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A Conversation with Paul Rabinow

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By Todd Meyers



Earlier this year I talked with Paul Rabinow about his most recent books — [The Accompaniment: Assembling the Contemporary](#) (University of Chicago Press, 2011), [Designing Human Practices: An Experiment with Synthetic Biology](#) (with Gaymon Bennett, University of Chicago, 2012), [Demands of the Day: On the Logic of Anthropological Inquiry](#) (with Anthony Stavrianakis, University of Chicago Press, 2013), and a fourth volume, [Designs on the Contemporary](#) (with Anthony Stavrianakis), to follow next year. What began as a conversation for Somatosphere evolved into a short interview for the Los Angeles Review of Books. In the coming months and years, we at Somatosphere hope to continue collaborations (to a greater or lesser extent) with other publications and forums. Below is an excerpt from the interview and a link to the full interview at the Los Angeles Review of Books.

[excerpt from [On the Logic of Anthropological Inquiry: A Conversation with Paul Rabinow](#), Los Angeles Review of Books, November 4th, 2013]

Todd Meyers: Your recent books are quite an undertaking. In part they provide a map for future work, but also, in an unambiguous way, they're an appraisal of the past – your own intellectual past, the past of the discipline of anthropology, and of the various projects in which you've

participated over the last several years. I'm curious how these volumes (including the forthcoming *Designs on the Contemporary*) were initially conceived, and how they evolved.

Paul Rabinow: For a long time now I have been in search of a different manner of practicing the qualitative human sciences. In a sense this quest goes back to my education at the University of Chicago in the 1960s where there was a curriculum and where we were encouraged to think beyond the disciplinary boundaries. I was drawn to anthropology as a discipline in which it might be possible to practice “fieldwork in philosophy”, that is to say to pose questions and address problems traditionally situated in philosophic venues but to explore them out of the academy through sustained inquiry in the world. With the prodigious exception of Michel Foucault twentieth century philosophers have not conducted this form of empirically based, slow and time-consuming, inquiry. Even John Dewey, one of my guiding lights in providing a conceptualization of inquiry, basically did not carry out any such project. Thus, the challenge has been to be conceptually innovative, experimental in the dual sense of an appropriately rigorous approach to problems and in the work on the self and others that makes one capable of ethically undertaking such work.

For some time now I have understood anthropology to be the study (*logos*) of *anthropos*, different figures and constitutive practices of human beings. In previous books, *Anthropos Today, Reflections on Modern Equipment* (2003) written while teaching in the philosophy department of the *Ecole Normale Supérieure* in Paris, and *Marking Time, on the Anthropology of the Contemporary* (2008), I began to clarify the conceptual equipment for an anthropology adequate to the twenty-first century. This work entailed reaching back in time to recover and remediate many concepts that had been articulated previously to address different if analogous problems of living beings and their milieus, science as a vocation, and the care of the self and others.

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[Paul Rabinow](#) is Professor of Anthropology at the University of California, Berkeley, and Director of the Anthropology of the Contemporary Research Collaboratory (ARC).

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