

JOAN RETALLACK

The Wager

THOUGHT EXPERIMENTS, POETHICAL PLAY,
DIFFICULT TIMES

“Supposium” is said to have 2 to 4 stable isotopes that do not decay into other elements. It may or may not be radioactive. If radioactive, its half-life is too long to be measured. Supposium is currently found in the sub-terrain of chemistry textbooks, periodically accessed for mostly benign thought experiments. Neither obviously utopian nor blatantly dystopian, the Supposium thought experiment awaits further analysis to determine long-term implications. S . M . QUANT

During the conversation when Adam Pendleton invited me to propose a contribution to his 2013–14 artist residency at MoMA, Plato’s account of Socrates and friends enjoying their debate on *erōs* in the *Symposium* (c. 370 BCE) came to mind. Supposium (2014 CE) materialized as homage and play on what I have taken to be the *Symposium*’s most fascinating aspect—a startling departure from the default masculine supremacy of the misogynist classical world and its philosophical patriarchy. I’m referring to the feminine swerve that the sudden appearance of poet-philosopher-priestess Diotima of Mantinea represents, and goes on to enact, after Socrates introduces her, without irony, as wise in many things but, apropos the occasion, his mentor on the nature of love. Socrates (whom I’ve come to think of as Plato’s feminine alter-ego) is not speaking of Diotima’s expertise on sexual assignation, but of her thoughtful analysis of *erōs* as the moving principle of *philosophia*, love of wisdom: the passion for truth, justice, and intellectual argument. Diotima, in fact, excels at arguing; not surprisingly,

in the Socratic manner that—wily, seductive, relentless—can address matters of utmost gravitas by means of playful thought experiments.

When I refer to Diotima as “feminine swerve,” I’m thinking of what Lucretius explains (c. 50 BCE) to his Roman readers in the Epicurean poem, *De Rerum Natura* (*On the Nature of Things*):

One further point in this matter I desire you to understand: that while the elements are being carried downward by their own weight in a straight line through the void, at times indeterminate and in indeterminate places, they swerve a little from their course, just so much as you might call a slight change of motion. For if they were not apt to incline, all would fall forever downward like raindrops into the profound void, no element striking any other: and so nature would never have produced anything.

For Epicurus (c. 341–270 BCE), the swerve was a matter of metaphysics beyond human control. Like most philosophers in the turbulent ancient world, parsing what is and is not within our control was a paramount task of setting out both reassurances and limits to our desires and intentions. (Retrospectively, Epicurus via Lucretius can be seen as foreshadowing Darwin’s chance mutations.) The human, ethical challenge (Epicurus’s chief interest was justice and compassion among ordinary people in everyday life) remains much the same—to use our wits and creativity to swerve ourselves out of the profound void of default sociopolitical patterns perpetuating misogyny, racism, fear and hatred of alterity of all kinds, despoiling our (all species included) Earth. Might bold thought experiments and poethical play create imaginative climates that can generate consequential swerves? Just as out-of-the-blue atmospheric disturbances generate both thrilling and calamitous storms, there are risks. In the case of thought experiments beckoning swerves the worst outcome is probably boredom. Not to minimize that. As La Rochefoucauld pointed out (c. 1665), we can forgive those who bore us, but not those whom we bore.

Suppose a curated event, billing itself as a series of invited thought experiments beginning with *suppose*, is procedurally designed to experiment with the structure of the event itself in such a way that everyone present becomes increasingly drawn from periphery to center. (See Sandi Hilal’s thought experiment for sociopolitical implications of this geometrical shift.) The *modus operandi* for SUPPOSIUM

2014 was to set this experiment ticking somewhere inside MoMA—ideally placed in implicit dialogue with the structural *habitus* of the museum. *Habitus*, in Pierre Bourdieu's sense of a largely unconscious, self-perpetuating value framework that tends to cordon off threats to its perpetual reinscription. The idea was that as the event went on implications and consequences of language used in the opening presentations would be reflected upon, altered and/or magnified by an audience gradually morphing into participants.

In its simplest construction, SUPPOSIUM 2014 turned out to be a peaceful takeover of the MoMA Founders Room. Peaceful but laborious. A labor of furniture moving that, retrospectively, should have been (had MoMA's insurance allowed it) part of the public event. Immense, dark-stained tables, hefty executive-upholstered chairs (enough to seat about forty important people) had to be hidden away in another part of the building. Emptied of its material gravitas the room turned out to be large enough for approximately 125 people to engage in a variety of peripatetic workshop groups, capped by self-organized performative play. Successive rearrangements of lightweight movable chairs allowed reconfigurations from rows to circles to a room-sized oval whose center, shaped like a giant paramecium, became the performance space.

From the start we had activated a procedure that would turn into a card game (using index cards) called *SWERVED*. As people arrived they found game kits set out on every chair: 4"×6" spiral pads (red, yellow, or blue), index cards, pen, instructions for deployment. Prior to the speakers' thought experiments opening the supposium, everyone was asked to engage in active listening by writing down striking words and phrases for later use. (Focus on words was in recognition of their power to redirect geometries of attention.) Culled language, along with reflective notes, entered the composition of nine group performances and was ultimately recomposed—using a simple alphabetical procedure—into the collaborative poem *SWERVED* that ends this book.

Section I presents texts of five invited thought experiments as delivered in the MoMA Founders Room on March 2, 2014. Sections II and III contain contributions by audience participants written in aftermath of the event. (*Aftermath*, etymological roots: new grass springing up after [Germanic dialect] *math*/mowing.) All audience participants were invited to submit work in any medium or genre for the book.

The documentation section contains material generated during the lead up to the supposium: invitations, links with a John Cage exhibition coinciding in the museum with the supposium, the event introduction, and two subsequent reviews. It might in fact be useful to look through that section to more fully contextualize the origin of the initial thought experiments. The complete text of the procedurally composed poem *SWERVED*, with contributions from almost all of the participants, has pride of place as a non-concluding culmination.

B I B L I O G R A P H Y

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