

CA 826: New Approaches in Performance Studies (Fall 2024)

Instructor:

Dr. Peter Dickinson (peter_dickinson@sfu.ca)

Office Hours:

By appointment, GCA 2845

Meeting Time and Location:

Wednesday, 2:30 pm-5:20 pm, GCA 4390

Course Description:

This course introduces students to the interdisciplinary field of performance studies, a practice-based mode of inquiry that takes performance as both an object of study and a method of analysis. That is, we will examine the creative content and (inter)cultural contexts of a range of “framed” performances (from theatre, dance, music, film, visual art, and beyond); but we will also look at different social and political events, everyday enactments, and expressive behaviours *as* performances. Applying foundational readings in performance theory to a broad spectrum of issues, artists, works, and sites, students will also be invited through their assignments and in-class discussions and activities to put into practice many of performance studies’ key methodologies, including: ethnographic observation and fieldwork; performance spectatorship and analysis; documentation and reenactment; and research-creation. In their final projects, students will be invited to explore an aspect of their own research/objects of study through the lens of performance studies.

Course Objectives:

- To understand the ways performance contributes to and is constitutive of culture.
- To read and write about core concepts, methods, and theories from the discipline of performance studies.
- To observe, analyze, and interpret a range of aesthetic and social performances.
- To apply performance principles and techniques as a means of research investigation and knowledge creation.
- To develop a focused topic of performance research that combines written and performative elements.

Course Readings and Materials:

All readings will be posted to Canvas as PDF documents. Links to relevant video and audio materials will be included in the course syllabus.

Course Requirements:

Attendance and participation

15%

- You will be asked to complete unscheduled in-class assignments that may include brainstorming exercises, creative writing, textual and video analysis, physical activities, and collaborative experiments. These are graded on effort. **You are allowed to miss one class without penalty.** Each unexcused absence after this will result in your attendance and participation grade being lowered by 5%.

Performance presentation on syllabus topic 20%

- For this assignment, students will select a date on the syllabus during which they will make a 10-15 minute performative presentation that brings to life some aspect of that day's reading. These presentations should be brief, concise, and dynamic. You may direct us in a scene, sketch costumes, stage a puppet play, create a musical or movement score for a performance, share an audio or video work, etc. You are limited only by your imagination! In addition to the presentation, you will provide a **one-page handout** that outlines the theoretical, critical, artistic, and/or historical contexts for the work(s) under discussion, summarizes the main elements of the reading(s), and highlights links to other texts we have studied in the class. The goal of this exercise is not to exhaust a topic, but to bring to life a few key aspects of it. Conclude your presentation with **two questions** to spark class discussion. **You must email me your outline and questions at least 2 days prior to your presentation; failure to do so will result in your grade being lowered by one letter grade (e.g., an A on your presentation becomes a B).** Dates and topics will be assigned at our first meeting.

Performance journal 25%

- For this assignment, you are asked to keep a journal in which you respond to the weekly prompts related to the syllabus readings and topics (see below). Your journal may take the form of a physical notebook; a Word or Google doc; a blog, vlog, or website; a series of Instagram posts; a box of things; or a combination of the above. Your journal entries may appear in words/text AND/OR in any of the following (blurred) genres: still or moving images; drawings; collections of objects; sound recordings; performance scripts/scores. While you are encouraged to complete journal entries for each of the prompts, **you are required to submit only five entries of your choice for assessment.** These are due on the date listed on the syllabus, below. **There is also one compulsory journal entry that you are required to complete for week 4 (see below);** while you will share from this orally in class on that date, it does not have to be included in your final journal submission.

Project proposal 10%

- This **one-page proposal** for your final project should clearly identify: the research question you wish to investigate; any forms supplementary to a written essay you may wish to use in conducting this investigation (e.g., a photo essay, a visual diary, an installation, a sound or video work, a short performance, a series of movement or other scores); and the secondary theoretical, performance, and cultural criticism you will be drawing on to supplement your research (this can be included as a short bibliography). **I encourage you to consult with me before your proposals are due (see below) regarding your chosen topic and research plan.**

Final project 30%

- The course culminates in a final project that will ideally derive from one of your journal entries, and that allows you to draw on your own research practice as scholars and artists. That is, I am suggesting you choose one of the weekly topic prompts and develop it into a project proposal. For example, you may want to conduct ethnographic interviews with family members or friends on a topic related to your larger research interests; in addition to incorporating material from these interviews into your essay, you may wish to use them to develop a short, scripted live or video performance that enacts aspects of your research (see week 7). If you're interested in digital performance and new media, you may want to explore more deeply the relationship between social media and the performative "presentation of self" through an Instagram story site (see week 8). Or you may want to use techniques related to performance documentation, archiving, and/or reenactment to delve more deeply into the history and aesthetics of a precedent artwork that forms a part of your larger research (see week 12). Students will have a chance to make a short presentation on their research to their peers during the final class. The final paper that synthesizes your research should be **a maximum of 3000 words (approximately 8-10 doubled-spaced pages in 12-point font)** and should be sent to me via email as a **Word document** by **noon on Dec 6**. It may be accompanied by any supplementary "performance materials" you wish me to look at.

Weekly Syllabus:

1. Sept 4: Introduction to the Course: What is Performance and What is Performance Studies?

Read:

- Richard Schechner, "What is Performance?" and "What is Performance Studies?"
- Marvin Carlson, "Introduction: What is Performance?"

Journal Prompt: Are there limits to PS's "broad spectrum" approach, as articulated by Schechner? Does the absorption of all enactments or "doings" *as* performances risk overwriting or marginalizing the performing arts? What's in a name? What statement does it make and why is or isn't it important to label what it is that we do? Select an action or activity not typically thought of as a performance, such as getting a medical procedure, ordering a drink at a bar, or waiting for the bus. In what ways can this event be analyzed "as" a performance? What is gained and/or lost by employing this interpretive frame? Try your hand at coining and defining a term that captures some essential dimension of this performance.

2. Sept 11: Other(ed) Performance Histories: Indigenous, Intercultural, Imperialist

Read:

- Coco Fusco, "The Other History of Intercultural Performance"
- Dylan Robinson, "Enchantment's Irreconcilable Connection: Listening to Anger, Being Idle No More"

- Jon McKenzie, "Is Performance Studies Imperialist?"
- Virginie Magnat, "Decolonizing Performance Research"

Watch:

- Coco Fusco and Guillermo Gomez-Pena, [The Couple in the Cage](#) (1992)

Journal Prompt: Choose a global majority (i.e., non-Western/Euro-American) event. How can a performance studies approach help you make sense of this event? What are the limitations, if any, of approaching this topic in this way? OR: Using *The Couple in the Cage* as a jumping-off point, how can the tools of performance and performance studies help reframe racist and imperialist scenarios of "conquest" in the Americas or elsewhere? What are some potential risks of such a reframing?

3. Sept 18: Performance as Method: Practice-Based Research (PBR) and Institutional Performatives at SFU

Read:

- Baz Kershaw, "Practice as Research through Performance"
- Susan Kozel, "The Virtual and the Physical: A Phenomenological Approach to Performance Research"
- Dasha Chapman, "Practice-Based Pedagogies for Counter-Memorial Performance: Teaching to Address and Shift 'Plantation Energy'"

COMPULSORY Journal Prompt: Synthesizing and building upon the readings for this week, this required journal prompt asks you to apply the principles of practice-based research (employing performance or other creative techniques as a form of knowledge inquiry) to an investigation of some question or issue that pertains to the institutional history/politics/culture of Simon Fraser University. For example, you might use movement (e.g., improvising on the steps to different campus buildings or developing walking scores between classrooms) to query the university's commitment to accessibility. Or you might collect field recordings to investigate through a sound-based composition what SFU's acoustic ecology reveals about its approach to environmental sustainability. Drawing or photography or animation or writing could become a way to document students' commutes and the challenges this creates to developing a sense of community. Key catchphrases and words from official SFU websites might be inputted into an AI software program, along with the right prompts, to create a satirical script about just how engaged "Canada's engaged university" really is. You need not be an expert in the practice (artistic/creative or otherwise) you deploy, but you will be sharing the results of your investigations in our next class—both in terms of the documentation/demonstration of your practical research process (video or sound recordings, a photo essay, sharing of writing or a brief performance showing, etc.) and some of the conclusions or additional questions that resulted from this process.

4. Sept 25: Sharing of PBR Discoveries

5. Oct 2: Performance and the City

Read:

- Paul Makeham, "Performing the City"
- Kim Solga, D.J. Hopkins, and Shelley Orr, "Introduction: City/Text/Performance"
- Selena Couture, "Self-Guided Walking Tour of spapəyəq/Brockton Point and χ^wayχ^wəy/Lumberman's Arch"

Watch:

- Rebecca Belmore, [Vigil](#) (2002)
- Jamie Hilder, [Downtown Ambassador](#) (2006-10)

Journal Prompt: Complete Couture's self-guided walking tour through Vancouver's Stanley Park and record your observations however you wish (in a notebook, on your smartphone, via a collection of found artifacts); use this to compose a short performance script or score or assemblage of your devising. OR: Take a walk/amble in your neighbourhood and/or set up an observational post in a park or café. Pay attention to the micro- and macro-performances of place (including your own) happening around you: the everyday human and animal social dramas playing out before you; the spectacle of signature architecture or LED screens or billboard advertisements; the transformation of institutional spaces through licit and illicit performative acts (busking, graffiti tagging, skateboarding, protesting); the different performative maps of the city evoked through sound or taste or smell or touch or sight or movement; the theatre of the weather and natural elements; unexpected choreographic encounters with objects or people or place names. Record your observations however you wish (in a notebook, on your smartphone, via a collection of found artifacts); use this to compose a short performance script or score or assemblage of your devising.

6. Oct 9: Performance and Ritual: On Sport and Food

Read:

- Bradd Shore, "Ritual as Performance"
- Claire Conceison, "Sport as Performance"
- Barbara Kirshenblatt-Gimblett, "Playing to the Senses: Food as a Performance Medium"
- Alana Gerecke, "Crowded White Spaces: Dîner en Blanc and the Place-Based Contingencies of Choreography"

Watch:

- Douglas Gordan and Philippe Parreno, [Zidane: A 21st-Century Portrait](#) (2006)
- Martha Rosler, [Semiotics of the Kitchen](#) (1975)
- Documentation of Raúl Ortega Ayala, [Last Supper](#) (2009)
- Official video documentation [Dîner en Blanc Vancouver 2018](#)
- Dan Ackroyd, "[The French Chef](#)" (*Saturday Night Live* Julia Child parody, 1978)

Journal Prompt: Identify an event, ceremony, or practice (it can be secular or sacred, cross-cultural or culturally specific; e.g., a sporting event or a wedding or dining out at a restaurant) and examine its “design features,” as discussed by Shore. In what ways is it similar to theatre and performance? How is it different? OR: Reflect on an activity that you practice in some kind of ritual fashion (e.g., yoga or running or other exercise; meditation; cooking or baking; video gaming; piano-playing; etc.). Where does it fall within Shore’s listed hierarchy of behaviors? Are there times when what is generally habit or routine shades over into something more formal, like a ritual, or a game? OR: Reflect on the Paris Olympic Games that took place earlier this summer and note, as per Conceison’s analysis, where performances of nationhood were most expressly on display. OR: Document your preparation of a meal at home and note when and where you are more conscious of its performativity. OR: Analyze a contemporary cooking show (reality or fictional). How much of it is actually about food and how much about the theatre of the kitchen?

Project proposals due via email as Word documents by noon on Oct 11

7. Oct 16: Performance and Ethnography

Read:

- D. Soyini Madison, “Performance and what it does to ethnography”
- E. Patrick Johnson, “Introduction,” from *Sweet Tea: Gay Black Men from the South—An Oral History*
- Angela Latham, “Jesus Camp Queen”
- Joe Dumit, “Notes Toward Critical Ethnographic Scores: Anthropology and Improvisation Training in a Breached World” (OPTIONAL ADDITIONAL READING)

Watch:

- E. Patrick Johnson, [Pouring Tea](#) video excerpts (2009)
- Angela Latham, [Jesus Camp Queen](#) (2017)

Journal Prompt: Ask permission to interview a family member or a friend. What kinds of questions would you ask? What kinds of questions, if any, should you avoid? If you wanted to use the narrative of your interview as the basis for a performance ethnography, what form would it take? Also, how would you involve your subject, secure their permission, and protect their identity (should they wish it)? OR: Think of an autoethnographic story you would like to tell. Create an improvisatory score that could be shared with/performed by others.

8. Oct 23: Performance and Everyday Life: From the Social Self to the Self on Social Media

Read:

- Erving Goffman, “Performances: Belief in the Part one is Playing,” from *The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life*
- Bernie Hogan, “The Presentation of Self in the Age of Social Media”
- Lachlan MacDowall and Kylie Budge, “Artists on Instagram”

Follow:

- [@cindysherman](#)
- [@amaliaulman](#) and [#excellencesandperfections](#)

Journal Prompt: Follow an artist/celebrity/public figure across their social media platforms (Facebook, Twitter, Instagram, TikTok, YouTube, etc.). What are they performing? To whom? How? To what ends? Are they ever not performing, or is the art/life divide hopelessly collapsed on social media? OR: Track your own presentation of self on social media. How conscious are you of “curating” what you exhibit online?

9. Oct 30: Performativity: From Speech Acts to Identity Acts

Read:

- J.L. Austin, “How to Do Things with Words: Lecture II”
- Judith Butler, “Performative Acts and Gender Constitution: An Essay in Phenomenology and Feminist Theory”
- José Estaban Muñoz, “Introduction: Performing Disidentifications”

Watch:

- Anna Deavere Smith, *Fires in the Mirror* (1992; [Part 1](#), [Part 2](#), [Part 3](#), [Part 4](#), [Part 5](#), and [Part 6](#))
- Yoko Ono, [Cut Piece](#) (1964-66) and [Cut Piece](#) (2003)
- Marina Abramovic, [Rhythm 0](#) (1974)
- Performance documentation of Cassils’ [Becoming an Image](#) (2012-present)

Journal Prompt: ANSWER ONE OR MORE OF THE FOLLOWING QUESTIONS: Why does Austin designate performative speech acts as felicitous or infelicitous, as opposed to true or false? Identify and analyze one felicitous and one infelicitous speech act from *Fires in the Mirror*. How does Butler apply the concept of the “performative” to gender constitution? Where do you see gender norms being subverted and/or upheld in contemporary popular culture and artistic practice? How does the 1960s and 70s performance art of Ono and Abramovic read today (in answering this question, you might wish to specifically consider the documentation of the version of *Cut Piece* that Ono re-performed in 2003, as well as the two versions of instructions for the work included in the YouTube description)? How does Cassils’ work further trouble historical and contemporary readings of gender identity in art, and to what extent does this involve moving from visual identifications to haptic ones? How has drag been mainstreamed (e.g. RuPaul’s Drag Race) and/or how has it retained its edge as a performance form (bring in your own examples)? How does Deavere Smith play with multiple gendered, racial, ethnic, and national “misidentifications” and “disidentifications” in her work?

10. Nov 6: Performance and the More-than-Human

Read:

- Karen Barad, “Posthumanist Performativity: Toward an Understanding of How Matter Comes to Matter”
- Jane Bennett, “The Force of Things”
- Robin Bernstein, “Dances with Things: Material Culture and the Performance of Race”
- Anna Lowenhaupt Tsing, “The Life of the Forest”

Watch:

- Patrick Blenkarn, [Books](#) (2018; password: books)
- Performance documentation of Iván-Daniel Espinosa’s [Messengers Divinos](#) (2018)

Journal Prompt: Take a photo of a random assemblage of objects on your desk, in your office/studio, in your medicine cabinet, in your kitchen sink, in the garbage, on the street corner, etc., and write not just about what you see, but what “thing-power” or “agentic capacity” you ascribe to them AND/OR how the materiality of these objects/things gets you to rethink your own materiality. OR: Focus on one thing that is especially prominent in your life and discuss how it “scripts” a performance from you. OR: Still focusing on one thing, research that thing’s material history or provenance—how was it and out of what was it made? OR: Thinking with Lowenhaupt Tsing, consider the ways in which plants, atmospheres, and other natural phenomena (seen or unseen) perform. Why is it important to pay attention to these performances?

11. Nov 13: Performance and Protest

Read:

- Judith Butler, “Bodies in Alliance and the Politics of the Street”
- Anusha Kedhar, [“Hands Up! Don’t Shoot!”: Gesture, Choreography, and Protest in Ferguson”](#)
- Rebecca Schneider, “That the Past May Yet Have Another Future: Gesture in the Times of Hands Up”

Watch:

- Justine A. Chambers and Laurie Young, [One Hundred More](#) (2019; password: jac100)

Journal Prompt: As the texts for this week make clear, the body is key to acts of remembrance and resistance. Reflect on a protest movement (local or global, contemporary or historical) and catalogue some of the iconic gestures that came to define that movement (e.g., the sit-ins of the Civil Rights movement or the die-ins of the AIDS movement or the elevated display of the removed hijab in Iran’s “Women, Life, Freedom” movement). Why were they effective? What was being performed through them? Where do we see traces of those gestures residing or relocating today? OR: Choose a public commemoration or celebration (e.g. Remembrance Day or the Women’s Memorial March; Diwali Fest or Chinese New Year) and examine where we see the gestural transmission of cultural memory. To what extent is that transmission legible and easily recognizable and to what extent does it remain necessarily fugitive and potentially illegible over time, and depending on the location/context/audience? OR: Having reviewed the dance performance under discussion this week, what signature gestures stayed with you?

Why? If you were to come up with gestures of your own in response, what would they look like? Where and how would you perform them?

12. Nov 20: The Afterlives of Performance: Archives and Repertoires; Documentation and Reenactment

Read:

- Diana Taylor, "Acts of Transfer"
- Philip Auslander, "The Performativity of Performance Documentation"
- Gabriella Giannachi, "At the Edge of the 'Living Present': Re-enactments and re-interpretations as strategies for the presentation of performance and new media art"

Watch/Listen/Review/Assimilate:

- Pierre Huyghe, [The Third Memory](#) (1999)
- David Bowie [performing Jacques Brel's "My Death"](#) at the end of the first half of the last Ziggy Stardust and the Spiders from Mars live concert at the Hammersmith Odeon in London (1973)
- Iain Forsyth and Jane Pollard talking about [Re-Learning Piece](#) (2008), a re-working of Vito Acconci's [Learning Piece](#) (1970), and featuring Steve Harvey, who played David Bowie/Ziggy Stardust in Forsyth and Pollard's [A Rock 'n' Roll Suicide](#) (1998), itself a live re-enactment of the entire 1973 Hammersmith Odeon concert by Bowie (short excerpts of Harvey in that piece can be reviewed [here](#) and [here](#); D.A. Pennebaker's documentary film of the original concert can be watched [here](#))

Journal Prompt: Drawing from materials in your home, curate an archive that is reflective of some aspect of your object of study (however you wish to define it). If you had to "reanimate" that archive as a performance, what would it look like? OR: Think of a repertory act that is meaningful to you, and that you do regularly (e.g. cooking, sewing, singing, storytelling), and that you believe escapes capture by the archive. Describe it as a performance. How and where does it live? OR: Think about the rabbit-hole of musical and other artistic connections and references in the Brel/Bowie/Acconci/Forsyth and Pollard roundelay of covers/tributes/reenactments? What relationship, if any, do these works have with fan reenactments of favourite musical videos (and especially their choreography) on TikTok and other social media sites? OR: Consider what the "third memory" refers to in Huyghe's piece. OR: Choose a precedent event (artistic or social/historical) and think about how you would reenact it. What issues (logistical, material, ethical) would you have to consider? What would be the intent and some of the possible effects of your re-do? (Feel free to think about this last prompt in relation to Taylor's discussion of the features of the "scenario" and how this might pertain to your thoughts on the second of the suggested prompts for Week 2, above.)

Performance journals due

13. Nov 27: **Project Presentations**

Final essays (and supplementary materials) due electronically by noon on Dec 6

Course and Grading Policies

- It is our collective responsibility to maintain a classroom environment where all feel comfortable to speak, and where intellectual curiosity fuels dialogue and debate. Please remind me, and your peers, of your preferred gender pronouns, and please respect those preferences in others.
- All students are advised to become familiar with SFU regulations pertaining to student conduct (<http://www.sfu.ca/policies/gazette/student/s10-05.html>), and to bring any questions or concerns to my attention.
- Students with hidden or visible disabilities who believe they may need classroom or assignment accommodations are encouraged to register with the [SFU Centre for Accessible Learning](#) (CAL) as soon as possible to ensure that they are eligible, and that approved accommodations and services are implemented in a timely fashion. Otherwise, please talk to me privately **before the second week of class** to discuss anything you wish me to be aware of in terms of your anticipated contributions to and performance in the class. If, at any time, you feel you require additional outside support, you may contact the Office of Student Support, Rights and Responsibilities at student_support@sfu.ca.
- **No late assignments will be accepted without a documented medical excuse.**
- **Plagiarism or academic dishonesty of any kind will not be tolerated.** Consult the following website for more information: <https://www.sfu.ca/policies/gazette/student/s10-01.html>. **Ignorance of the standards set out by the School and university will not preclude the imposition of severe penalties for any instance of academic dishonesty.**
- All assignments (oral and written) will be assessed according to **content** and **expression**: that is, **what** you say and **how** you say it. All assignments will be given letter grades and will be assessed according to the following standards:

Grade	GPA/%	Description	Comments
A+	4.33 95-100%	Outstanding	Demonstrates an outstanding knowledge of concepts and techniques with a very high degree of skill and originality; an exceptional ability to communicate; evidence of outstanding research skills and an extensive knowledge base.
A	4.0 90-94%	Excellent	Demonstrates an excellent knowledge of concepts and techniques with a high degree of skill and elements of originality; a strong ability to communicate; excellent research and conceptual skills.
A-	3.67 85-89%		
B+	3.33 80-84%	Very Good	Demonstrates a very good knowledge of concepts and techniques, some originality and independence of thought; above average research and conceptual skills.
B	3.0 75-79%	Good	Demonstrates a good knowledge of concepts and techniques; an ability to organize and analyze ideas and to communicate clearly and fluently; good indication of research.
B-	2.67 70-74%		

C+	2.33 65-69%	Satisfactory/Marginal	Demonstrates a satisfactory knowledge of concepts and techniques, together with some skill in using them; an adequate indication of research.
C	2.0 60-64%		
F	0.00 0-49%	Fail	Demonstrates an inadequate understanding of the subject matter; poor organization and communication skills. A student at this level has failed to meet the minimum requirements to pass.
FD	N/A	Fail (academic discipline)	This grade is awarded when a student has committed academic dishonesty (see Policy S10.01 Appendix 3). The grade will remain on a student's transcript until two years following graduation at which time it will convert to F.
N	0	Incomplete	Some or all of the coursework is incomplete. The instructor does not expect the student to ever complete the coursework.
DE	N/A	Deferred	Some of the coursework is not yet complete for valid (documented) reasons (e.g., medical). The instructor and student have determined a mutually agreeable timeline for the completion of the coursework.
GN	N/A	Grade Not Available	Grade not available due to circumstances beyond instructor/TA control.
AE	N/A	Compassionate Pass	The student has done at least 50% of the coursework, and would pass the course by completing the remainder, but has a compelling reason not to do so (e.g., medical, family crisis/death, etc.).