

The Performative Force of Photography

Susan Ash. 2005. *The Barnardo's Babies: Performativity, Shame, and the Photograph*. *Journal of Media and Cultural Studies* 19(4): 507–521.

Ariella Azoulay. 2008. *The Civil Contract of Photography*. Cambridge, MA: MIT Press.

Diana Taylor. 2003. *The Archive and the Repertoire: Performing Cultural Memory in the Americas*. Durham, NC and London: Duke University Press.

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Abstract

This review essay critically reflects upon recent contributions that have been made by scholars to a growing body of research on photography, performativity, and affect. Focusing on recent work by Diana Taylor, Susan Ash, and Ariella Azoulay, this paper explores how affect can be understood in performative terms and suggests the problems and possibilities of using this kind of performance analysis to read affect in photography. This review includes a consideration of some of the central

themes in performance studies research: the photograph as speech act, the intersubjective exchange between subject and viewer, and the use of photography as a form of participatory citizenship. In the process, it illustrates how the idea of performativity can reframe current discussions about the role that photos play in the production of civic responsibility and public action.

Keywords: performance theory; civic responsibility; public action

Since the early 1990s, a rich body of theory has emerged that explores intersections of photography and performance, two artistic forms that have often been defined in oppositional terms. Certainly, there are important distinctions to be drawn between performance's status as an ephemeral, live medium and the visual immobility of photography, a property that allows the photograph to function more easily as document and archive (Phelan 1993; Gilbert 1998). Yet, as a number of theorists have argued, the ontology of photography is intrinsically linked to performance. Roland Barthes, the theorist most often cited within this area of scholarship, paved the way in *Camera Lucida* for interdisciplinary analysis with his claim: "what founds the nature of Photography is the pose" (Barthes 1981: 78). This idea would prove influential not only to performance studies scholars writing about postmodern portraiture, for whom the pose offered a way of talking about the anti-essentialist gestures of performance artists (such as Cindy Sherman), but also for those visual historians interested in the more

quotidian processes of staging at work in personal and documentary images.

While early research on the relationship between performance and photography focused largely on the theatrical nature of the pose (Sayre 1989; Silverman 1995; Phelan 1993; Jones 2002), exploring ways that the self-styled body performs for the camera's gaze, much less has been written about the performative encounter between spectator and image. This kind of analysis, I want to suggest, is becoming more prevalent in scholarship associated with the "affective turn" in the humanities and social sciences, and particularly in writings that take up issues of affective spectatorship in relation to photographs of violence, trauma, and loss. As described in the writings of theorists such as Kathleen Woodward (1996), Lauren Berlant (2004), Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick (2003), and Patricia Ticineto Clough (2007), the affective turn calls for a return to subjectivity and emotions in response to the evisceration of the material body by poststructuralism, deconstruction, and a vanishing public sphere (formerly the context of sociality and the enactment of citizenship). In this review essay, I will trace some of the key elements of this emerging theoretical discourse, using a few representative works that draw together notions of affect, photography, and performativity. In doing so, I hope to illustrate how the idea of performativity can serve as a productive lens through which to understand the affective appeals that photographs make to their viewers, reframing current discussions about the role that photographs play in the production of civic responsibility and public action.

Although writings on photography and affective spectatorship have taken up a wide

range of subjects, a number of these works share a common methodological frame: approaching the photograph as interlocution or as speech act. Rather than treating photographs as aesthetic objects—assessing features of form, composition, lighting, etc. within the image proper—these authors privilege the “doing” aspects of photography, asking how images exceed their frames and directly affect their viewers. In this respect, these works attempt to present a “History of Looking” in the tradition of *Camera Lucida*, offering an account of the emotional experience of the “Spectator” encountering the photograph, the individual that, according to Barthes, becomes “the measure of photographic ‘knowledge’” (1981: 9).¹

This emphasis comes out of a particular strain of performance studies scholarship influenced by J.L. Austin and his now-famous lecture, *How to Do Things With Words* (first delivered in 1955). Working primarily in the terrain of linguistic analysis, Austin attempted to pry apart “constative” and “performative” utterances: the former he defined as a statement that “describes” or “reports” and the latter as an utterance that “[performs] an action—it is not normally thought of as just saying something” (Austin 1975 [1955]: 6–7).² The famous example here is the locution “I do,” which, when uttered at a wedding ceremony and under a specific set of socially recognized conditions (e.g. before an authorized officiant such as a priest), has the effect of producing a marriage. It is in this sense that certain speech acts are said to have “performative force,” that is, the capacity to produce what they name, to directly affect their audience, or, as Derrida argues, to transform the world (Gould 1995: 25).

To think about photographs as speech acts is to emphasize photography’s contexts of reception and the intersubjective relations that initiate the photograph’s performative force and meaning. This approach is evident in Ariella Azoulay’s recent book, *The Civil Contract of Photography* (Azoulay 2008), which examines the role played by photographs in the fashioning of citizens, particularly when used by stateless persons as political appeals to members of the international community. Offering a close reading of photographs taken by Palestinians and circulated outside the West Bank and Gaza, Azoulay attempts to draw together the functions of photography and citizenship by defining photographs as acts of communication. Implicitly gesturing towards speech act theory, she writes that “photographs are constructed like statements (*énoncés*), the photographic image gains its meaning through mutual (mis)recognition . . . Citizenship likewise is gained through recognition” (Azoulay 2008: 25). Echoing Austin’s argument that “many performatives are *contractual* (‘I bet’) or *declaratory* (‘I declare war’) utterances” (Austin 1975: 7), Azoulay points out that atrocity photographs set up a “civil contract” between spectator and photographed noncitizens, asking the former to go beyond a mere empathic response and “restore” the citizenship denied to the latter. In this sense, she contends, “A photograph is an *énoncé* within the pragmatics of obligation” (*ibid.*: 25); it exceeds the status of testimony or evidence by calling for action on the part of the viewer.³

Further revealing a strong connection between the “civil contract” drawn up by photographs and current theoretical

concepts in performance studies, Azoulay suggests that the force of atrocity images can only be fully understood if we rethink the time of photography. When photography theorists, following Barthes, define “the essence of photography as testimony to the fact that this something ‘was there’” (Azoulay 2008: 16, my emphasis), they firmly situate violent acts in the past, and, as a consequence, place the viewer at an affective remove from the subjects in the frame. Azoulay asks what it would mean for the spectator to recognize, instead, their temporal co-presence with a photographed body, in effect complicating the traditional distinction between, on the one hand, the photograph “as an inert, mechanically reproduced image” (Gilbert 1998: 21) that documents the past and, on the other hand, performance as the terrain of liveness and the continuous present. She explains, “When the assumption is that not only were the photographed people there, but that, in addition, they are still present there at the time I’m watching them, my viewing of these photographs is less susceptible to becoming immoral” (Azoulay 2008: 16). The civil contract of photography is a spectatorial acknowledgement of a “civic duty toward the photographed persons who haven’t stopped being ‘there’” (Azoulay 2008: 16).

Turning to the notion of eventhood, a central feature of performance analysis (Heathfield 2005; Franko 2007), and perhaps responding in photographic terms to the anti-theatrical formalism of critics like Michael Fried (1967), Azoulay insists that the meaning of photography inheres not in the photograph itself as autonomous object, but rather in the performative reconstruction of the photograph as “event”

by its spectator. Importing a sense of the live into our encounter with photography, she makes this proposal: “One needs to stop looking at the photograph and instead start watching it. The verb ‘to watch’ is usually used for regarding phenomena or moving pictures. It entails dimensions of time and movement that need to be reinscribed in the interpretation of the still photographic image” (Azoulay 2008: 14). Recalling Rebecca Schneider’s recent work on the Abu Ghraib photographs, which treats images of torture as temporally suspended but continuous actions (as “stills”) that directly implicate their American viewers (Schneider 2005), Azoulay implicitly opens up the dual meanings of the word “still”: without motion (a photographic still) *and* continuing in the present (still there). In doing so, she reconfigures the ethical relations that govern photography and resituates the spectator as intended recipient of the photographic speech act, as recipient of its ongoing injury claim, as its co-temporal addressee.

While Azoulay provides a starting point for reframing photography as speech act, politicizing and initiating a dialogue about the performative exchange between viewer and viewed, a more explicit connection to speech act theory can be found in Susan Ash’s essay, “The Barnardo’s Babies: Performativity, Shame and the Photograph” (2005). Here, Ash directly draws upon Austin to explore how photographs work performatively to solicit affective responses to human suffering, specifically focusing on the use of photographs by the UK charity Barnardo’s. In a controversial advertising campaign, Barnardo’s showed babies in abject conditions, getting ready to shoot heroin and later “covered in blood and

vernix ... their mouths filled with a dirty syringe, a live cockroach, or a bottle of methylated spirits" (Ash 2005: 508). The images, in turn, are accompanied by narrative captions meant to shock and appall—for example, "Baby Mary is three minutes old ... Poverty is waiting to crush Mary's hope and ambition and is likely to lead her to a future of drug abuse ..." (Ash 2005: 508). Ash makes a persuasive case for treating these photographs as performative speech acts, which move beyond just "saying something" to actually "shaming" the spectator into "doing something"; they issue a not-so-subtle appeal to the viewer's emotions in order to elicit a charitable donation. She explains: "[P]hotographs such as 'Heroin Baby' deploy the implicit challenge: '*I dare you*' (to help), backed up with the contingent, '*Shame on you*' (for refusing)" (Ash 2005: 509).

Like Azoulay, Ash reminds us that the performative force of these photographs depends on the "recognition" of its receiver. However, in directly employing the idea of performativity, Ash productively develops and complicates the process of affective exchange Azoulay describes by specifically addressing the forms and consequences of *misrecognition* that inevitably attend the photographic speech act. Azoulay, for example, often seems to rely on the tacit assumption that the affective appeals made by the atrocity photographs that she analyzes (from the Occupied Territories) succeed in interpolating their viewers as ethical citizens, inspiring political concern for the suffering of those photographed and creating a humanitarian contract between addresser and addressee. Given the diverse backgrounds of the spectators encountering the images she discusses, and the equally

varied conditions under which these images are circulated and viewed, this argument may appear too utopian for some readers. Surely photographs can operate in the way that Azoulay describes, particularly with the "right" audience, but it is also important to consider what happens when these speech acts fail, or in Austin's words, "misfire." As Austin notes, performative acts only accrue force if they succeed in the "securing of uptake" (Austin 1975: 117). In other words, in order for a dare to move its viewer, it must first be received and recognized *as a dare*. Or, to return to the marriage metaphor, a marriage vow will register as void—as an "unhappy" performative—if it is performed by a monkey, for example, rather than a human (Austin 1975: 24).

This discussion of performative misfires, I would suggest, allows Ash to offer a much closer reading of the affective exchange initiated by photographic images. Frequently, she points out, the "dare" of Barnardo's "Heroin Baby" failed to bring forth an empathic response from viewers and instead set off a set of reactionary ones: "Clearly, for many, the Barnardo's advertisements are not 'happy' speech acts, perhaps because they appear to mock the seriousness of human suffering implicit in humanitarian appeals" (Ash 2005: 515). She explains that many viewers took issue with the Barnardo's ads because of their seeming exploitation of the "real" babies in the images (the models), and this reaction was surprisingly strong despite the artificiality and digital manipulation of the photographs.

Ash insightfully relates this public outrage to Austin's argument about the importance of context in shaping the felicity of the performative appeal. Yet she also notes

that the success of the photograph as performative speech act not only depends upon the reception of the image by specific spectators under specific conditions, but also derives from the relative balance between the index (the real) and the icon (the representational). Experiencing the baby photo as “a literal (indexical) ‘emanation’ of a real referent that ‘touches’ them with intense, affective force” (Ash 2005: 511) can easily result in a refusal on the part of spectators to recognize the legitimacy of Barnardo’s dare and bring about its immediate reversal. The spectator responds: “*Who are you to dare me? Why should I take that action?*” and “*Shame on you, Barnardo’s for abusing an infant so*” (Ash 2005: 514). Of course, even when a photograph like this unintentionally misfires, it still carries considerable affective force, and perhaps even more force than the original photographic utterance might have contained. Ash’s multilayered analysis of the processes of performative interpolation and uptake thus offers a more realistic picture of affective spectatorship in relation to the photographic image. Taking into consideration multiple factors that affect the reception of an image, she avoids some of the blind spots found in spectatorship theory: the assumption of a homogeneous audience, the over-generalization of audience response, and the presupposition of a shared set of cultural signs.

The most nuanced explorations of photography, affect, and performativity to have emerged in recent years can perhaps be found in Diana Taylor’s *The Archive and the Repertoire: Performing Cultural Memory in the Americas* (Taylor 2003). Here, Taylor highlights a much wider range of meanings that have become associated with performance

and performativity, and expertly illustrates how these meanings can be thought of in relation to photographic practice. In doing so, Taylor avoids the common trap of relying too much on Austin’s understanding of performativity, which is but one of a number of dynamic models currently available to scholars studying performativity and photography.⁴ Austin, in fact, is quite normative in his discussion of the success and failure of performatives, as indicated in the rhetoric of “parasitism” that he uses to describe unhappy speech acts. For example, Austin would deem “I do,” spoken in a context outside traditional heterosexual marriage as “*parasitic upon its normal use*” and would therefore most likely define the usage in pathological terms as one of many “*etiolations of language*” (Austin 1975: 22) rather than read it as a subversive repetition or as a politically generative slip. However, as Derrida reminds us, the very idea of a “pure performative” depends upon all of those “impure” utterances that Austin seeks to exclude (Derrida 1982). The fact that this normative rhetoric in Austin is not registered in Ash feels like a missed opportunity given her interest in examining how photographic locutions can confirm existing power divisions, set off moralistic accusations, and block humanitarian responses to individuals in crisis.

This said, the idea of the image as performative speech act is certainly present throughout Taylor’s book, and is seen perhaps most clearly in her powerful chapter on the role of photographs following 9/11, “Lost in the Field of Vision” (Taylor 2003).⁵ Focusing primarily on the experiences of New Yorkers after this historic event, Taylor remarks upon the mass emergence of photographs

of the missing on the streets on New York: "8 × 10 Xerox and laser fliers taped on streetlamps, at bus stops, on mailboxes and hospital walls" (Taylor 2003: 247). Like the images described by Ash and Azoulay, the photographs of the disappeared are read less as personal testimony or memorial than as specific pleas for collective action, involving the public "in the search [for those lost], in the hope, in the mourning" (Taylor 2003: 250). Rather than using the term "performative" to describe the mode of address at work here, Taylor calls it an "act of transfer," which transmits "social knowledge, memory, and a sense of identity" through performance (ibid.: 2). In this sense, the New Yorkers who viewed these photographs of lost loved ones became more than witnesses to the suffering of others. The photographs, she contends, enabled acts of transfer by making the "missing" belong in some way to the citizens of New York ("the missing were now 'ours'" (ibid.: 250); they produced a sense of inclusion for the "nonheroes" and "nonvictims" following an event that, for many New Yorkers, felt alienating and unassimilable.

Taylor further develops the idea of the photograph as performative act by incorporating Derridean understandings of the term. As she explains in her excellent introduction, Derrida brought to performativity a discussion of "the importance of citationality and iterability in the 'event of speech,' questioning whether 'a performative statement [could] succeed if its formulation did not repeat a 'coded' or iterable statement'" (Derrida 1982, cited in Taylor 2003: 5). This notion of performative iterability comes into play for Taylor with a different set of images: the

iconic and officially sanctioned photographs of the Towers and surrounding wreckage circulated by the popular media. Describing her frustrations at not being able to find an appropriate emotional response to the "surreal and mostly silent scene" (Taylor 2003: 239) that she was witnessing through her home window, Taylor asks whether she was conditioned to view the unfolding events through a pre-viewed repertoire of media imagery:

This looked like one of those surgical strikes that the US military claims to have perfected. Our aviation technology and terror tactics turned against us. Our Hollywood scenarios live—complete with towering infernos and raging sirens—just down the street. Collateral damage, reconfigured. I wondered if my inability to make sense of what I was seeing had been conditioned by the dominance of this virtual repertoire of images, characters, plotline. I had seen it all before on computer and television monitors. Did this blinding signal the failure of the live as a means of knowing? (Taylor 2003: 239)

Here, an unnerving stall in affective reception is produced not by a failure in the recognition of cultural signs, but rather precisely by their over-familiarity.

This kind of citational "blinding," Taylor argues, was nowhere more apparent than in the activation of gendered image repertoires following 9/11. Gesturing towards Butlerian notions of performativity, which read gender and sexuality as produced through a series of "regulating and citational practices" (Taylor 2003: 5), Taylor discusses the reconsolidation of gendered identities through the display of highly emotional images drawn from an

over-determined visual archive of heroes and victims. This archive featured, not surprisingly, brave firemen and male politicians and, as a complement, Arab women in need of immediate rescue.

Yet the most compelling treatment of performativity in Taylor can be found in her approach to photography as an act of civic intervention, an approach that appears in many case studies throughout her book (e.g. the collective photo actions of the Mothers of the Plaza de Mayo in Argentina; the likely and unlikely mourners of the late Princess Diana). Rather than focusing primarily on how photographs themselves “speak,” she maintains that the very process of taking photographs at a moment of public crisis needs to be read as a political “act of interlocution, a need to make sense and communicate” (Taylor 2003: 243). This emotionally driven archival impulse, which she and many other New Yorkers experienced after 9/11, was not only a form of performance-based civic engagement, “a way of assessing whether we had all seen the same things, or if our takes on the events ... were in fact quite different” (Taylor 2003: 243–244), but also a means of personally coping with trauma. For those who failed to fit comfortably into the position of hero or victim in the official 9/11 narrative popularized on TV and in the press, taking photographs offered them an opportunity to “do something,” to look behind the hyper-managed media fronts and take up more active roles as witnesses in public space. Echoing the central argument in Azoulay’s book, Taylor suggests that photography needs to be read in this context as a form of participatory citizenship (Taylor 2003: 252) whose performative force is bound up in

its power to reterritorialize (to return the city to its inhabitants) and redress (to give individuals the tools to critique the official photo archive). In this evocative reading of photography, the aesthetic qualities of the images produced are, in many ways, beside the point, despite the many powerful photographs reproduced alongside Taylor’s argument in the book. At issue is the civic impulse to contribute to and participate in public visual discourse.

The three works that I have examined in this brief survey represent the very beginning of a larger conversation that is starting to take place around photography, affect, and performativity, and, as such, point to new directions in which this field might develop. In Taylor, for example, I think that there is still more to be mined around the idea of “trauma envy” (Taylor 2003: 244) as it pertains to public photographic actions. Individuals, she tells us, use photographs to feel directly involved in public crises, in order to successfully claim to “have been there” and to be “interpolated as potential heroes” (Taylor 2003: 252). But to what extent do these small-scale, civic actions mirror the troubling hero worship and “protagonism” (Taylor 2003: 245) that she condemns in the “patriotic and militaristic spectacle” that dominated the media after 9/11? Taylor gestures towards a deeper analysis of this problem when she acknowledges that photography can also be “a way of documenting without necessarily seeing,” as evidenced by the experience of two students who “recounted, with utter belief and self-disgust, that they had posed, smiling at the camera, with the burning towers behind them” (Taylor 2003: 258).

Perhaps the greatest methodological challenge of applying performativity to photography, as evidenced by the three works that I've discussed here, is complicating the narratives of popular resistance that have dominated investigations of their intersection. This preoccupation may be rooted in performance studies' affinity for the radical, the ephemeral, and the anti-structuralist, as well as the discipline's self-avowed approach to culture "as an arena of social dispute" (Taylor 2003: 7). In taking up this challenge, future theorists of photographic spectatorship will offer a more intricate account of the diverse ways that individuals engage in acts of image-based interlocation. Moreover, theorists and historians will find approaches to photography that go beyond the image as an autonomous aesthetic object, approaching it instead as a site of collective action (Taylor), of dialogue (Ash), and a place where social contracts are routinely made and unmade (Azoulay).

Notes

- 1 "The *Spectator*, is ourselves," Barthes writes, "all of us who glance through collections of photographs—in magazines and newspapers, in books, albums, archives" (Barthes 1981: 9). Barthes distinguishes the "Spectator" from two other producers of photographic knowledge: 1) the "Operator," the photographer who takes the photograph and 2) the "Spectrum," which he defines as "the person or thing photographed ... the target, the referent, a kind of little simulacrum" (Barthes 1981: 9). The authors discussed in this review essay seem to be drawing upon Barthes's definition "Spectator" in describing very distinct practices of looking at photographs and this term is often used interchangeably with related terms such as viewer, observer, etc.
- 2 Other theorists of performativity like Derrida and Judith Butler deconstruct the distinction between

"constative" and "performative"; for them, all language is performative in its citationality and insofar as it brings the world into being.

- 3 This idea also appears in an article by performance theorist Peggy Phelan on "atrocious photos." "Photographs of violence," she reminds us, "particularly those photographs that journalists and ethicists call 'atrocious photographs,' expose a question about the relationship between the violent image and the viewer's decision to act, or not to act, once that atrocity is seen" (Phelan 2009: 374).
- 4 See, for example, Parker and Sedgwick (1995).
- 5 Also see Taylor's chapter "'You are Here': H.I.J.O.S. and the DNA of Performance" (Taylor 2003: 161–190) where she discusses the performances of the Mothers of the Plaza de Mayo in Argentina, which used photos of the disappeared to directly engage viewers. She writes: "Would the national and international spectators respond to their actions, or look away? By wearing the small photo IDs around their necks, the Madres turned their bodies into archives, preserving and displaying the images that had been targeted for erasure" (Taylor 2003: 179).

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