

When Form Starts Talking: On Lecture- Performances

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Writing on Lippard's 'numbers shows' of the late 1960s and early 70s, Sabeth Buchmann describes this feature as defining the art of that period:

This developed into a new cipher crossing (virtually) all genres and media, promoting increasingly project-based, interdisciplinary and situationally mobile exhibition formats, and leading, in avant-garde style, to the collapse of distinctions between the process of production and reception, or exhibition and publication.

Such blurring of the boundaries between production and reception also appears to be relevant for examining the format of the lecture-performance today insofar as it opens up possibilities to experience knowledge as a reflexive formation that is as much aesthetic as social — in other words, as an open feedback system. In this sense, lecture-performances can be seen as picking up on a historical thread that runs from the formal interpretation of a work, via analysis and deconstruction of the circumstances of its modes of production, to a turn towards reception as part of the work's inherent condition — that is to say, to those time-based aspects that indicate processes of thinking, articulate relationships and ascribe meaning and value. To cite Patricia Milder's description of Jérôme Bel's film *Véronique Doisneau* (2004), 'It attempts to bring to the fore what is happening and how it is working on you and with you; how you as an audience member are complicit in it.' In the literature on this field Robert Morris's 1964 re-enactment of art historian Erwin Panofsky's lecture 'Ikonographie und Ikonologie' ('Studies in Iconology', 1939) is frequently cited as the first lecture-performance, as well as its historical model. Morris's lecture-performance stands out not only as an early example of this format (for example, Robert Smithson's slide-lecture *Hotel Palenque* is from 1969—72) but also for bringing together some of its main principles. In this work, titled 21.3, Morris silently lip-synchs his own reading of the first chapter of Panofsky's well-known essay. Even though Morris makes use of a playback situation, he subverts its logic by inserting a delay in his talking, facial expressions and gestures — folding his arms, stepping to one side, lifting the water glass, etc. — which desynchronises his movements from the recorded sounds. What makes this work so foundational for a reflection on lecture-performances is Morris's self-conscious use of performance as an analytical device that, by means of displacement and deferral, unsettles the 'order of things', such as the relationship between the document and the work, between presentation and mediation. The acting out of a temporal gap — in the performative dramatisation as well as in the interpretation of an art historical essay — addresses the different textures of temporality that are embedded in an artwork, as well as their reciprocal influence.

Taking Morris's lecture as a historical model, it seems only logical that the lecture-performance has been considered — inasmuch as a history of the form has been written — in relation to a tradition of conceptual lectures, in particular artist's lectures, on the one hand, and to the history of performance, on the other. Titles such as 'Teaching as Art: The Contemporary Lecture-Performance' (Milder, 2011), 'Artists Talking at the Doubting Interface' (2011), 'Ars Academica — the Lecture between Artistic and Academic Discourse' (Jenny Dirksen, 2009) or 'Doing Lectures: Performative Lectures as a Framework for Artistic Action' (Marianne Wagner, 2009) establish, at times very explicitly, a link to teaching and education. Whilst this may not offer conclusive evidence, it can be seen at least as an indication of affinity with the repeatedly diagnosed 'educational turn' in the field of contemporary art during the last decade. At the same time, it is precisely such educational interpretations that appear to work against the potential of the lecture-performance format, in many cases involuntarily promoting a concept of genre and media specificity, which seeks to keep a tight rein on a method — the lecture-performance — whose primary goal is precisely to work against such containment and frustrate the status of 'information'. In this vein, artist and film-maker Hito Steyerl — who has long deployed this format in a highly programmatic fashion as a form of critical

practice — recently prefaced her lecture at the conference ‘The Psychopathologies of Cognitive Capitalism’ (2013) with the following statement: *This is not Research. This is not Theory. This is not Art.* Opening a lecture titled ‘Withdrawal from Representation’ with this assertion might be understood as a strategy of denial and thus as a commentary directed against (neoliberal) approaches of economisation and commoditisation of knowledge production. However, in the light of Steyerl’s background in film, this ‘insert’ also evokes the tradition of the essay-film as a self reflexive and emancipatory form of criticism. As is the case with the lectureperformance, the essay-film functions as an umbrella term for an analytical form that turns attention to the way we experience information as a twofold transaction: as an act of structuring controlled by a subject and as an act of subjectivisation — that is, of becoming structured. Film-makers such as Chantal Akerman, Hartmut Bitomsky, Harun Farocki, Jean-Luc Godard, Alexander Kluge, Chris Marker or Agnès Varda — to name a few — have demonstrated the involvement of the personal voice in the narrative as a reflexive reference and structuring principle. But perhaps most importantly, the form of the essay-film can be seen as precursor.

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Fraser’s observation that a reflexive engagement with a site implies ‘both our relationships to that site and the social conditions of those relations’ leads to the question of how the changing social conditions of knowledge production affect artistic and curatorial relations to site — that is, the context in which knowledge is produced. As Tom Holert and Simon Sheikh point out in their respective critical readings of the ongoing reappraisal of knowledge and its placement in a new economy, what is currently at stake is different from the notion of transforming the societal realm with artistic means: what is in process, rather, is the outlining of the specificity of art as a knowledge structure. Following this argument, the popularity of the performative lecture could be seen as a ‘defence’ of the artistic field within the ‘institution’ — the public, political and social sphere. How, for example, is the notion of ‘our relations to a site’ — an essential component of knowing, yet difficult to quantify — articulated in lectureperformances? I am particularly interested in the idea that the affective dimension of the format doesn’t lie in the presence of the performer or the audience, but rather consists in introducing other forms of personal affect that complicate and obscure the understanding of the subject as a ‘resource’ to be capitalised upon; for instance, by making the structural openness of communicative situations physically present, like David Antin does in his talk pieces.

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In the context of ‘Amazing! Clever! Linguistic! An Adventure in Conceptual Art’, Désanges performed the lecture-performance *Signs and Wonders: Theory of Modern Art/ Theorem of Damned Art* (2009), with Alexandra Delage, on January 2013. If Désanges generally coins his performances as ‘living exhibitions’, here *Signs and Wonders* effectively became an exhibition within the exhibition. Structured as a reflection on the programme of basic geometric forms pursued by modernism, Minimalism and Conceptual art (such as the line, the not governed by any overarching logic, yet they organise navigation around the room — on both a physical and a visual level. This is the setting for Pierce’s performance *Future Exhibitions* (2010), which was presented at Museum moderner Kunst Stiftung Ludwig, Vienna (2010), and Tate Modern, London (2011), as part of the exhibition and performance series ‘Push and Pull’. The curatorial project took Allan Kaprow’s environment *Push and Pull: A Furniture Comedy* for Hans Hofmann (1963), for which the artist invited visitors to arrange and rearrange furniture across two rooms, as a point of departure to explore the interplay of installation and live performance, and of changing forms of presentation and reception of art. Pierce’s *Future Exhibitions* was conceived as a work-within-a-work, for it took place within Kaprow’s installation; it did so literally in its presentation at the mumok, where *Push and Pull* is part of the collection, and in both venues in a more discursive way, reflecting on how artworks wander through time and speak through one another. For this work, Pierce used furniture and objects from around the institution that informed the history of curating, to add another situated layer to the piece. Within this setting of ‘props’ embodying different textures of temporality, Pierce

described a series of scenarios, each based on a document relating to a particular (historical) exhibition. The artist began the performance with a description of a photograph of Kazimir Malevich's paintings as displayed at the exhibition '0.10' in 1915 (also known as 'The Last Futurist Exhibition of Pictures'):

— This is a photograph of an exhibition. In it there are several canvases hanging on the walls with paintings of geometric shapes, circles, squares, crosses and similar compositions. (Gesturing to the walls.)

— The paintings are numbered one through thirty-nine with bits of paper tacked to the wall. The paintings are hung in groups, salon style. The photograph is orientated to the corner of the room. Hung in the upper corner, near the ceiling is a BLACK square on a WHITE canvas. (Gesturing to the corner of the room.)

— On the floor, placed next to the wall is a modest BLACK chair. It is The Last Futurist Exhibition.

After each scene, a group of demonstrators changed the arrangement of the props and furniture and the artist took up a new position in the space, followed by the audience who wandered from scenario to scenario, through different times and networked spaces. Pierce's scripted lecture and her reduced gestures in front of the audience evoked a form of exhibiting as an act of 'processing relations', to use Beatrice von Bismarck's characterization of the 'curatorial'. The relations and 'gaps' between the visual elements — the props, the architecture of the exhibition space, the presence of the audience — and Pierce's verbal descriptions enacted moments of displacement and deferral, recalling Morris's 21.3 and his unsettling of representation as a set of causal relations. If in that seminal work Morris used the format of the performative lecture to reflect upon the relationship between form and content, as well as between production and reception, Pierce introduced a broader investigation into an understanding of meaning that, in the artist's words, 'hinges on a certain recognition of the conflicts or contradictions present in knowing'. At the same time, her interest in the 'personal' provides an alternative term for an affective attachment — for 'our relation to a site' — as a place of knowing that emphasises openness but also reflects on its structure: its social and situated conditions. Pushing this idea further, the format of the lecture-performance can be said to hinge on the recognition of the conflicts present in performing, lecturing and exhibiting, and in enabling the creation of a space in which conversation can exist.