I Can, I Can't, Who Cares?

Jan Verwoert

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From a personally felt necessity, Jan Verwoert calls on artists to search for a new form of ethics in this pamphlet-like text. An ethics that makes it possible to adopt a different position concerning the current demand to perform that characterizes today's culture. Acknowledging that you care about something makes it easier to make conscious decisions about whether or not you want to participate.

How can we address the current changes in our societies and lives? Some have said that we have come to inhabit the post-industrial condition. But what could that mean? One thing seems to be sure: after the disappearance of factory work from the lives of most people in the Western world, we have entered into a culture where we no longer just work, we perform. We need to perform because to do so is what is asked of us. If we choose to make our living on the basis of doing what we want to do, we need to get our act together, we need to get things done, everywhere and at any time. Are you ready? I ask you and I am sure that you will be as ready as you will ever be to perform, do things and go places.

Who are we? This group is ever expanding. It is us, the creative types who have created jobs for ourselves by exploring and exploiting our talents to perform small artistic and intellectual miracles. It is us, the socially engaged who create communal spaces for others and ourselves by performing the roles of interlocutors in and facilitators or instigators of processes of social exchange. When we perform we create concepts and ideas as well as social bonds and forms of communication and communality. Thereby we create the values that our society is supposed to be based on today. The Deutsche Bank currently sums up its company philosophy in a simple slogan (formulated in a symptomatically a-grammatical international English): *A Passion to Perform* (you have a passion *for* something but never *to* realize an end through actions, the wisdom of grammar). So which side of the barricades are we on then? Where do the barricades stand today, anyway? We are the avant-garde, but we are also the job slaves. We serve the customers who consume the communication and sociability that we produce. We work in the kitchens and call centres of the newly opened restaurants and companies of the prospectively burgeoning new urban centres of the service society. To offer our services we are willing to travel. Being mobile is part of our performance. So we travel, we go west to work, we go north to work, we are all around, we fix the minds, houses and cars of those who stay in their offices. What do we feel about ourselves and our lives? Are we happy? Are we in charge? What pain and what pleasure are we experiencing in the lives we have created for ourselves?

I Can't

What would it mean to put up resistance against a social order in which performativity has become a growing demand, if not the norm? What would it mean to resist the need to perform? Is 'resistance' even a concept that would be useful to evoke in this context? After all, the forms of resistance we know are in fact usually dramatic performances themselves. Or maybe we should consider other, more subtle forms of not performing, of staging, as the Slovakian conceptual artist Julius Koller called them, 'anti-happenings'. What silent but effective forms of unwillingness, noncompliance, uncooperativeness, reluctance or non-alignment do we find in contemporary culture when it comes to inventing ways to not perform how and when you are asked to perform?

Can we ever embrace these forms of non-performance in art and thinking as forms of art and thinking? Or will we always find ourselves on the other side of the barricade, with the performers and those who want to get things done and get enraged by people who stand in their way by being slow, sluggish and uncooperative? After all, is not uncooperativeness the revenge uncreative people take on the society of the creative by stubbornly stopping it in its tracks? Have you ever found yourself screaming (or wanting to scream) at an uncooperative clerk behind a counter: 'I haven't got time for this' – only to realize that, yes, he has time for this, an entire lifetime dedicated to the project of stopping other people from getting things done? These people work hard to protect society from change by inventing ever new subtle ways to stop those in their tracks who want to revolutionize it. Are they the enemy? Or are they today maybe the strongest allies you can find if you want to put up defences against a culture of compulsive performativity?

But does it have to take other people to make you stop performing? When and how do you give up on the demand and need to perform? What could make you utter the magic words 'I can't'? Does it take a breakdown to stop you? Do the words 'I can't' already imply the acknowledgment of a breakdown, a failure to perform, a failure that would not be justifiable if your body didn't authenticate your inability by physically stopping you? How could we restore dignity to the 'I can't'? What ways of living and acting out the 'I can't' do we find in art and music? Was that not what Punk, for instance, was all about? To transgress your (musical) capacities by rigorously embracing your incapacities? To rise above demands by frustrating all expectations? When the Sex Pistols were on one of their last gigs, when it was practically all over already and the band simply could no longer get their act together, Johnny Rotten turned to the audience and asked: 'Do you ever feel you have been cheated?' Would that be a question to rephrase today? If so, how? There are ways of confronting people with the 'I can't' that put it right in their face. But maybe there are also other means of making the 'I can't' part of a work, of putting it to work, means that art and poetry have always used, namely by creating moments where meaning remains latent. To embrace latency goes against the grain of the logic of compulsive performativity because it is all about leaving things unsaid, unshown, unrevealed, it is about refraining from actualizing and thereby exhausting all your potentials in the moment of your performance. We have to re-think and learn to re-experience the beauty of latency.

What Is the Time?

Performance is all about the right timing. A comedian with a bad sense of timing is not funny, a musician useless. Career opportunities, we are told, are all about being in the right place at the right time. Finding a lover to love may also be. Is there a right time for love? Stressed out, overworked couples are advised these days to reserve 'quality time' for each other to prevent their relationship from losing its substance. What is quality time? 'Is it a good time for you to talk?' people ask when they reach you on your mobile. When is a good time to talk? We live and work in economies based on the concept of 'just in-time-production' and 'just in time' usually means things have to be ready in no time at all, urgency is the norm. 'I haven't got time for this!' the just-in-time producer will shout at you when you are not on time and make him wait.

To be in synch with the timing of just-in-time production you have to be ready to perform all the time. This is the question you must be prepared to answer positively: Are you ready? Always. Ready when you are. As ready as I will ever be. Always up for it. Stay on the scene. Porn is pure performance. Impotence is out of the question. 'Get on the fucking block and fuck!' is the formula for getting things done. Frances Stark recently quoted it to me when we talked about the culture of performance. She got the sentence from Henry Miller and included it in one of her collages.

What happens when there is a lapse of time, when time is out of joint? Are we not living in times now when time is always radically disjointed as the 'developed' countries of the first world push ahead into a science-fiction economy of dematerialized labour and virtual capital? While at the same time pushing the 'developing' countries centuries back in time by outsourcing work to them and thereby also imposing working conditions on them that basically date back to the days of early industrialization? Sometimes the time gap doesn't even have to span centuries, it might be just years, as in some of the countries of the former Eastern Bloc (like Poland for instance) are rapidly catching up to the speed of advanced capitalism, but still not fast enough. Migrant workers bridge this gap in time. They travel ahead in time to work in the fast cities of the West and North. Yet they face the risk of any time traveller as they lose touch with the time that passes while they are away. Will they ever find their way back into their time or learn to inhabit the new time of the other country? How many time zones can you inhabit? Who is to set the clock and make the pace according to which all others are measuring their progress? 'Que hora son en Washington?' sings Manu Chao and it may very well be the crucial political question of this moment.

I Can

But would to embrace the 'I can't' mean to vilify the 'I can'? Why would we ever want to do that? After all , the joy of art, writing and performing freely lies in the realization that you can, a sense of empowerment through creativity that in ecstatic moments of creative performance can flood your body with the force of an adrenaline rush. And then living out the 'I can' is not just a cheap thrill. To face up to your own potential might be one of the most challenging tasks of your life if not even your responsibility. Giorgio Agamben speaks about the pleasure and terror of the 'I can' in this way. He refers to an account by the Russian poet Anna Akhmatova who describes how it came about that she became a writer. Standing outside a Leningrad prison in 1930 where her son was a political prisoner, another woman whose son was also imprisoned, asked her: Can you write about this? She found that she had to respond that yes, indeed she could and in this moment found herself both empowered and indebted.

Today it seems most crucial to really understand this link between the empowerment and the debt at the heart of the experience of creative performance. In what way are we always already indebted to others when we perform? In what way is it precisely this indebtedness

to others that enables us to perform in the first place? Could an ethics of a different type of performance – one that acknowledges the debt to the other instead of overruling it hectically to improve the efficacy of performance – be developed on the basis of this understanding? How could we perform differently? Freely? In his film *Teorema* Pasolini draws up a scenario of unleashed performativity. A factory owner hands over the factory to the workers. His obligations to work have thereby come to an end. A young man arrives at the villa of the factory owner, he has no personality or features except for the fact that he is a charming lover. He sleeps with all of the members of the family and leaves again. Disconnected from work and freed by love, all of the family members start to perform: The son acknowledges he is gay and becomes a painter. The daughter decides to never move nor speak again. The mother cruises the streets and sleeps with strangers. The housemaid decides to not commit suicide, instead she becomes a saint, starts to levitate and cure sick children. The factory owner himself decides to take his clothes off in the main train station and walk off into a nearby volcano. None of these actions are commented upon and they are presented as all having the same value as they are equally possible and the possibility of each of these performances does not equalize or relativize the possibility of any other. Pasolini thus describes a situation where the end of work and the arrival of love create the possibility for a radical coexistence and co-presence of liberated performances that are not forced under the yoke of any single dominant imperative to perform in a particular way. How could we create and inhabit such a condition of undisciplined performativity?

Who Cares?

To recognize the indebtedness to the other as that which empowers performance also means to acknowledge the importance of care. You perform because you care. When you care for someone or something this care enables you to act because you feel that you must act, not least because when you really care to not act is out of the question. In conversation Annika Eriksson recently summed this point up by saying that, as a mother, when your child is in need of you 'there is no no'. You have to be able to act and react and you will find that 'you can' even if you thought you couldn't. Paradoxically though, the 'I care' can generate the 'I can', but it can also radically delimit it. Because when you care for yourself and others, this obligation might in fact force you to turn down offers to work and perform for others, in other places, on other occasions. When the need to take care of your friends, family, children or lover comes between you and the demand to perform, to profess the 'I can't' (work now, come to the event . . .) may then be the only justified way to show that you care. Likewise, the recognition that you are exhausting yourself and need to take care of yourself can constitute a reason to turn down an offer to perform and utter the 'I can't'. So both the 'I can' and the 'I can't' may originate from the 'I care'. The 'I care' is the question of welfare. In the historical moment of the dismantling of the welfare state this is a pressing question. In a talk Jimmy Durham cited two people he had met in Italy as saying: 'We are liberated. What we need now is a better life.' Maybe this is indeed the question: How do we want to deal with the potential of living life caring for yourself and others by negotiating the freedom and demands of the 'I can' and 'I can't' in a way that would make another form, another ethics, another attitude to creative and social performance possible?

Jan Verwoert is a critic and writer on contemporary art and cultural theory. He is a contributing editor of *Frieze* and his writing has appeared in different journals, anthologies and monographs. He is the author of the essay collection Cookie! (Sternberg Press / Piet Zwart Institute, 2014), *Animal Spirits –Fables in the Parlance of Our Time* (together with Michael Stevenson) (Christoph Keller Editions, JRP-Ringier, 2013), the essay collection *Tell Me What You Want What You Really Really Want* (Sternberg Press / Piet Zwart Institute, 2010) and *Bas Jan Ader: In Search of the Miraculous* (MIT Press / Afterall Books, 2006). He teaches at the Oslo National Academy of the Arts, the Piet Zwart Institute and the de Appel Curatorial Programme.

Tags

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