

Metropolis M Books

To Seminar



With Camila Sposati, Falke Pisano, Henk Slager, Inci Eviner, Irit Rogoff, Jan Verwoert, Jeremiah Day, Job Koelewijn, Margo Slomp, Maria Hlavajova, Marijke Hoogenboom, Marquard Smith, Mick Wilson, René Francisco, Sara Sejin Chang, Sarah Pierce, Steven Henry Madoff, Tiong Ang, and Vivian Sky Rehberg

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Colophon

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Publisher	Metropolis M Books
Editor/Curator	Henk Slager
Final Editor	Annette W. Balkema
Language Editing	Id Est
Design	Joris Kritis
Printing	Die Keure, Brugge
Cover	Tiong Ang, <i>Sleeper (Ghosts and Audience)</i> , 2017, performative video, in collaboration with Heekyung Ryu, animation with Louwrens Duhén, soundtrack with Sinta Wullur

The project To Seminar took place at BAK basis
voor actuele kunst, Utrecht, March 10 – May
21, 2017

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Themes/Instituting-Otherwise/Exhibitions/To-
Seminar](http://www.bakonline.org/nl/Research/Itineraries/Future-Vocabularies/Themes/Instituting-Otherwise/Exhibitions/To-Seminar)

To Seminar has been made possible through the
collaboration between BAK and MaHKU (HKU
University of the Arts, Utrecht).

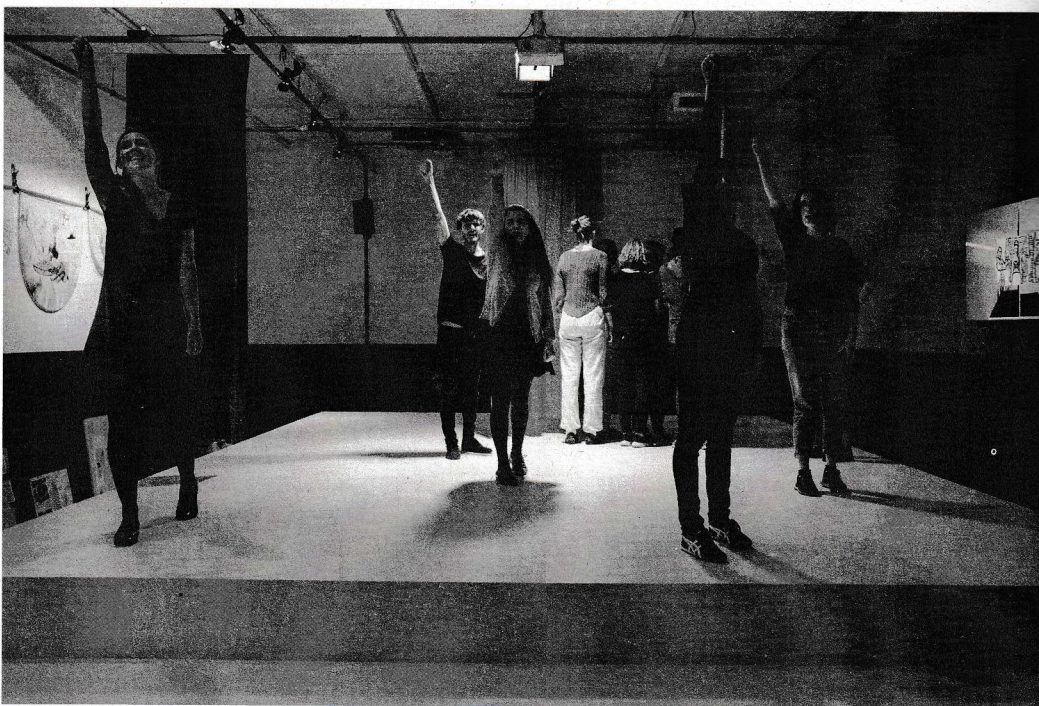
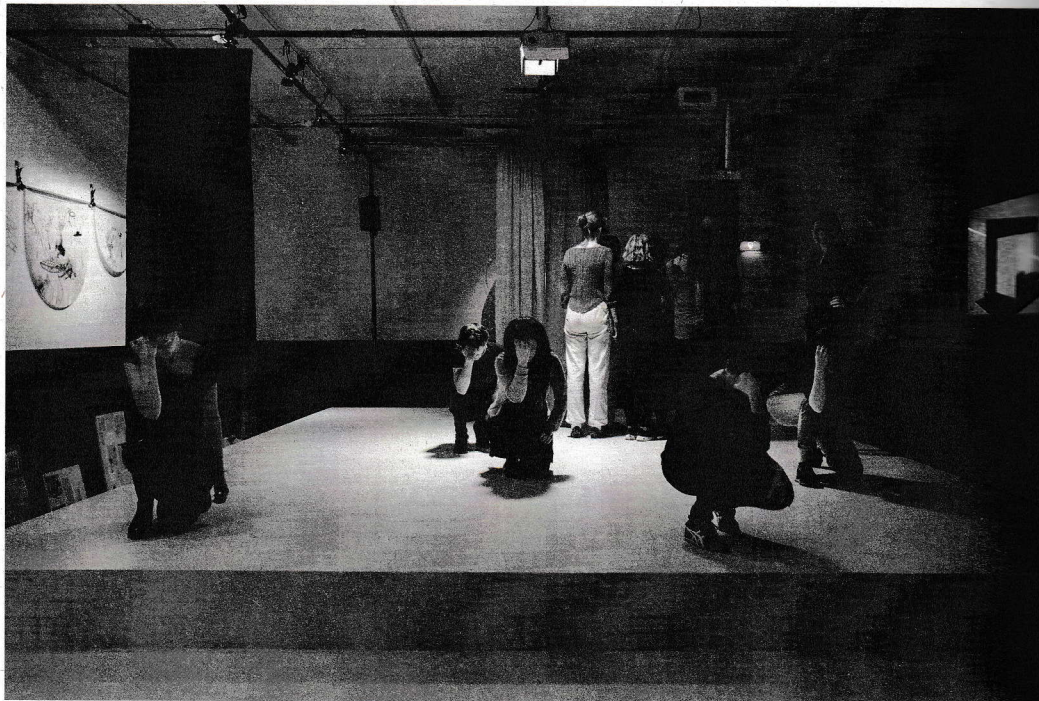
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ISBN 978-90-818302-6-3

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Campus

Sarah Pierce

Exercise 1 ALL ENTER *single file.*
OPEN curtains.
chanting
Find a place to stand!
Step back!
And look!
STOP *chant when curtains*
are in position.

How do we arrive at our politics? This question and its underlying premise that we do not arrive with our politics intact resonates in knowledge production as well as in our engagements with learning, teaching, and knowledge transfer. The performance *Campus* (2011-) emerges out of that question and its premise that we form our politics and our politics form us. The script entails nine exercises learned and performed by a group of students with an audience present. Each exercise involves a chant and a choreographed gesture performed by the group. The staging of the performance includes a set of five large red fabric panels that divide the space. The performers move the panels around in different configurations, sometimes guiding the audience around them. At times the panels obscure the performers, other times they form corridors drawn out by the performers as they cut through the room. When the performance is over, the panels remain. A main part of the performance is that the audience and the performers arrive together. As the performers learn the work, the audience moves through the room with them. When the students have run through the script a few times, the performance ends.

Exercise 2 Student 1, *walk to front of curtains,*
place hands on hips.
This is so clearly a strong form.
It wants to build.
Student 2, *walk to front of curtains,*

link arms. Repeat.

This is so clearly a strong form.

It wants to build.

Student 3, *walk to front of curtains,*

link arms. Repeat.

This is so clearly a strong form.

It wants to build.

Continue until ALL are in a line,
arms linked.

The idea that politics are handed from one generation to the next does not sufficiently account for making new beginnings within the conditions of politics. The political binds us to territories (both real and imaginary) that are difficult to escape difficult, but not impossible. This is the "promise of politics" evoked by Hannah Arendt.¹ A promise that is not predicated on mastering the political or gaining experience in politics and is not limited to speculative thought, but is itself an embodied reality.

As an artist who teaches, I often wonder how to *deliver* Arendt's promise to students. I wonder if it is possible to teach in ways that open up the political to new thoughts and new acts – not as the impact or result of teaching, but as a way of risking what it means *to teach*. The voice of the teacher is part of *Campus*. The chants come directly from the one-to-one instruction offered by an art professor to her students during a three-dimensional sculpture class. Inevitably, this process involves repeating and rephrasing the terms for making work: "Find a place to stand... Step back and look... You don't have any structure... This is a strong form... See this... Build this... Here... You're treating this delicately... Build this... Stay within the structure of the form... Find a place to stand... Step back and look..."²

From these recordings, I made nine exercises that form the basis of a group performance. Each exercise incorporates phrases from the studio instruction with a formalized gesture. The participants are students, and the performance involves learning the chants and gestures in the context of a performance that itself repeats over the course of *being learned*. The gestures

0 Exercise 1 of 9, *Campus*, (2011). Group performance with fabric curtains and archival materials. Original script by Sarah Pierce. Text adapted from JoAnna Comanderos' instructions to sculpture students in a 3-dimensional sculpture class, University of Pittsburgh. Archival materials courtesy the University of, University Archives Information Files, Civil Rights Archives. Performed by Zhenia Vasiliev, Mirjam Linschooten, Joy Mariama Smith, Sofie Hollander, Valentina Curandi, Flora Woudstra, Wilfred Tomescu Hannah Kindler, Sanne Kabalt, Astarti Athanasi-

adou and Avan Omar Muhammad at BAK, Utrecht on 18 May 2017 as part of the exhibition *To Seminar*, curated by Henk Slager.

1 Hannah Arendt, *The Promise of the Politics*, 2009, 191-200.

2 Johanna Comanderos to her students

acted play with the structure of the space and the group, so that simple "forms" made for each chant double as abstract, loosely choreographed movements with legible references to protest. Linking arms, standing back-to-back, kneeling, running, turning, raising one fist – each exercise restructures the group as well as the space.

Exercise 3 *Run behind curtains.*
 GROUP A
 Exaggerate!
Run out from curtains.
 GROUP B
 Strengthen!
Run out from curtains.
 GROUP A
 Simplify!
Run behind curtains.
 GROUP B
 Strengthen!

This is how *Campus* unfolds. Ideas about technique and observation merge with other acts that involve seeing and doing and we enter a knot of thought and action that is particular to the art student. Conceptual and practical work shift between materials and ideas. As a performance, *Campus* captures the students in this work. With each chant they *hold* language as a mode of address that includes its own disappearance. The chants repeat and then dissipate as the students move from exercise to exercise.

To ask how we arrive at our politics is also to ask how we learn to *be political*, and it is here that the structure of *Campus* as a work/performance/rehearsal links to politicized knowledge. The meaning of politics arises out of a plurality of thinking and doing together, but never securely or completely.

Exercise 4 *ALL arms linked, turning slowly.*
 GROUP A
 This feels delicate.
 GROUP B
 You're treating it delicately.
Continue chanting and turning x 3 rotations.

Exercise 5 *ALL pull curtains to opposite wall.*
 LEADER A
walking through audience
 You don't have any structure!
 ALL *crossing between curtains*
 Without structure you can't work!

At its most basic level, teaching involves others. It requires one to address the other through modes of address that formalize what is said through teaching. Even the most casual exchanges are part of an address. The conversations that take place through teaching behave like a monologue, spoken by one person and addressed to other people such that in the structure of a teaching-conversation, no matter how conversational the tone, there is an authority who *speaks*. Anyone who teaches knows this (or should know this). This is not to say that such privileging of the teacher's voice is warranted or preferable. Any teacher who makes efforts to counterbalance this authority by encouraging students to speak also knows that the student speaks as a student. While I can alter the mode of address, it is me who *authorizes* the realignment.

Exercise 6 *GROUP A stands, back to audience.*
 GROUP B *kneel on*
one knee, head bowed into right fist
(aka. the Thinker).
 GROUP A
 Negative space!
 GROUP B
Stand, raise right fist in 'power'
gesture.
It's not there!

As a teacher I am responsible for the mode of address. This introduces an ethical dimension to the activity of teaching that is further complicated by a paradox of teaching art. How to calibrate a mode of address that responds to the demands of the *contemporary* art world? This conflict is not unique to the field of art, although, because art students make things, this paradox plays out differently in art than in other disciplines. It is a dichotomy that goes

much deeper than the knot of theory and practice, to the core of what it means to learn. In an interview between artists John Baldessari and Michael Craig Martin (both well-known as teachers), Baldessari insists that "art cannot be taught." Such a position belies a conceit that true artists transcend *learning*.³ When Baldessari says that art cannot be taught, he really means that it cannot be learned. To reject the mode of address of traditional art education predicated on training and instruction is to reject a modernist paradigm and restore the cult of the artist as a singular genius – the man who rises to the top, made in the materiality of an invention as practice.

Exercise 7 *Sit on floor in pairs, back to back, arms linked.*

GROUP A

This is really all about staying...

GROUP B

Within the structure of the form.

Repeat x 5

Of course, the most famous art teacher of the 20th century shifted the mode of address to that of a shaman. Whereas a variation of conditions made it possible for John Baldessari to say "art cannot be taught," it likewise allowed Joseph Beuys to say "everyone is an artist." The seed of ambivalence that runs through teaching art is partly because many artists who teach wish they were *just* artists, and also because teaching is a daily and enduring reminder of our authority. Our inhabitations of dissent proceed through our complicity, even in our abilities to call such authority into question. In Beuys's words, "when I appear as a kind of shamanistic figure, or allude to it, I do it to stress my belief in other priorities and the need to come up with a completely different plan for working with substances. For instance, in places like universities, where everyone speaks so rationally, it is necessary for a kind of enchanter to appear."⁴

Exercise 8 LEADER

It's not just the seeing!

ALL

You have to feel!

REPEAT *chant until LEADER has drawn all curtains closed.*

On April 30, 1970, U.S. President Richard Nixon announced the American military bombing and subsequent invasion of Cambodia. Campus demonstrations and student strikes swept across the nation in protest of what was viewed by many to be an escalation of force and a breach of the government's promise to end the war in Vietnam. In Kent, Ohio, following a clash between the local police and a group of students late in the evening on May 1st, the administration at Kent State University along with the mayor of Kent, took "preventative" measures to protect the campus by calling in the National Guard. This decision was made possible by the then Governor of Ohio, James Rhodes. In a national press conference following his visit to the campus, Rhodes had this to say of the students involved in the protests: "I think that we're up against the strongest, well-trained, militant, revolutionary group that has ever assembled in America. They're worse than these Brownshirts, and the Communist element, and also the Night Riders, and the vigilantes. They're the worst type of people that we harbor in America."⁵ To this day it is unclear who gave the order to fire live ammunition into a crowd of student protesters on the Kent State campus on May 4th. Most sources speculate it was the governor's office. It is widely accepted that the protesters did not become agitated until the order was given to disperse.⁶ Thirteen people were shot that day; four were killed. Ten days after the Kent State shootings, student demonstrators at Jackson State College in Mississippi engaged with city and state policemen in an altercation resulting in the shooting deaths of two students. At least twelve others were wounded.

In August 1970, Nixon commissioned a report into the Kent State and Jackson State trag-

3 John Baldessari and Michael Craig-Martin. "Conversation", in: *Art School*, Ed. George Deem. New York, NY: Thames & Hudson 2005, 41-52.

4 John F. Moffitt, "Occultism", in *Avant-Garde Art: The Case of Joseph Beuys*, UMI Research Press Ann Arbor, Michigan 1988, 136. cited by the Walker Art Center archive. Web. Accessed 15 Jun. 2013 www.walkerart.org/archive/C/B043691D8FE1897B6163.htm#24

5 The Report of the President's Commission on Campus Unrest' Documents, U.S. Government Printing Office, Washington, D.C., 1970. Web. Accessed 8 Aug. 2007. <http://www.presidency.uscb.edu/ws/?pid=2844,253-254>.

6 Faculty statements, Kent State University Library and Archives, May 4 Collection. Web. Accessed 20 Oct 2009. <http://speccoll.library.kent.edu/4may70/box193/193.html#subseries1b>

edies. Despite pressure from the administration to find fault with the students, the President's Commission on Campus Unrest squarely sided with the students. In attempting to identify the principal causes of violence on college campuses and find reasons for the breakdown in processes for non-violent expressions of dissent, a major focus of the report is on a correlation between "academic freedom," faculty "attitudes" towards civil unrest, and incidents of campus violence. Leading up to the violence at Kent State, President Nixon and others in his circle (including Governor Rhodes), expressed a belief that college campuses had become breeding grounds for anti-American activity. The unofficial/official view of campus protests was that they were not civilian-based oppositions to the Vietnam War, but rather illegal incitements of violence set out to destabilize the government.⁷ It is clear from correspondence surrounding the report that Nixon hoped this view would be independently confirmed.⁸

As the commission formed its report over the summer of 1970, violence on other campuses across the United States erupted. Although the president's commission was not prepared to respond to these subsequent incidents of violence, the events shaped the commission's position on dissent and the college campus. The report emphatically concluded that the U.S. invasion of Cambodia was directly responsible for the escalation of protests leading to unrest at Kent State and the subsequent student strikes. In a remarkable recommendation to President Nixon the report concludes, "Actions and inactions of government at all levels have contributed to campus unrest. The words of some political leaders have helped to inflame it. Law enforcement officers too often reacted ineptly or over-reacted. [...] To this end, nothing is more important than an end to the war in Indochina. Disaffected students see the war as a symbol of moral crisis in the nation what, in their eyes, deprives even law of its legitimacy. Their dramatic reaction to the Cambodian invasion was a mea-

sure of the intensity of their moral recoil."⁹ In his cover letter to Nixon, the report's Chairman, William Scranton, goes further to admonish the government for bringing 'military combat' onto the university campus. He writes, "the term 'unrest' is an unfortunate muddling" of campus violence on the one hand and the "non-violent questioning" that accompanies "intellectual rigor" on the other.¹⁰

Exercise 9 *This is an accumulative chant. One person begins, then two, then three, etc. When ALL have joined, the group exits, continuing the chant. These kinds of structures need attention and finesse. These kinds of structures need attention and finesse. EXIT, continuing to repeat chant.*

Small gatherings, complex and intentional; informal structures that need as much care, perhaps more, than the more formal arrangements in the academy. In the seminar we return to the text. We return to an address that precedes those of us who have gathered together, on this day. The text moves us across geographies and across times. We return to the text. Again. Its value is predicated on its ability to continue to speak, and on our ability to take up the address, to receive it. Ideas about technique and observation merge with other acts that involve seeing and doing. We *know* by returning – the gestures, the texts, the words taken up and set down again.

7 William Scranton, Chairman. "The Report of the President's Commission on Campus Unrest" cover letter. Documents, U.S. Government Printing Office, Washington, D.C., 1970. Web. Accessed 8 August 2007 2007. <http://www.presidency.uscb.edu/ws/?pid=2844>.

8 Richard M. Nixon, "The Report of the President's Commission on Campus Unrest" Reply to chairman. Documents, U.S. Government Printing Office, Washington, D.C., 1970. Web. Accessed 8 August 2007 <http://www.presidency.uscb.edu/ws/?pid=2844>.

9 Ibid.

10 William Scranton, web. Accessed 8 August 2007

