

Dossier: Marina Vishmidt, 1976-2024

Crystal drills

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Ray Brassier

To reduce Marina to her accomplishments as a thinker feels reductive, aping capitalism's reduction of human life to a single measurable activity, just as it feels presumptuous to 'assess' Marina's achievements, like an inspector brandishing a checklist. Yet it is primarily as a thinker and teacher that Marina was renowned so what I want to do here is not pretend to assess but simply to express my sense of her extraordinariness in both these domains. I witnessed Marina's unwavering dedication to her students last year when, already gravely ill, she devoted as much time to preparing her next class as to the conference paper she was about to deliver. In an academic climate where teaching is depreciated while 'indicators of esteem' like conference presentations are inflated, Marina's refusal to put her own prestige ahead of her students' needs speaks volumes about her personal and political integrity. Although I never saw her teach, I imagine her classes were like her thinking: boldly comprehensive without being domineering; sharply incisive but never dismissive, in accordance with her uncommonly generous and typically expansive ethos. Yet Marina's thinking was as exacting as it was magnanimous. Her writing is uncompromising in tracking dialectical complexity, which is another way of describing the pursuit of truth. *Speculation as a Mode of Production* is an exceptional work whose full import, both political and philosophical, will be reckoned for years to come.¹ It twins art and value, aesthetic uselessness and socio-economic utility under the rubric of speculation, which governs the logic of aesthetic subtraction from economic

value as well as the valorisation of this subtraction. Speculation in this sense names the stage of capitalist production which commensurates useful exchange and useless inexchangeability. 'What happens', asks Marina, 'when both use and uselessness are sublated into the form of the speculative? Such an indistinction, as it obtains for labour and for art, can be held to be symptomatic of barriers to accumulation reached by the speculative mode of production, as well as the forms of antagonism that can arise from this impasse.'² Marina's determination to draw out the new modes of political antagonism arising from the metamorphoses of social contradiction is as typical of her as it should be exemplary for others. It made her matchless as a theorist but also somewhat exceptional among connoisseurs of *Wertkritik* too often content to chide activist 'naivety'. Yet there was nothing remotely naive about Marina's unwavering commitment to what she called 'antisystemic activism', in which antagonisms of race, class and gender are necessarily intertwined through the metamorphoses of value. Marina's political militancy was at one with her theoretical stringency. Complexity was not a license for equivocation, just as the inextricability of conceptual and political contradiction was no excuse for evading commitment. If she was dogged in pursuing dialectical truth, it is because she could detect the muffled pulse of liberation in even the most rebarbative theoretical or aesthetic works. At a moment when Israel's genocide of Palestinians has exposed the ignominious sophistry of certain proponents of *Wertkritik*, Marina's emphatic public solidarity with

Palestinian liberation was both inspiring and courageous, especially since she was teaching in Austria, a country where anti-Palestinian sentiment is perhaps even more virulent than Germany. It was Marina's fidelity to what is sometimes disparaged as 'historical materialism', the insistence that new forms of domination engender new possibilities of resistance, that let her see how changes in art's relation to capital are indissociable from mutations in capital's relation to labor. Once negativities like uselessness and inexchangeability become provinces of value accumulation, art can no longer be juxtaposed to capital as harbinger of non-identity. This makes it necessary to revise a longstanding Adornian consensus about art's negative relation to value:

If Adorno's negative dialectics of the social ontology of art presupposes instrumental reason and the monopoly of ratio (as exchange-value) as the regime of heteronomy that art, with its open-ended, future-figuring and material speculation was in principle opposed to, we now have to assess a situation in which the development of capital's value forms and value relations have captured much of this speculative energy, affirming processes which Adorno saw as antithetical to capital altogether.³

For Marina, this capture of art's speculative energy is misdiagnosed by institutional critique, which attributes it to private capital's grip on galleries and museums. But art's capture is not merely institutional, it occurs in the very production of subjectivity from whence social roles like that of artist, curator, or critic originate. Marina proposed 'infrastructural critique' as a corrective to critique which flatter art's fantasy of autonomy by ascribing its heteronomy to institutionalisation. She defines infrastructure as 'the spatial articulation of historically specific social relations which persists over time.'⁴ It is not just a set of objects – buildings, spaces, equipment, amenities, and the labour required to maintain them – but a system of social relations, distributed across space and stretching over time, embodied in the relations among these objects. The point of infrastructural critique is not simply to expose the nexus of relations involving exploitation and domination occluded by art as institution but to reveal the facticity of these social relations as that which enables the disruption as well as the maintenance of art's participation in capitalist production. This tension is the index of critical negativity proper to infrastructural critique, whose political import for Marina does not reside

in endless debates about protocols of representation but in antagonism waged from the standpoint of social transformation. As she puts it: 'infrastructure is both the basis for miserable and distorted life and the resource for very different types of co-ordination, along with the subjectivities that would struggle to realise them.'⁵

Beyond its import for aesthetic theory, *Speculation as a Mode of Production* also contains piercing insights into value theory. The commodification of abstract 'employability', beyond any specific modality of employment, turns the latency of unemployed but potentially employable labour-power into a new source of surplus-value. The potency of *Arbeitsvermögen*, labour-capacity, which for some Autonomist Marxists figures a creative capacity that transcends labour-power's use-value for commodity production, becomes just another commodified resource. With this shift, it is not just the actuality of labour that is exploited but its possibility:

We ... witness a change in the relationship between potentiality as the content of labour-power and labour as the substance of value. Potentiality takes on a different socio-economic standing altogether when 'employability' becomes a commodity with its own lucrative industry of government contracts, in a context where it is unclear whether it is the labour market or the welfare budget that is shrinking more rapidly. When work-readiness rather than work becomes both the carrot and the stick in the state management of expanding pools of the structurally unemployed, it is clear that speculative labour is not simply a way of emphasising the potentiality of non-realisation in all cases of labour-power sold for a wage, but the means for harvesting value from labour power which cannot find a buyer.⁶

Unemployment becomes a commodifiable resource at the point where the actuality of labour's unemployed potency falls under the aegis of value. The full ramifications of this remarkable insight have yet to be taken up and in this regard Marina's work has decisively influenced my own. Still more remarkable is the fact that a thinker so profound could also be so prolific: besides *Speculation as a Mode of Production*, Marina's collected works comprise several co-edited books, dozens of articles, chapters, and numerous miscellaneous interventions ranging over twenty-five years.⁷ Collaboration was a persistent feature of her work, showing how she was willing to contribute her exceptional power as a thinker to collective endeavours whose worth cannot be calculated by institu-

tional metrics.

I began by saying I would not try to assess Marina's achievements yet all I've spoken about is her work. But I also knew Marina, first when she was a graduate student and subsequently as an increasingly formidable theorist. I mention this because what is extraordinary in Marina's work derives from what was extraordinary about her person. She was luminously intelligent, deeply principled, and profoundly kind, by which I do not mean 'agreeable' but full of care for thinking and acting rightly. Of course, to highlight her virtues in this way is to abstract from her humour, her playfulness, her love of mischief and irony; everything which made her lovable rather than some stern incarnation of virtue (a suggestion which would surely make her laugh). To say that her loss is incalculable for those who knew and loved her is to resort to a necessary cliché. We are all diminished by her premature death. If she honoured friends with kindness,

she honoured readers with difficulty. She was too principled to court academic celebrity, yet her achievements – prematurely cut short – will outlast that of more feted contemporaries because they will stand as a common resource of intellectual wealth for years to come.

Notes

1. Marina Vishmidt, *Speculation as a Mode of Production: Forms of Value Subjectivity in Art and Capital* (Brill: Leiden and Boston, 2018).
2. Vishmidt, *Speculation*, 25.
3. Vishmidt, *Speculation*, 24.
4. Marina Vishmidt, 'Only as Self-Relating Negativity: Infrastructure and Critique', *Journal of Science and Technology of the Arts* 13:3 (2021), 15.
5. Vishmidt, 'Self-Relating', 20.
6. Vishmidt, *Speculation*, 20.
7. They have been made available online here: <https://on-vishmidt.memoryoftheworld.org/>.

