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*How to Do Things with Art*

*What Performativity Means in Art*



Last but not least, some thoughts about the methodology of this book. The title is a play on John Langshaw Austin's seminal lecture series *How to Do Things with Words*.<sup>8</sup> In the lectures, held at Harvard in 1955, Austin discussed the performative, or reality-producing, capacity of language. Since then the term "performative" has become a key word of art discourse and, given the fashionable appeal of a new term that has gained a certain academic attention within the last decades, it is mostly used in a way that is a complete distortion from its original meaning. Today it is widely believed that "performative" can be understood as "performance-like." Understood in this false sense it has become a ubiquitous catchword for a broad range of contemporary art phenomena that, in the widest sense, show an affinity to forms of staging, theatricality and *mise-en-scène*. As a category, however, it remains stubbornly slippery, and for good reasons, because it is based on a complete twist of the word "performative." Hence I trace the term back to its original usage in the philosophy of Austin and later in the works of Jacques Derrida and Judith Butler, not only because I want to restore the methodological precision that the term seems to have lost with its popularity. This book is also an attempt to make it productive for and within the discourse on visual art.

My line of argument is based on the two theoretical premises from Austin and Butler: first, there is no performative artwork, because there is no non-performative artwork. Austin introduced the notion "performative" into language theory in order to refer to the act-like character of language. In certain cases he argued that something that



is said produces effects that reach beyond the realm of language. Under certain conditions signs can produce reality; one can *do things with words*. The classic examples for what Austin at first thought would constitute a particular category of utterances—the “performatives”—originate in legal discourse: “I now pronounce you man and wife” and “I hereby sentence you to six years imprisonment without parole.” Although Austin had originally planned to isolate certain utterances under the notion of the performative, he soon understood that a clear-cut distinction cannot be made between a constative (descriptive) and a performative way of speaking. If every utterance contains both constative and performative aspects, it is tautological to speak about “performative language.” I believe the same principle applies to artworks. It makes little sense to speak of a performative artwork, because every artwork has a reality-producing dimension.

To ask about the performative in relation to art is not about defining a new class of artworks. Rather it involves outlining a specific level of meaning production that basically exists in every artwork, although it is not always consciously shaped or dealt with—namely its reality-producing dimension. In this sense, a specific methodological orientation goes along with the performative, creating a different perspective on what produces meaning in an artwork. It means to recognize and bring into discourse the productive, reality-producing dimension of, in principle, any work of art. What the notion of the performative brings into perspective is the contingent and difficult to grasp realm of impact and effects that art brings forth both situationally, i.e. in a given spatial and discursive context, and relationally, e.g. in relation to a viewer or a public. Consequently, we can ask: What kind of situation does an artwork produce? How does it situate its viewers? What kinds of values, conventions, ideologies, and meanings are inscribed into this situation? Art’s performative dimension signifies art’s possibilities and limits in generating and changing reality.

Second, the notion of performativity has nothing to do with the art form of performance. In its canonical form, the model of performativity is defined by the philosopher Judith Butler.<sup>9</sup> Taking Austin as a starting point, Butler holds onto the reality-producing character of language, but instead of the individual speaker, who for Austin is the central



authority, she stresses the power of social conventions that empower the speaker but also relativize the impact of the individual's intentions. A performative act, for Butler, produces reality not by virtue of will or intention, but precisely because it derives from conventions that it repeats and actualizes. Every utterance and every individual action needs to be part of a conventional context in order to be understandable and recognizable. It can only create an impact by drawing upon certain (linguistic) conventions. Only pre-existing conventions render a present speaking powerful, enabling it to produce effects that go beyond language, entering the realm of reality.<sup>10</sup> Yet, as no act of repetition is identical, it contains not only reproductive but also differentiating or deviating moments. For Butler it is only within this nexus of convention and innovation, repetition and difference that any action directed towards change can happen.

Thus the theoretical model of performativity and the art form of Performance Art are based on not only different but antagonistic worldviews. While Performance Art, at least in its own constitutive self-understanding, was linked to the individual performer and the singular, autonomous act; performativity (in Butler's sense) refers to a non-autonomous and non-subjectivist idea of acting. Performance Art operates with an ideology outside of the social systems of the museum and the market, while in Butler's model of performativity there simply is no such thing as an outside. While Performance Art strived to break with the fundamental conventions of art, for Butler any form of acting is only thinkable *within* the constitutive and regulative structure of conventions.

Given Butler's argument, it is clear that the idea of a radical break with conventions *must* fail and is therefore uninteresting. Singular expressive acts that completely withdraw from discourse are not only irrelevant; they are not even thinkable. The idea of efficacy produced by a rupture from conventions is replaced by the use of conventions—a use that also contains a transforming potential. With this notion of performativity we can, for example, concretize how every artwork, not in spite of but by virtue of its integration in certain conventions, “acts”: how, for example, via the museum it sustains or co-produces a certain notion of history, progress and development. The model of performativity points toward these fundamental levels of meaning production. It puts the



## INTRODUCTION

conventions of art's production, presentation and historical persistence into focus, shows how these conventions are co-produced by any artwork—independent of its respective content—and argues that it is precisely this dependency on conventions that opens up the possibility of changing them.