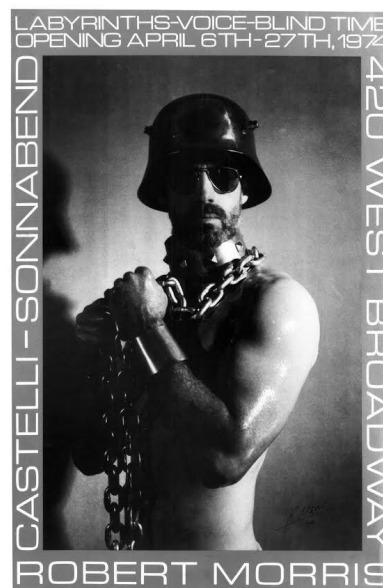


**Robert Morris**  
*Voice, 1974*

*Do metaphors have no meanings but rather prompt us to see one thing as another? Did the poster achieve a metaphorical status, demonstrating once again that the artist's intentions count for nothing?*

- Robert Morris, *Interview Magazine*, 2014.

Robert Morris offered the above comment when asked about the now infamously iconic poster he designed to promote the exhibition *Robert Morris: Labyrinths—Voice—Blind Time*, held simultaneously at Castelli and Sonnabend Gallery in 1974. The poster confronted viewers with a waist-length image of the artist: naked biceps flexed, rigged-out in a combination of S&M and military gear. As Morris' quote suggests the sensation caused by the poster had little to do with the artist's intentions. Detached from the context in which it was created, the hyper-masculine image was absorbed into a larger discourse concerning the limits of decency in art and the difference in where this limit lies for male and female artists. Many critics read the poster in relation to Lynda Bengalis's incendiary Artforum advertisement released the same year, in which she likewise posed naked, a dildo provocatively held between her thighs. Morris' became a metaphor for a certain masculine paradigm that had held sway in the artworld and was in the process of being dismantled. Despite the importance of the conversation the poster helped to spark, the fact that it eclipsed the exhibition it was intended to advertise has led to the unfortunate neglect of one of Morris' most important post-minimal works: *Voice* (1974). Castelli Gallery's upcoming exhibition seeks to rectify this oversight by re-visiting *Voice* and in so doing brings attention to Morris' rarely exhibited audio work.



In the catalogue for the Guggenheim Museum's 1994 Robert Morris retrospective, *Voice* is described as a "sound-sculpture installation." The installation's basic elements include eight audio tracks; played through eight loudspeakers; concealed within four large, rectangular structures; covered in white fabric and positioned in the corners of the gallery. Fourteen wooden boxes upholstered with white felt are arranged at random throughout the space and serve as seats for visitors. In the original exhibition of *Voice*, the



three-and-a-half-hour-long recording was scheduled to play at eleven AM and two-thirty PM. This specification suggests that Morris wished to give dedicated viewers the option of listening to the piece in its entirety, as an event, rather than as a conventional gallery exhibition where visitors define how much time is necessary to understand the work.

The recording is divided into four parts, each of which consists of two tracks that have been spliced together. In each section, Morris plays with different ways of using sound to shape visitor's experience of the space. For example, in the first section—entitled “The Four”—recordings of four male voices are broadcast from different speakers, while in the second section—“They”—a male and female voice alternate with occasional moments where the two voices overlap or repeat each other's words. Through these and similar tactics, Morris uses the intangible medium of sound to tangibly alter visitor's spatial awareness: shifting attention from one corner of the room to another or by overlaying two tracks played at different volumes, to produce the sonic equivalent of depth.

By making sound a key element in *Voice*, Robert Morris challenged the expectation that a work of art must be material, visual, and actively created by the artist. In his 1968 essay “Anti Form” Morris began to question this basic mode of making-art by interrogating the aesthetic principles that dictated the forms of his own minimalist sculpture from the 1960s, namely the principles of three-dimensional, symmetric geometry. Such mathematical forms, Morris contended, were not inherent in the plywood he used to construct these object-sculptures, but instead belonged to an abstract system of ideas, which he had imposed on the material in order to give its shape significance. In seeking an alternative to this “top-down” approach to art-making, Morris began exploring the possibility that art could effectively “make itself,” and in so doing reduce the artist's authority over the medium. Morris' Felt sculptures from the late 60s represent his first attempt to develop such a technique. In these works, the artist determines the size and shape of the pieces of felt as well as arranges the wall-supports on which they hang. Once installed however, the felt is allowed to drape freely. In this way, the form of these sculptures is determined as much by the material itself as by the artist's intentions. *Voice* extends this strategy through its use of speakers and the gallery space, which function as supports for the audio recording. Yet unlike the Felt sculptures, the audio for *Voice* has no physical form whatsoever. It pushes Morris' concept of “anti form” to a further extreme: forestalling any attempt at directly “forming” the work of art by selecting a medium that is essentially formless.

The content of the eight tracks used in *Voice* reinforces the piece's rejection of influences that impose form (and thus meaning) on the raw materials of life by deconstructing different institutions which on a cultural level, perform this same function. For instance, in the section titled “They,” Morris addresses psychology as a formal, scientific discipline that has helped fix a definition of normal human consciousness. In this section a male and female actor read from two texts by the psychiatrist Emil Kraepelin, *Dementia Praecox* (1919) and *Manic Depressive Insanity and Paranoia* (1921), which were instrumental in defining the conditions of schizophrenia and bipolar disorder respectively. In establishing scientific criteria for classifying and treating these two types of mental illness, Kraepelin simultaneously helped fortify psychology's definition of the self as a single, coherent entity and provided the means for systematically identifying and “correcting” individuals whose sense of self deviate from this norm—those who experience the self as multiple and contradictory. The alternating and

overlapping voices of the two actors reading Kraepelin's texts undermine the psychologist's own precise, authoritative voice, pushing it beyond the limits of normalcy it helped establish. In addition, the male and female actors occasionally reverse pronouns, the male voice using the pronoun "she" and the female voice using "he," further complicating scientific concepts of identity and self.

Other sections of the audio track for *Voice* likewise pit the personal against the institutional. For example, in the second part of section three, titled "Scar/Record," a male voice speaks in a subdued tone about a painful scar on his body while a second, louder track is played in which a different male voice recites entries from *The Guinness Book of World Records*. In this mash-up, the authoritative record of accomplishments almost completely drowns out the narrative of individual pain.

Throughout the entire track of *Voice*, language is also implicitly challenged as one of the most pervasive authoritative structures which determines the ways we verbally articulate our inner thoughts and emotions. The work's title suggests Morris' privileging of the voice as the unformed "material" that language marshalls into a specific form. At one point in the dialogue of *Voice* Morris makes a more direct acknowledgement of these linguistic strictures:

*Sourceless*  
*Our language is our authority.*  
*Lofty.*  
*Remote.*  
*And if incomprehensible.*  
*A necessary insurance.*  
*Against the private.*  
*The subjective.*

In these lines Morris suggests that language is something "lofty" and "remote" from the individual's subjective experience. The fact that in order to use language the speaker must translate his or her private experience into a foreign system of signification, ensures that this experience may never be fully communicated through language. At the same time, to completely reject language's authority is to alienate one's self from the linguistically bound community in which we live.

The anti-authoritarian spirit that animates *Voice*, is likewise present in Morris' *Blind Time* and *Labyrinth* drawings, also exhibited in the 1974 Castelli-Sonnabend exhibition. The structure of the labyrinth, for instance, evokes the claustrophobic confines of the social system that the individual is obliged to navigate. Meanwhile, in his *Blind Time* drawings, made with eyes closed, Morris intentionally abandons vision as the primary means by which the artist controls his medium and in so doing exerts his intention on the external world. Considered in the context of this larger project of



subversion, the promotional poster for *Robert Morris: Labyrinths—Voice—Blind Time* may be read as a satirical caricature of a certain aggressive male persona that is simply one form of oppressive power operative in society.

-Renée Brown, Castelli Gallery