Transpositions
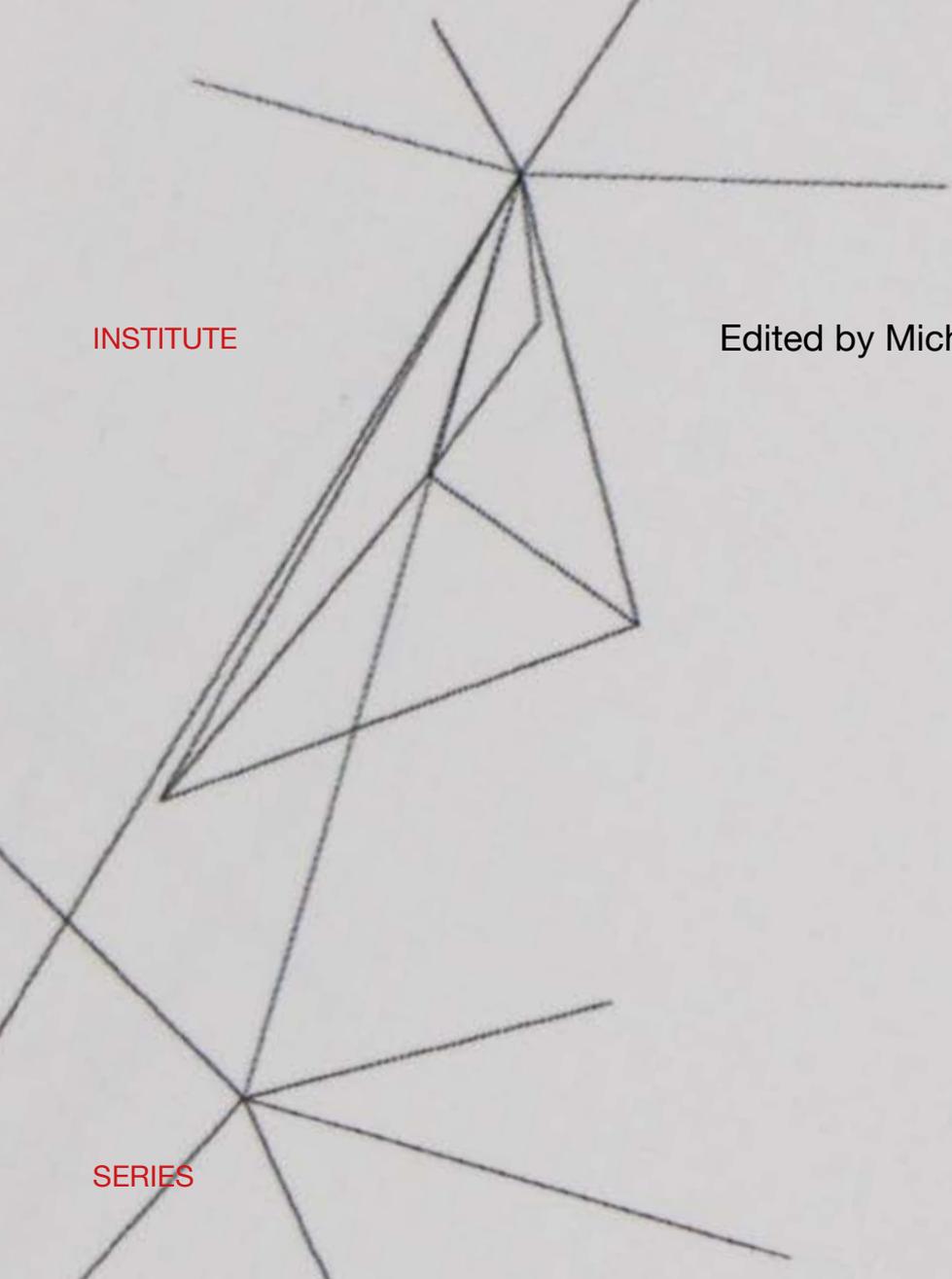
Aesthetico-Epistemic Operators
in Artistic Research

Edited by Michael Schwab

Transpositions:
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TRANSPOSITIONS: AESTHETICO-EPISTEMIC OPERATORS IN ARTISTIC RESEARCH

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Transformations[*]

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We who dwell in post-industrial societies live in a world that is not only geno-centric (Fausto-Sterling 2000, 235), but also lucratively and unjustly so. In this chapter, I want to address the ethical temperature or fibre of our era, also known as the technologically driven historical phase of advanced capitalism. The project is motivated by the concern that the desire for social justice and progressive transformation that is one of the salient manifestations of our ethical consciousness, seems to be dwindling today. Times are definitely no longer a-changing.

Nothing expresses this cultural climate better than the media's insistence on celebrating, with insuppressible glee, "the end of ideologies." For the last thirty years I have sat through regular waves of celebration of the multiple deaths of every available "ideology." So much so, that I am almost tempted to define ideologies as movements that never cease to end. When will a new one actually start? The emphatic reiteration of the decline of "ideology" finds its latest incarnation in the 1989 fall of the Berlin Wall. It translates into a one-way political model, namely that all programmes of change have exhausted their historical function, especially Marxism, communism, socialism, and feminism. Hence people can now relax and carry on with the normal task of minding their own business. A hasty and fallacious historical dismissal of social reformism and critical radicalism results in the reassertion of the banality of self-interest, as a lesser and necessary evil: this moral apathy constitutive of the neoconservative political liberalism in our era.

Donna Haraway (1997, 90) stresses the quasi-monopoly exercised upon our cultures by "the status of biotechnology in the transition from the economics and the biologies of the Cold War era to the New World Order's secular theology of enhanced competitiveness and ineluctable market forces." Alain Touraine (2001) describes this phenomenon as "la pensée unique,"[1] that is to say a de facto hegemony of a neo-liberal orthodoxy that denies "the existence of autonomous social actors capable of influencing political decision-making" (ibid., 1). Arguing forcefully that globalisation has not dissolved our collective capacity for political action, and wary of any facile rejection of globalisation per se, Touraine calls for renewed social criticism. Resistance is needed against the new master narratives, which entail American hegemony of the world markets and the specific brand of USA-based fundamentalism, which targets the

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[1] "The one-way thought."

Islamic world under the cover of the "clash of civilizations." Cultural identities and global capital are the key terms of the current political economy and they need to be turned into active spaces of resistance.

Paradoxes, however, multiply all along the way. Post-industrial culture triumphantly asserts the end of ideology defined as the desire for social justice and attempts to fulfil a conservative's favourite fantasy of an immutable and unmovable "human nature," allegedly best catered for by advanced capitalist services (Fukuyama 2002). This same culture, however, simultaneously frustrates the very conservative dreams it so perversely aroused. Contemporary society is in fact fascinated to the point of obsession by all that is "new." It pursues change with maniacal faith in its beneficial side effects. It disrupts the very social fabric and the modes of exchange and interaction that were established by industrial culture. The much-celebrated phenomenon of globalisation and of its technologies accomplishes a magician's trick: it combines the euphoric celebration of *new* technologies, *new* economy, *new* lifestyles, *new* generations of both human and technological gadgets, *new* wars and *new* weapons with the complete social rejection of change and transformation. In a totally schizophrenic double pull the consumerist and socially enhanced faith in the *new* is supposed not only to fit in with, but also actively to induce the rejection of in-depth changes. The potentially innovative, deterritorialising impact of the new technologies is hampered and turned down by the reassertion of the gravitational pull of old and established values.

Issues related to technology, more specifically to biotechnologies, are consequently central to my concerns. The convergence between information and communication technologies on the one hand, and biotechnologies and genetic engineering on the other, is one of the major social manifestations of the current status of the subjects in advanced, post-industrial societies, situated as they are in a state of dispersion and fragmentation.

Times of fast changes, such as those of the so-called advanced societies reveal the paradox of continuing archaism on the one hand and hyper-modernism on the other. In some ways, the defining feature of our days is the high level of anxiety, exhilaration, fear, or optimism. They are directly related to the speed and range of the social changes themselves, which in turn are a function of the availability and access to the new technologies. Genetics and biotechnologies are making people nervous about their DNA and their organic capital. Anxiety runs more and more to the surface of things. In such a context, politics can be described not merely as the government of the polis, but also in terms of the management of insecurity. The ongoing changes are currently packaged in modes of social representation that alternate between the euphoric and the apocalyptic. This is in keeping with a manic-depressive logic that cannot fail to affect also the scholarship that deals with contemporary techno-cultures. Studies of technology swing from utopianism to gloom while in mainstream culture negative modes of representing the technological artefact as potentially threatening monstrous others recycle classical gothic themes (Braidotti 2002).

The political climate of this historical context can be best summed up in terms of capitalism as schizophrenia. Deleuze and Guattari (1994) analysed this double pull in contemporary cultures as a conflict between, on the one hand, the rising demands for subjective singularities, or autonomy and, on the other hand, the conservative reterritorialisation of desires for the purpose of commercial profit. This is reflected in the schizoid paradox of the compulsive consumerism of mass culture, where all the emphasis falls on the quest for "personalised" or "itemised," custom-made specifications and commodities. This achieves a disastrous dual effect; it reasserts individualism as the unquestionably desirable standard, while it reduces it to brand names and to logos. It also pushes commercial profit-making to the innermost boundaries of subjectivity itself, making "I shop therefore I am" the leading refrain of our times. This is one of the reasons for the contemporary mix of archaic attachment to "safe" notions—and the fear of losing them on the one hand, and the euphoric celebration of technological innovation on the other.

Keith Ansell Pearson (1997) argues that grand narratives have come back into fashion, and that they tend to stress the inhuman character of the current evolution of the human species, through interface with the intelligent machines. "A new mythology of the machine is emerging and finds expression in current claims that technology is simply the pursuit of life by means other than life" (Ansell Pearson 1997, 202). He adds that such a vision is both philosophically and politically naive as it rests on a simplistic model of biotechnological evolution. Such grand narratives reflect "the dynamics of contemporary hyper-colonialist capitalism" (ibid., 303), one that conflates change with novelty, speed with simple acceleration, and sells "entropic modernization in its most imperialist guise." A hierarchical fantasy of vertical perfectibility and technologically mediated quest for immortality and for disciplined and acquiescent subjects has gained widespread currency. In opposition to this master narrative, which corresponds to what Donna Haraway (1991) calls "the informatics of domination," I want to stress the relevance of a materialist, nomadic philosophy of becoming, as an alternative conceptual framework, in the service of a sustainable future. These cartographies raise also an important set of ethical questions. On the analytic front: what means do social and cultural critics have at their disposal to make sense of and account for the structural paradoxes of a historical era? On the more normative front, the question is, what are our hopes of finding adequate ways of expressing empowering alternatives and of having them socially enacted? How does this consumerist and socially enhanced emphasis on the *new* fit in with the rejection of in-depth changes? How do they join forces in reiterating old and established viewpoints? What are our hopes of finding adequate ways of handling them?

Amid such cacophony of conflicting fears and desires, punctuated by public exposures of emotions in the "intimate public sphere" (Berlant 1997), it is important to focus seriously on the notion of political passions, and to stress a rigorous vision of affectivity. Nomadic subjectivity involves a materialist approach to affectivity and a non-essentialist brand of vitalism. These constitute a concrete answer to the contemporary flair for alternatively nostalgia or

euphoria for commercialised emotions. This project consists in transposing the ethical implications of nomadic subjectivity. The subject of postmodernity is caught between humanistic expectations of decency and dignity and the growing evidence of a post-human universe of ruthless power-relations mediated by technology. I wish to reposition the subject amid the return of "new" master narratives that aim at restoring traditional, unitary visions of the self in the new-liberal model, so as to be able to passionately pursue the quest for alternatives. I will concede from the outset that the non-unitary subject is ever prone to pressures that pull him or her in many potentially contradictory directions at once: nothing is played out in advance. Nomadic subjectivity is a contested space of mutations that follow no technological directives and no moral imperatives—but what kind of ethics is possible for such a subject?

Non-unitary subjectivity here means a nomadic, dispersed, fragmented vision, which is nonetheless functional, coherent, and accountable, mostly because it is embedded and embodied. *Transpositions* (Braidotti 2006) deals with the implications of this vision in terms of accountability—ethical and political agency. In the book I explored the possibility of a system of ethical values that, far from requiring a steady and unified vision of the subject, rests on a non-unitary, nomadic or rhizomatic view. The notion of "sustainability" is the central point of reference here. What conditions are the most conducive to cultivating and sustaining the desire for change and in-depth transformation of the dominant, unitary vision of human subjectivity, while avoiding the twin pitfalls of relativism and of nihilistic self-dissipation?

About transpositions

The term "transpositions" has a double source of inspiration: from music and from genetics. It indicates an intertextual, cross-boundary, or transversal transfer, in the sense of a leap from one code, field, or axis into another, not merely in the quantitative mode of plural multiplications, but rather in the qualitative sense of complex multiplicities. It is not just a matter of weaving together different strands, variations on a theme (textual or musical), but rather of playing the positivity of difference as a specific theme of its own. As a term in music, transposition indicates variations and shifts of scale in a discontinuous but harmonious pattern. It is thus created as an in-between space of zigzagging and of crossing: nonlinear, but not chaotic; nomadic, yet accountable and committed; creative but also cognitively valid; discursive and also materially embedded—it is coherent without falling into instrumental rationality.

Evelyn Fox Keller (1983), in her brilliant study of the life and work of Barbara McClintock, argues that "transposition" refers to processes of genetic mutation, or the transferral of genetic information, that occur in a nonlinear manner, which is nonetheless neither random nor arbitrary. This is set in opposition to the mainstream scientific vision that tends to define the gene as a steady entity that transmits fixed units of heredity in an autonomous and self-sufficient manner and genetic variation as random events. Transposable moves appear to proceed by leaps and bounds, but are not deprived of their logic, or coherence.

Central to transpositions is the notion of material embodiment; in the case of genetics, McClintock highlights the decisive role played by the organism in framing and affecting the rate and the frequency of the mutations. Transpositions occur by a carefully regulated dissociation of the bonds that would normally maintain cohesiveness between the genes, which are laid out in a linear manner on the chromosome. McClintock shows that as a result of the dissociative impact, a mutation occurs that splits the chromosome into two detached segments. The rate of the mutation of these "jumping genes" is internally determined by the elements of the cell itself, and thus is not pre-written in the gene. The notion of transposition emphasises the flexibility of the genome. This implies that the key to understanding genetics is the process itself, the sequence of the organised system. This can be traced a posteriori as the effect of the dissociative shifts or leaps, but these controlling agents remain immanent to the process itself and are contingent upon the rearrangements of the elements. In other words, genetics information is contained in the sequence of the elements, which in turn means that the function and the organisation of the genetic elements are mutable and interdependent.[2]

Consequently, as Hilary Rose (2008, 65) put it ever so wittily: "DNA, far from being the stable macho molecule of the 1962 Watson-Crick prize story, becomes a structure of complex dynamic equilibrium." Nobody and no particle of matter is independent and self-propelled, in nature as in the social. Ultimately, genetic changes are under the control of the organisms, which, under the influence of environmental factors, are capable of influencing the reprogramming of the genetic sequence itself.

As if it were capable of "learning from experience," the organism defined as the host environment of the genetic sequence, plays an interactive and determining role in the transmission of genetic information. Haraway (1997, 142) sums it up brilliantly: "A gene is not a thing, much less a master molecule, or a self-contained code. Instead, the term 'gene' signifies a mode of durable action where many actors, human and non-human meet."

Transposition is a scientific theory that stresses the experience of creative insight in engendering other, alternative ways of knowing. McClintock and Keller do not alienate scientific methods, but rather use them to demonstrate—albeit a posteriori—what they knew already. Resting on the assumption of a fundamental and necessary unity between subject and object, the theory of transpositions offers a contemplative and creative stance that respects the visible and hidden complexities of the very phenomena it attempts to study. This makes it a paradigmatic model for scientific knowledge as a whole, particularly feminist epistemologies, notably the critique of dualistic splits. It also shows affinity with spiritual practices like Buddhism, not in a mystical mood but in a cognitive mode.

Multiple and complex, transpositions occur on many levels at once. *Transpositions* (2006) applies, expands and develops the ethical and polit-

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2 I thank my sister Giovanna for these insights into contemporary genetics. See also her unpublished manuscript *The Sentience Paradox*.

ical implications of some of the arguments exposed as cartographies in *Metamorphoses* (2002). The relationship between the two books is neither linear, as in cause and effect, nor does it fall on the fundamental-applied distinction; they are inter-linked, while each maintains its singular profile. Their interconnection is a transposition, that is to say a creative leap that produces a prolific in-between space.

The term "transposition" refers to mobility and cross-referencing between disciplines and discursive levels. I rely on transposable notions that drift nomadically among different texts—including those I authored myself—while producing their own specific effects. Transposable concepts are "nomadic notions" that weave a web connecting philosophy to social realities, theoretical speculations to concrete plans, concepts to imaginative figurations. Transdisciplinary in structure, transposable concepts link biotechnology to ethics and connect them both with social and political philosophy. Moreover, I inject feminism, anti-racism, and human rights as an extra booster of theoretical energy and then let nomadic flows of becoming run loose through them all.

Furthermore, the notion of transposition describes the connection between the text and its social and historical context, in the material and discursive sense of the term. The passion that animates this text is a concern for my historical situation, in so-called advanced, post-industrial cultures at the start of the third millennium. A kind of *amor fati* motivates me, not as fatalism, but rather in the pragmatic mode of the cartographer. I am after modes of representation and forms of accountability that are adequate to the complexities of the real-life world I am living in. I want to think about what and where I live—not in a flight away from the embodied and embedded locations that I happen to inhabit. In *Metamorphoses* I argued that, if you do not like complexities you couldn't possibly feel at home in the third millennium. *Transpositions* enacts this notion by proposing creative links and zigzagging interconnections between discursive communities that are too often kept apart from each other. To name but a few significant ones: biotechnologies and ethics and political agency; the omnipresence of a state of crisis on the one hand and the possibility of sustainable futures on the other; the practice of nomadic politics of difference versus technological monoculture; the creative potential of hybrid subjectivity, in opposition to new and more virulent forms of ethnically fixed identities; cartographic accounts of locations and normative stances. Ultimately: post-structuralism and ethical norms or values.

More specifically, I transpose nomadically from philosophical theory to ethical practice. Loyal to the feminist politics of locations, I remain committed to the task of providing politically informed maps of the present, convinced of the usefulness of a situated approach as a critical tool to achieve an enlarged sense of objectivity and a more empowering grasp of the social. Politically, a cartographic method based on the politics of locations results in the recognition that not one single central strategy of resistance is possible (Grewal and Kaplan 1994; Patton 2000; Massumi 1992). A heterogeneous style of politics is needed instead, based on centrelessness. As a corollary, this implies a variety of possible political strategies and the non-dogmatic acceptance of poten-

tially contradictory positions. A scattered, web-like system is now operational, that defies and defeats any pretence at avant-garde leadership by any group. Resistance being as global as power, it is centreless and just as nonlinear: contemporary politics is rhizomic.

It is possible to track the zigzagging transpositions of multiple differences across the global landscape of a mediated world. The concrete socio-economic conditions of advanced capitalism, the so-called global economy, with its flows of commodities and the mobility of goods, is one of the factors responsible for the collapse of mono-centred systems and of binary modes of opposition between centre and periphery. The poly-centred, multiple, and complex political economy of late postmodernity is nomadic in the sense that it promotes the fluid circulation of capital and of commodities. In this respect, it favours the proliferation of differences, but only within the strictly commercial logic of profit. My nomadic vision of subjectivity on the other hand, is strictly non-profit (Braidotti 1994, 2002). It aims to provide a rigorous account both of the mobile subject positions that are available in late postmodernity and of modes of resistance and alternatives to the profit-minded values of today. I rely on transposable notions to account adequately for the fast-moving processes of change and for the overlapping complexities of place and time.

In *Transpositions* I investigate the creative force of transpositions in the framework of new power relations and explore its potential as the grounds for a new political ontology. Such a creative move takes the form of a qualitative leap. It does not entrust the mechanistic determinism of the genes and memes (*pace* Dawkins 1976). Nor does it rely on the reassuring linearity of a divinely ordained evolutionary teleology (*pace* Teilhard de Chardin 1959). It is rather the case that this qualitative or creative leap takes the form of a change of culture: a transformation not only of our schemes of thought but also of our ways of inhabiting the world. Such a radical change, rooted in the immanent structure of the subject, requires a lucid understanding of the topology and ethnology of the interconnections that link us to our social and organic environment. In other words, it is an eco-philosophy of belonging and of transformations.

Transformative ethics

An ethics of sustainability, based on these interconnections will consequently shape up as the main structure of my argument. This transformative ethics includes a critical or reactive and an affirmative or active phase. On the critical side, the issue at stake is the critique of tradition—that is, which forces, aspirations, or conditions are likely to propel us out of the inert repetition of established habits of thought and self-representation. On the affirmative side, the issue is how can we cultivate the political desire for change or transformation, for actively willing and yearning for positive and creative changes? How can we link the issue of desire as a structural force that entails both ethical and erotic elements, with the question of socio-political forces and power-relations?

My passion for transformations may lead to a seemingly hasty dismissal of attachment to traditional values. In defence of the desire for change or trans-

formation, I want to argue that the force of habit is indeed little more than inertia, that is to say a reactive type of affect. "Habits" are a socially enforced and thereby "legal" type of addiction. They are cumulated toxins that by sheer uncreative repetition engender forms of behaviour that can be socially accepted as "normal" or even "natural." The undue credit that is granted to the accumulation of habits lends exaggerated authority to past experiences. *Transpositions* (2006) addresses the question of which forces, desires, or aspirations are likely to propel us out of traditional habits, so that one is actually yearning for changes in a positive and creative manner. This leads to the classical political question, what makes people want to change? How do you motivate them to change? How can we account for the political desire for transformation to occur? How can we link the issue of desire—its structure, which entails both erotic and political elements—with sustainable ethics?

This approach calls for a style that adequately expresses the process in a non-linear manner. A philosophical style is a way of shifting the very foundations of the corporate identity of philosophy. Against the traditional definition of this discipline in terms of cognitive mastery and normative power, they call for a radical scrambling of its codes. The catalogue of alternative modes of postulating self–other interaction is broad: the placenta as a non-dialectical dyad; the figuration of the parasite; the cloned animal; the leaping gene; hybrid complexity, diasporic displacements, and cosmological resonance. These figurations are steps towards a nonlinear rendition of the subject in its deep structures. It is a kind of trans-position, a way of revisiting, reclaiming, and relocating a crucial shift in the process of becoming subjects.

Transposing is a gesture neither of metaphorical assimilation nor of metonymic association. It is a style, in the sense of a form of conceptual creativity, like a sliding door, a choreographed slippage, a drifting away that follows a trajectory that can be traced a posteriori and thus be made accountable. Like a weather map, genetic printing or digital tracking, an account can be made of what will have been—in the first instance—a fluid flowing of becoming.

Transposing between the cartographic and the normative, I ask: "So what, then?" What if the subject is "trans," or in transit, that is to say no longer one, whole, unified, and in control, but rather fluid, in-process, and hybrid? What are the ethical and political implications of a non-unitary vision of the human subject? How does this vision express and reflect the complexities and contradictions of contemporary culture and cultural politics? This is in some ways the philosophical question par excellence: it provokes and thus invites serious questioning, while injecting into the debate a healthy dose of debunking. I shall do my best to follow this thread while giving ample space in my work to a more normative dimension of thought in terms of the ethics of sustainability. This rigor in both intent and content will not prevent my flair for paradoxes from striking healthy blows to the philosopher's *esprit de sérieux*. This talent is needed more than ever, for these are strange times indeed, and strange things are happening.

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New modes of epistemic relationships in artistic research

Research leads to new insights rupturing the existent fabric of knowledge. Situated in the still evolving field of artistic research, this book investigates a fundamental quality of this process. Building on the lessons of deconstruction, artistic research invents new modes of epistemic relationships that include aesthetic dimensions.

Under the heading transposition, seventeen artists, musicians, and theorists explain how one thing may turn into another in a spatio-temporal play of identity and difference that has the power to expand into the unknown. By connecting materially concrete positions in a way familiar to artists, this book shows how moves can be made between established positions and completely new ground. In doing so, research changes from a process that expands knowledge to one that creatively reinvents it.

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