

## Performativity and its Institutional Ethics.

*Keti Chukhrov*

Performative turn of 1960-s and 1970-s is generally treated as the liberating process that democratized many terrains of representation – political, social, economic, artistic, theatrical, literary. It is seen as the expanded field of the critique of constancies and of ontological predestination in social activity, and linguistic and cultural infrastructures in general. Performance practices in art in 1960-s and 1970-s are known to be a harsh critique of objecthood and their transcendental rigidity. However, very soon it became clear that art performance, despite its activation of collective agencies, its actionism, body practices, feminist critique and exposures of trauma, pain and vulnerability, remains, nonetheless, an exhibited object. Performance, although it undermined the institutional borders of art, re-installed itself within institute even to a greater extent. There are two reasons of paramount importance to this state of affairs. 1. To remain art, contemporary art has to evolve under “the gaze of theory” to quote Boris Groys,<sup>1</sup> since it is art that according to Josef Kosuth supercedes philosophy becoming an after-philosophic practice and hence is destined to be some sort of quasi-philosophy, even if at times indiscreet, absurd, surreal or incomprehensible; in other words, it is not that art needs any theory for itself, but it and its body are the theory per se.<sup>2</sup> 2. Contemporary art as a conceptually grounded practice reinstalls itself via and due to self-sublation. It means that art becomes the institute of institutes, comprising versatile modes of artistic practices and genres, be it visual, or not. And hence whatever enters this hyperinstitute – even if these are the processual and performative “deviances” and subversivities – they are marked by rules that define and re-establish art in its self-referential dialectics of self-sublation and self-assertion.

Art as institute deals predominantly with itself as an art-institute, even when it deals with the whole world globally; and paradoxically, the more it sublates itself, the more it refers to itself. Hence performance that once endeavored to expand or transgress the art institute and its constraints merely re-inscribed itself into art on specific conditions. To confirm this point it suffices to refer to what Marina Abramovic always claimed about her practice; namely that in her performances she never acts on behalf of her own body, or subjectivity, but her performance body matters only as an art-piece, as a reified art-object.

If we agree that performance, as it evolved in contemporary art, has nothing to do with the performative ‘freedoms’ and behavioral hubris, or even more so, with quasi-rituals with which it is so often associated nowadays, as well as with trading performing arts – music, theatre, dance - into art context – then, we will find ourselves slightly at a loss in defining the episteme of performance. This is because nowadays the proliferating performative activities exploit the impact of art performance mainly due to its time-based and flexible structure; they use art performance as the exemplary case of exceeding the discipline, of undermining its lexicons, methods and languages; they apply performance as the example of autopoiesis and tautology of presence (as against mimesis), as long as

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<sup>1</sup> Boris Groys. “Under the Gaze of Theory”. E-flux #35, May 2012, <https://www.e-flux.com/journal/35/68389/under-the-gaze-of-theory/>

autopoiesis determines contemporary performing practices in terms of post-discipline: post-dramatic theatre, post-choreography, post-dance, etc.

In Erica Fischer-Lichte's book *The Transformative Power of Performance*<sup>3</sup> the anthropology of autopoiesis, the presence of "the Real" is emphasized as the exemplary trait of performance that theatre should borrow for itself. Andre Lepecki too, advocates for the immersion in presence defined as a counter disciplinary turn.<sup>4</sup> In fact these two works on performance – "Transformative Power of Performance" and "The Exhausting Dance" appeal for revolutionary transformation of mimetic and dramatic components of theatre and choreography by means of performance; both works demonstrate an utter belief that mimesis and the prescribed score to adhere to are the authoritarian remainders of Western modernity. What is interesting in both cases is that Lichte and Lepecki in their theoretic premises depart not from contemporary art prerequisites, but from the genealogy of performing arts. Yet when claiming and radicalizing the institute of theatre and choreography, they suggest exemplary cases from contemporary art, in spite of the fact that these examples have nothing to do either with theatre or choreography/dance whatsoever. As an example of the transformed theatre Lichte refers to the autopoiesis of art performance (she mentions performances of M. Abramovich), which makes the fictitiousness of an acted role redundant. Lepecki refers to Bruce Nauman to demonstrate the specimen of solipsist derangement of prompted choreographed score and composed temporality.

Lepecki's principal point is that the choreographed and composed temporality in dance (consequently in music) rely on the passing away of the eventuality of "now"; they stage the grievance over the eluding moment, over the loss of present. In this case, as Lepecki argues, the past functions as compensation for the inevitable death and vanishing of what "is". The spell of the kinetics in performing arts, their motility and catching up with the fleeing beauty as the modernity's frame arises exactly from this pursuit of the lost object. This is the reason why body has to be artificial, architected and disciplined in music, theatre and choreography. Body should attain 'impossible' skills and exist in 'impossible' conditions in the performing paradigms of modernity, since it has to fit perfectly the ideality of the irretrievable "now" at each moment when this "now" passes by. This is the reason why performing as it formed itself in the conditions of Western modernity consists of the glimpses of ideal images that are disappearing as we perceive them. In this case we have to do with the sequence of utmost moments, rather than becoming of the present. Instead of this model of "classical" modernity Lepecki advocates for an expanded anti-kinetic durational present without past and future, without activation of memory and the fleeting moment of now, which presupposes return to stillness, to the residing in contemplative becoming and natural duration of organism. In short, body and temporality should go loose, and keep the intimacy of what is existing, rather than what is evaporating and evolving in effectuation.

Yet the problem is that art performances of Abramovich and Nauman, of Francis Alys, VALIE EXPORT and many others have little to do with autopoietic freedom of

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<sup>3</sup> Erica Fischer-Lichte. *The Transformative Power of Performance*, Routledge, 2008.

<sup>4</sup> Andre Lepecki. *Exhausting Dance*. Routledge, 2006.

expression, with phenomenological materiality of body or any unmediated presence of post-dramatic, post-scored or post-choreographic practices of contemporary performing arts, or their self-reflection. Thus, these two cases of critique of performing arts – Lichte and Lepecki - show excellently how the legacy of art performance was misinterpreted by theoreticians of performing arts. From the nominalist point of view, in performance, we definitely deal with what in terms of direct perception is grasped as the straightforward presence of performed action. But the bodies in art, even when being nominally present never stop to be art-works; they never fall into any durational temporality of becoming nominal “autopoetic” presences as Lepecki or Lichte insist. Let’s see why and how.

As it had already been said, the nominal presence of a contemporary art piece in time and space is definitely demonstrating a specific type of exposure, quite different from the aesthetics of Kantian transcendentalism. Yet this exposure is not about an unmediated presence and its accidentality either. Even when materiality or substance – such as Boys’s fat or Mathew Barney’s vaseline - are exposed in their most uncanny presence; or even when the bodies of performance makers could have been before audience for hours or days, these exposures are not meant as any sensuous experience or any contemplation of the unmediated presence. What matters there is not only that concept should prevail over any materiality, so that matter becomes a reified speculative work; at stake in art performance is as well how the body of an artist intervenes into the whole block of the previous institutional politics or an art history narrative, thus re-instituting by means of the artist’s body the totality of art as such. So that a separate art gesture could stand for art universally and globally in all senses. The greatest art works achieve such scale of being a hyper-institute when one piece – “Black Square” or “The Campbell soup” represent not an image or even a conceptual gesture but art as a whole. If this is not the case than any visual imagery is simply a fine art. In art a set of institutions and their agencies can stand for a sole piece of an art-work, and, vice versa, a single piece of an art-work can bear the impact of art in general.

In a nutshell, in a contemporary artwork idea, concept or theoretical provocation dominates the matter and objecthood. Therefore, contemporary artwork is not a modernist object any more. When in contemporary art piece a body, object, or their constellations are exposed, what matters is not their visibility or duration, but something that Frederic Jameson called “gimmick”,<sup>5</sup> and what I would call after Valery Podoroga “kairos” – a happy moment of gnoseological epiphany, oscillating between grasping the sense of work and eluding to do so.<sup>6</sup> This surplus conceptual element promises explanation but never provides it; so that then the idea, concept and material presentation of the work concatenate to form an indexical machine producing signification gaps that are never resolved, but always remain in some non-sense. It is this *kairos* of cognitive blankness that accomplishes a contemporary art-work and does it in a second, in a moment, even when comprehending the work is impossible semantically or even when the piece’s duration lasts for hours or days.

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<sup>5</sup> Frederic Jameson. “The Aesthetics of Singularity”. *New Left Review* #92, March-April, 2015.

<sup>6</sup> Valery Podoroga. *Kairos, the Critical Moment*. Grundrisse, 2013.

Consequently, the presence in art that Lichte and Lepecki so much rely on when referring to the contemporary art-practices has little to do with autopoiesis per-se, but rather with reification of transcendentality. A readymade is a perfect example for it. It is what it is, but at the same time *it is not what it is*. It is truly incredible that while an object or a body of an art-work is present, its presence is “empty”; it produces annihilation of its presence in some sort of self-irony and self-profanation. In this sense, art is ever dystopian. I would cite here the differentiation that Frederic Jameson makes between modernist art and the contemporary conceptual art-practices.

In his text “Aesthetics of Singularity” he argues:

“I understand modernist conceptual art as the production of physical objects which flex mental categories by pitting them against each other. Yet these categories, whether we can express them or not, are somehow universal forms, like Kant’s categories or Hegel’s moments; and conceptual objects are therefore a little like antinomies or paradoxes or koans in the verbal-philosophical realm—occasions for meditative practice. [...] Meanwhile Postmodern neo-conceptualism is not at all like that: it is soaked in theory, these works are as theoretical as they are visual—but they do not illustrate an idea; nor do they put a contradiction through its paces, nor do they force the mind to follow the eyes inexorably through a paradox or an antinomy, in the gymnastics of some conceptual exercise. Concept is there but it is singular and rather nominalistic than universal. Therefore we consume not the work, but the idea of the work itself. It is a mixture of theory and singularity. It is not material, we consume it rather as the idea than a sensory presence and it is not subject to aesthetic universalism...”

We would not go deeper into Jameson’s differentiation of how concept functions for modernity and post-modernity respectfully. The issue at stake is to assert that even with withering of “classical” conceptual rigidity the logic of representation in contemporary art remains to be biased by cognitive, conceptualized prescriptions. This enables us to assert that the performance of contemporary art is that very “empty” site, characteristic for a conceptual art-gesture; it exerts no procedure of performing whatsoever; and even if it does so, performing act in it is merely a nominal move; otherwise at stake are contexts, interpretations, semiological machines and acts of instituting the institute.

When Francis Alys is pushing the cube of ice (“Sometimes Making Something Leads to Nothing”, 1997), or Bruce Nauman is bouncing against the wall (“Bouncing in the Corner”, 1968), these acts have nothing to do with new duration of movement in contemporary dance or with any essentialization of body presences; these performances are not plastic acts, or demonstrations of new attitudes to body and choreography.

To sum up, the endowment of art performance with the nominalistic and phenomenological characteristics to trade it into performing arts deprives performance of its episteme and when hijacked on stage or franchised into dance practice, or exerted as the act of social disobedience one sieves out of it only the pure phenomenology and nominal construct of that act, but never the ideological, epistemic and contextual genesis and etiology of contemporary art.

Consequently it is easy to get misled in perceiving the art performance. Some might think it is bringing contingent and loose forms of agency and existences into the institutes, based hitherto on discipline. But performance in contemporary art - in its emptied rigidity – is, on the contrary, the discipline of disciplines, a codex, no matter how subversive or contingent their agents behave. A Moscow conceptualist Andrey

Monastirsky even developed a term “empty act” (*pustoe deistvie*) for his “Collective Actions’. This empty form which forbids to enjoy, to perceive with interest and pleasure, with sensuous abundance and empathy, or pure psychedelic immersion – as against the perception modes that abound in popular modes of art: cinema, theatre, dance, music - this state of affairs is due to what we mentioned above – contemporary art’s readiness to function in the mode of self-sublation.

We have then to acknowledge that theatre and dance have not accomplished such self-sublation and hence they have never become contemporary art. As soon as they attempt such self-sublation, they stop to be themselves and become “art”. “4.33” by John Cage is a good example of the threshold, which checks whether Cage was remaining a composer reducing his composition to a zero degree of music, or this piece was already an act, surpassing the deconstruction of medium to become a conceptual performance act. Allegedly, the case is rather the former: ‘4.33’ continues to be rather an avant-garde music, than a contemporary art piece, which makes it reside in the modernist paradigm of radical music, rather than contemporary art.

But, what makes us say that even though theatre and dance try to deconstruct themselves, they do not achieve self-sublation to the extent that art exerts it, when it becomes a hyper-institute? As it was mentioned above, art maintains itself as a global meta-institute by sustaining its nihilist self-sublating condition constantly. In theatre the types and modes of action might be subject to deconstruction, but the interface of an institute remains in them intact: for example, even when the modes of behaviour are far from being traditionally choreographic, dramatic, or theatrical the audience and its perceptive habits are still treated quite traditionally in contemporary theatre. In other words, there has not yet been a *black square* of theatre and dance, that would profane the audience simply by not needing it. The «Black Square» by Malevich unlike «4.33» is a quasi-philosophic gesture which we try to critically speculate on, rather than contemplate as a novel anti-imagery of visual art, or even more so, as counter-painting. In the «Black Square» art reinstitutes itself by the token of slaughtering itself, dispensing with itself and only due to such self-destruction it acquires its hegemony. While post-choreographic dance and post-dramatic theatre derange themselves, but still crave for the audience to watch how they are being deranged, art dared to ultimately “spit” into the face of an audience and only after such an act it reconstituted the institute in meta-terms, and endeavored to globalize it. Despite proliferous audiences art historicizes and theorizes itself without any audiences and without even human kind whatsoever, since it is an extreme case of reification of speculating, and hence, aesthetic perception and its regimes are redundant for it. This is the reason why post-choreography and post-dramatic theatre or performing practices can not become art despite many efforts.

To repeat again, the performative conatus and belief in unlearning, in mere unmediated autopoietic being are myths that never took place in the episteme of art. Despite spontaneity of performativity or even contingent hubris art retains radical skepticism about anything to be performed. Only given the conditions of such radical nihilist negativity contemporary art can be valid.

Jacques Derrida has never written on contemporary art, yet he has excellently accounted for utter skepticism towards the liberating potentiality of performativity. In his “On the Grammatology” he excellently shows why he mistrusts any forms of auto-affectation. He discards the classical forms of sensuousness, such as mimesis; yet, for Derrida the autopoiesis and its performing subjectivity too is nothing but an affectation of a narcissistic self in her striving for power.<sup>7</sup> Therefore, according to Derrida, performance should be deferred and stuck into difference (*différance*) to evade the metaphysical self-establishment of a sovereign Subject.<sup>8</sup>

But even more important is that Derrida puts to doubt any actualization or accidentality of a performative procedure when he reveals to what extent performed utterances or acts are nothing but the iteration of the ineffable. In other words, for Derrida nothing can be per-formed, except for the impossibility to perform. This is because the performative semiology of the happened does not manifest what happened, or whether anything happened, - it cannot prove whether any event could have taken place at all.

Exactly such mood of negativity permeates performance of contemporary art.

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With all that said one cannot ignore the tendency becoming more and more evident nowadays. It subsists in the fact that art is exhausted with its cognitive reductionism, whereas performing arts in their own turn are tired of being insufficiently cognitive and theoretical. Both need mutual injections. Art craves for senses, moods, enjoyments, narratives, erotization. Performing arts crave for the hegemony that only theoretical and philosophic mind can establish; that’s why they lack ‘the contemporaneity coefficient’ of art. In this mutual crisis of two institutes we see testimonies of weakening of both paradigms more and more often. Young artists are no more afraid to present their emotions in performance. Not only contemporary artists engage dancing, singing or theatrical enactments in their work, but they inscribe in such practices psychedelic immersion, or mere pleasure of perception. When emphatic immersion and pleasure are allowed in art again, it submits to normal human senses and pleasures; i.e. it becomes a popular, non-conceptual behavior.

And although the hyper-institute of art still continues to be organized so that in the end castration of pleasure will happen anyway; still such castration of an otherwise pop-culture practice – even when it only pretends to stand for a conceptual component - is not any more conceptual or theoretical in Kosuthian sense. For example Ragnar Kjartansson in his piece “Sorrow Conquers the Happiness” (2014) sings with orchestra only 4 bars of music during 25 minutes, bringing his performing set to bad infinity. Anne Imhof’s “Faust” (2017) evolves as a mysterious and psychedelic happening oscillating between a ritual, installation, fashion show and contemporary dance, but at the same time it reveals senselessness of all the above-listed performing modes. A number of recent examples of writing on art too (by Graham Harman, Timotheus Vermeulen, etc) demand to liberate art from its verbal, linguistic, contextual packaging, searching for the pure reality of re-

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<sup>7</sup> Jacques Derrida. *On the Grammatology*. John Hopkins Un-ty Press, 1997.

<sup>8</sup> Keti Chukhrov. “On the Anthropology of Performing”. In: Springerin#2, 2013.

aestheticized and post-conceptual matter and objecthood in art, returning thus back to phenomenology and meta-modernism. As a result art as a meta-institute is weakening itself when it yields to democracies and pop-cultural regimes. Dance and theatre in their own turn, are inconsistent when they, on the one hand, retreat from drama, choreography, acting to derange themselves in their striving towards contemporary art's interfaces; but on the other hand, they nonetheless retain their institutional frames and persist in labeling themselves as theatre and dance, and therefore happen to be neither theatre any more, nor an art performance yet.