

3ECOLOGIES PROJECT: AN INTERVIEW WITH ERIN MANNING AND BRIAN MASSUMI

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3Ecologies Project: An Interview with Erin Manning and Brian Massumi

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Stacey Moran and Adam Nocek:

We're longtime admirers of your individual and collective work, and we're confident that many of our readers are too. What's inspiring to us is how the theoretical intersections of your research—evident in your deep and sustained engagement with Whitehead, James, Guattari, Deleuze, and Simondon, among others—are born out of what seem to be quite different creative and intellectual backgrounds. Can you speak to some of these differences, how they create mutually reinforcing contrasts and ultimately help sustain long-term intellectual investments?

Brian Massumi:

I'll come at this a bit sideways, from the angle of where our approaches intersect. We come together, across the differences in our backgrounds, in a shared way of activating philosophy. When we approach a set of philosophers, we delve into the possible convergences that work through them. This doesn't mean that we treat an author's work as incomplete and needing supplementation by another. We don't look for holes to fill in. We don't critique weaknesses and compare strengths. The work that attracts us is complete and self-standing, and we honor that. We are attracted to work in which concepts relay each other to form a web of consistency whose total texture confers upon each concept the particular power it has to make a difference for a movement of thought. We treat each work as a dynamic system. It's an essentially open system, in spite of—or, paradoxically, because of—its completeness. The completeness is more a saturation than a closure. What saturates it is the charge of implication couched in the conceptual web, by virtue of the tightness of its weave. Whitehead provocatively stated the conditions for an adequate philosophical system in the opening pages of *Process and Reality*, where he says that each component concept cannot be understood without reference to the others—but that they connect by *what is unsaid in each*. One concept's implications are brought out through a relay to others. In turn, the relay modulates the collective texture and reacts back on all its component concepts, creating new vectors of implication. This makes the system inexhaustible. The implications, once set in motion in this way, are of infinite complexity. The work becomes a machine for generating new distinctions while remaining self-consistent, true to itself. This is the characteristic of what we think of as “generative” texts, and it is to these that we return time and time again to find new riches, preferring this eternal return to broad reading and “keeping up with the field.” We're intensive re-readers, limited by the infiniteness of our generative texts.

We apply what Whitehead said about a philosophical system's dynamic self-relation to the relation between generative works. Certain authors' works share orientations that place them in operative proximity to each other. These are less doctrinal principles than



motivating presuppositions that set the conditions of possibility for what the thinking can produce and work it continuously from within. The concepts of different authors working from a similar presuppositional field have the same characteristic Whitehead sought: they connect on the level of what each leaves effectively unsaid *for another*, by dint of mutual oversaturation. So rather than critiquing, we draw out threads and weave them into a movement of thought emergent in the between. If this is successful, it creates a transindividual field of consistency that becomes our habitat of thought. This way of approaching works constitutes a “minor” treatment of the texts: sidestepping general discussion of “major” concepts (periods, schools, doctrines, stock philosophical problems).

If we had to state, in a way that is communicable from the major perspective, what presuppositional orientations the authors that are generative for us share, we would say that they take process as the starting point. This involves construing the basic unit of reality to be the event and seeing events in terms of qualitative change or emergence. This makes everything a question of potential and its playing out to give rise to determinate forms. These are understood as self-organizing takings-form—which makes process itself the agent. This recontextualizes the question of the subject, focusing on preindividual goings-on and asubjective intensities, of which the subject in the usual sense is a product or precipitate. We could go on—the implications multiply—but this short sketch is sufficient to signpost a direction. When a thinking operates from this presuppositional field, it is in the realm of what James called “radical empiricism,” Deleuze called “transcendental empiricism,” and what we like to call “speculative pragmatism.” But we multiply the terms to keep things productively off-balance and avoid falling into doctrine or school-building. So we’ll also call it “activist philosophy,” “process thinking,” “minor thought,” or “research-creation.” Each term carries different implications, inviting readers to draw out their own threads of consistency in response to our work. There is nothing we want less than followers.

Erin Manning:

For us, it’s the livingness of the philosophy that stands out. We seek thinkers whose concepts activate existence and make living possible. What modes of thought are capable of sustaining that quality of “saturation” Brian mentions?

Nietzsche’s work is where I always return to find the spark of living—“Was that life? Well then once more!” From Nietzsche, a world reveals itself that moves, that dances. This world, which refuses to limit itself to a preexisting subject, is full of questions, its aphorisms a persistent refusal to hold thought down by tethering it to the explicit. Whitehead’s philosophy is different, and yet it carries a similar openness to thought, a persistent commitment to the *activity* of living. This modality—what Deleuze might call “a” life, what I have called “life-living”—is the force of life beyond the individual subject, beyond the human.

Philosophy lived is philosophy practiced. As Brian says, there is no appetite here for critique. We don’t read to find the inconsistencies in thought and to fill the gaps with something from outside a given philosopher’s operative logic. Certainly, there can be times when it’s necessary to prolong a concept by other philosophical means, but mostly our work is to become more acquainted with what textures this singular thought and to *try it out*.

Brian Massumi:

As our answers imply, we don’t hold each other down to our own respective backgrounds. What philosophy does in concepts, art does in paint, movement, sound, light. The principle

is the same: an artwork carries the same intricacy of oversaturation among its component elements that a philosophical text does among its concepts, and the same goes for the relation between artworks that belong to the same series (by which I mean, emerge from allied problematics and intervene in correlative fields). This processual analogy between art and philosophy enables transfers and mutual supplementations to occur between them in an expanded field. This makes art philosophical, in its own way, and philosophy creative. This is the supplementarity that we both work through. What is unique about Erin's contributions is that she writes philosophy and also does artwork in a number of media: dance, textile, painting, installation, to name the most salient. I write philosophy and interfere in Erin's art. At least that's how I think Erin experiences it when she is deep in an artistic practice, and I come peer over her shoulder and kibitz. Although, we have done some truly collaborative artwork, like the "Twisted Nietzsche" performance, and we inhabit the between of art and philosophy together, in close processual embrace.

Adam Nocek:

I recall the first time I heard about the SenseLab. I was a PhD student at the time, attempting to bridge media philosophy, biology, and design and growing frustrated, not only because I was no longer legible to the "humanities" and certainly not to philosophy (which is where I started off) but because integrating practice into this research agenda was pretty much inconceivable from where I stood. I still remember enthusiastically showing a professor of mine the SenseLab and *Inflexions* websites and thinking of it as a model of research-practice at the busy intersection of philosophy, art, science, design, and activism. I also remember the professor telling me to steer clear of that kind of research because it's a one-way ticket to unemployment. I clearly didn't pay much attention to this advice, since I subsequently approached you to coedit an issue of *Inflexions*, but I imagine this story is not completely unique. Or at least, the SenseLab has been an important home for graduate research that's not always legible to what the MLA or CAA deem acceptable humanistic and arts research. I wonder if you could speak to the SenseLab's role in providing a shelter for graduate students, their research, and cultivating alternative research agendas?

Erin Manning:

I remember being delighted by that email, Adam! And what a gorgeous issue it is. When we started *Inflexions*, it was precisely with this concern in mind. We felt there needed to be more opportunities for the kind of interdisciplinary, art-oriented, and intensively philosophical (un-peer-reviewable) work we have published there over the years. At the time there were really no other examples of research-creation on the web, and so our main influence was the French journal *Multitudes*, particularly for its early commitment to the overlap of the political and the philosophical and its interest in what they called "the minor"—which is the title of a section of the journal dedicated to work that was transversal to the core concerns of any given journal issue. While we published much student work over the issues, the aim was never to situate *Inflexions* as a site for any particular kind of artistic or scholarly work. Our aim was simply to publish the most exciting work, and especially work we knew might otherwise fall through the cracks.

What you say about career suicide has been repeated as a "friendly" warning to everyone we've ever worked with! And while it may be true as regards a standard academic path, it's certainly not the case that people with whom we have worked have not thrived in charting new ways, both inside and beyond the academy. My sense is that it has very little to do with SenseLab or with *Inflexions*. It's more the other way around. SenseLab never did any kind of publicity, nor did *Inflexions*. We waited until people found us. We did that because we knew that we needed to learn from those who made their way to us—that in their arrival, they would bring something important, a quality of experience they would

then leave behind. You are an example of that. You came already poised to be at odds with academia as it likes to define itself. SenseLab was a step on that journey. Your gift to SenseLab was believing that there are other ways and forging that path so that others could also find their way there and beyond.

I have never thought of SenseLab as a site. It's more a proposition—a lure for feeling, as Whitehead would say. Perhaps it is what gives some of us the confidence we need to make the jump into other ways of living and learning. But "it" is nothing by itself.

Brian Massumi:

For me, the lure was to take seriously Deleuze's dictum that "concepts are nothing if they are not lived" and to act accordingly at a collective level. This phrase sums up what Erin and I mean by "speculative pragmatism." It means both that concept-making is a practice and that the practice of concept-making has a rendezvous with other practices, to which it transmits actionable potential and receives formative influences in return, in a symbiotic back and forth. This is the "movement of thought" that Erin writes about extensively.

The problem SenseLab was responding to is that the last thing at stake in academics, as it is dominantly practiced, is thought. It's about knowledge: data, information, description, and plausible interpretation, with the form of the results enframed by a methodology or analytic approach set in place in advance, preformatting the trajectory to conform to a certain image of what constitutes useful knowledge. I never worked that way on principle, because I was always more interested in how thought can approach the limit of the knowable and cross it into the creation of new trajectories, unforeseen. I felt myself marginalized in my department because of this. I also watched my students being channeled into that more traditional image of thought by the way the program of studies was structured. Along the route—usually during the thesis proposal writing process and its official departmental acceptance—they would very often deflate. They would lose their traction because they were often forced to relinquish the original impulse animating their work in order to fit the frame. It saddened me to see them lose the sense of urgency or necessity that had inspired their project. What SenseLab offered my graduate students was the same thing it offered me: a milieu where thinking-together was attended to as an emergent practice whose results are not preplayed and whose use-value is not predefined, fundamentally reposing the question of what constitutes knowledge. It offered the excitement of intellectual and creative exploration—what the university purports to be about but wouldn't know if it saw it.

Stacey Moran and Adam Nocek:

Your work at the SenseLab has always struck us as an inspiring mix of philosophical abstraction and embodied social practice, so much so that the one seems unthinkable without the other. We say this not simply because you've managed to combine philosophy—largely in the spirit of speculative pragmatism—with a style of arts-based research that's been fashionably dubbed "research-creation" in Canada (and now elsewhere) but because of what seems to be a much more sustained commitment to building conceptual practices inextricably tied to how you lead your lives—a kind of "life praxis." In this respect, the SenseLab always seemed to us less like a formal academic center or laboratory—even if it published and produced an incredible amount of research—and much more like a mobile site for actualizing the unseen potentials of a life; for experimenting with nomadic living, with neurodiversity, with antiracist pedagogy both inside and outside formal institutional settings, and for valuing what is rarely legible to

metric-obsessed universities and celebrity academic culture. It seems to us that the Three Ecologies Project (3E) continues to build on much of this work. But we're curious how 3E continues to expand what it means to activate potentials for living.

Erin Manning:

For us, radical empiricism—or speculative pragmatism—is lived across all of life's interstices. This means we just don't separate concepts from living. Philosophy is a web that complicates and sustains all that moves through it and beyond it. Our practices often take us away from the books. Those practices germinate the questions that allow us to return to philosophy differently each time. We need philosophy to excavate the ineffable, not-as-yet-known, that moves through the practices, particularly at the junctures where there are impasses.

More recently—since Brian and I purchased a large tract of land off-grid and have been moved to explore the ongoing work of our [3Ecologies Project](#) through the land—we have been pulled into a new angle of practice. In the past, as you say, our collective practice was usually oriented by the laboratory that SenseLab became, which involved coming together with others to explore the activation of a concept through a variety of modes (aesthetic, movement based, spatializing, etc.) or developing a movement of thought by engaging with materials. Many key concepts were born that way—enabling constraints, relational platforms, anarchiving, immediation, event. And what is perhaps most interesting is that these concepts, born in the making, became robust practices that could be carried elsewhere and experimented with under other conditions. A concept was never “purely” philosophical. It was philosophically orienting for those whose practice was attuned to writing, and it was aesthetically emboldening for those whose tendencies were more artistic. This doubleness allowed us to move with the concept to better understand what else it could do: Could it generate other concepts? Could it activate or sustain a practice? Could it spur new modes of existence?

Over the years, one of the most compelling directions this research-practice took was neurodiversity: we became increasingly sensitive to the normative constraints of the thresholds for experience we commonly entered into. Starting with the event and moving to the classroom, our collective work was committed to developing an emergent attunement to what lurks in the interstices of the normative modes of engagement. What is willfully backgrounded in order to foster neurotypical modalities of thought and movement? But as always, we arrived here not through conversation but through activity: we *practiced* other ways of coming into relation, developing new modes of collaboration. One of these modes, developed over several years, was called “composing.” It grew out of a recognition that to enter into a space is to make the space, and that this making of the space should be careful not to presuppose typical orientations. Space became the question: What is expected in a room where learning happens? In a bedroom? In a kitchen? Classrooms were rebuilt to foster worming, caves for hiding on the edges, tents sitting in the middle. Chairs were put on the ceiling, reminding us of what is expected by the postures they mandate. Tables were set on their backs. And then, in the years that followed: an active composting. Use the same elements and create again. It's not the materials themselves, it's how they come into relation to activate a movement, to create a body. From here: new concepts of the neurodiverse bodying. And then, an intensification of the question of how neurotypicality and whiteness co-compose.

By creating conditions for experimentation, concepts are created that shift our sense of where sites for collaboration best do their work. This is slow and careful work. It is often hard to discern whether anything is happening at all. Some days are spent repeating a gesture, lost in the image of what that gesture could have done under other circumstances.

But shifts are discerned: the commitment to what concepts can do in conditions that are sensitive to how worlds are made is strengthened. This alters individual practices. And it often affects how we see ourselves in the frames we are given to reflect ourselves.

Since we bought the land, the difference we've noticed is that for now, the practice is often less directly connected to concepts we recognize or can easily discern. Practice has become a mode closer to survival in a context where we are almost always in over our heads. The context is complex: we have purchased land three hours north of Montreal, where the winters are long and cold (and beautiful!) and we are trying to sustain three off-grid houses, two of which are powered by solar (and one of which has no power). Propane, like everywhere in the north, is the backup, and one we prefer to use as sparingly as possible because of its carbon emissions as a fossil fuel. To these ends, we find ourselves consumed by two things: wood and sun. The wood is not only to keep us warm—harvesting it is also necessary to clear sight lines for the sun and recomplexify a forest ecology coming out of an extractive history of occasional timber exploitation. So we cut and clear and stack and lug, replant and protect (in a losing battle with the beavers, who provide us with a lively set of ponds and toad havens). And then we hope for sun. In winter, daylight only lasts eight hours, and if we get four hours of sunshine, we consider ourselves blessed. In the midst of this, we try to understand why someone would build a generator for the north that doesn't start when it's colder than -5 C in a region where -30 C is not uncommon! And so we play the electricity game: Can we spare fifty watts for a heating lamp for the generator, or will the generator now go on *because* of those fifty watts?

The practice of keeping the houses awake moves us into act but is not necessarily of the species we might tend to understand as aesthetic or political or even remotely philosophical. Other emerging practices more so: preparing a permaculture-type gardening area, planting fruit trees, making maple syrup, caring for the old-growth maple forest, regenerating streams and previously logged forest. What all of these practices have in common, I think, is that they are pragmatic in a more emphatic way than those we engaged with through SenseLab: they pull us into act with an urgency that is theirs. Moving at the rhythm of an environment we are still in the process of connecting to is quite different from staging the conditions for a laboratory and experimenting with the concepts it generates.

We have found this disconcerting. Often our books feel quite distant, and we wonder how to “get back” to our work. This is the wrong approach (surely someone who wrote *For a Pragmatics of the Useless* should know that!), but it still lingers. This is our new challenge. Certainly, we will have more opportunities to move through concepts the way we have in the past; but for now, we are interested in the new rhythms of the environmental ecology and what those rhythms teach us about what it means to do the work we do.

While this is still very new, it has led us to become more curious about the relay between activity and thought. What practices take us further afield? On the spectrum of the speculative and the pragmatic, where is the philosophical, as a practice in its own right, most operative? My sense is that when we are fully engaged on the most pragmatic end of the spectrum—worrying about generators, say—the philosophical is much less directly present. What is perhaps interesting is to ask how its absent-presence is nonetheless having an effect. A process-philosophical approach would be curious about that, I think. It would ask how that pragmatic event carries a “perspective of the universe” and what that perspective does.

Whitehead's concept of perspective is never reducible to what inhabits a preexisting subject. What he calls a “perspective of the universe” is lived in each occasion of experience, tangentially. This means that a particular take of the world on itself agitates in its every activity, pulling us in and moving us along with it. The presupposition is that

because of this, there is always a speculative edge in experience, always a share that exceeds the given. Exploring this generative tension of the speculative and the pragmatic is how we live philosophy and how philosophy lives us.

Brian Massumi:

Put another way, what's important isn't the apparent contradiction between what we tend to think of as "merely" pragmatic and the creatively speculative. Feedback and feedforward effects can take the most mundanely utilitarian considerations up in a speculative movement. It is composing across the registers, each prodding and interrogating and potentializing the other, that draws the hyphen in speculative-pragmatic. It forms a hybrid assemblage. Or in more precise Guattarian terms, a transversality. Even battling generators can be generative! The trick is to find creative factors where they are least expected.

Stacey Moran and Adam Nocek:

Given the critical nature of your research-practice, it's remarkable to us that you've been able to sustain your work within the neoliberalizing institutional spaces of the university for almost two decades now (since at least 2004). Of course, we're all aware that to say the university is "neoliberal" is such a twenty-first-century cliché that it's barely worth mentioning. It just rehearses what everybody knows and says little about the actual policies and practices governing the university and the real lives affected by them. Yet, with the formation of 3E, you raise some incredibly important questions about what the institutional practices of the university can and cannot tolerate, and more specifically, about what it *values*. Can you speak to how specifically 3E creates spaces for entertaining values that challenge the practices, policies, and strategies of governance within the university? And by doing so, what do you (as an institution and/or subjects within a system) risk?

Brian Massumi:

There are three challenges to the neoliberal university that a project like 3E poses that come immediately to mind. They have to do with the use-value of knowledge that we already mentioned, collectivity, and evaluation. One of the main impetuses behind SenseLab from the beginning was to challenge not only the instrumentalization of knowledge along preset parameters but its commercialization. We were responding to this specifically in the context of art and creative practice.

In the early 2000s, there was a push within Canadian universities to annex artistic and creative practices to the culture industries. The official interest in what was introduced to artists as "research-creation" was motivated by a hope that it could serve as an innovation laboratory for potential products, especially in relation to digital media. The neoliberal vocabulary of "deliverables" began to be applied to art. Alliances between the arts and computer engineering were prioritized, creating an uneasy arrangement where the culture of the "hard" sciences was juxtaposed with that of creative practice without that juxtaposition being productively problematized. In the face of this, SenseLab proposed a "pragmatics of the useless." The revaluation of value at the heart of the proposition was a call for experimental practice to follow its own momentum and create its own techniques in the cracks between the disciplines. It's not about "interdisciplinary" practice as it usually plays out, where experts work according to their existing methods, each in their own corner, and then come together to share results—a basically communicational model of agglomeration. What it implied instead was a truly collective coming-together.

By “collective,” we mean entering together into a third space unpreformed by disciplinary strictures. Into that space a set of enabling constraints is injected to pressurize the encounter toward an eventful issue, one that would come of the singularity of that encounter. The collectivity is a synergy: a more-than the sum of the parts, so integrally, processually entangled that what can be credited to one participant as opposed to another becomes unassignable. This raises the issue of evaluation. How do you credit or grade a more-than of individual efforts? How do you grade the contribution of nonhuman participants? In an experimental or improvisational process, things entering in sideways or environmentally, not to mention chance impingements, can be as powerful a productive factor as the conscious, agential actions of the human ingredients of the event.

The only evaluation is a *valuation*: an experience of the process as having had value, as having been “worth it,” not in comparison to extrinsic standards but of its very occurrence as having intensified or activated or engrossed in a way that imparts creative momentum to the next encounter in the line and divergently towards the future individual or collaborative endeavors of the participants. This is what I have called “surplus-value of life”—the yield to be had by living concepts under the sway of movements of thought that sweep you up, rather than you directing them.

3E inherited this orientation. It takes what SenseLab was doing and places it at one remove from the university. Not as a frontal move against the institution, but sidling it, in potential concertation with certain of its functions but unsubmitted to its neoliberal mandates, operating by a logic of its own. In a way, this is a return to SenseLab’s origins, because during its first few years it was not based at the university. It entered the university midstream, in a Faustian bargain that created many potentials for SenseLab but also brought much pain. The big difference, as Erin explained, is that the remit of 3E has expanded to include the third of Guattari’s “three ecologies”: the environmental. SenseLab addressed social ecology in its prototyping of techniques of relation and experimentation with collectivity. It addressed the conceptual/psychic ecology in its dedication to the movement of thought and, especially in the later years, its attention to and fostering of neurodiversity. Now 3E addresses the environment by adding a vector of land-based practices. The forest, meadows, gardens, and streams of the 3E land have their own ideas about what an enabling constraint is and how synergies grow. It isn’t just an addition of another area or object of concern. It’s an interrogation by the land of SenseLab’s treatment of the other two ecologies. It can be very disruptive, but in a challenging way replete with the production of “surplus-value of life,” in the which the bees and the beavers, the berries and weeds, are ultimately collaborators.

Erin Manning:

As mentioned earlier, this third ecology can seem to be more pragmatic than speculative, its urgent call a refutation of the slow work of reading and writing or making art. It moves us into act before we can lay out the conditions for acting, before we can set up thresholds for qualities of existence. In this sense, it feels quite different from all we’ve practiced so far. Whereas in the past our work was the setting up of conditions, on the land the conditions are often beyond us, pulling us into them in ways that can feel completely out of control.

The work of 3E will be to learn more about how the conditions were actually never completely ours to control and to become more sensitive to the emergent field of conditions as they occur. To feel out of control, after all, is only a sign that you are not *on* a territory—that the territory envelops you and moves through you. As we learn how to move apace with it, in its necessity and to its rhythm, we become sensitive to the environment in ways we might not have been in the past, and we become more capable of discerning the panoply

of practices the environmental ecology calls forth. This new laboratory is terrifying insofar as the contours are indiscernible. It's impossible to know its limits in advance.

To practice in a territory without limit is to give into practice itself, as process. It is to learn in the midst and to be in the learning of the middle. This sounds easy in theory, but in practice it is often very confronting. It doesn't necessarily feel creative at first approach to work at the pace of an ecology that in all senses of the word exceeds us. But this teaching, this learning, is the radical pedagogy 3E is interested in.

So many of us dream of finding other ways—beyond the institutions that seek to frame and contain our work. But it seems to me that despite ourselves, we too often embody those frames. We carry them with us. We are so trained to recognize our value in those frames that we can't quite reconcile ourselves to other modes of living.

I often think of abolition when I am stuck in one of those frames. To truly practice an abolitionist politics is to commit to other forms of justice and, by extension, to other forms of value. It is to *practice* living otherwise. Abolition's radical pedagogy requires of us that we allow that practice to lead us. This will often feel like taking a step away from learning, because learning has become so synonymous with a format and with finalized form. In that format, we know we've learned because we have an output to show for it. We know we have been just because we have called something out, clearly delineating the boundary between what is right and what is wrong. The environmental ecology, in its transversal relation to the social and the conceptual, challenges this mode of thought. It asks us to follow the *necessity* of an orientation and to be reorganized by it. From there, it asks us to set ourselves aside so that we can better feel the contours of what has thresholded itself into activity. This activity is self-sustaining. It doesn't need us. Indeed—we are often a danger to it. To participate in it, to collaborate with it, is to learn another movement, another way of engaging.

Stacey Moran and Adam Nocek:

Rarely do we encounter scholar-practitioners who are willing to challenge the forms of social capital the academy is capable of bestowing on them. Sure, we see para-academic spaces and platforms popping up everywhere now, new autonomous summer and winter schools, certificate programs, and the like flooding the internet (we count ourselves among those who are guilty of just about all these para-academic models). What's striking, although not in any way surprising, is that many of these schools and programs, especially in the theoretical humanities, repeat the same old transactional logic of the university in a slightly altered form: there are academic experts and students who pay fees, and then credit is given in some form, etc. In fact, it's our experience that some of the worst tendencies of celebrity academic culture are reproduced in these informal settings, since "big names" (often propped up through Twitter debates, etc.) draw students, fees, and social-media chatter, all of which help reproduce the social capital required to create the celebrity needed to attract students. In any case, this brings us to 3E. It strikes us that you're attempting to create a very different model of pedagogical practice, a way of collectively organizing the spaces of education, research, and living that don't fall prey to this logic. Can you tell us how specifically (e.g., the techniques and tactics used) you've been able to evade certain transactional models of education, and what still requires work?

Brian Massumi:

First, as Erin mentioned, we have never advertised or promoted. We did send out calls for the first two SenseLab events, but they were worded in a way that made it clear that this

was not the kind of event you would know how to put in your CV. The calls were intentionally worded to make it difficult to know what the format would be and what exactly would happen. What was communicated was that, although the context would be carefully prepared, it would be prepared in such a way that nothing would happen if the participants didn't make it happen collectively. This disables the transactional assumptions people have been trained to enter with: treating the event as the delivery of a service, positioning the participants as consumers.

We have tried to follow through with this participatory, self-organizing ethos in everything we do—including administration. There is no executive or programming committee. We never have decision-making meetings. Everyone is empowered to throw out a proposition for an activity, start it moving, and see if it takes. Organizationally, we've experimented with affinity groups and with what we call SOPs (self-organizing propositions). These are like irrigation canals for the group's fluid energies that are hosted on our Slack and were conceived to be part of a new collaborative digital platform—the Process Seed Bank. The SOPs are ways of tending to emergent propositions and sheparding through stages of realization without any particular individual or delegated group making a decision about them—purely according to their own lure, their own power to gather energies themselves. In the transition to 3E, we even applied this to decisions about finances and the allocation of funds. (There are a number of working papers on the [SenseLab](#) and [3E](#) websites that go into these techniques.)

Emergent decision-making of this kind is exhilarating when it works. And a bog of quicksand when it doesn't. You have to be willing to accept the risk of failure. Failure in this context is usually due to the collective process flagging, when attention is in short supply and energies low, so that someone has to step in and act in a more top-down manner to avoid a car crash. This understandably leads to resentment, both on the part of the person who had to step in and thus is forced to betray their own anarchist desires and principles and others in the collective who feel that a central power has swooped down on the self-organizing. The focus is then diverted from the motive force of the propositions and the project, and the situation becomes personalized.

Personalization is the enemy of processualization. It activates all manner of all-too-human pettiness, competition, and moralistic holding to account. A breakdown is likely to ensue. This happened periodically with SenseLab, almost on schedule every four years or so (that seems to be the life expectancy of a flow of self-organizing energies, at least for us). Recovering from the breakdown and contagion of personalization requires a cut and reset—what we call a “schizz”—that detours things back in emergent directions. This requires precise technique. But there is no general technique for it. It has to find an angle on the situation that tweaks or leverages it into a phase shift. Not easy, and not always painless. It's always a work in progress.

We recently went through a period like that with 3E, because as Erin has been explaining, the land brings with it a different order of pressures than we've had before. There are things that just have to be done at a certain time and in a certain way, or the solar won't work and the batteries will get spoiled, or the pipes will freeze, or plants won't grow, or the sap won't turn to maple syrup, or vehicles will get stuck in the snow and ice. The milieu itself dictates. It requires of us a certain quality of attention and a capacity to creatively blur the boundaries or find a new accommodation between work and play, the creative and the mundane. In addition, the move from the university to what we call “parainstitutional” status, with one foot in and one foot out, required the formation of an official nonprofit and, in anticipation of a functioning alter-economy—a huge, uncertain, project!—a new, more traditional stream of financing (we settled on Patreon). These come with certain legal norms and

expected practices. We consider it a part of our creative practice to invent modes of “creative duplicity” that enable us to straddle those realms without letting their logic take us over. For example, we have defined the role of the administrative board that nonprofits are required by law to have as a caring-for and guardianship over the self-organizing process rather than the usual function of top-down oversight and executive decision in the last instance. There are always ways of meeting normative requirements while subverting them—a kind of pragmatic queering of the organizational.

We have an appetite for a culture of sharing experiences and techniques around organizational issues. Collectivity, outside the normative frames we all know too well, is a challenging practice, and that needs to be taken seriously. That’s part of what 3E would like to help foster. We offer our techniques—for what they’re worth—and would love to hear about others’.

In terms of pedagogy, I often think of Deleuze’s phrase for philosophy: “a pedagogy of concepts.” It means that concepts teach us what a concept can do as we go about constructing them. It’s not about teaching already-arrived-at concepts to others. It’s about swimming with the creative flow of concepts’ emergence, being fed and led by it, and inflecting it in return. Likewise, research-creation process teaches us what a body can do as we go about doing it. The key is to avoid a transmission model of knowledge and the hierarchy between those in the know and those to be brought up to standard that comes along with it. In an emergent model of thinking-living, everyone is a cofactor in knowledge formation. This doesn’t mean there are no differentials of expertise or power, only that things are so contrived that those inequalities don’t define the overall situation. They are acknowledged, even benefited from strategically at times, but they do not rule. They are backgrounded by the knowledge and powers of the emergent collectivity and defused when they start to impinge on it. This always requires situation-specific technique.

For 3E, we are working to build that backgrounding into the suggested structures of events that the project will host. Instead of a class structure, we thought of three formats for participatory workshops that can be initiated by any individual or grouping. We called them “knots,” “juncture,” and “vectors.” It’s probably too much to go into here—the definitions can be found on the [3E](#) and [3E Patreon](#) sites. They are actually less formats than different qualities of movement of thought to be collectively staged.

Erin Manning:

When the practice leads, the teaching is much harder to discern. But perhaps that is a settler-statement. I have a sense that Indigenous teaching understands this implicitly, and we are as attuned as we can be to those practices. But given our distance from those teachings, we learn this less from process philosophy than from Indigenous philosophy more directly. What teaching means in this context is hard to frame. But we have all the years of tending to the threshold, so rather than worrying too much, we keep focused on the ways the different thresholds teach us about the conditions for existence they make possible. What this looks like in practice is impossible to say, since it has to emerge over time. Anything we can say today about SenseLab comes not from a direction SenseLab sought to take but from what emerged, of its own, over years of moving quite slowly through operative problems.

The operative problem of 3E is the question of property. What might it mean to take seriously the challenge of Fred Moten and Stefano Harney’s concept of the undercommons in the context of a land purchase? Having worked for years on alter-economies (toward the 3E Process Seed Bank), we know how difficult it is to shift the contours of the financial. We are so wedded to the systems we hate!

Our aim with the property is to “give the land back to itself.” Once the debt is paid or an alter-economy grows around it that is capable of sustaining it, we will transfer it to a land trust or entrust it to a foundation to permanently take it out of the real estate market and the extractive economy, and preserve it in perpetuity as a commons where the land is cared for and made available for learning and practicing sustainable gardening and forestry techniques (not to mention growing philosophy!). This may include others, who cannot afford to purchase property, building and living on the land for free, provided it is with a minimal ecological footprint and it contributes to the collective potentials of the project. This is not a back-to-the-land model. What we hope to experiment with are ways of living-thinking that are committed to the transversality of the three ecologies. The land is one node in a larger matrix that includes the relation to the city.

For the moment this will look like fostering alter-economies that allow the 3E land to host, in the existing buildings, people who are interested in learning from that pesky pragmatic ecology that keeps us on our toes. Over time, it may involve experimenting with off-grid architectures suited to this kind of climate, such as Earthships or self-sufficient tiny houses. By necessity, this will involve learning about landscape architecture—how to keep old-growth forests flourishing, how to build without clearing unnecessarily, and how to regenerate the streams and wetland areas, not just for the “useful” species of sport fish but for the frogs and salamanders and sedges and other often overlooked inhabitants of the land. Next summer, our first large-scale garden will be seeded: a forest fruit, nut, flower, and vegetable garden. We will learn what might be feasible as a perennial vegetable in this climate. Asparagus is our focus for the first year, but we will also try other vegetables that might be sustained (perennially) through microclimates. We think a lot about flowers and insects and toads and beavers. What might an affective permaculture look like? A useless garden?

Transaction is hard to get around completely. You’re always implicated in a transactional economy of some kind, at some point of contact with the dominant culture. On the land, we engage in all kinds of transactions on a daily basis. We can’t do everything ourselves—we just don’t have the expertise. And so we pay people to do all kinds of things: cut trees that have fallen on the sap line, build woodsheds and generator sheds, fix generators and repair solar systems. At the moment we are the students. But the transactions can’t be confined to a simple model of exchange. The folks who come out here to assist us do much more than what we pay them for: they *care* about the land and the project. We find that more often than not, they do more than what they were contracted for. The transactional exchange economy overflows into a gift economy. At this generative interstice, another kind of learning happens. We learn to value the modes of existence a variety of skills facilitate and to see the world from the perspective of what that skill calls forth. An example would be the skill of the lumberjack. Rémi, who has cut many trees on our property, does more than receive an hourly rate in exchange for the lumbering of the trees. He is designing the forest as he cuts, sensitive to what needs more sun and what will soon have to be taken down because it is crowding out a healthier tree or because it will soon die. We don’t have to tell Rémi about 3E—he is already there, working at the transversality of the social, the environmental, and the conceptual. His work gifts us not only an expanse of land that allows the solar panels to be more optimal but a vision of how time moves through the forest.

Over the last many years of thinking about what else a radical pedagogy can be, a lot of thought has gone into the concept of accreditation. We are told, without fail, that we need accreditation, and yet we all know that accreditation is what we buy, not learning as such. Learning, it turns out, is what happens *despite ourselves*. There is an argument that accreditation is necessary for those kept out of the systems of learning. And that may be

true. But surely we have to question the capitalist nature of what we consider the credit of learning? What is learning outside the accounting of it, and what can this outside do?

Stacey Moran and Adam Nocek:

What's intriguing about 3E, and is also directly relevant to this special issue on Bordering, is that it's not entirely outside of the university system. While the project is formally autonomous (financially and culturally, it seems), it still draws on its connections to the SenseLab and Concordia. In this way, 3E seems to inhabit, if that's even the right word here, the conceptual and spatial logic of an institutional "borderlands," a domain of practice and inquiry that's neither fully outside nor inside the university. Can you speak to the bordering practices of the 3E, and more specifically, to what relations with the university still seem viable, which ones can be severed without destroying the ecological balance, and whether you see any more general lessons to be learned about institutional bordering?

Erin Manning:

We have thought a lot about the power of the parainstitutional. The university does one thing really well: it attracts creative people. The problem is that the creativity generated in that environment too often occurs in spite of it. It's a systemic issue, not an individual one. There are many fantastic people who teach and study and administer, and for the most part, I have found my interactions with those people to be generative. More often than not, I am moved by the care professors express toward students, and I am convinced that there is a commitment, by so many of us, to create environments for learning. The problem is that the institution itself is not nimble. Institutions never are. They are slow-moving machines that watch the bottom line. This means that whatever change they steward will always rely on an already existing set of criteria. These criteria are deeply mired in existing models of (capitalist) value. Evaluation—the matrix by which the university meters itself—is by extension also a capitalist equation. We don't study so much as evaluate ourselves according to a system that reduces us to the count.

What we need is the opposite! We need sites of conviviality and participation whose emphasis is on discovering value, not reducing ourselves to a depleted vision of knowledge mobilization. The parainstitutional has the advantage of moving at a more flexible pace. That doesn't mean the parainstitutional is unthreatened by the orientations institutions take. We are so habituated to the forms of organization that organize us that we tend to reproduce them . . . But it seems to me that the advantage of the parainstitutional is that it can fail more easily—that it can rebuild, or if necessary, self-destruct in ways the university never seems to be able to.

Something baffles me about the university: its capacity to make us thankful about the work we so often hate to do. It's amazing how often a conversation amongst professors turns to our collective anguish about the normative structures imposed on us, about the terrible conditions of teaching, about the unfair division of labor, about the debt our students take on. And yet we don't quit. I have thought about this for years and have come to the conclusion that we don't quit because we have been trained to respond affectively to the scarcity market of academia. To have a job that is tenured is to have "made it" into a small club you can never leave. Very few professions work this way. What is it that keeps us in these institutions? I think it's the belief that we are "called" to do this work, that the work *matters*. But what is it about it that matters? Aren't most of us doing the work that matters *anyway*? Aren't we already engaged parainstitutionally, finding zigzags that allow us to actually do the work we love, between the meetings and the marking and the administering?

A good reason to stay is that it pays the bills. Another good reason to stay is that it can foster certain sites of emergent sociality on the sidelines. But really, what I long for is something altogether different. I long for the courage to follow what matters where it needs to go, under its own conditions.

So much of this thinking comes of my frustration around neurodiversity and Indigeneity and race and how they play out in the institution. There is willingness, certainly, to address these, but this willingness remains tethered to that bottom line, both capitalist and colonialist. We are “welcoming” difference into the institution, but always on the institution’s own terms. How many times have I been told to “be realistic” or “to accept” that “this is the best the institution can do under the circumstances.”

3E doesn’t seek to be an “other” to the institution. The “para” of its proposition is as much about texture, qualities of relation, as it is about institutional form. I have no desire to fight the university at this stage. I am happy to go and teach and be moved by what I learn with students. What I want is to multiply environments for learning so that I can learn what else learning can be. In that context, I don’t want to “welcome” difference. I want to be welcomed by it, to be in the midst of it. An ecology is precisely that: a complexity. Here, settling is not an option. It’s not about owning or evaluating. It’s about being in conduit of an environment’s self-expression. The work of 3E will be to explore what that can involve. By necessity, I see this as an opportunity to delve into forms of encountering the world that are vastly at odds with a university environment. We will not know in advance what we are learning. There will be no matrix of evaluation to let us know that we are reaching milestones. We will not “mobilize” knowledge.

Brian Massumi:

Erin’s point about not wanting to be an other of the institution, an alter-institution, is crucial for me. My dictionary glosses “para-” as “from Greek *para* ‘beside’; in combinations often meaning ‘amiss, irregular’ and denoting alteration or modification.” Beside, amiss, alteration. That sums it up. 3E stands beside the university, in the sense of taking a step away from it, but also being in step with it in certain ways, hoping to supplement the opportunities for thought and practice its faculty and students may have access to, through a productive come-and-go. But it also troubles the institution, as a thorn in its side, standing as a constant reminder that something is amiss with the university’s hardening of the arteries of knowledge and eager subservience to the neoliberal economy. It signposts the possibility of alteration—of the very form of the institution. It’s not about an other of the university that would be an institution in the same sense it is. It’s about opening the concept of the institution to process in a way that avoids fixed hierarchies and the clinging to normative frames and bureaucratic proceduralization that weigh down the traditional institution’s self-professed concern with “excellence” with a gravitation toward the lowest common denominator, all in the name of “efficiency” and ensuring (minimal) “standards.” A “parainstitution,” in the sense we mean it, experiments in organizational form, endeavoring to find a dynamic form of acting-together that is equal, in the plastic potential of its own organization, to the emergent movements of thought it wishes to host. It eschews the content/form dichotomy of the university institution, where knowledge is packaged by the curriculum and supporting administrative structure like the contents of a box. “Para” opens out onto an expansive field. “How” things are done is as much a part of the study as the content of the propositions pursued. This is as political as it is pedagogical. It allies 3E with a long tradition of experimentation in participatory forms on the extraparliamentary left, particularly with respect to the anarchist and autonomist movements and throughout the history of the feminist movement. That is as much the milieu we move with as the university is. Our “para” straddles both.

Stacey Moran and Adam Nocek:

Many of our readers come from design and creative fields. They also tend to be dissatisfied with the reigning models of higher education and are passionate about forging new pedagogies within alternative institutional settings. It strikes us that the “speculative institutional design” you’re invested in is likely to generate a wealth of techniques that have been honed, experimented with, and transformed according to the specifics of a domain. Given your experience with establishing the SenseLab (and *Inflexions*) and now 3E, do you see yourselves engaged in a kind of critical and speculative institutional design? This isn’t meant to reduce the complexity of your work to something that sounds bureaucratic. On the contrary: we’re wondering how the many techniques for institution formation you’ve developed might be coordinated through shared values (e.g., the design of alternative education/research spaces) and whether they overlap with techniques cultivated in other design, artistic, and education fields, including social and speculative design, architecture, and urban design, as well as with the traditions of radical and antiracist pedagogy, performance art, activism, and other areas. Given this, we wonder if there could be a radical pedagogy of institutional design, where institutions are shaped to inhabit the borderlands? Or is this antithetical to the project itself?

Erin Manning:

Our Process Seed Bank project is very much aligned to the questions you ask above. For years we have longed for an environment where techniques are shared. So many people are doing fascinating and important work, and yet we tend to be too busy to really engage with each other’s practices . . . We dream of ways of aggregating that experimentation, which I suppose is the ethos of what you are doing here!

I think from our end, what we have learned, and what we continue to learn, is how to create conditions for the emergence of new techniques. The techniques themselves, we have noticed, are very local, very singular, and specific. They are really not interchangeable into another context. We came to this realization the hard way, over many attempts to bring our techniques into other settings (like the conference or the exhibition). It never worked. The techniques must emerge organically from the event that spawns them.

What is somewhat more transferable is an ethos, a care for the event’s capacity to be hospitable to new conditions. I think over years of practice what we have learned is to honor the durational yield of practice, to recognize that an emergent attunement to the conditions at hand is necessary. I suppose we have learned to be more agile? And certainly we have practiced not putting ourselves at the center of the work. This is the hardest task, to *practice* the impersonal.

The impersonal, as we’ve explored it over the years, has a lot of overlap with Gilbert Simondon’s concept of the transindividual, that force of emergent collectivity that transduces any notion of individuality. This “being of relation,” as Édouard Glissant might say, is the force of collectivity as we understand it. To attune to this quality of experience, and to practice it, is to be engaged in what I have called “minor sociality.” This quality of sociality—which I feel is allied to what Laura Harris calls “the aesthetic sociality of blackness”—is neurodiverse through and through in the sense that it refuses a strict boundary between body and world, individual and other.

To practice impersonality is to be engaged in the environmentality of the event, to be moved by the conditions of its coming-to-existence, to be brought to life through it. If we begin here, what reveals itself is the field of relation. This is where study does its work most emphatically, I find. So if we can foster conditions that allow this shift to occur,

techniques will be created that become a conduit for the field's opening up into other realms.

This is a roundabout way of saying that the techniques are there to be invented, but for that to happen, conditions have to be created. We will learn from past movements and be enriched by them, but in order to truly come into contact with their potential, we cannot stand outside looking in. We have to allow ourselves to be made by the environments we desire, and for that, we have to succumb to the risk of being unmade by them as well.

Brian Massumi:

I'll just add a chorus: conditions have to be created. Supple, adaptable techniques have to be set in place to terraform a terrain of participation and orient it in certain propositional directions whose outcome is not preplayed. What it takes to condition a milieu of relation is very different from the techniques that will then ply that milieu to produce a movement of thought and precipitate knowledge formation. This difference has to be kept in mind. It is what we try to get at with the term "techniques of relation." Relation isn't just coming together. It's more than conviviality. It's coming together under propitious conditions for the production of a surplus-value of collectivity—that "more than the sum of the parts" by which the individuals involved outdo themselves.

This is part of what we mean by the impersonal: the exceeding of our personal potentials by relational synergies. We don't want to express our sorry selves. Because there is nothing so impoverished as a separate self. "We are sick of ourselves," Nietzsche bemoaned. What we want to express is beyond ourselves. We want to express ourselves into ways of moving, thinking, and knowing that we ourselves, from our limited personal standpoint, can have only a vague inkling of before we actually experience them together. Erin and I are just embarking on a joint book project that we're calling *Living Beyond Biography*. Many people won't be willing to embrace this kind of impersonalism in the name of emergent intensities of existence, especially in this age of identity and what I like to call the "piety of the personal." But even for those who do not find this to their appetite, the suggestion that there are techniques of relation specifically addressing the conditioning of events of research and creation may still resonate.

Stacey Moran and Adam Nocek:

Where do you see 3E in five years?

Brian Massumi:

I would be extremely satisfied if, over the next five years, 3E were able to effectively merge the philosophical investigations that SenseLab carried out through reading groups, punctual events, and publishing projects with ongoing land-based activities that are regenerative in all senses of the word. A key part of this for me is activating a transductive relation between the city and the countryside, in the sense that there is continuous variation of techniques that pass between the rural and urban milieus and processually couple them, so that they become phase-shifts of each other's take on the three ecologies—the social, the conceptual, the environmental—rather than polar opposites and adversaries. At SenseLab, we had an event called "Generating the Impossible" (2012) that actually took place deep in the northern forest not far from what is now the 3E land, then experimented with transferring the processes initiated in the woods to the wilds of the city. It was one of our most successful events, in my experience. One of the concepts we tried to operationalize was "exaptation," which is a transductive concept that comes out of anti-

neo-Darwinian evolutionary theory. It refers to the repurposing and change in nature of an adaptation when it moves from one milieu to another. I would love to return to those experimentations. Perhaps most of all, I would like to take the very hard work and thinking we've done over the last five years on alter-economies and exadapt it to the new context created by the addition of the land component to our activities.

Erin Manning:

In five years, I anticipate I will be close to shifting from the university to full-time stewardship of the 3E land project. By then, we will have had the opportunity to learn from the passage of collaborators—folks we know and haven't met yet who are moved to experiment with the transversality of the three ecologies on this northern landscape. We will have gone further into our experimentation with sustainable power, perhaps having harnessed an additional source of nonextractive potential from the land, such as hydro or wind, enabling us to phase out our propane use. And our gardens will have grown and died away a few times, teaching us what thrives in this climate. In five years, perhaps we will be lucky to taste our first apple or pear or cherry or plum from our fledgling orchard, and we will have stomped down on the overgrown raspberries enough to have established some paths that allow us to cultivate that bountiful berry, whose aim it is to take over all the sunny land! The maple forest will have established itself a bit more, and we will have learned to better distinguish between the trees and to spot the chaga that the locals find so easily. We will also have tapped a few birch trees and have tasted the sap. Whether or not we will have built a greenhouse is hard to say. I dream of a kind of northern Earthship-greenhouse-studio, but I also wonder whether it is necessary. I suppose it will grow itself if the necessity presents itself. For the moment the necessity is more oriented toward encountering what is already here.

In five years, perhaps there will be a new structure. Sometimes we imagine a yurt or two, shared by folks in the wider network. Shared, noninheritable, but infinitely transferable housing. By then, if we are lucky, when we are renting out the houses to help financially support the project (which we do when there are no residencies or events), we may be attracting mostly folks for whom the project matters and who are interested in participating in it, if only economically. And I suspect we will have gotten better at making maple syrup. But nothing will ever surpass that first year's madness and the sixteen affectionately named maple syrup batches: gone fishing, ça mousse, come on baby, eternal return, it's a moose, push it!, ça traîne, one more degree, haut débit, double whammy, danger zone, second chance, disaster, endtrodition, eternal object, abstract surface.

Brian Massumi: The names say it all!

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