

Denis Maksimov, Maria Mileeva, Michal Murawski and David Roberts  
Making Pyramids Disappear: Faux Horizontalism and Wild Capitalist Topologies of Speculation//2022

## **(Counter-)Speculative Topologies of Wild Capitalism**

If speculation constitutes a ‘mode of production’,<sup>1</sup> then what aesthetic or spatial forms – what ‘topologies’ or ‘morphologies’<sup>2</sup> – does this mode of production produce or encourage? Many scholars of diverse disciplines and persuasions<sup>3</sup> have interpreted the current formation of coercive financialised capitalism as a late modern mutation or reincarnation of the pre-contractual proto-capitalist process theorised by Karl Marx (1867) and Rosa Luxemburg (1913) as ‘primitive accumulation’.<sup>4</sup>

You don’t need high theory, however, to interpret actually-existing capitalism. In two parts of the world engulfed by distinct but comparable waves of brutal economic metamorphosis carried out through financial instruments such as debt, conditionality and foreclosure, vernacular concepts arose to make sense of the economic and social violence pervading everyday life. These concepts – which may have developed independently or in conversation with one another – went by remarkably similar names. First, in Latin America reeling from the IMF-mandated structural adjustment programmes from the late 1970s until the 2000s, the term was ‘savage capitalism’ (*capitalismo salvaje* in Spanish or *capitalismo selvagem* in Portuguese). Soon thereafter, in the former COMECON countries experiencing socialism’s replacement with shock therapeutic mass-privatisation, the notion of ‘wild capitalism’ gained widespread currency in most of the region’s languages (for example: *dikiy kapitalizm* in Russian, *dziki kapitalizm* in Polish and *vadkapitalizmus* in Romanian).<sup>5</sup>

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1 Marina Vishmidt, *Speculation as a Mode of Production: Forms of Value Subjectivity in Art and Capital* (Leiden: Brill, 2018).

2 J. Bach and M. Murawski (Eds.), *Re-Centring the City: Global Mutations of Socialist Modernity* (London: UCL Press, 2020).

3 See Saskia Sassen, The global city: introducing a concept. *Brown Journal of World Affairs*, vol. 11 no. 2, (2005) 27–43; Silvia Federici, *Re-enchanting the World: Feminism and the Politics of the Commons* (Oakland: PM Press, 2018); Costas Lapavistas, *Crisis in the Eurozone*. (London: Verso. 2012) and Marina Vishmidt, *Speculation as a Mode of Production in Art and Capital*, PhD Thesis (Queen Mary University of London, 2012).

4 Karl Marx, *Das Kapital*, Volume 1 (Moscow: Progress Publishers, 1867) and Rosa Luxemburg, *Die Akkumulation des Kapitals*. (Berlin: Buchhandlung Vorwärts Paul Singer G.m.b.H., 1913).

5 K. Harper, *Wild Capitalism: Environmental Activists and Post-Socialist Ecology in Hungary* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2006); Michal Murawski, ‘Wild Capitalisms: The Political Ecology of the Post-Socialist City from Pyramid to PPParadise’ in Denis Maksimov, Maria Mileeva, Michal Murawski and

Our exposition of the aesthetics and topologies of wild capitalism (and the forms of smokescreening and obfuscation it relies on) will focus, constrained by our backgrounds and expertise, on the post-socialist variant (a multi-disciplinary, comparative transnational analysis of the myriad – spatial, social, rhetorical, affective and otherwise – forms that wild/savage capitalism has taken, however, is long overdue). In the first part of this text, we will explore the curious relationship between *architectural* and *financial* pyramids in the post-socialist wild capitalist city. In the second part, we will change tune and present some thoughts towards the question of how wild capitalism’s dispossessed speculative logic can give rise to what Aris Komporozos-Athanasίου describes as ‘counter-speculation.’<sup>6</sup> How can speculation be perverted, queered, repossessed or re-enchanted? In the concluding section, we present a bird’s eye overview of an interdisciplinary (undisciplined) medley of counter-speculative fictions, fantasies and topologies concocted under the umbrella of Pirammida.life – an enquiry into the political aesthetics of faux-horizontalism (and possible modes of its perversion) curated in July 2020 by the co-authors of this essay.

### **From Pyramid to Paradise**

What was the style of the wild capitalist era; and how did this aesthetic manifest itself in the life of the city? Arguably, one of its purest architectural incarnations consists in the profusion of glass and steel mini-pyramids, housing everything from kiosks and cafes to bus stops and police stations, erected throughout the post-socialist world during the 1990s and early 2000s.<sup>7</sup> But, as real-life pyramids sprouted up, private finance, too, became suffused by vertical forms, in the shape of what came to be called pyramid and/or Ponzi schemes (depending on their precise structure): get-rich-quick populist investment programmes, which promised to level the financial playing field for the benefit of those who were not capital rich; but, which – in effect – benefited only those who founded them, or the very early investors at the tip of the triangle.

When, if ever, did the time of wild capitalism come to an end? The common sense view is that a stabler, less corrupt, more civilised form has now replaced the chaotic realities of 1990s and early 2000s birthpang capitalism. In Moscow, among the symbolic moments of this ‘transition’ was the demolition in February 2016 of the ‘Piramida’ shopping complex on Pushkinskaya Square, in the very heart of Moscow. This doomed pyramid, erected in 1997–1998, recalled a time – in the commentary of a Russian TV newscaster chronicling its demise – ‘when the word capitalism brought to mind the epithet “wild”, when criminal empires hid

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David Roberts, *Cyber-PiraMMMida*, (<https://www.pirammida.life/>) (2020), Denis Stolyarov, *(Post)Soviet Art in the Era of Wild Capitalism, 1985–1995*,. PhD Thesis (Courtauld Institute of Art, University of London, 2020).

6 Aris Komporozos-Athanasίου, *Speculative Communities: Living with Uncertainty in a Financialized World* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2022).

7 Murawski, 2020, op. cit.

behind what appeared to be absolutely respectable contours'; a time during which chaos reigned or was perceived to reign in the post-socialist world. In the presentation of Moscow's current municipal administration, the city of the gleaming wild capitalist pyramids is in the process of being transformed into a 'liveable' metropolis of *blagoustroistvo* – an untranslatable Russian concept (literally meaning something like 'the construction of wellbeing'), which refers to the prettification and improvement of urban public space and infrastructure.<sup>8</sup> In the words of another reporter on a municipal news channel commenting on the demise of the Pushkinskaya pyramid: 'there will be no new capital investments on the site of the demolished pyramid; the territory will be improved (*blagoustroyat*) for the benefit [literally, for the delight] of Muscovites.'

The flagship project of this *blagoustroistvo* drive is Zaryadye Park – a grandiose, high-tech hybrid parkscape opened in 2017 by Vladimir Putin on the site of the demolished 1960s Hotel Rossiya; and snidely referred to as 'Putin's paradise' (*putinskiy rai*) by its critics. Zaryadye was framed, for public consumption, as a spontaneous 'gift' from Vladimir Putin to the people of Moscow; and designed by the fashionable Manhattan architectural practice Diller, Scofidio + Renfro (DS+R), who reached starchitectural prominence with Manhattan's High Line – incidentally, a project also prominently framed as from a gift from then-Mayor, oligarch philanthropist Michael Bloomberg, to the people of New York.<sup>9</sup> Both Zaryadye and the High Line rest on intriguing ideologies and aesthetics of wildness and rurality. For the High Line, DS+R developed the guiding principle of 'agri-tecture'. In Moscow, the ideology of 'agri-tecture' morphs into the idea of 'wild urbanism', defined in terms of a posthuman, 'scriptless' and 'pathless' symbiosis between nature and the city.

Zaryadye's rhetorics of wildness, freedom, pathlessness and spontaneity are, I am insinuating here, spurious obfuscations. Zaryadye – like the High Line – is hyper-sanitised, hyper-surveilled, hyper-controlled and policed, both on the level of coercive, external control; and on the level of internal (and digital) discipline. Of particular significance is the way in which the English term 'wild urbanism' was translated into Russian. Initially, the term '*dikiy urbanizm*' (lit. wild urbanism) was used, but this swiftly morphed in official materials connected to the park design into '*priodny urbanizm*' – which means something closer to 'natural urbanism.' As my Moscow interlocutors – those connected to the implementation of the park design – told me, this was explicitly done in order to foreclose any connotation of 'wild capitalism' – 'wild capitalism' being precisely the chaos that Zaryadye was supposed to be a symbol of the victory over; and of the erasure of.

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8 Markus Lahteenmaki and Michal Murawski, 'Blagoustroistvo: Infrastructure, Determinism, Re-Coloniality and Social Engineering in (Post-)Soviet Moscow', 1917–2021. *Comparative Studies in Society and History* 65 (3), July 2023.

9 Michal Murawski, 'Falshfasad: Infrastructure, Materialism and Realism in Wild Capitalist Moscow', *American Ethnologist*, 49 (4) November 2022.

## The Cultures of Wild Capitalism

While people in Eastern Europe were busy complaining about ‘wild capitalism’ and dreaming of coming closer to the ‘civilized’ west’, wrote Russian Marxist sociologist Boris Kagarlitsky in 2007 – himself since disgraced in 2014 by his support for Russia’s wild imperialist aggression against Ukraine – ‘western capitalism itself was only getting wilder’. 21st century late capitalism is indeed today as vicious, criminal, de-humanising, dispossessive, warlike, coercive and pyramidal as it ever was. At the same time, however, this capitalism has become extremely adept at endowing itself with legitimacy by adopting the anti-pyramidal rhetorics and aesthetics of horizontal, self-organising social movements; as well as of ecological art, activism and theory.

In his seminal structuralist analysis of Soviet architectural history, architectural historian Vladimir Paperny (1996) distinguishes between ‘Culture One’ – horizontal, dynamic, open, future-oriented, epitomised by the avant-garde of the 1920s; and ‘Culture Two’ – vertical, static, closed, fixated on the past, whose paradigm is the Stalin-era Socialist Realism of the 1930s–1950s.<sup>10</sup> Paperny’s analysis suggests that Culture One and Culture Two exist in a constant dialectical struggle with one another – although the opposition between them is not absolute, a discernible variant of one of two poles of the binary tends to end up ascendant during discrete historical periods. Paperny is sceptical about whether a Culture *Three* has or will ever crystallise – in more recent work, he has speculated that it may coalesce in the form of an ‘ecological avant-gardism’, whose – more or less disingenuous, greenwashed and gentrifying – instances are proliferating all over the world today, often in endlessly self-replicating forms: such as the emergent trend for land value-accelerating hyperinflationary urban parks sprouting atop disused (real or simulated) infrastructural facilities, set off by Paris’ Promenade Plantee and New York’s High Line; or the globally-proliferating ‘vertical forest’ condominia franchised by Milanese architect-developer Stefano Boeri.<sup>11</sup> This architecture of spurious ecogism and ersatz horizontalism reaches its apogee not only with vertical forests and assorted other High Lines and Zaradyes, but with next level indulgences – among these are Moshe Safdie’s carbon-churning paradisiacal shopping mall in Singapore Airport; or, even worse, global carbon chugger-in-chief and plague profiteer Amazon’s perverted eco-Tatlin Tower in Virginia.

I would like to suggest, taking my cue from Paperny, that there are two strands of political aesthetic false consciousness dominant in today’s accelerating wild capitalist moment. One, following the thread above, might be called Culture Tree. This is the paradisiacal culture of normalised architectural greenwashing: monstrous resource depletion masquerading as sustainability and ecology. The other is called Culture Free. This is the culture of hyper-centralisation and the power vertical cosplaying as an attitude of de-centring

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10 Vladimir Papernyi, *Kul'tura dva (Culture Two)*, (Moscow: Novoe literaturnoe obozrenie, 1996).

11 Vladimir Paperny, ‘Russian Architecture Between Anorexia and Bulimia’. *Russian Culture*, (2012), (8–11).

and horizontality. Culture Free, in other words, is the culture of the fake horizontal. This is the Culture of the Pyramid scheme and of MMM Bank; of BitCoin and NFTs. It is the culture of bullshit inclusivity that pervades all of our lives, especially our pyramidal institutions; and which has gone into overdrive since the irruption into our lives of Covid-19, still so often described in public discourse as the ‘great leveller’. Culture Tree and Culture Free, are intimately related and intersected. Together they comprise the twin poles of the obfuscatory archi-cultural false consciousnesses of the wild capitalist world.

### **(Counter-)Speculation as a Queering Agency**

Speculation, understood apart from the commonsensical definition connected to financialised capitalism, can function as a queering agency. As a method, it enables one to estrange straight and normalised categories. The speculators, therefore, are essentially disturbers of fixed power relations. They embody amplification, exaggeration, disorientation or other imaginative transformations of the constellations that are perceived as absolute, stable and unquestionable.

The naturalness of vertical classifications and topologies and space-time orientation of historical and ideological narratives are the prime targets of queering speculation. The vertical hierarchies of authority ensure the presentation of speculation as a harmful, dangerous category in knowledge production and research. The national museums and their arrangement of heritage in straight and simplistic stories, which feature golden ages, heroes and villains, are afraid of speculators. They legislate against them to prevent reinterpretation or alternative visions of the imaginary – mythologies and archetypes – and effectively build them into ideological structures of presentist power structures.

Speculation now as an agency, however, has been colonised by financial markets, ideological fake-versus-real-news warfare and oblique institutions of political control. Using the notion of care as a lubricant, as highlighted by Keti Chukhrov, institutions solidify the presentism of a particular interpretation of reality, a speculative fiction,<sup>12</sup> which belongs to the specific group of actors, which currently control the distribution of the sensible and visible, in Jacques Rancière’s terminology.<sup>13</sup> Today’s power pyramids wrap increasing precariousness and alienation in the shiny package of stability. They make a particular form of speculation separate from the overall category of speculative agency. All other premises are dangerous and destructive – only ours can be desirable. The ways of operation of the current speculative machines can be seen only from what Alena Ledeneva calls the ‘obliquity angle’.<sup>14</sup> It is a position revealed by the power-holder only after the fact of its impact, when the speculative arrangement does not work any longer and cannot be analysed or approached

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12 Keti Chukhrov, ‘Topology for Three Power Paradigms: Pyramid, Grid, Circle’ in *Cyber-PiraMMMid*, op. cit.

13 Jacques Rancière, *The Politics of Aesthetics* (London: Continuum, 2004) 10.

14 Alena Ledeneva, ‘Deep Structures of Financial Pyramids’ in *Cyber-PiraMMMid*, op. cit.

directly. It protects itself with the obfuscatory veneer of ‘pseudo-transparency,’ as noted by David Brodsky.<sup>15</sup> The fleeting escapism of the speculative angle of power makes it rigidly sturdy and effective in avoiding detection by queer speculators, disruptive agents who do not wish to participate in the game ruled by the power holders. The gamification of participation in the process of financial or political speculation in the wild capitalist epoch creates an illusion of control, responsibility and ability to create change. But the casino always wins. Joining its mechanisms and structures of value-affirmation becomes the only way to ‘succeed’. This is why alternative ways of being, gathering and community-structuring are pushed beyond the margins of viability.

How can we decolonise speculation and save it from the claws of power-holding pyramidal hierarchies of power and capital? Reclaiming speculation as a potent agency of change, as a tool that one can use to dismantle the solidity of a particular game hidden in the cloud of obliqueness, will require a cross-disciplinary, transnational, genuinely collective effort. Financialisation and capitalisation are aggressive, adaptive viruses, which continue to mutate and adapt into ever harder-to-detect (faux-friendlier, pseudo-ecological, quasi-inclusive) forms. Their operations have to be tackled with potent ‘counter-speculations’ that create alternative ways of being and discredit the perceived ‘capitalist realness’ of ‘there-is-no-alternativeness’ of hegemonic faux-horizontal modes of speculation.<sup>16</sup> Disorientation can be a powerful form of charging attack on the usage of archetypes and objects of heritage as both the symbols and elements of the narrative in solidifying the current mode of speculation narrative. Alternative speculations about possible futures can come from intergenerational alliances rearranging the elements of reality into new constellations. The past is even more critical here than dreams about different and better futures. Mining for counter-speculations in the historical imagination effectively undermines the solidified narratives that ‘naturally’ led to the present conditions, infrastructures, and power constellations.

The present pyramidal order’s disavowals of its own pyramidity can and should be dismantled from the foundations rather than from the peaks. The freedom to speculate as a critical practice must be omnipresent in the institutions which act as custodians of heritage (museums) and knowledge (universities). But they need broader allies – artistic researchers, filmmakers and other ‘weirdos’ – who will communicate alternative speculation on the more prominent, more comprehensive and diverse plateaus of the visible. Speculation as a queering agency, writes Sarah Ahmed, ‘would function as a disorientation device; it would not overcome the disalignment of the horizontal and vertical axis, allowing the oblique to open another angle on the world’.<sup>17</sup>

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15 David Brodsky, ‘Post Psevdo-Prozrachost (PPP)’ in *Cyber-PiraMMMida*, op. cit.

16 Mark Fisher, *Capitalist Realism* (Winchester: Zero Books, 2009).

17 Sarah Ahmed, ‘Orientations: Toward a Queer Phenomenology’, *GLQ: A Journal of Lesbian and Gay Studies*, vol. 12 no. 4, (2016), 543–574.

## PiraMMMida

PiraMMMida was originally planned as an installation, a deconstructed pyramid of translucent curtains and inverted clouds of dollar bills and chocolate coins to be built by artists, architects, academics and activists in the S.a.L.E. Docks on the Dorsoduro waterfront in Venice. The installation was a heterotopic riff on the official 17th Venice Architecture Biennale of Architecture's theme of 'How will we live together?' In seeking to build a pyramid that could be traversed, transformed or collapsed without crushing those at its base, it proposed that a new non-fake form of equalitarian sociality could be created.<sup>18</sup>

Rather than postpone the installation in the outbreak of COVID-19, it transposed into Cyber-PiraMMMida, an online platform constructed around three conceptual cornerstones: Power, Planet and Plague. In this virtual space, contributors try to make sense of, subvert and speculate upon the verticalities, horizontalities, perpendicularities and other political geometries (real and fake), which constitute the contours of our present-day pyramids in a time of pandemic, planetary meltdown and fascism resurgent. The projects, ideas and artworks presented collectively enquire: can speculation be repurposed in the direction of self-cancellation, critique and reaffirmation of the possible, desirable change of political and economic conditions of precarity and cancelled futures?

To speculate, Vyjayanthi Venuturupalli Rao observes, is to 'situate ourselves at an edge, a limit, an impasse. It is also to reach out from that edge, to peer over and to partake by peering over; speculation's classical Latin roots, *specere* and *speculari*, suggest that looking, observing, and anticipating are the active components of the act of speculating.'<sup>19</sup> At this edge, peering over the array of contributions to Cyber-PiraMMMida, we see the undulations and protrusions of wild capitalism – verticality, monumentality, uprightness; agentless networks and unstoppable flows; economic icebergs constituted by the care labour of women; a series of speculative bubbles; and potential tipping points in earth systems.<sup>20</sup> Space, Doreen Massey reminds, is the sphere of multiplicity, in which distinct trajectories coexist in contemporaneous plurality. From here, we also see the transference and transversality of holding environments; female earth, queer children of Zeus and the intergenerational juncture; the hieroglyph for hotep which represents an altar or offering table; Judenhuts, yarmulkes, satellites, and UFOs.<sup>21</sup>

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18 B. Penner, 'Cyber-PiraMMMida' in Cyber-PiraMMMida, op. cit.

19 Vyjayanthi Venuturupalli Rao, 'Speculation, Now' in V.V. Rao, P. Krishnamurthy, and C. Kuoni (Eds.), *Speculation, Now: Essays and Artwork* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2014) 19.

20 (Murawski 2020, Hetherington 2020, J.K. Gibson-Graham via Böhm and Szreder 2020, Papadopoulos 2020, Raworth via Rendell 2020)

21 Jane Rendell, 'Seven Studies for "a Holding"': Vivek Gupta and Denis Maksimov, 'The Pyramid as a Transhistorical Metaphor of Power in Greece and India', Tabitha Rezaire, 'Hoetep Blessings' and Bernstein, 'A Ball of Hands', in Cyber-PiraMMMida, op. cit.

From the immensity of the interplanetary, we can also see the intimately precious. Natalia Romik's *X Plagues* project takes the form of a monolith of pyramidal glass fetishistically rotating as if on sale at auction, housing a series of dream-like representations of ten contemporary plagues in the form of objects enclosed within a tower of crystal glassware, including: '1. Unequal distribution of goods – a coin; 2. Antisemitism/ xenophobia / racism – a bitter herb... 9. Religious fundamentalism – fragment of a destroyed Palestinian house in Jaffa; 10. Contempt for science – the cover of the book *Return to Jedwabne*'.<sup>22</sup> In their work on speculative design Anthony Dunne and Fiona Raby call for an alternate form of design practice, focused not on problem solving, but on dissent.<sup>23</sup> Calling for such speculative imaginings to be made tangible, Dunne and Raby also speak to the specific responsibility and agency that designers hold in the construction of worlds, to manifest these alternate forms in design practice.<sup>24</sup>

Situating ourselves at the edge here, we experience an 'overview effect' (Frank White via astronaut Robert Behken)<sup>25</sup> to witness space as always under construction, never finished, never closed, always in the process of being made, the 'simultaneity of stories-so-far'.<sup>26</sup> From this open-ended space of speculation, alternative temporalities and topologies can be anticipated and observed.<sup>27</sup> Alberto Duman's dystopian hyperlinked pitch to Netflix reimagines the Khufu Pyramid as a memorial for the Spectacular Cult of The Ethical Disease, a redemptive planetary culture's attempt to memorialise its possible annihilation with COVID-19, The Ultimate Object, buried deep within the belly of the pyramid, The Ultimate Architectural Object, as the Ultimate Utilitarian Land Art Formation as Mass Ornament.

Speculative fiction, Aimee Bahng summarises, is 'a genre of inventing other possibilities (alternate realities, upside-down hierarchies, and supernatural interventions).'<sup>28</sup> As well as imagining the future, these possibilities explore different accounts of history. Thandi Loewenson's weird fanfic research log speculates on previous incarnations of a

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PiraMMMida, op. cit.

N. Romik, 'X Plagues' in Cyber-

23 Anthony Dunne and Fiona Raby, *Speculative Everything: Design, Fiction, and Social Dreaming* (Cambridge, Massachusetts: The MIT Press, 2013) 160.

24 A. Butt, 'As Plain as Spilt Salt: The City as Social Structure in *The Dispossessed*', *Textual Practice*, vol. 35, no. 12), 2005-2020. (2021)

25 Jeeva\_d and Georgia Martin, '...and Now Back to the Future' in Cyber-PiraMMMida, op. cit.

26 Doreen Massey, *For Space* (London: Sage, 2005) 9.

27 Lisa Lowe and David Lloyd, *The Politics of Culture in the Shadow of Capital* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1997).

28 Aimee Bahng, *Migrant Futures: Decolonizing Speculation in Financial Times* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2017) 8.



governmental building in Lusaka through Liu Cixin's eyes.<sup>29</sup> What was once a royal residence and solar instrument, stacked stone slabs surrounded by Magnetite pendulums, transmogrifies into the banded windows, air conditioning units and downpipes of a central statistics office concretising its logo – a bar chart of exponential growth. Speculation, Bhang proclaims, can also take on different shapes, a radical unfurling, rather than protectionist anticipation: 'Instead of using predictive calculations that perpetually attempt to pull the future into the present, these alternative speculative fictions, films, and other media forms work to release speculation from capitalism's persistent instrumentalisation of futurity'.<sup>30</sup> Speculation therefore becomes a much-needed agent of change within the solidified, everlasting present.

Perhaps, in its virtual form, PiraMMMida.life embodies the radical openness of this speculative realm as a space of the possible. The project altogether suggests the potentiality of speculation to be perverted, queered, weirded to turn its creeping impact on reality. As Rao puts it, 'what emerges from a speculative process is and remains virtual. This does not mean that what emerges lacks reality, but rather that it remains in a process of potential realisation.'<sup>31</sup> PiraMMMida.life, as speculative counter-speculation, turns agency upside down, defamiliarises the present and opens the portals into possible futures.

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29 T. Loewenson, 'An Encounter with King Zhou's Pyramid' in *Cyber-PiraMMMida*, op. cit.

30 Bahng, op. cit. 7.

31 Rao, op. cit. 20.

Denis Maksimov, Maria Mileeva, Michal Murawski and David Roberts, 'Making Pyramids Disappear: Faux Horizontalism and Wild Capitalist Topologies of Speculation'. A new text prepared for this book based on the project Cyber-PiraMMMida, (<https://www.pirammida.life/>)(2022).