

**Sara Baranzoni, Paolo Vignola, Jon McKenzie**  
 Doing Things With Worlds:  
 Philosophy Becomes Cosmography

**Introduction**

The following are responses to comments and questions by Sara Baranzoni, Paolo Vignola and audience members following Jon McKenzie's plenary multimedia presentation, "Cosmography, Storytelling, and Performance Design Thinking," given at Cumulus Virtual Guayaquil: Arts imagining communities to come. Cumulus Association of Art and Design Education and Research, Universidad de las Artes del Ecuador (UARtes), 2021. You can find a link to the full presentation here: <https://vimeo.com/662662645>. The presentation provides an engaging overview of McKenzie's StudioLab work and the theoretical frameworks underlying it, including his earlier work in *Perform or Else*. The presentation recording is an essential companion to this issue, and we are grateful for the permission to make it available here for the issue's readers.

**Question and answer session [edited]**

**Sara Baranzoni:** Thank you very much, Jon, for your incredible talk. You made me dream a lot. You proposed so many suggestions, so many ideas, so many new worlds and words that obviously are really linked to the spirit of this conference, to the worlds we are trying to imagine, and also to the communities-to-come that we would like to see in the future and we would like to be part of. So, really, thank you very much. Paolo will give a short response and then ask some questions, and I will collect questions from our audience.

**Paolo Vignola:** Jon, I don't know how to thank you. It's incredible what you said. I thank you very much for your fantastic talk that responds in a very brilliant way, I think, to the first track of our conference, "Crisis, Criticism, and Creation." And I really love it especially for the great balance that you developed between theoretical thought, artistic practice and social engagement. I know that such a balance reflects your work at StudioLab, and so thank you very much for showing us your work, the nature of StudioLab, and for linking

the presentation of StudioLab to the Guattari's three ecologies, the environmental, social, and mental ecology.

I also really appreciated the wonderful way in which you stressed concepts of four great authors—Felix Guattari's three ecologies, Bernard Stiegler's pharmacology, Donna Haraway's speculative fiction, and Eduardo Kohn's speculative anthropology—great authors but very different, in some way very heterogeneous authors, that have four cosmologies, four different cosmologies but at the same times four thinkers that shared dreams as the first step to overcome a crisis:

- Ecosophy in Guattari's philosophy is a way to overcome the triplice ecological crisis
- Stiegler's pharmacology is a way to overcome our libidinal economic and political crisis
- Haraway's speculative fiction is a way to overcome the individualism implicit in thinking, and
- Eduardo Kohn's speculative anthropology is a way to share dreams between different cultures

Now, the way in which you stress these four great authors to me is not a philosophical way, I mean, not a philosophical way in the sense that it's not logocentric. It is not logocentric in the sense that, to me, your cosmography and your design thinking and the very idea of cosmography is a way to reverse logocentrism, but in particular to reverse Hegelian philosophy not only by passing from interpreting the world to transforming the world, to transform it as Marx argued, but—and it's more important to me—by giving to design, to aesthetics, to performance and to play the same relevance, power, and theoretical agency of poetry and philosophy. So, to me, cosmography is a way to overwhelm and to reverse logocentrism, and speculative telos a way of doing this. So, I come to the question: *does philosophy become cosmography in your way of thinking?*

Let me explain: cosmography and not cosmology; because if we think of cosmology, we know that its relation with philosophy necessary depends on—or at least has to struggle against—logos, that is, on an autopoietic and Eurocentric dimension of thinking, while cosmography to me is a kind of sympoietic dimensional thinking that can avoid such a relation. The graphic is not the logos: the graphic is a kind of mesh of heterogenous elements while logos is a kind of division, extraction and separation of elements based on a dualistic and topological structure (the Derridean In/Out), so the question is like a strategic question. In short: to you, *could philosophy become a general cosmography?* This is the question.

**Jon McKenzie:** That's a very provocative question. My approach can be described as grammatological to distinguish it from the deconstructive approach through which Derrida was received in the United States and made safe by becoming deconstructive literary criticism. For me, the grammatological leans on-graphé—I came to Derrida as a painter and film student—and this is precisely the way I approach and read across the four authors you mention. I would stress also Michael Taussig and Gregory Ulmer's work, as I studied with them both.

Derrida studied philosophy at the level of figures, as did Nietzsche. So, I'm studying them at these figurative levels but even the figure is not quite enough, because it's still trapped within a metaphoricity of what Derrida calls "white mythology, mythology blanc, blank mythology, where the distinction between concept and metaphor, literal and figurative remains unthought. So, Derrida goes to the letter, the gramme. In *Glas*, for instance, you're not just looking at metaphoric figures: you're looking at distributions of letters—chance operations, traces of willed error, gl+—creating philosophy. And whether that is still philosophy, what Derrida was doing back in the early 1970s, cutting and pasting texts by hand.... Well, the answer I would give to your question is yes: you can displace philosophy into another space, the way that Artaud tried to displace the play script into another space.

I came up with cosmography—which I now spell with a "k" as "kosmography," because if you know the genealogy of cosmography, it was precisely the art of medieval map makers, who gave way to the modern map makers we call "cartographers," and so let's imagine kosmography to help us rethink Descartes' cartography as "Descartography," that is, the eidetic mapping of nation-states around the world by mathematizing and thus being able to calculate their geographies—and also figuration to think otherwise than ideation.

So, you're absolutely right. To displace philosophy and the whole logos, it's not only trying to overthrow it; it's trying to transmediate it into another field of thought-action that one could say is figurative, but in a way that does not go back to some notion of proper, literal. That's the move, and I'm less interested in hand-to-hand combat between theorists over things and more in doing things with worlds. Thought-action figuration. I'm not a well-disciplined philosopher struggling to get everything right: I'm more interested in the impact out in the world—kosmographically. That's where to assess our work, and it's always going to be an open assessment.

**SB:** Many thanks, Jon, for this very rich reply, as it allows us to understand the complexity of the issues at stake. There's a point that is for me very meaningful, and it is when you talk about the distinction between concept and metaphor. How do you confront this in your theoretical practice? Is there a possible shift between concepts and metaphor—when you say, for instance, that you aim to create a thought-action that is figurative—or should we keep them well separate while trying to produce a kosmography?

**JM:** This is both a small, simple question and a huge, cosmic enigma, *mise en abyme*, for the distinction concept/metaphor resonates with those of philosophy/rhetoric, episteme/doxa, literal/figurative, proper/improper, truth/falsity, good/evil, being/non-being—and its vacillation upsets the mastery of identity and difference that these distinctions assume and depend upon on. The civilized West has proper concepts, the barbarian Others only metaphor, that's been the story, the history.

This Aristotelian tradition Derrida calls "white mythology," "blank mythology," the mythology that logos can do without mythos, the literal without the figurative, or in other registers, the figure without the ground, the ground without the abyss. For Derrida, these couples are not identical, nor are they opposed: they are *pharmaka* and their differences are enforced. Unsettling them calls for a double strategy, a double science, what I call a *gay sci-fi*, practices of catachristening (or deconstructive overnaming) and catastoration (the transfiguration of behaviours) that work both within and outside different systems.

Perfumativity.

If love is a rose, who or what knows its true, proper sense: the gardener? florist? botanist? or the bees pollinating it over generations? The poet? And what if this sense lay in the nose of the lover or, indeed, the perfume of the lover's discourse, what figure then captures it? And if we lose the proper sense of the literal, what becomes of the figurative then and the distinction concept/metaphor now?

Nietzsche poses this question in "On Truth and Falsity in their Extra-Moral Sense," published posthumously and only translated into English, French, and Italian after World War II. This small text opens a gardener's can of worms, the army of metaphors Nietzsche found underlying Western conceptuality: idea, concept, logic—all have forgotten metaphorical roots than can and have been uprooted. The essay's French translation unleashed the legion of strange figures that Bataille, Klossowski, Foucault, Lyotard, Barthes, Deleuze, Derrida, etc., will release into philosophy and critical thought after May '68 with experimental texts such as *Discourse/Figure*, *Lover's Discourse*, *Glas*, and *A Thousand Plateaus*.

What becomes of the figurative? Klossowski provides a Nietzschean semiology of impulse, phantasm, simulacrum, and stereotype, each separated by a leap of "metaphor," the shuttling equation of the unequal, the sharing of the unshareable, the smoothing and communing of radical alterity—and their forgetting: for me, such leaps "constitute" transmediation at its existential core and are key to following the sensible bouquet of its asignifying pathways. For Klossowski, the withdrawal of the proper, the multiplication and division of its pathic, impulsive origin, transforms its figuration into *willed error*, the originary distortion that gets things going, ruins them, and turns them around again.

Difference and repetition, singularity and recursion. At the cosmological level, originary distortion is cosmic glitch, chaosmosis, galactics. Kafka, Borges, Barthes, Laurie Anderson: these are among my tutor figures of pluriversal cosmic figuration. O Superman: while joyful, it's tragic, generalized exposure to pharmaka of multiple kosmograms, multiple un/worldings. Body as test site of eternal recurrence, the big bounce, pluriversally. At the institutional level, willed error informs Craig Saper's intimate bureaucracies, such as Fluxus and Occupy Wall Street, the becoming-builder of desiring-machines, the connecting of platforms. At the theoretical level, willed error calls for transdisciplinary transmedia praxis, the liminautic sharing of cosmic partial boundary objects by multiple makers across and beyond the discursive, by any media necessary—models, images, algorithms, institutions. Pink triangles, gorilla masks, manifestos, start-ups. Short-term critical concepts/figures emerge, get passed around, engage others, fall back at different scales. StudioLab's cosmography tries to "go there," "go big." Gathered in performances of everyday life, all this shuttling takes the form of *amor fati*, destinerrance, re.dis.enchantment as becoming thought-action figure, the living-dying of dramatic personae across spatiotemporal zones and cosmologies. DnG's K-function, Borges and I, Laurie Anderson for dummies.

**SB:** Many thanks, Jon. You gave us a lot of stimuli to think further. That's great. Now let's pass to some of the questions that we collected from our audience. There's a first one that José Ignacio López asked:

How do we construct and space for social transformation that does not include specific political biases?

The second question also comes from José Ignacio:

Do you think it is possible to construct these narratives about the global environment while confronting the locality of human phenomena? In my experience, this idea of “the same is true” in brings the danger of new colonizing models based on this perception of a one world. I mentioned this having lived in the United States for about twenty years. In my experience this idea of “the same is true” brings the danger of new colonizing models, of connecting things by applying models.

The third question is from Norberto Bayo, a colleague here at UArtes. He asks:

Would you work on LGBT+ issues in order to empower models of social representation at different ages of the student body? Do you work on gender issues with your students?

**JM:** I’ll start with the last one. So, the challenges our projects work with are the ones our partners are working on: they bring them to us. I’m working with faculties who have existing connections with community partners. We certainly would work on LGBT+ issues, and perhaps the most relevant and likely partner might be the Law School. The Center on Death Penalty Worldwide works on human rights, and we would certainly be open to working on LGBT+ issues with them.

One thing that we’re trying to do is learn from Lisa Montgomery’s life story, which ended when the Trump Administration executed her on Jan. 13, 2021. Two students—Lara Harvey and Veronica Cinibulk—and I ran a workshop that spring at Utrecht University of trying to think about such traumatic stories (see <https://tinyurl.com/studiolab-utrecht>). In many cases, women have had terrible, abusive home lives and then end up on death row. One thing we learned is that at key moments, if someone along the way had intervened, their lives might have been very different. How to increase these moments and interventions?

Connected to this question, we’re working with New York State 4-H on career paths in law, humanities, global development and info sci for high school students while also exploring youth media clubs and ideas like “girl squads,” “green teams,” and no doubt, an LGBT+ crew will emerge. (See the 3-day on-campus workshop Story, Design, Action: <https://blogs.cornell.edu/storydesignaction/>)

This connection loops back to my talk. In the US, 4-H is tied to Cooperative Extension offices located in every county in almost every state. Cooperative Extension in turn goes back to Land Grant Universities and the expropriative, land-grab of Indigenous lands. Significantly, there is both a national US 4-H (<https://4-h.org/>) and an international 4-H network, really an overlay of organizations concretizing and connecting decades of research in youth development, agricultural development, and global development—Guattari’s three ecologies map well here.

So, from this site today, could we help pilot a youth media club doing civic storytelling around social justice, environmental justice, LGBT+, etc. and then try to scale it to form other clubs elsewhere? It’s a huge idea and badly needed: 4-H, public schools, and youth programs worldwide have been rocked by COVID.

Now, the other two questions. In the work that I’m doing with multiple stakeholders, all of them bring different world views, different biases, and for me, the idea of getting to some place that's going to be absolutely without bias is tied to a liberal dream I’m suspicious of. Now, this ideal may not be what Josñ Ignacio was referring to, but we're trying to get to a

place where people can agree to disagree, as they're probably not going to be able to get to some completely unbiased place.

As to the question concerning the relationship between the local and the global, this is one of the most important questions. I'm trying to bridge between here and other sites. We don't have a big global model for anything happening here, but are there solutions that we can learn from different places? I'm totally open to that sharing, and so are my partners. For example, the relatively new Black Farmer Fund organization may learn from Health Access Connect's [HAC] experience about different ways to connect to donors. We're learning from everyone we work with.

We're trying as much as possible not to plop solutions down in the field but to listen to partners, and the solutions are coming up there. We co-design by working with folks out in the field via Zoom, trying to come up with things that will work with their stakeholders. At the same time, my students describe and reflect on what they're doing, creating deliverables documenting their process. Through these two things, partner media and student artefacts, it all comes together in a nice sweet spot.

It might take us a semester or two to really figure out the design challenge, but that's alright because it could be that time will help that partner, say by talking about the way other partners or organizations have approached things. So again, it's not a big paradigm up in the sky that we're plopping down. We're trying to work transversally as much as possible.

**SB:** I would like to focus on what you called performative thinking, when you say that we should pass from “what it is” from to “what it could be” and learning from the other, learning with the other, while developing these projects. Is this also a way to avoid the extractivist risk that any practice or project with local communities and specific people can introduce in our practices?

There are practices in academic fields and many other fields that perform a kind of extractivist logic: you go there, you work with people, you think you are doing great, and, finally, what you are doing is just taking away with you something and leaving the people there alone without any resource and without receiving anything in return. How do your projects avoid this kind of risk? How is it possible to keep in mind that this risk is always there? Should we be able to protect ourselves from the risk of falling in this kind of behaviours? What do you think about extractivist logic in projects?

**JM:** Well, we could say that all theory is extractive if we're just theorizing about the world. What do we produce if we're producing only journal articles and books? Is theory extractive? The argument behind transmedia knowledge is that we need an array of practices: different knowledges can take different forms, and we're trying as much as possible for those knowledges forms to come out of the community and then go back into the wider community of their stakeholders.

When I talk at a conference, when I publish, it usually means little to our community partners, although I have spoken with HAC about collaborating on an article. But many stakeholders may not really care about academics: it may mean zero to them. With my undergraduates, most of the conceptual extraction—theorizing—we do goes on to a web page that describes our work, while most of the other things we make go back into the field, where our work is deterritorialized by our partners: they take our work and do different things.

That's one thing we're thinking about: what is the value for partners in interacting with us? One thing I'm trying to do is make Cornell's research and resources more accessible for them—all kinds of research. Again, I'm trying to problem-solve far from discipline, so it doesn't all come back to art, to theory. It's trying to spread it out and put it back out there, and so, yes, that risk of extraction is already there.

Discipline itself is extractive and modern disciplinarity too, and so this is the rub: our critique comes out of this same discipline. This is the big challenge: how do you do work that is not extractive and that is a sharing?

But again, I will go back to the notion that we're going to get to some kind of equal place, that ideal that I don't know if we can hang on to, as nice as it would be. From just working with partners, I know they want different things and making them happy is my primary concern. But that's not just any partner but specific partners dealing with crises, partners I'm interested in working with.

So, again, yes, the extraction is there. It's already there, yet I think what human-centred design does, if it's done right, is challenge discipline by challenging the expertise and their deliverables, that it's just one set of deliverables and that is academic output.

**SB:** Yes, this is indeed very interesting and important, also this allows us to switch a little bit the topic and focus on the deliverables that any project should produce, which can be very dangerous sometimes because “having to produce evidence” makes us forget the real issue that is at stake in a socially engaged project [...]. It seems to me that you bypass the separation between academic deliverables and socially engaged practices when you refer to tactical media—we can call it a “deliverable” and say that's corporate tactical media we're producing [...] but for that group you are working with, it does have a meaning as well. [...] Could you please give us an insight of what corporate tactical media work in your projects?

Also, there is another aspect of deliverables production that I would like you to comment on: thinking for instance about the disciplinary field of performance studies and theory, where there's a lot of stress on processes, and also to the fact that a lot of the design stuff is all about process design. Could this be considered as a tactic to avoid the production of tangible results or there's something more that is not being considered when transforming everything into a (never-ending) process?

**JM:** These are very important questions, and I think “corporate tactical media” could point in several different directions. ACT-UP and the Guerrilla Girls famously combined marketing and graphic design in their work, while advertisers have long incorporated subversive, counter-cultural elements into highly visible, national and global campaigns. Academic essays and books have traditionally been the media forms of critical theory and knowledge more generally, forms that ride out phases of both revolutionary and normal science, to draw on Kuhn's paradigmatic thought. This suggests tactical forces and strategic guidance work in tension across and within academic, corporate, and vernacular media. By definition, as discourses, each generates meaning mixed alongside a platform of non-discursive elements, all shared by different players in different groups, aligned or not. This, again, takes us back toward a sympoietic, originary distortion

A similar rhythm of disruption and retrieval, divergence and convergence, marks the beat of performance design thinking, rhythms of thought-action, specifically loops of induction-

deduction and abduction-conduction, the difference of logical steps and graphic leaps within and across media. Steps and leaps recur at different sites and scales. StudioLab's co-media cascades begin in studio and then Zoom with descriptions of processes, overview diagrams, and emails; then it expands to research of stakeholders and existing media assets, conducted through weekly team exercises and biweekly partner co-design sessions.

Throughout, teams learn design frames to develop and refine ideas and media artefacts, gathering and sharing them with the class at monthly intervals. Running throughout is collective thought-action figuration, the transmedia design of different strategic stories for different players, different calls to adventure and action made to stakeholders such as patients, youth, death row inmates, politicians, the general public, policy-makers. This rhythm of divergence and convergence, by the way, can be reframed as performative process and constative deliverables. The forms or TAFs are snap-shots of flows, reports of efficacy, effectiveness, and efficiency, bits of taffy documented in our project websites.

**SB:** Many thanks, Jon. Maybe we can continue our conversation later. We would like to thank you for being with us, for your time, for your great talk, for your wonderful ideas that you shared with us. We were very proud to have organized this meeting with you. Hopefully, in some near future, in one of the shared worlds that we are dreaming of, we will have you here in presence. We will be glad to invite you on another occasion with us in order to see Guayaquil, the Universidad de las Artes, and everybody that works and studies here. Bye-bye, Jon, thanks.

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