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*How to  
Do Things  
with Art*

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Март 2010.  
Лондон

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*What Performativity Means in Art*

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understanding of time with an idea of history that is seized and actualized from the present and at the same time in the present, but because the artwork creates an image without being a representation. Like Benjamin's idea of the dialectical image, *Box* evokes an image of history that is beyond pictorial depiction. And this is because its actual location is neither the visual nor the aural medium but a visitor-body that is physically seized by the impact of the beat and integrated into the work. It is only in the visitor's physical and reflective experience that the individual parts of *Box* (the visual pulse, the beat and the voice) blend to form the work. Only there does this installation materialize in its entirety as an artwork. And only there does this work's conception of condensed time become concrete—in a moment that is both *jetztzeit* and history simultaneously, like, to borrow Benjamin's words again, "a muscle that contracts historical time."

In this staging Coleman brings two distinct levels of the work of art together: the level of representation and portrayal, which shows and re-presents *something*, and a dimension within which this portrayal shows *itself*, making its reality-creating effects explicit. Coleman's work produces an effect (the envisioning of a fragmentary and discontinuous image of history) that is already present in the (just as fragmentary and dissociated) structure of the work. It is only through the conjunction of these three areas of subject matter, structure and physical effect that the meaning of the work finally emerges. It is in this particular aesthetic construction that the singularity of this work of art lies, and also its link to an aesthetics of the performative, in Austin's terms.

#### Digression: The Saying of Doing (John L. Austin)

When John L. Austin introduced the expression "performative" in the mid-1950s, he was referring to the active character of speech. The underlying proposition of his argument is that under certain conditions language creates the reality it describes, so that one actually *does* something with words. In the 1990s, Judith Butler gave Austin's linguistic theories a social and political horizon by emphasizing the constitutive and the restrictive powers of conventions; both are prerequisites to giving the individual the performative power to create a reality.

Butler's wider application of the performative subsequently was adopted by cultural studies, in that it is also possible to examine the performativity of visual art as a specific area of social praxis. In my view, however, this extension of Austin's theory also led to the loss of an essential aspect of the concept: Austin not only describes how we take action with words, but also develops a way of speaking in his own presentation in which his *saying* and *doing* with words are related to one another in a performative manner.

Austin's lectures, published posthumously in 1962 as *How to Do Things with Words*, operate as a kind of instruction manual; establishing the existence of a performative level of speech by demonstrating how the production of meaning can be created through "doing" while speaking. This view of Austin is also suggested by Shoshana Felman and Sybille Krämer (independently of one another and with different emphases), both of whom I draw on here.<sup>40</sup> Their reading of his text varies from the usual one inasmuch as they understand *How to Do Things with Words* not only as a proposition, but also as a staging; not only as a text that speaks *about* doing things with words, but that also does something through speech. According to Krämer, "understanding Austin not only means listening to what he says, but also looking at what he is doing by saying it."<sup>41</sup> But what does Austin do? He begins his lectures by aspiring to formulate a theoretical definition of the performative, based on the distinction between a performative-generative and an asseverative-constative use of language. Austin very soon realizes, however, that this distinction is untenable, as there is no unequivocal criterion by which the performative and the constative can clearly be differentiated. At this point he decides to "go back to fundamentals," as he puts it.<sup>42</sup> He examines a series of criteria and rules through which he continually awakens new expectations of a theoretical systemization. As the newly conceived rules become more and more complex, the reader begins not only to doubt their validity, but also to wonder whether Austin is even interested at all in establishing a clear theoretical definition of the performative. He contrives a wealth of situations in which the performative power of the act of speech comes to fail: he marries donkeys, baptizes penguins, appoints horses as consuls. In the end, every absurd and at times mysterious attempt to fix the meaning of the term performative



demonstrates the failure of the rule. For most academic readers, Austin's lectures are a seminal but flawed attempt to define a theory of the performative, and therefore in need of improvement.<sup>43</sup> Read with Felman and Krämer, however, *How to Do Things with Words* seems more like a performance of the failure to establish the meaning of the performative—with the effect that, precisely because the performative cannot be determined in a conventional manner, a different *modus operandi* is needed to approach the concept and elucidate its meaning.

Austin, who taught at Oxford University, belonged to a continental tradition of analytic philosophy, a system of thought characterized by seeking meaning in concepts themselves, and not in their efficacy. In *How to Do Things with Words* he initially operates within this tradition—as his excessive use of examples illustrates—but eventually causes its internal logic to collapse. Austin shows that in *saying* there is always a *doing* and that this *doing* always brings forth meaning. Finally he demonstrates how this interaction can be configured. Austin devises a concept that eludes its own determinability, but that through a praxis, through use, becomes concrete, and in its application provides the most consistent definition of its own idea. Because of his subtle ability to connect various points of view and ways of thinking, the Wittgenstein philologist Georg Henrik von Wright dubbed Austin the “doctor subtilis” of Oxford postwar philosophy, recalling a 13th-century Oxford colleague who had been given this epithet. Wright sees a similar talent in Austin, describing him as “the unrivalled master in detecting conceptual shades of linguistic usage—superior in this art even to Wittgenstein.”<sup>44</sup>

From this perspective Austin's failure to reach a theoretical definition of the performative is not a methodical failure, but a failure with method. In *How to Do Things with Words*, his speech employs aspects of an aesthetic model of tension that is not only rhetorical but also dramatically staged between the levels of saying and showing, message and performance, in which words come to act and through this to mean. Within this conceptual frame, Austin can be seen not primarily as the theorist of a basic but deficient classification of the performative, but rather as a thinker who introduces a new relationship between act and referent.

In the separation between word and deed, between the sign and what it signifies, there is a foundation of enlightened thinking that underlies every cultural praxis. “This is the nerve centre of the idea of ‘representation’: not epiphany, i.e., presentness, but rather surrogacy, i.e., envisioning, is what signs have to accomplish for us,” writes Krämer.<sup>45</sup> This kind of relationship to the world, which is rooted in the semiotics of representation, is countered by Austin, in his concept of the performative, an approach that substitutes an ontological distinction between sign and being, word and deed with an intertwining and mediating of these levels. In *How to Do Things with Words* Austin shows that action can be taken with words and also *how* such action is organized and given significance. He demonstrates, accentuates and frames a performative level of speech, while at the same time providing a model for the consequences of shifting the production of meaning onto this performative level: the perception of the meaning of an utterance or text not only, or not even primarily, in what it *says*, represents or depicts, but above all in what it *does*, i.e., the real effects it brings about.

There is a methodical challenge in this emphasis shift from saying to doing that, as I think, can be made productive to the understanding of works of art. What is the relationship between an artwork's meaning and its effect? How do contemporary artists work with different modes of production of meaning? Every work of art functions by bringing forth a moment of aesthetic experience that can endure, yet is repeatable, thus enabling the work of art to exist in historical time. On a thematic level, Coleman's *Box* allegorizes this temporal existence of a work of art as an experience and portrayal of time. Performatively, however, it shows how the artwork itself can bring about these various levels of temporality and make them tangible—in an artwork that creates a moment that is both now and historical. Coleman's works thematize the practices of cultural memory, consciously aware of being a part of such a praxis which they also modify and form. Coleman sets up relationships between the portrayal and the creation of history; he gives expression within the work of art to a discontinuous understanding of history, and also intervenes formatively and transformatively in the similarly discontinuous passing on of his work into historical record. Understanding this approach as significant and as an



element of his artistic message—in other words, to perceive the saying of doing—requires the methodical shift of emphasis that Austin instigated with his concept of the performative and put into effect with *How to Do Things with Words*.

### *Box and Minimal Art: Historicity and Experience*

Coleman alludes to the distinctive iconographic feature of Minimal Art with the title *Box* and, at the same time, to a certain extent also takes up what Rosalind Krauss calls the primacy of Minimalist sculpture's "lived physical perspective," namely its spatial orientation to the viewer's body.<sup>46</sup> Minimal Art fundamentally changed the relationship between the object and its viewer, between art and its venue, by shifting the meaning of the object completely to the experience that is made with and through the object. The level of representation and that of narration both step behind the object's impact on a situation; an impact that throws the viewer back on him or herself, in space and in a situation. Although it is difficult to pinpoint this experience, it is not only the constitutive role of the viewer that comes into focus here, but also the spatial and atmospheric conditions.

For Krauss this phenomenological orientation towards experience, something she elaborates primarily in reference to Robert Morris's sculptures, brought with it not only a new approach to the physicality of the body, but even a kind of compensatory, if not utopian gesture.<sup>47</sup> A viewer-subject, alienated in everyday life from his or her own experiences, was to be re-aligned with them through the experience of art. "This," Krauss says, "is because the Minimalist subject is in this very displacement returned to its body, re-grounded in a kind of richer, denser subsoil of experience than the paper-thin layer of an autonomous visuality that had been the goal of optical painting."<sup>48</sup> In the course of time, Krauss revises her original position, acknowledging that the promise of Minimal Art not only remained unredeemed, but to a certain extent had even turned into its opposite. Looking back, she no longer considered Minimal Art to be the seedbed of a richer form of art experience, but rather as having paved the way for its own depletion. Because the Minimal Art object focuses not only on the viewer's body but also on the surrounding situation, i.e. the exhibition context, this

desubstantiation of the art experience also impacts on the museum. For what is in the final instance bereft of content is, Krauss suggests, the historical dimension of the art experience, or, more specifically, a dimension that references the historical. Krauss becomes aware of this at that very moment when, at the end of the 1980s in America, the social function of the museum profoundly changed. A new tax law enabled objects to be sold from collections, which affected the status of the museum collection, as did new spatial concepts, new museum design and presentation forms. Krauss quotes Thomas Krens, then the director of the Guggenheim Museum in New York, a key protagonist in this change, who referred deliberately to Minimal Art in explaining these developments: "It is Minimalism that has reshaped the way we [ ... ] look at art: the demands we now put on it; our need to experience it along with its interaction with the space in which it exists; our need to have a cumulative, serial crescendo towards the intensity of this experience; our need to have more and at a larger scale."<sup>49</sup> Krens understood that conventional museum architecture was not able to provide the kind of experience that these Minimal objects required. These sculptures prompted him to opt for new design paradigms, preparing and anticipating new spatial concepts that took their cue from warehouses and factories and presentation formats that were geared towards comprehensive, monographic shows. "Compared to the scale of the Minimalist objects, the earlier paintings and sculptures look impossibly tiny and inconsequential, like postcards, and the galleries take on a fussy, crowded, culturally irrelevant look, like so many curio shops," Krauss observed.<sup>50</sup>

When, in 1989, Krauss visited the Panza Collection in Paris and saw an exhibition of works by artists such as Robert Morris, Dan Flavin and Carl Andre, she realized in what way Minimal Art indeed heralded a "radical revision" of the museum. The powerful presence of these objects, she wrote, renders the room itself the object of an experience. Thus the museum itself becomes for the viewers an objectified and abstract entity, "from which the collection has withdrawn."<sup>51</sup> This experience, as Krauss explains, is very intense and effective, but in the final instance remains essentially empty, as it is merely aesthetically and not historically determined. The experience evoked by the Minimal Art object is oriented