



Rethinking performativity: ethnographic conceptualism

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ABSTRACT

Ethnographic conceptualism takes its cue from conceptual art and uses artistic interventions as an anthropological research tool. The term ‘ethnographic conceptualism’ was coined to sum up the method of the exhibition project *Gifts to Soviet Leaders* (Kremlin Museum, Moscow 2006) as simultaneously a reflection on the vast and complex economy of public gifts to heads of Soviet state, a distinctly post-Soviet political and cultural artefact, and as a tool for ethnography of post-socialism. This article explores ethnographic conceptualism’s contribution to performativity theory. I look at how it makes visible the tension between what such projects perform and describe. In doing so, I use ethnographic conceptualism as a vantage point to revisit the foundational distinction of performativity theory between the constative and performative statements (Austin). Drawing in this artistic and research method, I redefine the performative, not as a domain or a type of utterance that is distinct from the constative, but as an act of drawing this distinction.

ARTICLE HISTORY

Received 27 January 2019
Accepted 11 November 2019

KEYWORDS

Performativity; ethnographic conceptualism; gift theory; Soviet; post-socialism

Facts can be imagined as the original, irreducible nodes from which a reliable understanding of the world can be constructed. ... Fiction can be imagined as a derivative, fabricated vision of the world and experience, as a perverse double for the facts or as an escape through the fantasy into a better word than ‘that which actually happened’.

— Donna Haraway

In the opening pages of *Primate Visions: Gender, Race and Nature in the World of Modern Science*, Donna Haraway (1989, p. 3) sets up the categorical opposition of fact and fiction only to critique it. Originally, she observes, a fact is a ‘thing done, a neutral past participle in our Roman parent language’ (Haraway 1989). Indeed, Latin *factum* (‘deed’, ‘action’) is from *facere*, ‘to do’, ‘to fabricate’, ‘to manufacture’. Haraway’s celebrated point is not that facts in modern science are ‘in fact’ fiction, but that they are much closer to this linguistic origin of ‘fact’. From her point of view, facts are forms of action: they are what is done, rather than simply what is. Facts are manufactured, and facts manufacture – in both science and society beyond science. Haraway does not refer to the philosopher of language J. L. Austin, but her approach is close to his speech act theory. Haraway’s primatological facts are Austin’s ‘performatives’. They do things rather than represent them – as in the utterance ‘I do’ at a wedding that *makes* a couple ‘man and wife’ (Austin 1962a, p. 5). Performative statements can be efficacious or not – ‘felicitous’ or ‘infelicitous’ as Austin puts it (1962a, pp. 13–15) – but they cannot be simply true or false as can ‘constative’ statements like ‘it rains’. It is this performativity of primatological facts that Haraway (1989) explores as shaped by, and in turn shaping, what is seen as ‘natural’ in modern, Western understandings of gender, race, and rationality, and the origins of humanity.

Haraway is among an influential handful of scholars that includes Judith Butler, Michel Callon, Bruno Latour, Steve Woolgar, and others, who in the 1980s shaped a particular kind of anthropology of knowledge for which Austin's concept of the performative is foundational. Judith Butler argues that the 'factic datum of primary sexual characteristics' is not a matter-of-fact descriptive basis of gender, but 'performative' in a sense of speech act theory (Butler 1988, p. 528, 518). Michel Callon submits that modern 'economics, in the broad sense of the term, performs ... the economy' rather than describing it, that is, merely 'observing how it functions' (Callon 1998, p. 2). Bruno Latour (2005a) defines his career-long project as that of becoming 'attuned to the right conditions of felicity of ... different types of truth-generators'. He evokes Austinian 'felicity' but looks at scientific constatives, not Austin's performatives. His interest is in 'mapping out the "conditions of felicity" of the various activities that, in our cultures, are able to elicit truth' (Latour 2005a, p. 28). Used in this way, performativity theory articulates a shift from the epistemology of saying things about the world to this world's ontology crafted through knowledge statements as actions. This theory's radical thrust is its scepticism about knowledge's mere constative value. Analytically it starts with the distinction between the descriptive and the performative, but works by extending the domain of the performative to what seems descriptive. The scepticism about truth and falsity as relevant criteria at all for understanding knowledge reaches its peak in reflections on the postmodern condition (Jameson 1984, Lyotard 1984, Bauman 1987). In contrast to the methodological argument of Austin, Butler, Callon, Latour, and others, this is a historicist argument that posited a binary distinction between 'classical' or 'high' modernity, wherein the constative criteria of truth and falsity had socio-cultural credibility, and 'late' modernity, or postmodernity, that underwent a 'performative shift' (Yurchak 2006) towards knowledge as a language game (Lyotard 1984, p. 17).

This article revisits this foundational distinction between the descriptive and performative. My goal is to address what I see as performativity theory's blind spot. What I would like to take issue with is not so much what this theory seeks to understand, but its own status in this understanding. If the most interesting thing this theory has to say about knowledge is the degree in which it is performative, what kind of knowledge is this description of performativity? What is the description of how primatological facts are manufactured or how economics performs the economy or how late modernity, whether capitalist or socialist, undergoes a performative shift to a condition of incredulity towards metanarratives? I argue that in such descriptions the performative theory remains constative with reference to itself. Nothing is, from this point of view, simply a matter of a fact – except this very statement. The more total the realm of the performative becomes with regard to the world out there, the more descriptive this theory is with regard to how facts and knowledge systems perform. Performativity theory appears as a constative utterance of what performativity is. It works through its own constative and constitutive limit.

But indicating this limit is not my aim in itself; I use it here to suggest an alternative. This suggestion is, in brief, to redefine the performative. I shall argue for understanding the performative not as a domain or a type of utterance that is distinct from the descriptive, but as an act of *drawing this distinction*. I submit that this redefinition allows, first, to capture better performative interventions of the performativity theory, rather than seeing it just as a tool for a distinct area of constative inquiry – what Haraway described as a danger of critical theory becoming 'successor science' (Harding 1987, cited in Haraway 1988, p. 579). Indeed, this would be merely substituting facts in science or knowledge practices with facts of construction of facts (which I discuss in this article's conclusion as a 'bad infinity'). Second, this situates performativity theory's subject matter and the performativity theory itself within the same theoretical frame, rather than leaving this theory in as if a sovereign state of exception. But this also implies (third) paying close attention to a methodologically difficult symmetry of ethnography and auto-ethnography: a symmetrical emphasis on how one's own facts are constructed, as well as on the construction of facts that one explores. I call this symmetrical exercise 'ethnographic conceptualism' (Ssorin-Chaikov 2013a). This essay is a case study of such an exercise. I seek to demonstrate how one can use performativity redefined as an act of drawing a distinction between the descriptive and the performative.

However, I do so below not as a science studies scholar but an anthropologist of art. I will mention several projects that fall within the genre of ethnographic conceptualism. But my case in point that I discuss in detail below is the exhibition *Gifts to Soviet Leaders* (Kremlin Museum, Moscow 2006) in which I acted simultaneously as a curator, as well as auto-ethnographer. Let me briefly preface this discussion with asking why art, what the art in question is, and what the connections are between this art and the anthropology of knowledge.

Why art, and which?

One of the sources of performativity theory was the anthropology of magic, religion and ritual (Turner 1974, Geertz 1983, cited in Butler 1988, Descola 1993, cited in Rosaldo 1982, Latour 1993, Rappaport 1999, Lambek 2013, Tambiah 2017). For example, Stanley Tambiah (2017) uses Austin to reinterpret a classic case of Azande magic (Evans-Pritchard 1937). Tambiah highlights ‘resemblances’ or analogies between the cause of the spell or the disease and its cure (e.g. fowl’s excrement being both the cause and cure of ringworm). These analogies are, so to speak, analogous to Austin’s constatives and performatives. Tambiah argues that both magic and science can be characterised by an analogical mode of thought, but that it would be misleading to treat magic as an evolutionary predecessor of science that has so far failed to establish ‘true’ causal links, thus operating as ‘false’ or mistaken constative as in Frazer (1900) and Lévy-Bruhl (1926). In magic, a link such as the one between fowl’s excrement and ringworm constitutes a performative analogy that can be felicitous or infelicitous, but cannot be true or false. It cannot be subjected ‘to that kind of empirical verification associated with scientific activity’ (Tambiah 2017, p. 451).

Importantly, for Tambiah the performativity of scientific knowledge is out of the question. In his analysis, originally published in 1973, science’s constative value is only confirmed by contrast with the performative value of magic. Anthropological interests in the performativity of science has developed a decade later in the context of anthropology’s self-criticism of its earlier aspirations to model itself on natural sciences (Clifford 1983, 1988, Marcus and Fischer 1986). As George Marcus and Fred Myers observe, in the 1980s these aspirations were undermined by ‘critical ambivalence’ of anthropology that oscillated between a desire for objectivity, which required a distance as evidence that the subjects of study were ‘independently constituted’, and an increasing awareness of the opposite: of existing relationships of power and histories of encounter, which make anthropology itself already ‘a part of such subjects of study’ (Marcus and Myers 1995, p. 2). As a result, a vibrant field of descriptions of how anthropological knowledge was performative, rather than merely descriptive, has emerged. These included such topics as the role and place of anthropology in a production of colonial and developmental hierarchies, and in an invention of traditions from reification of ‘custom’ and ‘tribe’ to nation-building (Herzfeld 1982, Hobsbawm and Ranger 1983, Handler 1988, Stocking 1991, 1993), Western ‘folk’ models of biology in anthropological theories of kinship, gender, and identity (Schneider 1984, Delaney 1986, Strathern 1992, Yanagisako and Delaney 1995) and the anthropology of science (Martin 1991, 1998; Helmreich 1998).

But Marcus and Myers make these particular remarks while writing on the anthropology of art. Their argument is not simply that anthropology is closer to the arts and humanities than the natural sciences. Anthropology’s scepticism about scientific objectivity, they suggest, can be read on par with the twentieth-century art’s departure from realism. Thus, the contemporary (then) reflexive moment in anthropology is also a recognition of its affinities with the art world (1995, p. 3, 6).

Methodologically, my discussion in this article takes its cue from one very specific statement of such affinity, which was made, however, not within anthropology, but art itself. In two essays of 1974 and 1975, leading conceptual artist Joseph Kosuth identified conceptualism as ‘art that is anthropologised’. This kind of art, he states, like anthropology, makes ‘social reality conceivable’. Conceptualism comes out of artists’ deep, fieldwork-like immersion in cultures as subjects of their reflection. Most importantly for my argument here, Kosuth identifies this art’s aim in a “depiction”

of art's (and thereby culture's) *operational infrastructure*' (Kosuth 1991, pp. 117–124; emphasis added).

From the avant-garde and Surrealism onwards, anthropology has been a continuous source of inspiration for contemporary art. Kosuth's perspective is different as it does not draw on the anthropological trope of 'Otherness' for artistic imagination. Kosuth in fact critiques this trope as it existed in the 1970s:

... what may be interesting about the artist-as-anthropologist is that the artist's activity is not outside, but a mapping of an internalizing cultural activity in his own society. The artist-as-anthropologist may be able to accomplish what the anthropologist [of that time] has always failed at. (1991, p. 121)

that is, the anthropology of anthropology and other Western knowledge practices. This is not an 'artist as ethnographer' who is 'locating truth in terms of alterity' (Foster 1995, p. 204). Kosuth's call is to use anthropology as a method rather than a depiction of a particular kind of exotic 'Other' subject matter. This in my view is symmetrical to the performativity theory in science studies.

Ethnographic conceptualism and the Gifts to Soviet Leaders

The term 'ethnographic conceptualism' was coined to sum up the method of the exhibition project *Gifts to Soviet Leaders* as simultaneously a historical reflection on public gifts to heads of Soviet state, a distinctly post-Soviet performative artefact, and a tool for ethnography of post-socialism. Boris Groys proposed the term 'Moscow conceptualism' in 1979, summing up the experimentation with socialist realist aesthetics by Soviet artists (Groys 2010, pp. 35–56). Moscow conceptualism is important for the genealogy of ethnographic conceptualism, although the latter is more directly rooted in the Western conceptual art that started in mid-1960s as a critical engagement in art's foundations and, specifically, with ways in which this art is socially embedded (Alberro and Stimson 1999, Goldie and Schellekens 2007). The scope of ethnographic conceptualism extends beyond Soviet/Russian contexts, such as, for example, James Oliver and Marnie Badham's (2013) art-based study of inner-city social space in Melbourne, Felix Ringel's (2013) ethnography of hope in the former East Germany, and Khadija Carroll, Jesse Shipley, and Michał Murawski's ethnographic field-work-based, immersive installation *Dissident Domesticity* that replicates WikiLeaks founder Julian Assange's diplomatic asylum (*Investigated*, Berlin 2014; *Ethnographic Conceptualism in the City*, London 2014).

How do such ethnographic-conceptualist projects work as depictions of their own 'operational infrastructure' (Kosuth 1991) – for example, at the exhibition *Gifts to Soviet Leaders*? Curated by art historian Olga Sosnina and myself, it was comprised of about five hundred examples of a vast and complex gift economy which the heads of the Soviet Union received from Soviet subjects and international leaders and movements. These gifts ranged from military uniforms from Red Army units, china from porcelain factories, and towels from peasant women, to industrial artefacts such as a working model of an iron blast furnace given to Stalin and models of heads of nuclear missiles presented to Brezhnev (Ssorin-Chaikov and Sosnina 2004, Ssorin-Chaikov 2006b) (Figure 1).

Initially this was a research project aimed at filling a gap in the anthropology and history of Soviet-type societies, to which we simply added a museum component. The exhibition was intended to chart the relations between the Soviet government and its subjects, and its allies. The gifts to Soviet leaders spoke the affective language of love of the leader and devotion to the communist cause. Within Soviet society, the flow of these gifts mirrored the state-socialist 'allocative economy' (Verdery 1991) – the non-market system of centralised redistribution where the gifts moved in the same state and party hierarchies as the allocated resources, but in the opposite direction: up instead of down. In this looking-glass reversal of the Soviet economy, the gifts also worked very differently from mass-produced objects. Even gifted exemplars of industrial production were uniquely produced singularities constituting a conscious limit to both art and commodities 'at the age of mechanical reproduction' (Benjamin 1999). The exhibition was a reflection on these gifts' political and



Figure 1. Telephone set in the form of the globe with receiver as a hammer and sickle. A gift to Joseph Stalin for his 70th birthday from workers of the Aircraft Workshop No. 1. Łódź, Polish Republic, 1949. Metal, enamel, plastic and wood. Courtesy of the State Central Museum of Contemporary History of Russia.

aesthetic status as well as on curatorial approaches to Soviet heritage. If our research argument was that this gift-giving was generated from below as a means to navigate complex Soviet politics, the exhibition was also to counter the top-down, totalitarian approaches to Soviet art and materiality. We approached the Kremlin Museum, where Sosnina worked, and received an interested agreement to hold this exhibition.

In our curatorial approach, we broke with the principle of chronology, that is, with arranging gift artefacts by periods of rule from Lenin to Gorbachev or temporal categories of early, 'high' (Stalinist) and late socialism. Neither did we attempt a typology of objects (i.e. rugs, vases, leaders' portraits, etc.). Instead, we approached the gifts as articulating the vision of Soviet socialism as a 'new world' in a Bakhtinian unity of time and space – of 'new' and the 'world'. In the exhibition display, these gifts constituted a chronotope of the 'new' era of socialism and the communist future mapped on the 'world'. (Figure 1) The exhibition space of *Malyi Manège*, Moscow, which was selected as its site (more on this below) and which consisted of the two large halls to the left and right of the main entrance, made it possible to highlight these two concepts of time and space. One hall articulated meanings of the world (space) as it could be seen through these gifts: the world of class struggle and superpower contest; the world as a socialist 'horn of plenty'; the world as an assemblage of different state-socialist subjects, divided by occupation, class, ethnicity, etc. The other hall focused on different concepts of time from revolutionary struggle and the socialist 'leap forward' to stagnation (Ssorin-Chaikov 2006b). In following these different meanings of time and space we also aimed at departing from the figure of the leader as a central point of these gift practices and putting forward instead the figure of the gift giver.

The exhibition was a short, but intense event in late October and November of 2006. Importantly for my argument, it attracted not just a record number of visitors for this exhibition site, but also extensive journalistic coverage and numerous expressions of appreciation, as well as equally numerous criticisms from all parts of the post-Soviet political and intellectual spectrum that culminated on the pages of the exhibition visitors' book. There were neo-communist concerns, expressed in quite strong terms, about an apparent failure of the exhibition to show how great the Soviet Union was in general and Stalin in particular. There was an equally strong Soviet nostalgia triggered by the exhibition among its older visitors; and there was a curiosity about the Soviet era among those who were born after the collapse of the Soviet Union. There was also a neoliberal dismissal of the curator's conceptual approach as complicit in the making of the post-Soviet 'vertical of power' associated with Vladimir Putin's rule (Sosnina and Ssorin-Chaikov 2009).

All this commentary did not come to us entirely as a surprise. From the early stages of planning this event (roughly early 2004), we could foresee that it would attract very diverse and intense reactions and decided to use them to chronicle this exhibition's post-Soviet context. Once the exhibition was in place some two years later, we encouraged its viewers' reactions by placing the exhibition visitors book within the exhibition display next to video installations about the Soviet era, showings of gifts in the Revolution Museum and on occasions of Communist Party congresses and Stalin's birthday in 1949 (Ssorin-Chaikov 2006a). We conducted interviews with visitors and reporters. As a result, another layer of this exhibition project appeared: not just the Soviet past but the post-Soviet present – the post-socialist political economy of museums and the post-socialist politics of identity and memory.

Much conceptualist artwork integrates commentary about it. The exhibition visitors book played the central role in the commentary that our project have generated (Figure 2). In front of our eyes it became both a work of art and ethnographic notebook. It attracted long queues and was read and studied before (and if at all) any comments were written down. One moment of conceptualist success was when we saw the following note there: 'Thank you for the exhibition. We particularly liked the visitors' book. Each record is interesting and educating' (Ssorin-Chaikov 2013b, p. 166). Such commentary transformed the book into an artefact that can be viewed and studied like an exhibited object. The audience and its commentary became a conceptualist artefact on the par with the exhibited gifts.

The audience's reactions make three issues palpable. First, the commentary was continuous in terms of its themes as well as the tone with much broader range of reactions that I have already indicated. Second, it made us think about exactly where and when was, so to speak, the first reaction to this exhibition project. What was, for example, the decision of the Kremlin Museum to hold this exhibition (which was, and still is, exceptional for a museum that normally focuses on the Tsarist

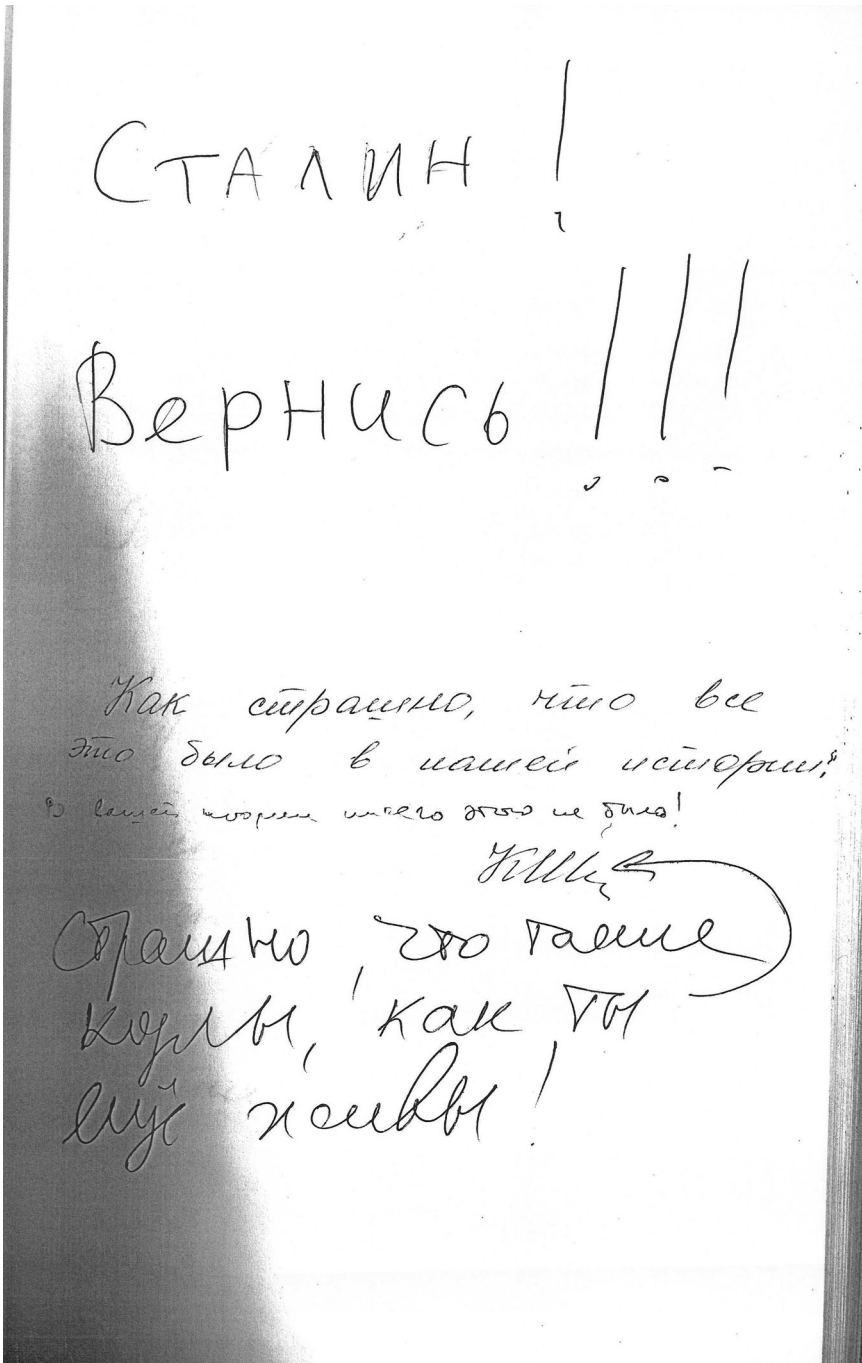


Figure 2. Comments in Visitors' Book, exhibition Gifts to Soviet Leaders (2006): downwards from the top line: 'Stalin! Come back!!!' – 'How frightening that this all happened in our history!' – 'In "your" history none of this has happened' – 'What is frightening is that bitches like you are still alive!'.

period)? What was the decision of private sponsors to support it (most important of those being the Russian giant AFK Systems)? These could be seen as reactions, but to what? In putting forward our original proposal, we of course took into account what the museum and sponsors were expecting in

order to make a convincing case. From the proposal stage, our project was therefore as much a reaction as it was a proposal. Then there were the complex negotiations with artists whom we commissioned to design the exhibition space, and with other museums that we approached for object loans as well as managerial negotiations and clarifications. All these decisions, negotiations, reactions, and counter-reactions contained views of Soviet socialism; all were embedded in post-socialism; and all were ultimately continuous with the exchange of opinion in the exhibition visitors' book. All parties involved were working out their own post-socialism through these reactions.

Third, precisely because our research and exhibition were on gift relations, we could not help but notice that by submitting the exhibition proposal to the Kremlin Museum, by helping its Public Relations Office to contract exhibition sponsors, and by asking other museums to take part by giving us inter museum loans (only the minority of gifts originated in the Kremlin Museum itself) *we were giving gifts and eliciting gifts*. This made us sensitive to how this exhibition mimicked its topic – the gift – and how our research conceptualisation of the Soviet-era gifts mimicked its post-Soviet context. This mimesis became quite apparent, especially when the administration of the Kremlin Museum decided to gift a copy of the exhibition catalogue to President Vladimir Putin for his 55th birthday in 2007. This gift was also a *reaction* to our project, albeit this time completely unanticipated by us. Yet this was just one striking instance in which we found the logic of the gift that we explored meandering out of our research and coming full circle into complex gift relations with the state, the sponsors, and the public where we were involved as both researchers and curators.

Second-order constatives

To sum up the argument that I have made so far: conceptualised as either a chain of reactions and proposals or gift-giving, it was this chain that constituted the exhibition's operational infrastructure – the constructed basis of its facticity first, as a narrative of Soviet history that was on display, and second, as a post-Soviet phenomenon of which we became increasingly interested: new relations between the state, museums, and the museum-goers. The first (Soviet) facticity was the exhibition's original goal. The second (post-Soviet) one was originally a means to manufacture (as in the performativity theory of knowledge) the first. From this point of view the exhibition's Soviet constatives were post-Soviet performatives – just as for Haraway (1989) primatological facticity was performative of its modern, Western context. The issue is that 'our' post-Soviet performatives also became constatives in the extent to which we used them, not just to construct the exhibition, but also to describe this process of construction as a case study in the anthropology of post-socialism (Sosnina and Ssorin-Chaikov 2009, Ssorin-Chaikov 2013b). Before moving to ways in which performativity can be rethought, let me outline some of the similar 'second-order constatives' that I see at work within performativity theory itself.

It was Judith Butler who, writing at about the same time as Haraway (1989), explicitly links the critique of categories of nature with speech act theory (Butler 1988, p. 518). She is a key figure in performativity theory, which she elaborates throughout her career by focusing on subjects constituted through performative acts in contexts that range from gender and materiality of the body to hate speech and politics (Butler 1990, 1993, 1997, 2015). However, one can read her approach as already crystallised in her 1988 article on the performative constitution of gender. Butler argues there that gender identity is a statement that may seem to refer to what simply exists – for example, 'ultimately expressing the discrete and factic datum of primary sexual characteristics' (Butler 1988, p. 528) – but 'gender attributes ... are not expressive but performative'. They 'constitute the identity they are said to express or reveal':

The distinction between expression and performativeness is quite crucial, for if gender attributes and acts, the various ways in which a body shows or produces its cultural signification, are performative, then there is no preexisting identity by which an act or attribute might be measured; there would be no true or false, real or

distorted acts of gender, and the postulation of a true gender identity would be revealed as a regulatory fiction. (Butler 1988, p.528)

We can see Butler's second-order constatives when she argues that her performative perspective is itself more true than that of Goffman (1956):

As opposed to a view such as Erving Goffman's which posits a self which assumes and exchanges various 'roles' within the complex social expectations of the 'game' of modern life ... I am suggesting that this self is not only irretrievably 'outside,' constituted in social discourse, but that the ascription of interiority is itself a publicly regulated and sanctioned form of essence fabrication. Genders, then, can be neither true nor false, neither real nor apparent. (Butler 1988, p. 528)

My point is that between Butler's own argument and that of Goffman there is a relationship of truth and falsity. Butler is also explicitly constative when she submits that gender is 'made to comply with a model of truth and falsity which not only contradicts its own performative fluidity, but serves a social policy of gender regulation and control' (Butler 1988). What is constative here is that gender is *made* to comply with these notions of truth and falsity, and that this construction *serves* social policies of gender regulation and control.

My next example of such second-order constatives comes from the work of Bruno Latour. In *Pandora's Hope* (1999), he invites the reader to look at the photograph of biologist Rene Boulet. We are given an archetypal figure of a scientist overlooking his materials on his desk in the field in the tropical jungle. His 'archetypal pose' is that of the master of the phenomena that he studies. Just a few days earlier, we learn, this material was 'tucked away in the soil, invisible and dispersed, constituting an undifferentiated continuum'. Latour's point is that science's purification of this mixed matter starts with arranging samples on a desk. 'I have never followed a scientist', notes he, 'rich or poor, hard or soft, hot or cold, whose moment of truth was not found on a one- or two-meter-square flat surface that a researcher with pen in hand could carefully inspect' (1999, p. 53).

I argued elsewhere (Ssorin-Chaikov 2013c) that, in the *Reassembling the Social* (Latour 2005b), we find Latour himself assuming a similar posture. Scientific facts he studies arrive as if they were 'maps crumpled into a bundle and as if we are to retrieve them from the wastebasket'. Having recovered them from there and having 'flatten[ed] them out on a table with the back of our hand until they become legible and usable again', he suggests we are then to proceed to 'measure the real distance every social connection has to overcome to generate some sort of tracing. What was hopelessly crinkled must now be fully deployed' (Latour 2005b, p. 172).

Latour does not photograph himself standing back and overlooking these first crinkled and then ironed out maps. But this is his own moment of truth. If Latour argues that the purification and differentiation practices of scientists are performatives, the connections that he maps out in his description of this performativity are the constatives. He extends the domain of the performative elsewhere when he argues that both nature and society are constructed symmetrically. To speak of the social construction of nature, as in science, is, as he argues, to work within the same logic of science. Such a science studies scholar is 'constructivist where Nature is concerned', but 'realistic about Society' (Latour 1993, p. 94). I argue that he is nonetheless constative ('realistic') about this symmetrical space. This symmetry has a true value of a constative utterance, rather than a felicitous value (efficaciousness) of a performative. Latour argues that this map's flat space constitutes a 'flat ontology' (2005b, pp. 165–172) where the observer (scientist) is on the same ontological plane as the observed (nature and society). But is Latour himself on the same plane? Let me put this question geometrically: exactly where does one have to stand to see and describe this as a truly flat surface? Where is Latour's point of view located?

If this flat space is a 'flat ontology', how can we see that this plane is indeed a flat, two-dimensional surface? If our own representations of this surface are *just like* those of scientists that we describe, if in this description we merely add dots and lines that are on the par with the flattened world we are exploring – in other words, if our own position is a dot on the very same flat surface – this surface cannot appear to us as a surface at all, but only as a line. It is a straight line if our point of view is on

the margin of this surface, as if we are viewing it from one side. If we are in the midst of it, then the surface appears to us as a circle with us in the middle. In either case, we can only argue that this is a surface, rather than just a line, by assuming its lateral depth. We presume that this line or a circle is a side projection of a two-dimensional flat space that lies perpendicular to our gaze. If we work within a flat ontology, this is a projection that we do not actually see. In this case, this projection is an assumption, a concept, a Cartesian possibility of multitudes of shape that we do not see but which is necessary to maintain the flatness of this perspective. But when Latour does this, his own figure is clearly not one of these crumpled maps that are to be flattened (Ssorin-Chaikov 2013c). Furthermore, his analytical move is not a Cartesian speculation but an empirical (constative) matter of a fact.

I have used the approaches of Butler and Latour to highlight the ways in which performativity theory remains constative in its description of how performativity works. In the remainder of this article, I will argue that it is possible to use the concept of performativity differently if it is redefined as an act of drawing a distinction between the performative and the constative, and between their respective criteria of felicity and truthfulness. We are going back to the *Gifts to Soviet Leaders*.

Performatives and constatives of the Gifts to Soviet Leaders

To begin with, this exhibition was a performative as an art project. It was crafted intellectually and materially. Yet our own research vision contained a number of constatives that were manufactured in Latour's sense of scientific truth production. This was, first, the Soviet gift chronotope: the analytical approach to Soviet-era gifts as articulating the view of the Soviet society as a 'new world'. Second, this was a conceptual understanding of microphysics of power in gift-giving that we called 'gift governmentality' (Sosnina and Ssorin-Chaikov 2006). The understanding of this kind of governmentality involved combining Mauss's famous approach to gift as seemingly voluntary, but in fact being obligatory with Foucault's view of self-discipline. Gifts to Soviet leaders were obligatory, but only in the form that appeared voluntary.

These historical constatives were, in turn, manufactured (performed) by the museum's crafted post-Soviet extensions and connections. For the Kremlin Museum this was the first, and so far the only, project that was devoted to the Soviet period, rather than the imperial and earlier Muscovite periods on which its exhibitions traditionally focus. It was also the first, and so far the only, project that the Kremlin Museum carried out on in Moscow outside Kremlin walls. Only a minority of exhibited gift objects originated in the Kremlin Museum collections; the rest came from loans from museums in Moscow, St Petersburg, and Volgograd (Ssorin-Chaikov 2006b). Only a fraction of the exhibition funding came from the Kremlin Museum; private sponsorship constituted its majority. It is these manufactured extensions, as performatives, that became in turn the subject of our ethnographic interest. Together with the exhibition visitors' reactions, these performatives became another set of Austinian constatives: the descriptions of these distinctly post-Soviet, complex, and hierarchical Kremlin-centred museum relationships (Sosnina and Ssorin-Chaikov 2009, Ssorin-Chaikov 2013b).

I will argue now that, first, just like the composite constatives of this exhibition, wherein the first-order constatives of its Soviet subject matter existed within the second-order constatives of its post-Soviet, complex, and hierarchical Kremlin-centred museum relationships, the performatives of this project were also Russian-doll-like performatives within performatives. Second, I will show how making this exhibition involved both uniting and differentiating its performative criteria of efficaciousness and constative criteria of truthfulness: the efficaciousness of its gift operational infrastructure and constative veracity of its historical and ethnographic analysis. I submit that it was this uniting and differentiating which worked as a *performative distinction* between what this project *manufactured* – its display as well as new connections between the museum, its sponsors, and its multiple audiences – and what it *described* as history of state socialism and ethnography of post-socialism.

Drawing the distinction of the performative and the constative

The preface to both the exhibition display and its catalogue began by stating that ‘this exhibition offers a unique opportunity to explore the Soviet worldview without either exonerating or indicting it’ (Ssorin-Chaikov 2006b, p. 1). By the time this sentence appeared in this preface, it had already had a long life of what Latour (1999) might call purification and amplification. The preface was rewritten, edited, or sometimes simply pasted from comments and notes that we made from the time we wrote up the original project proposal which we submitted, first, to the Kremlin Museum, second, to the potential exhibition sponsors and, third, to other museums that were asked to contribute gift artefacts from their collections. As any grant proposal, this text was a performative with its criteria of efficaciousness and ‘felicity’ of bringing in a desired result – the funds, the decisions to do this exhibition, and the other museums’ collaboration with it by loaning artefacts. It was only after this that these comments were edited again as this exhibition’s preface. These continuous textual drafts are examples of textual editing that Latour and Woolgar (1979) chart in the making of scientific facts. In our case, this editing amplified one of the constatives of this project: the concept of the Soviet gift chronotope. The way we sought to explore the Soviet worldview ‘without either exonerating or indicting it’ was to show how it was culturally constituted as an ‘historical crossroad of the “bourgeois” past and the universal “communist” future’ (Ssorin-Chaikov 2006b, p. 1).

Earlier versions of this statement included what we didn’t want to do: ‘this is *not* a remake of ideological exhibitions of the Soviet era’; ‘this is *not* about biography of Soviet leaders’; ‘we do *not* want to either marvel at these objects or denounce them as aesthetically false, or laugh at them as a strange curiosity’ (emphasis added). While these statements were important for us as curators and authors, we eventually toned them down. By the time we drafted the exhibition and catalogue preface, we edited these ‘negations’ out as much as we could. While we thought of them as conceptually important, ‘the audience’, as the catalogue publisher kept insisting, ‘will find it irrelevant; what is needed is a positive attitude’ (*pozitivchik nuzhen*).

The idea of the gift chronotope was that very *pozitivchik* which constituted a simple constative. At the same time, each iteration was a step in the ‘social life’ (Appadurai 1986) of this project and its objects – the performative step in the manufacturing of this project’s post-socialist gift infrastructure. Both inter-museum loans and sponsorship spoke the performative language of gift-giving, with the Kremlin Museum constituting an apparent point of cultural and economic gravity. This operational infrastructure performed the conceptual constatives of the exhibition and, at the same time, performed gift relations between museums, the state (that funded part of the Kremlin Museum exhibition budget), and the private exhibition sponsors. These relations were, however, contingent on drawing a distinction between what and how this exhibition performed – what it did as an event – and what it described as an academic argument about Soviet-era gift-giving. Each of these steps purified, in a Latourian sense, the exhibition’s research constatives as conclusions on exhibition display independent from this display’s conditions of possibility.

The above-mentioned birthday gift of a copy of the exhibition catalogue to President Putin was, on the one hand, one of the final ‘conditions of felicity’ (Latour 2005a, p. 28) in the curatorial ethnography of this project – describing the gift relations that this project performed – while, on the other hand, also performing gift relations that it described. Now, if this project has redrawn and redefined the distinction of the constative and the performative a number of times, the question is, what are the relations between these categories? If I redefine the performative as an act of drawing this distinction, what is the substance of this performativity? I will argue now that this act of drawing the distinction between the performative and the constative is itself not merely an utterance or action, but a matter of exchange. Indeed, any actual utterance or speech act is never alone – apart from those of the atomistic analytics of J. L. Austin (1962a). It is always-already both a response and itself generative of responses – a Bakhtinian dialogue and Lévi-Straussian exchange (Lévi-Strauss 1969, Bakhtin 1981) – from the time of our first project proposal which was as much a proposal as a response. What was given as performative could be, and was, taken as descriptive and the vice versa. Different parties to

this exchange – such as us as curators, our museum colleagues, our academic colleagues, project sponsors, journalists, and exhibition viewers – have drawn this distinction differently in a common if contested field of meanings of Soviet-era gifts and this post-Soviet project. Let me illustrate this with just one ethnographic example of the exhibition opening.

Performativity as exchange

Opening is a highly ritualised performance. It is an art of its own, which is to attract and also manage public and media attention. Heads of museums speak of the exhibition's relevance. Key patrons and sponsors are invited. Media interviews are sought. At the opening of *Gifts to Soviet Leaders* in the *Malyi Manége* hall, the Kremlin Museum director Elena Gagarina spoke of it as a symbol of a new kind of openness. For the first time the gates of the Kremlin Museum opened not to let visitors in but to take an exhibition out – to *give* it to the Muscovites, and to do this *in the city*, and not inside the Kremlin walls. This gift gesture became this opening's key note.

This rhetorical turn managed to mask the chief concern of the exhibition curators and the Kremlin Museum executive – that the then Moscow mayor Yuri Luzhkov might show up. *Malyi Manége* is a municipal property, ultimately answerable to Moscow mayor. The Kremlin Museum was a federal property ultimately answerable to the Russian government ('the Kremlin'). The Kremlin Museum's executive applied to the Mayor's office to use *Malyi Manége* as the Kremlin Museum itself was short of exhibition space within the Kremlin. As it was nonetheless abundantly clear from the start, this shortage was a technical issue that also proved political. It was politically convenient to use this other space, rather than trying to find a venue within the Kremlin itself, but by doing so the Kremlin Museum downplayed the link between the Kremlin Museum and the Kremlin (Ssorin-Chaikov 2013b). It was also politically convenient to call this just a technical matter. At the stage of the exhibition design, this distinction of the technical and the political was performed as an instance of the distinction of the constative (the technical) and the performative (the political). At the opening, this distinction was also performed, but differently.

All members of this project were grateful for mayor's administrative decision to let the Kremlin Museum use the *Malyi Manége* rent-free. This became one of the gifts that enabled this exhibition to take place. But the opening of the exhibition was marked by a visible atmosphere of worry that the mere presence of the mayor at the moment when the exhibition was unveiled would confuse the impression of the political ownership of the exhibition that the Kremlin Museum wanted to maintain. This presence would unsettle the issue of whose gift this is. Unlike Derrida's (1992) 'true gift' that he defines as unintended as such, this exhibition was about performing the role of the giver, and in doing, so ascertaining exactly who the giver was (the Kremlin Museum rather than the Kremlin) while also highlighting who the main giver was as opposed the giver's helping, but subordinate hand (the Kremlin Museum, rather than the exhibition sponsors or, indeed, other contributing museums). This was another instance of the distinction between the constative and the performative: the difference between the descriptive facticity of the dependency of this project on museum loans and sponsorship, and the performative hierarchy of the proper places of a list of enabling agents in which the Kremlin Museum was first, and everyone else distant second. The non-arrival of Luzhkov completed the exchange between the two: the constative dependency was exchanged for the performative hierarchy.

After feeling relief that the Moscow mayor hasn't shown up, and after Gagarina started her opening speech having described the exhibition as the Kremlin Museum's gift – with the Kremlin gates opening literally to take the exhibition out – she went on to stress that the Soviet-era gifts existed in the Kremlin Museum collections. She reiterated in speech what she has already put in writing in her own preface to the exhibition catalogue:

Museums of the Moscow Kremlin holds historic collections of the Armoury, the significant part of which is gifts to Russian Tsars and Emperors from foreign and Russian subjects. It is much less known that our museums also

have gifts that were presented to Soviet political leaders. While the diplomatic gifts of the 16 and 17th centuries were exhibited on numerous occasions, traditions of the twentieth century remains unexplored. We hope that our exhibition will fill this gap (Gagarina 2006, p. 5).

This iteration was also a performative way to draw the distinction of the constative and the performative but in a very different sense. The key here was describing the Soviet-era gift-giving a part of enduring ‘traditions’. Despite the seemingly academic and *constative* neutrality of this statement, its emphasis on the continuity of the Soviet and earlier gift practices was a loud and clear political *performative*. It was a statement of this project’s legitimacy. When we worked on this exhibition’s design, many of our Russian colleagues wondered if this is a legitimate art history and ethnology as the Soviet leaders’ dedications clearly spoiled the disciplinary purity of these objects. After the exhibition opened, some visitors remarked in its response book: ‘I do not think that this is what is worth reminding the people of, I do not think that this is beautiful art’; ‘We do not think the exhibition was worth having. Because its exhibits reveal, however partially, absolutely primitive character and a spiritual poverty [*dukhovnuuiu uscherbnost*] of our recent elite’. In the early 2000s, exhibitions on Soviet themes that were not denunciations of the Soviet past were still anomalies.

Gagarina’s performative act thus involved an exchange between the performative politics of this exhibition as a Kremlin project and its constative academic neutrality which was well beyond the issue of whether this was ‘beautiful art’ or if ‘our recent elite’ was without taste. However, as this neutrality was put in terms of continuity of Soviet and earlier gift giving, this description opened itself to criticism that it was not a description, but performance of this continuity – an assertion of enduring Soviet/Russian political identity. Some of the visitors commented that the exhibition was part of the Putinesque ‘vertical of power’, and that the timing of this project coincided with the remaking of Soviet-style hierarchy of governance. This was echoed between the lines in some of the journalistic coverage – particularly in the foreign media:

Sent with warm greetings from some of last century’s most cold-blooded rulers, they are not mementoes that many would choose to cherish. Now though, after decades of hiding them from the public eye, the Kremlin has finally unveiled the gifts that Soviet-era rulers received from admirers round the world. (*Sunday Telegraph*, 30/10/2006)

In both foreign and domestic reviews, one aspect of the exhibition that prompted suspicion was the use of anthropology: the display ‘follows Hegel, but was amended with Lévi-Strauss’, as newspaper *Novaia Gazeta* (06/11/2006) put it, despite the fact that the exhibition’s textual materials referred not to Lévi-Strauss, but Mauss, and not to Hegel, but Lenin. The subtle point of this commentary was that anthropology relativises the Soviet era by treating Soviet society as if it were any other society. By implication, this in itself performed the Soviet project as legitimate. (For many in our academic audience in Russia at that time, this commentary had similar implications that the Western proponents of totalitarian approach to Soviet history had drawn in regard to Revisionist School associated with the social history approach: namely that the latter legitimised the Soviet communist ideology and the system of rule [Fitzpatrick 2007]). Furthermore, it was the apparent attempt to anthropologise Soviet reality that was the source of this exhibition’s performative failure – and it was this *performative* failure that in the end revealed the *constative* continuation of Soviet-style hierarchies in the exhibition as an aesthetic and political project.

In other words, the exhibition’s performance was judged on the Austinian grounds of its felicity or infelicity. In turn, it was a judgment of the performative infelicity (not efficaciousness) that was the marker, not of the exhibition’s performativity, but of its real truthfulness as a constative utterance; for example, of its being an instance of the ‘vertical of power’. Radio Liberty was the most outspoken in putting forward this exchange between the performative and the constative. For its reviewer, the exhibition manifested an ‘imperial style in all its beauty’ (Pal’veleva 2006). ‘Imperial’ signalled a continuous space of identity that extended from the exhibition to the Kremlin, and then to the Soviet Union and the Russian Empire. Radio Liberty was fooled neither by the spatial distance of the exhibition from the Kremlin, nor by the curatorial emphasis on the Soviet gift chronotope. The

performed distance did not succeed. The project's apparent aesthetic failure highlighted its unavoidable ('true') imperial identity. The Radio Liberty journalist conducted interviews with both of us at the exhibition opening. Then she reported that the Kremlin Museum unveiled the show of such gifts, 'out of pure anthropological interest, as insist the exhibition curators': 'As Olga Sosnina emphasises, the goal of the exhibition was to reflect not Soviet reality, but Soviet mythology. Well, it did not work out like that'. The failure was in that the exhibition was 'full of pathos':

Even industrially made measuring scales for newborn babies are full of pathos ... [let alone] the design of the exhibition space, the items that are exhibited with care no matter if these are indeed precious objects, such as a sabre ornamented with emeralds, or a slanting ink set ornamented with beads that one disabled woman made with her toes. Imperial style in all its beauty! (Pal'veleva 2006).

Rethinking performativity: ethnographic conceptualism

Austin (1962a) grounded his speech act theory in the foundational distinction between constative and performative utterances. Interestingly, he went on to suggest that at a close inspection the differences between the two are difficult to maintain. Any utterance considered in its full context and conditions of possibility – a 'total speech act' (1962a, p. 52) – was in his view simultaneously constative and performative. For performative utterances to be felicitous, as in the utterance 'I thereby declare you a man and wife', certain conditions must be true: such as the propriety of the place and time of this utterance and ritual as a whole, as well as the authority of the person who utters this. If the truth of a simple constative 'he is running' depends on his running, the felicity of a complex performative 'I apologise' involves it being also a fact that I am apologising, and this fact being true (Austin 1962a, p. 47). It is these conditions of possibility that became some of the key points of further elaboration of performativity theory. These included symbolic foundations of utterances (Searle 1969) and their social conditions (Skinner 1971, Pratt 1986, Bourdieu 1991, Butler 1997, 2015). In an interesting inversion of Latour's argument about the 'conditions of felicity' of activities that 'are able to elicit truth' (Latour 2005a, p. 28), this contextual understanding of performatives, their criteria of felicity or infelicity, and conditions of possibility in turn required descriptions in a form of constative statements.

In this article, I argued that understanding performativity is not merely a matter whether it is the constatives or the performatives that work as each other's conditions of possibility. In and of itself this does not sustain the performative approach to knowledge, as it retains the descriptive approach displacing it to a different space: that of description of performativity. The status of this description was my main concern in this article. I suggested rethinking performativity – that is, approaching the performative not as a type of utterance that is distinct from the constative, but as an act of drawing a distinction between the two, as well as between their respective criteria of felicity and truthfulness.

Taking this back to Austin, this is ultimately the question of what kind of speech act is speech act theory itself. The complexity of this question is well beyond the scope of this article. Suffice it to say that the choice is between, on the one hand, seeing such a theory as being a constative or descriptive discourse on performativity – if we understand the performative and the constative as discrete types of utterances – and, on the other hand, this theory being a performative discourse if we redefine the performative as a 'speech act' of drawing the distinction between the performative and the constative (which is what the speech act theory in fact does). My argument in this article has been framed within this second option.

Two questions follow from this. First, if this redefinition of performativity allows a more nuanced view of both knowledge production in question as well as knowledge production about this knowledge production, what are implications of this for understanding such a recursive character of performativity – either of performativity within performativity or performativity of performativity of performativity, etc. Second, what does it actually mean to state that performativity theory, redefined in this way, is not just (or not so much) a theory of performativity, but performativity *as* theory?

The first question prompts an issue of how to avoid what is known as the ‘bad infinity’ of the construction of facts of construction of facts, and so on. ‘Bad’ or ‘spurious’ infinity is originally Hegel’s concept, which he defined as in fact a finite infinity which is simply ever-delaying its finitude in the infinite progression of its series (Hegel 2010). Marilyn Strathern (1996) identified the points at which this delay is stopped as those of ‘cutting the network’. This cutting produces the constative finality and certainty to the network’s performative configurations. It is at this point of cutting that the constatives are brought back to a ‘badly’ infinite series of performatives. Now, Hegel opposed this bad infinity to a ‘true’ infinity which does not contain the determinacy of the finitude, but is instead represented by universal reason’s eye as a line that is bent back upon itself making up a circle that is endless, eternal, and dialectical. I don’t subscribe to Hegel’s universal dialectics; I simply observe that the circle of this ‘true’ infinity might constitute a form of circulation. The circulation in question, as I demonstrated above, is that of the performative understood, first, as an act of drawing the distinction between the constative and the performative, and, second, a matter of exchange between these two. This, as Strathern has argued elsewhere, constitutes systems of ‘partial connections’ that appear infinite, but have what Georg Cantor called axiomatic foundations of this infinity (Strathern 1991).

This view of circulation is closely linked with the second issue; namely, with its status of performativity as a theory. I have argued above that my analysis in this article is close to the performativity theory in science studies, which indeed ‘depicts’ sciences’ ‘operational infrastructure’ (Kosuth 1991) and the anthropology of anthropology that charts the infrastructures of anthropological knowledge. This resonates with this special issue’s overall project of examining how artistic value is ‘crafted’ (Kompatsiaris and Chrysagis, introduction to this special issue). And yet there is a difference. As for Kosuth’s conceptualism of the mid-1970s and my ethnographic conceptualism, this is not merely a matter of anthropology *of* art but of anthropology *as* art.

The ethnographic conceptualism’s analogy between anthropology and art is very far from describing anthropology’s method through ‘arts’ as in poetics, rhetoric, or aesthetics. Conceptual art and ethnographic conceptualism are both Cartesian and intellectualist in their aims of an exchange of seeing with thinking, and material objects with concepts. Yet conceptualism does not just substitute art with a concept of art. It replicates this concept of art within art – what Kosuth called a deliberate ‘tautology’ of conceptualism in his work such as ‘Titled (Art as Idea as Idea) [Water]’ (1966). A good example of this, which is similarly and intentionally tautological, is Keith Arnatt’s *Study for Trouser-Word Piece* (1972) that includes a photo of himself holding a poster with a slogan ‘I’m a Real Artist’ and a caption with a lengthy discussion of the ambiguity of the notion of the ‘real’ from J. L. Austin’s *Sense and Sensibilia* (1962b). Now, if *thinking* itself approaches conceptual art as a form, then, as another conceptualist, Terry Atkinson, rhetorically asks in his famous inaugural editorial of *Art-Language: The Journal of Conceptual Art* (1969), ‘Can this editorial ... [as] an attempt to evince some outlines as to what ‘conceptual art’ is ... count as a work of conceptual art?’ (Alberro and Stimson 1999, p. xix). By analogy, I submit that this very piece of ethnographic conceptualist writing could count as a work of conceptual art. The difference is between approaching theory as art, on the one hand, and, on the other, approaching art as theory.

Acknowledgements

This article has benefited from its discussion at the Higher School of Economics St. Petersburg anthropology seminar (kruzhek). In particular, I am grateful for comments from Alexandra Kasatkina, Asya Karaseva and Sergei Abashin – as well as from this journal’s two anonymous reviewers.

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author.

Funding

This work was supported by Российский Фонд Фундаментальных Исследований (РФФИ) [grant number 18-05-60040].

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