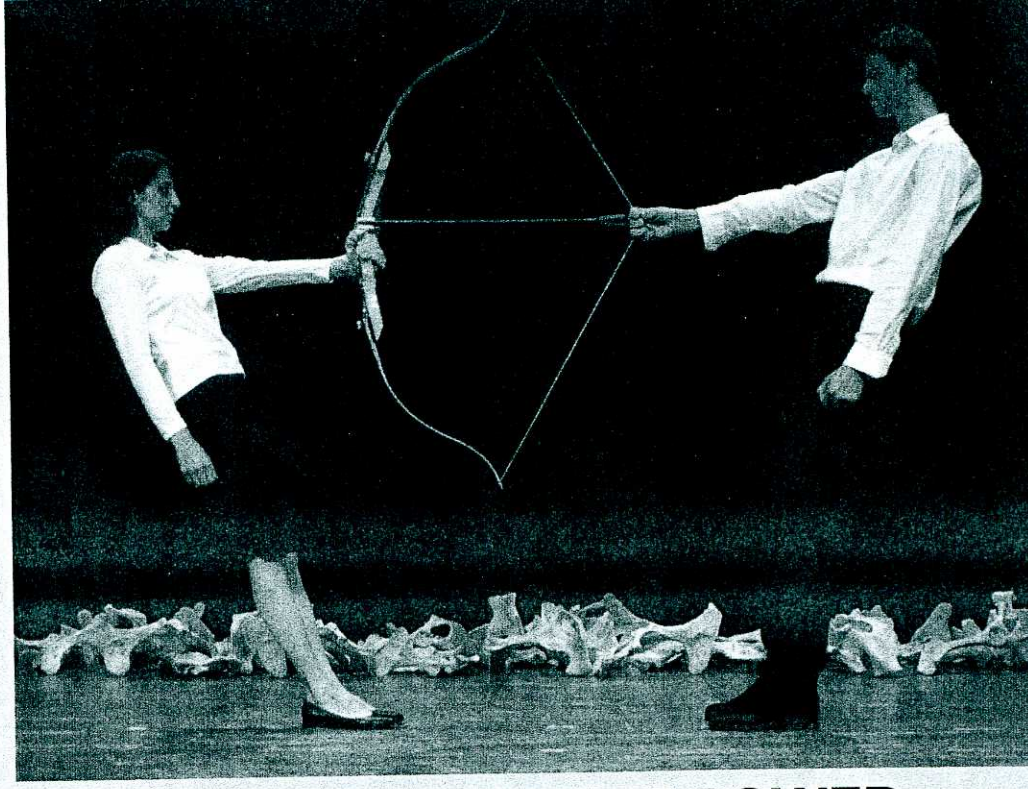

THE TRANSFORMATIVE POWER OF PERFORMANCE

A new aesthetics

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Chapter 2

Explaining concepts

Performativity and performance

Performativity

The term "performative" was coined by John L. Austin. He introduced it to language philosophy in his lecture series entitled "How to do things with words," held at Harvard University in 1955. The coinage of this term coincided with the period I have identified as the performative turn in the arts. While Austin initially used the term "performatory," he ultimately decided in favor of "performative," which is "shorter, less ugly, more tractable, and more traditional in formation" (1963: 6). One year later, he wrote an essay entitled "Performative Utterances" in which he elaborated on his choice: "You are more than entitled not to know what the word 'performative' means. It is a new word and an ugly word, and perhaps it does not mean anything very much. But at any rate there is one thing in its favor, it is not a profound word" (1970: 233).

The neologism became necessary because Austin had made a revolutionary discovery in language philosophy: linguistic utterances not only serve to make statements but they also perform actions, thus distinguishing constative from performative utterances. He named this second type of utterance "explicit performatives." When the words "I name this ship the 'Queen Elizabeth'" are uttered while a bottle is smashed against the stern of a ship or when a man speaks the words "I do [take this woman to be my lawful wedded wife]" in the course of a marriage ceremony, these statements do not simply assert a pre-existing circumstance. It is impossible to classify them as true or false. Instead, these utterances create an entirely new social reality: the ship now carries the name *Queen Elizabeth*; Ms. X and Mr. Y are now married to each other. Uttering these sentences effectively changes the world. Performative utterances are self-referential and constitutive in so far as they bring forth the social reality they are referring to. Austin formulated a theory that, while new to language philosophy, had been intuitively known to and practiced by speakers of all languages. Speech entails a transformative power.

The above examples fall under formulaic speech acts but using the correct phrase alone does not make an utterance performative. A number of other, non-linguistic conditions must be satisfied – or else, the utterance will fail. If, for example, the phrase "I now pronounce you man and wife" is not spoken either

by a registrar or a priest or any other explicitly authorized person, then it does not constitute a real marriage. The necessary conditions are not just linguistic but institutional by nature; they are social conditions. A performative utterance always addresses a community, represented by the people present in a given situation – it can therefore be regarded as the performance of a social act. It does not simply validate a marriage but performs it at the same time.

Austin collapsed the binary opposition between constatives and performatives in the course of his lectures. Instead, he suggested a division into three categories: locutionary, illocutionary, and perlocutionary acts. He demonstrated that speaking always involves acting, which in turn makes it possible for statements to actually succeed or fail and for performative utterances to be true or false (Felman 1983; Kraemer and Stahlhut 2001: 35–64). Austin's strategy of collapsing the initial distinction between performatives and constatives led Sybille Kraemer to argue for "the susceptibility of all criteria and the exposure of all definitive terms to the uncertainties, the imponderability, and ambiguity connected with real life" (2001: 45). That is to say, Austin drew attention to the performative act as the vehicle for the dynamics "that destabilize the dichotomous terminological scheme as a whole" (Kraemer and Stahlhut 2001: 56).

This aspect is of particular importance for developing an aesthetics of the performative. As the introductory examples from theatre and performance and action art revealed, dichotomous pairs such as subject/object and signifier/signified lose their polarity and clear definition in performance; once set in motion they begin to oscillate. Despite Austin's deliberate abandonment of the constative-performative distinction, he nonetheless reaffirmed his definition of ("explicit") performatives as speech acts that are self-referential and constitute reality. As such, they can succeed or fail because of their particular institutional and social conditions (however, his extensive and detailed "doctrine of Infelicities" suggests that Austin was far more interested in their failure). Another characteristic of the performative lies in its ability to destabilize and even collapse binary oppositions.

Austin applied the term "performative" solely to speech acts but his definition does not rule out the possibility of relating it to physical actions such as those performed in *Lips of Thomas*. In fact, such an interpretation almost imposes itself on us because Abramović performed self-referential acts that constituted reality (which all actions finally do), thus transforming artist and spectators. But how do we measure success and failure in this case? Evidently, the artist really did consume too much honey and wine and injured herself with the razor blade and whip. The spectators, in turn, did put an end to Abramović's performance by removing her from the cross of ice. Did the performance succeed or fail? What are the necessary institutional conditions to assess the "success" or "failure" of this performance?

As an "artistic" performance, *Lips of Thomas* primarily referenced the conditions established by the institutions of art[1] (Buerger and Buerger 1992). The performance space provided a frame of reference for the participants; in this case, the art gallery explicitly situated her actions within the institutions of art. But what follows from

this? What exactly were the conditions laid down by the institutions of art at the beginning of the 1970s – a period that fundamentally redefined and restructured these institutions both from the margins and the center? Unlike the institutional conditions of a marriage ceremony or baptism, the institutions of art simply do not provide any definitive criteria for reaching a confident verdict on the success or failure of a performance shaped by audience intervention.

Moreover, the performance was not framed by the parameters of art alone; it also exhibited elements of ritual as well as spectacle. This raises the question whether and to what extent the genres "ritual" and "spectacle" are transformed into an artistic performance. It remains to be explored to what extent these genres collide with each other and with the overarching framework given by the arts, and how they determine the success or failure of a performance (Bateson 1972: 177–93; Goffman 1974).

Evidently, Austin's list of prerequisites for a performative utterance to succeed[2] cannot simply be applied to an aesthetics of the performative. As Abramović's *Lips of Thomas* demonstrated, the very circumstance that the various frameworks interacted and collided also constituted an important aspect of the performance's aesthetic, especially with regard to the transformation of the participants. Who could claim the authority to ascertain whether a performance had succeeded or failed? At least in this context, the question of success or failure does not apply; evidently, the term "performative" requires further modification within an aesthetics of the performative.

While the term "performative" has lost some of its appeal within its original discipline of language philosophy – specifically since speech act theory popularized the notion of "speaking as acting" – it experienced a second heyday in cultural studies and cultural theory of the 1990s. Until the late 1980s, the notion of "culture as text" dominated cultural studies. Specific cultural phenomena as well as entire cultures were conceived as structured webs of signs waiting to be deciphered. Numerous attempts to describe and interpret culture were launched and designated as "readings." This notion specified the decoding and interpretation of texts as the central activity of cultural studies. Texts, preferably in foreign, nearly inscrutable, languages, were decoded and translated while other established texts were reread for their subtexts and thereby deconstructed in the act of interpretation.

In the 1990s, a shift in focus occurred, favoring the – hitherto largely ignored – performative traits of culture. Cultural studies increasingly employed this independent (practical) frame of reference for the analysis of existing or potential realities and acknowledged the specific "realness" of cultural activities and events, which lay beyond the grasp of traditional text models. This gave rise to the notion of "culture as performance" (Conquergood 1991: 179–94). Simultaneously, the term "performative" was given a theoretical reconsideration in order to accommodate explicitly bodily acts.

Without referring directly to Austin, Judith Butler introduced the term "performative" to cultural philosophy in her essay of 1988 entitled "Performative Acts and Gender Constitution: An Essay in Phenomenology and Feminist Theory"

(1990: 270–82). Butler argues that gender identity – like all forms of identity – is not based on pre-existing (e.g. ontological or biological) categories but brought forth by the continuous constitution of bodily acts: "In this sense, gender is in no way a stable identity or locus of agency from which various speech acts proceed; rather, it is ... an identity instituted through a *stylized repetition of acts*" (270). Butler labels these acts "performative," "where 'performative' itself carries the double-meaning of 'dramatic' and 'non-referential'" (273). While at first this definition seems to differ considerably from Austin's, the differences are actually minimal since they largely depend on Butler's reapplication of the term to bodily rather than speech acts.

Performative acts (as bodily acts) are "non-referential" because they do not refer to pre-existing conditions, such as an inner essence, substance, or being supposedly expressed in these acts; no fixed, stable identity exists that they could express. Expressivity thus stands in an oppositional relation to performativity. Bodily, performative acts do not express a pre-existing identity but engender identity through these very acts. Moreover, the term "dramatic" refers to this process of generating identities: "By dramatic I mean ... that the body is not merely matter but a continual and incessant *materializing* of possibilities. One is not simply a body, but, in some very key sense, one does one's body ..." (272). The specific materiality of the body emerges out of the repetition of certain gestures and movements; these acts generate the body as individually, sexually, ethnically, and culturally marked. Performative acts thus are of crucial importance in constituting bodily as well as social identity. In so far, Butler's definition corresponds to Austin's "performative" as being "self-referential" and "constituting reality."

Yet, the shift from speech acts to bodily acts implies consequences that mark a crucial difference between Austin's and Butler's respective definitions. While Austin emphasized the criteria of success/failure and subsequently inquired after the functional conditions for success (posing a fundamental problem for us with regard to Abramović's performance), Butler investigates the phenomenal conditions for embodiment. She cites Merleau-Ponty, who does not regard the body merely as a historical idea but as a repertoire of infinite possibilities, that is as "an active process of embodying certain cultural and historical possibilities" (272). Butler stresses the performative constitution of identity that occurs in the process of embodiment, defining the latter as "a manner of doing, dramatizing and reproducing an *historical* situation" (272). The stylized repetition of performative acts embodies certain cultural and historical possibilities. Performative acts, in turn, generate the culturally and historically marked body as well as its identity.

Nonetheless, individuals alone do not control the conditions for the processes of embodiment; they are not free to choose what possibilities to embody, or which identity to adopt. Neither are they wholly determined by society. While society might attempt to enforce the embodiment of certain possibilities by punishing deviation, it cannot generally prevent individuals from pursuing them. Evidently, Butler's concept of performative acts reaffirms their capacity to collapse dichotomies, already recognized by Austin. On the one hand, society violates

the individual bodies by imposing performative acts that constitute gender and identity. On the other hand, performative acts offer the possibility for individuals to embody themselves, even if this means deviating from dominant norms and provoking social sanctions.

Butler likens the conditions for embodiment to those of theatrical performance. In both cases, the acts that generate and perform gender roles are "clearly not one's act alone." They constitute a "shared experience" and "collective action" because they have always already begun before "one arrived on the scene." Consequently, the repetition of an act comprises a "reenactment" and a "reexperiencing" based on a repertoire of meanings already socially instituted. Cultural codes neither inscribe themselves onto a passive body nor do the embodied selves precede cultural conventions that give meaning to the body. In a theatrical performance, a text can be staged in various ways, and the actors may interpret and realize their roles within its textual framework. Similarly, the gendered body acts within a bodily space, restricted by certain demands. It enacts its individual interpretations within the limits of the given "stage directions." The conditions for embodiment thus coincide with the conditions of performance.[3]

As formulated in this early essay,[4] Butler's theory of performative acts sets its focus on bodily performative acts and processes of embodiment, thus complementing Austin's theory of the success or failure of speech acts. However, a cursory review of Abramović's performance shows that Butler's definition requires further modification with regard to an aesthetics of the performative.

The notion of the body as an embodiment of certain historical possibilities can indeed – and very productively – be applied to Abramović's use of her body. In the course of her performance, Abramović embodied various historical possibilities, which were relevant not only at the time of the performance but were for the large part already established as such in her time. The flagellation scene, for example, oscillated between historical (flagellation practiced by nuns) and contemporary (punitive and torture procedures or sadomasochistic sex practices) possibilities. Abramović's actions also did not restage a historical pattern through mere repetition. Instead, she modified it significantly: she did not suffer the violence, the pain, and the ordeals she inflicted on herself passively. On the contrary – she remained the active perpetrator at all times. Moreover, we are not dealing with the repetition of performative acts that is central to Butler's argument since every act occurred only once in the course of Abramović's performance. The processes of embodiment enacted in *Lips of Thomas* as well as in all other types of performance – theatrical and non-theatrical – require additional definitions, as does Butler's notion of "performative," especially because we are dealing with aesthetic and therefore "displaced" reenactments here. Butler only refers to practices of everyday life and hardly to strictly aesthetic processes.

By setting up the conditions for embodiment as the conditions for performance, Butler emphasizes another interesting parallel between her and Austin's theory (once more without referring to Austin). Both see the accomplishment of performative acts as ritualized, public performances. The close relationship between performativity

and performance seems obvious and self-explanatory to them. Performativity results in performances or manifests itself in the performative nature of acts, as was already apparent in the performative turn in the arts. As a result, traditional art forms tended to realize themselves as performances and new art forms such as performance and action art were created, which in their terminology already explicitly referred to their performative nature. It follows that both Austin and Butler seemingly view performance as the epitome of the performative, even if neither of them further elucidates the notion of performance.

Yet it seems plausible, almost self-explanatory, to root an aesthetics of the performative in the concept of performance. This would add a new aesthetic theory of performance to existing theories of performativity. Since the 1960s and 1970s, numerous theories of performance have been developed in the social sciences, especially in cultural anthropology and sociology. In fact, their popularity grew to such an extent that today performance is seen as "an essentially contested concept" (Carlson 1996: 1). In the arts and social sciences, "performance" has already become an umbrella term, deplored by Dell Hymes as early as 1975: "If some grammarians have confused matters, by lumping what does not interest them under 'performance,' ... cultural anthropologists and folklorists have not done much to clarify the situation. We have tended to lump what *does* interest us under 'performance'" (13). Since then the situation has deteriorated further still.[5]

Instead of appealing to different approaches to performance, ranging from sociology and cultural anthropology to cultural studies more generally, it would make more sense for an aesthetics of the performative to refer to the first (to my knowledge) attempts to theorize performance, dating back to the first two decades of the twentieth century. These attempts aimed at establishing a new discipline of art: theatre studies.[6]

Performance

The establishment of theatre studies as an independent academic discipline in Germany at the beginning of the twentieth century and its popularization as an essential addition to the academic discourse of the arts represented a break with prevalent notions of theatre.[7] Since the eighteenth century, dramatic literature had become central to the concept of theatre in Germany; it was not just to serve as a moral institution but to be realized as a "textual" art. By the end of the nineteenth century, the artistic value of theatre seemed to be almost exclusively determined, even legitimized, by its reference to dramatic works, i.e. literary texts. Yet, as early as 1798, Johann Wolfgang von Goethe suggested that theatre as an art form ought to be judged on the basis of performance, as he lays out in his essay entitled "On truth and probability in works of art;" Richard Wagner elaborated on this idea in *The Artwork of the Future* (1849). Nevertheless, the majority of their nineteenth-century contemporaries based their assessments of a performance's artistic value on the staged text. As late as 1918, the theatre critic Alfred Klaar

polemicized about the budding discipline theatre studies: "The stage can only attain its full value if literature contributes its content" (1918).

Accordingly, theatre was regarded as the object of literary studies. Max Herrmann, founder of theatre studies in Berlin and a specialist in medieval and early modern German literature, turned to advocate the centrality of the performance itself. He urged for the establishment of a new discipline in the arts – theatre studies – arguing that performance, not literature, constituted theatre: "... it is the performance that matters ..." (1914: 118). He considered the mere privileging of performance over text insufficient and proclaimed instead a fundamental polarity between the two that precluded a harmonious union: "I am convinced that ... theatre and drama ... are originally oppositional, ... the symptoms of this opposition consistently reveal themselves: drama is the textual creation of an individual, theatre is the achievement of the audience and its servants" (1918 – in response to Alfred Klaar). Since existing disciplines dealt exclusively with texts and ignored performances as objects of study, theatre required the establishment of a new discipline. Hence, theatre studies was founded in Germany as the discipline devoted to performance.

Notably, the reversal of text and performance implemented by Herrmann in order to establish the new discipline of theatre as performance was not the only such development at the turn of the last century. Ritual studies emerged around the same time as an academic discipline. While the nineteenth century maintained a clear hierarchy of myth over ritual – whereby ritual merely illustrated, "performed," myth – this relationship was now reversed. In his *Lectures on the Religion of the Semites* (1889), William Robertson Smith proposed that myths merely served the interpretation of rituals; ritual, not myth, deserved primary attention:

> So far as myths consist of explanations of ritual their value is altogether secondary, and it may be affirmed with confidence that in almost every case the myth was derived from the ritual, and not the ritual from the myth; for the ritual was fixed and the myth was variable, the ritual was obligatory and faith in the myth was at the discretion of the worshipper.
>
> (1889: 19)

In consequence, religious studies shifted its focus toward rituals: they were hailed as the underlying principle of religion – practice superseded doctrinal teachings. In turn, the predominance of religious texts, prevalent in Protestant cultures, came under attack. In his research, Smith focused on sacrificial rituals, such as a camel sacrifice customary among Arab tribes described by the fourth century B.C. writer Nilus, or Jewish sacrificial rituals from the Old Testament. He interpreted the camel sacrifice as an ancient totemic practice and proposed it to be a "merry sacrificial feast" (239). The performance of the sacrifice by the community, the common consumption of the meat and blood of the sacrificial animal – a deity, as Smith presumed in accordance with totemic practices – permanently tied

all participants into "a bond of union" (252, 295). The feast evoked a sense of community and, as ritual, was able to produce a political community. Once more, the performative acts were pivotal for the ritual in order to bring forth what they performed: the social reality of a community.

Smith's theory of sacrificial rituals proved extremely influential not only in religious studies but also in cultural anthropology, sociology, and the classics. In the foreword to the first edition of *The Golden Bough* (1890), the anthropologist James George Frazer attributed the central idea of his book – the conception of a slain and resurrected god – to William Robertson Smith. The sociologist Emile Durkheim also felt indebted to Smith, acknowledging that his *Lectures* single-handedly convinced him of the central role of religion in social life.[8]

The arguments for the establishment of both ritual and theatre studies were similar in kind. Both cases advocated the reversal of hierarchical positions: from myth to ritual and from the literary text to the theatre performance. In other words, both ritual and theatre studies repudiated the privileged status of texts in favor of performances. It could thus be said that the first performative turn in twentieth-century European culture did not have its place in the performance culture of the 1960s and 1970s but occurred much earlier with the establishment of ritual and theatre studies at the turn of the last century.[9]

Jane Ellen Harrison, head of the so-called Cambridge Ritualists, a group of classical scholars, even went so far as to draw a direct, genealogical connection between ritual and theatre, emphasizing the pre-eminence of performance over text. In her extensive study entitled *Themis: A Study of the Social Origin of Greek Religion* (1912), she developed a theory of Greek theatre as originating out of ritual. Harrison based her arguments on a ritual dedicated to the spring daemon (*eniautos daemon*), which she saw as the precursor to the Dionysian ritual. Harrison strove to prove that the dithyramb – according to Aristotle, the origin of tragedy – was nothing but the song for the *eniautos daemon* and a fundamental component of the *eniautos daemon* ritual. Gilbert Murray contributed to Harrison's study with his "Excursus on the Ritual Forms Preserved in Greek Tragedy" in which he discussed numerous tragedies, including Euripides' *The Bacchae*. It is noteworthy that of all the late tragedian's plays, Murray chose his last one to prove his theory. He argued that the elements of *Agon*, *Pathos*, *Messenger*, *Threnos*, and *Theophany* (epiphany), already attributed to the *eniautos daemon* ritual by Harrison, continued to play similar roles in the tragedies (Fischer-Lichte 2005: 30–45).

Harrison's theory fundamentally challenged contemporary beliefs about Greek culture as primarily textual and thus paradigmatic for modern cultural values. The much admired texts of Greek tragedy and comedy suddenly deflated into belated results of ritual actions, originally performed to celebrate a seasonal god. Theatre as well as text developed out of ritual; furthermore, text was written in order to be performed.

While Harrison's theories today are studied largely for their historical value, they still offer significant insights into the performative turn of culture, as a result of which the concept of performance gained central importance and demanded

careful theoretical reconsideration. Max Herrmann was one of the pioneers to undertake a detailed theorization of performance in his various writings between 1910 and 1930.

At the heart of his deliberations lies the relationship between actors and spectators:

> [The] original meaning of theatre refers to its conception as social play – played by all for all. A game in which everyone is a player – actors and spectators alike … The spectators are involved as co-players. In this sense the audience is the creator of the theatre. So many different participants constitute the theatrical event that its social nature cannot be lost. Theatre always produces a social community.
>
> (1981: 19)

The bodily co-presence of actors and spectators enables and constitutes performance. For a performance to occur, actors and spectators must assemble to interact in a specific place for a certain period of time. By describing it as "play by all for all," Herrmann is fundamentally redefining the relationship between actors and spectators. The latter no longer represent distanced or empathetic observers and interpreters of the actors' actions onstage; nor do they act as intellectual decoders of messages conveyed by the actions of the actors. Herrmann's theory also does not imply a subject–object relationship in which spectators turn actors into objects of their observation, while the actors (as subjects) cease to confront the audience (as objects) with non-negotiable messages. Instead, their bodily co-presence creates a relationship between co-subjects. Through their physical presence, perception, and response, the spectators become co-actors that generate the performance by participating in the "play." The rules that govern the performance correspond to the rules of a game, negotiated by all participants – actors and spectators alike; they are followed and broken by all in equal measure. The concept of performance proposed here and elaborated in the following by no means suggests an essentialist definition. Rather, it describes the underlying factors that, in my view, must be given when applying the term performance. This does not preclude the possibility of applying other definitions of the concept in other contexts.

Herrmann certainly did not reach his insights into the particular *mediality* of theatre solely on the basis of theoretical or historical deliberations. Contemporary theatre performances contributed their share. Max Reinhardt, in particular, pushed for new spatial compositions in his productions that forced the audience out of their occluded position in the proscenium theatre and enabled them to realize new ways of interacting with the actors. In *Sumurun* (1910), Reinhardt set up a *hanamichi*, a broad runway conventionally used in Japanese *Kabuki* theatre, across the auditorium of the *Kammerspiele* at the Deutsches Theater Berlin. Thus, all events occurred amidst the spectators. Both the stage area and the *hanamichi* were used by the actors simultaneously. In fact, they seemed to enter the *hanamichi*

precisely "at some vital point in each scene," as one theatre reviewer chidingly remarked at a New York City guest performance.[10] Inevitably, the audience was distracted from the events onstage by the actors that entered onto the *hanamichi*. Alternatively, those who fixedly watched the happenings onstage missed the appearances on the *hanamichi*. By being forced to independently prioritize their sensorial impressions, the spectators actively joined in creating the performance. The game of performance was played according to rules set up between actors and spectators – they were open to negotiation (Fischer-Lichte 1997: 61–72).

Reinhardt's productions of *King Oedipus* (1910) and the *Oresteia* (1911) at the Circus Schumann in Berlin exemplified the new-found negotiability, as the chorus repeatedly moved through the audience and actors emerged from behind and among the spectators. As the theatre critic Siegfried Jacobsohn noted: "... the heads of the spectators [could hardly] be distinguished from those of the extras who were actually standing amidst the audience" (1912: 51). Alfred Klaar, one of the defendants of the literary text against Herrmann's prioritization of the performance, complained that in Reinhardt's *Oresteia*

> the distribution of the acting onto the space in front of, beneath, behind, and among us; the never-ending demand to shift our points of view; the actors flooding into the auditorium with their fluttering costumes, wigs, and make-up, jostling against our bodies; the dialogues held across great distances; the sudden shouts from all corners of the theatre, which startle and misguide us – all this is confusing: It does not reinforce the illusion but destroys it.
>
> (1911)

It was evidently impossible for the spectators to maintain their traditional position of distanced or empathetic observers. Each audience member was forced to reposition themselves with regard to the actors and other spectators. The performance literally occurred *between* the actors and spectators, and even between the spectators themselves (Fischer-Lichte 2005: 46–68). In order to reenergize the relationship between actors and spectators, Reinhardt repeatedly questioned the given medial conditions of the theatre by reinterpreting the bodily co-presence of actors and spectators.

In accordance with his definition of performance as an *event* between actors and spectators – that is, not fixed or transferable but ephemeral and transient – Herrmann neither took the dramatic texts nor the set and props into consideration in the process of his analysis. Although he attributed artistic value to some set designs, he strongly argued against naturalistic and expressionistic backdrops, judging them "a fundamental mistake of great significance" (1930: 152). To him, these aspects did not contribute to the concept of performance. Instead, the actors' moving bodies constituted the unique, fleeting materiality of the performance: "Acting is the principal factor of theatre ..." Acting alone was responsible for creating "the only true and pure work of art that theatre is capable of producing" (152). Herrmann shifted the focus away from the fictive characters in their fictive

world, brought forth by the acting, towards the "real body" and to "real space" (152). He did not regard the body on stage as a mere carrier of meaning – a popular notion since the eighteenth century – but foregrounded the specific materiality of bodies and space, which sets in motion the performance in the first place.

Max Reinhardt's approach to theatre equally foregrounded the specific materiality of performance. His innovative theatre spaces, such as the *hanamichi* or the arena of the Circus Schumann, were not meant to reveal fictive places in a new light. As "real" spaces, they offered new possibilities for the actors to enter, move, and act so as to stimulate unusual perceptual experiences in the audience.

Reinhardt took a similar approach in his productions with regard to the acting. In their reviews of his *Electra* production (adapted from Sophocles by Hugo von Hofmannsthal at the Kleines Theater Berlin in 1903) as well as of his *King Oedipus* and *Oresteia*, critics deplored the unabashed use of the actors' bodies that accentuated their physicality, distracting the audience from the fictional characters they were meant to portray. Particularly Gertrud Eysoldt, in her role as Electra, was criticized for flaunting her body immoderately and with tremendous intensity on stage. To the critics, Eysoldt violated the norms of performing Greek tragedies by lacking "force," "dignity," and a "sonorous tone." In their place they found "nervosity," "unrestrained passion," and "raucous shouting" (Engel 1903). Eysoldt transgressed from the accepted "healthy" ideal and ventured into the domain of the "unnatural" and "pathological." Many critics disapproved of the "shouting and fidgeting, the exaggerated sense of horror, distortion and intemperance at every turn" (Nordhausen n.d.) and the "passion ending only in absurdity," a sure indicator of "pathological conditions" (H.E. 1903). They rejected Eysoldt's "immoderate" and "uncontrolled" movements which did not serve to illustrate the text but evidently referred back to the body of the actress. They deemed her transgressive exploration of "pathology" "unbearable" (Goldmann n.d.) because it dissolved not merely the limits of her dramatic character but, more importantly, of Eysoldt's self (Fischer-Lichte 2005: 1–14).

Many reviewers also criticized Reinhardt's productions of *King Oedipus* and the *Oresteia* for the manner in which the actors drew the audience's attention to the particularities of their bodies. Most of all, this applied to the extras, the "naked torchbearers," who "shot through the orchestra bearing their torches and ran up the steps of the palace and down again like madmen" (Siegfried Jacobsohn, writing about *King Oedipus*, dismissed them as absurd and pointless). Alfred Klaar mocked them in his review of the *Oresteia*. He deplored the "peculiar twisting of bodies and the copious play of limbs, which yesterday's production dreamed up into Aeschylus' text," and scoffed that "the half-naked torchbearers at least did their part when, for once, they bent to the ground and offered a sight worthy of a gymnastic show" (1911).[11]

However, such criticism extended to the performance of the protagonists. Jacobsohn complained about the "nerve-racking mass entertainment of spectators who grew up with bull fights" (1912: 49). He described the following scene as a horrifying example:

> When Orestes wants to slay his mother, it is more than enough for him to rush through the door of the palace after her, restrain her by the door and push her back into the palace after the battle of words. In this production, he chases her down the steps into the arena, where he engages her in a scuffle and then drags her up the steps again much too slowly. It is dreadful.
>
> (Jacobsohn 1912: 49)

All of the above examples produced the similar result of drawing the audience's attention to the multiple ways in which the actors were using their "real" bodies. These bodies were not seen as carriers of meaning tied to specific dramatic characters. They imposed themselves on the audience with their open sensuality – condemning the productions to failure from the standpoint of the critics but greatly enhancing their success for the remaining spectators.

Max Herrmann equaled Max Reinhardt's radical approach to theatre practice in his theorization of the theatre. He moved away from the body as a carrier of signs to embrace the "real" body. We can assume that, much as Judith Butler, Herrmann saw expressivity and performativity as mutually exclusive opposites. His notion of performance appears to have supported this view. Herrmann based his definition of performance on the bodily co-presence of actors and spectators and their physical actions. This dynamic and ultimately wholly unpredictable process precludes the expression and transmission of predetermined meanings; the performance itself generates its meanings. Yet, Herrmann did not make this claim explicit. His definition of performance neglected the specific semioticity that would generate meaning.

By defining performance as "festival" and "play," based on a fleeting and dynamic process and not an artifact, Herrmann excluded the notion of a "work of art" from performance. If he spoke of accomplished acting as the "true" and "purest work of art that theatre is capable of producing," this is part of his argument to recognize theatre as an independent art form. The prevalent notion of art in his time necessitated such a reference to a fixed work of art. From today's vantage point, however, Herrmann's definition of "performance" circumvents the concept of a work of art. The performance is regarded as art not because it enjoys the status of an artwork but because it takes place as an event. Herrmann's conception of a performance presupposed a unique, unrepeatable constellation which can only be determined and controlled to a limited degree. The created event remains unique as is inevitable when actors and spectators are confronted with each other in their various tempers, moods, desires, expectations, and intellects. Herrmann was first and foremost interested in the activities and dynamic processes that these two parties engaged in.

To Herrmann, the "creative" activity of the audience resulted from a "secret empathy, a shadowy reconstruction of the actors' performance, which is experienced not so much visually as through *physical sensations* [author's emphasis]. It is a secret urge to perform the same actions, to reproduce the same tone of voice in the throat" (1930: 153). Herrmann highlights that "the most important

theatrical factor" for perceiving a performance aesthetically is "to experience real bodies and real space" (153). The audience's physical participation is set in motion through synaesthetic perception, shaped not only by sight and sound but by physical sensations of the entire body.

The audience responds not only to the actors' physical actions but also to the behavior of the other spectators. Herrmann explained that "every audience includes people who are incapable of empathically experiencing the actors' performance and who then, by emotionally infecting the audience as a whole (otherwise a welcome phenomenon) curb the enthusiasm of the other spectators" (153).[12] The metaphor of "infection" highlights that the aesthetic experience of a performance does not depend on the "work of art" but on the interaction of the participants. What emerges from the interaction is given priority over any possible creation of meaning. The mere act of suddenly cutting into her own skin with a razor blade weighed heavier than the fact that Abramović cut a five-pointed, symbolically loaded star into her skin. What matters is the fact *that* something occurs and *that what* occurs affects, if to varying degrees and in different ways, everyone involved. It remains unresolved, however, whether Herrmann intended his formulations "[inner] empathy," "experiencing the performance," and "emotional infection" to indicate an actual transformation of the audience through the performance.

At the heart of Herrmann's notion of performance lies the shift from theatre as a work of art to theatre as an event. Hermeneutic aesthetics as well as the heuristic distinction between the aesthetics of production, work, and reception are incompatible with his understanding of performance. The specific *aestheticity* of performance lies in its very nature as an event.

As I have reconstructed Herrmann's concept of performance from his own and his students' writings,[13] it indeed broadens the idea of the "performative" *avant la lettre*, at least in terms of Austin's and Butler's later definitions. Herrmann is consistent with their respective definitions insofar as he does not consider performance to be a representation or an expression of something previously given. Performance describes a genuine act of creation: the very process of performing involves all participants and thus generates the performance in its specific materiality. Herrmann's notion of performance stretches beyond that of Austin and Butler insofar as he explicitly focuses on the shifting relationships between subject/object and materiality/semioticity achieved through performance. But he falls short of them by ignoring the problem of meaning generated in the course of a performance. On the whole, his concept of performance is particularly interesting for our discussion of aesthetic processes because his theory abandons the notion of an artwork for that of an event, even though he does not explicitly engage with the possible effects of such a move. Through the preceding analysis, we have established the possibility of developing an aesthetics of the performative out of the notion of performance.

Since the performative turn of 1960s demands the development of such a theory, I will first explore how the arts themselves modified the concept of performance and performativity. Such an approach lends itself, given that the topic of this book

is concerned primarily with a study of the arts and aesthetics. I will not engage in a discussion of different aesthetic theories that are in turn explained, modified, or contradicted with recourse to current trends in the arts. Instead, I will take the state of the arts as the starting point from which to probe varying theoretical approaches.

Reconstructing Herrmann's notion of performance revealed that, for heuristic purposes, it may be productive to investigate mediality, materiality, semioticity, and aestheticity separately, albeit keeping in mind that they are intrinsically interlinked through the performance event. The following four chapters will explore how performances since the 1960s have dealt with each of these categories. Special attention will be paid to theatre performances and to action and performance art. Theatre remains essential because Herrmann developed his concept of performance by analyzing theatrical events; action and performance art, in turn, completed the shift in the fine arts from producing works of art to creating performances.