



PERFORMANCE
PHILOSOPHY

SITUATING ARENDT'S DISCOURSE ETHICS: SPECULATIVE PERFORMANCES BY A THINKTANK OF PASSIONATE "NON-PROFESSIONAL THINKERS"

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Trigger Warning: there is a discussion of suicide in the final section of this text. The beginning of the section is marked and a reader may choose to conclude their reading with the previous paragraph.

Actors Thinking

The very first question is ceremoniously drawn out of a brown bowler hat. Scrawled in blue pen on a scrap of notebook paper by thinktank participant Eleanor/Dave Koenig,¹ this question inaugurates a year-long "thinktanking" performance (PPL 2017). The question is read aloud: *what is the difference between thinking and doing?*

I am one of eight or nine individuals gathered in a garage in Brooklyn, sitting in a circle on the dirty painted-plywood floor. The heat isn't working. Through chattering teeth, Hannah Arendt's chapter "thinking and doing: the spectator" from *The Life of the Mind* is brought to bear. Here, Arendt talks about withdrawal from action, how the "thinker" removes themselves in order to become a spectator who can view a bigger picture. The "withdrawn" thinker or "philosopher" can see the "harmonious ordered whole" of the *kosmos*, while "actors" go on operating within a world they can't see or comprehend (Arendt 1978, 92–98).

At first, it may seem that Arendt is reifying what we now might call the Western imperial/colonial “overseer mentality;” the idea mere players don’t know what’s best for our/themselves whereas those who are perched outside the dust and gore are better able to think, will, and judge. Writes Arendt, “the spectator, not the actor, holds the clue to the meaning of human affairs” (96). But Arendt is talking about how the *individual philosophers* distantiate themselves, not about how and which thinkers are *authorized* as overseers, authors, or builders of worlds, via political mechanisms. Arendt understands that schemas placing some persons “higher” are authoritarian; she discusses differences between the spectatorships of “pariahs” and “ordinary men” versus those of the “authorized” spectator (Arendt 1944, 1956, 1978). Her own perception of herself as (at least partially) a pariah or outsider informs some of her core arguments: first, that *all* persons are capable of withdrawing themselves from active participation in order to operate as reasoning, thinking, moral agents (Arendt 1954). Second, that thinkers must participate in discourse with a plurality of “other” thinkers, thereby “enlarging” their mentalities. Finally, she argues that reason must involve enlargement of mentalities through social discourse, even while the place that thinkers go when they withdraw from the world in order to think may be “within themselves,” a contemplative site of reflection-upon. The thinker is a spectator who, from their removed position, becomes an arbiter able to deduce justice, morality, and meaning *for themselves*.

Arendt identifies “thinkers who are not professionals,” as those “individuals who have “unified two apparently contradictory passions, for thinking and acting” (1978, 167). Perhaps this “unification” is what makes it difficult for us to consider ourselves *spectators*, even of the philosopher-as-pariah variety.² In the first place, we rarely have the time to sit back in armchairs and think and are certainly not paid to do so. In the second place, many of us do not desire to “withdraw” from what Moten and Harney (2013) name *parousia* (so much Greek), our haptic touching presences, mass embodiment, our ecstatic inter-play. Third and relatedly, we may like the idea of being part of an “undercommons” (Moten and Harney 2013), reifying our own ways of being-thinking but from fugitive, maroon, outcast, queer positions (and in “our own” ways), as persons forever engaged in a struggle to be recognized (and to reify ourselves) as intellectuals instead of instrumentals. Through confronting Arendt, however, we begin to feel these dichotomies and academic mappings of withdrawn builder-thinker-spectators vs. situated player-bricklike-actors, between the centralized, authorized “mainstream” and the delegitimized, meat-mass “undercommons” as each, in some ways, reproductive themselves of the conceptual origins of totalitarianism, colonialism, white supremacy, patriarchy, and ecocide. We want to be *doing* something that overthrows this whole *Theatrum Mundi* “centralized staging” paradigm. Dave/Eleanor re-phrases their initial question: what “good” does it do to *merely* think?

This inquiry is the very definition of a layperson’s philosophical problem. Most formally and presumptuously, I declare at the outset of the thinktank,³ we are attempting to theatrically practice a “domain of interaction” that may “mediate between the macropolitical institutions of a democratic polity and the private sphere” (Benhabib 1992, 12). More honestly and practically, we are trying to cope emotionally with political disenfranchisement and Trump-era despair (more on defense mechanisms soon).

Does it matter if we've read Arendt, Benhabib, or Moten and Harney? Does it matter if we've read these texts of our own volition or as assigned during a college class? Our thinktank will return to what I (a reader of Arendt in my leisure time) identify as "Arendtian" problematics again and again, through what we term "the scale-of-agency problem:" roughly, the cluster of problematics involving agentic scales and senses of being "inside" or "outside" the world-stage (*Theatrum Mundi*) and the "agency" (or lack thereof) of an individual or marginalized group to effectively construct (centralized or other-wise) "world(s)." We debate how—through use of this "holistic" ⁴ *Theatrum Mundi* worldview at large—we reproduce dichotomies between thinking and acting, between within the world (onstage), and outside of it (backstage, spectators in the audience). Even though some of us have not read much philosophy at all, we do seem to agree that discourse is essential to the emergence of a "political conscience" (Arendt 1958, Benhabib 1992) that can be used to inform our actions as we attempt to build a "common livable world" that "must be composed, bit by bit, or not at all" (Haraway 2016, 40).

I feel like, one thinktanker says, we're players of a D&D game relieved of an overseeing dungeon master, about to confront fabulous, vicious creatures of epistemic lore who insist that acts of knowledge production are political and public, whereas acts of thinking and feeling are personal and private. Or what about, another thinktanker adds, that paralyzing monster who, bolstered by misinterpretation of scientific studies, insists that human beings are "totally conditioned," our behaviors and beliefs pre-determined and our "agentic ideation" illusory? What teeth such dichotomies and insistences have, what powers.

In-situ, we are indeed assembled like players, if not in a game with rules (more on situational rules soon), then at least like the players in some devised-theater-making, compositional ensemble. The feeling is familiar to many of us, that first rehearsal "withdrawal" from the day-to-day when the task of deciding how to intentionally proceed as a de-hierarchized group seems insurmountable. Attempts to tackle and parse relationships between so-called "thinking" and so-called "doing" are multi-dimensional, opening up mise-en-abymic halls of angled mirrors that seem to split and project discourse endlessly in every direction. How will we get an "idea-thing" up "on its feet"?

How, concretely how, can dialogue situations be performed which move beyond the Kantian rupture between "the private virtue of goodness" and "impersonal justice," towards *performable* articulation of Arendt's demand for guaranteed rights to opinion and action in political discourse, what we might call *the right to think*? Through, alongside, and sometimes against Arendt's assumptions and propositions, an initial ontological question about differences between thinking and doing is re-written, socially broken down and broken through, becoming something like *how can this/a (p)articular assembly intentionally perform thinking actions that do something?*

Autonomy of an Idea(tion)

Our energies are primed by what Richard Turner (1973) calls "the 'methodological' principle, which makes certainty begin with reflection". As questions about "the scale-of-agency problem" pile up atop Eleanor/Dave's initial question about differences between thinking and doing, we choose to

adopt a (p)articular belief: all persons, we agree to believe in alliance with Arendt, *are able* to perform withdrawal from their own ongoing performativity in order to speculate. This (self and social) authorization to think *is* our definition of hum*nization.⁵

Further, we will borrow the term *reasoning* to discuss how we—as individuals and as an intentionally-in-formed embodiment—are thinking about something (*topoi*) in particular. For us, the term *reasoning* differentiates between thinking (passive ideation) describing compulsory, uncontrollable thoughts and mental-bodily phenomena, and the doing-of-thinking (active ideation) describing concrete plans, heuristic reasoning processes, tactics, and actionable schemes. Using the concept and terminologies of “reason(ing)s,” we posit, configures us semantically and conceptually to discuss thinking as *agentic performativity*, potentially even as intentionalized forms of “performance as/of art(ifice)” that could be called “theater,” “dance,” “performance art” “composition,” or “dialectics,” that is, praxical weaving of an intangible yet material web that is constructed to appear by and between (p)articular persons through their performed speech and action (Arendt 1958).

Arendt suggests that inability to reason is related—if not synonymous—with moral failing. At the very least, an inability to perform *active* ideation can be seen as a cause of immoral action. In *Eichmann in Jerusalem* (1963) Arendt identifies the embodiment of immoral behavior as caused by a lack of a faculty to reason, to think, to judge. She wonders, is this the fault of a person, or that person’s socio-political conditioning, and who should (in either case) incur blame when this lack of reasoning causes great suffering? Is the inability to reason a form of inherent mental disability (nature), a product of social conditioning (nurture), or does inability to reason owe its cause not to personal responsibility but rather to “technologic” techniques and apparati that treat all as instruments within objective, abstract orders (Heidegger 1977) designed by totalitarian political vehicles driving utilitarian mass activity? In our small group, we are concerned with how we can practice the performative “ability” to reason and reach some political “agency” to ideate. Like Heidegger and Arendt, we are concerned about being controlled by, complicit in, unable to see “the machine.”

Three general propositional motivations for our thinktank become visible. These may be correlated with more specific “why, how, who, and what” inquiries:

A. Through an initial ideative and ethical frame, we (thinking, rational, hum*nized individuals) intend and desire to proliferate and reflexively authorize our own and each other’s radically different (and dissident) ways of thinking, communicating, composing, and acting.

B. From and through a second ideative location, we (a thinktank driven by some shared ethics) want to develop ways of thinking and communicating *together*, constructing communication tactics for practicing ethical discourse and guiding each other out of and away from the internalized fascisms of our own shared and located state(s).

C. From a third ideative location, we want our discourse to materialize political considerations, histories, and activations of ethical considerations, including us (individuals, agents, our identity groups) as contributors to an emergent political conscience.

We get out a roll of paper and try to draw a diagram of these three interacting frames, locations, desires-to-think-and-know as they are becoming active reasoning practices (figure 1). We want to get away from *Theatrum Mundi's* "scales," and onstage/offstage boundaries and develop some ways of *methodologically* doing discourse as thinker-actors. This diagram may be judged arbitrary. It is arbitrary, in the sense that all must be *arbitrated* through use, spectatorship, judgment, and discourse, as must justice, reason, and law.

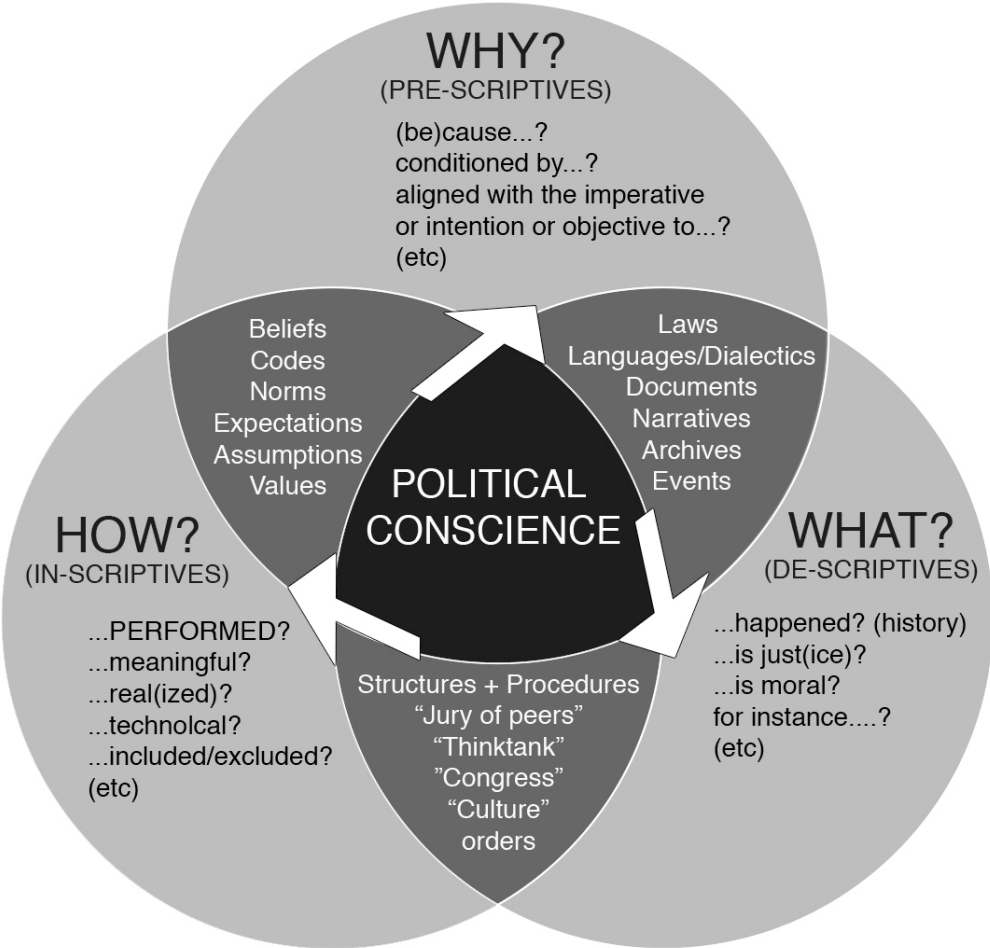


Figure 1

Arbitration of HOW? (In-scriptives and webs)

Is this fun?

Sometimes—and for some people—it doesn't feel good to think or speak together. Sometimes—and for many people—it is very hard to focus on “the big questions,” especially from within concrete struggles to survive. It's been a long day. The drive, the willingness, the responsibility to think—and moreover the desire, agency, or ability to “reason” in ways wildly resistant to dominant conceptualizations—magnetize both our forms of performative discourse and the subject matters discussed.

We identify the situation in which discourse occurs as that which transforms individuals into “reasonable” thinker-actors. We do not, we declare, depend on wealth, academic degrees, public recognitions, or elections to authorize us or confirm our membership in the *polis* as sharers of words and deeds (Arendt 1958, 216). Yet, in congruence with the paradoxa of spectatorship and public spheres, we are not sure we *are* able to be *seen* as reasonable. As we convene our thinktank, Fred Moten—an oft-cited idol amongst us—has been newly appointed faculty at NYU, and this is somewhat confusing. While we share with him the picture of the University as “the site of the social reproduction of conquest denial” (Moten and Harney 2013, 41), few of us follow his poetic arguments for “sneak(ing) into the university and steal(ing) what one can” (26). We simply can't afford it (in all senses of “affordances”). Only one of our thinktank members has had the opportunity to study with Moten and the bitterness and sorrows of exclusion remain with some of the rest of us, even as admirations run deep. We struggle with our attachments and affiliations, seeking to understand how our appearances can be neither entirely self-dependent on the private mirror's “vanity” nor “tyrannically ruled” but rather holding their own strength, “empowered,” in the way that “Power preserves the public realm and the space of appearance, and as such it is also the lifeblood of the human artifice, which, unless it is the scene of action and speech, of the web of human affairs and relationships and the stories engendered by them, lacks its ultimate *raison d'être*” (Arendt 1958, 222). This *reason* (to be) and its dependence on empowered construction of “the human artifice” seems to us a *good* reason to build discourse situations for one another, and describe how they must themselves involve processes of *intentional* co-hum*anization entailing mutual empowerment. We are given the intellectual tools to conceive of ourselves some sort of “subaltern counterpublic” (Fraser, 1990), say, yet our discourse remains private, “impotent,” and largely non-participant...until the publication of this text, perhaps.⁶

Arendt does not deal with the specifics of how “the web” of human affairs is engendered in-situ other than that it emerges from speech and action (*HOW?*). She does not provide many practical considerations with regards to situating “the space of appearance.” Arendt does, however, provide some *ethical heuristics* for how situational and performative decisions might be made that empower the public realm's inhabitation by actual/acting hum*ans. For example, it is both a stretch and a necessity to apply the ethical heuristic “plurality” to such considerations.

If we hold plurality as a principal value, that is, we assume that participation by differently abled, gendered, racialized, needs-holding, culturally-located individuals is desirable and ethical, we are

able to begin discourse events with forms of meta-discourse that establish flexible conditions for caretaking of particular and perspectives and bodily needs. Encouraging persons to come and go at will, de-hierarchizing speakers/performers and audience members, providing free food and drinks, de-regulating the appropriateness of silence and noise, are a few of the tactics suggested with regards to situating “inclusive” public dialogues. Time of day, access to bathrooms, quality of light, air temperature, can all become transparent considerations when it comes to the situation or event through which a “scene of action and speech, of the web of human affairs and relationships and the stories engendered by them” is staged.

Forms of dialogue can also be staged using core ethical considerations such as “pluralization.” If we intend to authorize diverse participants and substantiate different perspectives and sensibilities, self-governance tactics may need to be implemented that assure equity, safety, and self-determination (positive liberations) and prevent abuses, hierarchizations, violences (negative liberations).⁷ We discuss how, for example, a panel discussion is not a form of dialogue that we feel embodies our discourse ethics because it establishes hierarchies between speakers and listeners, divides “experts” from “non-experts,” and further positions bodies within one-to-the-many mediation and information-dissemination schemas.⁸ Further, a “traditional” play, through which assigned actors play out a scripted series of scenes in front of a spectating audience is inadequate (and potentially unethical) as a mode of discourse.⁹

Here in the *HOW?* location, where we are first each assumed by each other to be rational thinking individuals who also care about the comfort of each other’s body-minds, we can begin our thinktanking performance with a discussion about whether or not we want to implement “behavioral rules,” or positive and negative liberations. On our diagram, this *HOW?* appears as “inscriptions,” as scripts and scores for our bodies. These inscriptions should be aligned with our ethics and vice versa. For example, what are the ethics of applying (and enforcing) universal rules for behavior at all? Will we raise our hands to speak? (*Is it more important to ensure that no one is interrupted or is it more important that no one person mediate the conversation in any given moment?*) Will anyone take notes? (*Is it more valuable to document our discourse or to ensure that no note-taker process the dialogue through their singular perspective in any given moment?*) Will we take formal breaks or come and go as need-be? (*Is it more ethical to keep everyone present together or more ethical to allow for different bladder capacities?*) We decide that we must each take responsibility for our own (dis)comfort and for the courage to bring our needs to the group. There will be no hand-raising. Anyone can take notes for their own use but no central document will be kept. Persons should come and go at any time for any reason. Through these decisions, we both attempt embodiment of an ethical emphasis on self-determination and “open process” and assign ethical responsibility more strongly to individuals, trusting abilities to recognize and communicate at least our own pleasures, desires, (dis)comforts, and needs. We feel that elements of the discourse situation (if not always “fun” and “comfortable” than at least “not horrible”) must be considered if embodied persons are to construct their own (non-universal) affairs of intellect. Perhaps other forms of appearance may emerge via (plurally universalizable) pleasure-orientations and happiness-pursuits.¹⁰

Another group of unique persons, in another time and place, would and should make entirely different decisions regarding situational elements, ethical correlations with intentional performativities, and desirable forms of dialogue. *HOW* our thinktank is performed is designed by the assumptions, values, expectations, and presentations of unique persons. Honey Jernquist, Dave/Eleanor Koenig, Leili Huzaibah, Kaia Gilje, Marielle Pelissero, Edward G. Sharp, Joaquin Croaxetta, Mohammad Grout and myself each come to some—most to most—of the weekly meetings. All of these persons are able to sit on the floor. This group has been formed through an open invitation,¹¹ drawing thinkers from overlapping “communities” of persons living in New York City. Money is not involved. We do not all know each other, but some of us know each other very well. We are performance-makers, poets, and artists, food-service workers, educators, students, software coders, babysitters. Half of us have played “Dungeons & Dragons” and two of us have never heard of it.

The practical structure of our thinktanking performance is simple and decided in minutes at the very beginning of our first gathering; each participant writes questions as they occur in their own minds and puts them into a central hat (the brown bowler). When the conversation feels stuck, anyone can suggest drawing out a new question. The questions score the directions of our inquiry. As we proceed, questions written usually relate to previous questions, but sometimes send us off in entirely other directions. Each time a new question is drawn, we tend to begin address it by discussing the semantic terms and assumptions upon which it seems to be written. We begin by pretending that the writer of the question can remain anonymous but quickly learn that it is easier (and more fun) to task the identified writer of the question with some further explication and allow the writer of the question to somewhat lead the ensuing conversation.

Our conversation is performed in what *seems to us* a “natural” way. The shared language(s) we speak, our social intimacies and familiarities, cultural and behavioral expectations, and differing yet “contemporaneous” conceptual groundings operate effectively as conditioning and encoding elements. We socially reward non-competitive speech acts, encouraging “yes, and”-type communication and sometimes calling out speech acts that individuals judge to be overly toxic (“attacking,” “condescending,” “mansplaining”) and this calling-out is usually well-taken. The group’s members agree that racialization and gender paradigms should contribute to an individual’s decision about when, about what, and how frequently to speak up (“stay in your lane,” “don’t assume that you share beliefs,” and so on). However, just because our behaviors seem (to us) to follow “natural” norms, values, and rules, does not mean that reflexivity is impossible. We are not “blind” actor-doers, unable to narrate or tell stories about ourselves (Arendt 1978, 133); we also intentionally devise critical, narrative resistances to our own normative cultural behaviors.

For example, it was (and still is, as of 2019) dominant practice within artistic communities in Brooklyn to advise persons in dialogue to speak *only* from “within” experience, often to the *exclusion* of philosophical or meta-analytic propositions and statements. We discuss this norm in particular. Are these practices a symptom of our own internalized judgment of ourselves as “non-experts,” or unauthorized “non-thinkers,” or are these advisements developed in alignment with ethical assignment of value to the somatic, haptic, internal localities of members of an

undercommons (once again)? We decide that we *will* allow and authorize ourselves and each other to make wild claims, to theatrically assume temporarily “transcendent” positions, perform theorization, and to include opinions we do not share, paraphrase citations from texts, and submit examples from “outside” our individual lives; we authorize ourselves and each other to *speculate*.

We perform this authorization based on the semi-private nature of the thinktanking performance and a desire to develop an “agonistic” form of debate that assumes respect for the reasonability of dialectical “opponents” and assures the ability to disagree with ideas without discounting the experiences of persons (Mouffe 2013). Additionally, we decide, we are not to become a reading group (no texts were formally shared), a performance ensemble (no culminating performance outside the thinktank meetings themselves was devised), or a group-therapy session; rather, we would pursue lines of inquiry as clearly as possible, performing philosophical reasoning through a form of “collectively withdrawn” ideation.

This lattermost decision (to include, and also to value “withdrawn” or “speculative” ideation, even to the potential exclusion of “speaking from within experience”) proves the most entangled with conceptual subject matters themselves. When one thinktanker puts a question into the hat about whether or not *they in particular* “should or should not” apply for graduate school, the other members of the group at first turn their bodies towards the asker of the question, voices changing and modes of speech shifting. As we veer into a more colloquial, casual conversation, another thinktanker interrupts, suggesting that we transform this inquiry into a more general and objective form, replacing the question with another, such as “what considerations would *one* use to determine whether or not they ‘should’ (deontically) do something or not.” The writer of the personal question is upset, not wanting the moment of group attention, affection, and emotional support to become something else.

The interrupting thinktanker suggests we must consider the techniques of this discourse, not just assume that any and all conversation deepens a political conscience or leads to “enlarged” mentalities. Earlier, we had discussed how we liked the assumption that every statement is *inevitably* issuant from the uttering body. This assumption, we theorized, was perhaps a crucial aspect of “agonistic” philosophical discourse: let us proceed from the assumption that the only thing that everyone knows is that we are each “just” (theatrically) speculating. Further, the interrupting thinktanker proposes, because our subjectivity is assumed, we don’t need to use ourselves as *examples*; we can “enlarge” our discourse to apply to and include a deeper or more collectively-pertinent inquiry. “Ideas” should be autonomized from persons, put into the middle of the circle.

The thinktank is ethically split on this issue: either all conversation should be “general” and “objectively-oriented” in order to maintain the inclusion and intellectual participation of more individuals, *or* this generality marginalizes and diminishes embodied, affective participation and respect for personal differences and experiences.

In *The Human Condition* Arendt emphasizes the inevitability of the “disclosure of the subject” through action and speech:

Action and speech go on between men, as they are directed toward them, and they retain their agent-revealing capacity even if their content is exclusively "objective," concerned with the matters of the world of things in which men move, which physically lies between them and out of which arise their specific, objective, worldly interests. [...] But for all its intangibility, this in-between is no less real than the world of things we visibly have in common. We call this reality the "web" of human relationships, indicating by the metaphor its somewhat intangible quality. To be sure, this web is no less bound to the objective world of things than speech is to the existence of a living body, but the relationship is not like that of a facade or, in Marxian terminology, of an essentially superfluous superstructure affixed to the useful structure of the building itself. (Arendt 1958, 182–183)

Arendt helps us consider relationships between participants in a situated dialogue. When, through speech and action, a "web" of "inter-ests" becomes visible, this web becomes real—though "intangible"—and emerges as a sort of structural material. Arendt sees this "web" as the material substance of enlarged mentality, an element of the shared world "itself." Hereby, speech (dialogue) enables social forms of withdrawal which both potentiate "new beginnings" or social change (Arendt, 1958) and substantiates individual abilities to moralize, to reason, and to understand ourselves as political agents, makers or builders of worlds: our ideas are both aspects of our internal lives and elements of shared mentalities. Arendt's semantic trickery involving *inter-ests* (those motivations which drive thinking-speaking-doing actions between persons) and "best interests" (those material elements of life which make it well-lived for persons) reveals a critical way of seeing discourse as that which materially transforms subjective meaningfulness into (re)new(ed) social well-being.

But is there a difference, and/or a difference in value, between a group discussing the private concerns of one particular individual (matters of *idion*, say [Arendt 1958, 42]), and a group "concerned with the matters of the world of things in which men move, which physically lies between them and out of which arise their specific, objective, worldly interests"?

We are sticking against fragile silk lines between speech taking place amongst friends, family members, and lovers who care deeply about the well-being of one another and dialogues taking place between "civic" or "community" participants who might be charged (or charge ourselves) with determining some collective good for "all." *HOW* are dialogic inquiries performed differently when, say, buddies are drinking beer and talking about whether one of them should go to grad school than when, say, a jury is assembled to arbitrate a case? Further, how are differences in attitudes, behaviors, and agendas correlated with the "reasonability" of ethical, moral, and political judgments and subjectivities materialized, networked, woven? An attempt to bring Judith Butler into this discussion of "reasons for assembly" is met with loud groans.

[WHY? \(pre-prescriptions and theater\)](#)

Dialogic (speaking-acting) procedures and formalizations emerge from *why* the discourse is being performed. In the case of drinking buddies, inter-ests may be guided by affections and somatic impulse; in our thinktank, we do tend to go where the conversation takes us based on affective responses to *topoi* (talking about ghosts is especially exciting), whereas in the case of a jury, interests are oriented around a shared objective, for example, to reach a verdict and very abstract and differently-interpreted concerns such as “justice.” The above debate about objective or autonomous idea(tion)s forces us to consider *reasons* for the discourse and the different *orientation* options correlated with reasons (*WHY?*). We could use the “seeming interestedness” of the largest number of participants to determine the direction of a dialogue, for example, or we could (as the interrupting thinktanker suggested) regulate the syntax of our speech to keep it “objective” or “general” for theoretical reasons. Here, Arendt’s way of semantically flipping can be applied to *reason*: reasons for the speech actions materialize modes of reasoning and vice versa.

For example, if we are a co-operative council gathered for the *reason* of making decisions about what food to buy, we may want to use some of *Robert’s Rules of Order* (1876) for the *reason that* these procedural rules lower the affective agitation of speakers and increase the efficiency (value judgments) of discourse towards making a list of foods that can be democratically (an ethos) approved by a parliamentary-style assembly of equals (a way of decision-making for a group that is deemed by that group to be morally right). If we are a pair of lovers coming together for the *reason* that we desire sex with one another yet we find ourselves arguing about whose memory of a conversation is accurate, we may find ourselves without any formal mode of *reasoning* correlated with the *reason* for either our co-presence or the argument and thereby unable to reconcile or continue acting together; we thus may break apart, break up.

An intentional performance like a thinktank or inter-play, devoid of a clear procedural materialization process (such as the objective to reach a verdict), can also focus on correlating *reasons* and *reasoning* procedures with ethical and moral heuristics. These correlations and considerations can be frequently be re-addressed, reflected upon, and changed to level out power dynamics and otherwise enable shifting inter-ests of individuals involved.

Personally, I had reasons why I wanted to initiate a “thinktanking” performance. I have beliefs about what is good, valuable, and beneficial about small-group discourse. Other participants doubtless had and have different reasons and beliefs. My own reasons involve the view that testing our own opinions, reasoning processes, values, and beliefs against those of others leads to more informed and more ethical decision-making. Arendt writes “what we usually call ‘consciousness,’ the fact that I am aware of myself and therefore in a sense can appear to myself, would never suffice to guarantee reality” (Arendt 1971, 19). Rather Arendt believes “the stage is common to all who are alive, but it *seems* different to each species, different also to individual specimen” (21). “Moral precepts” then, must arise “directly out of the will to live together with others in the mode of acting and speaking, and thus they are like control mechanisms built into the very faculty to start new and unending processes” (Arendt 1958, 264).

Amateur philosophers such as myself sometimes act like stoners, connecting everything to everything else. Is it our “withdrawal” from legitimate discourse that constructs big claims, or the “removed” perspective of pariahs? The idea that dialectical discourse (and other proper, pub[li]c ways of distributing ideation) constructs better moral decisions and establishes egalitarian society is a basic Marxist view and a basic (neoliberal) argument for “education.” This view or argument also relies on *Theatrum Mundi*, Habermasian notions of a single dominant public sphere, and/or the assumption that we all share a “common stage” of external, material reality, a stage that benefits from “diversity” and assimilation of as many perspective as possible, perhaps, but still a singularity, a “state’s encyclopedia” (Moten and Harney 2013, 366). I, a theater artist, see *Theatrum Mundi* as a core thrust throughout Western discourse, a long arm of the sensible reaching out through everything, establishing, for example, Hamlet’s hubris, in that he *knows not “seems;”* Hamlet’s tragedy is caused by a failure to comprehend or include “reasonable” (central, encircling, rational) perspectives outside his own and refusal to test his beliefs socially or in public. If Hamlet only read Horatio’s books, perhaps he wouldn’t act so stupidly, he would understand his (insensible, insane really) reality as *merely subjective*.

It is not just an ability to educate oneself and see one’s own self as subjective and subjected that is at stake regarding the advisement to involve and engage with the perspectives, beliefs, and judgments of others, but also an ability to generate *entirely other* ways of thinking, to construct “new” ways of thinking and feeling. This latter act is perhaps more possible when what is thought about is *seen* as staged (autonomized, fabricated, artificial). For example, this volume and this essay provide spectatorship to the thought of Hannah Arendt, an author who fabricated written texts that we can each read. Although our interpretations are undoubtedly quite different, we readers of Arendt are meeting at a location “withdrawn” from any of our individual bodies, a place issuant from “within” Arendt’s mind, yet staged as a “third” location between us, delineated and actualized by her textual communication. Such third locations (neither within your body nor within mine) provide us with additional “seemings,” generating factorially-increasing ways of seeing, potentially-potentiating ways of seeing which carry us out and away from ways of seeing that may be seen (from without) to be causing oppressions, mechanistic totalitarianisms, and so on.

Arendt’s “thinker” can be interpreted as highly agentic and perpetually in motion, able to move themselves outside of the mainstream, in and out of discourse situations, to pull themselves out of the world and put themselves back into it. For Arendt, the withdrawal of thinking can be seen as agentic beyond consent to participate in existing modes of appearance; “we,” she writes “*are of the world and not merely in it; we too, are appearances by virtue of arriving and departing, of appearing and disappearing; and while we come from a nowhere, we arrive well equipped to deal with whatever appears to us and to take part in the play of the world*” (Arendt 1978, 22, original emphasis). Arendt leaves open, however, questions about how we each might decide when, where, and how to “take part” in the play of “the world,” which, for Arendt, remains a singular *Theatrum Mundi*. Bent around this vision of a true and essential external world, Arendt is unable to explore how forms of reason(ing)s themselves might stage forms of dialogue correlated with that which we ourselves (differently) find reasonable.

Historically and epistemically well past fundamental universalism, our thinktank becomes concerned with whether or not an individual may determine *who* will be involved in dialogue. Here we return to defense mechanisms and negative liberations (protections). The de-descriptions of a dialogic group may either protect the “otherness” of individuals involved *and/or* operate as collective bids or participations for/within political sovereignties. Which and why *certain* persons, groups of persons, and “webs” of ideas are used as a reflection of one’s personal morality comes to involve the identifications of those persons and the sources of their ideas from within their historic, cultural, identified, and socio-political contexts. We may each intellectualize internally in order to remove ourselves from painful emotions and traumas (in the pathological Freudian sense) or in order to reflect more peacefully (in the Aristotelian sense), but we also intellectualize in groups to reify our emotions and experiences (including traumas) as valid and real. Thus, the thinkers with whom we share discourse must recognize us in particular ways, providing spectatorships that confirm our individual appearances.

It may be dangerous to test one’s own ideas, reasons, and thoughts within and before a group that does not read sense, morality, or reasonability in ways “close” to one’s own or have the same reasons to gather, just as it may be dangerous to *only* test one’s own ideas, reasons, and thoughts within and before a homogenous (self-similar) group. The members of our particular thinktank debate whether or not one should rely on others who are *most like oneself* as readers of the morality or reasonability of one’s actions and thoughts, or if one should use those who are most *different*. Is it possible to assemble one’s own spectators across a spectrum between similarity and difference? Should some individuals trust themselves and others “like” them more than others should? If one is benefitting from an unethical, iniquitous paradigm—white supremacy, say—should that person trust themselves less, and particularly seek out the reflections of those “outside” their own identity group? (Our thinktank says yes, but also be careful not to demand intellectual labor, spectatorships and attentions, from others).

There is also an affective side to *reasons* for materialization of webs, shared reasonings, ensembles, and ideas as such, a “why” that ties together heartstrings and cuts shared meaningfulness from the “vast cloth;” we rely on one another not just to tell us if we are right or wrong, but also to affirm that we are valuable, that we ourselves matter. We must, in some ways, attach ourselves to existence through bonding procedures less akin to “political inclusions” or some utopian, universalizable “species being” than to semi-private, intra-social secure attachments between lovers, friends, and family members. *Why* we gather for collective thinking is not just a fulfillment of theoretical justifications but also a cause or motivation that must *move* us emotionally, spiritually, meaningfully, making us each a more “whole” and self-recognizing, self-determining thinker-actor.

WHAT? (de-descriptions: Not Everyone Will Be A Professional)

The activity of knowing is no less a world-building activity than the building of houses. (Arendt 1971, 421)

For Arendt as for Kant, *reasonable* and *moral* thinking requires a certain transcendence of subjection; the ideating agent must be able to see past and outside of their own context and conditioning, to a point. A *totally-subjective* (withdrawn *and* inwardly-turned) form of reasoning can't appear as reasonable. Only when pre-scribed by a particular problem, a need, a conflict, or question does reasoning appear, de-scribable as the "reason" for discourse. Thus, the discourse that is being performed materializes history, judgment, justice, in a way that is seen as such by those performing.

The apparent intentionality, theatricality, or artifice of "a thought," "a moral," or "an idea" must also be perceived, both by the thinking-actor from within (and as withdrawn from) their own body, and also from within (and potentially without) social embodiments. A social embodiment makes ideation processes material by objectifying "an inquiry" into written or spoken words (a "sentencing" if you will) or other conceptual expression (including "a performance") that can itself appear as such, as bounded and materialized by socio-politically-encompassing conditions and codifications. When we combine the locations of thinkers and doers, that is, spectators and actors, (making, let's say, an entirely processual performance such as a thinktank), we find ourselves seeking distancing and autonomization of "an" inquiry or "an" ideative procedure through and around which we can perform. For example, our thinktank used the written questions put into the central bowler hat.

It is possible, we propose, to construct a theater—a situation for sight—through which (*p*)*articular* reasoning procedures may be deliberated and determined to be reasonable by the same group using them. We identify this proposition as a dominant belief within the performance practices of our communities, which tend to value de-hierarchization, collaboration, transparency, temporality, and *process/presence*-oriented action rather than *product*-oriented action.

It is practically impossible, however, (we believe[d], speaking from experience) to make some-thing, a play, a dance, a ruling, a decision, without *any* built "knowledge" or ontological agreement about what (*WHAT?*) is being done. We must at least agree that *we are playing*, or that *this is a thinktank*. Through our unique userships of these (in)form(ation)s, such as "play" or "thinktank," we may devise some procedures for con-sensually per-forming reason via correlated modes of reasoning.

We propose that dialogic assemblies may construct collective thinking situations through which *reasoning processes* (e.g. how ideations are judged reasonable) are correlated with both *reasons* (to hold the dialogue, matters of attention, questions or problems to address) and ethical and moral heuristics used to design (materialize, actualize) the structure or situational elements of the dialogue itself.¹²

By the end of the year of thinktanking, we found our preliminary layperson's philosophy problem about agency, scales of effectivity, and self-determination vs. conditioning transformed first, into a more particular question (which I put in italics earlier: *how can this/a (p)articular assembly intentionally perform thinking actions that do something?*)

Then, as we learned through doing *how* we were doing "something," our inquiries began to drive harder and deeper into our own personal responsibilities and senses of self. As we concluded the thinktank, performances split and re-opened to "the public" as an array of nine new thinktanks (becoming a project called *9 PROPOSITIONS*, PPL 2018) as well as informal friendships.

Trigger Warning: the following conclusion to this essay involves a discussion of suicide. As a reader of this text, please respect your own needs and determine whether or not some emotional distress is "worth it" in this context and at this moment.

Since the thinktank about which I am writing here concluded, Eleanor/Dave chose to end their own life. It is difficult to complete this essay without mentioning this, since the first paragraph and the thinktank here discussed are both initiated by their handwritten question, *what is the difference between thinking and doing?*

In the center of moral considerations of human conduct stands the self; in the center of political considerations of conduct stands the world. If we strip moral imperatives of their religious connotations and origins, we are left with the Socratic proposition: "it is better to suffer wrong than to do wrong" and its strange substantiation "for it is better for me to be at odds with the whole world than, being one, to be at odds with myself." However, we may interpret this invocation of the axiom of contradiction in moral matters, as though the one and the same imperative, "Thou shalt not contradict yourself," is axiomatic for logic and ethics (which incidentally is still Kant's chief argument for the categorical imperative), one thing seems clear: the presupposition is that I live together not only with others but also with my self, and that this togetherness, as it were, has precedence over all others. The political answer to the Socratic proposition would be "What is important in the world is that there be no wrong; suffering wrong and doing wrong are equally bad." Never mind who suffers it; your duty is to prevent it. (Arendt 1968, 153)

To our own selves, we endeavor to be true (so says Polonius to Hamlet,) but we also endeavor to perform reason, to move somehow to the side of, or in front of, or over (*para*), an array of "seems" that are not all our own, rescuing us from our unmentionable, amaurotic essentialities (*doxa*).

In the end, suicide becomes a particularly difficult and relevant case study. It is an action that fulfills what we presume to be "unreasonable" reasons, staged from within the internal silence of an unlivable mind. Do we judge, as the friends and community members surrounding and respecting Eleanor/Dave, that their actions held true to their own moral compass and therefore must be deemed morally reasonable? Or do we value any hum*an life to the extent that we discount their private-intersubjective reasoning process to declare that murder—even murder of oneself—is unethical? Does it matter what anyone thinks? Does it matter how their action made others feel?

In the nation-state where this thinktank took place, the United States of America, suicide is illegal, seeming to provide a political answer to this inquiry and insisting that indeed, killing oneself is immoral. This judgment has no disciplinary consequence when a suicide is successful. Yet, moral reconciliations with the actions of another are of great emotional and social significance.

Since this suicide action, some members of this thinktank have used our vocabulary, discourse methods, and reasoning habits to process our feelings. Some of us feel guilty, thinking that perhaps if we had continued the thinktank (and the 2018 thinktanking performances in which Eleanor/Dave also participated) we could have reasoned or socialized them out of their decision. Most disturbingly, one thinktanker proposed that perhaps this thinktank partially contributed to Eleanor/Dave's actions in that our methods were *too* focused on "respect for different, private reasoning processes" and that our fealty to the imperative of correlating internal reasoning processes with actions can be deadly if "essential reasons" (ethics, values, morals seen as universalizable) *themselves* are left undiscussed. Do we want ideation processes to be formalized to enable actualization if the ideations themselves reason an individual or group towards death? Do we need, as Seyla Benhabib and Kwame Appiah have argued, to return to universalizable ethics, embedded moral heuristics, social prohibition of certain reasoning-processes? Writes Arendt:

the modern shift of emphasis from the "what" to the "how," from the thing itself to its fabrication process, was by no means an unmixed blessing. It deprived man as maker and builder of those fixed and permanent standards and measurements which, prior to the modern age, have always served him as guides for his doing and criteria for his judgment. It is not only and perhaps not even primarily the development of commercial society that, with the triumphal victory of exchange value over use value, first introduced the principle of interchangeability, then the relativization, and finally the devaluation, of all values. (Arendt 1958, 325)

Both *The Life of the Mind* and *The Human Condition* encourage a self's withdrawal from "appearances" into an internal space of the self, as well as a retreat of "actors" from sheer process to a place from which they can change course, form "new beginnings." This site from which a re-orientation can occur is not always felt as "peaceful" (*scholē*), it is often felt as the meat of existential chaos, the very wet of the hum**n* wound, the ashes (*katabasis*). Our movements away from dominant political sensibilities can be seen as righteous resistance but they can also be experienced as pure pain.

In my own community, there is a strong pull away from the regulated choreographies and directives of technique/technicality, institutionality, and capitalist mentalities towards and into haptic and "by us for us" self-authorization. Individual artists are moving from theater and dance disciplines into "performance art" (where the knife is "real" and the blood is "real" according to Marina Abramović). It seems, however, that we must be careful where and how we position the mouth of Plato's cave, the split between the wandering of the noble hermit philosopher from their delusional comrades, the difference between romantic eternalities/internalities of the individual hero (who is, "himself" a "rebel") and the deemed insensible, illegible, ugly, wrong, different, dis-identifiable (Muñoz 1999, Butler 1993, and basically any queer theory text written since 1989).

Moreover, *what if* (a layperson's speculative crudeness), through some theatrical staging of dialogue, more than one body-mind *could* trespass an exit from the cave *ensemble*? What if Arendt's sense that the philosopher, "having liberated himself from the fetters that bound him to his fellow men, leaves the cave in perfect "singularity," as it were, neither accompanied nor followed by others" (Arendt 1958, 38) can be transformed through *forms* of contemplation (*theōria*) which are neither solely work, labor, nor action, but rather a "thinking-doing"?¹³

Way out of my lane and off philosophical trend, I want to try something. I want to try and say what I think as clearly (and rhetorically, sophisticatedly) as I can, to perform as a moralizing agent:

The *ways* we think about ourselves, our social configurations, our historical contexts, our actions have affective and political consequences. We do not "know" anything about how anyone or anything "really is," but we do choose how to perform our own thinking and, to a certain extent, how to perform our own feeling, at least via intentional performances of naming and conceptualizing and speaking-together. Our ways of thinking and emoting must themselves be oriented around ethics discussed socially, designed and in-formed by moral considerations between individuals that are trusted to have each other's and their own (personal, intrasocial, political) "well being" at heart.

Certain faiths and beliefs, for example, that "hum**n* beings are basically altruistic" or that "there will be a future for hum**n*kind," that we *know* to be "merely" ways of thinking and feeling (theoretical/theatrical stagings/compositions) can be selected and used as *good ideas* based not solely on either "objectivized" reason or on how they make us feel (another false dichotomy) but also on what sorts of behaviors and actions they en-courage and empower. I believe that the implications of our conceptualizations for action should be given primacy.

Arendt's thought mobilizes this great optimism, that perhaps we can prevent suffering before it is caused by following reasoning-processes back and forth between internal reasons (feelings, thoughts) and their socio-political implications (stagings, discourses). This back-and-forth must be performed intentionally, theatrically, oriented around and co-constructive with reason(ing)s themselves. I am not sure about these "reason(ing)s themselves," though I taste a change in my own internal weather, regarding whether or not I believe that *particular ethics, values, morals* should be embedded in personal and political methodologies if "we" (hum**n* beings and other life-forms inhabiting planet Earth) are to survive. Perhaps our next thinktank *should* be oriented around a (theatricalized, speculative) objective to produce moral propositions that we believe *should* be adopted by a larger political body. Deontology is appearing to me. This objective would require an entirely different mode of practical discourse. Via discourse with trusted (and "other") persons, the moralizing hum**n* could perhaps then be seen/see themselves straddling a chasm between thinking and doing, drawing these spheres together, making a (under)stand-able location from which the meaningfulness of their/our existences could be provided "their own" forms of dialogic distancing, safety to "withdraw," and forms of substantiating spectatorship. If we are unable or unwilling to do this, perhaps moralizing tasks default to authorized "professional" thinkers who cannot be trusted to involve anyone but themselves in their considerations. If we do not do this,

moreover, perhaps individuals who matter to us become unable to carry any sense of their own “rightness” “agency” or “goodness” in and for themselves, and therefore become unable to maintain their own wills to live.

Notes

¹ As a gender non-binary trans person, Eleanor/Dave went by both of these names.

² Or are some persons always “merely” spectators? One thinktank participant points out that even though all of us are women/femmes, poor, queer, trans*, people of color, immigrants, Jews and Muslims (every single one of us fulfills more than one of these identifications, most three or more of them), those of us who are citizens of wealthy countries, for example, are removed from physical participation in the wars fought by our states, our lives are relatively stable, “globally Northern,” and our rights (debatably, relatively, quite differently between us) securable. None of us like to think about ourselves as spectators in this way (rather most of us prefer to see ourselves as “oppressed,” and argue about for whom and in what ways oppressions are more or less “authentic”) but her point is well-taken.

³ My role as the initiator of this thinktank, as part of the School of the Apocalypse’s semester of working groups, should be noted. Throughout the process, I do (because of my personality, because we are gathered in my space and home, and because of my personal passion for philosophy) perform as a moderator who sometimes summarizes, synthesizes, and suggests directions, terminological engagements, and frameworks for the group to consider. My role is several times affectionately/sarcastically referenced through thinktank members calling me (and gendering me) “mom.” My role in writing this text also demands reflexivity. Outside of “professional” academic spheres, it doesn’t matter as much whose ideas are whose, yet acts of ideation here are both plural and personal. Are the ideas I “report upon” here my own, is my incessant use of the collective “we” as in *we come to believe* really honest? Am I just talking about/as myself, and using a collective process as a form of self-substantiation because I feel insecure? Am I performing unpaid intellectual labor in-kind, or am I appropriating the ideas of others or of a group as my own intellectual “property”? The politics and ethics of this text are surely themselves debatable.

⁴ “(w)holism” is of special interest to us during this thinktank and operates in relationship with a concurrent performance project entitled *Embarrassed of the Whole (EotW)*, which was/is based on conceptual correlations between “holistic” Western theories such as those of South African eugenicist Jan Smuts (1926) and the enactment of genocides, apartheid, and fascist states.

⁵ I am using an asterisk to remove the gendered “man.” This is an emergent tactic amongst gender non-binary and trans* thinkers. Here, as with other words denoted by the asterisk, it implies “so on and so forth” as well as a perpetual state of flux. I am leaving Arendt’s use of “man” and “mankind” alone, due to respect for her historic situation and a personal choice to avoid revisionist citations.

⁶ We do “present” or “publicize” the existence of our processes through the School of the Apocalypse’s website, Panoply Performance Laboratory’s website, and report on the thinktank as a sort of format without content during a culminating meeting of SotA working groups,

⁷ Protecting the rights of persons to self-determine while ensuring protections of those who are oppressed or injured by the self-determinations of majority or empowered groups is a very practical problem as well as a core problematic for liberal Democracy. Further, Isaiah Berlin’s discussions (1958) of how even self-determining collectives remain oppressed minorities within so-called “free states” (which may become authoritarian in the name of freedom) can be brought to bear. With members of this group hailing from Indonesia, France, Brazil, the USA and elsewhere, our debates about forms of governance and “libertarian” vs. “liberal” vs. “socialist” policies warrant an entirely different essay. Practically, we agree that we share a responsibility to balance positive “freedom of self-expression” with negative limitations on those expressions, when and where they become injurious to others (as expressed by those others). This debate swings between colloquial discussion of “safe space” and grand political theory. We also had a brief argument about uses of Berlin, noting his contributions to Israel as an apartheid state; should we use/read Berlin, or Heidegger (who was a Nazi sympathizer) and other “European cis white male” theorists, or no?

⁸ Ethics of mediation, data collection and distribution, and information-as-design are of much interest to several members of this thinktank who work as software coders and makers of digital composition and we spend a lot of time talking about modeling and composing issues from these practical perspectives.

⁹ Members of this thinktank hold different “anti-theatrical” views, not only for classical reasons distinguishing “authentic” acts from “artificial” ones but also because of the social modes of production commonly used to stage mimetic event-objects via hierarchized, representational, methods within theater industries. Art history and criticism also hold a negative view of “theatricality.” Michael Fried (1988), for example, uses theatricality to describe leading, moralizing, “messaging” artworks that prevent “absorption”. From my own background in theater, especially in dialectical theater and the works and ideas of Bertolt Brecht and others, I do not see (counter-)propagandistic capacities as negative, but rather as the strengths of theater and as reasons for using theatrical modes; we use theatricality when we have something to say, when we are intending to provide space for critical reflection (upon), and when we are intentionally composing and devising media(tions) and worlds.

¹⁰ Here, I grit my teeth and resist veering off into a whole other area and new citations of Adrienne Maree Brown (2019) and Sara Ahmed (2010). Professionalism in philosophical writing requires discipline and focus: try to keep the cans of worms on the shelves!

¹¹ Over email and public announcement sent by the School of the Apocalypse and Panoply Performance Laboratory as well as a strangely private-feeling gathering in the educational department at the Brooklyn Museum

¹² This view is sometimes called “pragmatic feminism” (see Charlene Haddock Seigfried (1998), or “practical feminism,” see María Puig de la Bellacasa’s discussions of “thinking with care” (2012).

¹³ Of course, I am not the first to conceptualize in this direction, but I have already exceeded word count for this particular piece of writing....

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Biography

Esther Neff is the founder of PPL (Panoply Performance Laboratory), a discursive organizational entity and flexible performance-making collective. Their work across fields and spheres performs embodied research into how intuitions, desires, and mentalities materialize (intra)action.

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