations, as they are arranged in traditional theater plays.

The value of those complete theater pieces sometimes seems dubious or to be questioned. In new productions, we often see only fragments of them or they are dissolved in a flowing process. The criteria of realistic and psychological or mimetic acting become blurred. New forms of acting arise or are challenged. Current theater approaches to the form of acting, we call "performance." Also, oral performing of literature besides the theater ("Sprechkunst") is influenced by these new forms of acting.

Terms that try to grasp these trends, are deconstruction and performativity or the contradictions between product and flowing process or the relation between performativity and referentiality. Moving above all in the fields *between* the old-style theater and performative or post-dramatic events or those we call *performances*, I focus on the meaning of these terms or their opposition and reflect on the treatment of the aesthetic material, the kind of acting and the contact with the audience.

*Wandering through the fields* is an essential part of my profession. My profession is a mixture of *actor training*, *music and drama in education*, theater and speech *science* and not least: *acting and performing literature and music.* The examples I will give – *looking backwards, sideways and looking forward* – will reflect my experiences in these various aesthetic fields, including my experience as a *spectator.* My paper is divided into three parts or fields of thinking and a prelude at the beginning: *Turning to and from Terms and Phenomena.* The three fields of thinking concern the *exhibition of the first person*, the *post dramatic theater*, and the *dialectic relation of process and product*.

## Prelude: Turning to and from Terms and Phenomena

The conception or idea of *performance* in the German language is used more specifically than in English. In English, each kind of acting is a performance. In the German language, performance is to be understood as an aesthetic activity that *differs* from theater. But the term performance is even more complex:

- Any way of bringing communication to an execution or expression (for instance, speech or singing a song) is performance.

- In the language of science, performance is used in opposition to competence.

- Within the field of pop music, for example the European Song Contest, the term performance has a very simple meaning: it is the physical action while singing or the type of mediation to an audience. As one of the applicants said, I think I've sung well, but the performance was poor.

The diversity of the phenomena associated with the term performance, of course, is linked with the fact that performance today has become an *aesthetic fashion word* to decorate diverse forms of action.

I am mainly interested in the aesthetic fields *between* traditional theater and what we call a performance in an artistic meaning. Traditional theater is a dramatic action between clearly characterized persons: the characters on stage. Theater is a system of signs, which contains references to people, social situations and behavior, as we know. Theater requires an audience that can relate the dramatic action to situations of social life – as mythically, historically or culturally removed the events on the stage may be: an audience that *understands* the events. This applies also to the art of speech, the art to perform or mediate literature – that we call *Sprechkunst.*

What we – facing the stage – call a *performance*, usually presents no characters or social behavior and does not relate directly to social life and its situations. It is even missing a structure that is based on stories. The meaning of the performative process in a performance is not simply or necessarily to clarify by references or by a rational tangible message. Nevertheless, the performance *tells* us something. But, unlike the theater which reflects the social world, the performance tells us nothing except what *happens.* It refers (apparently) *to nothing but itself*.

Sometimes, we can still feel the origin of the performance derived from the *visual arts*, set in motion. A performance often consists of moving pictures, choreographed physical and vocal actions and is interspersed often by elements of dance, moving art, voice art or physical theater even if it relates to a topic or story. And when the actors of the performance use words or speech, they often use it by musical aspects: intonation of the voice changes into singing, words dissolve into sounds, into a whisper or are performed in compact rhythmic or splintering choirs. These events, however, do not occur in a structure of coincidence. They are created by a leading active subject; they are *presented, produced, performed.*

In contrast to the opposition or conflict between the character and the formative subject in theater, we can understand the performance especially as a *first-person*

*action*, by which the active subject occurs in public and performs himself or herself. And even if it is sometimes masked by action or costume, the performance points especially at this ego. It is the paradoxical result that the *first-person*, who acts, now becomes the *material* of his or her own performance. The exhibition of oneself, however, can always be carried out very differently.


## The Exhibition of the First Person

If one understands theater as a kind of *metaphor* by which two realities – the *event on stage* and the *social life* – recognizably relate to each other as mutual support, one could describe the performance as a metaphor without a *ground* or referential base. And the audience may be puzzled and try to seek the ground on which the metaphor rests. Helmut Hartwig (1999), a scientist of the arts, calls performance a "negative metaphor," meaning an absent metaphor: a metaphor *in absente*. He calls it the "hare without hedgehog" (273). I think the fable *The Race of the Hare and the Hedgehog* is well known. The hare races until he is completely exhausted, but there is no hedgehog.

I even once called the performance an *open parable*, an allusion to Franz Kafka: "All these parables are only set out to say that the incomprehensible is incomprehensible" (Ritter 2009, 186f.). Nevertheless, the incomprehensible can be sometimes experienced in its own way. In fact, in most cases one can finally find such a "ground" or referential base of the metaphor. For instance in the radical physical action of the Dutch group *Schwalbe/Swallow* that Barbara Gronau (2014) describes:

- The performance *Op eigene Kracht/By own Power* presents eight actors – nearly naked – on exercise bikes, producing the light of their spotlights by only their leg strength – rigidly looking into the audience and fiercely kicking: that way they become visible – and disappear in the dark when their power gradually declines. The audience is faced with nothing but the expenditure of body strength. But the wide opened eyes are acting too, just as the nearly naked bodies – usually erotically provocative, now perhaps drenched in sweat. (12f.)

Here you can recognize that it requires some effort to bring light into a cause or to set ourselves into light. But when the physical strength weakens, it will get dark again. That may be a kind of a metaphor.

Another form of an exhibition of oneself is *The Beauty in the Well*, a scenic miniature within a performance in summer 1982 (Ritter 2009, 183):

- A beautiful young woman – naked – sits in a fountain bowl full of black muddy water and grabs, lost in thought, again and again into the black mud and lets it slide over her body and her bare breasts. The visitors in several groups saw this and other apparitions or scenic miniatures – in the manner of a repetitive loop, wandering at night with torches through a vast dark garden – in a pouring rain.

I saw a similar performance – without rain – in a 1998 conference in Potsdam (182):

- On Pfingstberg overlooking the New Garden and the Havel lakes, people walk down a slope, scattered in conversations. And suddenly a young woman stands apart in a small valley above a man made pond. Again and again she throws a

bucket held by a long rope into the water below her. Tirelessly she draws and pours the water away to the side, as if it was her job to empty the pond. When she looks up, she looks like being in a picture that she cannot leave. One could see through this *glance of fierce determination* into the landscape of an evil fairy tale.

These people do not tell us an intelligible story, but visitors might find *themselves* in a story by those actions, moreover, in their *own* stories searching for their *own* metaphor. This probably becomes intensified when the events do not happen on stage, but in a common outdoor space where we are acting too as spectators.

Another region within the transition zone between performance and traditional theater is opened by the actors themselves and their biographical background. Again, these are first-person actions too, but they become also stories about society by these biographical backgrounds.

- At the *Berlin Theater Meeting 2013*, you could see a performance of the Swiss theater *Hora* called: *Disabled Theater*, a dance theater of disabled young people. First they stepped forward on stage, separately and mutely, and the audience could look at them. Then they stepped again to the ramp one after the other, naming their disabilities: *learning disabilities*, *Down syndrome*, *trisomy* and so on, and called their profession: I'm an *actor* or I'm an *actress.* One said: She does not want to *represent* anything, she wants *to be herself*. Then each of them dances a solo. But there was not only the dance to look at, but also the gestures of the looking actors in the background and their mutual compassionate imitation of the protagonists and their action. This seemed to be an important additional part of their performance.

- The project, *Song and Scene* (1982), was created as a musical biography of the participants without spoken words, assembling songs that had been important in their lives – loved or hated, ranging from children's songs, the hits during their puberty up to current songs, including contrasting songs or parodies. All songs contain a gestural foundation: love and disappointment, abandonment or collective behavior etc. and create situations and relationships between the actors themselves and the audience (Ritter 1990).

- In April 2014, the German performance group *She She Pop* presented the performance *She She Pop and Their Mothers*. The real daughters and their real mothers – by film clips – were acting on stage (only one son was involved too). Topics were real experiences and social problems, for example, whether and how the fact of *motherhood* restricts the possibilities of a self-determined woman's life, and whether motherhood is perhaps a form of *virgin sacrifice*. An essential aesthetic element of this performance was the recording of Stravinsky's *Sacre du Printemps* (*Sacrifice of Spring*), stimulating dances of the aged mothers and their daughters. A theater metaphor was not recognized at first glance: the mothers and daughters were – like you and me: no metaphor embodying beings. They were only fixed on their social and historical roles and their respective deviations.

But against the background of *Sacre du Printemps* a metaphor becomes evident behind these social roles: motherhood – to become or to be mother – may be a form of a *virgin victim*.

- The performance of *The Last Witnesses* by the Burgtheater from Vienna, shown in Berlin in May 2014, had a similar dramaturgy. It is an assembly of interviews and autobiographies of living witnesses of the Holocaust (82-100 years old). The autobiographical texts, however, were performed by actors, thus, bringing the "performance" into line with traditional theater. The very aged witnesses were sitting behind a curtain. While they were listening to their own stories and those of the other witnesses, their faces were projected onto the curtain. At the end they stepped forward to the ramp individually and formulated a statement.

## Postdramatic Theater

These and similar phenomena get more and more influence within traditional theater performances. The concept of "post-dramatic theater" as it is called by Hans-Thies Lehmann (2001) aims at such intermediate forms. Literary texts or theater plays often are used as a quarry, fragments are reassembled or interspersed with actual texts and pictures of society often by videos. We seldom find intelligible stories or psychologically motivated, dramatically enhancing conflicts between characters. The actors switch from fragments of a character to aspects of the person they are in everyday life. The majority of the performances of German-language drama school's theater meeting in 2013 could for instance be characterized in this way.

The performative elements of acting usually have a service function to the meaning. But in those forms of acting, one can say, they overgrow the connotations or the references to social life. The performative elements "jump in the queue" – sie "drängen sich vor" as Hans-Thies Lehmann (2001) formulates. Erika Fischer-Lichte (1999) calls it a "Performativierungsschub," intensifying the "performative function of theater" against the "referential" ( 20 ff.). Or: "The performance dominates the text" (2004, 45). And she noted, "Instead of creating art works artists often produce events, in which not only themselves but also the recipients, the viewers, listeners, spectators are involved" (29).

These developments of course have their predecessors, for example, the *Living Theater* that tried to mix kinds of living and forms of acting, most radically in the production *Paradise Now* (1968). Also the *Schaubühne* in Berlin has provided impulses: the *prelude* of the *Antikenprojekt/ Schauspielerübungen* (1973) for instance presented *actor exercises*, comparing the start of acting and the origin of theater: Starting with basic exercises of breathing, voice and movement, elementary scenic events, choral dances up to the monologue, where thinking and feeling become voice and speech. In *Shakespeare's Memory* (1976), actors and spectators met in a wide hall. The spectators wandered looking around as in a marketplace. A key experience for actors and spectators was the direct confrontation on the same ground.

An early prophet who tried to reinforce the performative elements in theater is Antonin Artaud. His battle cry was: *No more masterpieces!* (Artaud 1969, 83). He demands: "It's not about the oppression of the word in the theater, but to change his destiny: mainly

about the limitation of its position" (77). "It is important to break the subjection of the theater under the text and to rediscover the notion of a language between gesture and thought" (95). Julian Beck, the protagonist of the Living Theater, called him "That madman who inspires us all (...) and I think he is the philosopher, for those of us who work in theater (...)." (see Botting 1972, 18-19.) My own Artaud-Project (1984/85) used aspects of Artaud's biography, his diaries and letters, his poetry and his ideas of theater aesthetics,working with choreographic and musical structures, for example, in splintery and rhythmic choirs (Ritter 1990, 123ff.).

Another early model for the trends of post-dramatic theater, I used too, is Bertolt Brecht's *Learning Play*. One of his basic rules is "The shape of the learning plays is strict but only so that parts of own invention and current type can be inserted more easily" (Brecht 1967, 17, 1025). The result is the repeated interruption of plays and the assembly of fragments. Each member of the acting group (and the audience too) is authorized to stop the events. The identity of the actors and the characters is replaced by role change or breaks between the real person and the character. Acting presents characters only temporarily as fragmentary gestures. The play as a substrate of a story with clear references to social life turns into a theater of arguments, leaning on Brecht's model of the *Street Scene*, changing back and forth from the level of acting to the meta level of discussion and discourse. Hans-Thies Lehmann ,therefore, calls the post-dramatic theater, a theater in a post-Brechtian space (Ritter 2010).

- The project *Shakespeare's fools* (University of the Arts Berlin in 1986/87) is connected with these ideas and with my own attempts to Brecht's *learning play* in the seventies: Fools from various Shakespeare plays meet on a *fool's island* or a *fool's hill* – even fools of plays in which – originally – no fools occur*.* The model of this meeting was old *fools' academies.* In a grotesque way, they reflect people and situations they have experienced or overheard and the places where they come from. All Shakespeare's characters could occur in this play of *scenic quotations*, but always in the distorting mirror of fools. The individual performances sometimes were interrupted and connected at the same time by songs and dances. And sometimes the meeting exploded in a ritual of *bullshit* and *mucking around* ("Verarschung") by mutual imitation and caricature of the behavior within the group of fools (Ritter 1990, 131ff.).

The varying performative phenomena, which can be found in the transition zone between theater and performance, in variable distances from traditional theater (and also from traditional forms of *oral* and *literary performances*) can be characterized as follows:
- There are types of acting, which blur the boundaries between the *individual person* and the *character* or reinforce them

- *Experts of social life* are acting or appear on different media levels, presenting experienced situations – possibly supported by actors

- Plays or texts will be deconstructed: fragmented, reassembled or interspersed with actual facts

- Body actions or vocal actions produce a new and different quality of sense even if they relate to texts or topics

- Acting encourages the audience to participate and create a common space of events and experiences.


### Processes and Products and Their Dialectic Relation

Barbara Gronau (2014), a scientist in theater at the University of Arts in Berlin, recognizes – in ways similar to Erika Fischer-Lichte – a current trend in theater today: productions tend to *projects*, the *product* withdraws "in the background.". *Art works* are dissolved in *performative processes*. This appears, as described, on two levels:
- *Plays* become *deconstructed* : the *art work* is used as a quarry and reinvented in a process of performance. The continuity of stories becomes lost."The performance dominates the text" (Erika Fischer-Lichte 2004, 45).

- The outlines of *characters* become blurred, characters are *fragmented* or not considered. Space structures get into flow by opening the space of acting, for instance, but not only by video clips: the frontal spectacle splinters in an open space.

The result may be an entangled flow of fragmented forms in free non-narrative sequences.

Performative processes, however, *always* contain product-like elements or shares. They belong to the core of acting generally. Sometimes it is difficult to detect them in an open focus of attention or in flowing spaces, and it is difficult to relate them to each other. Nevertheless, there is a kind of a *dialectical relationship* between *product* and *process.* For example, it is not the flowing processes that stay in one's mind, but especially conspicuous points of awareness: tableau-like pictures, a surprising view, a moment of slowdown, a temporary stop or standstill, a sudden silence. That way the process of acting can be revealed in an impression or its emotional response. The *disruptive eye* gives them a *frame.* This applies to watching and vice versa to acting.
I provide two examples:
- Michael Chekhov (1979, 21ff.) describes a simple exercise. His instruction is to model the space by gestures like a sculptor. Your action is structured by three steps: the approach or the impulse of breathing, the action itself and the break after acting: the fermata. By the impulse of breathing, I anticipate my action; during the "fermata." I remember my action retrospectively. Both points of acting cause the consciousness of form or product in action. You can do it mutely, by sounds and voice, by words or by a scenic miniature.

- Bertolt Brecht (1967) suggests the actor send a glance into the audience before acting or after acting (9, 778) or to wait until an utterance and its meaning have reached the audience. This moment he calls "Nachschlag" (15, 407) – meaning: the *inner echo*.

This form of acting can be called *framing a process.* Walter Benjamin (1966) recognizes at this point the dialectical quality of gesture: "This rigid frame-like coherence of each element of an attitude – which as a whole is in a lively flow – is even one of the dialectical basic phenomena of gesture." (26) This just means the coincidence of *process* and *product.* The product arises within the performative process or the form within the flow of events. At the same time, the *product* dissolves continuously into the flow of events and disappears in a *process* of new approaches and action impulses. In the moment of the temporary stop of Michael Tschechow's exercise, you can, for instance, feel the energy of the action you did turning into the new impulse of the action you will start. Actor and spectator experience as contradictory: *immersing* in flowing processes and at the same time *emphasizing* details of an action or *perceiving* them pointedly. This also applies to the performance.

According to their function, the *products* are the places of thinking and sense-association. They produce the moments of highest proximity between actor and spectator and their dialogue, while otherwise both of them tend to be more self-conscious in the processes of their own experiences. Tableau-like elements *stimulate* the spectator's search for meaning and the process of interpretation or the "vibration" between aesthetic and social realities because it stops or retards the flow of events. Even the minimal offer of shapes on stage corresponds to the longing for meaning and its attempts of construction by the audience. And the actors, in those moments, experience most clearly that they are above all acting for an audience.

Hans-Thies Lehmann (2001, 193) notes that emotions perhaps could mislead the thinking when the performative elements "jump in the queue": "The perception does not stop to search for meaning and associations with realities." And the spectator possibly attributes "subjectively-determined meanings" to the events. That is probably true and could lead to a process of mutual missing. But in aesthetics we have – always and rightly – to accept subjective realities or subjective "connections and associations to realities" (193). It is always the *own vibration* between aesthetic and social realities. Misunderstanding must not necessarily be thought the opposite of understanding, but rather its constituent part.

The more complex and fragile the performative event is the more complex and multi-layered the search for meaning – acting as watching. The reference to people appears in the smallest fragment of a character, each fragmentary utterance or attitude will encourage the spectator to design a whole character. When the performative elements "jump in the queue," the referentiality stays always behind them – like a shadow or like the pre-shine of a possible meaning. And even where actors pretend to be nothing but themselves, they are always a sign of something at the same time because they are acting, that is, *performing* and *producing* themselves.

Erika Fischer-Lichte (1999, 25) claims that *what* actors are doing in this kind of theater or performance gets less important than *how* they do it. But the *How* is an essential part of performing: the *how* is its *product.* In the *How* appears *what* they are doing. The *How* contains the referentiality that acting must produce, if it does not want to appear empty and automatic. The actor's meaning of his acting and the spectator's interpretation of his perception. Both assemble around this *How* – like the bees around the honey, longing for (or addicted to) the vibrations of meaning.

However, in each performance we have to find a new quality of the balance between the *How* of acting or performing and its referential answer. If the "metaphor"

remains hidden or an answer is not given, a confused puzzle of interpretation may start – perhaps even up to *head shaking*. But, as Bertolt Brecht (1967) told us, just by shaking the head fruits may fall down, and we only have to pick them up (16, 843), Looking at *performativity* we fortunately cannot *exorcise referentiality*, because when *acting* or *performing* we are always *living.* The referentiality arises or nests within the performativity, and vice versa. That is the *dialectic* in this matter, even though we must sometimes accept that meanings remain enigmatic, iridescent and ambiguous or contradictory.

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