

In the Milk of Facts, There Always Lands a Fly

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Indiscriminate Monuments and the Crisis of Commensuration

I've seen the future, brother, it is murder . . . things are going to slide, slide in all directions, there won't be nothing . . . you can measure any more.

Leonard Cohen, *The Future* (1992)

Thirty years ago, Leonard Cohen sang these lyrics in his song *The Future*. What was prophetic then is now the stuff of our daily lives. We find ourselves fully immersed in what cultural theorist Lawrence Grossberg calls “the crisis of commensuration.” As he explains, “We seem to be living in the midst of, or at least facing the threat, of the impossibility of valuation and commensuration; across all dimensions of human activity, from religion and politics to knowledge and economics, there is at least the appearance of a growing inability to find any common ground or logic upon which one can constitute, measure, compare and possibly adjudicate (or compromise) differences.”¹

The issue of commensuration has always been central to the work of Richard Ibghy and Marilou Lemmens. The duo is best known for its works which mine the archive of economic and managerial research and play with the dominant visual language of neoliberal technocapitalism—graphs, pie charts, workflow diagrams and so on—in a way that reveals both the fabricated and performative nature of supposedly objective data visualisations, as well as the material and exploitative impact on bodies, minds, practices and desires of the truth claims they seek to establish.

In *In the Milk of Facts, There Always Lands a Fly*, collages from the series *What We Know for Sure* (2017–ongoing) are exhibited alongside works drawn from

the Fondation Guido Molinari collection. The brightly coloured charts and graphs condense data about the “Amount of Sugar in Certain Foods,” the “Average Number of Wives of a High-Income Man,” and the “Proportion of Non-Shirkers Attracted to Unstable Firms,” culled from academic journals, essays, and conference proceedings. All that remains of the complex realities represented here are decontextualized and aestheticized statistics, exposing the arbitrariness of data visualisation and the extent of its power of abstraction.

The big surprise in *In the Milk of Facts, There Always Lands a Fly* is a series of 30 small figurative, hand-molded clay sculptures hoisted on plinths, and given a matte, pastel finish, that preserves traces of manipulation. Contrasting visually with the hard edges and the bright colours of the graphs, they give shape to widely circulated allegations such as Obama birtherism, Pizzagate and the weaponization of COVID vaccines, rather than focusing on data. Such conspiracy theories have recently disrupted the hegemony of positivist/managerial modernism by elbowing their way into the public sphere primarily via social media and the rantings of a former American president. They epitomize the rising authority of “post-truth” which implies, as Silvio Waisbord explains, “[. . .] the levelling of opportunities for making any statements about reality that can potentially be deemed credible.”²

To tackle conspiracy theories and post-truth claims, Ibghy and Lemmens have crafted prototypes for monuments to the alternative history of the 21st Century. Unmoored from fact, history or significance, these indiscriminate monuments refuse the lines between truth and untruth, art and kitsch, public and private, the aesthetic, the lofty, the sacred, the banal and the ludicrous. Like their earlier works, these engage

directly with the crisis of commensuration. However, while the former played with, and perhaps even contributed to that crisis, the tools and tactics they deployed were firmly grounded in a sophisticated critique of science and its role in technocapitalist exploitation. For their most recent forays into the murky archive of conspiracy theory and the crisis of commensuration, Ibgby and Lemmens have needed to shift their approach, calling into question their own ways of wrestling with knowledge production.

Ibgby and Lemmens are not alone in this questioning. Most of us associated with knowledge- and culture-producing institutions are highly adept at recognizing the lies and half-truths (often backed up by dubious research) proffered by politicians and corporations. We are often at a loss, however, when faced with claims and narratives that reject logic, evidence or even the possibility of truth-telling as an open and dialogical process. Too often, our reaction has been to simply ignore them and hope that they will go away.

This is a mistake. Given their growing currency, reach and public presence, we can no longer afford to look away from conspiracy theories. By exposing their claims in ways that are tangible and playful, Ibgby and Lemmens encourage us to face them, reflect on them and discuss them. Simply put: they make them our problem. Because, as anyone who's been paying attention for the last 5-6 years will tell you, they *are* our problem.

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1 Lawrence Grossberg. "Modernity and Commensuration." *Cultural Studies* 24.3 (2010): 323.

2 Silvio Waisbord "The Elective Affinity Between Post-Truth Communication and Populist Politics." *Communication Research and Practice*, 4:1 (2018): 20.