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PERFORMANCE TECHNOLOGY AND PROJECT METHOD IN THE SYSTEM OF ART EDUCATION

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Abstract

The article explores the "performative-project" shift of contemporary artistic culture, which had originated in the avant-garde art of the 20th century and continues to dominate the culture of the first decades of the new century. While influencing all cultural subsystems, it finds a particularly vivid expression in the actual art. All types of art have shifted towards action, an event that is happening "here and now" and involving the viewers in a game. This is particularly relevant to the theatrical art, originally born from the Dionysian Mysteries that can be interpreted as the first form of performance. Contemporary theatre is born out of artistic and creative techniques that destroy the "wall" between the stage and the audience and envision a new type of spectator. The transformation of the language of theatre and the means of communication with the audience inevitably require changes in theatrical education, which forms an essential subsystem of the artistic culture. The paper analyses the principles and tools for reinvention of art education, where performative-project practices are becoming highly relevant tools for information learning and the development of creative skill sets required by future actors, directors and art managers. Performative-project techniques are indispensable not only in developing artistic and creative skills of future theatre professionals, but also for students studying theoretical subjects in humanities, cultural theory and art history. The article describes the author's experience in utilizing performative practices and the project method in Yekaterinburg State Theatre Institute.

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Key words: Performance and project cultural shift, art performance, contemporary theatre, art education techniques.

1. Introduction

Since its beginnings, art has always existed in unique communication with its audience. The history of art could be construed in correlation with its relationships with the audience, the types of such communications and their historical changes. Theatre establishes a sphere of unique interaction with the public because theatre is an art of action: theatrical performance is impossible without the audience, and it directly depends on the viewers' reaction. In theatre, an imaginative symbolic world is created in the process of perceiving the performance; this world continues its existence in the viewer's mind even after the performance is over. Architecture and sculpture, whose Ancient Eastern origins precede the emergence of theatre, also produce what are, in essence, performative spaces – the spaces of living events. In this, they share an affinity with theatre, which has separated the action (on-stage performance) from the public with an invisible wall. In this respect, the audience's active participation when interacting with the art has always been indispensable; it is a precondition for the existence of all kinds of art.

"Performance and project turn" is a characteristic feature of the artistic culture of the last three decades of the 20th century and the beginning of the 21st century. Valery Savchuk, Russian philosopher and art curator, believes that "during the last two decades of the 20th century, there was a shift in research perspective. Both the artist's and the analyst's interests have turned towards the creative *action:* to the act of producing, acting-doing... art becomes a "performation", an "event", a "game" or "staging". We are witnessing the process of radical transformation of art: from the artwork to the performative art" (Savchuk, 2004).

In the 21st century, all kinds and genres of art involve the audience into the action, into an event happening here and now, into a game. For example, contemporary art gallery exhibits works of painting in conjunction with media presentations that immediately elicit an emotional response from the viewers experiencing both objects simultaneously. Urban art (street art, public art) inserts itself into the life of the city residents by occupying the main urban streets and avenues that serve as common city routes. During the last century, the theatrical performance, which had traditionally been separated from the audience by an invisible wall, already moved closer to the viewers, putting them right on stage. Contemporary theatre is developing the projects belonging to the new immersive theatre (baby theatre, verbatim, quest), where the viewers become the direct participants of the performance.

Performance and project turn have been shaping not only the practice of art, but also its theory. Philosopher, cultural theorist and literature theorist Mikhail Epstein (2016) has proposed a new research approach and methodology, which he has named *culturonics*, and which is supposed to express modern culture's drive towards the future. This new theory, according to him, is "the construction of the new cultural forms of action, new communicative and cognitive techniques, new models of perception and creativity. While culturology utilizes projections (that is, the objects' refractions within the symbolic systems of various cultures), culturonics is based on projects – that is, the symbolic systems that has not yet become practices or institutions of any particular culture; they form the space of conceivable transformations of an entire field of culture" (Epstein, 2016). In his *Proyektivnyi filosofskii slovar'* ("A Projective Philosophical Dictionary") (Epstein, 2003, 2004), Epstein (2016) insists that projectivism is an indispensable part of

contemporary theoretical discourse, and that *culturonics* is a humanistic technique for working in the sphere of culture.

Aesthetics, as the philosophy of art, easily adapts itself to the development of socio-cultural methodology in contemporary art research, the new trends in the theory of culture, and its project-oriented mindset. Project aesthetics interprets art projects that are created through an actual aesthetic experience. The leading examples of the artworks that are the subjects of project aesthetics are the actual art projects within the urban environment; a class of artefacts existing at the boundaries between art and ordinary existence, which have come to be known as urban art practices (Lisovetc & Orlov, 2017).

2. Problem Statement

The dominance of project activity is typical for a culture developing during the periods of historical shifts, when a radically new individual and society are coming into existence. This is the situation that, at the juncture between the two millennia, is faced by the human culture in general and Russian culture in particular.

Art, which is a meaning-making and institutional centre of the artistic culture, embodies this general performance and project turn particularly strongly. Developing along the same lines, cultural research and the theory and philosophy of art has expanded this subject "in practice" and are now developing a new project methodology. Such transformations have to be reflected in art education – this indispensable component of artistic culture, focused on training artists, art interpreters and art managers. Teaching professionals are facing a challenge of aligning the performance and project bend of contemporary culture with the forms and techniques of art education.

3. Research Questions

What defines performance as a cultural phenomenon and a highly relevant art practice? What are the leading characteristics of an artistic project work? What talents and skills can be instilled through the process of art education thanks to the use of the performative techniques and the project teaching method? Could these techniques and this teaching method be applied to the teaching of theoretical subjects, such as philosophy, aesthetics, art history and cultural theory?

4. Purpose of the Study

My goal in addressing these questions is the development of the new art education techniques, which would open new possibilities for training contemporary creative professionals, art interpreters and art managers. Ultimately, it provides an opportunity to create an environment in which the developing artists might live and work under the new social and cultural conditions of fluid information society. Or, to put it differently, I believe that the change in art education is required to train professionals prepared to respond to the challenges and perspectives of contemporary artistic culture.

5. Research Methods

An analysis of art based on the characteristics of a culture that fosters it, termed *culturological approach,* helps to explore art in relation to the expression of the dominant cultural values, the understanding of contemporary individual and his/her future development. The methods developed by the cultural theory allow to elucidate the essence of the "performance and project shift" of modern culture.

The philosophical-aesthetical method works to reveal the characteristics of performance as an art practice and to understand how the performative techniques, in conjunction with the project method, facilitate the development of students' creative skills. The problem-based pedagogical approach allows to analyse the performance and project techniques through the lens of their compatibility with all parts of the educational process and their efficiency in providing the students with the necessary professional skills.

Today performance is being widely researched as a cultural phenomenon. The origins of performance can be traced back to the Dionysian Mysteries, which gave birth to the Greek theatre. Later, the performance was reborn within the modernist and avant-garde cultural movements of the early 20th century (Goldberg, 2014). However, according to the leading European and Russian philosophers and aesthetics scholars, both the dominance of the performative approach and the performance as an art practice are typical for the postmodern culture (Lyotard, 1994, 1998; Man'kovskaya, 2003; Savchuk, 2004). Exploring its characteristics, performance researchers define performance as a practice of public creation of artworks, which is "based on the synthesis of art and non-art that does not require specialized professional skills and does not strive for a long-term preservation" (Man'kovskaya, 2003, p.335). At the same time, by determining that action and the primacy and self-sufficiency of a creative act happening "here and now" form the central features of the performance, the researchers believe that performance is closely related to the development of theatre (Schechner, 2013).

The features of the performance were actively discussed at the last the 20th Congress of the International Association of Aesthetics "Aesthetics and Mass Culture" (Seoul, South Korea, July 24-29, 2016). In their plenary papers, Gunter Gebauer (Gebauer, 2016) and Oh Byung-Nam (Oh Byung-Nam, 2016) explored those essential characteristics of the performance that make it particularly relevant for the system of art education: its focus on game, both for the participants and for the audience, and an opportunity it creates for a spontaneous emotional expression of this experience through the collective action. Ludic character of the performance provides opportunity to activate the potential for collective interaction, free emotional exchange and, most importantly, full immersion into a secondary reality differing from the real world. These features of the performance as a role team game are important for the system of art education in general, and theatrical education in particular.

Obviously, role play matters when developing an acting ability required to create an image on stage. However, the role play technique is also useful in the study of complex humanistic subjects: art theory, aesthetics, art history, philosophy, history and theory of culture. Fostering understanding of a different cultural era through art, philosophy and artistic styles can be done by putting the students into the roles of artists and philosophers of that era. Imaginative approach and an understanding of an artist or a philosopher as an individual belonging to his/her age, help to "perform" this person – for example, by representing an

artistic style or a philosophical text in classroom setting. For example, Plato's *Dialogues*, where philosophical discussions unfold in conversations between Socrates and his disciples, naturally lend themselves to being translated into a classroom performance. Of course, it is highly important to find a balance between the spontaneity of the performance and the role play script set by the teacher. Students of the Acting Department of Yekaterinburg State Theatre Institute perceive educational role-playing games as an organic part of their philosophy, aesthetics and art history classes.

The project method, which underpins the creation, presentation and defence of artistic and aesthetic projects, is also an indispensable technique of theatrical education. It is actively utilized in training students of Producing and Theory and Practice of the Performing Arts of Yekaterinburg State Theatre Institute (www.egti.ru).

During the previous century, the project method, as a result-oriented activity, had already become an integral part of all cultural and social subsystems, but today its meaning and use in the sphere of art education need to be re-interpreted. Mastering the required course material should be linked to the development of original students' projects as a final result of an education process. In Yekaterinburg State Theatre Institute, project method is actively used as part of "Contemporary Art Practices" (*Aktual'nye art-praktiki*) and "Introduction to Art Business" (*Osnovy art-biznesa*) courses, which teach the students the process of project development and help them develop the relevant skill set. For the "Contemporary Art Practices" course, during the final examination that takes the form of colloquium, students present their own projects based on the implementation of an art practice (usually something in the sphere of urban art) into the familiar urban environment. For the "Introduction to Art Business" examination, students present their theatrical business-related project proposals, which are usually based on themes and problems that the students later explore in their final graduation paper.

Here are some topics of the projects that had been first presented for the "Foundations of Art Business" course, but later developed and successfully defended as graduation projects and, finally, implemented by the graduates after they had completed their studies. These are the following projects: "Transforming the Urban Culture and Recreation Park into a Multifunctional Cultural Complex" (*Preobrazovanie gorodskogo Parka kul'tury i otdykha v mnogofunktsional'nyy kul'turnyy kompleks*), "Exhibition Complex as a Creative Space of Contemporary Urban Culture" (*Vystavochnyy kompleks kak kreativnoe prostranstvo sovremennoy gorodskoy kul'tury*) by Baydina and Lisovetc, (2015), "Theatre Festival in a Provincial City" (*Teatral'nyy festival' v provintsial'nom gorode*), "Dance Theatre Management: An Experience of Yekaterinburg Dance Theatre" (*Menedzhment dans-teatra: opyt Ekaterinburgskogo teatra tantsa*), "Social Theatre in School Education" (*Sotsial'nyy teatr v sfere shkol'nogo obrazovaniya*), "Private Dance School in a Small-Town Cultural Environment" (*Chastnaya shkola tantsa v kul'turnoy srede malogo goroda*), "Organization and Realization of Youth Cinema Festival" (*Organizatsiya i provedenie molodezhnogo kinofestivalya*) (www.egti.ru).

Starting with the theoretical research of art practices and performance in her course papers and other works, Daria Baydina (2015), 2017 a graduate master's student at the Ural Federal University, not only successfully defended her master's thesis "Contemporary Art in Urban Space" (*Aktual'noye iskusstvo v prostranstve goroda*), but also realized her long-cherished project of creating a contemporary dance

company (Theatre 27/1), which she manages today (https://www.facebook.com/twentysevenslashone/). It is necessary to note that this turn from the theory of performance to the practice of contemporary dance is not arbitrary: body and body movement are the essential components of both dance and performance. Some of the graduates of the Department of Philosophy of Ural Federal University have also continued their theoretical project works into the fully realized actual projects: they are street artist Timofey Radya (http://t-radya.com/) and Marina Matushkina, who, after completing her master's thesis on contemporary dance, has established her own dance company (https://www.facebook.com/marina.matushkina).

6. Findings

Each historically defined culture is expressed through the art typical for this era. The changing languages and forms of art presuppose the changes in art education aimed at fostering the relevant skills required for the contemporary creative professionals, art organizers and art viewers. Art education techniques should be brought in line with the performative-practical orientation of contemporary culture. This is particularly important in theatre education since theatre *is* performance and *always* an original project.

The ways the performance and project techniques are applied in art education should be constantly developed according to different types of coursework. Performative techniques and the project method can be successfully utilized not only in teaching creative and artistic skills but also in theoretical humanistic education. Application of these methods fosters multifaceted emotional and notional understanding of the historical cultural experience, while building foundations for the student's graduation research projects – the outcomes successfully achieved by the Yekaterinburg State Theatre Institute.

7. Conclusion

Performance and project turn in contemporary culture, expressed through the changes in art language, through the emergence of art practices straddling the boundaries between art and everyday life, and through the direct inclusion of the audience into the process of artwork creation, has transformed methods and techniques of art education. By exploring the features of theatrical education through this lens, I have come to the conclusion that the use of performative techniques in teaching professional acting and producing skills, and the utilization of project method in mastering theoretical subjects, provide opportunities for the development of creative skill sets indispensable for all creative professionals working in contemporary theatre, while also helping to correct and develop these skill sets in response to the dynamics, space, time and human dimension of contemporary culture. These techniques foster the relevant action-based skills required for orientation and re-orientation within the sphere of artistic culture, as well as teamwork skills and an ability to pursue constant professional development.

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