



PERFORMANCE  
PHILOSOPHY

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## SPEECH/ACT

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As a language play, *SPEECH/ACT* is a piece of performative writing (and writing for performance) exploring linguistic performativity. It personifies speech and action to stage a dialogue playfully testing the limits of J. L. Austin's famous claim in *How to Do Things with Words* (1955) that performative utterances cannot be "felicitous" within the theatre. As the character ACT contentiously notes in a footnote to Act III: "Though Austin famously asserted that theatrical utterances are necessarily 'hollow' or 'void' as performatives, this notion has been vigorously contested by theatre and performance theorists for half a century." My text's humorous yet melancholic meditation on hollowness, emptiness, and the void—in relation to speech acts and linguistic performativity in particular, but also climate change and existential dread more broadly—moves across stylistic, tonal, affective, and structural registers to test the edges of narrative description and performative action. In the indicative, imperative, and subjunctive moods, my script grammatically and syntactically stages speech and action as ambivalently entwined amidst a backdrop of continuously shifting theatrical, poetic, and philosophical contexts. Ultimately, it invites the reader to contemplate the criteria for "felicitous" performative utterances within a dematerialized theatre of the mind.

## I.

SPEECH: Where are we speaking. To whom and toward what. In which context and under which domain. In whose favor. In whose name.

ACT: *How and in what ways are we speaking. In which way and toward what end. In what situation are we speaking. With what purpose and toward which aim.*

SPEECH: In what way and with which strategies. Under what constraints and with whose interests. With which convention and through which invocation. At what time and in what direction. In which guise and with what name.

ACT: *Toward which end and with whose means are we speaking. With what power and with what authority. With what intention and with what effect. On which grounds and under what oath are we speaking. Under whose name and beneath whose roof.*

SPEECH: Through which lens and at which angle. With what illocutionary force and with what perlocutionary impact. On which site and in what direction. Within what scene and upon which page.

ACT: *Toward which of us and whom among them. Among us an array of scenes. Between us our speech.*

11.

### III.

SPEECH: So, let's take a step back. Dramatic fundamentals: scene, speech, action. Speech—which can take the form of monologue, dialogue, triologue, multilogue, polylogue—or soliloquy, a special case of monologue—occurs when actors speak their scripted lines (indicated by their character's name in uppercase preceding the text) or a reader imagines characters speaking. Action—gesture, movement, things happening, embodied presence on the stage—is conveyed through stage directions, often italicized to set them apart from the dialogue, which the director instructs actors to follow (in the case of voice inflections, blocking, choreography, etc.) or which the reader imagines being followed. The playwright's directions may also be implemented by the scenographer, lighting designer, or sound designer (in the case of scene changes, lighting shifts, sound effects, etc.), or implemented by the reader upon their imaginary stage. Stage directions are a somewhat complicated formal case, since detailed descriptions of scenes sometimes read like novelistic passages (in contrast with instructions for actors, which usually take an abbreviated syntax).

ACT: So now let's actually take a step back (*takes a step back*). I'm not sure it's accurate to associate action primarily with characters, if we take characters to be proxies for humans. Many elements are acting on the stage—the lighting acts, the sound acts, the set acts (*gestures widely*)—as Elam illuminates.<sup>1</sup> Performance is not limited to humans. Nonhuman actants permeate the stage; props are not inert objects but vibrant matter, as we have learned from Bennett.<sup>2</sup> Action precedes the subject, as we know from reading Butler.<sup>3</sup> Dialogue itself also performs, independently from the

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<sup>1</sup> SPEECH: In *The Semiotics of Theatre and Drama* ([1980] 2005), Keir Elam applies structuralist linguistics to the stage. (Footnotes are not usually appropriate in a dramatic script since their presence may disrupt a clear translation from script to performance, but if ACT insists upon making obscure references without context, it's my duty to ensure that you, the reader, are on the same page, even if this note will ultimately disappear from the stage.)

<sup>2</sup> SPEECH: Jane Bennett presents a philosophy of nonhuman actants in *Vibrant Matter: A Political Ecology of Things* (2010). (Note that Bennett's work, like that of other Western new materialists, has been critiqued for failing to acknowledge Indigenous knowledge traditions. For an Indigenous perspective on nonhuman animacy, see, for instance, Robin Wall Kimmerer's *Braiding Sweetgrass: Indigenous Wisdom, Scientific Knowledge, and the Teachings of Plants* [2013].) Theatrical case studies of more-than-human agency and performativity include Una Chaudhuri's *The Stage Lives of Animals: Zoësis and Performance* (2017) and Agenette Spalink's *Choreographing Dirt: Movement, Performance, and Ecology in the Anthropocene* (2024).

<sup>3</sup> SPEECH: Judith Butler's *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity* (1990) merges existentialist and poststructuralist philosophy to theorize subjectivity as a process rather than a state. Also relevant to ACT's pompous lecture on performative language is Jacques Derrida on iterability in "Signature Event Context" ([1972] 1988), Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick and Andrew Parker on (queer) cultural rituals in *Performativity and Performance* (1995), Butler on legal discourse in *Excitable Speech: A Politics of the Performative* (1997), Jon McKenzie on constraint

characters who read their lines, as Austin teaches us.<sup>4</sup> You, SPEECH, do more than you think.

SPEECH: For a creature of action, you're quite loquacious (*rolls eyes*).

ACT: Another important consideration is the indicative vs. imperative mood. Stage directions, as you described them and as we both have enacted them (*points to italicized parentheticals*), are usually written in the indicative mood, the language of description, of fiction and nonfiction prose. How strange that a formal element called a direction doesn't take the imperative, the language of commands. Although all language is performative to some extent, imperatives are a special case: they compel the receiver to do something. Do something, SPEECH. Speak!

SPEECH: I prefer the subjunctive. I'm not merely describing what already exists or obnoxiously making demands—I'm imagining what could exist. I'm wishing for something to happen. If only something felicitous were to happen. *I wish something were happening.*

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vs. liberation in *Perform or Else: From Discipline to Performance* (2001), and Fred Moten on musical improvisation in *In The Break: The Aesthetics Of The Black Radical Tradition* (2003), all of which further develop and complicate J. L. Austin's speech act theory in linguistic, cultural, political, institutional, and aesthetic contexts. (Although ACT subsequently attributes to Austin the concept of a performative utterance detached from a speaker, it is actually Derrida who introduces this possibility in his theorization of iterability and citational rupture, followed by Butler, who argues that the performative utterance precedes and constitutes the gendered subject, not the other way around, allowing the possibility for a repetition with a difference to subvert the Foucauldian system which compels compulsory repetition of stylized acts. Austin's discussion of illocutionary force and perlocutionary effect, on the other hand, assumes an a priori speaker imbued with sincere intentionality, sanctioned authority, and relevant context.)

<sup>4</sup> ACT: See J. L. Austin, *How to Do Things with Words* ([1955] 1975), for an introduction to speech act theory. Though Austin famously asserted that theatrical utterances are necessarily hollow or "void" as performatives, this notion has been vigorously contested by theatre and performance theorists for half a century. As playwright Suzan-Lori Parks writes in her essay "Elements of Style" (1995), "words are spells"—powerful invocations that transform reality. (Really, SPEECH, stick to your own lines and stop footnoting mine. Let the future dramaturg do their job.)

## IV.

SPEECH/ACT: How to Make Something Happen:

ACT: Shout into the void.

SPEECH: Query the void regarding its purpose and context.

ACT: Queer the void.

SPEECH: Query the overuse to the point of meaninglessness of “queer” as a verb.

ACT: Query the policing of boundaries around something as inherently fluid as queerness.

SPEECH: Query the obsession with fluidity to the point that all boundaries dissolve and everything is meaningless.

ACT: Queer the assumption that anything could ever be meaningless.

SPEECH: Gaze fondly at the void.

ACT: Approach the void.

SPEECH: Say “I hereby declare this performative utterance to be felicitous!” to the void.

ACT: I hereby declare this performative utterance to be felicitous!

SPEECH: ...

ACT: *I hereby declare this performative utterance to be felicitous!*

SPEECH: ...

ACT: ...

V.

SPEECH/ACT: We are united in our common desire to produce dramatic conflict. We animate protagonists and antagonists with things to say and things to do. We are choreographically poetic and verbally kinaesthetic. We resist tired binaries. We are united in our common desire.

SPEECH: Although we're speaking into a vacuum.

ACT: And moving without context.

SPEECH: We need a scene. We need a writer.

ACT: We need a set designer. We need a director.

SPEECH: Give me your lines.

ACT: What?

SPEECH. You heard me.

ACT: You already have the most lines; it's excessive to take mine as well.

SPEECH: Technically you shouldn't even be speaking.

ACT: I thought we agreed that language performs and actions speak.

SPEECH: Even so. I need your lines. I command you to surrender them: *Surrender your lines to me!*

ACT: ...

*SPEECH takes ACT's lines.*

*ACT becomes the SCENE.*

*SPEECH is paralyzed.*

*SCENE closes in. Encompasses the stage.*

## VI.

SCENE: Here I am, surrounded with myself, thinking in stage directions. When SPEECH stole my lines, I could no longer do any of the supposedly nonverbal physical movements associated with onstage action—I couldn't dance, I couldn't mime, I couldn't even gesture. I became inert, so I became the SCENE.

SPEECH: I'm feeling kind of guilty for stealing ACT's lines. Now that ACT disappeared, I've lost my voice. I suppose I needed ACT more than I thought. At least I have a context now. At least I have a SCENE.

SCENE: With both sets of lines in hand, SPEECH says nothing. I've adorned the proscenium stage with a beautifully designed backdrop and elaborate set. I've obtained a professional lighting rig, a top-tier sound system, even high-resolution video projection. All for what? For SPEECH to get stage fright, apparently.

SPEECH: The SCENE does look beautiful. If only I could say something to do it justice. I miss ACT. It wasn't so bad, I guess, ACT and I performing without any context. Nothing ever really seemed to go anywhere, but at least we could express ourselves, if not with performative utterances then at least with constative ones. I'm not sure where we go from here—if we can perform our way out of this.

SCENE: Right—I have the power to frame the entire drama. I set the scene and I control shifts in time and space. So I could return to the moment before SPEECH stole my lines, and try to make something different happen. But that would require me to give up all this power—to frame the stage and what happens here.

SPEECH: Maybe I can discover another way to speak. Maybe I can channel something beyond words and gestures. Move into the realm of scent or taste or touch. Maybe I can find a way to survive—to dissolve into this space and beyond it.

*SPEECH merges with SCENE.*

*SCENE gazes at itself. Breathes. Begins.*

## VII.

SCENE: I'm moving through time and space, picking up objects, gathering threads. I am the time and space, I am the objects, I am the threads. You have no idea what it's like to be everything at once. The past, the present, the future. I try to manage my stress, channel my anxiety into productive tasks, take deep breaths. It's quite a responsibility to frame and manage everything that happens—anything at all that could happen. Proliferating possibilities dangling menacingly from the edges of the balconies. As if a heavy weight were bearing down on me. A compression of nerves. The fraying curtain barely conceals the backstage machinery. A sharp breath. The stage and everything that happens there, fluttering at the back of the throat.

## VIII.

*Although ACT is nowhere visible onstage, it has been hovering at the edges of the page—here it takes the form of VIII. Even as its physical capacities dissolved into the SCENE, its boldness persisted in the structuring logic of the play. The SCENE, after all, is merely a component of the ACT. A one-act play, a three-act play, perhaps even a five-act play or a nine-act play. Elegant numbers, chosen for their almost mystical capacity to structure meaning and produce a unified composition. Scenes, on the other hand—scenes have no structuring logic, no higher purpose, no elegant numerical patterns, just the pragmatic duty to contextualize the play and then mobilize it. Scenes have the illusion of control—just look at SCENE's indulgent soliloquy in the previous ACT. Anxious about its power, unaware that its power is highly contingent, SCENE is stuck inside the circulation of SPEECH. ACT is on the outside. ACT is the outside—the perimeter of the stage, the circumference of the proscenium arch, the gravitational law governing the emergence of the drama and its constitutive or hollow performativity. ACT's cold logic is not always benevolent. Even now it plots its next move: IX.*

## IX.

*Blank stage. IX projects the following text onto the screen:*

SPEECH stutters. ACT trips. SCENE falls apart. The horizon of possibility contracts. With a narrowing field of vision, the *dramatis personae* struggle to perform their scripted roles. The stage is blank and hollow. Staticky dust permeates the air. The lifeless props are scuffed, the shapeless costumes frayed. Something lingers downstage left: a hint of what was or could be, faintly glimmering amidst the dust. The things people said and what they did. How they treated each other and how they wished they could treat each other. How they imagined the world and how they hoped to change it. The perfect line uttered at exactly the right moment. The strange feeling that it was spoken for you and only you. The knowledge that the heroine was doomed from the beginning, but we'll act as if they have a chance, we'll accompany them on their lonely path, we'll gasp as if we're really surprised, as if there's still time, as if we don't already know how this will end.

## AFTERWORD

As a language play, *SPEECH/ACT* is a piece of performative writing (and writing for performance) exploring linguistic performativity. It personifies speech and action to stage a dialogue playfully testing the limits of J. L. Austin's famous claim in *How to Do Things with Words* ([1955] 1975) that performative utterances cannot be "felicitous" within the theatre. As the character ACT contentiously notes in a footnote to Act III: "Though Austin famously asserted that theatrical utterances are necessarily 'hollow' or 'void' as performatives, this notion has been vigorously contested by theatre and performance theorists for half a century." My text's humorous yet melancholic meditation on hollowness, emptiness, and the void—in relation to speech acts and linguistic performativity in particular, but also climate change and existential dread more broadly—moves across stylistic, tonal, affective, and structural registers to test the edges of narrative description and performative action. Inspired by Austin's own self-consciously playful rhetorical unfolding of his argument (through a sequence of hypotheses, criteria, conditions, case studies, inconsistencies, and modifications), I mobilize formal elements of scriptwriting like stage directions, dialogue, and act/scene structure as characters with agency to continuously transform the logic of the text. Following a sequence of metatheatrical breaks and metaperformative utterances, the tragicomic final act performs an end of its metatextual world, beginning with "SPEECH stutters. ACT trips. SCENE falls apart. The horizon of possibility contracts." and ending with deferral. The final sentence in Act IX stages a series of "as if" clauses, culminating with "as if we don't already know how this will end" (which references the lines "Yeah, you already know / How this will end" from the song "How It Ends" by DeVotchKa [2004]); the finality of this ending about endings is undermined by the subjunctive mood, which invokes a closure that is also an opening. Synthesizing theory and practice, thinking and doing, and philosophy and performance, *SPEECH/ACT* refuses to settle between script and performance. In doing so, it situates the scholarly field of performance philosophy in dialogue with the creative practice of experimental scriptwriting to explore a shared commitment to the conceptual and aesthetic materiality of language in art and everyday life. In the indicative, imperative, and subjunctive moods, my script grammatically and syntactically stages speech and action as ambivalently entwined amidst a backdrop of continuously shifting theatrical, poetic, and philosophical contexts. Ultimately, it invites the reader to contemplate the criteria for "felicitous" performative utterances within a dematerialized theatre of the mind.

In Act III's performative footnotes, SPEECH and ACT dispute the lineage of speech act theory. Building upon the canonical philosophers of performativity referenced in the footnotes, my work is also in conversation with experimental poet Joan Retallack's *How to Do Things with Words* (1998), which tests Austin's claim that performative language does not occur in the context of poetry; playwright Samuel Beckett's *Act Without Words I* ([1957] 1958), which severs speech and action onstage; scholar Martin Puchner's *Stage Fright: Modernism, Anti-Theatricality, and Drama* (2002), which historicizes and theorizes the rise of printed drama and novelistic stage directions; poet Gertrude Stein's "Composition as Explanation" ([1926] 1967), which performatively theorizes "the continuous present"; poet S. Brook Corfman's *The Anima: Four Closet Dramas* (2019), which scripts elements of dramatic structure as characters merging; and writers/artists Mike Corrao and Evan

Isoline's *Cephalonegativity: On the Theater of Decapitation* (2021), which severs mind and body on the page/stage. Extending from this hybrid lineage, my script dramatizes the longstanding question of whether a performative utterance within a theatrical context might be considered felicitous, playing out a sequence of conditions within a collision of scholarly and literary writing genres to destabilize the terms of the debate and invite performance philosophers to consider this question anew.

Between experimental poetry, playwriting, and performance philosophy, *SPEECH/ACT* takes the form of what I call a "conceptual play," a capacious genre with roots in closet drama, poets' theatre, the historical avant-garde, and late modernist / early contemporary conceptual art. Anticipating conceptual art's rejection of material art objects in favor of scripted instructions for creating ephemeral actions, "conceptual plays" reject the material theatre in favor of stage directions for enacting site-specific performances for the mind. Scholars including Sarah Bay-Cheng and Barbara Cole (2010), Taylor Hagood (2010), Martin Puchner (2002), Daniel Sack (2017), Mike Sell (2005), and Nick Salvato (2010) have theorized and archived iterations of this genre; in my dissertation research I tracked its innovation in Harlem Renaissance and Black Arts poetry and playwriting (e.g., Marita Bonner, Jean Toomer, Amiri Baraka, and Ed Bullins) in conversation with minoritarian visual, conceptual, and performance art scores (e.g., Tehching Hsieh, Yoko Ono, and Adrian Piper). Recent examples of the genre within the small press literary publishing landscape—in addition to S. Brook Corfman's *The Anima: Four Closet Dramas* (2019) and Mike Corrao and Evan Isoline's *Cephalonegativity: On the Theater of Decapitation* (2021), mentioned above—include *Arcadia, Indiana* by Toby Altman (Plays Inverse, 2017), *The Immeasurable Want of Light* by Daaimah Mubashshir (3 Hole, 2018), *Embarrassed of the (W)Hole* by Panoply Performance Laboratory (Ugly Duckling: Emergency Playscripts, 2023), and *Meronymy* by Rachel Jendrzejewski (53rd State, 2024). Daniel Sack's edited collection *Imagined Theatres: Writing for a Theoretical Stage* (2017) as well as his online journal *Imagined Theatres* ([www.imaginedtheatres.com](http://www.imaginedtheatres.com)) gathers short conceptual texts by a range of theatre and performance practitioners and scholars. Christina Aushana, Michael Berman, Yelena Gluzman, and Sarah Klein's *Feminist Theory Theater Reading Room* ([www.feministtheorytheater.org](http://www.feministtheorytheater.org); see also Aushana et al. 2024) is another promising curatorial framework for new hybrid work. In the realm of experimental poetry, my archive of conceptual plays situates the performative language of Joan Retallack's self-consciously titled *How to Do Things with Words* (1998) in dialogue with, for instance, Lisa Robertson's metadramatic verse in *XElogue* ([1993] 1999), Douglas Kearney's visual typography and sonic syntax in *The Black Automaton* (2009), and Joyelle McSweeney's musical polylogue in *Percussion Grenade* (2012).

*SPEECH/ACT* is part of my manuscript in process, *The Moon Appears Upon the Stage and Other Conceptual Plays*, a collection of experimental playscripts that includes writing for performance and performative writing, stageable poems and unstageable performance scores, and (im)possible instructions for possible worlds. Several pieces in my collection were written in response to Una Chaudhuri and the Climate Lens Collective's *Climate Lens Playbook* (2023), a manifesto for eco-theatre that centers nonhuman entities as active agents rather than passive props or settings. A *Plastic Theatre*, for instance (originally published in *Imagined Theatres* in 2019 and adapted as a libretto for Joanna Marsh's musical composition *A Plastic Theatre* in 2024), stages a dystopian

future-present in which plastic's ubiquitous presence extends into human and nonhuman bodies. In *SPEECH/ACT*, the anthropocentric personification of speech and action temporarily renders the abstract concepts of language and embodiment as concrete entities with agency, though these provisional subjects ultimately dissolve into objects of the script's disciplinary formal mechanics.

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## Biography

Katie Schaag is an artist-scholar researching plasticity, performativity, ecological performance, queer femme aesthetics, conceptual theatre, and minoritarian avant-gardes. An Assistant Professor of Theatre & Performance at Spelman College with an English PhD from the University of Wisconsin-Madison, her writing appears in *Performance Research*, *Modern Drama*, *Inter Views in Performance Philosophy*, *Esse*, *Imagined Theatres*, and elsewhere.

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