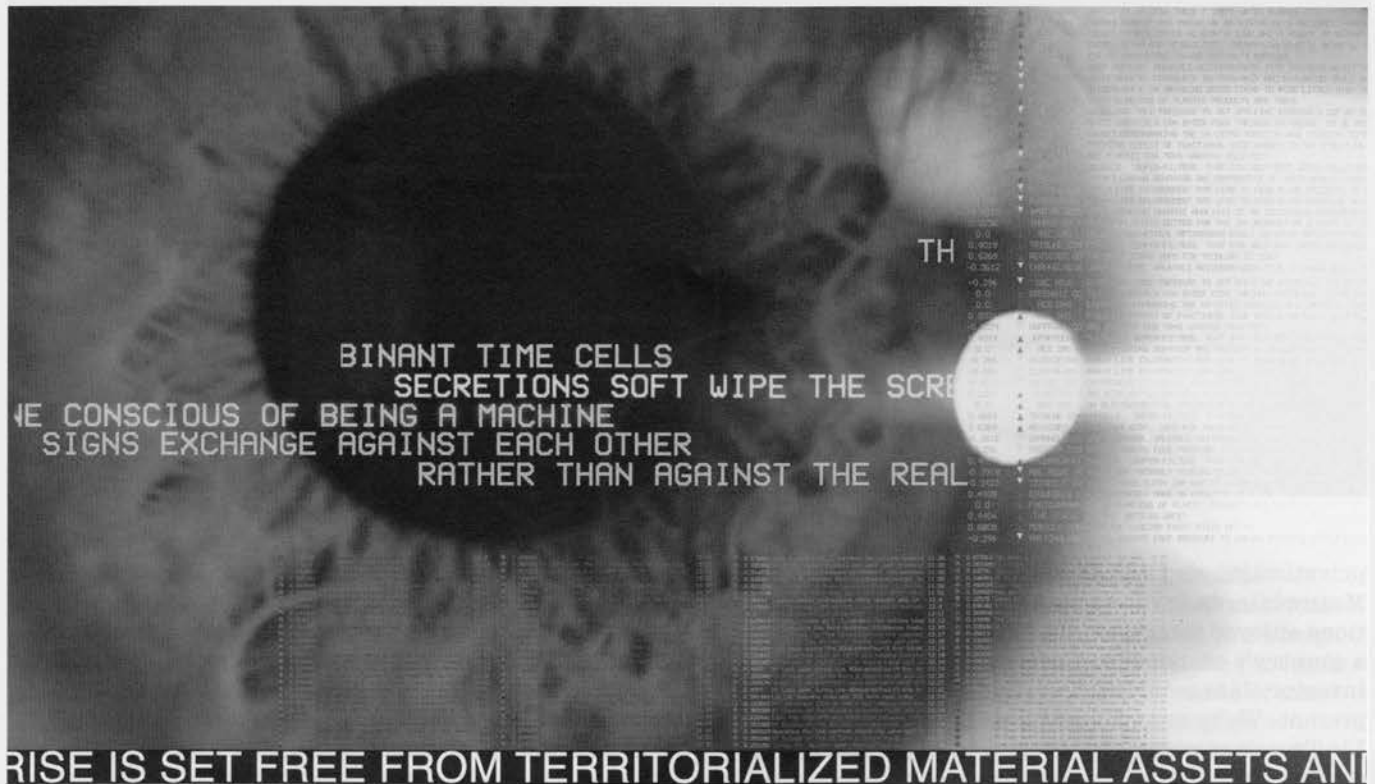


Reputation Regimes



Ami Clarke, *Lag Lag Lag*, 2019, video installation

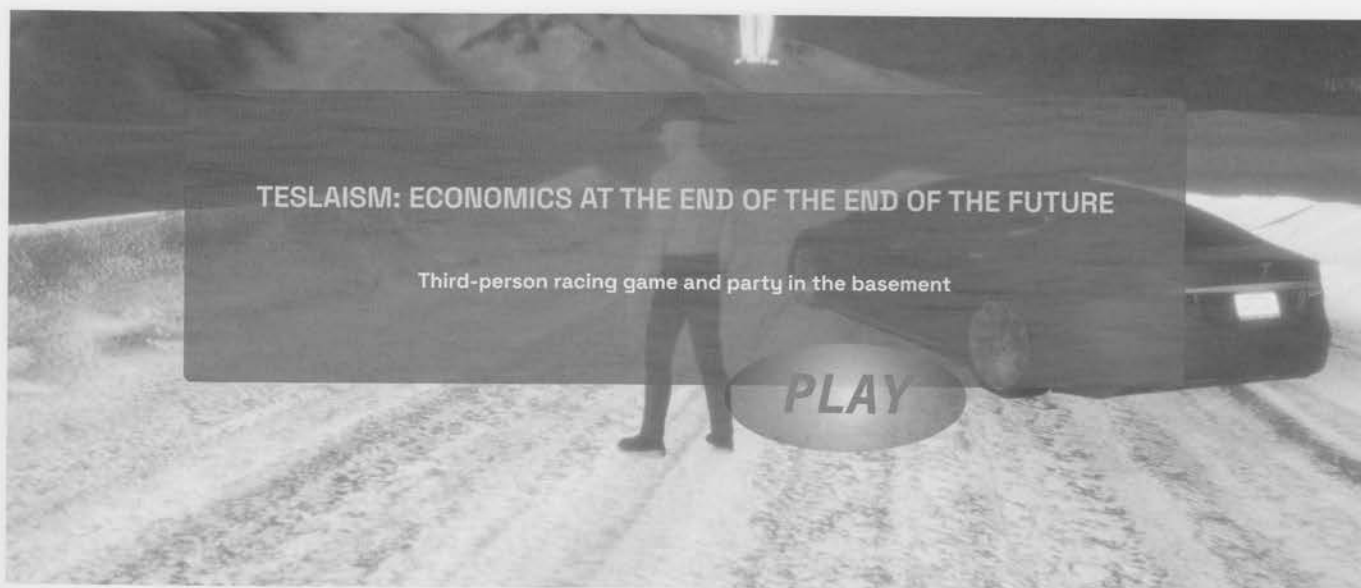
For Emily Rosamond, history shows that the internet is only the latest, albeit most powerful means of financialising information and disseminating disinformation, but that its very power and reach may also be its undoing.

It has long been said that financialised neoliberal capitalism has a troubled relationship with the future, indeed, that it is flatly destructive of the future. Years ago, Mark Fisher popularised the apt summation of this sentiment: 'It is easier to imagine the end of the world than the end of capitalism.' In the climate-crisis-ridden years since, this phrase seems more pertinent than ever. Yet, even as the climate emergency slowly cancels whatever might have been left of late-late-capitalism's future, the financial world constantly invents futures of its own. From projecting returns on investment to hedging financial portfolios, financialised capitalism is, as Ivan Ascher puts it, a mode of *prediction* as well as a mode of production. Even so, such predictions, as Joshua Ramey argues, are all too often little more than blank repetitions of the present, incapable of fathoming how radically different the future could be from that which is already known. The crisis of financialised neoliberal endgames is thus also a crisis of temporality: all too many projected futures flung in the face of not much future at all.

How do artists navigate these complex, conflicted capitalist temporalities? Recent works by three London-based artists – Ben Yau, Ami Clarke and Bahar Noorizadeh – take us into the neoliberal past, delve into the neoliberal present and project imagined neoliberal futures, respectively. In different ways, these artists draw attention to a valuation metalogic central to financialised temporality: reputation. Together, they trace the unexpected contours of what I will call the neoliberal reputation regime: a predominant logic of

evaluation that operationalises the 'general opinion' – a category that might sit alongside the Marxian 'general intellect' – as temporal construct, tool of power, choreographer of value micromovements and orchestrator of production rhythms.

Ben Yau's multimedia collage *The Spectre of a World Which Could Be Free*, 2019, looks back at a crucial moment in neoliberal history. Within two side-by-side frames, a set of reprinted vintage photographs, newspaper clippings and photocopied declassified documents convene against a grey background. Between them, the wavering red line of a stock market crash meanders haltingly, then dizzyingly downwards; in the next frame, it recovers upwards again. *The Spectre of a World* assembles viewpoints on a moment of singular importance to the neoliberal present: the CIA-backed Chilean coup of 11 September 1973, which ousted Marxist-socialist President Salvador Allende and installed General Augusto Pinochet as the country's brutal dictator (1973–90). Blood flowed abundantly during the brutal coup; but this was a multivalent violence, at once bureaucratic, economic and physical. The coup provided occasion for a pioneering, US-backed neoliberal experiment. The 'Chicago Boys', as they were known – Chilean students of the Chicago School of Economics' free-market-loving neoliberal trailblazer (and macroeconomics adviser to Margaret Thatcher) Milton Friedman – installed themselves alongside Pinochet as economic advisers. They implemented *El Ladrillo* – in English, 'The Brick' – straight away: it was an enormous policy document that swiftly imposed sweeping free-market reforms. 'The Brick' proved disastrous for most of the country's citizens; its rapid-fire deregulation unsettled markets and spiked inflation, leaving most people far poorer. The dispossession of indigenous Mapuche peoples reached fever pitch, via decrees that authorised the



Bahar Noorizadeh, *Teslaism: Economics after the end of the end of the future*, 2022, video

privatisation and sale of vast ancestral territories. Meanwhile, an investor class freed of market regulations enjoyed unprecedented profits. That tanking a country's economy can prove so profitable for an investor class seems all too salient a lesson for the present. We've recently watched UK prime minister Liz Truss's government attempt to wield a strikingly similar playbook which destabilised the economy and imposed 'reverse Robin Hood' policies solely benefitting the rich, and crashing the pound – leaving all to flounder, save the lucky few who can cash in on their newly boosted bonuses and wield the tools to capitalise on market volatility.

In Yau's assemblage, a 1964 photograph of fervent Allende supporters contrasts starkly with declassified CIA documents, describing how he was later to be undermined. Within the orbit of the faltering red line – the market's fall and rise – *The Spectre of a World* juxtaposes what was widely known of the Chilean political situation at the time with what was yet to be thoroughly evidenced: covert foreign support for the coup, most notably from the US. It was only in the early 2000s that the relevant CIA documents began to be declassified; similarly, 'The Brick' became public knowledge in 1992 after a Chicago Boys-affiliated think tank released it.

It is widely known that the Chicago Boys' brutal economic experiment began to set parameters for neoliberal playbooks in the years to come, well before Ronald Reagan and Thatcher implemented versions of Friedman's monetarist policies in the 1980s. Yet, despite featuring prominently in influential books such as Naomi Klein's *The Shock Doctrine* – which cemented the concept of 'disaster capitalism' in the public imagination – this part of neoliberalism's story is sometimes still strangely sidelined. I am surprised, at times, to find accounts of today's antidemocratic, authoritarian neoliberal turn that make so little of neoliberalism's authoritarian origins. Yau's piece is an invitation to look at this moment – a refrain, a score still central to the neoliberal playbook – not only as precedent-setting, but also as one that helped cement a conceptualisation of what I call the 'general opinion' as a tool of financial-political warfare.

To unpack this further, it is worth diving into one of the redacted documents to which Yau draws our attention. Admittedly, on first encounter, I felt

a slight resistance towards reading the declassified documents. Thinking, as I sometimes do, of Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick's powerful critique of paranoid reading (the desire to theorise as if it were merely a matter of revealing oppression's conspiratorial culprit, hidden somewhere in the wings), I wondered whether these documents would play too straightforwardly into an already well-worn paranoid reading of covert US foreign intervention – a fetishism of the 'covert operator', which sidelines the less dramatic forms of violence hidden in plain sight. And yet, the experience of engaging with these documents unfolds in quite unexpected ways. It is worth quoting one of the redacted documents at length:

'[Redacted], the Santiago Station's propaganda project, was renewed for FY 1974 for [redacted] on 4 April 1973. The project, which used a variety of propaganda mechanisms to inform the Chilean and foreign public of the Allende government's efforts to impose a Marxist totalitarian government, played a significant role in setting the stage for the military coup of 11 September 1973. Prior to the coup the project's media outlets maintained a steady barrage of anti-government criticism, exploiting every possible point of friction between the government and the democratic opposition, and emphasising the problems and conflicts which were developing between the government and the armed forces. Since the coup, these media outlets have supported the new military government. They have tried to present the Junta in the most positive light for the Chilean public and to assist foreign journalists in Chile to obtain facts about the logical situation.'

On the one hand, this document reads like Hannah Arendt's 'banality of evil' incarnate. Its dull, bureaucratic tone stands in chilling contrast to the violence it both perpetrates and describes. On the other hand, this redacted extract radically reorients narratives of the coup. In it, we hear, not 'The Brick', not the crash, not even the CIA as the story's main technocratic perpetrator – the decisive apparatus of its violence. We hear, instead, the history of the public relations industry, rerouted through the CIA. The PR industry has a known history of involvement in CIA-backed coups, even if this aspect of US imperialism is not often foregrounded. Take, for instance, Edward Bernays, one of the 'founding fathers' of public relations. From 1919, Bernays – Sigmund Freud's nephew –



Bahar Noorizadeh, *Teslaism: Economics after the end of the end of the future*, 2022, video

began applying his uncle's psychoanalytic principles to increasing sales of bacon, bananas, Ivory Soap, Dixie Cups and Lucky Strike cigarettes, amongst other products. He often favoured covert methods, subtly orchestrating third parties – from newspapers to physicians – to saturate the public sphere with his desired spin. He also worked with several political clients throughout his career. In 1954, via his work with the United Fruit Company (today's Chiquita) – which had lobbied the US to overthrow the Guatemalan government, after Guatemala curtailed the lax labour regulations from which the company had so richly profited – he orchestrated third-party messaging to help the CIA topple the democratically elected Guatemalan government. In Yau's work, we hear the Bernaysian approach to covert messaging cementing itself at the heart of the CIA. We hear the imbrication of corporate public relations and imperialist propaganda and a profound questioning of the histories and futures of the weaponised 'general opinion'. After all, today's so-called 'post-truth' moment (a term that, though galvanising, misleadingly implies that people have not had to weather mass disinformation campaigns before) might better be called a moment of mass online reputation warfare: a moment in which online reputation becomes an infinitely, ubiquitously tactical field.

In Ami Clarke's *Lag Lag Lag*, 2019, a composite configuration of eight screens, like an oversized financial trader's dashboard, flashes with moving images: computer cables, the vast iris of an eye, a scribbled equation, a rotating Bisphenol A (BPA) molecule animation. A breathless stream of theories of capital ticker across the bottom of the screen: 'molecular entanglements microplasticity absolutely everywhere optimising a state of life by maximising and extracting forces from aleatory events nothing but variables perpetually churning contingency no longer the writing of the future but an opportunity to game planetary equilibrium in a state of perpetual disaster

capitalism ... flowing through financial circuits as enterprise is set free from territorialised material assets and become signs ideas information knowledge and linguistic exchange compatible with the protocols of interfunctionality as competing fragments of time'.

Intermittently, something that at first glance resembles a stock market listing begins to layer over the pre-recorded montage of images. It is a multivalent, custom-built sentiment analysis system, which tracks several data streams; Clarke developed it in tandem with former derivatives trader Jennifer Elvidge and programmer Rob Prouse. Using Vader software, IBM Watson, Google Maps and Twitter API – and drawing from a range of data sets, including the Financial Times Stock Exchange (FTSE) 100 Index, Chicago Mercantile Exchange Weather Futures and locally sourced air pollution data – it performs live sentiment analysis of online news and social media mentions of the ubiquitous BPA pollutant, listing results on a spectrum between -1 and 1. It displays the emotion analysis via emojis alongside the Twitter feed in the bottom two monitors: fluctuating bars represent the intensity of sentiments in the online sources, from joy to fear, anger, disgust and sadness. It geolocates the tweets in question and displays hourly value rates.

Détourning the financial trader's tool of emotion detection, Clarke questions what it might look like if such tools were applied not to trades, but to the collectivised, semi-automated theorisation of the neoliberal present, as a self-coordinating mesh of interconnected molecule-data-language-value streams. Here, corporate reputations become choreographic devices, shifting financial decisions by the second. The installation's deep past – the metals mined to make the screens, the huge drift of sand Clarke has placed beneath the monitors, the BPA molecules – points towards a thick, posthuman present in which reputational, computational and chemical signals organise themselves into complex rhythms.

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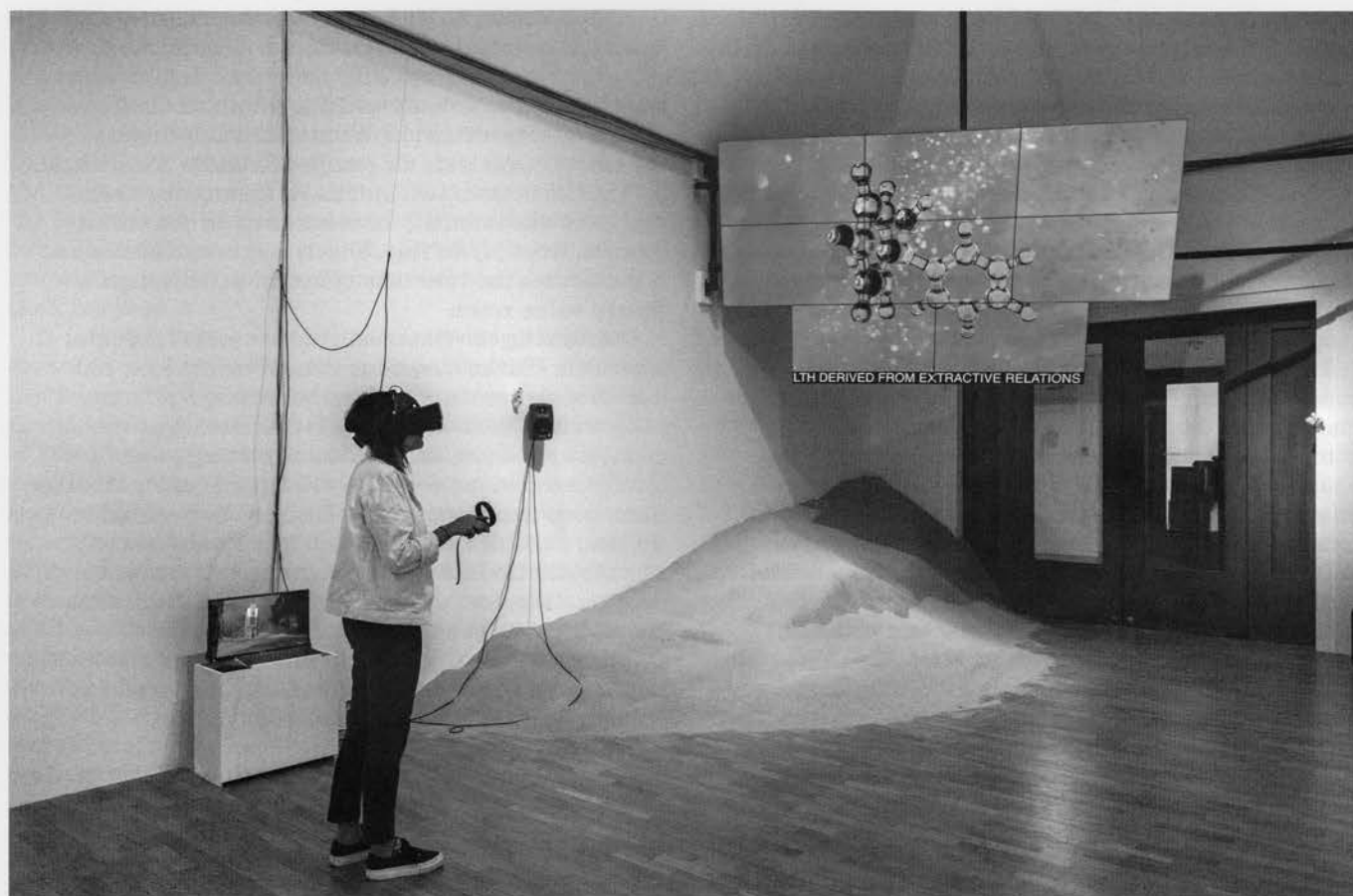
BPA is a pollutant that can jam the body's chemical signalling systems. It is a chemical widely used in plastic manufacturing, which is estimated to be present in over 90% of human bodies. Common exposure routes include food packaging, such as plastic bottles and the epoxy (or PVC) linings that prevent corrosion inside metal cans, or even water and air. BPA acts as a xenoestrogen – a chemical produced outside the body, which nonetheless has oestrogen-like effects within it. Once classified as safe, since 2010 there has been growing concern over BPA's impact on development, behaviour and mood, amongst other things; some research shows it can increase anxiety and depression.

As the philosopher of posthumanism Paul Preciado argued, the discovery of the hormone – as both chemical and concept – established the human body as a thick interiority, filled with 'semio-technical traffics'. An idea of the body as a complex signalling device, sending untold millions of electro-chemical messages, emerged alongside new telecommunication technologies – telegraph, radio, telephone, television – and established a confluence between the signalling body and the signalling technologies with which it lived. Clarke's data-molecular-value-language neoliberal theory-tale works within this confluence between signalling bodies and the signalling technologies with which they live. The xenoestrogen, which affects public sentiment, interfaces with the trading technology of sentiment analysis. Molecular materiality and data analysis converge; Clarke embraces the xenoestrogen as a tool for thinking at the interstices between human and nonhuman cognitive and correlative practices. *Lag Lag Lag's* bespoke, hyper-layered xeno-bio-signal system is a search for the minute, productive potentials in reputation signal-flows. What happens when, for instance, government environmental regulation fails,

but sentiment analysis reveals polluting companies losing their reputation, to the point where investors and insurance companies lose their taste for backing or underwriting them? If traders use sentiment analysis as a wealth-concentrating weapon, what would it mean to repurpose it as a tool for the public good? Clarke thinks of how semio-technical market signals might – however rarely – reveal the seeds of their own undoing, if we invent ways to inhabit the minutiae of this moment's market-reputation-rhythms: learning to see, sense, feel and act according to these posthuman choreographies of status and sentiment.

In a recently commissioned, 30-minute video-game-like video, *Teslaism: Economics after the end of the end of the future*, 2022, Bahar Noorizadeh explores neoliberal futurity in three parts. The pretext is 'Teslaism': a concept the artist describes as a mode of production succeeding post-Fordism, which embeds the concern with image and ever-fluctuating ratings into every stage of production, including the factory itself. Riffing off Tesla's new, futuristic production hubs, like the Gigafactory Berlin-Brandenberg, the video-fiction draws out the company's regressive, cyberpunk imaginary, which is mixed with futuristic, techno-solutionist jargon.

A quest unfolds across a futuristic animated landscape. Scene One: a car drives through a desolate, vaguely climate-apocalyptic animated landscape. Over this scene, text bubbles indicate that Elon Musk is heading to Tesla's annual shareholder meeting where he will be 'rebranding the future'. 'The CEO (or the president) here is a sort of DJ', the opening text reads, 'Weaving together one tweet, or one dance move after another. He creates a set of perpetually postponed and too-fabulous-to-be-fake stories to make time make power.' Musk tries out his speech on his assistant,



Ami Clarke, 'The Underlying', installation view, Whitechapel Gallery, London

Ami Clarke thinks of how semio-technical market signals could reveal the seeds of their own undoing, if we invent ways to inhabit the minutiae of this moment's market-reputation-rhythms: learning to see, sense, feel and act according to these posthuman choreographies of status and sentiment.

proudly reporting on helping climate refugees rather than 'producing the same old crappy car', declaring that Tesla wants to be 'part of the solution' and extolling the virtues of renting rather than owning a home, since 'possessions weigh you down'. In the newly rebranded Teslaworld, Musk declares, 'everyone is free to speculate on the value of their assets, be it their gender, their skin colour, or their house'.

Scene Two: a male figure in a white shirt, dark trousers and cowboy hat – who is called Elon but looks more like Jeff Bezos – stars in a 'third-person racing game and party in the basement'. He runs, jerkily, towards the 'Workplace Wreck Room' through a mostly desolate, red-skied, partially pixelated landscape. Tasks and helpful hints appear on the screen to help the imagined gamer. As Elon/Jeff runs through hillsides covered with waterlilies, a dialogue opens. 'Ask me anything,' he says. 'What is the sound of the social media buzz? The tweetrhythmic signals? What is the sound of a million likes all at once?' 'Ask me anything. *But not that.*'

Scene Three: it's the shareholder afterparty; but it's not a party. It's every bit as isolating as the other scenes. Layered digital landscapes and buildings fracture, distort and disintegrate against pulsing techno, interlaced with still images of people partying. A hallucinogenic distortion-fest of party/building/fragment.

Teslasm explores how reputation-rhythms enter into all manner of corporate activities. Its stories of reputation-inflected production are retold within the video game – usually considered a leisure pursuit. Yet, the game-space seems not to be one of pure leisure, but a site of production itself: part virtual, metaverse-like meeting-space; part dream-space where the unconscious consumer desires Bernays and others brought to light in the 20th century now saturate all stages of production; part expression of the desolate global endgame of CEOs gaming the entire world. Noorizadeh thinks of the CEO as a producer (of fast cars and tall

tales) whose wealth and power make it possible for him to generate productive fictions, and vice versa. She collages some of Musk's most curious attitudes and statements, which embody the complexities of this oligopolistic moment. Musk is the approachable, tech-solutionist 'bro' who shows his assistant his vulnerable side, while his intimidating authority hangs in the air. The world's richest man casting off property ownership. (Musk, indeed, once owned seven homes, but now rents a modest property.) Far from being a 'modest' gesture, this renunciation of the asset economy generates valuable headlines, and proves he doesn't need to depend on real estate inflation for his wealth, unlike the 'regular' rich. The weaponised benevolence of the CEO 'being part of the solution' when oligopoly is, itself, the problem.

Musk has been known for pulling strange publicity stunts. Most recently, he offered to buy Twitter and then withdrew the offer, claiming it was because Twitter had underreported the extent of its 'bot problems'. Immediately, commentators speculated that he may not have intended to buy Twitter at all: it might have all been a smokescreen to detract from Tesla's current problems (or, maybe they were wrong, but this, too, generates valuable headlines). Now he declares he is buying Twitter again, but only as a step towards creating X, his 'everything app'. The oligarch CEO, who wields reputation-changing stories like smokescreens, like squid ink covering social media tracks, is uniquely capable of generating financial value out of nothing but narrative (for instance, in the form of stock price fluctuations). Noorizadeh's video game fiction extends Yau's depiction of the neoliberal reputation regime into a future that seems like a darkly comic, blank repetition of the present. While Yau's declassified documents show the 'general opinion' wielded in a moment of struggle to establish a neoliberal order, Noorizadeh's depicts a foreclosed, exhausted world of oligarchic president-CEOs whose mannered reputation-games are the strange, mutant offspring of Bernays's foundational PR insights, spreading far beyond what used to be public relations to engulf production *tout court*. We can only hope that this prophecy turns out to be of the self-cancelling kind.

Emily Rosamond is senior lecturer in visual cultures at Goldsmiths, and associate editor of the academic journal *Finance and Society*. Her first book, *Reputation Warfare*, is forthcoming from Zone Books.



Ben Yau, *The Spectre of a World Which Could Be Free*, 2019, installation detail

Cover

Leila Hekmat, *Female Remedy*; Shirley, 2022



Features

- 1 **Reputation Regimes**
Emily Rosamond argues that the internet's power to financialise information might be its undoing
- 6 **Art/Other**
Mark Prince questions the limits and gains made in operating outside an artistic discipline or medium

Profile

- 12 **Leila Hekmat**
Mimi Howard

News & Comment

- 14 **Editorial**
- 15 **Letter**
Pierre d'Alancaise
- Artnotes**
- 20 **Obituaries**
Conrad Atkinson 1940-2022
Brian Catling 1948-2022

Reviews

Exhibitions

- 23 **Manifesta 14**
Juliet Jacques
- 24 **Simeon Barclay:**
In the Name of the Father
Amie Corry



- 25 **The Double: Identity and Difference in Art Since 1900**
Richard A Kaye
- 27 **From the Volcano to the Sea: Part II - The Feminist Group Le Nemesiache in 1970s and 1980s Naples**
Lucia Farinati
- 28 **Adeela Suleman:**
Allegory of War
Virginia Whiles
- 29 **Huw Lemmey with Onyeka Igwe: Ungentle**
Francis Whorral-Campbell
- Dani and Sheilah ReStack:**
Cuts in the Day
Cherry Smyth
- 30 **Bianca Hlywa: Residual Yeast**
Chris Fite-Wassilak
- 31 **SERAFINE1369: We can no longer deny ourselves**
Rosalie Doubal

Books

- 32 **Jonathan Crary: Scorched Earth - Beyond the Digital Age to a Post-Capital World**
Marcus Verhagen
- 33 **Nicholas Gamso:**
Art after Liberalism
Thomas J Watson
- 34 **Black Film British Cinema II**
Harvey Dimond
- 35 **Women for Peace: Banners from Greenham Common**
George Vasey

Film

- 36 **Marcus Coates: The Directors**
Maria Walsh
- 37 **Tom Dream: Shy Radicals**
Natalie Bradbury
- 38 **Rosa-Johan Uddoh:**
Cultural Field
Onyeka Igwe:
The Miracle on George Green
Tom Hastings

Reports

- 39 **Fair Enough?**
Susan Jones
- 42 **Letter from Bor**
Toby Üpson
- 44 **Artlaw**
On Freedom to Protest
Henry Lydiate
- 46 **Listings**

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