Practicing the *Vita Performativa*
Jon McKenzie, Professor of English, Director of DesignLab, University of Wisconsin-Madison

Project Description
My current research seeks to theorize the *vita performativa*, emerging life forms that mix performance, digitality, and design in creating radically new modes of thought and action. My guiding premise is that the traditional distinction between active and contemplative lives is collapsing in our own digital moment, and turning into a new, mixed *performative life* that is bringing with it new modes that are more networked than hierarchical, more collaborative than individual, more ecological than humanist, more affective than theoretical, more holistic than specialized, more fragmented than unified. I call these *post-ideational modes of thought and action,* since they move us away from Western culture's most fundamental assumptions about thinking, the image of distinct ideas, specialized disciplines, stable subjects and objects of knowledge, and clear distinctions between theory and practice, argument and rhetoric, writing and media. New performative modes of "thought-action" draw instead from such areas as experimental arts, indigenous media, neuroscience, and recombinant culture, mashing up practices of orality and literacy, stability and plasticity, mythic and dialectical thought, visual and aural forms, contemplative and active lives. The emerging *vita performativa* is both promising and troubling, uncanny in its jarring remix of past, present, and future.

The academic humanities, still very much enmeshed in traditional models of knowledge, have been slow to engage, theorize, *and contribute* to the emergence of recombinant culture, with its open forms and nonlinear processes of montage, collage, assemblage, combine, hypertext, and mashup. And this is no accident. The traditional liberal arts model continues to value norms of genius, originality, and seriousness, which cuts them off from the most common cultural practices, such as collaboration, remix, and gamification. Significantly, the academic sciences and professional schools are likewise out-of-sync, even computer science and electrical engineering: having helped invent mainframe computers and ARPAnet (precursor to the Internet), universities struggle to contend with the mobile devices, apps, and entire industries coming out of the campuses of Google, Apple, and Intel. Across different institutions today—schools and libraries, businesses and nonprofits, community organizations and activist groups—hierarchies of specialized knowledges feel the transversal pressures of networked knowledges and communities of shared practice. These pressures come from "above" via corporate models but also from "below" from communities online and off, for this emergent transversality entails new modes for producing resistant subjectivity, including collective assemblages of enunciation. Yet scholars maintain a separation from these non-academic communities, too, more often approaching them as objects of research than as collaborators or partners. My own research therefore seeks to shift the grounds of the liberal arts sideways. I argue that traditional assumptions and distinctions in the university are dramatically limiting our capacity to understand contemporary modes of power and knowledge and to engage with other communities and institutions. Faced with unprecedented challenges, academic disciplines have opportunities to mesh critical modes of disciplinary knowledge with collaborative modes of networked, performative life, where a more holistic, daring, and humble ethos emerges, one closer to noir wisdom than enlightened knowledge.

The *vita performativa* entails new ways of being in the world, new modes of social organization and subject formation, as well as new spatiotemporal architectures for work and life, patterns all associated in intimate and sometimes terrifying ways with digitality, whether it be social media, dataveillance, or in-app purchases. What are the forms and practices emerging out of our collective archives and into the performances of our networked lives? Over the past twenty years, I have helped to give concrete form to my theoretical work through a number of innovative institutional platforms, including a pedagogy I call StudioLab (which mixes conceptual, aesthetic, and technical practice), Media Studio classrooms (architectural forms whose flexibility allows mixing learning styles in one space), and more recently, the DesignLab consultancy (design services that mix research, consulting, and outreach), and "smart media" (emerging scholarly genres such as Ted Talks and theory comics that mix academic and popular media).

The book *Practicing the* Vita Performativa will bring together three key terms: performance, digitality, and design. The claims I make about performance draw from my first book, *Perform or Else: From Discipline to Performance* (Routledge 2001). There I argued that since WWII, the world has been increasingly organized by the demand to "perform." This period has seen the rise of performance reviews in the workplace, performance specs in engineering, and experimental performance art. Where traditional disciplines separated domains of knowledge, reinforced the dividing line between subjects and objects, and taught practices by breaking them down into discrete and replicable tasks, performance emphasizes creativity, combination, and dynamic flow. In a sense, *logos* shifts from logic as reflective reason to *poiesis* as mindful making. German performance scholar Erika Fischer-Lichte contends that the broad "performative turn" radically transforms the relation between subjects and objects, materiality and semioticity, the very foundations of ideational thought. This turn creates a fold cutting across the subjective, social, and onto-historic. In my new book, I will explore the ways in which the *vita performativa* is to global performativity—the generalized demand to perform or else—what Nietzsche's gay science is to Descartes' scientific method or Alfred Jarry's pataphysics is to Newton's physics: an embodied challenge to our sense of being as *eidos*, *idea*, form, as something permanent, originary, and/or destinal with respect to the flow of becoming.

This new project will show how the rise of digital media has been essential to the shift from discipline to performance, *from the form to the event of thought*. Just as the invention of writing displaced whole ways of being and thinking that organized oral cultures—including repertoires of knowledge passed on through song, dance, and ritual—digital culture displaces traditional models of knowledge embodied in the book and archive, reinscribing them within a more collaborative, multimediated, and polyrhythmic spacetime that is event-based—*dramatic* or rather *postdramatic*, as Hans-Thies Lehmann terms post-literate theater and performance. Drawing on the work of media theorists Eric Havelock, Walter Ong, Jacques Derrida, Gregory Ulmer and Friedrich Kittler, and ethnographers Jack Goody, Eric Michaels, and Jennifer Deger, I seek to make the case that *digitality mashes up the life forms of orality and literacy to produce the new modes of thought and action I call the* vita performativa*: it combines spirits and subjects, totems and objects, myths and logics, images and ideas, rituals and methods*. The affinity between digitality and the *vita performativa* is infrastructural, cybernetic, and onto-historical. In the next phase of my work, I plan

to explore both individual and collective practices of the *vita performativa* through the emergence of "postconceptual" personae such as avatars, secret societies, game communities, and activist networks (think Anonymous) that mix epistemic and popular knowledges, as well as contemporary and ancient practices of wisdom. At the collective level, the *vita performativa* generates global feelings or affective patterns that oscillate between disenchantment and reenchantment of the contemporary world.

Design is the third key term of the book, and it is the newest addition to my work on the *vita performativa*. Just as performance challenges traditional models of practice and digitality remakes knowledge, design challenges modernist and Western traditions of creativity and making, and it is striking to note *how little design is studied in the humanities*. Western aesthetics has produced highly specialized, individualistic experts, such as musicians, sculptors, and poets. These models are very different from emerging *processes of design*—whose performances valorize holistic, collaborative amateurs, best captured in the contemporary DIY movement: *everyone a designer*. Studies of collective media groups will help me to show how the *vita performativa* broadly democratizes. In all domains, it entails a movement away from detached expert to engaged practitioner in order to craft an art of life, a practice of wisdom, an environmentalism of design.

Design constitutes a deterritorializing force in the 21st-century, one cutting across fields and institutions and deforming and transforming their objects and subjects as it does so. The subtle, paradoxical, and profound impact of "human-centered design" is its radical *decentering* of human thought and action within sociotechnical assemblages of the larger Anthropocene or ecological life world. From human-computer interaction and the web industry has emerged powerful practices of *experience design*, practices that produce intimate experiences at massive scale (such as transnational birthday parties via Skype). From performance studies and architecture has emerged the field of *performance design*, which approaches the design of social spaces and architectural forms from the perspective of the events, bodies, and materials which flow through them (such as the use of public squares and buildings by successive generations of protesters). From industrial design and cultural anthropology has arisen *design thinking*, a meta-method used for product development and social innovation (such as microenterprise projects that bring locally produced goods to distant markets). *Design anthropology* is a new field which both practices and theorizes the ways that design research draws on ethnographic methods, as well as reflects on the affordances and constraints that design in turn offers to anthropology (such as the contrast between creation and interpretation). These new ways of living, knowing, and making all *jolt the experience of thought from form to event, from thinker to life world, from detachment to engagement*.

Despite their innumerable differences, analytic philosophy, pragmatism, psychoanalysis, speculative realism, phenomenology, existentialism, cybernetics, critical theory, behaviorism, structuralism, feminism, queer theory, and post-structuralism all register this jolt in thought: Platonic ideation—the very image of thought as ideas, as clear and distinct forms, as detached, objective idealization—is surmountable, deconstructible. *At stake in the* vita performativa *is a mode of ecstatic truth prior to correspondence or adequation, realism or constructivism, a truth that blinds as well as reveals, of which ideas are after-images or projections*. Nietzsche writes of revelations,

Heidegger of unconcealment, Benjamin of flashes, Ronell of electric speech, and McLuhan of "collide-o-scopic" pattern recognition. These new modes of thought-action entail nonlinear, networked patterns that differ markedly from the linear, hierarchical categories of ideational thinking. The jolt produced by iterative, nonlinear processes generates the psychophysical leaps that Carlo Ginzburg (following Pierce and Lacan) calls *abduction* and also the deliberative "flash reason" of recursive invention that Gregory Ulmer calls *conduction*.

By gathering the transversal, democratizing forces of performance, digitality, and design, the *vita performativa* supplements inductive and deductive forms of universal ideation with abductive and conductive events whose experiential patterns resonate with the collaborative networks of avant-garde groups, gaming communities, indigenous media makers, and cyber-activists. These thought-action events unfold less through transcendent, ideological critique than immanent refunctionings or queerings of sociotechnical systems at the levels of life, labor, and language. While subjects, objects, and the ideas that separate them emerged with the alphabet and literate archives and were later democratized via print, these new flickering figures appear and dissolve though their movement across diverse sites and are becoming democratized globally—for better and for worse—via digital media and other interfaces of the *vita performativa*.