

## TRAVELING FORMS – PRACTICES, POLITICS, POTENTIALITIES

International Interdisciplinary Conference  
organized by the NOMIS Research Project 'Traveling Forms'

**June 15-17, 2023**  
**hedicke's Terracotta**

Luisenstr. 9 – Konstanz  
and via ZOOM

Forms are not limited to the field of the arts, but also a powerful factor in the shaping of culture and society. Aesthetic forms are social forms and vice versa; and the circulation of artistic forms has wider cultural implications. As they travel, forms connect and translate between cultures, and by adapting to local conditions in turn are subject to change. Over the course of three sections (*Political For(u)ms – Publics, Communities, Cultures*; *Traveling Stories – Between Worlds and Languages*; and *Politics of Traveling Forms in Art/History*) this conference brings together scholars from the fields of anthropology, art history, curating, history of knowledge, literary studies, theater studies, and sociology. Contributions investigate the mobility of forms, and their ability to facilitate communication and orientation in our increasingly globalized and interconnected world.

### Contributions by:

**Donald Carter** (Hamilton College); **Beth A. Conklin** (Vanderbilt University); **Alex Ungrateeb Flynn** (UCLA); **Eva Geulen** (Leibniz Center for Literary and Cultural Studies, Berlin); **Nilüfer Göle** (EHESS, Paris); **Karin Kukkonen** (University of Oslo); **Caroline Levine** (Cornell University); **Henry Turner** (Rutgers University); **Matthew Vollgraff** (The Warburg Institute); **Rebecca Walkowitz** (Rutgers University); **Mechtild Widrich** (School of the Art Institute, Chicago).

### Contact:

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### Link:

<https://uni-konstanz-de.zoom.us/j/98496304973>

## **SCHEDULE**

### **THURSDAY, JUNE 15**

as of 15.00h – arrivals and welcome

15.30h – General Introductory Remarks

### **Political For(u)ms – Publics, Communities, Cultures**

#### First Section

16.00h – Section Introduction by Traveling Forms-Members

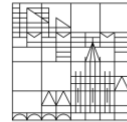
16.15h – Beth A. Conklin (Vanderbilt University)

- Generative Aesthetics in Brazilian Indigeneity

17.15h – Donald Carter (Hamilton College)

- Navigating Diasporic Invisibility: The Perilous Worlds of the Unseen

End of Day ca. 18.15h / Dinner



## FRIDAY, JUNE 16

*(Political For(u)ms... continued)*

10.00h – Caroline Levine (Cornell University)

- In Praise of Abstraction: A Formalist Approach to Climate Justice

11.00h – Nilüfer Göle (EHESS)

- Maidan: A Site for Creative Accommodations and Intercultural Encounters

12.00h-13.00h – Early Lunch

## Traveling Stories – Between Worlds and Languages

13.00h – Section Introduction by Traveling Forms Members

13.15h – Henry Turner (Rutgers University)

- Cosmology, Aesthetics and the Experience of Form in Early Modern Theatrical Culture

14.15h – Karin Kukkonen (University of Oslo)

- The Shape of Storyworlds: Form as Ethical and Structural Blueprint

15.15h-16.00h – Coffee Break

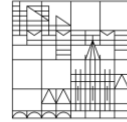
16.00h – Rebecca Walkowitz (Rutgers University) (REMOTE)

- One and Many Languages

17.00h – Eva Geulen (Center for Literary and Cultural Studies, Berlin)

- Stray Letters and Dud Shots: Some Reflections and one Strange Example

End of Day ca. 18.00h



## **SATURDAY, JUNE 17**

### **Politics of Traveling Forms in Art/History**

10.00h – Section Introduction by Traveling Forms Members

10.15h – Matthew Vollgraft (The Warburg Institute):

- Migration as Method: Diffusionist Scholarship and Global Politics, 1900–1950

11.15h – Mechtild Widrich (School of the Art Institute, Chicago):

- From the Balkans to the Plains: Ivan Mestrovic's Equestrian Indians

12.15h-13.15h – Early Lunch

13.15h – Alex Ungprateeb Flynn (UCLA)

- Toward a Social Plasticity of Form

14.15h-15.00h: Closing Discussion

## ABSTRACTS

Donald **Carter**:

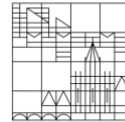
### Navigating Diasporic Invisibility: The Perilous Worlds of the Unseen

This discussion is an exploration of the power to establish or manifest a state of invisibility for specific categories of persons in a given space, location, time or positionality. Although often invoked in periods of transition, invisibility can have indeterminate temporal elasticity relegating persons or groups to varied forms of social and cultural erasure.

Beth A. **Conklin**:

### Generative Aesthetics in Brazilian Indigeneity

The intensely visual, performative activism of Indigenous movements in Brazil has developed from the two-way traffic of cultural forms: local practices of body-painting, adornment, dance, and music are repurposed for larger publics at the same time that global social-environmental discourses and media aesthetics open new spaces to reconceptualize and re-present local/national issues. Rather than being a rupture with the past, incorporating and transforming cultural elements from and for outside audiences reflect deeply "traditional" forms of agency and empowerment that work by mobilizing the affective power of visual, acoustic, kinesthetic experience. At the same time, moving these expressive forms into new representational contexts is changing internal dynamics and hierarchies of gender and generation. This paper examines the growing prominence of women and youth in three contexts: in community cultural performances that have become a gateway to public participation and activism; in pan-tribal mobilizations in recent Indigenous Women's Marches and pandemic-era campaigns; and in Indigenous youths' uses of juxtaposition and humor on social media. The new aesthetics and discursive positionings coalescing in this contemporary Indigenous Brazilian activism counter some of the liabilities that plagued earlier generations of more masculinist activism. I want to query relations between aesthetics and political efficacy, asking how the diffuse, sensorily immersive, playful, "life"-focused exuberance of contemporary activism opens spaces for a range of meanings and inclusivity in ways that the aesthetics of the older oppositional politics did not.



Alex Ungprateeb **Flynn**:

Toward a Social Plasticity of Form

Drawing on research conducted across Mexico, Brazil, and Argentina, this paper puts forward a reading of ‘cartonera’, a Latin American publishing phenomenon and social art project. Exploring the space between artistic practice and anthropology, the paper highlights how the indivisibility of social and aesthetic form upon which cartonera is premised presents unique challenges in working across disciplines and modes of thought. Following calls to rethink how the academy conducts research, the paper puts forward a methodological approach that engages with artistic practices in dynamic relation with the social and political processes in which they are embedded. Such a framework offers the possibility of researching and experimenting with contemporary cultural phenomena— located at the interstices of art, society, and politics—that opens up new possibilities for research that aspires to be collaborative, multidisciplinary, and participatory

Eva **Geulen**:

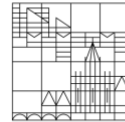
Stray Letters and Dud Shots: Some reflections and one strange example/  
Blindgänger und Irrläufer: Einige Überlegungen und ein merkwürdiges Beispiel

When considering traveling forms in literature, what fails to migrate or travel also deserves some attention. In the first part I will offer some reflections on how such failures have been addressed and how they impact the notion of traveling forms. In the second part I want to make the case that Goethe’s “Faust” (of all things) should be numbered among non-travelling texts. Georg Lukacs’ Goethe-interpretation will aide me in this admittedly bizarre effort.

Nilüfer **Göle**:

Maidan. A Site for Creative Accommodations and Intercultural Encounters

I’ll discuss the changing boundaries and potentialities of Public Space-Maidan from the perspective of margins and displaced activists. I will present the recent work of “Art Lords”, a wall painting realized in suburban Paris to illustrate the emerging forms of collective agency and expressivity.



**Karin Kukkonen:**

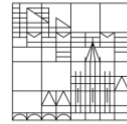
The Shape of Storyworlds: Form as Ethical and Structural Blueprint

This talk will consider two ways in which non-fictional forms shape storyworlds, deployed by authors in the creative process. Anne Weber proposes to write an epos with *Annette -- Ein Heldinnenepos*, because she does not want to deploy the novelist's fictional command over her characters' lives, and thereby draws on form for an ethical blueprint. Italo Calvino manipulates the formal features of tables of content and indices in order to create structural blueprints for encyclopedic storytelling in *Le città invisibili* and other texts. Between the ethical and the structural, then, I will discuss how authors move forms from non-fictional to fictional texts and across centuries in order to sketch out the shape of their storyworlds.

**Caroline Levine:**

In Praise of Abstraction: A Formalist Approach to Climate Justice

The humanities have long urged us to honor cultural specificity and heterogeneity in place of universalizing forms. But many of the most common forms never begin anywhere in particular: we can find hierarchies and enclosures, triads and binaries, rows and circles, in most social arrangements—ancient and modern, Western and non-Western. Bridges arise independently in many cultures, and so do wheels. We find narrative quests and repetitive song refrains in many places around the world too. As forms crop up across contexts, they carry their affordances with them, organizing materials in the same limited range of ways, with the same finite array of constraints and capacities. This paper will put forward an unfashionably transhistorical and transcultural hypothesis about politics and form: if collective life always depends on organizing forms, if similar forms can appear in multiple times and spaces, and if forms have general properties that they carry with them wherever they go, then it follows that we can make some predictions about how political forms will work wherever they take shape. We can then put that knowledge to use to design better forms for collective life in the climate crisis.



**Henry Turner:**

Cosmology, Aesthetics and the Experience of Form in Early Modern Theatrical Culture

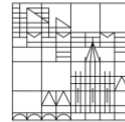
This paper uses two key early modern texts — a remarkable letter describing the most elaborate aristocratic site-specific entertainment in the Elizabethan period, and Shakespeare’s *The Tempest*—as bookends for a discussion of the place of form and formalism in early modern philosophies of cosmology: literally, “the discourse or speech of / about the world.” The paper takes up classical ideas of cosmology, or world-making and world-order, in Plato and in neo-Platonism, extended in the early modern period by writers on magic and astrology and medicine. It touches on the way ideas of form feature in this tradition, and then compares it to the use of form in two more modern theories of aesthetics: John Dewey’s pragmatist philosophy of natural form and experience and Jacques Rancière’s account of aesthetics, experience, and the political. The paper closes by bringing these arguments to bear on the *Tempest*, specifically a reading of the political cosmologies of Shakespeare’s play, from Prospero’s instrumentalizing neo-Platonism to Caliban’s very different cosmology based on an aesthetics of form and experience rooted in the apprehension of nature—a cosmology with significant resonances for contemporary uses of pragmatism, form, and experience in Black aesthetics and afro-futurism.

**Matthew Vollgraff:**

Migration as Method: Diffusionist Scholarship and Global Politics

This talk offers a fresh perspective on diffusionism, a current of the cultural sciences that examined the distribution of artifacts, human remains, and customs across geographical space. Beginning in the late nineteenth century, anthropologists and archaeologists endeavored to trace the movement of cultural traits and complexes to their presumed origins, ultimately aiming to reconstruct humanity’s deep past on a global scale. I contend that the narratives of cultural diffusion and migration these scholars produced were significantly influenced by contemporary globalization and geopolitics. Diffusionist methodology was ideologically flexible, serving both as a justification for imperial expansion and as a means to promote anti-colonial nationalism. The specific cultural elements in question – such as images, stories, tools, or deities – often determined the balance between such opposing political objectives. By examining four case studies, I propose a tentative typology of diffusionist research based on its diverse media and motivations. In conclusion, I offer broader reflections on how the history of cultural sciences can contribute to current discussions surrounding cultural influence, identity, and heritage.





Rebecca **Walkowitz**:

### One and Many Languages

How do you translate translation? Engaging with multilingual communities that operate within what have appeared to be monolingual geographies – the nation, the city, the island – contemporary writers and filmmakers are designing works that require translation. Yet unlike the enriched multilingualism that rewards linguistic scope (knowing many languages) or linguistic depth (knowing the patois of the neighborhood or region), the multilingualism of these works cultivates linguistic deficit: the experience of not knowing or knowing less than one language. These works are notable because they must be seen and heard in translation, even when they are consumed by their primary audiences. They operate in the original and in translation from the start. In fact, the films go further than this: the translation is part of the original because the dialogue features multiple languages, often in a single scene. Characters understand at least one language but not all of them. This is generally true for audiences too. Subtitles are part of the work rather than simply external or supplementary to the work. Deficit multilingualism is crucial to the films' stories about migrant labor, colonialism, globalization, transnational empathy, and civic hospitality. When the films travel out to global audiences, translators encounter a novel problem. How do you provide subtitles in one language that can convey the experience of dialogue in many languages? How do you show that characters are speaking a language that is not a dominant language or that is not a language that other characters, who speak minor or regional languages, can understand?

Mechtild **Widrich**:

### From the Balkans to the Plains: Ivan Mestrovic's Equestrian Indians

The case study involves two equestrian statues in Chicago depicting Native Americans by Croatian artist Ivan Mestrovic commissioned by a private fund juried by the Art Institute in Chicago in 1926. I will show how the paradigm of slavic mythic ancestors, which Mestrovic dedicated himself to on the formation of the Yugoslav kingdom, is transposed into a New World equivalent of nude ideal Indians riding horses and engaging in heroic warfare. The result is an anachronistic monument combining Karl May with art déco.