# Towards a Politics of Emergence: Posthuman Agencies and Speculative Pragmatism in Artistic Practice

# Abstract

This paper seeks to present a way of thinking (speculative) and doing (pragmatic) within contemporary cultural economies for artists and practitioners working between art and technology. Working with technology, suggests and embodied practice with tools, but also collaborative networks with people with diverse skillsets. Artworks often emphasize the process over the finished product and are time-based and experiential in form. This conception of art focuses on *practices* rather than finite objects that can be bought and sold. To reconsider the cultural economies of the art market around share processes of making and staging artworks, challenges notions of self-interested individualism in neoclassical economics and modernist regimes of the art market that valorize individual authorship and original art objects. Through a revision of notions of “agency” in economics through Karen Barad’s agential realism, this paper approaches an understanding of speculative pragmatism as practice that engages immanently in the world. This approach is briefly demonstrated through a description of my own work developing MetaObjects, a studio facilitating digital production with artists and cultural institutions, which presents a way of reformulating conceptions of artistic practice in contrast to values and conceptions in promoting artists and objects in the art market and creative economy.

Keywords: Posthuman Agencies, Speculative Pragmatism, Artistic Practice, Art and Technology

# Introduction

This paper seeks to present a way of thinking (speculative) and doing (pragmatic) within contemporary cultural economies for artists and practitioners working between art and technology. Working with technology suggests an embodied practice with tools, but also collaborative networks with people with diverse skill sets. Artworks [made in such a process] often emphasize the process over the finished product and are time-based and experiential in form. This conception of art focuses on *practices* rather than finite objects that can be bought and sold. Reconsidering the cultural economies of the art market around shared processes of making and staging artworks challenges notions of self-interested individualism in neoclassical economics and modernist regimes of the art market that valorize individual authorship and original art objects.

To emphasize *artistic practices* rather than *artworks* as objects, is to acknowledge a processual and relational conception of art. Art and technology in this sense supports open-ended, dynamic and collaborative processes that take into consideration the contexts and relationships which enable artworks to exist as part of the work itself. These relationships include all those involved in the creation of works from curators, technicians, administrators, project managers, artists, musicians, performers, and participants/audience members. Rather than centrally focusing the cultural economy around artists and artworks is to consider artistic practices as shared events, knowledge and experiences where everyone can participate in the process. An engagement in the cultural field is performative and open to constant renegotiation, opening up to reconfigurations of art, artists, organization/collectives could become in reflection of their roles in society. Shifting away from goal-oriented forms of thinking, an emergent practice does not begin with a predefined concept but allows for possibilities to emerge through a collective process of thinking-doing. To an extent, the hegemonic logic of the art market and industry blinds us from recognizing the possibilities for art in society. In this sense, an *ecological* perspective allows us to consider our relational embeddedness in communities and contexts to allow us to attune to the people and things around us and to sensitize to the potentialities emerging in our environment in order to nurture diverse futures.

A situated, embodied and experimental approach suggests moving away from grand narratives of the “Creative Economy” (Hartley, Wen, and Siling 2016) to understand the possibilities within a particular social, technological and economic environment. The creative economy as the global paradigm in cultural policy places great emphasis on culture, creativity and technological innovation. Neoliberalism accelerates the development of technology, reshaping our social and material universe at scales and speeds that are becoming increasingly difficult to comprehend. Artists and practitioners are often situated at the whims of market forces to participate in economies that emphasize innovation, competition and fame. However, to reorient ourselves in relationship to policy discourses is to understand artistic practices as shared processes that have the potential to exceed economic logics of profit and growth. A new logic and language for understanding art as shared practices and knowledge resists individual ownership of objects and ideas, where artistic practices require collective contribution in order to exist as social and material events.

# Posthuman Agencies

To shift an understanding away from the artist as genius at the center of the cultural economy is to reformulate an understanding of agency as not derived from individuals, but situations and events involving material and discursive processes.

In today’s economy, the notion of the self and brand identity becomes central to building one’s profile and career as an artist or creative. This self-interestedness has become normalized with social media and online platforms which allow anyone to promote and sell their works and building their own audiences. Political theorist Wendy Brown describes the economization of subjects by a neoliberal rationality as a process wherein financialization as a calculative logic is no longer reserved to banks or corporations but can be applied to individuals as entrepreneurs or firms themselves (Brown 2015, 34). The blurring between individuals and corporate entities becomes apparent, particularly as corporations are given legal rights and designation as a person. This definition has become particularly relevant in today’s start-up economies of innovation, where individual freelancers become sole proprietors as corporate entities themselves. Lois McNay describes the concept of “self as enterprise” as the marketization of social relations, where individuals are “encouraged to view their lives and identities as a type of enterprise, understood as a relation to the self based ultimately on a notion of incontestable economic interest.” (2009, 56). All aspects of one’s life and identity become part of an economization process, particularly social media, as one’s network and profile may determine one’s future ability to get jobs The logic of self-interestedness can appear to pervade all aspects of contemporary life. However, the idealized purely market-oriented businessman often becomes a strawman for criticism.

This understanding of the self-interested individual can be traced back to the notion of *homo economicus*[[1]](#footnote-2) as the ideal figure of the economic man emerged in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries amidst the beginning of the Industrial Revolution, particularly through writings of political economist, John Stuart Mill. The concept places human agency at the center of the economy, where the rational and self-interested ensure a functioning capitalist society (Mill 1884). Often conceived as male, *homo economicus* is a figure in patriarchal societies considered as the “breadwinner” working to maintain a family and household. Whereas in contrast to Western capitalism which emphasizes individualism, collectivist societies emphasize one’s role in society placing interests of the family and social group ahead of the individual. For instance, in Chinese Confucianism, there is an emphasis on maintaining harmony, filial piety and loyalty over individual interests.

Science and Technology Studies (STS) seeks to decenter the individual into networks of human and nonhuman actors. STS scholar Michel Callon, in the book *The* *Laws of the Markets* (1998), questions the role of economics as a discipline wherein theories of the market contribute to the making of markets. Callon presents a notion of economics that is not dominated by economic theorists, but as knowledge generated by practitioners and in collaboration with social scientists. Rather than critiquing economics, Callon takes a more balanced approach in considering diverse practices within a sociotechnical process. Callon also posits *homo economicus* as a part of his stance that markets consist of different “more-than-human” processes. His notion of the “performativity of economics” refers to how markets are constituted in practice, where “calculative and non-calculative *agencements* are mutually interwoven.” (2006, 47) The French term, *agencements,* is understood to connote agency as a collective becoming of sociotechnical agents in a dynamic process. Rather than a clear divide between economic value and moral values, those categories begin to converge where markets are performative assemblages of humans and non-humans, and/or where humans are not purely defined as self-interested individuals.

To view economics as performative is to understand that “performativity goes beyond human minds and deploys all the materialities comprising the sociotechnical *agencements* that constitute the world in which these agents are plunged: performativity leaves open the possibility of events that might refute, or even happen independently of, what humans believe or think.” (2006, 17) Agency emerges as an effect of *agencements,* as a particular arrangement of the world. Callon’s work begins to erode the separation between humans and nonhumans in the notion of performativity. He understands how practices can alter and change discourses in their performativity, but places emphasis on economics as a field of human knowledge that mediates interaction. Humans and technologies remain as pre-existing entities prior to their interaction.

In contrast, Karen Barad’s notion of post-human performativity incorporates discourse into a more complex process of *mattering,* where humans and nonhumans do not pre-exist but are instead constituted in the process of becoming. Human agency is dissolved into a broader and more complex nexus of processes in which the human is only one part. Barad’s perspective extends notions of performativity to not only humans and their bodies, but to “a host of material-discursive forces—including ones that get labeled ‘social,’ ‘cultural,’ ‘psychic,’ ‘economic,’ ‘natural,’ ‘physical,’ ‘biological,’ ‘geopolitical,’ and ‘geological’—that may be important to particular (entangled) processes of materialization.” (2003, 810) This view brings humans and their social and cultural processes together with and materials like technologies and physical structures as part of the formation of life. Agency, when considering the performativity of practice, is not something that belongs only to humans. Whereas *homo economicus* assumes a self-interested and rational individual, post-humanism decentralizes the human subject to re-situate agency as a process of intra-activity of entities. Agency does not belong to individual subjects, Barad contends, but is embedded within a set of diverse processes:

Agency is the enactment of iterative changes to particular practices through the dynamics of intra-activity. Agency is about the possibilities and accountability entailed in reconfiguring material-discursive apparatuses of bodily production, including the boundary articulations and exclusions that are marked by those practices in the enactment of a causal structure. Particular possibilities for acting exist at every moment, and these changing possibilities entail a responsibility to intervene in the world’s becoming, to contest and rework what matters and what is excluded from mattering. (2003, 827)

For Barad, *intra-action* differs from interaction, since the latter term assumes prior existence of entities in a relational ontology. Barad’s approach is nonrepresentational,[[2]](#footnote-3) de-centering the human and making room for complex co-constitutive intra-actions among humans and nonhumans. Sarah Whatmore uses the term “more-than-human” to describe the “co-fabrication of socio-material worlds,” (2006, 603) removing the centrality of the human subject acting upon the world. It is through practice that humans and technology enact or constitute each other where they are always already in relation. Barad explains:

Parts of the world are always intra-acting with other parts of the world, and it is through specific intra-actions that a differential sense of being–with boundaries, properties, cause, and effect–is enacted in the ongoing ebb and flow of agency. There are no preexisting, separately determinate entities called "humans" that are either detached spectators or necessary components of all intra-actions. Rather, to the extent that "humans" emerge as having a role to play in the constitution of specific phenomena, they do so as part of the larger material configuration, or rather the ongoing reconfiguring, of the world. (2007, 338)

The social and material are always entangled where and when meaning and knowledge emerges from intra-actions of humans and nonhumans. It is through this emergent practice of intra-acting entities that we understand the economies of art and technology as consisting of the entangling of the material and discursive practices in a “flow of agency” which acknowledges the world as constantly being in flux. This temporal, immanent and embodied study of economies is a process in which we are entangled and thus partially responsible. Agency is no longer of human intention; rather, it is constantly being enacted and re-enacted as a dynamic process of developing a practice. Barad’s intra-activity of social and material entanglements, describes a process of mutual co-constitution of humans and technics, as well as humans and society, which is not pre-determined and always in process. It is viewed as a co-emergence of humans and nonhumans within time and frees economics from rigid study as pure calculation, or with a preconceived view of the world, a view shared by the Pragmatists.

To reorient an understanding of artistic process not around individual authors, but rather collective agencies in our entanglements with humans and technology, it presents an understanding of cultural economies as complex dynamic systems of intra-activity, where artworks are an effect of our collective actions. No individual is responsible, where ideas also do not derive from a single origin, but a shared process of discovery. Rather than congregating around artworks and artists at the center of the cultural economy is consider artistic practices as on-going engagements around shared ideas, knowledge, materials and practices that constitute the work. Considering artworks as projects that evolve with every iteration as collective endeavor allows artworks to exist beyond the control of a single creator. Iterations of the work can be practiced and developed into new directions by different participants.

# Speculative Pragmatism (Thinking-Doing)

To resist goal-oriented forms of thinking, is to engage in an experimental process that is open-ended and speculative and responsive to a situated environment rather than planned. The cultural economy in institutional practice, for example with grant funding, requires clear proposals and outcomes with KPIs including audience numbers, revenue in order to mitigate risks and justify budgets. Such bureaucratic requirements limit artworks to outputs rather than engaging an on-going process of engagement and exploration of the unknown. Refocusing practice around research and development, for instance, rather than project outputs, allows ideas to evolve through an on-going process. This open-ended approach follows in line with Pragmatism, a philosophical movement that emerged in the late 1800s, led by Charles Sanders Peirce, William James, and John Dewey.

Pragmatists sought to bring together the divide between subject/object and mind/body, proposing that human experience is a combination of both thoughts and sense perceptions of events as temporal processes. It favors knowledge drawn from experience (Dewey 1958) as an *a posteriori* (as opposed to an *a priori*)understanding of the world. Plato and Aristotle first created a distinction between a theory of the mind as a deductive *a priori* thinking, which is in opposition to inductive, practical, *a posteriori “*thinking of the body” favored by the pragmatists and empiricists. While pragmatism emphasizes *a posteriori* ways of knowing through experience and sensation, it allows that both faculties operate together in a process of thinking-feeling. Pragmatism, privileges knowledge not drawn from pre-existing concepts, but rather through experiences of a phenomenon. Within pragmatism, Peirce’s notion of abductive reasoning involves a process of discovery (Burks 1946). Pragmatists prioritize experience and sensation over rational thought; although thinking does take place in a relational process, it can’t be fully understood until after an experience.

Speculative reason for René Descartes maintained a dualism of the mind-body, placing centrality on thinking and human cognition with the phrase “I think, therefore I am” (*cogito, ergo sum*), where the external world exists *for* us. In Didier Debaise’s speculative empiricism, mind and body are not mutually exclusive, but rather are entwined in a dual process of thinking-feeling. Speculation is a mode of thinking which “aims at something ‘beyond’ the critical and linguistic turns. As such, it recuperates the pre-critical sense of ‘speculation’ as a concern with the Absolute, while also taking into account the undeniable progress that is due to the labor of critique.” (Bryant, Srnicek, and Harman 2011, 3) In contrast to the original conceptualization of speculation as a theorization of the mind as an entity independent from the body, Alfred Whitehead’s speculative philosophy creates a link between empiricism and rationality through the notion of interpretation. (Diprose 2017, 40) Whitehead suggests the world is open to interpretation as an on-going process of experience. James’ radical empiricism takes experience as its starting point, where there is no *a priori* knowledge, yet knowledge is gained in the process of a simultaneous process of thinking, interpreting, and experiencing. That which comes to matter and acquires meaning is determined through a process of interpretation and selection. For Whitehead, what is made important should also align with ethical principles, as this act brings ideas and their potential consequences into being. (Debaise and Stengers 2017, 17) At the same time, to think is to bring awareness of what is possible to the creative process of interpretation as an abstraction of reality through concepts (which themselves must also dynamically change). Brian Massumi elaborates: “We find ourselves “invested” in the world’s running through our lives because at every conscious moment our participation in it has just come to us newly enacted, already and again, defying disbelief with the unrefusable feeling of a life’s momentum. The “speculation” is the thinking-feeling of our active implication in the ever-rolling-on in the world to really-next effects.” (2011, 37) Here, pragmatism and speculation are brought in line.

Whitehead introduces to radical empiricism a method of inventing abstractions and techniques for the interpretation of experience. (Debaise 2017, 167) These abstractions as concepts become versatile tools. Stengers calls these concepts-as-tools *speculative gestures*, able to be interpreted and applied differently in various situations, and perhaps transforming the concept itself in the process. (Doucet and Frichot 2018) Concepts take different meanings in different situations, which are always contingent on their milieu. To remain sensitive to the emerging possibilities in a changing environment is to potentially define what is subjectively important and can encourage responsibility for the consequences of one’s thoughts and actions.

Through this understanding of practice as an on-going process of thinking and feeling, reality can be conceived as an on-going flow within time. Bringing together practice and theory becomes a means of developing tools for thought, but also creates opportunities for action, in which knowledge is drawn from engagement with the world–an approach aligned with Whitehead’s notion that “relational, heterogeneous and emergent entities” (Halewood and Michael 2008) endure as actual occasions of experience. Rather than limiting thought to dialectical modes of critique, this approach is open-ended and constantly re-configuring in practice. Pragmatism and process philosophy understand the world beyond a separation of subject and object. These ontological considerations of emergence allow for a conceptualization of artistic practices as fluid and relational entities. Speculative pragmatism seeks to reconcile the divide between mind and body, while within the philosophy of science, there are analogous efforts to reconcile nature and culture, humans and machines, and form and matter.

Speculative thinking presents an opening to possibilities in the future. Speculation is conceived in multiple ways: within finance as a calculative logic with a preemption of the future as a means to manage risks (Savransky, Wilkie, and Rosengarten 2017, 6); as speculation of the mind in the Whiteheadian sense, beyond a division of subject and object, and always in process in relation to the material world (Diprose 2017, 40); as a creative process within art and design of speculating towards imaginaries of the future in practices of speculative design. (Dunne and Raby 2013; Bratton 2016) Marina Vishmidt explores speculation across art and finance, where artistic speculation becomes “a biopolitical device for the development of subjects who identify with capital structurally–or immanently–rather than ideologically.” (Vishmidt 2018, 5) Speculation becomes a means to structurally align as a pathway to power and visibility, thereby creating the potential to enact possibilities from within. Given these diverse definitions, speculative thinking is indeterminate, and open to a conception of the future as an ongoing unfolding of events.

Rather than looking at cultural economies as pre-formed entities of supply and demand, knowledge emerges through practices as active “doings” of artists as part of a sociomaterial process. Drawing from Barad, organization studies scholars Wanda Orlikowski and Susan Scott propose that materiality is not a fixed object one can study, but is “constantly being made and reconfigured in practice.” (2015, 6) Artistic practices are constantly in flux and multiple, contrasting a representational perspective that define objects and artworks as fixed entities. The concept of emergence embraces the complexity of the world to understand the multiplicity of possibilities in practice. The pragmatic process of “doing” and negotiating a practice brings different entities into a relational ontology in which they are constituted through their mutual entanglements. Andrew Pickering draws attention to material agencies, where knowledge is a “doing” in the process of engaging with technologies within artistic practices. Practices are “temporally emergent” in the sense that “practical goals are constructed in a temporally emergent cultural field, and their detailed substance is itself emergently constructed in that field.” (1995, 57) Economic infrastructures are made sensible through the encountering of the constraint and affordances in the process. Pickering reminds us that “constraints should not be ‘ontologized’–they should not be treated, as is often done, as somehow structuring and thus explaining the flow of practice from without. Constraints are as emergent as anything else.” (1995, 66)

Knowledge is gained through practices of thinking-doing throughout the process of discovery. Such practices can be approached creatively in what Silvia Gherardi calls “formativeness:” a “doing” that invents the “way of doing” (2016, 690) by inventing the ways of doing in the art of “knowing/doing,” (Gherardi and Perrotta 2013, 230) knowledge emerges from the process of negotiating a means to develop an artistic practice. In this sense, practices become creative, even when such practices are not considered part of the creative process, including ways of forming an organization or collaborating with others. Michel de Certeau’s *Practices of Everyday Life* looks at practices as “ways of operating” or “modalities of action,” which can be critical, experimental, artistic, and subversive. (1984, 29-30) A multiplicity of ways of moving, operating, and acting are presented in the process of “making-do” and exploring possibilities dynamically in the experience of living and negotiating space in a city. To make do is to shift tactics in the process of organizing and negotiating a means to make art in the here and now. To think relationally and ecologically is not to think of oneself at the center, but rather how one contributes to collective future possibilities, to also be open to different ways of thinking and doing to enact new realities.

# MetaObjects: Towards a Politics of Emergence

To illustrate how speculative pragmatism as an open-ended way of thinking-doing that reveals new possibilities in every instance, I briefly discuss my work with MetaObjects, a studio facilitating digital production with artists and cultural institutions. Co-founded together with technical director, Andrew Crowe in 2017 in Hong Kong, we help to bridge the gaps in knowledge between sectors and disciplines to enable a deeper engagement with advanced technologies. Through close collaborations, we help to create an environment to nurture the shared possibilities for artistic practice.[[3]](#footnote-4)

Our role is not fixed or predefined, but rather open to constant renegotiation where we take every situation as an opportunity to learn and test the possibilities within an environment. Our practice is thus open-ended and responsive to a changing environment, where we seek to support a conception of art not founded on individual authorship but collaboration, and not on finite objects, but shared processes of creation. While the art market continues to sell and speculate on art, artists and the latest technological innovations, we take a step back from such irrational exuberance, not in a mode of critique against market forces, but through an affirmative practice, which seeks to support and enable artistic practices. As such it requires constant reflection and attenuation to actualize the emerging potentialities, to shift practices towards a shared vision of what art could become.

Our practice continues to evolve through relational entanglements that consist of “multiplicities, disparate causalities, and unintentional creations of meaning.” (Stengers 2010, 34) MetaObjects seeks to find new and sustainable ways of working by navigating the inherent potentials in the immanent realities of the art market, industry, and academia, but to also understand how collaborations become meaningful in different situations. Rather than accept existing methods as models to follow, MetaObjects seeks to operate in a *nomadic subjectivity* to explore the possibilities in ever-emergent reality in our situatedness in Hong Kong, while developing collaborations internationally. According to Braidotti, a nomadic subjectivity is “generated affirmatively and creatively by efforts geared to creating possible futures, by mobilizing resources and visions that have been left untapped and by actualizing them in daily practices of interconnection with others.” (2006, 27) A nomadic subjectivity can be thought of as operating between sectors and disciplines, and modes of practice. Through our daily practices, we create the possibilities to make and remake and enact reality in new ways. While we call ourselves a “studio” our identity is fluid where we see organizing as an experimental process of defining our role in the artistic community. We’re not artists or curators in the strict sense, nor are we purely just technicians. Our role and identity evolve with every collaboration, which is also the origin of our name “meta” as a self-reflexive entity and logo as an emergent form (the rhombic dodecahedron, a shape naturally formed by bees in creating honeycombs). To develop speculative pragmatic practice is to remain sensitive to the possibilities emerging in the present. Considering this approach as a politics of emergence, is to acknowledge the world in flux and the necessity to respond to the moment and nurture the grounds for the collective future. The rethinking of agency as a collective flow considers the temporal dimension to reality where in one instance an action may have an effect and in the next it may not. As such, there is a need to constantly reflect on when and how our actions matter with a need to constantly shift practices according to an ever-changing social and material environment.

MetaObjects takes a speculative and pragmatic approach to developing our practice. What is meant by *speculative* relates to a mode of thinking, which is also embedded in the on-going experience of the world. To speculate is to remain sensitive to the potentials emerging in an experience or situated event. It is to be attuned to the “lure of the possible,” in Whitehead’s terms, to gesture towards in a collective and shared interests in art and technology and to risk possibilities. Martin Savransky et al, consider speculation “to take the risk of developing practices that, by engaging inventively with (im)possibilities latent in the present, can disclose, make available and experiment with possible prospects for the becoming of alternative futures.” (2017, 10) I consider MetaObjects’ practice experimental, in that it serves as a testing ground to understand the potentials of an environment, but also as a means of speculating in thought by making propositions. Such instances may include how we developed a long-term collaboration with the artist Samson Young through a single project, sharing knowledge and resources around 3D printing. After the artist purchased a large format 3D printer, we agreed to facilitate production for the artist, while opening up for other artists to use the printer. We negotiated our role around a 3D printer, which allows the artist to experiment more closely with the tools, where we developed a trust-based relationship in which we can also support others in the community to engage more with the technology. MetaObjects, as a practice, is speculative in that we risk possibilities by developing collaborations in an open-ended practice to enable artistic practices.

To be *pragmatic* is meant to highlight MetaObjects’ engagement in the practical realities of economies and technology. Orlikowski refers to practice as a process of “knowing-in-practice,” an on-going process of interpreting in our everyday activities of engaging in the material world, (2002, 252) in contrast to Schön, “knowledge in action” (1983) as a representational and reflective form of thinking, as a human-led endeavor. A focus on practice considers the milieu and the nonhuman entities that also play a role in the world’s becoming. Knowledge emerges through the practices of thinking-doing. For MetaObjects, such processes include working with technologies and discovering their possibilities. Through the projects we learn along the way together with our collaborators, and do not limit ourselves to specific tools or techniques. As such, we have developed long-term collaborations with artists like Lu Yang in developing a live motion capture performances and game artworks since 2018. (2022)[[4]](#footnote-5) In the development of Lu Yang’s game artwork, we discovered that VR was not the ideal platform for expressing the ideas of the artist. We did not want to limit ourselves to a specific technology, but rather explored what formats would be most suitable for the work. We then suggested a desktop game since the artist values high-graphics and world exploration which would be impractical in VR. Rather than starting with the technology, we take an arts and artist-led approach to allow artists realize works through the means that makes the most sense for the work.

Through MetaObjects’ collaborations with artists and institutions, we help problem-solve and open up ways for engaging with technology in a *becoming-with* artists and institutions, to address problems surrounding access to technology, skills, and other resources to make art. These resources include finding ways to navigate institutional settings to share knowledge and open avenues of access. Such as when we discovered the challenge of universities that acquire expensive technologies that are used for a single grant or research project and remain underused by students due to lack of technicians and expertise to support students. As MetaObjects, we seek to help bridge that gap by providing workshops in universities and seeking to make accessible resources that may otherwise be underused. In this sense, an ecology of practices fosters “an experimental togetherness among practices, a dynamic of pragmatic learning of what works and how” to allow a situation “unfold its own force,” (Stengers 2005, 195) producing an understanding of the world through our practices and entanglements in it. For Stengers, “pragmatism is the care of the possible,” (2011, 12) which is also a concern for consequences, meaning a willingness to be accountable for a particular thought, action, or idea. (Debaise and Stengers 2017) MetaObjects’ concern with sustainability of the arts reflects our priority of pragmatic engagement as a means to enact new possibilities for artistic practices engaging with advanced technologies.

MetaObjects becomes an ethical, political, and aesthetic project in differential modes of organizing. Operating in different modes of practice allows us to navigate potentials, to form collectivities, and to mobilize agencies. Our practice becomes a means of actualizing potentialities in the present to open up new possibilities for the future. Moving away from art as objects for sale on the art market, we understand an engagement in the artistic field as a way of collaborating and sustaining practices with technology in time. This temporal understanding of art resists notions of ownership and authorship, but rather values the collaborative process of creation, and enabling the continuation of a collective practice, while striving for deeper engagements and new creative possibilities with advance technologies.

# Conclusion

Artistic practice is not something reserved for the few artists with talent, but a process in which anyone can engage in. Speculative pragmatism, as offering a way to think and act nomadically, is an embedded and embodied approach to practice. Following Deleuze, Stenger called thinking through the middle (*par le milieu*) as always situated in a context. To consider humans as immanent to the milieu, instead of at the center controlling how events unfold, can foster and enable possibilities within an environment. To take a *meso* political approach is to draw knowledge immanently from the field in a collective and performative making of the world. In a pragmatic sense, thinking through the middle is to be entangled amongst artists and practitioners in the collective construction of reality, which is always open to reconfiguration. This approaches a politics of emergence that is practiced.

In this sense, artworks do not exist in and of themselves but are a product of complex relationships and practices. To think of artistic practices is to understand artworks within the social and material contexts and to consider them as part of the work itself. This means acknowledging all of those involved in the staging and creation of artworks, including curators, administrators, technicians, project managers, as contributing to the creative process, rather than the output of a single individual. To focus on concepts and ideas as shared work allows artworks to evolve and take new forms through every iteration through different networks of collaborators. Roles and identities are not predefined but negotiated and discovered in the process of creating work. Such a fluid and open-ended approach does not limit individuals to their capabilities but considers learning potential as inherent to the work.

Discourses around the Creative Economy seek to quantify outputs through spectacles of art stars and blockbuster exhibitions. It becomes difficult not to participate in larger forces of the economy. However, while efforts to support the development of economies superficially appear complicit with capitalism, such as forming a commercial studio and collaborating with brands, a closer look at how these economies operate in practice is necessary to understand the potentialities within them. Massumi explains, “Complicity is an ontological condition under neoliberalism. It cannot be avoided, but it is not all-defining. It should not just be critiqued. It should be practiced strategically, in ways aimed at always upping the ratio of escape over capture.” (Massumi 2018, 68) A nuanced perspective is required, where it is less about *what* these practices are (commercial or non-profit), but rather *how* they are practiced that comes to matter.

It can be said, contemporary capitalism has evolved into a large complex and dynamic system, where economic historians such as Quinn Slobodian (2021) ground neoliberalism within a history that is less focused on individual self-interest than a collective totality. Friedrich Hayek (1982, 37) describes the economy and free market as a self-organizing system, while Philip Mirowski (2002) presents a view of economics as a cyborg science in the postwar period challenging traditional understandings of neoclassical economics. While capitalism is considered a cybernetic system, where individuals are the product with dynamic systems involving big data, AI and smart cities as forms of algorithmic governmentality (Rouvroy and Berns 2013), it encourages us to consider ourselves not as consumers, but active agents who modulate systems and practices that retain a sense of our creative capacity as an on-going process in our shared evolution.

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1. Homo economicus is the notion of the ideal man who was the subject of the Enlightenment in the emergence of humanism premised on scientific innovation and the progress of knowledge. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
2. Such thinking on nonrepresentational theory has been developed in fields of Human Geography by Whatmore, Thrift, Dewsbury, and others. Nonrepresentational means subjectivities are constantly being performatively enacted, where there is not representation prior to their enactment. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
3. While there is limited space to go into depth about our work and practice, further details are elaborated in *Emergent Economies of Art and Technology* (Wong, 2020) and a forthcoming monograph published by The MIT Press. Also see [www.metaobjects.org](http://www.metaobjects.org/). [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
4. See article discussing our collaboration with Lu Yang in connection with the artist’s Buddhist worldview in Screen Bodies journal, Vol.7, Iss.1. 2022. [↑](#footnote-ref-5)