

Performativity and Transgression

An Introduction

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The idea to explore the interrelations of performativity and transgression in the performing arts and in the public sphere evolved some years ago when we started organizing an annual conference of the Association of Nordic Theatre Scholars in collaboration with the Union of Estonian Theatre Researchers and Critics. The conference titled “Performativity and Transgression” took place at the University of Tartu, Estonia 13-15 October 2022. With the event, we also celebrated the thirtieth anniversary of theatre studies at the University of Tartu.

Estonian video artist, scenographer and theatre director Ene-Liis Semper, Norwegian director and performance artist Vegard Vinge, and German scenographer and director Ida Müller gave fascinating keynote speeches about their transgressive works in the theatre. In addition, thirty-one papers were presented at the conference by Nordic theatre scholars, Estonian literary researchers and theatre makers. Overall, more than 100 participants attended the event.

This special issue is based predominantly on the papers presented at the conference. We invited contributions to address the following questions: Why and how does performativity make certain issues, styles, or tools transgressive? What are the strategies, processes, and consequences of transgressions? What are the debated boundaries, norms, conventions, and traditions in the performing arts? What kind of cultural, social, political, and religious contexts cause transgressions? Who has established the restrictions that performative transgressions try to overcome, and why?

In the following, we define and contextualize the notions of performativity and transgression and introduce articles that tackle the topics.

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Performativity

Performativity is an interdisciplinary term widely used across the humanities and social sciences, and it has also become one of the key notions in theatre and performance studies. This notion's rapid spread and increasing popularity is obviously due to the so-called performative turn in the arts which occurred in the 1960s. Profound aesthetic changes in the visual arts, music, and literature, not to speak of theatre, that have been described as "performatization of the arts", led to the turn in understanding and conceptualizing culture more generally.¹ The key aspect of the performative turn is identified by Erika Fischer-Lichte² as "the transformation from a work of art into an event", usually into a kind of performance.

The term *performative* was coined, as we know, by the British linguist John L. Austin in the 1950s, and popularized in his book *How to Do Things with Words* (1962). Performative utterances have been widely investigated in linguistics and communication studies. In narratology, the term *performativity* is applied to written narratives and refers to the imitation of a performance that readers reconstruct or imagine in their minds.³ The impact of linguistics and narratological studies on theatre research has been, however, much less than the influence of Judith Butler, who developed Austin's theory to highlight the social dimension of the notions of performative and performativity. When Austin focused on performativity in language, Butler emphasized bodily actions, claiming that identities (particularly gender identity) are constructed and performative, in the sense that they are created "through a stylized repetition of acts"⁴ by conventional gestures, movements, patterns of action, etc. Thus, unlike Austin, she considers performativity not a one-off act, but a quoting, norm-reproducing practice.

A range of ideas from language philosophy, cultural, and media studies and so on form the theoretical background or framework for understanding the concept of performativity. Still, they do not define exhaustively its meaning, as this depends heavily on the variety of discursive contexts where the term is used. Performativity is one of the so-called travelling concepts with several different, even contradictory meanings.

Performativity in Theatre and Performance

In the contemporary discourse about theatre, *performativity* has largely replaced the formerly common and popular concept of *theatricality*. The discussion about performativity has also intertwined with disputes over defining and distinguishing performance art and theatre.⁵ Indeed, *performativity* is closely associated with the similarly widespread notion of *performance*, which has become somewhat fluid, carrying multiple meanings. For the present articles, *performance* is understood broadly, denoting all kinds of performative events in the field of performing arts, as well as various cultural performances, different actions in public spaces, etc.

Despite significant differences in the perspectives from which it is seen, performativity usually stresses the notion of accomplishing, or executing an action. While studying the phenomenology of action, Alice Rayner observes that in the performative dimension, action is directed to someone's gaze, i.e. perceived publicly. This is a formative notion "at the public edge where the act opens into a sensory and social world"⁶, implying awareness of itself as performance or performative action.

If Austin applied his term only to speech acts – which also exist in the speech of performers on stage, contributing to the performative quality of a stage production – then later, the term has been expanded to cover physical acts in their materiality. Combined with Rayner's observation about the directedness of performative acts to the gaze of others, the notion proves to be essential for every performance – a live presentation of events in the co-presence of an audience.

Erika Fischer-Lichte⁷, who has adapted Austin's and Butler's ideas to theatre and performance,

1 See Fischer-Lichte 2014, 147–53.

2 Fischer-Lichte 2008, 23.

3 Berns.

4 Allain & Harvie 2014, 223.

5 Lahtinen 2020, 19.

6 Rayner 1994, 32. Other dimensions are expressed by the verbs *to act* and *to do*.

7 Fischer-Lichte 2008, 27.

argues that performative acts are self-referential (or non-referential) and constitute reality. Performativity opposes expressivity in that performative acts do not refer to or express any pre-existing essence or substance. Since they denote what they are doing, the very ability of performative acts to construct or constitute (new) realities shifts in the foreground instead. Richard Schechner even considers performativity a ubiquitous phenomenon, meaning that all social realities are constructed by performative acts as “a showing of a doing”.⁸ In summary, a performative is an act (whether verbal or bodily) in which something is made existent in carrying it out.⁹ Performativity can be imagined as the force inherent in performative acts.

Performativity and Representation. Performativity and Transgression

In contemporary theatre discourse, the notion of performativity sometimes tends to be used as clearly distinct from, if not opposed to the idea of representation. Indeed, wasn't the performative turn in theatre primarily a turn away from the referentiality and (mimetic) representation of reality? As stated above, performativity denotes actions that do not express or represent something previously given but bring about the reality they refer to.¹⁰ Still, these two notions are interconnected and interacting – they need each other.

On the one hand, theatre is, by its constitution, inherently “real”, made up of material things and live people. The real “can resurface in it at any moment,” as Hans-Thies Lehmann reminds us.¹¹ On the other hand, representation occurs through performative processes, although they are not necessarily engaged with signifying or depiction. Performance is always performative. Representation and performance, the represented realities and the process of representation form the fundamental structural split in theatre,¹² but the opposites meet at the deep bottom of the split. Rather, the question is what a researcher's (or spectator's) attention is focused on – either the performance's representational (referential, semiotic) or performative dimension.

The spectator's perspective, most definitely, cannot be left out of the discussion. According to Erika Fischer-Lichte, perception is fundamental to understanding performative processes characterized by fluidity and ambivalence. On the other hand, perception itself can also be regarded as an ambivalent performative process. Neither performance nor perception is wholly controllable or predictable.¹³ What realities are constructed on stage depends not only on what performers are doing but also on the qualities of spectatorial perception, first of all, how their attention is distributed. When performativity is enriched with the understanding of verbal and bodily acts and the dialogic nature of perception, it can help us to understand the centrality of performativity in our interaction with the arts and also in our existence as social subjects.¹⁴

Since Austin's and Butler's pioneering work, performatives (and performative processes) have been attributed the transformative potential, or the capacity to bring changes into the world and people's minds. (It is quite telling that the main characteristic of Fischer-Lichte's aesthetics of the performative is its “transformative power”.) It is helpful here to distinguish between weak, strong, and radical concepts of performative and performativity. According to Sybille Krämer and Marco Stahlhut the weak concept refers to the general pragmatic dimension of language and actions, the strong concept to the performative utterances that accomplish actions, and the radical one to the ability of self-referential performative acts to fulfil a strategic function that reveals and undermines the limits of dichotomous classifications and typologies.¹⁵ The radical concept of performativity implies the capability to cross the boundaries of a system (be it conceptual, aesthetic, or otherwise), thus dissolving the system itself.¹⁶ Thus, the scale of weak, strong and radical performative/performativity is based on the ability of an act to fulfil its intentions and make an impact. The potential of performativity for transformation and breaking

8 Schechner 2002, 141.

9 Lahtinen 2020, 27.

10 Fischer-Lichte 2012, 44.

11 Lehmann 2006, 103.

12 Lehmann 2006, 103.

13 Fischer-Lichte 2012, 101–2.

14 Marling & Saro 2021, 15.

15 Krämer & Stahlhut 2001, 56.

16 See Fischer-Lichte 2012, 44.

boundaries has manifested in manifold transgressive strategies and practices across the arts of the twentieth and the twenty-first century.

Here, we come to the relationship between performativity and transgression as one category of change. How does the concept of performativity contribute to conceptualizing and analysing transgression? Under what conditions do performative processes become transgressive?

Transgression as Crossing Boundaries

The term *transgression* comes from Latin (*transgressio*), meaning “a going over, across” or “a transgression of the law” and was first related particularly to Adam and the Fall.¹⁷ In theories of culture, transgression is understood as a crossing of boundaries, breaking physical or mental, aesthetic, social, or political norms and restrictions. The notion is thus an indispensable part of the limit or taboo which it transcends and completes but does not destroy.¹⁸ Transgressive acts violate the existing norms, yet simultaneously also explore, map, and transfer the values and norms.¹⁹ According to Chris Jenks, civility and transgression are interdependent, “the contours of each being defined in relation to the other.”²⁰ Transgression is thus an essential element of social experience.

Transgression as crossing boundaries is also an essential element of theatrical experience. In classical theatre, stage and auditorium, performers and spectators, were physically clearly separated from each other by a raised stage, ramp, or stage curtains. Thus, illusion and reality were safely distinguished. Nevertheless, performers throughout theatre history have crossed the boundaries of an individual when abandoning their former social status, embodied someone else, i.e. a character or just dared to be uncanny in a public space. According to Lehmann, theatre owes its existence to the audacity of transgressing collective boundaries: “Theatre itself would hardly have come about without the hybrid act that an individual broke free from the collective, into the unknown, aspiring to an unthinkable possibility; it would hardly have happened without the courage to transgress borders, all borders of the collective.”²¹ Lehmann’s citation, of course, also draws obvious parallels with Adam’s transgression of the law, although on a smaller scale. When at first the uncanny behaviour of performers was contained onto the stage, then, slowly, the rigid boundaries between stage and auditorium, performers and spectators, fiction and reality, and characters and performers began to fade, making theatre in itself a transgressive art form. As performance is always performative, then theatre is always transgressive.

The nature of transgression is fluid and context-dependent, influenced by the prevailing values and norms within a particular society. Borders, boundaries, and limits in social systems are constructions and could be considered both obstacles or opportunities for communication, exchange or transformation.²² It means that transgressive acts not only breach established values and norms but also serve to examine, map, and transmit them, functioning as a catalyst for societal change and artistic expression.

Transgressivity in the Arts

The position of the arts in a wider social system has certainly changed during the course of history. Since the end of the nineteenth century and the rise of modernism, Western art history is basically the history of transgressions. For example, naturalism and avant-garde movements were once perceived as strongly transgressive. One of the first to explore the phenomenon of transgressivity in theatre was Antonin Artaud, who, in his writings of the 1930s, established a strong connection between theatre and the plague. He emphasized the essentially epidemic nature of theatre, a kind of crisis in itself, that has a liberating effect. Artaud conceptualized an ideal theatre that would transgress societal, mental, and aesthetic boundaries, and where

17 Online Etymology Dictionary.

18 Bataille 2006 (1957), 63.

19 Jenks 2003, 2.

20 Foley et al. 2012, xii.

21 Lehmann 2006, 179.

22 Lotman 2009.

the audience would be engaged with (and provoked by) a performance on an affective level.²³

Blurring the boundaries between art and non-art has always been considered to be dangerous.²⁴ This strategy has already been used by futurists, dadaists, and surrealists but foremost by the performance artists of the 1960s and 1970s, who sought to overcome both artistic norms of representation and social norms of repression by using displaced taboo subjects and the experience of pain and danger.²⁵ Bodily exposure and the use of indecent language in public spaces have most often been seen as transgressions of societal norms, provoking discomfort and outrage. Such acts challenge established codes of conduct and can elicit strong reactions from individuals who perceive them as offensive or inappropriate. By intentionally blurring the line between art and non-art, these artists aimed to provoke and challenge societal conventions. These transgressive acts disrupted the status quo of the arts and prompted reflections and discussions about the boundaries of acceptability in society.

The idea that “theatre as aesthetic behaviour is unthinkable without the infringement of prescriptions, without transgression”²⁶ is widely discussed among researchers. In the liberal democracies of the twenty first century, artists seem to be unable to extend boundaries of the arts, since such boundaries seem not to exist anymore: no “avant-garde” implying a politics of transgression is possible anymore because “the transgressive politics of avantgardism presupposes cultural limits which are no longer relevant to the seemingly limitless horizon of multinational capitalism.”²⁷ This viewpoint challenges the conventional understanding of artistic innovation and societal boundaries, prompting further exploration into the dynamics of art, politics, and cultural evolution.

This line of thinking is also developed by Christopher B. Balme in his monograph of 2014. In his opinion, more or less everything is permitted at least on Western European stages, also highly explicit sexual content or blasphemous topics. Theatre has, in his view, become a private space, an intimate sphere for activities between consenting adults, conceding this at least in a progressive art-house theatre or festival context. Balme argues that theatre seldom becomes of interest to the wider public sphere and that Westernized audiences are prepared for transgressions. “Doors will occasionally be slammed but these are exceptions to a generally accepted state of tolerance. Artists largely enjoy constitutionally safeguarded and therefore unquestioned freedom to transgress against perceived taboos.”²⁸ According to Balme, in the closed (theatrical) sphere the freedom of art is practically boundless.

On the other hand, we see that with the rise of neoconservatism, there are voices that oppose this kind of viewpoint, that oppose any artistic transgression. This shows the changing relationship between the arts and the public sphere. Times are changing and we are entering into an era of new sensibilities. This phenomenon highlights the impact of societal changes on the arts and prompts us to consider the implications for freedom of expression in contemporary times. Some of these tendencies are also addressed in the articles of this volume.

Strategies of Transgression

What is at the heart of artistic transgression? According to the Estonian art curator and researcher Anders Härm²⁹, the persons or groups with transgressive behaviour sometimes just signal their disobedience to norms, attack them directly, construct their singular subject, or alternative collective reality (temporarily) on the other side of the norms, or sometimes attempt to create models for social transformation with the aim of changing the norms. Härm conceptualizes transgressivity as “disobedient bodies” – they subvert either a certain consensus, oppressive (or felt to be) symbolic order or valid political or moral framework.

Provocation has been a strategic tool in art-making since the beginning of the twentieth century. From Marcel Duchamp’s readymade sculpture “Fountain” in 1917 to the controversial

23 Artaud 1958.

24 Henderson 2015, Pop & Widrich 2016.

25 See Lehmann 2006, 140.

26 Lehmann 2006, 178.

27 Foster 1985, 145.

28 Balme 2014, 17.

29 Härm 2023, 20–1.

works of the YBAs (Young British Artists) in the 1990s, artists have often used provocation as a means to challenge societal norms and initiate critical discourse. The discussion on the strategic use of provocation in art-making and the commodification of transgressivity raises important points about the intersection of art, commerce, social order, and ethical considerations. Some avant-garde artists or institutions have indeed capitalized on transgressivity as a commodity and this is well documented in art history. On the other hand, commercially inclined or mainstream institutions try to avoid any disturbance of social order, and self-censorship may pre-empt any transgression on the part of artists. Such self-censorship and adherence to social norms can sometimes stifle artistic provocations, leading to debates about who has the right to represent whom and what subjects are appropriate for artistic exploration. Moreover, the recent #MeToo movement has brought to light ethical concerns regarding the conduct of artists and producers, further complicating the landscape of the arts. This confluence of political, aesthetic, and ethical challenges underscores the complex nature of contemporary art.

The authors of this volume discuss transgressivity as a wide concept. In the first part of the introduction, a distinction between weak, strong, and radical concepts of performative (performativity) was made. Insofar as every performance involves performative processes, this scale can also be applied to describe performances and their transformative potential. Following the line of thought further, we suggest a distinction between weak/soft³⁰ and strong transgression (transgressivity). Nevertheless, the scales of weak and strong performativity and transgression do not overlap because weak performativity, meaning just the aspect of action in performance, does not necessarily include weak transgression. Transgressivity can be more often found in strong and particularly radical performative acts, which intend to overcome boundaries and make a strong impact on its receivers. The authors of the special issue conceptualize strong transgression through nudity, sexuality, and acceptance of radical art in the public sphere, and soft transgression when they discuss crossing boundaries of artistic genres, and institutions, or analysing performances or plays situated in different cultural and geographical contexts. But radical performance, which includes the potential of crossing boundaries between aesthetic, social, political, etc. systems and can break down the system itself, approaches radical transgression.

Agreeing with Lehmann, the transgressive moment is essential for all arts. An art work, even a collective creation, emphasizes the individual and the unquantifiable nature of creativity, which stands in contrast to the calculated nature of laws. We suggest that the arts embody a realm beyond the reach of rules, as rules and laws attempt to regulate and calculate even the unpredictable.³¹ This viewpoint underscores the unique and subjective essence of artistic expression, which cannot be fully captured or governed by rules.

Overview of the Articles

The first three articles by Anneli Saro, Eva-Liisa Linder, and Riina Oruaas tackle representations of gender and sexuality in theatre and performance.

Anneli Saro, in her article “Sexuality and the Transgression of Gaze in the Theatre”, explores a minimal transgression – phenomenological aspects of bidirectional theatrical gaze. Saro uses the notion “soft transgression” by Patrice Pavis and theoretical approaches to viewing to contextualize the analysis of two productions: *72 Days* (2022, Estonian Academy of Music and Theatre) and *Sleepers* (2021, Lithuanian National Drama Theatre). The author claims that transgression in contemporary theatre is related first of all to the regime of new sensibilities of critical audiences who find certain representational traditions unacceptable.

Eva-Liisa Linder’s article “Icebreakers: The Untold Story of Queer Theatre in Post-Soviet Estonia” is the first treatise on Estonian queer theatre, a topic that has been considered taboo for a long time. At the backdrop of Western queer theatre, Linder gives an overview of queer themes, characters, and aesthetics throughout Estonian theatre history but focuses on the developments during the last thirty years. She concludes that Post-Soviet queer theatre has expanded from Anglo-American portrayals of closeted gay characters to representations of AIDS, transgender community, and drag culture.

30 Patrice Pavis (2020, 265) uses the notion of soft transgression.

31 Lehmann 2006, 178.

In the article “Performative Protest Actions in the Baltic States Against Sexual Violence in Russia’s War in Ukraine”, **Riina Oruaas** discusses the representational strategies of women in war in different media. The research is contextualized by Rancière’s essay “The Intolerable Image”, the notation of the public sphere, and the feminist research on women’s life stories. Oruaas highlights the performative power of protest actions and explores the created transgressive zone of disturbances where protest, art, media, mourning, etc. intertwine.

The following article by **Siemke Böhnisch** also investigates the interrelations of performance and public sphere, and a transgression of the performing arts field’s own closures. “Essentially Contested: Performative Transgression in and around *The Wastefulness Commission 2021* by Traavik.info” describes, examines, and discusses a rare case of an experimental artistic project in Norway. It was a project that ridiculed experimental theatre artists. Böhnisch discusses the transgressive performativity in the stage performances of Morten Traavik with a special focus on the re-enactments of passages of performance art works by Norwegian artists. All in all, it was a scandalous project that manipulated the Norwegian public sphere.

The next two articles are dedicated to transgressions in opera. **Justina Paltanavičiūtė**, in her text “Performative Representation of “Others” in the Opera Genre: The Case of *Have a Good Day!*”, presents the results of empirical research of the reception of the Lithuanian opera *Have a Good Day!* (2011). The experimental opera represents the professional activities of supermarket cashiers. Paltanavičiūtė’s research was carried out as a social experiment: the video of the performance was shown to people who work as cashiers. The cashiers were then interviewed, and qualitative content analysis of the gathered data was performed. Paltanavičiūtė discusses whether the performative representation of this socially vulnerable group of society affects and empowers them or if the real transgression to improve social reality fails.

Lauma Mellēna-Bartkeviča, in “Opera-film *Baņuta*: The Birth of a New Aesthetic Regime”, analyses a film that was shot during the COVID-19 pandemic in 2021 as an interart phenomenon. The Latvian national opera *Baņuta* (1920) was re-interpreted by an international team led by Latvian dramaturg Evarts Melnalksnis and German stage director Franziska Kronfoth. The author of the article finds that the new score, libretto, content (women in war, violence, otherness), and form (opera-film), as well as a replacement of representation with performativity makes *Baņuta* transgressive and offers a new aesthetic regime to a well-known national classic. At the same time, the film questions the relevance of the opera genre in the context of the performing arts today. This and the following article are linked with each other due to international collaborations and unusual working conditions or principles that have led to a soft transgression.

Daria Skjoldager-Nielsen, in her article “Polishing Reykjavík: the Third Space between Poland and Iceland”, takes as her case study a performance *Tu jest za drogo* (It’s Too Expensive here, 2022) by a theatre group named PóliS that is comprised of Polish and Icelandic professional and amateur actors. Skjoldager-Nielsen places her case study in a transmigrant context, the performance being embedded in two cultures. In addition, the author uses the concept of the third space in theatre and explains the power relations in the creation and reception processes of the performance and shows the transgression of boundaries. Since the performance was staged at the Reykjavík City Theatre, a prestigious location for Reykjavík’s cultural life, Skjoldager-Nielsen argues that this move transgressed social and political boundaries, perhaps even challenging the city’s cultural life and beliefs about the immigrant’s place in the city’s fabric.

Similarly to this article, **Zane Kreicberga**’s “Performances that Disappeared: Two Case Studies of Alternative Aesthetics during the Transition Period in Latvia in the Late 1980s” examines non-professional theatre and independent troupes. The article focuses on the short-lived activities of two troupes: The Obsessed House, led by Ilmārs Elerts, and The Theatre Studio No. 8, established by the graduates of the state theatre school. Kreicberga’s analysis reveals how these troupes transgressed the boundaries of established organizational forms and traditional mainstream aesthetics.

The last two articles tackle Finnish theatre in the period and aftermath of World War II, which was an inherently transgressive event in itself. In the article “When Contextual Events Become Central to Fiction: Theatre, Europe in Chaos, and the Finnish Winter War”, **Pirkko Koski** analyses and compares two plays about the Winter War: Hagar Olsson’s *Lumisota* (Snowball

Fight) (1939) and Robert E. Sherwood's *There Shall Be No Night* (1940). Both productions were suspended due to the tense political situation in the country during this period. Koski's case study shows how pacifist attitudes clash with political realities when a real war emerges behind fictional stories.

Hanna Korsberg's article "Theatre and Transgression: *Dirty Hands* at the Finnish National Theatre in 1948 and the Aftermath" looks into the aftermath of World War II, analysing the production of Jean-Paul Sartre's play *Dirty Hands* at the Finnish National Theatre in 1948. Performances were stopped after Finland received a diplomatic note about alleged hostile activity towards the Soviet Union. Korsberg examines in detail this episode, focusing on transgressive elements of the production and the strategies the theatre and the performers used to negotiate transgression.

Conclusions

As the selection of articles shows, transgression as a term and phenomenon can be interpreted quite broadly – some authors use it as overcrossing of physical (state, institutional, bodily) borders, others as overcrossing of symbolic boundaries (of a genre, and a habit, convention, norm or law). Of course, physical and symbolic violations often overlap and intensify the meaning of all kinds of border crossings.

Transgressivity can be viewed and measured on a scale from radical to weak transgression. The latter forms a grey, ambivalent zone in opposition to strong transgressions that generate heated debates on poetics and functions of the arts and often polarize audiences. As this special issue of *Nordic Theatre Studies* demonstrates, performativity and transgression are closely intertwined and often condition each other, since they both rely on action and impact.

Nevertheless, due to shifting political and cultural borders, social fragmentation and stratification, the position of the arts in society and the public sphere has become more complicated. One can even say that the transgressive potential of the arts has been rediscovered or retrieved by audiences and this changing relationship definitely deserves further research.

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