

VERMEIR & HEIREMANS
Selected press (English)

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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]

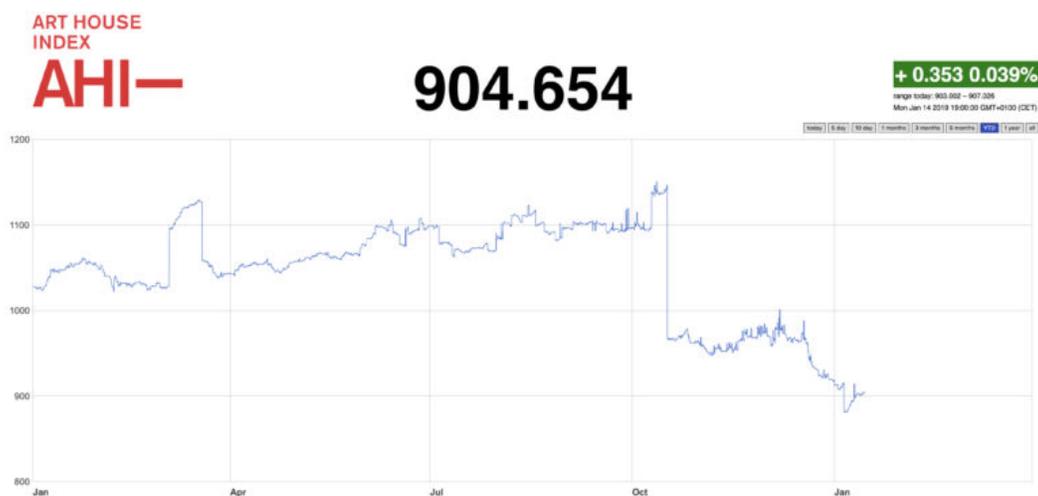


Figure 1: Vermeir and Heiremans, *Art House Index (AHI-)*, 2015. Screenshot: courtesy the artists.

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.^[3]

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.”^[4] 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.”^[5] 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.”^[6]

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.^[7] 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.”^[8] 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.^[9] 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.[14] 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.”[15] 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.[16] 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.[17] 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.”[18] 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.).”[19] 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."^[20] 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."^[21] 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."^[22] 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."^[34] 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."^[35] 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.^[36] 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."^[37]

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.
- [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.

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THE COMING EXCEPTION

Art and the Crisis of Value

AS 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.¹

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’.² 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.³

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

* Thanks to Kerstin Stakemeier for her comments.

¹ 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.

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

³ 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.⁴

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.⁵ 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.⁶ 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

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

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

⁶ 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.⁷

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.’⁸ 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.⁹ 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.¹⁰ They approach value itself as an ‘automatic subject’, engaging with

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

⁸ 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.

⁹ 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.

¹⁰ Robert Kurz, ‘Der doppelte Marx’, exit-online.org. See also Kurz, *Geldohne Wert: Grundrisse zu einer Transformation der politischen Ökonomie*, Berlin 2012, pp. 11–45.

capitalism's intrinsic logic.¹¹ 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.¹² 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.¹³ 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

¹¹ 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.

¹² Jappe, *Die Abenteuer der Ware*, pp. 104–5. See also Gruppe Krisis, 'Manifest gegen die Arbeit' (1999), krisis.org.

¹³ 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.¹⁴

¹⁴ 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.’¹⁵

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.’¹⁶ 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

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

¹⁶ Gilles Dauvé, ‘Federici versus Marx’ (2015), 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.¹⁷ 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.¹⁸ 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

¹⁷ Laurel Ptak, *Wages for Facebook* project/campaign, eyebeam.org.

¹⁸ 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.’¹⁹ 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.²⁰

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”’.²¹ This contract stipulates that the hourly rate is that of cleaners rather than of performers—though in the

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

²⁰ 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*.

²¹ 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’.²²

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.’²³ 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

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

²³ 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.'²⁴ 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.²⁵ 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.²⁶ 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.'²⁷ 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

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

²⁵ Beech, *Art and Value*, p. 227.

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

²⁷ 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.²⁸ In his essay on Wagner, Adorno contended that the autonomous appearance of the artwork is dependent on the concealment of labour.²⁹ 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.³⁰

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

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

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

³⁰ Adorno, *Ästhetische Theorie*, p. 39.

of artworks'.³¹ These prices are rather determined by critics, curators, other artists and even collectors.³² 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.'³³ 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'.³⁴ 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.³⁵ 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.³⁶

³¹ Beech, *Art and Value*, p. 311.

³² 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.

³³ Beech, *Art and Value*, pp. 311–2.

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

³⁵ 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.³⁷ 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.³⁸ 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.³⁹ However, not only does

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

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

³⁸ 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.

³⁹ 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.⁴⁰ 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.⁴¹ 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.⁴² 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.⁴³ 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

⁴⁰ Jappe, *Die Abenteuer der Ware*, p. 126.

⁴¹ Jappe, *Die Abenteuer der Ware*, p. 105.

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

⁴³ 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’.⁴⁴

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’.⁴⁵ 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.⁴⁶ 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.⁴⁷ While the

⁴⁴ Conference booklet for Deloitte’s 9th Art & Finance Conference, 21 April 2016, p. 11. Available on deloitte.com.

⁴⁵ *Real Flow: Art Is the Sublime Asset*, prospectus, 1 March 2015, p. 3. Available on p-exclamation.com.

⁴⁶ *Real Flow*, p. 8.

⁴⁷ 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.⁴⁸ 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.⁴⁹ 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?⁵⁰ And is this

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

⁴⁹ Beech, *Art and Value*, p. 307.

⁵⁰ 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.⁵¹ 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

⁵¹ ‘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.⁵² 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.⁵³

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'.⁵⁴

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

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

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

⁵⁴ 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.⁵⁵

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

⁵⁵ 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.⁵⁶ 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

⁵⁶ 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.⁵⁷ 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’.⁵⁸ 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 preface, 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

⁵⁷ Jappe, *Die Abenteuer der Ware*, p. 128.

⁵⁸ 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.’⁵⁹

⁵⁹ ‘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.⁶⁰

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.⁶¹

⁶⁰ 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.

⁶¹ 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’.⁶² 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.⁶³ 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:

⁶² 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.

⁶³ 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.⁶⁴

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’.⁶⁵ 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’.⁶⁶ 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.

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

⁶⁵ Andrea Phillips, ‘Devaluation’, *Parse*, no. 2, November 2015.

⁶⁶ Phillips, ‘Devaluation’.

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^[1], 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.^[2]

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

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

Public Space as Cultural Capital, lecture by Andrea Phillips on the 13th Istanbul Biennial

HARVARD ART AND DESIGN IN/FOR THE PUBLIC REALM

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. Vermeer & 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.

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: IKSV'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 Barnabas 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.

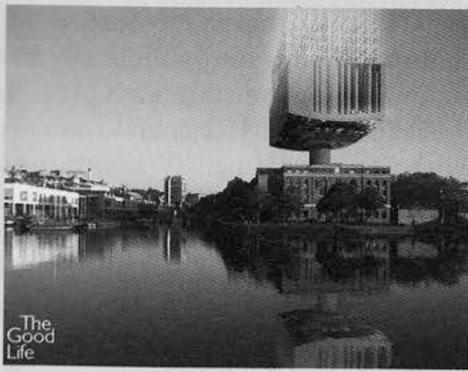
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THE GOOD LIFE-SIMULATION © ARNOLFINI-KATLEEN VERMEIR & RONNY HEIREMANS

'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 Benett) 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

Independent art critic and curator
Editor Nowiswera

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 Elegua, 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