



Interview with Erika Fischer Lichte

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Professor (Marvin) Carlson told me, and it is written in the preface of your book¹, that in German, different from (Richard) Schechner's approach, there is no real difference between theater and performance. Could you talk a little bit about that?

Our concept of performance is a wider one, whereas for Schechner and the English speaking world is a narrower one. In English, when you talk about theater, it is about dramatic theater; whereas in Germany, you talk about theater when we have performances, be it of dramatic theater, non-dramatic theater, dance or opera, whatever it is. And beyond that, we talk about that is theater on the streets, when people just make a scene, not something really devised, but just when others are looking. And so far, when theater studies, as an academic discipline, started in Germany, it started as the discipline about performances. It was said so clear by Max Herrmann, who was the founder here in Berlin. We had literature disciplines, but their subject is the text. We had no disciplines dealing with performances. And since we need some, we must have Theater Studies. So, our discipline was founded in Germany as an academic discipline dealing with performances. And why that is like that, we cannot follow all this discussion in the English speaking world: there is performance, there is theater. For us, this is all theater.

So, there is no dichotomy.

No.

That's very interesting. On the concept of the performative: as you pointed out in your book, one of the characteristics of the performative is exactly the dissolution of dichotomies; you refer to it also as self-referential, constitutive of reality and unfolded, considering also (J.L.)Austin's² approach.

This is Austin's approach, which you cannot transport to others, because if you consider the speech act, for instance, "I now pronounce you husband and wife", these words are doing

1. The Transformative Power of Performance, a new aesthetics. (2008)

2. How to Do Things with Words.

what they say, this is self-referentiality; they do not refer to something outside, they are doing exactly what they are talking. It is implied that the priest is entitled to do so, “I now declare you husband and wife”, and then this is done. And since it is done, it is constitutive of a new social reality; they now are a married couple, with certain rights and duties, and what else it is. This is the important thing of Austin’s concept - language is not something that describes certain states and processes that might go on, but language, by itself, can act. And when it acts, then what comes out is a new social reality.

And you also referred to the contributions given by Judith Butler.

Yes, she takes this up in a way because when she is talking about identity. Former ideas present identity as something innate in you, and it is described as a seed of a tree, the whole tree is there and it unfolds - so that is the Western notion of identities, since the 18th century. In fact, the dominant model was: there is a certain essence and it just unfolds. Whereas she just reverses the whole thinking in that way; she says, no, we bring forth our identity by performing certain acts. And by doing so, we bring it forth and we can change it all the time, if we bring forth other body acts that we do. And this is the important thing; identity is not something which is expressed by my performative acts, but something that is brought forth by my performative acts. They mean what they do exactly the same, and they constitute new realities, name it that my identity.

But then one of the questions that crossed my mind when I read your book was the relationship between the theatrical and the performative. Are these concepts interrelated at all?

Yes, they are absolutely. I mean, the theatrical is always performative. I cannot think of any theatrical that is not performative, because it always does what it points to and brings forth this reality of theater that it does. But the difference is, when one says something is theatrical, then, I mean, it is done in order to be perceived by others. It is in this awareness, when I am bringing forth it is perceived or will be perceived by others - this is theatrical, do it in order to be seen by others. Whereas performative, when I bring forth my identity by these acts, of course, one can say, and so for identity must be recognized by others, others must also recognize it. That will be. But it can also be, for instance, when I am reading a novel and by reading certain emotions stuck stood up in me , there is a impact on me, no one notices that, that is performative, but it is not theatrical. And so far, they criss-cross quite often, but they mean

something else. But theatrical is always performative, but not everything that is performative is also theatrical.

So, the relationship between the performative and the theatrical is that in order to make something happens the performative is necessary, right?

Yes, and that is the performative, but if you make something happen, just let it happens, that is fine, that is performative. But when you do it, when you let it happens, there must be someone who sees, someone who perceives that it happens. Then, that is theatrical.

Is there a role played by intentionality in this case?

Not so much, because intentionality usually means you want to convey something in particular. I mean, if we would sit in a café and talk to each other, and suddenly become aware that someone is looking at us, we start suddenly behaving in a different way; that is the theatrical, knowing you are perceived. This is the important thing. This is not so much about intentions, but it is about the awareness of being seen.

I see, but is intentionality involved in representation? For example, if I have a work based on Hamlet, I have a kind of view on it and I want to share this view with the public. What do you think about this?

If we do something, there is always intentionality; otherwise, we would not do it. But what happens with what we do, we cannot decide, we can intent this way, and then it goes around the other way. If you have a view on Hamlet and you want to share with me, and if you do certain things on stage, and I experience it in a very different way, maybe your intention does not interest me; but what interests me is what I perceived and what I make out of that. And this, I think, it is so important about performance. And what I say, we cannot do with this easy sender channel receiver model; it does not work, because it is a process where a lot of things can just emerge which no one neither the spectator that has a kind of experience, nor those who did that have ever in mind intended it. It just coming out by chance and that is very important thing. We just see in performances this heavy focus on intentionality that we have in the Western world. Then, that is ok, because we want something to do, we intended it, but we must have in mind that others we will receive what we do with best intention, in quite another way. I can just convey that, it is simply not possible. And we have to keep that in mind.

When you refer to materiality in your book, you talk about a process in which the actors or the performers do not intend to represent something, but they create a space for the spectators to read or receive that.

Receive, I would not say read, because read is just intellect, and the great thing about performances is that everything is involved, intuitions, emotions, responses, energy, all that is involved and goes together with cognition, I would not separate that from each other. It is all involved and since each of us brings with him or her something else into the performance, they will respond differently. Although we have moments in theater - and this has always been the great thing - when people seem to, at least, respond very similarly, when everybody laughs at the same time or - it does not happen so often now in theater but it used to be - when people start crying, or even when suddenly they become very quiet, there are some noises, people moving objects, then, there is one moment when they are absolute stuck, nothing happens. That is strange, this is something that is all there responding in the same way, and these are the great moments when we see what happens.

In respect of being producers of embodied events, do you recognize specificities related to the work of the actor and the performer? By performer I mean the producer of performance art.

For me, everybody is a performer; the actor is always a performer, but not every performer is an actor, to put it that way. In the end, I do not see there are so many differences because whether you perform a certain event is important for you, reading from your biography, or as Marina Abramovic did things to her own body, or whether you start to play a role, it is always for the audience that you do things which have an emotional impact on them. In some cases, the emotional aspect is dominant, I mean, we cannot look at a person when she is really hurting herself, without not having very strong emotions; whereas when an actor pretends that he would be an attacker, it is always a theater attacker, but there will be some pain, that depends on your faculty of imagination. Those who have great imagination, they will respond almost the same way, knowing very well that person is not hurt, but this is only a tragic character. But they can still identify with this character so much that they feel it with him. So I think it will really depend on the kind of spectator you have, the kind of recipient. And, in so far, I know that many people, for instance, Schechner did it for a long time and now he is back to theater, to say this one is horrible and the other is fine, representation is bad, I do not see what is so bad about representation. Could we live in a

world without representations? We could not, but I do not think why we should, so I think this is way too one sided, once you find some new things, then you always declare this is not the rightest way. And this is what Schechner did in *Dyonisius*'69: he was foregrounding that audience always participate, even if it would be to join dances and then that was grounded by what he did it, but it is always there. And in so far, I think this clear-cut dichotomy, here we have the actor to a part of play a role, and here we have performer who does something else – when they are always with a public, they always take upon themselves a role. They hurt themselves, but so they play the part of the person who hurts themselves. So you cannot, otherwise, there is again the question, I see or am I not seeing? It is wonderful in Becket, when the person says, am I as much as being seen? This is the question. When am I being seen? Then there is a certain kind of behavior, whether it is a performer or an actor or somebody on the street.

This is so interesting, so you think it does not make any difference the fact that the performer does not work with characters and stories.

No. And by the way, nowadays, they work with stories and characters and theater works with things which only performance art first did, they mix up already very much, I think it is just the way we have kind of spectacles of performance which have to serve the needs of people at a certain time. And when in the 17th century, they served the purpose really of being for the representation of the prince or religion, and then they did their jobs. Nowadays, they do not had this, they had either to entertain or to help people reflect on this or that, or they want to make people aware that things happened at this place. Whatever it might be, it has to do with time; so I think we should not make too much of differences.

Historical processes.

It is not such a big deal.

I would like to ask you about fictionalization, because you wrote an article which I did not find actually, but I know that it is on fictionality and real fictions, right?

I think so, it was sometime ago, and I remember slightly that I did something like that.

So, based on what you have just said, do you think are there degrees of fictionalization or, is fiction is something produced by the spectator?

Yes, I mean, this is my perspective. When I look at the stage and I see Ulrich Matthes he does this and that; (...), she does this and that. Ok, but when I take the perspective of, what's Uncle Vanya doing? How is Elena responding? Then I just take another perspective. So, the fiction comes up because I am ready and willing to accept that they are showing something that some people in a fiction world once did. But it depends on me whether to accept it or not. Otherwise I just wonder what they are doing there, whatever sense I can make out of it.

So, fiction does not depend on the intention of the artist, it depends on the attitude of the spectator.

Both, the artist has his intentions and he has, of course, institutions - let's say, when he does it in the Deutsches Theater then Dimiter Gotscheff or who else works there they know that people are willing to accept kind of fiction, and so they do it, but what I make out of this fiction, that is personal. Of course, it has to do with the whole background, a cultural background; I see it with the fellows³ over there, when we go together with them to theater performance. There are very different responses, which sometimes are, not only personally, but also culturally and that is fine. On the other hand, you see something (...) latest production, which travelled all over the world, I think 300 performances

3.
Scholars from
The Interweaving
Performance Culture
Research Center.

I saw it.

And it was a great success wherever it went. And this is extraordinary. So there was something and I think it was in the quality of acting, this extraordinary presence which (...) has, I think this is energy, I think this almost something animalistic, this energy that he is transferring and whatever human being are, they are tuned to that. And they do not need so much the cultural background, to put it that way, but you responded to what was there, and that is something very interesting. This only applies to theater, where there is this human being before you, not just the picture of something; but you are there and can sense this energy and this conjures up this energy in yourself.

When you refer to presence in your book, you differentiate a weak notion of presence, a strong and a radical one. Would you consider absence as a producer of presence?

It depends, when someone was there and then leaves, his presence can still be felt. Or it is also when there is something that you expect it should be there, it remains absent, then this

absent can have a kind of presence. But this is not like something energy emanated, it is just for you, it is the feeling of something that is lacking, kind of loss, something like that.

You mentioned in your book that the question of presence is not resolved; it is still a kind of open question. Since you published the book, did you find out other aspects of this question?

I did not deal with that so much anymore. You know, I usually wait until it comes back; I mean, in that respect I say, I work in an archaic way, because when I am sitting in order to write and I feel there is a blocking, I feel it in my stomach, then I do not do it. When I sit, and it starts flowing, I do handwriting. And it flows. When I am working on something I did it, and when it is two, three, ten years later, suddenly it comes back, now it is time to go into it. When I think it is done, I put in what I have to say at that moment. I think it needs some-time to really get so much you say, yes, I have to say something again, not just repeat myself, that is make no sense.

You refer to materiality in a very complex way but, at the same time, you recognize the difference between expressivity and performative.

Performative is that which brings about what it does, and expressivity, you have to express something which is in another place. In the 18th century, we had these books on emotions, and there is the idea behind, the emotion is in you, something in you and we have to externalize it in a way, by certain movements, or facial expressions; and deal with the other one idea of your emotion. Whereas nowadays it is more like that even these gestures, facial expressions are the ones that articulate the emotion, and if it is not there, there is no emotion, there is no inner space where emotion would do something; and, of course, you feel most of your emotions, you sense in your body, in your stomach if you are not well, a dizziness. This is not a feeling that seizes at a certain place, but an emotion articulates itself physically. It does not express itself, it articulates itself. This is way different. This is performative. And the other thinking is it is there and I have to express it, this is another thing.

It seems to me that the notion of event is unresolved.

But it is also a language problem. Because “event” in English does not cover what “ereignis” is in German. We have a whole philosophy on “ereignis”, starting with Heidegger and it is something that, in fact, happens just once – otherwise

it would be “ereignis”. Event, in English, has some other idiomatic shades in it; this is the difficulty of translation. You do not get it exactly as it is there. I used the English word “event” just in the sense of something that happened only once and affects all those who participate in it. That is important, and that is why I said this is not a mythology of something, of making a mystery of performances. Of course you can repeat a performance, but you can never repeat the constellation you had at that moment. I mean, if you have the same spectators, then you, what happens, so they will respond differently. If you have other spectators, also, it is just meant by just once. For each one who is there, it is once and also for a performer; it takes place once because the performer performs before an audience, for an audience, with an audience and this is not the same, not two times the same. And this is not mystifying, I cannot repeat? You can repeat it, but repeating just does not mean it will be the same, it is something else, and it is not mystifying.

For example, do you know the philosopher called Alain Badiou? He wrote a book called Being and Event, and he said “event is a hole in your previous knowledge”- when you experience an event, it means you are confronting something that will produce a hole in your previous knowledge, you are confronting the unknown.

This is a problem of semantics because the words we have in whatever language, they are performative and not expressive. There is no something like event, it does not exist. It is a concept, and concept is a heuristic tool: so I will define it in this way, because I have certain ideas that I want to not express, so I need this concept to substitute. Or you and I have different intentions, but we both need the term event, but since we have another horizon in which we want to put this, we define it differently. So for I will never bother about that, what is important, and I think this is a mistake which many the even advanced students say, “for him event is that, and for her it is that”. Ok, that is fine, because, this chair exists there and when I deny it exists and run against it, I will feel it exists there. But event does not exist like a chair does. Event is a construction in my head, therefore, I will always say this is not that any concept would be a perfect description of an essence, but it is a heuristic tool, I define it in a particular way that then foregrounds exactly those aspects that are interesting and important within my theory. And another one takes up just to this, and so he or she comes to another definition of this concept, that is ok, I do not bother about that. So there are different concepts. It just important to know what these concepts do within this theory, which could not do in the same form in another’s theory.

Concerning your personal view on event, would you see it as a rupture?

Well, this is important, it is not a rupture, but it is something, when you are in there, it can never be the same, and this is important, I do not mean this old, we never going to the same river. Of course not, but I do not care about whether the river has changed. But an event is only when it really means something to you, when it affects you, emotionally and cognitively.

So, in certain way, the event displaces you.

Yes, you can say so.

You can differentiate what happened before and after the event.

Yes.

The Interweaving Performance Culture Research Center, can you talk a little about it? What is the objective of this center?

Well, the idea is that, we had in the 80's something that came up like support "intercultural theater", and I also held conferences on that topic with this head "intercultural theater". And that was meant what we had already much earlier, but it was then highlighted, when people take with productions elements coming from different cultures, like Peter Brook, in Mahabharata, took elements from Indian theater; Or Bob Wilson did in The Knee Plays, things from Japanese theater. Or Suzuki, when he did his Trojan Women combining elements from Japanese and Western theater. So we had lots of these things and they were put "intercultural theater". But what is interesting that, under this umbrella term, only those productions fell, where the West was part of it. Something that African or Chinese did was not considered at all, and this is what made me later on suspicious about this term. I did not work on that when I came here. I was in another place, and when I came here, there were so many other things. Then I came back to it a few years ago, because we had so many things going on, dance companies where they consisted of dances from different cultures, we had so many things going on between people and texts and workshops. And that is when I become interested to see what happens now, when these things are put together and confronted before difference audiences, with different audiences, what else happens there. And now in a globalize world, this is something that happens more and more often. On one hand, we still have some theater forms like in India or China, Thailand, where people claim

they are traditional, also in Africa, but they also change. But on the other hand, it is so hilarious to see people from the West always take it as a matter of fact, that theater arts are changing all the time, that we have another theater than we had in the Middle Ages. On the other hand, we insist very much that Kabuki, Kathakali, Beijing Opera do not change. Keep as it is. Yes, they started already with this different view on our ballet, the classical ballet comes closest to this, but all these forms also change; they change into certain direction. That is fascinating nowadays to see what happens to theater since theater is not, I mean, it cannot be held down like a book, sculpture or painting. It has to be recreated by people now, today and here. What are we doing then with these different forms? I mean, we all know from Marcel Mauss e *Le Technique Du Corps*, well, he describes what every human being is able to run, to sit, to walk, to sing, to sit down, to swim, I do not know, but each does it in another way because the culture gives it another way to do it. So far so good, but what happens now when the same person undergoes workshops and training in different body techniques? They will leave an imprint on your body. And what happens there? If this person comes these other questions we are dealing with, and many others related to these that we have no pure traditional forms anymore, and then the question is where is something done, what we think: Is it really culturally created and produced? It is just lumping together things from here and there, making no sense at all, except that I know all these, and I can use all these? I mean, there are differences, real differences. And we work like that with fellows all over the world, to do research with us for a year here and have discussions together.

Here in Berlin?

Over there, on the other side of the street, that is the house, and this is very productive.

But is it possible to apply?

Yes, then we draw a certain line, you must have your Doctorate, for each researcher that have Doctorate, we have two Post-docs; but not with the purpose to rewrite a dissertation or a book, it must be a new research project. Then we usually have two positions, one or two for an artist, because we always have an artist. But, of course, we choose the artist carefully, because it must be a person who reflects on his or her own work, and then profits from our stay and on the other hand we can also profit for her stay because this person can reflect. We have right now two from India, who are fantastic

and do just that, and the others are senior scholars. Ten people you can imagine, it is about smuggle, is a very vital group, we have wonderful discussions, and we hope all people write a book out of that we are doing right here.

Is it a permanent team?

Each year new people come, it is an institute for advance studies, but with the distinction that in others, subjects can come from everywhere, whereas here we have a subject, only scholars can apply, not only theater scholars, people from Japanese studies or Anthropology. So, it does not depend on one discipline, but it is really this just one subject, but who can contribute to that can apply.

Does this person stay for a year?

Twelve months, some people split it in two periods of six months, or divide it in four months. All these things are possible.

The notion of interdisciplinary research is a very growing practice nowadays, do you believe in it as an attempt to establish a dialog between, for instance, theater and cognitive sciences?

Yes, I had this for twelve years at this center sponsored by the German Research Council on Performing Culture, and it was absolutely interdisciplinary. I think interdisciplinary makes only sense on solid disciplinary basis. Each one must got a good training on one's discipline - then you are able to get into each other studies. Whereas I must say there is a big difference for me between interdisciplinary work in the Natural Sciences and Humanities. In Natural Sciences, you have these articles with ten offers. In Humanities, it makes no sense. In the end, each of the writers write his or her books, but they write it differently then if we would not have this discussion. So we met every second Wednesday at the whole group, and four other working groups for special things. It was great I must say, I miss and I am happy I had this, because it was really wonderful what we achieved on that. Now everybody is talking on the performative, that was utile, it did something here. This is only possible in the interdisciplinary work. Otherwise it cannot be done from the perspective of one discipline.

Is it in English?

Our language is English, because we have people coming from all over the world; and it is strange because we have

music colleagues from Japan who are fluent in German and are not good in English, so our young people would translate for them, this is not a problem.

Can you talk briefly about your current research?

At the time being, I am writing a book on performances of Euripides' Bacchae, again in a globalized world, it is called Dionysius Resurrected. The question is really why since Schechner's very famous Dionysius'69, we have all over the world suddenly a boom of Euripides' Bacchae productions. That is the book and this is what I am working currently. That is great fun, I like it.