



## Performing for Performance Studies

By Isaac VanCuren

I'm in a dilemma. I have only operated within the Performance Studies department for a relatively small amount of time, however I was quick to pick up on the social structures and the governance of the department. For a place that focuses on understanding performative aspects, it seems to be overlooking its own flaws and contradictions. Granted, this may be a fairly new occurrence since I don't have a full grasp on the genealogy, however it doesn't seem likely that these practices are only now arising. I write this thinking of the reason this discourse has crossed my mind and make a direct correlation to the texts I have been reading in class. I figured if I am reading about theory, performances in the past, and global structures of oppression, I should look at the environments I interact with daily and closely examine the performances we are told to do in order to advance our career, our practice, or our continuation with the entity that is NYU: The Home of Performance Studies

In attempting to analyze, realize, and utilize a flow/cycle/or universal concept of enacting, reacting, and interacting, I have been combated against by the institutional apparatus. And apparatus that continues to control and patrols through surveillance, the high luxury of wealth, and reinforced rules of how to behave in a space. The potentiality of existence seems to be smothered by this ironic contradiction. By trying to dismantle this structure I would like to avoid self destruction since I don't want to be dragged towards catastrophe. By opening up the system I hope I am using enough caution in order not to suffer with a poor grade or limitation on my academic career. I understand, or would like to assume that this is almost the same precaution teachers use within the classroom, but at the same time it seems as if a teacher's precaution in acting with power and authority allows for the continuation of harmful dialogue which hinders our ability to interact with the canon.

The individual is a modern invention, a construction of power. It operates on a system of discipline and punishment which has been described by Foucault. Punishment shows the public what is right and what is wrong, which I understand operates through disciplinary powers that rely on observation, judgment, and examination. No punishment from authoritative figures sets the standards for what can be said within the classroom, putting the labor back on the students in order to train other students how to behave. The structure of the student/teacher relation brings up the question of the role of the teacher, particularly with power, the forced interior transformation, and labor left to the students. Instead of evaluating performance, the overall encouragement displaces the power from the teacher placing it back to the student which allows for diversity and multiplicity, but what if those multiplicities are harmful to individuals within the classroom? Do the students seek guidance, or do teachers feel trapped since their feedback or "action" within the classroom will cause an affect which will alter their future, perhaps losing a job or the chance to get tenure? Do they know, assume, or think that any action might cause isolation of an individual from the community dividing the cohort?

With the rise of the social realm<sup>1</sup>, and a need to provide for everyone's needs, is there an escape from feeling the constant need for improvement, is education becoming a consumer good?<sup>2</sup> One where we expect teachers to fall into a role of service and information and any action or showing of a personality and/or political belief will set a distance between the student attempting to form their beliefs? A capitalistic mindset mixed with neo-liberalist structures of post-identity have moved us into the condition of remoteness found in the "subjectivism of

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<sup>1</sup> Arendt points this out and develops the idea in *The Human Condition*

<sup>2</sup> The price of education is a classist structure which only offers up growth to those already in power.

modern philosophy”<sup>3</sup> With globalization on the rise, the individualization and isolation due to our alienation from the earth move us onto a question of who each of us are individually. We have allowed the destruction of the earth, one where ecological catastrophes almost have become background noise to our daily lives. The constant horrendous actions of the current monster of a president become a blur to those observers who find themselves poised freely in space<sup>4</sup>, one who dismisses the limits of the human condition. I find André enacting this mindset on a weekly bases by allowing destructive actions, mainly the continuation of racist, sexist, homophobic, and generally harmful speech within the classroom. The conflict between desiring-machines and body without organs has created an organized mass-society of relation but one that seems to have lost a common world or reality.

The “performance strata”<sup>5</sup> connecting cultures and disciplines has lead to the concept of cultural and organizational efficiency. “What has occurred has been the articulation and rapid extension of performance concepts into formalized systems of discourses and practices, into sociotechnical systems that have themselves become institutionalized first within the United States and then subsequently worldwide”<sup>6</sup>? This rehearsal of performance theory, reenactment, and a concluding final performance, creates a sense of perfect completion tying back to the principle of efficiency with a globalization.<sup>7</sup> As students, or more particularly I, are cranked through the department at rapid speeds, constantly consuming information of performance

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<sup>3</sup> *The Human Condition* by Arendt Pg. 272

<sup>4</sup>The scientific worldview symbolized by Einstein. Explained more in the *Human Condition* Pg. 195 and 273

<sup>5</sup> A concept explained in *Perform or Else* by Jon Mckenzie

<sup>6</sup> *Perform or Else* Jon Mckenzie Pg. 13

<sup>7</sup> *The Postmodern Condition* by Lyotard

theory, the shift from discipline to enactment produces a subject of knowledge out of us. The performative subject formed from fragments mutates with the binary digital system. Leading to this historical phenomenon is what the field of Performance Studies is about. Perhaps due to the relation of social norms and the study of cultural practices we have transformed into enacting theory therefore reinforcing them in an attempt to resist or transform them, or even understand them. Are we just interacting with the canon in an active voice? It feels like the canon is up on a pedestal by the reinforcement of work that created the department.

Its contradictory that students aren't able to deconstruct the racist, homophobic, and sexist actions that Richard Schechner enacted to André's support. The dynamic tendencies and transformation causes group displacement. The cohort is divided between those who can read the room and those who are disillusioned to these concepts. The classroom becomes a workshop where the labor has been left to the students and at what price do we become agents of production. By coming to the aid of particular students, mainly the quick rescue of Jeananna, while leaving Kendra & Arti by themselves, André creates a rhetoric of which students are worth protecting, thus leading to a hierarchy of importance which continues the performance of racist acts within the classroom.

With words, statements, and behaviors constantly being archived in a multimedia communication network, students are able to track other students' ideas/beliefs and I am left to wonder why the department has taken so long to react and why André hasn't been able to read a room, and adjust his performance to due to the circumstances at hand. I am a little shocked that by reading theory that the department, or more particularly André, has decided that is best to stay out of the problem than enact change or guidance to students who find their level of importance

or privilege so high to a point where it continues a narrative of racist structures. More generally and more simplistically, not seeing other people as people. This mindset destroys the existence or growth of a global flow or cycle. By ignoring or not reacting, André is just relying on the problem to solve itself. Yes, as academics we find ourselves observing and analyzing, but a teacher does more than that.

I hope that this paper doesn't come off harmful, more of a reparative reading. Learning how to teach is a process and a true test of interpersonal management. Especially considering that this is a program where the students actively look up to the professors since they have paved the way for the field. However, I have found a number of academics turned teachers within the department who seem uninterested, unwilling, or unable to put in the labor that is required in an educational institution. The lack of labor and heavy reliance on the students to operate the department and class cause me heavy anxiety about my future with the field of Performance Studies. What will next semester bring? Will I have to do the labor which my teacher is paid to do? Will my paranoid thinking again get caught up in the governance of the department? A flaw will always occur, it is our, or it at least I feel like it is my duty to acknowledge and help repair it. Perhaps a white savior complex, but that will be worked out later. The first thing we have to do is be able to acknowledge problems and go from there.