



Citation: M. Mazzocut-Mis (2019) Aesthetics, theatricality and performativity: an introduction. *Aisthesis* 12(1): 115-122. doi: 10.13128/Aisthesis-25627

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Data Availability Statement: All relevant data are within the paper and its Supporting Information files.

Competing Interests: The authors have declared that no competing interests exist.

Aesthetics, theatricality and performativity: an introduction

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Abstract. Contemporary theatre allows for a script, a scenario, that is exclusively visual. If action is no longer supported by dialogue, this does not mean that it will disappear. It will undoubtedly return in gestural exchange and in a temporality that is expansive or contracted and condensed. Action becomes an opaque enigma. The interpretation of performative action is a journey that the spectator undertakes in a foreign country, where we are forced to learn a new language. It remains to be seen what the reaction and the work of interpretation of the spectator would be when confronted with an action knowingly deprived of any meaningful anchor or referent. Would it merely be confusion? Confusion and an interpretative effort that often comes to an end by a harsh defeat: the aesthetic of the performative represents a moment of rupture in the process of rethinking of the traditional relationship between artist and spectator.

Keywords. Performance, Theatricality, Marina Abramović; Aesthetics.

PERFORMANCE AND THEATRICALITY

On October 24, 1975, a curious and memorable event took place at the Krinzinger Gallery in Innsbruck. The Yugoslavian artist Marina Abramović presented her performance Lips of Thomas. The artist began her performance by shedding all her clothes. She then went to the back wall of the gallery, pinned up a photograph of a man with long hair who resembled the artist, and framed it by drawing a five-pointed star around it. She turned to a table with a white table-cloth close to the wall, on which there was a bottle of red wine, a jar containing two pounds of honey, a crystal glass, a silver spoon, and a whip. She settled into the chair and reached for the jar of honey and the silver spoon. Slowly, she ate the honey until she had emptied the jar. She poured red wine into the crystal glass and drank it in long draughts. She continued until bottle and glass were empty. Then she broke the glass with her right hand, which began to bleed. Abramović got up and walked over to the wall where the photograph was fastened. Standing at the wall and facing the audience, she cut a five-pointed star into the skin of her abdomen with a razor blade. Blood welled out of the cuts. Then she took the whip, kneeled down beneath the

photograph with her back to the audience, and began to flagellate her back severely, raising bloody welts. Afterwards, she lay down on a cross made of blocks of ice, her arms spread out to her sides. An electric radiator hung from the ceiling, facing her stomach. Its heat triggered further bleeding from the starshaped cuts. Abramović lay motionless on the ice – she obviously intended to endure her self-torture until the radiator had melted all the ice. After she had held out for 30 minutes without any sign of abandoning the torture, some members of the audience could no longer bear her ordeal. They hastened to the blocks of ice, took hold of the artist, and covered her with coats. Then they removed her from the cross and carried her away. Thus, they put an end to the performance. The performance had taken two hours. In the course of these two hours, the artist and the spectators created an event that was neither envisioned nor legitimized by the traditions and standards of the visual or performing arts. The artist was not producing an artefact through her actions; she was not creating a fixed and transferable work of art that could exist independently of her. Yet her actions were also not representational. She was not performing as an actress, playing the part of a dramatic character that eats too much honey, drinks wine excessively, and inflicts a variety of injuries on her own body. Rather, Abramović was actually harming herself, abusing her body with a determined disregard for its limits (Fischer-Lichte [2004]: 11-12).

It is with this paragraph that Erika Fischer-Lichte opens her book *The Transformative Power of Performance. A New Aesthetics*. What interests me the most about her all-encompassing study is the fact that, as is evident in the passage above, the aesthetic of the performative (of “body art”, in the particular case cited) represents a moment of rupture in the process of rethinking of the traditional relationship between artist and spectator. Yet the challenging shift in the connection of such a closely linked pair does not equally upset other traditional elements of theatre: the role of acting, the mandatory and painstaking planning of each and every action on stage, and the ineliminable component of the proper *mise-en-scène* itself.

These final three elements, which make theatre what it is, destabilise any kind of clearcut distinc-

tion between the performative and the theatrical. Furthermore, the possibility of the repetition or even of the replication of a performance poses the problem of the performance’s double identity: namely, as both in the “here and now” and as “replicable”, bringing into play not only its indissoluble link with theatricality but also its foundations as a work of art. As, with the benefit of hindsight, we now know well, a performance can be pinned down and reproduced, perhaps even more faithfully than a director-led theatrical production.

In 1974, at Studio Morra in Naples, *Rhythm 0* by Marina Abramović was being staged: it is a performance in which the dynamics of passive aggression are explored. Marina Abramović stands near a table and offers herself passively to the spectators who can do whatever they wish on her body, with a range of objects. A text on a wall reads as follows: «There are 72 objects on the table that one can use on me as desired. I am the object». The range of objects includes: a gun, a bullet, a saw, an axe, a fork, a comb, a whip, a lipstick, a bottle of perfume, paint, knives, matches, a feather, a rose, a candle, water, chains, nails, needles, scissors, honey, grapes, chalk, sulphur, olive oil. After six hours, at the end of the performance, the clothes were torn. Her body was cut, painted, cleaned, decorated, crowned with thorns and made to feel the pressure of a loaded gun (Warr et al. [2000]: 125). A stripped, touched, possessed body. The statue came down from the pedestal, became flesh and allowed itself to be touched, embraced, undressed, tied, struck. Pygmalion has attained his purpose.

In the Sixties/Seventies, the use of the body was a practice, an obligatory step to the point that it became “academy”, it became a school and was no longer provocation (provided that the provocation was the end).

The overture to the excess, to the disobedience of the body, to the codes imposed by both the artistic conduct and performance and by society, may be an end in itself and not require being “perceived”:

Being, for the actionist artists¹, is not so much «being perceived» as in Berkeley's view, as being themselves absolutely, even against themselves, pushing themselves, when necessary, beyond their own strengths and even in the context of performances in which the body could suffer the consequences of the gesture to which it lends itself and pay a high price for the risks taken to test its limits. (Ardenne [2001]: 204)

However, the problem of exposure, display, exhibition, turns out to be, on the one hand, a false problem when this art is nonetheless consumed and, as in the case of *Rhythm 0*, also acted. An action by the spectator who is a consubstantial part of the performance.

Yet, what happens when the performance is no longer enjoyed in the throbbing excitement of the reality of the performance, but in the filmic or photographic re-presentation? If what happened is today viewed as “history”, the issue immediately stands out as paradoxical: it means to become now adapted to a historical reality that has now become museum. And the issue of the statute of images, photographs, 16 mm films, videos – that have now become what they should not have become, relics of a body once active and now subject to repetition and to the subjection of the eye, to the standardization of the structures of circulation – it's a pressing question.

One of *Body Art's* slogans was that of butchered meat just to recognize itself in the living and palpitating flesh, in the flesh that suffers. Performance art has had the opportunity to bring out the body from the picture, thus restoring it to its carnal, passionate, throbbing, erotic, painful, excrementitious existence. What is left of all this? A standardized code, a reproducibility that cancels the here and now. So, again: performance.

My task might now be accomplished: what is “performative” in the moment in which the concept of theatricality comes into play? Is it in the moment in which the performance could be categorised as an artistic object? I say that my task *might* be accomplished because the resolving of these kinds of general problems is rarely accom-

plished. But, like most problems, this one has a story and an ineliminable theoretical and aesthetic complexity.

THE BODY AS PANTOMIMIC EXPRESSION

For a long time aesthetic reflection, when it ventured onto the slippery terrain of action as corporeal practice, stirred up a series of interdependent questions such as those concerning sensibility or emotion, while more indirectly addressing those which take root in the domain of action, such as movement or correlated expressive dynamisms. The relations between body and action should instead be thought of by considering action in terms of its communicative value, which means the articulation of possible movements around the necessary constraint that is the body's limit. The expressive component thus brings action into play, which takes the form of education, technique, praxis, but also creativity, capable of transforming the body of the performer in canvas, paintbrush and the artist's hand all at once.

There is a margin in performative action between the precision of the gesture and the imaginative elaboration of expressive content into action. The more this margin narrows, the more the success of the performance will become evident to the artist. In other words, the more an action becomes an artistically expressive form, the more the gesture becomes complete and meaningful.

The body of the performer in action will give rise to numerous elements that have no purpose at all, automatic responses or movements that are simply functional in terms of posture rather than an expressive objective. On the other hand, a kinetic activity that is completely free is obviously also possible, but always within the limits of expressive potentiality: while it may exert a very powerful effect on the scene when it becomes the vehicle for emotion or of sentimental urgency, it can also overcome any expressive limit and turn into a kind of schizophrenic solipsism.

The relationship between action, space, and time is obviously very close. The body of an actor

¹ The reference is made to Viennese Actionism.

traces expressive figurations in which gesture can become meaning. Where to situate the action and how long it should last are elements essential to any interpretation that does not overlook the body. As such, one can also speak of the correlation between action and form, or rather of form as body in action. The performers, acting, detach themselves from the real world, entering into an “as if” world in which they have a monitored freedom; monitored by their own expressive potentiality or capacity.

The use of gestural language in theatre is the use of a language that has its own rules, and as such the body of the actor becomes the vehicle of another language. Diderot, whom Fischer-Lichte cites with regards to her argument, knew this well. The gestures and pantomimes that the actor portrays onstage in order to captivantly represent pathetic images – in accordance with the Enlightenment style, for example – are inexpressible through oratory eloquence alone, or the energetic force of spoken language. The worth of gestural language resides in expressivity, in immediacy, and thus also in its specificity and untranslatability. The actorial gesture should be understood in the light of its peculiarities, of its essential structural characteristics, which render it a “spatialized feeling”.

Theatrical language is physical, and breaks free from the absolute dominion of the word. The element of pantomime is the strength of theatrical art. The physical and temporal transformation of the text through performance, the representation of the human through the human being itself, the supremacy of the body in relation to the word – which stands by its side, amplifies it, but never fully substitutes it – renders performance a concrete action. This is the lesson of the Eighteenth century, in which the art of gesture is exalted as a way of “painting in space” and when body language is rediscovered. This will be the starting point for establishing an idea of expressivity, which in its development and in its meaning, is directly influenced by pantomime. It is a meaning which, in the silence of the word, or even in contrast with words, is formed through the signification of posture, gait, the face and the gaze (Barnett [1987]).

The dramatic and theatrical “I” is overloaded by the presence of a “here and now” that is very closely tied to the personality of the actors, their characteristics and potentialities. Diderot is well aware of this when he analyses the performance of the great actor Garrick, a prominent performer of Elizabethan and particularly Shakespearean drama. Diderot commented that his performance was worth the trip to England, just as the Roman ruins are worth the trip to Italy².

One day, Garrick made a son of a simple cushion: he stroked it, kissed it, and at the end pretended that it had escaped his grasp; the cushion fell out of a pretend window. The audience fell into such a confusion that many left the show. The pain of a father or of a son has a gestural quality that surpasses any convention, any technique of acting. It is the language of a pathos that is valid in every era, and anywhere. It is the language of nature. It is the language of the “man of genius” who creates the rule and gives it to art.

Another day, Garrick sticks his head through the shutters of a door and, in the space of four or five seconds, changes his expression from «insane joy to moderate joy, from this to calm, from calm to surprise, from surprise to awe, from awe to sadness, from sadness to dejection, from dejection to fear, from fear to horror, from horror to despair, and from this last to return to the first» (Diderot [1830]: 26). Here the lexicon of emotions creates an autonomous expressive space that is full of meaning, beyond any context. Garrick is communicating: this is the work in itself. It is a display of actorial virtuosity. It is, to follow Lessing, a kind of “transitory painting”.

SUBJECT AND OBJECT

As Simmel points out, the actor should not «imitate» the signs of passion, but «express» them.

² Garrick famously undertook a trip to Paris, first in 1751 and then again between 1764 and 1765. He was admired by the French for the work of cultural mediation that he was able to carry out between Shakespeare the “barbarian” and refined French culture.

The body of the actor is the vehicle of a truth that follows, and sometimes even contradicts, that of the verb. It is a truth that sometimes disregards the word, or doesn't need it at all. The performer embodies an art that is different to any other. It detaches itself from life in order to return to it.

In examining the complete error of the idea that the actor "realizes" the literary creation, whereas in fact he exercises with regard to this creation a special and unique art that stays as far from reality as the literary work itself – we grasp right away why the good imitator is not a good actor, that the talent of imitating people has nothing to do with the actor's artistic and creative gift. Because the imitator's object is reality, his goal is to be taken for reality. The artistic actor, however, is no more the imitator of the real world than is the portrait painter, but rather the creator of a new world, one that certainly is related to the phenomenon of reality because both are nourished by the stock of the contents available to all beings; only because reality is the earliest form in which we encounter these contents, the first possibility of knowing them – that gives rise to the illusion that reality as such is the object of art. Finally the most subtle seduction, that of detaining the actor's art in the sphere of reality, lies in the fact that experienced reality, into which the actor descends as his material, is essentially an inner reality. The writer's words require a reconstruction from psychological experience; it appears as the definitive task of the actor to make the words and events written in advance comprehensible to us as spiritually necessary, his art is applied or practical psychology. To set before our eyes a person's soul with its inner determination and its reaction to fate, its passions and its upsets, convincingly and understandably – that exhaustively describes the actor's task. (Simmel [1912]: 3)

The actor is the evident example, the living proof of the existence of a unity in principle between subject and object. In actorial aesthetics, man is both raw material and instrument; a means to an end. In action, the actor revives the content of his art as if it were life, simultaneously exceeding the contingent reality. «Let us grasp the actor's art as a wholly primary artistic energy of the human soul, such that it assimilates both the writ-

er's art and reality to its processes of living instead of assembling itself from them, so now its meaning also flows into the great current of the modern understanding of the world» (Simmel [1912]: 5).

The actor is thus essentially action, a scenic and therefore physical element. But where is his essence? Does it reside in the body or in the soul? These are certainly Diderotian paradoxes, but, whether one tends towards one or the other, they give life to ways of thinking, interpreting, understanding, and creating performative art.

How can one forget, then, Mejercol'd, for whom basing theatre on psychology is tantamount to depriving it of foundations? The body is the most important of all: its action is like that of a puppet, such that the same movement can be played and replayed without forgetting the unifying force that is the centre of gravity, from which the very same movement draws its impetus. This is the foundation of theatrical biomechanics: it is the study of a kinetic system mediated by the study of the movement of Italian actors at the time of the *commedia dell'arte*. These are the very same actors whom Diderot admired greatly because of their closeness to pantomimic interpretation. An actor in the style of Mejerchol'd practises using the exact sciences that develop and train the intellect, as well as sport or biomechanics. In the same way as one can detect in the gestures of a skilled workman the absence of superfluous movements, an evident element of rhythm, the awareness of their own centre of gravity and a form of "resistance", so the actor and the dancer display the same features, albeit applied to expressive art.

Later, with Grotowski, the culture of the body surpasses even the limits of theatre: the profound significance of a ritual is found in the physical action of the actor, in their gesture. Through an inductive technique, the actors can overcome any barrier, giving themselves up within an ascetic theatre where actor and audience are all that remain. This paradox leads Grotowski's experience out of the context of the theatre, searching for an alternative that focuses on a more human concept, that is the intermediate dimension between the soul and the body.

Grotowski seems closer to Aristotle, for whom essence was that of the body and not in the body, and could articulate itself only through a deed. In that sense – and that seems to be the conclusion of several threads of thought in connection with Fischer-Lichte’s book – it is not the embodiment of the mind/soul/consciousness that the spectator sees, but rather he or she witnesses the being itself – he or she is no longer the subject relating to an object, since the object-body vanishes in transparency. This shift of perspective from one that maintains aesthetic distance to one that doesn’t marks the transformation from spectating to co-being, or to being-towards, and ultimately changes the meaning of theatrical experience. The key in this change is the vanishing of traditional spectatorship, or the death of the spectator followed by the birth of the witness. (Salata [2013]: 50)

If, as Simmel highlights, other arts address one sense at a time, thus opposing the reality of things that “effectively exist”, then performative practice calls upon a multiplicity of “real or possible impressions” that only the body in action can solicit. I could beat the surface of a painting like a drum, but its purpose remains to be viewed. The active and sensible reality of the performer does not produce a work of art that exists apart from him. Rather, his action is his essence. Yet the work is performative action, and the action is art, which can even be pinned down. Nevertheless, and this is also a fact, the specificity of theatrical and performative art is created, and each time anew, through the meeting between the actors and the audience in the specific space and time of the show.

AN OPAQUE GESTURE

Contemporary theatre allows for a script, a scenario, that is exclusively visual. If action is no longer supported by dialogue, this does not mean that it will disappear. It will undoubtedly return in gestural exchange and in a temporality that is expansive and dilated, or contracted and condensed, and in the “actions of detail”. We know well that with Tadeusz Kantor or Pina Bausch (to name but a few examples), gesture lost its trans-

parency. Action itself became tension and an opaque enigma. It does not indicate, it possibly shows. Sometimes it evokes only an emotional state. The interpretation of performative action is, as Emma Dante maintains, a journey that the spectator undertakes in a foreign country, where they are forced to learn a new language. And it is from this anti-mimeticism that the dimension of the uncanny dream is born: “uncanny” because it is understood perceptively, it is familiar yet strange, out of place, out of measure, out of time. It is exempted, like a dream, from the proof of reality.

Obviously, actorial action does not only entail the creation of a gesture, but the creation of a gesture we must “believe” in. It is a double and unavoidable movement. No performer can not “believe” in their own action. Here I mean “believing” in the sense of attributing a meaning or a non-meaning to a gesture, and that such a choice should be a conscious one for the performer. It remains to be seen what the reaction and the work of interpretation of the spectator would be when confronted with an action knowingly deprived of any meaningful anchor or referent. Would it merely be confusion? Certainly not. Confusion and an interpretative effort that comes to an end only by a harsh defeat. There is no story to tell, there are no narrative relationships, everything disappears in the face of the staging that represents only the extremization of an event in a single continuous display.

If we think of the performances offered by the *Compagnia Pippo del Bono* or by the *Societas Raffaello Sanzio* at the *Teatro della Valdoca*; if we consider Jan Fabre, or Rodrigo Garcia; or we watch, on a different note, Marco Paolini’s narrative theatre or the vast gamut of ‘experimental theatre’ (here it is worth mentioning Leo de Berardinis, Remondi e Caporossi, the *Compagnia Gaia Scienza*, *Fura dels Baus*, and *Fortebraccio Teatro*), a link between such diverse experiences can be found in the possibility of matching them with concepts of limit and threshold. Interpreters and spectators are faced with a limit that can be dangerous to cross and at the same time they open a thresh-

old, a space that determines a change or a series of alterations on an emotional and physiological level. It is true that in this line of study – in which we can also include paths traced, in the history of theatre, from Tadeusz Kantor to Bob Wilson, from Shubert in Berlin (Botho Strauss/Peter Stein) to the Ontological Hysterical Theatre (Richard Foreman), from Odin Teatret (Eugenio Barba) to Peter Brook, and to Ekmuntas Nekrosius – the spectator is often called to an activity that is more perceptive than interpretative.

SYMBOLS

For instance, attempts to systematize and to provide a symbolic interpretation often fail spectacularly. Interesting evidence that the meanings of performances often go well beyond any pre-existing symbology can be found in a statement given by Marina Abramović during an interview. It is the body that speaks, the gesture. The five-pointed star Marina Abramović draws on her belly during *Lips of Thomas* for instance, is directly connected to the flag of Yugoslavia. The symbology deployed is often much more straightforward than one may think. On the contrary, the suffering body prompts our astonishment and puzzlement.

I don't like religions at all. Religion for me is very close to an institution and I don't like what institutions stand for. I want to divide religion and spirituality. Religion I don't like, spirituality – yes. When I was born, my parents were busy making their Communist careers, so I was raised by my grandmother until I was six. And my grandmother was deeply religious, I spent all the time in the Orthodox church. The priest was always in our house. I remember all those rituals with candles. I'm interested in everything to do with aestheticism, high spirituality experiences and ecstasy. In performance, when you push your limit to a certain point and overcome the pain, you reach a state of ecstasy, which is very similar to religious and spiritual ecstasy. All of those pure saints had that aspect. There's a deprivation of food, the solitude, the silence, all the techniques I'm using. For the MoMA show, I stop talking for three months. I cut

everything out of my life. No computers, no emails, no telephones. Everything is very minimal. When you cut off all that, then you really concentrate on yourself. Then your inner life becomes really alive. This is the way. When you purify yourself, you can create a charismatic space around you, which is invisible, but you can feel it, the public can feel it. The public is like a dog. They feel insecurity, they feel everything. When you're there 100%. The only thing I'm concerned about is to be in that state. The moment I'm in that state, everything's going to be fine. To reach that state is the most important goal for me. (Mogutin [2010])

To sum up, looking to the spectator is still problematic. It is for this reason that Fischer-Lichter places the “science” of theatre and its tradition at the centre of her treatise. It is an aesthetic of theatre that cannot but be reviewed, revisited, and reformulated in the moment in which theatre becomes pure action, and the sole presence of a body in the here and now. In the moment in which the performance becomes an awakening for the spectator, not only in terms of empathy but also in terms of ethics. The men and women who carry away Abramović's body in the performance described at the beginning of my speech, are compelled into action by an awakened morality that forces them to enter into the performance and thus become an unavoidable part of it. Is this enough to eliminate the fourth wall? I don't know. But what is certain is that the problem is open.

THE RETURN TO THE EIGHTEENTH CENTURY: A CONCLUSION

To conclude, we must develop an aesthetics of the performative that always takes into account both its past and the foundations of its theorizing. The return to the Eighteenth century is then far from unwarranted. Fischer-Lichte herself closes her book by returning to the century of the Enlightenment, when the aesthetics of the performative makes it possible to experience a restoration to the world of the enchanting, especially by highlighting self-referentiality and the abandonment of all claims to understanding.

Even if the aesthetics of the performative enables us to experience the re-enchantment of the world through emphasizing self-referentiality and relinquishing our efforts to only think rationally, it should not be understood as a counter-Enlightenment tendency. Instead, the aesthetics of the performative marks the limits of the Enlightenment by undermining Enlightenment reliance on binary oppositions to describe the world, and by enabling people to appear as embodied minds. Thus, the aesthetics of the performative reveals itself as a “new” Enlightenment. It does not call upon all human beings to govern over nature – neither their own nor that surrounding them – but instead encourages them to enter into a new relationship with themselves and the world. This relationship is not determined by an “either/or” situation but by an “as well as”. The re-enchantment of the world is inclusive rather than exclusive; it asks everyone to act in life as in performance. (Fischer-Lichte [2004]: 336)

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