

## FeedBack! Performance in the Evaluation Society

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### Abstract

Artistic performances in the museum have been increasingly evaluated by their viewers through modes of the quantitative evaluation of social media (Facebook, Twitter, Instagram). These public platforms, operating in the social domain, ascribe monetary value to popularity and 'equip us', as the German sociologist Steffen Mau suggests, 'with a certain kind of capital in certain markets.' As this phenomenon has been present in art world for a while, a fundamental tension has emerged between contemporary methods of ascribing value to performances by means of measuring digitally generated numbers and traditional critical analysis to critique performance. Traditional criticism addresses a contextual analysis rooted in aesthetic judgment. Against this background, my essay tackles the discrepancy between quantitative evaluation and qualitative criticism in the context of, what Mau calls the 'evaluation society'. It describes a shift from analysis and judgment to modes of publically digitalised evaluation. This essay takes as its case studies Anne Imhof's contribution *Faust* to the German pavilion at the Venice Biennale in 2017 and its social media representation and Anna and Lawrence Halprin's *RSVP Cycles*, also exhibited at the same Venice Biennial and at the documenta 13 in Athens/Kassel and argues that the works embody a type of performance that represent the described shift from categories of critique to those of evaluation. These case studies constitute a challenge to the redefinition of art criticism. My analysis of these works leads me to suggest that the logic of numerical values is already embedded in their artistic concepts as well as in established modes of critique. Considering the role of performance a ruling 'mode of power', as McKenzie describes it, I am suggesting to treat performance as both, a tool and subject of critique.

This essay examines how the medium of performance is critiqued inside museums, at biennials and documentas in the age of social media and argues that there has been a shift from traditional art criticism in sense of contextual analysis and aesthetic judgment to categories of quantitative evaluation. I am addressing the shift towards criteria that have less to do with critical categories of analysis, but with assessments that are based on value production by, what the German sociologist Uwe Vormbusch

calls, 'relationship markets' and 'reputation markets': In a conversation with Steffen Mau in *Texte zur Kunst*, June 2018, he pointed out that 'it's a question of how people are able to mutually evaluate each other in a fragmented modernity'. Of course, this question is also relevant for feedback-based forms of art criticism.

The influence of networking, likes, and links on social media platforms feed an attention economy of (art) criticism. Although the affixation of comparative value to human beings isn't new, the expansion and increased importance of numerical value is something that we participate in day per day via social media. While the participation of (media) consumers was (and occasionally still is) a classical demand of left-wing criticism, it has long since also dealt with the negotiation and relativization of quality criteria. In his highly instructive book *The Metric We. About the Quantification of the Social* (2017), Mau argues that evaluation operates according to the logic of quantification. Since statistics are normally a matter of assessment for institutions, the assumption that art is being measured and compared numerically, needs to be explained in more detail. Taking seriously the argument that numbers not only predict but are of importance, I am suggesting that visitor quotas and the number of Facebook likes and Instagram posts indicate which art exhibitions or events are relevant and which are not.

According to Mau, 'our consumer choices' correlate with our 'aesthetic, cultural, social and political preferences' (Mau 2018). Constantly communicated via Google searches, mouse clicks, and social networks, statistics and numbers help classify and evaluate our social lives and make them commodifiable to an advertising market. Mau is convinced that the number of online followers serves as an 'indicator' through 'which institutions can demonstrate that they are performing well' (Mau 2018). These mechanisms of quantification therefore have now an impact on editorial choices and critical judgment. Or, put differently, the quantity of interest in and the attesting of quality of an art work is dependent on numerical values. This, of course has, as

Mau admits, 'very little to do with a narrower evaluation of the artistic performance on the stage' (Mau 2018). Images of performance events thus also provide images of visitor gatherings that document public interest and evoke social relevance. Generally-speaking, to work effectively with the medium of performance, artists and institutions must position themselves as actors, resulting in that in order to make successful exhibitions and stage works more effectively than the traditional media coverage.

Performance, a subjective practice as well and as a source of social quality, might be a privileged site of evaluation because of its ephemeral nature and its reputation as a participatory and/or democratic practice. Considering the performance practice in the tradition of Yvonne Rainer and other choreographers of postmodern dance, in which professionals and amateurs participate(d), performance should not only be perceived as yet another elitist genre, but also as being socially and politically engaged beyond the artistic institution. It, therefore, makes sense to consider a possible connection between socially expanded artistic practice and an expanding evaluation logic.

There is no question that artistic performance practices depend on 'experts, in which networks of art critics, galleries, public institutions, and art periodicals are active agents of valorization' (Mau 2018). In this sense, 'the intrusion of new forms of evaluation – evaluation by the public, public interest, acclamation in the media, sale prices, followers and likes on social media (...)' (Mau 2018) has changed our common, perhaps naïve, understanding of art criticism as a more or less independent discipline following only its own conditions and rules. In this current climate, art critics recognize themselves as embedded actors within the expanded art institution. This is not new, of course, but the conditions of the market in relation to art criticism have intensified, insofar as criticism of and as art is increasingly dependent on 'relational' and 'reputation markets', now also including the approval of 'likes'. Drawing on Jon McKenzie's *Perform or Else: From Discipline to Performance* (2001), I am linking this phenomenon to the conjunction of,

what he calls, 'cultural', 'organizational', and 'technical' performances. As he highlights the role and function of performance in the 'design, testing, and evaluation of virtually all types of consumer products and technological systems', the emergence of data as art's lingua franca seems to exacerbate the horizon of problems of art criticism (24).

This is all the more remarkable when thinking about the reputation of performance as an antidote to the art market. As art criticism is often considered an elitist genre due to its hierarchical and selective practices, which represent internal institutional norms, performance and art criticism cannot be reconciled so easily. This is all the more reason to examine such values as 'social importance' or 'public relevance' within the framework of a society of evaluation, in order to understand the blind spots of today's art criticism. Insofar as they are often based on the traditionally democratic principle of feedback, artistic performances present themselves as a component that links the procedures of aesthetic qualification with those of social quantification. Since feedback structures configure, as Diedrich Diederichsen points out, 'new forms of public management, (...) new models of governance, which are accompanied by accountabilities to donors, to politics, and to the public sphere' (2008, 256ff.), it is obvious that especially participatory performances must be considered in terms of its role in the transformation of art and event markets.

In line with Mau's thesis that in 'new forms of mass evaluation [...] laypeople have the last word', the logic of evaluation has already changed more 'established reputation systems' like the weighting of the 'expert' (Mau 2018). This has been provoked by a fan culture, affective customer loyalty, non-institutional interest groups and target groups. Of course, this polarisation of lay and expert judgment might sound obsolete, or at the least like a neo-conservative backlash against democratic and/or emancipatory concepts of performance practice. I am thinking here of the Judson Church Theater as well as the US-American choreographer and dancer Anna Halprin—who together with her husband, landscape architect and environmental designer

Lawrence Halprin—developed the so-called *RSVP Cycles*, on which Halprin’s workshops and score practices, such as *Score for a Twenty-Day Workshop* (1968) are based. They were last shown at documenta13 in Athens and Kassel (2017) as well as at the Venice Biennial in 2017. Attributing new meaning to the widely conventional abbreviation for ‘répondez s’il vous plait’ (‘please respond’), ‘RSVP’ designates a four-component feedback system: ‘an assessment of resources (R); scoring (S); evaluation, an evaluation of the work based on values (V); and performance (P)’.

I mention Anna and Lawrence Halprin’s ‘RSVP Cycles’ because they represent the historical relevance of a participatory performance practice on the one hand and, on the other, because it is a significant historical example of the internal connection between performance and feedback-based evaluation procedures. Comparable to cybernetic models, the ‘RSVP Cycles’ implement the principle of a ‘circular causal relationship,’ in which actions resulted in alterations within a cyclical system that are then subject to evaluation. The reciprocity of action and (self-)evaluation, as the art historian Liz Kotz writes, is extended to all domains of human action: ‘Even a grocery list or a calendar [...] is a score’. Working with materials as diverse as architectural blueprints, diagrams, stage directions, and tabulations, Kotz quotes Halprin as she argues that ‘planning for future events is the essential purpose of a scoring mechanism. [...] Scores’ therefore have to be understood as “devices used for controlling events, of influencing what is to occur” (Kotz 49).

In addition to the undisputed participatory character of the *RSVP Cycles* we need to consider the role they attribute to the dialectics of scoring and evaluation, which is key to today’s quantitative procedures: Regarding Halprin’s model as an early example for the growing trend towards a ‘total record of life’—in which ‘everything that can be measured is measured and stored’ (Mau 2017, 126)—does not negate its anti-totalitarian character. On the contrary, Halprin’s practice is closely bound up with the ‘prognostic capacity’ that is a crucial feature

of the same quantitative procedures. 'Prognostic capacity', too, is hinted at in the *RSVP Cycles* and structurally contradicts Halprin's aspiration to artistic openness. Since the cycles functioned as a collective (self-) exploration of the body in its interaction with its environment, they are the basis of the 'Movement Rituals', which Halprin developed in collaboration with her multiethnic dance ensemble in response to the Los Angeles Watts Riots of 1965. Anna Halprin subsequently worked with other underprivileged groups, such as she did for the works created in the context of the women's movement. Her scores for *Female & Male Dance Rituals* were thought to help the participants to recognize and break down gender-specific blockages both physically and emotionally. Apart from the social implications, the 'RSVP Cycles' remind us of 'processes of control and regulation in dynamic systems' that has its roots in the military research since the late 1940s. Looking back to the performative revision of conventional body concepts in the context of postmodern dance, such as the Judson Church Theater, it is interesting to note that Norbert Wiener, the founding father of the discipline cybernetics, questioned the existence of the nervous system as a 'self-contained organ', and preferred to speak of 'circular processes emerging from the nervous system into the muscles, and re-entering the nervous system through the sense organs' (34). This scientific perspective converges with the approach of postmodern dance and conceives the body as an interdependent organism. Against this backdrop, the *form* of collective feedback, in which the Halprins discerned the possibility of 'evaluation'—a neologism combining 'evaluation' and 'action'—is all decisive. It remains unclear whether it positions itself within the framework of emancipatory body practice, or if it aims at representational and political participation?

What are the similarities and differences to today's feedback systems? Following Tiquun, a French collective of authors in the tradition of situationism, whose poetic-theoretical-political interventions aim above all at socio-technological sign circulation, it becomes clear that cybernetics was and still is a major factor behind the transformation of the

social subject into a 'self-disciplined personality', which has internalized the structural logic of constant (self-)observation and (self-) evaluation (Tiqun 32). I, therefore, agree with Tom Holert's consideration that those types of art, including performative mediations of knowledge, tend to transfer author-centered categories like 'invention, expression, emotion, creativity, and subjectivity' onto the audience' (2018). The subject then appears as a relevant object of evaluation: Who is invited to participate, what are the target groups, where and under which conditions does art overlap with social fields and/or with pop, fashion or celebrity culture? Such more or less voluntary acts of assessment can occur either in form of twitter followers, Instagram stats, academia.edu analytics, or artnet rankings and increase the success of blogs, social media, and 'algorithmic governmentality' (Rouvroy and Berns 2010).

Holert is concerned with an evaluation based event and infrastructure that has advanced to a highly relevant sector for the market of contemporary exhibitions. And in regards to this, McKenzie's focus on the conjunction of 'cultural', 'organizational', and 'technical' performances (24), the role and function of performance in the 'design, testing, and evaluation of virtually all types of consumer products and technological systems' comes into view again. To me, this is strongly linked to the emergence of data as art's lingua franca as a significant reason for the exacerbation of the current crises of art criticism. The same is suggested by the performance scholar Marvin Carlson (1996). He argues that any practice—human and non-human, autonomous and functional—can now be performance. We are required to distinguish between (non-artistic) 'doing' linked to 'organizational', and 'technical' performances as well as everyday gestures and (artistic) 'performance'? As Carlson writes, 'The task of judging the success of the performance (or even judging whether it is a performance) is [...] not the responsibility of the performer but of the observer' (5).

What Carlson notes is that the audience's position of power in performance implies a diminished significance of art criticism as a purveyor of both aesthetic judgments and expertise. The act of evaluation instead depends on the question of functional success.

Assuming that the audience is prepared to pass instantaneous judgment, Carlson's study also reads as an anticipation of the growing importance of feedback-based evaluation, since 'performance is always performance *for* someone, some audience that recognizes and validates it as performance even when, as is occasionally the case, that audience is the self' (Carlson 6). That is to say, performance is essentially addressing an audience. The audience represents the self that finds validation in it. This nexus of self-recognition and (self-)validation is one reason for the current expansion of the performative zone into the social realm as well as into the virtual world. As the boundaries between private, public, and commercial spheres have been blurred, performance could emerge as a key concept and artistic practice because it promises an appreciation and self-assurance within unstable and fluid spheres, where the production of events superimposes object production.

This includes the widespread conflation of art institutions, theatrical, educational, and scientific environments that we have seen in relation to the *RSVP Cycles*, as well as the interdisciplinary practices between visual and performative arts since the 1960s. Today, allegorical fusions of the exhibition space and the theater stage, the work place and the class room show the overlapping of different topologies. Holert points to Bruno Latour's science studies, which are based on the assumption that everything taking place in the academic realm—from the laboratory, to the studio and the seminar room, and not least on the various digital platforms of academic life—is intrinsically performative. What we are faced with today is a network-based transformation of institutions into infrastructural environments that foster performative ways of production.

This transformation is exemplified by *Faust*, Anne Imhof's contribution to the German Pavilion at the Venice Biennale 2017, which referred to Johann Wolfgang Goethe's tragedy of the same name, written at the end of the eighteenth-century. Imhof's historical reference was meant to be read in the light of the neoliberal creative culture, in the sense of an archetypal parable of the tension between ambitious self-realization and the modern desire for self-improvement



and self-optimization. German philosopher Juliane Rebentisch has identified this tension as an experience accompanied by feelings of fear and exhaustion (2017). In Imhof's performance piece the spatial design consisted mainly of a double glass ceiling mounted at hip-height and that divided the exhibition hall vertically. The architectonic intervention evoked a spatial co-presence of performers and visitors, turning the latter into performers of a second order, not only during the performance times, but also when the room was supposedly 'empty'. Glass pedestals that were mounted at head height and 'laboratory' props and ready-mades placed below the elevated glass floor choreographed not only the movements of the performers, but also those of the visitors. The participating performers embodied a series of *tableaux vivants* which transformed archetypal emotions into expressions of the digital condition over the course of four to five hours of performance. The evaluation society—the anxiety probed by *Faust*, rightly identified by curator Susanne Pfeffer as the dark underbelly of biopolitical subjectification (9) —is also fueled by a growing dependency on visible and audible resonance signals, signified, for example, by an overreliance on one's smartphone. In their roles as (in-)voluntary (co-)performers, the spectators were prompted to act in a procreative, more or less participatory way.

Whereas, on the one hand, the trope of transparency exposes the architecture of the German pavilion as a representative example for the National Socialists' preference for fascistic aesthetics, it evokes, on the other, an absorptive image that mixes—as Benjamin Buchloh points out (2017)—obvious references to the cool and stylish appeal of high-tech flagship stores, like the Apple Store, which stand-in for and obscured the opaque infrastructures of global cooperations. As intended by the artist (cf. Pfeffer 2017), the spatial and choreographic design bolstered the perception of *Faust* as a technologically reproducible image rather than an ephemeral performance. Remarkably, digital agents played a crucial part in *Faust* because their real-time Instagram feedback manifestly boosted, instead of deconstructed, the aura of the architectonic environment. A twofold code dictated the aesthetic of

Imhof's work: the photographic documentation shows the performers (including the fashion model Eliza Douglas) dressed in a mixture of casual sportswear and party clothing. Thus, the event explicitly addressed the overlapping of art, fashion, and club culture, creating an insta-famous, influencer aesthetic. Imhof's scenographic glass design also represented a perfect 'formula of the society of evaluation', where everything is exhibited, even if the performers act like self-referential, opaque monads in the middle of the audience. As Mau states, 'the more transparency, the better, because due to its image of objectivity transparency can hardly be criticised' (2018).

My criticism then becomes obvious: The photos of the four to five hour-long performance show the performers surrounded by masses of mobile phone users, who act like living sculptures perfectly suited for optical reproduction. In contrast to Anna Halprin, the choreography does not aim at the combination of physical and social movement, but rather at the participatory (re-)production of images and their distribution via and within (social) media. I have compared Halprin's and Imhof's work to distinguish between feedback-based concepts seeking to either connect us to emancipatory concepts, as in Halprin's case, or fit a bit too smoothly into the logic of economic-driven quantification, as is the case in Imhof's work. My article emphasises the argument that performance is an exemplary and vivid terrain of our participation in remote-controlled 'evaluation management' (van Eikels 286). Therefore, art criticism should analyse the instrumental values expanding within the infrastructure of networks of cultural, organisational, and technological performances in order to reflect on the society of evaluation, which it already inhabits. Considering performance a ruling 'mode of power' (McKenzie, 2001), it is necessary to treat it as both a tool and subject of critique. Assuming that performance claims to be a form of social criticism, its (art) criticism should develop a stronger awareness of the social expectations awakened when analysing performances, which further blur the genres of participation and evaluation. To this end, critics might need to better understand the media that level or at least obscure those distinctions.

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