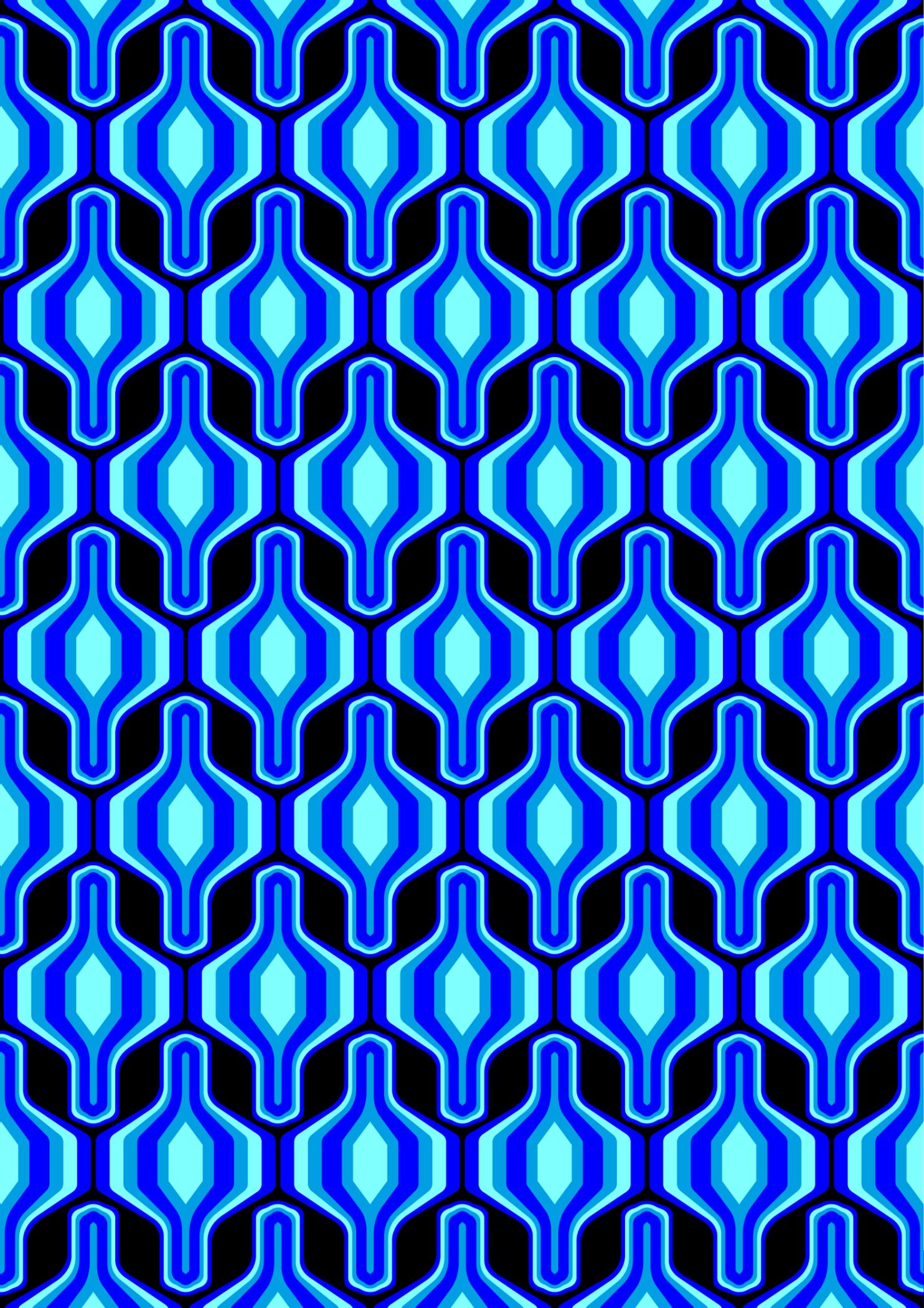


# Editorial Introduction



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Within a globalised world, language can act both as a barrier and facilitator for the circulation and visibility of peoplehoods, practices, knowledges, or traditions. The twentieth and twenty-first century have witnessed an arguably unprecedented diversification and spread of local cultures due to the rapid development of digital technologies and online networks, the expansion of transnational migrations, and the commercialisation of relatively affordable travel. Paradoxically, however, the increased exposure to foreign influences only seems to have reinforced the tendency toward ‘cultural homogenisation’ already identified by the socio-cultural anthropologist Arjun Appadurai back in the mid-1990s (Appadurai 1996). At its best, this kind of homogenisation recognises indigenous hybridity while striving to promote internal cohesion between diverse populations; at its worst, it flips into nationalist leanings that aim to reinforce borders and protect ‘imagined communities’ (Anderson 1983). In these evermore complex societal and political realities, language either serves to enhance communication between people or it is used as leverage to implement exclusionary ideologies.

It is against this backdrop of a deeply diversified and often divided global stage that the Essays Section of this issue of the *European Journal of Theatre and Performance* wants to reconsider the fairly expansive debate on the relationship between language and performance, which has surfaced repeatedly yet in various guises in the field of the performing arts. The various articles collected in this Essays Section critically inquire into how language is a central tool in the creation and reception of performance works, how artistic practices inform scholarly discourse or vice versa, and how local traditions position themselves toward international tendencies in both the arts and academia. The overarching aim of the issue is to shed new light on the intricate connections between language and performance by focusing on the various ways in which performance always operates on the microlevel of concrete practices as well as in dialogue with the macrolevel of larger socio-political and cultural contexts.

It is indeed striking that the main running thread throughout the Essays Section is that all authors devote particular attention to the political implications of probing the role of language in performance. This is a remarkable development that clearly aims to go beyond the focus of previous debates, which typically strove to delineate the medium specificity of performance with regard to language (see, e.g., Walker 2007; Hamilton 2009; Worthen 2010). In contrast, the articles presented here testify to a joint and critical endeavour to tie the manifold uses of language in performance back to the socio-cultural realities, ideological assumptions, and even ethical promises that emerge from specific artistic practices. If taking up arguably ‘old’ questions for ‘new’ purposes might teach us something about our current time, it is clear that the role of language in performance is no longer solely a formal matter but a topic that has taken on a distinct political urgency.

This introduction, then, serves to unfold the main reasons why we, as editors, wanted to return to the longstanding issue of language in/and performance as well as to lay out the rationale behind the different themes that structure the Essays Section. It should be clear from the outset that the contributions to this issue are by no means intended to provide a comprehensive state-of-the-art or exhaustive enquiry on the relationship between language and performance in all its variations, if that were ever possible. Instead, they offer a vivid image of how not only recent scholarly research but also performance practices (both historical and contemporary) continue to tackle the abiding question of how verbal discourse interacts with embodied enactment.

## Why Language and Performance?

Even in a postdramatic era allegedly marked by the deprived status of text in theatre, neither writing nor language have disappeared altogether from performative practices (Borowski and Sugiera 2010; Boyle et al. 2019). On the contrary, language remains vital to many aspects of the performing arts, ranging from creation, production, and performing to spectating, reception, and scholarship. Likewise, whereas dance conventionally foregrounds the moving body as its primary medium, leading to what Rudi Laermans describes as a ‘body humanism’ (2008), both written and spoken words are essential and widely used means for creating and transmitting choreography (Franko 2011). Common belief nonetheless holds that the actual experience of performing or watching a theatre, dance, or performance piece can never be fully captured within the limited means of linguistic expression. To the extent, however, that embodied, verbal, and sensory communication lies at the heart of the performing arts, language and discourse remain crucial to understand

how performance engages the senses and generates meaning (Nellhaus 2010; Blair and Cook 2016). Moreover, the endeavour to clarify the dynamics of what Mikhail Bakhtin aptly termed the ‘dialogic imagination’ (1975) acquires a distinct political urgency in a world in which dialogue and mutual understanding are increasingly under pressure.

In various ways, the disciplinary development of the adjacent yet distinct fields of theatre, dance, and performance studies has exacerbated the dichotomous tension between language and performance. For each of these domains, language served as a splitting surface to claim its distinctiveness and to become identified as a specific field of research and practice: whereas theatre studies sought to distance itself from literary studies, performance studies gained its contours in opposition to theatre studies while also dance studies differentiated itself from the former two through its outspoken focus on movement and the dancing body (e.g., Pavis 2001; Bottoms 2003; O’Shea 2010). As such, the stance toward language became part of discursive operations that were shaped by an entangled myriad of intra- and interdisciplinary dynamics. While these legacies still impregnate current views on the role of language and discourse in performance scholarship and practices, they remain to be excavated, particularly with regard to how transnational influences steered local traditions, both artistically and intellectually.

As primarily embodied and time-based art forms, the performing arts have a fraught relationship with languages and discourses, becoming subject to the ‘epistemic violence’ with which Western regimes of thinking have traditionally relegated practical, corporeal, and often tacit knowledges to an inferior status (Conquergood 2002). The attempt to counter this tendency has often isolated bodily knowing from the interaction between embodiment and language as one of the foundations for the acquisition of techniques or skills in training and performing. Conversely, the steady growth of artistic research especially in European

contexts has been raising renewed interest in the question of whether and how the performing arts need discourse to become validated as knowledgeable practices in their own right or whether there might be other formats more suitable for the dissemination of artistic knowledges (e.g., Spatz 2015; Bal and Chaberski 2020; Blades et al. 2021).

Recent scholarship in theatre, performance, and dance studies has directed attention to multilingualism and migration as two major cultural forces to be reckoned with in both research and practice, often with the aim to undermine pernicious postcolonial, decolonial, and hegemonic legacies still permeating the arts and societies at large (e.g., Cox 2014; Meerzon and Pewny 2019; Damsholt and Hoppy 2020). In the midst of these concerns, the current field of the performing arts, as well as academia, appears to be governed by two contradictory movements: whereas globalisation has contributed to a larger international outreach of both practitioners and scholars, the dominant position of English as the main communal language runs the risk of either flattening out onto-epistemic and culturally diverse backgrounds or dividing the field into centres and peripheries. Various countries with a vivid artistic scene and producing prolific scholarship still experience difficulties in finding their way into a more global network of peers, raising the question to what extent the performing arts can resist reigning political, economic, and social power relations.

# Subthemes of the Essays Section

We have organised the Essays Section in four parts, each corresponding to a specific subtheme. These subthemes do all but cover completely the wide array of subjects and questions concerning the complex and intricate relationship between language and performance. They allow the reader to navigate through four clusters of conceptually related articles loosely sharing connected research questions. The structure of the Essays Section aims to orient the reader rather than to demarcate this issue's subject matter. Most importantly, the four subsections propose a broad sample of the current state-of-the-art research within the vast field of language and performance, organised along four distinct research lines.

The first subsection explores the complex interwovenness of language and (local) identity through the lens of performance. It proposes three detailed case studies which investigate how a specific group or specific groups perform their multiple identities through language uses. How does language perform identity? How can language re-activate cultural memory? How can multilingualism question or reaffirm identities? Yana Meerzon, who explores the issue of multilingualism in contemporary theatre practice, analyses how language can function as a marker of authenticity while at the same time challenging paradigms of nationalism. In the world of global migration, language, Meerzon argues, performs specific identities endowing them with an aura of realness, while at the same time enabling and stimulating transnational encounters. Focusing on performance in languages on the verge of extinction, Sarit Cofman-Simhon explores how Jewish languages function not merely as a means of communication but as vibrant theatrical material in itself. She describes how the use of Ladino, Yiddish, Maghrebi, Juhuri,

Judeo-Aramaic, Bukharan, Judeo-Iraqi, and other languages in theatre and other forms of cultural expression trigger complex historiographic reflections, simultaneously articulating considerations about cultural identity. Postvernacular cultural practices, in which members of a community might have inherited a specific linguistic variety from preceding generations without actually using it in everyday life, allow members of specific communities to perform complex cultural identities and to reflect upon their diasporic roots. Language thus becomes a carrier of closely interwoven aspects of remembrance and identity both allowing for nostalgia (through the evocation of auditive soundscapes reminiscent of a shared past) and resistance (through the refusal of an all too monolithic, essentialist conception of Israeli identity). Finally, Aikaterini-Maria Lakka closely analyses carnival rituals and theatrical performances in Kozani, a city in Northern Greece. She describes how these rituals and performances foster identity through language and simultaneously question national identity and politics. Here, hyperlocal language performances allow for the construction of a shared historical and cultural memory, while at the same carnivalising identity constructions.

Language is a tool of empowerment but also of domination and thus a source of tension. It can both reinforce hegemonic identities as well as subvert these very same constructions. The second part of the Essays Section explores specific cases in which language in theatre practices both exploits and questions dominant representational regimes in a given context. Kati Röttger describes how the theatre language of the Colombian collective Mapa Teatro uses complex aesthetics based on the idea of 'mapping' reality as a tool to question the contingent status of both history and the present state of affairs. Through the dramaturgy of 'pasticcio', Mapa Teatro criticises and deconstructs colonial mimesis: their performances denaturalise Western historiographic conceptions of time and modernity and thus articulate a fundamental critique of dominant systems of historical and mythological representation.

Tracing back the work of Mapa Teatro to what Röttger calls the ‘Colombian dramaturgy of decolonisation’, she analyses the collective dramaturgy of three performances, showing how this dramaturgy allows for the creation of new theatrical languages of decoloniality. Exploring the interplay between language and queer performance, Alejandro Postigo takes a closer look at the phenomenon of *Copla*, a Spanish musical theatre genre developed by progressive artists in the early twentieth century, domesticated and then censored by Franco’s regime and subsequently rejuvenated by LGBTQ+ collectives after 1975. Taking his own artistic explorations of *Copla* as his starting point, Postigo discusses how this specific cultural practice grew into a subversive folklore, bringing together an international audience of diverse cultural backgrounds and promoting multilingualism as a space of encounter. More specifically, he shows how his own show *The Copla Cabaret*, a performance lecture directly based on the historical *Copla* traditions, allows for reflection upon the experience of migrant and queer minorities. Finally, Berenika Szymanski-Düll takes us back to the second half of the nineteenth century. During this period of rapidly increasing modernisation, actors started to travel the world, eagerly living experiences of cultural and linguistic encounter and displacement, most notably in the USA (one could think of the American tours of Rachel, Ristori, and Bernhardt). This new kind of professional tourism, Szymanski-Düll argues, transformed theatre into a transnational business, even though the attitude towards language was all but unambiguous. The process of translocation of languages raised opportunities both of conflict and encounter, oscillating between the desire for national unity on the one hand and the acceptance of multi-layered identity constructions on the other hand.

Previous discussions on the complex connections between language and performance focused predominantly on the medium specificity of performance with regard to (natural) language, in effect leaving aside the performativity of various kinds of (not always natural or articulate)

languages within and about performance. This has become increasingly important after historical and current performances started to be seen in larger socio-political and cultural contexts. One question remains pertinent to all performance forms, be it theatre (re)enactment, dance, or installation art: whose language is spoken as a part of concrete practices in performance, and how is it analysed and commented upon within the discursive sphere of academia and the mass media? The third part of the Essays Section intends to shed new light on this issue, starting with Klaas Tindemans’s article that returns to J. L. Austin’s speech act theory and its key notion of ‘(in)felicity conditions’ in order to compare law and performance as connected discursive practices but of fundamentally different consequences. The article focuses primarily on how formal requirements of legal procedures have to be rearranged on the stage to reach maximal artistic and political results. On the one hand, it looks at the Tricycle Theatre’s careful imitations of real hearings in which actors embodied lawyers and witnesses in terms of linguistic accent, body language, and attitude in a replicated courtroom configuration. On the other hand, it analyses Milo Rau’s activist IIPM public trials with real lawyers and experts as well as actual witnesses and defendants which created their own jurisdictional realities, in discourse and space. However, both cases demonstrate, as Tindemans argues, that by affirming itself as an ‘etiolation’ of real action, the theatre lays bare the fundamental inability of speech to discipline the body which the law obscures as its necessary strategy. In other words, regardless of its imitative or openly activist character, it is by not being felicitous in its performative acts that the theatre becomes political. Lindsey Drury situates the performativity of dance within and as language in a larger socio-political context of mass media while returning to the US at the turn of the century. She explores dance reception in print as a formative historical power through the study of large datasets of newspaper articles of that period. By employing Christian and colonial visions of the dance practices of Indigenous peoples as ‘pagan’, these newspaper discourses

shaped settler-colonist perspectives, and in effect became part of language-as-colonisation. Significantly, as the author underlines, the language of ‘pagan dance’ not only suppressed Indigenous dance forms but also provided cultural capital to early modern dancers. Its ‘double role’ has become evident only today, thanks to many postcolonial and Indigenous scholars. The third article of the subsection remains in the context of reception and its formative power. However, Mateusz Chaberski urges us to go beyond all language-based symbolic systems and seek affective ways of knowing in the face of the ongoing ecological crisis. As he insists, only affective approaches will allow us to better grasp the political and ethical dimensions of more-than-human agency, especially abiotic entities, such as radiation, rocks, fogs, and ice which do not conform to the biological carbon-based definition of life. Although Chaberski persuasively argues that performances of the arts have successively become an important epistemic tool for capturing dynamic environmental processes within the Anthropocene, he is mindful of the necessity we face to convey them through articulate language. To overcome this difficulty, he tries to foreground a situated experience of visiting the analysed installations, and to fuse language-based and affective ways of knowing. Therefore, Chaberski’s contribution shows how much the performativity of language depends on the context, be it on macro or micro level.

The fourth part of the Essays Section contains just two articles. Nevertheless, it opens a new and timely perspective on language as a material-semiotic tool in both performance and rehearsal processes. The two articles gathered here focus alike on contemporary dance and its embodiment practices, but their findings are important to other — historical and contemporary — forms and genres of performance. This is best exemplified by Rosa Lambert’s term ‘kinetic textuality’ by which she means a performative feature that portrays the interaction between text, movement, rhythm, body, and sound. In her analysis of Hannah De Meyer’s *new skin* she addresses the relationship between text

and body within the interaction between text and performance. At the same time, she explicitly states that any analysis of theatrical language has to take into account both the body that produces the text through voice and gesture and the bodies of the spectators perceiving the text on a cognitive as well as an affective level. Whereas Lambert intentionally goes beyond the limiting dichotomy between text and performance to demonstrate how tightly the material and the semiotic aspects of language are intertwined, David Rittershaus asks what role language plays in dance rehearsals and how choreographers, primarily William Forsythe as his main case study, use specific terms or verbal descriptions to communicate their artistic intentions or choreographic principles. To unpack the issue of language and discursive knowledge in embodied theatrical practices, Rittershaus returns to the psychoanalytic theory of the subject of the unconscious, particularly to Lacan’s notion of *lalangue*. In Rittershaus’s reading, the notion exceeds our common understanding of language as a system for relaying information through verbal or written communication, pointing instead to the affective and playful aspects of language which clearly refuses to subordinate moving bodies to representational notions of thought. Revisiting Lacan, the second article in this subsection convincingly demonstrates that the aim of such a ‘return’ is not to restore well-known and settled knowledge paradigms, verified methodological approaches, and analytical tools. Returning to them and re-reading them should allow us to see them anew in the context of both present and historical artistic practices that inform scholarly arguments. As a result, we can understand these past notions in previously unconsidered ways in order to make them applicable to current economic, social, and political changes. As editors, we believe that this could be said about all the articles gathered here. The overarching aim of this issue is to ‘return’ to the intricate connections between language and performance in order to focus on the yet unattended, omitted, or marginalised aspects of their entanglement in situated, local, and embodied practices which address spectators on both cognitive and affective levels. •

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