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Taking Art Personally: Austin, Performatives and Art

David Goldblatt

Abstract

This paper is an attempt to apply speech act theory to aesthetics. In particular, it purports to be a contribution to reception theory by drawing attention to certain similarities between the contextual *structure* of performatives and the structure of the reception of art. It hopes to locate the auditor or spectator of artworks in what J. L. Austin calls "the total context" to help explain how certain aspects of artworks can be taken personally, somehow being about and seemingly directed at "me." It is one way the so-called paradox of fiction can be by-passed by showing how the emotive aspects of artworks are not primarily a matter of our caring about the fictional characters portrayed therein, but directly about members of the viewing or listening audience. Concentrating on the performatives of warnings and threats, this paper details the writings of Austin to help explain why some people can relate to characters or situations presented by art while others are barely moved.

Key Words

l'art nègre, J. L. Austin, colonialism, Derrida, performatives, Picasso, Carlo Pontecorvo, road signs, speech acts

1. Introduction

Certain similarities between the contextual *structure* of performatives and the structure of the reception of art can help to explain why we take art personally--why art can seem to be directed at us (more so than some people we know) and so can help to explain one obvious aspect of the reception of artworks: that different people may respond to them differently and with varying degrees of depth and intensity of emotion.

Without dismissing this well-discussed paradox of fiction or underestimating the degree to which it intrigues philosophers, performatives are often directly about the very real viewer or auditor of movies, novels and the like and with *direct* impact on existing lives: their own rather than the fictional characters contained therein. As part of a performative's "total context," as J. L. Austin puts it, the viewer is merely egocentric; less concerned with the fictional characters than with her own personal self to whom the performative seems to be directed. For this and more I turn to Austin, his work on speech acts, emphasizing what he calls its perlocutionary force, acting upon the feelings and thoughts of its audience.

Taking things personally, as the idiom goes, means something like this: though they seem to be aimed at something more general, a principle or a type for example, those "things" seem to be directed at our person in particular and are usually the instigation of associated identifying feelings. In my account, artworks, in whole or in part, can be taken personally. Works may be experienced by art auditors and spectators as if they were directed at them. What happens on the screen or in a novel stays in the novel, but when it is taken personally it goes beyond the fiction, and the person you care most about, is you.

Despite its alleged failures, or perhaps because of them, speech act theory continues to provide opportunities to understand speech as social action: that saying something can, at the same time, constitute the completion of an action. Thinking of artworks as performatives, arguably the most context sensitive aspects of meaning, is to imagine works of art as generators of specific actions, and so to expand both the way we think about art and the

way we think about performatives.

Austin utilizes the terms 'locutionary,' 'illocutionary' and 'perlocutionary' to help explain how we use the words we use to do different kinds of things. Good at raising objections to his own analyses, he knew that his own distinctions were far from unproblematic, sometimes overlapping and sometimes vague. Nevertheless, here in his Lecture IX of *How to do Things with Words*, he tries to set them apart as simply as possible. As I will be using these distinctions throughout this paper it would be helpful to offer Austin's explanations early on:

...[W]e perform a *locutionary act*, which is roughly equivalent to uttering a certain sentence with a certain sense and reference, which again is roughly equivalent to 'meaning' in the traditional sense. Second, we said that we also perform *illocutionary acts* such as informing, ordering, warning, undertaking, etc., i.e. utterances which have a certain (conventional) force. Thirdly, we may also perform *perlocutionary acts*: what we bring about or achieve *by* saying something such as convincing, persuading, deterring, or even surprising or misleading.^[1]

Illocutions are acts performed by using words in appropriate contexts; perlocutions are acts performed by the consequences of those words. Note that for Austin, locutions can be true or false, but illocutions can be felicitous or happy, on the one hand, or infelicitous or unhappy on the other. Felicity and infelicity, as we shall see, are tied to the idea of elements of a context. My hope is that my own application of these concepts to art will become clearer as we move through this essay. However, it is Austin's emphasis on the illocutionary and perlocutionary performative uses in what he calls "the total context" that is important for the connection between speech acts and aesthetics, or so I will claim.

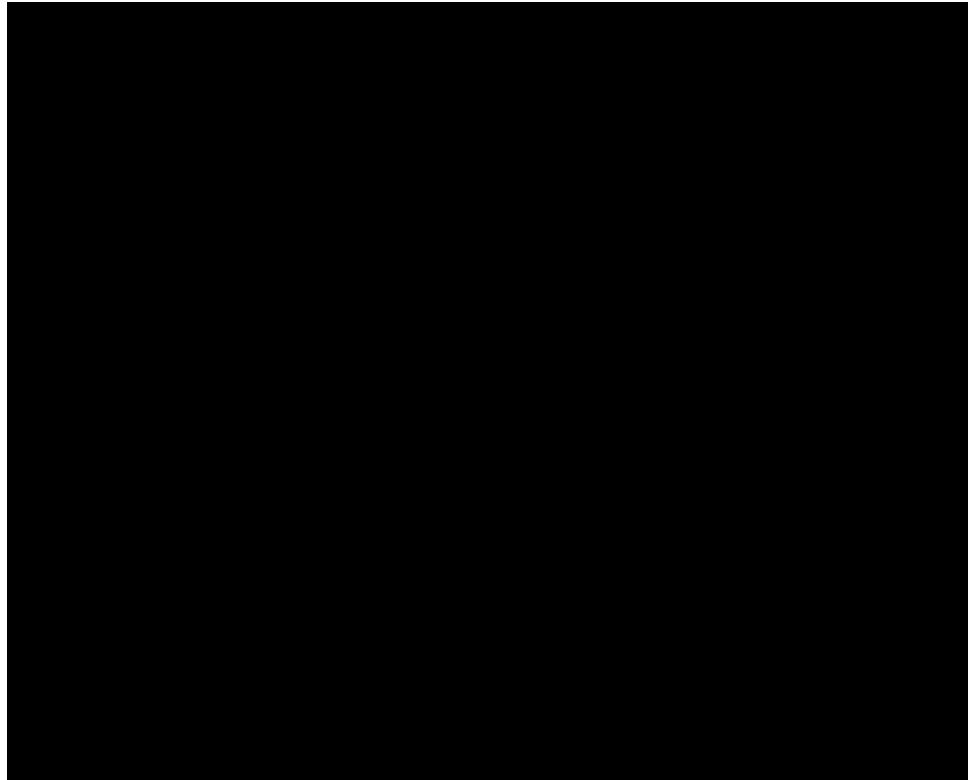
2. Austin, Warnings, and Being about Me (Not You)

In his 1958 essay, "Performatives and Constatives," J. L. Austin draws the distinction of his title by saying, "The constative utterance...so dear to philosophers of statement, has the property of being true or false. The performance utterance, by contrast, can never be either: it has its own special job, it is used to perform an action."^[2] Austin has in mind expressions such as "I promise" or "I apologize" performing the actions of promising and apologizing by saying those expressions in appropriate contexts, but it is odd to claim that, for example, "I'm terribly sorry," cannot at the same time constitute an apology *and* be true or false—play constative and performative at the same time.

Austin was fond of saying of sense-data theorists "there's the bit where you say it and the bit where you take it back." He does that very thing with his constative/performative distinction and indeed, came to be his own best critic, among a large number of others, of the performative thesis itself. He "qualifies" his distinction by noting how even stating (making a statement with an eye toward its truth) is also, like promising, to complete an action by virtue of speech, and is also subject to certain requirements to make it what it is. Nevertheless, Austin helped to bind meaning and action and expanded the opportunities for philosophers to do things with words.

If we consider some of the typical and most obvious examples of acts completed in the saying of something, those for which we happen to have simple names or expressions, such as reminding, greeting, condemning, welcoming, sentencing, admonishing, accusing, cursing, naming, flirting, outing and dissing, I will argue that we can find many of these acts, but many more complex ones, completed in artworks, as well as by utterances. If I say, "I don't like your face," my words are not merely an expression of my

aesthetic taste, if they are that. In the proper *context*, including the appropriate persons and vocalicity, those words would constitute a warning and/or a threat. However, warnings and perceived threats can also be achieved by depictions or pictorial acts, even complex or temporally extended ones, like novels or films, even if the “act” is somewhat elusive (as we shall see).



Trailer for *The Battle of Algiers* (1965), Gillo Pontecorvo, director

Gillo Pontecorvo's *The Battle of Algiers*, for example, banned in France in 1965, the year it was released, was re-released following the 9/11 destruction of the World Trade Center in New York. If I say, in 1965, that *The Battle of Algiers* is a warning, I would most likely locate the addressees as European colonialists and those sympathetic to them, in part but not entirely, because the film is based on real situations. But since art often asks us to assume a plurality of subjectivities and at times forces our reception in a number of subjective locations, we can also be asked to feel what the colonialist feels. And further, since the film is also told from the point of view of the colonialists as well as the terrorists and/or freedom fighters, the film might threaten two sides simultaneously for a complex and despairing aesthetic response. In 2004, the re-release of *Algiers* may be one indication that the context for performative enactment is once again in place. So too, a movie about amorous infidelity, marital or otherwise, one like *Unfaithful*, may be seen as a threat to those who are in the midst of an eroding marriage. However, the potential power of art can put us all in the experience of a marriage gone sour and violated. And so, for this film and many others, any aesthetic considerations without an account of its performative function, would be seriously incomplete.

Crime or horror movies are also warnings, not simply with respect to certain scenes but to leaving-the-theatre entireties. They tend to leave their audiences with feelings of vulnerability by accident or intent simply by being humanly fragile or by being a citizen of an uncertain world. Whatever else they may be, many religious paintings are warnings when they depict an apocalyptic future. The *Temptation of St. Anthony* and *The Last Judgement*

by Hieronymous Bosch are examples of warnings in a religious context. Pictorial performatives can be set up to contrast with the usual essentialist suspects like depiction, representation, or expression. The tales of the Brothers Grimm, with children as the directed addressee, can warn in ways that the simple saying of a moral never can. However, if I am not religious or am not a child, each of these works may come across flat, with diminished potency in comparison with my religious neighbor and the children next door.

In any case, Austin is careful to warn us of the indefinite number of ways a purported performative would not succeed, or as he puts it quaintly, would be unhappy or infelicitous. He says, "I can't quite bring off the baptism of penguins." Being unhappy or infelicitous might mean that one, some, or all of the required conditions in which the speaker finds him or herself are not ideal. Or, it might mean that something the speaker does, such as having an inappropriate intention or utilizing a variant intonation contour, renders the "success" of the utterance qua performative "null and void."

Philosophy is notorious for its emphasis upon "what can go wrong." The variables marking possible infelicities might read like an enormous to-do list even if it is not possible, in any given circumstance, to provide a complete list of what Austin calls "the total context." But it should be noted, as it is especially relevant to interpretations in the arts, that intention does not always play the role it may appear to play. For example, I may intend to say certain words, like "I promise to buy you those tickets," without intending to buy you those tickets. Nevertheless, the promise has been made, the act completed, even if Austin would call the situation "infelicitous." Here, words work on their own without the condition of a sincere promiser. Of course, I may not be qualified to make a promise no matter what words I use, if I am an infant, am coerced, etc. But in this case, as Austin points out, intention not to keep a promise would not by itself, mean disqualification.

We can understand easily why one might be impressed that things *ever* go right. Nevertheless, in practice, they do. When I say, "One," to the employee in the box office at the Regal theatre, the employee at the box office knows exactly what I mean. What I am saying, what I mean, cannot be understood without seeing that I am making a request to which there might be an array of appropriate responses. Here I need to imagine that most or all elements of the "total context" are in place.

Much of the infamous exchange between Jacques Derrida and John Searle concerns elements of this "total context," which Derrida sees as part of "a strategy fraught with metaphysical presupposition."^[3] "Are the conditions of a context ever absolutely determinable?"^[4] he asks. Henry Staten, writing on Derrida adds, "At the same time that different occurrences of a sign are recognizably the same...they are also different because new contexts bring out new aspects of their meaning possibilities,"^[5] and these possibilities cannot be limited as accidental or inessential. Therefore, the context is not merely something like a background for a sign, as it can also transform its meaning, while somehow retaining traces of previous meanings. Part of the problem has to do with being explicit, not whether being explicit can ever meet the conditions of certainty or decidability, but whether conditions for explicitness can ever be fully stated. Further, Derrida objects to Austin's exclusions of purported performative expressions as non-serious and questions the authoritative relationship between addresser and addressee. Of course, Austin's saying baptismal words to penguins is to complete a performative, just not one of baptism. Austin might then be making a joke or satirizing. Why the religious trumps the frivolous a priori is a question in the spirit of Derrida's critique.

As performatives, artworks are subject to some of the same problematic areas as performative utterances, locutions in the narrow sense of spoken words. However, it is often the problematic areas of works of art that initiate the kind

of conversations that keep them alive in a culture. Many live on their undecidability. For those that are also performatives in some significant way, it is necessary to think of a total context that includes the roles of audience, artwork, and artist and the general background, spirit of the times, conventions, or institutions. Doing so helps to offer resistance to general conclusions regarding the meaning of those works and, as elements of the total context vary, it may aid in directing our attention to personal circumstances that may not be forceful for everyone. Clearly, not all performatives are equally available to artworks, but those that are can generate a direct impact among the components of felicitous performative circumstances.

3. The "Force" of Performatives

In Austin's 1958 essay, he considers an example of a possible performative that is not spoken but rather is presumably written and in which a passive voice is used. "Passengers are requested to cross the line by the footbridge only," something, I suppose, that is a commonplace for the English. But it is revealing that Austin casually describes this as an example of an *utterance* issued in writing and imagines that somewhere, someone has given his signature so that the authority of the "I," the first person form of paradigmatic performatives, can be maintained through analysis and reduction. This Austinian move reveals a Derridian insistence on the philosophical privileging of speech over writing and the desire for a metaphysical presence that being present to one's own speech provides, while writing offers the possibility of absence (and due to absence, as Socrates notes in the *Phaedrus*, vulnerable to misinterpretation). The over-simplistic, first person present tense examples of performatives offered by Austin are likely to lead us to assume a single contextual situation for the completion of the performative act. On the other hand, writing opens the possibility of an abyss between the circumstances of writing and reading (both components of a *total* context), just as the display of artworks is typically a doubling of contextual placement for most viewing and making. It raises a skeptical but foundational question about the isolation and protection of museums as ideal contexts to experience paintings and sculpture.

The idea of a *perlocution* Austin explains this way:

Saying something will often produce certain consequential effects upon the feelings, thoughts, or actions of the audience, or of the speaker, or of other persons, and it may be done with design, intention, or purpose of producing them; and we may then say, thinking of this, that the speaker has performed an act in the nomenclature of which reference is made either only obliquely, or even not at all, to the performance of the locutionary or illocutionary act. We shall call the performance of an act of this kind the performance of a perlocutionary act or perlocution.^[6]

One of the points of interest of perlocutions is that the effect they have on different people varies according to *who they are* in an inclusive sense of that phrase. My sense is that Austin uses the idea of "force" as a measure of degree, not only between kinds of utterances but also to distinguish the perlocutionary effects among different persons in different contexts.

Perhaps more importantly for issues regarding art, Austin uses the illocutionary and perlocutionary coinages to utilize the notion of the *force* of an utterance. "We may be quite clear as to what 'Shut the door' means, but not yet at all clear on the further point as to whether as uttered at a certain time it was an order, an entreaty, or whatnot. What we need besides the old doctrine about meanings is a new doctrine about all the possible forces of utterances..."^[7] For Austin, an utterance having the force it does is a matter of convention and that it is a matter of convention matters in the

characterization of context.[\[8\]](#)

A force is a kind of transforming impact, and Austin was sensitive to the obvious idea that the impact of a thank you on the situation of a speaker and an auditor is considerably different from the impact of a condemnation or an order, and that the force itself is a matter of degree contingent upon context even if it is conventional. Force, then, can differ in *strength* in the sense that a suggestion is less forceful than a command. It seems that Austin uses it to apply both to utterances and to persons. A performative changes an unnamed ship or child into a named one and can turn a single man into a married one or a base runner into just another out. Words are sometimes acts with forces without which an utterance would be missing its conventional meaning.

Arthur Danto, in his seminal *The Transfiguration of the Commonplace*, discusses the transfiguration of the identity of auditors of artworks. In discussing Tolstoy's *Anna*, Danto says, "...to see oneself as Anna is in some way to be Anna, and to see one's life as her life, so as to be changed by experience of being her... you are what the work is about, a commonplace person transfigured into an amazing woman."[\[9\]](#) This theory of character identification is something like Danto's answer to the paradox of fiction. If the analogy between artworks and utterances holds, an artwork can be successful by its power to make the artistic auditor analogous to the addressee, thus opening the door to an emphasis on reception theory as an essential candidate for the total context. However, although performatives may be generated by fictions, the performative function of the fictional acts, for example, as real warnings or real threats, may not be. But this is another and more complex issue.

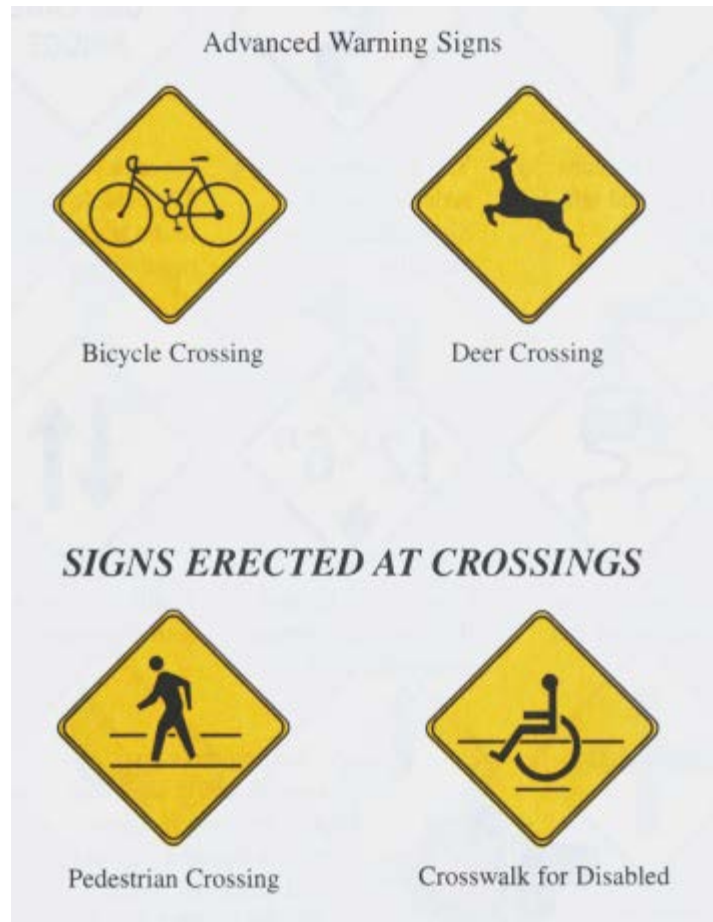
Writing about acts of "corporeal signification," those relevant to gender identification, Judith Butler argues that the gendered body is itself performative and that its ontological status is inseparable from the acts which are its reality. Here, with Butler, rather than words performing acts, we find acts performing acts, acts as signs acquiring meaning by virtue of performative forms and forces. In her book *Excitable Speech*, Butler, in a criticism of Pierre Bourdieu says, "I propose to borrow and depart from Bourdieu's view of the speech act as a rite of institution to show that there are invocations of speech that are insurrectionary acts....The force and meaning of an utterance are not exclusively determined by prior contexts or 'positions;' an utterance may gain its force precisely by virtue of the break with context that it performs. Such breaks with prior context or, indeed, with ordinary usage, are crucial to the political operation of the performative. Language takes on a non-ordinary meaning in order precisely to contest what has become sedimented in and as the ordinary."[\[10\]](#)

Of course, for a speech act to be insurrectionary, as Butler is also aware, it would need to oppose certain conventions. So Butler says, in recognition of this, "...the present context and its apparent 'break' with the past are themselves legible only in terms of the past from which it breaks. The present context does, however, elaborate a new context for such speech, a future context, not yet delineable and, hence, not yet precisely a context."[\[11\]](#) In typical artworld occurrences, works of art rely both upon conventions and defying conventions, growing out of an accepted art history and yet bringing something new to the very conventions they violate.

4. Road Signs as Performatives

Suppose we consider a certain set of familiar pictures, not artworks, although one can easily imagine that they would be the subject of artists like Jasper Johns, since they are clear of form, two dimensional, explicit, conventional, institutional, and as widely understood as flags or targets. The United States Federal Bureau of Motor Vehicles, for example, categorizes certain road signs

as “Warnings.” Pictorial or semiotic signs that mean “deer crossing” or “bicycle crossing” or the terse but verbal “Bridge Freezes Before Road” are, I want to say, performatives, even if they are not *speech* acts. Indeed, they are exemplars of explicit warnings even if the elements of their context for felicitous performativity is a bit complicated.

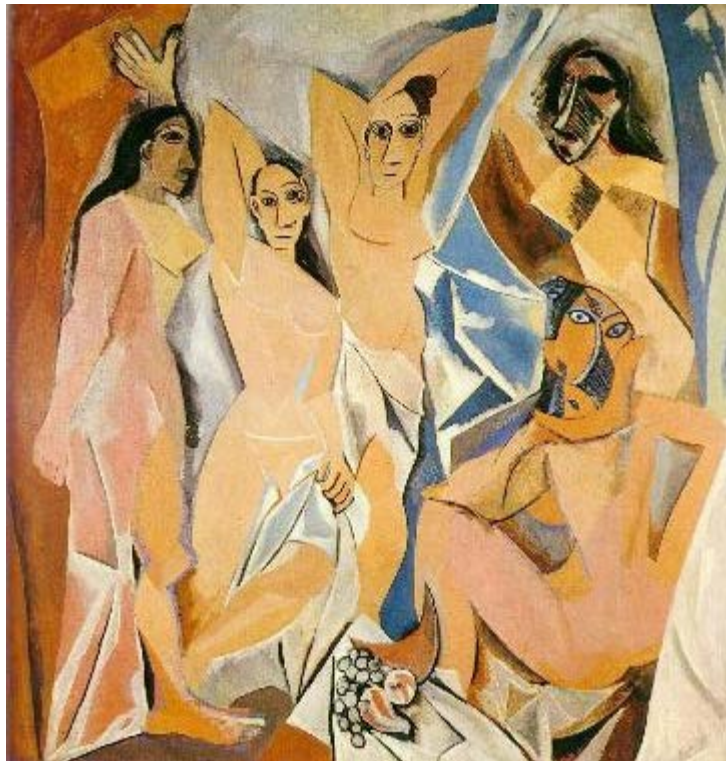


Unlike a willing bride and groom taking wedding vows, the addressee, the driver of a vehicle, presumably has taken certain qualifying tests. The tests more or less ensure his comprehension of the signs she sees and add to the credence of the belief that she is properly warned when she approaches a deer crossing sign at the side of the road. Of course, the word “presumably” lets in all kinds of possibilities like illegal or inattentive drivers, drivers who have forgotten their lessons and the like, but like insincere promising, the performative completing the warning is clear. Even if the driver does not heed the warning, at least in this case, the driver has been warned. But by whom? What isn’t clear is that a single individual has determined the idea for such a sign or for its appropriate posting. There are those who would not be satisfied with saying “the government” or “bureau of traffic control.” But the point is that intention can be clear without the intender being clearly identified. So the familiar issue of the author is raised. The *placement* of a road sign may be achieved by those having no idea that a warning is being issued. Is an analogy with the *posting* of road signs (as opposed to their production or ideal origination) and the *display* of artworks, a good one? Suppose the deer are hunted down and no longer cross at some approximate point just up ahead. Is “Deer Crossing” still a warning? Or think of “Bridge Freezes Before Road” losing its intensity under warmer weather conditions, what Austin calls its perlocutionary force. The driver only sometimes knows when he is warned and is appropriately uncertain at other times.

5. Picasso and a Colonialist/Primitivist Warning

Consider now one of the more famous paintings of the twentieth century, Picasso's *Les Femmes d'Alger* of 1907. This painting is often considered a major advance for formalism, and formalist analyses of this painting have been privileged over any contextual account, its content being marginalized or ignored.

By contrast, Patricia Leighton reminds us of the colonialist/primitivist context in which *Femmes d'Alger* was painted, an atmosphere of exotic popular imaginings of Africa as a pre-civilized Europe, with daily expressions of stereotypical items and illustrations in the Parisian press. She says, "Turn-of-the-century avant-garde artists and their primitivist aesthetic manoeuvrers operated in and against this world; Pablo Picasso and other modernists could simultaneously share in and be sharply critical of such colonial attitudes in an atmosphere we can no longer experience and in a measure we must work to understand." In her article, "Colonialism, *l'art nègre*, and *Femmes d'Alger*," she writes, "In *Les Femmes d'Alger* the Iberian faces of the two central figures and their crudely simplified forms ally them with Spain's prehistoric past and announce Picasso's origins and preoccupations as outside (and against) the French classical traditions. The context of the brothel points up the prostitutes' loss of freedom: like slaves they are bought and sold. At the same time, the exaggeration of their sexual display threatens the spectator/customer as they turn their attention from the room to the world beyond the frame."[\[12\]](#)



Les Femmes d'Alger, (1907) Pablo Picasso

Form and content come together here in a performative—the painting can be understood as a double threat: to the artworld and its audience and to the citizen of Europe-as-colonialist. If Leighton is even approximately correct, the performance of the threat is integral to the meaning of the work; a different understanding of the elements of the total context makes for different kinds of illocutionary and perlocutionary forces. Making the *Femmes d'Alger* qua threat more explicit might result in diminishing the power or force of the work as art.

Similarly, we can think of Raphael's *Transfiguration* as a unique kind of farewell or Robert Motherwell's set of paintings, *Elegy for the Spanish Republic*, as acts of memorializing. Without recognizing the illocutionary

functions of artworks, certain conversations with them (and us) cannot continue along the route they take and certain perlocutionary effects might never happen. Or, in architecture, massive favelas, or shanties, improvisational and illegally built, are often perceived as threats to the wealthy neighborhoods they may be near. And, they may actually threaten even if there is no such intention when favelados make their homes.

6. Declarations and the Possible Complexity of Speech Acts

As mentioned above, philosophers usually take as paradigm examples of performatives simple phrases like, "I promise to give you, Smith, five dollars" (Searle), just as epistemologists tend to find comfort in expressions such as "The cat is on the mat" or "The book is on the table," thinking, perhaps with good reason, that if they cannot deal with the simple cases, what hope have they of dealing with those more complex. However, it is not necessary that an illocutionary act be quick or short even if those are the more usual examples in the philosophical literature. The American *Declaration of Independence*, for example, of which Derrida has written a critical account, constitutes acts of declaration and rebellion as it appears in its entirety, despite the fact that its reception takes more than a few seconds to absorb, that it is in the fourth person, not the first, contains words that are also performatives such as promising or threatening, and that the moment of completion, as with road signs, is unclear.

Frank Stella sees paintings as declarations: "The idea in being a painter is to declare an identity. Not just my identity, an identity for me, but an identity big enough for everyone to share in. Isn't that what it's all about?"^[13] Here we can ask of Stella the question regarding authority asked by Derrida of the signers of the *Declaration*, "Can one declare for others?" But is declaring for others more permissible in art than in politics, assuming the two can be clearly distinguished? In any case, the performative aspects of the visual arts help to emphasize contextual analyses of artworks and forces attention to what aspects of the performative contexts are lacking when art somehow goes wrong. Moreover, artistic performatives may be part of an explanation of why we take art personally and therefore why we accept one of art's greatest gifts.^[14]

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Endnotes

^[1] J. L. Austin, *How to do Things with Words*, J. O. Urmson, ed. (Harvard University Press, Cambridge, 1965), p. 108.

^[2] J. L. Austin, "Performative-Constative," in *Philosophy of Language*, J. R. Searle, editor; (Oxford 1971), p. 13.

^[3] Jacques Derrida, *Limited, Inc.* (Northwestern University Press, 1988), p. 85.

[4] Jacques Derrida, *ibid.* p. 2.

[5] Henry Staten, *Wittgenstein and Derrida* (University of Nebraska Press 1984), p. 122.

[6] J. L. Austin, *How to do Things with Words*, p. 101.

[7] J. L. Austin, "Performative Utterances," in *Philosophical Papers* (Oxford 1970), p. 123.

[8] Just what Austin means by force is another contested ground, and some critics even wonder if there is such a thing at all independent of the idea of meaning or whether the idea of illocutionary force can be collapsed into the idea of an illocution.

[9] Arthur Danto, *The Transfiguration of the Commonplace* (Harvard 1981), p. 173.

[10] Judith Butler, *Excitable Speech* (Routledge, New York and London 1997), p. 145.

[11] *Loc. cit.*

[12] Patrica Leighton, "Colonialism, *l'art nègre*, and *Demoiselles d'Avignon*," in *Picasso's Les Demoiselles d'Avignon*, ed. Christopher Green (Cambridge University Press, Cambridge UK, 2001), p. 93.

[13] Frank Stella in conversation with Philip Leider, in "Literalism and Abstraction, in *Abstract Art in the Late Twentieth Century*; Frances Colpitt, ed. (Cambridge University Press 2002), p.13.

[14] A version of this paper was originally presented at the Eastern Division Meeting of the American Society of Aesthetics in Philadelphia in 2005. I would like to thank the commentator, Hans Maes, and others present for their suggestions and critique.