

## **Performativity, Performance and Perception**

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This special issue grows out of the 2019 conference “Perception and Performativity in Arts and Culture in the Age of Technological Change,” supported by the European Regional Development Fund (Centre of Excellence in Estonian Studies, TK 145) and Prof. Marina Grishakova’s Estonian Research Council grant “The Role of Imaginary Narrative Scenarios in Cultural Dynamics” (PUT 1481). The discussions on how digitation has affected performativity, performance, and perception in arts and culture that started at the conference developed into articles. Other colleagues joined the discussion, adding theoretical frameworks and textual sources. The results have been collected in this issue.

It seems that the heyday of interest in “performativity” is past. While in the 1990s, spurred by the work of Judith Butler, the term was ubiquitous in academic texts in disciplines ranging from gender studies to archaeology, it has lost some of its prominence today, when poststructuralist theories have been replaced by ontological ones. However, in many ways we live in a hyper-performative age, in societies of the spectacle, in a way that could not have been imagined by Guy Debord in the 1960s. Politics and the whole public sphere have become theatrical, and we live our private lives in social media that are constructed around performances of the self. This compels us to return to the concept of performativity in the present special issue and in this introduction specifically.

In the 1990s, performativity seemed to preoccupy primarily language philosophers and poststructuralist theorists. In the excitement it was often forgotten that performativity has been a central term in theatre and performance studies for a long time. The two strands of intellectual inquiry, however, hardly ever met in the 1990s. There were a few examples that bridged this gap, for example Andrew Parker’s and Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick’s edited collection *Performativity and Performance* (1995), which brings together Judith Butler and performance scholars, or Mieke Bal in her interrogation of the term in *Travelling Concepts in the Humanities* (2002). These examples, however, are rare. In this introduction we want to develop a dialogue between these two strands of approaches to performativity to show how it continues to play a productive role across the humanities, from theatre to fiction and video games.

### **What are we talking about: performativity and performance**

Performativity as a concept emerged in different disciplines of the humanities and social sciences at the end of 1950s. The authors most frequently associated with the concept are British linguist J. L. Austin, French philosopher Jacques Derrida and American gender theorist Judith Butler. Despite major differences in their perspectives, they are all rooted in, on the one hand, the concept in language, and, on the other hand, in performance and action. Yet performance, not as a linguistic act, but as a physical fact, is also the core research object of theatre and performance studies. The performativity of different acts and genres is also actively discussed in relation to artistic, social and religious performances. James Loxley (2007, 140) has argued that the term “performative” is not always necessarily borrowed from Austin or the tradition of thinking connected to him, or even if it is, the term and the concept have acquired a broader meaning when, for example, transplanted into the field of performance studies. He has also pointed out that while “for Austin ‘performative’ could be both a noun and an adjective, and its meaning was specialised and technical, in performance theory it has been used adjectivally and quite generally to denote the performance aspect of any object or practice under consideration” (Loxley 2007, 140). This should not be conflated with the very specific meaning given to this term by philosophers of language or gender. Andrew Parker and Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick (1995, 3), in their introduction to the topic, already warn that “while philosophy and theater now share ‘performative’ as a common lexical item, the term has hardly come to mean ‘the same thing’ for each.”

At this juncture, we can also see the emergence of two terms, performance and performativity. Mieke Bal distinguishes them as follows:

Performance – the unique execution of a work – is of a different order from performativity, an aspect of a word that *does* what it says. Hence, performance is *not* to performativity what matter is to materiality, the concrete to the abstract, or the object term to the theoretical term. Although derived from the same verb, ‘to perform,’ as soon as they become concepts the two words are no longer connected. [Bal 2002, 92]

This distinction is perhaps behind some of the divergences in the use of the term. Despite the often post-structuralist criticism of Austin’s ideas, the nature of the mutual affinity between the performative and performativity has been underappreciated. Austin believed that the irregularity embodied by the performative “needs to be expelled as it threatens to blur the difference between theatre and world” (Parker, Sedgwick 1995, 4). Parker and Sedgwick astutely note that Austin seems to equate the theatrical and the artificial with the perverse. Instead of suppressing this

association, however, they believe that we should relish the fact that the performative has been “from its inception already infected with queerness” in the broad sense of the term (Parker, Sedgwick 1995, 5). It is this connection with theatre, broadly conceived, that creates the space for transformation and for expanding our understanding of the relations between subjects. Thus we embrace Parker and Sedgwick’s belief that a productive dialogue can be established between speech act theories and theatre.

Different authors in different disciplines also develop different genealogies of the term. For example, French theatre scholar Patrice Pavis has pointed out three origins of the term: linguistics (J. L. Austin, John Searle), sociology and anthropology (Erving Goffman, Milton Singer, Victor Turner), and cultural studies of performance (Pavis 2016, 163–64). Based on a wide array of empirical material, all connected to performativity, he proposes the following definition: “[. . .] all that a culture can produce as a manifestation, an externalization, in short as ‘performativity’. This ‘performativity’ is always a production (also in the English sense of *mise-en-scène*), a productivity: the production of an experience, a situation of enunciation here and now, a meaning” (Pavis 2016, 164).

This set of references does not necessarily appear in other explications of the term. For example, although Butler’s first take on performativity, which tellingly appeared in *Theatre Journal* in 1988, referred to the work of Turner and Goffman, these references move to the background in the most famous presentation of the argument in *Gender Trouble* (1990). Goffman overall makes regrettably few appearances in articles on performativity, although his approach to social interaction is “dramaturgical,” as Goffman himself calls it, and he explicitly uses the term “performance” long before the term became trendy in cultural theory (Goffman 1959). Literary theorist Jonathan Culler (2000) traces a different path: from language philosophy to literature in the 1980s, then to gender studies in the 1990s and again back to philosophy. His key names are, predictably, Austin, Derrida, De Man and Butler. The names and the paths vary greatly across these texts. Mieke Bal (2002) tellingly calls performativity a travelling concept and in the following we will outline some of the key stops in its travel.

### **Different theorists in search of performativity**

In order to understand what has been lost and found in the travels of this concept, we have to look at different approaches to performativity, following a more or less chronological order of significant publications and interpretations.

J. L. Austin in his posthumously published lectures titled *How to Do Things with Words* (1955/1962) distinguishes constatives as descriptive utterances that can be

RAILI MARLING, ANNELI SARO

true or false from performatives, speech acts that accomplish actions and generate some kind of effect, such as wedding vows, baptisms, last wills and testaments, etc. But Austin stresses (1962, 6, 8, 13–18) that performatives are effective only in the appropriate circumstances, in the right context; verbal performative utterances never work alone, but require the appropriate physical conditions. Austin labels performatives that fail unhappy utterances, or infelicities. Among other examples of infelicities, he points out that

a performative utterance will, for example, be in a peculiar way hollow or void if said by an actor on the stage, or if introduced in a poem, or spoken in soliloquy. [. . .] Language in such circumstances is in special ways – intelligibly – used not seriously, but in ways *parasitic* upon its normal use-ways which fall under the doctrine of the *etiolations* of language. (Austin 1962, 22)

This quotation has been extensively cited in later research and perhaps also misunderstood. As Loxley (2007, 87) points out, it is not just fictional utterances that are parasitic for Austin, but also communicating with oneself, in contrast with public speech acts. Still, Austin seems to be treating the constative utterances as the model for language use, with performatives as an irregularity. However, as Culler (2000, 506) argues, the distinction between these two kinds of speech acts is rather porous, as constatives can also be interpreted as accomplishing things. Thus, perhaps, it is not the constatives that are the norm, but performatives.

This is why Sybille Krämer and Marco Stahlhut (2001) have distinguished between a weak, a strong and a radical concept of the term “performative.” While the first one refers to the general pragmatic dimension of language and actions, the strong concept is related to the performative utterances that accomplish actions. The radical concept destabilises Austin’s dichotomous terminological scheme of a distinction between performative and constative acts and draws attention to the performative act itself (Krämer and Stahlhut 2001, 56).

This understanding of language is particularly attractive for literary scholars who look for “what literary language *does* as much as what it *says*” (Culler 2000, 506). It is thus not surprising that although Austin wrote only few sentences about fictional performatives, they have stirred a lot of discussion among philosophers and art theorists. Art in general is assumed to strive to have an effect on the public, and it uses the most effective tools of expression at hand to achieve this aim.

This, however, creates a clash between philosophers of language and philosophers of literature, most famously embodied in the acrimonious debate between John Searle and Jacques Derrida (for the debate itself see, e.g. Moati 2014).

American philosopher John Searle's (1979, 1989) project is rooted in his interest in developing a deeper understanding of the nature of language. In order to achieve this aim, he remodels Austin's work. The philosophical nuances of this project are not relevant for this special issue and hence we will focus on the aspect that has created the most controversy, Searle's understanding of literature. Austin calls literary speech acts non-serious, as we saw above. Searle uses this idea to develop a theory of literature. His starting point is the serious, or literal, speech act and hence he sees literary speech acts as derivative or "parasitic." For him, in fiction language is used for pretending, and this intention is the most crucial quality that distinguishes a work of fiction from non-fiction (Searle 1979, 65–66).

Searle's confidence about his ability to explain fictional language is quickly challenged by literary theorists like Stanley Fish (1980) and, most famously, the French philosopher Jacques Derrida. Derrida's thinking on this topic is collected in *Limited, Inc.* (1988), which contains his early response to Austin in "Signature Event Context" and his later responses to criticism by Searle. Derrida, too, believes that Austin's work is promising. However, he questions the possibility of distinguishing between serious and non-serious speech acts. Instead, he focuses on two issues: iterability and the possibility of creating something authentically new. Any speech act, as Austin had already admitted, is citing some previous speech act (marriage vows, naming a boat, etc.) and its felicity is based on this formulaic nature. Thus natural language speech acts are as parasitic as those of fiction (Derrida 1988, 17–18). The greater challenge is that fiction must cite the existing, to be understood, while at the same time being expected to

give space for singular events, to invent something new in the form of acts of writing which no longer consist in theoretical knowledge, in new constative statements, to give oneself to a poetico-literary performativity at least analogous to that of promises, orders, or acts of constitution or legislation which do not only change language or which, in changing language, change more than language. (Derrida 1992, 55)

It is this tension between iterability and novelty that plays a key role in Derrida's understanding of literature but he also extends his discussion to law and politics (for example, he analyses the American Declaration of Independence to show that the signatories of the declaration did not exist as sovereign people before signing the declaration (Derrida 2002, 49)). In other words, despite his overall deconstruction of Searle's approach to speech acts, he finds performativity to be an important notion not only philosophically but also politically.

J. Hillis Miller continues Derrida's project on the nature of speech acts in the context of fiction in *Speech Acts in Literature* (2002). Specifically, Miller highlights Derrida's work on a uniquely performative aspect of literature: its ability to create emotions in the reader. Expressions of emotion are, in general, always performative for Miller, because of their unavailability to traditional processes of verification (Miller 2002, 159–60). We respond performatively, in an act of trust, and this trust is relevant to the smooth running of social life. Acts of reading also create communities on these notions of trust. Miller returns to speech acts in his later works as well, as they help to connect linguistic acts and social relationships and human interaction, thereby mobilising the notion for a deeper interrogation of ethics and intersubjectivity than in Derrida's work (see e.g. Miller 2005).

Judith Butler's influential intervention in the debate shifts the attention away from the theoretical discussion of language and speech acts to subject formation and bodily acts. Butler's *Gender Trouble* is most famous for stating that one does not have an essential gender identity, but that this identity is the result of performing different gendered acts, from modes of speech to bodily comportments. This, however, does not mean that gender is a mere theatrical performance that one can take on at will. Instead, as Butler writes,

gender performativity is not a matter of choosing which gender one will be today. Performativity is the matter of repeating the norms by which one is constituted: it is not a radical fabrication of a gendered self. It is a compulsory repetition of prior and subjectivating norms, one which cannot be thrown off at will but which work, animate and constrain the gendered subject, and which are also the resources from which resistance, subversion, displacement are forged. (Butler 1993, 23)

In other words, our compulsory performances of gender rely on repeating and citing the gender norms in place. It is this performativity that gives us a gender identity that is perceived to be stable. This is why Butler stresses that she is not speaking about performances, but about a process of performativity. For Butler the foundational speech act that brings gender identity into being is the sentence "It's a girl!", uttered when a girl is born: this "initiates the process by which certain 'girling' is compelled" (Butler 1993, 232). However, in the gaps and slippages of this repeated citational performance there is also space for subversion, as every repetition also carries the potential of altering what is being performed, even if slightly.

Culler (2000, 516) highlights that Austin and Butler both write about acts, but have very different acts in mind. Austin's speech acts are singular, while Butler, like Derrida, stresses the iterability of acts of gendering. This makes Culler (2000, 516) conclude that "the iterability that is the condition of possibility of performatives

introduces a gap that puts in question a rigorous distinction between singular events and repetitions.” This is why Culler returns to Derrida’s discussion of literature. For Derrida (1992, 73), literature is “an institution that consists in transgressing and transforming” of “discursive forms, ‘works,’ and ‘events’ in which the very possibility of fundamental constitution is at least ‘fictionally’ contested, threatened, deconstructed, and presented in its very precariousness.” This sense of precarity of the performed self brings together, in a way, speech acts and bodily acts.

The connotations of performativity have also changed in theatre and performance studies. The notion of performativity used in performance studies cannot be equated with the debate between language philosophers and literary theorists. Austin (1962, 22), for example, argued that stage performatives lacked performative force. He and some of the other thinkers cited above (e.g., Miller) have been against too casual equation of the work done in performance studies and in cultural theory. Loxley (2007, 140) proposes that the relationship between the two could be considered “asymptotic,” meaning “an ever-closer proximity without a final, resolving convergence.” The two fields share concerns and, increasingly, terminological foci, especially owing to the influence of the work of Judith Butler. This is not surprising, as Butler’s thinking has been influenced by performance theorists like Victor Turner, as mentioned above, although this connection has found less discussion than Butler’s dialogue with Austin or Derrida. Butler, however, relies on notions borrowed from theatre in her interpretation of drag, revealing the performativity that underlies all acts of gender while being attentive to the specificity of the stage (Butler 1990, 278).

Loxley (2007, 145) argues that today’s performances and also performance theory have challenged the traditional notions of the separation of the real and the make-believe and thus have made the broader philosophical questions about performativity raised by Butler relevant for performance studies and leading to the creation of new ontologies of performance (Phelan 1993). Participatory and relational art have also helped to erode former distinctions between authenticity and performativity (Bourriaud 2002; Bishop 2012). In parallel, owing to the work of sociologists like Goffman, we have also become increasingly aware of the theatricality of everyday life. Thus the two worlds have come closer to each other over the past few decades, despite the initial terminological tensions.

One of the possibilities within performance theory and studies is to understand performativity as a synonym of theatricality or, more precisely, as an efficiency with the tools of theatrical expression. There is also a cultural distinction here: the term “theatricality” seems to be more popular among continental and “performativity” among Anglo-American theorists (Reinelt 2002, 207). Due to different anti-theatri-

cal prejudices, theatricality as a term has also been ostracised during the last decades in Europe. Theatre scholar Teemu Paavolainen has highlighted intriguing ontological tensions between the notions of theatricality and performativity:

[. . .] the core distinction that their etymologies suggest between seeing and doing [. . .] is casually extended to those of form and function, theory and practice, fixity and change: rigid semiosis as opposed to effective action, inner meaning versus outer effect, the what of representation and the how of reiteration. (Paavolainen 2017, 174)

As can be seen from the quote, Paavolainen understands theatricality narrowly, as it is often understood outside of the circle of theatre scholars where theatre is related to more traditional forms of representation. Nevertheless, Paavolainen believes that “the conceptual positioning of the two terms is radically contextual and utterly flexible (cf. Jackson 2004, 6, 12)” (Paavolainen 2017, 175). Thus, he uses their meaning-making potential as a metaphor of human actions (performativity) and human perception (theatricality) in general.

Influential German theatre scholar Hans-Thies Lehmann opposes the view that theatrical means by themselves are performative, at least not in theatre, though perhaps more in politics. According to him, theatre is deceptive as an action, even when illusion is openly disturbed or destroyed. It is impossible to ever fully know whether an action does or means anything. This is why he calls theatre a doubtful performative or *afformance* art (Lehmann 2006, 179–80). Karen Jürs-Munby, in her introduction to Lehmann’s book, interprets “*afformance*” as follows:

While performance can address, show, destabilize and interrupt the ‘performativity’ of nationalism, racism, sexism or ageism, it does so not through a direct efficacy or real doing, not primarily by producing political meaning, but through something Lehmann calls ‘*afformance* art’. With this term Lehmann locates the political in perception [the emphasis of the authors] itself, in art as a poetic *interruption* of the law and therefore of politics. (Jürs-Munby 2006: 6)

A similar idea is expressed in the works of Jacques Rancière (2008, 2010) where he dismantles the opposition between viewing and acting, stressing that viewing is an action that confirms or transforms the distribution of positions. This perspective enables him to talk about emancipated spectators, who conduct performative acts in the process of reception of art works. In this process performativity and perception are interwoven and this explains the juxtaposition of the two terms in the present special issue of the journal.



The concept of performativity has also been highlighted and developed in *The Transformative Power of Performance: A New Aesthetics* (2008), by German theatre scholar Erika Fischer-Lichte. She named the new aesthetic an “aesthetic of the performative,” based on the self-generating and ever-changing autopoietic feedback loop between actors, i.e. performance and spectator. Of course, not all performances and especially not all theatre performances belong to the category of an aesthetic of the performative, only those where spectators can take a more or less active role in co-creating the performance. Fischer-Lichte (2008, 164) even proposes that these performances have not only articulated a new image of the artist but also propagated a new image of humans and society. The performances where several traditional dichotomies (performing and perceiving, reality and art, etc.) have been torn down create a liminal experience with several possibilities of transition. “The feedback loop thus identifies transformation as a fundamental category of an aesthetic of the performative” (Fischer-Lichte 2008, 50). Through numerous examples Fischer-Lichte demonstrates how a performance, either as an art form or a social event, can become a site and a vehicle of the performative.

### **Conclusion**

Performativity as a term has proliferated in so many disciplines that some scholars even write about a “performative turn” (about other turns, see Bachmann-Medick 2016). This development, however, is in itself not that new. Erika Fischer-Lichte (2008, 31) goes back to the turn of the last century to state that the first performative turn in European culture occurred with the establishment of ritual and theatre studies, since the first shifted the focus from myth to ritual and the latter from the literary text to the theatre performance. More commonly, the performative turn is associated with the popularity of the notions connected to theatre and performance in anthropology and sociology (Kenneth Burke, Victor Turner, Erving Goffman, Jean Duvignaud) in the 1940s and 1950s, in which the performative nature of society and human behaviour was highlighted. The performative turn in Western art took place in the early 1960s, making, on the one hand, different art forms more performative and eventful but, on the other hand, it also led to the (re-)creation of a new genre – performance art (Fischer-Lichte 2008, 18, 22). The new wave of popularity of performance and performativity is why we now perceive there to be a paradigmatic shift – a performative turn. In the 2010s, Patrice Pavis has listed areas of the humanities and social life that were, in his opinion, dominated by the theory of performativity as follows: a) the identity of gender, b) the actor’s performance and *mise-en-scène*, c) the anthropology of the body and corporeality, d) the ritual, e) the art of storytelling, f) the rhetoric of discourse and the control of spectators and lis-

teners, g) economy, h) the university, i) everyday and professional life (Pavis 2016, 164–67). We believe that performativity has continued to play a central role in all of these areas.

As the above discussion has shown, the notions of performance and performativity have had different complex genealogies. One dominant path comes through language philosophy, deconstruction and gender theory, the other through performance studies. The paths have mostly been independent of each other, but we believe that they can and should be brought together to generative cross-roads. This is especially important now when the intellectual field is reassessing its relationship with language and with anthropocentrism generally. Poststructuralist literary theory predominantly worked on language and discourse, to the extent that Butler herself cites a widespread criticism of her work in *Bodies that Matter*: “What about the materiality of the body, Judy?” (Butler 1993, viii). Today’s cultural theory has indeed taken a decisive turn away from language and discourse towards materiality and affect. Performance studies, too, is coming under increasing criticism for its perceived anthropocentrism, which necessitates a new range of questions about the human body and about the relationships between the human and the non-human (Salter 2020). Thus, although performativity may be perceived to be an old notion, it needs fresh attention in the 21st century.

In this special issue we address performativity in different disciplines and in different theoretical registers. Mieke Bal adds her theoretical meditation on the continued relevance of the distinction between performance and performativity for contemporary artistic practice. Raili Marling applies critical affect theories to the question of performance of emotions in contemporary fiction and autofiction. Tanel Lepsoo traces the use of passion performatives in the work of Marcel Proust and Jean Cocteau, relying on the work of Jacques Derrida and J. Hillis Miller. Richard Pettifer undertakes an ambitious theoretical project of developing an approach to non-human agency that can be adapted to the situation of theatre. Madli Pesti discusses space as an active agent. Jurgita Staniškytė’s theoretical overview of the notion of performativity is illustrated with examples from contemporary Lithuanian theatre. Performativity, however, also creates the need for new modes of reading, viewing or interacting. Thus Anneli Saro returns to the work of Erving Goffman and his frame analysis to propose a novel model of aesthetic reception. Marie-Luise Meier shows the presence of defaults in the seemingly free world of playing computer games. Technology and new genres require new interpretations of theories of performativity. Taavet Jansen and Aleksander Väljamäe engage in a creative dialogue on audience-performer relations created by the use of different experiments with physiological computing

in performative practice. Several articles return to the archives to trace the historical roots of performative practices: Katiliina Gielen and Maria-Kristiina Lotman look for the creation of self and other in early Estonian theatre translation, while Anne-Liis Maripuu investigates the performance of gender in Estonian modern dance in early 20th century.

We hope that this diverse range of texts will not only invite readers to reassess the relevance of performativity for analysing today's society of the spectacle, but also to consider its applicability to a wide range of texts, from novels and theatre performances to films and video games. Performativity, when lifted out of the narrow confines of linguistic speech acts and enriched with the understanding of bodily acts and the dialogic nature of perception in the context of arts, can help us understand the centrality of performativity in our interaction with arts and also in our existence as social subjects.

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