



## On Performance in the Work of Georg Keller—Some Musings

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For some time now the term “Performance” has come back into vogue in the art world. With the first flowering of Performances, Happenings, and Actions in the 1960s and 1970s now a thing of the past, the present generation of young artists is increasingly turning to performance and taking a new interest in ephemeral, process-based art forms. At the same time this term now also constantly crops up in financial circles: banks and insurances compete to outdo each other’s performance—regardless of the cost or the danger of meltdown—as in 2008.

Georg Keller conflates the two meanings of “performance” in his work, which is itself poised on the interface between economy and art. While artistic performance—live action and theatrical *mise-en-scène*—plays an important part in Keller’s work, he also uses his works to consider and question the mechanisms and power structures of our thoroughly economy-dependent world.

We are under constant pressure to work more efficiently and to improve our performance. Georg Keller’s early work *Der Arbeiter in vier Teile geteilt* (“Worker divided into four equal parts,” 2008) takes this notion to an extreme. In an installation divided into four open “booths” the artist presents work stations associated with four different occupations: bricklayer, office worker, distiller, and stall holder. The four work zones are connected by small door flaps. Over the course of 24 hours Keller fulfills the four different roles, one after the other, working without a break until he drops. Keller’s installation points to a widespread reality in contemporary society: many people can only survive by taking on multiple jobs; others, who are expected to be constantly on call, have no time left for themselves or their families. As Keller himself has put it: “The economy infiltrates our lives like metastases. The idea of working from home, which saves companies from having to provide expensive work stations, completely removes the divide between private life and the business world. And the much-vaunted idea of ‘starting your own business’ merely shifts the economic risk onto the individual.”

The pressure to achieve and, hence, to perform is also at the heart of *Über der Norm – Wiederaufnahme* (“Above the Norm – Second Run,” 1953/2011). The point of departure for this work was a photograph taken by Wiktor Pentel in 1953, showing a group of workers before the May Day demonstration in Nowa Huta (Poland). The workers are wearing sashes showing the percentage by which their work exceeded the norm. Georg Keller, working in collaboration with his partner, the artist Zofia Kwasięborska, produced 36 sashes with the percentages sewn onto them and now invites exhibition-goers to don one of these. The workers’ performance in their jobs thus leads to a performance by visitors to the exhibition.

Both aspects of this—the involvement of the public and the link between history and our own time—are characteristic of Georg Keller's work. He regularly finds historic texts or documents that subsequently become the point of departure for new works or that inform his visual art or theater works. In Keller's latest theatrical work, *Pamphlet gegen das goldene Kalb der Händler im Hosenladen* ("Pamphlet against the Golden Calf of the Tradesmen in the Trousers Shop," 2014), which he describes as "a performative investigation using stage techniques," he uses writings from 1809 by French social theorist Charles Fourier (1772–1837). In these texts Fourier describes 36 varieties of bankruptcy. His subject matter could not be more topical. However, Keller uses this glimpse of the past to open up a different perspective on questions regarding economic growth and social development today.

The notion of "performance" is of course of particular interest in any exploration of the interface between the theater and the visual arts. It is therefore only natural that Keller's works extend into the realms of theater. He both writes the scripts and creates the stage sets for his theatrical works. His stage sets always have something sculptural about them, conveying a strong sense of Keller the visual artist. By the same token, Keller's installations often look like deserted stage sets. Sometimes these supposed stage sets and theatrical objects are sporadically activated by a performer—as in *Warenhaus* ("Department Store," 2011), for which Keller devised six "stage-set elements/performance islands," which are successively used by an actor to enact or demonstrate various non-work activities in a department store: an official opening by a mayor, a fashion show, an autograph signing, a stamp exhibition, movie-going, and afternoon entertainments for children.

However, although Keller's sculptural works often evoke thoughts of theatrical performances, it remains unclear whether any such performance has already happened or is still impending. This is perfectly exemplified in one of his most recent works, *Robota* (2014), which brings together tools and equipment associated with nine occupations that were widespread from the Middle Ages to the pre-industrial era, but that now no longer exist. Disappearance and non-performance play an important part in Georg Keller's work. In 2010—in response to the financial crisis—he developed a work titled *0 Performance*. The plan was to set up a wooden stage with a rostrum at Paradeplatz in Zurich, which traders from the surrounding, major banking institutions could have used to explain why the stock market had not performed as expected. Keller's work invited bankers to leave their trading floors, to step up onto the stage, and to present an artistic performance rather than concentrating on economic performance figures. Although this project was the winning entry in a municipal competition, it was thwarted by resistance from the public transport authorities and the licensing office—resulting in yet another kind of "zero" performance.