

UNFRIENDLY TAKEOVER

Vera Knolle: I didn't mean to hurt you

Lecture Performance

Atelierfrankfurt, 5. 1. 2006

"Good evening Ladies and Gentlemen I will do this performance in English and if you have questions at the end of this performance I will be glad to answer. The title of this performance is: "Product of Circumstances". In 1987 I started to work on my thesis for my Ph.D. in molecular and cellular biology and at the same time I began to go to dance classes one time a week."¹

Good evening ladies and gentlemen, I will also do this performance in English. But in 1987 I entered the 7th grade of a comprehensive school in Hannover and I took dance classes twice a week. The title of this performance is: "I didn't mean to hurt you". It will present a re-working of "product of circumstances" by Xavier Le Roy of which you just saw the beginning.

→ description of the piece

The script contains the text that Le Roy speaks in the performance, but set apart from this, there are framed text sections in italics. These sections give instructions to a given re-performer of "Product of Circumstances". In the first of this sections Le Roy gives more general instructions.

And there is says:

"Try to perform without irony, sarcasm, romanticism or any affliction which could transform the facts."

This sentence caught my attention because I think it proposes an impossibility. It is a contradiction to the very notion of performance and performativity that Le Roy employs in conceiving and performing his lecture performance. It is a

contradiction to the whole idea of "lecture-performance", since the fact that we came to consider a lecture a performance is a result of a reconsideration of the status of constative utterances.

"Try to perform without irony, sarcasm, romanticism or any affliction which could transform the facts."

We can understand this instruction as directed against the notion of expression as the communication of an emotional content. Here Le Roy puts himself in a tradition in dance that tries to cancel out expression as coded emotional engagement. But it still considers a conscious author of an utterance. An author who can communicate an intention. And an author who in turn can intentionally *not* communicate.

I quote:

"I was admitted to work in a laboratory specializing in research on breast cancer and hormones.

The same year I started to look at a lot of dance performances during the summer festivals in the south of France where I lived. I was still playing Basket-ball and my body was trying to get some stretch."

→ bounces

End of quote.

But how can it be that a performance can mean different things at different times? How can it be that an act can be understood in different ways? How can it be that an utterance can be misunderstood?

"Try to perform without irony, sarcasm, romanticism or any affliction which could transform the facts."

This sentence implies two presuppositions: 1.) intention can be communicated, 2.) there can be a neutral performance that is a performance bare of rhetorical force

I think Jacques Derridas account of the sign can offer precious insight here. According to Derrida every sign must be re-recognizable to be a sign. That is to say the sign has to be identical. The identity of the sign is constituted by the

structural possibility to repeat the sign. Derrida calls this "iterability". This possibility to repeat the sign extends beyond the presence of the author. The sign has to be repeatable in the absence of the author and the addressee. And this is also to say: readable in the absence of both.

→ things I hate to admit

Iterability means thus the possibility to repeat the sign in the absence of a determinate *signified*. Or of the intention of *signification* – that which the author *means*. Or of all intention of *communication* – that what the author wanted to *say* or *do by means* of the utterance. The possibility to repeat and re-recognize the sign is what paradoxically constitutes the identity and the non-identity of the sign. Thus intention cannot be assigned with certainty. There is a good example by Samuel C. Wheeler concerning this point:

"Suppose we have the following marker for sincere assertion: "Hey, I really mean that..." Now, when I say "Hey, I really mean that you're my type." we do not know whether I am kidding. Iteration does not help either. "Hey, I really mean, that I really mean, that you are my type." can still be used to lie or to give an example in a philosophical paper."²

There is nothing inside the sign that determines its meaning and how it was meant.

Nothing that determines if it can or not be understood as ironical, arrogant even or as deep appreciation or not.

→ exercise

The sign is structurally cut off from its origin. It is cut off from an original significance and a saturated context, which could determine its meaning. A sign can be cited, can be isolated from its context and create ever new contexts. The consequence of the iterability of signification is that every sign is a "grapheme": since the sign has to be iterable to be a sign, it is necessarily writing-like, it is "graphematic". This is to say: it shifts.

" What is the nature of the debate that seems to begin here? Where, here? Here? Is it a debate? Does it take place? Has it begun already? When? Ever since Plato, whispers the prompter promptly from the wings, and the actor repeats, ever since Plato. Is it still going on? Is it finished? Does it pertain to philosophy; to serious philosophy? Does it pertain to literature? The theatre? Morals? Politics? Psychoanalysis? Fiction? If it takes place, what is its place? And these utterances – are they "serious" or not? "Literal or not? "Fictional" or not? "Citational" or not? "Used" or "mentioned"?"³

Plato criticizes writing because the letters leave the author. They are left without guidance. The iterability that constitutes the possibility of the written sign, constitutes the spoken utterance as well. Every performance be it lingual or of other symbolic kind is always already citational. And yet every performance differs due to its context that cannot be fully determined. A performance is always under threat of failure. The accidents of communication are no accidents. Consequently there cannot be a pure language, in which meaning is essentially determined. There is no ideal language behind its performance. No pure language means no self-interpreting sign. No signification that is identical with itself. But instead a continuous process and production of signification.

I think the contradiction becomes apparent now, which emerges from the instructions given by Le Roy. The *instructions* he gives for the performance of his piece presuppose, that there is a communication which can convey intention and thus saturate a context. His *practice* in turn shows, that meaning cannot be attributed to a sign with necessity and thus performance can constitute evermore contexts. Le Roy's plan has to fail in its execution, because the intention of the author cannot be transmitted with necessity by a sign, an utterance or performance.

I think we have to take this into account when we think about performance. This will also give us an understanding of the fact that there is no neutral performance. No performance that can state a fact without transforming the fact. And that, even if it was a conceptual performance, it was not clean, proper, void of irony, sarcasm, romanticism or any affliction - in other words - void of emotional engagement.

If I misunderstood the author Xavier Le Roy I did so because I could. I did so intentionally and unintentionally.

"I didn't mean to hurt you. I'm sorry that I made you cry."⁴ When I said these words, I couldn't know their meaning. This particular meaning. This effect. "I began to loose control."⁵ "Language is leaving me."⁶

I want to end with a last quote.

"voilà my first homage."⁷

¹ Xavier Le Roy: Product of Circumstances

² Samuel C. Wheeler: Metaphor According to Davidson and de Man, in: t.s.: Analytical Philosophy as Deconstruction, Stanford 2000, p. 100

³ Jacques Derrida: Limited Inc. a b c ..., in: t.s.: Limited Inc, Evanston 1988, p. 29f

⁴ John Lennon: Jealous Guy

⁵ s.a.

⁶ Annie Lennox: No More I Love Yous

⁷⁷ Jacques Derrida: s.a. , p. 29, my translation. The french original says: «(...) voilà mon premier hommage. ». s.: Jacques Derrida: Limited Inc., Paris 1990