Citation for the original published paper (version of record):

Wikström, J. (2012)
Practice Comes Before Labour: An attempt to read performance through Marx's notion of practice
Performance Research, 17(6): 22-27
https://doi.org/10.1080/13528165.2013.775753

Access to the published version may require subscription.

N.B. When citing this work, cite the original published paper.

Permanent link to this version:
http://urn.kb.se/resolve?urn=urn:nbn:se:uniarts:diva-850
Practice comes before Labour: An attempt to read performance through Marx's notion of practice

Josefine Wikström

To cite this article: Josefine Wikström (2012) Practice comes before Labour: An attempt to read performance through Marx's notion of practice, Performance Research, 17:6, 22-27, DOI: 10.1080/13528165.2013.775753

To link to this article: http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/13528165.2013.775753

Published online: 12 Mar 2013.

Article views: 277

View related articles
Practice comes before Labour
An attempt to read performance through Marx’s notion of practice

JOSEFINE WIKSTRÖM

What is the relationship between performance and labour? To answer that question one must first of all ask what is meant by ‘labour’ and ‘performance’. Both terms are historically produced concepts, existing within certain philosophical, cultural and theoretical discourses. Within the context of art (to not even mention within the field of cultural studies) ‘performance’ is a broad category, which has come to mean anything from staged dance pieces and sculptural installations to mass demonstrations. Labour, also a compound term, has broad connotations and can simply mean both paid and unpaid physical work. But as is well known, labour also appears in various forms and meanings in Karl Marx’s writings, where it takes centre stage.

My aim, on a broad scale, is to interrogate the historical formation and manifestation of the category of performance and its immanent relationship to forms of labour as they appear in the history of Western thinking and in particular in a Marxist discourse. More specifically – within this essay – is my intention to analyse performance as a generic category within the field of art as it established itself in the post-war period and its immanent ontological (‘ontology’ is the systematic study of being or what is) affinity with a specific category of labour that appears in Marx’s early writings.

I will do this, first, by examining the historical construction of performance as it took shape from the 1950s onwards in the field of art. I will demonstrate that this category of ‘performance’ is generic, is constructed relationally to other categories and concepts within art, and that it therefore can be considered a transdisciplinary concept in the sense that Peter Osborne describes it: ‘its tendency to move fluidly across disciplinary fields and modes of knowledge’ (2011: 15). I will then investigate, not the concept ‘labour’, but the much broader term ‘practice’, which appears in Marx’s early text ‘Theses on Feuerbach’ from 1845 (Marx 2000 [1845]: 171–3). ‘Practice’ lays the ground for both ‘labour’ and ‘production’, which are developed in Marx’s more mature writings such as Das Kapital. My point is that any philosophical and conceptual inquiry into ‘labour’ must begin with ‘practice’ in order to understand the former’s depth.

In the third part I will start by doing a reading of the relationship between ‘performance’ and ‘practice’ in a direct and literal way by pointing at the materialist side of ‘practice’ and its formal affinities on the level of representation with certain performance practices. I will then go on and do a more conceptual operation where I will look at the conceptual similarities between ‘performance’ and ‘practice’. My claim here is that the category of performance is immanently and intrinsically tied to the concept of labour as formulated by Marx in the widest sense of the term. After having demonstrated an ontological affinity between the two concepts ‘practice’ and ‘performance’ I hope to have been able to demonstrate that one way in which performance relates to labour is through its ontology. This stands in contrast to an investigation of the relationship between performance and labour, which takes place at the level of thematic representation in performance art works.
1. PERFORMANCE: A TRANSDISCIPLINARY CATEGORY

Performance has been used as an artistic media at least since the emergence of the avant-garde movements at the first half of the twentieth century in Europe. It was, however, not until the 1950s that performance became ‘recognized as a category in its own right, beyond mere provocation’ (Osborne 2005: 20). This was the result of parallel, multiple and complex processes that took place within the visual arts at the time in Western Europe, the US and Japan mainly. Informed by global, post-war political and economical changes and deeply shaped by experiences from the war and the Holocaust, artists began to identify their practices in terms of creation and destruction ‘and the subject of art increasingly became its own making’ (Schimmel 1998: 18).

There was a shift away from a focus on the representation of art towards an interest into the making and production of it. This change in direction took place within all the main, established disciplines.

The overall result of this tendency from artists to question and experiment with the making and production of art was that specific artistic disciplines – ‘painting’, ‘sculpture’, ‘music’ and ‘composition’ – and with them the notion of ‘art’ in general, were broken down, transformed and re-constituted. Put in other words, through a radical questioning and exploration into the making of art in general, and more specifically by investigating new modes of producing paintings, music, dance and sculpture – ‘art’, as well as ‘painting’, ‘dance’ and other established categories within art, were broken down and reformulated. In this process a generic category of performance slowly emerged and established itself.

Two things can be said about this category of performance as it developed after World War 2. The first thing is, immanent to its constitution, that it abolishes, transforms and reconstitutes other categories and concepts within art. As a space of reconfiguration, the concept ‘performance’, therefore, is not derived from the fact that all performance works share a specific characteristic, for example, that they would all include naked bodies. Rather ‘performance’ functions as a concept through its relations to other categories and concepts within art, manifested in different forms of artistic practices. Because the existence of ‘performance’ is through transformations, reconstructions, changes, movements and redefinitions its ontology, I would like to suggest, must be considered relational. This both explains and justifies why ‘performance’ historically has been used as a site for trying out new ideas and developing new forms. Put in other words, because ‘performance’, by its nature, does not have to be anything in particular, it has the potential to be anything.

This leads in to the second point to be made about this category of ‘performance’ and which can be regarded as a result of the first one. Because of its relational ontology, ‘performance’ is a fluid and inclusive concept, which moves easily between different forms of knowledge, artistic disciplines and academic fields. Although various genres within ‘performance’ have developed since then – ‘body art’, ‘dance theatre’, ‘critical choreographic practices’ and ‘lecture performance’, to name only a few – ‘performance’ remains an inclusive and constantly changing category. This generic character could perhaps be thought of in a similar way as ‘contemporary art’, which also by its very nature can take any form and refer to almost anything. And although performance by now has been as subsumed to capital as any other art form, of which ‘BMW Tate Live: Performance Room’ at Tate Modern in London, might demonstrate most aptly, ‘performance’ has continued to function as a field of exploration and point of transition, both within specific artists’ careers but also more broadly within the history of contemporary art. As a generic and transdisciplinary concept, ‘performance’ shares a number of qualities with the notion of ‘practice’, as it was developed in an early text by Marx.
2. PRAXIS COMES BEFORE LABOUR

Before the theory and concept of labour appeared in Marx’s writings, a much more classical concept — with its roots in Aristotelian philosophy — was explored by the then-young German philosopher in the posthumously published text ‘Theses on Feuerbach’ (Marx 2000 [1845]). In this short text ‘practice’ stands for a new type of practical subject which is its own practice and which, in Giorgio Agamben’s words, ‘makes a producer of him’ (Agamben 1999: 79). Furthermore, this activity is defined from the perspective of change and is therefore identified by Marx as ‘human revolutionary practical-critical activity’ (Marx 2000: 171).

Although Marx doesn’t define ‘practice’ explicitly in this text or in any of his other writings, it remains central throughout his thinking. ‘Theses on Feuerbach’ can in fact be regarded as the foundation for much of Marx’s later and mature thought and in which ‘practice’ is developed into the concept of ‘production’ which then becomes fundamental for his writings on political economy and his labour theory.

‘Theses on Feuerbach’ is a short text made of eleven theses — although with regards to their form they resemble fragments or aphorisms — and were written down by Marx in 1845. The main aim for Marx with this text was to plant the seed for a ‘new’ or ‘practical’ materialism. In order to do so, he had to criticize the latest version of materialism as well as its counterpart idealism. Marx wanted, as Étienne Balibar writes:

to move beyond the traditional opposition between philosophy’s ‘two camps’: idealism (i.e., chiefly, Hegel) which projects all reality into the world of spirit or mind, and the ‘old’ or ‘contemplative’ materialism, which reduces all intellectual abstractions to sensuousness, i.e., to life, to sensation and to affectivity. (Balibar 1995: 15)

What Balibar refers to as the ‘old’ or ‘contemplative’ materialism, and which Marx criticizes, must be distinguished, however, from the traditional or so called ‘mechanical’ model of materialism, which holds the idea that only inanimate matter in motion exists. The ‘old’ materialism, which was under attack by Marx, was instead a humanist reconfiguration of the traditional version, and it’s main representative was Ludwig Feuerbach. Rather than conceiving the world as pure matter in motion, existing independently from humankind, Feuerbach focused on the ‘givenness’ of the world to the senses of the human.

However, although Feuerbach’s materialism brought the sensibility of humankind into the centre, the problem for Marx was that it still rested on the Kantian idea that sensibility and intuition are passive and, therefore, on the conception that the world is there only to be interpreted. As is overwhelmingly clear in the last and most famous of the theses, Marx, in sheer contrast to that, considered that philosophers for too long had interpreted the world in various ways but that the point was to change it (Marx 2000 [1845]: 173). So, rather than conceiving the activity of the thinking subject as passive and as separated from the sensuous world, Marx claimed in his theses that this activity is subjective and in itself sensible. Moreover, Marx calls this sensible activity of the subject, ‘a sensible, human activity, practice’. That is why we read in the opening of ‘Theses on Feuerbach’: ‘The chief defect of all hitherto existing materialism (that of Feuerbach included) is that the thing, reality, sensuousness, is conceived only in the form of the object or of contemplation but not as sensuous human activity, practice, not subjectively’ (171). To conclude, by considering the subject’s thinking activity as practice, Marx brought forward a new philosophical definition of the subject, which broke with the prevailing Cartesian understanding of the subject defined merely as a subject of knowledge and of representation (Osborne 2005: 27). The subject Marx proposed with his concept of ‘practice’, in opposition to that, defines itself through its own activity and therefore changes continually.
A(n) (Old) Materialist Reading of Practice and Performance

The fact that a majority of the artistic works that emerged after World War 2 – and through which ‘performance’ was established as a generic category – defined their subject of art mainly with its production makes them interlink with Marx’s concept of ‘practice’ in at least two formal ways. First, by rendering visible the making of the artwork, these artists revealed the producer of it and so also emphasised the interconnection between the artist and the art object. In ‘Theses on Feuerbach’ Marx brought forth a sensuous subject, not separated from the object, but a practical subject able to transform the world. Artists such as Kazuo Shiraga, Georges Mathieu and Jean Tinguely, in a similar manner, staged a practical and active subject in the foreground who directly and literally transformed the surrounding objects. Kristine Stiles rightly argues that the use of the body as material in artworks after the 1950s had to do with the need to assert the primacy of the human subject over inanimate objects. This was a result, she writes, of the experiences of the war, the Holocaust and the atomic bomb. Although the body had been used in art before, ‘the regular, systematic and international use of the body over the past fifty years defined it as a medium and genre in the visual arts’ (Stiles 1998: 228). Artists such as the above mentioned, Stiles argues, brought ‘viewers closer to the fact that it is the body itself that produces objects’ (228). Secondly, many of the works during this time, and which are formative for the development of performance, involved a physical human body that took the role of the intermediary relation between the art object and the subject of that work. The body, in a way, was in these works the medium through which the artist literally broke through and redefined other artistic genres. Consider for example the well-known generation of artists concerned with the reinvention of painting. Yves Klein’s living brushes, Jackson Pollock’s macho painting style, Daniel Spoerri’s trap-paintings and Jean Tingley’s mechanical interventions were all bodily interactions with the physical object of painting itself.

Reading these artistic practices – and so the category of performance – in this way is to read Marx’s concept of ‘practice’ in a direct and literal sense. It is to think of the subject he proposes as embodied, the object as a physical entity and the connection between them as pure matter. Although it provides a model for how ‘performance’ as a category and genre to a certain extent developed out of a distinct and physical questioning of other art forms, this model tends to think of performance in a purely material sense, in line with the traditional sense of materialism, which Marx criticized. Moreover, Marx’s understanding of ‘practice’ at this time is not as a physical and concrete activity between subjects and objects. Rather he conceives it as a conscious vitality of the subject that, therefore, still operates at the level of consciousness. It is not until in the German Ideology, where Marx will extend his concept of ‘practice’ into that of ‘production’ and will link it to the production of the means of subsistence, that physical objects – and in particular objects produced as capital, also known as commodities – will be considered.

Apart from the fact that reading ‘practice’ in an overtly concrete way does not do justice to the complexity of the concept itself, it also seems to be working only in relation to certain performance works where there are concrete objects, physical bodies and a concrete interaction within these two. That is why this reading fits so well with early-1950s artworks, for example. But what about works associated with conceptual art, for example Yoko Ono’s Instruction Paintings from the beginning of the 1960s, in which the ‘performance’ becomes the creative imagination of the viewer trying to realize the paintings in his or her mind? Or take some more recent examples, such as Tino Sehgal’s ‘constructed situations’ or Xavier Le Roy’s choreographic work, in both of which the object of art includes only human subjects, works that, therefore, require a more complex dialogue with ‘practice’ and ‘labour’. More importantly, this reading of performance
through 'practice' only shows how certain artistic practices literally and materially transformed the objects around them. But it does not show how performance as a category has been constituted and has functioned historically. To do that we must consider one more aspect of Marx's concept of *praxis* as it appears in 'Theses on Feuerbach'.

3. PERFORMANCE: AN ONTOLOGY OF RELATIONS

A crucial aspect of Marx's concept of 'practice' is its status as a subject. As a subject it cannot be considered as something that happens occasionally, in the way we think of an action or an event. Instead, 'practice', for Marx, defines what it means to be human and to distinguish humans from animals. What's more, by defining the human subject as practice, Marx radically broke with the traditional conception of human essence. Balibar points out that 'human essence', until Marx, had been considered as a set of abstract attributes inherent within individuals with the same genus. Marx, in opposition to that, suggested that the human essence is relationally spread among all individuals. In Thesis 6, Marx therefore writes: 'Feuerbach resolves the religious essence into the human essence. But the human essence is no abstraction inherent in each single individual. In its actuality it is the *ensemble of social relations*'. (Marx 2000: 171)

Balibar convincingly argues that 'an ontology of relations' emerges with Marx's notion of practice. And he writes that with this ontology of relations Marx articulates precisely what is essential in human existence, namely:

By defining the human subject with practice and practice with the human subject, Marx constructed a complex but necessary reciprocity between 'humankind' and the individual, which, Balibar claims, 'cannot exist without one another and are therefore in and of themselves mere abstractions for thinking the relation or relationship, albeit necessary abstractions for thinking the relation or relationships' (30). Although this produces a hermeneutic circle between the human being and the human being's ability for production, this reveals the originality in Marx's thinking rather than a contradiction (Agamben 1999).

What Balibar and others point out is how the human being for Marx, defined as practice, is constituted by its relational status between human practices. Its essence is not inherent in each and every individual but is spread relationally and exists socially between individuals. Furthermore, practice is not one aspect of the human subject but is what defines it as such and therefore takes place constantly. Balibar takes this 'ontology of relations' slightly further than Marx himself did. By rejecting both the idea of a fictional individuality that could be defined by itself in isolation and an organicist point of view in which humanity simply is thought of as a whole, Balibar suggests that Marx with his notion of 'practice' proposed to think of humanity as a 'transindividual reality' (Balibar 1995: 30).

PERFORMANCE AS A SUBJECT, AS PRAXIS?

Considering practice in this deepened sense – maybe even as a 'transindividual reality' – as Balibar suggests, allows for thinking performance and its ontology in a different way than in a purely materialistic way suggested earlier. More specifically, it enables us to conceive 'performance' as defined through a set of relations between itself as a category (as a genus) and all existing individual performance art works. This means that the essence of performance, to speak with Marx, is not something that can be found within each existing performance work, as I tried to do in the first section. Its 'essence', in contrast to that, lies in its status as an intermediary discipline, which defines itself through its own practice rather than from a set of predetermined attributes. This can to some extent currently perhaps be said about many concepts such as 'theatre', 'painting' and 'art' in general. However the category 'performance', in contrast to both 'theatre' and 'painting', emerged and
was constructed in an intricate relation to the breaking down and reconstitution of already established disciplines.

Defining ‘performance’ as ‘ontology of relations’, one must however be wary not to idealize this ontology of relations so much that it begins to float above the social relations from which it departs. We have to remind ourselves that ‘practice’ for Marx is a double movement. ‘Practice’, on the one hand, is constituted through real relations between people made of flesh and blood. But ‘practice’, on the other hand, for Marx is not equivalent to these actual people but these people’s relations to each other. It is also crucial to recognize that certain artists and genres within performance throughout history, more than others, have emphasized this character of performance. Dance and choreography, as Andrew Hewitt points out in his excellent book Social Choreography (2005), not merely represent social relations but inhabit and perform them. My claim, however, is that performance as a category in art and as a concept in its own right functions relationally independently of the practices performed. Understanding ‘performance’ as a form of ‘practice’ enables us to see that the relationship between the constitution of the category of performance and that of labour lies less in performance’s physical, embodied content in individual performance artworks and more in the ontology of performance itself, which nevertheless is reciprocally dependent on these embodied and physical practices.

REFERENCES
Osborne, Peter (2011) ‘From structure to rhizome: Transdisciplinarity in French thought (1)’, Radical Philosophy 165: 15–16.