

Abstract

This conversation took place across two Skype conversations between Edgar Schmitz, Katleen Vermeir and Ronny Heiremans following the 2015 PARSE conference, linking the concerns of temporality, economics, confidence, fabulation and the time of exhibition found in the ideas and practices of the artists.

Never Really in Real Time

EDGAR SCHMITZ

Edgar Schmitz is an artist who produces escapist backdrops from film, sculpture, animation and writing. His work has been presented in national and international group exhibitions including “London Movies”, Bozar, Brussels (2005); “A.C.A.D.E.M.Y.”, Van Abbemuseum, Eindhoven (2006); Steirischer Herbst, Graz (2006); “No Soul for Sale”, Tate Modern, London (2010); British Art Show 7, Hayward Touring (2010/11). It has been the focus of solo exhibitions at the ICA, London (with Liam Gillick, 2006); FormContent, London (2010); Cooper Gallery, Dundee (2012) and Himalayas Art Museum, Shanghai (2015). Schmitz has also written extensively on contemporary art, with contributions to *Kunstforum International*, *Texte zur Kunst* and *Artforum* as well as *contemporary, tema celeste* and numerous catalogue essays. His book on *Hubs and Fictions* (with Sophia Hao) has just been published by Sternberg Press. Schmitz is a Senior Lecturer in Art at Goldsmiths, London.

VERMEIR & HEIREMANS

Vermeir & Heiremans are an artistic duo living and working in Brussels. They have presented their work at the 10th Istanbul Biennial (2007); Arnolfini, Bristol (2009); Kassel Documentary Film Festival (2009); Nam June Paik Art Center, Gyeonggi-do (2010); Loop, Barcelona (2010); Videoex, Zurich (2011); Salt, Istanbul (2011); Viennale, Vienna (2011); Argos, Brussels (2012); Extra City, Antwerp (2012); 7th Shenzhen Sculpture Biennial (2012); Manifesta 9, Genk (2012); CA2M, Madrid (2013); 13th Istanbul Biennial (2013); Rotwand Gallery, Zurich (2014); Stroom Den Haag (2014); Triennale Brugge (2015), 4th Dojima River Biennale, Osaka (2015).

Introduction 1: Vermeir & Heiremans

In 2006 Vermeir & Heiremans initiated a long-term project that focuses on the reciprocal relationship of art, architecture and economy. In this collaborative practice the artists nominated their home, a loft apartment in a post-industrial building in Brussels, as an artwork. The public does not have access to the artwork. Instead the artists use the home as source material for the production of “mediated extensions”, such as installations, videos, performances, interviews, publications and so on that transform the “house as artwork” into a virtual discursive site.¹

In this project Vermeir & Heiremans started to investigate how to “financialise” a “house as artwork”, how to make it “liquid” without having to sell the house. The result was *ART HOUSE INDEX (AHI—)*, an experimental financial index that measures the economic and symbolic value of the “house as artwork”, including the cultural capital and other symbolic values that Vermeir & Heiremans, as “public persona”, accrue. The index is itself both an artwork as well as a functioning financial index.

Art House Index gathers real-time information from different parameters that compose the index, such as the art and real estate markets, but also information from the attention economy, e.g. visitors to the artists’ website. Auction prices are not calculated in this index, since the work of Vermeir & Heiremans is not present in the auction market. The different data assembled are “weighed” against one another for their greatest relevance in measuring the “value” of the “house as artwork”. An algorithm continuously recalculates this information, resulting in an abstract number going up or down. At this moment it is not possible to invest in the index itself, but the artists are currently researching the conditions under which financial products could be developed to trade on the index.

In the film *Masquerade*, a “factual-fiction reportage”, a TV reporter tells the story of the protested “initial public offering” (IPO) of *AHI—*.² *Art House Index* was publicly presented for the first time in the form of a lecture-performance in a corporate conference room inside the Marmara Hotel on Taksim Square during the public programme of the 13th Istanbul Biennial. The form of an IPO was chosen in reference to ceremonies being organised for launching a company on the stock market. The performance was interrupted by activists protesting against the corporate sponsorship of the biennial and its (in)direct role in gentrification issues in the city. The corporate role-playing by Vermeir & Heiremans launching a financial index added to the confusion. In the end Vermeir & Heiremans decided to integrate the protests in their film *Masquerade*, reflecting also their own not-neutral position as artists.

Masquerade is a film that addresses a specific intersection of the contemporary art and finance markets, through the filter of Melville’s novel *The Confidence Man: His Masquerade* (1857) as the structure for its episodic narration. The film takes its name from the subtitle of Melville’s novel. In the film *Masquerade* Vermeir & Heiremans present the financial market as the *mise en scène* and a leading character of the narrative. The artists also created an “installation version” of their film, in which the financial market influences the real-time “cutting” of the film. The actual performance of *AHI—*, showing the index going up or down triggers in “real time” a switch between two timelines, one of which shows the “finished” film while the other captures variations, rehearsals and outtakes. The artists have no control over the “editing” of *Masquerade*, the markets creating a unique moment in time as it is statistically highly improbable one will ever get to see the same combinations twice. Vermeir & Heiremans staged *Masquerade* as their contribution to the 2015 PARSE conference on Time.

Introduction 2: Edgar Schmitz

Schmitz' work mobilises gallery settings towards film by orchestrating the way they oscillate between material, atmospheric and narrative promises. Across a diverse body of work, including sculpture, sound, animation and writing, his sub-filmic clusters act as portals into and escape hatches from the exhibition as event. Since 2012, Schmitz has been working across two interconnected bodies of work: *Surplus Cameo Decor*, a solo exhibition realised between Dundee in 2012 and Shanghai in 2015, and *alovestorysomewherearound2046*, a film treatment as work-in-progress towards a movie always yet to be made.

For *Surplus Cameo Decor*, Schmitz expanded on recent works that had elaborated on tactics of cultural camouflage and withdrawal from the exhibition as event, and installed a series of ambient backdrops in the Cooper Gallery that turned the space into a semi-fictional hub for cinematic plots and invited cameo appearances, complete with cinematic trailer flickering in the foyer and three large-scale neon signs announcing the different episodes of this "exhibition as movie".

Episode 1, *palasthotel*, was named after an East Berlin hotel in the German Democratic Republic of foreign travel under Stasi surveillance, and featured one of the building's iconic bronze-tinted honeycomb windows. Episode 2, *horizontes sorora*, was set in the swimming pool of a remote Cuban resort, under

refurbishment in the early 2000s.

Episode 3, *sindanao*, took its title from the fictional South China Sea island in a 1986 Ulli Lommel horror movie, and is set in 2017, just before the opening of the M+ super-museum in Hong Kong's West Kowloon Cultural District. The various episodes were inhabited by art and film world protagonists who made cameo appearances as themselves in the gallery-as-set. All of these cameo appearances were documented in photo shoots in the gallery setting.

alovestorysomewherearound2046 is an ongoing collaboration between Edgar Schmitz and Pieter Vermoortel that pre- and post-produces their exhibitions into a generic love story set in the near future. The treatment is elaborated in collaboration with film industry professionals providing their expertise, as well as artists contributing motifs and devices to be scripted into the material. As a format inhabiting multiple overlapping temporalities between pre- and post-production, Schmitz and Vermoortel staged *alovestorysomewherearound2046* as their contribution to the 2015 PARSE conference on Time.

1. See www.in-residence.be (Accessed 2016-07-14.)

2. See <https://vimeo.com/133391587>. Password M2015 (Accessed 2016-07-14.)

Conversation

After meeting at the Parse conference on Time in Göteborg in 2015, Edgar Schmitz and Vermeir & Heiremans continued their conversation on “time”, the cinematic and their mode of production in their current work and practice.

Film and (Real) Time

ES: When it comes to questions of film and time as they concern us here, one of the keys seems to be the invocation of “real time”, and how our works oscillate between translation, illustration and commentary. We are both interested in the potential of what we might refer to as “film”: as format, as technique of deferral, as mode of transferal, and as commentary on real-world structures that are scripted into film. One of the starting points through which we may be able to talk about our respective works and how film technique supports them, then, is time: the spectre of real time, the time of mediation, and the possibilities film opens up to engage with anticipation and deferral as well as more immediate proximities to real time, in supposedly real-world constellations. If indeed there ever is such a thing as real time, or indeed real-world infrastructures. *Masquerade* seems to be evoking and provoking something like a real world of measurable effects, not least in the way in which the work is underpinned by the real-time ticking of the *Art House Index*, and its conditioning of the edit.

RH: In the film *Masquerade* we were looking for ways to use the film medium as a direct expression of confidence, the film’s central theme. We tried to make a film not about confidence, but rather have our film incorporate confidence. That’s how we came to the idea to use green key during the shoot. Hence also the title *Masquerade*, since the ultimate form of masquerade in film, you could say, is filming in green key and composing images in post-production. Having made that decision, we could go into the

idea of how to present this material in such a way that the audience watching the film would ask: can we trust this image? Or is it something the film-makers have constructed for us, as a kind of make-believe?

So when presenting the live version of *Masquerade*, the audience sees the film as part of the real-time performance of *Art House Index*. You could say that the real-time editing is performed by the market, not by us. When markets are up, a fully post-produced film in terms of sound and image is projected. All green backdrops are filled out perfectly, while the actors are doing their lines in an eloquent way. When the index goes down, the backdrops consist of unfinished green-key shots, while the actors are rehearsing or keep forgetting their lines. A film normally stitches you into its narrative, into its illusion, but here, every time the index goes down, the viewer is not only confronted with the production conditions of the film, but also with the present moment of screening of the film and the surroundings in which this is happening.

KV: You could even say that the real-time attention of the public watching the film influences the behaviour of the index, and consequently the film they are watching. The screening becomes an interactive performance, mediated through this financial instrument. Every ten seconds the index re-calculates the values constituted by its parameters. In that way it provokes a disruption in the dominant experience of cinema, in which the viewer cannot step out of the A-to-Z film-time, fixed in the narrative and duration of the film reel. I remember the Situationists used to escape this dominant narrative experience by going in and out of several cinema theatres, in this way “editing” in memory a new film from the fragments they had seen in the different screenings.

RH: In your work, would you say that you also include the viewer in a real-time situation, since you present “film” in a material form?



Vermeir & Heiremans, "Masquerade " (set photos), 2015. Photographs by Michael De Lausnay.

ES: The exhibitions and the script that I have been working on recently are set up in such a way that they never really become film. They never take on the materiality of film. One of the differences worth talking about is what we mean by film, and what I have also described as the cinematic. Because it seems to me that one of the concerns around the immersive plausibility of film is that there is such a thing as an immersive space that you are then disrupting, through the edits, and the green key, and the alienation effects, which you deploy in a truly Brechtian sense, if I understand your work correctly—they all work against the backdrop of a really tight sense of illusion and immersion. And I find it interesting that this is premised not, in *Masquerade*, for instance, so much on the notion of the feature film as it is premised on a hard-nosed model of investigative journalism and the documentary format, which is very specific in terms of the attention it demands of an audience. What is interesting in the discrepancy between what you are working on and what I am working on, is that I borrow and appropriate and stage material that is so compromised by being somewhat outdated and half-remembered and fragmented, that it never really demands that level of immersive attention in the first place. There is a marked difference in texture between a feature film as a heavily dispersed, distributed and fragmented format, and forms of what we might call investigative journalism, which make a more direct claim on truth and knowledge production and formation.

KV: I would not call it investigative journalism. We often wrong-foot the viewer since our film mixes fact and fiction.

ES: We end up in a similarly deliberately unhinged space, in terms of viewer interaction and attention. But we are coming at it from exactly opposite directions. You are dismantling and disrupting something that would normally demand full attention, and would require a certain amount of faith in the plausibility of the narrative. The way in

which I stage a lot of my materials works the other way round; by saturating the exhibition space with an atmospheric fabric or texture that is sutured together from this rather deflated shrapnel of filmic narratives. I wonder whether the result of such a semi-confused, somewhat wrong-footed encounter with the work, is not in the end very similar.

RH: How would you describe the part of the visitor, are they a character in what you stage?

ES: I do not want to have a straight answer to this, because I do not want to think about the exhibition as necessarily a viewer invitation. I think about these situations much more as productions, more a studio situation than an exhibition situation. The gallery becomes the set for the production of a series of narratives that may or may not afford viewers the opportunity to participate. What happens though, whether I like it or not (and of course I do, to some extent, by now, like it) is that people then see themselves invited to invent roles for themselves.

RH: They are stitched in by the environment they enter, or should I say intrude?

KV: Who are the cameos?

ES: What was really precise about the set of cameo invitations both in Dundee originally, and then in Shanghai, was that we sent invitations to these people asking them to appear as themselves in the gallery-as-set and have a picture taken. Not filmed, but by means of one photograph, which becomes the official way of rendering the exhibition. Of course that kind of invitation is slightly different for someone who lives nearby. It has a different currency if you invite someone like Wang Naming, whom we had to fly into Dundee from Shanghai. The terms were identical for all the invitations, but what they then made of these differed from character to character. We had Lisa Le Feuvre, who was a co-funder of the exhibition, and director of the Henry Moore Institute, and also a close friend, and

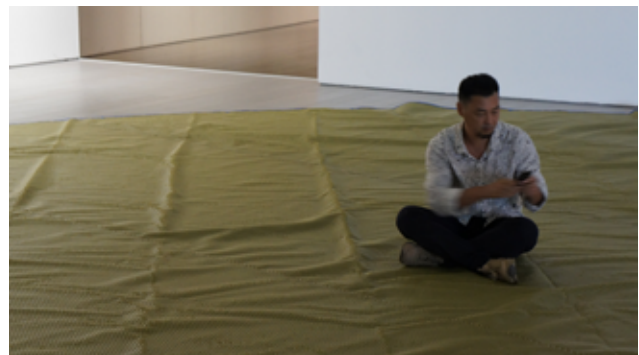
who was invited to talk at the roundtable conversations. When she came to Dundee, to the gallery, she decided to do what she always does; to look at the art, but to do it a bit more slowly, for the purpose of the photographs. So she turned herself into a slow-motion version of herself.

RH: Are the photos presented in the show, as part of the scenery you develop?

ES: They do not become part of the exhibition, but are part of its afterlife, a record, sometimes I use them in a publication. The exhibition is seen as a set, saturated with narrative fragments, and a displaced



Top and bottom right: Edgar Schmitz, "Surplus Cameo Decor: sindanao 2", 2015, installation views with Zhao Dayong. Courtesy British Council collection, Shanghai.



Left: Edgar Schmitz, "Surplus Cameo Decor: sindanao 2", 2015, production still. Courtesy British Council collection, Shanghai, photograph Mai Mai/ Himalayas.

association with filmic locations in time. It was important not to import the images back into the show.

KV: The quotes of fragments you used come from Hollywood and art house film. But the conversation in *alovestorysomewherearound2046*, how does that fit in?

ES: The *lovestory* was originally a way of not responding to a request to contribute to an exhibition. We were invited to participate in *No Soul for Sale* at Tate Modern in 2010, and we ended up thinking a lot about how we could counter that invitation, or how we could inhabit it, in a way in which we were not simply producing or displaying our goods for the benefit of Tate's visibility. So rather than present something for and in the Tate, we decided to recycle Tate for our own production, and to invert the economy slightly. Instead of showing work, we organised a series of guided tours through the collection of Tate Modern by way of which we collected material towards a script. Like location scouting the museum. And the suggestion of a love story somewhere around 2046 seemed as generic, future-bound and as useful as possible. A script, set in the future, in the shape of a generic love story. We would go around and we found a really nice strip of blue in a Mondrian which then became the colour of the wallpaper in the hotel bedroom where the lovers first meet. So appropriating some aspects of Tate and their collection and architecture, as material for the script. This also opened a space between pre- and post-production that has since become a really important space within which to work.

We first invited casting director Dan Hubbard, who had worked on the *Bourne* movies and who has also worked with amateur actors and Greenspan on *United 93*: we sent him a series of installation shots, some of the cameo shots, the press release statements made for the exhibition, and asked him how he would go about casting this. When he accepted the invitation, he came in for a panel

conversation at LUX, the centre for artists' moving image in London. We introduced the motifs of the show and he talked us through his knowledge of casting and what he might want to do. It became a conversation about the exhibition, but also one in which we were trading vocabularies around casting, naturalism, illusion, each of us under slightly different terms. We then had an agency director, Tony Noble who had been DoP for Duncan Jones' *Moon*, talking about making sets and props, quite technically really. And then we had Andy Nicholson, who was head of production for Cuarón's *Gravity*. We talked at length about what the vantage point of the artist or the curator or the choreographer in view of the overall production, which would be an exhibition, might be. But he was also talking much more pragmatically about Tim Burton sitting on a chair with a pre-visualisation version of the movie on a screen, and an actress in front of him, in front of a green screen, but in costume and holding a real prop. And it seemed really interesting to see to which extent we could appropriate those terminologies and those technical constructions.

RH: You speaking about the cameos reminds me of the fact that half of the people in our film are enacting their roles in daily life.

ES: Maybe I can turn that into a question concerning your use of the cameos. It seems to be a question about how many registers of legibility we are introducing.

RH: The characters were "playing" themselves, as is the case for your cameos: people are aware of their identity, but are estranged from themselves by the setting in which we have put them. In this artificial environment they re-enact themselves, they "play" the curator, or the banker. Melville talks about this. A person can and has to fulfil many different roles at the same time. A person can be an auctioneer, a father, a shopkeeper. You play all these roles at the same time, you can go out and wear a different mask every day.

KV: Which brings us to our own position, our own implication in the work. In *Masquerade* we are “playing” ourselves, promoting the artist brand.

RH: This is also what we were doing during a performance at the 13th Istanbul Biennial, which was one of the first stages in developing *Masquerade*. The performance was interrupted by artist-activists who protested against the biennial itself as a gentrifying agent in the city. For them our participation in the biennial made us part of the problem, something that was emphasised by the corporate perspective of the performance. For the audience it must have been pretty confusing, watching our performance and the activists’ agit-prop theatre at the same time. Was the whole thing perhaps staged by us? Reflecting on what happened while rewriting the performance as a film script, we decided we had to integrate the protests and ourselves as artists explicitly in our film. The protests showed us clearly that there is no such position as that of a neutral observer of events.

ES: There is an oscillation between the person, their professional and personal identities and how they are then cast, the persona they become and then identify or dis-identify with. Within the real time of production, how does it play out when Andrea Phillips hosted you and the film, in which she is the main character, in Gothenburg at PARSE? Is that another real time with a similar persona? In the economical field around the film, there cannot be a clear cut between real-life situations, persona, and their filmic render. How important is it for you that those relationships also change through the way in which they are being staged? To which extent is the film also a way of starting a conversation with a banking expert? Even though you are not interviewing them, you are creating a sense of proximity if not intimacy.

RH: We organised a workshop in which one of the guest speakers was a real asset manager, specialised in art as an alternative investment. Simple as our index is, he was still fascinated by it, and convinced

it could work. So yes, you could say that this project triggered an exchange between people who would not usually meet.

ES: Where does that leave you with regards to the alienation effect you deploy to de-naturalise the viewing conditions, the truth claim etc.?

KV: We recently attended a conference on art and finance, where they openly spoke about the need for more transparency in the primary (galleries) and secondary (auctions) art markets. This would be beneficial for the businesses that work on financialising art. These would very much like to have more transparency, especially in the primary art market, because it would generate more data and would open up a huge new market for them. Until now only so-called blue chip art works could be financialised. More transparency and regulations could cause disruption in the art market, but it would help the businesses working on its financialisation to grow. We have noticed however that financialisation exclusively benefits the investor. No thought is given to the producer/artist. We wonder if it would be possible to develop financial derivatives that would also benefit the producer and be the basis for a more sustainable art practice. *Art House Index* is a first attempt to elaborate on this thought.

ES: Inhabiting or amending these infrastructures of finance from within is an interesting attempt to project future change, or at least the possibility of change, and invent or carve out a space in real time within which to work with these infrastructures. This seems very different from more conventionally analytical research-based practice. It is bound up in the conceit of reproduction, into which it feeds. That temporality of a space of distribution and of production seems to be making a claim on real time while being entangled with future prospects. You spoke earlier about the reality of the market and making a claim in that reality with *AHI*, getting out of the mode of talking about something and tying it up with those realities instead.

KV: Outside representation...

RH: The film is of course still representation. The index might evolve in a different direction, becoming a financial tool with real-world consequences, but that's still very much a question, and maybe a bit overambitious. On the other hand, and this is something very concrete, we also interact closely with other artists and together we have set up a platform for research and production called Jubilee. What we research in our artistic work is also fed into this platform. So there are two "realities": one is our artwork, which includes imagination, fiction and fact, the other is about our real production conditions, on which we focus in Jubilee. It includes writing contracts, dossiers, setting up a logistical structure, but also creating more leverage, influencing cultural policies, trying to weigh on institutions that define the conditions in which we have to work.

ES: There are two different realms, which are of course not separate. Reclaiming the infrastructure also means reclaiming narratives of legitimation and validation. This overlaps somewhat with earlier excursions into institutional realities by artists. These are now often referred to as institutional critique, but of course they have very little to do with the revelatory piety suggested by this narrative. Art is not economically static or indeed reliable, and foregrounding its production as well as distribution is one way of insisting on this dynamic. Not only its economic performance as investment vehicle is precarious, unclear and therefore subject to so much speculative investment attention. It is also unclear how that distribution can be rearranged. And that's why it can be done, even if the outcomes remain unclear. In spite of the various object fixations of the art market, an expanded economy of art is inevitably an economy of production and distribution. But there is a risk of obliterating a clear conversation around conditions of production insofar as these are time-based. We need to construct situations of production that are at least plausible, even if not sus-

tainable. With the cameos there are these overlaps, and I was interested in how that then outperformed itself: I invite someone in from Shanghai as an exoticised stand-in for some idea of remoteness, and he invites me back into his institution in Shanghai. So where do these realities belong? In the realm of symbolic narrative fiction or in the institutional, economical realm? The show in Shanghai was then called "the revenge of the cameo", in which I was at his mercy of interpreters and photographers taking pictures...

This is not a question of precedence between symbolic, financial and institutional registers (which conditions precede the others, and that are thus constituted as resultant) but rather a question of how can one temporarily subsume the other. This is an escapist attitude, one of subterfuge, rather than one of analytical engagement.

RH: When you use the cameo, do you include a gallerist? Or only people related to the production of film?

ES: The exhibition was not directly configured in view of an art market reality as such. It would have been counter-intuitive to use this as a device for soliciting further economies that are not already at play and implicated in the germination and the production of the project. The range that seemed immediately available to the project at the time spanned funding bodies to curators and commentators, through to film directors who might have made a film that then produced the narrative conceit for the exhibition. This was not a deliberate attempt to exclude or circumvent the art market, but simply a realistic stock take that aligned producers from the film context as well as those of an art economy in the broader sense.

KV: We can talk a bit about the economies of invitation. The power structures inherent in invitations. For example, when you had to re-enact yourself as cameo, as a "revenge" in Shanghai.

ES: Of course there is an economy to the invitation, there is a coercive, transactional dimension to any invitation, like a gift: how you issue it, what happens when you accept it, what that entails. I do believe that performing this, playing with it, or playing within it, resonates with possibilities of production, and possibly also intervention. Of course there is also a flirtatious dimension to all of this. Invitations trade on mutual seduction. You can invite people in because they are interested in the art world resonance of what you do. For the cameos, for the Hollywood people—what kind of fascinations can you trade on? You suddenly have access to expertise and knowledge that normally, industrially or infra-structurally, you would not have access to, because you can offer up the fascination for a left-field art project that might resonate with their attempts to look sideways from their industrial frameworks. I would not go so far as to say that this is emancipatory or disruptive, but it is a space of transaction that allows you to occupy a position you would not normally, economically, be able to occupy legitimately. You can trade the art thing not so much as symbolic capital rather as affective capital, and atmospheric promise. The kind of appeal cinema might have had once. The behind-the-scene fetish plays into this as well of course, the oscillation between production and distribution, even though, and especially since they are largely indistinguishable in most practices now.

KV: The whole idea of the economics of invitation reminds me a lot of Melville's book. It is a critique of "professional" trust, in which all relationships are regarded as financial transactions. The so-called Confidence Man tests his victim's confidence and binds them with a financial contract. Invitations operate similarly of course.