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Review

Das Emanzipatorische Potenzial der Performance Art
(The Emancipatory Potential of Performance Art)

Sophia Firgau, Stuttgart, Germany: IBIDEM, 202. 1164pp.

Gwyneth Cliver*

Sophia Firgau's *Das Emanzipatorische Potenzial der Performance Art* (The Emancipatory Potential of *Performance Art*) is both a helpful introduction to performance art that could be well employed in both undergraduate and graduate classrooms, and a convincing scholarly argument for the transformative power of performance aesthetics. Firgau defines the genre of performance art, distinguishes it from both theater and public ritual performance, and explains the potential for personal, community, and civic transformation inherent in its formal characteristics. Firgau demonstrates that performance art transforms by crossing a number of conventional formal boundaries—for instance, those separating artist and audience and separating art and everyday life—and that, in so doing, it creates a

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threshold experience (*Schwellerfahrung*) whose liminal nature emancipates by emphasizing process over prescribed outcomes.

In chapters 2, 3, and 4, Firgau explains emancipation and performativity, and summarizes the development of performance art as a genre. These, by introducing content, defining terms, and elucidating theories clearly and concisely, would lend themselves well to the classroom. In chapter 2, Firgau explains that a broad definition of emancipation—whether from restrictive social convention or repressive social structures—does not limit itself to marginalized groups and can be applied to individuals and societies alike. Critically, emancipation cannot occur exclusively in the mind; it requires action. In chapter 3, Firgau outlines both the interest in linguistics since the 1950s in performativity, particularly in utterances that are also actions—such as the “I do” of a wedding ceremony—and the interest among humanities scholars since Judith Butler’s *Gender Trouble* (1990) in the physical performance of culture, in which identity formation becomes a process rather than a product. Because performance art is essentially heterogeneous in both content and form, Firgau emphasizes that it cannot be easily defined. But she differentiates performance art, which is self-referential and both a reflector and creator of reality, from theater, which she describes as the performance of fictional places, characters, and plots. She also differentiates performance art, which aims at process, from public ritual, which aims at outcome; she gives the example of a wedding ceremony as a ritual in which the aimed outcome is the marriage of two people. In other words, whereas both theater and public ritual employ performance to create a product, performance art takes as its aim the performance and its techniques themselves. Finally, in chapter 4, Firgau outlines the development of performance art as an aesthetic genre since Futurism, Dadaism, and the *avant garde* at the beginning of the twentieth century, focusing particularly on the happenings of the 1960s and feminism of the 1970s and 1980s.

In chapter 5, Firgau elucidates the myriad ways in which performance art transgresses formal and social boundaries. The power for emancipation lies in these transgressions themselves rather than in any rigidly expressed goal and is achieved by means of self-empowerment, the exposure of the boundaries themselves, the interruption of social restrictions, and the illumination of possible alternative realities. In five sub-chapters, Firgau explores how performance art transgresses definitions of genre by means of intermediality, the interaction of art and everyday life, the conflation of actor (in both senses of the word) and audience, corporeality in art, and the breaking of conventions for

appropriate aesthetic use of space. Performance art fundamentally questions and violates rigid binary divisions in these categories, for instance, between subject and object, performer and audience.

In three additional subchapters, Firgau explains how transgressions of genre, space, conventions, and taboos contribute to the fundamental power of performance art to transform individuals and society. Especially in the public sphere, the boundary between art and public protest blurs: art takes to the streets, literally and figuratively. All demonstrations are by definition performative and all performance art in a sense a demonstration. Particularly powerful are repeatable performances, such as “Duram Adam” (Standing Man) by Erdem Gündüz, who stood motionless and silent on Taksim Gezi Park in Istanbul in 2013, after the Gezi protests had been violently repressed. Slowly, a large group of mimickers followed his example and a silent, peaceful demonstration redeveloped. Movement of aesthetic production from conventional spaces like theaters or galleries to open public spaces contributes to the democratization of art, and the performative usurping of prohibited spaces contributes to the democratization of space—think of the Russian punk performance group Pussy Riot singing in a space of Moscow’s Cathedral of Christ the Savior from which women are barred. An aesthetic of provocation in performance art can be emancipatory on an individual level, by providing the participant with a cathartic experience of flouting taboos, and on a societal level, by shocking the public into participating in conversations about conventions, taboos, and discrimination. Performance art can achieve this cathartic experience corporeally-sensually, emotionally, cognitively, or socially. In so doing, the performance may irritate or even infuriate the public, but in overstepping boundaries, it exposes them for consideration and critique.

Finally, Firgau demonstrates that because it breaks down binary divisions between art and reality, subject and object, performer and audience, and performance space and public space, performance art creates by its very nature, by means of its formal structures regardless of its content, an in-between condition (*ein Dazwischen*) of liminality. Firgau borrows this concept from Victor Turner, who explains how rites of passage involve a liminal period in which new experiences allow for personal transformation. For Firgau, performance art differs from Turner’s rites of passage, however, because unlike them it does not have a predetermined goal to be reached when the liminal period ends. Instead, the goal of the performance is the liminal condition *per se*. Firgau is careful not to suggest that performance artists create without expectation or intention, but that the spontaneity,

unpredictability, and at least partial uncontrollability of the performance produce circumstances that make the performance fundamentally ambivalent. By breaking taboos, crossing boundaries, and exposing repressive structures without a clear aim, performance art puts artists and public alike in a liminal crisis state in which personal and social self-reflection and transformation are possible. It forces participants to acknowledge the social construction of the boundaries and conventions being transgressed and, in response, to reflect on the possibility of the “both-and” as a form of resistance to aesthetic and structural dichotomies. Firgau concludes with a call to performance, citing its transformative social-pedagogical potential; a transformation of the mind leads to transformative action. She illustrates this potential with a comment in the guest book for “Between Borders,” a performance art piece Firgau herself installed with Tabea Pippka in Mönchengladbach, Germany, in 2016, in which visitors were randomly chosen either to be allowed to cross or prevented from crossing simulated border controls: “I have to change something in my thinking and actions. I want to become involved.” (Ich muss was in meinem Denken und Handeln ändern. Ich will mich engagieren.)