Performatism, or the End of Postmodernism

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For the subject, postmodernism presents a mighty, seemingly inescapable trap.(1) Any attempt it makes to find itself through a search for meaning is bound to go awry, for every sign promising some sort of originary knowledge is embedded in further contexts whose explication requires the setting of even more signs. Attempting to find itself through meaning, the subject drowns in a flood of ever expanding cross-references. Yet even if the subject clings to form it fares no better. For postmodernism sees in form not an antidote to meaning, but rather a trace leading back to already existing, semantically loaded contexts. Every fixation of meaning is dispersed through cross-connected forms; every use of form links up with already existing meanings; every approach to an origin leads back to an alien sign. Searching for itself, the subject quickly ends where it began: in the endlessly expanding field of the postmodern.

The way out of postmodernism does therefore not lead through the intensified search for meaning, through the introduction of new, surprising forms or through the return to an authentic origin. Instead, it must take place through a mechanism completely impervious to postmodernism's modes of dispersal, deconstruction and proliferation. This mechanism, which has been making itself felt with increasing strength in the cultural events of the last few years, can be best understood using the notion of *performance*. Performance in itself is, of course, not a phenomenon new or unknown. In Austin's speech-act theory it refers to a language act that does what it promises ("I now pronounce you man and wife"). In the sense of an artistic event in the modernist avant-garde, a performance foregrounds or "makes strange" the border between life and art; in the happenings and performance art of postmodernism it integrates the human body or subject into an artistic context. The concept of performance I am suggesting here is, however, a different one. The new notion of performativity serves neither to foreground nor contextualize the subject, but rather to preserve it: the subject is presented (or presents itself) as a holistic, irreducible unit that makes a binding impression on a reader or observer. This holistic incarnation of the subject can, however, only succeed when the subject does not offer a semantically differentiated surface that can be absorbed and dispersed in the surrounding context. For this reason the new subject always appears to the observer as reduced and "solid," as single- or simple-

minded and in a certain sense identical with the things it stands for. This closed, simple whole acquires a potency that can almost only be defined in theological terms. For with it is created a refuge in which all those things are brought together that postmodernism and poststructuralism thought definitively dissolved: the *telos*, the author, belief, love, dogma and much, much more.

The first models of a reduced, holistic subject seem not to have been formulated by writers or artists, but rather by literary critics reacting with antitheoretical or minimalist arguments to poststructuralism. Thus Knapp and Michaels, in their groundbreaking article "Against Theory" (Mitchell 1985, orig. 1982), call for the unity or "fundamental inseparability" (1985, 12) of the three basic conditions of interpretation: authorial intention, text, and reader. To this unity they oppose "theory." According to Knapp and Michaels, theory privileges the one or the other part of the whole interpretation process while ignoring or playing down the others (the hermeneutical critic plays up authorial intention, the deconstructivist the sign, the relativist the reader, and so on; compare the discussion in Mitchell 1985, 13-24). In Knapp and Michaels' view "theory" does not refine or improve interpretative practice, but rather represents an unacceptable attempt to take a position outside of it: "[Theory] is the name for all the ways people have tried to stand outside practice in order to govern practice from without. Our thesis has been that no one can reach a position outside practice, that theorists should stop trying, and that the theoretical enterprise should therefore come to an end" (1985, 30). This insistence on the absolute unity of author, sign, and reader has indirect, but nonetheless far-reaching consequences for recreating the subject. Interpretation no longer takes place through floating, proliferating semiotic acts continually eluding their progenitors, but rather through the competition between individual, holistic statements made by discrete subjects. The subject expresses itself in holistic performances in which it believes; other, competing subjects question these acts of belief (cf. Mitchell 1985, 28). Antitheoretical subjects are opaque (they have no set qualities), but they are always present; the reader always has practical access to them on the basis of a discrete interpretative performance. In a similar sense Michaels, in a later book (1995), argues against searching for cultural identity in the past, in race or in foreign roots. Cultural identity is given in the way people live their lives at a given time; it is unproductive, and in fact impossible, to establish identity outside of that empirical frame. Both "theory" and the ideology of cultural pluralism work by disarticulating a part from a whole (the signifier from the interpretative act, race from culture) and making that part into a continually receding, unattainable other (cf. 1995, 15-16 and 128-129).

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Roughly at the same time as Knapp and Michael conceived their antitheory the American Romanist Eric Gans formulated his "Generative Anthropology," which is also based on a holistic, performatively conceived sign and a reduced subject.(2) Generative Anthropology may be described briefly as a minimalist theory of language origin inspired by the

victimization theory of René Girard. Central to Generative Anthropology is the assumption of an originary situation–a "mimetic crisis"–in which competing members of a small, prelinguistic group for the first time employ a linguistic ("ostensive") sign to designate an object of contention directly before them. The use of the ostensive sign defuses and defers the conflict: the previously existing, animalistic social order is transformed into a specifically human one based on semiotic representation rather than on physical imitation ("mimesis"). Analogous to Girard's "founding murder" of an innocent victim, the first use of the sign acquires a considerable sacral potency: the collective experiences the semiotically mediated act of pacification as something holy. This pacification, however, is merely a deferral of the originary, object-related conflict: although the ostensive sign represents an object it cannot be put to direct use. Representation therefore always gives rise to resentment, which continually threatens to expand into violence; only the renewed employment of the sign can once more defer this threat. Gans–quite consciously–ontologizes and sacralizes Derridian *différance*. Semiosis is ironic deferral, but this deferral serves not the play of traces and linguistic paradoxes, but rather a "holy" goal, namely the preservation of the subject in the semiotic collective. The ostensive sign always contains an element of paradox, since the sign pretends to be something that it cannot be (a usable thing). The sign brings about reconciliation on one hand and resentment on the other because it represents things without placing them entirely at the disposal of the subject. This paradox has direct consequences for the subject's search for identity. Instead of continually failing to find itself in a tangle of semiotic traces, the subject constitutes itself through a dialectic of "love and resentment" rooted in the holistic, object-bound sign; this dialectic continually asserts itself anew in cultural life. With this in mind, Gans has begun shifting his interest from a critique of theory to a far-ranging description of contemporary culture; his *Chronicles of Love and Resentment*(see bibliography), which appear regularly on his internet site, have recently been addressing what Gans calls "post-millennial," that is, post-postmodern, culture. All in all, however, neither Knapp and Michaels' much-discussed antitheory nor Generative Anthropology have found a broad base of adherents in American academia: their minimalist, antitheoretical critiques are unsettling not only to poststructuralism, but to hermeneutics and traditional literary criticism as well.[(3)]

Less radical, but perhaps more influential, versions of performatism can be found in what is generally called New Historicism. A case in point is Stephen Greenblatt's approach to self-fashioning, which may be thought of as a quasi-transcendent act aimed at reviving still earlier subject-creating performances–one need only think of the enigmatic opening line of his *Shakespearian Negotiations* : "I began with the desire to speak with the dead" (Greenblatt 1988, 1). Just how much performatist practices have come to inform literary scholarship and criticism since the 1980s is a question that cannot be treated here in detail. Further below, however, I will touch on two recent essays deeply marked by performatism: Jedediah Purdy's *For Common Things* (1999) and *Unter Verdacht* [Under suspicion] (2000) by the Russo-German critic Boris Groys.

In literature and particularly in cinema, the performatist sign and a holistic, reduced subject begin to appear in the mid-to-late 1990s. In Russian literature the best examples seem to me to be Viktor Pelevin's short stories as well as his novel *Chapaev i Pustota* [*Buddha's Little Finger*] (orig. 1996, English translation 1999). However, performatism can also be found in the popular, conventionally narrated realism of Liudmila Ulitskaia, as, for example, in her novella *Vesëlie pokhorony* [A happy funeral] or the short story "Genele-sumochnitsa" [Genele the purse lady] (both in Ulitskaia 1998).(4) In German literature a good recent example would be Ingo Schulze's much-acclaimed novel *Simple Storys* [Simple stories] (1999). In Western movies I would single out Sam Mendes's Oscar-crowned *American Beauty* (1999), Jim Jarmusch's *Ghost Dog* (2000), the Danish Dogma film *The Idiots* by Lars von Trier (1998), and Tom Tykwer's *Run Lola Run* (German orig.: *Lola rennt*, 1998); as a Slavist with a Bohemian specialization I've also been struck by the Czech films *Návrat idiota* [Return of the idiot] (1999) and *Samotári* [Loners] (2000). In spite of vastly different cultural backgrounds, themes, and genre traditions all the above-named works derive their strength from the authorially guided apotheosis of reduced, whole subjects and from the performative use of object-bound, holistic signs. Subjectivity and semiosis are no longer treated as context-dependent, continually failing gestures but rather form closed, performatively realized wholes that resist dispersal in surrounding contexts. Around these subjects there develop plots often dealing with a character transcending the context around him or her. The performative principle, which at first applies only to the individual, is carried over to the whole or at least to other subjects close to the central character.

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The new, performatist concept of the subject expresses itself most clearly in films like *American Beauty*, *The Idiots*, *Return of the Idiot and Loners*, in which dumb or dumbed-down heroes play a central role. In *American Beauty* the hero consciously reverts to a state of a puberty; in *The Idiots* the commune members intentionally act like mentally retarded persons; in *Return of the Idiot* the simple-minded protagonist owes his naivete to a long stay in a psychiatric institution; in *Loners* the pothead Jakub is continually forgetting salient details of daily life (for example, how the Czech national anthem sounds, that he's driving through Prague and not Dubrovnik, and that he has a girlfriend gone off on a two-week visit to her aunt). These subjects present themselves (or are presented) as self-sufficient wholes impervious to the demands or responsibilities emanating from the social context around them. Out of these self-presentations arise new freedoms which in all four cases serve to renew human relationships through love. Lester Burnham, the hero of *American Beauty*, becomes obsessed with a teenage object of desire but holds back from seducing her precisely when he is in a position to do so; in *The Idiots* the homely Karen, who professes love for all the commune members, overcomes her own bourgeois background through an atavistic performance ("spassing"); because he loves everyone, Frantisek in *Return of the Idiot* can act amidst an unhappy four-way relationship as an advisor, confidante, scapegoat and finally as a loved one who breaks through the cycle of false desire. In Pelevin's

programmatic short story with the characteristic title "Ontologiia detstva" [Ontology of childhood], the narrator states: "In general, the life of a grown person is self-sufficient and–how should I put it–doesn't have empty spaces that could hold experience not directly related to his immediate surroundings" (Pelevin 1998, 222). The "empty spaces," which can be psychological or ritualistic in nature, create room for a holistic perspective allowing characters to transcend their own immediate situations: compare, for example, the apotheosis of Lester Burnham in *American Beauty*; Chapaev's and Anka's passage to Nirvana in *Buddha's Little Finger*; Karen's break with bourgeois family life in *The Idiots*; the complete assimilation and application of samurai teachings by the contract killer in Jim Jarmusch's *Ghost Dog*.(5) Even in Liudmila Ulitskaia's realistically narrated short stories one can find this leap from almost total reduction to a dynamic, context-transcending performance. In *A Happy Funeral* the ecumenical testament of the paralyzed artist Alik is a taped message which is played unexpectedly after his death and admonishes his friends to revel spontaneously in daily life; in "Genele the Purse Lady" the vocabulary of the dying Jewish heroine is reduced after a stroke to the word "purse," in which a valuable legacy may or may not be hidden (her way of bequeathing value is evidently intended as an allegory of how secular, deritualized Judaism continues to renew itself).

This retrograde self-fashioning of the subject has something profoundly sacral about it, for every successful act of establishing selfhood implies a transcending, context-disrupting act of sacrifice which can exhaust or destroy the subject. The naive Frantisek in *Return of the Idiot* suffers from stigmata-like nosebleeds; after a particularly intensive act of "spassing" the naked, exhausted leader of *The Idiots* lies like Christ in the Pietà; Lester Burnham is killed when Colonel Fitts misinterprets his self-emancipatory message; the contract killer in *Ghost Dog*–in accordance with the samurai code–allows himself to be killed by his master. The performative subject, who delineates a whole, closed space within a certain context, must reckon with the entire resentment of the context being directed against the foreign body in its midst. At the same time the subject's "message" can spread when other subjects are infected by its example and create new free spaces of their own.

This messianic moment emanating from performative signs is expressly treated in *American Beauty* in conjunction with the character of Ricky Fitts. Ricky at first seems to be a voyeur who films everything passing by his camera lens. As it turns out, making digital movies–representing things in media–is only a means for him to temporarily participate in holistic processes like death and beauty. When asked whether he knows someone who had in the meantime died, he says: "[No, but] I did see this homeless woman who froze to death once. Just laying there on the sidewalk. She looked really sad" (Bell 1999, 57). And when asked why he filmed her, he says: "When you see something like that, it's like God is looking right at you, just for a second. And if you're careful, you can look right back" (1999, 57). Through his camera-mediated observations of things Ricky participates in the divine order as a whole, he constitutes himself in such moments as the performative likeness of God.(6) It is not only the sight of death that gives Ricky this chance, but also the performative

beauty of the things themselves. As Ricky says, the most beautiful thing he ever saw was a white plastic bag that danced before him in the wind: "And this bag was just dancing with me. Like a little kid, begging me to play with it. For fifteen minutes. That's the day I realized that there was this entire life behind things, and this incredibly benevolent force that wanted me to know there was no reason to be afraid. Ever" (1999, 60). This theistic insight is not shaken by Lester's violent death, which Ricky reacts to not with horror or voyeuristic curiosity, but rather with sacral sympathy (the script speaks of "awe," 1999, 97). Inert materiality (including death) is no longer a threat. Instead, it is part of a holistic, benevolent order which can be observed and confirmed by experiencing how actions and their designations come together in a performance. Just as postmodernism institutionalized evil–continuous boundary transgression–the new epoch institutionalizes the good–the one-time, firm drawing of borders. Accordingly, there is a strong tendency among performative works of art to justify divine creation, to turn to theodicy. Lester Burnham's murderer, Colonel Fitts, is not evil; he is simply a rejected lover who has deformed himself by denying his own "fit" or frame of being (his homosexuality); the result is a "fit" or single act of violent rage. He himself possesses only a trace of evil–a plate with a swastika on the back which he keeps under lock and key. A similar downplaying and limiting of evil can also be found in Pelevin–this in stark contrast to the brutal, endless border transgressions typical of postmodernists like Iurii Mamleev and Vladimir Sorokin in Russia or Brett Easton Ellis in America. Thus the Nazi period in "Oruzhie vozmezdiia" [Weapon of vengeance] is laconically described with the words "a certain Michel(7) had acted up" (1998, 308). The reduction of Nazism to banal objects or to boisterous actions is not a result of historical revisionism but rather of the need to uphold the "good" performative order. Evil, which is really misunderstood or ill-fitting goodness, is relegated to a small, insignificant space within this order.

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The performative drawing of boundaries expresses itself most clearly in terms of plot. Postmodernism, as is well known, allows no time or space for causal ties to develop. Chronotopes arise and disperse almost simultaneously (as can be seen in Derridian modes like *différance* or undecidability, which cannot be fixed in temporal, spatial or causal terms). In contrast, in the new, performatist epoch there is a tendency to create chronotopes allowing a choice between possibilities or even repeated choices between possibilities. Contingency is now the prerogative of the subject and not of signs: the point is to preserve the integrity of the subject even under the most unfavorable conditions. The most obvious example of this is Tom Tykwer's *Run Lola Run* . The movie's heroine gets the chance to repeat a botched money transfer three times until she and the hero finally get things right. Each of the three plot sequences appears as a discrete chronotope, each starting respectively with a few split seconds' difference. Each chronotope correlates formally with every other one, yet because of the slight difference in time each results in a completely different performance. Time and space are in other words adjusted until a holistic solution

favoring the subject is found, until wish and wish-fulfillment coincide. The actions of the subject are no longer determined by the aleatory, ultimately uncontrollable equivalences among signs, but rather through the manipulation of the transcendental frame by a subject endowed with authorial powers. Instead of unfolding as a freewheeling postmodern game, Lola's actions serve a single, self-confirming goal: they preserve a subject running for her and another's life. Rather than being justified in epistemological or argumentative terms this manipulation is simply performed: it is presented to the viewer as a narrative fact that must either be disbelieved or believed. In this way fiction becomes religion, belief becomes an unavoidable result of any semiotic or secular act. It is no accident in this regard that Gans especially emphasizes the sacral function of the market and consumption in capitalist societies (see *Chronicle* 124, *The Market Model: Three Points,* 31 January 1998); it is no accident that the exemplary Jewish heroine in Ulitskaia's "Genele the Purse-Lady" always gets the optimal price in her dealings with the market vendors (see Ulitskaia 1998, 162-164).

Since the positively acting subject should be preserved at all costs, we find in performatist works a tendency to invest characters with far-ranging authorial prerogatives. Accordingly, characters are endowed with the ability to manipulate time, space, and causality for their own benefit. The fact that Lola is allowed to take off on her run three times is not just the decision of an anonymous authorial narrator but also of Lola herself. A similar moment can be found in the narrative structure of *American Beauty*. At the film's beginning we see the bird's-eye view of a small town and hear a detached, almost meditative voice saying: "My name is Lester Burnham. This is my neighborhood. This is my street. This . . . is my life. I'm forty-two years old. In less than a year I'll be dead." As the first scene of the film appears, Lester's voice adds: "Of course, I don't know that yet" (Bell 1999, 1). Lester's tranquility is made possible by the holism of the narrative framework, which is oblivious to the ontological difference between implicit author and character–and hence to death itself. In this way even the evacuation or destruction of characters serves to strengthen the whole; after his murder by Colonel Fitts, Lester returns to the authorial frame, from which he reintroduces the story from a personal perspective. The act of narrating becomes an act of belief that cannot be made the object of a metaphysical critique or deconstruction. The film is constructed in such a way that the viewer has no choice other than to transcend his or her own disbelief and accept the performance represented by the film. This transformation of the viewing process into an involuntary act of belief stands in direct contrast to the postmodern mode of the virtual, where the observer can't believe *anything* because ontological parameters like author, narrator and character have been dissolved in an impenetrable web of paradoxical citations and cross-references (the best example of this is the unenviable fate of the private detective in Paul Auster's *New York Trilogy*).

Even Frantisek, the hero of the conventionally filmed *Return of the Idiot* has a striking authorial power: he has the curious ability to get on or off departing trains already well in motion. This ability, which departs annoyingly from the realistic context of the rest of the

film, is decisive for the outcome of the plot. In the beginning, it enables the hero to get to know the older sister and, at the end, it enables him to return to the younger one who apparently loves him. Once more, this is a case of contingency being foregrounded and at the same time suspended in the interest of the subject. The temporary suspension of "mere" mimesis is not a throwaway semiotic effect but rather serves the welfare of the subject in its personal guise. This sort of authorially self-empowered subject can also be found in Ulitskaia, who adheres consistently to 19th-century norms of realistic representation. By allowing a "dialogical" tape to be played after his death Alik, in *A Happy Funeral*, appears to his friends and relatives–literally–as a *deus ex machina* speaking authoritatively from the hereafter.

An authorially empowered character also plays a crucial role in the Dogma film *The Idiots*, which otherwise (in accordance with the "Dogma-95" oath) foregoes the use of all external authorial manipulations. The only person unable to "spass-out" in the commune's group actions proves to be the only one who dares to do so in the context of her own family life: her drooling and slobbering at her stiff, emotionally cold family's midtime coffee is not just a superficial provocation but materially equates her with her baby who had died two weeks before. In this way she alone realizes the missionary message of the domineering, egocentrical leader of the "idiots" (who characteristically does not act like an idiot when dealing with his own bourgeois relative). Dogmatic authoriality must always first prove itself in a spontaneous personal guise (this happens, for example, in *Buddha's Little Finger* when the New Russian gangsters involuntarily experience a Buddhist illumination). That the principle of the personally empowered implicit author can be transferred to the level of the real-life author can be seen in the "Dogma 95" code formulated by Lars von Trier and Thomas Vinterberg. The self-imposed authorial dictate that the director should only use natural light and sounds and not bring in extra props establishes a semantically unmarked frame that frees by confining. The result is not an obsessive adherence to rules, but rather the holistic unification of authorial rigor and personal spontaneity:

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> […] you can practise the technique–the Dogma technique or the idiot technique–from now to kingdom come without anything coming out of it unless you have a profound, passionate desire and need to do so. Karen discovers that she needs the technique and therefore it changes her life. Idiocy is like hypnosis or ejaculation: if you want it, you can't have it, and if you don't want it, you can.[(8)](#)

A successful performance depends on the unforced will of an authorially framed subject and not on the author himself. The programmatic, indeed almost Old Testamentary restriction against crediting the director in Dogma movies pays tribute to this principle: divinity expresses itself neither in an authorial dictate, nor in personal will, nor in pure ritual, but rather in the fortuitous convergence of all three. In spite of very different religious sources

(theism in *American Beauty*, Buddhism in Pelevin, Judaism in Ulitskaia, cult in *The Idiots*) all performatistic authors share an identical cultural-theological perspective: namely that Godliness is everywhere where wholes are created by individual subjects.(9)

How persons can be authorially empowered with architectonic means can be experienced, incidentally, in the newly renovated Reichstag in Berlin.(10) Whereas postmodern architecture disorients the subject by causing spatial coordinates to appear equivalent and interchangeable, the glass dome of the Reichstag presents a transparent, unmarked frame which allows the visitor to experience his or her own apotheosis by slowly ascending the spiral-shaped walkway curling around the dome; at the end of the climb the visitor, now completely surrounded by blue sky, "thrones" over the members of the Bundestag deliberating directly below.

In terms of media, the performative reduction and drawing of boundaries aims neither one-sidedly at the authentic reproduction of the real nor at the effortless, endless reproduction of signs in virtual, secondary reality. Rather, it performs a paradoxical unification of both moments in a cinematic frame which, precisely because it is constructed by an author and not by an interplay of signs, is marked by personal and technical "mistakes." In *The Idiots* Lars von Trier realizes this paradoxality in the most varied ways. Although "Dogma 95" rigorously restricts the technical possibilities of camera technique, sound effects, and lighting in *The Idiots*, the montage employed is comparatively dynamic and professional–that is, without the unbearably long, monotonous takes suggesting the absence of authorially scripted dramaturgy. At the same time, von Trier intentionally allowed easily removable mistakes to remain, as, for example, back-and-forth-focussing in poor light and footage of a badly set-up second cameraman. This intentional juxtaposition of professionalism and dilettantism causes the medium of film to appear as a real thing employed by a personally responsible authorial subject and not as a virtual, self-perpetuating process à la Baudrillard or McCluhan. The medium is the messenger, and no longer the message: it is the extension of a paradoxical authorial subject pointing out his (or her) own materiality and fallibility.

How messages are now linked to a specifically human medium can be seen in an especially vivid way on the walls of the new Reichstag, where Sir Norman Foster simply allowed much of the (in part obscene) graffiti left by Russian soldiers to stand as it was. Within the framework of the newly renovated building the banal messages scribbled on the walls by real people no longer have a semantic meaning; instead, they represent the violent intrusion of a history borne by human subjects into the massive, static space of German state power.(11) The graffiti on the Reichstag walls are not citations, they are *real*; rather than producing a nostalgic, simulatory effect, they demonstrate the materiality, subjectivity and fracturedness of history within a holistic, intentionally constructed framework. Precisely this perfomative, authorial framing of historical statements enables their renewal and keeps them from being degraded to mere quotes. On the other hand, though, performatism does

not return to authenticity. The force of the original signs asserts itself only after they have been framed in another medium which is necessarily always artificial.(12)

The paradoxical relationship between the medium as a conveyor of "true" physical facts and an authorially manipulated, virtual frame is expressed most vividly in *The Idiots* in the depiction of sexuality. There, the sexual act is presented as an indubitable physical performance: the film shows both erections as well as vaginal penetration. The depiction of these real physical acts, which would normally violate the intimate sphere of actors, characters and viewers alike, nonetheless does not appear degrading, dehumanizing or mechanical in the context of the film. This is apparently only possible because the subjectively undifferentiated, faceless sexuality of the commune members–group sex creates a unified field of action in which sublime, subject-fixated narrative and primitive, object-fixated lust converge in a congenial way. Performed idiocy, which at least temporarily levels out the difference between object and subject, creates a discrete space in which nothing human appears alien. This free space for performing faceless physical acts is itself however not the goal. Rather, it is a means for creating a new individual subjectivity residing beyond the confines of the free space itself. In a scene directly following the shots of group sex, where two individuals approach one another erotically, the camera behaves conventionally and chastely: it turns away just before the sexual act takes place, thus returning a sense of privacy to characters, actors and viewers. Lars von Trier's messianistic performatism (and Pelevin's as well) makes frequent use of such dramaturgical shifts, which the viewer is made to perceive and assimilate involuntarily. In general, performatism encourages self-therapy, it suggests we can transcend the force of rampant, oppressive contexts by repeatedly asserting our own selfhood (compare in this regard *Run Lola Run*, Pelevin's search for Nirvana or Michaels' critique of the pluralist dispersion of selfhood in *Our America*).

6

Performatism also has a political dimension. In his carefully honed essay *For Common Things,* Jedediah Purdy (2000, orig. 1999) argues against the postmodern attitude of ironic indifference and for the acceptance of individual political responsibility in a postideological age. But how is the individual to work towards a political goal in the absence of any clear ideological guidelines? Purdy exemplifies this dilemma using two seemingly disparate examples: that of the ruinous strip mining in his home state of West Virginia and that of the turn to democracy in Poland, the Czech Republic and Hungary. Destructive strip mining in West Virginia cannot, to paraphrase Purdy in my terms, be averted solely by imposing a strict governmental frame (a "carbon tax") or by performing acts of individual resistance. Rather, both need to coincide in a typically circular fashion whose alpha and omega is a non-ironic, "attentive" subject:

Reform through law is only effective if it joins with lives that realize some of the principles that law declares and tries to enforce. If we do not become the sort of people–more

reflective in our demands, more modest in our needs, more attentive in our actions–who could inhabit a responsible economy, such an economy will not come to us by law or government. Because it will not come without law and government, changing ourselves is all the more important. We are the beginning as well as the end of a decent economy's possibility, because we are the sole site of responsibility. Responsibility begins in attentiveness, because only that can help us to discern the conditions of hope. (2000, 159-160)By contrast, Eastern Europe's turn to democracy is for Purdy a successful act of political transcendency and a victory of democratic, revolutionary ideals: upright, courageous dissidents like Adam Michnik or Václav Havel not only promulgated these ideals publicly but also lived by them personally (see 2000, 113 ff.). As Purdy points out, though, the successful political performances in Eastern Europe have led to a paradoxical result. The heroic victory of democratic ideals has once more allowed the creation of a free private realm; this private realm is at the same time concerned mainly with banal, personal matters and continually threatens to fall back into political lethargy and social indifference. For Purdy, heroic, self-sacrificing political performances of the type cited above never deliver absolute ideological legitimacy. Rather, they create a frame in which we may actively overcome our own indifference and develop an interest in "common things"–that is, things which are in many respects banal but which are also objects of publicly shared concern (2000, 127-128). Attentive individuals must act in the private, banal sphere in order to transcend it temporarily and reach shared (but never ideologically binding) goals. This corresponds in practical political terms to the fictionally mediated creation of a frame and the transcending of that frame by a naive or simple-minded individual subject. "Realist" performatism (Purdy, Gans, Ulitskaia etc.) confirms this mechanism but allows for continual relapses into irony or paradox; "fantastic" performatism (Pelevin) holds forth the possibility of total transcendence.

Finally, the unifying intention of performatism is closely tied to the return of the phallus as a positive enabling force in culture.(13) Contrary to the poststructuralist assumption that the phallus functions only by muzzling, suppressing, or penetrating the female, the performative phallus creates a positive, gender-transcending unity through a process of more-or-less voluntary self-sacrifice. The centrifying, attention-grabbing fusion of corporality and semioticity which the act of self-sacrifice entails leaves behind an empty space which is not seldom filled out by female characters. The phallic order thus annihilates itself (Far Eastern tradition–*Buddha's Little Finger* and *Ghost Dog*), practices continence (Christian tradition–Lester in *American Beauty*) or leaves behind a codex or testament (Jewish tradition– Alik's tape in *A Happy Funeral*). To this can be added an element of cult: in *The Idiots* the erect penis of a faceless "idiot" in a mixed public shower acts as a cult object engendering nervous, "understanding" giggles rather than a sexual threat. In view of this active presentation and retraction of the phallus (not castration!) the female characters themselves receive the opportunity to act in a phallic–which is to say active and unifying–way. The resulting gender mixes cannot, however, be reduced to any single pattern; often they are treated ironically. In *American Beauty* and *Ghost Dog* women pick up

phallic weapons with mixed results. In the case of Carolyn in *American Beauty* the outcome is ludicrous; in the case of the little girl in *Ghost Dog,*who shoots an unloaded gun at Ghost Dog's killer and master, the suspension of violence emanating from Ghost Dog is suggested (but also the failure of the annihilating performance by the child, who has in the meantime has become the bearer of Ghost Dog's samurai teachings). In *The Idiots* it is ultimately not the sexually charged cult leader who transcends his life situation by "spassing out" but the shy and meek Karen. Finally, Michel Houellebecq's anti-postmodern novel *The Elementary Particles* (orig. 1998, Engl. 2000) and the Czech comedy *Loners* attempt to create entirely new genders: the hero in *The Elementary Particles* engineers a new, rational, non-agressive and sensual gender (possessing, incidentally, mainly female traits); in *Loners* the character Vesna believes that there is a race of aliens who need seven different sexes in order to consummate intercourse (a number corresponding directly to the number of comically intertwined heroes in the movie). In general, the above-named works tend to encourage reconciliatory performances enabling both sexes to frame or complement one another; in performatist theory (Gans and his adherents) one finds regular criticism of Lacanian psychoanalysis, which from the point of view of Generative Anthropology overloads the basic interhuman dialectic of love and resentment with convoluted symbolic explanations.

Indeed, in the world of performatism the symbolic order of language and the chain of signifiers with its distracting puns play little or no role. The sign and/or language acts as a massive instrument in the service of the subject; decisive for for the performatist work is the holistic, object-oriented force of the utterance and not the *glissement* of signifiers. As Knapp and Michaels vividly demonstrate with their poem magically appearing in the sand, highly complex combinations of signifiers cannot be considered a language at all when there is no subject behind them (Mitchell 1985, 15-16); conversely, the inarticulate grunting of the "idiots" in the eponymous movie and Gans's theory of the ostensive show that even the simplest combinations of sounds can be a highly effective language in themselves. As the Russian graffiti in the Reichstag and the harmonious communication between the English-speaking Ghost Dog and the French-speaking ice cream vendor in *Ghost Dog* show, performative language is not dependent on semantics or a even on a common code to function: decisive is the frame which has been placed around addressant and addressee (or to which addressant and addressee have submitted) and which serves to bridge their differences.

7

* * *

Performatism's break with postmodernism did not take place cleanly and in one stroke. Performatism–as with every other new epoch–borrows in many instances from the old epoch while breaking with it sharply in other, decisive regards. The main difference vis-à-vis postmodernism asserts itself in this case in the use of a holistic, discrete subject and sign.

This is logically and practically incompatible with postmodernism's notion of subject and sign as unstable side effects of a constantly shifting textual context. At present, however, the use of classical devices of postmodernism to create closed signs and subjects is almost unavoidable: the new epoch is still dependent on the instruments of the old. Critics of performatism will no doubt be quick to claim that works like *Buddha's Little Finger* or *Run Lola Run* are postmodern because they operate with virtual realities. It is important not to forget, though, that the function of virtual reality in such cases is completely different: it serves goals–the absolute reconciliation of the subject with its context in Pelevin, the unconditional preservation of the loving subject in *Run Lola Run*–which postmodernism dismisses as banal, metaphysical expressions of belief. If one chooses to ignore the annoying pretension of these works to achieving fictional transcendence, then there is no reason not to go on endlessly misreading them as postmodern.

An essayistic example of the gradual transition between postmodernism and performatism is Boris Groys's recent *Unter Verdacht. Eine Phänomenologie der Medien* [Under suspicion. A phenomenology of the media] (Groys 2000).(14) Groys, one could say, "rediscovers" the holistic sign, ontology and performance but, in keeping with the pessimistic metaphysics of the postmodern, still continues to conceive of them as evil and threatening. The main goal of Groys's essay is to explain the way aesthetic value is created in (post-)modern media culture. Groys assumes that aesthetic value arises when a thing is enshrined in a cultural archive, that is, in an authoritative space guaranteeing (at least for a time) the aesthetic object's effectiveness. Groys argues that the conditions for admission to the archive can be defined neither in terms of content nor material, otherwise such conditions could be predicted and reproduced at will (getting a urinal placed in a museum does not, for example, depend on the archive's secret preference for toilet fixtures or porcelain). For Groys, the specific conditions for admission to the archive can also not be purely semiotic, for they cannot be determined–as poststructuralism assumes–by the interplay of freely flowing, subject- and objectless signs. Rather, the key to the archive lies for Groys in the hidden, direct, unpredictable relation between the sign and its material substrate. This relation, in turn, can only come about when a subject causes a sign and its substrate to enter into a unified, binding relation vis-à-vis an observer. Consequently, the aesthetic effectiveness of the artistic artifact is for Groys an *ontological* and not a semiotic or semantic problem. Groys, however, chooses to address this problem in phenomenological rather than ontological terms. The defining feature of artistic success is hence not any specific, as yet unrevealed essence, but rather our suspicion that "someone or other" behind the scenes is manipulating things to get them into the archive. This "ontological suspicion," which is necessarily directed against an alien, manipulating subject, is not, in Groys's view, adequately accounted for in deconstructivism's critique of metaphysics, which sees culture as an endless sea of signs which the observer can bask in safely and comfortably (see 2000, 37). Much more convincing for Groys is way the subject is represented in popular culture (as, for example, in films like *Terminator*, *Alien* or *Independence Day*): there the alien subject appears as a merciless killer destroying everyone who crosses his path (2000, 75).

This suspicion of the alien subject's intrinsically evil nature can, however, be used to help gain entrance to the archive, namely by employing what Groys calls the "sincerity effect" [Effekt der Aufrichtigkeit]. Basically, this amounts to what psychologists call paradoxical intervention: you achieve best results by advocating the opposite of what is normally expected of you. Hence the liberal politician appears most sincere when he favors conservative positions, the conservative politician sincere when he propounds liberal ones (2000, 72). Also, according to Groys, whoever publicly reveals his or her own badness is usually regarded as sincere. This works not because such behavior is revelatory *per se* , but because it confirms our suspicion that, beneath the surface, the alien subject is always somehow evil (2000, 78-79). In Groys's view, the only protection against the alien, malicious subject is to be malicious oneself, that is, to appear "sincere" before others in the paradoxical way described above (2000, 79).

Groys's thinking, though ironic and cynical in Purdy's sense, is undoubtedly already performatist. The subject mysteriously engineering the admission of a work of media art into the archive carries out a holistic performance in which a subject, a thing-based sign, and a communicative partner are successfully united. Groys, however, remains obligated to the negative concept of subject prevailing in postmodernism, which insinuates that the subject striving for whole knowledge is either narcissistic (Lacan), reactionary (Foucault) or generally evil (Baudrillard), and he remains obligated to postmodern epistemology, which sees metaphysical fraud in every attempt to link signs with things (Derrida). In contrast to Groys, I believe that in the new epoch it is not the "evil" principle of continued, random border transgression that is dominant, but rather the benevolent principle of *drawing* borders to create a quasi-sacral space in which an existing state can under certain circumstances be transcended. Groys grasps this situation correctly when he notes that "the phenomenon of sincerity arises . . . in a combination of contextually defined innovation and reduction" (2000, 73). This reduction and innovation, however, takes place in performatism in a way that is much more radical and positive than Groys imagines. Under optimal conditions, the performative subject is reduced so much through its massive denseness that it no longer poses a threat to others.(15) Similarly, the performatist subject's utter simplicity tends to defuse any suspicion that it is simulating or insincere (even in the case of simulated idiocy in *The Idiots* none of the "victims" guesses its fraudulent nature; the guiding criterion is not authenticity, but rather the degree to which the performance is assimilated by the observer to form a working whole). In contrast to Groys I would also suggest that it is not evil which determines the post-postmodern condition (even if evil is still active and present as a residual phenomenon), but rather love, for love, as *the* optimal condition of innovation, enables *any* subject to be loved–that is, to enter with another, alien subject into a whole, salvational space or frame. This perspective, which is that of a sacralizing metaphysical optimism, means the end of postmodernism and not its continuation by other means.

8

Another example of mixed performatism and postmodernism can be found in *Les particules élémentaires* (1998), Michel Houellebecq's acid novel of postmodern manners. There, Houellebecq exposes the increasingly virulent dualism of postmodern culture by creating two characters completely incapable of love: one is guided entirely by the mind, the other by sex. Over the course of nearly 340 pages Houellebecq unfolds scenes of psychological indifference and coarseness, mechanical copulation and incredible brutality that are meant to document the utter emptiness of his heroes. It is only in the last ten or so pages that he begins to develop the utopian notion of a genetically engineered, peaceful, and selfless new gender. Houellebecq's novel is performatistic inasmuch as it fictionally transcends the postmodern image of humankind. At the same time, he remains for the most part obligated to pessimistic postmodern metaphysics, whose only point of orientation is death and its unsavory proxies (at one point a mouthpiece for Houellebecq states: "in the end, life breaks your heart after all. . . . And then nobody laughs. . . . All that's left is loneliness, cold and silence. All that's left is death"(16)). Houellebecq is a postmodern revolted by his own postmodernity so much that he seeks salvation through the genetic transformation of the old, evil, masculine subject; the author himself however evidently has problems developing an autonomous story line out of the new, cloned gender.

The problem of separating performatism from postmodernism–in this case from Russian conceptualism–is expressly treated by Viktor Pelevin in his short story "Vstroennyi napominatel'" [The built-in warning signal] (1998, 381-384). The story concerns a fictive artistic movement called vibrationalism which assumes that "we live in an oscillating world and ourselves represent a collection of oscillations" (1998, 381). The conceptualist, according to Pelevin' s "vibrationalist," makes the mistake of trying to fixate the concept: "the pure fixation of ideas leads us back onto the well-tread path of conceptualism" (1998, 381). Vibrationalism, by contrast, which intensifies the oscillations with artistic means and directs them back at itself, causes "its own boundaries to appear fuzzy and so to speak non-existent. For that reason the task of the vibrationalist artist is to leap between the Scylla of conceptualism and the Charybdis of ex-post-facto theoretizing" (1998, 381). Pelevin's critique of conceptualism is patently unfair. Conceptualism isn't static; it oscillates between contexts, or between subject and context, just as "vibrationalism" does. But is "vibrationalism" identical with conceptualism because of that? Crucial to "vibrationalism" as well as to Pelevin's work in general is that sign and subject overcome the dualism of subject and object, of thing and sign in a reductionistic performance. The successful suspension of this dualism can be achieved in various ways. It can be experienced in a mystical performance; it can be described using paradoxical Buddhist jargon; or it can be performed in a fictional frame that is accessible to everyone and that can always be invested with a certain degree of self-irony (in this case vibrationalism doesn't work because the artist doesn't heed his own instructions).(17)   Because precisely this sort of ironic failure plays a major role in Pelevin's plot lines these are often confused with the ironic devices of postmodernism, whose own dysfunctionality and failure is a foregone conclusion. While a *formal* identity is undeniable, postmodernism differs from Pelevin by not recognizing that a

unified, transcendent perspective can be temporarily instituted or performed within a fictional frame. In performatism the set is always toward transcending irony; in postmodernism it is toward generating irony *ad infinitum* . The crowning achievement of postmodernism is in any case hardly going to consist in enthroning precisely those things–the subject, belief, transcendence, presence...–which it has up to now relentlessly scattered to the winds.

<center>* * *</center>

I can make out five basic features of performatism:

1. No more endless citing and no authenticity, but rather the framing of things already existing in order to transcend or radically renew them; use of ritual, dogma or similarly inhibiting frames in order to transform or transcend existing states of being; return of history in the guise of an empirically framed subject (for example, Greenblatt's history of self-fashioning, Michaels' neopragmatism). In narrative, return of authoriality, of a binding authorial frame, marked by different ways of stylizing transcendence: vertically (passage to a higher level); horizontally (sidestepping to a different frame); holistically (getting the right fit between subject and frame).
2. Instead of an order of floating, unstable relations between parts of signs the holistic subject-sign-thing-relation becomes the basis of all communication and all social interaction; the use of a sign is an (involuntary) act of belief instead of a semiotic or semantic blunder. The subject appears to solid or opaque; it can be dumb, naive, dazed, simple-minded, simple, earnest and heroic but not endlessly cynical or ironic.
3. The switch from a mode of endless temporal deferral (*différance*, process) to the one-time or finite joining of opposites in the present (paradoxical performance, Gans's ostensivity).
4. Transition from metaphysical pessimism to metaphysical optimism; the metaphysical point of orientation is no longer death and its proxies (emptiness, kenosis, absence, dysfunctionality) but rather psychologically experienced or fictionally framed states of transcendence (resurrection, passage to Nirvana, love, catharsis, fulfillment or plerosis, deification etc.).

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5. Return and rehabilitation of the phallus as an active, unifying agent of performativity; simultaneous ironization or retraction of its desire and pretensions to power for the benefit of the feminine; the phallus as positive frame for the vagina and vice versa (male characters act empty or vaginal; female ones act phallic, that is, active and goal-oriented). In general, a tendency towards desexualization; love, or the unifying quality of desire, whether masculine, feminine, hetero- or homosexual, is more important than endlessly playing out one's otherness.

Finally, an excerpt from Ingo Schulze's *Simple Storys* (1998, Engl. trans. 2000), in which the massive opacity of his "simple" characters asserts itself with exemplary force:

> "Something happened to me once at the movies," said Edgar. "We came late, the only place to sit was in the front row. The movie started off with a bird's-eye view, a flight over a jungle. I closed my eyes so I wouldn't get dizzy. Then off to my right I heard a deep chuckling sound, a wonderful laugh. . . . And somehow it was always in places where nobody else was laughing. She had her legs crossed and was jiggling her right foot up and down, it was like an invitation. I touched her elbow with mine, she didn't even notice. I thought I'd only have to put my arm around her and she'd lean against me like it was completely natural, like it just had to be. And at the same time I wanted to stroke her calf. I had to really hold myself back, really, we were sitting so close together. . . My God, is she beautiful, I kept thinking all the time. After each chuckle I wanted to kiss her."
>
> "And–did you?"
>
> "I couldn't tell who was sitting next to her. A man–yeah, but I couldn't tell whether or not he was with her."
>
> "She wasn't alone?" asked Jenny.
>
> "No," said Edgar. "She wasn't alone. She was there with a whole group." He paused.
>
> "What then?"
>
> Edgar shook his head. "I couldn't have seen it. She was retarded, the whole group was retarded."
>
> "Oh shit," said Jenny.
>
> "I'd fallen in love with an idiot."
>
> "Unbelievable."
>
> "Yeah," he said. "The worst thing was, I wanted her anyway."
>
> "Huh?"
>
> "I'd fallen in love, it was too late."
>
> Schulze 1998, 257-258; my translation

In a way, we are in the same situation as Edgar: we feel the presence of an epoch whose

contours are just barely visible and in which we can perceive only simplicity or simple-mindedness.

The main thing, though, is to already be in love with it.

10

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Idioterne [*The Idiots*]. Denmark 1998. Written and directed by Lars von Trier; sound by Design Per Streit; edited by Molly Malene Stengaard. With: Bodil Jorgensen, Jens Albinus, Anne Louise Hassing, Troels Lyby, Nikolaj Lie Kaas and others.

Lola rennt. [Released in America as *Run Lola Run*] Germany 1999. Written and directed by Tom Tykwer; camera, Frank Friebe; edited by Matthilde Bonnefoy; music by Tom Tykwer, Johnny Klimek and Reinhold Heil. With: Franka Potente, Moritz Bleibtreu, Herbert Knaup, Nina Petri, Armin Rohde and others.

Návrat idiota [Return of the idiot], Czech Republic 1999. Written and directed by Sasa Gedeon; camera, Stepan Kucera; edited by Petr Turyna; music by Vladimír Godár. With: Pavel Liska, Anna Geislerová, Tatiana Vilhelmová, Jirí Langmeier and others.

Ghost Dog. America 2000. Written and directed by Jim Jarmusch; director of photography, Robby Muller; edited by Jay Rabinowitz; music by the RZA; produced by Richard Guay; released by Artisan Entertainment. With: Forest Whitaker (Ghost Dog), John Tormey (Louie), Camille Winbush (Pearline), Cliff Gorman (Sonny Valerio), Frank Minucci (Big Angie), Isaach de Bankole (Raymond), Victor Argo (Vinny) and Damon Whitaker (Young Ghost Dog).

Samotári [Loners], Czech Republic 2000. Directed by David Ondrícek; written by Petr Zelenka; camera, Richard Rericha; music by Jan P. Muchow. With: Jitka Schneiderová, Sasa Raasilov, Labina Mitevská, Ivan Trojan and others.

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Notes

1. The following article was originally written in German and will probably appear in that language sometime in the year 2001. The translation is my own. (back)
2. Gans's concept of language was first set forth in *The Origin of Language*, Berkeley 1981. After that follow: *The End of Culture*, Berkeley 1985; *Science and Faith*, Savage, Md. 1990; *Originary Thinking*, Stanford 1993; *Signs of Paradox.Irony, Resentment, and Other Mimetic Structures,* Stanford 1997. My resume follows *Signs of Paradox*, especially Chapter One, "Mimetic Paradox and the Event of Human Origin," 13-35.(back)
3. For more on this see Gans's humorous lament in *Chronicle* 188, "Adorers of Literature Scared of Criticism," 20 November 1999 as well as Knapp and Michaels' critique of E.D. Hirsch in Mitchell 1985, 19-20.(back)
4. For the references to Ulitskaia's stories I am indebted to Anita Becker of Weimar, Germany.(back)
5. The figure of the simpleton transcending his own lifeworld can incidentally also be found in the mass media. An example of this is Zlatko, a popular participant in the German version of the "Big-Brother" show, which itself can be understood in performatist terms as a closed, holistic frame propagating the growth of subjectivity under conditions of total representation. The show is, of course, cynical and voyeuristic, since it assumes that the artificially induced socialization of the participants will go awry. Zlatko, who was ejected fairly quickly from the communal container dwelling, showed himself to be the real winner of the game. As a true simpleton (among other things, he didn't know who Shakespeare was!) he remained at least for a time inaccessible to the greedy, voyeuristic gaze of the viewers. (back)
6. This may be contrasted to Derrida's well-known distrust of representation and visual evidence and Lacan's attempt in *Four Fundamental Concepts of Psychoanalysis* to separate the merely mechanical eye of the subject from the omnipotent gaze of the Other. Lacan's and Derrida's attitude toward vision and representation are gnostic: they prefer tracing a multitude of arcane, fleeting signs emanating from a dual origin to Christian witnessing, which is based on the ability of a viewer to reproduce a single, exemplary act of self-sacrifice. Ricky's theology, which is only latently christological, seems to suggest that *all* death is a form of self-sacrifice and that *anyone* or *anything* can act as a divine mediator. The incarnation of this theology is, of course, Lester: he winds up sacrificing himself for the others and becoming divine without really wanting to do so. In general, one could say that the performatism in *American Beauty* gives the aleatory world of postmodernism a chance at redemption by introducing into it a sacral, sacrificial, vestigially christological moment.(back)
7. Michel, a benign figure in nightgown and sleeping cap, is the German version of Uncle Sam.(back)
8. From an Internet interview "The Man Who Would Give Up Control" with Peter Ovig Knudsen (see bibliography).(back)
9. For theological, Girardian treatments of von Trier's Dogma films, Tarkovskij's *Offret* and other recent movies see Karrer 2000.(back)

10. Readers unfamiliar with the building in situ should refer to the documentation in Foster and Jenkins 2000. (back)
11. These are incidentally what Gans calls ostensive signs, i.e., simple signs referring to an object or situation that is directly present (Fire! Man overboard!). In the case of the Reichstag many of the scribblings are examples of ostensive self-naming, which in this case acts as a kind of self-referential historical performance: "My name is x and I'm here (as a Russian soldier at Hitler's seat of power)!"(back)
12. This "framing" must not be confused with Derrida's frame or parergon. Performatist framing serves to relate a lower state to a higher one, to stylize the possibility of transcendence. By contrast, the parergon is a spatially indeterminate line highlighting the endless problem of conditionality and not resulting in any sort of performative change (except, perhaps, further, temporally and spatially deferred reflexion on the nature of conditionality itself). More relevant than the parergon in this regard seems to me to be Gregory Bateson's concept of framing (Bateson 1972), which emphasizes not just the paradoxical nature of the frame but also its relation to psychological mechanisms prior to the linguistic sign; pertinent is also the sociological frame theory developed by Erving Goffman (1974), which offers, among other things, a typology of of frames as they appear in social reality. (back)

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13. The feminist, poststructuralist notion of gender as subjectless (preferably non-heterosexual, non-phallic) performance is expressed programmatically in Judith Butler's *Gender Trouble* (1990, 25), where she states that "gender is always a doing, though not a doing by a subject who might be said to preexist the deed." By contrast, performatism implies that what is important is finding a "fit" between fixed biological givens like male and female genitalia and the smorgasbord of psychosocial attributes comprising gender. Although subjectivity in performatism is not preset–there is always an interplay between subject and context–the goal of this interplay is to set an identity frame within the context rather than to flow along with it.(back)
14. The Russian-born Groys (b. 1947) is an art critic, philosopher and essayist; until his emigration to Germany in 1981 he was a leading member of the Moscow conceptualist circle. His *Total Art of Stalinism* (Princeton 1992, German orig. *Gesamtkunstwerk Stalin*, 1988) is a seminal analysis of Russian culture from the conceptualist point of view. (back)
15. This aspect of performatism–as with all others–can be presented ironically. For example, in *The Idiots* the commune's curvaceous blonde entices several men in a public pool to make a pass at her so that they can be driven away by a grunting, waddling cohort pretending to be her husband. The men are driven away not by a physical threat, but rather, as it would appear, by the shock of competing with an idiot for an erotic object of desire. (back)
16. My translation from the German (Houellebecq 1999, 328). (back)

17. It would be a serious mistake to claim that performatism is postmodernism simply because it contains irony. In performatism, irony results when transcendent ideals are realized imperfectly; in practical terms it is an unavoidable fact of life (the presumably steadfast anti-ironicist Purdy notes this expressly in the Afterword of *For Common Things*, 2000, 212-214). The intrinsic irony of all human cultural activity is also confirmed by Gans, who sees paradox and irony as an unavoidable and necessary result of having a sign but not complete control over the thing it designates (cf. 1997, Chapter 3, "The Necessity of Paradox," 37ff.). (back)