# Performance: A Critical Introduction

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# Introduction
## What is performance?

The term "performance" has become extremely popular in recent years in a wide range of activities in the arts, in literature, and in the social sciences. As its popularity and usage has grown, so has a complex body of writing about performance, attempting to analyze and understand just what sort of human activity it is. For the person with an interest in studying performance, this body of analysis and commentary may at first seem more of an obstacle than an aid. So much has been written by experts from such a wide range of disciplines, and such a complex web of specialized critical vocabulary has been developed in the course of this analysis, that a newcomer seeking a way into the discussion may feel confused and overwhelmed.

In their very useful 1990 survey article "Research in Interpretation and Performance Studies: Trends, Issues, Priorities," Mary Strine, Beverly Long, and Mary Hopkins begin with the extremely useful observation that performance is "an essentially contested concept." This phrase is taken from W. B. Gallie's *Philosophy and the Historical Understanding* (1964), in which Gallie suggested that certain concepts, such as art and democracy, had disagreement about their essence built into the concepts themselves. In Gallie's terms: "Recognition of a given concept as essentially contested implies recognition of rival uses of it (such as oneself repudiates) as not only logically possible and humanly 'likely,' but as of permanent potential critical value to one's own use or interpretation of the concept in question."[1] Strine, Long, and Hopkins argue that performance has become just such a concept, developed in an atmosphere of "sophisticated disagreement" by participants who "do not expect to defeat or silence opposing positions, but rather through continuing dialogue to

attain a sharper articulation of all positions and therefore a fuller understanding of the conceptual richness of performance."[2] In his study of the "post-structured stage," Erik MacDonald suggests that "performance art has opened hitherto unnoticed spaces" within theatre's representational networks. It "problematizes its own categorization," and thus inevitably inserts theoretical speculation into the theatrical dynamic.[3]

The present study, recognizing this essential contestedness of performance, will seek to provide an introduction to the continuing dialogue through which it has recently been articulated, providing a variety of mappings of the concept, some overlapping, others quite divergent. Recent manifestations of performance, in both theory and practice, are so many and so varied that a complete survey of them is hardly possible, but this book attempts to offer enough of an overview and historical background to single out the major approaches and sample significant manifestations in this complex field, to address the issues raised by the contested concepts of performance and what sorts of theatrical and theoretical strategies have been developed to deal with these issues.

My own background is in theatre studies, and my emphasis will be on how ideas and theories about performance have broadened and enriched those areas of human activity that lie closest to what has traditionally been thought of as theatrical, even though I will not be devoting a great deal of attention to traditional theatre as such, but rather to that variety of activities currently being presented for audiences under the general title of "performance" or "performance art." Nevertheless, in these opening remarks it might be useful to step back at least briefly from this emphasis and consider the more general use of the term "performance" in our culture, in order to gain some ideas of the general semantic overtones it may bear as it circulates through an enormous variety of specialized usages. I should perhaps also note that although I will include examples of performance art from other nations, my emphasis will remain on the United States, partly, of course, because that is the center of my own experience with this activity, but, more relevantly, because, despite its international diffusion, performance art is both historically and theoretically a primarily American phenomenon, and a proper understanding of it must, I believe, be centered on how it has developed both practically and conceptually in the United States.



"Performing" and "performance" are terms so often encountered in such varied contexts that little if any common semantic ground seems to exist among them. Both the *New York Times* and the *Village Voice* now include a special category of "performance"—separate from theatre, dance, or films—including events that are also often called "performance art" or even "performance theatre." For many, this latter term seems tautological, since in simpler days all theatre was considered to be involved with performance, theatre being in fact one of the so-called "performing arts." This usage is still much with us, as indeed is the practice of calling any specific theatre event (or for that matter specific dance or musical event) a "performance." If we mentally step back a moment from this common practice and ask what makes performing arts performative, I imagine the answer would somehow suggest that these arts require the physical presence of trained or skilled human beings whose demonstration of their skills is the performance.

I recently came across a striking illustration of how important the idea of the public display of technical skill is to this traditional concept of "performance." At a number of locations in the United States and abroad, people in period costume act out improvised or scripted events at historical sites for tourists, visiting schoolchildren, or other interested spectators—a kind of activity often called "living history." One site of such activity is Fort Ross in Northern California, where a husband and wife, dressed in costumes of the 1830s, greet visitors in the roles of the last Russian commander of the fort and his wife. The wife, Diane Spencer Pritchard, in her role as "Elena Rotcheva," decided at one time to play period music on the piano to give visitors an impression of contemporary cultural life. But later she abandoned this, feeling, in her words, that it "removed the role from living-history and placed it in the category of performance."[4] Despite taking on a fictive personality, dressing in period clothes, and "living" in the 1830s, Ms. Pritchard did not consider herself "performing" until she displayed the particular artistic skills needed to give a musical recital. Normally human agency is necessary for "performance" of this sort (even in the theatre we do not speak of how well the scenery or the costumes performed), but the public demonstration of particular skills can be offered by non-human "performers," so that, for example, we commonly speak of "performing" dogs, elephants, horses, or bears.[5]

Despite the currency of this usage, most of her audience probably considers Ms. Pritchard to be performing as soon as she greets them in the costume and character of a long-dead Russian pioneer. Pretending to be someone other than oneself is a common example of a particular kind of human behavior that Richard Schechner labels "restored behavior," a title under which he groups actions consciously separated from the person doing them—theatre and other role playing, trances, shamanism, rituals.[6] Schechner's useful concept of "restored behavior" points to a quality of performance *not* involved with the display of skills, but rather with a certain distance between "self" and behavior, analogous to that between an actor and the role the actor plays on stage. Even if an action on stage is identical to one in real life, on stage it is considered "performed" and off stage merely "done." Hamlet, in his well-known response to the Queen concerning his reactions to his father's death, distinguishes between those inner feelings that resist performance and the "actions that a man might play" with a consciousness of their signifying potential.

Hamlet's response also indicates how a consciousness of "performance" can move from the stage, from ritual, or from other special and clearly defined cultural situations into everyday life. Everyone at some time or another is conscious of "playing a role" socially, and recent sociological theorists, who will be discussed in some detail in Chapter 2, have paid a good deal of attention to this sort of social performance.

The recognition that our lives are structured according to repeated and socially sanctioned modes of behavior raises the possibility that all human activity could potentially be considered as "performance," or at least all activity carried out with a consciousness of itself. The difference between doing and performing, according to this way of thinking, would seem to lie not in the frame of theatre versus real life but in an attitude—we may do actions unthinkingly, but when we think about them, this introduces a consciousness that gives them the quality of performance. This phenomenon has been perhaps most searchingly analyzed in the various writings of Herbert Blau, to which we also will return later.

So we have two rather different concepts of performance, one involving the display of skills, the other also involving display, but less of particular skills than of a recognized and culturally



coded pattern of behavior. A third cluster of usages takes us in rather a different direction. When we speak of someone's sexual performance or linguistic performance or when we ask how well a child is performing in school, the emphasis is not so much on display of skill (although that may be involved) or on the carrying out of a particular pattern of behavior, but rather on the general success of the activity in light of some standard of achievement that may not itself be precisely articulated. Perhaps even more significantly, the task of judging the success of the performance (or even judging whether it *is* a performance) is in these cases not the responsibility of the performer but of the observer. Ultimately, Hamlet himself is the best judge of whether he is "performing" his melancholy actions or truly "living" them, but linguistic, scholastic, even sexual performance is really framed and judged by its observers. This is why performance in this sense (as opposed to performance in the normal theatrical sense) can be and is applied frequently to non-human activity—TV ads speak interminably of the performance of various brands of automobiles, and scientists of the performance of chemicals or metals under certain conditions. I observed an amusing conflation of the theatrical and mechanical uses of this term in an advertisement by the MTA (Metropolitan Transportation Authority) on the New York subway in October 1994, when the subway was celebrating 90 years of service. This was billed as "New York City's longest running performance."

If we consider performance as an essentially contested concept, this will help us to understand the futility of seeking some overarching semantic field to cover such seemingly disparate usages as the performance of an actor, of a schoolchild, of an automobile. Nevertheless, I would like to credit one highly suggestive attempt at such an articulation. This occurs in the entry on performance by the ethnolinguist Richard Bauman in the *International Encyclopedia of Communications*.[7] 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.

Performance art, a complex and constantly shifting field in its own right, becomes much more so when one tries to take into account, as any thoughtful consideration of it must, the dense web of interconnections that exists between it and ideas of performance developed in other fields and between it and the many intellectual, cultural, and social concerns that are raised by almost any contemporary performance project. Among them are what it means to be postmodern, the quest for a contemporary subjectivity and identity, the relation of art to structures of power, the varying challenges of gender, race, and ethnicity, to name only some of the most visible of these.

This book attempts, in an admittedly brief way, to provide an introduction to this complex field of activity and thought. In Part I, three opening chapters seek to provide a general intellectual background and context for the modern idea of performance by tracing the interrelated development of this concept in the various modern human sciences—first in anthropology and ethnography, then in sociology and psychology, and finally in linguistics. As performance studies has developed as a particular field of scholarly work, especially in the United States, it has been very closely associated with the various social sciences, and a complex and interesting cross-fertilization has been the result. The study of traditional "artistic" performance, such as theatre and dance, has taken on new dimensions and begun to explore newly observed relationships between these and other cultural and social activities, while the various social sciences have found theatre and performance metaphors of great use in exploring particular kinds of human activities within their own fields of study. While the actual practice of modern performance art is most closely related to concerns in sociology and psychology, its theory and certain of its strategies relate importantly to anthropological and ethnographic interests. Linguistic theories of performance have to date proven of greater interest to theorists of traditional theatre than to those of performance art, but the

implications, for example, of Derrida's critique of Searle (to be considered in Chapter 3 on the performance of language) offer intriguing possibilities for the analysis of performance art as well, especially, of course, in those examples of performance involved with linguistic strategies.

Part II of this study consists of two chapters devoted to the background and recent history of what has come to be called "performance art" (or sometimes simply "performance"), with special emphasis upon its development in the contemporary United States. The first of these chapters looks backward to suggest some of the historical antecedents of this major contemporary cultural expression, and the second traces the historical development of modern performance from its appearance at the end of the 1960s to its most recent manifestations. While these two chapters contain some theoretical material, they are primarily historical and descriptive, attempting to give some idea of just what sort of work has been associated with the idea of performance in the United States and elsewhere, and how it both relates to and differs from more traditional theatrical forms.

An impressive body of theoretical writing has grown up around performance art, and Part III of the book examines in different chapters three of the major orientations of the literature. The first of these theoretical chapters deals with the relationships between "performance" and "postmodernism," terms often rather casually linked in critical discourse, but in fact related to each other in very complex and occasionally quite contradictory ways. Postmodern dance, an especially illuminating area for the study of the relationship of performance and postmodernism, is given particular attention in this chapter. The next chapter explores the relationship between performance and identity, a relationship that is in many ways central to how modern performance has developed and been theorized, particularly in the United States. These two chapters have certain dialectic implications, since the frequent associations of the postmodern (the focus of Chapter 6) with a loss of origins, a free play of signification, and an instability of truth claims seem to suggest that to the extent that performance is a significantly postmodern form it is very ill-suited to the grounding of subjectivity or identity, either for purposes of defining or exploring the self or for providing a position for political or social commentary or action (the focus of Chapter 7). The final chapter explores this seeming contradiction



in a more detailed manner, looking at the theory and practice of performance that seek within the general assumptions of a postmodern orientation to find strategies of meaningful social, political, and cultural positioning, arguably the most critical challenge confronting performance today, and certainly the site where the most lively and interesting discussion of performance is now taking place.