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Performance and Performativity – How to Discuss Presence

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Abstract
Today's aesthetics discourse sees presence as a specific aesthetic quality not just of the human body but of objects from our environment, including products of technical and electronic media (in terms of their "presence effects"). I will apply the term "presence" to the performer's body and subsequently examine whether, within the frame of the aesthetics of the performative, it can be meaningfully related to objects from our environment.

Keywords
Performativity, performance, presence, theatre, atmospheres

Today's aesthetics discourse sees presence as a specific aesthetic quality not just of the human body but of objects from our environment, including products of technical and electronic media (in terms of their "presence effects"). I will apply the term "presence" to the performer's body and subsequently examine whether, within the frame of the aesthetics of the performative, it can be meaningfully related to objects from our environment.

While the terms "presence" and "presentness" only rose to prominence in the aesthetic discourse of the last decades, these terms (or their respective historical equivalents) have determined the theatre-historical discourse since its inception. This is particularly true for the church fathers in the late antiquity and the so-called *Querellé de la moralité du théâtre* from the seventeenth century. In the introduction to his tract of 1747, *Le Comédien*, Rémond de Sainte-Albine summarized the current state of the discussion by comparing painting to theatre: "The painter merely presents a situation. The actor in some manner lets it happen again" (pp. 14-15). Two hundred and fifty years later the director Peter Stein came to a similar conclusion when he compared theatre to painting and praised the "miracle" of theatre which still provides "the actor

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with the possibility to say: 'I am Prometheus' [...] If today someone were to paint like Piero della Francesca and say 'I am using colors made of egg-shells' then that would be imitation at best. The actor, however, is not imitating anything. He himself embodies the role as he did 2,500 years ago" (cited in von Becker 1997). Both Sainte-Albine and Stein insist that performance always occurs here and now, immediately before the eyes and ears of the audience which perceives and witnesses it. Both uphold the validity of the topos of presentness in theatre.

This topos primarily signifies that theatre – unlike the epos, novel, or a series of images –does not tell a story taking place at another time and place but portrays events that occur and are perceived by the audience *hic et nunc.* What the spectators see and hear in performance is always present. Performance is experienced as the completion, presentation, and passage of the present.

Presentness, today usually a descriptive term, acquires an evaluative quality in the debate on theatre. With it, theatre's superiority over the other arts is either asserted or its inferior placement confirmed. Both the church fathers and those involved in the *Querelle* (Thirouin 1998) acknowledged theatre's ability to exercise an immediate sensual effect on the audience and trigger strong, even overwhelming affects based on its presentness. The atmosphere inside a theatre has been interpreted and described as highly infectious. The actors perform passionate actions on stage, the spectators perceive and are infected by them: they, too, begin to feel passionate. Through the act of perception, the infection is transferred from the actor's present body to the spectator's present body. Both theatre-enthusiasts and theatre critics agree that this transmission is possible only through the presentness of actors, spectators, and events. They only differ in the evaluation of this presentness and either see the excitement of passion as a healing catharsis or as a profoundly harmful, destructive, and estranging (from oneself and God) disturbance, as Rousseau still argued in the second half of the eighteenth century. Both emphasize that the presentness of the theatre leads to a transformation of the spectator: it "heals" the "sickness" of passion, results in the loss of self-control, or can change one's identity. In this sense, the presentness of the theatre bears a highly effective potential for transformation.

Apart from the presentness of the depicted events, the *Querelle*'s theatre critics identified another source for the power of performance. They located it in the performer's body itself, regardless of the dramatic character or actions performed. They claimed that the sheer physical attributes of an actress or actor exercised

an erotic attraction for members of the opposite sex and stirred immoderate, even adulterous desires in the audience. The bodies of the actors seduced the spectators.

The enemies of theatre thus distinguished between two types of presence in the theatre: the presentness created by the actor's semiotic body in the portrayal of a fictional character's passionate actions, and the presentness exerted by the actor's phenomenal body, by his sheer presence. While the semiotic body infected the spectators emotionally, the phenomenal body impressed itself on them through purely physical eroticism. I will term the type of presentness given by the sheer presence of the actor's phenomenal body the *weak concept of presence.*

Theatre critics proved far more insightful in this differentiation than theatre enthusiasts. Their argumentation played a significant part in eighteenth-century attempts to make the actor's phenomenal body disappear into his semiotic body. The "infection" provided by the semiotic body and the character it portrayed was to be maintained but modified, while the performer's erotic physicality was to be subsumed by the character's specific aura, certainly also erotic in kind. Hence, the spectator's desires were directed at the character instead of the actor.

What had been the difference between the presentness of character and of the performer was inadvertently transformed into a distinction between different artistic strategies that the performer employed: those that served the presentness of the character and those that realized a special "aura" of the performer that reached above and beyond their depicted character. Performance reviews of the famous German actor Gustaf Gründgens, dating between 1922 and 1962, reveal numerous strategies to draw the critics' and audience's attention not just to the depicted character but also to the performer's own presentness. Gründgens, an actor decidedly in line with literary theatre and embodiment in its eighteenth' century interpretation employed two strategies in particular in this context: first, the occupation and command of space. One critic stated in an early review of Gründgens' Marinelli in *Emilia Galotti* (Stadttheater Kiel 1922): "How he commands the space –with an almost dancer-like freedom of movement! Yes, that was the most memorable. It was so stunning that one at first forgot what [role] he was playing" (cited in Kienzl 1999, p. 29). The critic Gert Vielhaber wrote of Gründgens' portrayal of Oedipus in his own production of Sophocles' *King Oedipus* (Dusseldorf Schauspielhaus, 1947): "How to explain the stream of magic that spreads over the audience as Gründgens all but appears? ... [H]e crosses the space, shaping it [...]" (1947).

Despite the 25 years gap between them, both reviews emphasize how Gründgens commanded the space as soon as he entered the stage and profoundly affected the spectators even before they could form an impression of his character portrayal. He revealed this ability in every role, irrespective of the particular character.

The performer managed not only to command the stage but the entire auditorium. He commanded it by – mysteriously, or "magically" – affecting the spectators and claiming their undivided attention. The latter represents the second striking quality with which Gründgens made himself present to the spectators. According to the critic Herbert Ihering commenting on Gründgens' portrayal of Mephisto in Lothar Muethel's *Faust* production (Staatstheater, Schauspielhaus at the Gendarmenmarkt, Berlin 1932), "[...] [i]t is not easy to break through the reserved bearing of a *Staatstheater* audience. This audience has worn out quite a few of us. Gründgens shakes things up. He makes things happen. He is provocative. But he forces people to listen ... Breaking through the boredom is an unusual event in the *Staatstheater*" (1932).

For Gründgens, his ability to generate presence was not opposed to representation – the portrayal of a character. But it could also not be attributed to that character. Rather, it was created by processes of embodiment in which the actor brought forth his phenomenal instead of his semiotic body in a very specific manner.

On this basis, I would like to introduce another definition of the term presence. It, too, refers to the phenomenal body of the performer. Presence marks not an expressive but a purely performative quality. Through specific processes of embodiment, the actor can bring forth his phenomenal body in a way that enables him to command both space and the audience's attention. It can be assumed that the performer's ability to generate presence is based on his mastery of certain techniques and practices to which the spectators respond – be it from his first appearance on stage and throughout the performance or only for very specific moments. To the spectators, who are struck by this presence as by lightning –a "stream of magic" – it appears unforeseeably; its inexplicable appearance lies beyond their control. They sense the power emanating from the actor that forces them to focus their full attention on him without feeling overwhelmed and perceive it as a source of energy. The spectators' sense that the actor is present in an unusually intense way, granting them in turn an intense sensation of themselves as present. To them, presence occurs as an intense experience of presentness. I will call the actor's ability of commanding space and holding attention the *strong concept of presence.*

This definition of presence throws up new questions. How is this "stream of magic" to be understood that I have described as a "force" for now? More importantly: what exactly emerges when the performer appears present? Is it *the* presence of his phenomenal body or a more specific quality of this phenomenal body?

Since the 1960s, theatre, action and performance artists have repeatedly tried to find answers to these questions. They based their performative experiments on a radical opposition of presence and representation, which allowed them to isolate and magnify the phenomenon of presence. The newly established genre of action and performance art did not only place itself against the commercialization of art but also vehemently opposed the theatre's convention to depict as present fictive literary worlds and their characters. This form of theatre epitomized representation. Its presentness remained an "as if," a pretense. The action and performance artists called for "real" presence. What occurred in an action or performance always really happened in the present – in real space and time, always *hic et nunc.*

Theatre in the 1960s completed the oppositionality of representation and presence by erasing the still widely assumed unity of actor and dramatic character and created ever new ways of separating the two. The character even disappeared entirely from time to time. This led to a redefinition of embodiment and subjected the phenomenon of presence to a closer scrutiny.

Spatiality, too, is transitory and fleeting. It does not exist before, beyond, or after the performance but emerges in and through it, as do corporeality and tonality. As such, spatiality needs to be distinguished from the space in which it occurs.

First, the space in which a performance takes place represents an architectural geometric space that pre-dates the performance and endures after it has ended. The architectural-geometric space consists of a specific ground plan, measures a certain height, breadth, length, volume, and is fixed and stable. Because of these attributes it can be maintained for a long time. It is often compared to a container. Accordingly, the space contains what takes place inside it, leaving it undisturbed in its basic attributes. Even when the floor becomes uneven and reveals holes, the wall's colors turn paler and its plaster begins to crumble, the architectural- geometric space remains largely unaltered.

In contrast, the space in which a performance occurs can be regarded as a performative space. It opens special possibilities for the relationship between actors and spectators and for movement and perception. Whatever the ways in which these possibilities are used,

applied, realized, treated, or, alternatively, subverted, they affect the performative space. Every movement of people, objects, lights, and every noise can transform this unstable and fluctuating space. The performance's spatiality is brought forth by the performative space and must be examined within the parameters set by it.

Theatre spaces, whether they are permanently installed or merely provisional, are always performative spaces. The history of theatre architecture and stage design – mostly written as the history of architectural-geometric spaces – must also be seen in terms of a history of performative spaces. It provides a lively document for the relationship between actors and spectators and traces the kinesthetic and perceptual opportunities granted to actors and spectators respectively. The relationship between actors and spectators changes depending on the audience's position: encircling the stage; standing; moving around three sides of a rectangular or square stage; sitting full frontal to the stage, separated from it by the footlights. Likewise, crucial preconditions for potential movement through the space are set depending on whether the actors have a spacious circular and almost empty orchestra at their disposal, or whether they must act in a condensed space in front of the first set of wings on a proscenium stage with back drops. Spatial arrangements offer the audience a wide array of perceptual possibilities.

The performative space always also creates an atmospheric space. The bunker, the street car depot, the former grand hotel – from each of these emanates a very specific atmosphere. Spatiality results not just from the specific spatial uses of the actors and spectators but also from the particular atmospheres these spaces exude. In the case of a small theater, in performance, spatiality and atmosphere are intricately linked. The possibility of strolling through the shopping mall or of observing from the gallery the various occurrences ranging from an ordinary Friday rush hour to the enactments of Beckett's and Pirandello's texts allowed for the mall's particular atmosphere to unfold and affect the spectators. The event permanently oscillated between reality and fiction.

Atmospheres also contribute to creating a specific spatiality in conventional theatre spaces that maintain the division between stage and auditorium, reserving the stage for the actors.

As Gernot Böhme (1995) explicates, atmospheres are not bound to a place but nonetheless pour out into, and thus shape, the space. They neither belong just to the objects or people who appear to radiate them nor to the people who enter a space and physically sense them. They usually constitute the spectators' first sensation on entering the auditorium and enable a very specific experience of

spatiality. None of this can be explained by reference to individual objects because atmospheres exist in the interplay of elements and usually form a carefully calculated part of a theatre production. Böhme, credited with introducing the concept of atmosphere into aesthetic discourse, draws on and modifies Benjamin's notion of aura. He defines atmospheres as:

> […] spaces insofar as they are tinged by the presence of things, people, or their surrounding constellations, that is, their 'ecstasies.' These ecstasies themselves are the spheres of presence of something else – their reality in space" (Böhme 1995, p. 33). As such, atmospheres appertain to the performative, not the architectural-geometric, space. They are […] not thought of as free-floating but as something emanating from and created by things, people, or their constellations. Conceived as such, atmospheres are not objective, like certain properties that things have, and yet they are tangible, belonging to that thing insofar as these things articulate the spheres of their presence through their properties –thought of as ecstasies. Neither are atmospheres something subjective, such as a mental state of mind. And yet, they are of the subject, form a part of it, insofar as they are sensed by people physically present. Simultaneously, these sensations reflect the bodily being-present of the subjects in the space. (Böhme 1995, p. 33)

This description and definition of atmosphere reveals two particularly interesting aspects for our context. For one, Böhme defines atmospheres as "spheres of presence." Second, he neither locates them in the things that exude them, nor in the subjects who physically sense them, but in between and in both of them at the same time. The term "spheres of presence" evidently refers to a specific mode of presence pertaining to things. Böhme further explains it as the "ecstasy of things," or the special manner in which a thing appears present to a perceiver. Not only the thing's colors, odors, or sounds – its secondary qualities – are thought of as ecstasies but also its primary qualities such as its form.

> The form of a thing also *affects* [...] its surroundings. It practically radiates into its environment, takes away the surrounding space's homogeneity, fills it with tension and possibilities for motion" (*Ibid*.). Form transforms space. The same applies to the dimension and volume of things. They are not only to be thought of as the thing's properties that occupy a specific space. "The dimension of a thing and its volume ... can be felt from without, they bestow weight and orientation on the room in which the thing is present. (*Ibid*.)

In performance, atmosphere is to the creation of spatiality what presence is to the generation of corporeality. Through its atmosphere, the entering subject experiences the space and its things as emphatically present. Not only do they appear in their primary and secondary qualities, they also intrude on and penetrate the perceiving subject's body and surround it atmospherically. The spectators

are not positioned opposite to or outside the atmosphere; they are enclosed by and steeped in it.

Odor may serve as a particularly useful example for the elements that take part in the creation of atmosphere. Theatre spaces usually teem with odors – regardless of whether they are undesired but unstoppable side effects or the result of theatrical devices. Therefore, it is all the more surprising how little critical attention has been paid to odors in the theatre. While open air theatres imbibed the fragrances of the surrounding environment for the creation of its atmosphere, indoor theatres (until the invention of gas lighting in the 1820s) were filled with the smells of smoldering candles and oil lamps mingled with whiffs of make-up, powder, perfume, and sweat.

At least since the onset of naturalism smells have been consciously employed for the creation of specific atmospheres. A foul-smelling manure heap on stage or the now proverbial cabbage smell significantly contributed to drawing the spectators atmospherically into the milieu of farmers or the poor more generally. Odor brought the two into physical contact.

The conscious and intentional use of odors operated on the assumption that odor could spread over the entire space and trigger strong physical affects in the audience. Through their odor, spaces, objects, and people can literally penetrate the body of the scenting subject. Georg Simmel (1922) focused on this peculiarity of smell when he wrote:

> When we smell something, we draw that impression deeply into the center of our being, assimilate it intimately, as it were, through the vital process of breathing, which is not possible for any other sense to do of an object –unless we eat it. That we can smell the atmosphere of someone else is the most intimate perception of him; he permeates our insides in gas form. (Simmel 1922, p. 490)

Finally, it always also creates spatiality and an atmospheric space. Vocality, however, always also brings forth corporeality. A voice creates all three types of materiality: corporeality, spatiality, and tonality. The voice leaps from the body and vibrates through space so that it is heard by both the speaker/ singer and others. The intimate relationship between body and voice becomes particularly evident in screams, sighs, moans, sobs, and laughter. Unmistakably, these sounds engage in a process that involves the entire body: it bends over, is contorted, or tenses up. Simultaneously, these speechless assertions of the voice might deeply move those who hear them. To hear somebody scream, sigh, moan, sob, or laugh is to perceive these sounds as a specific process of embodiment. The listener

perceives the concerned person in their bodily being-in-the-world, which immediately affects the listener's own being-in-the-world as the scream penetrates, resonates in, and is absorbed by the listener's body (Plessner 1970). When a performer lets out a scream, they create a moment in which the voice brings itself forth in its own sensual materiality (Risi 2003).

In performance, vocal expressions have mostly become indivisibly linked to language, since they mostly employ singing or speaking voices. In many ways, the voice represents a remarkable if strange material that contradicts all semiotic principles. It comes into existence only when it sounds out. It cannot survive the breath that created it but must be brought forth again with every new breath; it is a material that exists only in "ecstasy." Not only does the voice unite tonality, corporeality, and spatiality so that the performance's materiality constantly regenerates itself within it. Through it, the bodily being-in-the-world of the articulating subject expresses him/herself and addresses those who hear him/her in their own bodily being-in-the-world. The voice builds a bridge and establishes a relationship between two subjects. It fills the space between them. By making their voices audible, people reach out to touch those who hear it. Thus, performance transforms its participants, actors and spectators, alike, even if differently.

Conclusions

By transforming its participants, performance achieves a kind of re-enchantment of the world. The nature of performance as event – articulated and brought forth in the bodily co-presence of actors and spectators, the performative generation of materiality, and the emergence of meaning – enables such transformation. Theatre and performance art since the 1960s have repeatedly demonstrated a peculiar interest in playing with and reflecting on these constitutive conditions of performance and its inter-related processes of transformation. In consequence, we have begun to understand these conditions as inherent to all performance, regardless of its genre or historical placement. The aesthetics of the performative bases itself on these conditions.

The aesthetics of the performative does not aim to replace but to add to established theories of the aesthetics of work, production, and reception. Whenever artistic processes can be adequately described within the categories of "work," "production," and "reception," the aesthetics of the performative does not seek to be

a substitute, but merely offer the possibility to complement the existing categories productively. The aesthetics of the performative primarily addresses artistic processes that have traditionally been beyond the grasp of "work," "production," and "reception." Such processes have consequently, if at all, been dealt with inadequately and been frequently distorted within the frame of the aesthetics of work, production, and reception. It is noteworthy that "non-theatrical" art forms since the early twentieth century and especially since the 1960s have tended to privilege the performance mode. In light of this development in the arts, the formulation of an aesthetic theory of the performative seems imperative not merely for the theatrical context but for all the arts.

In particular, the collapse of the opposition between art and reality and of all binaries resulting from this opposition transfers the participants into a liminal state. This becomes especially apparent in the performances involving self-injury. These performances erase valid rules and norms and establish a state of radical betwixt and between for all participants, even for the artists inflicting injuries on themselves. In this situation, a purely "aesthetic" response would border on voyeurism and sadism. Ethical responses, however, contain the risk of violating the artist's intentions. These performances plunge the spectators into a crisis, in which the recourse to conventional behavior patterns is pointless. The established standards are no longer valid and new ones not yet formulated. The spectators enter a liminal situation which they can only overcome by seeking out new standards of behavior despite the constant threat of possible failure.

Since binary oppositions serve not only as tools to describe the world but also regulate our behavior and actions, their destabilization and collapse shatter both our perceptual and behavioral framework. Binaries allow us to deduce various frameworks, such as "this is theatre" or "this is a social or political situation." Each of their frames contains guidelines for appropriate behavior in any of the situations they encompass. By allowing seemingly contrasting frames to collide, the performances moved spectators in between the prescribed rules, norms, and orders. Some might dismiss this state as "inappropriate" to art. Frustrated by audience reactions, the organizers of the Vienna Festival of 2000 handed out slips of paper reading "This is art!" to the participants of Schlingensief's *Please love Austria!* Apparently, the organizers felt the need to identify Schlingensief's piece in order to elicit an "appropriate" reaction and "aesthetic," non-interventional behavior. But what was the "appropriate" reaction to this type of event? As an experiment, it

challenged actors and passers-by so as to play with and illuminate precisely the line of demarcation between aesthetically and ethically motivated behavior. Needless to say, Schlingensief collected the slips of paper from the spectators.

The state of betwixt and between, the experience of a crisis, is primarily realized as a physical transformation, in other words a change to the physiological, energetic, affective, and motoric state. A liminal state or crisis may also be induced by the conscious realization of physical change. Strong emotions triggered in the perceiving subject when confronted with sudden appearances in the space, fall under this category. Strong emotions bear the largest responsibility for triggering impulses to intervene and create a new set of norms for the acting subject. In the aesthetics of the performative, generating emotions and inducing a liminal state go side by side and cannot be separated from one another.

In performance, aesthetic experience and liminal experience ultimately coincide due to the workings and effects of the autopoietic feedback loop. The liminal situation is not only a result of the experience of elusiveness, generated by the permanent, reciprocal transitions between subject and object positions. Rather, every turn the feedback loop takes must also be seen as a transition and hence as a liminal situation. Every crossing of a threshold creates a state of instability with unpredictable consequences and as much of a risk of failure as a chance of successful transformation.

In my argument, so far, I have left an undeniably fundamental term for the aesthetics of the performative unexplained: aesthetic experience. It is no coincidence that the term was rediscovered, redefined, and popularized in the course of the performative turn of the late 1960s and early 1970s. The performative turn contributed to the dissolution of boundaries within the arts and between art and non-art. The new artistic development required an accompanying terminology that would apply to the most diverse art forms and, at the same time, be able to capture the aesthetic within non-artistic phenomena and processes. Aesthetic experience captures experiences responding to a wide range of phenomena from fashion, design, cosmetics, and advertising to sports, urban and landscape design, and nature; they all share an aesthetic function without belonging, strictly speaking, to one of the arts.

Where the concept of the work of art is accompanied by the terms production and reception, the notion of event is complemented by aesthetic experience. This terminological triad constitutes the conceptual backbone of the aesthetics of the performative.

A specific perception capable of transforming the spectator is needed to bring about the re-enchantment of the world. I defined aesthetic experience in theatre performances and performance art events as a liminal experience which can lead to transformations or which is in itself already experienced as transformative. I put forward the claim that this type of aesthetic experience is central to the aesthetics of the performative. So, the question arises whether the definition of aesthetic experience as liminal experience also applies to theatre performances (and all other types of non-artistic performances) of other epochs or cultures.

Extant texts in Western culture since Greek antiquity and in Indian culture roughly between the first and third centuries B.C. explicitly discuss the experience that performance affords both actors and spectators. Although the concept of aesthetic experience was only formulated with the proclamation of the autonomy of art, the question about the special quality of experience induced by performance goes back to the origins of aesthetic reflection in occidental and Indian culture. Both these examples roughly fall into the same period. Various terms were coined to describe this experience, such as the Aristotelian catharsis or the term *rasa* from the Indian theatre treatise *Natyasastra.* In the following, I briefly examine how these reflections are compatible with the definition of aesthetic experience as liminal experience. Despite their diverse definitions, the various tracts all seem to proceed from the assumption that theatre performances possess a transformative potential. They recognize that performance motivates the transformation of their participants –actors and spectators alike.

When Aristotle described the effect of tragic theatre in his *Poetics* as the excitement of ἔλεος (*eleos*) and φόβος (*phobos*), pity and terror, he was aiming at an exceptional affective state which is brought about in and through performance, articulated physically and able to alter the person concerned. Catharsis, the term he introduced to define the goal of tragic theatre, cannot negate its ritual origins and its idea of purging evokes healing rituals. While the excitement of affects transfers the spectators into a liminal state, catharsis brings about the actual transformation. The experience of catharsis enabled by performances of tragic theatre constitutes a liminal and transformative experience (Belfiore 1992; Hoessly 2001). The concept of catharsis significantly influenced the discussion on aesthetic experience in performance until the late eighteenth century that saw the end of the aesthetics of effect.

The concept of *rasa* developed in the *Natyasastra* had a comparable impact. The central focus of this treatise on theatre lies in

exploring the special kind of experience enabled by performances in dancers/actors and spectators alike. *Rasa* eschews straightforward translation; in German, it is frequently rendered as "taste," "juice," or also "emotional state," while in English "sentiment," "aesthetic rapture," or "emotional consciousness" predominate. Rasa is differentiated into eight different expressions, such as the erotic or the heroic *rasa,* which correspond to certain modes of being or emotional dispositions, commonly shared by all human beings. Triggered in the actors and spectators through gestures, costume, music, and so forth, *rasa* transforms this disposition into an actual physical and emotional state. In this respect, the term *rasa* also evokes a liminal and transformative experience (Bansat-Brudon 1992; Gerow 1981; Masson and Pathwardhan 2001).

As our cursory examination revealed, theatre performances are not only always staged but are also principally capable of triggering liminal experiences, even if the experiences afforded and methods used differ. In the same way that the *mise en scène* aims at reenchanting the world, aesthetic experience as liminal experience strives to transform the performance's participants. Transformation thus constitutes a fundamental category of the aesthetics of the performative.

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