

RESEARCH ESSAY

Speculation as Surplus-Value

Andrea Eckersley¹ and Terri Bird²

¹ College of Design and Social Context, RMIT University, Melbourne, AU

² Art, Design and Architecture, Monash University, Melbourne, AU

Corresponding author: Dr. Andrea Eckersley (andrea.eckersley@rmit.edu.au)

Speculation is an artist's capital, enabling the emergence of the new. This is art's capacity to bring about new frames of reference—new kinds of questions, experiences, events or encounters—to leverage difference in order to open onto an indeterminate future. As Elizabeth Grosz (2014: 123) notes, '(i)f art reads as other than an artistic expression, it is always about the summoning up of a new future, and as such it's always a kind of political gesture'. Brian Massumi (2018: 25) regards this gesture as a means of reclaiming value from its reduction to the economic logic of the market, in order to emphasise the intensities of experiences that have value in and of themselves, such as the singular vivacity of an experience of colour. Excess is at the core of this theory of value, the unselected that forms the virtual background, a world of surplus. However, Massumi argues that capitalism produces an impoverished version of surplus value, dependent on a continual accumulation of increasing quantity to the detriment of the singular quality appearing as such. Artists' social, affective and material speculations, their attempts to create something new, produce a processual surplus value as an affective excess that differs in kind from the surpluses of capital accumulation. We will argue that these speculative practices ought to be understood primarily in terms of an ethos actualised in an artist's practice and not, as is so often the case, only in terms of the speculative financial returns the products of such practices may yield in the global art markets. The paper will explore the affective aspects of speculation through an investigation of the practice of Belgian artist Joëlle Tuerlinckx. Her associative mode of working produces a web of processual thinking that forms connections as well as leaving loose ends open, often reactivating forgotten or abandoned objects, in a manner that produces a different order of value. Grosz, Elizabeth and Esther Wolfe (2014). 'Bodies of Philosophy: An Interview with Elizabeth Grosz', *Stance* 7, April, pp 115–126. Massumi, Brian (2017). 'Virtual Ecology and the Question of Value', in *General Ecology: The New Ecological Paradigm*, Erich Hörl with James Burton (eds.), London: Bloomsbury, pp 345–373.

Speculation is an artist's capital, enabling the emergence of the new. This is art's capacity to bring about new frames of reference—new kinds of questions, experiences, events or encounters—to leverage difference in order to open onto an indeterminate future. As Elizabeth Grosz (2014: 123) notes, '(i)f art reads as other than an artistic expression, it is always about the summoning up of a new future, and as such it's always a kind of political gesture'. Brian Massumi (2018: 25) regards this gesture as a means of reclaiming value from its reduction to the economic logic of the market, in order to emphasise the intensities of experiences that have value in and of themselves, such as the singular vivacity of an experience of colour. Excess is at the core of this theory of value, the unselected that forms the virtual background, a world of surplus. Capitalism, however, produces an impoverished version of surplus-value, caught in a relentless cycle of growth turning over itself, re-invested to ensure a continual accumulation of increasing quantity to the detriment of the singular quality appearing in and of itself (Massumi 2018: 14). Artists' social, affective and material speculations, their attempts to create something new, produce a processual surplus-value as an affective excess that differs in kind from the surpluses of capital accumulation.

We will argue that these speculative practices ought to be understood primarily in terms of an ethos actualised in an artist's practice and not, as is so often the case in the global art markets, in terms of the speculative financial returns that the products of such practices may yield. The paper will explore the affective aspects of speculation through an investigation of the practice of Belgian artist Joëlle Tuerlinckx. Her associative mode of working produces a web of processual thinking that forms connections as well as leaving

loose ends open, often reactivating forgotten or abandoned objects, in a manner that produces a different order of value. What Tuerlinckx's work repeatedly demonstrates is the various ways speculative practices, acts and processes can be deployed by an artist to produce sensations and form relations that enable sense to be apprehended anew. What is distinctive about value, speculation and artistic practice will be elaborated by way of a conceptual framework derived from the writings of Grosz and Massumi. This examination will focus on how artists work in zones of indeterminacy, in order to make the claim that these practices evoke a distinctive mode of speculation as an actualised affective ethos.

Focusing on what we value in experience Massumi (2018: 25) proposes an understanding of speculation that reclaims it from capitalism to link it to a quality of life lived for its own sake. His aim is to uncouple value from quantification and the notion that money is the best measure of value. In so doing, Massumi responds to Félix Guattari's (1995: 91) 'imperative to recast the axes of value, the fundamental finalities of human relations and productive activity'. The sub-ordination of value to money, as a general equivalent and universal standard, 'glosses over the singularity of what it measures' (Massumi, 2017: 346). It is a realignment with the singular that Massumi insists will transform value by emphasising the intensities of experiences that have values in themselves. Conventional empirical explanations cannot of themselves account for the circumstances of an actualisation of, for example the experiential qualitative character of redness. They are necessarily selective, focusing on elements that are capable of being quantified, in contrast to a quality of experience which Massumi (2017: 349) argues '*exceeds its empirical conditions*'.

This excess is the lure of the virtual that Grosz (2017) explores in terms of the incorporeal conditions that animate life. She argues that life is an elaboration of the excesses of matter, a mode of becoming other through the convergence with and transformation of material relations and energies. The energy and forces that are condensed and contracted into seemingly solidified matter should not be mistaken as inert. Life is not the vital spark added to the inorganic, rather it unfolds these accumulations utilising the propensity of matter to compress, enfold, prolong, and delay. Life and matter are not opposites but counterparts, divergent tendencies implicated in each other. In becoming-other life extends and transforms matter as a continuous actualization of its potential to be otherwise. The elaboration of matter in life responds to the excesses of matter that art also frames, transforms and intensifies. Art, Grosz (2011: 22) suggests, 'is engendered through the excess of matter that life utilizes for its own sake'. Matter and life are not two orders of organisation, but rather two modes of connectivity or types of relation. 'Life makes matter artistic', she (2011: 24) maintains, and in turn matter 'enables life its intense, incorporeal capacities, its own excesses of becoming'.

Grosz's writing is of particular interest to artists because she provides a framework for thinking about the practice of art that privileges the material forces that makes sense and signification possible. Drawing on the writings of Deleuze and Guattari, Grosz suggests that art works can be understood as experimentations, a play with an excess of forces found in the world for the purpose of enhancing sensations and affects, rather than representations of the real. Art and life are different ways of responding to what Deleuze (1988: 40) refers to as the test of existence. How to select, order and organize working solutions in response to the ongoing necessities for invention, how to develop ways of living creatively with problems that provide new modes of addressing them. What is required, Grosz (2017: 157) suggests, is 'an ethology through which an ethics and an aesthetics of existence become possible.' This ethology is elicited from an immersion in a world, it is the sum of all the complex reciprocal movements between a life and its milieu, all the elaborate inventions that respond to obstacles and the transformations that they give rise to. It focuses on the capacity of affecting and being affected that, for Deleuze (1988: 124), enables a valuing of what a thing can do over what it is. The ethology of an art work captures 'its vital environment and its material effectiveness', as Anne Sauvagnargues (2013: 10) notes. For Sauvagnargues this formulation enables Deleuze to move from an understanding of art as an interpretation of signs to an exposition of force-material relations. Both ethics and art capitalise on the excess of these relations as the force of affect in order to discover ways to intensify, as Grosz (2017: 157) writes,

Ethics aims to create an order in which a being can act for its health, well-being, and expansion, and art aims to create an order in which a being can express, and others can find expressed, this power of expansion and this capacity for more.

These are not questions of quantity, as Grosz (2017: 161) points out, 'how can I maximize good? how can I maximize beauty?—for these only address a certain kind of consumption'. It is, she maintains, a question of the intensive, of an affirmation of a life that can be lived beyond opinions, clichés, marketing slogans, that is open to an outside, a virtual excess.

This is a mode of life that rejects the quantification of value posited in economic relations of production, and aligns instead with Massumi's counter concept of value as an affective expression of intensity. Massumi (2017: 346) asks, 'what would a theory of value look like that held to the singular and dwelt in quality?' This uniquely qualitative experience of value stands in contrast (but not conflict) with how value is more commonly understood as a quantitative entity expressed in a multitude of forms. This is not to say that the qualitative or more intensive experience of value exists independently of the more commonly understood experience of quantitative value, for as Massumi (2018) stresses, both conditions of value typically coexist in the expression of valued forms. It is interesting here to note how we value the affective expressions of intensity in art, just as we value the actualised instantiation of this intensity in the work's material form. What is less common is an appreciation of the speculative creation, the social, affective and material processes that go into the production of these art works. Indeed, as Massumi (2017: 349) writes, 'every quality of experience self explanatorily *exceeds its empirical conditions*', pointing to how intensive experience always goes beyond the material from which it emerges. There is always a speculative excess to a work of art, an aura of process that surrounds it, expressing its conditions of appearance. This excess is at the core of Massumi's theory of value, a world of surplus.

In calling attention to this surplus, Massumi explicitly calls for a revaluation of value, emphasising the role of creativity, what we will call speculation, in the ethical, political and aesthetic work of producing values. This is not value as it is expressed in an economic system, but value as it is affectively and intensively lived. Artists' social, affective and material speculations involve practices that harness the excesses of materiality to create something new, grappling with this affective excess, making something of it, being affected by it, as they produce surplus-value. While surplus-value is the future potential that drives markets in relentless cycles of growth, Massumi argues for a re-valuation of the unabsorbed excess of what appears as a qualitative processual value concerned with the intensity of lived potential. He, like Whitehead and Deleuze and Guattari before him, regards value as an affective expression of intensity. What is important for our argument here is, as Massumi (2018: 96) insists, the view that '*affective intensity is inextricably linked to potential*'. Massumi (2017: 351) elaborates this when he writes that in 'the experience of a value, a moreness of the world appears.... A more of potential appears, selectively enveloped in a defining qualitative character'. This 'moreness' of potential is, in our view, an intrinsically speculative reality, an expression or form of critical and creative practice. It is this moreness, this excess that we find in Tuerlinckx's attunement to affective intensity. Artists like Tuerlinckx capture potential in ideas, materials and techniques, through distinctive processes of speculation. They produce an excess that has the potential to yield alternative economies from the productivity of the work of art: in what they do and the effects they produce.

Emphasising the productivity, or the work of the work of art should not be confused with the subjective experience of labour nor its valourisation. Rather, by exploring the inhuman character of sensation we argue a speculative mode of practice unfurls percepts that do not apprehend the world as it is lived, nor affects that invoke a world that is felt. This is the peculiarity of art that Deleuze and Guattari (1994: 197) insist enacts a passage that rediscovers the infinite through the finite. It is the potential of art to become more than material, a potential generated from what Grosz (2012: 1) suggests is 'the openness of matter, its form-taking qualities in whose operations sense inheres'. Tuerlinckx makes evident the ways that a speculative practice can be deployed by an artist in an effort to construe an alternative economy, one that activates the excessive force of affect. In a recent online discussion of her exhibition *Les Salons Paléolithiques, 2017*, at Galerie nächst in St. Stephan Switzerland, Tuerlinckx describes the work displayed as being about the gesture of an object. She (2018) says 'the object is not there but you have its mark, its trace. There are also prints made by feet and hands, traces of production. What you see here is the residue'. Tuerlinckx contends that this work, the work that occurs in the artist's studio, is of equal value to the art object that is traditionally placed on a plinth or hung on the wall. The productivity of practice captured in the traces of gestures, marks and other residues, opens onto the inhuman character of the infinite: a world not lived nor felt. In making this claim, Tuerlinckx is drawing attention to the indeterminate value of the art work that retains an antagonistic proximity to the actions undertaken to make it. Tuerlinckx (2018) goes on to say,

Since my first gallery shows I've tried to juxtapose two worlds, two space-time entities that in my view are the most distant imaginable, the studio on one hand, the gallery on the other. The walls of my studio are covered with the marks of my preparations for exhibitions. So they are always what's "off camera", things outside or prior to the work. The marks remain. The studio is a place of the present but also a paleolithic one in the sense that it's where you find traces and moments of much older works.

Drawing attention to the traces of production, marks and other residues, dissolves as Søren Grammel (2016) observes, ‘the limits of what is usually considered a “work”’. What is presented is a situation—the practice of making an exhibition—rather than an object or image. In her exhibitions Tuerlinckx captures the speculative potential of working between the space of the studio and the site of an exhibition, the time of the present and the past, the elements of the real she assembles and re-assembles in an ever-expanding inventory, and the discontinuities in-between.

The inseparability of context from making art, and the intensifying potential of discontinuous space-times have long been of interest to Tuerlinckx. In the Espace d’Art Contemporain in Lausanne in 1991, she opened the five double windows linking the exhibition space to its rural setting to expose five wine glasses filled with water which were precariously balanced on nails on the blank wall opposite the windows. These glasses reflected the light from outside which was also enhanced by light projected from a slide projector, so that together they produced a hazy spectrum. In relation to this installation Tuerlinckx (Kuijken 1994: 25) spoke of her desire to allow the quality of the space to appear in its ‘material emptiness’. Tuerlinckx embraces this emptiness in every space regardless of its institutional practices or pretensions to neutrality. In so doing, Tuerlinckx’s practice values, as Mark Kremer (1995: 79–80) observes, the experience of ‘non-matter (the white of the wall, openings of windows, light)’ as a different register of valuation, one that is open-ended and exceeds its empirical conditions.

This material emptiness should not however be confused with a striving for autonomy associated with the simulated neutrality of the white cube, described by Brian O’Doherty (1986) as an artificial hermeticism achieved in exhibiting spaces where there is a desire to present art in an isolated and controlled environment. As Simon Sheikh (2009) points out this control enacts a crucial separation of the art object from the world where its surplus-value is presented as a sound economic investment. Contrary to the simulated neutrality of the gallery Tuerlinckx ‘wants to know what the walls have to say’, as Frank Vande Veire (1996: 453) argues, ‘to slide into the story that slumbers in each space’. Into the always impure and talkative emptiness of an exhibition space, Tuerlinckx introduces minimal shifts, as Vande Veire (1996: 454) indicates, which change everything. Operations such as opening windows bring specificity to these contexts, the actual presence of matter and time. Through these operations Tuerlinckx repossesses the institutional art space implicitly questioning the vitality of exhibition and curatorial practices that manage visual art in a manner that isolates them from the world. Tuerlinckx’s practice seeks to bring the world back into the work, along with the traces of speculative practice that always precede and exceed the realised work, and the affective and material presence of the spaces of the work. In accentuating these processes and forms, Tuerlinckx repeatedly demonstrates how the intensities of the experience of space and speculative practice have values in themselves. Gesturing towards these intensities, the curator Julienne Lorz (2013: 175) writes about how Tuerlinckx’s investigations can be seen as an exploration of how ‘light and atmosphere are literally put into operation as they are components of space and time’. Expanding on these spatial operations in her *Lexicon*, Tuerlinckx (2013: 11) writes that,

an exhibition is:
 this moment of space.
 vision of space, projection of space, illusion of space, manipulation of space, displacement of space,
 crossing space, thinking space, hearing space, calculating space, scale of space, BEARING of space.
 VARIATION d’ESPACE, FLUCTUATION d’ESPACE, disturbing space, measuring space, observing space.
 A PRIORI d’ESPACE. SUPPOSÉS d’ESPACE.

the sentiment of space. the sensation of space. the sentiment of an object. the feeling of people. the
 impression of time. (re-sentiment).
 the exhibition: a way of seeing, of advancing as if with eyes close.

Tuerlinckx here reiterates how she treats the installation of an exhibition as a medium in itself. Any installation must negotiate its boundary as it constructs its frame and placement in relation to its contexts; contexts that extend beyond the physicality of an exhibition venue to include institutional, epistemological, social and cultural practices. In generating itself through these practices, an exhibition engenders and orients the contexts that always precede and exceed it. In doing so, a work of art creates thresholds that mark the instability of these common frontiers, inscribing potential openings to the irreducible exteriority of the virtual. Thresholds marked by, and marking in turn, the material limits at which a terrain might change or open onto an excess, where a ‘something beyond’ or moreness may be encountered. This beyond is a form of speculation, a mode of affective experience yielding forms of surplus-value expressed as intensities, thresholds,

indeterminate zones of becoming. It is these thresholds that Tuerlinckx's work probes and renders enigmatic at the moment of their authorization.

An exhibition is, for Tuerlinckx (1999: 106), neither an answer nor a question, 'it is an interrogation, an open statement, an exhibition is a frame made of dots'. In her installation at Witte de With in 1994 the residues or material remainders activated zones of energy that Tuerlinckx (1995: 150) indicates can be crystallized or lost. Pools of light from overhead projectors, deposits of plasticine in thin lengths on the floor outlining the building in plan-view, these materialisations of energy are dispersed throughout the gallery spaces, their patterns defining fields as easily as they mock boundaries.

Serial actualisations are inherent in Tuerlinckx work as she activates her proliferating inventory of visual and material remainders from successive projects. These materials, objects, slides, drawings, notes, maps, tracings, etc. are set in motion through multilayered procedures. Each time this accumulated inventory is mobilised through processes of forming that actualise their surplus-value, there is a transformation of the excess potential with the aim of an intensification of experience. Through these re-enactments Tuerlinckx's installations brings into play the problematics of inscription or capture, unfolding them in the domain of art. This unfolding renders the conventional understanding of art, as an unmediated expression of an artist's emotions or thoughts conveyed through an inert substance, enigmatic by challenging notions of proximity, immediacy and presence.

The intensifications produced in Tuerlinckx installations have a potential that Massumi (2017: 360) regards as non-teleological, orientated towards things not yet realised, a turnover that invents its own ends and perpetually exceeds them. The surplus-value Massumi is concerned with here addresses the singular and the vivacity of its appearance as quality, such as it is. While products may be produced in this appearance, they are incidental to the emergent processes of surplus-value's realisation in qualities. The potential of this process strives towards a revivification that for Massumi (2017: 362) bequeaths the *surplus-value of life*, and for us underscores the force of speculation. In a similar manner Marina Vishmidt (2015) refers to art's open-ended potential as its 'speculative intransigence', the source of its political power. Nonetheless, as a speculative form of labour, Vishmidt (2015) adds that, art 'can either be antagonistic or conciliatory,' insofar as these outcomes 'are not determined by the concept of art itself but precisely by what "role it is called upon to play."' With the passing of every biennial the economic logic of the market becomes more and more central to art, as Vishmidt (2018: 230) notes, with the risk that art becomes a model of, as well as a frame for, exploitation. Nonetheless art's transversal potential rests in its process of invention, its speculative gestures that as Massumi (2017: 365) writes, 'avails itself of excess: the qualitative surplus-value of life of the *more-than-human* haloing every predominantly human occasion of experience with an infinity of "other" potentials.' Activating these other potentials is the role played by art in Tuerlinckx practice, it is animated by a capacity to capture the force of speculation as the moreness that emphasises the intensities of experiences that have value in and of themselves.

Competing Interests

The authors have no competing interests to declare.

References

- Deleuze, G.** 1988. *Spinoza: Practical Philosophy*. Translated by Robert Hurley. San Francisco: City Lights Books.
- Deleuze, G** and **Guattari, F.** 1994. *What is Philosophy*. Translated by Hugh Tomlinson and Graham Burchell. New York: Columbia University Press.
- Gammel, S.** 2016. 'Dear exhibition visitor.' In *Joëlle Tuerlinckx Nothing for Eternity*, edited by Soren Gammel and Eva Falge. Basel: Art Museum Basel.
- Grosz, E.** 2011. 'Matter, Life, and Other Variations.' *Philosophy Today*, 55: 17–27. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.5840/philtoday201155Supplement3>
- Grosz, E.** 2012. 'Deleuze, Ruyer and Becoming-brain: The Music of Life's Temporality.' *Parrhesia*, 15: 1–13.
- Grosz, E.** 2017. *The Incorporable: Ontology, Ethics, and the Limits of Materialism*. New York: Columbia University Press. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.7312/gros18162>
- Grosz, E** and **Wolfe, E.** 2014. 'Bodies of Philosophy: An Interview with Elizabeth Grosz.' *Stance*, 7: 115–126. April. https://docs.wixstatic.com/ugd/5cd3e3_06222b25084443eeaaa39ba2d1cead2c.pdf. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.5840/stance2014712>
- Guattari, F.** 1995. *Chaosmosis: an Ethico-aesthetic Paradigm*. Translated Paul Bains and Julian Pefanis. Bloomington: Indiana University Press.
- Kremer, M.** 1995. 'The Life of a Repo Man is always intense.' *Archis*, pp. 70–80. June.

- Kuijken, I.** 1994. 'Passages.' *De Witte Raaf*, unpublished translation by Daniel Van Cleemput. November, pp. 24–25.
- Lorz, J.** (ed.) 2013. *WOR(L)D(K) In Progress*. Köln: Walther König.
- Massumi, B.** 2017. 'Virtual Ecology and Questions of Value.' In *General Ecology: The New Ecological Paradigm*, edited by Erich Hörl with James Burton. London: Bloomsbury, pp. 345–373.
- Massumi, B.** 2018. *99 Theses on the Revaluation of Value: A Post-Capitalist Manifesto*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.5749/9781452958484>
- O'Doherty, B.** 1986. *Inside the White Cube: Ideology of the Gallery Space*. Berkeley: University of California Press.
- Sauvagnargues, A.** 2013. *Deleuze and Art*. Translated by Samantha Bankston. London: Bloomsbury.
- Sheikh, S.** 2009. 'Positively White Cube Revisited.' *e-flux Journal*, 3. February. <https://www.e-flux.com/journal/03/68545/positively-white-cube-revisited/>.
- Tuerlinckx, J.** 1995. 'Departures from No Story, No History.' *Witte de With – Cahier*, 3: 149–153.
- Tuerlinckx, J.** 1999. *THIS BOOK, like a book*. Gent: SDZ.
- Tuerlinckx, J.** 2013. *Joëlle Tuerlinckx Lexicon*, exhibition catalogue published on the occasion of the exhibition 'WOR(LD)K IN PROGRESS?' at WIELS. Brussels: WIELS Contemporary Art Center.
- Tuerlinckx, J.** 2018. Commentary on her exhibition *Les Salons Paléolithiques*, Galerie nächst, St. Stephan, Switzerland. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=JMoWEOnXHwQ>.
- Vande Veire, F.** 1996. 'Something about How a Tuerlinckx Machine Traverses the Exhibition Machine.' In *Inside the visible. An elliptical traverse of 20th century art: in, of and from the feminine*, Catherine de Zegher (ed.). Gent: Kanaal Art Foundation, pp. 457–455.
- Vishmidt, M.** 2015. 'The Politics of Speculative Labour.' <http://transformativeartproduction.net/the-politics-of-speculative-labour/>.
- Vishmidt, M.** 2018. *Speculation as a Mode of Production. Forms of Value Subjectivity in Art and Capital*. Leiden: Brill. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1163/9789004384774>

How to cite this article: Eckersley, A and Bird, T. 2019. Speculation as Surplus-Value. *MaHKUscript: Journal of Fine Art Research*, 3(1): 6, pp. 1–6, DOI: <https://doi.org/10.5334/mjfar.43>

Published: 26 July 2019

Copyright: © 2019 The Author(s). This is an open-access article distributed under the terms of the Creative Commons Attribution 4.0 International License (CC-BY 4.0), which permits unrestricted use, distribution, and reproduction in any medium, provided the original author and source are credited. See <http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/>.

 *MaHKUscript: Journal of Fine Art Research* is a peer-reviewed open access journal published by Ubiquity Press.

OPEN ACCESS 