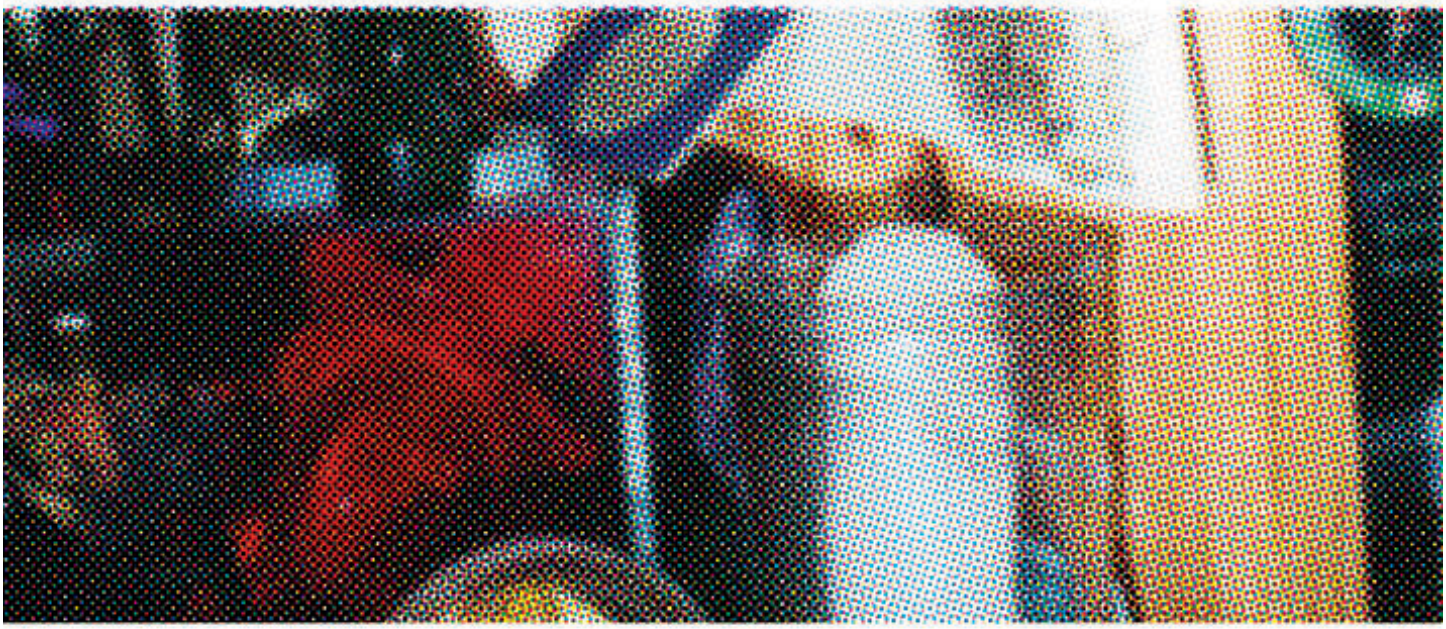


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Revisiting Jon McKenzie's *Perform or else*: performance, labour and pedagogy

Jon McKenzie, Tim Edkins, and Stevphen Shukaitis

Tim Edkins and Stevphen Shukaitis interviewed Jon McKenzie on 24 March 2013 about his book *Perform or else: From discipline to performance* (2001a), its current resonance and his recent research[1]. We begin by asking about *Perform or else*'s playful tone and composition. Then we ask about contemporary labour struggles, including in the state of Wisconsin where he is based as a Professor of English and Director of DesignLab at University of Wisconsin. We end by discussing how he sees the current role of the university. We focus on how DesignLab forms part of his applied research program, based on the multifaceted conception of performance theorised in *Perform or else* and instantiated in higher education.

Introduction

Stevphen Shukaitis: Currently I'm co-editing an issue of the journal *ephemera: theory & politics in organization*. It comes out of management and organisation studies, but it's a more critical theory orientated journal drawing from Marxism, queer studies, sociology and the arts. It is published open source, so its readership is much broader than most journals. This interview will be for an issue on workers' inquiry, which, coming out of the Italian autonomist tradition, is an approach that uses sociological tools to push forward and deepen labour antagonisms. Part of the idea for this issue is also to draw on perspectives from cultural studies, performance studies, and the arts more broadly that could be usefully combined with workers' inquiry.

1 McKenzie was in London presenting a keynote paper 'Remediating performances: Strange politics of higher education' (2013a).

Jon McKenzie: And this is the Marx survey you mentioned, in relation to workers' inquiry?

SS: That was the basic idea and it was taken up in Italy. So that rather than presuming too much about the workers and the working class, asking: What are they actually doing? What do they really want? Well people are going on mass wildcat strikes, why are they doing that? So it was using those sorts of tools. And the idea of interviewing you for the issue is to explore some ways that your work on performance could enrich such a project.

Tim Edkins: I was thinking about similar debates around performance and labour happening in performance studies at the moment, with a series of recent journal special issues on this topic.[2] And this is something that I encountered at Queen Mary, when I did the performance studies MA in the Drama department there.[3] It was when post-Workerist thought was being applied by a critical mass of scholars in performance studies. It offered another way, alongside your work, of undertaking an analysis of performance and management, by situating the labour of the artist within broader changes to working conditions under post-Fordism. *Perform or else* also valorised my trip across campus into Queen Mary's business school. There I found a link with performance studies with people such as Stefano Harney, who was researching there at the time, and who I ended up teaching with. He has written on pedagogy with his longtime collaborator Fred Moten (2013), within the business school (Dunne et al, 2008) and at Queen Mary in particular (2009a; 2009b). And also, before arriving in the business school, he wrote about state theory from a post-Workerist perspective and drew on performance studies (2002). So I guess I am interested in discussing where a performance studies of this tradition, and of the *Perform or else* moment, might go next. The critical business school would be one instance, but there are many other sites it could venture into.

2 'Precarity and Performance' a special issue of *TDR* edited by Nicholas Ridout and Rebecca Schneider (2012), 'Precarious Situations: Race, Gender, Globality' a special issue of *Women & Performance* edited by Tavia Nyong'o (2013), and 'On Labour and Performance' a special issue of *Performance Research* edited by Gabriele Klein and Bojana Kunst (2012), which includes an article by Shukaitis (2012).

3 See, for example, the work of Nicholas Ridout (2009; 2013), which sits alongside the department's treatment of this topic from a cultural materialist perspective (McKinnie, 2004; Harvie, 2013).

Part One: The performance of *Perform or else*

SS: I really like how *Perform or else* is both an analytic machine and a performative gesture at the same time. But the relationship between the two elements makes me question certain parts of it. For instance, is the project to launch an overall theory of performance? Is that possible? Or is it in some ways a gesture of why the attempt to do this would in fact blow up?

JM: It is the latter. I say that I am rehearsing a general theory of performance. In many ways it is modelled on Jacques Derrida's *Of Grammatology* (1974). He simultaneously launches this thing and also pulls it out. At the same time, I realised that there were these other paradigms of performance. So one of the rules in this was not to go out, as many performance scholars do, with an idea of what performance is and then find these objects and name it. I actually started with these different concepts and kind of went to different practices. Because I knew that there was a normative side of performativity, which I had discovered in my masters thesis. So the purpose was to kind of lay out these other kinds of performance, organisational and technological. When I first read Jean-François Lyotard (1979) I thought he was talking about Michel Foucault's (1979) discipline; the way that I understood performativity was as a mode of discipline. But then later I realised, oh no, there is something very different happening here. To lay out this notion that there was a stratum, drawing on Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari, I play with some of their diagrams, reworking and using them. I also knew there would be the kind of Derridian playfulness part, that I wanted to do something with this notion of the perfumative, which is why the last half becomes the way it is. It would go together in a more traditional way if I had a number of analyses at the end that took these three paradigms of performance – cultural, organisational and technological – and looked at X, Y and Z, and saw how these different values played off of one another. I don't do it here, but I've since brought those together for analyses of TOYWAR, higher education, dataveillance, Abu Ghraib, the BP disaster in the Gulf of Mexico, and global resistance to war[4].

TE: I guess you wouldn't need to perform that analysis if the gesture was to give the model to others. But the playful tone of it is at odds with other models, where you can be sure that they will remain steady. I was wondering how you thought about it being taken seriously or not. I know that tension is acknowledged within the text in different ways.

4 See McKenzie 2001b, 2008, 2009, 2013b, 2006a, and 2006b.

JM: A certain fatalism: I did not know whether I was going to write another book, and so it was important for me to have the playful gesture in this one. I think people take from the book what they want. I often get a sense that a lot of performance students are assigned just chapter one, 'The efficacy of cultural performance'. They don't get the rest of it, and don't see why they would need to go there. I suspect that other ones get probably halfway through the book, and that is something that they can use. There is a project that is laid out in the second half. That is to do with this catachrestic notion, what happens to names when they become post-conceptual in some way: they start to connect in different ways. The same thing with catastoration of behaviour, if the thing is nicely set up, how can you ship it out in a different direction. There it is about desubjectification, and you could do that around deobjectification too: when the names and the materials start to come apart, things open up, for better and worse, but could inscribe thought in a different space. There is also the notion of this collaboration through these cells influenced by Critical Art Ensemble, what I call gay sci fi[5]. What would the cells of people working together do, like creating a radical business school? And then the last part is a reinscription of what is laid out in the first. This notion of time travelling and moving through different times, and not necessarily thinking you're just in one time and you are sealed in this way. Disastronautics. There is a certain anachronism that is always happening and how do you plug into that?

TE: Would there be a popular version?

JM: I thought about writing one actually. To take this and make it available for managers almost. It could have an intervention there. Part of the move is to try to introduce these cultural values into institutions in a way that is not simply the creative class. Can you enter these things in and make them important, in a way that would still be critical and change those institutions. Maybe that is a utopian dream, but it sounds like these radical business schools are attempting something similar.

SS: If there was going to be a pop version I might suggest it taking a style along the lines of someone like Cory Doctorow who does almost pop teenage novels, such as *For the win* (2010).

JM: So you are suggesting not only lay this out but to show an application. I like this idea. I have remediated it into a video (McKenzie, 2012a) but that is a certain frame.

5 On Critical Art Ensemble see McKenzie (2001a: 235-6) and McKenzie, Schneider and Critical Art Ensemble (2000).

TE: What was interesting to me when I first read it was that the demand to be a productive worker is pretty familiar, and many people would spend time with this but wouldn't get as much from it as they could.

JM: There is a lot of scholarly apparatus and a lot of citations, which could be done in a much leaner way. I'm still working within this thing but to go back and rewrite it I cannot imagine doing that now. When Ralo Mayer asked me to reprise this for his artists' exhibition catalogue I was a little like, whoa, how would I do that[6]?

Part Two: Cultural labour, specialisation and resistance

SS: I wanted to ask something in a different direction. One thing I really like is the way that you hold together notions of performance as transgressive and as 'liminal-norm' (McKenzie, 2001a: 49-53). This seems quite important for ways for looking at the relationship between art and labour, where the role of the artist is both transgressive and also normative, in accepting longer hours and lower wages, etc. And I like your argument that 'performance will be to the twentieth and twenty-first centuries what discipline was to the eighteenth and nineteenth' (ibid.: 18). Thinking about this twelve years later, has this developed further from the way that you saw it then?

JM: Sure. My head is still in that space, because I have laid out general theory and it is pretty wide. There are other paradigms obviously out there: the financial, educational and medical performances[7]. So there are other ones. So I see it is continuing to be there and maybe it is not called performance, but this drive for assessment, this audit society is part of that. Artists have gone from legitimating themselves through these grand narratives of liberation and freedom to becoming increasingly under audit themselves. I think there is good and bad in this, and the question is what are the modes of resistance that are going to emerge under performativity?

SS: I was just thinking of Critical Art Ensemble, and if you ever worry that the arts will not have a political role, all you have to do is think of that moment in 2004 where Steve Kurtz got arrested for bioterrorism.

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6 McKenzie's (2011: 21-25) essay for this exhibition catalogue offers an overview of *Perform or else*. McKenzie (2012b) discusses remediating the book into this text, which also forms the script for the voiceover of the video essay (McKenzie, 2012a). More recently, Iga Ganczarczyk, Bartosz Frackowiak and Anna Zaradny (2013) have created a performance inspired by the book.

7 See McKenzie (2004) for a discussion of performance and audit in education and finance.

JM: Yes, but he had moved from electronic civil disobedience into that realm because he thought that what they had laid out in their first manifesto had already been co-opted and tactical media changes were needed. Artist activists have a critical role to play in experimenting with new social and media forms. It's important to note that the situation Critical Art Ensemble diagnosed in the early 1990s – namely, that artists were too technophobic, programmers were too tied to the state interests, and activists were too tied to the streets – had already changed. As Deleuze says, contemporary power is a constant modulation that breaks disciplinary moulds.

TE: To follow on, in terms of your use of perfumance (McKenzie, 2001a: 228-34), I can't quite follow that as a concept.

JM: It is not a concept. It is a condition, connected to Derrida's iterability and what Judith Butler does with iterability. The identity of something is not a substance that is there, it is relational and those relations can change, and things can flip over. I'm not quite sure poststructuralism ever happened because there seems to be a lot of dialectical puritanism: we are going to get ourselves in a nice pure space and be away from this ickiness. It is hard to be in that space. In terms of labour, Michel de Certeau wrote about what he called *la perruque*, wig making, as a fringe term for this: you are at your job but you are making your own wig. I think new media allows the space to do this. That would be the perfumative element of labour. It comes from a throwaway line that Derrida has in his reading of Joyce when he says 'I could have called this *On the perfumative in "Ulysses"*' (1992:300 cited in McKenzie, 2001a: 231). The notion for me that any performance, because of the citational network which precedes it, is iterable or other-able; that is the important thing; it's not that there is a performance and that there are iterations of it; the presence itself emerges out of iterability, which means the blur is always going to be in play for better and for worse. The reason perfumance cannot be a concept is if we traditionally think of concepts as having a unified sense with a series of attributes under it, this one, because it is a pun, is already in two places at once. It is trying to get at undecidability, and again I am channeling Derrida. But then what would it be to set up a whole system of thought that does that? For me, Deleuze and Guattari do this in *A thousand plateaus* (1987). Their concepts are introduced, for instance, the rhizomatic and the arborescent, and they seem very clear, but then later on, it's like, oh no, those things have been displaced into some other way. What would it be not just for one puncept but whole system of thought that is moving in a post-conceptual way of thinking and being in the world?

SS: I was just in Palermo and there's this certain tree that grows vines from it and when the vines hit the ground they turn into more trunks. It just destroyed things for me. I thought the tree and the rhizome were different.

JM: But Deleuze and Guattari say at the ends they turn into one another. On the one side it is stratifying and on the other side it's free flowing, and these things flip back and forth: a tree can become rhizomatic and rhizome can suddenly become a tree. It is interesting in *Kafka* (Deleuze and Guattari, 1986: 74) they have these two diagrams. One is of the tower, which I would take to be discipline, and the other is of a series of doorways; so this is the hierarchical organisation and this is a networked organization. There is not anything inherently good or bad in either one of those forms, that is the important thing to realise. Not only could one turn into the other, but they could coexist at the same time. In most organisations this is an organisational chart but the way that power flows through it is different. This is in *The castle* (Kafka, 1962), where there are these weird instances of short-circuiting of power.

SS: It is interesting how organisations can move back and forth between different modalities, in very unpredictable ways: Is this a rehearsal or is this the actual thing? Is it the informal or is it the actual structure? And the codes that let you know when it is the real thing when it is not. I wanted to ask about the particular outcomes of more performative forms of labour. I am thinking in particular of forms of cultural labour where you are not just producing your performance of the work itself, but also a certain kind of self-conception through it, such that it seems to be really difficult to talk about collective conditions in that labour. Because if the work you do is also about making yourself then it seems really difficult to talk about stopping work. How would you go on strike against your own creative labour? It becomes a very individualised: attached to particular bodies. Do you think there has been a change in labour politics, or the possibility for labour politics, coming out of more performative forms of work?

JM: In terms of cultural work why do we have to think that it is about the individual? If the romantic philosophers like Kant and Hegel had valorised theatre, rather than the poet and the painter, we would have a different idea of what aesthetics is: it would already be collaborative, recombinant, and multi-mediated. So many of those notions of originality, of being a single producer working in just one particular medium, might be different. So do we necessarily have to fall back that it is about individual labour? A lot of other folks have shown that there is a sociology always involved in this: everything from these situations that are supporting it to the medium and the training. If one is always already sociological, then you think of the way that it doesn't just come back to an

individual valorisation, but I think most artists do that. They see themselves as part of a community and that labour happens this way.

SS: I have had a lot of experience of talking to creative workers in London, who almost fall back on a certain moment of their arts training, where it is all about 'my practice.' And maybe that is a question about the way that arts education works itself, it then forms a certain kind of individual subjectivity, that looks to talk about your practice rather than focusing on these broader questions of the sociology of creativity.

JM: I originally trained as a painter and my experience of working in many different academic institutions, the pattern that I see is that, at least in the US, art is taught in mono media. There is the visual arts, dance, theatre, music and literature, and they hardly mix. Then within each of these there are certain valorisations of nineteenth century forms: painting, ballet, realist theatre, classical music or the novel or poem. My concern is how long can we maintain that within the academy when we are entering a good way into the twenty-first century? Are we going to continue to over-valorise those things and under, or even devalorise twentieth century art forms? And that's not just the avant-garde, well especially avant-garde, but also film, television, radio – media which are marginalised in the US both as object of study and languages of communication, expression, etc. I went to NYU: performance studies was disconnected from the theatre department, which was disconnected from the film school, etc. You still get narrow specialisation almost everywhere. I stopped being a painter because I felt the medium and materials that artists work in are often too narrow, and then the institutions that they work in are perhaps too narrow, too. There have been some scandalous paintings, but have they had the impact of certain films or television events? So if you're going to work on a visual arts mode, why paint? At some point I thought I needed to do something else. And to go back to what I was saying earlier about the notion of the individual genius being the primary mode still, except for theatre where it is collaborative.

SS: It is interesting that over the past year there have been a wave of theatres being occupied in Italy as a response to the drastic cuts in arts funding. And maybe that's part of it, why the theatres have been occupied as opposed to – well, I'm not quite sure if painters and poets decided they wanted to take over a particular space what in fact would they occupy?

JM: Galleries? I don't know what space poets would take?

SS: Bookstores?

JM: Bookstores. Another challenges that many of these institutions – the opera houses, the symphonies, the libraries, the bookstores - I don't know about the galleries, certainly the museums – are often times on life support in society, because people are not frequenting them the way that they used to. So are these new media cutting our legs off? Or is there something else that is emerging in which art is not done by artists? Creativity is a more widespread notion. This might an almost desperate hope for what is happening but it also opens the question of what new sorts of practices and interactions will emerge.

Part Three: Performance, austerity and Wisconsin

SS: I wanted to ask you about the performative dimensions of the events in Wisconsin when Governor Scott Walker was forcing through the changes in labour laws. Because that seemed to be significant politically but also in the way that it played out in US politics, where you had these connections between Wisconsin and Egypt, with people buying pizzas for one another. It seemed to me that it was both important because of the changes in labour law but also something broader than that, how it was being performed as a sort of public spectacle.

JM: It is hard to separate those two, because a lot of marches were organised by public sector labour unions. You did have then people coming because they felt strongly in support of this, even if they were not unionised. So there was a very festive feeling in terms of the marches from the UW campus. They would be faculty and high school students, who had been let out, marching up in the bitter cold, with signs and costumes. In terms of the physical occupation and music, for a while you could come into the Capitol, which has a really beautiful building. And people were coming in standing at the very base of the Rotunda singing 'We shall overcome'. One person at a time would come in and sing this song a cappella. It was very moving. Then you had people on the other side shouting 'What is this person doing? Drag them out of here. Why are they desecrating this space?' So it was a social space, though I don't know how much dialogue was going on between the singing and shouting. But then the Capitol police really clamped down and forbid such protests.

SS: Do think that we could say that there is a theatrics of austerity? So in a certain way you can't just say there is a problem with the budget but the thing is to perform it, like 'I am sorry but the White House tour is cancelled because we are out of money.' This sort of dramatisation of austerity becomes a certain way to rationalise and justify it, as opposed to actually argue for it.

JM: A theatricality of austerity. Do you mean a staging or falsity? Are you using theatricality in a negative sense?

SS: I would not see it as being purely negative, as much as just a way to bypass having to rationally argue for what is happening, almost like performance as a substitute for argument. Maybe that is a bit too simplistic.

JM: Certainly in the US the federal and state government have ignored the lessons of history in terms of economics and are persuaded that this is the right way to go. Is that theatrical or are they insincere? Perhaps these economists, who were in the federal government, should know better. They are in some sense, maybe in negative theatrical terms, just miming their own arguments and ignoring the history of their own models. One of the biggest frustrations with Obama is that he had an opportunity to do something very different, but in many ways he has ignored the progressive side of the Democratic Party. Perhaps he was never a progressive possibility, he was always a neoliberal, and we shouldn't have expected anything else, but for me he has been a disappointment.

SS: I remember there was an occupation of a window factory in Chicago, when the workers had not been paid. And as President-elect he said it was right that these workers occupy the factory. And I thought this is great he just said that worker occupation is a great idea. But then we saw who he appointed for the cabinet and it was like oh I remember these people, this was the '90s again.

JM: Getting back to Madison: what was so frustrating there was that the local Democrats were completely ignored by the DNC, even though Obama had come here and campaigned in Madison, and there was a great outpouring of support for him. It is interesting in terms of the timing of when they tried to recall the Governor. There were great debates between the DNC and the local Democrats about when to hold that election. It ended up being held in the summer when there were no students in town and when the voter turnouts would not be so great. I wonder in retrospect whether it would have been better to have it later, since Obama did so well and carried the state of Wisconsin. Coming back to your point, isn't there a theatricality of all sides, in terms of some sort of presentation and performance?

SS: Probably, yes. I would say if there is a theatrics of austerity it goes both ways. How the performance of contesting austerity measures is approached would be just as relevant to think about, as much as how they present themselves.

JM: Would it have that negative valence then? Because it depends on what side you are on, even if you recognise that it is a construction, you would say

nonetheless this side is right and that's whatever word that you would use-more authentic, or more politically progressive, I don't know what word you would use when you throw your die with this side. And then what happens to the recognition of that constructiveness? You say it is an artifice I will live with or embrace and affirm, rather than one I will turn around and criticise.

SS: It's really interesting because I'm thinking here about the moment in the Bush presidency where he lands on the aircraft carrier from playing it as mission accomplished. A lot of people were like 'this is pure theatre, it is all spectacle.' But then what was the Obama campaign but well crafted spectacle.

JM: I don't know if that is anything new. I mean Clinton, Reagan, Kennedy there is a long tradition. What was interesting about the mission accomplished is that it instantly was seen as a terrible mistake, a performative that spectacularly misfired. On the left it was: 'oh yeah, we are going to hold you to this thing and anything that happens after this will show that the mission is not accomplished.' Bush was one of many performative Presidents. So you would have to ask how do you evaluate these different artifices of performativity?

SS: Have you read the book that Brian Massumi wrote after he translated *A thousand plateaus*, *First and last emperors* (1993)? It begins with statues in China of the emperor. He has this picture of Reagan in China with one whose head has fallen off. So Reagan puts his head behind them. So Massumi writes about the two bodies of the emperor: the ancient notions of sovereignty and telemediated sovereignty. It is similar to your book, and you can tell he just finished translating *A thousand plateaus*, because it has this Deleuze-inflected language. He starts talking about lice and bugs, and it goes off in this very strange performative dimension, whilst still talking about sovereignty.

JM: It is interesting how the Republicans seem to be able to goof on themselves. That is Reagan goofing on himself. 'Start the bombing in five minutes', do you remember when he did that? And he's joking, and the left got outraged. I'm trying to think of Democrats that have been able to do that and what would the gesture be that would pull off something like standing behind the Emperor. Again it would be that kind of playful and why, can you think of, someone on the Democratic the left side who would attempt such a thing? In the States the conservatives did a really good job of making the word liberal a nasty word. But now it has finally turned and they are now seen as the crazy ones.

SS: You could say that it is just effective branding policy?

JM: But it is not just effective branding policy, it is a certain turn of the knife. Obama is incredibly well branded, but I don't know if there is this turn of the knife. Chavez would be an example. He would say things to just piss off everybody and yet rally his own troops. It would be interesting to do an analysis of where and when was the last similar gesture from a Democratic leader in the States. Truman?

Part Four: The university, pedagogy and DesignLab

SS: I would like to bring this back to where we started. If the university is drastically changing then how could it find ways to relate to forms of self-organised learning that grow outside of it in a non-exploitative fashion and encourage them. One thing that we have seen in the past five or six years here in the UK in particular, is lots of free university projects, forms of learning and education occurring outside of the university, in ways that are actually more advanced and interesting than what happens inside of the university itself.

JM: I am not familiar enough with things that are completely outside of university, but I can talk about some of the projects that have been coming through the media studios. There is my colleague Nancy Buenger, who works in legal studies at UW Madison, and she is interested in the youth justice system. She has collaborated with our public library on a service-learning course where students work with youths in the juvenile justice system to make new media projects. There is also, within my department, the Odyssey project run by Emily Auerbach, which works with people on the south side of Madison who are very poor, to help them learn literacy skills and earn a degree. And Jim Burling, a current DesignLab teaching assistant from our Theater and Drama Department, has worked with young people through public libraries to read and discuss novels while designing and building scenes from the narrative in the online game Minecraft. So there is both reading and building – they build these incredible virtual environments. But I don't have extensive knowledge of things completely outside of the university.

SS: A lot of projects that are outside of the university are not completely outside – they have some connection.

JM: That's one argument for the smart media that DesignLab studies and supports: video essays, theory comix, graphic essays, audio narratives, etc. You work in new genres, you go to new venues and you reach new audiences. I think the scientists may be better at this than humanists. On our campus we have three communications departments, and one is called Life Sciences Communication,

and it is about figuring out how scientific knowledge gets into the world. They go out and interview farmers about what they know about global warming: where they get this information, and how accurate it is, and how it affects what they are doing. It is part of the Wisconsin Idea from the Progressive era: the idea that the university should serve the people of the state. In the contemporary world the Wisconsinites are everywhere, and so it becomes a global thing. So there is a long tradition of outreach through the University's Extension Program, which has offices across the state. Wisconsin is a big agricultural state, and the program helped disseminate specialised knowledge generated by the Agriculture school. I see the smart media work that I am doing now grows right out of this. It is not so much about educating people. That is the wrong formulation: 'oh I've got the knowledge and I'm going to go in and educate others.' It needs to be a more collaborative process.

Within the academy and many other institutions, there is a generational split around technology, where the ones that are supposed to be the masters and have the knowledge realise their mastery and knowledge pertain to old paradigms and infrastructures. There is a sense of disjunction and a recognition that we could learn more from students and young faculty. Graduate students are a key way into it because they are more tied to the digital. They can 'teach up' as research assistants to faculty and if they are teaching assistants they 'teach down.' I have been arguing that we should put much more effort into helping graduate students work in this new infrastructure of knowledge. I think of the university as the good ship Theseus but being rebuilt while at sea: it's out there sailing, it can't stop, and it is going to have to transform itself in very choppy waters, with austerity or without. After fifty years of protest and critical theory, the organisation of the universities remains pretty much the same while its infrastructure has been radically transformed. New topics and new people have been welcomed, certainly, but made to fit in departmental structures organised in very traditional, hierarchical ways that restrict flows of information, resources, and decision-making and make new, vital connections very difficult.

In terms of digitality and new network structures of knowledge, will the University be to digital culture as the Catholic Church was to science: it helps initiate a break in thought and then can't handle it institutionally. Today there are least two institutions educating young people: formal education system and popular culture. And the learning practices and value systems are often at odds with one another. My partner Caroline Levine (2011) has written about how professors are represented in popular culture, and it is not a pretty picture: we are mad scientists, bumble heads and lecherous. That sounds pretty awful until you see what happens to popular culture when it comes into the university. It is not valorised: it is taken apart and relentlessly critiqued. At least in the US, when

popular culture is brought in it is something to distinguish from true knowledge. It is doxa as opposed to episteme. But is there some kind of mashup? You could say that smart media is sort of a mashup of that, trying to move into more mediated forms but keeping the critical, and that's what the smart part is. Keeping conceptual discourses still happening but in a way that would connect other audiences.

TE: Could you say a little more about DesignLab?

JM: DesignLab is like a writing centre for new media projects. We offer no courses but support potentially any project from any department, and we help faculty and departments develop assignments and courses with smart media components. Smart media are emerging scholarly genres: anything that moves scholarship into other media: video essays, Pecha Kuchas, scientific posters, theory comix, etc. DesignLab is located in UW's busiest library, and any student can meet with our TAs for media design advice on media projects for classes or extra-curricular activities. We focus on conceptual and aesthetic issues and refer technical issues elsewhere. I stress that smart media supplement and reinscribe, but do not replace, traditional genres such as books and articles. Smart media opens up new ways to structure arguments and evidence for new audiences[8].

DesignLab is itself a bit of a mashup at the institutional level. We're transversal: we're located in the Library with our nine TA consultants drawn from nine programs: Art, Curriculum and Instruction, Design Studies, English, Geography, Journalism & Mass Communication, Life Sciences Communication, Nelson Institute for Environmental Studies, and Theatre and Drama. We're funded by a tuition-based program called the Madison Initiative for Undergraduates and as such required to produce annual assessment reports.

Pedagogically, my approach comes out of a series of experiments called StudioLab, which I began while I was still at NYU, trying to get theatre people to work with media. I did one class 'Performing bureaucracies', where I had graduate students use new media to examine their individual experiences of bureaucracy in everyday life. And then, extrapolating from Deleuze and Guattari's *Kafka*, I had them as groups create a minor bureaucracy. But frankly the performance students could only parody organisational performance, which is fine, but people do organise and do serious work with it. And DesignLab comes from these earlier experiments, but it is not limited to performance studies and the arts and humanities, it is meant to be generalisable. It is an embodiment of the cultural, organisational and technological, and this

8 McKenzie (2012c) discusses DesignLab further and offers examples of students work.

displacement of the lecture machine, in one place. So it comes out of the book but I am scaling up and plugging into other things that people are doing with different pedagogies: providing a language and a set of services to help them move into different spaces too.

DesignLab has three missions. The primary mission is to democratise digitality, which I define as the global remediation of literate, visual, aural and numerate archives into networked databases and the accompanying changes in individual skills, cognitive patterns, and social organisation. The second, sub-mission is to democratise design, to make media design, graphic design, sound design, installation and performance design as commonplace as reading and writing. The third, deeper mission is to democratise experimental theory, to continue and expand the twentieth century media experiments by the avant-garde, by documentary filmmakers, by indigenous media groups and craft new modes of post-conceptual, post-ideational thought. And that is a tough one because that experimental theoretical moment in the academy was a very brief one and it is done sporadically.

TE: I am interested in how you are describing democratising theory because it sounds like it is tied to a spatial visual practice?

JM: The visual and spatial are crucial, as are other dimensions such as sound and interactivity. The idea is that there have been a series of attempts to theorise beyond the book. Sticking with avant-garde theoretical experiments, Walter Benjamin's *The arcades project* (1999) is probably one of the most interesting ones. The thing was never made, but it exists is this kind of utopian project. There are a number of other examples. Marshall McLuhan and Quentin Fiore's *The medium is the massage* (1967) book looks like a magazine: Fiore designed some great spreads, and McLuhan is doing this aphoristic theorizing. McLuhan also did an experimental record that came out at the same time (McLuhan, Fiore and Agel, 1968). In science, Benoît Mandelbrot, the mathematician behind chaos theory, wrote a book called *The fractal geometry of nature* (1982). It was not a traditional math book. It had giant beautiful computer graphics, equations, stories – and this strange text launched chaos theory. One thing that Mandelbrot says is that he had been doing this math for years and nobody would listen to him until computer graphics came along, and then he could show people what he was talking about. Avital Ronell's *The telephone book* (1989) has been made into a performance, dramatised. Such textual experimentation is a tough sell today, even to humanists, because they walked away from it a long time ago. I sometimes think that deconstruction paradoxically became the method used by literature and language departments' to ward off the eruption of gram and trace. They basically made it safe. The experiments didn't go outside of writing texts,

even when they were deconstructing the book. For me, the grammatological is a different mode to do something different than what deconstructivists were trying to do, and that's Gregory Ulmer's move. He has been doing this for almost thirty years. So when I was a student of his at Florida, we were the Florida School in juxtaposition to the Yale School[9]. The Yale School was doing by then rather safe literary deconstruction, and we were trying to do something else.

So the democratising part, hell, it's hard just to get people to do old theory. In the '80s, people were clambering to do theory, and it is much more difficult to do it now. Part of this is getting students to read theory the old way or new way or any way, and it could be that new, experimental ways will get them to do the old way. Certainly you need to have serious theoretical chops to do this. So some of the suspicions that I get with smart media is that, first, it is a dumbing down of theory or knowledge, 'Because you can't do in video or comics what you are doing in a forty-page paper.' This is the wrong comparison because these are different things. Abstracts are different from articles, and we produce them all the time. You have to recognise the limits of different forms and media genres. The second common objection is that smart media is against writing. It is not against writing but it is helping to reinscribe alphabetic writing within a different mise-en-scène. For me, this move comes from Antonin Artaud and Derrida's reading of Artaud, which inscribed it somewhere else, and also from Bertolt Brecht's call for theatre to both entertain and instruct. It is the same move. And finally the third objection, and this is a challenging one, is that there is not enough time to do this: that I am schooled up in the writing machine and I cannot possibly retool.

I am telling students and colleagues that we need to learn to play the old game and the new game. There is a real need now because we need to legitimate ourselves for different audiences and collaborators. We can't just go back and beat on the book and expect people to rally around the humanities because they are asking us 'so what?' We need to tell them 'so what' in new, more persuasive ways. This experimentation I think could be useful for the arts and humanities in general, not just performance studies. Because it is a legitimation and perhaps an existential issue when we are being asked what is the value of the arts and humanities, and even the sciences. At UW, faculty are engaging with this in a really concrete way. What's the value and function of our research for communities and our society? If you go back to the Lyotard, I mean it's a dated book, but he called a lot of things. We are being called on to 'operationalise or else.' What is to be done? In the US, there is much stress on public research universities. I teach at a large, Big Ten research university, and like other public

9 McKenzie (2007: 22-3) explores this experience at Florida.

universities, we're trying to figure out our place at this time. That's the big picture. I'm trying to see how the experiments I'm doing on a micro-level resonate with these larger demands, by scaling up frames and perspectives. That's how mutations go systemic. What DesignLab is trying to bring these smart media, emerging scholarly genres, not just to those in performance studies, or even in the arts and humanities, but to all disciplines where, at the edges, other connections are possible. The genres, the new modes of thinking and acting, are actually already there, waiting to be connected. What did E.M. Forster say, 'only connect'? Well, almost.

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