

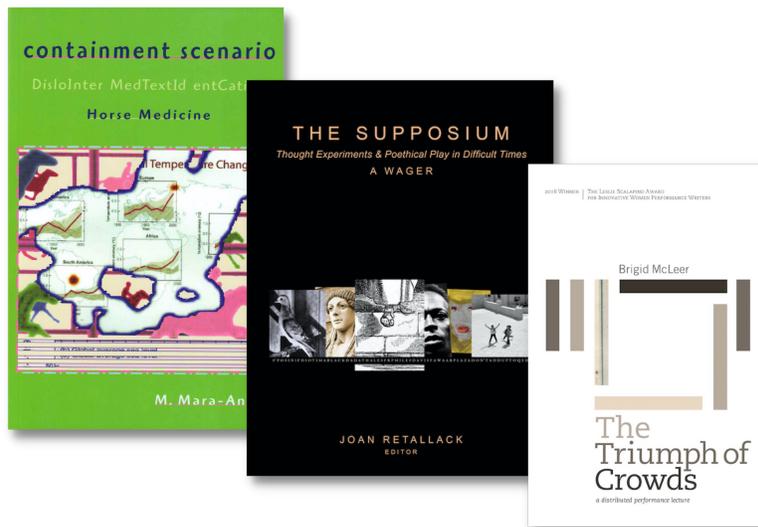


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Experimental Performance Scenarios  
Teaching Guide

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**The Triumph of Crowds: A Distributed Performance Lecture**

by Brigid McLeer

Litmus Press, 2019

ISBN 978-1-933959-39-9

\$15 USD, 90 pp

**The Supposium: Thought Experiments and Poethical Play in Difficult Times**

edited by Joan Retallack

Litmus Press, 2018

ISBN 978-1-933959-31-3

\$24 USD, 192 pp

**containment scenario: DisLoInter MedTextId entCation : Horse Medicine**

by M. Mara-Ann

O Books, 2009

ISBN 978-1-882022-67-0

\$15 USD, 192 pp

## Book Descriptions

### ***The Triumph of Crowds***

by Brigid McLeer

*The Triumph of Crowds* is a lecture as performance, or performance as lecture, distributed between the voices and gestures of ten performers. Written in conversation with Nicholas Poussin's painting *The Triumph of David* (1631), *The Triumph of Crowds* asks the question "What does it mean to appear politically?" In McLeer's invented form of the "distributed performance lecture," the author undertakes an aesthetic experiment in leveling the structured spaces in which political discourse and actions occur. Triumph unfolds in the space of a "pause" and scatters its performance "across so many bodies, images, objects, voices and sounds" to explore the politics of public assembly, protest, and becoming "us."

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### **Praise for *The Triumph of Crowds***

*The Triumph of Crowds* was the recipient of the third annual *Leslie Scalapino Award for Innovative Women Playwrights*. In memory of Leslie Scalapino and her "commitment to the community of experimental writing and performance," the award "recognizes the importance of exploratory approaches and an innovative spirit in writing for performance." The award wishes to encourage women writers who are taking risks with the playwriting form by offering the opportunity to gain wider exposure through readings and productions. As part of the award, *The Triumph of Crowds* was directed by Fiona Templeton and published by Litmus Press.

"*The Triumph of Crowds* is a layered work, weaving art history, film and the contemporary politics and poetics of community. It opens up the space of performance into a time that is both meditative and urgent."

— Fiona Templeton

## ***The Supposium: Thought Experiments and Poethical Play in Difficult Times***

edited by Joan Retallack

*The Supposium* is a multi-genre catalog of seriously humorous and grave responses to the crises of attention and value our human plurality is so spectacularly prone to. Edited by Joan Retallack, this book is documentation and continuation of an x-centric event held at MoMA, organized by Retallack and artist Adam Pendleton.

Black Dada vis-à-vis Black Lives Matter; misogyny as Feminist Responsibility Project; the art of *If*; decolonizing the architecture of a Palestinian refugee camp; Miles Davis's and other's *s'posin*; and of course Fall Guys. With all that, THE SUPPOSIUM is a polyvocal attempt to edge beyond default geometries of attention and enact *poethical* experiments. Its implicitly conversational sequence is homage and play on Plato's *Symposium* — Socratic dialogue on the nature of love (*erōs*) with its humor, gravitas, and improbable feminine swerve out of a prototypic masculine culture.

Contributors include Lauren Bakst, Lynne Beckenstein, Nova Benway, Allie Biswas, Anne Carson, Alan Devenish, Sandi Hilal, Alhena Katsof, erica kaufman, John Keene, Peter Krapp, Fred Moten, Adam Pendleton, Evelyn Reilly, Danica Savonick, Ingrid Schaffner, Beverly Semmes, James Sherry, and Mónica de la Torre.

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### **Praise for *The Supposium***

"Joan Retallack is a master teacher of the thought-experiment. In this loose, beautiful, and unlikely collection of writings, conversations and exuberances, we find more evidence of how much more work there is to do on the question Adam Pendleton asks: 'How can we have productive public conversations and exchanges?' So simple. Impossible? THE SUPPOSIUM is, therefore, an optimistic accumulation of successes at the one-second-of-attention-at-a-time level. I think this is the level at which the true future can be glimpsed and made."

—Simone White

"This is the thrilling choir of those who chose to support, and its constant call and response between multiple modes of expression—critical, poetic, musical, philosophical. If the supposium itself was a procedural collaboration of speakers and audience inside a closed room, THE SUPPOSIUM draws the rest of the world in, expands the we that the event built while pursuing its moving attempt at holding together gravitas and playfulness."

—Omar Berrada

**containment scenario: DisLolInter MedTextld entCation : Horse Medicine**

by M. Mara-Ann

M. Mara-Ann's long hybrid, hypnotic poem-theater work of spoken-music text is ecological structure based on the international report on global warming. The footnote-archipelagos require one to turn back to the origin and reorient one's reading becoming sustained attention, a holding of sounds like plateaus in the air, an inevitable letting go allowing the original's spot (place) in the text and one's attention to it to be lost, before one finds one's way again. The poem's reading is exchange "causing" the reader to hold a place in enlarging space. The content is the transience of life in its alteration—also our seeing that the outsides and insides are ending.

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**Praise for containment scenario: DisLolInter MedTextld entCation : Horse Medicine**

"As an excavator of listening, M. Mara-Ann understands the slipstream of parenthesis available to the interior voice. In pages filled with filmic excursions between text and performance, she gives us a requiem for modern truth-telling. Integrating graphics with soundscapes that hover mantra from density - its body scrolled against the material intrinsic to both crack and celebrate the inner folio-logue."

—Edwin Torres

"Enter this work as you would wade into semiotic seas in the age of Presocratic atomists. What you mistook for pure abstraction is nothing but material consequence. It's the most comforting and alien of experiences - senses saturated and emptied simultaneously, shifting codes washing through, transforming consciousness in the real time of the readerly act. M. Mara - Anns's implicit wager is that default modes of reading /being can be ecstatically overwritten. The recovery of the natural world, so central to her anti-generic, synergistic project, posits nothing less than overwriting the catastrophe of our nature/culture agon."

— Joan Retallack

## Lesson Planning – Discussion Questions

- Each of these books plays with what Joan Retallack calls our *default geometries of attention*. What might this phrase mean? Discuss.
- Now choose a small section of each book. Leaf through the pages and let your senses – visual, tactile, oral, intuitive – guide you in your “reading.” Which words, phrases, fonts, images, and blank spaces feel “magnetic”? Which pages and paragraphs make you want to linger? Write down page numbers and words. What devices in these texts nudge you beyond your *default geometries of attention*?
- *Performance art* or *live art* usually contains five basic elements: **time, space, body, presence** of the artist(s), and the **relationship** between the creator and the public (audience). Discuss these five elements as they pertain to each book. Is one element more pronounced than the other? Choose examples from each text.
- Building on the basic elements of *live art*: how do you translate each element into writing? What turns a written text into a performance? And what, in your opinion, makes a written text unstageable?
- *The Triumph of Crowds* centers its work around “a pause” by utilizing an empty space as the site for performance. In which ways do *Containment Scenario* and *The Supposium* create literary moments that create “a pause” for the reader? Choose examples.

### **The Supposium**

- Let’s create a *poethical* constellation to think with: look at the index of *The Supposium* and choose three contributions. Take a piece of paper and draw a (large) triangle. Now choose a sentence from each contribution and copy it into each corner of your triangle. How do the fragments change meaning when read alongside each other? How might the corners contradict and/or enrich each other?

### **The Triumph of Crowds**

- In *The Triumph of Crowds*, “The Illustrator” tells the audience that

*These words in the mouth of another are here to trouble ‘I’* (p. 29)

What is your idea of “I”? How is it being troubled here? Can you track the usage of “I” throughout the play? Refer to pp. 30, 32, and 60 for some guiding examples.

- What might this book be saying about the power/possibility that exists within a collective or crowd? Consider the speech on p. 45, Occupy Wall Street, the protests for Jyoti Singh, as well as the general practice of collective resistance.

### **Containment Scenario**

- *Containment Scenario* employs different languages: binary code, advertisement, algorithms; what other languages might you recognize in *Containment Scenario*? What is the intention of each language? Are there any speakers in the text? Characters? How would you describe them?
  - M. Mara-Ann adapted *Containment Scenario* for a five part intermedia performance series, exploring the discourse around the climate crisis through the lens of improvisational music-dance-theater. Look at some of the series' [documentation](#), then return to the book. How does engaging with the performance inform your understanding of the text?
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## **Lesson Planning — Writing & Performance Exercises**

### ***The Triumph of Crowds***

- In the “Scenario,” McLeer tells us that performance occurs in an “empty space” in that “it doesn’t already contain an apparatus for viewing. There are seats , no stage...” From this emptiness a collective movement develops . The play is also a reversal of Poussin’s [The Triumph of David](#), which centers its event around a single hero.

Let’s play with the concept of empty space and what can grow from there:

- Break into small groups.
- Tape a big piece of paper onto a wall (or an easel). You are going to create a collective drawing.
- Each person takes a 3-minute turn to draw an element from a collective action (a character, an object, a setting, etc.) onto your piece of paper.
- Each person adds onto what the previous artist has drawn.
- For those of you who are not drawing: you are a tiny audience watching the drawing grow.

- Let the collective action unfold for at least 15 minutes or until each of you has taken 3-5 turns.
- After each artist has taken their turn, talk about your drawing. What does it remind you of? Consider the empty space that still remains. Where, if anywhere, is the (compositional, energetic) center of your drawing?

### ***The Supposium***

- Choose a piece in *The Supposium* to stage. Try to incorporate sound, text and movement.
- Retallack invites us to *suppose*. Take a few deep breaths. Do 10 minutes of free writing beginning each sentence with *I suppose ...*

Your suppositions can be anything from apocalyptic to mundane. If you're lost for writing, describe what's immediately around you (I suppose this table is made of wood, etc.) until something else comes up. Don't lift your pen off the page. Let it be pleasurable.

Now look at your free write. Choose two sentences that make you curious. What do they tell you about this moment in time? What worlds do these suppositions help you imagine? Where do they fall short?

- *The Supposium* is based on Plato's Symposium, wherein a group of thinkers gather around a banquet and discuss the nature of Love and Knowledge. Let's stage our own impromptu Symposium à la Plato and Retallack.
  - Split into groups of at least 4 players.
  - Choose a line from *The Supposium* or a quote from today's class/book club. This will be the title for your "discussion."
  - After you have agreed on your line, take 15 minutes to prepare a response. Your response can take *any* form. You are encouraged to choose a form that is not traditionally thought of as "art." A science experiment. A public service announcement. A commercial. Etcetera! Think of Retallack's multidisciplinary participants and allow yourself to be playful.
  - Each player presents their contribution.
  - Optional: Everything is better as a potluck! Ask all participants to bring a dish to share and finish your Symposium with a banquet.

### **Containment Scenario**

- *Containment Scenario* employs a variety of fonts to communicate with the reader. Write a line of poetry. Change it into five different fonts and notice what changes for you as you read the familiar line.
- Split into groups of 4-5 people. Each group devises its own way of interpreting *The Soliloquy* (p. 107), *Endnotes* (p. 174) or a selection of your choice into a vocal score. The session ends with a showing of your performances.

### **All books**

- Can you think of a collective action or event that you have been to recently? A lot can count as an "event." It could be a show, gig, or dinner with friends. Now try to translate your event into a written text. Taking inspiration from the three texts, you can incorporate setting, dialogue, poetry, blank space, images, etc.
- Take lines from all three books and collage them into a poem. Turn the poem into a scene to be acted out.
- Find an excerpt of media (music video, painting, etc.) and translate the work into one page of text. Then, return to the five ingredients of *live art* and try to incorporate at least two of them into your writing.

## Reviews

### ***The Triumph of Crowds***

Announcement of The Leslie Scalapino Award for Innovative Women Playwrights @ Poetry Foundation

<https://www.poetryfoundation.org/harriet-books/2016/10/brigid-mcleers-the-triumph-of-crowds-wins-2016-leslie-scalapino-award-for-innovative-women-playwrights>

### ***The Supposium***

Mónica de la Torre reviewing The Supposium at MoMA @ *Bomb*

<https://bombmagazine.org/articles/critical-practices-inc-at-the-whitney-biennial-supposium-2014-at-moma/>

Review of The Supposium at MoMA by Lynne Beckenstein and Danica Savonick

<https://insearchofanimage.commons.gc.cuny.edu/2015/02/05/review-of-momas-supposium-co-authored-with-lynne-beckenstein/>

### ***Containment Scenario***

Review of Containment Scenario performance series @ *CatSynth*

“Containment Scenario: Fuel, Luggage Store Gallery.” *CatSynth*. 23 August 2009.

<https://www.catsynth.com/2009/08/containment-scenario-fuel-luggage-store-gallery/>

Containment Scenario: Profound Fatigue @ *Emergency Index*

<https://emergencyindex.com/projects/2011/420-421>

## Supplementary Materials

### ***The Triumph of Crowds***

Brigid McLeer. *Withholding 'us': Images in the space of appearance*  
PhD thesis, Royal College of Art.  
<https://researchonline.rca.ac.uk/4427/>

Video of performance of *The Triumph Of Crowds* :  
<https://vimeo.com/250402550>

*The Triumph of David* by Poussin:  
<https://artuk.org/discover/artworks/the-triumph-of-david-200203>

Article on Robert Stephen's arrest on Wall Street  
<https://www.gwhatchet.com/2011/09/30/gw-law-school-student-arrested-in-wall-street-protests/>

*The Anarchy of Colored Girls When Assembled in a Riotous Manner*, essay by  
Saidiya Hartman @ *The South Atlantic Quarterly*  
[https://www.sas.upenn.edu/~cavitch/pdf-library/Hartman\\_Anarchy\\_Colored\\_Girls.pdf](https://www.sas.upenn.edu/~cavitch/pdf-library/Hartman_Anarchy_Colored_Girls.pdf)

### ***The Supposium***

Adam Pendleton's *Who Is Queen* exhibition @ MoMA  
<https://www.moma.org/magazine/articles/635>

*S'Posin'* by Miles Davis  
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=I2S4e-jIPGM>

Conversation with Joan Retallack on *The Poethical Wager* @ *PoetryTalk*  
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=lcs4zRiHmzs>

More work by Joan Retallack @ *Jacket2*  
<https://jacket2.org/content/joan-retallack>

## Containment Scenario

M. Mara-Ann's website

<https://medusa.org/>

Video recording of Profound Fatigue (adapted from *Containment Scenario*)

<https://vimeo.com/108754434>

## Supplementary Materials - Extending the Conversation:

This section introduces the work of selected artists and authors whose work intersects with titles in this Teaching Guide. We hope that this presents an opportunity for further independent exploration.

- [The Clearing](#) by Jijjerome Ellis
- [Listening to Reading](#) by Stephen Radcliffe (Suny Press 2000)
- [Death Star/rico-chet](#) by Judith Goldman (O Books 2006)
- [IPCC report: The Physical Science Basis](#)
- [Step Across The Border](#), on Fred Frith and directed by Nicolas Humbert and Werner Penzel
- [Fred Moten's Radical Critique of the Present](#)

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## Contributor Bios —

**Joan Retallack** is a poet and essayist with a background in philosophy and visual arts. She has received a Lannan Poetry Award, a Pushcart Prize, and two Gertrude Stein Awards. Her friendship with John Cage led to *MUSICAGE* (Wesleyan), a volume of their conversations on Cage's compositional poetics. Retallack's *The Poethical Wager* (California) is a widely influential sequence of experimental essays on ethics and poetics, as well as the form of the essay itself. *BOSCH'D—Fables, Moral Tales & Other Awkward Constructions* (Litmus Press, 2020) rejiggers ancient and contemporary wagers on textual forms of "poethical courage." With gravitas and humor, Retallack considers our species' best and worst proclivities *in medias res* of the Anthropocene.

As an artist working with language, **M. Mara-Ann** expresses her creativity through writing, singing, and intermedia performance. Inspired by the musical qualities of language, the architecture of text and meaning, her love of theory and science, and the interplay between nature and technology, Mara's creative process combines a passion for \*hybridity\* and

\*experimental forms\*. This constellating dialogue can be seen with the CD *Luminous*, the audio-visual installation the *mirrorrim*, and the multi-media performance *Containment Scenario* as they relate to the book *containment scenario: DisLoInter MedTextId entCation: Horse Medicine*, published by O Books in 2009.

**Brigid Mc Leer** is an Irish artist working between disciplines and across genres. Her work has been made for galleries, public sites, the page, online and combinations thereof. Her academic career has included teaching posts at many UK universities and between 1995-2000 she co-wrote and lectured on the pioneering degree course "Performance Writing" at Dartington College of Arts. She is currently a researcher at the Royal College of Art, London. She lives and works in London, England.