

## *Discomforting Presentations*

I'm uncomfortable speaking here—as the Germans say, having just returned from there myself—in my *Haus*, in my institution. Not that I am uncomfortable speaking from my place or, especially, from the authority of a place. (I am quite willing to displace that stature... however, not necessarily replace it.) Most of all I am uncomfortable in that I have already spoken, not from my place but by displacement—which was, moreover, a double displacement. I have already “spoken” (I use quotation marks advisedly) at the previous symposium in Banff through the ventriloquism of a DVD, which I sent not so much as a representation but perhaps as a representative in the diplomatic sense, even though it could have been seen as an undiplomatic provocation, in that that second displacement enunciated the displacement of the discipline itself, or the discipline of the discipline, by leaving. All as a performance. Was this DVD only a representation, or was it really a performance? In spite of the provocation and the unsettling of convention of what was in, on, or through that DVD, OAAG seems to want me back. If for a repeat performance, I fear that I fail.

I am appearing as a courtesy to OAAG this time and not so much as a provocation, and if we examine the difference between these two—between courtesy and provocation—we will see that they are not defined by the mere fact or non-fact of being present or absent. So, here I am, here now, in my place, speaking where we are on display amongst ourselves, *chez nous*. Speaking, not curating. Would this not be the condition of performance, of a context, however, wherein we are judged for our performances?

So here I am, here now, in my place, speaking in person, without a script, improvising from notes. Hence my discomfort, because how can this speaking, which is not a performance, where I cannot control the context and codes completely but am subject to others, nonetheless, be at all performative? *Performative*. Here is the issue.

Why should the performative be the issue? Or, why here would a curatorial performance, a performance by a curator, become an issue? Are these two different issues: a curatorial performance and a performance by a curator? And, to add a third, the difference between performance and the performative? And a fourth, not to complicate the issue, but the issue of this symposium proposed by a performance artist about the performance of curating.

Let's halt an instant or two.

Firstly, or the first discomfort; let's call it the linguistic discomfort. “A curatorial project, like most performative work, sets up a situation of interrelationships in time and space.” I don't mean to unfairly pick on Paul Couillard in this quotation from his abstract. It just happens to be the closest. It's always useful to trace the transformation of a word from one context to another, or from its historical origin, to see what analytical value this distinction may reawaken. The word “performative,” for example, originated as a conceptual invention by the English philosopher J. L. Austin, and was then picked up in one of those periodic returns of interest in performance art, in the late 1970s, coincidental

with the development of postmodernism. People were attracted to the coincidence between these words “performance” and the “performative,” but the words have now been completely confused, because “performative” has been transformed handily into an adjective or replacement for “performance.” (There is another interesting return, as we’ve just heard earlier today, of performance, but curiously not through any actual curiosity of being threatened by it, by the here and now of performance, but through its reception in documentation. This is beside the issue here, though.)

I want to get back to the term “performative” because the term in Austin’s sense was an important distinction. Not all sentences make sense in the same way; some of them in fact, he says, are not nonsense, they just escape the logic of verification. Constative sentences describe and therefore have some sort of referential value and, thus, can be judged for their truth-value. “This is what curating is.” “This is what I do in curating.” A performative statement does not describe a situation but rather changes it; in other words, in saying, it does. It’s an act. By saying, something happens. Something is transformed. So it’s an interesting concept that has a lot of relevance to performance, but I also I think that it’s a concept that interestingly can be applied—through the various transformations that invention has since developed, not through Anglo-American philosophy, but by Derrida and Lyotard—to curating, which I attempted for myself long ago in *Thinking Through Curating*.

Secondly. Second discomfort. But a discomfort for whom? When I wrote the Banff presentation, I asked myself uncomfortable questions, but I then had fun turning this paper into a video, which became a performance of sorts. The text is serious. The text is of consequence, that is, the text has certain consequences for the discipline. But the video is not necessarily serious—or, I had fun making the video, or, I used the video to make fun of myself. I’m okay with this, because I am not afraid to displace myself within my discipline. The DVD wasn’t just about curating; it was an homage to my shirts. So for those who have seen it, you will have noticed that it’s a Five Shirts Production. My shirts were a way of working with time, of disrupting time, but also were formal elements, and references to experimental and auteur film history, etc.

Now, I could go on *describing A Way of Curating*, but what’s the use? It’d be more interesting for me if I actually performed again here. Which I’m failing to do, because, thirdly, and even though we’re not halting at the number two, my present discomfort is the fact that I *have* failed. I intended another performance today, but in the form of a music video this time. I didn’t have time to work it out. Or time to compel my two collaborators, who, once again, would have been Emelie Chhangur, who collaborated on the Banff video, and also Brian Joseph Davis, who would write the music. My original intention, in which I’ve failed and may continue to fail, was to create a music video to be called *Coyote*. It’s an inhabitation of another performance (maybe with a nod of historical reference, as well, towards Clive Robertson), in that it would look at Joseph Beuys’s performance from 1974, *I Like America and America Likes Me*, where Beuys caged himself with a coyote for a number of days in New York. Except it’s going to be from the point of view of the coyote. Or not necessarily from the point of view of the coyote, but asking questions of the coyote which nobody asks: “Where did you come from? Where

did you go?” Anyway, it’s still speculative. I wrote some of the lyrics but in the end I knew that it was just procrastinating from working on the AGYU January opening exhibition. You have to find some redeeming fun wherever you can as a curator. Or director.

But on the other hand, there would be an other discomfort, because the coyote pissed a lot, and somehow this would have to be performed, in front of you, through some of the connotations of the music happening in the mid-1970s, such as that of Patti Smith. So, fourthly, what is performative in what I perform here, or fail to perform, not delivering *Coyote*? Failure would not *be* performative, but the failure *of* the performative. Are curators failing in the performative? All I can do here is to announce a failure and promise a delivery later. But what would I be performing when I propose to perform in *Coyote*? Would I be performing, performing myself, performing a critique? Does the form of curatorial address have to take the form of the art? What happens when it does? What would curating then be, and could curators perform it? Or could only performance curators perform it?

Fifthly, the topic of the conference. My discomfort that, after all, I am still out of place in *my* context. Out of context in this re-placing that somebody else has decided for me: “*Thematic Role Call: (re)Placing Curating*.” An artist. No problem. That’s my job, to be supplanted by artists. That’s a curator’s function. But a function is different from a practice. You’re demanding a transformation of my practice as a curator from the point of view of an artist, not from the point of view of a curator where it takes place. The two are different.

Now, maybe I could ... well, who knows whether the subject of this conference is in part relational aesthetics? (i.e., “This roundtable discussion explores the role of the curator not as a fixed position, but ‘in relation to’ [artworks, artists, audiences, institutions...]”) ... maybe I could curate a relational aesthetics show. In fact, in my early years at the Power Plant, I was thinking of a show not called—although reference came from Duchamp—*The Unhappy Readymade* but *The Happy Readymade* with Rirkrit Tiravanija and Jorge Pardo, but for one reason or another I didn’t develop it. Would it have changed me? Changed my curatorial practice? What is this demand of curatorial transformation by mere mention of a type of artistic practice? Is relational aesthetics to accomplish this “re-placing” for curating? Is it to take place through *my* idiom and genres? Obligation is of another order in working with artists. I have no problem with the thematic of the conference: as curators, how do we respond to change? In fact, this always has been the definition of curating: responding—in and through the invention of our own discipline—to what artists propose. When has the role of the curator ever been fixed?

So here we are in this conference where we are being asked by an artist, a performance artist, moreover ... so here we are, not to talk about curatorial performance or performance by curators, but about what curators might learn, once again in their *proper* place, learn from art practice (or changing art practices such as, for example, this so-called “relational aesthetics”), but not exceed it, that is, learn from a context in contexts that are not learning but doing, performatively—doing so for themselves, in their own

discipline. When I do my own thing, are my actions then out of bounds? To whom? Could I do my own thing here? What would this thing be?

We're talking about curating here. We're not curating. We're talking in language, in this language universe in which we perform otherwise. Outside of our usual, day-to-day functions, even those intellectual, could we describe our practice otherwise, that is, not as constative (as here) but by what would be no description but a performance? Could we take the risk right now to address these issues here?

This is what I attempted in *A Way of Curating*: a performance. Was this a performance by a curator or a curatorial performance? It was an idiom that produced itself out of the conditions, conventions, and assumptions of presentation *in* presentation, in the space and time of presentation, that is, as performance itself, but *in relation* to artworks. But *where* did this performance take place, in what contexts and through which conventions? In the film? Of the film in Banff?

So, discomfort on discomfort. Nothing but failure and incompleteness. However, these are not words that discount the context of performativity, because they're exactly the terms that supplant verification within this class of language gestures. Within the performative's context or situation, when something doesn't take or something doesn't happen, it's called infelicitous or unhappy—an unhappy performative. When you promise something you don't intend to do, a promise has still taken place; it's still a performative, but an unhappy one.

So, someone after me, somebody presenting today or tomorrow, make me happy: Go ahead, make my day.

Would this have been a performance? Would this have been a curatorial performance, a performance by a curator?

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