

Performativity and the Body

“Even the most ordinary images find their value, their substance, their impetus, in the agency and investments of our flesh” (Vivian Sobchack 1997, quoted in Amelia Jones 2006:xiii)

“Portraiture is performance and like any performance, in the balance of its effects it is good or bad, not natural or unnatural. I can understand being troubled by this idea – that all portraits are performances – because it seems to imply some kind of artifice that conceals the truth about the sitter. But that’s not it at all.” (Phelan 93:37)

“The Category of sex is the political category that founds society as heterosexual” (Monique Wittig, quoted in Butler 1990, 1999:3)

The last few decades has seen enormous shift in the understanding of the place, perception and role of the individual in society. Issues such as sex, gender roles, race, sexuality as well as culture, memory and technology have been upended, questioned and reformed continually. Performativity is one of the more recent developments in this area that has influenced a generation and artists have been at the forefront of inaugurating and exploring these shifts. In this seminar series we will look at artists such as Pipilotti Rist; Valie Export; Lyle Ashton Harris; Nikki S Lee; Robert Mapplethorpe; Stelarc; Omer Fast and writers such as Judith Butler, Jacques Lacan, Michel Foucault amongst others. The seminar will give you a broad understanding of the range of artists using the body; the questions that are being asked about the subject in society and some of the historical reasons for where we are now.

Some key questions throughout the weeks will be

- How are these works performative? And in what way do they inform our understanding of the contemporary world?
- What are the possibilities and limits to working in these ways?
- What is contemporary about the production of meaning through the body?
- What are some of the differences (if any) between the artists cited from the 1970s and younger artists such as Ann-Sofi Sidén or Nikki S Lee
- What of possibilities for the future?

By looking at artworks and texts in relation to each other, we will tease out some definitions of performativity analyzing its impact and effects. In other words we will look at how art can constitute the subject and produce new meanings and ways of being in the world.

Week 1 Introduction - playing people

Week 2 Power and sex

Week 3 Misrepresentations of the “self”

Week 4 Performativity and geo politics (gender norms)

Week 5 Performativity and Geo politics 2 (memory, place and the body)

Week 6 Around the edges: The post human/immersive/animal body

Week 7 Essay discussion