# Collective Thought-Action: On Lecture Performances, Transmedia Knowledge, and Designing Possible Worlds

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Figure 1 https://vimeo.com/235663990

## The Global Lecture Machine

To give a lecture opening a lecture performance festival puts one in a paradoxical situation, especially before the International Congress of Aesthetics: I am lecturing before and about a genre whose aesthetics seem designed precisely to explore, expand, and in many cases explode the lecture as a form of power and knowledge. We can situate the lecture onto-historically as part of a global lecture machine, a disciplinary apparatus that arises with the modern university as a panoptic institution producing human subjects worldwide. "Lecture" means "to read," and this immense reading machine you are seated in today stretches back to Plato's Academy and around the world through colonialism and other waves of globalization. Over centuries, religious pulpits and shamanic circles have made way for secular lecterns dispensing universal reason through

ideational thinking. Universal reason demands universal seating, assigning errant individuals and entire nomadic peoples to their seats in schools and lecture halls so they can see and hear ideas presented in logical order — and learn to reason themselves. Compulsory education laws require them to do so. Modernity's challenge is thus: reason or else! Attend lectures, learn to read and write! From this perspective, experimental lecture performances explore, expand, and sometimes explode this global lecture machine, critiquing and/or reimagining its operation of power-knowledge. It is here that other possible worlds emerge.

If Derrida taught us that logocentrism is the most powerful ethnocentrism the world has ever known, we also know that the lecture machine can become not just a driver of intense nationalisms—one thinks of Heidegger's Rector Lecture—but also the *target* of such nationalisms. Thus, in India, the Modi government has long targeted JNU or Jawaharlal Nehru University for "anti-nationalism"; in Hungary, the Orban government has driven the Central European University from Budapest to Vienna; in the United States, the Trump Administration seeks to deny federal funds to sanctuary campuses protecting immigrant students, while campus lectures have become sites contested by both the right and the left. And more subtly and perniciously: national intelligence agencies in collaboration with IT corporations have manipulated electoral processes worldwide, using data analytics to localize and microtarget voting behaviors through social media we both love and hate. The dramaturgies of fake news and post-truth produced by Vladislav Surkov and Cambridge Analytica operate not only through texts and images, discursive performatives and embodied performances, they also function at the level of data flows and algorithms, the input/output matrices of micro-performative power and knowledge analyzed by Lyotard and which Lazzarato, following Guattari, analyzes in terms of the diagrammatic.[1]

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[1] See Jean-François Lyotard, *The Postmodern Condition* (Minneapolis: The University of Minnesota Press, 1986), Maurizio Lazzarato, *Signs and Machines: Capitalism and the Production of Subjectivity* (Los Angeles: Semiotext(e), 2014), and Felix Guattari, *Schizoanalytic Cartographies* (London: Bloomsbury Academic.

In the era of global micro- and macro-performativities, lecturers find their texts and images confronting diagrammatic power circuits operating at scales far below and above human consciousness. These circuits are not limited to nationalisms, but include international and multinational powers, as well as the powers of communities, coalitions, social groups, and individuals. Both states and hacktivists agree: power has gone virtual, nano, and networked, mobilized in the streets and raining down from cyberspace in a grand pincer movement joining earth and sky, intimacies and ontologies. The battle over subject positions — whether nationalist or ethnic, capitalist or communist, western or eastern, urban or rural, cis or lgbt, white or rainbow, old or young, human or posthuman—involves a battle over packets and networks, events and assemblages. Performative power and its ubiquitous dataveillance do not preclude the formation of stable identities and hierarchies, and in fact, the new power circuits depend upon these as raw material, as common building blocks of societies of control.

What becomes of knowledge as power becomes diagrammatic and post-disciplinary, when panoptic enclosures give way to open networks? And what becomes of aesthetics—which as embodied experience, philosophical concept, and field of knowledge emerged with the human subject, the Enlightenment, and thus with discipline and its global network of lecture machines? Without these lecterns, there would be no International Congress of Aesthetics, no International Association of Aesthetics, and none of the myriad of national aesthetics associations. What becomes of aesthetics in a post-disciplinary, performative world? And what might be its role in generating other possible worlds?

The future of knowledge, power, and aesthetics—in classical terms, the True, the Good, and the Beautiful—is precisely what is at stake and in play with the lecture performances we will see and hear shortly. Lecture performances mix elements of traditional lectures with practices from art, design, and everyday life, from experimental performance to data visualizations to walking in a field. A genealogy of the lecture performance would stretch back through 20th-century avant-garde

performance to 19th-century orators and beyond. Rather than attempt such a genealogy, I will instead situate lecture performances transversally across genres and mediums, connecting them to contemporary forms such as theory rap, science dance, experimental conferences, and other genres of what I call *transmedia knowledge*. Transmedia knowledge is knowledge moving across different genres to engage different stakeholders, including specialists, communities, policy-makers, and the general public. The Scholarly Communication Institute at the University of Virginia calls such forms "emerging genres in scholarly communication."[2] But communication does not exhaust the effects these genres produce and invite. By mixing specialized and common knowledge, by resituating *logos* within *graphe*, text within media, transmedia knowledge destabilizes a founding opposition of the Platonic academy: *episteme* (knowledge, science) and *doxa* (opinion, belief). In areas such as community engagement, participatory research, and citizen science, knowledge may flow from the people to the experts. What becomes of aesthetics in a post-Platonic universe, where mastery of knowledge takes a rap?

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[2] Scholarly Communications Inst., http://uvasci.org/institutes-2003-2011/SCI-8-Emerging-Genres.pdf

Figure 2 https://phd.aydeethegreat.com/

## Discipline, Control, and Masters

In his dissertation "Owning My Masters: The Rhetorics of Rhymes and Revolutions," A.D. Carson raps critical race theory as a form of knowledge that challenges the legacy of slavery and mastery in America and beyond. He writes: "This hip-hop album is a critical-theoretical reflection on personhood vis-à-vis Black bodies and Black lives. Rather than theorizing about hip-hop, the project 'does' this work through the genre of hip-hop."[3] Through rap, music, video, and texts, Carson situates his research using the campus of Clemson University as a critical site of intervention and invention. Clemson is a state institution whose founder, Thomas Green Clemson, was a former slave owner, US Cabinet member, and Confederate officer who bequeathed his plantation to found an agricultural, land grant university. Carson *owns* his masters by rapping critical race theory on Clemson campus grounds, monuments, and buildings such as the Strom Thurmond Institute, thereby exappropriating and remixing the US history of slavery and oppression of black lives. In

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[3] A.D.Carson, "Owning My Masters: The Rhetorics of Rhymes & Revolutions" (All Dissertations. 1885. https://tigerprints.clemson.edu/all_dissertations/1885, 2017).

doing so, he also analyzes the relation between mastery, discipline, and knowledge, and the ways that rap and hip hop culture struggle with and within established forms and institutions of knowledge, challenging the role of mastery within disciplinary knowledge. The implications here are profound.

Like millions of others around the world, I hold a Masters degree, one earned at another land grant university in the American South, the University of Florida. I now teach in upstate New York at Cornell University, itself a land grant institution founded on indigenous land and that recently changed its arboretum's name from the Cornell Plantations to the Cornell Botanical Gardens. Plantations and cultivation, masters and fields, subjects and objects, discipline and punish: Carson's theory rap exposes the violent colonial history underlying modern knowledge and cultural production at large. Here we can patch in tracks from Alexander Kojève's famous 1930s lectures on Hegel's master/slave dialectic, a reading that influenced an entire generation of French intellectuals, who later inspired an entire generation of American intellectuals. Kojève's reading: the dialectical victory of absolute knowledge over ideology marks the end of History and is achieved through the slaves' superior practical knowledge, the labor of making things.[4] In her pathbreaking essay "Hegel and Haiti," Buck-Morss argues that Hegel may have developed the master/slave dialectic — the model Marx adapted later to theorize the working class as the revolutionary agent of history — from the anti-slavery Haitian Revolution of 1791.[5] History rhymes through rhetorics and revolutions: through Carson's transmedia dissertation, the figure of the Master emerges, and it is us: the scholar's podium resonates with the slave auctioneer's podium.

The connection between masters of slaves and masters of knowledge was famously made by Audre Lorde, the self-described "black, lesbian, mother, warrior, poet." Angered by the marginalization of black women at a 1979 NYU conference on the role of difference in feminism,

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[4] Alexandre Kojève, *Introduction to the Reading of Hegel* (New York: Basic Books, 1969).
[5] Susan Buck-Morss, "Hegel and Haiti" (*Critical Inquiry* 26:4: Summer, 2000, pp. 821-865).

Lorde addresses what counts as acceptable skills for experiencing difference: "survival is not an academic skill. It is learning how to take our differences and make them strengths. *For the master's tools will never dismantle the master's house.* They may allow us temporarily to beat him at his own game, but they will never enable us to bring about genuine change. And this fact is only threatening to those women who still define the master's house as their only source of support."[6] The master's tools and master's house point to both the plantation and the university. In this light, A.D. Carson's rejection of the traditional dissertation, a monomedium genre with black letters lined up on white paper, is a rejection of the master's tools and the master's house — yet also an embrace. Citing Stephano Harvey and Fred Moten, he describes his work as "Black study, the work of fugitive planning. It is work for and against the university, for and against disciplines, for and against verification and validation. The object of 'Owning My Masters' is the aim of 'Owning My Masters.' The work is underground."[7] Carson's theory rap performs the critique of the master's thesis and does so precisely through the displacement of the logocentric dissertation into the rhymes and reason of transmedia knowledge.

What is specialized knowledge if not mastery of a field of objects and set of methods, in our context, the objects and methods traditionally categorized as aesthetics, as art, art history, and philosophy? Is not mastery what separates *episteme* from *doxa*, knowledge from ideology, method from ritual, experts from amateurs, and academic conferences from mere conversations? Is not shared mastery what motivates the formation of academic societies and international congresses? Lecture performances, theory rap, and other forms of transmedia knowledge challenge the model of mastery by enabling elements of common knowledge to encounter specialized knowledge in new and provocative ways. Carson's rap dissertation in Rhetoric, Communication, and Information Design follows on the graphic theory book *Unflattening,* Nick Sousanis' 2013 Columbia dissertation

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[6] Audre Lorde, "The Master's Tools Will Never Dismantle the Master's House" in *Sister Outsider: Essays and Speeches* (Berkeley, CA: Crossing Press, 1984), p. 112. My emphasis.
[7] Carson, ibid.

on visual and verbal thinking written in graphic novel form and published by Harvard University Press. These two transmedia dissertations indicate that tools other than the master's have emerged and that the master's house is being dismantled and reimagined.

Different bodies, different institutions, different worlds are coming into being. The International Congress of Aesthetics hosts a lecture performance festival: this suggests what aesthetics may become in post-disciplinary societies of control: transmediated, remixed, and remastered — and ultimately unmasterable. It comes as no surprise that the question of mastery arises in the shift from disciplinary to performative power-knowledge, for mastery bridges the grand narratives of humanist discipline and the input/output matrices of post-humanist control. To engage with the micro- and macro-performativities of contemporary power-knowledge and invent other possible worlds, mastery of a single medium or discipline no longer suffices, while mastery of many media and disciplines seems both unrealistic and undesirable. What is needed is something different than mastery: the willingness and agility to think and act across different media and fields of knowledge, both specialized and common. Transmedia knowledge entails choreographing different knowledges, different ethics, different aesthetics.

Split apart using beam-splitter

Figure 3 https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=BzKdKJn9El4

## Reconfiguring Thought and Action

Dance Your PhD is an annual contest sponsored by *Science* magazine in which doctoral candidates

in biology, chemistry, physics, and the social sciences transmediate their research into dance videos

judged by panels of scholars and editors. The quantum physicist and ballerina Merritt Moore won

the 2015 Dance Your PhD contest in physics for "Spontaneous Parametric Down-Conversion:

Photon Pair Generation," a Tango dance video shot partly in her lab and partly on a staircase. As

with other work in this transmedia genre, the dancing bodies here incarnate not fictional tales or

poetic images but rather scientific concepts and methods. The tango, it turns out, resonates with

quantum processes of entanglement, the phenomenon of groups of pairs of quantum particles to

share physical properties, even across the universe. Einstein called it "spooky action at a distance."

Dancing her PhD, Moore overlays music, dance, video, and text to present her research, juxtaposing

images of a lasars, beam-splitter, and other lab equipment with footage of herself dancing the tango

with a partner. Using small phrases in large text superimposed over the video images, she describes

the process of separating photon pairs. In her description of the video, she writes, "Even when a photon pair leaves the crystal (the lab), they continue down the same path. It is only when they are separated by a polarizing beam-splitter that the two photons are forced in different directions, because of their different polarizations. These photons are generated spontaneously and would otherwise be impossible to measure without destroying them; therefore they are intentionally separated so that one can be detected to herald the existence of the other."[8] Moore's tango of entanglement offers us a performance of quantum alterity: it heralds the existence of an other, beginning with other ways of thinking and acting that are always already entangled with our own. Quantum alterity offers a way to tune in the micro-performativities of post-disciplinary power-knowledge and displace mastery with spooky action at a distance, the telepathy of an other and another and an otter.

The dancer and choreographer Yvonne Rainer famously stated, "The mind is a muscle." Moore's "Spontaneous Parametric Down-Conversion" and other Dance Your PhD videos demonstrate how working across different media involves working different parts of the mind-muscle. By bringing together dance and highly conceptual discourse, Dance Your PhD effectively combines elements of orality and literacy, introducing into logocentric science the music, song, and dance that Plato so successfully excluded from true, epistemic knowledge when he banished Homeric poets from the Republic. In *Preface to Plato*, Havelock reframes *The Republic* as a battle over pedagogies: Plato vs Homer, idea vs. image, logic vs myth, monomedia writing vs polymorphic performance. Havelock stresses that the Homeric tradition functioned as the encyclopedia or repertoire of Greek knowledge. The epic is mnemonic: as in other oral cultures, Homeric knowledge is remembered in the body, and epic poetry both records and disseminates this knowledge through tales rhythmically composed and performed in organized action using the stringed lyre. And there are other means beyond music: "These are the legs and feet and their motions organized as dancing.

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[8] Merritt Moore, "Dance Your PhD" Physics 2015: EnTANGOed" (YouTube video description. https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=BzKdKJn9El4).

Once more, as with the use of the lyre, we confront here a pattern of organised actions, the function of which is mnemonic. It moves in a rhythm which parallels that of the spoken words, and spaces and punctuates them, so that the choric recitation becomes also a bodily performance which assists in 'acting out' the recital."[9] It is this precisely this acting out that disappears within the *vita contemplativa*, the life of contemplating ideas. This is why universal reason requires universal seating: Plato interrupts the poetry, song, and dance with prose, logic, and stillness. The separation of knower and known comes down to separating mind and body, ideal Forms (*Eidos*) and visceral Images (*Imagos*), logic (*logos*) and myth (*mythos*). With theory, the Greeks sat down: the birth of the lecture machine was the death of music, song, and dance as general activities of knowledge production and dissemination.

With respect to the festival before us: the Homeric tradition constitutes an entire world known through lecture performances, except without the ideas, arguments, and theories, all of which arise with Platonic literacy. Dance Your PhD transmediates these literate elements and acts them out. Transmedia knowledge reanimates song, dance, and images to revel in the entanglement of orality and literacy within digitality, understood as an onto-historical apparatus that displaces oral repertoires and literate archives within networked databases. The displacement of discipline by performative power-knowledge channels this displacement of literacy by digitality, and both entail the reinscription of static, Platonic ontology within the dynamic ontologies associated with Heraclitus, Nietzsche, and Whitehead. The genres of transmedia knowledge function as interfaces atop digitality's sociotechnical infrastructures. Through transmediation, knowledge is dynamically acted out, as truth has become not simply a report on the world for specialists but also an event in the world, a world with multiple stakeholders.

We can register this entanglement of thought and action in numerous modern philosophers and schools, beginning with the pragmatism of James, Pierce, and Dewey, for whom the truth of

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[9] Eric Havelock, *Preface to Plato* (Cambridge, MA: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 1963), p. 150.

theoretical knowledge is found in its practical application. Similarly, truth in the life forms that

Wittgenstein called language games resides in their everyday use, and the stable identity of ideas

gives way to shifting family resemblances. Austin distinguished constantive reports from

performative speech acts, utterances that "do things in the world." Such performatives are thus not

judged as true or false but as successful or unsuccessful, happy or unhappy. Along a very different

trajectory, Heidegger countered the contemplation of Platonic forms with the event of *Ereignis*

where truth unfolds as unconcealment or *aletheia*, a revealing that also conceals Being. For her part,

Arendt countered the entire tradition of the *vita contemplativa* with the *vita activa*, an explicit call

for an active philosophy. All of these philosophies act out, entangling thought and action, paired

activities that have been communing despite the Platonic beam-splitter.

Dance Your PhD heralds the emergence of *thought-action figures*, figures that are to

digitality what ideas were to literacy, cognitive forms of an emerging apparatus of power and

knowledge. Unlike ideas, thought-action figures are dynamic and mediated rather than static and

ideal, but like ideas they are not limited to human figures. Animals, plants, machines, systems,

processes, materialities, symbols, concepts, and other abstract entities—all become thought-action

figures via transmediation, movement through mediums deemed material, spiritual, cultural,

historical, ontological, etc. While ideas are transcendent, unitary, and eternal, figures are immanent,

multiple, and transitory: they emerge and dissipate both within and across different media and

contexts, from sociotechnical systems and animal rituals to microbiological evolution and chemical

interactions. Unlike ideas, thought-action figures are not governed by the three foundational laws of

thought: the law of identity (X=X), the law of non-contradiction (X≠-X), and the law of the excluded

middle (either X is true or -X is true). Nor are their movements and relations limited to aborescent

logic and its methodical steps of induction and deduction: figures can make these moves but are

also rhizomatic, their movements also include abductive leaps across conceptual systems and

conductive flashes that arise by overlaying different systems. Thought-action is thus choreographic.

Ideas are forms, figures are rhythms, or more precisely, packet-like waves moving across media and bearing traits of both traditional objects of knowledge as well as a class of strange objects that not only includes quantum particles but also Aristotle's black swan (rare event), the Stoics' *ti* and the Scholastics' *aliquid* (both meaning "something" rather than a thing), Meinong's *Aussersein* (outside being), Klein's partial object, Gödel's undecidables, Baudrillard's simulacra, Deleuze and Guattari's incorporeal acts, and Derrida's *pharmakon* (remedy/poison). Reinscribed within digitality, Platonic ideas become rare forms of thought-action figures, produced at particular moments within critical and creative processes alongside affective, non-discursive, and material, environmental elements.

When Plato expelled the poets from the Republic, he did so not only because for him poetry, music, dance, and myth could at best produce *doxa*, but more important, he believed that they harbor the morally corrupting effects of mimetic enchantment. Philosophy was the *pharmakon*/medicine he prescribed to counter the *pharmakon*/poison of mimesis, just as we prescribe critical theory to counter intoxicating ideologies.[10] Platonic beauty, like Platonic love and dialectics, idealizes away the body and its figurations, using *logos* and *eidos* to drive out myth, images, music, song, and dance. While Aristotle's *Poetics* effectively rescues practices that will later become known as art, this rehabilitation reduces their pedagogic and intellectual function to the training of small children and eccentric adults. Millennia later, art remains trapped in a cage called aesthetics; or perhaps it is the other way around, and it is aesthetic practices that remained trapped in the cage of art. In either case, it helps to approach this cage as a thought-action figure, alongside the lecture machine, the master, and the entangoed dancer.

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[10] See Jacques Derrida, "Plato's Pharmacy" (in *Dissemination*, Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1981).

Figure 4 https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=gXOIkT1-QWY

## Chance, Constraint, and the Cagean Escape

In 1960, John Cage performed *Water Walk* on the popular American game show *What's My Line?*
Cage had premiered *Water Walk* a year earlier on the Italian game show *Lascia o Raddoppia*. The

performance of *Water Walk* on television game shows was part of a series of experimental works

exploring the borders of music and sound, art and life, high culture and mass media. *Water Walk*

uses a specific chance operation technique developed in *Fontana Mix*. Over an existing score, Cage

overlaid different transparent sheets, some with random dots, another a line, another a grid: the

resulting performance score was determined by the chance patterns produced by overlaying the

sheets. For *Water Walk*, the score included a diagram of the space, a 3-minute timeline with

notations of events, and thirty-four different materials, including prepared piano, five radios, an

audio tape player, and a host of things related to water: ice cubes, pressure cooker, toy duck and

fish, water pitchers, vase and flowers, blender, and a tub. As Cage states on air: "I call it *Water Walk*

because it contains water, and I walk during this performance." And water walk Cage does, moving

about the set to pour water, chip ice, strike radios, water flowers, make seltzer water, strike the

piano, drink seltzer water, knock radios to the floor—each event's duration determined by chance

operations and then performed by this poised figure named John Cage.

Post-disciplinary, post-Platonic aesthetics gets its chance from a certain Cagean thought-

action figure. Cage is sometimes associated with anti-aesthetics or the rejection of art as the

expression of Beauty, or if you like, the freeing of aesthetics from the cage of art or vice versa.

Cage's displacement of music within the broader space of sound and, more broadly still, the

blurring of art's boundaries with everyday life obviously echoes Duchamp's dadaist interventions

in, and subsequent withdrawal from, the art world; and Cage's juxtaposition of indeterminacy and

intricate planning and execution would inform the neodadaist, Fluxus movements then emerging

around the world. Cage also gave "lecture events," reading texts composed by *I Ching* operations,

accompanied by music, installation, and/or dance. He was, in short, a prolific maker of lecture

performances in which the written text generates the performance, confusing the distinction of

thought and action. In her essay "Post-Cagean Aesthetics and the 'Event' Score," Liz Kotz identifies

the conceptual ambiguity that directly relates to the reinscription of writing within transmedia and

the entanglement of thought and action. "This conceptual ambiguity," she writes, "derives from the

use of the *text as score, inseparably both writing/printed object and performance/"realization."*[11]

Kotz shows how Cage's approach to composing texts as scores directly influenced Fluxus artists

such as George Brecht, George Maciunas, and La Monte Young. Here texts become performative and

diagrammatic: not reporting on past events but generating new ones, functioning she says as

"music scores, visual art, poetic texts, performance instructions, or proposals for some kind of

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[11] Linda Kotz, Post-Cagean Aesthetics and the "Event" Score," October, Vol. 95 (Winter, 2001), pp. 54-89.

action."[12] *Water Walk* has been performed by different artists over the years, and YouTube contains video documentation of many performances. Note, however, that all lectures have this performative dimension and transmedia potential, though typically we reduce the performing body to reading written texts whose contingencies remain hidden behind method and mastery. We don't touch the frame or call attention to the cage.

Cage's particular freeing of aesthetics from the cage of art (and vice versa), as well as the symbiotic play between John Cage and cage as enclosure, informs the 2012 documentary *How to Get Out of the Cage: A Year with John Cage* by filmmaker Frank Scheffer. Assembled from interviews and performance documentation that Scheffer shot between 1982 and 1992, *How to Get Out of the Cage* was created for the 100th anniversary of Cage's birth. Over the course of the film, we learn of several Cagean escape routes, beginning with Cage's citation of Duchamp's call to escape the image, specifically past or projected images that block off the event before us. Contributing to the emergence of thought-action figures, Cage says that ideas outside his head open his mind better than the ideas inside it. At another point, pianist David Tudor describes how working with Cage freed him from all past associations. But sometimes the escape may also be part of the trap. Perhaps the most provocative insight into the Cagean escape from the cage comes late in the film, when Cage states that if "you want to get free of your tastes and memories, likes and dislikes, then you have to discipline yourself."[13] Cage's freedom, his escape from the cage of traditional art-making and aesthetics, paradoxically lies in discipline, but this Cagean discipline is in turn itself paradoxical as it gives up control to the indeterminacy of chance operations. Discussing the impact of Zen Buddhism on his work, Cage makes it clear that the cage he seeks to escape is Cage himself, the ego or self making choices and judgments about the world. He does so by "shifting responsibility from making

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[12] Kotz, 57.

[13] See *How to Get Out of the Cage: A Year with John Cage*, directed by Frank Scheffer (DVD. Berlin: Euroarts and Silk Road & Dreyer-Gaido, 2012).

choices to asking questions and getting the answers by means of the ancient coin-tossing method of the *I Ching*. Now I have it in the computer."[14]

Digital *I Ching*: within post-disciplinary thought-action, mastery here gives way to the paradoxical constraints of chance operations and the chances of subject-less constraints, which entangle the pairs chance-necessity, art-life, though-action. Imagine reading John Cage's name as a performance script generated by chance operations and then using this script to compose a post-disciplinary, post-critical aesthetics, one freed from the cages of both discipline and Platonism. Ulmer attempts such a project in the influential collection *The Anti-Aesthetic: Essays in Postmodern Culture*. Ulmer applies to Cage the signature experiment that Derrida conducts in *Glas*, where Derrida reads Hegel in terms of eagle and *Ekel* (disgust) and Genet in terms of *genêt*, a flower that appears in *Our Lady of the Flowers*, Genet's breakout novel written in a prison cell. Unlike Hegel, Genet signed on to the becoming improper, become common of his name. Artists sign works but only because we first respond to the world's sign or call to respond, to an alterity beyond all mastery. Likewise, Ulmer follows the chances of Cage's signature in order to theorize the object of post-criticism, an entire genre of experimental works that mix theory and practice. "Such texts," Ulmer writes, "represent or mime not by means of signs but by signing—the signature. What remains of 'identity' in a post-critical text is constituted by the new mimesis—the contamination between language and its user, the effects of which may be seen in the fact that the man who composed 'Music of Changes,' who composes all his productions by means of the 'Book of Changes' (*I Ching*) in order, he hopes, to change society, is named *Jo Change* (John Cage)."[15] Thought-action figures thus include both the strange objects of post-criticism and also their eccentric and sometimes cagey subjects. To each subject-object pairing belongs its "own" immanent aesthetics, its own quantum signature event, its own possible world which escapes human mastery.

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[14] Cage in *How to Get Out of the Cage*.

[15] Greg Ulmer, "The Object of Post-Criticism" in *The Anti-Aesthetic: Essays in Postmodern Culture* (Port Townsend, WA: Bay Press, 1983), p. 107.

Compositionally: the lecture you are hearing-seeing now was composed by juxtaposing six different works of transmediate knowledge—video essay, theory rap, Dance Your PhD, avant-game show, etc.—and then using their chance associations as constraints to generate six texts roughly 3-pages each that together outline a theory of post-disciplinary aesthetics through different thought-action figures. The experiment seeks to produce abductive leaps and conductive flashes in others. Thus far, I have focused on individual works of transmedia knowledge; however, as I have intimated, experimentation also occurs at larger scales, such as academic conferences and research universities.
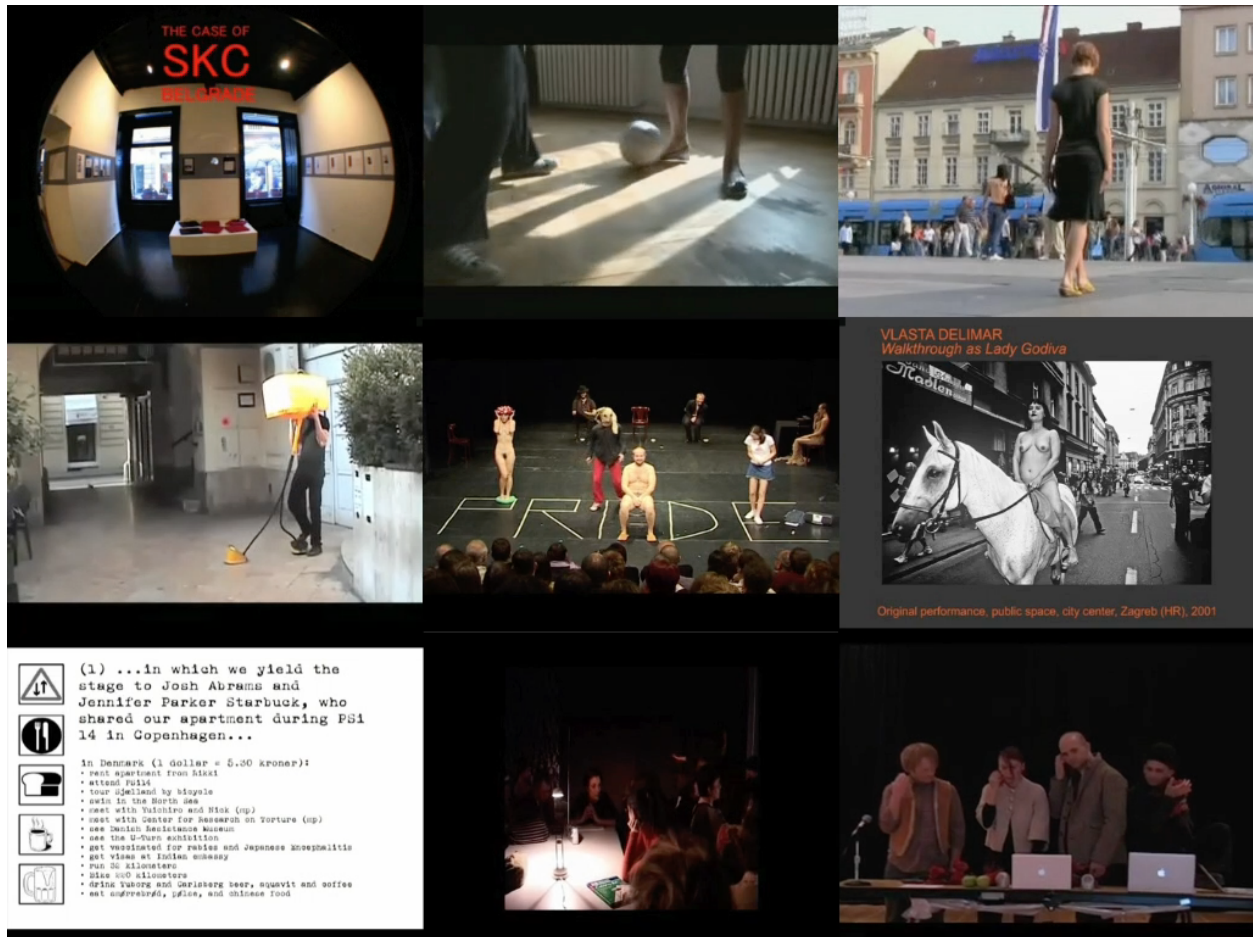
Figure 5 https://www.dropbox.com/s/a0gcqe9vx7wqrs0/shifts.mp4?dl=0

## Misperforming and Shifting Aesthetics

In 2005, the 15th annual gathering of Performance Studies international (or PSi), introduced an

intervention into the dominant form of conferences, the reading of papers. Unlike most conferences,

PSi combines scholarly and cultural practices, yet even then these are often siloed, caged off from

one another: papers here, performances there. Significantly, PSi 15 took place in Zagreb and was

titled *Misperformance: Misfiring, Misfitting, Misreading* for it explored the gaps and misalignments

between between and within fields, as well as between ideas and action. Co-organizer Lada Cale

Feldman states that the conference addressed the "longstanding issue of how to bridge the gap

between theory and practice, between the delivery of papers and actual performances."[16] She and

co-organizer Marin Blažević call this intervention *shifts*. Blažević writes: "Shifts are devised as a

crossover format that cannot be exclusively reduced to panels or working group meetings,

roundtable discussions, workshops or lectures, work-in-progress presentations, public forums,

highly contingent interactive events, actions or installations, theatre, dance or performance art,

multimedia performances, exhibitions, seminars or interventions: rather, *shifts may be the*

*combinations of all those formats and genres, shifts are experimenting on their intersections, with*

*their functions and protocols* (my emphasis)."[17] In short, shifts are transmedia knowledge operating

at scale to intervene in the university lecture machine. Indeed, shifts can help us situate aesthetics

in relation to the displacement of discipline by performativity and literacy by digitality: shifting is

displacement at the level of disciplinary fields.

The PSi Misperformance conference encouraged proposals by international and regional

scholars that shift research toward performance and also proposals by artists that foreground the

research dimensions of their creative process. "SHIFTS are hybrid collaborative platforms inviting

both artists and scholars to jointly (mis)perform 'in between' conventional or at least recognizable

modes of doing a conference, doing art, being an artist or an activist, being a scholar or a curator."[18]

The result: a conference that started each day with traditional panels and then moved to shifts in

the late afternoon and evening when participants attended lecture performances, parodic panels,

postdramatic theater, historical reconstructions of Yugoslavian performance art, and even a

participatory School of Sisyphus which misperformed disciplinary knowledge through absurdist

lectures, exercises, and examinations. The headmistress and headmaster, Rachel Fensham and Joe

Kelleher, describe the School of Sisyphus in Kafkaesque terms, highlighting both its disciplinary

cages and its existential transience: "Over the few hours of its existence, in cells dedicated to the

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[16] Lada Čale Feldman, "Intro 1 : PSi Mis-Performing Papers" (*Performance Research*, 15:2, 2010), p. 1.
[17] Marin Blažević, "Intro 2 : Dramaturgy of Shift(s)(ing)" (*Performance Research*, 15:2, 2010), p. 6.
[18] Blažević, ibid.

purpose, the School's professors conduct their lessons on a variety of singular skills and topics,

ranging across the discursive, the mechanical, the embodied, the disembodied, the 'practical,' the

arcane and the seemingly remote. […] Thankfully, the teaching cells adjoin an examination area

where the knowledge and capabilities acquired in the lessons can be put to the test (oral, gestural

and scriptoral) and thus made real. […] There is evidence that the School actually exists, has existed,

may exist again."[19] Another panel, on the genocides of the Yugoslav Wars, took a simple yet darker

form: in a black box theater, the audience sat on risers before an empty table and chairs placed

before a black curtain illuminated by a singler search light. Behind the curtain, the panelists read

their papers hidden from the audience.

Transmediating knowledge intimately and at scale—just as PSi introduced shifts, ICA is

thinking-doing at scale with its performance lecture festival, shifting the lecture machine and field

of aesthetics within the context of imaging possible worlds. Such shifts are not limited to aesthetics

and performance conferences. In the US, while lecture performances have not yet caught on as they

have in Europe, another transmedia genre has: Pecha Kucha, a presentation genre in which

speakers present 20 slides, each playing for 20 seconds, that advance automatically for a total of six

minutes and forty seconds. Sometimes called the poor man's TED Talk, Pecha Kucha's 20x20 format

uses constraints to generate creativity, just as Cage used chance operations. Pecha Kucha is a

Japanese term meaning "chit chat," and organizations from the American Folklore Society to the

Internet Engineering Task Force have held Pecha Kucha sessions at their meetings. Significantly,

Pecha Kucha conference sessions have also been held by the Association of American Colleges &

Universities, whose Essential Learning Outcomes criteria inform the curricula of over 1,300

member colleges and universities.

In the transmedia knowledge workshops I give at Cornell, faculty have repeated embraced

Pecha Kucha, along with another genre, information comics. Info comics use graphic narratives to

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[19] Rachel Fensham & Joe Kelleher, "The School of Sisyphus" (*Performance Research*, 15:2, 2010), p. 13.

present research to specific communities and the general public. Sousinus's *Unflattening* may be the first graphic dissertation but info comics have been used in public health for decades to combat issues such as the AIDS crisis, teenage pregnancy, and mental health. Brown University recently started a certificate program in Science Cartoons, and in another field, the University of Toronto Press has launched Ethnographics, a series of graphic novels produced by ethnographers. And info comics book series such as "For Beginners" and "Graphic Guides" offer hundreds of titles across dozens of fields, including aesthetics.

We may recoil at the very idea of *Introducing Aesthetics: A Graphics Guide*: that's the voice of the expert in us, the specialist, the master, the ego. We are trained to defend our fields and be wary, critical, and sometimes dismissive or hostile to amateurs and outsiders: "what do they know?" But let us recall Joseph Beuys' statement: "everyone is an artist." Could everyone be an aesthetician? What might a generalized aesthetics look like, one that shifts its focus to include not only art and media, art history and philosophy, but potentially any field? I note that the ICA's call for papers does not include the sciences and engineering, domains of knowledge where questions of beauty, form, perception, creativity, and design have emerged with considerable force. Design, in particular, now informs and structures everyday lives worldwide, both personal and social. While artists make art, designers make everything else, from iPhone apps to kitchen appliances to the undergraduate experience, for better and for worse. Yet design has historically been marginalized if not excluded from the humanities. Could we imagine general education requirements in critical design and transmedia aesthetics analogous to critical thinking and first-year writing courses (which in the US are the only required courses for virtually all college students, such is the power of the literate lecture machine)?

While teaching at the University of Wisconsin-Madison (another land grant university situated on formerly indigenous land), I founded and directed DesignLab, a design consultancy for transmedia knowledge. As with the Science Cartoons certificate at Brown, DesignLab scales up

transmedia knowledge and makes it sustainable through infrastructure. DesignLab trains graduate students from six different departments to support over twenty transmedia genres, including Pecha Kuchas, science posters, video essays, and info comics. One great challenge has been developing design frames to help students and faculty design, create, and evaluate transmedia knowledge integrated into class projects, theses, and dissertations. While conceptual skills are taught by individual disciplines, and technical skills can be provided by academic technology staff, the aesthetic dimension poses a daunting challenge in large part because of specialization: the aesthetics of writing, visual culture, music, dance, and theater all remain separated not only from the sciences, social sciences, and professions; they are also separated from one another, divided into different fields overseen by different masters. For those committed to social change, to connecting specialized knowledge with common knowledge and merging art with life, siloed aesthetics makes for siloed activism and siloed worlds.
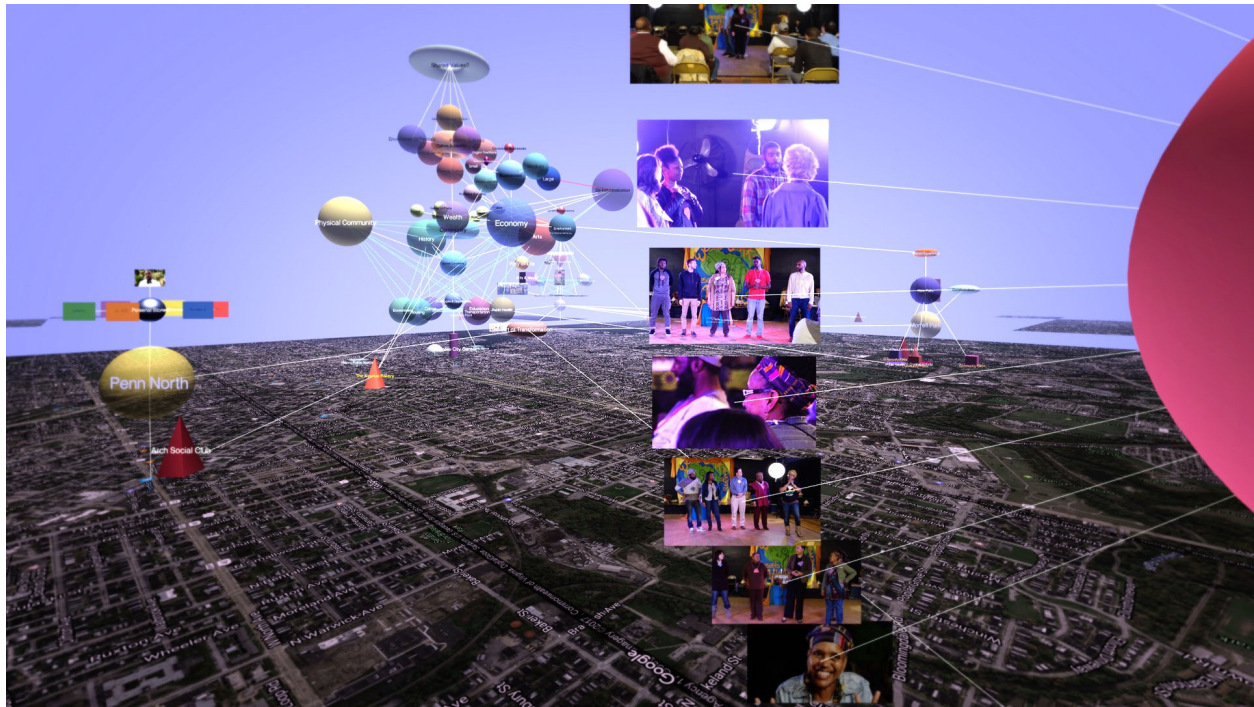
## Generalized Aesthetics and Collective Thought-Action

The Art of Transformation project at the University of Maryland at Baltimore County (UMBC) seeks to connect actual and virtual worlds by combining art-based cultural organizing with IT-based collaborative data analytics. Cultural organizing uses storytelling and art-making as forms of community engagement that help social groups to organize and advocate for rights and resources within the larger community. For its part, collaborative data analytics involves information systems that enable sharing and cross-platform integration of information among different groups in order to enhance and potentially transform organizational decision-making from the bottom-up. Developed by UMBC's Imaging Research Lab, the Art of Transformation (AoT) project promises under- and misrepresented communities of Baltimore a way to better represent themselves while contributing to the development of IT systems that support decision- and policy-making. Composed of university researchers and representatives of community organizations, the collaborative team writes that with "AoT we are asking: What media—as a tool for collective thinking—has the

capacity we need to create positive social change? What will it actually look like, and how will it work?"[20]

Connecting collective thinking and social change scales up thought-action into *collective thought-action*, transmedia figurations that scale up thinking and making into shared experiences and collaborative platforms. Collective thought-action moves across disciplinary fields and social institutions and potentially transform them. In the case of the Art of Transformation, collective thought-action connects the collaborative activities of advanced research with those of community organizing. For researchers, this may involve problem-solving and trouble-making far from discipline. As the AoT group writes, "Until recently, the pinnacle of good thinking and smart action was to dissect a problem with thinly sliced disciplinary thinking, seek its narrowest and most precise definition, and look for a single cure. We wanted the best perspective, an efficient and effective solution, and one truth. But now, the story of how we should address complex challenges is changing. We are increasingly more comfortable seeking out diverse perspectives and entertaining all relevant data, information, ideas, and truths at the same time."[21] What emerges here is not a fixed and coherent conceptual structure but an open, dynamic figure composed of diverse elements, a figure irreducible to any one medium or discipline but emerging through the interactions of different media, stakeholders, and values. In the field of human-centered design, researchers draw on Bruno Latour's "cascades of media" to describe how design projects move from abstract, low-resolution media such as notes and sketches to concrete, high-resolution media such as a manufactured object or public service. For us, figures of collective thought-action cascade through different forms of transmedia knowledge and social practice.[22] Just as conference papers

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[20] Frank Anderson, et al, 'The Art of Transformation: Cultural Organizing by Reinventing Media.' (Public 4:2 http://public.imaginingamerica.org/blog/article/the-art-of-transformation-cultural-organizing-by -reinventing- media/ Accessed 2/10/2019).
[21] Anderson, et al.
[22] See Jonathan Edelman and Rebecca Currano, "Re-representation: Affordances of Shared Models in Team-Based Design," in *Design Thinking: Understand – Improve – Apply*, *61 Understanding Innovation*. Ed. Hasso Plattner, Christoph Meinel, and Larry Leifer, (Berlin & Heidelberg: Springer-Verlag, 2011) and Bruno Latour,

often begin with initial notes and outlines, pass through drafts and revisions, and then culminate in a polished paper or PowerPoint presentation, a community engagement project might begin with conversations, move into research and planning, and culminate in a specific event or public policy. At this scale, transmedia knowledge operates as participatory research and civil discourse.

Collective thought-action produced through cultural organizing and collaborative data analytics offers one path for dis/engaging the microperformative circuits of post-disciplinary society. The AoT group cites the values of organizational efficiency and technical effectiveness: these values drive the performance assessment regimes of global performativity, from community organizations to national governments to multinational corporations. By connecting highly qualitative cultural organizing to highly quantitative data analytics, AoT can help contest knowledge-power relations by injecting values of cultural efficacy, of doing the right thing, into systems dominated by efficiency and effectiveness. The Art of Transformation thus heralds both generalized aesthetics (*everyone an aesthetician*) alongside generalized data analysis (*everyone a data analyst*). To succeed, it is not enough to create data and media. AoT writes that "the software and cultural organizing practices must attend to creating sacred, safe, and brave spaces, clarifying values and principles, and developing practices to support multiple perspectives and deliberation."[23] A post-disciplinary, post-Platonic aesthetics can help create such sacred, safe, and brave spaces, possible worlds where collective-thought action unfolds across multiple fields, institutions, and lifeworlds. .

A generalized aesthetics entails displacing our mastery, dancing our PhDs, and entering what I call simply *the field,* the space outside the lecture machine which nonetheless haunts its inside. Generalized aesthetics entangles specialized and common knowledge so as to approach the world not as an object to be mastered but as an open field for making knowledge, building

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"Visualisation and Cognition: Drawing Things Together" (*Knowledge and Society Studies in the Sociology of Culture Past and Present*, 1986, ed. H. Kuklick, Jai Press, 6).

[23] Anderson, et al.

platforms, and co-designing worlds. The lecture performances before us, the scheduling of a festival within the conference, an entire International Congress of Aesthetics devoted to possible worlds—all of this itself constitutes a possible world, one composed over days of presentations and discussions, transmedia knowledge and collective thought-action. The challenge will be to connect this event and its collaborative platforms with other events and platforms in order to generate still other worlds that engage and shift the micro-, macro-, and meso-performances of contemporary life. Perhaps there is no off-switch to the lecture machine; nonetheless, lecture performances and generalized aesthetics enable us to imagine other configurations, other cosmographies.

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