

CULTURE AS PERFORMANCE

Theatre history as cultural history

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During the last years, our understanding of cultural processes has changed considerably; and so has our concept of culture. We do not proceed any more only from the assumption that culture has to be understood as a text, made up of signs that has to be read as the concept of culture will have it that dominated since the linguistic turn in the seventies: "Culture as text". We rather have come to understand that culture is also, if not in the first place, performance. It can hardly be overlooked to what an extent culture is brought forth as and in performances – not only in performances of the different arts but also, and foremost in performances of rituals, festivals, political rallies, sport competitions, games, fashion shows and the like – performances which, in a mediatized form, reach out to millions of people. Hence it follows that the concept of performance, that performance theory is in the centre and at the heart of all debates in cultural, social and art studies.

So, I am going to sketch in rough outlines the concept of performance which I have developed in the context of our Sonderforschungsbereich (Centre of Excellence) "Kulturen des Performativen" (Performing culture)¹. I shall present and explain it by pursuing four arguments:

1. A performance comes into being by the bodily co-presence of actors and spectators, by their encounter and interaction.
2. What happens in performances, is transitory and ephemeral. None the less, whatever appears in its course, comes into being hic et nunc and is

¹ Cp. my full-length study *Ästhetik des Performativen*, Frankfurt a.M.: Suhrkamp 2004.

experienced as present in a particularly intense way.

3. A performance does not transmit pre-given meanings. Rather, it is the performance which brings forth the meanings that come into being during its course.
4. Performances are characterized by their eventness. The specific mode of experience they allow for is a particular form of liminal experience.

First argument: A performance takes place in and through the bodily co-presence of actors and spectators. For in order to bring it about two groups of people who act as 'doers' and 'onlookers' have to assemble at a certain time and at a certain place in order to share a situation, a span of lifetime. A performance comes into being out of their encounter – out of their interaction.

That is to say that in a performance the medial conditions are completely different from those underlying the production and reception of texts or artefacts. While the actors do something – move through the space, perform gestures, manipulate objects, speak and sing –, those who act as spectators perceive them and react. It may well be the case that such reactions, at least partly, are internal ones, imaginative and cognitive, i.e. purely mental processes. However, most of the reactions and responses can be perceived by the actors and other spectators – like giggling, laughing, shouting, yawning, snoring, sobbing, crying, eating, drinking, commenting on what is happening, getting up, running out, slamming the doors and so on and so forth. The perception of such responses, in its turn, results in other perceptible reactions. Whatever the actors do, it has an effect on the spectators; and whatever the spectators do, it has an effect on the actors and other spectators. Concluding from this state of affairs one might argue that a performance comes into being only in its course. It brings forth itself by the interactions between actors and spectators. Hence it follows that its course is not completely to be planned nor to be predicted. It is to be regarded as an autopoietic process which is characterized by a high degree of contingency. Whatever appears in the course of a performance, cannot be completely foreseen at its beginning. Many elements emerge in the course of a performance as a consequence of certain interactions.

It is true, the actors set the decisive preconditions for the course of the performance – preconditions that are fixed by the process of staging. None the less, they are not capable to totally control the course of the performance. In the end, all

participants together bring forth the performance. This not only minimizes but actually excludes the possibility that one individual person or a group of persons will be able to completely plan its course, to steer and to control it. The performance is removed from the control of any individual.

In other words: The performance, this way, to all participants opens up the possibility to experience themselves in its course as a subject who is able to co-determine the actions and behaviour of others and whose own actions and behaviour, in the same way, are determined by others. The individual participant – be s/he actor or spectator – experiences him/herself as a subject who is neither fully autonomous nor fully determined by others, as a subject who takes upon him/herself the responsibility for a situation which s/he has not created but participates in.

This elucidates that any performance – even an artistic one – is also to be regarded as a social process. In it, different groups have an encounter and negotiate and regulate their relationship in different ways. Such a social process turns into a political one the very moment when during the performance a power struggle between actors and spectators is started because one group attempts to force on the other certain definitions of the situation or the relationship between them, certain ideas, values, convictions and modes of behaviour. Since each individual participant – even if to a different extent – co-determines the course of the performance as well as lets himself be determined by it, there is no one who would 'passively' take part in the performance. In this sense, all participants bear joint responsibility for what is happening during the performance. Besides, in its course some kind of grouping may occur among the spectators. It is even possible that for the whole duration of the performance or at least for certain stretches of time a community among the spectators or even between actors and spectators may come into being. This is what might turn a performance into an eminently political process – without any kind of political topic being dealt with.

Second argument: The materiality of a performance, its spatiality, corporeality and sound quality is brought forth by and in the course of the performance. Hence follows the paradox of performance. It is ephemeral and transitory. However, what appears and takes shape in its course, comes into being hic at nunc and is experienced as present in a particularly intense way.

Even if, in this sense, performances exhaust themselves in their presentness, i.e.

in their permanent becoming and passing, this does not exclude that in their course, material objects are used – objects which after the end remain as traces of the performance and can be kept as such. While at their later exhibition in a museum – theatre, ethnological or other museum – the interest focusses on the object itself, in the performance attention is directed on its usage: What actions are performed by manipulating the object and which effect do they have?

Whatever appears in a performance, on the one hand, proceeds from the intentions, ideas and plans of several subjects. It is due to the production, to the *mise-en-scène* that defines which elements are to appear at what time and in which spot of the space, how they are to move through the space and when and where they are to disappear from it. On the other, that what appears springs from the interactions as described above. No matter whether such phenomena like the spectators' perceivable responses are declared to be constitutive of the performance as John Cage did it in his 'Silent Pieces' which included all the sounds brought forth by the spectators as well as those penetrating into the performance space from outwards; or whether such elements are understood as disruptive and as the performance's materiality is defined only that which is brought forth intentionally by the artists involved – whatever appears in the course of a performance, in any case, co-constitutes the particular materiality of this very performance. This is why we have clearly to distinguish between the concept of *mise-en-scène* and that of performance. While '*mise-en-scène*' means the materiality of the performance which is brought forth according to the plans and intentions of the artists, 'performance' includes any kind of materiality brought forth in its course. This is, why the *mise-en-scène* is reproducible, whereas the performance takes place only once.

Even if particular genres of performance may take place in spaces that are specifically construed for them, spatiality of performance is always ephemeral and transitory. For it is not to be identified with the physical-geometrical space in which it takes place. It comes into being in and through the performative space. It is the performative space which opens up particular possibilities for the relationship between actors and spectators, for movement and perception, which, it moreover organizes and structures. In which ways such possibilities are used, realized, evaded or counteracted, will have an effect on the performative space. Each movement of persons, animals, objects, light, each sound ringing out in the space will change it and, thus, bring forth spatiality anew and otherwise. The performative space is not stable, but permanently

fluctuating and changing. That is why in a performance, spatiality does not exist but happens.

This is all the more true if we consider the particular atmosphere which co-constitutes the performative space. As the philosopher Gernot Böhme has shown, atmospheres, although not bound to a particular place, pour into the space. They are not tied to the objects – or the persons – from which/whom they seem to emanate nor to the persons who enter the space and sense them physically. Usually, they are the first which grasps the spectator/visitor, tinges him and thus enables him to a very specific experience of the space. Such an experience cannot be explained by taking recourse to the single elements in the space – his extension, particular objects, smells, sounds or other. For it is not them as individual elements that create the atmosphere, but the interplay between all of them which, in theatre productions usually is carefully calculated. Böhme defines atmospheres as "spaces insofar as they are tinged by the presence of objects, of human beings or environmental constellations. They are themselves spheres of presence of something, its reality in space."

The term "spheres of presence" aims at a particular mode in which objects are present. Böhme explains it as "ecstasy of the object", as the mode in which a thing appears in a particular way as present. Not only its colours, smells or sounds are conceptualized as ecstasies – i.e. the so-called secondary qualities of a thing –, but also its primary qualities like extension and form. The ecstasy of things results in that the things have an effect on their environment, that they attract attention, even demand it and that they appear to those who perceive them in a particularly intense way as present. They force themselves on their attention. shown, atmospheres, although not bound to a particular place, pour into the space. They are not tied to the objects – or the persons – from which/whom they seem to emanate nor to the persons who enter the space and sense them physically. Usually, they are the first which grasps the spectator/visitor, tinges him and thus enables him to a very specific experience of the space. Such an experience cannot be explained by taking recourse to the single elements in the space – his extension, particular objects, smells, sounds or other. For it is not them as individual elements that create the atmosphere, but the interplay between all of them which, in theatre productions usually is carefully calculated. Böhme defines atmospheres as "spaces insofar as they are tinged by the presence of objects, of human beings or environmental constellations. They are themselves spheres of presence of something, its

reality in space."²

The atmosphere contributes considerably to the bringing forth of spatiality. Because of and through the atmosphere, which the space and the things seem to emanate – including the smells which they give off and the sounds they let ring out –, the things and the space appear to the subject who enters it as present in an even emphatical sense. Not only that they present themselves in their so-called primary and secondary qualities; moreover, in the atmosphere, they even invade the body of the perceiving subject – what, most of all, is to be experienced with light, smells and sounds. For the spectator is not confronted with the atmosphere, is not distanced from it; rather he is surrounded by it, he immerses into it.

Because of the bodily co-presence of actors and spectators, corporeality plays an essential role in performances. In a performance we deal with the phenomenal as well as with the semiotic body. The actors appear in their bodily being-in-the-world, no matter whether it is a theatrical actor, a politician, an athlete, a shaman, a priest, a singer, a dancer or the partner in a normal everyday interaction. From their phenomenal body there may proceed a particular radiation which the other participants/spectators sense bodily. In many cases, it seems as if a stream of energy would emanate from them, which is transferred onto the spectators and energizes them in their turn. In a particular way and particularly intensively, the actor is experienced as PRESENT. At the same time, the spectator who is hit by such a stream of energy, experiences himself in a particular way and particularly intensively as present.

The phenomenal body of actor and spectator is the existential ground of every kind of performance – be it in everyday life, in the arts or in cultural performances. That is to say that the performative character of culture cannot be investigated properly without taking recourse to the corporeality of all those who participate in a performance. It is not ideas, concepts, meanings which are to be examined in the first place, in order to bring into view culture's performative character, but the particular phenomenal bodies by whom and between whom the performance is brought forth – the body of the actor who by applying certain techniques and practices succeeds in occupying the space and in drawing the undivided attention of the spectators on this, his bodily presence, as well as the body of the spectators who respond to such an experience of presence in a particular way.

² Gernot Böhme, *Atmosphäre. Essays zur neuen Ästhetik*, Frankfurt a.M. 1995, p. 33.

In performances, it is the phenomenal body of the participants, the body in his different physiological, affective, energetic and motorial states which works on the phenomenal body of others and is able to evoke in them particular physiological, affective, energetic and motorial states. In all these cases, the phenomenological body, quite often, appears at the same time as a semiotic body. Be it in an everyday interaction, in a ritual or a theatre performance, the one who plays the part of the spectator will not only sense the other in his phenomenal corporeality, but at the same time pose the question what it means that the other lowers his eyelid, raises his arm or moves through the space – in any case whether such movements are intended to mean anything at all.

While up to now the semiotic body in performances has attracted and received much attention, the phenomenal body of actors and spectators did only seldom come into view. This is all the more surprising, since the phenomenal and the semiotic body are indissolubly bound to each other – what allows to think of the phenomenal body without referring to the semiotic body, albeit not the other way round. It seems quite productive to relate both of them to one another via the concept of embodiment.³ By embodiment I do not mean the process of lending one's body temporarily to something mental – an idea, a concept, a meaning or even a bodiless spirit – which needs a body in order to be able to articulate itself and gain appearance. Rather, the term 'embodiment' aims at such bodily processes by which the phenomenal body brings forth himself as an, in each case, particular body and at the same time specific meanings. Thus, the actor by processes of embodiment, produces his phenomenal body in a very specific way, which sometimes is experienced as PRESENCE, and, at the same time, he produces a dramatic figure, for example, Hamlet. PRESENCE as well as the dramatic figure do not exist beyond the particular processes of embodiment by which the actor brings them into existence in the performance; rather, they are produced by them.

What is characteristic of the play of the actor, can be applied to all kinds of performers and their actions in other genres of performance. Even here those who act bring forth their phenomenal body in a particular way and thus, at the same time, specific meanings – be they a dramatic figure or whatever kind of identity, a social 'role' or a symbolic order. All these kinds of meanings are grounded in the phenomenal body,

³ Regarding this concept s. Erika Fischer-Lichte, "Embodiment – From Page to Stage: The Dramatic Figure", in: Assaph, *Studies in Theatre* No. 16, 2000, pp. 65-75.

do not exist beside or beyond it. What we call PRESENCE in an actor, in a political leader, a shaman or a priest we might call as well charisma. But this opens up quite another debate.

Third argument: A performance does not transmit pre-given meanings. Rather, it is the performance, which brings forth the meanings that come into being during its course.

For a long time, scholars proceeded from the assumption that performances serve the purpose to convey specific pre-given meanings. The premise was held that the performance of a dramatic text transmits the meanings fixed in it or a particular interpretation of it; that in a court festival of the 17th century a particular pre-given allegorical programme was realized, or that political festivals and other mass performances are to be regarded as representation of an individual's power like that of Alexander the Great, Augustus, Louis XIV, Napoleon, Mussolini, Stalin or Hitler.

In case the first two arguments seem consistent, such an opinion can no longer be held. For, on the one hand, there are the unforeseen and unplanned elements emerging in the interaction between actors and spectators during the performance, which will disturb the pre-given programme. And on the other, focussing the attention on the particular presence of phenomenal bodies, ecstasies of things and atmospheres, will distract it from semiotic bodies, objects and spaces etc. and, thus, run counter to the procedure of such an interpretation. Rather, it is the performance which brings forth meanings. In this sense, meanings that come into being in and during the performance, are to be regarded as emergent.

To perceive the body, the things and the space in their specific presence, does not mean to perceive them as meaningless. Rather it says, to perceive all these phenomena as something. We are not dealing here with an unspecific stimulus, with a mere sense data, but with a perception of something as something. In my perception the things appear in their particular phenomenality. They mean that as which they appear. Their self-referentiality, accordingly, is not to be described as the mediation of a pre-given meaning nor as a desemantisation but as a process of a very particular kind of meaning production. This process is performed as the perception of a phenomenon in its particular materiality, in its phenomenal being. Perceiving and generating meaning, here, are performed in and by the very same act. Meaning is brought forth by and in the

act of perceiving. In other words: There is not something that we first perceive and to which then – in an act of interpretation – we attribute the meaning of something else. Rather, perceiving something as something is performed at the same time as a process of producing its meaning as this particular phenomenal being.

With such a mode of perception a very different one goes hand in hand. First the appearing element is perceived in and as its phenomenal being. The moment the attention dissolves its focus from the perceived element as such, and starts to go astray, the element appears as a kind of signifier to which the most diverse associations might refer as its signifieds like images, ideas, memories, emotions, thoughts etc. It is very questionable whether such associations come up following particular rules and, therefore, predictably. Rather it is to be assumed that they descend on the perceiving subject, more or less by chance, even if afterwards explainable. They seem not to be on the percipient's disposal. They simply emerge.

Such an oscillation of the perception between focussing on the phenomenon as self-referential and on the associations, which it might trigger, I will call the order of presence. From it I distinguish quite another kind of perception and meaning production, namely the order of representation. To perceive the actor's body in its bodily being-in-the-world lays the foundation for the order of presence. To perceive it as a sign for a dramatic figure or another symbolic order establishes the order of representation. It demands to relate any perceived element to the dramatic figure or the symbolic order, respectively. While the first order produces meaning as the phenomenal being of the perceived – what does not exclude that such a meaning is able to evoke other meanings that are not directly linked to the perceived phenomena like in a chain of associations – the second order brings forth meanings which, in their sum total, constitute the dramatic figure or another symbolic order.

During a performance our perception oscillates between both orders of perception. The moment it shifts from one to the other, a rupture comes up, a discontinuity happens. A state of instability comes into being. It places the perceiving subject between the two orders, transfers him into a state betwixt and between, into a state of liminality⁴: Each shift, each instability causes the dynamics of the process of perception to take another turn. The more often a shift happens, the more often the

⁴ Regarding the concept of betwixt and between and liminality cp. Arnold van Gennep, *The Rites of Passage*, Chicago: Chicago Univ. Press 1960 (originally 1909) and Victor Turner, *The Ritual Process –*

perceiving subject begins to wander between two worlds, between two orders of perception. More and more, s/he becomes aware of his inability to cause, steer and control the shifts. S/He may try to intentionally adjust her/his perception anew – to the order of presence or to the order of representation. Very soon, however, s/he will become aware that the shift will take place even if s/he did not intend it, that it happens, befalls her/him, that s/he gets into a state between the two orders without wanting to or being able to prevent it. In such a moment, the spectator experiences his own perception as emergent, as withdrawn from his will and control, but still, as consciously performed. That is to say that the shift draws the attention of the perceiving subject to the process of perception as well as to its particular dynamics. In the moment of shift, the process of perception itself becomes conspicuous, this way, conscious and in itself object of perception. The perceiving subject starts to perceive himself as perceiving subject, what produces new meanings, which, in their turn, generate other meanings and so forth. This way, the process of perception continuously takes another turn. What will be perceived and which meanings will be produced, seems less and less predictable. The perceiving subject becomes aware that the meanings are not conveyed to him, but that it is he himself who produces them and that he could have generated quite different meanings, if the shift from one order to another would have happened earlier or later or more or less often.

Fourth argument: Performances are characterized by their eventness. The specific mode of experience they allow for is a particular form of liminal experience.

In order to understand performances adequately, they are not to be held as works of art but as events. Since a performance comes into being by way of the interaction between actors and spectators, since it brings forth itself in and through an autopoietic process, it is impossible to label it a work. For when the autopoietic process has come to an end, the performance is not given as its result; rather, even the performance has come to an end. It is gone and irretrievably lost. It exists only as and in the process of performing; it exists only as an event.

The performance as an event – quite different from the *mise-en-scène* – is non-recurrent and not to be repeated. It is impossible that exactly the same constellation between actors and spectators will turn up once more. The responses of the spectators

Structure and Anti-Structure, Chicago: Aldine 1969.

and their effect on the actors and other spectators will be different with each and every performance. A performance is to be understood as an event also in the sense that no participant will have complete control of it, that it happens to them – and in particular, to the spectators. This holds true not only in respect to the consequences of the bodily co-presence of actors and spectators, but also with regard to the particular presentness in which the phenomena appear as well as to the emergence of the meanings. As has been explained concerning the shift of perception, it also befalls the perceiving subject and transfers him into a state of betwixt and between, into a state of instability.

The particular eventness of performances, moreover, is characterized by a strange collapsing of oppositions. The participants in a performance experience themselves as subjects who co-determine its course and, at the same time, are determined by it. They live through the performance as an aesthetic as well as a social, even a political process, in whose course relationships are negotiated, power struggles fought, communities build up and dissolve. Their perception follows the order of presence as well as that of representation. That is to say: What, traditionally in Western cultures, is held to be an opposition which is grasped by pairs of dichotomic concepts such as: autonomous subject vs. subject determined by others; art vs. social reality/politics; presence vs. representation, in performances is experienced not in the mode of either-or, but in that of an as-well. The opposition collapses, the dichotomies seem to dissolve.

The moment this happens, the moment when the one can also be the other, our attention is attracted by the passage from one state to the other, by the instability, which, in its turn, is experienced as an event. The space between the opposites, an interval opens up. The "betwixt and between", thus, becomes a privileged category. It points to the threshold between the spaces, to the state of liminality, into which the performance transfers all those who participate in it.

Since such pairs of dichotomic concepts not only serve as tools for the description and cognition of the world but also as regulatives for our actions and behaviour, their destabilization not only results in a destabilization of our perception of the world, ourselves and others, but also in a shattering of the rules and norms that guide our behaviour. From the pairs of concepts different frames can be deduced like "This is theatre/art" or "This is a social or political situation". Such frames entail premises for an adequate behaviour in a situation they encompass. By letting collide opposite or only

different frames, by, thus, allowing different, partly even completely opposite values and claims to stand side by side, so that they are all valid as well as annul each other, performances create liminal situations. They transfer the spectator between all such rules, norms, orders, they transfer them into a crisis.

That is to say: The performance transfers the spectator into a state which alienates him from his everyday life, from the norms and rules valid in it, without, however, showing him ways how to find a re-orientation. Such a state may be experienced as a pleasure as well as a torment. The transformation, the subject undergoes in it, can be most diverse. Mainly, it will be temporary transformations, which last only for a limited timespan in the performance. These include changes of the body's physiological, affective, energetic and motor states, but also actually in it realized changes of status like those from the status of a spectator to that of an actor or the building up of a community between actors and spectators or only among the spectators. Such changes take place during the performance and are perceptible; after the end of the performance, however, they usually do not continue. It can only be discussed and decided with regard to individual cases, whether the experience of destabilization of the perception of reality, self and others, the loss of valid norms and rules actually leads to a re-orientation of the respective individual and in this sense, to an ongoing and longer lasting transformation. It might as well be the case that after leaving the performance space the spectator dismisses his temporary destabilization as non-sensical and unfounded and tries to return to his previous perception of reality, self and others – or that even after the end of the performance he remains for quite a while in the state of disorientation and much later, by way of reflections, arrives at a re-orientation or returns to his old values and patterns of behaviour. Whatever may be the case, he has undergone a liminal experience while participating in the performance.

In the case of artistic performances we call such a liminal experience aesthetic experience, in the case of rituals ritualistic experience. The experience for which performances of the most diverse kind allow, quite generally is a liminal experience. However, we are able to discern between the liminal experience as an aesthetic experience and as a ritualistic experience. Ritualistic experience is characterized by two criteria not valid for aesthetic experience: irreversibility and social acceptance. However, although aesthetic experience does not result in a socially accepted change of status or identity, it may well cause in individual participants a change of their

perception of reality, self and others. This holds true not only for the artists involved but also for the spectators. In this sense, the event of the performance may result in a transformation of the participants, which is able to outlast even the end of the performance.

Conclusions

The concept of performance as outlined above entails an enormous innovative potential with regard to art, social and cultural studies, which I shall, at least, briefly indicate.

In art studies, the concept of the art work is in the centre. The work has to be analyzed with respect to the different artistic devices applied and to be interpreted in order to understand it. If the arts do no longer produce works, but performances, i.e. events, as it happens not only in theatre, music, performance art, but since the sixties of the 20th century more and more also in the other arts, then neither an aesthetic of the work can be applied nor production and reception aesthetics that refer to it. What is at stake now is the challenge to develop new aesthetics, above all theories of aesthetic experience as well as in the place of work analysis new methods of performance analysis.

The historic-hermeneutic disciplines, when dealing with performances, no longer will be able to proceed from the premise that they realize a particular allegorical programme or represent the power of an individual or that the performance of a dramatic text can be regarded as its interpretation. Rather, historic-hermeneutic approaches have to take into consideration that meanings emerge not before the process of performance but in its course and, therefore, cannot be identical with the meanings, which groups of persons or individuals wanted to express via the performance.

The concept of performance turns out to be just as momentous for the social sciences. For, given the premise that in a performance all participants, i.e. actors and spectators alike, are involved insofar as they co-determine its course and let themselves be determined by it, the widespread and popular thesis of manipulation fails. It says that political festivals and other mass performances are quite suited to the purpose of manipulating the participating population according to the intentions and plans of the ruler or the ruling classes. That would presuppose that the organizers are capable of applying such staging strategies, which have the power to overwhelm the per se passive

audiences in the exactly precalculated way and to move them to the desired behaviour. If we keep in mind the interaction between actors and spectators as well as the co-responsibility, which each participant bears for the course of the performance, it seems hardly feasible that such a manipulation could actually occur.

A special problem offer mediatized performances. Film-, television- and video-recordings of performances, in their turn, cannot be defined and understood as performances. For the bodily co-presence of actors and spectators, which constitutes a performance, is not given. Therefore, they are not included in the concept of performance; however, in any case, in the concept of performativity. Besides, there is a considerable difference between in this sense mediatized performances and performances which make ample usage of the different media and all kinds of reproduction technology. Such performances are a challenge for our perception by demanding new modes of perception without questioning the concept of performance itself.

The innovative potential, which the concept of performance implies, has still to be discovered and exploited by art and cultural studies.