

INVISIBLE VENUE

Question and Answer

Jamie Hilder

"Question and Answer" is not designed to challenge the power structure of the lecture or talk format. Recognizing the discursive practices implicated by the lecture format is no longer difficult; audiences are aware of the representation of authority concentrated in a lectern, microphone, or wide table - often on a raised platform - and they accept it for the simple reason that it remains a fairly efficient and dominant mode of intellectual exchange. The same is true of contemporary pedagogy. Emphasizing student participation, rearranging chairs into a semi-circle around the instructor or "seminar leader," and splitting classes into discussion groups are meant to disrupt the paternalistic order that has defined education policy at all levels going back hundreds of years. But there persists a figure who grades and figures who are graded: a process of humiliation that degrades both parties, but which does provide the material benefits of learning, of an activity requiring the devotion of significant amounts of time to speculative thought within a socially recognized apparatus known as "school," in its various manifestations. So that is what the work is not about, however tempting it might be to read it as a critique of contemporary modes of knowledge distribution within institutions.

The performance is, after all, a disruption of a process I maintain is valuable and effective. What the performance attempts to deal with is a style of performing knowledge, and of the affective relationship that develops in a crowd of witnesses. In the same way there are tropes of presentations - the use of jargon, the preemptive apology for lack of organization or conclusion, the assumption that the name of an artist or critic can function metonymically for that figure's entire oeuvre, and can absolve the presenter from dealing with ideas in depth - there are tropes of responses, as well. These tropes include: the initial flattery before a criticism; the vocalization of doubt or insecurity in the process of inquiry; the isolation of a peripheral word or phrase within a presentation to shift discussion towards an only slightly related field; the mention of the most popular thinkers or cultural producers of the day as a way to test the presenter's alignment within contemporary discourse; the mention of an obscure thinker or cultural producer as a way to disqualify the presenter's conventional, conservative approach to a topic; and the long, rambling speech that terminates in a banal, vague question or comment, a speech that denotes physical presence more than intellectual engagement.

The process of intellectual exchange within a talk or lecture is often characterized by anxiety. There is anxiety on the part of the speaker as well as the respondent, that their ideas might be misconstrued or miscommunicated, or that they might be considered unworthy of the attention they automatically receive as the cathexis of a room or auditorium. By consciously displaying the bad habits of a respondent, the performer of "Question and Answer" absorbs that anxiety by offering to be the dumbest, most oblivious figure present. The performer's intellectual crimes are slowly exposed but become egregious and are received with eye rolls, crossed arms, glares, and in each of two performances so far, a kind of protection in the form of interruption and deflection. But it is the collective resistance to the performance that is surprising. This response provides the best example of the social relations involved in processes of investigation and knowledge production: a group of people unified in their rejection of and/or annoyance with a threat to dialogue, despite the so-called interest that prompted them to participate in a discursive event in the first place. This collective rejection of a certain kind of participation becomes a kernel for the investigation of what kinds of interaction are acceptable. When does conversation become obstruction? Which connections should be severed and when? And what are the implications for contemporary art, which currently invests so much in the idea of publics, in discourse, and connectivity?

The performance is difficult not just because the script is close to nine hundred words long, and must be performed from memory after listening to someone else speak about unrelated and often complex issues. It is difficult mostly because the performer becomes the obvious jerk in a space of many potential jerks - the people who proclaim, who argue, who carve out intellectual territory and protect it as personal property. As it is unannounced and possibly unrecognizable as a creative performance, it also inspires a good deal of irritation and disapproval. The artist becomes a figure to be pitied and scorned, not admired as a privileged figure in an increasingly alienating culture. But it is not an angry or nihilistic project; it is not Bretonian, nor Rimbaudian, nor Dadaist. Sometimes art needs to be invidious to work properly, especially among those who spend so much time guarding it.