

Minor compositions

Marina Vishmidt's collaborations

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The spate of short essays published since Marina Vishmidt's passing have endeavoured to catalogue her major works: to summarise the immense, multifaceted contribution, only beginning to be digested, of her book *Speculation as a Mode of Production*, and to map the parameters of her theory of 'infrastructural critique' before the phrase is aerosolised in the ether of the art and academic milieu in which she trafficked, separated from the precision and utility embedded in her original articulation of the concept. As many have noted, Marina often shunned the standard markers of intellectual property common to the academic and art institutionalisation of thought in favour of a million partnerships, some easy to point to and others less so. Consider the countless exercises frequent within her life practice – informal crits, reading groups, summer camps, partnership with various small art institutions or formations, and heterogenous forms of organizing -- a grind as immaterial to her published record now as it is baked into how certain art worlds – between the UK, the EU and increasingly the U.S. – understand their bind with capital. Her fleshly, lifelong commitment to an intellectual commons was grounded in how she worked every day; it was equally philosophical and methodological. This latter point is especially important given that, in my view, there is a mundane gendered reason for the fact that although Marina's work shaped a particular art world configuration for the last decade, she has not been exalted to the extent of her male art theorist peers, even if she had begun more recently to receive the kind of institutional recognition her work demanded. This lag stems too from the way she operated, with an eye to the living ground of thought, to its genesis in common. Thus, a shorthand has developed to account for the numerous set-ups this commons took – that she was a writer, professor, mentor, organiser, critic, editor, programmer, etc, alongside and as fuel to her theoretical

production. What I want to address, with inevitable inadequacy, are some points of integral feedback between this praxis and her theoretical production.

The generative quality of this exchange can be understood under the awning of 'criticism', as she unraveled that term and as it traversed her academic, art institutional and organisational activity. In other words, I'm going to address Marina's impact on art. Surely art and its world(s) was the 'convenience store', as Kerstin Stakemeier recently put it, of her archive, a stop on the side of the road in her pursuit of articulating the terms of unfreedom and the possible paths of its contestation.¹ Yet art and its determinate contexts, which she catalogued casually, and with a singular precision, were frequent infrastructures, social and material, offering a certain autonomy of means for her writing. I am thinking here most immediately of the appearance of her thought in many smaller formats outside the larger book projects, as well as the discursive production that filled many an EU-funded cultural space. Another example would be the many – particularly female – writers, like myself, who Marina fortified, whose collective output has slowly integrated into art theory and criticism, how it's done, and what we expect it to do.² The impact of Marina's work in this sense isn't measurable, or perhaps might only be decades from now. Or we could insist that the immeasurability of all this 'minor' production is a feature of its structural relation to the world it created. As Marina summarised this recently:

the constitutive exception, whether it is reproductive labour in the home or the unquantifiable reproductive labour of the cultural worker or the serviceable artist: the 'under-labourer' who is the condition of possibility of the system's ability to reproduce itself as a whole, the 'work' that must disappear in order for 'the work' to appear, whether that work is the waged worker or the art installation.³



Marina Vishmidt at We are the Time Machines: Time and Tools for Commoning (WTM), Forum IV: Commoning Aesthetics, 12 March 2016, 14:00–18:00 at Casco HQ. Photo by Cee Bakker. Courtesy: Casco Art Institute: Working for the Commons.

As many have noted, Marina practiced what she theorised; this also entailed that her own ‘under-labour’, namely all the activity, from small format writing to organising, outside of her central oeuvre, fashioned the art system she circulated in. Provisionally, we can trace this in three guises. First, the historical effects propelled by her thought, trackable through institutional, and counter institutional, formations. Second, how Marina’s criticism enacted the kind of partnerships she forged in the rest of her life, writing with and alongside works of art in pursuit of more exacting social theory rather than as part of (or sometimes self-consciously pointing to) the processes of valorisation her work tracked at large. Finally, the way that – at a remove from art history and aesthetic theory – Marina’s writing renovated the artistic subject through capturing the terms of its relationship to the ‘automatic subject’ of capital, nullifying the possibility of perceiving this artistic subject in singular terms, despite the near complete disciplinary mandate to do so; how

the automatic subject of self-valorising value ‘shapes the activity of the practitioner’, or in other words, how social form in capital preconditions what the artist can begin to think, much less produce, changes the terms of writing – description, the question of assessment – on artworks.⁴

Marina was a key critical theorist of art after the 2008 financial crisis, who responded to but also expanded post-operaist theories of artistic labour by integrating theories of social reproduction. Social reproduction theory wasn’t an applied analytic but how she configured her overall practice, in the creation of the artistic realities she wrote about. There are the numerous artists organisations she shaped and was shaped by, perhaps most pertinently to what I’m arguing here is W.A.G.E. (Working Artists and the Greater Economy) which has reconfigured consciousness around artists’ labour and its institutional conditions, and arguably had a hand in the frameworks available to the last decade of museum strikes (such as the New Museum in 2019 and Tate United in 2020).⁵ As much

as she would reject the attribution of any singular influence, including her own, on a mass mobilization, or shift in labour consciousness, of cultural workers, she's not here to argue with me. The urgency of her intervention in these earlier years lay in the excavation of what happens after the popular recognition of art as work and what this entailed for theory, and particularly for organising around the determination of their interlinked value. It was inseparable from her own involvement in these emergent struggles that her criticism shaped how a contingent of artists understood the form, location and function of their labour in the greater economy, so to speak.

Marina's earliest stewardship of this subject – editing the volume *Immaterial Labour: Work, Research, and Art* (2003) and her writing for *Mute*, particularly the essay 'Precarious Straits' (2005), on issues resulting from the equation of art with precarious labour – predates the founding of W.A.G.E in 2008.⁶ Her seminal essay 'Situation Wanted: Something about Labour', condensing and departing from the mounting literature on art and labour, appeared in *Afterall* in 2008, the year of the crisis.⁷ She would be the first to say that many others also drew new linkages between art, labour and value in the fury surrounding the financial collapse. Indeed, the *Immaterial Labour* volume was a collaboration with Melanie Gilligan who would become a regular co-author over the course of the next decade. However, Marina's articulation of how art is a 'specialised niche' within the dynamic of real subsumption had a particular saliency, because it assessed the poles of art and value beyond the framework of the commodity and provided a necessary counterpoint to the limited organisational imagination for an artist's wage. Essays like 'Mimesis of the Hardened and Alienated: Social Practice as Business Model' (2013) narrated how art's logic of 'disruptive innovation', a process within capital's unabating incorporation of all that lies outside of it, explained not only the baldly 'threadbare and transparent' procedure of arts-led gentrification but the production of life-forms and activities shared between the vanguard outer lip (as one and the same threshold) of contemporary art practices and the technics of accumulation. In this essay, that was the entrepreneurial figure stationed at the heart of the surge in artist's social practice, 'distinguished by a pragmatism that appears subversive at first glance', against which she furnished a genealogy of that self-motivated character stretching from DIY 'small

ownership' culture in the Thatcher era through to NGOs and micro-finance.⁸ In turn, she consulted for W.A.G.E on policy regarding 'the value of non-monetary compensation' for artists, as well as the contract mechanism for deciding which activities are tied to the artists' fee, beyond the delivery of the discrete art object.⁹ She also relentlessly criticized the organisation, in many a board meeting or strategy summit, for its role in the socialization of art as abstract labour even as she pragmatically aided it at every turn. Her work thought with and in excess of the expected categories of artists' involvement in the economy – the question of the wage and the figure of the commodity. Instead, in demonstrating how contemporary art uniquely facilitates capital's evolving vanguard, she also located logics of solidarity for artists with those who labour on the non-valorised side of the reproductive border, particularly underpaid domestic workers such as those represented by groups like Italy's Chainworkers and San Precario Union and the National Domestic Workers Alliance in the U.S., founded in 2007.¹⁰

In true dialectical fashion, she wrote about consultants while serving as a clandestine one herself, critically informing several key feminist public art spaces as a board member and general touchstone, as funding for these types of institutions began to dwindle in the UK and EU.¹¹ Organisations like CASCO in Utrecht and the Showroom in London developed exhibitions on reproduction (as a body of theory and as a social reality in art histories) in consultation with her long before the art system's hazy discourse on 'care' appeared post-COVID.¹² How an analysis of reproduction – as undergirding value – has reconfigured art's politics cannot be overstated.¹³ It renovated the subject of the artist-worker, the sites and forms of what counts as her work, particularly the border between the art object and the life processes understood to be included in its production, and therefore the terms of both exchange and confrontation between artist and institution. Marina's work both cut through a masculinist art theory Left, caught in the intractable embrace of a Situationist-derived tactical imagination, and illuminated other histories that this version of an artist-subject-revolution couldn't apprehend. What does it mean that social reproduction theory and the history of Wages for Housework have broadly been art institutionalised? One measure is Silvia Federici's appearance

in both Documenta 13 (2012) and 15 (2022).¹⁴ What does that incorporation, which I am inferring was partly facilitated by Marina's thought, entail for what she called the 'value-form of artistic subjectivity', or in other words, what politics does it enable and what kind of foreclosure – what kind of institutional guardrails and preconceptions of activity or possibility – does it introduce to the materialist feminism it also invokes? We need Marina now to point towards how we, those still allied with art as a potentially pliable corner of financialised capitalism, 'win an autonomy with a general, socialized horizon.'¹⁵ Or in other words, how we pursue the extension of art's autonomy to its fullest imaginable realisation, 'to effect a more thoroughgoing transformation of social life and productive relations, one that would render autonomy specifically for art or culture redundant.'¹⁶

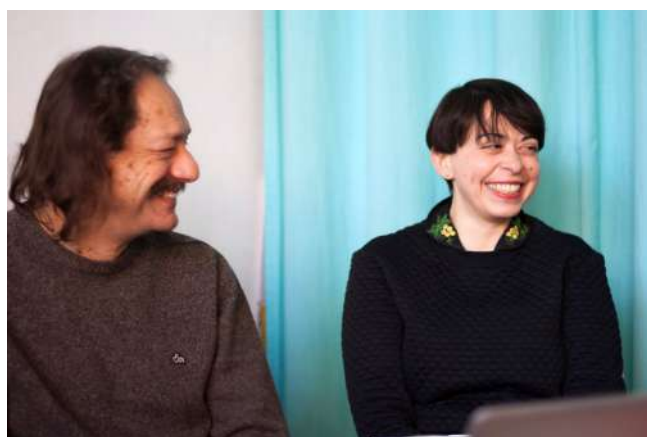


Photo by Cee Bakker. Courtesy: Casco Art Institute: Working for the Commons.

Marina's writing on and with art disenabled the embattled but still very much alive project of modernist criticism – to demarcate, to valorise – kept on life support by writing that furnishes the artwork with untold humanistic capacities, sustained by the laissez faire procedure of, as one example, the many critics who continue to write for *Artforum* despite the boycott of it in solidarity with Gaza. That the critical authority of art rests on a platform invested in genocide (perhaps an inevitability given the colonial underpinnings of aesthetic judgement) situates one such iteration, one narrative, of Marina's departure from 'criticism'. Instead, she utilised art within a larger project on the relations of value today, producing a form of writing about art that sought the demise of it and its present conditions; a seamstress of the negative

if there ever was one. What kind of value, then, did her writing in the field of art generate, if we think about 'criticism' as normatively directly productive of art's stature? Her work produced social, historical and specifically labour consciousness for artists; it also imagined tactical and organisational schema, and it functioned like the traditional broadside, albeit in a materialist lyrical form, to diagnose and build collective feeling toward action.

In 2009 for example she wrote of works by Melanie Gilligan ('Crisis in the Credit System') and Blaise Kirschner, artists with whom she would remain close, about how the 'opacity and argument' of their work deflected a reactionary curatorial melancholia around the crisis for the cultural sector created by the larger financial meltdown.¹⁷ Writing on Rosa Barba's exhibition at the Turner Contemporary in Margate, Marina read the artist's employment of film as a device of inherent repetition, as an 'engine' of production rather than a medium, through the work's inevitable participation in the culture-led regeneration of that city. What that reading entails for Barba's position is left relatively ambiguous, but perhaps resonant in the way her antique, 'tender devices break down easily', interrupting the unimpeded drive of the institution through their fragile form.¹⁸ She showed us how both Cameron Rowland and Grace Schwindt, two artists who at first seem unlike, grasp that 'medium-specificity has changed by now, now that the medium includes the market.'¹⁹ The phrasing links Rowland's manipulation of the real legal instruments of racialised property and Schwindt's furnishing of liberalism's embodied voice, to build the terms of an artistic posture between institution, artwork and market based on a relation rather than the standard markers of comparison (style, material, method).²⁰ Rather than a method, Marina identifies an artistic orientation to the space between the art object, its space of appearance and the market, in any given circumstance with any specified tools. In one of her last published art writings, an exchange with Claire Fontaine, she asked broad questions of their recent involvement in the Venice Biennale (2024), the reception of which is now cluttered with misguided treatises on the supposed dominance of 'identity' in contemporary art. Instead, Marina asked if their work 'sharpens antagonism' or 'provides resources' against the rise of a xenophobic far right (including Giorgia Meloni's government in Italy) beyond the inevitable limits of the exhibition's cosmo-

politanism. She used the situation of their practice to pose, not the problematic of ‘identity’ within the confines of an updated multiculturalism, but the potential of a “human strike” against the increasingly unlivable present.²¹

Marina’s materialist criticism also manifested through her lucid descriptions of the exhibition’s surrounds, placing artist and artwork in a wide and richly realised landscape. For example, she writes of the quality of the stone inlaid around the Turner Contemporary against the duller asphalt and iron otherwise used on walkways in Margate. She contrasts the lush curtains in Marres Contemporary Art Centre with the uncertainty of its institutional coffers. This is one way she lined the passage between art’s exception in capitalism and how that exception concretely appears in the social field. There are the artworks in question amid a set of curatorial decisions, but there are also all the tangible realities surrounding art in its realised state which exceed how the exhibition self-determines: the city it’s in and the coarse history of its present, the interior designer, administrators and city planners who furnished, organised and sign-posted the institution. Such details are one means by which Marina’s criticism refused to attribute any sense of singular agency to artist or artwork outside of their determination within the present relations of production and history. This is how she isolated what actual ‘determinate negations’, artistic gestures able to evince contradiction within capital, could achieve vis a vis an artwork’s contingent space of exception, a practical autonomy she hemmed tightly to the presiding details of possibility (whether the specificities of the institution or the discourse of ‘creativity’).²²

Most writing on art, whether variants of art history, criticism or aesthetic theory, contains an artist subject whose criticality manages to transcend even the dutiful plotting of his complicity within the immediate frame. It is worth briefly noting that where art history and its ancillaries can be easily dismissed, with the discipline’s evident roots in connoisseurship, the presumptive subject of aesthetic theory in the German tradition – ratified in Adorno’s thought, which *Speculation* departs from – is also one constitutively separated from labour, occupying an autonomous sphere from which it produces under alternate terms. Marina’s writing frayed this configuration by showing how contemporary capitalism rendered

all labour ‘creative’, seemingly incorporeal, and future leveraged, while also showing how, like the illusory but intractable realm of art’s state of exception, the value of speculative capital (in art or finance) is dependent on concrete labour. The level of abstraction she wielded in her writings served to place a fuller range of aesthetic subjects, including but not limited to artists, within the spectrum of analysis. One important aspect of this is how, with an indifferent negativity, it displaces the artist from the centre of aesthetic inquiry without removing her entirely. Her range of subjects includes the familiar homology between artist and entrepreneur, but also those at work in the inverted shadow of speculative production, such as those on right-to-work rolls, miming work to receive a welfare check.²³



Marina Vishmidt at Policy People 1, organised by E. C. Feiss and Karisa Senavitis, W139 Gallery, March 28, 2015. Photos Kym Ward.

I attempted to use Marina’s rendering of speculative value – that it describes art’s elastic appreciation as well as indebtedness or wagelessness – to describe a set of relationships (in 1961, at an earlier onset point of post-

Fordism) between an artist, his sculpture and the lumpen-proletariat around him. I don't think he consciously perceived the relation between his art and the surrounding unwaged population. Instead, I argue that this uneven economic landscape produced both him and his art, if not the sculpture's intimate formal elements, but certainly its available materials and the basis of its display. For example, his performance – as a “shopkeeper” in a gallery-cum-bodega – was isomorphic, to use a Marina word, with the kinds of welfare job play (as fake cashiers, gas attendants and servers in state-run establishments) these unemployed people were mandated to do. The art history journal that ultimately published it converted most of the argument into one where the artist maintained his interiority, if largely through a lapse to shared historical ‘context.’ The reviewers kept saying I had a subject-object problem – what was I arguing the artist was doing? Perhaps it was my own clumsy application, but this reception indicates how artistic authorship remains largely unassailable, fully insulated by its exceptional status. A more recent essay in the same journal uses Marina's work to argue that a certain artist ‘speculates’ or ‘speculated’, ironically collapsing an argument about class stratification into a descriptor of artistic innovation, but I imagine that was also a disciplinary conversion made through the pasta strainer of the review board. The focus in her writing ultimately never fell primarily on the artist's gesture, but rather on how an oblique view of it furnished a model for understanding contemporary modes of extraction as well as the ‘speculative and creative dimensions of antagonism.’²⁴ This is why criticism of *Speculation* for its lack of examples in artistic practice is banal and misguided – such case studies simply need collection from across her wider corpus, but art is also not really the point. I wonder whether, in some particularly heady corners of the later work, she began to offer ‘examples’ only through her graphic prose rather than external art objects.

Widespread mourning for her passing feels weighted, as Sven Lütticken recently put it, by the compounding of the loss with the deterioration of the Left's power more broadly.²⁵ The loss of Marina though is more specific to her role within that enfeebled Left, or, to put it another way, we feel the chasm of her departure at an increasingly frightening time. We lose her role as a narrator of and guide to our conditions; the loss of her abruptly

terminates, as she and Melissa Gordon once put it, the building of the collective ‘we’ that she wove so carefully with others.²⁶

Thanks to Danny Hayward, Kerstin Stakemeier and Avigail Moss

Notes

1. Kerstin Stakemeier, ‘Marina's Cues’, *eflux notes*, May 31 2024, <https://www.e-flux.com/notes/611821/marina-s-cues>.
2. Larne Abse-Gogarty expresses a similar sentiment in her obituary: ‘Marina Vishmidt 1976-2024’, *Art Monthly* 477 (June 2024): 24.
3. Marina Vishmidt, ‘The Aesthetic Subject and the Politics of Speculative Labour’, in *The Routledge Companion to Art and Politics*, ed. Randy Martin (London: Routledge, 2015), 30.
4. Marina Vishmidt, *Speculation as a Mode of Production* (Leiden: Brill, 2018), 6.
5. The dialectical relationship between Marina's thought and organising is beautifully catalogued in the obituary that precedes the archive of her work: <https://on-vishmidt.memoryoftheworld.org/marina-vishmidt/>.
6. Marina Vishmidt, and Melanie Gilligan, eds., *Immaterial Labour: Work, Research and Art. De- Dis- Ex Volume 5* (London: Black Dog Press, 2004); Marina Vishmidt, ‘Precarious Straits’, *Mute*, August 2, 2005, <https://www.metamute.org/editorial/articles/precarius-straits>.
7. Marina Vishmidt, ‘Situation Wanted: Something about Labour’, *Afterall: A Journal of Art, Context and Enquiry* 19 (October 2008), 20–34.
8. Marina Vishmidt, “‘Mimesis of the Hardened and Alienated’: Social Practice as Business Model”, *eflux journal* 43 (March 2013), <http://www.e-flux.com/journal/43/60197/mimesis-of-the-hardened-and-alienated-social-practice-as-business-model/>.
9. ‘W.A.G.E. Certification Development Materials’, W.A.G.E., <https://wageforwork.com/certificationdevelopmentmaterials#top>.
10. Marina writes about the Chainworkers and San Precario in ‘Precarious Straits’.
11. Other organisations included the Centre for Contemporary Art, Derry, CuratorLab, Konsfack, Stockholm, Marabouparken and Konsthall C, Stockholm, Arthur Boskamp-Stiftung/M.1, Hohenlockstedt, Germany.
12. *The Grand Domestic Revolution – User's Manual* (2009-2012), Casco – Office for Art, Design and Theory, Utrecht. Marina gave a the seminar for the Dutch Art Institute (Arnhem, NL) in the context of *User's Manual: The Grand*

Domestic Revolution on Feb 18, 2010. She published the essay 'Self-Negating Labour: A Spasmodic Chronology of Domestic Unwork' in Binna Choi and Maiko Tanaka, eds., *The Grand Domestic Revolution Goes on* (London; Utrecht: Bedford Press, Casco, 2010), 53–90.

13. Much of this theory was also co-written with Kerstin Stakemeier and Zoe Sutherland.

14. For example Documenta 13 (2012) published Silvia Federici's *Witch-Hunting, Past and Present, and the Fear of the Power of Women* as part of its 100 Notes-100 Thoughts publication series. Federici's work was included in the Commoning Curatorial and Artistic Education series in Documenta 15 (2022), see: <https://documenta-fifteen.de/en/calendar/commoning-curatorial-and-artistic-education-7/>. On this issue (of the discourse of the commons and issues of social reproduction in the institution of art), see Marina Vishmidt, 'All Shall Be Unicorns', *Open*, September 3, 2014, <https://www.onlineopen.org/all-shall-be-unicorns> and especially, Vishmidt, *The Manifestation of the Discourse of the Commons in the Field of Art*, KUNCI Study Forum and Collective, March 3, 2015, <https://www.kunci.or.id/ulasan/marina-vishmidt-commons-in-the-field-of-art/>.

15. Kerstin Stakemeier and Marina Vishmidt, *Reproducing Autonomy: Work, Money, Crisis and Contemporary Art* (London Berlin: Mute, 2016), 67–68.

16. Marina Vishmidt and Sven Lütticken, 'Genealogies of Autonomy', *eflux* 149 (November 2024), <https://www.e-flux.com/journal/149/637373/genealogies-of-autonomy/>.

17. Marina Vishmidt, 'I'M TOO SAD TO SELL YOU. On "The Avantgarde: Depression" at Marres Centre for Contemporary Culture, Maastricht', *Texte zur Kunst* online, December 3, 2009, <https://www.textezurkunst.de/en/articles/im-too-sad-sell-you-depression-marres-centre-conte/>. For more of Marina's writing on Blaise Kirschner, see "'Lights, Camera, Now-Time! Polly II: Plan for a Revolution in Docklands": Marina Vishmidt on a New Film by Anja Kirschner" (*Blaise Kirschner), *Mousse Magazine*, October 7 2024,

<https://www.moussemagazine.it/magazine/marina-vishmidt-kerstin-stakemeier-danny-hayward-blaise-kirschner-2024>.

18. Marina Vishmidt, 'A Rapid Inventory of the Universe: Marina Vishmidt on Rosa Barba at Turner Contemporary, Margate', *Texte zur Kunst* 90 (June 2013), <https://www.textezurkunst.de/en/90/vishmidt-barba-rapid-inventory-universe/>.

19. Marina Vishmidt, 'Fragile Prop in Constant Danger: On Some Motifs in Grace Schwindt's Works', in *Run a Home, Build a Town, Lead a Revolution. An Exhibition in Three Acts*, ed. Agar Ledo (Vigo: Fundación MARCO, 2017).

20. Vishmidt, 'Fragile Prop'; Vishmidt, 'On Cameron Rowland', *Artforum* 58:8 (April, 2020), 164–65.

21. Marina Vishmidt and Claire Fontaine, 'We Can Refuse to Abdicate in a Number of Ways', *Mousse Magazine*, April 3 2024, <https://www.moussemagazine.it/magazine/claire-fontaine-marina-vishmidt-2024>

22. The concept of determinate negation, from Adorno's *Negative Dialectics*, is one Marina frequently employed. For the 'creative subject', see Vishmidt, 'Precarious Straits' and Vishmidt, *Speculation*.

23. Vishmidt, *Speculation*, 10–11.

24. Marina Vishmidt and Andreas Petrossiants, 'Spaces of Speculation: Movement Politics in the Infrastructure', *Historical Materialism* (blog), November 14, 2020, <https://www.historicalmaterialism.org/spaces-of-speculation-movement-politics-in-the-infrastructure/>.

25. Sven Lütticken, 'Memories of Marina – Marina Vishmidt, 1976-2024', *Institute of Network Cultures*, <https://networkcultures.org/blog/2024/05/03/memories-of-marina-marina-vishmidt-1976-2024/>.

26. 'We not I' was a programme Gordon and Vishmidt ran between 2014-2015 and in which I participated along with many others. A related conversation between the two was published as 'From I to We', conversation with Melissa Gordon and editors, in *Politics of Study*, eds. Sidsel Meineche Hansen and Tom Vandeputte (London and Odense: Open Editions and Funen Art Academy, 2015), 103–112.