

# Performance Studies

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The field of *Performance Studies* takes **performance** as an organizing concept for the study of a wide range of behavior. A postdiscipline of inclusions, *Performance Studies* sets no limit on what can be studied in terms of medium and culture. Nor does it limit the range of approaches that can be taken. A provisional coalescence on the move, *Performance Studies* is more than the sum of its inclusions. While it might be argued that "as an artform, **performance** lacks a distinctive medium" (Carroll 1986:78), embodied practice and event is a recurring point of reference within *Performance Studies*.

*Performance Studies* starts from the premise that its objects of study are not to be divided up and parceled out, medium by medium, to various other disciplines--music, dance, dramatic literature, art history. The prevailing division of the arts by medium is arbitrary, as is the creation of fields and departments devoted to each. Most of the world's artistic expression has always synthesized or otherwise integrated movement, sound, speech, narrative, and objects. Moreover, the historical avant-garde and contemporary art have long questioned these boundaries and gone about blurring them. Such confounding of categories has not only widened the range of what can count as an artmaking practice, but also given rise to *performance art* that is expressly not theatre and art performance that dematerializes the art object and approaches *the condition of performance*. (Carroll 1986; see also Sayre 1989; Schimmel 1998) *Performance Studies* takes its lead from such developments. This field is not only intercultural in scope and spirit, but also challenges aesthetic hierarchies and analyzes how they are formed. *Performance Studies* encompasses not only the most valorized, but also least valued, cultural forms within these hierarchies.

Like other new knowledge formations (Cultural Studies, Visual Culture, Postcolonial Studies, Gender Studies), *Performance Studies* starts with a set of concerns and objects and ranges widely for what it needs by way of theory and method. *Performance Studies* has made common cause with, and is contributing to, the many fields from which it draws. By theorizing embodiment, event, and agency in relation to *live (and mediated) performance*, *Performance Studies* can potentially offer something of a counterweight to the emphasis in Cultural Studies on literature and media and on text as an extended metaphor for culture. *Performance Studies* can enrich the discussion of discourse, representation, the body (to be distinguished from embodiment), and identity. One can even discern what might be called *a performative turn* in contemporary cultural, aesthetic, and political theory. Ray Birdwhistell argued that "**Performance** is an inherent constituent of all communication" (Birdwhistell 1970, in Sullivan 1986: 7), while Dell Hymes suggested that "It is through *the study of performance*' that one could look forward to an integration of the social sciences and humanities." (Hymes 1975, in

Sullivan 1986: 3). The possibilities are signaled by Peggy Phelan, who writes that "To date...there has been little attempt to bring together *the specific epistemological and political possibilities of performance* as it is enacted in what are still known, for better or worse, as 'theater events' and the epistemological and political openings enabled by *the 'performative'* invoked by contemporary theory." (Phelan 1993: 15) She is referring here to the work of J.L. Austin and, based on his concept of *performative utterances*, the efforts of Judith Butler and others to theorize gender and sexuality.

During the last two decades *Performance Studies* programs have been established in the United States, Australia, England, Wales, France, and Brazil, among others. Increasingly, individual *Performance Studies courses* are being included in existing theatre history and speech and communication curricula, as well as in folklore, anthropology, ethnomusicology, art history, literature, history, cultural studies, and area studies programs including American, Asian, and Africana, among others. There are several indications that the field has come of age, including a series of highly successful international conferences during the nineties, the formation of professional associations, several specialized journals, and an increasing number of programmatic essays, textbooks, readers, and book series.

While they converge at many points, these programs and organizations offer at least three different paradigms for the field, thanks both to their particular disciplinary genealogies and to their visions for the future.

#### *Broad Spectrum Approach (New York University)*

In 1980, New York University's Graduate Department of Drama changed its name to *Department of Performance Studies*. The change of name followed almost twenty years of preparation, much of it recorded in the pages of TDR The Drama Review and the writings of Richard Schechner. Schechner has long advocated a broad spectrum approach:

We believe that if the *study of performance* does not expand and deepen--going far beyond both the *training of performance workers* and the Western tradition, far beyond the analysis of dramatic literature--the academic, *performing-arts enterprise* constructed over the past half century or so will collapse. A happier alternative is to widen our *vision of performance*, studying it not only as art but as a means of understanding historical, social, and cultural processes. (Schechner 1990: 15. See Appendix A for full text.)

NYU's program developed in the context of *contemporary experimental performance*, with links to the historical avant-garde. Its faculty (Richard Schechner, Michael Kirby, Brooks McNamara) were themselves active in the Off Off Broadway movement. To align their artistic practice with their pedagogy, they abandoned a traditional curriculum in European and American drama and theatre and set out to create *an innovative Performance Studies program* almost from scratch.

EuroAmerican theatre would thenceforth find its place within an intercultural, intergeneric, and interdisciplinary intellectual project as one of many objects of study. Taking their lead from the historical avant-garde and contemporary experimental performance, NYU's faculty was determined that Western theatre and the dramatic text would not be at the center of the *new Performance Studies curriculum*, though it continues to play an important role. As Schechner stated: "**Performance** is a very inclusive notion of action; theatre is only one node on a continuum that reaches from ritualization in animal behavior (including humans) through *performances in everyday life*--greetings, displays of emotion, family scenes, and so on--to rites, ceremonies and *performances: large-scale theatrical events*." (Schechner 1977: 1) Writing ten years later, Peggy Phelan articulated the notion that animated the establishment of *Performance Studies* at New York University as follows: "Was 'theatre' an adequate term for the wide range of 'theatrical acts' that intercultural observation was everywhere revealing? Perhaps '**performance**' better captured and conveyed the activity that was provoking these questions. Since only a tiny portion of the world's cultures equated theatre with written scripts, **performance studies** would begin with an intercultural understanding of its fundamental term, rather than enlisting intercultural case studies as additives, rhetorically or ideologically based postures of inclusion and relevance." (Phelan and Lane 1998: 3)

*Aesthetic Communication Approach (Northwestern University)*

The name changes at Northwestern University chart the movement over the course of more than a century from a nineteenth-century Department of Elocution to a Department of Oral Interpretation, which, in 1984, became *the Department of Performance Studies*. Much of Northwestern speech, communication, rhetoric, and oral interpretation curriculum remains in tact even as new courses in *Performance Studies* proper have been added. Northwestern's program "produces research and creative work in *the performance of literature*; the adaptation and staging of texts, particularly narrative works; cultural studies and ethnography; *performance theory and criticism; performance arts and dance theatre*; and the practice of everyday life." It does so in a spirit that has been characterized as inclusionary, noncanonical, "democratic and counterelitist"--*Performance Studies* "celebrate[s] *the performative nature of human communication*." (Pelias and VanOosting 1987: 221)

If NYU initially enlarged the concept of theatre to include *many other kinds of performance*, Northwestern expanded the notion of literature in terms of text, broadly conceived, to include not only literature but also "cultural texts." The two programs differ in several other important ways. First, NYU took a revolutionary approach to the transformation of a drama department into a *Performance Studies* one, whereas at Northwestern University and elsewhere the shift from oral interpretation to *performance studies* tends to be understood as evolutionary:

What may be said with certainty is that paradigm shift [*from oral interpretation to performance studies*], if such it is, is *not* a revolutionary denial of oral interpretation as the antecedent schema. Rather, the new nomenclature affirms the study and *performance of literary texts* as central to, but not limiting, its theory and methodology. Hence, *the paradigmatic relationship between oral interpretation and performance studies* might display *the performance of literature* as the central circle in a concentric figure widening out to include social dramas, rituals, storytelling, jokes, organizational metaphors, everyday conversations, indeed any communication act meeting the criteria of aesthetic discourse. (Pelias and VanOosting 1987: 229)

Second, NYU has made **performance** the umbrella under which *all kinds of performance* can and are studied and, at least in theory and despite its history as a drama department, none has precedence. In contrast, within speech and communication field, the metaphor of concentric circles places *the performance of literature* at the center. Stated another way, *performance studies* becomes a "subunit within speech communication." (Strine, Long, and Hopkins 1990)

#### *Ethnoscenology (University of Paris VI)*

The third and most recent model of *Performance Studies* is that of Ethnoscenology, whose mission is "to avoid any form of ethnocentrism in the study of the *performing arts and practices* in their cultural, historical, social context" by refusing to privilege the "Western theatre model." The object of study is "*the organized human performing practices (OHPP)*" of all cultures. Ethnoscenology's transdisciplinary perspective brings together "scientific disciplines devoted to the exploration and analysis of human behavior" (ethology, psychology, neurobiology, cognitive sciences, anthropology, ethnomusicology); humanities; *performers and their practical knowledge*; and "the proper implicit and explicit local paradigm." Inspired by Marcel Mauss's notion of techniques of the body and Eugenio Barba's Theatre Anthropology, Ethnoscenology rejects mind/body dualism and integrates the cognitive and the somatic. In contrast with Northwestern's paradigm, Ethnoscenology does not take text as its point of departure, but rather the "knowing body" and *the corporal dimension of performance*. Consistent with NYU's Performance Studies paradigm, contemporary experimental performance continues to animate the Ethnoscenology enterprise.

#### *New Directions/Sources of Creativity*

New directions and sources of creativity within *Performance Studies* arise from the living, breathing symbiosis between aesthetic practices and the study of them. There is an active interchange between theory and practice, scholar and artist, art form and knowledge formation. New objects of study, particularly the unruly objects of contemporary art, destabilize not only what counts as art but also how they and all that came before them might be studied. *Performance Studies* is not simply a more encompassing version of theatre studies. What is at stake is not inclusiveness per se, for inclusions are often structured in ways that reproduce the

conditions of their exclusion. Rather, *Performance Studies* picks up the gauntlet thrown down by resistant artistic and cultural practices. This requires the fashioning, however provisional, of a (post)disciplinary subject adequate to the task. It is in that spirit that *Performance Studies* questions the relationship between disciplinary formations, disciplinary subjects, and their objects of study.

**Performance** is a more welcoming and productive concept for a truly intercultural field of study than concepts that are more tightly bound up with culturally specific divisions of the arts by medium and genre, as is the case with theatre, for example. This is not to underestimate *the historical conditioning of the term performance*. As is true of any keyword, "the problem of its meanings" are "inextricably bound up with the problems it [is] being used to discuss." (Williams 1983: 15) *Performance* has a long history and wide range of meanings in everyday English usage, from *high performance in technology* and *performance measures in management and finance* to *the legally defined performance requirements of contracts*. Only recently has the word **performance** entered other languages, almost exclusively to designate **performance art**. It is essentially untranslatable. *Dictionary of the Theatre: Terms, Concepts, and Analysis* (1998), which was translated from French, provides no entry for *the term performance*, though it does include entries for *performance analysis*, *performance art*, and *performance text*.

An *expanded view of performance* requires more than simply adding to the inventory of what has historically been considered theatre (or oral interpretation). It requires *a reconceptualization of performance* in light of each and every inclusion. In other words, *performance is a responsive concept*, rather than a Procrustean bed. It is not simply a big tent under which all may gather, but an organizing concept under revision in light of the many activities to which it is addressed. Those activities may be taken for granted, part of the quotidian world. They may derive from traditions with great historical depth and theories about themselves, to mention only the Natyashastra for India and Zeami for Japan. Or, they may arise from contemporary experimentation, whether Happenings, *performance art*, postmodern dance, or installation art. This set of possibilities is as vital for artists as it for scholars.

As Schechner is quick to note, "long before scholars took an interest, artists had *an expanded view of performance*. From futurism through dadaism, in the arts and rituals of many non-Western cultures, in the practice and ideas of Vsevelod Meyerhold, Antonin Artaud, John Cage, Suzuki Tadashi, Anna Halprin, and Allan Kaprow (to name just a very few)." (Schechner 1990, 16) Oskar Schlemmer, who developed the Bauhaus theatre during the 1920s, laid out just such an expanded view in his "Scheme for Stage, Culture, and Popular Entertainment, According to Place, Person, Genre, Speech, Music, Dance." (in Gropius 1996: 19) This scheme integrated the sermon, Wagner, mass gymnastics, ancient tragedy, and circus within a utopian vision of what theatre of the future might become. As Schlemmer's scheme suggests, when the historical avant-garde and postwar experimentalists mounted their opposition, they turned to all that was outside

prevailing categories of art. Artaud declared "No more masterpieces," Marinetti proclaimed, "The distinction of the senses is arbitrary," and decades later, Kaprow would propose, "...nonart is more art than Art art."

Such radical artistic practices produce *notions of performance of special interest to Performance Studies*. A lively interchange between scholars and artists (and a blurring of the distinction) has informed the theatre anthropology (Eugenio Barba), *intercultural performance* (Peter Brook), poor theatre (Jerzy Grotowski), environmental theatre (Richard Schechner), theatre of the oppressed (Augusto Boal), reverse anthropology (Guillermo Gomez-Peña), and the Los Angeles Festival (Peter Sellars). (See Schechner 1993; Pavis 1996; Jeyifo 1996; Bharucha 1997.) As such artists look to everyday life, industry, popular culture, and ritual, to the outmoded and the repudiated, and to other cultures, so too do the scholars who study them. Noel Carroll encapsulates how *Performance Studies* emerged from such developments:

The repudiation of mainstream theater led *performance artists* to seek out, resurrect, and adopt *forms of theatrical performance* overshadowed or forgotten as parts of our theatrical heritage because of the dominance of the well-made play. This maneuver itself was heralded by Artaud's interest in Balinese ritual. As a result, since the sixties, *experimentation in performance art* has embraced revivals of circus, nightclub acts, ritual, story-telling, masques, mime, puppetry, stand-up comedy, television game shows, and talk shows. Indeed, a new academic category, *Performance Studies*, has been developed, replacing Drama, in order to accommodate the proliferation of the new paratheatrical avant-garde while also documenting the history of the forgotten theatrical forms from which *avant-garde performance art* is drawing its inspiration. (Carroll 1986: 77)

Not only are some artists theorists in their own right, but also the symbiosis between artists and theorists has been consequential for artmaking. (See Clifford 1988)

### *Science and Technology*

*Performance as an organizing idea* has been responsive not only to new modes of live action, but also new technologies. Citing *mediated performance art*, Philip Auslander (1992) takes issue with the assumption of human agents, live bodies, and presence as organizing *concepts for Performance Studies*. According to Jon McKenzie (1994: 86), virtual reality and the technologies that produce it make *"the distinction between human and technological performance...increasingly problematic."* Both can be understood in terms of "experience design." (88) If boundaries are to be blurred, why not also *the line between live and mediated performance?* Artists cross that line and *Performance Studies* has followed suit. One result can be seen in Stephen Kaplin's "puppet tree," which plots the distance between performer and object all the way from Balinese shadow plays to computer generated figures and virtual objects. (Kaplin 1999)

Technology is integral to *the history of performance*. First, the theatre itself can be understood as a machine, to cite only the extraordinary stage machinery of the Baroque theatre. Its inner workings are related to ship technologies, as can be seen at Drottningholm, near Stockholm, where shipbuilders applied their knowledge of ropes and wooden winches, pulleys, and capstans to create the inner workings of one of the best-preserved Baroque theatres in the world. Scene design is related to the history of what Jonathan Crary calls "techniques of the observer," Second, *the body itself has been imagined as an intelligent performing machine*, from historical automata, whose mechanisms are related to those of clocks, to the microchip, which "has replaced clockworks as *the intelligence driving performing objects*." (Tillis 1999; see also Sussman 1999)

**Performance** is integral to the history of technology. The notion of *gestural knowledge* is critical to an understanding of bodies of practice in the laboratory. Otto Sibum, Research Director at the Max Planck Institut für Wissenschaftsgeschichte, defines gestural knowledge and its value for a history of science as follows:

Despite the fact that one often knows the outcome of the historical experiments through publications of note book entries, undertaking to perform the experiment remains a highly valuable, investigative study, acting on a trial basis. It will become obvious that getting the experiment to work demands a great deal of embodied capabilities, many of which are no longer known at all well. Therefore success in repeating the trial depends above all on the improvisational work and knowledge of the researcher. Material objects (as well as accompanying texts) serve as *a kind of choreography for this performance* because they provide partial direction of our thinking and acting..... gestural knowledge in doing the experiment represents a resource in its own right, which complements the usually static representations of past practices like historical texts and material objects. *Doing* the experiment, and recognizing the troubles encountered in getting it to work, creating an awareness of the behaviour of the historical experimenter and the practices, possibly unarticulated, which are indispensable for *the performance of the experiment*. This acquired gestural knowledge can serve as a heuristic device in developing interpretations of the existing textual representations of the historical experiment. (Sibum 1995: 28)

Sibum explores how *instruments of precision* molded *gestures of accuracy*, taking as a case in point the brewing industry in England and Benjamin Joule's experiments to find an exact way of measuring heat. In other words, the issue is not whether or not to uphold *a particular definition of performance over and against media and technology*, but rather to work with the relationships between them. Critical to *the history of Performance Studies* is, for example, the cybernetic thinking of Gregory Bateson, who was drawing from the field of communications engineering long before the digital revolution of our time. (See Bateson 1972 for essays spanning four decades.)

## *Objects, Ideas, Knowledge Industries*

At a time when media--and, in particular, digital technologies--have altered our relationship to the material world, including our very own bodies, *Performance Studies* has much to offer to an understanding of materiality, embodiment, sensory experience, liveness, presence, and personhood as they bear on being-in-the-world and as they are mediated by technologies old and new. As the volume information increases and with it the artificial intelligence necessary to manage it, *Performance Studies* seeks to understand the kinds of knowledge that are located in the body. Fruitful contributions to this topic include Marcel Mauss's *techniques of the body*; Otto Sibbum's *gestural knowledge*; Pierre Bourdieu's *habitus*; and Paul Connerton's *body memory*. This is not to essentialize the body as technology's other, but rather to redefine and resituate the issues, including the technologizing of the body, the question of its boundaries, its history, and much that might once have been taken for granted about corporeality, somaticism, and the senses.

If *the body* is one *site of performance analysis*, *objects are another*. As suggested above, *object performance* provides a particularly rich arena for the relationship between people and things. This, among other themes, is taken up by *Performance Studies* scholars working on museums. The museum and the theatre are historically related, in connection not only with the architectural form of the memory palace but also with Protestant opposition to theatre. Museums, in this context, are one response to what Jonas Barish has called the anti-theatrical prejudice. They might be considered a form of Protestant theatre. *A grand instance of object performance, the museum* stands in an inverse relationship to the theatre. In theatre, spectators are stationary and the spectacle moves. In the museum, spectators move and the spectacle is still (until recently). Exhibition is how museums stage knowledge. They do this by the way they arrange objects, broadly conceived, in space and by how they install the visitor. The experience, however visual it may be, is corporeal. The key sense--so key that it is invariably overlooked--is proprioception or how the body knows its own boundaries and orientation in space. The museum is an archeological site for excavating the history of the body, understood in these terms. If anything, technologies of virtual reality, for example, have heightened awareness and required more sophisticated theories of embodiment. (See Moser and MacLeod 1996.)

The museum, particularly the natural history, science, and technology museum, is an archive of outmoded knowledge formations that have sedimented themselves in collections, catalogues, storage arrangements, particular modes of display, and the historically formed dispositions of its viewers. Many fields were once housed in museums. They were based upon collections formed in the course of research and provided the foundation for analysis. As those fields migrate to the laboratory and the university, a tension arises in museums between the historical value of old collections and the challenges of presenting new knowledge that is not collection based. In the process, museums have changed their relationship not only to their collections but also to exhibition as a medium. If anything, museums and their exhibitions have become more theatrical-

-even operatic--than ever. In the way they do what they are about--I have in mind museums of redress such as Holocaust museums--they are *more performative than ever*. They have also become prime sites for applying new technologies of information and display to the point that museums are established without collections and exhibitions may not feature objects. (See Kirshenblatt-Gimblett 1998.) This does not spell the end of objects. Rather, the question of the role and meaning of things requires attention to objecthood and materiality in an era so concerned with information and virtuality.

### *Cultural Equity*

Because of *the inclusionary spirit of Performance Studies* (and the theoretical concern with what "inclusion" presumes), the field is particularly attuned to issues of place, personhood, cultural citizenship, and equity. Artists and scholars concerned with *intercultural performance* deal with these issues by bringing *diverse performance cultures* into conversation and collaboration with one another. At the same time, *Performance Studies scholars* are developing theories of heritage as a mode of cultural production that have implications for cultural policy dealing with preservation and equity in a variety of contexts. (See Kirshenblatt-Gimblett 1995 [Appendix B] and 1998.) It could be said, for example, that heritage is a way of producing the local for export, tourism being a global market for this commodity. Or, put another way, processes of globalization produce the local, while altering the very nature and value of the local. Issues of equity and social justice inform the work of activists, both artists and scholars, concerned with a wide range of issues, from labor, immigration, and homelessness to homophobia, racism, AIDS, violence, and censorship. (See Boal 1998; Cohen-Cruz 1998; Muñoz 1999; Thiong'o 1998; Kondo 1997; Piper 1996; and Taylor 1996.)

*Performance Studies* is a promising context for exploring issues of cultural creativity in relation to the challenges of 20<sup>th</sup> century science and technology, changing knowledge industries, shifting configurations of the global and local, and issues of equity and social justice.

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