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The Entangled Vocabulary of Performance

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This article attempts to map the concept of performance, in terms of its genealogy and the diversity of its application. Such a mapping is an unavoidably reductive step, since the productive force of the concept partly relies on the difficulty of pinning it down to a precise typology or set of definitions. The act of mapping out the concept can itself be interpreted as a kind of performance, as has been argued by Richard Schechner (*Performance Studies*, 40-42), it is not a neutral or interest-free undertaking, and however persuasive the mapping may be, it may not necessarily simplify the application of the concept, nor resolve the disputes around it. As a "keyword" in the sense of Raymond Williams, performance is an operative concept, "whose meanings are inextricably bound up with the problems [they are] being used to discuss" (*Keywords*, 13). The concept is not merely descriptive, but programmatic, in that the choice and justification of the uses of the term lead to and imply specific effects. German theatre scholar Erika Fischer-Lichte describes the concept in terms of the range of its semantic shades, 'Begriffsabschattungen' (*Kulturen des Performativen*, 9), arguing that these shades need to be seen in relation to each other in order to trace the histories and contexts of the concepts of performance and the performative. Fischer-Lichte derives the semantic shades of the performative with reference to different disciplinary influences and deployments of the term, such as anthropology, linguistics, language philosophy, technology, economics and aesthetics. A typology and historicisation of the concept is a necessary though not entirely sufficient step in understanding its usage. Even if one makes sense of each of the shades of the term, one does not know how to make sense of the entire range of these shades.

In his *Introduction to Performance Studies*, Schechner claims that because performance is "open, multi-vocal and self-contradictory, [...] any call for a 'unified field' is a misunderstanding of the fluidity and playfulness fundamental to performance studies" (*Performance Studies*, 19). Being involved in teaching and researching in performance studies over the past decade in an international and cross-cultural setting, I initially found this to be an exciting idea, but have gradually found it to be a restrictive introduction of the field to students new to performance studies. On the one hand, it is a charmingly open-ended liberal statement, promising a horizon rather than offering the ground to stand on. If fluidity and playfulness are fundamental, then these become the very gestures unifying the field, despite the declaration that it is not possible to unify the field. On the other hand, the refusal to chart the practical parameters of the field can foster a certain elitism, whereby methodological tools and clarity are somehow

implicitly disseminated, but not systematically taught.ⁱThe view that the field of performance is unlimited and all-encompassing is, I would argue, a way to steer around the discontinuities and tensions that are inherent to the field, and mark instead a meta-level continuity. If everything can be seen as performance, then the term is easily susceptible to becoming a catchall phrase with no conceptual stability. One could ask, as Bert States does in an essay on the use of performance as metaphor, "what isn't performance, what isn't culture?" (5). Departing from Williams' idea that a keyword is better grasped by studying its systems of signification, rather than studying its meanings (*Keywords*, 23), this article maps the concept of performance by way of dwelling on some of its entanglements with other concepts and by reflecting on some continuous and discontinuous aspects of its vocabulary, aiming to address some common misunderstandings related to these terms.

A note on the disciplinary formation of performance studies is in order at the outset. As a relatively young academic field, it is dominated by Anglo-American and European scholarship, even though the contributions of academics from the Global South to its body of theory and geographical outreach are changing this scenario. In terms of institutional history, performance studies has emerged as an offshoot of Theatre Studies or Drama/Literary Departments, and has branched out and struck affinitive roots in areas as diverse as Anthropology, Sociology, Philosophy, Memory Studies, Musicology, Media Studies and Educational Sciences. Scholars who have established themselves in the field of performance studies tend to have strong methodological and theoretical ties to one of these disciplines, and this has led to a productive cross-pollination of the field, bearing an outlook that can often be characterized as comparative and internationally oriented. The emergence of performance studies as an academic discipline is further a result of a number of shifts in the humanities over the course of the 20th century, which broadened its focus, first from the study of drama texts to the study of theatre and theatrical practice, and then from theatre to performance, expanding its scope outside of the conventional theatre to include ritual, play, social interaction and cultural manifestations of all kinds in its gamut. These shifts are sometimes referenced in the shorthand terms 'linguistic turn', 'cultural turn' and 'performative turn', which will be elaborated in the last section of the article. Some tertiary institutions offering a degree in theatre and performance treat the combination of theoretical and practical training as essential to the study of performance. Others strictly differentiate between a vocational training in an academy or conservatory and a university level study of performance, which involves criticism, history, aesthetic and theoretical aspects, but not physical training and performance practice. The paradigm of artistic research or practice-based research in performance is another evolving path in the discipline, wherein the opposition between practice and research is sought to be undone at a fundamental level, calling for a broadening of research epistemologies and standards. These different institutional paths have contributed to both an

expansion as well as a “profound de-centering of the field” (McKenzie et al, 1), which includes divergent perspectives on both how to construct performance as an object of knowledge, as well as how to generate knowledge through performance. It is crucial to bear in mind the disciplinary formation of performance studies in order to recognize the grounds from which certain conceptual entanglements around performance have emerged.

Theatre and performance

The first entanglement to be examined is that between theatre and performance. The distinction between these concepts is usually explained in terms of performance being an umbrella term, including not only theatre, but also music, dance, ritual, everyday life actions, sports and all actions that involve embodiment. Yet there are more specific distinctions between theatre and performance, which are implicitly assumed when both terms are mentioned together. Performance, in opposition to theatre, sometimes specifically refers to ‘performance art’ or ‘live art’, an artistic event that combines visual art and public performance elements, often conducted in spaces that are outside institutional boundaries, or explicitly try to break these boundaries and are interventionist in nature (Goldberg). Unlike theatre, performance art can take place in any space, whether marked as an aesthetic space or not, sometimes without viewers being aware that they are witnessing art or without their consciously choosing to go to an art space. Performance art often questions the boundary between art and life, whereas most forms of theatre maintain the fourth wall or the distinction between an aesthetic space and the space of spectatorship outside of it.

The etymology of performance and theatre is instructive in order to understand the correlation between the concepts. The term theatre stems from the Classical Greek *the-in*, which denotes ways of seeing. Together with related terms such as *thea-tron*, *theo-ria* and *thea-mai*, it refers to specific rules and arrangements related to the activity of the gaze. *Thea-tron* is ‘a place for looking’ and *theo-rein*, root for ‘theory’, is the Greek verb meaning ‘to consider, to speculate, to look at’. In Aristotelian poetics, by far the most influential theoretical body of work in the Western canon, the concept of theatre covers aspects such as dramatic structure, spectatorship, aesthetic rules, the organization of social practices or events, as well as the organization of space through architecture. Theatre is etymologically closely related to theory, in that both concepts deal with orders of perception and meaning making of reality. Theatre has long been dominated by the notion of drama, and theorized chiefly as the representation of a dramatic text. This implied that societies without a scripted tradition did not have a place in the theatre history of the world. With the incursions of academic scholarship from and on non-Western societies, as well as the insights of communication studies, semiotics, postcolonial theory and post-foundational language philosophy in the course of the 20th century, this restrictive framing of theatre has been revised. Theatre has

come to be recognized as a communicative process and as an event with historical and cultural specificities (Zarrilli et al).

Performance, on the other hand, derives from the 16th century Middle French term *parfournir* (to accomplish, provide, supply, furnish) and Middle English *perform* (to accomplish, to alter form, to carry out). Compared with the etymology of theatre, performance foregrounds action as opposed to perception. It is connected to the legal act of executing a will or promise, as opposed to the emphasis in the terms 'theatre' and 'theory' on considering and speculating. Whereas theatre is a place for *looking*, performance is the legally or otherwise recognized accomplishment of an *act*. Placed together, theatre and performance span a range of investments, from the aesthetic and formal to the political and social. The relationship between acting and spectatorship, between modes of action and perception, forms a central concern that connects these terms in aesthetic theory. Yet, when the concept of performance is examined outside of aesthetic spaces, an entirely different system of signification comes to the fore.

Performance as Process and Performance as Goal

The term performance can be distinguished in terms of two paradigms: performance understood as process, and performance understood as goal or accomplishment. The former usage is most predominant in the humanities, referring to artistic, linguistic, cultural, and gender performance. The latter usage is most common when referring to economic, technical and sexual fields. One semantic field emphasizes performance in terms of its creation, constitution and becoming, whereas the other emphasizes performance in terms of success, accomplishment, growth, reputation, or inversely, non-performance, failure, collapse and inadequacy. Whereas the former emphasizes the processuality of performance, the latter emphasizes the fulfillment of a goal or the failure to do so. Linguistically, the two paradigms could be argued to correspond to the performative and the constative dimensions of language and speech. In Austin's theory of speech acts, constative utterances are concluded statements, whereas performative utterances are acts that have been ushered in to a situation (*How to Do Things With Words*). Here is a tentative glossary of both paradigms of performance in the English language:

Performance as process

1. Artistic or Cultural Performance: public presentation, exhibition, creatively developed work belonging to the realm of performing arts; culture as articulated and consolidated in practices and intangible archives and repertoires.
2. Linguistic Performance: ability to use language, linguistic competence to accomplish meaning and acts; the term performative as enunciated in speech act

theory derives from this field. Most widely recognized here are the works of J.L. Austin and N. Chomsky respectively.

3. Gender Performance: gender as identity being historically constituted through a 'stylized repetition of acts' (Butler, *Performative Acts*, 519).

Performance as goal

4. Technical Performance: the manner in which a mechanism accomplishes a task, as well as the measurement of its output;

5. Business Performance: an indicator of the difference between actual results vs. desired results in a business-related activity; the quality of execution of an action, operation, or process when measured against a standard;

6. Sexual Performance: vocabulary referring to the ability to carry out sexual activity and the associated norms around virility and libido.

It may be argued that these two paradigms remain largely distinct from each other, employing very different vocabularies and pointing to different trajectories in their conceptual histories.¹¹ Performance studies primarily engages the notion of performance as process. However, in works such as Jon McKenzie's *Perform Or Else* (2001), where performance is presented as a 'new power matrix of globalization' (McKenzie, 1), the technical and business dimensions of performance, which inform neoliberal society in far-reaching ways, interplay with performance as process, making performance into an all-encompassing organizing mode of life. Thus there is a dialectical entanglement between performance as goal and performance as process. Despite the inter-connections between the two paradigms, performance is most widely understood as a processual phenomenon in the field of performance studies, rather than as a marker of technical or business results. Here another noteworthy distinction needs to be drawn, namely between performance as object of knowledge and as lens of knowing.

Performance and Knowledge

One of Schechner's oft-cited distinctions around performance is the difference between "is performance" and "as performance" (*Performance Studies*, 38). The former refers to particular types of events such as dance, theatre, live art, music or ritual, embodied practices that follow certain conventions, traditions and styles. The latter category "as performance" points to how practically everything can be perceived as performance by way of a certain kind of framing. In Schechner's analysis, which is strongly influenced by the anthropology of Victor Turner, the framing of various cultural practices and interactions normally falling outside of the conventions of artistic performance, allows for creating performance as "a broad spectrum or continuum of human actions [...] any action that is framed,

presented, highlighted or displayed is a performance” (*Performance Studies*,2). For Schechner, the concept of performance allows for a development of a discipline that is not necessarily based on a common object or modality. However, it is Diana Taylor who has more fully articulated what it means when we say that performance is not just an object of study, but an epistemology, a way of knowing, which alters the subject in the process of seeking knowledge of another:

“Part of what performance and performance studies allow us to do, then, is take seriously the repertoire of embodied practices as an important system of knowing and transmitting knowledge. [...] It's not simply that we shift to the live as the focus of our analysis, or develop various strategies for garnering information, such as undertaking ethnographic research, interviews, and field notes. Or even alter our hierarchies of legitimation that structure our traditional academic practice (such as book learning, written sources, and documents). We need to rethink our method of analysis.”(Taylor, 26-27)

There are two aspects to Taylor’s claim worth mentioning: the first is that performance as lens necessitates the shift from the textual or the narrative to embodied practices, to forms of cultural articulation that cannot be captured in the archives of material culture, but are to be found in the repertoire of living practices. This shift, sometimes referred to as the ‘cultural turn’, describes yet another shift in the humanities, which emphasises that text is not the primary and-or only source of knowledge. It also calls into question the gap between so-called high and popular culture. The idea of performance as a way of knowing points to the recognition that culture is not only something that exists in opera houses or in classical concert halls, but also on the streets, in every class of society, and is worthy of study. So ‘performance as object’ is expanded from to embodied and living practices of all kinds. The second aspect is that this shift in focus from the textual to the embodied or lived culture also demands a transformation in the mode of research. The same tools of analysis that are used in studying texts cannot be applied to the study of performance. The tools of ethnographic and sociological research are necessary though not sufficient, because they still recognize the distinction between ‘knowing that’ and ‘knowing how’ (Conquergood, 146). The proposition that performance is an epistemological category means that the study of performance requires a re-alignment of the relationship between researcher and researched, the act of doing research is not separable from the object of research, as both are or can be perceived as performance. Taylor proposes that ‘performance as lens’ necessitates a questioning of the conditions of knowledge generation, new ways of knowing and not only new things to know (27). Thus the notion of performance as a processual phenomenon is itself a broad spectrum, on the one hand extending from texts to conventional artistic performances to all kinds of actions and interactions framed ‘as performance’. On the other hand, performance requires a re-positioning of the relation between the researcher and subject of research, acknowledging that in order for something to be known, it must be

formed as an object of knowledge, and this work of forming something as knowledge is also part of the knowledge. This latter understanding of performance as epistemology leads to the final entanglement around the notion of performance, which stems from its relation to the concept of performativity.

Performance and Performativity

It can be argued that performance relates to performativity in the usual way in which a noun becomes an adjective and then a nominalization, such as the relation between 'act' and 'activity', or between 'feast' and 'festivity'. Yet such an explanation would only chart the grammatical relation between the terms and ignore several turns, incursions and transformations that have occurred in the shifts between 'perform', 'performance', 'performative' and 'performativity'. These incursions come from linguistics, culture and philosophy in the course of developments in the humanities in the 20th century, and add further levels of complexity to the concept's already outlined entanglements. The concept of performativity can be approached through three inter-connected landmark turns: the cultural turn, the linguistic turn and the performative turn.

The idea of the cultural turn, outlined in the previous section, points to the first characteristic of performativity, namely an emphasis on embodiment, event, interaction and practice, rather than on text alone. The realization that paying attention to culture is crucial for various disciplines, also brought the performative qualities of culture to the foreground, the fact that culture is not simply artifacts and monuments but also practices, acts, embodied moments, events. The works of Goffman and Turner are two prominent examples of the adaptation of performance language to ask and answer questions about social life, practices, conflicts, rituals, ceremonies and phenomena of social interaction. The field of anthropology has influenced this use and development of the concept. With this emphasis on and recognition of sources of cultural expression other than the written or printed text, it becomes possible for cultural analysis to consider more fluid and impermanent forms as cultural material. Recognising the importance of performative practices means giving importance to gestures, acts and expressions that were so far considered to be irrelevant or only of ancillary significance to the main modes of social interaction such as language and text. It also allows for predominantly oral traditions to be recognised as valuable historical sources.

The second turn that charts the concept of the performative is the linguistic turn. This refers to the claims of post-foundational language philosophy, inaugurated with structural linguistics and the critique of the relationship between language and truth or reality. Representative of this turn is the work of C.S. Peirce, J.L. Austin in linguistics and of M. Heidegger and J. Derrida, amongst others, in continental European philosophy. Without even trying to cover this vast field in passing, I would like to focus on one idea which is relevant to this article, namely

that acts are not outside of the realm of language, or that language points to or represents a reality outside of itself, but that there are acts that are performed through speech. Austin names this act, for which speech or language is a prerequisite, the performative speech act. The 'performance' or accomplishment of the act is done through language. The notion of the performative speech act forms part of the larger claim that language is co-constitutive of reality. Performativity thus indicates the intertwining of language and action. Performativity in the sense of the speech act refers to the double bind of saying and doing, thus also of a way of perceiving action and the conditions of its efficacy. The performative refers to the way things assume shape and are constituted by way of naming, of being called and interpellated. The performative speech act emphasises that speech on the whole, and particular forms of address are acts in themselves, thus questioning the distinction between discourse and action.

The third turn, that cannot be separated from the cultural and the linguistic turn, is the performative turn. Here the work of J. Derrida and J. Butler have been instrumental to the discussion of subject formation as a process that can neither be understood as socially constructed, nor as a natural given. Performativity denotes the subject, understood as a linguistic category, not in a zone of free consumer choice, but in a highly regulated and historically determined framework. Following from the question of how speech can be a form of action, the concept of the performative asks about the formation of a subject through its actions. In Butler's theorization, the engagement with performativity is part of a larger project of a theory of practice and the creation or transformation of a subject, where the focus is not on finding an essence that is already existent, but on establishing the power relations at work that allow for certain acts to be performed and others not to be performed. To say something is performative thus implies it is not finished yet, that it is lively, it is taking shape in the crossroads of real life.

Performativity thus does not draw a division between the theatrical and other social spheres, although it carries different implications in each case. Just as language is performative in the sense of being co-constitutive of reality; just as culture is performative, in the sense of being lived interaction and process and not stable identity, so the subject is performative in the sense of being neither merely a natural body nor merely a social construction, but as the object of a gradual, compelling formation of acts. The entanglement of performance with concepts such as theatre, knowledge and performativity demonstrates that it is most valuable to approach the concept by asking what its operation it is useful for, what it sets itself out against or distinguishes itself from. Understanding performance is thus a matter of charting its vocabulary, rather than identifying its definition, to borrow Raymond Williams' well-known distinction. Far from having a proper or strict meaning, the concept of performance reveals the attempts of various disciplines of the Humanities to self-critique their working terms by reassessing their mutual relationship.

Notes

ⁱ In all fairness to Schechner, his book *Performance Studies* is an attempt to provide exactly such a practical handbook, though it does not explicitly reflect on methodological issues.

ⁱⁱThey curiously overlap or intervene with each other in relation to gender. When speaking of performance as process, gender is theorized as a subject position that is not natural or biologically given, but as generated and constituted through linguistic, socio-political and cultural acts and interactions. When speaking of performance as goal, gender is commonly understood in terms of the accomplishment of certain norms and the judgement of successfully fulfilling these standards, or, more frequently, failing to do so. This productive contradiction is theorized in Bala 2012.

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