

From the Scenic Essay to the Essay-Exhibition (Ghent, 27-29 Apr 22)

Ghent University, Apr 27–29, 2022

Deadline: Oct 1, 2021

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Research centre S:PAM (Studies in Performing Arts & Media) of Ghent University (Belgium) is delighted to announce 'From the Scenic Essay to the Essay-Exhibition. Expanding the Essay Form in the Arts after Literature and Film', an international conference from 27th-29th of April 2022 in Ghent (Belgium) and the corresponding call for proposals to contribute to this event.

Theme of the conference:

More than 400 years after the publication of Michel De Montaigne's 'Essais', the enduring afterlife of the essay form attests how this 'heretical form' (Adorno) not only continues to challenge the literary conventions but also transgresses the borders of the literary field to venture into other artistic disciplines. The genre of the essay film is the most prominent example of this dissemination but the expansion has set out into other areas as well. Engaging with this emerging prominence, 'From the Scenic to the Essay-Exhibition' welcomes scholars and art practitioners to present their academic and artistic engagements with the essay form. Unlike the realm of literature and film, the essay form in the field of performing arts, visual arts and curatorial practices has received only modest attention.

'From the Scenic to the Essay-Exhibition' aims to continue the mapping of the essay form in various artistic practices. By doing so, the conference aspires to enrich the existing vocabulary of theatre, performance, and curatorial studies and to resolve hiatuses between the existing theories on the essay. The conference's emphasis on the essay form beyond the field of literature and film by no means that scholars or artists operating in these fields are not welcome. On the contrary, by assembling a wide variety of perspectives on the essay form this conference aspires to create a productive dialogue between more established fields of study on the essay and the new articulations presented during this gathering.

Confirmed speakers:

Nora M. Alter (Temple University)

Frédérique Aït-Touati (L'École des Hautes Études en Sciences Sociales)

Thijs Lijster (University of Groningen)

Ho Rui An (Artist)

Anselm Franke (Haus der Kulturen der Welt, Berlin)

Mobile Akademie Berlin (Artist)

Call for proposals - deadline 1st of October 2021

The twenty-first century seems to be the century of the essay. Almost 400 years after the publication of Michel De Montaigne's *Essais*, the continuing afterlife of the essay form attests how this 'heretical' form (Adorno 1984 [1958]: 171) not only continues to challenge the literary conventions but also transgresses the borders of the literary field. The introduction of the notion of the 'film essay' by Dadaist filmmaker Hans Richter in 1940 marked the beginning of the essay form as a travelling concept in other artistic disciplines. The features of the essay form were apt to explore and to apprehend the cinematic practices of filmmakers like Chris Marker, Agnès Varda, Jonas Mekas, Harun Farocki and Hito Steyerl (amongst many others). The (re)new(ed) interest from the 1990's onwards resulted in a substantial body of theoretical work on the essay film within the field of film studies (Arthur 2003; Alter 2007, 2018; Alter & Corrigan 2017; Biemann 2003; Corrigan 2011; Hollweg & Krstić 2019; Rascaroli 2009, 2017).

In her seminal text from 2007, *Translating the Essay into Film and Installation*, Nora M. Alter pointed out how 'the nature of the essay encourages and promotes its translation not only into different languages but also into other media and forms' (55). Additional to this observation, W. J. T. Mitchell's definition of the 'photographic essay' (1995) and a more recent body of work on the photographic essay illustrates how the essay form provided a productive framework to approach the work of photographers like Jacob Riis, Dorothea Lange or the collective photographic projects of John Berger and Jean Mohr (Graf 2013; Klingensmith 2016). From the *Scenic to the Essay-Exhibition* takes Alter's observation as a starting point and as an invitation to trace, to map and to explore the essay form and essayistic practices beyond the field of literature, film, or photography.

'From the Scenic to the Essay-Exhibition' has a particular, but not an exclusive, interest in how the essay form, once leaving its written or audiovisual format, appears and is manifested in the field of performing arts, visual arts and curatorial practices. In his canonical book *Postdramatic Theatre* (2000), German theatre scholar Hans Thies-Lehmann coined in a concise way the 'scenic essay' as one of the elements that shaped the panorama of postdramatic theatre. Accompanied by theoretical and philosophical texts on stage, Lehmann's 'scenic essay' referred to how the means of theatre were used 'to think aloud' about the actors' subject, its mode of representation and the role of language (113). In contrast to many other ideas and insights that appeared in *Postdramatic Theatre*, Lehmann's rather brief expository on the 'scenic essay' was not picked up in the field of theatre and performance studies. A rather remarkably observation when one, as noted earlier, explores the history of the essay, its evolution and how it disseminated in the field of cinema and photography. Especially when we observe a rather explicit engagement with the essay form in the theatrical, performative, and curatorial practices of artists coining work as 'audio-essay', 'theatrical essay', 'performance essay', 'choreographic essay', 'performative essay', 'essay-exhibition'. The temporal and theoretical gap between Lehmann's observations and these recent developments coerces to explore new grounds and to expand the theoretical frameworks to capture this tendency.

The extensive collection of theoretical work on the essay in literature and film proves how the attribution of the label 'essay' or 'essayistic' to an artwork does not necessarily mean an artist designates its work or its artistic practice as such. Some artists are explicitly engaged with the form, others are not. This observation prompts to welcome contributions on artworks and artistic practices that comply with the hallmarks of the essay but do not label it as such. By its preference for

a dialogue of ideas, the observational, the display of a process of thinking, a high degree of subjectivity and (self-)reflexivity, speculation and ambivalence, the essay form could resonate with a wide array of artworks and artistic practices. The history and the dissemination of the essay attests how these attributes assisted the essay as a key agent in challenging conventional modes of expression, representation, and knowledge production. By welcoming artists, art practitioners, curators and theorists operating outside the academic realm, the conference aims to host a productive and enriching dialogue between those explicitly committed to the essay form and those (unintentionally) engaging with the essay's hallmarks. Within this context, we welcome submissions that address the essay form from a multifaceted understanding as emergent in theatre, dance, performance, visual arts, and curatorial practices. These submissions include but are by no means limited to:

- The essay form within the field of theatre, performance, and dance
- The essay form within documentary theatre
- The essay form as a dramaturgical tool or method
- The essay form and performativity/the performative dimension of the essay
- The staging of essays
- The essay form and scenography
- The essay form or the essayistic as a curatorial mode or curatorial practice
- The essay-exhibition
- Essayistic spectatorship
- The essay form and installation art
- The lecture performance as essayistic practice
- Audio-essays
- Essayistic storytelling
- The essayist as first-person narrator on stage
- The essay form in exilic, diasporic, or transnational contexts
- The essay form in the Anthropocene
- The essay form within autoethnography or autotheory

We accept:

- Individual paper-presentation (15/20-minute presentation)
- Thematic panels (max. 3 presentations of 15/20 minutes)
- Other presentation formats: performances, workshops, ...

All proposals (max. 350 words, including a short biographical note of 100 words) should be addressed to essayconference2022@Ugent.be by 1 October 2021. For further information about the conference, send an email to Jasper.Delbecke@Ugent.be. If an official invitation is required earlier for research funding purposes, please contact the convenor to ensure that you submit your abstract as early as possible.

Proposals are now being accepted to contribute to the conference:

- Proposal due date: October 1, 2021.
- Notification of acceptance: 15 November 2021
- Submit your proposal to essayconference2022@Ugent.be
- Consult our website to learn more about the theme of the conference

- For additional details about the conference, please contact Jasper.Delbecke@Ugent.be.

From the Scenic to the Essay-Exhibition is organized by research centre S:PAM (Studies in Performing Arts & Media) of Ghent University and hosted by KASK & Conservatorium (HO Gent – Howest). This conference is made possible by the support of the research fund (CWO) of the Faculty of Arts & Philosophy of Ghent University and KASK & Conservatorium (HO Gent – Howest).

Reference:

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