Maaike Lauwaert & Francien van Westrenen (eds.)

Facing Value

Radical perspectives from the arts

1. Be unproductive
2. Hesitate and question
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6. Embrace the void
Artist Navid Nuur is part of a generation of artists for whom the realization and distribution of their work takes on completely new forms: singular authorship is no longer important, the audience is part of every process and the process of making art is opened up to the viewer. Nuur and other artists like him mix very diverse techniques, materials, disciplines, knowledge and crafts. In distributing their work, they let go of traditional concepts of authorship or the individual. Nuur's open and generous practice centres on objects that, very much like the works of Krijn Giezen, have on the one side value as art objects but on the other side are also practical tools that are useful in bringing his ideas and vision to his audience. Nuur's work navigates between the deceptively simple and the conceptually unfathomable. The work is playful and accessible but at the same time very much aware of changes taking place in society and culture.

Nuur consciously plays with the value of his works by reproducing them, for example, or by giving people manuals to make the works themselves at home. Walter Benjamin famously wrote about the mechanical reproduction of art and the loss of aura that occurs within that process of multiplication:

Even the most perfect reproduction of a work of art is lacking in one element: its presence in time and space, its unique existence at the place where it happens to be.

Reproduced artworks, in other words, are distanced from that seismic moment in time of their creation. With the loss of aura that hence occurs, the 'unique value of the "authentic" work
of art’ disappears, and that unique value ‘has its basis in ritual’ where the ‘original use value’ of art is located.

Nuur, like many other artists who consciously tamper with the logic of aura, value and use, creates new rituals around his artworks. These rituals involve the public, his audience, in very precise ways. In every sense, an artist such as Nuur is looking for and creating a new aura that may not be connected to the exact moment and location of a unique artwork’s creation, but is far more contextual, embracing people, materials, circumstances and a complex network of connotations.

Nuur created a traveling exhibition and illustrated catalogue with the telling title The Value of Void. In this body of works, he expands on the notion of so-called ‘intermodules’: objects, thoughts, gestures and ideas that together generate a sphere existing between the material and the immaterial, the concrete and the abstract, between mind and body, between the tangible and the emotional. This in-between is the void mentioned in the title of his exhibition and book. In one of the works, Another window in my studio... (2008-2009), we see the artist himself stepping into a painted black hole, dripping with sticky crude oil wetness. He disappears in the void that he himself created. The work seems to suggest that there is something there in the void, it is not just empty space, a wasteland between two things we have separated to make them easier to understand and deal with. The void has substance, meaning and can be addressed and understood, you can walk into it and get lost in it. The void is therefore not feared but rather embraced and becomes the focus of the work and the object of consideration. What exists between the material and the immaterial? What happens between these two categories?

In another of Nuur’s works, Vein of Venus II (2008-2009), ice lollies are placed one by one on an overhead projector. The lamp of the projector slowly turns the frozen substance into a colourful liquid and projects the growing shape of that puddle onto the wall. The material, the ice lolly in this case, is literally turned into something immaterial as the puddle evaporates into thin air. Between those two states of existence, there is a void, claims Nuur. A void that fascinates him, that he wants to explore and show us. In case of the ice pops, what he shows us is the extreme beauty, poetics and plasticity of this void. The suggestion might be loss, loss of material, of substance, of usefulness and value. But the opposite is true. We gain, we win, we are enriched and enchanted. The void has value.

In an essay on the importance of the unknown and the hypothetical, German philosopher Hans-Christian Dany writes:

What is at stake is opening oneself up to the idea that there is something beyond the thinkable. Even if man is not capable of thinking this something, he can incorporate it hypothetically, as a blind spot that remains blind, embarking on the adventure of a speculative love of the unthinkable in order to leave the confines of his thought and its limited relation to people and things.
which can also be a source of pleasure’. Nuur’s work Another window in my studio... is a very fitting image here: the black hole in the wall is another kind of window in his studio. You can choose to step through it, into the unknown void behind.

But it is an important exercise and goal if we want to free up mental space for the not yet known, the hard to define and new futures.” As Dany writes, ‘The connection with the unknown creates the constant and necessary unleashing and liberation’ so that ‘spheres open up in which visions of the future are possible again.

What we need for this ‘journey into the unknown’, says Dany, is a ‘suitcase’ containing ‘imaginary shoes for walking on hypothetical paths’. These shoes will make the transition possible. Art, he asserts, plays a pivotal role in embracing the unthinkable: ‘Art can serve as a testing ground for such experimental situations at the edge of the void, ... a site for testing transgressions of the limits of thought.’

The aim of such journeys into the unknown, the void, is not to discard language and thought, Dany stresses, but to become ‘conscious that something exists beyond the horizon of our perception which must be endured as an unthinkable, darkened thing-that-remains, but
Valparaíso School, Hospedería de los diseños, 1989

Ghost house, Chicago, 2007