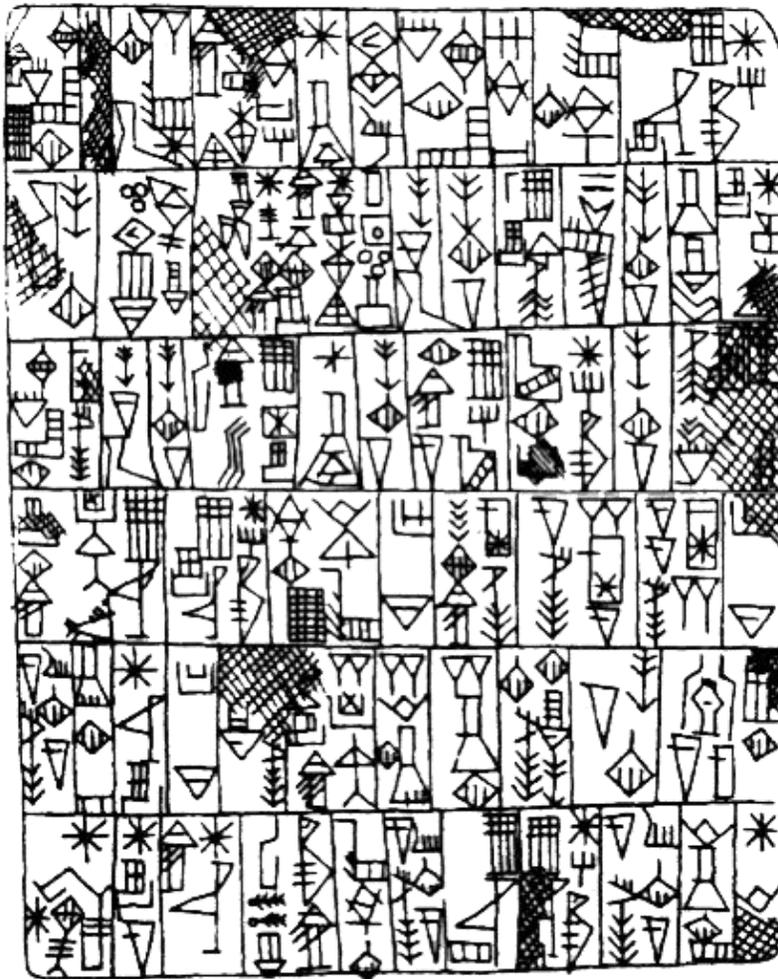


JUBILEE – platform for artistic research and production



## VERMEIR & HEIREMANS

OVERVIEW OF PRESS, REVIEWS AND REFLECTIONS

Selection 2009- 2020

# JUBILEE – platform for artistic research and production

## Vermeir & Heiremans

Through their work, Vermeir & Heiremans investigate the complex relationship between art, architecture and the economy in today's highly globalised world. Having designated their own house an art work, the artists use this 'house as artwork' concept as a framing device that questions the role the arts play within the ever-growing entanglement of finance, urban development and governance. Their practice employs financial tools, historical references, technology, and cinematic language to reflect on social codes as well as on the production of value in today's artistic and non-artistic realms. Katleen Vermeir and Ronny Heiremans live and work in Brussels.

Vermeir & Heiremans presented their work in exhibitions at 10th Istanbul Biennial (2007). Arnolfini, Bristol; Frankfurter Kunstverein; Kassel Documentary Film Festival (2009). Nam June Paik Art Center, Korea (2010); Videonale 13, Bonn; Videoex, Zurich; SALT, Istanbul; Viennale, Vienna (2011). ARGOS, Brussels; Extra City Kunsthall, Antwerp; 7th Shenzhen Sculpture Biennial; Manifesta 9 (2012). 13th Istanbul Biennial (2013). Brugge Triennale (2015). Transmediale; Bucharest Biennial (2016). Rencontres Internationales Berlin & Paris (2017); The Atlantic Project, Bristol; Pump House Gallery, London (2018).

The artists presented their work in discursive formats at La Capella, Barcelona; HKW, Berlin; Casco, Utrecht; ISELP, Brussels; Goldsmiths University, London (2016). Brussels Academy and Cosmopolis (VUB), Brussels; n.w.w.n.n.l.n.o., Brussels; City University of London; De Appel Curatorial Programme, Amsterdam; KADIST, Paris (2017). RITCS, Brussels; Hungarian University of Fine Art; Moholy Nagy University of Arts and Design, Budapest; Art Brussels; SOTA, Brussels; The Atlantic Project, Plymouth; RCA, London; University of Edinburgh; Flat Time House, London (2018). KASK, Ghent; Forum des Images, Paris; VUB, Brussels; Wiels, Brussels; University of Birmingham; HKW, Berlin; Carico Massimo, Livorno; City University of London (2019). Kunsten Museum of Modern Art, Aalborg (DK, 2020).

In collaboration with Jubilee, Open Source Publishing, Eté 78 and No New Enemies (Brussels), a number of artists and co-producers Vermeir & Heiremans developed Caveat, a collective research into the ecology of artistic practice.

## Jubilee

Jubilee was first established as a dialogue among artists and cultural workers in 2012 in Brussels. Since then it has evolved into an artist-run platform that provides continuous support for the work of six artists, while hosting others on a project base. Jubilee's focus is twofold. First, it is an organisation for the production of the work of these artists, in which research and collaboration are considered essential values. Second, these shared interests lead to collective research projects that focus on the conditions of artistic production.

Justin Bennett, Eleni Kamma, Vincent Meessen, Jasper Rigole, and Vermeir & Heiremans work in diverse media but always on a basis of collaborative research that brings in transversal knowledge from a wide range of humanities. For the Jubilee artists, collectivizing and sharing partnerships has been an opportunity to use the benefits of networks, visibility and other resources, while alleviating the responsibilities of fundraising, bookkeeping and legal costs. But Jubilee remains primarily a platform for content exchange and discussion. Together, the artists constitute Jubilee's collective artistic direction.

## VERMEIR & HEIREMANS

### Overview of press, reviews and reflections, 2009 - 2020

Pag	Publication	Date	Author	Title	Language
4	Boekman Stichting	2020	Dirk De Wit	<a href="#">Naar een wederkerig werken in de kunst</a>	NL
8	rekto:verso	2019, August 29	Zeynep Kubat	<a href="#">Kop of munt: financiële verbeelding in de kunst</a> <a href="#">Home Economics: Real Abstraction in the Work of Vermeir &amp; Heiremans</a>	NL
23	Open Set	2019, January 16	Steyn Bergs	<a href="#">A Model for a Quantitative Society</a>	EN
42	Spike Art Magazine	2019	Antony Hudek	<a href="#">What Are We Building Down There?</a>	EN
50	Flanders Art Institute	2016	Laura Herman & Niels Van Tomme	<a href="#">Bucharest Biennale 7</a>	EN
62	Metropolis M	2016	Laura Herman	<a href="#">Karl Marx - Het spook van het spook</a>	NL
72	Metropolis M	2016	Steyn Bergs	<a href="#">The Coming Exception - Art and the Crisis of Value</a>	EN
77	New Left Review	2016	Sven Lütticken	<a href="#">Dojima River Biennale 2015: Take me to the River</a>	EN
103	RealKyoto	2015, September 17	Haruhiro Ishitani	<a href="#">Booms, Blasen und das Latte-macchiato-Land</a>	D
109	Der Standard	2015, May 20	Anne Katrin Feßler	<a href="#">Masquerade. On public personae in a video installation by Vermeir &amp; Heiremans</a>	EN, NL
112	Kunstlicht	2015	Steyn Bergs & Jesse van Winden	<a href="#">Contre courant</a>	FR
126	L'art même	2015	Laurent Courtens Edgar Schmitz, Katleen Vermeir,		
127	Parse Journal	2015	Ronny Heiremans	<a href="#">Never Really in Real Time</a>	EN
146	Dojima River Biennale 2015	2015	Tom Trevor	<a href="#">Vermeir &amp; Heiremans, Masquerade (Osaka)</a>	EN
147	13th Istanbul Biennial catalogue	2014	Fulya Erdemci	<a href="#">Art and Capital: Institutional Critique Reloaded</a>	EN
151	Harvard Art & Design lecture	2013, October	Andrea Phillips	<a href="#">Public Space as Cultural Capital</a>	EN
157	ArtForum	2013, May 22	Kaelen Wilson-Goldie	<a href="#">Public Relations</a>	EN
163	Art Review	2013	Helen Sumpter & Bige Örer	<a href="#">The Biennial Questionnaire: Bige Örer</a>	EN
167	NY Arts Magazine	2013	Alan W. Moore	<a href="#">Sandbox Democracies</a>	EN
171	Ran Dian Magazine	2012, September 14	Rachel Marsden	<a href="#">The 7th Shenzhen Sculpture Biennale</a>	EN
179	H-Art	2012, September 2	Sam Steverlyncx	<a href="#">Een Faustiaans pact met de duivel</a>	NL
181	De Groene Amsterdammer	2012, August 15	Anna Tilroe	<a href="#">Het fatale verlangen naar een beter leven</a>	NL
185	Art Practical	2012, July 18	John Zarobell	<a href="#">dOCUMENTA (13), Manifesta 9, and the 7th Berlin Biennale</a>	EN
193	Domus	2012, June 22	Gabi Scardi	<a href="#">Manifesta 9: The Deep of the Modern</a>	EN
199	Art Review	2012, March	Nav Haq	<a href="#">Katleen Vermeir &amp; Ronny Heiremans</a>	EN
200	La Libre	2012, February 15	Claude Lorent	<a href="#">L'art en stratégies spéculatives</a>	FR
202	Argos	2012		<a href="#">The Residence (a wager for the afterlife)</a>	NL, FR, EN
206	Argos	2012	Carol Yinghua Lu	<a href="#">The Residence is Something Immaterial</a>	EN
210	Argos	2012	Lucy Chen & Ma Wen	<a href="#">A Wager for the Afterlife</a>	EN
212	Knack Focus	2012	Els Fiers	<a href="#">Wachten op het hiernamaals</a>	NL
213	L'art même	2012	Colette Dubois	<a href="#">Creative Land</a>	FR
214	Kaleidoscope	2011	Nav Haq	<a href="#">Current Account</a>	EN
220	The Gap	2011	Margit Emez	<a href="#">A Good Life?</a>	D
222	Building Design	2009, April 3	Pamela Buxton	<a href="#">Bristol's architectural brave new world?</a>	EN
223	H-Art	2009	Fatos Ustek	<a href="#">'The Good Life' of Vermeir &amp; Heiremans</a>	EN
224	Art Monthly	2009	Stephen Lee	<a href="#">Katleen Vermeir &amp; Ronny Heiremans: The Good Life</a>	EN

Dirk De Wit

# Naar een wederkerig werken in de beeldende kunst

Om de kloof te dichten tussen een kleine groep rijke megagaleries en een grote meerderheid kunstenaars en kleine galeries die het moeilijk hebben, moeten bestaande modellen worden herdacht. Drie cases laten zien hoe eerlijke en gelijkwaardige relaties in de ecologie van de beeldende kunst kunnen bestaan.

In het openingsartikel van deze *Boekman* schetst Olav Velthuis de steeds grotere kloof tussen een relatief klein aantal megagaleries en topkunstenaars die werken met een steeds groeiende groep (superrijke) verzamelaars wereldwijd, en de overgrote meerderheid van kunstenaars en middelgrote en kleine galeries die internationaal werken maar het financieel moeilijk hebben. Hij wordt daarin ondersteund door de Italiaanse hoogleraar Cultural Economics Pier Luigi Sacco (Sacco 2017).

## Het systeem herdenken

Sacco betoogt dat het noodzakelijke evenwicht tussen de domestieke ruimte, de gemeenschapsruimte, de marktruimte en de civiele ruimte grondig wordt verstoord, met schadelijke gevolgen voor het hele ecosysteem van de beeldende kunst.<sup>1</sup> Zo staan zowel kunstenaars als profit- en non-profitorganisaties die talent ontwikkelen, hun projecten realiseren en kunst zichtbaar maken en verbinden onder druk. Ondertussen pikken de grote galeries en kunstinstellingen talent op zonder mechanismen om die investeringen van talentontwikkelaars te honoreren en opbrengsten terug te laten vloeien. Speculatie op de kunstmarkt kan carrières in gevaar brengen. Het scheidt een beeld van kunst als investering voor superrijken terwijl de meerderheid van de kunstenaars én de samenleving streven naar het engagement, de (zelf)reflectie en de betekenis die kunst te bieden heeft.<sup>2</sup> Musea worden door de hoge prijzen voor kunstwerken genoodzaakt om deals te sluiten met verzamelaars. Hierdoor gaan ze ongewild een rol spelen in de waardevermeerdering van private verzamelingen. Verzamelaars richten ook private musea op rond hun collecties en co-financieren tentoonstellingen rond kunstenaars uit hun collectie.

Sacco pleit voor het herdenken van de bestaande productie- en distributiemodellen vanuit de vraag wat kunst kan betekenen voor burgers en gemeenschappen. Hij spreekt over *critical independence* in het aangaan van relaties en samenwerking met kunstorganisaties en kunstmarkt. Hij pleit er niet voor om uit het bestaande kader van kunstorganisaties en galeries te stappen, maar om met partijen die daartoe bereid zijn, het systeem te herdenken. Radicale keuzes die kunstenaars, kleinere galeries, *artist-run*

*spaces* en kunstruimtes vandaag samen moeten nemen (Sacco 2017).

Ook binnen de kunstmarkt leiden deze zorgwekkende analyses tot ideeën en oplossingen. Kleine en middelgrote galeries verlagen hun kosten door galerieruimtes en beursstands te delen; kunstbeurzen herverdelen de huurprijs van stands onder gevestigde en opkomende galeries en diversifiëren hun aanbod met secties voor projectruimtes; verzamelaars schenken meer aandacht aan opkomende kunstenaars; kunstenaars zetten zelf kunstgaleries op<sup>3</sup> of er ontstaan kunstbeurzen die opgezet worden door galeries en non-profitkunstruimtes zoals Independent of Condo.<sup>4</sup> Het zijn waardevolle initiatieven die echter weinig fundamenteel veranderen aan een kunstmarkt die sterk gericht is op economische en symbolische transacties en op groei. Daardoor komt de zorg voor de ecologie van spelers die betrokken zijn bij de productie van kunst en de verbinding met de samenleving onder druk te staan. Deze oplossingen veranderen met andere woorden weinig aan de overwaardering, de speculatie en de groeiende kloven door een opwaartse economie. Ook het gebrek aan wederkerig karakter tussen de megagaleries en -verzamelaars enerzijds en de meerderheid van de kunstenaars en de profit- en non-profitkunstorganisaties anderzijds blijft onveranderd.

Vandaar het pleidooi van diverse spelers in het kunstenveld, zoals het Brusselse kunstenaars-initiatief Jubilee met het praktijkonderzoek Caveat<sup>5</sup>, voor 'a shift from an economy to an ecology of players'. Een verschuiving waarbij financiële transacties een onderdeel zijn en ten dienste staan van die ecologie. Zo'n omslag houdt in dat je de ruimte van de markt situeert in de ecologie van de domestieke, de gemeenschaps- en de civiele ruimte.

### **Van economie naar ecosysteem**

Welke vorm neemt zo'n omslag dan concreet aan? De kunstmarkt kan zelf oplossingen bedenken en regulerend optreden door middel van handvesten en deontologische kaders.<sup>6</sup> Daarnaast kan de overheid de publieke waarde van kunst beschermen en versterken door rechtstreekse steun aan kunstenaars en kunstorganisaties, door de aankoopbudgetten van musea te verhogen en door galeries te steunen

die minder bekende kunstenaars of minder marktgevoelig werk van kunstenaars op een kunstbeurs presenteren. Maar er bestaat ook een 'derde weg' om die omslag waar te maken, een weg die groeit vanuit de gemeenschap, die niet in hoofdzaak gebaseerd is op investeren en op groei. Die weg is open en verbindt diverse netwerken, en ook markt en overheid kunnen zich daarbij aansluiten. Deze derde weg heeft nog volop de vorm van zoektocht en experiment. Enkele voorbeelden kunnen bijdragen om ons iets voor te stellen bij het potentieel van die derde weg. Geen van deze is volmaakt, ze worden stapsgewijs en al doende ontwikkeld in cocreatie met diverse spelers. Ze plaatsen zich niet buiten maar juist midden in de hoger beschreven domestieke, gemeenschaps-, civiele en markt-ruimtes, en sleutelen aan de onderlinge spelregels en verhoudingen.

### **Emergent, Veurne (BE)**

Emergent<sup>7</sup> is een kunstruimte in een 16de-eeuwse burgerwoning op de markt van Veurne met 900 m<sup>2</sup> tentoonstellingsoppervlak. Curator Frank Maes werd door de eigenaar verzocht om er een kunstgalerie te starten. Omdat een galerie commercieel niet haalbaar zou zijn en subsidies onrealistisch zijn in deze uithoek van het land, verkent hij sinds 2013 een derde weg. Daarbij investeren kunstliefhebbers en bedrijven in een kwaliteitsvol artistiek programma, dat het artistieke team van Emergent onder leiding van Maes volledig autonoom samenstelt met een non-profitdoel. De investeerders – momenteel een tiental – betalen jaarlijks 15.000 euro voor een periode van drie jaar en krijgen daarvoor kansen om hun kennis over kunst te verdiepen via de tentoonstellingen, lezingen en werk- en atelierbezoeken die ze gratis kunnen bijwonen. Bovendien krijgen ze als eersten de kans om bij Emergent geëxposeerde kunstwerken te kopen met een reductie op het aandeel dat naar Emergent gaat. De investeerders zijn verzamelaars, startende of occasionele kopers of mecenasen. Op verzoek krijgen ze gratis en vrijblijvend begeleiding en advies voor hun kunstaankopen van het artistieke team. Naast deze investeerders heeft Emergent ook een laagdrempelige vriendenvereniging opgezet waarvan kunstliefhebbers lid kunnen worden voor een kleine jaarlijkse bijdrage. →

De kunstenaars die er tentoonstellen krijgen een productiebudget en ze ontvangen 50 procent op een eventuele verkoop van een werk. Ze ontvangen geen apart loon, maar daar staat tegenover dat investeerders enkel een deel van hun investering kunnen recupereren wanneer ze werk aankopen, wat de kans groot maakt dat er werk verkocht wordt. Daarnaast wordt er steeds een percentage voorzien bij een verkoop voor de moedergalerie als de kunstenaar met een vaste galerie werkt. Met de investeringen en de opbrengsten uit lidgelden en verkoop betaalt Emergent de lonen van de deeltijdse contracten en werkingskosten, en de productie van kunstwerken en tentoonstellingen. Die tentoonstellingen zijn gratis toegankelijk voor het publiek tijdens het weekend en op afspraak. Om zich van de profitstructuur van een galerie te onderscheiden werd oorspronkelijk gekozen voor een non-profitstichting, maar die werd recent, onder impuls van directrice Roxane Baeyens, omgevormd tot een coöperatieve vennootschap (cvba). Daardoor krijgen de investeerders – nu vennoten – een fiscaal voordeel tijdens de eerste vier jaar van de cvba: van de 15.000 euro zijn 3.000 euro aandelen waarop 45 procent fiscaal voordeel geldt. Het is niet uitgesloten dat ook publieke overheden in de toekomst bijdragen aan dit model, dat na zes jaar haalbaar is maar financieel kwetsbaar blijft. Emergent verschilt van de klassieke galerie omdat ze de private sector niet enkel koopkansen biedt, maar ook inhoudelijk en financieel betreft bij een publiek en kunstenaarsgericht initiatief. Voor kunstenaars biedt Emergent productie- en presentatiekansen vanuit een inhoudelijke drijfveer, en verkoopkansen aan geëngageerde verzamelaars. Op die manier verbindt Emergent de kunstenaar en zijn of haar galerie, curator, burger en verzamelaar/investeerder in een circulair financieel model.

### V22, Londen (VK)

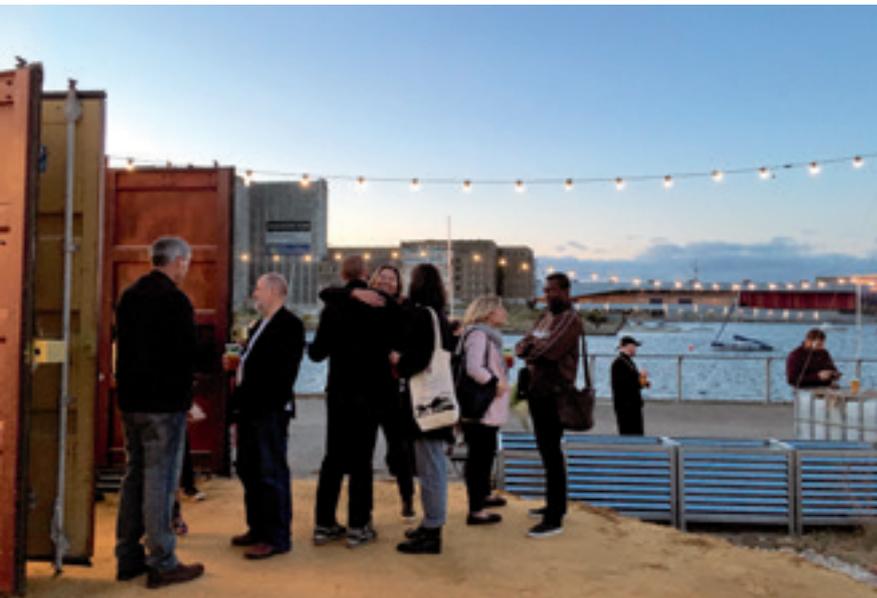
V22 zet nog een stap verder dan Emergent in het verbinden van financiën, vastgoed, collecties, creatie en presentatie. V22 werd in 2006 mede opgericht door Tara Cranswick vanuit de behoefte om wat kunstenaars nodig hebben te verbinden ('a place to work, a way to show their art, and collectors to buy and look after their art'<sup>8</sup>) en daar een gedeeld eigenaarschap rond te creëren.



Zaalzicht uit de tentoonstelling *Zwiefall*, Emergent, Veurne, 2019-2020. Links: Ante Timmermans, *Nie*, acryl en potlood op houten paneel, 2015; rechts: Charl van Ark, *Roncalli*, gemengde technieken, 2001/ 2019. Fotografie: Rachel Gruijters

V22 was tevens een reactie op de verstoorde marktwerking in de vastgoedwereld en de kunstmarkt, en op de gesloten en niet-transparante netwerken die kunstenaars en kunstorganisaties ondergaan en waar ze weinig zeggenschap over hebben.

V22 bestaat uit twee structuren: een profitstructuur en een stichting waarmee subsidies voor publieke programma's aangevraagd kunnen worden. De naamloze vennootschap V22 biedt aandelen aan op de sociale aandelenbeurs ISDX-ICAP.<sup>9</sup> Aandeelhouders besturen mee binnen zo'n structuur op een gereguleerde en transparante wijze. Met de aandelen – het kleinste aandeel bedraagt 25 pond – financiert een artistiek comité een collectie. De kunstenaars worden betaald met aandelen zodat ongeveer 50 procent van de aandelen in handen van de kunstenaars is. De opbrengsten uit verkoop worden opnieuw geïnvesteerd in de vennootschap die vastgoed voor studio's verwerft, waarmee ook kunstproducties worden gefinancierd, en die op termijn dividend uitkeert aan de investeerders. De aandeelhouders kunnen tijdelijk één of meerdere kunstwerken in huis of in het bedrijf hebben mits ze betalen voor verzekering, onderhoud en inspectie. De naamloze vennootschap V22 is ook eigenaar van een gebouw dat voor lage prijzen studio's verhuurt aan kunstenaars en waarin de V22 stichting tentoonstellingen en educatieve programma's organiseert. Momenteel beheert



V22, Londen. © V22

V22 meerdere gebouwen, waarvan een deel in eigendom en een deel in tijdelijk gebruik, waar meer dan 400 kunstenaars een atelier huren (Cranswick et al. 2014 en noot 8).

### **A Modest Proposal (in a Black Box), Vermeir & Heiremans (BE)**

Bovenstaande cases zijn slechts enkele voorbeelden van structuren, financieringsmodellen en vormen van governance waarmee eerlijke en gelijkwaardige relaties worden opgezocht in de ecologie van de beeldende kunst. Ook kunstenaars dragen daaraan bij in de manier waarop ze zichzelf organiseren, maar ook in hun artistiek (speculatief) onderzoek. Het project *A Modest Proposal (in a Black Box)* van de kunstenaars Vermeir & Heiremans is een voorbeeld van speculatief onderzoek hoe de financiering van publieke kunstcollecties, van museale infrastructuur en symbolisch kapitaal kan bijdragen aan zowel de investeerders als aan de kunstenaars, kunstwerkers en kleine kunstorganisaties die de kunst mogelijk maken. Bij hun onderzoek worden juridische, financiële, vastgoed- en artistieke kennis met elkaar verbonden rond de centrale vraag of financiën een instrument kunnen zijn voor eerlijk en duurzaam samenleven.<sup>10</sup> Hoe kunnen kunstenaars beter gehonoreerd worden voor hun werk en hoe kunnen de opbrengsten uit de kunstmarkt beter terugvloeien naar de kunstenaars en naar het netwerk van

kunstorganisaties eromheen, vormt daarbij de kernvraag.

De kloven die steeds groter worden in het ecosysteem van de beeldende kunst, en de instrumentalisering voor een top van verzamelaars/investeerders en enkele megagaleries en grote kunstinstuties die daarmee verbonden zijn, kunnen volgens Vermeir & Heiremans enkel gedicht worden door samenwerking (inclusief verkoop) te plaatsen in een systeem van eerlijke en wederkerige relaties. ●

#### **Literatuur**

- Cranswick, T. en T. Overbeek (2014) 'V22, barrières doorbreken in de kunstwereld'. In: *Courant*, nr. 111, 26-28.
- Gielen, P. (et al.) (2014) *De waarde van cultuur*. Brussel: Socius.
- Sacco, P.L. (2017) 'Post-millennium tension: contemporary art at a crossroads'. Op: [www.kunstenpunt.be](http://www.kunstenpunt.be).
- Van Doninck, D. (et al.) (2019) *Ondernemen in cultuur: een beschrijvend, praktijkgericht onderzoek naar werken en ondernemen in en financieren van de Vlaamse cultuursector*. Brussel: Cultuurloket vzw.

#### **Noten**

- Volgens Pascal Gielen bestaat de artistieke biotoop uit vier domeinen: de domestieke ruimte, de gemeenschappelijke ruimte, de marktruimte en de civiele ruimte (Gielen et al. 2014).
- Zie naast Sacco 2017 ook Van Doninck et al. 2019, waarin duidelijk wordt dat de finaliteit van het werk van kunstenaars in de eerste plaats gaat over het bereiken van maatschappelijke relevantie en artistieke kwaliteit.
- Zoals de in 2007 opgerichte Galerie Castillo Corrales, gesloten in 2015. ([castillocorrales.fr](http://castillocorrales.fr))

- [www.independenthq.com](http://www.independenthq.com) en [www.condocomplex.org](http://www.condocomplex.org)
- [caveat.be](http://caveat.be)
- Handvest van BUP, de belangenebehartiger van Belgische promotiegaleriën ([ubmp-bupb.org/nl/members/deontologie/handvest-van-bupb/](http://ubmp-bupb.org/nl/members/deontologie/handvest-van-bupb/))
- [www.emergent.be](http://www.emergent.be)
- [www.v22collection.com](http://www.v22collection.com)
- ICAP-ISDX: 'The new market segment on the ISDX stock market will be dedicated to Social Stock Exchange member companies which are accredited for positive social or environmental impact. The initiative will help to unlock access to capital for businesses of a variety of sizes. It will also create a secondary market segment for access to trade in these securities' ([www.hbcg.co.uk/isdx-stock-market-launches-new-segment-for-social-impact-companies](http://www.hbcg.co.uk/isdx-stock-market-launches-new-segment-for-social-impact-companies)).
- Solotontoonstelling door Vermeir & Heiremans in Pump House Gallery London, najaar 2018. Curator was Ned McConnell. ([jubilee-art.org/?rd\\_project=1607&lang=en](http://jubilee-art.org/?rd_project=1607&lang=en))



**Dirk De Wit** is medewerker beeldende kunst van Kunstenpunt, het Vlaams steunpunt voor muziek, beeldende kunst en podiumkunsten

**Rekto:Verso**

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# **Kop of munt: financiële verbeelding in de kunst**



**Door Zeynep Kubat**

**op 29 augustus 2019**

**Precariteit is een welbekende last in de kunstensector. Geld is een goede dienaar maar een slechte meester, zeggen ze wel eens. Maak er echter kunst van, en je krijgt een heel ander verhaal. In de beeldende kunst zie je hoe verschillende spelers de slinkse complexiteiten van geld, arbeid of kapitaal vertalen in hun werk zelf. Soms heel ernstig, vaak met een knipoog.**

Roteer je een liggende munt rond de rand van een andere liggende munt met dezelfde omtrek, dan zal die tweemaal rond zijn eigen as draaien. Mocht de draaiende munt half zo groot zijn als de liggende munt, voelt dat logisch. Maar het gebeurt ook bij munten

met precies dezelfde oppervlakte en omtrek. In de logische wiskunde noemt men deze tegenstrijdige observatie de muntparadox of *coin rotation paradox*. Zelfs de fysica ontsnapt dus niet aan Liza Minelli's wereldberoemde song in de film *Cabaret* (1972): 'money makes the world go round'.



**Zijn er voor de  
scheve  
verhouding  
tussen geld en  
arbeid  
alternatieven?**

Het beeld van de roterende munt vormt een mooie metafoor voor onze maatschappelijke afhankelijkheid van *cash flow*. In de kunstwereld is dat niet anders. Geld doet de kunsten draaien, maar corrumpeert ze tegelijk door een ongezonde balans tussen precariteit en financiële hebzucht.

Zijn er voor die scheve verhouding tussen geld en arbeid alternatieven? Terwijl er verschillende hedendaagse kunstpraktijken en verenigingen experimenteren met een innovatieve omgang met financiële modellen, zijn er ook kunstenaars die *high finance* en verwrongen fiscale constructies op de rooster leggen door er hun onderwerp

#### **BIO**

**Zeynep Kubat is docent aan de Sint Lucashogeschool in Antwerpen.**

#### **INFO**

**Coverbeeld: Yannick Ganseman, Le Grand Nu, 2018. Ceramiek en olieverf gezet op hout, 195 x 74 x 91 cm. Installatiezicht Paid by the Artist, Solo-booth Invited Section Art Brussels 2019. (c) Yannick Ganseman.**

van te maken. Welke nieuwe inzichten geven die werken ons over het raderwerk tussen geld en arbeid?

## **Vergiftigd geschenk**

In een hoekje van Art Brussels, de speelplaats voor welvarende kunstkopers en minder welvarende kunstliefhebbers, was er dit jaar een selectie alternatieve galerieën aanwezig. De beurs had een aantal verjongende initiatieven in het galeriewezen uitgenodigd voor hun *Invited*-sectie. Deze selectie bestond vooral uit galerieën die internationale samenwerkingen aangingen met andere galerieën om met elkaar kunstenaars en gehuurde ruimtes uit te wisselen. Op die manier konden zakelijke kosten gemakkelijker verdeeld en gedrukt worden.

Eén project viel echter meer op dan de andere: de galerie Paid by the Artist. Galerist Simon Delobel liet de huurprijs van zijn beursruimte betalen door kunstenaar Yannick Ganseman. Een zoveelste bewijs voor de exploitatie van kunstenaars door hebzuchtige galeristen?

Integendeel, het was de enige stand die eerlijk uitkwam voor hoe kunstbeurzen eigenlijk functioneren, terwijl andere commerciële kunstinstellingen daar veel dubbelzinniger over blijven doen. Galerieën

hebben nood aan kunstbeurzen en kunstenaars hebben op hun beurt nood aan galerieën. Er zijn nu eenmaal amper alternatieven om leefbare inkomsten te verkrijgen. Net als in de muntparadox rolt de kunstwereld steevast rond de kostbare munten om in beweging te blijven. Paid by the Artist leek die realiteit volop te omarmen.

De financiële constructie waartoe Delobel en Ganseman gedwongen werden omwille van – geloof het of niet – een gebrek aan *cash flow*, leidde tot een bijzondere ruimte voor dialoog. De galerie werd speciaal voor Art Brussels opgericht onder een naam die niet enkel onthulde hoe Delobel en Ganseman te werk gingen, maar ook hoe de kunstbeurs met positieve stunts als *Invited* haar financiële elitarisme probeerde weg te moffelen. Binnen de paar dagen moesten alle uitgenodigde jonge starters met weinig middelen hun aanwezigheid bevestigen, door stante pede toch nog een fiks bedrag op de bankrekening van Art Brussels te storten. Niet echt beleefd om halsoverkop huur te vragen aan een geïnviteerde, als je het mij vraagt.

Volgens de regels van de kunst is het gewoonlijk de galerist die voor een stand betaalt en daarna een afgesproken commissie per verkocht kunstwerk ontvangt. Maar Delobel beschikte niet over het nodige

bedrag toen hij uitgenodigd werd, terwijl Ganselman toevallig net een kunstenaarsbeurs had ontvangen.

Zo kwam een interessante constructie op tafel: Ganselman betaalde zelf de huur. Alle inkomsten uit verkoop zouden direct naar hem terugvloeien, tot het huurbedrag was terugverdiend – pas daarna trad de afgesproken commissie van Delobel in werking. Via hun naam Paid by the Artist afficheerde het duo het vergiftigde geschenk van de beurs open en bloot bij hun bezoekers en potentiële klanten. Ze namen de kans om naamsbekendheid te verwerven en hun kunst te promoten met beide handen aan, maar de geur van geld bleef onvermijdelijk in de lucht hangen.

## **Werken aan alternatieven**

Terwijl de commerciële kunstwereld nog maar zachtjes ontwaakt uit z'n rijke slaap, wordt er in de culturele non-profitsector en in gesubsidieerde kunstinstellingen al veel langer geroepen om nieuwe werkmodellen en juridische flexibiliteit op het vlak van statuten en boekhouding.

Jubilee vzw is daar een sprekend voorbeeld van, en misschien zelfs de organisatie die zich het sterkst identificeert met de zoektocht naar nieuwe financiële

mogelijkheden. De naam 'Jubilee' is etymologisch afkomstig van een vijfduizend jaar oude term voor een interessant cultuur-economisch gebruik in het oude Midden-Oosten. Om sociale onrust te temperen, organiseerden Sumerische, Fenicische en later ook Babylonische koningen publieke schuldkwijtscheldingen. Kleitabletten met daarop de schuld van bepaalde burgers werden in het water gegooid, waarop de openstaande schuld letterlijk oploste.

Vijftig eeuwen later, in 2012, kwam tussen een aantal kunstenaars een vurige dialoog op gang, die uitgroeide tot een heus onderzoeks- en productieplatform met de ambitie om zijn onderzoek ook in de praktijk te brengen. Bij de oprichters van Jubilee leefde vooral een gedeelde nood aan betere productiemogelijkheden, van assistentie tot financiële middelen. Want als je naast je kunstenaarsstatuut geen extra bijverdienste hebt, is kunstwerken maken en exposeren allesbehalve evident. Konden deze kunstenaars samen een verschil maken? Bewust kozen ze niet voor een vaste hiërarchische structuur. In plaats van een curator of kunsthistoricus de artistieke leiding te geven, gingen ze het platform zelf besturen.

Al snel botste Jubilee op de zakelijke limieten van de Vlaamse en Brusselse wetgeving rond arbeid, financiën, inkomsten en... geldgebrek.

Het is precies die lage erkenning van cultuur als een apart arbeidsproduct die kunstproductie dwingt om binnen de kapitalistische lijntjes te kleuren. Culturele arbeid wordt geacht te functioneren

**Het is precies die lage erkenning van cultuur als een apart arbeidsproduct die kunstproductie dwingt om binnen de kapitalistische lijntjes te kleuren.**

volgens het managementsysteem van bedrijven met Don Draperesque CEO's, of wordt anders simpelweg in de vuilbak van het paritair comité 329 gekieperd. Kunstenaarschap, ticketing, curatorschap, publiekswerking, zakelijke leiding, assistentie allerlei, onderzoek, verkoop, productie, behoud en beheer: één pot nat, toch? In het ergste geval wordt culturele arbeid gezien als een nutteloze hobby.

Daarom probeert Jubilee tot op vandaag allerlei blokkades en problematieken bij culturele samenwerkingen te counteren via initiatieven met allerlei jonge organisaties, met als doel artistieke productie te kaderen als echte arbeid en te laten erkennen binnen

een breder economisch systeem. Hoe moeilijk ook, Jubilee denkt na over allerlei manieren om good practices te promoten: van leesclubs en discussiegroepen tot symposia en kunstwerken.

## **Naar een nieuw contract**

Zou het mogelijk zijn om diezelfde missie door te trekken en toe te passen op complexere systemen als de beeldende kunsten zelf? Het kunstenaarsduo Vermeir & Heiremans, dat ook deel uitmaakt van de artistieke leiding van Jubilee, onderzocht die vraag al in verscheidene kunstprojecten, waaronder hun film en tentoonstelling uit 2018, *A Modest Proposal*. Voor de productie van dit project werkten de kunstenaars samen met advocaten, financiële experts en academici. Samen gingen ze op zoek naar een financieel model voor kunstproductie dat niet enkel investeerders, verzamelaars en instituties zou interesseren, maar ook een gezonde arbeidsecologie kon creëren voor kunstenaars en cultuurwerkers.

Het is die zoektocht die je te zien krijgt in de film *A Modest Proposal*. Als casestudy kozen Vermeir & Heiremans de Londense Pump House Gallery: vielen daar mogelijke *fair practices* te ontdekken vanuit het economische systeem van ‘de commons’ – de creatie en uitwisseling van diverse

grondstoffen of bronnen met alle leden van een gemeenschap? Niet toevallig ligt Pump House Gallery in een buitenwijk waar de commons vanaf de middeleeuwen tot de vroege twintigste eeuw actief werden toegepast in de Britse landbouw- en landgoedsystemen.

Maar ook in de bijhorende tentoonstelling in Pump House Gallery bleef de centrale vraag uiteindelijk open: is het mogelijk om in het veld van de beeldende kunsten een commons-systeem toe te passen en zo eerlijke financiering, productie en presentatie te bevorderen? Net als Jubilee blijven Vermeir en Heiremans in hun werk naar een geschikt antwoord zoeken.

Andere spraakmakende capriolen maakte recent Boris Van Den Eynden door op sluwe wijze een financieel probleem om te toveren tot een kunstproject. In de hoedanigheid van Evelin Brosi & Elvis Bonier, twee van zijn alter ego's, presenteerde hij zichzelf in Extra City als suppoost buitenlucht van de duotentoonstelling *De Keuze van Guillaume Bijl: Vedran Kopljar en Evelin Brosi & Elvis Bonier* (najaar 2018). Van woensdag tot zondag kon je hem elke namiddag aantreffen op een speciaal ontworpen balkon bij de exporuimte op de eerste verdieping.

De kern van zijn arbeid? Niets doen. Af en toe sprak hij met bezoekers en werknemers,

maar het merendeel van de tijd zat hij weg gemoffeld in jas, muts, sjaal en deken te vechten tegen een verkoudheid.

Nog frappanter dan Van Den Eyndens verrichte arbeid was evenwel de snode constructie die achter dit werk stak, ter bescherming van zowel zijn eigen precaire positie als die van de kunsthall. Toen Guillaume Bijl hem uitkoos om samen met de jonge Vedran Kopljar tentoon te stellen in Extra City, was Van Den Eynden werkloos. Met een kunstenaarsbijdrage van Extra City zou hij zijn recht op een werkloosheidsuitkering echter kunnen kwijtspelen. Daarom dokterden beide partijen een legale financiële werkwijze uit: Extra City nam de kunstenaar officieel in dienst als parttime openluchtsuppoot, zelfs al had het helemaal niet het geld om hem daadwerkelijk twee maand loon uit te betalen. Om die nood te lenigen werd aan de kunstenaar tegelijk een huurcontract uitgeschreven voor het balkonnetje. Ingekaderd kwamen al die contracten uiteindelijk mee in de tentoonstellingsruimte te hangen, samen met alle reacties van reële kandidaten op de open vacature voor de geconstrueerde job. Zonder enige didactiek of belerende houding slaagde Van Den Eynden in zijn opzet: de verwrongen relatie tussen kunst en geld blootleggen door een getuigenis tot kunst te maken.

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Net als Paid by the Artist vertelt ook dit project dat transparantie over de financiële situatie van kunstenaars en cultuurwerkers de eerste noodzakelijke stap is om ze ooit te veranderen, door de discussie over nieuwe financiële modellen op te poken. De suppoost buitenlucht moet niet enkel bekeken worden als een humorvolle geste die de grenzen van de absurditeit aftast, maar ook als een aanmaning aan het veld om kritischer na te denken over de precariteit die het soms zelf in de hand werkt. Niet enkel de subsidieschaarste wordt hier aan de tand gevoeld, maar ook de risicovolle alternatieve financiering van kunst en de rigide (soms zelfs sociaal discriminerende) wetgeving rond het kunstenaars- en zelfstandigenstatuut.

## **Bont op de beurs**

Zulke abstracte mechanismen toch visueel maken, dat is de uitdaging waar kunstenaars steeds weer op botsen. Neem *high finance*: financiële en zakelijke transacties die grote sommen geld doen circuleren, steeds dieper verwickeld in een complex web van politieke en globale economische dynamieken. In een versnellende laatkapitalistische samenleving ontsnapt ook de internationale kunstbeurs er niet aan. En dus hoeft het niet te verwonderen dat *high finance* steeds vaker opduikt in het werk van beeldende kunstenaars.

Een intrigerend voorbeeld is het werk van Toon Fibbe. Deze jonge kunstenaar compileert onderzoek en beelden van de zogeheten 'beurs-fashion': de vestimentaire geplogenheden op de stock market. Via verschillende media – tekst, foto's, realistische reproducties, 3D-renderings – toont hij er voorbeelden van in performances en pantomimes. Iedereen kent het clichébeeld van de beursgang uit documentaires of Hollywoodfilms uit de jaren 1980 en '90: hordes *traders* die alle kanten uitschreeuwen, door grote telefoons roepen en elkaar zwetend verdringen om met grote brillen en open monden naar de voorbijflitsende aandelecijfers te staren.

Zoals in elke jungle gold ook hier de wet van de sterkste: hoe opvallender je gekleed ging en hoe harder je kon schreeuwen, hoe meer en hoe sneller je kon kopen en verkopen.



Vanzelf ontwikkelden zich op de beursvloer heel eigen modedefenomenen, zoals exotische variaties op 'het meest opvallende

kostuumvest' of speciaal vervaardigde platformchoenen om er letterlijk met kop en schouders bovenuit te steken. De beurs werd een eigenaardige modeshow en beurs-fashion werd een zeldzame herinnering aan een kortstondig moment in de geschiedenis – toen de aandelenhandel nog geen zaak was van efemere digitale algoritmes.

Fibbe creëert met deze modieuze invallen niet enkel een geësthetiseerd of nostalgisch beeld van een eigenaardige *fashion style*.

**Hoe hoger de waarde van de aandelen, hoe hoger ook de platformschoenen, en hoe bonter de kostuumvesten.**

Door intelligent gebruik van performance, bewegend beeld en kritische scripts tracht hij tegelijk de samenhang aan te tonen tussen kledingstijl en aandelenkoers. Hoe hoger de waarde van de aandelen, hoe hoger ook de platformschoenen, en hoe bonter de kostuumvesten. De kledij werd extravaganter en artistieker naarmate de gesticulerende *traders* de munten sneller deden circuleren. In een mum van tijd transformeerden de effectenmakelaars tot performancekunstenaars, wiens succes afhing van de cijfers die over de schermen rolden.

Zo kan Fibbes  
werk ook dienen  
als spiegel voor  
de kunstwereld.

Voor de  
kunstbeurs  
vormt immers  
een parallelle  
wereld aan de  
vintage  
effectenbeurs:  
hoe opvallender  
de kunstwerken,  
hoe hoger het

cijfer dat je erop kan plakken. De  
concurrentie waarin dat resulteert op de  
sterk gemanipuleerde en elitaire kunstmarkt,  
werkt de groeiende precariteit van vele  
kunstenaars en publieke kunstinstellingen  
alleen maar verder in de hand.

Onverminderd zal de muntparadox blijven  
gelden, tenzij er munten in andere vormen  
worden geslagen. En daarvoor is het in de  
eerste plaats aan de cultuurwerkers zelf om  
hun stem te laten horen en samen met  
experts uit andere sectoren nieuwe financiële  
werkmodellen op tafel te leggen. Hoe  
verzoenen we beleid, economie, eerlijke  
arbeidsrechten en cultuur het beste met  
elkaar?

Voor kunstenaars kan een geestige omgang  
met hun tragikomische  
arbeidsomstandigheden allicht een beetje

**Het is aan de  
cultuurwerkers  
zelf om samen  
met experts uit  
andere  
sectoren  
nieuwe  
financiële  
werkmodellen  
op tafel te  
leggen.**

verlichting bieden. Door het vraagstuk 'werk' te integreren in experimentele projecten, nieuwe samenwerkingen en zelfs de iconografie van de hedendaagse kunst, banen ze de weg naar meer openheid in de zakelijke werkzaamheden van de cultuursector. Zo ernstig het onderwerp, zo welkom is ook elk speels antwoord erop, terwijl de munten even rusten.

## **Rekto:Verso**

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## Home Economics: Real Abstraction in the Work of Vermeir and Heiremans

🕒 January 16, 2019   📁 Essay Clusters, The Abstraction Issue   👤 Steyn Bergs

### Vermeir and Heiremans' Home Economics

Katleen Vermeir and Ronny Heiremans' collaborative practice revolves around the house they inhabit and share, an industrial building the artists renovated into a loft, in the Brussels municipality of Schaerbeek. Since 2006, their joint oeuvre has taken the guise of a project titled *A.I.R.* (short for "artist in residence"), in which Vermeir and Heiremans conceive of the loft they co-own as both an artwork and a financial asset. This "art house," as the loft is aptly called, remains inaccessible to the public but functions as the source material for what the artists call a set of "mediated extensions." These mediated extensions, which are extrapolated and abstracted by the artists from their house, together form the artistic output of *A.I.R.* In this essay, I consider two works by Vermeir and Heiremans which are intimately connected to one another: *Art House Index* and *MASQUERADE*. Focusing especially on the latter piece, I will discuss how Vermeir and Heiremans' work shows us the workings of real abstraction in both financialization and the attention economy. Ultimately, however, I am primarily interested in thinking about how this showing not only points toward what is properly unrepresentable about real abstraction, but also renders the work itself similarly elusive and, at times, mystifying. My discussion of Vermeir and Heiremans' pieces, then, is fundamentally about how, if at all, artistic practice can currently grapple with real abstraction without becoming its mere mimicry.

*Art House Index* (henceforth: *AHI*) was first presented as a performance at the 2013 Istanbul Biennial, mimicking an "initial public offering" to the market of an index that the artists supposedly developed, a financial tool to render the economic value of both their art house and artistic practice based on this piece of real estate more transparent and more liquid (extension #21). The performance consisted of a halting public Skype conversation between the artists and a financial analyst, who discussed the possibility as well as the pros and cons of such an index. At first, the analyst appeared to be streaming in live from a stock exchange's trading pit. Finally, however, in a decidedly Brechtian move, it became clear that he was performing in front of a green screen (the use of this technique being revealed by its malfunctioning), demonstrating that the whole set-up was staged, that the Skype

itself was not a live stream but rather a prerecorded video, and that the index itself was a hoax. The disruptive nature of the performance was exacerbated when, unexpectedly, a group of activists unexpectedly interrupted *AHI*, draping themselves in protest banners and lying down in front of the artists during the performance, only to be escorted out one by one. They had taken the artwork for an earnest financialization scheme, and had therefore chosen the performance as the site for their protest against the corporate sponsorship and the political complacency of the biennial, which they saw as complicit with the gentrification of Istanbul: “At ten-minute intervals,” one account of the performance states, “someone would stand up from the crowd, show off a T-shirt and a faux-branded banner printed with the names of gentrifying neighborhoods in Istanbul, and then drape himself or herself on the floor in the middle of the room, only to be quickly picked up and hastily dispatched by three members of the [biennial’s] loyal production team.”[1]

The mock-index was presented again in a 2014 installation which also featured glossy hand-outs promoting the index (extension #22) and again in 2015, where partly in response to the Istanbul protesters’ perception of the work, the artists chose to actually develop the index they had initially only proposed. It is still active today as an algorithmic instrument charting the market value of the art house as well as its mediated extensions, collecting and balancing, in real-time, information from real estate and currency markets. Important for my purposes here, it also weighs in on the visibility of Vermeir and Heiremans’ artistic practice, which is benchmarked by, for instance, website clicks and Google search queries. The actual *Art House Index (AHI)* (extension #23) thus exists online as a live algorithm collecting and combining market information in real time. The index’s movement is visualized by a graph.[2]

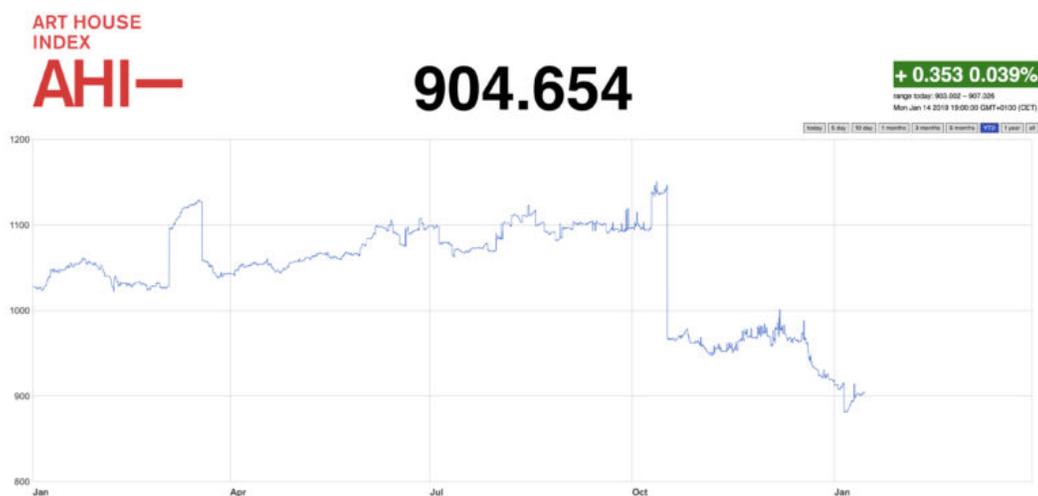


Figure 1: Vermeir and Heiremans, *Art House Index (AHI-)*, 2015. Screenshot: courtesy the artists.

In the same year, the duo went on to produce *MASQUERADE*, a video work which, like the original Istanbul performance of *Art House Index*, narrates and speculates about the initial public offering of the index. This time, however, the index was effectively operational by the time *MASQUERADE* was produced. The work uses some footage from the Istanbul performance and protests, but consists mostly of interviews and dramatic episodes taking place in sets vaguely reminiscent of such institutional settings as the auction house, the trading pit, and the courtroom. One interviewee is the financial analyst who appeared in the Istanbul performance, and whose name, we learn, is “Frank Goodman”—the name of a professional imposter who is the protagonist in Herman Melville’s satirical 1857 novel *The Confidence-Man: His Masquerade*, which also lends the video its name.<sup>[3]</sup>

*MASQUERADE* is well characterized by its own opening credits, which state, almost as a disclaimer: “A film it is not, unless a film means 45 exchanges conducted by characters who might pass for the errata of artistic creation.” In that description, “45 exchanges” refers to the structure of the 51-minute video, mirroring Melville’s novel, which consists of 45 short chapters. These brief chapters, however, do not exactly add up to a linear narrative but rather form an impressionistic accumulation of more or less disjointed fragments all revolving around the index, making the work hard to describe in narrative terms. The fact that these separate exchanges average a time span of just over one minute each speaks to a particularly striking formal aspect of *MASQUERADE*, one that undoubtedly is inspired by the financial interactions that constitute its subject matter: its speed, and the sense of confusion and bewilderment it induces in its viewers. The various short snippets that make up the work are stitched together in such a way as to prevent narrative immersion and interpretation. As a consequence of the editing, the video strikes its viewers as an accumulation of impressions, brief dialogues or statements, and scenes, rather than as the straightforward narration of a story or an event. By and large, the video sets out with what appears to be a reception in celebration of the initial public offering of the index. These first few minutes of the video are followed by a long middle section which consists mostly of interviews or news report-style clips, with various commentators (including Frank Goodman, but also a variety of other characters) offering their perspectives on the index. *MASQUERADE* then culminates in the actual public offering, which is however interrupted by protesters—but not activists protesting against gentrification. The angry mob that briefly makes an appearance at the end of the video consists of ‘old school’ art collectors who fear that the index will render impossible their privileged position as an elite of art market insiders.

What makes it challenging to go beyond a very basic description of the events depicted in *MASQUERADE* is that there is yet another layer of editing at play in the video, one that further complicates the piece. Neither the single-channel (extension #27) nor the multi-screen (extension #28) installations of the work show *MASQUERADE* as a static, finished video piece. Instead, these installations are connected, via the Internet, to the actual *AHI* graph, the movement of which causes

the video installations to alternate between two different versions of the work: one which is completely finished (the 'A track' of the video), and one which contains bloopers and errors of all sorts, and which was not post-produced (its 'B track'). To put it simply: when the *AHI* graph goes up and the total financial value of Vermeir and Heiremans' loft and artistic practice increases, the finalized film is shown. When the graph droops down, however, the viewer is presented with the unpolished version. This latter permutation, the unfinished video, is easily recognizable on account of its generally poor sound quality and the prevalence of non-operative green screens. Since the *AHI* graph is updated every ten seconds, this means that every ten seconds there is a potential 'switch' from *MASQUERADE*'s 'A track' to its 'B track' (which happens when the upward movement of the graph becomes a downward movement) or vice versa (which happens when the falling graph starts ascending again). As a result of this added layer of live editing by the *AHI* graph, the chances of watching the same version of the 51-minute video are made essentially negligible, and the viewers' desires for narrative immersion are further frustrated.

When installed in an exhibition space, *MASQUERADE* is projected alongside the *AHI* graph, which makes it possible for viewers to apprehend the connection between the narrative video and the movements of the graph. In the single-channel version, the latter is phenomenally unavailable, leaving viewers puzzled as to the source of *MASQUERADE*'s constant permutations. Crucially, however, Vermeir and Heiremans are sensitive to how contexts—institutional as well as discursive—co-determine the reception of their work. In their practice, they conceive of their works as conversation pieces in an ongoing process of critical artistic research. The essentially dialogic nature of this research process, in which they involve a number of parties and interlocutors (including, at times, myself), also comes to the fore in the presentation of the work, which the artists do not only, and not even primarily, show in exhibition settings. Rather, they often employ pieces like *AHI* and *MASQUERADE* in workshop or symposium contexts, rendering the works as imaginative, speculative, and provocative propositions that form the basis for critical discussions on financialization and art. As such, situational factors mitigate the otherwise overwhelming complexity of a work like *MASQUERADE*—which, if viewed without proper contextualization, would potentially be as mystificatory as financial capital itself.

Nonetheless, *MASQUERADE* was meticulously crafted to resist any attempted description in diegetic terms. For this reason, I have chosen here not to try and follow the plot of *MASQUERADE* itself, and have opted instead to focus on certain fragments of the video that I find particularly rich, and which are instructive because they stand metonymically for the whole of the work. Inevitably, my choice of scenes here is selective, and works in the service of my attempt to think through of some of the implications of what I find to be the main qualities and characteristics of the piece (including its tempo and its discontinuous nature, but also its algorithmic live editing itself), particularly when seen in relation to real abstraction.

## All That is Solid

Though first introduced by Georg Simmel, the notion of real abstraction is more commonly associated with Alfred Sohn-Rethel, who grants it a pivotal role in his book *Intellectual and Manual Labour: A Critique of Epistemology*. Here, Sohn-Rethel argues that all abstract thinking, rather than existing autonomously and prior to experience, is the result of certain concrete, material, and historical conditions. More specifically, for him, all ability to think in abstractions stems from the “original” real abstraction of exchange, in which heterogeneous things become commensurable and interchangeable through the mediation of exchange-value, which operates on a principle of purely quantitative, and therefore abstract, differentiation. This principle, for Sohn-Rethel, “has no existence other than in the human mind, but [...] does not spring from the mind.”<sup>[4]</sup> It is important for my purposes here that Sohn-Rethel’s magnum opus has been subject to critical reappraisal in recent years—arguably not so much for its sweeping critique of Western epistemology, but rather for what can be done with the concept of real abstraction. Jason Read has noted that, methodologically, real abstraction allows one to expand the Marxist critique of political economy with a consideration of abstractions “in terms of their concrete material conditions and effects.”<sup>[5]</sup> These effects, of course, are most acutely felt in instances of crisis, when it will seem to many “*as if* the mode of abstraction, namely value, has a real material existence of its own independent of the human mind.”<sup>[6]</sup>

One such instance in recent times was the global economic crisis of 2007-2008, which was instigated by the U.S. subprime mortgage crisis. It is certainly against the backdrop of this financial crisis that both Vermeir and Heiremans’ practice and the reevaluation of Sohn-Rethel’s work need to be thought.<sup>[7]</sup> And yet, already before this crisis (in which real estate played such a crucial role) the financial markets for land and housing had become something of a *locus classicus* in the critical theory and discourse on finance in abstraction. Tellingly, a 1998 essay by Fredric Jameson on land and real estate speculation is titled “The Brick and the Balloon: Architecture, Idealism and Land Speculation.”<sup>[8]</sup> As this title intimates, it is in relation to the supposedly bricks-and-mortar business of real estate that the abstractions of finance—bringing about so many forms of inflation, so many bubbles—are felt to be most unbearably light.

Consider, for instance, how absolutely nothing might happen materially with or to a dwelling seen in its concrete use-value, but at the same time the mortgage to this very same dwelling may serve as a financial asset spliced into bits that are then bundled together with bits of other assets and mobilized through the circuits of financial trading worldwide.<sup>[9]</sup> This mobilization is made possible by the autonomization of exchange-value (the process of abstraction already described by Marx), and since it might also have very concrete effects in the everyday life of the dwelling’s inhabitants, who may end up losing their house, it is a real abstraction. It

becomes clear here how, at bottom, it is the abstraction of the value-form itself—resulting from the split between a commodity’s quantified exchange-value and its always qualitative use-value—that accounts for real estate’s unreal state.

These uncanny effects of real abstraction on real estate are also what Vermeir and Heiremans examine in their work. A good example is the sixth of the forty-five exchanges that together make up *MASQUERADE*. This exchange, titled “A frontier investment opportunity,” is a mock promotional video of sorts—one that has also been released separately by the artists as a “publicity clip” prior to the completion of *MASQUERADE*—and unlike other scenes in the video is not filmed by a camera. Rather, it is a digital photographic collage, animated so as to offer a 360-degree view of Vermeir and Heiremans’ house. While at first sight the collage might appear as a rather seamless representation of the interior, upon closer inspection it soon becomes clear that something is off, that the image simply does not add up spatially. One notices that when looking out the windows in this collage, what we get to see is not Schaerbeek, the actual surroundings in which the house is located, but rather different city views from all over the globe cut and pasted into the window frames. Simultaneously, the names of all the cities where the house’s mediated extensions have been exhibited are shown one by one in the left-bottom corner of the screen. As such, this strangely composite image underscores the curious dialectic between localized concretion and abstracted circulation that characterizes the art house’ existence as both a material thing and a commodity, an asset moving through global financial markets. While one deciphers this image, one hears voice-overs in several languages layered on top of each other, and a promotional text scrolls by from left to right: “Behind its façade a house hides a multiplicity of forms / surprising views.” Underneath the city names, there is a digital timer ticking away. This is an image, then, of spatio-temporal simultaneity: the art house has a concrete here and now, but its abstract representations (in images, in exchange-value) are at the same time also elsewhere. Certainly, Vermeir and Heiremans seem to suggest, the art house’s exchange-value is dependent on its physical properties and its geographic embeddedness (its size, its features, the local demand for housing), but it is equally contingent on factors that are much less tangible, such as the intricate web of financial relations that make up the worldwide real estate market. The “frontier investment opportunity” scene is in that sense a concentrated image of the art house as a real abstraction, as something that leads a concrete and material existence on the one hand, and a spectral, ideational, and dematerialized one on the other. And importantly, these two modalities are brought together here through the technique of collage, implying that the concrete and abstract elements of the house cannot be neatly separated from one another while at the same time preserving their difference, emphasizing the heterogeneity and separation of the elements here held together.[10]



Figure 2: Vermeir and Heiremans, *A Frontier Investment Opportunity*, 2013.  
Photography: courtesy the artists.

It has been noted that the mobilization, in finance, of abstract representations or derivatives severed from their referent is strikingly congruous with the dematerialization of the art object, which wanted to separate the artwork as idea or concept from the art object as its material substrate.[11] In another scene in *MASQUERADE*, this art historical referent is brought to the fore by a character claiming in an interview that *AHI* can fulfill her “desire for a complete dematerialization of art.” And indeed it is true that the financialization of art represented by the fictional index proposed in *MASQUERADE* is something like a “higher” form of art’s dematerialization, rendering everything from paintings to massive COR-TEN steel sculptures free-floating and feather-light due to their inclusion in portfolios readily exchanged on globalized markets. Clearly, however, the analogy is also perverse, since financialization aims at continuous re-commodification rather than a de-commodification of art, while conceptual art—in its inception, at least—was a troublesome attempt to emancipate art *from* the commodity form. In Lucy Lippard’s words, conceptualism’s dematerialization was an attempted “de-mythologization and de-commodification of art”.[12] If dematerialization in conceptual art was a strategy for artists to emancipate art *from* the commodity form, financialization is essentially an emancipation *of* the commodity form. Whereas the former aspired to undermine art objects’ fetish character in an “egalitarian pursuit of publicness,” however limited and problematic, with the latter the market eclipses the public sphere, or any space for political agency whatsoever.[13] Without any apparent irony, finance’s ideologues in *MASQUERADE* present the liquefaction of art through the index as a way of making access to art more equal, more democratic—echoing the rhetoric of 1960s and 1970s conceptualism that equated dematerialization with de-commodification.

“An Edifice Built by the Gazes of Others”

But as it happens, such democratic access to art, too, has been rendered as productive of exchange-value. “All that looking,” an art auctioneer asserts in *MASQUERADE*, “sticks to the work and increases its value. To see is already to buy, to look is to labour.” Like many scenes in the video, this moment (which takes place in a segment titled “An edifice built by the gazes of others”) might strike us as rather contrived: the auctioneer in question is played by a real-life auctioneer, somewhat amateurishly performing a fictionalized version of himself. The artificiality of his persona is further underscored by Vermeir and Heiremans’ script, which does very little to imitate the spontaneity of everyday speech and is essentially an assemblage of paraphrases and quotations from critical theory. The formula “to look is to labour,” for instance, is excerpted from Jonathan Beller’s 2006 book *The Cinematic Mode of Production: Attention Economy and the Society of the Spectacle*. Here, Beller (in)famously furthered the claim that Marx’s labor theory of value should be elaborated into or complemented by an “attention theory of value,” as advertising in particular had posited human attentiveness as a form of productive labor.<sup>[14]</sup> Beller’s own main interest is cinema, which he posits as a precursor to techniques for the attraction, quantification, and rendering-productive of attention that we now see on the Internet—with clicks and “eyeball hang time” considered indicators of value.

However, it is clear that the attention economy also applies to—and has always applied to—visual art: “Take, for example, the case of a work of Vincent Van Gogh. The 50 million-dollar fetish character is an index of visual accretion, that is, of alienated sensual labor resultant from the mass mediation of the unique work of art.”<sup>[15]</sup> Contrary to the Benjaminian account of the withering of aura under conditions of technological reproducibility, then, under the conditions of the attention economy mass mediation and dissemination in fact serve to consolidate and valorize the status of the fetishized original.<sup>[16]</sup> David Joselit has described how artworks—or at least images of artworks—begin to function like a *currency*, the circulation of which becomes a means of generating value in and of itself.<sup>[17]</sup> Crucially, however, in the online attention economy—as opposed to the kind of financial trading discussed in the previous section—it is not so much the fact of circulation itself that is productive of exchange-value. What is commodified here is, indeed, attention itself—with “content” serving only as a kind of bait, more or less regardless of the nature or the qualities of that content.

For attention to become a form of productive labor, it first had to be rendered measurable, “describable in terms of abstract and exchangeable magnitudes.”<sup>[18]</sup> As such, the operations of the attention economy, like those of financialization, are founded on a fundamental abstraction—in this case the configuration of attention as quantitative rather than qualitative. As Tiziana Terranova has demonstrated, on the Internet this has meant introducing “specific techniques of evaluation and units of measurement (algorithms, clicks, impressions, tags, etc.).”<sup>[19]</sup> Such techniques of evaluation and units of measurement are incorporated in Vermeir and Heiremans’

work as well. As mentioned in the introductory section, among the determinants of the movement of the *AHI* graph are, for instance, the number of visitors to Vermeir and Heiremans' own website. As such, the artists underscore the fact that their work, too, is subject to the logic of the attention economy, and stress their own practice's immanence to its conditions.

Terranova has also described how, for an economy to arise that ascribed exchange-value to attention, attention first needed to become a scarce resource. With the hypertrophy of information and overabundance of content available online, she asserts, the fact that there exist certain neurophysiological limits to the quantity of information that humans can process, as well as (social) restrictions to time spent on content consumption, serve for the entrepreneurs of so-called "Web 2.0" as a means of reintroducing scarcity to the Internet, making it "a medium to which all the axioms of market economics can once again be applied."<sup>[20]</sup> As a consequence, the attention economy also instigates a generalized competition for attention. The cultural expressions and symptoms of this situation are manifold (and all too familiar), but of all these, *speed* certainly is of particular relevance to the reading of *MASQUERADE*. According to Jonathan Crary, the attention economy exacerbates a cultural logic of capitalism which has been firmly in place since the advent of modernity, and demands "that we accept as *natural* switching our attention rapidly from one thing to another."<sup>[21]</sup> The video's high-strung editing, mentioned earlier, and the resultant obstruction of immersion for the viewer, reflects this through exaggeration.

Finally, the attention economy does not remain conveniently contained within the online realm. Or rather, it was never entirely absent from the offline realm to begin with: the example of the fetishized Van Gogh painting, as a kind of "analogue" or prototypical manifestation of the logic of the attention economy, is a case in point. As the act of looking becomes increasingly productive of exchange-value, and as exchange-value co-constitutes concrete reality, the attention economy "restructure[s] the way in which we materially (re)produce our existence."<sup>[22]</sup> Like with finance, the abstractions of the attention economy are real abstractions, operating in and on the world. An analogue to these operations can be seen in the climbing and falling of the *AHI* graph, which, as a representation of Vermeir and Heiremans' house and work seen in quantitative and therefore abstract terms, has an actual impact on the viewing experience of the work itself through the work's additional layer of live editing.

### Mimesis and Mimicry

As the artists' incorporation of the parameters of the attention economy in their work demonstrates, there is in Vermeir and Heiremans' work a willingness to side with real abstraction. This willingness can be considered problematic, though not necessarily in the pejorative sense of the word. As mentioned earlier, among the

variables that make up *Art House Index* are quantitative representations of the visibility of the artists' work and of the mediated extensions of the art house, both online and offline. In a mimetic move, then, the artists willingly effect an abstraction of their own work, presenting it in strictly quantitative terms. This is all the more remarkable given the historical association of art with "the strictly transcendental timelessness of the model of 'contemplative immersion,'" [23] or, more simply put, what Katherine N. Hayles has called "deep attention." [24] This association, however, is also ideological, in that these attentive modalities suggest a disinterestedness radically at odds with the subsumptions of art (as well as of its reception) by capital under discussion here. By contrast, Vermeir and Heiremans' determination to flaunt and even expedite the insertion of their own work in the attention economy is a way of acknowledging these subsumptions, creating a possibility or a basis for an immanent critique.

Their particular mode of presentation contributes to this siding with abstraction too. Graphs like the one we encounter in the presentation of *AHI* are emphatically abstract delineations of a purely metric movement; one that, nonetheless, purports to point at—to *index*—something that is happening or moving in the realm of the concrete and material. That the *AHI* graph was subsequently put to work in the live editing of *MASQUERADE* makes it even more suitable as an expression of the operativity of real abstraction. Of course, Vermeir and Heiremans' auto-abstractions ultimately remain speculative thought experiments, more or less internal to their artistic work, as long as the economic and symbolic value tracked—or perhaps generated—by *AHI* remains unrealized in actual processes of exchange: Vermeir and Heiremans have never "cashed out" by trying to sell their work or otherwise extrapolate actual money from it. The value accrued around their work thus remains purely aspirational.

At their best, Vermeir and Heiremans' auto-abstractions draw our attention to the properties—and, as will be argued in the next section, the contradictions—of real abstraction. However, as the artists contemplate the creation of an actual market around the index as a next step in the development of their oeuvre, and have in fact produced recent work for a solo exhibition investigating "the possibility of financializing public art collections, museum real estate and symbolic capital," [25] it becomes necessary to consider the limitations and possible pitfalls of such a siding with real abstraction. As Ana Teixeira Pinto and Anselm Franke point out, the recognition of such mimetic and affirmational strategies as critical gestures has become something of a commonplace in contemporary art ever since Pop Art's identification with the surface effects of consumerism. [26] Around the same time, the notion of mimesis-as-critique was theoretically developed by Adorno, who wrote in his *Aesthetic Theory* that art could ignore the expanded reproduction of capitalist relations "only at the price of its own powerlessness," and therefore would have to amount to a "mimesis of the hardened and the alienated." [27]

Nonetheless, the propensity towards an unmitigated identification of art with capital in recent artistic practice has been subject to critical scrutiny in recent years. For Teixeira Pinto and Franke (who, it should be noted, are writing about post-internet artworks, not practices similar to Vermeir and Heiremans’), the “inability to imagine an outside to financial subsumption can also be construed as a symptom of the overwhelming fear of exclusion that accompanies the increasing precarization of life: a social anxiety masquerading as an aesthetic theory.”[28] Another important contribution has been made by Kerstin Stakemeier, who distinguishes between mimesis and mimicry—her conception of which is based on an essay by Roger Caillois.[29] She writes: “artists no longer primarily engage the structures of contemporary culture in what could be called an act of *mimesis*...but rather craft their works in acts of *mimicry*—as somatic reflexes to contemporary culture’s overpowering protocols.” She describes how this mimicry, in which art essentially dissolves in its capitalist environment, “not only sides with the inorganic, reified life under capitalism, but also comes to perceive the subject herself as an essentially inorganic entity.”[30]

In the face of the increasing occupation of all domains of life by capital, the efficacy of strategies of mimesis becomes a real issue of concern—and so does the question of how these strategies are still to be told apart from the brand of mimicry described by Stakemeier. The intervention by the activists in Vermeir and Heiremans’ 2013 performance at the Istanbul Biennial is a succinct testimony to this; precisely in taking Vermeir and Heiremans’ work at face value—naively or not—they raised some fundamental questions concerning what this kind of work does and who it is for. Their intrusion on the performance and their presence in *MASQUERADE* both serve as a welcome reminder of the persistent political need for antagonism, refusal, dissensus, and other forms of negativity to complement mimetic criticisms, setting them apart from a one-sided and ultimately affirmational complicity or ironization. Admittedly, there is rather little of all of this in Vermeir and Heiremans’ work, and quite a fair share of mimicry—think, for instance, of the glossies and faux-promotional videos that the artists use to draw attention to their work, to “sell” their ideas. Their strategy of siding with the abstractions of finance capital, in particular, is one that could well be construed as an artistic analogue to those strands of accelerationism that propagate an intensification of capital’s abstractions to a supposed point of collapse.[31] As for the artists’ speculations, in their most recent work, around the possibilities of what I am tempted to call a “financialization for the people,” the question certainly should be raised whether such a reappropriation, such a *détournement*, of the abstractions of finance is really desirable, or if it is financialization itself (and the abstractions that afford it) that were at the very root of the problem all along. Though articulated in a very different context, Audre Lorde’s famous admonition that “the master’s tools will never dismantle the master’s house” nonetheless seems pertinent to Vermeir and Heiremans’ work around their art house. [32]

## Cracks in Real Abstraction

Assessing Vermeir and Heiremans' work, it is certainly important to remain wary of mimetic critiques' propensity to co-optation, to be conscious of how easily mimesis might slide into mimicry. Equally, it might be objected that, in formally mimicking their subject matter, their pieces can in some cases also have the effect of dazzling their viewers rather than affecting, informing, or addressing them as political subjects. As was mentioned earlier, this is to a significant extent resolved by how the artists frame and contextualize their work, effectively using their videos and other works as conversation pieces in discussions about topics such as finance, the attention economy, and their real abstractions.[33]



*Figure 3: Vermeir and Heiremans, MASQUERADE, 2015. Photography: Michael De Lausnay.*

That being said though, the contention in this final section will be that the works in and by themselves, too, allow and at times even press for a more radical reading, challenging viewers to question the workings of real abstraction in a fundamental manner. Although admittedly there is very little in either *AHI* or *MASQUERADE* that hints at a non-capitalist (or, for that matter, a *less* capitalist) horizon, Vermeir and Heiremans' work continually exposes the contradictions of and fissures in real abstraction in ways that ultimately, and importantly, set the work apart from practices indulging in the fatal strategy of mere affirmation. Though there is no suggestion, with Vermeir and Heiremans, that these contradictions will necessarily lead to an overcoming or sublation of real abstraction, their critique remains highly incisive. It comes to the fore most prominently in the work's constant equation of financialization with fiction, and in its insistence on disclosing the fault lines, the flaws, and the cracks in the operativity of real abstraction.

In *MASQUERADE*, there is a sometimes-overwhelming sense that everything is make-believe, a scam. As we have seen, Frank Goodman, the only character in the video assigned a proper name, is a reference to Melville's conman protagonist. Furthermore, there are sustained proclamations, especially towards the end of the video, that the functioning of finance (and of the market more generally) is dependent on a willing suspension of disbelief comparable to the reading of fiction ("the market participants have to suspend their disbelief and wait", "fiction creates finance, and finance creates fiction"). Ultimately, this leads to absurdisms and language games that mirror the solipsistic circularity of the self-reproduction of capitalist relations. "We have to trust trust," we are told, "and have confidence in confidence."<sup>[34]</sup> In his aforementioned essay, Jameson too concludes a discussion of the theoretical problems posed by ground rent for the labor theory of value by saying that land's value, for capitalism, is "something like a structurally necessary fiction."<sup>[35]</sup> Certainly, there is no shortage of bankers and financial types making the kinds of demystificatory statements that we hear in *MASQUERADE*, but still, such statements are a far cry from the everyday (self-) representations of finance capital. Or rather, we should note that finance in fact prefers to shy away from any kind of representation whatsoever, operating in the background as something always already given and therefore exempted from interrogation; it only truly *appears* in moments of crisis, moments that then have to be cast as the exception rather than the rule.

There are certain religious connotations to all of this talk about belief in the capitalist market, connotations that *MASQUERADE* does not shun. One scene sees a character walking up a flight of stairs, uttering, in something of a trance, all permutations that become possible when switching up the word order in the sentence "I am doing the work of God." The same character, dressed in white, is later seen in a video editing booth overlooking the events unfolding in *MASQUERADE*, as if to underscore his mastery of this financialized microcosm. In a discussion of Pascal's infamous wager, Angela Mitropoulos has pointed to the religious dimensions of "internalised belief" systems, as well as of the "habitual performance of faith and acts of submission" that are so crucial to the everyday reproduction of existing economic relations.<sup>[36]</sup> Real abstraction is thus revealed to be grounded in our belief in its basic premises, and its reality produced and perpetuated by our collective acting *as if* it were real in the first place. To use the well-worn phraseology of social criticism, real abstraction is a "social construction." However, this also means that it is really constructed, and as such cannot simply be "name-called out of (or into) existence, ridiculed and shamed into yielding up its powers."<sup>[37]</sup>

It becomes important, then, to take heed of the many ways in which *MASQUERADE*, in particular, shows not only the operativity of real abstraction, but also the many flaws and imperfections in that operativity. *MASQUERADE*'s microcosm is most certainly not some perfectly negentropic simulacrum, some sinister shadow play of abstractions alone. What we see is a world in which residual and obstinate

materiality keeps coming back with a vengeance, and in which the irregularities of the real continue to thwart and frustrate abstraction's control over said world. Ultimately, Vermeir and Heiremans' aesthetic is an aesthetic of failure—and this failure is the failure of abstraction to fully enclose and master reality. This emphasis on failure is most ostentatiously the case in the ever-present malfunctioning green screens, but also in certain scenes planted vertically into the video's narrative flow—if indeed there is such a thing as a narrative flow in *MASQUERADE*. An assistant-like figure compulsively rubbing the screen of an iPad as if to clean it; another character trying to remove tape from a sheet of glass and, much to her annoyance, getting the tape stuck in a tangle with her latex gloves. Although Vermeir and Heiremans' work shares with much contemporaneous work a certain investment in surfaces and superficiality, these kinds of scenes ultimately serve to complicate the assumption that “the smooth user-friendly surfaces of the digital world inspire belief in a smoothly user-friendly reality”—an assumption that Kerstin Stakemeier argues is both fabricated and sustained by artistic mimics of financialized capital.[38] Failure, of course, is also built into the very structure of the work itself, with any downward movement of the *AH* yielding to the B-track of the video, which consists mostly of throwaway scenes. Then, on top of the constant interruptions caused by the live-editing of the index, there are the aforementioned interferences and discontinuities in the storyline—even in the A-track of the film—augmented by a high-strung and hyperactive editing style which could be construed as accelerationist, but only if one is willing to entertain the idea of a Brechtian accelerationism.[39]

Finally, and crucially, these moments of failure, disruption, and breakdown are not presented by Vermeir and Heiremans as antithetical or inimical to their mimesis of real abstraction. Rather, they are shown to be fully integral and immanent to it—and this, to me, seems to be precisely where the work diverges from how capital's real abstraction is usually conceived. It is precisely, in other words, where its mimeticism becomes critical. One scene in *MASQUERADE* illustrates this point particularly well. About half an hour into the video, we see three women circling around a maquette of Vermeir and Heiremans' art house, eyeing the miniature in an almost predatory fashion. They appear to be dressed as judges, and one of them is lecturing the others about the necessity of completely embracing the idea of art as a financial asset and of accepting the market as “the ultimate arbiter of worth, both economic and symbolic.” After her short soliloquy, the three come to a halt. They continue to gaze at the model for a brief while, until at a certain moment the woman who was speaking can no longer resist touching it. It is at that moment that the art house collapses, that the whole edifice comes crashing down, and the camera quickly cuts away. As we know, “the law of gravity asserts itself when a person's house collapses on top of him.”[40]

This is a metaphor of crisis if ever there was one, and though Vermeir and Heiremans use this metaphor to make real abstraction appear, they also refuse to

ascribe it any special significance. Their work contains no hints about contradiction leading to its own overcoming—that historical materialist shibboleth—and neither does it suggest any particular consequences or outcomes, for better or worse, of crisis. Instead, crisis is cast as part and parcel of real abstraction, as its everyday truth rather than as its exception. If only for this, Vermeir and Heiremans’ work is thoroughly counterhegemonic in its mimesis of finance and of real abstraction. As always, such a statement opens onto an entire set of new, and much larger, questions. One may ask where exactly the counterhegemonic gets us, with cultural production so clearly such a weak and limited force vis-à-vis real abstraction, and with anti-capitalist critique and demystification so obviously powerless about the fact that, without exception, all who will get to see the work will be dependent on capital for the reproduction of their daily existence—regardless of whether they believe its fictions or not. Surely, these are issues that art can and should press us to think about, but that cannot be resolved through art, or through thinking, alone.

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[1] Kaelen Wilson-Goldie, “Public Relations,” *Artforum*, May 22, 2013, <https://www.artforum.com/diary/kaelen-wilson-goldie-on-public-capital-in-istanbul-41191>. The biennial took place some months after the beginning of the Gezi Park protests in Istanbul, and was widely perceived as having toned down on some of its political statements in response to the climate of political unrest in the city. This sparked critique not only from local protesters, but also from (international) press. Vermeir and Heiremans’ performance took place at the Marmara hotel in Taksim, which was the epicenter of the political protests in Istanbul.

[2] In 2016 the project was represented on a billboard within the framework of the Bucharest Biennial, again in a form of make-belief promotion for the index itself (extension #30).

[3] Herman Melville, *The Confidence-Man* (London: Penguin Press, 1991).

[4] Alfred Sohn-Rethel, *Intellectual and Manual Labour: A Critique of Epistemology* (Atlantic Highlands, NJ: Humanities Press, 1978), 57.

[5] Jason Read, "Abstract Materialism: Sohn-Rethel and the Task of a Materialist Philosophy Today," *Unemployed Negativity Blog*, April 13, 2014, <http://www.unemployednegativity.com/2014/04/abstract-materialism-sohn-rethel-and.html>.

[6] Sami Khatib, "'Sensuous Supra-Sensuous': The Aesthetics of Real Abstraction," in *Aesthetic Marx*, ed. Samir Gandesha and Johan Hartle (London: Bloomsbury, 2017), 50. Khatib's emphasis on "as if" is in the original, establishing a clear link with Vermeir and Heiremans's presentation of real abstraction as fictional, discussed at the end of this essay.

[7] For a good account of this crisis, see the chapter on finance in Saskia Sassen, *Expulsions: Brutality and Complexity in the Global Economy* (Harvard: Harvard University Press, 2014).

[8] Fredric Jameson, "The Brick and the Balloon: Architecture, Idealism, and Land Speculation," in *The Cultural Turn: Selected Writings on the Postmodern, 1983-1998* (London: Verso, 1998).

[9] This practice, too, is described in more detail in the aforementioned chapter by Saskia Sassen.

[10] Thus, in what may appear as an ultimate squaring of the circle, it is precisely due to the aforementioned autonomization of exchange-value that the abstractions of the value-form become increasingly intermingled with sensuous reality. In the words of Sami Khatib: "Value relations [...] have material effects precisely because they have 'cut' themselves loose from the binary distinction of both the sensuous and super-sensuous, empirical and intellectual." Khatib, "Real Abstraction," 55.

[11] The original articulation of the "dematerialization of art" thesis is: John Chandler and Lucy Lippard, "The Dematerialization of Art," in: Lucy Lippard, *Changing: Essays in Art Criticism* (New York: E.P. Dutton & Co., Inc., 1971). Perhaps the most explicit articulation of the isomorphism between conceptual art and financialization comes from McKenzie Wark, who has written that "the 'dematerialization of art' was homologous with this transformation of capitalism into something else, something even more abstracted. Conceptual art is a side effect of the rise of conceptual business." McKenzie Wark, "Designs for the New World," *e-flux journal* 58 (2014): 3, [http://worker01.e-flux.com/pdf/article\\_8988222.pdf](http://worker01.e-flux.com/pdf/article_8988222.pdf).

[12] Lucy Lippard, *Six years: the dematerialization of the art object from 1966 to 1972...* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 2001), xiv.

[13] Alexander Alberro, *Conceptual Art and the Politics of Publicity* (Cambridge MA: MIT Press, 2003), 56.

[14] Beller writes: “At the moment, in principle at least, that is, in accord with the principles of late capitalism, to look is to labor. This is not to say that all looking is necessarily productive for capital, but looking first was posited as productive by capital early in the twentieth century, and currently is being presupposed as such.” Jonathan Beller, *The Cinematic Mode of Production: Attention Economy and the Society of the Spectacle* (Dartmouth: University Press of New England, 2006), 2.

[15] Beller, *Cinematic Mode*, 23. It is worth noting that this is entirely in accordance with Diedrich Diederichsen’s later attempt at normalizing the commodification of artworks within the orthodox Marxist labour theory of value, though Beller and the entire discourse on the attention economy are never explicitly mentioned by Diederichsen. Diedrich Diederichsen, *On (Surplus) Value in Art* (Berlin: Sternberg Press, 2008), 32.

[16] This is not a particularly new observation. Rosalind Krauss has written of “the ever-present reality of the copy as the *underlying condition of the original*.” Rosalind Krauss, “The Originality of the Avant-Garde,” in *The Originality of the Avant-Garde and Other Modernist Myths* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1985), 162. An excellent account of the mutual dependencies of original and copy can be found in the introductory chapter to: Erika Balsom, *After Uniqueness: A History of Film and Video Art in Circulation* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2017).

[17] David Joselit, *After Art* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2012), 3.

[18] Jonathan Crary, *Techniques of the Observer* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1990), 147.

[19] Tiziana Terranova, “Attention, Economy and the Brain,” *Culture Machine* 13 (2012): 4, <https://www.culturemachine.net/index.php/cm/article/view/465/484>.

[20] Terranova, “Attention,” 2.

[21] Jonathan Crary, *Suspensions of Perception: Attention, Spectacle, and Modern Culture* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1999), 29-30.

[22] Yves Citton, *The Ecology of Attention* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2017), 10.

[23] Peter Osborne, *Anywhere or Not at All: Philosophy of Contemporary Art* (London: Verso, 2013), 176.

[24] Katherine N. Hayles, “Hyper and Deep Attention: The Generational Divide in Cognitive Models,” *Profession* (2007): 195-198.

- [25] “Vermeir & Heiremans: A Modest Proposal (In a Black Box),” Pump House Gallery, accessed January 15, 2019, <https://pumphousegallery.org.uk/programme/a-modest-proposal-in-a-black-box>.
- [26] Anselm Franke and Ana Teixeira Pinto, “Post-Political, Post-Critical, Post-Internet: Why Can’t Leftists Be More Like Fascists?,” *open! Platform for Art, Culture & the Public Domain*, September 8, 2016, <https://www.onlineopen.org/post-political-post-critical-post-internet>.
- [27] Theodor Adorno, *Aesthetic Theory* (London: Bloomsbury, 2009), 30.
- [28] Franke and Teixeira Pinto, “Post-Political.”
- [29] The essay’s epigraph reads: “Beware: Whoever pretends to be a ghost will eventually turn into one.” Roger Caillois, “Mimicry and Legendary Psychasthenia,” in *The Edge of Surrealism: The Roger Caillois Reader*, ed. Claudine Frank (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2003), 91.
- [30] Kerstin Stakemeier, “Exchangeables: Aesthetics against Art” *Texte zur Kunst* 98 (2015): 126.
- [31] Though a thorough discussion of accelerationism is beyond the scope of this text, relevant critiques include Benjamin Noys, *Malign Velocities: Accelerationism and Capitalism* (Winchester: zero books, 2014). and Alexander Galloway, “Brometheanism,” *culture and communication*, June 16, 2017, <http://cultureandcommunication.org/galloway/brometheanism>.
- [32] Audre Lorde, “The Master’s Tools Will Never Dismantle the Master’s House,” in *Sister Outsider: Essays and Speeches* (Berkeley, CA: Crossing Press, 2007).
- [33] Furthermore, Vermeir and Heiremans often play devil’s advocate in and with their work, which in no respect offers a transparent perspective on their own personal politics. In a recent conversation with the artists, they were highly skeptical of much of the enthusiasm with which their propositions for re-appropriating financialization are often met. They noted how easily many let go of their criticisms and concerns about financialization as soon as they entertain the idea of employing financial instruments for the “common good”, i.e. themselves, rather than for the existing elite.
- [34] On capitalist reproduction as circular and repetitive movement, see Fredric Jameson, *Representing Capital: A Reading of Volume One* (London: Verso, 2011), 62-63.
- [35] Jameson, “Brick and Balloon”, 184.

[36] Angela Mitropoulos, *Contract and Contagion: From Biopolitics to Oikonomia* (Wivenhoe / New York / Port Watson: Minor Compositions, 2012), 41. Essentially, Blaise Pascal's wager holds that a rational person can bet that God either exists or does not. If they presume the former option to be the case, this involves only a comparatively limited loss (of earthly pleasures, affordances), whereas with the latter option there is a possibility for both unlimited losses (eternal suffering in hell), thus making belief in God by far the safer bet. Pascal thus applied an early form of probability theory (which would come to be crucial to finance) to religious matters. There is also a connection here with an earlier work by Vermeir and Heiremans, *A Wager for the Afterlife*, from 2012.

[37] Michael Taussig, *Mimesis and Alterity: A Particular History of the Senses* (New York and London: Routledge, 1993), xvi.

[38] Stakemeier, "Exchangeables", 124.

[39] Rather than aligning *MASQUERADE* with, say, the accelerationism of the latest blockbuster by Michael Bay, the constant switching of the viewers' attention from one thing to another in the video amounts to something strongly reminiscent of the Brechtian alienation effect or *V-effekt*. Like in Brecht's epic theatre, the interferences and discontinuities in Vermeir and Heiremans' work serve the purpose of sowing, rather than suspending, disbelief. For the importance of disruption in Brecht's drama, see: Walter Benjamin, *Understanding Brecht* (London: Verso, 1998), 3, 13, and particularly 18.

[40] Karl Marx, *Capital, Volume I* (London: Penguin Press, 1990), 168.

# A Model for a Quantitative Society



Palle Nielsen  
*The Model: A Model for a Qualitative Society*, 1968  
Exhibition view, Moderna Museet, Stockholm

Courtesy MACBA Collection, Barcelona © Palle Nielsen, Bildrecht, Wien 2019

Décor and theatricality have returned with a vengeance after more than a century of being shunned as art's lowbrow cousins. Marcel Broodthaers and Palle Nielsen were among the first artists to register the implications of this shift, anticipating the rise of immersion, affective networking, storytelling, surveillance, and monetisation that came along with it.

By  
*Antony Hudek*

When I wrote an article in these pages six years ago, on Palle Nielsen's 1968 *The Model: A Model for a Qualitative Society* at Moderna Museet in Stockholm, #MeToo had yet to take public effect, Sackler was still a respectable name in museum philanthropy, Trump had not threatened to dissolve the National Endowment for the Arts, and Penelope Curtis, Clémentine Deliss, Kimberli Meyer, Helen Molesworth, Maria Inès Rodriguez, Beatrix Ruf, Olga Viso, and Catherine de Zegher, among other prominent directors and curators, has not yet been pushed out of their now former institutions. For memory, in 1968 Nielsen had carried out a research project in Moderna Museet, transforming the museum's main space into a playground for children. As these were the subjects of the installation, as well as the objects of study, adults could look in the space from outside via closed-circuit video. Lars Bang Larsen, who wrote a book on *The Model* on which my article relied, perceptively locates the contradictions in Nielsen's project, utopian in its celebration of the child's spontaneity and flaunting of norms, while at the same time firmly ensconced in the institutional framework of the museum as a

research project. In the end, it is this same contradiction that, for Larsen, allows Nielsen's 1968 project to remain a viable model for a qualitative as opposed to quantitative society, because "it allowed for a working through of the idea of the political as something unfinished and becoming, in a space where others are present".

In 2013 I felt that it was "wishful thinking" on the part of museums to cite *The Model* as an early example of their institutional potential, providing a space "dedicated to experiences, experiments and 'grafted' proposals that could not take place anywhere else in the public sphere" – as Bartomen Marí, the then director of MACBA, which acquired the Nielsen archive, stated. Instead, I proposed that *The Model* was "such a timely institutional model, not so much for having challenged institutional norms, or anticipated its own institutionalisation, but for having laid the groundwork for the survival of both the generation of May 1968, and the museum, through the archive".

Now, with the benefit of the time that has passed, I recognise that I too was prone to wishful thinking, seeing in the archival re-presentation of

Nielsen's museological experiment a ghostly persistence of the "real" that the museum can neither completely evacuate nor accommodate. What I had missed in my earlier reading of *The Model* was the fact that, despite its utopian stagecraft, it was intended as a sociological study supported by Scandinavian research funds; and that the key feature of its scenography was both the most obvious and best concealed: the live feed between the playing children and observing adults, via the cameras, which the children could operate themselves.

Larsen invokes Tony Bennett's idea of the "exhibitionary complex" to suggest that *The Model* may have given the exhibition space "over to uncivilised bodies, but it also turned childhood into a spectacle of civics – albeit an emancipatory or utopian one". I would argue, however, that the technological means by which the emancipatory images of *The Model* were conveyed open up a much more quantitative definition of spectacle, synonymous with constant surveillance and data gathering. Archival re-presentations of *The Model* would, therefore, miss the point entirely: it is not so much the specific content of Nielsen's project that has survived as its visionary apparatus converting lived experience into data streams. As we know, this

information – the endlessly distributed and stored flow of images of children or any other compelling object-subject – has since become capitalism's most valuable asset.

This quantitative model was once again alluded to, in passing, in Marcel Broodthaers's 1974 installation *Un Jardin d'Hiver* at the Palais des Beaux-Arts in Brussels. A visitor entering the space would have witnessed, in the far corner behind a makeshift collection of potted palms, a monitor capturing her movements through a closed-circuit TV camera. This work was the first that Broodthaers referred to as a "décor", the series of theatricalised stage sets that he would pursue after the closure of his fictional Museum of Modern Art in 1972.

If *The Model* and to a lesser extent *Un Jardin d'Hiver* could be said to have anticipated what is today termed "surveillance capitalism", it would take another few years for it to become not only a scenographic element but arguably the very subject of an exhibition, namely "Les Immatériaux" (1985) at the Pompidou Centre in Paris, curated by Thierry Chaput and Jean-François Lyotard. The exhibition's brooding scenography was intended to simulate the thorough encroachment of technology in all aspects of our lives, from genetic engineering to new modes



"Les Immatériaux", Centre Pompidou, Paris, 1985  
Exhibition view



“Les Immatériaux”, Centre Pompidou, Paris, 1985  
Exhibition view

of dwelling and writing. Contrary to Tony Bennett’s view of the museum as a collective self-regulating space, in “Les Immatériaux” the visitor found herself isolated, equipped with a headset streaming literary and philosophical texts, wandering through “zones” and “sites” towards a concluding “labyrinth of language” full of Minitel terminals – forerunners of the internet. The visitor’s pathway through the exhibition was supposed to have been recorded on a personal magnetic card, to be printed out at the end of the trajectory. Although this feature was not implemented, probably for technical reasons, many other interactions in “Les Immatériaux” generated archival traces, from the visitors’ typing on the Minitels to the second of the exhibition’s two catalogues, which archives online exchanges between philosophers, writers, and artists around key terms related to “Les Immatériaux”.

With *The Model* in mind, Chaput’s and Lyotard’s exhibition now appears as an important milestone in the relation between art and its political economies: not only as an immersive experience of various “posts” (postmodern, post-Fordist, posthuman), but as the next level in the transformation of lived experience into predictive data. Like *The*

*Model*, “Les Immatériaux” turned the exhibition site into a generator of information produced by its “users”. But at the Pompidou the safe distance between spectator and information-generating subject collapsed entirely, each visitor becoming the producer of her or his own tailored experience and distributor of individualised data. It is therefore tempting to see in “Les Immatériaux” the end game of the museological experience as inherited from the nineteenth century, which inspired much of the critical tradition of the twentieth, from Michel Foucault and Brian O’Doherty to the institutional critique of the 70s and 80s. By placing life-style on the same level with life-choices, design and art with technology, and by affording the visitor an experience similar to that of wandering through booths at an art fair, or a shopping mall, “Les Immatériaux” laid bare the condition of spectacle in the age of hyper-visibility and absolutised culture.

One of the few art works in “Les Immatériaux”, in a section entitled *négoce peint* (“painted trade”), was *Sujet à Discretion* (Subject to Discretion) (1985) by Philippe Thomas. Each panel of Thomas’s photographic triptych represents the same frontal view of the Mediterranean, but with a different

paratextual apparatus: the first is anonymous and unsigned; the second is signed by the artist; while the third bears the signature of the collector who acquired the work. Within “Les Immatériaux”, Thomas’ *Sujet à Discretion* highlighted the linguistic and institutional codes that underpinned the conventional museological encounter. Thomas’s demonstration would have remained exactly that, a demonstration, had he not exported it into a radically different context. In 1987, during a prolonged stay in New York, Thomas officially opened readymades belong to everyone®, a proto-PR agency that would become his main platform of activity, to the intentional detriment of his own name as an artist. With his agency’s inauguration in New York, “the world capital of the art market”, Thomas left museological critique behind, adopting

instead the believable fictional stance of creative director. “If”, as he put it, “it was possible when confronted with the agency’s installation ... to hesitate between the impression of ‘environment’ ... and that of a real production house (where each element was present purely for functional reasons), this was no doubt a reflection of the agency’s desire to insist on ambiguity from which it derives the main principles of its identity.”

The same year as the founding of the ambiguous readymades belong to everyone®, Thomas returned to *Sujet à Discretion*, this time at the gallery American Fine Arts, Co. in New York, where he exhibited the seascape he showed at “Les Immatériaux” but under a different set of signatures: John Dogg, Barbara Gladstone, Joseph Kosuth, Allan



Jay Chiat, *Insight*, 1989  
 Colour photograph and title card with text: “Jay Chiat Insight 1989”  
 60 x 90cm, title card 4.5 x 11 cm, edition of 3

# In our post-truth era, the positioning of fiction in relation to reality seems like an innocent modernist parlour game. For what has changed since the turn of the 1970s is the nature of fiction itself.

McCollum, and his own. By re-assigning the works premiered at “Les Immatériaux”, Thomas signalled the waning power of the museum and that of critique, from “first-generation” conceptual art (Kosuth) and late 70s “Pictures Generation” (McCollum) to a gallerist (Gladstone), and a little-known post-conceptual artist (Thomas), culminating with John Dagg, a fictional character created by the artist Richard Prince and Colin de Land, the founding director of American Fine Arts. The concluding point on this arc marks the total surrender of art to self-promotion, where this “self” is a hybrid entity, embedded within the system yet removed from it on the inside through a stylised and believable semblance of reality.

If in the late-60s Nielsen could stage a mediated connection in a museum between the adults peering into *The Model* via monitors and the child users, it is because the institution could still countenance a form of qualitative aspiration. By 1985, with “Les Immatériaux”, an artist like Thomas could try out a new quantitative model for its own sake, no longer centred on the museum per se but on the relations between cultural consumers and the creative agent, who capitalises on affective networks and techniques of promotional storytelling at the cost of authorial self-positioning. In a way that recalls the activities of the data leakers of the past several years, such artistic projects remain difficult to locate on traditional moral scales, since they identify neither clear beneficiary nor hostile target.

Among the distant relatives of *The Model*, with strong echoes to readymades belong to everyone®, is the ongoing investigation into art’s immaterial value by Katleen Vermeir and Ronny Heiremans. Since 2013 the Belgian duo have been investing

in Art House Index, a financial index they created to track the fluctuating value of their Brussels loft/studio – a measure of their own creative capital as well as of their role in gentrification. In one of their latest projects, *A Modest Proposal* (2018), the duo formulate a financial model that proposes to leverage the fixed assets of museums and other art institutions worldwide – collections, but also buildings and branding – to allow “streams of economic and social wealth, produced by exchange, [to] flow back to its origins – the artists and the art workers”. Similarly, when in 2014 the New York based group Shanzhai Biennial attempted to sell an actual piece of real estate (the prestigious London address 100 Hamilton Terrace) at Frieze Art Fair, it wasn’t simply to turn a financial profit – although they presumably wouldn’t be averse to – but rather to consummate the union of art, promotion, and value creation.

When Marcel Broodthaers announced the bankruptcy in 1971 of his Museum of Modern Art, Department of Eagles, he chose the Cologne Art Fair to make his point. A year later, he closed the museum with a final iteration – the sections “Modern Art” and “Advertising” – at Documenta 5 (1972). Broodthaers was clear about his museum’s fictional quality, since for him it “plays a role of, on the one hand, a political parody of art shows, and on the other hand an artistic parody of political events. Which is in fact what official museums and bodies like Documenta do. With the difference, however, that a work of fiction allows you to capture reality and at the same time what it conceals.”

That, one could say, was then. In our post-truth era, the positioning of fiction in relation to reality seems like an innocent modernist parlour game.



Still from Vermeir & Heiremans, *A Modest Proposal (in a Black Box)*, 2018  
Video, HD, 28 minutes

For what has changed since the turn of the 70s is the nature of fiction itself – from one that holds onto the separation between inside and outside, and thus to criticality and the possibility of revelation, to a kind of made-for-reality fiction that, mediated by technology, becomes so engrossing that it absorbs the identities of its commodified subjects. This model of a quantitative society was glimpsed in Nielsen’s intervention at Moderna Museet, and pursued by readymades belong to everyone®, Art House Index and Shanzhai Biennial. Behind their fictional realities lie only more fictional realities, no less illusory than any

uptick or downturn in the stock market. If these projects betray any utopianism, it is that of capitalism itself – a surveillance capitalism in which every one of our transactions, cultural or otherwise, can be turned into data and monetised.

Nobody bothers to ask what the opposite of “fake news” would be, perhaps because the question is itself absurd. Truthiness? Factual nonsense? The literary fictions that still animated Broodthaers and the soundtrack of “Les Immatériaux” belonged to the melancholic spirit of the disabused Western subject. At the same time, from within



Shanzhai Biennial No. 3: 100 Hamilton Terrace  
Installation view, Frieze London, 2014

bona fide museums came *The Model* and later readymades belong to everyone®, providing a new model for a quantitative society that spelt the dead end of qualitative aesthetics. It's hard not to view today's art museum as anything other than a zombie institution, its ideological and economic significance overtaken by biennials, art fairs, and private foundations, its relevance now mostly touristic. Politically neutered, bankrolled by the likes of BP and Sackler, it fulfils in a sense the voided projection of its historically colonial and nationalist self: to allow citizens to commune in the phantasm of

a unified, pacified, paternalistic space open to all. Meanwhile, practices like Art House Index and Shanzhai Biennial happily mine this illusion, turning their décors into plausible media-saturated stories whose success can be measured by every second of our attention, every click of the mouse.

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# What are we building down there?

Interview with Niels Van Tomme  
curator of the Bucharest Biennale 7

BY LAURA HERMAN



Adelita Husni-Bey, The Sleepers, 2011. Photo: Charlotte Van Buylaere

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# What are we building down there?

**Interview with Niels Van Tomme**  
curator of the Bucharest Biennale 7

BY LAURA HERMAN

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In a valiant effort to reimagine what a biennale can be, the seventh edition of Bucharest's Biennale for Contemporary Art *What are we building down there?* comes with a concept that is both simple and smart. Rather than housing art in various galleries and venues, Belgian curator and critic Niels Van Tomme reshapes our expectations by integrating advertising billboards in the capital city's infrastructure.

Featuring work by twenty artists and collectives, the billboards are both a nod to the increasing privatization of urban space as well as a prime example of how we can navigate the city's built environment and its social realities differently.

But what, as the biennale's title suggestively asks, are notions of building that could potentially recover a sense of publicness that has nearly become extinct? A conversation with Van Tomme brings answers that are thoughtful and expansive.

**LAURA HERMAN** *The title of the Bucharest Biennale 7 What are we building down there? adopts the form of an open question rather than a proposition. It sets forth the importance of engagement – an open-ended and collective sort of inquiry. How does this implicit mode of address inform the biennale’s conceptual framework?*

**NIELS VAN TOMME** It does so by choosing a title that sounds equally popular (like a line from a pop song), engaging, and vaguely geopolitically insensitive. It is indeed, as you rightly point out, very much an open-ended and collective kind of inquiry, but it does so by adding an element that doesn’t feel comfortable: the deliberate use of ‘down there’. Some have said it adds an element of dismissiveness to the title, while others have read it as stating some kind of out-of-place solidarity. Both readings are problematic, of course.

But by using it despite these objections I wanted to point out and address the unique position of the Bucharest Biennale within the larger framework of international biennial events, as well as to complicate and problematize notions of marginality and isolation historically assigned to Romania and Eastern Europe more broadly. It is, in other words, very much a rhetorical device, and in that sense it also aligns with the biennial’s other remarkable proposition, namely to view Bucharest as a model city for privatization processes worldwide.

**LH** *In the past decades Bucharest has gone through several stages of architectural demolition, reconstruction and conversion. Bucharest’s skyline is blighted by endless rows*

*of standardized tower blocks, while its centre is marked by Ceaușescu’s megalomaniac constructions that, in many ways, have become the signifiers of Romania’s traumatic exit from socialism. Over the past years, the city has gone through rapid changes with private investments in office buildings, shopping centre and high-rise apartment blocks. What is the role of building processes in this 7th edition of the BB?*

**NVT** It is key. But not in the way it is usually understood. At first I was—like everyone who encounters the city for the first time—really struck by the remarkable way in which Bucharest has been shaped by a number of successive architectural ideologies. Most resolutely, state socialism forcefully transformed the city’s former eclectic urban development, which was equally formed by imperial influences from West and East, into a network of state-supervised public and private spaces. A lot of neighbourhoods were being demolished and built. Most remarkably, viable spaces for civic engagement were being eliminated. But that’s history, a history that nevertheless still has an eerie presence.

More visibly, perhaps, I noticed the fierce realization of a contemporary, post-socialist urban reality that resolutely rejects this omnipresent state-socialist heritage. I’m talking here about the architecture of privatized pragmatism that embraces an aggressive, wild capitalist urge for building that doesn’t really have time to consider history or time for deeper reflection. New, hybrid forms of urbanism emerge in which the traditional distinction between ‘private’ and ‘public’ evaporates, which is of course a potentially fertile ground for new things to emerge.



Tamás Kaszás, Wild Peripherals, 2016. Photo: Charlotte Van Buylaere

I'm definitely not an architecture expert or urbanist of any kind. I just started to notice things with the fresh look of a privileged outsider, namely a foreign curator who was being asked to curate a biennial in Bucharest. So rather than overemphasize and focus on these multifaceted processes of construction, I was interested in exploring a building of a different kind. As such, the artists as well as the curators in this biennial could be seen as a kind of alternative entrepreneurs, concerned with a different mode of construction. They are laying out and proposing actions for those who currently inhabit the city, making this endeavour at once specific to Bucharest but also applicable to other urban contexts that experience similar processes of privatization.

**LH** *I'd like to ask you about the role of faction (the mixing of fact and fiction) in this biennale. Although you employ fairy-tale tropes, there is a partial truth in the proposed narrative for the city of Bucharest to be 'a model for privatization processes worldwide'.*

**NVT** As mentioned, the proposition to view Bucharest as a model city for privatization processes worldwide really functions more like a rhetorical device which wants to undo historically assigned roles to the region. Truth, of course, is a very relative given, and fairy tales are no less realistic narratives than any other out there. For Metahaven, for example, one of the participants in the biennial, propaganda nowadays is less about propagating an ideology

than about undercutting and questioning an existing story. Their contribution to BB7 suggests that our current information overload is the new fuel for propaganda and that the time has perhaps come to move beyond reality itself. This is a powerful proposition, which importantly destabilizes the binary between fact and fiction, and of which the outcome remains wholly unknown.

**LH** *Let's talk about the format of the billboard, which over time has become reminiscent of the aesthetic of an early American culture of desire and capitalism more generally. Why have you decided to integrate the billboard in the very particular post-socialist context of Bucharest?*

**NVT** The billboard is truly all-pervasive in post-socialist Bucharest. We didn't add it to the equation; it was already flourishing out there, its multifaceted, smooth 2D-surfaces waiting for us to be occupied. At a specific point in the production of BB7—the head sponsor had pulled out; organizationally things were very complex—it seemed the best possible solution.

It was partly a pragmatic and economically motivated decision, but of course this inscription in the most vulgarly capitalist and tempting commercial surfaces quite literally translates the themes of privatization, commercialization and corporatization of the post-socialist city within the very structure of the biennial. It thus makes the themes of the BB7 visible in the most transparent way, almost casually yet not without a sense of poetic defiance.

Dispersed across the city, the billboards hold the potential to interact with unique local contexts in ways that traditional modes of exhibition-making oftentimes cannot, yet the question also remains as to how many people will actually see or notice them. Whatever the outcome, BB7 is definitely not another iteration of the global white cube! I very much see the billboards acting as artistic footnotes to the already existing city infrastructure, opening up new ways of interrelating and navigating the city as you travel from one to the other, while making apparent important yet hidden aspects of Bucharest's multifocal historical layering—its past, present and future.

Despite its strong adherence to—as you describe it—an Americanized culture of desire and capitalism, I'm also interested in how the use of billboards revives an almost anachronistic mode of artistic intervention in physical space, right at the magnified source of our spam-infused everyday existence. There is a very rich and potent history—which is even more pertinent in an Eastern European context—of the historical avant-garde with regards to the liberating and educational potential of advertising as an artistic medium, a theme the Hungarian artist Tamás Kaszás connects with in his contribution to the biennial.

And there are of course other important reference points, such as the more deviant culture-jamming practices of the Billboard Liberation Front or a collective like Adbusters.

But most of all, I was interested in applying what Keller Easterling so aptly describes as 'modes of non-oppositional dissent' and in



Bors & Ritiu, Holy Water, 2016. Photo: Charlotte Van Buylaere



Andrew Norman Wilson, Humpty Dumpty, 2016. Photo: Charlotte Van Buylaere

imagining new ways in which the billboard can be used in parasitic yet resourceful ways. While these former US activist groups tried to hack the billboard format and attack capitalism, we do not oppose any of these. The BB7, as a corporately sponsored biennial, infiltrates the inner workings of capitalism to suggest new modes of resistance. And so the billboards stand as somewhat disturbing yet appealing markers, as they brush against the format's usual manipulative use.

**LH** *The BB7 is staged across three main settings—Public Space, Office Space, Domestic Space. Could you address the relationship between those spaces and the role of the subjects who inhabit them?*

**NVT** To be entirely correct, BB7 used to be staged across those three main settings, at a time when the biennial was still conceived as a more or less traditional exhibition format. At the moment these settings function more like reminiscent spatial metaphors and are no longer linked so directly to the core of the exhibition. I was looking for three spaces that have become ever-more hybrid and are in a sense becoming increasingly interchangeable in a contemporary city fuelled by the incessant piling on of newness, precarious labour conditions, relentless growth, and eager business dynamics. These are also spaces in which a new type of collectivism without communism could emerge, to suggest a somewhat provocative term. Negotiating strategies of movement, translation, trickery and distraction that are scripted by the subjects that inhabit them, the BB7 suggests new ways to navigate urban life.

**LH** *Could you comment on the selection of twenty artists you commissioned to create an advertisement billboard to temporarily become part of Bucharest's urban infrastructure? It strikes me that only two are Romanian.*

**NVT** For one, the Bucharest Biennale has traditionally included international rather than local artists. Without this being a primary reason to continue to do so, there is something to be said for maintaining some sense of continuity from one edition to the next. Furthermore, the politics of negotiating the local art scene as an 'outsider' was something I was interestingly confronted with throughout the curatorial process. I feel that the current list of artists adequately represents a dialogue between local concerns and the global themes that its curatorial framework wanted to highlight. I totally understand your concern regarding the participation of Romanian artists, but as my assistant curator Charlotte Van Buylaere rightly points out, the current Berlin Biennale, for example, has a similar percentage of German artists participating. It of course doesn't justify this sensitive issue, but it does put everything in perspective when trying to grapple with the inner workings of the global biennial machinery. Questioning who else could have been included is of course a natural game to play, but it also becomes meaningless without taking into account the specific context and challenges of this and any biennial.

A small but important specification relates to the fact that the specific timeline of the BB7 included me selecting the majority of the artists long before the idea of the billboards materialized. I fully realize that the question of the billboards somewhat stretches the limits of what



Nasan Tur, CAAPPIITTAALL, 2016. Photo: Charlotte Van Buylaere

is professionally and conceptually acceptable for a curator, but most of the artists understand the exceptional relevance of this economically and infrastructurally necessary measure.

**LH** *How have the artists responded to your curatorial brief and what were the challenges of working together?*

**NVT** The challenges were not really related to working together as a team or to thematic concerns or to artistic and political alignments. I conducted studio visits with almost all the artists, or if that was not possible I had extensive conversations with them, so we knew in advance the challenges associated with the BB7. The issues had to do with the precarious

working conditions and oftentimes unresolved financial questions. Total transparency in these matters was very important from the beginning. The Danish collective Lehman Brothers, for example, used the impossibility of the BB7 to accommodate the realization of their initially proposed project as an opportunity to advertise something that never happened. And the Romanian artist duo Bors & Ritiu turned their contribution into a critical comment on the privatization of personal thought through religion from a very specific Romanian perspective, as it relates to relentless construction projects by the Church within the capital.

I have to say, though, that a remarkable and for me successful outcome of these unusual

conditions and the format they inspired is the fact that some of the artists were pushed out of their comfort zones and started to break with their thematic, aesthetic or political preoccupations. It created, in some cases, a type of movement away from a strange kind of conservatism that sometimes can occur even in the most progressive artistic practices.

So in a way it was amazing how positively the artists responded to our shifting the biennial from ordinary venues to one staged exclusively on billboards, but I also believe that it is in a large part our transparency as a curatorial team that helped foster their enthusiasm. We of course regret that most of the participants could not be paid because the biennial worked with almost no budget.

Nevertheless, in collaboration with some of the artists, we succeeded in getting funds from a variety of countries, ranging from state-funded sources in Denmark, Estonia, Japan and Netherlands, to private foundations such as Kadist Art Foundation in San Francisco and CEC Artslink in New York. The big, and in our opinion shameful, exception to this trend was the Flemish Minister of Culture's decision to not support the Flemish artists participating in BB7, a gesture that negatively impacted not just the biennial, but also the image of this region as truly connected to the contemporary international art sphere.

**LH** *Across the globe, the international art world seems to be suffering from a creeping 'biennial fatigue', fostering scepticism towards its often totalizing format. What are your thoughts on what the BB7 can accomplish for the collaps-*

*ing political and corporate imaginations it seeks to address?*

**NVT** I have been thinking a lot about the original strengths of 'biennialism', not so much its initial iterations like São Paulo or Venice, but the time when biennials emerged as sites of artistic renewal and critical forward-thinking throughout its heyday in the 1990s. In those times, biennials were staged as digressions from the type of artistic practices or exhibition models that you could experience in the other flourishing institutions of contemporary art, namely museums or art fairs. But those initial stakes have been flattened out and these days it is becoming increasingly hard to find such critical resistance in biennial thinking and organizing. There are of course meaningful alternatives, which also served as an inspiration, such as Bart De Baere's recent 6th Moscow Biennale or the rather unusual Ghetto Biennale in the slums of Haiti, to name just a few.

And more often than not this decision to stage different types of biennial formats is a response to the peculiar socio-economic and geopolitical contexts of these events. They often favour a more humble approach, but nevertheless achieve ambitious results, as they are able to mount a critical dialogue about the future and relevance of biennials and whether the most forward-thinking practices nowadays aren't to be found in the periphery.

To answer the second part of your question, I don't think it's the role of a biennial to actively address these issues. It can point to certain peculiarities and suggest different readings of stringent realities, but it cannot and should



Metahaven, Checkpoint Truth, 2016. Photo: Charlotte Van Buylaere



Adelita Husni-Bey, The Sleepers, 2011. Photo: Charlotte Van Buylaere



Vermeir & Heiremans, Art House Index (PUB), 2016. Photo: Charlotte Van Buylaere

not solve them or replace them by something else. But I do think it can create a community of interlocutors, as specific aspects or questions that remain hidden in the maelstrom of everyday life suddenly become apparent. They create, when they are successful, the possibility of dialogue, debate and reflection, or the possibility to expand artistic practices, and in this sense I strongly believe in the potential of biennials.

It's too early now to speak about BB7 in those terms, as it remains to be seen how it resonates locally and internationally.

**LH** *The setup of the BB7 (and its 'Travel Agency' at Onomatopée) seeks—at least in part—to critique the turn at the nexus of tourism and the creative industry, otherwise known as the 'experience economy'. How do you*

*anticipate the effects of the biennale's non-standard format to be on its future iterations, and on Bucharest's cultural landscape (and its consumption) more broadly.*

**NVT** That's really impossible to predict. The only thing I can hope for is that BB7 will come to represent a point of sincere reflection on the what, how, when and why of mounting a biennial in Bucharest. I truly believe it is a context for which the international exchanges brought by such an event remains pivotal, and this also holds for the other direction. Romania is a strong historical and contemporary marker for some of the most innovative and singular artistic practices out there. I'm thinking now of artists such as Tristan Tzara, Isidore Isou, Dan Perjovschi or Iona Nemes. The legacy of these people is significant, and thus my efforts will hopefully highlight Romania's importance rather than marginality to contemporary thinking about the relationship between art and society.

I'm also eager to continue to explore the conceptual limits of the BB7 format. In a sense, the project in its current state has become the perfect traveling exhibition, as it was initially conceived for Bucharest, yet its central themes resonate globally. Biennials generally contain a sense of utopianism, optimism, as well as an inherent structural consistency, as new versions are mounted every two years. With BB7, I am interested in exploring what happens when a biennial project insists on not going away and not moving on. In short, I want to know what the Bartleby of exhibition-making would look like! In this context, I envision BB7 to be mounted in other precarious urban contexts globally, places where processes of commercialization,

corporatization and privatization are key. In the meantime, the global experience economy will continue to thrive, and BB8, BB9, and BB10 will be mounted. Yet BB7 will inevitably reshape their meaning as it will stubbornly co-exist with them, in cities as diverse as Beijing, Kinshasa, and Detroit.

The oxymoronic phrase "once upon a time, there will be" is at the centre of a widely known Eastern European political joke that humorously describes the seemingly impossible sociopolitical realms that can be found in the region, and which has been crucial to my curatorial process for the biennial. Perhaps with this project, once upon a time there will be a BB7, again and again.

If you're interested in this proposal, you can email me at [perpetualbb7@gmail.com](mailto:perpetualbb7@gmail.com).

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# Metropolis M



## Bucharest Biennale 7 Curated by Niels Van Tomme, the new director of de Appel

16.07.2016 | REVIEW — Laura Herman



Interventions taking on unusual guises have often proved more effective than ones with predictable schemes. This realization must have been a starting point for Belgian curator Niels Van Tomme when conceiving the 7th edition of the Bucharest Biennale for Contemporary Art with limited resources and support. While the summer opened with a high concentration of cultural events like the 15th Venice Architecture Biennale, the 19th Berlin Biennale and Manifesta 11, fuelling on-going discussions of these large-scale exhibitions' virtues and pitfalls, their agendas and common strategies, little attention has been paid to the BB7 which has taken a more modest, perhaps more invigorating approach to an all-too-comfortable format.



Nasan Tur, Caappiittaall, 2016

The BB7 is not your usual biennale. It doesn't invite visitors into white cube venues or decrepit warehouse spaces full of art, nor does it include a thick exhibition catalogue or a



packed programme of side-events. Instead Van Tomme commissioned twenty artists to produce billboards, which were dispersed throughout Romania's capital city, some of them located in remote locations. This simple and straightforward concept could have worked very well if it weren't for the very long walking distances in between each billboard. To help us navigate to the different locations an online application was developed but it doesn't tell you how to get there most efficiently. After having walked to two bicycle rental shops only to discover that both no longer existed, I had no difficulties hailing a cab which seems to be the way to go in this city full of large boulevards; where everything moves quickly and nothing remains the same for long. In fact, as we drive through Bucharest's different neighbourhoods, the city unfolds as an extended sum of countless particulars. The urban environment is an honest expression of competing histories and adds to a more full understanding of the biennale's conceptual framework. By titling his biennale 'What are we building down there', Van Tomme ambiguously points to the perception of a marginalized Eastern-Europe shaped by ideology, myth and propaganda, while simultaneously opening up a collective conversation on processes of construction in an eclectic urban setting.



Andrea Faciu, Exercises of Comprehension, 2016

This premise puts to mind Harvard economist Edward Glaeser's observation that we should turn away from our tendency to see the cities as their buildings, and remember that the real

city is made of flesh, not concrete. A conversation with my cab driver is a reminder of exactly this. Driving past the People's Palace, the man recalls life in late seventies socialism, remembering his adolescent years when witnessing a large, steel wrecking ball swinging against the walls of a 16th-century hospital where many inhabitants of Bucharest, like himself, were born, nursed, and taken care of for centuries. It took a couple of tentative swings before the building's solid walls would finally break to make room for Ceausescu's gargantuan edifice, only slightly smaller than the Great Pyramid in Egypt. Today, businesses seeking economic benefit are exploring possibilities for repurposing the large heritage, while real estate speculation causing higher prices for housing make it difficult for many Romanians to take part in a future that was never planned for them.



Metahaven, Checkpoint Truth, 2016

If processes of top-down urban renewal, entrepreneurial spirit and burgeoning corporate development have increasingly marked the city's social fabric, turning it into a space where dreams quickly dry-up, how can we build differently? Or, if the inhabitants of the city have any purchase on the future what would it look like? What new things could arise from this hybrid configuration of the city where the line between public and private increasingly evaporates? These are a couple of questions the biennale asks, conveying a conflicted responsibility to locate agency in alternative practices of building and entrepreneurship.



Merve Bedir, What is it that you want?, 2016

Positioned alongside a busy boulevard Merve Bedir's billboard asks "What is it that you want?" The pronoun is highlighted in yellow, provoking passers-by to reflect on their own subject position within the urban fabric. Metahaven's contribution Checkpoint Truth located by Unirri Parc in the city centre, comments on the role of propaganda as an instance of fiction, suggesting we should move beyond fixed notions of truth.



Adelita Husni-Bey, *The Sleepers*, 2011

On the outskirts of the city, Adelita Husni-Bey depicts a group of drowsy leaders, alluding to political stasis and dormant instances of power in need of an urgent wake-up call. Then, there's Christian Bors & Marius Ritiu's billboard displaying a carefully designed bottle of holy water, playfully commenting on religion as the institutionalization and privatization of faith. By the train station, Andrew Norman Wilson's billboard presents a dried-out Humpty Dumpty, its luxurious egg-shaped body slowly deforming under all sorts of pressure. Although some of the billboards are straightforward and clear, others are more cryptic and allegorical. Using both images and text, these different surfaces revolve around similar issues, prompting us to think about the current state of affairs, and re-think our role within processes of decision-making in a context where a sense of publicness has nearly become extinct.



Andrew Norman Wilson, Humpty Dumpty, 2016

The biennale's use of billboards is, of course, no coincidence. Instead of displaying a reactive posture towards the corporatization of space, the biennale operates as a sort of parasite within the distribution of advertising billboards that permeate the urban infrastructure, piggybacking on the visibility of its repetitive 2-D surfaces. Yet, however pertinent the questions they ask, the billboards are hardly noticeable in the pervasive commercial net that covers the city.



Vermeir & Heiremans, Art House Index (PUB), 2016

Driving from billboard to billboard, I wonder whether this biennale should be visited in such an intentional way, or perhaps be experienced as a set of statements unexpectedly manifesting from the city's infrastructure. Van Tomme seems to be more engrossed in option two, and in contrast to an art event like Manifesta, this biennale doesn't have the pretence to change or solve anything. Rather, it explores how a position of refusal can subtly make visible certain realities and mechanisms that shape everyday life; how it can uncover the fallacies of a society that its leaders and managers have failed to address. In addition, the biennale underscores how Bucharest can be considered to be central--rather than marginal--to critical thinking about the affiliation between art and societal issues. While for some, the BB7 might have benefitted from more interaction between the artists, the public, the inhabitants and the organization, there is no doubt that this biennale's experimentation with modes of non-oppositional dissent is a worthy and valuable endeavour in its own right.

Bucharest Biennial 7

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Karl Marx

Het spook van het spook

Je hoort steeds vaker dat studiegroepen zich richten op teksten uit *Das Kapital* van Karl Marx. Nu het kapitalisme volgens sommige critici geblinddoekt afstormt op de afgrond, is de collectieve oerkritiek op dit door individueel winstbejag gedreven systeem in toenemende mate een serieus te nemen alternatief. Ook in kunstkringen. Steyn Bergs weegt enkele actuele marxistisch-geïnspireerde projecten.

Door Steyn Bergs

Tijdens de laatste editie van de Biënnale van Venetië in 2015 ging er nogal wat aandacht uit naar een integraal uitgevoerde live-reading van de Engelse vertaling van Karl Marx' *Das Kapital*. Deze voordracht van Marx' magnum opus vond plaats in een speciaal daarvoor opgezette arena (ontworpen door architect David Adjaye), onder auspiciën van de Britse kunstenaar Isaac Julien. *Das Kapital Oratorio* veroorzaakte nogal wat ophef; niet omdat het werk en het dwepen met Marx' antikapitalistische kritiek als te radicaal of te controversieel werd gezien, maar omdat men het binnen de context van een biënnale ongepast vond. Of beter gezegd: omdat men het werk niet radicaal genoeg vond. En terecht, want het ging om een dramatische en spectaculaire, maar weinig integere herwaardering van *Das Kapital*. Dit werd maar al te duidelijk toen Okwui Enwezor, curator van de biënnale, toegaf dat hij *Das Kapital* zelf weliswaar niet gelezen had, maar wel meende te weten dat als Marx nog in leven zou zijn geweest, hij niet zou willen dat het kapitalisme tot zijn eind kwam.<sup>1</sup> En dan was er nog het feit dat Isaac Juliens video-installatie *Stones Against Diamonds*, die ook in dezelfde tentoonstelling te zien was, zowaar bekostigd werd door Rolls-Royce – niet bepaald wat je noemt een bastion van antikapitalistisch verzet.<sup>2</sup>

Het is natuurlijk gemakkelijk (maar daarom niet minder terecht en ook niet minder belangrijk) om kritiek te spuien op dit soort exorbitante voorbeelden van pseudokritiek die in de kunstwereld helaas schering en inslag zijn. Een stuk moeilijker wordt het wanneer je je gaat afvragen hoe je de ideeën van Marx wél nieuw leven in zou kunnen blazen. Niettemin staat *Das Kapital Oratorio* niet alleen en is er sinds de laatste jaren, met name sinds de financiële crisis van 2008, een hernieuwde interesse in het denken van Marx binnen de beeldende kunst. Wat volgt is niet zozeer een overzicht van voorbeelden hoe die interesse zich manifesteert (gezien zo'n selectie zou nooit volledig kunnen zijn) maar een poging om de aanwending van het marxistische denken binnen de hedendaagse kunstproductie te analyseren.

Lezen of herlezen?

Wie zich vandaag de dag tot het werk van Karl Marx wendt, wordt voor een behoorlijke uitdaging geplaatst: hoe is een analyse van de dynamieken van de negentiende-eeuwse politieke economie relevant voor onze huidige situatie? Ook wie niet in de weerbarstige illusie verkeert dat er een onverbiddelijk causaal verband bestaat tussen boeken als *Das Kapital* of het communistisch manifest en de Goelag of Pol Pot, zal toch moeten toegeven dat er

een vertaalslag nodig is. Wie aan het begin van de eenentwintigste eeuw Marx wil lezen moet zowel oog hebben voor wat verouderd en veranderd is, als voor de relevantie van bepaalde ideeën. Een overdreven eerbied voor de auteur – of voor de traditie van het marxisme in zijn nasleep<sup>3</sup> – die een kritische benadering in de weg staat is daarbij niet erg bevorderlijk.

In dat opzicht is het interessant *Das Kapital Oratorio* te vergelijken met Alfredo Jaars installatie *The Marx Lounge* die in 2011 in het SMBA in Amsterdam te zien was, en waarvoor Jaar 394 boeken verzamelde die allemaal op een of andere manier met de marxistische traditie te maken hadden. Er zaten zowel historische als hedendaagse studies bij, en enkele boeken gericht op de Nederlandse context. In vergelijking met de retorische situatie van *Das Kapital Oratorio*, waarin Marx op een nogal autoritaire manier voorgedragen werd en bezoekers eigenlijk alleen maar mochten aanhoren, is *The Marx Lounge* aanzienlijk meer dialogisch. Jaars werk stond bezoekers toe de installatie in hun eigen ritme te ervaren in plaats van overweldigd te worden, en bood mogelijkheden tot gesprek en discussie. Omwille van het pluriforme, minder monolithische karakter van de installatie lijkt *The Marx Lounge* dan ook een veel geschikter model voor het lezen – en het vertalen van – van het werk van Marx in en naar onze huidige tijd.

## Werk

Maar hoe werkt dat herlezen in de praktijk, en waarom zou het een waardevolle oefening zijn? Gezien het niet mogelijk (en niet wenselijk) is om hier een snelcursus ‘Marx voor dummy’s’ uiteen te zetten is het handig om te focussen op één aspect van het marxistische denken en aan te tonen hoe het revitaliseren hiervan waardevol kan zijn; Marx’ focus op arbeid en arbeidspolitiek is in dit opzicht een goed voorbeeld. Zowel voorstanders als critici van het marxisme moeten erkennen dat Marx een keerpunt vormt in het westerse denken, en dat dit grotendeels komt doordat hij in het midden van de negentiende eeuw de eerste filosoof was die besloot politiek, geschiedenis en economie niet te bekijken vanuit een zogenaamd ‘neutraal’ perspectief, laat staan vanuit het standpunt van de elite, maar vanuit dat van de arbeidersklasse, van de meerderheid van de bevolking. Een boek als *Das Kapital* bevat weliswaar behoorlijk speculatieve, theoretische en ondoordringbare passages over de contradicties van het kapitalisme, maar het langste hoofdstuk is gewijd aan een nogal zakelijke, pragmatische beschrijving van de pogingen van negentiende-eeuwse fabrieksarbeiders om de werkdag te verkorten en zo hun eigen uitbuiting in ieder geval enigszins in te dammen.

In een bepaald opzicht is dit hoofdstuk uiteraard zijn houdbaarheidsdatum voorbij en vallen vooral de verschillen met het nu op: bij ons in het Westen vindt nauwelijks nog materiële productie plaats, in onze postindustriële samenlevingen is werk heel anders dan Marx het omschreef, en het idee dat een werkdag überhaupt nog een duidelijk begin en einde heeft is voor velen allang een anachronisme geworden. En toch zijn alle pogingen om de overgang naar – naargelang je terminologie – immateriële, postfordistische of affectieve arbeid te omschrijven ondernomen vanuit een nadrukkelijk marxistische invalshoek. Ook feministen die tegengewicht willen bieden voor Marx’ vaak patriarchale kijk op wat arbeid is doen dat vaak binnen een marxistisch kader.<sup>4</sup> Kort samengevat zou je kunnen zeggen dat het al deze hedendaagse theoretici (ondanks hun onderlinge verschillen) gaat om het benadrukken van hoe de verschijningsvormen van werk weliswaar veranderen, maar uiteindelijk nog altijd in dienst staan van een vorm van exploitatie die in essentie onveranderd is gebleven

sinds Marx' analyse. Wat de dynamiek van het kapitalisme betreft geldt het adagium *tout change pour que rien ne change*, en juist daarom is voortdurende kritische (her)interpretatie zo noodzakelijk.

## Kunstwerk

Deze aanhoudende update van Marx' ideeën over arbeid correspondeert met een hernieuwde interesse binnen de hedendaagse kunst voor hoe de artistieke sector zich verhoudt tot het bredere economische landschap. Sinds de financiële crisis wordt er meer en meer aandacht besteed aan het preciaire bestaan van kunstenaars; exemplarisch in dit opzicht is het New Yorkse collectief W.A.G.E. (Working Artists and the Greater Economy) dat de preciaire situatie van kunstenaars aan de tand voelt en actief probeert te bestrijden. Dit doen ze niet alleen door op een symbolisch niveau de werkomstandigheden van kunstenaars in de kijker te zetten, maar ook – of vooral – op een activistische manier, bijvoorbeeld door een soort keurmerk uit te reiken aan instellingen of organisaties die hun medewerkers een bepaald minimum betalen. Zeker even relevant is Gulf Labor, een coalitie van kunstenaars die opkomt voor de rechten van de arbeiders die de nieuwe Guggenheimvestiging in Abu Dhabi bouwen. Gulf Labor bekijkt de positie van de kunstwereld binnen de kapitalistische wereldeconomie – waarin alles en iedereen met elkaar verbonden is – en bouwt op die manier actief aan solidariteit tussen twee bevolkingsgroepen die op het eerste gezicht weinig met elkaar lijken te hebben, namelijk kunstenaars in het Westen en arbeiders (vaak migranten) in het Midden-Oosten.

Om nog eens terug te komen op *Das Kapital Oratorio*; omdat de meer hypocriete kantjes van dit project alle mogelijkheden tot oprechte kritiek zo duidelijk neutraliseerden, maakte het project in ieder geval één ding inzichtelijk: wie zich niet met het kapitalisme wil vereenzelvigen, maar toch leeft in de wereld zoals ze nu eenmaal is, kan bepaalde contradicties wellicht nooit helemaal vermijden. Dat ditzelfde dilemma echter in meerdere of mindere mate geldt voor alle kritische kunstproductie van vandaag, blijkt keer op keer opnieuw wanneer er onderzoek verricht wordt (zowel vanuit academisch als vanuit artistiek perspectief) naar hoe de kunstmarkt verweven is met de financiële sector en de financiële elite die grotendeels verantwoordelijk is voor de nog altijd woekerende financiële crisis. Niet alleen is het aantal publicaties over de medeplichtigheid van de hedendaagse kunst aan de financiële sector overweldigend (spoiler: de situatie is extreem problematisch; zo heeft Andrea Fraser zelfs kunnen aantonen dat er duidelijke aanwijzingen zijn dat toenemende economische ongelijkheid evenredig is aan de groei van de kunsthandel)<sup>5</sup>, ook behandelen veel kunstenaars dit onderwerp in hun werk. Neem bijvoorbeeld het kunstenaarsduo Vermeir & Heiremans, dat sinds 2014 binnen hun artistieke praktijk een zogenaamde 'Art House Index' heeft ontwikkeld, een – voor kritische doeleinden gebruikt – financieel instrument dat zowel de loft als het werk van het duo 'liquideert' door in real time de financiële waarde ervan te meten.

Dit benadrukken van de manier waarop hedendaagse kunst haast noodzakelijkerwijs verwickeld is met de financiële sector mag dan op het eerste gezicht weinig te maken hebben met de artistiek-interventionistische arbeidspolitiek van bijvoorbeeld W.A.G.E. of Gulf Labor, maar onder de oppervlakte zijn er wel degelijk belangrijke overeenkomsten. In beide gevallen wordt hedendaagse beeldende kunst niet gezien als een autonome, op zichzelf staande discipline of onschuldige bezigheid, maar juist als een praktijk die, omwille van haar afhankelijkheid van een kapitalistisch wereldsysteem, intiem verbonden is met grotere structurele ongelijkheden. En in beide gevallen wordt het erkennen van dit gegeven gezien als een absolute voorwaarde, of in ieder geval als het enige mogelijke vertrekpunt van waarachtige kritiek. Dit veelvoud aan hedendaagse incarnaties van het kapitalisme mag dan wel

enigszins afwijken van sommige meer orthodoxe interpretaties van Marx' denken, maar kan juist daarom als rechtmatige erfgenaam ervan gezien worden.

### Het spook van het spook

De eerste regel van Herman Gorters Nederlandse vertaling van het communistisch manifest luidt als volgt: 'Een spook waart door Europa – het spook van het communisme.'<sup>6</sup> Als er één aspect van het denken van Marx verguisd wordt – ook door diegenen die het met zijn analyse van de politieke economie eens zijn – dan is het wel het revolutionaire politieke programma dat hij uiteenzette. Dit is natuurlijk allesbehalve onbegrijpelijk, aangezien Marx' voorspellingen over het communisme uiteraard niet waarheid zijn geworden, en de meeste twintigste-eeuwse experimenten met 'daadwerkelijk bestaand socialisme' flagrant gefaald hebben (weliswaar deels omwille van militaire interventies van buitenaf). Als er één aspect van het marxisme is dat een grondige vertaalslag vereist, dan is het de visie op hoe het einde van het kapitalisme eruit zou zien.

Dat dat einde verder weg lijkt dan ooit, is precies wat het zo urgent maakt om hierover na te denken. Reformisme is geen optie meer in een tijd waarin de tekenen van klimaatverandering samenvallen met een economische recessie die de kloof tussen arm en rijk uitdiept, zowel op een lokale schaal – zie bijvoorbeeld de precariteit bij ons in het overontwikkelde Westen – als op een globale schaal, door een op de spits gedreven neokolonialisme. Aspecten van het menselijk leven die tot voor kort nog min of meer buiten direct bereik van de markt lagen (zoals sociale interactie, kennis en creativiteit) worden in toenemende mate via digitale technologieën gekwantificeerd en in geld omgezet. En dan hebben we het nog niet over de privatisering van zowat alles wat ooit publiek of gedeeld was, de wildgroei aan patenten en monopolies in elke denkbare sector, of het feit dat regeringen over zowat de hele wereld liever miljarden uitbesteden aan het tijdelijk redden van 'de economie' dan dat ze bezuinigingsmaatregelen verzachten voor de bevolking.

Richting het einde van *Where Has Communism Gone?*, een 'learning play' van het Russische agitpropcollectief Chto Delat dat in 2011 opgevoerd werd in het toenmalige Amsterdamse SMART Project Space (en later in HKW in Berlijn binnen het kader van Former West), doet een personage dat geïdentificeerd wordt als het spook van het communisme op nogal dramatische wijze zijn intrede.<sup>7</sup> Het gaat om een man gekleed in een witte pyjama; hij laat zich even door zijn medespelers op handen dragen, en komt inderdaad nogal spookachtig over. Hoewel die medespelers allerlei vragen voor hem hebben ('Where have you been?', 'Can we touch you?', 'Are you a man or a woman?') blijkt de personificatie niet erg spraakzaam en blijft het sfinxachtig een citaat uit *Hamlet* herhalen; 'The time is out of joint'. Terwijl het figuur onbeweeglijk bovenop een stapelbed zit en sprakeloos blijft, ontstaat er ruzie over de betekenis van zijn verschijning. Die ruzie ontaardt in geweld, en daarmee eindigt abrupt het stuk. Het moge duidelijk zijn: Chto Delats toneelstuk is een perfecte allegorie van ons heden, waarin wel een behoefte bestaat aan verandering, maar waarin hoogstens nog een spook van het spook van het communisme door Europa waart. En ook ons heden heeft, ondanks alles, een open einde.

Steyn Bergs

is kunsthistoricus en criticus

1 Charlotte Higgins, 'Das Kapital at the Arsenale: how Okwui Enwezor invited Marx to the Biennale', *The Guardian*, via: <https://www.theguardian.com/artanddesign/2015/may/07/das-kapital-at-venice-biennale-okwui-enwezor-karl-marx>

2 Ook een eerder werk van Isaac Julien, *Playtime*, werd bekritiseerd als een onsuccesvolle poging tot het in kaart brengen van de dynamieken van het kapitalisme. Zie: Alberto Toscano & Jeff Kinkle, *Cartographies of the Absolute*, Winchester: Zero Books, 2015, pp. 177-183

3 Filosoof Étienne Balibar karakteriseert het werk van Marx als pluraliteit aan (soms conflicterende) stellingen en doctrines die in hun geheel de filosofie als discipline overstegen, gezien ze ingezet moesten worden als instrumenten in een sociale klassenstrijd. Met die pluraliteit zijn vervolgens denkers doorheen zowat anderhalve eeuw wereldgeschiedenis aan de slag gegaan: Balibars punt is niet zozeer dat er niet zoiets als 'het marxisme' bestaat, maar vooral dat het concept erg veel kan betekenen, en geen eenduidig denken, noch een eenduidige politieke positie dekt. Zie: Étienne Balibar, *The Philosophy of Marx*, London: Verso, 2014

4 Zie bijvoorbeeld Silvia Federici, *Revolution at Point Zero: Housework, Reproduction, and Feminist Struggle*, Oakland: PM Press, 2012. 'Immateriële arbeid' is specifiek een concept van Maurizio Lazzarato en 'affectieve arbeid' komt van Michael Hardt; 'post-Fordisme' is een iets breder gedragen concept

5 Andrea Fraser, 'L'1%, C'est Moi', in: *Texte zur Kunst* 83, 2011, pp. 114-127

6 Voor de integrale tekst, zie: <https://www.marxists.org/nederlands/marx-engels/1848/manifest/index.htm>

7 De uitvoering is online te bekijken: <https://vimeo.com/20148600>

## STREAMERS

De aanhoudende update van Marx' ideeën over arbeid correspondeert met een hernieuwde interesse binnen de hedendaagse kunst voor hoe de artistieke sector zich verhoudt tot het bredere economische landschap

Als er één aspect van het marxisme is dat een grondige vertaalslag vereist, dan is het de visie op hoe het einde van het kapitalisme eruit zou zien

SVEN LÜTTICKEN

## THE COMING EXCEPTION

### *Art and the Crisis of Value*

**A**S THE CRISIS of financialized capitalism has morphed into a creeping catastrophe, the literature on questions of art and value has burgeoned.\* For Marx and many in his wake, in economic terms art was a partial exception—and the nature and extent of this exception are once more being hotly debated. These debates occur at a moment when the ‘culturalization’ of the economy and the economization of culture suggest that this exceptionality may be becoming a thing of the past.<sup>1</sup>

The following is an exercise in what McKenzie Wark has termed low theory: a praxis that ‘does not set its own agenda but detects those emerging in key situations and alerts each field to the agendas of others’.<sup>2</sup> When it comes to value and labour, art functions as a subject in two distinct ways: a subject of analysis, and also itself a quasi-subject that actively challenges and produces concepts. I will thus examine the ways in which contemporary art articulates the crises of both value and labour, with the aim not of arriving at a ‘correct’ Marxist understanding of art as commodity, or as an entity that fails to attain the status of ‘true’ commodity, but of bringing art as critical aesthetic praxis into dialogue with the work of theory.

Marx’s mature critique of political economy remained informed by romanticism, and hence by the aesthetic—for instance in the discussion of use value, which stands for the realm of the qualitative as opposed to quantifiable exchange value. The defence of the qualitative and of non-equivalence was a crucial aspect of the modern aesthetic project. It informed two distinct forms of aestheticism. The first was the more

familiar phenomenon of *l'art pour l'art* from Gautier and Whistler to Huysmans, Wilde and beyond; the second, which could be termed utilitarian aestheticism, was embodied in Ruskin's or Morris's attempts to reintegrate art into daily life and the realm of 'useful' labour and artefacts. Both strands were attempts to soften the blows of industrial capitalism and counter the relentless triumph of abstract labour and exchange value; Ruskin's invectives against Whistler's 'paint-flinging' amounted to internecine squabbling. The episode in 1875 when the young Oscar Wilde pushed wheelbarrows full of paving stones as part of Ruskin's project to have his students pave a road in Hinksey, near Oxford, in celebration of healthy and unalienated manual labour, shows how closely these genealogies are intertwined.<sup>3</sup>

If, according to the labour theory of value, the value of a commodity is the amount of labour socially necessary for its production, Marxist and non-Marxist theorists alike have long been aware that the artwork constitutes an exception to this rule. The artist did not sell his labour power to a capitalist who could pocket the surplus value, but worked in an artisanal manner, selling his products. While any work may be productive of use values, only labour that generates surplus value for capital is 'productive' in Marx's technical sense—which is to say, productive of value for capital:

Milton, who wrote *Paradise Lost*, was an unproductive worker. On the other hand, a writer who turns out work for his publisher in factory style is a productive worker. Milton produced *Paradise Lost* as a silkworm produces silk, as the activity of *his own* nature. He later sold his product for £5 and thus became a merchant. But the literary proletarian of Leipzig who produces books, such as compendia on political economy, at the behest of his publisher is pretty nearly a productive worker since his production is taken over by capital and only occurs in order to increase it. A singer who sings like a bird is an unproductive worker. If she sells her song for money, she

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\* Thanks to Kerstin Stakemeier for her comments.

<sup>1</sup> See for instance *Texte zur Kunst*'s issue on 'The Question of Value', no. 88, December 2012, as well as numerous articles published in recent years on [metamute.org](http://metamute.org).

<sup>2</sup> McKenzie Wark, *Molecular Red: Theory for the Anthropocene*, London and New York 2015, p. 218.

<sup>3</sup> For a recent restatement of utilitarian aestheticism that takes cues from Ruskin, see Nick Aikens et al., eds, *What's The Use? Constellations of Art, History, and Knowledge*, Amsterdam 2016.

is to that extent a wage labourer or merchant. But if the same singer is engaged by an entrepreneur who makes her sing to make money, then she becomes a productive worker, since she *produces* capital directly. A schoolmaster who instructs others is not a productive worker. But a schoolmaster who works for wages in an institution along with others, using his own labour to increase the money of the entrepreneur who owns the knowledge-mongering institution, is a productive worker. But for the most part, work of this sort has scarcely reached the stage of being subsumed even formally under capital, and belongs essentially to a transitional stage.<sup>4</sup>

In this respect, as Dave Beech has noted in his study *Art and Value*, modern art presents the paradoxical spectacle of commodification without true commodities. That is to say, works of art are simple commodities to which commodification remains external and *a posteriori*; their production process is not truly capitalist.<sup>5</sup> Art may have been subsumed formally, but not in its productive logic. Beech attempts a ‘shift from a theory of art’s exceptionalism based on choices and consumer behaviour to one based on artistic production and art’s relation to capital’, criticizing his predecessors for failing to address the fundamental logic of commodification.<sup>6</sup> However, he has a surprisingly narrow and rigid conception of what constitutes ‘properly’ capitalist production, while refusing to acknowledge that capitalism itself appears increasingly ‘exceptional’ to the labour theory of value. It is precisely this constellation that makes art a potentially privileged field of inquiry, even as much of it sinks into collector-pleasing irrelevance.

### *Autonomism vs. automatism*

I will return to Beech’s analysis later; the key point for the moment is that discussions over productive, unproductive and reproductive labour are fundamental to debates about art’s status as economic exception, or as model for the post-Fordist economy—a position exemplified by Antonio Negri:

Artistic experience . . . has to be related to an analysis of the mode of transformation of labour. So, whereas throughout the nineteenth and twentieth centuries work was becoming increasingly abstract, from the

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<sup>4</sup> Karl Marx, *Capital*, vol. 1, trans. Ben Fowkes, London 1990, p. 1044.

<sup>5</sup> Dave Beech, *Art and Value: Art’s Economic Exceptionalism in Classical, Neoclassical and Marxist Economics*, Leiden 2015, pp. 9–11.

<sup>6</sup> Beech, *Art and Value*, p. 22.

1960s onwards it has experienced again a process of singularization, which manifests itself in a new figure: that of intellectual labour, which is immaterial and affective—that of a labour which produces language and relations.<sup>7</sup>

One perceptive critic has argued that though Negri is right in noting that art and creativity are some of ‘the most prestigious commodities today’, he ‘never explains how this subsumed living labour will or can be transformed. The capitalist production process is in Negri’s writings only taken over, rather than changed fundamentally.’<sup>8</sup> What matters here is that Negri and other autonomists integrate art into a historical model in which forms of cognitive and affective ‘immaterial’ labour supplement and transform capitalist labour itself—generating new forms of collective subjectivation and action.

### *The esoteric Marx*

For the *Wertkritiker* of the *Krisis* group, autonomist accounts of the crisis of labour, value and capitalism remain too anecdotal, failing to address the fundamental logic and systemic crisis of capitalism.<sup>9</sup> There was a ‘double Marx’, as Robert Kurz liked to say, and for all their digging in the *Grundrisse*, the autonomists ultimately sided with the exoteric one of the *Communist Manifesto* and of workers’ emancipation. In contrast with the *operaist* insistence on the historical primacy of working-class struggle, and the subsequent autonomist emphasis on the proletariat or multitude as a potential revolutionary subject, the value critics side with ‘Marx no. 2’, the theorist of the value form and of abstract labour.<sup>10</sup> They approach value itself as an ‘automatic subject’, engaging with

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<sup>7</sup> Antonio Negri, *Art & Multitude: Nine Letters on Art, Followed by Metamorphoses: Art and Immaterial Labour*, Cambridge 2011, p. xi.

<sup>8</sup> Unsigned text, ‘Production, Creation and Outsourcing: Artistic Labour in Advanced Capitalism’, in Lucie Fontaine, ed., *Recherches: A possible anthology of signature, authorship, creativity and labour*, December 2012, p. 95.

<sup>9</sup> For an English-language anthology of the *Wertkritiker*’s writings, see Neil Larsen et al., eds, *Marxism and the Critique of Value*, Chicago 2014. For a critical perspective on *Operaismo*, Negri and Michael Hardt from the perspective of value critique, see Anselm Jappe, *Die Abenteuer der Ware: Für eine neue Wertkritik*, Münster 2005, pp. 235–40.

<sup>10</sup> Robert Kurz, ‘Der doppelte Marx’, [exit-online.org](http://exit-online.org). See also Kurz, *Geldohne Wert: Grundrisse zu einer Transformation der politischen Ökonomie*, Berlin 2012, pp. 11–45.

capitalism's intrinsic logic.<sup>11</sup> This automatic subject of value is pitted as being primary against that of the working class and its struggle against the perversion of work as human activity into alienating abstract labour. If the project of revolutionary working-class struggle became problematic in the wake of the West's deindustrialization, post-operaismo in its autonomist guise triumphed theoretically (or rhetorically) precisely because it sketched an alternative post-industrial and multitudinous subject as replacement for the old working class. As value progressively emancipated itself from living labour, becoming a short-circuiting automaton, the very proliferation of forms of precarity and unemployment demonstrated the need for siding with work as human potential and counter-value—as emancipatory praxis.

Both strands of theory articulate the crisis of value, looking towards the abolition of labour time as its measure, and towards the end of labour itself.<sup>12</sup> Both effectively analyse the current state of spluttering financialized global capitalism as one which, in its growing dysfunctionality, contains the seeds of a post-capitalist future that could be either a mere collapse—economic, but also ecological and social—or a consciously shaped alternative. In the latter case, according to Marx, the 'development of the social individual'—rather than labour power and labour time—will be the cornerstone of production and wealth.<sup>13</sup> This in effect returns us to the aesthetic dimension of Marxism, and of leftist political and aesthetic contestation in general. From Whistler to Morris, Jorn to Beuys, art has been conceived in different and frequently incompatible ways as *work against labour*. In the modern division of labour, the artist's job was to perform qualitative acts as a stand-in for liberated human activity, for true praxis, under capitalist conditions. The artist was a specialist of the qualitative in the realm of quantity—as another modern specialism, but one that took the form of an exception. Needless to say, conservative ideologies of the aesthetic exploited the tentative nature of the aesthetic

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<sup>11</sup> Marx noted that 'in the circulation M–C–M both the money and the commodity function only as different modes of existence of value itself', which 'is constantly changing from one form into the other, without becoming lost in this movement; it thus becomes transformed into an automatic subject': *Capital*, p. 255. The notion has been taken up with considerable enthusiasm by *Wertkritiker* and associated authors. See for instance Hans-Georg Bensch and Frank Kuhne, eds, *Das automatische Subjekt bei Marx*, Lüneburg 1998, and Jappe, *Die Abenteuer der Ware*, pp. 80–8.

<sup>12</sup> Jappe, *Die Abenteuer der Ware*, pp. 104–5. See also Gruppe Krisis, 'Manifest gegen die Arbeit' (1999), [krisis.org](http://krisis.org).

<sup>13</sup> Karl Marx, *Grundrisse*, trans. Martin Nicolaus, London 1992, p. 749.

promise, its relegation to the status of a harmless daydream. Still, as can be seen from Marx's gloss on Milton, artistic 'work against labour' always contained within it a potential for politicization. Standing for the aesthetic promise of unalienated work, Milton-the-silkworm remains an indictment of the present, both archaic and a figure of the future.

### *Wages for art-work*

In recent years, there has been significant art-world interest in domestic and reproductive labour. Some projects have addressed the rise in domestic workers—often foreign and undocumented—retained by busy professionals, including those in the cultural field. Jet-setting European curators, for example, may depend on migrant women from the Philippines for childcare. Rather than merely representing such migrants, attempts have been made to collaborate actively with them—though care of course must be taken to avoid deepening the instrumentalization of the undocumented. This 'reproductive turn' has also involved an unearthing of feminist practices that combine and conflate art and housework on the basis that both have an exceptional status, being relegated to a grey area beyond the domain of labour that is productive in Marx's sense.

Mierle Laderman Ukeles's 1969 *Maintenance Art Manifesto* and related pieces, such as her cleaning of the Wadsworth Athenaeum art museum in Hartford, Connecticut, have been increasingly recognized for the way in which they aligned art practice as 'unproductive' work with 'reproductive', feminized housework. Ukeles focused not on the artwork as commodity object but on art-work as labour. Recasting the productive/reproductive dichotomy as 'development' and 'maintenance', she quoted an alleged Balinese saying, 'We have no Art, we try to do everything well', stating that:

Avant-garde art, which claims utter development, is infected by strains of maintenance ideas, maintenance activities, and maintenance materials. Conceptual and Process art, especially, claim pure development and change, yet employ almost purely maintenance processes.<sup>14</sup>

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<sup>14</sup> Mierle Laderman Ukeles, 'Manifesto for Maintenance Art' (1969), in Binna Choi and Maiko Tanaka, eds, *Grand Domestic Revolution Handbook*, Utrecht 2014, pp. 134–5.

In arguing that the value of commodities—including labour-power itself—is determined by the amount of labour socially necessary to produce them, Marx included the time required for maintaining and reproducing the workforce. Until the later part of the twentieth century, however, the sphere of reproduction was not acknowledged as integral to the production process in general; women were relegated to the domestic sphere as a supposedly extra-economic supplement, which became the focus of feminist critique and activism. As Kerstin Stakemeier has put it, feminist theoreticians like Silvia Federici and Mariarosa Dalla Costa, ‘coming out of the *Operaismo* movement, demanded that autonomization be affirmed as a category of reproductive work’ in order to transpose ‘a struggle for autonomy *into* a social realm deemed heteronomous. This is precisely what Helke Sander addressed in 1968 . . . when she declared that the political struggle for autonomy could not be achieved by displacing heteronomy into specific sectors of life.’<sup>15</sup>

In a withering critique of Federici’s work, Gilles Dauvé has questioned the validity and efficacy of the entire Wages for Housework movement with which Federici—a key reference for contemporary feminist art theorists—was involved in the 1970s. Quoting Rivolta Femminile’s proclamation, in their 1970 *Manifesto*, that ‘We identify in unpaid domestic work the help that allows both private and state capitalism to survive’, he goes on to attack both the analytical soundness of this claim and its efficacy as a political tool, maintaining that, ‘We can call *work* whatever we want, yet the only work that reproduces capital is that which is done for a company.’<sup>16</sup> Dauvé disregards the fact that, as with art, there is a kind of immanent exception at play here. Is this exception—a seemingly extra-economic sphere of reproduction—also systemically necessary, such that its economization could bring down the whole edifice? Wages for Housework activists had thought of their programme of waging the unwaged as a kind of impossible demand which capitalists would be unwilling and unable to implement, and which would thus stand to ‘explode the system’ under the pressure of the oppositional alliances that such demands could bring together. In order to achieve this, it was necessary to critique the conceptual and political stranglehold that the categories of productive and reproductive labour held on the

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<sup>15</sup> Kerstin Stakemeier, ‘(Not) More Autonomy’, in Karen van den Berg et al., eds, *Art Production Beyond the Art Market?*, Berlin 2013.

<sup>16</sup> Gilles Dauvé, ‘Federici versus Marx’ (2015), [troploin.fr](http://troploin.fr).

radical imagination as long as they were used as positive descriptions rather than critical concepts. This seems to have been lost on Dauvé, as well as on Beech.

It is of course perfectly possible to critique the autonomist feminists' Wages for Housework campaign for a lack of tangible results. However, are all consequences that fall short of the immediate end of capitalism to be discredited? Artists tend to be unfazed by a lack of quantifiable results, and Laurel Ptak's *Wages for Facebook* website, with its witty appropriation of the Wages for Housework logic, seems more of a thought experiment than a real campaign to quantify and remunerate the value produced by each Facebook user.<sup>17</sup> However, in articulating what seems a utopian and unrealistic demand, *Wages for Facebook* is not entirely without effect, however minor. It is one effort among many to problematize conventional notions of labour, and the limits they impose on forms of activist practice. Perhaps, in seeking to unseat or effect a different approach to the productive/reproductive distinction, the Wages for Housework campaign, too, had an 'aesthetic' aspect.

Like the unpaid labour of housewives, the paid work of cleaners and other maintenance staff is unproductive in orthodox Marxist terms; it does not directly contribute to the production of surplus value. In recent decades, private and public sectors alike have increasingly outsourced cleaning to specialized companies. In such cases, as the value critic Anselm Jappe argues, formerly unproductive labour *does* become productive—but only on the micro-level of the companies in question, *not* on the macro-level of the entire economy. The rise of the 'service industries' or 'tertiarization' has certainly resulted in profits for these companies in particular, but not at a systemic level.<sup>18</sup> Thus, privatization and outsourcing reveal themselves not as part of capitalism's dynamism, but as contributing to a movement towards stasis.

### *Art-work as a service*

The notion of art as a 'service' first came to the fore with the dawning of the neoliberal era, as art became commodified and financialized to an unprecedented degree. When artists Christopher d'Arcangelo and Peter

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<sup>17</sup> Laurel Ptak, *Wages for Facebook* project/campaign, [eyebeam.org](http://eyebeam.org).

<sup>18</sup> Jappe, *Die Abenteuer der Ware*, pp. 130–1.

Nadin did construction jobs in the late 1970s, plastering apartments and suchlike, they sent invitations to view the results of their work in the style of an art-world opening—a masculine counterpart of Ukeles’s maintenance art—always listing the amount of labour time: ‘The product of four days work may be seen on June 16th, 1978, between 12 noon and 5 PM. At 99 Prince St NYC, 5th floor, West.’<sup>19</sup> In 1983, after d’Arcangelo’s death, Nadin co-founded ‘Offices of Fend, Fitzgibbon, Holzer, Nadin, Prince & Winters’, which advertised ‘practical aesthetic services adaptable to client situation’—though members of the short-lived group have admitted the nature of these services remained sketchy. A much more fully elaborated model of ‘artistic services’ was developed by Andrea Fraser in the early 1990s, when she published a number of prospectuses outlining her services for individuals, not-for-profit and for-profit institutions, and co-organized a symposium and documentary exhibition titled *Services* with Helmut Draxler.<sup>20</sup>

If one takes the stance of value critique—the theoretical elaborations of which come at the cost of an almost Adornian aloofness—such service-based art practices can appear as instances of the same capitalist logic as the object-based art they oppose. After all, post-Fordist capitalism is marked by both a proliferation of service industries and an expansion of the financial sector. However, ‘service art’ can engage with a different set of symptoms. In his work *Some Cleaning* (2013), the dancer and choreographer Adam Linder sits in an art space, talking to the gallerists and visitors, occasionally jumping up to perform movements akin to window-cleaning or dusting. Referencing Ukeles, D’Arcangelo, Nadin and Fraser, Sabeth Buchmann notes that Linder and the gallery have drawn up a contract for selling the piece that is ‘reminiscent of classical conventions of conceptualism as well as of institutional critique associated with what’s called “service art”’.<sup>21</sup> This contract stipulates that the hourly rate is that of cleaners rather than of performers—though in the

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<sup>19</sup> The best documentation of these activities was published by artist Ben Kinmont as *Project Series: Christopher D’Arcangelo* (2005); see [benkinmont.com](http://benkinmont.com).

<sup>20</sup> The original iteration was at the Kunstraum der Universität Lüneburg, where the project and its implications were the subject of a 2014 conference, *Art and Its Frames*.

<sup>21</sup> Sabeth Buchmann, ‘Art as (Un-)Specific Work as (Un-)Specific Labour’, lecture at the conference *Aber etwas fehlt. But Something’s Missing: Marxist Art History between Possibility and Necessity*, MUMOK, Vienna, 15 December 2015. Quoted from the manuscript.

latter case it would be much more difficult to determine what an average hourly rate would be.

As the New York collective WAGE (Working Artists and the Greater Economy) has uncovered, remuneration varies most among institutions that host performances (with The Kitchen being the best, and Performa the worst). In 2011 Andrea Fraser, a board member of WAGE, published the graph *Index*, which shows a correlation between the rise in the Mei Moses All Art Index and increases in US income inequality and the S&P 500 Total Return Index during the same decades. Correlation may not be causation, but it seems clear that forms of ‘deregulation’ have been good for the 1 per cent or the 0.1 per cent and, as a consequence, for the art market. In other words, ‘what has been good for art has been disastrous for the rest of the world’.<sup>22</sup>

Whether they explicitly situate themselves in the context of ‘services’ or not, art practices that foreground issues of remuneration and the living wage cannot escape the contradictions of contemporary capitalism. If they participate in a ‘transformation of labour’ such as that discerned by Negri, this remains within the capitalist horizon: nonetheless, they are part of a continuum of theoretical and practical work that articulates and intervenes in these accelerating contradictions. Meanwhile, the dominant ‘answer’ to the intensifying income and wealth gaps, precarization and increasing migration takes the form of exclusionary right-wing movements. While the denizens of the art world are usually staunchly opposed to this new identitarianism, they are profoundly implicated in the upwards redistribution that underlies it.

### *The trouble with classicists*

Dave Beech’s *Art and Value* is an extended critique of Western Marxism’s absent economy of art: ‘Western Marxism has always used every device it can find to associate art with capitalism without having to conduct the economic analysis that could establish such associations as [either] substantial or superficial.’<sup>23</sup> It is true that Western Marxists such as Adorno tended to sociologize economic categories, and to some extent focused on appearance rather than underlying logic, but at its best this move was

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<sup>22</sup> Andrea Fraser, ‘Le 1%, C’est Moi’, *Texte zur Kunst*, no. 83, September 2011, p. 122.

<sup>23</sup> Beech, *Art and Value*, p. 219.

tactical and well-considered. Noting that Marx's critique of the illusory sensuousness of the commodity as fetish is coupled with his attack on the 'illusion of the autonomy of the value-form', which is concomitant with a reversal of subject and object, Stewart Martin argues that in his *Aesthetic Theory* Adorno 'mobilizes the first illusion (fetishism) against the second illusion. The autonomous artwork is an emphatically fetishized commodity, which is to say that it is a sensuous fixation of abstraction, of the value-form, and not immediately abstract.'<sup>24</sup> But then, is Adorno himself not in fact falling into the trap of aesthetic *Schein*, falsely claiming commodity status for an aesthetic fetish that is not, strictly speaking, a commodity fetish?

Beech remarks that Adorno acknowledged that the culture industry was not in all respects a true industry.<sup>25</sup> Indeed, Adorno was well aware of the wastefulness of even the most 'Fordist' of its branches, the movie industry in Hollywood, noting that while distribution is fully standardized, the same degree of technological rationalization cannot be achieved in production.<sup>26</sup> With its expensive flops and surprise low-budget hits, the history of Hollywood speaks to the truth of that assertion. But Beech omits to note that Adorno also stressed that the culture industry is thoroughly capitalist, in that the 'profit motive' is implemented directly in artistic production, since the managerial caste is looking for 'new opportunities for the realization of capital' as 'the existing ones became ever more precarious because of the same process of concentration that in turn enabled the culture industry as an omnipresent institution.'<sup>27</sup> Adorno here shows a nuanced and dialectical grasp of the peculiarity of the culture industry: thoroughly capitalist, but still structurally incapable of being organized along Fordist-Taylorist lines.

Meanwhile, the culture industry is only one side of the equation. The other side is modernist art. Adorno, of course, did not assume that such art was situated in some realm of pure autonomy outside all economic and social structures. He did however argue that modernist art could

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<sup>24</sup> Stewart Martin, 'The Absolute Artwork Meets the Absolute Commodity', *Radical Philosophy*, no. 146, Nov–Dec 2007.

<sup>25</sup> Beech, *Art and Value*, p. 227.

<sup>26</sup> Theodor Adorno, 'Résumé über die Kulturindustrie' (1964), in *Kulturkritik und Gesellschaft I: Gesammelte Schriften* 10.1, Frankfurt am Main 2003, p. 339.

<sup>27</sup> Adorno, 'Résumé über die Kulturindustrie', p. 338.

aspire to the model-like status of pure commodity, precisely because it 'absented itself from real society' and barely counted as a sideshow within industrial capitalism.<sup>28</sup> In his essay on Wagner, Adorno contended that the autonomous appearance of the artwork is dependent on the concealment of labour.<sup>29</sup> This remark deserves to be unpacked. On the one hand, it is situated within the context of his critique of Wagner's *Gesamtkunstwerk* as a post-Romantic, proto-Hollywood phantasmagoria; the 'autonomy' we are dealing with, then, would be precisely that of the culture-industrial fetish. On the other hand, however, the dialectic of autonomy and concealment of labour was also at play in the modernist artwork, which seemed to embody the resistance to the division of labour that was fundamental for capitalist production.

Opposed to other commodities as the product of qualitative creation rather than quantitative wage labour, the artwork is nonetheless a product of the very division of labour it appears to sublimate: this is its aesthetic *Schein*. The reified products of the culture industry attempt to present themselves as products of creative subjectivity—whether sentimental, funny, or Oscar-worthy serious. By contrast, genuine modern artworks could be imperfect or all-too-perfect, exceptional and exemplary (potential, absolute) commodities, *objets de pensée*, theoretical subjects. Through their immanent construction, modernist works could effect a 'mimesis of the hardened and alienated' that acknowledged their fall from grace, the loss of aura, while still remaining loyal to a mute and maimed humanity through their irrevocably mimetic nature.<sup>30</sup>

Beech argues that on the level of production, visual art has mostly remained a matter of artisanal production of simple commodities, and that even when artists such as Warhol or Koons create studios in which assistants do not just sweep the floor or prime canvases but participate more directly in the making of the work, this 'is not commodity production according to the labour theory of value' because the work is insufficiently standardized. Further, these art factories 'do not require economizing measures, and they do not determine the prices

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<sup>28</sup> Adorno, *Ästhetische Theorie: Gesammelte Schriften* 7, Frankfurt am Main 2003, p. 351.

<sup>29</sup> Adorno, *Versuch über Wagner*, in *Die musikalischen Monographien: Gesammelte Schriften* 13, Frankfurt am Main 2003, p. 80.

<sup>30</sup> Adorno, *Ästhetische Theorie*, p. 39.

of artworks'.<sup>31</sup> These prices are rather determined by critics, curators, other artists and even collectors.<sup>32</sup> Arguing that it is 'strange within the labour theory of value to think that an act of consumption added value to a product', Beech maintains that 'in fact no value is added at all, even though the prices of artworks appreciate. The difference in price is not extracted from labour but, as Marx puts it when talking about trade as a zero-sum game, is "coaxed" out of the pockets of another capitalist.'<sup>33</sup> While it is indeed important to acknowledge the particularities of the art market, with its gatekeepers and its 'value-adding' experts, are we not living though an economic moment in which such work is becoming an ever more common and fundamental feature of value production? If the kind of work performed by experts in art spells trouble for the labour theory of value, then what of fashion bloggers, YouTube trend gurus, Facebook users, and all sorts of online likers and linkers?

Intriguingly, the newly vocal 'prosumer' of communicative capitalism has thrown processes of art-world valorization into a bit of a tailspin. Critical left-wing art writers in particular bemoan the powerlessness and marginality of discourse, as a speculative art market seems to have become largely autonomous from critical judgement. Back in 2002, Benjamin Buchloh glumly noted that 'you don't have criticism of blue-chip stocks either'.<sup>34</sup> In the age of websites that function as 'algorithmic moodboards'—from Mutualart and artifacts.net to DIS magazine—the conventional chain of artist–critic–curator–dealer–collector is in tatters.<sup>35</sup> Here as elsewhere, Beech comes across as curiously classicist in failing to address such developments.

### *Exception becomes rule?*

In contrast to Diedrich Diederichsen's spirited but flawed attempt to save the labour theory of value for the analysis of art, Beech acknowledges that art in fact flouts the theory's logic, but treats it as an isolated case.<sup>36</sup>

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<sup>31</sup> Beech, *Art and Value*, p. 311.

<sup>32</sup> Beech omits to mention the latter; today, the act of being acquired by a major art collector can itself add to a work's value.

<sup>33</sup> Beech, *Art and Value*, pp. 311–2.

<sup>34</sup> 'Round Table: The Present Conditions of Art Criticism', *October*, no. 100, Spring 2002.

<sup>35</sup> The phrase 'algorithmic moodboard' is by Melanie Gilligan and Marina Vishmidt, from a work in progress.

Whereas Diederichsen tried to normalize art by creating a more encompassing labour theory of value, Beech follows John Roberts in affirming that most art falls short of being productive in the capitalist sense, and the reason for this is ultimately that it cannot be adequately explained by the labour theory of value.<sup>37</sup> But while he is right in arguing that the labour theory of value meets its limits in art, he is wrong to stop there. If the labour theory of value falters on the ‘micro-level’ of art as a specific type of commodity, we need to acknowledge that art now has a status fundamentally different than it enjoyed in 1890, 1920 or 1950. If, on the one hand, certain artists and artworks realize baffling prices—and garner a lot of media attention in the process—while, on the other hand, precarious and badly remunerated ‘creative’ work proliferates, these are both symptoms of a crisis of labour and a crisis of value that seems to fall outside of Beech’s self-defined purview.

In different ways, Italian autonomists such as Negri, and German proponents of value critique such as Kurz, have both noted a breakdown in value production due to the increasingly technological nature and socialization of labour. In 1971, Negri had already noted a ‘disconnection between work and labour value/exchange value’ in the post-war welfare state in crisis, and technological, economic and social developments since then have only exacerbated this crisis of value.<sup>38</sup> In key economic sectors, little (or cheap) labour is used to produce material goods, and a lot of ‘immaterial’ labour goes into advertising and branding, with some of this work being done for free by the consumers themselves on social media and the like. It is possible to argue that the socialization and technologization of production ‘simply’ means that the calculation of the labour invested in a single commodity gets more complex.<sup>39</sup> However, not only does

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<sup>36</sup> Diedrich Diederichsen, *On (Surplus) Value in Art*, Berlin 2008; see Beech’s response on pp. 20–2 of *Art and Value*.

<sup>37</sup> John Roberts, *The Intangibilities of Form: Skill and Deskilling in Art After the Readymade*, London and New York 2007.

<sup>38</sup> Antonio Negri, ‘Crisis of the Planner State: Communism and Revolutionary Organization’ (1971), in *Books for Burning: Between Civil War and Democracy in 1970s Italy*, London and New York 2005, p. 24. See also Matteo Pasquinelli, ‘Capital Thinks Too: The Idea of the Common in the Age of Machine Intelligence’, *Open!*, 11 December 2015, [onlineopen.org](http://onlineopen.org).

<sup>39</sup> For a nuanced and incisive statement of this position see Wu Ming 1, ‘Fetishism of Digital Commodities and Hidden Exploitation: The cases of Amazon and Apple’, Wu Ming Foundation website, 10 October 2011.

this neglect the theoretical critique of the ossified productive/reproductive distinction by the autonomist feminists, it also fails to do justice to the cumulative effects of the scattering and diffusion of labour, which undermine such distinctions between productive and reproductive—or unproductive—in practice. As Anselm Jappe has argued, the calculation of the labour invested in a single commodity becomes a *de facto* impossibility.<sup>40</sup> Even if one were to try to identify all constituent factors, the question would be what to include and what not. Is a fashionista ‘liking’ posts by Louis Vuitton working or not? Or both, or neither?

One much-remarked characteristic of post-Fordism is that the distinction between labour and leisure has eroded in many sectors. ‘The measurability of labour presupposes that the individual subject is always either working or not working. It is impossible to measure labour time that is mixed with other activities’, as Jappe puts it.<sup>41</sup> If the value of a Facebook is indeed ‘proportional to the square of the number of its users’, as Metcalfe’s Law has it, this means that the value of an individual user’s quasi-labour can and will fluctuate greatly.<sup>42</sup> Thus re-establishing the labour theory of value by widening the net—by including what was previously regarded as non-labour—is not necessarily going to yield convincing calculations. What if the artwork, as a problematic quasi-commodity, is in fact much more similar to stocks and other assets? The fact that the top segment of the market is becoming increasingly disconnected from the rest would point in that direction. Beech is critical of accounts of visual art’s transformation into an asset. While noting that ‘artworks which are less like conventional art commodities (paintings, sculptures, prints) take on forms that belong to assets (documents, contracts, certificates)’, he maintains that even while art ‘has developed since the 1980s as an asset class, included in investment portfolios’, it remains exceptional and anomalous on this level too.<sup>43</sup> If artworks are not stocks or options or futures, this is precisely why they can function as a distinct, specific kind of asset, one with deliciously little regulatory oversight. At Deloitte’s 9th annual Art & Finance Conference, which took place at—and was co-organized by—the Van Gogh Museum (!) in

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<sup>40</sup> Jappe, *Die Abenteuer der Ware*, p. 126.

<sup>41</sup> Jappe, *Die Abenteuer der Ware*, p. 105.

<sup>42</sup> Jodi Dean discusses Metcalfe’s Law in *The Communist Horizon*, London and New York 2012, p. 129.

<sup>43</sup> Beech, *Art and Value*, pp. 303–4, 306.

Amsterdam, one panel was dedicated to the subject of ‘Monetizing—Why and how to turn your fine-art collection into a working asset’. Here, issues of ‘art-secured lending’ were discussed by speakers including the President and CEO (ex-Bloomberg) of the Athena Art Finance Corp., a ‘specialty lender for the art market providing non-recourse financing against art as collateral’. Another speaker was the CEO (ex-KPMG) of a group that ‘invests in rare art pieces for investment purposes and currently advises some of the largest art funds in the world’.<sup>44</sup>

It is in mimicry of such companies that the art project Real Flow—devised by a group that includes Suhail Malik and Christopher Kulendran Thomas—purports to pave the way to ‘art’s sublime future by offering tailor-made financial solutions’. Specifically, they note that ‘art’s potential is stifled by its entrenchment in a terrestrial, illiquid commodity form’ and is weighed down ‘by the gravity of obsolete historical identifications’.<sup>45</sup> Using romantic-idealist verbiage, they claim that financialization offers the prospect of a purified and rarefied, truly sublime art beyond distinct form or embodiment; an art of financial air. In order to achieve this, Real Flow offers ‘instruments’ that allow for a decoupling of the artwork from its physical incarnation. Different permutations of the art as object/property and as financial asset are possible—so that, for instance, a collector uninterested in ‘the burden of handling or possessing an artwork’ can deal with it as a virtual asset.<sup>46</sup> There is a virtualization at play here that is similar to artist duo Katleen Vermeir and Ronny Heiremans’ *Art House Index*, a multifaceted project based on a custom-made algorithm that charts the value of Vermeir and Heiremans’ Brussels loft, or a virtual double of it, by tracking the real-estate and art markets, and their careers. The project includes a video based on Melville’s *The Confidence-Man*; the video’s exact appearance is determined in real time by the movements of the index.<sup>47</sup> While the

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<sup>44</sup> Conference booklet for Deloitte’s 9th Art & Finance Conference, 21 April 2016, p. 11. Available on [deloitte.com](http://deloitte.com).

<sup>45</sup> *Real Flow: Art Is the Sublime Asset*, prospectus, 1 March 2015, p. 3. Available on [p-exclamation.com](http://p-exclamation.com).

<sup>46</sup> *Real Flow*, p. 8.

<sup>47</sup> On *Art House Index*, see Steyn Berghs and Jesse van Winden, ‘Masquerade: On Public Personae in a Video Installation by Vermeir and Heiremans’, *Kunstlicht* 36, no. 4, 2015, and Vermeir and Heiremans’s *In-Residence Magazine*, no. 2, spring 2015.

index is a mere number (it is not calculated in dollars or euros), the artists speculate about a potential market of options and futures as a financialization of the index itself.

In its focus on financial liquefaction, Real Flow in particular seems to mutate the Adornian ‘mimesis of the hardened and alienated’ into a captive mimicry *vis-à-vis* the automatic subject of finance capital.<sup>48</sup> The toxicity of its over-identification stratagems notwithstanding, Real Flow does introduce a factor that Beech consistently minimizes: historical change. Real Flow both acknowledges that art has become an asset of sorts and that it is an impure one; this is what it seeks to remedy, in however illusory a manner. The project pushes the transformation of artworks into ‘documents, contracts, certificates’ to a grotesquely logical conclusion. Beech’s insistence that ‘the appreciation of artworks as assets, whether paltry or spectacular, appears to be independent of the production of new value’ is useful, but one could extend it to other sectors of the ‘creative’ economy.<sup>49</sup> On the macro-level, it is not so much the labour theory of value that falters, but value production itself. Value production increasingly makes way for value extraction and redistribution—and financialized art, however unlike other commodities and assets this peculiar hybrid may be, plays a part in this redistribution. Welcome to the Van Gogh Museum, dear investors.

If the modernist artwork exacerbated the sensuous presence—or pseudo-concrete appearance—of the commodity fetish, the contemporary artwork sides with that other aspect of commodity fetishism: the seeming autonomy of the value-form. As with many commodities in today’s economy, this appearance takes on a new reality. On the micro-level of iPhones or paintings, fetishism is all too real. This is not to say, of course, that it is impossible to analyse the factors that go into a product’s success, but it *is* impossible to unveil the ‘true’ value of the commodity-fetish through the amount of labour invested in it. While this was always impossible, in the age of brands it seems all the more so, both in art and elsewhere. Beech notes that the value added by critics and curators to the artwork remains ‘external to the commodity’, but does it?<sup>50</sup> And is this

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<sup>48</sup> See also Kerstin Stakemeier, ‘Exchangeables: Aesthetics against Art’, *Texte zur Kunst*, no. 98, June 2015.

<sup>49</sup> Beech, *Art and Value*, p. 307.

<sup>50</sup> Beech, *Art and Value*, pp. 311–12.

not precisely where ‘the real economy’ has learned from art? At what dialectical tipping point does an exception become the norm?

*Practice makes imperfect*

John Roberts has linked the Marxian distinction between productive and unproductive labour with the issue of the unique versus the multiple in visual art. He sees art as a transformative intervention into productive labour, rather than as productive labour itself—even and especially in cases such as Duchamp’s readymades, which are artistic appropriations of mass-produced objects (though many of these objects were the products of pre-Fordist workshops). As with Duchamp, many more recent artists who appropriate objects or images singularize and auraticize them: they either become unique artworks or works in limited editions. Today, even artists working in other fields take cues from visual art’s ‘unproductive’ accumulation strategies. In the 1960s, Marcel Broodthaers ironically announced his transition from poetry to visual art by casting some copies of his book *Pense-Bête* in plaster, stating ‘I, too, wondered whether I could not sell something and succeed in life.’ Today, we see purely pragmatic use of singularization strategies, as with the Wu Tang Clan’s single-copy album *Once Upon a Time in Shaolin*, which sold for a reported \$2 million to pharma executive Martin Shkreli, notorious for raising the price of the drug Daraprim from \$13.50 to \$750 a pill.<sup>51</sup> This is an exceptional case that, like the blue-chip end of the contemporary art market, depends on a rarefication much more extreme than that of even the most exclusive branded goods. It is this ‘archaic’ dependence on the aura of singularized and financialized objects that has made contemporary visual art a real political-economic vanguard.

When appropriation artist and ‘rephotography’ pioneer Richard Prince printed out Instagram profiles of young people, mostly women—with extremely minor interventions in the form of his own vacuous comments on Instagram itself—and exhibited and sold them via the Gagolian Gallery for a reported \$90,000 apiece, this was unsurprisingly seen as a disturbing and creepy expropriation of self-fashioning women who were themselves trying to raise their visibility and value in the attention economy. Some of Prince’s photos were of women associated with a pin-up site named SuicideGirls, which then decided

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<sup>51</sup> ‘Who bought the most expensive album ever made?’, *Bloomberg*, 9 Dec 2015.

to offer prints of one of Prince's appropriations for a mere \$90, which must be one of the greatest discounts in history. This demonstrates the extent to which value in the age of the brand has become autonomous.<sup>52</sup> Here, a fairly disastrous critical reception barely seems to register. Not only can Gagosian catalogues always count on critics-for-hire, but media attention may have replaced critical judgement. In today's art world, websites that function as aggregators rather than critical platforms draw on artist or curator rankings to determine value. It is probably only a matter of time until some of these become further sublimated into further investment opportunities, perhaps akin to the 'Bowie Bonds' issued by David Bowie in the 1990s.<sup>53</sup>

Many practices today are marked either by enthusiastic participation or by some form of supposedly tactical over-identification. From Real Flow to Swedish artist Jonas Lund's algorithm that produces a curatorial ranking, these acts of mimicry result in a dismal form of capitalist realism. However, it is important to look beyond this. If there is one fundamental problem with many economic and sociological accounts of art, it is that they treat art as a mute object of study. Art is rarely accepted as a form of praxis that might itself have theoretical insights to add—sometimes precisely by problematizing all-too-perfect models. In certain cases this takes the form of projects that, in the tattered relation between labour and value, side with labour. This is the case, for instance, in the aforementioned collaborations with 'reproductive' domestic workers, or in Gulf Labor's engagement with the 'productive' male construction workers building institutions such as the Guggenheim Abu Dhabi under conditions of *de facto* slavery—marked by a general lack of rights, passport confiscation and debt from 'recruitment fees'.<sup>54</sup>

Without attempting to arrive at the 'true' value of Abu Dhabi's Guggenheim as an architectural icon and franchise of a global institutional brand, several posters and other pieces made by artists in the context of Gulf Labor attempt to quantify various factors, and emphasize jarring pay gaps. A newspaper ad by Andrea Fraser, for week 45 of the '52 Weeks of Gulf Labor' campaign, lists the budget as 'potentially

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<sup>52</sup> 'Payback for Richard Prince as Models Re-appropriate Stolen Images and Sell Them for \$90', *artnet.com*, 26 May 2015.

<sup>53</sup> 'Bowie: The Man Who Sold Royalties and Brought Music to Bonds', *Bloomberg*, 11 Jan 2016.

<sup>54</sup> Andrew Ross, ed., *The Gulf: High Culture/Hard Labor*, New York 2015.

unlimited'; the total construction budget of the Saadiyat Island Museum Complex (\$27,000,000,000); former Guggenheim director Thomas Krens's severance bonus (\$2,000,000); the Abu Dhabi GDP per capita (\$103,000); and the monthly wage of Guggenheim Abu Dhabi construction workers (\$177). In 'creative', 'cultural', 'semiotic' or 'communicative' capitalism, physical labour is made as invisible and disposable as possible, whether in iPhone factories or at building sites. The large question in Fraser's ad—'Who's building the Guggenheim Abu Dhabi?'—emphasizes the physical construction of the institution over other kinds of labour involved, such as that of architects, artists or managers.<sup>55</sup>

### *Workers leaving the factory*

Taking a more generalist and somewhat scattershot approach, Antje Ehmann and Harun Farocki's 2011–14 project *Labour in a Single Shot* took the form of a series of workshops in fifteen major cities on different continents, during which the participants were asked to represent one form of labour in a single shot of one to two minutes. When the project was exhibited at the Haus der Kulturen der Welt in Berlin, the main exhibition space contained a screen for each city, showing a selection of 'single shot' films, and also, behind a curtain, a thematic selection on sixteen monitors. Here, the focus was on the motif of 'workers leaving the factory', the subject of the first film by the Lumière brothers in 1895, which Farocki had previously explored in a 1995 video essay, and in the 2006 installation *Workers Leaving the Factory in Eleven Decades*. At the HKW, the 2006 version was mirrored by a new installation in which the Lumière film was shown with 'remakes' made by workshop participants in the project's fifteen cities. Not all the sites were actual factories: they included shopping malls and construction sites. Many of the other films show street performers and other 'picturesque' occupations. Industrial labour is scarce on the ground; there are a few interesting instances of domestic labour, though curiously it does not feature as a category on the project's website.

There is also no 'finance' category, though there is one for 'monitor work'. The project compellingly shows the impurity of the global

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<sup>55</sup> Andrea Fraser, '€132', published in *Frankfurter Allgemeine Sonntagszeitung*, 17 August 2014.

economy, in which ancient professions coexist with laptop labour, but it hardly functions as a cognitive map of contemporary capitalism and its vectoral, violently transformative powers.<sup>56</sup> The artistic labour of the workshop participants is largely subsumed under Ehmann and Farocki's double curatorship-as-authorship—and within the latter, Farocki is usually foregrounded. While the result is more than the sum of its parts, the legal status of the individual films and the remuneration of their makers remain unaddressed and opaque. With its networked approach, the project is hyper-contemporary in a way that Ehmann and Farocki never fully acknowledge: here, the labour of authorship becomes such a scattered and aggregate condition as to become obscure.

With his film *Transformers: The Premake* (2014), Farocki admirer Kevin B. Lee has crafted a 'desktop documentary' entirely from online videos, most of them taken by fans or random citizens of various *Transformers* 4 shoots in the US and Asia. What is striking is that, while Paramount occasionally requests some footage to be removed from YouTube, the company nonetheless can profit from the unpaid labour of hundreds or thousands of volunteers—though some of these attempt to 'monetize' their videos. In our circulationist age, images are forever being re-performed. Farocki's *Workers Leaving the Factory* re-performs historical films, and was re-performed once again in the context of *Labour in a Single Shot*. Subsequently, the piece was again re-performed as part of Alexandra Pirici and Manuel Pelmus's *Public Collection of Modern Art* at the Van Abbemuseum in 2014, in which performers 'enacted' various artworks. In this case, the performers left the exhibition space and museum, only to return and continue with their gruelling schedule.

Value is reaped from the process; but as with Facebook and other social media this is not only deliberately and systemically obscured, but also follows different logics to the traditional labour theory of value. If the latter counters commodity fetishism by demonstrating the determination of a commodity's value by labour time, here a new theory of value is needed that examines the ways in which networked capitalism transforms human labour and the creation of value. Of course, Beech and others will deny that value is actually being produced in art and in some other sectors of the contemporary economy. Here, one has to

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<sup>56</sup> Fredric Jameson's concept of cognitive mapping has been revisited by Alberto Toscano and Jeff Kinkle, *Cartographies of the Absolute*, Winchester 2015.

insist on a differentiation between levels: value is produced in social media as well as in art (itself increasingly permeated by social media), which is to say on the micro-level of companies or even entire industries; however, on the macro-level of the global economy as a whole, this amounts to redistribution.

Anselm Jappe insists that an hour of labour has the same value no matter what, and that the production of sixty chairs in one hour means that each chair is worth only one minute.<sup>57</sup> Less labour time spent in the production of an individual company of course does not mean less value realized as profit for that company in particular. In fact, more automated production processes with less living labour will often win: in spite of the fact that they ‘produced less value’, German and Japanese cars destroyed the UK car industry and thus effectively captured ‘a portion of the surplus value produced in England’.<sup>58</sup> The enterprise that employs more living labour per commodity—and therefore helps maintain the total mass of value—is punished.

Ultimately, according to the analysis of the value critics, capitalism is digging its own grave; rising superfluity of labour indicates that the objective limit of capitalism is drawing nearer, as do dwindling resources and increasing ecological costs. The autonomous alien Autobots of the *Transformers* franchise seem a celebration of the impending obsolescence of human labour by those who, in Lee’s premake, work for free in circulating images of the film shoot. Surplus populations face off against a capitalist system thriving on value that has become autonomous from labour; it is this rift that constitutes the crisis of value and labour alike. The intriguingly coiffed symptoms of this crisis continue to dominate the news cycle.

### *Prefigurativism*

In this context, many artists, activists and theorists have shifted to articulating and developing counter-values. One guiding assumption is that it is possible to create and maintain non-capitalist modes within

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<sup>57</sup> Jappe, *Die Abenteuer der Ware*, p. 128.

<sup>58</sup> Robert Kurz, ‘The Crisis of Exchange Value: Science as Productivity, Productive Labour, and Capitalist Reproduction’ (1986), in *Marxism and the Critique of Value*, pp. 62–3.

actually existing capitalism. Homing in on the impurity of the economy shown in *Labour in a Single Shot*, in which pre-capitalist forms coexist with industrial and post-industrial formations, such activities attempt to develop forms of production, exchange and collaboration which can forge a kind of embedded socio-economic alterity—albeit one of course still entangled in capitalist logic.

The Robin Hood Minor Asset Management Cooperative, for instance, is an art-activist intervention in the financial economy at large that originally emerged as part of a transnational network of initiatives seeking to develop alternative economies within and against actually existing capitalism. A ‘counter-investment bank of the precariat’, the cooperative tries to divert capital from the sphere of financial speculation to ‘commons-producing projects’ such as the P2P Foundation or Casa Nuvem in Rio. Pilfering from Deleuze and Serres to theorize its operations—which depend on a ‘parasitic’ algorithm that supposedly mimics the best-performing players on the market—the Robin Hood cooperative has so far produced mostly rhetoric. Its financial results are negative, though its website’s statistics page, which allowed one to verify this, had conveniently disappeared in April 2016. In contrast to Real Flow, this is a reversed-redistribution machine that makes the case for an art, or an aesthetic activism, that uses mimicry against its model. The Art House Index is also part of this constellation. For all their mimeticism, these artists ultimately stand for a practice with underpinnings very different from that of the ‘financialized’ segment of the art world.

Tactical mimicry can, however, lead to integration. In an attempt to create a Robin Hood 2.0 that would address the shortcomings of the original parasite algorithm, founder Akseli Virtanen is attempting to reinvent the project as a startup company that uses blockchain technology to offer ‘non-cryptocurrency cryptoassets’, taking Robin Hood in a direction that makes some RHMAC stakeholders profoundly uncomfortable. In a profile published in Vermeir and Heiremans’ *In-Residence Magazine* that makes him sound less like Melville’s confidence-man than a Deleuzian Bernie Madoff, Virtanen proposes a financial product named the Hood Note, which is backed by the assets in the Robin Hood portfolio—‘a dynamic portfolio of the stocks of the best companies in the world.’<sup>59</sup>

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<sup>59</sup> ‘RH 2.0’, *In-Residence*, no. 2.

If the mythical Robin Hood was a defender of the common forest against its appropriation by Norman kings, there is no primitivist nostalgia at play in RHMAC's jump from Sherwood Forest to high-frequency trading. The notion of the commons has become a key banner under which art-activists experiment with new non-capitalist modes—a step necessitated by the productive logic of communicative capitalism. According to Primavera de Filippi and Samer Hassan:

Today, the production and dissemination of information is increasingly done outside of the market economy. An alternative model of production is emerging—both on the internet and elsewhere—that does not rely on market transactions, but rather on sharing and cooperation among peers.<sup>60</sup>

As labour and value spiral into ever deeper crisis, practices of 'commoning' come to embody the aesthetic as well as political promise of immanent exceptions. Is it any wonder that art, seeing its exceptionalism eroding, latches on to commonist theory and practice?

In 2013 the Utrecht-based art space Casco organized a 'Conversation Market' in the shopping mall Hoog Catharijne, with artist Aimée Zito Lema providing newly built versions of De Stijl designer Gerrit Rietveld's crate furniture as the setting—a project titled, after Rietveld, *Sitting Is an Active Verb*. The project was indebted to feminist economic geographer-duo J. K. Gibson-Graham's notion of community economies, taking as its motto their slogan, 'The economy is something we do, not just something that does things to us'. Gibson-Graham insist that the capitalist part of the economy is just the tip of an iceberg: above the water level stand 'paid wage labour', 'production for markets' and 'capitalist business'; below we find a much massier informal economy—a mix of 'not for market' and 'not monetized' activity, including gifts and volunteer work, barter, non-capitalist cooperatives, self-employment and children's labour.<sup>61</sup>

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<sup>60</sup> Primavera de Filippi and Samer Hassan, 'Measuring Value in the Commons-Based Ecosystem: Bridging the Gap between the Commons and the Market', in Geert Lovink et al., eds, *MoneyLab Reader: An Intervention in Digital Economy*, Amsterdam 2015, p. 76.

<sup>61</sup> The diagram was originally devised by Community Economies Collective in 2001 and drawn by Ken Byrne. See J. K. Gibson-Graham, *A Postcapitalist Politics*, Minneapolis 2006, p. 70.

This has met with an enthusiastic response in art circles that are interested in moving from ‘artistic services’ to forms of commoning in art practices and institutions. Artistic appropriations of notions of the commons and of community economics can of course be criticized as naïve. Do they not leave the dominant structures intact, just resulting in the creation of commonist playgrounds that bother nobody? Is the supposed size of the ‘hidden’, informal part of Gibson-Graham’s iceberg metaphor fooling us about the pervasiveness of capitalism in society as a whole? As Jappe notes, a collapse of capitalism would have much more drastic consequences for the majority of the population now than it would have had around 1900. Indeed, for Nancy Fraser capitalism is ‘something larger than an economy’.<sup>62</sup> Nonetheless, in however scout-like a manner, these practices (or proposals for practices) tackle the crisis of value and the concomitant crisis of labour head on. They do indeed result in a conversation market.

### *Art after value*

In the context of the MoneyLab project, some of the more technologically minded actors in this field have attempted ‘the radical reinvention of money itself’ on the basis of a critical engagement with Bitcoin, other cryptocurrencies and the blockchain technology behind them. They have attempted to counter the frequently right-wing cyber-libertarian discourse associated with these technologies by sketching the outlines of a much more fundamentally alternative form of money. In Bitcoin, as a MoneyLab contributor argues, the asset function of money trumps the exchange function, meaning that it essentially becomes a derivative—an option or futures contract—in short, just what the Hood Notes aspire to be.<sup>63</sup> By contrast, Tiziana Terranova and others have proposed a ‘commoncoin’ that would lose value over time to counter this speculative aspect. While this proposal is neither the first nor the last word on the matter, it at least opens up the conversation beyond the ‘there are alternatives’ baseline of contemporary ideology. Terranova is insistent that the crisis of value and of capitalism should not lead to primitivism:

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<sup>62</sup> Jappe, *Die Abenteuer der Ware*, p. 138; Nancy Fraser, ‘Behind Marx’s Hidden Abode: For an Expanded Conception of Capitalism’, *NLR* 86, Mar–Apr 2014.

<sup>63</sup> David Golumbia, ‘Bitcoin as Politics: Distributed Right-Wing Extremism’, in *MoneyLab Reader*, pp. 118–31.

The notion of a bad, fake financialization opposed to the real economy is contested both by activist anthropologists of the financial world, but also by post-workerist Marxists who, as we have seen, consider financialization as the answer of capital to the crisis of measure—that is the inability to measure productivity on the basis of the labour theory of value. Financialization has a potential: it reveals how money can function as an intervention and that it can also account for different ways of organizing the production and distribution of wealth.<sup>64</sup>

In contrast to the merely theoretical radicalism of the value critics, Commoncoin is an attempt to devise a post-capitalist tactic that will help to accelerate the crisis even while reshaping social and economic structures in ways that go beyond a simple ‘taking over’.

If Commoncoin would have devaluation built into its DNA, then what about art? Given art’s capture as exceptional asset, Andrea Phillips has argued for its ‘devaluation’ as a political process through which ‘we dispossess ourselves of value as an economic and aspirational asset class’.<sup>65</sup> She advocates a transformation of art education to this end, and suggests that there may be uses of artistic skills that allow artists to make a living in ways ‘that do not necessitate individualized value as a form of capital expansion’.<sup>66</sup> Of course, this expansion goes hand in hand with shrinkage elsewhere. If a global capitalist machine predicated on growth has already reached its limits and has begun to eat its children—shifting from the accumulation of value to its redistribution on the macro-level—then we are overdue a revaluation of all values: an *Umwertung aller Werte*. As an increasingly normative exception whose disastrous success has forced many to rethink and reshape their practices, contemporary art may not be the worst place to start.

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<sup>64</sup> Tiziana Terranova and Andrea Fumagalli, ‘Financial Capital and the Money of the Common: The Case of Commoncoin’, in *MoneyLab Reader*, pp. 150–7.

<sup>65</sup> Andrea Phillips, ‘Devaluation’, *Parse*, no. 2, November 2015.

<sup>66</sup> Phillips, ‘Devaluation’.

REVIEW

ARTICLE, TALK & INTERVIEW

INITIATORS' BLOG ARCHIVE

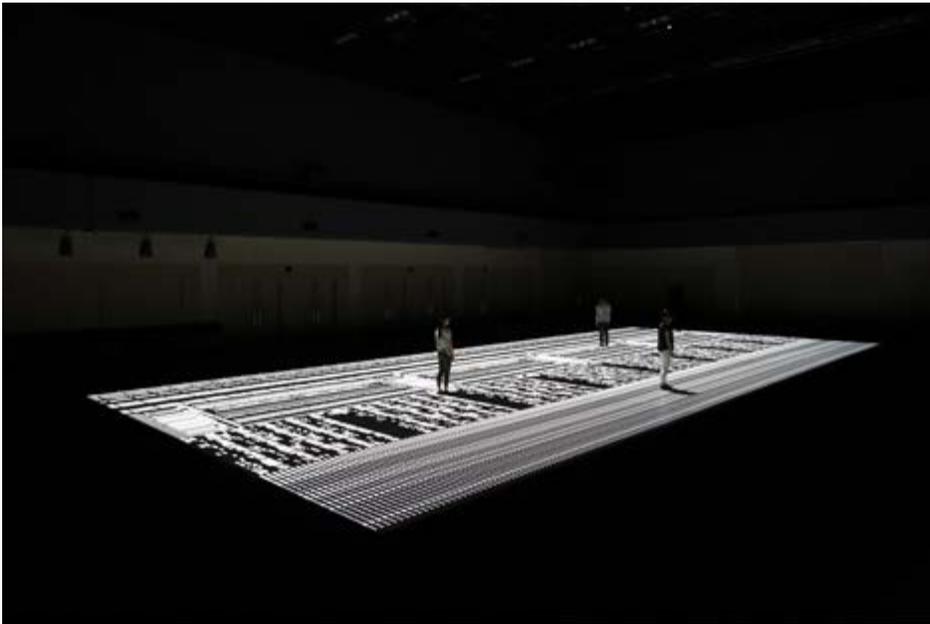
Dojima River Biennale 2015 Take Me To The River

## REVIEW

Ishitani Haruhiro

In the summer of 2015, Osaka is cool. The National Museum of Art, Osaka is offering “Time of others,” an exhibition of works reflecting on multiple histories, carefully chosen by four curators from Asia and Oceania; and a show devoted entirely to the oeuvre of Wolfgang Tillmans, laid out perfectly by the man himself – one of the world’s top contemporary photographers – during a two-week stay in Japan. Across the river, the cool factor is compounded by an exhibition at the Dojima River Forum offering an overview of the latest currents in top-quality, edgy contemporary art.

Beginning on the ground floor of the Dojima River Forum’s main hall, we find a gigantic work by sound artist Ikeda Ryoji. Aural stimulation in the form of shortwave sounds, pulsing and thumping bass accompanies lines of digital data racing across a screen extending across the floor. Visitors can stand on a structure similar to a theater stage to experience the light and sound, and the work and visitors as actors can also be viewed from the floor above. Ikeda Ryoji’s largest-ever installation in Kansai, it is worth dropping by the Dojima River Biennale just to experience it.



Ikeda Ryoji, *deta.tecture 3 SXGA + version*, 2015, Courtesy: the artists  
Installation view at Dojima River Biennale 2015 (Dojima River Forum)  
Photo: Kioku Keizo, courtesy Dojima River Forum

The theme for this Biennale is “Take Me To The River,” and making the connection between this theme and Ikeda Ryoji’s installation, visitors may find the data flowing wave-like through the elongated space also brings to mind a pool or jacuzzi, sending a pleasant vibe through the body. In light of Ikeda’s previous, more understated approach of stimulating listeners with high-pitched or sudden noises, it was surprising to find that this time he has produced an installation with rhythm honed to a predictable range, refined to a level even a child could enjoy. One can easily imagine children happily surrendering to the sound and light, and having a blast. If I may say so, this is fun of a sort akin to that offered by the complex recreational facilities of artificial flowing water at places like Hirakata Park and Toshimaen. The theme for this Dojima River Biennale may well mean jumping into an imaginary river of digital data in a dark, air-conditioned room, to cool down in an intellectual manner, as opposed to spending the stifling summer knocked about by the hordes in a real pool. Dojima is inextricably bound to its history as the site of the world’s first financial exchange, established through waterborne transport of rice during the Edo period. Capitalizing on the vertical structure of the buildings of the Dojima River Forum, a joint industrial and educational complex housing retail stores, offices and educational institutions, the intertwining of liquefying capital, information and nature in the exhibition

rooms, dominated by Ikeda's installation reminiscent of a data reservoir, unfolds in multiple layers. To put it simply, the passages and nearby exhibition rooms on the first and second floors point to the geopolitical expansion of modern globalization, while the underground carpark is the substructure providing the foundations of the world economy, and the exhibition room on the fourth floor with views out onto the forest of high-rises the superstructure of morals, art and so on. Based on this layered structure, issues in modern society surrounding history, ecology, food, education and emotional labor are arranged so as to resonate through images of water and fluidity. The Biennale is also notable for its concentrated retrospection on the work of international artists closely linked to the Japan of the 1980s onward.



View from the fourth floor of Dojima River Forum  
Photo: Ishitani Haruhiro

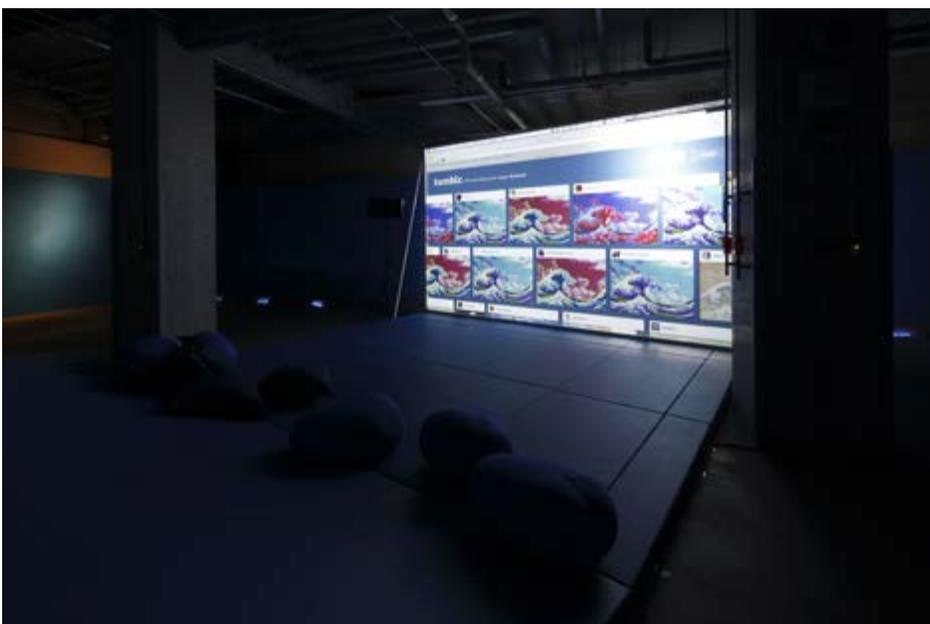


The Play, 1E: *PLAY HAVE A HOUSE*, 2015 / video 1972, courtesy the artists  
Installation view at Dojima River Biennale 2015 (Dojima River Forum)  
Photo: Kioku Keizo, courtesy Dojima River Forum



Sasamoto Aki, *Talking in Circles in Talking*, 2015, Courtesy Take Ninagawa, Tokyo  
 Installation view at Dojima River Biennale 2015 (Dojima River Forum)  
 Photo: Kioku Keizo, courtesy Dojima River Forum

At this point, allow me to describe in some detail two works serving as incisive portrayals of the substructure and superstructure of today's culture industry. Hito Steyerl's *Liquidity Inc.* installed in the basement and lasting about 30 minutes, makes the fluidity of water a metaphor for modern society, while highlighting the strength of will exhibited by a mixed martial arts fighter who survives by riding the highs and lows of uncertain times in the manner of a surfer. Bruce Lee's words, "Empty your mind. Be formless, shapeless like water," are quoted repeatedly, as an MMA fight shows on the screen. In brief, the fighter is one of the children sent to the West Coast of the US for adoption after the Vietnam War. He achieves success working in an internet-related company, but is laid off in the economic collapse accompanying the demise of Lehman Brothers and ensuing financial crisis, and becomes a fighter. Thus the vicissitudes of one refugee's life overlap with the paths taken by politics and economics in the last quarter of a century. War and terrorism are also in sync with the flow of money. As weather forecaster for an underground world, a masked man predicts the movement of air currents and tides, and the status of various conflicts from the South China Sea to the Pacific. The underground venue, a synthesis of boxing ring and private theater, inspires visitors with a fighting spirit that is the antithesis of comfort.



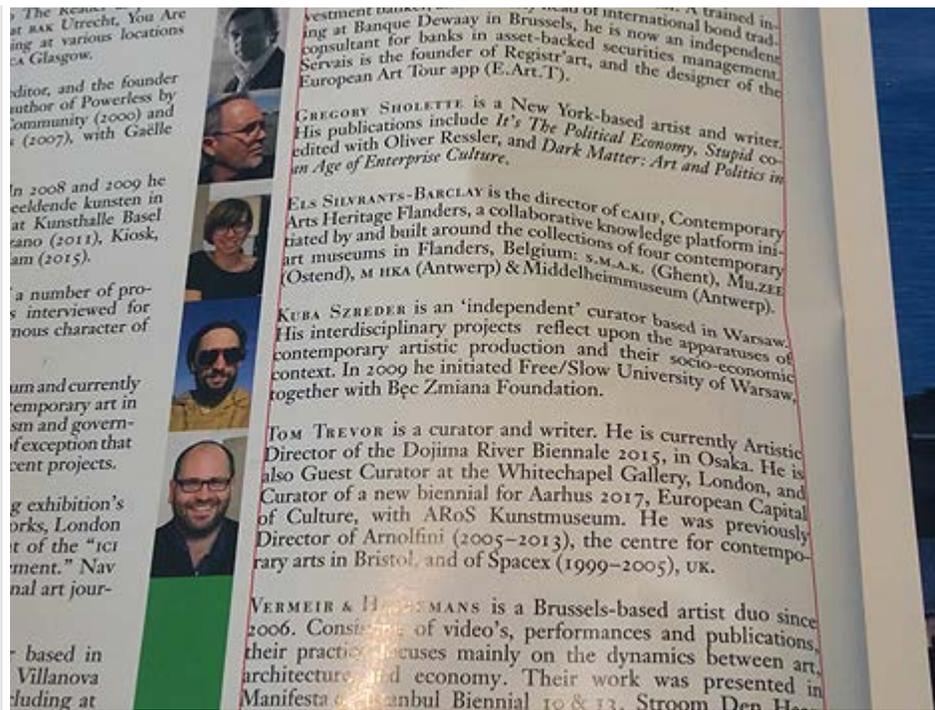
Hito Steyerl, *Liquidity Inc.*, 2014

Courtesy the artist and Andrew Kreps Gallery, New York  
Installation view at Dojima River Biennale 2015 (Dojima River Forum)  
Photo: Kioku Keizo, courtesy Dojima River Forum

Vermeir & Heiremans' 1-hour video work *Masquerade* on the top floor is a lecture performance video in which experts discuss the value of art as a special commodity. The democratization of the financial markets that started with 1980s neoliberalism made the language of politics subordinate to economics, engendering an unprecedented chasm between rich and poor that left 1 percent of the world's population wealthy, and 99 percent in poverty. The nihilistic view would probably be that the art market is no more than a monopolistic market aimed at this wealthy 1 percent. By concocting the imaginary concept of the Art House Index (AHI) however, and rolling out multiple artworks solely in their own studio in Belgium, Vermeir & Heiremans et al delve into the paradoxical true nature of art and business. The first half of this thought experiment sets out a mechanism by which a proportion of monopolistic speculators and members of the elite manipulate the price of art and the market with ease, and the second half explains theoretically how the more viewers possessing diverse tastes and desires participate in the art world, the more unstable the very value of this index will become. That is to say, unlike the fake free competition principle of the financial markets, the true object of the democratization of art is to bring about a disturbance in the market's value structure, making it crash and avoiding the manipulations of investors. But this educational video has yet another dimension: the people giving the presentations in it are curators and academics actually involved in the art sector, appearing as parodies of themselves. The magazine published to coincide with this exhibition contains texts full of academic notations and interviews conducted by the Biennale curator, and one can identify the names and faces of industry individuals cast in the video. Thus the title of *Masquerade*. So here we have a highly specialized game, an art world version of the film *Ocean's Eleven*, so to speak. The incorporation of the history and site of Osaka's Dojima in one location of ongoing attempts to survive this paradox is a welcome development.



Vermeir & Heiremans, *Masquerade*, 2015, Courtesy the artists  
Installation view at Dojima River Biennale 2015 (Dojima River Forum)  
Photo: Kioku Keizo, courtesy Dojima River Forum



Vermeer & Heiremans, *In-Residence Magazine #02, 2015*, Courtesy the artists magazine, limited edition of 750 (detail) / Photo: Ishitani Haruhiro

A river is nature and simultaneously culture, and the very current incorporating multiple unique occurrences and objects into the distribution network of intangible global capitalism. To quote British sociologist Zygmunt Bauman, our global culture since the 1990s could be described as “liquid modernity.” This year’s Dojima River Biennale, at the hands of UK-based Tom Trevor offers a superb, multilayered view of the state of globalization right now, by connecting the simple metaphor of the river, and a well-thought-out selection of works.

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(English translation: Pamela Miki Associates)

Publication: 17 September 2015

## Dojima River Biennale 2015 Take Me To The River

24 July – 30 August, 2015 / Dojima River Forum

# Booms, Blasen und das Latte-macchiato-Land

Anne Katrin Feßler

20. Mai 2015, 17:58

## "Life's Finest Values" in der Kunsthalle Exnergasse im Wiener Wuk zeigt Videos zum Ausverkauf der Städte und stiftet Rebellionspotenzial

Wien - "Dividendenregen und Kaviarträume nehmen uns unsere Freiräume." Als das Kollektiv The Good, The Bad & The Ugly 2013 anlässlich des drohenden [Abrisses der Essohäuser in Hamburg](#) die Dämonen der Gentrifizierung musikalisch an den Pranger stellte und mit Reimen wie "Die Fratze des Teufels steht vor unserer Tür, bayrische Babylonier mit Machtgespür" bedachte, war das auch eine Reaktion auf das Album *The Fine Art of Living* der Berliner Künstlerin, Kuratorin und Musikerin Ina Wudtke aka DJ T-Ina Darling.

Wudtke hatte 2009 ganze sechs Stücke dem Mietwucher und der Invasion der Investoren in der deutschen Hauptstadt gewidmet; für den Albumtitel eignete sie sich sogar den Slogan der "Feinde" an, einer Luxusimmobilienfirma, die in Berlin Wohnungen für die schöne - und insbesondere exklusive - Art des Lebens anpries. "Boom boom plisch plop - blow my fuckin' top!" umschreibt der Refrain ihres Titelsongs lautmalerisch die "Zwischenfälle" bei der Sanierung der Spekulationsobjekte, die Altmietler in die Flucht schlagen.

"Ihr habt die Wüste in einen beliebten Wohnort verwandelt. Ich nehme ihn Euch weg!", gibt sie den schmierigen, renditehungrigen Anzugträger im Video zu *The Law*. Aus Pionieren der Gentrifizierung wurden Opfer der Gentrifizierung, sagt Ina Wudtke, die dem Thema nun gemeinsam mit Florian Wüst in der Kunsthalle Exnergasse im Wiener Wuk eine Ausstellung widmete: *Life's Finest Values* - ebenfalls nach dem flotten Motto einer Immobilienfirma benannt, zeigt zwölf Videos zu einer nicht nur lokalen, sondern globalen Fehlentwicklung. Ein inhaltlich präziser Fokus, der - entgegen der gängigen Ausstellungspraxis - tatsächlich einmal ein Feld aufbereitet.

rudelrecords

"I am the Law" aus dem Album "The Fine Art of Living" von T-Ina Darling (Ina Wudtke)  
Es sind die Künstler und Künstlerinnen, die Kreativen, die Wohngegenden für die sogenannte "Latte-macchiato"-Mafia attraktiv machen. Ihre prekären Einkommensverhältnisse machen sie aber ebenso zum Opfer der Verteuerung wie andere Niedrigeinkommensschichten. Berlin

versuchte in den vergangenen Jahren, durch die Privatisierung von Häusern des kommunalen Wohnbaus Geld in die Pleitekassen zu spülen. Bereits 2008 war der Anteil kommunaler und genossenschaftlicher Wohnungen am gesamten Bestand von 30,6 (2000) auf 23,6 Prozent heruntergerasselt.

Inzwischen sei es ein Wert um 18 Prozent, mahnt Ina Wudtke. Kürzlich wurde wenigstens die "Mietpreisbremse" installiert, das bedeutet, dass neue Mieten nur zehn Prozent über dem ortsüblichen Richtmietzins liegen dürfen. Zwar sieht die Situation im "Roten Wien" rosiger aus, trotzdem macht die von antikapitalistischen Gedanken Henri Lefebvres ("Recht auf Stadt", 1968) und David Harveys ("Rebellische Städte", 2013) geprägte Schau hier Sinn:

## **Wer definiert Stadt heute - und wie?**

Im Gegensatz zu Marx, der die Vorhut des revolutionären Wandels im Proletariat aus den Fabriken wählte, erkannte der marxistische (Stadt-)Soziologe Lefebvre die urbanen Dimensionen des Revolutionspotenzials. Auch Harvey, der Städte als Abbilder der kapitalistischen Dynamik von Boom und Krise ansieht, glaubt daran, dass Wohnorte und Nachbarschaft Schauplätze sozialer wie politischer Solidarität sind. Wenn man heute, fast 50 Jahre nach Lefebvre und dem Aufkommen einer Psychogeografie des Urbanen, das Recht auf Stadt einmahnt, was heißt das eigentlich? Der Philosoph meinte das Anrecht auf Austausch, auf kollektiv gestalteten und genutzten öffentlichen Raum. Harvey fragt aber daran anschließend: wer definiert Stadt heute - und wie?

Von dokumentarischen bis zu experimentellen Zugängen reicht die Bandbreite der ausgewählten Filme, die teils bereits bei etablierten Festivals zu sehen waren - etwa beim Steirischen Herbst 2013 ([Liquid Assets](#)) oder der vorigen Istanbul-[Biennale](#). Gezeigt werden sie nicht vor einem kunsttypisch glatten, weißen Display, sondern gebettet in ein Setting aus Baugerüsten. Das symbolisiert nicht nur den Umbau der Städte, sondern auch ganz konkret die rücksichtslose Sanierungswut der Investoren in Berlin, deren Auswirkungen auf die Mieter schließlich auch ein Initial für die Ausstellungsmacher war. Metaphorisch auch die Graffiti-Schrift des Titels an der Wand: Sie übersetzt die Großkotzigkeit des Immobiliensprechs in eine widerständige Geste.

## **Denkmäler moderner Ideale**

Selbst antikapitalistische Betrachter müssen hier jedoch stark - aber gut - investieren: Zeit. Das Phänomen einer revolutionären Moderne zeigt etwa [Microbrigades](#) (2013, Lisa Schmidt-Colinet, Alexander Schmoegner und Florian Zeyfang) über Laienbautruppen in Kuba, die von 1971 bis 1975 jährlich bis zu 20.000 Wohnungen errichteten. Vierzig Jahre später bröckelt zwar der Putz und die Fassadenfarbe ist nur noch eine leise Erinnerung, aber sonst vermittelt der atmosphärische Beitrag über "Denkmäler" moderner Ideale ein recht idyllisches Bild. Annika Erikssons [I am the dog that was always here](#) (2013) hingegen ist ein schwermütiges Filmgedicht, in dem in der Peripherie Istanbuls ausgesetzte Hunde zum Symbol für Opfer der Gentrifizierung werden.

Den Ausverkauf des Öffentlichen breitet Oliver Ressler in [The Plundering](#) (2013) aus, lässt Betroffene aus Tiflis wie Zeugen der Anklage frontal auftreten. Sehenswert auch [The Anarchist Banker](#) (2009) von Jan-Peter Hammer, das in der Aufmachung eines Fernsehinterviews daherkommt: Der Banker verkauft sich doch tatsächlich als Anarchist, vertritt die These, je mehr Geld er anhäufe, umso größer werde seine persönliche Freiheit. Entlarvend auch das Video [Lobbyists](#) (2009) von Libia Castro und Ólafur Ólafsson, die

Protagonisten rund um das EU-Parlament in Brüssel vor die Kamera baten. Ein besonderes Highlight ist der perfekt produzierte Film *The Good Life* des Duos Vermeir & Heiremans. Die Umwandlung einer Kunsthalle in Luxuswohneinheiten inszenieren sie in einer Gebäudehülle: Die ist also ebenso leer wie die angepriesene Lifestyle-Philosophie, die die Kreativität als Gemeingut preist und von in der Sonne genossenen Croissants predigt. (Anne Katrin Feßler, 21.5.2015)

**Ausstellung** *Life's Finest Values* bis 30. 5., [Kunsthalle Exnergasse, Wuk](#)

**Filmabend/Diskussion "[Handel mit der Zukunft](#)"** am 29. 5., 19 Uhr: Gezeigt werden die Filme *Fictions and Futures #1 – Happiness in the Abstract* (2013) von Arne Hector/Minze Tummescheits (Stichwort "Termingeschäfte") und "Masquerade" (2015) von Vermeir & Heiremans (Stichwort "Kunst und Kapital"), im Anschluss diskutieren die Filmemacher/Künstler mit Kurator/Künstler Florian Wüst.

## MASQUERADE

Over publieke personae in een video-installatie  
door Vermeir & Heiremans

—  
Steyn Berghs & Jesse van Winden

Vermeir & Heiremans' meest recente filminstallatie, *Masquerade* (2015), bevraagt de waarde van kunst, en dan vooral de manieren waarop deze waarde opgebouwd en waargenomen wordt. Dit wordt ook duidelijk in één van de subthema's van het werk, waarin mensen niet zonder meer kredietwaardig zijn, en maatschappelijke rollen moeten construeren voor zichzelf.

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## MASQUERADE

On public personae in a video installation  
by Vermeir & Heiremans

—  
Steyn Berghs & Jesse van Winden

Vermeir & Heiremans' most recent film installation *Masquerade* (2015) questions the value of art, and especially the way this value is constructed and perceived. This is reflected in one of the subthemes of the work: people are not perceived at face value, but in direct relation to their constructed role—at mask value, so to speak.

In hun artistieke praktijk spitsen Vermeir & Heiremans zich toe op de dynamiek tussen kunst, architectuur en economie. Ze definiëren hun eigen huis, een loft in een post-industrieel gebouw in Brussel, als een kunstwerk. Terwijl ze hun thuis privaat houden, gebruiken ze het toch om zogenaamde *media-extensies* te creëren: vertalingen van het huis in installaties, video's, performances, publicaties, enzoverder. *Art House Index (AHI-)* is een nieuwe 'extensie' waarin het huis-als-kunstwerk getransformeerd wordt in een financiële index, een instrument dat de bewegingen in een specifiek onderdeel van de economie in kaart brengt. (*AHI-*) brengt kunst en vastgoed samen, en vormt zo een transparant instrument dat makkelijk toegankelijk is voor investeerders, voor wie deze producten anders te ondoorzichtig en te statisch — en daarom te moeilijk te verhandelen — zijn.

De beweging van (*AHI-*) is niet alleen het centrale onderwerp van hun recentste video-installatie, *Masquerade*.<sup>1</sup> Het is ook het instrument dat direct bepaalt hoe de centrale video in de installatie door het publiek gezien wordt. *Real-time* data verzameld op het internet (met betrekking tot vastgoed, de kunstmarkt en valutamarkten, maar ook de aandacht die het werk van Vermeir & Heiremans wereldwijd krijgt) worden elke tien seconden verrekend, en bepalen zo of de index stijgt of daalt. Deze beweging van de index beïnvloedt welke van de twee versies van *Masquerade* te zien is: de finale, volledig post-geproduceerde scènes (wanneer de index stijgt), of verschillende variaties, repetities en minder geslaagde scènes (wanneer de index daalt).

*Masquerade* begint met een niet mis te verstaan statement: "a film it is not, unless a film means 45 exchanges conducted by characters who might pass for the errata of artistic creation."<sup>2</sup> Het werk toont een allegorie op de hedendaagse kunst en economie. Een reporter doet verslag over de 'initial public offering' van (*AHI-*) op de financiële markt. Terwijl ze de index voorstelt, bevraagt ze de publieke personae van de kunstenaars als de basis van diens waarde: "We'll be discussing with a guest speaker, whom we'll introduce in a moment, if we can have confidence in... *Vermeir & Heiremans*."<sup>3</sup> In een eerdere scène begeleidde een tentoonstellingsgids een groep

Vermeir & Heiremans focus on the dynamics between art, architecture, and economy. In this practice the artists define their own house, a loft apartment in a post-industrial building in Brussels, as an artwork. Whilst keeping their home private, they use it to create so-called *mediated extensions*, translations of the house into installations, videos, performances, publications, et cetera. *Art House Index (AHI-)* is a new extension in which the artists propose the transformation of their *house as an artwork* into a financial index, an instrument that measures the performance of a specific part of the economy. Merging art and real estate, (*AHI-*) renders an opaque and static product that is difficult to trade, into a transparent tool that is accessible for many investors.

The actual performance of (*AHI-*) is not only the central topic of their most recent video installation, *Masquerade*.<sup>1</sup> It is also the instrument that in real-time defines how the central video in that installation is seen by the audience. Real-time data available on the Internet (global real estate, art and currency markets, as well as the attention the artists generate around their own work) are re-calculated every ten seconds, resulting in the index going up or down. This movement of the index triggers a switching back and forth between two *Masquerade* versions, one of which shows the perfectly post-produced scenes (when the index goes up), while the other displays variations, rehearsals, and failures as a consequence of the index going down.

As the viewers of *Masquerade* are informed in the opening scene: "a film it is not, unless a film means 45 exchanges conducted by characters who might pass for the errata of artistic creation."<sup>2</sup> The work presents us with an allegory of contemporary art and economy. In the film a reporter tells the story of the 'initial public offering' of (*AHI-*) on the financial market. While introducing the index, she questions the artists' public personae as a basis for value. "We'll be discussing with a guest speaker, whom

mensen en stelde dat “[...]the singularity of the public persona generates a monopoly situation which artists can exploit as a brand[...]”<sup>4</sup>

Vermeir & Heiremans gebruiken het concept van een publieke persona als een centraal instrument in de ontwikkeling van *Masquerade*. Vele personages zetten samen het fictieve debuut van (AHI-) in scène. De kunstenaars hebben een eigenzinnige benadering tot casting: een aantal mensen in de film spelen personages die erg vergelijkbaar zijn met hun sociale rollen in het dagelijkse leven. Aangezien Vermeir & Heiremans de hele film gescript hebben, spelen deze mensen gefictionaliseerde versies van hun eigen beroepen.<sup>5</sup> Eén van hen, die in financiën werkt, speelt Frank Goodman, genoemd naar een karakter in Herman Melville’s *The Confidence-Man: His Masquerade* (1857). Goodman legt uit dat transparantie, liquiditeit en media-belangstelling noodzakelijk zijn, wil je van kunst een financiële *asset* maken. Deze zaken leiden namelijk tot vertrouwen, en daardoor tot een hogere inschatting van de waarde van kunst: “Public information creates trust,” stelt hij, “so yes, we should consider the option of printing a prospectus. Apart from the output of the ‘art rating agency’, which could formally measure visibility, institutional attention, publication profile... in short their credit as an artist, there is a whole set of parameters that can be constructed and published so that potential investors will perceive the index as completely transparent.”<sup>6</sup>

*Masquerade* bestaat in essentie uit één lang gesprek tussen een aantal protagonisten die een positie innemen in het publieke debat over waarde, waardoor de discursieve aard van de waarde van kunst wordt blootgelegd. Goodmans betoog over kunst als een financieel goed wordt constant onderbroken door de meningen van verschillende figuren uit de kunstwereld — de curator, de verzamelaar, de gallerist, de veilingmeester, de investeerder, enzovoorts — die allemaal hun zegje willen doen. Parallel aan dit alternerend discours is te zien hoe de setting van de film verandert van een *white cube* in een galerie, een veilinghuis, een

we’ll introduce in a moment, if we can have confidence in... *Vermeir & Heiremans*.”<sup>3</sup> In a previous scene an exhibition guide shows a group of people around, stating that “...the singularity of the public persona generates a monopoly situation which artists can exploit as a brand...”<sup>4</sup>

Vermeir & Heiremans have used the concept of the public persona as a central device in the development of *Masquerade*. In the film, many characters enact the fictional debut of (AHI-). The artists have a specific approach to casting. In the film a number of people embody characters that are similar to their social roles in real life. Since Vermeir & Heiremans have scripted the whole film, these people perform a fictionalized version of their professions.<sup>5</sup> One of them is the financial trader who plays Frank Goodman, named after a character in Herman Melville’s novel *The Confidence-Man: His Masquerade* (1857). Frank Goodman explains that in order for art to become a financial asset, transparency, liquidity, and media exposure are necessary. They lead to trust and therefore to higher estimations of the value of art. “Public information creates trust,” he says, “so yes, we should consider the option of printing a prospectus. Apart from the output of the ‘art rating agency’, which could formally measure visibility, institutional attention, publication profile... in short their credit as an artist, there is a whole set of parameters that can be constructed and published so that potential investors will perceive the index as completely transparent.”<sup>6</sup>

*Masquerade* essentially consists of a single extended, continuous conversation between a number of protagonists that take a public position in the ongoing debate on value, attesting to its discursive nature. Goodman’s logic of the value of art as a financial asset is constantly interspersed with opinions of other protagonists in the art world — the curator, collector, gallerist, auctioneer, investor and so on — who

*trading pit*, en zelfs een rechtbank: plaatsen waar waarde(n) bevochten worden. Bovendien klinkt het jargon van de personages erg vertrouwd: het script voor *Masquerade* pasticheert teksten uit kunstmagazines en journals, teksten die Vermeir & Heiremans selecteerden tijdens hun onderzoek. De dialogen zijn opgesteld uit citaten uit deze teksten — die op zichzelf ook discursieve sites vormen voor het bepalen van de waarde van kunst.

Alle acteurs spelen in *Masquerade* meer dan één rol, en dit leidt tot een soort rollencontingentie die de toeschouwer voortdurend op het verkeerde been zet. Ook in dit opzicht is de film vergelijkbaar met Melville's roman: tot vandaag de dag zijn academici het er niet over eens of de 'confidence man' in het boek één of meerdere personages is.<sup>7</sup> Ook de kunstenaars komen in hun eigen film voor: we zien hoe ze regisseren en filmen. We zien hen 'screen in screen' in hun rol als het 'kunstenaarsmerk' *Vermeir & Heiremans* terwijl ze (*AHI*–) promoten, en terwijl ze ondervraagd worden door een personage gekleed als rechter. Samen met de andere figuren spelen ze een spel dat hun eigen publieke rollen transformeert en bekritiseert. De relatie tussen de publieke persona van de acteurs in het echte leven en de 'esthetische' of filmische personae van de rollen die ze spelen, is de toeschouwer niet duidelijk. Wat we zien is een transformatie van een gemaskerd of gestileerd subject in een geësthetiseerd, filmisch object — maar de precieze aard van iedere transformatie blijft onduidelijk.

De kwestie van geloof en vertrouwen wordt steeds opnieuw aangekaart, bijvoorbeeld met een Brechtiaanse onthulling van het cinematografische *dispositif* door het gebruik van zogenaamde 'green key' en de manier waarop Vermeir & Heiremans gebruik maken van publieke personae. Geloof en vertrouwen zijn cruciaal voor zowel de kunstwereld als het functioneren van *high finance*, en zijn thematisch verwant aan Melville's roman. *The Confidence Man—His Masquerade* zegt als verhaal veel over zijn eigen tijd: de slachtoffers van de bedrieger worden niet zozeer bedrogen; veeleer wordt de relativiteit van hun diepste overtuigingen en instellingen blootgelegd.

offer their own speculative views on the value of art. In parallel with these alternate discourses, the setting of the film transforms itself from a white cube gallery into an auction house, a trading pit, and even a courtroom: places where value(s) are negotiated. Furthermore, the characters' use of language sounds highly familiar: the script for *Masquerade* pastiches texts from art magazines and journals that Vermeir & Heiremans encountered during their research for the work. The dialogues are constructed on the basis of quotes from art historical and art critical texts — texts that are in themselves discursive sites where the value of art is determined.

In *Masquerade*, all actors perform more than one character and this makes for a contingency of characters that constantly puts the viewer on the wrong footing as was the case for Melville's novel: Scholars today still debate whether the Confidence Man is one or several characters in the book.<sup>7</sup> The artists themselves appear in their own film: we see them directing it and doing camera work. We see them 'screen in screen' in their role of the artist brand, *Vermeir & Heiremans*, promoting (*AHI*–) while they are questioned by a character dressed up as a judge. The artists and many other characters act out roles that seem to transform and criticize their own public roles. The relation between the actors' public personae in real life and their characters' aesthetic — one could even say cinematic — personae is unknown to the beholder. In other words, he is witnessing the transformation of a masked or stylized subject into an aestheticized, filmic object but can only guess what this transformation entails.

The Brechtian technique of unveiling the apparatus by making explicit the use of green screens deployed in *Masquerade*, as well as the way in which Vermeir & Heiremans make use of public personae, constantly evoke questions of confidence and belief. Both of these are underlying ideas on which the art world and high finance

figs. 1,2,3,4  
Vermeir & Heiremans,  
*Masquerade*, 2015.  
Collages. Photography:  
Michael de Lausnay.



PERFORM PRESENT — The artist's persona





PERFORM PRESENT — The artist's persona









PERFORM PRESENT — The artist's persona



(AHI–) brengt niet alleen kunst en financiën samen, maar behandelt ook de manier waarop het individu bekeken wordt. Zoals Vermeir & Heiremans zelf stellen: “Art House Index gaat niet over de waardeschommelingen van twee mensen. Het is eerder een metafoor voor het koppelen van subjectiviteit en financiën, waarbij we de kunstenaarspersona hebben gebruikt als substituuat voor het individu.”<sup>8</sup> De verschillende personae die in *Masquerade* ten tonele verschijnen lijken vormgegeven als ‘karaktermaskers’, zoals marxisten de personae noemen van mensen binnen een kapitalistisch systeem. Deze rollen worden gevormd door sociale klassen en de markt. Niet alleen gaan de mensen zelf ‘gemaskerd’, ook de waren die ze verhandelen krijgen geruisloos een bepaalde uiterlijke schijn. Ze verkrijgen niet alleen surpluswaarde, maar ook ‘surplusbetekenis’ — zoals het werk van gevestigde, kredietwaardige kunstenaars. Het is dan ook geen toeval dat Frank Goodman stelt dat het publiek zich zal afvragen: “Can we have confidence in *Vermeir & Heiremans*?”

Vermeir & Heiremans is een Brussels kunstenaarsduo. Hun praktijk spitst zich toe op de dynamiek tussen kunst, architectuur en economie. Vermeir & Heiremans hebben hun videowerk getoond op filmfestivals en binnen platforms voor hedendaagse kunst, waaronder The 10th Istanbul Biennial (2007); Arnolfini, Bristol (2009); Kasseler Dokfest (2009); Nam June Paik Art

Center, Gyeonggi-do, Korea (2010); La Rada, Locarno (2011); ARGOS, Brussel (2012); Extra City, Antwerpen (2012); Manifesta 9, Limburg (2012); The 13th Istanbul Biennial (2013); Impakt Festival, Utrecht (2013); de triennale van Brugge (2015); de Dojima River-biennale, Osaka (2015); en Curated by\_vienna (2015).

function, a theme that was very much inspired by Melville’s novel. *The Confidence Man—His Masquerade* was a timely story, in which the writer’s confidence man does not exploit his victims so much as reveal the contingency of their core beliefs and institutions.

(AHI–) does not only short-circuit art and finance, it also affects the perceived and judged image of the individual. Vermeir & Heiremans have commented on this aspect: “Art House Index is not about the fluctuating value of two individuals. It is rather an image for the linking of subjectivity and finance for which we have used the artist personae as a substitute for the individual.”<sup>8</sup> The various personae that are staged in *Masquerade* seem to be designed by the artists not only as personae but as character masks: the Marxian role-playing intermediaries of the humans who inhabit a capitalist system. Social class and market exchange determine these roles. Thus, not only the people are ‘masked’, also the commodities they exchange take on different guises. They acquire not only surplus value but surplus meaning, one could say, just like the work of established, ‘trustworthy artists’. That seems to be the reason why Frank Goodman mentions in the film that the audience will raise the question: “Can we have confidence in *Vermeir & Heiremans*?”

Vermeir & Heiremans is a Brussels-based artist duo. Their practice focuses on the dynamics between art, architecture, and economy. Vermeir & Heiremans have presented their video work in film festivals and contemporary art venues such as the 10th Istanbul Biennial (2007); Arnolfini, Bristol (2009); Kasseler Dokfest (2009);

Nam June Paik Art Center, Gyeonggi-do, Korea (2010); La Rada, Locarno (2011); ARGOS, Brussels (2012); Extra City, Antwerp (2012); Manifesta 9, Limburg (2012); 13th Istanbul Biennial (2013); Impakt Festival, Utrecht (2013); Triennale Brugge (2015); Dojima River Biennale, Osaka (2015); and Curated by\_vienna (2015).

## EINDNOTEN

- <sup>1</sup> Een éénkanaalsversie van het werk is te zien op: [vimeo.com/133391587](https://vimeo.com/133391587) – wachtwoord: M2015.
- <sup>2</sup> “Een film is het niet, tenzij een film 45 verhandelingen betekent, door personages die door kunnen gaan voor de errata van kunstzinnige schepping.” *Masquerade*, “Scene 01: In which a variety of characters appear”. Deze omschrijving is een aanpassing van een recensie van Herman Melville’s *The Confidence Man — His Masquerade (1857)* in *The Literary Gazette*, 11 april 1857: “Een roman is het niet, tenzij een roman vijftienveertig gesprekken aan boord van een stoomschip betekent, gevoerd door passagiers die door zouden kunnen gaan voor de errata van de schepping.” Melville’s roman diende als inspiratie voor de film. De kunstenaars namen (deel van) de titel van het boek over, maar bijvoorbeeld ook de 45-delige structuur ervan. *The Confidence Man* is een kritiek op de cultuur van ‘professioneel vertrouwen’, waarin menselijke relaties

worden gereduceerd tot financiële transacties. Het is een filmisch verhaal, waarin de ontmoetingen tussen een ‘confidence man’ en zijn slachtoffers beschreven worden. Het hoofdpersonage treedt op in verschillende identiteiten, manipuleert zijn slachtoffers, en smeert hen contracten aan.

- <sup>3</sup> *Masquerade*, “Scene 05: By the way, Madam, may I ask if you have confidence?”
- <sup>4</sup> “[...] de uniciteit van de publieke persona scheidt een monopolie dat kunstenaars als een merk kunnen uitbuiten [...]” *Masquerade*, “Scene 04: Showing that many men have many minds”. De dialoog parafraseert Isabelle Graw, *High Price. Art between the Market and Celebrity Culture*, Berlin: Sternberg Press, 2009, p. 25.
- <sup>5</sup> De namen en gezichten van de cast zijn vermeld in *In-Residence Magazine#02*, een ‘lifestyle-magazine’ dat Vermeir & Heiremans publiceerden naar aanleiding van *Masquerade*. Vermeir &

Heiremans, *In-Residence Magazine*, voorjaar 2015: *Art House Index*, 2015, p. 4.

- <sup>6</sup> “Openbare informatievertrekking scheidt vertrouwen, dus inderdaad, we moeten overwegen een prospectus te laten drukken. Buiten de gegevens van de ‘art rating agency’ die zichtbaarheid, institutionele aandacht en publicatieprofiel objectief kan meten, kunnen we een heel aantal parameters opstellen en publiek maken zodat mogelijke investeerders de index als volledig transparant ervaren.” Vermeir & Heiremans, *A conversation with Frank Goodman* (2014). Geraadpleegd via: [vimeo.com/109586203](https://vimeo.com/109586203), op 6 november 2015. Het citaat is de gescripte versie van het interview. Goodman imiteert een aantal professionals in financiën die Vermeir & Heiremans interviewden in hun voorbereiding voor *Masquerade*. Hij is een allegorische personificatie, maar doet denken aan Hilar, de *project investor* uit Vermeir & Heiremans’

vorige werk *The Residence (a wager for the afterlife)* uit 2012. Met verwijzingen naar speculatie en de cultuurindustrie, maakt Hilar de abstracties van *high finance* concreet in narratieve vormen: hij geeft de Chinese kunstenaar en architect Ma Wen de opdracht een huis te ontwerpen voor na zijn dood. Het hiernamaals, voorheen het alleenrecht van religie en spiritualiteit, wordt zo gekoloniseerd door investeerders. Ma Wen is echter geen fictief personage. Bij momenten lijkt *The Residence* om hem te draaien, als een documentaire. Uiteindelijk — afhankelijk van een algoritme gekoppeld aan de valutahandel — ontstaat er zo een complexe parafictionele nexus, waarin de kunstenaar en architect opvallend genoeg zowel zichzelf speelt, als een embleem voor de kunstwereld die gekoppeld aan internationale financiële netwerken.

- <sup>7</sup> Maurice S. Lee, ‘Skepticism and The Confidence-Man’, in: Robert S. Levine (red.), *The New Cambridge Companion to Herman Melville*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2013, p. 113.
- <sup>8</sup> Vermeir & Heiremans, in correspondentie, 3 januari 2015.

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## EINDNOTEN

- <sup>1</sup> A single screen version of *Masquerade* can be consulted online: [vimeo.com/133391587](https://vimeo.com/133391587) – password: M2015.
- <sup>2</sup> *Masquerade*, “Scene 01: In which a variety of characters appear”. This description is adapted from a review of Melville’s novel *The Confidence Man — His Masquerade (1857)* in *The Literary Gazette*, 11 April 1857: “A novel it is not, unless a novel means forty-five conversations held on board a steamer, conducted by passengers who might pass for the errata of creation”. Melville’s novel was a major inspiration for the film. The artists adopted part of its title and its 45 chapter structure with intertitles. *The Confidence Man* is a critique of a culture of ‘professional trust’, which regards human relations as purely financial transactions. It is a filmic story that narrates a series of exchanges between a so-called ‘confidence man’ and his victims. Appearing in multiple identities, the title character manipulates

the convictions and the confidence of his victims, and finally binds them with a financial contract.

- <sup>3</sup> *Masquerade*, “Scene 05: By the way, Madam, may I ask if you have confidence?”
- <sup>4</sup> *Masquerade*, “Scene 04: Showing that many men have many minds”. The dialogue paraphrases Isabelle Graw, *High Price. Art between the Market and Celebrity Culture*, Berlin: Sternberg Press, 2009, p. 25.
- <sup>5</sup> The names and faces of the art and finance industry individuals that were casted in the film can be found in *In-Residence Magazine#02*, a fake lifestyle magazine that Vermeir & Heiremans published on the occasion of the production of *Masquerade*. Vermeir & Heiremans, *In-Residence Magazine*, Spring 2015: *Art House Index* issue, 2015, p. 4.
- <sup>6</sup> Vermeir & Heiremans, *A conversation with Frank Goodman* (2014). Accessed through: [vimeo.com/109586203](https://vimeo.com/109586203), on 6 November 2015. The quote is the scripted version of the interview. Goodman is the impersonation of a number of finance professionals that Vermeir & Heiremans have interviewed in their preliminary survey for *Masquerade*. As an allegorical personification, he recalls Hilar, the project investor in their previous work *The Residence (a wager for the afterlife)* (2012). Revolving around speculation and what has been called the ‘cultural industries’, Hilar renders the abstract dimensions of present-day high finance in concrete narrative forms: he commissions the Chinese artist-architect Ma Wen to design a house for his afterlife. The hereafter, formerly the habitat of the religious and the spiritual, has been colonized by venture investment. Ma Wen, on the other hand, is not a fictional character. Rather, *The Residence* sometimes seems to center on him, sometimes appearing as a documentary film, and gradually — depending on

a live-editing algorithm linked to the currency trade — evolving into a complex parafictional nexus, in which the artist-architect curiously starts to function both as a portrait of himself and as an emblem of an art world that is intricately linked to global financial systems.

<sup>7</sup> Vermeir & Heiremans, in email correspondence with the editors, 3 January 2015.

<sup>8</sup> Maurice S. Lee, ‘Skepticism and The Confidence-Man’, in: Robert S. Levine (ed.), *The New Cambridge Companion to Herman Melville*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2013, p. 113.

"I'm doing God's work" assène Lloyd Blankfein, PDG de Goldman Sachs, au *London Sunday Times*, le 8 novembre 2009<sup>1</sup>. Cette déclaration inspire la troisième scène du film à venir de KATLEEN VERMEIR et RONNY HEIREMANS, *Masquerade*, reportage fictif sur un indice fictif évaluant les fluctuations de valeur d'une idée d'œuvre. Un emboîtement qui ne fait qu'incarner, dans la sphère de l'art contemporain, l'actuelle financiarisation du monde, à savoir sa complète fictionnalisation<sup>2</sup>.

Scène 3 donc : "I'm doing the work of God", psaume offert à un interprète pour une incantation solitaire murmurant les mots en autant d'agencements qu'il est possible. Sérialisme intégral pour une actualisation autistique des psalmodies fondatrices du capitalisme : le marché obéit aux lois divines, naturelles, humaines. Lois de fait immuables. Plus la réalité contredit ce dogme, plus celui-ci élève ses cantiques...

Autre liturgie : une cantatrice traduit en partition la chronique journalistique du krash de Wall Street du 6 mai 2010 tandis que les acteurs chorégraphient les codes gestuels de la Bourse de Chicago, puis s'immobilisent, comme pétrifiés ("A frozen moment of exchange"). Ils portent des combinaisons de couleur estampillées "AHI –"<sup>3</sup>.

#### Nombre d'or

AHI – ? "Art House Index", outil de mesure (un algorithme) créé en 2013 par Vermeir & Heiremans. À l'image d'indices boursiers tels le Dow Jones et le CAC 40, le AHI —sert à suivre l'évolution d'un secteur de l'économie... À le quantifier, mais aussi à le propulser, à le transformer en valeurs financières. L'index est un vecteur de financiarisation. C'est-à-dire qu'il génère la possibilité de créer des liquidités, de *métamorphoser un produit opaque et statique, difficile à vendre—comme un immeuble ou de l'art—, en une opportunité d'investissement transparent, virtuel et liquide, immédiatement accessible à une foule d'investisseurs. On n'investit pas directement dans un index, mais un marché peut se construire autour de lui (...)*<sup>4</sup>.

Mais qu'ont à "liquéfier" Katleen Vermeir et Ronny Heiremans ? Précisément, un immeuble et de l'art : leur loft, situé dans une arrière maison bruxelloise, désigné en 2006 comme une œuvre d'art, support d'investigation des congruences entre art, architecture, immobilier et économie<sup>5</sup>. Appelé A.I.R. (pour *Artist in Residence*), ce projet au long cours place en son cœur un objet (*The Art House*) qui ne peut être appréhendé ou activé que sous la forme d'"extensions" : installations, vidéos, performances, lectures, publications, interviews<sup>6</sup>... L'index en est la dernière formulation. Il génère lui-même de nouvelles expressions.

D'abord, ce clip promotionnel intitulé *A Frontier Investment Opportunity* (2013)<sup>7</sup> : le loft s'y offre comme foyer panoramique d'un défilé de paysages et de vues urbaines enchaînant les différents sites où le duo a exposé ou est appelé à exposer (Paris, Londres, Bruxelles, Montevideo, Shenzhen, Istanbul... : le "Grand Tour" et ses périphéries). Un texte déroulant énonce les vertus du AHI –. Dont ceci : "*Une alchimie unique de l'art et de l'immobilier, une fenêtre ouverte sur l'âme, mesurant le pouls de la culture, le rythme cardiaque de la civilisation*". Images et discours conduisent la mythologie complaisante d'une "creative class" hors sol à la conquête de tous les sols... Sûre de son standard de vie, assurée de la plus-value symbolique de l'art et de la culture.



# CONTE COURANT

## VERMEIR & HEIREMANS *MASQUERADE* 2015

PRODUCTION : LIMITED EDITIONS VZW  
PRODUCTEUR EXÉCUTIF : JUBILEE EDITIONS VZW  
INSTALLATION VIDÉO : TRIENNALE DE BRUGES  
WWW.TRIENNALEBRUGGE.BE  
DU 20.05 AU 18.10.15

#### D'une fiction l'autre

Ensuite, une première présentation publique du AHI –, sous la forme d'une pseudo conversation skype avec un financier fictif du nom de Frank Goodman, à la biennale d'Istanbul de 2013<sup>8</sup>. Cette discussion argumente, sur un ton très affable et "corporate", les avantages stratégiques du AHI –, du point de vue des artistes comme des investisseurs.

Chahutée par un groupe d'activistes hostiles à l'emprise de puissants holdings sur la biennale<sup>9</sup>, la performance forme la matrice du film à ce jour en construction, *Masquerade*. Celui-ci fragmente le discours endossé par Frank Goodman dans l'entretien (lui-même inspiré d'extraits d'analyses financières, sociologiques et économiques) en le faisant porter par plusieurs acteurs : une reporter (qui conduit une enquête sur la protestation à Istanbul), une avocate, un juge, un commissaire-priseur, plusieurs investisseurs...

L'intrigue et la tension dramatique se déplacent d'une galerie d'art à une salle de vente, une bourse des marchandises, un parquet de traders, un tribunal... Autant de scènes où s'éprouvent, se construisent et se ritualisent les croyances en des valeurs (financières, culturelles, politiques...). C'est la pierre d'achoppement du film : les rites, les récits, les gestes qui établissent foi et confiance<sup>10</sup>.

"La confiance, nous explique Frank Goodman, est de tout premier ordre dans l'économie de l'art. Comme la finance, l'art est un système de croyance et son marché existe là où cette croyance est à l'œuvre..."<sup>11</sup>. Si les valeurs faiblissent, cependant, le récit déchanté : dans l'installation projetée, les fluctuations du AHI – font basculer la projection de *Masquerade* de sa version achevée vers une version "cheap" et balbutiante. Il n'est pas certain que l'illusion de la construction échappe aux effondrements du monde réel...

Laurent Courtens

1 e.a. [www.thesundaytimes.co.uk](http://www.thesundaytimes.co.uk) ou [www.reuters.com](http://www.reuters.com)  
2 À titre indicatif, le montant des produits (financiers) dérivés représente aujourd'hui douze fois le PIB mondial, in Michel Pinçon et Monique Pinçon-Charlot, *La violence des riches. Chronique d'une immense classe sociale*, La Découverte / Poche, Paris, 2014, p.53.  
3 À la bourse de marchandises de Chicago (Chicago Mercantile Exchange – CME), les traders manipulent un code gestuel très précis. Leur secteur d'activités, leur grade et leur statut se signalent par ailleurs par la couleur de leur veste (orange, bleu foncé, bleu clair, noir, or...). En vente sur [www.tradingjackets.com](http://www.tradingjackets.com)...  
4 "MASQUERADE", dossier des artistes, 2015.  
5 La construction du AHI combine d'ailleurs des index quantifiant les activités de ces différents secteurs : l'immobilier, l'art, les monnaies.  
6 [www.in-residence.be](http://www.in-residence.be)  
7 [www.vimeo.com/77031534](http://www.vimeo.com/77031534)  
8 [vimeo.com/109586203](http://vimeo.com/109586203) et "ART HOUSE INDEX. Vermeir & Heiremans discuss their new financial product with Frank Goodman, cosmopolitan, alchemist and banker", *In-Residence Magazine*, Bruxelles, printemps 2015.  
9 En particulier le groupe Koç, premier conglomérat industriel de Turquie. Les militants "anti-biennale" pointaient du doigt les mêmes problématiques que celles de la performance contestée de Vermeir & Heiremans. Une contradiction entre expression politique et artistique qui mériterait d'être creusée. Voir Laurent Courtens, "11<sup>ème</sup> biennale d'Istanbul. Brecht au bal des nantis", in *Aborder les bordures : l'art contemporain et la question des frontières*, La Lettre volée / L'iselp, Bruxelles, 2014.  
10 C'est aussi le thème central du dernier livre d'Herman Melville, *The Confidence-Man : His Masquerade*, publié pour la première fois en 1857 (traduction française - Henri Thomas -, *Le Grand Escroc*, 1<sup>ère</sup> édition, Paris, Minuit, 1950). Il inspire le titre de la vidéo de Vermeir & Heiremans, autant que sa structure en 45 scènes. Frank Goodman est le nom d'un des personnages du livre de Melville.  
11 "ART HOUSE INDEX. Vermeir & Heiremans discuss their new financial product with Frank Goodman, cosmopolitan, alchemist and banker", op.cit., p.8. Inspiré de Noah Horowitz, *Art of the Deal. Contemporary art in a global financial market*, Princeton et Oxford, Princeton University Press, 2011.

**Abstract**

This conversation took place across two Skype conversations between Edgar Schmitz, Katleen Vermeir and Ronny Heiremans following the 2015 PARSE conference, linking the concerns of temporality, economics, confidence, fabulation and the time of exhibition found in the ideas and practices of the artists.

# Never Really in Real Time

## EDGAR SCHMITZ

Edgar Schmitz is an artist who produces escapist backdrops from film, sculpture, animation and writing. His work has been presented in national and international group exhibitions including “London Movies”, Bozar, Brussels (2005); “A.C.A.D.E.M.Y.”, Van Abbemuseum, Eindhoven (2006); Steirischer Herbst, Graz (2006); “No Soul for Sale”, Tate Modern, London (2010); British Art Show 7, Hayward Touring (2010/11). It has been the focus of solo exhibitions at the ICA, London (with Liam Gillick, 2006); FormContent, London (2010); Cooper Gallery, Dundee (2012) and Himalayas Art Museum, Shanghai (2015). Schmitz has also written extensively on contemporary art, with contributions to *Kunstforum International*, *Texte zur Kunst* and *Artforum* as well as *contemporary, tema celeste* and numerous catalogue essays. His book on *Hubs and Fictions* (with Sophia Hao) has just been published by Sternberg Press. Schmitz is a Senior Lecturer in Art at Goldsmiths, London.

## VERMEIR & HEIREMANS

Vermeir & Heiremans are an artistic duo living and working in Brussels. They have presented their work at the 10th Istanbul Biennial (2007); Arnolfini, Bristol (2009); Kassel Documentary Film Festival (2009); Nam June Paik Art Center, Gyeonggi-do (2010); Loop, Barcelona (2010); Videosex, Zurich (2011); Salt, Istanbul (2011); Viennale, Vienna (2011); Argos, Brussels (2012); Extra City, Antwerp (2012); 7th Shenzhen Sculpture Biennial (2012); Manifesta 9, Genk (2012); CA2M, Madrid (2013); 13th Istanbul Biennial (2013); Rotwand Gallery, Zurich (2014); Stroom Den Haag (2014); Triennale Brugge (2015), 4th Dojima River Biennale, Osaka (2015).

## Introduction 1: Vermeir & Heiremans

In 2006 Vermeir & Heiremans initiated a long-term project that focuses on the reciprocal relationship of art, architecture and economy. In this collaborative practice the artists nominated their home, a loft apartment in a post-industrial building in Brussels, as an artwork. The public does not have access to the artwork. Instead the artists use the home as source material for the production of “mediated extensions”, such as installations, videos, performances, interviews, publications and so on that transform the “house as artwork” into a virtual discursive site.<sup>1</sup>

In this project Vermeir & Heiremans started to investigate how to “financialise” a “house as artwork”, how to make it “liquid” without having to sell the house. The result was *ART HOUSE INDEX (AHI—)*, an experimental financial index that measures the economic and symbolic value of the “house as artwork”, including the cultural capital and other symbolic values that Vermeir & Heiremans, as “public persona”, accrue. The index is itself both an artwork as well as a functioning financial index.

*Art House Index* gathers real-time information from different parameters that compose the index, such as the art and real estate markets, but also information from the attention economy, e.g. visitors to the artists’ website. Auction prices are not calculated in this index, since the work of Vermeir & Heiremans is not present in the auction market. The different data assembled are “weighed” against one another for their greatest relevance in measuring the “value” of the “house as artwork”. An algorithm continuously recalculates this information, resulting in an abstract number going up or down. At this moment it is not possible to invest in the index itself, but the artists are currently researching the conditions under which financial products could be developed to trade on the index.

In the film *Masquerade*, a “factual-fiction reportage”, a TV reporter tells the story of the protested “initial public offering” (IPO) of *AHI—*.<sup>2</sup> *Art House Index* was publicly presented for the first time in the form of a lecture-performance in a corporate conference room inside the Marmara Hotel on Taksim Square during the public programme of the 13<sup>th</sup> Istanbul Biennial. The form of an IPO was chosen in reference to ceremonies being organised for launching a company on the stock market. The performance was interrupted by activists protesting against the corporate sponsorship of the biennial and its (in)direct role in gentrification issues in the city. The corporate role-playing by Vermeir & Heiremans launching a financial index added to the confusion. In the end Vermeir & Heiremans decided to integrate the protests in their film *Masquerade*, reflecting also their own not-neutral position as artists.

*Masquerade* is a film that addresses a specific intersection of the contemporary art and finance markets, through the filter of Melville’s novel *The Confidence Man: His Masquerade* (1857) as the structure for its episodic narration. The film takes its name from the subtitle of Melville’s novel. In the film *Masquerade* Vermeir & Heiremans present the financial market as the *mise en scène* and a leading character of the narrative. The artists also created an “installation version” of their film, in which the financial market influences the real-time “cutting” of the film. The actual performance of *AHI—*, showing the index going up or down triggers in “real time” a switch between two timelines, one of which shows the “finished” film while the other captures variations, rehearsals and outtakes. The artists have no control over the “editing” of *Masquerade*, the markets creating a unique moment in time as it is statistically highly improbable one will ever get to see the same combinations twice. Vermeir & Heiremans staged *Masquerade* as their contribution to the 2015 PARSE conference on Time.

## Introduction 2: Edgar Schmitz

Schmitz' work mobilises gallery settings towards film by orchestrating the way they oscillate between material, atmospheric and narrative promises. Across a diverse body of work, including sculpture, sound, animation and writing, his sub-filmic clusters act as portals into and escape hatches from the exhibition as event. Since 2012, Schmitz has been working across two interconnected bodies of work: *Surplus Cameo Decor*, a solo exhibition realised between Dundee in 2012 and Shanghai in 2015, and *alovestorysomewherearound2046*, a film treatment as work-in-progress towards a movie always yet to be made.

For *Surplus Cameo Decor*, Schmitz expanded on recent works that had elaborated on tactics of cultural camouflage and withdrawal from the exhibition as event, and installed a series of ambient backdrops in the Cooper Gallery that turned the space into a semi-fictional hub for cinematic plots and invited cameo appearances, complete with cinematic trailer flickering in the foyer and three large-scale neon signs announcing the different episodes of this "exhibition as movie".

Episode 1, *palasthotel*, was named after an East Berlin hotel in the German Democratic Republic of foreign travel under Stasi surveillance, and featured one of the building's iconic bronze-tinted honeycomb windows. Episode 2, *horizontes soroa*, was set in the swimming pool of a remote Cuban resort, under

refurbishment in the early 2000s. Episode 3, *sindanao*, took its title from the fictional South China Sea island in a 1986 Ulli Lommel horror movie, and is set in 2017, just before the opening of the M+ super-museum in Hong Kong's West Kowloon Cultural District. The various episodes were inhabited by art and film world protagonists who made cameo appearances as themselves in the gallery-as-set. All of these cameo appearances were documented in photo shoots in the gallery setting.

*alovestorysomewherearound2046* is an ongoing collaboration between Edgar Schmitz and Pieter Vermoortel that pre- and post-produces their exhibitions into a generic love story set in the near future. The treatment is elaborated in collaboration with film industry professionals providing their expertise, as well as artists contributing motifs and devices to be scripted into the material. As a format inhabiting multiple overlapping temporalities between pre- and post-production, Schmitz and Vermoortel staged *alovestorysomewherearound2046* as their contribution to the 2015 PARSE conference on Time.

1. See [www.in-residence.be](http://www.in-residence.be) (Accessed 2016-07-14.)

2. See <https://vimeo.com/133391587>. Password M2015 (Accessed 2016-07-14.)

## Conversation

After meeting at the Parse conference on Time in Göteborg in 2015, Edgar Schmitz and Vermeir & Heiremans continued their conversation on “time”, the cinematic and their mode of production in their current work and practice.

## Film and (Real) Time

ES: When it comes to questions of film and time as they concern us here, one of the keys seems to be the invocation of “real time”, and how our works oscillate between translation, illustration and commentary. We are both interested in the potential of what we might refer to as “film”: as format, as technique of deferral, as mode of transferal, and as commentary on real-world structures that are scripted into film. One of the starting points through which we may be able to talk about our respective works and how film technique supports them, then, is time: the spectre of real time, the time of mediation, and the possibilities film opens up to engage with anticipation and deferral as well as more immediate proximities to real time, in supposedly real-world constellations. If indeed there ever is such a thing as real time, or indeed real-world infrastructures. *Masquerade* seems to be evoking and provoking something like a real world of measurable effects, not least in the way in which the work is underpinned by the real-time ticking of the *Art House Index*, and its conditioning of the edit.

RH: In the film *Masquerade* we were looking for ways to use the film medium as a direct expression of confidence, the film’s central theme. We tried to make a film not about confidence, but rather have our film incorporate confidence. That’s how we came to the idea to use green key during the shoot. Hence also the title *Masquerade*, since the ultimate form of masquerade in film, you could say, is filming in green key and composing images in post-production. Having made that decision, we could go into the

idea of how to present this material in such a way that the audience watching the film would ask: can we trust this image? Or is it something the filmmakers have constructed for us, as a kind of make-believe?

So when presenting the live version of *Masquerade*, the audience sees the film as part of the real-time performance of *Art House Index*. You could say that the real-time editing is performed by the market, not by us. When markets are up, a fully post-produced film in terms of sound and image is projected. All green backdrops are filled out perfectly, while the actors are doing their lines in an eloquent way. When the index goes down, the backdrops consist of unfinished green-key shots, while the actors are rehearsing or keep forgetting their lines. A film normally stitches you into its narrative, into its illusion, but here, every time the index goes down, the viewer is not only confronted with the production conditions of the film, but also with the present moment of screening of the film and the surroundings in which this is happening.

KV: You could even say that the real-time attention of the public watching the film influences the behaviour of the index, and consequently the film they are watching. The screening becomes an interactive performance, mediated through this financial instrument. Every ten seconds the index re-calculates the values constituted by its parameters. In that way it provokes a disruption in the dominant experience of cinema, in which the viewer cannot step out of the A-to-Z film-time, fixed in the narrative and duration of the film reel. I remember the Situationists used to escape this dominant narrative experience by going in and out of several cinema theatres, in this way “editing” in memory a new film from the fragments they had seen in the different screenings.

RH: In your work, would you say that you also include the viewer in a real-time situation, since you present “film” in a material form?



Vermeir & Heiremans, "Masquerade " (set photos), 2015. Photographs by Michael De Lausnay.

ES: The exhibitions and the script that I have been working on recently are set up in such a way that they never really become film. They never take on the materiality of film. One of the differences worth talking about is what we mean by film, and what I have also described as the cinematic. Because it seems to me that one of the concerns around the immersive plausibility of film is that there is such a thing as an immersive space that you are then disrupting, through the edits, and the green key, and the alienation effects, which you deploy in a truly Brechtian sense, if I understand your work correctly—they all work against the backdrop of a really tight sense of illusion and immersion. And I find it interesting that this is premised not, in *Masquerade*, for instance, so much on the notion of the feature film as it is premised on a hard-nosed model of investigative journalism and the documentary format, which is very specific in terms of the attention it demands of an audience. What is interesting in the discrepancy between what you are working on and what I am working on, is that I borrow and appropriate and stage material that is so compromised by being somewhat outdated and half-remembered and fragmented, that it never really demands that level of immersive attention in the first place. There is a marked difference in texture between a feature film as a heavily dispersed, distributed and fragmented format, and forms of what we might call investigative journalism, which make a more direct claim on truth and knowledge production and formation.

KV: I would not call it investigative journalism. We often wrong-foot the viewer since our film mixes fact and fiction.

ES: We end up in a similarly deliberately unhinged space, in terms of viewer interaction and attention. But we are coming at it from exactly opposite directions. You are dismantling and disrupting something that would normally demand full attention, and would require a certain amount of faith in the plausibility of the narrative. The way in

which I stage a lot of my materials works the other way round; by saturating the exhibition space with an atmospheric fabric or texture that is sutured together from this rather deflated shrapnel of filmic narratives. I wonder whether the result of such a semi-confused, somewhat wrong-footed encounter with the work, is not in the end very similar.

RH: How would you describe the part of the visitor, are they a character in what you stage?

ES: I do not want to have a straight answer to this, because I do not want to think about the exhibition as necessarily a viewer invitation. I think about these situations much more as productions, more a studio situation than an exhibition situation. The gallery becomes the set for the production of a series of narratives that may or may not afford viewers the opportunity to participate. What happens though, whether I like it or not (and of course I do, to some extent, by now, like it) is that people then see themselves invited to invent roles for themselves.

RH: They are stitched in by the environment they enter, or should I say intrude?

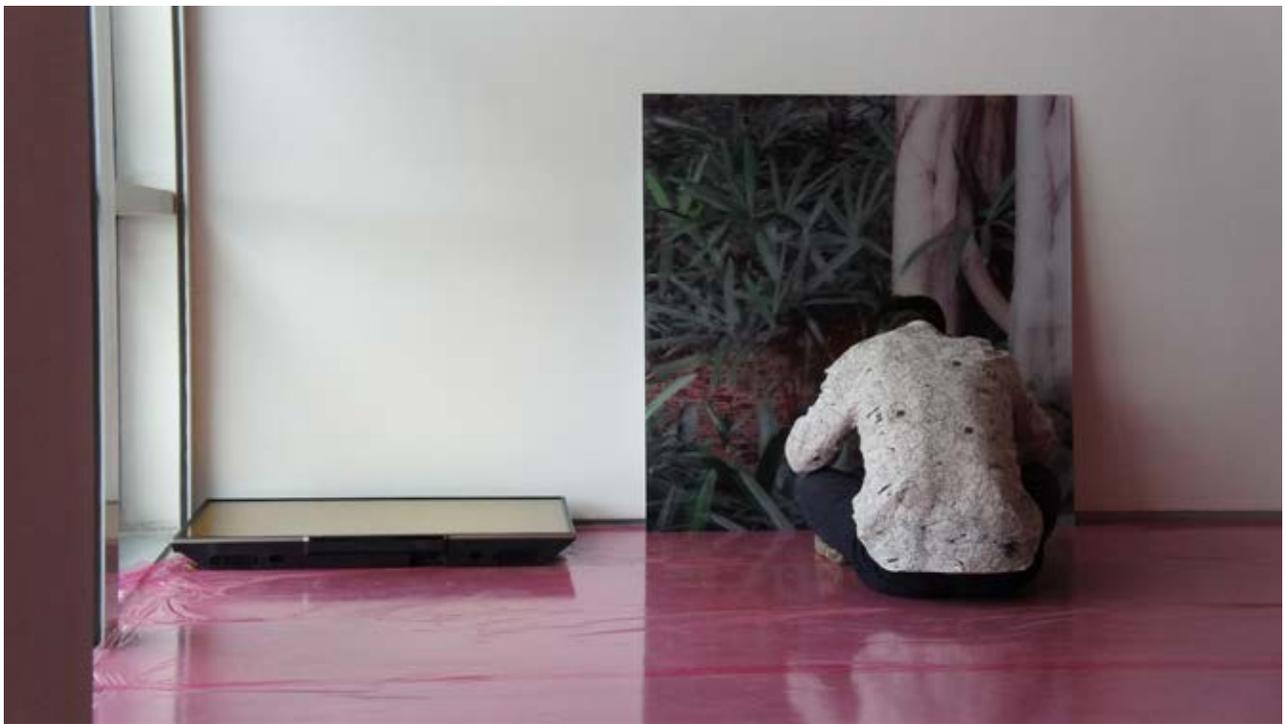
KV: Who are the cameos?

ES: What was really precise about the set of cameo invitations both in Dundee originally, and then in Shanghai, was that we sent invitations to these people asking them to appear as themselves in the gallery-as-set and have a picture taken. Not filmed, but by means of one photograph, which becomes the official way of rendering the exhibition. Of course that kind of invitation is slightly different for someone who lives nearby. It has a different currency if you invite someone like Wang Naming, whom we had to fly into Dundee from Shanghai. The terms were identical for all the invitations, but what they then made of these differed from character to character. We had Lisa Le Feuvre, who was a co-funder of the exhibition, and director of the Henry Moore Institute, and also a close friend, and

who was invited to talk at the roundtable conversations. When she came to Dundee, to the gallery, she decided to do what she always does; to look at the art, but to do it a bit more slowly, for the purpose of the photographs. So she turned herself into a slow-motion version of herself.

RH: Are the photos presented in the show, as part of the scenery you develop?

ES: They do not become part of the exhibition, but are part of its afterlife, a record, sometimes I use them in a publication. The exhibition is seen as a set, saturated with narrative fragments, and a displaced



Top and bottom right: Edgar Schmitz, "Surplus Cameo Decor: sindanao 2", 2015, installation views with Zhao Dayong. Courtesy British Council collection, Shanghai.



Left: Edgar Schmitz, "Surplus Cameo Decor: sindanao 2", 2015, production still. Courtesy British Council collection, Shanghai, photograph Mai Mai/ Himalayas.

association with filmic locations in time. It was important not to import the images back into the show.

KV: The quotes of fragments you used come from Hollywood and art house film. But the conversation in *alovestorysomewherearound2046*, how does that fit in?

ES: The *lovestory* was originally a way of not responding to a request to contribute to an exhibition. We were invited to participate in *No Soul for Sale* at Tate Modern in 2010, and we ended up thinking a lot about how we could counter that invitation, or how we could inhabit it, in a way in which we were not simply producing or displaying our goods for the benefit of Tate's visibility. So rather than present something for and in the Tate, we decided to recycle Tate for our own production, and to invert the economy slightly. Instead of showing work, we organised a series of guided tours through the collection of Tate Modern by way of which we collected material towards a script. Like location scouting the museum. And the suggestion of a love story somewhere around 2046 seemed as generic, future-bound and as useful as possible. A script, set in the future, in the shape of a generic love story. We would go around and we found a really nice strip of blue in a Mondrian which then became the colour of the wallpaper in the hotel bedroom where the lovers first meet. So appropriating some aspects of Tate and their collection and architecture, as material for the script. This also opened a space between pre- and post-production that has since become a really important space within which to work.

We first invited casting director Dan Hubbard, who had worked on the *Bourne* movies and who has also worked with amateur actors and Greenspan on *United 93*: we sent him a series of installation shots, some of the cameo shots, the press release statements made for the exhibition, and asked him how he would go about casting this. When he accepted the invitation, he came in for a panel

conversation at LUX, the centre for artists' moving image in London. We introduced the motifs of the show and he talked us through his knowledge of casting and what he might want to do. It became a conversation about the exhibition, but also one in which we were trading vocabularies around casting, naturalism, illusion, each of us under slightly different terms. We then had an agency director, Tony Noble who had been DoP for Duncan Jones' *Moon*, talking about making sets and props, quite technically really. And then we had Andy Nicholson, who was head of production for Cuarón's *Gravity*. We talked at length about what the vantage point of the artist or the curator or the choreographer in view of the overall production, which would be an exhibition, might be. But he was also talking much more pragmatically about Tim Burton sitting on a chair with a pre-visualisation version of the movie on a screen, and an actress in front of him, in front of a green screen, but in costume and holding a real prop. And it seemed really interesting to see to which extent we could appropriate those terminologies and those technical constructions.

RH: You speaking about the cameos reminds me of the fact that half of the people in our film are enacting their roles in daily life.

ES: Maybe I can turn that into a question concerning your use of the cameos. It seems to be a question about how many registers of legibility we are introducing.

RH: The characters were "playing" themselves, as is the case for your cameos: people are aware of their identity, but are estranged from themselves by the setting in which we have put them. In this artificial environment they re-enact themselves, they "play" the curator, or the banker. Melville talks about this. A person can and has to fulfil many different roles at the same time. A person can be an auctioneer, a father, a shopkeeper. You play all these roles at the same time, you can go out and wear a different mask every day.

KV: Which brings us to our own position, our own implication in the work. In *Masquerade* we are “playing” ourselves, promoting the artist brand.

RH: This is also what we were doing during a performance at the 13th Istanbul Biennial, which was one of the first stages in developing *Masquerade*. The performance was interrupted by artist-activists who protested against the biennial itself as a gentrifying agent in the city. For them our participation in the biennial made us part of the problem, something that was emphasised by the corporate perspective of the performance. For the audience it must have been pretty confusing, watching our performance and the activists’ agit-prop theatre at the same time. Was the whole thing perhaps staged by us? Reflecting on what happened while rewriting the performance as a film script, we decided we had to integrate the protests and ourselves as artists explicitly in our film. The protests showed us clearly that there is no such position as that of a neutral observer of events.

ES: There is an oscillation between the person, their professional and personal identities and how they are then cast, the persona they become and then identify or dis-identify with. Within the real time of production, how does it play out when Andrea Phillips hosted you and the film, in which she is the main character, in Gothenburg at PARSE? Is that another real time with a similar persona? In the economical field around the film, there cannot be a clear cut between real-life situations, persona, and their filmic render. How important is it for you that those relationships also change through the way in which they are being staged? To which extent is the film also a way of starting a conversation with a banking expert? Even though you are not interviewing them, you are creating a sense of proximity if not intimacy.

RH: We organised a workshop in which one of the guest speakers was a real asset manager, specialised in art as an alternative investment. Simple as our index is, he was still fascinated by it, and convinced

it could work. So yes, you could say that this project triggered an exchange between people who would not usually meet.

ES: Where does that leave you with regards to the alienation effect you deploy to de-naturalise the viewing conditions, the truth claim etc.?

KV: We recently attended a conference on art and finance, where they openly spoke about the need for more transparency in the primary (galleries) and secondary (auctions) art markets. This would be beneficial for the businesses that work on financialising art. These would very much like to have more transparency, especially in the primary art market, because it would generate more data and would open up a huge new market for them. Until now only so-called blue chip art works could be financialised. More transparency and regulations could cause disruption in the art market, but it would help the businesses working on its financialisation to grow. We have noticed however that financialisation exclusively benefits the investor. No thought is given to the producer/artist. We wonder if it would be possible to develop financial derivatives that would also benefit the producer and be the basis for a more sustainable art practice. *Art House Index* is a first attempt to elaborate on this thought.

ES: Inhabiting or amending these infrastructures of finance from within is an interesting attempt to project future change, or at least the possibility of change, and invent or carve out a space in real time within which to work with these infrastructures. This seems very different from more conventionally analytical research-based practice. It is bound up in the conceit of reproduction, into which it feeds. That temporality of a space of distribution and of production seems to be making a claim on real time while being entangled with future prospects. You spoke earlier about the reality of the market and making a claim in that reality with *AHI*, getting out of the mode of talking about something and tying it up with those realities instead.

KV: Outside representation...

RH: The film is of course still representation. The index might evolve in a different direction, becoming a financial tool with real-world consequences, but that's still very much a question, and maybe a bit overambitious. On the other hand, and this is something very concrete, we also interact closely with other artists and together we have set up a platform for research and production called Jubilee. What we research in our artistic work is also fed into this platform. So there are two "realities": one is our artwork, which includes imagination, fiction and fact, the other is about our real production conditions, on which we focus in Jubilee. It includes writing contracts, dossiers, setting up a logistical structure, but also creating more leverage, influencing cultural policies, trying to weigh on institutions that define the conditions in which we have to work.

ES: There are two different realms, which are of course not separate. Reclaiming the infrastructure also means reclaiming narratives of legitimation and validation. This overlaps somewhat with earlier excursions into institutional realities by artists. These are now often referred to as institutional critique, but of course they have very little to do with the revelatory piety suggested by this narrative. Art is not economically static or indeed reliable, and foregrounding its production as well as distribution is one way of insisting on this dynamic. Not only its economic performance as investment vehicle is precarious, unclear and therefore subject to so much speculative investment attention. It is also unclear how that distribution can be rearranged. And that's why it can be done, even if the outcomes remain unclear. In spite of the various object fixations of the art market, an expanded economy of art is inevitably an economy of production and distribution. But there is a risk of obliterating a clear conversation around conditions of production insofar as these are time-based. We need to construct situations of production that are at least plausible, even if not sus-

tainable. With the cameos there are these overlaps, and I was interested in how that then outperformed itself: I invite someone in from Shanghai as an exoticised stand-in for some idea of remoteness, and he invites me back into his institution in Shanghai. So where do these realities belong? In the realm of symbolic narrative fiction or in the institutional, economical realm? The show in Shanghai was then called "the revenge of the cameo", in which I was at his mercy of interpreters and photographers taking pictures...

This is not a question of precedence between symbolic, financial and institutional registers (which conditions precede the others, and that are thus constituted as resultant) but rather a question of how can one temporarily subsume the other. This is an escapist attitude, one of subterfuge, rather than one of analytical engagement.

RH: When you use the cameo, do you include a gallerist? Or only people related to the production of film?

ES: The exhibition was not directly configured in view of an art market reality as such. It would have been counter-intuitive to use this as a device for soliciting further economies that are not already at play and implicated in the germination and the production of the project. The range that seemed immediately available to the project at the time spanned funding bodies to curators and commentators, through to film directors who might have made a film that then produced the narrative conceit for the exhibition. This was not a deliberate attempt to exclude or circumvent the art market, but simply a realistic stock take that aligned producers from the film context as well as those of an art economy in the broader sense.

KV: We can talk a bit about the economies of invitation. The power structures inherent in invitations. For example, when you had to re-enact yourself as cameo, as a "revenge" in Shanghai.

ES: Of course there is an economy to the invitation, there is a coercive, transactional dimension to any invitation, like a gift: how you issue it, what happens when you accept it, what that entails. I do believe that performing this, playing with it, or playing within it, resonates with possibilities of production, and possibly also intervention. Of course there is also a flirtatious dimension to all of this. Invitations trade on mutual seduction. You can invite people in because they are interested in the art world resonance of what you do. For the cameos, for the Hollywood people—what kind of fascinations can you trade on? You suddenly have access to expertise and knowledge that normally, industrially or infra-structurally, you would not have access to, because you can offer up the fascination for a left-field art project that might resonate with their attempts to look sideways from their industrial frameworks. I would not go so far as to say that this is emancipatory or disruptive, but it is a space of transaction that allows you to occupy a position you would not normally, economically, be able to occupy legitimately. You can trade the art thing not so much as symbolic capital rather as affective capital, and atmospheric promise. The kind of appeal cinema might have had once. The behind-the-scene fetish plays into this as well of course, the oscillation between production and distribution, even though, and especially since they are largely indistinguishable in most practices now.

KV: The whole idea of the economics of invitation reminds me a lot of Melville's book. It is a critique of "professional" trust, in which all relationships are regarded as financial transactions. The so-called Confidence Man tests his victim's confidence and binds them with a financial contract. Invitations operate similarly of course.

# Masquerade



*Vermeir & Heiremans, Masquerade (2015). All photography: Michael De Lausnay.*

## **VERMEIR & HEIREMANS**

Vermeir & Heiremans is an artist duo living and working in Brussels. They have presented their work at 10th Istanbul Biennial (2007); Arnolfini, Bristol (2009); *Kassel Documentary Film Festival* (2009); Nam June Paik Art Center, Gyeonggi-do (2010); Loop, Barcelona (2010); Videoex, Zurich (2011); Salt, Istanbul (2011); *Viennale*, Vienna (2011); Argos, Brussels (2012); Extra City, Antwerp

(2012); 7th *Sbenzhen Sculpture Biennial* (2012); *Manifesta 9*, Genk (2012); CA2M, Madrid (2013); 13th *Istanbul Biennial* (2013); Rotwand Gallery, Zurich (2014); Stroom Den Haag (2014), *Triennale Brugge* (2015), 4th *Dejima River Biennale*, Osaka (2015).

1. URL: <http://ahi.in-residence.be/chart.php> (Accessed 2015-04-30).

2. Frank Goodman is an impersonation of a number of professional bankers that we spoke with during our research. The name refers to the eponymous character of Melville's last novel *The Confidence Man: His Masquerade* (1857). The subtitle of the novel inspired the name of our video.

3. Andrea Phillips in "Publics as Cultural Capital", a lecture delivered at the Graduate School of Design, Harvard University, 2013-10-01.

4. Inspired by Sandra Sherman. *Finance and fictionality in the early eighteenth century: Accounting for Defoe*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press. 1996. p. 5

5. Nick Summers. Short Jackson Pollock! Go long on Damien Hirst! In *Bloomberg Businessweek*. 2012-08-14. URL: <http://www.liquidityexchange.com/component/content/article/85-bloomberg-businessweek>. (Accessed 2015-03-16).

6. Robert Hughes. On Art and Money. In *The New York Review of Books*. 1984-12-06. pp. 23-24

7. Christian Viveros-Fauné. Business Art, Reconsidered. 2013-12-17. URL: <http://www.abladeofgrass.org/ablog/2013/dec/10/business-art-reconsidered/>. (Accessed 2015-03-16).

8. Noah Horowitz. *Art of the Deal: Contemporary Art in a Global Financial Market*. Princeton and Oxford: Princeton University Press. 2011. p. 208

 **OUR PRACTICE** as the artist duo Vermeir & Heiremans focuses on the dynamics between art, architecture and economy. In this practice we define our own home, a loft apartment in a post-industrial building in Brussels, as an artwork. Whilst keeping the home private, we create "mediated extensions" of the artwork that generate a kind of public hyper-visibility for our domestic space through translating it into installations, videos, performances, publications...

*Art House Index* (AHI-) is a new "extension" that proposes the transformation of "the home as an artwork" into a financial instrument. A financial index, like the Dow Jones or the S&P500, is a measuring tool that quantifies a well-defined part of the economy. The potential value of the new index would be in its ability to render an opaque static product that is difficult to trade, like a house or art, into a transparent, virtual and liquid investment opportunity that is highly accessible for many investors. One does not invest directly in an index, but a market can be created around it: financial bets as it were on how the index will evolve in the future.

We visualized the underlying value of AHI- in a publicity video with the art house unfolding as many virtual houses, each with a global skyline view of cities where we have showed our work. The video promotes art house as a global investment opportunity, and offers a projection of the desires associated with this living format and its ever-changing amenities. We developed a real-time algorithm that non-stop calculates the value of AHI-.<sup>1</sup> Designed as a page on our website the algorithm references tools for measurement of confidence and belief.

The Initial Public Offering (IPO) of AHI- was inaugurated with a lecture-performance: a putative Skype conversation with Frank Goodman,<sup>2</sup> held in a corporate-style conference room at the Marmara Taksim Hotel during *Public Alchemy*, the public programme of the 13th Istanbul Biennial. At the time our performance was interrupted by activists protesting the biennial over its sponsorship by Koç Holding, bringing up issues very much tied to the same anxieties over ruthless city development that sparked the Gezi Park movement. The script of our performance and the agit prop protest of that evening inspired us for the production of a new video, titled *Masquerade*.

The ephemeral worlds of "high finance" and the "global art markets" offer a unique context for the narrative of *Masquerade*. It is set in an environment that gradually evolves from a gallery white cube to an auction house, commodity exchange, trading pit, even a courtroom... all places where values are negotiated and exchanged.

*Masquerade* presents itself as a TV-reportage in which a reporter is telling the story of AHI-'s protested IPO. While she is addressing the camera, what appears to be a reconstruction of the event is taking place in the background. And then it all starts going wrong again! Is the audience witnessing a turmoil in an auction house, a crash in the market or is it a hearing in a courtroom, one that tries to unveil the intricate dynamics of a confidence game? The whole situation gradually transforms into an abstracted visual landscape of differing opinions and values.

*Masquerade* is presented as a video installation. The actual performance of AHI- triggers a switch between two video timelines, one of which shows the “finished” version of *Masquerade* while the other demystifies the finished version in the way that this timeline captures the video’s production process, rehearsals and failures, in the act commenting on the concealing operative ideology of the filmmaker as a double agent, the complicity of the audience, and the conditions of artistic production reflecting a wider economy, in which belief and confidence are crucial for its functioning. After all, art, like finance, is a system of belief and their markets are where this belief is put to work.

## Credits

*Masquerade* is a video installation by Vermeir & Heiremans in collaboration with Andrea Phillips, Werner Van Steen, Justin Bennett, Amir Borenstein, Michael Schmid, Salome Schmuki, and with Mon Bernaerts, Philip Brackx, Hans Bryssinck, Ludo Engels, Ciel Grommen, Elien Hanselaer, Nav Haq, Mieja Hollevoet, Liliane Keersmaeker, Heike Langsdorf, Dieter Leyssen, Karlijn Sileghem, Peter Sileghem, Fatos Ustek, Sun-Mee Vanpanteghem, Mi You and many others. Photography: Michael De Lausnay.

## Production

LIMITED EDITIONS vzw

Executive production: JUBILEE vzw (Katrien Reist, Reintje Daens, Marjolein Van der Boon, Kia Von Schoubie)

Co-production: Bernaerts Auctioneers (Antwerp), 4th Dojima River Biennale (Osaka), Goldsmiths, University of London, 13th Istanbul Biennial, Stroom Den Haag, Triennale Brugge 2015, V2\_Institute for the Unstable Media (Rotterdam). Supported by Flemish Audiovisual Fund (VAF) and the Flemish Community.

## Masquerade: A photo reportage

Below a number of Michael De Lausnay's set photographs of Masquerade, accompanied by fragments of our script.



*Reporter: What is Art House Index? It concerned the proposition – with distributed prospectus – in which the artists modelled a derivative for potential investment, an “art house” based on their own penthouse apartment in Brussels but able to be virtually rendered in any shape and form at creative global reach in the manner befitting an index.<sup>3</sup>*



*Investor 3: The information that we are talking about would actually correspond to certain expectations that other investors will have in the real world. With their futures and options these investors create narratives about the future performance of Art House Index. Until the moment of payoff, these narratives are potentially fiction while the investors have to suspend their disbelief and wait. If they become reality, then fiction becomes fact, and profits or losses are made depending on the positions taken. Now this match will give a boost of confidence to the index.*  
*Lawyer: Are you telling us that fiction creates finance?<sup>4</sup>*



*Reporter: The more liquidity you bring to a market, the more confidence you bring to it, and the more money flows in.<sup>5</sup> This creation of confidence, I sometimes think, is the cultural artefact of the last half of the twentieth century, far more striking than any given painting or sculpture.<sup>6</sup>*



*Reporter: The net effect of this phenomenon is nothing less than a revolution in artistic values...*

*Lawyer: ...an assault that finally jettisons traditional humanistic and postmodern aesthetics to nakedly embrace the idea of art as an asset (now without the aid of passé irony); that univocally accepts the market as the ultimate arbiter of worth (both economic and symbolic); and that, finally, banks on the auction houses as a stock exchange to be readily manipulated by powerfully opaque interests, with virtually no oversight.<sup>7</sup>*



*Reporter: After months of contentious behind-the-scenes battles, the public may finally get its chance to own a piece. The artists are moving ahead with the IPO after battling a group of dissident investors and rejecting a set of unsolicited offers for the Art House.*

*Investor 1: This kind of practice would be controversial for many artists, as well as for much of the art world. But you can see it as democratic. It is an equalizing practice that opens up the benefits of participation in an elite art market to a wider number of people than ever before.*



*Investor 2: The crowds? Well they don't realize that, in the end, it is us who need them. The very freedom of its users continually generates the data allowing Art House Index to progressively fine-tune itself. Trust is of the highest order in the art economy. Like finance, art is a system of belief and its market is where this belief is put to work... What remains crucial is that the debate on value never reaches a conclusion. And these negotiations are based on confidence...<sup>8</sup>*

# Vermeir & Heiremans Masquerade [Osaka]

TOM TREVOR

Artist duo, Katleen Vermeir and Ronny Heiremans, focus on the dynamics between art, architecture and economy, applying a reflexive logic to their own relationship to these wider systems of belief and valuation that result in deeply ironic critiques of contemporary living. In their collaborative practice they have a single artwork, their own home, a loft apartment that they constructed within a post-industrial building in Brussels. Whilst keeping this private, they use the idea of their own personal domain as an artwork from which they create mediated extensions<sup>[1]</sup>, translating their domestic space into installations, videos, performances and publications, that generate a public interface with their private residence. *ART HOUSE INDEX* (AHI) is a new extension that proposes the transformation of the home as an artwork into a financial instrument. The function of this index is to measure the fluctuating market value of their home-as-artwork, thus rendering a normally un-trade-able private space into a transparent, virtual and liquid investment that is theoretically accessible for financial speculators. The accompanying video *A Frontier Investment Opportunity* acts as a kind of quasi-promotional sales pitch, panning across the interior of the artist's home, but with views through the windows to all of the different cities around the world where public extensions have been exhibited. In their new video installation co-commissioned by the Dojima River Biennale, *MASQUERADE*, a TV-reporter is seen commenting on the AHI's Initial Public Offering, as the abstract concept of their home-as-artwork is floated on the market. The film is set in a fragmented environment that gradually evolves from a gallery white cube to an auction house, a commodity exchange, a trading pit, even a courtroom all places where values are negotiated and exchanged. But then it starts to go wrong! Questions arise: are we witnessing an insider-trading scandal in an auction house, a crash in the market or is this a hearing in a courtroom that tries to unveil the intricate dynamics of a confidence game? Alongside the main projection of this fragmented narrative, a real-time algorithm is presented on a smaller screen, monitoring the fluctuating value of AHI- live, measuring the confidence and belief of the market in the artist's home-as-artwork. It becomes apparent that the actual performance of the AHI-, as it rises and falls in value, determines which images of *MASQUERADE* will be projected on the main screen, triggering a switch between two video timelines, one of which shows the finished film while the other captures variations, rehearsals and failures. Alongside, Vermeir & Heiremans also presented a new edition of their faux lifestyle magazine, *In-Residence Magazine # 02*, a glossy coffee table periodical offering background information on the concept of value in the worlds of finance and contemporary art. Art, like finance, is a system of belief and their different markets are where this belief is put to work. The ephemeral worlds of high finance and the global art markets thus offer a unique context for the narrative of *MASQUERADE*. Likewise, the Dojima River Forum provided a unique location for such a conceptual proposition, situated as it is virtually on the site of the original Dojima Rice Exchange, established in 1697, which is often cited as the first ever futures market and, as such, the forerunner of the modern banking system today.<sup>[2]</sup>

<sup>[1]</sup> See Vermeir & Heireman's Artist-In-Residence web-site: <http://www.in-residence.be>

<sup>[2]</sup> The Origin of Futures, Tom Trevor in conversation with Professor Ulrike Schaede, *In-Residence Magazine # 02*, 2015

## **ART AND CAPITAL: INSTITUTIONAL CRITIQUE RELOADED**

Fulya Erdemci

Along with neoliberal funding policies, art institutions have become more dependent on private funding and commercial support globally, and have thus increasingly been criticised, protested, and boycotted for serving to whitewash the 'dirty' money, and for being epicentres for the distribution of neoliberal culture and mechanisms. For instance, a group of activists protested the 13<sup>th</sup> Istanbul Biennial because of its funding sources, starting from the first press conference in January 2013. The 19<sup>th</sup> Sydney Biennial was boycotted by the participating artists just before its opening for the same reason, and the biennial responded to the protests with the resignation of the president. The Manifesta Biennial realised in St. Petersburg in June 2014, on the other hand, has been criticised and boycotted because of legal pressure on gay rights in Russia. Biennials have become more politicised international platforms and the target of protests that wish to bring crucial issues to the attention of larger publics. And through art projects that critically examine art system(s) they have also become prime sites for institutional critique.

Although activism and art may share the same aims of social change in times of urgency—a process that Turkey has been going through—and they can learn from each other, in effect they are subject to different processes, and they create different modes of perception and experience. Therefore, they cannot be evaluated with the same criteria or the same forms of impact. Today many artists experiment with art and activism to question the boundaries between these two forms of resistance, aiming to activate social responses for diverse political issues by utilising the extensive possibilities of art and the art world. We can see certain shades and grades of such attempts in the exhibition.

Art's relation with power is a historical one. This relation takes form amidst the systems/economies/societies that it responds to, and thus, the production relations and representational regimes of art cannot be abstracted from the systems wherein it is realised. However, unlike many other fields, art has the capacity to critically unfold, from within, the systems in which it partakes. Since the 1970s, artists such as Hans

Haacke, Mierle Laderman Ukeles, Martha Rosler, and Andrea Fraser—and more recently Goldin+ Senneby, Vermeir & Heiremans, Burak Arikan, and Hito Steyerl have been working around issues of art, capital, and institutional critique. Trusting fully the capacity of

art to unfold and challenge its own mechanisms and systems, several projects were invited to the exhibition because of their focus on the relation of art and capital, labour and production.

Connecting theatrical rehearsals with financial speculation of an algorithmic trading strategy, Goldin+Senneby, in their ongoing performative project *Shortening the Long Position* (2013), have created a precarious system in which the financial performance of the trading strategy determines the duration of the actors' contract, and thus the duration of the performances. Splitting open the relationship between the two worlds—finance and art—the project reflects the insecure and unstable world of high finance as well as the vulnerable nature of labour in art. As the strategy developed by the economist Ismael Erturk worked successfully in Turkey, the performances could continue until the last two days of the exhibition.

Similarly, the lecture-performance *Art House Index* (May 2013) by Vermeir & Heiremans, realised before the exhibition in scope of the 'Public Capital' segment of the Biennial Public Programme 'Public Alchemy', denotes the speculative nature of value production in both art and the stock exchange.<sup>8</sup> The duo's video work in the exhibition *The Residence (a wager for the afterlife)* (2012) embodies abstract value production in neoliberal cultural processes and mechanisms in a complex story that unfolds the increasing entanglement between urban development, social status, and the art world.

An online 'collective data compiling, mapping, and publishing project on the capital-power relations of urban transformation',<sup>9</sup> the *Networks of Dispossession* (2013-ongoing) initiated by the artist Burak Arikan as part of his practice and developed collectively during the Gezi resistance, was triggered by similar concerns about unjust transfer of land through urban transformation in Istanbul. Inspired by Hans Haacke's well-known

*Shapolsky et al. Manhattan Real Estate Holdings, A Real Time Social System, as of May 1, 1971* in relation to the ownership and control of urban space in New York, the *Networks of Dispossession* compiled data on urban transformation actors, mainly developers, government, and media, to create maps that highlight and make legible their relationships. In the exhibition there were three maps: one on mega projects such as the third bridge for the Bosphorus, airports, or dams in Turkey; a second map on the actors and processes that deprive minorities of their properties; and a third map on urban transformation in Istanbul, which included one of the sponsors of the Istanbul Biennial. They also organised several workshops and meetings to communicate and disseminate to larger publics the processes and techniques of collecting data and making maps, and to discuss collectively how to utilise such information further.

‘What is the relation of art spaces and battlefields apart from showing works about conflict zones?’<sup>10</sup> Hito Steyerl articulated this question further at the lecture-performance and video *Is a museum a battlefield?* (2013), produced for the 13<sup>th</sup> Istanbul Biennial. In the search of her friend Andrea Wolf, who disappeared in 1998 as a member of PKK (Partiya Karkerên Kurdistan) in the region of Van, Turkey, Steyerl began to trace an empty bullet case that she found in a mass grave where her friend was possibly killed. With a witty and convoluted presentation, she questions the relationship between the arms producer General Dynamics, who made the empty bullet case she found, and the Art Institute of Chicago, where she presented the video of the search for her friend. Unfolding the historical alliances of art spaces and museums with power, she alludes to the nature of art institutions as war zones. By the same token, Steyerl asks what potential connection exists between the funders of the Istanbul Biennial and the military industry, and further articulates this relation with the biennial’s main sponsor.

8 The lecture-performance was interrupted by the protestors, who were protesting the companies connected with urban transformation and gentrification in Istanbul and simultaneously with art institutions. 9 Taken from the Guide Book text written by the participants

of the Networks of Dispossession p. 297 <http://mulksuzlestirme.org>  
10 Hito Steyerl: Zero Probability and the Age of Mass Art Production. Interview by Göksu Kunak  
in Berlin; Tuesday Nov. 19, 2013, <http://www.berlinartlink.com/2013/11/19/interview-hito-steyerl-zero-probability-and-the-age-of-mass-art-production/>

13th Istanbul Biennial catalogue (2014) p 47- p 53

# Public Space as Cultural Capital

Lecture by Andrea Phillips on the 13th Istanbul Biennial

HARVARD ART AND DESIGN IN/FOR THE PUBLIC REALM

OCTOBER 2013

## PUBLICS AS CULTURAL CAPITAL

Whilst other realms of social and material production reinvent themselves and their relationships with their user-clients, the domains of art and architecture (with notable but rare exceptions) retain the concept of the public (a body of people) and the public realm (a physical or virtual space which those people use) as an idealized and constitutional entity. The reasons for this are historic, wrapped up with the very performative and representational ideals of visual cultures.

Even the most radically transformed relation between product and recipient in contemporary art is dependent on a public – of viewers, of participants, of witnesses. This functions as a hegemony in the public sphere, with even the most critically designed works caught in a circuit of public perpetuation. Art makes publics: we need to think about why this happens, if we want it to happen, and what the alternatives may be if we don't want it to happen.

This talk will cover questions of the public realm and our right to/desire to imagine and act within it;

Questions I'd like to consider and discuss with you:

What is the public in a contemporary context?

How has it been constructed historically and what is the relevance for us of its geopolitics?

How have recent events (from Tahrir Square through Occupy and Wikileaks to Taksim Square) affected the ways we think about being public, making things public and, as practitioners and theorists of architecture and art, locating things in the public realm?

What are the challenges to publics now?

Do we want to sustain the term, reinvent it for a new politics of emancipatory collective action or has the term been surpassed?

What happens when the public says 'no': that they don't want what you're giving, that they reject your gift?

In the public programme of the Istanbul Biennial, Fulya Erdemci and I tried to grapple with – and stage – some of these contradictions. Doing so as part of a global art event with its high profile participation in the branding of cities, the making of cultural capital, the direct and indirect monetization of civic wealth, became extremely problematic. We found ourselves with a gift thrown back.

Rethinking publicness in Istanbul

The public programme of the 13th Istanbul Biennial examines the ways in which publicness can be reclaimed as an artistic and political tool in the context of global financial imperialism and local social fracture. From February to November 2013, a series of lectures, workshops, seminars, performances and poetry readings will examine how a political, poetic alchemy is at work, both in Turkey and across the world, in which conventional concepts of ‘the public’ are being transformed.

Today, the idea of ‘the public’ provokes extreme reactions, reactions that are weighted by religious, fiscal, governmental and geographical differences. Some see the public as a homogenizing and ideological machine, made up of supplicant and unified bodies, invented to aid categorization and containment, a tool used by the powerful upon the weak. Others assert their role as part of a public as a right of citizenship, a spectacular affront to autocratic legislation and a forceful tool of dissent. Both these perspectives are haunted by the potent image, historical and contemporary, circulated in ever-faster cycles of virtualisation, of bodies acting together to claim space – citizens choosing to be part of the count for or against a cause or a right; jubilant, frightened, heroic and political subjects the fate of which is so often either co-option or violent repression – civilization or barbarity. What are the alternative ways of thinking and being publics? How are these questions particular in the context of Istanbul?

An alternative version of publicness can be read between the lines and in the actions of some contemporary artistic, philosophical and political practices. Here a monolithic understanding of the public is replaced with the assertion of a variously scattered, singularized and networked subject who is inventive and flexible, sensuous and performative, a public subject that appears and disappears strategically, virtually. This public might be epitomized in the activities of the digital creative commons or, more precariously, as the set of subjects that came together in various western cities as the Occupy movement. Whilst these examples seek to either reject or experiment with the spatial and social binaries of public and private, actor and audience, author and recipient in the same way that many artists and curatorial projects do, they also put in place a model of the public with a commonality so flexible that it is uncoupled from history, and often in danger of reproducing the very values of sinuous capitalisation that it attempts to evade.

Whilst such temporary social and subjective engagements express a potent alternative to governmentalized public intervention in many forms, they often fail to grasp the real issues at stake – and the duration of investment needed – for sustainable change. When good-willed interventions ‘into’ the public domain by artists, architects, urban planners and politicians are so often quickly capitalized (a fact very evident in Istanbul), how do we rethink our public relations – relations of subjects, between subjects, in the spaces we need to learn to share, and with the methods of co-production that we need to learn?

Publics are not already there, whole, waiting quiescently in the spaces allocated to them, for instance in the city or town square, ready to act in unison in the name of predetermined legislature. Instead, publics are made of matters of our subjective, political demands. Isabelle Stengers and Philippe Pagnarre have written about the sorcery of capital. They describe the magical power of financialisation in which profit, that most immaterial of substances, is materialized in frighteningly sophisticated, creative and inventive forms. We can see this at work in Istanbul in the sudden transformation of the street, in the miraculous appearance of a new bridge here, a new shopping mall there. But Stengers and Pagnarre turn this financial alchemy on its head by reclaiming witchcraft, with its collective, gendered, ostracized and

often anonymised histories, as a form of anti-capitalism. Can we begin to discuss, and practice, a similar alchemy in terms of publicness, where the base material and ordinary knowledge of the public is used in its transformative capacity? One that allows us to reclaim our own sense of publicness rather than have behavior imposed upon us, to inhabit the city without discomfort or compromise, to assert our values without fear of reprehension?

On the basis of this rhetoric we organized 5 series of events inviting Turkish and international experts to discuss these ideas. They started in February with a focus on the right to the city (Lefebvre) then proceeded with discussions of freedom of speech, the capitalization of public space, the concept of public subjectivity and the potential for new collective publics. But our programme was protested by activist from the beginning (even from the press conference in January 2013). The protests were so effective that we had to close down and relocate many of the events, and others lead to extreme action from many sides, including the biennial which issued aggressive statements about the protestors. This was the forceful rejection on the part of activists, of the ability and motivation of a Biennial to participate in discussions about violent urban transformation. It came just before the momentous events of Gezi Park and Taksim Square protests that started at the end of May.

## 1. PERFORMANCE: VERMEIR & HEIREMANS, TAKSIM MAMARA HOTEL, MAY 2013

What are the contradictions that emerge when a Biennial (or any large-scale high profile art event) attempts to speak for or on behalf of a denoted public? I'll try to answer this question with an example of one of the protests we encountered.

In early May 2013 we commissioned the artist duo Vermeir & Hieremans to make a new work as part of the Biennial public programme. The work was staged in the conference suite of the Mamara Hotel, Taksim Square. The work, titled Art House Index, was a complex and cleverly staged discourse on the modes of financial speculation embedded within contemporary art's global economy and the mechanisms of reputational and thus fiscal accumulation therein. The artists, Katleen Vermeir and Ronny Hieremans, had modeled a fictitious derivative for potential investment, an 'art house' based on their own penthouse apartment in Brussels but able to be virtually rendered in any shape and form at creative global reach in the manner befitting an index (a flexible measurement of stock). The script of the performance, based on the duo's in-depth research into art and other market mechanisms, was intended to draw its audience's attention to the links between art and property investment, and the proliferation of global mega-exhibitions and museum and gallery development, a fact very much in evidence in contemporary Istanbul. The choice of site, the business suite of a global brand hotel at the centre of Istanbul's European quarter on a historically significant and soon to be occupied city square, was a symbolic choice. The audience was ushered into the basement suite and seated on either side of the conference room behind tables with writing pads, pencils and water bottles. The artists, at one end of the room, introduced themselves as the product 'Vermeir & Hieremans' image then proceeded to dialogue in seeming real time with a skyped-in investment expert, 'Frank Goodman', whose image was projected at the other end of the room.

After about ten minutes of the performance, a member of the audience stood up, walked into the centre of the room, unfurled a white flag upon which the logo of the Biennial's major sponsorship partner was printed along with the name of an Istanbul neighbourhood threatened with destruction due to the city's rapid and violent gentrification and lay down

with the flag covering his body. The act was carried out silently. After a minute, several technicians who had been standing at the side of the room came into the centre and picked up the body and carried it outside. Vermeir & Hieremans, who had paused while this was going on, looked confused, then resumed their performance. After another few minutes, another member of the audience stood up and took the same action, lying in the centre, this time with a different neighbourhood's name imprinted on the flag. This continued for some time until a large group of the audience stood and walked out of the event.

Whilst a number of people in the audience thought for a while, even throughout, that these interventions were staged by the artists themselves, it became clear to most viewers almost immediately that the people lying under the flags were enacting a protest against urban gentrification and, due to the presence of the sponsorship logo, the point they wanted to make was that the Biennial was part of the problem in a number of ways (for accepting sponsorship from an organisation involved in the gentrification process and for being a major element in Istanbul's burgeoning cultural economy). Given the ambiguity of the Vermeer & Hieremans' performance itself, with its careful filming of and interaction with the character 'Frank Goodman' to an extent whereby many members of the audience presumed for the first few minutes of his appearance that he too was 'live', this slippage between accounts of commissioned and uncommissioned, sanctioned and unsanctioned performance is unsurprising – indeed it was staged in a way that proposes a certain productive ambiguity. Further, the fact that the performance was a clear critique of the link between property and art market booms in cities such as Istanbul bore a close resemblance to that which the symbolic protest drew attention. Yet the protest was made in antagonism to the presence of the Biennial in the city, and followed on from a series of protests, all strategically managed and executed, that had grown in strength across the events of the public programme as they had taken place since February 2013.

For me complex layers of questions emerge around the publicness of bodies, the relationship between audiences and dominant theoretical and artistic-curatorial narratives, the relationship between speaking and listening as it impacts on the idea of a public programme per se, and these things in the context of the construction of a particular and still-dominant concept of the public and the public sphere upheld in and through contemporary art practice in its institutional forms. It occurs to me more and more frequently that the idea of a public programme typifies a certain type of aesthetic and political making within the sphere of recent and contemporary art wherein the usually unwitting and more or less well-meaning ethos of the programmer dictates a benign hierarchy of subjective and social power over the programmed, that is, 'the public'. Since most biennials, museums, public and increasingly private galleries now have regular public programmes, often aligned to charitable and educational imperatives, themed around the artworks on display and offering a translational or discursive approach to engagement, a contradiction is regularly repeated between the regulated bodies of those that constitute art's public (with which it could not do without constitutionally in its normative form) and those same bodies' desire to learn about, engage with and discuss art and ideas. This contradiction is of course not simply evident in the assemblage of art publics – it is historically formatted via a complex of institutions including the religious, educational and governmental. But in contemporary art we have a prime condensation of it. This notwithstanding the history of critique within the institutional and academic art milieu itself on this subject, much of which is an introjection into, and a production of, engagements with the curatorial at the level of the same environment of public discourse. Can those of us involved in various ways in the making of publics and the being of

publics in art imagine ourselves far enough away from these formats to practice alternatives?

Some of these questions had already emerged for Fulya Erdemci and I as we developed the public programme, and as it was protested. Indeed its theme was 'public alchemy', relating directly to Fulya's thematic approach to the Biennial as a whole, and consisting of a series of talks, performances, panel discussions and workshops on the idea of public transformation. Here, like with the antagonistic but shared political concern of the performance and protest described above, was a broader set of slippages or missed connections – between the ideas of public transformation suggested by a biennial and the hypocrisy of this articulated by its protest. Around two weeks after Vermeir & Hiereman's performance, Turkish police began the aggressive clearance of protestors in Gezi Park, just across the square from the Taksim Mamara.

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The concept of a public programme symptomatises a contradiction inherent in contemporary artistic and curatorial production in that on the one hand it speaks to a broad desire to open up and discuss ideas and contexts of the cultural milieu (replete with all its problematics) and on the other it physically and semantically refranchises the basic division between the makers and recipients of intellectual production. In this way it performs a function half way between two fictions; the first a fiction of egalitarian discursivity, the second a fiction of art's cultivating civic function.

Over the last two decades there has been increasing academic and artistic criticism of the ways in which the juridical spatialisation of the public has been taken up, much centering on perceived problems of Jurgen Habermas' 1962 publication *The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere*. Many artistic and curatorial projects, exhibitions and biennials have attempted to reorganise the ways in which art's relation to publics and counter-discourses of and actions in the public domain is directed and understood. High-profile and mainstream examples of curatorial experiments in providing spaces for – and therefore making and debating – more productive public formats range from unitednationsplaza in Berlin in 2006-7, the European FormerWest project that started in 2008, various events organised by Creative Time here through the seventh Berlin Biennial in 2012 to the Hayward Gallery's Wide Open School in London, 2012. Here there is often to be found a commitment to discussion, participation (however temporary), and involvement in the idea of interdisciplinary methods of social recalibration, at various distances from artistic production itself, though rarely any participation in decision-making or institutional shaping. There is a desire for an engaged public. But attendance to a body of people named the public by the institution, however enfranchised or redistributed, remains in place.

In the Marmara Hotel conference suite, a group of bodies came together in the name of a public politics and misrecognised each other. This misrecognition was profound and troubling for all involved – it had a violence to it that emanated from the anger and hatred of divided discourses and divided methodologies. Hierarchies of power were at once obvious and camouflaged; people were hurt – not physically (that was to come, through the tear gas and police batons that struck both sides as they came together to protest against the rendition of Gezi resistance) but psychically and politically. It is clear that many years – many biennials, many cycles of destructive gentrification – had built up to this point. But as these three groups of bodies performed – the artists, the protestors and the audience, each leaking

into each other as each watched one another in turn – it became clear that the form of the public programme was the thing that was eradicating a space of understanding, a space of discussion. The managed, administered gift of debate, given in seeming freedom by those that wanted it in Istanbul that night (and on all the others) was being forcefully rejected. No matter that both sides were trying to imagine the same thing.

In the end, Fulya decided to withdraw work from the public realm in response to both the protests in Gezi park and the Biennial protests. She said: “I don’t want to legitimize the authorities who have silenced citizens’ voices, violently so, to realize a series of artworks,” ... “My gesture of withdrawal shows this conflict clearly. By their absence I want people to hear the voices of the street.” But is this enough? Not according to the artist and protestor Ahmet Ogut:

“It is important to imagine, if we lose public and semipublic space, we lose everything. Artists give up their authorship when necessary, and it is the same for institutions. We need to find ways to get out of the art context, especially during historical moments like this. I don’t just mean anonymous, guerrilla-style projects. Artists often take those risks, step out of safe zones, and play around with permissions, regulations, and legal limitations. It’s time for the institutions to do the same, and to get more creative.”

Listen to the lecture here online:

<http://www.gsd.harvard.edu/#/media/mdes-adpd-lecture-andrea-phillips-on-the-13th-istanbul-biennial.html>



DIARY

## PUBLIC RELATIONS

May 22, 2013 • Istanbul • Kaelen Wilson-Goldie on “Public Capital” in Istanbul



Left: Fulya Erdemci, curator of the 13th Istanbul Biennial. Right: Andrea Phillips, co-organizer of the biennial's ten-month public program, “Public Alchemy.” (All photos: Kaelen Wilson-Goldie)

**WHEN THE ISTANBUL FOUNDATION FOR CULTURE AND ARTS (IKSV)** struck a sponsorship deal with Koç Holding to support five editions of the Istanbul Biennial over ten years, from 2006 through 2016, one can reasonably assume that everyone involved wanted something fairly solid—financial stability, reputational fortification—from the arrangement. What no one seems to have imagined, however, was that the deal would so ruffle the feathers of Istanbul’s factional communities of contemporary artists, political activists, and territorial leftists that Koç—Turkey’s largest industrial conglomerate, which is run by a powerful, wealthy family and has its hands in everything from banking, oil, and gas to defense—has since inspired a veritable performance program of increasingly aggressive protests running parallel to but angled against the biennial itself.

In 2009, a network of anonymous collectives set out to sabotage the event, albeit playfully, by producing posters mocking the curatorial framework, an open letter accusing the biennial of whitewashing arms dealers, a disseminated set of instructions for interrupting video projections and multimedia installations, and a series of demonstrations staged on the opening night, which sucked the air from an otherwise fine and serious exhibition curated by the Croatian collective WHW. At the time, observers across the political spectrum chalked the protests up to the petulance of the so-called “orthodox left” (how’s that for paradox), which apparently saw WHW as a rival and a threat, and perceived the group’s leftist credentials and Bertolt Brecht–inspired themes as an encroachment on its territory.



Left: Artists Ali Kazma and Burak Arikan. Right: Writer Lara Fresko with curator Vasif Kortun, director of research and programs at Salt in Istanbul.

In 2011, when Jens Hoffmann and Adriano Pedrosa organized a prim and mostly apolitical exhibition, a group known as the Conceptual Art Laboratory took advantage of the ideological vacuum to reprint—and slip into the biennial’s promotional material—a damning letter written by Vehbi Koç, founder of the family fortune, in support of the military coup that overthrew Turkey’s civilian government in 1980, which, among other things, set the country on a path of economic liberalization. The coup was followed by a dark period of roundups, arrests, and tribunals. In the text of his letter, Koç blithely puts himself at the disposal of coup leader Kenan Evren, and offers his services against the malice of communists, Armenians, and Kurds.

So what can we expect in 2013? Well, for one thing, the curator Fulya Erdemci, who is organizing the thirteenth edition of the biennial, is not only rooting her exhibition deeply in the city of Istanbul but is also digging into some of its most pressing urban problems. This firm emphasis on a specific time and place promises to position her biennial as a welcome

counterbalance to that of her predecessors, Hoffmann and Pedrosa, whose exhibition could have been anywhere. But it has also exposed Erdemci to a more virulent strain of protest, in part because with the launch of an ambitious, ten-month public program in January, called “Public Alchemy,” she considers her biennial already well underway.

There are still four months to go before the official opening, but Erdemci has titled her show (*Mom, Am I Barbarian?* after a book by the radical Turkish poet Lale Müldür) and outlined her curatorial themes (the public sphere as a political forum; contemporary art as the thing that both defines and dismantles what we know, experience, and understand to be public). A “prologue” exhibition just opened at TANAS in Berlin, featuring works by Jimmie Durham, LaToya Ruby Frazier, Amal Kenawy, Cinthia Marcelle, Şener Özmen, and Mierle Laderman Ukeles, among others. A writing workshop organized alongside the biennial is now hitting its halfway mark, as is “Public Alchemy,” which has so far addressed issues of urban planning, civil rights, censorship, repression, and free speech, all leavened with poetry readings, music, and a walking tour.



Left: Curator and critic Maria Lind, director of Tensta Konsthall. Right: IKSVM's production team removing a protester from the performance.

The Conceptual Art Laboratory has inserted itself into every event for “Public Alchemy” to date. In March, protesters countered Erdemci’s *Mom, Am I Barbarian?* with C. P. Cavafy’s poem “Waiting for the Barbarians,” which they recited until a day’s worth of talks and lectures had to be shut down and rescheduled. Two weeks ago, the group interrupted “Public Alchemy” again, during the third installment in the series, titled “Public Capital,” which delved into the relationship between art and money through a performance on May 10 and a symposium on May 11. A group of young, lanky activists turned up for the performance by the Brussels-based duo Vermeir & Heiremans, which was held in a

corporate-style conference room at the Marmara Taksim Hotel. As that piece unfolded, the activists staged their own bit of agitprop theater.

At ten-minute intervals, someone would stand up from the crowd, show off a T-shirt and a faux-branded banner printed with the names of gentrifying neighborhoods in Istanbul, and then drape himself or herself on the floor in the middle of the room, only to be quickly picked up and hastily dispatched by three members of IKS V's loyal production team, who removed five protesters before the rest of the audience, many more activists among them, left in droves. For the duration of these two bizarrely competing performances—Vermeir & Heiremans were doing the first run-through of a commissioned work called *Art House Index*, a putative Skype conversation with a fictional financial analyst who breaks down the abject horrors of contemporary art as an asset class—Conceptual Art Laboratory's Niyazi Selçuk kept a video camera trained on Erdemci's face, which led to a long, drawn-out confrontation, ending well past midnight with both parties at a police station filing complaints and countercomplaints against each other.

“I'm working on the public domain so of course I am touching the most contested space and opening it up to conflict,” Erdemci says about Taksim Square, in whose proximity the performance was strategically placed. The square sees a million in pedestrian traffic a day. It is Istanbul's preeminent public space. And it is currently in the throes of a controversial redevelopment plan, which is considered symptomatic of larger issues, including rampant real-estate speculation, demographic shifts, the dispersal of poor communities from the city center to peripheral suburbs, and the tint and scent of corruption that lingers around Turkey's robust, non-recessionary economy. “Istanbul is undergoing a wild transformation,” Erdemci explains. “What we are doing with the biennial is concurrently commenting on what's happening, not in the past or the future but in the present. For me it was inevitable that we would look into the city. Art has many ways to communicate. Dialogue and debate are an important part of it. We need to negotiate with local government, the intelligentsia, grassroots activists, and the extreme hard-core activists. There are publics to activate. If people are attacking us, then what we are trying to do is already there.”



Left: Writer and scholar Suhail Malik. Right: Artists Vermeir & Heiremans introducing their performance in a conference room of the Marmara Taksim Hotel.

Of course, one could argue that if the protesters really want to see changes in how Istanbul is developing, then they might want to take their demonstrations elsewhere, to the offices where public policies are actually made, or to the headquarters of Koç, if that is indeed their target. One could also argue that with this latest round, the protests have taken an unfortunate turn toward the personal and potentially chauvinist, attacking Erdemci directly because she is the curator but also, it seems, because she is a woman. A number of Istanbul's contemporary artists, meanwhile, have the good humor to be critical of the protests from a formalist point of view. "They're just not creative enough," one artist told me later. Throughout the program, several artists ducked in and out of the proceedings, amused but somewhat indifferent to the disruptions, including Ali Kazma, who is representing Turkey at this year's Venice Biennale; Emre Hüner, who was enjoying the tail end of a double-barreled exhibition at Rodeo and the nonprofit Nesrin Esirtgen Collection; Ahmet Ögüt, who was on his way to Beirut to give a talk at Villa Fleming; and Burak Arıkan, who hosted the unofficial afterparty in the studio he will soon vacate when he moves to New York this summer.

On Saturday morning, Erdemci was clearly tired and a little rattled. But with Andrea Phillips, who is co-organizing "Public Alchemy" and served as a lively, engaging moderator during the symposium to follow, she had already dashed off a written response, and prepared a small speech. She welcomed the protesters' repeated use of the biennial as a public platform but cautioned them against veering off into obstruction, harassment, and the vandalism of other artists' work, including the Vermeir & Heiremans performance. No protesters showed up for that day full of talks and discussions in the Salon IKS, which was a shame, given the many probing questions that came up, courtesy of some fine

contributions by the academics Alberto López Cuenca and Suhail Malik, the dealer Haldun Dostoğlu, and the curators Vasif Kortun, Maria Lind, Barnabás Bencsik, and Kuba Szreder. There was talk of moral versus commercial economies, vernacular culture and self-styled communities as bulwarks against the market, the manipulation and cartelization of that market, Gregory Sholette's 2010 book *Dark Matter* and the status of labor in and around contemporary art, the need for institutions to be agile more than sustainable, and the plain fact that art schools are graduating way too many students for the system to bear. Did the participants make radical proposals for reconfiguring that system? Absolutely. With just two biennials left on Koç's clock, perhaps the sponsorship deal could become the occasion for a critical response more productive and precise.

— Kaelen Wilson-Goldie



Left: Artist Emre Hüner. Right: Curator Barnabás Bencsik, 13th Istanbul Biennial curator Fulya Erdemci, Istanbul Biennial director Bige Örer, and scholar Alberto Lopez Cuenca of the Universidad de las Americas in Puebla, Mexico.

## The Biennial Questionnaire: Bige Örer

Ahead of the Istanbul Biennial 2013, director Bige Örer talks to ArtReview

By **Helen Sumpter**



Free, Protest is Beautiful 2007/2013, Agoraphobia exhibition, 13th Istanbul Biennial

**A** RTREVIEW:

*Istanbul's art scene has expanded rapidly in recent decades. As has the international art world's focus on the city. What have been the main reasons behind this and what, for you, defines Istanbul's current creative energy?*

*BIGE ÖRER:*

The contemporary art scene that inspired the Istanbul biennial (launched by the [Istanbul Foundation for Culture and Arts](#) in 1987) —fresh, dynamic, cutting edge, albeit with limited financial means and institutional support—has evolved into a much larger and multi-layered field: the art market has grown exponentially and erratically; many galleries have opened; there are more independent, self-funded initiatives; more privately-funded, non-profit institutions. Artistic production has become more sophisticated with a wider interest in socio-economic, political, historical and aesthetic/formal issues, as well as more innovative artistic, curatorial and institutional strategies. Yet public support, a critical art press, and an educational system to sustain the art scene in Istanbul—and also form a further link to the transnational scene on an academic level—remain near absent still. Against all the positive progress and reinforcement, a multitude of problems rooted in these contradictory circumstances continues to pose some very Turkey – and Istanbul – specific difficulties.

*What role does the biennial play in Istanbul's art scene?*

BO: The Istanbul contemporary art scene has undergone significant transformation over the past 10 years. Since the millennial turn, the Istanbul Biennial has become a central coordinate on the international contemporary art map and gained a reputation for its experimental and unique character. The biennial has opened up a platform of interaction for the contemporary art scene in Istanbul, and the international contemporary art community. It has served as a dynamic plane of dialogue, a meeting point, and a critical site for the development of new aesthetic and political imaginations. In a period of increasingly rapid communication and experience exchange, the biennial has become the main hub in Istanbul for the introduction, debate and assessment of current paradigms in both the theory and practice of local, international, and transnational contemporary art.

*How has this changed over its history?*

BO: Since its inception, the biennial has acted as a temporary museum and each biennial ignites public discussions, as well as deliberation in artistic circles. The increase in the number of viewers of the biennial (50,000 in 2005 compared to 110,000 in 2011) is an evident manifestation of the expansion of the biennial's audience. In every edition, the biennial uses new materials and establishes new relationships with art and public spaces, which in turn has attracted the interest of local audiences in contemporary art.

THE OPENNESS AND  
SOLIDARITY OF THE  
RESISTANCE MOVEMENT  
CREATED A UNIQUE PUBLIC  
DOMAIN AND ART HAS BEEN  
ONE OF ITS COMPONENTS

*The main focal point for this year's biennial – 'the public domain as a political forum' in the form of 'an exhibition in a dialogue with the city' – could not be more relevant (with this summer's protests in Taksim square, initiated by plans to redevelop the space). But prior to these events, what made this subject particularly pertinent to Istanbul as a city and to its art community?*

BO: Urban transformation has been going on in Istanbul since the 1950s. But in the recent period, with the emergence of lucrative housing markets and the rise of the construction sector after the 2001 economic crisis, the city has experienced a drastic transformation, which has affected every citizen. The upcoming edition of the biennial has been exploring the possibility of public domain as a political forum and urban spaces as the spatial component of the democratic apparatus.

The theme of this year's biennial is also a reflection of the curatorial practice of Fulya Erdemci, the curator of the 13th Istanbul Biennial. She has always been interested in the relationship between art and the city. Istanbul Pedestrian Exhibitions (2002 and

2005), initiated by Erdemci, were the first major urban public space exhibitions that adopted a critical stance on the position of the individual in the city. She has also been exploring the potential of the public domain to become a political forum in her curatorial practice since. Moreover, as she is a curator from Istanbul, she is very much interested in the country's current sociopolitical issues.

*The title of the biennial **Mom, am I barbarian?** reflecting the idea of an 'absolute other', is taken from Lale Müldür's book of the same name. What is the particular relevance of this work to Istanbul and to its artists?*

**BO:** **Lale Müldür** is one of the most influential poets in Turkey. She has developed a unique poetic language. Drawing inspiration from her language, we hope to rediscover and remember the relationship between poetry and contemporary art in the biennial.

Fulya Erdemci uses the word 'barbarian' with its two connotations. Originating from the Greek word 'barbaros,' it refers to those who cannot speak the language properly. But in its current use, the word is laden with strong connotations of exclusion. Quoting from the conceptual framework, 'barbarian 'may refer to a state of fragility, with potential for radical change (and/or destruction), thus, to the responsibility to take new positions, new subjectivities to rethink the possibility of "publicness" today.' Barbarian is related to language; a language that we don't understand and need to invent to imagine a different world. The title forms the artistic axis of the exhibition in terms of the unknown or yet to be invented languages as well as art's and social movements' relationship with poetry.

## WHAT MATTERS THE MOST IS TO PROVIDE ARTISTS AND CURATORS WITH AN INDEPENDENT AND AUTONOMOUS SPACE IN WHICH THEY CAN EXPRESS THEMSELVES FREELY

*How did the biennial's prologue exhibition **Agoraphobia**, and accompanying discussions (25 May-27 July at **TANAS**, Berlin) feed into the final programme of exhibitions and events?*

**BO:** *Agoraphobia* deals with the politics of space in relation to freedom of expression and unfolds the core question of public domain. The issue of freedom of expression is also addressed as one of the core topics of the biennial's public programme, which explored the urgency of spaces of freedom of speech in the context of a neo-liberalised public domain. *Agoraphobia* translates these issues into practice; represents an artistic exploration and in a way complements the issues previously explored in the public programme. It brings out diverse artistic strategies and formulas that can steer the imagination towards resistance and change.

*When the protests began in Taksim Square on 28 May what were your immediate thoughts on how the Istanbul art community, and the biennial in particular, should respond?*

**BO:** The Gezi Park protests proved the strong sense of unease and discontent in the society and brought together the demands of different groups. But this is still an ongoing process; the struggle is alive. The protests continue to create their own forms of resistance such as the standing man or viral performances. The art community is coming together to discuss what has been going on and we feel that the protests deserve a better assessment rather than a quick response. We still need time to think around this transformative experience that has opened up new possibilities.

*How did those thoughts change as events escalated, and would there have been a point at which discussions would have needed to take place as to whether the*

*Biennial should still happen at all?*

BO: To the contrary, this is a time when artistic production is more important than ever. Creativity and humour have been important aspects of the resistance. The openness and solidarity of the resistance movement created a unique public domain and art has been one of its components. Not only contemporary art, but also literature, music and all forms of artistic expression are much needed to improve dialogue, understand one another and what is happening. The main theme of the conceptual framework of the 13th Istanbul Biennial has become a part of the daily experience and has transformed us all.

*The third event in the biennial's public programme (which began on 8 February) was itself the subject of protest – when Brussels based artist duo Vermeir & Heiremans' performance Art House Index, was disrupted (on 10 May). How does protest against/or as part of the biennial, fit in with its framework?*

BO: Today, not only in Turkey, but also in the international art world, the relationship between art and the private sector is a highly contested point of discussion. In Turkey, criticism towards private sector support of art has increased over the last decade and this is partly due to the upsurge of privately-funded art institutions. On the other hand, public support is near absent in Turkey. Under current conditions, the biennial believes that what matters the most is to provide artists and curators with an independent and autonomous space in which they can express themselves freely.

Vermeir&Heiremans' performance, as well as the 3rd Public Programme titled 'Public Capital', intended to suggest alternatives to the aforementioned relationship. The aim of the performance was to offer a critique of the multifaceted and complex relationship between art and capital. The entire event aimed to question the relationship between private capital, contemporary artistic production and the making of publics and to envisage if and how private capital could be used for public profit. The fact that these protests happened during the public programme that dealt with the issue of public capital is not coincidence, but rather points out the urgency of these issues in the contemporary art world.

**THIS IS AN ONGOING  
PROCESS; THE STRUGGLE IS  
ALIVE**

*Workshops for emerging art critics are part of the Biennial's public programme. Why did you feel it was important to engage directly with critical writing in this way?*

BO: Alternative art education and innovative methods are part of the current discussions of contemporary art in Turkey. The biennial seeks to develop ways to contribute to these discussions and thus supports the development of creative art writing. Workshops where art critics come together with the curatorial team are part of this support.

*How do you think Istanbul's art scene will develop over the next decade, and what changes would you most like to see happen?*

BO: The contemporary art scene in Istanbul will evolve into a much larger and multi-layered field. Despite limited financial means and institutional support, we can imagine the artworld in Istanbul growing more dynamic, cutting edge and critical over the next decade. In a time where free media is much needed, citizen art critics are significant actors and alternative art education methods should be further explored and supported.

The 13th Istanbul Biennial, titled *Mom, am I Barbarian?* will run from 14 September to 20 October 2013. Entrance II be free.

# NY ARTS

## Sandbox Democracies

<http://www.nyartsmagazine.com/?p=12277>



*Image courtesy of swissinfo.ch*

The 20th annual Jornadas de Estudio de la Imagen is the kind of luxurious discussion event that happens regularly here in Madrid. This June, the CA2M (Centro de Arte Dos de Mayo) in the town of Móstoles near Madrid, hosted “Speculating on Change”—an enormously wide brief during these very interesting times. Present behind nearly all the talks that week were the inaudible sounds of riotous repression of popular protest: the tear gas we could not smell, and the smack of rubber bullets we could not feel.

What lured me in to Móstoles for nearly a week was the presence of Ayreen Anastas and Rene Gabri who were doing a workshop on “After Work.” I miss the great discussions and genial interactions at 16 Beaver Studio, a place that they founded and currently run in NYC.

Their work has been a lodestone for me.

The conference was very rich and interesting. It helped me to draw a bead on many recent works in the realm of political art. However, that's fatuous to say now, about the ideas behind the artistic practices that are engaging the overbearing problems of our day. I did not draw a bead so much as get absolutely soaking wet from the dense theoretical fog the presenters pumped out.

Unlike the formal fumings of decades past, the presenters here were dealing with subjects of immediate importance: the nature and constitution of value and property, remuneration for artists, concepts of political action separate from labor, and curatorial and artistic frames which could contain those economic and political speculations.

As the conference began, on June 17th, Hyperallergic reported that "Over the weekend, a group of 100 or so activists protesting Tadashi Kawamata and Christophe Scheidegger's 'Favela Café' were teargassed at Art Basel."

Attending the conference in Madrid was Andrea Phillips, the English co-curator of the Istanbul Biennial. Events she arranged had been disrupted by protests there only weeks before. She spoke about this during her presentation. During conversations about the Basel incident during social time, some voiced skepticism. "It looked like an Aernout Mik production." Could the whole thing have been staged? The coincidence between representation and an intervening reality had been too neat.

I was uncertain as to what they were talking about. After the talks were done, I learned more. This was a harsh event, but totally fascinating, interesting and ambiguous, both politically and, in the emergent terms of what must be called, a new aesthetic discourse.

If the attack on the faux-favela party was a set-up, the police were in on it, because they commented to the press afterwards. And cops don't do art. A video posted to one blog was shot from behind the Kawamata installation, almost as if this YouTuber was waiting for the event to happen. It's a slow pan, shot from behind the favela, just before and as the police arrived. When the event does happen it does it isn't directly visible. The classic frame is at 2:45 or so, as a chair hurled at police appears in the air above the favela roofline. It begs for the Beuys/Nauman/Johns question: "What is under the chair?" (This video is linked on Greg Allen's blog, "greg.org: the making of: movies, art, &c"; clearly this is "&c.")

[http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=FJkhVEyfhQY&feature=player\\_embedded#t=0](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=FJkhVEyfhQY&feature=player_embedded#t=0)

<https://vimeo.com/68430602>

[http://www.tageswoche.ch/de/2013\\_24/basel/551573/video-gewaltsame-polizeiraeumung-am-messeplatz.htm](http://www.tageswoche.ch/de/2013_24/basel/551573/video-gewaltsame-polizeiraeumung-am-messeplatz.htm)

The ambiguities of representation are in full play in an event that unfolds in an artwork. It purports to open up global urban poverty in a fair catering to the world's rich and their artist servitors. In Basel, in very rich, very secure Switzerland, this event has a very different

meaning than the disruption of the biennial-sponsored performance in Istanbul.

That same lecture-performance was restaged in Móstoles by the Brussels-based duo Katleen Vermeir and Ronny Heiremans. They had the tables in the meeting space arranged like a boardroom, and proceeded to hold a kind of corporate presentation of a fictional art index fund, complete with simulated tele-chat by a financial expert. This character was a fictional composite, performed by an actor, and inspired by Herman Melville's mid-19th century novel "The Confidence Man."

Their work, "Art House Index", concerned the proposition—with distributed prospectus—of a kind of investment vehicle based on art. By now I understand a great deal of this terminology, although the whole notion of an index on which one may "place bets" remains obscure. I suppose Willi Bongard kicked this off with his "Top 100 Artists" list in the mid-1970s. By now this seemingly innocent guide to comparative value among "investment grade" artists, based on their museum and one-man gallery shows in key art cities and auction sales, is a relic of a distant past. I met the short-lived German Bongard, and thought him an odd guy, in some way also an artist with a conceptual project. I was an art fool. He was a business visionary. This shit is now real, or as real as fictional financial instruments can make it. The Art House couple revealed in a Q&A that some experts have offered to help them make their index project a real investment vehicle. Yow.

The activist artists of Turkey broke into the Art House performance with banners and chants. One artist trailed co-curator Fulya Erdemci with his video camera for a long while, which led to an ongoing legal dispute over privacy rights. It is unsurprising that these artists should be inattentive to a parodic project to turn creative production into a speculative financial instrument. Already in 2009, the Istanbul Biennial purported to deal with the concerns of precarious labor. That outing was themed "What Keeps Mankind Alive?" and curated by collective What, How & for Whom. It was protested by anarchists, which the art world ignored. To move in four years later with a theme of presentations around public space on the eve of a revolt around the same issue was too much to bear.

The part of the biennial that was disrupted in Istanbul was the educational section. It is funded by Koç Holding, an enormous Turkish conglomerate deeply involved in the rampant hyper-development tearing Istanbul apart. Gezi Park, one of the last green lungs of the city and the site of recent riots, is slated for a shopping mall and a historical reconstruction of military barracks in fond recollection of the Ottoman imperium.

When I heard "Koç" in the Móstoles table talk, I thought they said "Koch," the right-wing billionaires who have also thrown money into the NYC culture pot, and whose sponsorship there has been protested by Occupy Museums.

In her talk, Andrea Phillips discoursed learnedly on notions of property around art today. In her view, art fairs like the Istanbul Biennial and Art Basel "protect art from indiscreet speculation" of the kind burlesqued by Art House by asserting other meanings for art. Auratic, profound, transcendental significations are advanced over the mere significations of art as property.

I'll buy that. Still it's a rear guard action at best and waged on the plane of ideas where neoliberal capitalism has not bothered to deploy its forces. What was more germane in Phillips' analysis was her understanding of the role of neoliberal culture in the "post-welfare state" as responsible for a certain constant "fictionalization of concepts of publicness."

Art is promoted as a social necessity, a “socially ameliorative tool, a healing tool,” which is more important than its commodity status. Still, it “holds up a spectacle of freedom to unfree spectators.” Art fairs, then, are vistas onto what Grant Kester calls the “ontic spaciousness of the bourgeois subject.” That is, they are social, political and philosophical comfort food for an increasingly precarious bourgeois class.

The activists of Occupy are precisely those “unfree spectators.” They are moving to free themselves from the “nightmare of participation” in cultural and discursive arenas by disrupting these toy public spheres which cannot stand in for the absent forums and mechanisms of democratic participation.

At this moment, when artists have taken leading roles in the Taksim Square occupation (said Andrea Phillips, who should know), another spectre of Melville’s fiction has emerged – Bartleby. The clerk of the short story who “prefers not to” – move on, protest, fight the police, resignedly watch TV, take up armed struggle, etc. – has reappeared in Turkey in the form of the “duranadam,” or standing man protest, begun by an artist, which has gone viral.

It’s a great public action, and clearly a work of art: a public sculpture.

By Alan W. Moore

<http://www.dianran-online.com/en/reviews/reviews-2012/shenzhen-biennale.html>

## The 7th Shenzhen Sculpture Biennale

by Rachel Marsden / September 14, 2012.



Lu Zhengyuan, "LU: "Can I Hang It Over the Cliff?" KA: "No, Any Other Things Can Do." Installation, wood, acrylic, neon signs, sketch, pictures, 2012.

**"The 7th Shenzhen Sculpture Biennale — Accidental Message: Art is Not a System, Not a World (偶然的信息：艺术不是一个体系，也不是一个世界)." Curated by Liu Ding, Carol Yinghua Lu and Su Wei.**

**[OCT Contemporary Art Terminal \(OCAT\)](#)** (OCAT Hall A/B & B10, OCT-LOFT, Enping Road, Overseas Chinese Town, Shenzhen, China). **May 12 to August 31, 2012.**

In its seventh manifestation since its inception in 1998, the "Shenzhen International Contemporary Sculpture Exhibition" was this year renamed the "**Shenzhen Sculpture Biennale.**" This can be seen as an instrumental turning point in the exhibition's development as, for the first time, it took on one strategy of International Biennale exhibition models — the appointment of a curatorial team to oversee its conceptual and academic organisation. "**Accidental Message: Art is Not a System, Not a World**" provided a critical visual presentation of the curators' thinking and judgements about the value of art systems by

focusing on mechanisms of artistic and curatorial production and infrastructures, the development of the criticality of Chinese art and the construction of art historical knowledge, and the economic implications and commercialization of art, through ultimately questioning social order and power games in the art world. In part, it was a clear continuation in more analytical terms of Liu and Lu's project "Little Movements: Self-practice in Contemporary Art," initiated in 2010 and also on display at OCAT last year, which similarly examined new modes of thinking and working in artistic and theoretical practices between individual artists, small artist collectives, institutions, publishing, art history writing, and education, in local, national to international contexts, from past to present.

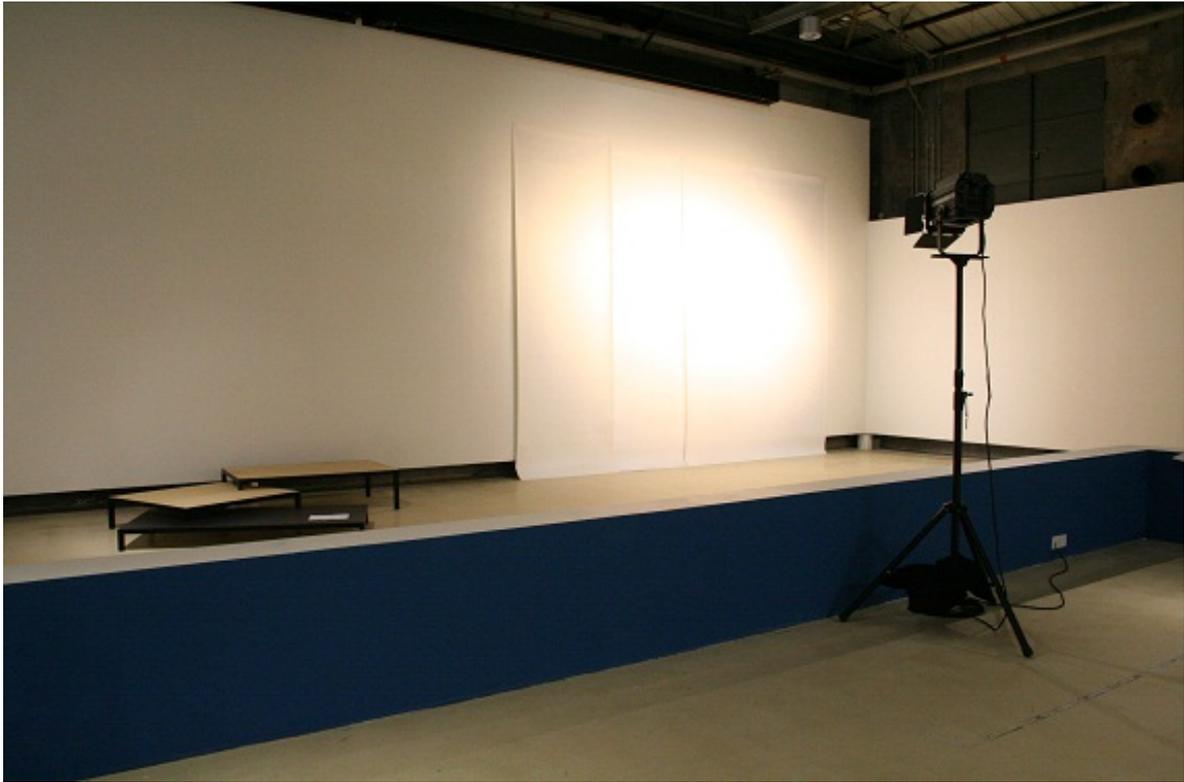
"Accidental Message" was clearly defined between two modes of curatorial thought, that of "Unexpected Encounters," defining examples of Chinese art from the 1990s, and of "What You See is What I See," the curatorial team's recent engagement over the past few years with Chinese and international artists. Together, they are presented alongside a handful of works installed in the sub-tropical outdoor landscape of the OCT-LOFT district to bring the exhibition's context further into the public domain. It became a show less about comparisons and dialogues between sculptures, or sculptures and other works — largely new media of which there was a strong digital, sound art and moving image faction to the show — and more of an opportunity to see how the creative international networks between the three emerging Chinese curators and over 50 artists, including the representation of their personal attitudes and belief systems, were put into a physical reality for viewers to deconstruct and interpret. This is done in an attempt to encourage disruption within the art system yet in turn reaffirm and exemplify their inherent status. It was only within the newly implemented construct of the Biennale that this level of inquiry can take place, thus a fluid and necessary decision for the sculpture exhibition's organizers to move it into a more contemporary mindset in relation to contemporary art and curatorial practice today.

The inclusion of established, deemed "blockbuster" artists from China as part of "Unexpected Encounters" acted as a minimal reference point to the socio-art historical contexts presented in the exhibition, and like the rebranding of the sculpture exhibition itself, further emphasized the economic and commercial value of contemporary art, specifically the unavoidable power struggles that exist within contemporary Chinese art. On one hand, this could be seen as a contradictory notion to the exhibition's overall concept as it explicitly embraced the idea of selling out to commercialism; yet conversely, it could be presenting a clever irony, a façade to make you further question and prove the systems that are in play. These observations highlight the establishment of new art systems in the 1980s and early 1990s in China that defined a specific generation of Chinese artists, where these infrastructures through which to practice were not often brought into question. When set in reference to its Western counterpart as within this exhibition, there is an awareness of the dualisms between the development of Eastern and Western art systems and art historical discourse where "What You See is What I See" provided a strong point of departure for critical engagement with the intended curatorial premise. It allowed viewers to delve into new contemporary artworks, of which notable examples are referenced below, to examine this relationship on an individual basis and question its future and place in Chinese and global terms.



Yan Xing, "A History of Repeated," performance and video installation, 2012.

A performance piece where the artist presented a prepared monologue script based on a painstaking 30,000-word academic document of a fabricated art history. Using his own literary practice and personal points of view, he narrates perspectives on the importance of an artist's formation of values and the power of the "his" artistic process by creation on site, whilst sceptically questioning different periods of art history.



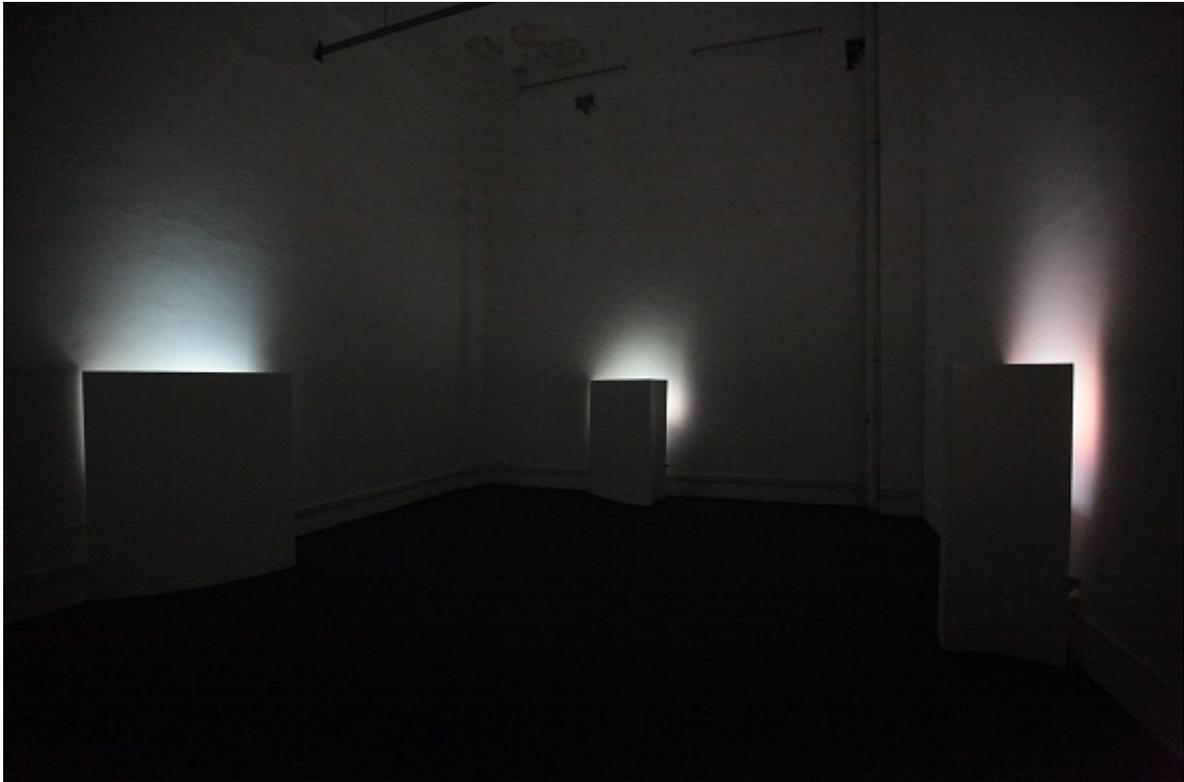
Kelly Schacht, "Un Tour d'Horizon," installation/performance, 3 paper sheets, varnish on wall, text on wall, 3 stages, 3 theater spots (+ electronic device), stickers on floor, video on flat screen, 6/7 performers, 2011.

As part of the installation, a set of three white sheets of paper hung layered on the wall to immediately create a personal awareness of our position as a "second-level" audience. Here, the artist wants us to stand in front of not only the artwork, but also the "artwork's own artwork-audience" to become an integral part of the piece, viewing "blind" and, in this case, often unknowingly engaged. This work makes immediate reference to its title's meaning, "Un Tour d'Horizon," a quick reflection upon the various perspectives of a topic. Through installation's mixed media facets, it provides a number of different opportunities for viewing by multiple audiences, therefore demonstrating a number of "perspectives." Schacht re-assesses the assumption about the way in which art "works" and the way an installation is provided for contemplation, questioning formalized and institutional ways of seeing.



Lu Zhengyuan, "LU: 'Can I Hang It Over the Cliff?' KA: 'No, Any Other Things Can Do.'," installation, wood, acrylic, neon signs, sketch, pictures, 2012.

Created over an extended period of time, this installation is as tall as the exhibition space, where its wooden structure emulates a cliff face, covered with acrylic panel facades and further adorned with neon lights. This artwork started in a dream and embraces the temporality of art, the creation of an artwork from nothing to a physical entity, and the interaction between artistic creation and everyday experience. Indecipherable bites of information and words are written by hand on the panels and lit up through the neon lights to provide immediate contextual guidance. They present the artist's perspectives on the exhibition, the curators' viewpoints and the further re-imaginings of possible exhibition artworks and the exhibition scene, thus challenging the art system in China and globally.



Lee Mingwei, "Quartet Project," mixed media interactive installation, 2005—2011.

Four monitors playing scenes from a performance of Antonin Dvorak's 1893 composition, "American String Quartet," are housed within closed white units with their backs almost entirely facing the audience and their screens completely hidden from view. In the dimly lit space, this enticing music emanates from the monitors, but as you move closer to get a glimpse of the screen, a sensor shuts off the image and the music. Thus the audience can only enjoy the music from a distance. This scenario, where it is impossible to simultaneously enjoy the visual and aural, is a reference to the contradictory state of moving between two cultures, referencing the artist's life experience of cultural negotiation from his immigration

from Taiwan to the US in his youth, and in addition, to the pace and change of globalization creating a sense of cultural homogeneity.



Vermeir & Heiremans, "The Residence (A Wager for the Afterlife)," video, 2012.

This film is based on a housing project commissioned by Hilar, a character modeled on an investor based in Xiamen, Geneva and Hong Kong whom the artists met whilst in residency in Xiamen from 2009 to 2010. The story of the film evolves as the Chinese architect Ma Wen receives a commission to design a house for Hilar; it depicts him alternating between his role as an architect and his alter ego as a painter. Considered as a “mediated extension” of the artists’ home, “The Residence” is embedded with capitalist and communist ideologies in a dichotomy of fictional and factual accounts, visualizing a reflexive exercise on the collective psyche of our society and the pressures of time in relation to our mortality, which motivates us to claim, to build, to expand, to sell, to win, creating an endless cycle of consumption. The

film places “something meant for the afterlife as the seed for growth of a story” whilst questioning whether we want the material or immaterial, within fiction or truth, and whether we will fall prey to the conspirators of the system. Ultimately, there is no remedy even after the afterlife.

Vermeir & Heiremans in Argos en Extra City

# EEN FAUSTIAANS PACT MET DE DUIVEL

Voor 'The Residence (a wager for the afterlife)' in Argos zetten Katleen Vermeir en Ronny Heiremans een boeiende en gelaagde video-installatie neer. De installatie bestaat uit verschillende componenten en gaat over een (fictief) bouwproject in China. Dat project fungeert als metafoor voor tomeloos kapitalisme, de excessen van de dolgedraaide markt en hoe de culturele industrie een speelbal wordt in het hele verhaal. De research die aan de installatie voorafging wordt onthuld in Extra City en verder aangevuld met een reeks lezingen.

Sam STEVERLYNCK

"From the moment you are welcomed through the exclusive security gate entrance, you are assured of total comfort, privacy and peace of mind." Met dit verkooppraatje wil de investeerder Hilar in de nieuwste video van Vermeir & Heiremans een ambitieus bouwproject aan de man brengen. Dat grootscheepse project moet kantoren omvatten, appartementen en het kunstcentrum Creative Land. Het centrum is bedoeld om het project een culturele meerwaarde te verlenen en het internationaal op de kaart te zetten. Want de culturele industrie is 'hot' in China en wordt gezien als motor van de economie. In de film heeft men het dan ook over het ombouwen van fabriekspanden tot lofts waarin kunstenaars worden ondergebracht, zodat de buurt hip wordt en de prijzen na een tijdje uit de pan swingen. Ma Wen – de architect van het project – is eigenlijk niet meer dan een pion die ook kampt met twijfels. Hij lijkt als het ware zijn ziel verkocht te hebben aan de duivel, net zoals China dat het communisme inruilde voor ongebreideld kapitalisme. Een van de vele bronnen voor de video was dan ook Faust II. Het hoofdpersonage in Goethes verhaal – waar hier op intelligente wijze hele passages aan werden ontleend – is namelijk een 'projectontwikkelaar' avant la lettre.

Dat materiaal biedt op zich voldoende stof voor een interessant verhaal. Maar wat het geheel nog

boeiender maakt is de originele manier waarop de video zich ontspint. Achteraan de zaal op de eerste verdieping in Argos wordt een video getoond die de ontwikkeling van het bouwproject op vrij 'klassieke' wijze weergeeft. Voor de andere delen van de installatie werden gefragmenteerde, niet-lineaire presentatiewijzen bedacht. Zo wordt de bezoeker verwelkomd door een videoscherm met de verschillende personages (niet toevallig aangeduid met allegorische namen zoals The Investor, Lady Credit, The Residence) en sequenties die fungeren als hoofdstukken in het verhaal. Dat verhaal wordt niet lineair verteld, maar volgens algoritmen die worden aangespoord door real time financiële markten. Naar gelang de fluctuaties van de beurs worden de sequenties weergegeven in een andere volgorde. Zo kan het verhaal op haast eindeloos verschillende manieren worden verteld. Net zoals in het dagelijks leven is het de beurs die de wetten dicteert. Daarnaast is er ook een geluidsinstallatie die onderhevig is aan de wisselkoersen en op geregelde tijden financiële berichten weergeeft. Het gaat om fictieve interviews gebaseerd op 18de-eeuwse teksten van onder andere Swift en Defoe die hun theorieën over de markt formuleren. Het is opvallend hoe actueel die teksten nu klinken. Het interviewformat wordt ook gebruikt in de middeleste videoprojectie, waarop effectenmakelaars



VERMEIR & HEIREMANS, THE RESIDENCE (A WAGER FOR THE AFTERLIFE) 2012. COURTESY THE ARTISTS. PHOTOGRAPHY KRISTIEN DAEM

te zien zijn die voor hun computer beurscijfers analyseren. Bovenop dat beeld worden bij wijze van aftiteling de namen vermeld van de mensen die aan de video hebben meegewerkt. Op een van die computerschermen wordt ook het beeld projecteerd van een brandende boot, als symbool van rituele zuivering. Het geheel wordt onderbroken door een interview met een financiële experte. Zij eindigt haar betoog over de invloed van de planetaire werking op de markten – opnieuw een citaat uit Faust – met een duivelse lach die door de tentoonstellingsruimte galmt.

## RESEARCH

'The Residence (a wager for the afterlife)' is een weldoordachte tentoonstelling met verschillende lagen en terugkerende symbolen. Vermeir & Heiremans slagen er door de presentatie in de

thematiek een meerwaarde te verlenen en te versterken. Zeer knap is ook de manier waarop ze hun talrijke bronnen als alchemisten omsmeden tot een nieuw, autonoom verhaal. En dat verhaal, dat haast volledig is opgebouwd uit bestaande citaten, lijdt niet onder het gewicht van de research die voorafging aan de film. Het voorbereidende onderzoek vormt dan weer het uitgangspunt voor 'The Residence (reading room)' in Extra City. Dat is een soort discursief platform waarop, naast een documentatiecentrum met de verschillende bronnen, diverse lezingen plaatsvinden rond de aangekaarte thematiek.

'The Residence (a wager for the afterlife)' tot 1 april in Argos, Werfstraat 13, Brussel. Open wo-zo van 11-18u. [www.argosarts.org](http://www.argosarts.org)

'The Residence (reading room)' tot 1 april in Extra City, Tulpstraat 79, Antwerpen. Open wo-zo van 14-19u, do van 14-20u, van [www.extracity.org](http://www.extracity.org)

Manifesta 9

# Het fatale verlangen naar een beter leven

‘We móeten moderniseren, het móet!’ riep Margaret Thatcher. De rondtrekkende kunstbiënnale Manifesta vraagt zich af wat die modernisering heeft voortgebracht. En hoe.

Anna Tilroe

15 augustus 2012 – uit nr. 33



**Volgens de** Britse sociaal-geograaf David Harvey vormen crises ‘de enige kracht die in de anarchie van het kapitalistische systeem een soort van orde en rationaliteit afdwingt’. In die zin, schrijft hij, heeft een crisis een belangrijke functie. Maar welke orde er uiteindelijk ook uit voortkomt, na enige tijd slaat het systeem toch weer op hol. Nu we opnieuw in de duisternis van een megacrisis rondtasten, is het niet zo’n slecht idee om eens achterom te kijken naar een crisis die, net als de huidige, samenhang met een radicale verschuiving in het sociale en economische landschap: de overgang van een industriële naar een post-industriële maatschappij. Hoe onthullend het perspectief van de kunst en een scherp gefocust tentoonstellingsconcept daarbij kunnen werken, zien we nu bij *The Deep of the Modern*, de negende editie van Manifesta.

De in Europa rondreizende biënnale is deze keer geland in het Belgische Genk, een voormalige mijnwerkersstad in het Belgisch-Limburgse mijnbouwgebied. In het vernieuwde, op shoppen ingerichte stadscentrum vertelt alleen al het grote aantal Italiaanse en Turkse restaurants dat vele van de duizenden migranten die in de jaren vijftig en zestig in de regionale kolenmijnen kwamen werken hier zijn blijven wonen. Of dat ook geldt voor de nog altijd zingende Italiaanse Belg Rocco Granata weet ik niet. In ieder geval heeft de beroemdste aller mijnwerkerszonen op de tentoonstelling in het gerestaureerde kolenmijncomplex ‘de Waterschei’ een aparte hoek gekregen. Zijn gouden platen (waaronder verschillende voor het wereldsucces *Marina*), zijn accordeon, de affiches, zijn fonkelende Vespa, alles vertelt een succesverhaal. Maar het steekt scherp af

bij een documentaire over de werkelijkheid van de eerste golf gastarbeiders in de jaren vijftig. Zelden zag ik die schrijnender in beeld gebracht dan met een opname van Turkse gastarbeiders in een Belgisch café. Gestoken in hun beste pak staren ze vanachter hun tafeltjes even onwennig als gefascineerd naar de onbereikbare, uitdagend met elkaar dansende ‘Flamandes’.

Migratie als kenmerk van een zich steeds globaler uitstrekkend, op massaproductie gericht economisch systeem is een van de grote lijnen van *The Deep of the Modern*. Maar evenzeer de ontheemding, vervreemding en ontmenselijking die ermee gepaard gaan. Op de eerste etage van het enorme mijngebouw krijgen we daar tal van onverwachte beelden van. De tientallen bidmatjes bijvoorbeeld die met elkaar een groot, richting Mekka wijzend tapijt vormen, hebben toebehoord aan de eerste generatie Turkse mijnwerkers. Moslims die hun geloof beleden in een hun volstrekt vreemde, katholieke omgeving. Regelrecht ontroerend zijn de van heimwee doortrokken servetten en wandkleedjes waarop de vrouwen van de Hongaarse, Turkse en zelfs Duitse mijnwerkers lieflijke folkloristische tafereeltjes uit hun eigen cultuur hebben geborduurd, soms met spreuken als: *‘Spare mit dem Feuer, denn die Kohlen sind sehr teuer’*. Hoe duur de kolen werden betaald tonen de vitrinekasten met werkboekjes van mijnwerkers, officiële statistische gegevens en wettelijke bepalingen. Ze vermelden onder meer dat in 1872 in de Belgische kolenmijnen 85 kinderen beneden de acht jaar werkzaam waren, 2556 kinderen in de leeftijd van tien tot twaalf en 7866 kinderen van twaalf tot veertien. Wetgeving in latere jaren bepaalde dat jongens onder de zestien en meisjes onder de 21 alleen langer dan twaalf uur per dag mochten werken als hun anderhalf uur pauze was vergund.

Schokkende feiten natuurlijk, te meer omdat we weten dat dit meedogenloze negentiende-eeuwse productieproces tegenwoordig ‘ge-outsourced’ is naar India, China en andere Aziatische landen. Wat dit inhoudt is in een monumentaal beeld samengebond door de in Nederland wonende Chinese kunstenaar Ni Haifeng. In een immens hoge, open ruimte van de Waterschei heeft hij met duizenden steenkoolzwarte textielvelden een slordig mijnlandschap geschapen waaruit, als een omgekeerde waterval, een metershoog kleed oprijst van kleurige stukjes stof. Het zijn restanten uit textielfabrieken in China, waar ze door een leger van anonieme werkers in ontelbare uren aan elkaar zijn genaaid. De lange rij naaimachines langs de kant nodigt de bezoeker uit om ter plekke een bijdrage te leveren. Want zoals het productieproces op altijd meer is ingesteld, zo is ook dit kleed eeuwig onvoltooid.

**Altijd meer.** De gevolgen zijn onderhand overbekend, maar de confrontatie met een kleurig ‘koraalrif’ van tonnen omgesmolten plasticafval blijft onaangenaam. Het afval is door Maarten Vanden Eynde verzameld op de Stille Oceaan, waar het ronddrijft als een eiland ter grootte van de Verenigde Staten. De boodschap is niet mis te verstaan. Maar er wringt ook iets. Want wat we op deze tentoonstelling ook zien is de drijfveer achter dit alles: het diepmenselijke verlangen naar een beter leven. Hoe dit verlangen is geworteld in een idee dat nu fataal lijkt, het idee van progressie door economische groei, krijgt een

verrassende belichting met een soort esthetische geschiedschrijving van het steenkooltijdperk.

Prenten, schilderijen, foto's en sculpturen uit 1900 tot het begin van de 21ste eeuw brengen het ontginnings- en productieproces van het 'zwarte goud' in beeld, en de verandering die deze teweegbrachten, zowel in het aanzicht en de beleving van de natuurlijke omgeving als in de hiërarchische indeling van het sociale landschap. *De mijnegroeve* bijvoorbeeld, een krachtig schilderij uit 1891 van Willem van Konijnenburg, mengt de ruige natuur en het geïndustrialiseerde landschap tot een voor die tijd nieuwe schoonheidsbeleving. Het drie bij vijf meter grote doek *Steenkolenwoud uit de oertijd* dat Jan Habex in 1945 voor de ontvangsthal van de Waterschei schilderde, doet daar nog een schepje bovenop. De zwaar romantische verbeelding van een carboonwoud verwijst niet alleen naar een vermeende paradijselijke oertoestand, maar evenzeer naar het feit dat dit ondoordringbare plantaardige bewind ooit in samengeperste vorm de mensheid zou voorzien van een brandstof die een heel nieuw wereldbeeld mogelijk zou maken.

Wat de overgang naar het industriële kapitalisme sociaal teweegbracht, zien we op een fotomontage uit 1892. De als een spekkoeke gestapelde foto's weerspiegelen hoe in de laag boven laag opgebouwde mijn galerijen de taken tussen mannen, vrouwen, kinderen en paarden waren verdeeld. De geënceneerde foto's dienden om nieuwe mijnwerkers wegwijs te maken in het ontginningsproces. De foto's die de Britse predikant Francis Cobb vijftien jaar later maakte, hadden een minder zakelijk doel. Ze moesten, net als de sombere litho's van Jan Toorop en de dramatische schilderijen van mijnwerker Gilbert Daykin, een breder publiek bewust maken van de ellendige arbeidsomstandigheden van de mijnwerkers. Die omstandigheden verbeterden maar langzaam. Op tekeningen uit 1941 van een andere beroemde mijnwerkerszoon, Henry Moore, liggen mijnwerkers nog in precies dezelfde krampachtige houdingen boven hun hoofd in de steenkool te hakken als in de tijd van Cobb.

Het engagement van de artistieke en intellectuele voorhoede met de arbeidersklasse had ook een sterk educatieve kant. De Ashington Groep bijvoorbeeld was een tekenclub die in 1934 in Engeland werd opgericht als een soort Bildungsproject voor mijnwerkers van de Ashington-kolenmijnen. Kunsthistorisch gezien zijn er niet meer dan amateuristische tekeningen uit voortgekomen, maar voor een nieuw licht op de sociaal-culturele geschiedenis wordt de groep hier terecht weer onder de aandacht gebracht. Nog veertig jaar lang zijn de leden wekelijks bijeengekomen om elkaars en andermans kunst te bekijken en te bespreken. 'Ik was een verdomd goede mijnwerker', zei een van hen ooit. 'Je vecht tegen (...) dat wat miljoenen jaren geleden werd gevormd. Dat was het leven dat ik heb geschilderd.' Het oordeel van een criticus lezen we in een aantekening. '*Something different*' schreef hij achter de naam Oliver Kilbourn. Dat had hij goed gezien.

**Een invloedrijk** nieuw medium voor kunstenaars die in die tijd hun solidariteit met de arbeidersklasse wilden uitdrukken, was de documentaire. Wie ze in de Waterschei allemaal wil zien, moet er flink wat tijd voor uittrekken. Ze lopen uiteen van compilaties

van fragmenten uit nieuwsjournaals tot ritmisch-poëtische experimentele films. Met elkaar leveren ze een verbijsterend beeld op van de euforie en ontgoocheling van het moderne vooruitgangdenken.

Een pionier die het genre tot grote hoogte bracht, was Joris Ivens. Voor *Misère au Borinage*, de documentaire die hij in 1934 samen met Henri Storck heeft gemaakt van de meedogenloze represailles na een mijnwerkersstaking in de Borinage, mengde hij journaalbeelden met eigen opnamen die vanwege repressie van de politie vaak in het geheim moesten worden gemaakt of zijn geënceneerd. Ivens koos met dit onsentimentele maar hartverscheurende document duidelijk partij en zou dat als communist zijn hele leven consequent volhouden. Van de propagandafilms die hij later heeft gemaakt voor 'wereldverbeteraars' als Stalin en Mao heeft hij nooit afstand genomen.

Een heel eigentijdse vorm van geëngageerde documentaire is *De slag om Orgreave* van Jeremy Deller. De in 2001 gemaakte film is een reconstructie van een bloedige veldslag die in 1984 in het Britse Orgreave plaatsvond tussen ruim vijfduizend stakende mijnwerkers en een even grote politiemacht. Een groot aantal van hen staat daarin opnieuw tegenover elkaar, en opnieuw laaien de emoties hoog op. Maar de woede is nu anders gericht. De betrokkenen weten nu, net als de deelnemende reënactmentgroepen, dat ze een gebeurtenis naspelen die veel verder reikt dan toen door iemand kon worden overzien. Hoe gemoderniseerd en productief de mijnen in die tijd ook geworden waren en hoe vaak de mijnwerker ook als held was bezongen (in de jaren vijftig zelfs als dienaar van het vaderland), de wereld had een draai gemaakt die het hele idee van arbeid en productiviteit radicaal zou veranderen. Hun verzet daartegen was door Margaret Thatcher zelfs bestempeld als het ergste landverraad: *'The enemy from within.'* Want, zien we haar in een van de ingelaste journaalfragmenten verklaren, 'we móeten moderniseren, dat móet!' Het klinkt maar al te bekend.

Nog altijd wordt progressie gekoppeld aan economische groei, koste wat het kost. Wat *The Deep of the Modern* laat zien is dat kunstenaars daartegen in verzet komen. Soms nostalgisch, zoals Lara Almarcegui die de herbestemming van een braakliggend terrein in Genk tien jaar heeft weten uit te stellen (wel vrij te bezoeken). Of pathetisch, zie de met runderbloed gemaakte tekeningen van Michaël Matthijs. Maar ook met een vlijmscherpe analyse van het vooruitgangdenken als holle fictie en de absurde behoefte aan totale controle, zoals in de film van Katleen Vermeir en Ronny Heiremans. Alles bij elkaar werkt de tentoonstelling als een ervaring die we misschien wel delen met de hun eigen geschiedenis naspelende mijnwerkers van Orgreave: een bewustwording van de wereld die onder de huidige ligt.

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*Manifesta 9 is tot 30 september te bezoeken in Genk, België*



# dOCUMENTA (13), Manifesta 9, and the 7th Berlin Biennale

By John Zarobell

July 18, 2012



Image: Jonas Staal. *New World Summit*, 2012; installation view, 7th Berlin Biennale. Courtesy Sophiensäle, Berlin. Photo: © Lidia Rossner

Just as history in Europe is told through its existing art and architecture (as well as through that which is missing because it has been bombed to bits), contemporary art questions our conceptions of the present and engages the problem of how we will remember it. In this review, I consider three concurrent exhibitions in Europe—Documenta (13), Manifesta 9, and the 7th Berlin Biennale. Each has a different history while sharing similar concerns and offering illuminating explorations of our collective present.

## Documenta(13)

The idea of a biennale, and particularly of Documenta (which occurs every five years), is a snapshot of the present, but this sprawling, almost endless version of the exhibition is far from that. It is absolutely a subjective interpretation of emerging movements in art and history, crafted over the past five years by the curator Carolyn Christov-Bakargiev. Her primary interest lies in artistic

research, but more than anything she is driven by history: both representing it and marking it. The guidebook states: “Whatever is, is somewhere and somewhen.”<sup>1</sup> Christov-Bakargiev’s iteration of Documenta is directed towards an institutional, artistic, and intellectual exchange with Kabul, Afghanistan. Other manifestations (called *platforms*) are presented in Kabul, Alexandria, and, of all places, Banff, and there have been a series of seminars in Kabul from February to July of this year with artists, scholars, and curators contributing to both exhibitions and discussions. Extending the exhibition in this way is generous, but these carefully selected sites make one consider their significance beyond the context of an art venue, particularly in light of the recent political upheavals across the Middle East and NATO’s ten-year occupation of Afghanistan.

But in Kassel, there is a festival atmosphere. There were lots of tourists on a Monday in July—about a month after the exhibition opened—and the venues were pretty crowded despite being distributed across town. Catering stations had been set up. Without doubt, Documenta (13) is a kind of vortex, and most of the art one sees was produced as commissions for the exhibition, making much of the enterprise’s relevance event-based. It is designed to inspire artistic innovation and to generate novel experiences for viewers. Even for the initiated, there is a real sense of discovery here—the end result is tremendous. I have the impression that the curatorial team traveled the world looking not for important artists but for really interesting ideas and projects to introduce, and a very international crowd is represented. Perhaps this has become de rigueur for an international exhibition, but I honestly find the artist selection expansive. Particularly noteworthy is the large number of artists from Muslim countries, doubtless a nod to the Arab Spring.

Juxtaposing a range of artists, cultures, and forms of inquiry is one main point of this show. It is not the idea of particularity that reigns (the labels do not mention artist birth dates or home countries) but a sense of shared purposes, investigations, and discoveries. There is much intervention into the urban fabric of Kassel itself. Some artists, such as Amar Kanwar and Maria Thereza Alves, engage ideas of nature and science at the Museum of Natural History in the Ottoneum while others, such as Jeronimo Voss and Mika Taanila, explore science and technology at the Orangerie Museum of Astronomy and Technology. There are countless pavilions sprinkled throughout Karlsaue, formerly a royal garden, and other projects and performances have taken over museums and even train stations throughout the city. Theaster Gates’s transformation of the historic but decrepit Huguenot House, *Twelve Ballads for the Huguenot House*, is a particular standout. Gates created a temporary living community for young artists from Chicago and Kassel, made with scrap housing materials collected in those two cities. With this group, he reconstituted the building’s interior spaces as a rambling large-scale installation filled with spaces for live music performances and videos of primarily gospel singers from Chicago. The sense of cultural contact across time (suggested by the history of the site) and space (by geography and architecture) is exemplary.

Theaster Gates. *12 Ballads for the Huguenot House*, 2012; installation view; deconstructed timbers and other construction materials from 6901 South Dorchester, Chicago, video, sound 9.14 x 18.29 x 36.56 m. Rebuild Foundation Construction Team, John Preus (lead). Courtesy the artist; Kavi Gupta, Chicago and White Cube, London. Commissioned by Documenta (13) in collaboration with MCA, Museum of Contemporary Art, Chicago, with the support of Phillip Keir and Sarah Benjamin, London; Kavi Gupta, Chicago; and the Huguenot House. Photo: Nils Klinger.

Christov-Bakargiev has extended her hand towards science, presenting the experiments of scientists such as Anton Zelliger and Alexander Tarakhovsky, translated into visual form. The early computers of Konrad Zuse, who invented the first programmable machine with a binary switching mechanism in 1938, are paired with his watercolors inspired by Lionel Feininger. Bringing in a non-professional artist because he was a significant inventor is an interesting curatorial move, one that forces viewers to reconsider the relationship between art and technology. But I do not think these presentations mix well into the overall exhibition; it seems as if certain projects were shoehorned into a context more proper to installation art. Still, the intersection of art, technology, and the history of energy are themes that overlap with another European biennale, Manifesta, which takes place every two years in a new location.

## **Manifesta 9**

In many ways, Manifesta 9 is a comparison to Documenta (13), telescoping and consolidating many of its interests in a smaller show. Also organized by a curator of international prestige, Cuauhtémoc Medina, Manifesta 9 is presented in a former mine building on the outskirts of the Belgian town of Genk, a post-industrial site far removed from any city. This site was chosen both to draw people to an underexplored region in the heart of northern Europe and as a reflection of the show's theme, "The Deep of the Modern." Both exhibitions bring together historical and contemporary global cultural production and both engage the local context, but the slickness of Documenta (13)'s interiors contrasts with the uneven concrete floors and peeling paint of Manifesta 9's venue.

Another major difference is that Manifesta 9 devotes a whole floor of its three-floor presentation to a “Heritage” section about the history of mining in the region, with artifacts that range from prayer rugs brought by Muslim emigrant laborers, to folk art made by miners, to a devastating section of work logbooks that reveal that many miners before 1914 were in fact minors. It is hard to imagine, but in 1889, the mine employed ten thousand children under fourteen (some even younger than eight) down in the hole. While many of the artists in Documenta (13) engage the historical context of Kassel, and even the Fridericianum itself—Michael Rakowitz and Mariam Ghani stand out in this regard—their contributions are particular while the investigation of location that takes place at Manifesta 9 is the focus of the entire project.

Manifesta 9 also took the step of bringing in a separate curator, Dawn Ades, to work on a modern section called “Historical”; it is something of a stand-alone exhibition that presents a sweep of history. Following the topic of coal and locality across art from the nineteenth century to the present, Ades’s most recent selections are contemporary (featured artists such as Jeremy Deller and David Hammons are still active). Thus, while the “Historical” section at Manifesta thematically overlaps neatly with the selections in the “Contemporary” section, the two periods are still presented separately, unlike at Documenta (13), where works of modern and contemporary art are integrated. The Rotunda at Documenta (13), for example, brings together modern art with craft and small-scale recent works in a contemporary cabinet of wonders that can only hold forty visitors at once.

Manifesta 9 can be characterized as unblinkingly sincere, its air of seriousness supplemented by the postindustrial context of the venue. There is hardly a trace of irony and barely any playfulness (the tongue-in-cheek installation, *Trading Post*, by Visible Solutions, LLC, is the exception here). This is not because Medina has an axe to grind. In fact, his approach seems rather thoughtful, resulting in the inclusion of artists who employ a variety of approaches. For example, a magical sound-and-scent work, *Martinete*, by the Brazilian artist Oswaldo Maciá is placed in a long light-filled hallway replete with peeling paint and rusty window casings. Upon entering the space, a visitor detects a scent emanating from a device hung above and hears a recording of industrial hammering, which the artwork label explains was the source of salsa’s rhythmic signature. Examining women’s role in industrial production and labor organization, Marge Menko presents a slideshow of historical Estonian factory photos paired with a recording of a scene of a drama by Elfriede Jelineck about female labor organizers. Tomaz Furlan’s prosthetic machines, *Wear Series*, execute simple tasks like crushing cans and sweeping, parodying the repetitive activities of everyday life outside the factory and demonstrating how the rationality of industrialization is not confined to the workplace.

Another theme at Manifesta 9 is globalization. Making visible new industrial partnerships between China and various African nations, the photographs of Paolo Woods update the documentary photographic tradition represented by another

participant, **Edward Burtynsky**. The expansive, multipart installation by Jota Izquierdo, *Capitalismo Amarillo: Special Economic Zone*, is composed of a painted floor, curved tables on which Chinese products are arrayed, and a series of suspended video monitors. The documentary videos shown on these monitors include interviews with merchants and producers that explore the new distribution channels in Mexico and Spain for cheap plastic objects and counterfeit designer goods exported from China. The masterpiece on the topic of how the geographical distribution of labor has gone mad is undoubtedly Katleen Vermeir and Ronny Heiremans's video installation about the globalization of the art world, *The Residence (A Wager for the Afterlife)*, in which a Chinese artist is commissioned by a wealthy Euro-American benefactor to produce an unlocatable house for the afterlife.

These issues are also inextricably connected to politics, most clearly seen in the work of Jeremy Deller and Mike Figgis in the "Historical" section. Deller and Figgis recreated the **1984 Battle at Orgreave**, a definitive victory for Margaret Thatcher's Neoliberal government policies over organized labor in Britain. In a less sympathetic vein, Nemanja Cvijanovic stages protests with Croatians—providing signs, cheers, and the rest of it—and then films herself paying the demonstrators. Her work presents a profound piece of postcommunist bad faith that nevertheless makes for some very compelling art. One wonders how many protests around the world are organized in just this way.

In numerous videos and installations on view at Manifesta 9, the ideas of creation, invention, and transformation are shunned in favor of commentaries on political commitment and neoliberal economics. Questions of accessing truth about the outside world are filtered through the syntax of documentary. But there is an overall degree of remove, underlined by the placement of the show in a postindustrial provincial Belgian province, that suggests that art and politics perhaps only meet in the imagination. The work in Manifesta 9 is relevant to the world; it exposes its processes and inequalities. Such work makes us think and may compel us to act, but it does not necessarily encourage participation.

Mariam Ghani. *A Brief History of Collapses*, 2011–2012; installation view; 2-channel HD video installation, color, 6.1-channel sound; 22:00. Dimensions variable, Courtesy Mariam Ghani, Commissioned and produced by Documenta (13), with additional support provided by the Graham Foundation for Advanced Studies in the Fine Arts. Photo: Roman März.

## 7th Berlin Biennale

However, activism is a current throughout Documenta (13), with projects by artist-activists such as Claire Pentecost, Amy Balkin, and the artist-run initiative AND AND AND, among others. Occupy protesters had also set up just outside the Fridericianum in Kassel. This was an interesting echo of the then-concurrent 7th Berlin Biennale, which was focused upon the Occupy movement. Organized by Arthur Zmijewski, the 7th Berlin Biennale was presented primarily at the Kunstwerke Institute for Contemporary Art (KW) and at the Deutschlandhaus, along with two other venues. There were philosophical and political discussions shared by both biennales, which so clearly aimed to open themselves up beyond the art world (a trend presaged by many similar art events, particularly the 2002 Okwui Enwezor-curated Documenta 11). But the 7th Berlin Biennale was in a sense a call to action, which invited political activists as well as artists to participate. To quote the official handbook:

*In the last year people of the worldwide social movements 15m/ Indigenados/ Occupy/ Real Democracy Now/ Arabian Spring were invited by the curators of this year's Berlin Biennale... This cooperation is no museum, but a workroom and experimental space for global change and opposition!*<sup>2</sup>

Most of the works in the project, and the various events that were organized within it, seriously sought to change not just the conversation around politics and art but also the way art viewers engaged in politics in the world.

It is fair to ask, then: Should this be the role of art? Or the artist? Or even the biennale? Is not a little distance the essence of the artistic project? The questions sparked by the 7th Berlin Biennale's ambitious agenda seemed more generative of palpable unease than measured consideration. Berliners involved in the art world with whom I discussed the biennale before arriving at the KW Institute, were somewhat dismissive: no one had gone, nor were they interested. When I arrived and saw the encampment inside the expansive gallery space, I could see the reason for their reserve. The project could have been titled "Occupy the White Cube." These folks had moved in, made art and food, and invited others to join in their discussions, their lives, and their utopian project. They were squatters at the core of the market-exhibition system, invading the art world with their unreconstructed idealism. They wanted to change larger systems, beginning with the art world. I am sure this looked familiar to those who have been around for forty years, but today, what Berlin gallerist would want to see that?

Arriving on the last weekend of the biennale, I had missed one of its major events, the “New World Summit” organized by the Dutch artist Jonas Staal, which took place on May 4 and 5. During that weekend, the artist and his collaborators brought together as many representatives of organizations placed on terrorist watch lists as possible. At the summit, these representatives were given free reign to speak, in a specially built circular structure designed to create an open, democratic forum, in the vein of the United Nations building. The video recording of the proceedings was a little dull, I’ll admit, but you have to respect Staal’s ambition. Having the United States government declare that a political organization contributes to terrorism effectively pushes its voice outside of political discourse. To make a space for those excluded voices was an attempt by an artist to intervene directly in global politics.

I did attend some of the conference organized by Zmijewski that explored in an open-ended way the intersection between art, film, and the politics of the Occupy movement. I arrived just in time for a Q & A where I saw a professor, Salvatore Lacagnina, questioned for his specialized academic reading of the etymology of *occupy*. A student-age woman directly asked whether his approach wasn’t counter-revolutionary. This does not happen at most conferences I attend, and I found the exchange refreshing. Upstairs, I saw *Breaking the News*, a panorama of continually updated videos made by a range of artists in the past year of political protests and conflicts with police around the world. Cushions were placed on the floor so you could recline and watch—which was far preferable to the unforgiving benches in the other expos for watching the countless hours of videos on offer. There were no videos from Oakland, but the display of solidarity was a form of validation for a protester like myself. For others, I imagine it provided a window onto the many forms resistance can take, at times fought for with placards or theatrics and, at other times, with lobbed stones. The police, when one could see their faces, did not look like they were having fun, but they did not come off as compassionate either.

Katleen Vermeir and Ronny Heiremans. *The Residence (A Wager for the Afterlife)*, 2012; Single-screen video installation; 35:00. Photo: Kristien Daem.

Another work, *State of Palestine* by Khaled Jarrar, involved the production of two kinds of stamps celebrating the Palestinian nation (which, of course, does not yet exist). One could get a stamp in a passport, but Jarrar's team also had managed to produce an actual German postage stamp, allowing visitors to become participants by mailing letters around the world. (Apparently there is a liberal German law that allows citizens to design their own stamps for approval by the national post office). Support for a Palestinian state seems to be the victim of a stalled Middle East peace process, and though the politics is complicated, the ideal of the two-state solution has apparently been thrown out by the current Israeli administration. So Jarrar's intervention aims to redress this stalemate by compelling action outside of official channels. On the top floor of the KW Institute was a seedling project, *Guerilla Gardening*, which involved the occupying collective (in this case, a collective of collectives) producing a large quantity of seedlings that local residents could take if they gave their names and addresses. The idea seemed hardly radical to a Bay Area denizen, but it made clear that art and politics had a local as well as a global dimension and that the curators were willing to make room for the activists' projects in the context of the biennale.

At first glance, it is hard not to think of the 7th Berlin Biennale as giving the lie to the spectacle, the flocking visitors, and the opportunism of the bigger art events such as Documenta (13). But that would be entirely too reductive. The Berlin show provided a sense of a project on the edge, not one that is well funded or that has a particular reputation to uphold. There are many levels from which to consider the significance of contemporary art and to argue for its relevance. The different strategies demonstrated by these three European exhibitions all have the same essential aim: to use cultural production as an agent to engage the present historical moment and to open this production up for viewers to reflect on it more deeply. Each exhibition has a distinct position, but their goals are very much aligned. At a basic level, each satisfied this viewer's desire to be stimulated and involved. The crucial question is: How does art contribute to our understanding of politics and history, and how can it provide a medium that allows us to take possession of these concepts, right now?

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NOTES:

1. Documenta 13, *The Guidebook*, catalog 3 (Kassel: Hatje Catz, 2012), 6.

2. "The worldwide movements network on the 7<sup>th</sup> Berlin Biennale," *Occupy Biennale, 7<sup>th</sup> Berlin Biennale for contemporary art* (Berlin: Berlin Biennale, 2012), unpaginated.

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**domus**

## **Manifesta 9: The Deep of the Modern**

Curated by Cuauhtémoc Medina, the true theme of Manifesta 9's main exhibition is our everchanging economic system, continuously transforming the terms and conditions of labour and social relations.



For the main exhibition of [Manifesta 9](#), Mexican curator [Cuauhtémoc Medina](#) has created – with Dawn Ades and Katarina Gregos – [The Deep of the Modern](#), a dialogue between personal narrative, history, the memory of a particular place, and a present era of connections, transversality and global dynamics.

**Author: Gabi Scardi**

**Published: 22 June 2012**

**Manifesta** is an itinerant biennial founded in the early nineties as a platform for investigating political, social and economic change underway – through an European lens. Among its guiding principles is its location: it is held in marginal areas that are not yet central to artistic production. This edition takes place at the gates of **Genk**, a small town halfway between Brussels, Eindhoven and Maastricht, in the Limburg region of Belgium. Inhabited mainly by miners, and developed primarily in relation to the presence of coal mines, this area has long been considered a sort of industrial hinterland in Europe. Today, a large percentage of Genk's population is made up of children and grandchildren of miners, who were originally late 19th century migrants, mostly from Italy. It is worth remembering that until not so long ago, Italy was a country of emigration; only in 1974 did the trend reverse.

The Deep of the Modern is concentrated in one location, an empty and dilapidated building at the Waterschei mining site. The show occupies three floors, with sections defined according to the building's structure. The exhibition space on the ground floor houses objects and documents; it is a web of history, stories and memories relating to the mining activity of the recent past. The first floor houses works by major artists from the post-war era, from Duchamp to Beuys, Broodthaers to Richard Long; part of the space, insulated and air conditioned, includes works from the history of art between the 19th and 20th centuries. The third floor hosts thirty-five contemporary artists, many of whom were invited to create new projects addressing the issue of labour, in light of our current zeitgeist. In fact, the show's true theme is our everchanging economic system, continuously transforming the terms and conditions of labour and social relations.



**Top: Carlos Amorales, Coal Drawing Machine, 2012. Installation with plotter printer, paper and charcoal, © the artist. Supported by Yvon Lambert Gallery, Paris, and Kurimanzutto Gallery, Mexico City. Acknowledgment to Atelier Calder, Sachém France. Commissioned by Manifesta 9. Photo by Kristof Vrancken. Above: Edward Burtynsky, China, Manufacturing, 2005. Selection of eight photographs, © the artist. Supported by Galeria Toni Tàpies, Barcelona. Courtesy of Nicholas Metivier Gallery, Toronto, Stefan Röpke Gallery, Köln**

The exhibition is interwoven and deeply rooted in its context. The energy of memory circulates unmistakably in the powerful space so strongly defined by the Waterschei. Emerging simultaneously from the recesses of memory, family "collections" and police archives, the material and immaterial heritage on view resonates with torment revealing something repressed, at times recovering a forgotten history with dramatic implications: the unspeakable misery of so many past lives spent, from childhood on, in the real and metaphorical darkness of the mine, the tragedy of an existence from which very little remains. There are tea towels embroidered with scenes of everyday life; record books of the work of men, women, and children – who, according to a 1889 law, were admitted to the mine only after reaching the age of twelve. Seven thousand of these documents are on display, along with portraits by former miner Manuel Duran, who used any available material – from pasta to salted potatoes – to paint to create a vast array of anonymous heads that speak as universal images of miners and personifications of misery.

 Claire Fontaine, *The House? of Energetic Culture*, 2012. Double and triple outline neon glass on aluminum characters, aluminum framework, transformers, flasher unit and cabling, 10,1 x 1,75 metres, © the artist. Supported by Neon Line, Dusty Sprengnagel. Courtesy of Air de Paris, Galerie Chantal Crousel, Paris. Commissioned by Manifesta 9. Photo by Kristof Vrancken

**Claire Fontaine, *The House? of Energetic Culture*, 2012. Double and triple outline neon glass on aluminum characters, aluminum framework, transformers, flasher unit and cabling, 10,1 x 1,75 metres, © the artist. Supported by Neon Line, Dusty Sprengnagel. Courtesy of Air de Paris, Galerie Chantal Crousel, Paris. Commissioned by Manifesta 9. Photo by Kristof Vrancken**

the [Ashington Group](#), a collective of a few dozen miners who, under the guidance of Robert Lyon in 1934, devoted themselves to amateur painting in their spare time, achieving a certain reputation. Or such as [Rocco Granata](#), the son of Italian miners, who as an accordionist recorded the 1958 international hit Marina and became a star. On display are his records, a glittering jukebox, his Vespa, paraphernalia of every kind, and images both of a young Granata and of him at the peak of his success.

**“The exhibition unfolds in a continuous back-and-forth, freeing itself from the tendency to see context-specific work as a way to claim a local identity to be preserved and defended”**



**Katleen Vermeir & Ronny Heiremans, *The Residence (a wager for the afterlife)*, 2012. Single screen video installation, 35 minutes, © the artists. A production of Limited Editions VZW supported by the Flanders Audiovisual Fund and the Flemish Community. A co-production of Argos, centre for art and media (Brussels), C-Mine (Genk), Cultuurcentrum (Bruges), deBuren (Brussels), Extra City Kunsthall (Antwerp), FLACC (Genk), Manifesta 9 Limburg (Genk) and Triodos Fonds. Research support by artist residencies in China CEAC (Xiamen), TIM (Beijing)**

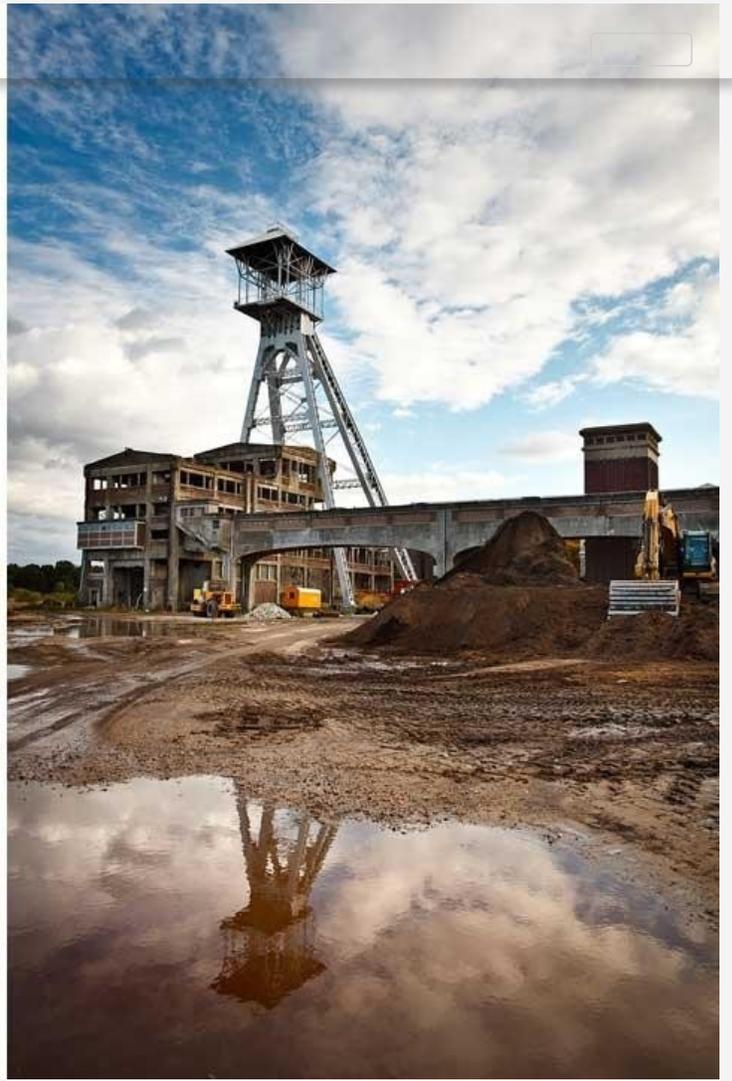
Many of the works on display on the first floor use coal or other materials charged with meaning and evocative power. Installations of environmental dimensions such as [Christian Boltanski's](#) *Le registres du Grand Hornu*, [David Hammons'](#) *Chasing the Blue Train* or [Rossella Biscotti's](#) *Title One, The Task of the Community* and *A Conductor* are complemented by experimental documentary films as

In this "historical" section, the pieces on display find their lowest common denominator in the mining landscape and the work and life of miners. The works range from the sublime to the picturesque, interpreting industrial sites as dramatic and grandiose elements; representing scenes of an underground hell and considering the aesthetics of pollution; going from a realism that sees workers as the main characters on the scene to [Stakhanovism](#). Work and workers are the central elements of representation.



**2012 Architects and Refunc, architectural implementations in the Manifesta 9 exhibition venue. Photo by Kristof Vrancken**

The building's uppermost floor is occupied by contemporary works, in many cases produced for the exhibition, in which the artists reflect upon the conditions of industrial production and work in today's post-industrial society. One of the most striking is a piece by [Mikhsil Karikis and Uriel Orlow](#), who asked singers from a choir of former miners to recall and vocalize the sounds of underground mining activities. The resulting piece is presented in a mysterious and fascinating video filmed near Genk. A video by Nicolas Kozakis and Raoul Vaneigem is also poetic and poignant: we see a lone worker intent on building a stone house near the sea, with a donkey as his only companion. His actions are accompanied by a text expressing the need for a new and more humane worldview.



**Former coal mine of Waterschei, Genk, Limburg, Belgium. Photos by Kristof Vrancken**

[Edward Burtynsky](#) photographs men and women who work in large-scale industrial factories in China, while [Paolo Woods](#), in his photographic series *Chinafrica*, explores the effects of the recent conquest of the African continent by the Chinese economy and the human relationships that come about through the resulting dislocation of the population. These trends are currently underway in our global world.

Manifesta 9's *The Deep of the Modern* unfolds in a continuous back-and-forth between questions and answers, freeing itself from the tendency to see context-specific work as a way to claim a local identity to be preserved and defended. The show's site and venue create, instead, a paradigmatic situation, which allows reflection upon the transformation of cultural, industrial, economic and relational models that go well beyond a specific context. Beyond an interesting exhibition, *The Deep of the Modern* is an important curatorial essay.

Gabi Scardi

**KATLEEN  
VERMEIR &  
RONNY  
HEIREMANS**  
BY  
**NAV HAQ**

*Just what is it that makes today's homes so different, so appealing?* asked Richard Hamilton's iconic collage, produced in 1956 for *This Is Tomorrow*, more a radical advertising showroom than an art exhibition, organised by the Independent Group at London's Whitechapel Gallery. In light of capitalism's projections of the future – new cities packed with new forms of architectures, lifestyles and unbound creativity – Hamilton's collage offered a prescient vision of societies mobilised by personal, unobtainable desires. It is in the contemporary landscape that developed out

of such desires that collaborative duo Katleen Vermeir and Ronny Heiremans have developed a practice that considers the sheer abstraction that is the global economy, and in particular its aesthetic manifestations in the realms of art and architecture.¶ Vermeir and Heiremans initiated their collaborative venture *A.I.R.* – the acronym for 'Artist in Residence', originally used for the pioneering scheme in New York offering artists loft-living in former industrial spaces – as a means to consider how property is visualised in marketing. Their own apartment – which they consider a kind of artwork in its own right – is located in Brussels and acts as a point of departure for several works that they term 'mediated extensions'. Each extension, often an installation recorded via the medium of narrative video, offers, in various ways, a visualisation of the apartment space that is reflexive of the pictorial and rhetorical language of marketing for future architectural developments – visualisations that aim to tap into aspirational desires for luxurious domestic space.¶ Their most recent video installation, *The Residence (A Wager for the Afterlife)* (2012), offers a glimpse into the lives of the poster boys of post-Fordism – creative entrepreneurs. The film tells of an investor named Hilar who commissioned a Chinese architect, Ma Wen, to design a house for his afterlife. The installation also incorporates a design for an algorithm linked to the currency market that in turn generates a never-ending edit of the Hilar footage. While Ma Wen regards art as an index to explore the unknown, he paradoxically considers the economy as the single measure of everything, opening uncomfortable questions about the status of creativity. Among sumptuous footage of the designed interiors, the story is a Faustian tale that is allegorical of the balancing act that is life in the creative class.



**Katleen Vermeir &  
Ronny Heiremans**  
*The Residence (A Wager for the  
Afterlife)*, 2012. Photo: Kristien  
Daem. Courtesy the artists



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Planète

Culture

Sports

Lifestyle

Débats

Régions



Arts &amp; Expos

## L'art en stratégies spéculatives

Claude Lorent

Publié le mercredi 15 février 2012 à 04h15 - Mis à jour le mercredi 15 février 2012 à 04h15

Le projet développé par Katleen Vermeir (1973) et par Ronny Heiremans (1962) pour leur nouvelle installation vidéo pourrait s'inscrire à la limite du documentaire s'il n'était finalement une fiction infiltrée par des images enregistrées sur les réalités du terrain. Et quel terrain, celui des relations entre l'art actuel et l'argent ou plutôt les finances ou encore l'art en ses relations avec les stratégies spéculatives dans lesquelles les productions artistiques trouvent de plus en plus leur place. Ou autrement dit encore, l'art qui n'a plus grand-chose à voir avec l'art si ce n'est en regard de sa valeur marchande qui guide de plus en plus d'acquéreurs à travers le monde. Dans ce secteur les enjeux ne sont plus artistiques car l'art est devenu une marchandise et une valeur de placement à court terme, si possible pour rapporter gros et rapidement. On disait fiction, mais est-ce si loin de certaines réalités dans le système économique actuel qui recherche de nouvelles opportunités d'applications ? Pas sûr du tout et la mégalomanie gagne sans cesse du terrain !

Sur ce terreau qui ne nécessite actuellement pas d'engrais, les deux plasticiens ont investigué en Chine et se sont inspirés de Goethe lorsque son Faust est devenu promoteur. L'histoire est complexe et exige un guide afin de pouvoir saisir valablement l'ensemble du déroulé au départ d'un graphique chiffré sur écran modifiant sans cesse les données en fonction de plus values. Il s'agit d'un algorithme basé sur le marché des devises et le cours de l'or dont l'incidence peut se lire en pourcentage sur la composition des images qui font face et montrent une certaine agitation. Quand on plonge dans le monde de la haute finance à énormes enjeux, il arrive qu'une certaine nervosité gagne les esprits.



Le protagoniste de l'histoire est un investisseur et collectionneur d'art qui sollicite un architecte afin de concevoir une maison non pour l'habiter de son vivant mais pour garantir en quelque sorte rien moins que l'au-delà ! Si l'utopie est évidemment de la partie, la symbolique d'une certaine folie liée à la toute puissance de l'argent est assez percutante et significative de la spirale dans laquelle certains ne sont pas loin de s'engouffrer ! La réalisation qui a été menée à bien avec le concours de l'artiste et architecte chinoise Ma Wen livre des images et des commentaires (en anglais) incisifs mais mériterait au minimum une introduction accessible à tous.

**Vermeir & Heiremans. The Residence (a wager for the afterlife). Argos, 13, rue du Chantier, 1000 Bruxelles. Jusqu'au 1er avril. Du mercredi au dimanche de 11 à 18 heures.**



Vermeir & Heiremans, *The Residence (a wager for the afterlife)* 2012, courtesy the artists. Photo Kristien Daem.

29.01 – 01.04.2012

**VERMEIR &  
HEIREMANS  
THE RESIDENCE  
(A WAGER FOR  
THE AFTERLIFE)**



**OPENING NIGHT**

28.01.2012 18.00-21.00

**(NL)** In 2006 startten Katleen Vermeir (1973) en Ronny Heiremans (1962) A.I.R ('artist in residence'), een samenwerkingsproject dat de dynamische relatie tussen kunst, architectuur en economie tematiseert. Deze praktijk ontwikkelt zich in verschillende projecten waarin architectuur het projectievlak voor consumentendromen vormt. Hun loft-appartement in Brussel is het uitgangspunt voor de productie van wat ze omschrijven als "gemedieerde extensies" van deze privéruimte. Vermeir & Heiremans zien A.I.R als een platform voor samenwerking. Hieruit ontstond bijvoorbeeld op uitnodiging van Arnolfini (Bristol) het research-based video werk *The Good Life* (2009), een meditatie over de onontwarbare relatie tussen kunst, vastgoed, kunstinstututen en de economie in bredere zin, zoals die tegenwoordig is ingebed in de creatieve industrie. Het werk behoort tot de Argoscollectie. Hun nieuwe videoproject *The Residence (a wager for the afterlife)* zoomt in op de kunstenaar als ondernemer binnen een geglobaliseerde maatschappij waar de economische context als maatstaf geldt. Het werk inspireert zich op *Faust II*, waarin Goethe Faust als projectontwikkelaar opvoert. Het project werd ontwikkeld tijdens een residentie in China (2009-10). Vermeir & Heiremans initieerden er een samenwerking met Ma Wen, een Chinese kunstenaar / architect, met wie ze inzichten

deelden over het concept 'creatieve clusters'. Ze documenteerden Ma Wen's praktijk als culturele producent.

In *The Residence* figureren Ma Wen en twee fictieve personages. De zeer rijke investeerder Hilar verzoekt Ma Wen een huis voor zijn leven na de dood te ontwerpen. Zijn personage opent een wereld van economisch fetisjisme. De andere figuur, een 'mysterieuze vrouw', is veeleer allegorisch van aard. Vertolkt door eenzelfde actrice in een klein dozijn naamloze rollen, verschijnt de vrouw niet alleen als Ma Wens kantoorassistente, maar verpersoonlijkt ze ook de vrouwen in Hilars wereld. Op die manier loopt haar veelvuldigheid parallel aan de wispelturigheid van de financiële markt.

Voor *The Residence* werkten Vermeir & Heiremans eveneens nauw samen met de Britse geluidsartiest Justin Bennett. Naast de geluidsarchitectuur ontwierp hij een aan de geld- & goudmarkt verbonden algoritme dat een oneindige transformatie van het Hilar-beeldmateriaal genereert. (IS)

Parallel aan de tentoonstelling in Argos presenteert Extra City Kunsthal Antwerpen *The Residence (reading room)*, een discursief programma naar aanleiding van het project (zie ook pagina 19).



Vermeir & Heiremans, *The Residence (a wager for the afterlife)* 2012, courtesy the artists. Photo Kristien Daem.

Ⓡ Katleen Vermeir (1973) et Ronny Heiremans (1962) ont lancé en 2006 la pratique A.I.R. ('artist in residence'), qui explore la dynamique entre l'art, l'architecture et l'économie. La pratique englobe divers projets, dont l'un définit leur habitat privé comme une œuvre d'art. Se livrant à un travail de réflexion, les artistes emploient leur loft bruxellois comme du matériel, produisant des "mediated extensions", des espaces communs, de leur espace domestique. Vermeir et Heiremans utilisent la pratique A.I.R. comme plateforme de collaboration avec les personnes les plus diverses. Cette approche débouche sur des œuvres vidéo expérimentales comme *The Good Life*, commandée par Arnolfini, Bristol en 2009 et qui intégra plus tard la collection d'Argos. La vidéo est une méditation sur la relation inextricable entre l'art, l'immobilier, les institutions artistiques et la vaste structure de l'économie, aujourd'hui exploitée par la 'classe créative'. Leur nouvelle installation vidéo *The Residence (a wager for the afterlife) - La Résidence (un pari sur l'au-delà)* (2012) porte son attention sur l'artiste comme entrepreneur dans une société mondialisée qui considère l'économie comme unique mesure des choses. Elle s'inspire de Faust II, œuvre dans laquelle Goethe fait de Faust un promoteur. Le projet a été conçu au cours d'une longue résidence en Chine (2009-10). Vermeir & Heiremans y sont entrés en collaboration avec Ma Wen, un artiste et architecte chinois, dont ils partagent les vues sur le concept de *creative clusters*, de *complexes créatifs*. Ils ont documenté sa pratique artistique de producteur culturel.

*The Residence* présente Ma Wen et deux personnages de fiction. L'un est Hilar, un très riche investisseur qui demande à l'architecte chinois de créer une maison pour son *au-delà*. C'est l'univers du fétichisme économique qui s'ouvre à travers le personnage de Hilar. L'autre personnage – la Femme Mystérieuse – est plutôt allégorique, revêtant une douzaine de rôles, tous tenus par une seule actrice. A la fois assistante dans le bureau de Ma Wen et incarnation de toutes les femmes dans l'univers de Hilar, elle reflète par sa multiplicité la volatilité du marché financier. Vermeir et Heiremans ont étroitement collaboré avec Ma Wen et le musicien britannique Justin Bennett. Mis à part la bande-son, les artistes ont demandé à ce dernier de créer un algorithme lié aux marchés des devises et de l'or et produisant une édition sonore sans fin du métrage Hilar. (IS)

Extra City Kunsthall Antwerpen présente en parallèle à l'exposition *The Residence (reading room)*, un programme discursif autour le projet (voir aussi page 19).

Ⓔ In 2006 Katleen Vermeir (1973) and Ronny Heiremans (1962) initiated A.I.R. ('artist in residence'), a collaborative practice that examines the dynamics between art, architecture and economy. The practice encapsulates different projects, one of which defines their private habitat as an artwork. Working reflexively, the artists use their loft apartment in Brussels as source material, producing 'mediated extensions' of their domestic space. Vermeir & Heiremans use A.I.R. as a platform for collaborating with a variety of people. This approach led to research-based video works like *The Good Life*, that was commissioned by Arnolfini, Bristol in 2009 and later became part of the Argos collection. This video is a meditation on the inextricable relationship between art, real estate, art institutions and the wider structure of the economy, harnessed today by the 'creative class'.

Their new video installation *The Residence (a wager for the afterlife)* (2012) focuses on the artist as entrepreneur in a global society that qualifies economy as the single measure of things. The work relates to *Faust II*, in which Goethe presents Faust as a project developer. Conceived during an extended residency in China (2009-10), the project initiated a collaboration with the Chinese artist/architect Ma Wen. Sharing insights on the *creative clusters* concept, Vermeir & Heiremans documented his practice as a cultural producer. *The Residence* features Ma Wen and two fictional characters. One is Hilar, a very wealthy investor who commissions the Chinese architect to develop a house for his *afterlife*. Through Hilar a world of economic fetishism opens up. The other one – the Mysterious Woman – is a rather allegorical character, enveloping a dozen roles, all of them performed by one actress. Appearing not only as assistant in Ma Wen's office but also as the embodiment of all women in Hilar's world, her multiplicity aligns with the financial market's shiftiness.

Vermeir & Heiremans collaborated closely with Ma Wen, and with British sound artist Justin Bennett. Apart from the soundscape, the artists also commissioned the latter to design an algorithm that is linked to the currency & gold market and that generates a never ending edit of the Hilar footage. (IS)

Parallel to the exhibition in Argos, Extra City Kunsthall Antwerpen presents *The Residence* (reading room), a discursive program on the project (see also page 19).

*The Residence* is a production of Limited Editions vzw supported by Flanders Audiovisual Fund and the Flemish Community. Coproduction: Argos (Brussels), C-Mine (Genk), Cultuurcentrum (Bruges), deBuren (Brussels), Extra City Kunsthall Antwerpen (Antwerp), FLACC (Genk), Manifesta 9 Limburg (Genk) and Triodos Fonds. Research support: artist residencies TIM (Beijing), CEAC (Xiamen).

*The Residence* is a video project by Katleen Vermeir & Ronny Heiremans in collaboration with Ma Wen, Justin Bennett, Amir Borenstein, Mieja Hollevoet, Salome Schmuki, Karlijn Sileghem, Wim van der Grijn. Photos: Kristien Daem.

# THE RESIDENCE IS SOMETHING IMMATERIAL

Essay: Carol Yinghua Lu

**(EN)** Like an architect, I will start with some basics even though you might already know of them. In 2006, Katleen Vermeir (1973) and Ronny Heiremans (1962) initiated A.I.R ('artist in residence'). A.I.R. is about using their loft apartment, which was built and furnished by themselves through an extended process of labour and time, in Brussels, as a platform and source material to explore "mediated extensions" of their domestic space. It's a reflexive practice on the engineering of life styles by social, political and economic structures and ambitions, imbedded in various channels of information dissemination, not least life style and fashion magazines, which the artists refer to repeatedly in their work. Their fascination with places where buildings are created driven by a certain economic philosophy, as well as with domestic spaces that house people and desires, led them to the creation of *The Good Life*, which was commissioned by Arnolfini, Bristol in 2009. Like any good architects, Vermeir and Heiremans developed the project with the specificities of Arnolfini and the immediate surroundings of the port city of Bristol in mind. *The Good Life* emulated a strategy commonly employed by property developers to activate certain fantasies and aspirations within their clients by resorting to the use of catch phrases, elaborate descriptions of extra attributes, such as the added value of having artworks around. Only that it took place within the bare walls of an art centre.

This is an experience that many have encountered to some degree when embarking on an attempt to acquire a new apartment that is yet to be built. After being greeted by the receptionist at a sales office, we would then be led to a property agent, who would show us to an elaborate architectural model that's often the centrepiece of the sales office. Often the foam model is a miniature of a gated community, a group of buildings,

and its immediate surroundings with interactive lighting device that can light up a certain feature when pointed to by a remote control held in the hand of the agent. "It will be very close to a kindergarten. There will be a supermarket with lots of variety. It will be close to a subway stop to be completed in year 2016. There will be a beautiful garden in this part." Promises are made. Temptations are offered. Emotions and excitement are evoked. Deals are sealed. We have been invited to join the imaginary of the sales agent, usually oblivious of the bigger capitalist fantasy of our society that urges us to own and then be happy. We are too absorbed into our own desires and projections of what a good life could be, to see the bigger picture. We would then end up buying something almost as intangible as a dream, prescribed to us by the agency and his/her scripted sales pitch, without even having a chance to see the actual building or apartment. Behind the façade of large-scale billboard ads advocating high fashion way of living there are endless scenes of exposed soil and underpaid and poorly equipped construction workers. It's a formidable attempt by the sales agents to create the right pitch, the right script, knowing which buttons to push and what kind of aspirations, sentiment, and vanity to evoke within each of us, steering us away from the bare facts right in front of us. We have been convinced that what we buy is what we want and hope for. What we want as individuals is often shaped by what is communicated to us through the media, not least in life style, design and architecture magazines that stipulate models of the perfect settings for living.

This familiar scenario was re-enacted in *The Good Life* in an extreme fashion. The upscale property that a well-dressed property agent is trying to sell to a group of potential customers in the video is actually the gallery spaces of Arnolfini but the artists made no attempt to hide the nakedness of the white walls, the crates, the wrapped up paintings and the noise of technicians installing works in the background. Instead, the presence of all these elements is emphasized throughout the film, juxtaposed with the agent's unperturbed introduction of the up-market architectural proposal and lifestyle that she is promoting and trying to sell, describing and inviting them to imagine with her the interior, the grand views, the artworks on the wall, and ultimately, a 21st century landmark building.

As absurd as it seems in the film, seeing *The Good Life* feels like stepping out of our own reality to look at something from afar, a moment of deliberation, reminding us how we have actually all subscribed to a certain logic of an ideal life that is not exactly of our own intention but a collective unconsciousness formulated by media languages and commercial interests, the interests of others. It was only fitting that the words spoken in the film to describe the

estate were all taken from various life style magazines, architecture and urban planning publications that the artists had come across. It revealed how these terms have become almost empty signifiers on their own accord. They can practically be applied anywhere. The property, and perhaps, the good life as embodied in the ownership of such property, is the emperor's new clothes, something existing in articulation, not in truth.

*The Residence*, a new video work by Vermeir and Heiremans, can also be considered one of the “mediated extensions” of the artists' home, a reflexive exercise on the collective psyche of our society and time that motivates us to claim, to build, to expand, to sell, to own, which constitutes an endless cycle. As the title suggests, the plot of the film is a housing project commissioned by Hilar, an investor modelled on a real person based in Xiamen, Geneva and Hong Kong whom the artists had met while doing a residency in Xiamen from 2009 to 2010. It was during this residency that *The Residence* was conceived and planned. The story evolves as the Chinese architect Ma Wen receives a commission to design a house from Hilar and alternates his positions and thoughts between his role as an architect and his alter ego as a painter.

The role of the investor in the film, Hilar, can be any top-level businessman in fact, who according to the research of the artists, operate relying on such references as the ‘I Ching for investors’ and ‘the planetary predictions’ for decision making. His sense of certainty though can be found in the act of owning; an insatiable yearning that is extended to his afterlife. *The Residence* is one that Hilar intends to be created for his afterlife, but it really speaks of many of our current obsessions: one of them being cultural activities and the role of artists implicated and instrumentalized into the scheme of city marketing and property branding. In the film, there is a former mining site that has been transformed into a cultural centre with oversized artist studios and gallery spaces.



Vermeir & Heiremans, *The Good Life (a guided tour)*, 2009.  
Photo Michael De Lausnay.

As the video opens, we follow Ma Wen, who ponders about life and his determination to leave his marks on the earth by embarking on an ambitious housing project for a million residents, from where he stands by the seaside of Xiamen, where he lives in real life as a practicing architect, into the sleek steel elevator that takes him into his architectural office. It is in this office that we are introduced to Hilar and his vision for his fantasy home project for his afterlife. Hilar appears not in flesh but in photographs, dressed in a white suit and wearing a white tie. In these pinned up photographs on the walls, Hilar, an older Western-looking man, looks down at the torn out magazine pages that cover a long table. On his left, a woman lies face down on top of an even bigger pile of torn out magazine pages on the floor. In another image, Hilar sits in front of a desk in a rather boring room, looking at two computer screens simultaneously, perhaps checking on his stock performance while trying to figure out what he wants for his afterlife.

We then wander into Xiamen's scenic botanical garden with Ma Wen, after he has giving a brief order over his phone to someone, asking him/her to entice as many workers as possible for the project, to make them work hard and to update him with daily news concerning the progress of digging a trench, recalling the ambition he pronounced at the beginning of the film to “make room for a million to live”...“on green fertile fields where men and herds may gain swift comfort from the new made earth.” In the garden, as Ma Wen seeks inspiration for his architectural plan, we hear Hilar narrating what he dreams of for his house, “with splendid gardens all around.”<sup>1</sup> He continues to pronounce his vision to Ma Wen, communicating through computer screens, while dressed casually in what appears like pyjamas.

As the film unfolds, a larger ideological context is slowly revealed to us. Ma Wen as the painter performs his act of painting in what appears to be an art event. The artist and the act of art making become something for the spectator, something not valued on its own but being projected with a certain value to be added to a life style or the gentrification of an area in the name of developing a cultural district. To quote Ma Wen: “People come with great curiosity to see how avant-garde artists live and create their work.”... “Some artists oppose the excessive commercialization that turns the district into a supermarket where art becomes an object of speculation”...“I think this question of opposition, firstly, is a misunderstanding of creative progress and of a city's progress. In fact this opposition to productivity is really nothing more than another type of productivity.”<sup>2</sup>

In the editorial introduction to the #29 issue of *e-flux journal* that focuses on Moscow Conceptualism, the editors wrote, “In this world, communist ideology had already converted objects to ideas (collective property)

and citizen-subjects to (non-professional) artists, so the found object, the privileging of idea over material, and the disappearance of the artist's hand were already indistinguishable from an ideological landscape taken for granted by the artists." It is in the mixture of fictional and factual accounts of *The Residence* that the complicated mingling and conspiracy of both capitalist and communist ideologies, the ideological landscape we inhabit in our societies, is seen clearly. In *The Residence*, to place something meant for the afterlife as the seed for the growth of a story is to stress the complexities in which we find ourselves no longer able to make out whether what we want is the material or the immaterial, whether what we want is something fictional or truthful, and whether we are the prey or the conspirator of the system. Or perhaps both the material and the immaterial have become derivative and redundant and we are already indefinitely implicated in the pact made by Faust as in Goethe's *Faust Part II*, a key reference the artists had cited for their production. What Ma Wen says at the opening scene of the video, for example, are quotes taken from Goethe's *Faust Part II*, in which *Faust* is seen as a project developer. "We think the narrative of progress and continuous development in Faust has become the official discourse in China, hence we asked him to speak like a party official when he quotes Faust."<sup>3</sup> In fact, all that Ma Wen says in *The Residence* are quotations Vermeir and Heiremans have selected from various sources, not only Goethe, but also the Chinese writer Lu Xun, when his alter-ego the artist speaks, as well as magazines such as *Urban China 33*, a special issue about Creative Industries in China that was edited by Ned Rossiter, Monica Carriço and Bert de Muynck. "But it comes close to what he speaks about in his classes (he teaches at Xiamen University) and with his clients for his architectural proposals when they want fancy bars or hotels."<sup>4</sup> The blurred line between facts and fictions, the present and the future, quotes from fiction and actual speeches, Ma Wen's engagement with the society as an architect and his dealing with the metaphorical as an artist, the switching scenes in the film between China and Belgium,

among cities such as Shanghai, Hong Kong, Xiamen and Brussels, resonates with the displacements in our societies. By placing itself aptly on multiple structures of time and space, the virtual and the factual, *The Residence* establishes its lines of thought beyond the dichotomy of the real and the fictional, the past and the future, pro-development or anti-development. It implicates all of us in the repeated traverses and oscillations of the 'in-between' and gives rise to a critical examination of our own position and desire. In *The Residence*, the Bloomberg talk in the background contains quotes from the 18th century – Hume, Defoe, Burke – all of them reflecting on the economic crisis and bubbles of their time. It is here when we are reminded again that not much has changed since then and we are a mere repetition of what has happened before.

This quote is from Defoe: "That substantial non-entity called CREDIT, seems to have a distinct Essence from all the phenomena in Nature: it is in it self the lightest and most volatile Body in the World, moveable beyond the Swiftness of Lightning; the greatest Alchemist could never fix its mercury, or find out its Quality; it is neither a Soul or a Body; it is neither visible or invisible; it is all consequence, and yet not the effect of a cause; it is a being without matter, a substance without form - A perfect free Agent acting by Wheels and Springs absolutely undiscovered; it comes without call, and goes away unsent; if it flies, the whole nation cannot stay it; if it stays away, no importunity can prevail for its return."<sup>5</sup> We soon discover that the residence being discussed in Vermeir and Heiremans' film is actually something immaterial, something almost tantamount to Defoe's description of CREDIT. In a discussion about the commission of the residence for Hilar's afterlife in the film, Ma Wen describes the house as such: "The client conceived the house as a stage, as a new domestic interior where he could enjoy the privileges of public space without being subjected to its dangers or law. Inside, the client would have absolute control over his environment. He could change night into day, screen a film at noon and order dinner at midnight. He could have appointments in the middle of the night and romantic encounters in the afternoon. It was to be his haven and sanctuary. There was no front, no back, no sides to his house. The house could have been anywhere. It was to be immaterial."<sup>6</sup> It is rather a projection, echoing a certain human sentiment and desire to have absolute control, something that the economy keeps promising us. The more we own, the more control we have. So it doesn't matter what it will be, what form it takes, with "no front, no back, no sides", as long as it is something onto which we can project what we envision to be worth having. The globalized market economy that Ma Wen refers to casually in the video can freely move manufacturing to "other continents" as if it is something intangible, like a gust of wind. In those better developed cities that



Vermeir & Heiremans, *The Residence (a wager for the afterlife)* 2012, courtesy the artists. Photo Kristien Daem.



Vermeir & Heiremans, *The Residence (a wager for the afterlife)* 2012, courtesy the artists. Photo Kristien Daem.

manage to rid themselves of manufacturing and are ready to move up another step further in the ladder of social classes, art becomes an index for a romantic pursuit of creativity, and more importantly, an aura of the elite. Like economy, art is able to generate money out of nothing. In the frequent reference to developing creative industry and art districts in cities, *The Residence* exposes the real danger that art, our personal worth and our own projections are in, which is that all are being instrumentalized in an effort to keep us in the deal. “By associating himself with the project the client can at one and at the same time be a stock market speculator and patron of the arts. The Residence will be a monument to his sense of refinement.”<sup>7</sup> At the same time, one only need to spend just a little on doing up a few warehouse, invite artists to move in and just wait for the land to rise in price. Such a low-investment/high-return project is, according to Ma Wen, real-estate alchemy.

At a certain point of the film, we’ve lost track of whether what Ma Wen describes is in the present or the hereafter. The formula of mixing commerce and consumption with art, fashion, creativity seems to be a time-tested one. We’ve also lost ourselves in terms of whether what he talks about is just China-specific or simply relevant to the globalized world. The “young crowd of internationalization” represents “a cosmopolite and ideally mobile clientele, who likes to spend time and money at trendy places.”<sup>8</sup> After all, material desires are something universal.

The cross-references to Goethe’s *Faust* and Lu Xun’s

stories, such as *Diary of a Madman* (1918), in *The Residence* constitute two parallel narratives throughout the film. One is allegorical to the kind of agreement we have signed ourselves into, which becomes a consumption of ourselves through our own endless acts of consumption. The other exposes a certain despair and vanity in attempting to break out of a dilemma and a given condition. We know well though, both have no remedy, even in the afterlife.

Carol Yinghua Lu is a Chinese curator and writer from Beijing. She is a contributing editor for *Frieze* and writes frequently for international art journals and magazines including *e-flux journal*, *The Exhibitionist*, *Yishu*, and *Tate*. She has recently been appointed one of the Co-Artistic Directors of the 2012 Gwangju Biennale.

- 1 Narratives in *The Residence*.
- 2 Ma Wen’s words in *The Residence*.
- 3 An email correspondence from Katleen Vermeir and Ronny Heiremans on November 8, 2011 responding to questions I raised in an email sent on the same date.
- 4 An email correspondence from Katleen Vermeir and Ronny Heiremans on November 8, 2011 responding to questions I raised in an email sent on the same date.
- 5 An email correspondence from Katleen Vermeir and Ronny Heiremans on November 8, 2011 responding to questions I raised in an email sent on the same date.
- 6 Ma Wen’s words in *The Residence*.
- 7 Ma Wen’s words in *The Residence*.
- 8 Ma Wen’s words in *The Residence*.

# A WAGER FOR THE AFTERLIFE

CELEBRITY REPORTER LUCY CHEN MEETS  
THE MAN BEHIND MA WEN STUDIO

Photography: Kristien Daem  
Text: Lucy Chen



**North of China. And if my memory serves me right, from 2002 till 2009 you lived in Germany where you studied art at the Fine Arts Academy in Munich. That was even before Beijing gave the go-sign for its abroad policy in 2004. How did that extended stay in Europe affect you? Was it important in your decision to become an architect?**

**Ma Wen:** Lucy, I have to say I don't really consider myself an architect. I am a person who does different things. I don't want to be in a position that a priori defines what I do. The same reasoning goes for what you've named my 'Journey to the West'. Of course it had a certain influence, but more important for what I do, seems to be my awareness that the China I left when I moved to Germany and the country I returned to after my German training are two different countries. And even more important is my ability to respond to this new situation. Upon returning I came back to a China that in a way had been remodeled into a capitalist nation. That process had already started when I left, but the speed with which 'the new way' had installed itself during my absence... Incredible! Maybe that's why being here I feel a bit schizophrenic... I have this double sensibility. It was like returning to a country I had not seen before. So many things had changed.

Not only places, but also the people. I could feel the change in the people. I remember saying to myself "Where have all the communists gone..."

**LC:** Modern, urban, affluent, international... I've read that the successful artist is surprisingly fit as a role model for the new China. The profession is even in the top 10 of preferred professions, as selected by middle class parents for their children. How did it begin for you? Was it a deliberate choice or...

**MW:** You see, I've had this 'bastard' training. I studied architecture in China. My training as an artist I got in the West, and what I absorbed during those years is based on a western social condition. This probably gave me an edge in China when I returned. As you know, we have this old saying here: "The blossom inside the wall is usually appreciated from the outside." Ever since the Open Door Policy, whatever comes from abroad has been quite influential. I'm not sure how long this will still be the case, and of course we are all aware of the situation in China, which does not exactly allow you to produce without restraints. A single spark could start a prairie fire, so the path is still filled with obstacles, not mentioning self-censorship. You yourself are probably familiar with all of that.

**(EN)** Summer of 2009. After finishing his education in Germany, Ma Wen returns to China. He sets up Ma Wen Studio and starts a business that embodies his fundamental artistic ideas and beliefs. After his Journey to the West, Ma Wen finds himself in a much-changed environment. His straightforward way of doing things, his talent for self-promotion and headstrong energy regardless of criticism position him lively against the monolithic conservatism of the state-run design houses. Not yet quite as prestigious as the international firms, his studio is in tune with the Chinese speed, which demands a just-do-it approach and ad hoc strategy.

**Lucy Chen:** Ma Wen, at the moment you live and work in Xiamen, but you were born in Henan, in the

**LC:** By the way, did you work on something specific in Brussels? You told me on the phone that you were designing a house for some rich investor.

**MW:** We did lots of things, but the main thing was the work on a new niche product. Actually the whole thing's a test case. What I learned in Germany is the need to maintain a strong focus in order to reach a goal. What's more,

I have become rather adroit in shifting between reality and imagination. If you concentrate only on the limits of reality, you may be able to realize a project, but it simply won't be that interesting. Your imagination can prevent you from simply implementing your ideas. Only by going beyond physical boundaries you can produce something new and interesting.

**LC:** Sounds pretty surreal. What form does it take then?

**MW:** It takes the form of a film, but we did not edit the film. Then we developed

an algorithm, a set of rules that precisely defines a sequence of operations. Since it was inspired on computerized trading operations in the world of high finance, we wanted our algorithm to be fed by real time financial news. For that we choose the currency market. We had to figure out a way to define tick size and currency equivalents for the video images. That was a very tricky process, but in the end we pulled it of. The news feed made the algorithm into a kind of continuous present that contextualizes the footage. Applying it to the footage generated an edit that would renew itself every time you would watch the film. Actually you could never watch the film twice, since every time the algorithm would generate a new combination of images. It would be like a continuous edit.

**LC:** Fabulous. How would you define the project? I suppose **The Residence is not meant to be built.**

**MW:** It's a representation of our client's way of living. The client's

individual worth is measured by the rise and fall of the stock market. By associating himself with the project the client can at one and the same time be a stock market speculator and patron of the arts. For the client art functions as an index, suggestive of his urge to explore the unknown, of innovative energy and the guts needed to be part of an esoteric, privileged and elite sphere. This aura can be attributed to the inexplicable ability to conjure money out of nothing, which exists both in economy and art. The Residence will be a monument to his sense of refinement.

Shanghai, April 2011.

The previous text is an extract of the complete interview, available as prepublication on [www.in-residence.be](http://www.in-residence.be). A physical copy is available in the exhibition *The Residence* (a wager for the afterlife) at Argos as well as during *The Residence* (reading room) at Extra City Kunsthal Antwerpen.



Vermeir & Heiremans, *The Residence* (a wager for the afterlife) 2012, courtesy the artists. Photo Kristien Daem.

## [OP KOMST]

### DAAN VAN GOLDEN, WIELS, BRUSSEL.

28/1-29/4

De Nederlander Daan van Golden maakt al sinds de jaren 60 schilderijen en foto's. Wiels brengt hulde met een retrospectieve.

### L.A. RAEVEN, CASINO LUXEMBOURG, LUXEMBOURG.

28/1-22/4

In hun video's, tekeningen en performances gaan tweelingzussen Liesbeth en Angelique Raeven op zoek naar het ideale individu.

### COLOGNE CONTEMPORARIES, CARLSWERK, KEULEN.

27/1-29/1

*Cologne Contemporaries* brengt Brusselse en Rijnlandse galeries naar de gerenoveerde fabriekssite Carlswerk.



GF©VERMEIR & HEIREMANS, THE RESIDENCE 2012 COURTESY OF THE ARTIST

## [UIT DE KUNST]

### WACHTEN OP HET HIERNAMAALS

In *The Residence (a wager for the afterlife)* koppelen Katleen Vermeir en Ronny Heiremans kunst aan een lastige partner: economie.

**THE RESIDENCE (A WAGER FOR THE AFTERLIFE), VAN 29/1 TOT 1/4 IN ARGOS, BRUSSEL**

Bij Argos gaat ei zo na *The Residence* van start, een nieuw, in China geconcipieerd videoproject van Katleen Vermeir en Ronny Heiremans. Vanuit het idee van de kunstenaar als ondernemer ontvouwen zich verschillende verhalen. De architect en kunstenaar Ma Wen, de rijke investeerder Hilar en ene Lady Credit doen hun intrede in een wereld waarin enkel economische normen heersen.

#### Hoe zijn jullie bij het idee van de kunstenaar als ondernemer beland?

VERMEIR & HEIREMANS: In ons vorige project *The Good Life* hadden we onszelf de fictieve rol van projectontwikkelaars toebedeeld. Toen we in China kwamen, bleek de fictie realiteit. De kunstenaar-entrepreneur werd er beschouwd als een rolmodel. De job prijkt zelfs in de top 10 van beroepen die door ouders gezien worden als ideaal voor hun kinderen. Het werd een van de uitgangspunten van *The Residence*.

#### Jullie zijn in 2010 teruggekeerd van een werkverblijf in China. Is de video daar tot stand gekomen?

VERMEIR & HEIREMANS: *The Residence (a wager for the afterlife)* is in China én in Europa gemaakt. De stedelijke context verschuift voortdurend, zij het ongemerkt, tussen plaatsen

als Shanghai, Hongkong, Xiamen, Brussel, Genk en Zeebrugge. Ma Wen is een Chinese architect/kunstenaar die we interessant vonden en met wie we inzichten deelden over de creatieve industrie. Dat vormde de basis voor de film. **Een ander personage is Hilar, een zakenman die een huis laat ontwerpen voor na zijn dood. Wat drijft hem?**

VERMEIR & HEIREMANS: Hilar is gebaseerd op een authentieke Chinese investeerder. Hij is mateloos gefascineerd door de scheppingsact van de economie. In de belofte van continue groei ontwaart hij zelfs een glimp van de eeuwigheid. Voor hem heeft economie iets religieus, wat een wereld van economisch fetisjisme doet opengaan.

#### Jullie vorige videoproject 'The Good Life' werd omschreven als een 'meditatie'. Geldt dat ook voor deze video?

VERMEIR & HEIREMANS: Het zou een reflectie kunnen zijn op wat er op dit ogenblik in onze maatschappij gebeurt. Als economie de enige norm wordt, kan dat enkel leiden tot een onderwaardering van wat echt waarde heeft. Daarom leek vastgoed voor na de dood ons erg geschikt als beeld. Laat de kolonisatie van 'the afterlife' maar beginnen. (E.F.)



## [WWW.GESPOT] ARTISTS AT WORK, ELINA BROTHERUS

De Finse Elina Brotherus (39) heeft haar plaats in de kunstscene veroverd. Ze maakt geladen reeksen waarin ze zelf model is en zich zonder schaamte op thema's als liefdesverdriet, ziekte of eenzaamheid werpt. In de reeks *Artists at work* verschijnt ze als naaktmodel voor twee klassiek gevormde Russische schilders. Naarmate de kunstenaars vorderen met hun doek, vervaagt de grens tussen mise-en-scène en werkelijkheid. Elina Brotherus is vanaf 4/2 te zien op *State of The Art Photography*, NRW-Forum in Düsseldorf. (E.F.)

En Chine<sup>1</sup>, les thèses de Richard Florida - la *classe créative* et la *ville créative* - sont parfaitement intégrées au développement capitaliste. Cela passe par la création de "clusters"<sup>2</sup>, des "villages d'artistes" qui réunissent des ateliers, des logements, des galeries, des bars et des restaurants, à la fois lieu de vie pour les artistes et lieu à visiter pour les collectionneurs, les amateurs, les curieux et les touristes. Il s'y noue un rapport tant artificiel que concret entre le fait d'habiter, de créer, de (se) faire ou laisser voir. Cette instrumentalisation de l'artiste, comme faire-valoir et facteur de développement capitaliste est au centre de *The Residence (a wager for the afterlife)*, la dernière installation vidéo de KATLEEN VERMEIR et RONNY HEIREMANS, présentée chez Argos.

Vermeir & Heiremans,  
*The Residence*  
(a wager for the afterlife) 2012.  
Courtesy the artists © Photo Kristen Dasm

# CREATIVE LAND

EO SEQUENCE	CURRENCY	VALUE	TING	IMAGE BANK
of the arts	EUR / USD	1.2987	0	
the briefing	EUR / GBP	0.8333	0.000003	
contrast	EUR / NZD	1.6076	-0.000412	
of refinement	EUR / JPY	101.443497	0.000527	
the TV	USD / EUR	0.7702	-0.000001	
market speculator	USD / GBP	0.6417	0.000003	
elegance and luxury	USD / JPY	78.110001	-0.000537	
casino	GBP / EUR	1.2	-0.000002	
er	GBP / USD	1.5584	0.000501	
er	GBP / CHF	1.451	0.000002	
er	GBP / JPY	121.736998	0.001012	
er	EUR / CHF	1.2091	0.000003	
esswoman	EUR / CAD	1.3159	0.000002	
ight into day	EUR / AUD	1.2392	0.00115	
ay into night	CHF / JPY	83.897003	-0	
as a stage	JPY / EUR	0.9858	-0.000004	
restreat	AUD / CHF	0.9756	0.000787	
desires	USD / CHF	0.9308	-0.000004	
of palms	USD / CAD	1.013	0.002115	
made	AUD / USD	1.0481	-0.000001	
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**KATLEEN VERMEIR  
ET RONNY HEIREMANS**  
**"THE RESIDENCE**  
**(A WAGER**  
**FOR THE AFTERLIFE)"**  
ARGOS, 13, RUE DU CHANTIER,  
1000 BRUXELLES  
OUVERT DU ME. AU DI. DE 10 À 19H.  
WWW.ARGOSARTS.ORG  
JUSQU'AU 1.04.12

UN PROGRAMME DE CONFÉRENCES EST  
PRÉSENTÉ À EXTRA CITY À ANVERS  
WWW.EXTRA-CITY.ORG  
OU WWW.IN-RESIDENCE.BE

<sup>1</sup> Et aussi ailleurs, c'est la vitesse vertigineuse du développement du capitalisme en Chine qui permet d'y examiner des phénomènes présents partout ailleurs.

<sup>2</sup> Des pôles de compétence, d'activités homogènes, généralement dans une agglomération.

<sup>3</sup> À ce propos, voir Sandra Sherman, *Finance and Fictionality in the Early Eighteenth Century*, Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1996.

En 2006, Katleen Vermeir et Ronny Heiremans (°1973 et °1962, vivent et travaillent à Bruxelles) ont créé A.I.R. (artist in residence), en relation avec leur loft qui devient ainsi plus qu'un logement et plus qu'un atelier, une œuvre à vivre et à travailler. En 2009, le film *The Good Life* mettait en scène la visite d'un lieu culturel destiné à être transformé en un complexe immobilier luxueux, stade ultime de la gentrification - pour attirer les investisseurs, l'histoire du lieu suffit désormais. Le discours de l'agence immobilière empruntait aux slogans, aux descriptions élaborées, trouvés dans des magazines de style de vie, d'architecture et de planification urbaine. Ce collage de propos séduisants se révélait vide de sens. *The Residence* prolonge ce dessein; le projet interroge les rapports entre art et économie et apporte une vision singulière de la manière dont le monde de la finance s'empare de l'art pour en faire une valeur ajoutée. L'installation prend place sur deux moniteurs et deux écrans de projection. Sur l'un d'eux, nous suivons Ma Wen, un artiste et architecte chinois que Vermeir et Heiremans ont rencontré lors de leur résidence en Chine. Il joue ici son propre rôle au

sein d'une fiction qui le met face à une commande particulière: Hilar, un riche homme d'affaire lambda, veut se faire construire une résidence pour l'au-delà. Il ne s'agit pas d'un mausolée, comme le faisaient déjà les industriels du dix-neuvième siècle et comme on peut en voir dans certains cimetières européens, mais bien d'une maison d'où il pourra contrôler complètement son environnement. Ma Wen conçoit "Creative Land", un complexe immobilier haut de gamme avec boutiques de luxe, hôtels cinq étoiles, centres de conférence et, cerise sur le gâteau, un centre d'art et un village d'artistes des plus luxueux. Ainsi, son projet allie-t-il un minimum d'investissements pour un maximum de profits. Comme il le dit dans le film, le fonctionnement de l'art peut se traduire par "un indice évocateur de l'énergie innovante et des tripes nécessaires pour faire partie de la sphère de l'élite", l'art étant capable, par magie ou par alchimie, de faire de l'argent à partir de rien.

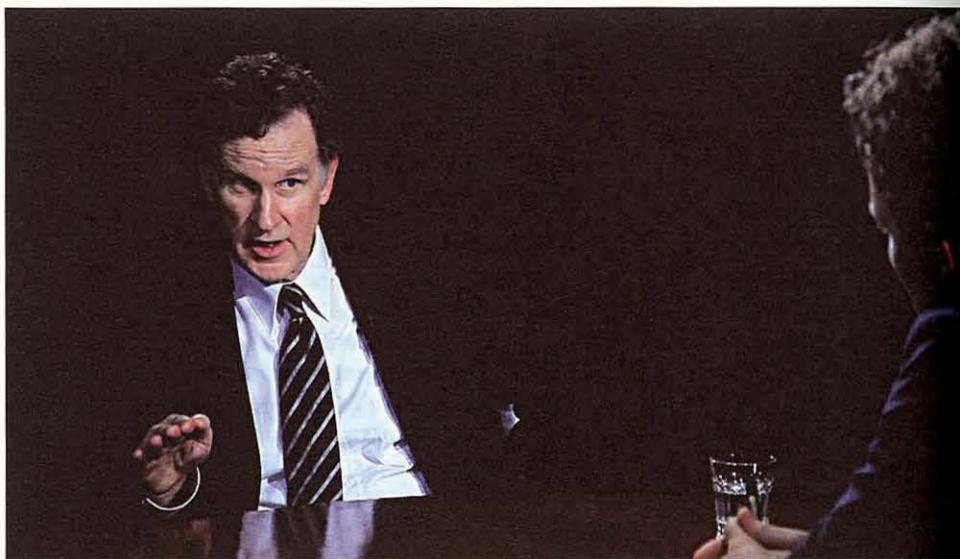
Sur le second écran de projection, deux images se trouvent côte à côte. Tantôt l'une occupe presque tout l'écran, tantôt les deux se le partagent équitablement. D'étranges groupements de plans se créent: les feuillages d'un palmier côtoient un alignement de vêtements dans une penderie, un visage de femme se juxtapose à la brillance d'un lustre. L'association des images résulte d'un algorithme, créé pour le film et inspiré par la haute finance. Il est relié en direct aux grandes bourses mondiales (dont l'activité tourne en continu) tandis que les rapports entre valeurs monétaires sont traduits en séquences. Comme le collage des images est relié en temps réel aux mouvements boursiers, la juxtaposition des séquences est aléatoire et le film toujours différent. L'écran devient alors l'équivalent, en images, des échanges internationaux, il traduit la célèbre "main invisible" du marché. Puisque chaque séquence porte un titre, chaque association définit un rapport particulier entre art et capitalisme qui contraste parfois avec la beauté des images ainsi créées. Le jeu semble infini, nous en oublions presque la demande spécifique du commanditaire.

## Naissance et actualité du capitalisme

Si Vermeir et Heiremans transforment le marché actuel en images, ils retournent aussi à ses sources. Les dialogues et monologues de Ma Wen relèvent d'un collage entre la publicité rédactionnelle des magazines, les écrits de David Hume, Daniel Defoe (qui leur apporte le personnage féminin de Lady Credit - une femme blonde à la fois imprésario, serveuse, jardinière, servante, secrétaire et femme d'affaire), Edmund Burke, et le *Journal d'un fou* de l'écrivain chinois Lu Xun, une sombre histoire de cannibalisme. La source principale en est le second Faust de Goethe, dont le récit du progrès et du développement continu est devenu le discours officiel en Chine. *The Residence* nous apparaît alors comme une allégorie de l'économie; la transformation de son fonctionnement en films répond aux productions littéraires anglo-saxonnes du 18<sup>ème</sup> siècle<sup>3</sup>. Le dispositif de l'installation en est la scène: en plus des deux projections, deux moniteurs nous informent, le premier sur le déroulement de l'algorithme, le second sur le film. Les sièges - éléments de design - ont été dessinés par Ma Wen.

Reprenons le fil du film: tandis qu'au gré des déambulations de Ma Wen, on remarque la présence quasi permanente d'un écran (ordinateur, téléphone portable ou façade de building), que les lueurs d'un feu d'artifice répondent à celles de soudures de poutrelles, un élément va prendre de plus en plus de place sur l'écran. Des billets de banque factices s'accumulent, des découpes de magazines s'y mêlent, bientôt Ma Wen y mettra le feu. Un geste qui achève la commande - garantir à son client un au-delà prestigieux -, en référence à la coutume traditionnelle chinoise qui consiste à brûler des billets et des représentations de produits de luxe pour assurer aux ancêtres une bonne vie dans l'autre monde.

Colette Dubois

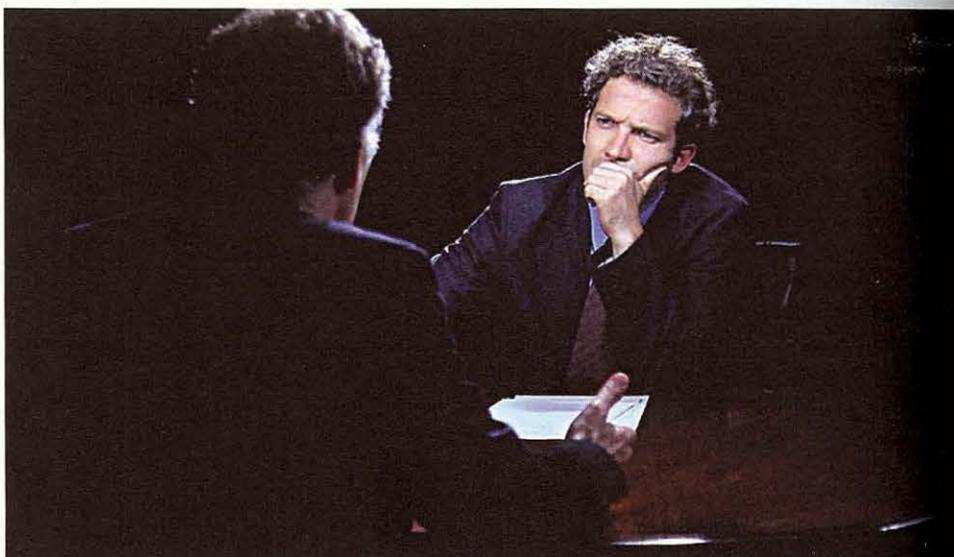


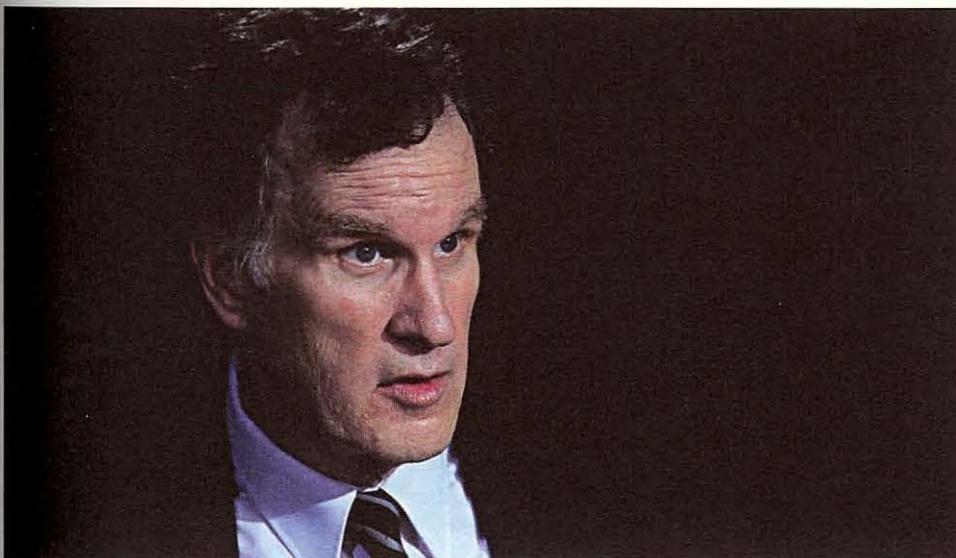
# CURRENT ACCOUNT

Motivated by the financial crash to examine and occasionally intervene in the dynamics of the economy, a new generation of artists is interrogating the idea of “social engineering” by venturing into business culture, the discourse of valuation, and the ruins of capitalism.

words by NAV HAQ

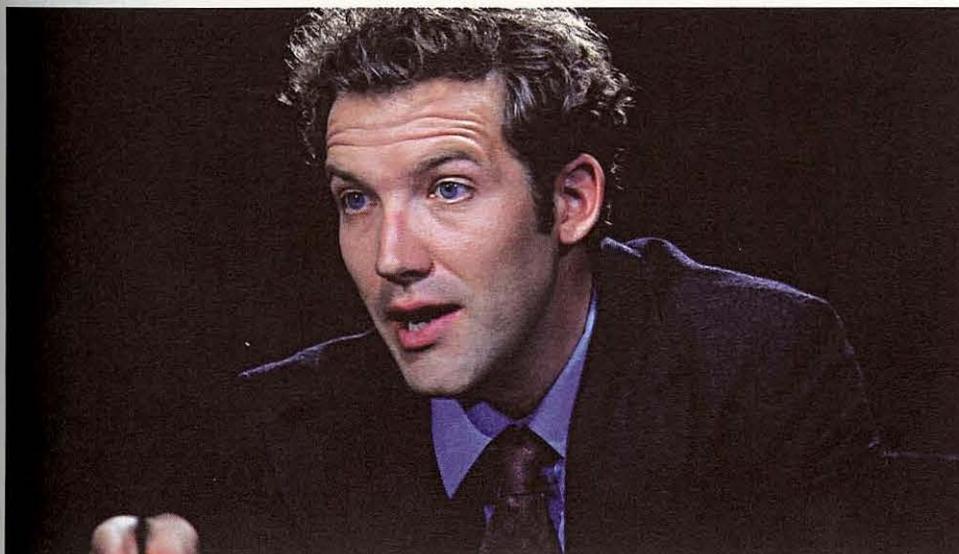
Jan Peter Hammer  
*The anarchist banker*, video stills, 2010  
Courtesy: Supportico Lopez, Berlin





When the artistic community in the Western world deals with the subject of the economy during a financial crash, it feels like it is also facing the existential question of its own survival. This is partly what makes the economy such an extraordinarily consuming concern in this day and age. While a tiny fraction of the art milieu continues to reap the benefits of serving the highest stratosphere of clientele—think “art for oligarchs”—the majority are looking to make sense of increasingly challenging circumstances. Artistic responses to the subject of the economy run the gamut. The financial crash has motivated artists to look at everything from the dynamics of the political economy and its associated cultural policies to the aesthetic productivity of businesses. Some artists are even conceptualizing their own alternative micro-economic systems. The economy is a sufficiently broad and significant theme, in fact, that one might wish that the subject had superseded other recent tendencies in art more explicitly. Why did we bother with all that “art and ecology,” for example, when “art and economy” would have been more appropriate? It envelops the whole issue, after all.

I recently wrote a text entitled “The Triangulation of Value” [published on [afterall.org](http://afterall.org), *editor’s note*] aiming to assess the discourse of valuation in the art system today. In it, I attempt to summarily describe how art has maneuvered itself into a situation where, as a reaction against the broad neo-liberalization of culture in Western society, it is now straddling three realms of value. As I see it, the three realms of the “artistic economy”—aesthetic value, economic value, and social value—exist in an obligatory triangular relationship imposed through government policy. Each realm still maintains its own circulations of demand and supply, yet they are interdependent. If one is removed, the triangle will collapse due to the non-fulfillment of the demand placed on art to continue generating more and more “val-



ue.” For this reason, any conversation about art, politics, and the economy—that is, art’s position in and amongst governance and the economy—should also take into consideration its audience and the social expectations of art. It is a complicated scenario, but one made increasingly lucid in tough times.

There is a specific historic persona who embodies this discourse: the British economist John Maynard Keynes, who pioneered the expansionist, “demand-sided” economic model that pulled the UK and most of continental Europe out of the Great Depression. Even today, his theories underpin the government’s responses to the current crisis, including the Obama administration’s “quantitative easing program” (i.e. stimulate demand and supply will follow). Though mainly renowned for his theses as an economist, Keynes was active in a whole host of other fields (including, as a great believer in social engineering, eugenics). His great passion, however, was for the arts. Keynes collected works by Braque and Picasso, among others, and was a member of the influential Bloomsbury Group of artists and thinkers. Keynes was also instrumental in the founding of the Arts Council of Great Britain and served as its first chairman. The liberal ethos of the Bloomsbury Group was passed on to the Arts Council in the form of its policy of maintaining an “arms-length” distance from artistic practice, allowing art the supposedly autonomous state of “exceptionality” that the Council believed to be a fundamental mark of civilization.

As an authority in economic, social, and artistic sustainability, Keynes was, in a way, a precursor to the roles demanded of art professionals today, as echoed by the multi-faceted remit of the contemporary Kunsthalle director. Moreover, the comparison of Keynesian economic principles to art’s realms of value might offer insight into the circulation of art today. There are certainly examples of artists whose practices have reflected, and occasionally crossed over into, the socio-economic situation of society. A key example is the Artist Placement Group, which questioned the artist’s role in the Western social democracy through their engagement with business and government. The APG’s ways of working had often been difficult for cultural policy makers, and this difficulty came to a head in 1971 following their exhibition “Art & Economics” at the Hayward Gallery, in which the APG “occupied” the Hayward for the duration of the show. In one space, they displayed documentation of their pioneering industrial placements—what we today call “residencies”—within companies like British Steel, while in another, they held a series of conversations between artists and various industry-mean appropriating the format of the corporate boardroom meeting. In response to the unusual exhibition format and crossover with business culture, the Arts Council of Great Britain, seemingly closing the “arms-length distance,” revoked the APG’s funding, suggesting in a letter to the group that they were “more concerned with social engineering than with straight art.” In hindsight, this response could be seen as the polar opposite of the demands made by policy-makers on art today—that art embed itself in a dogma of socio-economic engineering.

More recently, the sheer abstraction of capital, and its seemingly daily fluctuations since the crash, have been inspiring artists to engage with the economy as a theme, often by looking back at similar situations in the course of history. Zachary Formwalt’s video *At Face Value* (2008), for example, is a short documentary about the overprinting of postage stamps during the hyper-inflationary era of the Weimar Republic, which occurred when the economy fluctuated so fast that the printing of new stamps just couldn’t keep up. Narrated by Formwalt, the work provides a glimpse into the blunt aesthetic of this overprinting and the candid juxtaposition of cultural and economic representation it created. Or there is Jan Peter Hammer’s *The Anarchist Banker* (2010), a video interpretation of Portuguese poet

Fernando Pessoa’s eponymous 1922 poem. The video reframes the dialogue between a banker and his secretary as a recent interview between a banker and a renowned TV moderator. The scenario is that the Banker, who is called Arthur Ashenking—which translates roughly into Artur Alves dos Reis, the name of a banker said to have inspired the original banker in the poem—has, through high-risk fraudulent activity, single-handedly brought down the Portuguese economy. The rhetoric of the banker is framed through a belief in the hyper-individualism of today’s neo-liberal society, in which “rational egoism” trumps any consideration of the effects on others.

Two of Michael Stevenson’s recent projects have looked at the behavior of different Central Banks. *Answers to Some Questions About Bananas* (2006) assembles a number of artifacts that tell the story of the artist’s encounter with the world’s first computer for directing the economy. The “Moniac,” as it was nicknamed, was powered with hydraulics, and produced a systematic representation of monetary flows in a given national economy. Created by Bill Phillips at the London School of Economics, it created a visual representation of something ultimately conceptual, pumping dyed water around its circulatory system, and halting it occasionally in tanks to provide measures of data. Through a simple manipulation of its system, predictions could also be made on new trends and directions for a nation’s economy. In 1953, a Moniac was acquired by the Central Bank of Guatemala. However, the over-simplification created by the Moniac’s means of representation ultimately only served to distance economic theory from economic reality, making it useless as a strategizing tool. Following Stevenson’s unsuccessful search for the Guatemalan Moniac, he created a functioning replica, juxtaposing it with a 1950s promotional film by the American company United Fruit, the biggest landowners in Guatemala at the time and a symbol of colonial power. The ultimate failure of the Moniac experiment renders this elaborate water apparatus an ironic fountain of prosperity.

Stevenson’s method of bringing together a charged combination of artifacts is almost an economic system of its own, with each component working to further the value of the others. His *Lender of Last Resort* (2008) was first presented at the Kröller-Müller Museum as a commissioned response to their collection. A project about patronage, the installation gathers together a selection of contextual objects related to the founding of the museum and its collection, as well as items from the Dutch Central Bank dating from the same period. In 1924, the DCB used its position as “Lender of Last Resort”—a body that will offer credit when no one else will, particularly to institutions “too big to fail”—to alleviate the Dutch banking crisis. The Kröller-Müllers, who founded the museum in the 1930s to house their collection, were patrons of the arts, but were also both clients and executives of the Rotterdam bank that received help from the DCP. There is less of a sense of a direct critique of institutions in this installation than in Stevenson’s other work; rather, its simple construction and provisional nature evoke the fragility of the art system during periods of economic strain.

Stockholm-based duo Goldin+Senneby have looked at various strategies employed by businesses today, particularly around issues of rights and ownership. Their work also investigates clandestine or unrepresented corporate systems and activities, including the relationship between place and corporate identity, such as with their long-term project *Headless* (2007–), a semi-fictive account that looks to trace a secretive offshore company called Headless Ltd., based in the Bahamas. Both artists and their collaborator, writer John Barlow, embarked on an adventure into the realms of offshore business, speculating on possible relations between Headless and the secret society founded by Georges Bataille in 1930s Paris, Acéphale (from the Greek *a-cephalus*, also mean-



Laura Oldfield Ford  
*Work in Progress*, 2010  
Courtesy: the artist



ing “headless”)—two secret organizations that have fictionalized their public presence and absence. Their recent video *Shifting Ground* (2009) is another investigative project that looks at the changing landscape of EU agricultural policy through a fictive lens. No longer subsidized for over-production, farmers in the EU are now expected to diversify their business strategies, often pitching themselves to the public using the rhetoric of socially-conscious environmentalists protecting land. *Shifting Ground* can be seen as an allegorical commentary on the adversary relationship between funding bodies, policy-makers, and cultural workers, hinting unambiguously at the Post-Fordist balancing act, or the “flexploitation” working conditions, in the arts today.

Abstraction is seen as having a vast potential in business, as well as, historically, in art. Katya Sander’s recent video installations look at the Futures market, seeking an understanding of how the combination of intangibility and speculation creates a space for imagining potential risks to any corporate body. *Estimations* (2008), produced just before the financial crash, compiles the sound recordings of a number of telephone interviews the artist made with professionals in the insurance business. Her task was to film something that cannot be estimated in terms of risk to a corporation, according to the business practices of insurance companies. This includes everything from economic collapse to terrorism, and so-called “acts of God” such as natural disasters. The unanimous conclusion of the interviewees, however, was that everything can, in fact, be estimated in terms of risk; anything they couldn’t estimate would fall outside the industry’s vocabulary, and thus wouldn’t matter for the purposes of insurance. Since she could not identify any unquantifiable items to film, the artist shot city views from a window, which magnify the sheer abstraction in which these businesses trade. It is the vision of a Marxist’s nightmare: a dematerialized financial economy where wealth is generated from a purely hypothetical future.

This great potential of the future unknown can also have an intoxicating visual effect—particularly when it comes to the creation of desires and lifestyles. Katleen Vermeir & Ronny Heiremans have developed a long-term collaborative project titled A.I.R (short for Artist-in-Residence), in reference to the advent of artist residencies in post-industrial buildings in 1960s New York. A.I.R considers the ideology of architecture and its imagery. Through their works, they render architecture as a space of constructs for the projection of



Goldin+Senneby  
 “The Decapitation of Money,” exhibition view, Kadist  
 Art Foundation, Paris, 2010  
 Photo: Aurélien Mole  
 Courtesy: Kadist Art Foundation, Paris

## MAIN THEME: ART FACES THE ECONOMY

### AUTHOR

NAV HAQ is Exhibitions Curator at Arnolfini, Bristol, UK, where he has been developing their 50th anniversary program, taking place throughout 2011. This will include the first exhibition in the UK of work by Cosima von Bonin, as well as "Museum Show," a major historical survey charting the tendency for artists to create their own (fictional) museums. He is also the inaugural curator of the new MARKER section of projects at Art Dubai this year, working with a number of experimental art spaces from across Asia and the Middle-East.

desires. Working reflexively, they use their own home, an apartment in a post-industrial building in Brussels, as source material, producing representations of their domestic space through what they term "mediated extensions," which reflect the media landscape by using formats such as magazines, television, and exhibitions. Their most recent project, the film *The Good Life (A Guided Tour)* (2009), considers how "strategic foresight" has become part of the socio-economic plan for art institutions in the twenty-first century, locating these institutions as central in the regeneration of cities. *The Good Life* imagines a guided tour around a fictional art institution that has decided to sell off its building in order for it to be transformed into luxury apartments. The "neutrality" of the gallery space allows it to be transformed into a real estate opportunity. The real estate agent guiding the tour adopts a verbal style that veils any overt notion of gentrification, while conjuring up impressions of aspiration and opulence—a lifestyle fantasy projected onto an empty shell. Incorporating high-gloss brochures and a maquette of the extraordinary building designed by the renowned architecture office 51N4E, *The Good Life* adopts an approach that critically "over-identifies" with its subject matter to the point of adopting all of its rhetorical forms. The Keynesian thesis of pumping steroids into the demand is taken to a near-delusional aesthetic plane through generating unattainable desires for the individual.

For many, it is tempting to dream of a new utopia built on the ruins of capitalism. Think of Joseph Michael Gandy's renowned painting *Soane's Bank of England as a Ruin* from 1830, which depicts the building's state of ruination in a tranquil light. It remains an extremely satisfying image. I've tried to concentrate here on practices that look at the existing system in which we are participants, and that try to map out "how stuff works." This issue has a large enough scope for it to travel much further, into areas I've been unable to touch on here, whether it be in initiating alternative economies, such as Katè Rich's *Feral Trade* project and e-flux's *Time Bank*, or in producing art that is more reflective and opinionated about the tangible effect of financial crisis on urban and domestic life, such as with the work of Laura Oldfield Ford. But even a limited overview of artistic practices such as these demonstrates that artists have a clear and considered awareness of the multifarious nature of today's socio-economic conditions. ◇



Katleen Vermeir & Ronny Heiremans  
*The Good Life*, production still, 2009  
Courtesy: the artists



## ► GOLDEN FRAME

► »The Good Life« von Katleen Vermeirs und Ronny Heiremans

TEXT MARGIT EMESZ

BILD KATLEEN VERMEIRS UND RONNY HEIREMANS



# A GOOD LIFE?

*Ein Ausstellungsraum ohne Kunst, ein Wohnraum ohne Möbel, Apartments, die leere Hallen sind. »A Good Life (guided tour)« bietet Raum-Visionen, die in die Irre führen.*

»The Good Life (guided tour)« erinnert ein wenig an die Wohnrauminszenierungen von Elmgreen & Dragset für den nordischen Pavillon bei der Biennale in Venedig 2009. Damals wurden die Besucher durch fiktive private Wohnsituationen geführt. Bei Katleen Vermeirs und Ronny Heiremans filmischem Projekt besichtigt man ein leeres Gebäude, weiße Wände, schmucklose Stiegenhäuser, verspiegelte Aufzüge. Langsam fährt die Kamera über kahle Architektur, begleitet eine Gruppe von Besuchern, geführt von einer seriös gekleideten Frau. An den Wänden lehnen verpackte Bilder, ab und zu auch Kisten, in denen sich vermutlich Kunstwerke befinden. Ist die smarte Lady eine Galeristin, Museumsdirektorin oder Immobilienmaklerin? Aalglatt und sachlich spricht sie über Kunst und deren Präsentation, preist die Vorzüge der architektonischen Gegebenheiten an, die Lage der Immobilie innerhalb des Stadtgefüges. Hier sollen demnächst Upper-Class-Luxusapartements entstehen. Der Komplex soll dann ständig überwacht werden, der Sicherheit wegen. Die feine Gesellschaft wird in dem entstehenden Luxusgebäude ein blauäugiges Leben führen: eine Gentrifizierung mit stylischem Kunstanspruch.

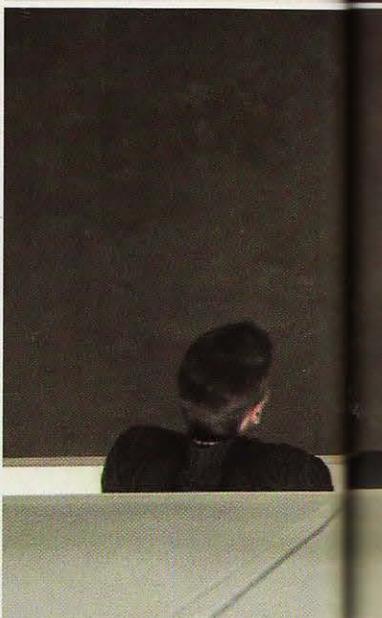
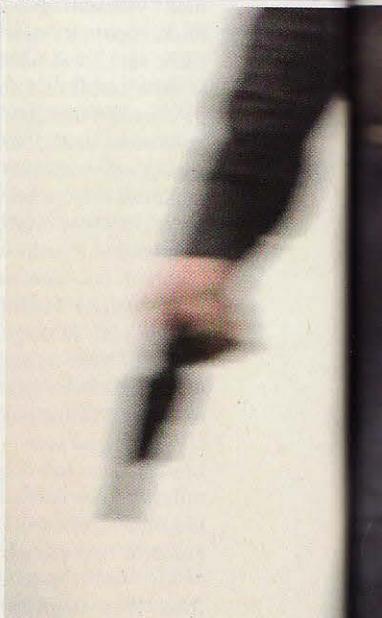
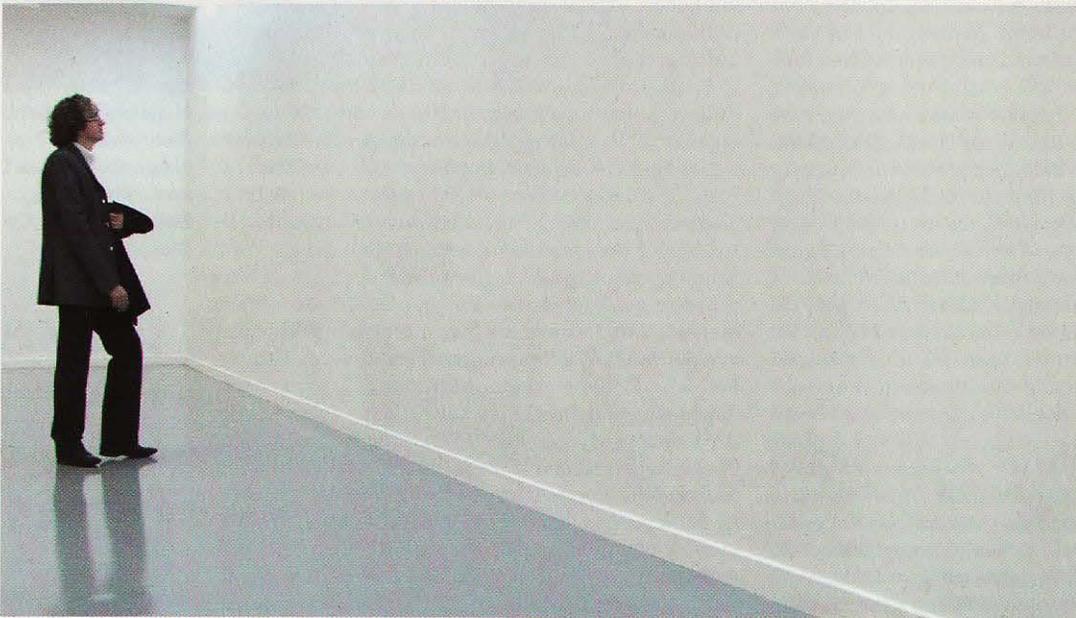
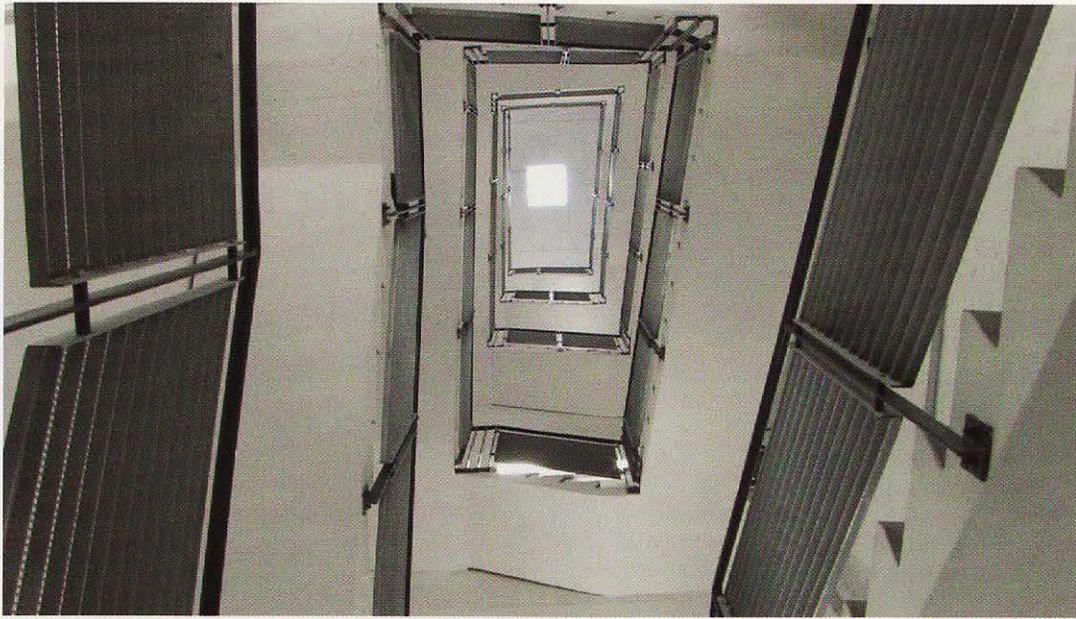
## FIKTIVE IMMOBILIEN-WELT

Die kahlen Räumlichkeiten spiegeln das oberflächliche, inhaltsleere Gerede der Maklerin wider, ihr übertriebener Businessstark, der von der Wertigkeit von Kunst und Kreativität im passenden (elitären) Kontext handelt, gipfelt in einer geläufigen bornierten Vernissagensituation, bei der ein Modell des Bauvorhabens präsentiert wird. Zwischen den Sequenzen der Führung, die den Raum, seine Funktion und Bestimmung infrage stellt, passieren beklemmende Kurzepisoden. Die Immobilienmaklerin bleibt im Aufzug stecken, irrt verfolgt durch einen dunklen Lagerraum, plötzlich ein Schuss – woher und warum?

Der Kurzfilm gehört zum Gesamtprojekt »The Good Life«, mit dem die beiden Belgier zusammen mit einem Architekturbüro eine fiktive Immobilien-Entwicklung erstellt haben, die im Rahmen einer großen Solo-Ausstellung 2009 im Arnolfini in Bristol (UK) gezeigt wurde. Der Film ist als Marketing für die Präsentation des opulenten Gebäudevorhabens gedacht, das (Kunst)Räume beherbergt und sich nicht zuletzt auch gesellschaftskritisch mit dem institutionellen Aspekt der Kunstwelt auseinandersetzt. ❧



*»The Good Life (guided tour)« wird im Rahmen der Viennale im Spezialprogramm »Between Inner and Outer Space« gezeigt.*



In der Arbeit »The Good Life« durchschreitet eine Kuratorin leere Ausstellungsräume. Der Kunstbetrieb wird in dem Kurzfilm zur inhaltsleeren Farce.



## Bristol's architectural brave new world?

03 April 2009

By **Pamela Buxton**

Two Belgian artists undertake an architectural reworking of Bristol's waterfront for this show at the Arnolfini gallery

### **The Good Life**

Arnolfini, 16 Narrow Quay, Bristol  
[www.thegoodlife-collection.com](http://www.thegoodlife-collection.com)  
 April 10-June 7

Bristol's respected Arnolfini arts centre has sold its waterside building to developers, who have gutted the galleries and built smart new loft apartments that sprout out of the shell in a spectacular high-rise extension. Everyone, it seems, is happy — the gallery, the affluent occupants with the great views, and the surrounding cafés doing a thriving trade in lattes. Welcome to the Good Life.

This is the fictional vision of Belgian artists Katleen Vermeir and Ronny Heiremans alongside architect 51N4E, for an installation opening next week at the Arnolfini. It is, they say, a non-moralising comment on the role that cultural institutions can play in regeneration.

"The project is a mirror of what's happening in society anyway — it's not us that's invented it," says Heiremans. "We're reformulating it into the future, as if it'll happen again soon."

In *The Good Life*, nothing is quite how it seems. In the marketing video created by the artists, the architect and gallery staff play themselves talking about a scenario that, although fictional, has been played out in various ways elsewhere over the past decade. The video presents a tour of the development from a fictional estate agent. We then fast-forward two years to read text from 2011 describing the regenerative impact of the development.

In 51N4E's plans, which are worked up in the same detail as an actual project, the Arnolfini is gutted and the shell of the ground floor becomes an "English landscape" public garden. This is part of the Good Life Collection of amenities, along with a spa and a first prints library. Heiremans comments that when the Arnolfini made the pioneering move to the harbourside back in the seventies, it too revamped the warehouse building, converting it to an arts centre. But whereas the Arnolfini is relatively unobtrusive, in the new vision this seemingly negative trait is addressed by the strident nature of the high-rise — destined to be yet another "iconic" building and a new symbol for Bristol that will put it on the international map à la Bilbao.

It's a fictional design — but all architecture is fictional at a certain stage, say the artists. Just like for any project, if the Arnolfini as client decided to go ahead with the project, it could (depending on planning permission) become a reality.

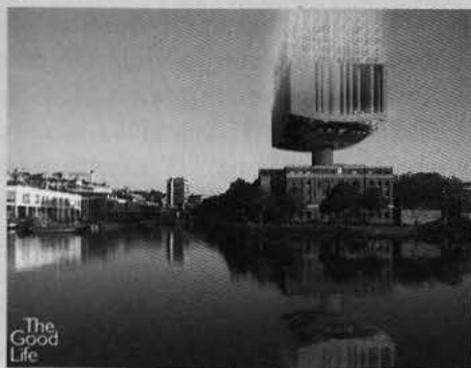
*The Good Life* deliberately leaves plenty of unanswered questions. What's happened to the arts centre? Has it gone off to do a similar job elsewhere? And how can yet more luxury apartments substitute for the cultural value of the gallery? What is the visitor to make of the estate agent's approving comment from 2011 that there are no beggars in the pristine, regularly patrolled gardens? Where's the affordable housing?

Heiremans and Vermeir say they aren't moralising, and that the project's name is not ironic but an attempt to give a lighter sense to a very charged, highly qualitative term — although it has nothing to do with the 1970s comedy TV series. The artists want visitors to enjoy the installation but by deliberately leaving the scenario open-ended, let visitors make their own minds up. Nightmarish vision or dream future? You decide.

After all, although the installation invites potential buyers to take a tour of the Good Life, in the end, says Heiremans, you can't buy a good life, you have to work at it. Just like regeneration — in the real world, at least.

© Building Design, 2009:

Original print headline: 'Bristol's brave new world?'



THE GOOD LIFE-SIMULATION © ARNOLFINI-KATLEEN VERMEIR & RONNY HEIREMANS

# 'THE GOOD LIFE' OF VERMEIR & HEIREMANS

'The Good Life' is a project commissioned by Arnolfini, one of the leading art institutions in United Kingdom based in Bristol, which functions as a hub of cultural events from large-scale exhibitions to live art and dance performances. Futurology is one of the concepts that Arnolfini chooses to look into in its contemporary content production through hosting a series of exhibitions and events under the framework of investigating the representations of future that affect the present. The first leg of the series starts with 'The Good Life' where invited artist duo Katleen Vermeir & Ronny Heiremans produce a site-located work in collaboration with a creative team brought together for the occasion.

The exhibition is comprised around the idea of the possible future for a mainstream art institution and a proposal for the aftermath of its 50 years presence. For the specific occasion of a golden anniversary, Vermeir & Heiremans proliferate an idea of restructuring Arnolfini conceptually and in rhyme with the ongoing re-generation projects in the city. That is to say, the artist duo in collaboration with the renowned architects of 51n4e-Office, developed a new design and use for the Arnolfini building with which the site will no longer be an arts centre but a residential building that embraces art in its style.

The new model includes an open air English landscape garden on the ground floor; a swimming pool inspired by the Byzantine cisterns of Istanbul on the first floor; and the residences on the second floor. The architectural formulation of the building differs in relation to the facilities it embraces, such as the ground floor is an open space surrounded by the façade of Arnolfini, the first floor consists of densely and heterogeneously positioned columns, whereas the second floor consists of metal columns, and glass applied as walls, ceiling and floor. Additionally, the reflecting surface on top of the secluded garden makes possible to see outside from inside and vice versa. Hence a feeling of whole-

ness is evoked through encapsulating the possible activities and needs of a contemporary individual.

## VIDEO & SOUND

The exhibition introduces the new model hence the future of the place to Arnolfini's audience through video, and sound installation additionally through embracing the exhibition space of Arnolfini as a component. The exhibition takes place on two floors. The first floor hosts a large-scale double screen video installation where the project is introduced in detail. Carly Wijs, acting as a real estate agent, guides the potential buyers / residents in the premises of the building while introducing the possible usage of the space in modern living. Wijs' vocabulary is composed of the terminology of sales that current real estate agencies make much use of while they create a new branding and desire for involvement. The physical space constructed in the film is a blending of three different locations as one. The actually discontinuous places brought into continuity in filmic space, form a new feeling especially while wandering in the premises of Arnolfini. In the moment of walking through Arnolfini's empty exhibition rooms, happens a shift in perception where the existing space becomes the imaginary of the artwork. The Freudian articulation of uncanny is at stake. The questions of 'What is being displayed'; 'What is the artwork'; 'Will Arnolfini become a residential site from 2011 onwards'; 'How can it be built'..., blend into the awkward feeling of visiting a skeleton of an art institution. The walls no longer carry the artworks or the institution no longer put things on display but it becomes the object of display. Vermeir & Heiremans work with the notion of 'unexpected', such as the elevator stopping all of a sudden references to the condition of a possible disruption in a place that is promoted as cleansed-off-all-the-malfunctioning, or the shooting of a gun (Shotgun Architecture # 3 specially developed as a sound-

scape for the video by Justin Bennett) during one of the tours references to the irrelevance of such an act taking place in such a highly-celebrated-life-style-residence.

The project also originates from the idea that cities are formulated around centres, which are created to embrace the desire of closure. That is to say, the values of housing are in relation with the popularity of the districts that host a variety of social and cultural activities. Hence, Vermeir & Heiremans reformulate the fact that Arnolfini fulfils the demand of the centrality. They implement the fetish condition of an art institution in the sense that the object of desire is no longer more important than its imaginary. Hence in the future of Arnolfini, the content is spooned off while the façade remains as a reference, still keeping the impact. The new model is no longer a space for art but a place for living that recalls art, like the lobby with its high ceilings and white walls resembling a cutting edge art gallery.

Lastly, Vermeir & Heiremans deal with the notion of 'privately owned public space', which is a motto of today's gated communities to pull back the illusion of secluded space and to formulate a feeling as if being part of a society or belonging to the bigger picture. The inclusion-exclusion-principle of the privately owned public space manoeuvres between the selected accesses to people who agree to obey the principles / responsibilities of living in such a place.

'The Good Life' is a striking project not only through the criticality it positions but also through its artistic and aesthetic presence.

## Fatos USTEK

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The Good Life, till 07.06. 2009 at Arnolfini, Bristol, by Katleen Vermeir & Ronny Heiremans. In collaboration with 51N4E - Office for Architecture, Justin Bennett, Amir Borenstein, Mieja Hollevoet, Pierre Huyghebaert, Eric Jooris and Carly Wijs

## ■ Katleen Vermeir & Ronny Heiremans: The Good Life

Arnolfini Bristol 10 April to 7 June

Walking the line between parody, pastiche and trickster humour, Belgian artists Katleen Vermeir & Ronny Heiremans have produced an exhibition, 'The Good Life', which is an architectural proposal that they believe could be built. With a target date of 2011, the artists' proposal is to renovate the Arnolfini contemporary art centre as a high-end apartment building, a Pantheon for 'good quality tenants'.

Visualised from the other side of the docks, the proposed new building – reminiscent of the floating city of Laputa in *Gulliver's Travels* – forms a pastiche of borrowed architectural elements. At the top is a gridded trellis of apartments in the manner of stacked Le Corbusier 'Dom-inos'. They offer a purist lifestyle surrounded by a skin of glass. The next layer in this trickle-down arrangement is a Brutalist colonnade providing amenities for the apartment dwellers. The underside of the colonnade houses a convex mirror that reflects the regenerated surrounding docklands. The whole unit is perched castle-like atop a giant single pilotis at a securely gated distance of 25m from the ground. Below this the Arnolfini former warehouse building, now a shell, appears like a romantic cult of ruins with picturesque parkland and roaming deer. The Arnolfini's artistic content has been triumphantly morphed, displaced and developed into apartments of distinction, as the dockland developers would say, for the 'creative classes'. The whole shebang appears to be a situationist invitation: a postmodern Bastille waiting to be stormed.

On the ground floor, the exhibition turns on large-scale, floor-to-ceiling films depicting an estate agent's guided tour. The environmental screens run the films in tandem, with speakers that reflect sound back. Shot in the Arnolfini galleries with actors, they can be seen as a total work of art where the white-on-white cinematographic interiors blur and merge with the white walls of the gallery.

Carly Wijs, an actress working in collaboration with the artists, interprets the estate agent role convincingly. Crisply dressed, she uses a mixture of NLP (neuro-linguistic programming) phrases suited to an upmarket sell, with occasional slips of the tongue and a subtly comic, exaggerated corporate manner. She is selling and making apparent what the curator, Nav Haq, has sardonically described as art's 'cool-factor' in an 'experience economy'. Within the real estate hype there is passing reference to the existence of an underclass when we are informed that the gated community has its own police and that there are 'no beggars here'. There is also the crack of gunshot that causes a brief hesitation in her ongoing pitch.

The estate agent sells apartments enhanced by the aura of artistic creativity and criticality. There is a frozen sequence in the film, a *tableau vivant*, where the actors are contemplating blank white walls previously inhabited by art. Upstairs on the next floor the visitor is either amused or bemused by the trickster humour of rooms that are empty save for a few chairs. Initially, the Brechtian consciousness evoked earlier continues as we briefly reflect on the meanings suggested in the proposal, gaze at blank walls and imagine ourselves in the proposed warehouse shell and garden.

The perceptive acting and scripting contained in the film and brochure allow a dense sensibility of humour to emerge in the work; otherwise this art practice could easily have produced a dry, theory-led experience. Fredric Jameson has elaborated on the difference between parody and pastiche; both use mimicry but parody, and by extension satire, requires a



historical linguistic norm to play around with in order to generate meaning. Pastiche, Jameson says, is 'speech in a dead language' a 'blank parody'; style that has lost its points of reference due to cultural fragmentation.

On the other hand, the trickster figure such as Reynard the Fox or Eleggua, with whom the Belgian artists identify, stands at a crossroads of inverted meanings and surprise. It is possible to imagine the play of their humour on entering empty galleries. More subtly, the transition between levels of humour and meaning can be seen when the estate agent, having performed like a marionette, momentarily rests and sips a glass of wine. She appears more human when deflated and the pastiche of her techno-speak transforms into satire.

In today's popular culture 'the good life' and 'the pursuit of happiness' are synonymous with the accumulation of wealth and entry into the middle classes. In the ancient world the Stoic idea of the good life meant making thoughtful decisions about a philosophy of life where complex emotional pleasure is more fulfilling than the quick-fix of distraction. It is important that in this exhibition the artists have enough historical awareness to enable us to question playfully the deadening effects of today's pastiche and market manipulation. ■

STEPHEN LEE is a sculptor and writer.

Katleen Vermeir & Ronny Heiremans

*The Good Life, Artist Impression: 51N4E/office for Architecture 2009*

## ■ Richard Hamilton: Toaster Deluxe

Gagosian Gallery London 16 April to 30 May

'Toaster Deluxe' comprises new versions of the iconic work *Toaster*, originally made by Richard Hamilton between 1966 and 1967. The founding idea could not have been simpler or more astute: an elegant and timelessly modern summary of consumer design, articulated in the pristine form and flawless metallic sheen of a domestic toaster, identified on its upper-left-hand corner in neat, sans serif scarlet lettering by its 'brand' name, 'hamilton'.

The meticulous transposition of a work through successive variations and media is a long-standing and vital strand of Hamilton's art-making process. In the case of *Toaster*, the initial version took the form of chromed steel and Perspex on a colour photograph. From the same period (1967-69), however, there is also a set of 'Toaster Studies' (Letrafilm on colour photograph) and a print edition, comprising offset