

Review of *Performative Realism: Interdisciplinary Studies in Art and Media*, edited by Rune Gade and Anne Jerslev (Copenhagen: Museum of Tusculanum Press, 2005)

Anna Scheer

This collection offers an intriguing cross-section of case studies relating to what could be called, 'the performance of being'. The editors, Rune Gade and Anne Jerslev, see performativity as a useful lens through which to view and explain current developments in a broader cultural sense, as well as within the art world. Most of the nine contributors are affiliated with the University of Copenhagen, which established the Museum Tusculanum Press, and the fields covered include; theatre, documentary film, photo books, literature, performance art, installation, and live action role-playing (LARP). Gade and Jerslev cite the title of Jon McKenzie's book *Perform or Else* (2001), as indicative of the way in which performance has become a social and cultural mandate from which it is increasingly difficult to secede. As a result, while the concept of 'freedom of choice' - in terms of the construction of identity - is a misnomer, Gade and Jerslev suggest that the field of aesthetics is a site where resistance to the pressure to perform/conform can be explored.

Setting out the discourses to which this volume responds, they see J.L. Austin's influential book 'How to Do Things With Words' as the inception point of performative theory, recognising its impact on arts and cultural studies as well as other disciplines. The rise of performance studies, while not necessarily congruous with the linguistic associations of performative theory, does share its engagement with real actions and the 'reality' of everyday life and social worlds. Hence, the crux of the book's enquiry is 'reality' and how it 'is produced and mediated within various contexts' (10), which clarifies the book's paradoxical title. In the chapters that follow, debates around authenticity, live presence and documentation are considered, and the perceptively challenging work discussed in this volume offers an insightful contribution to these ongoing discourses.

In the opening essay, Solveig Gade skilfully analyses Christoph Schlingensief's socially engaged 'Wahlkampfzirkus - Chance 2000', a meta-artwork that comprised a political party, circus performance, media election campaign, talk show, 'revivalist meeting and freak show' (32). Gade discusses notions of theatricality within the context of post-dramatic theatre linking its interests in the actions of both performers and spectators with the historical avant-garde's ambitions to subvert the boundaries between art and life. She takes issue with the ontological status of performance as necessarily being excluded from, or even opposed to, reproductive representation and mediation, by virtue of its intrinsic commitment to the present. Deftly arguing against the idea of performance belonging to an alternative cultural economy, Gade states that within the context of media society, we are all inscribed within the iterative practice of performativity. In her exploration of the political resistance potential of Chance 2000, Gade stresses that the work's meaning emerged through a performative process of exchange with the participating spectators. Whilst not operating as if he could 'secede from that cultural economy that determines the life world' (38), Schlingensief fluctuated between the positions of media performer and theatre performer. Gade asserts that while Schlingensief functioned within the logic of the media, he displaced it by revealing its election campaign operations to be a performance with politicians as the central players.

In a complex interweaving of Deleuzian and Nietzschean concepts, Bodil Marie Thomsen revises Peggy Phelans theorising of 'performance as negativity' to offer a positive reading of performative acts unconnected to performance art: in this case, Euripides' play 'Medea' and Lars Von Trier's film, 'Dogville'. Through the act of

Medea's infanticide, 'a performance of negation' (in terms of how it is written), Thomsen proposes that: 'Euripides lets the reader grasp the body as pure reality, outside any symbolic inscription' (68). She argues further, that a resemblance to Medea in the character of Grace in *Dogville*, suggests that both works engage the viewer in a cognitive decoding, whereby the killings are portrayed as a performative act via the body's connection 'to expression rather than to subjectivity' (76). For Thomsen, the works under discussion provide the possibility for spectators to distinguish between ethics and morality, by presenting the acts of the women as acts of grace.

Anne Jerslev addresses performativity by illustrating its application to documentary films and television reality programmes. Drawing on divergent perspectives, she points out the frequent usage of the term 'performative' to comprehend the way in which 'ordinary people' are refashioned into 'social actors' (90). As an example, Jerslev introduces the documentary film 'Family' (2005), by Sami Saif and Phie Ambo, which documents Saif's journey to locate the whereabouts of his Yemmite father. Jerslev sees 'Family' as flouting filmic conventions of what is usually included (and excluded) in the frame, in time and space, creating an atmosphere of something in the act of becoming - although it is already completed. She argues that the performative mode in documentaries and the medial awareness of social actors is not necessarily disavowing, making the valid point that 'conscious self-display is not necessarily a failed effort to act naturally' (103). For Jerslev, performativity can evoke how reality is simultaneously 'represented and presented through mediation' and affirms the terms application in rethinking such processes (106).

In her essay, Metta Sandbye examines how the realism of the snapshot becomes performative. Tracing the influential theories and philosophies of J.L. Austin and Ludwig Wittgenstein, she connects 'the language philosophy of daily life' (127) to the work of the Danish art couple Bjørn Nørgaard and Lene Adler Petersen. A descriptive analysis of their photo books follows, in which the simple details of the couple's home life are displayed in the first, while the second pairs quotidian objects presented on a table and captured in amateur style. Both books contain textual references to the images, underlining the artist's connections to Wittgenstein's 'Tractatus' whilst validating the trivia and whimsy of everyday life and its routines. In their attempts to articulate a perception beyond those traditionally recognised in the visual art hierarchies of the period, Sandbye sees the artist's work as politically 'art-critical', offering 'little manifestos of the importance...of everyday experience' (130). The transposition of the Renaissance term 'pastoral' (from its application to landscape painting) to describe art 'where a focus on the everyday, the simple, humble life is used as a filter to address the sublime' (125), is aptly suited to her context and forms the basis of the intriguing investigation into the 'performative realism' presented by the works.

Camilla Jalving's article analyses the photographic (non) performances of British artist, Hayley Newman, as documented in the series 'Connotations-Performance Images, 1994-1998'. Her discussion informs us that the 'performances' were staged solely for the camera over a period of one week and supplied with a supporting text containing fictional descriptions of the contexts, locations, duration and photographers. Questioning distinctions between what constitutes a document and a performance respectively, Jalving asks whether such distinctions are relevant to Newman's work. She sees Newman's practise as having multiple cognitive entry points, in the sense that her work 'performs, contests, undermines' and subverts both art-historical and gender stereotypes (153). Entering the liveness v non-mediated presence debates, she makes the valid point that Newman's performances clearly contest the 'dogma of presence' (164), being, in fact, made solely for the document with no intention of offering a live, unmediated

experience. Thus there is 'no 'original' behind the copy' and Newman turns the concept of not doing a performance into a performative act (164).

In his essay 'Making real. Strategies of performing performativity in Tanja Ostojic's "Looking for a Husband with a EU Passport"', Rune Gade discusses the complex and controversial issues arising from the Yugoslavian born artist's project. While the title of the work explicitly states Ostojic's purpose, Gade examines the work's intentions and the questions it raises about gender inequalities, sexual commodification, political disenfranchisement, and not least, whether art can have 'real consequences' (185). Ostojic's use of a nude Internet advertisement appeared to be a commonplace personal ad while evidently being readable as something else. Gade suggests that the dislocation of meaning, image and medium constitutes an, 'aesthetic meta-reflection' on the personal ad and the exploitations of the illegal sex trade via the Internet. (188) He sees Ostojic's work as emblematic of the sort of exchange theorised by Nicolas Bourriaud as 'relational aesthetics', in its movement beyond the field of art, and its invitation to an audience to contribute to, or even complete the work. In this way, the changes in Ostojic's personal life and circumstances become of public interest and concern, exposing the transformations she undergoes to critical evaluation and reflection.

Anne Ring Petersen examines installation art, and questions the signification of theatricality and performativity, in conjunction with immobile and scenic art works that operate without live actors or dramatic action. She suggests that 'performative realism', best encapsulates the medium's relationship to realism, specifying the work's potential to engage the viewer in a bodily way as they physically encounter and respond to an installation. To illustrate this, Peterson examines several installations by Danish artist, Thomas Bang. In his work, a dramatic tension is produced by inverting the norm of creating access to the interior space of an installation by means of a handrail employed as an exclusionary device. Over the handrail, the spectator views the everyday objects on display in front of drawn curtains, which reference theatrical backdrops. Arguing that theatricality can be identified as a significant framing device in installation art, Petersen defines it as a 'scenic use of space that defamiliarises the familiar and puts the viewer on the stage' (232).

In an interesting revision of Gertrude Stein's works, Laura Luise Schultz views them both as a forerunner to the contemporary performative mode and as related to post-dramatic practise. She contends that earlier this century, Stein's writings spanned the divide between text-based dramatic theatre and experimental performance, dismantling the accepted mimetic association between literary text and performance.

By rejecting mimetic correspondences, Stein sought to reconsider the relationship of text to performance and 'wrote plays suited for a modern performance theatre beyond a linear or 'literary' dramaturgy (236). Stein's aesthetic necessitated a seminal rethinking of representation and reality, thus her plays employed a performative approach that were a kind of 'literary performance' (236). Schultz thoughtfully analyses the playful component in Stein's early poems seeing it as central to her later dramatic writings, most obviously, in the text 'Play' with its repetition of the word fluctuating with its usage as noun, or verb, to rhyme with other words. Her discussion of 'Saints and Singing', as staged by Robert Wilson in 1996, illuminates aspects of Stein's composition and her 'performative poetics' (235).

In the book's final essay, Britta Tim Knudsen addresses the increasing popularity of LARP or live action role-playing, a practise defined by genre theorists as 'a meeting between people who, through their roles, relate to each other in a fictional world' (273). While the role-players perform for and to each other, that is, without an audience, the activity contains a sense of the live-ness of performance. This,

and the temporary nature of the activity, with its assumed fictionalised identities, points to the performative nature of the practise.

Knudsen employs Goffman's micro-sociological theories of the presentation of self to pinpoint the performativity of the selves at play in the aesthetics of LARP. She illustrates the complexities of how LARP operates in her discussion of the game 'Vampire Live', providing fascinating detail for those with no prior knowledge of the game. Knudsen considers LARP to be a form of 'theatrical social role-play' and underlines the positive democratic values practised by the players that allow them to 'speak and perform themselves', thus practising a 'horizontal ethics in action' (285).

While the book offers insights into the usage and application of the key terminology across different disciplines by surveying a range of critical standpoints, it is perhaps unavoidable that there is some doubling up of material. This occasionally becomes laborious as the theories of Austin, Goffman and Butler, in particular, are reiterated, in some cases with the repetition of key quotes. On that note, I am not convinced by the necessity of one long quotation that extends over two pages, and on the whole, the essays would have benefited from a more thorough proofreading in order to correct the occasional slippage into 'Euroenglish'. Having said that, the book usefully contains some colour and b/w reproductions of the artworks under discussion, which adds to the reader's comprehension of the works. Overall, 'Performative Realism' charts disparate approaches to a variety of artistic and cultural practices. It combines skilful critical analysis together with compelling case studies of works and practitioners many readers will be unfamiliar with. As a rich source of arts-interdisciplinary work, its incisively challenging commentaries will appeal to postgraduates and researchers engaged in performance theory in diverse fields.

References

McKenzie, Jon. *Perform or Else: From discipline to performance* (London & New York: Routledge, 2001).

Anna Teresa Scheer is co-editor (with Tara Forrest) of *Christoph Schlingensief: Art Without Borders* (Bristol: Intellect, 2010) and is a PhD candidate in Theatre Studies at the University of Melbourne.