ANATOMY GALAXY – EPISTEMIC ENVIRONMENT



An invited response to a one-day installation event – Anatomy Galaxy, by Connie Svabo.
University of Southern Denmark Odense June 24 2026. [Link]
Link to Connie Svabo's dissertation on the project – [Link]

Epistemic environments

Connie Svabo's *Anatomy Galaxy* began with a found situation: a decommissioned anatomy learning environment at the University of Southern Denmark – a wet specimen self-study room and, beside it, a large space named Galaxy. Over half a year she worked with this site as a curatorial studio, developing what she calls an inquiry into *epistemic environments*: an exploration of how spaces, materials, garments, images and bodies participate in the emergence of knowing. The rooms are no longer in use, but they remain saturated with the residues of pedagogical practice – ventilation infrastructure, old signage, the marks left by the heavy containers

that once held anatomical specimens. Even the name is a found object: an LED display outside the rooms reading “Anatomi Galaxy”, Danish and English spliced together, origin unknown, spanning — as she notes — from the anatomical body to the cosmos.

Potential space — method

Her framing proposal is *space as method*. Rather than treating the site as a neutral container for study, the curatorial studio takes environments, materials and mediating forms as active participants in inquiry. Connie describes the studio as a *temporary potential space*. For Donald Winnicott, the potential space is the intermediate zone between inner psychic reality and the external world, the space of the infant’s transitional object, and later of play, creativity and cultural experience altogether. It is a space that is neither subjective nor objective but paradoxically both — a zone where the question “did you find this or did you make it?” is precisely the question one must not ask. This is an apt description of what a curatorial studio does with a found site: the abandoned anatomy rooms are discovered *and* invented, encountered *and* made. (The rhetorical tradition knew this doubleness as *inventio* — to come upon and to create in a single gesture.) Reverie, symbolisation, holding environments — the psychoanalytic register runs through the project, surfacing explicitly in the responses to the installation, and in the Galaxy Dress itself, described as a “mobile experience architecture and holding environment”, clothing as first architecture, a mediating membrane between body and world.

Out of the inquiry emerges a distinction between two epistemic environments: *Anatomy*, the standardised, tightly choreographed and sequenced environment for knowing, and *Galaxy*, an open, emergent environment for exploration and imagination. The spiral — realised in the installation as a great cascading scroll of paper suspended from the ceiling — becomes the figure of the latter: knowing as iterative return, unplanned, autotelic, developing not according to a programme but through repeated visits to the site.

ASTS Art Science Technology Studies

This places the project within a rich lineage in science studies, while extending it through arts practice. The laboratory ethnographies of the late 1970s — Latour

and Woolgar at the Salk Institute, Karin Knorr Cetina's early work on the manufacture of knowledge – established that scientific facts are not simply discovered but made: fabricated in particular places, with particular instruments, inscription devices and bodily disciplines. Knorr Cetina's later *Epistemic Cultures* showed that even this making is not uniform – that high-energy physics and molecular biology constitute knowledge through quite different machineries, arrangements and forms of collective life. Shapin and Schaffer's *Leviathan and the Air-Pump* traced the experimental form of life back to its seventeenth-century founding, showing how the credibility of the air-pump trials depended on the space in which they were staged – the gentlemanly parlour, the register of witnesses, even the way they dressed – so that questions of architecture, access and decorum were, from the beginning, questions of truth. The spatial turn consolidated this: David Livingstone putting science in its place, Ophir and Shapin on the situatedness of knowledge, Peter Galison on the architecture of the laboratory, Robert Kohler on the border between lab and field. Thomas Gieryn gave us the "truth-spot" – the place that lends credibility to claims made from it. And Hans-Jörg Rheinberger's account of *experimental systems* and *epistemic things* offered a vocabulary for the way research objects emerge within material arrangements – vague, generative, question-generating entities that are always in excess of what can currently be said about them. His epistemic things are, one might say, the laboratory's transitional objects: found and made at once.

Anatomy theatre

The anatomy theatre is perhaps the paradigmatic case for all of this. From Padua and Leiden onward it was a purpose-built epistemic apparatus – architecture, spectacle, corpse, instrument, candlelight and audience choreographed into the production of anatomical knowledge, with the moral and the mortal never far from the epistemic: the Leiden theatre dressed its margins with skeletons bearing vanitas banners. Anatomical knowing has never been placeless. It is also worth recalling Donna Haraway here: all knowledge is situated, the view from nowhere a "god trick"; vision is always embodied, partial, located. Connie's inquiry takes this feminist epistemological insight literally and materially – knowing bodies are clothed bodies, and the garment, that most intimate of mediators, becomes an epistemic instrument.

Probing and activating space

What Connie adds to this lineage is praxis (practice-based research) and conceptual synthesis and density. Where science studies has largely observed and reconstructed epistemic environments — ethnographically, historically — her curatorial studio *inhabits and reworks* one. Installation, garment, video, journal and modeled clay are used not to represent the site's epistemic workings but to probe and activate them: research-creation, inquiry conducted in and through media. Open-ended, autotelic, seeing what happens if one tracks the vortices of association, the spiraling constellations. The abandoned anatomy room, caught between uses, becomes a privileged vantage — an epistemic environment made visible precisely in its dismantling, the way an instrument becomes conspicuous only when it breaks.

And this is where the visit begins. In the theatre archaeology that Mike Pearson and I developed, any visit — any performance of arrival at a site — involves three personae: host, ghost and visitor. The host is the place itself with its accumulated memories; the ghosts are the pasts saturating it, pasts-in-the-present; and the visitor arrives with their own baggage, their own hauntings, and with futurity — for memory conditions anticipation. A fine visit is a conversation among the three, a creative exchange whose destination is unknown, digging up indeterminate pasts for uncertain futures. Connie's half-year of returns to the anatomy rooms is exactly such a conversation — visitor becoming ghost, doppelgänger, in an iterative and spiraling hermeneutic. The response that follows takes up her spiral and plunges it into deep time — to the megalithic chambers of Atlantic Europe, where people came for six thousand years to visit, inspect, deposit and retrieve the parts of bodies: the anatomy theatres of prehistory.

Response, in five parts

1 What does one do on a visit? — a comment on invention

Connie has found and visited this place. At some point she will leave it behind, leaving traces, carrying memories.



Anatomy chamber. Modeled figurations of encounters with anatomical body parts in the wet specimen self-study room. Ventilation system for venting fumes from preserving fluid. The large vats for body parts have been removed.

In our theatre archaeology and for many years, Mike Pearson and I wandered – a performance artist and an archaeologist. Visiting places under the ever-present question – what do you do in a visit, in an itinerary? What might one do on a journey, when one gets there, if there is a there – moving to, through, and on.

Encounter. Engagement. Investigation. Vacation.

One finds things and one works with the findings, the experiences. This is re-search. In rhetoric, that ancient praxis of argument, communication, mediation, the production of knowledge-statements, research is called INVENTIO. In Latin INVENIRE is to come upon, to find, discover, *and* to invent, create.

We are always already part of the places we visit and seek to understand. We are complicit in making them what they are.



Mårhøj Jættestue, Fyn, Denmark. Entrance to the passage leading to charnel-chamber.

2 Host, ghost, visitor – in conversation

Connie heard stories of this place and found traces of what went on here. Because the anatomy theatre is being remodelled, transformed into something else.



Galaxy Dress (and regular body dress). The Galaxy Dress was a mobile experience architecture and holding environment – a means of unfolding spiraling inquiry. It was unpacked and worn at a video shoot. This video work is still in process. In the inquiry, clothing emerges as a first architecture: a mediating layer between body and environment.

Mike and I talked of the three personae in any (performance of) visit – host, ghost, and visitor.

Pasts are all around you. The host has memories. Every hosting place is saturated in memories, pasts-in-the-present, ghosts. And every visitor comes with their own baggage, pasts weighing-on-the-present, hauntings. And with futurity – because memories orient us, condition our anticipations of what might become of what was.

Surely, a fine visit is a conversation with the host, a creative exchange where one doesn’t know where one is going. Autotelic. Digging up indeterminate pasts for uncertain futures.



Galaxy Spiral. The inquiry takes place through repeated returns to site. It does not develop according to a plan, but in dynamic centripetal and centrifugal vortex.

And we returned (the NOSTOS) in an iterative and spiraling hermeneutic, visitor-becoming-ghost, doppelganger.

3 Vortices – centrifugal and centripetal

Connie found that the suite of rooms was called Anatomi *Galaxy*.

The archetype of galaxy is a spiraling vortex. Maelstrom.



Hulbjerg Jættestue, Langeland, Denmark. c3300–3200 BCE.

Any sensible visit is a plunge into the centrifugal and centripetal associations of site – the GENIVS LOCI – the becoming of place. Philosophically one can call this *haecceity* – the here-ness, there-ness of a place.

Vortices. Fountains and sinkholes.

Cosmic energies – stars and black holes, solar bodies and solar anuses.

The body and the cosmos. Micro and macro – one spirals into intimate details and out to big picture scenarios.

There's an etymological chain. Cosmos – is a proper arrangement and implies a process of arrangement – cosmetics – to accompany the galaxy dress!

4 Scroll and chiffon(age) – a comment on mediation

Spiraling vortex. Connie has suspended an unwinding scroll from the ceiling. A

spiraling cascade into folds.



Galaxy Spiral and **Anatomical Body in Galaxy Dress, layered and projected**. Video still. The projection combines anatomy, garment and environment into a layered composition, emerging through experimentation with projection, bodily performance and the Galaxy Dress as a mediating layer between body and environment.

One might write upon a scroll. Roll it up to keep for later. Unwind it to read. Fold the paper into a codex. We make notes and journals of our encounters. We might return to re-read our notes.

And one might recall that scrolls and codices were once made of vellum – skin.

Two dresses hang on the wall. We usually, but not always, come clothed on a visit. Clothing, as extra skin, is a crucial part of encounter, mediating, enabling, affording. This roll of paper might as well be a bolt of cloth. Finely textured, translucent – we see the light through the unrolling unfolding surface. And some supporting threads are loosened. An invitation to sew again, to reweave.

5 Bodies in place – prehistoric anatomy theatre

Connie has mobilized her sensibility attuned to architecture and containment,

integument and membranes, mediation and the instrumentality of clothing in environment – epistemic environments. A distributed phenomenology, one might say.

My archaeological sensibility takes me into the vortex of prehistory that remains with us even now.

Six thousand years ago they were everywhere across Atlantic Europe – great stone chambers, boxes of bones set in the earth, in the landscape. Megaliths. People came to visit, to inspect, to retrieve and deposit body parts. Dry bones inside and juicy pork sandwiches in the feasting outside. The anatomy theatres of prehistory.

Everywhere one finds cup and ring carvings. At New Grange in Ireland at the entrance to the chamber is carved a triple spiral. And on every midwinter morning for the last 5200 years, and only on those mornings, the sun’s rays visit the stone passage to throw light on the chamber of bone boxes. Cosmic sites.

Praxis – synchronicity? The probing and activation of a modern epistemic environment, anatomy theatre, nudges us towards fresh experiences of these prehistoric more-than-monument-tomb-container-structure-architecture-milieux – Anatomy Galaxies.



Skamby Jættestue, Fyn, Denmark.