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## **VISUAL EVENT AS THE EFFECT OF A NETWORK PERFORMATIVE ASPECTS OF INTERNET-MEDIATED COMMUNICATION IN NET ART**

**Abstract:** The starting point of the article is the assumption that the performative turn directs our attention to the expressive dimension of social activity and to events which have the character of a process. If we transfer this assumption to the field of visual culture, then the object of our inquiry will no longer be images, but rather their perception by the participants of visual events or the processes leading to those events. The performative aspects may be noticed in the definition of the “visual event” formulated by Nicholas Mirzoeff, who suggests the introduction of this term to replace “image”. In accordance with this concept, the visual event constitutes the main aspect of reception – the process of seeing in which the user or the consumer seeks information, meaning or pleasure in an encounter with visual technology: from an oil painting to television and the Internet.

The main thesis of the article is that the visual event is the product of a network, which in turn conditions the actions of the users communicating with one another. The performative aspects of Internet-mediated communication are revealed when Internet users employ speech acts. Simultaneously with this process of “doing things with words”, the interlocutors communicating with one another create a “community” which resembles *communitas* (the term used by Victor Turner). We can view the *communitas* as a network community in which the Internet users interact with one another not only with the help of verbal messages, but also with other forms of online communication (images derived from web-cameras, flash animations, photoblogs).

The presented issues find their reflection in the artwork *Listening Post* (2003) by Mark Hansen and Ben Rubin, the “visualisation” of Internet-mediated communication of the users employing speech acts in chat rooms. The online verbal communication used in this work takes on the dimensions of a performance which is the source of its visual aspect, and the speech acts employed by the Internet users function as the “citations” within the “iterability model” in the sense suggested by Jacques Derrida. The artwork *Bodies@INCorporated* (1993) by Victoria Vesna is another example of the performative aspects of Internet-mediated communication, which is described in the context of Judith Butler’s theory of performativity. These examples present the ways of using performative aspects of Internet-mediated communication in net art

**Keywords:** performativity, visual event, Internet-mediated communication, net art, *communitas*.

## INTRODUCTION

The performative turn is one of a number of turns which structured Cultural Studies in the second half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. Unlike the linguistic turn, which took as its starting point the metaphor of “the culture as text,”<sup>1</sup> the performative turn was based on the theories that substantially changed the approach to the same problems. The fundamental difference between the linguistic and the performative turn was that the latter “directs our attention to the expressive dimension of (social) action” and of the events which have the character of a staged enactment (performance) or of a process.<sup>2</sup> I will describe the performative aspects of the selected works of net art based on Internet-mediated interpersonal communication from this perspective.

## THE PERFORMATIVE TURN WITHIN VISUAL CULTURE

The performative turn is related here to pictures and visual processes which find themselves at the centre of attention also on account of the pictorial turn. The aim of my inquiry is to attempt to consider the performative turn in the context of visual culture and to work out some text-independent methods of

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<sup>1</sup> The metaphor of “the culture as text” puts emphasis on treating culture as a symbolic form generating meaning on the principles analogous to those of the linguistic systems. This sort of conviction is characteristic of the linguistic turn, which took place mainly in the poststructuralist philosophy of Jacques Derrida, Michel Foucault, Jacques Lacan and Jean-François Lyotard (see: M. Gołębiowska 2003, *Między wątpieniem a pewnością. O związkach języka i racjonalności w filozofii poststrukturalizmu*, Universitas, Kraków, pp. 30-41). The critical movement acquired its special position, however, owing to the reflection of Richard Rorty, who characterised the history of philosophy as a series of “turns” and made it the last stage in its development (see: R.M. Rorty, 1967, “Metaphysical Difficulties of Linguistic Philosophy”, in: R.M. Rorty (ed.), *Linguistic Turn*, The University of Chicago Press, Chicago; R.M. Rorty 1979, *Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature*, Princeton University Press, Princeton; cf. W.J.T. Mitchell, 1994, *Picture Theory. Essays on Verbal and Visual Representation*, Chicago University Press, Chicago, p. 11). The linguistic turn substantially changed the understanding of language, which “becomes thus an active factor in the formation of reality, and not a passive reflection of thoughts and things” (L. Rasiński, 2009, “‘Reguły’ i ‘gry’ świata społecznego – Wittgenstein, de Saussure i zwrot lingwistyczny w filozofii społecznej”, in: L. Rasiński (ed.), *Język, dyskurs, społeczeństwo. Zwrot lingwistyczny w filozofii społecznej*, PWN, Warszawa, p. 9), and moreover plays a crucial role in the processes of social communication. Numerous concepts of “the culture as text” have been developing based on the notion of performativity, which was gradually losing its importance in the philosophy of language while gaining significance in cultural theory. In the latter field, the understanding of culture as a complex sign structure with a determinate meaning which it is possible to describe through the process of “reading” (expounding its meaning or deconstructing it) dominated until the late 1980s.

<sup>2</sup> D. Bachmann-Medick, 2012, *Cultural Turns. Nowe kierunki w naukach o kulturze*, transl. K. Krzemieniowa, Oficyna Naukowa, Warszawa, p. 119.

the interpretation of pictures. The topic of performativity has been raised within visual culture in a number of ways. Above all, linguistic performatives and speech acts have been compared to visual signs. It has also been pointed out that pictures have no meta-signs. That is why it is difficult to command, inquire, or state with their help, or to consider speech acts as analogous to pictures. Pictorial acts do exist, however. Pictures cannot directly indicate that they are stating, promising or vowing something, but they can perform these acts in indirect ways. It is not possible to identify an element of a picture that would be promising something, but it is possible to see the picture as a whole as a promise. Compared with words, pictures have a greater variety of meanings, and that is why interpretation is of much importance when dealing with them.<sup>3</sup> One may therefore ask: are there any performative pictures?

Mindy Fenske believes that performativity is above all about the processes in which meaning is constructed, rather than about the discursive products of representation. In this sense performativity helps us to understand the mechanism of the production of meaning. We can therefore treat pictures as performative when they exhibit some features of a live performance or perform a communicative function. Other meanings of performativity can also be related to the creative process. The origin of the word *performative*, however, is linguistic, and it relates to the procedures of citation.<sup>4</sup> It is in this aspect that this article will relate the performative paradigm to the analysis of visuality on the basis of net-art. Visual structures and pictures may be cited similarly to sentences or texts, and that is why they may be seen as performative, that is iterable. However, as Tomasz Załuski aptly notes, “Iterability is not limited to what has traditionally been labelled as ‘writing.’ Its broader description appears in places where Derrida attempts to show that it is not only characteristic of other types of signs and their respective ways of communication, but also describes the structure of the whole experience of reality.”<sup>5</sup> I use iterability in this sense as an interpretive tool applied to selected visual works of net art. The source of their visuality are textual structures which have prompted the use of this method. This does not mean, however, that the pictures in these works are to be treated as text or that their structure is a kind of writing.<sup>6</sup>

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<sup>3</sup> Cf. W. Nöth, 2011, ‘Visual Semiotics: Key Features and an Application to Picture Ads’, in: E. Margolis, L. Pauwels (eds.) *The SAGE Handbook of Visual Research Methods*, SAGE, London, pp. 309–310.

<sup>4</sup> M. Fenske, 2007, *Tattoos in American Visual Culture*, Palgrave Macmillan, New York, p. 20.

<sup>5</sup> T. Załuski, 2012, *Modernizm artystyczny i powtórzenie. Próba reinterpretacji*, Universitas, Kraków, p. 63.

<sup>6</sup> Załuski goes on to state that “Owing to ... the fact that the notion of iterability was introduced in the context of reflection on writing, endowing it with a broader meaning entails a strategic generalization of the reinterpreted notion of writing and agreeing that the whole of reality has the structure of a peculiar ‘writing,’ a ‘graphematic’ structure.” *Ibidem*, pp. 63–64. Within this

The performative turn within visual culture has led to the interest in the forms of behaviour based on playing social roles with the use of various means of visual expression. Seeking the meanings of performance and performativity useful for visual culture, Mindy Fenske mentions the sociologists who, influenced by the theories of Erving Goffman, analyse everyday life in terms of a theatrical performance.<sup>7</sup> This point of view may be helpful in interpreting the problems of the visibility that is part of everyday life and that includes nonverbal interpersonal communication (which may become the source of visibility in webcams). However, Goffman's theory is also useful in the context of the Internet-mediated interpersonal communication. The research in the area of visual culture tackles the problem of the reception of pictures transmitted in the process of online communication, which may be considered on the basis of Goffman's theory.

#### FROM "THE CULTURE AS TEXT" TO "THE CULTURE AS PERFORMANCE"

In order to understand the specificity of the transition from text communication to performative treatment of text one must introduce a number of ideas whose source lies in the process described by Erika Fischer-Lichte in the following manner: "A change in the research prospects occurred in the nineties. Now performative features of culture hitherto unnoticed have found themselves at the centre of attention. This made it possible to approach in an innovative (practical) way the already existing, or considered as potentially possible, realities, at the same time endowing artistic action and events with a peculiar character, not-acknowledged by the traditional model of culture seen as text. The career of another metaphor started then – that of 'the culture as performance'. It was also necessary to redefine performativity, so that it would begin to include physical action as well."<sup>8</sup>

The indicated transition from "the culture as text" to "the culture as performance" also affected the area of visual culture. However, it has not had the character of a radical change. Anna Zeidler-Janiszewska thinks that Erica Fischer-Lichte's diagnosis seems accurate, but only in part, since "[...] the performative approach in the research practice of humanist scholars has been

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perspective, the interpretation of visual works on the basis of Derrida's notion of iterability assumes that an image is a text, and that the work of art has the structure of writing. In my interpretation I assume otherwise.

<sup>7</sup> M. Fenske, 2007, *op.cit.*, p. 22.

<sup>8</sup> E. Fischer-Lichte, 2008, *Estetyka performatywności*, transl. M. Borowski, M. Sugiera, Księgarnia Akademicka, Kraków, p. 36.

developing most effectively not only on the intersection of both its sources [John Austin's philosophy of language and late twentieth-century art and aesthetics], but also at the crossing point of the textual paradigm (or, more precisely, the orientations which brought it to life) with these sources. Due to this double crossing of inspirations, one should speak of 'a performativist limit' to the textualist claims of universality or 'performativist supplement' to textuality.<sup>9</sup> In this sense the subject of our interest is a study of "visuality," which supplements "textuality" from a performative point of view.

### THE PICTORIAL TURN AND THE PERFORMATIVE PARADIGM AS FACTORS SHAPING INTERNET-MEDIATED COMMUNICATION

The term *performative* was introduced by John L. Austin, who first used the adjective *performatory* in his earlier works, before he decided on employing the other term. Both adjectives derive from the verb *perform*.<sup>10</sup> Austin's ideas<sup>11</sup> have many times been discussed in the context of the performative paradigm in Cultural Studies.<sup>12</sup> There have also been attempts to use them in the area of visual culture. In effect, new developments in Visual Semiotics, the Rhetoric of the Image and Picture Theory took place, initiated by another methodo-

<sup>9</sup> A. Zeidler-Janiszewska, 2005, 'Performatywizm i problematyka tożsamości. Próba teoretycznego umiejscowienia koncepcji Judith Butler', in: J. Kmita, B. Kotowa, J. Sójka (eds.), *Nauka – humanistyka – człowiek. Prace dedykowane Profesor Krystynie Zamiarze w czterdziestolecie pracy naukowej*, Wydawnictwo Naukowe Uniwersytetu im. Adama Mickiewicza, Poznań, p. 258.

<sup>10</sup> J. Austin, 1962, *How To Do Things With Words*, Oxford University Press, New York – Oxford.

<sup>11</sup> Austin's ideas were expanded by his disciple, John R. Searle, who, back in the 1990s, took the "speech act" to be the basic unit of communication. Searle included speech acts within the category of social behaviour referring to events as well as predicting them, stating, questioning, ordering or promising. He also believed that speech acts are to be seen not as formal linguistic structures but as organized systems which are not based on acting according to rules that have been agreed on, but rather function as outright games based on precisely formulated rules, such as football or chess (see: R. Schechner, 2006, *Performance Studies: An Introduction*, Routledge, London – New York, p. 125). According to Searle: "The unit of linguistic communication is not, as has generally been supposed, the symbol, word or sentence, or even the token of the symbol, word or sentence, but rather the production or issuance of the symbol or word or sentence in the performance of the speech act. To take the token as a message is to take it as a produced or issued token. More precisely, the production or issuance of a sentence token under certain conditions is a speech act, and speech acts [...] are the basic or minimal units of linguistic communication" (J.R. Searle 1969, *Speech Acts. An Essay in the Philosophy of Language*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, New York, p. 16).

<sup>12</sup> Cf. A. Zeidler-Janiszewska A., 2007, 'Perspektywy performatywizmu', "Teksty Drugie", nr 5 (107), pp. 34-47; A. Zeidler-Janiszewska, 2008, 'Perspektywy performatywizmu', in: R.W. Kluszczyński, A. Zeidler-Janiszewska (eds.), *Perspektywy badań nad kulturą*, Wydawnictwo Uniwersytetu Łódzkiego, Łódź, pp. 87-100.

logical turn known as the pictorial turn. In terms of its origin, the pictorial turn was a mirror reflection of the linguistic turn. As a consequence, this point of view led to treating pictures as texts. A similar situation took place in the case of the performative turn, which, transferred onto the area of visual culture, also led to some theoreticians comparing linguistic structures (speech acts) with pictures, searching for analogies and trying to isolate pictorial acts. This conviction, however, proved false each time since, as W. J. Thomas Mitchell claims, "What makes for the sense of a pictorial turn, then, is not that we have some powerful account of visual representation that is dictating the terms of cultural theory, but that pictures form a point of peculiar friction and discomfort across a broad range of intellectual inquiry. The picture now has a status somewhere between what Thomas Kuhn called a 'paradigm' and an 'anomaly,' emerging as a central topic of discussion in the human sciences in the way that language did: that is, as a kind of model or figure for other things (including figuration itself), and as an unsolved problem, perhaps even the object of its own 'science,' what Erwin Panofsky called an 'iconology.'"<sup>13</sup>

The pictorial turn may be defined as a change of methodological direction from the linguistic to the visual paradigm. The outcome of this situation is that it becomes just as valid to use pictures in social communication as it is to communicate textually. Consequently, "textual encoding" is being replaced by "visual encoding." Another symptom of the pictorial turn is that visual communication has been assuming the position of an independent semiotic system, and that the picture now performs a role analogous to that of language, which was understood to be the foundation for all ways of communication within the linguistic turn.

The pictorial turn may also be compared with the performative paradigm, which draws attention to the visual aspects of social behaviour and makes "visual events" happening as a result of the influence of pictures on the recipients of mass media the object of its inquiry. Zeidler-Janiszewska has aptly captured the nature of this transformation, claiming that "the moment of transformation of the participants of a performance into a special community resembling *communitas* as understood by Victor Turner, emphasized by some authors more firmly than by others, is important for the intersection of the sources shaping today's 'performativist paradigm'; it is connected not only with 'doing things with words,' but also with acting through other forms of 'semiotic expression and communication.'"<sup>14</sup>

What this observation indicates is that the performative paradigm has been developing by supplementing "doing things with words" (speech acts) with other means of "semiotic expression" ranked among nonverbal communica-

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<sup>13</sup> W.J.T. Mitchell, 1994, *op.cit.*, p. 13.

<sup>14</sup> A. Zeidler-Janiszewska, 2005, *op.cit.*, p. 261.

tion. This tendency emphasizes the role of visual forms of social behaviour noticed in Erving Goffman's concept as described in the book *The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life*. The author of the concept understands "performance" as the process of "playing" a social role and uses the term "performance" "to refer to all the activity of an individual which occurs during a period marked by his continuous presence before a particular set of observers and which has some influence on the observers."<sup>15</sup>

Goffman's definition touches a very significant feature of the performance: the relation between the "actor" and the audience. Theoreticians of cultural performance have strongly underlined the role of the audience or community in which performance is happening, while psychologists, to the contrary, are prone to emphasize the role of the performance actor. Goffman describes social interactions with the language of the theatre, noticing in them numerous instances of successive performances. Performers – participants in a social interaction – create a stage effect with the help of visual impressions perceived by others. It is worth noticing that the term which Goffman used denotes not only a performance, enactment, role-playing, theatrical show, circus act, concert or holding a ceremony, but also the performance of everyday activities, such as a surgery, associated with a particular social role. According to Goffman, the behaviour of the participants of social interactions is an information game of a kind, full of masking and mutual subterfuges, and subordinated to the rules governing the exertion and perception of visual impressions. Goffman's concept of performance contributed to the formation of belief that interpersonal communication is currently being shaped by visual, that is nonverbal, social behaviour.<sup>16</sup> As Jacek Isański aptly notes, "The key assumptions of Goffman's dramatic theory pertain to the connection between the stage (where the interactions, or rather 'performances' take place), the decorations (helping actors present themselves on stage in a desired way), and the backstage (where the actors prepare for engaging in these interactions). The interactions, constituting a series of performances, involve using a façade, appropriate to the given situation, which, like in architecture, is characterised by a particular attention to detail and performs the most important role in the interaction, imposing a particular impression on the addressees and helping the actor sustain the impression during the interaction."<sup>17</sup>

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<sup>15</sup> E. Goffman, 1990, *The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life*, Penguin Books, Harmondsworth, p. 22.

<sup>16</sup> See: M. Carlson, 2004, *Performance: A Critical Introduction*, Routledge, London – New York, second edition, pp. 34-35.

<sup>17</sup> J. Isański, 2007, 'Wizualne tło dramaturgicznej koncepcji Ervinga Goffmana', in: M. Krajewski, (ed.), *Wizualność miasta. Wytwarzanie miejskiej ikonosfery*, Wydawnictwo Naukowe Uniwersytetu im. Adama Mickiewicza, Poznań, p. 123.

The façade is the visual background for social interactions which take place within Internet-mediated communication by means of presentation of non-verbal behaviour through the use of webcams in chat rooms and digital photographs uploaded to the Internet. The increasing share of these elements in Internet-mediated communication is the evidence that such communication does not have to proceed textually. Quite the contrary, most Internet users are fond of visual means of communication, even if their use often entails losing one's anonymity.

### PERFORMATIVE ASPECTS OF INTERNET-MEDIATED COMMUNICATION

The performativity of Internet-mediated communication manifests itself in several ways. Firstly, the Internet, like virtual reality, is a domain of simulation, where "differences between media and live events, originals and digital or biological clones, performing onstage and ordinary life are collapsing."<sup>18</sup> In this sense performativity makes social, political, economic, personal and artistic events, happening in a public space, acquire evident characteristics of a performance. The described situation also pertains to Internet communication in which interlocutors perform social roles by using speech acts and "doing things with words."

The other aspect of the performativity of Internet communication points to the nature of social relations which are formed among Internet users. It emerges in the process of Internet-mediated interpersonal communication, which is above all about Internet users using speech acts. Simultaneously, during this process of "doing things with words", the communicating interlocutors form a community resembling *communitas*. The term, introduced by Turner, relates to Martin Buber, who claims that "community, growing community (which is all we have known so far) is the being no longer side by side but *with* one another of a multitude of persons. And this multitude, though it also moves towards one goal, yet experiences everywhere a turning to, a dynamic facing of, the other, a flowing from *I* to *Thou*. Community is where community happens."<sup>19</sup>

According to Turner, Buber touches upon the spontaneous and direct specificity of *communitas*, which constitutes the opposite of the institutional, abstract social structure<sup>20</sup>. *Communitas* (the Latin term denoting a community,

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<sup>18</sup> R. Schechner, 2006, *op.cit.*, p. 123.

<sup>19</sup> M. Buber, *Between Man and Man*, transl. R. Gregor-Smith, Routledge, London – New York, p. 37.

<sup>20</sup> V. Turner, 2008, 'Liminality and Communitas', in: *Idem, The Ritual Process: Structure and Anti-Structure*, Aldine Transaction Press, New Brunswick, pp. 126-127.



a collective, reveals its common genealogy with the term *communicare* – “to communicate”) can thus be related to a network community, formed during Internet-mediated communication, as well as to all the symptoms of its functioning, wherein Internet users act on one another not only with words, but also with other forms of visual communication (webcamera pictures, flash animations and photoblogs).

Nonverbal behaviour of Internet users transmitted over webcams can also become a source of performativity, because it is hard to distinguish a situation depicted objectively by webcams from a subjective vision which often derives from the manipulation of a digital picture, which “was created to provide a testimony to reality more faithful than photography or film, to capture the world in vistas that would give the impression of a direct access to reality, or even participation in this reality (Flusser’s ‘gesture of video’). The phenomenon of electronic and digital imaging and the tools that accompany it consist in the fact that in its aspirations to corroborate reality the tool that was supposed to capture the world interferes with it, testifies to its own being-in-the-world, thus being to a certain degree self-referential. This can be understood also as coexistence of the observer, the one that registers the view, as well as their look together with the tool used for registering, with the observable world.”<sup>21</sup> It is therefore impossible to differentiate an objective situation shown on webcams from a subjective vision resulting from manipulation of digital pictures.

#### **VISUAL EVENTS AS THE EFFECT OF A NETWORK AND PERFORMATIVE CITATION**

Goffman’s theory emphasizes the role of the recipient in the process of the functioning of the performance. This aspect is particularly visible in the approach presented by the theoreticians of Visual Culture Studies. Nicholas Mirzoeff suggests replacing the notion of an “image” with that of a “visual event” which is generated with the help of visual media technologies in the process of social communication. If we transfer the assumptions of the performative turn to the area of visual culture then the subject of our inquiry will not be images, but rather the ability of those who participate in visual events to see them, or the process which leads to their creation. The visual event also constitutes a focal aspect of the process of seeing or reception in which a contemporary recipient or consumer analyses impressions originating from various visual objects in a public space: art works exhibited in galleries,

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<sup>21</sup> M. Gołębiewska, 2003, *Demontaż atrakcji. O estetyce audiowizualności*, Wydawnictwo “słowo/obraz terytoria”, Gdańsk, pp. 201-202.

pictures watched at the cinema, on television, video or on the Internet. This definition reveals that images may come into existence in social interactions established in a both private and public space during the reception of art works, film or television, as well as in the process of visual events which take place during live multimedia performances and during online interpersonal communication.

The above way of image creation in the act of communication is evident in the phenomenon of convergence, which, according to Henry Jenkins, consists in “the flow of content across multiple media platforms, the cooperation between multiple media industries, and the migratory behavior of media audiences who will go almost anywhere in search of the kinds of entertainment experiences they want.”<sup>22</sup> Convergence takes place in the minds of the recipients, but it also happens in their social interactions with others while communicating on the Internet. Describing these phenomena, both Jenkins and Mirzoeff refer to the events of 9/11. As a case of convergence, Jenkins provides the example of a digital collage by Dino Ignacio showing *Sesame Street*'s Bert and Osama bin Laden together in a single photo. Mirzoeff uses the 9/11 images to show that convergence takes place within the minds of the spectators, with a flux of disaster movie scenes entering the domain of real events.

A visual event is closely connected with the performative paradigm. Although Mirzoeff does not point directly at connotations of this sort, he understands the notion in terms of a visual impression received in the process of social communication mediated by visual media, which allows one to think that he includes within its scope both textual and visual forms of action. In his essay *The Subject of Visual Culture* Mirzoeff underlines that “The constituent element of visual culture's practice is the visual event. The event is the effect of a network in which subjects operate and which in turn conditions their freedom of action.”<sup>23</sup>

In this context, the Internet may be seen to foreground in a particularly strong way the “eventhood” of the practices of communication based not only on verbal transmissions, but also on the interaction with webcam pictures. Mirzoeff presents the 9/11 terrorist attack as an apogee of contemporary visual events, and he comments on it as follows: “After the events of September 11 (...) it is now terrorism that is cinema. The visual drama of the events in New York played out as if cinematically directed. The largest possible target was hit with the most explosive force possible to produce the maximum effect on the viewer. At a symbolic level, the disaster was the result of the impact of the two

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<sup>22</sup> H. Jenkins, 2006, *Convergence Culture. Where Old and New Media Collide*, New York University Press, New York – London, p. 2.

<sup>23</sup> N. Mirzoeff, 2002, ‘The Subject of Visual Culture’, in: N. Mirzoeff (ed.), *The Visual Culture Reader*, Routledge, London – New York, p. 6.

dominant symbols of modernity's triumph over the limitations of body and space – the airplane and the skyscraper. The scenario made sense to the viewer precisely because we had all seen it before [in cinema – note K.C.]. (...) Many of the eyewitness accounts used the metaphor of cinema to try and verbalize the enormity of what had happened."<sup>24</sup>

This example makes one aware of the fact that real reality is now beginning to resemble fictitious events which we have seen at the cinema. The definition of the visual event also leads to the conclusion that pictures generated with the help of media technologies can come into existence in the process of social interactions established in a public space during the reception of films or television as well as multimedia shows or Internet-mediated social communication. The practices belonging to the last of these categories have a particularly performative character, because messages created within them are ephemeral, undergo constant changes and, above all, do not exist before triggering the interaction. Mirzoeff believes that the future of the Internet consists in creating new forms of visibility which are based on textual forms of communication, yet exhibit a tendency to picture them in the form of iconic representations, such as flash animations on web sites.<sup>25</sup> An important aspect of the visual event is the problematic of seeing, which emerges from how pictures generated with the help of visual media affect their recipients. Mirzoeff stresses the fact that the nature of this phenomenon is the interaction between the visual sign and the technology which enables it to function with the active attitude of the spectator. Visual communication created on the Internet is based on this principle. The seeing and reception of visual media takes place during interactions in which recipients use speech acts, which may be observed in the case of Internet-mediated communication. The performative character of the visual event may be seen in that it is a "citation." Mirzoeff compares the visual event to the "visual drama" which took place during the attack on the World Trade Center. What is more, in its visual structure, this attack was a "citation" of scenes originating from disaster movies. In this sense, as Jacques Derrida claims, the message, which was here referred to as a visual event, "must be repeatable – iterable – in the absolute absence of the addressee or of the empirically determinable set of addressees."<sup>26</sup> Derrida's conclusion finds its reflection in the social reception of media images presenting the 9/11 attack. Many of the recipients of these messages were convinced that they were watching images from a disaster movie and not a broadcast of real events.

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<sup>24</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 8.

<sup>25</sup> N. Mirzoeff, 1999, *An Introduction to Visual Culture*, Routledge, London – New York, p. 108.

<sup>26</sup> J. Derrida, 1982, *Margins of Philosophy*, transl. A. Bass, The University of Chicago Press and The Harvester Press, Chicago – Hassocks, p. 315.

It is worth pointing out that Jean Baudrillard in his book *The Spirit of Terrorism* claims that “Whereas we were dealing before with an uninterrupted profusion of banal images and a seamless flow of sham events, the terrorist act in New York has resuscitated both images and events. (...) The role of images is highly ambiguous. For, at the same time as they exalt the event, they also take it hostage. They serve to multiply it to infinity and, at the same time, they are a diversion and a neutralization (...). The image consumes the event, in the sense that it absorbs it and offers it for consumption. Admittedly, it gives it unprecedented impact, but impact as image-event.”<sup>27</sup> Baudrillard’s conclusion seems to confirm the fictitious dimension of the attack on the World Trade Center. The French sociologist claims that the collapse of the towers is not enough to make it a real event. The fiction does not precede reality, does not anticipate it, but rather adds to it, creating a single unified whole. It is no wonder then that Baudrillard stated that “Reality and fiction are inextricable, and the fascination with the attack is primarily a fascination with the image.”<sup>28</sup> In this sense the images of the 9/11 attack shown in the media were “fictitious” and “real” simultaneously, without the possibility of separating the two.

#### **LISTENING POST: VISUALISING THE “CITATIONS” OF “ACTOR-NETWORKS”**

The performative aspects of Internet-mediated communication are noticeable in a work of net art that has inspired a lot of controversy since the moment of its creation – Mark Hansen’s and Ben Rubin’s *Listening Post* (2003). As Ryszard W. Kluszczyński observes, in discussions about it referring to other works that present the model of “the Strategy of System. “It came as a noticeable fact that despite their dynamic processing, digital properties, and immersing in interactive environment of the Internet, they do not create a possibility of real interaction for their users. They are characterized by eventfulness which does not find many ways out where the viewers are, but takes place rather in their inner, technological, digital world.”<sup>29</sup> Within this model of “the Strategy of System,” the texts spoken in chat rooms and appearing on LCD screens are, on the one hand, “citations” of the utterances of Internet users,

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<sup>27</sup> J. Baudrillard, 2003, *The Spirit of Terrorism and Requiem for the Twin Towers*, transl. Ch. Turner [New Edition], Verso, London and New York, p. 27.

<sup>28</sup> *Ibidem*, pp. 28–29.

<sup>29</sup> R.W. Kluszczyński, ‘Strategies of Interactive Art’, *Journal of Aesthetics & Culture*, 2010, vol. 2, p. 19.

and, on the other, function as performative utterances conforming to the pattern of iterability and being identifiable as “citations.”<sup>30</sup>

*Listening Post* presents in a suggestive way the “visualisation” of the process of communication of Internet users who use performative social behaviour (in this case limited to textual communication) when chatting on-line. The visualisation is based on a performative invocation of “citations” from online chats with the help of seven algorithms which select the texts. Among these algorithms, the first, third and fifth are visual. However, the impression of pictures forming is also felt when the spectator is at a greater distance from the LCD screens and cannot read the citations. *Listening Post* does not allow for a full participation, giving a choice of alternatives only: image or text, the whole or just a fragment.<sup>31</sup>

The situation described above is justified by the reasons for which *Listening Post* was created. Hansen and Rubin were invited to produce a work that could be called “the representation of the Internet; they wanted to answer the question of what a hundred thousand people chatting on the Internet would sound and look like. To depict this process, the authors used the word “crowd,” suggestive of occupying a certain space.”<sup>32</sup> The work operates in the following way: a computer monitors chat rooms and with a one-hour delay displays “citations” originating from chat-room conversations on small LCD screens. During these conversations the visual sphere of the process of Internet-mediated communication comes into existence, which reveals its performative character as well as the fact that it is the effect of making an impression on the recipients of digital pictures generated during the reception of this art-work by the spectators in the space of the gallery.

The utterances which appear in *Listening Post* are performative on the linguistic level, but they can also form the basis for its visual aspect. For this reason it is not just the textual dimension of the work but its visuality as well that is performative. The situation is well described by Mirzoeff’s apt remark: “Where it seemed at first that the Net had simply adapted the traditional spaces of representation for its own use, it is now creating new models of visual experience.”<sup>33</sup> *Listening Post* makes the Internet cease to be an exclusively textual means of communication and begin to function as a visual medium.

At the same time it is worth pointing out that the performative character of *Listening Post* manifests itself on two levels. On the one hand, what appears on the screens are sentences and speech acts which perform the role of

<sup>30</sup> J. Derrida, 1982, *op.cit.*, p. 326.

<sup>31</sup> R. Raley, 2009, ‘List(en)ing Post’, in: F.J. Ricardo (ed.), *Literary Art in Digital Performance. Case Studies in New Media Art and Criticism*, Continuum Press, New York – London, pp. 24-25.

<sup>32</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 23.

<sup>33</sup> N. Mirzoeff, 1999, *op.cit.*, p. 112.

a repetitive “citation.” Derrida claims that meaning arises out of repetition, from former usage, as in the cases of our own signature. That is why we need to use a “citation” if we want to create meaning.<sup>34</sup> Transferring this observation onto the area of visual culture it is worth noting that pictures too can construct meaning through repetition and citation. A similar process takes place in the case of *Listening Post*, in which the source of visuality is to be found in the linguistic “citations” of chat-room conversations used in a repetitive manner. On the visual level of the analysed work, the appearing “citations” form pictures. What appears on the small, oblong screens is single words, sentence fragments or full sentences taken from the Internet (chat-rooms, discussion groups, etc.). They are replaced in short intervals and read as soon as they appear by a synthesized voice. The situation changes after a moment, however: the computer scans through the data very quickly, and the spectator attempting to embrace in a single view the whole of the work presented in the gallery cannot read the semantic value of the words, whose variety and mutual patterning create a unique visual effect.

One more thing has to be noted: the performative act operates on the principle of convention. In this situation meaning is built not only through repetition but also through experiencing social roles. On the basis of the texts appearing on the LCD screens we realize what social roles the chat-room users perform. Linguistic performatives appearing in *Listening Post* are drawn into the “machinery of iterability,” which becomes the source of visuality.

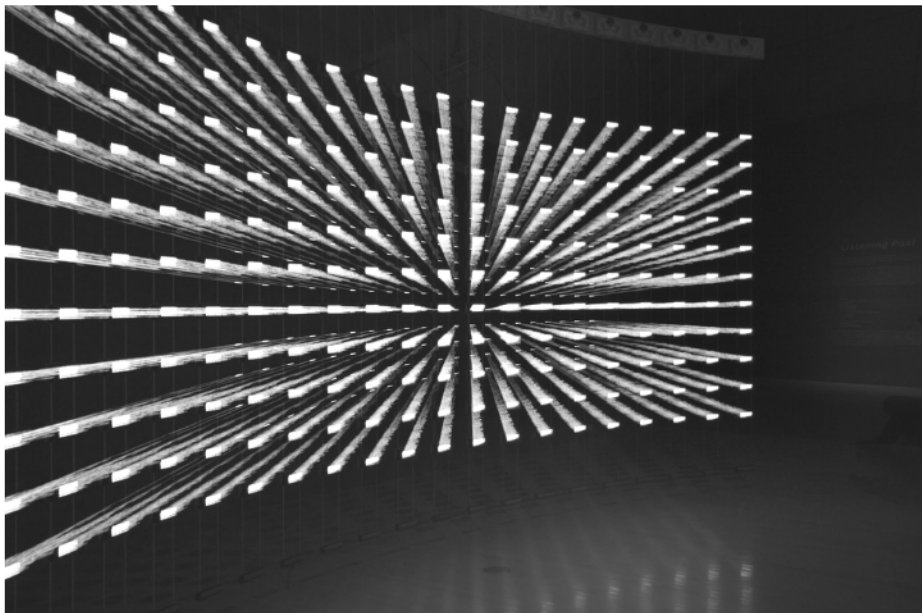
*Listening Post* reveals two aspects of Internet-mediated communication. On the one hand, it is obviously based only on the written text, and, on the other hand, this text is to a large extent visualised, already on the level of the chat-room communication itself (with emoticons, for example), and later, as the mentioned work reveals. Text can thus serve to create pictures, or even films. This quality is evident in the discussed work in a particularly strong way. As the computer selects new texts with increasing speed, some disappear from the screens, while others remain lit, creating patterns that refer, in a symbolic way, to iconic representations of animals or flowers. Reading these “images” sometimes requires a lot of imagination, but it directs our attention to quite an important aspect of the visualization of Internet text, which conveys the specificity of pictures generated in *Listening Post*. They may consist of text fragments, yet their role is not semantic but “iconic.” Moreover, this iconicity is performative: created in the process of performative transformation of speech acts. The method described here is widely used on the Internet, for instance in ASCII-Art – the art of creating drawings and film with the help of font characters.

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<sup>34</sup> J. Derrida, 1982, *op.cit.*, p. 326.



Listening Post (2004) by Mark Hansen and Ben Rubin



The final issue that I would like to raise in connection with *Listening Post* is the notion of community which is formed during the work's reception between individual spectators present in the gallery space and the people whose utterances are cited during the work's presentation. On the one hand, it is worth noting that the intention of the work's authors was to create a sense of "being" among the people chatting. The community created by Internet users participating in *Listening Post* resembles *communitas*. This is so because it only exists for the duration of the conversation, happens in the present and is spontaneous. Such qualities of *communitas* can also be found in Turner's description.<sup>35</sup> However, the artists who created *Listening Post* used a different dimension of collectivity. As Rita Raley put it, "To understand the community in and constituted by *Listening Post* we need to think in terms of the crowd in order to convey the sense of presentation, monitoring, surveillance. The crowd is that which one surveys, represents, assesses – yet it is also that which invites transport, the 'transcending of the limits of one's own person'. Our connections and affinities with it may be fleeting and temporary, but no less powerful and productive for being such."<sup>36</sup>

The community mentioned above is formed as a result of performative citations of the Internet texts. The community is thus formed as a result of "doing things with words." However, trying to find the most adequate terms to convey the way the community functions, it is useful to refer to the "Actor-Network Theory" (ANT) by Bruno Latour.<sup>37</sup> His idea is based on the assumption that both the subjective interlocutors and the agentive computers participate in the act of communication and that the connections form a peculiar network. For the network to survive, it must be ceaselessly performed. The "actor" and the "network" become one. Similarly, in *Listening Post* there arises the impression of being in a "network" of connections between the chat-room users. It is, on the one hand, those who take part in these conversations and, on the other, the spectators watching the work in the gallery who are the "actors."

#### **BODIES© INCORPORATED: "TEXTUAL" IDENTITY UNDER COPYRIGHT**

Nicholas Mirzoeff considers the visual representations on the Bodies© Incorporated (1993) website, designed by Victoria Vesna and available at <http://www.bodiesinc.ucla.edu/>, in the context of the problematic of identity

<sup>35</sup> V. Turner, 2008, *op.cit.*, p. 113.

<sup>36</sup> R. Raley, 2009, *op.cit.*, p. 32.

<sup>37</sup> B. Latour, 2005, *Reassembling the Social. An Introduction to Actor-Network Theory*, Oxford University Press, Oxford – New York.



shaping in Internet-mediated communication. On the website the user can create visual representations of his or her own body, which become tele-present. As a result of his or her choices, the “body” acquires a certain psychological identity, sex, sexual orientation, age (0-999 years) as well as an “image” which we can see on one of the pages on the website known as the “Showplace!!!”<sup>38</sup>

Choosing sex for the body, we act according to the performative paradigm, which, according to Judith Butler, inscribes these beings into a fixed model of identity.<sup>39</sup> If we give the bodies a particular sex and sexual orientation, it is not because they are essentially “male” or “female” but because we refer to the opposition of gender, a particular socio-cultural order and the conventions of the social role which we wish to bestow on the bodies. In *Bodies that Matter* Butler describes the first medical interpellation, “the initiatory performative, ‘It’s a girl!’ [which] anticipates the eventual arrival of the sanction, ‘I pronounce you man and wife.’”<sup>40</sup> The pronouncement does not relate a fact but in a performative manner brings into existence a creature with a fixed sex identity. The “bodies” brought to “life” on the Bodies© INCorporated website acquire their identity on a similar principle. Moreover, their identity is from the very beginning subject to the power which the users have over their bodies. This power has its limits, however, for a being given “life” cannot be deprived of it. Victoria Vesna describes how in the early version of the website it was not possible to take the “life” of the body away. After pressure from the users of the bodies such an option became available, although it is difficult to implement<sup>41</sup>.

The example of Bodies© INCorporated points to the fact that Internet-mediated communication integrates aspects of identity with visual bodily representations. However, as Vesna claims, “The title Bodies© INCorporated is a play on words. ‘Bodies’ is accompanied by a copyright symbol and ‘INCorporated’ draws on the Latin root ‘corpus’, while alluding to a corporation – bodies are incorporated into the Internet and their information is copyrighted.”<sup>42</sup>

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<sup>38</sup> N. Mirzoeff, 1999, *op.cit.*, pp. 112-114.

<sup>39</sup> J. Loxley, 2007, *Performativity. The New Critical Idiom*, Routledge, London – New York, pp. 117-120.

<sup>40</sup> J. Butler, 1993, *Bodies That Matter: On the Discursive Limits of “Sex”*, Routledge, London – New York, p. 232.

<sup>41</sup> V. Vesna, 2007, ‘Seeing the World in a Grain of Sand: The Database Aesthetics of Everything’, in: V. Vesna (ed.), *Database Aesthetics. Art in the Age of Information Overflow*, University of Minnesota Press, Minneapolis – London, p. 14.

<sup>42</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 12.





On the Bodies© INCorporated website the bodies are treated as “texts” under copyright. They can thus be “read” but they can also be “cited” and incorporated into other bodies. In *Performative Acts and Gender Constitution: An Essay in Phenomenology and Feminist Theory*<sup>43</sup> Judith Butler refers to Maurice Merleau-Ponty’s notion of embodiment derived from the book *Phenomenology of Perception*, which is of special importance also for the philosophical movement within visual studies. Butler constructs identity on its bodily basis, referring to the chapter entitled “The Body in its Sexual Being” and quoting the statement that the body “is a historical idea and not a natural species.”<sup>44</sup>

The identity of the bodies on the website is thus shaped through “performative acts.” In this sense the process of embodying identity, mentioned by

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<sup>43</sup> J. Butler, 1988, ‘Performative Acts and Gender Constitution: An Essay in Phenomenology and Feminist Theory’, *Theatre Journal*, vol. 40, No. 4, pp. 519-531.

<sup>44</sup> M. Merleau-Ponty, 2005, *The Phenomenology of Perception*, transl. C. Smith, Routledge, London – New York, p. 198.

Butler, resembles “enacting a script.” The performative identity is also constructed in the context of Austin’s linguistic theories and Derrida’s notion of iterability.<sup>45</sup> Similarly, the bodies on the Bodies© INCorporated website and their identity are shaped textually, which is seen in the textual descriptions which tell us what they are called, how old they are or what their sex and sexual orientation is. Perhaps this situation results from the fact that the bodies exist on the Internet, which is based on hypertext, but these performative “texts” are simultaneously pictures.

## CONCLUSION

The domination of visual media confirms the proliferation of visuality and reveals the reasons which led to it, making some theoreticians proclaim that “Contemporary culture is becoming to a greater and greater degree the culture of image, or (...) the culture of visibility.”<sup>46</sup> At present performative social behaviour dominates the processes of communication achieved through visual media, especially the Internet. These processes, together with the visual elements of image simulation which render the modern practice of communication performative, highlight the visual processes, procedures of seeing and picture reception. This is achieved by affecting the spectators, who are more and more flooded by pictures generated by means of media communication technologies. The reception of pictures has replaced their creation. Nowadays pictures are generated on their own, and come to life like viruses on the Internet. The performativity of images is connected with seeing them as living entities. Mindy Fenske talks about it openly: “Images (...) are living things. The particular form of life is not, however, analogous to an acting individual agent or subject. Instated, the images’ life is more similar to the potential for life imagined in, for example, religious icons or, seen another way, the reproducibility of a biological virus. In the first case, images live because of human tendency to attribute life. There is propensity (both historical and cultural) to approach images ‘asif’ they have immanent power and life.”<sup>47</sup>

The issue mentioned here has been voiced most strongly by Mitchell, who firmly states in *What do Pictures Want?* that “A picture is less like a statement or speech act, then, than like a speaker capable of an infinite number of

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<sup>45</sup> S. Salih, 2002, *Judith Butler. Routledge Critical Thinkers*, Routledge, London – New York, p. 86.

<sup>46</sup> E. Wilk, 1998, ‘Preface’, in: E. Wilk (ed.), *Methodology – Culture – Audiovisuality*, Instytut Kultury and Wydawnictwo Naukowe “Śląsk”, Warszawa – Katowice, p. 7.

<sup>47</sup> M. Fensky, 2007, *op.cit.*, p. 23.

utterances.”<sup>48</sup> This remark illustrates the performative transference of the image from the position of a text to that of a visual subject or agent.

**ZDARZENIE WIZUALNE JAKO EFEKT SIECI  
PERFORMATYWNE ASPEKTY KOMUNIKOWANIA ZAPOŚREDNICZONEGO  
PRZEZ INTERNET W NET ARCIE  
(streszczenie)**

Punktem wyjścia jest założenie, że zwrot performatywny, kieruje naszą uwagę na ekspresyjny wymiar działania społecznego i zdarzenia, które mają charakter procesu. Jeśli przeniesiemy to założenie na obszar kultury wizualnej to przedmiotem naszych dociekań nie będą obrazy, ale zdolność ich widzenia przez uczestnika zdarzeń wizualnych albo proces, który prowadzi do ich powstania. Performatywne aspekty można więc zauważyć w definicji „zdarzenia wizualnego”, sformułowanej przez Nicholasa Mirzoeffa, który proponuje wprowadzenie tego określenia w miejsce pojęcia „obrazu”. W myśl tej koncepcji zdarzenie wizualne stanowi centralny aspekt odbioru – procesu widzenia, w którym użytkownik lub konsument poszukuje informacji, znaczenia albo przyjemności w mediach wizualnych: od obrazów olejnych do telewizji i Internetu.

Główną tezę eseju jest przekonanie, że zdarzenie wizualne jest efektem sieci, która warunkuje działanie komunikujących się między sobą użytkowników. Performatywne aspekty komunikowania zapośredniczonego przez Internet ujawniają się gdy internauci posługują się aktami mowy. Jednocześnie podczas tego procesu „działania słowami” interlokutorzy komunikujący się między sobą tworzą wspólnotę przypominającą *communitas* – termin używany przez Victora Turnera. *Communitas* możemy odnieść do wspólnoty sieciowej, a także do wszelkich przejawów jej funkcjonowania, w których internauci oddziałują na siebie nie tylko za pomocą komunikatów werbalnych, ale także innymi formami internetowej komunikacji wizualnej (obrazy pochodzące z web-kamer, flashowych animacji i fotoblogów).

Opisane problemy znajdują swoje odbicie w pracy sieciowej *Listening Post* (2003) Marka Hansena i Bena Rubina, która ukazuje „wizualizację” zapośredniczonego procesu komunikowania internautów posługujących się aktami mowy w pokojach czatowych. Wykorzystane w tej pracy internetowe komunikowanie werbalne przyjmuje wymiar performance’u, który jest źródłem powstania jej sfery wizualnej, a używane przez internautów akty mowy funkcjonują jako „cytaty” zgodne z „iterowalnym modelem” w rozumieniu zaproponowanym przez Jacquesa Derridę. Innym przykładem performatywnych aspektów komunikowania zapośredniczonego przez Internet jest praca internetowa *Bodies*© INCorporated (2001) Victorii Vesny, która została omówiona w kontekście teorii performatywności Judith Butler. Wymienione przykłady ukazują sposoby wykorzystania performatywnych aspektów komunikowania zapośredniczonego przez Internet w sztuce.

**Słowa kluczowe:** performatywność, zdarzenie wizualne, komunikacja zapośredniczona przez Internet, net art, *communitas*.

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<sup>48</sup> W.J.T. Mitchell, 2005, *What Do Pictures Want? The Lives and Loves of Images*, The University of Chicago Press, Chicago – London, p. 140.