

# Introduction

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# INTRODUCTION

Stanca Scholz-Cionca and Robert Borgen

The words ‘performance’ or ‘performativity’ occur with striking frequency in recent scholarly writing. They appear in the titles of international meetings and research projects in various fields. Some scholars even invoke a ‘performative turn’ in cultural studies. Despite the popularity of these terms, no consensus has appeared regarding their meanings. They seem to resist consistent application as analytical tools, both within the various disciplines that apply them and across those disciplines. The terms recur so stubbornly as to seem unavoidable, even though they are employed in different, if not to say diverging, ways.

As early as the 1950’s, linguistics became the first discipline to test the value of ‘performance’ as an analytical category (see J. L. Austin’s seminal *How to Do Things with Words*), but it was also the first to recognize its limits. The initial distinction between ‘constative’ and ‘performative’ verbs became untenable, as every utterance is a performance, but the idea of speech as act – doing by saying – came to be generally accepted (Searle’s analytical speech act theory) and resulted in a shift in the perception of language, which is no longer seen simply as ‘representation’ but also as creation of reality. Hierarchical oppositions such as ‘competence/performance,’ ‘constative/performative utterance,’ ‘rule/application’ are destabilized, becoming dynamic and relative.

Among anthropologists, the term ‘performance’ acquired a different meaning in the late nineteen fifties, when Milton Singer proposed his seminal paradigm of ‘cultural performance’ to designate the most concrete observable units of the cultural structure, characterized by “a definitely limited time span, a beginning and an end, an organized program of activity, a set of performers, an audience and a place and occasion of performance.”<sup>1</sup> This theatrical paradigm inspired scholarly investigation of ritual behaviour in ethnology (Victor Turner and his followers) and theatre studies (Richard Schechner), the latter expanding their scope to become comprehensive ‘performance studies.’ Still, theatre scholars, conscious of the roots of their discipline in the revolt against the dominance of the text (dramatic literature) tend to overstress the false opposition

1 Milton Singer (ed.): *Traditional India. Structure and Change*. Philadelphia 1959, XIIIff.

between text and performance (Fischer-Lichte). It was the contribution of literary studies to distinguish between the functional and the structural performativity of texts and to use the latter as a pertinent analytical tool.

Even more noteworthy was the fate of the 'performance paradigm' in feminist theory and gender studies, where 'performing gender identity' (Judith Butler) or the more radical stance of 'doing gender' (Candace West/Don Zimmermann) triggered a protracted and vociferous debate in the 1990's, imposing a shift from the traditional concept of gender as 'expressive' of a presupposed, pre-existing biological substratum to understanding gender as an active process of identity formation by performing repeated acts. The gendered subject came to be recognized in its processual aspect as emerging in bodily as well as speech acts. Moreover, performative approaches are prominent in all disciplines pertaining to society and history. Social order, or social reality as such (including ideas, mentalities, institutions, the instauration, inscription, and legitimation of power and knowledge etc.) came to be seen as generated by repetitive social acting, i.e. in processes of discursive and interactive construction. New Historicism, one of the fashionable trends of the past decades, turns to performative models when describing processes of identity formation, including both individual identity as well as identity in a peer or cultural group or in a nation. This approach is anchored in key concepts such as 'self-fashioning,' 'life-styles,' and 'auto-poiesis,' but also in Michel Foucault's 'technology of the self,' or Pierre Bourdieu's insistence on 'habitus' and on 'instauration rites.' All these terms are related to performance and suggest a shift in the perception and description of socio-historical phenomena.

Notwithstanding this broad expansion of performance models in various scholarly domains, the term has not acquired the precision of a stable analytical tool, but instead retains a disconcerting imprecision and fluidity. Rather than a fixed quality, 'performativity' may be regarded as a signal marking a change in perspective that occurred in various fields: a shift from the perception of cultural and societal phenomena as stable texts to their perception as fluid, dynamic processes, from referential to constitutive symbolic practice. 'Performativity' is after all a signal (and symptom) of anti-essentialist stances. It directs our attention towards the processual and fleeting, towards the interference of materiality and mediality in phenomena; it is connected to corporeality and transitoriness; to the ludic and dramatic modes.

The idea of a symposium on performativity in the cultures of the Far East was motivated by three premises: the recognition of a prominent role of performance

in cultural practices of the three regions connected by the medium of written Chinese; the insufficient attention given to such approaches in Sinology, Korean and Japanese studies; and the feeble and sporadic contacts between academics who work in those fields. Observers have long noted that this cultural region never experienced the ‘fading out’ of performative values that took place in Europe at the threshold of early modernity, around the sixteenth century. Neither has it gone through the separation of thought from materiality that underpins the binaries of the post-Enlightenment European world (body/mind, orality/script, bodily expression/text, ritual/monument etc.).

The symposium was held June 19-22 at the University of Trier under the ambiguous title *Performing Cultures in East Asia: China, Korea, Japan*, meaning both ‘cultures of performativity’ and ‘performative approaches’ to cultural phenomena in the area. It brought together scholars including chairs and discussants, from eight countries: Austria, France, Germany, Italy, Japan, The Netherlands, Norway, and the USA. As a workshop, it allowed long discussion between the presentations. As discussants and chairs we invited Halvor Eifring from Oslo, Bonaventura Ruperti from Venice, Noriyuki Sakai from Tokyo, and Jean-Jacques Tschudin from Paris.

Seventeen participants presented papers: five on Sinological topics, four treating Korea, and eight on Japan. Four papers from the conference are not included in this volume. Michael Friedrich from Hamburg discussed the mediality of written Chinese. Yûko Tanaka from Hôsei University, Tokyo, made a presentation on ‘performing the kimono’ in Edo time, as reflected, for example, in woodblock prints. Roald Maliangkay from Leiden compared the narrators who accompanied silent movies in Japan and Korea. Werner Sasse from Hamburg uncovered performative strategies in a narrative text from fifteenth century Korea.

The other thirteen papers, revised and amended, found their way into the present volume. Because the topic of the symposium had a geographic focus, a journal dedicated to Asian studies seemed the most appropriate place for publication.<sup>2</sup> The papers are divided into two sections, first those pertaining to premodern times, followed by those on modern subjects. Within the premodern section, they are ordered by area, China, Korea, Japan. This seems the best arrangement, given the diverse topics of the premodern papers. In contrast, the modern papers, all but one of which happen to treat Japan, are arranged

2 We wish to thank the editor of the *Asiatische Studien/Études Asiatiques* for hosting this volume.

typically, beginning with studies in literature and art and moving on to social scientific approaches.

The authors adopted various positions when dealing with performativity: some found the approach helpful or even enlightening, others tested its relevance and rejected it at least partially, others again avoided theoretical discussion but discovered performance in unexpected places. We hope this broad spectrum of stances will make these essays worth reading and possibly inspiring.

In the first paper, Karl-Heinz Pohl (Trier) highlights the high performativity of Chinese visual arts, especially painting and calligraphy, as compared to their western counterparts. In fact, the discovery of such differences in the taxonomy of the arts triggered a lasting enthusiasm in the West for art forms of East Asia, which has continued now for well over a century. Drawing on early theoretical reflections on art and creativity, this article reminds us that we can focus on the performance in which painters or calligraphers produce their art just as easily as we devote attention to the finished artefacts that are the result of these performances.

Next, Erling von Mende (Berlin) is concerned with the performativity of rituals. He investigates the transformations an old shamanic ritual underwent in the eighteenth century under the reign of the Qianlong Emperor when it was transposed both into a new political context (as a formalized, central state act) and a new medium (translated from Manchu into Chinese). As this paper's close philological and historical investigation tends to obscure the ritual itself, performance is conjured, only to vanish in its textual traces.

Rui Magone (also Berlin) begins with a lively discussion of the merits and drawbacks of performative approaches. He then illustrates the problem by analyzing a familiar and much-debated element of the traditional Chinese state, its civil service examination system, which he treats as a performance. In his detailed description of examination practices, he tests both the theatre model and the linguistic pattern (oriented by the pair competence/performance), only to reject both as less useful than traditional philological research.

In the first of the two papers focusing on Korea, Jörg Plassen (Bochum) is primarily concerned with the functional performativity of early Buddhist commentaries written in China and Korea. In a close philological analysis he sheds light upon the contexts of text production, communication (preaching before audiences) as well as reception processes (impact on the listener), by tracing elements of orality, visualisation and acting practices inscribed in the dialogic structure of the commentaries.

Marion Eggert (also Bochum) undertakes a radical exploration of structural performativity in a canonical text from the late eighteenth century, a classical Korean travelogue. In close readings of core scenes in the travelogue, she highlights performative strategies its author consciously employed to reinforce and modulate the overall themes of his work. By disclosing the confluence of multi-voiced dramatic narrative with political, religious, epistemological and aesthetic claims, Eggert unveils the complexities of a highly intricate and sophisticated literary text. Her analysis demonstrates how performative approaches can enrich the philological work by lending it greater flexibility.

Robert Borgen tacitly follows Singer's model of cultural performance to illustrate the relationship between a religious ritual act, a pilgrimage, and traditional theatrical shows. He treats the successive transpositions of a real pilgrimage to China by a Japanese monk as it enters various genres, short didactic narratives, a *noh* play, and finally *kabuki* shows. Borgen contends that over time worldly show tends to displace religious performance, itself a form of dramatic art in that it addresses listeners or readers. The paper reconstructs how a motif evolved, focusing on the gradual extinction of the actual pilgrimage from theatre plots to be replaced by a close-up only on what had been the climactic scene in the earliest dramatization. In that scene, the pilgrim encounters a deity in the form of a lion, which performs a spectacular dance suggesting the pilgrim's enlightenment. Later versions become lion dances quite independent from the initial religious narrative.

Performative approaches are used in several ways in the paper that closes the premodern section. Klaus Vollmer (Munich) offers a new, complex description of a medieval literary genre in Japan, the so-called "poetry contests of various occupations." He draws on the functional performativity implied in text production and reflects on the performative facets of its very objects, for the genre deals with arts and crafts, as well as on the performative space essential to the contests themselves. But he also insists on the multiple layers of meaning inscribed into the texts and the pictures that illustrate their poems by dramatic strategies of 'staging.' By stressing the multi-mediality of its subject, this paper highlights complex interferences within cultural phenomena in premodern Japan, with side glances at parallel phenomena in European culture. Moreover, it unveils the reductive way modern scholarship has dealt with literary works of East Asia, by, unconsciously or deliberately, ignoring their performative context. Finally, Vollmer claims a shift in perspective, overdue in scholarly work: a change in focus, from the literary product (the text) to contextual embedding

(which implies processes of production, communication and reception) and also to performative techniques employed in literary texts.

The papers dealing with modern culture show a remarkable homogeneity in their uses of performative stances. All authors are concerned with problems of identity (individual, group or national identity) as well as strategies of self-fashioning or self-control. In the first paper, Evelyn Schulz (Munich) deals with the identity of a city, Edo/Tokyo, which she considers both in its material dimension (urbanism in process) and as literary construct (in a prose narrative written in the nineteen fifties). The performative approach proves helpful, if not essential, to describing processes of urban development and change brought about both by human intervention such as industrialization or war, or natural catastrophes, notably earthquake and fire. It is equally useful when exploring the production of literary images of the city, affected by nostalgic memories and meant to trigger such memories in the minds of readers. This approach shapes the fluctuating perspective of the article, as it oscillates between the actual urban space and its image in either collective or personal memories.

Unlike most other papers, Hackner's contribution deals not with an Asian variant of performativity, but with a cultural import. He considers the impact of European avant-garde movements, especially Dada, on Japanese poets active in the third decade of the past century. For the poets involved, the import of European programmes entailed a radical revision of concepts of 'art' and 'creativity' reconsidered in their performative aspects. Within the context of 'modernization,' which was accompanied by a radical denial of traditional practices (including the performative dimensions of literary creation!), dadaist stances reaffirm the poet's role as performer and occasionally even refer to traditional precursors from the classical past.

Similar problems, and especially the blurred distinction between art and life, in this case, the artist's life-style, are addressed by Wolfgang Kubin (Bonn) in his essay, which also reveals interesting parallels and contrasts to Pohl's paper. Starting from a lyrical deliberation on the transience of theoretical frameworks and key concepts, Kubin embarks on a description of performative aspects in the life and works of three contemporary artists, best known as photographers but with multimedia interests, dwelling at length on the fluctuating borders between creativity and self-fashioning.

Lifestyle as a strong factor in shaping modern identities, not only of professional artists but also of ordinary consumers, is the central topic in the contribution by Steffi Richter (Leipzig). Using as her main source a magazine

published by a famous department store between 1911 and 1933, Richter explores ambivalent connections between ideological constructs and consumers' conduct. Her essay is primarily concerned with the formation of individual identities by consumption practices and with the manipulation of this process by influential print media, but it also tackles issues of national and ethnic identity.

The consumer's world is also present in the contribution of Peter Ackermann (Erlangen), but here it is treated from a different angle: that of the professional vendor. Self-fashioning – or, in a narrower sense, bodily control – is not seen as identity shaping, but rather as a practical answer to the problem of how to improve sales. Ackermann compares Japanese manuals for shop clerks with their German counterparts and notes that the Japanese provide far more detailed attention to precise scripts, both verbal and physical, that salespeople should follow. In other words, the Japanese are more conscious of the performative side of salesmanship.

Wolfram Manzenreiter (Vienna) investigates modern Japanese sports as they relate to nationalism. Sporting events contain obvious elements of performance as they are literally performed by the individual body in a ritualized context taking the form of a dramatic contest. Like Ackermann, Manzenreiter notes a Japanese tendency to stress mastery of fixed body actions that athletes, like shop clerks, are expected to perform correctly. This approach was taken from traditional athletic competitions and adopted into new ones learned from the West. Sports not only adopted Japanese performing techniques but also came to be performed as symbols of national pride.

Those who presented papers in the original workshop shared only their interest in one of the three major East Asian cultures, China, Korea or Japan. The objects of their study, however, ranged from the classical arts to the contemporary social sciences and none was a specialist in performance. As a result, the papers included here are quite diverse in both subject matter and approach. Participants in the workshop found this very lack of unity to be a positive element in that it encouraged them to think about other ways of looking at their own work. We hope readers will share this view and encourage them to seek possible relationships among a seemingly disparate group of papers.

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