

Disastronautics: How to do Things with Worlds

by Jon McKenzie & Ralo Mayer

Friday 28 June 2013 10.00 p.m. · Nitory Theatre

BLOG RESPONSE BY
KELLEN HOXWORTH

'First and foremost, *différance* is a theory of space-time.' Speaking these words into a microphone behind an unlit table, Jon McKenzie provides a model for his and Ralo Mayer's praxis session in miniature. Centre-stage, a projector screen dominates the space. On its surface, various media of sound, music (notably, the B-52's 'Planet Claire' and Muse's 'Butterflies and Hurricanes'), still images, documentary film and Google Maps cross-pollinate to create a dense constellation of referentiality. Within this array, a particular motif emerges: 1986 was a year marked by disaster, and following the French origins of the word, these disasters were those of the stars, '*des astres*', and the star-crossed. For McKenzie, the central image for conceptualizing the astral qualities of disaster becomes the Space Shuttle *Challenger*.

McKenzie's narrative of the *Challenger* disaster resonates with autobiography – an intuitive mapping of history's constellations. Moving from the National Aeronautics and Space Administration's (NASA's) Rogers Commission Report on the event, McKenzie traces the *Challenger* as 'an accident rooted in history'. He charts the disastronautics of the past half-century, from John F. Kennedy's instantiation of the Race to

Space and his assassination in 1963, to McKenzie's collection of early NASA memorabilia from cereal boxes, to Ronald Reagan's invocation of *Star Wars* and his administration's support of anti-Union of Soviet Socialist Republics (anti-USSR) resistance movements in Afghanistan.

Soon after, Ralo Mayer maps a different constellation. His originates with former United Nations Secretary-General (UNSG), former Austrian president and former Nazi, Kurt Waldheim. The history of earthly disasters are carried beyond the astral plane in the form of Waldheim's voice, inscribed on the golden record aboard the *Voyager 2*, which recently left our solar system. Such convergences between the earthly and the cosmic provide the frame for considering the world through the model of disaster – the moments when, as McKenzie quotes of Reagan's eulogy for the *Challenger* astronauts, humans 'touch the face of God'. *Challenger* thus reiterates in the twenty-first century disasters of 9/11 and the Space Shuttle *Columbia* disaster (2003). Placed against Nietzsche's idea of eternal return, disastronautics is a study of limits, of boundaries, of conceptual modelization. It is, in McKenzie's interpretation and in Mayer's art, a model for the

cosmic bounce-back predicted by the theory of the multiverse. In other words, it is a framework for considering 'how to do things with worlds'.

Ralo Mayer's artistic works, captured through visual documentation in a PowerPoint archive and video, insist upon modelization, of considering worlds in miniature. Such models, McKenzie and Mayer assert, are the basis for a form of *artistic* knowledge production. To the contrary of separations between form and content and disciplinary divisions between orality, literality and digitality, McKenzie and Mayer provide a model for a new academic media. The multimedia of 'Disastronautics' presents a new rhetoricity, structured on the palimpsestic layering and simultaneous juxtapositions enabled by new technologies.

Paradigmatically, McKenzie and Mayer present a video of a science-fiction narrative of Dr. Kx4l3ndj3r [pron. "Challenger"], a trans-historical figure who interpolates Heidegger's 'challenging forth' towards revealing. In this frame, the 'question concerning technology' is one of revelation; placed alongside the *Challenger* disaster at the face of God, the question is also one of Revelations. Cosmic thinking, therefore, structures

disastronautics, which views the universe primarily as disaster: a primal originary disaster – either in the form of the Fall or the Big Bang – iterating recursively, producing fractal reality of reiterative, multiplicitous disastrology. The world begins by ending, and continues to end throughout its modelization.

In McKenzie and Mayer's presentation, 'content' emerged as rich, provocative and expansive. Their performing

bodies, however, were not at object. Rather, the technologies at their disposal were the primary instruments of questioning – of challenging forth – new paradigms of knowledge production, transmission and reception. The praxis of this session, in part, reconceptualized the place of technology in the academy – part of McKenzie's broader project based out of the University of Wisconsin-Madison's DesignLab – and of

providing a practical model for the co-imbrication of theory, art and their mutual praxis. Rather than viewing this shift towards new technologies as a disaster for the traditional academy, disastronautics seems to assert that disaster has been with us all along, and the latest wave of technological and practical innovation is merely a challenging forth of new modes of engaging (with) our worlds.