

Performance: a critical introduction

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According to Bauman, all performance involves a consciousness of doubleness, through which the actual execution of an action is placed in mental comparison with a potential, an ideal, or a remembered original model of that action. Normally this comparison is made by an observer of the action - the theatre public, the school's teacher, the scientist - but the double consciousness, not the external observation, is what is most central. An athlete, for example, may be aware of his own performance, placing it against a mental standard. Performance is always performance for someone, some audience that recognizes and validates it as performance even when, as is occasionally the case, that audience is the self.

When we consider the various kinds of activity that are referred to on the modern cultural scene as "performance" or "performance art," these are much better understood in relation to this over-arching semantic field than to the more traditional orientation suggested by the piano-playing Ms. Pritchard, who felt that so long as she was not displaying a virtuosic skill she could not be "performing." Some modern "performance" is centrally concerned with such skills (as in the acts of some of the clowns and jugglers included among the so-called "new vaudevillians"), but much more central to this phenomenon is the sense of an action carried out for someone, an action involved in the peculiar doubling that comes with consciousness and with the elusive "other" that performance is not but which it constantly struggles in vain to embody.

Although traditional theatre has regarded this "other" as a character in a dramatic action, embodied (through performance) by an actor, modern performance art has, in general, not been centrally concerned with this dynamic. Its practitioners, almost by definition, do not base their work upon characters previously created by other artists, but upon their own bodies, their own autobiographies, their own specific experiences in a culture or in the world, made performative by their consciousness of them and the process of displaying them for audiences. Since the emphasis is upon the performance, and on how the body or self is articulated through performance, the individual body remains at the center of such presentations. Typical performance art is solo art, and the typical performance artist uses little of the elaborate scenic surroundings of the traditional stage, but at most a few props, a bit of furniture, and whatever costume (sometimes even nudity) is most suitable to the performance situation.

It is not surprising that such performance has become a highly visible - one might almost say emblematic-art form in the contemporary world, a world that is highly self-conscious, reflexive, obsessed with simulations and theatricalizations in every aspect of its social awareness. With performance as a kind of critical wedge, the metaphor of theatricality has moved out of the arts into almost every aspect of modern attempts to understand our condition and activities, into almost every branch of the human sciences-sociology, anthropology, ethnography, psychology, linguistics. And as performativity and theatricality have been developed in these fields, both as metaphors and as analytic tools, theorists and practitioners of performance art have in turn become aware of these developments and found in them new sources of stimulation, inspiration, and insight for their own creative work and the theoretical understanding of it.

Cultural performance may indeed function as a kind of metacommentary on its society, and may be best studied in that function by ethnographers, but neither performers nor spectators can be primarily characterized as consciously seeking out cultural performance as metacommentary on their culture. In "theatrical" performance, however, this concern is central. Performers and audience alike accept that a primary function of this activity is precisely cultural and social metacommentary, the exploration of self and other, of the world as experienced, and of alternative possibilities.