

The Forms of Academic Work: Practices, Taxonomies, Perspectives

In recent years, humanities scholarship has turned intensively to considerations of its own various practices and infrastructures, the things the humanities do and the system in which they do them (e.g., Bourdieu 1988, but especially: Hyland 2009, Bennett 2014, Frietsch/Rogge 2015, Hyland 2015, Krentel 2015, Martus 2015, Krause/Pethes 2017, Fitzpatrick 2018, Hoffmann 2018, Etzemüller 2019, Chihaya et al. 2020, Krey 2020, Niemann 2021, Sagner Buurma/Heffernan 2021, Martus/Spoerhase 2022, Guillory 2022, Herzogenrath 2023, Lanzendörfer 2023). One aspect that has received comparatively little attention is what this conference will call the question of the “forms” of academic work. Most recently, “form” has been proposed as an overarching concept capable of finding homologies between disparate sets of things (Levine 2015), both textual and practical. “Forms”, as the proposed conference will understand it, designates the discrete things, objects, shapes, and configurations that emerge from and in interaction with academic practices and systems, from monograph books and journal articles to syllabi and keynote addresses to breakroom chats and email exchanges. It also takes the guise of “minor” forms, such as footnotes, epigrams, letters of recommendation, lightning talks, office hours, and so on. The reach of forms, their historical and contemporary valences and the ways in which new medial opportunities and systemic infrastructural changes shape and reshape them is what the conference will take as its object of discussion and exploration. Academic work practices emerge to a great extent in particular forms, and the particular forms in which we work in turn shape humanities practices and humanities infrastructures, from our efforts to produce a certain size monograph to the need to write the prose of a funding application. But despite the fundamentality of these forms to our practices and professions writ large, the question of the relationship between form and academic work has been addressed only haphazardly, usually in individual examinations of specific forms and their work (e.g. Kemp 2009, Roach 2018, Callaci 2019, Carriera da Silva and Brito Veira 2019, Germano/Nicholls 2020, Webster 2020, Karshan and Murphy 2020).

The proposed conference seeks to make amends in this situation by starting an interdisciplinary and international conversation about the work of academic forms, understanding this conference work as both an initial critical inventory-making and as agenda-setting. Fundamentally, the persistence of such by-now almost transhistorical forms as the monograph, the journal article, the essay, the review, the grant application, the CV, and other more-or-less self-evidentially academic forms poses questions about how practices and forms interact with one another, how disciplines are shaped by historically persistent but by no means readily understood forms. At the same time, these transhistorical forms have been reshaped and revalued, resituated and sometimes fundamentally changed, by developments that also impact the larger infrastructures of academic work. Forms are, but have been taken to be, central to how we think and rethink our practices and the systems in which we labor, if often invisibly. Forms of qualification writing (doctoral dissertations and *Habilitationen*), for instance, are becoming awkward in a market interested in shorter monograph forms (e.g. Palgrave’s

Pivot series, Routledge's Focus On, U Tampa P's Pith, Minnesota UP's Forerunners, Suhrkamp's 100 Seiten). Accustomed forms, such as the 7000 word essay, may come to appear less relevant against the backdrop of online publication of unlimited length. Digital teaching has created the need for new forms and revisions of the old; indeed, the affordances of the digital including the challenges of generative "AI" have barely been addressed in what they mean for academic work (with the exception of teaching); and whether or not a lunch-break chat with a colleague is work or not is not clear. Indeed, not everything we do is readily perceivable as work, even though it generally takes recognizable form. Whether we are literary scholars reading Dickens, musicologists listening to Brahms, or sociologists going to football matches, often, the forms of our work are untransparently work, sometimes untransparently form. And that does not even address the fact that concrete forms which are the result of what is clearly work may be troubling in the larger system in which the humanities operate. Concrete forms of academic work meaningfully correlate with the perceived struggle against expressions of the academic humanities' irrelevance: who but other humanities scholars reads an academic monograph, for instance? The insistence on greater public impact is often framed as concern over the forms of community engagement and outreach, including the role of social media and other forms of public presentation. The question of how forms are concretely distributed, often by international for-profit conglomerates, is ultimately about inclusivity, global barriers of access, and the appropriation of public value for private gain, a practice in turn afforded by the structure of academic work itself as understood largely for the production of objects in need of distribution.

To understand these and other issues as problems of forms—bound up in the shapes and guises of our work—is a crucial step in rethinking what is possible in the humanities in the 21st century. The conference's desire to locate, conceptualize, and taxonomize form must be read as an intervention into the current crisis in the humanities. It provides a much-needed inventory-taking as the grounds on which a perspective of the future idea of can be built. The major intervention of this conference is that a fundamental (re-)consideration of the concrete forms of academic work is absolutely necessary to progress in thinking perspectives for the humanities' future. As a first step, therefore, a critical inventory of forms, understood both practically and expansively, will permit us an insight into how we conceive of the shapes of academic practices in the first place, and what kinds of grey areas persist. The production of such an inventory at the conference will require us to reconsider where we invest our labor as academics, and how that academic work is perceived and, in the best case, valued and valuable. Grounded in such an inventory, the conference then aims to produce a sense of how academic forms function and how they might be historicized both for the contemporary and as a point of departure for a future agenda. It aims to think about how to most productively utilize existing forms and how to prospectively reshape and repurpose them, even as it imagines the work of future forms.