Research network „Theology, performance & politics"
Work profile

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1. An emerging research perspective: the intersection of performance, performativity and power

Performances in the public sphere are an increasing form of political activity. The Chilean feminist group *Las Tesis* develops and performs choreographies in order to protest against sexual assault and violence against women (Colectivo Las Tesis 2020). Groups of art activists, like the *Centre for Political Beauty* in Berlin, install provocative art works in prominent public places in order to stimulate controversial debates about cultures of memory and political representation of minorities (Centre for Political Beauty 2019). People assemble in public spaces, occupy streets, parks and places and protest against precarious life conditions and for sociopolitical change (HKFS 2015). Climate activists organize flashmobs in museums in order to protest against climate pollution and mass extinction (Extinction Rebellion Deutschland 2020).
It is not only activists of this kind who use public performances as a means of opinion-making. Politicians and, more generally, people who hold positions of institutional power do so as well. Political representatives stage themselves in particular ways, using conventional images, narratives or gestures, quoting and reiterating shared symbols, and thereby *perform* their messages (Svab 2019). Products of everyday consumption are put on stage, stimulating feelings of joy and happiness, and thus promise and reveal new ways of living which reach far beyond purely technical or practical solutions (SONY 2020). Often, religious symbols are used in such performances; implicitly or explicitly, they have a spiritual dimension and allude to religious institutions or rituals, be it as point of critique or as source of support for their message.

Political performances 'do' something in the ***public sphere***. They use and quote existing signs, symbols, images, gestures, and thus reproduce existing symbolic and political orders, prolonging them from past into present. Simultaneously, these performances recontextualize existing codes and signification systems and thereby inscribe them with different, modified, new meanings and significations. Performances have this twofold character which is not free of ambivalence: They are repetitive and conventional on the one hand, and critical and creative on the other hand. They reestablish normative codes and, simultaneously, open a possible space for the discovery and appearance of something new.

The term "***performativity***" is used as a name for this repetitive-conventional quality of actions that is simultaneously critical and creative. It refers not only to art performances, but to all different kinds of human and non-human activities, interactions and behavior. Something is ***performative*** insofar as it (re-)produces the reality it signifies and (re-)presents and possibly transforms it.
The term "performative act" was first introduced by the British philosopher of language John Langshaw Austin in his famous Harvard lectures from 1955, published in 1962.One of Austin's decisive discoveries was that language does not only describe realities but contains a particular force to establish certain realities by referring to, using, quoting and recontextualizing conventions or

norms. Expressions like "I promise that…" or "I bet that…" are not only a description of an action, but are activities in itself which establish social realities in and by the very act of being said.

Austin's discovery has been discussed, critiqued and modified in many different forms and fields. It has been transformed into a general theory of speech acts (Searle 1970) and theories of communicative action, its normative and pragmatic foundations and conditions of possibility (Habermas 1987; Apel 1973).It has been connected with theories of language and signs (Derrida 1999, 2001), texts (Man 1979; Fish 1980), media and mediality (Krämer 2017, 2004; Mersch 2011). Feminist and Gender theory have intensively drawn on it (Butler 1999; Sedgwick 2003), as well as sociology of science/science and technological studies (Latour 2014; Barad 2017) and theories of economics (MacKenzie 2008; Callon 2008).A particular reception and elaboration of "performativity" /performative theory has taken place in political theory. In this field, it has been adapted to reflect on the foundations of law and its legitimation (Derrida 1990, 2002), on subversive practices in everyday life (Certeau 1984), on the ways and mechanisms by which identities and communities are formed and stabilized(Butler und Spivak 2008), on conditions of precarity (Butler 2006) and claims of change, on conditions of in/visibility, (non-)participation and dissent (Rancière 2008).Recently, performative theory has beenused to reflect on body assemblies in the public sphere and to analyze the way they claim and practice performatively sociopolitical change (Butler 2018; Kaelin et al. 2020).

This ***growing attention for critical interventions*** by means of art and body in public spaces corresponds with recent developments in ***performance and theatre studies***. Theatre is analyzed as a particular place and practice where new meanings emerge and realities are transformed (Fischer-Lichte 2008; Rancière 2011), the political implications of these processes are highlighted (Fischer-Lichte und Wihstutz 2013). Human performances in general, also beyond theatre, are analyzed as practices which constitute, critique and possibly modify human worlds (Goffman 1974; Turner 1988; Schechner 2003; Carlson 2018).In this context, the attention has very recently been drawn to manyfold forms of ***public art activism*** and the ways they intervene into the public sphere: urban street art, performances in migration contexts, theatrical acts as forms of subversion and resistance (Ridout 2008; Haedicke 2012; Serafini 2018; Arfara et al. 2018; Gržinić und Stojnić 2018). Such performances in the public space are considered as political interventions and count as a "new genre sui generis" (Balme 2013, 2018) in theatre and performance studies.

Political theories of this kinds make visible what is implicitly present in all forms of performative actions: ***power***. Performative acts, be it in language, science, media, art, protest, do not only invoke consequences *for the future* which are not yet present. Further, they realize and execute *here and now* what they say, they establish and make appear the realities they signify. They enact a force or power that really "matters" – that produces realities and in and by the activity itself. This power-dimension is ***ambivalent***: performative acts can, on the one hand, stabilize existing realities and open space for the discovery and appearance of something new, but they can also conceal, exclude and de-realize certain forms of life, signs and appearances. With "performativity" we touch upon profound questions of power, mechanisms of in/exclusion and de-/realization, and violence. "Performances" in its political quality are an emerging field for the discussion of this dimension of performative power.
Against this background, performative theory and performance theory are a ***tool for the critical reflection of the power dimension*** that is inherent in language, knowledge, social norms, technology, aesthetical codes of visibility, embodiment and livability. These critical lenses highlight the relations between structures, power and the constitution of reality, and they also give ***impulses for changes***: for creative re-configurations, re-imagination, re-appropriation of different conditions and expressions of life in the worlds of today.

2. Theology and performativity/performance

Within different fields of theology and religious studies, we can observe a growing interest in performative theory as well as an intensified attention to theological aspects of performance over the last 10 years.

This concerns, first, **practical theology**: religious education (Klie und Leonhard 2008; Dressler 2009), rituals, liturgy and homiletics (Fischer 2013), as well as the staging of biblical texts (Plüss 2007; Hardmeier 2005) are reconsidered in performance/performative perspectives. Second, there is a growing reception of performative theory in **political theology**. Beyond queer theology (Althaus-Reid 2003; Mendez-Montoya 2013), this concerns theological reflections in a North American perspective onblackness (Lloyd 2018; Crawley 2008), social protest movements and practices of artistic resistance(Sales 2013; Miller 2019).With a focus on current political and social developments and crises in Europe(Kirschner und Nate 2019; Zeilinger), Scholars have started to develop a performative political theology, which seeks to respond to current challenges of the continent, including questions of political representation, participation and migration(Schmiedel 2017). **Systematic theology, too,** has started to take up performative theory, e.g. in order to analyze the dynamics of prayer and comtemplation (Trawöger 2019) or to reconsider sounds and symbols(Sequeri 2012), styles (Certeau 1992; Morra 2004) and spaces (Hoff 2019) of Christian faith(s). Philosophers have reconsidered religious language in performative perspectives, as well (Agamben 2011; Latour 2013).

However, this **reception, adaption and reconsideration of "performance" and "performativity"** in theology is in a nascent stage and, up to now, appears to be **partial/fragmentary**.

1) A systematic discussion, implementation and reconsideration of "performance"/ "performativity" in academic theology has not taken place yet, including a perception and discussion of the different theory branches, the historic developments of the respective theories, and an in-depth discussion of their epistemological, aesthetical and practical complexity.

2) Performances have not yet been taken into account as a *locus theologicus* and *forma theologica*, nor have correlated terms been discussed intensively, like mimesis, scenography, enactment/embodiment, scripted reality, orchestration, style, mediality and intermedial spaces.

3) Existing approaches and research outcomes have not been brought into a broader dialogue with each other and with non-theological disciplines.

4) In particular, a systematic reception and reconsideration of the power-dimension of performative acts, as well as an intensified and systematic reflection on the conventional as well as critical and creative quality of performances in theological perspectives has not taken place. **Elaborated performative theologies / performance theologies**, including critical perspectives on power questions in performative acts, are still a **desideratum**.

A systematic development of performative approaches / performance approaches in theology is a promising chance. It offers possibilities to **reconsider theological concepts, practices and gestures in performative perspectives**. Such a reception builds bridges to a wide range of academic disciplines, **stimulates interdisciplinary exchange and dialogue** and increases sustainably the translatability (?) of theology into other disciplines. It enables theology to offer reflections on performance and performativity and to show the implicit/explicit theological dimensions of the latter. What is the theological in "performativity"? Not least, it offers possibilities to **address performances** as a form of political activity, to reflect on their implicit and/or explicit theological dimension, and to reconsider the **performative/performance character of the Christian gospel** itself.

3. A possible working perspective for the research group

The research group "Theology, performance, performativity" will answer to these research gaps.

- It seeks to bring *scholars/researchers from different theological domains together* (PhD students, Post-docs, Professors)who develop theological reflections in dialogue with performance /performativity theory and correlated perspectives.

- It wants to stimulate and foster the *reception, adaption and reconsideration of "performance" and "performativity" in theology* and support the development of respective theological approaches.

- It offers an opportunity to discuss performance(s) and performative theories and correlated concepts, practices, experiences in an *inter-theological and inter-disciplinary* way, including a power-critical perspective.

- It offers an opportunity to *present and discuss research projects*, ideas, questions, projects and outcomes with regard to the research fields described above.

- The research group offers space for **personal encounter** with colleagues in an international, German and English speaking setting.
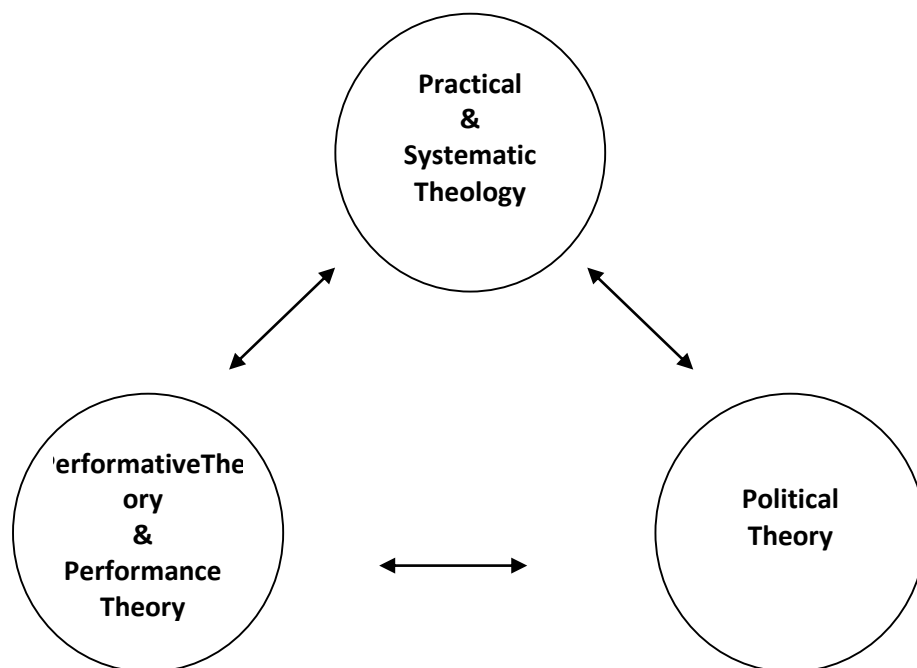
… mimesis, scenography,enactment/ embodiment, scripted reality, orchestration, styles, mediality, intermedial or liquid spaces

The concrete possible *working methods and elements* are:
- ○ Presentation and discussion of research ideas, processes, outcomes, questions
- ○ Reading and discussion of texts on "performance", "performativity" and correlated theories/practices/aesthetics.
- ○ Visit of theatre plays, music performances, exhibitions… and reflection on them
- ○ Input by external, non-theological speakers and interdisciplinary discussion
- ○ Open forms of shared spirituality
- ○ Working languages, depending on participants: English and/or German

Possible *first organizational steps*: In case a group of >7 participants will form, we will schedule a first meeting of 1,5-2 days in June or July 2020. The place of the first meeting will be fixed depending on the provenance of the participants.

- o This first meeting will give the opportunity to get to know each other, to work on the themes described above, to decide together about possible further meetings and to develop a basic work plan
- o We will also consider possibilities of financial support for the Research Group (e.g. KU Leuven support "Young researchers networks"), possible forms of outreach, e.g. publications in form of multi-authoredvolume after 3-4 meetings/work phases in late 2021/2022, panel application in EuARe conference, Bologna.

- In case you are interestedin taking part in the first meeting and possibly in the Research Group do not hesitate to send an email to: christian.kern@tu-dresden.de. The group is hosted at Institut für Katholische Theologie / Lehrstuhl Systematische Theologie TU Dresden, Germany.

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