



**Luzar, R. (2020) 'Performative problems', *Drawing: Research, Theory, Practice*, 5 (1), pp. 29-41.**

Official URL: [https://doi.org/10.1386/drtp\\_00018\\_1](https://doi.org/10.1386/drtp_00018_1)

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### ***Performative Problems***

This article investigates the 'performative' and how this concept is used in drawing today, particularly in using writing, performance and choreography to address relations between self and other as a gender. The investigation starts with the question 'Who is it that draws and also writes?' From this a notion of the performative is investigated further in terms of how gender identities are claimed to be produced (Butler). This deals with deeper questions about who and what kind of subject engages in the drawing, writing and production of gender. The aim is to investigate an underlying problem that deals with where this gendered subject sits within global-market contexts of art and culture, where value is placed on doing, subjectivity, and bodily action... when in fact these same relations produce pseudo-activity, alienation and abstraction; as Kunst (2015) asks, what does 'performative' mean today when art and capitalism are so closely related? The article concludes with comments about the role of the body in contradictory spaces, where relations between artists and spectators deal with a notion of 'withdrawing' and 'doing less'.

Key words: performative, inscription, body, gender, subjectivity, doing less, withdrawing.

Luzar, Robert (2020), 'Performative Problems', *Drawing: Research, Theory, Practice*, 5:1, pp. 29-41, doi: [https://doi.org/10.1386/dntp\\_00018\\_1](https://doi.org/10.1386/dntp_00018_1)

Who is it that draws and also writes? This is the basic question that I wish to open with and come back to throughout this article. The question deals with a certain complication of subjectivity, or what I will call a *performative problem*. The problem is basically this: that whilst writing and drawing – and one might say writing-as-drawing or ‘inscription’ – it is never merely the individual as ‘I’, purely me or you, that is doing this; instead, as Hélène Cixous confides, whilst inscribing it is as if ‘I obey [some] strange and foreign voice in my body’ (2005: 18). Strange as this may seem there is a complication as to who is *doing* this, who is ‘performatively’ doing not only the writing but, in so-called mark-making, drawing too. The aim of this article is to investigate who – and more philosophically what – seems to be inscribing in ways said to be ‘performative’. Here the performative has to basically do with *doing*, and more particularly doing writing-as-drawing and vice versa. To understand what the performative means with reference to subjectivity I will look at cultural and philosophical contexts around gender. As I will show, gender is important in understanding how someone becomes a subject, a kind of identity that is amenable to changes in relating self and other in meaningful ways. By the end of the article I will raise some critical comments on a certain politics of the performative as a process of inscribing, doing, moving and marking.

There are two works I wish to start with. In his book *Miserable Miracle*, Belgian artist Henri Michaux brings together drawing and writing in a surreal way. He inscribes as if to look deeply into himself and beyond. His approach to mixing hand-writing—and typing—with abstract mark-making is a clear example of how closely drawing and writing are claimed to be connected (Farthing and McKenzie 2014). There is a kind of inscription that also resonates with a so-called ‘performative’ approach, an approach that ranges from ‘doing’ (art, work, truth) to enacting an identity (I am here, you are there, we are this, they are that, etc). Here the question of who and/or what is making marks, writing in an automatic and unconscious way, becomes a matter of enacting a certain metaphysical ‘flux and reflux’, as Michaux says (2002: 12). The (re-)flux has to do with a certain substratum. Philosophically speaking, this is a metaphysical *ground of being* that is difficult to express, even goes beyond words and representation. The (re-)flux therefore remains something too-much, the sense that at the core of being are forces that ‘spread out, only to be redistributed once more before me, with me, within me, drowned, and unendurably buffeted’ (Ibid.). For Michaux what he writes goes into the act

of drawing. It is an act of inscribing that focuses deeply on what seems his 'inner self'. This is one example of how the performative takes place: a way of doing and disclosing who and what is making the inscription take place. As John Paul Ricco would say further, this 'praxis of writing, drawing' exposes, and further exscribes, Michaux into an 'intimacy of the outside' (2017: 104).

Now for the second work. *Human Writes* (2006) is a work by Australian choreographer William Forsythe (**Figure 1**).<sup>1</sup> *Human Writes* mixes drawing with writing and choreography, where a number of dancers use their entire bodies – assembled in ways that socially set up relations between spectator and artist, not working individually – to inscribe words and also abstract marks onto table tops. The words cite the *Universal Declaration of Human Rights*. Inscribed in dark, charcoal crayon, some of the words appear clearly rendered like 'liberté' and 'bildung'; other inscriptions remain accidental scribbles. Meaningful words mixed with meaningless scribbles? Or is it all meaningful 'mark making'? Not quite. Whereas for Michaux the inscription remains focused on himself, for Forsythe the process is shared between different people, that is between self and other. Forsythe calls this publicly shared space of inscription a 'performative installation.' The space filled with inscribed tables is an installation in that it shows the materials (tables, charcoal crayon, ropes) and, more importantly, emphasizes the appearance – rather than disappearance – of the human body in a 'communal act' (Brandstetter in Hallensleben 2010: 70). It is important to note that this work is not centred on marks. The bodies trace the work, expose who and what takes place. This is not about bodies that 'disappear' after making the marks; rather I claim that the this is a bodily act that appears in the tracing. *The tracing appears through who makes the work take place*. The human body appears alongside others. This in how the dancers and spectators corporeally stand, move, linger and so forth; they trace and thus share a common space in which the inscription – and one might even say exscription – addresses a social and political problem. The problem is in how the performative act deals with exposing the human body as that 'which is excluded from the written legal text: the implicit, structural violence of the law itself' (Ibid.).

Both works are examples that present different approaches to inscription. Lines, points, planes, marks or letters, bodies, tables, ropes; all these things appear throughout an assembly that reflects a kind of event. For many still today, what takes place is a 'process'. Now, if our attention focuses mainly on marks, and marking to make meaning, then this process becomes complicated. Because the act of mark-making works through 'meaningless meaning' (Krauss 1989: 206).

## Inscription and gender

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<sup>1</sup> William Forsythe. (2005). *Human Writes*. Photo: Dominik Mentzos. © William Forsythe.

The process of inscription as something performative is complicated. The process struggles with a performative act that, how to say, folds meaningless scribbles into marks one tries to invest with meaning. In which case the performative is problematic not only in art but also in a cultural context—Why problematic? Because there is a value placed today on ‘marking’—and doing and moving—when, as I argue, the inscriptive process remains fixated on a certain ideology that focuses on creating meanings in profoundly subjective ways. The problem regards what some will criticize as a ‘pseudo-activity’ (Kunst 2015, Zizek 2018), which I will elaborate at the end of this article. In the meantime, the problem I am proposing is in how inscription is used subjectively to reflect on one self and others (who focus on themselves first as well). The subject is the individual who uses ‘mark-making’ in an attempt to reflect upon, question and change their identity by working through a fundamental contradiction: to mark and make lines as if to creatively express oneself as one, unified, organically constituted being and gender. The (performative) act of marking struggles with a problem then of, paradoxically, not being as much as being there. As Michaux’s words attest: ‘the multitude of liquid lines, enormous with a thousand folds, *I was and I was not*, I was caught, I was lost, I was in a state of complete ubiquity’ (2002: 12).

The problem of the performative, as I am saying, concerns a logic of identity that branches into notions of gender. There is a notion of gender that largely swirls in a kind of existential maelstrom, a struggle with engaging oneself and others relationally. In the process of inscription who is relating to who? More precisely, what logic of identity is at play? What kind of identity, from what subjective state or agency, is the artist writing-drawing and thus inscribing from? The performative act has to do with an identity concept, a concept that enables one to do something creatively, and doing what is neither true nor false.

What then is meant by the performative in recent forms of drawing, and contemporary art and culture more broadly? According to art historians Amelia Jones and Andrew Stephenson,

the performative highlights the open-endedness of interpretation, which must be understood as a process rather than an act with a final goal, and acknowledges the ways in which *circuits of desire and pleasure* [emphasis added] are at play in the complex web of relations among artists, patrons, collectors, and both specialized and non-specialized viewers (2005: 1).

The ‘performative’ is rooted in a process that is different to a theatrical or dramatic act. The emphasis on process has been apparent in not only a Western but globalised art context since the 1960’s. As countless female artists have shown, from from Carolee Schneemann, to Hannah Wilke to Barbara Kruger—and male and, one must say today, non-binary (gender) artists, such as Franko B or Diamond Stingly—the work of art is a

matter of showing elements that go into making the work (showing the body, revealing materials, marking time, etc.). This process is an approach that seems to express change, a change that is cognate with flux or transformation. Process is popularly expressed through elements of line and movement. Drawing has emerged anew in light of such elements. The performative is thus the process of showing the mark, body, space and time; elements that go into making and doing the work—rather than only making an object or commodity as end-goal.

The kind of drawing that has emerged in art since the 1960's crosses over performance, sculpture, and other disciplines. What is called 'performance drawing' is a case in point. Forsythe's *Human Writes* might be viewed as a performance drawing, especially when it is viewed as 'choreo-graphics, choreography in the sense of a bodily writing in time and space' (Brandstetter in Hallensleben 2010: 57). Whether viewed through choreography or live-art performance, drawing in this instance resonates with the performative as something that is done in a bodily way. The entire physicality of the artist is – and if involved as active participants than spectators are also – used to engage in mark-making. The marks are to reveal the making, showing where and how movements physically take place. What is performative then are movements that express the *jouissance* of 'circuits of desire and pleasure', to recall Jones and Stephenson idiom. This peculiar logic is at the core of so-called gender politics. Contemporary art discourses, notably under the broad term of Feminism (alongside with the non-binary gender discourses such as LGBTQ+), continue to address and uphold a form of politics in which identities are to be constructed around 'gender'. Such discourses are fast becoming rehashed around marrying drawing practices with theories around constructing identities socially and culturally. Gender is fundamentally interpreted around notions of equality, promoting social justice; however, gender also accords with a kind of fluid concept of identity—and more problematically what some will now call a 'protean subject'. Michaux's '(re-)flux' resonates with this fluid identity, albeit an identity that remains more incomplete, restless and constitutively split. What Meskimmon and Snowden call 'allotropic figuration' is a concept that articulates the individual as a fluid and creative subject. For them, changing ourselves materially, in meaning and identity, is profoundly chemical and epigenetic: using marks and lines to express 'an unfolding of matter and meaning through manifold, non-binary, non-hierarchical modes' (Meskimmon and Sawdon 2016: 3). A mark drawn, written, or inscribed is pitched toward a performative way of making meanings in deeper processes that, I claim, struggle to shake off a more dubious metaphysical notion of flux.

The emphasis on relations, changeable identities, and openness of interpretation expresses a liberal, democratic ideology that Feminist discourses seek to cultivate in art and culture today. Here the idea of process widens toward rethinking and socially

changing identities from being self-centred, private and fixed by certain norms. There are norms for instance that fix identities sexually, that you are male or female because of biological organs; but also norms that fix identities symbolically through social and cultural values around who is gendered as a body. For gender theorists, such as Judith Butler, change becomes existentially problematic when relations remain normative. This individual struggle for change can be interpreted through performance-art and drawing based works such as Carolee Schneeman's *Up To and Including Her Limits* (1973), and more recently Forsythe's *Human Writes*. By marking with one's entire body and physically appearing before audiences 'the performance of the body as an artistic practice is a mode of textual inscription' (Jones and Stephenson 1999: 8). Here the question of gender has relevance. The act of letting the artist appear live before an audience whilst inscribing all sorts of marks—as if to do something meaningful, reflecting who draws and disclosing relations between self and other—demonstrates what Butler would describe as 'a graphic event that inaugurated gender' (Butler 2018: 29). Scribbling words, signs and abstract marks on a wall, paper, or table; expressing resistance through defiant inscriptions reflects a performative act of struggle. This resonates with a social and political—and not merely artistic process of—struggle with 'the psychosocial imposition and slow inculcation of norms', or as Butler would say further:

Such norms are not simply imprinted on us, marking and branding us like so many passive recipients of a culture machine. They produce us, but not in the sense of bringing us into being, nor in the sense of strictly determining who we are. Rather, they inform the lived modes of embodiment we acquire over time, and those very modes of embodiment can prove to be contesting those norms, even breaking with them (Butler 2018: 29).

When works such as Forsythe's use mark-making it should be viewed critically in this way; the marks inscribed expose norms as rules and conditions that coercively implicate individuals as much as groups under certain identity concepts. Making marks is not about individuals expressing themselves freely; choreo-graphics deals with rather exposing a social and political struggle. What is unique about choreo-graphics is the shift from focusing on the mark to the appearance of bodies. And note the plural 'bodies'—rather than individual body. Throughout the work, spectators and audiences do not disappear so much as appear to one another. The meaning of this appearing of bodily acts runs deep: showing bodies at work that struggle to overcome a 'structural violence' of a Law (inner voice, legal and divine Other) that regulates freedom, agency and

autonomy. The Law alludes to an apparatus of norms. There is an issue of ethics that we do not have space to properly investigate here; but it should at least be said that when such norms fix identities (as same, without difference, as 'normal') then they may be said to force or coerce such bodies, and such subjects, into becoming either atomistic individuals (me first) or intolerant populists (belonging with others like me while excluding others that seem to threaten and contaminate the so-called community). The question of 'who draws, writes, inscribes...' is complicated by the way in which the complex Law as a transcendent Other (spelt with a capital O) overdetermines the subject.

### **Performativity and structural change**

The performative is indeed a complex problem indeed. It is popularly associated with gender discourses, Judith Butler being a key figure; but it is now also used widely as a buzzword in contemporary art too. Now, to critically understand it one needs to look at the philosophical context of language that the performative is rooted in. The performative is attributed to the English philosopher of J. L. Austin, who claims that the 'performative' is a unique act that happens through speech. From the ceremonial 'you are now married' to the affectionate 'I love you', the performative is a speech act. The act is that of speaking words that do *do* something. What is said is always already becoming meaningful here and now while, furthermore, enacting what is to come. Speech acts are then promissory and thus 'performative' because they declare a way of doing what – effectively – seems always already taking place. Meaning is given in advance and followed through this linguistic process. There is no one meaning performed (as there is no one identity fixed and already made). And there is no description required, no 'constative' explanation as to whether the act is true or false. Now for Butler the performative is a way of constructing one's identity as a 'gender'. When someone identifies themselves as either woman or man—or some other 'non-binary' subject—he or she or (the non-binary) they are identified by their gender. Gender is also distinct from sex. And this is important to note. For Butler gender is where someone's identity becomes something 'constructed' socially and culturally, i.e. symbolically woven by however one says to be what they are and in being recognised by others too.

The performative however struggles to produce changes at an existential level. This problem is noted today under the kind of global, market Capitalism that continues to pervade cultures worldwide. In this context there are values placed around flux, movement, and subjectivity (e.g. creative engagements with materials, energetic exertion, alternative spiritual activities, travel, choosing identities, changing lifestyles); however, such elements are problematic in terms of a subject that is fluid in gender. For Butler, someone is a subject that is implicated by *conventions*—'*an inherited set of*



*voices, an echo of others who speak as the "I"* (1997: 25). When someone either marks, writes, or speaks, or expressively moves... the bodily act is never performative without always already confronting *conventions*. The inner flux (Michaux) is like the Law/Other never coming from himself as 'one' voice (Cixous); there is no private, transcendental object, no metaphysical substance to close our eyes and find through meditation, that guarantees the artist with 'performatively' creating and expressing themselves as if purely subjective. That each of us is constructed, and struggle to change through, an 'echo of others' is the anti-metaphysical lesson that Butler tries to address. Conventions are certain effects that, in advance of doing or inscribing anything, happen as symbolic voices (e.g. conscience, Super-Ego). This is the proverbial 'inner voice' that tells each of us daily what ought to be done (the voice we also might try resist with an 'oh no, no...' but, in the end, capitulate to and obey). Conventions are effects that thus call upon, or interpellate, each of us to *become* certain ways of being (father says you are this, mother says you are that, the State identifies you as so and so, and so on).

Before going any further a clarification should be made. 'Performative acts (as bodily acts) are "non-referential" because they do not refer to pre-existing conditions, such as an inner essence, substance, or being supposedly expressed in these acts; no fixed, stable identity exists that they could express' (Fischer-Lichte 2008, 27). Performativity is also not there to enact a gender with reference to someone naively thinking themselves free of conventions. *If it has any radical sense now, not only for gender but for discourses of drawing and art today that engage structural change, then the performative must be rethought in terms of who is really at play in constructing as much as moving someone as a subject.*

### **Pseudo-activities, protean subjects**

According to writer Bojana Kunst '[w]e live at a time when creativity, a wish for change and constant reflection on creative conditions are the driving forces behind development in the post-industrial world, marked by the need to constantly revolutionize methods of production and creativity' (2015: 6). However, the change expressed by performatively moving and marking smacks of a 'pseudo-activity' (ibid.). The act of doing something all the time, being on the move, being creative, being authentic (in Being) by trying to engage oneself and others (as fluid subjects), sadly reflects how 'there's a growing political powerlessness of art' (ibid.). In other words, the change one seeks to do (performatively) is existentially reductive. The value placed culturally today around 'movement' is a case in point, what Kunst criticises as today's *social choreography*.

There is something deeply choreographic about today's social machine, which discloses its own compositions through the constant organisation of smoothness, acceleration, non-disturbance and the illusion that movement has nothing to do with disturbance. The material for this kind of social choreography comes from what bodies can do: their everyday mobility and numerous movements through numerous protocols of transgression, which are heavily controlled and regulated... (Kunst 2015, 116)

Walking, exercising, dancing; marking, performing, moving, recording; though convivial and positive as these activities may seem they must be viewed as symptoms of the individual as a fluid subject that pervades daily life and art today. This also means thinking twice as to how subversive a bodily act of writing might seem in the choreographics posed by Forsythe's work.

In terms of performative drawing, the act of marking and moving, can be rethought in light of this complicated situation. When artists continue to 'draw lines', for instance, move fluidly or act as if the performative is a way of doing and creating freely, are they not ideologically duped in thinking that they are liberating themselves as a fluid subject? Philosopher Slavoj Žižek (a peer of Butler's) calls this a *protean subject*. He describes the protean subject in the following passage:

today the hegemonic form of subjectivity is no longer the autonomous subject subordinated to the paternal Oedipal Law that guarantees his (moral) freedom, but the fluid [protean] subject that experiences itself as permanently reinventing and reconstructing itself, joyfully experimenting with combinations of different identities. The paradigmatic theorist of this new form of subjectivity is Judith Butler, and although she insists on its 'subversive' character, it is easy to demonstrate that such a subjectivity rejecting any fixed identity and obsessed with permanent playful discursive reinvention fits perfectly [with] contemporary consumerist and commodified society (Žižek 2018: 190).

The kind of movement that artists privilege through mark-making is implicated by current global-market, liberal society, or Capitalism. In other words, mark-making and the figure of line remain uncritical of a problematic form of subjectivity that privileges a proliferation of genders. Choosing whatever gender one thinks one is (ontologically) is never subversive; rather, the focus on choice is about as effective as choosing a lifestyle or commodity – and one should add spirituality too. Here, Butler's theory of gender performativity 'has been eclipsed in the era of neoliberalism' (Ricco 2019: 42). Constructing gender through profoundly inward images of the self runs parallel with a liberal, market ideology that reproduces entrepreneurial notions of creative process, where subjectivity rhymes with consumer choice and individualism. Feeling oneself able to choose a gender (as Butler will say it is *never* a purely subjective and privately made choice) is as problematic as making one's mark as if to reveal some hidden meaning of being or invisible substance (cosmic energy, Being, metaphysical principle of causation).

There is not enough space to go deeper into this but the question of gender as a choice would need a further investigation into notions of sex and sexual difference, and what these approaches to understanding ourselves and underlying realities would have for drawing, and contemporary art and culture. What can be highlighted at least is that '[t]he proliferation of genders repeats this same mistake: it multiplies rather than thinks,' and what is not effectively thought is what is meant by difference – rather than identity – and a difference that means structurally changing *the* metaphysical problem: 'the central concept of monotheism: the concept of the One' (Copjec 2012: 33). This is not merely about the notion of an individualistic self, one who feels he can performatively mark and access some hidden, private and inner substance; it is really the concept of the One (e.g. Law, God, Capital, metaphysical Other, alternative-spiritual voice of power) that needs to be radically interrogated. In practice, and put very briefly, the notion of sexual difference argued from the standpoint of sex vis-a-vis gender would imply two things. Firstly, that the relation between artist and spectator would be radically different: a contradictory non-relation. Not in becoming closed off from everyone; rather the relation would be how each body appears and struggles far more socially, that is in a way that is 'not about accepting the contradiction, but about *taking one's place in it*' (Zupančič 2017: 72). This contradictory space implies an *object disoriented ontology*, which is based on the 'structural incompleteness of being' (Zupančič 2017: 141). Secondly, because the space is in itself contradictory the bodies writing and drawing would no longer need to focus fundamentally on marking; instead the process would emphasize repetitions of the performative act, kind of like presenting the work again and again in a space that changes each time. Overall, what I am trying to do here is open up discourses of drawing, and art and culture more widely, toward more recent and crucial debates about the role of difference, and more particularly sexual difference.

As I have tried to show, a problem of the performative needs to be addressed and understood in terms of how meaning is produced by someone as a subject and, more deeply and metaphysically, around mark-making and movement. My contention with drawing-writing as a process of inscription is that, in its current form, it does not effectively produce approaches that are open and radical enough to rethinking and structurally changing practices, frameworks and ensuing discourses. This essay follows up what I have shown elsewhere in terms of how mark-making as a graphic trace is too focused on expressing flux and fluid movement (Luzar 2017). Such approaches expose how 'the body becomes subservient to mysticism' as 'it falls into the trap of searching for what it is that animates our bodies' (Myers 2012: 169). The notion that there is a metaphysical movement that animates one's body has indeed the tendency to fall into this trap. It is a trap of not only using a fluid, protean subject to make the process seem creative but also in using the performative act to unquestionably hold up an ideology

that, at a mystical level, remains bound up in the concept of the One. To rethink and structurally change the practice we must also take into consideration the complex question of the bodily act, trace and appearance. Gender discourses are important in terms of exposing and working through so-called hidden forces as social and cultural conventions. Today, the attempt to use mark-making to express any change remains profoundly at the level of reflecting on who was there, the one (I, me, you) who was physically making the mark, and, metaphysically, a desire for an underlying and overarching reality (energies, invisible forces), a reality principle that is presupposed as One (organic, unified, whole and substantive).

The question of who and how subjects draw, write, or inscribe is, to say the least, difficult in the kind of practices that privilege constant activity. It is a question that further touches upon the meaning of a politics of aesthetics. Here I wish to add a comment on what is meant by politics in this case. 'Even in much of today's progressive politics,' as Žižek writes, 'the danger is not passivity but pseudo-activity, the urge to "be active", to "participate": people intervene all the time, "do something", academics participate in meaningless debates, etc., and the truly difficult thing is to step back, to withdraw from it' (Žižek 2018: 277). The act of withdrawing, and one might say further *with-drawing*, could be understood as a proposition that might open a different conversation around practices and theories of drawing as inscription. We can see a form of with-drawing in how the body, materials and space appear in the choreo-graphic. Some of this approach involves obviously moving and marking, but in instances where one stops and holds still, stands, crouches or lays in the space... there is arguably a radical act of 'doing less' (Kunst 2015: 193). To do less, 'step back...' and to draw in a way of being and appearing with others. This non-relational act of drawing with others does not mean completely withdrawing. Stopping to do anything is ultimately reactive, as is doing completely nothing. Stopping keeps from the harder work of still upholding whatever might be understood now by change at a structural level.

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