

Staging Professionalization

Lecture-performances and para-institutional pedagogies, from the postwar to the present

MASHINKA FIRUNTS

For many years, I received a counterfactual account of the Soviet academy as a site of uninhibited radical potentiality. In the late 1970s and early 1980s my mother received graduate training as a linguist at the Moscow State Pedagogical Institute. She recalls the Institute primarily as a space of distributed Samizdat publications, nocturnal dormitory gatherings and discourse and para-institutional reading groups where knowledge circulated informally. These recollections are filtered through the affective spectral prism of memory, and bear little resemblance to officially documented narratives of Soviet higher education. The Institute no longer exists as it once was, having been renamed the Moscow State Pedagogical University in 1990. Prior to 1960, it was known as the Moscow State V. I. Lenin Pedagogical Institute. Her recollections purposively refuse a factual rendering of the university and its regulatory functions. In lieu of such a report they opt for a historical imaginary in which institutions, en route to their own disappearance, produce a spectrum of unforeseen, unintended social and aesthetic forms alongside resistant knowledgeable bodies. Like so many pedagogical projects from the postwar era to the present, they generate fabulist narratives and para-fictions of the academy's horizon of possibilities.

ARTISTS AND DATA PROCESSORS

Is it possible to conjure recollections of the lecture-performance that exceed its status as the aesthetic correlate of a professionalized, post-industrial artistic labour force? Would it

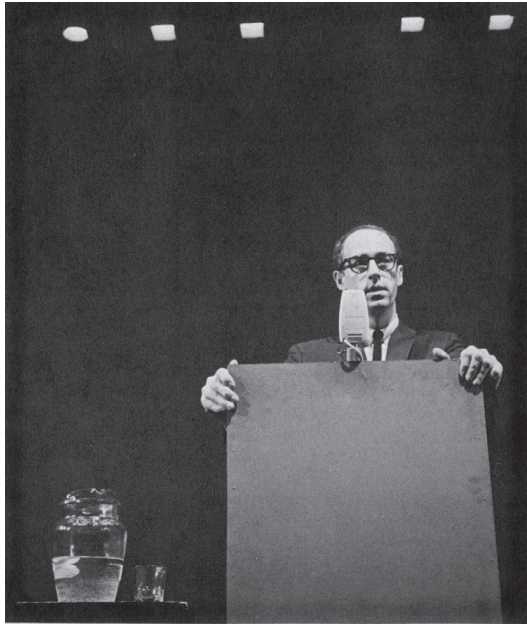
be possible to draw out from these recollections a set of radical potentials for circulating knowledge in the present?

In the United States, the institutionally accredited artist – professionalized to a high-gloss finish – first appeared on the scene in the 1960s. This figure emerged, by most accounts, as the standardized product of research-based graduate education and the newly popularized Master of Fine Arts (MFA) degree.¹ Diagnosing this condition in *Art Subjects: Making artists in the American university*, Howard Singerman observes that universities called for 'reconstructing artistic practice as an academic discipline' (1999: 203). Coding oneself as an artist in this climate became synonymous with internalizing the protocols of formalized arts education. Both as a result of and reaction against compulsory academicization, a range of pedagogical formats proliferated in artistic output of the period. At precisely this moment, the lecture-performance emerged as a vital aesthetic form. Throughout the decade artists mobilized the format to imagine how knowledge may be produced and disseminated outside the academy: within alternative institutional frameworks, beyond authorized communicative forms and through embodied modes of performativity.

We are all too aware, by now, that the development of the lecture-performance in the 1960s does not culminate in a totalized negation of the university, nor dismantle its production of professionalized bodies overwhelmingly coded as male, white, cis-gender and able-bodied. Nor did its early practitioners obtain unilateral victories over the commoditization of information within discursive institutions,

¹ Several scholars and critics have noted the correlation between graduate training for artists in the 1960s and the rise of explicitly pedagogical projects, including Jenny Dirksen (2009: 13), Howard Singerman (1999: 166–80), Rike Frank (2013: 6–8) and Marianne Wagner (2009: 20–2).

■ Robert Morris, *21.3*, 1964, performance. © 2016 Robert Morris / Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York



² Gabriel Rockhill usefully critiques art historical methods that hinge on the ‘binary normativity’ paradigm of success and failure (2014: 47).

³ Patricia Milder provides a cross-section of contemporary works deploying ‘lecture-performance as activism through education’ (2011: 14).

⁴ For documentation and textual materials from this project, see *A Field Guide for Female Interrogators* (Fusco 2008).

⁵ *Walkthrough*’s themes are related to Raad’s political organizing as a member of the Gulf Labor Artist Coalition, the group responsible for the Gulf Labor boycott (Gulf Labor Artist Coalition 2016).

⁶ The video lecture documenting the live performance is not for sale. Instead, non-profit collections can acquire it through a donation to Kurdish refugee relief efforts.

⁷ For an account of the ‘educational turn’, see O’Neill and Wilson (2010) and Hlavajova *et al.* (2008).

from the academy to the museum. It is not a matter of charting this format’s history in order to plot its coordinates along the binary axis of success and failure.² Instead, I surface the social, political and economic forces that informed early lecture-performances in order to historically inflect contemporary attempts to imagine other spaces and forms through which knowledge may come into being.

The status of contemporary lecture-performances, in their wide-ranging heterogeneity, remains similarly indeterminate. In its most potent manifestations the format is deployed as a vehicle of activist and critical pedagogies by politically invested artists.³ Coco Fusco’s *A Room of One’s Own* (2006–8) offers a lesson on the links between detention centres in Abu Ghraib and Guantánamo, torture interrogation tactics and pedagogy (Beckman 2009: 134).⁴ Walid Raad’s *Scratching on Things I Could Disavow: Walkthrough* (2015–16) unravels the exploitative labour conditions imposed on migrant workers building art museums in Abu Dhabi.⁵ Hito Steyerl’s *Is the Museum a Battlefield?* (2013) examines interrelated circuits of military and cultural funding by following the trajectory of a machine-gun bullet from the death of PKK member Andrea Wolf, to the coffers of Lockheed

Martin, to the halls of the Art Institute of Chicago.⁶

Each of these affectively charged works taps into a history of activist pedagogy. They are delivered from the position of artist-educators engaged in political activity through information distribution. Notably, each work was staged at a major museum or biennial. Steyerl’s performance meta-discursively addresses the fact that it was sited at the 2013 Istanbul Biennial whose sponsors include Lockheed Martin. She further unravels the ramifications of this observation in a recent essay, ‘The Terror of Total Dasein’. In her formulation, the lecture-performance and artist talk are embedded in an ‘economy of physical human presence in the artfield’, wherein artists are cast as ‘content providers’ delivering quasi-academic social labour and the illusion of ‘unalienated, unmediated’ access (Steyerl 2015). Borrowing from corporate jargon, critic Simon Sheikh terms this phenomenon ‘talk value’, a feature of knowledge economies and the rise of what Felix Guattari has called semiotic capital (Sheikh 2008: 183–7). In the same vein, Jelena Vesić and Ana Vujanović remark that art’s current dalliance with educational models belies the pursuit of legitimacy within ‘cognitive capitalism ... market logic, the mass media, and the Internet’ (2009: 51). Put otherwise, the artistic field has been a good deal occupied with shuffling knowledge assets.

Following the ‘educational turn’ in contemporary art, the lecture-performance has become a ubiquitous component of the auxiliary programming that accompanies museum and gallery exhibitions.⁷ Despite its current prominence, the origins of the lecture-performance in the 1960s – specifically as an attempt to revise institutional models of scholarly output – remain critically neglected. Bringing examples from its hitherto nebulous history into focus, we can locate one of its points of origin in artists’ critical responses to encounters with the university. Sorting through the lecture-performances of the postwar era, we may chart possibilities for radical modes of knowledge production, performative pedagogy

and tactical information distribution in the present. Recounting recent paradigmatic shifts in the academy, Alan Liu writes, ‘I went to sleep one day a cultural critic and woke the next metamorphosed into a data processor’ (2004:4). Transformations like these demand that we revisit early pedagogical experiments with ever-greater urgency.

21.3 AND THE ARTIST-EDUCATOR IN THE 1960S

Robert Morris’s *21.3* (1964) sets the stage for a pedagogical spectacle where the university-trained artist demonstrates bravura fluency in scholarly discourse. Almost immediately, this spectacle dissolves into a Brechtian mist of defamiliarization and disrupted information transmission.

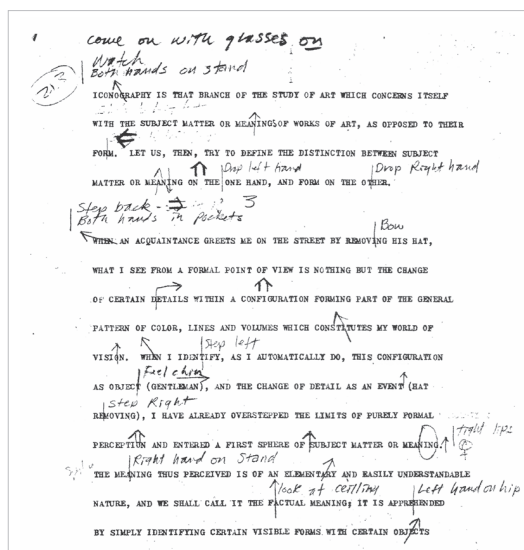
Hosted at New York’s Stage 73, the work was presented in conjunction with a dance series curated by Steve Paxton. Morris’s contribution occupies a midway point between theatre and academic address. Lights were lowered while the artist, smartly attired in a suit and glasses, assumed his position at the podium onstage. Next, he rendered an abridged reading of art historian Erwin Panofsky’s canonical essay ‘Studies in Iconology’ (Panofsky 1939). Rather than recite the text live, Morris lip-synched to an audio recording of himself reading Panofsky’s words. As Eve Meltzer notes, the audio that played also includes a flurry of ‘superfluous sounds’ like the swallowing of liquids and the speaker’s exhalations, each of them failing to signify. Over the course of the piece, Morris demonstratively de-synchronized his live delivery from the recorded address, inserting friction into the flow of information. What followed was a deliberate misalignment of mimed speech and gesture in relation to the pre-recorded material. The artist’s execution introduced a disconnection between the pedagogical authority his visual persona courted on the one hand, and a tactical failure of discursive mastery on the other.

The score for *21.3* reveals the performance as a work of precise scholarly choreography.

Handwritten marginalia scrawled by Morris on Panofsky’s text determines each of his micro-actions and gesticulations in advance. On the first page, Morris reminds himself to ‘come on with glasses on’. Underlining the final word, he indicates the urgency of making himself visually legible as an intellectual archetype from the outset. A note directly below it mandates ‘both hands on stand’, dictating an aggressively upright stance. In a carefully managed arrangement of the artist’s body, Morris’s spread arms signalled possession of the podium and its surrounding space, while his ambiguous facial expressions telegraphed an inability to process his own speech.

Amidst the profusion of lecture-performances generated in the post-war period, Morris’s work is often cited as an early precedent in the scarce existing literature on the subject.⁸ This claim appears so frequently that artist Gordon Hall rightly notes the necessity of mapping ‘alternate, non-chronological’ lineages of the format that do not ground its history exclusively in the works of Morris and Joseph Beuys. Their suggestions include Adrian Piper, Simone Forti and Scott Burton (Hall 2014). To these we may add the V-Girls, Carey Young, Sharon Hayes, Vaginal Davis and many others. Despite the ubiquity of *21.3* in inventories of 1960s pedagogical projects, few scholars have turned attention toward an extensive analysis of the

⁸ Other frequently circulated examples of lecture-performances from this decade feature a familiar roster of post-war artists, including Joseph Beuys’ *How to Explain Pictures to a Dead Hare* (1965), Andy Warhol’s *Lecture Tour* (1967) and Robert Smithson’s *Hotel Palenque* (1969–72).



■ Script for Robert Morris, *21.3, 1964*. © 2016 Robert Morris / Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York

work, or to how its constituent parts inflect later lecture-performances. Eve Meltzer's important account discusses the piece as the eruption of a discursive subject's affect over and against systems that would seek to repress it (2013). Hall describes it as 'a dance of a lecture', highlighting its roots in the practice of Morris's partner and collaborator, Forti (2014).

I turn to *21.3* not as a canonical instance of the lecture-performance in the 1960s, but as an example that explicitly addresses the academic institutionalization through which artistic practice was being fashioned. It functions, first and foremost, as a translation of scholarly language into a range of hemmed in motions and circumscribed corporeal affects. Morris offers us a body that has been imperfectly trained, that exceeds the bounds and strictures of professionalization, that has only partially internalized disciplinary discourse. Borrowing from Jack Halberstam's formulation of failure, Morris presents a body that has devised resistant 'ways of inhabiting structures of knowing' (Halberstam 2011: 12) – a body whose glitches render it incapable of transmitting usable data. Where, then, did this body emerge?

Post-war fetishizations of professionalism are part and parcel of what Benjamin Buchloh has famously called 'an aesthetic of administration and legal organization and institutional validation' (1990: 119). Alexander Alberro sheds further light on this, noting that the aspirational leanings of the advanced degree artist 'parallel developments in the world of business and the emergent managerial class' (2003: 2). While continuous with these models, the paradigm represented by *21.3* is not merely of the artist as a 'company man', but more pointedly as a 'university man'.

To be sure, the institutionally accredited artist emerges through the dual project of professionalization and masculinization that governed the formation of art departments in the post-war period. Within a decade after 1960, when the College Art Association sanctioned the MFA as the terminal degree for graduate studio work, thirty-one new MFA programmes opened at universities across the United States

(Singerman 1999: 6). Howard Singerman outlines how art departments subsequently issued 'the call to professionalize ... in relation to earlier attempts to formalize the teaching of art, and to masculinize its academic image and its student body' (129). Importantly, this dual-pronged imperative was partially a byproduct of male war veterans entering degree-granting art programmes in the 1940s. G.I. Bill funding enabled a 'flood of subsidized students' to receive art education sponsored by the US government.⁹ To gain eligibility for state-funded students and approval from the Office of Education, departments streamlined their courses of study. In effect, the situation of the state-funded post-war university artist maps on to Stefano Harney and Fred Moten's observation that 'professionalization – that which reproduces professions – is a state strategy' (2013: 32). Not incidentally, Morris had an extended encounter with the university system in the 1960s, receiving a masters (MA) in Art History from Hunter College, New York. Directly citing this experience, the title of *21.3* is derived from a numerical university course listing.

Professions, as Singerman puts it, 'control at the level of practitioners; their rules of credentialing and certification govern who can speak' (1999: 201). In the 1960s, university professions addressed themselves to practitioners coded as male and expected to master the cognitive labour of standardized verbal discourse. Such labour was privileged to the exclusion of manual labour, which was associated with outmoded forms of 'feminized' craft. Sporting professorial drag ('come on with glasses *on*') while systematically undermining his own pedagogical authority, *21.3* destabilizes the pedagogical figure Jacques Rancière has dubbed the 'master explicator' (1991: 46). This lecture-performance models what it may look like to forfeit the institutionally matched bedfellows of professionalization and masculinization – to evacuate a position of sovereignty and circulate knowledge as a non-sovereign subject. Rebinding scholarly speech to an embodied speaker, Morris queers the academic address by conspicuously rooting it in

⁹ Norman Rice quoted in Singerman (1999: 129).

¹⁰ In this period, Morris performed a markedly different kind of gender identification from the one exhibited in *21.3*, displaying 'nostalgia for the lost masculinity of working-class manhood' (Bryan-Wilson 2009: 125).

¹¹ Amidst Art Strike's ongoing protest of museums' exclusionary practices and complacency with US military actions in Vietnam, Morris issued the announcement, 'Museums are our campuses,' further identifying with student activist populations (Bryan-Wilson 2009: 120).

the body, a body whose expressions fail the tests of mastery and legibility.

Morris soon shifted his approach to the field of professionalized artistic labour. In the years following *21.3*, he assumed the position of what Julia Bryan-Wilson has called an ‘art worker’, a practitioner who claims cross-class identification with blue-collar labourers.¹⁰ At the end of the decade, he was elected co-chair of the New York Art Strike against War, Racism, and Repression, marking a period when his artistic and activist activities were increasingly intertwined.¹¹ These dynamics came to a head in his 1970 solo exhibition for the Whitney Museum of American Art, New York, when Morris invited museum visitors to witness the construction and installation of his outsize sculptures by an anonymous labour force. Here, Morris placed ‘labor on display to demonstrate how the physical work of the artist becomes reified’ (Bryan-Wilson 2009: 103). We may, then, link this gesture to his laying

bare of the cognitive labour of late capital in *21.3*. Bryan-Wilson compellingly associates such tactical manoeuvres with the widespread influence of Herbert Marcuse’s writing on artists of the 1960s and 70s. In particular, Marcuse’s formulation of ‘radical practice’ allowed artists to conceptualize their activities in terms of ‘a rehearsal or trial, the refining and trying out of politics’ (8). Such a reading also sheds considerable light on *21.3* as a disidentification with the professionalism valorized under neoliberal economies.

In recent years, Morris’s aesthetics of discourse has shifted toward a negation of speech. This negation arrives at a moment dubbed ‘para-performative’ by Matthew Jesse Jackson, when ‘distribution, promotion, commentary and display are ... art’s primary media themselves’ (Jackson 2007: 46). Receiving invitations to speak on the institutional lecture circuit in this climate, Morris has issued the following reply:



■ Gordon Hall *Read me that part a-gain, where I disin-herit everybody*. Performance still. Wood, paint, and performance-lecture with projected images and coloured light, 50 minutes, 2014. Commissioned by EMPAC/ Experimental Media and Performing Arts Center, Rensselaer Polytechnic Institute, Troy, New York, USA.

■ Gordon Hall *Read me that part a-gain, where I disin-herit everybody*. Performance still. Wood, paint, and performance-lecture with projected images and coloured light, 50 minutes, 2014. Commissioned by EMPAC/ Experimental Media and Performing Arts Center, Rensselaer Polytechnic Institute, Troy, New York, USA.



I do not want to participate in staged conversations about art – either mine or others past or present – which are labored and disguised performances. I do not want to be interviewed by curators, critics, art directors, theorists, aestheticians, aesthetes, professors.... Everybody uses everybody else for their own purposes, and I am happy to be just material for somebody else so long as I can exercise my right to remain silent, immobile, possibly armed, and at a distance of several miles. (Morris 2011)

‘WORK NOT WORK:’ GORDON HALL AND THE LECTURE-PERFORMANCE IN THE PRESENT

21.3 reappears fifty years after its initial staging in Gordon Hall’s lecture-performance, *Read me that part a-gain, where I disin-herit everybody* (2014–15). Hall is the founder of the Center for Experimental Lectures, through which they provide a para-institutional ‘platform for artists, theorists, and other cultural producers to engage with the public lecture as a format’ (Hall 2011). In a metadiscursive history of the lecture-performance, *Read me that part a-gain* ... explores what it means to frame politics and thinking as ‘something you do with your body’,

corporeal acts grounded in material structures (Hall 2014). This statement, Hall notes, is one they frequently direct to their undergraduate students. Hall’s utterances issue forth from a body that resists binary identifications, speaking back to the historical gendering of the professionalized artist-educator as a masculine figure. Hall delivers their script as a mobile body navigating a shifting set of spatial coordinates. The coordinates are nested within a stage set of white, geometric sculptures that resemble academic podiums in various stages of construction. Early on in the piece, the artist projects a poster they produced in 2012 that reads ‘WORK NOT WORK’. Unravelling this statement, they point to the uncertain status of lecture-performances as aesthetic products that ‘are and aren’t the work’ (Hall 2014). On the one hand, the lecture-performance presents cognitive labour continuous with the principles of knowledge work under late capital. At the same time, Hall suggests, its indeterminate, dialogic nature exists on the periphery of ‘real work’, alongside the resistant, affect-laden sociality of ‘werk’ and ‘talking politics on the naked gay beach’.

Morris appears in Hall's piece – as in this essay – not as a point of origin or an instructive model to be replicated. Rather, he is cast as one catalyst among an expansive constellation comprising the history of pedagogical aesthetics. He is recollected non-chronologically, a single node in an alternate mapping. Counterfactually reshuffling the history of this aesthetic form, Hall opens up new spaces for thinking the embodiment of knowledge in the present, reigniting the possibility of unintended and unforeseen effects.

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