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Mise en abyme:

A Tour of Jon McKenzie's Thought-action

The issue editors conducted the following interview with Jon McKenzie over email in 2022. Each of us took a particular focus, with Cheng focussing on how we can read Perform or Else in 2022, Hay asking about the “queer potential to disrupt the performative imperative,” and Willis taking up McKenzie’s more recent work with StudioLab. You can also find in this issue a response to the interview by Edward Scheer, titled, “The Joys of Jon McK?#&!: Reading McKenzie’s Perform or Else After Laurie Anderson.”

Nien Cheng: The starting point for this issue is to ask what the imperative to perform looks like when performance seems to be thwarted or interrupted in the pandemic age. From where you stand, does performance appear to be thwarted? Or has it proliferated in novel ways along with COVID-19, perhaps forming a new pandemic paradigm? We are here *in medias res*, but if so, what does an early sketch of such a paradigm look like?

Jon McKenzie: Perhaps the contemporary imperative today appears as a typographic error or curse: *perform or else?#&!* The curse of typography and the typographies of this curse are recursive, open to multiple performances whose paradigms and platforms—no matter how established, restored, or projected—remain thwartable within the pandemic and wider Anthropocenic ages, if not beyond. Thus, perhaps, the imperative asks of us, challenges us: *which performance?#&!*

If, in some extended willed error or general theory, we distinguish between more or less formal paradigms of performance research, on the one hand, and an onto-historical performance stratum on another hand, and on third, fourth and fifth pods, embodied performances, discursive performatives, and also perfumance as the iterability (other-ability) of any and all performances, then, yes, I think the “perform or else” imperative has impossibly been both multiplied and interrupted by *?#&!*: in this case, COVID-19, itself entangled with climate change, spillover, and neofascist nationalisms—and something else that gives one hope?*?#&!*

It seems to me that breakdown, disaster, transformation, contagion, mutation—are part and parcel of performance’s event?*?#&!* across multiple spacetimes. Perhaps performance is

precisely our “own” interruption, the crisis, emergence-ruin, interruption of *?* in and as us.

What to do?

This *?* perversely enables and disables us to think-act in different ways, across scales of self, society, and world, as it is not so much one imperative but many, and we don't share it as much as *?* shares us, tears and gathers us (who? what?). Bataille's accursed share opens us to our “own” waste/excess. *?* both issues and prevents the perform or else imperative from being fully unified or understood conceptually, even if it can be and is registered and felt intimately on a daily basis across a wide variety of interactions and contexts: beautiful, brutal, blasphemous... at home, village, street, cosmos, body. We share *?* as it shares us.

When COVID-19 started, a young Chinese student of mine created an infographic of the virus, explaining its acronym, its spikes, its emergent history with words, images, diagrams. Before and after Artaud's plague, viral performances spill over and across bodies, species and geographies, immune systems, cell walls, and gene sequences, lifedeath. Let us not paint these as white metaphors (that is, as metaphors, the distinction concept/metaphor being abysmally in play).

HIV and the AIDS pandemic shaped my lifedeath experience of the performance paradigm at New York University (NYU) in the late 1980s and early 1990s, Reagan and ACT UP, the NEA 4¹, the performative matrix and Critical Art Ensemble, and fellow students Martin and Jay, who rest in peace, along with Ed down South, all of whom died of AIDS.

My thought-action of performance as an alternative to—as iterabilities of—paradigm, episteme, strata had begun in 1986-87 in Florida, studying Laurie Anderson's “Language is a Virus (from Outer Space)” (1984). Challenger blew up on 28 January 1986, an event telegraphed in her *United States: Parts I-IV*, a performance I experienced in vinyl, magnetic tape, and printed matter. So I'm not sure if it is a question of a new paradigm, a new historical episteme, a new ontological epoch—perhaps all these or something else altogether. Multiple elses? StudioLab operates in this milieu, this unsettling, telegraphic world.

NC: In 1996, you taught a course for NYU titled “Electronic Performance”, creating a website platform called StudioLab for students to experiment with crossing cultural performance with technological performance. Today, the interfaces of business teleconferencing software, such as Zoom, have become common performance spaces, traversing the values of cultural, organizational and technological performance. Do you think this is an instance of interjecting cultural efficacy into such spaces? As you see it, what are the possibilities (and pitfalls) of this phenomenon?

JM: All phenomena are pharmaka; their mastery constitutes performativity, discipline, the metaphysics and politics of presence. Difference, performance means this: difference and hierarchization in the origin, an-archy of identities, indeterminacy of ends. StudioLab grew out of my training in studio arts (painting, printmaking, sculpture, performance), theory seminars, computer labs, and corporate America. I wrote my MA thesis at Florida on Laurie Anderson using a PC and worked on my first Mac in my NYU dorm. Training in

Performance Studies (PS), I studied another technology of performance: theatre, closely tied to logocentricism, European colonialism, and modernity. I focused on experimental avant-garde performance: dada, Artaud, Brecht, Wooster Group, Karen Finley, Kipper Kids, Survival Research, Critical Art Ensemble, as well as indigenous and ethnographic media, theories of play, and the history of freak shows and monstrosity (the general theory at one time coalesced around Joseph Merrick, aka the Elephant Man). I was also taking courses in the Interactive Telecommunications Program and when my writing TAship ran dry, working in the city as a graphic designer.

The milieu thickened, with StudioLab crystallizing around the time of my work on virtual reality and certainly by my work on Anderson's *Puppet Motel*, and etoy, eToys, TOYWAR, where the three performance paradigms and the performance stratum fully emerged. I'd only sketched the technoperformance paradigm and performance stratum in the dissertation. At my defense, I was recruited to be part of a small web design startup by a Filipina-American ethnomusicologist working with a Jewish-American anarchist Computer Science graduate student and a Caribbean-American graphic designer. I was soon working freelance as a writer and information architect in NYC's Silicon Alley, making crazy money in the belly of the beast. We built a tiny website for the US branch of the Japanese firm Mitsui. Freelancing with another NYU-based startup, I began working on design teams with Citibank, Delta, and 3M in the day, and reading and making theory by night. The studios, labs, offices, and classrooms offered transversal fieldwork sites for thinking-doing the pharmakon of performativity. Performing across media and sites enables post-ideational figuration.

Given teaching opportunities by Peggy Phelan and Una Chaudhuri, I developed courses practicing theory as a form of post-conceptual performance that shuttled graduate PS and undergraduate Theatre students between performance studio and computer lab. We created electronic performances in both physical and digital space, displacing Brenda Laurel's Aristotelian poetics of human-computer interaction with those of Artaud, Brecht, LeCompte, and Boal. Laurel's work provides a crucial counterbalance to the Computer Science, Engineering, and Cognitive Science models of Human-Computer Interaction. I also developed courses in performing bureaucracies and electronic civic disobedience, all of them combining elements of cultural, technological, and organizational performances. Since then, I've reinstalled StudioLab across different disciplinary sites.

I am detailing these events to suggest that PS—and any other discipline, field, or formal paradigm—has never been and will never be the properly sealed entity it must feign itself to be in order to perform alongside other established disciplines, fields, and paradigms. Dreaming of a legitimating presence, they must feign an archy despite their an-archy. Even the paradigm of liminality can and does carefully guard its borders, set up its reading machines, and control difference by stratifying the flows and elements into proper and improper, into who and what counts as performance.

Postwar research universities, their funding agencies and foundations, graduate education programs, and the dot.com "erra" can all be seen as massive test sites of the general theory of performance, of Marcuse's Marxo-Freudian performance principle and Lyotard's Nietzo-Wittgensteinian theory of postmodern performativity. Scholarly essays, journals, conferences, professional organizations, and the nation states which fund and produce advanced research across all the disciplines have been cutting-edge figures producing

global performativity, even as we now attempt to critique it (note that I could write “ourselves”) as “neoliberal,” which is a good start but risks obscuring the larger stakes. All theory is Cold War theory whose financial foundations are national states and international and global research and cultural institutions of the First, Second, and non-aligned Third Worlds. The academy’s epistemological foundations stretch back to Athens’ Akademia, whose columns and gardens adorn schools worldwide, built by waves of colonialist ships, horses, and people, those of the Portuguese, Spanish, French, Dutch, English, peoples already long at war with themselves in Europe and with Islam in the Mediterranean, Balkans, and eastward to India.

Descartography produced disciplinary Platonism, repackaging it and developing extraordinary new “forms”: nations, peoples, cultures, arts and sciences, especially history and geography. From Athens to Madrid to London to San Juan and New Amsterdam, the Platonic separation of knower/known, the presumption of critical distance, informs the mapping of subject/object ontologies around the world. Descartography maps the world as *eidos*—both the ideal form divinely uniting the mind/body, subjective/objective dualism via method, idea, and logic, and as material form: the surveying and mapping of nation-states was made possible by optics and Cartesian geometry, the royal road to Leibniz’s calculus and Babbage’s difference engine which program the digital cosmos of performance.

The emergent performativity and its postmodern installation remains for me not so much an object before us to be studied and critiqued with analytic methods than our onto-historical condition or atmosphere, one that requires embodied intimacies as well as distanced responsibilities, systemic performative interventions as well as constative reports and critical theories—as well as nothing, letting be. For me, these embodiments, interventions, and releases extend far beyond the discipline of Theatre and Performance Studies, beyond discipline itself, and also our current performative event horizon. One must explore performing in several spacetime zones at once. The general theory enables one to situate oneself; StudioLab and performance help one pass across multiple worlds.

NC: Twenty-five years after “Electronic Performance”, StudioLab has developed into a transmedial pedagogical approach, which aims to democratize digitality, democratize design, and to resist global performativity, with the ultimate goal to transform the academy by collapsing disciplinary boundaries and exploding the way we attain and present knowledge. How is such an approach different from the trend towards multi- and inter-disciplinarity in the neoliberal university of excellence? I’m thinking, for instance, about the University of Sydney’s Multidisciplinary Initiatives (MDIs), and the National University of Singapore’s brand-new College of Humanities and Sciences.

JM: StudioLab’s development has been driven by my itinerant, serially and surreally institutionalized lifework trajectory, one exposed to onto-historical forces whose directions and cues are linear and nonlinear, obvious and imperceptible. From ‘electronic performance’ to ‘democratize design,’ like all “from/to” constructs, partakes of the incalculable shuttling of performance, difference, iterability. Hithering and dithering, I’ve come a long way getting nowhere, as it were, yet that’s the way of post-ideational praxis, an-archic design, displacement as reoccupation. From discipline to performance shuttles or throws one, but who? what? where? when? why? how? And if it were no longer a question of questions, quests, conquests but gay queries posed from random queues... then

perhaps riddles and willed errors give something else? \$#&!

My recent book, *Transmedia Knowledge for Liberal Arts and Community Engagement: A StudioLab Manifesto* (2019), tracks the pedagogy's path/passions/pathologies from NYU to UArts to Dartmouth to Wisconsin and articulates its current platform or plateau at Cornell (my recursive institutional morphing echoes Challenger's flightpath in the backend of *Perform or Else*). Roughly miming *PoE's* poetics of perfumance (hinting without saying), StudioLab Manifesto unfolds three becomings: becoming-maker of transmedia knowledge, -builder of collaborative platforms, and -cosmographers or dreamer of worlds. The medium/means of these becomings is transmedia knowledge, formal and informal knowledge that moves across different media to engage different groups.

Transmedia knowledge blurs the Academy's founding dialectic of logos/mythos, eidos/imagos, and episteme/doxa. At stake is something like the past/present/future of Plato's Fight Club, a global network of over 24,000 academies, their performances measured and evaluated by regulators, certification boards, administrators, faculty, students, and many other stakeholders, including journals such as *Performance Paradigm*, *Performance Research*, *TDR*—all play roles and share responsibilities for the global high performance network of lecture machines, even as—and perhaps especially when—we all critique it. We are operating this machine right now, asking questioning and giving responses (Plato's model of thought), finding value and meaning in what we do. It's pharmaka, medicine/poison, all the way down, up, and sideways—and chance and fate play roles in who and what lives on, how lifedeath unfolds.

Plato's Fight Club—the academy—is pharmaka at an institutional scale, its instability affecting students, faculty, staff, administrators, and the public en masse. The modern lecture machine has been in crisis and crisis-making from the start, as witnessed in reports from Australian, Canadian, and soon US residential schools for Indigenous youth. Settling peoples and seating individuals at national scales produces docile subjects; that is, human subjects. Today, subject machines—higher education, as well as all modern, highly literate, disciplinary institutions and industries—find themselves unsettled by multiple, conflicting demands to perform or else. StudioLab starts with the challenges facing our community partners: their crises make our work critical design.

Multidisciplinary and interdisciplinary programs can be read as critico-creative responses to performative demands—the rise of cybernetic performativity, systems theory, and universal human rights—and as the future knocking at the door, for better and worse. For me, all disciplines are multi/interdisciplinary and para-disciplinary, composed from the start of reframed forms, methods, questions, etc. found elsewhere, including in the imagination, myth, religion, play, nature, etc. (much like the emerging onto-historical stratum whose composition allows us to define and distinguish such “forms” here as “subjects,” “objects,” and “methods”). From this largely forgotten, repressed, shameful, and/or celebrated in-mixing emerged humanism and its disciplines, its arts and sciences and professions.

Such programs can also be read as responses to disciplinary overspecialization. The Cold War globalized the modern research university while inventing hundreds of fields, disciplines, specialties and subspecialties, institutions and foundations. Each new program adds another wing to what we might call the Hotel Don Quixote, the diversified Platonic

Fight Club of global performativity. The master's tools are used to extend the master's house and install thermostatic performo-meters in all rooms. Young researchers find themselves performing on a career treadmill producing highly specialized discourse structured by epistemological and methodological genealogies learned from specialized journals and graduate programs. We're squeezing thought-action into writing machines whose pain we barely acknowledge, grateful for any bit of attention and care we get, a bit like juxtaposing Kafka's writing machine on the beach of the penal colony with his real-life insurance claimants apologizing that their limbs had damaged the factory's machinery.

Our arborescent epistemology, its tree of genus/species, maps directly back to Aristotle's categories and Plato's interpretation of being as *eidos*, concept. Logocentric transmediates the world into logos, alphabetic writing and a substantive ontology, and the extraction costs have become evident. Disciplinary emperors are losing their clothes, even running away from their poses and costumes, and the new performers taking the stage are armed with data and processes and DEI programs, a tragicomic reality show for COVID times. I didn't see *The Chair* but felt the dramas of the Hotel Don Quixote.

Before coming to Cornell, my experience at Madison designing and co-founding the Digital Studies certificate program and the DesignLab media composition centre taught me the joys-pains of working at the intersection of disciplinary and performative power set-ups, i.e., panoptic surveillance and algorithmic dataveillance. These have different, sometimes flipped joy-pain points that shape our challenges and interrupt our trajectories. Without going into too much detail, both were cross-campus, institution-making events, with scores of makers forming a collaborative platform for world-building. Departments, colleges, the Library and Provost's office: high performance innovation can build stuff when the stars align. To be clear, Digital Studies and DesignLab cannot be reduced to my efforts, as many institutional fingerprints and forces can be found in their design and actualization. At the same time, both UW initiatives and the associated Digital Salon event and Media Studio spaces transmediated the general theory through StudioLab praxis (itself the recursive matrix of the rehearsed theory, *mise en abyme*), concretizing its mission of inserting cultural efficacy into systems dominated by efficiency and effectiveness. Miming performativity, StudioLab works transversally to experiment with para- and post-disciplinary learning.

Both Madison initiatives succeeded/failed in their transversal ambitions and continue operating today. The 5 Digital Studies faculty positions funded across five different departments (and two colleges) and the 8 DesignLab TAs funded across eight departments (and four colleges) were diminished in number due to attrition and funding but the programs continue. Yet the disciplinary and performative pressures on assistant professors and graduate students—the perform or else pressures to specialize and discipline one's thought-action, one's performance, one's research into topics, methods, fields, the entire performance judged by pass/fail and input/output ratios—radically narrows the scale and timeliness of questions, methods, and career activities.

Media merely communicates and informs in the lecture machines of higher education, stripped of their generative recursivity and transmedial synthetic potential. Although many pieces were in place, StudioLab's post-ideational and performative pretensions succumbed to disciplinary and performative forces and only intermittently sparked a plane of consistency—truly magical, performative events such as Mad Theory with Katie Schaag, Andrew Sayler and crew, or Chrys Bocast's sonic Pale Blue Dot, performed on Earth Day.

Performance takes time. UW-Madison helped create interdisciplinary cluster hires—Science & Technology Studies (STS), Visual Culture, many others—and while some generated new programs (one “measure of success”), the folks tracking the clusters found that most hires were absorbed back into departments by professionalization and tenure expectations. Madison is a very progressive and smart place, and we were simultaneously battling Scott Walker and the Koch brothers’ attacks on unions and the Wisconsin Idea², but DesignLab and Digital Studies demonstrate transversality can be actualized with visionary administrators, collaborative creative faculty and staff, and substantial ongoing funding.

Disciplines generally can only think big up a tree and barely at all across performative plateaus, though they provide lots of materials and research skills. The trans- or post-disciplinary performative teams in corporations can move up, down, diagonally, wherever, but all moves allegedly circulate in rational systems themselves subject to environmental blows and demands to perform or else. In the academy, we call these systems colleges, departments, and programs, which form isolated disciplinary archipelagos connected by interdisciplinarity centres and supplied by administrative flows of information and resources, especially financial. The rising seas of performativity are not a metaphor: the disciplinary chickens are coming home to roost, there’s fewer places to land, and cybernetics gave up on the thermostat long ago. Now it’s STEM time, it’s getting hotter and the humanities and humanism are losing at musical chairs. We need STEAM and STEAMED (Science, Technology, Engineering, Art, Math, Education, Design), which we (who? what?) mostly “critique”/normalize/position as coming from other, “outside” paradigms, as we cling to ours like a life preserver while arguing over the seating arrangement on Challenger’s flight deck. We need to find footholds wherever we can, far from discipline.

What I’m trying to do now with StudioLab while there’s time is work with community partners to navigate between and “below” discipline and performativity, drawing on their powers and resources to compose a plateau with multiple stakeholders both inside and outside the academy. The shared transmedia knowledge forms come and go out in the field, the world, shuttling between people far beyond discipline, deterritorializing it by examining and displacing multiple demands to perform or else. It’s cosmography, anarchic performance design.

NC: About 15 years ago you published a *TDR* Comment, “Is Performance Studies Imperialist?” (McKenzie, 2006), as a sort of precursor to *Contesting Performance* (2010), an anthology of essays on global sites of performance you edited with Heike Roms and C. J. W.-L. Wee. The clarion call to decolonize PS and the universities the discipline is so tied to has amplified (to say the least). What’s changed, if anything, for yourself since you wrote that comment? How has your work worked against the “nested structure” (McKenzie, 2006:6) that you identified in terms of British, American and Anglophone Imperialisms in Performance Studies?

JM: The *TDR* Comment and *Contesting Performance* anthology came out of PSi #10 Singapore, where Heike, Wan-ling and I gathered performance researchers to discuss what a global genealogy might look like and explore what other archaeologies might be out there. Conference organizers Paul Rae and Ray Langenbach took part, and we met researchers from India, China, Indonesia, and elsewhere who had studied with Richard Schechner and others in the US. We three editors met again in Aberystwyth, where Rustom

Bharucha asked us whether our genealogical project—effectively to map the PS empire—wasn't itself imperialist. This Borgesian map/territory overlay subsists in all theory, repressed by norms of “stylistic clarity” for it opens representation up to its crypts. We were interested in contesting performance. “Is Performance Studies Imperialist?” and the anthology was our way of grappling with Rustom's question, for it was our own.

I had already addressed this question at a more general level in *Perform or Else*: the disciplinary stratum and colonialism co-emerge, along with the industrial capitalist revolution. All academic disciplines are imperialist. They are extractive Concept Cults producing expert knowledge of the world housed in museums, archives, and libraries. The paradigms and their methods situating objects before subjects, all these figures are choreographed ontohistorically by Descartography, again, the mapping of the world as geometric *eidōs*, as forms, fields, and nation-states. Heidegger's deconstruction of modern technology's challenging-forth of the world, like Marcuse's and Lyotard's analyses of performativity, operate beyond discipline, beyond Cartesian modernity to engage cybernetics, difference, performativity. Performativity dismantles discipline as postcolonialism dismantles colonialism as Empire dismantles imperialism... These deterritorializations are relative and reactive but provide the stuff of active, perfumative interventions.

Again, it's less one Panopticon, one grand narrative, and more shifting scenes and memes that structure subject formation, social organization, and worlding. Or rather: shuttling or jump-cutting between disciplinary forms and performative events, between point and wave. The integration of diversity is being supplemented by the diversification of integration, the multiplication of language games, paradigms, and strata. Discipline and performativity push rival pharmacological “s/care packages,” competing curing/cursing regimes that seek to administer the pharmaka or radical alterity of becoming, flow, chaosmosis.

Both strata can and must be strategically posted as “West” or “North,” even as these have been shaped and informed by forces of the “East” and “South.” In light of Descartography, these directions or coordinates can be mapped cosmographically, figuratively rather than conceptually. The Global South and North may appear to be new orientations but both bring deep ontohistorical challenges to discipline and Platonism. West and East is an ancient border but its location has shifted without end: for instance, anthropomorphic images of Buddha descend from Greek Buddhism, while some argue the Persian empire brought Indian philosophy to the Pre-Socratics centuries before Alexander founded Alexandria of Arachosia, now Kandahar. For Heidegger, the East was sometimes the Russian front. Hitler's model for ethnic cleansing of the Nazi East was the genocidal “settling” of the America West. Andrew Jackson had rehearsed the 1830 Indian Removal Act by himself leading the ethnic cleansing of the American South. As the 1830 Act moved Cherokee, Seminole, and other nations to Oklahoma, the Trail of Tears moved East to West. This is disorientalism, at least with respect to Descartography.

I offer a temporal nesting rather than geolinguistic one in the StudioLab Manifesto book, an ontohistorical *mise en abyme* of the crisis of the liberal arts. Our current neoliberal crisis dates back to the mid-1970s when Milton Friedman and the Chicago Boys introduced Hayekian economics in Chile, Peru, Colombia, enforced by the likes of Pinochet. Yet this neoliberal crisis is also structured by World War II, the Cold War and Third World, and by

the end of the Third World, which Brazilian writer Marcio Souza figures really magically with Dr Kxalendjer. The grand narratives of Liberalism, Communism, and Fascism that drove both World War II and the Cold War are ontologically “modern”: the Christian God was not at stake, Man was and remains so, though God and the gods and other spirits never really left the stage and have returned, so it’s crowded now with many peoples, species, and things.

Modernity is disciplinary colonialism, humanism, Descartography, the disenchantment of the world, an event dating back five centuries. And this modernity is also perversely “postmodern” or a mashup of Greek forms, ideas, logic, and European capitalism, and the newly connected “cultures” of the world. Descartes and other Enlightenment thinkers rebooted Platonic ideation, and disciplinary colonialism’s dealing in ideational pharmaka created an international drug trade called “universal reason” for understanding and mapping the world as subject/object, culture/nature, mind/body. The 24,000 academies were erected phallogocentrically on Indigenous grounds, the *Abgrund* or abyss of theory. Our theory, logic, and ideas all come packaged together, and with them Plato, who threw the poets out of the Republic. Perform *logos* and *eidos*—or else, that recurrent challenge echoes through the gated communities and favelas of global performativity.

If we focus only on neoliberalism, we risk making rear-guard defenses of Cold War bunkers. The Cold War created the Third World alliances and also jump-started global performativity, which draws on and erodes the Enlightenment’s disciplinary institutions, institutions that had reigned in colonies and in Europe by creating and subjecting humans in a globe gesture that banished image, song, dance, etc. as mythic or religious enchantment, while installing science and calculus to mechanize and automate *logos* and *eidos* via symbolic logic and truth tables. Today, Western truth tables have turned again, powered now by an algorithmic performativity operating above and below our current consciousness, challenging us to think-act in profoundly different ways.

The suppression of Homer, Indigenous lifeworlds, popular culture, and digital media today within 24,000 academies are all linked via ideational circuits millennia old. These links are challenged, for me, become self-extractive as it were, by the pharmakon Plato put in the mouth of Socrates. In the *Phaedrus*, Plato critiques writing by telling the young sophist the Greek myth of the Egyptian god Thoth, who presents his invention of writing to Cadmus, founder of Thebes. Cadmus rejects it as poison, as a source of forgetting true, present thought. Of course, Plato will elsewhere describe the dialectical *eidos-logos* relation precisely as writing in the soul, the “good writing” of psyche, hence Derrida’s association of writing with pharmakon, cosmetics, perfume.

Figures such as Theban Egyptians, Pre-Socratic Krishnas, and Greek Buddhas point to the recombinant need for ontological spacetime travel, what I call disastronautics. In *Perform or Else*, I rehearse this flight path through the “last” two Challenger figures, Jane Challenger and Dr Kxalendjer, who were taken and reposed from Marcio Souza’s 1989 novel, *Lost World II: The End of the Third World*. There, reporter Jane Challenger discovers neoliberalism in the form of eighteenth-century economists—the Chicago Boys—living on a jungle plateau near Manaus, Brazil, a fetid city where she later encounters Dr Kxalendjer, a shamanic figure bringing cosmic forces to bear on the anachronistic situation. These two characters perfume the general theory’s sign-off maneuver, initiated in the book’s final pages: to jettison not just the performance paradigms but the performance strata, as well.

In the sequel text and film, *The Revelations of Dr. Kx4l3ndj3r* (2012), the shift from stratoanalysis to cosmography takes flight with performative research. I highly recommend Ralo Mayer's "How to Do Things with Worlds" as a clear and simple model or paradigm that explains everything ;-).

From what place does one think-act multiple worlds? *Kx4l3ndj3r* is a collective thought-action figure: its flight deck provides a platform to transmediate and perform texts such as *Cosmotechnics* (Hui and Lemmens, 2021), *Designs for the Pluriverse* (Escobar, 2018), *How Forests Think* (Kohn, 2013), and *Vibrant Matter* (Bennett, 2009). Cosmography offers a way to "play them." Beyond oral ritual and literate method opens play, the slippage of both disciplinary mastery and performative control. Perfume or else? \$#&!

Chris Hay: I'm particularly interested in the queer potential to disrupt the performative imperative. I'm thinking here of the body of work from Josū Mucoz, Jack Halberstam, Tavia Nyong'o, and others, that has sought to mobilize queer failure as resistant to neoliberal logics of capitalism and performance. Your book anticipates this through gay sci-fi and the disastronauts, and the notion of "experimental resistance"—and the later *Revelations* piece (McKenzie, 2012).

At the same time, though, there are certain demands of performance where queer failure is not an option — the demands of "major change proposals" the mobilization of our field for neoliberal measurement purposes doesn't seem to accommodate what Sara Ahmed might call a 'slantwise' performance. All of which leads me to ask these few questions: How might we live slantwise to the performative imperative of neoliberal capitalism? Are there certain paradigms of performance that could accommodate a politics of disorientation, or an orientation towards failure rather than success, where others cannot? Thinking about how the field has developed, could we understand failure as a new paradigm of performance?

JM: These are important questions in light of the perfumative spacetimes we've entered, the light of Platonic ideologocentricism, colonial Descartography, and the panoptic Enlightenment—as well as the neon lights and fibre optics of postdisciplinary, algorithmic performativity principles and input/output optimization—all these lights glimpsed with their dark side, as if seeing both the bright and dark sides of several moons at once, perfume or else? \$#&! as midnight blue.

How might gay sci-fi and the *Revelations* film anticipate questions of failure and queer resistance to performativity? Things are queer in multiple, contradictory, and undecideable ways, which makes other things possible and calls for different, critico-creative responses.

Not only have liminal rituals (e.g., initiations) become supplemented with liminoid methods (e.g., modern education), both have become liminautic, set adrift on memory's bliss by global flows of peoples, materials, and processes. There's no virgin land of cultural performance. Performance measures preceded the formation of Performance Studies by some 70 years and were no doubt in play as its programs and departments were conceived and came on board in the 1970s, 80s, and 90s: we'd only need to access the proposals, plans, budgets, and certifying documents to determine the stakeholders and stakes in play. Taylorism's disciplinary measures themselves became performative over the past century,

yet while Scientific Management gave way to cybernetic Performance Management and all the paradigms now perform-or-else according to different performance specs, nonetheless disciplinary techniques remain embedded within them and can continue to function, evoking and deploying Panoptic power via modern grand narratives still championed by some tenured radicals, radicals on tenure tracks, and radical adjuncts and staff. And rightly so: our disciplinary calls still have power, as well as disciplinary forms of resistance and critique.

Now amidst this ripped and perfumed lightshade between and beyond discipline and performance, must we only map emerging worlds into disciplinary fields and try to master things in paradigms with modern, representational reading machines and their alphabetic texts? Recognizing the limits of representation as Descartographic literacy must indeed disorient us and test our limits of the here and now, there and then. Long ago in Poland, I spoke of “The Performative Matrix: *Alladeen* and Disorientation,” defining the latter as “the disorienting and uncanny play of proximity and distance, presence and absence, familiarity and strangeness, self and other” (McKenzie, 2008:28). Random walks, Brownian motion, chance operations provide alternatives to the methodological steps of subjects before objects.

Indeed, stepping back: why *do* we study performance or any other object, for that matter, and largely seal it away in archives and password-protected databases? Why extract conceptual knowledge (theory, ideas, data, evidence, facts, history, etc.) from the world? What world poses and presupposes itself as extractable? Why do we (who? what?) perform this extraction and train others to do so, too, generation after generation? Why write books? Why go to night school? Why demand identity papers? And what if all worlds “self-extracted” *and* simultaneously resisted “self-extraction”? What then? Could we (who? what?) affirm non-self-world-extraction? Radical alterity as sameness, juxtaposed with identity? Through which shared, accursive media (bodies included) might *!@#&* repeat itself differently?

I channel these queries, it’s not like I know the answers. They overcome me.

The figures Kxalendjer, Professor Rutherford, and perhaps even Professor Heidegger all anticipate as well as recall this queer failure, this *!@#&*, shuttling it about, Kxalendjer with critical shamanism, William Rutherford by sacrificing (his) queer animality and desire via vivisection, and Heidegger with his queer or odd suggestion (resignation? lament? hope? withdrawal?) that perhaps only a god can save us (who? what?). These challenging figures suggest a typology of failure, different genres, perhaps ways of failing better, following Beckett. Or Laurie Anderson: that’s how you can be walking and falling at the same time.

Failure, misperformance, is built into performance and into any relational or processual ontology, any worlding of things and events. Thus we can read Derrida and Judith Butler’s point with iterability, the other-ability of J. L. Austin’s infelicity, his failed or unhappy performative, this iterability also gets things going and turns things around. But the thing is, performativity too “gets this” and mobilizes the flow, controls the feedback of same/other, even the breakdown of systems, before which disciplinary subjects and objects tend to become paralyzed, transfixed like deer before headlights. As the Frankfurt School theorists put it long ago: the dialectic freezes, history appears to stop. Something else is called for to think-act difference differently.

In France, Foucault, Deleuze, Derrida, Lyotard, Cixous, Irigaray and Kristeva—and before them Bataille and Pierre Klossowski—were aligning cybernetics with Hegel and Aristotle and taking on structuralism, existentialism, Marxism, psychoanalysis, phenomenology—all of which for them channelled the eidos and logos of Plato, the idea and logic of Descartes. French theorists followed second-generation cybernetics into the chances and contingencies of chaos, interfacing with Nietzschean play and excess, the excesses of *graphie*, schizoanalysis, *écriture féminine*, what I channel today as thought-action figuration.

Different eyes and ears have guided me, the eyes and ears of Laurie Anderson, yes, and before her Roland Barthes, a heavily closeted writer and reader of Jules Verne, striptease, and the third meaning. “Once you let a ‘bluish circle of smoke’ into critical discourse,” he wrote, “you can find the courage, quite simply... *to copy it over*” (Barthes, 1977:135). Barthes, the forgotten (repressed) inventor of so many moving, critico-creative writing genres, the stylist figure who gallantly crossed the boulevard from structuralism to post-structuralism, who proclaimed the death of the author, poor Roland was run down by a laundry truck one night in Paris, his mangled body not recognized in the morgue for many days. Barthes’ disastronautic flights, his gay sci-fi of *jouissance* and drawing figures, was brought down the very day he had lunched with future Prime Minister Francois Mitterrand. There’s a smart who-done-it detective novel about it, sexy if not naked theory, with scenes in Paris, Ithaca....

Amor fati. Barthes was too closeted for some, perhaps, like Cage and Duchamp, who was too silent for David Wojnarowicz. AIDS brought a lot of people out, even as millions have died. For me, RB’s figures, in Lacanian terms, his stagings of the imaginary for multiple symbolic effects, remains a touchstone of thought-action figuration, for disastronautic flight across multiple worldings. Looking back, RB staged his own closeting, played at his own striptease, exposed himself—and us—to different types of exposure, as Klossowski had so scandalously done bringing out *Sade My Neighbor* (1991). Though Barthes was closeted, then violently run over in drag, nothing prevents us from reading *A Lover’s Discourse: Fragments* (1978) as an intimate manual for reconfiguring the poses of romantic love—the quest, the waiting, dark glasses, suicidal anguish, tenderness—and playing them out across social media, reality TV, and dating apps.

Dear RB, I love you, Kx4l. In *Fragments*, Barthes reads a foundational Romantic *Bildungsroman*, Goethe’s *The Sorrows of Young Werther*, as a tutor text for experiencing his own desiring body. Yet *Fragments* remains open for cruising contemporary sites. If the scenes don’t fit, project others. RB’s figures, each posed and described from different perspectives—theoretical, everyday, historical, aesthetic—constitutes, for me, a paradigm of gay sci-fi, of performing cosmography, perfuming k0sm0gr4phy. RB does the trick. I taught a workshop on D.A. Miller’s *Bringing Out Roland Barthes* (1992) in the 1990s with Peggy Phelan in a performative theory class at NYU. Mick Taussig was teaching experimental anthropology: experimental theory was happening and then—

Why do we feel experimental theory is returning? Where did it go? *Who killed Roland Barthes?* Who killed experimental theory? Why was *PoE*’s casting call for gay sci-fi not read, its challenging and queer genealogies missed? What does experimental theory do?

Performance is recursive transmediation across broken scales.

Perhaps I dropped the mic heading out of paradigmatic orbits. Styles, spurs, change. Most Anglo Performance Studies readers have, imho, focused on *PoE*'s cultural performance paradigm, demonized the others, and largely ignored and/or swallowed the performance stratum whole, whereas by generative contrast, many Eastern European, Slavic readers have approached the stratum subtly and critically, testing my claims about its all-too-ugly-American features. Zagreb knows ugly Americans; Belgrade, too, from the skies. There are many clues. Only a few, dear readers, have gotten near the perfumative poetics of catachristening/catastoration, gay sci-fi, disastronautics, and their effects across the general theory's three levels. For a reason: the backend of *PoE* remains unreceivable for disciplinary reading machines seeking to master difference conceptually, theoretically: it takes a different set of yearnings to smell perfumance, to become cosmographer. It may be hard to publish, get tenure.

I'm not shitting you. It stinks sometimes.

Perhaps *!\$#&!*'s time will never come, in any case, there won't be spacetime for a full report. Shuttling between two ontohistorical set ups of the say-able/see-able/feel-able, with a nose for something else, *PoE* says so: the failure to read was anticipated, even programmed by our reading machines, as were (still are?) the misreadings of Marcuse and Lyotard and Butler, who even sought to make things critically queer.

Some readers have inhaled and experienced discipline in a new light. Aneta Stojnic, Ralo Meyer, Dorita Hannah, Helen Dickinson, Anna Street, and others. One must sign on/off, take chances, take flight, enter black holes, survive crashes at different scales. Make pataphysical love. Or so my cardio data tells me, having suffered congestive heart failure, atrial fibrillation, and a couple of ontohistorical breakups during COVID.

What to do with this psychophysiosociotechnicosmic inhalation of perfumance? *!\$#&!* I'm still trying to figure it out. Telegraphically: paradigm becomes patadigm, just as Jarry displaced general physics with singular pataphysics, and Derrida mimes *The Archaeology of Knowledge* with *The Archeology of the Frivolous*. The gay sci-fi of perfumance emits worlds via disastronautic flight, extended singularities, chance chants, as the odour adorns things, psyche, breath, sweet summer sweat, metal, citrus jam. The world in a mustard seed, recursive, the Aleph, multimonads for the masses. How does re.dis.en.chanting happen? Who or what acts, reacts, transacts? Oar knot? How to do things with worlds, with rows of whirls? Exhale...

Perhaps we shuttle between two queer failures, between the two homo columns of Derrida's *Glas*, the left a reading of the pristine Hegel (*Antigone*, the Holy Family, the State), the right a reading of a tattooed Genet (*Our Lady of the Flowers*, *The Maids*, Mettray Penal Colony). The one a proud and proper dialectical erection, the logic of the phallus, the masterable object, the paradigm, the other, a perverse galactic an-erection, the logic of the reversible glove, of generalized fetishism, hymen, patadigms endlessly making passes at—

History, chance—between the two, between the eyes, in hands, ears, throats ring gl—

twin failures

and yet

LGBTQIA2S+

emission elle 51

?\$#&!

How to do things with worlds, to think-act performance at scales micro, meso, and macro, on stage and off, in crypts and out?

Millions saw Challenger explode and millions more bear witness still—

Perhaps felicities are rare forms of infelicities. How queer is that?

Emma Willis: When I read the statement "all performance is electronic" it really made me stop and think. It would be fantastic if you were able to unpack and speak to this.

JM: "All performance is electronic" can stop one in their tracks: I can't recall when or how it struck me but it stuck. The thought provokes, seems absurd in that we can point to endless examples from past and present that seemingly aren't digital or electronic or even technological in the vulgar sense: a dance, a ritual, a walk through the countryside.

Yet, for me, our ability to see some phenomenon as "performance" depends on the coalescence of formal concepts and techniques whose epistemological histories and ontological trajectories can be tracked rather precisely, as I attempt in *PoE*. We and it are not just there, here and now. Shamans and devices and bureaucracies haven't always performed, and when I found feedback installed in liminal rituals, guided missiles, and management schools, I began to sense how both liminal and liminoid activities were becoming liminautic, and orality and literacy becoming digitality, these becomings themselves becoming multiple and chaotic, loopy and recursive. I had a revelation in the old Paramount Building, 10th floor, Managing Director's office overlooking Central Park, holding a *Forbes* magazine. Perform—or else—is us.

Marcuse and Lyotard's work points to World War II as a breaking/gathering moment when our modern spacetime coordinates—specifically History and Geography, Descartography—cracked, bifurcated, when the legitimizing grand narratives exploded, the dialectic "froze," etc., and the performative matrix crystallizes: a new plane of individuation, difference, repetition emerges to challenge the substantive ontology of subject/object, culture/nature, social/technical with feedback loops and their recursive processes.

Hence, all performance is electronic.

Performance, for me, entails this cybernetic ontogenesis, itself twofold: not only the occupation and displacement of discipline by control but also, at another ontohistorical, epochal scale, the emergence of digitality as a mashup of oral repertoires and literate archives within an even larger apparatus, that of digitality, whose databases and processors,

memories and imaginations, give and receive traces of species and materialities through earthly and interplanetary sensors and devices. From stratanalysis to cosmography.

Hence, the nested chronogeopolitical and ontohistorical structures stretching from the jungles of Brazil to the *polis* of the Republic to the steppes of the East. And hence, too, my interest in the three ecologies of Guattari, taken from Gregory Bateson's *Steps to An Ecology of Mind* (1972): the ecologies of world, society, and self. The nomadic Bateson and systems theorists installed feedback loops across endless fields, a thousand plateaus. How to study the performance of intergalactic events, Runa puma (jaguar shaman), and their relation to tomorrow's weather? What paradigms and pataphysics, what patatechnics are needed to study such a performance, what pata-methods and resources, what modes of flight and transmission are required? What gay sci-fi? What cosmography?

Because systems perform, anything we frame as a system, with or without us in the picture, performs: subatomic particles, universities, multiple universes—all perform. We don't yet know what performance is, much less what it can do, especially as we recur within the flow, *mise en abyme*. Nor do we know what research itself is becoming, but we know we don't like it: it stinks. But that's the disciplinary perform or else we're channeling there, in part, our disciplinary, highly literate nose sensing pharmaka of different futures and tasting only toxins. Performance enables the transvaluation of sense and sensibility.

EW: The theme of democratization of digitality came through very clearly in your discussion and description of the work of StudioLab. This is such a pivotal societal problem, and I'm very interested how the methodologies of StudioLab approach this.

JM: To fold its three missions into one: StudioLab seeks to democratize digitality by democratizing design in order to remix performative values, to queer the war machine's ontohistorical installation. Student design teams collaborate with NGOs and NPOs working in human rights, gender and violence, public health, environmental and land rights. We've worked on death penalty cases in Texas, family planning in Uganda, BIPOC mental health in Georgia, and thinking outside a box surrounded by a million landmines in the Mideast. We make media, build collaborative platforms, and co-design worlds with our partners. You can access the project sites at labster8.net.

As a pedagogy, StudioLab entails three becomings—becoming-maker, -builder, and -cosmographer—and its critical design teams perform as desiring-machines engaged with larger sociotechnical systems. These becomings channel our three missions.

First, we seek to democratize digitality just as nineteenth-century public education sought to democratize literacy, though we're cognisant of both the liberating-enslaving powers of the alphabet and any techne: pharmakon. In addition to StudioLab, I teach first-year writing seminar, effectively the only course required of all US college students, for a reason: we think we think through writing, and indeed we ideate through the composition of letters. Our arts and science depend on them, all the disciplines do, all Platonic knowledge and critical thinking. Logocentrism is the most powerful ethnocentrism the world has known.

StudioLab reframes writing as transmedia knowledge, just as Schechner reframed theatre as performance, and Derrida's speech as writing. Post-ideational, thought-action figuration depends on both the composition of letters and the making of other media—and thus

StudioLab's first becoming is becoming-maker of transmedia knowledge, thinking-acting in media beyond writing while recasting writing as synthetic, plastic, graphic. Figuration offers a new image of thought-action: Rodin's *The Thinker* stands up and strolls as a flaneur, cyborg, shaman, cruising from seminar to studio to lab and out into multiple worlds.

Becoming-maker is becoming thought-action figure oneself, recursively moving through transmedia forms to break the frame of Cartesian representation, placing it in abyss, a Mouse Trap within a Mouse Trap, a map within a map, worlds within worlds, recasting one's mind-body-soul-manna-psyche-etc. simultaneously. This iterative, abyssal figuration is precisely not a concept, idea, or abstract paradigm—or rather, it is all of those as well as image, sound, taste, gesture, flow, plague. Ideation occurs in an event cascade composed of many other media.

StudioLab's move mimes Artaud's Theater of Cruelty, which Derrida's grammatology mimes and Lehmann generalizes as postdramatic theatre. Yet theatre is too narrow and representational a site for StudioLab: its performances happen across many platforms. No audiences, no users, only stakeholders with lifedeath at stake, in play, often dark play. The transformations we seek to support are themselves recursive, radiating out from the collaboration, affecting the team, our partners, and their stakeholders at the level of discourses and practices, institutions and infrastructures, by any media necessary: websites, instructional videos, info comics, rapid-response social media campaigns.

StudioLab's second mission is thus to democratize design, to bring it to the masses—or rather let them bring it to us disciplinary experts. As Tim Brown of IDEO provocatively puts it: design is too important to be left to designers, a point that resonates with Joseph Beuys's shamanic utterance "everyone is an artist." While artists make art, designers make everything else, so democratizing design opens an immense terrain for exploring a post-Romantic, post-Great Artist, paradigm of collaborative production. We are all dormant designers, for better and worse, and that has an ethical dimension: design is shared alterity.

The second transformation is thus becoming-builder of collaborative platforms and shared experiences. StudioLab's platforms deconstruct the academy of Plato into a plateau of intensities, a plane of consistency that can connect our platforms (e.g., a team's work tables, production and media platforms) with those of our partners, who we encourage to connect to their stakeholders' platforms. We often do this by co-creating collective thought-action figures that emerge and transverse many sites: e.g., Health Access Connect's "medicycles," SOOFA Ranch's "horse therapists," and the music video "Lisa's Song" which was part of an unsuccessful campaign to stop Donald Trump's execution of Lisa Montgomery. How might a dancing Plato perform across 24,000 academies?

The third mission is to queer the war machine, remix performative values, inject cultural efficacy into systems dominated by technical effectiveness and organizational efficiency. In short: challenge and displace performativity, its operations large and small that have come to multiply and diversify power/knowledge operations via innumerable language-body games. This may sound abstract and low-res, which it is, as that's where critical design thinkers start with their partners: hearing and tuning in their situation, their dreams, their worlds. Per the general theory, we assume all organizations operate under demands to perform—or else and help them address these challenges and imagine a different world, the one they dream of making. In Daryl Fletcher's dream of SOOFA Ranch, equine therapy

brings mental health services to Black communities in new ways than traditional psychotherapy while also connecting to the land, to farming, to a whole new world. StudioLab's third transformation is thus becoming-cosmographer, co-designer of worlds.

EW: I was struck by how many times the word "empathy" came up in the chapter, and the importance of empathy to both the processes you describe and their outcomes. The notion of empathy is sometimes approached with skepticism in performance and theatre studies, and it was refreshing to see the concept being mobilized so clearly and directly here. I'd love to hear any further thoughts you have about the role of empathy in the processes you describe.

JM: Breaking out of disciplinary set-ups opens different perspectives and valuations. In StudioLab, "empathy" is short-hand for many things, especially the first phase of the design thinking process, also known as Hear. For us, it's the entire ensemble of our initial fieldwork with our partners, learning from them about what they do and want to do, about their stakeholders and their desires, about the partner's media ecology and platforms—we learn about their world or multiple worlds: they literally teach us.

At the same time, we examine our own 'cosmograms,' the conflicting sets of discourses and practices, references and values, the different worlds we each bring to the table, the platform. Sometimes these resonate strongly with the partner's world, producing traditional 'empathy,' and sometimes they don't but likely we 'sympathize.' However, we don't really use these terms in these ways. The Hear phase ends with teams articulating the design challenge before us: Partner A wants to create X in order to do Q. The challenge guides the collaboration and often morphs during the design process, especially if the partner reframes the project midstream.

The partner projects often become "tutor texts" for us: we learn from them in many ways, both about their specific project and about the larger possibilities and constraints of our critical design. For instance, HAC co-founder Kevin Gibbons explicitly seeks to avoid the figure of the "white saviour" in both Uganda and HAC's online media ecology. We too seek to avoid this figure in our work: I am an American white male, and while my students are diverse and many international, we all recognize we perform in the Ivory Tower of an Ivy League University, a top performer among the 24,000 academies in the world. Cornell is the only public Ivy, a land grant/land grab university endowed with lands expropriated from Indigenous tribes in Wisconsin and California, and this founding endowment gives Cornell historic—and for us, onto-historic—responsibilities.

Testing multiple channels, some beyond representation and ideological critique (subject-method-object sequencing), StudioLab's critico-creative work is neither traditional critique nor art: it's critical design thinking as collective thought-action figuration.

EW: Similarly, I really smiled when I read the phrase, "collaborative creations of joy", and the value that you place on joy. I love you to open this up for further discussion: What is joy in this context? What does it do or undo, change or challenge? What brings you joy in your work?

JM: In the new book, I juxtapose the often isolated and sometimes sad experiences of critique to collaborative creations of joy that StudioLab often produces. The criticality of

our critical design flows from the crisis situations our partners bring to the table, whether it be a live death penalty case or long-term structural challenges like racial, economic, and environmental justice.

Collective joy comes precisely through the figures and openings that emerge with the collaborative platforms—which can also be understood as experiential architectures, affective networks—the shared experiences of cosmography as shared dreaming of worlds and whatever actualization we can achieve.

The joy for me often comes at semester's end when partners and teams co-present their collaborative work, and the entire class and all the partners see what's been produced in three months, three design iterations. I stand at the back, often beaming as community partners explain the ways the work advances their organization's mission, followed by the students' description of their design work. They produce collective insights building things. My students come from across campus, and while my Info Science students often know HCI, most students—especially humanists—have zero formal design experience and mostly study rather than make (or rather, their making is restricted to writing), so they experience all three becomings.

Joy also connects directly to collective thought-action figuration, which we can understand as transindividuation, to use the term Bernard Stiegler borrows from Gilbert Simondon. Thought-action figures (aka TAFs) emerge via the gathering and condensation of different sociotechnical milieus, milieus which themselves are in flux. Kx4l3nd3r is thus "my" TAF but also part of different sociotechnical TAFs, 7 or 8 Challengers themselves open to different cosmographic forces unfolding over the horizon, both past and future. One can stage TAFs in a theatrical frame, as Aneta Stojnic and I did with the Kosmography lecture performance staged at the Performing Knowledge symposium, Segal Theatre, CUNY Graduate Center. However, TAFs' critical forces fully emerge in everyday life: the Marxist hammer and sickle, ACT-UP's pink triangle, Watson and Crick's double helix, Moten and Harney's Undercommons—all gather and project thought-action that cannot be reduced to either symbolic representation or material praxis as they mix both.

All ideas, forms, processes, entities have figurative potentialities reined in by arborescent thought-action regimes: not just disciplinary logocentrism, but other ethnocentrism, phonocentrism, indeed, any -centrism. Pharmakafiguration is eccentric, ek-static, ?\$#&!

Let me also cite one traditional function of Western art and culture: the transformation of pain to joy through creative practice. As Nietzsche points out, the legacy of Aristotelian aesthetics privileges the catharsis of spectators. Becoming-maker, -builder, -cosmographer does not so much exit the theatre as start with multi-paradigmatic performances of contemporary life. Blanchot writes: *learn to think with pain*. We suggest: *learn to think-act with pain*. Gay sci-fi is thought-action figuration of lifedeath, painjoy, anxietydesire: it can be represented on stage for audiences and theorized on page for readers but its events unfold elsewherewhywhen—and sometimes, indeed in theatres and journals.

EW: Lastly, there's a lovely description in the chapter of StudioLab as a "heterotopia for generating heterotopias." You also discuss the potential of the processes that the students engage in StudioLab with for further applications as they move through their lives. As I mentioned above, I'm very interested in how StudioLab builds on the ideas you explored in *Perform or Else* and models a set of practices for social transformation—for changing

values. I'd love to hear your thoughts on the relationship between critique and practice, and on the social and political role of scholars.

JM: It's uncanny the way the final lecture in *PoE* resonates with StudioLab's current work, the way Jane Challenger's report to the academy on her collaboration with Dr Kxalendjer foreshadows the collaborative reports of partners and students, how transdisciplinary co-design can indeed challenge performative power circuits. Critical design thinking, human-centred design, and participatory action research all inherently challenge the academy's foundational oppositions of episteme/doxa, logos/mythos, and eidos/imagos—and thus modern disciplinary hierarchies of master/slave and expert/amateur which rule all knowledge fields and lecture machines. The question is what to make of it? For whom or what?

As intimated above, StudioLab's three becomings build on/off the perfumative poetics guiding *PoE*'s becoming-challenger. Becoming-maker of transmedia knowledge entails opening up discourses and practices, performatives and performances, ears and eyes to radically new syntheses across different media: catachristenings of language and catastorations of behavior. Becoming-builder of collaborative platforms entails the shared experiences of transdisciplinary research and creativity, often producing psychophysical flow and feelings of joy: gay sci-fi. Becoming-cosmographer or co-designer of shared worlds entails connecting up platforms to launch critico-creative flights between different onto-historical strata, epochs, and life-worlds: disastronautics.

Perhaps the most surprising and powerful connection between *PoE* and StudioLab Manifesto was the discovery that efficacy, effectiveness, and effectiveness correspond to design thinking's three spaces of innovation: human desire, technical feasibility, and financial viability. Rather than oppose efficacy to effectiveness and effectiveness, both design thinking and StudioLab seek transvaluations of performative values. Traditional design thinking may not yet point toward posthuman design as StudioLab does, but there's no reason it cannot pivot—and this may already be happening as environmental performance research enters the fray.

But even off the shelf, design thinking situates ideation in doxa, not episteme, and critical design thinking explicitly foregrounds the larger social and historical forces shaping both doxa and episteme. In short, design thinking operates via post-Platonic ideation, which I reframe as a moment in the media cascade of thought-action figuration. That design thinking seems "corporate," "ubiquitous," "neoliberal innovation," etc., is precisely its strength for me and for our community partners: nonprofits and NGOs, like theatre companies, cannot rely on efficacy alone but must sustain themselves by miming and queering effective and efficient modes of production within larger ecologies and economies that they are trying to alter. Black Farmer Fund seeks land reclamation, raises funds, and distributes them to Black farmers, using us as a design think tank, and this thought-action builds on itself.

Don't get me wrong: things don't always go smoothly, and there are lots of crashes, only we try to affirm rather than deny them. Both partners and teams have many other things going on: other projects, life, world. To connect back with Chris' question regarding a performance paradigm built on failure, StudioLab combines Beckett's line, "Try Again. Fail Again. Fail Better," and the d.school's "Fail Faster" mantra: "Fail early, fail often." That's

how you can be walking and falling at the same time, to patch in Laurie Anderson.

While narratives of disciplinary mastery hide falling and failure, ignorance and loss of control, and performative optimization seeks evidence-based inquiry and practices that normalizes deviation statistically to serve the greatest good, we try to share and learn from our failures, somewhat like choreographers sharing notes after rehearsal, though this role is shared with our partners.

The choreography of performance design thinking shuttles between efficacy, effectiveness, and efficiency in both linear and non-linear fashion, privileging efficacy at times, effectiveness at others, and at others efficiency, which for us may include sustainability, scalability, and responsibility, thus looping back into efficacy. And all performances remain exposed, precisely, to performative contingencies. Aesthetics, anti-aesthetics, generalized aesthetics provide senses for tuning them in and out.

Efficacy and pharmaka, imho, are key to overcoming artists and humanists' fears of instrumentalizing our own work. Some folks hold an art-for-arts'-sake attitude (and there are good aesthetic reasons for doing so) but many, myself included, affirm that art has a critical function, especially around community-formation, utopian imagination, and shared world-building. But art, too, emerges from the same onto-historical milieu as the Enlightenment and can function as both cure and curse. StudioLab's work is neither art nor critique but functions as critico-creative design, pharmacological kosmography.

I stress a situated, contingent efficacy, as instrumentalism is not a good model, even for technology, because it assumes human mastery of techne. Techne turns humans on from the get-go and pushes our buttons, and it is not restricted to humans, especially in light of the machinic phylum which stretches from geology to biology to symbolization. Thus, again, there is not someplace "outside" technology, the environment, and our material conditions whose innumerable performances we cannot fully perceive and conceive, much less fully control.

World is pharmaka, in play, and itself misfiring and misperforming long before humans became human and sought to capture it with our hands, mouths, eyes, ears, noses, and feet—all of which are shaped by material flows. Despite—or rather—thanks to this machinic phylum or genre mechanic, StudioLab's critical design teams function as desiring-machines situated within an immense sociotechnical system, the Academy and its 24,000 sites worldwide, what I call Plato's Fight Club, whose disciplinary forms and functions struggle with performative demands to optimize or else. Our partners do so too, and our collaborations can connect platforms to become a collective ensemble of enunciation, a plateau of intensities, a plane of consistency, to use Deleuze and Guattari's terms. Not just in theory but practice, in thought-action as critical design.

On this plateau of 24,000 dancing Platos, there can emerge heterotopias within heterotopias, even spin-off desiring-machines. For instance, in fall of 2020, a StudioLab team of four undergraduate women named themselves Her Whole Truth and joined an advocacy coalition organized by one of our partners, Cornell's Center on the Death Penalty Worldwide. This coalition included some 80+ lawyers, activists, PR professionals, and other mostly women volunteers fighting to save Lisa Montgomery, whom Donald Trump sought to execute before leaving office. Her Whole Truth sought to tell Lisa's whole life

story—utterly tragic and appallingly represented by her original lawyers—countering her demonization by the legal system and news agencies, restoring her dignity through rapid-response legal storytelling across different media platforms, including Twitter and Instagram. The Save Lisa campaign also included “Lisa’s Song,” a powerful, heart-wrenching music video written and performed by law student Veronica Cinibulk.

Her Whole Truth’s work on the Save Lisa campaign reveals how complex yet simple thought-action figuration can be, especially with legal story, and how much advocacy can differ from political protest. The team helped to translate and transmediate a complex legal case and life story into the forms and functions of social media, journalism, and public relations. Here the direct action took aim at Trump and his inner circle, for only the President could commute Lisa Montgomery’s federal death sentence. Despite their own passion and political positions, Her Whole Truth created a sensitive, moving campaign of tweets and posts, not yelling and screaming in bright colours and jarring images but asking and pleading with pastels and hand-drawn images.

The legal case seemed overwhelming and doomed almost from the start, but over the holiday break—after our class had ended—the team and larger coalition were buoyed by victories in court. Yet sometimes the brightest day foreshadows the darkest, and indeed just as everyone suddenly thought victory might be possible, it all ended with a higher court decision, and on 13 January, one week after the 6 January Insurrection at the Capitol, the federal government executed Lisa Montgomery. Her execution was utterly devastating for everyone: the legal team, the coalition, me and my students. Work, love, hope, failure. Some folks lost it.

And yet, Her Whole Truth lives on, both in StudioLab and more importantly, as a group of interns and volunteers within the Center on Death Penalty Worldwide, itself a non-profit organization. Our collaborative platform connected with the Center’s collaborative platform and generated another desiring-machine, another intimate bureaucracy, another Her Whole Truth overlapping with StudioLab.

Currently, in March 2022, StudioLab has a team of 6 students working on another Her Whole Truth project to save the life of Melissa Lucio, convicted and sentenced to death by the state of Texas for killing her own child. Again, the rhetorical mission is delicate: the media campaign seeks to persuade conservative Christian voters to persuade their conservative Republican governor to commute the death sentence during Easter. Note the cosmographic challenge of working between two worlds, the secular world of the legal system and the religious world of these stakeholders. In addition to legal storytelling and media design, we’re also beginning to help the Center with branding and fund-raising, with sustaining itself to build the world it dreams of crafting.

My dream is that StudioLab can jump-start other intimate bureaucracies, other critical design firms, non-profits, and/or NGOs that connect community organizations, researchers, and designers working on human rights, public health, social and environmental justice, and related issues. While there’s still spacetime for me, I’m trying to give away StudioLab, especially to youth, to the Greta Thunberg generation, to my own kids. A fourth mission, then: *let the kids reign by any media necessary.*

Notes

¹ The NEA Four—Karen Finley, John Fleck, Holly Hughes, and Tim Miller—were performance artists whose work was defunded by the National Endowment for the Arts (NEA) in 1990 after Congress legislated a so-called ‘decency clause’ into the statute governing federal arts funding.

² The Wisconsin Idea is summarised on UW-Madison’s website as the general principle “that education should influence people’s lives beyond the boundaries of the classroom”.

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