

WHY IS IT SO HARD TO DESCRIBE EXPERIENCE? WHY IS IT SO HARD TO EXPERIENCE DESCRIPTION?

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*[W]hat is given in experience
and what renders experience possible correspond to one another in an endless oscillation.*
Michel Foucault

496

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A B O O K, an exhibition, an artwork – objects, things – is always paradoxical, self-contradictorily allowing the energies and agencies responsible for their arrival to disappear. Each of these forms is assumed to be an evidential return of experiences of the world, whereas they are but momentary detents in experience with the world. Still, we conceive of knowledge production as the swing of an imagined pendulum in this way, as we try to render explicit an inframince^[1] distance between analysis and synthesis, research and development, backstage and the stage itself. The edited publication, the designed exhibition, and the *objet d'art* swing out of the open doors of the writing room or studio, immediately becoming closed systems. “Hiding Making – Showing Creation” is the leitmotif of the researcher, the designer, the artist, the creator, just as it is for the reader, the viewer, or the audience (Esner, Kisters, and Lehmann). The forming of forms and the production of products wraps us all up in this most hermetic of affairs. We are all always on the outside, at the end, trying to look inwards. The word “form” goes from verb to noun (to form becomes a form), and the messy prehensions of actual, real materials, methods, and interactions are transformed into “the hegemonic and dominatory pretensions of certain versions or accounts of method” (Law, *After Method* 4). Finalized ideas, designs, and artworks hide (in plain sight) the means and methods that bring about and sustain them as things; objects, as results of informing activities, always warrant still further informing. But how might we avoid pretensions and attempt to explain what is really going on? How do we bear witness to what has happened? Surely, we must try.

The physicist Léon Foucault wanted people to know what was going on. In 1851, the 32-year-old hung a twenty-eight kilogram bob at the end of a sixty-seven meter wire from the apex of a former

The *Reset Modernity!* exhibition was collaboratively designed and curated by a group consisting of people from the AIME Research Team, the Critical Media Lab of the Academy of Art and Design FHNW in Basel, and the ZKM | Center for Art and Media Karlsruhe. Invited to contribute their thoughts on this process to this catalogue, Jamie Allen, Claudia Mareis, and Johannes Bruder of the Critical Media Lab have opted to trace and reflect on the far from equilibrium entanglements that emerge between the various modes of history and tradition, scholarly inscription and description, experimental design practices, and impossible scenographies in such processes. The authors describe the practice and thinking of the Critical Media Lab (Basel), dedicated to continuous questioning and critique that is “associated with more, not with less, with multiplication, not subtraction” (Latour, “Why Has Critique” 248), intertwining praxis-led art and design research with historical and theoretical reflection.

church turned mausoleum for distinguished French citizens, the Paris Panthéon. The bob, pulled taut to the outside of the spectators’ ring, was attached by a short linen cord to the railing there. This cord was then burned through with a candle flame; cutting it in this ingenious way ensured that no manual forcing would induce lateral oscillations in the pendulum’s main swing line. Instead, lateral oscillation would come from the uneven angular momentum of the earth, increasingly detectable as we move away from either pole and, luckily for Léon, entirely detectable at 48.8462218 longitude and 2.3442251 latitude, between the fifth and sixth *arrondissements* in his hometown Paris. There, as in every place nonpolar on earth, planetary rotation entrains the earth at a rate slightly ahead of the

[1] “Inframince” is a notion developed by Marcel Duchamp that refers to an inseparable duality or intimate closeness, a kind of infinitely close separation or “unmediation.” Duchamp coined this term and worked on the notion, asserting that it was impossible to conceptually define it. Instead, he gave examples of things inframince: the infinitesimal separation between the fired bullet and the noise of the gun or the disappearing warmth of a seat that has just been left by a sitter.

entrainment of a protracted pendular plumb line, causing the latter to trace the path of elongated ellipses on the plane or platform beneath it. It is a phenomenon astronomers call “precession.”

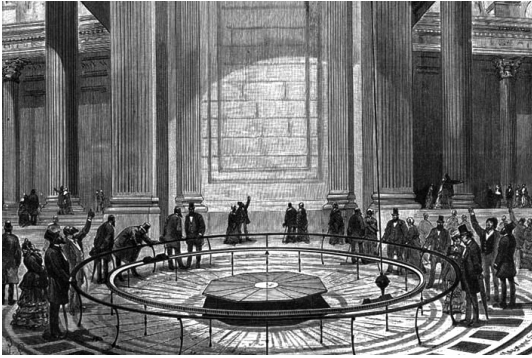
In the mid-nineteenth century, Léon Foucault contrived for the world a first and primary, popular, and public exhibition of a scientific “fact” – specifically, he transformed the known, mathematical descriptive reality of the rotation of the earth into an experiential thing through an instrumental dispositif and performed architecture. *Putnam’s Magazine* described the “pendulum mania” (Conlin 181) that ensued immediately afterwards, when popular and scientific reports and copies of Foucault’s pendulum caused a sensation worldwide. It is a mania that has not yet abated – one can visit Foucault pendulums in present-day science museums, planetariums, and vestibules of higher education from London to Istanbul, and Vancouver to Bogotá. Some time after the fumes from the burned-through length of string had dissipated, Léon’s presentation of the rotation of the earth took on a singular form as a quintessential mathematico-scientific fact; rendered, once and for all, palpable and exhibitable. It is a form that is as simple, elegant, repeatable, and determined as we might expect to be installed beneath the Panthéon’s dome, authorized by the two primary demiurges resident there: the transcendent deities of the church and the Enlightenment heroes of France entombed in what is now a secular mausoleum. Léon’s juggernaut of a contribution to the history of public exposition of scientific knowledge is an apparatus that, perhaps more than any other, continues to contribute to the popular conception of a universal reality that is formal, formed, and harmoniously tuned by divinity. The pendulum remains “celebrated as the ascent of truth and reason over falsity and superstition” (Tresch 17).

Taking this ragtag assemblage only as a finely tuned instrument, which renders the large-scale reality of earth’s spinning momentum directly perceptible to our senses, demonstrates one of

modernity’s perennial mistakes or misgivings. Léon Foucault’s pendulum is, of course, no more an *experience* of what is really going on, cosmologically, than Magritte’s famous painting of a pipe can be smoked. What is witnessed in Foucault’s 1851 installation is a constellation of artifacts, architectures, assemblies, and environments that are, in actuality, a sort of mess: a sixty-seven-meters long wire and a twenty-eight-kilograms bob purchased at some expense from a metalsmith; the charred remains of a burnt length of linen cord; the the unusual construction of a church-cum-site of public honor forged from lead, iron, and stone; a city and the people of Paris still trembling from the street violence of the 1848 *révolution de Février* in the nation of France spinning with all the rest of the globe at about four hundred meters per second.

Through this remarkable artifice the skilled experimenter rendered sensible to all eyes the invariable meaning according to which the movement of the earth occurs. (Figuier 28; Trans. the authors)

Léon’s pendulum is a medium of apparent use in representing the rotation of earth, a *demonstration* for the *demos* who call it home. It is an installation-as-instrument that exhibits and imparts scales and forces which leap over innumerable hiatuses and discontinuities to arrive into human experience – operating as a technological translator, “completely original every time ... [as a] perpendicular movement of rummaging around, exploring, undulating, kneading, which so obstinately misses the relation between form and function and the relation between ends and means” (Latour, *Inquiry* 227). These often missed and misinterpreted means of conscripting phenomena into acting themselves out is often part of what an exhibition designer is supposed to do, along with curators and science communicators. Such roles and activities are linked genealogically to the moment of Léon’s not-so-subtle



1 Illustration of Léon Foucault's 1851 scenography for the Paris Panthéon, in: Louis Figuier. *Les nouvelles conquêtes de la science. L'électricité*. Paris, 1883: 29.

nineteenth-century exhibit design for the Panthéon (to say nothing of his more theatrical endeavors).^[2]

Just how invested we remain in the illusory clarity of old Léon's smoothly folding epistemology is told and retold by the ubiquity of clocks, "seconds pendulums"^[3], radio frequency sweeps, the cyclical scan of tunneling microscopes, the periodic raster rhythm of digital displays – and in the production of smoothed over histories, airtight published methods sections, and time-lined, linear histories. For the mountaineer, a "pendulum traverse" is the act of swinging out on a taut rope in order to reach securely a hold or precipice. Christian Kassung's book *Das Pendel. Eine Wissensgeschichte* [The Pendulum: A History of Knowledge] outlines the centrality of the pendulum as a classical image of closure and finality in research and knowledge production. It is a figure that alleges undulating continuity between a clearly defined question, on the one hand, and a just as well defined answer on the other. Yet, "the more precise a question is formulated, the less space remains

for answers" (Kassung 7; Trans. the authors). The pendulum's closure begets a monologic reading of how knowing works, as the presupposed precision of scientific questioning wrung through well-defined categories of knowledge. This image of knowledge as a smooth pendulum always falls short, because it forces us toward understandings that block out the frictions, disruptions, and messes intrinsic to all research and all experience. In this there is a danger of neutralizing the scope and specificity of epistemic attention and alertness, forecasting in advance what is to be found, or found out.

What if we were to attempt an experimental *Gedankenausstellung* [thought exhibition] that not only showcased placid, perfect, sweeping ellipses – the ends always produced by representational, mathematical, and algorithmic epistemes? What if we were to veer instead toward the conceit of spaces and media to think with that tended to slightly skew perspectives, vaguely constrict visibilities, and render things just a little bit claustrophobic? Could we construct a human formicary that would seek not to constitute, but to dissolve modernity, toward effecting its careful, attentive recrystallization?

In a similar vein, Michel Serres asks us to "overturn old images" as perhaps "the search for truth follow[s] the path of shadows" (Serres, *Eyes* 69). To serve and protect "the lowly darkness which is less peremptory, less arrogant, less harrying than invasive brilliant lights" (69) would give way to scenographies that are much more murky and manifold – the lights kept always just a bit too low for enlightenment.

And I count as an aesthete since Sartre
applies this term to anyone purporting to

[2] John Tresch sounds "the subterranean links between the positive sciences and fantastic mass spectacle" (20) through the person of Léon Foucault, who was otherwise gainfully employed throughout the mid-nineteenth century creating special effects for the Paris opera.

[3] A one-second half-period pendulum, that is, a rod 0.994 meters long at standard gravity. An early act of the newly formed French National Assembly in 1790 was to specify by decree the "seconds pendulum" as metrological default for linear measurement.



- 2 Diego Velázquez's 1656 perspectival portrait of portraiture. Diego Velázquez. *Las Meninas*. 1656. Oil on canvas, 318 × 276 cm. Museo Nacional del Prado, Madrid.

study men as if they were ants.... But apart from the fact that this seems to me just the attitude of any scientist who is an agnostic, there is nothing very compromising about it, for ants with their artificial tunnels, their social life and their chemical messages, already present a sufficiently tough resistance to the enterprises of analytical reason ... So I accept the characterization of aesthete in so far as I believe the ultimate goal of the human sciences to be not to constitute, but to dissolve man. (Lévi-Strauss 246–47)

The painter is observing a place which, from moment to moment, never ceases to change its content, its form, its face, its identity. (Foucault 5)



- 3 Central exhibition room of the *Exposition Internationale du Surréalisme*. 1938. 1200 coal sacks hung from the ceiling above an art installation. Galerie Beaux-Arts, Paris.

In his lecture “Information and Thinking,” reading from *The Star of the South* by Jules Verne, a passage that also complements Bruno Latour’s essay in this book (“Let’s Touch Basel!”, r·M! II–23), gives us the image of an epistemology that inverts the emancipatory clarity of Plato’s cave allegory:

They were in the center of an immense grotto. The ground was covered with fine sand bespangled with gold. The vault was as high as that of a Gothic cathedral, and stretched away out of sight into the distant darkness. The walls were covered with stalactites of varied hue and wondrous richness, and from them the light of the torches was reflected, flashing back with all the colors of the rainbow, with the glow of a furnace fire and the wealth of the aurora. (Verne, “Star” 276)

Equating light as the tyranny of the “yellow dwarf” (the sun), Serres speaks of a knowledge that is clandestine, streaked, and striated:

Verne’s cave reverses the Platonic one. The latter sings the glory of one sun, discovered in the daylight, as one emerges from the shadow, while the former is an invitation to penetrate under a vault that is so deep that one’s gaze is as lost as if it stared at a starry sky: here, in this cave, a thousand lights dazzle the thinker. (Serres, “Information and Thinking”)

Serres’s geo-epistemology eschews the ascetic, divisive knowledge offered by Plato’s hollow, monologic derivations, throwing a reticular wet blanket over the traditionally Platonic urge to escape the confines of earth. Serres denies to us the pursuit of unmediated knowledge through the supposed transcendent emancipation of blazing sunlight. We are not *chained* underground in need of light, but are in fact rather deftly able in our negotiations, scurrying and scampering about, gathering up the multiple, parallel, and simultaneous interpretations offered below, above, and here, on the ground. Freedom, if it must come, comes through attachment, as investigation and inquiry into the specificities of the illusory “surfaces” that appear to separate, but are better thought as zones of interchange between scales (e.g.: of energy), phases (e.g.: of matter), and rates (e.g.: of individuation). The “surface” of the earth is no boundary at all, but a transitional detent – a state of non-rest marking dynamic equilibrium, as in the low point of a pendulum’s swing. How

might we render an experience of “modern knowledge” that swings through this space, this non-surface, dipping into the dark mantle below? Deep in Verne’s cave (not Plato’s), we can imagine equipping ourselves for a probing inquiry, gathering samples for later demonstration, demos for the *demos*. The dark technical arts of instrumentation – electron micrography, digital video, gas chromatography, photography, illustration, satellite imaging, and sculpture – actively equip this inquiry, scaffolding and highlighting knowledge (as a) production, urging (re)composition and the performance of a reset.

Imperatively, we might imagine an entirely other pendulum, named for that non-native Parisian who was also a creator of scenes (also linking him to that so well-named French museological practice *scénographie*). Michel Foucault was a writer and thinker who engaged with the scaffolding, staging, and infrastructuring of thought, words, and things. A pendulum named for Michel Foucault would be different, altogether subaltern, and much more eccentric. It would be a pendulum for driving thought through and into the stuff of dirty, telluric life, registering not just the rotation of the earth but its microtremors and tectonic creeps. It would be an exhibition of scuttles and scratches, of the finer delicacies of phenomena, of frustrated translations of information, and of incomplete, inefficient, and devastating transductions of energy, knowledge, and power. It is a pendulum we would hesitate to call a pendulum at all for its lack of superterranean periodicity, clear symmetry, and smooth tracing out of parametric lines.^[4]

Michel Foucault’s treatise on the history and development of modern epistemology, *The Order*

[4] Unsurprisingly, this metonymic play has its precursors. After the publication of his mystery-conspiracy novel *Foucault’s Pendulum*, Umberto Eco commented, with characteristically ambiguous wit: “As an empirical author I was not so happy about such a possible connection [between Léon Foucault and Michel Foucault]. It sounds like a joke and not a clever one, indeed. ... maybe I am responsible for a superficial joke; maybe the joke is not that superficial. I do not know. The whole affair is by now out of my control” (Eco, *Interpretation* 82–83). We agree with Eco’s modulation of Foucault’s “epistemes” – no complete epistemic breaks are possible. For Foucault, relations of sympathy, resemblance, and hermetic semiosis are historically delimited, whereas Eco notes how these “premodern” tendencies persist in the hermetic, Baroque writings, in parallel to the development of quantitative science (Hutcheon, “Irony-Clad Foucault” 312–27). Of course, we also agree with Eco that “maybe the joke is not that superficial.”

of *Things*, begins in scenography. Like that of Léon's pendulum, it is a scenography that is apparently but deceptively simple – the famed *mise-en-scène* (and *mise en abyme*) painting of classical portraiture, *Las Meninas* (1656) by Diego Velázquez. Foucault describes this painting of painting, first, in terms that seem to perform a smooth swing between research and creation, observation and inscription, representation and sensation. Foucault's portrayal of the artist in Velázquez's painting is, at the outset, an almost symmetric motion – from analysis to synthesis and back again. The artist is placed "at the neutral centre of this oscillation" (Foucault 4), between world and representation. Satisfying our moderns' desire for simple, geometric explication, Foucault's pendular tracing notes, at first, how the "painter's sovereign gaze commands a virtual triangle whose outline defines this picture of a picture: at the top – the only visible corner – the painter's eyes; at one of the base angles, the invisible place occupied by the model; at the other base angle, the figure probably sketched out on the invisible surface of the canvas" (5). The artist in Velázquez's painting is, for a moment, something of a functionary, transporting light between two kinds of visible objects. Foucault speaks indeed of the painter ruling at the precipice between these two scopical regimes, "at the threshold of those two incompatible visibilities" (4).

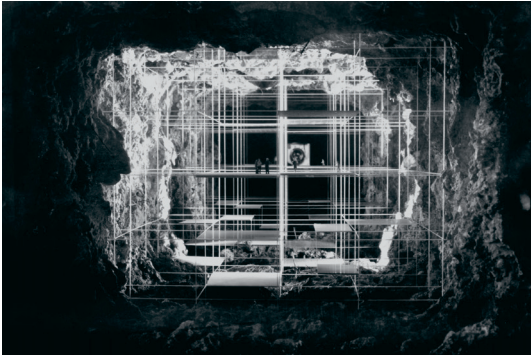
Yet Foucault does not leave us for long in the comfort zone of this oversimple description. This fallacy of a static world transported to the canvas is swiftly swept away. In place of such a static world is installed "a place which, from moment to moment, never ceases to change its content, its form, its face, its identity" (5), even as the self-assured painter, "standing a little back from his canvas" (3), poises himself for the next mark to be made. The pendulum of observation and reproduction, observing and acting in the world, is quickly disturbed under scrutiny, transforming itself into a more complex scene

of acting with the world not in it, as interlocking and dynamic frames and focuses, gazes and reflections, and ambiguous swirls – a "spiral [that] is closed, or rather, ... [that] is opened" (12).

Oblique rays of illumination and dark, enigmatic shadowy figures begin to (over)populate Foucault's description, as he stirs up an aesthetic-epistemic cyclone. The full text of Michel Foucault's essay on *Las Meninas*, comprising 6,845 words in its English translation, is at pains to describe the parallel, recursive, folded networks of relations – a set, perhaps, of micropendula – constituting the composition (of composition) in the painted *Las Meninas*. It is a painting that Velázquez himself seems to have produced in order to recompose, reset, and put on display the illusion of sovereign points of view or reflected perspectives popularized in medieval painting (today we could call it "glitching"). Full of impossible baroque convolution, as well as impossible perspectives and lines of sight, no amount of words have been able to provide an interpretation of this painting that is clear or satisfactorily diagrammatic. What is the baroque after all, if not an art and science in service of presenting overwhelming meshes and infinite connections, of exhibiting the unknowable, resonant relationality of the world. This is the baroque that John Law has explored in relation to Actor-Network Theory, that "[i]nstead of looking up, this looks down and discovers limitless internal complexity within, which is materially heterogeneous, specific, and sensuous" (Law, "And if the Global" 13).

The romantic art historian remains frustrated that we can draw no definitive, singular point of view regarding the points of view in Velázquez's painting.^[5] *Las Meninas* by both Foucault and Velázquez are contradictory depictions of the impossibility of depiction, impossible scenographies, constantly in flux, exhibiting unsimply that the oscillations between objects, ideas, and their framing as exhibition

[5] John Searle opens his own essay on *Las Meninas* with the line "Why after over three centuries does *Las Meninas* continue to bother us?" (477). "maybe the joke is not that superficial."



does not take sinusoidal shape; they do not fit the form of Léon's famous pendulum. These are the characteristics of a "pendulum" that is never simple to describe; one that recomposes the undeniably heaving mess of things; one that helps "tie a complex, reticular knowledge net" (Kassung 390; Trans. the authors) where the romance of scientific and artistic modernism would have us install yet another smooth, hyperbolic ellipse.

[W]hat can be studied is always a relationship or an infinite regress of relationships. Never a "thing." (Bateson 246)

Foucault's intention in his *Las Meninas* essay is apparent and explicit: to "preserve the infinity of the task" (10) of both study and description, freeing representation from the simplistic relation impeding it; manumitting words, things, theories, practices, descriptions, and experience. "Las Meninas" the essay translates into text, dissolves, resets, and recomposes the complex undergirding of lines of sight and plays of shadow in *Las Meninas* the painting. Foucault's linguistic gesture is not smooth, but the erratic zigzagging and scuttled procedure of an infinite and interminable attempt. Invoked in "Las Meninas," the essay, just as spending time with the painting itself reveals, is what Dan Mellamphy

4 Frei Otto. *Vorgespanntes Raumseilnetz i.d. Kiste* [Pre-taut wire net space in a box]. Ca. 1964. Model.

and Nandita Biswas Mellamphy have called, after Benjamin, the "messy antics" of materialist reality: the interactions of objects and subjects acting together with the world. It is a linguistically dowsing^[6] of what might light up beyond the painting's surface. Seeking out transversal, subterranean resonances, the probing insurrection of a Foucault's pendulum named for Michel Foucault sketches out its alternate lines. What truths might be found, recalling Serres versus Plato, in the dusky storm of ceiling shadows that dominate *Las Meninas*, a Muslim architectural interior in the Royal Alcázar of Madrid that so often, if inadvertently, replaced the backdrop for Velázquez's scenographies.

Through Léon's and Michel's pendulums, we outline divergent types of hermetic, hermeneutic "swings" – these are divergent aesthetics and imaginaries of knowledge, the mythologies of methodologies which subtend research, practice, evidence, and exhibition. We admit preference for the infinite recurrence of a pendulum named for Michel Foucault – found in the asymmetries and heterogeneousness of the "reset" and linked to the occasions precipitating these writings: a research project undertaking an anthropology of modernity entitled *An Inquiry Into Modes of Existence* (AIME), published in book form; an exhibition project, *Reset Modernity!*, at the ZKM | Center for Art and Media Karlsruhe; the fruitful collaboration between researchers at the Critical Media Lab in Basel, Bruno Latour and the team behind the European research endeavors AIME at Sciences Po, Paris, and the minds, bodies, and edifices of ZKM | Karlsruhe, Germany's foremost media arts institution; a scenography designed and developed at the Critical Media Lab in Basel by a loose amalgam of

[6] A "dowsing pendulum" is an apocryphal technology – a weight hung from a string – that is used to locate ("divine") the subterranean water, petroleum, and metal deposits.

- 5 The “verbose” console output for the incremental, sequential process of initiation processes that take place each time a computer is “reset.” Screenshot.

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MAC Framework successfully initialized
using 10485 buffer headers and 7290 cluster IO buffer headers
FakeSMCKeyStore: started
DirectHW: Driver v1.3 (compiled on Jun  8 2012) loaded. Visit http://www.coresystems.de/ for more information.
AppleKeyStore starting (BUILT: Sep 19 2013 22:20:34)
FakeSMC v6.0.1018 Copyright 2013 netkas, slice, usr-ssa2, kozlek, navi, The KING, RehabMan. All rights reserved.
IOAPIC: Version 0x11 Vectors 64:87
FakeSMC: 10 preconfigured keys added
ACPI: System State ISO S51 (S0)
pci (build 22:16:29 Sep 19 2013), flags 0x61008, pfm64 (36 cpu) 0xf8000000, 0x80000000
[ PCI configuration begin ]
console relocated to 0xe0000000
[ PCI configuration end, bridges 3, devices 8 ]
RTC: Only single RAM bank (128 bytes)
USBF: 0.205 We could not find a corresponding USB EHCI controller for our OHCI controller at PCI device number 31
SMC: successfully initialized
acpi: 1 CPUs, 64 bytes CPU cache line size
ubinit: done (64 MB total pool size, (42/21) split)
pthread support ABORTS when sync kernel primitives misused
rooting via boot-uuid from /chosen: 9073466E-1B60-34E7-BB84-30B94065C3F4
Waiting on <dict ID="B"><key>IOProviderClass</key><string ID="1">IOResources</string></key><key>IOResourceMatch</key><string ID="2">boot-uuid-media</string></dict>
com.apple.AppleFSCompressionTypeZlib load start
com.apple.AppleFSCompressionTypeDataless load start
com.apple.AppleFSCompressionTypeZlib load succeeded
com.apple.AppleFSCompressionTypeDataless load succeeded
USBF: 0.206 AppleUSBHC1::CheckSleepCapability - controller will be unloaded across sleep
USBF: 0.260 AppleUSBHC1::CheckSleepCapability - controller will be unloaded across sleep
Got boot device = IOService:/AppleHCPPlatformExpert/PCI001e0000/AppleHCP/pci10006,202901f,2/AppleICH8AHCI/PR0000/IOAHCI0Device00/AppleAHCI0skdDriver/IOAHCI0
BlockStorageDevice/IOBlockStorageDriver/VBOX HARDDISK Media/IOGUIDPartition
BSD root: disk0s2, major 1, minor 2
jnl: b(1, 2): replay_journal: from: 935936 to: 2162680 (joffset 0xa0000)
jnl: b(1, 2): journal replay done.
ufs: mounted Stuff on device root_device
com.apple.launchd 1 com.apple.launchd *** launchd(1) has started up. ***
com.apple.launchd 1 com.apple.launchd *** Verbose boot, will log to /dev/console ***
com.apple.launchd 1 com.apple.launchd *** Shutdown logging is enabled. ***
** /dev/disk0s2 (NO WRITE)

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- 6 The irregular networks, apocalyptic geology and chromatic “reset” of: Alberto Burri. *Grande cretto nero*. 1977. Masonite, soil, and vinyl. 149.5 × 249.5 cm. Centre Pompidou-CNAC-MNAM, Paris.

researchers, students, independent designers, artists, and architects, knit together in a manner that parallels the messy prehensions and articulations we have just described: the practices of scholarship, research, exhibition design, art, and media. A description of these latter processes is not attempted here, as this kind of didacticism would no doubt tend toward those unfortunately pretentious accounts designers often use to productize what they do as “design methods.” We conclude, as John Law does:

If much of the world is vague, diffuse or unspecific, slippery, emotional, ephemeral, elusive or indistinct, changes like a kaleidoscope, or doesn't really have much of a pattern at all, then where does this leave social science? (Law, *After Method* 2)

We ask instead: Where does this leave the methods of design? Of artistic practice? Of exhibition-making?

The “reset” of *Reset Modernity!* is a pendular gesture, instituted as it is by that word-forming prefix “re.” It never returns precisely to a point of origin, that impossible point that always long since dissipated. Like its syllabic cousins “return,” “review,” and “restart,” it instigates a movement done again, once more or in turn, but with just a hint of undoing, decortication, of “peeling back the surface to see what the planetary reality is” (Woods n. pag.), followed by a call for recapitulation or recomposition. As Donato Ricci’s contribution to this volume attests (“Don’t Push That Button!” *r·m!* 24–41), resets are applied variously to alarms and scoreboards, rings and bones, and video games – the stuff of the earth, as usual, offering up its own highly articulate enunciation^[7] that is also a declination of the possibility of “starting all over again.” Practically absurd, yet still part of modernist eco-pastoral fantasies of the re-turn,

and extraplanetary fantasy of re-birth, “starting all over again” seems to besiege thinking as a kind of “necrophilosophical drive for eternity through extension” (MacCormack 11). There is, for example, certainly no pretechnological condition to which “we” could re-turn, as “technologies precede humans by hundreds of thousands of years” (Latour, *Inquiry* 223). But the slate can never be completely wiped clean, and backward compatibility^[8] is, broadly speaking, always a necessity and never a feature. A “reset” never presumes the wholesale, conclusive violence of a clear-cutting, or the clean, ahistoric sanitation of purification, but instead speaks to the conditions for the possibility of renewal that acknowledge themselves as tautological.

The reset’s pendular gesture is then of a kind we have now named for Michel Foucault, just as the reset of a computer or Internet browser, which does the good work of clearing out log files, dumping bungled memory allocations, and erasing “cookies,” all in expectancy of a recomposition, bit by bit. We should not mistake these for “smooth” processes: a computer’s reset sequence – ever so slightly different every time – gives us a reconstitution that is the same but not, rigorously tautologically. An infinite, differential task, the reset links operations of re-production and re-newal, as the re-initiation of a series of phenomena linked in a chain, that one by one, little by little, effect microtranscendental recompositions. Why else would our everyday be so full of this infinite task – this unquestioned, techno-ritual of “turning it on and off again”? *Things*, and technologies in particular, like being reset.

The “reset” is a pendular path that stutters and cracks our modern imaginaries, all the while attempting to log the enunciations of our archival world, dragging along with it an earthly, historical ballast, never naively trying to escape what has come before: “There is always something that exists first as

[7] “Language is well articulated like the world with which it is charged” (Latour, *Inquiry* 144).

[8] Technical culture gives us “backward compatibility” as the ability of a contemporary model apparatus or system to function in concert with legacy systems, that is, older products or technologies.

a given, as an issue, as a problem” (Latour, “Cautious Prometheus” 4). The artistic practices, mediations, and exhibitions of modernity are shot through with the rebar of indentured labor and the vulgarities of rare earth and strip mining; the boundless industry of science and computation are grounded by the historic materialities of an earthly finitude with which everything must necessarily be “backwardly compatible.” Just as design is “never a process that begins from scratch: to design is always to redesign” (4), all architectures (including our osseous skeletons^[9]) are backwardly compatible with the ever spinning globe; the most cutting-edge, high-fidelity digital media are ineluctably backwardly compatible with the properties of atomic silicon. Only that which has been built can be reset, and only by those with enough access, and power, to know where the “reset button” is, and push it.

Never the impossible apocalypse of a complete “re-start,” the “reset” gives up on the idea of entirely clearing ground. It avoids creating yet another, apocryphal *Lichtung* – that delusion of Western philosophical thought we humans have long congratulated ourselves for being singularly capable of. Instead, we return to the description of experience, and the experience of description – both “ours” and “yours.” A reset of modernity does not clear the ground so much as it grounds the clearing. If our relatively small, impressively brutal human scratchings on the surface of earth show us anything, it is that overtures toward *Lichtungen* come only via incommensurable and involved zoning authorization meetings, legislative permission tribunals, mass land redistributions, and landscape geoengineering projects.

Reset Modernity! is a scenography of resituated, grounded bodies; an immersion into the cumbersome “realities” constituting Western culture; a simultaneous recomposition and description (Law, *After Method* 13); a set of philosophical and ambulatory “turns” where multiple entrances and exits fold

into and onto one another. From above we should deny ourselves a view of what we descend below to better experience. As with Vernes’s “cave streamed with light,” it is a scenography of knowledge as attachment, as grounded – not a “clearing,” or even a “clearing up,” but the attempt to jostle and reset the jumbled museum of the earth. It is the exhibition of a Foucault pendulum named for Michel, oscillating through the fissured and cracked surface of the earth.

GRATITUDES

THE AUTHORS wish to extend their heartfelt thanks for the enthusiasm and commitment of the project team linked to Critical Media Lab, Basel: Flavia Caviezel, Moritz Greiner-Petter, Paolo Patelli (independent designer and researcher), Carola Giannone, Martin Siegler (Bauhaus-University Weimar), and Deborah Tchoudjinoff (Royal College of Art, London). Further gratuities are extended to FHNW student collaborators Ephraim Ebertshäuser, Dan Kray, Josefine Krebs, Mirko Mertens, Yunhyun Park, Felipe Schwager, Esther Stute, and Jil Wiesner for their time and generosity. Thanks to Bronwyn Lay, Orit Halpern, Garance Malivel, and Nina Jäger for their insightful reviews of early versions of this essay.

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[9] A cosmo-pathological example, “spaceflight osteopenia,” names a condition wherein prolonged absence from our home planet results in decreased bone mass.

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7 BGL. *Domaine de l'angle I*. 2006. Installation. Saint Charles de Bellechasse.

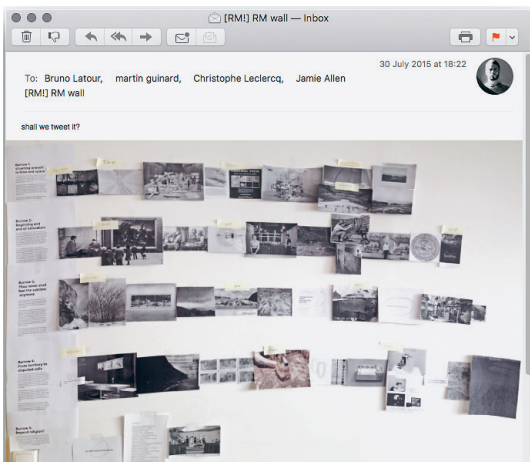


8 Paolo Patelli, Moritz Greiner-Petter, Jamie Allen, Dan Kray, and Mirko Mertens. *r·m! exhibition earth/grounding scenography concept*. 2015. A photograph of a physical model of *z·k·m* at Critical Media Lab Basel, showing part of the *earth/grounding* scenography concept for the *Reset Modernity!* exhibition. Special thanks to Inbal Lieblich.

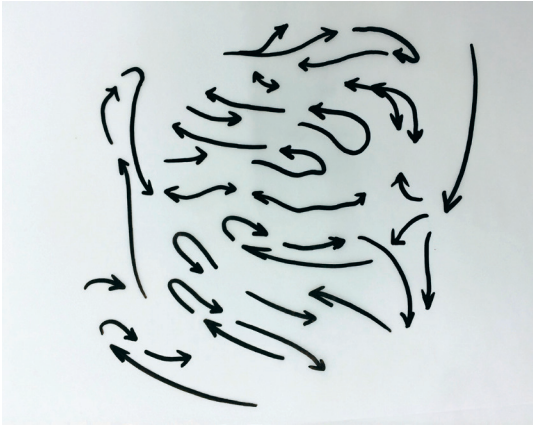
The Critical Media Lab, part of the Institute of Experimental Design and Media Cultures at the Academy of Art and Design in Basel, was as a research and relay partner for the development of the AIME exhibition at ZKM | Karlsruhe. Researchers acted as curatorial and scenography advisors during exhibition development, and undertook sketching and prototyping sessions amongst interdisciplinary researchers and students, taught a shortcourse on AIME topics and themes, held reading groups, and advised on material and curatorial selections, exhibition development and visitor flow.



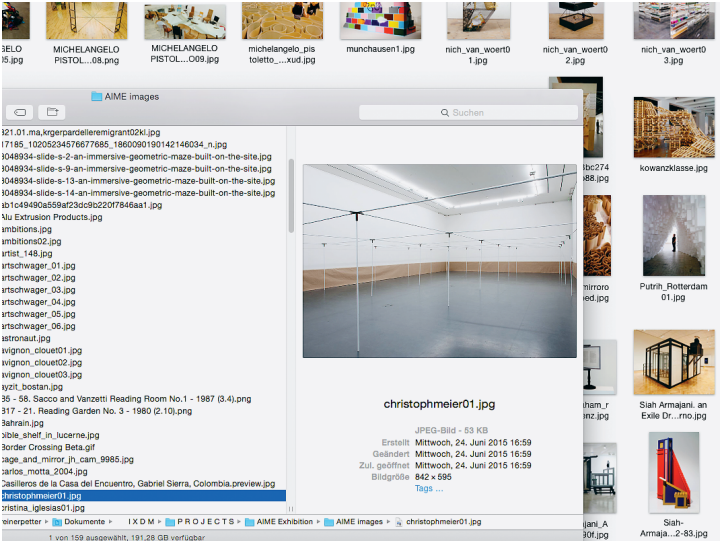
9a Roof parts of the cardboard model. 2015. Photograph.



9b "Re:[RM!] RM wall." E-mail from Donato Ricci to Bruno Latour, Martin Guinard-Terrin, Christophe Leclercq, and Jamie Allen. 30 July 2015. Screenshot.



9c Jamie Allen. Sketch of the visitor's movement in the exhibition. 2015. Drawing.



9d Moritz Greiner-Petter's image folder for the exhibition. 2015. Screenshot.



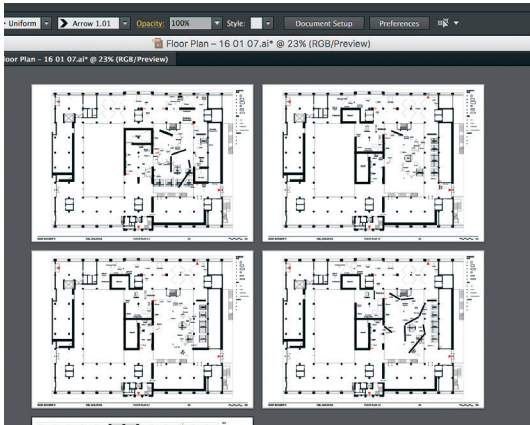


9e Photo of a construction site in Basel during the summer of 2015.

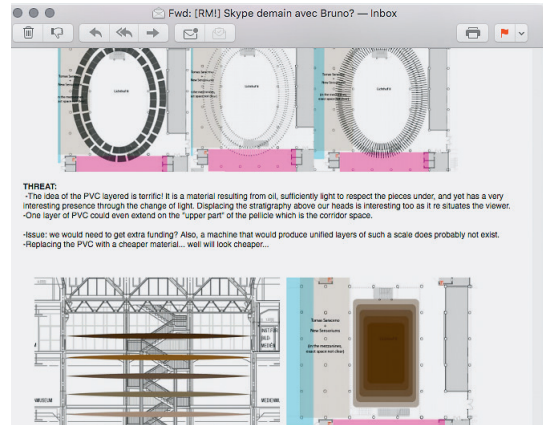
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9f Jamie Allen and Johannes Bruder develop AIME exhibition ideas with students of the Academy of Art and Design FHNW in Basel. Oct. 2015.



9g Paolo Patelli's floor plans for the exhibition. 2015. Screenshot.



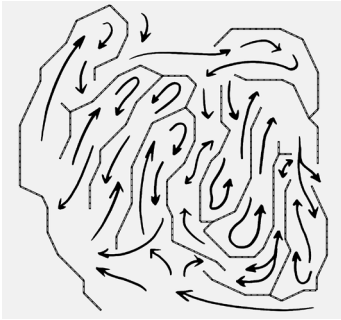
9h "Fwd: [RM!] Skype demain avec Bruno?" E-mail on material propositions for the exhibition scenography. 2015. Screenshot.



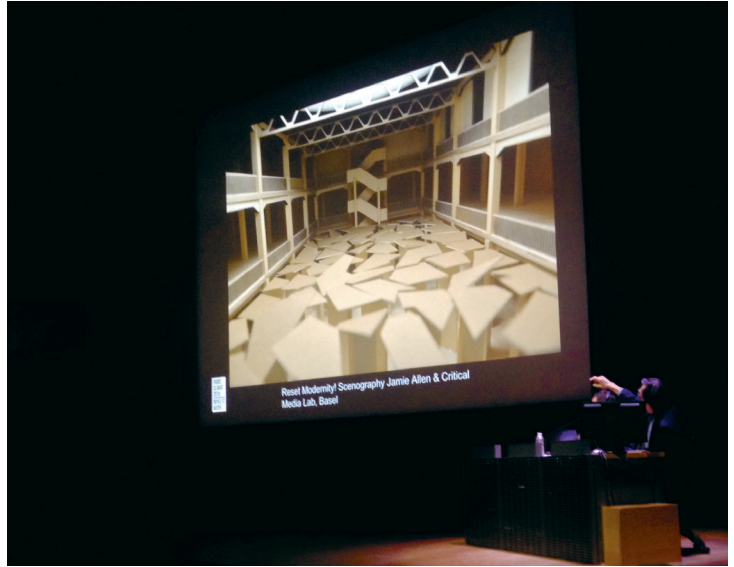
9i Material sample of a perforated metal plate for the exhibition scenography. 2015. Photograph.



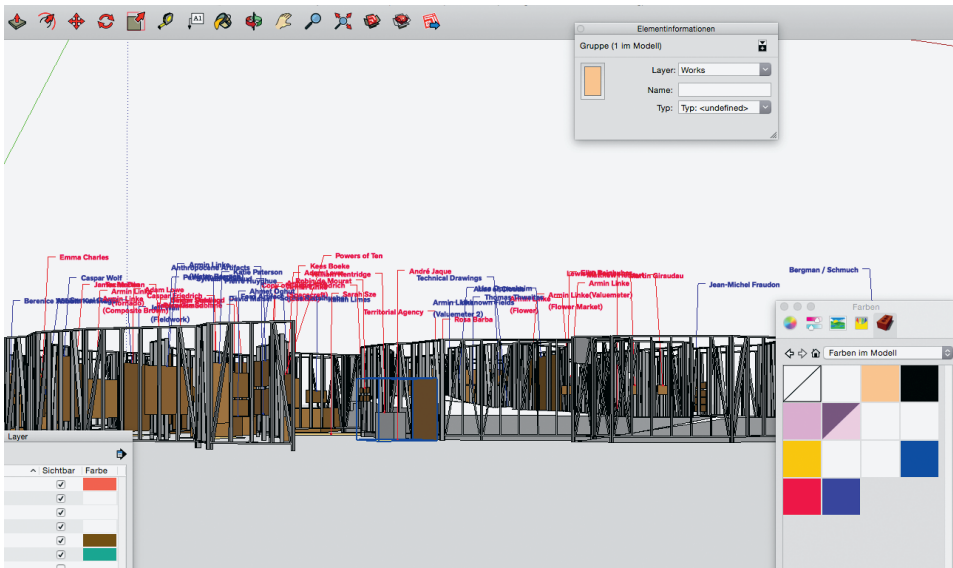
9j Mosaic floor, inspiration for the exhibition scenography taken in Paris. 2015. Photograph.



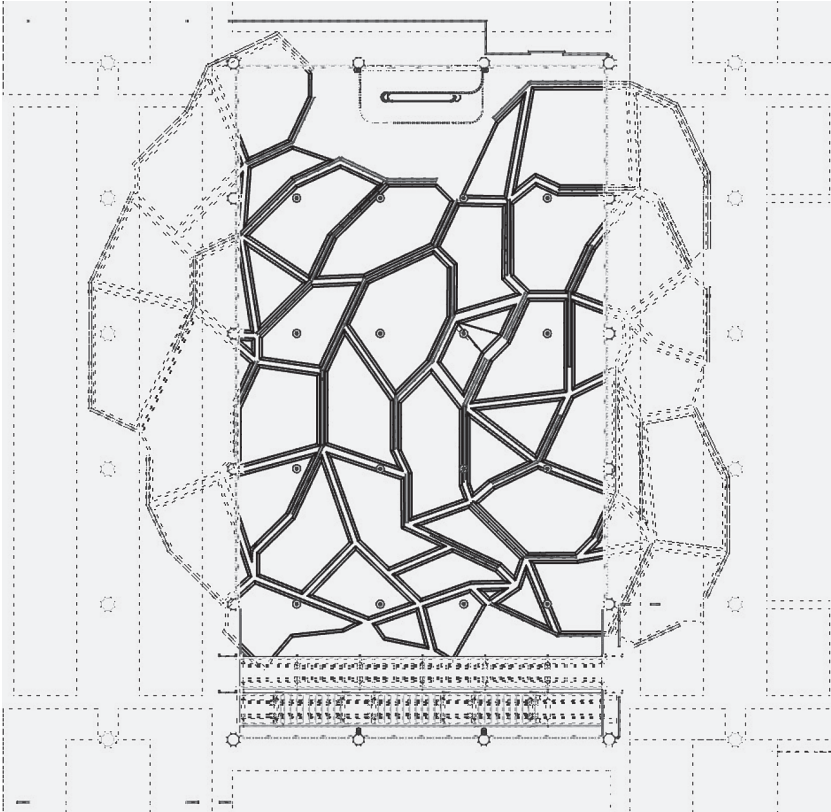
9k Jamie Allen. Sketch of the visitor's movement in the exhibition, including the walls. 2015. Drawing.



9l Bruno Latour presenting the exhibition scenography at Louvre Museum Auditorium. Paris, 25 Sept. 2015. Video still.



9m Moritz Greiner-Petter's rendering of the exhibition scenography. 2015. Screenshot.



9n Sketch of a topview of the proposed exhibition scenography. 2015. Drawing.

9o “Re: [RM!] RM wall.” E-mail from Donato Ricci to Jamie Allen, Bruno Latour, Martin Guinard-Terrin, Christophe Leclercq, Moritz Greiner-Petter, and Paolo Patelli. 31 July 2015. Screenshot.

