# Performing Knowledge: Contemporary Lecture Performances and the Politics of Knowledge in Cognitive Capitalism

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# DECLARATION

I, Clio Unger, declare that I am the author of this work, and this thesis is a presentation of original work. This work has not been presented for an award at this, or any other, University. All sources are acknowledged as references.

*Clio Unger*
March 2023

# ABSTRACT

Today the lecture performance has become a fixture in the by-programs of museums, galleries, theatres, and performance festivals, as well as in academic conferences and seminars: the lecture performance straddles the intersections between art and academia and combines academic analysis and performative intervention into traditional presentations of knowledge. This thesis investigates how the ubiquity of the form belies its complexity: Drawing on developments in theories of knowledge production – Jon McKenzie's focus on performance and managerial knowledge, Yann Moulier-Boutang's cognitive capitalism, as well as post-Fordist ideas of labour as performance – it argues that the hybrid-status of the lecture performance, positioned between lecturing and art practice, ideally situates it to study contemporary knowledge politics. By investigating the different ways in which lecture performances stage knowledge, I show how the form reproduces modes of knowledge marketisation and standardisation on the one hand, and how it acts as critique of these processes on the other.

Part 1 focuses on lecture performances in the context of theatre and dance. Drawing on post-Fordist theories centring performance in current labour practices, I argue that the lecture performance is both an agent and a consequence of cultural politics driven by economic rationalisation and the insertion of entrepreneurial logics into the artistic and academic field. Part 2 pivots to higher education to argue that the form's association with the more popular genre of the TED talk and other presentation formats geared towards generating a 'knowledge experience' is indicative of wider pedagogical shifts in the field. It analyses the TED talk as a model for popular pedagogies as well as a vector of identification for contemporary academics, before turning to examine Jon McKenzie and his digital pedagogies project, under which he broadly subsumes the practice of the lecture performance. Through analysing McKenzie's lecture performance as a pedagogical ideal, I show how his project nonetheless reproduces neoliberal knowledge politics. Part 3 turns to two epistemological and methodological uses of the form that attempt to negotiate, critique, and, at times, interrupt the logics of the global knowledge economy. By revealing the theatrical construction of common knowledge presentations (such as in the archive or via forensic investigation) my primary contention is that the lecture performance unmasks the institutionalised repertoires of knowledge production and offers ways of complementing standardised research procedures by illuminating gaps in knowledge.

Through these analyses the thesis makes two main contributions to knowledge. First, it extends existing debates concerned with contemporary lecture performances by connecting the form to a wider set of epistemological concerns that highlight the multifaceted and institutionally fluid ways in which performance is invested in the economics of knowledge production. Second, the thesis contributes to the field of knowledge politics and economy by attending to the performative aspects of these trends and developments that scholars of cognitive capitalism or the knowledge economy tend to gloss over or overlook.

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# INTRODUCTION



**Figure 1** (upper left): Rabih Mroué in *The Pixelated Revolution* (dOCUMENTA 13, Kassel, 2012); **Figure 2** (upper right): Coco Fusco in *Observations of Predation in Humans: A Lecture by Dr. Zira, Animal Psychologist* (The Studio Museum Harlem, New York City, 2013); **Figure 3** (lower left): Hito Steyerl in *I Dreamed a Dream: Politics in the Age of Mass Art Production* (Haus der Kulturen der Welt, Berlin, 2013); **Figure 4** (lower right): William Kentridge in *Ursonate* (Performa 17, New York City, 2017).

To contemporary audiences this setting has become a familiar scene: a dark stage with a lone performer sitting at a desk with a laptop in front of them and slides projected on the wall behind them. Perhaps there is a mic or a lamp on the desk. Maybe instead of sitting at the desk, they are standing at a lectern or holding a script. Some might wear a costume; most are just in their everyday clothes. We might encounter such performances in a black box theatre, a dance venue, a museum or gallery and they have become known as lecture performances. This is a project about lecture performances.

## Contemporary Lecture Performances between Rebellion and Compliance

More specifically this thesis is about how the contemporary lecture performance is embedded in and negotiates current developments of the knowledge economy. But it wasn't always about that. When I first became interested in the form it was for two reasons. Having moved to the US from Germany after my undergraduate degree to pursue postgraduate education, I was struck by the different expectations around how I was expected to present and perform knowledge in the different academic settings. In Germany, the cultural politics of the post-war liberal welfare state have ensured a dense network of publicly funded national, state, and municipal theatres. As a consequence, theatre is generally considered to have an important standing in society. While by no means a mass medium, it is widely accepted that theatre can and should have something to say about matters of societal importance.[1] In turn, scholars of theatre (Theaterwissenschaftler*innen) often paint in broad strokes. They use theatre and performance to think through broader societal concerns and developments and draw on wider philosophical discourses (often presented in a rather dense way) and can sometimes be quite speculative in their conclusions. Theatre in the US has a different standing. Confined mostly to big cities and almost exclusively privately funded, it is more associated with elite entertainment than a place for public debate. To me this meant that theatre studies in the US felt more withdrawn. More value was placed on researching minute details and reconstructing the individual lives of actors and playwrights or the institutional histories of specific theatre buildings.[2] These are of course generalisations, and I can think of several examples on both sides of the Atlantic that do not fit the mould established here. But I draw on this experience because it is how I became interested in the presentation and performance of knowledge in theatrical contexts and what prompted me to look for performance formats that centred discussions of how knowledge is constructed. What I found were lecture performances, and I was

[1] This is further aided by the fact that most state funding for theatres comes from state ministries of 'science, research and art' (for example the 'Ministerium für Wissenschaft, Forschung und Kunst' in Baden-Württemberg), which also fund universities, libraries, archives, and museums. The idea of theatre as an educational facility is thus more prominent in public thinking.

[2] This impression, I think, was reinforced by the fact that the department where I studied focused heavily on theatre historiography, which of course needs this level of detail.

immediately intrigued by how this form stages and negotiates concerns similar to mine: What counts as knowledge? How is our idea of knowledge shaped by its modes of presentation? How can we disrupt culturally dominant ways of presenting knowledge? And how does knowledge get legitimised based on our specific cultural and institutional contexts?

At the same time, my studies had also shifted from a more practical degree (a diploma in dramaturgy) to a more researched-based programme (an MA in Theatre and Performance Studies). In the anglophone academic sphere I became acquainted with concepts of practice research or performance research, which at this time were only marginally present in German universities (and often belittled by senior scholars). Again, I was fascinated by the lecture performance and its potential to combine practice and research. I was especially drawn to the promise that it could integrate forms of knowing previously outside of the realm of academic enquiry into the field of theatre and performance studies. The lecture performance, it seemed to me, was the perfect object of study to trace aesthetic investigations of knowledge productions and also sat at the nexus of my own practice between research and theatre.

This perception changed when, after having started my PhD studies in the UK, I began teaching the lecture performance (both in theory and practice) at various university drama departments and conservatory programmes.[3] Here I encountered three main ways in which the lecture performance was integrated into the curriculum: In the first instance, it was seen as a tool to enliven university lectures (and free them of their associations with antiquatedness and tedium). In these contexts, I was often asked to conceptualise my research in relation to recent developments such as the TED talk, a clear sign that discourses of edutainment had entered the realm of higher education pedagogies. Secondly, the form was seen as an aid to professional development meant to enhance students' ability to present and speak publicly. Upon learning the topic of my research, and even when this was unrelated to my teaching, line mangers repeatedly assumed I could easily integrate the practice of presentation skills (a highly praised soft

[3] Between 2018-2023, I have taught lectures, seminars and workshops about the lecture performances geared at both BA and MA levels at Royal Central School of Speech and Drama, Mountview Academy of Theatre, University of Worcester and Goldsmiths, University of London. I have also delivered an online workshop entitled 'Performative Strategies to Enliven the Business Pitch' as part of a module on 'Business Pitches' at the Haskayne School of Business at the University of Calgary.

skill) into my lessons. This is indicative of a pervasive logic within higher education that seeks to reconfigure arts and humanities teaching within the context of fostering so-called transferrable and employable skills. And lastly, the lecture performance was seen as a tool to prepare students for the harsh realities of creative production in an under-funded cultural market. Slotted in modules called 'Writing for Solo Performance' or 'Creative Solo Project', engagements with the lecture performance on many drama degrees prepares students for the para-institutional production industry in the UK, sometimes dubbed the 'fringe model' of performance producing.[4] Lecture performances, students learn, are mainly solo performances, they are often minimal in their set-up and scenography. They rely on widely available presentation technologies and often require the performer to run their own tech, such as changing slides or playing music. This is seen as both a function of the form, as the main performer is 'in charge' of the presentational situation, and the one best-equipped to make these calls in terms of dramaturgical timing, but it also prefigures a reality outside of the university setting, where emerging performers are increasingly expected to work independently or in small companies, and devise their own usually one-hour (solo) performances, for which they cannot expect much financial or technical support.[5] Put bluntly, the lecture performance as artistic practice teaches students to adjust their expectations, and to make the most of the 'creative constraints' that years of austerity politics have imposed on the cultural landscape in the UK.

I was (and remain) unsettled by how a form, which supposedly is so invested in interrupting dominant modes of knowledge presentation, fitted so easily into logics of economisation and neoliberal performance production, in which knowledge is considered a resource and a skill that can be packaged and cheaply implemented. Suddenly, critiques of the form as a 'lazy excuse of a genre',[6] which was only created out of economic necessity, rang true.[7] Holert points out that one of the reasons lecture

[4] See Ruth Simpson et al., 'Emotions, Performance and Entrepreneurship in the Context of Fringe Theatre', *Organization* 22, no. 1 (1 January 2015): 100–118.
[5] For a more in-depth description of this cultural market see Jen Harvie, *Fair Play - Art, Performance and Neoliberalism* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan UK, 2013).
[6] Diedrich Diedrichsen, 'Kontexterzwingung Und Aufeinanderangewiesensein: Dichtes Milieu Und Live Feuilleton – Ein Werbetext', Hebbel am Ufer, 2016, my translation: 'faule Ausrede einer "Gattung"', https://www.hebbel-am-ufer.de/ueber-uns/profil/ein-werbetext-von-diedrich-diederichsen/.
[7] Tom Holert, 'Lecture Performance: Verlegenheitsformat Oder Rebellische Form?', *POP. Kultur Und Kritik* 9, no. 1 (Herbst 2016): 64–68.

performances get programmed relatively frequently is that they tie in nicely with the modes of production in neoliberal arts education, where public resources are limited and productions are often co-produced among various venues, thus need to be able to travel easily.[8] In short, they are the ideal format for the precarious cultural worker, who must thrive in a milieu where speaking alone comprises the reality of much artistic production within the neoliberal cultural market. Yet still I kept being drawn back to the form, which derives such versatility from a relatively simple and repetitive set-up. When I became aware of this tension inherent in the form between experiment and interruption on the one hand, and processes of commodification on the other, my project shifted from an exploration of the aesthetics of the form (answering questions like 'What makes the lecture performance a lecture performance?', 'Can we understand it as a genre?', 'What are current trends of the form?') to an interrogation of how the form circulates and operates in multiple contexts of contemporary creative and knowledge economies.

I take my cue from Lucia Rainer and Daniel Ladnar who have also pointed out this dialectical position of the lecture performance between 'emancipatory and compliant',[9] which was imagined as an 'emancipatory' form at its inception but has been 'appropriated or incorporated by capitalism'.[10] In his 2013 thesis 'The Lecture Performance. Contexts of Lecturing and Performing', Ladnar suggests that the 'popularity of the lecture performance form might actually be linked to the ambiguity inherent in the form, to the fact that the lecture performance *can be read both* as an example of and as a critique of the role of knowledge production and presentation in today's society'.[11] Building on this assessment of the lecture performance as a contradictory form, this thesis examines the contemporary lecture performance as a paradoxical form, which strives to critique the way knowledge is currently produced and performed, while at the same time being caught in exactly the same material and ideological circumstances it aims to critique, which is the contemporary mode of producing and circulating knowledge under the regime of the knowledge economy. Caught in this difficult position, lecture

[8] Holert, 66.
[9] Lucia Rainer, *On the Threshold of Knowing: Lectures and Performances in Art and Academia* (Bielefeld: transcript, 2017), 196.
[10] Daniel Ladnar, 'The Lecture Performance: Contexts of Lecturing and Performing' (Doctoral Thesis, Aberystwyth, UK, Aberystwyth University, 2013), 227.
[11] Ladnar, 28.

performances represent the ideal object of study to trace how contemporary art and performance practices participate in the knowledge economy. As such they are indicative of the current proximity between artistic and academic practice but also of what Tom Holert has termed the increasing 'epistemization of art',[12] which I draw on in this project to contextualise my engagement with the lecture performance in broader discussion of knowledge-based arts practices of the day.

## The 'Epistemization of Art'

In his book *Knowledge Beside Itself,* Holert observes a recent rise of knowledge-based artistic practices. Thematic trends in the art world such as the archival impulse, the rehabilitation of marginalised modernities, or the reconstruction of performance repertoires are often channelled into forms aimed at demonstrating the artist's knowledge, such as research installations, documentary videos, or archival exhibitions. Paired with an expanding institutionalisation of 'artistic' or 'practice research' in universities and conservatories, this development is characterised by an increased emphasis on notions of 'knowledge' and 'research' in art practice. Holert asserts that this 'epistemization (or knowledgization) of art' has blurred the 'onto-epistemological fault lines between established conceptions of art and knowledge'.[13] The lecture performance, as a form between academic and artistic production, is both an agent and a consequence of these shifting fault lines, and taking this change towards epistemisation seriously necessitates, as Holert points out, not just a meditation on the philosophical 'specificities of "artistic knowledge" or the true meaning of "thinking aesthetically" but consideration of the 'political and economic dimensions of this shift from aesthetic to epistemic'.[14] These political and economic dimensions cannot be separated from the broader project of cognitive capitalism and its impetus to a) commodify and b) homogenise knowledge.

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[12] Tom Holert, *Knowledge Beside Itself: Contemporary Art's Epistemic Politics* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2020), 8.

[13] Holert, 8, 10. See also Ana Vujanović's recent charting of the rise of 'theory' in contemporary art: 'In the contemporary international art world, the use of theory is greatly expanding, from the academy to the independent scene. Curricula, bookstores, artists' websites, programme booklets, festivals' brochures and conversations among scholars, artists, curators and programmers all reverberate with theoretical names, concepts and references'. (Ana Vujanović, 'Critical Performance Studies : A Practical Response to the Celebration of New Modes of Work in Performing Arts', *Performance Research* 17, no. 6 (1 December 2012): 63-71.)

[14] Holert, *Knowledge Beside Itself*, 14.

I draw on Holert's theory of epistemisation of contemporary art because of the economic entanglements in which these current epistemic art practices engage in. In describing the reformatting of knowledge under late capitalism, Holert conceives knowledge as 'either a luxury commodity or a mode of subjection to economised models of higher education, vocational training, lifelong learning, and edutainment'.[15] As a consequence of this commodification, Holert sees a risk of a devaluation of critical discourse as a well as an attempt to spectacularise knowledge. As I will show in this thesis, the lecture performance also has to contend with similar accusations of edutainment and spectacle: In her criticism of Tania Bruguera's 2009 lecture performance *Self-Sabotage*, for example – where the artist played Russian Roulette while giving a lecture – Claire Bishop asserts that the spectacular character of the piece distracted from any critical engagement with the lecture.[16] And various scholars have pointed towards the form's proximity to the TED talk to underline the lecture performance's close link to cultural practices of virtualised and commodified knowledge.[17]

On the other hand, epistemic art practice – in which the contemporary lecture performance inheres – often draws on non-hegemonic knowledges, such as situated, feminist, queer, indigenous, bodily, or common forms of knowing, and expresses a wish to remap epistemic hierarchies, violence, and ownership. It may also use its para-institutional status, beside the university, to claim non-hegemonic and therefore non-homogenised epistemic practice. Rabih Mroué – whose work is often discussed in relation to the lecture performance – for instance labels his performances 'non-academic lectures', signalling their conceptual distance from the conventional 'academic' lecture. Yet, Holert warns against the assumption that contemporary art can or does resist these modes of 'neoliberal notion of knowledge as an endlessly exchangeable commodity and instrument of social hierarchization', and invites scrutiny of the idea that art serves a

[15] Holert, 60.
[16] Claire Bishop qtd in Julia Bryan-Wilson, 'Intelligent Discomfort. Interview with Claire Bishop.', *Mousse Magazin*, October 2012, http://moussemagazine.it/claire-bishop-julia-bryan-wilson-2012/.
[17] See Sibylle Peters, *Der Vortrag Als Performance*, *Der Vortrag Als Performance* (Bielefeld: transcript Verlag, 2011); Ladnar, 'The Lecture Performance: Contexts of Lecturing and Performing'; Diedrichsen, 'Kontexterzwingung Und Aufeinanderangewiesensein: Dichtes Milieu Und Live Feuilleton – Ein Werbetext'.

'counter- or alter-epistemological function' and regularly stages critical knowledge that subverts the power of knowledge capitalism or its homogenising tendencies:[18]

> As much as contemporary art is invested in the promotion, showcasing of nonstandard, transdisciplinary, experimental, informal, and oppositional modes of knowledge productions, research, archival work, philosophical speculation and pedagogy, it also (and inevitably) feeds a market of constantly updated knowledge products and educational commodities, suggesting a consumerist rather than politically empowering experience.[19]

While many lecture performances in this series are conceived with such an oppositional mode of knowledge production in mind, their integration into and appropriation by modes of capitalist production make them susceptible to the consumerist attitude to knowledge that Holert describes. It is from this sense of ambiguity that I begin this exploration of the lecture performance. Throughout the course of this thesis, I will attend to the lecture performance in three different contexts: artistic and creative production; pedagogies and models of identity formation in higher education, and, finally, performance research itself, where I interrogate how this ambiguous form can and does intervene in contemporary debates about the methodologies of knowledge production in the field. Tracing these three distinct but interconnected contexts, I will show that the contemporary lecture performance cannot be considered as an isolated aesthetic phenomenon but needs to be examined within the larger context of capitalist expansion into knowledge practices, which drastically changes how knowledge is produced, circulated, and received in the twenty-first century. Scholars of the knowledge economy like Michael A. Peters, Peter Murphy and David Pauleen have already illustrated the dangers of knowledge standardisation and homogenisation associated with the emergence of the knowledge economy.[20] My focus on a performance format allows me to expand this analysis and test it against assumptions of performance fleeing or evading

[18] Holert, *Knowledge Beside Itself*, 18.
[19] Holert, 59.
[20] See, for example, Michael A. Peters, 'Lyotard, Marxism, and Higher Education. The Problem of Knowledge Capitalism', in *Knowledge Economy, Development and the Future of Higher Education*, ed. Michael A. Peters (Rotterdam: SensePublishers, 2007), 77–87; Peter Murphy and David Pauleen, 'Managing Paradox in a World of Knowledge', in *Creativity and the Global Knowledge Economy*, ed. Michael A. Peters, Simon Marginson, and Peter Murphy (New York, NY: Peter Lang, 2009), 257–76.

commodification (famously propagated by Peggy Phelan[21]) or resisting modes of standardisation (for example by scholars of intermediality in theatre like Steve Dixon[22]). By examining a series of case studies from different institutional contexts (arts, academic, public education, performance research) that are presented live or circulated online, I show that the knowledge goods and services (also known as the knowledge products) created via the lecture performance need to be understood as a form of commodification. In this thesis, I will analyse artists, academics, and performance researchers as contemporary knowledge workers and, at times, knowledge transformers.

My approach is mainly materialist but also merges with theories of art and performance as well as ideas of counter-hegemonic knowledges. I take my cue here from Michael McKinnie, who offers that a 'somewhat bleak version of materialism'[23] can result in an all-encompassing cynicism. Instead, like McKinnie's, my goal is a form of material analysis that takes into account aesthetic and social theories of knowledge. In doing so, I attend to the complicated and multifaceted ways in which the lecture performance is entangled with the contemporary knowledge economies. In the following I will give an overview of current research into and practices of the lecture performance to engage with how scholars have approached this topic. Secondly, I will introduce theories of the knowledge economy, especially the discourse of cognitive capitalism, to set up my enquiry of the lecture performance in relation to the questions and challenges these contexts pose. I end this introduction by giving an outline of the three main parts of this thesis.

[21] See Peggy Phelan, *Unmarked. The Politics of Performance* (New York, NY: Routledge, 1993).
[22] See, for example, Steve Dixon, *Digital Performance: A History of New Media in Theater, Dance, Performance Art, and Installation* (The MIT Press, 2007), https://direct.mit.edu/books/book/1945/digital-performancea-history-of-new-media-in.
[23] Michael McKinnie, *Theatre in Market Economies*, Theatre and Performance Theory (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2021), 12, https://www.cambridge.org/core/books/theatre-in-market-economies/94D7C5D5996CBA836F6917F2306C5D22.

## What are Lecture Performances?

*→ The language of the lecture performance is often reminiscent of or borrows directly from theory or critical prose. […]*
*→ Even when scripted, the lecture performance is live thinking, unfolding over time, which is its medium-specific affordance. It presents thinking that is absorbed aurally and visually at the same time. […]*
*→ If performance is either fiction or autobiography, then the lecture performance is creative nonfiction but live.*

(Excerpt from Sophie Seita, 'Playing with Knowledge. On Lecture Performances')[24]

*Structured as a reflection on […] Minimalism and Conceptual art […] the lecture-performance linked art historical references and their historiography to mystic traditions by means of a shadow play and other ludic gestures based on the transformation of forms.*

(Rike Frank, 'When Form Starts Talking: On Lecture-Performances')[25]

*The best lecture-performances always seem to originate from artists who believe that teaching itself is a central component of their artwork.*

(Patricia Milder, 'Teaching as Art. The Contemporary Lecture-Performance')[26]

From these three conceptualisations of the lecture performance, it is already clear that there is no one right way to define the lecture performance, and how people understand it depends largely on the perspective from which they approach the idea of lecture as performance. For Sophie Seita, a writer and performance artist, the lecture performance becomes a vehicle where she can think through and negotiate her writing and performance practice. Rike Frank is interested in establishing the lecture performance in the tradition of art history and performance art, thus stresses the playful and gestural aspects of the form. Patricia Milder champions the lecture performance as a successful counter-hegemonic pedagogical tool and so is keen to demonstrate its educational aspect. Attempting my own preliminary definition, I am inclined to follow Pablo Helguera, the former director of Adult and Academic Programs at the Museum of Modern Art in New York City, who describes the lecture performance as a 'live presentation imparted

[24] Sophie Seita, 'Playing with Knowledge: On Lecture Performances', *TDR: The Drama Review* 66, no. 3 (September 2022): 92–93.
[25] Rike Frank, 'When Form Starts Talking: On Lecture-Performances', *Afterall: A Journal of Art, Context and Enquiry* 33 (June 2013): 10.
[26] Patricia Milder, 'Teaching as Art: The Contemporary Lecture-Performance', *PAJ: A Journal of Performance and Art* 33, no. 1 (97) (1 January 2011): 13.

by an artist who takes advantage of his or her artistic license and of the conventions of academic pedagogy to create a work that straddles fiction and reality'.[27] His situating the lecture performance between artistic and academic practice is useful to establish the hybrid character of the form that is also echoed by Rainer, when she highlights the 'in-between' status of the format, which 'builds on the unsettled relationship between arts and academia'. [28] However, while Helguera stresses its position between 'fiction and reality', I am more drawn by Seita's suggestion of the lecture performance as 'creative non-fiction'.[29] While some lecture performers draw on strategies of fictionalisation, this idea of an artistic approach to non-fiction really resonates with many of the practices of the lecture performance discussed in this thesis, which often feature a pedagogical or educational outlook. Most importantly, I follow Ladnar's description of lecture performances as inherently self-reflexive, making them both 'meta-lectures' and 'meta-performance':[30]

> Lecture performances function both discursively and aesthetically. With regard to their relation to the academic lecture, this means that they simultaneously participate in and aesthetically explore the performative production and dissemination of knowledge enacted in traditional lectures. Yet they also often explore the performance event itself, thus negotiating a knowledge of and about performance. (e.g., when they turn either the documentation of an existing work or the conception of a yet unrealised work into an event, or when they negotiate the relation of performance practice and theory).[31]

Meta-lectures 'explore the performative production and dissemination of knowledge enacted in traditional lectures'. This means lecture performances use elements of performance, such a dance, lip-synching, music, etc. (in short, performative engagements we do not associate with traditional lectures) to draw attention and potentially challenge classical dramaturgies of lecturing and the assumptions of expertise they stand for. In one of the earliest lecture performances, *21.3* (1964), for example, Robert Morris lip-synched

[27] Pablo Helguera, *Theatrum Anatomicum (and Other Performance Lectures)* (New York, NY: Jorge Pinto Books, 2009), xi–xii, http://pablohelguera.net/2009/08/theatrum-anatomicum-and-other-performance-lectures-2009/.
[28] Rainer, *On the Threshold of Knowing*, 11.
[29] Seita, 'Playing with Knowledge', 93.
[30] Ladnar, 'The Lecture Performance: Contexts of Lecturing and Performing', 18.
[31] Ladnar, 17–18.

to a voice-over of a pre-recorded lecture. But as the performance went on, his lip-synching became increasingly de-synched from the recording as he performed acts like taking sips of water or adjusting his professorial-looking glasses. By drawing attention to actions that are habitual in the performance of the lecture, yet usually ignored and not considered relevant to the meaning of the lecture,[32] Morris not only unmasked the standards of performance in a lecture, but also pointed to the unexamined connection between visual persona (of a male professor) and discursive mastery, thus opening up this performance of expertise to further scrutiny. Similarly, Andrea Fraser's piece *Museum Highlights: A Gallery Talk* (1989) can be considered a meta-lecture, which questions the performance conventions of the gallery talk. Fraser leads a gallery tour but applies the same reverent language and exaggerated praise usually reserved for artistic masterpieces to cloakrooms, visitor toilets and exit signs. With this, Fraser enacts an institutional critique of the engagement with art the museum produces – both in terms of the 'expert' tour guide and the visitors to the museum. Similarly, in a more recent example of the meta-lecture called *Observations of Predation in Humans: A Lecture by Dr. Zira, Animal Psychologist*, Coco Fusco played Dr Zira, a character from the movie Planet of the Apes (2001), to explore how scientific disciplines, such as ethnography and anthropology, are steeped in racist language and discourse. In full ape costume, Fusco uses the premise of *Planet of the Apes*, where apes are the superior species, to portray an 'animal psychologist' who displays the same racist disdain for the human race that early ethnographers displayed towards what they considered their 'primitive' subjects. Here the performance element of the ape costume as well as the mode of fictionalisation is employed to comment on the anthropology lecture (and discipline at large) as a project of white supremacy. Each of these lecture performances draw on performative elements usually disregarded in the reception of a lecture, to draw attention to the underlying logics of how expertise is performed.

[32] Sibylle Peters calls the 'rules of irrelevance' (Irrelevanzregel) of a lecture, which point to the conventions that tell the listener of the lecture, which circumstances or aspects of the performance they are to ignore or consider irrelevant for their process of understanding. For example, the colour or font of the slides, the time of day the lecture takes place or the outfit of the lecturer are all aspects, which we might examine when examining the performance of a lecture, but which we have been trained to ignore when trying to discern the 'meaning' of a traditional lecture. Thus the lecture performance as meta-lecture intervenes in the rules of irrelevance. (Peters, *Der Vortrag Als Performance*, 39.)

As meta-performances, lecture performances use devices associated with the act of lecturing – commenting, analysing, and contextualising – to 'negotiating a knowledge of and about performance'.[33] Here they add a discursive layer to the performance and thus change the audience's interaction with and reception of it. An early example of such a meta-performance is Dan Graham's *Performer/Audience/Mirror* (1975), where he had the audience sit on the floor of a dance studio facing the mirror, while he stood facing the audience. For the course of the performance, the conceptual artist Graham offered a continuous description of each of the movements in his body as he was executing them, thus exhibiting and voicing aspects of being in the position of the presenter that are usually not externalised. At the same time, due to the mirror, the audience found itself caught in a double gaze. While they were observing Graham, they were also observing their own act of observation. Graham's commentary intensified the performance situation and thematised the relation between audience and performer in this situation. Other popular examples of the lecture performances as meta-lecture include Xavier Le Roy's *Product of Circumstance* (1999) and Jérome Bel's *Véronqiue Doisneau* (2004). In the former, the dancer and choreographer Xavier Le Roy introduces a discursive element into his lecture performance to trace his own autobiographical journey from molecular biology to conceptual dance as well as establishing his own place among the traditions of post-modern dance. Similarly, *Véronqiue Doisneau* (which will be discussed in more detail in Chapter 1) uses the technique of lecture to explore the working conditions of a dancer as well as the performance repertoire of classical dance. In both cases the commentary is used to contextualise and expand on the topics explored through dance and it adds to the audience's experience of this dance by also engaging them in the question of how these performances reflect the histories and conditions of dance, thus producing the performance as a self-reflexive process.

Naturally, this distinction between meta-lectures and meta-performances is to an extent arbitrary. Ladnar rightly points out that the lecture performance operates in both spheres of reflexivity and that we can read each of these performances as both meta-lectures and meta-performances. But what this distinction shows is that the reading of lecture performances is conditional on the perspective one takes. Reading them from the

[33] Ladnar, 'The Lecture Performance: Contexts of Lecturing and Performing', 18.

perspective of academia means they become a commentary on the institution of the lecture (and the modes of knowledge production and presentation within which it stands). Reading them from the perspective of art or performance (or artistic/performance analysis) means focusing on how they integrate other performance histories and contexts. It also points to the multiple possible genealogies of the form. In the next section, I focus on the various institutional affiliations of the lecture performance as well as its multiple genealogies to show how these discourses initiate specific discussions of the lecture performance in the realm of knowledge politics.

## The Multiple Disciplinary Contexts of the Lecture Performance

This brief outline makes clear that lecture performances circulate across multiple disciplines and institutions. They can be found in museums, in galleries, in black box theatres, in academic conferences, in dance venues. Although they do not always go by the same name (they might describe themselves as performance lectures, lecture demonstrations, performance presentations, performative essays, etc.), lecture performances have become popular at cultural or academic events (often programmed within discursive supporting programmes) and as stand-alone performances. While the form's institutional and disciplinary boundaries are somewhat blurred, its hybridity, manifested in its double name (lecture *and* performance), already suggests a constant negotiation and reconfiguration of the fault lines that currently exist between academia and art, fact and fiction, as well as criticism and immersion.[34]

While the lecture performance as both a performance and lecture format has been firmly established in multiple institutional contexts, academic interest in the form and developments of its study have been uneven. In continental Europe, and especially in the German-speaking parts, there was a burst of activity around the form in the early

[34] Part of the aim of this thesis is to analyse the various iterations of the lecture performance, which shift the impetus between academia and art, and to find out how these different formations highlight the politics and aesthetics of knowledge the lecture performance is invested in.

2000s, both in academic writing[35] and academic and artistic events.[36] The initial interest and excitement generated by the appearance of lecture performances seem to have declined.[37] Fewer academic texts dedicated to the subject have been published in recent years compared to the early 2000s[38] and no programming dedicated to the form itself has been organised since 2013. While the Live Arts Development Agency logged a 'Performance Lecture Archive' in 2011, there has been relatively little academic interest in the form in the UK and the wider anglophone world. When it is discussed, it has been approached from the perspective of arts pedagogy,[39] or the wider context of solo performance,[40] or, as I demonstrated with Seita, as a practice of artistic reflection.[41]

This shift in focus is also indicative of a wider transformation of the form. While earlier writings on the lecture performance were concerned with the form as an artistic intervention into the traditional performances of knowledge (in this case the lecture) and the criticism this intervention levelled at universities and associated institutions of knowledge,[42] the form's absorption into modes of academic production has shifted the focus of scholarship. In art and drama schools, student assessment sometimes includes the option of a lecture performance as a mode of assessment and calls for papers to

[35] See Gabriele Brandstetter, 'Der Körper Als Anekdote. Beobachtungen Zum Bewegungstheater Der 90er Jahre', *MLN* 115, no. 3 (2000): 403–22; Wolf-Dieter Ernst, 'Die Lecture-Performance als dichte Beschreibung', in *TheorieTheaterPraxis*, ed. Hajo Kurzenberger and Matzke Matzke (Berlin: Theater der Zeit, 2004), 198–201; Peters, *Der Vortrag Als Performance*; Jenny Dirksen, 'Ars Academica – the Lecture between Artistic and Academic Discourse', in *Lecture Performance*, ed. Jenny Dirksen and Katrhin Jentjens (Cologne: Kölnischer Kunstverrein, 2009), 9–16; Ana Vujanović and Jelena Vesić, 'Performance as Research and Production of Knowledge in Art', ed. Jenny Dirksen and Katrhin Jentjens (Cologne: Kölnischer Kunstverrein, 2009), 45–57; Ladnar, 'The Lecture Performance: Contexts of Lecturing and Performing'; Marianne Wagner, 'Lecture-Performance. Sprechakte Als Aufführungskunst Seit 1950' (Doctoral Thesis, Bern, Switzerland, University of Bern, 2013).

[36] The 'Performing Lecture' series by Unfriendly Takeover from 2004-6, the exhibition 'Lecture Performance' curated by the Kölnischer Kunstverein in 2009, the Performing Science competition of the University of Gießen in 2007 and a conference called 'Lecture Performance – between art and academia' organised by Overgaden Institute for Contemporary Art in Kopenhagen' in 2013

[37] To the point where multiple times when attending conferences in continental Europe my 'I study lecture performances' was met with an incredulous 'Really, still?'.

[38] The esception is Rainer, *On the Threshold of Knowing*.

[39] See, for example, Mashinka Firunts, 'Staging Professionalization', *Performance Research* 21, no. 6 (December 2016): 19–25.

[40] See, for example, 'Solo Performance', Routledge Performance Archive, n.d., https://www.routledgeperformancearchive.com/browse/subjects/performance-art-live-art-performance/solo-performance.

[41] Seita, 'Playing with Knowledge'.

[42] See, for example, Brandstetter, 'Der Körper Als Anekdote. Beobachtungen Zum Bewegungstheater Der 90er Jahre'; Andrea Fraser, 'What Is Institutional Critique', in *Institutional Critique and After*, ed. John C. Welchman (Zürich: JRP/Ringier, 2006); Dirksen, 'Ars Academica – the Lecture between Artistic and Academic Discourse'.

international conferences now routinely include lecture performances as one of the possibilities of non-traditional presentation formats.[43] As the lecture performance becomes accepted as an established performance format, it is championed as either an enhanced pedagogy or innovative approach to lecturing even outside of the field of theatre and performance studies.[44]

It is tempting to read this growth of lecture performances in every-day implementation in academic and pedagogical contexts as a sign of success; however, as I have demonstrated above, there's something unsettling about this absorption of the form into the conventions of conferences and accepted modes of academic presentation, in the sense that this shift in application of the lecture performance might also indicate an instrumentalisation of the form, a cementing of institutional practices that aim to make its mode of knowledge production economically commodifiable. This is not to suggest that the many performers and practitioners of the lecture performance, whether they are artists, researchers, or teachers, are insincere in their efforts or are not in fact presenting interesting and challenging engagements with the performance of knowledge. Rather, the question of the political status of the contemporary lecture performance in light of its cultural ubiquity and institutional dispersion points to the societal and economic structures in which the lecture performance is implicated and participates. Whilst it is true that the lecture performance positions itself effectively as a vehicle for critiquing traditional modes of performing knowledge (in the form of the lecture), it is also true that, with its focus on performance generation, experience, and intervention, it is perfectly situated at the nexus of a societal and economic shift, which can be characterised by an imperative to perform, as Jon McKenzie formulated it in his

[43] Performance Studies International (PSi), Performance Philosophy, Dance Studies Association have all included 'lecture demonstrations', 'performance presentations' or 'performance lectures' on their lists of possible submission types on their calls for conference participation in recent years. And taking Psi as an example case, it is clear that this explicit inclusion of such presentation modes was not always represented in their calls for contribution. While PSi conferences before 2016 called for contributions in the form of 'panels, papers, and performances' or similar, PSi22 in Melbourne was the first to explicitly ask for 'performance presentations. PSi23in Hamburg the following year then asked for 'individual papers, panels, roundtables, open spaces, lecture performances, praxis sessions, workshops, performances, installations, etc.'. This is not to say, of course, that alternative modes of paper presentations were not present at PSi before 2016 but that such contributions where not actively pursued at submission stage.

[44] See, for example, Pemra C. Ünalan et al., 'Using Theatre in Education in a Traditional Lecture Oriented Medical Curriculum', *BMC Medical Education* 9, no. 1 (15 December 2009): 73.

seminal study *Perform or else.* Drawing on Jean François Lyotard, McKenzie's study shows that performance has long become a feature of economic necessity in all areas of society, and particularly in managerial capitalism.[45]

In his explanation of the performance imperative laid out by McKenzie, Sven Lütticken observes that 'increasingly the performative colonizes labor'.[46] His example is the service economy, where 'even in jobs where wages are standardized (and low), the worker is expected to put his or her unique charms and qualities into the job if he or she wants to keep it'.[47] This personalised way of enacting labour transforms anonymous services into performance. This, according to Lütticken, turns both the performance (of labour) and the performer into a commodity.[48] This observation of performance turned into commodity is echoed in theories of cognitive capitalism, which extend the necessity of performance to the realm of cognitive labour and knowledge as work. The lecture performance as a decidedly performative interrogation into the mechanisms of the relationship between performance and knowledge production contends with modes of knowledge circulation under cognitive capitalism and thus cannot be separated from a material critique of the conditions of knowledge production.[49] This thesis suggests that the lecture performance in its fairly varied yet widespread cultural practice offers a productive ground by which to examine some of the mechanisms that knowledge production operates through under knowledge capitalism. It stages the tension between the somewhat 'uncritical' absorption of the lecture performance as a mode of knowledge production in theatre and performance studies and the material conditions of commodified knowledge and the knowing subject.

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[45] Jon McKenzie, *Perform or Else: From Discipline to Performance* (London and New York, NY: Routledge, 2001), 14.

[46] Sven Lütticken, 'Progressive Striptease', in *Perform, Repeat, Record: Live Art in History*, ed. Amelia Jones and Adrian Heathfield (Bristol: Intellect Books, 2012), 194.

[47] Lütticken, 194.

[48] Lütticken, 194.

[49] One big caveat here is that the lecture performance, or any performance of knowledge for that matter, is, of course, not an 'anonymous service' like the services in the service economy. In fact, the way knowledge is circulated in the Western academy are highly personal. Copyright and intellectual property laws make sure of that. Yet, there are certain academic and scientific traditions, such as Haraway's much lamented 'God-trick' that seek to depersonalise the generation of knowledge from those producing it. One crucial question here is to what extent the personalisation and subjective positioning of knowledge aids practices that seek to establish knowledge as am individualised commodity.

## The Multiple Institutional Genealogies of the Lecture Performance

Various theorists, writers, and practitioners of the form have formulated different theories detailing the origin of the genre of the lecture performance based on the different institutional perspectives they follow. It is therefore difficult to begin the discussion with one key historical example as the question of the history of the form is entangled in the institutional and disciplinary politics of each field. When placing the lecture performance in the field of visual arts, art historians prefer to refer to the conceptual artists of the 1960s as the originators of the form. Robert Morris's performance *21.3* (1964) or Joseph Beuys's *How to Explain Pictures to a Dead Hare* (1965) are then seen as early forerunners of the form.[50] More performance-minded theorists read the lecture performance in conjunction with more explicit performance histories such as Dada, Antonin Artaud, or John Cage's famous *Lecture on Nothing* (1949).[51] Those interested in contextualising and establishing the lecture performance as its own genre[52] tend to see Xavier LeRoy's *Product of Circumstance* (1999) as the beginning of the form as it was one of or even *the* first to call itself a lecture performance and because it was widely considered as 'paradigmatic for the form'.[53]

In this context, the question of where to begin not only risks re-iterating already well-trodden territories, but also risks entering disciplinary border disputes, which, too, are situated in the contemporary knowledge politics. The lecture performances disputed genealogy displays the fault lines between different disciplines engaged in struggles of visibility and legitimacy. Depending on which starting point one chooses, which trajectory one upholds, the suggested aims and aesthetics of the lecture performance shift. Where situating the form in the live art of the 1960s might suggest an investment in undermining elitist art historical discourses or art practices obsessed with realism, placing lecture performances in the history of conceptual dance of the 1990s might mean it is read in

[50] See Frank, 'When Form Starts Talking'; Karen Archey, 'Performance and Pedagogy: All Talk, Some Action', *MAP Magazine*, 1 November 2009.
[51] See, for example Gavin Butt, quoted in Ladnar, 'The Lecture Performance: Contexts of Lecturing and Performing', 52.
[52] See, for example, Brandstetter, 'Der Körper Als Anekdote. Beobachtungen Zum Bewegungstheater Der 90er Jahre'; Janine Hauthal, 'Ein „Blick von Der Seite": Die Lecture Performance Als Vortragslabor', *Unfriendly Takeover* (blog), 2004, www.unfriendly-takeover.de/lecturetheorie.html; Ladnar, 'The Lecture Performance: Contexts of Lecturing and Performing'.
[53] Peters, *Der Vortrag Als Performance*, 217.

conjunction with practices that focus on reclaiming the body as a site of knowledge. What is valuable in one institutional discourse might be of lesser interest in another.

While there are multiple points of origin for the lecture performance as an artistic practice, it is much harder to pinpoint its genealogy in academic or scientific practices. The best attempt can be found in Mashinka Firunts's 2016 essay 'Staging Professionalization. Lecture-Performances and Para-institutional Pedagogies, from the Postwar to the Present', where she traces the emergence of the form as a pedagogical tool concurrent with the academisation of artistic practice since the 1950s and 60s.[54] When it comes to the implementation of the lecture performance in performance or theatre studies, and especially in the university context, it becomes even harder to discern early pioneers of the form or trace a clear lineage. It is notable, however, that many of those theorising the form also become practitioners of it.[55] The form is also engaged in a larger debate in theatre and performance studies that seeks to change or renegotiate the conventions of how knowledge is presented in the field. The analysis of various conference calls for papers over the last few years suggests that this demand for innovation and the changes in presentation style has been taken up by some of the major organisations in the field, such as Performance Studies international (PSi) or the Dance Studies Association (DSA). The form's historic trajectory in the academic practice of performance studies is thus related to wider calls for more inclusive knowledge practices, which early pioneers like Dwight Conquergood called for when performance studies was just in the process of becoming a discipline.[56]

It is notable that many earlier scholars of the form chose to focus on the 'lecture' part of the lecture performance when conceptualising the form. Wolf-Dieter Ernst and Sybille Peters examine the form in the context of the history of lecturing, paving the way to conceive of the form as either a pedagogical tool or a methodological experiment that produces knowledge in its performance. Ladnar expands this analysis by reading the lecture performance as a continuation of various performance art histories and asking

[54] Firunts, 'Staging Professionalization'.
[55] Sibylle Peters and Marianne Wagner, Gavin Butt and Lucia Rainer all presented their own lecture performances at the 'Lecture-Performance between Art and Academia' in Copenhagen in 2013 and Daniel Ladnar won the second Performing Science competition in Gießen in 2011.
[56] Dwight Conquergood, 'Performance Studies: Interventions and Radical Research', *TDR: The Drama Review* 46, no. 2 (Summer 2002): 145–56.

what this focus on performance can bring to the methodological practices of performance studies. Similarly, Rainer tries to pay homage to both lecture and performance traditions by examining the form as a mode of artistic research that traverses both lectures and performances as a matter of switching codes and frames. And like Firunts, Milder attends to the lecture performance as a form of pedagogy, which is explicitly interested in the institutional politics of its creation. As different as these approaches might be in terms of their focus, what they have in common is a deep concern for how and under what circumstances the lecture performances emerge in different academic contexts and how this can be read in conjunction with the political and economic nature of knowledge production. Peters primarily sees the lecture performance as a consequence of and critical intervention into what she calls the 'presentation society', where presenting knowledge no longer falls primarily to educators or scholars but has become a dominant cultural practice, expected of people in most professional fields. In turn, presentation formats popularised in the 'presentation society', such as the PowerPoint presentation or the business pitch, have permeated academic presentations which, according to Peters, the lecture performance can critically reflect. Ladnar, on the other hand, finds value in the form in its ability to challenge dominant theories of performance ontology within performance studies. He uses his analysis of the lecture performance to intervene in discourses around the politics of performance documentation and the conceptual binary between critical distance and emotional immersion often employed in performance analysis. In mobilising the lecture performance as a form of artistic research, Rainer seeks to establish it as a valid research methodology able to produce legitimate academic knowledges. Her interest in knowledge as a resource is thus related to Peters' analysis of the lecture in the presentation society but goes beyond that by using the findings that the lecture performance incorporates and champions other ways of knowing as a means to introduce these knowledges into the realm of academic legitimacy. Milder and Firunts, by contrast, question the position of the lecture performance within the (para-)institutional frames of universities or arts education. Their interest, in opposition to Rainer, is not one of inclusion into academic modes of knowledge production but rather a criticism of these institutional politics in the form of lecture performances that aim to transgress, circumvent, or simply abandon formal education.

What this focus on the multiple genealogies and institutional contexts of the lecture performance shows is not only that it is not possible to conceive of the lecture performance as one distinct artistic practice, but also that attending to the multiple disciplinary frames might prove productive when analysing the political implications of the form. However multiple the genealogies of the lecture performance are, many theorists locate its emergence as concurrent with post-Fordism and the advent of neoliberalism. This means topics like knowledge capitalism, knowledge work, and knowledge as performance emerge in many texts discussing the lecture performance. Firunts mentions the lecture performance as the 'correlate of a professionalized, post-industrial artistic labour force'[57] and Peters stresses its status as an area where current and often contradictory developments in the economisation of knowledge are being negotiated.[58] She sees cognitive capitalism as an apt context for these developments,[59] which is also a central concern of this thesis. The idea of knowledge as a practice that is performed links the lecture performance to the ideas of knowledge as labour, which emerge in theories of cognitive capitalism. This makes me ask how the lecture performance reflects knowledge production in a current capitalist system that employs cognitive activity as a performance.

## Knowledge as Performance: Cognitive Capitalism

Broadly speaking, cognitive capitalism refers to labour theories that try to conceptualise the shift in working processes and cultures in post-industrial societies since the 1950s. In post-industrial societies, according to Post-Fordist[60] theorists like Maurizio Lazzarato, labour processes are no longer traceable or conceivable via the end-products they produce but have increasingly become 'immaterial' or cognitive, that is to say, they are

[57] Firunts, 'Staging Professionalization', 19.
[58] Peters, *Der Vortrag Als Performance*, 200.
[59] Peters, 193–200.
[60] Post-Fordism, as propagated by theorists such as Maurizio Lazzarato, Paulo Virno, Michael Hardt, and Antonio Negri, refers to the reorganisation of common working practices in post-industrial countries in Europe and North America since the 1960s, which shifted understandings of work from predominantly physical activities to the techno-centric, communicative, and affective labours of an immaterial economy. (See, for example, Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri, *Empire:* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2001); Paolo Virno, *A Grammar of the Multitude. For an Analysis of Contemporary Forms of Life* (Los Angeles: Semiotext(e), 2004); Maurizio Lazzarato, 'General Intellect: Towards an Inquiry into Immaterial Labour', Geocities, 2002, http://www.geocities.ws/immateriallabour/lazzarato-immaterial-labour.html.)

comprised of intellectual activities that produce the informational and cultural content of the commodity.[61] This, they argue, changes not only the nature of work and the relationship of the worker to their labour but also the status of knowledge itself, the concept of publicness, and the notion of the political.

Performance and performativity are central to the way cognitive capitalism thinks through contemporary modes of cognitive labour and knowledge production. If, as stated by Jon McKenzie and others, the performance imperative has encroached on all areas of public and private life, it is only a logical consequence that it has also affected modes of knowledge production and circulation. And if contemporary labour is in fact increasingly 'immaterial', then it only occurs in its own performance and is less and less linked to a definite end-product. McKenzie calls the diversification and proliferation of researchers, academic disciplines, and fields during the last fifty plus years 'a qualitative mutation in what we call knowledge, the becoming-performative of knowledge itself'.[62] He draws on Lyotard's concept of performativity to explains the radical transformation of knowledge in post-industrial societies:

> Lyotard argues that the status of knowledge has radically changed in postindustrial societies and that this change has been underway since at least the end of the 1950s. Modern knowledge fully emerged in industrial societies of the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries and legitimated itself upon what Lyotard calls "grand narratives," epic stories of history such as "the dialectics of Spirit, the hermeneutics of meaning, the emancipation of the rational or working subject, or the creation of wealth." Depending upon their defenders' political commitments, even highly specialized knowledges were socially legitimated by arguments that their truths served the progress of humanity, the revolution of the working class, and/or the liberation of historically oppressed groups. Postmodern knowledge, by contrast, legitimates itself by "optimizing the system's performance—efficiency." Its emergence marks the decline of grand narratives within academic and public discourse and the growing hegemony of computer technologies. Significantly, Lyotard names this postmodern legitimation "performativity".[63]

[61] Paolo Virno, Michael Hardt, and Maurizio Lazzarato, eds., 'Two Hundred Questions for Anyone Who Wants to Worker Identity in the Factory Immaterial Labor', in *Radical Thought in Italy: A Potential Politics* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1996), 61–78.
[62] McKenzie, *Perform or Else*, 14.
[63] McKenzie, 14.

This focus on performance and efficiency marks a new status of knowledge in cognitive capitalism, where the pursuit for knowledge is no longer justified by teleological arguments of human progress but by logics of efficiently optimising capitalist processes. The performance of knowledge also becomes a performance of efficiency.

At first glance it might not be very apparent what these theories of economic production (today often centred around knowledge production in Silicon Valley or other hyper-technologised spaces) have to do with the fairly low-tech production of the contemporary lecture performance. However, it is this focus on the centrality of the performance to the production and generation of (postmodern) knowledges that makes the lecture performance and its performance of cognitive labour an interesting object of analysis in relation to labour processes in cognitive capitalism. Crucially, Paulo Virno in *A Grammar of the Multitude* draws on artistic and specifically performance-based work as the blueprint for these new modes of labour in his development of 'virtuosic labour', which might best be described as a performative variant of 'immaterial labour'.[64] Here, the intersections between artistic processes and economic modes of production become clear, in that Virno's focus on performance changes the traditional relationships between labour, politics, and knowledge that he identified – a change that I argue is mirrored in contemporary practices and discussions in and around the lecture performance (this idea will be further explored in Chapter 1).

Additionally, Peters echoes McKenzie's, Lyotard's, and Virno's observations of performance's ubiquity when she employs the term 'presentation society'.[65] In it not just knowledge itself becomes commodifiable but so do the cultural techniques of presenting knowledge. Peters remarks that today's situation is not only characterised by a 'knowledge society',[66] but that the term presentation society is also appropriate as the question of how knowledge is adequately and successfully delivered and presented is no longer restricted to the realms of researchers or teachers but has infiltrated multiple labour practices, as shown by the rise of business presentation tools such as Microsoft PowerPoint or the increasing popularity of TED talks (discussed in Chapter 3). According to Peters, in the presentation society, 'the presentation of knowledge [has become] its

[64] Virno, *A Grammar of the Multitude. For an Analysis of Contemporary Forms of Life*, 52–55.
[65] Peters, *Der Vortrag Als Performance*, 15. (In German: 'Präsentationsgesellschaft')
[66] Peters, 16. (In German: 'Wissensgesellschaft')

own cultural technique […], which is fundamentally self-referential and displays itself as technique'.[67] The understanding of the presentation of knowledge as a cultural technique in the presentation society is helpful as it places not only knowledge itself as a resource to be commodified and circulated under cognitive capitalism but similarly integrates knowledge about the presentation of knowledge as a resource already marked for profitable exploitation. The landscape of the TED talk is indicative of this development and will later provide an interesting case study for the presentation of knowledge as a cultural technique. I suggest that the lecture performance as a format that is both a presentation of knowledge and a (self-referential) negotiation of this presentation is interestingly positioned at the fault lines between knowledge and knowledge presentation as commodity.

In cognitive capitalism, the pursuit of knowledge is not an end in itself but becomes necessary only in relation to its particular economic utility. This underlying assumption explains why many theories of cognitive capitalism draw heavily on the Marxist notion of the general intellect in their conception of knowledge. Virno's concept of 'virtuosic labor',[68] Yann Moulier-Boutang's theory of cognitive capitalism,[69] and Gerald Raunig's abstract (knowledge) machines[70] are all based on the idea of the 'general intellect', as it emphasises the relationship between knowledge as 'know-how' and economic productivity. According to Marx, general intellect describes general knowledge as a main force of production. It is a combination of technological expertise and social knowledge which aids the development of industrial machines (fixed capital and dead labour) and structures social life in a capitalist society. To conceive of knowledge in terms of the general intellect is to conceive of it in terms of know-how (a term that also haunts analyses of the lecture performance),[71] which is to emphasise its entanglement with economic profitability. Knowledge as know-how or general intellect reduces a conception of knowledge to its use-value and status as a resource. Moulier-Boutang goes so far as to

[67] Peters, 16. (German original: 'Man kann also der Rede von der Präsentationsgesellschaft insofern folgen, als mit ihr das Präsentieren von Wissen zu einer eigenen Kulturtechnik […], die prinzipiell selbstbezüglich ist und sich selbst als Technik ausstellt'.)
[68] Virno, *A Grammar of the Multitude. For an Analysis of Contemporary Forms of Life*, 54.
[69] See Yann Moulier-Boutang, *Cognitive Capitalism* (Cambridge: Polity, 2011).
[70] See Gerald Raunig, *A Thousand Machines*, Interventions Series (Cambridge, MA: Semiotext(e)), accessed 14 January 2023, https://mitpress.mit.edu/9781584350859/a-thousand-machines/.
[71] Ladnar, 'The Lecture Performance: Contexts of Lecturing and Performing', 33; Peters, *Der Vortrag Als Performance*, 17.

dub the time of the cognitive capitalist the 'age of the General Intellect',[72] and thus places cognitive activity at the centre of contemporary economic production, where 'knowledge is regarded as just a factor of production like any other, there to be mined and made over into all kinds of complex collective goods',[73] and thus can be considered a resource.

Virno conflates the general intellect with what he calls 'public intellect' (64). This conflation is due to his claim that in post-Fordist times the 'boundaries between pure intellectual activity, political action, and labor have dissolved'.[74] Like labour, which crucially has moved to the realm of action and thus has become political action, the work of the intellect is only discernible in a performance, i.e., in public. Intellect is moved from a solitary reflection to a communal expression. This understanding of the general intellect as a form of public expression of a cognitive process is crucial to an analysis of contemporary lecture performances that seeks to situate the artistic and academic practice of the form within the performance practices of cognitive capitalism. Virno's conception of the performance-based character of both intellectual and labour activities points to his concern over a waning of the public sphere, in which this performance of the public intellect can take place. Understanding the general intellect as a public intellect gives credence to the idea of knowledge as a public good. According to Virno, 'what matters is the exterior, collective, social character which belongs to intellectual activity when this activity becomes, according to Marx, the true mainspring of the production of wealth'.[75] The general intellect for Virno is thus a form of a 'publicness of mind',[76] it is public in both senses of the word as a) belonging to a public and b) in need of being uttered in public. At the same time, the performance of public knowledge (which in Virno's conception should be all knowledge) is threatened by the anxieties over the reconfiguration of the public sphere, where knowledge is increasingly circulated virtually, which changes its performance and thus its capacity for political action. This anxiety over the legitimacy of performances of knowledge is mirrored and negotiated in the practices

[72] Moulier-Boutang, *Cognitive Capitalism*, 2011, 163.
[73] Nigel Thrift, 'Foreword', in *Cognitive Capitalism*, by Yann Moulier-Boutang (Cambridge: Polity, 2011), vi.
[74] Virno, *A Grammar of the Multitude. For an Analysis of Contemporary Forms of Life*, 50.
[75] Virno, 37.
[76] Virno, 40.

of the contemporary lecture performance, which, I argue, respond to Virno's uneasiness over the legitimate performance of public knowledge in a waning public sphere.

These anxieties over a limited possibility of public exchange are currently being reformulated by the idea of platform economies and platform capitalism, where a hegemonic expansion of big tech and finance risks a complete reorganisation of digital public spaces.[77] Theorists of the platform economy describe how companies such as Google, Meta, Apple, Microsoft, Uber, Airbnb, etc. have already reshaped how we garner and receive information and how we interact with each other and our surroundings, and how their use is no longer optional but increasingly socially and economically mandatory. Jeremy Gilbert and Alex Williams stress that the public status of our online exchanges and actions is not only threated due to the private control of these companies but also by the 'important modes of control embedded in the algorithms that organise the information with which we interact'.[78] The structure of online interactions (a majority of which are enabled by these platforms) is therefore opaque and the possibility for public expression limited. As lecture performances are increasingly performed and circulated online, this is an important context to keep in mind as we encounter online integrations of the form (Chapter 2) and explore it as the proposed tool of a critical digital pedagogy (Chapter 4).

To summarise, embedding the contemporary lecture performance in the political realm of cognitive capitalism brings three characteristics of knowledge production, which the lecture performance negotiates, to the forefront. Firstly, the performativity of the labour process situates knowledge in a specific relation to a public, just as the lecture performance is invested in a specific relation between the knowledge performed (artistic and/or academic), the institutions in which this takes place, and the audience that receives it. Secondly, the status on knowledge as know-how (or general intellect – meant to be employed for economic gain) is one that is taken up in discussions of the lecture performance that accuse the form of being complicit in contemporary practices of the knowledge economy, thereby dismantling the value of knowledge for its own (non-economic) sake. And thirdly, the political implications of these cultural techniques of

[77] See, for example, Jeremy Gilbert and Alex Williams, *Hegemony Now: How Big Tech and Wall Street Won the World (And How We Win It Back)* (London: Verso Books, 2022); Nick Srnicek, *Platform Capitalism* (New York, NY: Wiley, 2016), https://www.wiley.com/en-gb/Platform+Capitalism-p-9781509504862.
[78] Gilbert and Williams, *Hegemony Now*, 187.

knowledge presentation and circulation have yet to be fully understood. Focusing on the lecture performance as one such cultural technique, implicated in multiple publics and thus multiple political processes, might help tackle questions of how hierarchies of knowledge can be critiqued via the introduction of alternative knowledge presentations, how claims of primacies of certain knowledges need to be considered with regard to their specific institutional conditions of their presentation, and how knowledge circulates within multiply situated contemporary public spheres. This conception of knowledge as a relational process in post-Fordist capitalism seems to me a crucial observation for the understanding of meaning-making in lecture performances (or any kind of performances in fact) as it foregrounds the collective responsibility of interpretation and knowledge production that resides with both the producer and consumer of the performance.

## Lecture Performers as Knowledge Entrepreneurs

The contemporary lecture performance is illustrative of the complicated relationship between production of knowledge and its performance in the contemporary knowledge economy. In the conception of knowledge as a resource lies the paradoxical status lecture performances occupy in relation to cognitive capitalism. On the one hand, they try to claim an intervention (into capitalist modes of knowledge production and logocentric traditions of legitimising knowledges), while on the other hand they seem to fit easily into modes of presentation that justify artistic and academic work by pointing to its economic utility.

Classifying lecture performances as artistic or performance research can be seen as a way of elevating their status and establishing their value within the knowledge economy. Rainer and Wagner, for example, use their analysis of the form to present them as new research methods (Rainer sees them as tools for artistic frame analysis and Wagner as a method of analysing speech acts).[79] The argument is that as a form of art as research, the form of the lecture performance can add value to fields other than the artistic and thereby adds to the status of the practice as a whole. By claiming that the lecture performance produces or showcases *new* knowledge, it is legitimising it as an

[79] See Wagner, 'Lecture-Performance. Sprechakte Als Aufführungskunst Seit 1950'; Rainer, *On the Threshold of Knowing*.

artistic practice. This logic is often viewed sceptically by the theorists of the lecture performance. Ana Vujanović and Jelena Vesić suggest that it betrays an anxiety in the art world about its own waning importance that looks for alternative narratives to legitimise itself:

> The question that arises is: why has education in art gained such popularity today? A (self-)critical thesis brings us back to the issues raised pertaining to *art as research*, pointing out that art and culture, while declaring themselves to constitute the *production of knowledge*, try to ensure themselves a new legitimacy […] in this context of cognitive capitalism, the market logic, the mass media and the Internet.[80]

Vujanović and Vesić see the impact of cognitive capitalism played out in higher (art) education by the introduction of the Bologna Reforms across the European Union in the early 2000s (and that are continued in the UK, for example, by the Research Excellence Framework's focus on 'Impact' or the explicit imperative to produce *new* knowledge in research projects). Here, they detect a fundamental opposition between the 'humanist ideal of education' and the 'increasingly servile' position of education 'in the sphere of corporate-market demands'.[81] Following Vujanović and Vesić, Ladnar, too, sees danger in legitimating the lecture performance via its use-value in current forms of cognitive capitalism. According to him, seeing the lecture performance as a form of knowledge production risks reducing it to its pure functionality and disregarding it as an artistic practice, which, by implication, should be allowed to operate outside of a knowledge economy:

> But there is also a danger in thinking about the lecture performance primarily in terms of knowledge production: not because it neglects the lecture performance's artistic or aesthetic aspects – those can be accounted for in a consideration of the lecture performance as producing different types of knowledge compared to conventional lectures (e.g., embodied knowledge, experiential knowledge etc.) – but because it too clearly attributes a function to it. The claim that it produces knowledge is, as Vujanović points out, a way of legitimising artistic practice today

[80] Vujanović and Vesić, 'Performance as Research and Production of Knowledge in Art', 51, emphasis in original.
[81] Vujanović and Vesić, 52.

> (Vujanović and Vesić 2009: 51) and is as such in line with the idea of knowledge as a resource.[82]

These descriptions see the cultural worker at risk of rationalising their own practice only in terms of economic potential and utility, thus pre-empting or succumbing to neoliberal criticism of the purpose of art, and reasoning within a framework of knowledge as know-how that judges artistic and academic production purely on the basis of its use-value. They mount a critique of neoliberal market and working conditions, when they attest that the goal of education today is then no longer to produce 'expert personnel' but 'entrepreneurial subjectivity', where studying becomes a 'profitable investment into a person' and knowledge is not attained as a 'goal in itself' or for its 'social-political utilisation' but as know-how, which is valued based on its immediate applicability and accumulated 'through experience, practice and social capital'.[83] Vesić asserts that this 'is precisely what regulates obedience to the ruling system […] through producing creative entrepreneurs ready to take matters into their own hands and relieve the state and society of the burden of social insurance, permanent employment, etc.'.[84] Artists and academics turned creative entrepreneurs thus employ a capitalised form of knowledge, 'know-how', to legitimise their own practice in the market logic of cognitive capitalism, further driving the epistemisation of art. Thus Vujanović, Vesić, and Ladnar warn against conceiving of the lecture performance solely in terms of knowledge production as it affirms rather than challenges the marketisation of knowledge and in turn limits the creative practice of artists. While I broadly agree with this line of argument and share their scepticism of the idea that lecture performance should be understood as tools to create *new* knowledge, this thesis will also show that the discourse around the neoliberalisation of knowledge is also emblematic of a changing cultural landscape, where those who until recently where relatively protected from processes of marketisation (through public funding and subsidies – both in the arts and higher education) now have to navigate the introduction of economic rationales into their fields of practice.

[82] Ladnar, 'The Lecture Performance: Contexts of Lecturing and Performing', 225.
[83] Vujanović and Vesić, 'Performance as Research and Production of Knowledge in Art', 52.
[84] Vujanović and Vesić, 52.

## Chapter Overview

This thesis sets out to explore the contradictions inherent in the form of the lecture performance outlined in this introduction, namely its precarious status as a tool of knowledge production, its position between innovation of and subsumption into capitalist modes of knowledge production, and its ambivalent relationship to modes of working and performing in cognitive capitalism. I test the effects of performance standardisation in the knowledge economies and the consequence of what Holert describes as a consumptive approach to knowledge reception on contemporary lecture performances and ask if and how the lecture performance is able to intervene in these processes.[85] To do so the thesis draws on a wide range of case studies from artistic, academic, and wider cultural contexts. The thesis is divided in three parts, where each part addresses a different aspect of the institutional contexts of the form. The first part attends to it from the perspective of artistic production; the second considers its impact on pedagogies and performances in higher education; and the third traces its proximity to discussions of knowledge production and diversification in performance studies. I argue that the lecture performance is both an agent and a consequence of cultural politics driven by economic rationalisation on the one hand and the insertion of entrepreneurial logics into the artistic and academic field on the other. At the same time, the form's investment in a constant and serious renegotiation of established knowledge practices also shows its potential to contribute to a wider criticism of the commodification and standardisation of knowledge performance.

'Part 1: The Lecture Performance and the Labour of Knowledge Production' considers lecture performances in the fields of contemporary dance and performance to establish how in these contexts the lecture performance can stage and critique current forms of post-Fordist work, such as cognitive and – to a lesser degree – emotional labour. Having outlined discussion of how knowledge and knowledge work is conceived in theories of cognitive capitalism and why performance is central to its understanding of (post-Fordist) labour in this introduction, I show that the lecture performance is implicated in economic and political processes which increasingly homogenise cognitive labour and argue that the form can stage the exploitations and alienations of this

[85] Holert, *Knowledge Beside Itself*, 59.

cognitive labour. Chapter 1 – 'Cognitive Labour and Servile Virtuosity in Lecture Performances' – focuses on readings of performance labour as representation of what Paolo Virno called 'virtuosic labour' and examines how lecture performances from the field of conceptual dance stage and problematise this mode of working; Chapter 2 – 'Digital Labour, Lecture Performance and the Artistic Cognitariat' – discusses a lecture performance series mounted digitally during the first COVID-19 lockdown to illustrate the proximity of contemporary artistic labour and other forms of cognitive labour and attends to the ambivalent position of the artist in cognitive capitalism as an elite yet precaritised worker. It engages with the potential for solidaristic practices between artists and other cognitive workers under the conditions of cognitive capitalism.

'Part 2: Civic Aesthetics. Lecture Performance and Higher Education' shifts towards implementations of the lecture performance in higher education. Seen in the context of higher education I argue that the form's association with the more popular genre of the TED talk and digital pedagogies geared towards generating a 'knowledge experience' is indicative of pedagogical shifts in the field, which mirrors the knowledge economy's encroachment into higher education. Chapter 3 – 'The TED Talk Problem in Higher Education' – analyses the TED talk as a model for popular pedagogies as well as a vector of identification for contemporary academics. I analyse the TED talks dramaturgies to show the homogenised knowledge experience which the format cultivates. Picking up on this analyses, Chapter 4 – 'Lecture Performance, Pop-Pedagogies and Digital Literacy' – turns towards Jon McKenzie and his digital pedagogies project, called 'smart or transmedia', under which he broadly subsumes the practice of the lecture performance. McKenzie's lecture performances are designed to give insight into a pedagogical project intended to foster critical digitality on the one hand and a more democratic access to knowledge on the other. Through analysing his lecture performance as an example of his pedagogical ideal, I show, however, that this project reproduces neoliberal knowledge politics, which strive for the immediate practical applicability of scholarship and, while purporting a goal of wider access to knowledge, actually leave the privatisation of education unchallenged.

'Part 3: Lecture Performance and Knowledge Diversification' tests the lecture performance's investment in negotiating, critiquing, and, at times, interrupting the logics of the global knowledge economy. I take my cure from Boaventura de Sousa Santos's call

for an 'end to the cognitive empire'[86] – a term he uses to describe the interrelations between cognitive capitalism, cognitive colonialism, and cognitive patriarchy – and an epistemological diversification in favour of previously disregarded and marginalised ways of knowing. I argue that despite being embedded in the politics of the cognitive empire, the lecture performance often openly stages unequal relations between knowledges, thus taking a more active and self-aware role than other artistic and epistemic practices and drawing on its inherent modes of self-reflexive performance to constantly challenge and destabilise its own claims to knowledge production. Consequently, this part of the thesis turns to two epistemological and methodological areas that have been a focus of debate within theatre and performance studies to show how the lecture performance engages with dominant modes of knowledge production in these fields. Both chapters interrogate the lecture performance's engagement with performance reenactment and read it as a prominent method of staging knowledge via performance. Chapter 5 – 'Staging the Archive: Lecture Performances Between Historical Immersion and Critical Fabulation' – analyses how contemporary lecture performances stage and intervene in discourses of the archive and archival research, while Chapter 6 – 'Lecture Performance as Embodied Forensic Analysis' – turns towards the practices of forensic investigation and re-enactment. In both cases, I ask how the lecture performance intervenes in these forms of knowledge production in order to foreground how different knowledges interact in these practices of performance research. By revealing the theatrical construction of common knowledge presentations (such as in the archive or via forensic investigation), my primary contention is that the lecture performance unmasks the institutionalised repertoires of knowledge production and offers ways of complementing standardised research procedures and illuminating gaps in knowledge.

[86] Boaventura De Sousa Santos, *The End of the Cognitive Empire: The Coming of Age of Epistemologies of the South* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2018).

# PART 1: LECTURE PERFORMANCES AND THE LABOUR OF KNOWLEDGE PRODUCTION

This first part of the thesis takes as its starting point a cultural development shift in values described by Luc Boltanski and Eve Chiapello in *The New Spirit of Capitalism.* The shift they discuss is that markers of what was traditionally seen as a 'distinctly artistic lifestyle',[87] such as the pursuits of self-fulfilment, creativity, and autonomy, have now become a demand placed on everyone in late capitalist society. In conjunction with Boltanski and Chiapello's theory, Ladnar posits the question to 'what extent the lecture performance as a form follows the constant demand for self-presentation that goes hand in hand with this development'.[88] Locating contemporary lecture performance practices within these practices of self-presentation and a larger economic shift that draws value out of these modes of presentation, I engage with the lecture performance in contemporary dance and performance practices as a place where these demands of self-presentation are stages and examined. I draw on Ladner, who states that the act of speaking publicly, for example in a lecture performance, 'implies positioning or presenting yourself […] as an "entrepreneurial unit" on the market on which this [presentation] is traded [as a resource]'.[89] The questions I explore in this section are: how is this mode and demand for self-presentation reflected in the contemporary discourse of cognitive labour and can the lecture performance act as a vehicle to stage the exploitation and alienation of this mode of working and self-presenting in late capitalism? These questions become complicated when considering entanglement of the arts and performance in systems of power that pit high-skilled 'elite' workers against lower-skilled workers or those at the periphery waiting for their chance to enter an already saturated job market. The relative privilege of many of the practitioners of the lecture performance and the institutions that fund them calls into question their commitment to the political work of formulating a mode of resistance to cognitive capitalism. Should lecture performers then be thought of as creative and artistic vanguards of a cognitive capitalist elite or can they be seen as resisting these forms of capitalist interpellation that Boltanski and Chiapello describe? By tracing how lecture

[87] Luc Boltanski and Eve Chiapello, *The New Spirit of Capitalism* (London: Verso Books, 2018), 420.
[88] Ladnar, 'The Lecture Performance: Contexts of Lecturing and Performing', 229.
[89] Ladnar, 228–29.

performances theatricalise the conflict between the self-organisation and self-exploitation of contemporary cognitive workers, I show the ambiguous status of the lecture performer caught between precarisation and elite occupation.

To do so, Chapter 1 turns to Virno's concept of 'virtuosity' – as an expression of the performative character of contemporary knowledge work – to explore how lecture performances stage cognitive labour (as opposed to the physical labour of dance and performance). I draw on the writings of Judith Hamera and Nicholas Ridout to establish that discussions of virtuosity in performance studies have so far over-emphasised either physical effort or non-human actors. I mobilise two lecture performances from the field of conceptual dance (Jérôme Bel's *Véronique Doisneau* and Jochen Roller' trilogy *Perform Performing*) to show how discourses of virtuosic labour drive tensions between intellectual and physical labour, or choreography and performance, in contemporary dance. The lecture performance's hybrid form, its oscillation between speaking and doing (in this case dancing) allows me to explore the tensions between the two main modes of labour (mental and physical) at play. In my analysis of the two productions, I harness Virno's idea of 'servile virtuosity'[90] ('a condition of subjugation to the logics of production'[91]) to show how these lecture performances stage a) the institutional servility of the corps de ballet dancer (in the case of Véronique Doisneau) and b) the economic servility freelance dancers and choreographers like Jochen Roller are trained to perform. Here, the lecture performance performs a critique in contemporary forms of artistic (knowledge) production, while also being implicated in these modes of production.

Chapter 2 pivots to the forms of cognitive labour even more explicitly found in digital productions of the lecture performance. Working from the premise that lecture performances produced online during the first 2020 lockdown (due to the COVID-19 pandemic) have further heightened similarities between contemporary artistic production and managerial labour in post-Fordist economies, this chapter examines the online lecture performance series 'My Documents/Share your Screen' curated by Lola Arias and hosted by a coalition of theatres and performance spaces in Germany. Featuring the work of prominent artists, such as Rabih Mroué, Tim Etchells, and Tania

[90] Virno, *A Grammar of the Multitude. For an Analysis of Contemporary Forms of Life*, 68.
[91] Nicholas Ridout, 'On the Work of Things: Musical Production, Theatrical Labor, and the "General Intellect"', *Theatre Journal* 64, no. 3 (2012): 404.

Bruguera, the series offers the chance to examine how lecture performances participate in the 'epistemization of art' within cognitive capitalism. I discuss how the lecture performances in the series problematised and tried to resist the commodification and hegemonisation of knowledge under cognitive capitalism. Drawing on Liam Gillick's conception of the artists as the 'ultimate freelance knowledge worker', I argue that lecture performances are emblematic of a cultural market that mobilises artistic processes as artistic products and has them stand-in for more costly productions. As the global pandemic put these conventional productions on hold, this moment presented an ideal opportunity to investigate artists as cognitive workers. Here I draw on Franco 'Bifo' Berardi's conception of the 'cognitariat' (a virtual class of cognitive workers) to ask what modes of solidarity and organisation are possible under cognitive capitalism. I argue that while artists should not be discounted as possible members of this self-organising cognitariat, their alignment with the relative privilege of the elite cognitive workers mark their more ambiguous class status.

# Chapter 1: Cognitive Labour and Servile Virtuosity in Lecture Performances

## Dancing as Work

*As the curtain rises and the lights come up on the stage of the Paris Opera, we see a single dancer in rehearsal costume walking on stage. She is wearing a headset and carrying a tutu skirt in one hand and a bottle of water in the other. She looks small compared to the vastness of the space around her, designed for big ensemble ballet productions. 'Bonsoir', she begins: 'My name is Véronique Doisneau. I am married and have two children. Of six and twelve years. I am 42 years old, and I will retire in eight days. Tonight, is my last performance at the Paris Opera. […] In the hierarchy of the Paris Opera I am "sujet". That means that I dance both the corps de ballet parts and soloist roles. I earn about 3600€ per month. […] I never became a star. The question never came up'.*[92]

*A man in his 30s stands in the middle of a stage in green adidas tracksuit and an olive-coloured T-shirt. Empty shopping bags, a Hello-Kitty case, a flipchart and a record player are strewn across the stage. To the sounds of 'Notorious B.I.G.' by The Notorious B.I.G., the man removes his sweater and the T-shirt and drops them to the floor. He goes to one of the shopping bags and pulls out what looks like a black belt and white tube of cream. He steps to the microphone, squirts some of the cream onto the back of the belt before placing it on his stomach and fastening it to his torso. When the music fades, he begins to speak: 'When you have to earn money quickly because the city where one lives has frozen its cultural funding, and you are not quite sure how to pay the next rent, there's a special category of jobs. These jobs follow the provision principle: The more you sell, the more money you make. In June of this year, I sold electronic muscle trainers for the company AbGymnic. I don't actually know much about electronic muscle trainers, but I had a good performance. In the language of the economy this means that I sold a lot. For me, having a good performance means having a good show. A good show as a dancer, a good show as a dancer pretending to be a salesperson. A performance as salesperson is not so different from a performance as a dancer because as a dancer – as well as a salesperson – you need to a) make a good impression, b) seem competent and c) sell yourself well'.*[93]

These two excerpts from the lecture performance *Véronique Doisneau* (2004) by French choreographer Jérôme Bel and Jochen Roller's lecture performance trilogy *Perform*

[92] Jérôme Bel, *Véronique Doisneau* Part 1, 11 April 2011, YouTube Video, 11 April 2011, 01:13-03:37, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=OIuWY5PInFs.
[93] Jochen Roller, *Perform Performing. Part 1: No Money, No Love*, 23 February 2015, Vimeo Recording, 23 February 2015, 25:48-26:57, https://vimeo.com/120360771?embedded=true&source=vimeo_logo&owner=5915739.

*Performing* (2002-2004) both are concerned with the description of dance as work. Both performers speak of their profession as something integrated in and related to economic processes and embedded into specific institutional politics. They chart out their own position in relation to these macro-structures and thematise their own participation in creative economies under these conditions. This joint focus lays out the central concern of this chapter, which examines the relationship between contemporary dance and contemporary labour practices. This chapter understands lecture performances both as a representation of the exploitations and alienations of (cognitive) work, which stages and theatricalises how intellectual labour is performed today, and as a site of these exploitations and alienations itself – where the lecture performance's conditions of performance reside in the fact that it exploits the emergence of cognitive labour. As such, the lecture performance offers a unique vantage point from which to unpick the ambiguity involved in intellectual work that is also creative and critical of its own conditions. By drawing parallels between how the lecture performance represents contemporary (creative) labour and the conditions in which this labour occurs, I examine the political efficacy of their staged criticism of creative economies.

I consider the work of two contemporary dance performances – broadly based on the field of conceptual dance – who harness the mode of the lecture performance to comment on the material conditions under which their performances are produced and performed. Jérôme Bel's 2004 performance *Véronique Doisneau* follows a dancer of the Paris National Opera, who is about the retire from the stage, as she reminisces about her life and work at one of the world's most prestigious ballet companies. Jochen Roller's performance trilogy *Perform Performing* (staged between 2002 and 2004) stages the conditions under which Roller, a freelance dancer and choreographer in Germany, has to work. Both performances touch on the topics such as cultural policy, arts funding, institutional hierarchies, and the creative economy. First and foremost, however, they draw connections between the aesthetic of a performance and the conditions of its production, including the physical, emotional, and mental labour that went into it.

Here their employment of strategies of the lecture performance are crucial. Due to their status as hybrid-forms, of being in between – or being simultaneously lecture and performance – lecture performances enter the discussion of how developments of cognitive capitalism have configured processes of work and knowledge production from

two different but related vantage points. While the interest of this thesis is primarily their relationship to the production and performance of knowledge via cognitive labour, they are, by the very fact of being a performance practice also invested and implicated in modes of physical and – perhaps to a lesser extent – emotional labour. Similarly, *Veronique Doisneau* and *Perform Performing* make direct reference to the work of dancers and performers (historically and contemporaneously) and the performances comment, both verbally and performatively, on the strain this work places on the body. However, they both also feature, as is common in the genre of the lecture performance, a discursive level where historical or theoretical context outside the scope of the purely physical performance is delivered to the audience. Lecture performances situated in the field of dance thus offer fertile ground for the analysis of discursive and physical performances and their configuration within the scope of cognitive labour.[94]

I take my cue from research that examines contemporary performance as a representation of labour. When thinking about how performance, and specifically the lecture performance, can depict or comment on cognitive labour, it makes sense to look towards comparisons between dance and physical labour and try to apply these to the lecture performance and cognitive labour. In her essay on the 'The Labors of Michael Jackson: Virtuosity, Deindustrialization, and Dancing Work', Judith Hamera reads Jackson's performances as a dancer in relation to the modes and mobilisations of industrial work during the height of his fame. Paralleling his upbringing and dance training with the deindustrialisation of the American Midwest and the emergence of post-Fordist

[94] It should be noted here that neither *Veronique Doisneau* by Jérôme Bel nor Roller's *Perform Performing* were originally billed as lecture performances. However, their formal structure of merging modes of physical performance with accounts of subjective experience and modes of (historical) research, have put them in such close proximity to the genre of the lecture performance that they have been included in discussions thereof. Their critical reception has also often made this connection clear by labelling them as lecture performances after the fact. *Veronique Doisneau* is described on Bel's website as a 'a theatrical documentary on the work of the dancer' and was included as a case study in Patricia Milder's article 'Teaching as Art: The Contemporary Lecture-Performance' and is listed as among other lecture performances in the appendix of Lucia Rainer's *On the Threshold of Knowing. Lecture Performance in Arts and Academia*. Gabriele Brandstetter also uses it as the key lecture performance case study in her 2016 chapter 'Showing Dance: Lecture Performances in Dance since the 1990s'. Here she also lists Roller's *Perform Performing* as a seminal lecture performance series of the time. Similarly, Gabriele Klein reads *Perform Performing* as a lecture performance in her essay 'Labour, Life, Art: On the Social Anthropology of Labour'. I follow these categorisations in my choices of case studies for this chapter.

rather than Fordist modes of labour in the 1980s and 90s, Hamera posits dance as an allegory of physical work and working relations:

> Dancing is work: a job, the product of labor, it is also allegorical: a "mix of making a reading" regimes of work "combined in one" (Fletcher 10). This dual status makes dancers significant, if largely unrecognized, rhetorical actors in public imaginings of bodies and work. Bodies in motion offer visible, potent templates for imagining ways work is produced and consumed. Virtuoso performers illuminate these dynamics with special intensity.[95]

Hamera's argument is one of staging labour processes. In her view, dance is seen as being able to stand in for and theatrically represent the working body: dancing bodies can become visible templates or allegorical stand-ins for the physically labouring body, and the virtuosic performer, such as Michael Jackson, is particularly suited to exemplify the relations between the working body and economic production in the sense that his dance training and presentation mirrors the shift towards more performance-based modes of labour arising in post-Fordism. Hamera mobilises the concept of virtuosity to point to the extreme physical control and precision a performer like Jackson was able to present. I, however, want to shift the focus from this reading of virtuosity as a physical feat towards a reading of the concept that takes its involvement in knowledge politics and cognitive capitalism seriously. In the following, I will be analysing my two case studies, specifically located within the field of dance and dance history, in order to examine whether the virtuosic paradigm of labour can be applied to cognitive labour through the lecture performance as productively as it seems to be applicable to physical labour and dance. I argue that both performances, *Veronique Doisneau* by Jérôme Bel and *Perform Performing* by Jochen Roller, engage in virtuosic performances and that an analysis of their conception of virtuosity can help illuminate some of the assumptions underlying the claim of virtuosity in intellectual labour.

What is interesting about these case studies is that they both deal with the material conditions of dance production around the early 2000s and the working conditions that dancers in both the state-funded and the freelance sector find

[95] Judith Hamera, 'The Labors of Michael Jackson: Virtuosity, Deindustrialization, and Dancing Work', *PMLA* 127, no. 4 (1 October 2012): 752.

themselves in. Both pieces, while not specifically billed as lecture performances, make use of particular dramaturgical structures that have become known as markers of lecture performances. Both are solos, both combine speaking and dancing, or more concretely: verbal commentary and physical demonstration. This way of demonstrating which combines speaking and doing is a crucial component of the lecture performance's dramaturgical strategy. In Sybille Peters study of the history of the academic lecture, *Der Vortrag als Performance* (*The Lecture as Performance*), she singles out the lecture performance as a form of interpretation that does not carry out the separation between the demonstration of the art and the speaking about said art.[96] One of Peter's main arguments is that, since the eighteenth century, the development of aesthetic theory as a specialised academic discourse about art brought a shift in the presentation of knowledge. Peters differentiates between the 'art of demonstration' (*Kunst einer Demonstration*) and the 'demonstration of an art' (*Demonstration einer Kunst*). The rhetorical teaching before 1800 utilised the 'model' (*Muster*) as a way of speaking of and teaching art, which was to encourage imitation, and thus lay within the realm of 'demonstration of an art'. With the rise of aesthetic theory and literary studies, the model increasingly yields to the 'example' (*Beispiel*), which is meant to confirm certain statements of the speaker but no longer demonstrates them. This switch of orientation from production to reception, so Peters argues, allows for the emergence of a modern scholarly speaking about art (versus rhetoric as the art of speaking). According to her, the lecture performance goes from model to example but without leaving behind the praxis of demonstrating an art. In both performances discussed in this chapter the conjunction of example and demonstration becomes apparent. By staging the process of 'speaking about' the dances and the process of showing the dances simultaneously, the performance moves from implementing these specific dances as models to using them as example without letting go of the 'art of demonstrating' the dances. Thereby, it refuses the step, common to interpretation, by which the (meta-)discourse, in this case about a dance, is isolated from the performance of the dance.[97]

[96] Peters, *Der Vortrag Als Performance*, 217–21.
[97] Peters, 221. (My paraphrase; in German: 'Auch die Lecture-Performance geht den Schritt vom Muster zum Beispiel, jedoch ohne dabei die Praxis, eine Kunst zu demonstrieren, zu verwerfen'.)

Further, both pieces are invested in concepts of skill, mastery, authenticity, and value. What makes them interesting for an analysis of virtuosity is their negotiation of various subject positions both within the institutional frame of the performance tradition they are showcasing (ballet and contemporary dance) and in terms of their intimate and multiple connections to the materials presented (as dancers embedded in the structures, but also as observers of these fields). Here Gabriele Brandstetter's positioning of the lecture performance is crucial. Like Peters, she highlights their investment in showing and telling but stresses the 'friction' this interplay of showing and telling creates. According to Brandstetter, this 'friction is often rendered productive when a contradiction, irritation, or blurring occurs' between what is shown and what is said.[98] By contrasting the experiential knowledge of the performers with their political commentary, as well as by blurring their movements with commentary and vice versa, the lecture performances featured in this chapter point towards the productive frictions that can become apparent when staging speech as dance and dance as speech.

## Paolo Virno's Concept of Virtuosity

In order to make the concept of virtuosity fruitful for performance analysis, I begin by briefly summarising the main aspects of Virno's definition of virtuosic labour before discussing how this concept has thus far been applied in performance analysis in dance and performance studies. Differing from the somewhat more conventional understanding of virtuosity as an exceptional physical feat or talent, Virno reframes it as the crucial mode for understanding contemporary labour practices under conditions of post-Fordism. It thus is intimately implicated in the relationships between labour, performance, intellect, and knowledge production in cognitive capitalism. In the following I will introduce three characteristics of virtuosic labour as Virno conceives it: 1) Virtuosic labour as having no end product; 2) The general intellect as the score for virtuosic labour; 3) Virtuosity as servile labour. These characteristics will then be examined in relation to the performance of cognitive labour in the case studies.

[98] Gabriele Brandstetter, 'Showing Dance. Lecture Performances in Dance since the 1990s', in *The Oxford Handbook of Sound and Image in Western Art*, ed. Yael Kaduri (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2016), 364, https://academic.oup.com/edited-volume/34549/chapter/293122538.

One of Virno's main theses is that the relationship between political action (*praxis*) and labour (*poiesis*) have shifted in post-Fordist societies, with labour increasingly imitating the sphere of politics, more precisely the mechanisms by which political action is characterised. According to Virno, (political) action is qualified by its proximity to (or absorption of) virtuosity. Virtuosity is denoted by two main qualities: a) an activity that finds its own fulfilment (that is, its own purpose) in itself, without objectifying itself into an end product, without settling into a "finished product"', and b) it requires 'the presence of others'.[99] Using the pianist Glenn Gould as an example, Virno illustrates these crucial differences between political action and Fordist models of labour, which by extension is not in need of a public and can be identified by the production of an end product. Gould was a performing artist, which according to Virno's definition would have implicated him in the field of political performance making him a virtuoso. However, Gould was averse to performing in public and thus opted to only produce records in a recording studio. This, Virno claims, moves Gould's activity closer to the activities of (pre-Fordist) labour and removes it from the realm of the political (the performance). The product of his labour was palpable in the records he produced, and he was no longer dependent on the (immediate) presence of others to perform his music.[100] It was no longer a form of virtuosity because it was no longer identifiable with the space of (political) action.

This observation is crucial to the discussion of lecture performances which also hinge upon their performance in public and draw an artistic and epistemological value from the specificity of their performed context. Instead of opting for an end product (an essay, an article, a book), lecture performers perform their knowledge to a given public, thus moving their practice closer to what Virno identifies as virtuosity as post-Fordist labour. It is intellectual labour, which does not produce an end product.[101]

For Virno, intellect becomes the intermediary factor between labour and politics. In fact, it is the transferral of intellect to the public (sphere) that makes the emergence

[99] Virno, *A Grammar of the Multitude. For an Analysis of Contemporary Forms of Life*, 52.
[100] Virno, 52–55.
[101] Of course, the current practice of lecture performance on video or online complicates this claim. Hito Steyerl, for example, performs live lecture performances, videos of which are then used in some of the reinstallation art works, thus a) outliving the situation of the live performance and b) becoming a constitutive part of a different art work.

of virtuosity as labour (aka. 'virtuosic labour'[102]) possible. Virno invokes the concept of the artist's score to illustrate the function of intellect.[103] By understanding 'intellect as a score', as a form of script the 'virtuosic worker' can follow, Virno expands the meaning of virtuosity to 'the totality of social labor' under post-Fordist conditions.[104] He continues, 'the score of modern virtuosos is the general intellect, the general intellect of society, abstract thought which has become a pillar of social production',[105] thus pointing to the convergence of labour and politics via the intellect:

> Now, however, the third facet of human experience comes into play, Intellect. It is the "score" which is always performed, over and again, by the workers-virtuosos. I believe that the hybridization between the different spheres (pure thought, political life and labour) begins precisely when the Intellect, as principal productive force, becomes public. Only then does labor assume a virtuosic (or communicative) semblance, and, thus, it colors itself with "political" hues.[106]

As established in the introduction to this thesis, Virno's focus on the publicness of labour and intellect highlights the political dimension of both and makes it clear that any discussion of contemporary knowledge production needs to consider it within a wider field of the 'publicness' of knowledge. General intellect, which Virno also calls 'public intellect', for Virno is a communal property that structures both relations of labour and political processes, a dynamic potential to be actualised through the communicative faculties of language. Knowledge then does not originate from the general intellect or reside within it but is a relational property, constructed through communicative virtuosic work. The case studies featured in this chapter can therefore be seen as attempting to materialise the score of the communicative skill associated with virtuosity as communicative labour.

Concealing the structural characteristics of labour as political activity to Virno is the logical consequence of performative work standing in for productive work as a whole in post-Fordist capitalism. At the same time, Virno stresses that for Marx, the labour of

[102] Virno, *A Grammar of the Multitude. For an Analysis of Contemporary Forms of Life*, 54.
[103] Virno, 63.
[104] Virno, 63.
[105] Virno, 63, emphasis in original.
[106] Virno, 64.

the performing artist can be considered a form of servile labour, 'in which no capital is invested, but a wage is paid'.[107] By considering virtuosic labour as 'a form of wage labor which is not, at the same time, productive labor', he subsumes processes of immaterial labour into the production of surplus-value. Commenting on Virno's theory of virtuosity, Nicholas Ridout observes:

> In post-Fordism, Virno argues, this capacity [for performance] has become a crucial source of value for capitalism, and virtuosity is called into service as the immaterial labor on which production depends across a range of fields: in the affective labor of care workers, the communicational work of call centers, and the cognitive work of finance and education, as well as in the vast quantity of unremunerated reproductive labor largely undertaken by women, which makes the system of wage labor possible. This is what Virno calls "servile virtuosity," a condition of subjugation to logics of production that contains within itself the potential to be exercised differently.[108]

'Servile virtuosity' is thus a crucial concept from which to examine the cognitive work of art and knowledge production. Virno observes that 'productive labor, in its totality, appropriates the special characteristics of the performing artist', and thus virtuosity as a face of public-facing political action is no longer restricted to the practice of a performing artist. Servile virtuosity, in Virno's sense, thus extends to the cognitive and physical work involved in creating artistic work, and this chapter examines how the case studies stage this form of intellectual labour, thus making it accessible to an audience and inviting questions as to how this knowledge work is structured in cognitive capitalism.

## The Virtuosity Debate in Performance Studies

At first glance it is not immediately apparent how Virno's theory of virtuosity might productively be implemented to analyse the modes of labour performed in the lecture performance. In fact, writers in performance studies who have mobilised virtuosity as a theoretical framework seem to either restrict it purely to the physical aspect of a performance – as is the case with Hamera's work, who analysing Michael Jackson's dance moves argues that his virtuosity lay in his flawless and deceptive 'execution of [his dance]

[107] Virno, 54.
[108] Ridout, 'On the Work of Things', 404.

moves, not in the inherent complexity of the moves themselves',[109] or they transfer it to the abstract knowledge of machines (as Ridout does), thereby forgoing the human body or worker/performer in their discussion of virtuosity. This is in line with the general consensus in theories of cognitive capitalism that cognitive labour is increasingly replacing the need for physical labour via the introduction of automation, which only needs the input of a human worker for its conception, programming, building, and maintenance, but does away with the necessity for physical worker (and their labour time) in the process of production.

Along these lines, the concept of virtuosity is then applied in performance analysis to draw connections between the automated work of machines and automated object performances. Ridout, for example, reads an automatically playing piano in Heiner Goebbels *Stifters Dinge* as an expression of cognitive labour (which is programmed once but able to be countlessly reproduced without any further labour costs). Instead of being the instrument of a performance of physical labour (which would have to be performed repeatedly for each occasion or concert), the programmed piano as the machine performer embodies virtuosic performance itself. Drawing on Marx's reading of performance as 'servile labour' (labour that is not immediately economically productive), Ridout argues that while the musician playing an instrument can be seen as virtuosic – fulfilling a task that finds 'fulfillment in itself'[110] – in the case of the automated piano, the machine acts as worker/performer and thus is virtuosic in itself but is outside of any possibility of fulfilment. However, knowing that the 'machine is not alien power', but the 'abstracted knowledge and labour of those who built it',[111] the virtuosic work the machine enacts is that of the cognitive processes of those who programmed it, even if it disconnects the process of generation of this knowledge from its public performance.

From the perspective of the lecture performance, both these perspectives on the implementation of virtuosity in performance analysis pose a problem. Restricting virtuosity to purely physical expressions of work (in this case dance labour) has the obvious drawback that it does not conceptualise the other modes of labour at work in the lecture performance, which – as stated above – is similarly invested in cognitive,

[109] Hamera, 'The Labors of Michael Jackson', 754.
[110] Virno, *A Grammar of the Multitude. For an Analysis of Contemporary Forms of Life*, 55.
[111] Ridout, 'On the Work of Things', 404.

emotional, and physical processes and practices. Here, cognitive work is almost excluded from the definition or recognition of virtuosity, which becomes merely mechanical in character. Instead, this approach focuses almost exclusively on virtuosity as mastery of technique. There seems to be a distinct binary between physical effort and technique vs. mental labour and cognitive processes. While the former is associated with virtuosity, the latter might be more a question of individual genius. The word 'genius' today has of course been critiqued as a masculinist ideal of solitary, non-collaborative work and I do not wish to reanimate discussions of genius as a Romantic ideal. I use it merely to point to a conceptual difference between the understanding and appreciation for certain kinds of work. While virtuosity is commonly framed as pertaining to a physical feat or process (in arts, sports or music), genius/intellect point to a cognitive/intellectual component (in writing, science, or composition). The common binary, enacted in practice as well as in the criticism of performance, is the dancer as the virtuoso and the choreographer as genius (or the actor as virtuoso and director or writer as genius). Cognitive work seems to be automatically disconnected from potentially virtuosic performances. As the lecture performance's hybrid status holds both mental and physical work in close proximity to each other, this distinction is explicitly challenged by the form. The question then becomes whether one can think of virtuosity as a process pertaining to cognitive processes as well as physical skill. Similarly, the absence of human performers in Ridout's analysis is unhelpful in the case of the lecture performance insofar as it is characterised by having human performers on stage. Remaining focused on the human performer, is there a way then to conceptualise the virtuosic performance of cognitive labour in the lecture performance?

One aspect of Virno's theory of virtuosity, which both Hamera and Ridout pick up on, is the emphasis he places on the connection between virtuosity and servile labour (which he borrows from Marx to describe 'wage labor which is not productive labor').[112] As stated above, for Ridout servile labour is 'the immaterial labor on which production depends across a range of fields',[113] while Hamera defines it as the 'defining mode of Post-Fordism, characterised by, among other things, the imperative to be excellent at all times

[112] Virno, *A Grammar of the Multitude. For an Analysis of Contemporary Forms of Life*, 54.
[113] Ridout, 'On the Work of Things', 404.

as the only bulwark against one's own dispensability'.[114] The fact that Hamera sees Jackson's servile virtuosity expressed or perpetuated in his 'insistence on flawless execution [of dance moves] and his own perfectionism' points towards a connection between the labour of performance as a performance of servile labour and the simultaneous assertion that this is to be conceived of as virtuosic work. It strikes me that servile virtuosity can be seen as the negotiation of the power structures embedded into the creation and staging of an artistic performance. The question at the opening of this chapter thus has to be amended to ask to what extent the lecture performance can be seen not only as a representation of cognitive labour but as a representation of the forms of servile virtuosity embedded in performance labour.[115] Starting from the conceptual binary between physical and intellectual work, which a discussion of virtuosity necessitates, as shown above, I turn to the case study of *Véronique Doisneau* to discuss how the performance problematises this understanding of virtuosity and to trace the differentiations of mental and physical work in contemporary conceptual dance. Later, I use Roller's performance trilogy *Perform Performing* to examine understandings of virtuosity as communicative and service-centred labour that pushes dance into proximity with other forms of contemporary work, for example in the service industry. Here the binary between physical and mental labour is less pronounced but a focus on how virtuosity is conceptualised in this performance shows the necessity to perform a certain servility towards precarious economic conditions, which shape the freelance dancer in similar ways as other (service) workers.

## The Servile Virtuosity of *Véronique Doisneau*

According to choreographer Jérôme Bel, the show is 'based on a very simple principle'.[116] Alluding to the interplay of telling and showing central to the lecture performances, he

[114] Hamera, 'The Labors of Michael Jackson', 757.
[115] A logical next step might then be to ask about the possibility of virtuosity featuring in the lecture performance as non-servile virtuosity, what Virno tentatively terms 'republican virtuosity': 'understanding "republic of the multitude" to mean a sphere of common affairs which is no longer state-run' (69). Here, Virno opens his own investigation of the political implications of his theory of virtuosity, asking 'How do we conceive, in principle, of political action based on the *general intellect*? (69, emphasis in original). If virtuosic work can indeed register as non-servile virtuosity, the question then becomes whether we can conceive of the lecture performance as political action.
[116] *Jérôme Bel*, Vimeo Recording (Théâtre Vidy-Lausanne, 2022), 01:18:46.

describes the dramaturgical principle of the show as the 'alteration between the discursive and the performative. In other words, something is told first, then danced by Veronique Doisneau'.[117] Differentiating between different modes of understanding and knowing he expands: 'Each scene is therefore first perceived by the audience in an intellectual way, through language, and then through the senses, thanks to the movements and the music'.[118] The desired effect of this is a balance between 'intellect and affect, the intelligible and the sensitive',[119] which is palpable throughout the whole performance.



**Figure 5:** A speaking ballerina. *Véronique Doisneau* by Jérôme Bel (Opéra de Paris, 2004). Photos: ICARE.

*Véronique Doisneau* (2004) is a biographical work created for ballet dancer Véronique Doisneau in her final month as a dancer in the company of the Paris National Opera. She begins the lecture performance by taking up a position centre stage and addressing the audience. Uncommon for a ballet dancer on stage, she is dressed in a rehearsal costume and wearing a microphone, immediately signalling not only a departure from the

[117] *Jérôme Bel*, 01:18:52.
[118] *Jérôme Bel*, 01:18:56.
[119] *Jérôme Bel*, 01:19:09.

conventions of classical ballet but the addition of a layer of speech onto the performance. She states her name, her age, her marital status, and the age of her children.[120] She informs the audience that night's performance will be her last performance before retiring from her career as a ballet dancer. For those not close enough to see, she gives a description of her looks by claiming that it is said she looks like the famous French actress Isabelle Huppert. Here, her gaze wanders upwards to the cheaper seats in the balcony while the camera zooms out to show the impressive regal décor of the Paris Opera. Both the direction of the gaze and the camera displaying the grand architecture of the theatre draw in the multiple stratifications of the audience and offer a first glimpse into the carefully choreographed commentary on the social structures of the institution of ballet. She continues by telling the audience her monthly income and that within the hierarchy of the Ballet she is a 'sujet', which means she dances both soloist roles and as a member of the corps de ballet. She has never been a star. She is not a principal dancer. This is what this show is about. Conceived for the opening to the choreographic season of the 2004/05 season of the Opéra de Paris, where director of dance Brigitte Lefèvre wanted to 'pay a vibrant homage to the corps de ballet' of the company,[121] the piece focuses on the mundane yet highly taxing working life of an elite performer. The pull of the performance lay not only in the fact that Bel was billed as a 'young iconoclast'[122] and was thus seen as an unusual choice of choreographer for this classical ballet company but also that the dancer – Véronique Doisneau – was not a principal dancer (usually the only dancers to have new works created for them). The title *Véronique Doisneau* points to this as well as making clear that she is both the subject (as the social actor/worker) and the 'sujet' (as in topic or theme) of the performance.

Through her autobiography, personal experience, and intimate physical knowledge of the ballet canon, Doisneau sheds light on the institutional politics of dance from a dancer's perspective. By performing the 'quintessential work-a-day, matter-of-fact ballerina',[123] Doisneau succeeds in transmitting knowledge not only about the typical working practices of a dancer but also about the institution of ballet itself. During the

[120] See Bel, *Véronique Doisneau* Part 1.
[121] René Sirvin, 'Véronique Doisneau - Review', Artist Website, *RB JEROME BEL* (blog), 30 October 2004, http://jeromebel.fr/index.php?p=2&lg=2&s=8&ctid=2&cid=150.
[122] Sirvin.
[123] Milder, 'Teaching as Art', 20.

show Doisneau presents excerpts from historical ballet choreographies that have particularly shaped her career (such as an excerpt from Rudolf Nureyev's *La Bayadère* or Merce Cunningham's *Points in Space*, which stand in for her work with these choreographers and their influence on her conception of ballet). She demonstrates this in a stripped-down version: she makes the audience wait while putting on her point shoes centre stage and then performs the dance while humming the music to herself instead of dancing to music. After each dance there are long periods, where the audience watch her catch her breath or drink water, demonstrating how physically demanding these choreographies are while at the same time breaking with the convention of classical ballet, which demands that all physical effort is to be concealed from the audience. Instead, she lets the audience witness the work that goes into transforming into the 'perfect' ballerina and bear witness to the exhaustion this process entails.



**Figure 6:** Véronique Doisneau putting on point shoes centre stage. *Véronique Doisneau* by Jérôme Bel (Opéra de Paris, 2004). Screenshot taken 17 January 2021.

Doisneau's display of preparation and exhaustion and the stripped back aesthetics (rehearsal clothing, no set design, no orchestral music) are signs of the show's investment in giving insight into what conventionally remains hidden in the staging of classical ballet: namely, any signs of physical effort or work on the part of the dancers, any gestures towards rehearsal or practice, and any indication of the work that goes into staging a piece of ballet apart from the dancers, such as costumes, make-up, or stage, sound or lighting design. I argue that in relation to these slippages we can begin to understand how the piece can be read as a kind of critical commentary on the problem of servile virtuosity.

The virtuosity of a ballet lies not only in the flawless execution of the choreography by the dancers but in the totality of the ballet machine that produces the performance (for an audience). Just as the virtuosic labour of the dancer is not objectified into an end product, neither is the work of those other practitioners – technicians, designers, etc. – working on the ballet geared towards anything but the (staging of the) performance. And while the dancer's body might be the quintessential locus for the analysis of servile virtuosity, it is important to note that everything else is no less 'in service' of the form of the work and also presents a 'subjugation to logics of production' of the machine of ballet.[124]

### *Dancing against One's Own Dispensability*

While it would be too simplistic to suggest, as Hamera does, that servile virtuosity can be attested to wherever a commitment to a 'flawless execution' and 'continued excellence'[125] is observed, *Véronique Doisneau*'s preoccupation with mastery and the price that is paid by the dancer for that mastery (exhaustion, short career due to early retirement, an existence just outside the spotlight) is indicative of the connection between servile virtuosity and the work ethic and institutional practices necessary to produce it. In terms of institutional practice, the question of dispensability is prominent. According to Hamera, servile virtuosity, present in contemporary labour processes, is fostered through an 'imperative to be excellent', which is perceived as the only protection against one's expendability.[126] Few other professions epitomise this mentality as acutely as ballet does with its commitment to continual training, long hours, harsh discipline, and short career spans. The imperative to be excellent is built into the logic of a craft, whose mastery is only achievable by adhering to strict work schedules and working at the limits of what the human body is physically capable of enduring. This imperative already creates its own conditions of dispensability due to the high risk ballet poses to the dancer's physical health and mental wellbeing. It is aided further by an economic logic of dispensability: Worldwide, thousands of aspiring dancers complete their training each year to compete for the very limited opportunities for work in professional ballet companies. For those inside, the competition does not ease up but is intensified by

[124] Ridout, 'On the Work of Things', 404.
[125] Hamera, 'The Labors of Michael Jackson', 757.
[126] Hamera, 757.

internal rivalries with dancers vying to move through the hierarchies of the company towards the coveted soloist roles. Additionally, the pressure from the outside continues. The market is flooded with reserve workers eager to replace any unfit dancers. When every injury (or pregnancy) could mean the end to one's career, and an army of surplus workers ensures that this would not come at a great cost to the company, the sense of one's dispensability is ever-present. This impression is further compounded by the relatively short career spans of professional dancers, which ensures a high turnover and few second chances. This sense of dispensability also negatively affects the imperative to be excellent, insofar as it causes the expectations of what constitutes an excellent performance to become harder and harder to fulfil. The constant workers surplus and high levels of competition means that dancing abilities that were considered exceptional 10 or 20 years ago is now considered merely a standard level of execution, which is illustrated by the ever-increasing difficulty of turns and jumps. So, while excellence might be perceived as a 'bulwark'[127] against dispensability, the fear of dispensability ensures that excellence always represents an aspiration rather than a reality. The entanglements of excellence and dispensability ensure that ballet dancers, like other post-Fordist workers, face highly unstable working conditions and little job security despite their high levels of skill and education and status as elite cultural workers.

Bel makes a clever dramaturgical choice when choosing a dancer close to retirement. With her career as a dancer due to end within days, Doisneau is at the verge of her own dispensability, and thus both embodies and comments on dispensability in multiple ways. On the one hand, the fact that she has managed to have a career as a ballet dancer at a prestigious opera house means that she has succeeded in carving out a space for herself in a very competitive field. On the other hand, her matter-of-fact assertion that she 'never became a star'[128] acknowledges the fact that the stars are the only dancers who enjoy a certain level of indispensability. When Doisneau retires, a few days after the performance, the company will have already run rehearsals to replace her solo roles and parts in the corps de ballet, ensuring a seamless transition, and demonstrating the interchangeability of the company's employees. By naming the piece

[127] Hamera, 757.
[128] Bel, *Véronique Doisneau* Part 1, 03:33.

*Véronique Doisneau*, Bel inverts this logic of dispensability, giving Doisneau, perhaps for the first time in her career, a piece that no one else can perform – a show for which she is truly, if ironically, indispensable.

### *Creative Concept versus Physical Execution*

This institutional practice of dispensability is complimented by a work ethic, which engenders servile virtuosity. I have already mentioned the strict work regimes and corporeal strains that feature prominently in the practice of ballet dancing. This is true for the performance of the spectacular and athletic performances of the soloists but also for the less glamourous but by no means less virtuosic performances of the ensemble dancers. In a particularly revealing moment of the performance, Doisneau lets the audience observe the amount of physical skill that is required from the dancers in the corps the ballet for just holding a single pose for several minutes. Performing the part of one of 32 dancers in the corps de ballet during the second act of *Swan Lake*, which includes long moments of stillness for the corps de ballet, where they become 'human décor' to highlight the stars, Doisneau demonstrates the high levels of routine and self-control a position in a ballet company demands in performing such moments. After asking the sound technician, Bruno, to play a recording of the ballet music (another hint at the theatrical machinery and labour in service of the performance), she spends the next several minutes in several poses, which she executes with almost complete stillness, often with her back turned towards the audience, interrupted only by short dance sequences to transition from pose to pose. In total, this section lasts for about 10 minutes, which is a substantial part of a show that is only 40 minutes long. Waiting, this suggests, is a substantial part of the everyday work routine of a dancer in the corps de ballet of a classical ballet company.[129]

[129] Depicting the worker as waiting, of course, has a longer tradition in theatre. In opposition to Socialist imaginings of the worker or proletariat as active and bursting with activity, Brecht, for example, conceives of waiting as the main actions of the proletarians featured in *Saint Joan of the Stockyards*. The passivity of waiting suggests a being at the mercy of and in service to more powerful social forces. More recently sociological studies of waiting have suggested that the question of who has to wait is increasingly becoming a question of class with those with access to wealth increasingly able to forgo, as in buy their way out of, long waits, whether this is in the airport security line, at cultural events, or for more crucial services like health or finance (See, for example, Barry Schwartz, 'Waiting, Exchange, and Power: The Distribution of Time in Social Systems', *American Journal of Sociology* 79, no. 4 (1974): 841–



Figure 7: Véronique Doisneau holding a pose from *Swan Lake* on an otherwise empty stage. *Véronique Doisneau* by Jérôme Bel (Opéra de Paris, 2004). Screenshot taken 17 January 2021.

Crucially, Doisneau stresses here that this task is not only taxing physically but also demands a substantial mental effort. Describing it as 'the most horrible thing we do' adding that she usually 'wants to scream' during this passage.[130] The self-discipline she exerts both corporally and cognitively is indicative of a work ethic in service of servile virtuosity, and in staging her role in the corps de ballet during *Swan Lake, Véronique Doisneau* comments on the subjectivity of servility these working process produce in the dancers. Here, the productive friction of the lecture performance, which Brandstetter points to, comes into focus. Doisneau embodies the contradiction that, in order to demonstrate her critique of this mode of performing in ballet (the painful and dreary poses), she has to first master it. In a mode that can be described as Brechtian, as it embodies the sense of estrangement from her work she faces, she oscillates between the understanding of this work as alienating and the virtuosic mode in which she performs it. Staging this contradiction allows the lecture performance to make the audience experience the criticism Bel launches at the form of ballet not only from an

70. Doisneau's waiting thus needs to be seen as an expression of the professional hierarchies within ballet as well as the unequal distribution of agency within it.

[130] Jérôme Bel, *Véronique Doisneau* Part 4, 11 April 2011, YouTube Video, 11 April 2011, 00:58, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=TfsOj4a2ggA&t=57s.

intellectual but also from an experiential point of view. Observing Doisneau hold the poses for as long as she does make the pain and discomfort this must cause palpable.

This subjectivity of servility is further explored in her discussion of various choreographers and their influence on her career as well as her understanding of ballet. Especially telling are her comments on her meeting with Rudolf Nureyev. Again, the associations of flawless execution and mastery of movement entangled in conceptions of servile virtuosity are taken up when she says that 'a meeting with Rudolf Nureyev was fundamental' for her.[131] She says, 'he understood everything. He gave us the idea that it was through the mastery of the language of dance that emotion is created. Above all he told us to respect the sense of the movement and not to interpret it'.[132] Aside from the fact that it is hard to imagine how one could execute a movement without interpreting it, this is telling in light of the assumptions of mastery and authority present in this statement. According to Milder, this section illustrates the irony with which Bel approached this piece. She claims that Doisneau 'explains this, ironically, in the context of a show that serves to interpret not only the movements, but also their social history'.[133] While Milder's observation is true and speaks to the irony of that moment in performance, her assertion neglects to speak of the expectations of obedience and the (self-)denial of creative agency present in Doisneau's presentation of Nureyev's work. Nureyev's conception of ballet, as relayed by Doisneau, enacts a binary between mastery and execution of movement on the one hand, and concept and score on the other. In short, Milder neglects the split between physical and cognitive labour. While virtuosic mastery is contingent on the flawless execution of movement, according to Nureyev, it requires no form of creative agency ('interpretation') on the part of the dancer. Instead, the virtuosity of the choreographer ('score') is expressed via the dancer's body but without their creative contribution. In this conception, the dancer becomes the instrument, which expresses the choreographer's mental labour, leaving no room for her own creative labour or credit.

Here, this conception of the division of labour re-enacts a hierarchy between different modes of labour. By reproducing the split between choreographer, as the

[131] See Bel, *Véronique Doisneau* Part 1.
[132] Bel, 04:02-04:28.
[133] Milder, 'Teaching as Art', 19.

person providing the mental labour, and dancer, as the performer providing the physical labour, the performance steps into the tradition of separating the 'genius' of mental labour (which is largely assumed to be the product of talent or inspiration) from the virtuosity of physical labour (which is seen as the result of mastery and skill).[134] However, *Véronique Doisneau* complicates this assumption not only by Doisneau drawing attention to the fact that the execution of the physical labour of ballet also takes a lot of mental effort, but also by the piece's status as conceptual dance itself.

Conceptual dance refers to the group of European choreographers around Jérôme Bel, Xavier Le Roy, Tino Sehgal, and others, who first became active in the 1990s and, who according to Gerald Siegmund, sought to link choreography to the minimalism of the 1960s, where concept takes 'priority over its implementation and uniqueness'.[135] In Bel's case that often meant taking up an 'ironic play with the notion of the author'.[136] His works do not feature the author as the 'autonomous creator, constantly making art out of nothing',[137] the inspired 'genius', so to speak. In *Véronique Doisneau*, the ironic title features Doisneau as the subject of the performance and the (indispensable) performer of the piece, while the authorship (or the credit) for the choreography remains solely with Bel. This connects the piece with a longer tradition in Bel's work to comment on authorship and authenticity via his choice of title. His second piece of performance, entitled *Jérôme Bel*, featured himself as a dancer but also three other dancers, thereby

[134] Bel himself has a problem with this definition of labour in contemporary dance. He says as much in his 2022 lecture performance *Jérôme Bel*, which he wrote but has various local artists perform in the role of Jérôme Bel (Bel and his company no longer travel by aeroplane for environmental reasons, so this is a way of distributing his performances abroad, while of course also probing questions of authenticity and performance, always at the heart of Bel's work). In his performance, the performer standing in for Bel says: 'Indeed I have always found this power of the author/choreographer that I exert and that is conferred upon me problematic and questionable. For I, too alienate the performers in my shows by directing them, often clumsily, in order to subject them to my vision, which they do not necessarily share' (*Jérôme Bel*, 01:30:03.) This is the reason, he states, that in his later pieces, like *Disabled Theatre* and *Gala 2015*, he is wary of imposing anything onto the dancers. Striving for a more equitable distribution of power and creative agency, he cites Rancière's *Ignorant School Master* as a choreographic ideal and says 'I am emancipating myself from my own authority, my domination, and that is a relief' (*Jérôme Bel*, 01:32:24.) His whole choice to have yet another performer stand in for himself, thus differentiating between the concept of a performance and the execution, however, points to the fact that Bel knows that this imagined emancipation is not entirely possible in light of how conceptual dance is structured today.

[135] Gerald Siegmund, 'Xavier Le Rox - Review', Artist Website, *Xavier Le Roy (* (blog), 12 February 2001, https://www.xavierleroy.com/page.php?sp=54e59ecc36602be4e50bbc961458fc724e63011a&lg=en.

[136] Siegmund.

[137] Siegmund.

complicating the relationship between the dancer body on stage and the perceived authority of the choreographer of stage. Similarly, his piece *Xavier Le Roy*, which was in fact choreographed and conceptualised by Le Roy, but claimed by Bel, points to a negotiation between authorship, credit, and execution. His ironic comments on authorship show that Bel is aware of the perceived division of labour and the social hierarchy attached to it. However, in the context of ballet, in which *Véronique Doisneau* appears, and the rigid roles ascribed to those participating in it, this binary between author and executor is so inscribed in the historic conditions of its mode of production that the multiple signifiers of production Bel mobilises in his other works are unable to float quite so freely between different bodies and identities. In this context then it becomes significant that Doisneau is not given any choreography credit but is relegated to the realm of performer/executor. For all its interest in subverting exiting hierarchies, in this case Bel re-inscribed the binary between concept (genius) and execution (virtuosity) rather than deconstructing it.

In fact, if in conceptual dance, as Sigmund suggests, concept takes priority over implementation, then conceptual dance as a movement is just as invested in servile virtuosity – and the subjectivity of servility it creates – as classical ballet.[138] The difference between them is the form of virtuosity they are interested in showcasing. Ballet is principally interested in the flawless execution of the dance based on a codified repertoire that showcases the 'beautiful bodies' of the dancers, as Sigmund puts it. Conceptual virtuosity (score) can thus rely on the performance (servility) of the dancer. Bel's concept-driven pieces are not interested in movement being singular or original but want to assert virtuosic work as sperate from the body of the dancers. In both cases, the dancer is placed in a servile position but the parameters of what makes their performance virtuosic change because the mode of their labour moves from technically flawless execution to exposing the institutional practices behind the image of perfection. The idea of concept taking priority over implementation is then actually an aid in producing servile virtuosity in dancers as it fully separates mental and physical production, leaving those on the side of physical production little room for reclaiming creative agency.

[138] Gerald Siegmund, *Jérôme Bel: Dance, Theatre, and the Subject* (London: Palgrave Macmillan UK, 2017), 10.

*Véronique Doisneau* thus perches precariously between two traditions of dance both invested in separating mental from physical labour and thus creating a hierarchy within a division of labour. This separation leads to a perpetuation of the notion that servile virtuosity is a necessary feature within the mode of artistic production and that an expression of servility needs to come from those invested in the physical labour of performance. This shows not only an imbalance of power with cognitive labour taking priority over the physical delivery of the concept but also questions what experiences of subjectivity this post-Fordist conception of virtuosity engenders. Among all the critiques of the institution of ballet Bel's piece presents, it is the production of the servile worker/dancer that ballet produces that is given the most focus. Yet, my analysis has shown that the same critique is encapsulated in the ideological formation of the field of conceptual dance itself.

## Jochen Roller: *Perform Performing* – The Virtuosity of Precarity

Roller's performance deviates from the established conception of dance virtuosity and instead recentres virtuosity as a discourse of creative and performative restraint. Unlike *Véronique Doisneau*, Jochen Roller is the dancer and choreographer of his lecture performance trilogy *Perform Performing*, so the split between concept and execution exhibited in the previous case study is nullified here. Instead of focusing on how the performance negotiates different aspects of creative labour (both physical and intellectual) my analysis of this piece will focus on how Roller's trilogy traces the economic constraints to contemporary cultural production and the sort of virtuosic performance work that these constraints necessitate. Here, creative agency is dictated not by someone else's concept/mental labour – as in Jérôme Bel's performance – but by the material realities that shape not only how the work of the dancer is produced but also what kind of work and the aesthetics of this production. The 'score' the performance trilogy plays out again is how a certain economic logic inscribes itself into modes of artistic production and how the virtuosic labour performed under these conditions cannot be separated from them.

In *Perform Performing* Roller tackles the precarity risk and insecurity that freelance artists face in a creative economy. Based in Berlin, a city with relatively high

levels of publicly available arts funding yet nonetheless hit by austerity politics in the last 20 years, dancer/choreographer/curator Roller chronicles the daily struggles of freelance artists – such as needing to work multiple jobs, navigating complicated art funding bureaucracies, and facing an uncertain future. Carrying the subtitle 'a trilogy on the sense and senselessness of looking at dance as work', *Perform Performing* negotiates the idea that dance performances are nothing more than commodities. This is especially apparent in the first two parts of the trilogy *No Money, No Love* (which premiered at Podiwell in Berlin in November 2002) and *Art Gigolo* (Kampnagel, Hamburg April 2003), which thematise the economic precarity dancers face as well as the precarious status of dance as work. In *No Money, No Love* Roller examines the connection between dance, profession, and performance. Faced with insufficient arts funding that might otherwise protect his existence as an artist, Roller is forced to take on various non-artistic jobs, such as a salesperson for H&M, a customer service agent in a German Rail call centre, an escort, a bike courier, or a telemarketer for muscle trainers. Roller stresses that these jobs alone allow him to carry out his artistic career and uses the physical tasks connected to each of these jobs as the materials for his movement pieces that puncture his address to the audience. In the second part, *Art Gigolo,* Rollers asks about the economic value of contemporary dance. Probing the social and economic relevance of dance, Roller questions whether the state funding of culture is justified or can ever be justified in economic terms. Conjuring the figure of the 'art gigolo' who experiences an internal and not economically motivated desire for arts and culture, Roller positions artistic labour as both labour and non-labour, ironically preserving – or reinstating – a romantic ideal of the artist. In the final performance of the trilogy *That's the Way I Like It* (premiered in 2004 at the Industriekultur Saar Festival in Saarbrücken), Roller looks to the future of art and asks what '"technologies of an entrepreneurial self" does the artist need if, on the one hand, he is exposed to the conditions of production in capitalistic markets, but when, on the other hand, the social demand for art is declining?'[139] To answer this question, Roller shows five recorded telephone conversations with five men also named 'Jochen Roller' and living in various parts of Germany. These conversations are often indicative of

[139] Gabriele Klein, 'Labour, Life, Art: On the Social Anthropology of Labour', *Performance Research* 17, no. 6 (1 December 2012): 5.

the declining social demand and appreciation of art (in the forms that cultural funding is producing at the time). Roller concludes that the only way to survive as an artist in such a climate is to generate additional income and garner symbolic capital from the artistic work of the performer.[140] With this in mind, Roller staged an auction at the International Summer Festival at Hamburg's Kulturfabrik Kampnagel in August 2009 after his last performance of *No Money, No Love*, where he sold costumes and props, but also dances and choreographies featured in the performance, giving perhaps the ultimate tongue-in-cheek comment on commodification of dance.

*Perform Performing* is structured along similar lines to *Véronique Doisneau*, with sections of direct audience address interspersed with moments of dance or video recordings illustrating some of the points made before. Like Doisneau, Roller wears a headset throughout the performances and also plays up the lecture-like aesthetics by using a mobile flipchart and colourful felt-tip marker in the first part of the trilogy to illustrate his cost-benefit analyses to the audience. In her essay on lecture performances in dance since the 1990s, Gabriele Brandstetter comments on this structural similarity between lecture performances from that era. Terming them 'choreographies of showing and telling', she describes lecture performances as a practice where meaning is produced 'only through this overlap of the telling-through-showing and the showing-through-telling'.[141] Brandstetter interrogates *Perform Performing* and other performances to draw attention to the fact that the interplay between showing and telling happens in the realm of autobiography.[142] Autobiography, here, gives not only the context or the content of the lecture but is 'elevated to another figuration of performance: it is a "self-performance" in the sense of a performance/presentation of the self'.[143] This mode of categorising these performances as 'self-performance' seems particularly apt in Roller's case as the self explored in this trilogy is not only the focus of a certain (auto-)biographical curiosity, it literally becomes the nexus from which the trilogy will try to create artistic and economic value. The self – which under the condition of freelance artistic labour is

[140] The last part of the trilogy diverts somewhat from the lecture performance set-up of the first two performances, as the telephone recordings shift the focus more towards video essays, which is why I will predominantly focus my analysis on the first two performances for the purpose of this chapter.
[141] Brandstetter, 'Showing Dance. Lecture Performances in Dance since the 1990s', 360.
[142] Brandstetter, 360.
[143] Brandstetter, 360.

pushed into permanent productivity and permanently productive labour – is the site where the labour of the contemporary creative worker becomes manifest.

According to Gabriele Klein, the lecture performance as a form is particularly apt at showing this connection between self-performance and creative labour. Summarising Roller's performance, she writes:

> The artistic work of the performer itself becomes a work performance in which the production of added value in terms of symbolic capital is decisive for the existence of the artist's subject. The adequate artistic format for this is the lecture performance, which exhibits the process of artistic work, thus legitimizing artistic creation as a process of labour. The artist appears here as a self-creating value chain, encompassing all areas of life and labour.[144]

As shown above, 'legitimizing artistic creation as a process of labour' is a feature of Virno's understanding of virtuosity, which is also founded on the 'hybridization between different spheres' of (political) life and labour.[145] The lecture performances – with their repetitive 'score' (of showing and telling), which is, as Virno points out 'always performed, over and again', their status as public-facing performance, and their ability to perform this self-performance as self-abstraction – become the site where labour 'assumes a virtuosic (or communicative) semblance'.[146] In other words, the labour displayed in *Perform Performing* is both a theatrical abstraction of the labour it took to raise the funds and money outside of the performance to be able to make this performance and an interrogation of the communicative labour happening in the moment of the performance itself. Roller's work and self thus stand in for a form of virtuosic performance that is present in creative production but not limited to it.

### *A Job Like Any Other*

Whereas *Véronique Doisneau* highlights the exceptional status of dance/ballet work – both in terms of its physical rigour and in terms of its relative security from common economic constraints – *Perform Performing* highlights dance's proximity to other forms of work. In the opening section of *No Money, No Love* Roller states:

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[144] Klein, 'Labour, Life, Art', 5.
[145] Virno, *A Grammar of the Multitude. For an Analysis of Contemporary Forms of Life*, 64.
[146] Virno, 65.

> When I don't work as a dancer, I do different jobs. And I don't get these other jobs because I apply for them as a dancer. So, I have to find a different professional identity when I don't want to work as a dancer. I move differently, I dress differently, I speak differently. I do the same thing when I am standing on stage and working as a dancer. Sales people also move, speak and dress differently when they work. They perform, as I do, their job.[147]

Echoing Joseph Pine's and James M. Gilmore's exploration of the experience economy – encapsulated in the now famous adage 'work is theatre and every business is a stage',[148] – Roller points to the ways behaviours and expressions are modulated in the workplace, especially in service-oriented jobs like sales. The statement also touches on the concept of emotional labour, which workers in public-facing jobs regularly have to perform as part of the service that is expected of them. Coined by Arlie Hochschild in her book *The Managed Heart*, emotional labour refers to the process of regulating one's emotion at work (by smiling more, acting more nicely than would come naturally but also by suppressing negative emotions, such as frustration or anger – no matter how justified) in order to regulate the emotions of customers, co-workers, and managers and enhance the emotional experience of clients during the service provision.[149] Both the idea of the experience economy and the concept of emotional labour underline the role of performance in contemporary workplaces, which Roller also draws attention to. Roller goes a step further, however. For the purpose of this performance, he not merely draws parallels between dance work and service work, he makes this part of his non-dance jobs the object of his lecture performance.

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[147] Roller, *Perform Performing. Part 1: No Money, No Love*, 04:26-05:03. (My translation, original German: ‚Wenn ich nicht als Tänzer arbeite, mache ich andere Jobs. Und diese Jobs bekomme ich nicht, weil ich mich da als Tänzer bewerbe. Also muss ich mir eine andere berufliche Identität zulegen, wenn ich nicht als Tänzer arbeiten will. Deshalb bewege ich mich anders, kleide mich anders und spreche anders. Genau das gleiche mache ich, ich auf der Bühne stehe und als Tänzer arbeite. Verkäufer bewegen, sprechen und kleiden sich auch anders, wenn sie arbeiten. Sie performen, wie ich auch, ihren Job'.)

[148] B. Joseph Pine and James H. Gilmore, *The Experience Economy* (Boston, MA: Harvard Business Press, 2011), 1.

[149] See Arlie Russell Hochschild, *The Managed Heart: Commercialization of Human Feeling* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 2003). For an analysis of the performance of emotional labour and also the Stanislavskian understanding of acting used in *The Managed Heart,* please see Jaswinder Blackwell-Pal, 'Serving the Self: Authenticity, Performance and Emotional Labour' (Doctoral Thesis, Birkbeck College, University of London, 2022).

He says, 'I perform the performing of jobs because my actual job is that of a dancer not a salesperson',[150] and begins by giving some details about his time working at the clothing brand H&M. He tells the audience that before being able to work there, each potential employee has to take an 'aptitude test', [151] which consists of folding a T-shirt in front of the other sales staff in a store. H&M has what Roller calls 'patent folding',[152] meaning a special and standardised way all their clothing is folded, which new employees have to master to ensure brand continuity and a similar customer experience in all stores. He then plays an audio recording of the instructions of the folding process, while doing what could be described as a 'folding dance' – a piece of dance that begins by miming the individual steps of the folding process in the air in front of him but then uses these materials to develop a more complicated and abstracted short dance mainly focused on arm movements, which gather speed as the audio recording progresses. In the next moment, the audio switches to a recorded radio documentary about dog shows, describing the kind of tricks dogs are asked to perform during one of these events. As the recording plays, Roller grabs the shirt he had previously placed on the flip chart and folds it according to the H&M method described before.

Roller's actions here demonstrate the difference between workers' movements and working knowledge. While it is unlikely that H&M actually has a patent on their folding method (and I could not find anything suggesting this during my research), the term nonetheless denotes how the intellectual labour is integrated into the work process and how the workers are expected to repeat a rehearsed score again and again. This differentiation between physical and intellectual work in industrial production is not new to post-Fordism. Klein rightly points out that 'ever since the establishment of the factory regime (Marx), material theorists have differentiated between workers' movements and working knowledge in the factory, and thus between physical and intellectual work in industrial production'.[153] However, what theories of post-Fordism and virtuosity make clear – and what Roller's performance illustrates – is that this differentiation is now being

[150] Roller, *Perform Performing. Part 1: No Money, No Love*, 05:03-05:15. (My translation: ‚Sie arbeiten aber nicht als Tänzer. Im Unterschied zu Ihnen performe ich das Performen von Jobs, weil mein Job eigentlich Tänzer und nicht Verkäufer ist'.)
[151] 'Eignungstest'
[152] 'Patentfaltung'
[153] Klein, 'Labour, Life, Art', 10.

mined for performance and derives value from that process. The fact that the test is being staged in front of other co-workers seems telling here. In order to perform well at the job at H&M, it is not enough to learn the folding technique and execute it exactly. One needs to be able to display the confidence to do so in front of an audience.

Roller's performance even goes one step further. By de-contextualising this work, by following the score of the folding technique on stage first without the piece of clothing and then exemplified like a 'trick' in a dog show, Roller comments on how this performance of virtuosic intellectual labour can be alienating. Hochschild describes how those compelled to perform emotional labour in their jobs can become estranged from their expression of feelings and their actual feelings. She cites her observations and interviews with flight attendants, who have shut down emotionally (both in their professional and personal lives) as a result of the demands of the managed friendliness of their job.[154] By intentionally performing the movements (which here represent the intellectual property of the H&M) disaffectedly and while also casting himself in the role of a 'show dog', Roller stages a similar dissatisfaction and estrangement from the movements and performances this particular service job requires. While the performative aspect of the role is crucial to execution of the job, it is also – according to Roller – what alienates the virtuosic labour of the H&M worker. Like the flight attendants who suffer from the all-encompassing emotional regime of their jobs, Roller's performance illustrates the demands of standardised intellectual labour. Roller uses the techniques of the lecture performance, which layers showing and telling, demonstrating with commentary, to negotiate the tensions between worker's movements and working knowledge as well as physical and intellectual labour in service jobs. While dance work is one mode of working among others, in this case Roller uses the work of dance to show how the interplay between movement and concept can theatricalise contemporary work processes. On the other hand, the fact that the found material of the 'score' of the folding technique becomes a dance in Roller's show also points to the fact that virtuosic labour is increasingly able to be frozen and commodified for consumption. Roller's engagement with the folding technique allowed him to extract additional value from the company's intellectual property. Like other workers he collected a wage but by integrating it into his

[154] Hochschild, *The Managed Heart*, 89–136.

lecture performance he also was able to extract from it symbolic (and by extension economic) capital. Dance work thus stands as one job among many, while also existing in a slightly exceptional relation to the ideas of virtuosity in this performance series.

### *The Economic Case for Virtuosity*

Roller's performance draws more similarities between the concept of making work and working (as a dancer) on stage. In the most lecture-like section of *No Money, No* Love, Roller performs a cost-profit calculation of the production for freelance dance work. Charting numbers and figures on his flip chart with felt-tip markers and magnetic letters, he takes the audience through the costs of producing a piece of dance without the help of cultural funding. He tells the audience that his newest solo piece, 'Being Christina Aguilera', took him four weeks to create, where he rehearsed the piece three hours in the morning and spent the afternoons working in a record store. Broadly speaking, he explains, he had to work 6 hours to be able to afford 3 hours of rehearsals, which he marks up as a 'self-exploitation factor of 0.5'.[155] Per hour of work in the record store, he earned €10, resulting in a daily wage of €60, a weekly wage of €300, and a monthly wage of €1200. The solo was 20 minutes long, so in total he spent €1200 on 20 minutes of production time or €600 for 10 minutes. One minute of dance production thus cost him €60. This kind of calculation is of course facetious. It omits other factors, such as living costs, taxes, other production costs, such as marketing, etc., yet it points to the real calculations freelance workers regularly have to make. The nod to the 'self-exploitation factor', which is more indicative of exploitation the lower it gets, serves as an ironic comment on the rational considerations casualised arts workers must engage with. This sense of 'underappreciation' and over-investment is also highlighted in the excerpt from 'Being Christina Aguilera' Roller then performs. Dancing to Aguilera's pop balled 'Underappreciated' – which includes the line 'after time, I realized I seem to give more than I get'[156] – Roller's movements are looped and involve him miming elbowing himself in the stomach. The movement repertoire is firmly situated within contemporary modern dance, with isolations of arm and leg movements as well as echoes of contract and

[155] Roller, *Perform Performing. Part 1: No Money, No Love*, 14:15.
[156] Christina Aguilera, 'Underappreciated - Lyrics', Songlyric Repository, Genius, 22 October 2002, https://genius.com/Christina-aguilera-underappreciated-lyrics.

release techniques, which contrasts with the pop-y 2000s video dance moves one might expect given the choice of music, further highlighting the ironic undertones of this otherwise serious (self-)critique.




**Figure 8:** Jochen Roller's engaging in a cost-benefit analysis of his work as a dancer. Jochen Roller, *No Money, No Love* (Podiwell, Berlin, 2002). Photo: Friedemann Simon.

Roller pushes this kind of ironic cost-benefit analysis even further in the next section of the performance, where he vows not the spend any arts subsidies in the next three minutes of the performance. Instead, he proposes to outsource the performance work to a member in the audience while he works on the financing of the production by bagging letters for three minutes. Roller had already mentioned that the low-skill job of bagging campaign pamphlets and advertising leaflets is a menial job with which some workers in the call-centre earn additional money while performing their other job in customer service. He explains that each bagged letter is worth 10 cents and that, in rehearsals, he was able to bag 50 letters in three minutes, earning him a wage of 5€ per three minutes. He will use these 5€ to pay whichever member of the audience to perform for him over the course of the next three minutes. 'This means as an artist I earn the capital through my work, so that in the next three minutes not one tax euro needs to be

spent on culture'.[157] He then begins bagging letters as the song 'Takin' care of business' plays. After about a minute of watching Roller perform the bagging of letters, a member of the audience gets up and tries to help Roller with his task. Roller directs them to the microphone instead and the audience members says 'He wants me to perform for you instead' while shrugging their shoulders. They then perform an awkward two-step turn to the beat of the music before Roller 'saves' them and offers to share the task of bagging the letters instead, which the audience member gratefully accepts. Together they spend the rest of the song bagging letters before Roller hands the audience member a 5€ note and asks them to return to their seat. Here the tension between what is considered performance and what isn't is obvious. While the act of bagging letters for money is not in itself performative, the fact that Roller now does this in front of an audience turns this economic activity into a dance score. Like the folding of the H&M T-shirt the act of bagging letters becomes part of a found movement repertoire, which Roller and the audience member then develop together. Contrary to his claims, Roller does not stop performing but integrates this secondary job into his performance in order to show the similarities between freelance dancers and other casualised workers. Virtuosity here becomes conditional on a) generating the necessary income to produce dance work outside of the realm of arts and dance funding and b) on the replicability of this work in performance contexts.

Through these lecture performances, Roller performs what Sybille Peters calls a 'gesture of submission to the economic regime',[158] which exposes the demands of virtuosic labour as contradictory. Standing at the flipchart and calculating what one minute of dance costs, while literally taking up one minute of the performance for this calculation means that he turns the calculation into a dance that is part of the choreography of the piece (as does the bagging of the letters for money), which is not virtuosic in the traditional sense of being even particularly physical. Submitting to the economic regime of artistic production in this case means to eschew expectations of physical virtuosity in favour of highlighting the imperative to perform – and to show

[157] Roller, *Perform Performing. Part 1: No Money, No Love*, 21:50-22:08. (My translation: ‚Das heißt, ich als Künstler erarbeitet mit meiner Arbeit das Kapital und in den nächsten drei Minuten muss kein einziger Steuer-Euro für die Kultur ausgegeben werden'.)
[158] Peters, *Der Vortrag Als Performance*, 199. (In German: 'Geste der Unterwerfung unter das ökonomische Regime')

performance as economic success – under post-Fordist regimes. Here the lecture performances move from a 'representation of economic facts'[159] to an 'economy of representation'[160] or better to economic justification for the form of representation exhibited in this decision to perform calculations as dance. For Peters the lecture performance becomes a 'episto-poetic scenario',[161] which makes knowledge appear predominantly through its ability to perform economically – both by making those economic structures of the work apparent in performance and as a way of performing dance within very limited economic means.

Both the cost-benefit analysis above and this interaction with the audience raise the question of what art is worth and more specifically what the performance of dance work is worth and to whom. The discourse on self-exploitation points towards conceptions of artistic work as 'labours of love',[162] which are often used to justify precarious working conditions in cultural fields. 'Outsourcing' the work of performance to audience members for money, thus integrating them in the performance as 'prosumers' (producers and consumers of the work at the same time), also stages questions of skills and mastery in the performance. If the dance work requires so little preparation and skill that a random person from the audience can step into Roller's shoes during the performance and create the same 'value' as Roller as a trained dancer (the 5€ Roller is simultaneously generating), then how is his performance to be justified as art? Roller himself wrestles with this question of what his work and his art is worth when he applies for cultural funding. He says that for cultural funders his work is only worth something if they give him money to work as a dancer. When he does not receive cultural funding, he cannot work as a dancer, which must mean that then his work as a dancer does not have value.[163] The show ends on this purposefully pessimistic reading of dance work as labour, which sets the scene to further explore the question of the societal value

[159] Peters, 199. (In German: 'Darstellung ökonomischer Fakten')
[160] Peters, 199. (In German: 'Ökonomie der Darstellung')
[161] Peters, 199. (In German: 'wissenspoietische[s] Szenario')
[162] Harvie, *Fair Play - Art, Performance and Neoliberalism*, 53.
[163] Roller, *Perform Performing. Part 1: No Money, No Love*, 35:01-35.41. (My translation: ‚Wenn ich mich bei Kulturbehörden, Kulturstiftung, Kulturverwaltung, und Kulturämtern um Geld bewerbe, um als Tänzer arbeiten zu können, frage ich mich wie viel meine Arbeit wert ist. Denn Kulturbehörden, Kulturstiftung, Kulturverwaltung und Kulturämtern ist meine Arbeit dann etwas wert, wenn sie mir Geld geben, damit ich als Tänzer arbeiten kann. Wenn sie mir kein Geld geben, kann ich nicht als Tänzer arbeiten und meine Arbeit als Tänzer hat keinen Wert'.)

of dance and dance funding in part two of the trilogy *Art Gigolo.* The title *Art Gigolo* makes obvious connections between the work of performance/dance and the work of escorts and sex workers. Roller has already established in the first part of the trilogy that he also works as an escort to finance his dance work and drawn out the similarities between the two jobs. Like escorts, dancers are paid to entertain clients/audiences. Being a 'gigolo' for art, however, is also tied to notions of doing art as a labour of love, which in this performance is pitted against doing dance for economic gain (both individually and on a societal level).

The most striking argument Roller makes for the economic value of art is his ironic imaging of himself as the 'tendu star'. Here virtuosity becomes imagined as an economic asset, a unique selling point of each performance. Roller observes that most taxpayers prefer going to musicals rather than contemporary dance performances. Hence, he says, it is illogical that he receives art funding for his productions, but musicals do not.[164] 'I create a performance from the money of a taxpayer, who is not here'.[165] He then gives the following calculation comparing his arts funding to a manual labour job, claiming that him doing one *tendu*[166] on stage costs the equivalent of a worker in the port of Hamburg carrying three sacks of potatoes onto a ship. He goes off stage and comes back dragging a large heavy sack onto the stage; an action, which he repeats twice more until three large hessian sacks filled with potatoes lie centre stage. This kind of comparison is of course somewhat arbitrary and far-fetched as even in the early 2000s ships in large global ports were not loaded by individual workers carrying individual sacks but are part of much bigger logistical apparatuses with container systems and cranes loading and off-loading ships. That is not to say that working processes in port do not still rely on huge amounts of physical labour (in loading and off-loading lorries and containers, for example) and

[164] The 1990s and early 2000s were a time when private production companies opened big Broadway and Westend musicals in various German cities. The live entertainment company Stage Entertainment opened the German production of the Lion King in Hamburg in 2001 and since then Hamburg had become a hub for Broadway-style musical theatre production in Germany. Currently German-language productions of Disney's *Frozen*, Lin Manuel-Miranda's *Hamilton* and the Abba jukebox musical *Mamma Mia* are running in Hamburg , and according to Hamburg Marketing, over two million visitors come to Hamburg annually to see musicals. (See Hamburg Marketing GmbH, 'Hamburg - The Musical Metropolis', n.d., https://marketing.hamburg.de/musicals.html.)

[165] Jochen Roller, *Perform Performing. Part 2: Art Gigolo*, 28 April 2015, Vimeo Recording, 28 April 2015, 08:37-08:42, https://vimeo.com/126295507?embedded=true&source=vimeo_logo&owner=5915739.

[166] A *tendu* is a a fundamental ballet move where the working leg is extended along the floor until only the tip of the toe remains touching the floor.

what Roller's comparison purposefully juxtaposes is the creative work of the artist against the manual labour of the port worker. Having demonstrated the hard work of dragging heavy sacks, Roller asks the audience, how he can justify his action of doing a *tendu* on stage to the port worker. His answer is:

> [I can justify this tendu to the worker] only if I try to use the tendu to regenerate the tax money. To do this, I'd have to do the tendu so well that news gets out around the country that "this Roller guy does such f***ing great *tendus*, let's go to Hamburg!" When the tourists then come to Hamburg, they will go on a harbour tour before the tendu show. This tour will subsidise the ailing harbour, which employs the port worker. This way a fantastic give and take is initiated: the port worker hauls sacks of potatoes and I do *tendus*. Through this, my *tendus* will become so popular that I will start touring internationally and bring the image of Hamburg as the 'tendu-city' to the whole world. Then, of course, even more tourists will come to Hamburg and the investment of taxpayer money into my art will have damn-well paid off.[167]

Roller describes the idea of cultural funding as investment, where arts and culture are integrated in city-marketing to attract visitors, which generate income for the city. The imagined virtuosity of the dancer – here seen as an artistic exceptionalism – stands in for or is extended via the communicative labour of marketing, which is able to monetise the performance and embed it in a chain of value creation, which ultimately sees both the dancer and the manual labourer as better off.

That this is an idealised and ironic notion quickly becomes clear when Roller performs a *tendu* following his speech. Having taken out two potatoes from one of the sacks during his description of the mutual aid between dancer and port worker, he assumes the fifth position, a potato in each hand. He opens his arms to a second position (via *bras bas*) and performs a quick *tendu* to the side with his right leg. Ending again in a

[167] Roller, *Perform Performing. Part 2: Art Gigolo*, 09:46-10:48. (My translation: ‚Doch nur, wenn ich versuche durch das Tendu die Steuergelder wieder reinzubekommen. Dazu müsste ich das Tendu so gut machen, dass sich in der ganzen Republik herumspricht: Der Roller macht so arschgeile Tendus, lass uns nach Hamburg fahren. Wenn die Touristen dann in Hamburg sind, machen sie vor der Tendushow eine Hafenrundfahrt, die den maroden Hafen subventioniert, der ja dem Hafenarbeiter Arbeit gibt. Auf diese Weise entsteht ein fabelhaftes Geben und Nehmen: Der Hafenarbeiter schleppt Kartoffelsäcke und ich mache Tendus. Dardurch werden meine Tendus so bekannt, dass ich international touren werde und das Image von Hamburg as „Tendustadt" in die ganze Welt hinaustragen werde. Dann kommen natürlich noch mehr Touristen nach Hamburg und die Investition von Steuergeldern in meine Kunst hat sich verdammt gelohnt'.)

fifth and *bras bas*, he shortly holds the pose before walking away upstage left and throwing the potatoes to the ground. The audience reacts with laughter to this anti-climactic presentation. The contrast here stems from the fact that a *tendu* is such a foundational and usually transitory movement that it could not possibly hold up the expectation Roller had created for it in his speech. Those unfamiliar with ballet terms might have expected a spectacular jump or a perfect turn, however, Roller's choice of such a quotidian gesture is telling. Even though Roller executes the *tendu* well, he purposefully curates an image of amateurism here. The physical presentation offered by the performer is not virtuosic in Hamera's sense of 'flawless execution', 'mastery', or 'excellence',[168] rather it points to a de-skilling of virtuosity or rather re-skilling towards the communicative power of (city-)marketing. Like the audience member bagging letters in *No Money, No Love*, this de-skilled performance of the *tendu* is done on purpose to point towards an understanding of virtuosity as a communicative skill that will allow value generation through its circulation in a globalised performance market.

This kind of virtuosity, like the virtuosity of the de-skilled *tendu*, is reproduceable and repeatable, which ties into the discourse of commodification of dance work that Roller also engages with during the performance. Throughout the first two parts of the trilogy Roller mentions buying and selling choreographies on eBay, however, the full extent of this focus of the performance became clear a couple of years after the first performance of *No Money, No Love*. At the opening of the International Summer Festival at Hamburg's Kulturfabrik Kampnagel in August 2009, he performed the first part of the trilogy for the final time before auctioning off the performance to invited guest at the festival opening in the Hamburg Chamber of Commerce, the economic and symbolic centre of power in the Hanseatic city. An auctioneer from Sotheby's called ten items connected to the performance: a Hello-Kitty suitcase, which was used on stage and, according to Roller, has a 'performance history'; an audio recording of the applause of one of the performances, the green Adidas trousers that Roller wore during the performances (which sold for €500), the flip-chart and its travelling case covered in airline luggage tags and various dents from transport (Roller likened it to a 'sculpture'); and the licence for his solo 'Being Christina Aguilera'. The highest bids received a recording of the

[168] Hamera, 'The Labors of Michael Jackson', 757.

video and a lesson from Roller himself. Roller stressed that this person would now be the new owner of the piece and has the unlimited right to perform it. While an auction takes the idea of commodifying performance to the extreme, it strikes me that this potential to commodify is already present in the form of the lecture performance itself. Roller mints the performance having toured it to at least 12 countries, taking little else but a flipchart and a Hello-Kitty suitcase (which doubles as a prop). While other big company dance performances might feature a big ensemble and a difficult to transport set, Roller is a solo performer, who also does his own sound and does not rely on costume changes or make-up. This performance is already made extremely cost-efficiently and banks on how relatively easily its condition for performance can be replicated in different venues. This process of economisation and commodification is already instilled in the way the performance is set up and then made explicit by the process of the auction.

At the same time, the auction re-stages the main concern of the trilogy, which traces how the performer-subject is constituted via the merging of work and life. According to Klein, the auction 'marks the end, the total sell-out of the work of art'.[169] Yet, at the same time it thematises the relationship 'between the true character and the commodity character, the usage value and the exchange value of a performance'.[170] When Roller shouts his realisation of 'I am the product, which I have produced'[171] towards the end of *Art Gigolo*, he points to the commodification of self that is inherent to an understanding of dance as work under current economic conditions. The auction is thus the logical end point of an exploration of the proximity of labour, life, and art. Referencing Boltanski and Chiapello, Klein stresses how in the twenty-first century artistic production and life have become 'the leading dispositive of contemporary society'.[172] She describes how working methods attributed to artists 'such as creative, project-oriented, flexible work, the creation of a work biography, self-presentation and self-styling, the documentation of one's own creation, have become the working ethos of neoliberalism'.[173] This leads to a 'biopolitical strategy of normalization, in which the

[169] Klein, 'Labour, Life, Art', 6.
[170] Klein, 6.
[171] Roller, *Perform Performing. Part 2: Art Gigolo*, 32:30. (My translation; ‚Ich bin das Produkt, das ich produziert habe'.)
[172] Klein, 'Labour, Life, Art', 13.
[173] Klein, 13. This idea was also developed by Bojana Kunst and Jen Harvie. In her study of the Artist at Work, Kunst also cites Boltanski and Chiapello to describe 'autonomy, self-realization, creativity and the

concept of labour is synonymous for the naturally appearing technologies of the self'.[174] Virtuosity – as outlined by Roller (and also Bel) as both a communicative skills and a feature of intellectual labour that is present in dance work (but not exclusive to it) – is one such technology of the self, which complicates the relationship between physical and intellectual labour as well as blurring the lines between work and life.



**Figure 9:** Jochen Roller as *Art Gigolo* (Kampnagel Hamburg, 2003).

With this critique of dance work as self-commodification in mind, Roller's ending to *Art Gigolo* perhaps seems surprising. Instead of following this line of argumentation to its logical end and campaigning for different dance-work conditions, he rehashes an argument by which dance work is declared non-work, wherein it is seen as a labour of love. He reiterates a romantic ideal in which the artist's practices exist mainly for the satisfaction of the artist themself. Before the final section of the performance, he

disappearance of the difference between work time and private time' which characterise not only creative work but all work under the spirit of new capitalism. (See Bojana Kunst, *Artist at Work, Proximity of Art and Capitalism* (Alresford: Zero Books, 2015).) Similarly, Harvie coined the term *artepreneur* to describe the entrepreneurial risk and processes of individualization artists are pushed to assume. The imperative to behave entrepreneurially is expressed by a willingness to self-exploit, perform one's own (artistic) brand – which Roller exemplifies in the tendu star narrative – and act in their own self-interest. (See Harvie, *Fair Play - Art, Performance and Neoliberalism*.)

[174] Klein, 'Labour, Life, Art', 12.

pointedly announces that he will make himself scarce 'to increase his market value'. He leaves the stage and returns a few minutes later completely naked. Taking his position centre stage, he declares:

> With this I request that all my grant monies be cut. It is like this: Earlier I said that I want to be paid as a dancer because I am also paid as a gigolo [and the kind of work in both professions is comparable]. But there is one situation in which I am also not paid as a gigolo. When a gigolo falls in love, then his love doesn't cost anything.[175]

And with this he begins to dance to Jennifer Lopez's song 'My Love Don't Cost a Thing'. The dance consists of bending his arm at the elbow and holding both hands in loose fists, while shaking his hips from left to right so that his penis slaps his thighs to the rhythm of the song. His face remains expressionless, and he calmly gazes at the audience. While at first glance this line of argumentation might be slightly disappointing as it reinforces the idea of bad renumeration of artistic work as a logical consequence of it being something the artist does for their own merit, the way in which it is performed, and especially the intentionally ridiculous final dance, show that Roller does not wholeheartedly subscribe to this way of relegating artistic work as non-economic activity. While his words suggest an interpretation of dance work whereby the dancer prostitutes themself for the 'love of the game', the song choice as well as the stoic presentation with which this rather comic dance is performed point to the cracks in this analogy to escort work. Aside from the fact that escort and sex work also can be enjoyed by those engaged in it and still produce economic value and be deserving of adequate renumeration, the image of the 'art gigolo' seems to have been purposefully chosen to illustrate the absurdity of such arguments that claim that enjoyment of a job precludes it from proper compensation. Paying attention to how virtuosity is positioned throughout this performance trilogy as a facet of contemporary dance work as well as other forms of service labour makes it obvious that this seemingly simple conclusion is not actually as simple as it seems. Instead, economic developments that have drawn labour, art, and life closer together highlight

[175] Roller, *Perform Performing. Part 2: Art Gigolo*, 36:00-36:26. (My translation: ‚Ich beantrage hiermit all meine Fördergelder zu streichen. Es ist doch so, vorhin habe ich gesagt, dass ich [als Tänzer] bezahlt werden möchte, weil ich als Gigolo auch bezahlt werde. Es gibt aber eine Situation in der ich auch als Gigolo nicht bezahlt werde. Wenn sich ein Gigolo verliebt, dann kostet seine Liebe gar nichts'.)

the economic servility freelance dancers and choreographers like Jochen Roller are trained to perform.[176] While this makes them workers like many others, Roller's lecture performance highlights how contemporary dance can stage and respond to the way performance has seeped into many forms of work today. Highlighting the 'conditions of subjugation to the logics of production',[177] which means attending to the financial realities of producing contemporary dance, allows Roller to focus on connections between how intellectual labour is performed today (on stage and in everyday life) and how conceptual dance is commodified.

## Alienated Virtuosity

What the debate around virtuosity has brought up is the question of whether forms of physical labour have been displaced or subsumed by processes of communication and mediatised exchange (as Virno argues). The two case studies I've engaged with in this chapter offer very different answers to this question. Roller uses the proximity between dance work and forms of contemporary service labour to illustrate the economic precarity contemporary workers (dancers and others) face. His performance draws on ideas of virtuosity (as an expression of the performative dimension of many contemporary jobs such as sales or marketing) to criticise a precaritisation of artistic labour. Purposefully mixing various meanings of 'performance' to point to the multiple capitalist contexts in which the word surfaces (echoing McKenzie's famous phrase of *Perform or Else*), Roller takes his audience through the realities of economic insecurity and shows that virtuosity is conditional on yielding to these realities. Virtuosity here is not the flawless execution of movements as imagined by Hamera and others but the ability of the performer to assimilate to contemporary modes of (artistic) production. Bel's performance, on the other hand, explores the conceptual tensions enacted by ideas of virtuosity as a public facing but essentially embodied mode of performing labour. He uses the distinction between concept and execution to explore tensions between employment and agency within conceptual dance. I have argued that by staging the virtuosic servility expected of ballet dancers but also reproduced in contemporary dance,

[176] See, for example, Boltanski and Chiapello, *The New Spirit of Capitalism*.
[177] Ridout, 'On the Work of Things', 404.

Bel comments on an understanding of cognitive or intellectual labour that often devalues or disregards other forms of labour. Both performances discussed in this chapter focused on the performative aspects of intellectual labour (on stage and beyond) and how they allow insight into how cognitive labour is understood, performed, and replicated today. I also contend that they show how dance work can be commodified by drawing on the differentiation between concept and execution. Here, the lecture performance with its focus on showing and telling is the ideal form to portray this differentiation as it is set up dramaturgically to oscillate between concept and execution, talking and doing. By offering commentary on the modes in which these dance performances have been created, the lecture performance, I have argued, marks the distance between these modes of delivery but also productively combines them to comment on the alienation the separation of concept and execution has caused.

The observation that understandings of virtuosity and cognitive labour have separated ideas of concept and execution becomes particularly potent when we consider that in recent years the proximity between conceptual (dance) work and modes of digital work has been heightened even further. The way work was carried out during the lockdowns of the COVID-19 pandemic has further underlined the need for an analysis focusing on the similarities between contemporary artistic work and cognitive labour. In the next chapter, I therefore turn to lecture performances taking place exclusively in an online environment to show how these modes of presenting work and presenting knowledge are in danger of further fragmentation, standardisation, and commodification.

# Chapter 2: Digital Labour, Lecture Performance, and the Artistic Cognitariat

## Lecture Performers Between Elitism and Precarity

The last chapter engaged in an analysis of virtuosic labour to draw out how the lecture performance stages the conflict between self-organisation and self-exploitation that contemporary dance artists face. By highlighting their depiction of artistic and non-artistic virtuosity on stage, the discussed lecture performances participate in a trend in which artists increasingly make art about work and where the acknowledgement of artistic activity as work becomes a central theme. This engagement with the 'visibility of work', according to Bojana Kunst, is a consequence of the artist becoming a 'prototype of the contemporary flexible and precarious worker' whose work is 'connected to the production of life itself - in other words with the production of subjectivity'.[178] The idea of the artist as a stand-in or model for the worker in late capitalism is by now – not least due to Kunst's resounding analysis – a well-established concept and one which, as Chapter 1 has shown, proved vital for my analysis of how work is presented in contemporary lecture performances. This idea, however, becomes more complicated when we ask: which workers specifically does the artist stand in for? Theories of the precarisation of artistic work, like Kunst's, often position the artist at the bottom of the contemporary labour market and thus align them implicitly with a wider proletariat or working class. This idea, however, gets complicated when considering the ambiguous class position of many artists on the one hand and the increasing confluence of artistic work with more 'elite' forms of cognitive labour on the other.

In this chapter, I put pressure on the assertion that the precarisation of artistic labour turns the artist into a prototype post-Fordist labourer and thus aligns them with a broader working class. I assert that the global COVID-19 pandemic, or more specifically, the modes of working during the time of the lockdowns, has made it clear that it is more complicated than this and that artists occupy a more ambiguous class position than Kunst implies. I argue that attending to the modes in which lecture performance conflates artistic and cognitive labour shows their proximity to forms of elite labour, rather than

[178] Kunst, *Artist at Work, Proximity of Art and Capitalism*, 137.

those characterising the position of the broader proletariat. The lockdown policies in many Western European countries have illustrated the gulf between elite workers – able to work from home, and thus more protected from exposure to the virus – and those 'keyworkers' (UK), 'systemrelevante Gruppen' (Germany), or 'lavoratori essenziali' (Italy), many of whom worked in precarious jobs, who were not afforded the same protections. Speaking of the widening gap between the professional elite and the unemployed or precariously employed majority, André Gorz comments on the fact that elite versus precarious labour has become a main motor of social distinction,[179] a reality that has only become more entrenched during the COVID-19 lockdowns. Artists, and especially performing artists, were positioned somewhat uncertainly between these groups. While the 'proletarianization of performance'[180] and gig economy meant that many could not work and were reliant on (very limited) crisis funding, those that were able to experiment with new modes of online circulation and ended up producing work – because they had relatively 'secure' working conditions (for example, actors employed in the German repertoire system) – were able to do so in working environments similar to those of other 'elite' workers from the comfort and safety of their own home. Their work environment – sitting at the laptop communicating over online technology – thus looked similar to that of other cognitive workers and mimicked many of their processes. This chapter begins with the assumption that the recent COVID-19 pandemic has highlighted the proximity between artistic and cognitive work, and work produced during this time particularly allows for an analysis of the ambiguous class position of artists as post-Fordist workers.[181] By engaging with the lecture performance series 'My Documents/Share Your Screen' curated by Lola Arias, this chapter asks what it means to understand the contemporary lecture performer as a cognitive worker and argues that the way artistic work was

[179] André Gorz, *Critique of Economic Reason* (London and New York, NY: Verso Books, 2010), 68.
[180] Jaswinder Blackwell-Pal et al., 'Marxist Keywords for Performance', *Journal of Dramatic Theory and Criticism* 36, no. 1 (2021): 37.
[181] Elsewhere my colleagues of the 'Performance and Political Economy' Working Group (London) and I have stressed the ambiguous class positions at work in many performing arts contexts: 'Although work in performance is often poorly paid, precarious, and demanding, signifiers of class privilege—from levels of educational attainment to disposable wealth—are ubiquitous. This makes for an odd situation' (Blackwell-Pal et al., 37.). I see this chapter as an extension of this observation and base my analysis on the understanding of class as a social relation: 'Class is an essential structuring component of capitalist society that is determined by material positions within commodity production: it ensures the maintenance and reproduction of capitalism but can also contribute to its overthrow' (Blackwell-Pal et al., 37.).

organised during the pandemic has further implicated epistemic art practices in a global economy that treats knowledge as commodity. Further, this chapter traces the possibilities for solidarity among a workforce that is increasingly divided and fragmented both conceptually and physically. It explores their positioning as artists (in this case lecture performers) at a historic moment when the distance between elite workers and proletarian workers became clearer than ever.

Before moving on to the case study, it is important to point out that there is a lack of theorisation about how the population of immaterial cognitive workers is supposed to organise themselves as a social and political entity in the mobile, detached, and virtual conditions of cognitive capitalism.[182] While calls for 'communicative interaction' and 'cooperation' among cognitive workers are common among theorists of cognitive capitalism[183] and echo the calls for labour organisation central to leftist politics of over the past 150 years, they are less clear on how this cooperation is meant to occur. There is a distinct anxiety or ambiguity about class belonging in these writings on cognitive capitalism. The fact that Paolo Virno bases his analysis of virtuosic work on the performance practices of a highly skilled classical musician means his conception of work is no longer closely related to the skilled physical workers of industrial capitalism, leaving open questions about class and class consciousness. In fact, Virno conceived of the somewhat vague notion of the multitude – which he borrows from Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri – not as a 'replacement of the [earlier] working class'[184] but an increased proletarianisation of the population, which extended to 'all those whose labor is being exploited by capital'.[185] Sylvère Lotringer points out that Virno is largely pessimistic about the possibility of class resistance: since the contemporary multitude is not a class, it 'can't build a class consciousness of its own, let alone engage capital in a class struggle'.[186]

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[182] In *Empire*, Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri do vaguely gesture towards the idea that the 'creative forces of the multitude that sustain Empire are also capable of autonomously constructing a counter-Empire, an alternative political organisation of global flows and exchange ', but it remains unclear how they see such an organisation manifest or how exactly they imagine this counter-Empire (Hardt and Negri, *Empire*, 15.). This chapter, thus, seeks to examine their claim by testing how the practice of the lecture performance can be used to subvert the forces of empire (in this case cognitive capitalism) that seek to homogenise knowledge within capitalist production.

[183] See, for example, Gerald Raunig's call for the 'social machine' (Raunig, *A Thousand Machines*, 116.).

[184] Sylvère Lotringer, 'Foreword: We, the Multitude', in *A Grammar of the Multitude: For an Analysis of Contemporary Forms of Life*, by Paolo Virno (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2004), 12.

[185] Lotringer, 12.

[186] Lotringer, 13.

Similarly, Yann Moulier-Boutang aligns the cognitive workers with an earlier form of class solidarity by referencing both Franco 'Bifo' Berardi's concept of the 'cognitariat'[187] and Ursula Huw's 'cybertariat'.[188] However, he too does not offer any suggestions with regard to the possibility of social organisation by and for this group of labourers. One of the few suggested strategies comes from Berardi himself. When asked how this networked and 'virtual' class of cognitive workers organises itself and what possibilities of solidarity and resistance it can find, Berardi called for a 'theatricalization of the hidden conflict that is growing in the process of mental work'.[189] He believes that the dispersed and virtual cognitariat[190] holds the 'tool of self-organization in the same network that is also the tool of their exploitation' and that mental work, 'once organized and consciously managed can be very disruptive for capitalist rule'.[191] While this statement is still vague and only a small step beyond Moulier-Boutang, who chooses not to address this question at all, it is notable that Berardi opted for the word 'theatricalization'. One of the key questions this chapter attempts to answer is whether the lecture performance can be seen as such a theatricalisation of the hidden work of cognitive capitalism that makes palpable the ensuing alienation (from work, knowledge as more than know-how, and the collapse of the means of political organisation). Can the lecture performance function as an agent of criticism or mode of political resistance under cognitive capitalism or is it always already subsumed into these practices?

Virno's, Moulier-Boutang's, Gerald Raunig's and even Berardi's vague nods to networked cooperation as a tool for resistance are complicated by Gorz's observation that under the current economic regime, elite workers and precarious workers are purposefully kept apart both physically and ideologically. Speaking of a 'dualized' society,

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[187] Yann Moulier-Boutang, *Cognitive Capitalism* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2011), 97.
[188] Moulier-Boutang, 235.
[189] Franco 'Bifo' Berardi, Cognitariat and Semiokapital, interview by Matt Fuller, Subsol-Blog, May 2001, http://subsol.c3.hu/subsol_2/contributors0/bifotext.html.
[190] While the term cognitariat is derived from 'proletariat' the two are not synonymous and the term is not without its problems. Firstly, it ignores large number of members of the global precariat, who are cut off from even the minimal privilege the access to cognitive work provides. Secondly, as mentioned above, the conceptual proximity to the notion of the proletariat is even more questionable during a pandemic when cognitive workers can a) continue to work largely without disruption and b) do so in isolation without putting their physical bodies on the line. Nevertheless, I mobilise the term cognitariat for my analysis here because it offers a chance to trace the work of contemporary lecture performers in relation to the work of cognitive capitalism and highlights the form's proximity to those forms of communicative labour.
[191] Berardi, Cognitariat and Semiokapital.

Gorz contends that members of the elite of workers are 'encouraged to form their own independent trade unions and their own forms of social insurance, co-financed by the enterprises in which they work'.[192] At the same time, their employers will isolate these workers by stressing their relative privilege and work security and appeal to their self-image as hard-working, self-made, and extremely productive. Gorz also comments on the consciousness this dualised organisation of workers cultivates, which is to generate an (unrealistic) sense of superior work ethic in the members of the professional elite. This mirrors the formation of subjectivity of the contemporary artist, as described by Kunst, where the neoliberal imperative to be flexible, networked, productive, and self-interested meets the individualising impulse of Gorz's dualised society. Here, again, artistic work practices are aligned with the working processes and environments of the elite workers instead of a more generalised precarious workforce. Isolating the individual artist as well as the elite worker in cognitive capitalism also reinforces narratives of personal success through hard work, and to an extent prevents meaningful political cooperation amongst these social actors.

In the following, I complicate the notion that the lecture performance can act as a theatricalisation of the exploitations and alienation of cognitive labour by considering the entanglement of the artist and academic in systems of power that pit high-skilled 'elite' workers against lower-skilled workers or those at the periphery waiting for their chance to enter an already inundated job market. I argue that the relative privilege of many of the practitioners of the lecture performance, and of the institutions that fund them calls into question their commitment to the political work of formulating a resistance to cognitive capitalism.

## 'My Documents/Share Your Screen'

At beginning of May 2020, when most of Europe was under strict lockdown rules due to the global spread of COVID-19, the Künstlerhaus Mousonturm, a production house in Frankfurt, Germany, announced a six-part online lecture performance series that would take place weekly between mid-May and late June.[193] The artist and curator Lola Arias

[192] Gorz, *Critique of Economic Reason*, 68.

[193] This chapter was developed with the help of the TaPRA mentoring programme for the Postgraduate Essay Prize in the summer of 2020. I thank TaPRA for the conception of the mentorship programme and

had re-conceptualised her performance series 'My Documents' for the online space, where, over the course of six weeks, six theatre and performance artists would present one lecture performance each on Zoom and YouTube.[194] Now called 'My Documents/Share Your Screen' the event featured an international line-up of artists from theatre, performance, video, and visual art, sharing parts of their personal archives or creative processes with audiences.[195] This series was among the earliest attempts to put on theatrical programming and engage with audiences during the lockdown in ways that went beyond streaming previously recorded productions online. It is no coincidence that practitioners of the lecture performance were so quick and eager to make the transition to online performance. Usually conceived of as solo (or duo) performances with minimal sets or equipment, lecture performance has been a preferred genre of mobile and internationally touring artists for some time, even before the global pandemic hit. In the wake of COVID-19, these sparse aesthetics allowed practitioners to make the transition online with relatively few changes to their artistic productions: instead of at a lectern or table on a bare stage, artists delivered the lectures from their home offices, bedrooms, or living rooms. What was previously a projection on the wall became the 'Share Screen' function on Zoom. And a Q&A hosted on Zoom provided the audience with a chance to share their experiences and ask questions after the show.

This easy adaptability to online formats is significant not only because it enabled a prompt implementation of a programme that allowed artists, who were otherwise out of work, to be employed, it also pushed artistic work closer to how most cognitive and managerial labour was performed during the pandemic. Aesthetically, each of the performances in 'My Documents/Share Your Screen' resembled each other, but also, and

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all the mentors and judges of the prize for donating their time and expertise to support emerging scholars. A version of this chapter appeared in *Contemporary Theatre Review.* See: Clio Unger, 'Share Your Work: Lola Arias's Lecture Performance Series and the Artistic Cognitariat of the Global Pandemic', *Contemporary Theatre Review* 31, no. 4 (2 October 2021): 471–95.

[194] The series was hosted by the Künstlerhaus Mousonturm in collaboration with other production houses, namely, Kampnagel in Hamburg, the Munich Kammerspiele, and the Kaserne Basel in Switzerland. It was funded by the Alliance for International Production Houses (a confederation of seven German cultural institutions of visual and performing arts), which receives funding from Germany's Federal Government Commissioner for Culture and Media as well as by the state of Hessia's Ministry of Science and Art.

[195] For more information on iterations of 'My Documents' prior to the online performances, see Arias's website, where the performance project is documented since 2012: Lola Arias, 'My Documents', *Website*, https://lolaarias.com/my-documents.

more importantly, they resembled the business presentation, the corporate team meeting, or the university lecture. All of these, at the time of the lockdown, hinged on the ability to meet via video call and were aided by the speaker's ability to share audio-visual material with other participants of the teleconference via the screen-sharing function, making the way knowledge is presented and circulated in these meetings virtually indistinguishable. This pandemic has thrust modes of 'immaterial' or virtual cognitive labour into the spotlight, raising the question: to what extent do projects like the lecture performances in 'My Documents/Share Your Screen' illustrate the proximity between contemporary artistic production and modes of post-Fordist labour?

Authors like Paul B. Preciado have highlighted how the recent imperative to work and produce from home has intensified the communicative but isolated forms of labour under cognitive capitalism.[196] Confined to their homes, these 'cyber-oral' cognitive workers no longer experience a separation of spheres of production and reproduction. The fact that lecture performances have sprung up as one of the most adaptable formats of online artistic circulation and their similarity to dominant modes of working during the pandemic make them a productive vehicle to ask how contemporary artists participate in the global knowledge economy and how they stage current modes of artistic production as intimately entangled in epistemic practices and politics. Lecture performances participate in the contemporary knowledge economy in terms of what kinds of artistic and academic modes of (cognitive) labour they produce.

My assertion is that the response to the pandemic condenses and dramatises some of the ongoing arguments around neoliberal modes of performance and knowledge production. Thus, an analysis of how the form was mobilised during this crisis offers insight into the politics of knowledge production the lecture performance is engaged in, as well as into the modes in which it proliferates post-Fordist labour.[197] While the lecture performance has always displayed a proximity between modes of artistic and academic labour, as shown in Chapter 1, this moment, which necessitated teaching and performing online only had brought this proximity into sharp relief. The move to online production

[196] Paul B. Preciado, 'Learning from the Virus', *Artforum* 58, no. 9 (June 2020), https://www.artforum.com/print/202005/paul-b-preciado-82823.
[197] For an analysis of the ways artistic work approximates modes of post-Fordist labour, either cognitive or affective see Bojana Kunst, *Artist at Work, Proximity of Art and Capitalism*.

has accelerated the way in which academic and artistic practices approximate each other. The online lecture performance therefore serves as an object of study capable of reflecting on the politics of knowledge, art, and labour under conditions of cognitive capitalism.

## Networked Ideas

Theatres in Germany generally had a different response to the pandemic than UK theatres. While there were some online festivals (like GIFT Festival and Yard Online) and isolated productions by companies already versed in digital storytelling (like Coney), the UK furlough scheme meant that many theatre employees were prevented from working. The Royal Court and the Old Vic theatres began live streaming plays from empty auditoriums in late June and July. In contrast, government funding and longer-term employment contracts meant that venues in Germany could respond more quickly. In addition to sharing filmed productions right from the beginning of quarantine, many theatres produced 'home stories' in which artists submitted short videos about their lockdown experiences or shared topical readings. Some theatres tried to find ways of recreating their repertory productions via drive-in theatres or from home with ensemble members meeting via Zoom. Others quickly commissioned new work, like Forced Entertainment's *End Meeting for All* at the Hebbel am Ufer (HAU). Based in Berlin, Arias drew on this cultural infrastructure and managed to put together a programme when many other theatres, like the National Theatre in the UK, were only able to stream previously filmed productions online. Even in Germany, however, Arias's series marked one of the biggest lockdown events due to the high-profile of participating artists and institutions. Within days it had created a buzz and attracted an international audience.

Another reason why 'My Documents/Share your Screen' could be mounted so quickly is that the format is a continuation of a performance format that artist and curator Arias has been organising since 2012 with iterations in Buenos Aires, Milan, and Lisbon. According to the Künstlerhaus Mounsonturm's website, the purpose of the series is to give 'artists from different backgrounds' the chance 'to delve into their personal archives' and 'present personal research, a radical experience, a story that secretly obsesses

them'.[198] This iteration of the online series allowed Arias to cast the net of invited artists even wider and assemble her 'dream team' – as she called them – for the Zoom sessions.[199] This dream team had a very international appeal. It included famous artists whose name has long been associated with the lecture performance as a form, such as Rabih Mroué, Tania Bruguera, and Tim Etchells, as well as less well-known or emerging artists, whose appeal to Arias seemed to be their geographical location (Zhang Mengqi presented her performance from Hubei, at that time the epicentre of the COVID-19 epidemic), their thematic content (Pedro Penim reflected on the feeling of isolation, which felt very apt for the experience of the lockdown) or a conceptual closeness to the format of the lecture performance (Lagartijas Tiradas al Sol stresses that their performances provide a 'place to think'). Aside from Lagartijas Tiradas al Sol, who are a duo, all artists presented their work solo for about 45 minutes, before Arias opened the floor for questions from the audience. Each performance focused on one personal secret, archive, or obsession, and took audiences through a presentation aided by screenshots, virtual journeys on Google Maps, or live writing in PowerPoint or Word. The project constituted an act of curatorial solidarity by way of distributing funds to artists based in countries with less cultural funding, where the pandemic potentially meant even less social and financial security for artists. This kind of redistribution is usually limited by strict travel and visa regulations, and so presented an opportunity to reach artists beyond the epicentre of European cultural funding.

A similar redistribution took part for the audience as well. The online circulation made the series available to a large international audience and spoke to the series' engagement in a kind of networked sociality. The network as a basis for social interaction is also a tenet in many post-Fordist theories, which seek to mobilise the 'general intellect' as a form of collective intellectuality potentially able to transform society.[200] A knowledge

[198] 'Lola Arias: My Documents | Share Your Screen', Künstlerhaus Mousonturm, 11 May 2020, https://www.mousonturm.de/en/projects/lola-arias-my-documents-share-your-screen/.
[199] Rabih Mroué and Lola Arias, *"My Documents/Share Your Screen" – Make Me Stop Smoking*, 22 May 2020, YouTube Video, 22 May 2020, 05:24, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=WxfC0ReZG-c.
[200] This concept was initially introduced in Karl Marx's *Grundrisse* and refers to knowledge as an '*immediate productive force'*, which shapes and controls 'the conditions of social life'. (Karl Marx, *Grundrisse. Foundations of the Critique of Political Economy* (London: Penguin Books, 1993), xiii.) It was then rediscovered and re-envisioned by Virno, who posited the general intellect as knowledge – distributed, embodied, and potentially revolutionary – might help to establish a form of "mass

network or commons in the form of a democratised digitality is often part of this idea,[201] and in the case of this performance series this took the shape of open and free participation. While attending events with such prominent line-ups has previously been largely the privilege of the affluent art tourist, who can afford to travel to international biennials and performance festivals,[202] the online mode of 'My Documents/Share your Screen' allows more dispersed, less affluent audiences with other access needs (those with caring duties or limited mobility, for instance) to participate in the experience. Participation via Zoom or YouTube was free and the decision to make this content available worldwide regardless of geographical location therefore needs to be seen as a step towards the 'networked sociality of ideas'.[203] All lecture performances of the series were still available on YouTube months after the original presentations, emphasising the organisers' wish to make the knowledge experiences presented in these artistic lectures part of a longer-term public engagement. Notions of a 'digital commons' are often invoked in relation to such networks of ideas and were particularly popular at the beginning of the lockdown restrictions. However, these ideals of the commons are complicated by the fact that, while free to use, the chosen platforms – Zoom and YouTube – are not public but private, for-profit companies seeking to exploit all contributions made on their sites for financial gain. Zoom initially did not provide end-to-end encryption to non-paying users, leaving them open to data exploitation, and YouTube turns users into consumers of paid-for advertising. While these platforms widen geographical, financial, and durational access to the performances, they remain flawed entities to conceptualise any ambitions towards a democratisation of knowledge (artistic or otherwise).

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intellectuality" as a form of living labour. (See Virno, *A Grammar of the Multitude. For an Analysis of Contemporary Forms of Life*, 49–61.)

[201] See, for example, Jon McKenzie, 'Ouisconsin Eidos, Wisconsin Idea, and the Closure of Ideation', in *Inter Views: Conversations and Crossings in Performance Philosophy*, ed. Anna Street, Julien Alliot, and Magnolia Pauker (London: Palgrave Macmillan UK, 2017).

[202] For reading on the economy of the biennial, see Elena Filipovic, Marieke van Hal, and Solveig Ovstebo, eds., *The Biennial Reader. An Anthology on Large-Scale Perennial Exhibitions of Contemporary Art* (Berlin: Hatje Cantz, 2010).

[203] Holert, *Knowledge Beside Itself*, 34. The decision to make the programming accessible for free worldwide is markedly different to other countries, especially in the United States, where free streaming content during the lockdown was often limited to those residing within the geographical territory of the United States.

The desire to interact with the audience is also present in the curatorial choice to host a Q&A session after every performance, giving audience members a chance to reflect on the piece and pose direct questions to the artists. Here the international make-up of the audience became obvious when questions were asked in multiple languages, or spectators located in the regions whose histories or conflicts the lecture performances discussed, were able to engage directly with the artists about their respective experiences. This direct exchange is something that, in my experience, rarely occurs among the more homogenised and English-speaking audiences of biennials or performance festivals.[204]

It is clear that the lecture performances presented in this event were deeply involved in the political economy of knowledge, both in terms of the networked sociality of the featured artists and in terms of the democratising impulse of the general intellect the event promoted. What is not yet clear is whether the knowledge that is presented in these performances is co-opted into the 'triumphant reorganization of capitalism that is deploying the new technological innovations to solidify an unprecedented level of global domination'[205] or whether these lecture performances can function as a site where the capitalist subsumption of the knowledge economy is resisted or dislocated. From the outset, the lecture performances in 'My Documents/Share Your Screen' are caught in the double bind Tom Holert has set-up in his theorisation of the epistemisation of art, which is 'invested in the promotion and showcasing of nonstandard, transdisciplinary, experimental, informal, and oppositional modes of knowledge production' while also feeding a 'market of constantly updated knowledge products and educational commodities'.[206] While the lecture performances in this series are conceived with such an oppositional mode of knowledge production in mind,[207] their online iteration has pushed them even closer to popular digital products – such as TED talks – and the

[204] For a reflection on English as the *lingua franca* in the world of contemporary art and the exclusions this produces, see Zofia Cielatkowska, 'Native Speaker: Art Criticism and Its Lingua Franca', *Platform - Journal for Theatre and Performing Arts* 13, no. 1 (2019): 130–8.
[205] Nick Dyer-Witheford, *Cyber-Marx: Cycles and Circuits of Struggle in High-Technology Capitalism* (Urbana-Champaign, IL: University of Illinois Press, 1999), 221.
[206] Holert, *Knowledge Beside Itself*, 59.
[207] Frank Hentschker, 'SEGAL TALKS: Interview with Lola Arias', *The Segal Center and HowlRound,* 5 May 2020, 25:44-56, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=1ReqNcHx1KY.

consumerist attitude to knowledge it represents.[208] If they are to be perceived as sites where knowledges outside the logic of the globalised knowledge economy can emerge, both their para-institutional frames and their commitment to non-homogenised presentation formats have to be further analysed.

## Our Knowledge is Not a TED Talk

It strikes me that the site of the TED talk and the lecture performance's uneasy connection with this commercial format illustrate the difficult position this epistemic art form finds itself in. Both TED talks and lecture performances trace a shift in the *experience of knowledge* that has coincided with the expansion of cognitive capitalism to more and more areas of everyday life and contributes to the commodification of knowledge that views performing intellectual ability as a virtuosic skill. But while scholars like Holert are sceptical of the dimensions these artistic-epistemic practices tap into via spectacularisation, Jon McKenzie is more optimistic. Attributing this scepticism to long-standing academic mistrust of the spectacle and the university's aversion to popular culture, he sees in this moment an opportunity to 'mash up' the affective and conceptual and to bridge *doxa* and *eidos* (borrowed from Plato's distinction between common knowledge and dialectical epistemic knowledge), thereby democratising knowledge itself and popularising access to it. McKenzie relies on 'smart media', by which he means emerging scholarly outputs that are 'not books or articles', but 'video essays, theory comics, TED talks'.[209] Smart media merge affective and conceptual, playful and rigorous, academic and popular ways of knowing and thus 'entail a massive redesign of our experience of knowledge'.[210] In considering how the performances in 'My Documents/Share Your Screen' positioned themselves within this reorganisation of *knowledge experience* in cognitive capitalism, it is noteworthy that the TED talk gets referenced by both those sceptical of these developments, who fear that the genre will

[208] See Laura Kressly, 'Thinking Bigly, Online', *The Play's The Thing UK* (blog), 1 April 2020, https://theplaysthethinguk.com/2020/04/01/thinking-bigly-online/.
[209] McKenzie, 'Ouisconsin Eidos, Wisconsin Idea, and the Closure of Ideation', 86.
[210] McKenzie, 86. This renegotiation of the *experience* of knowledge is also something scholars of the lecture performance stress as a function of the genre. In her definition of the form Rike Frank, for example, foregrounds the lecture performance's ability to make their audiences engage with knowledge 'as a reflexive formation that is as much aesthetic as social. (Frank, 'When Form Starts Talking', 6.).)

accelerate the transformation of intellectuals and artists into a 'globalised neoliberal consumer self',[211] and by those, like McKenzie, who see it as a chance to challenge conventional and exclusionary ways of performing knowledge in the university and who – reminiscent of the general intellect – want to bring about more democratic ways of sharing knowledge.

Arias herself is aware of the proximity between the TED talk and the lecture performance, and while she seems to be in agreement with McKenzie over the networked sociality of the general intellect, she adamantly disavows any perceived similarities between her lecture performance series and the TED talk, whose single-message dramaturgies are too utilitarian for her liking. Speaking in a promotional interview, she notes that for her the project is a 'way to connect with other artists and to think together about how to work… with your own obsessions, our own materials that usually we don't work with, like our failures also. It's not a TED talk, it's the contrary of a TED talk'.[212] In his contribution to the series, Pedro Penim shares such an 'obsession' with the audience. In *Doing It,* Penim describes his habit of 'visiting' small, often uninhabitable islands via Google Maps, and invites the audience to join him on his virtual wanderings. These escapist journeys are presented as aimless, and indicative of a drifting – and thus not immediately productive – state of mind.[213] Similarly, Tim Etchells's lecture performance *Or All Changes Will Be Lost* highlights the sense of incompleteness and the searching inherent to the artistic process, which differentiates these performances from the straightforwardness of the TED talk. Adopting Arias's description that the series is about 'the things we do when we don't know what to do',[214] Etchells talks about his compulsion to 'collect language', which, more often than not, leads to nothing but accumulated material, remaining in a state of potential.[215] Etchells's particular performance style in this piece, which consists of live remixing of previously assembled

[211] Wesley Shumar, '"Being TED": The University Intellectual as Globalised Neoliberal Consumer Self', *Learning and Teaching: The International Journal of Higher Education in the Social Sciences* 9, no. 2 (2016): 89.
[212] Hentschker, 'SEGAL TALKS: Interview with Lola Arias', 25:44-56.
[213] Pedro Penim and Lola Arias, *"My Documents/Share Your Screen" – Doing It*, 15 May 2020, YouTube Video, 15 May 2020, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=fY4zPEyBeE8.
[214] Hentschker, 'SEGAL TALKS: Interview with Lola Arias', 25:56-26–03.
[215] Tim Etchells and Lola Arias, *"My Documents/Share Your Screen" – Or All Changes Will Be Lost*, 5 June 2020, YouTube Video, 5 June 2020, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=RrDf9ySVmKg.

text, also contains a temporal and dramaturgical defiance to the monodirectional and self-assured logic of the TED talk.

Knowledge in 'My Documents/Share your Screen' is not only deliberately dislocated as 'obsession', but also repurposed as 'private struggles with communal resonance' to cast the performances as less commercialised than their popularist counterparts. It is understood as less institutionalised, spectacularised, and homogenised than similar but more popular performances, and thus is presented as resisting modes of commodification. The minimalism of the Zoom lecture performances, which sometimes bordered on sterility, did its part in marking the series' difference to the TED talk. While TED talks are often edited to show the speakers in front of adoring audiences listening with awe and intent, the lecture performances in this series did not exalt the speakers in any formal or edited way. Instead, like each of their audience members, Etchells, Penim and the others sit in front of their screens, wrapped in blankets or, as Etchells admits, a days-old 'lockdown shirt' and stare into the abyss of their laptop cameras.[216] Yet, it was the strategies of the lecture performances themselves that did most of the work of mounting these resistances to the commodification of knowledge. To illustrate this, I will now outline four strategies of countering more homogenous forms of knowledge. While I draw on examples from specific performances, I have observed variations of these techniques in all the performances of the series.

### *Hyperpersonalisation of Knowledge*

The concept of negating any claim to the universality of the ideas presented in the lecture performance is most palpable in dramaturgical strategies that aim to isolate these ideas by constructing them as hyperpersonal. This is the case with secrets or obsessions, as well as highly personal and rare autobiographical stories. I've already touched on Penim's secret dream of exploring 'untouched' islands. In *Doing It*, he shares the knowledge he has gathered about the islands' flora and fauna and shows the audience how he 'escapes' to those islands via Google Maps. This habit consumes such a considerable amount of Penim's time that he classifies it as an obsession. He calls it 'doing it' to mark the repetitive nature of his desire to escape virtually – to be isolated. While Penim brings distance between himself as the narrator of this story and the person engaged in this

[216] Etchells and Arias, 12:44.

activity by referring to himself as 'he', it is clear that this is an autobiographical revelation. Penim acknowledges the potentially problematic nature of such a desire by hinting at the latent colonial impulse inherent in such an explorational endeavour, which is especially uncomfortable for him as he is from Portugal, a country with a substantial colonial history. But this remark is more a tongue-in-cheek commentary on why Penim has not yet dared to make this into an artistic performance than an invitation to think through the political implications of such a statement. Similarly, Lagartijas Tiradas al Sol use their lecture performance *Lázaro* to tell the story of an actor who changes his face and name and decides to become someone else.[217] The siblings Luisa Pardo and 'Lázaro' Gabino Rodríguez make up Lagartijas Tiradas al Sol and use this performance to tell the (auto)biographical tale of Rodríguez's transformation, of him changing identities. They do so using archives of films and personal photos of themselves and their performance career. Both of these performances use personal stories of shameful secrets and identity changes to particularise the knowledge and ideas that are being shared in the performance. These are not 'how to' manuals and there are no claims that these are universal experiences, as one could expect in a TED talk. Rather they present atomised snippets of experiences without didactical conclusions. This does not mean that there's not potential for identification from the side of the audience. But there is no expectation of a 'take-away' message or any pre-scripted expectation of how the audience is to react to such a revelation.

[217] Luisa Pardo, 'Lázaro' Gabino Rodríguez, and Lola Arias, *"My Documents/Share Your Screen" – LÀZARO*, 12 June 2020, YouTube Video, 12 June 2020, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=7mLNCBniDGI.

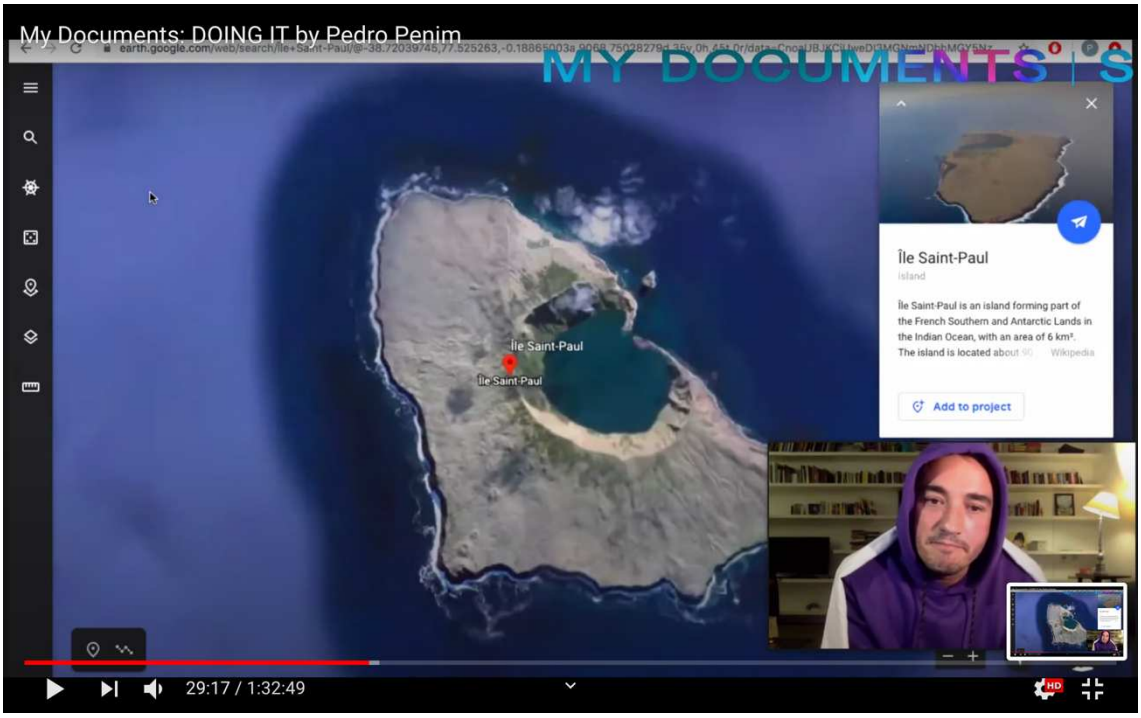



Figure 10: Pedro Penim exploring Île Saint Paul on Google Maps in *Doing It* for 'My Documents/Share Your Screen', Künstlerhaus Mousonturm, 15–16 May 2020. Screenshot taken 5 August 2020.

### *Desynthesising Ideas and Context*

Another way in which these performances try to resist a hegemonisation of the form and of the knowledges presented in them is by employing what we might call a dramaturgy of confusion by deliberately separating the spoken text from the shown images. In his performance *Make Me Stop Smoking*, for example, Rabih Mroué spends about five minutes talking about the relationship between personal memory and a personal archive, while the images on the screen show grainy footage filmed by a security camera potentially depicting a bank robbery.[218] Mroué does not comment on these images, nor offer any means of contextualisation otherwise. Later in his presentation he reveals that part of his purpose in this lecture performance is to work through his own archive, which he broadly divides into things to do with the past and things to do with the future – unused materials that have not yet made it into any performances. Thus, by using them in a performance, he can move them into the past-performances part of the archive and unburden himself from the task of incorporating them into any future performances. This grainy footage is Mroué's way of working through the archive, a fact that goes unremarked for the entirety of the lecture performance. What this desynthesising of

[218] Mroué and Arias, *"My Documents/Share Your Screen" – Make Me Stop Smoking*.

content, spoken word, and images does, however, is make it more difficult for the audience to follow the performance and further confound the idea that there's one overall message or meaning in this presentation of knowledge. Mroué's archive does not follow the logics of an institutionalised archive where the description matches the object, so neither must his lecture performance necessarily follow this format. It is his attempt to flee the institutionalisation of knowledge, which is the prerequisite for its hegemonisation.

### *Mocking Concepts of Original Content/Knowledge*

The performances in 'My Documents/Share Your Screen' often take on a playful or even mocking air when attempting to outline their specific artistic or epistemic contribution. The resistance to articulating this can be seen clearly as yet another way of trying to push back against the formal institutionalisation or commodification of their contributions into any utilitarian model of knowledge. In *Or All Changes Will Be Lost*, Etchells jokes that all his accumulated knowledge amounts to a chaos of documents on his screen. Taking the series invitation 'Share Your Screen' the most literally out of all participating artists, Etchells spends most of his performance taking the audience on a tour of his desktop and through various Word documents, which function as his notebook. Etchells makes no claims to originality and often gestures to a more embedded network of ideas. Mroué goes even further in his rejection of the idea that artists need to create new or original concepts or knowledges. Mroué describes his compulsive collection of newspaper clippings and audio-visual materials and his inability to let go or delete any of these personal archives in terms of the anxieties of an artist. He holds onto those materials, he says, out of a fear of being unproductive. These archives are his way of assuring himself that he will always have something else to make an installation or performance out of, to assuage his fears of becoming a (financial) burden on his family or the state, even if this means holding on to things that have since become unproductive. He tells the story of how he attempted an art project a few years ago where he would photograph manhole covers in different countries with the goal of collecting them in a book. When his friend told him that a project like this already existed and someone else had already published such a book, Mroué became mockingly defiant. He vowed that his next project would be

original and absolutely new, because 'you know artists should be original'.[219] He then proceeds to show photographs from his 'next project', hundreds of photos of the same streetlamp at different times of the day across multiple years. It is a streetlamp Mroué passes on his way to work every day. This project, he assures the audience, will be absolutely unique, no one will have done it before. The mocking and joyful attitude here lies in the extreme particularisation of his artistic practices. His project would create knowledge about a specific streetlamp, but this knowledge would escape any utilitarian or broader political understanding of knowledge. His strategy of resistance thus is a satirical rejection of originality.

### *Hyperlocalisation of Knowledge*

The final strategy the lecture performances in 'My Documents/Share Your Screen' employed to counter any claims of spectacularisation is to embed their practice in a very specific and local context. In *Blue House*, Zhang Mengqi navigates the tensions between producing and creating art for a specific community and the global logics of a Zoom performance.[220] *Blue House* traces the dancer and documentary film maker's return to her home village in Hubei, China. In the last few years Zhang has worked to open an arts and culture centre, the Blue House, in a rural community. Her performance surveys some of her recent art projects including her participation in a local folk memory project which aims to capture memories of the Great Chinese Famine (1959-61). Zhang's contribution is to make these experiences accessible intergenerationally. She has built an archive of the famine with films and interviews with the older generation in her village and creates performances inspired by these testimonies in the Blue House with young people from the community. As she talks, sitting in her studio in the Blue House, the lecture performance feels more akin to an artist interview or a summary of her past activities. She talks the audience through her techniques for filming and the need for a cultural space in rural areas. Her talk ends, however, with Zhang walking outside and delivering the last few minutes of the presentation in front of the Blue House, which due to the lockdown is dark, eerily empty, and unliving. This choice shows the stark difference between a

[219] Mroué and Arias, 32:42.
[220] Mengqi Zhang and Lola Arias, *'My Documents/Share Your Screen' – Blue House*, 22 May 2020, YouTube Video, 22 May 2020, https://www.you tube.com/watch?v= h6d8uEURX0M.

participatory and community-based practice (which was only accessible to the audience via archival video), and the demands of the universalised aesthetics of the TED talk, or any other form of knowledge production that tries to merge the affective and the conceptual, the popular and the academic. Zhang's performance does not 'raise awareness' or participate in any tropey narrative of non-Western poverty, rather her insistence on the uniqueness of this localised experience enables her to mark the absence of her specific performance-community in the lecture performance.




**Figure 11:** The Blue House before and during the pandemic. Zhang Mengqi in *Blue House* for 'My Documents/Share Your Screen', Künstlerhaus Mousonturm, 29-30 May 2020. Screenshot taken 5 August 2020.

What all of these strategies have in common is that they use dramaturgical tools to differentiate the practice of the lecture performance from any popularly recognisable form of circulated online lectures. And although the Zoom aesthetic does place them in the vicinity of the online academic lecture or the business conference, lecture performances in 'My Documents/Share Your Screen' went to some length to conceptually extricate themselves from this association. What is harder to extricate, however, is the position of the lecture performer in contemporary cognitive capitalism. Summarising the position of contemporary artists vis-à-vis the knowledge economy's encroaching capitalisation, artist Liam Gillick writes about the artist's 'existence within a regime that is centred on the rampant capitalisation of the mind'.[221] Gillick sees artists faced with the accusation that they are at best 'the ultimate freelance knowledge workers',[222] which he

[221] Liam Gillick, *Industry and Intelligence: Contemporary Art Since 1820* (Columbia University Press, 2016), 118.
[222] Gillick, 118.

sees grounded in the indiscernibility between art and non-art as well as work and non-work in post-Fordist production: 'The fact that it is superficially hard to determine observable distance between the daily routines and operations of the new knowledge worker and the artist is precisely because art functions on a track closely parallel to the structures it is critiquing'.[223] This shows that the negotiation of the politics of knowledge are also a negotiation of the politics of self and that the 'knowledge economy re-orients the connections between art, subjecthood, labour, and technology'.[224] To this end, it is important to ask what kind of subjectivity this mode of artistic knowledge production in the lecture performance produces. As the way they work and the work they produce look so similar, does it make sense to perceive of the contemporary lecture performer as a cognitive worker?

## Share Your Screen – The Artist as the 'Ultimate Freelance Knowledge Worker'

Considering the para-institutional position of the lecture performance and its practitioners, the formation of the freelance knowledge worker is a particularly useful framework to analyse both the economic positions of Preciado's 'cyber-oral' worker and the internalised governmentality that structures their work processes. Subjectivity has become the battleground where the struggle for and against cognitive capitalism is fought.[225] Moreover, as the presentations in this series existed explicitly in the virtualised economy of knowledge, the connections between labour, technology, art, and subjecthood were particularly heightened in their performances. These, like other forms of cognitive labour, now happen on thousands of laptop screens, compartmentalised into the logics of Zoom, and consumed in identical manners.

The technological realties of 'My Documents/Share your Screen' evidenced this lack of discrepancy between these modes of labour, while also playing to the excitement of the revelation of these glimpses into each other's laptop screens promised. A lot has been made journalistically of the fact that Zoom meetings offer a glimpse into someone's personal life, including their home décor and what that says about their tastes, values,

[223] Gillick, 118.
[224] Holert, *Knowledge Beside Itself*, 35.
[225] See Kunst, *Artist at Work, Proximity of Art and Capitalism*, 19–32.

and social standing.[226] The implication here is that the ubiquity of teleconferences has turned something previously private into a public attraction ripe for intimate revelations and inviting the judgement of others. 'My Documents/Share your Screen' extended this metaphor of personal revelation to the function of sharing one's screen in a teleconference, insinuating a similar but different mode of sharing intimate information. Commenting on the situation of the Zoom meeting when promoting the series, Arias remarked, 'we are [already] opening our living rooms to the world but now we are opening our computers to the world'.[227] This indicates that the process of revealing the contents of one's computer desktop is even more intimate and revealing than letting others see one's choice of sofa cushions. Drawing on Marshall McLuhan's media theory, she stated, 'our computers became like an extension of our brains' and allowing people access to that is a personal act.[228] Notably, the sharing of the screen mirrors the hierarchical situation between audience and performers in a theatre. While the gaze into each other's living room is, at least in theory, reciprocal, the gaze onto the artist's screen imitates the theatrical gaze, which leaves the spectator in the dark (a circumstance 'My Documents/Share Your Screen' heightened even more by switching to 'webinar mode', which removes the audience members from the screen completely) without the need to reveal themselves, while the artists, and in this case, the contents of their 'brains' are in the spotlight.[229] 'So basically we are opening our brains [to the audience]', says Arias.[230] The draw of these lecture performances thus lies in the revelations, not physical but mental, a kind of intellectual striptease – like admitting to a secret obsession with the colonial mind-set of a pseudo-explorer in Penim's case or in admitting defeat in the face of overwhelming collections of potential source material in Etchells's and Mroué's case.

[226] Penelope Green, 'You Show Me Your Décor, I'll Show You Mine', *The New York Times*, 31 March 2020, sec. Style, https://www.nytimes.com/2020/03/31/style/decor-webcam-coronavirus.html; Kyle Chayka, 'The Honest Truths Zoom Backgrounds Tell about Quarantined Lives', *Curbed*, 9 April 2020, https://www.curbed.com/2020/4/9/21212323/zoom-backgrounds-coronavirus-culture).
[227] Hentschker, 'SEGAL TALKS: Interview with Lola Arias,' 23:17.
[228] Hentschker, 23:20.
[229] In this context it is relevant that Arias highlighted her position as the curator and facilitator of the event by choosing to present all performances in the series in front of a virtual background. She rejected the reciprocity of the living-room-gaze (something she did not do in the earlier promotional interview) but also did not indulge in the performer-based revelation of the sharing of one's screen.
[230] Hentschker, SEGAL TALKS: Interview with Lola Arias, 23:38.

What's palpable about these insights into the screen-brains of the lecture performers is not only the atomisation of the workforce, and the demands of working virtually, familiar to ideas of post-Fordism, but also the idea of workers seeing themselves as human capital, their 'self' as the content of the artwork, and their ability to perform the discoursification of their practice as artistic skill.[231] According to Chi Chi Shi, the concept of skill 'conflates the qualities of a person with their labour-power',[232] which the lecture performance is particularly apt at exploiting. All performers in Arias's series mined their personal anxieties and compulsions as material for their artistic production, underlining the internalised logic of subject formation of the post-Fordist immaterial worker.

This all-encompassing subject formation is mirrored in, and to some extent emerges from, the practices of artistic dematerialisation in the conceptual art of the 1960s, 70s, and 80s.[233] Claire Bishop has observed that a practical de-skilling of artists in terms of crafts since the 1960s has given rise to a re-skilling in discursive expertise and linguistic virtuosity.[234] The assertion is that conceptual art's decreased interest in the physical artwork, and increased focus on the conceptual and cognitive, and, thus, immaterial properties of the artwork, reflects the way cognitive capitalism prioritises 'intelligent, inventive, and innovative labour', which cumulates in communicative activity.[235] This deskilling has led to a privileging of modes of intellectual, affective, and interpersonal labour, such as networking, liaising, and collaborating in contemporary artistic and curatorial practices. This tendency to de-skill artists as craftspeople, and re-skilling them in the art of presenting finds its zenith in the mode of the lecture performances present in 'My Documents/Share Your Screen'. The minimal aesthetic of the shared screen and seated speaker make any other kind of showcasing of skill or ability difficult. While non-online lecture performances often included dancing, live painting, or

[231] For studies tracing how contemporary theatre producers and consumers have also internalised this entrepreneurialism, self-surveillance, and flexibility of the post-Fordist neoliberal subject, see Jen Harvie, Harvie, *Fair Play - Art, Performance and Neoliberalism*. and Adam Alston *Beyond Immersive Theatre: Aesthetics, Politics and Productive Participation* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2016).
[232] Chi-Chi Shi, 'Defining My Own Oppression: Neoliberalism and the Demands of Victimhood', *Historical Materialism* 26, no. 2 (30 July 2018): 274.
[233] See Boltanski and Chiapello, *The New Spirit of Capitalism*.
[234] 'Black Box/White Cube: Issues in Contemporary Performance' (Seminar Presentation, The Graduate Center, City University of New York, 8 March 2016).
[235] Moulier-Boutang, *Cognitive Capitalism*, 2011, 55.

audience interactions, the living room stages of the lecture performance series rendered these more explicitly theatrical modes less impactful than in a live performance. Lagartijas Tiradas al Sol, for example, experimented with having a camera film the back of one presenter for most of their performance and then ended the piece with them getting up and engaging in a small movement section set to music. But the busy background of multiple bookshelves, the camera perspective from below, and the somewhat distorted proportions of the shot meant the moment lacked the visual concentration it deserved. Speaking and screen-sharing thus remained the most effective and direct ways to engage the audience and encapsulated the skill of the performer's labour-power.

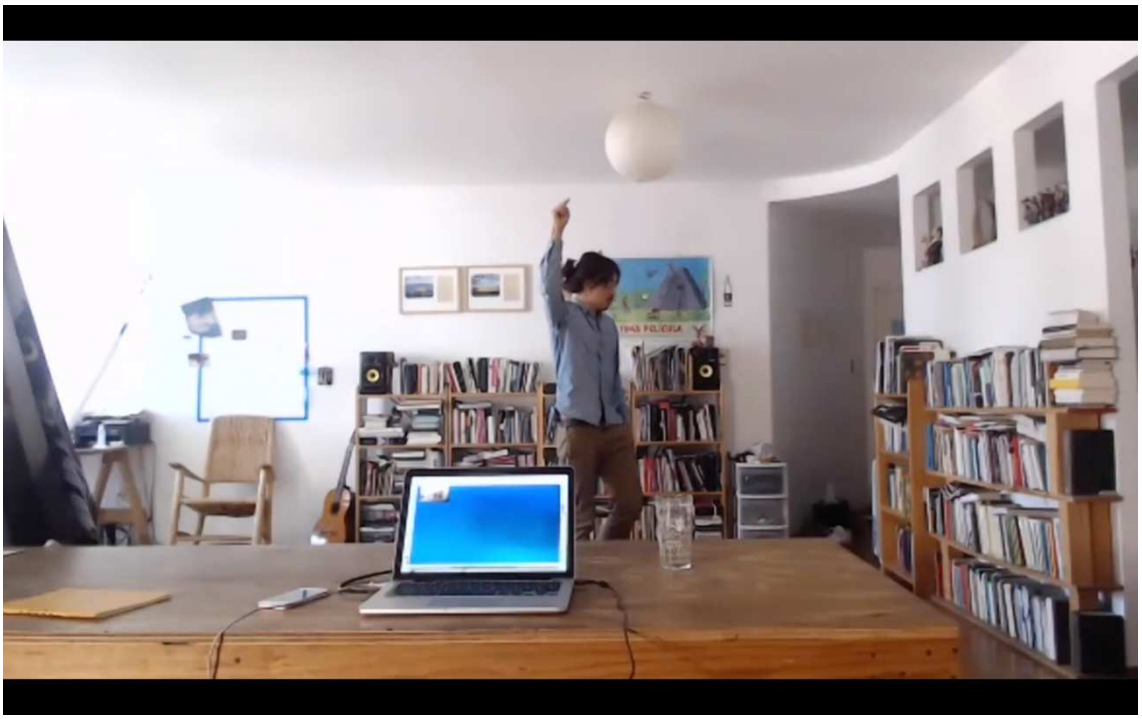


Figure 12: 'Lázaro' Gabino Rodríguez dancing at the end of Lagartijas Tiradas al Sol's *Lázaro*. Performed as part of 'My Documents/Share Your Screen', Künstlerhaus Mousonturm, 12-13 June 2020. Screenshot taken 5 August 2020.

The knowledge work produced in this way is also tied up with notions of technologically dependent subjecthood and, in this way, 'My Documents/Share Your Screen' mirrored the ideological production of a network subjectivity in the contemporary knowledge economy. Berardi offers the term 'cognitariat', which refers to a 'virtual' class of cognitive

workers, to conceptualise this subject formation.[236] The cognitarian's labour no longer produces commodities intended to be destroyed in the act of its consumption, but rather it 'enlarges, transforms, and creates the "ideological" and cultural environment of the consumer'.[237] Thus, cognitive capitalism has reorganised the relationship between production and consumption. Holert consequently extends the ascription of the cognitariat also to the consumer of contemporary art and not just its producer. Similarly, Moulier-Boutang sees this cultural environment of this economic logic manifested in the 'collective brain activity mobilised in interconnected digital networks' of producers and consumers.[238] The digital infrastructures present in Arias's series – the emphasis on sharing, the live Zoom session, the insistence on an audience Q&A – thus encourage the performers as well as the audience to perceive themselves as cognitarians, participating in the new normal of pandemic artistic production.

## Share Your Process – The Aestheticisation of the Unfinished

As freelance knowledge workers, the artists featured in 'My Documents/Share Your Screen' did not only share their secret obsessions or personal archives. Rather, the imperative to share their screen-brains also gave significant insight into *how* they make their artworks. Crucially, the fact that the monodirectional gaze onto their shared screen revealed intimate knowledge about the artists' production process is not an accidental by-product of the event but a logical consequence of the form of the lecture performance itself, which is invested in a theatricalisation of intellectual endeavours. In the case of Arias's series, the shared screen becomes a stand-in for the mind and the site of the intellectual work of the artists. And it can stand-in because, to some extent, it already did, even before the global pandemic made virtual performances mandatory. In fact, even the original title 'My Documents' – borrowed from the standardised folder title of a personal computer – already gestured to the everyday digital reality of the artists featured in the programme. When Arias talks about how the previous live iterations of 'My Documents' already had elements of the virtual adaptation, she also describes the conventional set-up and dramaturgy for a majority of contemporary lecture performances:

[236] Berardi, Cognitariat and Semiokapital.
[237] Lazzarato, 'General Intellect: Towards an Inquiry into Immaterial Labour'.
[238] Moulier-Boutang, *Cognitive Capitalism*, 2011, 56.

> There was the presence of the artist and the computer. Because when people talk about their own archives, they have them in their computers, so it was basically, there was always like a table, and a computer, and an artist and a screen behind [them]. And sometimes the artist would dance or do crazy things or bring a lot of objects, but the minimal format was the artists and the computer, so I thought this is has a lot of potential to be done in the virtual life.[239]

This shows that even before the migration to a virtual format, the lecture performance was concerned with the theatricalisation and representation of the mental work of the artist. In doing so the lecture performance reifies this work as the artwork. By sharing their work processes as artistic form, the practitioners of the lecture performance not only let audiences observe the intellectual labour they perform to make their art, they allow these modes of labour to become the artwork themselves, blurring the boundaries between 'process and product'.[240] This focus on process and the theatricalisation of mental work also explains why the more traditional performance elements come almost as an afterthought to Arias. She notes that 'sometimes artists would dance' or, even less specifically, would 'do crazy things', showing that the presence of demonstratively performed elements are, in her eyes, not a prerequisite for these presentations to be categorised as lecture *performances*. Rather, the performance at hand lies in the knowledge work of the artists, which in cognitive capitalism has been rendered largely 'immaterial'.

This presentation of cognitive labour turned artistic product points to one of the most interesting contradictions inherent in the lecture performance as a form, which also illustrates the difficulty of resisting commodification in cognitive capitalism. Lecture performances could be seen as resisting what Kunst calls the 'project horizon', where the artist's time is parcelled out and present production is dominated by a preoccupation with future projects.[241] Daniel Ladnar observes that by privileging the process over the product the lecture performance 'can appear as the deferral of the finished product'.[242] Consequently, the lecture performance becomes a way of celebrating and aestheticising

[239] Hentschker, 'SEGAL TALKS: Interview with Lola Arias', 26:48-27.01.
[240] Kunst, *Artist at Work, Proximity of Art and Capitalism*, 138.
[241] Bojana Kunst, 'The Project Horizon: On the Temporality of Making', *Manifesta Journal* 16 (2012): 112.
[242] Ladnar, 'The Lecture Performance: Contexts of Lecturing and Performing', 14.

the unfinished, the not-yet project. In his lecture performance *Or All Changes will be Lost*, Etchells, for example, gives detailed insight into how his overcrowded desktop and compulsive saving of writing scraps in his digitised notebook contributes to his method of writing. The sheer volume of saved material, as well as his practice of adding each new bit to the same (extremely long) document means that he forces himself to interact differently with his collected materials. Instead of being able to navigate directly to a specific passage, his method dictates a certain ambling and getting lost in previous materials. Anyone familiar with Etchells's highly associative writing style will find this an illuminating revelation about his working practice. However, the question is to what extent the form also becomes a way of capitalising on the unfinished. Is this a meaningful defiance to the 'just in time' logics of production of capitalism, which according to Shannon Jackson has taken over the art and performance world?[243] Or might it be seen as an intensification of this logic, where it is no longer necessary for the artistic 'product' to be viewed as performance-ready, and that which is unfinished yet ready for consumption can be presented and devoured at any stage? Is this a resistance to perform or rather a redesigned imperative to produce and 'perform or else'?[244]

[243] Shannon Jackson, 'Just-in-Time: Performance and the Aesthetics of Precarity', *TDR/The Drama Review* 56, no. 4 (19 November 2012): 10–31.

[244] McKenzie, *Perform or Else*. McKenzie's book not only provides an early contribution to the literature on the cultural performance of the lecture and the emergence of what he calls the 'global lecture machine', his recent work on transmedia performances, also affords the lecture performance and its more popular cousin, the TED talk, pride of place among interventionist practices, which he sees as critiquing and reconceptualising modes of academic performance (See, for example, Jon McKenzie, 'Collective Thought-Action: On Lecture Performances, Transmedia Knowledge and Designing Possible Worlds', *SAJ - Serbian Architectural Journal* 11, no. 2 (2019): 321–40.)




**Figure 13**: Tim Etchells's overcrowded desktop *in Or All Your Changes Will Be Lost*. Performed as part of 'My Documents/Share Your Screen', Künstlerhaus Mousonturm, 5-6 June 2020. Screenshot taken 5 August 2020.

In response to this, I want to suggest that some performances responded to this problem of being productive by addressing the problem head-on. The idea of the process becoming the product is particularly palpable in Mroué's performance. At the end of *Make Me Stop Smoking* he tries to unburden himself from some parts of his personal archive via the dramatic gesture of deleting the entire contents of his laptop desktop live, in front of the audience. He even goes so far as to click 'empty trash' on his screen, ensuring that whatever was on this desktop at the time of the performance has been permanently deleted.[245] While there is freedom in this refusal to collect any longer, the fact that this is being done as a performative gesture as part of a performance makes this moment somewhat ambiguous. Arguably, by including these materials in the present performance, they've already become productive as artistic materials, and the process of throwing them away becomes a way of translating this refusal to hold on into an artwork. The act of active forgetting, of refusing to synthesise, of leaving things unfinished becomes the product of the performance.

[245] Mroué and Arias, *"My Documents/Share Your Screen" – Make Me Stop Smoking*, 01:04:22.




**Figure 14**: Rabih Mroué emptying his desktop and trash in *Make Me Stop Smoking*. Performed as part of 'My Documents/Share Your Screen', Künstlerhaus Mousonturm, 22-23 May 2020. Screenshot taken 5 August 5, 2020.

On the face of it 'My Documents/Share Your Screen' is about the refusal to be artistically productive and wants to attend to those obsessions, the hang-ups, that usually throw spanners in the works of economic production. Yet, by making them the topic of artistic production and commodifying this work as artistic output, the lecture performances in the series themselves become productive. They become part of art's participation in the economy of knowledge and thereafter circulate as artistic products. At least to some degree then, the contemporary lecture performance becomes an agent of cognitive capitalism, which subsumes that which resists it. 'My Documents/Share Your Screen' showed that the situation of the pandemic accelerated this development as it privileged cognitive work as the predominant form of artistic work and makes other forms of artistic production increasingly difficult. As things stand it is hard not to be pessimistic about this development or see it as a sign of things to come. It is unclear if we are currently witnessing a more permanent reorganisation of artistic work, yet the findings of Naomi Klein's pivotal study on 'disaster capitalism' suggest that this would not be the first time that capitalist ideology has exploited natural disasters or international crises to permanently rework modes of production, install precarious and fragmented labour

practices, and expand the realms of consumption.[246] For the production of artistic knowledge, this expanding subsumption under the logics of post-Fordist labour holds many dangers, not least the waning potential of artistic collaboration, the vacating of a critical position towards spectacularisation of knowledge, and the increasing futility of mounting any effective resistance to the proximities of art and capitalism.

## Share Yourself – Looking for Other Bodies

To end on a more optimistic note, I would like to turn in this final section of this chapter towards one of the more unexpected developments of the performance series and one that points to an idea of potentials of solidarity and collaboration among the 'cognitarians' of the art and performance world. The fragmented and virtualised mode of working in the online lecture performances I have described above makes it clear that the practitioners of the lecture performance can be understood as members of this cognitariat class, yet what remains to be answered is whether this subject-formation and class membership can be productive in organising forms of political or collective subjectivity. To explore this collectivity I turn to the two final evenings of the series.

The last performance of 'My Documents/Share You Screen' was intended to be delivered by the Cuban artist and lecture performance veteran Tania Bruguera. However, due to broadband connectivity issues in her home in Havana, Cuba, Bruguera was unable to give her performance. Instead, Arias and her team organised an open call inviting performers from all over the world to give mini lecture performances (seven minutes each) of their own personal archives. Although the call was only open for about 48 hours, the response, according to Arias was enthusiastic. The team managed to programme six different presentations for both of the nights Bruguera was meant to perform. Despite the spontaneous character of the event, the team managed to pay all participating artists in more than the usual 'exposure' by redistributing Bruguera's fee.[247] While it is good practice to compensate artists for their work, Bruguera's financial loss also highlights the

[246] Naomi Klein, *The Shock Doctrine: The Rise of Disaster Capitalism*, 1st edition (London: Penguin, 2008).
[247] It is unclear from Arias's remarks whether this meant that all 12 artists 'shared' Bruguera's fee or whether the participating institutions topped up these payments to a more substantial rate. If they did not, this creates the odd situation where performance is compensated by length, suggesting that artistic work, even if it is cognitive, can be paid by the hour.

challenges these new modes of artistic production pose for those on the digital peripheries. Artists without the technological means of participating in this mode of producing art, (who are often already disadvantaged because they do not live and produce in the epicentres of the art and performance world, often cannot rely on public funding, and might be restricted from participating in events due to visa restrictions) face further precarity that even efforts like Arias's event cannot alleviate. At the moment, they are cut off from even the most unstable networks of artist-cognitarians.

For those artists that did have the technological means and the digital access, however, these open call performances provided a platform to showcase their work to international audiences, who might not have come across these artists otherwise. The atmosphere for those last two performances of the series was elated. Arias was visibly touched by the responses to the call, and the spectators, many of whom had been returning week after week, were interested, generous, and genuinely thankful for this opportunity to virtually connect with others also in isolation. The shorter length of the presentation and the fact that they did not switch to webinar mode also gave the open call sessions a less formal feeling. At times, it felt like a virtual reunion. There was also, to me, a dramaturgical logic to these events. By opening up participation in the event like this, it felt like the invitation of 'Share *Your* Screen' also present in the title of the series was finally honoured. Instead of remaining spectators only, some members of the audience were given the chance to reciprocate and participate in a more active way. Their performances took very different formats: some shared their screen and disappeared behind the images, others split the screen to show both their documents and their faces, still others walked audiences through (virtual) environments. Some read from a script, while others spoke freely. Some presented alone, others in groups. The wide range of different practices not only reiterates the elasticity of the genre of lecture performance but also points to the feeling of authorship participating artists were given (or felt able) to take of the event. This sense of ownership, which both participating artists and returning audience members felt can be seen as an illustration of the 'general intellect searching for a body', which, according to Berardi, is a way towards an 'autonomous and

collective subjectivation', in his eyes the only answer to 'conditions of virtual isolation and intense economic competition'.[248]

The topics of these performances were wide-ranging. There were scientific projects, like research into cellular medicine, robotics, or the US military stationed in Germany. There were personal projects about loss in the family or the origins of one's first name, the historical research into aftermaths of genocides, the criminalisation of queer communities, and ritual apologies for injustices of the past. And there were projects born out of this specific moment in time, like the one intent on building a collective archive of domestic spaces during the lockdown, which invited people to submit images, videos, or texts of their own experiences at home during the pandemic. While it is impossible to cover each of these mini-lecture performances here, I want to briefly outline two to give an idea of how they were similar and how they differed from the programmed performances. The two performances I believe to be particularly emblematic of this shifted sense of togetherness during the open call performances were Yoni Oppenheim's *My Archive of Mourning and Memory,* where he marked the one year anniversary of his father's death and *I Didn't Get Any Title Till Now*, which followed Daniel Wetzel (a member of the performance collective Rimini Protokoll) walking through an abandoned Athens and ended with him, his children, and his wife happily burning some of his old books, notebooks, and diaries in a bonfire in their courtyard. Affectively, these two performances were on opposite ends of the spectrum. Oppenheim's solemn deliberation of what it means to mourn a parent was decidedly different from Wetzel's cheerful demeanour as he was clearing out his possessions in preparation for a move from Athens to Germany. Yet, they both called on the audience to help mark an important step in their personal journey.

In Oppenheim's case it was the marking of the first anniversary of his father's death (the first *yahrzeit*). In Jewish tradition the anniversary of a parent's death is marked by several recitals of the *mourner's kaddish*, a prayer which can only be performed in the presence of a *minyan*, a group of ten Jewish men or Jewish persons. The outbreak of COVID-19, however, had made it impossible for Oppenheim to carry out this crucial ritual.

[248] Franco 'Bifo' Berardi, 'Cognitarian Subjectivation', *E-Flux Magazine*, November 2010, https://www.e-flux.com/journal/20/67633/cognitarian-subjectivation/.

Instead of reciting the prayer, he offered a reflection on his year of mourning through Jewish ritual and used documents from his father's estate to re-perform the eulogy at the funeral exactly a year before. He thus used his open call performance to mark the *yahrzeit* with a different group of people and found a way to make the day meaningful to him in the absence of the formal ritual. Wetzel, too, made the audience witness part of his life coming to an end but he also used the opportunity to conduct an inventory of his life, merging personal and professional documents, and inviting both his immediate family and an anonymous audience into the process. Both performances offered the audience a glimpse into a highly personal event, while also contextualising the occasion by referring to spiritual texts, poetry, and diary notes. And crucially, the two performances needed the presence of this virtual audience to be able to honour these occasions.

The current pandemic is, of course, a time where this isolation and economic competition (in the arts and elsewhere) is felt acutely, and I don't want to suggest that 'My Documents/Share You Screen' was a utopic space free of these realities. To this end it is important to point out the ways it participated in modes of competition firstly by holding an open call as a sort of audition, and secondly by outsourcing the last two events of the series both conceptually and practically. The participating artists each provided fragmented pieces that together made up the whole of an evening's productions, and the lecture performances came to Arias and her team as ready-made pieces. While it was advantageous for the open call artists, many of whom were at the early stages of their careers, to be associated with an event that also featured established artists and performers, thereby raising their social clout, they shouldered the production costs of the research that went into making the performances themselves. The production houses that featured the performances as part of the series were not involved in developing the pieces and did not contribute to the production costs with either rehearsal time or space. This is, of course, in part due to the spontaneous nature of the event, yet it illustrates the realities of cognitive-artistic labour, which is often produced outside artistic institutions or in semi-detached relationships to the institution. The risk for the production is thus often borne by artists alone, who have to find alternative funding and often are only able to find a performance outlet once the development has progressed enough for it to be shared with an audience, as was the case for the performances of the open calls. Here,

the position of the artists is similar to that of the cognitarian 'who are the social body of the soul at work in the sphere of semiocapital',[249] which, as Holert and others have shown, also dominates the art world as it had become subsumed by the knowledge economy. Berardi notes that it is in the interest of semiocapital that this social body is 'dimidiated in a sphere isolated from the other's body', as that prevents effective modes of organising resistance, a condition exacerbated by the isolation necessitated during the pandemic. In this sense the open call sessions of 'My Documents/Share your Screen' participated in are emblematic of the mechanisms of cognitive capitalism and its effects on the cognitarian's subjectivity.

Yet, Berardi also sees the cognitariat as possible agents of disruption to semiocapital's hegemony. He asserts that the 'tool of self-organization' is found in the 'same network that is also the tool of [the cognitariat's] exploitation' and that their collective power 'once organized and consciously managed can be very disruptive for capitalist rule'.[250] Crucially, he identifies the 'language of poetry' as the conceptual tool for this reorganisation. For it is this language 'much more than the language of politics and the conceptual tools of modern political science' that the 'political organizer of cognitarians' must wield to 'do away with panic and depression' and to 'speak in a way that sensibly enacts a paradigm shift, a resemiotization of the social field, a change in social expectations and self-perception'.[251] 'My Documents/Share your Screen' and perhaps particularly the open call sessions were a way of working towards this resemiotisation of the social field of the pandemic. The chosen format of the lecture performance – with its insistence of poetic knowledges as political tools to displace post-Fordist notions of productivity with personal obsessions – played a crucial part in this re-organisation of expectations. The sessions became a way for the participants not just to 'do away' with panic and depression but to sit with and share their fears for both the immediate world of the global lockdown and for the world beyond the pandemic. The research presented in the lecture performances gestures to ways of being together in grief or uncertainty and aimed to rehearse ways of sharing knowledge to create a

[249] Franco 'Bifo' Berardi, 'Cognitarian Subjectivation', *E-Flux Magazine*, November 2010, https://www.e-flux.com/journal/20/67633/cognitarian-subjectivation/.
[250] Berardi, Cognitariat and Semiokapital.
[251] Berardi, 'Cognitarian Subjectivation', November 2010.

different world post-pandemic. These moments of sharing, for me, were an unexpected consequence of the project partly because it seems counter-intuitive to the form of the lecture performance itself. A format of mainly solo performances in separate rooms about personal obsessions does not, at first glance, seem to have this capacity for collaboration. Of course, lecture performances are always embedded in larger networks of dramaturgy, curators, collaborators, and institutional and (para-)institutional alliances as was the case with the performances presented in 'My Documents/Share your Screen' but, notably, they are also instrumental in connecting the bodies of the participants and spectators across the network of ideas. Berardi stresses that to effect change, the cognitariat needs to be seen as a collective of bodies rather than just a 'hive mind'. Only then are we 'forced to acknowledge that we do have a body, a social and a physical body, a socioeconomic body'.[252] The lecture performances in 'My Documents/Share your Screen' connected the anxious experience of the pandemic to the affective experience of the knowledge shared in the lecture performances. These knowledge experiences were neither spectacular nor ornamental rather they became a way of being together in crisis. The sessions, conceived of as an opportunity to share research, archives, and thinking, also became a moment of respite, a way of breathing through the panic together.

## Share Your Work – Theatricalising Cognitive Labour

The modes of participation conceived and emerging throughout the performance series took seriously the physical, emotional, and economic insecurities of the socio-economic bodies of the cognitarians, who came to be represented by artists and spectators alike. This change is also visible in Arias's overall vision for the project. When asked whether the pandemic would shift something in her artistic practice dramatically, she reaffirmed her commitment to collective artistic practice: 'This is what I am more and more interested in, in sharing these times and creating these communities of people together that can do something artistic together that can help us to go through this process together'.[253] Among the hopeful tone in this statement and the lecture performance

[252] Berardi.
[253] Hentschker, SEGAL TALKS: Interview with Lola Arias, 51:48-52:07.

series at large, the real precarities of contemporary artistic work shine through. When put against the already unchecked mechanisms of cognitive capitalism, which have only accelerated against the backdrops of these existential insecurities of the pandemic, it is difficult to conceive of meaningful alternative modes of being together. This project and its insistence on the presence of artists and artistic work during the pandemic, thus also needs to be seen as a statement from the artists that they are still here; still working.

The lecture performances in 'My Documents/Share your screen' in many ways are emblematic of these contradictions of artistic production during the epistemisation of art and the advancing power of cognitive capitalism. On the one hand, they are a way of enabling artistic production even in circumstances of extreme isolation and manage to connect disparate artist-knowledge workers across virtualised networks. On the other hand, their reliance on the capitalist networks of distribution and their approximation of exploitative labour practices under cognitive capitalism makes them vulnerable to critics that see in them a consumerist rather than a politically empowering logic. Their reception then becomes at best a form of distraction, and at worst a devaluing of the artistic process, which diminishes or does away with artistic forms of production outside that of cognitive labour.

Arias's lecture performance series was by no means the only format that celebrated and showcased modes of artistic process turned artistic product, which thrived during the pandemic: In *No Show* at the Yard Online festival, Christopher Green played a reluctant performer denouncing the exploitative and voyeuristic by-products of engaging in physical and emotional labour as a performer, which he illustrated by outsourcing acts of stripping or revealing personal secrets to the audience. Nicolas Stemann hired video artist Emma Lou Herrmann to document the creation and rehearsal process of his *Corona Passion Play* at the Schauspielhaus in Zürich*,* thus intentionally aestheticising the creative process before the release of the theatrical production. And Suzan-Lori Parks invited audiences to 'watch her work' in regular livestreams between March and August. Hosted by the Public Theatre in New York and *HowlRound*, Parks's *Watch Me Work* was structurally the closest to Arias's series. Half performance half masterclass, the event allowed members of the Zoom audience to watch the playwright work on scripts or work on their own writing projects and ask her questions about her writing process during the Q&A. Like 'My Documents/Share your Screen', *Watch Me*

*Work* was already an ongoing project before the pandemic, but its low-fi and process-based aesthetics meant that it could be easily adapted to an online format. While artists were encouraged to view their work as part of a global knowledge economy that privileges cognitive labour even before the outbreak of COVID-19, this moment has further accelerated the discoursification of art. Projects like these, which theatricalise cognitive labour feed an economic logic that accepts or even encourages the precarisation of knowledge work. This is not only significant within the art world itself but touches a variety of other fields as well. As universities, for example, seek to integrate more permanent online or blended teaching, it remains to be seen, for instance, if and how the imperative to 'share your work' – both as process and product – will influence the policies and labour regulations that dictate how and by whom knowledge is produced and shared online. How the lecture performance engaged with academic modes of knowledge production is the focus of Part 2 of this thesis, which will expand on two discourses touched upon in this chapter, but not sufficiently explored. The first is the lecture performance's difficult relationship to the TED talk, which is the theme of Chapter 3. The second is the mobilisation of the lecture performance and other hybrid and blended forms as pedagogies in higher education as a mode of engaging students in the topics of the digital commons and digital literacy. I develop this further in Chapter 4, by exploring Jon McKenzie's theorisation of the lecture performance as a means to engage with knowledge in a digitised society.

What an engagement with the online lecture performances performed during the pandemic lockdowns has shown is that the form can function as a theatricalisation of the hidden work of cognitive capitalism and the alienation and isolation this type of work can foster. It has further highlighted the ambiguous class position of artistic-cognitive workers, who are encouraged to distinguish themselves from other cognitive workers – for example by distancing their work from the more conventional TED talk – and while also often faced with the precarious realities of the gig-economy are far removed from the 'multitude' of keyworkers, who faced very different physical and/or financial risks during the lockdowns. What this shows is that the maybe too-enthusiastic grouping of cognitive workers into a coherent cohort (by scholars like Moulier-Boutang, Virno, or Berardi) is oversimplified. While the idea of the cognitarian was useful in this chapter to show how artists navigate current challenges of the knowledge economy and to point to

transient but nonetheless meaningful moments of solidarity in their coming together, the harsh realities of the pandemic – with its clear distinction between elite and non-elite working practices has shown that the term itself needs to be further scrutinised and its potential for disrupting capitalised rule – as Berardi promises – needs to be called into question. As these lecture performances are subsumed into the logics of creative and knowledge economies which they seek to critique, their prospect of theatricalising solidarity among workers seems bleak. Rather the ambiguous class status of the lecture performers as cognitive workers as well as the absorption of their artistic processes into modes of knowledge commodification unmasks these performances as what Hito Steyerl calls 'bourgeois critique' where critique gets reduced 'innovative contribution' which is absorbed into the progressive cultural and economic institution instead of effecting a more radical change.[254] These lecture performances have revealed the connection between artistic-cognitive workers and other forms of elite labour under pandemic conditions. As this chapter has shown, this is not to say that these elite spaces of cognitive labour are free of processes of precarisation – quite the opposite in fact – but that the relative privilege surrounding this work is emblematic of the processes by which both creative and epistemic works are assimilated into dominant modes of capitalist production.

[254] Hito Steyerl, 'The Institution of Critique', transversal texts, January 2006, https://transversal.at/transversal/0106/steyerl/en.

# PART 2: CIVIC AESTHETICS: LECTURE PERFORMANCE AND HIGHER EDUCATION

Part 1 of this thesis attended to lecture performances in artistic contexts in order to investigate recent trends towards the 'epistemization of art',[255] as well as contextualising the form's proximity to contemporary forms of cognitive labour. I highlighted the form's investment in contemporary knowledge politics and pointed out the shifting understandings of artistic and creative labour due to the increasing proximity between art and knowledge work. Against this background, this part of the thesis pivots to the lecture performance in the context of higher education, where recent developments in online teaching, lecture-capture, and discourses of edutainment have made an analysis of how knowledge is performed and transmitted even more pertinent.

Much has been made about the encroachment of processes of marketisation, corporatisation, and neoliberalisation in higher education.[256] The marketisation of higher education has meant that the institutional role of the academic has changed because of this larger cultural transformation in universities. Wesley Shumar differentiates between three phases in the commodification of higher education since the Second World War.[257] The first phase is the re-conceptualisation of university degrees as products, which 'needed to be sold in a segmented and stratified marketplace' in the 1960s and 1970s.[258] This process of segmentation and stratification led to a crisis of legitimation that academic institutions are still dealing with today. According to Randall Collins, one of the consequences of education being commodified and sold as a product (or series of products) was that the credentials of education came to be questioned.[259] The question became whether a university degree had value beyond its sign value; did it have use

[255] Holert, *Knowledge Beside Itself*, 8.
[256] See, for example, Wendy Brown, 'Neoliberalized Knowledge', *History of the Present* 1, no. 1 (2011): 113–29, https://doi.org/10.5406/historypresent.1.1.0113; Stefan Collini, *What Are Universities For?* (London, New York, NY: Penguin, 2012); Mark Olssen and Michael A. Peters, 'Neoliberalism, Higher Education and the Knowledge Economy: From the Free Market to Knowledge Capitalism', *Journal of Education Policy* 20, no. 3 (1 January 2005): 313–45.
[257] See Shumar, 'Being TED', 92–99. Shumar focuses his analysis mainly on the US context but I would argue a similar observation can be made for the UK and, to a lesser extent, for continental Europe, even if the mentioned timings don't quite align with economic developments in those countries.
[258] Shumar, 93.
[259] See Randall Collins, *The Credential Society: An Historical Sociology of Education and Stratification*, 2nd Edition, originally published 1979 (New York, NY: Columbia University Press, 2019).

beyond its bestowing of a credential? Collins calls this devaluation of university degrees 'credential inflation' and shows how this stratification of education stifles mass education and its promise of upward mobility, instead expanding credential requirements for job applications (first to high-school diploma then to college degree and, we could say, now towards the necessity of a master's degree), raising educational costs and promoting misleading information about job prospects to students.[260] The main consequence of this shift is that it has turned students into consumers.

The second phase is marked by the rise of the knowledge worker as 'prosumer', who 'engages in the work of becoming a cosmopolitan consumer and producer'.[261] This second phase of commodification of higher education is marked by the rise of the information society in the 1980s and 1990s, which is a post-industrial phenomenon where, as theories of cognitive capitalism have insisted, positions of producer and consumer tend to overlap in immaterial and affective economies.[262] Scholars such as Richard Florida have outlined how, in this moment of prosumption, creative and technological industries came to approximate each other,[263] driving a corporatisation of universities, which increasingly style themselves as branded knowledge hubs.[264]

[260] The consequences of this development today are picked up, for example, by Peter Kennedy in his article 'The Knowledge Economy and Labour Power in Late Capitalism', where he traces how the current economic compulsion that 'everyone needs a degree' has led to universities being repositories of surplus labour, which serve mainly to relieve an already over-saturated labour market, especially in the so-called creative industries (Peter Kennedy, 'The Knowledge Economy and Labour Power in Late Capitalism', *Critical Sociology* 36, no. 6 (1 November 2010): 822, 833.). This situation is worsened by the fact that today the benefits of getting a degree are collapsing for many students as student debts outstrip earning potentials.

[261] Shumar, 'Being TED', 95.

[262] See, for example, Moulier-Boutang, *Cognitive Capitalism*, 2011, 56.

[263] See Richard Florida, *Rise of the Creative Class* (New York, NY: Basic Books, 2003).

[264] See Florida. Shumar notes that 'as software companies began to look like universities, universities increasingly came to resemble a cross between a corporate research park, a shopping mall and a country club' (94). While this development is easy to imagine in the US context, and universities such as Stanford with their geographical and ideological closeness to Silicon Valley exemplify this transformation, similar developments can be observed in Britain as well. The 'UK Innovation Strategy', published in July 2021 by the Department for Business, Energy, and Industrial Development, stresses the importance of the on-going confluences between the investment community, the university sector and technology firms, and highlights the importance of advanced technological development and university partnerships for regional development. (Department of Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy, 'UK Innovation Strategy: Leading the Future by Creating It', July 2021, 47, 27, https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/uk-innovation-strategy-leading-the-future-by-creating-it.

The last phase, according to Shumar, is characterised by the logics of audit and debt as consequences of neoliberal expansions of the university, and its contradictory logic of capitalist expansion (for example, free movement for goods and services) vs. market discipline. The expansion of unregulated investment on the one hand and boundless consumption on the other powered an atmosphere of speculation and risk, which has created a situation requiring a constant process of auditing to avert the threat of major global financial disruption, such as crashes or recessions. In his *Academic Diary*, sociologist Les Back has traced the logic of the audit in higher education. Embedded in initiatives such as the Research Excellence Framework (REF) or the Teaching Excellence Framework (TEF) in the UK, the logic of the audit requires university lecturers and researchers to demonstrate their own value to the institution employing them and the wider economy.[265] The audit as a management tool for the university in the contemporary knowledge economy thus seeks to prevent a crisis of deregulation where the spending of public and private money goes unchecked.[266] The other consequence of such speculative development and expanding capital accumulation that Shumar describes, citing David Harvey, is debt. According to Shumar, debt (and the taking on of debt in the form of student loans) creates a particular set of concerns for the contemporary university, which can be described as a 'questioning of the knowledge produced and the quality of the instruction to the next generation of workers'.[267] The question of 'getting your money's worth' – which is connected to the consumer-identity outlined above – is a central concern for current students at university and one whose answer seems increasingly uncertain. This is especially true in the creative subjects, where, as Peter Kennedy has pointed out, the university's main function might lie in providing a market-adjacent (yet crucially separate) repository for surplus labour and where the perceived lack of marketable skills is a continued source of complaint for Conservative and Liberal pundits and politicians.[268] This phase has produced highly ambiguous and fraught identities in both

[265] See Les Back, *Academic Diary: Or Why Higher Education Still Matters* (London: Goldsmiths Press, 2016), 173–75.
[266] Wendy Brown sees the audit as another effect of the 'neoliberalization' of higher education in that it replaces 'principles and protocols of shared governance with managerial and business principles' and increases the 'involvement by nonacademics in academic matters (whether corporate funders participating in institutes or managerially-minded administrators deciding academic priorities)' (Brown, 'Neoliberalized Knowledge', 123.).
[267] Shumar, 'Being TED', 96.
[268] Kennedy, 'The Knowledge Economy and Labour Power in Late Capitalism', 833.

university lecturers and students and is indicative of the competitive and to some degree paranoid atmosphere perpetuated by logics of commodification within the contemporary university.

What is clear form this short summary is that these shifts towards marketisation create a crisis of legitimacy for those producing knowledge in universities and other institutions of higher education. To recognise universities as sites of economic processes means to challenge the long-held conception of knowledge as autonomous (from such economic and political processes). This poses a problem for universities, which thus far were not in the habit of articulating the conditions of how their knowledges are produced. In their book *The University and the Global Knowledge Society*, David Drank and John Meyer are optimistic about the university's ability to adjust to this problem of legitimisation.[269] The book traces the flexibility of the university throughout the twentieth century to incorporate various political and institutional changes and not lose legitimacy in the process, which is why they assume that it will also be able to do so in this instance. Others are more sceptical. In 'Globalisation and the Crisis in the Concept of the Modern University', Michael Peters and Peter Roberts point out how this shift in modes of organisational structures as well as modes of knowledge production produces a clash with the ideals of the liberal nation-state, which the modern university used to represent.[270] And in 'Lyotard, Marxism, and Higher Education. The Problem of Knowledge Capitalism' Peters goes so far as to say that this shift has hollowed out the university's institutional legitimacy. Citing Lyotard, he observes that in the absence of conventional markers of legitimacy, institutions of higher education have turned to self-legitimisation via performativity: 'Science and education are to be legitimated, in de-facto terms, through the principle of performativity, that is, through the logic of maximization of the system's performance, which becomes self-legitimating'.[271] And Wendy Brown coined the term 'neoliberalized knowledge' to mark the extent of this crisis in legitimacy of knowledge. Stressing that while it is not new that financial or corporate capital are

[269] See David John Frank and John W. Meyer, *The University and the Global Knowledge Society* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2020).
[270] Michael A. Peters and Peter Murphy, 'Globalisation and the Crisis in the Concept of the Modern University', in *Knowledge Economy, Development and the Future of Higher Education*, ed. Michael A. Peters (Rotterdam: SensePublishers, 2007), 56.
[271] Peters, 'Lyotard, Marxism, and Higher Education. The Problem of Knowledge Capitalism', 84.

imbricated in both private and public universities, 'what is novel is the degree to which the university is being merged with this world and remade in its image – its powers, needs, and values.'[272] As a consequence, neoliberalised knowledge acts as a substitute:

> [It] replaces education aimed at deepening and broadening intelligence and sensibilities, developing historical consciousness and hermeneutic adroitness, acquiring diverse knowledge and literacies, becoming theoretically capacious and politically and socially perspicacious, with education aimed at honing technically-skilled entrepreneurial actors adept at gaming any system.[273]

In other words, it denies the fostering of an educated and critical citizenry and replaces students with indebted graduates, able to 'game the system', equipped with skills-based training but otherwise uncritical and unable to conceive of knowledge outside of the 'self-legitimising' parameters of practical application. In turn this produces lecturers as precarious managerial workers, subject to audits and quality assurance, and – as I will show – encouraged to identify with a class of elite professionals of which they are not usually considered to be a part.

I give this summary of the encroachments of capitalist logics into higher education because they open fundamental questions for the consideration of lecturing and research practices within such institutions. In the following two chapters, I analyse the lecture performance's negotiation of these realities as it, I argue, is situated at the intersections of many of the discourses and practices produced as a consequence of the marketisation of higher education. To do so, I will briefly summarise two discourses that anchor the discussion of the chapters in this part of the thesis and help establish the lines of arguments in them. The first concerns the commodification of university degrees, which helped establish students as consumers. This significantly shifted power dynamics within universities, as 'customer satisfaction' now became a driving factor in the economic success of a university.[274] If understanding students as customers, we must pose the

[272] Brown, 'Neoliberalized Knowledge', 123.
[273] Brown, 123.
[274] Shumar, 'Being TED', 93. See also Eddie Mark, 'Student Satisfaction and the Customer Focus in Higher Education', *Journal of Higher Education Policy and Management* 35, no. 1 (1 February 2013): 2–10; Gabrielle Baldwin, 'The Student as Customer: The Discourse of "Quality" in Higher Education', *Journal of Tertiary Education Administration* 16, no. 1 (1 May 1994): 125–33; James E. Groccia, 'The Student as Customer versus the Student as Learner', *About Campus* 2, no. 2 (1 May 1997): 31–32.

question: how much does a 'happy customer' tend towards experience and enjoyment rather than critical challenge, intellectual growth, and personal effort? This tension is also articulated in discussions around edutainment – often conceptualised as technology-prone, pop cultural, low-effort and low-threshold education activity – which centre a similar concern for the decline of 'serious academic learning'.[275] For professors and other academic staff this shift towards 'customer satisfaction' meant that their teaching now had to 'navigate the tensions between entertaining their students enough to get high marks on student evaluations or to be rated highly on professor ranking sites, but at the same time appear rigorous enough to satisfy their colleagues, department heads and deans'.[276] Turning to the discourses and practices of the lecture performance can illuminate how contemporary higher education practitioners are negotiating this tension between education and entertainment and how far we must understand this shift as consequence of the knowledge economy's encroachment on academic pedagogies.

Secondly, analysing how the lecture performance is mobilised in and around contexts of higher education allows me to unpack the figure of the professional knowledge worker. Theorists of the knowledge economy in higher education point out that the shift towards financialisation of the creative and academic industries has led to the proliferation of the image of the academic as an elite knowledge worker, akin to other professionalised workers in the tech and financial industries with high status.[277] While the same theorists are quick to point out that this high status is not the reality for most academics, they do point out that university researchers 'are now a central part of the

[275] See, for example, Zühal Okan, 'Edutainment: Is Learning at Risk?', *British Journal of Educational Technology* 34, no. 3 (2003): 255–64; Oksana V. Anikina and Elena V. Yakimenko, 'Edutainment as a Modern Technology of Education', *Procedia - Social and Behavioral Sciences*, Proceedings of The International Conference on Research Paradigms Transformation in Social Sciences 2014 (RPTSS-2014), 166 (7 January 2015): 475–79; Chris A. Heidelberg, 'Edutainment and Convergence: Utilization in Higher Education from the Perspective of Entertainment Professionals' (Dissertation, Baltimore, MD, Morgan State University, 2008), https://www.proquest.com/openview/081545671459a0e116b6365bdad23481/1?pq-origsite=gscholar&cbl=18750https://www.sciencedirect.com/science/article/pii/S1877042814066968.

[276] Shumar, 'Being TED', 93. To add to this, studies in education psychology have shown gender and racial bias in student evaluations and ranking disadvantaging female lecturers and lecturers of colour as they are often read as less competent or rigorous than their white male counterparts. (See, for example, Kerry Chávez and Kristina M. W. Mitchell, 'Exploring Bias in Student Evaluations: Gender, Race, and Ethnicity', *PS: Political Science & Politics* 53, no. 2 (April 2020): 270–74; Troy Heffernan, 'Sexism, Racism, Prejudice, and Bias: A Literature Review and Synthesis of Research Surrounding Student Evaluations of Courses and Teaching', *Assessment & Evaluation in Higher Education* 47, no. 1 (2 January 2022): 144–54.)

[277] Shumar, 'Being TED', 95.

capital accumulation process, and their intellectual property plays a critical role in the knowledge economy'.[278] This is crucial for the identity work expected of these professionals, whereby a contemporary 'university faculty member engages […] in the work of becoming a cosmopolitan consumer and producer'.[279] As opposed to older identity models, such as the academic in the ivory tower, hidden away from public scrutiny or accountability and protected by a certain level of class-status and privilege, the model of the university lecturer as prosumer of knowledge and creative products is a meritocratic model and allows for a fantasy of equity to be indulged in terms of who gets to take up these positions. However, as my analysis in these chapters will show, this obscures a deep inequality within this economic system, where all lecturers are encouraged to think of themselves as elite knowledge workers, while only a fraction will ever be part of this creative and technological elite and get to reap the benefits from this association with elite culture.

With this in mind, the key questions Part 2 addresses are: How does the discourse of the student as consumer and the idea of *edutainment* enter educational practices of the lecture performance? How might ideas of prosumption and immaterial (knowledge) production relate to pedagogies of the lecture performance as well as with the image of the lecture performer as the one engaging in this neoliberal identity model? In order to answer these questions, I first turn to the phenomenon of the TED talk in Chapter 3. I argue that the lecture performance's association with the more popular genre of the TED talk and other presentation formats geared towards generating a 'knowledge experience' is indicative of pedagogies in higher education responding to the economic shifts induced by the marketisation of higher education. I analyse the TED talk as a model for popular pedagogies as well as a vector of identification for contemporary academics and attend to the TED talk's dramaturgies to show the homogenised knowledge experience that the format cultivates. By investigating how TED talks codify the performance of knowledge in a para-academic context, I show what kind of relationship higher education imagines with prominent actors of the knowledge economy – such as the global organisation of TED – , which relationship it actually produces, and how ultimately their different modes of

[278] Shumar, 95.
[279] Shumar, 95.

production complicate the approximation of such performances inside and outside of higher education.

Chapter 4 draws on Wendy Brown's assertion that encroachments of the knowledge economy into higher education have eroded the potential of a critical citizenry. It mobilises pedagogical projects that imagine the lecture performance as a way of critically engaging modes of marketisation by appealing to a knowledge commons and fostering a critical engagement with everyday digital practices and products of the knowledge economy. Examining Jon McKenzie's own lecture performance, I critically analyse his digital pedagogies project, called 'smart or transmedia'. McKenzie's lecture performances are designed to give insight into a pedagogical project intended to foster critical digitality on the one hand and a more democratic access to knowledge on the other. By reading his lecture performance as an example of his pedagogical ideal, however, I show that this project reproduces neoliberal knowledge politics, which strive for the immediate practical applicability of scholarship and, while purporting a goal of wider access to knowledge, actually perpetuate its privatisation.

# Chapter 3: The TED Talk Problem in Higher Education

In Chapter 2, I described artists going to some length to distance their experiments in the lecture performance from the idea of a TED talk. Aware that the new online iterations of the lecture performance invite comparison to the TED talk and highlight the form's proximity to the popular website, the artists and curators of the online lecture performance were keen to stress how their projects differ both in their conception and delivery. This is an important backdrop to the discussions in the coming chapter, which focuses on TED talks as popular examples of performing lectures and discusses the relationship in which TED talks stand to the field of higher education and specifically to the role of the lecturer/professor. The question of whether to approximate or distance oneself from the likes of the TED talker is even more hotly debated in academic contexts than we have seen in the case of the lecture performance artists. In recent years the question of what influence the expansion of TED (and the ideological apparatus for which it stands) will have on universities has been floated by various factions within and outside the sector. There are many individual academics who have given and continue to give TED talks, universities host various TED or TED-affiliated events, and TED talks are routinely used in higher education classrooms. At the same time, there are also op-eds in newspapers lamenting the 'TEDification of higher education'[280] and articles linking the rise of TED talks to specific forms of the marketisation of higher education.[281] Especially, the idea that the prevalence of TED talks pushes higher education towards edutainment and dictates that teachers in higher education deliver content in an engaging – even entertaining – manner is what many opponents hold against TED. In this chapter, I engage with the TED talk as a popular iteration of the lecture performance to show how it participates in the commodification of knowledge and reproduces the mode of self-

[280] See Simon Sadler, 'TEDification versus Edification', *Places Journal*, 21 January 2014, https://placesjournal.org/article/tedification-versus-edification/; Mark Carrigan, 'The TEDification of #HigherEd? Negotiating Between the Accessibly Simple and the Simplistically Accessible', *Mark Carrigan* (blog), 31 December 2013, https://markcarrigan.net/2013/12/31/the-tedification-of-highered-negotiating-between-the-accessibly-simple-and-the-simplistically-accessible/; Corinne Ruff, 'The TEDification of the Large Lecture', *The Chronicle of Higher Education*, 10 May 2016, sec. Teaching, https://www.chronicle.com/article/the-tedification-of-the-large-lecture/; and James Cersonsky, 'When Professors Strip for the Camera', Viewpoint Magazine, 10 September 2012, https://viewpointmag.com/2012/09/10/when-professors-strip-for-the-camera/.

[281] See Shumar, 'Being TED'.

presentation crucial to post-Fordist labour. Following Ladnar, who states that TED talks have a 'normative function' by which they 'replicate[] the organisation of capitalist production in today's knowledge economy',[282] I argue that TED talks are indicative of a pedagogical model that promises chances for participation and empowerment but relies on values such as flexibility and individual responsibility as well as ideas of meritocracy and self-made success. As such they reproduce exclusions inherent to neoliberalised knowledge, namely, unequal access to networks of knowledge, a degradation of knowledges not immediately practically applicable, and an emergence of the knowledge worker as entrepreneurial subject.

In a time of online edutainment subscription services (such as Masterclass.com), free and open-access education models (such as Massive Open Online Courses or MOOC for short), wide-spread lecture-captioning (see Panopto, which must be the most cynical programme title), and increased online teaching (intensified by the COVID pandemic), higher education has to contend with questions around online access and how the dissemination of knowledge has changed since the introduction of highly popular and globally available online education formats. TED talks and their concept of sharing short lectures and presentations online for free are one of the earliest of these tech-based knowledge dissemination formats. It is important to note here that the discussions around the TEDification of higher education invoke TED not so much as an institution itself (though some criticisms of that do also exist) but as an emblem of a certain kind of knowledge performance that a) trades in likes and clicks (and thus assimilates the logics of social media into the university), b) is highly individualistic in its outlook, yet fairly formulaic in its structure, and c) is often oversimplified and lacking the complexity deemed necessary for academic enquiry.

Because lecture performances in higher education are often read against or in conjunction with their more popular sibling, the TED talk, it is important to give an overview of the way academic practice and TED are entangled with each other and how current academic practice is haunted by the spectre of TED. I begin by giving an overview of the organisational structure of TED, highlighting its proximity to Silicon Valley cultures, its highly developed franchising model, and its ambiguous position between profit and

[282] Ladnar, 'The Lecture Performance: Contexts of Lecturing and Performing', 26.

non-profit ventures. Drawing on journalistic and scholarly material, I question the organisation's claim to provoke social change through the re-distribution and making accessible of various professional and academic knowledges and unpack TED's membership structures, which betray a certain elitism and strive towards social distinction from traditionally academic milieus. In a second step, I examine specific dramaturgies of the TED talk and show that that their use of 'charismatic signalling'[283] reveals an individualistic performance practice, which rejects traditional modes of performing academic knowledge such as the research paper. In the third and last section of the chapter, I trace how academics are hailed by the TED talk, which promises a new mode of academic self, led by logics of entrepreneurialism and knowledge commodification and access to social and economic capital. Employing the case study of Amy Cuddy's famous talk on power poses and the ensuing academic debate around her research and her research presentation, I examine the difficulty academics face in trying to bridge the gap between different academic conventions and popular forms of performing knowledge such as TED. Overall, I argue that TED embodies a key contradiction of the knowledge economy, which is that knowledge production (once reified) is based on scarcity while its distribution is marked by abundance. Academics are interpellated into this competitive model of knowledge performance whether they choose to actively participate in the TED system or are (only) affected by the reach of the TED logic within and beyond academia.

## TED Talk Logic: What is TED?

TED stands for technology, entertainment, and design and refers to a media conglomerate with headquarters in New York City, USA and Vancouver, Canada. Rooted in the emerging culture of Silicon Valley, TED began as a conference in 1984 co-founded by graphic designer and broadcaster Harry Mark and architect and designer Richard Saul Wurman, who had begun to notice a 'powerful convergence among three fields: technology, entertainment and design'.[284] From the beginning, the focus lay on showcasing new technologies and bringing together members of the emerging digital

[283] Benjamin Tur, Jennifer Harstad, and John Antonakis, 'Effect of Charismatic Signaling in Social Media Settings: Evidence from TED and Twitter', *The Leadership Quarterly*, 27 February 2021, 101476.
[284] 'History of TED', TED Website, n.d., https://www.ted.com/about/our-organization/history-of-ted.

elite with influential commercial partners. The first conference featured demonstrations of the compact disc (co-developed by Sony and Philips) and the e-book and one of the first showings of the Apple Macintosh Computer.[285] The first line-up of speakers already foreshadowed the eclectic mix of digital entrepreneurs (often with links to media and broadcasting), established scientist and academics, and self-proclaimed counter-cultural iconoclasts. Speakers at the first conference included Nicholas Negroponte, an entrepreneur and architect and one of the future founders of the technology and culture magazine *Wired*, famous mathematician Benoit Mandelbrot, who 'demonstrated how to map coastlines using his developing theory of fractal geometry',[286] and writer and editor Stewart Brand. Brand was at this point most famous for his LSD-inspired campaign to petition NASA to release the three satellite images showing the entire earth and the communal living, 'do-it-yourself' manifesto, the *Whole Earth Catalog*, but he would go on to co-found the 'Global Business Network', a consulting firm specialising in corporate development.[287] While initially the speakers were drawn only from fields associated with the acronym TED, 'the roster of presenters broadened to include scientists, philosophers, musicians, religious leaders, philanthropists, and many others' in the 1990s.[288]

While the conferences and meetings continue to this day and TED has expanded to encompass various franchises – including an education programme (TED-Ed), a podcasting channel, a publishing series (TEDBooks) and a fellowship foundation (TED Fellows) – TED today is mainly synonymous with its associated compendium of TED talks, short online-streamed presentations in which speakers address a wide spectrum of topics. The idea to record the conference talks and make them available online came from Chris Anderson, who took over the company in 2002. This and the upgraded online platform meant that TED went from an invitation-only conference (with ticket prices in the thousands of dollars) to global phenomenon in a few short years. Today the conferences are no longer invitation-only but based on a prohibitively priced membership

[285] See 'History of TED'; and Virginia Heffernan, 'Confessions of a TED Addict', *The New York Times*, 23 January 2009, sec. Magazine, https://www.nytimes.com/2009/01/25/magazine/25wwln-medium-t.html.
[286] 'History of TED'.
[287] See 'History of TED'; and 'Stewart Brand', in *Wikipedia*, 22 October 2021, https://en.wikipedia.org/w/index.php?title=Stewart_Brand&oldid=1051271801.
[288] 'TED (Conference)', in *Wikipedia*, 28 November 2021, https://en.wikipedia.org/w/index.php?title=TED_(conference)&oldid=1057620548.

scheme.[289] This and the fact that the conditions for acceptance of the membership include something called 'community fit' suggest that TED conferences have moved very little from their original conception as elite networking events for tech and tech-associated industries.[290]

Online, however, the organisation is pursuing a different strategy. Under the motto 'ideas worth spreading' these talks are distributed on TED.com and YouTube to a global audience.[291] More than 3 billion people watch or listen to TED talks annually,[292] with the most famous talks reaching 20-70 million views.[293] TED talks are thus marketed as both exclusive live events and accessible and potentially viral online products. These two aspects stand in a productive relationship to one another. As Ladner points out: 'the live manifestations of the TED talks evidences [sic] the "worth" of the ideas, while the online manifestations guarantee that they are being "spread"'.[294]

[289] To attend the yearly five-day conference in Vancouver, members have to pay fees ranging from $5000 for early career, first time TED attendees who have access to this 'heavily subsidized price' to $10,000 for the standard fee to $250,000 for a five-year TED Conference Patron membership (all prices for the 2022 conference).('TED Conference', TED Website, n.d., https://www.ted.com/attend/conferences/ted-conference.) All memberships come with varying degrees of perks and special access like concierge services, early access to theatres or special networking events.

[290] Another limiting factor in terms of access to the conferences is the fact that they are mostly held in the global North, with the main conference taking place in Vancouver and several satellite conferences in the US and the UK. To date, the only non-North American or -European official TED event was TEDGlobal hosted twice in Arusha, Tanzania. This of course excludes locally organised TEDx events.

[291] From 2012-2016 the company also had a deal with streaming giant Netflix, where users can watch selected talks via the streaming platform. (Kasey Moore, 'TED Talks Catalog Being Removed from Netflix in March - What's on Netflix', 20 February 2016, https://www.whats-on-netflix.com/news/ted-talks-catalog-being-removed-from-netflix-in-march/.) Ironically, the talks were classified as 'comedy' on the streaming website. Notably, some of the most famous TED talkers, like Brené Brown, have been able to use their TED fame to negotiate their own Netflix specials (See Brené Brown, *Call to Courage,* Netflix).

[292] 'TED Talks', TED Website, n.d., https://www.ted.com/about/programs-initiatives/ted-talks.

[293] 'The Most Popular Talks of All Time | TED Talks', accessed 2 December 2021, https://www.ted.com/playlists/171/the_most_popular_talks_of_all.

[294] Ladnar, 'The Lecture Performance: Contexts of Lecturing and Performing', 25.



**Figure 15:** A typical presentation situation for TED talks and the TED motto. (Promotional material taken from TED.com)

The talks are highly rehearsed and expertly produced short videos (talks can range from 5-18 minutes). TED actively scouts its presenters and asks members and audiences for suggestions. For speakers who do not already hold a platform or public acclaim, the route to TED is usually through the gateway of presenting at a series of independently organised TEDx events.[295] TEDx events are small scale events hosted by smaller organisations, universities, or companies. They comprise an audience of no more than 100 spectators (although the events are often also streamed online simultaneously). Tickets to these events are generally free or cost only a small fee. Unlike the talks from the bigger TED conferences, talks presented there do not appear on the TED website right away. They are uploaded onto YouTube under the TEDx label and only later will a few selected ones appear on the official website. As with the TED conference, the talks are elaborately planned and rehearsed. TED mandates that each speaker is given a 'coach' to help with the crafting and rehearsing of the talk. While these coaches are professionals in the case of the TED talks, at TEDx events they are other volunteers who are looking to gain experience in this kind of coaching. Both TED and TEDx talks (in their exact wording) have to be pre-approved by TED and are ideally delivered from memory and without a script in hand (though there is some slippage in the independently led TEDx events).[296]

[295] Shumar, 'Being TED', 91.
[296] Chris Anderson, *TED Talks: The Official TED Guide to Public Speaking* (New York, NY: Headline Publishing Group, 2016), 199–203.

While the TEDx recordings sometimes have a decidedly low-fi quality (they are filmed with 1-3 cameras, and only minimally edited), actual TED talks are highly polished media products, filmed with up to nine cameras and professionally edited.[297] TED is also increasingly conscious of making the talks as accessible as possible, adding subtitles in multiple languages and ready-to-download time-stamped transcripts in up to 60 different languages.[298] Their ready availability, short-form, and easy digestibility have made TED talks a staple of the twenty-first century 'global communication landscape.'[299] TED talks today are ubiquitous: they are present in most classrooms, flicker on phone-screens of commuters on public transport, feature in film and TV series, and are referenced in memes and Twitter culture (see the popular use of 'Thank you for coming to my TED talk'[300] added to detailed but often inconsequential opinions).[301] With multiple commentators even going so far as to declare that they have a 'TED Addiction',[302] their 'binge-ability' seems confirmed along with their efficacy. Fans of the TED talk, such as Jeremy Donovan, the writer of a how-to manual for TED talks, think of them as one of the most effective contemporary modes of communication and thus believe in their ability to increase the speaker's chances of making themselves heard and 'making a difference in an ever-more crowded world'.[303] Donovan, like others, holds up their free access and availability as a sign of their inherently democratic project.

However, TED talks' claim to open-access communication and a democratising of access to knowledge is more slippery than this. The status of TED as a private corporation has already been pointed out, as has their highly priced membership programme. Yet, their status as a not-for-profit organisation is further made questionable by their

[297] 'TED Talks'.
[298] 'The Most Popular Talks of All Time | TED Talks'.
[299] Tobias Denskus and Daniel E. Esser, 'TED Talks on International Development: Trans-Hegemonic Promise and Ritualistic Constraints', *Communication Theory* 25, no. 2 (2015): 166.
[300] 'Urban Dictionary: Thank You for Coming to My Ted Talk', in *Urban Dictionary*, n.d., https://www.urbandictionary.com/define.php?term=Thank%20you%20for%20coming%20to%20my%20ted%20talk.
[301] The most popular talks have even become a sort of pop-intellectual shorthand; the key ideas in them can be gestured to as if they represented a general consensus on the topic. The ideas of 'the power of vulnerability' or 'power poses', for example, are often invoked as accepted truth.
[302] Jeremey Donovan, *How to Deliver a TED Talk: Secrets of the World's Most Inspiring Presentations, Revised and Expanded New Edition, with a Foreword by Richard St. John and an Afterword by Simon Sinek* (New York, NY and San Francisco: McGraw Hill Professional, 2014), 1; and Heffernan, 'Confessions of a TED Addict'. Donovan even goes so far as to say: 'TED talks are caffeine for normal people, they are crystal meth for speaking nerds'. (Donovan, *How to Deliver a TED Talk*, 5.)
[303] Donovan, *How to Deliver a TED Talk*, 5.

organisation's structures. Controversially, neither TED nor TEDx speakers are compensated for their presentations,[304] which seems baffling, especially in the case of the actual TED conference, where ticket prices range from $5,000-50,000 per conference.[305] Frank Swain, a deaf journalist, has pointed out the hypocrisy of TED's non-profit status in light of their ticket prices and the rule not to pay presenters for their work.[306] Much like many universities today, TED seems to be blurring the lines between profit and non-profit. While TED highlights its status as a non-profit organisation (CEO Chris Anderson does not receive a salary, for example), the 'foundation's 2015 990-PF tax return states that the foundation had assets of $53 million, revenues of $65 million, and paid its top six employees over $2 million in compensation'.[307] In their article examining the influence of TED talks on the sector of international development, Tobias Denskus and Daniel E. Esser observe that TED talks 'reflect a communicative culture rooted in Silicon Valley entrepreneurism; TED embraces the latter's business model while asserting its social non-profit aims', thus creating a 'new hybrid market for "celebrity-academic-entrepreneur-innovators"'.[308] In this way, TED provides the vehicle for the commodification of ideas:

> TED talks exist in the grey zone between global social movements and global capitalism. Speakers leverage their appearances in TED talks to market goods and services such as products, policy papers, and best-practice recommendations. Aside from TED talks constituting a 'knowledge commodity,' they also constitute the technological platform for a global knowledge economy where 'expertise' and fame promise substantial revenues [for both the organisation and the individual speakers].[309]

This process of commodification is aided by an infrastructure of franchises that all feed into each other. TED talkers can become guests on TED podcasts (or better yet host

[304] 'Speaking at TED', TED Website, n.d., https://www.ted.com/about/conferences/speaking-at-ted.
[305] 'TED Conference'.
[306] Frank Swain, 'Why I'm Not a TEDx Speaker', *Futures Exchange* (blog), 21 November 2013, https://medium.com/futures-exchange/why-im-not-a-tedx-speaker-3be652b8eccb.
[307] Adrian Segar, 'The Tyranny of TED', *Conferences That Work* (blog), 4 October 2016, https://www.conferencesthatwork.com/index.php/event-design/2011/10/the-tyranny-of-ted/; and Sapling Foundation, '990-PF Tax Form, "Return of Private Foundation"', 15 November 2015, https://www.conferencesthatwork.com/wp-content/uploads/2011/10/Sapling-Foundation-2015-990-PF.pdf.
[308] Denskus and Esser, 'TED Talks on International Development', 181.
[309] Denskus and Esser, 170.

them), from where they can be commissioned to write books for TEDBooks.[310] Evgeny Morozov commented on this circular logic in his scathing essay 'The Naked and the TED': 'In the world of TED – or, to use their argot, in the TED "ecosystem" – books become talks, talks become memes, memes become projects, projects become talks, talks become books – and so it goes ad infinitum […] until any shade of depth or nuance disappears into the virtual void'.[311] Denskus and Esser, too, stress the influence this logic of consumption underpinning the TED concept has on their field of international development: 'By epitomizing mediatization and adopting franchising strategies not dissimilar to, say, *American Idol*, TED has likely already altered the global discussion around complex concepts such as "innovation," "development," and "poverty reduction" through simplified representations'.[312] What they are suggesting here is that the franchising tactic of TED has a homogenising effect on the ideas circulated within the TED ecosystem. This they see further represented in the 'trans-hegemonic nature of TED talks' that enables access from around the world but exports a 'one-size-fits-all global model to a plethora of localized contexts'.[313] Their analysis of TED talks associated with international development examines whether TED talks can foster long-term change and sustained engagement, rather than just short-lived digital activism (often associated with global aid products, for example in the now infamous 'Kony 2012' campaign) that frames provoking social change as easy and fun. While they see the simplification of problems and homogenisation of solutions as threats to the implementation of lasting change within the field of international development, their main concern lies in the underlying capitalist logic of TED, which prioritises individual action over collective organisation and consumption over joint action:

> Many of the TED talks in our sample evoke individualism despite explicit emphasis on collectivism. Rather than actually engaging the audience collectively in critical thinking via a political-economic analysis of structural

[310] Famous examples include psychologist Barry Schwartz, who turned his viral TED talk 'The Way We Think about Work is Broken' from 2014 into a 2015 TED book called *Why We Work*, and essayist Pico Iyer, who has both a TED talk and a TED book titled *The Art of Stillness* (2014) to his name, and mathematician Hannah Fry who has published the *Mathematics of Lov*e (2015) after a particular unexpected appearance at a TEDx event at the University of Birmingham.
[311] Evgeny Morozov, 'The Naked and the TED', *The New Republic*, 2 August 2012, https://newrepublic.com/article/105703/the-naked-and-the-ted-khanna.
[312] Denskus and Esser, 'TED Talks on International Development', 181.
[313] Denskus and Esser, 182.

> problems, stories of success and resilience shape the narrative which then, in turn, frame 'solutions' but not broader actionable projects, let alone any kind of 'movement'.[314]

This logic of individualism and consumption is also exemplified by a look at the ten most viewed TED talks, seven of which could be categorised as self-help or self-improvement; six of whose presenters also have popular non-fiction books and/or TV series or podcasts attached to the theme of the talk.[315] Denskus and Esser see this individualism and sense of generating an experience for the audience as the main limiting factor as to why TED talks are not a vehicle for structural societal change. They note, '[t]he much-lauded sense of empowerment commonly evoked by watching TED talks results from "being in the know" as opposed to participating in actual change'.[316] Their criticism here suggests that TED's main objective seems to lie in creating a memorable experience for the audience that centres around being invited into a certain kind of previously specialised knowledge ('being in the know') and being emotionally affected by entering this temporary knowledge community. The logics of social media algorithms and online consumption dictate that this experience is coded as special, yet also repeatable, so each talk needs to reperform this notion of 'being in the know'. This may not be that surprising for an organisation focused on dissemination rather than activism, and whose lucrative business model depends on commodification – not so much the implementation – of ideas. Crucially, TED's success is more dependent on the audience's feeling of being inspired or empowered than on any actions these feelings might propel.

This focus on dissemination is also mirrored in the overall communication model of TED talks. Like the lecture, they privilege a 'sending only', one-way communication rather than exchange. While the website interface and the YouTube pages featuring TED talks are set up to enable comments on the individual talks, the viewing numbers far surpass the numbers of people commenting on or seeking conversation about the presented material,[317] suggesting a consumptive rather than interactive form of audience

[314] Denskus and Esser, 178–79.
[315] For more on how marketers are specifically utilising the TED talk for the promotion of non-fiction books, see Brooke Warner, 'Tapping into TED to Boost Your Author Platform', *PublishersWeekly.Com*, n.d., https://www.publishersweekly.com/pw/by-topic/authors/pw-select/article/74604-taping-into-ted-to-boost-your-author-platform.html.
[316] Denskus and Esser, 'TED Talks on International Development', 174.
[317] Denskus and Esser, 174.

engagement, or perhaps pacification. This is the same for the audience in the room of the live presentations, whose participation does not go beyond the conventions of attending and listening to a conventional lecture or presentation. In fact, TED rules actively forbid the implementation of panels or Q&As in any TEDx event, thus pre-emptively excluding more audience-centred approaches to the talks.[318]

One could, however, think of the TEDx events themselves as the organisation's attempt to soften the boundaries between this very one-sided and highly controlled communication style, and a more interactive approach to engage with various communities and audiences. In her master's thesis on TED talks as alternative media, Imy Ferica sums up this approach as follows:

> Although TED maintains a centralized authority in policy making, its relationship with its communities is based on a rhizome-like network which strives towards semi-hierarchical access and participation, multiple replications by community and heterogeneity of its community across geographical and cultural borders.[319]

The company's strategy for 'striving towards semi-hierarchical access,' however, is to outsource this building of communities to unpaid volunteers. TED offers no budget or payment for organising a TEDx event.[320] TEDx organisers may pay their own staff but TED suggests mainly relying on volunteer labour.[321] TEDx organisers must closely mimic the TED structure but assume all legal and financial risks. They may charge small ticket fees of up to $100 for the event itself but all the rights to generated content must be signed over to TED.[322] TED also only allows 100 people to attend a TEDx event unless the lead organiser has been to a 'qualifying TED conference', and so paid the entrance fee to at least one of

[318] 'TEDx Rules', TED Website, n.d., https://www.ted.com/participate/organize-a-local-tedx-event/before-you-start/tedx-rules.
[319] Imy Ferica, 'Understanding TED as Alternative Media' (Master Thesis, Helsinki, University of Helsinki, 2021), https://helda.helsinki.fi/bitstream/handle/10138/34133/MASTER%27S%20THESIS_IMY%20FERICA_7512.pdf?sequence=5&isAllowed=y.
[320] 'TED Organizer Responsibilities', TED Website, n.d., https://www.ted.com/participate/organize-a-local-tedx-event/before-you-start/organizer-responsibilities.
[321] 'Build Your Team', TED Website, n.d., https://www.ted.com/participate/organize-a-local-tedx-event/tedx-organizer-guide/volunteers-staff/build-your-team.
[322] 'License Agreement', accessed 2 December 2021, https://www.ted.com/participate/organize-a-local-tedx-event/apply-for-a-tedx-license/tedx-license-agreement.

the major TED events.[323] This approach seems hardly in line with the organisation's utopian focus on 'spreading ideas' and betrays a more elitist approach to maintaining editorial control of the TED brand.

This might be read as an attempt to establish a form of rentier economics in the heart of the knowledge economy. In *Rentier Capitalism: Who Owns the Economy and Who Pays for It?* Brett Christophers traces how digital platforms increasingly operate as rentiers by renting out access to their platforms and brands. He uses the London Stock exchange's digital platform, the London Stock Exchange Group pls (LSEG,) as an example: 'LSEG does not create financial assets, or trade in them itself; rather, it furnishes platforms where such trading can safely and smoothly occur. It thereby facilitates exchange'.[324] Thus, LSEG acts as a rentier that 'hires its platform out, in the sense that it creates a forum enabling third parties to conduct business with one another, and then charges for the use of that trading platform'.[325] The rentier basis is determined entirely by who owns the platform and can give access to the brand. In the case of TED, this access to the brand is 'rented' out to those having paid the 'license fee' in the form of a conference attendance, where they are also introduced to and made aware of the mechanisms of TED conferences, thus ensuring editorial consistency and brand protection. Christophers points out that, aside from the fact that platform rentiers 'control platforms of some kind that generate rents', the other thing they have in common is that they act as '*intermediaries*' and thus add legitimacy to the process of transaction. People trade on the LSEG platform because the London Stock Exchange as a brand lends legitimacy to the trading of stock on its platform.[326] In the case of TED a similar legitimacy is given by the mobilising of the TEDx-label. It means possible audiences are given a shorthand of what to expect and organisers are able to advertise their event in the bigger franchise project of TED, rather than as an independently organised conference or workshop. By selling or rather renting out access to its brand, TED and other platform rentiers supplant other modes of legitimation (like status, accolades, reputation) and legitimises themselves via

[323] 'TEDx Rules'.
[324] Brett Christophers, *Rentier Capitalism: Who Owns the Economy, and Who Pays for It?* (London: Verso Books, 2022), 272.
[325] Christophers, 273.
[326] Christophers, 273, emphasis in orginial.

capital and the flow of capital.[327] Here we see a first clash between TED and more traditional modes of legitimation in higher education (usually via academic achievements, professional honorifics, etc.). However, the corporatisation of universities means that they also increasingly operate as brands and might look for ways to rent out access to those brands.[328]

To sum up, TED's political, economic, social, and cultural influence is contingent on a networked organisational structure that blurs the boundaries between profit and non-profit. TED adopts dominant media and business practices such as commercialism and exertion of strict editorial control. While proposing civic goals, such as democratising knowledge and fostering social change, it upholds structures of elitism (both in terms of access to its network and the one-sided communication style it practices in the lecture-like talks). Its claim to counter-hegemonic knowledge practices is thus not entirely believable. With this insight into the organisation's structure and business model in mind, I now turn to the TED talk, and its dramaturgy more specifically, to ask what kind of experience of knowledge is fostered by TED and how TED invites a certain standardised performance from those involved in these talks.

## The Dramaturgy of the TED Talk

A celebration of individualism seems to be built into the dramaturgy of the TED talk. The unilateral modes of communication and the fact that most talks feature a single speaker (though some joint presentations do feature on the website, TED generally discourages the practice[329]) give weight to the position of the speakers and emphasise their position as 'leaders'. However, TED speakers are often not leaders in the conventional sense. Denskus and Esser, for example, note that in their sample of TED talks on international

[327] This is also reminiscent of Peters' observation via Lyotard of performativity as self-legitimation, whereby they logic of maximisation becomes a system's primary goal and modus operandi. (Peters, 'Lyotard, Marxism, and Higher Education. The Problem of Knowledge Capitalism', 84.)

[328] See, for example, the phenomenon of the 'satellite campus' – like NYU Abu Dhabi or Northwestern University in Qatar – as well as the many 'executive education courses', where places like Harvard University or the University of Pennsylvania offer short leadership courses to allow middle managers the ability to put their institutions' names on their CVs. Increasingly, this strategy is also picked up by drama schools. RADA Business and Central for Business are branches within these schools geared towards establishing alternative revenue streams for the schools by using those schools' reputation in acting to offer voice and communication courses.

[329] 'Can Two Speakers Give a Talk Together on Stage?', TED, accessed 2 December 2021, https://help.ted.com/hc/en-us/articles/360039154933-Can-two-speakers-give-a-talk-together-on-stage-.

development there is an absence of the traditional expert and political leaders in the field. The sample does not include politicians, diplomats, or leading financial experts, such as World Bank chief economists or OECD- chairpersons;[330] rather, the speakers are drawn from a transnational elite from various sectors of the global aid industry. While the speakers in their subset broadly signal bottom-up approaches to global aid 'in response to a perceived failure of traditional development models',[331] many – like Melinda Gates, for example – are in fact part of a new global elite, whom Wesley Shumar calls 'digerati' in reference to the Silicon Valley roots of the organisation. To attend to the ways in which TED is changing traditional notions of 'leaders' and 'experts' it is helpful to turn to the idea of charismatic leadership. Charismatic leadership, a term originally coined by Max Weber, refers to a form of informal power that is derived not from legal or political authority but instead from a set of personal characteristics and communicative skills.[332] Charismatic leaders signal their beliefs and preferences to others but do not necessarily have any formal authority over them. Sibylle Peters observes that TED talks 'put the focus on the presenters […] as charismatic advocates of their ideas',[333] and stresses that this emphasis on personal narratives and individual personalities draws focus from the institutional and professional backgrounds of the speakers. It makes it hard to ascertain easily whether they are, for example, entrepreneurs or social scientists, which is also what enables Melinda Gates talk to appear in the same register as those of on-the-ground NGO workers, and both be labelled as 'leaders' in the field.

In their data-driven analysis of popular TED talks, Benjamin Tur, Jennifer Harstad, and John Antonakis employ the term 'charismatic signalling' to describe the behaviours and rhetoric choices that help garner higher viewer numbers and more retweets for specific TED talks.[334] They found that talks using verbal cues (such as using personal stories

[330] Denskus and Esser, 'TED Talks on International Development', 178. The authors do, however, stress that although these traditional holders of powers are absent from the TED stage their messages and solutions based in 'liberal market economies' are more or less echoed in the various talks, as the speakers featured also privilege such solutions rather than advocate for widespread political and structural change.
[331] Denskus and Esser, 178.
[332] See 'Chapter 14: Charisma and its Transformations' in Max Weber, *Economy and Society: An Outline of Interpretive Sociology*, vol. Volume 2 (Bedminster: Bedminster Press, 1968), 1111–57.
[333] Peters, *Der Vortrag Als Performance*, 165, my translation.
[334] It is telling that one of the emerging bodies of scholarship around TED talks is focused on predicting viewer ratings. Md Iftekhar Tanveer et al. use automated prediction tools to predict ratings of online viewers for TED talks, which they claim will enables 'novel systems for tutoring public speaking skills' ('A

or anecdotes) categorised under the label of charismatic signalling were predictive of higher ratings and meant that these talks were more likely to be perceived as 'inspiring'.[335] They differentiate between charisma and charismatic signalling, conceding that charismatic leadership stems from a discourse where charisma is depicted as an inalienable trait – such as a supernatural or superhuman quality for Weber or as 'gifts of extraordinary competence'[336] for Robert J. House – rather than learned behaviours. Charismatic signalling, on the other hand, can be distilled to observable verbal and non-verbal behaviour and can thus be learned and trained.[337] Charismatic signalling then has the effect of evoking leadership skills through interference. A person who engages in charismatic signalling will then be assumed to possess some of the underlying leadership qualities:

> For example, wearing a yellow wig is easy to replicate by low ability individuals (beyond the point that it is hard to see how this headpiece can signal leadership ability). However, crafting a well-thought metaphor requires knowing the topic, the audience, and having strong verbal skills and intelligence. Unlike wearing a wig, these rhetorical skills are hard to acquire and thus credible—and honest—signals of an individual's qualities.[338]

Charismatic signals are thus a mix of rhetoric and performance skills that gesture towards an underlying skill set that correlates with leadership qualities, such as intellect and emotional intelligence. Crucially, they need to be perceived as credible and 'honest' in order to have the desired effect. This idea of honesty, however, is complicated in the case of TED, as their scriptedness and rehearsed presentation mean that charisma is not

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Causality-Guided Prediction of the TED Talk Ratings from the Speech-Transcripts Using Neural Networks', 21 May 2019, 1, https://arxiv.org/abs/1905.08392v1.), and the authors of 'FairyTED: A Fair Rating Predictor for TED Talk Data' are concerned with training machine learning to correct the biases in viewer ratings against speakers who are women and/or people of colour (Rupam Acharyya et al., 'FairyTED: A Fair Rating Predictor for TED Talk Data', *ArXiv:1905.08392 [Cs, Stat]*, 25 November 2019.). Similarly, the authors of the charismatic signalling study acknowledged that there are other reasons for the popularity of a talk (such as attractiveness of the speaker) but worked against this by controlling for a 'host of nonverbal signals including cues like attractiveness as well as voice intensity and pitch, body language, as well as other cues like reputation, and professional status' (Tur, Harstad, and Antonakis, 'Effect of Charismatic Signaling in Social Media Settings', 4.)

[335] Tur, Harstad, and Antonakis, 'Effect of Charismatic Signaling in Social Media Settings', 1.

[336] Robert J. House, *A 1976 Theory of Charismatic Leadership.*, Working Paper Series (University of Toronto: Faculty of Management Studies, 1976), https://eric.ed.gov/?id=ED133827.

[337] Tur, Harstad, and Antonakis, 'Effect of Charismatic Signaling in Social Media Settings', 2.

[338] Tur, Harstad, and Antonakis, 2.

evoked spontaneously but is the result of a careful crafting of the performance through formulaic construction.

While the researchers of the charismatic signalling study focus more on verbal signalling, they do stress the importance of non-verbal signals in the establishing of a successful presentation persona. Non-verbal charismatic signals include inviting facial expressions, a calm tone of voice, and confident body language.[339] It is fair to say that the people behind TED talks are very aware of the role these attributes play in creating an effective talk. In the official manual for potential TED speakers, *TED Talks: The Official TED Guide to Public Speaking* – written by CEO Chris Anderson himself – significant attention is paid to these non-verbal forms of communication and the extent to which they determine whether someone is seen as relatable. 'Eye contact, backed by an occasional warm smile, is an amazing technology that can transform how a talk is received',[340] writes Anderson, while another section explains the connection between effective voice modulation and audience engagement,[341] and yet another part points to the importance of the speaker's choice of clothing for establishing an audience connection. At TED, we like reasonably casual clothes, giving the sense that we're all on a retreat together. […] [W]earing something that makes you feel good will help you project relaxed confidence. [Y]our clothing can earn you an audience connection before you've even spoken a word'.[342] The importance of casual clothing and relaxed confidence is, of course, another way in which TED seeks to differentiate itself from the image of the 'old expert', such as the university professor, who is associated with overt formality – both in terms of expression and dress. Charismatic leadership today, TED seems to suggest, needs to aspire to a different register of behaviour, no longer expressed by the same markers of professionalism.

Aside from these non-verbal cues, the researchers identified the following categories as areas of charismatic signals: [343]

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[339] Tur, Harstad, and Antonakis, 5.
[340] Anderson, *TED Talks*, 82.
[341] Anderson, 302.
[342] Anderson, 269.
[343] For a performative investigation of these verbal and non-verbal charismatic signals within TED talks, please see my TEDx talk 'Would Shakespeare Have Given A TED Talk?', which examines these markers of performance and the role they play in conferring knowledge and expertise to a TED audience. The talk was given in October 2018, at the TEDx Royal Central School of Speech and Drama event in London. (https://www.ted.com/talks/clio_unger_would_shakespeare_have_given_a_ted_talk).

> We measured for the presence of the charismatic signals to frame the message, including (a) metaphors and analogies, (b) stories and anecdotes, (c) contrasts, (d) three-part lists, and (e) rhetorical questions as well as tactics focusing on the substance of the message including (f) moral conviction, (g) expressing the sentiments of the collective, (h) setting high and ambitious goals, and (i) creating confidence that goals can be achieved.[344]

While most of these categories sound like they are taken directly from any standard book of advice for public speaking, it is telling that they also correspond almost completely with the areas of presentation the manual on TED talks encourages potential speakers to focus on. Anderson stresses the importance of establishing a personal connection with the audience. He advises them to 'get personal',[345] 'tell a story',[346] and 'make them laugh'.[347] The importance of basing the talk on someone with whom the audience can empathise and identify is stressed several times throughout the book.[348] Metaphors, analogies, and the 'power of parables'[349] are lauded, as is the strategy of asking audiences 'unexpected questions to stir [their] curiosity'.[350] Advice like this directly maps onto the categories a-e of the verbal charismatic signals and shows how much importance TED places on presenting a speaking persona that is likeable and can easily connect with a wide audience. The idea of projecting moral conviction (f) also features heavily in the dramaturgy of TED talks. While expressing any kind of political, partisan, or religious opinion is discouraged (for obvious reasons considering the goal is to reach as wide an audience as possible),[351] the idea of moral conviction is explicitly embraced. Anderson stresses the need to have and be convinced of the core idea for the talk,[352] and a lot of effort is put into the performance of this conviction. Anderson suggests, for example, that an effective way to end a talk would be to make a public statement of a personal

[344] Tur, Harstad, and Antonakis, 'Effect of Charismatic Signaling in Social Media Settings', 19–20.
[345] Anderson, *TED Talks*, 78.
[346] Anderson, 95.
[347] Anderson, 87.
[348] Anderson, 105.
[349] Anderson, 112.
[350] Anderson, 134.
[351] Anderson, 98–99.
[352] Anderson, 31.

commitment (that will somehow further the presented cause),[353] alternatively, he encourages speakers to set a 'setting high and ambitious goal' (h) by ushering a 'call to action' to all spectators.[354] He stresses the importance of letting the audience into the speaker's confidence, which is similar to what Denskus and Esser have described as bringing them 'into the know'.[355] Both formulations rely on the audience feeling that they are being brought into the trust of the presenter. Rhetorically this is done, for example, by blurring the distinction between the speaker and the audience and using 'we' constructions instead of 'you' and 'I' or by relying on subjective adjectives and descriptors rather than specialised terminology to instil in the audience a sense of similarity with the speaker and reduce the asymmetry between them and the presenter.[356]

Much has been made of this change of address and this linguistic inclusion of the audience. Linguist Giuseppina Scotto di Carlo even goes so far as to suggest that this style of communication can revolutionise the popular distribution of scientific knowledge by breaching 'the expert/non expert barrier' and 'considering science not as something distant, but as a human experience for both laypersons and professionals'.[357] However, the set-up of these talks, and how the audience is used within the filmed talks says more about the consumptive logic of the format than about the audience's active engagement, even though rhetorically they are constantly evoked via 'we' constructions and rhetorical questions. Filmed TED talks often use the presence of the audience to highlight the performance situation of the talk, starting from a total perspective where the speaker's position on a stage is introduced from the back of an auditorium – showing the backs of the heads of the spectators, and sometimes even doubling the image of the speaker with an additional screen that shows a bigger image of the smaller figure on stage[358] – before switching to a different perspective showing a close-up of the speaker. Here, the

[353] Anderson, 260.
[354] Anderson, 259.
[355] Denskus and Esser, 'TED Talks on International Development', 179.
[356] Both the phenomenon of inclusive pronouns and the use of subjective adjectives have been studied by linguist Giuseppina Scotto di Carlo, who studied hundreds of individual TED talks to see these patterns emerge. 'Patterns of Clusivity in TED Talks: When "You" and "I" Become "We"', *Ibérica* 35, no. 1 (2018): 119–44; and 'Stance in TED Talks: Strategic Use of Subjective Adjectives in Online Popularisation', *Ibérica* 29, no. 1 (2015): 201–22.
[357] Scotto di Carlo, 'Stance in TED Talks', 1.
[358] See, for example, 'Your Body Language May Shape Who You Are', June 2012, TED Talk, June 2012, https://www.ted.com/talks/amy_cuddy_your_body_language_may_shape_who_you_are.

audience's presence is used to set up the situation of the presentation and the high stakes that are associated with such an event for the speaker. Beyond this, the other use the audience fulfils within the aesthetic of the TED talk lies in the 'reaction shots', where smaller sections of the audience or individual audience members' reactions to talks (laughter, awe, agreement) are recorded and edited into the films to emphasise the talk's impact on the audience. Overall, the audience's function seems to lie more in underlining and emphasising the speaker's charismatic power than in their direct address as stakeholders in the presented issue. 'Being in the know' trumps active engagement, and the experience of the speaker's ability as a speaker (their performance) rather than their knowledge of a certain subject seems to become TED's actual commodity. This overlap between the markers of charismatic signalling and TED's strategies for public speaking is no coincidence and is indicative of the ritualised aesthetics and scripted logic of the TED talk. It also speaks to the logic of commodification of the TED experience, which needs to be repeatable in order to be profitable. The promise of the TED experience allows the audience to be similarly moved or affected by each talk regardless of its topic (see, for example, the testimonies of the self-proclaimed 'TED-addicts'). For this kind of engagement, which keeps audiences committed to regularly watching TED talks, to be sustained, the organisation relies on repetitive dramaturgies, which regularly churn out performances deemed as 'inspiring'.

Critics of the form have identified the repetitive implementation of these dramaturgical strategies as one of the sources for the homogenisation of the TED talk performance. Denskus and Esser broadly identified two scripts used by all talks in their sample. They differentiated between a micro to macro approach, where the speaker started from a personal experience or anecdote and then widened their focus to the macro-politics exemplified by the personal example, and the macro to micro approach, where the audience is confronted with a broad question or some 'macrolevel data', which is then 'leveraged in support of a particular product, organisation, or brand invented, founded, or backed by the speaker'.[359] Denskus and Esser see a correlation between these limited dramaturgical options and the 'solutions' to problems of international development put forward in the sampled talks, which prioritise a 'one-size-fits-all'

[359] Denskus and Esser, 'TED Talks on International Development', 176.

approach to global aid.[360] Similarly, the dictum to be 'inspiring' at the expense of actual analysis or content is ridiculed in the skit 'This is That' by CBC comedy. Here, comedian Pat Kelly plays a self-proclaimed thought leader, who spoofs the widespread use of charismatic signals in TED talks.[361] While presenting no actual content, the performer unmasks the formulaic dramaturgies of TED talks by directly referencing the imperative to give a personal anecdote, repeating things multiple times, giving three-part lists, and modulating voice and pace in order to 'engage' the audience. Crucially, this comic presentation only works because we as the audience recognise the wide-spread use of these strategies and laugh at the resulting similarity of TED talks in general, which is being put on show in this skit. What is clear in both examples is the feedback loop between the content and the message. Both critiques have identified a homogenisation of the message as a consequence of the homogenisation of the form, and vice versa, and bring attention to the TED talk's overreliance on audience's experience over a more complex analysis. The idea of the charismatic leader is a helpful tool in tracing this development as it helps to establish the idea of the new expert of 'thought-leader' as distinct from other models of leadership and expertise.



Figure 16: Pat Kelly, 'Thought-Leader', *This is That Talks*, CBS, 2016.

[360] Denskus and Esser, 182.
[361] CBC Comedy, *'Thought Leader' Gives Talk That Will Inspire Your Thoughts (Comedy/Satire Skit)*, 6 August 2016, YouTube Video, 6 August 2016, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=_ZBKX-6Gz6A.

The charismatic leadership performed in TED talks is a process of distinction against older formats of expertise and leadership.[362] Their personal approach to sharing knowledge is a rejection of a supposedly objective academic view, which is understood as too distant and abstract, and not able to draw in a more general audience. Their emphasis on a casual and relaxed demeanour can be seen as a way of levelling the 'communicative playing field'.[363] However, this casualness is a habitus in itself, which aspiring TED talkers are encouraged to emulate. While traditional experts are sometimes invited to the TED stage, there is a pervasive scepticism towards traditional forms of education and expertise, made visible in performance strategies that eschew traditional rituals of conference presentations, such as 'overcrowded panels, suffocating PowerPoint presentations, pre-formulated conference conclusions, and lengthy read-outs'.[364] All of these are foregone in favour of a more lively, personal, and charismatic presentation format that praises itself as non-traditional, innovative, and engaging.



**Figure 17:** TED's idea of a more laid-back expert. Graham Hill, 'Less Stuff, More Happiness', *TED Talk*, 2011.

This process of distinction is also mirrored in popular narratives around educational careers that circulate in and around TED talks. In *What Tech Calls Thinking*, Adrian Daub traces how ideas of genius circulate in Silicon Valley. He singles out the dropout narrative

[362] I use distinction here in Pierre Bourdieu's sense of social distinction via habitus and taste. See *Distinction: A Social Critique of the Judgement of Taste* (Abingdon: Routledge, 2013).
[363] Denskus and Esser, 'TED Talks on International Development', 180.
[364] Denskus and Esser, 179.

as a rejection of conventional education, which has come to stand in for unconventional thinking, independence, and entrepreneurial success.[365] The dropout myth was made popular by various leaders in the tech industry (most prominently Bill Gates, Steve Jobs, and Mark Zuckerberg). It tells the story of how promising young students, whose talent goes unrecognised in traditional educational institutions, drop out of university early on only to become successful businessmen and technological innovators. The seductive quality of these stories is only increased by the fact that the universities featured in these stories are not just local institutions but places like Harvard, Stanford, and other prestigious schools of international acclaim, which here are painted as responsible for stifling the creativity of these 'promising young men' (and they are almost exclusively men).[366] These narratives are powerful tools in the establishing of this new and more down-to-earth expert and leader, who has become successful not because of their engagement with higher education but in spite of it. TED itself is an important place for the popularisation of these stories as many of the protagonists of the drop-out narrative regularly present at TED. Their general distrust towards formal education is also mirrored in the topics of many popular talks, not least the most viewed TED talk of all time, which is Sir Ken Robison's passionate analysis of how schools kill creativity.[367] Stories like the drop-out myth are powerful and intentional, as they also work to mask the realities of the social and professional connections in the tech business,[368] as well as access to family funds and seed capital that accompanied these miraculous transformations or rather made them possible in the first place.[369] Put differently, to drop out of Harvard one has

[365] Adrian Daub, *What Tech Calls Thinking: An Inquiry into the Intellectual Bedrock of Silicon Valley* (New York, NY: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2020), 18–19.
[366] The lone female figure among the drop-out narratives is Elizabeth Holmes, who dropped out of Stanford University to fund the biotech company Theranos, which turned out to be a multimillion-dollar investment fraud. The fact that both the podcast and TV series about her business were called *The Dropout* shows how salient the myth of dropping out is in the tech industry and beyond. Her decisive lack of success, however, also points to the limitations of this fantasy of a self-styled tech genius.
[367] The person of Sir Robison is perhaps an odd bearer of this message and hardly an icon of the charismatic speaker Anderson tried to conjure in his book. A knighted professor in a suit actually seems to evoke the old academic and elitist structures TED is trying to differentiate themselves from, yet the anti-establishment message of the talk resurrects the same 'sixties counterculture' associations (Daub 19) as does the drop-out myth, making this unlikely pairing work in conjunction with each other.
[368] Taylor Locke, 'How Bill Gates' Mom Helped Microsoft Get a Deal with IBM in 1980 – and It Propelled the Company's Huge Success', CNBC, 5 August 2020, https://www.cnbc.com/2020/08/05/how-bill-gates-mother-influenced-the-success-of-microsoft.html.
[369] Gene Marks, 'Entrepreneurs Are Great, but It's Mom and Dad Who Gave Them Their Start', *The Guardian*, 31 January 2021, sec. Business, https://www.theguardian.com/business/2021/jan/31/small-business-entrepreneurs-success-parents.

to get into Harvard first, which in the case of many drop-out stars was made possible by their families' social and financial capital.

This performative rejection of conventional modes of (higher) education is one of the reasons why academia as a field has a complicated and somewhat strained relationship to TED talks. It is undeniable that the popularity of TED talks has already had an impact on how knowledge is presented in institutions of higher education. TED, not so much as the concrete organisation but as a shorthand for popular ways of disseminating knowledge, has become a foil in relation to and against which discourses around teaching in higher education have to position themselves.[370] Shumar points out that many academics are 'hailed' by 'the radical chic' of the TED talk, seduced by their proximity to a new global elite and the symbolic capital they stand for.[371] In light of this powerful pull, it is therefore important to ask: what are academics gaining or losing by assimilating to or resisting the ways in which TED performs knowledge?

## TED and Higher Education

University professors and lecturers occupy a complex position in relation to the apparatus of TED. While many of the artists engaged in the online lecture performances discussed in Chapter 2 are invested in distancing themselves and their performances from the association with TED talks, many professionals in higher education have a more ambiguous relationship with the format. TED talks are a highly popular genre in terms of academic self-promotion. Although only a small percentage of talks are given by academics (in 2013 it was 21% of all talks), TED's influence looms large in academic circles, with many academics engaging in TED talks hoping to gain some sort of 'street cred' by participating in the popular genre.[372] Through an engagement with the historic marketisation of higher education in the US in the last 60 years, Shumar traces the economic and political developments that have encouraged academics to see themselves as 'elite knowledge workers'.[373] Shumar defines the image of the elite academic

[370] See, for example, Carrigan, 'The TEDification of #HigherEd?'; Ruff, 'The TEDification of the Large Lecture'; Sadler, 'TEDification versus Edification'.
[371] Shumar, 'Being TED', 92.
[372] Indiana University, 'Academics Earn Street Cred with Ted Talks but No Points from Peers', PsyPost, 18 June 2013, https://www.psypost.org/2013/06/academics-earn-street-cred-with-ted-talks-but-no-points-from-peers-18527.
[373] Shumar, 'Being TED', 95.

knowledge worker who 'contributes products or at least ideas to the knowledge economy' in a context where 'research is defined as that which is economically valuable', and for whom 'status is defined by having high profile grants'.[374] This aspirational image is one of the reasons why TED talks and their proximity to the 'digerati' are a desirable vehicle for the identify formation of these knowledge workers. The term digerati (a portmanteau of 'digital 'and 'literati', aka, a new version of the 'man of letters') was coined in Silicon Valley by those who see 'the computing and Internet industries as the pinnacle of Western civilisation'.[375] According to Shumar, the 'power of TED' lies in the fact that it 'extends the notion of who can be digerati from computing and Internet industry people to those in myriad professions, including even introverted academics'.[376] For a worker in the knowledge economy, the promise of TED is that, with its help, one might create symbolic and maybe even economic power (see the mechanism of the franchising explained above) that is transferable to much larger audiences than traditional academic circles. In this sense TED holds significant entrepreneurial potential for contemporary academics, who, through the marketisation of higher education and its focus on audits, have been trained to think of themselves in those terms. TED hails academics and produces desirable selves that are sold to academic and non-academic audiences. These selves and their performances become the media products that TED can then circulate and sell. Academics as TED talkers, Shumar stresses, 'are selling their ideas, their intellectual property, directly to a buying public. And they are becoming something like media stars in the process',[377] thereby clearly displaying proximity between popular TED talks and cultures of celebrity.

However, Shumar is quick to point out the contradictory position most academics occupy in relation to TED: While the image of the elite knowledge worker is a seductive one, the vast majority of academics are not part of the digerati (or any other form of the global elite), nor popular or well-known enough to be considered charismatic leaders or media stars. Yet, they are nonetheless encouraged to conceive of themselves as potentially productive workers in a TED economy:

[374] Shumar, 95.
[375] Shumar, 90.
[376] Shumar, 90.
[377] Shumar, 90.

> Just as most workers are not cosmopolitan elite prosumers living in expensive lofts in global cities and travelling the world, not every academic is an elite intellectual who has a public voice. In fact the vast majority of academics have part-time jobs, and even those who have full-time jobs spend more time doing the teaching and service that keep the system afloat that, among other things, makes a space for that veneer of elite intellectuals who we hear on public radio, read in the Times Higher Education or see in TED talks. And as Harris (2005) and Archer (2008) have argued, those academics are pressured by a neoliberal system (that includes the offices of research, their department heads, their vice chancellors or provosts) that asks them to define themselves, their research, their identity and their value as scholars in market terms. Are they doing things that have economic value? Are they contributing to their students' future employment? How can they justify themselves and their jobs? This is a system of double disenfranchisement. They are both not elite academics with a public voice and they are queried about their social value – what are they contributing to the economy? In this contradictory context, TED does some interesting work. TED mythically reconciles these contradictions as it hails us all to become better than we are by imagining ourselves as stars on the stage of TED.[378]

The myth of TED and its contradictory implications for contemporary academics puts most of them in the awkward position of simultaneously identifying with and rejecting the TED mechanism. This contradiction is generally observable in the two factions the academic commentary on TED seems to fall into. Those in praise of TED, such as Jon McKenzie, are quick to point out its potential of communicating academic and scientific research to a wider public, bypassing the jaded gatekeepers in the ivory tower, and allowing for different forms of expertise and counterhegemonic knowledges to emerge.[379] Those more sceptical about TED talks focus on its tendency towards elitism, reductionism of complex problems, and short-lived solutionism.[380] They also focus on the spectacularisation and

[378] Shumar, 104.
[379] See, for example, McKenzie, 'Collective Thought-Action'; Scotto di Carlo, 'Stance in TED Talks'. The fact that McKenzie is now in favour of these kind of commodified attempts at knowledge dissemination seems particularly surprising considering he was one of the early critics of such a confluence of managerial, cultural, and technical logics.
[380] See Thomas Frank, 'TED Talks Are Lying to You', Salon, 13 October 2013, https://www.salon.com/2013/10/13/ted_talks_are_lying_to_you/; and Morozov, 'The Naked and the TED'.

highly affective presentation formats,[381] and the commercialised aspects of the TED model.[382] While a criticism of TED for its commodifying and homogenising tendencies are valid, the scepticism towards TED for fears of spectacle or affective engagement are harder to contend with, as some of these critiques seem to be wrapped up in a general mistrust of popularity and popular formats.[383] It is therefore important to ask to what extent these are the claims of traditional gatekeepers wary of how these newer developments might impact on the reach of their influence. Here, the case of Amy Cuddy illustrates the tensions between academic institutions and TED; in fact, this example clearly demonstrates how their different performances of knowledge impact on the reciprocal scepticism with which TED and the university encounter each other.

In 2012, social psychologist Dr Amy Cuddy was an assistant professor at the Kellogg School of Management at Northwestern University in Chicago when she gave a TED talk at a TEDGlobal event entitled 'Your body language may shape who you are', which popularised the now famous concept of 'power poses'. The concept of power poses is that holding strong, powerful poses for one or two minutes before important conversations, such as job interviews or wage negotiations, will improve one's confidence and thus increase the chances of success. Taken from animal behaviour theory, high-power poses are about signifying dominance by making oneself bigger and taking up space. The poses Cuddy suggests are thus things like stretching up one's arms, opening up the chest, taking a wide-legged stance with hands on the hips, etc. The idea behind power poses is that by performing certain poses and gestures mechanically the body will produce the feelings associated with the gesture. For example, Cuddy tells the audience that putting a pencil between your lips forces a smile, and that this act of smiling will

[381] See, for example, the comparison with American Idol in Benjamin Bratton, 'We Need to Talk about TED', *The Guardian*, 30 December 2013, sec. Opinion, https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2013/dec/30/we-need-to-talk-about-ted.
[382] See Denskus and Esser, 'TED Talks on International Development'; Shumar, 'Being TED'.
[383] It is also telling that a lot of this discourse is mirrored more widely in criticisms of social media in general, which is also viewed sceptically for bypassing traditional gatekeepers within the media and academia. See, for example, Ian Greenleigh, *The Social Media Side Door: How to Bypass the Gatekeepers to Gain Greater Access and Influence* (New York, NY and San Francisco: McGraw Hill Professional, 2013); Mark Coddington and Avery E. Holton, 'When the Gates Swing Open: Examining Network Gatekeeping in a Social Media Setting', *Mass Communication and Society* 17, no. 2 (1 March 2014): 236–57; and Cristina Navarro et al., 'The Challenge of New Gatekeepers for Public Relations. A Comparative Analysis of the Role of Social Media Influencers for European and Latin American Professionals', *Public Relations Review* 46, no. 2 (1 June 2020): 101881.

make you feel better, which is called the 'facial feedback hypothesis'.[384] The material for this talk came from research already published in high-profile journals and had thus gone through a process of peer-reviewing.[385]

Cuddy's talk was immensely successful and quickly became one of the most popular TED talks. Today it has over 60 million views and is the second most watched TED talk of all time. Looking at the classical dramaturgy of TED talks, the appeal of the talk is immediately apparent. Cuddy is a confident, attractive, and engaging talker. She peppers the talk with an array of personal anecdotes that underline her personal stakes in the outcome of her research. Cuddy shares with the audience how she was in a severe car accident as a university student that caused her traumatic brain injury and significant cognitive impairment. Despite this, she managed to secure a place at a prestigious PhD programme at Princeton University but suffered from imposter syndrome and questioned whether she 'deserved' to be on the programme. She followed the advice of one of her supervisors, who suggested she 'fake it' and act more confident than she is. To her surprise, Cuddy tells the audience, this approach worked. She goes on to say how she relived this story several years later, when at business school one of her female graduate students described the same feelings of being an imposter and how she advised this student to 'fake it' too. Power poses, she suggests, change the way we relate to ourselves as well as how we are seen by others. Faking it lets us become what we are faking. To the TED audience this is a powerful message. At this point in the talk the reaction shots of the audience show that they are clearly touched. Several people seem to have tears in their eyes; in fact, Cuddy's voice is breaking and she seems to have to choke back tears when she relays the story of her own student.[386] Her final message is

[384] This research has since been disproven as it could not be replicated in a multilab study ('Effect of Facial Expression on Emotional State Not Replicated in Multilab Study' (Washington, DC: Association for Psychological Science, 27 October 2016), https://www.psychologicalscience.org/news/releases/effect-of-facial-expression-on-emotional-state-not-replicated-in-multilab-study.html.).

[385] See Dana R. Carney, Amy J.C. Cuddy, and Andy J. Yap, 'Power Posing: Brief Nonverbal Displays Affect Neuroendocrine Levels and Risk Tolerance', *Psychological Science* 21, no. 10 (1 October 2010): 1363–68; Amy J. C. Cuddy, Caroline Ashley Wilmuth, and Dana R. Carney, 'The Benefit of Power Posing Before a High-Stakes Social Evaluation', *Harvard Business School Working Paper Series # 13-027*, 12 September 2012, https://dash.harvard.edu/handle/1/9547823; and Dana R. Carney, Judith A. Hall, and Lavonia Smith LeBeau, 'Beliefs about the Nonverbal Expression of Social Power', *Journal of Nonverbal Behavior* 29, no. 2 (1 June 2005): 105–23.

[386] 'Your Body Language May Shape Who You Are', 18:20-30.

that the slogan should not be 'fake it till you make it' but 'fake it till you become it'[387] – shifting the emphasis away from a specific goal or point of success towards a change that is more integral to someone's very being. This is in line with the underlying authenticity discourse in the talk. Cuddy is keen to stress that power poses are to be seen as a form of self-help and not a performance or, worse, the speech of a 'fake' designed to manipulate others. Rather, power poses allow people 'to bring their true selves'[388] to the table, something that feelings of inadequacy and pre-existing social power imbalances (for example, between men and women in professional settings, which Cuddy acknowledges) prevent them from achieving. Power poses, then, provide a low-fi and quick solution to remedy social anxiety; they are a form of redressing ingrained power disparities that do not require expensive technology, any serious investments in training, or a prolonged time commitment from those interested in using them. In short: everyone can do them. This performance and message earned her a standing ovation at the end of the talk.



**Figure 18:** Amy Cuddy demonstrating a power pose in her TED talk 'Your Body Language May Shape Who You Are', *TED Talk*, 2012.

[387] 'Your Body Language May Shape Who You Are', 19:20.
[388] 'Your Body Language May Shape Who You Are', 15:10.

Ironically, the idea of power poses is itself connected to signals of charismatic leadership, as the poses are intended to elevate non-verbal communicating signals and boost the confidence of those using them in situations of public speaking. Cuddy claims that those participants in her experiment who were asked to perform 'high-power poses' instead of 'low-power poses' are more likely to be rated positively and more likely to make it through the job interview situation in the study more successfully. She explicitly says that this outcome is not due to 'the content of their speech' but due to the 'presence that they are bringing to the speech'.[389] Power poses are part of a communicative style and media culture that value and understand the importance of attending to the performative aspects of knowledge dissemination. As such, power poses mirror and reference the dramaturgy of the TED talk with its prioritising of charismatic signals. In this sense, it can be described as self-referential, although its status as a meta-TED talk seems to elude most spectators and the speaker herself.

What makes this a successful TED talk, however, is more than its well-executed and confident performance full of charismatic verbal and non-verbal signals or the fact that Cuddy's life story has a direct relevance for the theory she is discussing; it is also the fact that what she is proposing has an 'immediate practical application', which can be used to instantly 'improve anyone's life'.[390] Here, again, we see a proclivity towards a concept of knowledge that is immediately implementable, and privileges personal action over other measures, such as structural changes that attempt to address the gendered power imbalance that both Cuddy and her student have encountered in their places of work. Shumar concludes that this kind of performance 'resonates with the neoliberal milieu',[391] as it proposes a low-cost and low-tech individual solution to a structural problem, which is exactly the kind of knowledge the knowledge economy – and TED as one of its actors – is after: the kind of knowledge that can be commodified and sold widely in books, self-help seminars, podcasts, etc. Ironically, Cuddy's stories about her own experience and that of her grad students speak to the gender imbalance present in various performances of confidence in the workplace, a fact that she acknowledges in her talk, and which she is keen to differentiate from the actual competency someone

[389] 'Your Body Language May Shape Who You Are', 05:49.
[390] Shumar, 'Being TED', 97.
[391] Shumar, 97.

might hold. Yet, instead of critiquing these performances of dominance as an indicator for confidence and/or competence – which she herself admits is coded as 'male behaviour', thus putting women at a structural disadvantage – she employs a solution that emulates and effectively perpetuates this behaviour, leaving dominant power-structures intact.[392] Comparing this to the findings of Denskus and Esser, whose analysis of the international aid talks came to a similar conclusion, suggests that this kind of messaging is not tangential or incidental to the TED talk but one of its core performative strategies, which also contributes to the highly individualistic aesthetic of the form – present both in the charismatic performances of the speakers and the structures of their messaging, which foreground personal responsibility and action.

While Cuddy's talk is emblematic of the performative logic of TED talks, it is also a cautionary tale for academics seeking to engage with or further their profile through TED. At first things seemed to go very well for Cuddy, and she lived a version of an academic fairy tale. In 2013, she was hired as an assistant professor on tenure-track at the Harvard Business School, received a book deal and multiple invitations to speak at prestigious events. But soon her extraordinary visibility made her a target and a posterchild for a methodological war raging within the field of social psychology. Advocates of the Open Science Movement singled out her study as an example of what they consider bad science.[393] The accusation centred around a statistical method known as 'P-hacking', which proponents of the Open Science Movement claimed distorts and manipulates results, making them harder to replicate in follow-up studies, a debate now

[392] See also Carole Hooven, 'The Real Problem with Power Posing Isn't the Data', *Slate*, 4 November 2016, https://slate.com/technology/2016/11/power-posings-real-problem-is-with-hormones-not-data.html.

[393] See Uri Simonsohn, Leif Nelson, and Joe Simmons, '[37] Power Posing: Reassessing The Evidence Behind The Most Popular TED Talk', *Data Colada* (blog), 8 May 2015, http://datacolada.org/37; and Andrew Gelman and Kaiser Fung, 'The Power of the "Power Pose"', *Slate*, 19 January 2016, https://slate.com/technology/2016/01/amy-cuddys-power-pose-research-is-the-latest-example-of-scientific-overreach.html. The main critics of Cuddy's work are her 'former grad school classmate, Joseph Simmons, a psychology-and-softball bro who joined with Uri Simonsohn and Leif Nelson to lead the charge for greater rigor in psychology, and who go after Cuddy's research on their blog Data Colada; and Andrew Gelman, a Columbia University statistician, political scientist […] who has written at length, repeatedly, about the flaws in Cuddy's work (if not her character), and her unwillingness to acknowledge her mistakes' (Daniel Engber, 'The Trials of Amy Cuddy', *Slate*, 19 October 2017, https://slate.com/technology/2017/10/did-power-posing-guru-amy-cuddy-deserve-her-public-shaming.html.)

called 'replication crisis'.[394] While many commentators on this case have since noted that what Cuddy was and is being criticised for was more or less standard practice within her field at the time of those studies and continues to be used today, Cuddy's position as 'celebrity intellectual', a reputation she gained in no small part due to the success of her TED talk,[395] made her a high-profile target, someone whom it seemed worth going after. Daniel Engber points out her somewhat ambiguous position in relation to this replication scandal. Cuddy was not the only academic to be publicly pilloried for her use of p-hacking, but unlike others she lacked professional security at the time of the controversy. As a mid-level academic who did not yet have tenure, she lacked institutional power to protect her against these accusations. Yet, her status as academic celebrity with a huge following online 'meant that going after her could still be understood as punching up'.[396] Crucially, then, her status as a TED star along with the performance that becoming a star of TED necessitates was one of the reasons why she was singled out. TED's reputation of oversimplification and manipulation followed her into her academic life, where she was attacked in particularly vitriolic ways because she was seen as not only manipulating her findings but also profiting disproportionately from a system that enables and encourages this kind of over simplification and hyped-up results in favour of direct practical usability.[397] On top of that, the personal details she had revealed in her TED talk were used against her, as commentators online used her brain injury to question her intelligence[398] or suggested that instead of having imposter syndrome she was masquerading as a scientist, thus accusing her of actually being an imposter.[399] In her

[394] Ulrich Schimmack, 'On Power Posing, Power Analysis, Publication Bias, Peer-Review, P-Curve, Pepsi, Porsche, and Why Psychologists Hate Zcurve', Replicability-Index, 4 April 2018, https://replicationindex.com/2018/04/04/on-power-posing-power-analysis-publication-bias-peer-review-p-curve-pepsi-porsche-and-why-psychologists-hate-zcurve/. Daniel Engber explains this controversy by saying: 'Statistics-minded critics pointed out that standard ways of setting up experiments and analyzing the results had some major flaws, and that the research literature seemed all but guaranteed to be infected with a rash of false-positive conclusions. Cuddy's work, like that of many other scientists, would fail to replicate in larger studies. It seemed that she and her co-authors had cajoled the data in the usual ways, by excluding certain information when it seemed useful or convenient—a process known as p-hacking' (Engber, 'The Trials of Amy Cuddy'.

[395] Engber, 'The Trials of Amy Cuddy'.

[396] Engber.

[397] Engber.

[398] According to Cuddy, commentators repeatedly likened her to the character of Phoebe from the sitcom *Friends* implying that she is lofty and ditzy and cannot be taken seriously. (Amy Cuddy, Twitter Post, 15 November 2021, 8:41 pm, https://twitter.com/amyjccuddy/status/1460347263910301696.)

[399] Katie Corker, 'Two Examples: Https://T.Co/WaOe9tAcO2', Tweet, *@katiecorker* (blog), 20 April 2017, https://twitter.com/katiecorker/status/855153823895236609.

feature for the *New York Times Magazine*, Susan Dominus writes that the backlash against Amy Cuddy happened on social media as well as in professional settings, like conferences, where people 'savaged not just Cuddy's work but also her career, her income, her ambition, even her intelligence, sometimes with evident malice'.[400] The glee some commentators showed while observing her public downfall, especially online, seems to suggest that an element of jealousy and begrudging her this popular success played a role in the persistent attacks on Cuddy, which continue to this day,[401] although she is no longer in an academic position. In the spring of 2017, The New York Times reported, 'she quietly left her tenure-track job at Harvard',[402] and she has not taken up a new academic position since. Additionally, her co-author for the original study on which the TED talk was based, Dana Carney, has since distanced herself from the result of the study and published a statement saying that she no longer has 'any faith in the embodied effects of "power poses"' and does not 'think the effect is real', thereby further isolating Cuddy's position in her field.[403]

There is a not-so-subtle undercurrent of misogyny that accompanies Cuddy's place in the replication controversy. The attacks on her were more pronounced and more persistent than those on other social psychologists (many of them older, male, and in more secure positions). Hers were also exemplary in the way they became personal almost immediately and seemed to display a certain revelling in her public shame. While it is well-documented that women in the public eye receive more harassment and abuse on social media than men in similar positions,[404] in Cuddy's case her status as a successful TED talker seemed to have invited a particularly vehement response. This suggests that

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[400] Susan Dominus, 'When the Revolution Came for Amy Cuddy', *The New York Times*, 18 October 2017, sec. Magazine, https://www.nytimes.com/2017/10/18/magazine/when-the-revolution-came-for-amy-cuddy.html.

[401] See, for example, Jimmy Coan, Twitter Post, 18 November 2021, 6.10 pm, https://twitter.com/jimcoan/status/1461396458578616323.

[402] Dominus, 'When the Revolution Came for Amy Cuddy'.

[403] Dana R. Carney, 'My Position on "Power Poses"', 26 October 2016, https://faculty.haas.berkeley.edu/dana_carney/pdf_my%20position%20on%20power%20poses.pdf.

[404] See Hannah Yelin, 'Opinion: Sexism Aimed at Public Figures Is Holding Back Poor and Black Young Women – Our Research Proves It', *The Independent*, 13 March 2019, https://www.independent.co.uk/voices/women-public-eye-sexism-gender-equality-a8820946.html; Emily Harmer and Rosalynd Southern, 'Digital Microaggressions and Everyday Othering: An Analysis of Tweets Sent to Women Members of Parliament in the UK', *Information, Communication & Society* 24, no. 14 (26 October 2021): 1998–2015; and Commonwealth Parliamentary Association UK, 'A Guide to Addressing Online Abuse' (Westminster, UK: UK Parliament, July 2021), https://www.uk-cpa.org/media/4282/cpa-uk-guide-to-addressing-online-abuse.pdf.

the position of 'celebrity intellectual' is particularly precarious for women, as seeking public attention in the form of TED talks can backfire and result in them being perceived as attention seeking and their research labelled as less rigorous. As I have shown in this chapter, TED's dramaturgy is not focused on evidencing scientific rigour. Thus, it has come to be associated with 'blue-sky thinking',[405] oversimplifications, and generalisations.[406] Yet, TED's insistence on identifying the speaker with their message means that aligning oneself with the TED logic is more dangerous for academics whose identity position means that their work is already more likely to be taken less seriously and considered naïve. Cuddy herself has commented on this asymmetry in a recent series of tweets, where she disclosed that the criticism levelled at her in blog posts and on social media was the main reason her tenure procedure was delayed. According to her, she was told that the 'most important thing [she] needed to do to get tenure was address [these criticisms]'.[407] Cuddy points out that none of the attacks on her work were made in peer-reviewed journals but on blogs, which are, like TED, tangential to the academic publication circuit.[408] Yet, those disseminating their criticisms in this way did not face the same scrutiny and ridicule that she did.

It is important to note that TED itself seemed to have only limited stakes in this debate and has done little to address this controversy. In 2017 *Ideas.TED.com* – a supplementary website for TED talks, which gives context and further information – published an interview with Cuddy, where they invited her to respond to the criticism levelled against her,[409] which she does in detail and with care. However, the article does not feature any of her critics. One question asks how TED can best represent social science and depict ongoing debates while still 'making the science attractive and

[405] Carole Cadwalladr, 'TED – The Ultimate Forum for Blue-Sky Thinking', *The Observer*, 3 July 2010, sec. Technology, https://www.theguardian.com/technology/2010/jul/04/ted-conference-oxford-carole-cadwalladr.
[406] See Morozov, 'The Naked and the TED'.
[407] Amy Cuddy, Twitter Post, 25 November 2021, 8:25 pm, https://twitter.com/amyjccuddy/status/1460343264645722112.
[408] See, for example, Andrew Gelman, 'Gremlins in the Work of Amy J. C. Cuddy, Michael I. Norton, and Susan T. Fiske | Statistical Modeling, Causal Inference, and Social Science', *Statistical Modeling, Causal Inference, and Social Science* (blog), 5 July 2016, https://statmodeling.stat.columbia.edu/2016/07/05/30596/; Simonsohn, Nelson, and Simmons, '[37] Power Posing'.
[409] David Biello, 'Inside the Debate about Power Posing: A Q & A with Amy Cuddy', *Ideas.Ted.Com* (blog), 23 February 2017, https://ideas.ted.com/inside-the-debate-about-power-posing-a-q-a-with-amy-cuddy/.

understandable to a general audience', gesturing towards the question of what TED's institutional responsibility is in a situation like this. Cuddy suggests TED should implement a 'TED Science Update', a feature where several years after giving their talks presenters return to TED to discuss 'updates and refinements' of the research they presented before. The question of whether or not such a programme would be beneficial to or in the interest of TED is not raised but a look towards their franchising apparatus reveals that the organisation will have little incentive to complicate or revise the messages their discourse machine regularly churns out. To date, no such programme or revision mechanism has been implemented, and judging from the almost 9000 YouTube comments to Cuddy's talk – the vast majority of which are very positive – there seems to be very little awareness of the controversy about power poses outside of the field of social psychology. This might also be because, while a brief note citing the ongoing debate about the replication crisis was added to Cuddy's talk on the official TED website,[410] no such note appears on its YouTube page, suggesting that the organisation is at least limiting its effort to communicate any uncertainty about the findings presented in the talk to its audience. The 'E' in TED notably stands for 'entertainment', not education and its commitment to the latter seems given only as long as this education (in this case about the methods of science) does not stand in contrast with its primary mode of functioning. TED's focus on charismatic presentations and simple and immediately applicable messages reveals that, not only is the organisation ill-equipped to hold space for doubt or uncertainty, is it not in its financial interest to platform critical conversations.

Amy Cuddy's case shows how the spectre of TED haunts contemporary knowledge politics in higher education. While the draw of TED talks lies in the increased social and potentially economic capital it bestows on the speaker, as well as in the form of teaching that promises to merge education and entertainment, the immediate commodifiability of the ideas presented and the idea of the academic celebrity TED popularises risk being perceived as manipulative and methodologically lazy. TED offers academics a vehicle to showcase how their knowledge can become commodified and offer immediate market applicability. In a time when there is a widespread call for university education to be more skills-based and practical and lead to a well-paying job so that the 'investment' of high

[410] 'Your Body Language May Shape Who You Are'.

tuition fees will pay off, this promise is a powerful incentive. Although TED for the most part is tangential to the university, it offers academics new ways of selling themselves (as charismatic leaders) and their knowledge (as a simple action) to a consuming public. TED then provides academics with an identity model. It allowed Amy Cuddy and other knowledge workers to 'present themselves as a business selling a product, and of course the product is themselves'.[411] Although, as stated at the outset of this chapter, academics and lecturers are not members of the global elite or media stars, TED allows them to imagine themselves as an 'elite knowledge worker, who is consumer and consumed, and has become part of the media spectacle, at the same time as they become a venture that might be very profitable'.[412] For the context of higher education, TED works to obscure the social and financial realities of most workers in higher education. It offers an aspirational model of identity, while also profiting from the actual working conditions within universities where excellence frameworks and demands for public engagement make self-marketing and commodification unavoidable. Cuddy's case shows how difficult it is to walk this line.

It has to be stressed that this critique of the TED presenter as the global knowledge entrepreneur is not without pitfalls. While it is easy to condemn this kind of academic identity as individualistic, selfish, and looking for personal profit, criticisms of the TED model and the marketisation of higher education it is associated with often uphold or implicitly contrast this to older versions of academia free from market interference. They lament the loss of an altogether more civilised and distinguished 'culture of letters' without acknowledging how older narratives such as the republic of letters obscured and depended upon the invisible structures of a class-based and racialised patriarchy to uphold the privileges of a small number of individuals. Similarly, Sarah Brouillette warns against historicisations that paint neoliberalism – not capitalist structures themselves – as the main threat to public goods and knowledge. She is critical of scholars such as Wendy Brown, whose book *Undoing the Demos: Neoliberalism's Stealth Revolution* makes the case that recent neoliberal developments are a threat to

[411] Shumar, 'Being TED', 96.
[412] Shumar, 102.

public exchange of knowledge and thus a fundamental threat to democracy itself.[413] Critiquing the relatively limited historical scope in Brown's book, Brouillette notes that 'the term neoliberalism tends to index the reluctance to name capitalism as the culprit in the destitution and immiseration of people's lives' and that in academic circles it 'is more permissible to engage in a defence of democracy against neoliberal "market conditions" than to suggest that democracy itself is as we know it inseparable from capital and the capitalist state'.[414] Further, Brouillette identifies in those criticisms of the neoliberalisation of higher education a nostalgia for the 'good old days' of higher education and a liberal narrative that a) wants to maintain the distinction of knowledge workers from other forms of work, which were always marketised/'neoliberalised' to begin with and b) serves as a justification for the social and economic protections academics traditionally enjoyed against the effects of marketisation. She states:

> Indeed at times, perhaps especially in accounts of conditions in the higher education sector – a sector whose neoliberalization has perhaps been more lamented than any other – it appears as though the word "neoliberal" simply signals the introduction into one's liberal enclave of conditions from which one might have thought a certain level of education and privilege served as protection. It is as though the real problem is simply that forms of work whose relationship to economic rationality was more indirect – the professoriate – have been reshaped in ways that threatened their distinction.[415]

Understanding the TED presenter, and by extension the academic hailed by TED, as the global knowledge entrepreneur should thus not be understood as a mere lamentation of the loss of the university as a 'liberal enclave' but rather point towards the various entanglements between the higher education sector and the mechanisms of the global knowledge economy.

What this chapter has shown is that while it makes sense to view TED and TED talks in relation to the marketisation of higher education, and readings such as Shumar's have illustrated how TED effectively works as a vector of identity formation for contemporary academics, some caution is needed when examining these criticisms. We

[413] See Wendy Brown, *Undoing the Demos: Neoliberalism's Stealth Revolution* (Brooklyn, NY: ZONE BOOKS, 2015).
[414] Sarah Brouillette, 'Keyword: Neoliberal' (Unpublished Manuscript, June 2018), 1.
[415] Brouillette, 1.

might ask, for example, whether the alternative narratives or historic moments upheld by these criticisms – regardless of whether they are mentioned explicitly or stated implicitly – are indeed more equitable, just, or accessible or whether this was/is only the case for a certain privileged group, who traditionally had access to the professoriate, and whose influence and powers of gatekeeping are threatened by these newer models. What this brief look towards alternative models of higher education as a distinguished cultural network or liberal enclave shows is that processes of marketisation/ commodification and massification/democratisation of higher education are often locked in a dialectical relationship with each other. From this perspective, TED represents one of the main contradictions of the knowledge economy, where on the one hand production of knowledge (once reified) is sought to be controlled (patented, copyrighted, etc.) but on the other hand digital circulation means that information goods are easily and cheaply transmitted and distributed.[416] In the case of TED, its 'model of production is based on scarcity (only the best and the brightest can rise to the top) while its distribution is based on plenitude (everyone can have TED talks for free)'.[417] The democratisation/massification of higher education through actors such as TED is thus at odds with the logic of scarceness and exceptionalism it associates with the privilege of presenting at and attending a TED conference. Similarly, TED embodies the idea of the 'new academic self' – a successful producer of knowledge goods for the global knowledge economy – which clashes with the idea of equitable and collaborative knowledge sharing in order to provoke structural social change. The reach of TED both within and outside of the university means that academics are in some way implicated in this competitive model of knowledge performance, whether they choose to actively participate in TED as TED or TEDx speakers or not.

It remains to be seen whether one of the consequences of this excess of supply over demand will be the devaluation of education both in terms of its economic and symbolic capital. TED's (and Silicon Valley's) mistrust of formal education and its model of entrepreneurial scholarship might already account for the diminishing status and social

[416] Michael A. Peters, 'Introduction: Knowledge Goods, the Primacy of Ideas and the Economics of Abundance', in *Creativity and the Global Knowledge Economy*, ed. Michael A. Peters, Simon Marginson, and Peter Murphy (New York, NY: Peter Lang, 2009), 2–6.
[417] Shumar, 'Being TED', 106.

capital that once belonged to higher education teachers and scholars. At the same time, it is important to ask what the alternative modes of expertise (as produced by TED) have to offer in terms of critical potential or forming a critical subjectivity. The focus on productive outcome under conditions of cognitive labour within the system of TED makes it clear that this form of production does not limit itself to the production of commodities and fungibles (although TED does produce those as well as I have shown) but, as I have argued, is interested in the production of an entrepreneurial subject who is a critical thinker with a limited capacity for critique, or better limited interests in enacting this critique. What TED sells is a performance of expertise designed to induce an experience of a certain criticality. Understanding TED as an actor within the knowledge economy allows us to observe how it participates in processes of knowledge homogenisation while also glimpsing those ideologies of meritocracy that enable TED talkers to profit off their performances. Reading TED talks as popular iterations of lecture performances thus enables a critical engagement with both forms' tendency to view knowledge as commodifiable and as something that can be turned into an experience to a repeatable and profitable effect. By outlining its formulaic construction, my analysis of the TED logic has shown its embeddedness in a Silicon Valley culture, which reduces the lecturer/talker to an individualised performer of charismatic signals and thus offers a limited scope for critical thinking.

The following chapter picks up on this idea of the critical thinker and asks what the lecture performance as a hybridised and to some extent compromised pedagogy can bring to the question of whether a form of critical digitality is possible under the conditions of today's knowledge economy and the marketised realities of higher education. To do so, I turn away from TED as a metanarrative of the challenges to perform knowledge under the conditions of cognitive capitalism and turn towards a more concrete pedagogical model, which mobilised the lecture performance (among other forms) as a mode in which the contradictions of forms of knowledge production can be explored and made obvious.

# Chapter 4: Lecture Performance, Pop-Pedagogies and Digital Literacy

Chapter 3 has shown the ambiguous entanglements between institutions of and professionals in higher education and the phenomenon of TED talks. In this context, the TED talk stands in for the broader developments in the global knowledge economy and shows its encroachment into the politics and practices of higher education, where teaching and research are increasingly being considered, marketed, and sold as knowledge products. The analysis of TED talks and their expansion into academic settings demonstrated the problematic blurring of for-profit and not-for-profit tactics. All of this puts academics and teachers in higher education in a difficult position. While there are many that embrace the TED model and see it as a vehicle for less stratified knowledge communication, there are others who are more sceptical towards its embrace of elite culture. The expansion of economic logics into the field of higher education, however, is widely recognised, and my examination has shown that TED talks have used the digitalisation of knowledge to shift the power relations between producers and consumers, as well as between different institutions of knowledge production. The university's status as the foremost site of knowledge production is being challenged, and the image of the academic – a professional whose practice is relatively independent of economic considerations and free from the imperative to generate profit – gives way to a model embedded in realities of competition and (self-)commodification.

It is one of the premises of the argument of this thesis that this change of institutional politics has had an impact on the way knowledge is performed and circulated today. For this very reason, the lecture performance as a form is such an intriguing object of analysis as it foregrounds questions of knowledge production and transmission while always adhering to performance (rather than text or data) as its central concern. In this chapter, I therefore turn towards the lecture performance's engagement with teaching. Focusing on Jon McKenzie's pedagogy of 'smart media', which proposes to use lecture performances (along with other hybrid-forms) to bridge the gaps between popular and academic cultures and as a vehicle of digital literacy, I read the lecture performance as a consequence of the economisation of higher education, as well as a critique of some of

these managerial and economic developments. I analyse the lecture performance *Thought-Action Figures Episode 11: Kosmograms* (2018) by McKenzie and Aneta Stojnić, as well as McKenzie's TED talk (2016), as case studies that exemplify their pedagogical project. I argue that McKenzie and Stojnić's focus on the performative intersections between thought and action connects to ideas of the knowledge economy in utopian ways. While trying to establish a network of transmedia or 'smart media' users, they find themselves within two of the contradictions Gerald Delanty has outlined for universities existing within the contemporary knowledge economy, namely, the contradiction between massification and democratisation and the contradiction between efficiency and scholarship.[418] Born within the circulatory networks of the contemporary university but increasingly operating outside of it, the thought-action figure network is an example of a wrangling with the contradictory politics of the knowledge economy and a reflection of the role teaching plays within this system. In this context the lecture performance functions as one presentation format – or one smart medium – among others but is emblematic of its position as the place where the intersections of thought and action are staged. In what follows, I argue that while McKenzie's pedagogical concept encourages students and professionals in higher education to perceive themselves as knowledge entrepreneurs within an academic system that rewards innovation and the implementation of popular aesthetics, it ultimately falls short of creating the civic-aesthetics, commons, or democratisation of knowledge it aims for.

## Thought-Action Figures Episode 11: Kosmograms

*Close your eyes. We are going to locate you in the kosmogram of your life. There are four categories; in each pick the thing, person, animal, construct, songs, image, plant, dance, smell, gas, liquid, or symbol that you feel best represents you in relation to the category. First there is history: Which historic event or time has defined you? Has structured your relation to the world? Then there's family: How are you represented by and representing family? Then there's profession: Who or what has shaped your relation to your profession? And lastly, there is pop culture: What pop cultural reference best fits you? Do you have the four images or constructs in your mind? Do you? Now try to combine*

[418] See Gerard Delanty, 'Ideologies of the Knowledge Society and the Cultural Contradictions of Higher Education', *Policy Futures in Education* 1, no. 1 (1 March 2003): 71–82.

*them! What links them? Are there patterns among them? Do you see yourself emerging? Now, open your eyes.*

These words were spoken by Jon McKenzie in his lecture performance *Thought-Action Figures Episode 11: Kosmograms*, which he developed and performed with his collaborator Aneta Stojnić. It was first performed at the Martin E. Segal Center at the City University of New York on 17 September 2018. These words were intended as instructions. If you followed them, you would construct your own personal kosmogram, a structure invoked by McKenzie to aid the creation of the 'thought-action figure'. Thought-action figures are constructs, alter egos, or practices aimed at overcoming the Platonic division between thought and action, logos and mythos, and dialectics and mimesis. Throughout their lecture performance McKenzie and Stojnić introduce the concept of the thought-action figure, explain how it relates to their pedagogical project of critical digitality, and invite the audience to create their own thought-action figures, which they hope will reshape our conception of knowledge. The lecture performance is part of a larger collaboration between the two performers/researchers and a continuation of McKenzie's longstanding project of 'smart media', a design pedagogy project started at his DesignLab at the University of Wisconsin-Madison, which has since moved to Cornell University.[419] By 'smart media' or transmedia McKenzie refers to mash-ups between academic formats (such as books, articles, and essays) and products of popular culture (music videos, raps, graphic novels, slam poetry, etc.). He names lecture performances, TED talks, video essays, and theory comics or theory raps, as examples of smart media, which he hopes will aid the democratisation of knowledge and reconfigure the university's relationship to popular culture. He sees smart media as experiments in bridging specialised knowledge (episteme) and common knowledge (doxa) to de-centre the disciplinary apparatus of the modern university.

[419] See Jon McKenzie and Aneta Stojnić, 'McKenzie Stojnić – Performance Media Life', Artist Website, n.d., https://www.mckenziestojnic.org/; Jon McKenzie, *Transmedia Knowledge for Liberal Arts and Community Engagement: A StudioLab Manifesto* (London and New York, NY: Palgrave Macmillan, 2019), http://link.springer.com/10.1007/978-3-030-20574-4.



**Figure 19:** Jon McKenzie and Aneta Stojnić amongst a collection of their Thought-Action Figures. (Image taken from https://www.mckenziestojnic.org/)

Like no other scholar in performance studies, Jon McKenzie's name is synonymous with the fluid meanings of the word 'performance' and the proximity between business, management, and performance theory they engender. In his influential 2001 study *Perform or Else*, McKenzie convincingly traced the convergences between performances of power, capitalist expansion, and managerial tactics of post-Fordist economies. McKenzie analysed the many similarities between discourses of cultural, technological, and organisational performance.[420] The title *Perform or Else* implies the possibility of failure: a failure to perform, which looks different in the various areas of performance McKenzie analyses. 'A failure to perform results, respectively, in being fired [organisational failure], becoming obsolete [technological failure] and being socially normalized [cultural failure]', writes Henry M. Sayre in his review of McKenzie's work.[421] The threat of being socially, and we might add economically, normalised refers to the idea that cultural performance, like performance art, 'defines itself as liminal or marginalized expression and if the performance is assimilated into the mainstream it loses its critical power of position'.[422]

[420] See McKenzie, *Perform or Else*.
[421] Henry M. Sayre, 'Perform or Else: From Discipline to Performance (Review)', *Modernism/Modernity* 10, no. 1 (2003): 201.
[422] Sayre, 201.

By pointing out how all three fields of performance are in danger of being subsumed and thus neutralised, both socially and economically, into capitalist forms of production, McKenzie countered trends – popular at the time – that saw performance as a radical agent of social change (as in most of the work of Richard Schechner)[423] or a source of personal transformation outside of the media-obsessed mainstream capitalist society (most prominently, Peggy Phelan made this argument in *Unmarked*).[424] McKenzie was one of the first performance theorists to see performance not as a formation of counter-knowledge but as a driving force between contemporary structures of power and knowledge. It is with this central intervention in mind that I now turn to McKenzie's newer project, which can usefully be described as an experiment in critical (digital) pedagogy.

With the threat of failure, obsolescence, and subsumption looming large, McKenzie's newest project turns to the question of what arts and humanities education is for in this economic and social reality. Sayre points out that the convergence of fields of performance poses a challenge to knowledge and its production: 'Today our organizations value agility more than stability and our technologies accept their own obsolescence even at the moment of their production', he writes, which means that knowledge 'rapidly becomes obsolete' and outdated.[425] What, then, is the function of higher education at a time when the economic realities of student debt and academic casualisation mean there is a demand for skills-based training and practically applicable knowledge, but the mechanisms of the knowledge-driven economy mean that these practical knowledges might be obsolete before students can implement them? McKenzie's answer, according to Sayre, is that at such a time 'creative thinking – that is thinking "beyond knowledge" – is of a premium'.[426] McKenzie's strategy is to propose an arts and humanities pedagogy that extends the skills of critical literacy (in his eyes the pinnacle of liberal arts education prior to digitisation) to critical digitality, where this out-of-the-box thinking becomes socially productive. In this chapter I trace how he conceives of this mode of criticality both as a pedagogical strategy – as smart media – and as a re-

[423] See, for example, Richard Schechner, *Performance Studies: An Introduction*, 3rd edition (London and New York, NY: Routledge, 2012).
[424] Phelan, *Unmarked. The Politics of Performance*.
[425] Sayre, 'Perform or Else', 201.
[426] Sayre, 201.

conceptualisation of knowledge more broadly, where he positions this thinking against what he calls 'the global lecture machine'.

Within this project there seems to occur a shift in outlook on McKenzie's part. While in *Perform or Else* he was sceptical and rather pessimistic about the confluence of managerial, technological, and cultural performance, this newer project seems to be much more optimistic about it without being clear on what prompted this change in perspective. On the one hand, his project of critical digitality is clearly counter to the radical forms of open digitality as promoted by Mark Zuckerberg and other tech gurus, who argue for extreme deregulation in terms of media and free speech laws and fully financialised digital platforms, yet demand extremely narrow intellectual property and copyright laws when it comes to protecting their technology.[427] On the other hand, McKenzie's own status both within the university as an actor in the knowledge economy and in relation to these technocratic networks is much less clear. His lecture performances serve as the theoretical justifications and demonstrations of his pedagogical project, and in them, as I will show, he mobilises and ironically repeats the forms of institutional critique championed by earlier lecture performers of the 1960s and 1970s. He does so, however, without ever thematising his own positions in relation to the systems he critiques, which means that his critique falls oddly flat. This, I believe, speaks of the ambiguity of the current moment, where digital interaction is often marked by a sort of wilful decontextualisation. Similarly, McKenzie looks to older avant-gardist practices but disregards their utopian imaginary, which means his performance ends in a sort of empty joke or cliché.

[427] Zuckerberg's extreme style of knowledge entrepreneurialism is also palpable in the context of where he put forward these radical ideas of an open digital world. Giving a lecture at Georgetown University, he uses this as a CEO publicity opportunity, not only taking students and faculty through his reasoning for this stance but also announcing 'new measures of online security' that Facebook would implement during the lecture. Here the academic setting of this talk (old university hall, a wooden lectern) almost seems to act as a cover for what is actually a product launch or product announcement. This impression is also aided by the presence of teleprompters and the vocal and linguistic performance more akin to a practiced TED talk (full of certainties and absolutes) than the more questioning academic lecture. (CNET Highlights, 'Facebook CEO Mark Zuckerberg's Entire Speech', 17 October 2019, YouTube Video, 17 October 2019, Georgetown University, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=nYMX-ArjYz8. See also Christophers, *Rentier Capitalism*.)

## Against the Global Lecture Machine

McKenzie spent years specifically engaging with the lecture form and what he calls the lecture machine, where the form of the lecture stands in for the exclusionary and often violent epistemologies of Western thought. His engagement with the form of the lecture and the lecture performance is therefore never mere artistic or pedagogical experimentation but something he sees as an intervention into the contemporary knowledge politics of higher education.

McKenzie sees the lecture performance and its circulation inside and outside of higher education as part of a network of other 'smart media' working against the concentration of knowledge within academia. By 'global lecture machine', McKenzie refers to a powerful, historical dispositive, which not only acts like a gatekeeper of specific knowledge goods but also functions as a disciplinary apparatus that decides what gets counted as knowledge in the first place. It upholds Plato's division between episteme (specialist knowledge achieved through ideation and dialectic) and doxa (common knowledge achieved through myth and mimesis). This division casts its long shadow on the contemporary university, which is still struggling to incorporate and take seriously those knowledges not arrived at through absorbed contemplation (*vita contemplativa*), scientific method, and idealist reason.

> We can put a lecture in an onto-historical context as part of a global lecture machine, a disciplinary apparatus that arises with the modern university as a panoptic institution producing human subjects worldwide. 'Lecture' means 'to read', and this immense reading machine you are seated in today stretches back to Plato's Academy and around the world through colonialism and globalisation. Over centuries, religious pulpits and shamanic circles have made way for secular lecterns dispensing universal reason through ideational thinking. Universal reason demands universal seating, assigning errant individuals and entire nomadic peoples to their seats in schools and lecture halls so they can see and hear ideas presented in logical order – and learn to reason themselves. Compulsory education laws require them to do so. Modernity's challenge is thus: reason or else! Attend lectures, learn to read and write![428]

[428] McKenzie, 'Collective Thought-Action', 322.

In this context, McKenzie sees lecture performances as a means to 'explore, expand, and in many cases, explode the lecture as a form of power and knowledge'.[429] For him, they point to a way of imagining other forms of thinking and doing, and as such offer a utopian potential of restructuring the production of knowledge.

At the same time, McKenzie is aware that while the power of the global lecture machine is unbroken, its primacy is challenged by modes of digitality and new modes of networked knowledges. While the panoptical power of the lecture machine rests on literacy (and the logocentrism of reason and the logophonism of speech), the lecture performances and other transmedia find themselves at the nexus of a historical shift, where power is no longer disciplinary but performative, no longer centralised but dispersed:

> In the era of global micro- and macro-performativities, lecturers find their texts and images confronting diagrammatic power circuits operating at scales far below and above human consciousness. These circuits are not limited to nationalisms, but include international and multinational powers, as well as the powers of communities, coalitions, social groups, and individuals. Both states and hacktivists agree: power has gone virtual, nano, and networked, mobilised in the streets and raining down from cyberspace in a grand pincer movement joining earth and sky, intimacies and ontologies. The battle over subject positions – whether nationalist or ethnic, capitalist or communist, western or eastern, urban or rural, cis, LGBT, white or rainbow, old or young, human or post-human – involves a battle over packets and networks, events and assemblages. Performative power and its ubiquitous "dataveillance" do not preclude the formation of stable identities and hierarchies, and in fact, the new power circuits depend upon these as raw material, as common building blocks of societies of control. [430]

What McKenzie has identified here is how this transformation of power from disciplinary to performative and from analogue to digital situates the lecture performance at the nexus of literacy and digitality. The lecture performance, as an example of 'transmedia knowledge', reintroduces mimetic techniques such as song, dance, and images 'to revel in the entanglement of orality and literacy within digitality'.[431] However, digitality as McKenzie conceives it is a threat, or at least a serious challenge to both ideation and performance. As an 'onto-historical apparatus that displaces oral repertoires and literate

[429] McKenzie, 322.
[430] McKenzie, 323.
[431] McKenzie, 328.

archives within networked databases',[432] digitality subsumes both literate and mimetic knowledges and re-configures them into open networks of production, circulation, and consumption (particularly consumption as abstracted and reproduced via algorithms).

## The Lecture Machine and the Global Knowledge Economy

This focus on digital networks of production and circulation of knowledge puts McKenzie's theories in close proximity to ideas of the knowledge economy. By asking what happens to knowledge when 'power becomes diagrammatic and post-disciplinary, when panoptic enclosures give way to open networks',[433] McKenzie moves knowledge production and its gatekeeping towards discourses of the global knowledge economy or cognitive capitalism, which also mobilise the digitalisation of knowledge to ask how these shifts in power-knowledge impact on workers, citizens, and individuals as knowledge producers and consumers. Michael Peters traces the emergence of the knowledge economy in relation to discourses of the weightless or immaterial economy:

> The development of the knowledge and learning economies emphasizes the changing significance of the intellectual capital and tacit knowledge in the forms of human, social, and intellectual capitals for economic growth and development. The 'symbolic' or 'weightless' economy has highlighted the general importance of symbolic, immaterial and digital goods and services for economic and cultural development and resulted in new labour markets with a demand for higher analytic skills and new markets in tradable knowledges.[434]

Links between the cognitive and the digital are significant in as much as they parallel other shifts towards immaterial goods and services, such as affective labour in the service industry or experience economy, more broadly associated with shifts towards post-Fordist industries (as my discussion of virtuosity in Part 1 of this thesis has shown). However, Peters is quick to point out that while the idea of the knowledge economy is helpful to think through economic, political, and cultural changes since the mid-1990s,[435] special attention needs to be paid to knowledge if one tries to treat it as an economic

[432] McKenzie, 328.
[433] McKenzie, 323.
[434] Peters, 'Introduction: Knowledge Goods, the Primacy of Ideas and the Economics of Abundance', 1.
[435] Peters, 2.

good. Unlike other goods and commodities, knowledge 'defies traditional understandings of property and principles of exchange and closely conforms to the criteria of public good'.[436] According to Peters, at the stage of ideation, when it is considered as 'pure ideas', knowledge defies the law of scarcity – and thus evades the dynamics of supply and demand – as it is non-rivalrous (thus not depleted by use), barely excludable (meaning it is difficult to exclude users from it and it can be reproduced at little or no cost), and not transparent (meaning its worth is not immediately clear and it requires experimentation to know whether it is suited to a practical purpose). Thus, knowledge may be treated as a commodity only once it becomes 'codified, written down, physically embedded in a system or process' and can then be subjected to intellectual property rights, such as patents and copyright.[437] As McKenzie's conception of the smart media is a specific attempt to wrest the concept of knowledge from the status of pure thought and ideation, the question is, to what extent does this conceptual move constitute a materialisation (and thus commodification) of knowledge? To what extent do smart media, like the lecture performance, represent knowledge products that can be exchanged, copyrighted, and treated as artistic and intellectual property?

Here an initial tension in McKenzie's conception of smart media as a sort of anti-platonic academy emerges. Transmedial knowledge aims to mix specialised and common knowledge in order to destabilise the hierarchical opposition between episteme and doxa, so as to challenge ideas of mastery and the monodirectional flow from 'experts' to 'non-experts'. It wants to level the playing field to enable 'community engagement, participatory research, and citizen science'.[438] However, McKenzie says little about the institutional frames of such exchanges, the (in)accessibility of the artistic and educational spaces that produce such smart media, nor about the universities as holders of intellectual property.[439] McKenzie's conception of knowledge as a public good that must

[436] Peters, 5.
[437] Peters, 5.
[438] McKenzie, 'Collective Thought-Action', 324.
[439] What this line of argumentation leaves out is that it presupposes equal access to open digital sources to enable the digital sphere to disrupt the hoarding of knowledge by private firms and institutions (like universities). Events like the COVID-19 pandemic, however, have shown the immense inequality in access to digital knowledges, which makes this hope of the democratizing force of the digital idealistic at best.

be made accessible in order to be democratised thus differs from Peters' idea of knowledge, where immateriality and abstraction aid its status as public good.

Rather than accumulating physical capital, the knowledge economy is about creating intellectual capital, which means in this respect, too, information goods – which today are often digital – undermine the conventional logic of economic exchange. As digital information goods 'approximate pure thought or the ideational stage of knowledge'.[440] They also differ from traditional goods in multiple ways: digital goods can be copied and reproduced easily, and due to 'new forms of copying, archiving, and content creation have substantially lowered fixed costs'.[441] Similarly, they can be transported, broadcast, and shared at low cost and, like pure thought, are 'non-rivalrous' – meaning not depleted by use – and thus cannot be consumed.[442] Most importantly, however, '[i]nformation and knowledge goods typically have an experiential and participatory element that increasingly requires the active co-production of reader/writer, listener and viewer'.[443] This active co-production between writer and reader not only echoes similar participatory co-production between performance and spectator in performance contexts, it also points to broader shifts traced by theorists of the knowledge economy, who see the shift from Fordism to post-Fordism in terms of an effort to find more collective ways of knowledge production 'developed through the commons, and based on civic-aesthetics rather than market relations'.[444] Theorists such as Peter Murphy cite the commons-based approach of Wikipedia as exemplifying this idea of the civic-aesthetic. Here, it is important to note the somewhat idealistic oversimplification of these civic aesthetics as articulated by theorists of the knowledge economy. My analysis of the TED model has shown the ambiguous character of this civic-mindedness and its focus on the commoning of knowledge. While this might be the ideal in theory, a lot of the organisations and institutions, like TED, are using the promise of the commons to make profit or otherwise uphold stratified access to knowledge. One of the key questions this chapter asks is: are people like McKenzie, who wholly embrace this

[440] Peters, 'Introduction: Knowledge Goods, the Primacy of Ideas and the Economics of Abundance', 5.
[441] Peters, 6.
[442] Peters, 5.
[443] Peters, 6.
[444] Peter Murphy, 'Defining Knowledge Capitalism', in *Creativity and the Global Knowledge Economy*, ed. Michael A. Peters, Simon Marginson, and Peter Murphy (New York, NY: Peter Lang, 2009), 35.

idea of the commons, too naïve about this aspect when praising the civic purpose of smart media and lecture performances? I argue that in this commons-oriented mode of knowledge production McKenzie's civic-aesthetic intervention – in the form of the thought-action figures – assumes its most concrete and critically productive shape.

While at first glance it might seem strange to attribute to those digital goods, which 'approximate pure thought', the ability to break free from Platonic ideals, McKenzie's focus on digitality, not digitalisation, turns out to be a fitting frame with which to follow or analyse the circulation of digital goods in the knowledge economy. McKenzie argues that while digitalisation and the omnipresence of digital information goods have become a staple of everyday life, our critical capacities to read and treat those goods critically have not evolved to the same extent. Thus, the ways in which power-knowledges circulate in the open network has become obscured, and skills in digital literacy are necessary if we are to understand the processes by which the onto-historical apparatus of digitality displaces oral repertoires and literate archives within networked databases. McKenzie sees digital literacy as an extension of critical literacy and critical thinking that now also expands into critical design and critical artistic practice. His method for this re-education of the commons is the thought-action figures, which he describes as being 'to digitality what ideas are to literacy'.[445] Crucially, his idea of democratising knowledge about digitality is then not just about opening access to these transmedial knowledges but laying claim to what constitutes them as knowledge in the first place. For McKenzie, it is not what is circulated through digital media that needs democratising so much as the understanding of what structures, forms, and relations underpin it.

## What are Thought-Action Figures?

Or maybe, as McKenzie states, the better question would be: How do you make yourself a thought-action figure? He explains this using himself as an example in the lecture performance *Thought-Action Figures Episode 11: Kosmograms*. Showing a slide of an obscure figure, which looks a little like a Lego robot-rabbit in a spacesuit holding what could be a lightbulb balloon, McKenzie says:

[445] McKenzie, 'Collective Thought-Action', 329.

> This figure combines many things, such as the space shuttle disaster, a 19th-century gay scientist by the name of Rutherford, a sci-fi character by the name of Professor Challenger, whom Deleuze and Guattari make into another character that turns into a lobster, a 19th-century warship, and also Heidegger's 'challenging-forth' of the world, the entire world challenged-forth through technology. This is an alter ego of mine that I thought I had discovered but I've come to think it discovered me. And it's been taking me along for a ride. Now, kosmograms allows us to think about how to produce your own thought-action figure.[446]

McKenzie then goes on to take the audience through the kosmogram[447] (composed of the four discourses: history, family, profession, and pop culture) and encourages them to think through how these four categories intersect for them.[448] For him, for example, the space race and its significance for the Cold War was a defining historic trajectory in his life: 'This structured my whole approach for what it was to be an American and this battle between capitalism and communism structured my life'.[449] So, the idea is to look for these structuring elements within one's biography and look for patterns. In McKenzie's case, out of these patterns emerged the figure of what might be a Lego robot-rabbit in a spacesuit, or as he calls it 'Professor Challenger'. Naturally, McKenzie gains quite a few laughs for this punchline from the audience, and it might in fact seem that this 'explanation' of thought-action figures has made things more confusing than it has cleared anything up. But this ambiguity is intentional. Thought-action figures are meant to work against or counteract ideas, in that ideas are to be presented in a rational argument, can be neatly categorised, and remain the same over time. 'Unlike ideas, thought-action figures are dynamic and mediated rather than static and ideal', McKenzie states, but 'like ideas they are not limited to human figures.'[450] He lists '[a]nimals, plants, machines, systems, processes, materialities, symbols, concepts, and other abstract

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[446] Jon McKenzie and Aneta Stojnić, *Thought-Action Figures Episode 11: Kosmograms*, 12 November 2018, YouTube Video, 12 November 2018, 23:39 – 24:18, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=6QGpKzqbvl4.

[447] McKenzie and Stojnić explain during the lecture that they have chosen to spell kosmograms with a 'k' instead of a 'c' in reference to Herr and Frau K in Freud's case studies and Kafka's protagonist Joseph K as well as Kafka's autobiographical writings, all of which they see as representing an uneasiness and uncertainty of someone's multiple relations in the universe (35:40).

[448] Later on, in the lecture performance, McKenzie is keen to stress that kosmograms are merely one of many techniques of forming a thought-action figure, but as this particular performance focuses on these structures, I will concentrate on them in this chapter.

[449] McKenzie and Stojnić, *Episode 11: Kosmograms*, 24:45-24:53.

[450] McKenzie, 'Collective Thought-Action', 329.

entities' as being able to 'become thought-action figures via transmediation, movement through mediums deemed material, spiritual, cultural, historical, ontological, etc.'[451] And it is in this movement, vagueness, and fluidity that McKenzie sees their critical potential against the lasting legacy of Plato's division between idea and story at work.

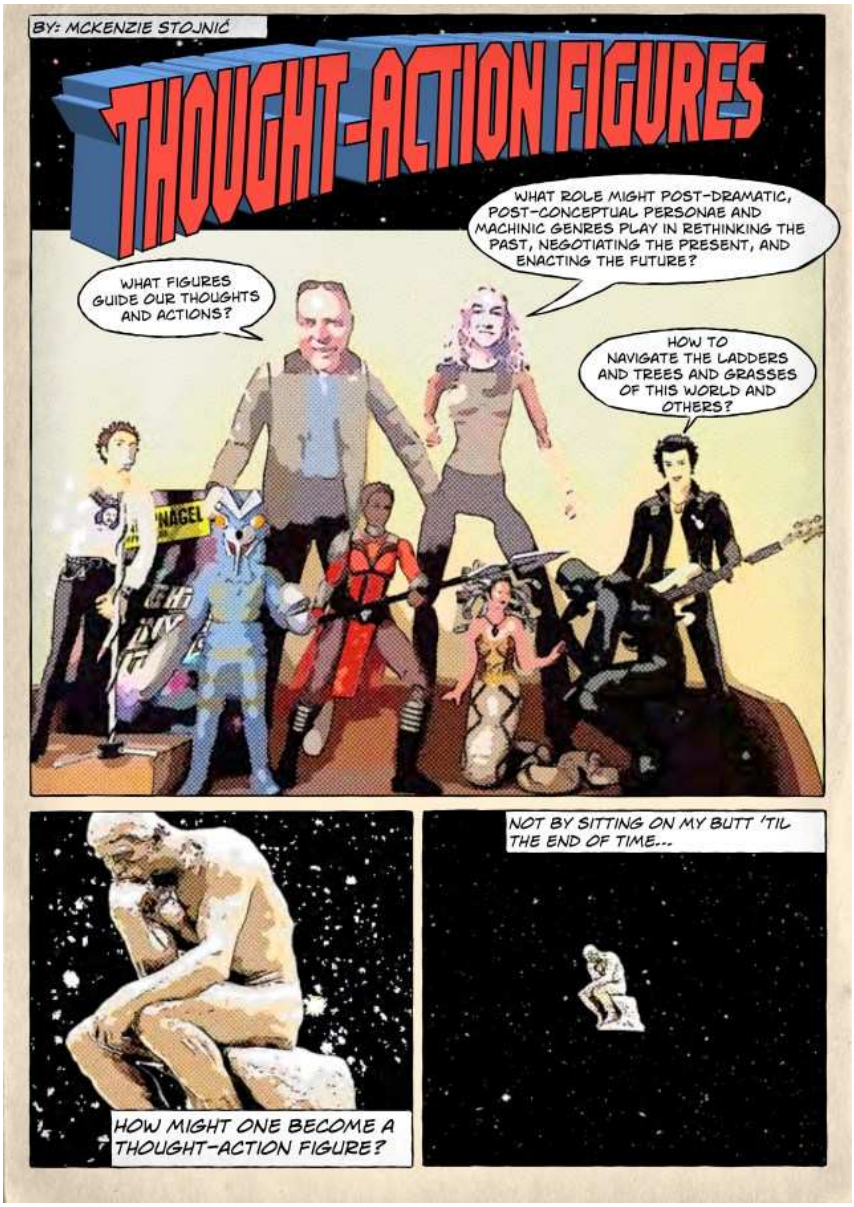



**Figure 20:** Title page of theory comic *Thought-Action-Figures*, which explains what thought-action figures are and how they are formed. (Taken from https://www.mckenziestojnic.org/)

McKenzie employs the thought-action figure – which is the methodological foundation of all smart media, be it lecture performance, rap essay, or theory comic – in two ways. The

[451] McKenzie, 329.

first is as a means of mounting criticism towards the Western (and Platonic) conception of knowledge. By mixing language and images or actions, personal (auto)biography and world events, disciplinary traditions and pop cultural references, he sees a chance to destabilise the ingrained opposition between specialised and common knowledge. This entails a specific critique of mastery, which is stuck in the boundaries of disciplinary thinking, and thus prevents true collaboration between different stakeholders. McKenzie asks:

> What is specialised knowledge if not mastery of a field of objects and set of methods, in our context, the objects and methods traditionally categorised as aesthetics, as art, art history, and philosophy? Is not mastery what separates *episteme* from *doxa*, knowledge from ideology, method from ritual, experts from amateurs, and academic conferences from mere conversations? Is not shared mastery what motivates the formation of academic societies and international congresses? Lecture performances, theory rap, and other forms of transmedia knowledge challenge the model of mastery by enabling elements of common knowledge to encounter specialised knowledge in new and provocative ways[452].

In short, smart media like the lecture performance, to McKenzie, are a way of breaking the power of the global lecture machine, stuck in old ideologies of mastery and disciplinarity. In their lecture performance McKenzie and Stojnić also critique the (performative) markers of mastery by using and echoing other lecture performances' strategies in disrupting the implicit hierarchies at work in the lecture, in this case by drawing specific attention to the lecturer's position at the lectern, which is one of the performative markers of the speaker's authority. Their first method of drawing attention to the expected performance at the lectern and the position of power this conveys is an ironic nod to Robert Morris's *21.3* from 1964. This performance is often cited as one of the earliest examples of a lecture performance[453] and involved Morris 'silently lip-synching to his own recording of the first chapter of Erwin Panofsky's well-known essay' on iconology.[454] During his performance, Morris drew attention to the otherwise silent repertoire of the lecturer's gestures and facial expression. He folded his arms, adjusted

[452] McKenzie, 325–26, emphasis in original.
[453] See, for example, Frank, 'When Form Starts Talking'; Firunts, 'Staging Professionalization'.
[454] Frank, 'When Form Starts Talking', 6.

his glasses, had a sip of water, but subverted the situation by desynchronising these movements with the recorded lecture. Morris's critique, according to Rike Frank, lay in his 'self-conscious use of performance as an analytical device that, by means of displacement and deferral, unsettles the "order of things", such as the relationship between the document and the work, between presentation and mediation'.[455] McKenzie, too, unsettled the 'order of things' and echoed Morris's performance by lip-synching through a pre-recorded section of his own lecture. As opposed to Morris, however, he 'unveiled' the fact that he has not been talking 'live' by leaving the lectern and walking to the other side of the room before returning to the lectern and resuming the lip-synching, suggesting even less deference for the position of the lecturer. Prior to that Stojnić had already marked the unexamined authority of the position of the lecturer behind a lectern by subtly decentring McKenzie's place there. As he talked, she walked in front of the lectern, stopping to examine its top and sides and eventually 'shooing' him away from behind it, before choosing a sofa at the back of the stage as her own vantage point for the delivery of the next section of their talk. In fact, during their entire performance she never delivers any of her sections at the lectern, thus marking this position as a historically white male space. McKenzie also increasingly abandons the position of the lecturer behind the lectern by first turning it around and sitting in it like an armchair, feet dangling playfully in the air, and later completely vacating the position by pushing it to the side when the lecture performance ends in a communal dance party.

[455] Frank, 7.

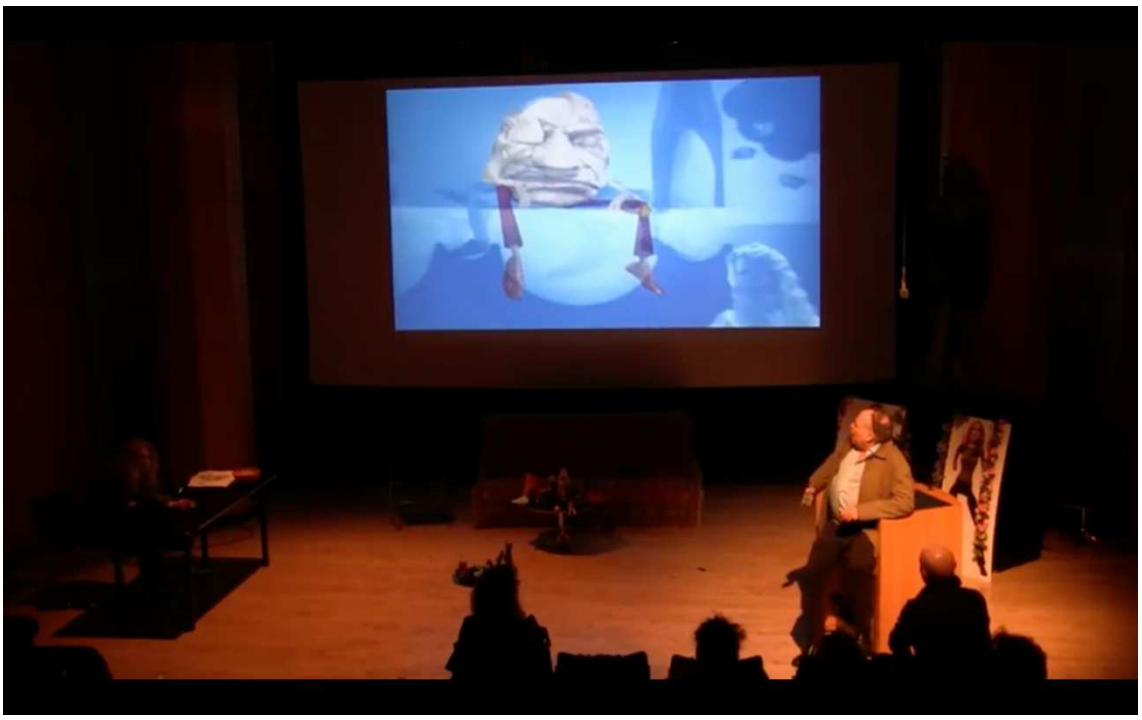


Figure 21: Jon McKenzie using the lectern as an armchair, while contemplating his representation of the Dogon egg in *Thought-Action Figures Episode 11: Kosmograms*, lecture performance by him and Aneta Stojnić performed at the 'Performing Knowledge' conference at the Segal Center (The Graduate Center, City University of New York), 11 October 2018.

All of these instances are examples of the process of mediation (or, as McKenzie would say, transmediation) typical for the repertoire of the lecture performance. Through concrete actions, the performative strategies underlying a specific knowledge performance are unveiled and critiqued. Here, it is important to note, as McKenzie does, that in principle 'all lectures have this performative dimension and transmedia potential, though typically we reduce the performing body to reading written texts whose contingencies remain hidden behind method and mastery. We don't touch the frame or call attention to the cage'.[456] In the case of the lecture, the performance of ideation and episteme demands a certain stillness and adherence to a practiced dramaturgy and stage design, which McKenzie and Stojnić's performance playfully dismantled by drawing attention to its frame and historical context. By critiquing, and ultimately overcoming, the mastery of the lectern, McKenzie and Stojnić tried to performatively reverse the separation between thought and action, embodied in their conception of the thought-action figure.

[456] McKenzie, 'Collective Thought-Action', 331.

## Thought-Action Figures as Relational and Interdependent

Thus, the process of (trans)mediation at the heart of smart media offers a way of bridging thought and action through modes of figuration: 'Through transmediation, knowledge is dynamically acted out, as truth is not simply a report on the world for specialists but also an event in the world, a world with multiple stakeholders'.[457] It is of course no coincidence that this process where knowledge is reported and simultaneously acted out is also the conceptual focal point for many contemporary lecture performances (including McKenzie and Stojnić's own performance). What McKenzie's formulation makes clear is that these dramaturgical changes of embedding performative strategies within the lecture and report are not done merely to increase their entertainment value and add some lighter moments for the audience. Rather, they are part of a wish to rectify a longstanding imbalance and reverse the exclusion of common knowledge from the academic realm. The hope is that this will not only lead to more engaging presentation formats but encourage 'stakeholders' who might have been previously excluded to take ownership of these smart media practices and the knowledges they entail. The underlying critique of the Platonic binary thus conceptualises knowledge as something that encompasses both dialectics and mimesis, which in turn opens up possibilities for wider engagement and participation with different modes of knowing.

One example of this doubling of reporting and acting out in McKenzie and Stojnić's lecture performance can be seen in the way they illustrate the relational ontology of the thought-action figure. Here, they mobilise Sigmund Freud's concept of displacement (as the process by which one idea might surrender to another) and transfer it onto their thought-action figures. Stojnić explains the relational dimensions of the thought-action figure:

> By the process of displacement one thought-action figure may surrender to another […]. By the process of condensation, it may appropriate […] several other thought-action figures. Thought-Action Figures, they are always created in relation, and these relations are always multiple, fluid, networked, and always, always in motion. They are always performing each other and transforming into another.[458]

[457] McKenzie, 328.
[458] McKenzie and Stojnić, *Episode 11: Kosmograms*, 28:54 – 29:33.

As she speaks, this idea of condensation and displacement is represented in the fluid relationships the performers construct between the objects and ideas in the room. Stojnić talks to the audience while sitting on a chair, next to a couch, which is also echoed in a projection of a couch on the screen at the back of the stage. McKenzie is lying down on the couch during this explanation. The couch is thus present in multiple ways at this point: physically as a piece of stage design, visually in the image of the projection, and through McKenzie's body who is demonstrating the object's relationship to the body. Stojnić sitting next to someone lying on the couch while talking about Freud also immediately opens a narrative frame transmitting the stereotypical image of analyst and their analysand. Stojnić then goes on to evoke the couch verbally, while the projection changes from the couch to the photograph of a word-processing software with the shadow of a reclining woman in its bottom-right corner:

> Last night I had a dream and in this dream the couch was a large machine. The couch as a thought-action figure that enabled unknown depth of psyche and generated kosmograms. The analyst here appears as a proper thought-action figure, too, because she will become anything and everything, anyone and everyone in the transference that occurs in the room.[459]

Not only is the couch as the thought-action figure activated via multiple sign systems at this point in the performance, thus layering speech and action, but Stojnić also shows how this layering in turn creates new thought, actions, and thought-action figures (in this case the analyst), which exist in chains of endless association and transferal. The point is not to strive for fixed meaning but to follow the flight of meaning along unexpected paths, which the doubling (or tripling) of sign systems from linguistics to visual projection to performance can break open. While McKenzie sits up from the couch and begins playing with various toys and action figures assembled on the table in front of the couch, Stojnić concludes:

[459] McKenzie and Stojnić, 29:37-30:20.

> Psychoanalysis is in fact a form of reclining thinking, or maybe better reclining thinking together as a way to access the unknown dance of psyche and to make sense of the cosmos, while it flows through you.[460]

The connection of the very inner (psyche) and the very outer (cosmos) here seems deliberate again in its repetition of the rhetorical move at the basis of this performance that tries to construct and then tear down binaries of thought/action, idea/image, language/body, interior/exterior, and private/public.[461] The images they conjure to make this point ('reclining thinking', or elsewhere, 'thinking while walking') are then doubled in the different frames of the performance to point out their interrelations and verbal, physical, or visual associations. The lecture performance's tactic of telling and showing (or reporting and acting out as McKenzie calls it) is utilised to illustrate thought and think action further.

## Thought-Action Figures as Critical Digitality

For McKenzie and Stojnić thought-action figures can help us navigate our digital lives, where distinctions of private and public and cognitive and embodied are increasingly more difficult to ascertain because of both the everyday social practices in digital spaces and the legal logics of digital platforms and companies that use personal data for profit. Thought-action figures then become vehicles to critically engage with the consequences of this digitality. McKenzie's second purpose for the thought-action figures is to generate digital literacy and foster critical digitality, which McKenzie stresses is not an academic pursuit but increasingly a neglected but necessary everyday skill. In his TEDx talk delivered

[460] McKenzie and Stojnić, 30:21-30:37.

[461] In referring to dreams, psychoanalysis, practice, and rhizomatic flows, McKenzie and Stojnić clearly harness modes of schizoanalysis in their conception of thought-action figures. According to Deleuze and Guattari, schizoanalysis aims to expand psychoanalysis by showing how libidinal investments and desires are shaped by political and economic context. (See Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari, *Anti-Oedipus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia* (London: Bloomsbury Academic, 2004), 105.) While it goes beyond the scope of this PhD to examine how psycho- and schizoanalysists understand the relationship between knowledge and the unconscious or knowledge and desire respectively, it is telling that McKenzie and Stojnić draw on this established school of thought, which holds that inner life (the unconscious or desire) needs to be externalised (spoken about, acted out, etc.) to be made legible. (For more in-depth studies on psycho- and schizoanalysis and knowledge, see Eugene B. Brody, *Psychoanalytic Knowledge*, Psychoanalytic Knowledge (Madison, CT, US: International Universities Press, Inc, 1990); Mark Schmitt, 'Dysfunctional Capitalism: Mental Illness, Schizoanalysis and the Epistemology of the Negative in Contemporary Cultural Studies', *Psychoanalysis, Culture & Society* 22, no. 3 (1 September 2017): 298–316.)

at the University of Wisconsin-Madison in 2016, he stresses the need to develop strategies of reading contemporary (digital) design and the ways these aesthetic politics construct and circulate knowledge.[462] Commenting that '[w]hile artists make art, designers make everything else, from iPhone apps to kitchen appliances to the undergraduate experience',[463] McKenzie emphasises the civic need for a critical engagement with the aesthetic manifestations of knowledge-based capitalism. Here we see a concentrated attempt to mobilise the smart media as a critical intervention into the logics of platform capitalism, which draws power from the fact that its modes of operation –algorithms – as well as financial set-ups are obscure and our modes of interaction with those platforms not sufficiently scrutinised.[464] By turning attention to their design and the forms of interaction this design dictates, McKenzie proposes a practical approach with which to endorse a more critical engagement with the 'hegemonic platforms'.[465] This he sees as particularly relevant in the realm of design, where secondary and higher education have not kept up with new developments and thus are unable to provide students with a critical perspective towards this aesthetic expression of how power-knowledge operates in today's world. He laments that especially in the humanities, design has 'historically been marginalised, if not excluded'[466] and proposes a reform to general university education in the US that seeks to elevate such shortcomings:

> Could we imagine general education requirements in critical design and transmedia aesthetics analogous to critical thinking and first-year writing courses (which in the US are the only required courses for virtually all college students, such is the power of the literate lecture machine)?[467]

[462] Jon McKenzie, *DesignLab & The Democratization of Digitality*, 8 December 2016, TEDx Talk, TEDx University of Madison, Wisconsin, 8 December 2016, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=YmYgTy2VkBU.
[463] McKenzie, 'Collective Thought-Action', 335.
[464] See Gilbert and Williams, *Hegemony Now*.
[465] Gilbert and Williams, 171.
[466] McKenzie, 'Collective Thought-Action', 335.
[467] McKenzie, 335.

Seeing the lecture machine's power expressed in mandatory writing classes again speaks to the scepticism with which McKenzie encounters educational programmes that only focus on what he views as one-sided knowledge production.

It is notable that while McKenzie's TEDx talk makes very similar points to McKenzie and Stojnić's lecture performance, his mode of delivery here is very different from the lecture performance. There are no couches, props, or turned-around lecterns. Instead, McKenzie follows TED's modus operandi. He delivers his talk in casual clothing using conventional slides and 'we'-messages. The talk showcases the work of DesignLab more from a managerial perspective, pointing out aspects of the project that might appeal to university administrators, like labelling it a 'cross-campus initiative', able to engage in 'consultancy'. There are no mentions of thought-action figures and their conceptual grounding in psychoanalysis, and his hope that these figures might reshape existing knowledge hierarchies. Instead, the project's clear useability (critical digitality as an everyday skill) is stressed, as well as how it might aid the university's brand building and thus be made profitable.

In their lecture performance, McKenzie and Stojnić point to this form of critical digitality in passing. In reference to Deleuze and Guattari's 'body without organs', which in itself had become somewhat of a popular metaphor for life in the digital sphere (a supposedly bodyless realm), McKenzie notes that this represents a state of existence marked by 'unrealised potential'. Again, the performance produces a parallel between what is said and how it is acted out. While McKenzie talks about the organ-less body, the lights are dimmed to the point where his voice becomes a bodyless voice speaking from darkness. Visually, his body has been made to disappear, and the sense of floating is enhanced by a projected image of a star constellation and atmospheric music playing from the speakers. Rather than romanticising this state of unbodied potential, however, McKenzie invites the audience to think critically about such an assertion by scrutinising Deleuze and Guattari's inspiration for this image: the Dogon egg, a since-disproven anthropological discovery of a primordial cosmology. By drawing attention to a problematic aspect of one of the myths of the digital (as the bodyless existence) McKenzie not only criticises the primacy of disciplinary knowledge (in this case anthropology) within the lecture machine, but also points to the transmedia aesthetics

(between anthropological discovery and a philosophy that uses this discovery as metaphor) that he wants to see more critically reflected.

A more direct reference to the design of the digital and the lack of critical engagement with the form comes when McKenzie and Stojnić trace popular thought-action figures of the twentieth century. Alongside the rhizome and the double helix (which 'changed the way we think about life itself and give us the model for recombinant creativity'[468]), they also mention the Apple computer desktop, and directly reference the behavioural, cultural, and organisational change this innovation in design has created. McKenzie notes, '[b]ureaucracy means rule by desktop, and what's happened [is] we've gone from the old analogue to the new digital desktop bureaucracy'.[469] Here, the implication is that this piece of design is structuring life in unremarked-upon ways, which leads to blind compliance instead of critical use. This is where the line between design and branding becomes blurry, as it cultivates certain consumerist mentalities and behaviours, which McKenzie imagines a critical engagement with these everyday thought-action figures can challenge. The unspoken invitation is that once identified, the thought-action figure of digital life is something that needs to be performatively and mimetically explored but also can be copied or extrapolated as an alternative mode of organising thought. A critical engagement with these digital design practices would mean that the scepticism with which they are encountered in art/performance would ideally extend to one's engagement with the use of design in everyday life. This is an instance of transmedial digitality McKenzie would like to see activated more commonly in (arts and humanities) teaching.

## Thought-Action Figures and Transdisciplinarity

Another consequence of the Western conception and organisation of knowledge McKenzie and Stojnić problematise is the strict disciplinarity of the contemporary university. To McKenzie this is not just a practical issue that begs reorganisation for better

[468] McKenzie and Stojnić, *Episode 11: Kosmograms*, 42:48-42.53.
[469] McKenzie and Stojnić, 42:54-43.16. In this context, Performances like Lola Arias's My Documents series seem only an extension of this particular thought-action figure. Named after the documents folder on a digital desktop the organisational logic of the personal computer has inscribed itself into the logic of the performance event.

efficiency and working practices; it reflects the expression of elitist and outdated modes of knowledge production that concentrate power in the hands of the few:

> [T]he aesthetic dimension poses a daunting challenge in large part due to specialisation: the aesthetics of writing, visual culture, music, dance, and theatre all remain separated not only from the sciences, social sciences, and professions; they are also separated from one another, divided into different fields overseen by different masters. For those committed to social change, to connecting specialised knowledge with common knowledge and merging art with life, siloed aesthetics makes for siloed activism and siloed worlds.[470]

In their lecture performance, McKenzie and Stojnić give many examples of trying to bridge the siloed nature of disciplines. They take classical philosophy, psychoanalysis, critical theory, and certain mathematical structures and mix them, more than a little eclectically, with alternative cosmologies, pop cultural myths, and a pseudo-therapeutical frame that sometimes is more reminiscent of the personality tests in beauty magazines than what would be recognised under the disciplinary frame of psychology. In the case of the Dogon egg, even debunked theories make it into their lecture. McKenzie wriggles out of the incorporation of methodologically fraught anthropology by evoking what he calls 'willed error', by which he means the assumption that 'no matter how silly a myth or a science or a religion might be doesn't mean it can't produce truth'.[471] While this might narratively be an elegant way of drawing on a theory that while scientifically disproven can still serve a metaphorical function, the invocation of 'truth' is, of course, not unproblematic in the context of trying to elevate other ways of knowing and grant them the legitimacy of the academic institutional frame. But here perhaps lies one of the misconceptions or paradoxes of McKenzie's overall project of transmedia knowledge. In trying to decentre mastery and blur the boundaries between specialist and common knowledge, McKenzie risks a crisis of legitimacy and potentially opens up a dangerous form of equivocation between these ways of knowing, which conflates common knowledge with disproven facts. While McKenzie never suggests that his goal is to elevate common knowledge to the level of legitimacy of specialist academic knowledge (he mainly seeks to blur the boundaries between them, suggesting that they can meet

[470] McKenzie, 'Collective Thought-Action', 336.
[471] McKenzie and Stojnić, *Episode 11: Kosmograms*, 37:58-38:10.

somewhere in the middle), the fact that these performance and digital initiatives take place in the context of various university departments does invite the question of whether he is opening up these institutions to other, and maybe more dangerous, forms of de-specialising knowledge, such as conspiracy theories, populist polemics, and opinion masquerading as fact. McKenzie stresses that myths like the Dogon egg carry their own 'truth'. However, what goes unremarked in McKenzie's writing and in the lecture performance are the institutional and political consequences (unintended or not) of having these forms of popular or common knowledges that enter into the realm of the university. While a little less reverence (which might produce paralysis and feelings of inadequacy for those on the outside) for episteme, and less scepticism from the side of academia towards popular performance formats, is surely a good intention, McKenzie and Stojnić's own performance shows some of the practical difficulties and political dangers of trying to dismantle such well-established boundaries between common and specialised knowledges.



Figure 22: Jon McKenzie demonstrating the thought-action figure of the Guerrilla Girls in *Thought-Action Figures Episode 11: Kosmograms*, lecture performance by him and Aneta Stojnić performed at the 'Performing Knowledge' conference at the Segal Center (The Graduate Center, City University of New York), 11 October 2018.

But maybe this was not their point at all. For the moment, let's give them the benefit of the doubt, and assume that it was not their intention to pave the way for conspiracy theorists and populists to undermine the legitimacy of the university, and instead focus on how McKenzie and Stojnić themselves cast doubt on the ways they are mobilising this eclectic mix of theories and histories of thought. The performance is without doubt very silly. In fact, the two performers seem to revel in the silliness of some of the associative connections they are making. There's a particularly bizarre moment when McKenzie puts a Guerrilla Girls tote bag showing the group's iconic gorilla mask on his head in an attempt to emulate wearing the mask himself and starts throwing saltwater taffies into the audience.[472] The Guerrilla Girls had previously been identified as another thought-action figure, which combines art, activism, and guerrilla warfare, and the taffy is a gag because thought-action figures abbreviate to TAF and this is the kind of lateral, unfixed thinking they are encouraging throughout the performance. They also carry over this quintessential silliness of the performance when they get to the climax of the evening: the point where they invite the audience to use the kosmograms to create their own thought-action figure alter egos. In the tone of motivational speakers at multilevel marketing annual meetings, they entice the audience to participate in their exercise. However, the tone quickly shifts when McKenzie threatens: 'I wrote a book called *Perform or Else*, so I don't want to put you under any pressure… we are going to spend one minute doing this'[473] and then screams 'five, four, three, two, one!' as a countdown musical sound effect with a ticking clock starts playing. In 15-second segments, they take turns talking the audience through the four sections of the kosmogram.

McKenzie: What you want to do is start with profession: is there a figure in your profession that you are either drawn to or perhaps repelled from? In my case it was Laurie Anderson, but you may have different figures.

Stojnić: Next is the history section. This relates to your personal history or a historical figure that has influenced you very much. It could be your own community or communal practices you are involved with or anything really, even some kind of a cultural thing.

[472] McKenzie and Stojnić, 43:46.
[473] McKenzie and Stojnić, 39:44-37.

McKenzie: For family, what you want to draw upon is think of some incident, a crazy uncle, a crazy aunt or maybe just some sort of incident happening in your psychic life. This is the realm of psychoanalysis.

Stojnić: Pop culture! All those guilty pleasures. All those action figures. All those heroes, superheroes. All those things that you maybe really rather wouldn't have out there but they are part of you.

McKenzie: THAT'S DONE. TIME! We are going to stop now. And remember this is to find your own thought-action figures. So, start doing it. Start having revelations, ladies and gentlemen.[474]

Their hyper-excited speech paired with the gameshow format is highly exaggerated and overperformed, making it clear that the exercise of finding one's thought-action figure is not meant as some sort of personal journey to self-discovery in the sense of many pseudo-scientific or alternative healing processes, but rather is a proposal for a more fluid relationship between the academic realm and its pop cultural resonances. It is a call to the academic community to take ourselves less seriously. This performance is a playful invitation to those inside academia to change the way they perform their knowledge, which will in turn change what gets conceptualised as knowledge as well. Rather than an elevation of common (and thus potentially 'dodgy') knowledges this is a call to humble oneself, work against epistemic exclusions, and revel in the messiness of the transdisciplinary. It is also true, however, that such a call to be less serious needs a certain amount of social and cultural capital within academia to be believable and register as 'serious scholarship' not outlandish ideas. This is one of the moments in the performance where the symbolic capital McKenzie holds within the realm of performance studies (as a scholar who contributed significantly to the founding of the field) goes unremarked. The irony is that he is drawing on the very status and process of legitimation, which this idea of transdisciplinarity seeks to dismantle.

This 'insider'-dramaturgy is once again performatively underlined in the next section, after the performers have taken the audience through the exercise. When asked if anyone has a newly created thought-action figure to share, a person in the audience (who just happens to be the organiser of the event) raises his hand and says: 'I am a

[474] McKenzie and Stojnić, 39:50-41:07.

plant'. The immediate projection of a houseplant on the back wall reveals the scriptedness of this moment, which is of course another mode of doubling, as the figure evoked here is the plant both as a biological organism and theatrical strategy of 'planting' knowing participants in an audience to control the modes of audience interaction and generate a planned effect. By staging 'the insider' of the performance as an audience plant, the performance reveals its tongue-in-cheek character and underlines performative strategies, which in this case deliberately overwrite the 'ideas' presented in it. The performative dimension takes over to the point where it decentres and ultimately undermines the theoretical ideas presented. While the rest of the performance doubled telling and showing, here it takes a clear departure from this doubling. By foregrounding the performance of the plant, they forego the possibility of showing that their 'scientifically' devised method (the kosmogram) works, which purposefully disqualifies their own presentation as 'research'. 'A plant! Ladies and Gentlemen, a plant!'[475] McKenzie and Stojnić cheer and clap, and McKenzie exclaims, 'It works? The method works',[476] reaping laughs from the audience. By setting up the audience member as a plant, McKenzie and Stojnić opt for theatrics rather than Plato's dialectics or scientific method. This is a relief considering their somewhat questionable theory, as it precludes the opportunity for their performance to be read as an endorsement of unfounded pseudo-science, but, through this separation of theatrics and method, they have indeed resurrected the binary between mimesis and rationality they have worked the entire performance to dismantle. What's more, this 'inside jokes' reaffirms the institutionality of the context in which it becomes salient for an audience, thus gesturing to the very disciplinary boundaries the performance seeks to undo.

## From Thought-Action Figures as Single Figures to Collective Action

One of the main tenets of McKenzie's pedagogy of the thought-action figures is the goal to translate the work of transmediation and transdisciplinarity into collective action no longer siloed by discipline or Platonic division. He sees the smart media emerging from

[475] McKenzie and Stojnić, 42:18.
[476] McKenzie and Stojnić, 42:23.

the thought-action figures as a way of connecting research, art, activism, and community organising:

> Connecting collective thinking and social change scales up thought-action into *collective thought-action*, transmedia figurations that scale up thinking and making into shared experiences and collaborative platforms. Collective thought-action moves across disciplinary fields and social institutions and potentially transform [sic] them.[477]

McKenzie gives the example of the Art for Transformation collective as a group that combines transdisciplinary and transmedia thinking into collective action. The group notes that, until recently, 'the pinnacle of good thinking and smart action was to dissect a problem with thinly sliced disciplinary thinking […]. We wanted the best perspective, an efficient and effective solution, and one truth'.[478] This narrow disciplinary focus and conception of one unobjectionable truth is no longer tenable to them; instead they see the solution in 'seeking out diverse perspectives and entertaining all relevant data, information, ideas, and truths at the same time'.[479] (This, according to McKenzie, results not just in an open and dynamic transmedial exchange 'irreducible to any one medium or discipline but emerging through the interactions of different media, stakeholders, and values'.)[480] In this sense, the knowledge created through smart media can operate as participatory research and even 'civil discourse',[481] again echoing the civic-aesthetic of the knowledge commons evoked by Murphy and other theorists of the knowledge economy. The connection between these aesthetic practices and their civic dimension, then, is not a random by-product of the change in knowledge presentation, but, at least to McKenzie, a purposeful and targeted consequence of the de-centring of the legacies of platonic knowledge divisions. The overarching goal is a 'generalised aesthetic' that not only democratises the means to aesthetic and intellectual production but frees artistic production from the realm of the idea and anchors it firmly in the realm of action, which ultimately has far-reaching consequences:

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[477] McKenzie, 'Collective Thought-Action', 336, emphasis in original.
[478] McKenzie, 337.
[479] McKenzie, 337.
[480] McKenzie, 337.
[481] McKenzie, 337.

> Collective thought-action produced through cultural organising and collaborative data analytics offers one path for dis/engaging the microperformative circuits of post-disciplinary society. […] The Art of Transformation thus heralds both generalized aesthetics (*everyone an aesthetician*) alongside generalized data analysis (*everyone a data analyst*). To succeed, it is not enough to create data and media. [Art for Transformation] writes that 'the software and cultural organizing practices must attend to creating sacred, safe, and brave spaces, clarifying values and principles, and developing practices to support multiple perspectives and deliberation.' A post-disciplinary, post-Platonic aesthetics can help create such sacred, safe, and brave spaces, possible worlds where collective thought-action unfolds across multiple fields, institutions, and lifeworlds.[482]

While the lecture performance *Thought-Action Figures Episode 11: Kosmograms* does not get quite as far as engaging everyone in acts of data analysis, it does end with an open invitation to the audience to shape the aesthetic appearance of the performance. McKenzie and Stojnić opt to invite everyone for a dance: 'We thought that this part of the performance could be where we ask you to get up, quit being seated thought-action figures (or rather just thoughts) and join us in a dance'.[483] As McKenzie and Stojnić begin by dancing with each other, more and more audience members join them, either also in couples or in small groups. The stage fills up quite quickly with dancing bodies, chatter, and laughter, as well as more intimate gestures, such as hugs and kisses. Everyone dances to Peggy Lee's 'Is that all there is?', the performers once again opting for the tongue-in-cheek double meaning, as the song's affected disappointment and nihilism is in this context at least partially a comment on the decision to simply end this performance in a dance instead of offering any concluding remarks or a summary of the main points. Instead, they make the decision to – quite literally – open the floor up to the group, acknowledging the audience's participation in the performance overall, and shifting at least some of the responsibility of how it ends to them. While this might not yet be the far-reaching and life-changing collective thought-action McKenzie imagines in his writing, the post-(and also pre-)Platonic aesthetic of communal dancing brings a touching and harmonious close, which is still relatively rarely seen in the context of an academic research presentation.

[482] McKenzie, 337–38, emphasis in original.
[483] McKenzie and Stojnić, *Episode 11: Kosmograms*, 44:35-44: 48.

My analysis has shown that this performance is designed to give insight into a pedagogical project intended to foster critical digitality on the one hand and an understanding of pedagogy that makes access to specialised knowledge more accessible on the other. It is important to note that, to a certain extent, McKenzie uses both the lecture and the lecture performance as metaphorical stand-ins for his thinking. The lecture stands for the traditional interface between teachers and students and for the logocentric pedagogies that this represents. Questioning not only the mode of this interaction but also the utility and reality of the lecture as such an interface (again the COVID-19 pandemic with its shifts towards digitised education accelerated this line of argument), he positions the lecture performance and other smart media as pedagogies that seek to interrupt this traditional interface and its commitment to older logocentric knowledges (aka the global lecture machine).

These new forms of smart media are conceived of as working against logocentrism, bringing together different people and stakeholders, and silencing the lecturer as the one holding more power than other contributors. In McKenzie and Stojnić's case this silencing is done quite literally with the introduction of the dance party at the end of their performance. However, there is a limit to the metonymic move contained in this pivoting of the lecture performance against the lecture. While the invitation to dance is framed as a moment for action, for participation, it is in actuality little more than a performance effect, which manipulates the audience to enact the point the performance was always going to make. This is an important caveat, as it calls into question the liberatory function McKenzie and Stojnić assign to techniques such as the lecture performance, and one that I argue is a consequence of their ahistorical reading of the current university. In their striving for a knowledge commons (away from just logocentric understandings of knowledge), McKenzie and Stojnić instrumentalise lecture performance against the reclusion of the scholar in the university (which they feel is out of touch) and against the tendency to shield and keep knowledge behind university walls and firewalls. McKenzie tries to dissolve the tension between inside and outside the university without acknowledging the historical circumstances of privatisation and marketisation that have created this hierarchal structure in the first place. When the university – and the knowledge produced within it – are no longer public goods but private assets that allow private entities and nations to compete with each other through

rankings and excellence schemes, this 'making permeable of the university walls' becomes hypocritical.

Within the global knowledge economy, the differentiation between inside and outside is both reinforced (through privatisation, rising fees, and exclusive access) and dissolved as the university becomes increasingly like other actors in the knowledge-driven economy. The contemporary logics of knowledge management (via debt and audit) dictate these patterns of 'collaborative' work, which, as Peters and Murphy have shown, already extend beyond creative or academic institutions. McKenzie and Stojnić's failure to acknowledge these realities perpetuates a narrative of 'public humanities', which brings supposedly inaccessible knowledges to various publics without acknowledging the university's complicity in making the humanities 'unpublic' in the first place. DesignLab and smart media are as such a band-aid for a self-created problem (inside and outside the university) but do little to confront the bigger problems of privatisation and commodification of knowledge. In fact, they might actually be perpetuating them, as their idea of knowledge, while on the surface positioned against the skill-based limitations of neoliberal knowledge, is in their own performance unmasked as an inside joke, which endlessly plays with chains of signifiers (e.g., plant as living organism and plant as pre-selected audience member) to avoid making clear statements. While this might be seen as a strategy to elude attempts to make the thought-action figures epistemologically productive and thus as a strategy to escape applicability, the way in which smart media reward innovation and implementation of popular aesthetics points towards the underlying entrepreneurial logics of the form. Lecture performances like this claim to trick or undermine the politics of the knowledge economy without acknowledging their own complicity in a system that profits from exclusive access to knowledge, which also calls into question their call for the democratisation of knowledge more broadly.

This is indicative of a larger performative contradiction also at play in this lecture performance, which is produced by the very distinction between common and specialised knowledge that it challenges. McKenzie's social and cultural capital here extends him the epistemological privilege of defining what counts and does not count as specialist and non-specialist knowledge. This does not necessarily do away with the distinction between the inside and outside of the academic 'ivory tower'; in fact, it reinforces this structure.

Who gets to decide what constitutes 'common knowledge' and what is to be included within it? As soon as you ask this question, of course, then the answers reimpose the very structure that McKenzie seeks to avoid, i.e., the 'mastery' of the common.

Both chapters in Part 2 of this thesis have traced the fluid and para-institutional connections between higher education and other actors within the knowledge economy. My analysis of the different performance practices has shown how the lecture performance straddles the relationship between the 'inside' and 'outside' of the academy, and how the lecture performance is mobilised to navigate, blur, or tear down that distinction. In the case of TED talks this is done via the formulaic yet personalised style of the talks, McKenzie and Stojnić pursue a pop-pedagogy, which aims to dissolve the distance between pop culture and specialised knowledge. In both bases, however, the dramaturgies and aesthetic assumptions of those performances rely on or even reinscribe the very division they claim to overcome. TED relies on a performative distinction between its presentation of expertise and overly academic model, which it rejects. McKenzie and Stojnić claim to elevate or legitimatise knowledges previously unable to enter the academic realm but do so while blurring the boundaries between legitimate and non-legitimate knowledge. Their lecture performance, for example, incorporates debunked scientific theories, because McKenzie feels they can still offer some 'metaphorical truth' without considering the united consequences such an inclusion might generate. Both case studies try to shake up what they perceive as tired presentation formats in the hope of disseminating knowledge more widely but ignore the material circumstances – of privatisation and precarisation – which limit access to higher education.

The question of what counts as legitimate research techniques, knowledges, and reconstructions of the truth is also what motivates the final two chapters of this thesis. Taking my cue from the binary between different forms of knowledge exposed, mobilised, and deconstructed by McKenzie and Stojnić, I turn towards the lecture performance as a mode of research and knowledge production. Situating my analysis in methods of performance research, I ask what the lecture performance (and its contemporary iterations within performance research) can bring to the discussion of historic and contemporary gaps in knowledge perpetuated by epistemic and physical violences (of coloniality, empire, and fascism). Here, too, the question of how knowledges

and experiences outside of logocentric epistemologies can be recognised and made comprehensible is crucial. My analysis suggests that the lecture performance's focus on relationality and self-reflexivity means that it can succeed at negotiating, critiquing, and, at times, interrupting the logics of the global knowledge economy.

# PART 3: THE LECTURE PERFORMANCE, REENACTMENTS, AND KNOWLEDGE DIVERSIFICATION

My analysis of Jon McKenzie's and Aneta Stojnić's smart media project and its wider implications for pedagogies in higher education in Chapter 4 has shown some of the pitfalls of widening access to knowledge in a climate of marketised education. Thinkers like McKenzie as well as theorists of the knowledge economy have shown that questions of democratic access to knowledge poses a problem – both financially (where high university fees are prohibitive) and conceptually (where the only things legitimated as knowledge are seen as too abstract and distant to bridge understandings for a wider public). However, critics of these access-widening initiatives have pointed out that focusing on accessibility alone is not enough to respond to the growing pressures of knowledge commodification and marketisation. Intermediary methods of broadening academic access via mediations of popular culture as in McKenzie's smart media or via charismatic forms of presentation, as in the case of the TED talk, can be seen as responding to these challenges. But for scholars that study the epistemic violences imposed by the disciplinary regimes of the Global North (of which institutions like universities are part) these methods do not go far enough. In his 2014 book *Epistemologies of the South*, Boaventura de Sousa Santos, for example, critiques the problems with access. The book's main intervention can be summarised as emphasising the understanding that there '*is no global social justice without global cognitive justice*'.[484] And he sees this struggle impeded if it only focuses on access and distribution: '*The*

[484] Boaventura De Sousa Santos, *Epistemologies of the South: Justice Against Epistemicide* (London and New York, NY: Routledge, 2014), 207, emphasis in original. Please note: In April 2023 – two weeks after this PhD was submitted – three researchers, Lieselotte Viaene, Catarina Laranjeiro, and Miye Nadya Tom accused Boaventura de Sousa Santos, then emeritus director of the Center for Social Studies (CES) at the University of Coimbra, of sexual and moral harassment, including sexual assault and exploitation of labor, in their article 'The walls spoke when no one else would'. Following the publicised allegations, Brazilian congresswoman Bella Gonçalves, a member of the Municipal Chamber of Belo Horizonte and a former student at the research center CES, revealed that she had experienced sexual assault by de Sousa Santos in a manner mirroring the described incidents in the article. At the time of writing de Sousa Santos has suspended all his activities at CES, and the Latin American Council of Social Sciences suspended all activities with him. An independent commission was created in September 2023 to investigate the allegations, and its conclusions are expected to be published by December 2023.

*struggle for cognitive justice*', he writes, '*will not be successful if it depends exclusively on a more equitable distribution of scientific* [read here as broader academic] *knowledge*'.[485] He calls instead for upvaluation of 'non-scientific knowledges, which circulate in subordinate [thus less legitimised] form in and out of scientific practices'.[486] He imagines an 'ecology of knowledges', which does 'not entail discrediting scientific knowledges' but simply implies a 'counter-hegemonic use' of non-scientific knowledges to explore an alternative academic practice and to 'valorize[] the interdependence between scientific and non-scientific knowledges'.[487] Thus he imagines a reorganisation of the hierarchies of knowledge (in which positivist, objective scientific approaches no longer outrank forms of cultural and oral traditions and embodied knowledges) and a re-evaluation of legitimacy that is ascribed to certain knowledge practices. Only such a fundamental shift will bring about a more epistemologically just world and combat the exclusionary politics of knowledge capitalism (which de Sousa Santos also sees intertwined with broader exploitations of 'cognitive colonialism' and 'cognitive patriarchy').[488]

In this third and final part of the thesis I turn to lecture performance practices that are invested in this diversification of knowledges. What does it mean to take this plurality of knowledge seriously from the perspective of performance studies? While the lecture performance is by no means the only site of performance, where the de-hierarchisation of knowledge is discussed, I propose the lecture performance – with its double-play of thought and action, speech and enactment, commentary and presentation – is well-situated to negotiate this plurality and thus needs to be taken more seriously as a research method in performance studies.[489] Here, I again lean on de Sousa Santos. Crucially, for my discussion of the lecture performance, he stresses that the diversity of

[485] De Sousa Santos, 207, empahsis in original.
[486] De Sousa Santos, 207.
[487] De Sousa Santos, 207.
[488] De Sousa Santos, *The End of the Cognitive Empire*, 280. De Sousa Santos does not actually define the term 'cognitive empire' in his book, but we can surmise that it's the combination of these three aspects or capitalism, colonialism, and patriarchy. His conceptualisation focuses on empire as an ideological as well as material force but attends to the ideologies underlying empire in preparation for tackling the real material differences the ideologies of cognitive empire create.
[489] By performance studies here I mean the disciplinary field both inside the university and in higher education, as well as in the broader field of cultural and artistic production. As Tom Holert's theorisation of the 'epistemization of art' has shown, questions around knowledge production have entered contemporary art practices, so the question of how they navigate various research methods and knowledges has relevance beyond the academy.

knowledges inherent to this new ecology of knowledges is not just about content but also about construction: 'Knowledge diversity is not limited to the content and kind of its privileged intervention in social reality. It includes as well the ways in which it is formulated, expressed, and communicated'.[490] By pointing to the potentials of formulation and communication of these diverse knowledges, de Sousa Santos explicitly mobilises both processes of knowledge construction and presentation, which as he stresses are being reconfigured as much as the contents of what these non-traditional knowledges produce themselves. The lecture performance, too, is interested in the way different methods of knowledge production and presentation interact depending on which institutional or disciplinary context they are situated in. When de Sousa Santos states that 'the relation among knowledges changes according to the kind of social practice in which they intervene',[491] it strikes me that the lecture performance is a site that stages and by extension analyses this relation among knowledges.

To me, the idea of a relationality of knowledges is particularly interesting because it might illustrate another function of the lecture performance – namely showing this relationality. I do not want to suggest that the lecture performance is some kind of silver bullet, a space where different knowledges co-exist without conflict, or a golden solution to the epistemic inequalities de Sousa Santos describes. Rather, I suggest that by showing how legitimacy is constructed and constantly questioned in contemporary knowledge politics, lecture performances illustrate the contested ground where these knowledges interact. With de Sousa Santos we can say that by staging 'the relation among knowledges' lecture performance shows these relations as historically contingent, and thus enables us to think about them differently. This in itself might be seen as a small step towards the epistemic and cognitive justice de Sousa Santos imagines.

To test this, I attend to lecture performances' investment in reenactment. I trace two recent discussions within performance studies, which have been interested in how knowledge is conceived in the field: namely, the confrontation of performance with the archive, and the rise of performance forensics – both of which mobilise the reenactment of historical events but, as my analysis, shows on very different terms. I draw on Rebecca

[490] De Sousa Santos, *Epistemologies of the South*, 208.
[491] De Sousa Santos, 208.

Schneider, whose study of the practices and politics of performance reenactments have become an important basis for discussions around the intersections of performance practice and performance research. As a corporeal methodology the lecture performance enters the discourse of reenactment and expands the practice by adding a discursive dimension. In *Performing Remains*, Schneider argues that reenactments offer a space where the modes of historiography (one of the foremost techniques of performance studies) can be re-examined and the logics of its technologies (such as the archive or forensic reconstruction) can be staged and critiqued.[492] On the other hand, Schneider also stresses the risks of reenactment as a performance strategy, which are decontextualisation of the event that is being restaged,[493] scandal (as reenactments are often engaged in violent histories), and commercialisation (as reenactment as a trend in visual arts has become a lucrative exhibition strategy, observable for example in Marina Abramović's act of hiring other performers to restage her earlier performance art pieces at MOMA in New York in 2010). In Schneider's conception, however, the reenactment is seen as an independent strategy, which speaks for itself and rarely relies on any mode of contextualisation (in the moment of its performance). I argue that by expanding the practice of the reenactment through strategies of discussion and contextualisation, lecture performances negotiate these potential risks and create a different relationship to their source material, which leaves room for reflections of doubt and attends to the complexities of encountering archival, as well as the forensic re-enactment. In both cases lecture performances stage an investigation, thus making the search for what counts as legitimate knowledge palpable.

In Chapter 5, I examine how the dramaturgies of the lecture performance are implemented in historical performance research. Drawing on theories of the archive by Michel Foucault, Jacques Derrida, and Stuart Hall, I establish the archive as a problematic epistemic formation and trace two lecture performances by Laila Soliman and Prarthana Purkayastha, which attempt to counter the epistemic violence of the archive. I suggest

[492] Rebecca Schneider, *Performing Remains: Art and War in Times of Theatrical Reenactment* (London/New York: Routledge, 2011), 182.
[493] Interestingly this risk of decontextualisation is present in some of Schneider's own analysis of the reenactment traditions around the US Civil War, which often disregard the cultures of whiteness from which these reenactments emerge.

that the archive is a key concern for many contemporary lecture performance practices, and that these practices often succeed in highlighting and responding to the gaps in the written record of the archive. Thus, borrowing from Edward Said, lecture performances offer a chance to read the archive 'contrapuntally'.[494] As such, they contribute to those ongoing projects in performance theory and practice that seek to challenge the hegemony of the written word, emancipating modes of embodied knowledge as legitimate sources of knowledge production, thus diversifying what de Sousa Santos calls 'epistemologies of the [global] North'.[495] Drawing on Diana Taylor, I suggest that lecture performances can stage this tension between archive and repertoire and critically read the in-betweens of both modes of knowledge production and presentation.[496] Through this I show that they offer both an epistemological and methodological intervention into hegemonic forms of knowledge production.

Chapter 6 turns to the more recent emergence of what has been termed performance forensics or investigative aesthetics to examine the lecture performance as a site of forensic knowledge production. Drawing on what James Frieze has termed the forensic turn in performance as well as the push for investigative aesthetics by Matthew Fuller and Eyal Weizman (best known as one of the founding members of Forensic Architecture),[497] I trace the lecture performance's similarity to the forensic site of the 'controlled environment', 'construction of evidence', and 'dissection'. Starting from the observation that the forum (which has the same root as the word 'forensic' and points to the idea of making an argument in public) and the theatron are historically and culturally related as specified places of looking and making apparent, I examine the trilogy of lecture performances by the performance collective Hauptaktion to test the form's ability to stage an investigative gaze. Crucially, this chapter is not interested in upholding hierarchical privilege of the positivist and scientific approach inherent in many forensic techniques, but instead asks how the lecture performance uses the techniques of

[494] Edward W. Said, *Culture and Imperialism* (London: Vintage Books, 2014), 78–79.
[495] De Sousa Santos, *The End of the Cognitive Empire*, viii; See also Achille Mbembe, 'Decolonizing Knowledge and the Question of the Archive' (Lecture, Wits Institute for Social and Economic Research (WISER), University of the Witwatersrand (Johannesburg), 4 May 2015).
[496] See Diana Taylor, *The Archive and the Repertoire: Performing Cultural Memory in the Americas* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2003).
[497] See James Frieze, *Theatrical Performance and the Forensic Turn* (London: Routledge, 2019); Matthew Fuller and Eyal Weizman, *Investigative Aesthetics: Conflicts and Commons in the Politics of Truth* (London: Verso Books, 2021).

reenactment to stage the relation between this form of investigation and other knowledges and question assumptions of neutrality and objectivity wrapped up in ideas of forensic examinations. I argue that while the lecture performance is apt for staging the 'neutral gaze' by, for example, performing a sort of hyper-depersonalisation from its chosen topic, its embodied approach at performance analysis means it is better understood as striving for a form of 'situated objectivity'.[498] I suggest that the lecture performance as a form of performance forensics is an apt model with which to analyse specific problematic repertoires connected to histories of violence and argue that this forensic lens is particularly constructive when the focus of a performative investigation lies in the – often unseen – histories of dominant (and often violent) ideologies underlying certain historic crimes.

[498] Donna Haraway, 'Situated Knowledges: The Science Question in Feminism and the Privilege of Partial Perspective', *Feminist Studies* 14, no. 3 (1988): 575–99.

# Chapter 5: Staging the Archive: Lecture Performances Between Historical Immersion and Critical Fabulation

*Performer 1: ''There's something very personal about these […] investigations.'*

*Performer 2: 'Despite the fact that those women exist in another time entirely, I feel like they are here, present with us right now.'*
— Excerpt from Laila Soliman's *Zig Zig* (2016)

*'Yours is a dance I can never claim to reenact. I cannot. Yours is a voice I can never claim to recover. I need not.'*
— Excerpt Prarthana Purkayastha's *Decolonising the Human Exhibit* (2018)

These quotes taken from the two case studies selected for this chapter speak to the related but different strategies of reenactment present in each lecture performance. While the first highlights the performers' personal relationship and closeness to the materials encountered in the performance, the second betrays a certain distance or restraint in relation to the archival subjects encountered in the performance. Both *Zig Zig* (2016) by Laila Soliman and *Decolonising the Human Exhibit* (2018) by Prarthana Purkayastha concern the epistemic violence of the colonial archive. They engage with omissions or silences in the archive or seek to re-construct physical and epistemic violences documented by colonial archives. Lecture performances like Soliman's *Zig Zig* and Purkayastha's *Decolonising the Human Exhibit* perform re-readings of the archive. Their focus lies in reconstructing and reclaiming the archival traces of colonised or marginalised subjects whose voices were silenced by the archive. Both lecture performances concern specific, colonial archives, and think about how their focus on performing can respond to or reflect on what is commonly termed gaps, silences, or omissions in the archive. By comparing and contrasting their strategies of restaging the archival materials, I read the lecture performance as a form of embodied close reading of historical records, which allows me to reflect on the ways both performances engage strategies of enactment and reenactment to map out the ethical implications of engaging in these kinds of reconstructive practices.

I argue that in their attempt to counter archival violence, Soliman's *Zig Zig* and Purkayastha's *Decolonising the Human Exhibit* can be described as engaging in and specifically staging a 'contrapuntal reading' of the archive. A contrapuntal reading, according to Edward Said, is twofold. In the first instance it requires the reader to 'connect the structures of a narrative to the ideas, concepts, experiences from which it draws support',[499] which is to unearth underlying assumptions, prejudices, and ideologies (such as colonialism, patriarchy, class interests, heteronormativity, etc) that lie beneath the surface of a text. In a second and crucial step, contrapuntal reading necessitates uncovering not only the construction of the colonial situation as envisaged by the writers (of the archive), but the historical resistance to it as well. Said writes:

> We must therefore read the great canonical texts with an effort to draw out, extend, give emphasis and voice to what is silent or marginally present or ideologically represented in such works. The contrapuntal reading must take account of both processes – that of imperialism and that of resistance to it, which can be done by extending our reading of the texts to include what was once forcibly excluded.[500]

In showing those historic resistances to the archival practices of the imperialist West, these lecture performances aim to other dominant archival discourses and emphasise moments of resistance to the British Empire. By responding to specific colonial archives (in one case the archive of a human exhibit of the nineteenth century in London, in the other the transcripts of a military tribunal that considered the rape and pillaging of an Egyptian village during British occupation), the speakers retrieve the voices of colonial subjects. However, they have to turn to colonial archives in their search because the logics of colonialisation dictate that no alternative archive from the perspective of the colonised exists. Thus, the only way of locating these live stories is through a contrapuntal reading of the colonial archive, whose primary purpose is not to preserve their stories but rather to disappear them. In both cases, the speakers use their particular embedded cultural and experiential knowledge to tease stories out of these archival materials that

[499] Said, *Culture and Imperialism*, 79.
[500] Said, 78.

might have passed other readers by and in both cases, they draw on their own bodies and physicality in the re-telling of these historic events.

My analysis will show the different strategies employed by Soliman and Purkayastha in countering the dominant archival narratives they face in their performance research projects. I begin by examining Soliman's method of staging and her identification with the historic events to show that the concept of 'giving a voice' to those subjects and histories overlooked or erased by the archive has become a popular strategy to engage with the legacies of colonial violence. In my analysis of Soliman's performance, I show that the lecture performance strategy which merges the position of the speaker with the position of the subject (whose location in the archive is being examined) can offer a compelling insight into the archival events and bring up the question of how their legacies are still being felt in the present. In a second step, I complicate the notion of 'giving voice' to archival subjects as a viable strategy of historic reconstruction by analysing Purkayastha's performance, who is critical of the efficacy of such attempts. Drawing parallels between Purkayastha's 'historical fiction as a corporeal methodology'[501] and Saidiya Hartman's approach of 'critical fabulation',[502] I show how Purkayastha's performance reveals some of the limitations of the idea of 'giving voice', which risks speaking over or instead of the archival subject. Before examining both case studies in detail, I begin by turning to prominent theories of the archive to help me establish the archive as an ambiguous formation, which is linked to forms of epistemic violence. It is important to establish this context to understand the interventions these performances make and show how their embodied encounters with these archives indeed produce a counter-hegemonic epistemic method.

## The Archive as Form of Epistemic Violence

The archive remains a contested field of enquiry. Many contemporary negotiations of the archive take Jacques Derrida's *Archive Fever* as a starting point for their considerations. In *Archive Fever*, Derrida describes the archive as an essential aspect of democratic societies saying, 'there is no political power without control of the archive, if not memory.

[501] Prarthana Purkayastha, 'Decolonising Human Exhibits: Dance, Re-Enactment and Historical Fiction', *South Asian Diaspora* 11, no. 2 (3 July 2019): 2.
[502] Saidiya Hartman, 'Venus in Two Acts', *Small Axe* 12, no. 2 (17 July 2008): 11.

Effective democratisation can always be measured by this essential criterion: the participation in and access to the archive, its constitution, and its interpretation'.[503] However, Derrida is also aware of the processes of exclusions that prevent equal and fair participation and inclusion in the archive. He elaborates that the structure of the archive determines what can be archived in the first place and that our understandings of history (and memory) are formed by the technologies of what he calls 'archivization'.[504] He uses the example of early psychoanalysis and states that if people like Sigmund Freud had access to telephones, tape recorders, or computers, they would have completely changed the development of psychoanalysis. These technologies would have transformed the kinds of records created by early practitioners of psychoanalysis and thus changed the knowledge it produces. The methods of transmission shape the nature of the knowledge that can be produced; thus, Derrida makes the important observation that 'archivization produces as much as it records the event'.[505] Derrida then speaks of 'archival violence'[506] – a form of epistemic violence – to mark the conscious and unconscious exclusions that produce the hegemony of the historical record.

Similarly, Michel Foucault notes the constitutive character of the archive. Writing against the assumption that the archive is a fixed entity, Foucault stresses that the archive is not 'the library of all libraries',[507] not 'the sum of all the texts that a culture has kept upon its person as documents attesting to its own past, or as evidence of a continuing identity',[508] nor the 'the institutions, which, in a given society, make it possible to record and preserve those discourses that one wishes to remember and keep in circulation'.[509] Instead the archive is a system of discursivity and enunciability:

> The archive is first the law of what can be said, the system that governs the appearance of statements as unique events. But the archive is also that which determines that all these things said do not accumulate endlessly in an amorphous mass, nor are they inscribed in an unbroken linearity, nor do

[503] Jacques Derrida, *Archive Fever: A Freudian Impression*, trans. Eric Prenowitz (Chicago, IL and Londno: University of Chicago Press, 1996), 4.
[504] Derrida, 13.
[505] Derrida, 17.
[506] Derrida, 7.
[507] Michel Foucault, *Archaeology of Knowledge*, trans. Alan Mark Sheridan Smith (London/New York: Routledge, 2002), 146.
[508] Foucault, 145.
[509] Foucault, 145.

> they disappear at the mercy of chance external accidents; but they are grouped together in distinct figures, composed together in accordance with multiple relations, maintained or blurred in accordance with specific regularities; that which determines that they do not withdraw at the same pace in time.[510]

Part of this enunciability is the transformability of 'what can be said' over time. The archive 'reveals the rules of a practice that enables statements both to survive and to undergo regular modification'.[511] As a 'general system of formation and transformation',[512] the archive is relational and enables processes of interpretation and reinterpretation. As such, the archive is open to re-examining its own epistemic politics; however, Foucault is keen to stress that this does not mean that the archive is not policed and that access to it is not controlled. In fact, his wider conceptualisations of knowledge and power reveal the archive – with its focus on enunciability – as a site of struggle or epistemological formation and historical analysis.

What both Derrida's and Foucault's theorisations of the archive have in common is not only the focus on the transformability of the archive but also its potential for exclusion and epistemic policing. Performance scholars like Diana Taylor have expanded on these observations to mark how the politics of the archive have also been inscribed with patriarchal, racist, and colonial logics that have long dictated what is worth being preserved and what is not, and what is seen as archivable and thus what can be historicised. In her influential book, *The Archive and the Repertoire,* Taylor describes how a key strategy of colonialisation by the Spanish in Latin America and South America was the systematic devaluation of oration and oral histories in relation to the archive of the written record.[513] This debasement allowed the promotion of ideas of European supremacy and allowed for the proliferation of the myth that the Indigenous peoples had no significant histories of culture, and thus relied on the European coloniser to 'civilise' them.[514] Taylor proposes the repertoire – which she defines as a live and living repository of bodily and oral histories kept in performances, rituals, stories, and bodies – as a

[510] Foucault, 145.
[511] Foucault, 146.
[512] Foucault, 146.
[513] Taylor, *The Archive and the Repertoire*, 36.
[514] Taylor, 41.

counterweight to the epistemic dominance of the archive.[515] For Taylor, the archive stands for a reductive and homogenised approach to knowledge production, which wilfully ignores other epistemological strategies. By expanding the episteme of the archive by including the repertoire, she imagines a communicative interrelation of different modes of knowledge production and a challenge to the hegemony of the archive. Here, her thoughts align with analyses from political scientists de Sousa Santos, who also calls for a diversification of knowledge practices.

Following this line of argument, I read the lecture performance as a performative embodiment of the tensions between the archive and the repertoire and as a methodology for performance studies to negotiate and explore these tensions. By investigating the lecture performance's position as existing somewhere between the archive and the repertoire, I illustrate the proximity between the archive/repertoire debate and the discourse of the lecture performance. In both cases, a written or read (lecture/archive) mode of producing and conserving knowledge (the lecture/the archive) is contrasted with an embodied, corporeal, and experiential mode of understanding (the performance, the repertoire). Tracing this commonality, I want to suggest that the lecture performance is a specific site, where the epistemic tensions of the archive/ repertoire paradox can be explored and staged. As a way of creating knowledge about history, both are valid (as Diana Taylor shows repeatedly in her book) and the lecture performers can give performers and historians (or performance historians) the necessary tools to navigate the limitations and potentials of both forms of meaning making.

By engaging with the politics of the reenactment, Schneider also draws on the similarities between historical research and performance practice. She insists that historical research is also the work of the performance maker. In fact, Schneider remarks upon the similarities between the work of the historian and the actor, when she says: 'Understanding the causes and effects of feelings, and thinkings and doing is as much the craft of the actor as it is of the historian'.[516] Pushing against the assumption that legitimate historic practices necessarily need to disregard feelings and emotions, she insists that the understanding of emotions is vital to our understanding of history.

[515] See Taylor, 26.
[516] Rebecca Schneider, *Theatre and History* (London: Red Globe Press, 2014), 49–50.

Drawing on Nicholas Ridout's formulation of theatre as an 'affect machine',[517] Schneider proposes the theatre as the space where feelings and emotions and their relation to or construction of certain historic records can be examined.[518] Unearthing and re-enacting the affective remains of historical events as well as performance histories, then becomes the purview of what performative engagements with archival documents can add to other more conventional studies of history. I show that by recalibrating the labour of the archive as not only that of the historian but also that of the theatre performer, lecture performances are engaged in the reconstruction of affective remains as well as the examination of the complex affects and feelings the engagement with the archive (and the oftentimes violent histories contained within it) produces in the present. In doing so, they are not only thematising the feelings of frustration, helplessness, or doubt that can accompany archival engagements, they are also often able to recover what's hidden in plain sight or what is fleeing the categorisation of the archive.

## Performative Speculation and 'Giving a Voice': Mixing History and Present Experience

Laila Soliman is an Egyptian writer and theatre maker based in Cairo, whose productions are shown in Egypt and tour widely in Europe. Since the Egyptian Revolution of 2011 (also called the Arab Spring), her theatre work has often been concerned various revolutionary movements in Egypt, especially in the early twentieth century, thus her works often contain readings of colonial archives and historical materials from this time. Her best-known play *Whims of Freedom* (*Hawa al-Horreya* in Arabic) was commissioned by the LIFT Festival's '14-18 NOW, WWI Centenary Art Commissions' and co-produced by LIFT, the Maxim Gorki Theater in Berlin and Kaaitheater in Brussels in 2014. It parallels the 1919 uprising lead by revolutionary and statesman Saad Zaghloul, who led a civil disobedience campaign to demand Egyptian independence from British rule after the First World War, with the 2011 uprising during the Arab Spring.

Her next production *Zig Zig* from 2016 also deals with a colonial archive: the records of a British military tribunal investigating the raid of the Egyptian village of Nazlat

[517] Nicholas Ridout, *Stage Fright, Animals, and Other Theatrical Problems* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006), 168.
[518] Schneider, *Theatre and History*, 46.

al-Shobak.[519] During the Egyptian Revolution of 1919 (which led to independence from the UK in 1922), British soldiers guarding a sugar factory in the south of Cairo cited the cutting of nearby railway lines as grounds to make 'their way through nine villages along the railway line, stopping at each to carry out attacks' as collective punishment for the interference with the rail lines.[520] According to records held by the British Foreign office, a 'witness from the village of Nazlet el Shobak [sic] said the soldiers burnt 144 houses out of 210, killed 21 people and wounded 12 more, raped many of the women and killed all the animals'.[521] Soliman's production faces these archival documents and she turns her attention to the experiences and testimonies of the Egyptian women who accused the British soldiers of rape. These accusations were made in a military tribune set up by the British military after these events, which – predictably – came to the conclusion that no rapes had been committed during the raids.[522] According *to Zig Zig*'s production announcement, the nationalist independent movement 'took up the women's stories in their slogans and pamphlets. Yet they were quickly swept aside by the political discourse of independence, and before long, history had forgotten them entirely'.[523] Soliman's show wants to bring to light this forgotten history of the revolution but also ask what its legacy means for liberation movements today.

The production oscillates between staging and reenacting the interrogation scenes documented in the records of the military court and the personal musings and experiences of the five female performers (four actors and one violinist). In her review of the performance, Hadia abd el-fattah Ahmed describes that each of the 'four actresses played three roles: one of the raped victims, one of the British prosecutors, and herself as a narrator and commentator on the trial and investigations'.[524] The set-up of the stage

[519] The show premiered at the Jesuit Cultural Centre in Cairo in April 2016 and then toured a range of European production houses and festivals, including Theatre Spektakel in Zurich Switzerland, Teatergarasjen in Bergen Norway, Kaaitheater in Brussels, Belgium, and Hebbel am Ufer in Berlin Germany. I saw the production at the 2017 Spielart Festival in Munich.
[520] See Dima, 'Colonial Laws Still Used for Mass Arrests in Egypt', *Fanack.Com* (blog), 7 July 2021, https://theconversation.com/uncovering-the-similarities-between-the-police-crime-sentencing-and-courts-bill-and-british-colonial-laws-in-egypt-158588.
[521] Dima.
[522] See the military records published on the production's website: Laila Soliman, 'RESEARCH/البحث', *Zig Zig* - Performance Website, n.d., https://www.zigzig.info/research.
[523] Laila Soliman, 'WHAT/ماذا', *Zig Zig* - Performance Website, n.d., https://www.zigzig.info/.
[524] Hadia abd el-fattah Ahmed, 'Boundaries of History, Memory and Invention: Laila Soliman's *Zig Zig* in Light of Absence of Egyptians', *Arab Stages* 8, no. 1 (Spring 2018): 2.

is simple. There are five desks with reading lamps at the back of the stage. From here most of the show is conducted by the five performers (Mona Hala, Reem Hegab, Sherin Hegazy, Zainab Magdy, and Nancy Mounir) sitting at their desks reading directly from the records of the tribunal. The backwall is used for the projection of court documents, and the space in front of the desks is used in a variety of ways: occasionally the performers use chalk to draw specific locations to re-create and visualise the geography of the village and the movements of individuals (soldiers and civilians) during the raids on the floor. At other times, the space in front of the desks is used for scenic reenactment, when one or two performers pick up their script to enact crucial scenes of the interrogation of the village women. At other times, the performers position themselves in front of the desks to dance or sing along to the violinist to illustrate particularly violent recollections from the records.



Figure 23: Five desks, five lamps, five performers. Staging archival documents in Laila Soliman's *Zig Zig* (Jesuit Cultural Centre, Cairo, 2016) Photo: Ruud Gieslens.

This layering of roles and positions of the speaker as well as the set-up of the stage, which focuses the audience's attention on the act of reading from the documents is why I think it makes sense to read this performance as a lecture performance although it is not

explicitly billed as such. Some reviews referred to it as a 'documentary play',[525] which makes sense considering how the performance relies heavily on historic records. However, while the performers take on the roles of specific historical characters briefly – during the scenes when they enact the women being interrogated by the military court – this is not an attempt to coherently re-enact the court proceedings step-by-step, nor does the content of the production remain solely in the past. I argue examining it through the lens of a lecture performance is illuminating, as it places the emphasis of analysis on the lecture-like set-up – with the desks and reading-lamps, and direct readings from the documents – while it also gives more room to analyse the many non-documentary facets of the performance, such as the dance scenes, and the moments of personal recollection from the five performers.

While the reenactment of the documents is spoken in English with Arabic surtitles projected behind the performers (highlighting the situation of the colonial archives as one that plays by the rules of the colonisers), these records are interrupted at multiple times in the show to offer moments of reflection from the performers. These reflections all take place in Arabic (with surtitles in English or the language of the host country) and generally take two forms: combining movement and speech, they offer space to wonder about the broader situation of the women who decided to testify to their rapes in the tribunal. They ask themselves and the audience: What made these women come forward? How did they feel during the investigation? What happened to them afterwards – when the military court (with hindsight predictably) decided that there had been no wrongdoing by British military personnel? Or they link the accounts of rape and violence in the records to their own experiences and fears of sexual assault and rape, charting the continuance of rape culture – as a societal phenomenon and not exclusive to the military – today, and suggesting that little has changed in the reception and prosecution of sexual violence.

[525] Simon Kaemp, 'Wahrheit Erspielen. *Zig Zig* Am Berliner Hebbel Am Ufer', *Nachtkritik.De* (blog), 27 April 2017, https://nachtkritik.de/index.php?option=com_content&view=article&id=13910&layout=*&Itemid=100190; Susanne Schanda, 'Zwischen Koma Und Protestschrei. Arabisches Theater Beim Zürcher Bühnenspektakel', *Qantara.De* (blog), 5 September 2016, https://de.qantara.de/inhalt/arabisches-theater-beim-zuercher-buehnenspektakel-zwischen-koma-und-protestschrei.




**Figure 24**: Reenacting the tribunal interrogation in front of the archived transcript projected onto the wall in Laila Soliman's *Zig Zig* (Jesuit Cultural Centre, Cairo, 2016) Photo: Ruud Gieslens.

The contrapuntal reading here lies not only in the re-reading of a forgotten archive, which showcases the resistance to colonial power by the villagers of Nazlat al-Shobak, it also is constituted in the performance strategies of *Zig Zig*. Speaking of the chances of theatrical reenactment, Schneider highlights the possibility that through reenactment the distinction between historic time and the present can become blurred. The materials and immaterial (affective) remains of an event might 'drag something of the no longer now, the no longer live, into the present, or drag the present into the no longer now'.[526] This blurring also occurs in this performance and offers a chance of redressing or bringing to light again something that the colonial and in this case also patriarchal logic of the archive had disappeared. The choice to have only women perform centres the allegations of sexual violence perpetrated against women (something often omitted from the archival recounting of war) and attempts to situate it within larger colonial crimes. Even before they speak, the choice of casting these five female non-European performers tells the audience something about the position this performance takes up in relation to the archival materials – one that purposefully excludes both whiteness and maleness – and,

[526] Schneider, *Theatre and History*, 45.

by extension, this shapes the audience's affective relation to the historic documents. The reenactment mediates the affective remains of the document through the voices and bodies of the performers. By merging their own personal stories with speculations about how they imagine the archival subjects to have acted or thought, the performers drag something of the no longer now into the present and project their own experience of today onto this examined past.



Figure 25: Reconstructing the events of the crime in Laila Soliman's *Zig Zig* (Jesuit Cultural Centre, Cairo, 2016) Photo: Ruud Gieslens.

This strategy of reenactment tries to approximate the abject horror the original women were subjected to at the hands of British soldiers; however, the question is to what degree this approximation is helpful to illustrate the crimes or whether it aestheticises them beyond recognition? In her review of the performance, the Egypt-based performance critic Naira Antoun is critical of Soliman's approach. She speaks of the alienating effect this kind of representation can have on the audience, when she describes how alienated she felt by the attempt to mimetically recreate what the women might have felt as they were giving their testimony, and by the attempt to stylise the experience of violence through song and dance. For Antoun both dramaturgical strategies expose the shortcomings of specific strategies of reenactment, which widen

the distance to the historic materials rather than shorten it. Speaking of the moment, when one of the actors starts crying while relating the testimony of one of the women, she says:

> The first time the voice of one of the women broke with tears relating what happened to her, I felt an utter disconnection. I was aware I was meant to feel the opposite. I was annoyed. Did the woman at Nazlat al-Shobak cry more when she described her kitchen utensils being stolen, her jewels taken, or when her husband was shot in front of her, or when she was violated? Who are we to decide? The women crying as they relate what happened to them are the sharpest indicators of the unknowingly futile attempt at connection that underlies the production.[527]

Here Antoun's criticism points towards the seemingly 'authentic' depiction of the testimony, which she feels adds an unnecessary and presumptive layer of speculation to the performance. The fact that Antoun was annoyed because she felt at this point that the production was manipulating her emotional response to the material ('I was meant to feel the opposite') shows the difficult navigations performances engaged with archival records need to make. It raises the questions: How much speculation is too much and at what point does our contemporary reading of a situation overshadow the historical events? On the one hand, the strategy of employing testimony – both the testimonies from the actual historical records and the performers attesting to the current realities of rape culture – can be seen as a way of reading the archive contrapuntally by widening the perspective and judging a historic crime not only by its status of being in the past. It allows for an engagement with the historic documents that a stricter historiographic approach would not allow, and as such can be seen as a way of speaking back to the archive through the contemporary voices of the performers. On the other hand, Antoun's comments point to the danger of this approach, which lies in an equivocation of experiences (past and present) and a substitution, where present tears stand in for something that is past the reach of reconstruction.

Similarly, Antoun had issues with the second approach the production took towards reenacting the materials. Some of the depictions of violence were accompanied

[527] Naira Antoun, '*Zig Zig*: Bridging an Unbridgeable Distance to Rape in 1919?', *Mada*, 21 April 2016, https://www.madamasr.com/en/2016/04/21/feature/culture/zig-zig-bridging-an-unbridgeable-distance-to-rape-in-1919/.

by movement and dance; however, this strategy of gesturing rather than mimetically representing also has its pitfalls. Antoun writes:

> Perhaps, especially in relation to sexual violence, we shouldn't attempt to depict violence if we will not or cannot fully depict its horror. Representations of extreme violence tend to be either poor depictions (which thus fail) or something that points to the horror (and can work). I suppose pointing is what Soliman sought to do by including dance. As one woman recounts a sexual assault, another dances around with one hand pulling at her own hair, jerking her head to the side by the violence of it. At another point, accompanying a description of a rape, a woman part-simulates it with push-ups. Strangely, the stylized dance combined with the realistic impulse of the crying both minimized the horror these women faced and emphasized the distance between myself and them.[528]

While Antoun's reaction shows how starkly she felt the distance between her experience as an audience member in *Zig Zig* and the historic materials it deals with, Soliman's decision to layer the archival testimony with contemporary accounts of sexual violence shows that the production's dramaturgy lay precisely in the attempt to collapse the distance between historic and contemporary experiences of women. This also raises the question to what extent the production equivocates between the historic and contemporary crimes, and if this is in fact a productive route of analysis.

[528] Antoun.



Figure 26: Tracing the affective remains of the archive in Laila Soliman's *Zig Zig* (Jesuit Cultural Centre, Cairo, 2016) Photo: Ruud Gieslens.

The main dramaturgical strategy of how the performance attempts to approximate the archival document is by tracing the affective remains of this archive via the personal stories of the performers and by speculating on how the historical subjects might have reacted in certain situations. The historic events are refracted and viewed through the lens of the performers' own experiences of assault. This strategy of identification (with the documents) is noticeable in the way they chose to 'act' the interrogations. One of the performers seems on the verge of tears when recounting the sexual violence one of the women in the village was subjected to, while another imagines one of the women 'Aisha' to find a way to live with the pain to 'not be broken by what happened'. This wish for defiance is linked to the performer's own desire to emerge stronger from a hurtful incident. Of course, this is an understandable wish (if not also an often-used narrative trope), however, the complete collapse between historical story and contemporary account raises questions about the unintended violence of such a mode of recreation as it projects our desires onto these past lives. Antoun observes that this strategy meant that the contemporary experiences overshadowed the archival subjects:

> But I felt those [historical] women only as an absence, and I felt only the presence of contemporary women trying to collapse a distance, to recuperate them according to our own desires. In trying something impossible — bridging an unbridgeable distance — and failing to reflect on this impossibility, there is an unintended violence in *Zig Zig*.[529]

*Zig Zig* exemplifies this tension between the wish to do justice to the archival materials and the lives they represent, and the desire to resurrect or make present again their stories and experiences. What is interesting about the performance is that instead of simply choosing a strategy of representation and staging it, the performers also comment on and debate this strategy during the performance, which is another reason why the lecture performance – with its focus on combining commentary and action – is an apt vehicle of analysis for this mode of performance making. Throughout the play the actors discuss their choices of materials and acting strategies. One performer talks about the need to embody the women's pain in order to prevent it from being forgotten again. Another claims that the military interrogations, though hard to bear, make it possible to make the lives of these women present again. Towards the end one even goes so far as saying that the village women are present in this performance, even if they don't have their own voices. All these statements speak to the wish to do justice to the stories contained in the archive; however, it also shows the difficulties inherent in such an attempt.

According to Antoun, the production fell short when it collapsed the distance between historical materials and contemporary accounts, so that the lives of the women were subsumed by the experiences of the performers. Instead, she wanted the performance to uphold the tension created when living bodies stage archival materials:

> I would have liked to feel that interplay of presence and absence were explored rather than collapsed. I wanted to sense that, in approaching the testimonies, the playwright and actors had in mind the thorny questions raised by Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak in her 1988 essay "Can the Subaltern Speak?" We remain in the midst of a cultural preoccupation with the archive and the subaltern, a term first used by Antonio Gramsci to indicate those populations outside of the hegemonic power structure. Even if *Zig Zig*'s makers do not agree with Spivak's claim that the subaltern cannot speak — by which Spivak also means, in a way, that the subaltern cannot be heard —

[529] Antoun.

> it would have been more effective to grapple with the difficult questions of representation, with the violence often inherent in simple gestures to reverse silence, in "giving" a voice to the oppressed.[530]

Here Saidiya Hartman's concept of 'narrative restraint' – the 'refusal to fill in the gaps and provide closure'[531] – is helpful to further investigate this impetus to simply 'reverse silence' and 'give voice' to marginalised and erased stories in the archive.

As a literary scholar and author, Hartman is acutely aware of the seductive powers speculation and fictional embellishment might have on those trying to reconstruct past lives from only fragmentary materials. In her essay 'Venus in Two Acts', Hartman wrestles with a similar problem as the creators of *Zig Zig*. Her writing project wants to 'recount the violences that deposited these traces [of enslaved women and girls] in the archive […] without committing further violence in [her] own act of narration'.[532] Being similarly faced with only the colonial archive as a source for information and little to no accounts from the enslaved themselves, she empathises with the intensity of longing for those stories. She observes: 'The loss of stories sharpens the hunger for them. So, it is tempting to fill in the gaps and to provide closure where there is none. To create a space for mourning where it is prohibited'.[533] Hartman is sympathetic to the desire for closure, while also critical of its effects. For her, it is important not to romanticise or aestheticise a situation or to provide closure where there was none as this distracts from the realities of violence and would only serve to make us (as contemporary readers and audiences) feel better.

But what would be won by us feeling better? Does the story of defiant Aisha, who vows to not let this experience break her, really add to our understanding of the historical situation concealed by the very archive that reveals it or does is obscure or supplant the knowledge that all these women were subjected to relive these traumatic experiences in front of a hostile military court only to be dismissed as unreliable witnesses or as liars? The mechanisms of the colonial apparatus meant that the outcome of the case was a foregone conclusion and Hartman would suggest that the story of Aisha distracts from

[530] Antoun.
[531] Hartman, 'Venus in Two Acts', 12.
[532] Hartman, 2.
[533] Hartman, 8.

this reality, while critical accounts like Antoun's illustrate the alienating effect this can have on audiences because it places a contemporary demand on her story: the demand for her experience to be made useful or instructive to us as a way of extracting a helpful lesson from her story. Hartman calls for 'narrative restraint' to dissuade the instrumentalisation of marginalised histories.[534]

This wish to project defiance onto Aisha's story also shows another problem with the equivocation between past and present crimes. Showing the continuity of sexual violence is important but it perhaps erases the particulars of this specific sexual violence, so entangled with the politics of Empire. In the archival documents rape is a tool of coloniality and patriarchy, employed as a form of collective punishment for the anti-imperial protests and actions of (part of) the population. However, the contemporary stories shared by the performers focus on sexual abuse only as an issue of patriarchy, which to an extent flattens out the specific structural violence of rape present in the archive. Here the production seems to pander to a specific (often white) feminism – what Jessie Daniels (author of *Nice White Ladies*) calls 'gender-only feminism'[535] – which ignores or sidesteps more intersectional readings of sexualised violence.[536] A position like this is maybe not that surprising considering the intended audience for this production. Aside from the premiere in Cairo, of the 17 tour locations, only two were staged outside of continental Europe. The question of how consciously the emphasis of the production shifted from colonial legacies to (presumably more global and enduring) matters of patriarchy is hard to answer. However, this might be one instance where the lecture performance's emphasis on tour-ability (with little set and few props) and its primary circulation within Western European theatre and production houses, as well as museums

[534] It is important to note here that Hartman's conceptualisations are writerly strategies and that in the realm of performance, the idea of 'narrative restraint' might also have to be expanded to include a form of 'performative restraint', which is what I will be exploring in the following case studies. For now, I draw on the concept to mount a critique of how the fictional embellishments of the historic materials in *Zig Zig* are dramaturgically problematic as they further collapse the distance between the source materials and the performers' own experience instead of illuminating the tensions inherent in such acts of re-enactment.

[535] Jessie Daniels, *Nice White Ladies: The Truth about White Supremacy, Our Role in It, and How We Can Help Dismantle It* (New York: Hachette UK, 2021), 29.

[536] Although the production slightly pre-dates the #MeToo-movement, this speaks to the cultural climate of this moment. When I saw the performance at the Spielart Festival in Munich in 2017, several #MeToo scandals had just broken the previous summer, and the way testimony was positioned in this production felt very much in this vein of reading sexual abuse as a mono-issue divorced from other structural inequalities.

and galleries, has influenced the messaging of a show. While the colonial crimes are not excused in this production and the impetus to wrestle with those past legacies is genuine, white female spectators (who are the largest demographic of theatregoers in Germany and the UK)[537] get to leave this production with a sense of solidarity (with women of colour as fellow women – similarly exposed to dangers of sexual violence) that leaves their whiteness and their complicity in ongoing projects of Empire untouched. While sexual violence against women is sadly a universal experience, the way the production leans towards generalisation has perhaps unwittingly contributed to another silencing – or at least distorting – of a subaltern experience.[538]

To sum up, in trying to respond to and resist the all-encompassing character of the imperial archive, *Zig Zig* stages a contrapuntal reading that gives voice to female subjects, who were doubly marginalised – first by the racism of the British Empire, and then by the patriarchal violence from within the nationalist movement, which side-lined their role in struggles for independence. It uses strategies of re-creating and reenacting archival materials and merges them with contemporary reactions, stories, and personal accounts of the performers. This merging adds a layer of commentary to processes of reenactment which is akin to the general strategies of the lecture performance, which connect strategies of performance and discursive analysis. In doing so, the production

[537] The Art Council England's 'Equality, Diversity and Inclusion: A Data Report' for 2020-21 noted that during this period 64% of audiences (to cultural events funded by the Council) where female, and only 7% reported a non-white background. (Arts Council England, 'Equality, Diversity, and Inclusion: A Data Report 2020/21', Data Report (Arts Council England, 23 June 2022), 10.) In Germany, the theatre platform nachtkritik.de reported a study whereby ca. 67% of theatre audiences are female in 2016/17. (Anne Peter, 'Gender Gaps. Geschlechterungerechtigkeit Im Theaterbetrieb - Eine Diagramm-Serie Zu Den Zahlen & Fakten', *Nachtkritik.De* (blog), 23 April 2018, https://www.nachtkritik.de/index.php?option=com_content&view=article&id=15721%3Ageschlechterungerechtigkeit-im-theaterbetrieb-zahlen-fakten&catid=101&Itemid=84.) There's no data on ethnic background in audiences in Germany, but considering that according to the 'Bundeszentrale für politische BIldung' only 26% of people in Germany have a migrational background (compared to 35% in the UK, according to the Migrants Statistics of the House of Commons Library' it seems likely that numbers of non-white audiences would not be significantly higher than in the UK. (Bundeszentrale für Politische Bildung, 'Zahlen Und Fakten: Bevölkerung Mit Migrationshintergrund', kurz&knapp, 1 January 2022, https://www.bpb.de/kurz-knapp/zahlen-und-fakten/soziale-situation-in-deutschland/61646/bevoelkerung-mit-migrationshintergrund/; House of Commons Library, 'Migration Statistics', Research Briefing, 30 May 2022, https://commonslibrary.parliament.uk/research-briefings/sn06077/#:~:text=In%202021%20there%20were%20approximately,live%20in%20the%20capital%20city.)

[538] It is also notable that the production has not been performed in the UK, so we have no idea how British audiences would react to this staging of imperial violence. In continental Europe, the specificity of the case as a case from the British Military archives, might have further aided the assumption of some audience members that these past crimes are far removed from their own reality.

echoes Taylor's critique in *The Archive and The Repertoire*, where in the colonial archive the body was dismissed as an illegitimate source of knowledge and thus not considered an adequate archive and attempts to rectify this by drawing on the physical experiences of the performers to validate and rehabilitate this embodied form of knowledge. It also attempts to stage what Hartman calls 'writing a history of the present'.[539] By writing a history of the present, Hartman wants to 'illuminate the intimacy of our experience with the lives of the dead' and 'write our now as it is interrupted by this past'.[540] The interaction between reenactment, commentary, and personal stories perform this interruption, in that *Zig Zig* uses the historic materials as prompts for contemporary accounts and vice versa. The intimacy conveyed between the experiences of the past and present is expressed in the ongoingness of sexual violence. This is of course not a positive connection but a way in which the archival stories can become significant to contemporary audiences. As my analysis has shown, the pitfalls of this production and its approach to reenactment lie in its 'trespassing the boundaries of the archive',[541] and what can be known through archival engagement and in perhaps leaning too heavily on the perceived similarity between past and present experiences (of sexual violence) that overshadows the concreteness of the historical situation and its complex relationship to the imperial archive.

In Hartman's terms we can say that while the production uses speculation, fabulation, and fictional embellishment, it is not critical enough of its own methods, and thus slips into moments of collapse between past and present, instead of maintaining a critical restraint or distance. In an interview Soliman stated that she wanted to foster an 'emotional interpretation' of the documents, which is also how she justifies the use of the violin, and the singing and dancing'.[542] This shows a contrast between different strategies of reenactment, which also enacts a core question of the lecture performance: does the employment of theatrical elements, such as dance and music, lead to an over-emotionalisation of the material and what constitutes a critical engagement in light of these performative strategies?

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[539] Hartman, 'Venus in Two Acts', 4.
[540] Hartman, 4.
[541] Hartman, 9.
[542] Soha Elsirgany, 'INTERVIEW: Egyptian Theatre Director Laila Soliman on "Zig Zig" and Drawing from Historical Archives - Stage & Street - Arts & Culture', *Ahram Online*, 9 August 2016.

Hartman coins the term 'critical fabulation' to describe her own writing practices, whose goal above all is to 'illuminate the contested character of history, narrative, and event'.[543] While Hartman uses fabulation and speculation to 'imagine what might have happened or might have been said or might have been done',[544] she is careful to stress the need to resist 'filling in the gaps'.[545] Commenting on the seeming paradox of this approach, she writes:

> The intent of this practice is not to *give voice* [to the disenfranchised], but rather to imagine what cannot be verified, a realm of experience which is situated between two zones of death—social and corporeal death—and to reckon with the precarious lives which are visible only in the moment of their disappearance. It is an impossible writing which attempts to say that which resists being said […]. It is a history of an unrecoverable past; it is a narrative of what might have been or could have been; it is a history written with and against the archive.[546]

The strategy of critical fabulation seems crucial to an examination of how the lecture performance navigates the omissions of the archive and places itself at the intersections of the archive and repertoire. I suggest that critical fabulation is a productive lens through with to view the dramaturgies of the lecture performance engaged in explorations of the archive and repertoire, as it highlights its oscillation between criticality (distance, restraint) and engagement (emotional investment, connection, intimacy). The next case study will illustrate this dramaturgical implementation of critical fabulation and show how this approach, when implemented via the lecture performance, can illuminate the 'contested character of history'.[547]

## Critical Fabulations and Corporeal Readings of the Archive

Prarthana Purkayastha's lecture performance *Decolonising the Human Exhibit* can be characterised as an embodied close reading of a specific archive and as such it gestures openly to the proximities between historical research and performance work that

[543] Hartman, 'Venus in Two Acts', 12.
[544] Hartman, 11.
[545] Hartman, 12.
[546] Hartman, 12, emphasis in original.
[547] Hartman, 12.

Schneider has hinted at. The performance makes use of the performative strategies of the lecture performance to stage the speaker's own position in relation to the material, as well as examine the performer's relationship to the objects of her research. Purkayastha calls herself a 'historian-dancer'[548] and she uses elements of costume, dance, exclamation, and historical fiction to put herself – and by extension the lecture performance's audience – in conversation with the historical documents. Specifically, positioned as an examination of the 'structural limitations of reenactment, a current trend in contemporary Euro-American dance',[549] the performance argues for a corporeal or performance-based approach to historical fiction. This strikes me as a crucial addition to the idea of critical fabulation, which as a literary strategy does not take enactment into account. An analysis that makes the concept useful to the lecture performance needs to consider, for example, how the idea of narrative restraint can be expanded or translated to include a certain performative restraint. Purkayastha's performance allows for this consideration.[550]

Purkayastha developed this performance for a keynote lecture at the 'Dance in the Age of Forgetfulness' conference organised by the Society of Dance Research in 2018 at Royal Holloway, University of London and later re-performed it at the opening plenary of the Dance Studies Association annual conference in 2018 in Valetta, Malta, as well as at the London Theatre Seminar in 2018 and at the Royal Central School of Speech and Drama as part of a research series in 2019.[551] Purkayastha is a Indian scholar of South Asian and British Asian dance and dance history based in the UK. She focuses on embodied and decolonial approaches to historiography and social justice. This performance concerns Purkayastha's research into the colonial practice of human

[548] Purkayastha, 'Decolonising Human Exhibits', 11.
[549] Purkayastha, 1.
[550] I note that Hartman uses the term fabulation, while Purkayastha speaks of 'historical fiction'. While fabulation and fiction are not the same (in fact Hartman talks about the elements of the fable as the 'building block of the narrative', whereas for her fiction seems to operate at a level above fabulation), the ways in which both writers use the strategies of fictionalisation and fabulation to question the dominant account of events and to jeopardise the status of the archival documents as objective truth allows me to treat their methods as similar. (Hartman, 'Venus in Two Acts', 11.)
[551] I saw iterations of it at both the London Theatre Seminar in 2018 and the research event at Royal Central School of Speech and Drama (RCSSD) in 2019. A train delay meant that for the London Theatre Seminar, Purkayastha was unable to perform the lecture performance, and opted instead to give her paper while also talking us through the performative choices she made in the previous performances. At RCSSD, she was able to perform the lecture performance in full.

exhibitions; specifically, the exhibition of a troupe of Indian *nautch* dancers at the 1885 Liberty's Exhibition held in Albert Palace, in Battersea Park, London. The records of the event, held by the Westminster City Archives, enabled Purkayastha to trace not only the media's reception of the dancers (through newspaper clippings and reviews) but also to reconstruct some of the actions and conflicts the troupe were entangled in during their engagement as the exhibit. While the sources are limited (Purkayastha speaks of a 'slim file'[552]), a close reading of the records as well as a corporeal engagement with these records allows her to reconstruct a much larger narrative of exploitation and, crucially, resistance. Reading the archive contrapuntally through and with the body allows for the resistances already present in the archive to become palpable.

The lecture performance is specifically positioned against practices like Brett Bailey's performance installation *Exhibit B*, which was meant to open at the Barbican in London in September 2014 but was cancelled following widespread protests.[553] In it, the white South-African director presented a reenactment of colonial exhibitions, specifically the nineteenth-century practice of 'human zoos' and connected this objectified display of colonised bodies to the situation of present-day refugees and asylum seekers around the Mediterranean whom Bailey installed in small cells throughout the installation. The strategy of critiquing present-day violence by reenacting past violence was contested and as the protests to the show made clear, this was 'not a prophylactic against the risks posed by reiterating violent speech and depicting again rituals of torture'.[554] Rather than simple and uncontextualised reenactment, which risks reperforming the violence of the historic event, Purkayastha's performance aims to respond to the call for 'more differentiated engagements with the ethics of confronting a violent, racist history, the dramaturgy of interracial encounter and the politics of decolonising cultural institutions'.[555] And she uses the strategies of the lecture performance to negotiate these multiple and complex ethics of confronting violent and racist histories.

[552] Purkayastha, 'Decolonising Human Exhibits', 7.
[553] See Hugh Muir, 'Barbican Criticises Protesters Who Forced Exhibit B Cancellation', *The Guardian*, 24 September 2014, sec. Culture, http://www.theguardian.com/culture/2014/sep/24/barbican-criticise-protesters-who-forced-exhibit-b-cancellation.
[554] Hartman, 'Venus in Two Acts', 4.
[555] Katrin Sieg cited in Purkayastha, 'Decolonising Human Exhibits', 1.

The basis for this research project is conventional and exhaustive archival research. Although her sources are limited (a few newspaper announcements and reviews, contemporary illustrations of the exhibition, and an employment register), Purkayastha's attention to detail means she is able to reconstruct not only the broad narrative of the *nautch* dancer's presence at the exhibition but also unearth 'archival fake news, inconsistencies, and the failure of textual and visual records'.[556] Her analysis shows, for example, that the two female dancers in the troupe, who were marketed as mother and daughter in the promotional news material, in fact came from 'opposite sides of India'.[557] Purkayastha's research also comments on the violence of the archive, and on how the recorded documents strip the dancers of their identity, not referring to them by either name or profession,[558] which betrays the 'anthropological and taxonomic impulse to […] categorise people of colour'.[559] But she also finds moments of confusion and possible resistance to the dominant gaze of the exhibition audience. The fact that the dancers all came from different parts of India and thus shared no common language or movement traditions,[560] paired with circumstance owing to the particularly cold winter that meant the performers had all been given coats and winter clothing, meant that what was billed as authentic representation was more likely to have been a chaotic and eclectic mix of 'cultural performance'. Here Purkayastha sees the 'layered up bodies of the *nautch* dancers' as a disruption to both the voyeuristic impulse of the general audience and to the taxonomist desire of the anthropologists. She writes:

> These dancing bodies disrupted both the scopophilic gaze that attempted to consume them, and the violent anthropological/pedagogic/taxonomic drive that may have wanted to study and visually dissect them. The corporeality of the dancers butted against the ocular hegemony of the exhibition.[561]

Similarly, her research reveals that the dancers were actively involved in a labour dispute with the recruiting agent for the exhibition who 'ignored contractual obligations around

[556] Purkayastha, 10.
[557] Purkayastha, 10.
[558] Purkayastha, 7–8.
[559] Purkayastha, 7.
[560] Purkayastha, 10.
[561] Purkayastha, 10.

suitable board, fees, accommodation and clothing',[562] and were eventually able to hire a barrister who took on the case on their behalf. To Purkayastha, this is evidence that the dancers of the Liberty's Exhibition, who were side-lined as colonial bodies and then again side-lined in the archive, 'still managed to find a voice' and use it.[563] This observation is central to her reconstructive strategy and prompts her to therefore turn to performance reenactments in order to seek a viable methodology to make sense of a violent colonial history.[564] Confronted with the 'nearly vanished remains of dancing bodies'[565] and the lack of any notation or other representation of the dances presented, Purkayastha – like Hartman – is sympathetic to the wish to claim back this history. The prospect of giving the dancers 'a "true voice" to speak back to history seems [to her] to be a fair way forward'. Yet, she quickly relativises this wish saying: '[B]ut Spivak whispers that I, the privileged academic and "native informant" would then be ventriloquising for the subaltern'.[566] Weary of ventriloquising, Purkayastha instead centres her own position and relation to the archival documents in the lecture performance without letting that overshadow the main dancers as the actual subjects of the research.

Broadly speaking there are three main performative interruptions through which Purkayastha attempts to encounter lived experiences of the dancer, while also reflecting on the distance between herself and the historical persons. They are an appropriation of costume, an imagined dance of cursing and swearing, and a letter to the dancers. Each of these performative strategies reflects on a different dilemma of re-enacted dramaturgies and adds a layer of methodological commentary to the historic research.

### *Costume*

The costuming is the most obvious of the three interventions and is present from the very beginning of the performance. Purkayastha enters the presentation space dressed in a large winter coat, hat, scarf, and gloves and carrying a suitcase. She steps up to the lectern, and briefly enacts a slow turn while holding an imaginary veil before beginning to give her lecture. As she does so, she removes one item of winter clothing after the

[562] Purkayastha, 6.
[563] Purkayastha, 12.
[564] Purkayastha, 10.
[565] Purkayastha, 10.
[566] Purkayastha, 10.

other (sometimes throwing individual items into the audience) and reveals layer upon layer of mismatched but clearly connoted as 'Indian' pieces of clothing. In the end, Purkayastha is in dark jeans and professional blouse (a typical and no longer culturally specific attire for a performance scholar giving a lecture) while the floor is covered in discarded garments. At the end of the performance Purkayastha gathers up the flung pieces of clothing puts them in the suitcase and leaves behind an empty stage.

There are two reasons for this decision to illustrate the spoken part of the lecture with first the costumes and then the discarding of the clothes. In the first instance, her mix of clothing echoes the historical situation in which the dancers were not only given Western winter wear but also wore clothing from different parts of India, suggesting a much wider range of cultural traditions than the catch-all designation 'Indian village' allowed for, and which became collapsed under the white gaze of the spectators and anthropologists of the time. Purkayastha's decision to illustrate this mishmash can be seen not only as a tongue-in-cheek comment on the endurance of this white gaze, as contemporary audiences are also not very likely to pick up on the differences in style, but also as an ongoing negotiation of 'authentic' performance present in her lecture performance. While the mismatched garments worn by the historical performers served to signal 'authenticity' to the unknowing spectators, they also unveiled their cultural mish-mash to the scrutiny of a historical and culturally informed gaze. Thus, the garments Purkayastha wears as a performer point to the ongoingness of imperial violence (here presented as a wilful ignorance). By drawing connections between the cultural ignorance of spectators then and now, Purkayastha employs reenactment as a tactic to paint the past as 'unfinished business'.[567]

The second reason for this choice of costume lies in Purkayastha's wish to 'corporealize history'.[568] When researching the exhibition and finding out that the dancers were issued winter clothing and coats, she wondered what their dance might have looked and felt like muffled under the weight and shapelessness of warm clothing. In order to answer this question, Purkayastha decided to try this out for herself:

[567] Mark Franko cited in Purkayastha, 11.
[568] Purkayastha, 12.

> I wore a long skirt, a blouse, a dupatta as a veil, and on top of these I wore a long coat, hat, gloves, scarf and shoes. I tried to dance. I moved awkwardly, clumsily, unable to pirouette at speed, to traverse space fluidly. My hand gestures were muffled by the gloves. My neck and head movements were buried under the hat. My footwork vanished under the cover of shoes. Theirs was a clumsy, awkward dance. A dance muffled, buried, vanished in the cold, in the archives.[569]

This personal exploration is revealing and there remains a trace of it in the final performance. Yet, Purkayastha was aware that she needs to 'return this awkward and clumsy dance to the pages of history',[570] because she knows that reperforming any recognisably South Asian movements might work to reify the model of the 'exotic oriental dancer'[571] instead of subverting it. Rather than performing a complete movement sequence, she opts for a brief enactment of one of the poses shown in the contemporary illustration (a slow turn while holding a veil) at the beginning of the lecture, but abandons it quickly, replacing it instead with the flinging away of the discarded garments – a set of movements not immediately associated with any particularly culturally specific dance tradition. While Purkayastha acknowledges that 'a reenactment of the material conditions in which the Liberty *nautch* dancers may have moved was a useful starting point to imagining their corporeality',[572] she stresses that 'the limits of reenactment as a methodology in this context lay mainly in the impossibility of returning to a violent history without repeating or reifying its violence'.[573] The performative restraint she shows in this dramaturgical decision to not complete the gesture of the turn speaks of her attempt to flee or trouble the role of the 'native informant' (Spivak, 79) at the risk of corporeally ventriloquising a subaltern subject and re-performing problematic notions of authenticity for a mainly white, mainly bourgeois academic performance and dance studies audience.

In this sense, the chaotic choice of costume as well as the chaotic way of discarding it can be read as a play on the audience's expectations to observe the

[569] Purkayastha, 12–13.
[570] Purkayastha, 13.
[571] Purkayastha, 13.
[572] Purkayastha, 13.
[573] Purkayastha, 13.

'"authenticity" [of] the reimagined colonial past'[574] while simultaneously critiquing such expectations as one of the reasons why tropes like that of the 'exotic oriental dancer' persist. In using her own movement and the chosen costume as a historical exploration, Purkayastha stages her own confrontation with the archival materials but by enacting performative restraint and adding the discursive framing of the lecture, she not only points to the methodological limitations of contemporary reenactments, but also shows an awareness of her positionality and the positionality of her audience, for whom archival sources might be less legible. With each layer of clothing she discards, Purkayastha ridicules the trope of 'peeling off layers' to reach a genuine reading of the past. Thus, she ends the performance not in South Indian dress, but in the clothes of a contemporary dance scholar – pointing instead to their role in the construction, and we might say, critical fabulation of the past.

*Swearing Back*

A further way in which this idea of critical fabulation or historical fiction is manifested in the lecture performance is through the introduction of a series of imagined exchanges or exclamations of the historical performers. Purkayastha's research revealed that the female performers in the recreated 'village', Sahina Jayabanoo and Sheeta Thayi, were subjected to unsolicited physical touch. Multiple sources confirmed that visitors expressed sexual interest in the women, and some tried to touch them despite the 'clearly demarcated zones for spectators and those exhibited'.[575] The Liberty's exhibition was not unique in this and Purkayastha stresses that the research shows that this was a regular occurrence in human exhibits.[576] She uses this particular piece of information to create a very vivid interruption to her own lecture:

> When I re-performed the lecture at the opening plenary of the Dance Studies Association annual conference in 2018, I added another layer. I imagined what the dancers would have muttered under their breath when their buttocks were groped or their breasts pinched by spectators of the

[574] Purkayastha, 13.
[575] Purkayastha, 7.
[576] Purkayastha, 7.

> Liberty's display. I wrote a fiction in which the *nautch* dancers swore back. Along with my dance colleagues Melissa Blanco Borelli and Ann Cooper Albright, I performed a choreography of choral swearing, in which the filthiest of expletives were uttered, echoed, and repeated loudly.[577]

Here the imagined frustration of the historical subjects mixes with a contemporary anger about the conditions these women were kept in and the violence to which they were exposed and also becomes a comment on the archival practices that have conserved their experiences of this event so poorly. In view of the absence of any recordings of how this level of objectification felt to the dancers, Purkayastha turns to speculation in her attempt to unearth the affective remains of the event. She gestures to this realm of speculation through the mode of the chorus. The choral mode emphasises that this is not an individual speaking, they do not take on the roles of the historical subjects – clearly pointing away from reenactment at this moment in the performance. Instead, the swarming and echoing of expletives and swears de-personalises the speaker (and her specific position), while also gesturing to the more universal and still on-going reality of the sexual violence contained in the archive. The choice to break the solo-performance frame of the lecture at this point and invite other performer/scholars into the space also speaks to the imagined communal resistance present in this act. Instead of a lonely voice swearing and raging, the fact that this is presented as a group performance strengthens the solidaristic and subversive impulse of the scene.

Hartman, too, describes such a speculative fleeing of the confines of the archive by asking:

> Is it possible to exceed or negotiate the constitutive limits of the archive? By advancing a series of speculative arguments and exploiting the capacities of the subjunctive (a grammatical mood that expresses doubts, wishes, and possibilities), in fashioning a narrative, which is based upon archival research, and by that I mean a critical reading of the archive that mimes the

[577] Purkayastha, 13. Note: I did not see this version of the performance in person and have only seen this act of swearing performed by Purkayastha as a solo, where she half performed the actual curses and half narrated, what happened during this cooperation with other performers/scholars at the Dance Studies Association studies. When I reference the effects of this scene in the following paragraph, I rely on retellings from colleagues who were present at the event and Purkayastha's description of this moment in her article.

> figurative dimensions of history, I intended both to tell an impossible story and to amplify the impossibility of its telling.[578]

This tension of 'telling an impossible story' and amplifying the 'impossibility of its telling' is exemplified in this choreography of swearing back. While it is possible that the dancers might have muttered complaints and curses under their breath, the idea that they might have directed these curses at the spectators loudly and directly is harder to imagine given the potentially harsh and violent repercussions such a behaviour would have likely been met with. In this sense, this is – if not an impossible – then maybe an unlikely story; however, the absence of records – which necessitates such a speculative engagement – points towards the impossibility of telling such a story in the first place and is also why there is such joy and relief present in the act of Purkayastha, Borelli, and Albright swearing back. Hartman tellingly uses the word 'miming' here when talking about how the act of speculation gestures to the 'figurative dimensions of history'. Miming carries the connotation of relying on gesture and movement – thus denoting a corporeal involvement – while also being associated with presentation and make-believe. Miming towards the fabulative dimensions of history, therefore, can be seen as engaging in a moment of make-believe. Through their bodies and voices, the performers in Purkayastha's lecture performance engage in a moment of make-belief, which carries in it the potential for an imagined resistance to the material conditions of the past event. In trying to approximate the affective remains of that which was not captured in the archive, the performance also created a new affective engagement for the now. And it is this dual play between the imagined affective remains of frustration and anger and the actual joy in performing such a transgression, which the three performers exuded during this session, that made this performative interruption of the lecture a rich experience for the spectator and exemplified yet another corporeal strategy of reading and re-reading the archive.

### *A Letter to the Archive*

The last and potentially most memorable intervention Purkayastha makes into her investigation of the archive is a letter she wrote to the *nautch* dancers, which she reads

[578] Hartman, 'Venus in Two Acts', 11.

at the close of the lecture performance. In it, she re-iterates her own engagement with the archival documents, her position towards them, as well as their own actions of resistance and self-advocacy, which her research has uncovered. Instead of attempting to recreate their dance practice, she concedes that she cannot do so; gesturing not just to the limits of the archive (which as Taylor has shown is already restricted when reproducing non-text-based cultural practices) but also the limitations of the practice of reenactment. She reads:

> Dear Sahina, Sheeta and Sheik Ameer: yours is a dance I can never claim to reenact. I cannot. Yours is voice I can never claim to recover. I need not. You had a voice and you used it. But in fictionalising your history, I have in my body felt the tiniest fraction of the enormous weight and burden of empire that you did. I have overthrown, cast off and shed that burden, as you managed to do, even if partially. I swore back, as you may or may not have. I took some liberties. I appropriated your history by performing your story. But I also bit, pulled, spat at, shook off, flung, threw, cast off, undid and unhooked the part written for you by the archive.[579]

By reading this letter, she again opts for the discursive rather than the enacted (as she did with the half-executed dance pose and the lecture itself) so as not to expose the memories of the dancers to further symbolic violence. She draws on her own experience of 'corporealiz[ing] history' in her body via fictionalising their responses to the conditions of the exhibition but is careful to demarcate this from their lived experience of which she only experienced 'the tiniest fraction'.[580] She is adamant that her way of approximating their performance is not, as we saw in the example of *Zig Zig*, a way of reclaiming their voice, but instead a research method drawing on her own experience as a dancer and historian, geared towards not a reclaiming of but creating an intimacy with the past. The dramaturgical move of the letter is crucial here, as it allows her to shift perspective from talking *about* an archive to talking *to* it. By insisting that their own voices were heard (during their lifetimes and via the reception of the archive), Purkayastha upholds the distance between her position as the researcher and the subjects of her research. She

[579] Purkayastha, 'Decolonising Human Exhibits', 13.
[580] Purkayastha, 12.

does not project contemporary desires or wishes onto them, yet in addressing them directly, she found a different way of 'getting close' to them.

With the letter she leaves behind the realm of historical fiction without leaving the historical subjects behind. Via this solution, Purkayastha might have found a simple solution to one of Hartman's core dilemmas when dealing with the incompleteness and violence of the colonial archive. In her essay, Hartman talks about the need to practice narrative restraint, to not embellish or romanticise the past, to not provide closure although we as contemporary readers might be longing for it. Her reasons for this are valid. Like Purkayastha she does not wish to re-iterate the violence of the archive and knows of the dangers of making the past more bearable than it might have been – when the actual catastrophe lies in the cold annihilation of life (both of the physical bodies via the reality of the transatlantic slave trade as well as the social bodies, who have disappeared from the archive). However, Hartman still wavers in her decision to not give the two girls she writes about any form of ending or closure. She asks herself whether this is in fact a form of conceding to the powers of the archive:

> By retreating from the story of these two girls, was I simply upholding the rules of the historical guild and the "manufactured certainties" of their killers, and by doing so, hadn't I sealed their fate? Hadn't I too consigned them to oblivion? In the end, was it better to leave them as I found them?[581]

Although Hartman's reasons for 'leaving them as she found them' are transparent and understandable, Purkayastha letter charts a third option. One that is not invested in making up an 'alternative ending' or projecting current debates onto historical sources, but one that takes seriously the 'impossibilities of telling' the story of Empire and colonialism through archival research. Purkayastha does not leave them where she found them, but responds to them, answers their calls that echo through the historical documents and dances with them but not instead of them.

Through her close reading of archival materials both textually and through her body, Purkayastha's lecture performance offers a mode of reading again and reading anew not just the specific archival materials she deals with but also our position towards

[581] Hartman, 'Venus in Two Acts', 10.

the archive more generally. Hartman calls for a new reading of the archive that does not simply content itself with 'exposing the scandal' (of dehumanisation, objectification, etc.) but 'generate[s] a different set of descriptions' that 'imagine what could have been' and 'envision a *free state'* from the pre-determined consequences of the scandal.[582] Purkayastha's performance went beyond the scandal of the human exhibit. Her corporeal engagement added a set of descriptions to the verbal analysis in the lecture. The choice of costume created a spectacle of cultural signifiers while working simultaneously to unmask the idea of authenticity as a colonial fantasy. The chorus of swearing and cussing allowed for an imagined exploration of resistance, which was then expanded by the actual archival traces of material resistance unearthed in the historical labour dispute. And the letter meets the historical lives at eye-level. Here their experiences are not case studies of objects of analysis, which stand in for the violent effects of Empire, but individuals whose lives this lecture performance allows us to encounter.

In this sense, the lecture performance's engagement with the archive can be described in terms of what Stuart Hall called the 'living archive of the diaspora'. Hall insisted on the livingness of the archive in order to stress the changeability of our receptions of the archive. '"Living" means present, on-going, continuing, unfinished, open-ended',[583] says Hall, and thus encapsulates the key strategy of how the lecture performances featured in this chapter engage with colonial archives. By attending to the on-going and unfinished character of those imperial histories, they staged encounters with the archival materials that took seriously our embodied responses to certain affective remains (as captured in the archive, according to Schneider), as well as opened up new modes of engaging with the archive, which did not relegate it to a 'dead' object of the past,[584] but took it seriously as a living entity. Commenting on works that come from an engagement with the archive, Hall observes.

> The new work which will come to constitute significant additions to the archive will not be the same as that which was produced earlier, but it will be related to that body of work, if only in terms of how it inflects or departs from it. This notion of 'living' is strongly counter-posed to the common

[582] Hartman, 7, emphasis in original.
[583] Stuart Hall, 'Constituting an Archive', *Third Text* 15, no. 54 (1 March 2001): 89.
[584] Hall, 89.

> meaning accorded to 'tradition', which is seen to function like the prison-house of the past.[585]

Purkayastha's performance especially gestured to this limiting capacity of tradition when she remarked on the ways in which her attempting to re-perform some of the historical dances might pose a danger of re-orientalising these dancers and thus reenacting the symbolic and epistemic violence that they were subjected to. Her 'new work' came from the archive but did not remain there and thus reflects the construction of the archive while also performatively fleeing from its confines.

## Reenacting the Archive

While *Zig Zig* tried to bring the knowledge of the archive to its audience by 'giving voice' to its lost voices, Purkayastha draws political power from an epistemic position that refuses to 'stand-in' for or 'give voice' to subjects of the colonial archive. Yet, what both performances examined in this chapter have in common is that they mount modes of reading the archive contrapuntally, thus letting in the possibility of experiencing archival documents outside of what a traditional historiographic approach to historical documents would permit. They both use the performers' bodies to stage the encounter – thus drawing attention to the living histories and current legacies of these archival violences, again offering a view beyond the reading of the document. They take seriously the knowledges created in and experienced with bodies and use them critically to make the gaps of the archive palpable to contemporary audiences. And while they inhabit different positions in relation to their object of study and choose different levels of intimacy and distance towards it, they draw on the ambiguity of the lecture performance (which lets the speaker oscillate and reflect on their position in relation to their object of study) to perform their resistance to knowledge practices that strive for certainty and easy answers.

Other than many of the lecture performances discussed so far in this thesis, the ambiguity of the form here is less open to exploitation by commodification – as is the case, for example, for the online lecture performances in Chapter 2 where process has

[585] Hall, 89.

become repackaged as product. Drawing attention to process and its limitations here acts not as a subsumption but as a refusal – to fill in the gaps, to acknowledge the superiority of the written record, to yield to the demand of stepping into a certain role (in Purkayastha's case). They use the ambiguity of the form – between commentary and embodiment – to negotiate their own position in relation to the hegemonic knowledge of the archive and navigate this pull between distanciation (from the materials and the archival subjects) and identification skilfully. They are more careful when it comes to fictionalisation than, for example, Jon McKenzie was in his lecture performance. While they also draw on ideas of speculation and fabulation to be able to make points that lies outside of the strict boundaries of the archive, they do not opt for pure fabulation (to the point where he draws on debunked theories). This upholds the critical aspect of the distanciation produced by lecture performances, and makes them productive as spaces of uncertainty, which nonetheless can draw on the performative strategies of dancing, singing, costuming, and swearing to point to a more intimate engagement with the archive. This constitutes a critique of the hegemonic knowledge of the archive. According to de Sousa Santos 'a distinct feature of hegemonic knowledge is its capacity to impose its [criteria for what constitutes] knowledge and [criteria for what constitutes] ignorance on the rest of the knowledges'.[586] As part of the ecologies of knowledge that negotiates and answers to the dominance of the archive, the lecture performances in this chapter 'have a broader view both of what we know and what we do not know',[587] and they consider the possibility that the position of not-knowing and not being able to know might be used productively to point to a different engagement with the legacies of those archives and make their experience palpable to audiences unfamiliar with the stories they represent.

[586] De Sousa Santos, *Epistemologies of the South*, 209.
[587] De Sousa Santos, 209.

# Chapter 6: Lecture Performance as Embodied Forensic Analysis

In the last chapter I argued that lecture performances, such as Prarthana Purkayastha's *Decolonising the Human Exhibit* or Laila Soliman's *Zig Zig*, respond to Edward Said's call to 're-read the archive contrapuntally' to counter the damaging effects of the 'archival impulse', re-contextualise colonial violences documented in the archive, and reclaim the voices of those silenced by the archive. In their search for stories of resistance, both performances had to turn to colonial archives because the logics of colonialisation dictate that no alternative archive from the perspective of the colonised exists. Thus, the only way of locating these lived stories is in the colonial archive, whose primary purpose is not to preserve their stories but rather to disappear them. In both cases, the speakers use their embedded cultural and experiential knowledge to tease stories out of these archival materials that might have passed other readers by, and in both cases, they draw on their own bodies and physicality in the re-telling of these historical events. What these kinds of lecture performances have in common is that they are invested in the countering of a dominant archival narrative and in the process examine, make use of, and critique the politics of reenactment.

This chapter engages in an analysis of lecture performances that come to the topic of historical violence from a different perspective: one that is perhaps trickier and thornier to navigate. Their focus lies not in (colonial) stories and identities that have been ignored or disappeared by the apparatus of the archive but instead they are concerned with dominant cultural repertoires of fascism and white supremacy. They question how fascist and supremacist ideologies act on and in bodies and ask how these corporeal repertoires are being historicised. I suggest that these performances can be understood as forensic in nature. If by forensics we understand the study of the material evidence left behind when a crime is committed (and the larger legal and scientific frameworks that govern how this evidence is being made legible), we can think of the lecture performances in this chapter as the study of what gets left behind ideologically. What are the cultural and corporeal residues of dominant fascists and supremacist ideologies and how do we carry their legacies in our bodies? To answer these questions, I turn to a performance trilogy by the Munich-based performance collective called Hauptaktion, a

group loosely based around the director and performer Oliver Zahn, the cultural anthropologist Julian Warner and the dramaturg Hannah Saar.[588]

In the years between 2015 and 2018, Hauptaktion produced a trilogy of lecture performances all titled *Situation with xxx*.[589] All three performances use and stage archival documents in a way that merges archival re-enactment and academic commentary. And all three – in varying levels of explicitness – ask the audience to position themselves towards the documents they are being confronted with on stage. Their lecture performances probed politically and culturally sensitive topics (such as the legacy of the fascist salute, the practice of black face in dance, and the public showing of extreme violence) and merged historic research with physical enactment to examine particular performance histories and corporeal repertoires. This contentiousness makes them harder to approach: Instead of re-discovering or rectifying past injustices, they engage with historical violence from the perspective of the perpetrators (albeit, as we will see, through various modes of distanciation). They are interested in examining the body politics of the dominant culture under fascist and/or racist regimes.

Unlike the performances by Soliman and Purkayastha covered in the previous chapter, Hauptaktion's performances do not engage in critical fabulation, which, given their content-matter, could be seen as cynical or even presumptuous. Instead, they rely on a rather sterile and restrained performance set-up, which privileges factualness over fabulation and speculation. Hauptaktion's performances feature very contentious performance repertoires (specifically the history of the Nazi salute and the history of minstrelsy and blackfacing) and, I argue, use the form of the lecture performance to stage a form of embodied forensic analysis to invite their audiences to consider how remnants of historical repertoires persist in the present.[590]

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[588] Between 2014 and 2020 Hauptaktion produced several research-based performances, which toured internationally at various performance and dance festivals. In 2020 the group announced that they have decided to dedicate more time to individual projects and will end their collaboration in this form.

[589] Hauptaktion advertised these performances as essay performances, gesturing to the fact that they each contained a large discursive portion, which is read out in the performance. This act of reading-aloud is why I think they can also be described as lecture performances, as lectures often entail reading a pre-written text. The position of the speaker is obscured or complicated in these performances but this kind of negotiation of the parameters of a lecture is often a substantial part of the lecture performances' commentary on academic convention.

[590] Here I draw on Saidiya Hartman, who also asked what this 'intimacy of our experience with the lives of the dead' ('Venus in two Act', 4) entails when those considered are not the lives of the colonised or oppressed but the bodies and histories of the oppressors? Speaking of the historical documents of a

I focus on forensics as a field of knowledge creation because art and performance studies have seen a rise of projects invested in forensic investigation as a research and performance methodology. Groups like the Turner-Prize-nominated London-based interdisciplinary research network Forensic Architecture have popularised the term 'performance forensics' to refer to a range of 'cutting-edge techniques in spatial and architectural analysis, open source investigation, digital modelling, and immersive technologies, as well as documentary research [and] situated interviews'.[591] They use these techniques to investigate human rights violations perpetrated by states, police forces, militaries, and corporations and crucially structure their artistic output as evidence collection. The results of their forensic research are also presented in courtrooms and parliamentary enquiries, which means their exhibition aesthetic is often influenced by the logic of the courtroom, seeks to eschew any suggestion of subjective interpretation, and strives to let the documents (as evidence) speak for themselves as much as possible. This artistic turn towards investigative aesthetics is mirrored also by a broader cultural turn and fascination with forensic methods. Pointing towards a rise of entertainment products classed as 'true crime' – which spans documentaries, podcasts, TV-shows and movies about real-life criminal cases – James Frieze observes a current trend in forensic practices (not just within art), and links this to this particular political moment. In *Theatrical Performance and the Forensic Turn*, he examines the current forensic impulse and notes that the 'rampant spread of the term 'forensic' is symptomatic of what forensic aesthetics responds to: a large-scale breakdown of certainty about the basis of truth'.[592]

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slave holder, who brutally raped enslaved women and tortured enslaved men and then wrote about his acts in his diary in Latin, Hartman notes, '[i]t is too easy to hate a man like [this slave holder]; what is more difficult is to acknowledge as our inheritance the brutal Latin phrases spilling onto the pages of his journals' (6). This idea of 'acknowledging' something (terrible) as 'our inheritance' strikes me as crucial, if difficult, to the strategies of the lecture performance discussed here.

[591] Forensic Architecture Agency, 'About', Artist Website, n.d., https://forensic-architecture.org//about/agency. Note: As we will discover in this chapter Hauptaktion's performance strategies differ from these very data and tech-based forms of performance forensics. They do not focus on digital modelling and architecture, but they do engage in open-source document investigation and highlight and question the immersive qualities of certain media like the YouTube video. Following other scholars, who have conceptualised performance's investment in the idea of forensics like James Frieze, I am interested in establishing these techniques are reaching beyond associations with clinical pathological or data-analysis. As this chapter focuses on corporeal repertoires of dominant (and harmful) ideologies, the forensic techniques explored also focus more on the embodied practices, such as reenactment rather than tech-based approaches.

[592] Frieze, *Theatrical Performance and the Forensic Turn*, 7.

This breakdown of trust in what constitutes the basis of knowledge is what makes the area of forensics, and performance forensics especially interesting for the lecture performance, where a similar turn away from fictionalisation towards more fact-based approaches has been observed. At a symposium I attended at the Kunsthalle Mainz in May 2022 – held in conjunction with the solo exhibition 'We Lived So Well Together' by the Lebanese artist Walid Raad – theatre scholar Benjamin Wihstutz observed a general shift towards forensic and investigative aesthetics in contemporary art. Wihstutz theorised that artists who emerged in the 1990s or early 2000s, like Walid Raad or Mounira Al Solh, often drew on practices of meta-fictionalisation and fabulation in their artistic practices, while more recently – in the age of alternative facts and post-truth – contemporary artists, like Rabih Mroué or Forensic Architecture turn to the hyper-factual, that what can be evidenced (and in the case of Forensic Architecture must even be able to be used in legal proceedings) in an attempt to use art as activism, and to gesture to its ability to construct verifiable truth in an unstable world. They are suspicious of any form or pretence or artifice and rely on strategies of reproduction that are independent of the person engaging in the reproduction. For example, Mroué's reconstructions of amateur videographic material of the Syrian civil war (in his lecture performance *The Pixelated Revolution*) can be read as such an attempt to make artistic and academic strategies of performance analysis fruitful for crafting and expanding aesthetics of resistance to state-inflicted violence. I am intrigued by this theory which contrasts modes of fictionalisation with analytical and investigative strategies. I am sceptical of Wihstutz's periodisation, where one approach is thought to have replaced another – after all Soliman's and Purkayastha's performances were developed at the same time as the works of Forensic Architecture, and they do use modes of fictionalisation. However, I do think it is useful to consider them as alternative reconstructive practices: not instead of fictionalisation but in addition to it.

Where Forensic Architecture points our attention to residues of harmful events, Hauptaktion's lecture performances engage with the living embodiments (or residues) of harmful ideologies and show how these repertoires have become habituated in contemporary bodies. Here, a focus on forensic aesthetics can be seen as expanding Rebecca Schneider's considerations of repertoire and reenactment, whose examination of the US Civil War reenactments hinted at the interconnections of whiteness and

memory culture within them but does not go into detail about how certain forms of reenactment (such as the war reenactment) could be seen as upholding repertoires of whiteness and what it would take to critically deconstruct them.[593] I expand on Schneider's reading which aligns historical analysis with performance practice by pointing to their shared goal of understanding 'the causes and effects of feelings, and thinkings, and doing'.[594] By reading reenactment as a forensic strategy, I invest in an analysis of the causes and effects of feelings via what Schneider terms 'affective remains'.[595] I argue that the strategies employed in Hauptaktion's performances can be described as a form of embodied forensic analysis, which stages a controlled environment where historical evidence can be viewed dispassionately, while at the same time insisting on the high artifice and constructedness of such a situation.

Here the lecture performance expands modes of forensic analysis through a corporeal dimension thus adding to the analytical and critical abilities of the method. By diversifying strategies of reenactment, embodied forensic analysis allows for an engagement with the contemporary affects that surround harmful performance repertoires and offers a way of embodying – rather than just stating – the argument of a forensic research project. In this chapter, I investigate the reenactment as a forensic strategy of the lecture performance through three main areas of analysis: First, the staging of a controlled environment in which a certain performance repertoire can be examined, and which prepare the space for an investigative gaze; second, the construction of evidence via forensic techniques such as staging and analysing documents; and third, the practice of dissection as a form of media analysis. Before presenting these strategies alongside the three lecture performances featured in Hauptaktion's trilogy, I begin by briefly outlining the similarities between forensic and theatrical environments and establishing the epistemic stakes of performance forensics, which are not interested in merely reproducing modes of forensic analysis but in their performance also deconstruct them.

[593] Schneider, *Performing Remains*, 64–70 and 170–79.
[594] Schneider, *Theatre and History*, 49–50.
[595] Schneider, *Performing Remains*, 101.

## Performance Forensics

Forensics can be seen as a specific representational strategy to gain knowledge of a past event. In *Theatrical Performance and the Forensic Turn*, Frieze describes forensics as the context of the activities of a legal trial or enquiry in which experts are called upon and 'truth must be established'.[596] Like the theatrical presentation or the lecture, an audience plays a crucial part in the construction of a forensic process. Frieze describes the three main elements of forensics as the 'object', the 'mediator', and the 'forum'. The act of presenting in front of such a forum or audience is captured in the etymology of the word itself. Frieze notes that the word 'forum', like the word 'forensic', derives from the Latin *forensis*, referring to 'the practice and skill of making an argument before a professional, political, or legal gathering'.[597] Commenting on the structural similarities between the forum and theatron, Frieze observes the epistemological similarities between theatre and forensics:

> The forum and the theatron are historically and structurally related as culturally demarcated spaces for looking and for making apparent. Both theatrical and forensic method make human behaviour the object of archaeological enquiry. Both treat their subjects as evidence. […] For actions to be evidentially significant, they must be extracted through authorial desecration of context, ripped from their space and time and re-planted in the controlled environment of the forum/theatron.[598]

With this we can understand both the theatre and forensics as places of looking but controlled looking. What is being presented is not random but meticulously planned to create a specific impression. In this sense it is a constructed gaze that allows for a critical engagement with whatever is presented within the parameters of the controlled environment. Within the context of performance, this idea of looking again is of course not exclusive to a forensic approach. We have seen a revisiting and reconstruction of archival materials in the previous chapter. Here, I suggest that this focus on a controlled and therefore to a certain extend neutralised environment can make it possible to examine contentious performance histories, which – without this particular framing – are

[596] Frieze, *Theatrical Performance and the Forensic Turn*, 6.
[597] Frieze, 2, emphasis in original.
[598] Frieze, 20.

at risk of reproducing these violent histories. I show that the lecture performance is particularly apt at setting up this controlled environment of 'revisiting' or 'looking again' at engrained and embodied repertoires of historical events.

In his article 'On Performance Forensics: The Political Economy of Reenactments' Branislav Jakovljević employs the term of 'forensic theatre' to negotiate the tension between reconstruction (as a forensic technique), which is focused on 'repeatability' and 'strives to overcome the transience of performance and performers' and the residues that are explored in forensic theatre (what he calls the 'indexes of mortality and death').[599] This tension is what puts forensics and reenactment in a productive relationship with each other:

> [F]orensic theater is not a past event restored to life, but the way of seeing assisted and enhanced by technology which reveals traces of the past in the present. Both reperformance and forensic theater address that which is not visible. The former revives past events and in doing so brings them back into the field of vision. The latter changes the scope of the field of vision to include that which was deemed invisible.[600]

These qualities strike me as crucial for an investigation of performance forensics in the lecture performance and I argue are present in the case studies discussed here. Reenactment as a forensic strategy is able to stage a 'way of seeing […] which reveals traces of the past in the present' and makes visible what is 'deemed invisible'. This also points to the way in which forensic theatres or performances question how knowledge is produced via these forensic methods. While performance forensics broadly speaking do engage with forensic methods (such as digital reconstructions of crime scenes, witness testimony, or medical evidence), they are not interested in simply reproducing a forensic logic unquestioned. Frieze and others are keen to differentiate artistic involvements with forensics with actual forensic enquiries. Frieze aims to mobilise the 'generative power of doubt' which he sees as 'integral to the theatre' in opposition to the 'reductive power of forensic logic'.[601] Similarly, Matthew Fuller and Eyal Weizman seek to differentiate modes

[599] Branislav Jakovljević, 'On Performance Forensics: The Political Economy of Reenactments', *Art Journal* 70, no. 3 (1 September 2011): 51.
[600] Jakovljević, 51.
[601] Frieze, *Theatrical Performance and the Forensic Turn*, 24.

of aesthetic investigations from practical application of forensic evidence (such as in courts). In *Investigative Aesthetics: Conflicts and Commons in Politics of Truth*, they argue that these kinds of staged investigations are not only interested in staging evidence of a crime but also reflecting the construction of evidence in the first place:

> Aesthetic investigations have a double aim: they are at the same time investigations of the world and enquiries into the means of knowing it. This means that they seek accountability both for events and for the devices with which we perceive them. They deal with the production of evidence while questioning and interrogating the notion of evidence, and with it the cultures of knowledge production or truth claims that it relies upon. They engage in the presentation of facts while being aware of the way each presentation, indeed each media form, can distort the very facts they produce. They seek to establish claims to truth while criticising the institutions of power and knowledge with their monopoly over the mechanisms of truth production.[602]

Performance forensics are thus invested in a diversification and critical reflection of forensic practices. Again, we see an interpretation that calls on artistic production to interrogate the conditions of knowledge and the media-specificity of the technologies engaged in the production of legal and historical truth. I argue that the lecture performance is very helpful in staging this construction of evidence, thus pointing to the limits of such an (empirical) mode of analysis. By drawing attention to what is presented as fact and how facts are presented, lecture performances test the devices theatre and performance have at their disposal – most prominently the reenactment – to create truth claims and controlled environments.

## Building a Controlled Environment

*Once the audience is seated, a young female performer enters the black-box stage. She briefly stands at the front centre of the stage and inspects the people sitting in the front row. Then she removes her red long-sleeve jumper, revealing a green tank top, and places the jumper at the back of the stage. She returns to her spot centre stage and slowly raises her right arm until it is lifted in the unmistakable angle of the Nazi salute. There she remains. After a couple of seconds, a voice from the off begins to talk: 'This posture is the topic of this piece. The title of this piece is* Situation with Outstretched Arm*. This is the*

[602] Fuller and Weizman, *Investigative Aesthetics*, 15–16.

*arrangement of this piece: A voice – this voice – and a body in this space – this body, Sara – who is assuming this position. Let's take a close look at this position.' For the next minute Sara rotates slowly around her own axis, giving the audience a chance to observe the pose from all angles.*[603]

In this opening of Hauptaktion's first performance of the trilogy *Situation with Outstretched Arm* (*Situation mit Ausgestrecktem Arm*, 2015) we see immediately how the set-up of the performance is used to establish a certain environment of examination, which directs the both the direction and the mode of the audience's gaze. The stage is bare aside from the performer – Sara Tamburini[604] – which focuses all attention on her, and the voice from off-stage intensifies this by inviting the audience to look at the performed posture. Her gradual turning established the pace of the piece, which is intentionally slowed down to enable close examination. Also, the articulate, and matter-of-fact tone of the male voice is reminiscent of a report dictation that we might associate with medical contexts, such as a pathology report and establishes the scientific mode of engagement embraced by the performance. Next the voice (pre-recorded by Helmut Becker) engages in constructing of the scope of the enquiry. 'This is the posture this piece is about',[605] the audience is informed; and to narrow down which posture exactly, Tamburini spends the next few moments experimenting with the limitations of the pose. She moves the arm diagonally to the side; she leans forward bringing her upper body horizontally to the floor or makes a fist. Each time her movement is met with a firm statement, 'This is not the posture this piece is about'.[606] Having established the parameters of the enquiry, the voice turns to the scientific or disaffected mode of looking the piece seeks to emulate. Meticulously reciting the Latin name for each of the muscles involved in the creation and holding of this body position.

[603] Hauptaktion, *Situation Mit Ausgestrecktem Arm (Situation with Outstretched Arm)*, November 2015, Vimeo Recording, November 2015, 00:57-01:28, Kammerspiele, Munich.
[604] Tamburini performed in the production for two years before the role was taken over by Isabell Przemus. Both performers are German, but Tamburini had dual citizenship in Germany and Switzerland.
[605] Hauptaktion, *Situation Mit Ausgestrecktem Arm (Situation with Outstretched Arm)*, 02:33.
[606] *Hauptaktion, 02:38.*




**Figure 27**: Situation 01: Explaining the anatomy of the Nazi Salute. Sara Tamburini in Hauptaktion's *Situation with Outstretched Arm* (Gasteig, Munich 2015). Photo: Regina Heiland.

With this simple introduction Hauptaktion set up the space of the stage as a space of investigative looking and turn it into a controlled environment, where the performance of the Nazi salute is de-contextualised in order to be re-contextualised as the object of a performance forensic examination. The performance establishes the situation of the forum with the voice as the mediator between the object of study – the gesture of the Nazi salute – and the audience before introducing the actual context of the investigation, which is that of the history of art and the representation of this gesture throughout art history. Speaking of the realm of art, the voice says:

> Here is where this posture has its origins, this is its typical environment: the gallery, the museum, the cinema, the stage; the space of art. This is where it returns again and again. Here, this posture can be examined without interference. Here it can be admired without interference, here it can be loathed without interference. Here we can view it as art. So, let's talk about art.[607]

[607] *Hauptaktion, 04:15-04.51.*

Examining the posture without interference (like such things as cultural context) on the one hand, sets-up the context of the investigation, on the other, it already points to the specific historic and cultural context in which this performance takes place. In Germany and Austria, the public performance of the Nazi salute is illegal with the notable exception that it can be performed in artistic contexts (such a period movies). *Situation with Outstretched Arm* premiered at the Gasteig in Munich in February 2015 and deals with the politics of representation of this gesture via its representation in art. Hauptaktion were spurred on by a controversy in 2012, when German performance artist Jonathan Meese performed the gesture in the context of a penal discussion hosted by the *Spiegel* newspaper at the University of Kassel. This caused outrage and public debate. In the court case following the incident Meese appealed to the legal loophole, which makes allowances for the gesture's usage in art and won.

Following this controversy, Hauptaktion conceived of its performance as a reaction and response to Meese's provocation. Instead of performing the gesture without context and in a public space (not designated as a space of performance art), the production goes to great lengths to, first, contextualise the gesture through the use of its art historical records and to, second, stress the situation (of a theatrical black box) in which the performance takes place. It makes clear that the gesture finds its origin in art and not – as is the power of the lasting myth attached to this gesture – in Ancient Rome. Examining the earliest evidence from art historical materials the production makes it clear that the first records of the gesture we have date back to neo-classical French art of the 1800s.[608] The production shows the history of the gesture as an invented tradition, which mobilises the imagined glories of Ancient Rome to harness for political purposes: from the French revolutionaries to the Italian and later the German fascists. The strict formalism of the gesture, in turn, helped train the 'folk body', a way of disciplining the body into a fascist subject. The voice describes it as a 'choreography of the masses' and a 'medium to manufacture consent' for fascist rule.

[608] Jacques-Louis David's 1784 neo-classical depiction of the 'Oath of the Horatii' is credited with the popularisation of the idea of a 'Roman salute', which is what the Italian fascists will term the gesture later on: Saluto Romano.



Some of the images *Situation with Outstretched Arm* refers to but does not show. **Figure 28** (upper left): Jacques-Louis David, *Oath of the Horatii*, painting, Louvre Paris, 1784. Image: Google Art Project. **Figure 29** (upper right): Screenshot from *Scipio Africanus: The Defeat of Hannibal*, film, dir. Carmine Gallone. 1937. **Figure 30** (lower left): Benito Mussolini at a Speech in Genoa (14 May 1938) in the Piazza della Vittoria with the Arch of Victory in Background. **Figure 31** (lower right): Jacques-Louis David, *The Tennis Court Oath*, painting, Musée National du Château de Versailles, 1791. Image: Google Art Project

This strict formalism is also what is being picked up on this performance. Through Tamburini's body the production finds a way of restaging and thus taking the audience through the history of the gesture both in the realm of paintings and early cinema and later in the realm of political rallies and public performances. In 17 chapters the voice-over then leads the audience through a cultural history of the gesture, while the performer faces the task of upholding the pose for the duration of the lecture which is about 40 minutes long. While she gets some short breaks between some of the early scenes, those become fewer and fewer as the show progresses and the physical effort it takes to hold this body posture for that long becomes obvious. The performer's arm begins to tremble, and she begins to sweat as she fights to see this performance of endurance through to the end.

While the performance is clear about its intention of setting up a controlled environment in which to examine and analyse the Nazi salute, its dramaturgical strategies also depart from forensic standards early on. While a forensic approach would warrant a

presentation of 'all of the evidence', and we might thus reasonably expect to view the art historical paintings and early cinema, the performance restrains itself by substituting the images with the body of the performer. While the audio lecture leads the audience through the chronological development of the 'saluto romano' and its jump from the realm of art to the realm of body politics, the performance never shows the audience any of the discussed images or documents. Instead, it uses the performer's body and the voice-over to describe them in some detail. Tamburini's body, thus, stands in for the images the audience is asked to construct in their own minds. This refusal to show the images produces an interesting juxtaposition as it asks audiences to engage with the art historical commentary via the stand-in of the performer's body. Her physical struggle is symbolically extended to the messy politics of the history of the gesture. By substituting the images (such as David's painting and stills from early silent movies to photographs of fascist rallies), the performance consciously enacts a kind of performative restraint as Tamburini's expression is decidedly neutral and does not re-enact the affects of the images. There is no sense of triumph in the moments that describe images from the French Revolution and the pathos and national pride, we associate with representations of the Nazi salute as it was implemented in mass rallies during the Hitler's regime, is absent. Instead, these descriptions are contrasted with Tamburini's growing pain and discomfort. And even though this discomfort is physically induced, it is difficult not to read it as an expression of Tamburini's (and likely our own) sense of repulsion in light of the gesture. Here, we see an idea of performance forensics enacted. Weizman and Frieze speak of an 'immersion' into the evidence,[609] as a way of 'finding unexpected commonalities and perspectives that illuminate and align previously hidden aspects of a problem'.[610] Substituting the images with the performer's body the audience is being presented with a different perspective. Setting up the examination from the perspective of art history or the anatomy of the gesture is one thing, in order to show the gesture's disciplining function, however, an embodied approach is necessary. The voice-over stresses multiple times that the fascist salute needs to be read as a technology for manufacturing consent. From early iterations of an oath to a leader to later uses as a

[609] Frieze, *Theatrical Performance and the Forensic Turn*, 21.
[610] Fuller and Weizman, *Investigative Aesthetics*, 159.

disciplining tool for a 'folk' body the gesture is not to be separated from its association with state-inflicted violence. By exposing herself to this mode of corporeal disciplining, Tamburini engages the strategies of the reenactment to foster an epistemic immersion into an aspect of the gesture's history that would otherwise remain unseen by the audience.




Figure 32: Situation 12: 'Olympia – Fest der Völker'., Tamburini has been holding this position for about 15 minutes at this point and the strain is starting to show. Sara Tamburini in Hauptaktion's *Situation with Outstretched Arm* (Gasteig, Munich 2015). Photo: Regina Heiland.

The Nazi salute can be seen here as a representation of what Lauren Berlant calls the 'ordinary of violence',[611] where the gesture itself does not immediately produce physical violence, but its effects (the disciplining function and the creation of a folk body) produce an ideology (the manufacturing of consent) which justifies, accepts, and ultimately welcomes the violence committed in its name. By submitting herself to this gesture, Tamburini explores her own implication in the violent history of the gesture as a German national. Drawing on Michael Rothberg, I want to suggest that Hauptaktion's

[611] Brad Evans, 'Without Exception: On the Ordinariness of Violence. Interview with Lauren Berlant', *Los Angeles Review of Books*, 30 July 2018, sec. Interview, https://lareviewofbooks.org/article/without-exception-on-the-ordinariness-of-violence/.

performance stages an 'implicated subject'. In his book by the same name, Rothberg argues for a need to move away from the 'victim/perpetrator binary' that shapes our understanding of racist and antisemitic violence.[612] Rothberg argues that those descendant from perpetrators of historical violence are not perpetrators of the same acts as their ancestors but are rather 'implicated subjects'. As such, these implicated subjects have a responsibility to address and, if possible, repair, the crimes of their ancestors. Rothberg sees confronting those acts, and the way those descendants might still be benefitting from the hierarchies and inequalities produced by those acts as 'one of the most urgent political tasks of our time'.[613] The forensic set-up of the controlled environment allows Tamburini to confront her own – and by extension her German audience's – implicated relation to the Nazi Salute and to address the reproduction of its (extra)ordinary violence.

In addition to the reenactment strategy which sees the performer's body act as a substitution for the images discussed in the performance, there is also a dramaturgical doubling familiar to the lecture performance at play. While the spoken essay would also work perfectly well on its own or as a silently read text, the performer's body intensifies what is being said. We, as the audience, can hear which muscle groups are involved in producing the gesture, while also being able to observe their activation via the performer's body. This ironic 'show and tell' is, however, alienated by the nature of the gesture itself, whose actual physical performance raises the stakes of what is being said, and changes our orientation towards it. Without the intervention of the performer's body, the text might 'merely' be seen as an academic research paper on the history of the fascist gesture. The performance of the gesture changes the reading of the essay from an analytical exercise into a provocation for the audience. Tamburini performing the fascist salute at the same time as its history and the genocidal violence it stands for are excavated in the voice-over might create an uneasiness and claustrophobia in the audience, as they are unable to escape the oppressive legacy of the gesture. And while the voice interacts with Tamburini at various points, asking her whether she would have 'consented' with this gesture to fascist rule or whether she feels her body has been

[612] Michael Rothberg, *The Implicated Subject: Beyond Victims and Perpetrators* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2019), 6.
[613] Rothberg, 10.

disciplined into fascism already ('Do you feel fascist yet?'[614]), this interaction remains one-sided as Tamburini refuses to answer. The questions then are indirect questions to the audience and are asking the members of the audience to reflect on their own complicity in this particular performance and the legacy of the fascist salute.[615]

Another aspect of the controlled environment the performance set-up is the temporal elongation of situation, which extends the amount of time that is afforded to the act of looking and examining. I've already mentioned the slow-motion turn in the beginning of the performance, another aspect of this time stretch lies in the extension of how long the gesture is endured. *Situation with Outstretched Arm* turns this gesture, which is usually portrayed as abrupt and quite stark, into a feat of endurance that unhinges its temporal representation. In asking the performer as well as the audience to endure this prolonged gesture, the performance confronts us with an extended interruption of the present by the past and asks the audience to unpick fascist myth building as a 'history of the present'.[616] Tamburini holds the fascist salute for almost 40 minutes (with small breaks), thereby taking Giorgio Agamben's idea of the gesture as something that is endured to the extreme. Describing the gesture, Agamben writes, '[w]hat characterizes gesture is that in it nothing is being produced or acted, but rather something is being endured and supported. […] But in what way is an action endured and supported?'.[617] The production is clear on how an action is being endured and what it asks of an audience in enduring the witnessing of this extended gesture. The audience is allowed to observe the gesture, which enforces the sterility of the set-up, but at the same time they bear witness to the physical toll this endurance takes on her body. The pain (that before long becomes visible in her body and on her face) breaks through the sterile set-up of the performance that so clearly differentiates between context (voice-over) and performance (the actions of the performer). Here, the performance stages a prolonged forensic gaze, while also questioning the legitimacy or appropriateness of its own set-up.

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[614] Hauptaktion, *Situation Mit Ausgestrecktem Arm (Situation with Outstretched Arm)*, [19:45].
[615] Interestingly this substitution is also found in the topic of the lecture performance itself. As the voice-over essay notes, the prohibition of the gesture of the fascist salute acts as a substitution of prohibiting the extremist ideologies for which it stands. Legally prohibiting those extremist convictions would go against the right to freedom of thought enshrined in the German constitution, so the law prohibiting the expression of these convictions acts as a placeholder of sorts.
[616] Hartman, 'Venus in Two Acts', 4.
[617] Giorgio Agamben, 'Notes on Gesutre', in *Philosophers on Film from Bergson to Badiou: A Critical Reader*, ed. Christopher Kul-Want (New York: Columbia University Press, 2019), 215.

This does not mean that the show is trying to elicit sympathy for the performer as she enacts the Nazi salute, but rather that her pain and discomfort become symbolic for the enduring legacies of fascist ideologies, which still circulate in our culture and – and this is the shocking proposition of this performance – in our bodies.

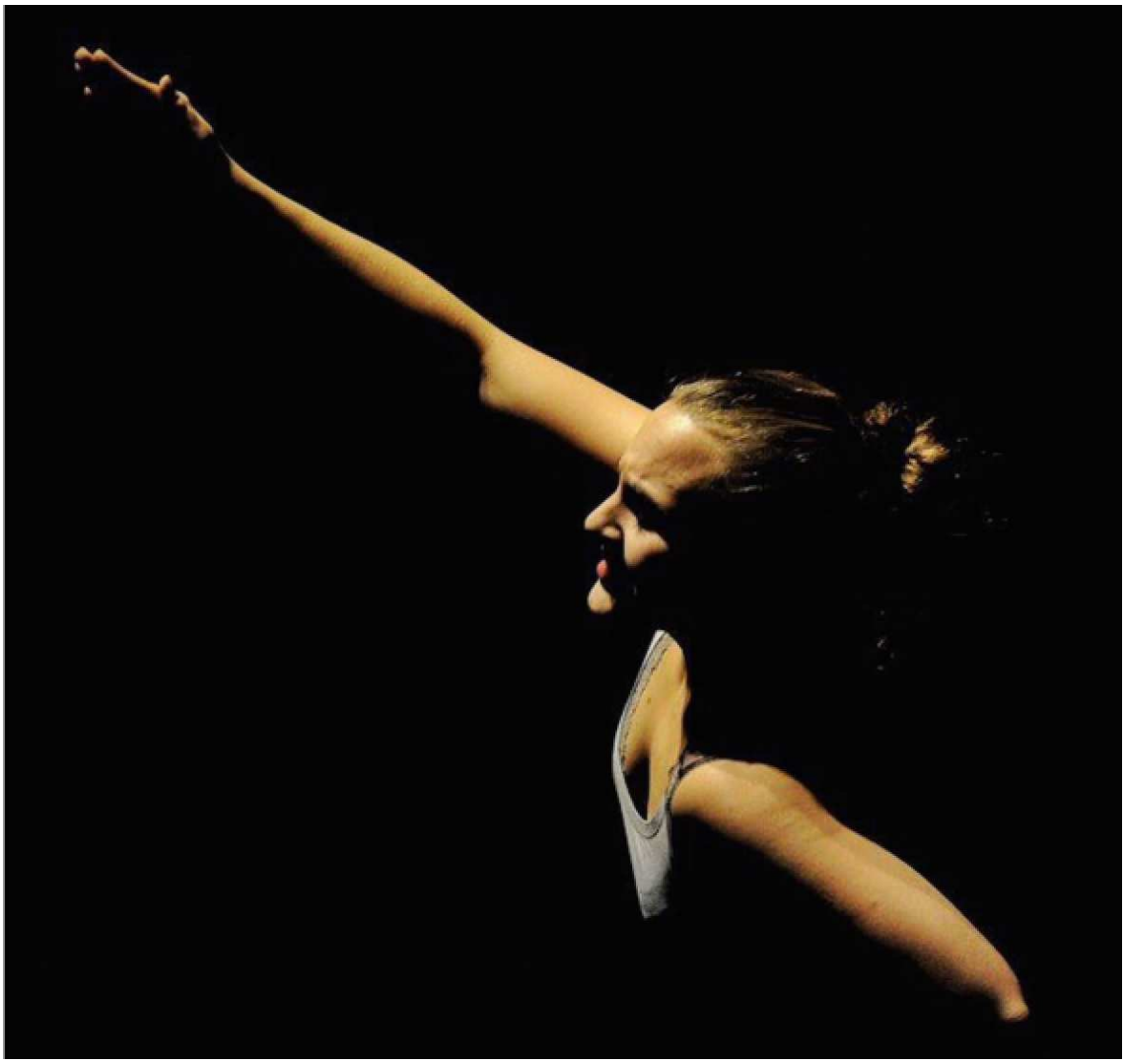


Figure 33: Close-up of Sara Tamburini showing the effort it is taking her to uphold the salute for an extended period of time in Hauptaktion's *Situation with Outstretched Arm* (Gasteig, Munich 2015). Photo: Ricardo Espinosa.

The core question the performance asks, I suggest, is not whether it is ever acceptable to perform such a gesture (although that is part of it) but what it means to engage with the legacy of such a performance repertoire by refusing to delegate it to a bygone past. The performance positions itself against voices that either seek to instrumentalise the fascist salute as pure provocation or wish to ignore its continued representational power. Citing Jonathan Meese's proclamation that he seeks to 'neutralise the gesture for future

generations' by using it in artistic spaces, where, he claims, it loses its political connotation, *Situation with Outstretched Arm* instead draws together the historic and ongoing interrelations between the use of the gesture in the realms of politics and art (which they of course don't see as separately as Meese does). They also rebuff critics of Meese, who claim that a better way of 'neutralising the gesture's' power would be by not performing it at all, by pointing to the multiple recent instances of neo-fascist groups enacting the gesture in public in countries like Switzerland or Greece, where no legal prohibition of the Nazi salute exists. They expose the wish for the gesture to quietly disappear into the past, and to simultaneously shield themselves from accusations of having needlessly dragged a harmful gesture from the relegated past into the present. The performance sets up a controlled environment in order to stage a re-examination of the Nazi salute as a corporeal residue of fascist ideology. As a lecture performance, *Situation with Outstretched Arm*, uses theatrical and forensic methods to 'make human behaviour the object of […] enquiry'.[618] And while the scope of the enquiry is not a specific event or crime, as we might expect it from a forensic approach, it draws in strategies of reenactment to a longer historical trajectory and applies forensic techniques to a performance repertoire (the history and enactment of a gesture) and the enquiry to encounter it on an experiential level.

## Constructing Evidence, Staging Documents

The second show in the trilogy also relies on the refusal to stage actual documents and draws on a similar technique as the first one when it comes to staging documents through the bodies of the performers. *Situation with Doppelgänger* premiered at the Ballhaus Ost in Berlin in October 2015. Here, the question of how to stage the historical documents is complicated by the fact that it was not just paintings and cinema reels the production tried to re-stage but also historical dances and events, whose archival traces are considerably less clear than the popular images from art and film history which were staged in the first performance of the trilogy. As its starting point the production once again takes another case with potentially legal implications. While not born out of an actual court case, as was the case with *Situation with Outstretched Arm*, this performance

[618] Frieze, *Theatrical Performance and the Forensic Turn*, 2.

dealt with issues of intellectual and cultural property: Miley Cyrus twerking at the 2013 MTV Video Music Awards sparked a public discussion about cultural appropriation of elements of Black culture by white media starlets, who stand to profit from this re-performance of dance styles that originated in cultures outside of their own cultural heritage.[619]

Hauptaktion's production traces this discussion of cultural appropriation to the development of minstrel dances in the nineteenth century in the USA (and their circulation in Europe and Germany). Through this historical reconstruction it asks questions about what gets termed as 'folk' or 'folkloristic' and who can or cannot claim ownership of certain cultural traditions. Again, the set-up is similar to the previous performance as there are two non-speaking performers in the room, and a voice-over (spoken by the white German actor Tinka Kleffner) that leads the audience through an essay historicising the emergence of minstrelsy and minstrel dances (a tradition in which they read Cyrus's performance), while the performers perform certain elements of the discussed dances. The dramaturgical set-up of the show revolves around a re-construction of a dance contest held in 1844 New York, which pitted William Henry Lane, a free Black man, as 'Master Yuba' against John Diamond, a white American of Irish decent, as 'Master Diamond'. The point of the contest was to see who could perform so-called 'plantation dances' better and more authentically. The voice-over lecture is divided in different chapters, or situations – each separated by a short blackout – which draws a connection between different historical contexts and scenes as well as relating them to contemporary instances where dances are used as markers of cultural or national identity. Taking this as its basic set-up, the show features two performers (Julian Warner, who is Afro-German and Oliver Zahn, who is white and German), who seemingly enter a similar contest for their audience, except neither of them is a trained dancer and the production goes to some length to eliminate the competitive element from the execution of the dances, turning their performance instead into a question of endurance for both performers (again we see the similarity between the first two parts of the trilogy).

[619] In the case of twerking, its origins are found in Igbo and Yoruba traditions of West Africa, and it was developed in the New Orleans Bounce Music scene of the 1990s. (See Broderick Chow, '"It's Your Whole-Ass Body!" Interview with Kelechi Okafor', *Contemporary Theatre Review - Interventions* (blog), November 2019, https://www.contemporarytheatrereview.org/2019/kelechi-okafor-interview/.)



Figure 34: Julian Warner and Oliver Zahn attempting the 'Schuhplattler' in *Situation with Doppelgänger* (Ballhaus Ost, Berlin 2015). Photo: Nicole Wytyczak.

The two dancers spend the most part of the 45 minutes performance jumping, spinning, and stomping, performing stylised versions of the dances mentioned in the voice-over essay – from the Bavarian folkdance, 'the Schuhplattler', the military parody 'Gumboot Dance' to the plantation dances, like the 'Cake Walk', and contemporary representations of the 'Twerk'. In her review of the performance, Josephine Leask comments on the physical stamina the show demands from the Warner and Zahn and how their physical exhaustion translates to an emotional and cognitive fatigue in the audience. By the end of the performance, she says, 'we too feel the fatigue of these relentless, repetitive, high energy dances, the grim reality of what they represent becomes forcibly etched in our minds: the shocking revelations of cultural theft and racial stereotyping'.[620] Again, the corporeal endurance performed by the dancers becomes a stand-in for the emotional reaction induced in the audience, which merges the historical commentary provided in the voice-over with the high intensity of the physical activity to create a sense of physical, intellectual, and emotional overload.

[620] Josephine Leask, 'Hauptaktion at London's Collisions Festival 2018 – Examing Cultural Appropriation and Minstrel Shows', *DanceTabs* (blog), 5 October 2018, https://dancetabs.com/2018/10/hauptaktion-at-londons-collisions-festival-2018-examing-cultural-appropriation-and-minstrel-shows/.

While the show does not differentiate between the two performers, who are both driven to complete physical exhaustion, the audience are made aware – not least because they are reminded by the voice-over – of the conditions of physical and intellectual exploitation under which many of these dances were created. Again, the question of subject positionality and personal implication is raised by the performance. It purposefully contrasts the performers with each other (based on the set-up of the competition that is established). And while Warner and Zahn engage in almost identical actions, it is hard not to read Zahn as the embodiment of the white minstrel dancers and slave holders mentioned in the text, and Warner as the stand-in for the African American figures mentioned. While superficially then their actions are the same, they become readable as either exploitation or acts of resistance, only in the context of historical situatedness. This strategy goes to the core of the debate around appropriation in dance, where, as the performance makes clear, it is not about specific gestures or movements 'belonging' to one group or another, but where the context of how they were engaged in and performed becomes important.

Leask also observes how the various dances featured in performance and thematised in the lecture comment on each other's movement materials. When Kleffner's voice is describing a scene in which white Bavarians performed the traditional folkdance the 'Schuhplattler') at a G7 summit in Germany in front of (among others) then US president Barack Obama, it is clear that their 'quick, agile footwork punctuated by slapping the knees and ankles [also] resembles the Gumboot Dance'[621] featured in an earlier scene. Here, black dancers in South Africa performed this dance at a similarly formal occasion, at the birthday celebrations of the King of Swaziland (now Eswatini) in 2013. Leask relates the slippages between the two dance forms, writing that the 'military salutes and flexed torso which are characteristic of the Gumboot dance are both comparable and contrasting with the Bavarian folk dance'.[622] This sets up the questions of appropriation and ownership of movement materials negotiated in the performance.

One of the main arguments the performance makes is that a lot of the dances thematised started under conditions of coercion but later morphed into acts of resistance

[621] Leask.
[622] Leask.

and ridicule of the white plantation owners or military personnel. However, through their appropriation by the entertainment industry of what was the minstrel circuit in the nineteenth century, these dances lost their political efficacy. The plantation dances, like the 'Cake Walk', for example, which has its origin in the imitation and ridicule of the superficial formality of the white plantation owners loses its subversive potential when performed by a white performer in black-face and instead becomes an act of looking down and laughing at already disenfranchised groups. As the dancers on the minstrel circuit also exaggerated the racialised features of the original performers their violent and racist history is well documented. However, again the performance alienates those documents by refusing to show them directly to the audience and instead channelling them through the bodies of the performers whose unaffected and almost disinterested facial expression stands in contrast to the vigorous activity of their bodies.

Here the performance can be said to emulate a disinterested mode of analysis inherent to a forensic logic, which is based on letting the 'evidence' speak for itself. Based on the logic underpinning the scientific method, which is reliant on being repeatable and falsifiable, the forensic investigation fosters an analytical frame not situated in a specific perspective. As in *Situation with Outstretched Arm,* the performers' facial expressions offer no insight into their interior thoughts about what is said in the essay or how they are performing the dances discussed. They do not nod, smile, or frown at anything mentioned, or show frustration when the voice-over 'corrects' their posture by saying things like 'the upper body should not move here'.[623] Leask comments on this minimalist approach to representation:

> While we are enlightened by Hauptaktion's multi-dimensional, riveting documentary, our attention is drawn to the minimalistic presentation of both men's bodies as they dance without music in the harsh spotlights, clothed in shorts and t-shirts. What's fascinating is how they perform each dance style as if it was a perfunctory gym task: gaze detached but focussed on the audience, devoid of expression or bodily emotion.[624]

[623] Hauptaktion, *Situation Mit Doppelgänger (Situation with Doppelgänger)*, October 2016, Vimeo Recording, October 2016, [27:21], Ballhaus Ost, Berlin.
[624] Leask, 'Hauptaktion at London's Collisions Festival 2018 – Examing Cultural Appropriation and Minstrel Shows'.

Their blank faced expressions and their choice of exercise outfits are calculated. They stand in ironic contrast with the racial caricatures the voice-over describes thus leaving the audience to imagine this caricature in the difference between the physical presentation in front of them and the description of their historical reality. In both lecture performances, this lack of 'buy-in' into the movements is deliberate. There is no enthusiasm for the expression of the fascist salute in *Situation with Outstretched Arm*, nor do the two performers of *Doppelgänger* throw themselves into the imitation of these historical dances with gusto. While the essay (or essayistic commentary) works to contextualise concrete historical situations within the emergence of these performance histories (aka the birth of the fascist salute and the emergence of minstrel dances), the performance operates almost in the opposite way, refusing engagement and affective connection with the audience. Instead, they use both the disengagement of the performers and the sense of academic distance conveyed in the voice-over as a V-effect to appeal to the audience's own sense of responsibility.[625]

There is only one moment when the performers depart from the dead-pan expression. This is when the focus of the lecture turns to the 'Cake Walk'. When describing the contemporary illustrations of this dance, the voice over describes the 'broad grin – where teeth must be visible'. As she does so, the performers both plaster a huge but frozen smile onto their faces and begin to imitate the movements the voice describes.[626] Like the rest of the poses, they hold the grin, which quickly turns into disconcerting grimaces such that their faces become masks, which again – just like their use of deadpan expressions earlier – precludes rather than invites a connection with the audience. This refusal to enact any kind of affective connection with the materials is deliberate and again functions as a way to employ modes of forensic enquiry while also unmasking the construction of this kind of enquiry. A disaffected mode of engagement is meant to signal neutrality and distance, but Hauptaktion's performance shows this mode as artifice deeply steeped in assumptions of authority and histories of racism. In this moment the distance between the two performers embodying the same archival materials is most

[625] Here, the fact that these performances are all called 'situations', instead of for example 'reenactment' or 'observation' is significant. The term situation implies a level of active engagement or agency which includes the spectator: they are part of the situation not separate or secondary to it.
[626] Hauptaktion, *Situation Mit Doppelgänger (Situation with Doppelgänger)*, [27:00-33:35].

palpable. The voice-over describes the Cake Walk as subversive dance practice, in which enslaved people on plantations imitated the overt formality of the minuet associated with white ball culture in the US American South (, which had in turn been adapted from 17th century Vienna and other European courts). The knowledge, however, that these dances were then turned into racist caricatures within the minstrel tradition complicates how we read Warner's and Zahn's engagement in this reenactment. The frozen smiles on their faces can respectively be read as both laughter as resistance (in Warner's case) and racist ridicule (in Zahn's case). Here their embodied position in relation to the archival materials is marked and the politics of reading those materials within a forensic enquiry are gestured to: Both bodies stand-in for that which is being examined but their different subject position facilitates two opposing readings of the situation. [627]

[627] It also must be noted that with this reenactment, the performance also enters the discourse of blackfacing on the German stage that was wildly debated at the time. Blackfacing was still a relatively common and unreflected practice on the German stage in the 2010s (and unfortunately progress is being made only slowly) and the subject of frequent debate and protests, often led by Afro-German activists, who have campaigned for a more nuanced depiction of Afro-Germanness on stage and in German society more generally. By citing and even copying – though in an alienated way – the caricature of the 'Cake Walk' Hauptaktion's performance enters the discourse of blackfacing, as it could be argued that Zahn, who is white, engages in a practice of mimic blackface in this moment of the performance. As opposed to any of the plays caught in the blackfacing debates in the 2010s, which featured no Afro-Germans at all, this production was co-created by an Afro-German artist, and thus needs to be read as an assertion of Afro-German subjectivity on the German stage. The way the performance makes connections between the German situation and its cultural specificity and the US American historical context, where these dances originate, as well as the way Warner and Zahn deliberately put their bodies in contrast to each other (as is also suggested by the title 'Doppelgänger')suggest to me a conscious provocation but also a direct critique of the more obvious and explicitly racist iterations of blackface circulating on the German stage at the time. (For more on the history, practice, and critique of blackfacing on the German stage, see Katrin Sieg, 'Race, Guilt and "Innocence": Facing Blackfacing in Contemporary German Theater', *German Studies Review* 38, no. 1 (2015): 117–34; Macelle Mahala, 'Asserting Afro-German Subjectivity on the German Stage', in *Beyond Failure: New Essays on the Cultural History of Failure in Theatre and Performance*, ed. Tony Fisher and Eve Katsouraki (Abingdon: Routledge, 2018), 95–117.)



Figure 35: Julian Warner and Oliver Zahn demonstrating the 'Cake Walk'in *Stituation with Doppelgänger* (Ballhaus Ost, Berlin 2015). Photo: Nicole Wytyczak.

The performers' refusal to enact an affective connection to the materials does of course not mean that no affect is produced in the audience. Leask talks about how 'intensely powerful the affect' is, which is generated by Warner's Black and Zahn's white body 'as they energise their bodies, actively collaborating with the verbal text, playing out histories of race'.[628] The histories of race being played out in the enactment of the broad grin nods to tropes of the 'happy and docile slave', a much-reproduced romanticised image of slavery often received and perpetuated by minstrel practices. However, the immense physical effort, 'detectable on their sweating bodies and in their occasional gasps for breath',[629] ensure that their grinning is not read as an expression of actual enjoyment but is marked as another element of choreography that needs to be upheld and endured. With this strategy of deadpan facial expressions, this lecture performance gestures to an arbitrary separation of physical and facial engagement, which aids the stylisation of the movements overall and distances the performers' physical enactment from a potentially more contentious re-enactment of the dances, which attempts to mimic the dances

[628] Leask, 'Hauptaktion at London's Collisions Festival 2018 – Examing Cultural Appropriation and Minstrel Shows'.
[629] Leask.

faithfully. At the same time, it unmasks disinterestedness as a forensic pose employed to enforce the mechanisms of the controlled environment.

Hauptaktion's performances go to great lengths to examine the performing of distance and disinterestedness in these modes of forensic historical reconstruction. One of the most obvious interventions the lecture performances *Situation with Outstretched Arm* and *Situation with Doppelgänger* engage in is separating the positions of speaking and doing. While a usual lecture (and lecture performance) is centred on the presenter as the one who does the speaking and the doing of presentation, here the positions are split. We hear a dis-embodied voice lead us through the contextual framing of the performance, while the doing is shifted onto the bodies of the performer whose actions illustrate, contrast with, or parody the spoken text. The fact that the voice-overs are pre-recorded which means that any 'interaction' between the voice and the performers is scripted, adding to the sterile, experiment-like set-up of the performance. This splitting has multiple consequences, one of which is the heightened sense of distance it produces between us, as spectators in the audience, and the spoken text. The text is never personalised, the voices do not introduce themselves, there is no mention of a speaker's position, the word 'I' is never used.[630] This de-personalisation makes clear the delineation between the absence of the speaker and the intense presence of the performers' bodies. The voices here (male in *Outstretched Arm* and female in *Doppelgänger*) read the pre-prepared texts in a detached manner without seeking to create any particular emotional response in the audience.[631] This contrast between the extreme physical activities presented and the 'neutral expression' of the voice-over is stark, and further centres the physical actions of the performances.

[630] This lack of speaker position also shows that the label 'essay', which Hauptaktion uses instead of lecture, might be somewhat displaced. The written texts in their performance feature none of the meandering 'idleness', which Theodor Adorno's influential work 'The Essay as Form' isolate as a crucial feature of the essay (T. W. Adorno, 'The Essay as Form', trans. Bob Hullot-Kentor and Frederic Will, *New German Critique*, no. 32 (1984): 152.) Adorno sees the essay as a way for the author to think through difficult topics in writing. Hesitation, doubts, backtracking are all common by-products of this way of thinking. No such thing is displayed in these performances. Adorno also stresses the 'individual experience' as one of the key characteristics of the essay (156). This does not feature in Hauptaktion's written text, nor does it contain any subjective utterings and, as such, it is unclear whether we can speak of it as an essay.

[631] This style of delivery is also underlined by the fact that the two speakers were not part of the group devising the performance but were only asked to record the texts once they'd been researched and written.

This investment in neutrality is interesting because it seems to invert earlier strategies of reenactment, which centred a personalising approach. Where performers in performances discussed in the previous chapter work to relate their own experiences to the experiences uncovered in the archive, Hauptaktion's forensic set-up means that all research materials are kept at arm's length. Given the serious content of the productions, this is perhaps understandable. This sterile approach makes it possible to approximate such profoundly uncomfortable topics as the fascist totality of the Nazi salute or the dehumanising ridicule of blackface – there is safety in distance.

Alternatively, we might be tempted to read this avoidance in stating the position of the speaker as a mark of privilege where their ability to speak and be heard is not questioned and thus does not need to be justified by stating a specific perspective. In her article 'Situated Knowledges: The Science Question in Feminism and the Privilege of Partial Perspective' (1988), Donna Haraway observes the 'god trick' – the mechanism by which white male perspectives in science are markers as the sole location for 'objectivity' and 'neutrality' and perspectives outside of that dominant mode are side-lined as particularised and partial.[632] The un-marked,[633] disembodied voice in Hauptaktion's performances is somewhat aligned with this god-like perspective, which does not necessitate any further justification of its own speaking.[634] In both cases, Hauptaktion's performances gesture towards this outside (and thus distant) perspective: in *Situation*

[632] Haraway, 'Situated Knowledges', 582.

[633] Here it is important to note that the performed unmarkedness of the voice is more prominent when Hauptaktion perform in German, as there the voice-overs are spoken in immaculate 'Bühnendeutsch' (stage German, which is devoid of any accent or dialect whereby the speaker's origin might be identifiable), whereas the English versions of their shows display a distinct 'German-accent' (Leask, 'Hauptaktion at London's Collisions Festival 2018 – Examing Cultural Appropriation and Minstrel Shows'.) thereby marking the speaker as other, yet still a member of a Western industrialised nation and located in the global.

[634] This contrast between the personalising impulse in the case studies of the former chapter and the restraint and sterility of the spoken text in Hauptaktion is particularly significant considering that speakers and researchers from marginalised groups are often expected or asked to perform their personal connection to a topic as a way of legitimising their enquiry, which also means that some can feel shoehorned into specific fields related to their origin or identity rather than their specific research interest. So, while the act of taking a personal stance can act as an emancipatory practice, against assumptions of false objectivity or epistemic hegemony (like Haraway and de Sousa Santos argue), it can also feel like an obligation. In some ways the speakers in Hauptaktion's performances are free of this obligation to counteract the epistemic violence of what is being left out. Considering this tension, their use of this form of hyper-depersonalisation displays a certain privilege in their approach but also showcases the difficulties and pitfalls of finding an appropriate tone when dealing with traces of fascist and colonial violence.

*with Outstretched Arm* the male voice directs the female performer's actions and thus exerts control over her, and in *Situation with Doppelgänger*, the white female voice, speaking in perfect 'stage German' (Bühnendeutsch) in a calm and directive manner marks the distance to the increasingly out-of-breath performers and signals her supposed disinterest and (drawing on Rothberg) un-implicated position, which the performance's focus on the embodied way of playing oneself in relation to the presented materials seeks to challenge.

At the same time, Hauptaktion's decision to present the lecture portion in their performances as disembodied, unemotional, and disengaged cannot be taken completely at face value but must also be read as a parody of certain modes of academic presentation. Between *Situation with Outstretched Arm* and *Situation with Doppelgänger* Hauptaktion made significant changes to their citation practice, which points to a larger reading that sees their performance style as a critique, or at least negotiation, of assumptions of neutrality. For the most part, *Situation with Outstretched Arm* upholds conventional modes of referencing sources. When quoting from newspaper articles, academic texts, or reviews, the voice over names who wrote the cited text and where it was found or published. The voice also gestures at the beginnings and endings of cited text as is common in academic presentation, and the show even ends with the bibliography of the lecture being read out loud. *Situation with Doppelgänger* disrupts this practice. Instead of ascribing quotes of references to certain authors, the voice-over remains vague. Sometimes an indistinct publishing context (like 'a newspaper writes') is given but usually even that is omitted, and opinions, descriptions and historical documents are merely reproduced as 'someone said' or 'someone wrote'. This undermines academic forms of citation, where legitimacy is also drawn from naming the scholar or thinker in question. This destabilises their sources and has the effect that some spectators begin questioning the truthfulness of the sources.

In his review of the performance, Matthias van den Höfel, for example, questions the voice as a reliable narrator and asks how truthful this reconstruction of dance history can really be.[635] This not a surprising reaction, the 'recreation' of dances from

[635] Matthias Van den Höfel, 'Doppelgänger Des Tanzes', *Tanzplattform - 2018 in Deutschland* (blog), 17 March 2018, https://www.tanzplattform2018.de/en/blog/doppelganger-des-tanzes.

contemporary illustration and accounts is necessarily limited and borders on the impossible (which is something Hauptaktion does not deny but makes very plain in their quite rudimentary and highly stylised and repetitive enactments of the described movements), so the choice to obscure sources like this aids the precarious status from which this knowledge is being presented. Hauptaktion's citation style mobilises what Frieze calls the 'generative power of doubt […] integral to the theatre' in opposition to the 'reductive power of forensic logic'.[636] Where forensic investigation banks on certainty and specificity (in fact a certain obsession with details is usually a necessary facet of any investigation), Hauptaktion rely on a strategy of obfuscation to stage a non-traditional encounter with their sources. This strategy prioritises what is said over who said it and puts the said in relation to the dancing bodies of the performers on stage.

From conversations with Zahn and Warner,[637] I know that they do not take liberties with their sources in terms of altering or fictionalising parts of the texts (despite what their strategy of concealing the sources of their materials might suggest). This is why I'd like to offer a different reading of this strategic choice to omit their sources. One of the consequences of this strategy is it treats all sources on the same level. This way the words of an eminent scholar or historian do not overshadow smaller marginalia in the archive or eyewitness accounts. This mimics practices of 'lateral citation'. Lateral citation refers to a feminist writing practice, often used in essays and autotheory, where non-experts – like members of the writer's community, family, kin – are cited next to more formal academic sources (the latter is referred to as 'citing upwards').[638] In autotheory this is done to elevate the experiential knowledge represented in the citing of living sources by assigning them the same position as traditional authorities. However, instead of elevating all kinds of sources as legitimate, Hauptaktion omits the concrete source of found texts and denotes and de-contextualises all sources. This way what is said also becomes a comment on the uncertainty and speculation present in even the most controlled attempt at forensic reconstruction. Hauptaktion embraces this uncertainty

[636] Frieze, *Theatrical Performance and the Forensic Turn*, 24.
[637] As curator of the COLLISIONS practice research festival at Royal Central School of Speech and Drama in 2018, I invited Hauptaktion to present *Situation with Doppelgänger* as the festival's keynote performance. Through this collaboration I was able to have personal conversations about the group's performance and research practice.
[638] Lauren Fournier, *Autotheory as Feminist Practice in Art, Writing, and Criticism* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2021), 154.

without becoming fatalistic about their attempt at forensic reenactment. Instead, their performance strategy illustrates the condition under which knowledge is created. By undermining an established academic convention, their performance gestures towards its unexamined logic (which upholds certain epistemic inequalities) and offers an alternative practice to a citation form that upholds excluded voices deemed illegitimate in academic citational traditions.

By introducing the possibility of doubt and lateral citation into their engagement with their sources, Hauptaktion point to the fact that evidence, however convincing, is not just found but needs to be assembled and made legible in specific ways for it to be taken seriously and count as legitimate in the controlled environments of forensic investigation. Here , I also draw on performance scholars Natalie Alvarez and Keren Zaiontz, who in their article 'Feminist Performance Forensics' coined the term 'forensic persuasion' to show that 'forensics is not defined by the accumulation of evidence alone' but by practices that contextualise this evidence.[639] Alvarez and Zaiontz specifically turn to artistic strategies that 'include the explicit and durational use of the survivors', artists', and spectators' own bodies to make the case against the abuses of the state',[640] to establish the practice of feminist performance forensics. It is clear that the focus in Hauptaktion's trilogy does not lie with survivors and those victimised by histories of fascism, white supremacy or patriarchy (as it does for Alvarez and Zaiontz) but rather focuses on the cultures that sanction continued (epistemic) violence perpetrated by these systems. However, it strikes me that both the aspect of the durational investment as well as the focus on the performer's body are strategies that Hauptaktion also uses to show the way evidence is constructed and framed in forensic analysis. Paired with the fostering of doubt, this points to how the group uses specific aspects of forensic reconstruction while also critically reflecting the limits of such a reconstructive practice.

The fragility of this kind of performative reconstruction and its claim to knowledge is also visible in the way the different chapters in *Situation with Doppelgänger* contrast or even contradict each other. I have already mentioned the way the Gumboot Dance becomes entangled with the representation of the 'Schuhplattler' (kickstarting a debate

[639] Natalie Alvarez and Keren Zaiontz, 'Feminist Performance Forensics', *Contemporary Theatre Review* 28, no. 3 (3 July 2018): 286.
[640] Alvarez and Zaiontz, 286.

over what kind of performance traditions get to be labelled as folk or folkloristic). Another example is the topic of twerking itself, whose public discussion was the impulse for the creation of the show. In two scenes dedicated to histories of twerking, Hauptaktion present two contradicting accounts of the origin of the dance. The first locates its origins in the Bounce culture of New Orleans, the second ponders if there are connections between the contemporary form of the dance and older West-African tribal traditions. Van den Höfel wonders whether these varying origin stories can be seen as an indication that accusations of exploitation and appropriation against Miley Cyrus are untenable (presumably because the origins of the dance are too contested to be sure what or who is being appropriated).[641] While this is a tenuous claim to begin with, as it does not touch the issue of white celebrities profiting from appropriating Black culture (and potentially neutralising its subversive properties), it also misses the point, which is that the performance is not interested in passing judgement or taking sides but rather is invested in showing the history of dance as one of appropriation and parody, shaped by effects of globalisation, the vagaries of current fashion, claims to authenticity, and the search for and construction of identity. The fragility of this approach (as it is built on few archival sources and attends mainly to how those histories continue to be passed on in bodies) is mirrored in their approach to the spoken and written texts, where strategies of distanciation are implemented to prevent any assumption of certainty. With this Hauptaktion intervene in established modes of staging evidence via forensic approaches.

[641] Van de Höfel asks: 'Entzieht das der Kritik derer, die die Aneignung des Twerkens durch weiße Stars wie Miley Cyrus verwerflich finden, den Boden, weil der letzte, der echte Ursprung viel weiter zurückreicht?' (Does [the circumstance of the contesting origin stories] invalidate the critique of those who find the appropriation of the twerk by stars like Miley Cyrus objectionable, because the last, the true origin goes much further back?'; my translation). (Van den Höfel, 'Doppelgänger Des Tanzes'.)



**Figure 36**: Attempts at twerking from Julian Warner and Oliver Zahn in *Situation with Doppelgänger* (Ballhaus Ost, Berlin 2015). Photo: Nicole Wytyczak.

## Dissection and Bearing Witness

While the first two performances in Hauptaktion's trilogy addressed the audience and gestures towards their experience of watching, they did not thematise the audience's concrete position within a forensic investigation. Their position as the forum – those who will make the decisions about the validity of the presented evidence in the controlled environment – was not made explicit. The last part of the trilogy, however, takes seriously the audience's responsibility of 'looking again' in a forensic setting. The third part of the trilogy is clearest in gesturing towards the spectators' own responsibility when consuming (reproductions of) violent images and materials. It employs the forensic technique of dissection as a technique of media forensics to bring together the ethics of engaging in the re-staging of violent materials, the question of how such archival materials should be approached by performers and researchers, and the impossibilities of doing justice to the actual dimensions of violence represented by those materials regardless of which strategy of representation is chosen. *Situation with Spectator (Situation mit Zuschauer)* premiered at the Kammerspiele in Munich in

January 2017[642] and makes this ethical dilemma, which the previous two performances were already hinting at, explicit as it literally stages the question of the complicity of the audience. It does so by giving the audience a choice. From the beginning of the performance, it is made clear that at the end a distressing, extremely violent, and morally corrupt video will be shown on stage and that each audience member will have to decide for themselves whether to view this video or not. The 2017 performance concerns the re-posting and watching of online videos of executions which the terror group Islamic state (ISIS) was increasingly posting on online video platforms like YouTube. The performance goes to some length to place the spectacularisation of violence featured in these videos in a historical context by reading them against other traditions of staging and representing violence on stage and screen. Rather than just featuring one voice-over, the contextualising voice is split into three different voices and is no longer delivered as a disembodied voice from offstage. Instead, the context is delivered by three performers sitting behind three desks in front of a curtain, which also has a speaking part of sorts as projections personalise it and let it 'communicate' with the audience. The set-up of the stage looks like an academic plenary with the three performers sitting at old school desks. The fragmentation of what used to be one contextualising voice might hint at the more fragmented and less-authoritative manner in which commentary on the present is possible. Here the commentary is presented as less stable than commentary on the past.

Unlike the two previous productions this last does not use a present event as a jumping off point, which it then problematises historically. Instead, it turns fully to a contemporary atrocity, the filmed executions of American and other Western journalists and civilians by ISIS. Several videos like this were captured and circulated by ISIS's propaganda apparatus since 2014, and the production uses one of them as its focal point. With this, the trilogy arrives in the present, no longer dealing with historical material but now looking towards present-day documents and their circulation online. After the curtain has introduced itself to the audience, warned them of what lies behind (the video of the execution), and informed them of the decision they will be expected to make later

[642] The show was a coproduction between the Munich Kammerspiele, Hebbel am Ufer (HAU), Berlin and Theater Rampe in Stuttgart.

on in the performance, the three performers take their seats at the desks, and deliver three short, interspersed lectures each containing one stream of analysis of the video. The first lecture concerns the history of violence on stage and in the public domain, starting with real executions during the performance of tragedies in Ancient Rome, going via the violent plays of the Restoration, the spectacle of public executions in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, and the carefully planned staged violence of the Grand Guignol to arrive at violent acts in performance art and acts of self-harm as protest as with the case of the Buddhist monk Thích Quảng Đức, who set himself on fire in protest of the catholic regime in South Vietnam.

The second lecture concerns the video itself and gives a frame-by-frame description of what happens in it. This can be read as a form of media dissection, whereby a whole is broken up to study the structure and function of its components. Each frame is narrated in detail playing close attention to how the violent act is threatened, prepared and finally executed. Each frame is treated with care and analytical exactness. At the same time, this acts as a form of distanciation. The descriptive layer is put between the audience and the actual video and the violent visuals are replaced by a description of the violence.[643] This is done a) to prepare the audience, who are meant to know exactly what is coming and what they are agreeing to should they stay to watch the video in the end and b) as a way of emphasising the separation between descriptive layer and the actual embodied act of viewing the video.

The last performer's essay, finally, concerns the YouTube/newspaper and other online comments the video had already accrued at the time the performance was made. They are often marked by a cruelty and disregard for or numbness towards the human suffering shown in the video. Here a form of close analysis is at play. By taking the comments out of their usual media environment and speaking them aloud within the controlled environment of the performance (or investigation), this facet of contemporary human communication is put under a magnifying glass, exposing its crudeness and inadequacy in addressing the scale of the violence and the complicity of those pushing the video in the algorithm by giving it traffic.

[643] This strategy is also reminiscent of the messenger or teichoscopy of ancient Greek tragedy, where the performer relays a description of the violent events to the viewer, a traditional form of mediation, which means the audience is distanced from the direct representation of the violence.



Figure 37: Three intertwining lectures given by Banafshe Hourmazdi, Jasmina Rezig, and Oliver Zahn (right to left) *in Situation with Spectator* (Kammerspiele, Munich, 2017). Photo: Nicole Wytyczak.

While the strategy of the second lecture – the careful and frame by frame recounting of the exact actions and events in the video – might strike us as the most obviously forensic in its approach, as it fragments and reorganises the evidence, all three lectures in the performance can be seen as forensic reconstruction. Frieze stresses that one of the key principles of forensic logics that needs to be upheld is the 'illusion that evidence speaks for itself, that it is "found" rather than constructed'.[644] By treating the 'found object' of the YouTube beheading-video as its object of analysis, each of the lectures constructs a specific context (the history of violence on stage, the method of verbal re-telling, the video's situatedness in the context of online commentary) and reads the video through this context. While verifiability is the core-goal of the step-by-step retelling of the video, the lecture restating the online comments exposes the video as a moment of high affective intensity in a chain of algorithmically determined spectacles, whereas the historicising lecture (much like the citing of legal precedent) gives insight into previously significant incidents related to the object in question. By employing a forensic logic, the performance mimics a cultural and political aesthetic invested in making visible all forms

[644] Frieze, *Theatrical Performance and the Forensic Turn*, 20.

of social transgression, making them readable in the context of the forum, and closing the gaps in understanding. This affinity for the found object, which is seen across forensic practice, is also often a constitutive practice for the lecture performance. Ladnar points out that many of the earliest examples of what later would be considered lecture performance utilised found objects or scores 'written to be potentially performed by others'.[645] He argues that this form of employing found objects is relevant to the lecture performance for two reasons: a) they themselves portray a research practice (of finding a suitable subject to engage with); and b) they showcase a 'process of recontextualization (of archival or documentary or illustrative materials) that is inherent in the lecture form and, by extension, in the lecture performance'.[646]

These three layers of commentary serve to alienate and contextualise the video, yet the extreme violence represented in it looms large throughout the performance and it is often unclear how much any essayistic commentary can actually alienate something so gruesome. Before the curtain rises a final time, each of the three performers clears away their desk and states whether they will be watching the video on that particular evening or not. Both nights I saw it, two of the performers chose to forgo the presentation while only one stayed to watch. The audience is then given a few minutes to make up their mind and, if they so chose, leave the room before the curtain rises and the video is shown. There is no final applause or curtain call when the performance ends, meaning that those audience members who decided to stay are left with their own impressions of the video and the performance and the dramaturgy of the production actively works against any sort of transitional time or 're-entering' the real world after having been part of a joint theatrical arrangement for the duration of the show. This, of course, re-enforces the reality of the existence of such execution videos and leaves no escape from the discomfort intentionally created in the performance.

I have seen the performance twice and opted to stay the first time but left after the lecture-portion the second time. My decision to stay the first time was in large part due to my curiosity about whether the previous frame-by-frame description did justice to what I would see on screen and by the question to what extent knowing this amount

[645] Ladnar, 'The Lecture Performance: Contexts of Lecturing and Performing', 235.
[646] Ladnar, 235.

of detail would alter my viewing experience. I found that the previous description acted as way of alienating the violence in the video as it gave me something else to focus on (the comparison between the verbal description and the visual evidence) and made the viewing slightly easier. That said, I still found the video extremely harrowing and did not want to experience it more than once.

While the previous two performances in the trilogy concerned legacies of historical violence, whose shadow nonetheless reaches into the present, this treatment of a present (or what was at the time a present) injustice refused to see this violence, as un-stomachable and unimaginable as it is, as a historical anomaly. Instead, it insists on the historical contingency of acts of violence like it and pointed towards various modes of theatrical and medial staging that accompany such propagandistic displays of violence. Again, the question of whether it is moral to show and watch something like this looms large. There are those, who feel that showing and watching videos like this, in whichever context, plays into the hands of the perpetrators and disrespects the victims.[647] While others feel that the distance the performance creates between the video and its viewing via the essay performance defuses its content, and voids it of its scandal, shock, and terror.[648] What the performance makes obvious, however, is that this is an ethical and moral choice that we face quite regularly in everyday life (especially in the online lives we all live today), and the production found a way of theatricalising this choice. The fact that the audience must make a choice also means that they are shown their responsibility within a forensic process itself. Here, they decide how to behave in respect to and towards a particular document in the digital repository (in this case YouTube), and their interactions, which usually go unobserved (especially online) are put on display for their fellow audience members to see and to measure against their own actions. The question of if and how to bear witness to those crimes is raised, which is also, I suggest one that is crucial for any engagement with performance forensics. While the reason behind

[647] Crucially, Rabih Mroué decides against showing these videos in his lecture performance *Sand in the Eyes*, which also concerns the rise of ISIS with the explanation that it they only strengthen position of the perpetrators and expands the fear they sow.

[648] See, for example, Martin Jost, 'Exihibitionismus Und (Daten)Schutz. *Situation Mit Zuschauern* – Die Kunst Der Überwachung" an Den Münchner Kammerspielen', *Nachtkritik.De* (blog), 20 January 2017, https://nachtkritik.de/index.php?option=com_content&view=article&id=13525:situation-mit-zuschauern-das-kuenstlerkollektv-hauptaktion-mit-einer-essayperformance-beim-kongress-sensible-daten-die-kunst-der-ueberwachung-an-den-muenchner-kammerspielen&catid=99&Itemid=100089.

engaging with forensic evidence and a court of law is clear, its restaging in an artistic space is murkier. What are the parameters of our engagement with those violent histories, events, or repertoires?

I argue that the performance suggests that our own orientation towards forensic investigations (both online and in the space of theatre) shapes how they are written and constructed, and crucially our engagement with their evidence dictates how their residues are received and circulate in public discourse. This becomes a particularly uncomfortable message, considering that the trilogy's first two performances have already shown how fascist and white supremacist ideologies and repertoires continue to structure how certain performances are received. By staging the audience's complicity in the writing and reception of any forensic process through their own media engagements, *Situation with Spectator* also suggests a mode of looking again at our own actions in a controlled environment. The parameters of consuming violent videos (usually not thematised publicly) are set out clearly through the experimental character of the performance, which is designed for audiences to engage not only with their own reaction to such violence but the larger politics of looking.

Multiple investigative strategies are at play in this lecture performance. They are revealed in the creation of the 'controlled environment' in which the evidence for crime (of beheading a journalist) and the transgression (of watching the act online) can be presented and tested, as well as in the contextualising and dissecting strategies of the accompanying lectures. *Situation with Audience* places the audience in this controlled environment, asked to make a judgment (albeit a moral not legal one), and their actions are placed under the magnifying gaze of the theatron (which here does not remain a place of just looking but turns into a space of action, and also a space of observing each other). The evidence presented of the actual crime, is finely dissected, and presented bit by bit to an expectant audience. At the same time, the audience becomes part of the experiment as it is their action (in the phase while the execution video is revealed) that is also under observation. In the span of the performance, the audience go from those judging the evidence presented (on the basis of validity) to those being examined.

Shows like *Situation with Spectator* mobilise the discursive apparatus of the lecture performance to, for example, draw attention to the specific medial embeddedness of a YouTube video. This has consequences for the spectator's mode of

engaging with a specific object and that can be illuminating when trying to analyse the performances of either extreme identification or detached nonchalance in the online comments, which might be a consequence of how the video circulates in the online repository as well as its specific content. Similarly, by drawing the audience's attention to histories of staged violence (some of which were produced artificially, some by enacting actual bodily harm), the performance pays attention to the need to interrogate evidence as well as the dramaturgical strategies that deem evidence convincing or believable. As a product of an aesthetic investigation, *Situation with Spectator* interrogates mechanisms of online truth production and puts the spectator at the centre of this investigation.

## Embodied Forensic Analysis

The key dramaturgical strategy in Hauptaktion's lecture performance lies not just in staging a forensic gaze. This way of using the theatrical apparatus as a way of staging and examination also corresponds to how Maaike Bleeker understands the lecture performance. Bleeker writes:

> In lecture-performances, theatricality is used not (or not only) to explore a new understanding of art, but also allows for an exploration of the object of investigation: what this object is, how we know it, and what it means to know it.[649]

Understanding the lecture performance as a mode of staged investigation speaks to the centrality of theatricality in performance forensics. By staging a forensic gaze, Hauptaktion also insist on attending to the risks and limitations of engaging in such a gaze. Van den Höfel is correct when he says that Hauptaktion is inviting us to 'risk another look' at these problematic cultural histories.[650] The word risk here is crucial as it conveys the risk embodied not only in the choice of the performers to re-enact problematic gestures and dances, but the risk embodied in our act of looking. Their adoption of forensic strategies like the controlled environment makes the idea of 'risking another look' tenable, but the responsibility for this act still lies with the spectator – who is tasked with

[649] Maaike Bleeker, 'Performing the Image: Rabih Mroué's Lecture-Performances', in *Rabih Mroué: A BAK Critical Reader in Artists' Practice*, ed. Maria Hlavajova and Jill Winder (Utrecht: BAK, 2012), 188–89.
[650] Van den Höfel, 'Doppelgänger Des Tanzes'.

reflecting their own complicity in the reproduction of these repertoires. Like Soliman and Purkayastha in Chapter 5 who engaged with epistemic violences of the archive, Hauptaktion are aware of the risks posed by taking another look – they are the risks posed by 'reiterating violent speech and depicting again rituals of torture'.[651] This is where, along with Hartman, we have to ask, 'do the possibilities outweigh the danger of looking (again)?'.[652] By performing the histories of the fascist salute and minstrel dancing, Hauptaktion illustrate the double-bind performance-based reconstructive approaches face. Hartman described this double-bind as the 'necessity to represent what we cannot'.[653] It is necessary to engage with problematic cultural repertoires because not doing so leaves them unexamined, which is potentially aiding their expansion and uncritical use (as we see in the case of Jonathan Meese and Miley Cyrus at the MTV awards).

Yet, at the same time there is no simple way to stage any kind of intervention into such contentious repertoires. In terms of representing the acts, gestures, and dances, Hauptaktion face the choice between showing those images, describing them verbally, or enacting them through bodies. As some of the images they deal with are highly contentious, showing them on stage would put them at risk of reproducing fascist imagery and racist caricature. Their choice to represent them solely through the performers' bodies and via verbal description, can thus be seen as form of alienation and performative restraint. But by alienating the images, Hauptaktion has nonetheless entered the realm of physical reenactment, which of course has its own pitfalls and risks. In a way it might be easiest (and less controversial) to only rely on verbal descriptions of the performance history of the fascist salute or minstrel dancing, and in fact there could easily be a version of the lectures used in the performances that might appear in an arts journal or the cultural section of a newspaper. But to what extent would this be a reduction of the scope of their enquiry? As these are embodied histories shouldn't we have to meet them where they take place, i.e., in performance? And would a relegation to text deny an investigation of the entanglements of contemporary bodies with those problematic repertoires? I argue that this is one of the moments, where the lecture performance interrupts

[651] Hartman, 'Venus in Two Acts', 4.
[652] Hartman, 4.
[653] Hartman, 13.

conventional modes of forensic analysis, in favour of an embodied approach to forensic analysis, to confront audiences today with chances and difficulties or 'risking' a forensic gaze.

Hauptaktion's performances knowingly push the limits of what cannot or should not be represented to engage with the question of what can be known of the history of a performance repertoire.[654] When talking about the responsibilities of reconstructive practices, Hartman (quoting Michel de Certeau) stresses that good analysis not only engages in a reconstruction of past events but makes visible the 'conditions of our knowledge of the past' themselves. By employing the forensic technique of the controlled environment, for example, Hauptaktion show the conditions of our knowledge, about the fascist salute: They channel previous representations of the salute through the body of the performer to point out that current and historical representations of the fascist salute are steeped in invented traditions and archival myths. Their performance seeks to undo those myths by showing how our knowledge of this gesture is conditioned by the enduring and damaging power of those myths. Lecture performances, like those featured in this chapter, make visible the 'conditions of our knowledge of the past' and mark the double-bind of risking to represent them. They ask what we can know about certain gestural, corporeal, and choreographic repertoires and locate knowledge about them in the bodies of the performers, who are enduring the legacies of past performances. In doing so they insist on an embodied way of encountering forensic materials that involve the body and the cultural repertoires in which it operates as a site of their investigation.

In the trilogy *Situation With XXX*, Hauptaktion creates a reconstructive practice, whose methods lie in dissecting the cultural repertoires of fascism, white supremacy, and violent extremism. Their process is marked by a certain productive pedanticism which is inherent to the forensic mode. As Jakovljević states: the forensic site is plagued by a sense of heightened significance',[655] hence even 'the smallest detail becomes impregnated with

[654] And they do so in a mode more careful than many other cultural products, where a forensic gaze is applied. True crime approaches, for example, have been heavily criticised for their voyeurism and lack of precaution when presenting and reproducing violent pasts. (See, for example, Ethan Stoneman and Joseph Packer, 'Reel Cruelty: Voyeurism and Extra-Juridical Punishment in True-Crime Documentaries', *Crime, Media, Culture* 17, no. 3 (1 December 2021): 401–19; Kelli S. Boling and Kevin Hull, 'Undisclosed Information—Serial Is My Favorite Murder: Examining Motivations in the True Crime Podcast Audience', *Journal of Radio & Audio Media* 25, no. 1 (2 January 2018): 92–108; Maeve O'Keeffe, 'The Ethics of True Crime: Invasive Voyeurism, or Natural Fascination?', *University Express*, 14 January 2023.)
[655] Jakovljević, 'On Performance Forensics', 51.

meaning'. Because in a forensic investigation everything can have meaning, can leave a trace, can be relevant to what is being discovered, reconstruction is centred around minute observation and the embrace of detail. We see this most clearly in Hauptaktion's frame-by-frame dissection of the YouTube video, but it is also present in their more conceptual question of how events and actions leave traces in bodies. Their performance research strategies combine forensic methods of constructing controlled environments, which spell out the modes of engagement for the audience, staging the construction of evidence, and pointing out the audience's responsibility in handling and judging those presented materials. They combine document analysis, essayistic commentary, and performed enactment to prompt us to reflect on the modes of production of knowledge under a forensic gaze. The strategy of relying on the performer's body as a form of substitution for historic images makes palpable the distance between the documents presented on stage and the embodied repertoire of specific performance traditions and their residues in contemporary bodies. The substituted enactment as well as the temporal extension of gestures, question visual representation of violent performance histories.[656] Similarly, the strategy of doubling the commentary with the gesture's performance works to contextualise the provocation of the performance and emphasises the framing of the discussion as one that stages not only the cultural history of a specific topic (in this case the Nazi salute or the question of cultural appropriation in dance) but also the conditionality of knowledge about that topic. Layering different aspects of the reconstructive practice via the commentary of the lectures and the bodies of the

[656] And as such also enters conversations about their reproduction on stage started by works like Brandon Jacob-Jenkins's *An Octoroon*, which famously reproduces the photograph of a lynching to exemplify and critique the logics of the white gaze inherent in nineteenth-century melodrama, and Claudia Rankins's *The White Card*, which thematises the commodification of Black pain in contemporary visual arts. Interestingly, the 2022 production of *The White Card* at Soho Theatre, London chose a similar performance strategy of substitution. Instead of plastering the stage with replica of famous paintings, which the play text places in the apartment of the New York City art collector (like Robert Longo's *Untitled (Ferguson Police, August 13, 2014)* or Jean-Michel Basquiat's *Defacement* (*The Death of Michael Stewart),* the production chose to substitute those images by placing the para-text (usually displayed next to a painting in museums and galleries) on a canvas the size of the original painting. Instead of a print of *Defacement*, for example, the canvas on stage reads: 'Jean-Michel Basquiat / Defacement / A Painting Depicting the Death of Michael Steward / Acrylic and Marker on Wood'. This might have been a result of a limited stage design budget, but it also shows a hesitation of reproducing visual representations of violence on stage (even if they are deemed art works) and marks the process of describing them through words a suitable mode of approximating them for an audience, alienating them in order to make the audience question the normalisation of their reproduction (Branden Jacobs-Jenkins, *An Octoroon* (London: Nick Hern Books, 2017); Claudia Rankine, *The White Card: A Play* (Minneapolis: Graywolf Press, 2019).)

performers allow for a form of corporeal commentary on underexamined links between fascist and racist myth building and disciplinary bodily regimes and choreographies. At the same time, it emulates a disinterested and distanced attitude towards the presented materials – via disengaged facial expression and stylised movements – while also showing the obvious exhaustion and fatigue which results from the prolonged performance of these repertoires. This points to tensions within modes of forensic analysis, which rely on assumptions of neutrality, but also are aware of their own role in constructing and producing this neutrality. Lastly, the strategies of alienating the text, by splitting the positions of speaking and enacting and by playing with standards of academic expression, exhibit and question dominant modes of knowledge presentation, insisting instead on alternative modes of performing the speaker's and performers' embeddedness in the process of the examination. Hauptaktion's lecture performances draw on physical and performative enactment as an epistemic strategy that expands traditional forensic methods and take seriously the aims of performance forensics. We might call this strategy a form of embodied forensic analysis.

By adding the embodied performance of the gesture to the discursive analysis of historical and contemporary documents, the lecture performance proves to be an effective mode of analysis for performance histories and legacies that are 'still contested in the present'. Their reconstructive method offers a mode of performance analysis, which takes seriously the contextualising potentials of the lecture, while also enlisting performance repertoires as a mode of expanding forensic analysis via a taking up of position in relation to the materials or 'inhabiting' the investigation.[657] The practice of inhabiting the investigation is a central contribution of the lecture performance's engagement with forensic reconstruction. Like the idea of 'forensic persuasion' it focusses on the constructive elements of these techniques.[658] The idea of 'persuasion' implies that an argument is being made. Materials are arranged and presented in a

[657] I borrow this idea from Les Back, who coined the term 'inhabiting the argument' in his *Academic Diary*, when describing the particularly effective strategies of a performative lecture given by one of his former PhD students, Heidi Hasbrouk, in sociology. Having conducted ethnographic research into 'female waitresses in American diners and restaurants', she delivered her research presentation in her waitressing uniform and offered 'Coffee? Cream? Sugar?' to her somewhat bewildered audience. Back observes, 'Part of what a waitress does is the performance of a gendered cultural script. This involves tending to patrons needs but also making them feeling attended to and cared for. Heidi inhabited her argument before she explicated it'. (Back, *Academic Diary*, 148.)

[658] Alvarez and Zaiontz, 'Feminist Performance Forensics', 286.

specific way to make the reader/listener arrive at a specific conclusion. Similarly, the idea of inhabiting allows for a more subjective and involved mode of engagement, which also changes how the audience receives what is being presented. While, for example, an essay about the fascist salute can be interesting, informative, even stirring, being immediately confronted with the performance of this gesture changes how the audience receives this information. The position of the performer in relation to the argument is being exposed. They cannot hide behind euphemisms or make excuses for certain phrasings. They are the direct correspondence between what is being said and what is being done. In short, the questions the performance poses and the answers it suggests are mediated via the performers' bodies. Their bodies go from being the object of analysis (that which is being examined and studied via a forensic gaze) to being the mediators of the analysis, which reveals the interconnections between object of study and mediation, which a forensic logic necessarily seeks to separate. An approach of embodied forensic analysis makes clear the arbitrariness of such a distinction.

'Inhabiting the investigation' goes from a creative strategy to the staging of an ethical dilemma in Hauptaktion's performances. 'Inhabiting' also suggests taking responsibility for what is said and how. The end of *Situation with Outstretched Arm* illustrates this dilemma. After the commentary offered by the voiceover has summarised the most recent events around Meese's use of the gesture in public, the performance turns towards its own performance situation. The voiceover asks Tamburini whether she can still keep up the gesture. She does not answer but her pained face speaks for itself. Looping the performance text from the beginning, the voice then once again explains the set-up of the piece and invites the audience to 'take a closer look' at this gesture. It then falls silent. After a few seconds of continuing to struggle, Tamburini shakes her head and takes down her arm. She walks off stage, shaking and massaging her arm and neck. The performance ends with the bibliography of the text being read out loud. Tamburini takes a towel and walks across the stage briefly nodding to the audience, who applaud and drown out the rest of the bibliography. There is no curtain call. This nod to Tamburini's responsibility within the setting and her eventual refusal to keep going is emblematic of a performance strategy that places the body at the centre of its engagement with problematic performance repertoires and marks it as a site of contested knowledge production. In this context, Tamburini's final refusal needs to be read not as a stepping

away or shrinking from difficult inheritances but as an acknowledgement of that responsibility as an implicated subject. Hauptaktion's performance opts for engagement rather than dis-engagement, looking again rather than looking away, and enduring rather than shrugging off.

Part 3 of this thesis has attended to how the lecture performance engages in strategies of encountering the archive and forensic investigations. It has shown that both methods offer different ways of staging and interrogating modes of reconstruction. Both focus on reenactment as primary reconstructive methods and centre the bodies of those engaged in those reconstructions as primary sites of meaning making. Both the archive and the idea of forensics are associated with limited conceptions of knowledge. In the case of the archive, the epistemic violence lies in the prioritising of the written record to the detriment of all other forms of knowing, whereas forensics might be seen as relying too heavily on ideas of empirical evidence and assumptions of neutrality that do not consider how these 'natural' conditions are being produced and how much they rely on processes of standardisation. Yet, the focus on the lecture performance has shown that these limitations can be negotiated and critiqued through the modes of performance. Chapter 5 has tested modes of 'giving voice' to those silenced by the historical record or engaging 'critical fabulation' as a way of approximating the lives of those insufficiently represented by those records. Chapter 6 has turned to the ideas of performance forensics to employ but also expand on knowledge production through investigative aesthetics. In both cases, we have seen an impulse towards knowledge diversification, which is interested in the co-existence and convergence of multiple forms of meaning making.

# Conclusion

In August 2022 theatre critic Lyn Gardner covered the first full-scale Edinburgh Festival Fringe after the COVID-19 pandemic. Having been cancelled completely in 2020 and run at a much-reduced size and partly online in 2021, 2022 marked the festival's return to pre-pandemic levels in terms of staged productions and visitor numbers. After her first day of reviewing, Gardner observed on Twitter: 'Well an excellent first day @edfringe. Every show I saw had something and sometimes a great deal to recommend'.[659] And her second tweet in this thread of first impressions read, 'The performance lecture or Ted talk style show also seems popular, sometimes tongue in cheek and sometimes not'.[660] Gardner pointing to the popularity of the lecture performance format post-pandemic is poignant and speaks to many of the developments charted in this thesis. With the festival asking artists to shoulder all financial risks of mounting their shows themselves, it is easy to imagine why the lecture performance might be a popular genre with artists – especially after two years of severe disruptions and restrictions to their professional lives. As mentioned throughout this thesis, lecture performances tend to have a fairly low production budget, do not rely on large-scale scenery and expensive costumes or props, and are often relatively stationary; involving artists sitting in front of a laptop or standing at a microphone. They do not necessarily need to be created in rehearsal rooms, which can be expensive to rent and might not have been as easily available in the run-up to the festival due to the ongoing COVID restrictions.

This popularity Gardner picks up on could also be indicative of a continued interest in the staging and performance of expertise or experience, and of artists negotiating their positions in a cultural landscape where questions such as who gets to tell which story or speak on which topics is frequently raised. In a time when public discourse continues to be influenced by populist rhetoric and 'post-truth' politics, and advancements in artificial intelligence and machine learning mean that chatbots can produce university-grade essays, what is considered 'authentic' knowledge is being

[659] Lyn Gardner, Twitter Post, 3 August 2022, 9:40 pm, https://twitter.com/lyngardner/status/1554930247698612224.
[660] Gardner, Twitter Post, 3 August 2022, 9:47 pm, https://twitter.com/lyngardner/status/1554932045930954754.

renegotiated. This renegotiation alongside the developments of the knowledge economy, which subjects knowledge to market forces and transforms knowledge producers into entrepreneurs of knowledge capital, means that what we know, how we gained this knowledge, and how we circulate it have become pressing questions. In this thesis I have shown how contemporary lecture performances creatively interrogate these questions. Lecture performances not only describe questions of representation, they also participate within their own modes of representation – of knowledge, or experience, or expertise.

Gardner's observation not only touches on the form's continued popularity but indicates what this thesis has identified as lecture performance's engagement in the processes of 'epistemization of art'.[661] This thesis takes seriously the form's interest in challenging dominant and ingrained modes of knowledge presentation and staging a multiplicity of knowledges. But it also tested the effects of the knowledge economy – namely, the standardisation and homogenisation of knowledge practices and the consumptive approach to knowledge reception which Tom Holert identified – on the lecture performance. Questioning the modes of labour showcased and engaged in in lecture performances, the form's broader position within a market of knowledge products (especially in relation to the TED talk), its status as a digital pedagogy, and its ability to intervene in established modes of critical analysis, I showed the lecture performance's engagement in a changing epistemological landscape.

In Part 1, I demonstrated how developments in cognitive capitalism and the knowledge economy manifest in the form of the lecture performance and how artists negotiate the limitations these developments put on the form's potential for critical intervention. Focusing on labour and artistic work, I showed the ambiguous class status of the lecture performer and how the form theatricalises the conflict between self-organisation and self-exploitation contemporary (cognitive) workers face. Chapter 1 examined current discourses of virtuosity in theatre and performance studies in relation to the cognitive labour performed in the lecture performance to point to the alienation and exploitation lecture performers face within their work. Turning to Jérôme Bel's *Véronique Doisneau* and Jochen Roller' trilogy *Perform Performing*, this chapter

[661] Holert, *Knowledge Beside Itself*, 8.

established the institutional and economic servility, which contemporary performers are trained to perform and which these lecture performances seek to unpack in their own presentations. The chapter represents the first comparative case study and draws on previous research into the lecture performance to connect it to debates and analyses in political economy. It also works to establish the framework within which the lecture performance is understood in this thesis. By examining how both performances stage processes of precarisation the chapter highlights similarities between artistic and other forms of cognitive labour.

Complicating this finding, Chapter 2 turned to online representations of the lecture performance and sought to connect the lecture performance to larger developments of the knowledge economy during a time of global disruption. Highlighting the proximity between modes of cognitive managerial work and lecture performances, I examined the ambiguous position the lecture performer as knowledge worker assumes within the hierarchy of cultural production; I also questioned the overall efficacy and ability of artists to organise or act in solidarity of the global knowledge worker, subsumed under the label of cognitariat – as Berardi imagines it. Examining the lecture performance series 'My Documents/Share your Screen' (curated by Lola Arias), I argued that lecture performances are emblematic of a cultural market that mobilises artistic processes as artistic products and has them stand-in for more costly productions. I traced the ways in which artists involved in the lecture performances sought to distinguish their work from more popular genres and iterations of the lecture performance, such as the TED talk, and highlighted their attempts to challenge the standardisation of knowledge practices under cognitive capitalism. What the chapter highlights are the existing similarities between artistic work and other forms of labour; in doing so, it contributes to the ongoing discussion of modes of labour organisation in the knowledge economy.

Having examined the lecture performance within artistic production Part 2 shifted to the lecture performance in the context of higher education where recent processes of marketisation and developments in online teaching have given rise to new questions about the performance of knowledge and made its analysis even more timely. The second part of the thesis set itself the task of examining the underlying tension between the promises of online knowledge dissemination – which is often heralded as the champion of open-access education (for example in the form of Massive Open Online Courses

[MOOCs] or TED talks) – and the processes of privatisation and inequity that are often the direct consequences of the marketisation of higher education. I argued that the lecture performance is well-placed as an object of study to examine this tension and the contradictory performances it elicits from academics, lecturers, and other professionals in higher education. Showing how the lecture performance intersects modes of academic self-presentation with discourses around edutainment, I traced how pedagogies in higher education have shifted since the knowledge economy's encroachment into higher education.

In Chapter 3, I therefore turned to TED talks, as a popular performance genre, to critically analyse its performance dramaturgies and disclose the homogenisation of the knowledge experience which the format cultivates. By outlining its formulaic construction – which focuses on the individualistic and charismatic capacities of the speaker – I demonstrated the limited pedagogical efficacy of the form and highlighted its embeddedness in a Silicon Valley culture which offers individualised solutions to systemic problems. I also showed that as a mode of identification the TED talk is problematic for academics because it risks a clash between two different conventions of expertise, which can leave academics (especially those from marginalised backgrounds, such as in the case of Amy Cuddy) vulnerable to ridicule or to being considered illegitimate within their professional surrounding. Situating the lecture performance within the broader context of the knowledge economy and its mode of circulating knowledge, the chapter examined the often fluid and para-institutional relationships between higher education and other actors in the knowledge economy.

Expanding on these relationships Chapter 4 took on the popular pedagogies championed by dispositives like TED and looked at what happens when they are applied to a university curriculum. Dissecting Jon McKenzie's model of smart media that seek to combine products from popular culture, such as comics and music videos, etc. with forms of academic productions, like essays and lectures, this chapter asked how the lecture performance is engaged in pedagogies invested in lowering the threshold for academic participation. By centring his practice on digital literacy as a form of civic participation, McKenzie's suggests that these mixed-media forms are helpful in making accessible otherwise inaccessible knowledge. He argues for pedagogical reform to include modes of knowing previously ignored in academic settings. By highlighting the tension between

this call for wider academic participation and the material realities of university education as commodity, I questioned the efficacy of such a pedagogical programme, its potential to promote fairer access to knowledge and a more democratised approach to digital performance practices. Employing an in-depth study of how the lecture performance is positioned and aligned with other practices, promising pedagogical innovation, and higher student satisfaction, the chapter read this investment in edutainment critically and suggested that these forms of popular pedagogies can seem like window-dressing when they ignore the very material circumstances – of privatisation and precarisation – which limit access to forms of specialised knowledge.

Recognising that access to specialised knowledge alone does not redress deep-seated knowledge inequalities, in Part 3, I turned to lecture performance practices that are invested in the diversification of knowledges and asked what it means to take a plurality of knowledge seriously from the perspective of performance studies. Questioning how the lecture performance participates in ongoing methodological debates within the discipline of performance studies, I examined contemporary lecture performance practices that are engaged in showcasing different forms of knowledge. I showed how these performances stage different modes of knowledge as knowledge constructions, and thus expand the methodological toolkit of performance research. To show how the lecture performance oscillates different modes of knowing, I attended to the form's investment in the politics of reenactment. Drawing on two recent discussions within performance studies – namely, the confrontation of performance with the archive, and the rise of performance forensics – I demonstrated how lecture performances mobilise the reenactment to navigate the complexities of encountering archival and forensic materials.

Chapter 5 focused on the lecture performance's engagement with the archive. I established the archive as a problematic epistemic formation and analysed two lecture performances by Laila Soliman and Prarthana Purkayastha, which attempt to counter the epistemic violence of the archive. Staging different strategies of re-enacting the archive, by either speaking *for* or speaking *to* the subjects of the archive, I established the lecture performance as a mode of performance where the representational politics of the modes of engaging the archive can be negotiated. Drawing on Diana Taylor's well-known distinction between the archive and the repertoire, I argued that lecture performances

offer a way of staging, naming, and in some cases redressing the violences of the archive. This chapter works to illustrate how the dramaturgical strategies of the lecture performance – with its double-play of thought and action, speech and enactment, commentary and presentation – can participate in practices of knowledge pluralisation, while also staging the contested political and economic status quo which treats some knowledges are more legitimate and thus profitable than others.

Finally in Chapter 6, I explored performance forensics as a new methodology in performances studies and established the lecture performance as a mode of performance well-suited for this practice of forensic analysis. I argued that lecture performances can stage the process of forensic analysis while simultaneously calling attention to the limitations and constructedness of these forms of analysis and knowledge creation. Drawing on theorisations of investigative aesthetics by James Frieze, Matthew Fuller, and Eyal Weizman, I observed the similarity between the set-up of many lecture performances and the forensic methods of the 'controlled environment', the 'construction of evidence', and the practice of 'dissection'. I examined the trilogy of lecture performances by the performance collective Hauptaktion to test the ability of the form to stage an investigative gaze and to ask how the lecture performance's use of reenactment stages assumptions of neutrality and objectivity central to the forensic approach. I established that the lecture performance as performance forensics is particularly well-suited to the analysis of specific problematic repertoires connected to histories of violence. And I argued that the forensic lens can help articulate the often-unspoken ideologies, which produced historic violences, the effects of which might still be felt in the present. This chapter showed how the concept of forensic investigation reveals the critical possibilities of Hauptaktion's performances. Reading the lecture performance as a method of performance forensics can provide a richer sense of the form's potential to intervene in contemporary knowledge politics, while also being determined by the material circumstances that shape those politics.

Tracing the lecture performance's entanglements in the politics of knowledge also has shown that that 'knowledge' is not an uncontested term. How it is approached depends on who is talking and from what vantage point. From the perspective of knowledge management, which is articulated in McKenzie's critique of performativity and many theories of the knowledge economy, knowledge is skill and needs a practical

application to be marketable. From the perspective of Paolo Virno and other post-Fordist thinkers it is about the 'general intellect' and the virtuosity inherent in making this intellect become visible as labour. From the perspective of decolonial thinkers like DeSousa Santos, knowledge is both an expression of dominant cultures and their epistemic and social hegemony and a potential tool to effect social change. I have not sought to offer a definition of knowledge – that is not the point of the thesis – but rather to problematise lecture performances in relation to the different ways knowledge has been thought or mobilised in the context of the contemporary knowledge economy. Attending to these different conceptions of knowledge can not only bring out different understandings of the lecture performance as a form, but it also complicates our notion of what it means to engage with artistic and academic practices that claim to offer critical interventions into these knowledge politics. Understanding the lecture performance as a self-reflexive format of knowledge production allows me to interrogate the critical potentials of the form, while also taking seriously its multiple susceptibilities to the logic of marketisation.

I began this research by discussing the commodification of cognitive processes within post-Fordist economies with the rest of the thesis examining the consequences that the increasing demand for this aspect of labour has created – for both artists and academics. Cognitive labour commodifies the worker's own intellectual life and subjectivity as part of the sale of their labour power and – as some of the lecture performances examined here have shown – commodifies its display to the consumer/audience. Citing the process of commodity production via labour is crucial and underlines the importance of interrogating forms of labour that classical political economy did not envision. This thesis has built on post-Fordist definitions of immaterial labour to argue that knowledge work, as social display of commodified cognition and intellect, should also be understood as performance. As such, the research aimed to make contributions to scholarship on cognitive labour and contemporary knowledge work, as well as respond to a recent interest in the performance of knowledge in theatre and performance studies, where scholars and practitioners of the lecture performance have paid attention to both theatrical representations of knowledge production and the conditions under which these knowledges are produced. Here, especially the latter chapters of the thesis offer insights into how the lecture performance offers modes of

resistance to dominant modes of knowledge production and shown that theatre and performance can illuminate knowledge work and knowledge production, particularly where this involves processes of performance and theatricalisation itself. Finally, I have argued that the labour conditions facing lecture performers themselves – whether they are lecturers, researchers, artists, dancers or performers – can further our understanding of the conditions faced by other groups of cognitive workers.

Reflecting on the conclusions drawn in my research, the relationship between theatrical estrangement and other forms of alienation of work comes into view. This research has explored the relations between cognitive labour, modes of performing academic and artistic subjectivities, and epistemological hegemonies. This interplay between modes of theatrical and non-theatrical alienation seems emblematic for the lecture performance and points to further avenues of analysis which study the connections and potentialities this mode of staging alienation can foster between artists, academics, and other workers. While I touched on the modes of solidarity between cognitive workers and the problems in navigating the frequently ambiguous class relations within artistic and academic contexts, my analysis in Part 1 opens up new questions for future research concerning the ways knowledge workers can and do resist the often-exploitative demands placed on them, and what kind of new strategies of labour organisation an expanding cognitive workforce might imagine or create.

Future research could also complicate the connections made in this thesis between popular pedagogies and online dissemination of knowledge. While Part 2 traced the TED talk, its implication for contemporary standards of knowledge presentation, and its call for pedagogical innovation, further research could be done into formats aimed at broad audiences – both free-of-charge as is the case, for example, with the YouTube tutorial or for a fee as with the video lectures and workshop on Masterclass.com – and intended to produce educational products for everyday consumption. For Masterclass.com especially, the celebrity status of the lecturers seems to be a prerequisite for appearing on the platform, which further pushes discourses of edutainment and spectacularisation, leaving open the question to what extent universities, theatres and museums will have to compete with these enterprises in future.

Lastly, the fraught relationship between knowledge diversification and commodification would be a valuable topic for further research. Part 3 of this thesis has

attended to practices of the lecture performance invested in diversifying the modes with which new knowledges are created – in relation to archival or forensic objects of study. However, it did not dissolve the basic tension between these attempts at knowledge pluralisation and the realities of the knowledge economy in which they circulate. To what extent these practices resist the consumptive approach to knowledge reception Holert describes remains unclear,[662] as does the question whether these efforts offer a long-term potential to curb the effects of standardisation and homogenisation arising from the developments of the knowledge commodification. Further study into related practices – artistic or otherwise – and not confined to the lecture performances are necessary to paint a broader picture of this situation.

In the process of writing this thesis, I have found that when I talk to people about the topic of my research, they often link this to having to present at school or at work and are interested in unpacking the often-formulaic dramaturgies of these events, as well as the 'demand' to perform or even entertain, which these situations placed on them. When I describe the concept of knowledge work or cognitive labour and its relations to performance, many point to the endless online meetings during the COVID lockdowns as a time when they became aware of the performative elements of their jobs, which while connected to their ability to effectively undertake their jobs, also highlighted the managerial aspects of knowledge and work management to them. And when I mention TED talks and their way of codifying charismatic signals, listeners are keen to share their own frustrations with this way of performing knowledge, which strikes many as self-absorbed or as a trivialisation of expertise. The idea of knowledge as performance, and the concept of performing knowledge work especially, helps people to name something they have experienced or thought about but not had the conceptual framework to describe. These ideas help name the complex demands of performance placed onto contemporary workers and point to a shifting understanding of performance within everyday work culture, as well as an anxiety over what is considered an effective presentation of knowledge – and by extension an effective presentation of self.

While concepts such as knowledge as performance are blurry and the idea of cognitive labour is not without contestation, especially as there is no such thing as labour

[662] Holert, 59.

without cognition, the range of responses to my research confirm to me the political and analytical potential of my line of investigation. My research was inspired by the desire to describe the many layers of different performance of knowledge and to link them to broader developments of the marketisation of the arts and higher education. I hope this thesis has been able to offer insights into the conflation of presentation of self and presentations of knowledge in contemporary workplaces and contributed to unpacking the ways in which these practices are increasingly in danger of controlling our working lives and alienating us from the knowledge practices we participate in.

Throughout this thesis I have looked at the lecture performance from different institutional and epistemological contexts and highlighted its often-contradictory politics. On the one hand, lecture performances are an apt means for staging current debates in knowledge production: they often take a stance of resistance towards modes of conventions of knowledge production, which have previously gone unquestioned; some have actively participated in the increased calls to diversify knowledge and to question the epistemic status quo. On the other hand, they are emblematic of developments in the marketisation and commodification of knowledge that make them harbingers of the encroachment of the knowledge economy into artistic and academic spaces that have been previously untouched by demands of neoliberalisation. As such, lecture performances are not ever one thing. Among other things, they are a celebration of what might be possible if we take seriously different modes of knowing: they provide a chance to re-examine our own investments in certain conventions of knowledge presentation; they offer a model for contemporary work practices; and thus, also constitute a site where these work environments can be reimagined. They also provide a warning to not capitulate to the demands of self-exploitation and self-presentation. As a negotiation of the different markers of expertise circulating in our society, the lecture performance invites us to imagine other more inclusive pedagogies and at its best it promises to keep experimenting with new ways of doing knowledge.

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