

## **BROWSING THE PERFORMATIVE: A SEARCH FOR SINCERITY**



### **ABSTRACT**

The paper proposes an approach to a better understanding of the Internet and the behaviours we exhibit online, when viewed in relation to Performance. Throughout I will reflect on the modes of address we bring to bear on these two notionally dichotomous media. The paper begins by examining the medium of Performance in relation to social networks of the Internet and ‘brings forth’ (Heidegger, 1977) relationships between the two. In particular I will take into account social media such as blogs, Second life, Chatroulette, Facebook, and Twitter. A distinction will be made between ‘performance’ and ‘the performative’ with reference being made to ‘narcissistic performance’ as opposed to a more ‘performative performance’. I will then go on to examine social media from a traditionally sociological perspective and analyse the ‘narcissistic’ tendencies of online behaviours in relation to Erving Goffman’s text, “The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life” and the consequent dishonesty that this kind of exhibitionism generates. To end with I will re-evaluate our use of social networks, this time from a ‘performative’ perspective, and consider how Foucault’s discourse of ‘Confession’ and Heidegger’s ‘enduring presence’ might lead us to a more truthful and positive reading.

### **INTRODUCTION: ‘Bringing Forth’ (Heidegger, 1977) Relationships between Performance and Social Media**

I want to begin by briefly drawing some parallels between performance and social media. In my recent collaborative performance with Eloise Fornieles, titled, ‘*My Dog’s Name is Cat*’, performance and technology were brought into the same arena, whilst examining the paradox of the Internet as a highly intimate yet extremely public medium. Dressed as a dog and a cat we sat at opposite ends of a long table, each in front of laptop computers. The performance was based on a constructed dialogue between the two animals that was spoken by the computers in automated voices; one a female voice and the other male. As the performance played out it became clear to the viewer that the dog was pretending to be a cat and the cat a dog. A romantic narrative ensued that was all the more absurd due to it being spoken in automated computerised dialogue. The

performance concluded with these simulated online identities being unveiled in exchange for a stab at love: a happy ending all round. However, it also addressed a darker side of social networks and hopefully hinted at the dangers of loneliness, simulated identities and façades of intimacy that are intrinsic to our ever-increasing use of social media.

Peggy Phelan in her 1993 paper, *The Ontology of Performance: Representation Without Reproduction* writes: 'Performance's only life is in the present'. I will argue that this definition of performance can just as easily be levelled at our current daily experiences of the Internet and online social networks. When using the Internet you become part of a specific time/space frame that cannot be repeated. For instance, the same search in Twitter *can* be repeated but the experience and results will not be the same. Twitter offers real-time searches, a device of its own functionality, which means that search results are updated on a real-time basis, unlike Google's algorithm. Correspondingly, Phelan writes of Performance Art: 'It can be performed again but this repetition itself marks it as "different"'. In this way we can see how both the life of social networks and performance exist fundamentally in the present.

The Internet lays claim to being the voice for the collective entity, a democratic medium, yet our experiences of it are mostly received on a very individual and intimate level. This, however, it is a faux-intimacy at best. The whole world might be suddenly accessible by the click of a button, however this immediate intimacy, often accentuated by the familiarity of your home workstation, should be addressed cautiously. For example, if you're following Lindsey Lohan on Twitter you might begin to feel like you're part of her innermost circle. She suddenly tweets that she's going to the fridge to get a diet coke. This is probably untrue and is far more likely to be an example of a recent phenomenon of celebrity twitter endorsements where everyday rituals are in fact covert advertising campaigns. The Internet ideal is fully transparent behaviour and many advertising companies use this to their advantage in relation to celebrity endorsements on social media sites. In these instances celebrities use their online presence to promote products, without clearly stating their relationship with the brand, thereby giving their followers a false reality.

Social networks are ritualized and intuitive in the same way that performance is and in both instances there is an audience. Currently within social sciences there is a prevalent assertion that a performance comes about through there being an audience (Abercrombie and Longhurst, 1998). So in everyday circumstances it is possible to see how people become performers because they demarcate their behaviour in the awareness that they are being scrutinised by others (including, in narcissistic terms, themselves – I will return to this). Furthermore, in the case of social networks and performance it is necessary to understand the context and the modes of address that the audience, with whom you are communicating, invoke. The inward-looking but nevertheless mediatised environment of television, "it was constantly argued, would be a better approximation of live entertainment than any previous form of technological reproduction. Its ability to broadcast direct to the home would allow people to feel as if they really were at the theatre" (Spigel, 1992, pp.138-9). However, television traffic only goes one way: it gets pumped into your homes and renders you passive spectators. Internet traffic, on the other hand, goes both ways. The spectator is no longer thus and becomes a player, as if by proxy. In performance also, the spectator is no longer passive and is in some sense 'activated' into an agent or mediator. As a performer, I always consider the audience a variable. In conventional theatre or television the audience is not usually regarded in these terms. This idea of exchange can as easily be applied to performance as it can to the social networks. Both are, if you like, public interfaces and sites of action. This two-way dialogue, in both contexts, requires from the participant an instinct or intuition that can aid them in their navigation of these potentially hazardous arenas.

At this juncture I wish to make a distinction between performance and the performative. The word 'performative' originally came from linguistics. John Langshaw Austin described the uttering of a performative as, or part of, the *doing* of a certain kind of action; the performance of which, again, would not normally be described as just 'saying' or 'describing' something. An example of a performative utterance is as follows: "I do (sc. take this woman to be my lawful wedded wife)" i.e something gets done. We are reminded here how action and change of states are intrinsic to the

definition of the performative. Richard Schechner in his 1994 text points out how the word 'perform' (to make or do something) and the word 'act' (to dissimulate, feign action) often double-up in performance theory. In order to begin to unpick them, I will utilise John-David Dewsbury's distinction of the two. He says:

*'Performativity is a slippery term indubitably linked to the idea of a performance, but, regardless of the multiple instances by which a performance might come to be defined (see Schechner, 1994), the performative slips across, beyond, and through such actual renditions. In this sense, whilst constituting a discrete act - the performance - the performative is not itself a concept signifying such an act. The performative is the gap, the rupture, the spacing that unfolds the next moment allowing change to happen.'*

He goes on to differentiate between 'Narcissistic Performance' i.e. that of performing to and being watched by an audience, be it an audience made up of oneself (which I referred to earlier whilst citing Abercrombie and Longhurst's view that a performance comes about through there being an audience) and 'Performative Performance' i.e. a more general performance practice that is constituted by the *performative* as outlined above. In this sense I see 'Narcissistic Performance' as an example of one-way traffic where the viewer is far more likely to remain passive. 'Performative Performance' on the other hand is more of an interactive exchange or two-way process between the performer and the spectator: an inherently symbiotic relationship, if you like.

### **1.) Social Media and Narcissistic Performance from a Sociological Perspective**

Firstly I will take up this idea of Narcissistic Performance and social media from a sociological perspective. Richard Sennett in his book *The Fall of Public Man* published in 1977 mourns the erosion of the public domain – the replacement of city streets and squares as social centres with suburban living rooms – and calls for a re-evaluation in our thinking towards public and social behaviours. He urges us to consider what social conditions specifically encourage people to display their feelings to others in a way that rouses sympathetic response. In other words: Under what conditions do human-beings tap their creative powers to make an ordinary experience expressive? Sennett maintains that these questions are ways of asking when, if ever, does the human being naturally and without fuss call on the energies which today seem isolated in the very preserves of art. He is talking in this instance about social playacting.

*'The artfulness that is squandered in self-absorption is that of play-acting; playacting requires an audience of strangers to succeed, but is meaningless or even destructive among intimates. Playacting in the form of manners, conventions and ritual gestures is the very stuff out of which public relations are formed, and from which public relations derive their emotional meaning. The more social conditions erode the public forum the more people are routinely inhibited from exercising the capacity to playact ... These modes of playacting are "roles". Thus, one method of making sense of the shift between public and private in modern culture would be to investigate the historical changes in these public "roles"' (Sennett, 2002, pp. 28-29)*

I am not going to do that here but I would like you to think about how the internet as a technology has brought about a new kind of public forum that paradoxically still exists in the realm of the private. Take for example the question of why people blog: Emma Beddington writes how she is reserved to the point of total inarticulacy in person, but on her blog she is able to express things she couldn't possibly say face to face. She writes: 'There's a particular kind of candour you get from bloggers that I don't think you get in other kinds of writing. Something about the anonymity – the vastness of the internet gives you the sense that you're whispering your secrets into the void.' But that void is nevertheless a public forum as Heather Armstrong in 2002 discovered when she wrote about her job at a software company (and not always positively). In this cautionary tale, her blog's name entered the lingo: to be "Dooood" was to get fired from a job because of some indiscretion online.

So *is* it then the term ‘public’ that needs to be re-defined? Public now is not the same as public then (1977). A public arena today can mean all manner of things and as a result of the media is often linked with public image or persona. A public arena then was almost always framed by a physical architectural structure. Boris Groys in his recent book *Going Public* does a good job of expanding on the idea of public persona and what this means politically and aesthetically in the long-term: ‘Today it is not only professional artists, but all of us who must learn to live in a state of media exposure by producing artificial personas, doubles, or avatars with a double purpose – to situate ourselves in visual media and conceal our biological bodies from the media’s gaze’. (Groys, 2010, pp.17-18) He goes on :

*‘The political dimension of art thus precedes its production. The politics of art has less to do with its impact on the spectator than with the decisions that lead to its emergence in the first place. This means that contemporary art should be analysed not in terms of aesthetics, but rather in terms of poetics. Not from the perspective of the art consumer, but from that of the art producer’.*

Indeed later on in the same text Groys goes on to explain how ‘Today more people are interested in image production than image contemplation.’ He expands upon how the traditional statistical relationship between image producers and image consumers has altered as a consequence of the global distribution platform of the Internet. And in the same way that people are abundantly generating images, they are also producing text. Geert Lovink writes how blogging in the post 9/11 period closed the gap between internet and society. Are we then on the cusp of a time when the Internet becomes its own society? The Sociologist Erving Goffman’s assertion that we are all performing all of the time should be explored here.

His ideas also relate back to Sennett’s thoughts on ‘playacting’ or ‘role-playing’ if you like although Goffman sees playacting as less of an ‘Art’ than a science. Goffman and his text *The Presentation of the Self in Everyday Life*, provides a potentially useful framework for online identities vis a vis performance. To begin with Goffman believes that as an actor plays his established role each night, an individual will *repeatedly* play his own particular role in a particular situation. Goffman calls this a ‘front’. His basic premise is that life is theatre and the world is a stage.

And this, it can be argued, relates very closely to our online behaviours and our urge to perform online. Goffman outlines how certain behaviours are considered to be appropriate in certain circumstances. For instance, just as a certain attention to style – or a stubborn flouting of its demands – enters into the clothes we choose to wear in public, there is inherent artificiality in our choice of screen name on a social network (unless an account related to our real name happens to be available). And whatever we choose generally expresses something we want to reveal about our nature. This doesn’t mean we are deceiving ourselves, or others: we are just becoming a stylised version of ourselves. Indeed, as Andy Oram points out, Goffman’s approach applies online, because our postings, and instant messages are more deliberate acts than our informal behaviour in real life. Some participants might play at being flippant and spontaneous on Facebook walls and microblogs, yet in essence they have greater consciousness of their effects on the viewer than most dinner table guests or concert attendees.

Secondly, Goffman points to the importance of a separation between spheres of action i.e. the divide between ‘front stage’ and ‘back stage’ in most institutions. Goffman explains how, when these two separate spheres are amalgamated, the workers performances are degraded. Yet this is precisely the situation on most Internet forums or social networking sites. Very rarely can people collaborating or sharing information on a public forum pull aside into a private space as the functionality of these forums relies on a high level of transparency; everything has to be seen to be a public interface. Scott Rosenberg in *The Fine Art of the Confessional*, reminds us that we are constantly taking social interactions that we normally pursue out of courtesy or affection or

enjoyment, and treat them as transactions. This posturing is rarely a result of out and out deception because, if anything, we are deceiving ourselves and commodifying our own authenticity.

Finally, Goffman articulates how our conscious presentations of self are often meant to act as scaffolding that can be disassembled once their purpose has been fulfilled. For instance we can relax the 'front' we put up in the case of a job interview once we know the initial contact has been successful. However, on the Internet our front is continuously presented to the world and can therefore never be fully relaxed. Furthermore an anxiety exists that questions whether the performance is sustainable. This, Oram suggests, leads to the ultimate dilemma in Internet identity. The artificiality of our participation online, and the limited scope of available media, suggests that the Internet will never let us show our true selves. However, other characteristics – the persistence of information and the ease of recombining information from different places – suggest just the opposite: that we can't conceal our true selves for long.

Either way, this sociological perspective allies itself with the premise that we are performing online all of the time (even if we are eventually found out), and nothing manufactured within this context can be truly sincere. However I will argue that the sociological view in relation to art and social networks is not expansive enough. Groys also expounds that the sociological analysis of art is inadequate because: 'Art cannot be completely explained as a manifestation of 'real' cultural and social milieus because the milieus in which artworks emerge and circulate are so artificial. They consist of artistically created public personas – which accordingly, are themselves artistic creations.' He adds that contemporary art should no longer be analysed in terms of the spectator but also with reference to the producer: the artist. (as we discussed earlier) I.e. in terms of poetics as opposed to aesthetics. And he goes on - 'more specifically to autopoetics, to the production of one's own public self.' (Groys, 2010, p.18)

Groys' analysis of the sociological perspective is valid, yet it still doesn't lead us anyway more sincere. I believe that the sociological perspective is inadequate because it leaves us in the narcissistic realms of the artificial and although, historically, the sociological discipline has been an outward-looking study of societies; conclusions in this context seem inevitably introverted. Perhaps then, we need to consider online performance from an alternative perspective; one that is more contingent on the 'performative' as opposed to the narcissistic?

## **2.) Social Media and Performative Performance: The Search for Sincerity**

I imagine the perspective of the performative might allow us a potentially more positive and sincere reading of social media. Let us return to blogging for a second. Very simplistically blogs can be viewed as irritating, cynical, daily diatribe prone to self-absorption, narcissism and regurgitation of other people's words. However perhaps it is more helpful to view them as a search for something, or a journey in the performative sense. In a way, blogging can be viewed as the opposite of spectacle. As Geert Lovink points out: blogs are flat (and yet meaningful). They sit in opposition to the hierarchical printed and broadcast message, which has lost its aura and is now consumed as a commodity with entertainment value. 'Blogs are not anonymous news sites, they are deeply personal.' They lure us away from the objective into the realm of the subjective. As Dave Winer so precisely defines it, a weblog is 'the voice of a person'. It is a digital extension of oral traditions more than a new form of writing. Lovink further expands this idea: 'through blogging, news is transformed from a lecture into a conversation. Blogs echo rumour and gossip, conversations in cafes and bars, on squares and corridors'. And herein lies my point: Is this not a move in the direction of a more enriched and performative public life, and an attempt at a return to the idea of 'public' as outlined by Sennett in *The Fall of Public Man*; a move towards a reversal of an imbalanced personal life and empty public life that he suggested had been so long in the making?

This idea of a performative 'public' is further explored by Foucault, in his writings on confession. To him confession is a discourse of identity rather than one of apology. It is equated with what he calls the 'hermeneutics of the self'; the rigorous interpretation of the inner self that for

Foucault, constitutes the act of confession. He claims that the body is transformed into a self through practices of communication, and specifically through the process of confession. We no longer view confession as a forced obligation by some other authority but as a way to finding the truth, an escape from the repressive powers that be. Today people are taught that to be liberated requires them to tell the truth, to confess all to someone and through doing this they will be set free. (Lovink, 2007) Foucault writes that we have become 'subjects in both senses of the word': we are subjected to powers that draw confessions from us, and through confession we come to see ourselves as thinking subjects, the subject of confession. In this context online exhibitionism equals empowerment.

Foucault tells us how through confession you interpret your thoughts by confessing not your acts, nor your faults, but the continuous the movement you are aware of in your thought. (In some sense I think this can be allied with the idea of the performative: 'the performative is the gap, the rupture, the spacing that unfolds the next moment allowing change to happen') In this way confession is a discourse of identity that precedes via a hermeneutics of the self in which the confessant speaks the tiniest movement of his or her thoughts. Yet the movements themselves are meaningless; they provide no basis for understanding oneself. What is significant is the act of confession. In other words the self is constituted by confession, not disclosed by it. I perceive this to be true of blogging and social networks in general. With blogs of course, you may have to take the confessional with a cynical pinch of salt. Indeed, a new interpretation of the more common definition of cynicism might call it 'the unpleasant way of performing the truth' (Lovink, 2007) – yet it is the confessional nevertheless, that constitutes the act of blogging. I could take it one step further in surmising that if confession is the act of disclosure (i.e. intrinsically performative) then the truth *is* performativity.

Heidegger in his text, *The Question Concerning Technology*, talks of truth in relation to technology's essence and capacity to reveal. He says: 'If we inquire, step by step, into what technology, represented as means, actually is, then we shall arrive at revealing. The possibility of all productive manufacturing lies in revealing. Technology is a way of revealing. If we give heed to this, then another whole realm for the essence of technology will open itself up to us. It is the realm of revealing, i.e., of truth'. (Heidegger, 1977, p.12) For Heidegger, everything has an essence (or *quidditas*, as Duns Scotus has it), yet that essence is concealed to humans. In order to access this essence we must engage in a 'bringing-forth' – Heidegger's translation of the Greek *poiesis*. 'Bringing-forth' is to challenge the concealment of the essence, rather than to accept the concealed. Heidegger writes:

*'Bringing-forth propriates only insofar as something concealed comes into unconcealment. This coming rests and moves freely within what we call revealing [das Entbergen]. The Greeks have the word aletheia for revealing. The Romans translate this with veritas. We say "truth" and usually understand it as correctness of representation.'* (Heidegger, 1977, p.11)

Heidegger then turns more specifically to technology and the origins of the term. For the Greeks, *techne* was intimately linked to *poiesis* and thus linked to the 'bringing forth' so essential in the pursuit of *aletheia/veritas/truth*. I think the *essence* of performance is a search for truth through the *essence* of its medium. 'Essence' is the traditional translation of the German noun *Wesen*. Heidegger writes elsewhere that the German noun *Wesen* does not mean *quidditas* originally but, rather 'enduring as presence'. It seems to me that Heidegger's 'enduring as presence' encapsulates the nature of performance and the difficulty in re-producing, documenting and saving performance from its life in the present.

In these terms I think it is possible to view the performance and performativity that underscore our use of social media, less as narcissistic spectacle, than a search for the truth, be it through the act of "confession" or the "bringing-forth" into unconcealment. Either way the performative is an essential tool in our sustained search for sincerity.

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