

Introduction

Tanja Schult

No Way Out—A Researcher’s Entanglement with Holocaust Memory

In 2016, I was accepted as a research fellow at the Stellenbosch Institute for Advanced Studies in South Africa. The month-long fellowship was meant to offer a creative space to allow some necessary distance from my decade long engagement with Holocaust memory and time for reflection on how I could make my gathered expertise accessible to other areas, other painful pasts.

On my first night in Stellenbosch, I went to the movies. I saw the newly released documentary *Nobody’s Died Laughing: A Journey with Pieter-Dirk Uys*. The title and description promised joyful distraction and seemed a perfect introduction to the country’s cultural and political history. There I was, enclosed by the darkness of the movie theater, being acquainted with the internationally well-known performing artist, writer and activist Pieter-Dirk Uys, most famous for his character Evita Bezuidenhout. For more than 50 years, this outstanding personality had used satire to confront discrimination and intolerance in order to affect political change during apartheid, and to educate about AIDS and the value of democracy in the new South Africa. Nelson Mandela himself called Pieter-Dirk Uys one of his heroes. I laughed, and cried, deeply moved by his courage.

However, if I thought I could have a break from my research topic I was mistaken. Brought up in the Calvinist tradition of the Dutch reform Church, it was more than three decades after his mother’s suicide on Chapman’s Drive in 1969, when Uys learned that the reason why his mother had fled from Nazi Germany was that she was Jewish (Gräff 2004). All the familiar topics of my research encountered me again in Eikestad’s mall, on the other side of the world: questions of trauma transfer, concealed identities, and attempts at reconstructing family history. Once again, it became plain that the Holocaust

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was indeed a global phenomenon, not only when the historic events happened, but also in terms of memory that had penetrated each corner of the world, and was in fact omnipresent.

The entanglement and performative interplay of the personal, of history and memory, hit me most strongly in the journeys of Uys' mother's piano. Helga Bassel had been a music teacher. As a Jew she had been expelled from the Reich Music Chamber. Her piano was shipped to South Africa in 1936, where she and her brother were able to emigrate. In 2004, the piano returned to Berlin—to Daniel Libeskind's Jewish Museum, inaugurated by Uys' sister Tessa, a concert pianist based in London. After Tessa had studied family documents in 2003 and learned of the piano's origin, she became the driving force behind its return. The source of great pain whenever played after their mother's death, returning the piano to Germany was a closure of a painful past, a kind of catharsis, as Tessa described it (Cowell). This materialized cultural memory was in fact so very close to my ongoing research project on performative Holocaust commemoration that I could not help but smile benignly in the darkness.

The following day, Steven Robins, professor of anthropology, presented his *Letters of Stone. From Nazi Germany to South Africa* (2016) at Stellenbosch University. His father too was a Jewish refugee from Berlin who had fled to South Africa in 1936, the year before these borders were closed by the passing of the Aliens Act. This gripping search for family history is compelling reading. Most important for our purposes are his reflections on his own academic discipline. While searching for family traces, Robins learnt that the South of the African continent had served in repeated, multiple ways as a field study for European anthropologists whose research findings subsequently "boomeranged [their] way back to Europe" (Robins 2016: 276), where they contributed to the implementation of racist ideology. The established laws forced his own family in the 1930s out of Germany, while other countries denied them access, in their turn influenced by similar ideas (168-70).

The consequences of the international refugee crisis caused by the German persecution of the Jews in the 1930s, which once again had hit me in the cinema, found here a stunning counterpart in one component of its prehistory: eugenics, then a worldwide recognized and respectable science thought to bring each nation more health, wealth and welfare (165)—leading to medical experiments, sterilizations and the murder of millions. Robins' book reminded me of the global implications of colonialism and race biology, of the worldwide outreach and entanglement of ideas which preceded the Holocaust, contributed to it and still impact the values and norms in the societies in which we live. He notes the irony that some eight decades ago the migrant waves brimmed from Europe to the rest of the world, while European (and other Western) nations during the last two decades eagerly try to prevent refugees from entering (183). What of the detested old conceptions still linger there, defining our thinking, deciding the fate of others? It struck me most poignantly that by focusing on the Holocaust alone, we will not come to terms with this painful past. Globalization is no recent phenomenon. Everything is

entangled. The question that remains is: What do we do with the painful pasts, with the heritage which made the Holocaust and other atrocities possible?

Steven Robins' saw his *Letters of Stone* as a response to each anthropologist's call to consider "alternative ways of seeing and being in the world" (284). The first song Tessa Uys played on her mother's piano in Berlin—the piano that had outlived two world wars, the Nazi and the apartheid regime—was *Nikosi Sikelel'Afrika—God Bless Africa*, a song often performed at political gatherings against the apartheid system, and in 1994 recognized as national anthem of the new South Africa (Gallagher 2004).

Performative Commemoration of Painful Pasts

The urge to widen my perspective from Holocaust memory to the commemoration of other painful pasts had already led to an international conference at the Department of Culture and Aesthetics, Stockholm University, 15-17 June 2016. This conference examined how artists, educators and practitioners worldwide employ performative strategies to address the dark legacies of the 20th century, the Holocaust as well as other atrocities, like the suppression under communist regimes in Eastern Europe, the Apartheid system in South Africa, genocides on the African continent, civil wars and dictatorships in Latin America, ethnic cleansing in the former Yugoslavia, and recent terrorist attacks.

As it was mentioned in the conference report (Östh Gustafsson), the conference was less about the past than about the present, and in fact often directed towards the future; it was less about what *had* happened than how the past *performs*—in exhibitions, art works or audio walks; and how dealing with past events is made meaningful and used to influence audiences today and to shape the future. Indeed, performative practices are used frequently in many different fields and contexts but hardly by historians to explain past events. Instead, they are employed to confront painful pasts in artistic works, or to describe the performative entanglement of past and present (cp. Schult 2017 and 2018).

The concept of performativity originated in linguistics in the 1950s, leading to a variety of conceptions (Velten 2012). Since the 1990s, there has been a proliferation of theories on performativity and in particular the performative character of gender in Cultural Studies (see e.g. Sedgwick 1990; Butler 1997). In the new millennium, performativity has become an important tool in the humanities and social sciences. The concept explores the ways in which our lived world and our identities are not given, but rather shaped and reshaped through actions, gestures and signs in social space. Artworks, commemoration ceremonies, performances, public or private forms of (self-) representation, and many other things, can be understood as performative acts that not only represent the world, but contribute to its formation, and by doing so also hold a transformational potential, namely to produce new ways of understanding and constructing the world (Austin 1962; Hantelmann 2010; Hedlin Hayden and Snickare 2017). Performativity relates to the making of

the art work, the impact it has on the viewer, and the impact the viewer's encounter has on the work—and thus on the lived social reality that the performed work calls forth (Widrich 2014). The concept elucidates both the intended and the potential political dimensions of the displayed behavior or created works (Derrida 1982; Butler 1990, 1997). In the context of commemorating painful pasts, a performative approach asks what we do with these pasts; how artistic interventions, educational campaigns, or literature act as agents of memory, provoke certain forms of behavior, and contribute to social change (Bal 2002: 179).

Choosing performativity as a theoretical framework influences the researcher's/writer's attitude towards the research material and lets her rethink her position in the process of creating meaning. Thereby the interpretation of an art work is understood as an open-ended process which depends on "social and personal investments and contexts" (Jones and Stephenson 1999: 1, 2). Instead of the commissioner's or creator's *intention* with a work, it is the work itself which becomes the main focus of attention, the agent whose outreach capacity depends on the context (Mitchell 2005)—and above all on the receiver who might, or might not, activate the art work's meaning, thereby again influenced by personal background, social context and the form of presentation. All this shifts the focus of attention to the *experiences* the art work potentially provides—the reception by the audience becomes key to constituting the work (of art, performance, speech, or any other event or object; Jackson 2014). Consequently, this Special Issue pays particular attention to audience reception. Its aim is to contribute with new knowledge on how performative strategies are perceived and if they are successful in their aim to raise critical awareness and social activism, in short if they contribute to producing new ways of understanding and defining the world.

This short description of performativity cannot hide the fact that the term 'performative' is used in multiple, sometimes contradictory ways in Memory, Cultural and Performance Studies (von Hantelmann 2010: 17; Velten 2012: 249). Thus, it remains vitally important to understand how the term operates, especially when performative practices are increasingly employed in many democratic countries worldwide, often financially supported by public authorities, entrusted to contribute to social activism, reconciliation, or to strengthen democracy. This makes it important to investigate if these practices really are successful, if they reach an audience in the intended way (cp. Popescu and Schult 2018).

The conference opened up understandings of performative practices as a globally recognized discourse of critical engagement with legacies of painful pasts and addressed the need to convey clarity and a deeper comprehension of how the term is used and what was expected by the use of these practices. By bringing together researchers from various disciplines, the conference shed light on the use of the term in various fields. However, it did not provide *one* satisfying answer to what performativity is. This Special Issue builds on the conference. It includes a number of case studies from many different

disciplines (Art History, History, Genocide and Holocaust Studies, Sociology, Geography and Human Environment, as well as Cultural, Theater, Performance, Heritage and Museums Studies), and contains contributions from artists, writers, performers, theatre practitioners and facilitators. The selected articles tackle different geographical areas as well as different painful pasts, from colonial heritage, via Holocaust imperatives, to the Troubles in Northern Ireland and the 9/11 terrorist attacks in the US. The selection of articles is furthermore based on the different media employed (museums, exhibitions, photography, performances, literature, audio visual walks, sonic interventions, prison life, etc.), and the various performative ways of engaging audiences. By building on a variety of different scholarly traditions, this Special Issue offers new explorations of the potentials of performativity. However, neither does this Issue provide one clear answer to what performativity is. It seems that the concept is characterized by an openness that resists a single definition. This openness might be theoretically challenging or unsatisfying, but has some advantages, as will be shown.

In what follows, I draw some preliminary conclusions on how the term performativity is currently used and understood in the commemoration of painful pasts. Thereby my overview is solely based on the gathered articles, without providing traditional summaries (for these, please see the abstracts) or scholarly references (for these, see the articles). Based on the contributors' writings and research findings, I try to capture the main aspects of this Special Issue and render an explanation why painful pasts are frequently commemorated through performative strategies. This overview shall also serve as orientation for the reader to choose case studies of personal interest. The solution to add the authors' names in brackets remains somehow unsatisfying, as all authors tackle a multitude of aspects, and each of the articles is worth an individual reading.

Important to me was that the conference's lasting result, the publication, should reflect its interdisciplinary approach and interactive, practice-based nature (see the visual contributions by Adriansson, and by Miikman, Petersson and Larsdotter) which had led to a fruitful communication between academics, artists and facilitators. Furthermore, the multitude of roles the authors held, their reflectiveness on their positions and artistic practices, as well as the often very personal approach, demanded the right forum. *Liminalities* was a self-evident choice. The journal allows the inclusion of writers, artists, and practitioners on equal terms with academic researchers, and it offers to include a wide range of media—a chance we admittedly should have made even greater use of.

Why Performative Practices when it comes to the Commemoration of Painful Past?

The selected articles suggest that performative practices are employed in particular for two reasons: when it comes to events that are further away in time, such as the Holocaust, they are used to activate repressed memory,

reactivate interest in the historical events, and to learn from these events, strengthen democratic values or (national) identity (Frostig; Jean). When it comes to events that are closer in time, they are employed to empower formerly traumatized victims and support them to become active agents in the commemoration process (Močnik; Miikman, Petterson and Larsdotter), enable them to break down stigma and social exclusion (Grundell), and to address victim groups who hitherto remained unheard, advocating for confronting the painful pasts and urging for social justice and (mutual) recognition (Murphy; Fenster and Schlesinger; Frostig; Königstein).

In this Special Issue, the term 'performative' points to the prevalent intention to engage audiences, the will to stimulate active participation and reflectiveness. Performativity seems a suitable concept to capture processes of all kinds—the working process of how an art work comes into being, the entanglement between creator, work and audience, the ratio between past and present, and the implications of the past for future (political) action. Many authors stress the importance of the process, of sharing memory or experiences as a transformative agent that stimulates reflection and engagement (Grundell; Frostig; Königstein; Krook). The making of the work becomes at least as important as the final work, or even more so (Murphy). Of further importance is the live aspect of many works, which seems to give the work its urgency and relevance; thereby lengthy productions seem to have great outreach capacity (Frostig).

Performative practices are about processes and interaction, about recovering, reconstructing, selecting; as well as questioning, altering, transforming, and in fact about becoming, about creating something new. Therefore, openness does not mean arbitrariness but rather acts as a precondition, which makes creation, and change, at all possible. It is here that the concept of performativity is useful as it describes a search, a way to lay open and unfold what is complicated or hidden, the layers of memory and their implication for the present. This approach is often accompanied by an ethical claim, urging transformation and social change, in order to make the world better, more emancipated, equal, enlightened.

Commonly, and so also in the majority of articles in this Issue, performative practices are attributed positive characteristics. Performativity and embodied art making provide spaces for deep engagement and reflective learning. These practices are believed to be able to encourage or foster emotional and imaginative responses, which have the capacity to bring long hushed-up subjects to the surface, thereby achieving greater insight and awareness in how the past has its impact on current lives. These projects contribute to unmasking silence, visualizing or verbalizing loss and absence (Crooke; Frostig; Krook). Performative practices are entrusted to lead to empowerment and social change, entrusted even to have healing capacities (Murphy), to contribute to recognition (Fenster and Schlesinger; Frostig), or to have cathartic effects (Grundell).

Positive understandings and the trust in performative practices are contrasted with more critical approaches (Sodaro; Walsh). Authors take up enforced uses of performative practices leading only to pretended transformational acts, which is necessary, for example, to allow release from a regulated societal system such as the prison (Walsh). Thus, we can say that performativity seems a coherent concept to capture both processes of real but also pretended transformations. The possible downsides of using performative strategies are also discussed, dangers which result from neglecting the cognitive in favor of emotional approaches. Museums/exhibitions can act as performative spaces that demand moral transformation without providing a solid knowledge transfer which might enable alternative confrontations with traumatic events (Sodaro).

A number of articles are dedicated to the performative nature of physical interaction and the performative aspects of (sonic) memorial interventions, activities of walking and listening and site-specific performances in places that contain conflicting memory narratives (Breyne; Fenster and Schlesinger; Frostig; Jean; Murphy). They show how walking, combined with the use of audio, encourages active listening and contributes to a deeper engagement. The authors reveal the complex relations between sound, hearing/silence and memory and reflect upon the meaning of community, responsibility and empathy. Notions of trauma(scape) and catharsis are used to investigate the transformative processes of meaning making resulting from the interplay of the body of the performer, employed objects and other participants, passers-by or spectators (Breyne; Fenster and Schlesinger; Grundell; Jean; Močnik; Murphy). Questions addressed encompass the relevance of sites, the aftermath of contested spaces, how new, alternative sites can be opened up, and can turn former sites of silences into places of remembrance or activism where another future can be imagined (Frostig; Crooke).

The body, the physical and the tactile, are often the center of attention. Many contemporary artists, but also individuals, are using their own body, or participants' bodies, as a performative vehicle to deal with dreadful memories of military dictatorships, state oppression, civil wars and mass rapes conducted in its shadow, and political violence against indigenous populations, but also the aftermath of unsuccessful medical treatment of severe illnesses, such as AIDS, stigmatized by society (Breyne; Grundell; Močnik; Murphy). The body becomes a tool and an arena for visualizing their own and others' suffering, as well as the pain former acts of violence caused in their societies or how it affected them personally. In some cases, the foregone pain acts as a catalyst for social change, or for calling forth alternative understandings of the world which potentially might lead to change in the future. The felt pain stimulated profound reevaluations of how the world is constituted and perceived. Thereby personal pain and anger resulted in the very questioning of the norms that currently constitute our world. The authors' critical approach made them rethink the world and their own roles within it, leading to alternative scenarios of how the world might

look, or how it could be portrayed and perceived (Frostig; Grundell; Königstein).

Given the physical and emotional involvement, it is no wonder that the creator's role enjoys a great deal of attention. In almost all articles, the role of the researcher/artist/facilitator is taken up (Breyne; Grundell; Fenster and Schlesinger; Frostig; Königstein; Mikkman, Petersson and Larsdotter; Močnik; Murphy; Königstein; Krook; Walsh). Academics, artists and practitioners, each simultaneously take on multiple roles, they act as mediators of past events, and as facilitators of possible change. This leads to a performative reflection on their own entanglement. The belief in creating works that act as agents of social transformation encourages field studies in order to learn how audiences respond to them. Becoming practitioners to a higher degree than used to, the researchers realize their own involvement — with the subject, the recipients, and how all this retroacts on them, personally and professionally, physically and emotionally. The authors discuss the risk of being re-traumatized. The entanglement and reflectiveness impacts the artist/researcher deeply and results in rethinking the methods of operation. Here, performativity serves as a method, an approach to conduct (embodied) research. The transformative power encompasses not only audiences, but just as well the researcher/artist who needs to face her own transformation process when confronted with the pain of others, or the silences resulting from repressed painful pasts. It is a mutual, multifaceted process which aims at revealing how knowledge is gathered and mediated.

The interest in agency draws attention to the audience's role(s), and thus to audience reception. In line with the overall aim of my and Diana I. Popescu's research project on *Public Perception of Performative Holocaust Commemoration since the Year 2000*, the aim also of this Special Issue was to depart from earlier studies by expanding the meaning of the performative from a category that merely refers to the *intention* to engage audiences to an actual understanding of the *effects* these engagements have upon audiences. Thus, the authors of this volume were encouraged to provide information about collaboration with the audiences, and respectively provide data on audience reception whenever possible. Many of the gathered case studies investigate how audiences respond and contribute to the works through their own multifarious performances, as perceivers of the realized works but also as initiators of works (Crooke; Breyne; Fenster and Schlesinger; Jean; Sodaro; Walsh). These projects intend to involve audience members in a transformative process, provoke critical self-reflection and challenge their positions as spectators to become more engaged and active citizens (Frostig).



Fig. 1: Impression from the graffiti workshop conducted by Guy Königstein as part of the conference *Performative Commemoration of Painful Pasts*, 14 June 2016. Photo: Björn Adriansson.

This introduction concludes by looking back at how the conference started. An airline strike caused some chaos. It looked as if the first keynote speaker would not be able to attend, and the opening-night workshop would not take place. In the end, with some delay, the artist Guy Königstein arrived, without showing a single sign of exhaustion. Friendly, calm and determined, he turned the staircase and the patio in front of my flat into a graffiti workshop (see Adriansson's contribution). Its aim: to commemorate possible future painful pasts. Thinking back, still thrilled by the incredibly beautiful and creative atmosphere of this sunny evening in June 2016, and after many months editing this Issue's articles, it seems to me that Königstein's workshop pointed to what we eagerly ignored: instead of working through and commemorating painful pasts, we may imagine possible atrocities we would find hard to remember. It may give all of us who do commemorative work or research on the commemoration of painful pasts a sense of virtue, of doing the "pure and noble act of claiming what is morally right" (Baer and Sznajder 2017: 135), but all this happens retroactively, and comes almost always too late for the victims. If the quintessence of memory studies is that there "is no healing of trauma" (132), we may rethink our own position. Königstein's workshop held a guiding potential for our own future work: By imagining possible painful pasts we wouldn't want others to face one day, we may contribute towards preventing these events from happening at all.

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