*Abstract*

Artistic performance is increasingly seen as a crucial creative means of empowerment in the midst of urban transformation. However, the varied abilities of performance to challenge, or not, existing power structures are often lost in analyses that either celebrate the utopian potential of performance for challenging hegemonic oppression, or critique performance for being inevitably complicit with hegemonic socio-political ideologies due to its material conditions. By introducing a neo-Marxist critical framework that focuses on the interplay between socio-material conditions and performance, this paper promotes a nuanced analytic strategy for examining the relation between performance and urban space.

*Introduction*

Urbanization is rapidly transforming global landscapes and cities are increasingly seen as agents for change (Hajer 2016). Pressing issues of our times, such as for example migration, are particularly manifest in cities, demanding city governments to come up with solutions. In present contexts of urban upheaval, performance, defined as specific actions and events that often constitutes content and experience in relations to forms of politics, has often come to be seen as a crucial creative means of empowerment in the midst of urban transformation. This paper provides a neo-Marxist framework for analysing the relation between performance and urban space in order to address ‘the varied abilities of [performance] practices to challenge –or not- prevailing norms and power relations’ (Pinder 2011, 688) and, this way, act as an agent for change. The new wave of critical urban theory, relating to more-than-human geographies, assemblage thinking and non-representational theory, is often considered as being more apt to discuss the relation between performance and urban space as it focuses explicitly on central aspects of performance such as embodiment, affect and processuality. However, I argue in this paper that (re)turning to neo-Marxist spatial theories is crucial for understanding the ‘context of context’ (Brenner et al. 2011, 234) in terms of engaging not only with the performative qualities of urban space itself, but also with the urban political-economic structures and institutions in which the performance of urban space is embedded. Central here is to thoroughly engage with the socio-material conditions of which any performance is part, making explicit the processes in which both performance and urban space are constantly invented and comes into being within on-going social and cultural practices and processes.

I start the paper by outlining the neo-Marxist framework, before putting it to work through two performance cases that ask us to (re)consider, firstly: what notions of resistance and conceptions of power are exposed and/or produced through performance? And secondly: how does the site-specificity of the performance produce an ambivalent and messy interplay between criticality, personal agency and structures of power? Finally, I discuss how performance may destabilize the very production of urban space and foreground the performativity of cities in general.

My accounts of the two performance cases are based on primary and secondary sources. These sources include an official statement from Bellinck, one of the performance makers, and otherwise literature by scholars that witnessed the two performances. The aim here is to use the cases simply as illustrative examples, rather than providing thorough empirical case studies. Furthermore, this paper does not provide an exhaustive mapping out of geographies of performance in relation to cities (for an excellent overview in this regard, see Rogers 2012 in this journal). Rather, the paper provides tools for developing a critical framework that thinks carefully about the politics of performance in relation to the production of urban space.

*Framework: Scrutinizing socio-material conditions*

For geographers, the potential of performance to reflect on contestations around, for example, place and identity is nothing new (see e.g. Johnston and Pratt 2010, Longhurst 2000, Nash 2000). As Rogers (2012, 60) points out, theories and practices from the performing arts offer geography means through which to ‘reveal the experiential qualities of space and place’ and ‘provide a way to think about their power-laden politics’. Accordingly, geographers have long applied performance as a useful lens to better understand how different spatialities are lived, experienced and constituted (see e.g. Thrift 2000, 2003; Thrift and Dewsbury 2000). Performance here constitutes a methodological lens that enables us to analyse urban space as performance. For the purpose of this paper I define urban space in line with the well-known definition by Massey (2005) as a social and contingent construction that is the product of interrelations and always in the process of becoming. I further define ‘performance’ in relation to the Austian notion of ‘performativity’. The term ‘performativity’ originates from linguistic studies, and the recognition that language does not merely describe things, but actually makes them exist. For example, by saying the phrase ‘I declare war’, the speaker enacts is. Exploring processes of performativity in relation to space and identity has been practiced widely in human geography since the 1990s (see e.g. Bell et al. 1994). Human geographers such as Daniel Bell et al (1994), John-David Dewsbury (2000), Robyn Longhurst (2000) and Nigel Thrift (1997), for example, have posited performativity as providing an important connection between identity, power and the construction of normative geographies. The body here becomes a performative site upon which multiple social identities are continually encoded and potentially resisted. The work of Judith Butler (1993) on the social construction of sexuality and gender has been particularly influential in this regard. Protests, citizenship, civic obedience, identity and even the built environment are performed daily in the urban sphere. As these daily performances of becoming are what produces urban space, the city is a particularly good place to think through the politics of performance. To understand these daily events as performance suggests that performance is ‘a term simultaneously connoting a process, a praxis and episteme, a mode of transmission, an accomplishment and a means of intervening in the world’ (Taylor 2007, 15).

Recent developments in more-than-human geographies, urban assemblage theory and the exploration of the non-representational have taken this understanding of performance seriously by focusing on how it may foster alternative forms of knowledge and understanding of urban space centring around notions of affect, sensation and intuition (see e.g. Lorimer 2013; Thrift 2008; Latham and McCormack 2004; Whatmore 2006). Debates here relate to how urban space is performative in that it accommodates the affective, the habitual, the excessive and the processual. As McFarlane (2011) points out, urban space does not pre-exist the performances taking place within it, but it is brought into being through performance. This understanding of urban space as being brought into being through performance is well familiar to geographers, as it relates to the idea of space as a social construction that gained ground in the ‘70s, following the general rise of social theory, and Marxist approaches in particular (e.g. Lefebvre, 1991; Smith and Katz, 1993; Soja, 2000; Harvey, 2000; Massey, 2005). As mentioned, Marxist approaches are recently often seen as less apt than the new critical urban theories mentioned above to discuss performance in relation to urban space. In this paper I argue the opposite. While adventurous and innovative approaches to site that encourage greater attention to embodied ways of being, doing and knowing such as affect are indeed important for examining the relation between performance and urban space (as I will illustrate later in this paper), there is a risk of cutting out half the equation by sidelining the material conditions that are part of the performance to begin with, as well as those produced through the encounters taking place within it. For example, in McFarlane’s account (2011) of assemblage urbanism, potentiality is an exteriority that lies *outside* of the present urban assemblage, rather than being understood as historically specific or immanent to the material relations that are scrutinized. According to Brenner et al. (2011) this approach is problematic in that it does not offer a sustained account of how, when and why particular critical alternatives may be pursued under specific historical-geographical conditions and why some spatial configurations are actualized over and against others.

By focusing on a neo-Marxist approach to the performance of urban space, then, this paper offers an important contribution to debates within geography on performance in urban contexts. The potential of performance for providing means of empowerment in the midst of urban transformation is here understood as not solely about how urban space comes into being through affective processes and practices, but also about recognizing the opportunities and limits within these processes and practices for enabling or constraining forms of power. From this perspective there is no ‘outside’ from which change, critique, resistance or opposition can be articulated. Change is only enabled in relation to present structures and systems rather than as an escape from them. In other words, it is vital here to conceptualize the performance of urban space as in some sense produced by power, and not as removed from power’s political script. In the following two performance cases, I will apply the neo-Marxist approach in order to elucidate these aspects of performance.

*Case 1: Re-thinking resistance*

*In 2009, the Flemish actor, theatre-maker and activist Thomas Bellinck got involved in a protest by a group of paperless immigrants in Brussels. The protest started as a hunger strike hidden from public view, in a car park, but Bellinck turned it into a public event on a central square in the city. Dressed in oversized tuxedoes, the immigrants here performed the Belgian national hymn in the three official languages of the country: Dutch, French and German. In doing so, they were claiming their rights to be Belgian. The same year the protest action was – to everyone’s surprise - selected for the Flemish Theatre Festival, as one of the most important performances of that season. At the opening of the festival, Bellinck made a speech in which he criticized the jury for presenting a ‘months-long political struggle’ as a performance (Bellinck 2011).*

Pinder (2011) observes that there is a tendency for critics and writers to deploy celebratory and undifferentiated notions of resistance when discussing the potential for performance to intervene in powerful spaces (see e.g. Bell et al 1994, Dewsbury 2000, Longhurst 2000b, Thrift 1997). According to Pinder, there is a need to think more carefully about the politics of performance in terms of how it might be better understood as compromising and making do with powerful spaces rather than directly changing them. While performance has the potential to disrupt existing spatio-temporal orders through its occurrence, it may also be complicit with hegemonic socio-political ideologies, structures and understandings. This contradictory nature of performance is illustrated in the example of Bellinck’s protest action: On one hand, the action opened up the city as a platform where new notions of citizenship, community and public sphere are being performed. By singing the national hymn of Belgium in public, the immigrants claimed their right to be Belgian through self-articulation and –creation. The social and political potential of performance for challenging hegemonic oppression is here foregrounded. On the other hand, performative interventions may constrain the subject positions available to its performers due to its material conditions (Harvie 2009). For example, in his speech, Bellinck attacks the festival director for organizing ‘immigration-themed weeks’ in which paperless immigrants were invited to ‘share some cuddly audience participation with the visitors’ only to be kicked out as soon as the week was over (Bellinck 2011, 51). Within this context, the immigrants risked being perceived merely as a scripted play - a cultivated pictorial and poetic symbol of the protest rather than as a political action in itself. To Bellinck, the protest action is worth nothing in the context of the theatre institution where the immigrants are seen as nothing more than performing and starving bodies representing personal tragedies with which the audience could sympathize. He wants, through the protest action, to enable the immigrants to construct new subject positions for themselves in terms of becoming Belgian citizens (Bellinck 2011).

The constraints of the material conditions of performance, in terms of space, institutional structures and practices, meaning-making, money and people, are here highlighted. However, there is a risk in this analysis of introducing a dichotomy between power and resistance, and structure and agency, which divides the space of the performance into two: the theatre structure vs. the performative action. There is a clear opposition here in terms of what Bellinck considers the ‘true’ performance of the hunger strike and the conceptual and staged performance of the theatre (Bellinck 2011, 49). Consequently, Bellinck creates a binary between what he perceives as the false and oppressive representative hegemony of the theatre institution and the pure reality revealed through his action. As Massey (2005) argues, these kinds of binaries imply a conception of power as a static and monolithic order, and thus reduces complex power systems to fixed structures. Consequently, performative practices risk being seen as merely reactive to what is presumed to be there already, rather than as generative of new identities and histories that are responsive to various productions of urban space.

The problem with seeing performance as a mere reaction and/or resistance to a fixed structure can be illustrated with an example borrowed from Dikeç (2012). Think of a jigsaw puzzle and a mosaic as two different modes of resistance. In the puzzle, pieces can be physically moved around, but they only fit in one way. There is only one rational and predetermined way of assembling the pieces. This mode of resistance is quite fixed and depends on splitting the world into two levels: the false and oppressive representative hegemony of everyday urban life and the good and pure reality revealed through performance. In order to resist the oppressive hegemony, the act of resistance is ‘afflicted by the question of scale, of intensity or the unconditionality of the act’ (Marchart 2011, 971). There is not much room here for the multiple, complex and uncertain modes of resistance that may be produced through performance.

The potential of a more flexible understanding and mode of resistance is illustrated in the mosaic. In the mosaic it is possible to imagine a variety of assemblages of the pieces without even moving them around. The individual pieces are in the mosaic, but the final outline is not given. Depending on the outline you imagine, different pieces will be related to each other, producing different forms and making new connections each time. In order to take into account the multiplicity, complexity and uncertainty of performances and performed spaces we need to move towards this, more flexible, mode of resistance. This flexible mode does not approach performance as being inherently liberatory and oppositional, and thus being based on an intense and unconditional act. Rather it examines how performance may enable a (re)configuration of a specific space in relation to what Rancière terms ‘the distribution of the sensible’ (2004, 12): ‘What are these places? How do they function? Why are they there? Who can occupy them? […] It is always a matter of knowing who is qualified to say what a particular place is and what is done in it’ (Rancière, 2003: 201). In the next case, I will explore these questions in relation to the ambivalence created by the site-specificity of performance.

*Case 2. Acknowledging ambivalence*

*For 7 days, in the summer of 2000, the German performance artist Christoph Schlingensief placed 12 immigrants in a container on the steps of the Vienna Opera House. A big sign reading ‘FOREIGNERS OUT’ in capital letters covers the outside of container. Inside it, cameras were installed that broadcasted life in the container, Big Brother style, via the Internet. The Viennese people were invited to log on and vote out one refugee for deportation each day. The performance was called ‘Please Love Austria’ and was part of the international theatre festival, Wiener Festwochen.*

Since the advent of Fluxus, Performance and Conceptual art in the ‘60s and ‘70s, the question of the distribution of places has increasingly become the focus of performance practices. As performances entered urban space, artists shifted the attention from ‘inside’ the performance, to focus on the meaning of the performance as constituted through its context. Site-specific interventions could here be seen as a critique of the capitalist and exclusive art institutions by proposing other, less elitist and more inclusive (for example public), sites for art. However, referring to Kwon (1997), Rendell (2010) argues that site-specificity should not be seen as an automatic signifier of criticality. As Rendell and Kwon emphasise, even though the artwork or the performance is located outside the art institution, it is not necessarily free of institutional constraints, influences, interests and power relations. As Gregson and Rose (2000, 446) insist, performance is ‘infused simultaneously with multiple subject positions, rather than as an individual subject located within, or in response to, a single subject position.’ This means that the potential of performance for subversion, disruption and critical reworking of power through practice are messier and more unpredictable than many geographical accounts acknowledge.

‘Please Love Austria’ effectively illustrates this ambivalent messiness of performance. Schlingensief was invited by the theatre festival to make the performance as a form of ‘political happening against xenophobia’ (Lilienthal and Philip 2000, 7, cited in Beyes 2010, 230) due to the rise of the right-wing party, FPÖ, in the last general election. Similar to Bellinck’s protest action, Schlingensief locates his performance in a public square. The site-specificity of the performance here opened different possibilities in terms of the subject-positions that were made available in the space and through the performance. This can be explained through Cresswell’s notion of ‘being in’ and ‘out of place’ (1996) in relation to who and what is expected within public spaces. In Bellinck’s action, the visible presence of the immigrants in the public square, claiming their right to be Belgian citizens by singing the national hymn, challenged taken-for-granted assumptions of who was considered in place or out of place at this particular location. Bellinck deliberately used the fact that the immigrants were out of place as a form of protest or resistance to accepted forms of power. Similarly, Schlingensief’s performance violated the common sense of what could be said and displayed in the scenic city centre of Vienna. The container and its xenophobic slogan made painfully visible a right-wing rhetoric that was otherwise well hidden from tourists and other visitors to the idyllic Viennese inner-cityscapes. Beyes (2010) points out that by over-identifying with gross far-right statements, the performance publicly confronted the Viennese passers-by, as well as the international media audience, with FPÖ rhetoric and its claims to be taken seriously. This public visibility foregrounds the ambivalence spurred amongst the spectators of the performance. As Beyes (2010) observes, those who want the performance removed find themselves advocating censorship of art, while those who oppose its removal are put in an awkward position due to its xenophobic content. Accordingly, the spectators become co-participants in the performance, participating in both an art project and a xenophobic campaign.

The boundary between art and ‘real life’ is here blurred, and different stakeholders were quick to utilize this uncertainty for their own benefits. Government officials wanted to bring the performance into the ‘safe’ realm of art by putting up a sign saying ‘Caution: art’, and this way potentially de-politicize the performance. The FPÖ, however, attempted to renounce the performance as a failed political intervention, a strategy that might relate to the fact that the performance was using their own slogan which it would be contradictory of them to deny (Beyes 2010).

Some critics pointed out how the ambivalence of the performance led to ‘a dangerous game with emotions’ (Beyes 2010). The container was several times occupied by demonstrators, aiming to remove the ‘FOREIGNERS OUT’ sign and ‘free’ the refugees. During the action Schlingensief was at some point hit in the face by a spectator. Through these events, the performance, as Beyes (2010, 240) puts it, ‘turns into more than a parody; it engenders debate, drawing the spectators’ passions into its twisting shape and taking on a life of its own’. The notion of affect is certainly important to understand the charged atmosphere and independent actions generated by the performance. As Colebrook (2002, cited in Thompson 2009, 117) notes, ‘[a]rt may well have meanings or messages but what makes art is not content but its affect, the sensible force or style through which it produces content’. The performance produced feelings of embodied sensations such as disgust, shock, awe or astonishment, that resulted in some spectators taking the matter in their own hands. The affect produced through the performance then, was closely linked to a capacity for action and to a sense of aliveness that prompts a person’s desire to connect and engage (Thompson 2009). This form of affect can be seen to produce a real-time somatic experience that is no longer framed as representation (Bennet 2005, cited in Thompson 2009, 120). However, it is not helpful to categorize the affective experience produced through the performance as purely subjective (relying solely on individual schemas of perceptive behaviour), nor is it helpful to categorize it as purely objective (wholly represented by the container installation). Either categorization neglects the fact that both the performance and the spectator’s experience of it, were heavily mediated by the socio-material context the performance was part of, relating to, for example, the spatial dynamics in and of the Viennese public sphere, the political context of Austria and the national and global representation of the performance in the media and on the Internet. Accordingly, the action by the spectators became part of the performance (it was even applauded by Schlingensief) rather than working as an interruption coming from ‘the outside’. In other words, the opposition to the performance was not simply a matter of individual opposition or normative commitment but emerged as an essential moment within the same ambivalent, messy and dynamically evolving social totality within which the performance was part.

*Performance remains*

In this complex and charged situation of the Schlingensief performance, the immigrants remain inaudible, invisible and mute, as they are stowed away in the container compound. The artistic objectification of these people is in many ways problematic and could be seen in contrast to Bellinck’s attempt at activating the public square to offer the immigrants a position from which they could claim the right to exist (Merx 2013). This contrast is, however, a simplification. As Merx (2013, 58) points out, ‘[d]ifferent stages activate different positions from which political subjects can appear, speak and act.’ For example, at the opening night of the festival, when Bellinck delivered his speech, the immigrants were not with him on stage. Nevertheless, they were very much present through Bellinck’s speech. At the end of the speech, Bellinck asked the audience to applaud them, ‘not because they are brilliant theatre-makers, but because they were willing to give their lives for something no one should have to fight for’ (Bellinck 2011, 53).

Merx (2013, 57) argues that the absence of the hunger strikers is to be understood neither as an exclusion nor as an inability to appear. Rather, ‘their absence signals the ability to disappear, the possibility to leave the stage, to refuse (…) the positions from which you can appear as a (political) subject’. Nevertheless, Bellinck accounts for the immigrants, and in so doing implicitly critiques an urban society in which they belong to a category of peoples who are seen to not count (Rancière 2010). Similarly, Jelinek (2000, cited in Beyes 2010) points out that the invisibility and muteness of the refugees in Schlingensief’s performance serve to underline the ambiguity of the performance. By hiding the immigrants’ ‘real’ stories and denying the spectators a fuller understanding of what is going on inside container, the performance avoids imposing any particular object character on them that would reproduce and confirm their status. Both performances, then, produce urban space as not just a platform for presence, appearance and encounter, but also a place for absence, for accounting for what is not present. The refugees are there albeit they ‘are and always have been radically elsewhere, performing in other scenes, fighting their fight on other stages’ (Merx 2013).

This understanding of performance as something that remains, despite the absence of physical actors and actions, is crucial for understanding and analysing the relation between performance and urban space. The work of performance scholar Rebecca Schneider provides further useful insights in this regard. In her book Performing Remains: art and war in times of theatrical re-enactment (2011), Schneider unpacks the antagonistic relationship between performance and the archive that courses through Western historiography on the one hand, and performance theory on the other. The problem with seeing performance as an ephemeral anti-archive is, according to Schneider, that the archive, or in our case urban space, is reduced to a passive container of remains - as ‘supposedly enduring materials’ such as texts, documents and buildings (see e.g. Taylor 2007, 19)- and therefore cannot assimilate the liveliness and contingency that is the constitutive trait of performance. As a result, the role of urban space as a performative space for the live encounter with remains is neglected, and we miss the opportunity to use performance as a means of interrogating and destabilizing urban space itself. This destabilization occurs when performance produces urban space as a place for performative repetition and live encounters with remains, which in turn enables a complex engagement with our surroundings. Pearson (2010) illustrates this by discussing the manifestation of ‘contemporary past’ (p. 43) and remains in urban space. These remains are marks and traces of our movements, actions and encounters in the material surroundings: graffiti, footprints, handrails rubbed naked of paint, stains, dropped groceries, vomited kebab etc. - attesting to our presence as well as our absence. The marks of physical contact with urban space are authentic traces of the performance of everyday life: ‘the result of routine, tradition, habit, accident, event, social ritual, of long-term evolution and unconnected short-term ruptures and singularities, of nearness, of dwelling’ (Pearson 2010, 43).

This immaterial materiality of our urban surroundings foregrounds the performative production of cities. An example from the theatre and its semiotic function, turning for example a chair into a throne can be used to illustrates this. One may say that theatre’s relationship to matter is secondary; the imaginative and performative labour required to transform a chair into a throne is significantly less demanding than the physical and cognitive labour of the carpenter who carves a throne out of oak. However, by letting the semiotic and experiential processes through which meaning is produced come readily into view, theatre expands our view of materiality: it reveals the relation between practice and representation (the actor playing the king transforming the chair into a throne by sitting down on it) (Lin 2012). This way, theatre elucidates how representations are inseparable from the broader social practices that authorize their existence. Similarly, focusing on the relation between material conditions and performance may expand our view of the city by emphasising the multiple, and often competing, practices through which cities are produced as a performance of the actual and the possible, practice and representation, the present and the absent, the material and the imagined.

*Conclusion*

Geographers have long recognized performance as an apt discourse and approach for understanding our interactions with cities, and for representing the nuance, diversity, and lived experiences of our urban spaces. However, urban analysis that draws on notions of performance risks neglecting the complex, conflictual and even contradictory relation between performance and the city by either celebrating the utopian potential of performance for challenging hegemonic oppression, or critiquing performance for being inevitably complicit with hegemonic socio-political ideologies due to its material conditions. In this paper, I have developed a neo-Marxist critical framework to help geographers develop a more nuanced analysis of the relation between performance and urban space, that avoids the impasses of being either too optimistic, or too pessimistic about the liberatory and political potential of performance in an urban context. This critical framework foregrounds firstly, the importance of scrutinizing how material conditions and performance relate and negotiate on another; secondly, the need to rethink resistance in order to avoid reducing complex power systems to fixed structures; and thirdly, the key of placing subjective experience inside the socio-material conditions of the city in order to further examine the power relations that constitute urban space. By conceptualizing performance and urban space as in some sense produced by power, the framework further foregrounds how performance has the potential to expose the power dynamics in urban space while at the same time producing and rehearsing strategies for re-configuring them. Central here is to understand that this potential is not an external, normative orientation or a mental abstraction, but is embedded within and enabled by the same socio-material structures, contradictions and conflicts that constrain the realization of what might be possible in and through the performance and urban space itself. To paraphrase Harvey (2000), we cannot pretend that we are not embedded and limited by material conditions such as the institutional worlds and built environments we have already created. Accordingly, as Harvey points out, the future must be constructed ‘not in some fantastic utopian mold, but through tangible transformations of the raw materials given to us in our present state’ (p. 191). Therefore, it is also important that performance is seen as not inherently liberating or political, but also as bound up with considerations of the constraints of spatiality and the material conditions of space. The critical framework presented in this paper, then, enables a nuanced analysis that oppose binary perspectives, false clarity and simplicity and rather elucidate the conflictual, contradictory and ambivalent urban space produced through performance.

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