

Edward Scheer

The Joys of Jon McK?#\$&!:

Reading McKenzie's *Perform or Else* After Laurie Anderson

As Jon McKenzie reminds us in this remarkable series of post-COVID responses to questions from the *Performance Paradigm* team, his early research focussed on the transmedia storyteller and performer Laurie Anderson who, we should remember, claims to have been influenced by characters such as Bugs Bunny, Daffy Duck, Yosemite Sam and Porky Pig. The observant reader will have spotted that all these latter figures are, in fact, animations and hold no onto-historical claim to presence other than their endlessly reiterated Disney media performances. In these, any expletives, or indeed any expression of cognitive overload, was usually rendered as a ?#\$&!, the conventional cartoon logographic shorthand for any surfeit of negative emotion: shock, anger, fear etc. ?#\$&! takes the place of an expression beyond signification eluding the pharmakon of language and thereby open to the most sensorial of interpretations. Sorry for ?#\$&!splaining.

McKenzie uses it as a motif in this text to encode a collective WTF response to the current global SNAFU in which the world's 24,000 odd tertiary education institutions (McKenzie's "Plato's Fight Club" (128)) find themselves even as they double down on the Publish or Die, Perform Or Else logics of performance management. Before any of us can say "Youuu're dehtpicable!" this imperative remains the governing logic of these institutions where many of us continue to labour, reconfigured as knowledge "extraction industries," McKenzie's term thereby belling the cartoon cat of the Academy:

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?(134)

Ouch! ?#\$&! WTF! Intermission.

McKenzie is not so much attempting the big reveal as he pulls back the curtains on the back rooms of the University—it's a performance of the Latourian move from critique as a

'beautiful staging' to a kind of composition or recomposition (Latour) as McKenzie unleashes a stream of neologisms into the discourse: the Hotel Don Quixote, the diversified Platonic Fight Club of global performativity, perfumance, Descartography *etc.*

All theory, he says, "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" (127). What he calls *Descartography* presupposes "critical distance" and produces "the mapping of subject/object ontologies around the world" (127). Still a geo-political game then and it's uncomfortable reading this string of pharmaka, taking our medicine/poisons, even here on the other side of the global distribution centres for discourse in the Southern hemisphere. But these challenges still need a response and for a career academic like me, it hurts to admit that after so many years, the answers are becoming increasingly far from self-evident especially as the Universities merge ever more indistinguishably with their corporate strategic partners.

Occasioned as we are here by a global pandemic, perhaps one response is that, like viral replication, knowledges as well as the Universities that promote them and their constituent academic disciplines seek to reproduce and survive in their host organisms (societies, nation-states, institutions) hopefully transforming them in the process. Maybe that's us as well, we the "reading machines" (126) and docile bodies that McKenzie describes are also sometimes activating the "temporal nesting" (132) that his StudioLab also performs. There is a call here, despite the recursive nature of the discourse McKenzie employs, for those of us invested in this Concept Cult of the Academy to inhabit and to transform, to attach to the host, penetrate its structures, release our learnings, replicate them, assemble groups to work on them and then send them out into the world. And at the risk of sounding like a Modernist Humanist... that might have real effects.

Sorry. ?\$#&! And...

Th-th-th-that's all, folks!

Works Cited

Cheng, Nien Yuan, Chris Hay, Emma Willis and Jon McKenzie, 2022. "Mise en abyme: A Tour of Jon McKenzie's Thought-Action." *Performance Paradigm 17*: 122-144.

PROFESSOR EDWARD SCHEER works across *Performance Studies and Visual Culture* and recently completed two collaborative ARC funded *Discovery projects* Towards an Experimental Humanities with colleagues (Brannigan and Muecke) at UNSW and New Media Dramaturgy with an international team (Eckersall and Grehan et al.). Recent books include William Yang: Stories of Love and Death (New South Press, 2015) with Helena Grehan and The Dumb Type Reader with Peter Eckersall with MTP Press in Copenhagen in 2016. He has published articles on performance art and aesthetics in TDR, PAJ, Parkett and Performance Research and has written numerous catalogue essays for the AGNSW, Documenta (12), the Biennale of Sydney (2006) and the Auckland Triennial (2010) as well as pieces on arts and culture in The Sydney Morning Herald and The Monthly.

Author of Scenario, a study of new work from the iCinema Project (UNSW Press and ZKM, 2011), his Multimedia Performance (Palgrave 2012) with Rosie Klich is on course reading lists across the

world. Scheer's study of Mike Parr's performance art, The Infinity Machine (Schwartz City Press, 2010) is the first comprehensive account of this aspect of the artist's practice.

He is a founding editor of the journal Performance Paradigm and has edited a number of books including Antonin Artaud: A Critical Reader (Routledge 2004) and Technologies of Magic. A Cultural Study of Ghosts, Machines and the Uncanny with John Potts (Power 2006).

A former chairman of the board of directors of the Performance Space in Sydney, he was also President of Psi, Performance Studies international, the largest international professional association in the field of performance studies from 2007-2011. He was a member of the Australia Research Council College of Experts (2013-2015).

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