Instruments, Instrumentalities

2013 Leboff Seminar – Jonathan Sterne
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Prospectus:

What is an instrument?

Today, in a variety of fields, the definition of instrument and instrumentality is transforming. While retaining its older connotations of delegation, means to ends, and tool-use, the term instrument—and instrumental—now also implies bigger, messier complexes of technologies, bodies and rationalities. In some places, like the dashboards in cars, once-separate instruments collapse into systems. In others, like operating rooms, music studios, and financial markets, they proliferate wildly.

In this seminar, we will think transversally, across categories and contexts, to consider the form and meaning of musical instruments, technical instruments, and ideas of instrumentality.

Readings:

15 April: Articulations, Processes


22 April: Bodies and Techniques

Murphy, Michelle. Immodest Witnessing, Affective Economies and Objectivity. Seizing the

26 April – Orientation, Reorientation


29 April – Means and Ends (Men Criticizing Instrumentality)


Course Requirements:

Auditors are expected to arrive having done the readings and prepared to discuss them. You will also have to participate in in-class reading and writing exercises.

Etiquette:

1. Full and complete attendance, attention, participation, listening and reading (of required texts). I expect the very best you can give.

2. Good faith and good humor toward your colleagues in the classroom. For both: disagreements are expected and encouraged, but please keep nitpicking to a minimum; personal attacks and intimidation are not acceptable under any circumstances. There will be a strict limit on seek-and-destroy hermeneutics. Follow the Golden Rule. Encourage basic questions as well as advanced ones.

Product (for enrolled students only):

1. **April 15th:** In an email to me, you will name an instrument you want to study for the course and offer a paragraph explaining why you are interested in it. You instrument can be as general as "the speedometer," “a cane,” or as specific as “Prince’s sign-shaped guitar”;
the important thing is that there is a good deal of documentation about your instrument readily available to you. To avoid excessive ego investment, you should not choose something that will be the topic of your thesis or dissertation. One I've approved it, you can't change subjects.

2. **For each of the next three class meetings** (by 3pm the day before the class), you will acquire at least one artifact or document related to your instrument in that has some relation to the meeting's reading assignment. If your object is digital, make sure to save a local copy (404 is the most common page on the web). If your object is not digital, you find a way to document it digitally.

You are, of course, welcome to collect more, but this is meant to be a process of regular accumulation. Even if you collect a lot of documents in a single session, you are expected to keep at it.

3. **ALSO for each of the next three class meetings** (by 3pm the day before the class), you will send to the listserv a short paper of approximately 500-750 words (2-3 pages double-spaced in a standard font, excluding citations—2 pages is really ok, 3 pages is a max). The paper will make use of the document or artifact you acquired for the week (if you acquired more than one, focus on one, though others may be mentioned if necessary; you may also refer to material from previous meetings). Please keep the file size down so as not to jam up people's mailboxes. If you need us to see something large, please post it somewhere and share a link.

The paper must be written in the style of one of the authors we have read for the meeting. Choose an aspect of the week’s assigned reading to imitate and try your best to imitate it. Your job is to try and occupy the same discursive headspace as the reading, except with your own material. The relevant aspects of “style” here are up to your interpretation. Is it something about the author’s prose style that is relevant? Her analytical approach or theoretical commitments? The types of source materials he uses?

Bring your paper to class (and your artifact if it’s good for show-and-tell) and be prepared to discuss your choices.

3. **Your final assignment, due May 3rd, 3pm** will be a short paper (6 pages, double-spaced, give or take) containing two parts: A) a proposal for further research on your instrument that includes clear research questions and their connections to larger debates in your field, a list of places to go and get primary source material, and further reading you know you need to do; and B) an assessment of your writing for the course, a list of goals for yourself as a writer, and a plan to work on them.