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PERFORMANCE & SPACE II

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Dasein Design: Eco-anxiety, Platform Performativity, and Making Cures

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41

Dasein Design:
Eco-anxiety, Platform Performativity, and Making Cures

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Abstract

Bodies exist *in medias res*. Platform performativity — cybernetic imperatives to perform or else — operates across the three ecologies of self, society, and environment through diverse sociotechnical systems, producing transmediated performances that extend yet challenge logocentric power forms of Platonic and disciplinary platforms (eg, the rules and roles of schools and theatres, classical and modern spacetimes). The content of platform performativity is eco-anxiety, trickle-down angst triggered by climate change, legitimation crises, and pandemic viruses cascading through bodies young and old, human and animal. Hence, experience design. Collaborative making cures combine direct communication of information and indirect evocation of transformational experiences among different stakeholder groups, including partners and designers. The form of platform performativity is *Gestell* or positionality of subjects and objects, while its poesis or making is *dasein design*, eccentric attunement beyond modern critique and human expression. Making cures cure perfumatively, as shamans cure with incense, beyond therapy. Wrangling site-specificity (*da*, there) and being thrown (ek-static *sein*), dasein design's detouring of positionality resonates with applied research in environmental theatre (Schechner), performance design (Harslov), event-space (Hannah), and notably, design for dasein (Wendt). Overlaying design thinking with a general theory of performance, StudioLab's dasein design unfolds through participatory action research and design projects that match media designers with community partners working in education, healthcare, and environmental and human rights. Co-designing with Health Access Connect in Uganda and its network of rural clinics, design teams negotiate messianic narratives, data storytelling, and KPIs (key performance indicators) while tapping a geology of morals whose restorations of behaviour run deep. At stake are transvaluations of efficacy, efficiency, effectiveness—and experience writ large. Between calls to adventure and action, responses vary. Conversion of performative eco-anxiety solicits perfumative lifedeath, making paranoia metanoia. Making doesn't always take — this (what?) may be rare — even as it gives.

Keywords: platform performativity, eco-anxiety, pluriversal design, social media, transmedia knowledge, participatory action research, community engagement, strategic storytelling, making cures, geology of morals

Program

StudioLab's media design projects at Cornell grapple with performativity, eco-anxiety, and dasein design. Student teams work online with NGOs and nonprofits biweekly each semester. These community-based design projects are neither art nor critique yet are creative and critical and respond to traumatic situations in the United States and abroad. I report on these projects as *making cures* in a world challenged forth by platform performativity and eco-anxiety.

Platform Performativity and Plato's Fight Club

Srnicek theorizes platform capitalism as a dominant mode of production (e.g., gig economy, attention economy) associated with social media platforms such as Instagram and YouTube, work platforms such as Zoom and Slack, and transaction platforms such as Uber and AirBnb (Srnicek 2017). I define platform performativity as our contemporary power-knowledge matrix, overlapping sociotechnical platforms built atop modern disciplinary institutions, themselves built atop colonized indigenous grounds worldwide. As Descartes updated Plato's interpretation of being as *eidos* as subjective *idea,* its mapping of the world by some 24,000 academies constitutes Descartography. Reality is Descartographic, both epistemologically and ontologically, a world composed of subjects and objects ruled by methods and schools that function as postmodern Plato's Fight Clubs (McKenzie, 2019; McKenzie 2017).

StudioLab focuses less on opposing modern alphabetic discipline and postmodern digital performativity and more on their spatial cohabitation and synchronic operations, as well as their incommensurabilities. Fragmenting and multiplying oral petite narratives and literate grand narratives globally, platform performativity is itself post–human, post-Western, aligned as much with difference and alterity as identity and sameness, drawing on knowledges of shaman and the Buddha as much as Plato and Descartes.

Zooming out, Platonism and its academies constitute Platformism 101, for logocentrism has for millennia transmediated the world into alphabetic platforms of books, archives, academies, and theatres—and now files, databases, social media, and mobile devices. Thus, in addition to conceptualizing platform performativity strategically by tracing its contours theoretically, we will also speculate in a more diagrammatic, less flat-footed fashion. Platform, Plato, plateau: all share *plat* — Greek for flat, broad. A thousand plateaus displace a thousand Platos via a thousand platforms, putting all in play.

What is the form of contemporary platform performativity?: *Global positionality systems*, interactive sociotechnical platforms that include not just the Internet and social media but all

media (oral, literate, digital). Positionality relies on dynamic categorization of social identities and relationships generated, overcoded, and operationalized by systems optimization, second-level information, and debt-guilt systems that challenge us to perform or elsemaccording to roles, functions, and categories of identitarian difference. Theatres, classrooms, workplaces, apartments, villages — these are performative platforms, as well as social media, word processors, email, etc.

If positionality is the form of platform performativity, what is its content? Beside and inside sociotechnical systems are psychophysical systems — bodies robust and precarious, neurotic and schizo. While second level information is *info about info*, primary level info today is *user-based eco-anxiety.*

Eco-anxiety, Traumaturgy, and Making Cures of Dasein Design

Scientists now study "eco-anxiety", anxiety that cascades from the climate crisis through social institutions and into individual bodies (Vakoch & Mickey, 2023). Infused with pandemics, such eco-anxiety thus pervades Guattari's three ecologies of self, society, and environment (Guattari, 2000), while viral patterns of eco-anxiety drive content creation of memes, profiles, avatars, as well as desiring-machines left, right, center and out-of-here. Among US youth, the crisis is so widespread it overwhelms our care systems: we lack enough couches and therapists to handle this traumaturgy, this working of pain into something else. Traumaturgy is the work that trauma entails and gives rise to, including suffering and curative work that responds with care and attention. Traumaturgy is both individual and shared, intimate and infrastructural.

Locating eco-anxiety in spacetime — or in multiple spacetimes — poses many challenges: it is everywhere and nowhere, triggering subjects, institutions, and worlds intermittently, all the time. Alongside talking cures made famous by psychoanalysis, StudioLab thus explores collaborative *making cures* as part of its dasein design process. Here (where?) dasein design unfolds at scale, with *mitsein* (being with), designing media with shared eco-anxieties. Making cures extends beyond patient-based storytelling to strategic storytelling and collaborative making through any media necessary. Wrangling site specificity (*da*, there) and being thrown (ek-static *sein*), dasein design's detouring of positionality resonates with applied research of environmental theatre (Schechner), performance design (Harsløf), event space (Hannah), and notably, design for dasein (Wendt).

Health Access Connect and Data Storytelling

A long-term StudioLab partner is Health Access Connect (HAC), a US-based NGO supporting remote Ugandan villagers' efforts for sustainability and equity by connecting them with public health services from Kampala. At stake here is chronic rather than acute trauma, policy action rather than political activism. Key to HAC's work is its network of monthly pop-up patient clinics, its staff and public healthcare workers, and taxi "medicycles" for connecting these urban resources to remote, off-grid villagers. Since 2015, HAC has run 1,169 clinics, distributing 44,329 services, including family planning and basic pediatrics. Long-term, HAC hopes to expand its process to other nations, and it documents its work using interviews, photography, data collection and visualization.

With HAC's patients living off-grid, StudioLab's design work focuses primarily on strategic storytelling for donors, specifically, institutional and individual donors who visit the HAC website or conference presentations. We call this work *data storytelling, storytelling up* (based on ethnographic "studying up" of elites), and thus *data storytelling up*. Significantly, HAC's success here now inform KPIs (key performance indicators) used by Uganda's Ministry of Health. HAC's staff — all in Uganda — are skilled visual storytellers, and our collaboration includes strategic storytelling, website analysis and testing, prototyping, creation of brochures and flyers, and two collaborative, online workshops on storytelling and data visualization.

Our on-going collaboration with Health Access Connect reveals the role participatory action research, strategic storytelling, and performance design can play in understanding and creating widespread delivery of healthcare services to remote, rural communities. The traumaturgy here involves chronic rather than acute situations, thousands of patients, a small, dedicated staff, policymakers and donors, and its making cures stretch across villages via roads and networks. Connecting platforms and spaces, HAC can also serve as a heuristic "tutor org" for other small organizations across a wide range of public and private sectors, as its growing ecology of stakeholders and strategic stories demonstrate how pluriversal design can help connect multiple worlds individuated in different ways in different places and thus navigate platform performativity.

Acutely, HAC's sensitivity to messianic narratives and its place in the history of global development reveals the complexities of designing across worlds and the value of both historical and mythic storytelling, of conceptual ideation and thought-action figuration, of universal and pluriversal design.

Cosmography and the Geology of Morals

Let us approach performing space from the perspective of pluriversal design or *cosmography*, StudioLab's creation of shared worlds. Delivering healthcare to remote villages during COVID reveals different worlds composing HAC's work. For StudioLab, working with HAC has concretized *the geology of morals*, Deleuze and Guattari's metamodel in *A Thousand Plateaus* for the stratification of matters, bodies, and languages, the layering of worlds within worlds, bodies within bodies (McKenzie, 2019; Deleuze & Guattari, 1987)

What is the geology of morals underlying Ugandan rural healthcare? For traumaturgical care — medical staff, vaccines, neonatal medicines — to reach villagers, it must pass through at least four strata:

1) a *global pharmaceutical industry*, regulated locally by

2) *Uganda's postcolonial national government*, itself built upon

3) complex, continuing *legacies of British colonialism and Christian and Muslim monotheisms*, all these strata layered atop

4) *Indigenous tribal animistic traditions* still shaping everyday lifedeath

Moreover: *individual villagers, HAC staff, and StudioLab designers all embody different geologies within themselves*, worlds composed of different layers of feelings, perceptions, habits, actions, and beliefs that come to the fore in different situations and environments—as patient, citizen, worker, villager, designer, etc. Cascading restorations of behavior unfold across different temporalities, producing intergenerational care and rhizomatic traumaturgy. Such geologies of morals are thus not limited to contemporary Uganda, but can be found globally, locally. Cornell University's geology of morals has similar colonial layers but with very different sediments and chronologies.

Elsewhere, in post-Soviet Buryatiai, anthropologist Buck Quijada draws on Bakhtain's *chronotope* to describe how contemporary citizens there use ritual to inhabit multiple historic pasts — indigenous, Buddhist, Russian Orthodox, Soviet. Chronotopes can help us dasein design between strata by demarcating moral faultlines, sites where configurations of word, image, and act break up and recombine. These chronotopes resonate with Schechner's restored behaviors, yet the geology of morals harbors different performing spaces within individual and collective bodies, *broken hegemonies* of thought and action that cannot only be activated but, more subtly and overwhelmingly, activate us with different calls to action (Schurmann, 2003).

We answer less to a call of being than *multiple call centers* ringing us up from different worlds with different interpolations, dreams, and nightmares. StudioLab's PAR&D, its community work with civic storytelling, legal storytelling, and data storytelling up likewise draws on different cosmograms, different pluriversal designs.

Coda

Turning back to the traumaturgy of Indigenous grounds and our 24,000 academies. In our age of platform performativity, if there is any institution in need of pluriversal making cures — of converting its trauma to care, its paranoia to metanoia — it is the Academy.

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