

Gatherings blends performance art, political theater, philosophical speculation, and intimate reverie. The performance combines spoken word, choreography, 3-channel video projection, and 4-channel sound. It was first performed at Transmediale, Berlin, in February 2011, during which I won the 2011 Vilém Flusser Theory Award for outstanding theory and research-based digital arts practice, given by the Transmediale in collaboration with the Vilém Flusser Archive of the University of Arts, Berlin.

Gatherings is a performative study of the nature of the event and the new forms of awareness, cognition, and material agency that are emerging in data-intensive environments. It is about how things come together as matters worthy of attention: how actors assemble, relate, and affiliate in entities and phenomenal occurrences that are more than the sum of their parts.

My concept of "actor" is drawn from vitalist philosophy, object-oriented ontology, and feminist science studies, along with theories of affect informed by the life sciences. It is understood in terms of distributed, transindividual modes of apprehension and affiliated presence, rather than in terms of modernist frameworks of subjectivity. I consider what can be said to exist, materially, in the new information-intensive timespace of urban life, in terms of all manner of human and nonhuman entities as they are increasingly endowed with cognitive and actuating ability.

I explore the constitution of agency and event in terms of a very specific historical context: a contemporary environmental space driven by the techniques of tracking. Ascending with the rise of computation in mid-century wartime, I understand tracking as a science of movement optimization that has shaped a very specific kind of practiced timespace. It has shaped an urban environment where movement is understood as strategically calculable: a world where all entities are regarded as locatable, yet subordinated to movement, and thus able to be tracked, modified, and transported with some degree of predictive regularity. All urban phenomena are categorized, standardized, and rendered interoperable within the analytical architectures and procedures of this strategic, calculative mobilization. It constitutes a defining organizational horizon for the movements of the world -- a sensory, cognitive, and calculative ambience against which the phenomena of urban life are understood.

Gatherings begins with a meditation on the changing nature of tracking. It begins with a familiar figure: a man sitting at a cafe, scanning the faces of passersby as they flow by him. This man, who is also a narrator of sorts, evokes the surveilling man in Edgar Allan Poe's "A Man In the Crowd." We then move to a more modern figure: an observational expert sitting at the interfaces of an intelligence agency, interpreting movements on images, maps, and screens. From this basis, I begin to displace the centrality of the human agent in the process of tracking. I explore how, in the contemporary world, tracking has come to rely, increasingly, on algorithmic procedures and automated systems. I explore how technologies of tracking have been incorporated into distributed network environments -- augmented by new sensing and locationing technologies and embedded into mobile devices, buildings, cars, and urban infrastructures.

Studies of this new paradigm, however it is termed, inevitably focus on its epistemologies. Yet as the urban environment gains cognitive abilities, it is also endowed with agential ones, in ways that call for entirely new ontological frameworks. As urban actors increasingly combine sensing, processing, and actuating functions, they are able to apprehend, track, and respond to phenomena with a degree of autonomy. Environments become able to directly sense phenomena and respond to what they apprehend, in ways that complicate distinctions between body and space, as well as between human, artifact, and computer.

Gatherings focuses on these neglected ontological dimensions. It offers new formats of analysis for the material, agential status of these hybrid urban entities -- their principles of organization, apprehension, and engagement -- as they increasingly challenge conventional philosophical frameworks, which have largely privileged the interface between human and world.

In order to accomplish the above, the project makes several key moves. First, rather than understanding these hybrid urban entities in terms of formed and distinct objects or subjects, it defines them in terms of their complexes of practices. It understands these practices as involving affective transmission and absorption as much as reflective distance, and thus, as operative in ways that do not privilege linguistic meaning, representation, or the relation between human and world. From this basis, it then focuses on the structuring principles of these practices -- their maintaining mechanisms and their principles of motivation and inclination. It defines these structuring principles in terms of "program" -- a concept it retools and deploys in a novel way.

In my conception, program is not simply algorithmic. It is a guiding principle of structural inclination -- involving stabilization, standardization, and coupling -- that is rooted not simply in code but in practice. It is a dynamic, densely layered site of social negotiation and organization that works across the affective, symbolic, and rhythmic registers of experience, where it is embedded in routines, spaces, motivations, and behaviors -- material clusters of recurrent action, form, and stance. Its foundational structure is not based in difference but in commonality and correspondence. It is about the solicitation and maintenance of accordances, in ways that often privilege relinquishment over mastery.

Such a course of study involves some degree of rhetorical experimentation. Gatherings aims to forge new concepts that may take on a life of their own, like good fictional characters, and at times exceed the boundaries of traditional forms. Conveying experiences through allegory and enaction rather than solely through explanation, it aims to overcome the limits of specialized discourses and argumentative conventions. In general terms, the project is an analytics, ethics, and poetics of social forms: an emergent methodology that, combining lived experience with analysis, offers a way of apprehending the event, becoming receptive to its politics, and transforming it into a practice.