

**AP:**

In your book you draw parallels between the processes of speculation in financialisation and in art, arguing that neither financialized capitalism nor artistic production can be thought of as unproductive labour. As a point of departure for this conversation, I propose this excerpt from your introduction:

[T]he concern here is to draw a parallel between contemporary capital and contemporary art as they come to constitute the poles of a society structured around speculation, reflected in social practices ranging from systems of welfare provision to the constitution of the self and the image of work ... 'Speculation as a mode of production' thus denotes the conjunction of the characteristic valorisation processes of art and of financialised capital as two social forms that are related through the compatibility of their logics.<sup>1</sup>

So, to start, could you briefly explain how you understand these two speculations? Or more appropriately, this singular speculative labour form as it is reflected across the spheres of art and finance.

**MV:**

Yes, sure. To begin with, I feel like one simple heuristic I've used in discussion around this non-identical concept of speculation—and non-identity has a methodological dimension I'll get into later on—is one I came across in Steven Shaviro's work, which is 'open' and 'closed' speculation.<sup>2</sup> To posit an open and a closed strain of speculation as a social logic or a social form means already to engage in immanent critique of the image of speculation we normally have to hand, which is generally either a vaguely emancipatory one as in 'speculative fiction', a utopian type of approach, or the disparaging one of 'irresponsible' financial speculation which sees it as a pathology that goes from being a subset of the system to taking over the whole of the global capitalist system (a clear illustration would be discourses that draw analogies between capitalism and cancer<sup>3</sup> - though of course there are some, most significantly Anne Boyer, who have done remarkable and non-metaphorical work in limning the parallels).<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Marina Vishmidt, *Speculation as a Mode of Production: Forms of Value Subjectivity in Art and Capital* (Brill, 2018), viii, 3.

<sup>2</sup> Steven Shaviro, 'Speculative Realism -a Primer', *Texte zur Kunst* 93, March 2014, pp. 40–51.

<sup>3</sup> John McMurtry, *The Cancer Stage of Capitalism: From Crisis to Cure* (Pluto, 2018).

<sup>4</sup> Anne Boyer, *The Undying* (Farras, Straus and Giroux, 2019).

What the 'open/closed' frame allows us to do, if we use it dialectically, is to see how financial speculation, which thinks of itself as 'wealth-creating' or 'market-making' doesn't actually create anything but more of itself. That makes it a prime example of 'closed' speculation - it has no horizon besides an indefinite replication of the future as the present, thus predicated on enclosing the future as a temporality and as a resource. Meanwhile, the 'open' speculation of theory, of art, that which is supposedly able to renew perception, proposes new worlds or ways of being, is open as well in the indefinite way that its emancipatory promise is institutionally and economically not only imbricated in the 'closed' speculation of the financial market, which might be a true but somewhat established observation, but in the disciplinary autonomy of those fields that defines their speculation as constitutively 'free' of real-world consequences. So that's maybe also a Brechtian point that aesthetic speculation has to be materialised as the 'socially' or politically' speculative, i.e. what is it in aesthetic form and performance that can displace both its confinement as aesthetic form and can give it an immanent connection to actual and unpredictable - hence 'open', hence actually speculative - processes of determinate social transformation. So the idea of 'speculation' then seems to shade into a sort of genealogical, immanent critique of the autonomy ideology as the infrastructure of art's concept of itself as critical but also the sand in the ability of this infrastructure to carry out its intended tasks - so that's either a scripted non-performance, or a need for the de-functionalisation of this particular norm of scripted non-performance, perhaps. Or, as Max Haiven recently wrote, the imbrication of artists and institutions with wider movements for the abolition of the wage, property, race and gender, at least on their far horizon, might also entail the abolition of the artist as an 'economic figure'.<sup>5</sup> The creative dimension of negation, tendentially implicit in *all* labour but institutionally sanctified only in artistic labour, might prove to be the generative point of conjunction between artistic practices and those movements - especially in a time when biological life is directly threatened by the prospect of the form which it takes in our societies continuing unabated, and un-negated.

**AP:**

Right, in other words, both the scripted non-performance of autonomy ('I am complicit, but simultaneously exceptional'), and the defunctionalisation of this non-performance (the paradigms of 'refusal' or counter-practice, e.g.) are imbricated in the critique of art's

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<sup>5</sup> Max Haiven, 'No Artist Left Alive: Speculations on the Post-Pandemic Struggles of Cultural Workers Within, Against and Beyond Capitalism' *Arts of the Working Class* (April 23, 2020).

antagonistic relation to work, and the value-form. Here, as a follow up to Haiven, I wonder whether Tronti's oft-cited claim that the working class is simultaneously the articulation and dissolution of capital could be rephrased for thinking *cultural* production (capital) and *cultural* 'workers'. Upon first thought, the autonomy ideology—that art is 'dependent on financial surplus and not on labour', as you've helpfully summarized in a prior conversation we've had—would make the analogous rephrasing impossible, given that the post-Kantian artistic subjectivity as 'non-worker' is thus predicated on an exceptionality from labour. So, the contradiction of how to de-subjectivize is quite complicated. For this and other reasons, I really like how you provocatively reframe the notion of artistic subjectivity in the book as 'aesthetic subjectivity', after which you write: 'the subject of labour is transformed into the subject of judgement'.<sup>6</sup> Given you draw on aesthetics (from Hegel to Adorno), value-form theory, post-operaist Marxism and its critique, among many other strains of critical political economics and theory, can you summarize a bit how you develop the methodology you employ in the book?

**MV:**

Yes, the methodology is a bit of a messy amalgam. I do feel that a stronger reflection, or even programmatic outline, of the book's methodology is one aspect that could have really been developed in the text, and it's one that I have been trying to focus on when I've been presenting the book in public. I suppose because the book is at its core, and maybe even overall, a PhD thesis with a certain level of revision but nothing like a complete overhaul, the mix of methodologies also reflects my process of putting it together, like Morris' *A box with the Sound of its Own Making* (1961). I guess I do say something in the beginning about it being a 'speculative' methodology, meaning speculation operating in this unstable double way as both a principle of construction and a principle of analysis. That means there's a level of recursion operative in parts of it, this ultra-dialectical structure which means none of the propositions I make get to stand very long before being subjected to further assessment and critique. That may be where this idea of non-identity can also be seen as operative in the writing, and that attaches directly as well to the idea of productivity and non-productivity, that all these ideas have to be situated, especially when they seem to function as axiomatic, in Marxist analysis as well as other forms of knowledge production about art, economy, labour, etc. The object can never be subsumed by the concept and part of that resistance to subsumption rebounds on the coherence of the concept, which has to become an object, or fragment into multiple objects for itself, as it were, and the

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<sup>6</sup> Vishmidt, *Speculation as a Mode of Production*, 155.

first object likewise has to be taken as partial and unstable. So there's probably, at the methodological level, a lot going on that is not articulated about epistemological questions to do with critique and its politics, questions of critique and critique of critique, to put it broadly, and how both contribute to a reification rather than this more 'negative dialectical' approach. (Though some would argue we have to hold on to Hegel's negativity per se, and not try to elaborate another one). This 'negative dialectical' approach practices its politics in the field of theory by always remaining mutable vis-a-vis its objects of study, and how those objects reflect on themselves. Methodologically, this also has to do with engaging in the different levels of abstraction that a 'dialectical method' holds open but holds as imperative to trace the mediations between.

But to return to something you said at the start of this question, about the double nature of autonomy, and the double nature of its (non-) performative ontology, I was wondering if you would make any distinctions between strategies of de- and re-functionalisation in the staging of this autonomy. More specifically, I'm thinking of the examples in your writing of work by Christopher D'Arcangelo and Mierle Laderman Ukeles. D'Arcangelo's interventions in the 1970s were geared at triggering the institution's non-performativity of autonomy, either through compulsive artification or compulsive expulsion of him and his actions. So this would be a strategy of de-functionalisation. Ukeles's practice could be seen as more interested in a re-functionalisation, staging both the figure of the artist and the museum as sites of hidden (reproductive) labour, and then going on to programmatically highlight the general social occlusion of racialised and gendered maintenance work. Something less complex and more aggregative is perhaps going on in current projects such as Arte Útil, and other emphases on a fairly unmediated (and non-speculative) concept of 'usefulness' in art. Finally, I would mention not the staging of labour but of wage labour that reproduces the institution as such in mimetic performances such as Jan Peter Hammer's *That Which is Seen and That Which is Unseen* (2012) (where the performance is simply the museum guard doing his job, but visibly watching his wages accumulate in the same space as the visitors - wage-labour as social sculpture). As you note about the Whitney's attempt to cordon off D'Arcangelo's 1975 action, *there is nothing to see here* either.<sup>7</sup> I was curious if you think these descriptions of 'de-functionalisation', 're-functionalisation' and performative de-abstractions of labour have some bearing on the

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<sup>7</sup> Andreas Petrossiants, "Inside and Out: The Edges to Critique," *e-flux journal* no. 110 (June, 2020).

inside/outside demarcation, or the ‘demarcational activity’ negotiating the institution’s ‘policing activity’, that you are so suggestively developing.

**AP:** That’s a fantastic pair of questions. To answer the first—of whether I would distinguish between strategies of de- and re-functionalisation—I would say ‘not necessarily’, given that both strategies are proposed within regimes of aesthetic autonomy (and abstraction) or heteronomy that are neither ‘real’ nor conscious of value as it relates to the art’s infrastructures. I’m interested in how value can be destabilized in cultural production as an exchange between viewer and producer or between institution and object, and furthermore whether ‘culture’ as a qualifier prefix for production is even relevant here (circling back to Haiven). D’Arcangelo’s actions, confrontational disruptions of the museum’s mechanisms of display are a great example. For the 1971 action at the Whitney that you reference, he chained himself to the doors of the museum and obstructed entry. It was only after he was covered up by staff (incorporated into the museum’s spatial matrix), making his conversations with museum visitors impossible, that he unchained himself and left. I read this as an attempt by the museum to neutralize his action doubly: firstly by making his action a ‘performance’, and secondly by making it a ‘rejected’ performance. Here, he does in fact destabilize value (the value-form of capital in the museum) by disturbing reception: 1. by not having been invited, and 2. by abandoning the critique the moment he is *incorporated* (literally, with his body) into the museum’s space. The latter fact is what makes it different from contemporaneous (Vietnam War-era) acts of sabotage in museums like Tony Schfrazi who spray painted over Picasso’s *Guernica* or the Guerilla Art Action Group staging protests in front of the same painting and spraying the floor with fake blood. In D’Arcangelo’s actions, the ‘triggering [of the] non-performativity of autonomy’ is expressly targeting *how* museums produce value, and not just the use or exchange values of specific works/spaces. With Ukeles, a strategy of re-functionalisation operates exactly as you describe, though I’m also interested in the way taking the museum as a stage has been continued and re-applied in *struggle* rather than critique, as we’ll get to later. For Arte Útil, I would give it less credit given such projects end up being representative forms of collabouration. The exceptionality of the museum (or academy, studio, and so on) from cycles of production (not to mention historical specificity) is so thoroughly enforced in such projects that consumption is seen to operate separately as well.

Your second question, about whether de- and re-functionalisation relate to the inside/outside dichotomy has preoccupied me for some time, and I'm not sure I have an answer. I would first question what is being de-functionalized, and then by whom? Is the museum de-functionalizing itself to aid its own ability to recuperate? Or is some sort of system being appropriated (in part) by the artist to facilitate critique of the artist position and the museum? I would question the critical artist's belief in autonomy in the way Marx critiqued the young Hegelians, for not changing the world but for only interpreting it differently—which in this context is also my way of putting forward a critique of the sort of idealism implicit in social democratic thinking, so prominent in postwar “radical” art through today.

|                                                            | Open Speculative Practice                                                               | Closed Speculative Practice                   |
|------------------------------------------------------------|-----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|-----------------------------------------------|
| Inside, with respect to the Museum's self-assigned borders | Utopian, Idealist, ultimately reformist.<br><br>Art as Activism; Subversion as practice | Day Trader Artist (Renzo Martens, Jeff Koons) |
| Outside, with respect to the “art system”                  | Abandonment of art and its claims to autonomy (Laurie Parsons, e.g.)                    | Creative Capitalism                           |

So in the end, the goal of much critical work today becomes how to mobilize one's imbrication, and a similar understanding is present in more militant struggles as well. I find it interesting to consider how discourses of communisation may set artistic critique into other zones of political engagement. As *endnotes* helpfully summarized in their second issue, '[t]hose who developed the theory of communisation rejected [the] posing of revolution in terms of forms of organisation, and instead aimed to grasp the revolution in terms of its content'.<sup>8</sup> Following this, how, then, to spur the self-activity of (art) workers to *struggle* (rather than critique), and not simply for wages, and so on, but for the elimination of production. As Douglas Huebler said: 'The world is full of objects, more or less interesting; I do not wish to add any more'. What if that statement was less a minimalist quip and instead an attack on production as the determinant of artists' ability to

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<sup>8</sup> Endnotes collective, 'Communisation and Value-Form Theory', *endnotes* 2 (April, 2010), <https://endnotes.org.uk/issues/2/en/endnotes-communisation-and-value-form-theory>.

satisfy the necessities of social reproduction, or a call for an art strike? What kind of institutional critique would unbind production from consumption?

Can you talk about how you analyze the ubiquitous processes of codifying speculation as creativity in the book—this closed speculative outside of art’s exceptional space? Either in ‘creative capitalism’ or in the turn to performance and conceptualist process in art? If we agree that all work is material (and concrete), and add that value is an expression of (socially-necessary labour) time, what does that mean for the speculative productive form? As you say in the first chapter: ‘It is not simply labour which is alienated, but all other human capacities, simply through their *potential*—hence “speculative”—to produce value, even if no value is produced in fact’.<sup>9</sup> This might be seen as a contradiction: if art doesn’t produce value then can we consider it labour, in the strict sense? Or should we apply Sohn-Rethel’s emphasis on exchange, or Marx himself in Capital vol. 1 where he writes: ‘value can only manifest itself in the social relation of commodity to commodity’. For all these contradictions, I’m really interested in your critique of Adorno’s reading of Hegel, wherein he argues that art is both absolute commodity and a potential space of non-labour, given our interest in the shift of some Euro-US artists identifying, if only rhetorically, with the worker’s struggle since the late 60s—the popularisation of the moniker ‘art worker’ in particular, as opposed to say, situationist critiques of art and spectacle. As you write elsewhere: ‘Only labour can check the infinite expansion of the “automatic subject”; of capitalist value in art as elsewhere’.

**MV:** Yes, exactly - the politics of labour, the actually socially meta-static action of wage struggles, checks the value-form of artistic subjectivity, but that doesn’t equate to affirming a worker identity as a political horizon. That’s just a basic anti-politics-of-recognition point, staying with the negativity of the struggle to the whole rather than imagining a positive identity claim has the capacity to re-shape the whole in a better direction. You really don’t even need communisation theory for that. Cultural workers, unionisation and strikes provide a good example. The Tate United struggle at the moment, a job loss of 313 precarious contracts from ‘Tate Enterprises’, itself set within a context of mainly racialised precarious workers facing the loss of 1000 jobs across the South Bank cultural institutions. This is what happens in institutions that get covid bailouts from the state, as in the US - some symbolic goodwill cuts at the top, and the sacrifice of hundreds of already low-paid and irregular workers at the large base

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<sup>9</sup> Vishmidt, *Speculation as a Mode of Production*, 57.

of the meritocratic great pyramids that art institutions are in our own latter-day funerary culture. The phenomenon of those with the least resources being brutalised by the rich in the middle of a pandemic is very much of a piece with the contradictions the pandemic has exposed and exacerbated. Artists stand in solidarity, and they are often these same workers in cultural institutions. So the crucial thing is not whether artists are workers and can organise as such - this is not an identity problem, this is a capitalism problem (hence always already also a race problem, a gender problem, a colonial problem, a displacement problem, and overridingly a police problem). There are so many terrains on which to fight. No one in this society can avoid trying to find money to survive, and whoever pays you that money is de facto your enemy. As Tai Shani wrote, in the conclusion of a recent broadside against the servility of non-performative autonomy, 'We should not be worrying about biting the hand that feeds us [...] We should eat the hand, for it is [...] much, much tastier than the boot.'<sup>10</sup>

I guess I'd also think about how creativity is re-allocated from labour to capital in neoliberal common sense, and so capitalising on the 'immaterial' becomes a *modus operandi* across social production, across the 'cultural' and the 'real' economy. The creation of value as the individualising, propertising and branding of cultural and social material is the 'aesthetic' attitude that Hegel already forecasts as the 'groundless ground' of modernity, as in Agamben's book on aesthetic subjectivity, *The Man Without Content*, that I have some discussion of in the book. Or, in the words of Baudelaire, 'Of the vaporization and centralization of the self. Everything is here'. Yet there's still a distinction between the artist as a maker of specific objects in Judd's terms, and the artist as an 'entrepreneur' of themselves, i.e. in the Schumpeterian sense of the entrepreneur as a maker of new combinations. Nowadays artists are educated to do both. The creativity of the artist and a sort of generalised 'creative economy' notion of creativity that underpins gentrification and so many other dimensions of structural violence, especially in urban areas, is symptomatic of a lot of things. Ideologically, perhaps, it demonstrates the necessity of precarizing more and more of the population, or, the fact that capital's valorisation now is more invested in the control of labouring (and excluded from labouring) populations—or in routing around them—than it is in putting them to work directly. I guess when it comes to culture and art, and attempting to dissociate it from those imperatives and put in in a more practical connection to political movements for liberation and refusal, creativity, like speculation, has to be wrested back from capital and re-defined in terms that

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<sup>10</sup> Tai Shani, 'Why Art Workers Must Demand the Impossible', *Art Review* (September 1, 2020).



build out the generative and propositional aspects of those fights, which are so often couched in terms of regression and defensiveness by their enemies and in terms of vulnerability and melancholy by those who might see themselves as allies. There really needs to be a full weight given to the speculative and creative dimensions of antagonism. It's just incredibly obvious that there can only be stagnation and conservatism if we look to culture to lead the way, and not see the culture both suffusing and inspired by social movements, like the insurrection on the streets now - how much cultural change is happening, how much aesthetic innovation, triggered by that event of speculative politics and world-ending praxis?

The last quote you referenced, about labour checking the infinite expansion of the automatic subject, comes in the book where I suggest we need to think speculation *negatively*. That is, in terms that seem to be the furthest, again, ideologically or axiomatically in a Western political and philosophical tradition, from its vaunted creativity and openness. That means trying to think it in terms of labour (so a really counter-Arendtian move, for whom only politics is creative whereas labour is biological, repetitive, not fully human). I talk about 'the labour of the negative' as a line of argument in and departing from Hegel, and especially Adorno's approach to Hegel, which means engaging with the social form of what it means to do speculative philosophy (and here I'd take the opportunity to recommend a brilliant essay by Hammam Aldouri in the last issue of *Radical Philosophy* that embarks on just such a project).<sup>11</sup> More prosaically, that's also the dialectical approach to the question of labour politics in art, where I would want us to look at that as not something to be affirmed or dismissed, but as a political articulation of the labour that was always there, and constitutively excluded for art to reproduce itself solipsistically as autonomous, i.e. as dependent on financial surplus. So an organisational rather than thematic appropriation of the labour in art is possibly the only way that a negative critique of that autonomy can be initiated both using the institutional and infrastructural resources of that autonomy, and to allow it to transversally connect with and through movements elsewhere, and to materialise those movements within the space of art as a concrete rather than gestural politics.

Insofar as the 'automatic subject' of self-valorisation is a presupposition in the institutional and libidinal economies of art as they are elsewhere in capitalist social production, here they are

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<sup>11</sup> Hammam Aldouri, 'Hegel's Natural Assumption: The First Sentence of the *Phenomenology of Spirit*', *Radical Philosophy* 2.07 (April 2020).

premised on the plenitude of the creative author figure, however dispersed or dissolved in intention or in project, if not in practice. It's only labour that can block, negate, withdraw from that cycle of valorisation, to suspend it and introduce another relationship to time than the empty, teleological time of de-socialised creativity. That means the politics of labour, not a 'labour'-related content. And that is an issue for cultural workers as much as for 'artists', in whatever, situational sense the boundaries between them are drawn. The political economy of the cultural field is very often one where you have to first invest in your own precarity in order to have a platform or a voice to dis-invest from it elsewhere or at another time. And that's why unionisation is so important - not for itself, but because it creates a block, both for individuals and organisations, to reproduce those particular 'automatic subject' relations, which are class and property relations disguised as individual and guild exceptionalism.

**AP:**

I feel this last point is so often forgotten in unionisation struggles in the cultural sector, especially in the US. Once a union of cultural workers forms, why not use that block to then deal with the gentrification maintained by the museum, or fight along with the cleaners of the space who are not legally allowed into the same union. Something from your book that I'm still struggling to wrap my head around is how exactly your analysis of the speculative form, of speculation, can be read in the context of Adorno's negative dialectics. For those who have not yet read your book, is your proposal something of a return to Hegel by way of Adornian negativity? I just read a funny blog post by Alexander Galloway the other day where he quotes (perhaps the most prominent US Hegelian) Frederic Jameson, who admits: 'The most serious drawback to the Hegelian system ... [is] the way in which it conceives of speculative thinking as "the consummation of itself"'.<sup>12</sup> In short, how does rejection of Hegel's dialectic in lieu of the negative play into speculation as you describe it?

**MV:**

That's a great question, also in the sense of posing a challenge and a potential avenue for future work. Possibly one of the reasons you're struggling to wrap your head around this issue is that the book evidences struggle with it on my part as well. In the book, I contest one of the key arguments in Adorno's aesthetic theory, which is that of art being absolutely other to labour, to

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<sup>12</sup> Alexander Galloway, 'Let's Spit on Hegel', August 27, 2020, <http://cultureandcommunication.org/galloway/lets-spit-on-hegel>.

administered society - its sort of capitalist modernity-directed divine impotence (autonomy) as the source of its critical force. So there I am suggesting that the border is less clear when contemporary forms of labour can no longer be cleanly bifurcated from the improvisatory quality of artistic creation and the precarity of artistic life. There's a new proximity in terms of 'form-of-life', then. Which we have to reckon with for its consequences for artistic practice as social critique in the most general sense.

At the same time I endorse Adorno's argument because art is still not value-producing in its subsumption to the capitalist form of value; its mystified and ideological forms drift much nearer to the typical forms of 'abstract labour' and factually they contain and associate with it, but artistic labour is no more a type of abstract labour than it ever was - not because it is concrete, because all labour has the side of being concrete, but because it is structured differently and occupies a different site in the landscape of value relations. So maybe that's a topological emphasis on what can be seen as an ontological problem, and here I appreciate and am very much inspired by your inside/outside inquiry because it also takes a topological approach to the problem of critique. This seems important because it evacuates the problem of the afflicted subject, which is so perennial for all those involutions of complicity-criticality you mention, and doesn't just stop at affirming a sort of embedded solidarity on the other side of that worry, as do some writers who try to draw a line under this problematic but focus on practical and material forms of organizing.

But you asked a different question, and that I can try to answer more simply. Speculation comes after negative dialectics; it is a kind of negative dialectics of artistic autonomy, which already took a strictly negative or relational form in Adorno's thinking. The concept is not self-sufficient because of the object; speculation is not sufficient unto itself - in its financial or creative iteration - because of labour. At the same time, rather than taking this shortcut via Adorno's exposition and critique of Hegel's short circuit between labour and philosophy, in the future I'd like to revisit this project with a wider range of Hegelian tools. More straightforwardly, Adorno's negative dialectics are negative because for him resistance is irreducible and he argues that for Hegel resistance, or negativity, is always ultimately system-affirmative in the march of Spirit (and some, most recently David Lloyd, have also tried to develop an analysis of how this connects to the racist moments, or, perhaps, the racist texture,

of Hegel's thought).<sup>13</sup> So I'd say similarly part of what I wanted to do with the concept and the method of speculation was to insist on the entanglement between the 'open and 'closed' moments but also on the excess of 'social speculation' as it runs into the irreducibility of social antagonism.

**AP:**

To pry a bit more, could you speak about how you would position negative speculation alongside more recent debates on materiality? I was just reading through Steve Wright's *Storming Heaven: Class Composition and Struggle in Italian Autonomist Marxism*, and was reminded of our conversation during a section on Della Volpe's re-reading of Marx with a scientific materialist bent. Wright summarizes: 'Marx's enquiry, the opposite of a speculative philosophy which confused concept and reality, formed a methodological circle of induction and deduction [...] the application of science to modern capitalist society as a materialist sociological economics'.<sup>14</sup> That said, the speculative, productive form you refer to doesn't eschew a scientific, materialist analysis of capital, one of the great feats you accomplish in the book. Can you discuss how you reconcile (or rather counterpose) Adornian negativity, speculation, and materialist analyses of production?

**MV:**

With regard to how to reconcile, or even how to effectively counterpose, Adornian negativity and the materialist analysis of production, I suppose for me that would actually entail the very kernel of the speculative as a method and an object that takes on a materialist dimension almost *de facto*, right, in an era when so much of capitalist accumulation, whether it's industrial, financial, extractive, is premised on speculative valorisation and the positing and realisation of fictitious capital at a very practical, quotidian level. So the trope of Marx putting Hegel on his feet that Wright might be alluding to in that passage you mention needs to be revisited from a more concrete, if not thereby sociological, perspective. With regards to aesthetic theory, the key has to be where Adorno writes about 'form as sedimented content', meaning historical materialism in general, and certainly a historical materialist approach to art and its institutional ontologies, is always working through the lens of form (starting with the value form, as you

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<sup>13</sup> David Lloyd, *Under Representation: The Racial Regime of Aesthetics* (Fordham University Press, 2018).

<sup>14</sup> Steve Wright, *Storming Heaven: Class Composition and Struggle in Italian Autonomist Marxism* (Pluto, 2017 [second edition]), 24.

already observed earlier). Here I'd also like to ask you about your thoughts on form as part of a speculative method, which again I am, perhaps hastily, relating to the relational inside/outside topology you are drawing in your recent text. Does the continuity between financial form and aesthetic form dramatically intensified by the performativity of data on social media as personal brands, entrepreneurial politics, and so forth provide sets of challenges and possibilities that could further fractalize the inside/outside question? At times, this almost seems like the nightmare endpoint of Fraser's 'we are the institution', as the institution diffuses, becoming milieu, becoming protocol. Here I am also thinking of a striking formulation by Sven Lutticken, whose piece appears in the same issue of the journal as your essay, where he writes 'Whereas modern aesthetic theory at times posited a quasi-autonomous *life of forms*, the question now needs to be how *forms of life*, with a degree of autonomy, can be created from and against the structural conditions that both necessitate and sabotage them.'<sup>15</sup> Can that reversal (between modernist autonomous artistic forms and potentially autonomous forms of life) still be made, or is the spiral of speculation/immiseration too advanced?

**AP:**

Sven Lutticken's text was certainly striking!<sup>16</sup> Without sounding too cynical, nor waxing poetic, I would venture that the spiral of speculation/immiseration is always some steps ahead of us, which makes it even more imperative to try and activate this reversal, both discursively and tactically, and attempt to construct autonomous forms of life. Firstly, social reproduction needs to be considered both in the reproduction of surplus populations, but also in how capital reproduces itself, as you've written about extensively. In the reproductive regimes of financialized capitalism, one way of escaping the 'productive constraints of operational abstraction', as Lutticken puts it in that text, is to understand consumption to be similarly reproductive. In this sense, autonomy is not to be found in the form of the (art) work, but in the different collective possibilities nested within forms of life as we organize them, from producing art to building a space within which to show it. To quote the excellent conclusion to Lutticken's text:

As deformed subjects attempting to attain a degree of self-organization by intensifying self-exploitation, we cultivate an art of breakdown in precarious affinity groups,

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<sup>15</sup> Sven Lütticken, 'Performing Preformations: Elements for a Historical Formalism', *e-flux journal*, no. 110 (June, 2020).

<sup>16</sup> In the interest of full disclosure, I remind the reader that I work on the editorial team of *e-flux journal*. — AP

coalitions, and alliances. As always, some are more exposed and vulnerable than others; this is precisely what makes such organizational labour imperative, as well as fiendishly difficult. In the accelerating storm of history, today's historical formalists try to construct the necessary out of the impossible.

Transcending the life of forms, in art as elsewhere, I would take two examples: the character of recent struggles against (art) institutions on one hand, and the recent George Floyd rebellions on the other. In many instances of the former, the autonomy of culture was taken as an invitation to wage battle in places safer than the street—what Decolonize this Place calls an 'arts of escalation' in their general call to become 'ungovernable'. Here, the 'form of autonomy' is taken as a weapon rather than taken for granted. With regards to the second example, at least at first, the uprisings showed a militancy void of political allegiances, of experience, or of calls for specific 'forms' of struggle.<sup>17</sup> To burn the Third Police Precinct in Minneapolis, it was not thanks to political cadres that gathered, nor actors from social democratic caucuses. It was a mass of angry people developing tactics organically in the practice of keeping each other safe. The 'forms of struggle', the 'sedimented content', of the actions and tactics emerged in a space void of politics and took the determinants of social reproduction, of life and defense as the objectified site of struggle. These two sites of struggle—the museum with its claims to extra-political constitution and the street wherein formal political organization is exchanged for spontaneous tactical development—share a privileging of being together and collective antagonism over specific formal considerations. Another example here might be Claire Fontaine's 'human strike': an attempt to reconstitute (artistic) form into antagonistic forms of life rooted in reproduction struggles.<sup>18</sup> Yet another is Nanni Balesrini's poetry and (some) novels, that take the sedimented forms as direct, malleable content for narrativizing history.

One thing we've not really had a chance to talk about prior is how you analyze 'waste and uselessness', as a 'decisively aesthetic project of negation'. Explain what you mean here, as it relates to human capital and the 'libidinal economy'?

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<sup>17</sup> Crimethinc, 'The Siege of the Third Precinct in Minneapolis: An Account and Analysis', *crimethinc.com*, June 10, 2020, <https://crimethinc.com/2020/06/10/the-siege-of-the-third-precinct-in-minneapolis-an-account-and-analysis>. See also: Liaisons, 'Warning', *The New Inquiry*, September 9, 2020, <https://thenewinquiry.com/blog/warning/>.

<sup>18</sup> Claire Fontaine, *Human Strike and the Act of Creating Freedom*, trans. Robert Hurely (Semiotext(e), 2020). Thanks to Jose Rosales for reminding me of this text.

**MV:** I guess the arc I would like to chart there, without necessarily affirming that I'd managed to do so in the book, is to begin with the the privileging of the 'purposeless' in one of the founding moments of Western philosophy of aesthetics, Kant's account in the *Critique of the Power of Judgment*, and how that helped to garner a critical faculty for the kind of activity that went on to be categorised as art in Western (hence colonial, imperial) modernity via its separation from the utilitarian fetish of capitalist industrial civilization. Art is exceptional by not being useful, by reflecting the categorical imperative of being an end in itself, and this places it at the other ethical pole from e.g. garbage, and this polarity is collapsed by the avantgarde. So looking at the contemporary moment, as with other categories and polarities that have helped establish the specific location and affordances for the institution of art, we see those both breaking down and being re-affirmed by the relentlessness of capitalist logics of valorisation, appropriation and expulsion transforming spaces and dimensions of social relations, mental and biological life where they are relatively new and unprecedented, pushed by the economic dynamism of finance and the quantification of data. Human capital is one of those, social impact bonds another, but these have been around for a while.<sup>19</sup> Ethics-washing austerity as value propositions for investors in prisons and even individual higher education portfolios) is another, a sort of generalised entrepreneurialism that becomes not just ideologically but materially unavoidable, which is one of the core arguments of the book - you just *are* human capital, or if you cannot accumulate or valorise it, you are waste. Especially in situations where the state has broken down or wasn't there to begin with as a source of social support, which of course might describe the U.S. and lots of less economically powerful places while having quite different implications - but not so different that proletarian internationalism cannot be glimpsed or enacted. In any case, the story of art is one where the market has always operated with subjects and objects as its sources of value, where there is no value without authorship, without personal inscription - and that means something different when the imperative to self-brand becomes universalised the way it has, where human capital formation is a threshold of entry to the labour market. Without this you are already entering, or not entering,

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<sup>19</sup> See <https://www.forbes.com/sites/annefield/2020/06/30/upstart-co-labs-member-community-1b-of-impact-investing-capacity-for-the-creative-economy/#ab2c7257e38a>. For a clear-eyed analysis, see Emma Dowling, 'In the wake of austerity: social impact bonds and the financialisation of the welfare state in Britain', *New Political Economy*, 22:3: 294-310. Cameron Rowland had the institutional investment arm of the Whitney Museum of American Art purchase a \$25,000 social impact bond which will expire in 2022 and contributes towards a prisoners' re-entry program in Ventura County, California (*Public Money*, 2017).

the labour market as waste, as negative surplus, and so, tendentially, is any art you are making, if that's what we're considering.

**AP:**

Your work on institutional critique has been vital for me, particularly your connection of the “institutions of critique” to those of neoliberal representation in a novel way. In an essay on Marion von Osten, where I believe you introduce your call for an ‘infrastructural critique’ for the first time, you write:

[Institutional critique] has aimed to clarify the legitimate bounds of critique, but in this case, the bounds have been drawn around the type of critique artists could, in good faith, level at the institution of art, while also embodying it professionally, socially, psychically, and economically. This soldered artists and institutions together in an increasingly half-hearted tableau vivant of autonomy, a reconciled realpolitik not all that different from the kind that anointed liberal democracy as the least-worst form of government still standing after everything else has ostensibly been tried.<sup>20</sup>

After reading *Speculation as a Mode of Production*, I've rethought this statement and others as an invitation to consider forms of critique in art that are parallel instead to extra-parliamentary struggle, forms that do not legitimize the object/subject of critique through reconciliation. This is a call for art that applies speculative negation, one that would in fact erode the classification of art as autonomous from productive labour.

**MV:**

Yes!

**AP:**

Great! So following from such a rearticulation of production, one of the arguments I'm most intrigued by from your book is that art can be analyzed as a form of reproductive labour and social reproduction—as well as speculation broadly considered. Of course, Ukeles's works come to mind here: her *Maintenance Art Manifesto* (1969),<sup>21</sup> but also her *Transfer: The Maintenance of the*

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<sup>20</sup> Marina Vishmidt, 'Beneath the Atelier, the Desert: Critique, Institutional and Infrastructural', in *Marion von Osten: Once We Were Artists (A BAK Critical Reader in Artists' Practices)*, ed. Maria Hlavajova and Tom Holert (BAK, 2017), 219.

<sup>21</sup> Ukeles's seminal text is available here: [https://www.queensmuseum.org/wp-content/uploads/2016/04/Ukeles\\_MANIFESTO.pdf](https://www.queensmuseum.org/wp-content/uploads/2016/04/Ukeles_MANIFESTO.pdf).



*Art Object*, 1974, Wadsworth Atheneum, Ukeles cleaning mummy case in which the subject of valorisation is destabilized by making three different labourers do the same work for different wages and *I Make Maintenance Art One Hour Everyday* (1976) in which she asked low-paid workers to consider one hour of their drudgery as art. Furthermore, in equating maintenance in the home with maintenance on the municipal level by entering herself into the NYC Department of Sanitation, as you've argued in your stellar text 'The Two Reproductions'<sup>22</sup> she bridges the gap between material feminist critiques of gender with feminist critiques of racialised capital. Can you talk more about how you make the case for art as a form of socially reproductive labour?

**MV:**

Yes, this is a really good question, and one which I feel my conceptualisation of could really go a lot further, potentially, or hopefully, though it tends to fluctuate with the level of my interest in the category of 'social reproduction'. I guess with Ukeles, that practice is really compelling because it takes up both the gendering, and in other works, the racialisation of reproductive labour, and the relational constitution of this labour as 'maintenance', as routine, uncreative and unskilled vs the 'creation' that belongs to the space of art making and display. That means it encapsulates the two 'sides' or the 'two reproductions' I've chiefly been interested in, that is, the feminist critique of art and the feminist critique of work. Or, to align more closely with my *Third Text* piece, the critique of labour from the standpoint of its gendering and the critique of institutions of the reproduction of the social relations where that labour is situated, that is, the reproduction of capital, or the capital relation. That allows me to talk about both classical feminist critical/conceptual artists such as Ukeles and contemporary critical/conceptual artists such as Cameron Rowland as both types of institutional critique conducted from the standpoint not of the institution of art as their horizon but how the institution of art plays a role in the social reproduction of the capital relation, or, its socialisation, which, in capitalism, means its naturalisation. Here, there is also a maybe quite canonical Althusserian notion of 'institution' at work, as Ideological State Apparatus, that which stakes out a position of autonomy in order to do its work of naturalisation more effectively.

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<sup>22</sup> Marina Vishmidt, "The Two Reproductions in (Feminist) Art and Theory since the 1970s)," *Third Text* 31, no. 1: 49–66.

But that's more art as a form of social reproduction approached through an institutional lens. As a form of socially reproductive labour, that would maybe be more social practice, art engaged in community provision, which can be quite close to activism and organising, and shouldn't necessarily be reduced to its contradictions or unmanageable pretensions as in *Arte Util*, for example. But I'm really very interested in thinking about the relation between Ukeles's performance of 'maintenance art' and her delegation of the performance of 'maintenance art' in the two works you mention. I see the former as a critique of art as a reproductive institution performed through the modality of maintenance labour - which is gendered and domesticated, in its coding, by the artist's normative whiteness and femaleness, and I am sure there were plenty of non-white people doing those tasks in normal working hours for a low wage - and the latter as a critique of reproductive labour and the gendering and racialisation that it entails, using art as a device. That is, it could conceivably serve or have served an organising purpose for those workers were it not recuperated as an authored work. Maybe it did. I don't really know enough about it. But on that note, temporality is also interesting, because of course Ukeles's *Touch Sanitation* piece went on for a number of years, and involved a much greater degree of involvement in the workers' tasks, lives and sociality than this one-hour-a-day piece, which might have been something like a precursor to it.

**AP:**

Definitely! In terms of Ukeles's work's dual critique: of the labour of maintenance (reproduction) and of capital's reproduction of itself (as ideology), I also return often to her quip about who would clean up the morning after the successful revolution. I've often thought this as an implicit critique of statist socialism, not to mention authoritarian marxism—something like the explicit argument in Lizzie Borden's *Born in Flames* (1983). Perhaps this applies more directly to your writing on 'infrastructural critique' and speculation as an invitation for extra-parliamentary politics and power, in art as elsewhere?

**MV:** Yes, exactly, and I guess that can function in several ways: the imagination of other social relations, temporalities, and ways of producing and co-ordinating which is speculative in a sense that aligns closely with the 'prefigurative', i.e. practicing the future in the present in a way that enhances the likelihood of that future coming about. Though we don't invariably have to think of it such such chrono-normative ways (albeit that's what financial speculation does, locking the future into the present through property titles and control of resources), more by

practicing forms of social organisation and collective power sidelined by history and the modes of domination characteristic of racial capitalism. 'Social speculation' is thus quite a mundane idea, it can just mean taking a materialist approach to the project of social transformation that doesn't polarise radical imagination from radical action, and can also operate tactically. As Phil A. Neel writes at the end of his recent screed in the Brooklyn Rail, 'reality seems now to scream the word communism at us in every waking moment.'<sup>23</sup> Where art comes into that is that its habitus is the speculative, it has those techniques and methodologies, as well as that social liminality, of unlearning perceptual, ethical and cognitive habits, the 'de-functionalisation' of subjectivities, as Adorno and more latterly Claire Fontaine articulate it.<sup>24</sup> And though it normatively takes hyper-individualised and branded form, there is also a social habitus there - in education, in other collective milieus - that engrains that speculative approach to reality which, under other social circumstances (as it has, briefly, in modern revolutionary moments) overwhelm the pragmatism and authoritarianism of large-scale oppositional politics (and where I think some comrades coming from the art field who are very active in these movements now, such as within political education within the DSA, could be catalysing some important shifts). If this isn't an oxymoron, I can be quite a staunch Guattarian about some of this stuff - production of subjectivity is crucial, and this is where I see the speculative power of art and radical politics alike, coupled with the exhilaration of negation of a violent and necrotic social stasis. And that's where I would also perhaps distinguish the notion of 'speculation' from a kind of general or surplus 'creativity' or the 'radical imagination' - there's a calculating and strategic dimension to speculation, as well as a systemic scope, that I think is necessary for working infrastructurally, within and across social and institutional location. I feel especially with a lot of the emphasis on the affective in contemporary political thought, a force which is absolutely transindividual gets privatised and the same enclosures of vulnerability and complicity play out again and again. Some serious and complex critical thinking about depersonalization, or *re-individuation* in struggles is really necessary, perhaps.

Now the discussion of cleaning up at the start of your question, bridging from Ukeles, also brings me to a question about 'using the boundary between outside and inside' by movements that are transversal to the grammar and institution of art and whether you think there's a de-valorisation going on there, of the institution's operation of 'bringing in' and 'keeping out'

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<sup>23</sup> Phil A. Neel, 'Crowned Plague', *The Brooklyn Rail* (July-August 2020).

<sup>24</sup> Claire Fontaine, 'Ready-Made Artist and Human Strike: A Few Clarifications' (2005).

which is more or less the only ontology of art we can still find credible, and how that mode of critical 'laundering', of accumulation and centrifuging of any social phenomena, any social contradiction or particular history, as artistic and curatorial material - what you have called 'nominalization' - emerges as a key resource for those movements? Does there have to be a sort of transformation of cultural capital into waste before it becomes a political process, a kind of reverse engineering of the de-sedimentation of content into form that the institution performs? And finally, though this may be another very large question, could there be a pedagogical aspect to this de-sedimentation? Is the evacuation of context, the displacement of social praxis, performed by the production and display of contemporary art enable an educational, and thereby potentially a speculative process? Like any other cultural mediation? So I guess I'm interested in the accumulation of waste product as art on the one hand, and the re-purposing of art as waste for a political process - its determinate negation - and if that is something adjacent to refractively using the power of the boundary between inside and outside that institutions uphold, in the pursuit of ends other than institutional reproduction.

**AP:**

Firstly, rather than a 'devalorisation' that would be at the core of historical institutional critique (I think of Hans Haacke or Michael Asher here are prototypical of this), in other examples where the act of critique is taken outside the realm of an aesthetics of forms, somewhat ironically there emerges an expressed 'valorisation' of the institution's operations in the process of 'using' the inside/out boundary. And this is then a way of activating a pedagogical aspect that you allude to later in the question. What I mean is that to take the boundary of the institution (one set by the institution itself) as a site of contestation necessarily means also accepting other boundaries that the institution will set forth: what constitutes art and what doesn't, what constitutes politics and what doesn't. One example that I use in the *e-flux journal* text to address this is one demonstrator who spoke during the Nine Weeks of Action at the Whitney Museum that unseated war-profiteer Warren Kanders. While being filmed by Whitney staff she proclaimed that she is an artist, and asked why her work wasn't shown in this museum. Then, after pointing to the videographer she speculated whether this video of 'her work' would be up on the Whitney's walls some years later documenting 'artist protest histories'. On the one hand, this shows a deep understanding and cynicism about recuperation, but it also shows the character of recent art demonstrations: she was not there in her subjecthood as an artist à la Art Workers Coalition. She was there as a comrade of abolitionist, anti-gentrification, anti-capitalist

demonstrators. In this sense, the museum, as I alluded to above, is taken as a safer field upon which to agitate given there are fewer cops in that space. This uses the autonomy myth, which claims at times (as the director of the museum later did) that art is separate from the political sphere, to the advantage of protecting demonstrators and garnering attention. Here is where pedagogy comes in, which operates not on the level of the canvas or the performance, but in the interest of disruption. The museum's aesthetic forms are not devalorized so much as re-tooled in the direction of abolition. In this sense, the museum can nominalize action as (art) performance all it likes. This is where I see connections between your work and my argument: this disregard for the autonomy myth while employing its 'sedimented forms' is speculative, open, and disinterested in reform. Your wording, that there might have to be a 'sort of transformation of cultural capital into waste before it becomes a political process, a kind of reverse engineering of the de-sedimentation of content into form that the institution performs' reads strikingly appropriate to me.

With pedagogy, I think of visibility and opacity, which are correlatives to your contrasting of form and waste. Much art discourse of the last two decades, especially as social reproduction theory became more of a reference point, speaks of pedagogy as a form of making 'the invisible visible'. My concern, even as I use this language as well, is how this abstraction, (in)visibility, often trades in incoherence. As Alberto Toscano asked some years ago: 'But the character of ... invisibility varies – are we speaking of a form, a force, a structure? And could we not say that the problem of representing capital is much better framed as a problem about the representation of a metamorphosis, the sequence and syncopation of value forms, than it is in terms of an absent structure?'.<sup>25</sup> I think the difference, between direct pedagogy through form and this more militant making-productive of waste becomes much clearer through your discussion of infrastructural critique, especially now in the age of Covid-19 as liberal infrastructures, from welfare to electoralism are visibly crumbling before us. I don't have concrete data on hand, but one sentiment that's been circulating in New York as of late, is that at the height of lockdown, unhoused people were more likely to be fed by anarchists than the state, as food pantries closed and mutual aid networks stepped in, or rather stepped up, creating their own supply chains and networks. The plasticity of these networks were then strategically utilized during the rebellions, though how well or in what capacity is a subject of debate given how quickly mutual aid can

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<sup>25</sup> Alberto Toscano, 'Materialism without matter: abstraction, absence and social form', *Textual Practice* 28:7, 1221–1240.

dissolve in charity, and furthermore that the logics of racial capitalism make themselves apparent in such a militant reaction as well.

**MV:** Not so much a de-valorisation as a re-tooling in the direction of abolition - I find this formulation incredibly apt. And I agree it coincides with what I was thinking with 'infrastructural critique' and maybe from the other side of the problematic. You emphasise the materiality of abolition as a process, a process that requires tools and tinkering, as well as evacuation and rupture. I want to point to the critical dimension of building stuff and abducting resources, stuff that allows you materially to weaken the enemy by practically and ideologically eroding their legitimacy because the means of - at least - social reproduction are at your disposal. So it's really about practical critique, which I think the figuration of abolition everyone is thinking about now is entirely in the same spirit, that there's no opposition between breaking and building if you approach the parameters of reality speculatively.

There's a really striking moment early in your text which seems to collide all the stakes of the shift you're charting from what could be called a 'hygienic' or 'immunitarian' model of institutional critique to the political model of infrastructural critique. The reason I use 'hygienic' is that it's about drawing lines of contamination or purity, which something like the individual morality of a notion like 'complicity' captures really well - this seems to be a notion that implicitly contains a reference to structural violence (and its rewards, for some) but contains it *really well*. Thus the protocols of institutional critique turn out to be a great preparation for the infection control measures which now organise our social lives. You write, of the border between the institution and the 'outside world', 'It's only more recently that grassroots groups (some including artists) have reframed the last question by acknowledging the border as nonexistent, while incorporating into their tactics the belief in that border exhibited by systems of power.' That last part is really interesting because you are suggesting that autonomy can be used tactically or diverted from its disciplinary ends, and not just evacuated critically so as to de facto affirm heteronomy as universal complicity. It is the institution's commitment to autonomy that can be used to expose its universal complicity, so to speak, but this is secondary: the priority is the situation of collective rebellion which is capable of turning that border into a chalk drawing on the pavement around the defunct institution, and taking it as a space for our 'plans', as Harney and Moten might say. I feel you've said in a fabulously concise way the whole premise of infrastructural critique is to forget about insides and outsides

as Kantian 'what is it possible for us to know, what is it possible for us to hope' - that is what 80s and 90s institutional critique boiled down to, until its austerity was upgraded and franchised by Relational Aesthetics - as limits or borders for us, and take them up as part of the productive equipment afforded to us by the art field, both economically and ideologically. My exploring the notion of infrastructural critique was premised on whether it was possible to just completely sidestep all the handwringing, and just acknowledge what resources are there, how they can be repurposed, which ones cannot, and which ones are needed. Maybe that is also related to an ambivalence I feel towards sectarianism of all kinds, also in leftist and communist politics as well as art-field politics; the search for radical coherence, a position taking that is not so much an escape from a feeling of marginality as a direct expression of it, though it often takes a displaced form. Somehow this whole line of thinking has led me into an excursion around nursery furniture - security blankets, hobbyhorses, teddy bears - and the fact that your imaginary friend can be much smarter than you, like Calvin & Hobbes. I'm not sure where that takes us, but maybe a final touchstone is Jeff VanderMeer's *Borne*, with its huge hovering bear that terrorises everyone in a town but then its fur becomes a rich repository for scavengers when it's asleep. What do you think of that as an allegory for capital?

AP:

I love it! It's also a great allegory for the museum (monster with value ripe for liberation). I often remind readers of Ukeles' *Maintenance Art Manifesto* that the second half was actually an exhibition proposal that, among other things, imagined using the museum as an actual space to treat and process waste and recycling: to turn museum into plant, artistic production into municipal maintenance and reproduction. This is a way of asking questions like: what materials and possibilities reside in this space? How canuygyf it be repurposed?

MV:

We need to be thinking about infrastructure full stop, in all areas of our counter-planning and organising, and art is one space among others where that thinking needs to happen. If anything, it feels to me like the pandemic makes that imperative that much more tangible and urgent. Infrastructure is what enables. That is the baseline. This is something I'd need to develop more, but wondering whether any infrastructure has a politics or a vision of society encoded into it - it is easy to think of capitalist technologies that exist purely or largely for the purpose of facilitating surplus value extraction, but it's harder to think of a purely capitalist infrastructure.

But the line between these is not always clear, and people do write about it in different ways, also taking into account the whole welter of discursive production around the dispositif, the apparatus, and 'technologies' as social techniques rather than machinery. I've always been fascinated by Rheinhold Martin's example of the dumbwaiter as a piece of infrastructure that both predicates and disappears enslaved or waged domestic 'help'. But you can also see how those kinds of technologies - upstairs-downstairs ones, in this case - take on another valence in critical disability studies and crip politics, to take one example. So that underlines both the embodiment of the functional premise of infrastructures, and how that constantly has to be questioned from the perspective of how the violence is abstracted into them precisely as a (universal) functionality.

But to try and respond more directly to your question about the impact of stepped-up covid-era surveillance and security on the latitude available to practices of infrastructural critique, I guess it's also about the political spaces opened up by the responses to the impact of the virus, from wildcat strikes by warehouse workers to the ongoing insurrection against the world that the virus seized hold of, foremost the murderous inescapability of anti-black racism. I think a lot of the covid security measures are about restrictions on movement and gathering, but this doesn't really apply outside, and maybe the restrictions on movement means you have to work harder to transform where you are. The restrictions will maybe be more salient economically, as social reproduction becomes more of a challenge for vastly more people. To what extent the pre-existing and the covid-era infrastructures of support can both address that, and see some kind of coalescence with the uprisings is something which is both happening and the scale or future of which is impossible to predict, at least at the distance from which I'm writing this. But what it definitely does seem like is that the relevance of contemporary art institutions will continue ebbing, and their infrastructural aspects - supporting research, production, organising with money, space, time, access, amplification - will continue to eclipse the traditional functions of those institutions ever more decisively.

**AP:**

I think of a beautiful video that emerged from the uprisings in Minneapolis, in which a man describes the scene of an 'autonomous zone' set up by people on the streets. After having liberated many commodities (food, drink, provisions), they were distributed on a basis of need. As he said: 'people just came and shopped for free'. There is a clear devalorisation of



commodities here, on the level of exchange value, and a rearticulation of their use-value, but most interesting to me is also how it operates on an infrastructural level. As you say: what resources are here? How can they be used? Also that the verb 'shop' hasn't been traded for something else.

This leads us, if only tangentially, to your forthcoming text in *Radical Philosophy*, which is particularly timely as well. In the text, you argue that the turn to discussion of bodies:

... underlines the prioritisation of vulnerability, or, more generally, life, materiality and affect which constitutes the parameters of basic political analysis today ...Vulnerability, or, more concretely, exposure and exclusion, seems so much a facet of daily experience for so much of the global population (even in the 'West') that, for many theorists, they suggest the parameters of any critical analysis that would prove adequate to both diagnosing this state and imagining forms of collective life otherwise.

Since the onset of the pandemic, I've been thinking that one of the defining privileges of the elite has been transformed into *immobility*, as opposed to their prior privilege of mobility. This is in turn predicated on the forced mobility of care workers, the unemployed, unhoused, and so on. Displacement was re-codified as productive in the sense of 'essentialness'. Of course, being exposed and vulnerable in contemporary contexts for non-white people means more than just exposure to Covid-19, but also exposure to a violent police guaranteeing the protection of property. Can you talk about your recent work on the discursive and practical turn to 'bodies' rather than subjects, individuals, etc? What about humans? This last question prompted me to return to a pamphlet on torture by Kristian Williams from some years ago where he writes: 'Talking about *bodies* is useful because it helps to remind us that politics is not only about abstract principles and broad social forces. It is also personal, and physical. But there is a danger in this rhetoric, as well. It has become faddish, of late, to write about 'bodies' in ways that sometimes obscure the fact that we are really talking about *people* ... Treating a person as a body often involves some degree of violence. Reducing a person to a body always does.'<sup>26</sup> What do you make of this line of thought?

**MV:** One way to start narrating that is how the experience of the pandemic has generalised what used to be a certain understanding of biopolitics which was perhaps common sense in

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<sup>26</sup> Kristian Williams, *Hurt: Notes on Torture in a Modern Democracy* (Microcosm, 2012).

certain academic, activist and critical domains but less so in a broader discursive, or even affective, context. What happens to the individual or biological body is systemic, is institutional, is connected to and engendered by not just the evident disciplinary and governance infrastructures of gender, race, sexuality, ability, legal status, etc. that we are perhaps familiar with from the Foucauldian paradigm, but also to the perhaps more conventionally materialist considerations (which are not at all separate or detached from the above) of global food production systems, logistics networks, the shredding of social safety nets and public health, and so forth. The pandemic, and the management of the pandemic, or the failure thereof, made these connections very obvious and implacable, very hard to ignore, basically from the moment panic buying began, before you even had to look for any critical research or analysis on what was going on regarding the long-term background or the incredibly differential if socially embedded horrific impacts of the pandemic. The management of the pandemic and its economic and social fallout, and how it follows the existing distribution of life chances and protection in societies whose every aspect of social reproduction is defined by extreme violence against black people, people of colour, racialised migrants, women and trans people. This is a violence both structural and gratuitous, as well as men whose class position gets lethally combined with their allocation to the first three groups, of course.

So on the one hand it feels like the pandemic has definitely revealed the extent to which individual, bodily vulnerability to harm and risk is socially produced and socially institutionalised. On the other hand, there have continued to be discourses around the greater vulnerability of black and brown people to the virus which attempt to locate this vulnerability in some extra or surplus 'unfitness' or specific racialized susceptibility, some 'x factor', which seems quite problematic on a lot of levels, given the kind of alibi this would provide for the neglect -to- sadism spectrum that white racism authorises and practices through public and private mechanisms to be written off as the peculiarity of, or written on, particular bodies, or, even more insidiously, 'cultures'. At the same time, there's of course a lot of emphasis on individual responsibility in some states, incl US and UK, for the management of a pandemic which is at the very least a collective action problem, as sociologists would say - and the reason I bring in that reference is that the common sense of individual responsibility is actually a motivated, intensely politicised right-wing libertarian denial that there can be anything relevant in the social sphere between individual judgment and authoritarian orders, so you have the heavy-hearted decision to vacillate between the two, as in Johnson's government. The notion of a 'collective action' problem is a facetiously technical term for a state reason that

necrocapitalise ‘common sense’, as has been characteristic of neoliberalism as a logic of governance in general, without a doubt.

Given the individual is the naturalised unit of life, social relations, and human reason in neoliberal ideology, this is perhaps another way that the social and the biological are intertwined in a way that disavows the collective and the social in the systemic prioritisation of the economic – which is the systemic dimension that the emphasis on individual choice and judgment precisely disguises, unless it’s an issue of universal provision of vouchers to go to restaurants, which seems like some kind of New Yorker cartoon on what Tories think of when they hear the term UBI.

And with this preface about the slippage between vulnerability as social and biological, this allows me to say a bit about my recent research on how this suddenly common-sense status of the critical trope of ‘biopolitics’ has been taken up on the left, including in contemporary art. Here I am thinking, more topically, of texts on ‘left biopolitics’ that have been circulating in the last couple of months, such as by Panagiotis Sotiris, which basically translate some of the feminist arguments around self-determined social reproduction and the political implications of the networks of mutual aid that were so active during lockdown in some parts of the West (while persisting under the radar in places where the state has never been a reliable provider of any collective survival mechanism) into this Foucauldian vocabulary, and hearken back to the breakfast and other social betterment and collective self-provision programmes run by liberation movements in the 20<sup>th</sup> century such as the Black Panthers, to take the best known example.<sup>27</sup> But I’m also thinking of the turn to a vocabulary of ‘bodies’ which pervades activist and cultural discourse, from art and curatorial theory – see the *Parliament of Bodies* in 2017’s Documenta as one of the early and most visible examples – to the everyday political vocabulary of the anti-racist, queer and feminist left. This is something I try to analyse in the work you mentioned. It’s part of a turn to affect, to the somatic, as the ground of political legibility and possibility, echoing in some ways new materialist and object oriented discussions in the academy in the determination to go beyond linguistic, symbolic, even psychoanalytic narratives that privileged a ‘split subject’ structured famously, ‘like a language’ in their unconscious and their desires. In this sense, it tries to override the consumerist individualism that is the default of conceiving of the ‘person’, so to speak, in the abstract in contemporary capitalist societies. At

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<sup>27</sup> Panagiotis Sotiris, ‘Democratic Biopolitics Revisited: A Response to a Critique’, *Critical Legal Thinking: Law and the Political* (May 25, 2020).

the same time, there's an ambiguity there, because the individual thus conceived and normalised is not so much a linguistic or a rational individual necessarily, although the rational choice theory of markets continues to be very much in effect in policy design, but then of course so does behavioural economics, and all the disciplines and popular notions of the person as a bundle of quantifiable affects and data, frequently communicated by and elicited from their bodies, as with fit bits and other such self-quantifying devices. So my question is really whether the self-proprietorial individual that is the model of the neoliberal human, the consumer, can be avoided, politically or ideologically, whether we actually do get to a more collective and connected place through the use of the language of 'bodies' or whether that is trying to get to a level of concreteness that sidesteps the powerful forces of social abstraction that turn us into isolated, helpless, suffering bodies, just as the pandemic has made so unbearably clear.

What is really worrying as well, and I will note that my personal anxiety levels around this have been pronounced lately, is that returns to normality in many places not only have no mechanism for reckoning with the trauma of the last few months - the uprisings took that on in a big way, but are not so much a part of the landscape in most places outside the US anymore - but there is also no reckoning with the fact that for vast numbers of people working through a period of mass infection and mass death was their normality. And the fact that they were working enabled the people who could be homebound to hold on to what was their normality (through consumption). And now we're going into a period of majority unemployment, and possibly second waves, which are definitely already happening in some places. Just so many diagrams of the intrinsic entropy of capitalist society. There are movements, or absence of them, or small pockets of resistance like labour organising on the local and sectoral level (as in the national HE and FE union I'm active in), but also I am finding it hard on a psychic level to entertain the idea that we are no longer in a state of emergency, when this has been a consensus position, in a strange way, for the last few months, and has also contributed to the self-evidence of systemic critique, as I mentioned earlier. I find the idea of a 'back to normal' so apocalyptic at this moment.

**AP:** During lockdown I got pretty interested in reading about U.S. neoconservative movements from the past given their coherence with today's austerity politics—I got hooked by reading Kim Phillips-Fein's *Fear City* about the almost-bankruptcy of New York in 1975.<sup>28</sup> There's a

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<sup>28</sup> Kim Phillips-Fein, *Fear City: New York's Fiscal Crisis and the Rise of Austerity Politics* (Henry Holt, 2017).

passage that was glaringly relevant in which she discusses how technocrats and neoliberals came to NY to legislate what services were ‘essential’ and which could be cut—unlike schools and a once-expansive public hospital system in neighborhoods with people of colour, which were defunded, the police budget was protected, just as NYC’s six billion dollar police budget was protected some weeks ago, as the rebellion’s first wave waned. The rioting and looting during the 1977 blackout in New York demonstrated more historical coherence with the present. In some sense, I think the legitimacy of a term like ‘essentialness’ has only become stronger with the grouping of vast swaths of labour into terms like precarity, flexibility, etc. Making the return to normalcy all the more terrifying, do you think that ‘bodies’ are easier to make precarious than ‘workers’?

**MV:** Yes, I think so, because ‘bodies’ evoke some totally fragmented and individualised entities, without context, biography or relationships. Totally exposed, totally vulnerable, and totally atomised, drawing on notions of ‘dead bodies’ on the one hand, and ‘bodies’ as a neutral descriptor in e.g. physics, which are the two parameters that much of the mockery on Twitter and Black Twitter around the ubiquity of the term brought into focus. Clearly the use of that language is meant to highlight those conditions, but I worry that what it doesn’t do is highlight them as socially constructed and politically embedded. So bodies are precarious, whereas workers are in a productive relationship to capital, to the state, and thus have power, and when their situation is made precarious there are different things that they can do to fight back, individually but mostly collectively, because they are of course *systemically* made precarious. As workers, but also, and this is something I write about in the RP piece as well with reference to the Guéry and Deleule book<sup>29</sup>, as bodies, which is the individualised and brutalised form that the competition for survival roots as the base level of your social existence in a capitalist society, but especially in a neoliberal capitalist society where you are trained in all important respects to see yourself as a consuming monad. And as I was outlining earlier, it really did seem to me, and maybe this is naive, but that the pandemic made the connection between the hyper-vulnerability of ‘essential’ workers and their situation in a structurally and expressively anti-black, misogynist capitalist society socially legible, or it ‘de-essentialised’ it. Which is also, clearly, why you saw a rush in parts of the media in the UK to restore the essentialism, that is, to find a biological rather than a social basis for that hyper-vulnerability, which can be more or less

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<sup>29</sup> Didier Deleule and François Guéry, *The Productive Body*, Philip Barnard and Stephen Shapiro, trans. (Zero Books, 2014 [1972]).

formulated in the UK versions as ‘but once you take all the social factors out of the equation, the fact is more black and brown people are dying’, which obviously sounds extremely confused because you can’t remove ‘those factors’ from the ‘equation’ when it’s a matter of a structurally and expressively racist society, and the US version, which maybe maps on more to pre-existing fascist erogenous zones like ‘oh, it’s just black people dying, they’re weaker because they make poor lifestyle choices’. At least that has been my impression of how this sideshow discourse has developed.

**AP:**

That shitshow discourse, as we could also call it, certainly trades on this very stream of thought. And I don’t think it’s naïve at all to think that the pandemic, and its conditions, have encouraged a process of de-essentialisation. Some, perhaps more naïve arguments that I was/am susceptible to were those that proclaimed the emergence of a general strike, but one void of intention. I would argue, following your argument, this thought probably stems from thinking bodies as workers, even when the former is not taken to be the latter by capital. To close out our discussion, and given you mentioned your union work, I’d be remiss not to bring up the struggles at Goldsmiths, and in UK education right now. How does rank and file union action come into play in speculation, as you understand it?

**MV:**

Here I guess I’d say something like unauthorised action, which is the main type of effective labour organising we have seen in recent years at the university (as with the Goldsmiths Anti-Racist Action occupation last year or the wildcat marking boycott this year) is speculative in the very quotidian sense of the hazardous state of taking action without securing official legitimisation from the main negotiating body for workers’ rights on campus, in this case the national union for academics. But this would be a rather thin sense of speculation, because it would be peremptorily imputing the political to a pragmatic decision - acting in a quick and timely fashion, which the official union is not set up to do - and we all organise collectively and unofficially across the union and other groups on campus in practice anyway, so in some ways it wasn’t really a gamble or species of political ‘entrepreneurship’. This is not so say that unofficial action doesn’t have political implications inasmuch as it claims space and claims justice, and in doing so acknowledges that institutional structures are by and large in place to reproduce the institution, and that these institutions support people in resistance either a/if they act as passive

service users or b/push the union to a place where struggle has reached such a level it scrambles to keep up (saying 'it' to refer to the institution, and not the rank-and-file active within it, who may often be a minority of the membership, but not always). That's part of the romance of the rank-and-file within trade union bureaucracy - or any form of state, if you recall Obama urging social movements to keep putting pressure on him at various points of his presidency - a mythologization that hopefully most of the rank-and-file keep their distance from.

But the question - sorry I keep going off course - was about how rank and file union action comes into play in speculation as we've been discussing it. I suppose one important aspect to develop here would be that the speculative arises in the connections and conjunctions, as well as in the negations, at stake for any movement, and here the emphasis would be on how workers movements and other campaigns are articulated as class movements without losing their specific autonomy and political genealogies and contexts. The articulation of BDS, Fuck the Police, anti-displacement and Decolonize This Place militants in the Whitney situation last year is an example of such a speculative composition, and something which I've also learned a lot about from you and other comrades in NYC as those crossed over with the social antagonism among the museum staff, biennial artists and various cultural workers, proximate and remote. At Goldsmiths, a comparable situation, albeit one which did not foreground divestment or police violence, but which leveled the embrace of labour in the representational politics of contemporary art vis-a-vis the labour conditions of racialised migrant cleaners was the campaign to bring maintenance staff in-house which picketed the opening of the new campus art centre, using slogans such as 'who keeps the white cube white'. What is speculative here, or in both these instances, for me, is how a common social surface is inscribed with action, becomes a space of solidarity where the *same things* are seen to destroy the lives of what seem to be functionally autonomous actors (as in Fred Moten's line about 'is killing you too, just more slowly...') but the socially effective differences are not sublated or bracketed - they are politicised, and sometimes the speculative solidarity doesn't last, and there is the kind of splintering and phantom micro-politics that you and others have observed emerging within the current movement, which is both a product of an oppressive society and its insidious assaults and equally insidious rewards, and the product of the process of rising up within and against it. Speculative, again, in the sense of acting without guarantees, acting in the present as if it were the future already achieved and refuting thereby the politics of linear time and development, while not refuting the use of strategy and base-building. If the antagonism is still there, the

speculative alliances will keep coming back, and it also has to be clear that if we keep our focus on the real antagonism then the sideshow debates about extra-state vs electoral politics, grassroots vs institutions, identity vs class will not get traction. These are false questions, false debates, and they exist purely to trap the movement - they are the sea lions of political praxis, and we troll ourselves when we assent to those terms, so to speak. Which is why the kind of topology of inside and outside that you trace is so important, because you show how to use that line to construct something totally different and more useful. You do this by clarifying the intrinsic relationality of the border and that we can approach it resourcefully and not from a perspective of immunization. I keep coming back to categories as ways of staking out relations in antagonism, rather than categories as classes of things, or identities. So it comes back to non-identity, and the wish to deflect the reification of boundaries in praxis. I remain committed to the notion that capitalism is the total enemy (relation) that incorporates and generates all others, to speak and think historically and systematically rather than mythically or ontologically. Since capital totalises and separates, as part of its own valorisation and the suppression of the life of everything else, what this means is that we have to fight in specificity, as black queer feminist socialist movements from the 1970s into the current tumult have been showing. Knowing what is based in a common world, and what is a specific fight based on how that world has identified and subjugated you, and where these overlap or diverge. So, when saying that capitalism is the total enemy, what that has to mean is that capitalism = anti-black exterminism, capitalism = misogyny, capitalism = ecological collapse. None of these are incidental or simply included, they are synonyms, and it's obtuse to try and separate them, logically or empirically.

So where does that leave us with speculation? A non-deterministic approach to social antagonism, especially from the viewpoint of practice. Taking the speculative subject, the self-optimising doom of creativity, ingrained in artistic subjectivation, and the confidence in experimentation those forms of education can also impart, and turning that inside out as a resource for experimental forms of connecting and infrastructures of organising. That's as far as I've gotten.

**Marina Vishmidt** is a writer and editor. She teaches at Goldsmiths, University of London. Her work has appeared in *South Atlantic Quarterly*, *Artforum*, *Afterall*, *Journal of Cultural Economy*, *e-flux journal*, *Australian Feminist Studies*, and *Radical Philosophy*, among others, as well as a number



of edited volumes. She is the co-author of *Reproducing Autonomy* (with Kerstin Stakemeier) (Mute, 2016), and the author of *Speculation as a Mode of Production: Forms of Value Subjectivity in Art and Capital* (Brill 2018 / Haymarket 2019). She is one of the organisers of the Centre for Philosophy and Critical Thought at Goldsmiths, a member of the Marxism in Culture collective and is on the board of the New Perspectives on the Critical Theory of Society series (Bloomsbury Academic).

**Andreas Petrossiants** is a writer and editor. His work has appeared in *e-flux journal*, *Bookforum*, *Artforum*, *The Brooklyn Rail*, *Hyperallergic*, *View. Theories and Practices of Visual Culture*, *Strelka Mag*, *nuart journal*, *Exhibition Reviews Annual*, and elsewhere. He is the associate editor of *e-flux journal*.