

One Acts: Reductive Performances Make a Difference

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Abstract

Since the twentieth century, the dominant understanding of the operational basis of a performance has been located in the differentiation between the performer and the spectator. As Jacques Rancière points out in *The Emancipated Spectator*, this differentiation can posit spectators as active or passive, oppressive or oppressed, as long as difference remained. This ambiguous differentiation leads to a seeming impasse in the analysis of how a performance system operates. Four intentionally reductive performance works, conceived by the author as a series of *One Acts*, are introduced in the context of this audience/performer dilemma. *One Acts*, performances in which the content of the work consists of one performed action, are further characterized by the fact that the performances are enacted and received by the spectators themselves. Sociologist Niklas Luhmann adapted the notion of autopoiesis and applied it to various social systems, describing these systems as operationally closed, distinct from a larger environment which can interact with the system only by becoming part of the internal language of that system. Significantly, in Luhmann's paradigm, humans are always relegated to the environment, and are not constitutive elements of the system itself. Drawing on Luhmann's theory, this paper proposes locating a performance's operative structure in the difference between a performative action and its environment, rather than the difference between a performer and spectator. The four *One Acts* described here (*Give and Take*, *M.E.A.T.*, *Free Family Portraits*, and *The Emancipated Spectator*) are framed by this endeavor.

The purpose of this paper is to introduce four original performance works (*Give and Take*, *M.E.A.T.*, *Free Family Portraits*, and *The Emancipated Spectator*) and to position these works within a historical and theoretical framework focusing on the notion of differentiation as it has been used to describe theatre events.¹ To frame this

¹ Differentiating theatrical elements in an attempt to define or understand theatre has depended on dominant trends, which have shifted considerably over the past few hundred years. Whereas pre-twentieth century theatre practices were largely concerned with aesthetic issues (including questions of Spirit, pedagogy, and professional technique), twentieth century theatre (and overwhelmingly so post-1960) has been more concerned with political issues (centred around problems of community, agency, and power). So, though a good deal of theatre in 1920s-1940s was political in intent (including the works of Brecht and the Federal Theatre) it presupposed a stable relationship between the performers (whose actions within a symbolic – i.e. theatrical – structure agitated the spectators) and the spectators (who were agitated to later real –i.e. non-symbolic – action). By the 1960's, it was the differentiation

distinction within a broader discussion of differentiation, I will draw upon the writings of Jacques Rancière and Niklas Luhmann.

Rancière, in *The Emancipated Spectator*, analyzes the conditions underlying performance events, and delineates the power relationships inherent in the required differentiation of giving and receiving parties.² As in his earlier work ‘The Ignorant Schoolmaster,’ Rancière critiques a system which, ostensibly in order to emancipate or educate, must reinforce the stratification separating educator and student, active agent and passive agent. I use Rancière’s analysis to illustrate the apparent impasse involved in locating the differentiation between performer and spectator as the operational basis of a performance system.

Luhmann, in *Art as a Social System*, positions art as a communication system, arguing that the operational form of the artwork is created through its differentiation from everything outside itself, both by the creator and receiver of the work. Luhmann has made similar claims about various social phenomena, including law, mass media, and love.³ Informed largely by the concept of autopoietic systems, as developed by biologists Maturana and Varela to define life in lower-order organisms,⁴ Luhmann’s

between the performers and spectators (and, correspondingly, between symbolic and actual behaviour) that would be located at the centre of the problem of power and agency in theatre, and by extension, in civic life. To put it another way, a performance situation after 1960 could be seen in terms of the problem of who holds (actual and symbolic) power, on whom power is imposed, and the consequences of these impositions. For a discussion of this twentieth century shift, see Hans-Thies Lehmann’s book *Postdramatic Theatre*, especially pages 42-45, and 48-57; also Erika Fischer-Lichte’s *The Transformative Power of Performance*, especially Chapter 3.

² Specifically, Rancière spoke of ‘all those forms of spectacle – drama, dance, performance art, mime and so on – that place bodies in action before an assembled audience’ (2).

³ I am referring to Luhmann’s texts *Law as a Social System*, *The Reality of the Mass Media*, and *Love as Passion: The Codification of Intimacy*.

⁴ Maturana and Varela’s theory of autopoiesis rejected the dominant paradigm of causal, open systems, in which an organism was seen as processing ‘input’ from the environment to create ‘output’ which would re-enter the environment. In an autopoietic description of a system, the teleological underpinnings of open systems could be avoided altogether, leaving the closed system of the organism as the primary mechanism which constitutes itself (instead of organisms being defined by their morphological properties or function in maintaining a larger environment). Among other things, this paradigm allows for an organism to undergo changes in form and yet retain its status as a discreet operational living system. See Maturana and Varela’s texts in *Autopoiesis and Cognition: The Realization of the Living* (1980).

social systems are closed and self-producing; they primarily differentiate themselves from a larger (more complex) environment and, through this differentiation, maintain their operation as a system.

Luhmann's adaptation of autopoiesis to social systems is focused on each being operationally distinct from a larger environment, which can interact with the system only by becoming part of the internal language of that system: 'It is possible...to treat society as a social system that consists solely of communications and therefore as a system that can only reproduce communication by means of communications' (*Love* 4). Significantly, Luhmann always relegated human beings to existence outside of the social system in question, part of the environment but not a constitutive part of the system. An example illustrating this idea is of two humans having a conversation. The conversing humans are not part of the communication system itself (which is comprised solely of language and signs) but are external to the system. This paradigm allows us to imagine a theatre which is not defined by the humans who (have traditionally been seen to) constitute it.

On its own, human behaviour is necessarily operational, yet it does not attain the status of what Luhmann called an operationally bounded communication (or social) system; to communicate, human behaviour must be apparent to an outside system capable of communication (*Art* 9). When the situation that structures this communicative act is a theatrical performance, the communicative act can be delineated by the roles of the performer and the audience, or the one who communicates and the one who receives communication. Theatre practice and scholarship have focused on the salient division between the spectator and the performer since the 1960s, and continue to do so. Contemporary examples include the popular performance works of groups like Improv Everywhere and Rotozaza, as well

as recent discussions by Erika Fischer-Lichte, who argues that performances occur in a liminal space created by the ‘autopoietic feedback loop’ of performers’ and spectators’ physical co-presence (38-40).

However, the implications of power in this division are complicated since, as stated simply by Rancière, ‘reformers...have made theatre the place where the passive audience of spectators must be transformed into its opposite: the active body of a community enacting its living principle’ (5). At the same time, the understanding of artist as active and spectator as passive can easily be swapped ‘without altering the functioning of the opposition itself...The terms can change their meaning, and the positions can be reversed, but the main thing is that the structure counter-posing two categories – those who possess a capacity and those who do not – persists’ (12-13).

Rancière and Luhmann each make the point that both roles (active/passive, or in Luhmann’s terms, operational/observational) are enacted by both the artist and the spectator (Rancière 17; Luhmann, *Art*, 37-39; 117). If a performance event can be considered a communication system, it must therefore be differentiated from a greater environment. Following twentieth century theatre’s concern with power and the performer-audience split, it is intuitive to locate the distinction, as Erika Fischer-Lichte does, at the semi-permeable boundary between the performer and the spectator, implying that either the performer or the spectator is the communicating system and the other a structurally coupled observing system. However, to draw on Luhmann’s practice of excluding the human being from the social system in question,⁵ perhaps it

⁵ It should be noted that Luhmann never discusses this in the context of theatre or performance. His discussion of artworks in *Art as a Social System* is limited to static, object-based works, which have a clear distinction between the time in which they are made and the time in which they are viewed. Performance works are necessarily time-based and compress the act of making and viewing into one event. Applying autopoiesis or systems theory (necessarily based in static, instantaneous events) to an entire performance event encounters problems Luhmann’s theory cannot resolve. For this reason, to focus on a single performative action rather than on the entire work (i.e. play or spectacle) may be more feasible in Luhmann’s theoretical model.

is possible to circumvent the audience/performer impasse by describing the system of performance in which human actors are elements in the system's environment, without constituting the system itself.

The performance works I introduce are collectively called *One Acts*.⁶ Based on my conviction that the basic, indivisible unit of theatre is human behaviour, I conceived *One Acts* as a series of performances in which the performance event can be reduced to one performed action. I relate the 'action' in a performance to what Luhmann has called a 'differentiation.' It may be that, as suggested by Luhmann's work on social systems, the differentiation necessary to create and continue the unlikely communication attempted in a performance event is not between the performer and the spectator but rather a distinction between an action and its environment.

In this sense, the structure of *One Acts* is created to both eliminate difference (namely, that between the performer and spectator) and simultaneously point to the difference that cannot be eliminated without also eliminating the performance itself (namely, the difference between a performative or theatrical action and its environment). The four works comprising *One Acts* each consist of one action. This reduction allows us to relate the operation of each work to the proposal that the defining systemic feature of a theatre work is a performative action. When the action can no longer be distinguished as performative (i.e. can no longer be distinguished from its environment), the performance ceases to exist.⁷

⁶ Of the four *One Acts* mentioned here, *Free Family Portraits* was performed in 2009. *The Emancipated Spectator* was performed in 2010, while *Give and Take* and *M.E.A.T* have not yet been performed.

⁷ I realize that making this distinction between a performative act and a non-performative one threatens to slip back into the mucky pool of subjecthood, in that it necessitates an external observer (or describer) to ascertain the end of the performance. It is relevant that autopoiesis itself was posited to incorporate the problem of the external observer by treating her as a structurally coupled describing system (i.e. a system which functions autopoietically by describing). Though a satisfactory discussion

The first work in this series is *Give and Take* (Figure 1). In it, the audience and performers comprises thirty parents, their respective thirty infants (aged 0-9 months) and thirty strangers (unknown to parents and infants). The performance itself entails all thirty parents simultaneously handing their thirty infants to the thirty strangers for a duration of one minute. At the end of one minute, the strangers give the babies back to their respective parent. The duration of one minute must be determined/perceived by the baby-holders without the aid of a time-keeping instrument.

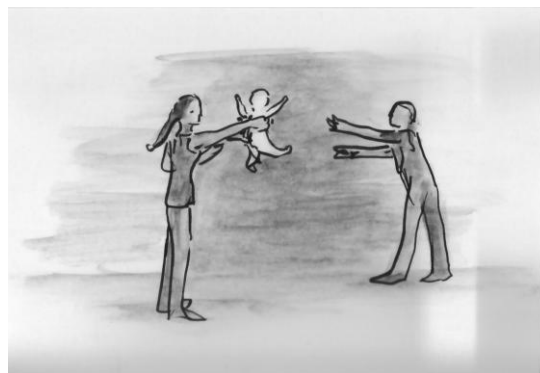


Figure 1. A planning sketch of *Give and Take*, by Yelena Gluzman.



Figure 2. A planning sketch of *M.E.A.T.*, by Yelena Gluzman.

Figure 2 shows a sketch of the second work in the series, titled *M.E.A.T.* (*More Experiments in Art and Technology*). Here the notion of technology is invoked as

of this crucial issue is beyond the scope of this essay, see Maturana's seminal essay 'Biology of Cognition' in *Autopoiesis and Cognition: The Realization of the Living*.

referring to the ‘body of knowledge available to society’ used to ‘extract materials.’ In this work, two lactating mothers, sitting within sight of the other, breast-feed each other’s child. This continues for as long as each child and woman chooses.

The third work in the series of *One Acts* is *Free Family Portraits* (2009). This piece was performed at an outdoor festival in Shibuya, Tokyo, at the invitation of the Japanese performance unit Potalive. In this piece, passing families are offered free family portraits. Posing for the photographer, the family is asked if a stranger can replace one of the family members. If the family agrees, one family member steps out, a stranger steps in (into a similar pose) and the ‘family portrait’ is taken. These photos are displayed at the site (with no indication that the families depicted are not authentic).



Figure 3. A planning sketch for *Free Family Portraits*, by Yelena Gluzman.

On the following January 1st, the family receives a Christmas or New Year’s greeting card, showing the ‘free family’ into which the stranger was inserted. The family continues to receive holiday greeting cards, always picturing their own momentary free family, in designs/images which change yearly, until they or I die. The posted cards are the property of each family, who become not only performers and audience, but also collectors of this work, and the only original material artworks that remain of the piece. Some of the cards are pictured in Figure 4.

In all the works in *One Acts*, the performer of the action is the same individual as the spectator of the work, and indeed, on some level, the only person to possess the entire body of that work. The content of the performed action, in other words, the material used as the subject of acting, is behaviour already embedded within the life



Figure 4. Images of 2010 and 2011 *Free Family Portraits* New Year greeting cards, each one picturing a free family photographed months earlier. Photos by Ayana Katayama and Koji Takaguchi, August 2009. Highway image (on 2011 card) by Dima Dubson.

of the performer/spectator. The requirement to perform is primarily an act of consent.

Though the action, the situation, and the respective roles of performers/spectators are determined in these works, in all of them the content of what is communicated is intentionally left undetermined. So, for example, in *M.E.A.T.*, though the action (to breastfeed another woman's child) is prescribed, the communication network (between the two women, between one woman and one child, between all four performers) is left as a distinguished but unmarked space.⁸ In this way, the roles of actor/audience criticized by Rancière are conflated and relegated to a movement that only that particular actor/spectator can determine and observe.

It is true that the three works above all function within the semantic field of *family*, by displacing relationships that could be considered essential. Though this was of semantic interest to me when I made the pieces, it is not necessary to the

⁸ See Luhmann's discussion of unmarked space as a requisite to the incompleteness that allows an artwork to operate (*Art* 30-31).

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functioning of the *One Acts* structure. A performance work structured as a *One Act* need only be performable by its audience, and be performable by the enactment of one definable action.

The fourth *One Act* I will discuss is called (after Ranciere's text) *The Emancipated Spectator* (2010). It was commissioned by the British performance group Stoke Newington National Airport for one of their signature *Live Art Speed*



Figure 5. A spectator/performer in *The Emancipated Spectator*, by Yelena Gluzman. Photo by Jim O'Connell.

Date events in Tokyo. A *Live Art Speed Date* is a multi-artist event in which each artist creates a performance work of four-minute duration, to be performed repeatedly for one audience member at a time. Audiences are given 'date cards' listing the

artists they are to visit, and in what order. After each four-minute slot, a loud buzzer indicates the end of that period and audiences have two minutes to find their next performance.

In *The Emancipated Spectator*, I asked each spectator if they would like me to tie them up. If they said yes, I would bind their wrists and their mouth, and bring them into a small room with a few chairs facing each other. The spectator and I would sit down and wait. I neither spoke nor signalled to the spectators in any way. After four minutes passed, the loud buzzer sounded, indicating the end of the performance time. At that moment, I did not move, but continued to sit impassively facing the spectator. This created a crisis; caught between the rules of the greater event (namely that each performance lasts four minutes) and the rules of the performance they were in (where

they may have expected to be released or in some way acted upon by the performer), the spectators found themselves in a double-bind. Though literally bound, they could easily stand up and leave the room. By being compelled to make the choice to stay or go, the spectators became the performers who allowed the piece to function. It should be noted that this piece could be enacted without me (except for actually tying up the spectator at the beginning) and retain its structure, though could not exist without the action of the performer/spectators and the rules structuring the contextual Speed Date event.

The four works described here are not intended as examples of an autopoietic system or as illustrations of Luhmann's theory applied to the performing arts. They are, rather, performance works created to eliminate the division of the spectator and performer in order to focus the performed event on the single action that constitutes the performance. Therefore, whether the performative action is giving a baby, taking a family portrait with a stranger, breastfeeding another person's child, or being (and remaining) tied up, these actions perform because they are both actual and symbolic. In Erika Fischer-Lichte's terms, the performances invoke the materiality or semioticity of their elements (17). Even in the absence of a spectator other than themselves, the performers' actions function in this double capacity.

Luhmann explains, 'In my approach to systems theory, you will see that I try to leave this subject-object distinction behind and replace it with the distinction between, on the one hand, the operation that a system actually performs when it performs it, and, on the other hand, the observation of this operation, be it by this system or be it by another system' ('Self-Organization' 146). Through focusing the operation of a performance system upon a single action, I engage with the possibility, suggested by Luhmann, that a performance can be analyzed or experienced through

the operation of this single action. A performance can be analyzed without the paradigm of actor and spectator, or the position of stage and auditorium, in the autonomous and self-creating operations of the performed action. What remains is to understand, as Luhmann suggests, the operation that this system actually performs when it performs it .

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