



Ralo Mayer

**Woran  
glauben  
die Motten,  
wenn sie zu  
den Lichtern  
streben**

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mit Texten von Graham Harman,  
Jon McKenzie, Ursula Maria Probst

Ralo Mayer



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Essays by Graham Harman, Jon McKenzie, Ursula Maria Probst

VERLAG für MODERNE KUNST



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# THE REVELA- TIONS OF DR. KX4L3NDJ3R

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His ongoing research investigates the interconnected ways in which scientists, engineers, managers, anthropologists, and artists utilize concepts and practices of performance at scales both local and global.

*"The explosion of NASA's Challenger shuttle on January 28, 1986 AD, Earthtime, resonates through many personal, historical, and cosmological dimensions."*

So begins a fragment of a log entry by the enigmatic Dr. Kx4l3ndj3r, the time-traveling disastronaut described for perhaps the first time in Brazilian writer Marcio Souza's 1990 pseudo-sci-fi novel, *Lost World II: The End of the Third World*, though there the doctor bears the name Kxalendjer. (Like "Challenger" and "Kxalendjer", "Kx4l3ndj3r" is presumably also pronounced in English as [ˈʃælənʒə].)

After escaping the orbits of Souza's eccentric novel, Dr. Kx4l3ndj3r roamed Europe for several decades, where he discovered the work of RM and became fascinated with a series of exhibitions titled *HOW TO DO THINGS WITH WORLDS* – and, in particular, the glass orbs or miniature biospheres that recur within and without RM's work. The impact of these small orbs becomes clear in another decisive log entry: *"RM's biospheres revealed to me the limits of my training as an ethno-archaeologist and ignited a passion for cosmology, especially cosmography."*

Given the doctor's nonlinear itinerary, dating these entries remains problematic, but it is now believed that these same revelations led him to adopt the alphanumeric encoding of his name as Kx4l3ndj3r, a spelling whose numerological significance has generated so much debate among mathematicians, philosophers, and choreographers. Our purpose here, however, is to attempt an account of Kx4l3ndj3r's revelations, which appear to have unfolded along three axes.

## Axis 1: The Disasters of RM

In a legendary account, Dr. Kx4l3ndj3r reports that while stopped for petrol during a lightning storm high in the Austrian Alps, it was revealed to him that artist RM's cumulative body of work, his entire life experience, and even those of his closest contemporaries had all been choreographed down to their smallest details by *The Greatest Disasters of the 20th Century*, a long-forgotten book that, in codex form, has only recently been unearthed among the artist's possessions. The veracity of this perplexing revelation may never be determined but images of this codex's cover and table of contents have long been noted in various Kx4l3ndj3r databases.





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RM himself, of course, publicly stressed the importance of 20th-century disasters for his artwork, in particular the NASA Challenger, whose fiery trails of smoke and debris stretch across the book's full-color cover. The artist stated on many occasions that the shuttle's televised explosion had had a profound effect on his creative development, even if admittedly he could not remember whether he had actually witnessed the disaster live on TV or had seen so many replays that one of them quickened and transformed his entire psychophysical system. In 2010 or 2011, he wrote:

*i take the shuttle program as a parallel of the lives of people my age (~35). 1986, aged 10, was some sort of "awakening" from childhood to me, like stepping out of the small family world, first glimpses of politics etc. i do remember seeing the Challenger explode on TV (was it live broadcast around here as well?)*

The awakening RM experienced functioned as a catalytic ON switch that triggered a long, broken, at times mundane but nonetheless decisive chain of events: graduation, further study, first exhibitions, artistic success, transfiguration....

While the biographical impact of Challenger on RM cannot be overestimated, the power of Kx4l3ndj3r's revelations along this first axis lies elsewhere – in Earthian history and atmospherics. For RM pairs his Challenger awakening with another disaster, that of NASA shuttle Columbia, which disintegrated reentering the atmosphere on February 1, 2003. Significantly, RM's own account of this second shuttle disaster points outward rather than inward, at historical and political events, at war, at social protests, rather than at personal family concerns.

*... when the Columbia burnt up in 2003, i was more or less adult, whatever that means, the wall had fallen, the world changed blabla, i had protested against the g8 in Genoa in 2001, only to see the towers fall a couple of months later, somehow a bigger blow against the anti-capitalist movement than the Italian boy being shot by police in Genoa. as Latour writes, at the same time when the images of Columbia went around the world General Powell powerpointedly presented the weapons of mass destruction at the UN preparing war.*

We see here how strongly RM sensed a relation between the disintegrating shuttle and the disintegration of the political and social world around him, a relation he terms "blabla", (presumably an acronym for some forgotten algorithm). However, there is little evidence in this fragment that the artist had yet realized the direct causal relation revealed to Dr. Kx4l3ndj3r, much less any flash of connection to the book *The Greatest Disasters of the 20th Century*. For evidence of RM's intimate and complex exploration of such causal connections, we must turn to other fragments, taken from *HOW TO DO THINGS WITH WORLDS*. Its storyboard reads:

*There are many false myths about space-born technologies in everyday life, like the Teflon pan. In reality no space probe has returned yet from even our closest planetary neighbors, Venus or Mars. All we have*

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*received from landers are digital images of deserted landscapes, hostile to every form of life. Still, some of the structural narratives of the Space Age have effectively become part of today's world, sneaking into every single moment of our lives, shaping our experiences, messing with our desires, manipulating life-time.*

Here, within an artwork that "does something" with worlds, an artwork created by an artist known for mixing fiction and reality, art and world, here lies an analysis of a false myth – of frying pans, probes, and landscapes – of Space Age narratives sneaking into every single moment of our lives – and here also echoes Kx4l3ndj3r's revelations concerning *The Greatest Disasters*, namely that its full-color cover, its list of chapters and page numbers effectively program and manipulate every moment of the lives of RM and company.

Whether or not one believes in the veracity of Kx4l3nJ3r's lightning strike, it is important to note that RM himself sought to relaunch both shuttles for disastronautic flight.

*My plan is to take the shuttle disasters of 1986 and 2003 as a framing of global transformations of the past decades, from Chernobyl (uncannily present again) and the collapse of the soviet block to the emerging anti-capitalism movements, 9-11 and the following wars. the soon-retiring shuttles would be a "vehicle" to travel this space-time-continuum.*

## Axis 2: 7 or 8 Challengers?

The second axis of Dr. Kx4l3ndj3r's revelations opens along another series containing the NASA Challenger disaster: not the lives of RM and crew, but the odd collection of Challengers found in my own book, *Perform Or Else: From Discipline to Performance*. Ostensibly outlining a general theory of performance, this text takes a number of strange, looping turns in its second half, shifting from careful descriptions of various performance paradigms – cultural, organizational, technological – found in the early chapters, and becoming increasingly twisted and cryptic in its composition, as if the materials discussed in the last half had entered into another atmosphere altogether. Significantly, the book's final seven chapters all deal with Challenger.

Or rather, with Challengers and challenging-forth, for my research into the diverse discourses and practices of performance had revealed an incessant pattern of challenging. For instance, sociologist Diane Vaughan provided the key theoretical model for understanding how the different imperatives of cultural, organizational, and technological performance – demands for efficacy, efficiency, and effectiveness – are negotiated by social institutions: they are "satisficed" or traded-off with one another. Was it by

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chance that Vaughan's analysis of competing "performance pressures" emerged in a massive study titled *The Challenger Launch Decision*? From this perspective, the shuttle explosion occurred in an atmosphere characterized by intense, conflicting challenges to perform – or else.

It was another challenging that led to the realization that the performance pressures shaping Challenger's launch were not isolated conditions but instead form a defining element of our world picture, a world increasingly defined by global performance. Martin Heidegger described this challenging in his essay *The Question Concerning Technology*. There Heidegger contends that modern technology is neither a tool nor an extension of human capabilities but a type of revealing that enframes and *challenges forth* the world, transforming it into objects set before human subjects. To know

something, we challenge it forth and make it perform.



*Proposal for a Monument at Lagrange 5, Dedicated to the Lost Space Age, closed ecosystem with seawater, shrimps, algae, and microorganisms, text and diagrams on glass, 2008*

The connection between NASA Challenger and Heidegger's challenging-forth may seem tenuous but other Challengers solidify it. Most important is Professor Challenger – or rather, two of his incarnations. First, there is the Professor Challenger of Arthur Conan Doyle, who after finishing his long engagement writing detective stories, began composing science fiction tales starring an irascible scientist whose adventures include drilling down deeply through numerous geological strata in order

to puncture the skin of the Earth, which he believes to be a living organism. Professor Challenger, in short, attempts to literally challenge forth the world.

A second incarnation of the professor occurs in Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari's *A Thousand Plateaus*, in a chapter titled *A Geology of Morals*. There Professor Challenger delivers a lecture that roams from geology to biology to human society, all of which he contends can be understood in terms of geological processes of stratification, in particular, the sedimentation and folding of rock. Organisms are sedimented and folded, Challenger explains, as are social formations: all become stratified by this double-pincer move-

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ment of stratification. Other scientists disrupt the event by calling out rival theories, but the professor lectures on. As he does, though, his voice grows shrill and begins to click; his body hardens as his hands morph into giant pinchers. Professor Challenger becomes a lobster – and then slowly begins to destratify, to break apart, to liquefy and enter into a line of flight.

We seem light-years from the Challenger disaster, not to mention RM's biospheres and Kx4l3nj3r's revelations. But NASA Challenger and Professor Challenger were both named after yet another Challenger: the HMS Challenger, a warship converted into a research vessel by the British navy and made famous by the Challenger expedition. From 1872–1876, Challenger and its crew sailed the world's oceans, measuring and mapping its depths, collecting and cataloguing thousands of species. HMS Challenger challenged forth the world's oceans – and thereby launched the science of oceanography.

The reader can begin to sense the extraordinary range of materials composing this second axis of Kx4l3ndj3r's revelations – and the challenges they present to anyone trying to grapple with them. And there are more Challengers to come. First, there is Professor William Rutherford, a physiologist Doyle studied with at the University of Edinburgh. Rutherford was a famed lecturer whose exuberant personality provided Doyle the inspiration for his character Professor Challenger. Rutherford's career, however, was controversial and ended sadly. His and other scientists' experiments in vivisection – operating on live animals – were publicly condemned and terminated. Later, accused of making sexual advances to male students, Rutherford was forced from his teaching position, entered into an asylum, and eventually passed away alone and forgotten.

We come now to what I considered many years ago to be the seventh and final Challenger, Jane Challenger. The protagonist of Marcio Souza's *Lost World II*, this Challenger is the granddaughter of Doyle's Professor Challenger and thus "related" to all the Challengers discussed here – and to Dr. Kxalendjer, who also appears in this very same novel. Significantly, Jane Challenger makes a fateful trip to Manaus, Brazil, the very city which Professor Challenger visited in Doyle's famous novel *The Lost World*, where the professor discovers prehistoric animals living on an isolated jungle plateau. The granddaughter makes a similar discovery, unearthing a "reasonably healthy and well-fed species of capitalists considered extinct in England since the eighteenth century."

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But Dr. Kxalendjer's appearance in *Lost World II* raises this question: are there 7 or 8 members in this Challenger series? It is true that the number 7 acts as a strange attractor within *Perform Or Else*: there were 7 Challenger astronauts; there are 7 chapters devoted to 7 Challengers; and a close reading will reveal that many crucial concepts (e.g., "the performance stratum") are defined as having 7 attributes, etc. It's almost as though the book was composed in the key of 7, rather than around a set of critical concepts. And yet Kxalendjer's appearance in it makes 8 Challengers, not 7: what to make of this?

It is here that Dr. Kx4l3ndj3r's revelations become pertinent. As the 8th Challenger, one might expect him to make a case for this twisted number, especially since *Perform Or Else* endlessly refers to strange loops, contains several infinity signs, includes a graph of the relation between efficacy and entertainment that features a similar figure, and even asserts that the loop functions as a "metamodel applicable to the invention of a general theory of performance."

However, Kx4l3ndj3r's second revelation points in another direction: "My recent calculations of this book confirm a revelation I had while reading it long ago in a Brooklyn garden: *Perform Or Else* – and all it discusses, as well as those who read it closely – exist in a fractal dimension between 7 and 8. Using Paul Bourke's Fractal Dimension Calculator, I have now calculated this dimension to be 7.433." For some, this last number explains and perhaps justifies Kx4l3ndj3r. Others contend that Kx4l3ndj3r is actually a 9th Challenger and point to Roni Layerson's sci-fi novel *The Ninth Biospherian* to support this claim. Still others respond by asserting that Kx4l3ndj3r himself exists in a fractal dimension between 9 and 10.

### Axis 3: X is a Rare Form of Disaster

Dr. Kx4l3ndj3r's third revelation revolves around a startling proposition found in Nietzsche's *Nachlass*. Kx4l3ndj3r's translation of this proposition reads: "Life is a very rare form of death." This blunt interpretation of life may shock even the hardest of materialists, though from a strict materialist perspective, its truth seems self-evident.

Kx4l3ndj3r, however, also draws attention to a similar proposition offered by Nietzsche: "Pleasure is but a rare form of pain." This proposition is perhaps even more troubling than the first, but significantly, Kx4l3ndj3r seems less interested in the truth value of either proposition and more taken

by their *form*. Indeed, his own log entries suggest a certain obsession with their syntactical inversion of binary oppositions. For instance, he generated a long list of similar propositions:

**Satiety is a rare form of hunger.**

**Intelligence is a rare form of stupidity.**

**Freedom is a rare form of slavery.**

**Altruism is a rare form of selfishness.**

**Meaning is a rare form of nonsense.**

**Form is a rare form of force.**

**Destiny is a rare form of chance.**

Each of Kx4l3ndj3r's propositions offers its own shock, and for different readers, each no doubt produces its own truth effects – or not, truth being but a rare form of falsity. The latter, of course, is another Nietzschean proposition, one that generated an entire essay. An industrious reader might reverse-engineer Nietzsche's book *The Genealogy of Morals* and distill its analogous proposition.

Taken together, these propositions form the third axis along which Kx4l3ndj3r's revelations unfold. What I am here calling a revelation is actually an additional, unfinished proposition that takes the same form as above, though it may be more accurate to describe this last proposition as open rather than unfinished. It reads:

**X is a rare form of disaster.**

X does not mark a lack in this proposition's formulation, for this same log entry also continues: "*Let X = the everyday, evolution, production, success, happiness, boredom, the universe [...].*" Each value assigned to the variable X conveys its own tremor but in our remaining space-time, I want to touch upon the last proposition suggested by Kx4l3ndj3r:

**The universe is a rare form of disaster.**

At first glance, this proposition may appear absurd, but two profoundly influential Earthean myths can be read as versions of it: the Fall, found in Jewish, Christian, and Islamic traditions; and the Big Bang, found in secular scientific traditions.

We are finally in a position to consider Kx4l3ndj3r's revelations across all three axes presented here. These revelations are indeed cosmographic: If the universe is a rare form of disaster, all of existence is programmed by this event, not just the lives of RM and crew. This primal disaster repeats itself recursively across all scales of the universe: superclusters, clusters, galaxies, stars, planets, and any geological, biological, and social strata they may harbor. The form of existence is therefore fractal; its force



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is repetition, eternal recurrence conceived not as a circle but in a circuit or iterative network connecting and disconnecting all things. Disaster thus recurs in your breathing and gestures, even now as you read these characters and turn away.