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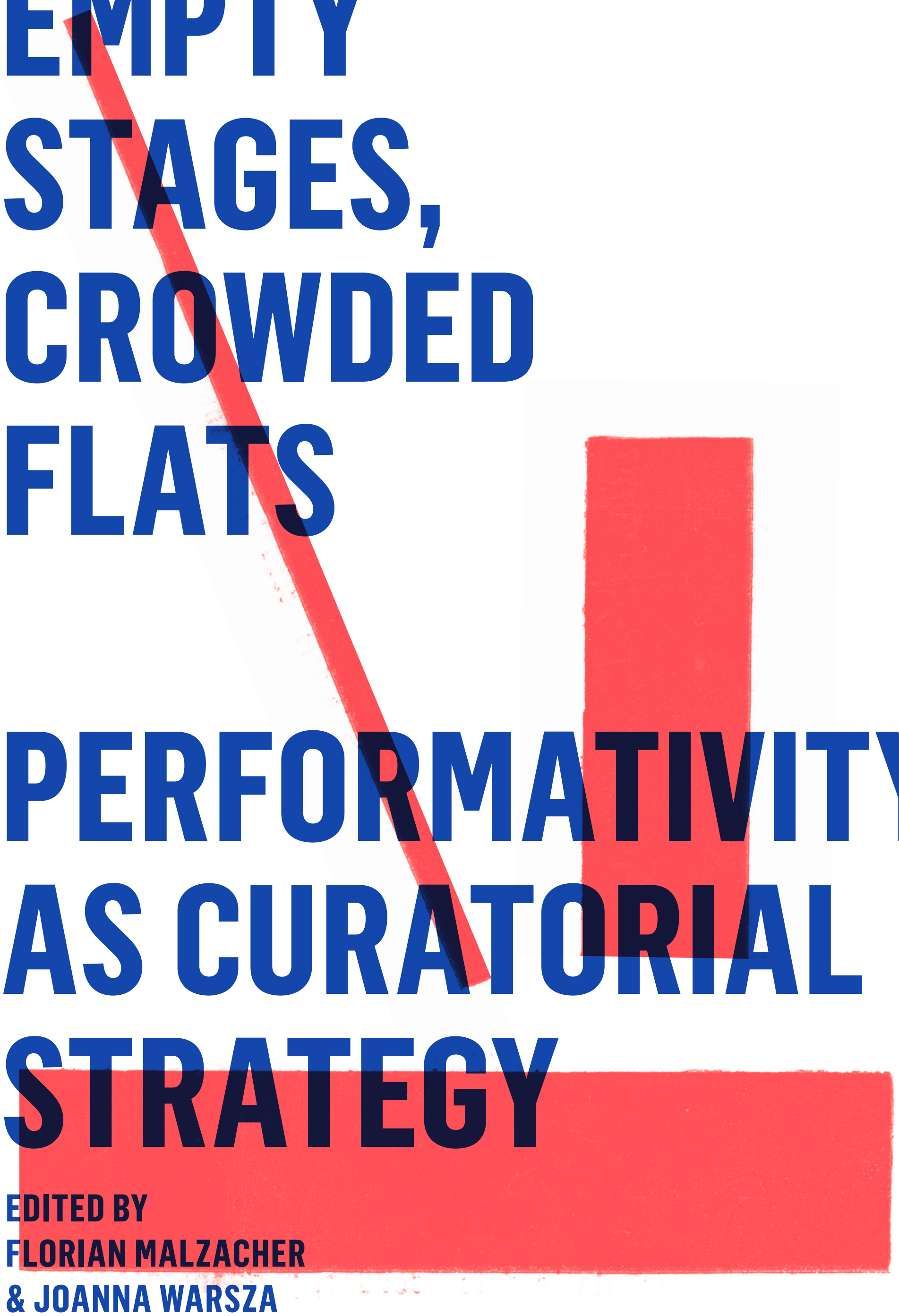

EMPTY STAGES, CROWDED FLATS

PERFORMATIVITY AS CURATORIAL STRATEGY

EDITED BY
FLORIAN MALZACHER
& JOANNA WARSZA

[redacted]

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[redacted]

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Edited by
Florian Malzacher & Joanna Warsza

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Introduction 11

ESSAYS & CONVERSATIONS

Shannon Jackson
Performative Curating Performs 16

Florian Malzacher
Feeling Alive
The Performative Potential of Curating 28

Joanna Warsza in conversation with Catherine Wood
Reinventing the Template 42

CASE STUDIES

Exposing Constellations
Marcia Tucker & James Monte's *Anti-Illusion: Procedures/Materials* (1969)
Beatrice von Bismarck 56

On Performative (Self-)Production
Belgrade Student Cultural Centre's *Oktobar 75* (1975)
Jelena Vesić 62

Through Days and into Nights
Christine Peters' *Portraits* (2000)
Tim Etchells 68

The Borders of Visibility
deufert&plischke's *B-Visible* (2002)
Gerald Siegmund 75

Foreign Strangers
Matthias Lilienthal's *X-Apartments* (2002-)
Lina Majdalanie 80

Too Much, Too Soon
Tor Lindstrand & Mårten Spångberg's
***International Festival* (2004-2010)**
Galerie 86

A Personal Alphabet
Hannah Hurtzig's *Blackmarket of Useful*
***Knowledge and Non-Knowledge* (2004-)**
Karin Harrasser 91

Rehearsing the Political
Joanna Warsza's *Stadium X:*
***A Place that Never Was* (2006-2009)**
Ewa Majewska 97

Curator as Dramaturg
Pierre Bal Blanc's *The Living Currency* (2006-)
Ana Janevski 103

The Curator-Critic
Kjetil Kausland & BIT Teatergarasjen's
***No Más* (2008)**
Knut Ove Arntzen 108

Spectacular Insurgency
Carnival, the Curatorial,
and the Processional (2008-)
Claire Tancons 113

Every Exhibition Needs a Panel Discussion
Boris Charmatz's *expo zéro* (2009-)
Claire Bishop 119

Invading the Medias
Selma & Sofiane Ouissi's *Dream City* (2010-)
Rachida Triki 125

Fear and Love in Graz
steirischer herbst's *Truth Is Concrete* (2012)
Maayan Sheleff 131

Micro-Revolutions on the Periphery
Agata Siwiak's *Wielkopolska: Rewolucje* (2012)
Kasia Tórz 136

Curating as one Dreams
Raimundas Malašauskas' *Oo* (2013)
Vanessa Desclaux 141

Flipping the Table for Curating Colonial Legacy
HAU Hebbel am Ufer's *Return to Sender* (2015)
Nedjma Hadj Benchelabi 146

For a Speculative Policy
Bruno Latour & Nanterre-Amendier's *Le Théâtre des négociations / Make It Work* (2015)
Frédérique Aït-Touati 152

An Exhibition of 60 Minutes
Alexandra Laudo's *An Intellectual History of the Clock* (2016)
Joanna Warsza 158

A Small Step, A Huge Gap
Teatro Maria Matos'
***Marvila Maria Matos* (2016-2021)**
Rui Catalão 163

House on Fire 169
Authors 170

‘You are more than entitled not to know what the word “performative” means. It is a new word and an ugly word, and perhaps it does not mean anything very much. But at any rate there is one thing in its favour, it is not a profound word.’ With these critical lines British philosopher John Austin characterised his own invention in the essay ‘Performative Utterances’ (1979). And it is still true: during its impressive career over the last decades the term developed many parallel, sometimes opposing meanings in the humanities, philosophy, anthropology, arts, and economics. While we even witnessed in recent years a ‘performative turn’ that built up the influential discourse, it at the same time became overused, misused, and abused.

When we propose to apply the notion of the performative in the context of curating it is with the hope that its very openness unfolds a potential that so far has been mostly neglected. On the one hand we follow Austin’s and Judith Butler’s belief in the performative capacity to transform reality with words and other cultural utterances — in short, performativity as ‘reality-making’. Maria Lind referred loosely to this concept when she introduced the term ‘performative curating’ relating ‘to a pragmatic interest in the means and conditions of production’, as she says in ‘Going Beyond Display’ (2011).

This book also emphasises the often dismissed, colloquial, and yet more frequently applied notion of the performative to describe something that is related to the live arts, something being ‘performance’ or ‘theatre-like’. Not dividing these two strands but rather considering them as interdependent agents opens up a whole range of possibilities. Therefore we claim that using the notion of performative in curating can mean: adapting ‘theatre-like’ strategies and techniques to enable ‘reality-making’ situations.

Empty Stages, Crowded Flats: Performativity as Curatorial Strategy investigates a whole array of situations from choreographed exhibitions, immaterial museums, theatres of negotiation, and discursive marathons, to street carnivals and subversive public-art projects and inquires how curating itself has become staged, dramatised, choreographed, or composed. The opening essay by Shannon Jackson offers a detailed overview of the understandings and misunderstandings of the term performative, and how it can be situated within the concept of curating. Florian Malzacher then outlines how curatorial thinking and performative strategies can be combined, drawing on several examples from its practitioners. Tate Modern curator Catherine Wood, in a conversation with Joanna Warsza, describes her own approach of integrating live arts into the context of a museum which is set to present only objects — and how this becomes a performative challenge to the institution.

The second part of the book assembles 20 case studies mapping a field of the possibilities of performative curating, following the practices of both artists and curators in the words of their fellow colleagues. Marcia Tucker's and James Monte's *Anti-Illusion: Procedures/Materials* from 1969, described by Beatrice von Bismarck, is an early example of maintaining an exihibition, which, for its duration, was in progress and subject to change. Jelena Vesić's portraits *Oktobar 75* at the Belgrade Student Cultural Centre in Yugoslavia, as a participatory endeavour of the community cultural workers — artists, critics, curators, and friends — gathered around the gallery, was based on the gestures of not-showing and non-representationalist exhibiting. Such negotiations between performing and visual arts continue with curatorial projects like the theatrical exhibition *The Living Currency* by Pierre Bal Blanc (penned by Ana Janevski), Raimundas Malašauskas' *Oo* (described by Vanessa Desclaux), as well as the Musée de la Danse and its *éxpo zero*, devised by choreographer Boris Charmatz and, as Claire Bishop shows, as an exhibition without any sculptures, installations, or videos.

A number of case studies go back to the early 2000s, which, in retrospect, was a moment when the fields of theatre and dance started to become interested in a more considerate, more pronounced approach to curating, and to an understanding that programming performances, theatre works, dance pieces, or music can be more than just selecting or producing shows and instead emphasising larger contexts and the interaction between the different works as well as with the audience. Examples of this turn are Christine Peters' series of *Portraits* (described by participating artist Tim

Etchells) that commissioned theatre makers to present their own work and to contextualise it by inviting additional guests, or Matthias Lilienthal's *X-Apartments*, the Beirut iteration of which is introduced by Lina Majdalanie. Comparable context-specific approaches are part of Joanna Warsza's *Stadium X*, which used a derelict soccer stadium and its surrounding market for rehearsing the political, as formulated by Ewa Majewska; or *Marvila Maria Matos,* created by the Lisbon theatre with the same name, that focused on work with its direct neighbourhood as witnessed by Rui Catalão.

Using the public sphere as stage, content and context is also the aim of the Tunisian Festival *Dream City*, curated by Selma and Sofiane Ouissi and depicted here by Rachida Triki, as well as Agata Siwiak's *Wielkopolska: Rewolucje*, the only example of a project in the book that purposely leaves the city and addresses the Polish province, in the words of Kasia Tórz. Claire Tancons' practice is rooted in the tradition of the carnavalesque and how it informs her curatorial projects, which themselves often become carnival-like exhibitions. A different kind of mass event is analysed by Knut Ove Arntzen, who looks at Kjetil Kausland & BIT Teatergarasjen's *No Más.* Here the black box became the site for a Mixed Martial Arts showdown between the artist and a professional fighter, which created high level political discussions about the borders of art and curation in Norway.

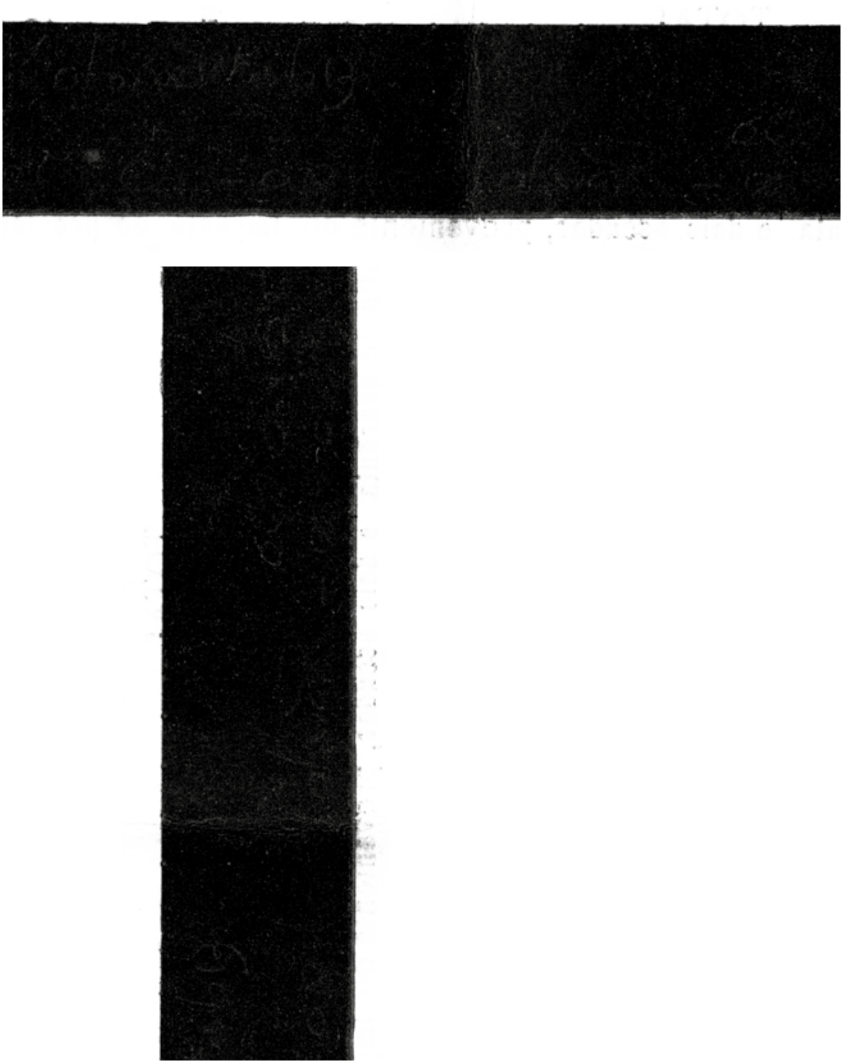
Understanding art not *in*, but *as* public space — to use a distinction by art theorist Miwon Kwon — might be one of the most important contributions of a performative curating that puts its focus on creation of a (temporary) community and spaces of mediation. *Théâtre des Négociations* was a political, diplomatic, scientific, and artistic experiment described by Frédérique Aït-Touati, initiated by Bruno Latour, where some 200 students from all over the world simulated an international conference on climate change. Maayan Sheleff portraits how *Truth is Concrete* at steirischer herbst festival invited hundreds of artists, activists, and theorists as well as a broad audience to discuss and rehearse the relation between art and politics in a seven-day around the clock marathon of 170 hours. Nedjma Hadj Benchelabi writes how HAU Hebbel am Ufer, in its programme *Return to Sender,* investigated the colonial legacy from an African perspective through a system of delegated curatorship.

Hannah Hurtzig's way of creating a discursive public sphere has been developed over many years by her performative installation *Blackmarket of Useful Knowledge and Non-Knowledge*, one of the most influential artistic knowledge platforms, introduced here by Karin Harrasser. *Blackmarket*, together with other projects, are both curatorial and artistic works at the same time. Artists that not only curate but also see their curation clearly as a performance are also deufert&plischke, whose *B-Visible* presented at Kunstencentrum Vooruit is pictured here by Gerald Sigmund as a project that pushed the notion of queerness and played with the functions of time and space. While Tor Lindstrand & Mårten Spångberg's *International Festival* (portrayed here by Galerie, an art project itself) can be seen as one of the few works of institutional critique in the field of theatre and dance, Alexandra Laudo's *An Intellectual History of the Clock* (described by Joanna Warsza) is an exhibition in a form of a narrated lecture performance referencing other works without showing any of them.

Obviously this list is subjective and incomplete, lacking some famous examples like *Il Tempo del Postino* curated by Hans Ulrich Obrist and Philippe Parreno, proclaimed as 'The World's First Visual Arts Opera' presenting in 2007 time-based art on the theatre stage. Or the use of curatorial strategies in performances by Tino Sehgal or recently by Danish choreographer Mette Ingvartsen, as they are mentioned in some of the essays in this book. And most of all, we also lack an essay devoted solely to the patron of the genre, Harald Szeemann, as much as his spirit can be felt in several texts. Even before knowing the term curator, he actually used to say that his exhibitions were staged. In this regard we consider ourselves in line with his thinking when we propose that the field of performing arts has more to offer to the field of curation — both in its form and its content — than one might think. *Empty Stages, Crowded Flats* hopes to encourage the practice but also the thinking about these possibilities.

SHANNON JACKSON

PERFORMATIVE CURATING PERFORMS



How do we know when curating is performative? Does it happen when one is curating a performing artist? Does it mean that the act of curation is itself performative, regardless of the nature of the artwork? Are some types of curating performative and some not? While I do not want to ignore this tangle of questions, I do want to take another philosophical tack to chart our way through them. Let's first consider the philosophical history of the term performative, focusing especially on what the concept implies about the receiver that any curator is trying to address. As it turns out, the receiver's role — the role of the figure we might variously call the audience, the beholder, the visitor, the interlocutor, the participant, or the spectator — is fundamental to understanding the uses of the term performative. Indeed, the reception by the audience is key to constituting any artwork, action, speech, or curation as 'performative' in its power.

The term performative comes from a longer tradition of speech act theory that explores the world-making power of language. In this school, language is understood not simply to describe the world but to constitute it. Speech shapes our perception and also alters the conditions in which we live, structuring how we think about ourselves, about our relationships, and about our environment. The title of J. L. Austin's formative book, *How to Do Things with Words* (1962), enacts the philosophy it describes. Language is not simply descriptive or representative of a prior reality; language has active power to make the reality to which it refers. As a term that arose within this strain of Western philosophy, theories of performativity also coincided with a Western history of post-Second World War art practice, one that was itself preoccupied with philosophical and political questions of subjectivity, action, and autonomy. Arguably, this historical link explains, at least in part, the ubiquitous use of the word 'performative' in modern and contemporary art parlance. It coincided with the use of a string of associated terms — action, happening, event, experience, engagement, interaction — that artists, critics, and curators used to come to terms with heteronomous experiment. For some Modernist art critics, such as

Clement Greenberg or Michael Fried, such Minimialist and post-Minimalist work risked a compromising 'theatricality' that was the 'enemy' of art. For others, such as Harold Rosenberg or Allan Kaprow, such work presaged an increasing turn to 'action' in the world of art. Like other forms of linguistic action, such art works sought specifically to do something, to bring a world into being through its action. But, as Dorothea von Hantelmann has argued in 'The Experiential Turn' (2014), a deeper understanding of speech act theory would suggest that all artwork is performative. 'It makes little sense to speak of a performative artwork,' she says, 'because every artwork has a reality-producing dimension.' Indeed, in the long history of aesthetics, scholars have debated the question but have largely concluded that representational acts of art are always reality-producing actions, contingent upon their conditions of production. Interestingly, it is precisely at this point that the position of the receiver comes in to advance and consolidate this process. As J. L. Austin would argue, the reality-making capacity of the performative happens in the moment of a receiver's 'uptake.' A world is made in that exchange. Moreover, that exchange is made whether the work self-consciously understands itself to be performative or not.

Of course, the language of performativity circulates ubiquitously without necessarily acknowledging this deeper philosophical history — or the redundancy of its application. As a critic, one can decide to be annoyed by the imprecision, or one can decide instead to read this use symptomatically. Let's try out the latter. Questions of philosophical integrity aside, what explains the ubiquitous use of this p-word as the century turned from the twentieth to the twenty-first? Indeed, much recent conversation about 'the performative' in contemporary art came about not so much to recall action painting or to embrace Minimalism's 'theatricality' or to descsribe performance curating, but to come to terms with more recent 'relational' art practices. Many contemporary artists have been creating extended events of social encounter under a variety of newer labels, and each of the terms — social practice, community engagement, participatory art, relational aesthetics — has a different resonance and different stakes. A number of artists tend to serve as indexes of more recent experimentation — including Felix Gonzalez-Torres with his 'stacks' and 'spills', Rirkrit Tiravanija with his cooking installations, Santiago Sierra with his disturbing installations of unemployed humans in the gallery, and many more. The phrase 'relational aesthetics' is often credited to the French curator Nicolas Bourriaud, who used the term to describe a variety of work in which 'intersubjectivity' functioned as the 'material substrate' of the art event. That is, rather than paint, clay, wire, metal, or canvas, the 'material' of the art object becomes the relational exchange that it provokes. As I have argued at length elsewhere, the 'new' turns of these participatory forms can certainly be found in earlier work and in a variety of mediums.

In order to frame a deeper connection between speech act theory and contemporary art, let's try focusing on a particular work. The performative task of curating relational work comes to the fore quite precisely in the practice of Tino Sehgal, an artist who tellingly has rejected the word performance to describe his work, but not the word performative. Consider how the curatorial paramters of a piece like *This objective of that object* (2004) differently refracts these philosophical puzzles. Sehgal's objectless pieces have received worldwide attention, in part because they actively resist the structures of both visual and performing art. Trained in economics and dance, he seeks to make work that uses no natural resources and leaves no material imprint. Previous pieces have drawn on experimental choreography, distinctive in part because he forbids documentation or any reproduction that could substitute for the live event. *This objective of that object* shares company with a number of pieces that make use of a game-like structure, including *This Situation*, acquired by New York's Museum of Modern Art, and *This Progress*, originally sited at the Institute of Contemporary Arts in London and remounted at the Guggenheim Museum in New York to bemused renown. Arguably, its structures can be found in expanded form in recent larger-scale projects at the Gropiusbau Berlin and the Palais de Tokyo in Paris.

This objective of that object is composed of five interpreters who form a loose circle around gallery visitors with their backs turned. The interpreters breathe softly, and then each successively begins to whisper, 'The objective of this work is to become the object of discussion.' As noted in the relatively spare acquisition documents of the Walker Art Center, these interpreters repeat the phrase, 'in expectation of the visitor's response.' If there is none, the interpreters will gradually lower their voices and, after pauses and moments of silence, sink to the floor, apparently undone by the fact that their performative utterance has not produced a felicitous uptake. If, however, a visitor does offer a response, the interpreters actively celebrate the apparent 'happiness' of the performative encounter. There may or may not be a self-conscious exchange between a visitor and an interpreter. Either way, the interpreters may decide at any moment to initiate a circular dance, to speak a series of phrases, and then to exit the room, often leaving one remaining interpreter behind to sustain a conversation with the visitor. As in other works by Sehgal, the interpreter may finish by reminding the visitor of the name of the artist, the name of the work, and the year it was made, both parodying and reinforcing visual art conventions of attributing artistic authorship.

If much contemporary relational art has called upon the receiver to avow her role in the constitution of the art object, then this piece isolates that directive in its skeletal structure. The piece is an encounter about encounter. Because it self-consciously uses text and language as art materials, the Sehgal piece also more explicitly returns our discussion of the performative to the exchange of speech. How, after Austin, is this piece doing things with words? The 'objective' is the intention of an utterance as well as the intent of the work. Reciprocally self-constituting, the work is itself the 'discussion' that it seeks to produce; if felicitous, that exchange will be both the form and the content of the work. To continue the Austinian frame, the utterance of the work is 'happy' when the 'object' of the discussion becomes the discussion itself. Meanwhile, the work has less than satisfying mechanisms for contending with a lack of uptake; interpreters sink to the floor until the process can start again. But the aspiration is also to induce awareness in receivers of their own role in producing the outcome. Importantly, that sense of a receiver's embeddedness comes within a structure that is simultaneously the work's theme. It is an exchange about exchange whose misfires are about misfiring. There is a kind of recursive quality to Seghal's work — one that in turn produces recursive sentences from critics like me who are trying to come to terms with it. However, we can also interpret this recursive structure as a kind of perpetual self-curation. Seghal's artistic parameters are also curatorial parameters; by embedding the game of its own curation within the medium of the work, he creates a self-conscious awareness amongst interpreters and receivers of their own tacit, diffuse, and ongoing curatorial role. Even if all curation is performative, Seghal makes its recursive processes available for reflection.

It might be exactly that sense of recursion that explains the interest of so many critical theorists and contemorary art curators in Sehgal's work. Earlier I noted that interest in the mid-century reflections of speech act theorists resurged as the twentieth century wore on. The recent revision of performativity theory was thus part of a broader effort to understand the complexities of subject formation, a project that questioned the assumption that self-making was essentially a voluntary operation, regulated only by the exercise of internal will. More recent thinkers as varied as Michel Foucault, Jacques Derrida, Judith Butler, and many others began to excavate a history of critical philosophy to mount alternative conceptions, frames that took seriously the degree to which social 'circumstances' in fact produce our internal perception of a voluntary will, often with particular ideological effects. It was in such a context that the notion of the 'performative' was revived, this time to tease out the implications of the constitutive power of language that J. L. Austin himself might not have pursued. Indeed, for many recent theorists, it is most important to consider the degree to which the primary 'doing' of the performative is the ideological constitution of the doer herself.

It is at this point that one begins to understand the political stakes of performative doing. To ground this political, philosophical, and aesthetic complexity, let us look at one famous philosophical example that dramatised recursion — and, incidentally, served as a resource for Bourriaud's relational aesthetics. Louis Althusser's 'Ideology and Ideological State Apparatuses' (1970) is a key text in this conversation, particularly for his vocabulary of 'hailing' and 'interpellation' and for the example he used to describe how we participate in our own ideological formation:

> That very precise operation which I have called interpellation or hailing [...] can be imagined along the lines of the most commonplace everyday police (or other) hailing: 'Hey, you there!' Assuming that the theoretical scene I have imagined takes place in the street, the hailed individual will turn round. By this mere one hundred and eighty degree physical conversion, he comes a subject. Why? Because he has

> recognized that the hail was 'really' addressed to him, and that 'it was really him who was hailed' (and not someone else). Experience shows that the practical telecommunication of hailings is such that they hardly ever miss their man: verbal call or whistle, the one hailed always recognizes that it is really him who is being hailed.

Althusser's teachable example proved fruitful for many subsequent conversations in critical theory. It temporarily anthropomorphised 'ideology' as a cop whose performative utterance sought an addressee; moreover, it was by physically and psychically allowing ourselves to be addressed that ideology did its work. That famous 'turn' was a form of uptake that ensured the felicitousness of ideology's performative reach. Moreover, Althusser was keen to note that the process of address and uptake had a temporal coincidence:

> Naturally for the convenience and clarity of my little theoretical theatre I have had to present things in the form of a sequence, with a before and an after, and thus in the form of a temporal succession. [...] But in reality these things happen without any succession. The existence of ideology and the hailing or interpellation of individuals as subjects are one and the same thing.

Althusser thus posited interpellation of subjects by ideology as itself a recursive process, as 'one and the same thing.' Joining an Austinian language with an Althusserian one, Judith Butler would, in 'Subjection, Resistance, Resignification: Between Freud and Foucault'(1997), attempt to tease out a degree of variability in the process of hailing:

> As Althusser himself insists, this performative effort of naming can only attempt to bring its addressee into being; there is always the risk of a certain misrecognition. If one misrecognizes that effort to produce the subject, the production itself falters. The one who is hailed may fail to hear, misread the call, turn the other way, answer to another name, insist on not being addressed that way.

At the same time, if misfire or misrecognition is possible, it still occurs within a recursive structure that both constrains and enables the subjects it made.

It is no coincidence that some bloggers, curators, and other commentators have used the language of Althusser's 'hailings' to describe the exchanges at work in Sehgal's pieces. Since Sehgal is concerned with exposing the ideological nature of subject formation within museum institutions, we could say that *This objective of that object* is an interpellation about interpellation, a hailing about hailing. Indeed, the curatorial choreography of the piece seems to invoke but revise the choreography of Althusser's 'theoretical theatre.' In Seghal's piece, in fact, the addresser's back is turned while the addressee reckons with being hailed by the piece. Any 'comment' is registered as a felicitous 'recruitment,' prompting the addresser to instantiate its success by making her own 180-degree turn. Moreover, the piece seems to hail participants whether or not they fully intend to be recruited. In Von Hantelmann's accounts of the enactment of this piece, its structure accommodates a wide range of responses, even turning ringing 'cell phones' or discreet 'comments in a foreign language' into a felicitous uptaking. Visitors thus find themselves 'hailed' despite themselves, reckoning with the process of recruitment. It is thus perhaps no wonder that accounts of Sehgal's pieces include so many critics' chronicles of their own process of reception. We find critics using the first person more often in their accounts, as the evaluation of the work coincides with a highly personal process of exchange. (I have my own story, one that involves the effects of bringing my children to *This Situation* in Paris and watching how their presence unsettled the commentary of the players until one found a way to interpellate my son into the piece). We also find critics trying to push the structure of the work to test its hailing capacities. When he participated in *This Progress* at the Guggenheim Museum in 2010, a 'theoretical theatre' that included structured conversations with child players, the critic Jerry Saltz was not sufficiently attentive to its discursive conventions. The result was that his child interlocutor burst into tears, prompting Saltz to write an account titled 'How I Made an Artwork Cry.'

As noted above, the match between this work by Seghal and the concept of performative curating is easier to surface, in part because lingustic interaction is its primary material. We could imagine adapting the arguments above to address different uses of curated speech, in say, Hannah Hurtzig's structured forms of knowledge exchange in *Blackmarket* (2004-). Moreover, the political stakes of ideological hailing — and counter-hailing — helps us understand the structures and effects of ambitious experiments in curation, including Hebbel am Ufer's, *Return to Sender* (2015), Joanna Warsza's *Stadium X* (2006-09), or Teatro Maria Matos's current efforts to curate the city in ways that provoked counter-ideological 'turns.'

Before concluding, however, I think that it is important to return to my opening gambit and acknowledge that the concept of 'performative curating' is relevant for some, not necessarily for its links to speech act theory, but more to describe the practice of curating performance. Indeed, this collection appears after a renewed interest in curating performance in museums, galleries, and biennials. And it also coincides with a newer interest amongst theatre directors and performance presenters in adopting the language of 'curation' to describe their practices. Between artistic leadership positions at the HAU and in Munich, Matthias Lilienthal adopted the language of curation to experiment with the alternate 'formats' of *X-Appartments*. And as co-editor Florian Malzacher has noted, curation now describes acts that used to be the function of the theatre producer or presenter who 'booked' a season or a festival. As a result, the languages and practices usually associated either with the visual arts or with the performing arts find themselves curiously mixed.

So what happens when we take questions of performative curation back to this burgeoning practice of performance curation? First off, we will hear objections from the likes of Tino Seghal who quite actively refuses the language of theatre and performance to describe his structures, using terms like interpreter or player to refer to the interlocutors he hires. At the same time, he is perceived as challenging the conventions of a visual art world motored by the creation and purchase of material objects. As Rebecca Schneider has argued in *Performing Remains: Art and War in Times of Theatrical Reenactment* (2011), whether he welcomes it or not, these pieces seem to accrue a good deal of 'medial panic' as artists, critics, and curators debate different frames of legitimation and delegitimation. But 'medial panic' also engenders new senses of medial productivity, if sometimes to provoke renewed reflection about what performance is. Sometimes, performativity is used to describe work that partakes of performance but that reworks the conventions of the performing arts. Philippe Parreno's 'set designs' for *The Bride and the Bachelors* (2013) also offered a dynamic curatorial platform in which to house a meeting of artistic cross-pollination (from Duchamp to Rauschenberg to Cage to Cunningham). Meanwhile, his self-transposition (along with Hans-Ulrich Obrist) into the role of Manchester International Festival curator de-familiarised the medium-specific nature of curation itself. As we consider a range of work collected in this book, we find ourselves constantly asking how we know ourselves to be in the presence of performance curation. The works presented might incorporate a body, exist in time, or perhaps ask their visitors to do something. But what is their medium? Their genre? They might be choreographed but are not quite 'dance.' They are theatre-like but not theatre. Some artists gathered in this collection position their work as a break from or revision of a performing arts tradition — Boris Charmatz revises 'dance,' Matthias Lilenthal rejects 'theatre' in favour of new 'formats' — whereas other artists do not particularly worry about their relation to those traditions.

Indeed, when one looks at the exciting work featured in this book, one might ask whether we could find one descriptive term to unify this gathering. Some might call such works 'performance art', and yet others would be unsure about the use of such a term, especially if the piece lacks the chocolate (of Karen Finley), the scissors (of Yoko Ono), the loaded gun (of Marina Abramović), or the oozing blood (of Ron Athey) that would confirm its place in the increasingly canonical history of that genre.

In the face of critical confusion, the term 'performative' comes in to save the day. It seems to provide an umbrella to cluster recent cross-disciplinary work in time, in space, with bodies, in relational encounters — even if the term does this work without saying anything particularly precise. Let me call this phenomenon the intermedial use of the performative vocabulary. It is a use that foregrounds the sometimes productive, sometimes uncomfortable, relation between the performing arts and the visual arts. And in fact, that discomfort and productivity brings us back to the role of the receiver in navigating this intermedial interplay. Depending on what art form they understand the work to be challenging, our reception will take different forms and make different judgments. Our responses gauge a work's closeness to and distance from sculpture, to dance, to theatre, to film, to painting, or to other mediums. Tim Etchells contribution to Christine Peters' *Portraits* series will be differently encountered if they are curated as revisions of 'theatre' or as a revision of 'portrait painting.' Tacita Dean's contribution to 'Il Tempo del Postino' placed an aging Merce Cunningham in a seat for four minutes and 22 seconds; the performativity of this durational piece would be differently understood if a receiver read Cunningham's body as a sentient sculpture than if she read it as a dancer stopped in time. The difference would affect how it hailed her, and how it hailed you. Indeed, such intermedial calibrations will affect whether the receiver calls herself a beholder, an audience member, a spectator, a viewer, a visitor, or a participant. The imprecision of 'performative work' in terms of medium thus gets tested most urgently in the encounter with someone who is deciding what kind of receiver she wants to be.

Finally, the lingustistic actions and intermedial puzzles of contemporary art create new performative realities (and new performative problems) for curators who try to activate them and for receivers trying to make sense of them. As we have also seen thus far, the relational exchange among participants will certainly have different stakes depending upon how receivers understand the regional politics and perceptual parameters of the situation in which an encounter occurs. But it also seems important to explore the possibility of recursion and reciprocity happening in more than one direction. A museum context does something to these intermedial works, but these works also do something back to the museum. And when the same works transition to a theatre context, more reciprocal institutional transformations occur. These works require new presenting and curatorial apparatuses — across museums, theatres, cities, and biennials; they ask the institution to make new kinds of promises. To curate performance means caring for the bodies and communities it gathers — in green rooms and hotel rooms, on sprung floors, and with access to food and water. As we explore the works in this collection, it is exciting and intriguing to see whether and how intermedial panic can be turned into institutional transformation. The performativity of art will, in the end, perpetually transform the curators who care for it, who activate it, and who release it to new field of happy and unhappy uptakes.

FLORIAN MALZACHER

FEELING ALIVE

[redacted]

[redacted]

THE PERFORMATIVE POTENTIAL OF CURATING

The concept of curating has arrived in the field of performing arts, and with it the understanding that programming performances, theatre works, dance pieces, or music can be more than just selecting or producing shows and then inserting them into a time slot and space. There is a necessity of putting works into larger contexts, to have them interact with each other and the world that informs them. And there is a possibility of creating a collective experience not only within the performance itself, but rather turning a programme, festival, event, or venue into a larger field of communication and communing.

Even though concepts of curating within the field of visual arts are clearly more elaborated than within the performing arts, the relation between them has always been more reciprocal than is often acknowledged. After all it is no coincidence that Harald Szeemann, in many ways the prototype of a contemporary curator, compared his work to that of a theatre director, and that art theorist Beatrice von Bismarck emphasises the propinquity of an exhibition-maker's task to that of a dramaturg.

But taking Szeemann's idea of staging exhibitions seriously takes us even further. It raises the question of how curation not only generally borrows (and often without any awareness) the tools of theatre, performance, and choreography but rather how it could gain even more from these practices by consciously integrating their very strategies and techniques, and by understanding curation itself as performative.

Performing the Performative

The impressive (and sometimes exaggerated) career of the concept of the performative began with J. L. Austin's 'speech acts', introduced in his set of lectures 'How to Do Things with Words' (1955). As a precursor to the idea of performativity it described verbal utterances that exercise the transformative capacity of an act that constitutes or changes reality. The mainly linguistic discourse that followed Austin was, in the early 1990s, the base for Judith Butler's radical interpretation of gender as something that is performed and constructed via speech or physical action: reality as a social construction coming to existence by permanently repeating and quoting. Performativity for Butler is, as described in Bodies that Matter (1993), ‘that reiterative power of discourse to produce the phenomena that it regulates and constrains.’

While definitions of performativity are numerous, often contradictory, and regularly rather vague, most are connected to a constructivist belief that there are no fixed concepts of objectivity, reality, or truth, and that everything is constructed individually, influenced by context and interaction.

Influential impulses in theatre and performance studies came next to the linguist arguments from ethnographical and anthropological discourses: the term ‘cultural performance’ was introduced in 1959 by ethnologist Milton Singer’s book *Traditional India: Structure and Change.* Singer believed that in many cultures performances, like dances, theatre, and rituals (defined by having a dramaturgy, a division between performer and audience, a framed time, a specific reason and place etc.) enable people to reassure themselves of their traditions and identities. Anthropologist Victor Turner continued to develop the concept of cultural performance, which was picked up by theatre makers and theorists like Richard Schechner, who collaborated with Turner, applied his discoveries to theatre, and pushed them further. As different as all these concepts of the performative are they all emphasise in one way or the other its ‘reality-making capacity’, as Shannon Jackson puts it in this book.

Yet there is another strand of the use of the word ‘performative’ — equally vague and additionally rather colloquial. It describes, again in Jackson’s words, art works that are ‘theatre-like but not theatre’, mainly to ‘provide an umbrella to cluster recent cross-disciplinary work in time, in space, with bodies, in relational encounters.’ Jackson calls this the ‘intermedial use of the performative vocabulary’ that often ‘foregrounds the sometimes productive, sometimes uncomfortable, relation between the performing arts and the visual arts.’

Keeping Szeemann in mind, it is this very notion of ‘theatre-like but not theatre’ that despite often being dismissed as too literal, opens up a whole range of possibilities when applied to the processes and products of curating: how can the understanding of dramaturgy, time management, narration, process, use of space, the co-presence of the audience, role play etc. — many of which were already important for Singer's definition of 'cultural performance' — inform curatorial work?

To my belief the curatorial potential of the performative does not lie in dividing these two strands but rather in thinking about them together as different aspects of the same approach: adapting 'theatre-like' strategies and techniques enables the curation of 'reality making' situations that not only describe reality but create an awareness of their own realness. By putting the focus less on the product or the result (as Austin's speech act still does) but on its own becoming, performative curating highlights liveness, the co-presence of all participants, the (temporary) community — all this being core aspects of most definitions of theatre and performance.

From the point of view of curatorial praxis, it is at least an unnecessary limitation to separate the more linguistic, anthropological, or philosophical ('reality-making') concepts of the performative from its rather literal 'theatre-like' use. In difference to Dorothea von Hantelmann who in 'The Experimental Turn' (2014) dismisses the latter definition as a mere 'misunderstanding', I would insist on the connection to the tools of live arts. Not only because Austin, Singer, Turner, and Butler themselves clearly referenced theatre in their writings, but because in turn their discourse was referenced again by theatre and performance makers and changed the artistic practice. One could say that by performing the performative a new reality of performative performances was created.

Theatre has always been a social and a self-reflexive art form, as much as conventional approaches have been trying to neglect it. Theatre is a paradoxical machine that allows us to observe ourselves while being part of the performance. It does not create an artificial outside of pure criticality but neither is it able to lure in mere immersive identification (even though it sometimes tries). Theatre marks a space where things are real and not real at the same time, it creates situations and practices that are symbolic and actual at once. A curatorial thinking that makes conscious use of this knowledge underlines its own relational aspects and highlights social and political implications — it creates spaces of negotiation (as several examples in this book clearly show).

The proximity to theatre can also be seen in concepts of the curatorial itself, for example, when art theorist Irit Rogoff in conversation with Beatrice von Bismarck in *Cultures of the Curatorial* (2012) poses the question of 'how to instantiate [the curatorial] as a process, how to actually not allow things to harden, and how to create a public platform that allows people to take part in these processes'. The curatorial is a 'dynamic field' (Bismarck) of liveness, transformation, and ephemerality.

This very fear — that the work may seem too complete, too much like a finished product – is an integral part of all live arts, where the permanent possibility of failure, chance, mistakes, and loss of control are not seen as unavoidable flaws, but rather as the core of the medium. Instead of ignoring these obstacles, embracing them may be seen as a key curatorial strategy for creating a tension that emphasises the very aliveness that is inherent even in the most conventional repertory theatre, dance company, or music ensemble. Expanding, shortening, interrupting, or varying time (thus navigating the physical or mental strength, exhaustion, boredom, or enthusiasm of the collective body of the visitors) can create such an awareness, as well as creating specific densities of spatial complexities. Inventing specific dramaturgies or playing with the potential and limitations of narration or scores is another option, along with confronting works that might not be compatible at first sight, in order to create both tension and openness through their friction. The list can be extended and the possibilities are vast. The many concrete examples in this book — developed by curators as well as artists, dramaturgs, and activists — reveal how much understanding the curatorial as performative means by putting a focus on the here and now. At best it creates a temporary reality — particular but porous — that connects to many other realities, thus enabling art works to be experienced not as autonomous entities, but well within their own rights, their own lives, and in relation to others.

Empty stages, crowded flats

Theatre still is mostly bound to certain spaces reserved exclusively for its practice: proscenium stages and black boxes. But even in the most conventional settings an awareness of the specificity of the space can produce artistic or curatorial added value. How does the audience enter the space? When does the performance actually begin? At the entrance to the theatre? In the foyer, in the auditorium? What difference does it make when I have to enter a different way than usual? Is that part of the performance or mere pragmatics? What are the rules of the theatrical contract in that case?

Even conventional theatre spaces are not neutral. On one hand they provide the necessary technical equipment, protect the work from unwanted encounters with the surroundings, enable concentration, protect artistic clarity, and so on. On the other hand the spaces themselves already largely define the possible outcome. Not only are they limited in terms of architecture and possible spatial arrangements, they also represent a certain idea of the institution as it was mainly formed in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries. Their inherent structures not only reproduce certain conventions of what theatre was and is supposed to be, but also a certain image of society. They frame and often tame artistic as well as political visions. It is therefore no surprise that many curatorial projects in the field of theatre either leave these predetermined spaces behind or try to challenge them (as the choreographers deufert&plischke together with dramaturg Jeroen Peeters did with their project *B-Visible*, as described in this volume).

The hype around site-specific works, mainly from the mid-1990s on, brought a special focus on space by leaving theatres and occupying supposedly non-artistic spaces, seeking something authentic or to contradict the seemingly authentic. This move into the city (and very often to the outskirts of the city, to empty industrial areas, half-ruined factories, and vast storage places) is closely linked to the desire for the real behind all strands of so-called documentary theatre, which only a few years later became so extremely popular. But it also fits into the logic of gentrification, at least symbolically occupying spaces that were reserved for others.

Using the designated areas of theatre against the grain — as deufert&plischke did — or even abandoning them completely not only challenges the institution but the artistic work itself, by showing both the limitations and the possibilities of the genre as such. Working conditions become messy or even tough, chance and contingency may take over, the audience may have to be organised differently, and technical possibilities may be limited. Site-specific work cannot just transfer the logic of a theatre venue into another spatial situation. It needs to be more than a mere reaction to the situation, a pragmatic response that deals with the disadvantages or adapts initial plans only as much as neces-