



What We Can Knot

Shifter 20

A.K. Burns
& Alexandro Segade

AKB: Maybe we should start with what we are teaching this semester.

AS: I have three and a half classes this semester.

AKB: That's a lot, where does your practice fit into that?

AS: I'm teaching a class at Parsons which I made up, called "Public/Spectacle," which is part of their 4D topics.

AKB: What's the fourth dimension—performance?

AS: It's time — being a science fiction fan that's what I think. Last semester I was in 3D, teaching a class called "Sculpture and Theater," looking at the intersection of the two. "Public/Spectacle" is looking at different ways that performance constructs audience. In my own practice there is a continuum from this sort of self-made music-video maker to the performer who is trying to create a community. I don't think that's a rupture. I'm interested in how that can all happen in the same practice. I have a lot of students who seem to be doing all those things.

AKB: I wonder what ruptures? Institutional critique and collective gestures don't necessarily disrupt institutions, if institutions capitalize on them to ensure that their programming remains progressive. I also don't think that inherently devalues those interventions.

Speaking of the relationship between sculpture and theater—that was a particular focus last semester in my class at Cooper Union. In "Shared Form," I was interested in rethinking the historical narrative of twentieth and twenty-first century art through the actions of groups as opposed to individuals. I asked students to produce "in relation to" and look at collaboration as a pedagogical model. We spent the semester dissecting a Brecht play, *Saint Joan of the Stockyards*.

I used theater as a model for that class because the communal is built into it. They were free to interpret the acts of the play in any medium—painting, sculpture, performance... So I didn't expect them to make "theater" per se, rather to look at how parts or individuals might relate. Since I don't come from a theater background I was thinking that the gallery is like a stage, works are like props or performers (or both, and what is the difference? This is a larger sculptural question that I'm interested in), and the way these parts relate and are orchestrated in that space is like theater.

AS: You asked where my practice fits into this and I dodged the question. But what you just said reminds me of a song I wrote with Malik Gaines for one of our pedagogical projects:

Theater can be a model / For the forms we hope to create / Act out dissent and affirmation / Reconfigure the event as a process / Invert the hierarchical stage / The audience becomes the cast / The cast gets naked / Mandate to Participate, yeah yeah / Each Rehearsal's a show / Each show is a life / Each life's a rehearsal for a better life / If we make each show better / Than the show we expect / Then our lives will get respect. Theater was really helpful with teaching. Theater and teaching are closely connected through the Brechtian theoretical strain and his model of the *Lehrstück*, or the learning play. In the classroom, we can perform as part of the class, as part of the learning process, and it can have political dimensions. Which also reminds me, I'm going to Washington D.C. once a week to teach a class at the Corcoran, "Professional Practices." It's supposed to help them get their portfolios together but they don't need to get portfolios together actually.

AKB: (laughs) The greatest misconception of the art world.

AS: Andrea Fraser taught a class called "Intro to the Art World" at UCLA that I TA'd for when I was her student. That is my model for this class at the Corcoran. There are classes on the books at art schools that are professional practices courses, and whenever I get my hands on those, it's an opportunity to do a survey of the actual realities of the art world within a much more expansive discussion that includes theory and critique.

AKB: Right, it's all about how an artist makes a lot of choices around the opportunities that arise as they interact with galleries, museums, DIY spaces, education, writers, curators, art fairs, etc. The intention behind and outcome of those interactions actually shapes the meaning of your practice to a certain degree. Sounds like you need to have a W.A.G.E.¹ talk too.

AS: I was thinking about how you and I met. We were in graduate school at the same time.

¹ New York-based activist group that focuses on regulating the payment of artist fees by nonprofit art institutions, and establishing a sustainable model for best practices between cultural producers and the institutions that contract their labor. A.K. Burns is one of the founding members.

AKB: Oh right, we met in L.A. for the Wight Biennial.

AS: Yes, at UCLA, which I co-curated with Wu Tsang and Matt Merkel-Hess. We had all exhibited or functioned within the art world in some way professionally and still needed to be in a graduate program.

AKB: Even after having gone through it I wonder how necessary an MFA is for an art practice. Yet I really enjoyed that process. The time, space and feedback was an evolution for me. I think that reciprocal social aspect of education is the reason I like being a teacher.

AS: I wanted to teach. Everyone at school knew that's what I was there for.

AKB: The most unexpected part of going to graduate school was that I did not go into it wanting to be a professor. Prior to that I had been making a living as a graphic designer. I was at the end of my rope with sitting at a computer. Being back in school I began to recognize how significant dialogue is for my practice. I would align teaching with other collaborative projects I do, like W.A.G.E., Community Action Center and the magazine/curatorial project RANDY. Teaching is a creative process where I get to expose others to and experiment with ideas in my own work.

AS: Right out of undergrad I went to USC Film School. This is pre My Barbarian². Malik and Jade [Gordon] and I were all in different parts of the universe: Jade was an actress and Malik was learning to be a writer at CalArts. I saw that there were other schools that seemed better suited for me, but I couldn't figure out how to go to any of them so I just dropped out of school. We started a band right after USC, which became My Barbarian. It wasn't a band for long but we were gigging and playing college radio. But we were more interested in performances that responded to the site than we were in forever touring the same set list. At a certain point, we were brought into the venues that presented performance in the L.A. art world. From there, we found ourselves at Performa and other things in New York, then presenting work in Canada, then Europe. I realized there were things I didn't know about the context we were operating in.

AKB: You kind of came into the art world through the side door?

AS: We were in it because we were invited by curators who saw us in clubs, but I didn't know what "it" was. Everyone else seemed to have an MFA but I didn't. The Interdisciplinary Studio Program at UCLA had so many good people coming from it and going toward it. I spoke to Emily Roysdon who said, "This is the program that you should be in, I'm going to introduce you to Mary Kelly." Once we met it was clear to me that it was the right place to be. Then luckily Andrea Fraser got hired that year so I had on my thesis committee Andrea and Mary, Cathy Opie and Stanya Kahn.

AKB: What an awesome line-up of art mothers!

AS: And sisters. Who was on your board?

AKB: Sadie Benning, Teresa Hubbard and Taylor Davis, who is an amazing teacher and I think she is the reason I wanted to teach. Watching her maneuver in a crit space and in my own studio profoundly changed the way I was dealing with my work. It was a huge gift and totally inspiring.

With the Bard MFA program what they expect from you is pretty individualized yet dependent on the group dynamics that are reinforced by interdisciplinary critique. There's a sense that the group is there to "break-the-horse" and your task is to rebuild yourself. I think a lot of other programs cater to a kind of "mastering" of what it is you came in doing.

AS: There's some shepherding at Bard which may include asking a student to give up some part of their practice. I heard about Bard through Anna Sew Hoy, who went to this mysterious school, and then right after I graduated my first teaching job was to go to Bard and be performance faculty that summer. It was shocking because it was such a different graduate program from the one I had just left minutes before. I thought it was what I had imagined Black Mountain to be.

AKB: What is it that makes that happen there? They sequester a bunch of artists in the woods for what seems like a very calculated eight weeks. It is literally the length of the honeymoon phase. Just as you're going to crack from the insular group dynamics, you're released. Then you retain the love drug to go back. In a way it's very manipulative and culty (laughs). The Bard program maintains a fragile sanity. Do other programs experience this?

AS: At UCLA they didn't induce a hysterical euphoria. Not that that's what Bard is trying to do, but it happens. I was wondering, do you have any teachers in your family?

AKB: Well, my grandparents were. So 1950s. My dad's mother taught home economics and his father taught shop at the local high school in Palo Alto, CA. My other grandmother was a painter and she was the most influential adult in my childhood who shaped my path as an artist. My mother also homeschooled my siblings, although she herself was a high school dropout. Regardless she's brilliant, an avid and opinionated consumer of information, and has always advocated the importance of self-education.

² My Barbarian is a collective consisting of Malik Gaines, Jade Gordon and Alexandro Segade, founded in Los Angeles in 2000. Their interdisciplinary performance, video, music and installation projects use fantasy, humor, camp and clashing aesthetic sensibilities to playfully reenact artistic, political, social and historical situations. www.mybarbarian.com

POLITICS/POLITICAL: as in political art versus non-political/apolitical art. On one hand, a case can be made that all art and all art-making is political in the broadest sense of politics. On the other hand one can make a case for "political art" being art with a political intention. Between the two lies a minefield of presumptions and viewer subjective positions. While art in all its manifestations has been used to provoke political implications, it would seem, there is a paradox that art's strongest ideological need and since culture are highly contextualized, its force of provocation and humanity itself are in its nature.

AS: My dad was a college professor and my mom a high school teacher, and they're both retired. It's a family trade.

AKB: So did you always think you would teach?

AS: I always thought so, but like you, I first worked as a graphic designer after undergrad. I worked for various Internet companies and it funded my ability to go back to graduate school.

AKB: I actually did my undergrad in graphic design.

AS: Cool.

AKB: (laughs) Well sort of....

AS: I had been an English major, focussing on Elizabethan theater. I didn't know what I was doing.

AKB: It's always been a personal point of contention. I literally had a breakdown deciding my freshman year, "Should I do sculpture or graphic design?" Having watched my mother struggle with multiple jobs and being a single mom, the choice didn't feel like a choice. By my early to mid-twenties everything became very clear. I had a lot more I needed to say and do in the world than design could accommodate. But being a graphic designer defiantly funded my transition into art full time.

AS: I thought, "I'm out of vacation days, I'm going to go back to school and teach." I thought Mary Kelly would be a really good mentor in part because her Interdisciplinary Studio Program at UCLA has an academic component, and I wanted her to tell me what books to read. What actually happened was training in critique based on formal analysis, which is the foundation of my approach to running a crit.

AKB: Her practice is exactly that space between artist and teacher.

AS: She occupies both positions with total commitment. Making art and prepping for the classroom are not the same thing, but they can be connected.

AKB: My first years of teaching were at MassArt in the foundation program, via Taylor Davis. Since there is no teaching education at Bard I had to do whatever I could, including commute eight hours to get teaching experience. I was given a lot of liberty in terms of how I could teach 3D foundation, but I started by copying Taylor's curriculum. Each semester I would change things to fit my own ideas and process. I did foundation my freshman year but because I majored in design and then went to Bard, I had never taken a sculpture class and suddenly I was going to teach one. Learning to teach was a process of understanding my own practice and interests enough to translate and challenge others with something I felt grounded in. The way I teach also comes out of a reaction to ways I disliked being taught and the things I wish I had been introduced to as a student. I transitioned into art post undergrad. I went into the world and found like-minded peers. They had their references and I had other references. There's a whole community that grew out of that exchange and that was my education. LTTR³ was my education. Peer-to-peer learning is complicated to translate into teaching in a formal university setting where power and authority are built into the dynamics.

AS: I like dynamics.

AKB: I've been thinking about how I "manipulate" in an educational setting, and I was wondering, do you have professor drag?

AS: My mother is my idol because she was always a cutely dressed teacher, really good at figuring out how to buy clothes at the mall. But I also dress a little younger than I am, with baseball caps and sneakers, and I chew gum.

AKB: I have a uniform. Boots, clean jeans, and a button-down shirt buttoned to the top ... but mostly it means not wearing my clown pants or leather jacket into the classroom.

I will only wear certain things because there's this idea that I have to maintain some kind of authority in that space. But then I question: Is that something I believe in—the illusion of authority in the classroom? I think I'm self-conscious about this because I look young. When I finally go gray-haired I will start wearing clown pants to class.

AS: Mimicry—that's how we learn. That's part of the conditioning at UCLA with teaching assistants who are chosen by professors: we model ourselves after them. Mary Kelly has a whole signature style and she would notice if you changed yours. It meant something to her when I cut off my hippy hair.

AKB: Were you critiqued on your teaching?

AS: We got a lot of feedback. I was given the job of being the TA who trains the TAs, which meant I took a class on teaching from the education department.

³ LTTR is a feminist genderqueer artist collective with a flexible project oriented practice. LTTR produces an annual independent art journal, performance series, events, screenings and collaborations. A.K. Burns has been closely involved with the collective as a collaborator and contributor to the journal since 2003. www.lttr.org

AKB: I think because I didn't have the structure of formal teacher training I created a tradition that on the last day of class I would have the students critique me.

AS: Oh no.

AKB: Yeah, I honestly needed to know what projects were stimulating and if they felt like they were lost by the way I presented things... etc.

AS: Good questions.

AKB: At the end of the last class I would tell them, "This has absolutely no effect on your grade...." But it always had this tinge of a big reveal when I would hand over authority at that moment. Also one can look at the crit space as a teaching method that develops peer-to-peer learning. Imagine if in an English class you handed your paper to each student and had to talk with each other about it rather than get a paper back from your teacher with a grade stamped on it. I think I really believe in critique as a productive model for learning and love that aspect of art education.

AS: We're being presented as experts who can help do what exactly?

AKB: I've been thinking as a teacher I'm more like a guide than an expert. I have different references than they do just because I've been around longer and seen/read more—I bring that into the classroom. But because of the speed of fingertip accessible information, cultural trends proliferate in a way that is almost impossible to keep up with. Students often have a different relationship to that media than I do. They bring that cultural immediacy. This is something I enjoy getting from teaching and can take back to my own practice. I think the apprentice/master model exists in a much more porous way today because of that.

AS: The interdisciplinary space we occupy in the art world is the same in the teaching part of art. I'm teaching "Unconventional Drawing" at Hunter this semester but that's the closest I get to a traditional class, because there are pencils. I have to function in multiple ways and also question my own position because that's part of the kind of work that I make. So this authority thing is an issue. Um, well, it's part of the job description.

AKB: Yeah, I felt like I really understood that authority was useful while at MassArt. In the foundation program they don't have grades, it's just pass/fail. I entered the first semester in a utopian haze thinking, "This is great, it's art school, why would you need grades?" Giving grades at the end of the semester seems like an irrelevant ritual. It can be one of the weirdest things to do.

AS: Agreed.

AKB: By the end of the semester I found the pass/fail model to be an inadequate way to evaluate students. It's so binary. I was so frustrated by the lack of effort from many of my students that before the last class I told them, "Every single one of you in here is going to fail, if..." Then on the last class, it was incredible, they finally brought work in that incorporated the conversations of the semester. But I resented the fact that they essentially wanted to be parented and needed the incentive of grades as motivation.

AS: That happened to me the one time I taught at CalArts, which also is pass/fail. It's a culture that I didn't really understand. They came in really late which is supposedly okay somehow and then I had to say, "You know I'm super disappointed, I thought you kids were going to be really creative compared to the students I teach in Orange County, but you're the worst students I've ever had and you're all going to fail." The next day they came in with better and more engaged work, but it was never great.

AKB: Yes, what makes the culture of a school? At MassArt my biggest hurdle every semester was that most everyone entered with a certain level of apathy. I got really good at turning that energy around, but I always wish they would just come in the door hungry. When I taught at Cooper Union, although there was a bit of an entitled attitude that came with that institution but they're deeply engaged from day one. City College students are also very invested. I'm curious if it's a difference between teaching electives and required courses? I definitely feel more passionate as a teacher when I'm developing my own curriculum and that obviously translates back to the students. What if required courses didn't exist? Teachers would be chosen on the merit of their differences and the courses offered would be things each teacher cared deeply about. If you spent four years seeking out and learning things you were curious about, from people who were passionate about what they were sharing, I'm sure you would get an amazing education.

AS: This semester at Parsons, I'm putting together a modular syllabus. On the first day of class I'll workshop the syllabus with the students and see which units they want. I'm going to have a legislative process.

AKB: I'm experiencing syllabus irrelevance this semester. I am teaching basic and advanced sculpture at Virginia Commonwealth University. What that means is essentially whatever I want it to mean. In general I have a hard time dealing with hierarchies, so I was challenged by how to differentiate between the two classes. Nonetheless, I went through the process and shaped each class around certain concepts, like the body as a basic concept in sculpture and moved into ideas like formlessness and play for the advanced classes.

In my basics class, I have this awesome contingent of women including a few gender studies minors (because I attract a certain crowd). They are a fairly cohesive group, so when I came into crit the other day they had all decided to collaborate without my initiating it. I was confronted by an impromptu need to adapt the critique to a format that could address the work as a whole. They also started an email chain to share reading texts with each other. I feel like the curriculum has turned into me responding to where they keep

(indirectly) telling me they want to go. In some ways the authority paradigm has been turned on its head. My advanced class is the complete opposite, it's more disjointed and needs that structure.

AS: That comes from experience with collaboration. When you're working on a project with other artists, the group itself creates the structure through skill-sets and interests—what that particular group can do, can create something from, that another group can't. When you look at a group of people who are your students and you go, "This group isn't actually fitting into my plan," the instinct is to change the plan!

AKB: But a lot of people will force people into the plan, I mean typically that's how education works....

AS: This is where there might be a generational shift and disciplinary difference. I come from performance, where you change the plan.

AKB: Another thing I wanted to touch on was our discussion about Rupaul's *Drag Race* as an educational model. When *Project Runway* first emerged, I thought this is incredible TV, it captures the pathology of art school. And then, having recently been addicted to *Drag Race*, *Project Runway* feels overly serious and dry as a TV show, reality competition or model for art pedagogy. It's clear why *Drag Race* makes better TV: indulgent fantasies are so much more entertaining. But maybe that's also why it makes for better art? They are having more fun. It's a competition dedicated to self-expression using body, materials, concept, and performance to create a total illusion....

AS: It's artifice within the realm of artifice. I think of it as feminine-ism, not feminism. Fashion is connected to planet earth and drag is like the unconscious mind. Like, "Stop it already with the feathers." They just keep coming, because in your imagination the feathers never end.

AKB: It's true, they never end!

AS: *Drag Race*, *Top Model*, *Top Chef*—I found them useful. These students are born in the 1990s—and one thing I noticed was that long-term projects weren't always working out the same way that short-term projects were. The classroom could be used to play a series of high-speed educational art making games.

AKB: That was a problem for me last semester in the Cooper Union class because we spent the semester working on a single Brecht play. The final presentation was good, they totally put themselves into it, but the whole project got bogged down in process. The spontaneity was gone. So this semester I chopped things up, I have one, two, and three-week projects.

AS: For performance, six-hour projects are a good way for them to learn collaborative skills and improvisation. In "Sculpture and Theater," one highlight moment for me is "Prop Swap." Everybody brings in an object they could hold in their hands, and puts it on the table, and then everyone picks one and then goes off and writes a speech from the point-of-view of the object. Another person then comes and directs the person holding the object in the performance of their speech, while the object is manipulated somewhere in the room in relationship to this speech act.

AKB: Are they performing from the point-of-view of the object?

AS: Not always. In "Mask Task" they bring excess materials from other classes for a workshop where they're going to make masks. After viewing a PowerPoint presentation of 300 masks, set to music, they break into groups, and I give them these anthropological articles from TDR [an academic journal] about how different cultures use masks. They make the masks for a couple of hours. Then they have to make scenes from a ritual away from the rest of us, so we don't see what they do. They then show it through only one still image, which they present to the class. That's a day of class, and in that day we do as much work as we would have done over a three-month period. These are attempts to bring theater into a studio classroom environment. I was thinking about my colleague Jade Gordon, whose MA is in Applied Theater at USC, a program primarily influenced by Augusto Boal and the Theater of the Oppressed. Theater is a social practice made of games. When we came to visit your class the very first thing we did was break the group into a more visible set of parts by asking questions of them and having them act out an answer.

AKB: I think I'm doing some kind of strange variation on that with my classes at VCU this semester. The first work they make is always like an introduction, to me and the other students. So the first project is to do a lecture on their work—a lecture in the broadest sense, a unique live presentation—but without showing any work. Anything but the work itself—interests, ideas and questions. Inevitably this results in actually creating a work....

AS: Oh, interesting.

AKB: In my other class they're paired up to do studio visits with each other and then they create a work that I'm calling "mutual representation." Some of them are just coming out of freshmen foundation and it's not like there is actually so much work to see, which is fine because that's not the important part. They have things to talk about and can share who they think they are at that moment. I was like, "You're going on a date and then you're going to make a work for the other person based on your feelings and understanding of who that person is." It can be a kind of romantic gesture if they totally clicked. If they didn't, they are usually very concerned that they didn't like the other person. But then there is a lot to respond to if they look at what and why they dislike something.

AS: I like how you remove the visual.

AKB: Well yeah, it's about their potential to make, because they have desires and ideas. Rather than catering to the idea that they should synthesize their work into some kind of statement or cohesive visual.

AS: I assign proposal projects where the narrative is often more interesting than the visual representation. I'm not that invested in how things look, but I'm not into looking at things that are boring. Sometimes I'll look at the undergrads and see this wild energy in their work and then a set of developments that have to do with professionalization is what I see in the studios of the graduate students at the same institution.

AKB: Yes, this is a problem of art school in the age of late capitalism. Students are programed to facilitate curators, shows, resumes, and thereby sales. It's no coincidence that the art market also multiplied in size and income over recent decades. Why do you need to be able to clearly articulate what your work is about? Sure you need to understand your impulses; sure you should be able to share that with others formally and verbally. But it should be a unique diatribe and it's okay if it's a skewed logic because there is nothing particularly logical about art. Art is powerful and special specifically because it's so illogical.

The pedagogy of contemporary art school is about being able to sell yourself. That's when art is a product that is the answer to the game. That skill is good for the market but not for art. As I'm teaching now, I wonder how students can have ideas and feelings that are translated with the clarity of intuition?

AS: What I can't actually do is give them a gallery career. They're not necessarily looking for what I was looking for: models of pedagogy and a way into the discourse. I can help people with that, and I have certain skills that will help them on a technical level. What I can't really do is figure out how to make their perfect gallery show of handsomely appointed wall decor.

AKB: The question is, do they need that skill and where did they get that idea?

AS: Where do they get that idea? From the dominant art world model of what it means to be an artist—which is not something I knew about when I made the determination that I was going to be an artist.

AKB: Amen sister.