

What can a study of performance contribute to art education? What are performance studies and what is the object of their study? What relevance do performance studies have for history of art, visual culture, theatre, philology, philosophy, anthropology and education? What has been the attitude of playwrights, anthropologists, artists and educators to performance studies? What is the relationship between the study of drama and the study of performance arts and performativity?

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# Scenarios and actions for a theory of performance





Over the last forty years, the metaphor of theatricality has gradually extends from the terrain of the arts to other areas of knowledge in social sciences: sociology, anthropology, linguistics, philosophy... This re-territorialization of performance has led to a reappraisal of the political status of the theatre, in a context in which both terms have been redefined in relation to the other. Because of its nature as a «repeated construction» it has often been confined to the fringes, especially in light of the anti-theatre prejudice that has dominated the social sciences for quite some time<sup>1</sup>. But experiences such as direct action, political aesthetics and the practices of [feminist] embodiment have blurred the divisions between spectacle and reality, and the boundaries between art, life, politics and fiction. For performances are also essential acts of transferral and transmission of social knowledge, of cultural memory and a sense of identity, etc., which are perpetuated through repeated actions, which have come to be called «cultural performances»<sup>2</sup>, «social performances»<sup>3</sup> and «social dramas»<sup>4</sup>.

From this point of view, performance is at the same time a practice and an interpretative methodology, which allows us to analyse the majority of everyday events and behaviours *as* performances. Dwight Conquergood<sup>5</sup> defined the possibilities and characteristics of performance art using a series of alliterations: the *i*'s as in *imagination*, *inquiry*, and *intervention*; the *a*'s as in *artistry*, *analysis* and *activism*; and the *c*'s as in *creativity*, *criticism*, *citizenship*.

The many derivations of the term, nearly a philological exercise of disciplinary «translations», mean that the history of the practise of performance art is replete with strange transferrals that some critics have censured for their lack of definition at the disciplinary borders. Imported into a Spanish context, it has been referred to basically as *performance art* or *action art*, although this is only a minute part of what performance studies actually encompass. In this short cartography of the term, there is also another «bastard» concept: «performativity», which has radically transformed both the approach to artistic practices of performance in contemporary art and the very conceptualisation of the configuration of subjectivities in daily life, the policies and aesthetics of experimentation by minority [*queer*] groups.

Revisions of John Austin's work by philosophers such as Jacques Derrida and Judith Butler have eclipsed other minor localisations of the term «performativity», such as those offered by Lyotard and Marcuse, who defined it as the mechanism of operativity and functioning in the postmodern era —characterised by the power-knowledge relationship— where education and data optimisation, knowledge and information, legitimise each other through a series of repetitions subjected to parameters of productive effectiveness (economic, symbolic, political, etc.).

This territorial conquest by linguistic contributions that define the performative as a quality more of discourse than of performance has made it difficult to reclaim the use of performative in the terrain of performance. Some authors, including Diane Taylor, have proposed using the adjectivised form «the performative», which encompasses both the discursive and the embodied dimension. Accustomed to the potential connections between theory and activism, many performers saw this linguistic advance as involving a certain political paralysis, mainly because the distinctions between performance and performativity were not clear.

[...]

Performance is going to become one of the buzzwords of the twenty-first century, associated not only with the experimental art, but also with an analysis of functionality in capitalist technological and economic systems; with linguistic formations; with workforce regulation and with the regulating repetitions of gender, race and sexuality...

In a kind of futuristic prediction, Jon McKenzie envisaged that «performance will be to the twentieth and twenty-first centuries what discipline was to the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, that is, an onto-historical formation of power and knowledge»<sup>6</sup>. He suggested three paradigms of investigation from which to build a general theory of performance and understand its links to education, technology and labour in contemporary post-Ford societies. These three systems are constituted by means of performative processes of repetition and optimisation of data, of performance, of cultural, economic, political effectiveness, etc.:

1. Performance Management: organisational performance, of management and administration of multinationals, company administration and management posts, etc.
2. Techno-Performance: studies the operating ability of technological devices in everyday life (testing), telecommunications and the development of military and government technology, etc.
3. Performance Studies: analyses cultural performance —rituals social and artistic practices and performative acts— that make up our identity with regard to a series of corporal regulations.

McKenzie finds similarities in their respective operating systems, governed according in terms of efficacy, efficiency and effectiveness. In the organisational-manufacturing system: efficiency in the organisation in terms of bureaucratic economy. In the technological system: effectiveness in technical execution. And in the case in hand —the production of cultural capital and cultural performances— effectiveness

in terms of social and political justice, as well as effectiveness in the artistic execution of the performance, and in the transformation of the audience. Because the cultural paradigm has lived in a fantasy of permanent transgression *vis-à-vis* the other two systems, regulated more by institutional and economic relations. If, as Lyotard says, performativity is the postmodern condition, McKenzie attributes the fact that this regulatory feature has been ignored in performance studies precisely to the paradigmatic condition of the field, i.e., to the machinery of these studies which are «programmed» to generate a type of narrative that does not match this more regulatory vision of the performance.

This has been a serious omission on the part of a generation of theoreticians and artists who may have been too optimistic in theorising exclusively on the resistant and subversive part of performance. The repetition of these dissident features has overshadowed other performance genealogies, localisations, discourses and practices which could also form part of the constitution of the field. Thus, the language of subversion will accompany and coexist in a complicated fashion with the language of academic institutionalisation, which has turned the transgressive and effective security of the performance into a «liminal norm».

The pedagogy of performance should make it possible to analyse critically the social dynamic through which we are constituted by means of what one might call «unteaching acts», «contact pedagogies»<sup>7</sup>, or «aesthetics and policies of experimentation», which see in performance a reproductive-normative component and at the same time a reflective potential to deconstruct hegemonic representations and practices.

[...]

In both the US and the UK, *performance art* was developed more extensively in the field of the visual arts than the dramatic arts. This genealogy may help us understand why performance artists have historically tried to distinguish what they do from traditional dramatic arts in a context imbued by a certain anti-theatrical prejudice, suspicious of any cultural norms and methodological practices that might in some way be related to «spectacle», «simulation», «masquerade»... The paradoxical thing about this dissident position is that precisely at the time of the greatest boom in *performance art*, the avant-garde visual arts also built their identity in opposition to the theatrical and the performative, especially as a result of art critic Michael Fried's article «Art and Objecthood» (1967), which characterises the transfer from modernism to postmodernism in the visual arts as «theatrical», in a clearly disparaging adjectivization.

This tendency among «new» disciplinary formations to disqualify their relationship and affiliation with «previous» formations ends up homogenising the genealogical lines and «traditions» from which they

are supposed to be breaking away, often as a strategy for consolidating their «own» field. Even so, there have been artists and theoreticians who have sought to recover minor genealogies in order to open up new possibilities of hybridization in performance and theatricality, exploring unpredictable connections. Their efforts have centred on making visible the eccentric condition that both the dramatic arts and performance have had within the research areas of the humanities and, to a lesser extent also, in the panorama of cultural production and art education.

[...]

One of the peculiarities of *performance art* is its process-based and ephemeral nature. Because it coexists alongside loss and disappearance —of bodies, texts and actions— the moment and the experience generated become stronger than the register. This feature of performance has earned it a name for resisting capitalist hoarding regimes, although it would be naive to think that it does not participate in contexts of circulation of [cultural] capital and the fixing of meanings and representations.

Different theoreticians (Antonio Prieto, Jane Blocker, Peggy Phelan, etc.) and artists (Johannes Birringer, etc.), were to show an interest in the complicated connections between performance, repetition, register and representation, for example in the shift that occurred in the register of the performance, by decentering the auratic presence of the performers' bodies, as well as the unique experience in the audience's presence-testimony of the action taking place at that particular time. In this way, the importance of the action resides not only in the simultaneity and presence of the bodies present, but also in the historical nature and potential for other (posthumous) subjects who can generate other types of spectatorial encounters with this material. This is what has been termed «prosthetic performance»<sup>8</sup> or «performative writing»<sup>9</sup>, whereby the practice of writing the performance serves not only to preserve, fix and describe something, but precisely to re-produce it. As a result, the act of writing involves more the disappearance or production of other types of event, rather than a representation *of* the re-representation.

[...]

Performance studies are committed to study the social construction of the relations that are erected around the systems of ideological belief they build for us, and which organise our experience through cultural representations, practices and regulations. They do so not only through artistic practice.

In the educational context, the close relationship between performance and visual culture goes back to Visual Arts Education, when the first American Theatre Department appeared in the School of Fine and

Applied Arts in Carnegie Mellon University in 1914. A few years later, when performance emerged as a provocative tool for artistic innovation in the 1960s and 1970s, art schools considered it necessary to re-evaluate their study programmes and teaching methods and incorporate performance into their art curricula.

Indeed, performance studies, like visual culture studies, emerged in a period characterised by a revision of traditional academic disciplines<sup>10</sup>, and the «cultural wars» that took place at this time of professional and social opposition. Defined as «anti-discipline», «interdiscipline», «post-discipline» or even «indiscipline», performance studies became consolidated from the 1980s on. This «indiscipline» has gradually extended territorially, especially in the United States, but also in other countries such as Australia, England, Scotland, France, Mexico and Brazil, among others. In the Spanish context, there is no field of studies defined as such from which performers and theoreticians can explicitly recognise their affiliations, although one could undoubtedly trace an emerging genealogy from which one might build a map of local practices.

A similar process of hybridization occurred in the formation of visual culture studies. The publication of a questionnaire in *October* magazine in 1996 sparked heated debates on the need to incorporate changes in the curriculum. Some critics argued that visual culture had been built along the lines of anthropology (a criticism also levelled against performance studies because of their interest in ethnographic ritual and methodologies), which distanced it from a relationship with art history. They also warned of the danger of producing subjects for a globalised market, referring not only to the knowledge market, but also to the encouragement of objects of study linked to a market of consumer products and goods (advertisements, films, etc.).

[...]

Hybridisations in the intellectual and artistic panorama of the 1970s and 1980s revolved around the three axes or «cultural turns». These did not always co-exist peacefully, perhaps because of the anxiety in a changing context of academic struggles:

1. Those who stressed the importance of language as opposed to perception (the «linguistic turn»), and who emphasised the textualization of culture, producing a shift in emphasis from literature to popular culture, communication, creation of meaning, the circulation of discourses, the narrative constitution of subjectivity, the acts of speaking and writing, etc. In the specific case of cultural studies, they favoured a committed study of the literacy of the popular classes and an interest in the practices of reception, consumption and construction of meaning.

2. Those who focused on the political implications of certain visual practices (the «visual turn»), centring on a study of images in relation to the circulation and power of mediation of the performances, the incorporation of pleasure into the forms of seeing and the practices of spectatoriality in the «consumption» of the visual, the formation of identity, etc. Just as there was a shift in cultural studies with regard to literature, in visual culture studies there was a clear need for a separation from art history, often unjustly condemned as being elitist because it ignored the contributions made by other minor enclaves, such as feminist and postcolonial art history.
3. Those who emphasised the forgotten role of the body (the «theatrical» turn), who highlighted the importance of embodiment practices and the use of «theatrical» concepts to understand current forms of identity configuration. In performance studies, the strongest points tended more towards a discussion on the embodiment of the discourse, re-presentation, identity, and the body, an analysis of the strategies through which power operates, the search for tactics of resistance and policies of experimentation, the gradual abandonment of theatre and the championing of performance and ethnography as a political practice, etc.

[...]

The emergence of performance studies coincided with a growth in personal narratives following the Second World War, when there was an increase in the number of people writing memoirs and autobiographies in the United States<sup>11</sup>. Together with the new identity movements organised around civil rights, this fostered an interest in giving voice to the experience of subjects through narratives such as ethnodrama, dramatised biography, storytelling, etc. These narratives, which sometimes took the form of performances (mainly by feminist artists), highlighted the issue of the formation of subjectivity in relation to gender, sexuality, age, race, trauma, disease cultures, disabilities, etc. But it was not until the period after 1960 that performativity would become the prevailing model for understanding the articulation of the subject and identity in the contemporary world.

Feminist performance criticism has made a fundamental contribution to the debate and to the growth in the practice of performance and theories on the constitution of subjectivity. From this perspective, the recovery of the artistic panorama of the 1960s and 1970s has highlighted not only the recovery of the role of women artists at a time when they were still very underrepresented in art institutions (schools, galleries, museums, criticism, historiography, etc.), but also their significant contributions to experimentation with other types of artistic practice, where performance actions played a key role in championing body politics. In some institutions, the perspective of performance studies was adopted as a



result of a feminist revision of the curriculum. One of the most significant examples was the educational experience of Judy Chicago in 1970s. Beatriz Preciado has already written about this experience in the 54th issue of this magazine and there is therefore no need for me to go into greater detail about it here.

What exactly do all these genealogies have to do with each other? Can a student develop his or her artistic practice while at the same time looking in greater depth at such different approaches? How is all this reflected in the pedagogic strategies of performance studies? What is really the transforming capacity of performance studies when it comes to adjusting to specific needs and circumstances?

## Notes

- 1 Because of its association with artifice, representation, mimicry, audience immediacy, etc. although more recently the «theatrical turn» in the social sciences has reassessed concepts that have come to form part of poststructuralist, postcolonial and feminist-queer theories, such as the masquerade, mimicry, performativity, drag.
- 2 These are occasions through which we reflect on ourselves and define ourselves as a culture or a society, by «dramatising» our collective histories and myths, while at the same time through other alternatives, (religious festivities, rites, etc.) we also present ourselves with opportunities for change.
- 3 Ordinary interactions from the day-to-day life of individuals, and their consequences. In most of these interactions, we are not fully aware that they are culturally regulated. The sociologist Erving Goffman was one of the most important theoreticians to use the dramaturgical model applied to social reality.
- 4 The anthropologist Victor Turner tried to devise a model that would allow an analysis of way rites of passage were organised, in order to understand breakdowns in the social, personal, psychic and cultural unity of individuals and societies. The phase performance theoreticians were most fond of was the «liminal» phase, which furnished a model that could be used to theorise on the ways in which theatre and other types of art practice could transform individuals and society.
- 5 In Madison Soyini and Hamera Judith (2006: xii) (Ed.) *The Sage Handbook of Performance Studies*. London: Sage Publications.
- 6 McKenzie Jon (2001:18) *Perform or Else. From Discipline to Performance*. London and New York: Routledge.
- 7 I have referred to these concepts in another writing «event».  
See → <http://aulabierta.info/node/785>
- 8 Cheng Meiling (2002) *In Other Los Angeleses: Multicentric Performance Art*. Los Angeles: University of California Press.
- 9 See Pollock Della (1998) «Performing Writing», in Phelan Peggy, Lane Jill (Ed.) (1998) *The Ends of Performance*. New York and London: New York University Press; Allsop Ric (1999) «Performance Writing», in Auslander Philip (Ed.) (2003) *Performance. Critical Concepts in Literary and Cultural Studies*. Vol. II. London and New York: Routledge.
- 10 These disciplinary debates were initially led by two universities, New York University (NYU) and Northwestern University (NWU) in Chicago.
- 11 See Denzin Norman (2003) *Performance Ethnography: Critical Pedagogy and the Politics of Culture*. London: Sage Publications.