

EDITORIAL

Whatever Speculation

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MaHKUscript's 2019 issue *Whatever Speculation* will focus on a key-concept in the history of artistic thinking, i.e. speculation. Nowadays speculation has been devalued to a mere one-dimensional, economic meaning. It seems that speculative thought about both future forms of knowledge and solutions to problems surrounding existence and social viability has made way for an almost self-evident resignation in the present moment and the status quo, producing a blurred view of complex issues that characterize the here and now. For that reason it is extremely urgent to reconsider different and alternative connotations of speculation and bring them up to date.

The current logic of an efficient, result-driven culture and its neo-liberal focus on free market mechanisms supports a flat worldview that, as philosopher Byung-Chul Han describes in *Fatigue Society*, continuously demands transparency and visibility and, therefore, indisputable forms of exhibition. Thus a horizontalistic world has been produced that, with its twitter-democracy and ubiquitous blogosphere, brings a "net culture" into being that leaves no room for rest, contemplation, creation and experiment. Such a world is carried away entirely by entrepreneurial thinking and a focus on the contemporary moment where adaptivity and flexibility are defined as the highest values.

In this world, knowledge has been instrumentalized and its homogenized patterns of thought, generated by a disciplining dispositive, deploy neo-liberal concepts such as expert-knowledge, stakeholders, and knowledge transfer as formatting requirements. The panorama that emerges is shaped by globalized capitalism where verticalist perspectives such as reflexivity, imagination, and historic profundity have been squeezed into horizontalistic frameworks, thus leaving them no room to flourish anew.

In its interaction with human existence, art – just like philosophy – is the utmost ontological purveyor of verticality. Therefore, it is up to art to critically map and investigate the current straitened situation and to demand once more attention for different forms of reflection in order to find a more subtle balance between horizontality and verticality.

With this goal in mind, MaHKUscript's 2019 issue *Whatever Speculation* will focus on a key-concept in the history of artistic thinking, i.e. speculation. Nowadays speculation has been devalued to a mere one-dimensional, economic meaning. It seems that speculative thought about both future forms of knowledge and solutions to problems surrounding existence and social viability has made way for an almost self-evident resignation in the present moment and the status quo, producing a blurred view of complex issues that characterize the here and now.

For that reason it is extremely urgent to reconsider different and alternative connotations of speculation and bring them up to date. The addition "Whatever" in the title emphasizes that these connotative forms should always matter to the reality we live in. From an artistic perspective, it seems essential to start investigating the following methodological question: how could we engage in that assignment of reconsidering and revealing speculation in order to arrive at novel panorama's and "not-yet-known-knowledge?"

A first answer to that question is given by Marina Vishmidt who, in her keynote contribution *The Hard Labour of Speculation: Shaping a Reflection on Methods*, goes back to the Kantian epistemological project where speculation is described as a form of thinking seeking to establish boundaries. Such a form of thinking remained at the core of the artistic thinking process for many, many decades. In the current neo-liberal era, however, the most important characteristics of artistic practice – creativity, flexibility and interdominancy – appear to have been appropriated by the rhetoric of the creative industry. Against this commodification

drive, Vishmidt argues, speculation should be placed as a form of production that presents itself as an engine of social change.

In a conversation with Geert Lovink, Bifo calls in question whether changes of this kind will still be possible considering the inescapable presence of the regressive laws of realism of capitalism and the total absence of (temporary) separate zones where the future could be thought in other ways. Would the disappearance of time as duration necessitate us to accept that the future-related principle of hope would vanish as well?

In Joshua Simon's proposition the understanding of speculation appears to be quite differently. In a world where even liberation movements and emancipatory politics are being absorbed in neoliberal market mechanisms – transforming value into price, labor into debt, and revolution into speculation – speculation seems to stand solely for risk management. Simon believes that change could be produced by a form of counter-speculation: a mode of thinking that destabilizes the perpetuation of the supposedly inevitable logic of life subjected to financialization. This modality does not project the ontological conditions of the present into the future, but focuses on destabilizing the certainty and inevitability of our current financialized reality.

Sanne Oorthuizen and Natasha Tontey's essay *Speculating in Dark Times* also searches for alternative forms of speculation giving rise to post-capitalist futures and alternative forms of living, while beating the global powers of financial speculation currently in charge of our lives. Confronted with a once free Internet that is controlled now by capitalist speculation and governmental security, they explore the Dark Web as a multi-dimensional space of resistance where speculation can break free from oppressive regimes of power, and where a more commons-oriented thought about forms of economy will no longer be dictated by capitalism.

In order to be able to think about alternative economies, the concept of "value" should be redeployed and reactivated from the perspective of artistic practice, Andrea Eckerly and Terri Bird maintain in their essay *Speculation as Surplus-Value*. They are inspired by the work of Brian Massumi, where speculation is understood as enabling the emergence of the new in reclaiming the value of speculation itself and releasing it from its reduction to economic logic of the market. Eckerly and Bird state that social, affective and material speculations of artists produce a processual surplus-value as an affective excess that differs in kind from the surpluses of capital accumulation.

Massumi would consider such a counter concept of value an affective expression or intensity. That has a Deleuzian resonance, but in the speculative debate about Object-Oriented Ontology there is also another approach that is focused on the intensity of things. What does the emancipation of an art object mean for the practice of art, James Charlton asks in his contribution *No More and Less: The Withdrawal of Speculation*. Is it possible to engage in an art practice beyond human activity and agency? And does the emergence of a non-human practice of aesthetic intensity imply the disappearance of the historical contingency of speculation?

Further reflection on the non-human perspective will be found in Tyler Coburn's *Excerpt from Richard Roe: A memoir of a Legal Person*. This memoir gives a voice to the legal, psychological and metaphysical fictions swarming around the margin of selfishness and increasingly dictating the political and economic conditions. But the text also intends to speculate about a different mode of living together: a mode that is no longer based on the individual, but on a non-personal, impersonal type of community.

Coburn inserts the historical figure of Richard Roe used in English law when someone's real name is withheld: it is the known unknown, a potential everyone, but actually nobody. Eleanor Duffin also uses a constructed narrator in her contribution *A Phantom Limb*. For her, however, speculation does not focus on the future, but on the past. By using a fictional other – an assembly of three historical persona – a speculative form of auto-fiction is generated through narrative strategies of presence and absence, ghost and shadow.

Last but not least, there is the issue of how artistic research projects aimed at articulating a different kind of speculation concept can be presented and exhibited. Do these projects require a specific display practice or curatorial strategy? Or better put: how could exhibitions (or expositions, if you like) contribute to disclose the means with which these projects intend to re-think and re-imagine the world?

Such and similar questions are raised by Azadeh Fatehrad in her report on the curatorial project *Between the Visible and the Invisible*. In what way could staging a space advance contemporary notions of belonging, history, and memory? The various works in the exhibition (including Nikolaus Gansterer's *Psychoréographies* and Oliver Ressler's *Anubumin*) demonstrate that strategic intertwining of fact and fiction offers possibilities to expand the notion of speculation within contemporary spatial politics – and activate as well a sense of the possible in an interstice situation.

Răzvan Ion's political approach is even more explicit in his contribution *Editor Your Future*, a reflection on the 8th Bucharest Biennale curated by him and Beral Madra. For Ion, biennales in the current era of

post-truth might be the last agoras, where, away from the calculation powers of the global art scene, there is time and space to reveal a critical awareness of social-cultural problems, to formulate and express truths, and, most of all, to rethink the future anew.

As an epilogical completion of the *Whatever Speculation* publication, a research screening entitled *Re-Imagining Futures* was organized in the project space of OnCurating (Zurich), where various elements of the above considerations will be resumed and where a number of the discussed and contextualized works will be situated once again.

Competing Interests

The author has no competing interests to declare.

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