

Call for Cooperators

Academic Forms: Thinking the Ways We* Do Our Work

(*Where “We” Names, Specifically, Humanities Scholars)

Preliminaries Towards Some Academic Product

We are looking for people who would like to help us think through the forms of academic work in all their various genres, from the intellectual to the managerial. The monographs, seven-thousand word papers for book collections or journals, peer-reviewed or not, the book reviews, edited collections, special issues, conferences and their keynotes and fifteen minute papers and lightning talks that frame how we perform our research, distribute and publicize it: where do they come from? What work do they do? Are they ideal forms, or conventional, or both? What do they say about our work? Who and what are they for? Why are they? The various forms of readers’ reports (on dissertations, peer-reviewed manuscripts), committee reports, minutes, protocols, applications that give shape to our managerial writing: what are the points of contact and interdependencies between these and more properly “scholarly” forms? How do forms of writing qualifying texts—seminar papers, theses, dissertations, *Habilitationen*—shape and orient our academic work, and how and why do they, and other written and oral forms, reproduce the system of the university? At a first approximation, these forms, material and symbolic, perform and make us perform, bind us to the preexisting system of the university machine even as—for instance, in Adorno’s reflections on the essay—they ask us to exceed any firm routes and obvious destinations.

We see the groundwork of the humanities, its self-understanding, reflected in these forms: they circumscribe what we do, and how we understand our scholarly work; and they do so in a historical lineage, often virtually unchanged since the days when actual *manuscripts* were sent to actual typesetters. While some movements have been made in the last two decades towards taking advantage of the affordances of the digital—both shorter and longer forms of argumentative essays and/or scholarly papers, increasing collaborative work on shared-work platforms, and digital opportunities for public and professional outreach, such as podcasts and videos—as a profession, we hold on to often-ancient forms. These forms often appear to respond to the publication and communication regimes of their original day more than ours, and so, perhaps too, more to the intellectual needs of those days than ours. Maybe they not only respond to older regimes of communication but also constrain our approaches to our work. Equally as possibly, they retain their validity because they are the best way of doing what we understand our work to be and indeed what that work must be. How do those forms serve or disserve the best work of the humanities and the university as a whole, then—and how do they not? What is their relationship to the regimes operative in the university landscape today, including neoliberalism? What is their orientation (to whom are they directed?), and why? How do disciplines and national traditions produce these forms differently, and what is the significance of these differences, if there is any?

Our aim in proposing a cooperative working group—a thinking group, if you like—is to begin at the very beginning, with the feeling that we’ve not thought about the form of our practices a whole lot, but that we should. We should do so on general principles, we think, just to have done it; but we should also do so on the assumption that we may find other ways of doing our work, perhaps even ways that are more conducive to what we understand our work to finally do in the world. But the “perhaps” is operative: we lay no claim on us to develop alternatives, merely to spend some time to think through the premises and aims of our academic forms.

For now, we are explicitly *not* proposing this as a call for papers, since we want to discuss the form of the “paper” as much as the form of the “call;” we are explicitly not proposing it as a call for written

contributions, because we want to explicitly think through the form of written academic work as much as oral academic work. We may eventually end up producing an object—perhaps a glossary in print or online, or even an edited collection, or a multi-author monograph—but we also very well may not.

If you are interested in thinking through this problem, including trying to develop it into a potentially useful academic object, objects, project, projects, or performance, please contact us at

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There is no deadline (except for the purposes of websites where deadlines are required, as a matter of form). This is an open-ended inquiry you may join at any time. We have initial thoughts on how to proceed, and assume that this is a project that could start in the fall of 2022 with an initial digital discussion meeting and setting up a continual means of communications online, via Google Docs, Discord, Open Humanities tools, or other means to be decided on. In the meantime, we would propose open opportunities for exchange as an initial setup on which we might discuss a preliminary sense of what forms we understand there to be in the first place: a corpus of discursive academic forms it is worth thinking about.