
The Transformative Power of Performance

A new aesthetics

Erika Fischer-Lichte

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The transformative power of performance

On October 24, 1975, a curious and memorable event took place at the Krinzinger Gallery in Innsbruck. The Yugoslavian artist Marina Abramović presented her performance *Lips of Thomas*. The artist began her performance by shedding all her clothes. She then went to the back wall of the gallery, pinned up a photograph of a man with long hair who resembled the artist, and framed it by drawing a five-pointed star around it. She turned to a table with a white table-cloth close to the wall, on which there was a bottle of red wine, a jar containing two pounds of honey, a crystal glass, a silver spoon, and a whip. She settled into the chair and reached for the jar of honey and the silver spoon. Slowly, she ate the honey until she had emptied the jar. She poured red wine into the crystal glass and drank it in long draughts. She continued until bottle and glass were empty. Then she broke the glass with her right hand, which began to bleed. Abramović got up and walked over to the wall where the photograph was fastened. Standing at the wall and facing the audience, she cut a five-pointed star into the skin of her abdomen with a razor blade. Blood welled out of the cuts. Then she took the whip, kneeled down beneath the photograph with her back to the audience, and began to flagellate her back severely, raising bloody welts. Afterwards, she lay down on a cross made of blocks of ice, her arms spread out to her sides. An electric radiator hung from the ceiling, facing her stomach. Its heat triggered further bleeding from the star-shaped cuts. Abramović lay motionless on the ice – she obviously intended to endure her self-torture until the radiator had melted all the ice. After she had held out for 30 minutes without any sign of abandoning the torture, some members of the audience could no longer bear her ordeal. They hastened to the blocks of ice, took hold of the artist, and covered her with coats. Then they removed her from the cross and carried her away. Thus, they put an end to the performance.

The performance had taken two hours. In the course of these two hours, the artist and the spectators created an event that was neither envisioned nor legitimized by the traditions and standards of the visual or performing arts. The artist was not producing an artifact through her actions; she was not creating a fixed and transferable work of art that could exist independently of her. Yet her actions were also not representational. She was not performing as an actress, playing the part of a dramatic character that eats too much honey, drinks wine excessively, and inflicts a variety of injuries on her own body. Rather, Abramović was actually harming

herself, abusing her body with a determined disregard for its limits. She fed it substances which, though certainly nutritious in small doses, would doubtlessly cause nausea and discomfort in such excess. Moreover, the audience had to infer a strong physical pain from the heavy external injuries that she inflicted on herself. Yet, the artist betrayed no sign of distress – she did not moan, scream, or grimace. She generally avoided any physical sign that would express discomfort or pain. The artist restricted herself to performing actions that changed her body perceptibly – feeding it honey and wine and inflicting visible damage on it – without producing external signs for the inner states induced by these actions.

This put the audience in a deeply disturbing and agonizing position that invalidated both the established conventions of theatrical performance and generally of human responsiveness to a given situation. Traditionally, the role of a gallery visitor or theatregoer is defined as that of either an observer or spectator. Gallery visitors observe the exhibited works from varying distances without usually touching them. Theatregoers watch the plot unfold on stage, possibly with strong feelings of empathy, but refrain from interfering. Even if a character on stage (e.g. Othello) sets out to kill another (in this case, Desdemona), the audience knows full well that the murder is but a pretense and that the actress playing Desdemona will join the Othello actor for the final curtain call. In contrast, the rules of everyday life call for immediate intervention if someone threatens to hurt themselves or another person – unless, perhaps, this means risking one's own life. Which rule should the audience apply in Abramović's performance? She very obviously inflicted real injuries on herself and was determined to continue her self-torture. Had she done this in any other public place, the spectators would probably not have hesitated long before intervening. What about this case? A variety of considerations come into play. Abramović's artistic intent demanded a certain respect, ensuring that she could complete her performance. One risked destroying her "work of art." Then again, calmly watching her inflict injuries on herself seemed incompatible with the laws of human sympathy. It is also possible that Abramović wanted to force the spectators to take on the role of voyeurs¹ or test how far she could go before someone would put an end to her ordeal. What rules should apply here?

Throughout her performance, Abramović created a situation wherein the audience was suspended between the norms and rules of art and everyday life, between aesthetic and ethical imperatives. She plunged the audience into a crisis that could not be overcome by referring to conventional behavior patterns. Initially, the audience responded with the very physical signs that the performer refused to show: signs from which inner states could be deduced, such as incredulous amazement at her eating and drinking or horror at her breaking the crystal glass with her hand. When the artist began to cut into her flesh with the razor blade, one could hear the spectators drawing their breath in shock. Whatever the transformations the spectators underwent in those two hours – transformations that, to some extent, were manifest in perceptible physical expressions – they flowed into and prompted concrete reactions. Moreover, these transformations

had clear consequences: the spectators put an end to the artist's ordeal and thus concluded the performance itself. The performance transformed the involved spectators into actors.

In the past, when one spoke of art's potential to transform – referring both to the artist and the recipient – one generally evoked an image of the artist seized by inspiration or the beholder of art roused by an inner experience, calling out like Rilke's Apollo: "You must change your life." Nonetheless, there have always been artists that treated their bodies abominably. Legendary accounts and autobiographies of individual artists consistently tell of sleep deprivation, drug consumption, excessive use of alcohol and other substances, as well as self-inflicted injuries. Still, the violent treatment that these artists inflicted upon their bodies was neither hailed as art by them nor considered art by others.² Relevant sources from the nineteenth and twentieth centuries reveal that such practices were tolerated at best. They were accepted as a possible source of inspiration for artistic endeavor, sanctioned as the price for the work of art that they induced – but never credited as art itself.

Nevertheless, there existed – and continue to exist – cultural domains that consider practices in which people injure themselves or expose their bodies to serious harm not only "normal" but even laudable and exemplary. This applies particularly to the domain of religious rituals. Many religions bestow a special saintliness on ascetics, hermits, fakirs, or yogis, not only because they suffer unimaginable privations and put their own bodies at great risk but also because they injure their bodies in the most tremendous ways. It is all the more astounding that even mass movements occasionally adopt these practices, as is the case with flagellation. Part of individual and collective practice for nuns and monks from the eleventh century onwards, self-flagellation was taken up in various forms: in the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries, processions of flagellants moved through Europe and conducted their ritual publicly in front of large crowds; orders of penitence, prevalent particularly in Latin countries, had their members flagellate themselves collectively on various occasions. Voluntary self-flagellation has sustained itself as a living practice up to the present in Good Friday processions in Spain and in certain places in southern Italy, as well as in Corpus Christi processions, and in the liturgy of *Semana Santa*.

The descriptions of the everyday lives of the Dominican nuns at the cloister Unterlinden near Colmar, composed by Katharina von Gebersweiler at the beginning of the fourteenth century, reveal that voluntary self-flagellation constituted a fundamental part, if not the culmination, of the liturgy:

At the end of the morning and evening prayers, the sisters remained standing in the choir and prayed until they were given a sign to begin with their devotional worship. Some tortured themselves with knee bends while praising the rule of God. Others, consumed by the fire of divine love, were unable to contain their tears, which they accompanied with devotional wailing. They did not move until they were suffused anew by grace and found 'thou whom

my soul loveth' (Song of Solomon 1:7). Others finally tormented their flesh by severely maltreating it on a daily basis – some with birch rods, others with whips, containing three or four knotted straps, a third group with iron chains, a fourth one with flagella furnished with thorns. During Advent and the entire fasting period, the sisters went into the chapter house and other appropriate places after the morning prayers, where they mauled their bodies severely with the most diverse instruments of flagellation until blood flowed, so that the lashings of the whip sounded through the whole cloister and, sweeter than any other melody, ascended to the Lord's ears.³

(Ancelet-Hustache 1930 cited in Largier 2001: 29)

The ritual of self-flagellation lifted the nuns above their monastic routine and offered the promise of transformation. The violence inflicted on their bodies together with the physical transformation evident after the torture brought about a process of spiritual transformation: "Those who approached God in these diverse ways were granted enlightenment of the heart, their thoughts were purified, their passion ignited, their conscience became clear, and their spirits ascended towards God" (Ancelet-Hustache 1930 cited in Largier 2001: 30). Voluntary self-flagellation – physical abuse that aims at spiritual transformation – is recognized by the Catholic Church as a penance practice even today.⁴

A second cultural domain that allows for bodily injury or risk thereof can be found in fairground spectacles. On the one hand, tricks that would "normally" lead to serious injuries miraculously seem not to harm the artists themselves, such as fire eating, sword swallowing, or piercing the tongue with a needle, to name only a few. On the other hand, the artists perform extremely hazardous actions, exposing themselves to real dangers. The mastery of the performers lies precisely in their ability to defy this danger. The performer's concentration need but slacken for a fraction of a second for the ever-lurking danger to erupt that is posed by a tightrope act without a net or by the taming of predatory animals and snakes: the tightrope dancer falls, the tamer is attacked by the tiger, and the snake-charmer is bitten by the snake. This is the moment the audience fears most and which it yet feverishly awaits. Its deepest fears, fascination, and sensationalist curiosity are unleashed in this moment. These spectacles are not so much about the transformation of the actors or, even less so, the spectators. They rather seek to demonstrate the unusual physical and mental powers of the performers, and are intended to elicit awe and wonder from the audience. We are talking here about precisely the emotions that also took hold of Abramović's audience.

The second distinctive feature of Abramović's performance is the transformation of the spectators into actors, for which there also exist examples from different cultural domains. Of particular interest for our context are the penal rituals of the early modern period. As Richard van Duermen has shown, spectators would crowd around the corpse after an execution in order to touch the deceased's body, blood, limbs, or even the lethal cord. They hoped that this physical contact would cure them of illness and generally provide a guarantee for their own bodily

well-being and integrity (1988: 161). The transformation of spectators into actors occurred in the hope of achieving a lasting alteration of their own bodies. As such, this transformation had a completely different thrust from that experienced by the audience in Abramović's performance. Her spectators were not concerned with their own physical well-being so much as that of the artist. The actions that transformed the spectators into actors, i.e. the physical contact with the artist, were aimed at protecting her bodily integrity. They were the result of an ethical decision directed at another, the artist.

In this respect, the audience's actions also fundamentally differed from those of the Futurist *serate*, Dada-soirées, and Surrealist "guided tours" at the beginning of the twentieth century, in which spectators turned into actors. In this case, the spectators were provoked into action by deliberate shocks. The transformation of spectator into actor happened almost automatically as specified by the *mise en scène*; it was hardly the result of a conscious decision on the part of the concerned spectator. Accounts of such events as well as manifestos of the artists speak to these conditions. In his manifesto entitled *The Variety Theatre* (1913), for instance, Filippo Tommaso Marinetti makes the following suggestions for provoking the audience:

Introduce surprise and the need to move among the spectators of the orchestra, boxes, and balcony. Some random suggestions: spread a powerful glue on some of the seats, so that the male or female spectator will stay glued down and make everyone laugh ... – Sell the same ticket to ten people: traffic jam, bickering, and wrangling. – Offer free tickets to gentlemen or ladies who are notoriously unbalanced, irritable, or eccentric and likely to provoke uproars with obscene gestures, pinching women, or other freakishness. Sprinkle the seats with dust to make people itch and sneeze, etc.

(1973: 130)

In this artistic spectacle, members of the audience became actors merely through the impact of shock and the power of provocation. Throughout, they were watched with anger, excitement, amusement, or malice by the other spectators and organizers. In Abramović's performance, too, the transformation of some spectators into actors would have aroused contradictory emotions in the remaining spectators: shame for having lacked the courage to interfere oneself; outrage or even anger due to the premature conclusion of the performance, preventing one from seeing how far the performer would have still been willing to go in her self-torture; or relief and contentment about someone finally deciding to end the ordeal of the performer and most probably also that of the audience.⁵

Whatever the final assessment of the similarities and differences, Abramović's performance notably exhibited elements of ritual as well as spectacle, that is to say, it hinted both at a religious and a fairground context. In fact, it constantly oscillated between the two. It was ritualistic⁶ by virtue of engendering a transformation of the performer and certain spectators but lacked the publicly recognized change in status or identity, as is often the case with rituals. It resembled a spectacle by virtue

of eliciting awe and horror from the spectators, shocking and seducing them into becoming voyeurs.

Such a performance eludes the scope of traditional aesthetic theories. It vehemently resists the demands of hermeneutic aesthetics, which aims at understanding the work of art. In this case, understanding the artist's actions was less important than the experiences that she had while carrying them out and that were generated in the audience. In short, the transformation of the performance's participants was pivotal.

This is not to say that there was nothing for the audience to interpret; the objects used and the actions carried out on and with them could indeed be construed as signs. The five-pointed star, for example, would have given rise to the most diverse mythical, religious, cultural, and political associations – not least as the established symbol for socialist Yugoslavia. When the artist framed the photograph with a five-pointed star and then cut a corresponding star into her abdomen, the audience might have interpreted these actions as a symbol for the ubiquity of the state. This ubiquity manifests itself to the individual through its laws, provisions, and injustices; the audience might have read Abramović's actions as a symbol of the violence that the individual suffers at the hands of the state and that inscribes itself onto the body. When the performer used a silver spoon and a crystal glass at a table set with a white tablecloth, the audience might have been reminded of daily activities in a middle-class setting, while the excessive consumption of honey and wine may also have implied criticism of consumerist, capitalist society. Alternatively, the audience might have read these actions as a reference to the Last Supper. In this context they would have then interpreted the flagellation – which in another context might have alluded to sadomasochistic sex practices – as a reference to the flagellation of Christ and his followers. When the artist lay down on the cross of ice with her arms spread out, the audience would probably have made a connection to the crucifixion of Christ. They might even have read their own act of removing her from the cross as the prevention of a historical reenactment of the self-sacrifice or as a repetition of the removal from the cross. Overall, the audience could have interpreted the performance as an exploration of violence that ranged from self-harm to the sort of violence that individuals encounter at the hands and in the name of the state or religious communities. The audience could have seen it as a criticism of social conditions, which allow the individual to be sacrificed by the state and which require such self-sacrifice.

However plausible such interpretations might seem in retrospect, they remain incommensurable with the event of the performance. The audience would have attempted such interpretations only to a limited degree during the performance itself. The actions that the artist carried out did not simply mean “drinking and eating excessively,” “cutting a five-pointed star into the abdomen,” or “flagellating oneself;” instead, they accomplished precisely what they signified. They constituted a new, singular reality for the artist and the audience, that is to say, for all participants of the performance. This reality was not merely interpreted

by the audience but first and foremost experienced. It provoked a wide array of sensations in the spectators, ranging from awe, shock, horror, disgust, nausea, or vertigo, to fascination, curiosity, sympathy, or agony, which stirred them to actions that equally constituted reality. It can be assumed that the affects that were triggered – obviously strong enough to move individual spectators to intervention – by far transcended the possibility and the effort to reflect, to constitute meaning, and to interpret the events. The central concern of the performance was not to understand but to experience it and to cope with these experiences, which could not be supplanted there and then by reflection.

In this way, the performance redefined two relationships of fundamental importance to hermeneutic as well as semiotic aesthetics: first, the relationship between subject and object, observer and observed, spectator and actor; second, the relationship between the *materiality* and the *semioticity* of the performance's elements, between signifier and signified.

For hermeneutic and for semiotic aesthetics, a clear distinction between subject and object is fundamental. The artist, subject 1, creates a distinct, fixed, and transferable artifact that exists independently of its creator. This condition allows the beholder, subject 2, to make it the object of their perception and interpretation. The fixed and transferable artifact, i.e. the nature of the work of art as an object, ensures that the beholder can examine it repeatedly, continuously discover new structural elements, and attribute different meanings to it.

This possibility was not offered in Abramović's performance. The artist did not produce an artifact but worked on and changed her own body before the eyes of the audience. Instead of a work of art that existed independently of her and the recipients, she created an event that involved everyone present. The spectators, too, were not presented with a distinct object to perceive and interpret; rather, they were all involved in a common situation of here and now, transforming everyone present into co-subjects. Their actions triggered physiological, affective, volitional, energetic, and motor reactions that motivated further actions. Through this process, the relationship between subject and object was established not as dichotomous but as oscillatory. The positions of subject and object could no longer be clearly defined or distinguished from one another. Did the spectators establish a relationship amongst themselves and Abramović as co-subjects by removing the artist from the cross of ice, or did this act, carried out without her requesting or explicitly approving it, turn her instead into an object? Conversely, were the spectators acting as puppets, as objects of the artist? There are no definite answers to these questions.

The transformation of the subject–object relationship is closely connected to the change in the relationship between materiality and semioticity, signifier and signified. For hermeneutic as well as semiotic aesthetics, every aspect of a work of art is seen as a sign. This does not imply that they overlook the materiality of a work of art. On the contrary, every detail of the material is given closest attention. Yet, everything perceptible about the material is defined and interpreted as a sign: the layers of paint and the specific nuance of color in a painting as much as the

tone, rhyme, and meter in a poem. Thus, every element becomes a signifier to which meanings can be attributed. All aspects of a work of art are incorporated into this signifier-signified relationship, while any number of meanings could be assigned to the same signifier.

Any spectator in Abramović's performance could have carried out the relevant processes of attaching meanings to objects and actions, as demonstrated by the above-mentioned interpretations of a fictive viewer. At the same time, the spectators' physical reactions were a direct result of their perception of Abramović's actions, but not of the possible meanings that those actions might carry. When Abramović cut the star into her skin, the spectators did not hold their breath or feel nauseous because they interpreted this as the inscription of state violence onto the body but because they saw blood flowing and imagined the pain on their own bodies. What the viewers perceived affected them in an immediate, physical way. The materiality of her actions dominated their semiotic attributes. As such, their materiality is not to be seen as a bodily excess, in the sense of an unresolved surplus that could not be worked into the meanings that were attributed to those actions. Rather, the materiality of Abramović's actions preceded all attempts to interpret them beyond their self-referentiality. It did not yield to and dissolve into a sign but evoked a particular effect on its own terms and not as the result of its semiotic status. This very effect – holding one's breath, the feeling of nausea – set the process of reflection in motion for the audience. Rather than addressing the possible meanings that Abramović's actions implied, the spectators wondered why and how they reacted. How do effect and meaning relate in this case?

For one, the shifting relationships between subject/object and materiality/semioticity generated by Abramović's *Lips of Thomas* realigns the interconnection between feeling, thinking, and acting, which will be further explored later on. In all events, the spectators here were admitted not merely as feeling and thinking but also as acting subjects – as actors.

Moreover, these shifts make the traditional distinction between the aesthetics of production, work,⁷ and reception as three heuristic categories seem questionable, if not obsolete. There no longer exists a work of art, independent of its creator and recipient; instead, we are dealing with an *event* that involves everybody – albeit to different degrees and in different capacities. If “production” and “reception” occur at the same time and place, this renders the parameters developed for a distinct aesthetics of production, work, and reception ineffectual. At the very least we should reexamine their suitability.

This seems all the more pressing as *Lips of Thomas* was, of course, neither the only nor the first art event to redefine these two relationships. Overall, Western art experienced a ubiquitous performative turn⁸ in the early 1960s, which not only made each art form more performative but also led to the creation of a new genre of art, so-called action and performance art. The boundaries between these diverse art forms became increasingly fluid – more and more artists tended to create events instead of works of art, and it was striking how often these were realized as performances.

Visual art took a performative approach early on with action painting and body art, later also with light sculptures, video installations, and so forth. The artists presented themselves in front of an audience through acts of painting, by displaying their decorated bodies, or enacting themselves in another way. Alternatively, the viewer was invited to move around the exhibits and interact with them while other visitors watched. Visiting an exhibition thus often meant participating in a performance. Beyond that, it also gave one the chance to experience the specific atmosphere of the various surrounding spaces.⁹

More particularly, visual artists such as Joseph Beuys, Wolf Vostell, the FLUXUS group, or the Viennese Actionists were at the forefront of this new form of action and performance art. Since the early 1960s, Hermann Nitsch's various actions that involved tearing a lamb to pieces have brought not only the actors but also the other participants into contact with objects otherwise tabooed and provided them with particularly sensual experiences. Time and again, Nitsch's audience has been physically involved in his actions, repeatedly turning the spectators into actors. They were sprayed with blood, faeces, dishwater, and other fluids and were invited to slop about in the gore, disembowel the lamb, eat meat, and drink wine.

The FLUXUS artists also began their actions in the early 1960s. Their third event, held at the Auditorium Maximum of the University of Technology, Aachen, on July 20, 1964,¹⁰ entitled *Actions / Agit Pop / De-collage / Happening / Events / Antiart / L'autrisme / Art total / Refluxus – Festival der neuen Kunst* brought together the FLUXUS artists Eric Andersen, Joseph Beuys, Bazon Brock, Stanley Brouwn, Henning Christiansen, Robert Filliou, Ludwig Gosewitz, Arthur K pcke, Tomas Schmit, Ben Vautier, Wolf Vostell, and Emmett Williams. In his action, *Kukei, akopee – Nein!, Braunkreuz, Fettecken, Modellfettecken*, Beuys caused a commotion following his majestic gesture of holding a copper staff wrapped in felt horizontally over his head, possibly by spilling hydrochloric acid (the exact circumstances are unclear according to a statement issued by the senior prosecutor in his investigation of 1964–5). The students stormed the stage in response. One of them punched Beuys in the face several times, so that blood streamed from his nose onto his white shirt. Already covered in blood and still bleeding from his nose, Beuys in turn opened a big box of chocolates and threw them into the audience. Surrounded by frenzied shouting and turmoil, Beuys compellingly lifted a crucifix with his left hand, while raising his right hand as if to stop the chaos (Schneede 1994: 42–67). Here, too, the issue lay in negotiating the relationship between the participants; once more, corporeality dominated semioticity.

In music, the performative turn had already set in by the early 1950s with John Cage's events and pieces (Fischer-Lichte 1997: 233–40).¹¹ Here, audio-events consisted of a variety of actions and sounds – especially those produced by the listeners themselves – while the musician, for example the pianist David Tudor in *4'33''* (1952), did not play a single note. In the 1960s, composers increasingly began to write instructions for the musicians into their scores, specifying movements that would be visible to a concert audience. The performative nature of concerts was

thus increasingly brought into focus. Further evidence can be found in such terms as “scenic music” (Karlheinz Stockhausen), “visual music” (Dieter Schnebel), or “instrumental theatre” (Mauricio Kagel), often coined by composers. These approaches to the concert event posited a new relationship of musicians and listeners (Christa Bruestle 2001: 271–83).

In literature, the performative turn is evident within the genre, for example in “interactive” novels that turn readers into authors by offering a vast array of material to be combined at will (Schmitz-Emans 2002: 179–207). But it also manifests itself in the enormous number of literary readings, attended by audiences that wish to listen to the voice of the poet/writer, such as Guenter Grass’s spectacular reading from *The Flounder*, in which he was accompanied by a percussionist (on June 12, 1992, at the Thalia-Theater in Hamburg). However, audiences are not just attracted by readings of living authors; readings from the works of long-dead poets are equally popular. Some prominent examples include Edith Clever’s rendering of Heinrich von Kleist’s *The Marquise of O –* (1989), Bernhard Minetti’s reading of Grimm’s fairytales, *Bernhard Minetti Tells Fairytales* (1990), or also the event *Reading Homer*, which the group Angelus Novus put up at Vienna’s Kuenstlerhaus in 1986. The members of the group took turns reading the 18,000 verses of the *Iliad* in 22 hours without intermission. Copies of the *Iliad* had been laid out in various rooms, inviting the wandering listener – accompanied by the reading voice – to read themselves. The particular difference between reading literature and listening to it being read – between reading as decoding a text and reading as performance – became evident here. Moreover, the attention of the listeners was directed toward the specific materiality of the respective reading voice with its timbre, volume, and intensity, which stood out unmistakably whenever one reader was replaced by another. Here, literature became emphatically realized as performance, as it came to life through the voices of the physically present readers and seeped into the imaginations of the physically present listeners by appealing to their various senses. The respective voice did not merely function as a medium for the delivery of the text. Precisely because the readers changed, each voice emerged clearly in its peculiarity and influenced the listeners with an immediacy that surpassed the meanings of the words spoken. Furthermore, the time factor shaped the performance. The lengthy period of 22 hours not only modified the participants’ perception but also made them aware of this modification. The passage of time was consciously acknowledged as a condition for perception that triggered reflection and, in particular, as a condition for emotional transformations to occur. Participants later related that they felt they changed during the course of the event (Steinweg 1986).

Theatre, too, experienced a performative turn in the 1960s. In particular, it advocated a redefinition of the relationship between actors and spectators. Peter Handke’s *Offending the Audience*, directed by Claus Peymann, premiered at the Theater am Turm in Frankfurt during the first “Experimenta” (June 3–10, 1966). It aspired to redefine theatre by redefining the relationship between actor and spectator. Theatre was no longer conceived as a representation of a fictive world,

which the audience, in turn, was expected to observe, interpret, and understand. Something was to occur *between* the actors and the spectators and that constituted theatre. It was crucial that *something* happened between the participants and less important *what* exactly this was. The aim no longer lay in creating a fictive world, within which the channels of communication were limited to the stage, i.e. between dramatic characters, as the basis for the external theatrical communication between actors and audience to take place. The pivotal relationship would be that between the actors and the spectators. The actors shaped and tested this relationship by addressing members of the audience directly and abusing them as “drips,” “diddlers,” “atheists,” “double-dealers,” and “switch-hitters” (Handke 1969: 30). They also established specific spatial relations to individual audience members through their movements, by pointing fingers at individual spectators and deliberately turning towards or away from them. The audience, for their part, also responded actively: by clapping, getting up, leaving the room, commenting, clambering onto the stage, quarreling with the actors, and so forth.

All participants seemed to agree that theatre was specifically process-oriented – through the actions of the actors, aimed at creating specific relations with the audience, and through the reactions of audience members, which either endorsed the actors’ proposed relationship, modified, or sought to undo it. To negotiate the relationship between stage and auditorium in order to constitute the reality of the theatre was of crucial importance. First and foremost, the actions of the actors and spectators signified only what they accomplished. They were self-referential. By being both self-referential and constitutive of reality, they, along with all the other examples described so far, can be called “performative” in J.L. Austin’s sense.¹²

On the opening night, the processes of negotiation occurred concurrently. The spectators took on the roles of actors by attracting the attention of the stage actors and other spectators through their actions and comments. They either refused to further negotiate by leaving the theatre or conceded to the actors by sitting down again as repeatedly requested. On the second night, however, the situation got out of hand when some members of the audience climbed onto the stage to join in the “acting” and refused contrary proposals from the actors and the director. The latter finally broke off the negotiations and tried to enforce his own definition of theatrical relationships by pushing the spectators off the stage (Rischbieter 1966: 8–17).

What had happened here? It was obvious that the director Claus Peymann and the spectators who stormed onto the stage had set out with differing notions about the theatre. Peymann acted in accordance with the assumption that he had staged a literary text that concerned itself with the relationship between actors and spectators. To him, this did not automatically imply the possibility of seriously negotiating the actor/spectator relationship. He had created a “work of art,” which was to be presented to the audience. They, in turn, were permitted to express their pleasure or displeasure with his “work” by clapping, jeering, commenting, and so forth. But he denied them the right to physically interfere in his work and to change it through their actions. For Peymann, the spectators’ crossing onto the

stage area was an assault on the nature of his staged production. It questioned his authority and authorship. Ultimately, he insisted on a traditional subject–object relationship.

Based on the ostensible consensus that theatre is constituted and defined by the relationship between actors and spectators, the audience, conversely, understood the performance not primarily as a work of art – traditionally assessed on the basis of how successfully one applies theatrical means to a text – but as an event. The audience aimed at a fundamental rethinking of the relationship between actors and spectators, opening the possibility of role reversal. According to them, the performance would only succeed as an event if there was equal participation by the spectators. For them, the performativity proposed by the performance was not to be realized through conventionalized actions such as clapping, jeering, or commenting, but through a genuine structural redefinition and an open-ended result, incorporating the reversal of roles.

While Peymann's intervention sought to save and restore the integrity of his artwork, it led instead to the failure of the performance as an event, at least from the perspective of the spectators that were pushed off the stage. In contrast, American avant-garde theatre, such as Julian Beck's and Judith Malina's Living Theatre (since *The Brig*, 1963) or Richard Schechner's Environmental Theater and his Performance Group (founded in 1967), incorporated audience participation into their program. The audience was not only allowed to participate but explicitly invited to do so. Physical contact with the actors as well as with other spectators was actively encouraged in order to achieve a kind of community ritual, as exemplified in *Paradise Now* (Avignon, 1968) by the Living Theatre and *Dionysus in 69* (New York, 1968) by the Performance Group (Beck 1972; Beck and Malina 1971; Schechner 1973, 1970). The redefined relationship between actors and spectators went hand-in-hand with a shift in the semiotic status of the actions and their respective potential meanings. Favored instead was the experience of physicality by all participants and their responses to it, from physiological, affective, energetic, and motor reactions to the ensuing intense sensual experiences.

The dissolution of boundaries in the arts, repeatedly proclaimed and observed by artists, art critics, scholars of art, and philosophers, can be defined as a performative turn. Be it art, music, literature, or theatre, the creative process tends to be realized in and as performance. Instead of creating works of art, artists increasingly produce events which involve not just themselves but also the observers, listeners, and spectators. Thus, the conditions for art production and reception changed in a crucial aspect. The pivotal point of these processes is no longer the work of art, detached from and independent of its creator and recipient, which arises as an object from the activities of the creator-subject and is entrusted to the perception and interpretation of the recipient-subject. Instead, we are dealing with an event, set in motion and terminated by the actions of all the subjects involved – artists and spectators. Thus the relationship between the material and semiotic status of objects in performance and their use in it has changed. The material status does not merge with the signifier status; rather, the former severs

itself from the latter to claim a life of its own. In effect, objects and actions are no longer dependent on the meanings attributed to them. As events that reveal these special characteristics, artistic performance opens up the possibility for all participants to experience a metamorphosis.

Prevalent aesthetic theories hardly address the performative turn in the arts – even if they can still be applied to it in some respects. However, they are unable to grasp its key aspect – the transformation from a work of art into an event. To understand, analyze, and elucidate this shift requires a whole new set of aesthetic criteria, suited to describe the specific characteristics of performance – an aesthetics of the performative.

Explaining concepts

Performativity and performance

Performativity

The term “performative” was coined by John L. Austin. He introduced it to language philosophy in his lecture series entitled “How to do things with words,” held at Harvard University in 1955. The coinage of this term coincided with the period I have identified as the performative turn in the arts. While Austin initially used the term “performatory,” he ultimately decided in favor of “performative,” which is “shorter, less ugly, more tractable, and more traditional in formation” (1963: 6). One year later, he wrote an essay entitled “Performative Utterances” in which he elaborated on his choice: “You are more than entitled not to know what the word ‘performative’ means. It is a new word and an ugly word, and perhaps it does not mean anything very much. But at any rate there is one thing in its favor, it is not a profound word” (1970: 233).

The neologism became necessary because Austin had made a revolutionary discovery in language philosophy: linguistic utterances not only serve to make statements but they also perform actions, thus distinguishing constative from performative utterances. He named this second type of utterance “explicit performatives.” When the words “I name this ship the ‘Queen Elizabeth’” are uttered while a bottle is smashed against the stern of a ship or when a man speaks the words “I do [take this woman to be my lawful wedded wife]” in the course of a marriage ceremony, these statements do not simply assert a pre-existing circumstance. It is impossible to classify them as true or false. Instead, these utterances create an entirely new social reality: the ship now carries the name *Queen Elizabeth*; Ms. X and Mr. Y are now married to each other. Uttering these sentences effectively changes the world. Performative utterances are self-referential and constitutive in so far as they bring forth the social reality they are referring to. Austin formulated a theory that, while new to language philosophy, had been intuitively known to and practiced by speakers of all languages. Speech entails a transformative power.

The above examples fall under formulaic speech acts but using the correct phrase alone does not make an utterance performative. A number of other, non-linguistic conditions must be satisfied – or else, the utterance will fail. If, for example, the phrase “I now pronounce you man and wife” is not spoken either

by a registrar or a priest or any other explicitly authorized person, then it does not constitute a real marriage. The necessary conditions are not just linguistic but institutional by nature; they are social conditions. A performative utterance always addresses a community, represented by the people present in a given situation – it can therefore be regarded as the performance of a social act. It does not simply validate a marriage but performs it at the same time.

Austin collapsed the binary opposition between constatives and performatives in the course of his lectures. Instead, he suggested a division into three categories: locutionary, illocutionary, and perlocutionary acts. He demonstrated that speaking always involves acting, which in turn makes it possible for statements to actually succeed or fail and for performative utterances to be true or false (Felman 1983; Kraemer and Stahlhut 2001: 35–64). Austin’s strategy of collapsing the initial distinction between performatives and constatives led Sybille Kraemer to argue for “the susceptibility of all criteria and the exposure of all definitive terms to the uncertainties, the imponderability, and ambiguity connected with real life” (2001: 45). That is to say, Austin drew attention to the performative act as the vehicle for the dynamics “that destabilize the dichotomous terminological scheme as a whole” (Kraemer and Stahlhut 2001: 56).

This aspect is of particular importance for developing an aesthetics of the performative. As the introductory examples from theatre and performance and action art revealed, dichotomous pairs such as subject/object and signifier/signified lose their polarity and clear definition in performance; once set in motion they begin to oscillate. Despite Austin’s deliberate abandonment of the constative-performative distinction, he nonetheless reaffirmed his definition of (“explicit”) performatives as speech acts that are self-referential and constitute reality. As such, they can succeed or fail because of their particular institutional and social conditions (however, his extensive and detailed “doctrine of Infelicities” suggests that Austin was far more interested in their failure). Another characteristic of the performative lies in its ability to destabilize and even collapse binary oppositions.

Austin applied the term “performative” solely to speech acts but his definition does not rule out the possibility of relating it to physical actions such as those performed in *Lips of Thomas*. In fact, such an interpretation almost imposes itself on us because Abramović performed self-referential acts that constituted reality (which all actions finally do), thus transforming artist and spectators. But how do we measure success and failure in this case? Evidently, the artist really did consume too much honey and wine and injured herself with the razor blade and whip. The spectators, in turn, did put an end to Abramović’s performance by removing her from the cross of ice. Did the performance succeed or fail? What are the necessary institutional conditions to assess the “success” or “failure” of this performance?

As an “artistic” performance, *Lips of Thomas* primarily referenced the conditions established by the institutions of art¹ (Buerger and Buerger 1992). The performance space provided a frame of reference for the participants; in this case, the art gallery explicitly situated her actions within the institutions of art. But what follows from

this? What exactly were the conditions laid down by the institutions of art at the beginning of the 1970s – a period that fundamentally redefined and restructured these institutions both from the margins and the center? Unlike the institutional conditions of a marriage ceremony or baptism, the institutions of art simply do not provide any definitive criteria for reaching a confident verdict on the success or failure of a performance shaped by audience intervention.

Moreover, the performance was not framed by the parameters of art alone; it also exhibited elements of ritual as well as spectacle. This raises the question whether and to what extent the genres “ritual” and “spectacle” are transformed into an artistic performance. It remains to be explored to what extent these genres collide with each other and with the overarching framework given by the arts, and how they determine the success or failure of a performance (Bateson 1972: 177–93; Goffman 1974).

Evidently, Austin’s list of prerequisites for a performative utterance to succeed² cannot simply be applied to an aesthetics of the performative. As Abramović’s *Lips of Thomas* demonstrated, the very circumstance that the various frameworks interacted and collided also constituted an important aspect of the performance’s aesthetic, especially with regard to the transformation of the participants. Who could claim the authority to ascertain whether a performance had succeeded or failed? At least in this context, the question of success or failure does not apply; evidently, the term “performative” requires further modification within an aesthetics of the performative.

While the term “performative” has lost some of its appeal within its original discipline of language philosophy – specifically since speech act theory popularized the notion of “speaking as acting” – it experienced a second heyday in cultural studies and cultural theory of the 1990s. Until the late 1980s, the notion of “culture as text” dominated cultural studies. Specific cultural phenomena as well as entire cultures were conceived as structured webs of signs waiting to be deciphered. Numerous attempts to describe and interpret culture were launched and designated as “readings.” This notion specified the decoding and interpretation of texts as the central activity of cultural studies. Texts, preferably in foreign, nearly inscrutable, languages, were decoded and translated while other established texts were reread for their subtexts and thereby deconstructed in the act of interpretation.

In the 1990s, a shift in focus occurred, favoring the – hitherto largely ignored – performative traits of culture. Cultural studies increasingly employed this independent (practical) frame of reference for the analysis of existing or potential realities and acknowledged the specific “realness” of cultural activities and events, which lay beyond the grasp of traditional text models. This gave rise to the notion of “culture as performance” (Conquergood 1991: 179–94). Simultaneously, the term “performative” was given a theoretical reconsideration in order to accommodate explicitly bodily acts.

Without referring directly to Austin, Judith Butler introduced the term “performative” to cultural philosophy in her essay of 1988 entitled “Performative Acts and Gender Constitution: An Essay in Phenomenology and Feminist Theory”

(1990: 270–82). Butler argues that gender identity – like all forms of identity – is not based on pre-existing (e.g. ontological or biological) categories but brought forth by the continuous constitution of bodily acts: “In this sense, gender is in no way a stable identity or locus of agency from which various speech acts proceed; rather, it is ... an identity instituted through a *stylized repetition of acts*” (270). Butler labels these acts “performative,” “where ‘performative’ itself carries the double-meaning of ‘dramatic’ and ‘non-referential’” (273). While at first this definition seems to differ considerably from Austin’s, the differences are actually minimal since they largely depend on Butler’s reapplication of the term to bodily rather than speech acts.

Performative acts (as bodily acts) are “non-referential” because they do not refer to pre-existing conditions, such as an inner essence, substance, or being supposedly expressed in these acts; no fixed, stable identity exists that they could express. Expressivity thus stands in an oppositional relation to performativity. Bodily, performative acts do not express a pre-existing identity but engender identity through these very acts. Moreover, the term “dramatic” refers to this process of generating identities: “By dramatic I mean ... that the body is not merely matter but a continual and incessant *materializing* of possibilities. One is not simply a body, but, in some very key sense, one does one’s body ...” (272). The specific materiality of the body emerges out of the repetition of certain gestures and movements; these acts generate the body as individually, sexually, ethnically, and culturally marked. Performative acts thus are of crucial importance in constituting bodily as well as social identity. In so far, Butler’s definition corresponds to Austin’s “performative” as being “self-referential” and “constituting reality.”

Yet, the shift from speech acts to bodily acts implies consequences that mark a crucial difference between Austin’s and Butler’s respective definitions. While Austin emphasized the criteria of success/failure and subsequently inquired after the functional conditions for success (posing a fundamental problem for us with regard to Abramović’s performance), Butler investigates the phenomenal conditions for embodiment. She cites Merleau-Ponty, who does not regard the body merely as a historical idea but as a repertoire of infinite possibilities, that is as “an active process of embodying certain cultural and historical possibilities” (272). Butler stresses the performative constitution of identity that occurs in the process of embodiment, defining the latter as “a manner of doing, dramatizing and reproducing an *historical* situation” (272). The stylized repetition of performative acts embodies certain cultural and historical possibilities. Performative acts, in turn, generate the culturally and historically marked body as well as its identity.

Nonetheless, individuals alone do not control the conditions for the processes of embodiment; they are not free to choose what possibilities to embody, or which identity to adopt. Neither are they wholly determined by society. While society might attempt to enforce the embodiment of certain possibilities by punishing deviation, it cannot generally prevent individuals from pursuing them. Evidently, Butler’s concept of performative acts reaffirms their capacity to collapse dichotomies, already recognized by Austin. On the one hand, society violates

the individual bodies by imposing performative acts that constitute gender and identity. On the other hand, performative acts offer the possibility for individuals to embody themselves, even if this means deviating from dominant norms and provoking social sanctions.

Butler likens the conditions for embodiment to those of theatrical performance. In both cases, the acts that generate and perform gender roles are “clearly not one’s act alone.” They constitute a “shared experience” and “collective action” because they have always already begun before “one arrived on the scene.” Consequently, the repetition of an act comprises a “reenactment” and a “reexperiencing” based on a repertoire of meanings already socially instituted. Cultural codes neither inscribe themselves onto a passive body nor do the embodied selves precede cultural conventions that give meaning to the body. In a theatrical performance, a text can be staged in various ways, and the actors may interpret and realize their roles within its textual framework. Similarly, the gendered body acts within a bodily space, restricted by certain demands. It enacts its individual interpretations within the limits of the given “stage directions.” The conditions for embodiment thus coincide with the conditions of performance.³

As formulated in this early essay,⁴ Butler’s theory of performative acts sets its focus on bodily performative acts and processes of embodiment, thus complementing Austin’s theory of the success or failure of speech acts. However, a cursory review of Abramović’s performance shows that Butler’s definition requires further modification with regard to an aesthetics of the performative.

The notion of the body as an embodiment of certain historical possibilities can indeed – and very productively – be applied to Abramović’s use of her body. In the course of her performance, Abramović embodied various historical possibilities, which were relevant not only at the time of the performance but were for the large part already established as such in her time. The flagellation scene, for example, oscillated between historical (flagellation practiced by nuns) and contemporary (punitive and torture procedures or sadomasochistic sex practices) possibilities. Abramović’s actions also did not restage a historical pattern through mere repetition. Instead, she modified it significantly: she did not suffer the violence, the pain, and the ordeals she inflicted on herself passively. On the contrary – she remained the active perpetrator at all times. Moreover, we are not dealing with the repetition of performative acts that is central to Butler’s argument since every act occurred only once in the course of Abramović’s performance. The processes of embodiment enacted in *Lips of Thomas* as well as in all other types of performance – theatrical and non-theatrical – require additional definitions, as does Butler’s notion of “performative,” especially because we are dealing with aesthetic and therefore “displaced” reenactments here. Butler only refers to practices of everyday life and hardly to strictly aesthetic processes.

By setting up the conditions for embodiment as the conditions for performance, Butler emphasizes another interesting parallel between her and Austin’s theory (once more without referring to Austin). Both see the accomplishment of performative acts as ritualized, public performances. The close relationship between performativity

and performance seems obvious and self-explanatory to them. Performativity results in performances or manifests itself in the performative nature of acts, as was already apparent in the performative turn in the arts. As a result, traditional art forms tended to realize themselves as performances and new art forms such as performance and action art were created, which in their terminology already explicitly referred to their performative nature. It follows that both Austin and Butler seemingly view performance as the epitome of the performative, even if neither of them further elucidates the notion of performance.

Yet it seems plausible, almost self-explanatory, to root an aesthetics of the performative in the concept of performance. This would add a new aesthetic theory of performance to existing theories of performativity. Since the 1960s and 1970s, numerous theories of performance have been developed in the social sciences, especially in cultural anthropology and sociology. In fact, their popularity grew to such an extent that today performance is seen as “an essentially contested concept” (Carlson 1996: 1). In the arts and social sciences, “performance” has already become an umbrella term, deplored by Dell Hymes as early as 1975: “If some grammarians have confused matters, by lumping what does not interest them under ‘performance,’ ... cultural anthropologists and folklorists have not done much to clarify the situation. We have tended to lump what *does* interest us under ‘performance’” (13). Since then the situation has deteriorated further still.⁵

Instead of appealing to different approaches to performance, ranging from sociology and cultural anthropology to cultural studies more generally, it would make more sense for an aesthetics of the performative to refer to the first (to my knowledge) attempts to theorize performance, dating back to the first two decades of the twentieth century. These attempts aimed at establishing a new discipline of art: theatre studies.⁶

Performance

The establishment of theatre studies as an independent academic discipline in Germany at the beginning of the twentieth century and its popularization as an essential addition to the academic discourse of the arts represented a break with prevalent notions of theatre.⁷ Since the eighteenth century, dramatic literature had become central to the concept of theatre in Germany; it was not just to serve as a moral institution but to be realized as a “textual” art. By the end of the nineteenth century, the artistic value of theatre seemed to be almost exclusively determined, even legitimized, by its reference to dramatic works, i.e. literary texts. Yet, as early as 1798, Johann Wolfgang von Goethe suggested that theatre as an art form ought to be judged on the basis of performance, as he lays out in his essay entitled “On truth and probability in works of art;” Richard Wagner elaborated on this idea in *The Artwork of the Future* (1849). Nevertheless, the majority of their nineteenth-century contemporaries based their assessments of a performance’s artistic value on the staged text. As late as 1918, the theatre critic Alfred Klaar

polemicized about the budding discipline theatre studies: “The stage can only attain its full value if literature contributes its content” (1918).

Accordingly, theatre was regarded as the object of literary studies. Max Herrmann, founder of theatre studies in Berlin and a specialist in medieval and early modern German literature, turned to advocate the centrality of the performance itself. He urged for the establishment of a new discipline in the arts – theatre studies – arguing that performance, not literature, constituted theatre: “... it is the performance that matters ...” (1914: 118). He considered the mere privileging of performance over text insufficient and proclaimed instead a fundamental polarity between the two that precluded a harmonious union: “I am convinced that ... theatre and drama ... are originally oppositional, ... the symptoms of this opposition consistently reveal themselves: drama is the textual creation of an individual, theatre is the achievement of the audience and its servants” (1918 – in response to Alfred Klaar). Since existing disciplines dealt exclusively with texts and ignored performances as objects of study, theatre required the establishment of a new discipline. Hence, theatre studies was founded in Germany as the discipline devoted to performance.

Notably, the reversal of text and performance implemented by Herrmann in order to establish the new discipline of theatre as performance was not the only such development at the turn of the last century. Ritual studies emerged around the same time as an academic discipline. While the nineteenth century maintained a clear hierarchy of myth over ritual – whereby ritual merely illustrated, “performed,” myth – this relationship was now reversed. In his *Lectures on the Religion of the Semites* (1889), William Robertson Smith proposed that myths merely served the interpretation of rituals; ritual, not myth, deserved primary attention:

So far as myths consist of explanations of ritual their value is altogether secondary, and it may be affirmed with confidence that in almost every case the myth was derived from the ritual, and not the ritual from the myth; for the ritual was fixed and the myth was variable, the ritual was obligatory and faith in the myth was at the discretion of the worshipper.

(1889: 19)

In consequence, religious studies shifted its focus toward rituals: they were hailed as the underlying principle of religion – practice superseded doctrinal teachings. In turn, the predominance of religious texts, prevalent in Protestant cultures, came under attack. In his research, Smith focused on sacrificial rituals, such as a camel sacrifice customary among Arab tribes described by the fourth century B.C. writer Nilus, or Jewish sacrificial rituals from the Old Testament. He interpreted the camel sacrifice as an ancient totemic practice and proposed it to be a “merry sacrificial feast” (239). The performance of the sacrifice by the community, the common consumption of the meat and blood of the sacrificial animal – a deity, as Smith presumed in accordance with totemic practices – permanently tied

all participants into “a bond of union” (252, 295). The feast evoked a sense of community and, as ritual, was able to produce a political community. Once more, the performative acts were pivotal for the ritual in order to bring forth what they performed: the social reality of a community.

Smith’s theory of sacrificial rituals proved extremely influential not only in religious studies but also in cultural anthropology, sociology, and the classics. In the foreword to the first edition of *The Golden Bough* (1890), the anthropologist James George Frazer attributed the central idea of his book – the conception of a slain and resurrected god – to William Robertson Smith. The sociologist Emile Durkheim also felt indebted to Smith, acknowledging that his *Lectures* single-handedly convinced him of the central role of religion in social life.⁸

The arguments for the establishment of both ritual and theatre studies were similar in kind. Both cases advocated the reversal of hierarchical positions: from myth to ritual and from the literary text to the theatre performance. In other words, both ritual and theatre studies repudiated the privileged status of texts in favor of performances. It could thus be said that the first performative turn in twentieth-century European culture did not have its place in the performance culture of the 1960s and 1970s but occurred much earlier with the establishment of ritual and theatre studies at the turn of the last century.⁹

Jane Ellen Harrison, head of the so-called Cambridge Ritualists, a group of classical scholars, even went so far as to draw a direct, genealogical connection between ritual and theatre, emphasizing the pre-eminence of performance over text. In her extensive study entitled *Themis: A Study of the Social Origin of Greek Religion* (1912), she developed a theory of Greek theatre as originating out of ritual. Harrison based her arguments on a ritual dedicated to the spring daemon (*eniautos daemon*), which she saw as the precursor to the Dionysian ritual. Harrison strove to prove that the dithyramb – according to Aristotle, the origin of tragedy – was nothing but the song for the *eniautos daemon* and a fundamental component of the *eniautos daemon* ritual. Gilbert Murray contributed to Harrison’s study with his “Excursus on the Ritual Forms Preserved in Greek Tragedy” in which he discussed numerous tragedies, including Euripides’ *The Bacchae*. It is noteworthy that of all the late tragedian’s plays, Murray chose his last one to prove his theory. He argued that the elements of *Agon*, *Pathos*, *Messenger*, *Threnos*, and *Theophany* (epiphany), already attributed to the *eniautos daemon* ritual by Harrison, continued to play similar roles in the tragedies (Fischer-Lichte 2005: 30–45).

Harrison’s theory fundamentally challenged contemporary beliefs about Greek culture as primarily textual and thus paradigmatic for modern cultural values. The much admired texts of Greek tragedy and comedy suddenly deflated into belated results of ritual actions, originally performed to celebrate a seasonal god. Theatre as well as text developed out of ritual; furthermore, text was written in order to be performed.

While Harrison’s theories today are studied largely for their historical value, they still offer significant insights into the performative turn of culture, as a result of which the concept of performance gained central importance and demanded

careful theoretical reconsideration. Max Herrmann was one of the pioneers to undertake a detailed theorization of performance in his various writings between 1910 and 1930.

At the heart of his deliberations lies the relationship between actors and spectators:

[The] original meaning of theatre refers to its conception as social play – played by all for all. A game in which everyone is a player – actors and spectators alike ... The spectators are involved as co-players. In this sense the audience is the creator of the theatre. So many different participants constitute the theatrical event that its social nature cannot be lost. Theatre always produces a social community.

(1981: 19)

The bodily co-presence of actors and spectators enables and constitutes performance. For a performance to occur, actors and spectators must assemble to interact in a specific place for a certain period of time. By describing it as “play by all for all,” Herrmann is fundamentally redefining the relationship between actors and spectators. The latter no longer represent distanced or empathetic observers and interpreters of the actors’ actions onstage; nor do they act as intellectual decoders of messages conveyed by the actions of the actors. Herrmann’s theory also does not imply a subject–object relationship in which spectators turn actors into objects of their observation, while the actors (as subjects) cease to confront the audience (as objects) with non-negotiable messages. Instead, their bodily co-presence creates a relationship between co-subjects. Through their physical presence, perception, and response, the spectators become co-actors that generate the performance by participating in the “play.” The rules that govern the performance correspond to the rules of a game, negotiated by all participants – actors and spectators alike; they are followed and broken by all in equal measure. The concept of performance proposed here and elaborated in the following by no means suggests an essentialist definition. Rather, it describes the underlying factors that, in my view, must be given when applying the term performance. This does not preclude the possibility of applying other definitions of the concept in other contexts.

Herrmann certainly did not reach his insights into the particular *mediality* of theatre solely on the basis of theoretical or historical deliberations. Contemporary theatre performances contributed their share. Max Reinhardt, in particular, pushed for new spatial compositions in his productions that forced the audience out of their occluded position in the proscenium theatre and enabled them to realize new ways of interacting with the actors. In *Sumurun* (1910), Reinhardt set up a *hanamichi*, a broad runway conventionally used in Japanese *Kabuki* theatre, across the auditorium of the *Kammerspiele* at the Deutsches Theater Berlin. Thus, all events occurred amidst the spectators. Both the stage area and the *hanamichi* were used by the actors simultaneously. In fact, they seemed to enter the *hanamichi*

precisely “at some vital point in each scene,” as one theatre reviewer chidingly remarked at a New York City guest performance.¹⁰ Inevitably, the audience was distracted from the events onstage by the actors that entered onto the *hanamichi*. Alternatively, those who fixedly watched the happenings onstage missed the appearances on the *hanamichi*. By being forced to independently prioritize their sensorial impressions, the spectators actively joined in creating the performance. The game of performance was played according to rules set up between actors and spectators – they were open to negotiation (Fischer-Lichte 1997: 61–72).

Reinhardt’s productions of *King Oedipus* (1910) and the *Oresteia* (1911) at the Circus Schumann in Berlin exemplified the new-found negotiability, as the chorus repeatedly moved through the audience and actors emerged from behind and among the spectators. As the theatre critic Siegfried Jacobsohn noted: “... the heads of the spectators [could hardly] be distinguished from those of the extras who were actually standing amidst the audience” (1912: 51). Alfred Klaar, one of the defendants of the literary text against Herrmann’s prioritization of the performance, complained that in Reinhardt’s *Oresteia*

the distribution of the acting onto the space in front of, beneath, behind, and among us; the never-ending demand to shift our points of view; the actors flooding into the auditorium with their fluttering costumes, wigs, and make-up, jostling against our bodies; the dialogues held across great distances; the sudden shouts from all corners of the theatre, which startle and misguide us – all this is confusing: It does not reinforce the illusion but destroys it.

(1911)

It was evidently impossible for the spectators to maintain their traditional position of distanced or empathetic observers. Each audience member was forced to reposition themselves with regard to the actors and other spectators. The performance literally occurred *between* the actors and spectators, and even between the spectators themselves (Fischer-Lichte 2005: 46–68). In order to reenergize the relationship between actors and spectators, Reinhardt repeatedly questioned the given medial conditions of the theatre by reinterpreting the bodily co-presence of actors and spectators.

In accordance with his definition of performance as an *event* between actors and spectators – that is, not fixed or transferable but ephemeral and transient – Herrmann neither took the dramatic texts nor the set and props into consideration in the process of his analysis. Although he attributed artistic value to some set designs, he strongly argued against naturalistic and expressionistic backdrops, judging them “a fundamental mistake of great significance” (1930: 152). To him, these aspects did not contribute to the concept of performance. Instead, the actors’ moving bodies constituted the unique, fleeting materiality of the performance: “Acting is the principal factor of theatre ...” Acting alone was responsible for creating “the only true and pure work of art that theatre is capable of producing” (152). Herrmann shifted the focus away from the fictive characters in their fictive

world, brought forth by the acting, towards the “real body” and to “real space” (152). He did not regard the body on stage as a mere carrier of meaning – a popular notion since the eighteenth century – but foregrounded the specific materiality of bodies and space, which sets in motion the performance in the first place.

Max Reinhardt’s approach to theatre equally foregrounded the specific materiality of performance. His innovative theatre spaces, such as the *hanamichi* or the arena of the Circus Schumann, were not meant to reveal fictive places in a new light. As “real” spaces, they offered new possibilities for the actors to enter, move, and act so as to stimulate unusual perceptual experiences in the audience.

Reinhardt took a similar approach in his productions with regard to the acting. In their reviews of his *Electra* production (adapted from Sophocles by Hugo von Hofmannsthal at the Kleines Theater Berlin in 1903) as well as of his *King Oedipus* and *Oresteia*, critics deplored the unabashed use of the actors’ bodies that accentuated their physicality, distracting the audience from the fictional characters they were meant to portray. Particularly Gertrud Eysoldt, in her role as *Electra*, was criticized for flaunting her body immoderately and with tremendous intensity on stage. To the critics, Eysoldt violated the norms of performing Greek tragedies by lacking “force,” “dignity,” and a “sonorous tone.” In their place they found “nervosity,” “unrestrained passion,” and “raucous shouting” (Engel 1903). Eysoldt transgressed from the accepted “healthy” ideal and ventured into the domain of the “unnatural” and “pathological.” Many critics disapproved of the “shouting and fidgeting, the exaggerated sense of horror, distortion and intemperance at every turn” (Nordhausen n.d.) and the “passion ending only in absurdity,” a sure indicator of “pathological conditions” (H.E. 1903). They rejected Eysoldt’s “immoderate” and “uncontrolled” movements which did not serve to illustrate the text but evidently referred back to the body of the actress. They deemed her transgressive exploration of “pathology” “unbearable” (Goldmann n.d.) because it dissolved not merely the limits of her dramatic character but, more importantly, of Eysoldt’s self (Fischer-Lichte 2005: 1–14).

Many reviewers also criticized Reinhardt’s productions of *King Oedipus* and the *Oresteia* for the manner in which the actors drew the audience’s attention to the particularities of their bodies. Most of all, this applied to the extras, the “naked torchbearers,” who “shot through the orchestra bearing their torches and ran up the steps of the palace and down again like madmen” (Siegfried Jacobsohn, writing about *King Oedipus*, dismissed them as absurd and pointless). Alfred Klaar mocked them in his review of the *Oresteia*. He deplored the “peculiar twisting of bodies and the copious play of limbs, which yesterday’s production dreamed up into Aeschylus’ text,” and scoffed that “the half-naked torchbearers at least did their part when, for once, they bent to the ground and offered a sight worthy of a gymnastic show” (1911).¹¹

However, such criticism extended to the performance of the protagonists. Jacobsohn complained about the “nerve-racking mass entertainment of spectators who grew up with bull fights” (1912: 49). He described the following scene as a horrifying example:

When Orestes wants to slay his mother, it is more than enough for him to rush through the door of the palace after her, restrain her by the door and push her back into the palace after the battle of words. In this production, he chases her down the steps into the arena, where he engages her in a scuffle and then drags her up the steps again much too slowly. It is dreadful.

(Jacobsohn 1912: 49)

All of the above examples produced the similar result of drawing the audience's attention to the multiple ways in which the actors were using their "real" bodies. These bodies were not seen as carriers of meaning tied to specific dramatic characters. They imposed themselves on the audience with their open sensuality – condemning the productions to failure from the standpoint of the critics but greatly enhancing their success for the remaining spectators.

Max Herrmann equaled Max Reinhardt's radical approach to theatre practice in his theorization of the theatre. He moved away from the body as a carrier of signs to embrace the "real" body. We can assume that, much as Judith Butler, Herrmann saw expressivity and performativity as mutually exclusive opposites. His notion of performance appears to have supported this view. Herrmann based his definition of performance on the bodily co-presence of actors and spectators and their physical actions. This dynamic and ultimately wholly unpredictable process precludes the expression and transmission of predetermined meanings; the performance itself generates its meanings. Yet, Herrmann did not make this claim explicit. His definition of performance neglected the specific semioticity that would generate meaning.

By defining performance as "festival" and "play," based on a fleeting and dynamic process and not an artifact, Herrmann excluded the notion of a "work of art" from performance. If he spoke of accomplished acting as the "true" and "purest work of art that theatre is capable of producing," this is part of his argument to recognize theatre as an independent art form. The prevalent notion of art in his time necessitated such a reference to a fixed work of art. From today's vantage point, however, Herrmann's definition of "performance" circumvents the concept of a work of art. The performance is regarded as art not because it enjoys the status of an artwork but because it takes place as an event. Herrmann's conception of a performance presupposed a unique, unrepeatable constellation which can only be determined and controlled to a limited degree. The created event remains unique as is inevitable when actors and spectators are confronted with each other in their various tempers, moods, desires, expectations, and intellects. Herrmann was first and foremost interested in the activities and dynamic processes that these two parties engaged in.

To Herrmann, the "creative" activity of the audience resulted from a "secret empathy, a shadowy reconstruction of the actors' performance, which is experienced not so much visually as through *physical sensations* [author's emphasis]. It is a secret urge to perform the same actions, to reproduce the same tone of voice in the throat" (1930: 153). Herrmann highlights that "the most important

theatrical factor” for perceiving a performance aesthetically is “to experience real bodies and real space” (153). The audience’s physical participation is set in motion through synaesthetic perception, shaped not only by sight and sound but by physical sensations of the entire body.

The audience responds not only to the actors’ physical actions but also to the behavior of the other spectators. Herrmann explained that “every audience includes people who are incapable of empathically experiencing the actors’ performance and who then, by emotionally infecting the audience as a whole (otherwise a welcome phenomenon) curb the enthusiasm of the other spectators” (153).¹² The metaphor of “infection” highlights that the aesthetic experience of a performance does not depend on the “work of art” but on the interaction of the participants. What emerges from the interaction is given priority over any possible creation of meaning. The mere act of suddenly cutting into her own skin with a razor blade weighed heavier than the fact that Abramović cut a five-pointed, symbolically loaded star into her skin. What matters is the fact *that* something occurs and *that what* occurs affects, if to varying degrees and in different ways, everyone involved. It remains unresolved, however, whether Herrmann intended his formulations “[inner] empathy,” “experiencing the performance,” and “emotional infection” to indicate an actual transformation of the audience through the performance.

At the heart of Herrmann’s notion of performance lies the shift from theatre as a work of art to theatre as an event. Hermeneutic aesthetics as well as the heuristic distinction between the aesthetics of production, work, and reception are incompatible with his understanding of performance. The specific *aestheticity* of performance lies in its very nature as an event.

As I have reconstructed Herrmann’s concept of performance from his own and his students’ writings,¹³ it indeed broadens the idea of the “performative” *avant la lettre*, at least in terms of Austin’s and Butler’s later definitions. Herrmann is consistent with their respective definitions insofar as he does not consider performance to be a representation or an expression of something previously given. Performance describes a genuine act of creation: the very process of performing involves all participants and thus generates the performance in its specific materiality. Herrmann’s notion of performance stretches beyond that of Austin and Butler insofar as he explicitly focuses on the shifting relationships between subject/object and materiality/semioticity achieved through performance. But he falls short of them by ignoring the problem of meaning generated in the course of a performance. On the whole, his concept of performance is particularly interesting for our discussion of aesthetic processes because his theory abandons the notion of an artwork for that of an event, even though he does not explicitly engage with the possible effects of such a move. Through the preceding analysis, we have established the possibility of developing an aesthetics of the performative out of the notion of performance.

Since the performative turn of 1960s demands the development of such a theory, I will first explore how the arts themselves modified the concept of performance and performativity. Such an approach lends itself, given that the topic of this book

is concerned primarily with a study of the arts and aesthetics. I will not engage in a discussion of different aesthetic theories that are in turn explained, modified, or contradicted with recourse to current trends in the arts. Instead, I will take the state of the arts as the starting point from which to probe varying theoretical approaches.

Reconstructing Herrmann's notion of performance revealed that, for heuristic purposes, it may be productive to investigate mediality, materiality, semioticity, and aestheticity separately, albeit keeping in mind that they are intrinsically interlinked through the performance event. The following four chapters will explore how performances since the 1960s have dealt with each of these categories. Special attention will be paid to theatre performances and to action and performance art. Theatre remains essential because Herrmann developed his concept of performance by analyzing theatrical events; action and performance art, in turn, completed the shift in the fine arts from producing works of art to creating performances.