

STATION

Tony Schwensen

Performatism

19th July — 16th August

This body of work is the results of ongoing research into the behaviour of hominins in restrained conditions, in this case a family of bonobos in a zoo in Belgium.

It is a direct development from previous investigations that examined the comparative sameness between behaviours of humans and chimpanzees (Monkey Business I, II and III in 2012)

One of my initial questions was how is it possible to interpret intent from the gestures and behaviours of humans and chimpanzees. Through intensive examination of documentation made whilst observing the actions of different groups of hominins, this question transitioned into a consideration of the differences between performance and the term performative, a term that is now generic and overused in any consideration or discussion of contemporary art practice. This term, has been redefined in a manner far removed from its initial usage by Austin, where it refers specifically to a linguistic utterance that is simultaneously the actuation of intent (for example saying “I do” as the participants in at a wedding is for Austin a performative act of speech).

Whilst considering the term and its current use in discourse on the arts, I determined that when performative is being used it actually has nothing at all to do with the articulation or actuation of intent. Rather it is a term that is referring to something that has the aesthetic appearance of performance documentation, where it appears that someone is doing something. Whilst thinking about this slippage I came to the realisation that the term is not applicable and is in fact misleading in this context.

Art that is described as performative is in fact art that merely makes direct and distinct reference to the aesthetics of performance documentation on a formal level. This is certainly how the majority of the art-educated world is aware of performance and the lens through which performance is interpreted.

Art such as this is not performative, but is in fact formalist. It is work that utilizes the formal aspects of documented performance. It is work that is dependent on the innate capacity of an audience to project an interpretation based upon the formal aspects and qualities of art-work.

It would be audacious of me to proclaim that I can determine the intent of these hominins, that I can determine meaning in their gestures and behaviours. This is no different when observing humans or looking at art. I have to acknowledge that I can only make up a meaning, a meaning that is mine.

What I can do is understand and state that these images are stellar examples of the concept of Performatism.

—Tony Schwensen 12/07/2014

