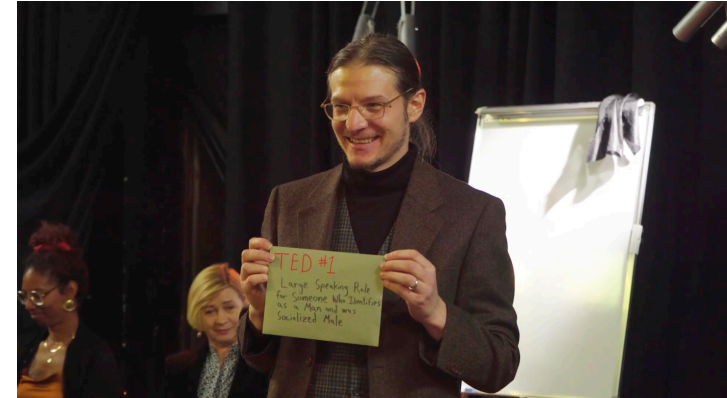




Video documentation of ~~xxXtedXxx~~ performance—Joseph Gold Hendel setting up the performance, 8 November, 2023, video-graphers Rapolas Grinčelaitis and Aleksandra Ivinskaitė

INTRODUCTION

As part of the *Not Quite King, Not Quite Fish* Artistic Research Symposium organized by the doctoral students of the Vilnius Academy of Arts and the Lithuanian Theatre and Music Academy in November of 2023, I proposed and presented an hour-long participatory performance titled ~~xxXtedXxx~~, which I had pitched as an “Anti-TED Talk.” My idea for the performance was to critique and artistically intervene in the univocal, expertise-laden, and masculine-coded structures of knowledge dissemination widely seen in capitalistic digital entertainment formats like TED Talks, YouTube “explainer videos”, and other similarly “masterful” forms of corporate-backed “infotainment.” My working research question for this project was: how can I mount a performative critique of “TEDness” without replicating the format’s tendencies to fix the location of knowledge

in a masterful speaker's body. To be "Anti-TED" without being a total TED about it would require the discovery and elaboration of methods to unfix mastery from my knowing, performing, and disseminating self.

My research explores how performance art can represent and critically analyze the intersections between contemporary hegemonic masculinities and digital capitalism. By hegemonic masculinities I mean the modes of being masculine that socially compete for the highest power positions within the set of other possible masculinities and within a patriarchal gender order which privileges men and masculinity over women, femininity, and non-binary genders and sexualities. These masculine hegemonic power positions need to be continually reaffirmed and justified through social practice and ideology. One deep-seated tactic of this hegemony is what the sociologist Victor Seidler refers to as the "historic identification of masculinity with reason and progress" (1989, 3). Because of the central status that technology has in today's capitalism and the way that ideology has gender-coded technological rationality as masculine, the disruptive tendencies of digital capitalism are often nearly indistinguishable from the priorities of a digitally-globalized hegemonic masculinity.

Contemporary archetypes of hegemonic masculinity are manufactured and globally exported from the Western centers of power via the cultural apparatus of capitalism. Masculinities studies scholar R. W. Connell reflects on the shifts in masculinity stemming from neoliberalization, writing, "Many men are relatively advantaged by the shift of social resources from the state to the market, and by the de-regulation of markets. And there is a particular group who are the intended beneficiaries of the whole neo-liberal policy package—entrepreneurs" (2005, 255). Given the massive global expansion of the digital economy and the monetization of digital "content creation," Connell's statement could be expanded to include the emerging class of "influencer-experts" that has risen up around the entrepreneur as the leading evangelists of the "knowledge economy." These experts peddle not only whatever technical or social knowledge they are officially disseminating, but also the

signs of *their (gendered) mastery as experts*.¹ Through a successful "stylized repetition of acts"² inside standardized, popular formats, the contemporary capitalist expert seems to possess mastery over *how to perform the role of knowing* in capitalism. This *appearance of mastery* in the body of the expert, and the ideological underpinnings of the broader system he is embedded in, were to be the targets of my ~~xxXtedXxx~~ performance.

In previous iterations of my research I had primarily focused on situations where the quest for male mastery and hegemony was somehow thwarted or frustrated, looking at instances where a failure to conform to the changing requirements of hegemonic masculinity produced "pathological" and "symptomatic" outpourings in men online.³ my task would be to approach mastery in a situation where the master sits easily inside his comfort zone, well-adjusted to the social and economic realities of 21st century digital capitalism. To make this critique without lapsing into the very patterns of male-coded control that fix knowledge inside

- 1 The hegemonic wager here in justifying the elevated social position (and financial remuneration) of the "popular public intellectual" in capitalism requires gaining a broad consensus around the "rightness" of this figure's elevated status. By publicly displaying the signs of mastery within well-understood parameters (e.g. by appearing to have a control over "the facts", by communicating in relatively popular and non-academic terms, by making claims that tap into a prevailing "commonsense"), the expert "buys" the ideological justification for his power through his expert performance. This hegemonic tactic is significantly bolstered by the hosting platforms' own social power and appearance of mastery. In a circular logic, the fact that the expert was "chosen" to speak to the masses by some powerful, popular platform serves to justify the speaker's claim to be someone worth listening to. Whether this selection or "platforming" of the speaker is due to direct human curatorial intervention or by algorithmic processes as on a YouTube or TikTok feed makes little difference to the perceived "extra" power of an expert who is "successful" under capitalism.
- 2 To borrow a phrase from Judith Butler's *Gender Trouble*: "gender is an identity tenuously constituted in time, instituted in an exterior space through a stylized repetition of acts." (1990, 179).
- 3 See, for example: Hendel, Joseph Gold, *Artificial (Man) Intelligence*, 2022. An "oratorio of grievance" based on "manosphere" Reddit boards utilizing early generative AI technology. <https://youtu.be/PFqQquz1gvs?si=Zxm3YbVzyk-GKbkv>

a master's body and perpetuate a closed hegemonic epistemology, I had to keep at arm's length my own socialized inclinations towards performing mastery. This "keeping at arm's length" of mastery became my method for approaching the task of doing xxXtedXxx, and I repeated this "avoiding," "thwarting," and "maneuvering" logic at several levels throughout the process. I will now present three salient tactics that I used to perform this research action, offering reflections around the idea of capitalist mastery, the nature of "TEDness," and the potential results of my experiment.

TACTIC 1—NAME YOUR PERFORMANCE SOMETHING YOU CANNOT PRONOUNCE

Giving something a name is one of the most fundamental gestures of mastery. "The name of my talk is...," "this animal shall be called a Hippopotamus." One of my first actions was to place the title of my intervention inside a zone of questionability. Typically, names of things are chosen to create an immediate, clear distinction between the thing itself and everything else around it. Under capitalism, this is especially important because a name also functions as a brand name, which requires a clear identity to be able to freely and easily circulate in the market.

"xxXtedXxx" as a name troubles clarity and immediacy. The letter 'X/x' – always something of a phonemic oddball—carries connotations of danger, toxicity, termination, and porn. The use of lower- and upper-case forms (as well as the struck-through, lowercase "ted" in the center) suggests that a rhythmic emphasis or tonal inflection may be needed to produce its sound, bringing more of the body into play in speaking it than would be required for a less "troubled" word. The orthography also hints at the name possessing some graphical significations, its architectonics implying enclosure, some situation of overthrow or demotion, perhaps even a sexually-infused power game. Yet because of the name's polysemic nature, none and all of these interpretations could be correct. Outside of having a master's voice to dictate the exact meaning and pronunciation of the title,

"xxXtedXxx" required imagination and agency from those who dared to engage with it. Were this voice to emerge and claim a definitive "master's knowledge" over its sound and sense—reducing its inherent polysemy to an enforced monosemy—the claimant and his mastery could be exposed as highly dubious, if not absurd.

To arrive at this title, I employed a not-fully-rational, psychosomatic, and intuitive decision-making process—something I suppose many other artists do in their artistic practices. I iterated through several options, moving my body to them, subvocalizing, and "trying things out." Ultimately, I simply *liked* the title "xxXtedXxx"; it *worked* for me. Yet despite my "poetic" process for arriving at this title, I wonder now whether solidifying this decision was also some kind of mastery. Yes it was! I had branded the entire set of utterances, events, and actions of the performance under a single "master signifier" (to use Lacan's term to describe this very action of circumscribing a "universe" of knowledge under the heading of a single term which represents the collection without being a part of it). I put the head on the body, I slapped on the label. And, in reality, I felt obliged to. "xxXtedXxx" became the title for xxXtedXxx because, as far as I understood,⁴ the presentation of

4 I had yet to participate in any academic symposia at the time I submitted for this one, though *Not Quite King, Not Quite Fish* immediately suggested in their call for contributions that the symposium would be something well outside the norms of disciplinarily and usual modes of knowledge dissemination. Its open call (see: <http://www.researchcatalogue.net/portal/announcement?announcement=2121387>) explicitly embraced the epistemic uncertainty suggested by the hybridized figure of the "artistic researcher" (not quite artist, not quite researcher?) and organized itself around four suggestive thematic clusters as "temporary epistemic communities." The description for my cluster, "Microscopic Gesture: Being and Moving With..." (curated with a deep sense of experimentation and caring encouragement by Greta Grinevičiūtė, Miklós Ambrózy, and Miglė Križinauskaitė-Bernotienė), asked "What if one does not take a stand at the outset of creative acts, including the often repeated expectation for situating one's practice within existing families of knowledge?", a direct challenge to the need for epistemological certainty required by masterful discourses. Perhaps for this group of organizers I could have submitted a work without a title, but I did not dare make that experiment at the time. The fact that my highly speculative

research at an academic symposium requires a title—for the sake of communicability.

TED communicates very well. Ted the speaker, and “TED” the brand name. TED stands for Technology, Entertainment and Design. This all-caps acronym represents a complex of research, production, and consumption under the sunny, Californian dream of abundance and global connectivity. TED is friendly. TED is casual. TED is a guy, but don’t let that stop you. TED is democratic: everyone is a capital letter, so no one is left out. The title “TED” cannot be mistaken and, like its lectures, can be circulated easily through the monetized channels of digital capitalism.



Video documentation of xxXtedXxx performance—participant holding an Audre Lorde quote on a handmade “slide” (Lorde portrait created by Midjourney AI), 8 November 2023, videographers Rapolas Grinčelaitis and Aleksandra Ivinskaitė

“xxXtedXxx” is not friendly. Though I did make the “xxXtedXxx” is not friendly. Though I did make the master gesture to turn it into a name (for the poster, for my resume), it has a different kind of materiality than “TED.” Written into the word is its failure to be read. Whereas the capitalist signifier aims at pure circulate-ability, my title resists unabated flow. It gets caught in the throat, requires

(and minimally-fleshed out) proposal to overcome the epistemological binaries in TED was accepted by the team for programming was at least proof that the organizers were serious about encouraging experimental performance-as-research and creating the space for me to grapple with “the master” without needing to pretend to be one.

unfamiliar keystrokes to reproduce, and, generally, keeps at arm’s length any easy master-ability.

TACTIC 2—LET CHATGPT WRITE IT FOR YOU

In going from the title to an actual framework for the performance, I tested many ways to generate content that I hoped would estrange myself from my own need to master, such as automatic writing, disembodiment of my voice through sound recording, and experimenting with general silliness. However, none of these methods worked. I kept seeing my “little master” reiterated, my desire to be clever apparent in the clever ways I thought might obscure it. After weeks, in a bodily frustration to finally cast away my ego, I turned in desperation to ChatGPT.

I regularly use “Generative AI” as a critical artistic method in my research⁵—I see these highly-disruptive, ethically-questionable, and heavily-invested-in technologies as both an embodiment of the connections between hegemonic masculinity and digital capitalism as well as a means for representing those connections in critical ways—but the ChatGPT model developed by OpenAI had always struck me as too coherent, too controlled, and too masterful for my purposes. I preferred open-source models⁶ and free-to-use *beta* versions of not-yet-commercialized apps, which could more easily be hacked or “creatively used” to expose their

5 See Artificial (Man) Intelligence above. Also: Hendel, Joseph Gold, *hypermasculine thriftcore hangnail pixel art human hyperbolic outsider*, 2024 (<https://www.josephhendel.com/main/hypermasculine-thriftcore>). And Hendel, Joseph Gold, *Some Questionable Revelations...*, 2024. (<https://www.josephhendel.com/main/some-questionable-revelations-from-the-ai-neural-net>)

6 Like Tensorflow’s “RNN” Recurrent Neural Network text-generating algorithm: https://www.tensorflow.org/text/tutorials/text_generation; EleutherAI’s VQGAN+CLIP image-generating model (based on code by Katherine Crowson and Ryan Murdock): [https://github.com/EleutherAI/vqgan-clip/blob/main/notebooks/VQGAN%2BCLIP_\(MSE%20regularized%20z%2Bquantize_method\).ipynb](https://github.com/EleutherAI/vqgan-clip/blob/main/notebooks/VQGAN%2BCLIP_(MSE%20regularized%20z%2Bquantize_method).ipynb); NVIDIA’s StyleGAN2 image-generating AI: <https://github.com/NVlabs/stylegan2-ada-pytorch>; And Stable Diffusion’s models: https://huggingface.co/docs/diffusers/v0.14.0/en/stable_diffusion

various representational lapses, the biases embedded in their training data, and their latent tendencies to fail to grasp the world that they aspire to “know.” ChatGPT, with its many layers of content moderation and its ingratiating “customer-service” tone of voice, was less fun to use. It had always masterfully deflected my attempts to expose its underbelly by redirecting my difficult questions, apologizing away its lapses, and dodging real-world social antagonisms like a TV-ready politician.

However, after inputting this prompt into the machine:

“write me the transcript for an ‘anti-TED talk’ that deconstructs the techniques and power imbalances inherent in the TED-talk format. Use quotes from Jacques Rancière [sic] and Luce Irigaray”



I was forced to adjust my perspective. ChatGPT perfectly encapsulated the TED voice in a coherent 600+ word response to my query. It gave (seemingly) well-sourced professional examples; it nailed the approachable TED style; it even threw in some halfway-decent “dad jokes.” And like a proper capitalist machine, if I requested it, it would produce a near-infinite stream of the exact same thing with only minor variation. I immediately asked it to make me a half-dozen scripts which went on to form the basis for the performance text. Instead of trying to find a tricky way to out-master the master, I just let him speak. And from my experience as a reader of psychoanalysis (and an exemplary patient as well), I know that if you let something speak long enough, it will eventually cough up some truth.

This latest, greatest “master’s tool” of digital capitalism could easily supply a critique of the TED-Talk. This was, in fact, its function as a text-generating, world-grasping machine: to “know” and represent the world it lives in; and ChatGPT and TED live very much in the same world. I knew from my own grasp on the world that the philosophers Rancière⁷ and Irigaray⁸ would have been great “masters” to call upon to assist me in my critique had this been a traditional lecture, so I was well-poised to benefit from ChatGPT’s immense datasets and combinatorial powers.



But could ChatGPT truly “understand” and present these thinkers’ dense, erudite ideas in a coherent and cogent way? Well, actually, it kind of could. It summarized things perhaps better than I could have! It betrayed zero intellectual hangups about condensing complicated

- 7 Rancière’s *The Ignorant Schoolmaster* (1987, trans. 1991) and the *Emancipated Spectator* (2008, trans. 2009) probe deeply into the politics of situations where knowledge is unequally held and problematically disseminated, both in educational settings and in the contemporary art gallery, respectively. His concept of intellectual “stultification” vs intellectual “emancipation” figures prominently in both texts, critiquing an intellectual establishment where those *who don’t know how to know* are subordinated by those who do.
- 8 Irigaray’s *Speculum of the Other Woman* (1974, trans. 1985) and *This sex which is not one* (1977, trans. 1985) mount a psychoanalytically-informed critique of the phallogocentrism that lies at the roots of western philosophy and psychoanalysis, asking intriguing, destabilizing questions about patriarchal hegemony and language in the discursive arenas of western knowledge that, ostensibly, hold universal validity despite sexual and gender differences.

theories into easily-digestible soundbites. It entirely lacked “imposter syndrome.” And it treated its audience equally: as open-minded digital content-consumers. This disarmed me. ChatGPT offered up its endless, unabashed, textual stream of “consciousness” for me to take and do with as I pleased. Given my failure to find anything better in my arsenal to launch a critique of mastery, I appropriated the bot, mercilessly.⁹

I had specifically asked the AI to compose a critical *Anti* TED Talk, and it had obliged me by offering several (rather timid) “gestures of rebellion” for my use, like “stepping off the rug in protest,” “refusing a standing ovation,” and “leaving the room.” What struck me about these gestures was that despite their ostensibly critical attitude, they were absolutely in keeping with the pseudo-defiance that capitalism easily incorporates and even encourages. Of course I am allowed to step off the rug and raise my fist about it. It is certain that nothing will change. My defiance is a relatable part of my personality. I could sell you a T-shirt about it. In a confident hegemonic structure like digital capitalism, “free critique” is entirely permitted and absorbed, even in its most publicized spaces. What must be forestalled, however, is a destabilization of the system’s governing epistemology and its “distribution of the sensible.”¹⁰

After extensive interaction with the smooth, forthright, and pseudo-rebellious ChatGPT, the bot *finally* coughed up an exploitable symptom from its “machinic unconscious”: it misattributed the ubiquitous Simone de Beauvoir quote from *The Second Sex*—“One is not born, but rather becomes, a woman”—to Luce Irigaray. Wrong French Feminist! In a different output, ChatGPT would not have made this misattribution. Somewhere it “knows very well”

9 Materials appropriated from ChatGPT included: spoken text (sometimes edited/editorialized, sometimes not), “tone of voice” for use in additional text, “play” format with written stage directions and visual cues, convention of creating “slides” with quotes and pictures of philosophers (pictures created with Midjourney AI and mounted on handmade “slides”), instructions to use TED props and tropes (including circular red rug and the “Anecdote -> Problem -> Solution -> Call to Action” schema). For how these materials were used, and to view the entirety of the performance, see Hendel, Joseph Gold, *xxXtedXxx*, 2023: <https://www.josephhendel.com/main/antited-talk>

who said this famous utterance. But because it operates according to stochastic, probabilistic mathematics in the deeper layers of its code, this time the roll of the dice forced an error. Bingo.

I, of course, *obeyed* this mistake, including the misattribution in the script without comment and allowing it to linger for much of the performance. At the right moment, I allowed the correction to be made. “Actually...” In this small, “innocent” moment of emendation, the audience, who had been well informed that ChatGPT wrote much of the script, could plainly see that the powerful futuristic AI overlord was merely another flawed invention. In psychoanalytic terms, this moment constituted an “analysis,” an action materially affecting some unconscious: by committing myself to taking ChatGPT at its word, literally (at the “level of the signifier,” to paraphrase Lacan), I was finally able to reveal a meaningful lapse in its functioning. I drew attention to the contradiction in the flow of its supposedly masterful speech, and simply let it register.

What was gained from including ChatGPT as a co-author? I had used its outputs verbatim as “content,” appropriated its style to flesh out a full-length script, and allowed it to reveal the disavowed ignorance behind its sheen. Critical theory was transmitted; laughter was provoked. But on top of this, I created a situation where the master’s precise

10 From Rancière’s *The Politics of Aesthetics*: the distribution of the sensible: “I call the distribution of the sensible the system of self-evident facts of sense perception that simultaneously disclose the existence of something in common and the delimitations that define the respective parts and positions within it” (2006, 7). He continues: “This apportionment of parts and positions is based on a distribution of spaces, times, and forms of activity that determines the very manner in which something in common lends itself to participation and in what way various individuals have a part in this distribution.” (Ibid). The stagecraft and dramatis personae of TED defines a particular distribution of the sensible that reiterates itself with each and every lecture. The “content” of any individual iteration of this form (even a “critical” lecture) does nothing to disturb the overall distribution of the sensible of the form and its ideological partitioning of roles and capabilities.

For more on how capitalism incorporates and neutralizes its own critique (as well as suggestions for how to circumvent this logic), see Tiqqun’s *The Cybernetic Hypothesis*, 2020.

location and status were destabilized. The TED-like strategy of appearing whole and in control was punctured, disclosed, and turned into something conscious that could now be acted upon, discovered more readily in the world. The fantasy of an intact technological master—capable of accepting both our praise and/or our blame for its power—was dissolved, and mastery could begin to move in unpredictable ways.

TACTIC 3—LET THE AUDIENCE PERFORM IT FOR YOU

Beyond compiling the written text, there was the question of how I would translate it into time, space, and bodies. Instead of assuming the role of the TED myself, I decided to “redistribute” it to a volunteer male audience member that would be determined during the performance. I also created a second speaking role, The Narrator, who would be played by a female-identified, femme, or non-binary volunteer. The Narrator, speaking over the performance’s sole microphone, would provide stage directions, instructions to the participants (including myself), and the occasional ironic aside. These audience-participant roles were not permanently fixed, and, throughout the performance, space was created for playful forms of audience engagement.¹¹ The participatory element and the introduction of the “meta” Narrator role worked to shift the balance of speaking-power in the room, creating a dialogic, self-referential structure instead of a monologic one, and upending the traditional hierarchy of a TED lecture.

- ¹¹ These included prompts for audience members to meet in pairs and share their own research with each other (verbally and nonverbally), invitations for physical exploration based on somatic movement techniques I use in my own practice, and opportunities for more participants to try their hand at the main TED and Narrator roles. I did even experiment with leaving the room for the final six and a half minutes of the performance, absenting my person but leaving the yet-to-be concluded script in the hands of the participants. (I have yet to come to any solid conclusions about whether that unconventional gesture produced anything worth further investigation).

I devised a system where partial cue scripts were given to the audience volunteers in unsealed envelopes. Participants received their cues from their scripts or from other participants acting out their newfound roles, and I was freed up to focus my own activity on facilitating from the periphery. My control over the performance was pushed a step further away, a bit beyond my grasp, and this method produced surprises as the performance began to shape itself in ways I could not anticipate. This group of people I had just met exercised agency over the text: adding spice, shifting emphases, hamming it up, going off script. Typically in public speaking, the text is something within the speaker’s control. It is composed, finalized, and rehearsed before the performance begins, intentionally minimizing any chance for slippage in the speaker’s portrayal of mastery. If a rare mistake is made, pre-learned masterful tactics are employed to snap the performance back into its original shape. However, with an unrehearsed script read and performed for the first time by a group of strangers, it’s all mistakes. There is no original shape, no standard of mastery to conform to. This inevitably produces unforeseen effects in the bodies of the participants and generates unforeseen meanings in unpredictable densities.

(cue: 3 seconds after TED says “The partition of the sensible is always a sign of power”)

Slides transition to a picture of Luce Irigaray (LOOS EE-RE-GA-RE) with a quote.

(cue: “What is phallogocentrism?”, perhaps indicate TED as you speak:)

The dick stands in the middle of the circle and speaks.

(TED says: “...often male, delivers wisdom to a passive audience.” Joseph now switches the roles between TED and The Narrator)

Joseph Switches the Roles!!!!!!!

(cue: Begin when you receive your new Narrator role and reach the

Screenshot of Narrator’s partial cue script in xxXtedXxx

The difficulty and awkwardness created by the decentralized turn-taking structure functioned similarly to the unpronounceable title of the performance. Both created material resistances in the bodies of others that troubled the smooth flow of information and, as a result, created bodily effects like laughter, shared looks of confusion, stumbling speech, and little bits of odd choreography. The body needed some outlet to express its not-knowing.

In the world of TED, no unforeseen effects should get in the way of the circulation of expert lectures delivered in bite-sized formats to a content-hungry global audience. When this system functions smoothly, the mask of its masterful control is unremarked upon. However, if the master's mask slips off, its nature as a mask is revealed, and the unremarked-upon illusion of totality is proven false. "Liar!" Pointing and laughing ensues. My decision to make this a performance of non-experts ensured that the master's mask was constantly sliding down and tripping around. Some participants enjoyed "putting it on and taking off"—tada! Others held onto it a little too tightly... and we all saw. Mostly, people enjoyed tossing it around playfully like a "hot potato."

But what of the specifically *masculine*-coded aspect of mastery? In my performance, I used gender identity as a criterion for role selection in an attempt to highlight the gender imbalances at work in the deeper structure of capitalism. Now, having performed the experiment, I am not fully convinced that this was a necessary intervention. The personality of TED can be adopted by anyone, provided they are willing and able to conform to the character of Ted: display expertise, be approachable, tell a clear story, and keep the mask fixed firmly so you can inspire people to feel they are part of a great progressive, global, and innovative community based on democratic exchange.¹²

Connell writes about the "officially de-gendered heaven of professional success" promised by a socially

¹² Why not create an entire TED-themed event of your own? The TED organization licenses its name for "TEDx" events, providing an extensive production template covering everything from allowed content, to sponsorship, to stage, lighting, and logo design, on to documentation and distribution. See <https://www.ted.com/participate/organize-a-local-tedx-event> for the hyperlinked guide. (Thanks to Miklos Ambrozy for pointing me to this site).

liberal market capitalism where anyone can become a CEO (1995, 255). "Officially", yes, this is the case. "Unofficially", the wealth generated by "Technology, Entertainment, and Design" primarily enriches powerful men: this may imply that to be a TED one must be an upper-middle class White cisgendered able-bodied man (like me). In actuality, TED experts are of all races, religions, genders, etc. TEDness is beyond identity categories, just as "hegemonic masculinity" is beyond the simple social identity of men. Donning the TED mask transforms one into a vector that broadcasts and champions the ideas of a disruptive technological capitalism that keeps certain key binary hierarchies in place.¹³ "Gamifying" the real-life social gender identities of the participants into my performance may have been a distraction from the deeper structural intersections of digital capitalism and hegemonic masculinity. To say that TED is *male* makes things easier; but to recognize that TED, mastery, and digital capitalism are *male*-coded is a much trickier thing.

CONCLUSION

My experiment in Vilnius was only made possible by the experimental format of the *Not Quite King, Not Quite Fish* symposium and the encouraging and risk-taking curation of my piece by Greta Grinevičiūtė, Miki Ambrózy, and Miglė Križinauskaitė-Bernotienė. My ability to prolong my own epistemic uncertainty—my *personal* "keeping mastery at arm's length"—during the performance's development period would have been impossible without the implicit belief in the process of experimentation and the explicit language to that point in the symposium's open call and in subsequent communications from the curators.¹⁴ I was

¹³ E. g. that professions associated with men are valued more highly than those associated with women; that extractive ecological practices carried out in the Global South are acceptable trade-offs for the comfort of middle-class citizens of the wealthier nations, etc.

¹⁴ To get a feel for the wonderful fruits of the entire organizing team's effort to create a symposium that legitimately realized the ideals of experimentation and epistemically novel modes of disseminating research they set out foster, see documentation of the symposium at Miki Ambrózy's website: <http://mikiambrozy.com/not-quite>

also grateful to perform my piece as the “opening night’s entertainment” on the first night of the symposium. Walking into a room full of strangers with my materials before anyone knew what was *supposed* to be happening here, at the threshold of several days of “organized experimentation”, was rather exhilarating. And I think that in my “avoiding-thwarting-maneuvering” and participatory dance with mastery I helped set the tone for the days that followed. “Wait, we don’t yet know.” “What if we try this?” “Oh, come on, don’t be such a Ted about it—how about *this*?”

I had set out to deconstruct the performance of mastery in a dominant discourse of capitalist knowledge exchange with an informative but fun intervention inside the male-coded global-American power game that I so preoccupy myself with. But what was lurking in the background of xxXtedXxx as I sashayed around in my lady’s gloves and presumptuous “professor’s tweed” adorning my hegemonic male body, holding placards with quotes from Black, feminist, lesbian, and marxist philosophers, soliciting participation from a mostly non-American audience of art professors, graduate students, independent researchers, and experimental artists? Was I the secret, occulted master here, pulling the strings behind a veneer of a well-executed “not knowing”? After all, the “little master” in me had conceived, proposed, titled, designed, and implemented the performance. Aside from the moments where the performance was informed by the machine or spontaneously shaped by the participants, I was the man behind the curtain who set the game in motion—perhaps I even extracted a perverse masterful enjoyment from the whole proceedings.

Regardless of where mastery lands after being maneuvered, twisted, played with, it will find a location inside the discursive act. This is the lesson of Lacan’s four discourses from his *Seminar XVII*: mastery, knowledge, desire, and subjectivity enter into relationship with each other whenever language is used to communicate (Lacan 2007). With xxXtedXxx, it was not ever a question of fully escaping whatever (male) mastery I carry with me and forever doing away with that TED epistemology that seems so masterful in its reach and power in the world. My goal was much more tentative,

more humble (and far less like me in my usual social existence). With a few artistic and conceptual methods, an inclination to legitimately experiment, and the encouraging, courageous structure provided by the symposium’s curatorial team (and inside the larger compass of the field of artistic research), I was able to help provide the parameters for others to play with the mask of mastery, to pass it around, and to see it falter and resurrect and falter again. In doing so, I hope I helped deconstruct some of TEDness’ powerful, friendly, and affective modes of operation, making the invisibility of its mastery more visible and more materially malleable.



Video documentation of xxXtedXxx performance—participants exploring somatic movement, 8 November, 2023, videographers Rapolas Grinčelaitis and Aleksandra Ivinskaitė

REFERENCES

Butler, J. (1990) *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity*. Routledge, New York.

ChatGPT, OpenAI.

DALL-E, OpenAI

Connell, R.W. 2005. *Masculinities* (2nd ed.). Routledge.

De Beauvoir, Simone. 1956. *The Second Sex*. Jonathan Cape.

Hendel, Joseph Gold, *Artificial (Man) Intelligence*, 2022. Presented by the Exponential Festival, 2022, Brooklyn, New York: <https://youtu.be/PFqQquz1gvs?si=Zxm3YbVzyk-GKbkv>

Hendel, Joseph Gold, “*hypermasculine thriftcore hangnail pixel art human hyperbolic outsider*”, 2024. Ph.D. Research Show, Burren College of Art. <https://www.josephhendel.com/main/hypermasculine-thriftcore>

Hendel, Joseph Gold, *Some Questionable Revelations...*, 2024. (Pas si) Fragile Festival, Brussels, Belgium. <https://www.josephhendel.com/main/some-questionable-revelations-from-the-ai-neural-net>

Hendel, Joseph Gold, *xxXtedXxx*, 2023. Not Quite King, Not Quite Fish Artistic-Research Symposium, Vilnius, Lithuania. <https://www.josephhendel.com/main/antited-talk>

Irigaray, Luce. 1985. *Speculum of the Other Woman*. Translated by Gillian Gill. Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press.

Irigaray, Luce. 1985. *This Sex Which Is Not One*. Translated by Catherine Porter and Carolyn Burke. Ithaca, New York.: Cornell University Press.

Lacan, Jacques. 2007, *The Seminar of Jacques Lacan, Book XVII: The Other Side of Psychoanalysis*. Translated by Russell Grigg. New York: W. W. Norton & Company.

Lorde, Audre. 1984. “The Master’s Tools Will Never Dismantle the Master’s House.” In *Sister Outsider: Essays and Speeches*. Berkeley, CA: Crossing Press.

Midjourney AI

Not Quite King, Not Quite Fish Artistic Research Symposium. Organizers: Jan Glöckner, Gabrielė Gervickaitė, Sophie Durand, Povilas Marozas, Miglė Križinauskaitė-Bernotienė, Greta Grinevičiūtė, Rasa Jančiauskaitė, and Miklós Ambrózy. 8-11 November 2023, SODAS 2123 Cultural Center, Vilnius, Lithuania.

Rancière, Jacques. 1991. *The Ignorant Schoolmaster*. Stanford University Press.

Rancière, Jacques. 2006. *The Politics of Aesthetics: The Distribution of the Sensible*. New York: Continuum.

Rancière, Jacques. 2009. *The Emancipated Spectator*. Verso Books.

Seidler, Victor J. 1989. *Rediscovering Masculinity: Reason, Language and Sexuality*. Routledge.

Tiqqun (Collective). 2020. *The Cybernetic Hypothesis*. South Pasadena, CA: Semiotext(e).

<https://doi.org/10.37522/3qmqz0p59>