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Performativity, performance studies and digital cultures

MARTINA LEEKER, IMANUEL SCHIPPER AND TIMON BEYES

Performing the Digital seeks to map and reflect registers of performance and techno-social layers of performativity in today's digital cultures. The book's basic proposition is that the ubiquity and pervasiveness of digital media and their networked infrastructures profoundly influence the ways and styles in which performativity appears and is enacted. Contemporary technological apparatuses and media provoke new forms of 'intra-action' between what is usually considered to be either human or machinic agency, to use Barad's terminology of posthumanist performativity (Barad 2003).

In this sense, digital cultures are performative cultures. They condition and are shaped by techno-social processes and agencies, and they afford new possibilities for performative practices and interventions. It follows that the study of performativity in its heterogeneous dimensions cannot afford to ignore the agential forces and effects of digital technologies and their entanglements with human bodies. Accordingly, investigations of social, economic and political processes conducted in and across other disciplines have to reckon with the performativity of digital devices and algorithmic organizing. The book's genesis and development – and, we hope, the discussions it will instigate – were therefore informed by two guiding questions: How is performativity shaped by contemporary technological conditions? And how do performative practices reflect and alter techno-social formations?

In proposing answers to these questions, *Performing the Digital* offers a double contribution. First, we see the book as part of the wider 'performative turn' in the cultural and social sciences (Bachmann-Medick 2016; Thrift 2008), contributing to an understanding of how techno-social performativity – or perhaps a regime of digital performativity – effects the world we live in. More specifically, this collection seeks to map and thus make visible the relations between

distinct approaches, overcoming the usual boundaries of focusing either on the performativity of affect (see Angerer, Leistert, this volume), or of markets (see Lange, Schröter, this volume), or of organization (see Beyes, McKenzie, this volume), or of critique (see Kozel, Leeker, this volume), etc. In its manifoldness and malleability, the notion of performativity emerges as a powerful concept to explore and reimagine digital cultures.

Second, we aim to contribute to and further develop recent engagements with technological developments and media-theoretical concepts in the field of performance studies itself (Auslander 2005; Bay-Cheng et al. 2010; Salter 2010). By relating questions and issues of performance and performativity to the broader empirical and conceptual landscape of digital cultures, the notion of performance is not limited to art-, dance- or theater-based practices but is seen as encapsulated in wider processes of techno-social emergence, production and control (McKenzie 2001).

Conceived as an explorative venture into territory of performativity (studies) and digital cultures, *Performing the Digital* brings together scholars from different disciplines – performance studies, media theory, sociology, organization studies – and practitioners of performance. Arranged according to the ‘doings’ that are in the focus of the respective chapters, the book’s map of themes, concerns and concepts of ‘performing the digital’ as well as the interrelations between them presents a timely, promising and, we believe, exciting field of research.

In the remainder of this introduction, the collection is contextualized with a short discussion of its two guiding themes: the performativity of digital cultures, and performance studies’ encounter with digital technologies. Based on this, the book’s outline and the sequence of notions and chapters are briefly presented.

DIGITAL CULTURES AND PERFORMATIVITY

If we were to assume that digital technologies were merely tools, conveniently on hand and ready for human deployment, then this book would be superfluous. Yet perhaps now more than ever, such an image of technology seems patently absurd. As the prevalence of the terms ‘ubiquitous’ and ‘pervasive’ in conjunction with technologies, media and computing indicates (Ekman 2013), life is embedded in, and interwoven with, technological environments (Hörl 2013; Engemann/Sprenger 2015) – from the fiber-optic cables of the Internet to the omnipresence of intelligent artifacts that can, in part, communicate with one another without the intervention of human subjects. As a result, the book is

framed through the notion of ‘digital cultures’. Digital technologies now widely, perhaps even invariably participate in the ‘making’ of culture (Deuze 2006; Gere 2008; Stalder 2016).¹

Correspondingly, the understandings of performativity and performative practices need to be rethought. To put it somewhat crudely, digital devices and infrastructures perform, and they make humans (and non-humans) perform. ‘Smart things’ profile and categorize, foresee and predict, propose and delete, charm and become dubious. Such ascriptions would have been perceived as suspect forms of anthropomorphization only a few years ago (Tholen 1994); now they come across as matter-of-factly descriptions of what technological objects and software do. And the consequences are serious. Consider the financial markets and their algorithms of high frequency trading (see Lange, this volume), the everyday organization of affect (see Angerer, this volume), the simulations of climate change research or the dressage of the quantified self and its self-optimization devices (Baxmann et al. 2016). Yet this is not merely a technological or medial a-priori of cultural forms and processes. In what amounts to techno-social interplays, human bodies also make digital technologies perform, through, for instance, embodied movements, gestures and habits, and the practices of streaming, updating, capturing, uploading, linking, saving, sharing, trashing, trolling etc. (Chun 2016).

Now, traditional or conventional notions of performativity and performance are grounded in the distinction between human and technological performance (see Leeker, this volume). Human performativity is linked to intentionality, reflexivity and sense-making, to embodiment, repetition and transgression. The technological, one the other hand, refers to deterministic operations without semiotic or affective qualities. This neat separation of human agency and non-human ‘procedurality’ has become untenable. Human bodies and technological apparatuses enter instead into a relation of performativity, a redistribution of aetial constellations towards a techno-social ‘mangle of practice’, to use Pickering’s term (Pickering 1995) (and it is by no means clear that, in this mangle, ‘performing devices’ are necessarily cooperative, as Schröter (2015) has pointed out). In digital cultures, we might then say, the ‘performative turn’

1 As Baecker (2007) argued, media revolutions, such as the invention of the printing press, are accompanied by new cultural processes, practices and forms that emerge to make the ensuing excesses of words, images and affects ‘manageable’ (Baecker 2007: 7). What Baecker called the ‘next society’ is negotiated in today’s discussions on ‘digital cultures’. We opt for ‘cultures’ in the plural, since these processes, practices and forms are multiple, heterogeneous and partly contested.

(McKenzie 2001; Fischer-Lichte 2004) needs to embrace its own ‘technological turn’. The following essays explore different forms, registers and understandings of technological cum social performativity.

PERFORMANCE STUDIES AND DIGITAL CULTURES

For an investigation of performativity, performance studies is likely the first discipline brought to mind. In this context, *Performing the Digital*'s transdisciplinary set-up echoes the development of this relatively young field, which emerged in the 1980s. While there are various schools and branches of performance studies (see Pelias/VanOosting 1987; Madison/Hamera 2006; Powell/Shaffer 2009),² they share certain similarities. First, they can be characterized by a lively symbiosis between “aesthetic practices and the study of them” (Kirshenblatt-Gimblett 2008: 46), i.e. by a strong linkage between artistic practice and reflective analysis. Second, there is a marked tendency across the different schools towards the inclusion of a variety of research fields and approaches. As befits its ‘object’ of analysis and practice, performance studies both draws on methods and theories of a range of disciplines and contributes to their respective discourses (as is manifested by the wider performative turn in the cultural and social sciences). Third, performance studies explores bodies, identities, events, and narratives in terms of “the myriad ways in which meaning is created and social life is shaped” (Pearson/Shanks 2001: xiii). As Schechner (2006: 40) wrote, “[a]ny behavior, event, action, or thing can be studied ‘as’ performance”.

Reflecting the circumstances under which something is considered to be ‘performance’ and exploring how performativity takes place and unfolds is therefore more important than a-priori definitions of what performance ‘is’ or might be. This is precisely why influential scholars (e.g. McKenzie 2001; Jackson 2004; Bay-Cheng et al. 2010) called for the field to distance itself from what currently defines the education and professional activities of performance workers, from Western concepts of theater and dance, and from the understanding of performance as an art form. Instead, performance studies should regard itself as a “means of understanding historical, social, and cultural processes” (Schechner 2008: 9); and “[p]erformance must be construed as a ‘broad spectrum’ or ‘continuum’ of human actions ranging from ritual, play, sports, popular

2 Indeed, performance is “an essentially contested concept, meaning that its very existence is bound up in disagreement about what it is, and that the disagreement over its essence is itself part of that essence” (Strine et al. 1990: 187-188).

entertainments, the performing arts and everyday life performances to the enactment of social, professional, gender, race and class roles, and on to healing, the media and the internet” (Schechner 2006: 2). Similarly, Fischer-Lichte proposed that what she called “performative studies” would denote the study of culture through the perspective of the performative; it thus stands for a “specific interdisciplinary approach to different subjects, which are analyzed from the perspective of the performative” (Fischer-Lichte 2012: 134; our translation).³

Clearly, then, researching and intervening into the present and performativity of digital cultures call for the sensibilities and approaches of performance studies. To do so, however, the field is challenged to more fully embrace and grapple with today’s technological condition and the human/non-human or perhaps ‘posthuman’ performances that shape social and cultural processes (Bay-Cheng et al. 2010). This collection and its respective contributions seek to help push the field towards a more sustained engagement with performance and performativity ‘after’ digital media.

AN ASSEMBLAGE OF DOINGS

The book’s structure seeks to reflect and, yes, perform its aims and rationale. As the outcome of an explorative, transdisciplinary endeavour into the messy and complex sphere of relations of digital cultures, performativity and performance studies, it constitutes “the beginnings of a map, or, more accurately perhaps, a map of beginnings” (Pile/Thrift 1995: 2) – an assemblage of phenomena, cases and concepts through which we can begin to chart and further explore the performative makings of and in digital cultures. After all, and contradicting the

3 We here use the notion of transdisciplinarity (and not inter- or crossdisciplinarity). A contested term, of course (Osborne 2015), ‘transdisciplinarity’ pragmatically entails an orientation towards and alongside phenomena or spheres of phenomena that require the reflexive mobilization of different and diverse theoretical contexts and methodical practices. As Osborne (2015) recently pointed out, the potential of transdisciplinarity – against its restriction to practical rationality and technocratic problem-solving – resides in the construction of a problem and the definition of a joint field of research, which harbors the potential of unexpected twists and of the problematization of established concepts and methods. In this sense feminist theory, for example, and gender studies and media studies can all be regarded as transdisciplinary research contexts par excellence – as well as, we would add, performance studies or performativity studies.

tropes of transparency and participation that seem to befall the jubilant discussions of technological progress, the techno-social relations and procedures of ‘performing the digital’ are largely invisible, obscure and opaque, cloaked in secrecy and incomprehensibility (Beyes/Pias 2014) or ‘black boxing’ and obfuscation (Galloway 2014). Under these conditions, the strategies and tactics of conducting research, of doing theory and of scholarly representation are open to debate and experimentation (e.g. Galloway 2011).

How, then, to perform ‘performing the digital’ through the time-honored medium of the book? Rather than structuring this collection according to different theoretical approaches, pre-given aspects of performance studies or social spheres or systems, we have opted for a non-hierarchical and ‘flat’ way of ordering the chapters – manifesting a ‘map of beginnings’ and perhaps a kind of queering of dominant registers of scholarly book production. The contributions are framed through ‘doings’; they thus enter into and engage with the complexity of digital cultures by way of specific processual notions. We have sought to lend the sequencing of the ‘doings’ a certain narrative coherence or flow:

To begin, there is *historicizing*: **Martina Leeker** inquires into the parallel trajectories of performance theory and media technologies up to the present, and in this context discusses the possibilities and limits of critique in digital cultures. From there, **Scott deLahunta** and **Florian Jenett** delve into a concrete performance in and on digital cultures through the notion and practice of *annotating* in the enactment of digital choreographies. This is one way of *affecting* human bodies by way of coding; the following chapter by **Marie-Luise Angerer** enlists affect theory, in particular the notion of the ‘affective interval’, to ponder the performative effects of digital ‘co-processing’ between media technology and human bodies. Such digitally produced ‘involuntary moments’ have taken on a particularly serious and quite uncanny role in the financial markets, as **Ann-Christina Lange** demonstrates in her investigation of the algorithmic exploitation of time-delays in financial *trading*.

That the affective landscape is increasingly shaped by mobile media technologies leads to new forms of surveillance as well as to new ways of performing with and through such media. In her contribution, **Susan Kozel** reflects on *encrypting* as a performative counter-practice to control and ‘dataveillance’. That *protesting* is reconfigured through digital devices such as mobile phones and the ways such reconfiguration occurs is explored in the subsequent chapter by **Oliver Leistert**. Drawing upon Guattari’s notion of post-media, Leistert examines the problems for collective enunciations that the modulation of affect via mobile devices poses. Perhaps, however, the digital possibilities of performative cartography offer alternative and emancipatory forms of *mapping*, as

Sigrid Merx studies by following a concrete artistic intervention in Amsterdam. Such performances thus have to deal with urban topographies that are marked through tags. Relating Lefebvre's 'triadic' notion of space to digital *tagging*, **Margarete Jahrmann** studies the gamification of urban space for commercial and activist purposes. Such urban art changes the role and practices of audience and spectators from watching and listening to *co-producing*. Discussing works by Ligna and Rimini Protokoll, **Immanuel Schipper** analyzes the turn towards 'the performative spectator'.

Beyond temporary interventions, there is the performative labor of *instituting*. **Melanie Mohren** and **Bernhard Herboldt** reflect on their own artistic practice of 'performing institutions'. From here, it is a small step to apprehending processes of *organizing* as performative. **Timon Beyes** reads Tom McCarthy's novel *Satin Island* (2015) as a novel on intersecting layers of 'performing organization', in particular with regard to a posthumanist performativity. And the markets? They are prone to *crashing*. Taking issue with Michel Callon's influential work on the performativity of economic thought, **Jens Schröter** shows how this kind of performance theory lacks a notion of crisis and seems thus incapable of thinking and exploring alternative forms of organizing. Perhaps, such forms can be experimented with in education. Inquiring into the relationship of performance and *democratizing* digitality, **Jon McKenzie** discusses the potential of 'critical design pedagogy'.

As this brief tour through the contributions shows, mapping different ways of exploring and theorizing performativity in digital cultures is a critical project. It is critical in at least two ways: For one, we need to learn to think and apprehend how techno-social performativity – as a kind of actualization or further development of the regime of performativity analyzed by McKenzie (2001) – inscribes human and non-human actors into what can for instance be called affective (Angerer 2014) and governmental (Rouvroy 2011) regimes. Second, especially the interventionist and practice-based chapters in this book demonstrate the possibilities of queering and at least temporarily reconfiguring such regimes. In digital cultures, too, performance theory thus offers a two-fold agenda of critique: to investigate the intricate relation of power and performativity, and to insist on the openness and changeability that is immanent to performative processes. It is up to scholars and practitioners (and scholar-practitioners) of performativity to further pursue and interweave both trajectories.

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