

Žižek Conference: I made it.

Jorge Lucero, University of Illinois, Urbana-Champaign.

I'm not a Žižek scholar. I'm not even a Žižek enthusiast. What I am interested in is pliability and particularly testing the pliability of something that seems immovable. The call to participate in the 2014 International Žižek Studies Conference as a creative contributor was a call to pliability for me. The question wasn't "how can a creative practitioner illustrate about and around the work of Žižek?" although that certainly would have counted too, the question was "how can we make more pliable what surrounds a highly venerated, cited, and even lazily generalized philosopher, while also testing the parameters and structures of the conference as a mode of presentation and representation?". If we think about the possibilities of an academic conference through the etymological poetics of the word "conference" itself, we are given the opportunity to think of *con-ferencing*—or "together" "bearing"—as a means to "carry" the issues and topics jointly and to compare approaches, impressions, and ultimately creative responses.

The 2014 Žižek conference was chalk full of creative response. Yes, some of it came from the artists, but much of it came from the speakers who delivered—what to the naked eye appeared to be merely run-of-the-mill—lectures, presentations, and panels. Each presentation, including Žižek's keynote address, had its materiality and therefore it had its potential pliability. In the case of Žižek's lecture there was an air of celebrity prior to the man actually presenting. To many of us who had only come upon this powerful cult of personality via brief internet videos, Žižek's films, and countless caricatures of

Žižek's unique blend of visual mannerisms, ticks, and "style", we were struck by the reality of the modest aesthetic that was unfolding in front of us. Here was not a man who was pontificating philosophically and peppering his monologues with references to David Lynch or Kung Fu Panda; here was a man apologizing for not being able to endure the girth of a three-day conference the way he would like to due to some of the exhaustion caused by his diabetes. Here was a man telling embarrassingly intimate anecdotes about how his father taught him to approach women and he was speaking without a single bit of irony, coyness, nihilism, or sarcasm. The "made-for-TV" Žižek that so many people cited and sometimes impersonated to me whenever I mentioned my participation in the conference was nowhere to be found. Here was the man, the plain, struggling, in-progress man and the whole spectacle (if you can even call it that) was incredibly humbling—dare I say small—and even tender.

While I was sitting in the third row witnessing this moment unfold before my eyes I again thought about the pliability of conferencing and of participating in the particular ubiquity of this academic economy. What did it mean to come together, even if it was—for me—around a topic or a man's work that I was only nominally introduced to? During Žižek's talk I made a series of videos as a means to listen to him better (or maybe differently), but also to bracket out something of the unusualness that I was witnessing. And here I mean the sheer banality of what I was experiencing at the moment that I was sitting there listening to Žižek talk about psychoanalysis and Marxism. I made four videos: one of Žižek's forehead, one of myself listening to Žižek, one of Žižek's table, and one of Žižek's left shoulder video-taped from an angle that peeked at him from behind the two listeners that were sitting in front of me.



Figure 1: Screenshot of all four Žižek videos as scene on artist's website. *Here is the man*, digital video arrangement, 2014. View here: <http://www.jorgelucero.com/Pages/hereistheman.aspx>

Practicing primarily as a conceptual artist, I don't have a studio. I mostly work out of my computer, notebooks, camera, the Internet, the classroom, a school office, and—when necessary—borrowed spaces. When I returned to my computer I uploaded all of my videos to YouTube and shortly thereafter I arranged them on my website in a grid. The way that I imagined this four-squared arrangement of videos was as a simultaneous playback device, as sort of musical instrument. All four videos are meant to be played at the same time, although playing them separately or allowing my videos to roll into any one of the hundreds of videos YouTube suggests for viewing after mine finishes playing, is certainly okay and within the expectations of a more nuanced Žižek encounter. Of course the experience is still mediated, but my interest had to do with creating a rupture, a rupture that is related to the experience that I had when coming to the conference with one kind of thinking and then being confronted with “the man” himself. This arrangement of images is called *Here is the Man*. (See the video arrangement here: <http://www.jorgelucero.com/Pages/hereistheman.aspx>)

My thoughts about Žižek and the Žižek Studies Conference's pliability started way before I arrived at the site of the conference. I had been researching and writing about documentation in conceptual art and this partly led me to think further about the pliability of things that are perceived to be immovable, but just haven't been tested properly (e.g. school, cultural capital, art, etc.). Conceptual art in many instances is captured and circulated by insufficient documentation (usually in the form of photographs and/or video) and also the work-narrative. The work narrative can be thought of as the story that accompanies, follows, and perpetuates the work. These stories are the actual cache of the artworks since the artworks themselves are usually ephemeral, event-based, or simply uninteresting or formless as objects. Frequently, when encountered with a "work" of conceptual art the viewer is left wondering, "what is it?" or "Am I not seeing it correctly?" That feeling comes mostly from the fact that conceptual art is not to be consumed with the eyes but rather as an idea. Conceptual art carries merit if the ideas circulate widely. This is equally as problematic as the type of currency that envelops object centered cultural capital(s), but what is interesting here is that conceptual art is traded differently simply because it is harder to regulate due to its immateriality. When consuming conceptual works of art, "What's the idea?" is the better question and the answer usually lies in the work narrative.

As such it is not important always for conceptual works of art to be seen (or at least witnessed "first-hand"), much like it may not always be important for the pedagogical components of a conference (e.g. the lectures, discussions at dinner, etc.) to actually be witnessed in the flesh in order for them to be currency. Conference participation and conversations have currency, particularly within academic economies where we trade in CV lines, collaborations, notoriety, and ultimately a certain kind of aesthetic, meaning the cultivation of robust scholarly public personalities.

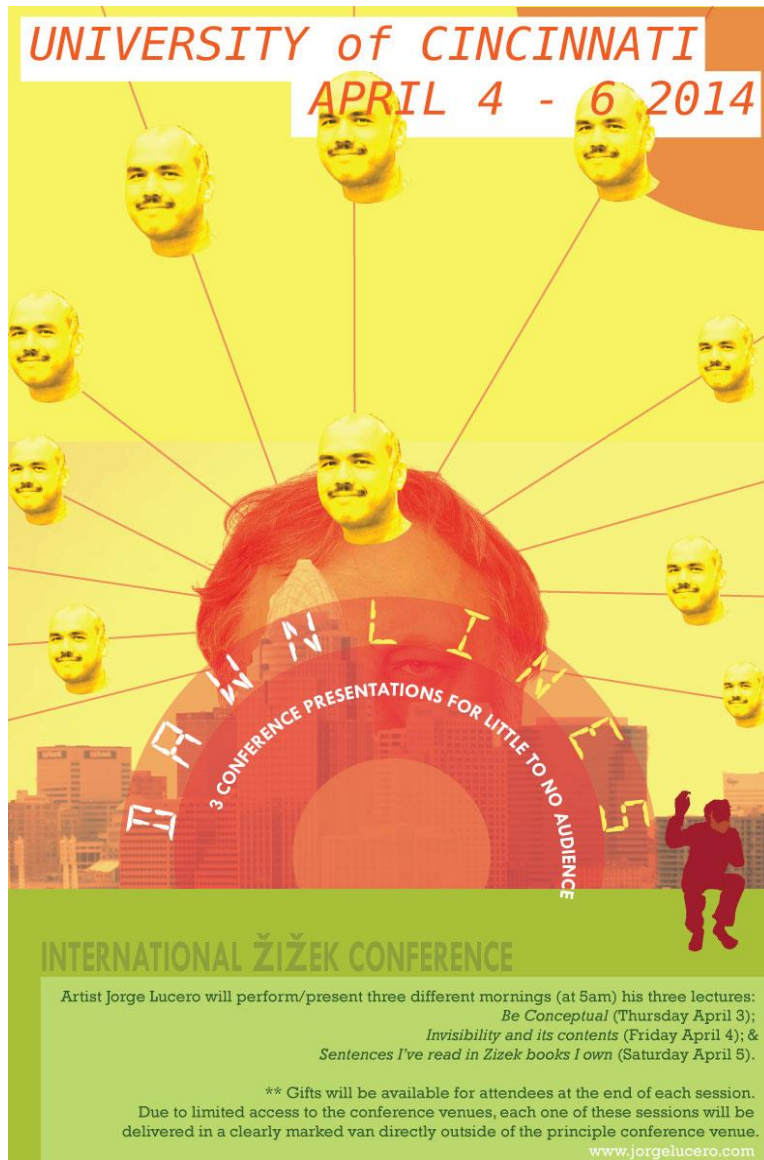


Figure 2: Silkscreened poster announcing the Dawn Line performance/lectures by Jorge Lucero

I imagined that—given the opportunity—I wanted to make a piece for the Žižek conference that tested the pliability of the conference itself but also tried to understand what has currency and where. I wanted to make conference presentations that played with duration, documentation, and the work narrative. The way to do this was to make my conference participation difficult to access. I proposed to the conference organizers that I be allowed to do a series of lecture-performances at dawn everyday of the conference (roughly 5 AM). The blind-reviewers accepted my proposal but I was told that the building where we were having the conference didn't open until 8am so that I might

consider delivering my contributions then. For me the whole point was to put the conference presentations in a place where they would be so difficult to access that I would end up having to present to small, albeit dedicated audiences, or even completely empty rooms. I was determined to present regardless of how many people attended.

At this point since it was not possible to have the presentations at dawn within the conference venue I came up with another idea, which—of course—ended up being much better. I rented a Chevy Suburban, whose cavernous interior feels like a small auditorium and I resituated all of my plans for this smaller venue. For each presentation I parked the car immediately outside of the official conference venue with several magnetized signs adhered to the outside of the car announcing it as part of the conference series of events (see Figures 3 and 4). I rigged the interior of the SUV with a viewing screen, a projector, and was prepared to funnel audio through the car's speaker system. I prepared three lectures with introductions and PowerPoint presentations for each dawn of the conference and I hired a printmaker to help me manufacture a hand-pulled silkscreened poster that would announce the project to the rest of the conference attendees (See Figure 2). This poster served as the usual conceptual art ephemera, which stands as evidence long past the occurrence of the actual artwork. This periphery object-making is intended to leave an archive that hopefully triggers the telling of the narrative and therefore feeds the long-gone artwork into the conventional market of other more orthodox, media-based artworks.



Figure 3: Chevy Suburban geared up and parked outside of conference venue



Figure 4: Magnetic decal designed by Jorge Lucero. It was then adhered to the exterior of the Suburban SUV to announce the lecture site.

During the days of the conference I placed my poster everywhere at the conference site. Hanging up the poster was enacted as an extension of the dawn performances manipulating the banal act of hanging an announcement into a sort of dance (see Figure 5). The way that I did this was by first taking down all the existing announcements that surrounded the area where I wanted my poster to hang. Then I used every single item that I took down from that wall to make a clean grid arrangement, which now included my poster. The posters were also available for free at the conference merchandise table and people were taking them because they were hand crafted silkscreened artworks. Some people called the posters “beautiful”.



Figure 5: Before and after of poster arrangements at Conference venue.

Needless to say no one showed up for the first lecture (see figure 6). A lectured titled, *Be Conceptual* where I outlined some of my reasoning and the theoretical underpinnings of what I was doing. *Invisibility and its Contents*, the second day presentation furthered the idea of the value of invisibility in art, academia, and social practice, which is a form of art world civic engagement. No one showed up for the second either. At this point however people at the conference began to come up to me and say things like, “you’re the guy whose doing those early morning lectures right? Ugh, I want to come but I just can’t seem to get out of bed that early!” A variation of this sentence was spoken to me more

times than I can count. I was very pleased with this result since in the end it was the form that was of considerable interest to me, and it was the form that was getting the requisite audience I had wished for. The form in this case was merely the work narrative. These conversations usually slid into questions about why I was doing it the way that I was doing it. These questions helped me to think about what it meant to talk about something even though no one was participating in it directly.



Figure 6: First day of attendance at the lecture/performance by Jorge Lucero

On the final day of the conference four people showed up to hear me present the final talk: *Sentences I've read in Žižek Books I own* (see Figure 7). Two students from the University of Cincinnati's art school and two conference attendees were at the final presentation. This was the most unusual lecture of the three days because it consisted literally of me reading highlighted sentences from three Žižek books that I currently owned: *Paul's New Moment*, *The Monstrosity of Christ*, and *God in Pain: Inversions of Apocalypse*. I had prerecorded myself reading from the books and was merely playing the audio to the attendees in the car. All the while I took them on a dawn drive towards

Mt. Airy, a Cincinnati forest preserve about five miles away from the conference venue.



Figure 7: Final day of attendance for Jorge Lucero's lecture/performance. Faces obscured to preserve participant anonymity.

Immediately concluding this final talk the attendees were invited to take a set of complimentary collages as a gift for their participation in the final lecture (see Figures 8 and 9). The collages were from another artwork I had made where I was thinking about labor and how much work needs to be put into making something in order to make it worth anything. Motivated by the conceptual art theorists Lucy Lippard and John Chandler's quote of "still not knowing how much less nothing can be" (Lippard and Chandler, 1968/1999, p.50), I attempt over and over again to make small, minimal, dematerialized, and invisible gestures into art currency. I want to trade in these insignificancies.



Figure 8: Attendees select their complimentary artworks after the final presentation



Figure 9: Two examples from the collages that were given away at the conclusion of the final lecture/performance

Without attempting to contextualize the three lecture performances to succinctly, perhaps the best move is to incorporate into these concluding pages a descriptive portion of the three lectures that were delivered. In the introductory remarks that were made at the beginning of all three presentations this statement was made aloud:

In the first essay I propose an artist's mode-of-operation I call *Be Conceptual*. *Be Conceptual* encourages creative responses to the institutions that govern us. "Institution" is defined broadly as anything that places parameters, whether real or imagined, around a fantasy that we might have about our own autonomy. *Be Conceptual* requires a nominal—but steady—study of conceptualist gestures typically made by artists. The study of conceptual art explained in the first essay is facilitated by the fact that conceptual art can sometimes circumvent—through its documentation—any strict requirement to be experienced in the "flesh".

The second essay, called *Invisibility and its Contents* aims to encourage life, philosophical, and art gestures that push towards invisibility or—at least—play with visibility. Now one might ask, “aren’t most of the things I do already unseen?”. Yes, of course. At the same time, testing the pliability of visibility through conceptual art gestures carries with it a certain degree of intentionality, which is what makes it art and not just good ol’ living. By making conceptual art that grapples with invisibility, one pushes into the realm of philosophy. I am perpetually gripped by one sentence in Lucy Lippard and John Chandler’s germinal conceptual art text on dematerialization. They pondered that, “We still do not know, how much less ‘nothing’ can be” (Lippard and Chandler, 1968/1999, p. 50). My proposal for a testing of visibility’s pliability is propelled by my curiosity to see as many attempts at Lippard and Chandler’s seemingly unattainable challenge.

The final lecture is called *Sentences I’ve read in Žižek books I own* and it is exactly what it sounds like. It is a collection of sentences that I have highlighted for a variety of reasons in Žižek books I own, which incidentally is not that many. The straight juxtaposition and reading of those bracketed and decontextualized texts is both a mimicry of the modalities involved in delivering lectures at conferences like this, while at the same time it is—as Barthes called it—“ a pure gesture of inscription” (Barthes, 1968/1977, p. 146) meaning it is simultaneously taking on meaning as it is being enacted. Although I am unsure at this moment—meaning prior to having done the act—of what will be the consequence of my straight recitation of those juxtaposed texts; I’m diving in with the amusing words of John Dewey in the back of my mind. Dewey was talking about the artist and viewer’s shared experience of creation in their respective individual encounters with the same artwork. The artist (or author) creates first, but the viewer also re-creates the work when they encounter it. Dewey only implies that this recreation takes place in the mind, so I’m left free to interpret that recreation through other means. Dewey, plays with the way the word “re-creation” reads and consequently opens up the question of playful imitation (or pantomime) as a means to

“appreciate the work of art” (Dewey, 1938/1988, p. 365). I will recite Žižek’s words as a means to appreciate, meaning further “understand, the worth or importance” of the authors’ words and by inference, the author’s importance.

As a final archive of all these activities I created the Dawn Lines webpage, which can be found here: <http://www.jorgelucero.com/Pages/dawnline.aspx>. On this page the reader will find some of the same documentation included in this brief recounting. You will also have access to a short sliver of one of the lectures given to no audience on the first dawn of the lectures (see Figure 10).

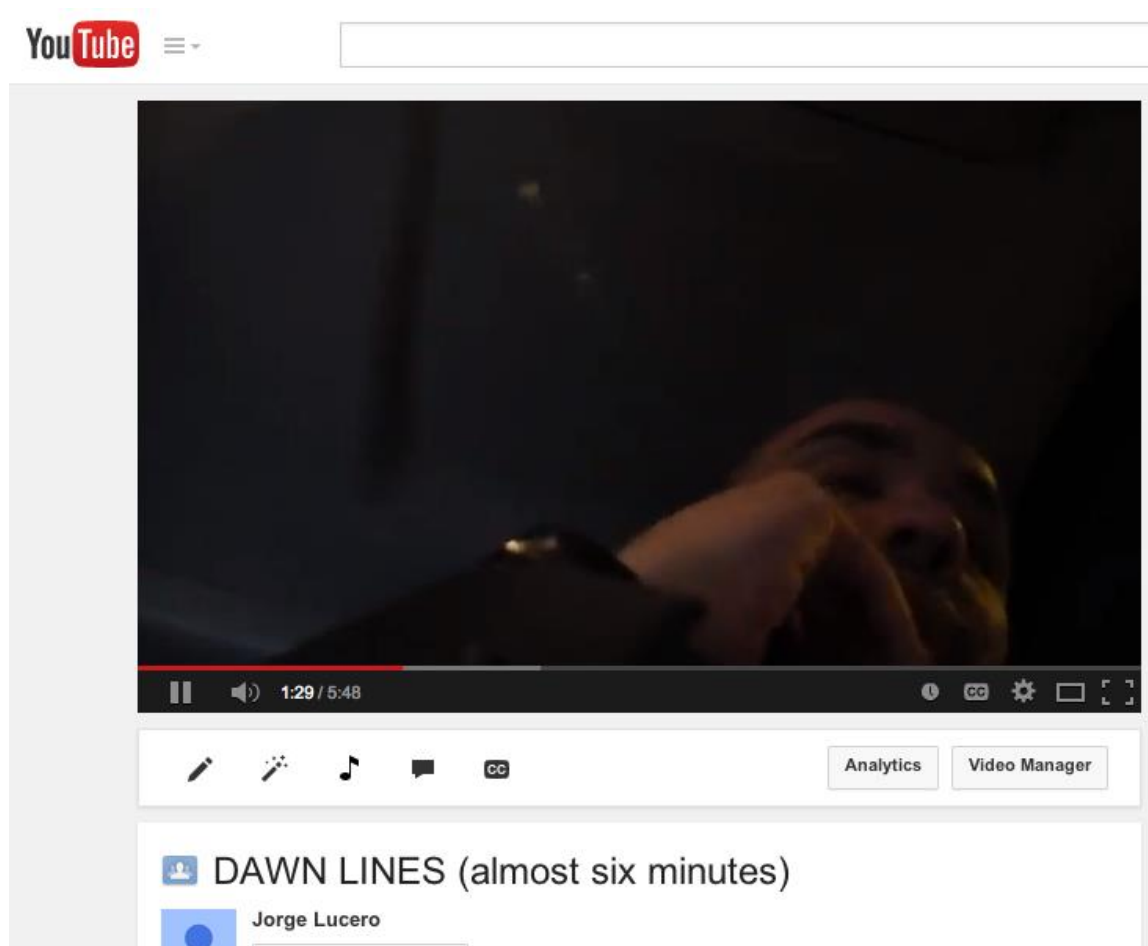


Figure 10: Screen capture of the YouTube moment for Dawn Lines

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