

Performance or Enactment

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The Problem with "Performative"

"Enactment" is a term I began using in the mid-2000s as an alternative to "performative" and "performativity," terms that exploded into cultural theory with so much promise in the 1990s. As is widely known, the term "performative" first developed in linguistics and the philosophy of language. It is most often traced back through J. L. Austin's 1962 book, *How to Do Things with Words*, which developed on the idea of "speech acts"—utterances that DO things. This idea was taken up by a number of people in the 1970s and '80s, such as Shoshana Felman in *The Literary Speech Act*, and John Searle, but it was Judith Butler who brought the term to the forefront of much thinking about culture and gender with a series of books, beginning with *Gender Trouble* in 1990, that developed the theory of gender performativity. "Performative" and "performativity" quickly became two of the most often used terms in art discourse, perhaps second only to "critical" and "criticality." In the process, they became almost completely detached from their dictionary meanings as specifically linguistic forms, as well as from the theory and politics of gender identity with which they developed in Butler's work.

When the term "performative" jumped from linguistics into literary theory, it promised to break down the boundary between doing, on the one hand, and saying, writing, or representing on the other. When it developed in feminist and queer theory to describe the often compulsory and normative character of gender performance, it promised to break down the boundary separating self-conscious and specialized cultural performance from the often unconscious and overdetermined social and psychological aspects of gender performance. In many ways, I see the rise of the term "performative" in art discourse, where it has come to describe any kind of artistically framed and conceptualized activity, recorded or witnessed, as a regressive re-inscription of these very boundaries.

For me, that generalized usage is a disappointment and a failure of the promise of the performative: of doing away with the opposition between saying and doing and thus freeing our conception of doing from the constraints of motility; of framing a reflection on what it is that we do when we do whatever it is that we do, whether speaking, writing, interacting, making objects or images, or even, of course, performing. The evolution of the term from a noun denoting a linguistic form to an adjective describing any element of an artwork that involves a physical action, or any aspect of a text or lecture that is conceived as dramatic or formally effective, may actually be a devolution. It's gotten to the point that when I hear the word "performative" used to describe an artistic action, I want to jump up and yell, No! no! That's not what it means! It's a linguistic form! It's not an action. It's specifically not an action! It is doing something with words! I'm not sure why I care. I can't feel any particular claim

to a legitimate usage, since my history with the term is superficial at best. My frustration, I think, has more to do with the function the term often seems to serve in art discourse—with what the term “performative” itself performs.

The term “performative,” it seems to me, has become a kind of camouflage or lure, a distraction or diversion such as those employed to augment a sleight of hand, in which we name something but only in order to distance, conceal, and contain it. Rather than opening up all manner of forms and activities to a reflection on what they do, even our capacity to use “performative” to reflect specifically on what we may be doing with words and other nonactions has been lost in artistic usage, as that primary meaning of the term is now mostly consigned to anachronistic and academic usage. But what this artistic usage has accomplished above all, it seems to me, is the re-enclosure of what is potentially unconscious or unthought, unwelcome, uncontrolled (and perhaps uncontrollable) in what we do within a sphere of artistically and theoretically framed intention and conceptualization and, ultimately, a kind of artistic and intellectual omnipotence.

In many ways, the explosion of the terms “performative” and “performativity” seems to have been less a response to a shift in art practice or how we understand it, or to any interpretive need, than to a need among artists and academics to reassure ourselves that we are actually doing something: that our works do not just sit on pages or shelves or hang on walls, but do things; that, within the forms of autonomy that have defined the field of art and have distanced and neutralized function, we can indeed have an impact. It seems to me, however, that the current usage of the terms has the opposite effect. Despite their apparent connotation of doing things (with or without words), the terms now more often seem to inscribe an ever larger sphere of activities within the symbolic and discursive systems of our artistic and academic fields. In doing so they tend to empty activities that are always inescapably embedded in a whole range of social, economic, and psychological and emotional relations of all but their artistically and intellectually intended and conceptualized meanings.

Enactment in Psychoanalysis

There was an afternoon in the mid-2000s when I was in a session with my psychoanalyst in New York, working diligently (as usual) to avoid some important issue, when I said, with the just-came-to-mind casualness with which I generally attempted to hide my efforts to impress him: “I am just so done with ‘the performative.’ It is overused and mostly MIS-used. From now on, I’m only going to use the word ‘enactment.’” He replied, “You better hurry.”

I'm not sure where I first came across the term "enactment." Butler uses it in a fairly specific way, as does Pierre Bourdieu, and I imagine there may be a body of literature on the term in performance studies with which I'm unfamiliar. When I started using it in the mid-2000s, it came to me primarily through a range of psychoanalytic perspectives I was exploring at the time, particularly Kleinian, object-relations, and relational psychoanalysis. I soon became aware that the term "enactment" had been subject to intensive debate in those frameworks starting in the mid-1990s, roughly in parallel to the explosion of interest in performativity in cultural theory, but with no apparent connection to that term or its development.

In psychoanalytic theory, the concept of enactment emerged through a reconciliation of the notions of transference and acting out. One of the premises of psychoanalytic practice is that you can't change something over there—by talking about it, interpreting it, representing it, reflecting on it. You can only work on what is made "immediate and manifest" (as Freud put it) in the "here and now" of the analytic situation. This principle has been central to my thinking about performance, critical practice, and site-specificity since the mid-1980s. Transference is the concept developed by Freud to describe the mechanisms through which psychological and emotional structures and relationships are made "immediate and manifest" in the context of psychoanalytic treatment, and thus available for analytic working-through. Freud was concerned primarily with the repetition of early relationships to primary attachment figures. Melanie Klein and others expanded on Freud's narrow preoccupation with what she called "whole objects" to include under the rubric of transference phenomena the entire range of intrapsychic as well as interpersonal relationships with any object of emotional investment—including those that exist only or primarily in fantasy and thus can no longer be considered repetitions of early relationships.

If Austin theorized how we do things *with* words, psychoanalysis instead developed as a technique of doing things *without* actions. It developed by way of a prohibition on actions: physical actions such the manipulation or direct therapeutic treatment of the body or any physical contact between patient and physician. Psychoanalysis, as Freud described it, was to work through the replacement of compulsive, symptomatic *doing* by means of *speaking*. The neutrality and abstinence of the analyst, the patient's relative immobility on the couch, and the strict boundaries of the analytic frame were all oriented toward limiting the potential for impulses to be "discharged in action," so as to confine transference repetitions to the realm of thought and corral them toward speech, and thus toward conscious memory, symbolization, recognition, and integration. It was in this realm of speech that the "*therapeutic action*" (as James Strachey called it) specific to psychoanalysis was conceived. Other kinds of action on the part of patient or analyst were considered coun-

terproductive and labeled "acting out," a term that developed strong implications of adolescent delinquency and a developmentally challenged need to communicate through actions rather than words. While the concepts of transference and acting out were clearly paired by Freud, they became split along lines parallel to the opposition of speech and action.

But the opposition between saying and doing, remembering and repeating, never really held up. By the mid-90s, many analysts were acknowledging that speech did not restrain or substitute for actions, but was itself an action, and that therapist and patient always enact the issues being discussed. The emergence of the concept of enactment was also spurred by the critique, developed by feminist and queer analysts, of the kind of normative thinking that linked terms like "acting out" to delinquency and pathology. It was also linked to a broad rethinking of counter-transference. While enactment encompasses a whole range of transference phenomena, it is used most specifically to describe "actualizations" of unconscious structures and impulses in which both patient and analyst participate. In this sense, the term has been strongly linked to what are sometimes called two-body (as opposed to one-body) psychologies, in the context of which it describes the intersubjective dimension of transference phenomena as distinct from what may be considered a projection of purely intrapsychic phenomena.

Despite over two decades of debate, there is not a lot of consensus within the field of psychoanalysis on what enactment is and whether the term describes anything new. Some analysts see it just as a new way of describing transference phenomena; others acknowledge that it now seems that everything that happens in analysis, as well as outside of it, can be called enactment. At that point, some suggest, the term loses its meaning and place in psychoanalytic theory.

From Performance to Enactment

For me, the value of the term "enactment" in engaging with culture lies not in the specificity of the phenomenon it describes so much as the perspective on phenomena it frames. First, it allows us to step back from the opposition between doing, acting, or performing on the one hand, and saying or representing on the other, by framing a focus on what we are doing within or beyond—and often in contrast—to what we are saying. At the same time, it allows us to look past the specifically and narrowly defined artistic motives and meanings of what we do, framed by art discourse above all (including the discourse of performativity) and begin to take into account the full range of motives and meanings of our activities, including those that are unconscious and unthought, compulsive and compulsory, and socially and psychologically overdetermined.

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What the concept of enactment can bring into focus, in art as in psychoanalysis, are the structures of relationships that are produced and reproduced in all forms of activity. These may include intra- or intersubjective psychological relationships—particularly relationships to objects in a psychoanalytic sense, that is, anything that becomes a focus of emotional investment—as well as social and economic relationships that may be internalized, objectified, or institutionalized. What enactment implies above all is that in the production and reproduction of these relationships there is *always* an investment, and that the meaning of the enactment, its significance, function, and effect, is intimately and inseparably tied up with that investment. In most psychoanalytic frameworks, that investment would be understood primarily as an affective investment—emotional or sexual: an investment of psychological energy in which the body is always at stake on some level as subject to pleasure or pain, satisfaction or frustration, security or anxiety. I would say, more broadly, that it is always a *material* investment: *economic* in both the psychological and social sense of that term, inseparably, in which a whole range of objects, real and phantasized, from which we hope to derive some form of satisfaction—or fend off frustration, deprivation, and anxiety—are also at stake.

If we are always enacting, and if these structures are always there, performance art—and art generally, as I understand it—aims, first of all, to occasion a recognition of and reflection on those structures in their enactment: structures that include not only what artists, performers, or intellectuals do, but what audiences, readers, and other participants in any encounter also do. And this, for me is how “performative,” if I used the word, would be defined: that is, as enactment that performs itself and in so doing structures a recognition of and reflection on the relations produced and reproduced in the activity and, above all, on the investments that orient them.