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A “SPECIFIC PERSPECTIVE” FROM A “PERFORMANCE STUDIES
INTERNATIONAL” VOICE.
AN INTERVIEW WITH MAAIKE BLEEKER

*Performance Studies, as an academic discipline, was born in the United States, but nowadays it seems not to be only an American field of research. What does Performance Studies look like from a European perspective? This interview with Maaïke Bleeker, the current President of the P*S*i (Performance Studies International), focuses on what international, intercultural and interdisciplinary actually mean in relation to Performance Studies. Here Maaïke Bleeker stresses the idea of how powerful Performance Studies becomes when it embraces all the different traditions and the specificities that constitute it.*¹⁴³

CC: First of all I would like to ask you to briefly introduce yourself and to talk a little bit about your academic background, your research interest and your work...

MB: Ok! More or less how I ended up where I am now (laughs)... It's a mixed road. When I started going to the University, originally I wanted to go to Art School, and I ended up more or less incidentally in Art History, but I really liked it and so I stayed a long time at the University. I did a program called “Doctorat”... that was before the Bologna process; so I was working at what they now call a Bachelor and a Master together, and I studied, I think, for nine years, and I did Art History and then Theatre Studies and Philosophy, and in the meantime I started making theatre, first as costumer designer and then as a dramaturg. So it was a kind of the two things together, both the theory and the practice. Then when I finished I decided, after Philosophy, that it was time to do a PhD. Also very pragmatically I think that I went through the selection for the money, but having a grant through the PhD meant that I could make theatre for free, and that was for me at that time really important. Then I was in the Amsterdam School for Cultural Analysis for my PhD. That was at the time a very interdisciplinary School. I was the only one working at that time in theatre, performance kind of work. I did spend part of my time in California, with Susan Foster who was my supervisor, and after that I continued a kind of trying to combine theory and practice. I developed a big interest in questions of perception. My work was on visuality in the theatre, and visuality as a cultural specific phenomenon, and embodied phenomenon also very much. And from there I developed a continuing research on questions of perception and the very complicated but interesting connection between perception and cognition in thinking, so more questions on

¹⁴³ This interview with Maaïke Bleeker was taken in May 2012 in New York City.

sensorial experiences, the theatre as a perspective on this kind of questions; and on the other hand in poetics; it also grew from this interest in visuality, the question of politics in visual culture, a performativity, a performance of politics, but also the politics of performance. I have been working on these things for quite a while now. And along that also we are generally still working a lot around dramaturgy from my own experiences, because I find dramaturgy at the moment a very interesting question that connects to a lot of my other research interests, thinking, perceiving, how people make sense, but also what is political, what is critical, what is important to do in the theatre now and why. And generally I am interested in new forms of theatre, a lot of dance, I write quite often about dance as well, and the kind of shifts and overlaps with visual arts and philosophy. I think this is generally where I am now. I feel also that I am running off my projects. I got to PSi also because I am interested in the question of performance studies and of Performance Studies in different cultural contexts, but this is probably something we can talk about later more. But I guess this how I ended up where I am. I did this PhD project, I was on a Post-doc for a couple of years, and then quite soon I was appointed in Utrecht as Head of Theatre Studies there. And that meant that a totally different part of the University became part of my life in terms of administration and much more teaching. So for that moment I thought more strategically about University politics, Performance Studies within that, and connections with other departments. In Utrecht we are very interdisciplinary so that's a very interesting kind of context to think about these things.

CC: Great! Thank you! The next question is right about PSi. You are the President of Performance Studies International, so I was just wondering if you can talk a little bit about your experience also in relation to what you did in Utrecht last year.

MB: Yeah! I guess the first thing was my surprise to end up in a way as being a President of something at all, but also maybe of Performance Studies, because, as I explained before, Performance Studies as a discipline was not part of my background, but it also had to do with the Dutch situation where Performance Studies doesn't exist separated from Theatre Studies. And a lot of what happens maybe in other places under Performance Studies does happen in the other places where I was part of Theatre Studies, Art History, Cultural Analysis like things. And PSi... I encountered PSi through a conference I went earlier in Singapore. I was going there just because of curiosity. At that time my department in Amsterdam was more connected to the International Federation for Theatre Research. So I had been going there, but I was very curious about PSi and I was very very much impressed by the conference then.

It was a very interesting conference in the way that it was in a such different cultural context, and very much asking the questions also about Performance Studies in different parts of the world. I was also much taken by the interest in a non-hierarchical type of conference: in that sense the dynamics of Performance Studies and the interaction between theory and practice in very different ways; the interdisciplinary outlook of Performance Studies also outside the arts. So that was a moment that I got curious and then I attended the next conference because I was invited to go there to get with two artists that I had been talking about in Singapore. So it was a very interesting way of entwining with the artists. And then things went quite fast. I remained interested in the conference and I was invited to become a member of the board and also, at some point, the then President started to inform whether I would be interested in organizing a conference, which was a big thing. But then I was just appointed in Utrecht and I thought: “Actually it makes sense to do that. We have a wonderful context to do it; it will be great to collaborate within my department in doing something like that.” I was more and more feeling connected to what I saw happening in PSi: this all question of Performance Studies as something that is not unitarian but something very different in different places of the world. I find it a very important question at the moment in the context of globalization but also in the context of awareness that many practices are performative and meaning itself is performative. But also this performativity means that it is loco, and it is important to understand how to negotiate this connection between the loco and the global, how to respect the differences but also to connect. That was when I got more and more involved and then, at some points, it apparently mixed... and I was informed I would have been nominated as President, and I thought: “Yeah! Actually this is an organization that I would like to do that for”. Because it felt for me, and it still feels for me like an organization that has some important and very intriguing steps to make this movement and that made a very interesting challenge to do that. And it has also maybe to do with my background. That would be the challenge of the organization having of course a very strong connection to its origins in the United States, but as the organization having moved away from that, not in the sense of opposing the situation in the United States but becoming more diverse. At the moment the board has only four members who are affiliated to an American University on twenty-three members of the board. So that’s a huge shift away to the inclusion of other parts of the world. I think the dominance now is continental Europe, becoming a mix of continental Europe and UK. I think this is very significant of this moment and the question of how to move also beyond that to include much more and then again also other parts of the world. And for me the idea of representing Performance Studies for the first time as somebody not from the US/UK/Australian

connection and as a not an English native speaker. And that's of course also a big issue in an international organization. This complex relationship to English, that for me has always been the language that allowed me to communicate with people from all over the world, and that has something very positive, but it also causes power differences; and I am very much aware of being not born into English myself.

CC: Thanks! There is something you have just said that was a kind of suggesting me something else. You were talking about people who are part of the board, and so this kind of no balance in a certain way between people from US and people who are not from US. So I would like to ask you which are according to you the main differences in terms of issues between PS people from Europe and PS people from US, in your experience.

MB: I find it very hard to answer. I am not sure if there are main differences, and I also think that US are not one thing. But I think that one difference that happens is that, since the US is such a big country and Performance Studies is established as a discipline within the University, it is very easy on one hand to keep looking at Performance Studies as a US phenomenon, as long as you are within the United States. There is also maybe a very important interest because of this having been institutionalized as a discipline, which of course brings a lot of department politics. This is very different from Performance Studies in some other places in the world, where it does not exist as such an institution. So that works differently. But I think for me the main surprise sometimes is that, although I don't think it is often consciously done, but the automatic identification of Performance Studies with PSi or viceversa, or with Performance Studies as an international phenomenon within the United States... I am not so sure if it is so international within the United States. Sometimes it seems a little bit a lack of awareness of the diversity of Performance Studies outside and the specificity of Performance Studies within the US. It reminds a little bit what Peggy Phelan calls *Unmarked*. There is not specificity; specificity exists only in the rest of the world. That looks differently if you are not from the US.

CC: How was for you introducing this field through a conference in a country where, as you have just said, Performance Studies doesn't really exist as an academic field? And I am thinking about what is happening in other countries: for instance what they have done in some countries through the PSi clusters, like in Greece, or in Portugal or even in Italy. These are all countries where Performance Studies doesn't really exist as an academic field. So I was thinking about your own experience also in terms of the feedback you got from people in your country.

MB: I don't think that was very complicated in a way, in the sense that a lot of that kind of research exists, it's just not called Performance Studies and it happens in other places, it happens partly in Theatre Studies, partly in Media Studies, in Gender Studies, and in many other fields actually. Right now there is a quite strong tradition of interdisciplinary research anyway in the Netherlands, not everywhere of course. And in a way many of the issues that are Performance Studies are also very much part of Theatre Studies in the Netherlands, and there is not that much of distinction and maybe that is also connected to the field of theatre and performance. We don't have so much of strong opposition there and maybe the opposition is getting stronger with becoming more conservative. But we have a history since the early 70s in the Netherlands in terms of state support and discourse; also a very strong interest in experimental work and in work that crosses disciplinary boundaries. It used to be not such a strong text based tradition in the Netherlands for example. So maybe most of the oppositions that were important one upon a time to distinguish Performance Studies from Theatre Studies do not make so much sense, and a lot of work that we see, you probably don't call it theatre somewhere else, but it is theatre in a Dutch context. We teach theatre and dance combined in a program, because there is so much in common in the practice that we don't have really two separate programs at the University. In practical training yes, the dancer training is different than the training for actors, but ever there, they are so many interdisciplinary fields. These distinctions work differently. I did not have the feeling that it was difficult to introduce the conference of Performance Studies in a Dutch context. Also the Festival that was part of the conference, that kind of work, it could have been called performance festival but it is called theatre festival. So in the Netherlands I usually say that Performance is the word we use to describe that, that and that. I think of the Dutch context that it was interesting to see how many people from different disciplines were interested in coming together in Utrecht to talk about these issues and to feel supported in an international community, because a lot of this work happens interdisciplinary and then sometime when you feel a bit alienated in your department, conferences like PSi is a moment when you notice that there is a lot of people doing similar things, and that can be helpful!

CC: Thanks! This is very helpful for me, because one of my main issues is trying to understand if, what and how Performance Studies can give something new to its own object of analysis. Most of the scholars, most of the times, come from different fields, Theatre Studies, Anthropology, and so on and so forth. And then they become part of this specific field in a certain way, which is Performance Studies. So I am still

wondering what is the peculiarity of Performance Studies, in terms of what Performance Studies can give which is new to the object of analysis. For example, you were saying that as theatre scholars we are used to analyze our object of analysis in a kind of interdisciplinary way, so my question is: what do you think it is new in the Performance Studies perspective? Is there something so peculiar that we cannot find in other approaches?

MB: I do not think that Performance Studies has one methodology or one approach, but I do think that there is something which is quite characteristic of the various ways of working that happen under this label of Performance Studies. And when it is for example about what it is that it has to offer to the analysis of theatrical arts and performing arts, I think there, in Netherlands now we have to have Performance Studies next to Theatre Studies, but somehow the idea has got incorporated as part of what Theatre Studies does. But it is a different approach that it represents, in a sense that Theatre Studies has a tradition of dealing with its object, these theories of semiotics, of drama, theories that are part of a history of a specific artform, whereas Performance Studies brings in a perspective that does not necessary bring in this all history, but it looks a bit from the perspective of how it is performative, with all these theories of Austin and Butler and Derrida on performativity; but also the connections with the anthropological approach of ritual, of cultural performances. I think in that sense it approaches these artforms from a different perspective, and I believe that is one way that is very refreshing and it focuses on different elements of performances; it does not necessary explain a performance in terms of this all history of how people have been thinking about theatre and what now performance is doing with it, or in relation to traditions of dramaturgical structures or that kind of things. This approach makes possible that you can look at theatre and other phenomena in similar ways. The wonderful thing about approaches from performance, performativity and Performance Studies is also that we can look at many other things, not only at performing arts in that way, and start to see connections that would remain invisible if you only look at performing arts or only from a performing arts perspective. So I think there is an interesting possibility for the field and a challenge also to expand on these possibilities, to, again, not get stuck in very specific topics or focused areas. For long time in Performance Studies the all notion of identity has been very dominant. That is something that, for example, from my Dutch-European perspective, is not a very prominent one, whereas in how I have been trained and in the connection with philosophy and in current questions about perception and cognition, very different aspects of performance and performativity are now very interesting. In Utrecht we did this prelude panel with questions of technology where Jon Mckenzie has such a

wonderful work, or with the performance of perception, or the question of the involvement of mathematic and performance, which is a slightly different approach of what can be studied from Performance Studies, and they are more cultural anthropology context, which has been quite dominant for quite a while.

CC: Thanks! You were just saying that there is not a specific kind of methodology in terms of Performance Studies. We always talk about a post-disciplinary or trans-disciplinary or inter-disciplinary field for Performance Studies, but, do you think it is possible to identify some methodologies within the field, even if diverse methodologies?

MB: I think that is at the moment the big question. When I say that Performance Studies is not one thing that is my conviction when we look at Performance Studies as something that exists in different places in different ways, and even in one place it can exist in different ways. But it is not to deny that some approaches to Performance Studies are institutionalized and very strongly. And I think that part of thinking through this international character of Performance Studies is also aware of that. There are some methodologies and approaches that are more equal than others. I guess it is one of the questions at the moment to keep it open and to be aware that some more institutionalized forms of Performance Studies are only one possible form of Performance Studies, and that opening up to an international field means not only to open up to spread your own world or to include objects from all over the world, but it is really to acknowledge that there are different approaches to what Performance Studies is, and that it is not owned by one place.

CC: .. one way of thinking about it...

MB: Yeah! One way of thinking...

CC: This can be a way we could use to define the academic field in itself. Every time we try to understand what this field is about, we also try to define it. But we are all aware that Performance Studies in itself does not like to be labeled, although, for some aspects, it is a field and it is institutionalized. Do you think that what we have just talked about, which is the impossibility of fully defining the field of Performance Studies, is part of its identity?

MB: Actually no, because I think that the state of impossibility is also a way of avoiding it, and it tends to become a kind of mythology. I think that really

acknowledging differences will require that we define various Performance Studies and the specificity of each of them, and also how they are specific. This goes back to this point of *Unmarked*. A wonderful work has been done by Jon McKenzie in his *Perform or Else* to show the cultural specificity of Performance Studies as emerged in the United States. It is stronger if we can say “Ok! This kind of Performance Studies has to do with this cultural context, because that allows others to be different”. I think it is very important to look at the specificity, and then to look at what else is going on that might be called Performance Studies, which Jon McKenzie and others did in this wonderful book *Contesting Performance*. They show that there are many traditions, and I think that there is a lot of work to be done there. We can look at the research going on in different places, and at how in different places different genealogies of performance research developed, and how they make sense in a particular loco context, and how we can benefit from that if we think about that more globally. I think specificity is really important.

CC: This is about the field and the methodologies in the field, but then there is something which is about the object of the field itself, performance. So another big issue is just defining what performance might be. How would you define performance?

MB: I don't know (laugh). This is like saying that I don't know what I am talking or writing about! I know what I am talking and writing about, but this is, of course, first of all, a language issue. Performance has a definition in English. Performance is not translatable in Dutch and that happens with many other languages as well, or, if it is translatable, it is not necessarily translatable in a similar way in opposition to, for example, theatre. So this understanding already exists within a language, which means that we will constantly be shifting in different languages. But I also think that to work with a concept is not necessarily to have a very strict definition. I mean, for some concepts that you work with, you need a very strict definition, because you want to do things with them that require strict definitions; but you can also look at performance in the context of Performance Studies as a kind of searchlight. It highlights to look through the lens of performance at objects, at a field of potential objects; it highlights different elements of this object, than looking at them as theatre, or looking at them as whatever. In that sense I like that idea of a concept as a searchlight, because then your research is doing both things: it defines the concept as performance to look at the field and then the field also tells you back what performance can be, because if you look at something in a certain way then you realize that that thing actually could also be a performance, or could be looked at as a

performance. I think that after great thinkers like Derrida we are careful with the assumption that we could ever fix the meaning of other concepts. We are very much aware of how they are all connected and of how we try to negotiate a field of meanings, how there is always interest involved, politics. For some reasons at some point it can be very useful to define something as performance, just to make something happen that you find important to happen. It can be a very critical concept because it can oppose others who say something about something that you disagree with, So, it is a tool, I think.

CC: It is an object and a methodology at the same time.

MB: Yeah! True! We cannot distinguish the method and the object, because the method will define the object and the object will define the method. They are always entwined. The challenge is to make them not entwined in a way that everything is already fixed before, but in a way that the object needs to be able to talk back and challenge the theory, because otherwise you are just putting things into theoretical categories. But as long as there can be a kind of back and forth then it makes sense to look at them as entwined.

CC: Thank you! There was something you were saying at the beginning that is about the intercultural identity of Performance Studies. Do you think that Performance Studies, by trying to be so intercultural, is really able to avoid an only western point of view?

MB: Very good question, and I think, indeed, one of the big questions for Performance Studies at the moment... the intercultural and the international. It's clear that Performance Studies from the beginning, as it developed, had a great interest in other cultures. I am not so sure how much space there is for real differences. I think that is the bigger question. It's clear that Performance Studies has been very fascinated by talking about objects from other cultures or thinking about performances from other cultures, but the real question is a question about the power relationship and the perspective in these approaches. And that I think is the big question at the moment, and that comes back to what we were talking about before: the fact that there might be different Performance Studies. That would be about acknowledging the perspective in Performance Studies as it exists and the possibilities that there are other perspectives and that there is not one way of uniting them into one overall kind of happy family, but it might be about negotiating differences much more; that is a crucial question at the moment. My address in

Utrecht, when I start as a President (of PSi) was that we need to start to think about Performance Studies as a western invention, because otherwise we never get acknowledged that that is where it comes from. The only way to make the situation of *Unmarked* go away is to mark, is to acknowledge that that is how it came into being as an invention of the West, with a very beautiful intention and with a lot of good things. But if we really want to give others the possibility of thought back we also need first to be able to dare to say that we are self-specific and that the intercultural is not only about reaching out and finding beautiful things there, but also being confronted with your own specificity. I think that is a challenge at the moment.

CC: You have mentioned several times *Unmarked* which is a famous book written by Peggy Phelan. There is a specific chapter in that book that is about the Ontology of Performance, where she highlines the idea that the ontology of performance lies in its disappearing in a certain way. How do you relate, as a scholar, to this idea of dealing with performance as something which disappears?

MB: Well, the fact the object disappears and you still have to deal with it as a scholar, that also goes for history. We were all not present at the French Revolution and still that seems not to be a problem writing about it. That's much broader and of course in the context of trying to think about the ontology of performance it is absolutely an important remark, but I am not sure if that means that we cannot write about it. Sometimes it is taken as an apology that we cannot write about it. There is a very strong ideology that says that it is about presence, but this is not necessarily the same as the essence of the object. We can very well study performance in very similar ways we study history, because it is an event from a moment in the past, and there are maybe some documents left and we start writing about that. And maybe some can write from having been present there, in other cases we are not personally present there but maybe we have testimonies of what happened there, and we can go to the place where it happened. The difference is not so much essentially in the object but in the ideology that has been very strong in Performance Studies. The idea that performance is about presence is a very specific idea about performance, but I do not think it is the only necessarily one. And if, indeed, you say that performance is about presence then of course automatically you start lamenting the fact that it's basically never really present, because it is already always disappearing. But you can look at it as something which is not always necessarily present, that is the way that many people have looked over the ages to performances; they have been looking in very very different ways, and not in the lost of presence or in the idea of a constant disappearance. So I think that is a specific understanding of performance that works

through in certain approaches of Performances Studies. That is one way of approaching, but then I think it is very important to be culturally specific because this is not necessarily shared. The idea of performativity implies the concept that things are performative in the sense that they are produced in the doing, or that they get their meaning through practices instead of having that kind of internally essential there. Also that is not necessarily about disappearing. For me it is very much about the creative force of performance actually, or even the disciplinary force of performance. Performance and performativity are constantly producing what we think is the reality as given, but in fact that's the all gender argument of course of Butler, elaborated by others in their fields after her. And Butler is also very clear about the normativity of performance and performativity. How we can look at all kinds of practices in life as actually producing what we think is simply there. So my approach would be more on that side.

CC: I would like to ask you something which is about historiography in the field, which is not the historiography of the field, but it is more about the historiographic approach that each Performance Studies scholar has in relation to its own object of analysis. In one of the most recent issues of TDR there is a contribution coming from Marco De Marinis in which, among the other things, he also addresses the idea that Performance Studies does not really have an historiographic approach to its object of analysis...

MB: I think he must be responding to a specific tradition of Performance Studies when he observes that. Because I do not think it is inherent to an approach that one could call performance research that has no attention for historiography of the object. But I agree that there are many examples of concrete Performance Studies work where this is absent, but that is not a matter of the approach not allowing it. But I agree that certain people who are working in the context of Performance Studies or maybe certain traditions within Performance Studies have very little attention for that. That was also something that occurred to me coming to Performance Studies and being initiated in thinking about performance and performativity through Cultural Analysis. For me the time in school in Cultural Analysis was the time when I learnt most about performativity and performance as an approach to many different phenomena, although it wasn't a training in Performance Studies. There was always an historiographic approach as part of the reflection there, and I agree that I am sometimes surprised. I guess it is somehow in a very integrated way related to what you were mentioning before, that within certain traditions of Performance Studies

there is this strong focus on presence, which on a way focuses so much on this overwhelming here and now.