

# Introduction

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For the last five decades, Robert Morris has remained unclassifiable, producing an œuvre in a variety of media and methods, an œuvre at turns qualified as minimal, post-minimal, conceptual, land art, anti-form, process art, and performance. The retrospective *The Mind/Body Problem*, organized in 1994 by the art historian Rosalind Krauss for the Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum (later traveling to Paris at the Centre Georges Pompidou in 1995, under the auspices of curator Catherine Grenier) established Morris' resistance to formal categorization as an essential trait of his process.<sup>1</sup> Although Krauss's reading has become generally accepted, the methods for an in-depth analysis taking this complexity into consideration had yet to be imagined.

The lens of Morris' writing practice seemed to hold this promise. Parallel to his career as a visual artist, Morris has written prolifically. He has published in multiple contexts, in art journals such as *Critical Inquiry*, *October*, *Art in America*, or *Artforum*, in exhibition catalogues, in academic contexts—as in a volume on Donald Davidson alongside Richard Rorty—, as well as in book format. His “enterprise” he tells us, “is piled as high with words on one side as with images on the other.”<sup>2</sup> This writing practice has often led him to be labeled a “theorist,” even as his work mobilizes a wide variety of genres. Writing is a material for the artist. His texts range from statements of intent, however ironic or negative, through critical assessments of artworks and movements, to investigations in philosophy and aesthetics. Morris' writings also espouse the genre of the polemic, sketching staunch political critiques of Western imperialism, of the increasing commodification of the aesthetic, or of monumentality in art under the auspices of what he calls the Wagner effect. Weaving throughout are autobiographical narratives, the biographical being a significant source to

1. *Robert Morris. The Mind/Body Problem*, ex. cat., 1994; *Robert Morris*, ex. cat., 1995.

2. Robert Morris, “Professional Rules,” in *Have I Reasons: Work and Writings, 1993–2007*, 2008, p. 97.

which Morris often returns, varying his approach from the documentary to the fictive. Morris' tone is rarely univocal, and his unreliable narrators significantly complicate the delivery of what meaning games they construct. Playing with its fragmentation into a multitude of *personas*, the voice of the artist contradicts itself, turns against itself derisively, entering into a labyrinthine game whose meanderings issue from a series of slippages of meaning, ironic disengagement, and smokescreens. Add to this a variety of narrative positions, a multiplicity of tone, a profusion of references and a discursive field of resistant unclarity unfolds.

The complex devices his writing performs aim, in fact, to produce distance and play of references, building a meandering architecture of gradual clarifications and obscuring. Morris' prose unfurls as a series of *investigations* (a Wittgensteinian title that Morris borrowed in 1990), a kaleidoscope of inquiries and questions rather than straightforward demonstrations. If the texts from the 1960s and 1970s, reprinted by the MIT Press in 1993 under the title *Continuous Project Altered Daily*, are the most well-known, the idea with this colloquium was to take into account all of his textual production on the occasion of the release of the second volume of his writings, *Have I Reasons: Work and Writings, 1993-2007*, by Duke University Press and thanks to the diligence of Nena Tsouti-Schillinger.<sup>3</sup>

Morris' textual production, however, is but one part of the equation; on the side of the image, text is also piling high. Indeed, since the early 1960s, the linguistic has been consistently inscribed within what, for lack of a better word, is labeled the "visual work." In fact, a suspicion, and a conscious resistance to the image might even "have offered a certain purchase, a certain foothold" for the work, writes Morris in retrospect.<sup>4</sup> His emphasis on the discursive arises out of such suspicion, as if the dangers of viscosity could be averted, or at least lessened, by a strategy of textual inscription. Morris' suspicion of the image is political. It arises as a preliminary, affective barrier against inurement to spectacle, and reflects Morris' distrust of the entertainment industrial complex, the Mega Image, what is, he writes, "after all always too dangerous, too threatening, too irrational, too uncontainable, too freighted with ideological weight of one kind or another."<sup>5</sup>

Text finds its place within the "visual work" in a variety of ways. Text can, for example, be presented in lieu of image, as in the punning *Memory Drawings* (Fig. 24) from 1963. Subverting the representational procedure hinted to by its

3. Robert Morris, *Continuous Project Altered Daily: The Writings of Robert Morris*, 1993; Robert Morris, *Have I Reasons: Work and Writings, 1993-2007*, 2008.

4. Robert Morris, "Professional Rules," in *Have I Reasons: Work and Writings, 1993-2007*, 2008, p. 95.

5. Robert Morris, "Solecisms of Sight: Specular Speculations," in *Have I Reasons: Work and Writings, 1993-2007*, 2008, p. 148.

title, this series of “drawings” from memory consist in the repeated drafting of a scientific text about the physiological bases of memory which Morris had learned by heart. As the series unfolds in time, errors and omissions appear, manifesting the entropic nature of memory evoked by the text itself. The linguistic might also appear under the guise of the aural, in performances and installations, shearing text of its alliance with the iconic. And what of the works produced in dialogue with philosophers, as if such figures could lend an air of rationality to Morris’ image-making pursuit. The vast series of the *Blind Time Drawings* present an instance of obsessive probing of the blind underside of the image, below the visible. Morris, his eyes covered, executed these graphite drawings with his hands, leaning over a table, following a set of determined rules and guidelines. The texts inscribed below the drawings evolve alongside the series, and are borrowed from Wittgenstein and Donald Davidson. Morris’ ambition, he remarked, was to search for “a basis for drawing other than straightforward representation on the one hand, and the nonrepresentational on the other.”<sup>6</sup> This could be read as an attempt to bridge a certain partitioning of text and image. But it also implied examining the psychological, philosophical, and political underpinnings of our constructed field of visibility.<sup>7</sup> The texts which accompany the produced images are in no way illustrative, they are rather indicators of position in Morris’ somatic groping behind the visible.

The productivity of the negative is a significant Morrisian *modus operandi*, and not simply because of Morris’ affinity with irony and deflation. Only rarely does he enact a straightforwardly affirmative stance, and even then, he reflects upon his convictions with suspicion. The steadfast belief in eradicating all transcendence espoused in the early days of minimalism, for example, is later reviewed with a circumspect distrust as having left ajar a crack for a return of what it so emphatically rejected. Morris’ embrace of the negative can also be taken as indicative of his nuanced inscription within the field of aesthetic production. “Art has always been dependent upon and served one set of forces or another with little regard for the morality of those people of forces it served (pharaoh, pope, nobilities, capitalism).”<sup>8</sup> Morris’ tonality, ranging from irony, skepticism, or virulent critique, to joking dismissal, displays a consciousness of the larger socio-political and economic implications from which his practice cannot be divorced. The negative tearing of gaps and interstices is meant to pry

6. Robert Morris, “Writing with Davidson: Some Afterthoughts After Doing Blind Time IV: Drawing with Davidson,” in *Have I Reasons: Work and Writings, 1993–2007*, 2008, p. 42.

7. On this question, see Miguel Hernandez-Navarro’s “Politics of Blindness: Robert Morris’ Antivision,” in this volume.

8. Robert Morris, “Notes on Art as/and Land Reclamation,” in *Continuous Project Altered Daily: The Writings of Robert Morris*, 1993, p. 229.

apart what appears unified as dominant social space. Skirting the abstract and the transcendent, the negative demonstrates an attachment to context, history, and the details of socio-political inscriptions. It is perhaps as well the most adequate tool to charting a minor history, or at least a conscious, cautious inscription within a narrative of domination that Morris is too realistic to believe he can escape. Indeed, there can be no utopian exteriority in which to claim refuge. Instead, Morris works from within to disrupt forms of invisibility couched in naturalized physical garb. “Spectacle is dedicated to avoiding consciousness, and is always transporting in delivering the phenomenological ride”<sup>9</sup> he writes with characteristic charge.

Whenever historians have turned toward artists’ writings, they have “primarily searched for an ‘explanation’ there, a commentary, an instruction about form, a theoretical stance, in short, the confirmation of an *aesthetic intention*.”<sup>10</sup> Morris’ textual corpus refuses to provide such intellectual reassurance. First of all, his artistic project resists the attraction of disguised or *a posteriori* justification. As he explains in “Professional Rules,” a 1997 article published in *Critical Inquiry* which looks to uncover certain family resemblances in his own work, and perhaps unearth a set of rules for these resemblances, “It is in forums like this one that the question, now in an altogether different form [...] would illuminate the shaded space of the studio. [...] There was something in the series of questions accompanying the making that responded to the conditions, the results, the accidents. It was as if the questions followed along without question. But in retrospect, and under the klieg lights, those steps taken reappear on stage to take their bows in the costumes of reasons.”<sup>11</sup> *A posteriori* critical analysis is a theater, replete with the trappings of illusion and artifice of the genre, and Morris performs a humorous display of brilliance as he accounts for the many stylistic shifts in his work. The high disregard in which he holds the rationalization of action after the fact harks to many factors. Wittgenstein, of course, and the distrust of the illusion of a private mental space of known and rationalized intentionality, but also a long standing dialogue with Donald Davidson concerning the difference between reasons and causes. Surely there is also an emphasis on the experiential which Morris carries with him from his early minimalist days, as he refuses to create a hierarchy between embodied and material forms of aesthetic practice and more abstract ones.

9. Robert Morris, “From a Chomskian Couch: The Imperialistic Unconscious,” in *Have I Reasons: Work and Writings, 1993–2007*, 2008, p. 173.
10. Françoise Levaillant, “L’invention d’un auteur,” in Françoise Levaillant, ed., *Les Écrits d’artiste depuis 1940* (Saint-Germain-La-Blanche-Herbe: Institut Mémoires de l’édition contemporaine, 2004), p. 14.
11. Robert Morris, “Professional Rules,” in *Have I Reasons: Work and Writings, 1993–2007*, 2008, p. 65.

Secondly, Morris' attempt to reinscribe criticism within his own sphere of activity is an engagement with the larger economic and discursive frameworks of aesthetic production. Morris' early Duchamp influenced works are emblematic of this positioning, and reflect upon the status of these objects within larger social-political frameworks. Examining the role of the critic, Morris sheds light upon mechanisms of symbolic valuation and validation which position the work of art in the hierarchy of culture. Morris does not directly engage with critiquing institutional (museums or academic spaces) or commercial (the gallery, or personal space of consumption) forms of validation. However, he answers to issues of power in the game of critical justification through distributing different roles to the critic, to himself, and performing spoofs of the artist as critic. His works provide a self-conscious reflection on his own uneasy position as a subject of analysis, on the implications that his theoretical practice might have in this game of power, and acknowledge the role of the art historian, and perhaps at times the artist-critic himself, in inscribing the work within a narrative of cultural relevance, status and dominance. A humorous deflation of the power of the analytical over the iconic, and by extension of the power-knowledge complex, ensues. It is difficult here to distinguish between the critical texts and the performances or video work as they often borrow the same elements to mount this critique. Morris has been engaged in such deflationary practice since the performance *21.3* (1964). Dressed in professor's garb, he parodied a conference, speaking over a recording of a text by the eminent art historian Erwin Panofsky as it progressively fell out of synch. In the video *The Birthday Boy* (1994), he staged two art historians recounting the evacuation of narrative from the visual as a fundamental strategy of Western domination. Stumbling and increasingly drunk, the male and female narrators grow more and more perturbed as their story of domination unfolds, and end up insulting the screen behind them as it projects signs of their own alienation through the iconic. Morris also incorporated the critic within his own text. In "Robert Morris replies to Roger Denson (Or Is That a Mouse in My Paragone?)," he stages this as a cacophonous address between the anti-hero Ignatz the Mouse, and a number of figures lurking in the darkness in an asylum-like space. Morris continued this strategy during his intervention at the Lyon symposium. In oblique response to questions from the public, he retreated behind a dadaist move, reading quotes printed on pieces of paper blindly pulled from an envelope.

Morris spent his career considering the cohabitation of text and "visual" work (image, sculpture, performance, installations), as well as the repercussions of such cohabitation. This meant leaving behind the autonomy of each sphere in view of a contextualized, empirical, embodied inscription of meaning. Neither a user's manual to the visual work nor truly immunized against iconic infiltration, text for Morris seems like a fabric full of holes, figuring the back-and-forth be-

tween the visual and the written, each relaying its adjoining philosophical, historical, and social implications. Even when it seems to be dealing with the visual works directly, the artist's text quite rapidly redoubles upon itself, with a more silent, opaque, underlying texture through which the visual work resurges in the shadow of the written work. Writing becomes a game of conceptual framing, disturbing the construction of stable and coherent meaning and, as such, unsettling the finality of interpretation. There are, of course, the visual works that do not mingle with text, the early minimalist sculpture, the anti-form felt works, the cenotaphs, there are also the texts that do not mingle with the iconic. But overall, the distinction between both domains, worn thin with passage, unfold as a labyrinthine complex. Even in the most restricted of linguistic spheres, as the philosopher Donald Davidson tells us, the metaphoric always slips the image back in from behind, for it shows, but doesn't tell. Loose lips sink ships.

A recurring figure in his work, the labyrinth appears as one of the structural modes privileged by the artist. As an ancient form, Morris sees in it the possibility of bypassing a cultural ethos which he associates with Western modernism and links to the violence of humanism, colonialism, capitalism and the genocides that have left their bloody marks upon the 20th century. The labyrinthine form also provides a metaphor for the complexity of the interface between text and image, mind and body, inscribed within a narrative of the search for meaning. This labyrinth of meaning is indeed the stage for an encounter with desire and death, which we might define in psychoanalytic terms as origins and limits of the subject. The Minotaur at its center figures the uncertainty, fear, and sometime violence that come when ethics collide with individual subjectivity. In its latest incarnation, *White Nights* (2000), this labyrinth took the form of a canvas structure at once fragile and monumental. We were invited to walk through it, and were drawn into its center. Under projected images of the German occupation of Lyon during the Second World War, we could see ourselves as projections of socio-historical circumstance, and perhaps feel the dangers, for ourselves and others, of our floating identities as they take shape in fields of power.

This labyrinthine interface swells as it traces the space of new practices, strategies as well of negative resistance. Throughout his career, Morris has ceaselessly invented new ways of doing, gone against established genres, attempted to break beyond enclosures. The subtitle of this book, "The Expanded Field of Writing," references Rosalind Krauss's seminal article<sup>12</sup> of 1979. It proposed to redefine sculpture by taking into consideration the complexity of the new artistic practices that had appeared in the 1960s and 1970s, including

12. Rosalind Krauss, "Sculpture in The Expanded Field," *October*, no.8 (Spring 1979), pp. 30-44.

Morris' own. If we have taken up the title once again, it was not to force Morris' practice into a system, but to make use of the openness of the semiotic square, so as to move from a binary opposition of text and image (or "visual" practice) to a space stretched between four, eight, even ten new poles. And thus, through a combination of contrasts, contradictions, complementary aspects and implications, a new field of hybridity could appear.

We have sought to travel the artist's labyrinthine space through a pluridisciplinary approach, bringing together art historians, literary scholars, analytic philosophers, but also filmmakers and writers. The project of the symposium ran simultaneously to a critical writing studio at the Center for Studies in Poetics devoted to the work of Robert Morris. The aim of the workshop was to provide the conditions to generate knowledge as a collective, writing the text that the students read during the symposium, and preparing it for publication, with the difficulties and breakthroughs that collective writing implied. Our desire was also to provide a place for the equal collaboration of students with faculty, artists, scholars, and a larger field of experts against the partitioning of hierarchies and disciplines. The multiplicity of approaches that we wished to privilege in the symposium, and in this book, thus sought to answer and continue the radical investigations and debunking which Morris has impelled since the 1960s.

From this diversity of analysis, we defined three major pathways to examine Morris' work: the place of writing in the "visual works," the relations that Morris maintains with philosophy, and the experimentation of diverse textual genres. For the purposes of clarity, the texts in this volume appear in chronological order according to the period of Morris' work that they reference.

The first of these pathways, entitled "Embedded Writing," examines the different manners the visual works relate with writing. Christophe Cherix reflects on the series of prints *On Wheels* and *Morris Print* from 1962, where text and image are one. Katia Schneller turns to *Continuous Project Altered Daily* (1969), focusing on that isolated type in the artist's textual corpus that is the log, written by Morris while he produced this ephemeral work, and which she analyzes in order to understand the devices through which the artist distances himself from intention and subjectivity. Gilles A. Tiberghien studies Morris' relation to "land reclamation," pitting together the different projects of outdoor works and the texts written about them during the 1970s. Rachel Stella presents another illustration of this interpenetration between text and image by considering, via the yardstick of Roman and Baroque cenotaphs, the installation *Preludes for A.B.* (1981), a series of texts engraved on marble plaques, with a skull mounted on each. Denis Briand reinscribes the autobiographical work from 1998, *Telegram: The Rationed Years, from R Morris KC MO Nineteen Forties to R Morris NY NY Nineteen Ninety-Eight*, in the context of the exhibition

held at the Leo Castelli Gallery for which the text was published. Finally, the students from the Critical Writing Studio at the *Center for Studies in Poetics*—Clémentine Gozlan, Marie Cadalanu, Julia Klarmann, Emöke Simon, Thomas Spok and Luiza Vasiliu—address how *White Nights* (2000) interrogates the social construction of the symbolic through its labyrinthine form and its integration of archival photographs from World War Two.

Following this is a series of investigations concerning Morris' complex relationship to philosophy, and in particular, to analytic philosophy, phenomenology, and art theory. Brian Winkenweder interprets the mechanisms Morris used in *Memory Drawings* and *Self-Portrait (EEG)*, both from 1963, and in the series of drawings called *Investigations* (1990) against Wittgenstein's *Philosophical Investigations*. Anaël Lejeune discusses Morris as a theorist, analyzing the evolution of Morris' phenomenological approach in texts written between 1966 and 1975 in light of the writings of Maurice Merleau-Ponty and Anton Ehrenzweig. Jean-Michel Roy returns to the way in which Morris convokes the figure and the thought of the philosopher Donald Davidson in the series *Blind Time Drawings IV* and the text "Writing with Davidson: Some Afterthoughts After Doing *Blind Time IV: Drawing with Davidson*," both from 1993. W. J. T. Mitchell reflects on the plasticity of Morris' theoretical thought by studying, notably, the logogram used in one of his more recent texts, "The Labyrinth and the Urinal" (2008).<sup>13</sup> Miguel Hernández-Navarro passes the artist's work through the sieve of Jay Martin's arguments in *Downcast Eyes* (1994) concerning the rejection of an optical predominance associated with Cartesian thought in 20th century art. Finally, Ileana Parvu examines "Cézanne's Mountains" (1998) and "Jasper Johns: The First Decade" (2007) as imbrications of the textual and the iconic, and seeks, via language, to approach Morris' visual experience of these paintings.

More specifically textual, the final section brings to light Morris' inventiveness as a writer. It looks at the multiplicity of his writing practices, at his way of going beyond established genres, and discloses the writing games that he invents. Cécile Mahiou focuses on the often indirect dialogue between Allan Kaprow and Morris around the notion of experience, examining issues of process and how a work is perceived in its environment. Noura Wedell seeks to localize, in Morris and Vito Acconci, the moment where poetry leaves the page to orient itself toward performance. The question of withdrawal, so central to Morris' artistic process, is developed by Valérie Mavridorakis, who is interested in Morris' textual role-playing. She interrogates the ironic use of *personas* in "The Art of Existence" (1971), "Robert Morris Replies to Roger Denson"

13. Robert Morris, "The Labyrinth and the Urinal," 2009, pp. 76-99.

(1993) and “From a Chomskian Couch: The Imperialistic Inconscious” (2003), texts of an ambiguous nature that oscillate between pastiche, hoax, and “character drama.” Finally, Isabelle Alfandary provides a literary analysis of *Telegram* (1998) centered around the question of the address of oneself. Autobiography, espousing a logic contrary to the duty of memory, responds here to the need to forget a past whose specter has haunted the artist’s production since the 1980s.

The volume closes with the testimony of filmmaker Teri Wehn-Damisch as she looks back to her collaboration with Morris and Rosalind Krauss, a collaboration whose goal was to bring to light the paradoxes of the text/image relation. The script of the film which that collaboration gave rise to, *Robert Morris, The Mind/Body Problem*, on the occasion of the 1995 Guggenheim retrospective, is reproduced here.

Finally, this collection of essays is placed under the aegis of a series of unpublished texts by Robert Morris himself. These are autobiographical writings which condense the obsessive fears that have pursued and nourished him and his work for the entire length of their becoming. They are humorous notes of sorts, witnesses to the elegance of this master of trenchant irony.