

feedback loop

chris wood, 2017

Performance describes a genuine act of creation: the very process of performing involves all participants and thus generates the performance in its specific materiality.

Erika Fischer-Lichte, *The Transformative Power of Performance: A New Aesthetics*, 2008

Any gathering of people always constitutes a social situation. Theatre, music, dance, and other performing arts are no different, only in the embedded structures of the social situation. "The founding father of theatre studies" Max Herrmann explains exactly how theatre produces community:

The original meaning of theatre refers to its conception as social play - played by all for all. A game in which everyone is a player - actors and spectators alike... The spectators are involved as co-players. In this sense the audience is the creator of the theatre. So many different participants constitute the theatrical event that its social nature cannot be lost. Theatre always produces a social community.

Max Herrmann, *Bühne und Drama*, 1918

Theatre Studies in the 1960s saw a shift of focus towards the contingency of the audience. Performance theoretician and director Richard Schechner pioneered this in his writings and his work with The Performance Group in New York in the 60s and 70s. He emphasized the necessity of equal co-subjects in performance settings "to enter the performance as equals", and stressed the importance of breaking free from traditional performance settings and practices to do so.¹

"Everyone is a player" rings so purely in a way that is hard to negate, but the current social structures have turned performances into more of a spectator sport. With elements like: *the stage* - leveling the performer above and separated from the

¹ Schechner, Richard. *Environmental Theater*. New York: Hawthorn, 1973.

audience, *house lights* - leaving the audience hidden and disembodied, and *social expectations* - rendering the audience member silent and uncomfortable at the fear of being a social outcast: the modern audience member is disempowered and disenfranchised. Disempowerment leads to an unhealthy community, which is particularly vital in a space that is meant for the constitution of community. Only through role-reversal and intentional restructuring can there be a rebalancing of power and reclamation of constitutive community experience.

Theoretician Erika Fischer-Lichte is at the forefront of this reclamation. In her book *The Transformative Power of Performance: A New Aesthetics* she introduces the phrase “auto-poetic feedback loop” in an effort to develop a vocabulary for the directions and aesthetics of the performative.² An auto-poetic system is a circular system that survives by self-generation wherein all parties are simultaneously producers and products. Presupposing that performance is a community constitutive act, Fischer-Lichte calls on the continuous renegotiation between performers and audience members in order to create a genuine performance situation. This aesthetic breaks away from historically pragmatic schools (such as Formalism, Emotionalism, Intuitionism, etc.) in that though the artist/performer has creative power through intention and presentation, the audience member has an equal creative power through presence and reaction.

This is no new approach, but we have seen an increased prominence in the performing arts since the mid-20th century; examples lay in the works of performance artists/directors Richard Schechner, Coco Fusco and Guillermo Gómez-Peña, Brenda

² Fischer-Lichte, Erika. *The Transformative Power of Performance: A New Aesthetics*. (London: Routledge, 2008).

Hutchinson, Christoph Schlingensief, Einar Schleef, and Marina Abramovic to name a select few. In examples of their works, a primary material at the conceptual level *is the audience*. They're thinking about where the audience is situated, how to include the audience in the performance, how are the performers related to the audience, how many audience members are appropriate per performance...with a common intention of provoking audience members to act and feel as individuals. In this kind of framework, the artists aren't accepting traditional structures of performances by showing up to a venue and simply performing, but are actively restructuring the social situation through intentional aesthetic choices - a way to reclaim a balance in the power dynamic between performer and audience.