PERFORMANCE STUDIES

An introduction

Richard Schechner
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Introducing This Book, This Field, and Myself

The book you hold in your hand is "an" introduction to performance studies. There will be others, and that suits me just fine. The one overriding and underlying assumption of performance studies is that the field is wide open. There is no finality to performance studies, either theoretically or operationally. There are many voices, opinions, methods, and subjects. As I will show in chapter 2, anything at all can be studied "as" performance. But this does not mean performance studies as an academic discipline does not have certain specific subjects that it focuses on. Theoretically, performance studies is wide open; practically, it has developed in a certain way which I will discuss in this chapter.

Nor does this kind of openness mean there are no values. People want, need, and have standards by which to live, write, think, and act. As individuals and as parts of communities and nations people participate and interact with other people, other species, the planet, and whatever else is out there. But the values that guide people are not "natural," transcendent, God-given, or inalienable (despite the claim of the US Declaration of Independence). Values belong to ideology, science, the arts, religion, and other areas of human endeavor. Values are hard-won and contingent, changing over time according to social and historical circumstances. Values are a function of cultures, groups, and individuals. Values can be used to protect and liberate or to control and oppress. In fact, the difference between what is "liberty" and what is "oppression" depends a lot on where you are coming from.

This book embodies the values, theories, and practices of a certain field of scholarship as understood by one particular person in the seventh decade of his life. This person is a Jewish Hindu Buddhist atheist living in New York City, married, and the father of two children. He is a Professor of Performance Studies at New York University and the Editor of TDR: The Journal of Performance Studies. He directs plays, writes, lectures, and leads workshops. He has traveled and worked in many parts of the world. Who I am is not irrelevant. I will be leading you on a journey. You ought to know a little about your guide.

Because performance studies is so broad-ranging and open to new possibilities, no one can actually grasp its totality or press all its vastness and variety into a single book. My points of departure are my own teaching, research, artistic practice, and life experiences. But I am not limited by these. I will offer ideas far from my center, some even contrary to my values.

The Boxes

Before going on, I want to point out a feature of this book. My text includes almost no quotations, citations, or notes. Ideas are drawn from many sources, but the voice is my own. I hope this gives the reader a smoother ride than many scholarly texts. At the same time, I want my readers to hear many voices. The boxes offer alternative opinions and interruptions. The boxes open the conversation in ways I may not be able to reach. They are hyperlinks. They help enact some of the diversity of performance studies. I want the effect to be of a seminar with many hands raised or of a computer desktop with many open windows.

What Makes Performance Studies Special

Performances are actions. As a discipline, performance studies takes actions very seriously in four ways. First, behavior is the "object of study" of performance studies. Although performance studies scholars use the "archive" extensively—what is in books, photographs, the archaeological record, historical remains, etc.—their dedicated focus is on the "repertory"—namely, what people do in the activity of their doing it. Second, artistic practice is a big part of the performance studies project. A number of performance studies scholars are also practising artists working in the avantgarde, in community-based performance, and elsewhere; others have mastered a variety of non-Western and Western traditional forms. The relationship between studying performance and doing performance is integral.
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Third, fieldwork as "participant observation" is a much-prized method adapted from anthropology and put to new uses. In anthropological fieldwork, participant observation is a way of learning about cultures other than that of the fieldworker. In anthropology, for the most part, the "home culture" is Western, the "other" non-Western. But in performance studies, the "other" may be a part of one's own culture (non-Western or Western), or even an aspect of one's own behavior. That positions the performance studies fieldworker at a Brechtian distance allowing for criticism, irony, and personal commentary as well as sympathetic participation. In an active way, one performs fieldwork. Taking this critical distance from the objects of study and self invites revision, the recognition that social circumstances—including knowledge itself—are not fixed, but subject to the "rehearsal process" of testing and revising. Fourth, it follows that performance studies is actively involved in social practices and Advocacies. Many who practice performance studies do not aspire to ideological neutrality. In fact, a basic theoretical claim is that no approach or position is "neutral." There is no such thing as neutral or unbiased. The challenge is to become as aware as possible of one's own stances in relation to the positions of others—and then take steps to maintain or change positions.

Performances—as I will show in some detail in chapter 2—occur in many different instances and kinds. Performance must be construed as a "broad spectrum" or "continuum" of human actions ranging from ritual, play, sports, popular entertainments, the performing arts (theatre, dance, music), and everyday life performances to the enactment of social, professional, gender, race, and class roles, and on to healing (from shamanism to surgery), the media, and the internet. Before performance studies, Western thinkers believed they knew exactly what was and what was not "performance." But in fact, there is no historically or culturally fixable limit to what is or is not "performance." Along the continuum new genres are added, others are dropped. The underlying notion is that any action that is framed, presented, highlighted, or displayed is a performance. Many performances belong to more than one category along the continuum. For example, a football player spiking the ball and pointing a finger in the air after scoring a touchdown is performing a dance and enacting a ritual as part of his professional role as athlete and popular entertainer.

As a method of studying performances, this new discipline is still in its formative stage. Performance studies draws on and synthesizes approaches from a wide variety of disciplines in the the social sciences, feminist studies, gender studies, history, psychoanalysis, queer theory, semiotics, etymology, cybernetics, area studies, media and popular culture theory, and cultural studies. But as Barbara Kirshenblatt-Gimblett (birthdate withheld), the founding chair of NYU's Department of Performance Studies, notes, "performance studies is more than the sum of its inclusions" (see Kirshenblatt-Gimblett box 1). Performance studies does not study texts, architecture, visual arts, or any other item or artifact of art or culture as such. When texts, architecture, visual arts, or anything else are looked at, they are studied "as" performances (a concept I will develop in chapter 2). That is, they are regarded as practices, events, and behaviors, not as "objects" or "things." The question of "liveness," as Kirshenblatt-Gimblett points out, is at the heart of performance studies. Thus, performance studies does not "read" an action or ask what "text" is being enacted. Rather the emphasis is on inquiring about the "behavior" of, for example, a painting: the ways it interacts with those who view it, thus evoking different reactions and meanings; and how it changes meaning over time and in different contexts. The performance studies scholar examines the circumstances in which the painting was created and exhibited; and looks at how the gallery or building displaying it shapes its presentations. These kinds of performance studies questions can be asked of any event or material object. Of course, when performance studies deals with behavior—artistic, everyday, ritual, playful, and so on—the questions asked are closer to how performance theorists have traditionally approached theatre and the other performing arts. I discuss and apply this kind of analysis more fully in every chapter of this book.

Barbara Kirshenblatt-Gimblett (prefers not to have her birthdate disclosed): American performance theorist specializing in the aesthetics of everyday life, Jewish performance, and folklore. She was the founding chair of NYU's Department of Performance Studies from 1981 to 1993. Author of Destination Culture (1998).

In performance studies, questions of embodiment, action, behavior, and agency are dealt with interculturally. This approach recognizes two things. First, in today's world, cultures are always interacting—there is no totally isolated group. Second, the differences among cultures are so profound that no theory of performance is universal: one size does not fit all. Nor are the playing fields where cultures interact level. The current means of cultural interaction—globalization—enacts extreme imbalances of power, money, access to media, and control over resources. Although this is reminiscent of colonialism, globalization is also different from
Performance Studies is more than a sum of its Inclusions

Performance studies starts from the premise that its objects of study are not to be divided up and parcelled out, medium by medium, to various other disciplines – music, dance, dramatic literature, art history. The prevailing division of the arts by medium is arbitrary, as is the creation of fields and departments devoted to each.

To study performance, as an artform that lacks a distinctive medium (and hence uses any and all media), requires attending to all the modalities in play. This distinguishes performance studies from those that focus on a single modality – dance, music, art, theatre, literature, cinema. For this and other reasons, performance studies is better equipped to deal with most of the world’s artistic expression, which has always synthesized or otherwise integrated movement, sound, speech, narrative, and objects.

A provisional coalescence on the move, performance studies is more than the sum of its inclusions. While it might be argued that “as an artform, performance lacks a distinctive medium” (Carroll 1986: 78), embodied practice and event is a recurring point of reference within performance studies. What this means, among other things, is that presence, liveness, agency, embodiment, and event are not so much the defining features of our objects of study as issues at the heart of our disciplinary subject. While some may address these issues in relation to plays performed on a stage, others may address them in relation to artifacts in a museum vitrine.

We take our lead form the historical avant-garde and contemporary art, which have long questioned the boundaries between modalities and gone about blurring them, whether those boundaries mark off media, genres, or cultural traditions. What they found interesting – Chinese opera, Balinese barong, circus – we find interesting.

Such confounding of categories has not only widened the range of what can count as an artmaking practice, but also gives rise to performance art that is expressly not theatre and art performance that dematerializes the art object and approaches the condition of performance.


colonialism in key ways. Proponents of globalization promise that “free trade,” the internet, and advances in science and technology are leading to a better life for the world’s peoples. Globalization also induces a sameness at the level of popular culture – “world beat” and the proliferation of American-style fast foods and films are examples. The two ideas are related. Cultural sameness and seamless communications make it easier for transnational entities to get their messages across. This is crucial because governments and business alike increasingly find it more efficient to rule and manage with the collaboration rather than the opposition of workers. In order to gain their collaboration, information must not only move with ease globally but also be skilfully managed. The apparent victory of “democracy” and capitalism goes hand in hand with the flow of controlled media. Whether or not the internet will be, finally, an arena of resistance or compliance remains an open question. There are areas of resistance to the new world order, but these are often stigmatized as “rogue states” or “fundamentalists.” I further discuss these questions in chapter 8.

Performance studies explores a wide array of subjects and uses many methodologies to deal with this contradictory and turbulent world. But unlike more traditional academic disciplines, performance studies does not organize its subjects and methods into a unitary system. These days many intellectuals know that knowledge cannot be easily, if at all, reduced to coherence. In fact, performance studies scholars consciously and eagerly express the tensions and partialities driving today’s world. No one in performance studies is able to profess the whole field. This is because performance studies has a huge appetite for encountering, even inventing, new kinds of performing while insisting that cultural knowledge can never be complete (see Geertz box). If performance studies were an art, it would be avant-garde.

As a field, performance studies is sympathetic to the avant-garde, the marginal, the offbeat, the minoritarian, the subversive, the twisted, the queer, people of color, and the formerly colonized. Projects within performance studies often act on or act against strictly ordered or settled hierarchies of ideas, organizations, or people. Therefore, it is hard
Clifford Geertz

The Pitfalls of Cultural Analysis

Cultural analysis is intrinsically incomplete. And, worse than that, the more deeply it goes, the less complete it is. It is a strange science whose most telling assertions are its most tremulously based, in which to get somewhere with the matter at hand is to intensify the suspicion, both your own and that of others, that you are not quite getting it right. But that, along with plaguing subtle people with obtuse questions, is what being an ethnographer is like.

1973, The Interpretation of Cultures, 29.

to imagine performance studies getting its act together, or even wanting to. Those working in the field resist creating a new, singular body of knowledge or methodology of the kind cosmologists dream of in their quest for the “theory of everything.”

Literacies, Performatics, and Texters

Some people complain that literacy is declining not only in terms of basic reading skills, but also in what people read and how they write. The universality of television plus the growing global availability of the internet gives speech and visual communication a strong lift over conventional literacy. This affects all strata of culture from the ways ordinary people communicate to the art of writing. Few novelists in the early twenty-first century care to write panoptic, “big” novels such as Leo Tolstoy’s (1828–1910) War and Peace or even hyperliterate works such as James Joyce’s (1882–1941) Ulysses or Finnegans Wake. Andy Warhol (1928–87) was more than a little right when he predicted that everyone would have fifteen minutes of fame. Life is lived too fast; events and “stars” come and go before we can really take them in. The form and pressure of such an age is expressed more in the compact disc, music video, or hyperlinked email than it is in the considered piece of literature.


Another way of understanding what’s happening is to regard our time as witnessing an explosion of multiple literacies. People are increasingly “body literate,” “aural literate,” “visually literate,” and so on. Films come at all levels of sophistication, as do recorded musics. Email is a burgeoning of letter writing. Not the elegant hand-written correspondence of eighteenth and nineteenth century Europe and Europeanized America, but a rapid part-words-part-pictures hypertext type of communication. People not only gab on their cell phones to converse via instant messaging, but they also read each other’s body languages across cultures. They travel actually or virtually to far-away places interacting across ethnic, national, linguistic, religious, and gender boundaries. Operating at these levels and in so many directions takes multiple literacies. These multiple literacies are “performatives.” Writing, speaking, and just about everything else is being transformed into performances. Exactly what that means and how it is being accomplished is a principal subject of this book. A world of multiple performatics is the purview of performance studies. Or to put it another way, the academic discipline of performance studies is emerging as a response to an increasingly performative world.

Traditional literacy is being forced to the extremes—a low-level pulp-and-tabloid literacy and a high-level specialized literacy. What is being squeezed is mid-level, or ordinary, literacy. The ability to read, write, and calculate above a basic level is probably declining in so-called “advanced” societies. Whether literacy will ever be achieved globally is open to question. Computers are taking over basic tasks. For example, a clerk in a store simply swipes a bar-coded item past the scanner, enters the amount of money proffered, and waits for the computerized cash register to read out how much to give in change. Efficient voice-recognition programs transcribe speaking into writing. A short time from now, a person will speak in one language and her words will be typed out (or spoken) in another. Many web pages already automatically translate into several languages. At least at the level of basic comprehension and
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Dwight Conquergood

The Five Areas of Performance Studies

1. **Performance and Cultural Process.** What are the conceptual consequences of thinking about culture as a verb instead of a noun, a process instead of product? Culture as an unfolding performative invention instead of reified system, structure, or variable? What happens to our thinking about performance when we move it outside of aesthetics and situate it at the center of lived experience?

2. **Performance and Ethnographic Praxis.** What are the methodological implications of thinking about fieldwork as the collaborative performance of an enabling fiction between observer and observed, knower and known? How does thinking about fieldwork as performance differ from thinking about fieldwork as the collection of data? (...

3. **Performance and Hermeneutics.** What kinds of knowledge are privileged or displaced when performed experience becomes a way of knowing, a method of critical inquiry, a mode of understanding? (...

4. **Performance and Scholarly Representation.** What are the rhetorical problematics of performance as a complementary or alternative form of "publishing" research? What are the differences between reading an analysis of fieldwork data, and hearing the voices from the field interpretively filtered through the voice of the researcher? (...) What about enabling people themselves to perform their own experience? (...

5. **The Politics of Performance.** What is the relationship between performance and power? How does performance reproduce, enable, sustain, challenge, subvert, critique, and naturalize ideology? How do performances simultaneously reproduce and resist hegemony? How does performance accommodate and contest domination?

1991, "Rethinking Ethnography," 190

The “Inter” of Performance Studies

Performance studies resists fixed definition. Performance studies does not value “purity.” It is at its best when operating amidst a dense web of connections. Academic disciplines are most active at their ever-changing interfaces. In terms of performance studies, this means the interactions between theatre and anthropology, folklore and sociology, history and performance theory, gender studies and psychoanalysis, performativity and actual performance events — and more. New interfaces will appear as time goes on, and older ones will disappear. Accepting “inter” means opposing the establishment of any single system of knowledge, values, or subject matter. Performance studies is open, multivocal, and self-contradictory. Therefore, any call for a “unified field” is, in my view, a misunderstanding of the very fluidity and playfulness fundamental to performance studies.

At a more theoretical level, what is the relation of performance studies to performance proper? Are there any limits to performativity? Is there anything outside the purview of performance studies? These questions will be discussed more fully in chapters 2 and 5. For now, let me say that the performative occurs in places and situations not traditionally marked as “performing arts,” from dress-up and drag to certain kinds of writing and speaking. Accepting the performative as a category of theory makes it increasingly difficult to sustain a distinction between appearances and reality, facts and make-believe, surfaces and depths. Appearances are actualities — neither more nor less so than what lies behind or beneath appearances. Social reality is constructed through and through. In modernity, what was “deep” and “hidden” was thought to be “more real” than what was on the surface (Platonism dies hard). But in postmodernity, the relationship between depths and surfaces is fluid; the relationship is dynamically convective.

Ethical Questions

Many who practice performance studies resist or oppose the global forces of capital. Fewer will concede that these forces know very well — perhaps even better than we — how to perform, in all meanings of that word. The interplay of
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efficiency, productivity, activity, and entertainment – in a word, performance – informs and drives countless operations. In many key areas of human activity “performance” is crucial to success. The word crops up in apparently very different circumstances. These divergent uses indicate a basic overall similarity at the theoretical level. Performance has become a major site of knowledge and power (see McKenzie box). In relation to this relatively new situation, many ethical questions remain nakedly open. The most important concern “intervention” – biologically, militarily, culturally. When, if ever, ought force be used to “save” or “protect” people – and why say yes to Kosovo and no to Rwanda? Who has the right and/or the responsibility to say yes or no? What about genetic intervention? Who can be against preventing or curing diseases and increasing crop yields? But what about cloning? Or modifying human traits? What constitutes a “disease” and what traits are “bad”? The nineteenth and twentieth centuries saw some very nasty things done under the aegis of a eugenic “improvement” of the human species. What about genetically engineering “super athletes” (see Longman box)? In terms of art and scholarship, what, if any, ought to be the limits to creativity and cultural borrowings? I will take up some of these questions in chapter 8.

Jon McKenzie

Performance is a New Subject of Knowledge

[...]. Performance will be the 20th and 21st centuries what discipline was to the 18th and 19th, that is, an onto-historical formation of power and knowledge [italics in original][...]

Like discipline, performance produces a new subject of knowledge, though one quite different from that produced under the regime of panoptic surveillance. Hyphenated identities, transgerdered bodies, digital avatars, the Human Genome Project – these suggest that the performative subject is constructed as fragmented rather than unified, decentered rather than centered, virtual as well as actual. Similarly, performative objects are unstable rather than fixed, simulated rather than real. They do not occupy a single, “proper” place in knowledge; there is no such thing as the thing-in-itself. Instead, objects are produced and maintained through a variety of sociotechnical systems, overcoded by many discourses, and situated in numerous sites of practice. While disciplinary institutions and mechanisms forged Western Europe’s industrial revolution and its system of colonial empires, those of performance are programming the circuits of our postindustrial, postcolonial world. More profoundly than the alphabet, printed book, and factory, such technologies as electronic media and the Internet allow discourses and practices from different geographical and historical situations to be networked and patched together, their traditions to be electronically archived and played back, their forms and processes to become raw materials for other productions. Similarly, research and teaching machines once ruled strictly and linearly by the book are being retooled by a multimedia, hypertextual metatechnology, that of the computer.

2001, Perform Or Else, 18

Jere Longman

Genetically Altered Athletes

Genes serve as a script that directs the body to make proteins. It seems fantastic today to think that injecting a gene could result in more fast-twitch muscle fibers, enabling a sprinter to run 100 meters in six seconds instead of just under 10. Or injecting a gene that could increase oxygen-carrying capacity so that a marathoner could run 26.2 miles in one and a half hours instead of just over two. Some scientists and Olympic committee members think genetic engineering in sports is a decade away. Some believe it may appear in two years. Still others believe crude forms might already be in use, at great health risk to athletes. [...]. Instead of repeatedly ingesting pills or taking injections, an athlete may be able, with a single insertion of genetic material, to sustain bulked-up muscle mass or heightened oxygen-carrying capacity for months or even years. Such genetic manipulation would be extremely difficult, if not virtually impossible to detect [...].

Conclusion

Performance studies came into existence because of a radically changed intellectual and artistic landscape emerging during the late third of the twentieth century. Combined with a dissatisfaction with the status quo was an explosion of knowledge and a new means of distributing this knowledge via the internet. The world no longer appeared as a book to be read but as a performance to participate in. The academic discipline of performance studies—a fully vested department only in a few places but a presence in many—arose to deal with these swiftly changing circumstances. But even as performance studies scholars began to research, organize, and interrogate the performative they experienced everywhere, they were faced with ethical and political questions. Ought there to be any limit to the ways information is gathered, processed, and distributed? Should one intervene in the interest of “human rights” or respect local cultural autonomy at whatever cost? Artists and scholars are playing decisive roles in raising these ethical questions. One job of this textbook is to help you think about and act on these questions.

THINGS TO THINK ABOUT

1. From what academic disciplines or fields does performance studies draw its issues and methods? To what fields or disciplines can performance studies be applied?
2. Why do you think “performance studies” can/cannot be helpful in dealing with some of the world’s great problems, such as the environment, oppression and exploitation of people, over-population, and war?

THINGS TO DO

1. Form a circle. Let each person give her/his name. Let others ask questions of the speaker. Different kinds of questions, “Why are you taking this course?” “Where do you live?” “Do you have friends in the class?” Go around the circle, but not in any particular order. Continue until everyone in the class knows everyone else’s name.
2. Have someone walk across the room. Someone else describes that simple action. Then let the person walk across the room again, this time “showing” what previously they were just “doing.” The second person again describes the action. The class discusses the differences between “just walking” and “showing just walking.”

SUGGESTED READINGS


