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The Art of Zoom

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In a text named “Writers, Intellectuals, Teachers” (1971) Roland Barthes undertakes a small analysis of the difference between a written and spoken text. He observes that when one writes a text and publishes it, it goes out into the world in a resolved state, or, at least in a form that offers some sense of temporary closure. In contrast, Barthes notes, when one speaks one’s ideas, either in a teaching situation or a lecture that is freely spoken, one is left with a sense that the words hang in the air, that they smell; that there is a residual “odour”. I have often thought of those words in moments following public appearances when I am alone with my thoughts. That lingering sensation revolves around not knowing exactly what one has just said. In the flow of words, things are spoken differently, mangled, or embellished. New juxtapositions emerge; experimental word choices happen that cannot be undone or deleted. It is not possible to give one’s pre-approval of material in this state of flux in the ways that one can do in writing. For me, this is part of the joy of speaking freely from notes or images. I have never opted for pre-written papers, but always favored a rhetorical engagement with a context. While I question the labour-intensive nature of this approach sometimes, I realize that it is important to me that I speak to the people in the room.

Perhaps this is why I am thinking about Barthes again today in the aftermath of my first public lecture by Zoom, while trying to grasp some rather new residual feelings. I should mention here that my lecture went well. My child did not burst into the room, like the newscaster who went viral on You-tube a few years ago. My neighbours respected my last-minute request to stop using power tools in their garden. The lecture was well attended; the audience stayed watching and the question time lasted almost an hour. Yet, I notice that there is still a strange “odour” in the air; that a Zoom lecture “smells” different than a public lecture in a physical location. It smells different too than all the other teaching and guest seminars I have done by Zoom.

This difference has, undoubtedly, something to do with not knowing my audience. Despite being hosted by a European academy, I had very little idea who my audience actually was, thanks to the lecture’s public access. Having chosen to use PowerPoint and not read a paper, some of the strangeness lay in finding myself speaking to and looking into the camera at an audience I could neither see nor fully imagine while knowing that two hundred people were “there”. In fact, the bare “facts” of who was watching my lecture had never been more readily apparent. Not only was the exact number of viewers visible on my screen, but the losses and gains in attendance were also calculated live in front of my nose, operating like a

Stock exchange of my value as I spoke. I am glad to say that the digits were positive – I cannot imagine the traumatic aftermath of those watching their audience dwindle mid-lecture – but I have never had a more literal experience of being human capital than at that moment. Seeing the worth of what I had to say being calculated live was not only the most unambiguous encounter I have ever had with the understated performativity of all public talks but in these fragile times for the art world, it was also a reminder of the precarious value of all artistic-intellectual work at this moment.

My lecture was based on my recently published book, *Reclaiming Artistic Research*, which sets aside academic notions of artistic research to attend to embodied, material, and medium-specific knowledge in dialogue with artists and curators. Notably, another central topic of my lecture was, in fact, the unknowable. I foregrounded how art tends to work towards the unknown and inhabit zones of unknowability, rather than seeking to extend knowledge as such. (There is no doubt a humorous sketch underlying this scenario; the speaker's apparent authority over the subject of the unknowable while performing their struggle with the unknowability of the encounter.) While Barthes observes that one never knows how one's discourse is being received, one usually has at least the look on people's faces to discern something from. Here the audience remained invisible throughout.

When question time came, I found myself conversing with a writer in L.A., which was odd as I too was on the West coast of the U.S. but we were in conversation via an academy in Europe operating in a different time zone. It sounds facile to even mention this, as if the Internet does not constantly throw one into such situations, but there is something about the sense of addressing an audience in a lecture format that made this feel disorienting. Moreover, unlike the Zoom sessions where I could see my audience if I scrolled through their thumbnail images, I now saw only names, written in fonts that took over the screen as though each audience member was the main actor in a feature film. I scribbled down a few in an attempt to grasp the sources of certain questions of particular interest. Yet this felt strange in itself – almost invasive. And I have no doubt that part of the residual "odour" of my Zoom lecture is the unknowability of the afterlife of my own words, which feels more out of my control than usual. I imagine my ideas floating in cyber-space somewhere, public in a way that is different even from a public lecture that is documented on YouTube.

I sense, not only that my words have gone out live, and thus not pre-approved in Barthes' sense, but also that my words, my images, my voice has been recorded without my permission; that my work exists in fragments that differ from the usual note-taking in ways I can only begin to fathom. The immediate geographic dispersal via an unknown human audience is accompanied by a more insidious feeling of Zoom data ownership. (Official Policy: "The categories of data we obtain when you use Zoom include data you provide to us as well as data that our system

collects from you.") I feel like I have left something behind or something was taken from me without my permission, even having agreed to do the lecture in this format. (I'm not sure that choices during the quarantine are as voluntary as they might be under other circumstances.)

As the lecture came to its close, there was a rush of "thank you" messages in text format, which were strangely personal, given the anonymity of most audience members until this moment. Appearing on the screen for all, they too seemed to constitute a digital count of the relative value of the lecture. These texts were followed by a number of personal emails, including one from a Dutch ex-student whom I hadn't been in contact with for many years. I'm not sure why she attached a screenshot of me mid-lecture, but it was an unexpected confirmation that things had been taken without my permission. With two more upcoming public Zoom lectures already scheduled, I know that I will soon become so immersed in this format that I will no longer notice any of this. Yet perhaps it is art's place to dwell a little longer in moments that will otherwise go unarticulated.

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