

Stefan Heidenreich

Freeportism as Style and Ideology: Post-Internet and Speculative Realism, Part I

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e-flux journal #71 — Stefan Heidenreich
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Works in Wooden Boxes

The Geneva Freeport can hold up to one million artworks. Recently its facilities had to be expanded due to increasing demand. The artworks end up in wooden transport boxes, stacked in rows on shelves in huge halls, where they sit and wait for their price to rise or fall, or to be shipped to an auction or to another freeport. The air temperature measures 21 degree Celsius, with exactly 55 percent humidity.¹ These are considered ideal conditions for the survival of artworks.

We know of many strange cults that have produced works of art not meant to be seen, at least not in this world: paintings in Egyptian pyramids; a terra-cotta army buried alongside the first Chinese emperor; ritual art, when it isn't entirely funereal; totems and fetishes; shrines where artworks remain hidden; triptychs opened only once a year.

It is safe to say, however, that never before now have so many artworks been produced to remain hidden, all enclosed in disenchanted wooden boxes, suspended in a permanent circuit of exchange, in a place called a "freeport" because it is free of customs duties and taxes of all kinds. Since no one is allowed to see the art, it is also free of audience and spectators, an *anti-theatron*; it is a place of un-seeing. We must examine the conflict between the forces that create new ways of representing and being seen, and the relations that just as quickly place these out of sight.

What does it mean to participate in such a cult? What discursive operations accompany the production and marketing of these works? Art and ideas alike have always responded to their conditions of encounter, to how they are exhibited, inscribed, perceived, bought, and sold, adapting to whichever is dominant among their various modes of representation. Hito Steyerl was the first to recognize the significance of "duty-free art" and to theorize the mode of representation I am calling "freeportism." Steyerl notes how this tax-free art concretizes and complicates the old dream of total artistic self-legislation, of autonomy from the heteronomous laws of the market, the court, and the state:

Art's conditions of possibility are no longer just the elitist "ivory tower," but also the dictator's contemporary art foundation, the oligarch's or weapons manufacturer's tax-evasion scheme, the hedge fund's trophy, the art student's debt bondage, leaked troves of data, aggregate spam, and the product of huge amounts of unpaid "voluntary" labor – all of which results in art's accumulation in freeport storage spaces and its physical destruction in

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Artists Nik Kosmas, Martin Thacker, and Bitsy Knox produced a brand of matcha which they suggested for use as a green tea mask, offering the following recommendation: "If, when you rinse away the mask, you notice that your face looks a little bit, er greener than normal, don't panic: simply remove any excess 'greenness' using a cotton swab and some face oil, or gentle cleanser."

zones of war or accelerated privatization.²

There must be contemporary forms of art and thought that have adapted to the political economy of this mode, which I begin by considering in a little more detail, before examining post-internet art and speculative realism, as its corresponding style and ideology, respectively.

Risk and Collection

The market for art is about 5 percent of the trillion-dollar market for luxury goods. Contemporary art accounts for about 13 percent of the 5 percent, or less than 1 percent of the total market. It is a small fraction, but the most risky.

Not coincidentally, the notion of risk has recently undergone a deep reevaluation, not to say a revolution. Since the invention of the Black-Scholes formula in 1973, risk can be calculated, separated from its underlying assets and priced appropriately. This ability to price risk was a huge advance, we can say, in the technological forces of representation, as risk was brought under the regime of value. The result was an explosion in the market for derivatives and their dissemination throughout the world economy. Today, it is possible to purchase insurance against almost any contingency one can think of. This has made risk management crucial to contemporary investing, much of which now involves bundling risky assets into larger collections, or securities, diversifying the dangers and minimizing, presumably, the chances of everything going wrong at once.

Buying an artist's work is a risky position. Collection means diversification. Buying a contemporary artist is especially risky, but since Black-Scholes, we can represent risk – or we think we can – insofar as we can price it. The risks of contemporary art can be managed, and they are. Contemporary speculation on art and artists relies less and less on individual judgment and more and more on benchmarking with other collectors. It's just a subfield of modern portfolio theory, with proper risk assessment and diversification strategies; meaning and criticism are simply outdated methods of managing risk. They belong to another time.

If risk is a claim about the future, then the capacity to price risk is a technology for disenchanting prophecy. It reaches out towards the future, and the strain affects all kinds of goods and assets, artworks included. Even if there are, as yet, no derivatives on artworks, these are nevertheless being evaluated in the same way. In fact, every artwork functions like a

derivative on the artists' future output. Artists are priced according to their implicit volatility. When still young, they appear as prized call options with very good potential – potential they lose as they grow older. Volatility expectations shrink as they near their expiration date.

No investor looks at an asset's inherent or eternal value – whatever that might mean – but instead considers the probability of a different price in the time to come.

Assets at Zero Interest

Today's collectors know that being rich means having claims on future payments. Liquidity is the key, and this is measured not in stocks, but in flows. In 2008, the housing crisis resulted in a fundamental shift in economic policy that has left assets at the center of the political economy. Artworks can be assets and their value rises and falls in parallel with the value of other assets, like houses or land.

As yields fall, any asset with claims on rent – a piece of land, a house, a highway or other infrastructure – rises in value relative to nonproductive assets. The point is not the rent-seeking; the point is the rising price of rent-producing assets relative to other, historically higher-ceiling investments. With yields closing in on zero, these valuations can rise to infinity: as returns of any kind become rarer and rarer, even a limited return becomes relatively more and more valuable, even if the return on an asset is limited.³

After the housing crisis, as interest rates went down to zero – and recently, below zero – even the demand for unproductive assets increased, so long as they were risk-free. This is why works of art have been so powerfully affected by the general rise in asset prices. Although works of art do not pay rent, they are nevertheless a kind of real estate, titles to a piece of a limited body – no matter what, there are only so many Picassos. And this makes them safe places to put money. Being exhibited, being shipped here and there, being viewed by people – all of this is considered risk. It's costly. It's useless, and it's potentially damaging. Those works of art better stay in their wooden coffins in a freeport! And so, post-securitization crisis, the freeports grow in number and in size. Art is more valuable out of sight, stabilizing value-as-such. As Steyerl has it: "The freeport contains multiple contradictions: it is a zone of terminal impermanence; it is also a zone of legalized extralegality maintained by nation-states trying to emulate failed states as closely as possible by selectively losing control."⁴

In freeportism, the contradiction between the work of art as an asset and its existence as a work of art is installed permanently. Like the gold

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in the Swiss banks near the Geneva Freeport, the strange – and limited – visual qualities of art make it too significant to be seen. Freeportism is the institutional location of a perpetual disruption in the value process. It is an effort to harness the energy generated by an endless crisis of representation by creating a permanent liquid hoard, an alchemical anti-museum art-bank which captures and hides art as a way of propping up and stabilizing the mode of representation more generally.

Lack of Transparency, Black Money

The lack of transparency is not a bug, but a crucial feature of the art market. There is no central clearing house. Nobody needs to know about a deal except the dealer and the client. Prices remain secret. Assessing a “real” value is impossible, because reality is an effect of the transaction.

This is perhaps what Yves Bouvier, the CEO of the Geneva Freeport, understood that Dmitry Rybolovlev, the Russian collector he overcharged by roughly one billion dollars for several paintings, did not.⁵ By reinvesting that money in new arms of his freeport empire in Luxembourg and Singapore, he was creating the institutional architecture that would retroactively confirm the

validity of the exorbitant prices he had charged, which then became the founding deposits, securing his bank of art. The value of a Picasso without a system of freeports might be much less than the value of a Picasso in a world equipped with a full-service, international network of institutions designed to preserve, and thus recognize, in perpetuity, the absolute value of the works in question.

Art exists, relatively autonomously, at the border of the mode of representation, and makes the art market similar to money laundering, because this border is always being crossed and recrossed, such that the numbers that appear on either side can't really be compared. When I recently asked a dealer active in the international market what percentage of dirty money was involved in the art business, his reply was: 200 percent. The joke was instructive: the amount a painting is sold for might be less than what was paid, but the circuit through the art-asset value-form will also have cleaned it off.

What the art market demands are objects of durable quality produced in large numbers. Yet, each one should be unique in order to warrant the impossibility of falsifications and reproductions. “Movable assets” is what Rybolovlev told Bouvier he needed, and so

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An ad exhibits the chrome high-tech interior of a freeport art storage facility in Singapore.

Rybolovlev bought art.

Liquidity reflects the power of an artist's brand. She or he has to issue a certain amount of work, and, at the same time, obey safety regulations against overproduction. Anselm Reyle, a pre-post-internet artist, whose output looked very much like many recent post-internet products, and which was also directed towards a smooth adaptation to market needs, nevertheless retired after overproduction caused the price of his work to crash in 2013. A liquid market has also another side. Not only supply must be guaranteed, but also demand has to be carefully managed. This is where the challenge and the risks rest on dealers, in the primary and sometimes also the secondary market, and on auction houses. In order to provide liquidity they have to act as market makers, meaning they have to guarantee minimum prices or buy back artworks. The liquidity constraint poses a major danger to all these market participants, and maybe that is why artists have not failed to address the issue.

It was impossible to miss, in this respect, the appearance of a certain "liquid" surface in so many early post-internet artworks. The style soon became so widespread that an exhaustive list is impossible. Especially memorable examples include the slurps of color in Timur Si-Qin's work and the use of fluid surfaces and water bottles by Pamela Rosenkranz. Steyerl, of course has shown the way here, too, with her show *Liquidity Inc.*

The use of liquidity is an example of the metaphorical appropriation of technology by art, one of four kinds of such responses I will discuss. When gold was the stuff of hoards, art was placed in frames painted gold. Today, having broken gold's monopoly on liquid wealth, it is liquid which limns the surface of the post-internet work.

Post-Internet

The term "post-internet" did not spread because it was well defined. On the contrary, its ambivalence and its openness allowed it to resonate widely. Its prefix "post-" is borrowed from notions like the "postmodern" or the "post-digital." "Post-" used to mean "after," but now it also includes "beyond" and "deriving from." It confirms and denies at the same time, exerting a kind of double bind. It says: we belong to the internet, knowing that the internet is over. We are digital, but it does not matter, because that is just what everybody is. "Post-" also presumes to know the border of something: post-internet means we believe that the end of the event called "the internet" is somewhere in sight, in the same way that postmodernism served first of all to consolidate modernism into something we

could have conceivably moved beyond.

Post-internet represents the latest episode in the long trajectory of artistic responses to shifts in the forces of representation and the evolution of media technology. We can characterize these responses in one of four ways: 1) the aforementioned metaphorical appropriation; 2) "technologism"; 3) tech-derived projects and practices, or "derivatives"; and 4) tech-related projects and practices, or "relatives."

Technologism

Technologism describes artwork that threaten to be entirely exhausted by an embrace or a rejection of a given technology. There are both technophilic and technophobic examples of technologism, in this respect. The point of departure for classic modernism, for example, can be seen as a technophobic rejection of the new technologies of representation that appeared in the nineteenth century. By contrast, many movements of the second half of the twentieth century, like Fluxus, Land Art, and Conceptual Art, paved the way for the reentry of technophilia, a belief in the liberating power of tech in and of itself.

As the name implies, Media Art was an attempt to formulate a technophile modernism, liberating it from its technophobic constraints. Of course, by refusing mechanical reproduction, this phobia had made modernist works exceptionally attractive as repositories of value. In contrast to the dire prophecies of certain critics, the effect of the mass media was to make singular, "authentic" expression more valuable than ever, precisely as this value was no longer different in kind. The relationship between high modernism and mass-market representation was one of reciprocal stabilization, in this respect, rather than total antagonism or total identity. The Media Artists' unfettered belief in the progressive nature of technology naturally led them to collapse this structure, refusing materialization and art's economic exceptionalism in the same gesture, and creating art irrespective of the capacity of the market to price it *as art*. And so it didn't sell.

Media Art did however manage to settle down in the lap of the new neoliberal governments of the Eighties, whose fiscal policy called for the massive subsidy of technological innovation. The appearance of Media Art allowed the funding of culture to be channeled towards this, more directly lucrative, goal, and so Media Art was institutionalized alongside media-related commercial disciplines at universities and academies.

Like Media Art, most of the proponents of Net Art fall under the category of technophile

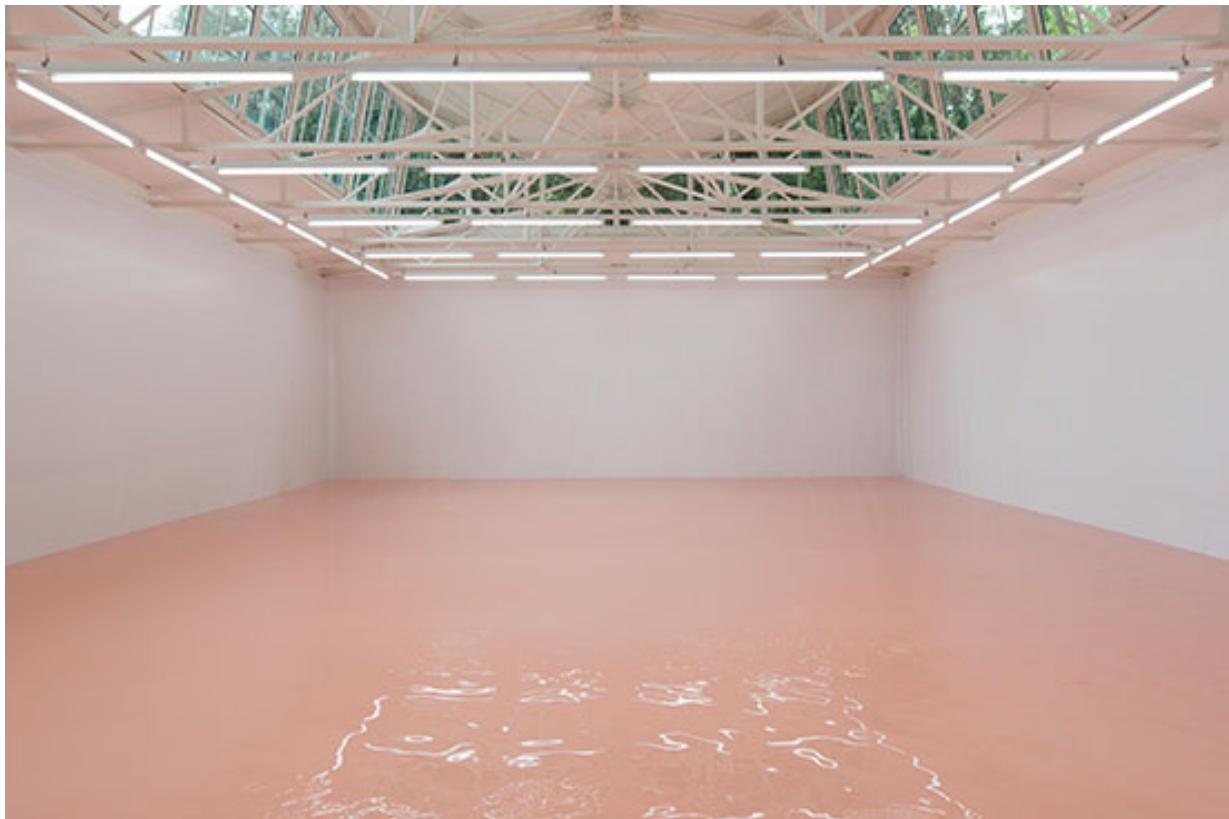
technologists, and, to a certain degree, they repeated the strategies of their predecessors. But the window of opportunity was closed. Neither were states willing to create another body of media-related institutions, nor were the established institutions of Media Art willing to share their funds. In the United States the situation was somewhat less strict, with some funding provided by institutions like the Walker Art Center and the Dia Foundation. But it never allowed for a second wave of institutionalization. And it did not change the enmity of the market for these self-hating valuables.

This was because Net Artists made even fewer concessions to the demand for assets. Nor were market participants willing to expand the conventional understanding of value. The first wave of Net Art took place entirely outside the marketplace, and was mostly about applying conceptual practices within the novel environment of the internet. With few exceptions, immateriality was crucial for works like those of Jodi.org, Heath Bunting, and Olia Lialina. Even more so than Media Artists, whose production adapted to established institutional career opportunities, many Net Artists were deprived of profitable options and were forced into productive desperation.

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There are contemporary artists who similarly elude materialization and operate only within the web. Unfortunately, the disruptive energy that the curator Tatiana Bazzichelli, among others, has claimed for these art practices remains somewhat hermetic and limited to a closely connected network, without spreading out towards the larger culture.⁶

It is only with what is known as “post-internet” art that technologism – either pro or con – begins to fade. None of the post-internet artists claims to be spearheading technological progress. But nor are they wringing their hands at the colonization of the life-world by the march of reification or calculability due to relentless technological advancement. Quite the opposite: practices shared by most post-internet artists derive from activities in social media, awareness of technological change, well-established techniques of production, and a preference for new materials.



Pamela Rosenkranz, *Our Product*, 2015. Installation view at the Pavilion of Switzerland, Venice Biennale. Photo: Marc Asekhame.



A screenshot of artist Oliver Laric's website and project *Lincoln 3-D Scans* (2014).

Derivatives

Practices *derived* from the internet include artworks whose core motif remains an internet practice. Commodities and objects may *result*, but the practice can be sustained without them. Among early post-internet artists, many projects regarded the act of exhibiting as a slightly old-fashioned ritual, opening the possibility for a freeport to replace a gallery. One of the most famous examples are the staged exhibitions and TV projects of LuckyPDF in London.

Oliver Laric can be seen as another proponent of web-derived practices. The website *vwork.com*, which Laric cofounded, provided a showroom-like service for artworks, focusing entirely on their visual qualities. With the *Lincoln 3-D Scans* project, Laric realized an online distribution platform for freely available 3-D scans of sculptures from the holdings of the Collection and Usher Gallery in Lincoln, UK. Both projects are centered within the web and extend to artistic practices outside it.

But there are examples from beyond the first wave, too. Being disappointed by what he perceived as a surrender to market forces, curator Ben Vickers initiated the *unMonastery* project to encourage internet-based conceptual practices. As he stated in response to a questionnaire in the catalogue for the 2014 exhibition *Art Post-Internet: INFORMATION/DATA*:

I guess I'd define "post-internet" as a lost sign post to a community that doesn't exist anymore, one that fell apart due to opportunists and general distrust but that serves as a convenient marketing term for dealers and young curators wanting to establish themselves on the first rung of the art industrial complex ladder.⁷

Unfortunately, the possibility to turn web-related practices into a conceptual questioning of the art market itself was never fully recognized. The very few gestures in that direction were limited to

imitations of web commerce stripped of all conceptual originality – the signal example being *DIS* magazine's webshop featuring artists' products like printed T-shirts for ordinary consumers.⁸ This was a depressing echo of early, Net Art technophilia, albeit one shorn of even the slightest utopian desire. Sometimes a cigar is just a cigar, Freud said, and sometimes retail is just retail.

Relatives

With web-related practices, the core consists in conventional material artworks that nevertheless could not exist or would not make sense without some web-related activity.

The most representative example of web-related practices can be found in the work of Katja Novitskova. Her works install images taken from the web as sculptures in the gallery. Here the artwork is not much more than a transitional stage through which the images are being fed before slipping back into the online circulation of images.

Many post-internet artists have applied this kind of dual strategy by closely interlinking web-based resources with material production. The resulting artworks possess a double existence, as material objects and as information. The object is hosted in the gallery – or for that matter in a wooden transport box – while the images are hosted on social media and websites like *vwork.com* and *Contemporary Art Daily*. Many more people get to see the images of the artworks than the objects.

On one level, of course, this has been the case at least since the introduction of image-reproduction techniques in the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries, a revolution in the mode of representation that made the careers of Marcantonio Raimondi and Albrecht Dürer. But entering the internet not only allows a different scale of distribution; there is also a reversed circuit of representation. The sequential relationship between depiction and object is turned upside down: it is not that the original doesn't exist or doesn't matter, but that it exists only to occasion its representation somewhere else. The work of art is not a simulacra, but a stage on which to perform social media. To a greater or lesser degree, all post-internet artists partake of this shifting cycle of attention. But only some of them declare this practice as the conceptual core of their production, whilst others simply take it as a given and unavoidable side effect. Navigating like this – between web-related aspects and material work – is no longer limited to post-internet artists. As art critic Michael Sanchez pointed out, it had already become a widespread practice by 2011.⁹

As we saw with "liquidity," metaphoric

appropriation means that conventional artworks are produced independently of new technological practices – like the internet and securitization – but nevertheless claim some link with them.

In terms of “post-internet,” this fourth category – web-related art – encompasses all those works that relate metaphorically to the internet, by either applying online available production processes or being hosted within social media communities. The works in question tend to take a very conventional shape, as either sculptures or videos. And these may be very interesting, but not for reasons of the internet.

This fourth strain has grown to be the most successful, and in consequence the most attractive and populated. This is no surprise. Liberated from conceptual concerns, artists were free to go where an imaginary market would be waiting for them.

There are positions that embrace this attitude, most notably the work of Simon Denny, who openly promotes a practice of product development learned from start-up culture. His idea of user or exhibition experience became most apparent in his works at the DLD 2012 conference, which in turn sped the adaption of post-internet to market demands.¹⁰

The turn taken by post-internet – from its early preference for derivatives to its later, inflated output composed chiefly of densely material metaphorical appropriations – is both an example and a reflection of the imperatives the market is currently forcing on artistic production. In the course of less than five years, an artistic movement growing out of networks and mutual recognition within social media was turned into a branded production machine providing liquidity for speculation. That the freeports do not yet house many post-internet artworks does not matter. What matters is the speculative approach that leads venture collectors to invest in these assets. In order to claim their future value, artworks have to fit the site of non-exhibition at a freeport. The better objects are optimized for circulation through social media images, the more they adapt to the requirements of freeportism. The secondary layer of online-existence allows the “real” object to be completely withdrawn, buried in a wooden coffin.

In the second part of this essay, I will show how speculative realism became the ideological partner of this mode of representation.

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A contribution coordinated by *e-flux journal* editor Julieta Aranda will reply to this text in an upcoming issue.

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1

For details, see
<http://www.lefreeport.lu/site/index.php/faq-2>

2

Hito Steyerl, "Duty-Free Art," *e-flux journal* 63 (March 2015)
../journal/duty-free-art/

3

Yield is defined as the combination of interest and dividends an investment is likely to return in the future, not including capital gains, which is itself partially determined by yield. So, for example, a risky investment with a high yield may be worth less than a safe investment with a low yield. With fewer and fewer high-yield investments available, of any kind, the safety of a fixed income comes to be valued higher and higher.

4

Hito Steyerl, "Duty-Free Art."

5

Eileen Kinsella, "Gagosian Says Freeport King Yves Bouvier's Activities Pose 'Terrible Conflict of Interest,'" *artnet news*, September 24, 2015
<https://news.artnet.com/market/gagosian-comments-bouvier-rybolovlev-335165>

6

Cf. Tatiana Bazzichelli, *Networked Disruption: Rethinking Oppositions in Art, Hacktivism and the Business of Social Networking* (Aarhus, Denmark: Digital Aesthetics Research Center Press, 2013).

7

"How do you define 'post-internet'? How does this terminology relate to artistic practice?" in *Art Post-Internet: INFORMATION/DATA*, eds. Karen Archey and Robin Peckham (Beijing: Ullens Center for Contemporary Art, 2014), 98. Published in conjunction with the exhibition of the same name shown at Ullens Center for Contemporary Art, Beijing, March 1–May 11, 2014.

8

See
<http://disown.dismagazine.com/>

9

Michael Sanchez, "2011," *Artforum*, Summer 2013
<https://artforum.com/inprint/issue=201306&id=41241>

10

Cf. Timo Feldhaus, "The Soul of Simon Denny," *Spike*, July 29, 2015
<http://spikeartmagazine.com/en/articles/soul-simon-denny>

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Freeportism as Style and Ideology: Post-Internet and Speculative Realism, Part II

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Freeports are large, tax-free storage facilities that are uniquely suited to housing works of art adapted to the demands of contemporary financial markets. Because of the dominance of these markets, “freeportism” can be understood to signify the conditions of representation, production, and distribution that correspond to this dominance. The successful freeport artwork requires a strong artistic brand, ample liquidity in the form of tradable artworks, galleries operating as market makers, and photogenic material objects that produce likable images on platforms such as Instagram and Facebook.

In the first part of this essay, I argued that the kind of art known as “post-internet” adapted to these conditions within a relatively short period of time – about five years – mostly by leaving aside its initial focus on web-related practices and processes. This transformation has turned “post-internet” art into a style of freeportism as such, much in the same way that, once upon a time, it could have been argued that Dutch still-life painting, with its depiction of worldly goods, was the style of the early financial market that flourished around the Amsterdam stock exchange founded in 1602.

To make the transmission from financial markets to artistic practices complete, an ideological framework was needed that supported the turn from discursive to material practices, from rituals of communication to objects and commodities, and from web-oriented and process-based artworks to shiny items provided in ample liquidity. The new brand of philosophical thinking called “speculative realism” offered itself as the ideology of freeportism and its associated modes of artistic production and circulation. Whether its appearance was a lucky coincidence, or whether both post-internet art and speculative realism are symptoms of the very same economic and technological regime, is open to discussion. However, both serve each other exceedingly well.

Speculative Realism and the Reality of Speculation

In 2013, “Speculations on Anonymous Materials” was the first major institutional exhibition to link post-internet art with speculative realism. Curated by Susanne Pfeffer at the Fridericianum in Kassel, the show was accompanied by a conference featuring several philosophers associated with speculative realism, including Markus Gabriel, Maurizio Ferraris, Iain Hamilton Grant, Robin Mackay, and Reza Negarestani.

The show rendered post-internet art as a visually and aesthetically coherent movement, through a materiality- and object-oriented selection of artists like Yngve Holen, Josh Kline, Katja Novitskova, Jon Rafman, and Timur Si-Qin, and by displaying the works in traditionally museal fashion. In so doing, the show contributed to canonizing post-internet art in a state that had already left behind its web-related roots.

At that point, post-internet art had shifted decidedly to the production of material objects. Galleries had come around to the new work, which was regularly shown at fairs and was already establishing its presence on the commercial side of the art world.

What was remarkable about the show was not so much the selection of works, or the individual contributions of the philosophers at the conference, who mostly struggled to find a relation to the context of the exhibition. Most remarkable was the mere fact that the exhibition was the first attempt on an institutional level to connect post-internet art with the broader theoretical framework of speculative realism as such.

Of course, at that early point, very few pieces of post-internet art would have been dumped in the darkness of storage facilities. However, freeportism as a style does not only affect art that actually enters the storage facilities, but also work that strives to do so. Post-internet art's marriage with philosophy was

perhaps not straightforwardly meant to increase the former's freeport eligibility, but in the end it did so, whether deliberately or not.

Philosophical Hedging

In trading, to hedge a position means to secure against future losses – like buying insurance against falling prices. Whenever a professional trader enters a speculative trade, she tries to mitigate the risks involved. Usually, this can be achieved in two ways. The first method is diversification, or bundling multiple positions whose risks neutralize each other. Venture capitalists routinely follow this recipe. Contemporary venture collectors mimic the same strategy. They buy the works of not only one young artist but of many. This helps to diversify the risk. Taste, subjective judgment, and emotional affinity give way to more risk-averse strategies of art portfolio management.

The second strategy is hedging. In the market this usually involves buying derivatives like forward contracts, options, swaps, and futures that help to lock in a future price. A small expenditure now can serve to guarantee returns later. Similar derivatives for artworks do not exist. But there are discursive constructions that serve the same purpose. Attaching philosophy to art is like buying a derivative.

How does philosophy work as hedging?

Creating an awareness of time and history requires intellectual and institutional efforts. The big time machines of the art world used to be

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Yngve Holen, *Extended Operations*, 2013. Installation view Fridericianum, Photo: Achim Hatzius. Courtesy Yngve Holen, Johan Breggrem Gallery, Malmö and Neue Alte Brücke, Frankfurt am Main.

museums. Starting in the late eighteenth century, they established an order of historical time, following the new scientific models of art historian and archaeologist Johann Joachim Winckelmann, as applied by Christian von Mechel and Dominique Vivant Denon.¹

Today's museums have a different focus. A national cultural identity and the maintenance of a historical heritage have been reduced to secondary goals. A lot of money is spent erecting new palaces of the arts. They look great. As architectural landmarks they serve all kinds of purposes, from tourist attractions to soft factors in competitiveness among cities and nations. But for the arts and for the construction of history and time, they don't work as they used to. Instead of amassing a big collection, these institutions devote their resources to organizing temporary shows. A cultural canon is no longer their main concern.

The absence of history becomes most visible in their focus on the "contemporary." Caught in the ever-changing presence of the now, museums have lost their function of developing a historical reserve. Throughout the museum's history, art markets have profited from its canon-building efforts. As the buyers and lenders of last resort, museums have acted like the central banks of the art market. Grounded in a stabilized history and a canon, they have provided safety – in other words, the basis for nearly risk-free investment. Curators don't do this. Biennials don't do this. And museums no

longer do this either. Today's new repositories of art – freeports – operate entirely according to the laws of the market, and are therefore exposed to its fluctuations.

Here is where philosophy enters the picture. The traditional rhetoric of philosophy invokes an appeal to authority. A proper and well-grounded philosophy paper derives its status from calling on authors from the rich 2,500-year history of written thinking. It is exactly this historical reach that renders philosophers so valuable to contemporary art discourse. The more art texts are decorated with quotes and references to this long history of thought, the better they serve the purpose of guaranteeing the durability of the artworks associated with them.

The one and only requirement for hedge-worthy philosophy is therefore a formal one. Like ghosts from the past, this philosophy needs to call in the old authorities, by citing them or referencing their theoretical concepts. The more ancient, the more solemn, the better.

By this metric, speculative realism scores pretty high. In contrast to the French post-structuralism that preceded it, speculative realism began by dusting off the eternal, core questions of philosophy. Its main points of reference are scattered throughout the long history of the discipline. For the purpose of philosophical hedging it does not matter whether you argue for or against Kant. It is the name "Kant" that matters.

Another property of speculative realism

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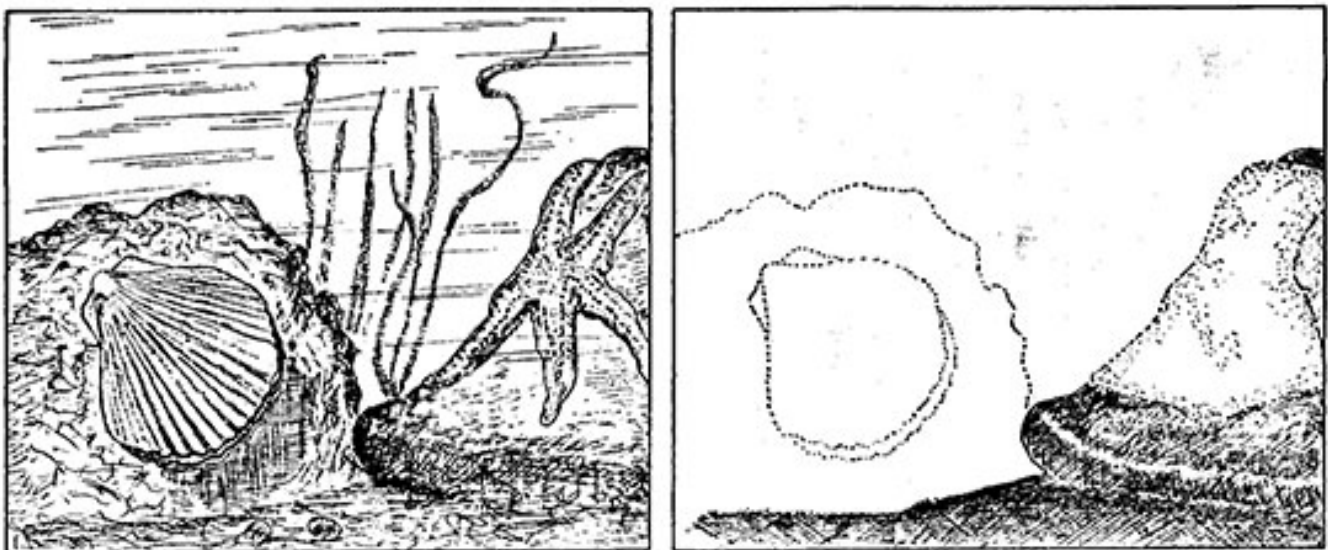


FIG. 19
Environment and *Umwelt* of the scallop

The above is an illustration of a scallop's *Umwelt* from Jakob von Uexküll's book *Stroll Through the Worlds of Animals and Men* (1934). Uexküll defines the *Umwelt* as the perceptual world in which an organism exists and acts as a subject.

adds to its hedging capabilities: it is completely devoid of a political agenda, unlike continental philosophy. For the sake of the purity of philosophical reasoning, most proponents of speculative realism steer clear of crude issues like political and economic theory, let alone political activism. For this reason, the risk of critical disruption or an unfavorable discursive intervention is very low. And when it comes to hedging, avoiding risk is what matters.

Speculative realism has no direct interest in the arts. Few of its thinkers ever touch art as a subject. Only rudimentary traces of aesthetics can be found. Recently, however, after the art world became interested in speculative realism, some of its thinkers felt inclined to utter statements regarding artistic practices – not so much to serve the interests of artists, but to cover the full spectrum of philosophy. This has introduced a measure of risk into philosophers' involvement in the art world, albeit only a small one. Idiosyncratic aesthetic judgments by speculative realists have the potential to complicate their participation in the art world.²

A successful philosophical hedging requires a historically well-grounded theory that is connected via ample quotes and references to a long history of thinking, and that is wise enough to avoid adverse political and aesthetic judgments. In its approach to reactivating the classic question of philosophy and their main thinkers, speculative realism fulfills this purpose perfectly.

Rhetorical Appropriation

We should keep in mind that the artistic appropriation of philosophy does not entail an extensive discussion or rigorous critique of its theories and conclusions. That part is left to academic discourse. Artistic practices apply, transform, mirror, echo – and occasionally also precede – the findings of philosophers. One can of course criticize this appropriation as merely acting on the level of buzzwords. But the opposite suspicion can also be raised: perhaps the philosophical statements in question were written exactly for that purpose.

Apart from formal requirements and rhetoric relations, there are also more substantial ways in which speculative realism encourages and justifies an artistic production fit for freeports. These include its preoccupation with materialism, its object-oriented ontology, and its “anti-correlationist” stance. Before delving into these three subjects, however, I will pause to note that among the key terms that tie speculative realism to post-internet art, “speculative” and “realism” are not among them. This is because philosophy and art use these terms in significantly different ways.

Philosophical speculation operates in a different domain than speculation in art markets. While the latter – related as it is to future prices, payments, and risk – concerns the domain of time, speculation in a philosophical sense usually concerns the domain of existence and abstraction. Speculation – at least in speculative realism – refers to a claim on the eternal existence of something otherwise inaccessible or not demonstrable.

There is a similar divergence in meaning when it comes to the term “realism.” Suhail Malik is an art theorist teaching at Goldsmiths and one of the main proponents of the idea that speculative realism has strong implications for contemporary art production. Malik points out that the philosophical term “realism” does not have much affinity with the “realism” known from art history: “Such a realism here is not to be confused with realism as a style or genre of art committed to ‘accurate’ representations of pre-existing reality, such a genre already assuming representation as an interval from a real elsewhere.”³

Materialism

The return of materialism in philosophical debates coincides nicely with a focus on materiality within the arts. The topic has been deemed so important that the magazine *October* dedicated a recent issue to materiality. The issue includes a questionnaire with responses from art theorists, art historians, and artists, who were asked to “think the reality of objects beyond human meanings and uses. This other reality is often rooted in ‘thingness’ or an animate materiality.”⁴

Contemporary materialism refers to the thread leading from Spinoza through Bergson to Deleuze and the Marxist tradition.⁵ Referring back to the Spinozian notion of the “conatus,” things are thought to be equipped with an agency of their own. A vitalist drive reigns over the material world. “One moral of the story is that we are also nonhuman and that things, too, are vital players in the world.”⁶

If material carries its own energy, there is less need for a discursive layer of communication. This approach has major consequences for art production. Materiality can speak for itself. When it comes to post-internet art, this is one of the strongest arguments for leaving aside the early attachment to social media platforms, and to online communication in general. The trust in the vibrant energy of matter helps to promote the retreat to traditional material production.

The consequences of this ideology for the art world become even clearer when compared to the aesthetic relations attached to preceding



Josh Kline, *Tastemaker's Choice*, 2012 (detail). Installation view at Fridericianum. Photo: Achim Hatzius. Courtesy Josh Kline and 47 Canal, New York

philosophical approaches: “This position sharply contrasts with the philosophical and cultural view dominant over the last half century, a view that affirms the indispensability of interpretation, discourse, textuality, signification, ideology, and power.”⁷ Once the layer of communication is thrown overboard, we are left with merely material things, and we have to assume that they can stand for themselves, regardless of what happens to them.

Object Orientation

The concept of the “object,” as it figures most prominently in Graham Harman’s “object-oriented ontology,” has little in common with vitalist materialism. Harman’s objects are paradoxical beings: “By ‘objects’ I mean unified realities – physical or otherwise – that cannot fully be reduced either downwards to their pieces or upwards to their effects.”⁸ The only common trait is the assumption of a reality that both material things and Harman’s objects belong to. Navigating the philosophical quagmire of the old discipline of epistemology, Harman postulates the object as a being, not necessarily material, that is neither explainable from its components nor from its relations. If we regard the artwork as an object, Harman’s theory offers a justification for a belief in the autonomous, inherent reality of the artwork. Its unique quality can neither be fully explained by the process of production, nor can it rely on its relation to the beholder: “At issue is the independence of artworks not only from their social and political surroundings, their physical settings or their commercial exchange value, but from any other object whatsoever.”⁹ In addition, the object takes the place formerly occupied by the genius – an individual possessed by an inherent talent or ability that is not subject to educational efforts but naturally inborn, and for this reason someone who is self-reliant and free of outward relations.

Harman’s metaphysical conception of objecthood bears a striking resemblance to the requirements for things to be stored in a freeport. Whether intentional or not, his description of objects perfectly fits the artistic practices of freeportism: “The only way to do justice to objects is to consider that their reality is free of all relation, deeper than all reciprocity. The object is a dark crystal veiled in a private vacuum: irreducible to its own pieces, and equally irreducible to its outward relations with other things.”¹⁰ On other occasions he speaks of objects being “vacuum-sealed.”¹¹ With well-packaged artworks coming so close to Harman’s idea of the object, the freeport represents the ideal environment for object-oriented works of art.

Anti-Correlationism

In *After Finitude*, Quentin Meillassoux writes: “By ‘correlation’ we mean the idea according to which we only ever have access to the correlation between thinking and being, and never to either term considered apart from the other.”¹² For our purposes we do not need to follow all of Meillassoux’s intricate lines of argumentation as he defends his refutation of correlationism against basically all the major representatives of modern philosophy, from Kant – whom he deems his main opponent – onward. The consequences for the arts of the anti-correlationist approach are easy to draw out.

According to Suhail Malik, “that a reality such as art can only be apprehended by the thinking or consciousness of it and that it is necessarily accompanied by that thinking and consciousness is the dependency that Quentin Meillassoux has influentially called correlationism.”¹³

Anti-correlationism, then, frees art from aesthetic considerations and the involvement of a beholder. Under these ideological premises the existence of an artwork requires neither human perception nor consciousness. Very much like the “arche-fossil” that Meillassoux constructs as a hypothetical 4.65-billion-year-old object, the artwork may live for an indefinite amount of time in eternal darkness without losing its real existence. Malik has drawn further and more far-reaching conclusions from Meillassoux’s assumptions, translating them into requirements for anti-correlationist works of art: “The demand here upon contemporary art is strictly non-trivial: it removes subjective interpretation or experience as a condition or telos of the artwork, and therewith collapses the entire edifice of the contemporary art paradigm.”¹⁴

Stripped of interpretation and experience, the purpose of exhibiting artworks becomes completely empty. Consequentially, artworks no longer need to be shown anywhere: “An art responsive to this theoretically-led imperative would be indifferent to the experience of it, an art that does not presume or return to aesthetics, however minimal or fecund such an aesthetics might be.”¹⁵ There can be no better justification for an artistic production that goes straight from the artist’s studio to the storage facility, without ever being publicly displayed or shown to anybody.

Conclusion

Speculative realism, with its emphasis on material and objects and its repudiation of the beholder, provides an almost perfect ideology for an artistic production catering to freeports as sites of material storage and non-exhibition.

This contradicts Suhail Malik's claim that speculative realism opens the way for an entirely different contemporary art. He writes: "From yet another angle, realism's provocation to art is the undoing of aesthetic experience as a condition or term of art, even in the avowal of art's ineluctable materiality. Which is to say that realism speculatively indicates the conditions for another art than contemporary art."¹⁶ On the contrary, considering the practice of post-internet art, the theoretical framework of speculative realism does precisely the opposite of what Malik claims it does. It offers an ideological framework for today's dominant art practice and is uniquely adapted to the current state of markets and financial feudalism, satisfying a demand for speculative assets hidden in the treasure chambers of freeports.

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