

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

By Steyn Bergs | Jan. 16th, 2019

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Vermeir and Heiremans' Home Economics

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

Art House Index (henceforth: *AHI*) was first presented as a performance at the 2013 Istanbul Biennial, mimicking an “initial public offering” to the market of

an index that the artists supposedly developed, a financial tool to render the economic value of both their art house and artistic practice based on this piece of real estate more transparent and more liquid (extension #21). The performance consisted of a halting public Skype conversation between the artists and a financial analyst, who discussed the possibility as well as the pros and cons of such an index. At first, the analyst appeared to be streaming in live from a stock exchange's trading pit. Finally, however, in a decidedly Brechtian move, it became clear that he was performing in front of a green screen (the use of this technique being revealed by its malfunctioning), demonstrating that the whole set-up was staged, that the Skype itself was not a live stream but rather a prerecorded video, and that the index itself was a hoax. The disruptive nature of the performance was exacerbated when, unexpectedly, a group of activists unexpectedly interrupted *AHI*, draping themselves in protest banners and lying down in front of the artists during the performance, only to be escorted out one by one. They had taken the artwork for an earnest financialization scheme, and had therefore chosen the performance as the site for their protest against the corporate sponsorship and the political complacency of the biennial, which they saw as complicit with the gentrification of Istanbul: "At ten-minute intervals," one account of the performance states, "someone would stand up from the crowd, show off a T-shirt and a faux-branded banner printed with the names of gentrifying neighborhoods in Istanbul, and then drape himself or herself on the floor in the middle of the room, only to be quickly picked up and hastily dispatched by three members of the [biennial's] loyal production team."^[1]

The mock-index was presented again in a 2014 installation which also featured glossy hand-outs promoting the index (extension #22) and again in 2015, where partly in response to the Istanbul protesters' perception of the work, the artists chose to actually develop the index they had initially only proposed. It is still active today as an algorithmic instrument charting the market value of the art house as well as its mediated extensions, collecting and balancing, in real-time, information from real estate and currency markets. Important for my purposes here, it also weighs in on the visibility of Vermeir and Heiremans' artistic

practice, which is benchmarked by, for instance, website clicks and Google search queries. The actual *Art House Index (AHI)* (extension #23) thus exists online as a live algorithm collecting and combining market information in real time. The index's movement is visualized by a graph.[2]



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

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

MASQUERADE is well characterized by its own opening credits, which state, almost as a disclaimer: “A film it is not, unless a film means 45 exchanges

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

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

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

When installed in an exhibition space, *MASQUERADE* is projected alongside the *AHI* graph, which makes it possible for viewers to apprehend the connection between the narrative video and the movements of the graph. In the single-channel version, the latter is phenomenally unavailable, leaving viewers puzzled as to the source of *MASQUERADE*’s constant permutations. Crucially, however, Vermeir and Heiremans are sensitive to how contexts— institutional as well as discursive—co-determine the reception of their work. In their practice, they conceive of their works as conversation pieces in an ongoing process of critical artistic research. The essentially dialogic nature of this research process, in which they involve a number of parties and interlocutors (including, at times, myself), also comes to the fore in the presentation of the work, which the artists do not only, and not even primarily, show in exhibition settings. Rather, they often employ pieces like *AHI* and *MASQUERADE* in workshop or symposium contexts, rendering the works as imaginative, speculative, and provocative propositions that form the basis for critical discussions on financialization and art. As such, situational factors

mitigate the otherwise overwhelming complexity of a work like *MASQUERADE*—which, if viewed without proper contextualization, would potentially be as mystificatory as financial capital itself.

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

All That is Solid

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

Marxist critique of political economy with a consideration of abstractions “in terms of their concrete material conditions and effects.”[5] These effects, of course, are most acutely felt in instances of crisis, when it will seem to many “*as if* the mode of abstraction, namely value, has a real material existence of its own independent of the human mind.”[6]

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

Consider, for instance, how absolutely nothing might happen materially with or to a dwelling seen in its concrete use-value, but at the same time the mortgage to this very same dwelling may serve as a financial asset spliced into bits that are then bundled together with bits of other assets and mobilized through the circuits of financial trading worldwide.[9] This mobilization is made possible by the autonomization of exchange-value (the process of abstraction already described by Marx), and since it might also have very concrete effects in the everyday life of the dwelling’s inhabitants, who may end up losing their house, it is a real abstraction. It becomes clear here how, at bottom, it is the abstraction of the value-form itself—resulting from the split between a commodity’s quantified exchange-value and its always qualitative use-value—that accounts for real estate’s unreal state.

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

something that leads a concrete and material existence on the one hand, and a spectral, ideational, and dematerialized one on the other. And importantly, these two modalities are brought together here through the technique of collage, implying that the concrete and abstract elements of the house cannot be neatly separated from one another while at the same time preserving their difference, emphasizing the heterogeneity and separation of the elements here held together.[10]



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

It has been noted that the mobilization, in finance, of abstract representations or derivatives severed from their referent is strikingly congruous with the dematerialization of the art object, which wanted to separate the artwork as idea or concept from the art object as its material substrate.[11] In another scene in *MASQUERADE*, this art historical referent is brought to the fore by a character claiming in an interview that *AHI* can fulfill her “desire for a complete dematerialization of art.” And indeed it is true that the financialization of art represented by the fictional index proposed in *MASQUERADE* is something like a “higher” form of art’s dematerialization, rendering everything from paintings to massive COR-TEN steel sculptures free-floating and feather-light due to their inclusion in portfolios readily

exchanged on globalized markets. Clearly, however, the analogy is also perverse, since financialization aims at continuous re-commodification rather than a de-commodification of art, while conceptual art—in its inception, at least—was a troublesome attempt to emancipate art *from* the commodity form. In Lucy Lippard’s words, conceptualism’s dematerialization was an attempted “de-mythologization and de-commodification of art”.[12] If dematerialization in conceptual art was a strategy for artists to emancipate art *from* the commodity form, financialization is essentially an emancipation *of* the commodity form. Whereas the former aspired to undermine art objects’ fetish character in an “egalitarian pursuit of publicness,” however limited and problematic, with the latter the market eclipses the public sphere, or any space for political agency whatsoever.[13] Without any apparent irony, finance’s ideologues in *MASQUERADE* present the liquefaction of art through the index as a way of making access to art more equal, more democratic—echoing the rhetoric of 1960s and 1970s conceptualism that equated dematerialization with de-commodification.

“An Edifice Built by the Gazes of Others”

But as it happens, such democratic access to art, too, has been rendered as productive of exchange-value. “All that looking,” an art auctioneer asserts in *MASQUERADE*, “sticks to the work and increases its value. To see is already to buy, to look is to labour.” Like many scenes in the video, this moment (which takes place in a segment titled “An edifice built by the gazes of others”) might strike us as rather contrived: the auctioneer in question is played by a real-life auctioneer, somewhat amateurishly performing a fictionalized version of himself. The artificiality of his persona is further underscored by Vermeir and Heiremans’ script, which does very little to imitate the spontaneity of everyday speech and is essentially an assemblage of paraphrases and quotations from critical theory. The formula “to look is to labour,” for instance, is excerpted from Jonathan Beller’s 2006 book *The Cinematic Mode of Production: Attention Economy and the Society of the Spectacle*. Here, Beller (in)famously furthered the claim that Marx’s labor theory of value should be elaborated into or

complemented by an “attention theory of value,” as advertising in particular had posited human attentiveness as a form of productive labor.[14] Beller’s own main interest is cinema, which he posits as a precursor to techniques for the attraction, quantification, and rendering-productive of attention that we now see on the Internet—with clicks and “eyeball hang time” considered indicators of value.

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

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

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

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

Finally, the attention economy does not remain conveniently contained within the online realm. Or rather, it was never entirely absent from the offline realm to begin with: the example of the fetishized Van Gogh painting, as a kind of "analogue" or prototypical manifestation of the logic of the attention economy, is a case in point. As the act of looking becomes increasingly productive of exchange-value, and as exchange-value co-constitutes concrete reality, the attention economy "restructure[s] the way in which we materially (re)produce our existence." [22] Like with finance, the abstractions of the attention

economy are real abstractions, operating in and on the world. An analogue to these operations can be seen in the climbing and falling of the *AHI* graph, which, as a representation of Vermeir and Heiremans' house and work seen in quantitative and therefore abstract terms, has an actual impact on the viewing experience of the work itself through the work's additional layer of live editing.

Mimesis and Mimicry

As the artists' incorporation of the parameters of the attention economy in their work demonstrates, there is in Vermeir and Heiremans' work a willingness to side with real abstraction. This willingness can be considered problematic, though not necessarily in the pejorative sense of the word. As mentioned earlier, among the variables that make up *Art House Index* are quantitative representations of the visibility of the artists' work and of the mediated extensions of the art house, both online and offline. In a mimetic move, then, the artists willingly effect an abstraction of their own work, presenting it in strictly quantitative terms. This is all the more remarkable given the historical association of art with "the strictly transcendental timelessness of the model of 'contemplative immersion,'" [23] or, more simply put, what Katherine N. Hayles has called "deep attention." [24] This association, however, is also ideological, in that these attentive modalities suggest a disinterestedness radically at odds with the subsumptions of art (as well as of its reception) by capital under discussion here. By contrast, Vermeir and Heiremans' determination to flaunt and even expedite the insertion of their own work in the attention economy is a way of acknowledging these subsumptions, creating a possibility or a basis for an immanent critique.

Their particular mode of presentation contributes to this siding with abstraction too. Graphs like the one we encounter in the presentation of *AHI* are emphatically abstract delineations of a purely metric movement; one that, nonetheless, purports to point at—to *index*—something that is happening or moving in the realm of the concrete and material. That the *AHI* graph was subsequently put to work in the live editing of *MASQUERADE* makes it even

more suitable as an expression of the operativity of real abstraction. Of course, Vermeir and Heiremans' auto-abstractions ultimately remain speculative thought experiments, more or less internal to their artistic work, as long as the economic and symbolic value tracked—or perhaps generated—by *AHI* remains unrealized in actual processes of exchange: Vermeir and Heiremans have never “cashed out” by trying to sell their work or otherwise extrapolate actual money from it. The value accrued around their work thus remains purely aspirational.

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

Nonetheless, the propensity towards an unmitigated identification of art with capital in recent artistic practice has been subject to critical scrutiny in recent years. For Teixeira Pinto and Franke (who, it should be noted, are writing about post-internet artworks, not practices similar to Vermeir and Heiremans'), the “inability to imagine an outside to financial subsumption can also be construed as a symptom of the overwhelming fear of exclusion that accompanies the increasing precarization of life: a social anxiety masquerading as an aesthetic theory.”[28] Another important contribution has been made by Kerstin

Stakemeier, who distinguishes between mimesis and mimicry—her conception of which is based on an essay by Roger Caillois.[29] She writes: “artists no longer primarily engage the structures of contemporary culture in what could be called an act of *mimesis*...but rather craft their works in acts of *mimicry*—as somatic reflexes to contemporary culture’s overpowering protocols.” She describes how this mimicry, in which art essentially dissolves in its capitalist environment, “not only sides with the inorganic, reified life under capitalism, but also comes to perceive the subject herself as an essentially inorganic entity.”[30]

In the face of the increasing occupation of all domains of life by capital, the efficacy of strategies of mimesis becomes a real issue of concern—and so does the question of how these strategies are still to be told apart from the brand of mimicry described by Stakemeier. The intervention by the activists in Vermeir and Heiremans’ 2013 performance at the Istanbul Biennial is a succinct testimony to this; precisely in taking Vermeir and Heiremans’ work at face value—naively or not—they raised some fundamental questions concerning what this kind of work does and who it is for. Their intrusion on the performance and their presence in *MASQUERADE* both serve as a welcome reminder of the persistent political need for antagonism, refusal, dissensus, and other forms of negativity to complement mimetic criticisms, setting them apart from a one-sided and ultimately affirmational complicity or ironization. Admittedly, there is rather little of all of this in Vermeir and Heiremans’ work, and quite a fair share of mimicry—think, for instance, of the glossies and faux-promotional videos that the artists use to draw attention to their work, to “sell” their ideas. Their strategy of siding with the abstractions of finance capital, in particular, is one that could well be construed as an artistic analogue to those strands of accelerationism that propagate an intensification of capital’s abstractions to a supposed point of collapse.[31] As for the artists’ speculations, in their most recent work, around the possibilities of what I am tempted to call a “financialization for the people,” the question certainly should be raised whether such a reappropriation, such a *détournement*, of the abstractions of finance is really desirable, or if it is financialization itself (and the abstractions

that afford it) that were at the very root of the problem all along. Though articulated in a very different context, Audre Lorde's famous admonition that "the master's tools will never dismantle the master's house" nonetheless seems pertinent to Vermeir and Heiremans' work around their art house. [32]

Cracks in Real Abstraction

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



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

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

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

away from any kind of representation whatsoever, operating in the background as something always already given and therefore exempted from interrogation; it only truly *appears* in moments of crisis, moments that then have to be cast as the exception rather than the rule.

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

It becomes important, then, to take heed of the many ways in which *MASQUERADE*, in particular, shows not only the operativity of real abstraction, but also the many flaws and imperfections in that operativity. *MASQUERADE*’s microcosm is most certainly not some perfectly negentropic simulacrum, some sinister shadow play of abstractions alone. What we see is a world in which residual and obstinate materiality keeps coming back with a vengeance, and in which the irregularities of the real continue to thwart and frustrate abstraction’s control over said world. Ultimately, Vermeir and Heiremans’ aesthetic is an aesthetic of failure—and this failure is the failure of abstraction to fully enclose and master reality. This emphasis on failure is most

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

Finally, and crucially, these moments of failure, disruption, and breakdown are not presented by Vermeir and Heiremans as antithetical or inimical to their mimesis of real abstraction. Rather, they are shown to be fully integral and immanent to it—and this, to me, seems to be precisely where the work diverges from how capital's real abstraction is usually conceived. It is precisely, in other words, where its mimeticism becomes critical. One scene in *MASQUERADE* illustrates this point particularly well. About half an hour into the video, we see three women circling around a maquette of Vermeir and Heiremans' art house, eyeing the miniature in an almost predatory fashion. They appear to be dressed as judges, and one of them is lecturing the others about the necessity of completely embracing the idea of art as a financial asset and of accepting the market as “the ultimate arbiter of worth, both economic and symbolic.” After her short soliloquy, the three come to a halt. They continue to gaze at the

model for a brief while, until at a certain moment the woman who was speaking can no longer resist touching it. It is at that moment that the art house collapses, that the whole edifice comes crashing down, and the camera quickly cuts away. As we know, “the law of gravity asserts itself when a person’s house collapses on top of him.”[40]

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

Steyn Berghs is an art critic and a researcher. Currently, he is conducting his PhD research on the commodification of digital artworks at Vrije Universiteit Amsterdam. From 2016 to 2018, together with Rosa te Velde, he was co-editor-in-chief of Kunstlicht, a journal for visual art, visual culture, and architecture. His writing has appeared in various magazines and journals.

[1] Kaelen Wilson-Goldie, “Public Relations,” *Artforum*, May 22, 2013, <https://www.artforum.com/diary/kaelen-wilson-goldie-on-public-capital-in-istanbul-41191>. The biennial took place some months after the beginning of the

Gezi Park protests in Istanbul, and was widely perceived as having toned down on some of its political statements in response to the climate of political unrest in the city. This sparked critique not only from local protesters, but also from (international) press. Vermeir and Heiremans' performance took place at the Marmara hotel in Taksim, which was the epicenter of the political protests in Istanbul.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Attention Economy and the Society of the Spectacle (Dartmouth: University Press of New England, 2006), 2.

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

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

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

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

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

[20] Terranova, "Attention," 2.

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

- [22] Yves Citton, *The Ecology of Attention* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2017), 10.
- [23] Peter Osborne, *Anywhere or Not at All: Philosophy of Contemporary Art* (London: Verso, 2013), 176.
- [24] Katherine N. Hayles, “Hyper and Deep Attention: The Generational Divide in Cognitive Models,” *Profession* (2007): 195-198.
- [25] “Vermeir & Heiremans: A Modest Proposal (In a Black Box),” Pump House Gallery, accessed January 15, 2019, <https://pumphousegallery.org.uk/programme/a-modest-proposal-in-a-black-box>.
- [26] Anselm Franke and Ana Teixeira Pinto, “Post-Political, Post-Critical, Post-Internet: Why Can’t Leftists Be More Like Fascists?,” *open! Platform for Art, Culture & the Public Domain*, September 8, 2016, <https://www.onlineopen.org/post-political-post-critical-post-internet>.
- [27] Theodor Adorno, *Aesthetic Theory* (London: Bloomsbury, 2009), 30.
- [28] Franke and Teixeira Pinto, “Post-Political.”
- [29] The essay’s epigraph reads: “Beware: Whoever pretends to be a ghost will eventually turn into one.” Roger Caillois, “Mimicry and Legendary Psychasthenia,” in *The Edge of Surrealism: The Roger Caillois Reader*, ed. Claudine Frank (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2003), 91.
- [30] Kerstin Stakemeier, “Exchangeables: Aesthetics against Art” *Texte zur Kunst* 98 (2015): 126.
- [31] Though a thorough discussion of accelerationism is beyond the scope of this text, relevant critiques include Benjamin Noys, *Malign Velocities: Accelerationism and Capitalism* (Winchester: zero books, 2014). and Alexander

Galloway, “Brometheanism,” *culture and communication*, June 16, 2017, <http://cultureandcommunication.org/galloway/brometheanism>.

[32] Audre Lorde, “The Master’s Tools Will Never Dismantle the Master’s House,” in *Sister Outsider: Essays and Speeches* (Berkeley, CA: Crossing Press, 2007).

[33] Furthermore, Vermeir and Heiremans often play devil’s advocate in and with their work, which in no respect offers a transparent perspective on their own personal politics. In a recent conversation with the artists, they were highly skeptical of much of the enthusiasm with which their propositions for re-appropriating financialization are often met. They noted how easily many let go of their criticisms and concerns about financialization as soon as they entertain the idea of employing financial instruments for the “common good”, i.e. themselves, rather than for the existing elite.

[34] On capitalist reproduction as circular and repetitive movement, see Fredric Jameson, *Representing Capital: A Reading of Volume One* (London: Verso, 2011), 62-63.

[35] Jameson, “Brick and Balloon”, 184.

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

- [37] Michael Taussig, *Mimesis and Alterity: A Particular History of the Senses* (New York and London: Routledge, 1993), xvi.
- [38] Stakemeier, “Exchangeables”, 124.
- [39] Rather than aligning *MASQUERADE* with, say, the accelerationism of the latest blockbuster by Michael Bay, the constant switching of the viewers’ attention from one thing to another in the video amounts to something strongly reminiscent of the Brechtian alienation effect or *V-effekt*. Like in Brecht’s epic theatre, the interferences and discontinuities in Vermeir and Heiremans’ work serve the purpose of sowing, rather than suspending, disbelief. For the importance of disruption in Brecht’s drama, see: Walter Benjamin, *Understanding Brecht* (London: Verso, 1998), 3, 13, and particularly 18.
- [40] Karl Marx, *Capital, Volume I* (London: Penguin Press, 1990), 168.