

Transformation in Teaching

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How might I best speak about my teaching activities, about mutual expectations within institutions, among genres, between students, about the special subtlety inherent in teaching a format that is as mobile as performance?

I would have to be personal, while keeping an eye on the big picture, avoiding the beaten paths of oft-repeated stock phrases, with a mind that is in principle extremely open to drawing connections, including those that have fallen by the wayside or have vanished in the mists of finishing touches.

And what sort of language would I want to use?

What would people say if I used an academic tone to recount a film or describe a picture? Would it convey the immediate experience of that film or picture? Would it be the same as personally absorbing its artistic content? I hardly think so.

With my apparent show of disrespect, I'm only trying to revive the figure of respect. Diverse. Vice versa. Upward and downward, sideways and crosswise. I thought for a long time about how to speak about things that are important to me as an artist but also as a teacher. I still find the medium of text meaningful as a way to express my ideas on the extremely mobile and moving medium of performance. But in which way exactly?

I find it overwhelming that I am continually asked to do something that is simultaneously the subject of widespread criticism (and to my mind rightly so): to speak about my work in purely theoretical terms, preferably in a "scholarly" mode. This is something I am expected to do as an artist but cannot do according to these strict specifications. It is in fact something I mustn't do—not in the sense of a condescending ban on such an attempt, but because I would then not live up to my identity as an artist. These are the considerations that have prompted me to express myself once again, in spite of everything, in the form of an article.

So many questions arise from this insight, so many tasks, so much earnestness when I take every single part seriously. As a teacher who will never abandon the artist, I would ask: Under

which circumstances am I thrilled by impudence? By dead serious re-enactment? By rebellion? Even by the struggle for institutional recognition? Is there an underlying equation, or am I supposed to be indulgent and generous, as befits each respective situation, in my desire for comprehensible motives, aesthetically transformed in a compelling manner? Do I have to approach performance history in a non-linear way, or is there a point at which everything that's demanded, all the claims made on art, degenerate into a compulsion, into the dogma of an older and more established generation? What do we—the students and I, their *lehrkörper*—have to offer each other? (Yes, in the language of the bureaucrats, I am a “teaching body”—*lehrkörper*. What a horrible word, in every respect!)

Who is fresh? Who is experienced? Who knows what, who is willing to put herself to the test? Where are the conventions at home? The fragmented way in which education, artistic exploration, and one's own research enter into relationships is still astounding to me.

I always like to illustrate such thoughts, this whirring beehive, with anecdotes. This visualization in words pleases me; I believe that it allows access, a familiarization, an inkling, a form of understanding, even if one is still far from attaining true insight.

The mother of a friend of mine told me that as a child, back when it was anything but a matter of course to have seen the sea with one's own eyes, she imagined it as an endless row of swimming pools. She realized that there was a downside, however, and she racked her brain wondering how the ships could cross the walls in between the pools ...

I think this is a wonderful image of how we might very well realize that something is extremely complex and yet still try to make it fit into our narrow understanding. Instead of simply not worrying about it and accepting it as it is. That's something we control freaks just aren't capable of. Recognizing horizons that are beyond our ken—this is a form of respect we still have to learn. We have a way of shamelessly oversimplifying things while simultaneously and stubbornly making them more complicated than they are.

This could be said of a number of things, but I first want to talk about the establishment of the department of “Performative Art” at the Academy of Fine Arts Vienna. You could call it a prosaic piece of history with comic elements. Also of interest in this respect is the way that people today fall all over themselves trying to affirm the high regard in which they hold

“performance.” It’s hard to believe that in the beginning (2006) the institution did not even provide a dedicated room to this new field within its walls.

The first concession came when an open area behind the auditorium was made available—with furniture on castors, so that it could be cleared away quickly in case the Academy needed to use the space for another purpose. My cautious conjecture: perhaps this was based on some mistaken conflation of the ephemeral character of performance art and an ability to make do without infrastructure. Nor can I resist remarking on the curious fact that performance, that “most transient” format among the “fine arts,” has in the meantime become a welcome guest, or taxi dancer, for all major art world events. No show would be complete these days without a live performance! But setting aside a separate room for students ...?

That said, in the course of the university strike of 2009, the performative art class seized the area behind the auditorium as a permanent workspace. Since the class had not had any doors or walls up to that point, we decided to install a paperboard wall, including swinging saloon doors and pink-and-yellow windows—both as important working props (a door and a wall!) and a political statement saying that performative art needs a permanent rehearsal space/studio, just like other media!

Another interesting aspect of this action, which had more than symbolic meaning, was the reasoning that was eventually applied. Instead of referring to the unquestionable necessity of giving painters a studio, it was pointed out that dancers naturally needed a rehearsal room ...

How long do codified standards remain valid? Until an artist is established? How does one become established? How often does it happen that one succeeds only through almost Kafkaesque revelations to demand something—and to get it. And who was there first in the subsequent canonization? The disenfranchised yet demanding voice, or the power that at some point budes and then sees its advocacy as affirmation of always having been open-minded on the issue?

To proceed to the next layer of walls in this story: We still need to agonize in endless debates about the differences between performative art in theater, dance, and visual art. What is most amazing is that this is not in order to reach a rapprochement, with adequate respect for the

particular qualities of the respective genres, but in order to be pitted against one another with regard to “genre differences.”

Criteria of quality are necessary, and in a sense categories are as well. But I find it unfortunate that such categorizations, which have long been regarded and criticized as “hegemonic programs,” are not only upheld but translated into rigid hierarchies.

The history or histories of a term, a format, an art form, are by contrast often enough blurred, so that we fail to develop an awareness of what it is we are actually doing, what we are building on.

I would like to bring in one of my favorite sentences at this point: “Suffragettes Invented Performance Art.” This is the title of a performance by the artist Leslie Hill that examines the simultaneous historical emergence of performance art and feminism, as well as their dual use by women. Hill’s work compellingly demonstrates in addition how well suited live performance is as a political and at the same time aesthetic tool.

Sometimes, as in this case, what is said before and surrounding a performance suddenly provides an insight into the revolutionary quality of a situation. Here, for example, we realize the significance feminist battles have had for our lives from the twentieth century onward.

In Austria alone, it is incredibly rewarding to establish alongside Viennese Actionism a feminist and queer Austrian performance history, an aspect that has hardly been explored in teaching and research on performance art to date. This context can open up new interpretations of Viennese Actionism, or, on the basis of acknowledging more than one possible history, can help us to read it reflexively in a different way.

I pursued these issues in a book written with Stefanie Seibold, *Let’s Twist Again*, and in two exhibitions on performance art.¹ I was able to bring quite a few aspects back into the public eye that had been consigned to oblivion. This research forms my own foundation—both for teaching as well as for dealing with others in a more attentive way (student to teacher, artist to artist).

¹ Carola Dertnig and Stefanie Seibold, eds., *Let’s Twist Again: If You Can’t Think It, Dance It – Performance in Vienna from 1960 until Today* (Vienna: deA Verlag, 2006).

Such insights are infinitely more valuable than endless jockeying for position, for the loudest voice. They are more valuable than rigid scientific methods or coercive expectations to say, or be forced to say, the “right” thing—and to put it in such nimble words that it is always “the right thing” for the rapidly changing zeitgeist. Each season has its own fashion, which interrupts the previous disputes and sometimes even handles them condescendingly. Concepts and terms come into inflationary use (“discursive love and knowledge production”) ...

So much for fragmentations. So much for my opinion on distinct categories; on rigidly asserted “truths”; on stubbornness that sometimes doesn’t even bother to look around, to generate contexts other than the prevailing ones, to examine the struggles that surrounded what has evolved historically and hence enable us to relate to it again.

A re-enactment might sparkle with life precisely because it is aware of what went before. A video might genuinely claim to be a “piece” because the author does not view her/himself as the creator of each “take,” of each idea, but rather knows something about who has conceived it before, and when, and in what degree of complexity.

It would then be possible to convey that previous experiments are not boring spaces that are supposedly no longer accessible, but that they form a firm ground for engagement, where it is by no means an annoyance that someone else may already have had your “own” idea, perhaps even finding exactly the format you wanted to think of as “totally fresh.”

I find the term “appropriation” exciting in this sense, as a form of borrowing, not stealing, that can succeed based on concrete knowledge, a certain education, or on the kind of knowledge I would perhaps refer to as respectful or “modest,” in the sense that you are not the only talented person on this planet.

At the same time, a degree of nonchalance is of course necessary, because otherwise, out of sheer awe for what has already been “done,” your own creativity could only unfold as exemplary and controlled down to the last detail. This would certainly lead to an acknowledgement of your predecessors but not to any controversy, any jolting awake, any passion.

What I'm trying to say is that it is the mix that makes performative art, like other genres, interesting today. Too much of either ignorance or pandering is in any case a good way to feel frozen.

It is this mix—this open field that can never consist of boxes with their walls broken down—that I try to convey in my teaching. With propositions that are open and hence designed to incite more openness. As an artist I must always be in alert motion. I must stay agile, both in terms of what has gone before as well as in the courage to take leaps, to make decisions, to improvise, all while remaining conscious of my own limits.

I want the students not only to acquire knowledge and assimilate unfamiliar contextualizations but also to experience the broadest possible infrastructures. This is because performance can take place inside the protected but also controlling space of an institution, just as it can in sheltered settings—for example, a residency established specifically for performance such as the Performing Arts Forum (PAF) in France. But performance can also go out into the city and have an impact there.

Important to me in this connection, along with the variety of settings, are the kinds of opportunities for experience these respective places most directly enable. A school pampers the performer with everything necessary for productions. A city provides abundant space. A residency helps one confront the element of embarrassment that is so important to a performance, to take risks, and sometimes to also learn to cope with humiliation.

All of these types of performance are preceded by a joint closed session, similar to the working method in theater—a submersion in a concentrated work situation. Process-based working, non-hierarchical confrontations, a continuous questioning that doesn't stop even despite temporary signs of uncertainty, are much more important to me than frontal teaching, giving instructions, power structures I consider outdated.

It would therefore be a shame if we were to try to conceal a certain, recurring crux: namely that students not infrequently expect conventional professorial behavior and don't know what to do when offered greater freedom, demanding instead strict pedagogical guardrails and classes that proceed according to a fixed structure. They project the expectation of perfection and its merciless enforcement. Openness is hence often misunderstood as a sign of indecision;

perfection, by contrast, as decisiveness, as strength—in an unquestioning adaptation of the self to the neo-liberal conditioning of the subject.

But I have nothing against moments of embarrassment and humiliation of one form or another. I am in favor of WORKING THINGS OUT, not of perfect postulates. Freedom is something that must be learned. Freedom is the framework that makes concentrated work and productions possible in the first place.

What remains? At least no fear of humiliation!

This text came about in the course of many conversations with Carola Platzek.

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