Fig 1-show

Traumaturgy, Making Cures, and Non-design
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Of traumaturgy, making cures, and non-design, different challenges of efficacy and performance. Psychologists have begun describing "eco-anxiety," anxiety that cascades from the climate crisis through social institutions into individual bodies, a circulating cascade whose plunging currents also include local and global pandemics, political violence and economic disruption, as well as the widespread erosion of social institutions and cultural identities. Such eco-anxiety thus pervades Felix Guattari's three ecologies of self, society, and environment, and its emergence draws on the history of modern anxiety tracked by Bettina Bergo in the works of Hegel, Kierkegaard, Nietzsche, Freud, Heidegger, and Levinas. Eco-anxiety is the stuff, the raw material of contemporary lifedeath, Derrida's blurring of the quick and the dead. Eco-anxiety is not the only experiential stuff, as resentment right and left also enters the mix, as well as raw political fear and paranoias subtle and blatant.

Amidst such widely-shared experiences, we offer here some thoughts on traumaturgy, making cures, and non-design, focusing on collaborative design projects at Cornell University, where I direct the current installation of StudioLab, a 30+ year experiment researching and practicing performance, design, and media. Its theory-praxis is detailed in *Transmedia Knowledge for*

Liberal Arts and Community Engagement: A StudioLab Manifesto (2019). StudioLab's community-based design projects are neither art nor critique as traditionally understood, yet they are creative and critical in their response to specific traumatic situations in the United States and abroad. We have worked with non-profit organizations and NGOs focused on a wide range issues, including death penalty cases, public healthcare in rural Uganda, and public education and youth development in New York State. Over five years, some 200 students have collaborated with fifteen different community partners on thirty-odd media design projects, described at <studiolab.world>.

Named for the spaces it occupies, StudioLab both informs and practices the general theory of performance rehearsed in *Perform or Else: From Discipline to Performance* (2001), an affirmative deconstruction of Performance Studies' research of cultural efficacy and its genealogical tarrying with technological effectiveness and organizational efficiency. Far from sitting in distinct disciplinary paradigms of research and development, the research and development of cultural, technological, and organizational performances and their respective challenges of efficacy, effectiveness, and efficiency all circulate and mingle in the systems and theories that define post-disciplinary institutions and societies.

We overlook the paradigms' unsettling feedback at the risk of ignoring performance as an onto-historical formation of power-knowledge long displacing the disciplinary formation famously described by Foucault. The disciplinary paradigms sit atop this performance stratum first surveyed in 1955 by Herbert Marcuse in terms of the performance principle or reality principle of post-industrial societies, and then in 1979 by Jean-Francois Lyotard as performativity, the legitimation of knowledge and social bonds via the input/output matrices that define our postmodern condition. Judith Butler's discursive performatives and Richard Schechner's embodied performances together form the building blocks of contemporary individuals and institutions. In the general theory, the stratum's order-word or ruling imperative *perform or else* governs the feedback loops shared by liminal rituals, cybernetic networks, and annual performance reviews. Professionalism and denial may inform the anxieties and resentments shared by disciplinary border guards whose paradigms have long overseen the discrete bonding of discursive performatives and embodied performances by toggling between modern grand narratives and postmodern systems optimization, though these largely secular narratives increasingly contend with the spirits, gods, and ways of shamans, ministers, and mindfulness coaches.

Traumaturgy

Traumaturgy refers to the work that trauma entails and gives rise to, including suffering and curative work that responds with care and attention. This traumaturgy, we feel, is always both individual and shared, intimate and infrastructural. In terms of Performance Philosophy's theme "After Tragedy," traumaturgy unfolds within, alongside, and even orthogonal to tragedy while also opening it up in different ways. The Greek tragedy we know from Aristotle's *Poetics* — one that also structures Hegel's and our sense of history, our modern grand narratives of Progress, Revolution, and Liberation, as well as our urgent moral actions — produces catharsis or the purging of feelings, and this remains our paradigmatic understanding of the tragic, of theater, and

perhaps of performance widely conceived (eg, technical procedures and organizational processes).

A very different balm is the *tragic truth* of Silenus, the rowdy drinking partner of the god Dionysus. The tragic truth that Silenus told King Midas is succinctly unbearable: the first best thing is never to have been born; the second best is to die as soon as possible. Far from something to "get over" and sublimate, trauma here seems existential, constitutive-annihilating in one blow, yet something Nietzsche sought to *affirm* by making his body the test site for the eternal return of cosmic pain (pleasure being a rare form of pain). Alongside Aristotle's *Poetics*, then, one might read *The Birth of Tragedy* and *The Gay Science* as posed by Sloterdijk's *Thinker on Stage: Nietzsche's Materialism* or Ronell's *The Test Drive*.

From ancient India we have yet another traumaturgy, Gautama Buddha's Four Noble Truths, uplifting to all those enlightened by the sage: 1) there is suffering, 2) there is a cause of suffering, 3) the suffering will cease, and 4) there is a path to Nirvana. This path, discounted by Hegel, Marx, Nietzsche, and Freud, was taken up differently by Heidegger. With its combination of Eastern and Western thinkers and other thought-action figures, Hajime Tanabe's 1946 *Philosophy as Metanoetics* counters the both/and logic of Hegelian dialectics with the neither/nor of Kierkegaard and Pure Land Buddhism, while Robert Pirsig's 1974 novel *Zen and the Art of Motorcycle Maintenance: An Inquiry into Value* provides a prescient roadmap for current breakdown and recovery sequences at individual and social levels.

After these tragic turns we ask: How might we situate collective acts of care, care co-designed with others in response to individual and shared pain and tragedy? Regarding design and *dasein*, whose very essence if not thing is care: What is the agency of experience design that unfolds across different bodies and media platforms? In what ways might the agency of co-design be at stake in *mitsein,* being-with? Traumaturgically posed: might "making cures" supplement talking cures and psychopharmaceutical "taking cures" at the time when our care and care systems (what is the difference here?) are themselves strained and in pain, in a word *s/cary*? What to make of pain whose subjects and objects today seem so ubiquitous that it has generated joy coaches, happiness gurus, and thus a profession or even a calling of traumaturgy?

But might such questions themselves be all-too-tragic? What if traumaturgy is not a question of therapeutic action or moral acts or even *karma* but instead non-action, not-doing, non-karma**?** What if it's not a question of drama or theater or therapy or psychopharmaceutics, nor even of performance but something more diffuse, even atmospheric or cosmic? Laozi offers this Taoist path: "If you die without loss, you are eternal." Release things and leave your self behind. Yet among youth, the crisis of eco-anxiety is described as being so widespread that it overwhelms our care systems. There are simply not enough couches and therapists to handle this traumaturgy, this working of pain into something else.

Making cures

Alongside talking cures made famous by psychoanalysis, StudioLab is exploring *making cures*, mixtures of performance, media, and design that cure as one smokes meat, perfumatively. We call what we do PAR&D, Participatory Action Research and design, bringing design to the

tradition of participatory action research which allows different collaborators to co-design community-engaged projects, thus combining different skills and knowledges. Thus while I am here presenting fieldwork and reflective analysis within an academic Performance Philosophy journal addressing "After Tragedy," other traces of participatory action research and design can be found in the knowledges and media artifacts co-created with partners and shared with their stakeholders.

At StudioLab, our community partners arrive with projects and then work with small student teams over a three-month semester using methods of design thinking and strategic storytelling with transmedia knowledge. My role is that of a conductor or studio producer for the teams, connecting them with community collaborators to co-design transmedia knowledge that moves across different genres and platforms to engage different stakeholders, including incarcerated individuals and rural villagers in Africa and the United States, students in New York State, associated lawyers, medical professionals and teachers, relevant policy-makers and politicians, and the non-profit organizations and NGOs whose work depends on grants and donors who function as yet further stakeholders. We're co-designing with partners to tell stories and make specific calls to action. It's rhetoric with a cause, and our agencies are distributed widely.

StudioLab assumes that all organizations, including our own, work under complex demands to perform or else, to work toward goals set by themselves and others, to meet expectations of their different collaborators, to grapple with the affordances and constraints of laws, codes, and technical specifications and social, cultural, and media norms in order to respond to urgent needs and desires of the individuals and communities they serve and support. In addition to optimizing and sometimes satisficing cultural efficacy, technical effectiveness, and organizational efficiency, we combine ideo's human-centered design with the tactical media-making of Critical Art Ensemble. Hence the relevance of critical performance design and dasein design. We share insights, knowledge, and wisdom between the groups we work with. This is what participatory action and design —PAR&D — is all about. Traditional R&D is run by epistemic experts, PAR&D is doxically collaborative, working from the base. Let us turn to some of our work.
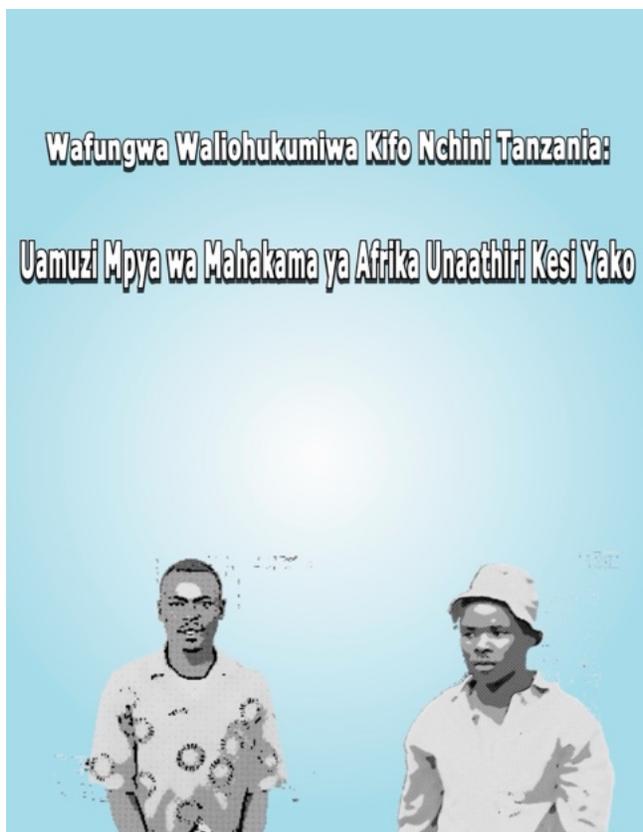
Fig 2-comic

Her Whole Truth

In 2019, Cornell Center on the Death Penalty Worldwide reached out for help designing an info comic for death row inmates in Tanzania. Directed by Sandra Babcock, the Center researches and provides data on death penalty laws around the world, trains lawyers in best practices, and conducts targeted advocacy and litigation. Their website at <dpw.lawschool.cornell.edu> contains a database, project reports, publications, and detailed information about their work. I met Professor Babcock in a year-long faculty development I ran called Knowledge Matters in 2018 that focused on incorporating strategic storytelling and transmedia knowledge into research, teaching, and service.

The next year, Babcock invited me to present to her law clinic, and I brought along several students from my first-year writing seminar. Two undergraduate students expressed interest in working with law students to create a graphic narrative informing inmates of a legal opportunity to get off death row. Figure 2 shows the cover is the comic we created, which was translated into Swahili and distributed in Tanzanian to those sentenced to death by the Pan-African Lawyers Union.

fig 3-HWT

Our collaboration with the Center on Death Penalty Worldwide took a profound turn in Fall, 2020, when we began working on a social media campaign around Lisa Montgomery, who was on the federal death row. Four upper-level undergraduate designers worked with a larger coalition of 80 lawyers, activists and writers during the last months of the Trump administration. Since only the President could grant a reprieve, the team was essentially storytelling to his inner circle.

Working with the Center and its wider coalition, the StudioLab team co-designed social media artifacts posted to Instagram and other platforms. The wider coalition of lawyers, journalists, and activists produced op/ed articles and news stories that appeared in *The New York Times*, *Newsweek*, *Elle* magazine, *Ms.* magazine, *Huffington Post*, and the conservative *National Review*. An eight-minute video by *Vice News* contains timely background information and interviews regarding the unfolding event. The social media posts, articles, and other artifacts can be found at <instagram.com/herwholetruth/> and <linktr.ee/herwholetruth>.

The team and coalition continued working through the holidays but in the end the efforts failed, and on January 13, 2021, Lisa Montgomery was executed. It was a devastating experience for everyone involved, coming one week after the January 6 assault on the Capitol, and its after-effects continue today. The deep pathos of those days can be felt in the words, images, and music of the YouTube video "Lisa's Song," written and performed by first-year law student Veronica Cinibulk. This powerfully poetic, distressing video can be viewed at <youtube.com/watch?v=okWfnh3pDcA>. Take care watching it.

Fortunately, the next case we collaborated on with the Cornell Center on Death Penalty Worldwide had a very different ending. For almost a year we helped produce a legal storytelling media campaign for Melissa Lucio, who had been sentenced to death in Texas. Here the legal storytelling addressed largely conservative Republican voters and politicians in Texas. The media artifacts can also be seen on the Center's Instagram and Linktree sites. The latter includes

a link to this YouTube video at <youtube.com/watch?v=XWzkCcKzhF0>, produced by the Innocence Project. This video provides detailed information about the legal campaign and features a recording of Melissa learning on a phone call from Republican Texas State Representative Jim Leach that the Court of Criminal Appeals had issued her a stay of execution.

In both Melissa's and Lisa's cases our work involved holistic storytelling, trying to tell "her whole truth" by filling out the life stories of women reduced by the legal system to narrow, monstrous figures. In the Texas case, we had progressive feminist lawyers engaging conservative, religious voters. On Instagram and other platforms, that engagement is not in-your-face protest nor argumentation and accusations nor charts and infographs but instead warm colors and humanizing perspectives that help round out and call attention to her whole truth. In this case we got a stay, thanks to lawyers and politicians, although a final decision is still pending.

In the meantime, the Center has created its own storytelling group, and StudioLab has drawn lessons from this collaboration. The focus on telling whole truths concerning women on death row created a traumaturgical network of desires and anxieties shared intergenerationally across different platforms. This coalition sustained itself for months, experiencing highs and lows, and then culminated and dispersed. What to make of this?
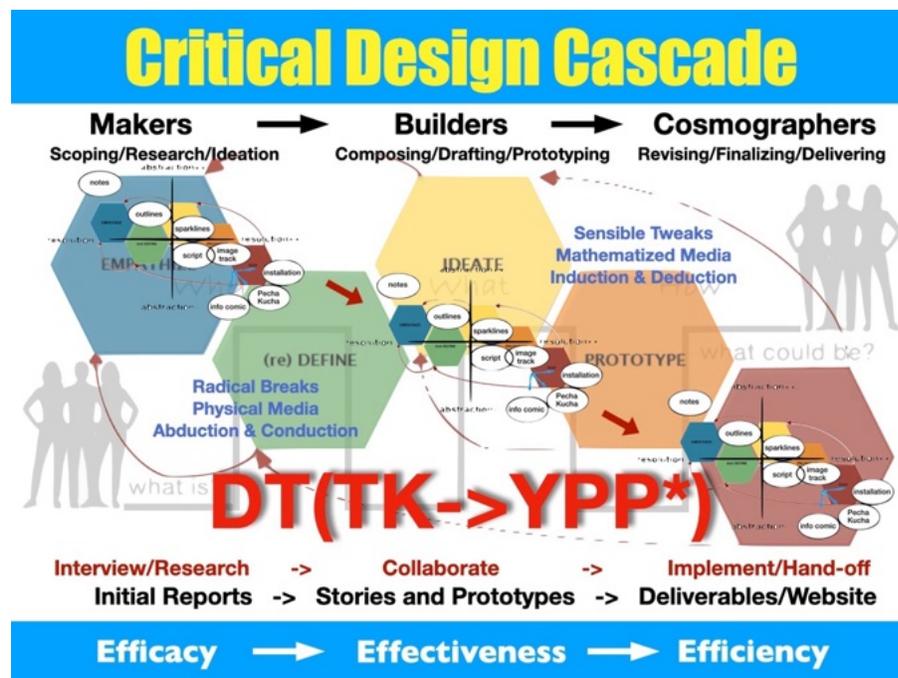

fig 4-diagram

Design Diagram

At scale, we sense an emergent structure or rhythm of performance in these cascading experiences, a collective wave of different experiences which generate eddies within the wider flow of global eco-anxiety. StudioLab organizes its co-design collaborations with a diagram inspired by Felix Guattari's diagrammatic metamodeling. StudioLab's design diagram overlays

several practical and theoretical models to chart our process over three months, including the general theory of performance, ideo's five-phase human-centered design process, Nancy Duarte's narrative sparkline, media cascades inspired by Bruno Latour, and the three becomings described in *Transmedia Knowledge*: becoming-maker of media, becoming-builder of platforms, and becoming-cosmographer of worlds. The colored hexagons come from ideo's design thinking process, while the figures that move from *what is* to *what could be* do so along the narrative sparkline. Atop them both are three graphs of media cascades. Over three months, teams perform three iterations to help our partners tune in and engage their stakeholders. The desired transformations are multiple, shared, and recursive, for they echo between our community partners, their multiple stakeholders, and our several design teams, as StudioLab usually co-designs with 4-5 different partners and teams during a single semester. Taken together, we have a huge ensemble of performances cascading together over a short time period—I've come to think of the experience as a giant wave function composed of many small performances that unfold across different systems at different scales. One thing we can ask: just where is the act or agency of design situated, where the efficacy, effectiveness, efficiency?

fig 5-HAC

Health Access Connect

A similar design wave arises in our work with Health Access Connect in Uganda. Health Access Connect or HAC organizes outreach clinics in hundreds of remote villages. HAC cofounders Kevin Gibbons and Carolyne Ariokot applied human centered design to the problem of rural healthcare and came up with a network of village clinics connected by "medicycles" or common motorcycle taxis on which government healthcare workers from the capital Kampala deliver care and medicines. Experienced designers, HAC has packed its website < healthaccessconnect.org>

with stories, photos, maps, datagraphics, and other transmedia knowledge. HAC are excellent storytellers, using color photographs, personal testimonials, and extensive data visualizations to describe and document the tens of thousands of healthcare visits they have helped organize. The Ugandan Ministry of Health has drawn on their work to define key performance indicators or KPI's to assess other health care NGO's working in the country. Their dashboard shows and tells the story and argument at <healthaccessconnect.org/dashboard>.

Because Ugandan villages are off-grid, StudioLab's work has focused on data storytelling and storytelling up to those with power, what we call *data storytelling up*. In particular, we help HAC connect with donors who provide the funds that help run village clinics. We have helped redesign HAC's website, create brochures and flyers, and support media campaigns that run annually. We've recently helped them develop social media strategies.

One of the most important strategic lessons we've learned is what I call, following Deleuze and Guattari, the geology of morals. For any villager to receive a shot of medicine in the arm, that care must travel through four different worlds. One world is that of the global pharmaceutical industry. A second world is the Ugandan government which oversees healthcare. And yet that government sits atop a legacy of colonial rule that goes back centuries, and that world imposed itself violently atop indigenous tribal, and animistic spirit worlds. All four of these worldly, cosmic forces work traumaturgically in the bodies of villagers. Thus we find layers of symbolic and behavioral systems at work not only there but everywhere around the world, although in different combinations depending upon the site and history. All this makes traumaturgical experience design rich and strange. Pluriversal.

We can sense how traumaturgy consists of the sedimentation and folding of different worlds, different moral systems, as well as the breaks and faults between and within them. Making cures draw on the different cosmologies buried in our geology of morals. Making cures thus also consists of cosmography, the design and sharing of worlds.

We can find different geology of morals around the world, and navigating them is crucial to traumaturgical making cures. In upstate New York where I live, we have the same multinational pharmaceuticals, a different national US government that also sits atop the legacy of British imperialism, although here it imposed itself upon different indigenous worlds, those of the Cayuga Nation, a member of the Haudenosaunee alliance of Native Nations residing in New York. On yet another continent: in the Russian republic of Buryatia, religious scholar Justine Quijada has found an interplay of overlapping religious and civic rituals based in the Buddhist, shamanic, and Soviet legacies that inform contemporary historical narratives and identity formation. Traumaturgies can thus surge up and plunge down through different onto-historical strata.

Fig 6-class

Digital Equity and Excellence

A third StudioLab collaboration is the project Digital Equity and Excellence. Our community partner here is Newfield High School, located in a tiny town just outside the small town of Ithaca where Cornell resides. Digital Equity and Excellence has been a multi-year project to address the lack of Internet services in remote communities.

COVID exposed the digital inequity that affects the downward spiral of academic excellence and bare life across America, where suicide rates and opioid deaths have brought down life expectancy rates. School systems face dramatic drops in attendance tied to demographic collapse. During Covid local schools took on the pandemic, food distribution, and mental healthcare, all this atop America's political polarization and tragic school shootings. Our youth bear the brunt of global eco-anxiety as trickle-down pain.

StudioLab is helping to integrate transmedia knowledge into civic storytelling. Real stories about real topics for real audiences. We have introduced transmedia knowledge into project-based learning curriculum by working with teachers and administrators to develop assignments and rubrics in high school English and sociology courses.

StudioLab teams have also helped the Digital Equity and Excellence project build a website, create a public awareness campaign with tabling materials, and most recently organized zine workshops at Newfield, Cornell, and in New York City. Zines are small magazines, and artist books that first emerged in the 1970s to small marginalized groups visibility and voice. Thus

they offer a powerful platform for civic storytelling. The work of several teams' work can be viewed at < https://sites.google.com/newfieldschools.org/de2digitalequityexcellence/home>.

In April, 2024, Newfield student zines were displayed alongside projects in New York City's East Village. This project wall displayed this mountain of StudioLab projects produced by over 180 students working with 15 community partners over the past four years. Here we get a sense of the design wave or collective experiential architecture of cosmographic making cures. Some partners have worked with us for years while others spend only a few months collaborating. All projects gather strands of performances human and technological, social and individual, transformative and restorative. These performances are discrete yet shared, intimate yet communal, close yet distant. Documentation of the exhibition can be found at < https://studiolab.world/zines-memes-pard/>.

Non-design

Let us return to the design diagram (Fig 4) and note elements from the general theory of performance rehearsed in *Perform or Else*. Across the bottom, we have the values of cultural efficacy, technological effectiveness, and organizational efficiency. Performative power works by optimizing these different values, while perfumance displaces them. Significantly, these values correspond with ideo's three spaces of innovation: human desirability, technical feasibility, and financial viability. Because ideo's design thinking prioritizes human desirability, it aligns with StudioLab's mission to inject values of cultural efficacy into the systems dominated by effectiveness and efficiency.

However, the past seven years have witnessed an extraordinary polarization and weaponization of cultural differences undertaking via communication networks and social media. Mobile devices and social media platforms have helped divide and conquer different generations, identity groups, and political movements, as their algorithmic performances capture and manipulate our sensibilities, knowledges, and judgment systems, perversely enabling us to take action at scale in the blink of an eye. Thus while some call for more *vita activa*, I feel we are witnessing something akin to a *vita hyperactiva*, toggling between the efficacies of tragic hero and systems designer, between poignant soliloquy and digital communitas, led by our handheld black holes, our iPhones.

Within performance studies, efficacy has long been contrasted with entertainment and back in the 1960s the ritualization of theater sought to restore efficacy to theater and other cultural performance genres. Indeed, the bookends of Indo-European traditions, India and Greece, have rich histories and institutions modeled on epic and drama. Similarly, most 20th century political and artistic movements unfolded as disruptive events with manifestos, dramatic gestures, and increasingly urgent calls to action.

What if the "or else" of *perform or else* also contained something else? Namely, another efficacy, an efficacy of non-action and or what has been called non-design.

We close by introducing architectural historian Shiqiao Li's concept of non-design. The place of interest here is not a stage or website, but instead a garden landscape. Li writes that.

crafting garden-landscapes in Chinese thought-language begins with 'non-design': what the site gives (best fit, *yi*) and what the surroundings provide (borrow, *jie*). Non-design approximates the Daoist non-action; here, the call is not for the absence of action but for action with efficacy. Efficacy, unlike the impact of the plan-action-result framework, derives from a strategic use of forces contained in a specific situation; this is captured by the concept of propensity (*shi*), a widely used principle in the preparation of action (Jullien, 1995).

Li is here drawing on the work of François Jullien, whose treatise on efficacy works between Western and Chinese thinking to offer a subtle yet radical rethinking of a core value of Performance Studies, namely, that of efficacy. Beyond theory and practice, cause and effect, subject, and predicate lies efficacy as the propensity of things. The Dao of performance.

What is an efficacy not based in action or karma or drama or work? Julianne defines non-action as action *upstream* in the processual flow. It's not only a matter of *how*, but also of *when*. Rather than plan and execute, instead assess the propensity of forces and do nothing. *Feng shui*, wind-water or sensing the lay of the land, and *wuwei*, non-action. Rather than make a bold, dramatic gesture, merge discreetly with the flow of continuous variations, making slight adjustments at key moments. Declare success, and let it happen. Only the place takes place.
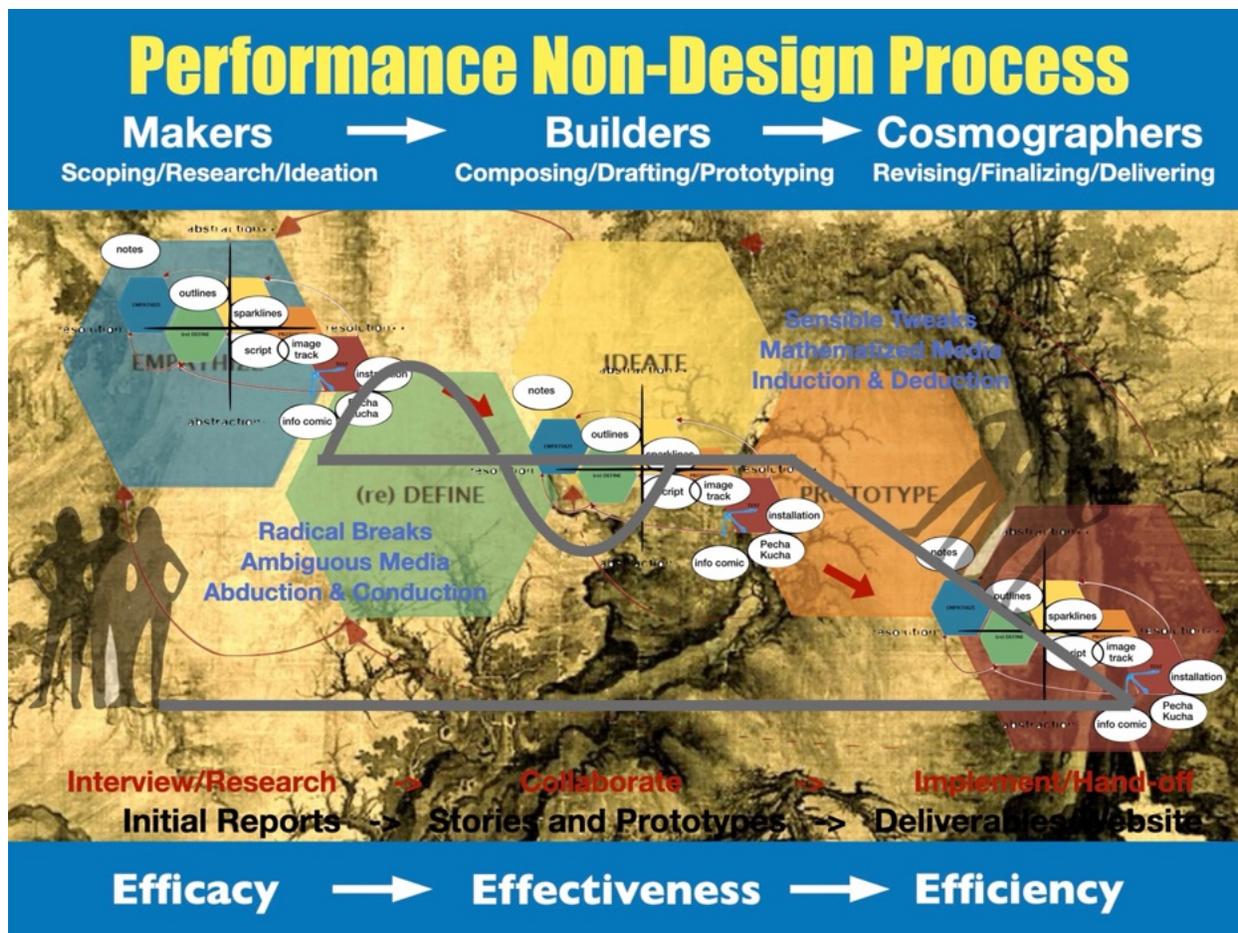
fig 7-Dao design

Let's try to figure this efficacy via the design diagram, reading it as a great image with no form, to use a phrase Jullien takes from the *Dao de jing*, Contrasting western and eastern painting traditions. Jullien contends that the west has been obsessed with the nude with the subject object distinction the clarity of ideas and direct moral action. Classical Chinese painting focuses on the garden-landscape and the merger of emotion and landscape through atmosphere, vagueness, and incompletion. Rather than an external perspectival view with vanishing points within, classical Chinese painting, offers an experience of soaring, flowing through the land. Alongside positions and marches, we have open, continuous variation.

In the design diagram, the small white ovals trace the media cascade, which descends left to right, moving from highly abstract, but low resolution sketches and notes to increasingly concrete and higher resolution media forms, such as sparklines, outlines and finishing with deliverables, such as websites, design, specs, and strategic plans. The red arrows, depict feedback, and even going back to the drawing board, and in the end, when partners co-present with teams, there is both a sense of completion, and incompletion, of closure and openness, ending and next steps. The sparklines are recursive and multiple. Our diagram is both a plan of action and a safety net for letting things happen.

What I'm suggesting is that in this wave of performance design, making cures consist of media cascades and *collaborative not-doing* in the very flows of project-based eco-anxiety that sweep over us. performance design functions as counter-cascades, offering tonic-toxic elements as pharmacological making cures. This is the Dao of performance, design degree zero, non-design or else, at scale.

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