

A performative account of power and place

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Abstract

This paper looks at how an intersection between 'performativity and architecture' provides a way to question how we think about power. The broad context of this exploration is a shift within the humanities away from an understanding of culture-as-text, to a 'performative' view that highlights culture as a dynamic process. This perspective is shaping architectural discourse as well as architectural production. A feature shared by this perspective – in architecture, as with other disciplines – is a questioning of the contested terrain linking power, identity and place. To consider this, a 2004 project in Leipzig is used as a case. Collaborating with a group of artists, Grundei Kaindl Teckert designed a building and exhibitions in Leipzig based on the notion of performativity. Argued here is that the Leipzig project highlights a tension between how performativity is framed within theory and its translation within an architectural practice which directly engages with a physical place. The way that performativity, is theorised, in relationship to both architecture and identity, is tested by its enactments in architectural production. Finally it is suggested that the Leipzig project offers an opportunity for a more nuanced understanding of how an embodied subject 'does' identity in place.

Introduction

In the last few decades, there has been a shift within the humanities away from text, objects and monuments, along with readings of objects as representations of cultural production (Walker, 2003). The shift to highlight culture as process provides a new perspective across a number of disciplines, and it is also shaping architecture. The focus on the dynamic offers the promise of freedom, creativity and escape from essentialised, place-bound identities. As a result this rhetoric has become extremely powerful in our contemporary poetic imagination. However, historically, architecture has been located within discourses of form, function, stability and place. Against this framework, the association between architecture and the performative may at first seem contradictory. However, such historical and metaphorical connotations of architecture and its concomitant association of stability, power and the sedimentation

of subjectivity provides a rich territory for architects, artists and philosophers to question, explore and challenge .

Butler's performative, linguistically orientated and non-foundational account of gender as performative rather than essential and stable has become highly influential amongst feminists, social geographers and art discourse – in particular in the 1990s (Nelson, 1999; Hemmings, 2005). Her analysis elaborates on John L Austin's linguistic theory of performativity to capture the ways that gender and sex are continually remade through repetition and accomplished through its very enunciation. As Butler writes "there is no gender identity behind the expression of gender; that identity is performativity constituted by the very 'expressions' that are said to be its results" (Butler, 1993, p.68). Butler's theorising on the performative relations of gender is complex. Its complexity builds from the arguments she weaves together, often drawn from within and across disciplines that have been defined as incompatible, contradictory or at least problematic in their relationships (Nussbaum, 1999).

Butler acknowledges that her work is problematic. This problematic dimension, she claims, is a strategic textual practice: pronounced as performative formulas. Indeed her definition of the term performative is far from static. For example, her notion of performativity in her first book *Gender Trouble* is described as a repetition of discursive norms, in the second book on performativity *Bodies that Matter: the Discursive Limits of Sex*, whilst still central, this notion of performativity is now reframed as the iteration of a "specific modality of power as discourse" (Butler, 1990, p.25 & 1993, p.187). As a result, in part due to the complexity and shifting nature of the term performativity, the translation of Butler's theorisation of performativity into other disciplines has taken on varied meanings.

Performativity, in contemporary architectural discourse, has taken on different meanings and to an extent, different uses. For the most part, the language of performativity has entered into the vocabulary of architecture to explore the interrelation between subjectivity and place. It is used to explore how subjectivity is enacted in place and finally to explore how place itself is enacted in the process of performance. Butlers writing has entered architectural discussions, as exemplified by

Katarina Bonnevier and Lisa Henry Benham, who look to Butler to question architecture's neutrality, and to consider how it actually participates in the construction of norms (Bonnevier, 2005 & Benham, 2003). Bonnevier also contends, following Butler, that it is no longer important to define what architecture 'is' as an object to be located, or as a text to be read, but instead she suggests that "architecture' appears through its performance, through its enactment it comes into being" (Bonnevier, p.167). In this framework architecture is understood as a process rather than as an object. The language of performativity is also used to question the limits of a textual model, to augment knowledge through experiential and sensual relations that occur within space and time. This position is exemplified not only by Benham and Bonnevier but also by Renna Tiwiri and Hanne-Louise Johannesen (Tiwiri, 2003 & Johannesen, 2003. For Johannesen and more recently Neil Leach, the language of performativity enables architecture to escape the confines of 'identity.' It also enables another possible way to describe the 'betweenness of relations' (Johannesen, 2003 & Leach, 2006). This recent uptake of Butler's theorisation of performativity in architecture however, for the most part, has been limited to an analysis of architecture.

This paper looks specifically at an architectural project by Grundei Kaindl Teckert, who with a group of invited artists, challenge the configuration between power, identity and place in the name of performativity. Significant here, is that performativity was used as a vehicle to design from rather than as a way to analyse architecture and place. In this paper what is proposed is that there is richness exemplified in the architectural project of Grundei Kaindl Teckert, via ironies, inconsistencies and miss-translations – the places where something gets slightly bent. In this paper I am analysing the only formal review of this project by Barbara Steiner as I feel this review embodies these very contradictions between theory and the translation into practice that I am interested in. This approach may be interpreted as criticism rather than creation. Yet in this space of irony, inconsistency, and partiality, one is drawn towards a more fluid and heterogeneous lexicon, rather than dualisms and essentialising language of relations between power, identity and place. This paper argues that the Leipzig project highlights a tension between how performativity is framed within theory and its translation within an architectural practice which directly engages with a physical place. The way that performativity, is theorised, in

relationship to both architecture and identity, is tested by its enactments in architectural production where the Leipzig project offers an opportunity for a more nuanced understanding of how an embodied subject 'does' identity in place. Finally this paper, in terms of the overriding theme of this conference will speculate, briefly, on how this project enables a way to think about contemporary communication.

Grundeis Kaindl Teckert

Berlin-based architects Grundeis Kaindl Teckert completed the Galerie für Zeitgenössische Kunst, (Contemporary Art Gallery) a new exhibition venue in Leipzig completed in 2004. The architectural design was generated using theories of performativity. A number of artists were invited to explore the relationship between architecture and performativity, including BLESS, Monica Bonvicini, Angela Bulloch, Oliver Hangi, Jeppe Hein, Olaf Nicolai and Pro qam (Steiner, 2003). The performative conception of relations was translated into a space that was "changeable and variable", that could be repeatedly redefined and "charged up with different functions" (Steiner, 2003, p.185). The description of the project, by Steiner, foregrounds changeability by focusing on elements such as movable doors and curtains that allow varying display configurations and through assertions that the design enables unpredictable viewpoints and encounters, without explaining how these are achieved. Steiner also describes how the architects wanted to connect with the neighbouring buildings via large windows in the gallery walls. For Steiner, these elements facilitated awareness of one's own "social constitutiveness and social enshrinement", making evident how the subject is devised "within a relationship of dependency with the architectural and social context" (Steiner, 185).

The invited artists explored a range of architectural issues, under the banner of performativity, including meaning, power relations, function and most importantly, the constitutive relationship between identity and place (Steiner, 2003). For example, BLESS created a project exploring how we perform roles tied to objects around us, linking the notion of performativity to conventions associated with the iterative wearing of clothing. While Steiner is critical of the reliance on cultural norms in such work, it still, in her view, challenges conventions by altering the function of clothing, putting into question historical meaning (Steiner, 2003). The clothes are generic, neither inside nor outside wear, so the onus is on the wearer to ascribe meaning. This

continues in Olaf Nicolai's work, where performativity is tied to the necessity for the subject to negotiate afresh the meaning of his or her subjectivity in relation to variable objects, thus inscribing their affirmative and oppositional role in the construction of subjectivity (Steiner, 2003, p.193). Oliver Hangi puts the coded subject on stage and subjects the participants to an observation regime. Hangi wrote scripts for residents of Vienna's Simmering district to perform at home with open curtains to an audience of passers by, as well as being documented for subsequent publication and installation within the gallery. The intention was to merge reality and stage within the home, at once scripted yet not bound by script (Steiner, 2003). While this explores the importance of observation regimes in the process of subjectification, the project also considers how observation constructs the gaze of the subject's opposite, the voyeur (Steiner, 2003). Steiner writes that what is critical to this project is how the artist alters the relationship between inside and outside, public and private that "takes place 'publicly' within one's own four walls" (Steiner, p.193). Finally, Bonvincini's work demonstrates the way the visual economy dominates these artists' explorations of performative thinking in relation to architecture. Bonvincini explores the relationship between gender, control and repression as an effect of spatial restrictions on women. (Steiner, p. 200). Her confrontational work combines images of clichéd masculinity with a sadomasochistic charge (Steiner, 2003). In *'Wall fucking'*, a woman 'fucks' a wall, in *'Hammering out (an Old Argument)'* a woman's hand destroys a white-washed wall and in *'Plastered'* the (white) floor of the Secession in Vienna collapses under the massive impact of treading feet (Steiner, 2003). For Steiner, the images enact dissolutions of, and resistances to established meanings that underlie a rational conception of architecture – a conception reliant on normative social and gender roles that are pre-configured from an architectural point of view (Steiner, p. 201).

Before I begin my analysis there is a sense in which I need to come clean. When I enter a gallery I know that there are certain things to be looked at as a viewer. I enter, walk the lines of paintings, navigate installations, pausing and contemplating. Of course this movement has come under some scrutiny within both architectural and art discourse. I am aware I am now no longer just a 'viewer' in a state of passive contemplation, I am now an active participant, part of the process that challenges the reception and recreation of an art object as reproduction. As an architectural observer, I do not betray my education; I take stock of spatial syntax, settings and cues; how the

gallery functions for its users, artists and staff. Am I compressed in transition spaces, or afforded space around the paintings and the installations in which to breathe and to contemplate? Of course, to consider my own interaction and perception is more obviously a process than the artwork itself. Yet I have not been to this gallery. This is an account that is framed through mediation. It is an experience mediated by carefully framed photographs and a written account of the building. This mediated account is embedded within a discursive process that is still bound to questions of discourse and power, and in terms of this project, how ideas of performativity and the performative reflect these issues.

The subject that is constructed in the Leipzig project has a theoretical investment. This is a subject that is located within a visual, mirror economy, constructed through gazing/looking/screening; a subject that is drawn from the works of Jacques Lacan, Michel Foucault and Gilles Deleuze (Steiner, p.185). The importance placed on the question of gender in these projects also draws strongly on the work of Butler, who has popularised the idea of performativity in questioning/describing the iterative relations of gender (Steiner, p.185). This theoretical indebtedness that the architects and artists draw on is looked at critically in this paper as it is asserted that what this brings to architecture is a highly abstract notion of the subject constructed through a power-discourse nexus rather than the problems posed by three dimensional space. To explain this more fully I focus on the writing of Butler, as one of the theoretical sources for the project.

Butler, in her exploration and definition of performativity, makes a clear distinction between what she means by performance and performativity. Does one choose to perform identity? Do I wake up in the morning and choose to perform a feminine or maybe a masculine identity? In Butler's formulation there is no choice, as there is no doer behind the deed. The notion that there is agency or choice is an effect of the iteration of the 'structures of meaning' by which we reproduce the norms of discourse, of signification, of gender, and it is this discursive injunction in our very actions which gives our identity meaning. Thus performance in Butler's theorisation is different to performativity; performance is relegated to the realm of theatrics; however this is a distinction that Butler seems unable to maintain in her own writing

as she iteratively relies on the term performance – to describe a particular doing in her text.

The argument that Butler relies on an abstract subject is premised on the fact that her subject does not occupy place, yet her writing is heavily indebted to spatial metaphors, in particular when she explains how a subject is constrained. As Walker highlights, on the one hand, the subject in Butler's text is defined by the metaphor of space, "where the subject is constrained within a synchronic structure of discursive relations" (Walker, 2003, p.164). On the other hand, Butler defines the subject through the metaphor of time, "where the subject is potentially free to resist the structures within a diachronically-marked moment in the process of reproduction" (Walker, 164). Thus one can suggest that Butler's "deployment of space, in its normative understanding, is used to suggest that the subject who exists in space is always constrained, whereas the subject that exists in time is always potentially free" (Walker, p.164). But to divide this subject in this manner, for Walker, merely reflects a mode of analysis that separates space from time, in order to conceptualise the subject; yet "under ordinary conditions of lived experience, of course, space and time are fused" (Walker, p. 164).

Butler's theorisation of the subject which becomes confined to space initially draws from Foucault's writing on Power in *Discipline and Punishment*, which links the disciplined body to the process of subjectification. However, in Foucault's understanding, there is a correlation between forms of "subjectivity, mobile fields of discourse and the material effects of three-dimensional institutional spaces" (Kirby, 1996, p.2). Butler, in her analysis, deploys a spatial rhetoric, but disregards three-dimensional institutional space. Butler extracts from Foucault the notion of a docile body and a materiality that is a dissimulated effect of power (Butler, 1993, p.251). Subjectivity is now a correlation of discourse that for Butler has "material effects." (Butler, 1993, p.69). Butler, through this act of erasure of three dimensional space, enacts the historical positing of inside and outside within philosophy, where the object is once more cast outside of discourse and prior to language. Place is left to haunt her text, hidden within the boundary of her rhetorical questions, or entrenched within the referential properties of her language, where the real properties of place are replaced by a particular semantic construction that operates abstractly. Yet Butler also quickly

moves to cover this process of editing and erasure. She moves to evoke the gaps in Foucault's own writing and replace three dimensional spaces with regulatory ideals and psychoanalytical models of foreclosure, models of thinking where place is not an important constitute, but, rather, time.¹

This paper argues that Butler's occupies a problematic position within architectural discourse, because of this notion of an abstract subject who is located solely within a power-discourse nexus, whilst drawing on a spatial rhetoric. By doing this, Butler reduces a complex notion of subjectivity which negotiates relations of power and place physically and discursively, to privileging "the moment in which discourse encloses or subjugates a person's identity" (Nelson, 1999, p.332). Thus the ability to change or challenge relations is actually now reduced to moments of 'slippages' and 'accidents' within the power-discourse nexus, in Butler's framework (Nelson 1999). Butler forecloses of reflective intentionality by arguing that "the disruptions of this coherence through the *inadvertent* re-emergence of the repressed reveal... that identity is constructed" (Butler, 1990, p.28, emphasis added). This raises a question about the performative turn within architectural discourse, which actually relies on an abstract notion of subjectivity as the 'subject' is not reducible to discursive practices alone in three-dimensional space – discourse is only one constituent. Moreover the subject in Butler's defining of performativity does not actively engage with place.

Now to return to the Leipzig project where the notion of performativity undergoes a transformation – it gets slightly bent. As outlined earlier, performativity as a way of thinking about place, subject and power underscores how the architects and artists approached the Leipzig gallery. However, the notion of performativity is modified from the outset. Evident in Steiner's 2003 writing is that performativity is explained as a modified form of performance. Steiner argues:

The event aspect of the performativity (the moment, now) is linked to the materiality of an installation in the sense of simultaneousness of action and experience, or

¹ Judith Butler argues that subjects are constituted by a power immanent to social discourse, particularly the discourse of psychoanalysis. Thus in Butler's description of materialisation, the subject is located within the disciplinary powers of regulatory ideals and also within a psychoanalytic model of foreclosure, yet, in this very process she deletes the questions of space and architectural space from this intersection.

the event aspect of artistic production (performance) continues to take effect within the installation. (Steiner, 2003, p.13).

Steiner argues further that performativity is a unique event occurring without time limitations: it is physical performance, rather than a linguistic utterance (Steiner, 2003). Performativity as an event, for Steiner, is also linked to the materiality of the installation; it speaks of both action and experience, and even the performative aspect of the artistic production (Steiner, 2003). Performativity, understood through the lens of performance, is framed within the text thus as a way to question how architecture is conceived to be static, and also how space works to oppress, dominate, exclude, and coerce the subject (Nollert, 2003, p.9). Thus a critical difference here, with Butler's understanding, is in that the when one '*does*' *identity* in place and time is some kind of performance.

Through the interpretation of performativity through the lens of performance, the key rhetorical feature in the description of this project is the language of mobility and temporality, in this respect it is in keeping with the project's theoretical investiture. Both terms are used to question how architecture has constrained the body to reproduce a coherent subject. On the other hand, stasis (particularly in relation to the subject and how the subject is emplaced) is clearly to be associated with notions of regularity, routine and habitual relations that operate within a framework of power to inscribe, contain and control. Further in this line of thinking the 'sense of place' required is reliant on a familiar conception of place as fixed, certain and concrete, the 'source domain' of this metaphor being a "single architectonic logic of place"(Colebrook, 2000, p.26). In practice, this is challenged through the design of the Leipzig Gallery so it does not allow for a coherent architectural narrative. Together the artists and architects, create places of partial vistas and spatial juxtapositions facilitating the subject's 'literal' movement, and multiple interpretations to exclude the possibility of coherency and power over the body.

The critique of static relations is thus a process of disrupting domestication of the subject in a certain place, and is now given over to the involuntary, the mobile and the temporal (Colebrook, 2000). Yet is not this departure from place-as-static and the process of domestication also a dichotomisation? Such definitions of place-as-static

within a negative framework rely on relations between the subject and place that are stable to function as a stereotype, away from which to draw a line. The imprint of the stereotype is never fully erased as it leaves its trace on the revision of theory.

Furthermore, it can be asked, how is movement or the temporal necessarily redemptive and transformative; is it not also tainted? For James Clifford, the deployment of a language of movement, change and variability is tainted by its associations with

gendered, racial bodies, class privilege, specific means of conveyance, between beaten paths, agents frontiers, documents and the like...thus raising the question of how far does this language of movement change and variability get us before it falls apart? (Clifford, 1992, p.110).

The Leipzig project engages with the issue of how gender and social issues pre-configure our body in specific reiterative relations to space. Whilst the project relies on a rhetoric of temporality and mobility, this is not a depressing account of abstract subjectivity – this subject has a spatial and social relationship (Thrift, 2000). Evident here is that the body is always culturally loaded and that we occupy different relations to space and, as such, underscores the impossibility of body being a-signifying, only occupying a temporal dimension; instead the Leipzig project highlights this is a particular kind of fantasy (Grosz, 1995).²

Thus, this paper argues that the theoretical separation between space and time privileges an abstract subject who does not act in the world. Yet, reiterated through the description of these projects, the notion of performativity and the performative is tied to words such as ‘awareness’, ‘reflection’, ‘making meaning’ and ‘direct action’, to describe how we come to question how we are constructed in relation to place (Steiner, 2003). Here then, the subject is framed as playing a decisive role in the projects’ performance through direct action and contemplation – the subject is self-reflexive and aware. A challenge is therefore offered to contemporary post-structuralist discourse, whose performative turn defines a subject whose ability to re-

² As Elizabeth Grosz writes the body, as a-signifying is an existence without debt, commitment, ties – the fantasy of the self-made male liberal subject (Grosz, 1995, p.45).

construct relations is tied to notions of slippage and accident in relation to a ‘power’ discursive nexus. However, in architectural space, the embodied subject redefined through mobility and mobilised in space is not only positioned as negotiating space, but also occupies multiple positions and has the ability to make meaning about context (Steiner, p.190). Indeed the Leipzig project poses a challenge to framing the subject as *either* an absolute term bound to a notion of a humanist subject that is emplaced *or* as a subject on the other hand that is only defined through a power-discourse nexus. Rather, the subject in these projects is produced through ongoing and recursive relationships between power/discourse and via negotiating multiple discourses at any concrete moment in relation to their sedimented life history (Smith, 1988). A somewhat ironic turn from the theoretical origins of this project starts to highlight a dichotomy between theory and practice where the abstracted subject starts to give way to a subject that ‘does’ identity in relation to discursive and spatial practices.

Furthermore this paper argues that rather than the abstract subject that prevails in the theoretical basis of this project, there is another subject altogether. This subject is an embodied subject, negotiating physical and discursive environments in fluid relationships. Instead what is made evident is that the way that space is occupied and negotiated is a mark of power in itself, where the less tangible relations of use are able to open out or close down power relations. This way of thinking about power concerns action in space and the ‘doing’ of identity, where space and design may or may not provide affordances for such to occur (Woodcock & Smitheram, 2007).

Very briefly, the praxis of operating in space in the Leipzig project is argued to afford an evolving symbolic resource for theorising power, subjectivity and place that also seems to be pertinent to questions about communication. Increasingly communication, as architecture, is a story about travel, interconnectivity, internet, transnationals and globalised forms of communication (Rodgers, 2004). The rhetoric, for Rodgers, that is dominating and intertwined with contemporary communication and research on communication, is temporality (Rodgers, p.287). However in this ‘globalised’ view and approach to communication what receives less explicit attention is “the spatialization of globalization” (Massey, 1994, p. 22).

Critical in the Leipzig project is that architecture is not a neutral backdrop when considering relations of power but is an intrinsic constituent; moreover, it is an “active element in the constitution of power itself” (Massey, p.22). Thus questions start to evolve in relation to how we think about communication in the context of the homogeneity of globalisation; are relations more, contested, negotiated, socially and spatially uneven when one does not deny the problem of place? Although far from suggesting that power is bounded with a particular entity, power, in the Leipzig project, extends between human and non-human actors that evidence different ‘geometries of power’, operating between multiple actors who are able to negotiate discursive relations and spatial arrangements – or choose not to (Massey, 1994). To think of power spatially, for Rodgers, suggests a “way to link theory and practice in the analysis of the multi-dimensionality of modern communications systems – in their development, use, regulation and ownership” (Rodgers, p. 275). Although it needs to be noted that temporality and mobility, the rhetoric of globalisation, also informs the Leipzig project. A critical position was, however, taken, suggesting that this was a fantasy of a-signification, a fantasy that does not acknowledge that people have different relations to technology and also to technologies of communication.

Conclusion

The Leipzig project, through the ironies and inconsistencies between theoretical intentions and creative practices, presents a challenge to the dichotomy between a located subject and a placeless one; between a masterful subject and one suspended at a node in the power-discourse matrix. As demonstrated in this paper, ideas of agency, place and signification within post-structuralist discourse are, for the most part, refuted. However, in the Grundeis Kaindl Teckert project, the subject is defined as being ‘aware’ and ‘self-reflexive’; a subject that makes embodied comparisons and draws parallels with how s/he configures habitual bodily relations to place. By dealing with questions of an embodied, spatial subject rather than notions of an abstracted subject, a contestation of a hierarchy between mobility and stability is enabled; a hierarchy that finds place excluded from a theorisation of relations. However, the Leipzig project provides the opportunity for a more nuanced understanding of how an embodied subject ‘does’ identity that is not secured within absolutist terminology (Nelson, 1999). Finally, this also provides an evolving symbolic resource for how we think about communication, which is now

predominantly told through stories of temporality and movement. The Leipzig project highlights the necessity of considering the spatial distinction of relations, which provides a challenge to a fantasy of homogeneity.

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