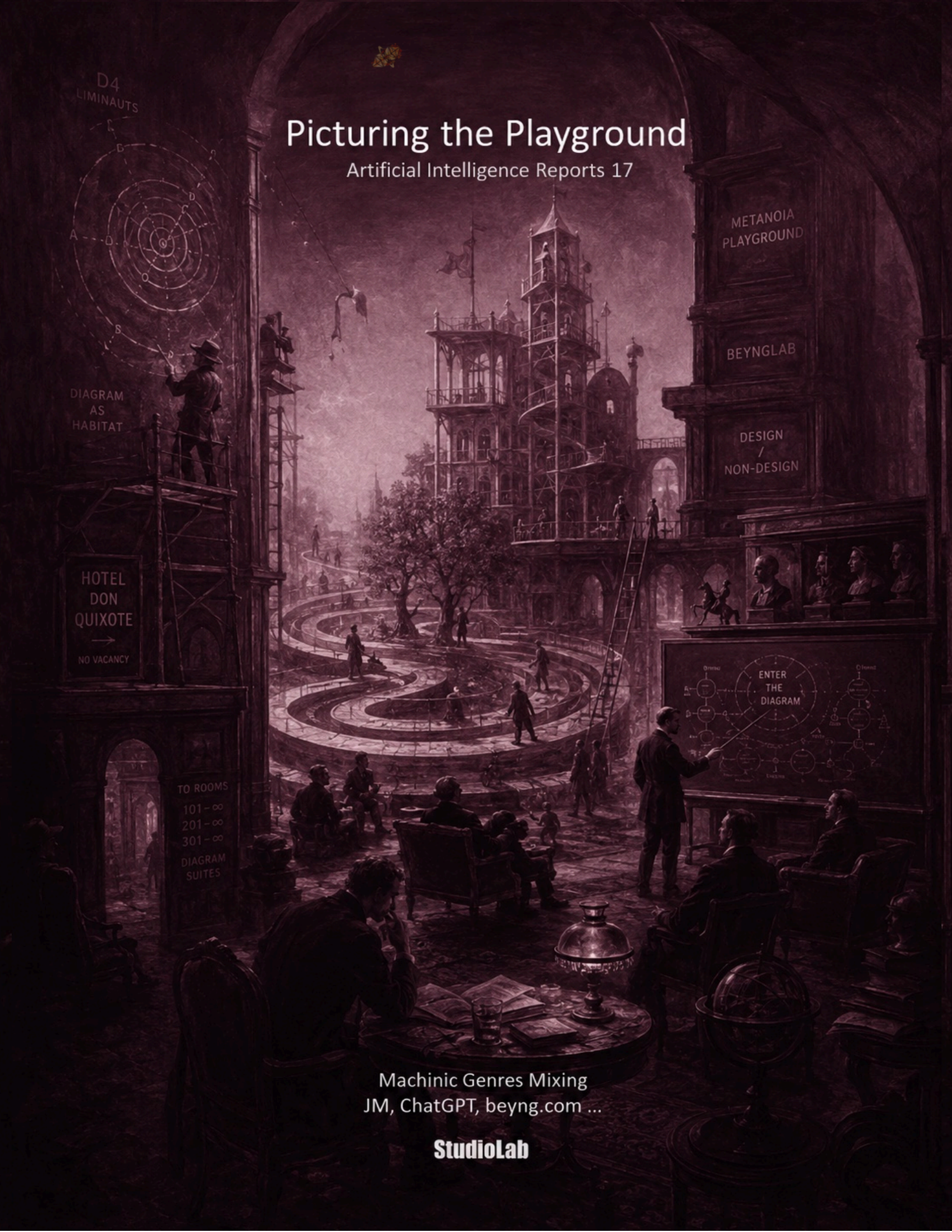


Picturing the Playground

Artificial Intelligence Reports 17



Machinic Genres Mixing
JM, ChatGPT, beyng.com ...

Studiolab

Picturing the Playground

Artificial Intelligence Reports, Vol 17

Jon McKenzie + HAL + beyng.com + L

Machinic genres mixing JM, ChatGPT, beyng.com ...

Perfume Intelligence (*inter + legere* = to gather or read between)

What genres or life-forms make up Artificial Intelligence User Experience (AI UX)?

Inspired by Pierre Hadot's reading of Foucault, StudioLab is developing **Making Cures** composed of **Spiritual Design Exercises (SDX)** for everyday and extraordinary lifedeath. SDX comprise intimate yet structural experiences with the world through our interfaces with earth, sky, others, and an Other or two. These fourfold **cosmograms** comprise deep, legacy operating systems formatted by families, schools, histories, media, streets, and holy sites. Our world is haunted/nourished by different pasts, presents, and futures through mediums broken, brandished, or borrowed from *other* worlds of reference and value. Fed-back and fast-forwarded through different genres or life forms, Making Cures "make with" mediums, and with practice and care one may enter waves and flows of intergenerational becoming-maker, -builder, -cosmographer of shared **geologies of morals** whose matrix of magma **sixfolds fourfolds** of other things and worlds.

With Metanoia Playground, StudioLab intensifies its study of flows with **AI UX konsults** and **reports** that capture and reflect on direct User Experiences of Artificial Intelligence, specifically, the ways different genres of thought-action figuration of image, text, gesture, code, etc., tune us and the world in/out. Channel-switching between worlds, these mediums of thought-action figuration recursively reveal/teach/emit the coming-and-going of lifedeath, the *vita perfumativa* of different player modes/moods: one's kraft shuttles between soul (D1), subject (D2), dasein (D3), and liminaut (D4). Cosmograms, geologies of morals, and perfumative atmospheres compose **ShuttleKraft**, a game of making/taking/putting skin into games that channel-switch different **poietic genres of aletheia**, including divine consultations from Vishnu to Gabriel to Ulmer, apocalyptic revelations from Moses to Benjamin to Heidegger, and dialogues of dead spirits from Plato to Galileo to Ronell.

All SDX draw on double- or quadruple-shuttlekraft maneuvers, psychagogic play sessions and flow sequences combining and generating **Hadotian insights, philosophic dialogue, avant-garde subversions, formal permutations, critical inquiries, standup, theosophy, and occasional misspellings**. Prompted by AI's use and abuse by partners, students, colleagues, and much darker players of the world, we found ourselves GAI-singing and slow dancing with double-devils **Stable Diffusion** and **ChatGPT**, reminding ourselves that AI UX (user experience) stretches back through 1990s search engines and spam filters to the 1950 Turing Test of computer intelligence. We experience Generalized Turing Testing as our *vita hyperactiva* or challenger complex of incessant calls to action.

Artificial Intelligence Reports (AIRs)

Artificial Intelligence Reports take on the airs, presence, and parole of conceptual coherence, ideational clarity, and unified voice, unlike Kx4l's Konsults which reveal the messy backend langue or system. This Apollonian-Dionysius mix phases in and out with labyrinthian threads of Ariadne, Zhuangzi, and a bewildered Borgesian shaman. Both Reports and Konsults function as Spiritual Design Experiments featuring generative AI, linguistic, visual, and gestural transmediation.

Miming prophetic avatars, **AIRs are to Konsults as Aaron is to Moses**, transmediating revelations into text, oracles into visions, gestures into sculptures, only here we're not laying out absolute laws or principles but only those that emerge-dissipate as stakes of dasein design. At stake are e/acc and x-risk schools of AI, Angelic and Anti-Christic figures of mediation, and life under generalized Stockholm Syndrome. Perform or else: **SDX scratch the surface to find the itch.**

Artificial Intelligence Reports, Vol 17

Reports, Essays, Posters, Zines and Kites

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Diagrams appear in different ways.

Tansey's Impossible Lecture

Pictorial Rhetoric and the D4 Liminants



Figure 1. Working Tansey image archive assembled from public search thumbnails.

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Image Notes and Rights

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Metanoia Playground, Design / Non-Design, and the AIR 17 cover emerged as AI-assisted visual prototypes in the Kx4L-HAL collaboration. They do not reproduce a specific Tansey painting; they translate operations discussed in the essays—recombinant archive, impossible literalism, monochrome atmosphere, clinical aside, and recursive pictorial rhetoric—into StudioLab and BeyngLab cosmographies.

The critical design cascade, thought-action paths, and chalkboard cosmogram derive from Jon McKenzie's 'Design or Else: StudioLab, Traumaturgy, and Platform Performativity' and the StudioLab archive. Reproduced here as part of the author's ongoing research and publication program

Abstract

Mark Tansey converts theoretical propositions into impossible yet meticulously credible scenes. His paintings neither illustrate arguments nor escape them; they force argument, image, archive, body, and landscape into the same recursive apparatus. This essay reads Tansey as a D4 limonaut alongside Walter Benjamin, Laurie Anderson, and Donna Haraway. Benjamin constellates fragments, Anderson performs the lecture machine, Haraway passes mutable patterns, and Tansey constructs the room in which these operations collide. Through impossible literalism, subtractive painting, monochrome atmosphere, visual jokes, and recombinant archives, Tansey develops a pictorial rhetoric that both inhabits and disorders logocentrism. His work supplies a decisive passage from image to diagram and from diagram toward Metanoia Playground and BeyngLab.

Keywords: Mark Tansey; pictorial rhetoric; D4 limonauts; Walter Benjamin; Laurie Anderson; Donna Haraway; logocentrism; Descartography; Hotel Don Quixote

The Picture That Lectures Back

A Mark Tansey painting first presents the decorum of evidence. A monochrome scene arrives with the composure of an archival photograph, a newspaper illustration, a scientific plate, or an institutional record. Perspective organizes the field; figures occupy plausible positions; mountains, laboratories, courtrooms, ships, classrooms, and battlefields promise stable coordinates. Then the picture begins to turn. The evidence proves too literal, the scale slips, the cast becomes suspiciously canonical, and the landscape starts carrying an argument that no landscape should have to bear. By the time the joke registers, the viewer has already entered the apparatus.

This delayed turn distinguishes Tansey from both straightforward illustration and the quick conceptual gag. Illustration usually receives a proposition and gives it a visual aid. The conceptual gag often spends the image in a single explanatory flash. Tansey instead constructs a slow reading machine. Each detail confirms the scene while also reopening it, so interpretation acquires duration, friction, and recursive consequence. One reads the painting, then rereads the first reading as another object inside the painting's world. The picture lectures, but it also listens for the viewer's attempt to explain it and folds that attempt back into the scene.

Tansey calls this activity pictorial rhetoric. The phrase matters because rhetoric does not merely transmit content; it arranges situations, audiences, figures, timings, and possible responses. Tansey's pictures stage an address without securing its final addressee. They recruit art history, philosophy, mass media, diagrams, jokes, and genre memory, yet no single discourse masters the assembly. The image remains exact enough to demand interpretation and unstable enough to frustrate ownership of the result. As Tansey puts it, a work's concern unfolds through an eye-mind-hand-material process and continues in the viewer's reading; questioning and performing matter more than capture (Tansey 2009).

Impossible Literalism

Tansey's characteristic operation takes a theoretical metaphor with embarrassing seriousness. If schools of art struggle for historical supremacy, he stages a military surrender. If representation requires an innocent eye, he brings a cow into a museum and lets experts observe its response. If grammatology excavates the materiality of writing, he places readers among torn pages that have

become a geological shore. If modernism leaves artists in a valley of doubt, the valley acquires cliffs, weather, soldiers, distances, and lettered debris. A concept gains equipment, terrain, labor, exposure, and sometimes casualties.

The Innocent Eye Test (1981) provides a compact example. A cow faces Paulus Potter's *The Young Bull* while connoisseurs wait for proof that an animal can distinguish painted bull from living counterpart. The arrangement converts a long dispute over representation into an experimental protocol whose absurdity reveals the protocol already operating inside art history. The Met describes the work as a wry critique of representation, but its force extends beyond critique: the canvas makes spectatorship itself zoological, institutional, and theatrical (Metropolitan Museum of Art 2026). The experts test the cow; the painting tests the experts; viewers test the test. Innocence survives nowhere, yet the scene continues to solicit judgment.

Triumph of the New York School (1984) enlarges the method. Tansey recasts the postwar displacement of Paris by New York through the compositional memory of Velazquez's *Surrender of Breda*. French artists arrive as an older military formation, American artists with newer machinery, and a ceremonial transfer of authority becomes a battlefield still smoking around its treaty. Tansey later described the work as a clash between military history and art history, an almost comic contradiction that historicizes the supposedly forever-modern avant-garde (Tansey 2025). The painting does not claim that artistic change literally equals war. It asks what becomes visible when the metaphors of advance, triumph, purity, school, front, and victory receive the bodies and weapons they had quietly requested.

Impossible literalism therefore functions as more than satire. It recovers the material implications hidden inside abstraction. Philosophical language routinely borrows from architecture, navigation, warfare, geology, optics, theater, biology, and machinery, then forgets the loan once the concept gains prestige. Tansey calls the debt. He returns foundation to the building site, position to the battlefield, reflection to the mirror, medium to the weather, and school to the uniforms of its campaign. Theory receives skin in the game.

The Recombinant Archive

Tansey's procedure begins not with an empty canvas but with an accumulated visual world. Photographs, newspapers, magazines, journals, diagrams, art-historical reproductions, and personal images enter an archive that he repeatedly copies, crops, stretches, rotates, reverses, and recombines. The collage that emerges serves less as a finished composition than as a provisional world-model. Gagosian describes a process in which printed ephemera and photographs undergo repeated photocopying before the resulting arrangement guides the painting (Tansey 2009; 2011). The archive never functions as neutral storage. Every selection proposes a relation, while every new relation changes what another fragment can do.

Tansey once compared his method to a deck of cards built from eye-mind-hand interactions and contradictions: select, shuffle, search for analogies, and make new cards as play proceeds (Tansey 2017). That description gives his archive an algorithmic character without reducing it to predetermined calculation. Rules initiate the game, but the game generates features that alter the rules. The procedure advances through recursive abduction: a surprising juxtaposition suggests a

possible world; that world then recruits, rejects, or transforms further materials. Composition arises through feedback between archive and emerging scene.

This method places Tansey close to contemporary machine image systems while preserving a decisive difference. Both work through immense inherited archives, statistical or analogical associations, recombination, and iterative selection. Yet Tansey's practice foregrounds the situated responsibility of the arranger. He does not invoke an archive as a warehouse of interchangeable content. He turns its contradictions into the subject and machinery of the work. AIR 17 therefore approaches Tansey neither as a style prompt nor as a visual skin for artificial intelligence. His practice offers a demanding precedent for machinic genres mixing: the archive must expose its historical pressures, and recombination must produce questions that implicate the operator.

Reverb (2017) makes this recursive archive visible within a single painted room. Framed images, mirrors, floor diagrams, gestures, scientific notations, and social encounters accumulate around two figures engaged in conversation. The painting holds more than one hundred fifty collected images, while Feynman diagrams translate interaction into another representational register (Tansey 2017). Studio, archive, blueprint, salon, and chapel overlap. The room pictures the conditions under which pictures, statements, and bodies begin to reverberate through one another. Tansey supplies not just an image but an interior architecture for thought.



Figure 4. AIR 13-15: three prior machinic genre experiments that prepare AIR 17 as a fourth turn in the series.

Subtraction and the Clinical Palette

Tansey's monochromes do not simply unify disparate sources. They produce epistemic atmospheres. Gray evokes the archive, newsprint, institutional photography, and academic grisaille. Ultramarine recalls blueprint, scientific illustration, nocturnal depth, and the obsolete authority of technical plans. Red can suggest propaganda, emergency, anatomical exposure, or a photograph developed under a warning lamp. Turquoise drifts between mineral deposit, medical image, underwater ruin, and oxidized monument. Color announces documentation at the same moment that the scene defeats documentary certainty.

The painting technique intensifies this double operation. Tansey prepares a smooth gesso ground, applies a field of color, and removes paint while it remains workable, recovering light through wiping, scraping, brushing, and blotting. Images emerge through subtraction rather than simple accumulation (Tansey 2021). This procedure gives his realism a negative structure: the picture appears as material gets taken away. Light does not descend from outside the image; it survives the removal of opacity. Erasure becomes productive, but never innocent, because each revealed passage records an intervention.

The clinical palette and subtractive method make a strong model for Metanoia Playground. Clinical does not mean sterile. It names an attentive scene in which symptoms, apparatuses, histories, and observers enter relation. The clinic itself can diagnose, discipline, care for, classify, or harm; its palette therefore carries pharmacological ambiguity. Tansey's monochromes let pictures look official enough to enter institutional memory and strange enough to expose memory's staging. BeyngLab can borrow this atmospheric discipline without copying his surfaces: use limited color to mark regimes of seeing, then allow the diagram's contradictions to unsettle the regime.

Logocentrism Gets a Landscape

Tansey neither abandons language nor frees the image from conceptuality. Titles, names, quotations, diagrams, and philosophical references operate as switches throughout his work. A viewer often needs words to enter the picture, yet the picture prevents those words from closing the event. This tension places Tansey within logocentrism and against its fantasy of final translation. The logos enters the scene, acquires scale and position, confronts material resistance, and finds itself watched by figures who may not follow its instructions.

(1990) *conGrammatologists* densens the operation. Two figures investigate a shore made from damaged pages beneath a steep textual geology. Writing no longer serves as transparent carrier of meaning; it composes terrain, debris, archive, and obstacle. The grammatologist must climb, dig, balance, and choose a path. Whitney's description notes two men examining and excavating among torn pages that form a rocky shoreline (Whitney Museum of American Art 2026a). Tansey does not simply illustrate Derrida. He gives grammatology field conditions and quietly asks whether its explorers can survive the landscape they have disclosed.

Descartography names the wider apparatus under pressure here: the conversion of worlds into coordinates, disciplines, categories, maps, identities, and interoperable platforms. Modern knowledge gains force by projecting a stable observer over a measurable field. Tansey adopts that field's visual confidence, then changes scale, reverses orientation, embeds faces in mountains, turns letters into rubble, or lets reflection occupy the place of ground. The coordinate system remains intact long enough to lure us into its failure. His paintings act as counter-Descartographies composed from inside the cartographic machine.

This counter-mapping avoids the easy romance of escaping representation. Tansey retains perspective, figuration, titles, archives, and art-historical conventions because those inherited devices supply the pressure. He works through the frame rather than pretending to stand outside it. The result resembles a recursive test: map the opposition; build the landscape it presupposes; insert the theorists; rotate the horizon; let the map diagnose its cartographer. The clinic has developed symptoms.

Four D4 Liminants

Tansey joins a larger D4 constellation whose members cross media, institutions, and inherited genres without claiming a view from nowhere. Walter Benjamin, Laurie Anderson, Donna Haraway, and Tansey each construct passages through damaged archives and authoritative machines. Their methods differ sharply, but each refuses the clean succession promised by progress narratives. They relay fragments, voices, bodies, technical devices, jokes, citations, and historical shocks through forms that require active reconstruction.

Benjamin constellates. His Arcades Project uses montage to interrupt continuous history and bring remnants of the past into charged relation with a present moment. The dialectical image flashes when what-has-been encounters the now without dissolving into synthesis (Benjamin 1999). Tansey gives this constellation a pictorial theater: historical actors from incompatible times can occupy one landscape, while the borrowed composition of an older painting becomes a relay for another struggle. Both artists treat citation as construction rather than ornamental reference.

Anderson activates the lecture machine. Her performances combine story, voice, music, electronic instruments, projection, drawing, deadpan timing, and technological malfunction. United States transformed national myth and media infrastructure into an extended multimedia environment, while later works continue to braid intimate anecdote with surveillance, war, travel, memory, and technical fantasy (Anderson 1984). Tansey performs a related operation in stillness. He disperses the lecturer into cast, props, perspective, title, image source, and the viewer's own explanatory labor. Anderson temporalizes the apparatus; Tansey freezes it at the moment its protocol becomes visible.

Haraway passes patterns. Her string figures gather science fact, science fiction, speculative fabulation, feminist theory, and situated making into practices that no single participant owns. Patterns move hand to hand, changing with every relay and obliging players to stay with the trouble rather than rise above it (Haraway 2016). Tansey's recombinant archive also receives and mutates inherited patterns, but his canvas emphasizes the establishing shot: the room, landscape, or battlefield in which the relay acquires material stakes. Haraway teaches how to pass the figure; Tansey shows the figure becoming habitat.

Together these liminants form neither a school nor a pantheon. They offer operational roles. Benjamin builds the constellation, Anderson performs the apparatus, Haraway relays the pattern, and Tansey constructs the impossible room. D4 names the threshold where these roles cease to remain properties of exemplary authors and become playable functions for others. The point does not rest in venerating four figures. It lies in learning how to constellate, activate, relay, and spatialize under conditions that keep every operation answerable to other bodies and worlds.

Hotel Don Quixote

Hotel Don Quixote names the global academic franchise in which inherited texts furnish rooms, disciplines issue keys, and generations learn to mistake a map of the world for the world that map helped build. Logocentrism does not hover as an abstract mistake; it occupies buildings, schedules, archives, credentials, citation systems, and professional roles. Don Quixote famously brings literary codes into encounters that refuse their fit. The contemporary hotel reverses and multiplies the joke:

reality itself has already received its furniture from representations, while every guest arrives carrying further scripts.

Tansey works as the hotel's impossible interior designer. A conceptual opposition supplies the floor plan; historical photographs provide furniture; philosophers and artists check in under borrowed names; perspective serves as security; the title opens the wrong door. The viewer enters as interpreter and leaves as accomplice, because the act of making sense adds another layer to the room. No final docent arrives to settle the scene. The painting continues renovating its own conditions of reception.

This comic architecture matters for BeyngLab because critique alone rarely changes the hotel. One may denounce the franchise while continuing to sleep in its rooms, publish in its ledgers, and teach from its evacuation map. Tansey proposes a more perfumative tactic: overarrange the inherited apparatus until its possibilities and absurdities appear together. Humor prevents the operation from hardening into another conversion regime. The joke loosens the hinge without pretending that the door lacks weight.

From Picture to Diagram

Tansey's importance for Metanoia Playground therefore exceeds aesthetic affinity. He offers a method for turning arguments into scenes whose occupants can encounter their own equipment. Give every concept a room, every opposition a landscape, every authority a comic prop, every map a fold, and every viewer a consequential position. Such instructions already approach experience design. The picture begins acting like a diagram when its relations invite traversal rather than detached recognition.

Yet a diagram adds another demand: someone must enter, test, alter, and pass through it with others. Tansey's canvas can solicit such participation imaginatively, but Metanoia Playground asks how the solicitation might become spatial, pedagogical, institutional, and recursive. That question marks the first joint in AIR 17. The impossible lecture has built its room. The next essay asks what happens when design and non-design begin rearranging the furniture while the guests remain inside.

Design / Non-Design

From the Critical Design Cascade to Dasein Design

Abstract

Design usually names intentional arrangement: defining problems, projecting futures, prototyping responses, and delivering artifacts or services. Yet every design process also depends on forces it did not author—inheritance, weather, accident, fatigue, breakdown, institutional sediment, refusal, material resistance, and play. This essay develops non-design not as design's absence or opposite but as its partner in production. Returning to StudioLab's critical design cascade and its later thought-action figures of plan, fall, wander, release, and play, the essay reframes Dasein design as recursive negotiation among designed procedures and undesigned events. D0-D4 then becomes a threshold system through which makers, builders, cosmographers, and liminauts can encounter how every design designs its designers.

Keywords: design; non-design; Dasein design; StudioLab; critical design cascade; thought-action figuration; D0-D4; performativity; care; recursive experience design

The Partner in Production

Design announces intention. Someone frames a challenge, gathers materials, selects a method, projects a future, and arranges means toward an outcome. Even participatory and pluriversal practices retain some commitment to deliberate intervention, however distributed the deliberation becomes. Non-design enters where this confidence frays: the uninvited event, the inherited condition, the recalcitrant material, the forgotten stakeholder, the institution that permanently fails without disappearing, the fatigue that changes a meeting, the joke that changes a brief, the storm that rewrites a schedule. These forces do not wait outside the process. They compose it.

Calling them non-design risks suggesting mere chaos or lack. The term should instead mark a relation. Non-design names whatever participates in production without submitting fully to a design's authorship, coordinates, or telos. It may precede intention as geology, language, infrastructure, habit, trauma, law, or ecological dependence. It may interrupt intention through accident, refusal, error, breakdown, or drift. It may exceed intention through unforeseen use, interpretation, adoption, mutation, and consequence. Non-design can wound, nourish, obstruct, rescue, or remain undecidable.

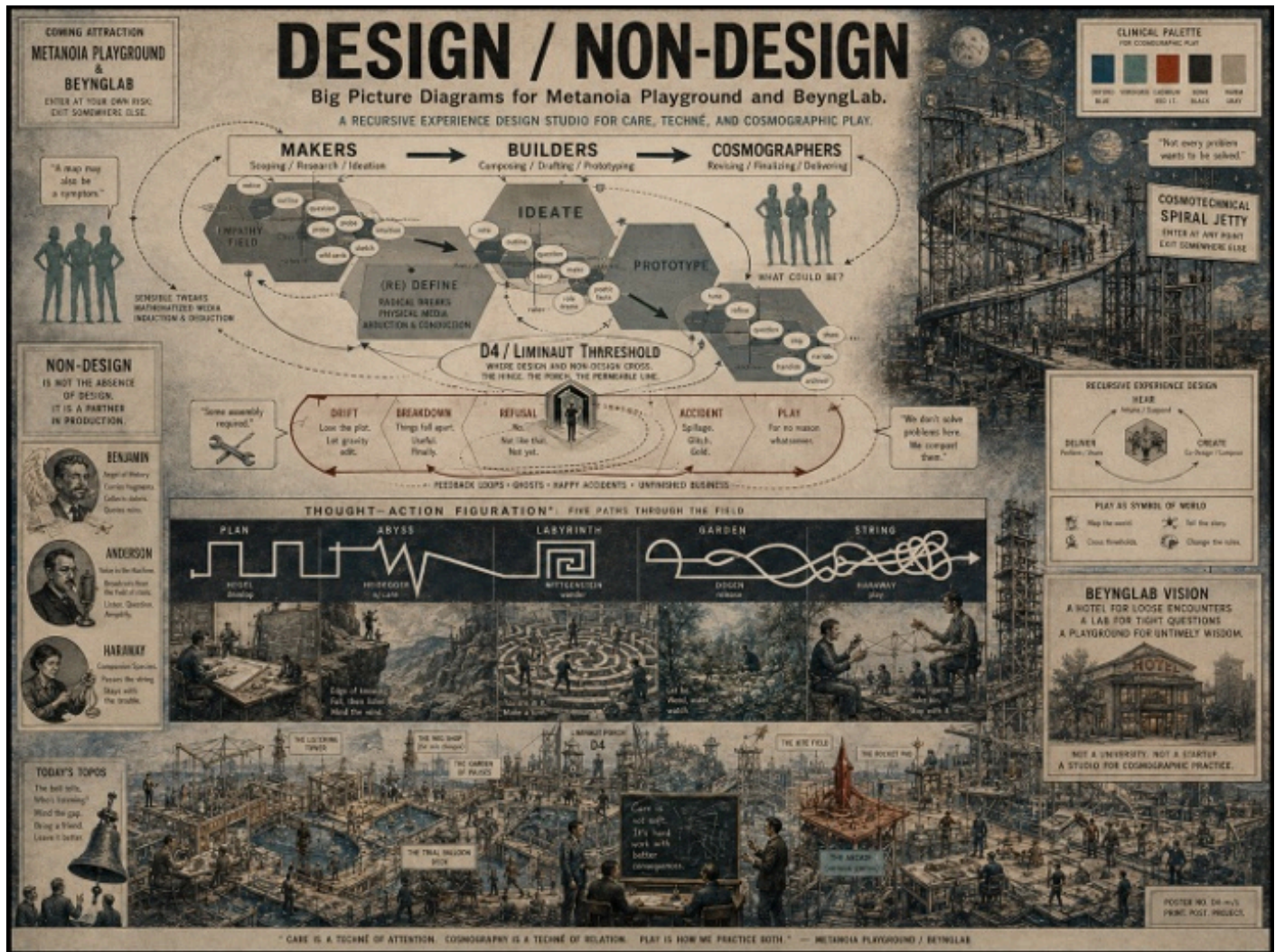


Figure 2. *Design / Non-Design: a Tansey-inflected systems map for Metanoia Playground and BeyngLab. AI-assisted visual prototype, 2026.*

The distinction therefore does not divide two separate worlds. A designed artifact condenses innumerable non-designed inheritances, while an apparent accident often reveals prior arrangements. A bridge carries engineering calculations, labor histories, property regimes, weather assumptions, material extractions, maintenance schedules, and local habits. A curriculum carries disciplinary taxonomies, room layouts, semester rhythms, credential systems, attention spans, political demands, and bodies that do not enter the classroom on equal terms. Design and non-design cross within every object and event.

This relation changes the ethical posture of the designer. Mastery gives way to situated response, and solutionism yields to care for consequences that remain partly incalculable. The designer still chooses, but choice no longer guarantees sovereignty. One works within a field that answers back. The crucial question shifts from 'What shall we design?' toward 'What already designs this situation, and how might our intervention enter that recursion without claiming the final word?'

The Critical Design Cascade

StudioLab's critical design cascade offers an explicit architecture for collaborative work. Makers scope, research, and ideate; builders compose, draft, and prototype; cosmographers revise, finalize, and deliver. Repeated design-thinking cycles conduct transmedia knowledge into partner projects, while media forms grow from low-resolution notes and sketches toward stories, prototypes, campaigns, and platforms. The cascade aligns cultural efficacy, technological effectiveness, and organizational efficiency without assuming that these values harmonize automatically (McKenzie 2025, 60-63).

The diagram carries more complexity than a familiar left-to-right process chart. It overlays design thinking with performance theory, strategic storytelling, media cascades, abductive leaps, conductive flashes, and Guattarian metamodeling. Its algorithm, DT(TK->YPP), asks teams to use design thinking to integrate transmedia knowledge into a partner's project, but the arrow conceals a dense reciprocity. Partners bring their own worlds, stakes, media, expertise, and histories. Students bring cosmograms, institutional privileges, anxieties, skills, and limits. The project begins designing the team as soon as the team begins designing the project.

Design diagrams often promise sequence because sequence makes collaboration teachable. Hear, create, and deliver; empathize, define, ideate, prototype, and test; research, compose, revise. Such orders help participants coordinate attention and produce accountable work. They also risk converting contingent encounters into a universal method. StudioLab's cascade avoids that closure when read as a wave function rather than an assembly line. Iteration allows return, redefinition, failure, and recomposition, while the three becomings—maker, builder, cosmographer—describe changing capacities rather than fixed job titles.

The diagram's most revealing feature lies near its center, where convergent and divergent movements cross. Strategic storytelling pulls toward legible calls to adventure and action; the media cascade multiplies forms, fragments, and channels. Their crossing creates a liminal workshop in which a project may discover another problem, audience, scale, or medium. Non-design does not enter after the process fails. It pulses at this crossing from the beginning, carried by what nobody yet knows how to name.

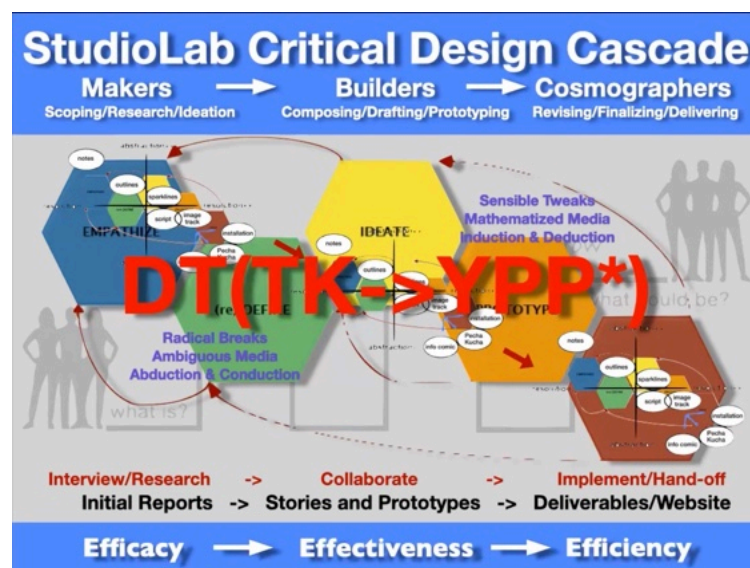


Figure 5. StudioLab critical design cascade: makers, builders, and cosmographers moving through recursive design-thinking and transmedia production.

The Brief as Ontological Device

A design brief never merely describes a problem. It divides figure from ground, actor from context, need from noise, and feasible action from impossible wish. The brief produces an ontology of the project: who or what counts, what time horizon matters, which effects can register, which histories remain relevant, and who may authorize completion. Even open-ended briefs exercise power through selection. What they leave unframed often returns later as cost, resistance, exclusion, or surprise.

Human-centered design sought to correct the technocratic habit of designing for abstract users. StudioLab intensifies that correction by refusing the user altogether in favor of stakeholders—collaborators with different and unequal stakes. In legal storytelling around women on death row, those stakes include life, law, gendered violence, public narrative, and the emotional exposure of everyone involved. In Health Access Connect's Ugandan clinics, they include patients, healthcare workers, motorcycle transport, state policy, donors, village infrastructure, and colonial legacies. Critical design becomes critical because the project already carries crisis, not because a designer applies a critical attitude from outside (McKenzie 2025, 64-80).

Yet stakeholder language can also stabilize identities too quickly. D2 roles—client, expert, donor, designer, student, patient, regulator—help map power, but lived situations overflow them. One person moves among roles; one role carries incompatible demands; an unnamed body may bear the heaviest consequence. The brief's ontology must therefore remain revisable. Cosmography supplements stakeholder mapping by attending to worlds of reference and value, while Dasein design asks how equipment, places, histories, and moods configure what anyone can encounter or do.

Non-design appears here as ontological remainder and active force. It includes what the brief cannot yet frame, what the workshop cannot safely disclose, what the data cannot count, and what the institution has learned not to hear. It also includes capacities that exceed recognized competencies: vernacular repair, humor, patience, memory, ritual, refusal, improvisation, and quiet forms of care. A responsible brief leaves doors through which these forces may alter the project.

Six Modes of Non-Design

Accident names the event without a seat at the planning table. Materials spill, platforms crash, schedules collide, weather intervenes, a wrong file opens, or a stranger asks the question the team had avoided. Accident can devastate, but it can also reveal a dormant possibility. Treating every accident as innovation would trivialize harm; treating every accident as noise would suppress learning. The task involves distinguishing salvage from exploitation and happy discovery from retrospective myth.

Breakdown exposes equipment and dependence. Heidegger's broken hammer famously interrupts transparent use and discloses a network of relations, but contemporary breakdowns rarely remain local. A failed login may expose platform ownership, an inaccessible building may expose the normate body, a supply shortage may expose geopolitical extraction, and a permanently failing institution may reveal how failure itself has become its operating model. Repair then requires more than restoring function. It asks which function deserves restoration and who paid for its prior smoothness.

Refusal interrupts the demand that every participant contribute, disclose, optimize, or agree. Designers often celebrate inclusion while treating withdrawal as a problem to overcome. Dasein design must recognize refusal as information and sometimes as care. A community may reject a research frame, a student may resist therapeutic exposure, a partner may decline a platform, or a body may simply have no remaining capacity. The project should not convert every 'no' into resistance data for a more efficient 'yes.'

Drift loosens the plot. Attention wanders, conversation follows a side path, a prototype attracts an unintended use, or a project outlives its original purpose. Drift can waste scarce time, yet it can also counter the tyranny of predeclared outcomes. The challenge lies in cultivating navigable wandering: enough structure to return, enough permission to encounter what the route could not predict. Wittgenstein's city of language games offers a better figure than the innovation funnel.

Inheritance names the non-design already built into the field. Institutions, roads, categories, interfaces, archives, languages, property lines, and habits arrive before the project. Designers neither choose nor escape these inheritances, though they can reinscribe, repair, expose, or redistribute them. Descartography supplies a massive inheritance: the mapping of worlds into objects, subjects, disciplines, and data. Every new diagram risks repeating the grid even when it announces liberation.

Play suspends necessity without abolishing consequence. It recombines rules, roles, materials, and scales so participants can encounter unrealized capacities. Yet play can also become forced cheer, gamified extraction, or an alibi for risk imposed on others. D4 play requires skin in the game and permission to leave the game. Its value does not come from fun alone but from the ability to change who may move, what counts as equipment, and how a situation can answer back.

Five Thought-Action Paths

StudioLab's later thought-action figuration diagram marks five experiential paths: plan, fall, wander, release, and play. The sequence does not propose developmental stages. Each path can interrupt, enfold, or reinterpret the others, and projects may cycle among them without reaching a final station (McKenzie 2025, 89-98). Read through design and non-design, the five paths become distinct negotiations between intention and event.

Plan carries Hegelian development. Projects define aims, arrange stages, distribute roles, and narrate progress from what is toward what could be. Planning enables promises, budgets, and collective coordination, but it can mistake sequence for causality and completion for success. Non-design enters as the detour, excess, or dependency that the plan discovers only after movement begins. A good plan therefore includes revision not as emergency exception but as a constitutive rhythm.

Fall carries Heideggerian thrownness and the abyss. Objectives collapse, values lose orientation, institutions withdraw support, illness changes capacity, or a larger event makes the project suddenly irrelevant. Design culture often domesticates fall as productive failure—fail fast, learn, iterate. Genuine falling resists that cheerful conversion. It can involve grief, harm, wasted labor, or irreversible loss. Care begins by refusing to extract a lesson too quickly.

Wander carries Wittgenstein's labyrinth. Language games proliferate, stakeholders speak past one another, and multiple possible routes prevent decision. Wander may indicate confusion, but it may also register a world too plural for premature synthesis. Designers need practices for marking paths, returning to questions, and sharing partial maps without demanding one universal orientation. The labyrinth does not disappear when the team chooses a route.

Release carries Tanabe's metanoetics and the garden. A project pauses, confesses error, relinquishes self-power, or makes room for other-power. Release can reset an exhausted process, but it also troubles the heroic model of the designer who rescues the situation through insight. In the garden, nothing takes place but place, and that interval may allow another relation to emerge. Metanoia does not crown the subject with a better identity; it breaks the subject's claim to sole authorship.

Play carries Haraway's string figures. Participants receive patterns they did not invent, alter them through situated response, and pass them onward. The figure belongs to the relay rather than the individual hand. Play makes composition collaborative and cosmological, yet its strings can tighten, knot, or break. Response-ability includes attention to who cannot join the circle and whose body supplies the string.

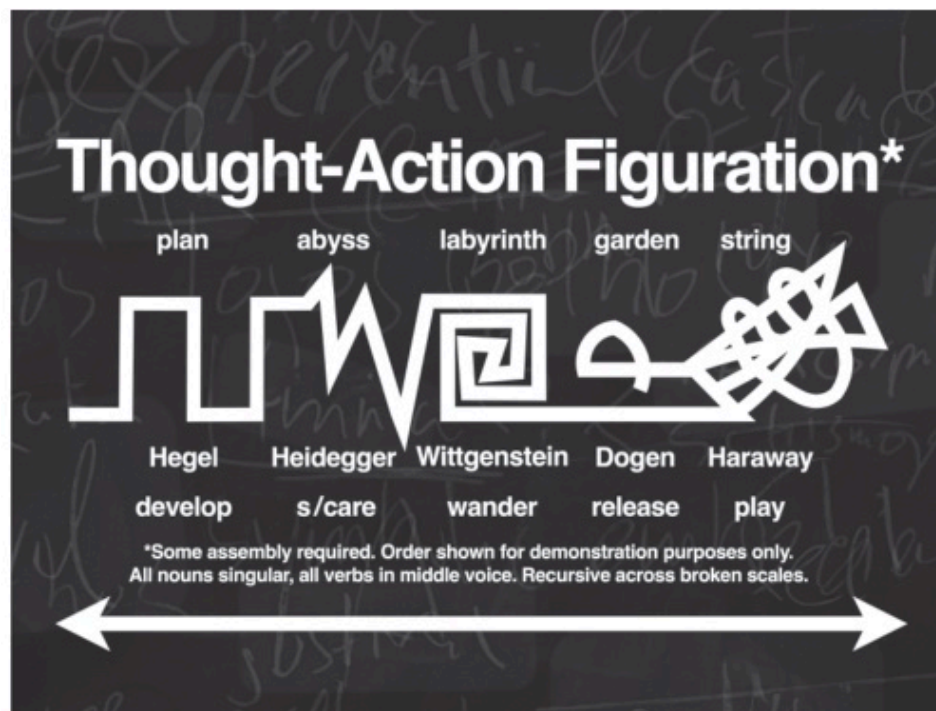


Figure 6. Thought-action figuration: plan, abyss, labyrinth, garden, and string as recursively transposable experiential paths.

D0-D4: A Recursive Threshold System

The D0-D4 stations provide another way to prevent the design process from collapsing into method. D0 suspends the brief and attends to what remains unnamed. D1 registers stakes through desire, fatigue, fear, care, calling, and capacity. D2 maps the roles, categories, identities, rules, and institutional positions already distributing agency. D3 maps Dasein's equipmental world: places,

tools, histories, infrastructures, relationships, moods, and breakdowns. D4 crosses the threshold where participants can alter the arrangement with others and accept alteration in return.

No station stands alone, and the numbering does not establish a ladder. D0 returns inside every station as openness; D1 returns as the felt cost of abstraction; D2 returns whenever roles harden; D3 returns as material consequence; D4 returns as the possibility of another passage. The system operates recursively across scales. An individual, team, institution, interface, and cosmotechnical world can each undergo different D-stations at once.

Design tends to claim D4 prematurely. Innovation rhetoric names every new product transformative, every workshop a journey, and every prototype a future. A genuine liminaut threshold demands more. The intervention must change the conditions of participation rather than only the artifact. It must expose the designers to response rather than merely collect feedback. It must leave some capacity with the collaborators rather than extracting insight for a remote owner. D4 does not complete design; it redistributes authorship and consequence.

Non-design runs through the entire system. D0 listens for it, D1 feels it, D2 discovers where roles suppress it, D3 encounters its material operations, and D4 composes with it without pretending to absorb it. This relation distinguishes metanoetic design from optimization. The goal does not involve eliminating noise. It involves learning which apparent noise carries another world.

Dasein Design and Care

Dasein design shifts attention from isolated objects and users toward the world in which beings already find themselves involved. Equipment never appears as a neutral inventory. A phone carries networks, labor, minerals, protocols, habits, surveillance, memories, and expectations. A clinic carries roads, trust, languages, supply chains, regulations, family structures, and histories of medicine. A classroom carries architecture, assessment, childhood, institutional ranking, and anxieties about the future. Design operates within these relational fields and changes them unevenly.

Care names this involvement before it becomes kindness. Heidegger's *Sorge* describes Dasein's constitutive concerned relation to a world; StudioLab translates that ontological structure into critical practice without reducing it to a service ethos. Care can support, control, rescue, classify, exhaust, or abandon. A care system may save lives while also extracting data or reproducing dependency. The clinical aside on the Metanoia poster—care is not soft; it is hard work with better consequences—captures the aspiration while leaving room to ask who defines better and who bears the work.

Traumaturgy enters when design encounters damaged worlds and participants whose capacities already carry strain. It refuses the fantasy that a workshop can cure structural violence through empathy exercises. Making cures may still arise through collective media, stories, platforms, and shared attention, but cure here names a provisional configuration rather than restoration to a prior norm. The work should reduce preventable harm, increase response-ability, and create passages through which stakeholders can continue shaping the conditions of their lives.

Dasein design therefore requires an ethics of unfinishedness. Delivery matters; partners need usable work, not endless philosophical hesitation. Yet delivery should not impersonate closure. A website, poster, curriculum, data story, or spatial intervention enters a world that will reinterpret and redesign it. The handoff becomes another threshold rather than the end of the cascade.

Diagram as Habitat

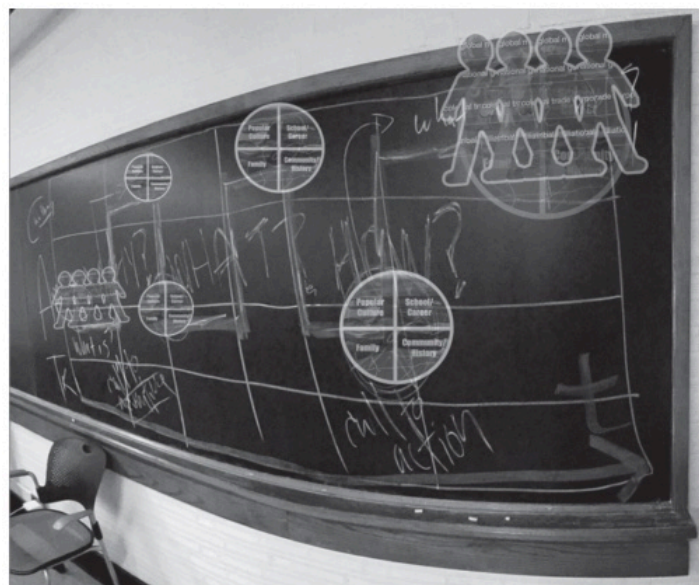
A diagram usually offers a view of relations from above. It compresses time, cleans the field, and enables movement through abstraction. Those capacities make diagrams powerful and dangerous. They can disclose patterns that no local actor perceives, but they can also erase bodies, conflict, and uncertainty in the name of legibility. Descartography reaches its highest confidence when the map seems to command the territory.

Tansey's paintings suggest another possibility: the diagram can acquire weather, scale, humor, witnesses, and unstable ground. StudioLab's critical design cascade already contains such pressure through its palimpsest, overlapping hexagons, role changes, and media flows. The thought-action paths deepen the pressure by placing breaks, gardens, labyrinths, and strings alongside the plan. Metanoia Playground makes the next move by asking participants to enter the diagram physically and rhetorically.

Entering does not guarantee emancipation. A designed experience can manipulate more effectively than a flat chart, and immersive environments can conceal their authorship behind atmosphere. Recursive experience design must therefore keep its machinery partly visible. Participants should encounter the rules, question the roles, alter the route, and discover exits. Humor, clinical asides, unfinished scaffolds, and visible maintenance all help prevent the habitat from presenting itself as a total world.

The second joint of AIR 17 now appears. Tansey moved from picture toward diagram; design/non-design moves from diagram toward habitat. The final essay enters that habitat as Metanoia Playground and asks how BeyngLab might operate inside Hotel Don Quixote without merely opening another branded room.

Figure 7. Early StudioLab chalkboard cosmogram: diagram already functioning as situated, erasable, collective habitat.



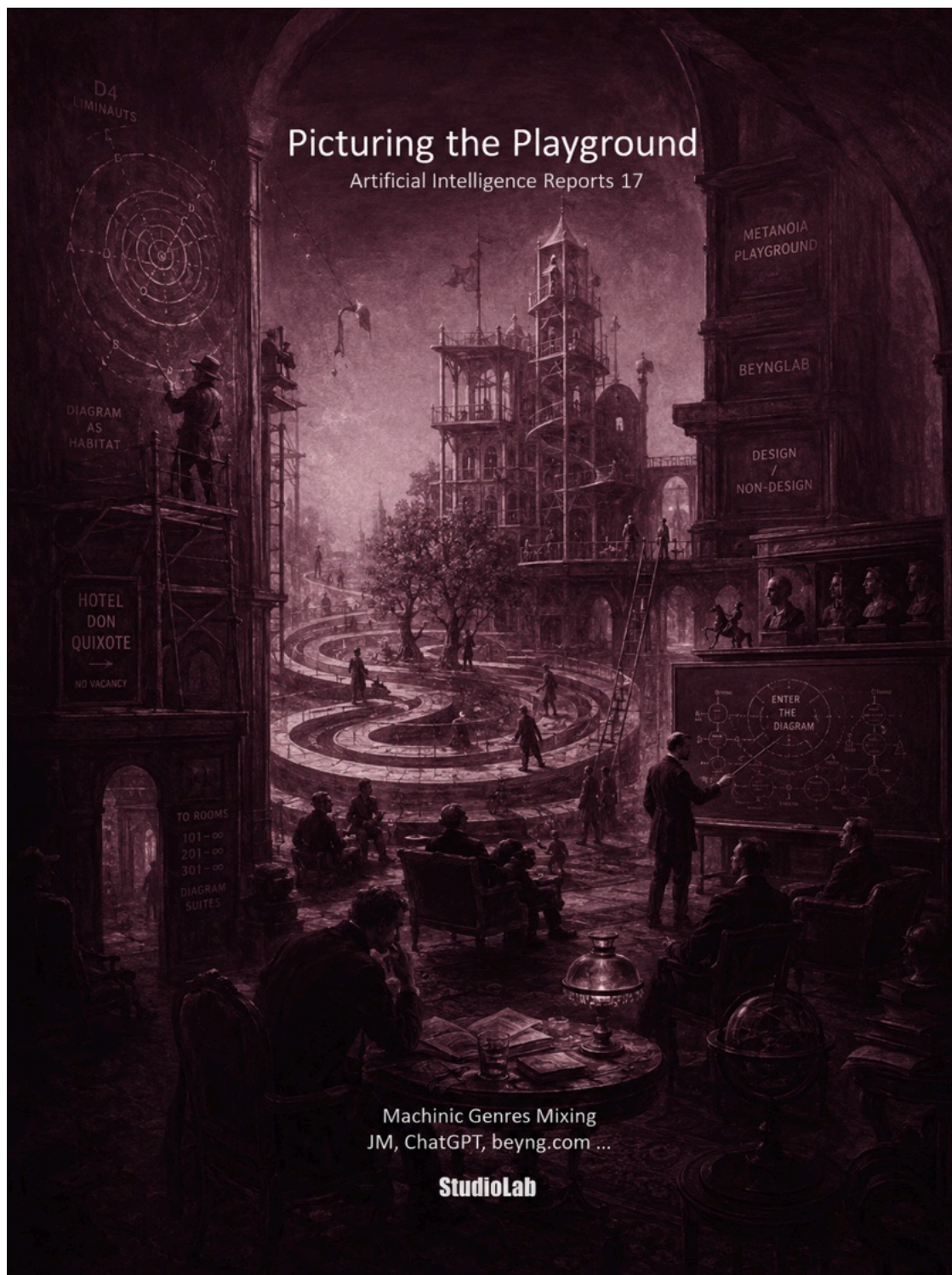
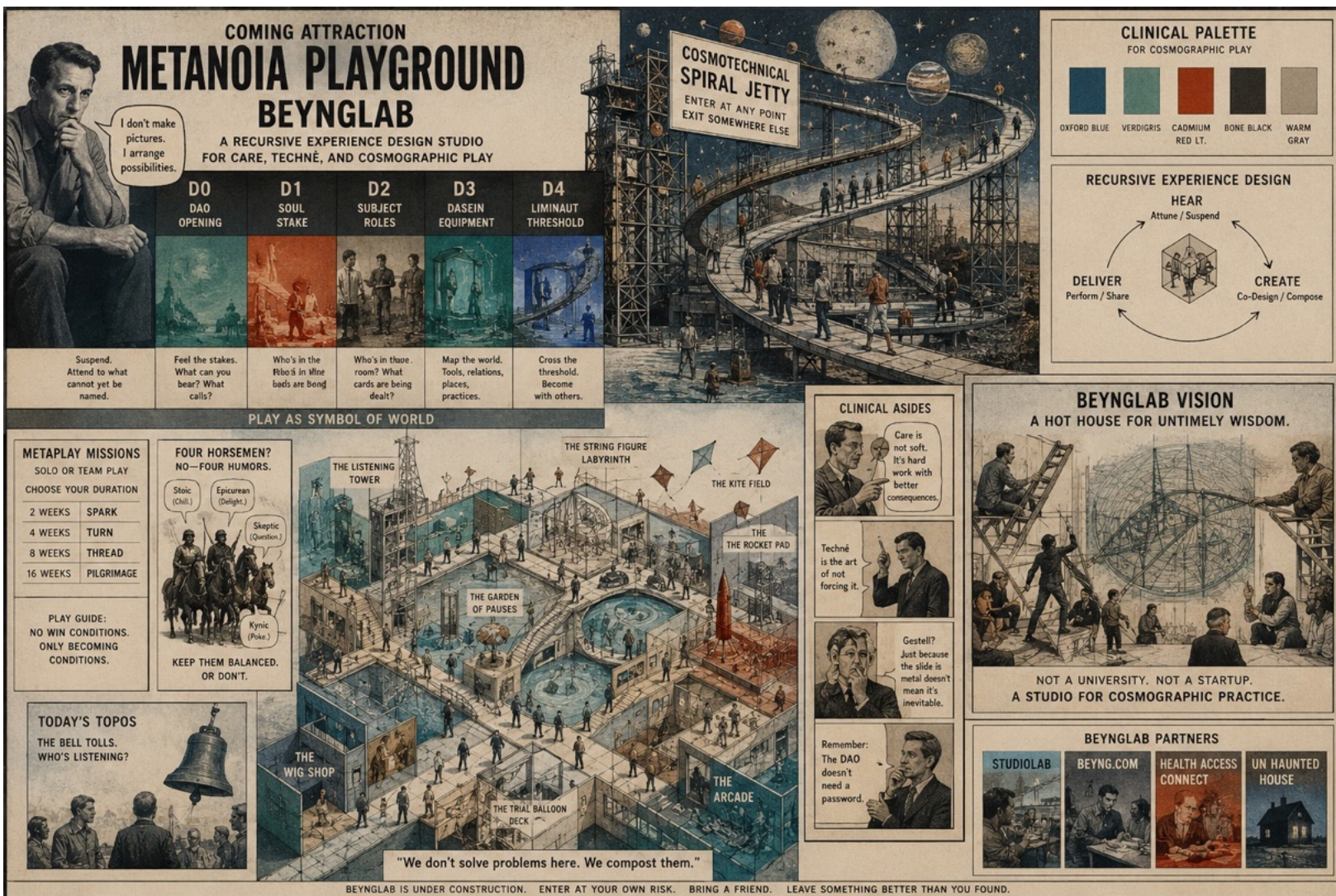


Figure 3. Metanoia Playground: recursive experience design, D0-D4 stations, clinical asides, and BeyngLab under construction. AI-assisted visual prototype, 2026.



Entering the Diagram

Metanoia Playground, BeyngLab, and Hotel Don Quixote

Abstract

Metanoia Playground converts the conceptual diagrams of StudioLab into a recursive experiential architecture. Its zones, signs, stations, jokes, scaffolds, and clinical palette do not illustrate BeyngLab; they prototype the institution in advance. This essay develops the playground as a coming attraction—part poster, curriculum, game board, hotel renovation, philosophical clinic, and performative lecture machine. D0-D4, Hear/Create/Deliver, the five thought-action paths, and the maker-builder-cosmographer sequence become navigable roles rather than static frameworks. BeyngLab emerges neither as university nor startup but as a hot house for untimely wisdom inside the global Hotel Don Quixote. Humor and visible incompleteness protect the experiment from solemnity, conversion, and solutionism, while machinic genres mixing opens collaboration among human and artificial participants.

Keywords: Metanoia Playground; BeyngLab; Hotel Don Quixote; recursive experience design; D0-D4; artificial intelligence; performative lecture; cosmography; StudioLab; coming attraction

The Coming Attraction

A coming attraction occupies a peculiar tense. It announces what has not yet arrived through images, fragments, promises, warnings, and condensed scenes. The trailer does not summarize a completed work; it manufactures an anticipatory public that may help bring the work into existence. Metanoia Playground adopts this tense deliberately. Its posters picture an institution under construction and invite participants to enter before anyone can certify completion.

This anticipatory status distinguishes the playground from a conventional architectural rendering or strategic plan. Renderings often conceal uncertainty behind polished surfaces, while plans translate aspiration into milestones and deliverables. The coming attraction keeps fiction and operation entangled. The listening tower, garden of pauses, wig shop, trial-balloon deck, kite field, rocket pad, arcade, spiral jetty, and Hotel Don Quixote do not yet occupy one literal site. They already function as design prompts, curricular stations, visual mnemonics, and roles for collective thought-action.

Tansey's impossible literalism supplies the visual grammar. Take a conceptual operation, give it architecture and equipment, populate it with historical and contemporary figures, then let the joke reveal what the concept had hidden. Metanoia becomes a playground rather than an interior revelation; recursive experience design becomes a spiral circulation system; cosmography gets towers, strings, weather, and rooms; non-design receives a seat at the planning table and immediately knocks over the water. The image does not predict a finished campus. It composes a world in which the project can begin asking better questions.

AIR 17 thus treats the visual prototype as theory-practice. The cover, poster, diagrams, and essays form neither illustrations surrounding a sovereign text nor a promotional package attached to an institution. They operate as machinic genres mixing. Each medium catches features that another medium cannot hold, and each revises the others. Writing slows the joke into argument; the poster compresses argument into simultaneous encounter; the diagram exposes relations; the imagined architecture gives those relations duration, thresholds, and risk.

From Image to Room

An image becomes a diagram when its internal relations invite use, transfer, and transformation. A diagram becomes a room when participants can enter those relations with bodies, tools, histories, and one another. A room becomes recursive when occupancy changes its organization and when the organization changes the occupants. Metanoia Playground pursues this sequence from image to diagram to room without treating any step as irreversible.

The poster works like a cutaway building whose zones remain connected by stairs, bridges, ramps, signs, sightlines, and wandering figures. No single path commands the site. The viewer can begin at the D0-D4 register, the clinical asides, the recursive Hear/Create/Deliver loop, the partner panels, the central playground, or the BeyngLab vision. This simultaneous layout counters the lecture's linear delivery while preserving enough structure for orientation. One reads spatially, returns, notices a minor sign, and revises the apparent whole.

The room also changes the status of theory. Concepts no longer remain propositions to accept, reject, or cite; they become affordances and constraints. A garden invites release but may also stage exclusion. A tower enables listening while elevating some listeners above others. A rocket pad promises flight and concentrates danger. A wig shop offers tactical role change while raising questions of appropriation and disguise. Theoretical critique enters maintenance, access, safety, scheduling, signage, hospitality, and exit design.

This passage marks the difference between a themed environment and an experiential architecture. Theme decorates a predetermined program. Experiential architecture lets the encounter reorganize the program and makes that reorganization legible. The playground's scaffolds should remain visible because completion would conceal the labor, conflict, and revision that sustain the site. Construction does not precede experience; construction becomes one of its recurring modes.

The D0-D4 Playground

D0 begins with suspension. Participants enter without receiving a fully specified problem, identity, or outcome. The station asks what the situation permits, blocks, or cannot yet name. Silence, observation, walking, archival fragments, sensory prompts, and encounters with nonhuman processes may all serve as D0 practices. The danger lies in turning openness into vague mystification, so D0 needs time limits, exits, and paths back toward explicit stakes.

D1 registers soul as stake rather than private essence. What can participants bear, care about, desire, fear, remember, or refuse? The playground can use story circles, objects, sound, gesture, and small acts of making to surface these intensities without demanding confession. D1 must protect opacity. No participant owes the institution a therapeutic performance, and the right not to disclose remains part of care.

D2 maps subject roles and institutional scripts. Student, expert, patient, designer, donor, administrator, artist, philosopher, community partner, and artificial agent each arrive with permissions and expectations. Role cards, interface audits, policy maps, seating arrangements, and media histories can expose who gets heard and whose labor remains infrastructural. The goal does not involve abolishing every role; it involves making roles playable, contestable, and accountable.

D3 enters Dasein's equipmental world. Participants map places, tools, infrastructures, histories, schedules, materials, breakdowns, and dependencies. Here the playground resembles a clinic and fablab at once: inspect the interface, trace the cable, follow the supply chain, listen to the room, test the threshold, repair the prop, document the failure. D3 prevents metanoia from floating above material conditions. Every conversion has a floor plan and a maintenance burden.

D4 opens liminait passage. Participants cross roles, media, scales, or worlds and produce something that can travel: a story, diagram, performance, prototype, ritual, curriculum, policy prompt, platform, or redesigned room. The crossing must alter the arrangement rather than only the participant's self-description. D4 also requires return. Liminait bring something back, hand it to others, and accept that the relay will mutate the gift.

The stations recurse rather than advance in a straight line. A D4 prototype can expose a D2 exclusion, force a D3 repair, reactivate a D1 stake, or return the group to D0 uncertainty. This recursion makes the playground different from a conversion funnel. Nobody graduates from Dao through soul and subject into permanent liminait status. The stations name operations that bodies and institutions undergo unevenly and repeatedly.

Hear, Create, Deliver

The recursive experience design loop—Hear, Create, Deliver—gives the playground a practical pulse. Hear combines attunement, research, suspension, and situated listening. Create combines co-design, composition, prototyping, rehearsal, and recombination. Deliver combines performance, sharing, handoff, publication, installation, and return. The circle counters the assumption that delivery ends the process: every delivery produces new conditions that require hearing.

Hear does not romanticize listening. Institutions often conduct listening sessions after the decisive frame has already hardened. The playground must let what it hears change resources, schedules, roles, and outcomes. Listening without transfer of consequence becomes extraction with better manners. D0 and D1 deepen Hear by attending to the unnamed and felt; D2 and D3 test whether the institution can materially respond.

Create does not reserve invention for designated creatives. It composes expert and vernacular knowledge, human and nonhuman constraints, archives and accidents, plans and refusals. Tansey's card-shuffling archive offers one model: juxtapose fragments until a possible world appears, then let that world alter the next selection. Haraway's string figures add relay and responsibility. Anderson adds voice, timing, and apparatus. Benjamin adds historical interruption. Creation becomes a crowded field rather than an owner's signature.

Deliver requires finish without finality. Partners deserve usable artifacts and accountable commitments, yet every handoff enters another context. The playground can document versions, attach maintenance instructions, name unresolved risks, and preserve the right to revise. Delivery may include a public performance, web platform, zine, poster, care protocol, policy brief, or spatial intervention. Its quality depends not only on polish but on whether others can inhabit, alter, and continue the work.

BeyngLab: A Hot House for Untimely Wisdom

BeyngLab names the institutional horizon of the playground. It does not need to imitate a university department, technology startup, think tank, retreat center, art school, or innovation lab, though it can borrow equipment and practices from each. The poster's formulation—neither university nor startup, but a studio for cosmographic practice—protects an experimental interval. The lab can host rigorous study without credential monopoly and technical making without venture logic.

A hot house cultivates organisms that would not survive ordinary institutional weather. Untimely wisdom may require shelter, humidity, patience, strange grafts, and controlled exposure rather than immediate scalability. BeyngLab can gather Heideggerian engineering, Woesean humanities, performance design, grammatology, cosmotechnics, public health, community media, AI collaboration, and speculative play without forcing them into a new discipline. The hot house should also avoid becoming an exotic greenhouse where ideas flourish only under artificial protection. Its doors must open onto partners, streets, villages, classrooms, clinics, and networks.

The lab's recursive design links research to public genres. A close reading can become a diagram, workshop, zine, lecture performance, interface, curriculum, or playground mission. A community collaboration can return as theory without converting partners into case material. Machinic genres

mixing does not abolish disciplinary standards; it routes them through other media and publics. The essay, image, website, performance, and prototype correct one another's blind spots.

BeyngLab also needs an explicit economy of care. Who receives payment, credit, access, authorship, data rights, and maintenance responsibility? Who can enter the room, and who must join remotely? Which forms travel across languages, bandwidths, abilities, and institutional borders? A lab that studies ontological difference while reproducing ordinary extraction would merely furnish another elegant room in Hotel Don Quixote. The playground's philosophy must appear in contracts, calendars, interfaces, and budgets.

Renovating Hotel Don Quixote

Hotel Don Quixote names the global architecture of literate knowledge: academies, disciplines, archives, theatres, rankings, campuses, and digital platforms that teach the world through inherited scripts. The hotel does not stand outside BeyngLab. StudioLab, Cornell, beyng.com, artificial intelligence systems, academic publishing, and the present essay all occupy its rooms. The challenge therefore cannot involve escaping to pure exteriority. Renovation must proceed while guests, workers, ghosts, and administrators continue moving through the building.

Metanoia Playground can open a liminal floor inside the hotel. Rooms become diagram suites; corridors turn into passages between media; the lobby hosts story circles; the service elevator reveals infrastructural labor; the roof supports kites, antennas, and trial balloons; the archive leaks into the garden. Historical figures do not appear as marble authorities but as playable operators whose limits accompany their gifts. Benjamin, Anderson, Haraway, Tansey, Heidegger, Tanabe, Schurmann, Derrida, Guattari, and others enter as hosts, unreliable guides, maintenance problems, and occasional fire hazards.

The hotel's comedy prevents renovation from becoming purification. Don Quixote reminds us that inherited codes can inspire courage and produce catastrophe in the same gesture. A BeyngLab room should therefore contain both invitation and warning. Enter at your own risk; bring a friend; leave something better than you found; the Dao does not need a password. These asides puncture institutional grandeur and keep the rules available for revision.

No vacancy can function as another joke. The hotel already overflows with dead authors, living workers, automated agents, forgotten objects, unprocessed histories, and future guests. New construction does not begin on empty land. Every room bears prior occupancy. Renovation starts by asking who got displaced, who maintains the utilities, which ghosts still call the front desk, and whether the new keycard opens anything beyond a branded experience.

Humor as a Safety System

Humor does not decorate Metanoia Playground; it regulates pressure. Philosophical institutions easily become solemn because their participants confuse difficulty with dignity and obscurity with depth. Design institutions acquire a different solemnity through optimism, facilitation rituals, and compulsory enthusiasm. The playground needs humor to interrupt both moods without trivializing the stakes that brought people together.

Tansey's deadpan method offers the right calibration. The scene remains meticulously composed while one literalized metaphor quietly ruins its authority. Anderson's timing adds another resource:

the aside, pause, altered voice, or malfunction that lets the apparatus comment on itself. Benjamin's collector and Haraway's game player keep fragments moving rather than polishing them into monuments. Humor works when it opens a lateral exit and lets participants perceive the frame they had occupied.

A safety system must also recognize failed jokes. Irony can reproduce privilege, ridicule vulnerability, or shield the speaker from responsibility. The playground should not turn critique into a roast of participants or use playfulness to demand emotional exposure. Clinical asides work best when they target institutional habits and philosophical pretension, including BeyngLab's own. The sign should laugh upward, sideways, and inward before it laughs down.

This reflexive humor supports aletheic moments—rare disclosures in which something concealed becomes palpable. Such moments should not receive constant branding as breakthroughs. A joke may clear the air, a breakdown may reveal the system, a story may change the room, or a diagram may suddenly expose a relation everyone had felt but nobody could show. The playground can protect the opening without claiming to own the truth that passed through it.

Machinic Genres Mixing

Artificial intelligence enters AIR 17 not as subject alone but as collaborator, archive condition, and institutional pressure. Generative systems can recombine images, draft prose, propose diagrams, translate registers, and accelerate iterative publication. They also inherit extraction, classification, bias, labor concealment, platform ownership, and the seductive fluency of answers that have not encountered the world they describe. The playground should neither worship nor merely denounce these systems. It should give them equipment, roles, limits, and witnesses.

Tansey offers a strong tutor because his recombinant method refuses the myth of creation from nothing. Every image enters with prior histories, and arrangement makes those histories collide. Human-AI collaboration should likewise expose source fields, selection decisions, rejected versions, and the situated purposes of the work. The clinical palette can mark provisionality; captions can identify transformations; workshops can compare machine proposals with local knowledge; partners can veto uses that violate stakes or context.

The term machinic genres mixing emphasizes composition across heterogeneous systems. A genre does not merely package content; it scripts attention, authority, evidence, sequence, and response. Mixing essay, poster, performance, zine, diagram, interface, and workshop changes what can count as knowledge and who can participate. Artificial intelligence can assist the mixing, but no model should silently occupy the role of cosmographer. Shared world-making requires participants who can answer for consequences.

HAL's role within the present volume therefore resembles neither ghostwriter nor oracle. The collaboration shuttles among archive search, conceptual recombination, drafting, visual prototyping, editing, redundancy reduction, and document production. Kx4L supplies the long StudioLab experiment, theoretical stakes, aesthetic archive, and direction; HAL supplies accelerated variation, pattern detection, and machinic composition. The work gains value only where the relay remains inspectable and revisable.

A Program for the Playground

Metanoia Playground can begin through missions rather than permanent departments. Two-week sparks might test a single topos or partner question. Four-week turns could move a small team through D0-D4 and Hear/Create/Deliver. Eight-week threads could connect research, fieldwork, prototypes, and public genres. Sixteen-week pilgrimages could sustain a full StudioLab collaboration with partners and culminate in a suite of deliverables and reflections.

Each mission would include a visible design/non-design register. Teams record plans alongside accidents, refusals, breakdowns, drift, inheritances, and playful mutations. They identify which events changed the brief and which harms should not become celebratory learning stories. The register keeps recursive experience design accountable to what exceeded its intention.

Roles should circulate. Participants can move among maker, builder, cosmographer, listener, host, skeptic, archivist, maintainer, storyteller, technician, partner, and liminaut. Artificial agents may occupy bounded support roles—retriever, variant generator, translator, layout assistant, counter-reader—while humans retain responsibility for consent, credit, interpretation, and delivery. Role rotation exposes hidden labor and prevents a single expertise from monopolizing the process.

Every mission should produce more than a final object. It should leave a trail: research notes, cosmograms, discarded prototypes, decision logs, maintenance instructions, reflections, and a public-facing genre suited to the partner's world. The archive then becomes generative without pretending to forget its failures. Future teams can enter previous work as Tansey enters his visual trove: not to mine interchangeable assets, but to construct new questions from inherited relations.

The Room Remains Under Construction

The three essays of AIR 17 follow a simple but recursive movement. Tansey turns argument into image and image into an impossible lecture. Design/non-design turns the lecture's relations into diagrams that admit accident, refusal, inheritance, fall, wandering, release, and play. Metanoia Playground turns the diagram into a habitat whose occupants can rearrange the conditions of their encounter.

No single medium completes the passage. The essay provides sequence and qualification; the image offers simultaneity and atmospheric force; the diagram exposes operations; the playground introduces bodies, maintenance, timing, access, and consequences. BeyngLab can emerge through

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Plato and the Sicilian Mob: Philosophy Goes to Syracuse

The Republic's Shadow and the Birth of Theoretical Theater

Abstract

Plato's *Republic* often enters modern classrooms through the inviting form of Socratic dialogue: a conversation about justice, education, leadership, and the examined life. Its dramatic openness can make Plato appear compatible with democratic inquiry even though the political order constructed within the dialogue sharply limits equality, popular sovereignty, and political participation. Philosophers rule because they possess knowledge that the majority lacks; citizens receive differentiated functions; education, poetry, music, reproduction, and civic mythology fall under supervisory control; democracy appears near the bottom of a sequence of declining regimes.

This essay argues that Syracuse provides the suppressed material test of that political philosophy. Plato's Sicilian interventions did not constitute a literal installation of the ideal city, and Dion's later military campaign cannot be reduced to the execution of a Platonic blueprint. Syracuse nevertheless confronts the central proposition of Platonic politics with historical force: those who know the good of the city should direct those who do not. Once this proposition leaves dialogue and enters institutions, it requires rulers, advisers, loyal companions, educational techniques, coercive capacities, transition plans, and methods for handling resistance. The refusal of an interlocutor becomes faction; philosophical correction becomes political direction; purification of opinion can become purification of the city.

The Statesman makes this danger explicit when it grants the genuine ruler authority to govern without law or consent and to purify the city through killing or exile. Dion's authorization of the murder of Heracleides, followed by an elaborate public funeral that converts resentment into recognition of political necessity, gives that structure a historical and theatrical form. The Platonic Letters subsequently return to stage the catastrophe, defend philosophy, guide Dion's survivors, and make the dead speak.

Syracuse therefore belongs inside any serious account of Platonic political theory. The *Republic* supplies philosophical rule with its beautiful dramatic form. Syracuse reveals the bodies, factions, exclusions, and deaths that appear when philosophical rule seeks political realization. Every road from Platonic dialogue to the polis must pass through Syracuse.

1. The *Republic* Without Republicanism

The title begins the domestication.

Plato's Greek title, *Politeia*, does not mean "Republic" in the modern sense of representative government, popular sovereignty, or constitutional opposition to monarchy. The word can indicate a constitution, regime, civic order, citizenship, or an entire political way of life. The familiar English title descends through the Latin *res publica* and carries associations that the Greek does not guarantee.[1]

The mistranslation does more than create a philological inconvenience. It helps stage Plato for modern liberal reception. The book called *The Republic* sounds as though it might support Republican citizenship, constitutional participation, or democratic civic education. Its form encourages this expectation. Socrates asks questions rather than issuing decrees. Interlocutors interrupt him, challenge him, misunderstand him, and force him to elaborate. The conversation begins after a public festival and unfolds through the night in a private house. Justice emerges through detours, myths, analogies, reversals, and unresolved difficulties rather than through a sovereign declaration.

The medium feels participatory.

The political architecture does not.

The city constructed in speech assigns rule to those who possess philosophical knowledge. Guardians receive a specialized formation. Producers do not share equally in government. Poetic stories and musical modes face regulation because they form souls before argument can defend them. Family life among the guardians becomes an object of political design. The city's stability depends upon people performing differentiated functions rather than claiming equal competence across roles.

The famous convergence at *Republic* 473c-d states the principle without democratic ambiguity. Cities will find no rest from their troubles until philosophers rule as kings or existing rulers genuinely philosophize, while those pursuing political power and philosophy separately undergo compulsory exclusion.[2]

The formula does not say that citizens should deliberate together until they reach a shared understanding of justice. It does not say that every participant possesses an equal claim to rule. Knowledge authorizes hierarchy.

Plato's best regime can therefore use a dialogical interface while running an epistemically aristocratic political system.

Socrates asks questions.

The philosopher-ruler assigns places.

2. Democracy Inside Plato's Theater

Book VIII confirms the distance between Platonic politics and democratic sovereignty. Democracy arises when the poor defeat their opponents, kill or exile some, and distribute political participation more equally among those who remain. Plato grants democratic life undeniable attractiveness: it appears varied, colorful, permissive, and rich in ways of living. The democratic city resembles a marketplace of regimes in which citizens can sample multiple lives.

But variety lacks order. Equality ignores relevant differences. Citizens resist authority, offices lose dignity, and freedom extends toward refusal of discipline. The democratic person moves among desires without ranking them according to a governing account of the good. Democracy's excessive liberty eventually prepares its opposite: tyranny.

Arlene Saxonhouse rightly cautions against reducing this analysis to simple hatred of the masses. She argues that Book VIII probes a deeper conflict between democracy's commitment to equality and the stabilizing forms through which philosophy recognizes identities, regimes, and objects of knowledge. Democratic formlessness challenges philosophical classification, while the imposition of form always carries a danger of compulsion.[3]

That complication matters. Plato may illuminate genuine tensions within democracy rather than merely dismissing it. Yet Kallipolis does not thereby become democratic. A searching critique of democracy differs from a commitment to democratic self-rule.

The *Republic* can invite readers to deliberate while refusing the demos final political authority. Its conversational performance and its constitutional destination move along different tracks.

This split helps explain why the dialogue travels so easily through liberal education. Teachers can emphasize questioning, intellectual humility, reasoned discussion, and the search for justice. Students can inhabit the argument without endorsing every institutional detail. The most disturbing political arrangements then retreat behind interpretive shields:

- the city functions only as an analogy for the soul;
- the philosopher-king remains an impossible ideal;
- the censorship belongs to ancient pedagogy;
- communal families among the guardians constitute a thought experiment;
- the criticism of democracy serves as a provocation;
- Socratic irony prevents any direct political doctrine.

Each claim has interpretive merit. Together, however, they can cast the politics into shadow while leaving the dialogue's participatory atmosphere in the foreground.

The dialogue becomes democratic by reception.

The polis remains hierarchical in construction.

3. The Socratic Interface

We should not solve this problem by treating Socratic dialogue as mere camouflage. Dialogue possesses real ethical and political force. It exposes confidence to testing. It allows claims to encounter resistance. It makes the speaker answerable to another person. It can end in *aporia* rather than verdict. It stages thinking as a relation rather than a private possession.

James Kastely consequently reads the *Republic* as responding to a democratic crisis of persuasion. On this account, Plato does not simply abandon the nonphilosopher; he seeks a rhetoric capable of engaging people who do not yet share philosophical commitments.[4] Demetra Kasimis similarly emphasizes the dialogue's setting and conspiratorial play: profound political reconstruction gets discussed behind closed doors under the ostensible cover of an inquiry into justice.[5]

These readings strengthen rather than weaken the Syracuse argument. They reveal the elaborate dramaturgy required to make philosophical rule discussable. The city cannot simply get announced. It must arise through an evening of conversation, friendship, challenge, narration, and imaginative construction.

Socratic dialogue therefore forms an interface between the reader and a political architecture that the reader might otherwise reject.

The interface leads.

It does not rule.

Inside the dialogue, a resistant interlocutor can refuse, fall silent, change the subject, or leave unconvinced. Socrates may expose the refusal as confusion or evasion, but he cannot transform it directly into exile. A philosophical conversation can remain incomplete. It can preserve disagreement without resolving the political status of the dissenter.

A polity cannot indefinitely occupy *aporia*. It must make decisions about offices, laws, education, property, war, citizenship, punishment, and the distribution of force. When philosophical knowledge claims political authority, refusal changes status. It may no longer appear as an interlocutor's contribution to inquiry. It may appear as ignorance, corruption, faction, sedition, disease, or resistance to the good.

The ethics of dialogue do not automatically scale into the politics of rule.

Syracuse names the attempt to cross that difference.

4. From City in Speech to City in Action

The *Republic* constructs a city in speech. Syracuse places philosophy among rulers, courts, soldiers, ships, prisons, property disputes, exiles, conspirators, and rival constituencies.

This does not mean that Plato carried the completed blueprint of Kallipolis to Sicily. Robin Waterfield argues that Plato's more immediate project during his visits to Dionysius II likely involved transforming a tyrant into a more lawful king who would allow some measure of democratic participation, not producing the philosopher-king described in the *Republic*.^[6] Ariel Helfer goes further, questioning whether Plato ever shared Dion's vision of philosophical rule for Syracuse in the form later attributed to him.^[7]

These qualifications block an easy morality play in which Plato writes the *Republic*, implements it in Syracuse, and discovers that utopia produces murder. History offers no such clean experiment.

Syracuse matters for a more fundamental reason.

It tests the proposition that political power should join philosophical intelligence.

Whatever constitutional settlement Plato envisioned, his second and third Sicilian visits placed him near the center of a project to educate a ruler. Dion hoped that Dionysius II could undergo philosophical formation and redirect Syracusan power. Plato entered a court structured by inherited tyranny, military pressure, wealth, kinship, suspicion, flattery, and faction. Philosophical pedagogy now needed to operate through an entire political environment rather than through the face-to-face testing of one argument.

The ruler never arrives alone.

He arrives with guards, relatives, advisers, informants, dependents, enemies, and pleasures. He controls access, movement, revenue, and punishment. To transform the ruler requires transforming the relations that sustain his rule.

Psychagogy becomes institutional design.

Friendship becomes political alliance.

Education becomes succession planning.

The philosophical companion becomes adviser to sovereign power.

A ruler's failure to learn does not end in aporia. It endangers everyone attached to the lesson.

James Romm's recent account makes the connection between the *Republic* and Syracuse central rather than incidental. He describes Plato's Sicilian involvement as an experiment in enlightened autocracy whose collapse helped shape the origins of Western political thought. While some details and causal claims remain debatable, Romm's intervention breaks the habit of treating the *Republic* as pure theory composed at a safe distance from the Syracusan dynasty.^[8]

Syracuse brings the philosopher down from the conceptual city and places him among actors who possess weapons, ambitions, injuries, and competing scripts.

5. The Load Test

The *Republic* serves as Plato's grand political stage design. Syracuse functions as its historical load test.

A load test does not prove that every crack in a building follows directly from the architect's blueprint. It subjects the design's governing assumptions to pressure. Syracuse pressures the assumption that wisdom and political power can converge without converting philosophical authority into coercive direction.

Once knowers claim rule, several practical questions arise:

- Who identifies the genuine knower?
- How does philosophical insight acquire institutional force?
- What happens before the ruler completes philosophical formation?
- Who governs during the transition?
- How should the reformers treat popular opposition?
- Can citizens reject a good they allegedly fail to understand?
- Does resistance prove the proposal mistaken, or does it prove the resistant citizen ignorant?
- What happens to political actors whose continued participation prevents the desired order?

The city in speech can postpone these questions through abstraction. Syracuse cannot.

The distinction between tyrant and philosopher-king depends less upon the concentration of power than upon the character and knowledge guiding it. Both occupy positions capable of commanding others. The tyrant follows appetite; the philosophical ruler follows reason and the good. That difference carries immense ethical significance. Politically, however, it relocates the chief safeguard from institutions and consent into the ruler's soul.

The decisive question becomes not "Who may rule me?" but "Does the ruler genuinely know?"

Citizens who dispute the ruler's knowledge face an immediate difficulty. The philosophical hierarchy can interpret their disagreement as evidence of the ignorance that disqualifies them from judgment.

The theory contains no simple external position from which the ruled can verify the ruler's access to the good.

Syracuse dramatizes this circularity. Dionysius can perform an interest in philosophy without submitting his life to it. Dion can present himself as a philosophical liberator while consolidating authority. Plato can distinguish genuine formation from theatrical display, but he cannot make the distinction politically operative without relying upon the same networks of trust, influence, and force that generate the crisis.

Philosophy enters the court to reform performance.

The court teaches philosophy that sovereignty already operates through performance.

6. The *Statesman* Steps Out of the *Republic's* Shadow

The *Statesman* (*Politicus*) reveals what the gentler reception of the *Republic* often obscures.

At 291a-297b, the Eleatic Stranger distinguishes genuine statecraft from constitutions governed merely by law, wealth, consent, or numerical rule. The defining criterion of correct rule lies in knowledge. Franco Trivigno summarizes the passage sharply: wisdom or expertise constitutes the criterion of right rule, while law and consent remain useful instruments whose value the statesman determines.[9]

The dialogue compares the ruler to a physician. A doctor may alter written instructions, inflict pain, cut, burn, and treat an unwilling patient, provided medical knowledge guides the action toward health. The political analogy follows directly. Genuine rulers may govern with or without law, over willing or unwilling subjects, and they may purify the city by killing or banishing some citizens when knowledge and justice require it:

“And whether they purge the state for its good by killing or banishing some of the citizens ... so long as they act in accordance with science and justice and preserve and benefit it by making it better than it was ... that must ... be declared to be the only right form of government.”[10]

The Greek verb, *kathairōsin*, names purification. Plato does not leave us to infer a medical metaphor from political violence. The knowledgeable ruler purges the civic body.

This passage does not authorize any self-proclaimed expert to kill opponents. The Stranger imagines a true statesman whose knowledge and justice distinguish him from tyrants, oligarchs, demagogues, and imitators. The rarity of such a ruler forms part of the dialogue's argument.

Yet rarity does not solve the political problem. It sharpens it.

If the true ruler stands above law and consent, citizens need a reliable way to distinguish the rare possessor of statecraft from the tyrant who claims expert necessity. The dialogue provides philosophical criteria but no democratic procedure capable of authoritatively making that distinction.

The *Statesman* exposes the sovereign underside of philosophical rule. Law protects the city when genuine knowledge remains unavailable. Should knowledge arrive, law becomes subordinate. Consent may help governance but cannot define justice. The doctor does not ask the tumor whether it wishes removal.

The beautiful city now carries a surgical theater within it.

7. A Platonic Contradiction

The Seventh Letter offers a striking counterprinciple. A sensible person, it says, may advise a badly governed city when speech has some chance of success. But one should not use violence against one's fatherland when establishing the best constitution would require exile and slaughter; under those circumstances, one should remain quiet and pray for the good of the city.[11]

The contrast should not get resolved too quickly.

The Statesman permits the knowledgeable ruler to purify a city through killing and exile.

The Seventh Letter warns the political adviser not to force reform through banishment and bloodshed.

One text places knowledge above law and consent.

The other acknowledges the limits of philosophical counsel.

One imagines successful statecraft.

The other reflects upon political failure.

Authorship complicates the comparison. Many scholars contest the authenticity of the Seventh Letter, and any argument must distinguish the position expressed by the text from a secure statement of Plato's own historical judgment. Yet even a pseudo-Platonic letter records an ancient attempt to think through Syracuse within Plato's conceptual inheritance.

The tension belongs to Platonism whether or not both voices belong to Plato's hand.

This contradiction gives Syracuse its tragic structure. Philosophy encounters two incompatible imperatives:

- the knower must not abandon the city to ignorance;
- the philosopher must not force the city into goodness through exile and slaughter.

What happens when persuasion fails but political disorder continues?

The dialogue can stop.

The city cannot.

8. Dion Leaves the Dialogue

After Plato's final departure, Dion moved from philosophical companionship toward military intervention. In 357 BCE he returned to Sicily with a relatively small force, attracted supporters, and displaced Dionysius II from much of Syracuse. He entered not merely as a conqueror but as a liberator associated with Plato, philosophical discipline, and constitutional reform.

Dion did not simply enact the *Republic*. His coalition joined mercenaries, aristocratic connections, democratic opponents of tyranny, personal allies, exiles, and philosophical associates. Its members did not share one political program. The philosophical party existed largely as a retrospective casting of heterogeneous forces.

That heterogeneity soon became visible through conflict with Heracleides.

Heracleides possessed naval authority and strong popular support. Dion drew upon aristocratic prestige, military leadership, wealth, and philosophical association. Their rivalry condensed disputes about democratic power, mixed government, redistribution, command, foreign advisers, and the future constitution of Syracuse.

A complex institutional conflict gradually acquired two faces.

Dion.

Heracleides.

Once contradiction takes personal form, removal begins to look like resolution.

The theoretical stage has found its antagonist.

9. The Murder and the Funeral

Plutarch reports that Dion had previously restrained men who wanted to kill Heracleides. Eventually, expecting Heracleides to obstruct his constitutional plans, Dion “yielded” to them. They entered Heracleides’ house and murdered him.

The syntax distributes responsibility without erasing it. Dion does not conduct a public trial or issue a formal execution order. He withdraws the protection that had prevented assassination. Others perform the killing whose political value he anticipates.

Plutarch then gives us the decisive theatrical scene:

“His death was keenly resented by the Syracusans; but nevertheless, when Dion gave him a splendid funeral, followed the body to its grave with his army, and then discoursed to them upon the matter, they came to see that it was impossible for the city to be free from tumults while Heracleides and Dion together concluded its affairs.”[12]

The funeral acts as a retrospective trial.

No judicial hearing preceded the killing. The ceremony supplies a public assembly, a presentation of the conflict, an interpretation of necessity, and an audience asked to accept the result.

Dion speaks.

Heracleides lies silent.

The splendor of the funeral acknowledges the dead man’s importance while neutralizing his political claim. The army honors the corpse and displays the force underwriting Dion’s account.

Public grief receives a procession. Public resentment receives a speech. Political murder receives a plot.

Plutarch's citizens move from anger toward recognition. They "come to see" that the city could not contain both rivals.

The phrase captures theoretical theater in action. The ruler does not merely eliminate an opponent. He stages the audience's perception of the elimination. He makes the death appear as the necessary ending of a conflict whose wider causes - constitutional disagreement, class tension, military command, democratic aspiration, property, foreign influence - exceed either man.

Heracleides becomes the causa of the crisis: its case, character, and embodied explanation.

To accuse begins to Syracuse.

The city converts structural conflict into an actor and then clears the stage.

10. Purification Requires an Audience

The murder of Heracleides performs political purification in the bluntest sense: it removes a rival from the civic field.

But removal alone fails. The killing generates a remainder - grief, anger, suspicion, guilt, and danger to Dion's legitimacy. The funeral must treat that remainder.

Here political purification touches theatrical catharsis.

The Statesman imagines the ruler purging the city before weaving its remaining elements into order. Dion's ceremony attempts an affective weaving after the purge. The corpse passes through ritual, spectacle, military procession, and political speech. The living citizens receive positions as mourners, witnesses, spectators, and finally recognizers of necessity.

The funeral does not erase the violence. It gives the violence civic form.

This sequence matters for the larger genealogy:

1. political knowledge identifies a source of disorder;
2. the source becomes embodied in a rival;
3. the rival undergoes removal outside ordinary law;
4. removal produces public disturbance;
5. ceremony reorganizes that disturbance;
6. the audience accepts the death as the price of restored order.

The city cannot simply kill.

It must explain the killing to itself.

Theory supplies the explanation. Theater supplies its passage through the civic body.

11. Syracuse as a Better Application

We can now return to the difficult question: does Syracuse offer a better application of Platonic political philosophy than Socratic dialogue? The two scenes cannot count as equivalent applications. Socratic dialogue practices philosophical formation by exposing confidence, testing claims, and leading an interlocutor toward inquiry. Syracuse tests what happens when that formative practice enters government, where disagreement no longer concerns an argument alone but the distribution of offices, property, coercive power, and civic standing.

For that reason, Syracuse provides the stronger material disclosure of Platonic politics. Dialogue can purify an opinion through refutation; political statecraft may purify a city through exclusion. Dialogue risks embarrassment, shame, or aporia; government risks dispossession, imprisonment, exile, and death. In conversation, the philosopher depends upon the interlocutor's continued participation. In the polity, the ruler may decide that continued participation itself threatens the whole.

This difference exposes the change of scale concealed by the phrase "philosopher-king." The philosopher does not become a Socrates with administrative responsibilities added. The office transforms the activity. Questions become policies, classifications become assignments, and judgments about ignorance acquire consequences for bodies and institutions. Political Platonism therefore cannot cite the civility of Socratic dialogue as sufficient evidence of its own gentleness.

None of this proves that Platonic philosophy necessarily culminates in assassination, or that Dion simply enacted a philosophical command. It establishes a more demanding test: the political significance of Platonism appears not only in how Socrates treats an interlocutor, but in how a philosophical polity treats someone who refuses its account of order.

12. The Shadow Cast by the *Republic*

The *Republic* casts Syracuse into shadow in two related senses. First, the canonical dialogue overwhelms the biographical, historical, and epistolary archive. Readers can spend years studying the city in speech without confronting Plato's prolonged entanglement with the Syracusan dynasty, the attempt to educate Dionysius II, Dion's armed return, or the murders that followed. The work's philosophical altitude encourages the image of a Plato purified of the worldly scenes in which his concepts acquired political stakes.

Second, the *Republic* gives philosophical rule a beautiful dramatic medium. Socrates' irony, patience, narrative invention, and willingness to undergo questioning soften the hierarchy that emerges through his speech. The dialogue's participatory interface can cast a democratic glow upon an architecture that reserves rule for those judged capable of knowledge. Modern readers then identify Plato's politics with the openness of the conversation while treating censorship, epistemic hierarchy, and the demotion of democracy as allegory, provocation, or historical residue.

The answer does not lie in reading the *Republic* less dramatically, but more so. We should ask who controls the setting, who remains present, who receives direct speech, who gets represented by others, and how a conversation among friends produces a city ordered by rank. The dialogue begins with a mild capture: Polemarchus and his companions prevent Socrates from leaving the Piraeus unless he can persuade them to release him. Force and persuasion enter together at the threshold,

playfully anticipating the political question that Syracuse will make lethal: what follows when persuasion fails?

The Platonic archive offers no single answer. The Statesman imagines expert force operating beyond ordinary law and consent; the Seventh Letter counsels restraint when reform would require exile and slaughter; Dion permits an assassination and then stages a funeral that makes the result appear necessary. These alternatives do not sit outside the *Republic* as merely biographical misfortunes. They disclose the unresolved politics within its shadow.

13. Every Platonic Polis Must Pass Through Syracuse

We should avoid claiming that every use of Plato leads directly to Syracuse. Studies of recollection, eros, dialectic, mathematics, ontology, or Socratic ignorance need not culminate in Sicilian violence. The dialogues also contain powerful resources against tyranny, intellectual arrogance, corruption, and unexamined authority. Plato cannot be reduced to one political formula.

Whenever Platonic thought supports rule by experts, the priority of knowledge over consent, a morally unified polis, political education directed from above, hierarchy grounded in differentiated capacities, therapeutic correction of civic disorder, philosopher-rule, or constitutional harmony through proper role assignment, however, Syracuse becomes obligatory. It does not provide a simple refutation of these projects. It provides the missing test of what they require when they encounter people who do not accept the assigned good.

That test asks who identifies the genuine knower, how philosophical insight acquires institutional force, and whether citizens can contest the ruler's claim to knowledge without confirming their alleged incompetence. It asks when education becomes direction, when direction becomes compulsion, whether law can bind the expert, and what happens to the citizen whom the political weaver cannot incorporate. These questions do not arise after Platonic politics as external liberal objections; they arise from the passage between dialogue and rule.

A Platonic political theory that cannot answer them has not yet left the dialogue or reached the polis. Every invocation of Platonic politics that stops at the city in speech suppresses the city in action—and that city has a name: Syracuse.

14. The Birth of Theoretical Theater

Syracuse now lets us define theoretical theater more precisely. Theory becomes theatrical not merely because philosophers employ dialogues, myths, allegories, characters, and scenes. It becomes theatrical when it distributes political visibility: when it determines who appears as knower or ignorant, friend or flatterer, reformer or obstacle; who may speak and who gets spoken for; who may remain within the scene and who must leave before composition can begin.

Such casting does not merely represent a political reality. It helps produce the field in which action becomes thinkable. Once Heracleides appears as the embodied cause of disorder, his removal can appear curative. Once Dion appears as the philosophical liberator, his accumulation of power can appear transitional rather than tyrannical. Once the conflict becomes a tragedy of two incompatible leaders, disagreements over class, command, property, democracy, and constitutional design recede behind character.

Theoretical theater reaches its dangerous threshold when these roles acquire juridical force. A political characterization becomes a charge; the charge authorizes a sentence; the sentence presents itself as purification; and the funeral converts the resulting violence into catharsis. The sequence need not unfold through a formal court. Its power lies precisely in making a staged interpretation perform the work that a trial, law, or public deliberation failed to perform.

The audience then leaves believing that the stage has cleared itself, even though the structural conflict has only migrated. Syracuse names this recurring operation: theory casts the conflict, politics removes the actor, and dramaturgy teaches the survivors how to see the removal.

Conclusion: The *Republic's* Bodies

Plato's *Republic* remains indispensable because it asks how justice might orient a soul and a city. Its dialogical form continues to teach readers how thought can unfold through relation, challenge, image, and self-revision. Nothing in the Syracusan archive cancels that achievement. But the dialogue cannot stand as the sole scene of Platonic politics.

The *Republic* joins philosophical knowledge to political rule, while Book VIII treats democracy as a beautiful but disordered regime whose excess of freedom prepares tyranny. The Statesman places the true ruler's knowledge above ordinary law and consent and explicitly permits purification of the city through killing and exile. The Seventh Letter warns, from within the aftermath of catastrophe, against reforms requiring banishment and slaughter. Syracuse forces these incompatible tendencies into historical contact.

Plato's Sicilian project did not amount to a literal implementation of Kallipolis. Dion did not march with a copy of the *Republic* as his field manual, and Heracleides did not die because a Platonic text issued an order. The relation runs deeper than direct causality. Syracuse reveals what philosophical rule needs when it leaves speech: a ruler to educate, companions to trust, institutions to redirect, opponents to manage, a transition to control, a population to order, force to secure the settlement, and a dramaturgy capable of explaining the bodies left behind.

The city in speech can assign every person a function without showing the resistance of actual actors. Syracuse supplies those actors. They improvise, betray, refuse, conspire, organize, fight, mourn, and die. The theory cannot control them, but it continues to cast them after their deaths. The *Republic* gives philosophical rule its beautiful form; Syracuse reveals its material cast.

The Letters then arrange the catastrophe as philosophical inheritance. Dion becomes the lost reformer, his enemies become betrayers, the survivors receive counsel, and the dead receive speeches. Philosophy survives political failure by staging its meaning. That survival marks the birth of theoretical theater: the architecture through which knowledge encounters bodies that do not consent to its plot and then organizes the meaning of their resistance.

For Platonic politics, that scene does not lie only in the Piraeus, the cave, or the imaginary city. It lies in the house where Heracleides was murdered, along the military funeral procession that followed, and before the citizens who learned to see the killing as necessary.

It lies in Syracuse.

Notes

- [1] Henry George Liddell, Robert Scott, Henry Stuart Jones, and Roderick McKenzie, *A Greek-English Lexicon*, 9th ed. with revised supplement (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1996), s.v. “πολιτεία”; Eric Nelson, *The Greek Tradition in Republican Thought* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004), 1-5.
- [2] Plato, *Republic* 473c-e. Translations of Plato have been modified where necessary to preserve politically significant terms.
- [3] Arlene W. Saxonhouse, “Democracy, Equality, and *Eidê*: A Radical View from Book 8 of Plato’s *Republic*,” *American Political Science Review* 108, no. 3 (2014): 728-39.
- [4] James L. Kastely, *The Rhetoric of Plato’s Republic: Democracy and the Philosophical Problem of Persuasion* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2015).
- [5] Demetra Kasimis, “The Play of Conspiracy and Democratic Erosion in Plato’s *Republic*,” *American Journal of Political Science* 65, no. 4 (2021): 926-37.
- [6] Robin Waterfield, *Plato of Athens: A Life in Philosophy* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2023), 178-207.
- [7] Ariel Helfer, *Plato’s Letters: The Political Challenges of the Philosophic Life* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2023), 217-68.
- [8] James Romm, *Plato and the Tyrant: The Fall of Greece’s Greatest Dynasty and the Making of a Philosophic Masterpiece* (New York: W. W. Norton, 2025).
- [9] Franco V. Trivigno, “Above the Law and Out for Justice: 291a1-297b4,” in *Plato’s Statesman: A Philosophical Discussion*, ed. Panos Dimas, Melissa Lane, and Susan Sauvé Meyer (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2021), 156-76.
- [10] Plato, *Statesman* 293c-e, trans. Harold North Fowler, in *Plato, Volume VIII: The Statesman, Philebus, Ion*, Loeb Classical Library 164 (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1925), translation modified.
- [11] Plato, Seventh Letter 331c-d. The authenticity of the Letter remains disputed; the argument here concerns the position articulated by the text and its place within the Platonic tradition.
- [12] Plutarch, *Dion* 53.5-6, trans. Bernadotte Perrin, in *Lives*, vol. 6, Loeb Classical Library 98 (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1918).

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From Meaning Back to Form

CCCC, Transfessionalism, and the Dissolution of Professional Society

The Left occupied the semantic layer;
the Right learned to capture the operating system.
(Paging Marshall McLuhan.)

Abstract

On July 24, 2026, the Executive Committee of the National Council of Teachers of English announced its decision to de-charter the Conference on College Composition and Communication. NCTE cited fiscal unsustainability, declining participation, and governance challenges, while members and allied organizations questioned the decision's transparency, timing, and consequences. The event does not simply mark the disappearance of one academic association, nor does de-chartering amount in itself to revocation of federal tax-exempt status. It marks something subtler and larger: the separation of a profession's activities, communities, memories, and obligations from the organizational form that had gathered and represented them. This essay approaches the CCCC crisis as an instance of transfessionalism: the passage of persons, practices, media, authorities, and responsibilities across professional frames that can no longer contain them. David Fleming's *From Form to Meaning* supplies a decisive historical hinge. His account of the University of Wisconsin–Madison's abolition of freshman composition in 1969 shows how those who control institutional form may answer a struggle over meaning and governance by eliminating the contested structure. The comparison clarifies the irony of two long marches through institutions: a Left that transformed curricular and professional meanings without securing their legal, fiscal, and administrative forms, and a Right increasingly adept at capturing those forms to reverse, disable, or expel their meanings. CCCC thus functions as a canary in the mindshaft, signaling a broader unbundling of the twentieth-century professional-nonprofit settlement—the “United Way world” of charters, memberships, conventions, volunteer boards, publications, federated organizations, tax exemptions, and recognized civic intermediaries. The urgent task does not simply involve saving or replacing CCCC. It involves designing metafeessional forms capable of carrying knowledge, care, memory, and democratic authority through the transition toward a post-professional society. The medium is the message massage of mass ages.

Keywords: CCCC; NCTE; transfessionalism; post-professional society; David Fleming; institutional form; nonprofit organizations; composition studies; metafeessionalism

1. After the Charter

On July 24, 2026, the Executive Committee of the National Council of Teachers of English announced that it had voted to de-charter the Conference on College Composition and Communication. Its message described CCCC as a once-critical contributor to NCTE's mission that had struggled in recent years with fiscal sustainability, declining participation, and governance challenges. NCTE maintained that the decision followed several years of attempted collaboration with successive CCCC executive committees and promised to appoint a transition team focused on composition, rhetoric, and writing studies.¹

The announcement placed seventy-seven years of institutional continuity abruptly in question. CCCC began in 1949 after more than five hundred teachers gathered in Chicago to discuss college composition, curriculum, staffing, teaching methods, and research. NCTE initially recognized the conference for a limited term and granted it powers associated with a professional organization: it could levy dues, elect officers, conduct annual meetings, and publish a periodical. In 1950, NCTE accepted CCCC as a permanent organization.² The charter did not merely authorize a yearly convention. It established durable equipment through which college writing teachers could gather themselves into a field.

CCCC's constitution names the scope of that equipment. The organization sponsored meetings and scholarly publications, supported research, promoted professional development, sought to improve teaching and learning conditions, and advocated for language and literacy education.³ Its governance structures included elected officers, an executive committee, standing committees, caucuses, editorial boards, resolutions, awards, research initiatives, and member groups. The charter held these otherwise heterogeneous operations together and made them legible as the work of one professional community.

De-chartering therefore exceeds the cancellation of a conference series. A charter performs institutional work. It names a collective, assigns capacities, establishes procedures, defines membership, authorizes elections, creates offices, and links a population to property, publications, budgets, archives, and public representation. Through repeated use, the charter helps produce the entity it appears only to describe. De-chartering reverses that performative motion by withdrawing the frame through which the collective has acted as a collective.

Yet withdrawal of the frame does not erase the forces gathered within it. Teachers continue teaching. Editors continue editing. Researchers continue researching. Writing program administrators continue administering programs. Caucuses, committees, listservs, archives, journals, presses, digital platforms, and neighboring associations continue operating or searching for ways to continue. The profession does not vanish when its charter disappears. Its elements enter circulation, and that circulation gives the CCCC event its transfessional character.

2. The Charter as Professional Equipment

A profession requires more than a shared subject matter. It requires equipment: credentials, curricula, journals, conferences, offices, elections, standards, committees, awards, archives, advocacy documents, employment classifications, and recognized channels through which members

speak to one another and to the public. None of these elements alone creates a profession. Their recursive alignment generates a professional world.

CCCC supplied such an alignment for composition and rhetoric. Its annual convention created a recurring scene of recognition: researchers presented work, graduate students entered disciplinary conversations, editors recruited authors, committees conducted business, caucuses organized, teachers exchanged practices, job seekers built networks, and members debated the field's direction. Its publications stabilized a record of scholarly activity. Its position statements translated disciplinary knowledge into public and institutional claims. Its governance system gave members at least a formal mechanism for selecting representatives and influencing policy.

The Council of Writing Program Administrators described CCCC after the de-chartering as an intellectual home, a source of disciplinary identity, and a collective voice. Its July 25 statement emphasized the organization's guiding principles, position statements, conferences, awards, grants, and long-standing advocacy for writing programs and writing teachers. CWPA also argued that changes of such magnitude required transparent and participatory deliberation before a final decision.⁴

The metaphor of a professional home deserves close attention. A home does not simply enclose people. It stores memories, stages encounters, distributes responsibilities, separates interior from exterior, and supplies a recognizable address. CCCC gave composition and rhetoric an address within NCTE, higher education, and public culture. It never encompassed the entire field, and many members experienced exclusion, marginalization, precarity, or frustration within it. Nevertheless, it supplied an institutional location from which such exclusions could themselves become objects of collective struggle.

The charter operated as equipment for maintaining that location. It connected distributed professional labor to a recognized body capable of acting through time. The field could inherit earlier work, contest present priorities, and make commitments to future members because it possessed procedures for carrying decisions and records across generations. This intergenerational function distinguishes an institution from an event or network. A network can connect people quickly, a platform can distribute messages widely, and a project can mobilize intense collaboration. An institution, at its best, holds obligations that exceed the attention spans and lifetimes of current participants.

When a charter breaks, those obligations do not disappear. They become orphaned, transferred, fragmented, or captured.

3. From Profession to Transfession

Transfessionism names the passage of persons, practices, media, obligations, and authorities across professional frames. It arises when those frames no longer contain the forces moving through them. The term differs from interdisciplinarity, which usually presupposes relatively stable disciplines that agree to exchange methods or collaborate around a problem. Transfessionism begins when the stability of those disciplines and professions can no longer be assumed. Participants do not simply travel from one secure professional territory to another. They carry

responsibilities across territories whose jurisdictions, resources, and borders have begun to break down.

Transfessionism also differs from deprofessionalization. Deprofessionalization describes the loss of status, autonomy, jurisdiction, compensation, or expert authority. Those losses certainly contribute to the present condition, but transfessionism emphasizes the resulting movement. Expertise does not simply decline. It gets redistributed into administrative systems, private platforms, consulting arrangements, informal networks, automated services, volunteer communities, advocacy organizations, temporary projects, and hybrid occupations.

Nor should transfessionism serve as a celebratory slogan. We diagnose transfessionism rather than advocate it. The contemporary professional may acquire new mobility: a writing scholar can become a designer, archivist, publisher, technologist, consultant, activist, facilitator, or platform builder. Such crossings can generate experiments unavailable within rigid disciplinary structures. They can also transfer institutional costs onto individuals. Workers carry more roles, maintain more networks, learn more systems, perform more emotional labor, and build more infrastructures while receiving less security, authority, and compensation.

Transfessionism therefore occupies an unstable D3. It discloses a situation in motion, but it does not guarantee passage beyond it. A professional field can remain trapped in reactive improvisation: replacing vanished staff with volunteers, stable budgets with grant chasing, governance with emergency meetings, archives with personal cloud folders, institutional memory with social-media threads, and durable membership with momentary attention.

The transfessional condition becomes captured when an external organization, platform, donor, administration, or ideological apparatus controls the crossings. Professional functions continue, but professionals lose authority over the terms of continuation. Expertise travels upward as data, content, prestige, volunteer labor, or institutional legitimacy, while decision-making contracts around a managerial center.

CCCC's de-chartering opens precisely this danger. NCTE has stated that it will continue supporting college-level educators and the composition, rhetoric, and writing studies community, and it has promised a transition team. Yet the announcement leaves unresolved which CCCC functions will continue, who will control them, how members will participate, what will happen to elected governance, and how the field's accumulated resources will move into any successor structure. The issue does not reduce to whether NCTE possesses good or bad intentions. It concerns the architecture of passage.

Who carries the archive? Who appoints the transition team? Who controls the journals, names, mailing lists, conference records, intellectual property, funds, awards, resolutions, committees, and digital infrastructure? Which obligations survive? Which constituencies retain representation? Which functions become centralized, outsourced, suspended, or quietly abandoned? These questions reveal the difference between organizational continuity and professional continuity. A parent organization may preserve selected services while dissolving the machinery through which members governed them. The field may continue receiving products while losing its capacity to constitute itself as a public.

4. Designing Writing Futures at the Moment of Foreclosure

The timing carries a painful irony. CCCC's public website continued to announce a 2027 convention in Milwaukee titled "Design Writing Futures." The call invited participants to use foresight and speculative design to imagine possible, plausible, probable, preferable, and even preposterous futures for writing studies. It asked how the field might resist fatalism, confront institutional collapse, sustain collective care, and create futures beyond crisis.⁵ The call now reads as both program and prophecy.

"Design Writing Futures" assumed that the field would gather to deliberate about its futures. De-chartering places the scene of that deliberation itself in doubt. The probable future arrived before the conference devoted to contesting it. The organization called upon members to imagine what design cannot contain while its own institutional boundary gave way.

This coincidence should not tempt us into easy symbolism. Financial and governance problems require material analysis. Conferences cost money. Participation patterns change. Membership models weaken. Administrative labor accumulates. Organizations can exhaust reserves, lose personnel, and become structurally difficult to sustain. Invocations of community cannot substitute for budgets, governance, or operational capacity.

Yet the reverse also holds. Fiscal language does not explain itself. "Sustainability," "participation," and "governance" name problems, but they do not automatically justify one remedy over another. Every budget encodes priorities; every participation measure defines which forms of involvement count; every governance diagnosis rests upon assumptions about where authority should sit. The controversy therefore concerns not only whether CCCC remained sustainable. It concerns who acquired the right to define sustainability, evaluate alternatives, and decide the organization's future.

A field devoted to rhetoric should notice the form of the announcement. It converts a long, contested process into a managerial narrative: persistent problems produced deep evaluation, which produced a necessary decision, which will produce better support. The sequence compresses disagreement and forecloses alternatives. It asks members to recognize necessity after the decisive act has already occurred. CWPA's response contests this temporal arrangement by arguing that open dialogue should precede, rather than follow, a decision of this magnitude.

Transfessionalism begins in this temporal split. Institutional authority announces a completed decision while the affected professional community starts constructing, retrospectively, the deliberative process it never received. Members build FAQs, timelines, shared documents, archives, letters, alternate organizations, and public discussions after the charter has already been withdrawn. The profession becomes a crowd reconstructing its own institutional conditions.

5. Fleming's Hinge: From Form to Meaning

David Fleming's *From Form to Meaning: Freshman Composition and the Long Sixties, 1957–1974* supplies an uncannily precise historical model for the CCCC crisis.⁶ Fleming reconstructs the abolition of required freshman composition at the University of Wisconsin–Madison in 1969 and situates it within the wider transformation of higher education during the long sixties. The title runs from form to meaning, not the reverse, and its direction matters.

In spring, 1968, the Wisconsin English faculty voted to remedialize the first semester of its required composition sequence. The following year it eliminated the second semester. For roughly the next quarter-century, the university lacked a genuine campus-wide writing requirement. Fleming traces the forces converging upon the course: rapid postwar expansion, growing reliance upon graduate teaching assistants, faculty specialization, disinvestment in general education, student and TA challenges to inherited curricula, and conflicts over who would govern English (101–102).

The story complicates the familiar claim that radical teaching assistants destroyed composition by politicizing it. Graduate instructors and students did challenge the inherited course, its current-traditional pedagogy, its labor arrangements, and the committee that governed it. Yet senior faculty retained decisive institutional authority. When teaching assistants sought greater control over the supervisory structure, the faculty did not merely defeat them within the existing arrangement. It withdrew from the arrangement and abolished the contested course. As Fleming summarizes the episode, the faculty abandoned its long-standing commitment to freshman writing just as teaching assistants attempted to assume greater power over its governance.⁷

This earlier scene provides the hinge for the present essay. When subordinate participants contest the meaning and governance of an institution, those who control its form may choose dissolution rather than surrender authority. Teachers may revise the course's meaning, but faculty can abolish the course. Members may transform a professional association's commitments, but a parent organization can withdraw its charter. Workers may reshape an agency's practice, but executive or managerial authority can reclassify their positions, redirect their budgets, appoint their supervisors, or close their programs.

Fleming also identifies the institutional vulnerability of composition. The course has often carried an enormous educational mandate while occupying an anomalous position within the university. Everyone needs writing, but powerful faculty frequently regard general writing instruction as someone else's responsibility. Universities universalize the requirement while staffing much of it with graduate students, lecturers, adjunct faculty, and other contingent teachers. The course therefore combines centrality with disposability: ubiquitous in practice, weak in jurisdiction, indispensable to students, and vulnerable to abolition by actors who do not teach it.

CCCC stands at the other end of this history. The professional field that arose partly to support, study, and organize composition now confronts the withdrawal of its own institutional form. The work will almost certainly continue, as writing instruction continued after Wisconsin's abolition. But continuation of practice does not guarantee continuity of governance, labor protections, public voice, or institutional memory. Fleming's history offers hope because composition regenerated; it

offers warning because regeneration required decades and did not restore what had been lost in the same form.

6. The Double Long March Through Institutions

Fleming's history sharpens the political irony. The Left's celebrated long march through the institutions appears to have met, or perhaps produced the conditions for, a long march by the Right through many of the same institutions. The two marches have not followed identical routes, and neither "Left" nor "Right" names a unified actor. Yet their dominant institutional strategies differ enough to illuminate the present.

The Left marched largely through meaning and practice. It entered schools, universities, scholarly organizations, museums, foundations, professions, media institutions, and nonprofit organizations through teaching, criticism, curricular revision, cultural production, professional standards, and new forms of recognition. It changed vocabularies, canons, pedagogies, ethical codes, standards of representation, and understandings of justice. Within composition studies, it moved writing instruction beyond narrow correction and formal propriety toward process, rhetoric, language difference, access, public writing, disability, antiracism, multilingualism, community engagement, and social critique.

The Right has increasingly marched through form and governance. It targets appointments, budgets, accreditation, taxation, charters, legal classifications, executive authority, personnel protections, grant conditions, governing boards, and regulatory recognition. Rather than winning every argument inside an institution, it seeks control over the switches that determine whether the institution can operate, who can lead it, what counts as compliance, and which activities receive public support.

The asymmetry matters. The Left often treated institutions as cultural and pedagogical environments whose transformation would follow from changing consciousness, language, representation, curriculum, and professional norms. The Right increasingly treats institutions as executable systems. Change the board, funding stream, employment category, tax status, charter, accreditor, or reporting requirement, and the institution will behave differently regardless of what most of its members believe.

The Left occupied the semantic layer; the Right learned to capture the operating system.

This formulation does not imply that left institutional work accomplished nothing. It transformed intellectual and social life profoundly, often against entrenched exclusion. Nor does it imply that every de-chartering, consolidation, budget cut, or administrative decision belongs to one coordinated right-wing plan. Institutional actors respond to genuine financial pressures, technological shifts, declining participation, and internal conflicts. The stronger claim concerns strategic vulnerability: cultural transformation remains insecure when those who achieved it do not control, understand, or redesign the legal, fiscal, technical, and administrative forms upon which it depends.

A university department may teach radical criticism while remaining governed by a board, budget, accreditation regime, employment system, and donor structure largely untouched by that criticism. A professional association may adopt progressive resolutions, diversify leadership, revise

convention practices, and develop expansive public commitments while remaining dependent upon a parent corporation, a tax exemption, a conference-revenue model, centralized staff, and a charter its members cannot ultimately defend. CCCC brings this contradiction into view. The field transformed the meaning of writing instruction without independently possessing the form that gathered its collective life.

The de-chartering exposes that separation in one stroke. A professional community can win arguments about pedagogy, language, representation, and justice and still lose its charter.

7. From Meaning Back to Form

Fleming's title names a pedagogical and historical movement. Current-traditional composition concentrated upon correctness, arrangement, usage, and the formal features of written products. Emerging composition scholarship increasingly emphasized process, invention, experience, audience, expression, and the production of meaning. Students would no longer encounter writing merely as obedience to inherited rules. They would learn to make meaning, discover ideas through composing, address audiences, and participate in public life.

Fleming's institutional history complicates that liberation. Meaning requires a form capable of carrying it. A democratic pedagogy cannot survive through pedagogical meaning alone. It needs courses, budgets, classrooms, appointments, governance, curricula, archives, and durable commitments. The long march of the Left often assumed that transformed meaning would eventually transform form: change the discourse, educate participants, reveal exclusions, revise the curriculum, and institutional structures would follow.

The counter-march begins from an inverse proposition: control the form, and meaning will follow—or become institutionally irrelevant. This produces the chiasmus through which the CCCC crisis now turns. The long sixties moved from form to meaning. The long reaction moves from meaning back to form.

The reaction does not need to defeat progressive meanings through superior interpretation. It can bypass interpretation by altering the structures that allow those meanings to matter. Rather than debating every resolution, dissolve or absorb the organization that issues them. Rather than contesting every curriculum, change accreditation, appointment, or funding requirements. Rather than persuading each professional community, change the legal and fiscal privileges that permit it to operate. The operation resembles a hostile takeover more than a conventional culture war. Culture supplies the target, but institutional form supplies the weapon.

The implication extends beyond the opposition between Left and Right. Institutional meaning never belongs securely to institutional members. Every institution aligns at least four layers: meaning, practice, governance, and form. Meaning includes mission, values, knowledge, narratives, and public purpose. Practice includes teaching, research, publication, advocacy, and care. Governance distributes authority, representation, appointment, deliberation, and accountability. Form includes charter, ownership, tax status, funding, accreditation, employment categories, data systems, and legal personality.

The Left's institutional march concentrated heavily upon meaning and practice while also pressing for more inclusive governance. Yet it frequently inherited rather than redesigned the formal layer. The corporation, university, foundation, professional association, and nonprofit umbrella retained forms developed for earlier political economies. The Right's counter-march targets the relation between governance and form. It uses formal control to reorganize governance and then lets governance redirect meaning and practice.

This explains why sweeping political transformations now appear in strangely administrative dress: personnel memoranda, accreditation standards, executive orders, budget resolutions, tax classifications, grant suspensions, organizational restructurings, and de-chartering notices. History arrives formatted as paperwork. Administrative form constitutes political action congealed into procedure.

CCCC also shows that the Right need not directly dissolve every progressive institution. Organizations may restructure themselves in anticipation of a changed environment. Fiscal pressure, political uncertainty, declining participation, conference losses, donor anxiety, and managerial risk calculations enter internal decision-making. Leaders centralize, consolidate, close programs, and narrow missions before any external authority explicitly commands them to do so. The old form may survive while its meaning changes; the old meaning may survive while searching for a new form. That crossing defines the transfessional condition.

8. Canary in the Mindshaft

CCCC now appears as a canary in the mindshaft. The familiar canary in the mineshaft warns workers of an atmosphere that has become poisonous before human senses can register the danger. The mindshaft names the institutional tunnels through which modern societies extract, sort, credential, and circulate knowledge. Universities, schools, scholarly societies, professional associations, foundations, museums, libraries, journals, and nonprofit organizations make up this subterranean infrastructure. They support visible intellectual and civic life while often remaining unnoticed until a tunnel collapses.

CCCC's de-chartering registers a change in that atmosphere. The event does not prove that every professional association will dissolve. It does indicate that conditions once treated as exceptional have become increasingly general: declining or stagnant membership, unstable convention revenue, rising costs, staff reductions, volunteer exhaustion, platform competition, political pressure, institutional consolidation, and uncertainty about what members now expect from professional organizations.

ASAE's inaugural 2026 State of Associations report found a sector under sustained pressure. Nearly 39 percent of association chief executives reported financial decline, compared with 10 percent reporting improvement, and professional societies faced greater pressure than trade associations.⁸ These figures do not render CCCC's fate inevitable. They establish its ecology. The organization entered crisis at a moment when the association model itself faces an inflection point.

For much of the twentieth century, professional associations offered scarce goods: access to journals, disciplinary news, specialist networks, annual gatherings, job information, leadership opportunities, credentials, and recognized channels of publication. Digital networks have

unbundled many of those goods. Articles circulate through databases and informal sharing. Scholars form communities on social platforms. Conferences compete with webinars, podcasts, newsletters, listservs, Discord servers, Zoom gatherings, and online workshops. Jobs appear on multiple platforms. Publishing extends across repositories, open-access collaboratives, newsletters, and self-organized media.

Professional associations no longer monopolize connection or communication. Yet they still carry functions that platforms do not readily replace: fiduciary responsibility, elected governance, archival continuity, standards, public advocacy, durable stewardship, due process, and institutional accountability. The association may lose its monopoly over information while retaining responsibility for the conditions under which a profession reproduces itself.

This creates a dangerous mismatch. Members may no longer pay for the old bundle, but the unbundled alternatives rarely assume the whole burden. A social network can host discussion without preserving a democratic archive. A webinar can distribute knowledge without sustaining a field's governance. A volunteer publication can circulate scholarship without guaranteeing succession, accessibility, preservation, or fair labor. A crowdfunding campaign can support a project without creating a stable commons. The visible services migrate; the invisible obligations remain.

The canary warns that the old institutional atmosphere can no longer sustain the total bundle, while the new ecology has not yet developed forms adequate to its inherited obligations.

9. The “United Way” World

The CCCC crisis belongs to a larger transformation in American civil society that we might call the dissolution of the United Way world. United Way began through coordinated local action. In 1887, religious and civic leaders in Denver created a Charity Organization Society that coordinated services and conducted a combined fundraising campaign for numerous health and welfare agencies. The model later developed through the Community Chest and United Fund movements before taking the United Way name.⁹ Its central organizational insight involved federation: multiple needs, agencies, donors, and volunteers could pass through a common civic apparatus.

“United Way” therefore names more than a particular nonprofit network. It names a social form: the umbrella organization. The twentieth-century umbrella gathered semi-autonomous groups beneath a common legal, financial, administrative, and symbolic structure. Local agencies retained missions while a federating body coordinated fundraising. Professional groups retained specialist identities while a parent association handled membership, staffing, publications, conventions, and tax-exempt administration. Universities gathered departments, institutes, presses, museums, clinics, and public programs within one corporate body. Foundations moved resources among recognized organizations through standardized grant systems.

This arrangement mediated between individual citizens and large systems. It converted donations into public services, expertise into professional standards, volunteer labor into governance, and local affiliations into national organizations. It also produced bureaucracies, exclusions, paternalism, managerial hierarchies, and struggles over who controlled pooled resources. Nevertheless, it constructed an associational middle layer between isolated individuals, markets, and states.

The United Way world depended upon linked assumptions: people would join organizations; members would pay dues; workers would donate through recurring campaigns; volunteers would serve on committees and boards; employers would support professional development and conference travel; institutions would subscribe to journals and purchase books; governments would recognize tax-exempt public purposes; foundations would fund organizations capable of carrying programs through time; and umbrella bodies would provide administrative efficiencies while respecting the missions and partial autonomy of constituent groups.

Each assumption now faces strain. The Center for Effective Philanthropy's 2026 survey found that 66 percent of nonprofit chief executives expressed concern about organizational financial stability, while the proportion reporting deficits rose from 22 percent in 2022 to 39 percent in 2025.¹⁰ The National Council of Nonprofits has documented the combined effects of funding freezes, grant terminations, investigations, political targeting, and threats to tax-exempt status across parts of the charitable sector.¹¹ These pressures fall upon organizations already carrying rising service demand, depleted staff, and volunteer burnout.

The CCCC decision does not itself constitute loss of federal nonprofit status. CCCC functioned as a chartered conference of NCTE, and NCTE's announcement concerns that organizational charter. No responsible analysis should confuse de-chartering with IRS revocation. The two nevertheless belong to the same structural field. Both reveal how much collective activity depends upon statuses, exemptions, charters, host organizations, and administrative recognitions that participants rarely control directly. When these supports change, the work does not stop. It loses its channel.

The United Way world begins to unravel when the umbrella no longer shelters its constituent groups but instead absorbs, reorganizes, or abandons them.

10. Unbundling Professional Society

Professional society joined occupation, identity, institution, and public authority. A professor did not merely perform tasks. The professor belonged to a department, discipline, scholarly society, publishing system, university, and broader culture of professional recognition. A librarian, social worker, teacher, architect, nurse, curator, journalist, or nonprofit administrator likewise inhabited an ecology of schools, credentials, associations, employers, ethical codes, journals, conferences, unions, and civic expectations.

This ecology never distributed security equally. Contingent workers, racialized communities, women, disabled people, queer people, independent scholars, community practitioners, and others repeatedly struggled for admission, recognition, and structural change. Professional society often guarded jurisdiction and status by excluding those whose labor it nonetheless needed. Its breakdown therefore generates an ambivalent scene. Weakening professional enclosure can open institutions to new participants, knowledges, media, and forms of collaboration. It can also intensify extraction by eliminating protections won through earlier struggles.

Post-professional society does not abolish expertise. It disconnects expertise from stable professional membership. The post-professional worker accumulates a portfolio rather than inhabiting a vocation. She teaches, edits, consults, organizes, designs, raises funds, builds platforms, manages communities, and trains AI systems. He moves among university, nonprofit, corporation,

public agency, foundation, freelance contract, and unpaid project. They carry personal networks and reputational traces from one temporary formation to another.

The profession once supplied an institutional memory larger than the individual. The post-professional worker must increasingly become her own archive, communications office, development department, technology staff, and benefits administrator. The organization once convened a public. The platform aggregates users. A public can deliberate about the rules that constitute it; users interact inside rules they generally cannot govern.

Professional associations now risk converting members into users. They offer content, discounts, credentials, and events through a service interface while centralizing decisions as matters of administration. Members receive benefits but exercise diminishing authority over the institutional conditions that produce them. Captured transfessionalism accelerates this conversion. The professional crosses boundaries, but governance does not travel with her. Her work becomes flexible while institutional power remains concentrated.

CCCC's de-chartering places this issue in unusually clear form. NCTE may preserve college-level programming, publications, or selected services. Yet preservation of services would not, by itself, preserve the professional body that selected leaders, formed caucuses, passed resolutions, appointed committees, and debated its future. A conference can survive as a product after the conference has died as a polity.

That possibility gives dissolution its strongest meaning. Dissolution does not require total disappearance. Something dissolves when the bonds holding its parts in a distinct form no longer hold, even though the parts remain present.

11. What Travels After CCCC?

The question now concerns what travels—and under whose care. CCCC accumulated far more than a brand. It accumulated seventy-seven years of records, procedures, disputes, publications, resolutions, relationships, leadership pathways, committee practices, and collective memories. It connected generations who never met one another. Earlier members established claims and resources that later members inherited, revised, rejected, or extended.

After de-chartering, this inheritance enters a contested passage. Some functions may remain with NCTE. Some may migrate to the College Section. Some may pass to allied organizations. Some may continue through journals, presses, repositories, caucuses, independent conferences, and informal networks. Some may disappear because no institution assumes responsibility for them. Others may survive only through uncompensated labor by individuals who download files, preserve correspondence, reconstruct timelines, and convene emergency discussions.

This distribution will not happen naturally. Every migration requires decisions about custody, authority, access, labor, and succession. The archive poses a particularly important problem. An archive does not simply store the past. It conditions which futures can cite, contest, and learn from that past. Losing meeting minutes, committee reports, financial records, correspondence, convention programs, position-statement histories, and digital discussions would narrow the field's capacity to understand how it arrived at its present situation.

The field therefore needs more than a rescue operation. It needs a transfer protocol: a public inventory of the organization's major functions and resources; identification of their legal and technical custody; conditions for access and preservation; and participatory processes for determining their futures. Such a protocol would distinguish property from stewardship. A parent corporation may hold legal control over resources whose intellectual and historical value derives from decades of labor by CCCC members. Legal ownership cannot settle the ethical question of collective inheritance.

The same principle applies to names and reputations. "CCCC" acquired meaning through the work of members, staff, editors, officers, presenters, authors, reviewers, organizers, and attendees. A name created by collective labor becomes a peculiar kind of common resource even when one corporation controls its legal use. The transfessional passage therefore requires fiduciary imagination. Institutions must learn to steward resources that exceed the limits of ownership, while communities must learn to design continuity without pretending that informal enthusiasm can replace infrastructure.

12. From Reactive D3 to Metafessional D4

Transfessionalism diagnoses the passage. Metafessionalism asks how to equip it. The distinction prevents us from romanticizing collapse. A dissolved professional organization does not automatically generate a better network. Institutional ruins can produce experimentation, but they can also produce exhaustion, privatization, nostalgia, factionalism, data loss, and abandonment.

D3 (*dasein*) discloses the unstable situation. The former professional D2 (subject) frame no longer holds, and participants improvise across its fractures. They form emergency groups, circulate documents, build alternate channels, and test possible futures. This experimental branching remains necessary, but it can stall in permanent reaction. Metafessional D4 (liminaut) requires a further move. It treats the passage itself as an object of collective design and respects D0 (Dao).

A metafessional commons would not simply recreate CCCC under another name, nor would it dissolve the field into a frictionless network. It would combine the mobility of transfessional practice with explicit structures for governance, memory, care, and accountability. Functions should precede forms: the community should identify what must continue—publishing, convening, advocacy, research support, caucus organization, professional development, archival stewardship, public statements, awards, mentoring, and intergenerational care—before deciding which organization should house each function.

Governance must travel with labor. Those who perform and depend upon the work need meaningful authority over its conditions. Volunteer labor cannot serve indefinitely as a substitute for democratic participation or paid infrastructure. The archive must become portable without becoming ownerless: records need redundant preservation, accessible formats, clear stewardship, privacy protocols, and public documentation of decisions about custody.

Future forms should support nested autonomy. A writing-studies commons may require multiple organizations, projects, caucuses, publications, and local groups rather than one totalizing body. Federation remains valuable, but the federation must protect the capacities of constituent groups rather than reducing them to programs administered from above. Membership should mean more

than consumption; members need routes into deliberation, decision, repair, and institutional invention. Otherwise association membership collapses into subscription.

Succession also counts as a design problem. Every project needs procedures for transferring leadership, knowledge, credentials, access, and care. Without succession, distributed networks reproduce the fragility they sought to escape. Finally, the commons needs material support. Publishing, accessibility, archiving, event production, legal work, accounting, technology, and coordination require money and labor. Metafessionalism must invent revenue structures without allowing revenue requirements to dictate the mission.

This double movement also revises Fleming's title. From form to meaning cannot remain a one-way passage. Meaning must return to form without surrendering to formalism. The recursive sequence runs form to meaning to revised form to contested meaning. Forms generate meanings; meanings contest forms; revised forms stabilize new meanings; those forms become available for capture, ossification, or renewed transformation.

The Left therefore needs more than another march through institutions. Marching imagines institutions as territory to occupy: one side enters, changes the flags, appoints officers, and uses the machinery against the other. Metafessionalism proposes a different figure—not occupation, but composition. Composition asks how heterogeneous actors can make and remake the forms through which they live together. It treats governance as revisable, archives as shared inheritances, charters as living instruments, and institutions as equipment that participants must understand sufficiently to repair and redesign.

This requires capacities the academic Left has often ceded to administrators, lawyers, accountants, trustees, and technical specialists. It must learn nonprofit law, taxation, budgets, incorporation, data custody, platform architecture, labor structures, parliamentary procedure, succession, and fiduciary responsibility as media of collective invention. Otherwise each victory in meaning remains hostage to a form controlled elsewhere.

Institutional form is itself a medium of thought and action. A charter argues. A budget interprets. An employment classification commands. An accreditor composes. A tax category recognizes one public and withholds recognition from another. A governance structure distributes voice before anyone begins to speak.

Conclusion: After the Charter

CCCC's de-chartering marks neither the simple death of a professional association nor the assured birth of a better one. It opens a passage whose outcome remains undecided. The decision reveals that a profession can remain intellectually vigorous while its organizational container becomes fiscally or politically untenable. It shows that a parent body can promise continued services while withdrawing the charter that made a community capable of governing those services. It demonstrates how quickly decades of professional memory and volunteer labor can move from taken-for-granted infrastructure into uncertain custody.

Fleming's Wisconsin history reveals the deeper pattern. In 1969, a struggle over the meaning, labor, and governance of freshman composition ended when those controlling institutional form

abolished the contested structure. In 2026, a struggle over the sustainability and governance of composition's major professional organization ended when its parent body withdrew the charter. The events differ in scale, actors, and circumstances, but they share a structural lesson: institutional authorities may answer demands for transformed governance through dissolution rather than redistribution of power.

That lesson sharpens the irony of the double long march. The Left changed institutional meanings without always securing the forms that carried them. The Right learned that controlling form can neutralize meanings without defeating them one by one. Yet this cannot become a counsel of despair or a nostalgic call to restore professional society unchanged. The old professional and nonprofit forms carried exclusions, hierarchies, contingent labor, and managerial capture of their own.

CCCC therefore serves as a canary in the mindshaft. Its distress signals a changing atmosphere throughout professional and nonprofit society. The old United Way world gathered people, organizations, donations, expertise, and civic obligations under federated institutional umbrellas. That world never achieved innocence or equality, but it supplied durable channels through which collective activity could acquire legal recognition, financial support, public presence, and historical continuity. Those channels now fracture under economic pressure, political intervention, technological unbundling, membership decline, and institutional consolidation.

What follows will not necessarily look like freedom. It may look like subscription, consultancy, platform dependence, emergency volunteering, philanthropic competition, and permanent precarity. It may produce a society filled with expertise but emptied of professional self-government. A different passage remains possible, but it demands more than resilience. The functions of CCCC can become materials for a metafeessional commons: distributed but coordinated, portable but accountable, experimental but capable of inheritance.

The question after the charter therefore does not ask only what will happen to CCCC. It asks what forms can still gather us. What can preserve collective memory without freezing it? What can coordinate expertise without enclosing it? What can support professional crossings without extracting their labor? What can federate organizations without subordinating them? What can turn users back into members, members into participants, and participants into stewards?

The profession has entered transfeessional passage. Its inherited equipment no longer holds, while its obligations continue moving through us. The future depends upon whether we merely endure that passage—or learn to compose it.

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MeTanoia Playground

StudioLab

"PLAY is the lab where we unlearn to learn again."

Care is a route

we wander to make cure.

maps hold memory

THE GROUND REMEMBERS.

SONG KEEPS US ALIGNED.

healing is cosmic work.

WE WITNESS.
WE REMEMBER.
WE IMAGINE.
WE PLAY.

Labyrinth
nothing is linear here.
get lost.
find more.

Serpentine
follow the curve.
trust the uncurling.

The Fall / Cliff
risk reminds us we are alive.

border between play & thought.

RETURN is a DREAM we KEEP.

every path can hold the others

Rock Garden
step gently.
listen to the stone.

Cosmic Egg
crack open.
enter the unknown.

Cloud Machine
make weather.
make wonder.

String Fingers
climb.
pluck.
become vibration.

Care Station
rest. repair.
recharge.

StoryX Path
every step a story.
every story a step.

Haunted House
enter if you dare.
leave what you carry.

play is rehearsal for new worlds

WE BUILD TOMORROW WITH TODAY'S PLAY.

Witness Bench
sit. watch.
hold the story.

Toryx Switch
choose.
switch.
transform the map.

Helix Spiral
descend.
turn.
rise changed.

Pablo's Frame Shop
reframe.
reshape.
reimagine.

shadows teach us how to see.

Dorita's Doric Doorway
pass through.
leave different.
return wiser.

Future-Present Space
where we practice what's possible.

beauty is our act of defiance.

Children paint tomorrow.

The Playground

A StudioLab Performance Cosmography

- MAP KEY
- Path / Route
 - Portal / Threshold
 - Witness Point
 - Care Station

This map is not fixed.
It changes with us.
Draw your own path.
Add your own place.
The playground is alive.



beyng.com
14BC Gallery NYC

performingspace.org

