THE TRANSFORMATIVE POWER OF PERFORMANCE

A new aesthetics

Erika Fischer-Lichte
Translated by Saskya Iris Jain

The Transformative Power of Performance

'Wonderfully erudite, clear and concise'
Maria Shevtsova, Goldsmiths College, University of London

'A major reference work for debates on theatre theory, performance, and methodology. Written by one of the foremost representatives of the field of theatre studies'
Hans-Thies Lehmann, Johann Wolfgang Goethe-Universität, Frankfurt

In this book, Erika Fischer-Lichte traces the emergence of the performance as **an art event** in its own right. In setting performance art on an equal footing with the traditional art object, she heralds a new aesthetics.

The peculiar mode of experience that a performance provokes – blurring distinctions between artist and audience, body and mind, art and life – is here framed as the breeding ground for a new way of understanding performing arts, and through them even wider social and cultural processes.

With an introduction by Marvin Carlson, this translation of the original *Ästhetik des Performativen* addresses key issues in performance art, experimental theatre and cultural performances to lay the ground for a new appreciation of the artistic event.

Erika Fischer-Lichte is Professor of Theatre Studies at the Freie Universität Berlin and Director of the Institute of Advanced Studies on the Interweaving of Theatre Cultures. She was President of the German Association for Theatre Studies (1991–1996) and of the International Federation for Theatre Research (1995–1999). Among her numerous publications are *The Semiotics of Theatre* (1992, in German 1983), *The Show and the Gaze of Theatre* (1997), *History of European Drama and Theatre* (2002, in German 1990), *Theatre, Sacrifice, Ritual. Exploring Forms of Political Theatre* (Routledge, 2005).

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Will transformation. Oh be inspired for the flame
in which a Thing disappears and bursts into something else;
the spirit of re-creation which masters this earthly form
loves most the pivoting point where you are no longer yourself.

What tightens into survival is already inert;
how safe is it really in its inconspicuous gray?
From far off a far greater hardness warns what is hard,
and the absent hammer is lifted high!

He who pours himself out like a stream is acknowledged at last by Knowledge;
and she leads him enchanted through the harmonious country
that finishes often with starting, and with ending begins.

Every fortunate space that the two of them pass through, astonished,
is a child or grandchild of parting. And the transfigured Daphne,
as she feels herself become laurel, wants you to change into wind.

Rainer Maria Rilke

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Introduction

Perspectives on performance: Germany and America

Marvin Carlson

The modern field of performance studies was largely developed within the United States, but performance has proved so useful and stimulating a concept that today scholars around the world are exploring its possibilities for a better understanding of social and cultural processes. The present book by Erika Fischer-Lichte makes an important and welcome contribution to this growing body of discourse. Fischer-Lichte is one of the leading contemporary figures internationally in the area of theatre and performance research, and director of one of Europe's leading programs in theatre studies, the Institut für Theaterwissenschaft at the Free University of Berlin. She brings a fresh, continental perspective to a field which up until now has been dominated by Anglo-Saxon scholarship.

As Shannon Jackson has convincingly demonstrated in her study, *Professing Performance*,[1] just how this complex and contested concept is understood and utilized is, like any such theoretical abstraction, profoundly influenced by the genealogy of its development and application. Although the modern field of performance studies draws upon the insights and theories of many figures in a wide spectrum of fields across the humanities and the social sciences, the field was crystallized in the United States at two major universities during the 1970s and 1980s, at New York University and Northwestern University. Jon McKenzie, in his *Perform – or Else*, the most extensive study yet to appear of the concept of performance in modern culture, calls the approaches to the field represented by these two schools the "Eastern" and "Midwestern" variations of performance studies.[2]

At New York University, the program of Performance Studies grew out of a theatre program at the Tisch School of the Arts and its interest in developing an interdisciplinary faculty composed not only of theatre scholars, headed by Richard Schechner, but also of dance theorists, musicologists, folklorists, and anthropologists, most notably Victor Turner. The background of performance studies at Northwestern was quite different. Although there also performance studies might be said to have arisen from a convergence of the interests of social scientists (especially the anthropologist Dwight Conquergood) and theatre scholars, the academic position of theatre itself within the institution was very different.

To understand this difference, one must step back to the early twentieth-century and the beginnings of theatre studies in the United States. From early in that century there existed a version of something similar to what McKenzie

later designated as the "Eastern" and "Midwestern" variations of this academic field. What developed into the "Midwestern" version appeared first, and in fact was created at a number of Eastern colleges and universities, at Carnegie, Yale, Harvard, and Radcliffe. These schools, soon joined by many others across the country, inaugurated the field by offering non-academic study in such subjects as playwriting, acting, elocution, and oral interpretation. As time passed, this approach, strongly influenced by the popular educational theories of John Dewey, who stressed the importance of practical experience in learning, became particularly associated with the large state universities of the American Midwest. There, this emphasis upon performance and practice led to theatre becoming closely associated with and frequently merged into programs of oral interpretation and communication. This is the tradition at Northwestern, where a School of Speech provided an academic umbrella for departments of oral interpretation, communication studies, radio, television, film, and theatre. Thus performance studies arose at Northwestern not as an outgrowth of and to some extent developed in opposition to a pre-existing program in theatre (as at New York University), but rather as a further development of a long-standing interest in the study of oral culture.

Again on the East Coast, an alternative to this speech, communication, and oral interpretation-oriented approach to theatre studies began to develop in the 1940s. This new approach was heavily influenced by recent work in theatre studies being developed in Germany by Max Herrmann, a figure of critical importance in Fischer-Lichte's own approach. The central figure in America to champion this approach was Alois Nagler, an Austrian scholar who began lecturing at Yale in the 1930s and who joined the faculty there in 1942. For the next several decades he was America's leading theatre historian and the model for a more academic, European-oriented approach to theatre than the more performance-oriented work of the previous generation, now very well established in the major state universities of the United States, especially in the middle of the country. Traces of the rivalry between these early "Eastern" and "Midwestern" approaches to theatre studies may still be seen in the alternative professional journals and organizations which today still serve theatre scholars in the United States.

The American Educational Theatre Association, founded in 1949 with its first executive offices at the University of Michigan, created that same year a quarterly publication, the *Educational Theatre Journal*. The direct lineal descendents of this organization and this journal are today's American Theatre in Higher Education (ATHE) and *Theatre Journal*. Nagler and other *Theaterwissenschaft*-influenced scholars, mostly in the East, found the production-oriented emphasis of both this organization and journal largely irrelevant to their own concerns, and so undertook the establishment of alternatives. The founding in 1955 of the International Federation for Theatre Research in Europe, of which Nagler was one of the eight founding members, inspired Nagler to call for an American organization more in line with the IFTR interest in academic research in theatre, an interest he felt inadequately represented in the American Educational Theatre Association or

its journal. The result was the foundation of the American Society for Theatre Research (ASTR) in 1956, with its own journal of this organization, *Theatre Survey*, first appearing in 1960. Despite a significant converging in interests between these organizations today, and even more between these journals, to which a common interest in performance has significantly contributed, their division still stands as a memorial to the early "Eastern" and "Midwestern" division of this field.

Despite their difference in orientation, the development of "Eastern" theatre studies as an independent field at Yale and elsewhere and of "Midwestern" theatre studies under the umbrella of speech and communication at many large state universities created in early twentieth century America something akin to the "performative turn" that Fischer-Lichte argues that the work of Max Herrmann achieved at roughly the same period in Germany. In both countries the study of theatre, which had previously drawn its authority and its critical grounding from its close relationship to literature, now sought to shift its attention from the dramatic text to the realization on stage. Despite this similar shift in focus, neither branch of the American "performative turn" quite resembled Herrmann's approach, even if the Yale version was to a significant measure inspired by his insights.

For Herrmann the process of embodiment, not text, was central to the theatrical experience and this embodiment moreover had to be experienced and empathized with by other bodies, those of the audience, in each unique manifestation of the art. The American Yale school embraced Herrmann's view of theatre as based not upon a dramatic text but on a physical event, but Nagler and his students did not consider embodiment a central concern. They tended to be more interested in the material conditions of performance – the physical stage, the scenery, the costumes – with the body of the actor only one such element and often not even the most interesting one. The alternative, "Midwestern" school, on the other hand, while it shared Herrmann's focus on embodiment, tended to privilege the voice, reflecting its grounding in oral interpretation and public speaking. Moreover, its strong debt to the pragmatic educational doctrines of John Dewey encouraged a view of theatre as experiential training for the individual performer, with distinctly less interest in the theatre event as a whole than was to be found in either Herrmann or Nagler.

A closely related important distinction between modern performance studies in Germany and in the United States, particularly in the formative years of the field, was that this new field had a troubled and somewhat contradictory relationship with the already established field of theatre studies. At New York University, theatre tended at best to be regarded as a minor, rather specialized area of work within the far broader field represented by performance studies, characterized by Richard Schechner as "a very small slice of the performance pie."[3] At worst, performance studies defined itself in direct opposition to theatre studies. At Northwestern, performance studies and theatre were considered as two separate fields, within the same family of studies, but distinctly different in concerns and goals. In Germany, however, no such division or distancing from theatre studies resulted from the evolution of the academic disciplines. The field

of *Theaterwissenschaft* (the study of theatre), established in the early 1920s by Max Herrmann, defined itself, like the parallel early theatre programs in the United States, in opposition to traditional study of the literary text (*Literaturwissenschaft*), but since Herrmann based this opposition on the study of theatre as a social event and a process of embodied action rather than the communication of a literary text, his version of theatre studies was far more compatible with the concerns later developed by modern performance studies. Thus German programs in *Theaterwissenschaft*, like that headed by Fischer-Lichte, never suffered from the tensions and divisions between theatre and performance that were frequently felt in the United States.

Beginning around 1980, American theatrical theory was profoundly influenced by the importation of semiotic theory from Europe, but that theory was at its foundations concerned with textual study – the dramatic text, what was called the performance text, and the relationship between the two. An alternative approach, for a time much less visible but ultimately equally significant, called for the analysis of theatre not with the tools of such arts as literature, but with a recognition of the importance of performance as experience. Gerald Hinkle's short 1979 book, *Art as Event*, marks this shift, even in its title. Hinkle argued that the performance aspect of arts like theatre relates them more directly to our perception of life as an "event-full" process, such as that described by the philosopher Whitehead, than to the working of non-performance arts like literature or painting.[4] While this provided a striking new alternative approach for theatre and performance scholars in the United States, it was already well established in German *Theaterwissenschaft*. As Fischer-Lichte herself observes in the present study, "At the heart of Herrmann's notion of performance lies the shift from theatre as a work of art to theatre as an event."

As the head of Germany's leading program in *Theaterwissenschaft* at the Free University of Berlin, where Max Herrmann established this discipline early in the last century, Fischer-Lichte is thus working in a tradition in which the development of modern performance studies comes as a natural extension of an already well established field, not as the "new paradigm" that Schechner and others in America have considered it. This may help explain to American readers why Fischer-Lichte, although concerned with a key question in performance studies, that of what performance actually accomplishes for its participants, actors and audience alike, draws her examples almost exclusively from what might be called the artistic tradition of theatre and performance art, instead of ranging broadly through other examples of social and cultural performance as an American theorist might do. The live theatre still remains the grounding of her work as it was for Herrmann, her illustrious predecessor.

There is yet another reason why Fischer-Lichte finds examples from theatre particularly useful and accessible for her arguments, which also separates her approach, at least in some measure, from recent American theorists in this field. The theatrical culture in Germany is very different from that in the United States. While the record of innovation and achievement of the American experimental

theatre, especially in the later part of the twentieth century, compares favorably with that of almost any other major theatre culture, the theatre in general in America holds a very different position in the cultural imagination than it does in Germany. In general, theatre is regarded in America as a form of entertainment, more elitist perhaps than films, but still lacking the cultural respectability of orchestral music, painting, or even such closely related forms as opera or dance. In Germany, on the other hand, theatre is a major cultural form, knowledge of theatre is considered an important part of any cultured person's experience, and the stage is regarded as a significant contributor to the public discussion of social and cultural concerns. For an American theatre-goer (much rarer proportionally than among the German population), the central and most visible example of the art will be a Broadway "show," while in Germany it is much more likely to be a controversial politically, socially, and artistically challenging production by an innovative director in one of the major theatres in Berlin, Munich, or Hamburg.

In addition to her situation within an academic institution where modern performance theory has found theatre a comfortable companion, Fischer-Lichte lives in a general theatrical culture where the directors and dramaturgs at leading theatres, unlike those in America, regularly mount productions that are highly informed by current theory and offer readily accessible examples for the sort of analytic study Fischer-Lichte is pursuing.

This of course presents a potential problem for American readers of her work, who are very likely unfamiliar even with such major figures in the recent German theatre as Castorf and Schlingensief, whose work will be well-known to any German reader of this book. Happily, however, this does not present a problem, for two reasons. The first, and more important, is that the argument that Fischer-Lichte is developing is grounded not in German performance or German aesthetics, but in contemporary performance theory as it is being built up largely within the United States. She therefore draws upon John Cage's event theory, Austin's establishment of the concept of the performative in linguistic theory, Judith Butler's work on performative acts and gender, the contributions of the Cambridge anthropologists to ritual study, Peggy Phelan and Philip Auslander's discussions of presence, all quite familiar references to anyone working in this field of study.

Second, when Fischer-Lichte utilizes specific examples from modern theatre and performance art, these draw equally upon German and non-German examples. In support of her discussion of theatre's performative use of space, for example, she draws upon examples from the contemporary German directors Claus Peymann, Einar Schleef, and Klaus Michael Grüber but also from American work by Richard Schechner and the Los Angeles Cornerstone Theatre, from international performance artists Joseph Beuys, Guillermo Gómez-Peña, and Coco Fusco, as well as from Max Reinhardt, Nikolai Evreinov, and Jerzy Grotowski, familiar figures from the history of the modern European theatre. An American reader will thus be able easily to situate the work of less familiar continental figures by the way in which their work is related to that of more familiar artists. Even when an argument is based on the specific performance practice of, for example,

Castorf or Schleef, Fischer-Lichte's description of the relevant features of the work in question is always sufficiently precise and detailed to provide an adequate understanding of it and of its significance to the ongoing argument.

Let us now turn to that argument, and again consider it both within its German context and in relationship to recent and current work in performance studies in America. Fischer-Lichte praises Herrmann for making the "performative turn" which turned from regarding the theatre as a static work of art to considering it as a spatial, embodied event, thus opening the way to developing an aesthetics of the performative. She argues, however, that he did not go on himself to consider the features of such an aesthetics, or of the function or meaning of performance. These considerations became much more central and pressing with the subsequent performative turn of the 1960s and after, when a new aesthetics of performance began to be developed alongside a new consciousness of and appreciation of this activity. The aim of her book, then, is to lay out the foundations of this aesthetics, based, following the example of Herrmann, on the practice and operations of the theatre.

Once again the difference in orientation between the development in performance studies within the tradition of *Theaterwissenschaft* in Germany and its rather different genealogy in the United States opens questions of both function and aesthetics in quite different directions, although, as I ultimately hope to argue, to some significant convergences, especially in more recent writings in this field. In very general and obviously oversimplified terms Fischer-Lichte's approach, based as it is on what might be called the aesthetic side of theatre and performance, seeks the "meaning" or "purpose" of performance in what she calls its "specific aestheticity," a concern one would be most unlikely to encounter in an American performance theorist. American performance theory, with its close historical ties to the social sciences, to Deweyesque pragmatism, and to the tradition of rhetoric and communication, has in general looked for the utility of performance in its ability to alter or at least alter the spectator's thinking about general and specific social situations. Phillip Zarrilli, for example, speaking of performance as "a mode of cultural action," describes it as "not a simple reflection of some essentialized, fixed attributes of a static, monolithic culture but an arena for the constant process of negotiating experiences and meanings that constitute culture."[5]

While doubtless Fischer-Lichte would agree with this emphasis on the dynamic and fluid quality of performance, Zarrilli's emphasis upon "negotiating" marks a distinctly different orientation. Fischer-Lichte's concept of performance as involved with the "enchantment" of the world may possibly be read as having some specific social or cultural implications, but it is not really concerned with cultural "negotiation," which suggests the sort of directly pragmatic interests found in much American performance theory. It looks rather to a deeper experience of being in the world and of becoming newly conscious of that being that is much closer to traditional aesthetic theory. Her basic concept of "enchantment," for example, has much in common with the well-known concept of "defamiliarization," so important to the Russian formalists and most clearly

articulated by Victor Shklovsky. His often-quoted definition of art is much closer to the approach of Fischer-Lichte than almost any theoretical formulation of the function of performance by an American theorist:

> Art exists that one may recover the sensation of life; it exists to make one feel things, to make the stone *stony*. The purpose of art is to impart the sensation of things as they are perceived and not as they are known. The technique of art is to make objects "unfamiliar," to make forms difficult, to increase the difficulty and length of perception because the process of perception is an aesthetic end in itself and must be prolonged. *Art is a way of experiencing the artfulness of an object; the object is not important.*[6]

Clearly when Fischer-Lichte speaks of performance as a process wherein "the commonplace appears transfigured and becomes conspicuous," she is dealing with a phenomenon very similar to what interests Shklovsky. And yet, although a common aesthetic orientation connects their work, it would be a serious misrepresentation to see Fischer-Lichte's approach as simply a contemporary reworking of this aspect of formalism.

The key difference, once again, is the shift from art object to event. In this regard Shklovsky remains firmly in the European aesthetic tradition, from which the "performative turn" departed. His concern is clearly with "the object" or "the thing" and the manner in which this object is observed and understood. It is obviously a fundamentally different matter when we shift from the artistic experience in the course of which we are led to look at an object with fresh eyes, exposing its "artfulness" or one might say, its more sensual relationship with the world, to a situation in which we have an experience which causes us to gain a new, refreshed comprehension of our own situation of being in the world. The former, despite the potential operations of empathy, remains a rather abstract and intellectual process. The latter engages the full activity of the human being as an embodied mind, a point frequently emphasized by Fischer-Lichte.

The special critical terms that Fischer-Lichte employs all point in this direction. The most central of these is autopoiesis, a term that to the best of my knowledge has so far been employed rarely if at all in American performance theory, despite its widespread use in such diverse fields as sociology, psychotherapy, management, anthropology, and organizational culture. The term was first utilized by the Chilean biologists Humberto Maturana and Francisco Varela to point to the unique self-producing operations of living systems. While all other kinds of machine produce something different from themselves, autopoietic systems are simultaneously producers and products, circular systems that survive by self-generation. Recently autopoiesis has entered American literary theory through the work of such critics as Joseph Tabbi[7] and Ira Livingston,[8] but, as Fischer-Lichte argues, the continually operating feedback loop provided in any performance event by the ongoing interactions of performers and audiences provides an even more fundamental example of this dynamic that can be provided by literature. It

ties the living process of the theatrical event back to the fundamental processes of life itself, and as the creation of embodied minds on both sides of the loop (actors on the one side, spectators on the other) demonstrates not only how performance operates within human society, but why it is important, indeed essential. As a self-organizing system, as opposed to an autonomously created work of art, it continually receives and integrates into that system newly emerging, unplanned, and unpredictable elements from both sides of the loop.

As embodied minds, we are involved in autopoieses continually in our being in the world, but what theatre and performance art offer are occasions for heightening our awareness of and sensitivity to this process. The dynamic has some resemblance to formalist aesthetics, as I have noted. Both might be said to be centrally concerned with what Fischer-Lichte calls the perceptual transformation of "what has been ordinary into components of aesthetic experience." For formalists like Shklovsky, however, the ordinary was found in the materiality of the world, while for Fischer-Lichte it is the experience of the ever-evolving dynamic of being in that world.

Essential to this project, and to the shift from art object to art event, is the collapsing of binaries, headed by that of subject and object, or in the case of performance, spectator and actor. Here Fischer-Lichte is on ground much more familiar to American performance theorists, for whom liminality, dissolving of boundaries, continually shifting perspectives, and the privileging of dynamic process over the stable work have long been central to their concerns. Fischer-Lichte's term "perceptual multistability" may be unfamiliar, but the process that it characterizes, the "oscillating focus between the actor's specific corporeality and the character portrayed," between "presence" and "representation," will surely strike a familiar and sympathetic chord in American readers.

The concept of performance as transformation itself is also not unfamiliar to American performance theory, although generally speaking it has been employed with rather different implications than those in Fischer-Lichte's book. A recent anthology, *Teaching Performance Studies*, contains essays by many of the leading American scholars in this field, including Richard Schechner, Joseph Roach, William O. Beeman, Phillip B. Zarrilli, John Emigh, Bruce McConachie and Michael and Ruth Bowman,[9] and thus provides a useful survey of current work. The introductory essay, by the two editors, bears the title "The Power of Transformation in Performance Studies Pedagogy." In fact, although this essay has much to say about embodiment and pedagogy, it mentions transformation only once, and that is in quoting a later essay in the collection, Beeman's "Performance Theory in an Anthropology Program."

Somewhat surprisingly, despite the title of the introductory essay, Beeman's is the only essay in this collection to address the matter of transformation, and it is surely not coincidental that this essay is oriented not toward aesthetics, but toward social science, and anthropology in particular: "Performance theory in an Anthropology Program." Beeman, who teaches at Brown University, is clearly in the tradition of the "Eastern" school of American performance, his academic

appointment being in anthropology as well as in theatre, speech, and dance. Echoes of the Richard Schechner (from theatre) and Victor Turner (from anthropology) alliance that shaped this field at New York University are found throughout his article, which in fact begins with a quotation from Turner's *The Anthropology of Performance.*

Both Turner and Beeman stress the utility of performance, although their emphases are slightly different. Turner, at least in the passage cited by Beeman, sees the primary function of performance as revelatory: "man is a self-performing animal – his performances are, in a way, reflexive, in performing he reveals himself to himself."[10] In his own discussion of the transformative potential of performance, Beeman stresses not a developing self-knowledge, but the achievement of specific pragmatic goals. Citing Austin's concept of the performative speech act, he equates "transformational" with "effective." Performance is "intentional." If successful "it does cultural work in the world. It strives to affect human affairs."[11] Later he notes "As a transformational force, performance behavior has the power to restructure social order through the persuasive power of rhetoric and through the power of redefinition of both audience and context."[12]

The difference between this very American concept of the transformational potential of performance and that of Fischer-Lichte is, I hope, quite clear. Beeman's focus is upon the pragmatic, the utilitarian, and the model (derived from Austin) is that of a performer seeking to achieve a certain effect (note Beeman's telling use of the term rhetoric) on an audience. There is almost nothing here of Fischer-Lichte's dynamic of performer and audience mutually involved in an ongoing dynamic of the fulfillment of the process of life and consciousness, not under the control of either. The Turner formulation cited by Beeman, stressing self-knowledge rather than rhetorical effictiveness, is somewhat closer, but still colored by Deweyesque pragmatism and still focused on the performer as initiating the performance in order to affect his or her audience.

I would suggest that the American performance theorist who has so far come closest to the orientation suggested by Fischer-Lichte's study is Jill Dolan in her recent book *Utopia in Performance.*[13] Although like Beeman (and for that matter like Fischer-Lichte) Dolan refers back to J.L. Austin, and to his concept of the performative as something that in its enunciation *acts*, this "doing" is seen by Dolan and by Fischer-Lichte as much more general than the specific goal-directed behavior described by Beeman. What Dolan describes as the "utopian performative" is clearly something very closely akin to Fischer-Lichte's tracing of autopoieses in performance. Utopian performatives is the term Dolan applies to those "small but profound moments in which performance calls the attention of the audience in a way that lifts everyone slightly above the present, into a hopeful feeling of what the world might be like if every moment of our lives were as emotionally voluminous, generous, aesthetically striking, and intersubjectively intense."[14] These "small but profound moments" are clearly the moments that Fischer-Lichte would call moments of enchantment, resulting in a sudden deeper insight into the shared process of being in the world. Dolan's stress on the

"aesthetics" and "intersubjectivity" of this experience provide further evidence of her similarity to Fischer-Lichte on the analysis of this experience.

Given the pragmatic orientation of much American theory, one might be tempted to read Dolan's use of the phrase utopian performance to indicate a sort of teleological performance directed toward achieving some utopia, but this is an interpretation that Dolan specifically and clearly rejects. Her investigation into this subject, she insists, "resists the effort to find representations of a better world." Recalling that the word *utopia* literally means "no place," she refuses pinning this experience "down to prescription." "Any fixed, static image or structure would be much too finite and exclusionary for the soaring sense of hope, possibility, and desire that imbues utopian performatives," she argues.[15]

Also like Fischer-Lichte, Dolan stresses the importance of the co-creating of this performative by the embodied minds of actors and spectators. In the "present, live moment" of performance, she argues, "the synergy of the actor's embodiment and the spectator's willing imagination creates possibility, the potential for new understanding and insight charged by the necessity of intersubjectivity."[16] Finally, Dolan also speaks of the "transformative powers" of performance, "the new worlds it creates with each shoring, the potential … of feeling myself part of a public newly constituted, held together in the moment of performance by a filament of faith."[17]

The striking convergence between the enchanted performances of Fischer-Lichte and the utopian performances of Dolan offers the potential of developing a new dimension in the ongoing discourse of modern American performance theory. That discourse has on the whole so far been oriented distinctly, and it must be admitted, very productively toward pragmatic concerns and the use of performance to achieve certain specific social, cultural, personal, and rhetorical goals. In the formation of modern American performance theory, aesthetics in general and theatre in particular have often been sidelined or outright rejected as areas of particular interest. In the present book, even more specifically and extensively than Dolan, Fischer-Lichte restores these areas of interest to the center of performance studies. Perhaps this book will be seen as marking an "aesthetic turn" in such studies, which would be a development with important and far-reaching consequences. In any case, however, it clearly marks and establishes an important alternative approach to this popular field of study.

Chapter 1

The transformative power of performance

On October 24, 1975, a curious and memorable event took place at the Krinzinger Gallery in Innsbruck. The Yugoslavian artist Marina Abramović presented her performance *Lips of Thomas*. The artist began her performance by shedding all her clothes. She then went to the back wall of the gallery, pinned up a photograph of a man with long hair who resembled the artist, and framed it by drawing a five-pointed star around it. She turned to a table with a white table-cloth close to the wall, on which there was a bottle of red wine, a jar containing two pounds of honey, a crystal glass, a silver spoon, and a whip. She settled into the chair and reached for the jar of honey and the silver spoon. Slowly, she ate the honey until she had emptied the jar. She poured red wine into the crystal glass and drank it in long draughts. She continued until bottle and glass were empty. Then she broke the glass with her right hand, which began to bleed. Abramović got up and walked over to the wall where the photograph was fastened. Standing at the wall and facing the audience, she cut a five-pointed star into the skin of her abdomen with a razor blade. Blood welled out of the cuts. Then she took the whip, kneeled down beneath the photograph with her back to the audience, and began to flagellate her back severely, raising bloody welts. Afterwards, she lay down on a cross made of blocks of ice, her arms spread out to her sides. An electric radiator hung from the ceiling, facing her stomach. Its heat triggered further bleeding from the star-shaped cuts. Abramović lay motionless on the ice – she obviously intended to endure her self-torture until the radiator had melted all the ice. After she had held out for 30 minutes without any sign of abandoning the torture, some members of the audience could no longer bear her ordeal. They hastened to the blocks of ice, took hold of the artist, and covered her with coats. Then they removed her from the cross and carried her away. Thus, they put an end to the performance.

The performance had taken two hours. In the course of these two hours, the artist and the spectators created an event that was neither envisioned nor legitimized by the traditions and standards of the visual or performing arts. The artist was not producing an artifact through her actions; she was not creating a fixed and transferable work of art that could exist independently of her. Yet her actions were also not representational. She was not performing as an actress, playing the part of a dramatic character that eats too much honey, drinks wine excessively, and inflicts a variety of injuries on her own body. Rather, Abramović was actually harming

herself, abusing her body with a determined disregard for its limits. She fed it substances which, though certainly nutritious in small doses, would doubtlessly cause nausea and discomfort in such excess. Moreover, the audience had to infer a strong physical pain from the heavy external injuries that she inflicted on herself. Yet, the artist betrayed no sign of distress – she did not moan, scream, or grimace. She generally avoided any physical sign that would express discomfort or pain. The artist restricted herself to performing actions that changed her body perceptibly – feeding it honey and wine and inflicting visible damage on it – without producing external signs for the inner states induced by these actions.

This put the audience in a deeply disturbing and agonizing position that invalidated both the established conventions of theatrical performance and generally of human responsiveness to a given situation. Traditionally, the role of a gallery visitor or theatregoer is defined as that of either an observer or spectator. Gallery visitors observe the exhibited works from varying distances without usually touching them. Theatregoers watch the plot unfold on stage, possibly with strong feelings of empathy, but refrain from interfering. Even if a character on stage (e.g. Othello) sets out to kill another (in this case, Desdemona), the audience knows full well that the murder is but a pretense and that the actress playing Desdemona will join the Othello actor for the final curtain call. In contrast, the rules of everyday life call for immediate intervention if someone threatens to hurt themselves or another person – unless, perhaps, this means risking one's own life. Which rule should the audience apply in Abramović's performance? She very obviously inflicted real injuries on herself and was determined to continue her self-torture. Had she done this in any other public place, the spectators would probably not have hesitated long before intervening. What about this case? A variety of considerations come into play. Abramović's artistic intent demanded a certain respect, ensuring that she could complete her performance. One risked destroying her "work of art." Then again, calmly watching her inflict injuries on herself seemed incompatible with the laws of human sympathy. It is also possible that Abramović wanted to force the spectators to take on the role of voyeurs[1] or test how far she could go before someone would put an end to her ordeal. What rules should apply here?

Throughout her performance, Abramović created a situation wherein the audience was suspended between the norms and rules of art and everyday life, between aesthetic and ethical imperatives. She plunged the audience into a crisis that could not be overcome by referring to conventional behavior patterns. Initially, the audience responded with the very physical signs that the performer refused to show: signs from which inner states could be deduced, such as incredulous amazement at her eating and drinking or horror at her breaking the crystal glass with her hand. When the artist began to cut into her flesh with the razor blade, one could hear the spectators drawing their breath in shock. Whatever the transformations the spectators underwent in those two hours – transformations that, to some extent, were manifest in perceptible physical expressions – they flowed into and prompted concrete reactions. Moreover, these transformations

had clear consequences: the spectators put an end to the artist's ordeal and thus concluded the performance itself. The performance transformed the involved spectators into actors.

In the past, when one spoke of art's potential to transform – referring both to the artist and the recipient – one generally evoked an image of the artist seized by inspiration or the beholder of art roused by an inner experience, calling out like Rilke's Apollo: "You must change your life." Nonetheless, there have always been artists that treated their bodies abominably. Legendary accounts and autobiographies of individual artists consistently tell of sleep deprivation, drug consumption, excessive use of alcohol and other substances, as well as self-inflicted injuries. Still, the violent treatment that these artists inflicted upon their bodies was neither hailed as art by them nor considered art by others.[2] Relevant sources from the nineteenth and twentieth centuries reveal that such practices were tolerated at best. They were accepted as a possible source of inspiration for artistic endeavor, sanctioned as the price for the work of art that they induced – but never credited as art itself.

Nevertheless, there existed – and continue to exist – cultural domains that consider practices in which people injure themselves or expose their bodies to serious harm not only "normal" but even laudable and exemplary. This applies particularly to the domain of religious rituals. Many religions bestow a special saintliness on ascetics, hermits, fakirs, or yogis, not only because they suffer unimaginable privations and put their own bodies at great risk but also because they injure their bodies in the most tremendous ways. It is all the more astounding that even mass movements occasionally adopt these practices, as is the case with flagellation. Part of individual and collective practice for nuns and monks from the eleventh century onwards, self-flagellation was taken up in various forms: in the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries, processions of flagellants moved through Europe and conducted their ritual publicly in front of large crowds; orders of penitence, prevalent particularly in Latin countries, had their members flagellate themselves collectively on various occasions. Voluntary self-flagellation has sustained itself as a living practice up to the present in Good Friday processions in Spain and in certain places in southern Italy, as well as in Corpus Christi processions, and in the liturgy of *Semana Santa*.

The descriptions of the everyday lives of the Dominican nuns at the cloister Unterlinden near Colmar, composed by Katharina von Gebersweiler at the beginning of the fourteenth century, reveal that voluntary self-flagellation constituted a fundamental part, if not the culmination, of the liturgy:

> At the end of the morning and evening prayers, the sisters remained standing in the choir and prayed until they were given a sign to begin with their devotional worship. Some tortured themselves with knee bends while praising the rule of God. Others, consumed by the fire of divine love, were unable to contain their tears, which they accompanied with devotional wailing. They did not move until they were suffused anew by grace and found 'thou whom

> my soul loveth' (Song of Solomon 1:7). Others finally tormented their flesh by severely maltreating it on a daily basis – some with birch rods, others with whips, containing three or four knotted straps, a third group with iron chains, a fourth one with flagella furnished with thorns. During Advent and the entire fasting period, the sisters went into the chapter house and other appropriate places after the morning prayers, where they mauled their bodies severely with the most diverse instruments of flagellation until blood flowed, so that the lashings of the whip sounded through the whole cloister and, sweeter than any other melody, ascended to the Lord's ears.[3]
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> (Ancelet-Hustache 1930 cited in Largier 2001: 29)

The ritual of self-flagellation lifted the nuns above their monastic routine and offered the promise of transformation. The violence inflicted on their bodies together with the physical transformation evident after the torture brought about a process of spiritual transformation: "Those who approached God in these diverse ways were granted enlightenment of the heart, their thoughts were purified, their passion ignited, their conscience became clear, and their spirits ascended towards God" (Ancelet-Hustache 1930 cited in Largier 2001: 30). Voluntary self-flagellation – physical abuse that aims at spiritual transformation – is recognized by the Catholic Church as a penance practice even today.[4]

A second cultural domain that allows for bodily injury or risk thereof can be found in fairground spectacles. On the one hand, tricks that would "normally" lead to serious injuries miraculously seem not to harm the artists themselves, such as fire eating, sword swallowing, or piercing the tongue with a needle, to name only a few. On the other hand, the artists perform extremely hazardous actions, exposing themselves to real dangers. The mastery of the performers lies precisely in their ability to defy this danger. The performer's concentration need but slacken for a fraction of a second for the ever-lurking danger to erupt that is posed by a tightrope act without a net or by the taming of predatory animals and snakes: the tightrope dancer falls, the tamer is attacked by the tiger, and the snake-charmer is bitten by the snake. This is the moment the audience fears most and which it yet feverishly awaits. Its deepest fears, fascination, and sensationalist curiosity are unleashed in this moment. These spectacles are not so much about the transformation of the actors or, even less so, the spectators. They rather seek to demonstrate the unusual physical and mental powers of the performers, and are intended to elicit awe and wonder from the audience. We are talking here about precisely the emotions that also took hold of Abramović's audience.

The second distinctive feature of Abramović's performance is the transformation of the spectators into actors, for which there also exist examples from different cultural domains. Of particular interest for our context are the penal rituals of the early modern period. As Richard van Duelmen has shown, spectators would crowd around the corpse after an execution in order to touch the deceased's body, blood, limbs, or even the lethal cord. They hoped that this physical contact would cure them of illness and generally provide a guarantee for their own bodily

well-being and integrity (1988: 161). The transformation of spectators into actors occurred in the hope of achieving a lasting alteration of their own bodies. As such, this transformation had a completely different thrust from that experienced by the audience in Abramović's performance. Her spectators were not concerned with their own physical well-being so much as that of the artist. The actions that transformed the spectators into actors, i.e. the physical contact with the artist, were aimed at protecting her bodily integrity. They were the result of an ethical decision directed at another, the artist.

In this respect, the audience's actions also fundamentally differed from those of the Futurist *serate*, Dada-soirées, and Surrealist "guided tours" at the beginning of the twentieth century, in which spectators turned into actors. In this case, the spectators were provoked into action by deliberate shocks. The transformation of spectator into actor happened almost automatically as specified by the *mise en scène*; it was hardly the result of a conscious decision on the part of the concerned spectator. Accounts of such events as well as manifestos of the artists speak to these conditions. In his manifesto entitled *The Variety Theatre* (1913), for instance, Filippo Tommaso Marinetti makes the following suggestions for provoking the audience:

> Introduce surprise and the need to move among the spectators of the orchestra, boxes, and balcony. Some random suggestions: spread a powerful glue on some of the seats, so that the male or female spectator will stay glued down and make everyone laugh … – Sell the same ticket to ten people: traffic jam, bickering, and wrangling. – Offer free tickets to gentlemen or ladies who are notoriously unbalanced, irritable, or eccentric and likely to provoke uproars with obscene gestures, pinching women, or other freakishness. Sprinkle the seats with dust to make people itch and sneeze, etc.
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> (1973: 130)

In this artistic spectacle, members of the audience became actors merely through the impact of shock and the power of provocation. Throughout, they were watched with anger, excitement, amusement, or malice by the other spectators and organizers. In Abramović's performance, too, the transformation of some spectators into actors would have aroused contradictory emotions in the remaining spectators: shame for having lacked the courage to interfere oneself; outrage or even anger due to the premature conclusion of the performance, preventing one from seeing how far the performer would have still been willing to go in her self-torture; or relief and contentment about someone finally deciding to end the ordeal of the performer and most probably also that of the audience.[5]

Whatever the final assessment of the similarities and differences, Abramović's performance notably exhibited elements of ritual as well as spectacle, that is to say, it hinted both at a religious and a fairground context. In fact, it constantly oscillated between the two. It was ritualistic[6] by virtue of engendering a transformation of the performer and certain spectators but lacked the publicly recognized change in status or identity, as is often the case with rituals. It resembled a spectacle by virtue

of eliciting awe and horror from the spectators, shocking and seducing them into becoming voyeurs.

Such a performance eludes the scope of traditional aesthetic theories. It vehemently resists the demands of hermeneutic aesthetics, which aims at understanding the work of art. In this case, understanding the artist's actions was less important than the experiences that she had while carrying them out and that were generated in the audience. In short, the transformation of the performance's participants was pivotal.

This is not to say that there was nothing for the audience to interpret; the objects used and the actions carried out on and with them could indeed be construed as signs. The five-pointed star, for example, would have given rise to the most diverse mythical, religious, cultural, and political associations – not least as the established symbol for socialist Yugoslavia. When the artist framed the photograph with a five-pointed star and then cut a corresponding star into her abdomen, the audience might have interpreted these actions as a symbol for the ubiquity of the state. This ubiquity manifests itself to the individual through its laws, provisions, and injustices; the audience might have read Abramović's actions as a symbol of the violence that the individual suffers at the hands of the state and that inscribes itself onto the body. When the performer used a silver spoon and a crystal glass at a table set with a white tablecloth, the audience might have been reminded of daily activities in a middle-class setting, while the excessive consumption of honey and wine may also have implied criticism of consumerist, capitalist society. Alternatively, the audience might have read these actions as a reference to the Last Supper. In this context they would have then interpreted the flagellation – which in another context might have alluded to sadomasochistic sex practices – as a reference to the flagellation of Christ and his followers. When the artist lay down on the cross of ice with her arms spread out, the audience would probably have made a connection to the crucifixion of Christ. They might even have read their own act of removing her from the cross as the prevention of a historical reenactment of the self-sacrifice or as a repetition of the removal from the cross. Overall, the audience could have interpreted the performance as an exploration of violence that ranged from self-harm to the sort of violence that individuals encounter at the hands and in the name of the state or religious communities. The audience could have seen it as a criticism of social conditions, which allow the individual to be sacrificed by the state and which require such self-sacrifice.

However plausible such interpretations might seem in retrospect, they remain incommensurable with the event of the performance. The audience would have attempted such interpretations only to a limited degree during the performance itself. The actions that the artist carried out did not simply mean "drinking and eating excessively," "cutting a five-pointed star into the abdomen," or "flagellating oneself;" instead, they accomplished precisely what they signified. They constituted a new, singular reality for the artist and the audience, that is to say, for all participants of the performance. This reality was not merely interpreted