OVER LITERAL SPEED

Two podiums face each other on stage. A projected gray
PowerPoint image floods the scene, casting shadows.
Soundtrack plays. Actors enter.¹

Voice #1: Over the past three years, events have appeared in Europe and the United States under the auspices of something called Our Literal Speed. Consisting of two conferences, a Web site, gallery installations, and a sequence of public talks, the project has involved several dozen people, mostly English-speaking academics, artists, and critics. While the events are difficult to summarize, they are united by an interest in discovering historically grounded yet experimental forms that might bring advanced art and academic culture into intersection.

Voice #2: On this score, we must consider the ways that “knowledge” is typically packaged and presented to the “public,” and the ways that knowledge is already being made over by the public in its own image. Our technological atmosphere is now producing an astonishing range of semi-serious/semi-scholarly collective labor, as epitomized by, for example, Wikipedia. It is a global phenomenon. This real and vital mass of popular knowledge production on and around the Internet is now making it possible for conventional forms of collective scholarly endeavor to migrate into popular culture in ways that were unimaginable twenty years ago. Perhaps it is not surprising that the encyclopedia entry, the paradigmatic Enlightenment form, is a place where this has happened so fast.

Voice #1: Nonetheless, academics seem either oblivious to this situation, or, as in a recent New York Times editorial contributed by Mark Taylor, Chair of the Department of Religion at Columbia University, they have come to conclu-

1. This event took place at The Art Institute of Chicago on May 2, 2009. Voice #1 was performed by Abbey Dubin, Voice #2 by John Spelman. Soundtrack by The Size Queens.
sions that seem to fundamentally misconstrue our historical moment. Taylor explains that we will improve the academic landscape by 

**Voice #2:** restructuring the curriculum so that it is “like a web or complex adaptive network” by 

**Voice #1:** abolishing permanent departments, to create problem-focused programs. Taylor imagines a university featuring “zones of inquiry” with headings like “Mind,” “Body,” “Law,” “Information,” “Networks,” “Language,” “Space,” “Time,” “Media,” “Money,” “Life,” and “Water.” He also wants to introduce **Voice #2:** distance learning. He argues that “teleconferencing and the Internet” will allow more subjects to be taught at more places with “half the staff.” This goes hand in hand with 

**Voice #1:** a desire to “transform the traditional dissertation.” “For many years,” he underscores, his students have not written “traditional papers.” Instead they “develop analytic treatments in formats from hypertext and Web sites to films and video games.” Likewise, he argues that graduate students should be encouraged to produce “theses” in “alternative formats.” All of this will 

**Voice #2:** “expand the range of professional options for graduate students” by preparing them for work in fields other than higher education, such as “jobs at businesses . . .” 

**Voice #1:** To bring all of this about, Taylor argues that we must “impose mandatory retirement and abolish tenure.” All academics would instead receive seven-year contracts that would be renewed only if Taylor and his friends deemed the scholar’s work to be attuned sufficiently to the problems of the day. 

**Voice #2:** As this argument makes clear, our imagining of scholarly activity, even among supposedly progressive academics, remains tied to models dependent on the homespun wisdom of postmodern American business culture and its managerial obsessions with flexibility, change, fluidity, and transformation. What is more, Taylor proposes that we become “contemporary” in the only way ever envisioned by bureaucrats: by imitating innovations whose technological apex has just passed, the academic equivalent of unveiling a new search engine in 2009. 

**Voice #1:** Taylor demands capitulation on all fronts to the innovative forces of consumerism and the flexible values of the global marketplace. That is, if in the non-academic arena capitalism amounts to a constant process of “creative destruction,” then perhaps we can say that in the academic realm, capitalism manifests itself in quasi-administrative gestures of “destructive creativity.” 

**Voice #2:** And if they have their way, it is obvious that we will soon be debating the merits of videogame “dissertations” on monetary policy with whatever rump faculty remains after the hypertext coordinators and Web site organizers clear out those who resist their efforts to streamline and “modernize” the university. 

**Voice #1:** But it’s not the creativity, nor the destructiveness of this argument that is most striking. It is its breathtaking mediocrity.
Voice #2: To inhibit Taylor, along with, as one letter to the op-ed page put it, his “crass utilitarian approach,” we must begin to produce an academic culture with a richness of forms and a breadth of ambitions that the crass utilitarians will never be able to understand.

Voice #1: We must take up Taylor’s own project of interdisciplinary knowledge production and extend it in ways that generate forms, surfaces, situations, relationships, juxtapositions, and orders of knowing that will not be available to be functionalized in this dystopian universe of perpetual youth and mandatory mobility in the service of corporate problem-solving.

Voice #2: Moreover, Taylor thinks that we are in a period of retreat in the arts and humanities.

Voice #1: This is absurd. Never in human history have more people spent more time engaged in the analysis and debate of cultural production. Never have more people expressed more opinions about scholarly material in public than they have in the last ten years. Yet some would have us conclude that the correct response to this atmosphere of proliferation is to dismantle our established centers for the cultivation of expertise and curiosity in order to reproduce the Internet in three dimensions.

Voice #2: Clearly, we need forms and ambitions that will emancipate expertise and curiosity from narrowly professional obligations. We need an academic culture of skill and risk whose rigor and spontaneity mirror the best moments in life itself.

But sadly, the folkways of contemporary American academia have become those of “the business person without a business”; as a result, everyone feels the grip of “professionalization,” yet they generally have no way of imagining alternative distributions of interest and conviction.

Voice #1: Perhaps there are other places to look for inspiration in reimagining the shape and texture of our scholarly activities. Perhaps one should inspect the ways that popular music has existed in our culture.

With the rise of various forms of “distance learning,” it seems logical that “creating unique experiences in the classroom” will become a critical element in future “client recruitment strategies,” and not just in the United States. In other words, universities everywhere find themselves in a situation roughly analogous to that of “live” music venues in the 1960s.

Voice #2: At that time, there was a widespread fear that the expansion of the album sales of studio recordings would render live music functionally obsolete. Why would the consumer pay to see a performed version of a song that would be inferior in sound quality to a recorded album? As musical recordings grew more complex and multilayered over the course of the decade this problem became acute.

Voice #1: One of the answers to this situation was the appearance of rock opera and arena rock, an attempt to ape the overblown production values of 36-track recording and multiple overdubbing through pop Wagnerianism. But
within a few years, Led Zeppelin and The Who were being dismissed as dinosaurs, while the scruffier and androgynous elements of Glam Rock, the New York Dolls, and Roxy Music restored conditions of danger, privation, and immediacy to the pop scene, beginning the process of redirecting musical energy away from the sterile technicity of the recording studio to the immersive experience of live performance. This tendency later culminated with Punk—an atmosphere in which recordings seemed nearly superfluous.

Voice #2: Likewise, to compete with videogames, Web sites, podcasts, Skype, and all the other burgeoning forms of techno-learning that Taylor and the administrators fantasize about, scholars will inevitably begin to emphasize the “dramatic dynamism of the scholarly space.” We may not like it, but we should probably be entering a period of academic glam rock.

Voice #1: Nonetheless, in our current scholarly environment the immediate, “literal” situation that surrounds the academic lecturer is almost always disavowed. It is crucial that this immediate, “literal” situation fall away, because attention to the situationality of professional academic discourse begins to cast doubt on the disembodied, authorial voice that imparts truth, information, or exhortation to the audience.

Voice #2: One way to think about this is through Donald Judd. It seems that if one removes the unquestioned coincidence between the text and its author, and all the associations of prestige and authority that name and title convey, this has an effect not unlike that of removing the pedestal from sculpture. The absence of clear academic authority makes one more aware of everything else in the room. So the key characteristics that Judd attributes to “specific objects” seem to be broadly analogous to the crucial aspects of what we might term “literal discourses.”

Voice #1: That is, the activities of the academic should become permeable to all of the experiences of language, observation, and description that one encounters outside the context of scholarship, so that, just as Judd resisted “parts” in his objects, we must resist the notion that the “product” of scholarship is ever a self-contained entity, a better way of seeing scholarly production would be to view it as an activity continuous from the very beginning with shopping, eating, and sleeping.

Voice #2: In this way, attention to the literal situationality of discourse will prompt the viewer to ponder analogous situations in the world at large. And once this process of analogizing kicks in, new formations of expertise and curiosity appear; the always-alreadyness of the academic setup falters, and a productive vertigo sets in.

Voice #1: What happens next, however, is terribly important. Because this is where
Taylor comes in. This pedagogical vertigo of displacement and rupture could lead to the abandonment of historical memory, to an inattentiveness to detail, to the collapse of the self-seriousness that seems absolutely necessary for collective knowledge work. Academic cabaret and pedagogical spectacle could emerge as our “new didactic forms.”

Voice #2: This would be the worst situation of all.
   How to avoid it? [long pause]
   Once this vertiginous situation is “in play,” and the audience feels able to begin making much more wide-ranging conclusions about value, interest, and the very structure of the pedagogical moment, one must inject some sense of movement, not movement for its own sake, but movement toward something.

Voice #1: That something, we propose, might be a far more expansive conception of the place of scholarly endeavor in contemporary society. That is, there is no reason why “popular scholarship,” and not just in the United States, could not become a pastime as active and meaningful as our manifold exercises in consumption.

Voice #2: There is no particular reason that one could not imagine a future society punctuated by “collective manifestations of scholarly intensity” that would be far less professionalized, far less susceptible to faux-academic oracles, and far more conceptually challenging than our current modes of knowledge management.

Voice #1: In other words, from a society of consumers to a society of scholars; instead of worldifying pedagogy, pedagogifying the world.

Acts exit. Soundtrack plays.