Protest without return; or, pedagogy with a gag

Matt Rodda

In art and art education, when those representing protest speak, write, perform, or otherwise distribute their labours, they encounter a conflict of consumption. This conflict is fought over the returnability of such actions into the system of funding, validation, and recognition that generally defines the climate of art's research culture today – a research culture dominated, on the whole, by contemporary neoliberal policies in UK education. At stake here is the autonomy of protest in art education and pedagogy, and its role in the critique of neoliberal governmentality in general. With this in mind, it is the aim of this article to address the problem of returnability and, specifically, how to suspend it. The intention is not to elaborate further on this government's ideological attack on the arts and humanities *per se* (inclusive of a wider attack on the poor and the British welfare state in general). But rather, to focus on the pedagogical performance, i.e. the signifying or discursive practices, of those artists, lecturers, and theorists engaged with dissent against this system.

Firstly, the intention is to address the repercussions of occupying a pedagogical terrain of protest. The primary point of reference here (specifically with relation to the pedagogical activities of anti-cuts actions) will be John Cussans' paper 'The paradoxes of protest pedagogy in a "research culture"' (2011), in which he formulates the term 'protest pedagogy' as 'pedagogy *about* protest, *through* protest and *in* protest' (Cussans, 2011: 1). Secondly, in order to posit how artist educators might organise themselves from a critical territory of autonomy, this article develops a gestic understanding of protest pedagogy in relation to Giorgio Agamben's conceptualisation of the gag. To express the gestic concept, I will refer to the artist Jonathan Trayner (involved with Free School In A New Dark Age) and specifically his pedagogical performance/role at the Slade Research Centre's symposium *It started with a car crash: Alternative education road tour* (2011). Neither Trayner nor the symposium are posited here as an example of protest pedagogy *par excellence,* but serve to give focus to the individual struggles and contexts associated with occupying a space of protest and art, protest and pedagogy. From these sources, this article seeks to define a critical gestic space of artistic production, a space defined by the gag, which is not subject to return.

Protest pedagogy

A summation of the predicament in question can be made according to Cussans' critical paper 'The paradoxes of protest pedagogy in a "research culture"', which addresses:

> … the paradoxes of being invited to speak about anti-cuts actions in contexts which are either research-funded, take place in established educational institutions (which charge students fees) or events which charge the public for entry. (Cussans, 2011: 1)

Cussans' paper – presented at the *Alternative education road tour* symposium, alongside the Bruce High Quality Foundation, Kurt Schwitters DIY Summer School, Free School In A New Dark Age, The New International School, among others – contributes to the present debate around alternative networks of arts education and artwork dissemination. In particular, his comments highlight both a personal struggle and general need to identify, review, and make predictions about what it means to occupy a space of protest that coincides with art, pedagogy and research.

For free or open school initiatives (such as The Free University of Liverpool, the Really Free School, and Free School in a New Dark Age) this struggle involves organisational problems over how to address 'the pragmatic requirements that would enable a free school to operate effectively and consistently' (Five Years, 2010: 4). At the individual level, the problem involves performing a pedagogical role about, through and in protest while maintaining some kind of distance (non-return) to the framework of university pedagogy, which supposes certain consumability. For instance, when artistic protest or critique is conducted within or at the invite of institutions, there is a tendency for art to become what Maria Lind calls 'constructive institutional critique' (Lind, 2002: 150). This means that critique becomes a productive practice of the institution rather than an analytical and judgemental practice. Cussans' scrutiny, though, is not only directed to the external pressure of consumption by institutions, but how 'workers in arts education increasingly treat any work they do outside the university as a potential 'research output' that can be 'returned'' (Cussans, 2011: 5). This process is epitomised in UK Higher Education by the Research Excellence Framework (previously the Research Assessment Exercise), a five yearly survey of the quality of research being done at universities. The REF follows on the general neoliberal turn the UK has taken in art education/research policy since Thatcher's Conservative government (1979-1997), then under Blair's and Brown's New Labour government (who placed emphasis on the arts as an economic generator for the 'knowledge economy') (1997-2010), and now under the Conservative-Liberal Democrat coalition government[1]. The particular issue at stake is not merely the problematic of diminishing critical distance between artists and institutions of power, but over the emerging prevalence of 'a new mindset among artist educators, who increasingly tend to assess their work in terms of its 'returnability'' (Cussans, 2011: 5). This tendency goes hand in hand with present educational policy, whereby, in the words of Alexander García Düttmann

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1   For an overview of the neoliberal turn in the UK see Claire Bishop's 'Con-Demmed to the Bleakest of Futures: Report from the UK' (Bishop, 2011).

(professor of philosophy and visual culture at Goldsmiths) 'the value of an academic is … measured against his ability to provide money' (García-Düttmann, 2010)[2]. It is a system that not only models the artist academic as "the networker and the lobbyist", as opposed to "researcher and the teacher" (García-Düttmann, 2010), but produces practitioners that foster their own return.

It is not a matter, though, of drawing new definitions around the categories of art making, about separating out art teaching, writing, theory, criticism, and talking. Instead, the importance of Cussans' conceptualisation of protest pedagogy is that it pin-points the crux of (re)organising art and education around understanding the pragmatic requirements needed to organise at the individual level, at the level of the 'mind set' of art educators. The individual performance of protest pedagogy therefore becomes the front line in a conflict fought over one's awareness of the present intolerable trend and one's already defined position within it. The task at hand, then, is to postulate how artist educators might free their utterance, writing and actions (namely their performative communication) from return, without simply withdrawing from the sphere of art education.

Protest pedagogy as gesture

Consider protest pedagogy in terms of one's performative practice. Following the concept of the performative that Jacques Derrida details in his essay 'Signature event context', I propose to address what we might call one's essential 'force of rupture' in communication (Derrida, 1988: 10). The force of rupture is that which 'separates [performative communication] from … all forms of present reference' (Derrida, 1988: 9). Moreover, and appropriately insofar as the form of performance predominately addressed here is the spoken word, I argue that we need to think of this rupture in terms of gesture, and particularly as a gag. Here I take my meaning from Agamben's essay 'Notes on gesture':

> In itself it [gesture] has nothing to say, because what it shows is the being-in-language of human beings as pure potential for mediation. But since being-in-language is not something that can be spoken of in propositions, in its essence gesture is always a gesture of non-making of sense in language, it is always a gag in the strict meaning of the term, indicating in the first instance something that is put in the mouth to hinder speech, and subsequently the actor's improvisation to make up for a memory lapse or some impossibility of speech. (Agamben, 2007: 156)

Before expanding the concept of the gag, it is first necessary to define Agamben's use of the gestic and understand what is at stake in the artist's gesture of protest pedagogy. Gesture is a term that situates human activity at a point that is neither truly action (*praxis*) nor production. Production, we come to understand from 'Notes on gesture', constitutes a means with a view to an end. Action, or *praxis* (the 'to do' of acting), defines itself as its own end, or what we may call an 'end without means' (Agamben, 2007: 154-155). Both action and production therefore form ends of human endeavours that, as such, are open to

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2   Rosalind Gill's 'Breaking the silence: The hidden injuries of neo-liberal academia' elaborates further upon life within neoliberal academia and the urgent need to investigate it critically (Gill, 2009).

systems of valorisation. Gesture is contrary to both of these statuses. What it defines is the aesthetic dimension of *praxis*, which is neither truly a means directed toward an end (production), nor action as an end in itself (*praxis*). Instead the gestic describes a process of 'undertaking and supporting' (Agamben, 2007: 154). What is meant by this gestic status, insofar as it denotes purely the 'undertaking' or 'supporting' of human action, is that, rather than focus on the alternative positions of means and ends, gesture focuses on the act of mediality itself.

If we pursue Agamben's example of the gesture in terms of performance, e.g. dance, we would say that dance is *praxis* because the performing human body directs its movements not as a means toward an end – in the way walking is the active aspect of directing the human body to move from A to B – but for its own end of dancing. *Praxis* assumes an aesthetic dimension, becomes gesture, when we make evident the means of one's bodily movements. Agamben explains this with the example of photographing a performance, whereby 'through the sole fact of being photographed and displayed in his or her own state of mediation this person is suspended from that mediation' (Agamben, 2007: 155). Barbara Formis exemplifies the aesthetic dimension in theatre, in her essay 'Dismantling theatricality: Aesthetics of bare life', with reference to Anna Halprin's *Parades and changes* (composed in 1965 and presented in New York in 1967). Formis argues that the choreographed performance of actors whose walk becomes militarised like a parade, as well as their gaze that affronts the audience like the stare of a star in a pornographic film, opens up a dialogue of knowing and makes us understand 'that the persons on the stage are not so much bodies or characters, but very much persons, anyones' (Formis, 2008: 183). Effectively the gestic, by engaging only with the position of means and one's evident mediation in that position, allows us to relate to actions without action itself being related to individual biographies (authorship) or outcomes. In conclusion, 'gesture is the display of mediation, the making visible of a means as such' (Agamben, 2007: 155).

Although the conceptualisation of gesture defines a 'means without end''(*ibid.*: 155-156), it is necessary to draw a distinction between it and Michel Foucault's concept of *travail*. *Travail* – situated by Foucault's contemplation of the question 'how is one to live?', to which he proposes an 'aesthetics of existence' (Foucault, 1989: 451) – defines 'a continuously renewed act of creation' (O'Leary, 2002: 17). For Foucault, the aesthetic task of existence is an artistic task, and the result of such a work, Timothy O'Leary posits, 'is an ephemeral, never to be completed work-in-progress' (*ibid.*: 133). The gesture is similar to *travail* insofar as it is a process by which a connection between art and life is achieved (Agamben, 2000: 73-88). By comparison, however, gesture does not focus on the ethical position of how one is to live, but instead on how one is to give aesthetic visibility to one's living in language. In this way, gesture is rather 'the name of … intersection between life and art, act and power, general and particular, text and execution' (Agamben, 2000: 80). Whereas the process of *travail* cannot be separated from life even with death (O'Leary, 2002: 137), the gestic is a process of subtracting 'a moment of life … from the context of individual biography as well as a moment of art subtracted from the neutrality of aesthetics

(*ibid.*). I will return again to this idea of the gesture as a moment of subtraction, or rather a moment of suspension, later in this paper.

At this point it is useful to address the concept of gesture to an example. Consider the artist Jonathan Trayner, whose art practice involves various performative relations to knowledge, pedagogy, and dissemination, and includes informational videos (*A short history of the two-fingered salute*, 2011), radio plays (*Tales of the woodland folk (ignorance or terror)*, 2011), and readings (*Reading Rabelais*, 2009). He is also involved with Free School In A New Dark Age. For the *Alternative education road tour* Trayner brings together these practices through a reflection on his art performance *Not a manifesto*. Conducted at Brixton Village Market in 2011, *Not a manifesto* involves the artist standing and reading a (non)manifesto he drafted for the Communist Gallery. In it he addresses the problems of participating in a 'collective endeavour' while believing in 'collective individualism' (Trayner, 2011). In particular, at the symposium he candidly draws attention to his uncertainties about the relationship between art performance and art protest and, especially, the process of dissemination in institutional contexts. The concern Trayner voices, extending a problematic of art performance in general, is that the action of 'standing … and reading', or the artist's attempt to 'hold the street', has the dangerous potential of turning the art/protest event into mere representation or theatre (*ibid.*)[3].

The problem Trayner confronts is that if his labours at the *Alternative education road tour* are understood as a mode of production, then we identify only with the outcome and end product of his talk. Namely we identify with the dissemination of knowledge through oratory and visual displays of representation, which reifies his actions. If we focus on the 'to do' of his acting in front of an audience (*praxis*), then we define his performing human body only according to how he directs its movement and assumes this movement as an end in itself (theatre). As such, a critique based on *praxis* (rather than gesture) as an end without means will still fail to escape attributing means to ends. This is because, as Agamben tells us, a 'finality without means is just as much of an aberration as a mediation that makes sense only in relation to an end' (Agamben, 2007: 155). Both of these operations lead to outcomes that are returnable.

The alternative is to read Trayner's performance in terms of the gestic. This means that we address the aesthetic dimension he gives to *praxis* as a position of pedagogical labour. His position, then, is dissociated from all other considerations except expressing its own medium. However, in order to achieve this, Trayner would first have to engage with protest pedagogy, which as Cussans posits is 'pedagogy *about* protest, *through* protest and *in* protest' (Cussans, 2011: 1), and have all of these positions as a privation. Having a privation means 'not simply non-being, simple privation', Agamben tells us, 'but rather *the existence of non-being*, the presence of an absence' (Agamben, 1999b: 179). Trayner, in having his action as a privation, would therefore be present in his actions of art and

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3   The paradigm of the event, understood according to Maurizio Lazaretto, focuses on images, signs and statements as they contribute to the world's happening. The representational paradigm, in contrast, decodes images, signs and statements according to how they represent the world. (Lazaretto, 2003: 1)

pedagogy only as absence. He would express *nothing more* than the endurance of action, and *nothing more* than the exhibition of action. If, as Agamben posits, the human being is characterised as '*zoon logon echon* (living thing using language)' (Agamben, 1993: 156), then gesture denotes the human being as the *living thing in-language*.

The gag

The medial position of gesture, then, 'is not an absolutely nonlinguistic element but … a forceful presence in language itself' (Agamben, 1999b: 77). The force of this presence, understood in performativity as a rupture, is what I propose the gag defines in the gestic. It is the force that 'hinders speech' and indicates the 'impossibility of speech' to be fully resolved in signification (Agamben, 2007: 156). Furthermore, linked to Agamben's use of the shifter in language (specifically with regard to Heidegger's *da*, the there, of *Da-sein* and Hegel's *diese*, this), the emergence of the gag, as Justin Clemens comments, 'is not itself simply due to the performative aspect of utterance; it is rather the 'place' at which the performative opens onto something quite other' (Clemens, 2008: 45). What we need to address, then, is what makes the 'other' space of the gag different to a normalised space of production?

In *Language and death: The place of negativity*, Agamben similarly asks: 'What, in the instance of discourse, permits that it be indicated, permits that before and beyond what is signified in it, it *shows* its own taking place?' (Agamben, 1991: 32) His conclusion is that taking place '*shows* its own taking place', such as it is, by not-taking-place (*ibid.*). The relevance of both, this question and his subsequent theses, is that in showing 'its own taking place' there occurs a correspondence between three key points: the instant of discourse (the articulation of labour), the meaning or what is indicated by that articulation (what it signifies), and a time-space that accounts for a presence 'before and beyond what is signified' (*ibid.*). The instant of the gag, I argue, refers us to the last of these points. It directs us to a time-space that has a presence neither in the instant of discourse nor in meaning. Rather it grounds artistic labour at the specific (and solitary) point of its own taking place between the 'before' (*praxis*) and the 'beyond' (production).

The power of the gag to open up a non-returnable space of protest in pedagogy becomes clear if we follow Agamben's logic of this 'before' and 'beyond' of production and *praxis*. In defining the status of the work of art and artistic practices in *The man without content*, he employs two aspects of work's presence into being: being-at-work (one's energetic status) and availability-for-work (one's dynamic status) (Agamben, 1999a: 65). Being-at-work (which is also referred to here in terms of *praxis*) is work traditionally associated with human production under aesthetics, whereby human action 'enters into presence and lasts by gathering itself into its own shape as into its own end' (*ibid.*). Art's availability, on the other hand, or what we may call its *dynamic* aspect, is defined by the availability of the artist's production, literally as a product in the strict sense of the word, for aesthetic enjoyment, judgement and consumption (Agamben, 1999a: 66). 'Wherever a work of art is

pro-duced and exhibited today', we are told, 'its *energetic* aspect … is erased to make room for its character as a stimulant of the aesthetic sentiment' (*ibid.*). This process of erasing the energetic status in favour of the dynamic status describes a passage that leads from artistic action to the potentiality of aesthetic production, whereby the latter obscures the former. This passage also describes the tendency of art's research culture to turn critique into constructive critique and events into representation.

The third zone that exists between these two statuses (being-at-work and availability-for-work), where I posit the gag, is described by Agamben as a space of "availability-toward-nothingness" (Agamben, 1999a: 67). Availability-toward-nothingness describes a zone of non-production that operates by negating the interchange of the other two productive aspects. The gag opens up this third space of production and escapes being reduced to a (returnable) exhibition value by freeing the status of artistic work from belonging to both its energetic and dynamic aspects simultaneously. This arises not from the artist educator elevating one specific status of their productive activity, nor by merely playing with the double status of artistic production. Instead, what the gag hinders, we may say, is the ability to posses one's energetic aspect as its own end, because it only concerns solitary moments of activity subtracted from activity. On the other hand, the dynamic aspect is removed from consumption and strict availability because the gag does not denote anything that is resolved into an outcome. The third space of production, one's availability-toward-nothingness, therefore identifies the gestic with a play on Kant's expression 'purposiveness without purpose' (Agamben, 2000: 58). The gag does not refer to the process by which artists/educators labour or produce works, because each of these stations in presence are what we can call purposeful. Instead, the purposiveness of artistic means is made apparent in their being-toward-purposiveness.

Extending the argument further, this strategy seeks an encounter with a 'state of exception' (Agamben, 2005: 40). This means that one operates from a space of production where the force-of-law (the norm) can only really be expressed as a state of law in suspension, or temporally removed from present application. Developed from the juridical theory of exception, which Agamben notably outlines in *State of exception* (2005: 25, 31), the role of suspension describes the peculiar presence in law when law itself requires its own release from the force of the law, or from the obligation of observing the law. The gag, like the state of exception, does not propose a state of artistic production that supersedes the original order of (energetic/dynamic) production with a new model, nor is it really a strict suspension of production. Instead, the exception arises as a release that takes place 'from the literal application of the norm' (Agamben, 2005: 25).

It is useful to think in terms of suspension here to help define the indistinction that Cussans' conceptualisation of protest pedagogy seeks between inside and outside, inclusion and exclusion. Drawing on Willem Schinkel's essay 'The autopoiesis of the artworld after the end of art' (Schinkel, 2010), Cussans suggests that the paradoxical self-constitution of the art world and contemporary art, 'despite all it's defamiliarising and relational tendencies must uphold its self-referentiality *as art* in order for the artworld to maintain its

relative autonomy' (Cussans, 2011: 7). As such, he proposes that 'the most programmatic way to do this would be to position the actions [of protest pedagogy] as an artwork' and, therefore, 're-secure the operational closure of the art/not art system' (*ibid.*). The gag, according to this present article, does not insist that protest pedagogy assume a position of art work *per se*, but that artist educators adopt a gestural, which is to say aesthetic, dimension of protest in pedagogy. For ideas of what this might look like in art education one might draw on art practices for potential *modus operandi*. The group of artists, practitioners, designers, theorists and teachers known as the Faculty of Invisibility, for instance, show how communicability and intelligibility can be manipulated around an organisational psychology in order to situate artistic speech as an encounter with its own deferral (*The speech*, 2006). Or consider Nicoline Van Harskamp's (pseudo)events of education (*Any other business*, 2009) that encourage disjuncture between the event-act and event-language of performance, whereby the event-act is specifically designed to break up its own system of communication (Lütticken, 2010: 129).

Protest without return / pedagogy with a gag

In these neoliberal times, in order to assert critical opposition to neoliberal policies and governmentality, protest in the arts and especially in art education needs forms of protest pedagogy. Not only to offer alternative forms of art education, but also to provide a mode of pedagogical dissemination that escapes the pervasive mechanisms of valorisation peculiar to the contemporary University. As Claire Bishop proposes, the neoliberal idea of academic capitalism has 'entirely foreclosed' on the notion of the university as 'a place where research cannot always be accounted for' (Bishop, 2011: 7). Nevertheless, this present argument posits the gag as a point of contestation against the prevailing mindset of returnability. It contests returnability by focusing precisely on the peculiar moment where the artist educator's position of means (for instance Trayner's act of standing and reading at the *Alternative education road tour*) is evidenced only by one's mediation in that position. In general it evokes what Agamben calls the 'essential 'mutism'' of articulation (Agamben, 2007: 156). The gestic gag mutes action, it neither denotes a presence or absence of the action, is neither at-work nor available-for work, but like the state of exception defines the presence of a space where the normal forces (of capital, art education) do not apply but still exist. In short, the gag contributes to the ongoing autonomist fight over 'what authorised speech cannot capture through immaterial production of intellectual property' (Brouillette, 2009: 146).

In conclusion, protest pedagogy maintains a space of criticism by reducing its subject to the sphere of pure gesture, and gesture, in reducing communication to the mediality of language, finds reality precisely in what itself "has nothing to say" (Agamben, 2007: 156). Moreover, from a reality that has nothing to say, nothing can truly be returned.

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the author   Matt Rodda, Ph.D, is an independent artist, writer and theorist. His research interests are in the concept of labour in contemporary art, immaterial labour, the imaginary of labour, and the theory of the phantasm.
E-mail: info@mattrodda.com