



Desk chair in a classroom at the Universidad Nacional in Bogotá, Colombia draws attention to the *Falsos Positivos*
photo: niki kekos

Double-Blind

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What does it mean to perform academic labor in the university now? There has been extensive academic discussion of the expansion of “immaterial labor,” a term popularized by Antonio Negri and Michael Hardt (Negri and Hart, 2000) to designate what is colloquially known as the “knowledge economy,” a broad term encompassing anyone from web designers, software engineers and biotechnologists to artists, performers and videographers. There is a specific labor of looking that Jonathan Beller has summarized stating, “to look is to labor” (Beller, 2006). That is to say, much of the knowledge economy is designed to capture and then “monetize eyeballs,” meaning that if you click here someone makes two cents (literally); if you choose one channel over others, its ad rates can go up; or if you select one movie at a multiplex it might get a sequel. Little of this discussion concerns the university, so how do we designate

the looking that is done in the university?

Looking has long been divided and distributed across the university from the cinematic gaze to the connoisseurship of art history and the audience-response strategies of TV studies. Since 1989, motivated equally by the convergence of all visual media on digital technology and the ambitions to the Full Spectrum Dominance generated by the Revolution in Military Affairs, the field of visual culture has sought to recast the labor of looking as a generalized problem. I will consider the changes in academic labor first and then move onto the questions of looking. Then I will take Tania Bruguera's performance at the 2009 *Encuentro* of the Hemispheric Institute for Performance and Politics held at the Universidad Nacional de Colombia (UNAL) in Bogotá as a metonym for these questions.

Academic Labor

There is a new model of labor in the industrial workplace that has been called "[Toyota-ism](#)" (Marxist Internet Archive) which is replacing the earlier model of Fordism. If in Fordism, the worker was asked to perform a task over and over again, s/he is now required to make suggestions to improve the overall performance of the production process. These are tabulated and posted for all to see—a permanent panoptic performance review. By the same token, whereas it was previously axiomatic that new areas of study would generate a new division of academic labor, resulting in a department or program, present-day initiatives center on rewarding only "interdisciplinary" convergence.

Academic labor is thus being configured into a form of what the Autonomist theorist [Paolo Virno](#) has called "virtuosity," creating the hybrid "[edu-factory](#)" in which the virtuoso worker operates in circuits of knowledge and communication, modeled precisely on the performing artist (Virno, 2003). The value of such an economy is not created by the quantity of labor expended in the conventional sense so much as by a contribution to the performance of "general intellect." Academic and performance labor have much in common in this model. While they can be prestigious in terms of cultural capital, they are also "servile," to use Marx's term, because of their [precarious conditions](#). They have long "apprenticeships," whose poor conditions and acclimation to flexibility and retraining are ideal models for the Toyota-ist workplace.

This actually existing Toyota-ist university is some distance from the most widely cited paradigms. For Edward Said, the "[North] American University generally [is] for its academic staff and many of its students the last remaining utopia" (Said, 2002: xi). No idealist, Said understood all too well the value of such bedrock features of US academia as the [AAUP 1940 tenure statement](#) protecting academic freedom. If that freedom was almost immediately compromised in the McCarthy period, its declaration was nonetheless crucial. As Jacques Rancière reminds us, rights are most important when being claimed but not held: that

is to say, we performatively assert the right to academic freedom precisely because government, corporations, or administrations try to impinge upon it. Against this view, or perhaps in ironic detachment from it, Bill Readings surveyed what he called “the university in ruins” (Readings, 1997). For Readings, the modern university was characterized by its tautological pursuit of “excellence,” achieved by excellent faculty working with excellent students to produce, yes, excellence. This goal was imported from Ford’s concept of Total Quality Management and was designed to produce customer satisfaction. There is no need to point out what has happened since to Ford and Ford-ism.

The Labor of Looking

According to the Colombian constitution, the UNAL has [autonomía](#) (autonomy) from state control, especially that of the police. In the current context of what Ximena Castilla named the “dictatorship” in her keynote address at the 2009 Hemispheric Institute Encuentro in Bogotá, such autonomy is clearly of value, however attenuated it may be in practice. In some senses, all universities have a degree of autonomy—think of alcohol and drug enforcement around most colleges. It is as if the university is invisible, a zone where things are permitted because they do not matter or because the students have exerted an unspoken class privilege.

Rancière describes the relation of the people to power in reverse terms: “the police are above all a certitude about what is there, or rather what is not there: ‘Move along, on there’s nothing to see’” (Rancière, 1998) Our responsibility is to keep circulating and to avoid looking at that which we very well know to be there because it is forbidden. Very often, under typical circumstances, we do in fact sneak a peek. In extreme cases, however, this command leads to what Diana Taylor has called “percepticide,” the self-elimination of sense perception (Taylor, 1997). In case of the university, the police encircle where we are and declare it to be invisible. Reconfiguring that space “into the space of the manifestation of the subject” is, says Rancière, the very work of politics itself and, I would add, the constitution of the right to look.

This reversal is itself further complicated by the politics of disappearance and displacement. In Colombia, the scandal of “[false positives](#),” civilians murdered and dressed up to look like rebels, has been matched by the widespread displacement of rural and indigenous people. Where there was once someone or something, a zone of invisibility appears. There is only a difference of degree—important though that difference is—between these conditions and those in the United States where people suspected of terrorism have been “renditioned” to unknown prisons and where entire groups of people are subject to mass incarceration. It has become fashionable to describe these conditions as the “state of exception,” the condition in which the state allows itself to break the law in order to preserve the nation. No such ruling has been made in either country: rather the conduct of the state has been declared legal, and any [exceptions are to be prosecuted](#), albeit with less than full enthusiasm.

Performance in the Double-Blind

Tania Bruguera's performance was thus multiply invisible—it took place within the *autonomía* of the university under the militarized regime of invisibility. Paradoxically, it was not a performance that one actually had to see to experience. In the intensely crowded space of the university art school, very little could be seen by those present until people began to leave, perhaps disappointed that they could see so little. At this point, the university security staff was, for the first time, able to see the distribution of cocaine and closed the building.

Bruguera's intent in disrupting the panel of testimony with the distribution of cocaine was to indict everyone present for their complicity with the unseen drug trade underpinning the state. As a rhetorical point it has familiar force. Familiar because by naming us all as already guilty, sinners, the performance claimed a theological viewpoint in which there was no audience, only those in need of repentance. This orchestration of the visible from the viewpoint of (divine) power has a long history—see Foucault, Michel; Benjamin, Walter; Haraway, Donna.

Responses at the Encuentro were two-fold. One view held that drugs were omnipresent on the campus and it was a restatement of the obvious to say cocaine underpins the Colombian political economy. Against this, it was claimed that many students were very hostile to the presence of cocaine. However, the protective aura of the *performance* meant that no one took the logical next step of knocking the powder to the floor or taking it away from the unthreatening woman offering it around. For many, the performance was unacceptable not in itself, but because of the threat it posed to UNACL faculty and staff, especially in terms of employment. As we know, this kind of retribution is more often exerted invisibly in the form of promotions denied, merit pay not awarded, unpopular assignments given, rather than cause célèbre inducing dismissals.

In the middle of it all, the drugs, as ever invisible to most as much as their costs are known to all. This “investment-grade” cocaine might be considered what Marx called a “real abstraction,” like money. It requires labor to produce, certainly, and even more to distribute, but its exchange value is entirely out of all proportion and relation. As Avital Ronell puts it, “drugs resist conceptual arrest” (Ronell, 51). We have had a war on drugs—not going so well—and a war on terror that was modeled on it, now downgraded to a counterinsurgency—also not going so well.

So in the end I am disinclined to blame the performer here. Instead, I see exposed a lack of self-reflexivity in the university. As the academic workplace has been transformed into a part-time low wage occupation, we have yet to show the kind of cultural creativity in our own practice that we applaud and write about. For the most part we continue to use top-down models, allowing the private foundations to direct research priorities and adhering to avowedly elitist models. There are many

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alternatives out there, especially in the free software, open-source digital movements. Ironically, MIT, the quasi-Ivy, has led the way with its [opencourseware](#)—free syllabi, lectures and course notes. Out of space, I can only conclude that we either take the initiative ourselves, or, like the [University of California](#), wake up one day and find that they have simply completed the outsourcing of the edu-factory for us.

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