

Performance/perform-ance

Bruce Barber

La nécessaire réalité de l'identité
Number 45, 1990

URI: <https://id.erudit.org/iderudit/46847ac>

[See table of contents](#)

Publisher(s)

Les Éditions Intervention

ISSN

0825-8708 (print)

1923-2764 (digital)

[Explore this journal](#)

Cite this article

Barber, B. (1990). Performance/perform-ance. *Inter*, (45), 52-53.

créer » obéit à elle-même en désirant de nouveaux medias en ses ouvertures. Conserver l'ancienne écriture équivaut à dire que l'actuelle Ariane est de peu de fumée, et qu'un lampion (faible lueur des verbes comparée au maintenant) vu comme naguère est d'importance, quand bien même on l'amplifierait aidé d'un microphone.

En somme, ce vingtième siècle est toujours inconnu ; si tout va bien il prendra naissance au XXIII^e, avec la gentille bonté des Académies, entraînant leurs poètes et compositeurs.

Il sera déjà tard, et le Père Lachaise en sera marri.

Contre cette pesanteur du poids des passés, heureusement les temps vont vite.

Et si deci-delà on nous casse les oreilles avec des rythmes primaires, rock and roll issu du jazz, et prosodies antiques marchant de pair (« balancer, rouler », deux ou quatre temps sur un rythme très marqué) au contraire nous nous sommes offert tant de sons et de voix que nous avons touché l'indicible humain.

Car tout humain est indicible, comme l'est la vie, qu'on ne devrait pas limiter aux temps pauvres de l'ancien emploi.

Toute vie est vaste et rien ne peut limiter ses imaginaires, pas même les lois élémentaires, pas même les groupes poétiques qui se connurent dans la première moitié du siècle, eux aussi doctrinaires, en certains aspects.

Il y a trop à faire avec la vie unique, et toutes les techniques nous convient à nous déployer, en chaque expression connue ou à découvrir.

En nos débuts, nous voulions sortir des littératures, ainsi qu'on voulait aller au-delà des microscopes, sachant toutes particules des sangs concrètes.

EN nous, nous voulions aller loin des « mots en liberté » car ils ne se libéraient pas, loin de l'anti-art qui affirmait l'art, loin des couches abyssales surréelles nous renvoyant à des mystiques prétendues automatiques, nous voulions nous affranchir de l'édition racontée, au dialogue entre livre et lecteur. Nous pressentions que pour nous libérer il fallait trouver d'autres valeurs aux langages de l'homme, et qu'il fallait privilégier les sonorités des verbes, plutôt que leurs frontières.

C'est en ayant cette pensée que par ma revue *Ou je donnais*

à entendre des parlés connus ou moins, sans souci d'en connaître les sens, pour peu que les voix soient présentes, soient des valeurs en soi.

Puis, nous succédant, sont venus d'autres moyens, car depuis les années cinquante nous vîmes paraître les réverbérations, les synthétiseurs, les cassettes, les vidéos... tous moyens dangereusement faciles à ceux qui ne possèdent pas leurs œuvres.

Entre 1950 et 1989 quel changement.

Quel changement dans le verbe même ; il ne se contente plus de ses données écrites, de ses signes alphabétiques, de ses oralités dites, de ses performances, de ses théâtres, de ses dictionnaires et déclamations puisqu'il est devenu une progression en exploration continue, plus jamais fixé à la parole bien venue.

C'est ce qui explique la future exploration du verbe et de ses voix, qu'il faut déjà multiplier, afin d'éviter leur mort ; une langue monosyllabique comme le chinois devra s'inventer d'autres alphabets si elle veut aller à l'ordinateur, moyen certain de nos mémoires. Et tout est à l'avenant, comme la poésie même qui, mourante dans l'écrit, ne méritait plus que confidences secrètes, intimes, ne touchant que le seul poète.

Poète qui ne parlait que de ses états d'âme, oubliant qu'*anima* s'anime dans le corps.

Il faut te ressaisir, humain, ne plus parler de toi, car tes milliards de données te dépassent, toi, l'ordinateur de chairs.

Quant à tes futurs, ils sont irréversibles en de nouveaux medias, puisque les langues et sons sont à l'infini venus.

Tu n'as plus le choix, tu dois « parformer : accomplir, exécuter » et non faire une ou des performances allant n'importe où. Le mot ancien français est tout un programme, le mot nouveau anglais est aussi vague que le terme « sound poetry » disant n'importe quelle parole entendue.

Et puis, et puis, après tout, des milliers d'années inconnues furent orales, pourquoi conserver cinq siècles écrits, surtout que nous avons de redoutables véhicules, et des joyaux sonores incomparables.

PERFORMANCE PERFORM-ANCE

Bruce BARBER

À l'aide de l'étymologie, Bruce BARBER tente de cerner le territoire performatif : il y passe en revue quelques étapes historiques menant vers une pratique performative d'aujourd'hui, à travers les années 60, 70 et 80. Selon lui, cette pratique serait politiquement engagée, possédant son identité propre et non une sorte d'appendice secondaire noyée dans la culture.

The verb *perform* and its associated words *performer*, *performance*, *performing*, *performative*, *performatory* and *(performance)* have both general and specialist uses. Within the past twenty years some quite fine distinctions in meaning have been accorded the terms *performance*, *performative* especially in linguistic theory, art history and art criticism and the theory and practice of acting. *Perform* has been in the English language since 1C15 and 3C16. The word is from the of *par-perform*, and *ef* *parfournir* meaning to furnish or accomplish completely. Its early C17 meanings relate it closely to the word *function* (q.v.) from *L* *functus*, *onis*, *fungi*, *functare*, meaning to perform. The most common and useful correspondences between the two words are the twin notions of instrumentality and utility.

1C176 meanings for *perform* suggest its principal contemporary meanings ; the achieving or carrying out of something ; an undertaking. Others suggest an execution of a piece of work, the act of doing, to bring about or suggest a result. The execution of a piece of work, was common through to the 1C17 which is close to the early senses of *ART* (q.v) as were the meanings associated with the notion of discharging one's function *FUNCTIONARY* (q.v.). Playing one's part, doing, were also closely associated meanings referencing themselves to the noun form of performance. The relevance of the term to action and playing musical instruments beyond the mere carrying out of a command and the other senses in performance of carrying out something for the benefit of others was common by eC16 ; for example the carrying out of an action, act, deed and the act of publicly performing a play, ceremony, piece of music as in : « Besides her walking and other

actual performances, what... have you heard her say » Shakespeare.

Colloquially, to perform, by the eC20, was used to describe the behavior of one who fussed, or displayed extreme anger or bad temper, (an Australasian slang term, probably gained from music hall banter from London's East End).

In the 1C18 the mechanical uses of perform and performance became current. And especially in the 1C19 and 3C20th the relationships to the working or function of mechanical contrivances, devices, automobiles and aircraft and boats measured under certain test conditions ; the final designation referring to the best performer or performance, as in *Mechanical Magazine* 1832 30th June 224/2 : « Extraordinary performances... on two occasions a load amounting to 100 tons was drawn by one engine... a distance of above 30 miles in an hour and a half. »

Thus derived from the mechanical uses, from the late 1960's high-performance became popular in the language of advertising.

Perform and *performance* gained additional meanings with respect to behavior ; the medical, psychological usages corresponding to the mechanical meanings in terms of measuring, comparing one item, organ, function to another. Its psychological usages are numerous, attending a wide range of experimental or quasi experimental situations in various fields from worker management (F. W. TAYLOR *Show Management* 1904) to flight engineering in the 1920's, business management and animal husbandry in the 1960's.

The association with linguistic theory occurs in the 1950's. *Performative* occurs in J.L. AUSTINS *How to do Things with Words* (1962). « What are we to

call a sentence or an utterance of this type ? I propose to call it a performative sentence or a performative utterance or for short, a « performative » ».

In AUSTIN's work the performative was described as a member of a class of actions termed illocutionary acts. Utterances that effect actions by being either spoken or written are called a performatives. Performatory language is composed of such utterances. The range of declarative statements from the first person (present, future) indicative i.e. I ask you, I am telling you, I promise you, that... all are performative. In the work of CHOMSKY, LILES and others, the term performance was often used to distinguish between language rules and the actual use of language in everyday speech. Theories of transformation (hence the term « transformational grammar) were partially predicated upon these differences. The term performatory is closely linked to the performance distinctions which occur in language when it is spoken in a « active » manner. For instance, any declarative or imperative construction, spoken or written, is performatory.

From philosophical discourse, linguistic, specifically Anglo-American linguistic theory, performative and its derivatives found their way into psychological and psycho-analytic discourse, anthropology (symbolic), particularly the work of Victor TURNER *Drama, Fields and Metaphors: Symbolic Action in Human Society* (1974) and the interdisciplinary fields of communication research, for instance in the work of Erving GOFFMANN: *The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life* (1969) and *Interaction Ritual: Essays on Face to Face Behavior* (1972). The relationships between the use of performance, performative in these fields and those of actions theory and visual art are very strong, suggesting the appropriation from one discourse to another. However, other distinct meanings are suggested in the separate corpus of literature documenting recent performance history and theory/criticism in the separate fields of linguistic theory, theatre, anthropology and visual arts.

The use of the term performance within the discourse of visual arts is interesting. Performance was italicized in A. KAPROW's

introduction to *Assemblage Environments and Happenings NY 1966* to distinguish happenings from theatre and other performances. The word also appears in the definition of happening in the Webster's Third International Dictionary in that year. In 1969 performance (art) began to be used in America to distinguish the theatre of visual art (one definition of performance) from the « true » work of theatre. Further, the term performance art was used by English speaking visual artists to describe work which was not theatre, music nor dance. Performance art was contrasted early in 1970 to Body Art, a term probably coined in 1969/70 by the editors of the cultural magazine *Avalanche*. Performance had more currency as a art world buzz than « event », « piece », « thing », « auto » art and « action ». In the Northern America the word gained preference over others to describe live art produced at set times for an audience. (q.v. « non-matrixed theatre » (event) KIRBY), « Intermedia » (HIGGINS). The relationship of performance to theatre and language persisted. The work of TURNER V., and particularly SCHECHNER, R. and SCHUMAN, M., (eds.) *Ritual Play and Performance* N. Y. 1976, reveal the extent to which by the mid 1970's performance theory had become anthropological. Performance as text, as non-simulated (represented) acting in the world, as ritual, symbolic act, was often stressed. (q.v. act, action).

« Various called action, event, performances, things, the works present physical activities, ordinary bodily functions and other usual and unusual manifestations of physicality. » SHARP 1970.

In *Rolling Stone* 24, June 37 *Performance Art* (defined as) « basically an extension of art into the theatre, often involving more or less set programs at specified times and places... »

The term performance (art) was used in several conflicting ways throughout the 1970's. 11 1976 *National Observer* 7 Feb 20/2. « Not quite the same as theatre of dance, though it combines elements of both, performance art grew out of avant-garde movements, particularly in painting and poetry, that swept Europe early this century ». Performance was

described (GOLDBERG R., 1979, *Live Art and the Avant-avant-garde in Performance Live Art 1909 to the Present*, London 1979.

Performance was related to shamanism which provided a western correlative to a range of « primitive » behaviors, myths, rituals and mysteries. Performance was discussed in mid-decade symposia as « the unifying mode of our time » BENAMOU M. in *Performance in Post-Modern Culture* (eds. Benamou and Caramello C.) Wisconsin, 1977. The words refusal to be adequately defined resulted in overuse and redundancy.

Performance continued to have currency in many European countries throughout the 1970's, which signaled to some, an Americanophilia, particularly in those countries where indigenous substitutes for performance were available. This was not the case in French speaking countries where Performance already had currency and in view of its derivation perhaps, greater validity.

However, debates in Germany suggested the rejection of the term in favor of *Handlung* and *Aktion(en)*. *Handlung* meaning action, deed, transaction, performance in translation relates performance to the English word function. The emphasis on transaction is also available in the term performance bonded a bond issued by a bank or other financial institution, guaranteeing the fulfillment of a particular contract. The German words *Handlungweise* (mode of procedure) and *dramatische handlung* (plot of a play) correspond to some of the meanings associated with the term performance in English.

The term demonstration art, action/aktionist and interventionism began to be distinguished in the mid seventies as particular kinds of political art performances. The term art performance or performance (art) seemed too ambiguous for some performance theorist/practitioner. To a few artists performance was beginning to have too much currency within popular culture. *Lauder's* cosmetic company used the term in advertising promotions i.e. « The performance face pack » and « the night performer » for their « Performance Collection ». Artists responded to the commodification of performance in the pages of *Life Magazine* and other popular media institutions by politicising

performance and theorising a performance as resistance. (Performance) was coined in 1982 by BARBER B., in *Essays in (Performance) and Cultural Politicisation. Open Letter Summer/fall 1983. Fifth series No's 5 & 6, Toronto, 1983.* « ... in these sense, performance, far from being regarded merely as a separate genre within the history of art, would once again confirm those meanings common to its original use — function, utility and instrumentality. Nominally, (performance) describes the engaged and committed task of acting on culture, as distinct from an enactment in culture. »