Writing performance : on relations between texts and performances
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Writing Performance: On Relations between Texts and Performances

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Introduction

In this introduction I will outline the research field and topic of the dissertation. The method, research question and aim of the research will be presented, and my artistic position introduced. My artistic practice is the point of departure for this research project. The motivation, desire, need and urgency for the research are anchored there.

The research project *Writing Performance – Research on Relations between Texts and Performances*, conducted at PhDArts, investigates relations between texts and performances from the perspective of contemporary visual art, and more specifically from my perspective as a visual artist who produces performances.

The research started off with the very general question: "How can relations between texts and performances be thought, understood and described in and through artistic practice?"

Performances are connected to texts on many different levels. Texts surround performances and encircle them temporally. Texts are written before and after performances, and are related to performances in a productive way: performances are conceptualized and produced by way of specific texts. The most common formats are scripts and scores. Other texts present, mediate, announce, explain and clarify performances. Furthermore, texts enable us to remember, to visualize and create images of them, to make them accessible, researchable, teachable and reproducible. Texts archive performances, impart them, sell them, change them, rewrite them and keep them alive.

Although the field of research is diverse and widely ramified, one can roughly divide it into two areas which both will be addressed in this dissertation: texts before performances and texts after performances. Texts before performances include paratexts like title, announcement text, name of the author as well as texts like scores and scripts which enable, create, or trigger a performance, and play a decisive role within the working process.

Texts after performances, which are often "created" for purposes of maintaining, documenting, and archiving, include texts in a narrower sense, like descriptions and reports of performances as well as texts in a broader sense like audio-visual documentation. Texts written after performances can potentially become texts before

a performance again, either in an intertextual sense, or in the concrete case of a re-creation.

I conceive of both creating scores, instructions and directions, and of activities like recording, documenting and describing performances, as forms of "writing performance."

Terminology

My terminology is based on the assumption that both written language (to write, writing) and spoken language (to speak, speaking / speech) are two forms in which language expresses itself.

"Text" is a specific form of written language. Whereas writing means to leave traces, the characteristic of text is to build a unity that can be read. Text is a trace which can be read disconnected from the author.

I make a distinction between texts in a narrower sense and texts in a broader sense. Texts in a narrower sense may refer to texts of verbal language such as words and sentences. Texts in a broader sense refer to non-verbal written languages of signs and symbols and to (moving) images which may be coded, be idiosyncratic, or abstract. According to this definition texts in a broader sense can take on the form of photography or video, which in this case will be named as such.

Texts which are part of performance practices, like notations, scores, scripts and instructions are mostly mixtures, including texts in a narrower and in a broader sense. In general, texts in a narrower sense may include texts in a broader sense and the other way round: a text of verbal language may include images, and likewise an image may include verbal language.

The broader understanding of text resonates with the etymological roots of writing. The Greek word *scrībō* originally meant "to scratch," and later in Latin "to write, draw, or otherwise make lines, letters, figures."[1] To scratch means that a trace is made on a surface. The surface is injured and altered by the act of scratching and becomes

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[1] Cf. *Charlton T. Lewis, Charles Short, A Latin Dictionary*, http://www.perseus.tufts.edu/hopper/text?doc=Perseus:text:1999.04.0059:entry=scribo

the carrier of this trace. Depending on the carrier material, the traces last longer or shorter, and may alter throughout the course of time. This understanding of writing can be applied to the analogue and digital sphere. I consider audio-visual media as texts in a broader sense, because they are capable of keeping traces of performances as well. Besides the production of texts, the presentation of them may take place in an analogue or in a digital form as well, and be presented in a screen-based or projected form.

To analyze the difference between verbal and non-verbal forms of language (between texts in a narrower and in a broader sense) in depth is beyond the scope of this dissertation.

With the term "performance" an act or action is designated which is bodily executed by one or more people within a specific time frame. Performances in visual art can include elements of other disciplines, such as sound, movement, acting. They are mostly shown live, in front of an audience, and can likewise be received after the enactment through an audio-visual recording or reports. In performance, speaking and writing are potentially interwoven.

This dissertation relies on a notion of performance in visual art coined by the art historian and curator Felicitas Thun-Hohenstein, according to whom performance within the field of visual art is an original achievement of this field.[2] Following Thun-Hohenstein the performative gesture in visual art can be identified with the production of spaces. This understanding of performance does not oppose collaboration or multidisciplinary practices. It means to consider the specific conditions of producing and presenting work in visual art, as well as its effects on contemporary art production.

Main Thesis

The main claim of this dissertation is that performance in contemporary visual art can be understood in and through the relations it has to texts (in a narrower and in a broader sense). This claim is based on my experience as an artist engaging with

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[2] Thun-Hohenstein, Felicitas, *Performanz und ihre räumlichen Bedingungen. Perspektiven einer Kunstgeschichte*. Wien: Böhlau, 2012.

performance practices, as well as from my research into contemporary and historical performances.

Rather than understanding performance as a form of art that is confined to a live-act, and as live-act only, I believe that performance in the field of visual art comes into being precisely within the tension between its written and its time-based aspects. In other words, I consider the fact that performance is dependent on texts, that is to say on textualisations before and after its enactment, as the potential of performance in the visual art. It is my conviction that artists in contemporary performance practices deal exactly with this potential.

With this dissertation I try to provide a perspective through which one can look at performance in visual art. This thesis does not raise my claim to be universally applicable, and valid for all existing performances. There might be performances which do not, or hardly have/produce texts around them.

Research Question, Discursive Framework

The main research question which accompanies the endeavour to analyse the relations between texts and performances is whether or not it is possible to think of relations between texts and performances as non-hierarchical. If yes, how and under which circumstances is this possible? Can one find at least one relation which can be thought of as non-hierarchical, and what can be said about it? This question will be answered at the end of this dissertation.

This research, an investigation into the relationships between text and performance in visual art, takes place within the discursive framework of post-structuralist thinking in the broadest sense. This means that it builds upon theories of the power of language, its ability not only to represent, but also to generate realities, to add to, and to alter them. The "realities" I look at here are performances within the context of contemporary visual art. In this dissertation not language at large, but specifically written language will be taken into account.

Aim of the Research

The aim of this research is to acquire a deeper understanding of the relations between texts and performances in visual art in general, and specifically in and through my artistic practice.

Firstly, different categories of texts connected to performances, their various functions and importance will be identified and described. Subsequently, I will discuss the implications of these observations for an understanding of performance in terms of a contemporary practice that can be comprehended in and through texts (in a narrower and a broader sense).

Regarding relationships between texts and performances, the following questions arise: What is the significance of writing down a concept – a mental vision or imagination of a performance – in relation to the materialization, realization and implementation of it? What status do the concept and its written form have in relation to the enactment, in other words, in relation to the performance of the performance? Under which circumstances can a text not only inspire or influence a performance, but be understood as a performance as such, already before its enactment? What role do the interpretation and the subjectivity of the performers have in the enactment? To what extent and how do written notations contribute to the reproducibility of performances? To what extent can a text which triggers a performance be seen as an independent artistic work beyond the performance? Is the authorship in performance to be understood as specific, because the body of the author (potentially) is involved in the work, and not only in the working process?

These questions arise out of my artistic practice and are rooted there. The aim is to use these questions for writing this dissertation in the way that a score triggers a performance.

Artistic Position

My artistic practice includes performances and installations, in which sculptural and visual elements come together with spoken, sung, printed, or projected text. For the realization of commissioned work and/or the contribution to exhibitions the context is often taken as point of departure. I am interested in the structures provided by the context, such as the title or topic of the exhibition and the architectural structures, the setting which enables the presentation of artistic work.

I was trained as a visual artist at the Academy of Fine Arts Vienna from 2003 to 2009. I studied *Performative Art – Sculpture* with Monica Bonvicini and *(Post)Conceptual Art Practices* with Marina Gržinić at the department of Fine Arts. In 2006 I was an exchange student at the University of Fine Arts Hamburg and additionally a guest student in the Performance Studies master course *Conceptual Choreography* led by deufert&plischke at the University of Hamburg for one semester. After I finished my studies in art I took courses in Philosophy and Literary Studies at the University of Vienna for two years.

Studying choreography fundamentally changed my view on and my practice of performance. It opened my eyes to the possibility of involving other people and instructing them to perform according to my (or shared) ideas. Before that, I performed in front of video cameras or in public space. Based on this experience and without questioning I assumed there is a specific connection between the idea and the body of the artist who carries it out this idea. This connection between idea and body creates the value or impact of performance art.

Since one's own bodily presence is such a crucial aspect in many a performance, and since instructing people is so different from that, especially in regard to the relation between concept and outcome, I wondered how one can conceptualize the specific potential of putting something into language for someone else to perform it. The desire to understand this "language" (put) between these two positions and to reflect on it was the most profound motivation for this research.

The performance practice I developed after studying choreography can be described as a "collaboration-based performance practice" within the field of visual art. This means that the creation of performances involves other performers instead of (or besides) myself, the artist. It includes collaborating with musicians, dancers, performers, non-professionals and audience members who perform within the situation of the performance. Mostly, I do not perform myself. Rather, the texts that I write and on which the performance is based (like scores, scripts) mark my own position within these performances. This position I try to reflect upon in this dissertation.

For collaborations to happen the concept or idea has to be communicated to the performers. This usually happens before the performance in a preliminary meeting or

in rehearsals. Theoretically the concept or idea can be conveyed to the performers in oral or in written form. In practice however, the oral communication of tasks and written materials in the form of scores or rules often complement each other. The research interest pursued in this dissertation is in any event confined to the role of written material, to texts and its relations to performances, and oral communication is not taken into consideration. Text has it very own and distinguished potential that I am interested in.

The second motivation for this research comes from the need to give performances, which are often shown only once or twice in the field of visual art, a life after the enactment(s). Performances are often part of the opening of an exhibition or otherwise of a special occasion during an exhibition. To give a performance an afterlife in another form enables it to be shown throughout the whole length of the exhibition period for example, or to be re-shown in other exhibitions, in publications and online.

Considerations of how to exhibit and disseminate a performance already play a role in the conception of a work. This means that future presentations of the performance reach into its production process. During this process a performance may temporarily take on, or already exists in, textual formats like sketches and descriptions of the concept. So, its enactment or staging is connected with these texts from the beginning. In this dissertation both texts which precede and texts which follow a staging will be at stake.

Besides supporting the creation, texts can serve the purpose of re-creation and re-showing. Written material "survives" the act/time of a performance, and can potentially be performed again. This is particularly relevant in the context of collaboration-based performance practice.

Scores may enable the performance to be done again by the same performers, for example in other places, but also by other performers (potentially creating a different outcome through a different reading of the text). The subjectivity and the skills of the performers influence their reading and interpretation of the text. The fact that text can be read independent from the person who wrote it can be understood as the very particular potential of texts, to which this research, amongst other things, is dedicated.

In performance practices (including collaboration-based ones), apart from the technique and subjectivity invested by those involved (artist and/or performers), it is the (present or mediated) body, which in its socially incarnated materiality shapes the performance and its meaning. If it is not the body of the artist, it is bodies selected by the artist. This is where the questions of reproducibility as well as of the interchangeability of the performers challenge the medium of performance itself.

In this dissertation, I try to show the relevance of the many different relations between texts and performances from different perspectives, ranging from performance theory through social implications of performativity to political dimensions of collaboration. I am aware that I am not able to treat each of these implications exhaustively; this is not my aim, each would be a dissertation in itself.

Research in and through Artistic Practice

In the case of this research project, artistic research means to shed light on a specific aspect of my own artistic practice by means of reading, writing, reflecting, speaking and performing presentations. This reflection is supported by 1. theoretical research that enhances the understanding of this practice within a discursive framework (which is built at the same time), 2. feedback from my supervising team, consisting of Janneke Wesseling, Frans de Ruiter and Felicitas Thun-Hohenstein, 3. feedback from my colleagues in the PhDArts program who were regularly informed about the progress of the research through presentations. The feedback increased a critical self-understanding and thus influenced the further development of the research. The result is an increased awareness of my artistic position and practice in relation to the discourses engaged with. Within the course of the research, reflecting, writing, and the production of research-related work mutually influenced each other.

Writing about one's practice involves three aspects: 1. describing this practice, 2. identifying discourses that touch upon one's interests and 3. critically reflecting (on) these discourses and the practice. The first means developing a vocabulary that allows for communicating about one's practice in a comprehensible way, the second means engaging with terms and discourses that enhance the understanding of it, and the third enables taking a step back, thus creating an awareness of one's own position.

The PhDArts program at Leiden University which I attended for four years is focussed on "research in and through artistic practice." It means that knowledge is gained from research processes executed in artistic practice in and through these processes. At the beginning, I asked myself whether or not the knowledge that is produced *in* is the same as the knowledge produced *through* artistic practice? It was not clear to me if I had to do two different projects – a practical one and a theoretical one – and where they would come together in the end: in writing or in a final artistic project?

The preposition "in" suggests that the knowledge production happens inside a certain area or realm, which in this case is the artistic practice, and that the knowledge produced can be located or found within this area. The preposition "through" suggests that in artistic practice a process is hosted that enables or generates something different than itself, as if this were a transitory place. The artistic practice in this case becomes a condition – in the sense of a cause or the reason – for knowledge that itself is located or made visible elsewhere. In both cases, the artistic practice itself remains clearly distinguished from the knowledge, but at the same time is not untouched by its production process.

My experience with the PhDArts program has been that both aspects of "in" and "through" are interrelated during the whole research process, and that they are both needed in order to present the research at the end of this process.

The outcome of the research is this dissertation as well as an artistic project presented in the form of an exhibition. Although, or because, these two forms work quite differently in regard to reception as well as concerning my own position, they complement each other in the end. This can be understood as a paradox of this type of research. The research does not take place either in writing practice or in the artistic practice, but rather in their connectedness and interrelatedness.

The knowledge produced by this research process can be described as what the American philosopher of science Donna Haraway calls "situated knowledge." This concerns a form of knowledge that takes into account its own situatedness in specific contexts, without therefore withdrawing its claim for objectivity or, in other words, its claim for contributing to academia. Haraway writes: "So, not so perversely, objectivity turns out to be about particular and specific embodiment and definitely not about the false vision promising transcendence of all limits and responsibility. The moral is

simple: only partial perspective promises objective vision".[3] The situated form of knowledge gains its legitimacy from the partial perspective connected with one's own experience and body.

Method

> "Neither in philosophy nor in art it is about proof or opinion. It is about positing, about assertion. Assertion differs from proof or opinion in so far as it must manage without certainty. Assertion philosophy transgresses the modalities of conventional thought, such as reflection, reason, critique and argument. It is about uncertainly touching a reality as a subject and giving this touch a form, language."[4] (Marcus Steinweg)

I assert here that one can understand performance within its textual relations. This understanding was developed in my artistic practice and was the starting point for my PhD-research. Through the research, this understanding has developed further and gained new forms and insights.

On a general level, the method employed is an engagement with discourses and working with and through terminology and a specific set of terms. The most important terms I consider and work with are text, performance, writing, recording and intention. In this context the difference between an art-theoretical perspective and the perspective of an artist on her/his practice is that in the case of the artist the practice is not only described with terms, but additionally understood through them. This means that the theory has an impact on the practice, and there is a mutual influence of theoretical and practical work.

More precisely the method comprises bringing the questions that come out of my artistic practice into theoretical fields, and into dialogue with them. This includes reviewing various approaches from continental philosophy, literary studies, and art theory in order to shed light on my research questions from different perspectives. The aim is to show where in theory and philosophy my questions already exist and to bring these theories in dialogue with my perspective.

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[3] Haraway, Donna, "Situated Knowledges. The Science Question in Feminism and the Privilege of Partial Perspective," in: *Feminist Studies*, Vol. 14, 1988, pp. 575-599, here: p. 583.

[4] Steinweg, Marcus, *Behauptungsphilosophie*, Berlin: Merve Verlag, 2006, p.7, translated by LN.

The selection of theories with which I engaged myself emerged from the context of academia as well as form personal preferences. I try to fulfill academic standards in the sense of not neglecting who said something relevant about the topic already. At the same time the selection has a personal dimension, because I am the person who defines the relevance and who tries to find her own way through these theories.

I therefore reproduce passages from primary and secondary literature that I consider relevant in the context of this dissertation but try to interpret these texts as little as possible. Rather, I say afterwards what these texts mean for me, from my perspective as an artist, and translate their meaning into the context of the research.

Content of the Chapters

In the first chapter entitled "Performances and Texts", the research is contextualized. A brief insight is given into the role texts and notations play in the performing arts and in visual art. I will then introduce the most important positions in relation to performance theory. Furthermore I will argue for a paratextual understanding of performance which takes the live-act as well as its (potential) textualizations into consideration. Against this backdrop, light will be shed on performance as live-art. The chapter is concluded with a view on contemporary performance documentation.

In the second chapter entitled "Performances in and through Texts", a dialogue between my experience of working with texts related to performances, and considerations of and theories about the characteristics of writing and texts by Émile Benveniste, Sigmund Freud and Jacques Derrida among others will take place.

The third chapter, entitled "Translations from and into Performances", is primarily dedicated to the notion of "translation." Translation from and into performances will be approached by means of the theory of translation developed by Walter Benjamin. Furthermore, the theory of musical reproduction developed by Theodor Adorno will be consulted.

Guide for the Reader

The following dissertation is divided into three chapters. Each of them has several subchapters.

For referencing literature "op. cit.," "Ibid." and "Cf." are used. "Op. cit." refers to literature which was already mentioned before, "Ibid." refers directly to the previously footnote, and "Cf." means "see" and is used for indirect quotes.

In this dissertation, different texts, theories, and voices are speaking. For the main body of the text (except for headings) a standard formatting of font Arial, size 12 points and a line spacing of 1,5 lines is used. For texts that differ from this main body and that were written before the writing of this dissertation other fonts, sizes and line spacing are used in order to mark them as artistic quotes.