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After Words: Intention and the Homometrics of the e-Interview

Hey, what's going on, Ignatz? Everybody is rolling on the floor and laughing. I've never seen such a hysterical gang of assassins. What, you read that ticket about our 'new tone of ironic self-reference?' And what? Body Bob threw the I-Box at [Major Minimax] . . . wait a minute, Ignatz. You started this bedlam by throwing bricks at everyone. . . .Get Body Bob out of that Kraut helmet immediately.¹

Robert Morris, aka Body Bob and Major Minimax, invoked George Herriman's brick-hurling Ignatz Mouse as a rhetorical flourish to enhance his written answers to an interviewer's questions. By indirectly responding to thirteen queries, submitted in writing by art critic Roger Denson, Morris manipulated the conventional artist interview. Instead of systematically answering Denson, Morris wrote an essay in which the questions appear as supplements exerting little or no influence on the artist's commentary. The resulting text, entitled "Robert Morris Replies to Roger Denson (or Is That a Mouse in My *Paragone*?)," is unprecedented as an artist interview. The final essay in a collection of Morris's writings, its publication coincided with the artist's retrospective at the Guggenheim. Morris first came to international acclaim as a minimalist, and has enjoyed a long-career as a leading conceptual artist. His "Notes on Sculpture" remains one of the most significant explanations of Minimalism.

Given this experimental approach to answering Denson, Morris emasculates his interlocutor. Denson is granted no agency in the interview because the potential for conversation is forsaken; creative monologue replaces interrogative dialogue. That is, by responding in private to questions submitted in advance, Morris eliminates the frisson and appeal implicit in real-time, face-to-face interviews. This empowered position grants Morris a safe locus whereby he can simultaneously participate in an interview and yet shield himself from unguarded moments. Moreover, this rhetorical space, facilitated by today's electronic resources, I argue, offers a dialectical resolution between speaking and writing. For the past decade, Morris has refused to be recorded via video or audio; he only consents to interviews conducted by fax or email. The results of many of these e-interviews have since been published conforming to a transcript's graphic conventions. Morris insists that an interview is not a conversation; but, it is also not an epistolary exercise. Located between these discursive processes, e-interviews are neither spoken nor written but an amalgam of both. Therefore, they are unlike conventional interviews. Email, given its immediacy, synthesizes the directness of speech with the

circumspection of writing, producing a new discursive arena in which artists and scholars can interact.

Roland Barthes explored the interplay between writing and speaking within the context of interviews; his neologisms help frame Morris's discomfort with the taped interview. Barthes described his own unease: "Now, why don't I enjoy interviews? The basic reason has to do with my ideas on the relationship between speech and writing I could not say what I want to say any better than by writing it, and to repeat it by talking about it tends to diminish it".² This, too, is Morris's dilemma; although his quandary suggests a double-remove, for his customary practice is to create art, and after a period of reflection, write essays about it. To speak about that which he has initially created, and subsequently written about, suggests the law of diminishing returns. To avoid such aphasic dissonance, Morris embraces the e-interview because it grants homometric equilibrium. Barthes defines "homometer" as "a correct metric relation between what one has to say and the way one says it."³

Two photographs of the same artist reveal an ambivalent persona capable of representing both opaque honesty and transparent fabrications. With these two images Robert Morris hides as much as he gives away, trapped between holding cards close to his chest and exposing them for all to see. Let these images, then, metonymically represent this artist's polarized relationship with interviewers. The interior of Morris's *I-Box* reveals an artist stripped bare, a trope suggesting visual and linguistic truth. It is simultaneously an "I" signifying the mythical creator and a punning "eyeball" conjuring a phenomenological viewer encountering and identifying with the art object. *I-Box* never reduces to the sum of its parts; it suggests more than it reveals. As Morris claimed in his first published e-interview "What [*I-Box*] really does is put theories of truth on hold, and replace them with a *fort/da* game for adults".⁴ In contrast, Morris's poster for an exhibition at Castelli-Sonnabend asserts without ambiguity. It suggests a visual threat, as violence and hostility seethe through the clichéd tropes of sadomasochism; the image can be read as a punned warning: "Beware," the artist seems to say, "I box." Yet, even as the artist wears the collar, chains and cuffs suggestive of a submissive deviant, his aggressive pose, locked-jaw expression, helmet, sunglasses and flexed bicep assert a powerful, defensive persona. Perhaps, a third image metonymically represents the ideal interviewee. In *Box for Standing*, Morris is contained, relaxed and contemplative. But, when e-interviewing Morris, the interviewer will never be certain which of these three personae will respond.

I conducted an e-interview with Morris that began in early 1999 and ended in late 2001. Beginning to research my dissertation topic on the influence of Wittgenstein's *Philosophical Investigations* on conceptual art, I wrote Morris by snail-mail to ask "Would you be willing to meet me and to discuss my project?" He replied via email: "Your questions I can best respond to by e-mail. This seems the easiest and fastest way for me. Of course I'll be happy to meet with you in NYC." In my reply, I took the opportunity to ask a few questions regarding his experiences as a semi-professional baseball player and philosophy student at Reed College, an elite liberal arts college in Portland, Oregon. A few days

passed before he responded in a polite, if terse, tone. Many answers were incomplete sentences: "I played baseball in the midwest. Position was catcher. . . .Read Merleau-Ponty at Reed but not L.W. Although Pragmatism was the big ticket out there at the time I didn't take to Dewey. Learned of Reed from a friend." I quickly realized that extracting long-winded exposition from Morris required deft skill and delicate timing.

Broaching the right topic at the right time made all of the difference for how energetically Morris would respond; the key required limiting the number of topics and questions per email. Part of the advantage an e-interviewee gains is a beneficial shift in subtle social mores. That is, to respond in curt or one-word answers in a face-to-face dialogue can quickly devolve to the point of rudeness, as the effort on both parties needs to be proportional if the interview is to generate any substantive energy and interest. As I conducted this formal e-interview with Morris, I also met with him informally on several occasions. During our first meeting we engaged in a long-lasting, broad-ranging conversation. Inevitably, information that I gleaned during this conversation catalyzed my subsequent e-mailed questions and eliminated the need to ask about critical issues.

However, the e-interview offers opportunities to explore issues in a manner that real-time conversations cannot replicate. Just as e-interviews foster immediacy, they also enable participants to reflect and research before responding to one another. For instance, a year after our e-interview began, I asked Morris about his installation of a triangular labyrinth included in the Hirshhorn's 10th anniversary exhibition in 1984. I wrote: "in some of your previous labyrinths (or at least the one constructed for the Hirshhorn in the mid 80s) you placed a mirror above the structure, granting the viewer/participant a sense of their position vis-à-vis the whole...Do you think mirrors placed in such a way ironically serve to disorient the viewer, creating a sensation of further entrapment? Are they to inform the viewer or to create a kind of Panopticon of (self-) surveillance?" Less than seven hours later, he responded:

*A Labyrinth with a mirror!!! Perish the thought. Was this actually done at the Hirshhorn? I thought they only installed mirror above beds in certain motels of questionable repute. I've always liked to have a place where one could climb up to look over the labyrinth...But never a mirror. The two experiences—seeing the plan, being inside—should be separate. Maybe the mirror was some security guard's idea. I know that after the *Philadelphia Labyrinth* was finished and about to open the fire department appeared and insisted that a passageway be cut from the outside to the center, but apparently somebody paid them off since this was not done.*

An hour later, I replied with a citation of, and quote from, my source, an *Artnews* review:

Morris has created a gray triangular maze in which no wrong turns are possible. A mirror on the ceiling above the work offers the visitor the reassurance of being aware at all times of where he is in relation to the entire piece. Yet as he moves toward the small room at the heart of the maze, through narrow corridors wide enough for only one person, he begins to sense that no mid route escape is possible. The corridors seem to turn on and on within a space impossibly small to contain them all; the mirror's reflection no longer provides any real comfort.⁵

The following morning, Morris wrote back disparagingly: "As for the mirror. I guess it happened. It is painful to contemplate." These exchanges reveal the advantages of an e-interview; I was able to provide my interviewee with irrefutable evidence about the exhibition of his own work of which even he was unaware. In turn, he responded with a tone conveying honest, sincere shock. A few months after this exchange, I conducted archival research at the Hirshhorn and read notes regarding this exhibition compiled by Joseph Shannon, then Chief of the Department of Exhibits and Design (record Unit 516; Box 10 of 11). No mention was ever made regarding the decision to mount a mirror above Morris's labyrinth. If the mirror was a concession to a fire marshal, this decision may not have a paper trail for legal purposes. This anecdote reveals the gap between an artist's intention for an installation and an art institution's execution of the same installation done in the artist's absence.

Shortly after I began my e-interview, Anne Bertrand, a scholar working on behalf of the contemporary art museum in Lyon also began to e-interview Morris. While I was interviewing Morris as a primary component of research for my dissertation, Bertrand's interview was intended for publication in an exhibition catalogue. On January 10, 2000, Morris emailed Bertrand: "For the past decade I have done interviews by fax whenever possible. That is to say, I receive the questions by fax (although email is just as good) and reply here at my word processor rather than in to a microphone. . . .[A] conversation is not an interview, and an interview can never be a conversation." He goes on to tell her that he is not an artist for whom

words seem to erupt ... like a gushing spring. . . . I, on the other hand, am at the other end of the scale – being both wary and enamored with the precise linguistic formulation. I've always seen the relation of the visual to the verbal as conflicted. . . .For me, that exquisite torture of trying to find a precise answer to a given question is best done in solitude.⁶

A curious aspect of this publication is that Bertrand's questions were replaced by bold-face headings whereas Morris's replies to her absent questions were reproduced in full. Here, the e-interviewer is not only neutered, she is virtually erased from the exchange. Further, we have no indication how this text was edited. An e-interview can be a-temporally packaged for a reading public since the "thread" need not be published based on the chronology of the emailed

exchanges. The elasticity in which an e-interview can be presented differs substantively from traditional interviews, especially as they are transcribed. This distinction, then, suggests an advantage for e-interviews; since they are not transcribed, they need not be ensnared by another Barthesian concept:

the trap of scription. . . [W]e lose an innocence; not that speech is in itself fresh, natural, spontaneous, truthful, expressive of a kind of pure interiority; quite on the contrary, our speech is immediately theatrical, it borrows its turns from a whole collection of cultural and oratorical codes: speech is always tactical . . . in rewriting what we have said we protect ourselves, we keep an eye on ourselves, we censure and delete our blunders. . . speech is dangerous because it is immediate and cannot be taken back.⁷

And, yet, this seems to be precisely what is forsaken in the e-interview. Scription, located between writing and speech, the rhetorical mode of the e-interview, does not foster uncensored spontaneity; it prohibits the risk of blunder, those moments in which an artist may speak openly without keeping an eye on themselves.

The first interview Morris conducted via fax was with W.J.T. Mitchell and published in *Artforum*. Mitchell's introduction claims: "I taped an interview with Robert Morris a few hours before the February opening of his current retrospective at the Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum. . . . Mercifully, most of this conversation turned out to be inaudible on the tape. Instead, we offer here an edited sequence of the faxed exchanges that occurred in the days just before and after the opening."⁸ The operative adjective "[m]ercifully" suggests that much of the conversation was not worthy of publication (even if that was the rationale for recording). And, what does "edited sequence" entail? It could mean typos were fixed and grammar was polished, or that questions and answers were altered or eliminated. Perhaps, even the sequence of faxes was rearranged. Unlike face-to-face interviews, e-interviewees have complete control over how revealing they will be. The influence of genteel manners functions differently in written exchanges than spoken exchanges. It feels rude to ask variations on a basic query via fax or email, once the artist has responded to a topic, even if only superficially. However, in conventional interviews, questions can be asked organically whereby the potential for digging deeper into the intentions and motivations of the artist exists due to the psychological tension of face-to-face exchanges; a tension eliminated by e-interviews. Certainly, most interviewers come with prepared questions, but sensitive interviewers understand the value of straying from their scripts to prod and cajole the interviewee into revealing insights not yet articulated.

Mitchell begins by asking Morris why he hates interviews. Since this line of questioning initiates their faxed exchanges, it suggests that the "taped interview" was a ruse justifying their idiosyncratic, collaborative text. Morris's answer, however, validates his on-going refusal to be taped:

I hate interviews because, (a) if verbalizing about the work, I would rather write; (b) they're part of the being-an-artist game; (c) they are

performances, pretending to be conversations.... This interview might become an artwork if we worked on it long enough—revised, rewrote, added, subtracted, etc.”⁹

In Morris’s mind, not only are conversations not interviews, but interviews are a kind of performance. Oddly, though, the e-interview has the potential to become a collaborative work of art, if the interviewer and interviewee “worked on it long enough.” Unstated, but implied, is the depth of sincerity; Morris implies that the performance-interview is insincere because of both party’s hyper-awareness of the presence of a recording device, whereas the e-interview, if it is labored over long enough, could become a sincere work of art because the written exchanges might rise to the level of literature.

In June 1995, *Art in America* published “Robert Morris: Formal Disclosures,” an interview between the artist and Pepe Karmel. In the introduction, Karmel explained the manner in which the interview was conducted: Morris decided that he did not want to do a spoken interview but preferred to respond to my questions in written form. ...It seems to me that Morris’s responses to my questions reveal a kind of alternation between the urge to reveal and the urge to conceal—and that this ambivalence... constitutes an essential element in Morris’s work.¹⁰

Just as importantly, conducting an interview in this manner eliminates extra-literary modes of communication: vocal inflections, hand gestures, facial expressions, and body language. While these features are not manifest in transcripts from real-time dialogues, they do exert an impact. Barthes recognizes this loss as an element of the “trap of scription”—for editing out the “uhms” and adding punctuation alters the spoken word by eliminating the body: “It should be understood . . . that what is lost in transcription is quite simply the body—at least this exterior (contingent) body which, in a dialogue, flings toward another body, just as fragile (or frantic) as itself, messages that are intellectually empty, the only function of which is in a way to *hook* the Other and to keep it in a state of partnership.”¹¹ A sensitive interviewer can gauge an interviewee’s mood and ascertain when more probing questions will elicit new information or perhaps a dead-end in which the subject will reveal no more on a topic. That is, the inorganic aspect of e-interviews prohibits phenomenological triggers, the extra-literary features of human interaction that provide emphasis, shape reactions, and influence connotations.

Further, the isolation between the participants in the e-interview shifts the power dynamic. An interviewer has a surplus of control in a real-time discussion as s/he is empowered to ask the next question, change the subject, incorporate non-sequiturs, or re-state previous questions; therefore, the interviewee is at the mercy of the interviewer who directs the conversational flow. Interviewers, especially in the “gotcha” mode of mass media, can easily abuse this power. Barthes claims: “a somewhat sadistic relationship is established between the interviewer and the interviewee . . . by asking aggressive or indiscreet questions

to get a reaction out of him.”¹² Certainly, such power inequity is eliminated by the e-interview, as the interviewee need not respond to all questions and his extra-literary reactions are not witnessed. But, does the electronic arena foster an equal dispersal of power? At its essence, the interviewee possesses privileged information, especially regarding intention, influence and motivation; the interviewer succeeds when s/he solicits kernels of information not already in the bibliographic record. Morris’s insistence to conduct interviews via email enables a calculating control by the interviewee over the interviewer; in many ways e-interviews inversely distribute power.

The need for authority in the work of Robert Morris was articulated by Donald Kuspit in his incisive essay “Authoritarian Abstraction.” Analyzing the Castelli-Sonnabend poster of Morris wearing the clichéd props of sadomasochistic bondage, Kuspit claimed: “The apparent sincerity of the self-portrait is belied by its self-advertising character, which makes clear that it is propaganda for Morris’s art-self.” Let this image serve as a graphic metonym for Morris’s projected self as interviewee usurping the interviewer’s agency. Kuspit suggests: “In his vanity—and perhaps by reason of it—Morris is an authority figure, exhibited for our acclaim. But he appears to us in chains, which however theatrical they may appear in the context of an art exhibition, suggest a troubled, self-flagellating, imprisoned—at least in the role of artist—authority figure.”¹³ Of this image, Morris in his interview with Mitchell claimed: “As for memorable images, one I consider a total failure and mistake, the 1974 poster of myself with chains and a Nazi helmet, seems destined for a Guggenheim T-shirt.”¹⁴ If destined for overt commercialization, why is it a mistake? It appears as though Morris’s self-effacing irony also serves as shameless self-promotion.

In 1997, *Art Monthly* published “Cut Felt” an interview between Robert Morris and Richard Williams. Although Morris was in Leeds for the opening of an exhibition at the Henry Moore Institute and to give a lecture at the University of Leeds, he insisted that Williams conduct the interview via email. Their e-interview unfolded during the course of four days, from May 23-26, 1997. Yet, the publication of this e-interview is not presented as a series of emailed exchanges. Rather, the text is repackaged to look like a conventional transcript, as if the exchanges occurred in real time. Indeed, one section even reads as if the interviewer interrupts the interviewee to clarify a question. Morris writes: “Maybe I’m not picking up on what sense of representation you have in mind here ...” and the text trails off with an ellipsis. Williams responds: “I was thinking of the interview you did with Rosalind Krauss in 1995 for *artpress*...”¹⁵ In this case, the script suggests seamless unfolding in time, but that was not the case. Just as the “trap of scription” irrevocably alters the recording of an interview for publication, so too do e-interviews undergo a transformation to correspond with the graphic conventions of published interviews.

The lecture Morris delivered at the University of Leeds, “Professional Rules” was previously published in *Critical Inquiry*. In this essay, Morris incorporates two distinct voices defined by the roles of “you” and “I”. He explains:

In the studio I ask myself this question: What will happen if I do *a* and then *b*? After that I ask further, Now what happens after *c* and then *d*? ... And you—that is to say, R. Morris; and I will adopt the *you* to address him from here on in—want to say that your questions in the making not only preceded the object but resulted in it?¹⁶

Interrogating the performance of interviews as imagined through the rhetoric of a hypothetical conversation, Morris seems to realize his suggestion to W.J.T. Mitchell that an interview could become a work of art. In this e-interview, Williams asks: “Watching you deliver ‘Professional Rules’ . . . I was interested in to what extent it might be regarded as a form of performance.” Morris responds: “Of course delivering any lecture is a kind of performance . . . since a number of people came up to me afterwards with requests to read the text, I just assume that as a lecture it was probably a failure.”¹⁷ Curiously, the performance was not a failure, only the lecture.

Indeed, Morris treats the artist interview as a critical component of his studio practice. Imagine my surprise when I received this unsolicited email from the artist. Not only is this email fashioned as a dialogue, but the interviewee turned the tables on me by becoming an interrogator. Issuing an enigmatic challenge, he framed our relationship as a Wittgensteinian “language game,” assigning me the task of explaining it in my reply:

A and B meet. . . . What they do might be described as a language game that only those familiar with art can play. . . . B goes home and makes an object, X. . . . Then A says, “The production of X is like what we’re doing here.” B says, “Huh?” “Art game,” says A. “Huh?” says B. “I’ll explain in Chapter 4 which you will find in your email when you return from Europe,” says A. You are A.

Given that time and space constraints are not a part of the e-interview a conundrum emerges with such an exchange. Is this a part of the interview? Certainly, this is not a letter. It is unlikely to occur in a face-to-face conversation; rather, a missive like this suggests the elasticity of email, opening up a new form of communication between artists and scholars. Therefore, one must ask, are all emailed exchanges between artists and their interlocutors a part of the interview?

Morris repeatedly uses dialogues in his work. Morris’s most recent publication, “From a Chomskian Couch,” consists of a script in which he plays the role of an analysand and casts Noam Chomsky as his psychoanalyst.¹⁸ Like the numerous e-interviews Morris has allowed to be published, this essay suggests one who enjoys talking about his art and yet fears doing so. In an email to me he wrote:

I think my art has always been a kind of therapy, or even a kind of prophylaxix [sic] against constantly sensed threats—just an endless labor of putting up hex signs to ward off the terror. Primitive, semi-magical fetishes and totems to hide behind. Didn’t Nietzsche say

something about when we look down we can see beneath our thoughts that which is always simpler, darker?

In this passage, homometric equilibrium is achieved. For the interview, when successful, circumvents the hex signs, and produces moments of clarity for both the interviewer and the interviewee. Morris lets down his guard with me, and in conversational tone, writes honestly about his psyche as an artist. Here, he acknowledges his authoritarian defensiveness, exposes his vulnerability, and offers a synthetic equivocation between them. Nonetheless, while Morris requires this electronic forum to transcend the insincerity of the interview-performance masquerading as conversation, my experience suggests the e-interview cannot replace the traditional interview. Like speech, email is immediate and ephemeral; like writing, email is circumspect and reflexive. E-interviews promote homometric equilibrium by operating in the interstice between speaking and writing; but, they do not benefit from the space-time limitations that traditional interviews require to elicit concise, unexpected insights. The extra-literary features of face-to-face interviews enable a mode of verbal communication that e-interviews do not replicate; conversely, e-interviews produce discursive forums in which interviewers and interviewees might interact with immediate spontaneity and innovation as well as lexical precision and circumspection.

¹ Robert Morris, "Robert Morris Replies to Roger Denson (Or Is That a Mouse in My *Paragone*?), *Continuous Project Altered Daily*, Cambridge: MIT Press, 1993, 307.

² Roland Barthes, *Grain of the Voice*, Berkeley: U California P, 1985, 322-3.

³ Barthes, 323.

⁴ W.J.T. Mitchell and Robert Morris, "Golden Memories," *Artforum* 32 (April, 1994): 88.

⁵ Lee Fleming, "Issues are the Issue," *ARTnews*, 84.1 (January, 1985), 87.

⁶ Robert Morris, *From Mnemosyne to Clio: The Mirror and the Labyrinth*, Milan: Skira, 2000, 161-2.

⁷ Barthes, 3-4.

⁸ "Golden Memories," 86.

⁹ "Golden Memories," 87.

¹⁰ Pepe Karmel, "Robert Morris: Formal Disclosures," *Art in America* (June, 1995) 88-95, 117.

¹¹ Barthes, 5.

¹² Barthes, 323.

¹³ Donald Kuspit, "Authorial Abstraction," *Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism*, 36.1 (1977): 34 and 36 respectively.

¹⁴ "Golden Memories," 87.

¹⁵ Richard Williams and Robert Morris, "Cut Felt," *Art Monthly* (July-August, 1997): 9.

¹⁶ Robert Morris, "Professional Rules," *Critical Inquiry* 23 (Winter, 1997): 299.

¹⁷ "Cut Felt," 7.

¹⁸ Robert Morris, "From a Chomskian Couch: The Imperialistic Unconscious," *Critical Inquiry* 29 (Summer, 2003): 678-694.