MEMORY ACTS: PERFORMING SUBJECTIVITY
Mieke Bal

Three kinds of acts are set up together in this: performance, performativity, and memory. Performance – playing a role, dancing, singing, or executing a piece of music – is unthinkable without memory. How can you play a part, a role, without memorizing the part or score, and rehearsing the gestures, mimic, and diction that fit the role, that make it available for understanding? Even improvisation requires memorization of the structure that sustains it. Performativity, on the other hand, is the unique occurrence of an act in the here and now. In speech-act theory, it is the moment when known words detach themselves from their sleep in dictionaries and from people’s linguistic competence to be launched as weapons or seductions, exercising their weight, striking force, and seduction in the present only, between singular subjects. Here, memory would only stand in the way of the success of the performing, to be swatted away like a fly. Both terms have gained great currency in cultural studies. The need to keep distinguishing between them seems obvious.

But theoretical neatness takes its toll just as much as the messiness of confusion. This paper is an attempt to deploy the two concepts in order to bring to the surface what remains hidden as long as they are kept separate; the interaction between performance on the one hand, as the skilled and thoughtful production of, say, a spectacle based on the memorization of a score by performers, and performativity on the other, in a unique present, where memory plays its tricks. Among memory’s toys a particularly relevant one is time. It is also where subjectivity is produced: over time, in time, with time. While theoretical in thrust, the argument I seek to make, in all its simplicity, is contradictory to theorizing as such, for it opposes objectifying discourse and the very possibility of “theory” as distinct from “practice.”

I will therefore probe the aspects and subtleties, implications and consequences of this argument through a close engagement – itself a performative performance – with a single artwork, the installation Photograph by Irish artist James Coleman, from 1998-99. I “saw” – or, according to my argument below, “performed” – this work during six weeks of spring 2000 in Paris. The installation consists of a slide projection lasting 19 minutes, accompanied by a young woman’s voice declaiming poetic text. The projection takes place in the dark. The images occupy the entire wall. No benches or chairs are available.

In spite of the deceptively simple technology used in this installation, Photograph offers an utterly rich sensuality, beyond synaesthetic, to the extent that the senses, while each emphatically clear, can in the end no longer be distinguished. The voice is both theatrical and historical. The discourse is romantic and interior. The diction is imposing and moving. It binds theatricality with poetic rhythm, rhyme, and content. That is, unless your entrance happens to coincide with the beginning of the installation, which is unlikely. In that case, you hear only breathing.

For an account of the technology and an exploration of the meanings it produces, see Rosalind Krauss’ rich and brilliant, if in the end, somewhat formalistic, analysis of Photograph. Rosalind E. Krauss, “First Lines: Introduction to Photograph.” In James Coleman, Barcelona 1999, p. 9-25.
sighing, and see slowly developing blurred-looking stains on the screen. Just white. Not white as in “black-and-white,” although a gut-reading of the work’s title, *Photograph*, might suggest this. Rather, white as in the spectrum, where white merges all colors. And white as in baroque thought, where white consists of foam, decomposed into a thousand tiny convex mirrors, each engaging the viewer into a different, complete world. White, as in bright, light, and Might. And white, finally, as in the name of Hayden White, who definitively changed contemporary history-writing by infusing it with a need for self-reflection and for theoretical analysis of what we do when we write about the past. This opening-up of “white,” points to a first way in which this work is a *theoretical* object.

The opening sequence of non-figurative stains, then, puts the problematic of memory on the table. A photographic historian like Rosalind Krauss is compelled to read them as a reference to early photography, helped, of course, by the work’s title. Having just written a book on baroque art, my inevitable association is with Caravaggio’s foaming whites, hence, with color. Others might think of such idiosyncratic little facts as this or that person called “White,” or of racial whiteness, clean linen or hospital garb; angels or AIDS and much in-between. The point – or rather, the performativity of these images-without-image, these stains – is that you think of something, something that is culturally embedded so that the sequence of images to come will confirm or infirm the association. Memory as *stage director*. This is what makes the viewer a performer. But the viewer can only be a performer if performance is taken, here, in the double theoretical sense. The viewer “plays” the part scripted by the work, to the extent that he or she “acts,” responding to the perlocutionary address of the work, in the present of viewing.

Performing memory in ways I will return to in a moment, the voice begins, before these ostensibly non-figurative images yield to crystal-clear figurative ones. The short-term retrospective effect of this sudden transition is astounding. For, the clarity, in fact, has not increased. What seem to be blurs at first sight, are images, just as clear as the ones following. Meanwhile, the voice continues to read what had begun “during” the unreadable images: untraceable snippets of a timeless, perhaps contemporary, discourse, immediately recognizable as “romantic” without being recognizable as specific quotations. Word for word, slowly, clearly, but unfathomably, the voice says, or rather, I hear: *in its bright stillness present though far! would she smile….* The bright – white but not quite – stains – that look like blurs but not quite – almost, but not quite – might suggest a body; no, a face; no, neither. But, while my failed attempts to give meaning to the shapes linger on my retina, and the unreadable images linger on the figurative images, the point of this “dialectic of seeing” staged through this “optical unconscious” slowly dawns on me.

This point here has to do with the double meaning of the verb “moving.” Its productive ambiguity stages the theoretical point I am trying to make in this article about performance meeting performativity on the site, and under the direction, of memory. Physical movement is literalized, has become a conceptualizing metaphor of moving as affect, for the non-figurative images, evoking stains in the surrealist sense, move, are the only moving images: untraceable snippets of a timeless, perhaps untranscribed, traces, which I do not “own” but which I cannot ascribe to the work-as-object either.

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3 For me, an important association came about with Ann Veronica Janssens’ mist installation at the Venice Biennale of 1999. See my commentary in Janssens (2000).

4 I mean this quite specifically if not literally, in the sense that the *mise-en-scène* is predicated upon, “directed,” by memory. On staging, see e.g. Hans-Thiess Lehmann, “From Logos to Landscape: Text in Contemporary Dramaturgy.” *Performance Research* 2,1 (1997), p. 55-60

5 In this and other “quotations” from the text read in the installation, I am reduced to “quot-ing” from memory. Below, I will try to interpret the artist’s reluctance to give access to the written text, even for the sake of correct transcription, as a crucial element of the work itself. Since the text as well as the impossibility of transcribing, tracing, and, indeed, “authorizing” it – hence, also, my inevitable misquotings – are part of the work. I present the snippets of text in italics. I take full responsibility for these snippets, which I do not “own” but which I cannot ascribe to the work-as-object either.

images of the installation. But, it is not they that move; it is the technical apparatus, the computer-directed timer, the projection itself. The movement of the non-figurative images due to dissolving through time is acoustically out of sync with the sound of the slides dropping, the fan, the carousel, and the voice. The a-chrony, or rather “heterochrony,” produced between words and images, voice and machine-sound, non-figurative and figurative images mutually remaining present within one another, is congenial to theatrical attempts in contemporary mise-en-scène to produce apparently empty time.

Heterochrony, the rhythm of the installation, characterizes memory. This is a second sense in which this work is a theoretical object. It “theorizes” memory by offering a figuration of it as heterochrony. Most of the installation consists of the projections of still, bright, color photographs of, mainly, schoolgirls involved in rehearsing for a costumed dance. But that is the future; for now, against the non-figurative images that mobilize memory by their refusal to represent it, the voice offers an acoustic mise-en-scène. Like Rorschach stains, these sequences give up some of their openness-to-interpretation through the quasi-institutional framing imposed by the voice. Thus, the voice’s framing of the images prefigures the subsequent figurative images by suggesting that figuration is itself a limitation. This is a third sense in which this work “theorizes.” But the voice, although clearly a young actress, emphatically declaiming the verses, is no one’s. This fundamental anonymity is the motor of the performance of subjectivity, in the double sense of the term.

Its very theatricality makes it anonymous. The reading is slow. The pace “embodies” – although no body can claim it – its theatrical exteriority as a statement against any realistic interpretation. Neither the schoolgirls, who would speak faster, shout, or laugh, nor the poet-artist, who stays rigorously out of the picture, can be the target of the viewer’s irresistible tendency to attribute the voice, so that the time it occupies is itself a performance of no-voice, of a critique of all the connotations of personal specificity that have culturally accrued to the notion of “voice.” The voice as a mold, trace, even part of, the body of the unique person who speaks is told off by this voice-over. A less theatricalized voice can be recognized, and disguising it through theatricalization, exteriorization, and heterochrony is an act of refusing to allow this policing of identity by the recognizable and unique voice. The time-consuming reading that this voice performs takes it out of such subjectivity and emphatically produces “theater,” turns it from performativity into performance. Something happens in that transition, and memory is the act that makes it happen.

Together with the romantic nature of what she is reading, which pushes “quotation” into your face, even though the words, like the voice, are not obviously easily traceable to specific sources, I hear, or think I hear, words that sound romantic. They belong to the treasure house of language handed down at school, familiar but only vaguely remembered. Those that keep turning in my mind are those that speak to me; other viewers will recall other words. I feel addresses when I hear, or rather, feel, such words: My friend, where art thou, day by day … Breathing. Sighs. Oh faithful sister and friend / wouldst thou following … these lines … shrouded … wouldst thou read … the fluttering of my breath and joy and woe beneath … I know I am misquoting – not to speak of misspelling! – just as the poet-artist cannot but misquote romantic poetry. We know from Borges’ “Pierre Menard, Author of Don Quixote,” that we cannot preserve in self-identical permanence a discourse that only lingers in our memory. For memory is doomed to anachronism. Its fundamental anachronic nature is not a consequence of a failure to produce “the truth” of the elements of the past, for, after all, performance in the first sense is possible.

But, in its re-emergence, each snippet from the past is torn off from its fabric. Memory cannot transport its time.


9 For the numerous aspects of “voice,” one might consult the recent book by Renata Salecl and Slavoj Zizek (eds), Gaze and Voice as Love Objects, Durham and London 1996. Voice is also a concept in narratology, where it refers to the implicit or explicit “first person” of discourse.

10 On memory as act, as activity with its own liability laws, see Mieke Bal, Jonathan Crewe, and Leo Spitzer (eds.), Acts of Memory: Cultural Recall in the Present, Hanover (NH) 1999.
frame. For this reason, the work “reasons,” the attempt to recall, trace, place in the fabric of past discourses what we read or hear in the present, is an act of memory that colludes with such acts of distortion as lying, pretending, and cheating. As I transcribe what I hear, stitching words into the new fabric of my, I am perpetrating these crimes, adding yet another layer to the de-authorizing acts of the artist. Deploying an emphatically theatrical voice, disguising its “personhood,” and betraying its refusal to have the person’s identity policed, Coleman, the visual artist, the maker of images, drives this point home in words and sounds together. But he is a visual artist, and hence, these words and sounds in non-harmonious interaction also act with images.

The poetry is as romantic as it is contemporary. Like insistent, continuous stage directions, this version of romanticism scripts rather than writes. It picks up the graffiti of our cultural memory, the personalized, interiorized experiences, whose subject, irredeemably lost in time as well as in the anonymity of cultural voice, we cannot know. What I hear can be no more than scraps, shards from a past I cannot master but from which I cannot rid myself either. Subjective and anonymous, here “cultural memory” bridges the gap between private and public. The cultural memory of romanticism as we remember it today is doubled by romanticism’s discourse on cultural memory. This most subjectivizing moment of Western literature – the moment that has bound the very genre, or mode, of poetry to subjectivity – in fact questions what it also put before its readers.

Flowing in and out of personal discourse, wavering between first/second interactivity and third-person narrative, the romantic discourse that this work is proposing in its guise as theoretical object and contra commonplace views of romanticism, is, in fact, primarily, insistently, effectively, anti-individualistic. Thus, because of this commitment against individualism, it explores and probes the nature of subjectivity. It probes subjectivity by means of the double sense of the notion of performance/performativity. The subject is situated between private, where it goes mad with loneliness, and public, where it drowns in alienation. Coleman’s work “re-stages” this philosophy of subjectivity, with the pre-fix “re-” involving repetition and reply, quotation and criticism, theorizing and thinking through. One of the ways in which it, as aesthetic object, does this, is the interactivity between word, sound and image, each figuative and non-figurative in their own way. Re-staging this is making present the cultural memory that shaped contemporary society. The work, thus, shows that presence. But the verb showing falls short of what is at stake. For, if memory is acting, then staging the occurrence of such acts is performing – as in performativity – by means of a performance, the cultural situation in which all participants are necessarily en-acting such acts. Showing, that is, can no longer be conceived of as spectacle “in the third person present,” set before us on a stage and separated from us by a fourth wall. This is, in a minimal account, why performance, according to this work, requires performativity, a requirement that becomes obvious as soon as memory is foregrounded.

The sound, the physical aspect of the voice that relentlessly casts out the grammatical use of the word “voice” as metaphorical, is involved in this profound thinking-through by means of appropriation-and-disappropriation of romantic discourse undone of its written fixity and of its subsequent authorial naming. Coleman uses clarity of voice as well as childhood to open up representation. The voice offers an effective counterpoint to the authoritative voice of omniscient and distant (“third-person”) narration. The question “who is speaking?”, so central to narratological analysis, falls flat. Its metaphorical nature is criticized here for its individualistic, heroic implications that commonplace views of romanticism have culturally established. Instead of the heroic voice of the lone poet, the theatrical voice of the declamation merges with the alleged consciousness of the children soon to be filling the screen. When I hear ... late but not in vain ..., I do not know if “late” refers to romanticism now or to the images finally yielding figures, or to my realization that it is up to

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11 For a theoretical account of “scraps” of discourse, elaborated through a discussion of the phrases in this function of scraps that constitute the literary production of the Dutch writer and visual artist Armando, see Ernst van Alphen, Caught by History: Holocaust Effects in Contemporary Art, Literature, and Theory, Stanford 1997, p. 123-45 and p. 176-90.

me to perform the irrelevance of who I am. The words “not in vain” console me for a wound that is being inflicted only now, whose victim and accomplice I am willfully condemned to be. The wound of anachronistic loss, of the irreparable lateness of any act of memory. Willfully – for I decide to stay and perform. Condemned – for I can only do this if touched by performativity. Between the individual will and the system of language, these words are either performative or they are not.

Coleman’s non-figurative stains dissolve the boundaries between self and other as those between body and the complex thought-feeling-emotion inadequately called “mind.” But, they “say,” figurativity is not the opposite of clarity; it may instead be clarity’s enemy. Figures, perhaps, distract from clarity of vision, just as identification of authorship distracts from meaningful language use, from the performativity in performance. They distract by interposing between viewer and image the triggers of such distorting acts of memory as iconographic recognition.

Drawn by the succession of moving non-figurative stains and still figures to reconsider both figuration and “abstraction” (a word now so inadequate) as well as temporal succession and the discreteness of successive moments, I think back to the preface to this installation, Coleman’s earlier Connemara Landscape (1980), which one passes before descending into the dark room of Photograph. Here, no sound, no movement, no words. Like an internal cultural memory, this work, consisting of an enigmatic image of projected lines, is non-figurative, although its title refuses to yield to the opposition with figuration. Tenaciously unreadable, it is not only in precarious and ultimately untenable opposition with the figurative images of the schoolgirls, but also with the stains, which seem blurs again in comparison with these sharp lines.

**GIRLS WITHOUT VOICE**

The non-figurative images or stains available for projection, offset against, but also staged by, the clear voice, give way to a photograph of two girls – equally clear. The bright colors, it now seems, were already inside the white, which embodied the full spectrum of possible colors in the stains that preceded and announced them. Perhaps their forms, their bodies were too? And what do these girls – fixed in an image that on all counts can only be qualified by that awkward, memory-laden word “beauty” – do to that voice that is filling my head and body with a discourse that is not mine? The inevitable question of the relationship between words and images, a question so precarious situated between academic and artistic disciplines and so inadequately theorized, is here staged in its most crucial situation. The words fill the images, the images give body to the words. One of the many performances of this relationship itself – consisting of an entanglement, each “mode” (to avoid the wrong word “medium”) sticking to the other but not in symmetry, not in harmony – is to sharpen the predicament of children, who are not quite given a voice because they are not listened to, through an old voice, a learned one: the poetry, the stuff we learned at school. Through this “schooling” they are allowed to speak.

This is an important, complex issue that I cannot do justice to in this. It is put on the table by the visual and verbal allusions to chalk, which invoke Brecht’s appropriation of an ancient Chinese text in the Caucasian Chalk Circle. The issue that Photograph foregrounds, lifts from the Chinese, then the German, allegory, is the position of the child. The child in the Chinese legend doesn’t talk at all; Brecht’s child babbles unintelligibly. In and out of personalizing visual discourse, the children, who are the “main characters,” are together but do not make visual contact; they do not “speak” to each other. This is foregrounded by contrast, by the background tableaux in which, in a different aesthetic, small groups of children stand chatting. The eyes of the main characters are turned inward, perhaps making more contact with the diffuse anonymous lines being read by that voice without visible body, but whose body we hear, in the breathing, just as we hear the mechanical body of the projection when the slides click into place and when that sound collides with words like ... the hush of hearts that beat. Retrospectively, the still photographs of the live schoolgirls fill the “blurred,” “abstract” (all terms fail the critic here) but moving images with meanings that, while remaining just as unreadable, are contiguous to “heart.” Ultimately, the words can be neither “quoted” nor attributed, but they can be “seen” in their interaction with the children, who “perform” not the words themselves but their meaning and performativity. For the children are literally without speech; instead, through the poetry, they are spoken with.

Among memory’s many tricks, the illusion of narrative coherence is primary. Narrative’s presence, performances, and performativity, its presence as a cultural force that affects the lives of subjects, cannot be over-estimated. It is an indispensable tool as well as a dangerous weapon. In this installation narrativity is imposing itself...
yet held at bay. The stain-like dissolves move but don’t yield story. The girls imply story but don’t move. The sequence imposes moments that follow in each other’s wake but refuses to let the relentless punctuality of rhythm and mechanical order coincide with any chronology of events. No events come to disturb the breathtaking stillness of the photographs, which are so still that we don’t imagine the noisiness that any school space emanates. The contrast between such noisiness and the perfect stillness of the photographs, enhanced by the perfection of their execution, emphasizes the paradoxical status of the children as acting, performing it, without speaking. They do not have voices. Yet by acting out the re-presentation, the exteriorization of the discourse we hear, they appropriate it in the performativity of their performance “on the stage.” Visual stillness entails acoustic silence, entails the whiteness of a clarity of vision that no figuration disturbs, a whiteness that leaves all possibilities open. All colors, all light, all sound, all meanings. The injunction I hear when the voice says something like of white of light that I must tell ... is also my own doing. Who is speaking? The question can no more be answered than ignored. This puts the voice on a different ontological level.

But it is not the level of the bossy narrator of classical narrative. Even in its rare moments of third-person narrative voice unconnected to images, the classical voice is far away. I cannot answer the question “Who is speaking?” when absorbing the sonority of words. Classical, realist narrative has accustomed us to the absence of voice, in all senses of the term. No sounds, no staged subjectivity. An authority that is stronger the more it is silenced, holding the strings of figures and events, make-belief of a world whose otherness is obscured by the assertion of its description. The voice of classical, realist narrative – that narrative mode so pervasive and predominant that everything else is perceived in deviance from it – produces narratives that can be illustrated by images subjected to a role of abject subordination. Ultimately, Coleman’s intricate theorizing of the staging of subjectivity takes the relationship between words and images as the site, or stage, where this power struggle between semiotic “media” is overcome, in favor of an equality that in turn allegorizes the equality claimed for the children in the images.

The allusion to Brecht’s restaging of the Chinese myth of the Caucasian Chalk Circle, discrete as it is – no mention of it occurs – takes different forms. It is perhaps there, in the intricate combination of verbal and visual allusions to Brecht’s work, that the theoretical claim of Coleman’s work is performed with the greatest precision. In itself recalling a text emblematic of political theater, as well as of the recycling inherent in language use, the act of recycling itself carries along the claim for the voice that both the Chinese and German texts deny the child. When two of the children in the images stand – again in a “post-dialogue” pose that compresses the time of speaking and the time of absorbing what was said – on the stairway of their school, I hear words in search of a speaker that sound like ... brief rest, a glance, free from lips or lime of marbled memories that forced him from that spot .... Nor can I “reconstruct” the fabula of these events. But lips invoke the possibility of speaking as well as the right to be heard, while lime suggest that the lips are represented – drawn – in the lime of the chalk circle. Meanwhile, metaphors like marbled memories evoke scrambled scraps – a scrap that the word lime, precisely, is. The mournful tone of memory subjectivizes the narrative voice, infusing it with compassion incompatible with the model of objectifying history-writing that held the realistic narrator in its spell. For both the mesmerizing voice and what it utters are so close to the image as to seem “inner” and other at the same time in relation to it.

The voice and its discourse are simultaneously being performed in the present and helplessly, irretrievably lost in the past, of which they present the diffuse, anonymous, collective memory. A chalk circle circles around in that present memory. But the allusion is not confined to words. Memory is emblazoned on the image when the main character tries to clean the graffiti from the school’s outer wall. Visual graffiti now become visual metaphors of the verbal graffiti performed by the voice-over, uttering sonorous words that resist grammar and meaning while speaking of what I see. That image of the girl outdoors, which follows the third sequence of “stains,” is “about” graffiti while also performing graffiti. The girl’s bright, beautiful colors stand out against the equally bright white wall on which encrusted lime has left unreadable traces of past voices. Unreadable, because the girl stands in front of them, her figuration over-writing them, as her hand holds the brush with which she meant to eliminate the chalk that overwrote this “wild” discourse. What made the – literally – veiled, overpainted voices unreadable is the school’s neatness, against which the girl’s brush positions her revolt. In terms of Brecht’s play and its voices from the past, she aims to wash away the chalk that imprisons the child. But the brush stands not only for the act of undoing the erasure that it metonymically signifies; it also figures the
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and image, present and past which, however, never blur or merge in spite of the deceptive promise of the stains-figuring-blurs that open and puncture the sequence like a refrain, the installation performs the staging of subjectivity most acutely, almost painfully, through the timing of memorization in short bits. The refrain-like placing of the stains sticks to the lyric qualities of the text and voice, in their joint efforts to hold narrativity at bay, this time by foregrounding narrative’s other – lyrical poetry. One gets an inkling of this when, on their third occurrence, the stains, toward the bottom of the screen, appear to be contaminated by the bright orange of the main character’s sweatshirt that we saw a while before. And, incredibly, after such a long interval, a liminally-remnant visual memory now reveals that already in the opening sequence of stains, there was an orange sheen shimmering through the white succeeded by the girl in her orange sweatshirt. Perhaps that color didn’t affect me consciously – then. But it does now, as the stain carries the memory of it in the sequence’s retrospective narrative intervention. That touch of orange in the bright white was for me the performance of the performative punctum – in Barthes’ sense – that pierced the work’s beauty, to allow an overwhelming sublimity to invade all domains of the work – simultaneously but without merging. Aesthetics without synaesthetic – until that orange stain.

Could it be, then, that the stains are the girl, that they already contain her form in their refusal of figuration, so that – non-distracted by figuration, trained to see clarity in its purity – we see her photograph better? Better, that is, than photography – with its culture of the snapshot, of quick fixes in both senses of that phrase – has trained us to do, helping the further acculturation of amnesia by which Benjamin was fearfully fascinated? To attempt to answer this question – which remains obtusely unanswerable – you feel compelled to stay for another round of the cycle, another 19 minutes. Here, the poetry, not the reality of it but the model, performs, in its visual guise of stains, the performance through the performativity. This compulsion to repeat – to use a Freudian phrase – also makes this work profoundly different from theater as predicated upon the fourth wall, or from classical narrative, or films that have “The End” inscribed in them.

Visually, too, this work flaunts its theatricality, thus imposing reflection on performance as role-playing. Theatricality is a theme as well as a mode of this work. But its very thematic presence also changes the theoretical status of thematics. For, in all its promise of narrativity, no story is enacted. The theme’s presence thus emphasizes its own status as self-reflexivity, much in line with Naomi Schor’s analysis of “restricted thematics” in Flaubert’s Madame Bovary (1985). The schoolgirls preparing for their dance rehearsal wear makeshift costumes that irresistibly evoke commedia dell’arte. This tradition is the systematic other of romantic poetry, the tradition that, as commonplace has it, idolizes personal expression, whereas commedia dell’arte is formulaic, as its stock masks and costumes show.

Theatricality, ostensibly subjectivity’s other, is Coleman’s reply, his critical addition, to this commonplace view. Thus he makes romanticism’s performance of subjectivity into a poetry that wavers between, and encompasses, the private and the public. And hence, it makes between the personal and the political – or, as we now say, as the political – available again to a time that is in need of a critique of cynical reason (15): on the side of the cynical, “pure” performance, for delight, amusement, or brief outside sentiment; on the side of the romantic, “pure” performativity, affect, doing something to arouse strong feeling. Beyond both, the personal is political, and that particular memory – of the sixties, of performance art and of the revival of Brechtian theater as theater without the fourth wall – permeates this work qua work, this object in its guise of agent. To perform this recall of the sixties, however, is not performance-only. The theoretical point of this work also protects it against a simplified notion of performance as play-acting only. For this, like the other acts in this work, is an act of

13 This allusion to Peter Sloterdijk’s book (Critique of Cynical Reason, Minneapolis 1988) is not meant to suggest a specific engagement with that book.

14 I borrow this phrase from Spivak (Gayatri Chakavorty Spivak, A Critique of Post-colonial Reason, Cambridge (MA) 1999) who uses it to characterize her attitude toward Kant and other writers with whom she critically engages.
memory, responding, that is, to the sixties, with critical intimacy. The theatricality that is embodied, enacted, and thematized is at the same time a critical response, a denial of performance art and political theater’s claim to be more “real.” It is a critique of the unrelenting claims of realism in the history of our culture.

The work’s reply resides, aesthetically, in the fact that the theatrical quality of the discourse-cum-voice embodies this contrast within itself. The content – at first hearing, a romanticism, out of joint, perhaps, with contemporary sensibility – supports and is sustained by verses that rhyme and words that alliterate, thus foregrounding its quality as sound: ... veiled voices ... that might mingle ...

I may be hearing it wrong, I must be, but the compulsion to “quote” is too strong to resist; relentlessly, this installation keeps me alert to my complicity. But do these phonetic repetitions recall, in a literal, sonoric sense, that the past unknown and out of hearing (veiled voices) must perform in the future, when the clarity of distinctiveness is lost (might mingle)?

But, within the historically specific polemical recall of performance art and theater, the theatricality underlying the theory of subjectivity put forward in this work as theoretical object remains relentlessly foregrounded. The activity that holds together the tenuous fabula of the sequence, the dance rehearsal, is itself a theatrical event. Moreover, each slide presents the children in emphatically artificial poses, their bodies’ stillness doubling-up with the stillness of the images, which are constructed with as much artifice as surrealistic photographs except that the montage occurs between frames, not within frames. Paradoxical, like the tableaux vivants evoked a propos of Coleman’s work, by Benjamin H.D. Buchloh: stills from life instead of life from stills. Poses, like a glossy fashion magazine without fashion. Poses, instead, for heteropathic identification; two portraits, bust-length, in precise recall of the tradition of portraiture so fraught with political problems; pristine, beautiful, isolated as if sanctified, while I hear this:

I stood beloved, in recant from the light. Love must be performed, hence, the (romantic?) “I” is necessary. But the child cannot speak. Her portrait, following his, says “I”: its beauty, its insertion within a tradition that it appropriates for those it had excluded – in recant from the light – the inward looking eyes, they all say “I” in the children’s claim to speech.

The accumulated acts of memory performed in and by this work are nourishing as well as burdening for the viewer, who must participate in their performativity. All allusions to the stage culminate toward the final sequence of the installation, where the preparations for the rehearsal – again, a doubling-up of anticipation of a never-realized fullness of the performance – are set against the backdrop of a stage. Drawing on all the media he deploys, including the mechanics of slide projection, carousels, automatic equal timing, zoom lenses, and sound recording, not to forget writing in its de-individualized guise of scripting, Coleman “writes” his meanings indirectly, through contrast, so that they are never caught in the trap of univalent denotation. Against a stage, not on it. The stage, that is, is a theoretical object in its own right, a self-reflexive theme, not an element of, nor occasion for, narrative.

The curtain remains rigorously closed. Its high position suggests it is out of reach for children. Instead, the work ends on a sigh, in the dark. Sound, bodily but “abstract,” begins and ends the piece. Just before the closing sighs and breathing (when did I hear ... a breathless pause ...?), the text joins the image, at least in its reference to space. The space of the theater so loaded with memory is the last image I see while hearing, perhaps, the performance of a word/image interaction that resists “illustration.” The last words do not rhyme, but they contain inner rhyme: ... lives entwined with other lives... and that inner rhyme is the signified in the word “echo”, ... in an echo of a crowded hall, sounds ... an echo, in turn, performed in the repetition of this last word: ... sounds of how all things shall speak and quicken.

In-between, the stage is as shabby as the everyday world of the city: graffiti on the wall, an overturned chair, a

15 This entails a radical innovation, which Krauss calls the “invention of the medium” of the slide tape. Buchloh (Benjamin H.D. Buchloh, “Memory Lessons and History Tableaux: James Coleman’s Archaeology of Spectacle.”

16 In James Coleman, Barcelona 1999, p. 51-75.) does not develop the paradox of tableaux vivants. Instead, he links the historicity of the genre with memory.

17 The term “heteropathic identification” is derived from Kaja Silverman’s highly relevant study (The Threshold of the Visible World, New York 1996). On the politics of portraiture and the visual polemic against it in contemporary art, see Ernst van Alphen, “The Portrait’s Dispersal: Concepts of Representation and Subjectivity in Contemporary Portraiture.”
corner in the stairwell. No stage that accommodates fiction. But the possibility of fictionality as the willing suspension of disbelief is constantly present: in the voice and the discourse; in the costumes and the poses; in the inward-looking gazes of the children who “never” communicate — with each other or with the viewer.\(^{(18)}\) Interiorizing, their gazes are not closed, however. And this is, precisely, how they offer the possibility of — indeed, facilitate — the performance of subjectivity.

There is also another way that the stage is evoked but tantalizingly kept at a distance. The figurative slides have a central character, a colored girl who appears on most but not all of the images. But sometimes she is just in the background, and if you weren’t used to seeing her so often you wouldn’t go and look for her in the group images. But now you do. What does this mean? Is she or isn’t she the main character of the play? Well, precisely; there is no play, only the veiled voices from the past that suggest a play through an appeal to our cultural memory. In the compelling injunction to perform the act of memory, the art work dangerously detaches our “second-personhood” from its reassuring self-evident support: pastness. And what do you do when you search the screen for her face among the others? In one sense, I submit, you scrutinize time. The time of your own life-time construction of your subjectivity.

This is the meaning of the allusion to that comic-strip device, also practiced in the photo-novel, that Krauss, referring to Barthes, calls double face-out. That device is used in the popular genres from which it derives to collapse time. The looking of the character/actor outside the frame carries the memory of an earlier exchange, in a post-dialogue reflectiveness. Photograph has three ways of both emphasizing the borrowing from popular genres and marking its performative distance from the double face-out through convoking memory. First, as Krauss contends, Photograph foregrounds this device as alternative to narrative meaning-making through the discrepancy between narrative, diegetic communication and the children’s poses and facial expressions. Refusing, that is, to be the object of (third-person) narration, the children insist on staging their own subjectivity, each individually. The device, to the extent that it collapses time, carries the memory of what precedes it. But, unlike the popular genres, the memory concerns not just what was said and can be answered or acted upon, but what that which was said (or not said) does to the other’s subjectivity. In this sense, the almost-double-face-out teases out from Austin’s theory of performativity the dangers of performing speech acts. Not marriage — Austin’s happy example — but, say, deceit, sacrifice, or, indeed, silencing.

Second, to further emphasize the silence which holds the primary figures in its spell (or its chalk circle), Coleman has placed tableaux of talking children in the background of some frames. The visual device that because of its conventional nature and the realism that comes with it, stages conversation in the photo-novel, would immediately overrule the silence, which is why the children are not quite looking out. Therefore, the reminiscence of the double face-out also undermines that device’s complete deployment. As a result, and thirdly, the refusal to look the viewer in the face except in the latter’s role as mirror, foregrounds the performativity of the act of viewing. For, the act of looking in, that is, out of the viewing space into the diegetic space, is bound to fail. It is as if the boundary between the two spaces is a chalk circle that cannot be maintained without sacrificing both. These children also remain forever still, forever balancing on the rope, or circle, that marks their subjectivity as staged: artifice, impossibly torn from conventions on which it remains grounded. The near-deployment of a well-known device from popular culture, then, drives home the point that the memory of cultural conventions can neither be shed nor fully endorsed.

In this respect, both age and occupation vibrate strongly with the issue of performative performance. It is no coincidence that these children, who are indexical for
future generations, are young adolescents. Standing still, with bodies in between stages of development, in a social setting in between milieus, and in the drab reality of everyday life ready to leap into the fiction of dance, they hold time itself at bay. Our act of memory must first be performed. Thus they make a clearing better suited than any “real” stage to the performance of a subjectivity that is just like this work: clear and individual, but built up of veiled voices from the past; scripted by Coleman, but not written, only written down, by him. The artist’s endeavor is giving “voice” rather than recording voices; unveiling, not rewriting them.

These girls are perhaps dreaming up their future while performing their pre-assigned roles in the present. The girl who teases you into searching for her among her classmates functions like the visual space, the stage, of dreams. She “speaks” visually in the hypothetical past-future, like some of the words spoken, but not by her (nor by the artist). Drawing the viewer in, her presence-in-absence or her unnoticeable presence also saddles the viewer with a role in the play, or gives the viewer some say in its plot and performance. And this, according to Christopher Bollas, is how the dreamer is positioned in the dream. In his psychoanalytical account of the dream, Bollas uses all the terms my analysis has been probing:

I regard the dream as a fiction constructed by a unique aesthetic: the transformation of the subject into his thought, specifically, the placing of the self into an allegory of desire and dread that is fashioned by the ego. (Christopher Bollas, The Shadow of the Object: Psychoanalysis of the Unthought Known, New York 1987, p. 64.)

Bollas, using the terminology of theater, articulates the nature of the aesthetic involved, by insisting that the ego, not the subject, “directs” the play. This makes sense, as long as we understand that the ego is defined as being somehow “other” to the subject, out of the grasp. Hence the sleeper is both the subject of the dreams, metonymically bound to them, and the non-subject of them. The sleeper “speaks” the dream but as its voice, performing it without controlling it, in an interdiscursivity that is rigorously distinct from intertextuality. For the quotation has no source, no writer. Instead, the viewer stands in as an understudy, to take over the role assigned to the subject by the dream’s director. To describe the viewer’s part, then, the full meaning of performance – as in theater – must be realized.

Here, one assumes, the director is not the ego of the sleeper but of the maker of the art work. The director-alias-dreamer is in turn shaped, like the dreamer’s ego, by individual disposition but also by the logic of cultural framing. The role of the viewer is not to be the sleeper, but to stand on the stage where the dream images make their disturbing appearance. The artist whose installation I have foregrounded here, yields power over his creation to the viewer, in a generous endorsement of the willful suspension of authority that is required by the performance of subjectivity in a cultural merging of individuality. But this can only happen – only be performed, successfully, theatrically – if the full meaning of performativity in the philosophical sense is realized. For the artist yields another, major share of the creative power to the children who are enacting subjectivity – with the viewer’s sustaining help.

In this conflation of performance and performativity, memory is the crucial element, the motor of both activities and the factor that makes the event social. But in turn, memory as a concept is contaminated by the stickiness that binds performance and performativity together. It, too, needs to be performed. To wind up, then, let me allege once more that “other” of romantic poetry to substantiate this point. Through all the layers of memory staged by the artist in a variety of creative, metaphorical, and sensuous acts, the viewer, in this performance of memory, is given, and saddled with, agency. This is so because forgetting is as much an act as remembering. The viewer who declines to recall, say, commedia dell’arte, refuses to grant these adolescent girls – the categorial objects of contempt in elite, “adult” culture – the prestigious tradition according to which they set themselves free, from artists, viewers, and their social world alike, to perform (in) the lingua franca of the imagination. (9) By the same token, such an act of forgetting
deprives the subjects of their most conspicuous visual work: the improvised nature of their poses; the popular clothing, costumes, settings; the public exposure of their personae; the stock characters; the simple scenario; the wishes and desires of the “common people” they enact and the words that are spoken off screen, as if kept behind masks; the shifting sense of reality (Pirandello); the transformation of (elite) stardom into group work. All of these features of commedia dell’arte, which provide these working class girls with glamour, can be either bestowed or withheld, according to the viewer’s performative acts of memory.

The viewer who allows herself to be seduced into this play accepts to perform the work, and hence, to serve the staging of their subjectivity. Acknowledging the way they have been culturally silenced, like the child in the Kaukatische Kreidekreis who never speaks, a viewer willing to perform such acts of memory bestows, finally, a voice on them that can only function if sustained by memory. In one of the frames set in the dance hall, the “main character,” or she whom I saw to be that, has her arm in front of her body. In the background two other girls make arm movements, so that we might safely assume, “realistically,” that this is what she is so intensely involved in. But realism appropriates, colonizes. Instead, bizarrely, this girl, turning her back to all others and her face in our direction, is looking intently at her arm. Clothed in a scrap of commedia costume, this arm is also posed as if to hold the viewer off. Meanwhile, the girl looks seemingly at her watch. Is she abiding her time to take over the stage of the adult world, and rule it when her subjectivity has been formed, and ours faded?

Ma’am, is she reading Shakespeare? Can you explain the narrative to me? How much longer will it last? Three questions of the many I set myself up to be asked by standing in the dark, taking notes all this time. The people who asked such questions were troubled by the connections they could not make, the coherence they could not project, the memories they could not place, the pain their bodies felt by standing too long. The refusal to offer seating accommodation: even that is part of the work’s performativity. Like the refusal to hand over words that must slowly be conquered, always imperfectly because subjectively, the inducement to stand did its work through time.

Time is an odd player here. The last question, I found, is the most profound one. The first time I saw Photograph I, too, found it long, slow. As I saw it more often, it sped up, became faster, as it became more heavily burdened with memories. The ever-changing pace denaturalized that most naturalized of cultural conventions: time, pace, linearity. The last time I saw it, which was the very last showing before the show was taken down, I knew it was going to leave the present and become part of the past. That time I found it excruciatingly fast, nightmarish almost, refusing to stop for me. This is when I realized that memory is the greatest cheater of all. For, as I was finally endorsing my task of performing it, it performed me, dragging me along in the pace of a time I could neither stop nor follow. This was the work’s own double face-out, its heterochrony of the other. And like the people asking me their questions, I went away, dragging my feet, full of unanswered questions. And that, I think now, is the definition of subjectivity that Photograph proposed. To make the “argument” for it, it just performed it. And its performativity hit home.

Mieke Bal is Professor of Theory of Literature at the University of Amsterdam