

FACING THE CROWD

**WEST DEN HAAG
2022**

FACING THE CROWD

ORV DESSAU

On the occasion of the exhibition:
Facing the Crowd: On and Around Lecture Performance
October 9, 2021 — February 27, 2022

There are two starting points to this story

One starting point approaches lecture performance as a marginal, yet relatively distinct format, exercised by artists since the 1970s. Historically, a lecture performance is described as an act of speech, delivered by an artist in a shared public setting in front of a live audience. Originated in the groundbreaking developments of the 1960s early-1970s, lecture performance follows the path paved by performance art, which turned the body of the artist into the medium of the work; by the linguistic turn of conceptual art and the reduction of the world into a word, and by practices of institutional critique incorporating the physical and structural conditions of a given exhibition site as part of the display.

In 1964 Robert Morris carried out what many consider the first lecture performance. Titled *27.3*, it was based on the recording of Erwin Panofsky's 1939 lecture *Studies in Iconology*. In it, the artist lip-synchs Panofsky's recorded lecture with a slight delay, which keeps him from fully immerse in the text his work was determined by. As put by Rike Frank: "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 desynchronizes his movements from the recorded sounds. What makes this work so foundational for a reflection on lecture performances is Morris' 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."

Morris' 27.3 conveys some of the fundamental characteristics of lecture performance as an amalgam of text and context, form and content, practice and theory. Blurring the difference between art and the art discourse, it converts the work into the event of its own interpretation, its own critical account.

The second starting point approaches lecture performance as a testimony to the disappearance of art within verbal communication, especially under the global reign of digital media. In these circumstances, rather than a relatively distinct form of speech verging on and intermingling all forms of speech, lecture performance dissolves into everyday language. It loses itself in the endless production of socially accepted speech — the flux of posts, chats, video conferences, and live events — circulating through the communication networks that govern our life and make everyone a lecture performer. Merging the two starting points one can argue that the disappearance of art into communication is consistent with the disappearances from which lecture performance was born, namely, the effort of conceptual art to dematerialize the object into a linguistic construct, and of institutional critique to assimilate the artistic outcome into the physical circumstances in which it is perceived. The exhibition *Facing the Crowd: On and Around Lecture Performance* seeks to expose the inherent duality of its subject, referring to lecture performance as an open category, a flexible frame enabling to gather works by artists of different generations without narrowing their joint display, and the term lecture performance, into a homologous narrative.

The exhibition focuses on the marginal status of lecture performance in art history, and within the practice of each of its artists. None of the artists represented in the exhibition exclusively exercises lecture performance. Some of them exercise it to disguise their proposition with and as speech, some to widen the public reach of their work, and some to enhance the social scope of the art field. For some, lecture performance is a means to push past the boundaries between contexts and disciplines, between art and life, while for others it is a mere attribute; a feature.

Each of the pieces comprising the exhibition suggests its own version of lecture performance, linking it to theater, spoken poetry, public reading, slide show presentation, political speech making, experimental cinema, television broadcasting, and online video streaming.

DAN GRAHAM (BORN 1942)

Performer/Audience/Mirror, 1975

Black & white video, sound, 22:52 min.

In essence, a lecture performance is an act of speech about the function of speech, about being a speaking body and giving rise to one's own voice, language, and social identity. It embodies the process of subjectification, symbolically replaying the event of acquiring language, and as a result, a sense of self.

This stance is demonstrated by *Performer/Audience/Mirror*, Dan Graham's seminal lecture performance. In it, Graham stands in front of an audience and describes the situation of standing in front of an audience. Behind him is a mirrored wall reflecting the audience and the back side of his body. The mirror view disrupts the correspondence of speech and vision. While Graham's description takes place when facing the audience, the image reflected in the mirror positions him with his back to the audience. Later on, Graham faces the mirror and moves to describe his front body's gestures. There again, while hearing the description of Graham's front, the audience sees his back. The real-time description of the conditions in which the performance takes place becomes the situation itself and the rupture therein. The verbal and optical reflections become the thing reflected upon and the reason for its inconsistency. The disruption of sight by speech and vice versa alienates Graham from, and reconnects him to, the others, and at the same time, alienates him from, and reconnects him to, himself. It highlights his singularity and exposes the inner split his self, and any self, is based upon.

In the catalogue of his 2009 retrospective at the Museum of Contemporary Art, Los Angeles, Graham charts the performance's dynamic: "The audience sees themselves. They can hear my description of them or they can look at themselves directly in instantaneous present time. What I'm saying in the performance is a little bit behind their time. So they can see themselves in the mirror, or they can hear what I'm saying a little bit behind, slightly time delayed. Also, what I'm saying is continuous whereas the mirror is instantaneous, it's a snapshot."

PAUL MCCARTHY (BORN 1945)

Class Fool, 1976

Two channel video projection, slide projection, color, sound, 40:45 min.

Courtesy the artist and Hauser & Wirth

In contrast to Graham's performance, Paul McCarthy's 1976 *Class Fool* can be regarded as a denied lecture performance addressing the function of verbal communication by ways of negation. Though executed in a lecture hall in front of a live audience, McCarthy's performance avoids speech, introducing a naked performer whose set of obscene gestures, involving baby dolls, a bowl of ketchup and his own erogenous body parts, characterizes a purely sensual way of being, both prior and subsequent to the distinction between self and other, internal and external. It marks the artist, or the role he plays, as fundamentally blind or radically antagonistic of social interactions and processes of subjectification.

Thomas McEvilley offers a detailed summary of the performance: "*Class Fool* opens in darkness with indecipherable moving lights, muted sounds, and people glimpsed moving darkly in trousers ... McCarthy is vaguely seen naked in the fitful glow ... He walks by bare-ass in a streak of light, underpants pulled just below his buttocks. He is kind of hopping in the dark, now he falls to his knees, other people can now be seen seated in classroom seats watching as he crawls around; they are seated as if watching a croquet game ... A girl's face floats by in the dark, bloody monster leaping while spectators watch; ketchup is layered heavily on his back. A little dolly appears, a naked dancer. He's suffering, hopping, class fool bleeds and dances, little green lights move a tiny bit. There are floating pictures — of a baby? The naked

monster boy, blood and gore on his shoulders, rubs his asshole with something. He begins to back out through the seated audience."

McCarthy's performance is filmed from two different angles and the two films are projected together on one wall. The right footage is slightly behind in time. A still image projected on an adjacent wall depicts Umberto Boccioni's 1913 sculpture *Unique Forms of Continuity in Space*. The joint projection of the performance and the sculpture extends both of them into the exhibition space. It further extends the ceaselessly extending bodies they are made of, actualizing them in the here and now of the exhibition.

KAREN FINLEY (BORN 1956)

It's my Body, 1992

Single channel video, color, sound, 03:37 min. / Courtesy the artist

Karen Finley's notion of lecture performance summons the convergence of art and politics, anchoring it in a real historical context. For Finley, a lecture performance is not an isolated situation exclusively determined by the physical conditions in which it takes place. It is part of the public sphere and is informed by specific political battles.

Rather than outlining the abstract structure of self-identification, Finley's lecture performances incarnate a concrete social identity. In them, she addresses the nation, the general public, the politicians. Her audience is the entire civil society. Finley speaks as a woman who embodies the female sex as a political class amidst a conflict. In her performances Finley appears as a possessed medium discharging the sediments of rage that decent political debating tends to repress. Utilizing aspects of a political speech, an exhortation, and an agitated monologue, Finley's lecture performances are dissentious, positioning the performer in confrontation with her audience. The fact she often delivers her speech naked intensifies her lecture performances as a real transgressive act deconstructing existing conventions of discourse and public appearance.

In *It's my Body* Finley confronts the ongoing political and legal debate in the United States around the right of women to control their body, and in particular, around women's right to abortion. *It's my Body* is one act within a longer performance titled *A Certain Level of Denial* (1992). The performance was executed in different art

institutes in front of a live audience, but was also recorded and released as a CD, by ways of which Finley further expanded the scope of her lecture performance towards the public sphere and the broader cultural field.

JESPER LIST THOMSEN (BORN 1978)

Blackbirds, 2018

*Audio recording of live reading at Hot Wheels Project, Athens, April 2019;
09:41 min. / Courtesy the Artist and Hot Wheels Athens*

Originally, the poem *Blackbirds* was part of BASE BASE etc.: a six day reading event that took place in April 2019 at Hot Wheels Project, Athens. According to Jesper List Thomsen, the event ruminated "on the body and its language, political perversion, public performance, body-building, the vernacular of the gym, and the coalescence of corporal and semantic expression."

BASE BASE etc. was comprised of a live reading, a sculptural installation, and a public reading group. It introduced the artist's concept of live reading as a blend of lecture performance and spoken poetry, but also as one act within a multidisciplinary and multi-contextual practice evolving to site-specific interventions, as well as a theoretical group study. This diversity allows us to experience the artist's spoken texts, and in particular *Blackbirds*, not as poetry per se, but as an expanded sculptural operation and a potential of theory-based politics. Though its title recalls historically significant verses (from Shakespeare to Wallace Stevens), *Blackbirds* is more than a poem; it is a textual chain reaction, a linguistic discharge of energy into the world and onto the body.

List Thomsen's recent text, titled *FREEEee* (2022), is "the logical extension" of his 2018 poem. At once a folksong and a lecture, *FREEEee* is premised on a 32-page text probing the parameters of "corporeal and intellectual deliberation, of essayistic logic and poetic neglect, via a series of encounters with current and deceased thinkers."

HANNE LIPPARD (BORN 1984)

Mistakes Made, 2016

Digital audio, 03:50 min. / Courtesy the artist and Lambdalambdalambda

Hanne Lippard's art practice ranges from sonic installations and video essays to lecture performances and wall displayed texts. For Lippard, language is a reflexive medium with which she explores the simultaneous consequences of owning and disowning a body, of identification and alienation. In many of her works, language and speech generate an experience of conjunction and integrity, while also implementing and highlighting the inner splits of selfhood.

The sonic installation *Mistakes Made* exercises language and speech as conductors of an ambiguous perception of the body and the world. Out of a narrow vertical speaker reminiscent of a human upright posture, we hear Lippard's voice reciting the verses of a poetic lecture in which she creates and traces impossible skeletal connections, as if informed by a hallucinatory x-ray vision: "The knee bone is connected to the hip bone / The hip bone is connected to the ankle bone / The ankle bone is connected to the neck bone / But the neck bone is detached from its spine / Which makes the back bone bent." Lippard's verses recall the words of the song *Dem Bones*, which enumerate the bones of the body in their structured order. They also allude to the biblical passage *Dem Bones* alludes to, namely, the *Vision of the Valley of Dry Bones* described in the *Book of Ezekiel* as a process in which dry bones connect into human figures, and then become covered with flesh and skin, up to the point of resurrection.

Lippard's allusion to Ezekiel's resurrective prophecy is not a mere literary homage, but an experiment in the generative and mutative power of language and speech.

JOSEPH BEUYS (1921–1986)

Dialogue with Audience, 1980

Color and black & white film, 50:19 min.

Unlike American lecture performance, Joseph Beuys' public discussions and lecture actions were not an act of dematerialization, but served as members within the complex array of his expanded field of art, partly epitomized in the concept of Social Sculpture.

The video *Dialogue with Audience* documents a discussion between Beuys and a crowd of spectators/listeners gathered at Cooper Union, New York, on January 7th, 1980. Public discussions play a significant role in Beuys' activity. For example, Beuys' participation in Documenta V (Kassel, 1972) included setting up an office space for the **Organization for Direct Democracy** through Referendum which he established a year earlier (while still teaching in the art academy in Düsseldorf, where he also established, among other things, the **German Student Party**). In the organization's office in Kassel, Beuys conducted endless public discussions throughout the whole period of the exhibition, engaging passersby in wide-ranging conversations about educational systems, environmental practices, and political initiatives.

In Documenta VI (1977) Beuys inaugurated his social-educational project of the **Free International University for Creativity and Interdisciplinary Research** in a series of gatherings, discussions, workshops, and lectures, which shared the space with his memorable honey pump sculpture (*Honey Pump for Workplace*, 1977).

However, in contrast to his public discussions, Beuys' celebrated 1965 performance *How to Explain Pictures to a Dead Hare* presents a cryptic notion of communication

and speech. In it, Beuys' head is covered with honey and gold leaf as he walks through an exhibition of his drawings with a dead hare cradled in his arms. After the walk-through he sits in a chair and explains all the works to the hare. Originally, the performance was only visible from the doorway and a television monitor via a street window of the gallery. Though it was recorded on video, the gallery was closed to the public, staging the performance as a ritualistic intervention into the underworld, where Beuys' speech and words of explanation are rendered unheard, uncommunicative; inaccessible to living humans.

ANDREA FRASER (BORN 1965)

Official Welcome, 2001-03

*Video, color, sound, 30:00 min. / Courtesy the artist
and Galerie Nagel-Draxler*

As written by Richrad Martin: "In *Official Welcome* artist Andrea Fraser performs a speech to an audience at the Kunstverein in Hamburg. Wearing a black dress and standing on a white platform in front of a lectern and microphone, Fraser is filmed by two static digital cameras as she adopts a succession of different personae during the speech. Her performance is a satirical rendering of the rhetoric and rituals that traditionally constitute an 'official welcome', with Fraser mimicking the language and gestures of archetypal figures associated with the art world, including patrons, museum directors, curators, critics and artists.

Although Fraser does not explicitly inform the audience of the specific role she is inhabiting at any one time, the changes between different personae are signaled by distinct shifts in her tone, language and posture, often to comic effect ... Around two-thirds of the way through the thirty-minute video, Fraser begins to undress. She moves to the side of the lectern in her black underwear and high-heeled shoes and tells the audience, 'I'm not a person today. I'm an object in an artwork. It's about emptiness.' She subsequently removes the last of her clothing and continues the speech naked. Towards the end of the performance, she puts her clothes back on, before beginning to cry.

Official Welcome can also be viewed within the history of performance art, especially in its claim that the performer is 'an object in an artwork'. In it, the provocations Fraser

issues while standing in her underwear draw attention to how the female body has been depicted in art throughout history and raise questions about the status of women within the institutional art world."

JORDAN WOLFSON (BORN 1980)

Animation, masks, 2011

Video animation on monitor, 12:29 min.

Courtesy the artist and David Zwirner Gallery

Animation, masks by Jordan Wolfson shakes our prior knowledge about lecture performance. Although it features a speaker directly addressing the viewers, this speaker is not the artist, and in fact, not a real person, but a fictional animated caricature character of an ultra-Orthodox Jewish man, whose appearance derives from a collection of references found under the Google search terms 'evil Jew' and 'Shylock.' The narration accompanying the protagonist's appearance changes voice at intervals, pointing to the changes of identity to which he is subject. The protagonist's different voices recite the opening passage from Richard Brautigan's 1967 **Love Poem**: "It's so nice to wake up in the morning all alone / And not have to tell somebody you love them / When you don't love them, anymore." With this passage Wolfson amplifies the film's inner clash between expressions of aloneness and crowdedness. To further manifest the notion of multiple personalities populating a single character, Wolfson's protagonist also mimes the two voices of an intimate conversation between a man and a woman.

By using an animated avatar miming various pre-recorded voices on a shifting virtual background, *Animation, masks* undermines the premise of lecture performance as a localized live speech given by artists in their own voice. Deconstructing the framework of a defined architectural venue, it carries lecture performance to the nowhere and anywhere of digital communication systems, abandoning the physical site and bodily presence of lecture performance for the flat screen and the disembodied anonymity of the chat-room or the videoblog.

AGNIESZKA POLSKA (BORN 1985)

The New Sun, 2017

Digital video, color, sound, 12:19 min. / Courtesy the artist

The New Sun by Agnieszka Polska is more a lecture film than a lecture performance, but it does consist of fundamental qualities historically attributed to the latter, such as explicitly addressing the audience as an entity. Like lecture performance, *The New Sun* is indistinguishable from the speaker it features, which, in this instance, is a virtual childish figure of a sun. The film is both the sender of an utterance and the utterance being sent.

According to Polska, "The Sun's speech is a juggle of styles and moods: it goes from the elevated and emotionally-charged confessions to the goofy stand-up comedy, and ends up with an interpretation of 'I got love', a song from the 1970 musical Purlie. The general ambiance of the film is dark, but the sung monologue leaves a space for hope and marks the significance of words as tools of social responsibility."

The New Sun situates the spectator as its direct addressee, but as a direct speech it is also dependent on the spectator's perception, and in this sense, it is validated by the spectator. In the beginning of the film, the figure of the speaking sun announces that "if something catastrophic would happen, and the language, justice, and tolerance, were to disappear from the face of the earth, all that would remain would be the words that I speak to you. And whatever comes next would be built on the words that I tell you." As a consequence, all that is told afterwards situates the audience in a post-Apocalyptic scenario, turning the here and now of the presentation into the future of a past catastrophe.

ED ATKINS (BORN 1982)

Depression, 2012

Video, color, sound, 17:20 min.

Courtesy the artist and Galerie Isabella Bortolozzi

Recalling a peculiar kind of a late night television broadcast, Ed Atkins' *Depression* is one of the very few live performances executed by the artist throughout the years. In it Atkins sits in front of a bluescreen and appears to recite passages from his text, *Air for Concrete*, as reproduced in his collected writings, *A Primer for Cadavers* (2018). A chromakey blue hood fully covers his head. The hood not only renders him faceless and blends him in with the bluescreen (in itself, a sign of a blank surface, ready to be filled in postproduction), it also seems to alter his voice and his capacity to control the video and the accompanying music. The technique is simple, but its defamiliarizing effect is profound. The mode of auto-anonymization conducted by the performance is further extended in Atkins' 2022 version of *Depression*, consisting of the same soundtrack and video, but performed by a delegated performer, who wears the same blue hood while mimicking the artist's movements from the original video.

Depression's mode of auto-anonymization is also conveyed in the recited text — an emotionally loaded yet excessively aestheticized sort of love letter/farewell letter, whose addressee is kept nameless, obscure.

Atkins' live performance should be examined in relation to his work in advanced video. A work like *Depression* is somehow akin to a recent video work like *The Worm* (2021), which recreates the artist as a digital avatar,

using data collected during a phone conversation he made with his mother. *The Worm* reframes the rather intimate conversation as a broadcasted telephone interview, animating Atkins' double as a talk-show host. It processes private familial interactions into a spectacular performance, emphasizing the self-alienating, auto-anonymizing effect of technologically generated images.

Further reading:

Rike Frank

When Forms Start Talking: On Lecture Performances

Afterall, (issue 33, Summer 2013), p. 23.

Dan Graham: Beyond, exh. cat., ed. Bennet Simpson and Chrissie Iles (MIT Press, 2009).

Thomas McEvelley, *Paul McCarthy: Performance and Video Works: The Layering in Paul McCarthy*, Head Shop / Shop Head exh. cat. (Steidl, 2007), p. 42.

Richard Martin, *On Andrea Fraser TATE etc.*, (issue 30, summer 2014), p. 40.

www.agnieszkapolska.net

Facing the Crowd

On and Around Lecture Performance

Participating artists: Ed Atkins, Joseph Beuys, Paul McCarthy,
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West

Lange Voorhout 102
2514 EJ, The Hague
The Netherlands

+31 (0)70 392 53 59
info@westdenhaag.nl
www.westdenhaag.nl

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