





academic studies & research

- PhD in moral philosophy at the Centre for Ethics and Value Inquiry (Faculty of Arts and Philosophy, University of Ghent, Belgium) (2011 -)
- Master degrees in theoretical physics (1991; orientation quantum physics and cosmology) and nuclear physics (1993) from the University of Ghent, Belgium
- Master degree in information- & media technologies (orientation artificial intelligence) from the Technical University of Ghent, Belgium, 1987

cooperations, affiliations

- Researcher at the Centre for Ethics and Value Inquiry (Faculty of Arts and Philosophy, University of Ghent, Belgium) (part-time) <http://www.cevi-globalethics.ugent.be> / project website <http://www.the-possibility-of-global-governance.net>
- Researcher and lecturer on 'the ethics of scientific assessment in the context of radiological risk governance' with the Science & Technology Studies group of the Belgian Nuclear Research Centre (part-time) http://science.sckcen.be/en/Institutes/EHS/SPS/STS/nuclear_tech_assessment
- Adviser and guest lecturer at the Rijksakademie Amsterdam
- Occasional guest lecturer at the International Atomic Energy Agency, the Polytechnical University of Madrid, the Aachen Technical University, the University of Hasselt, the Higher Institute of Fine Arts (HISK, Ghent), the World Nuclear University
- Steering Committee member of the Constituency of Research-oriented Non-Governmental Organisations to the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change (<http://www.ringos.net>)
- Permanent additional representative to the United Nations of the Centre for Environment & Development (an NGO working on issues of social and environmental justice based in Sri Lanka) ([website](http://www.website))
- Guest author for Apache.be, a site for 'investigative journalism to the fourth dimension' (in Dutch) (<https://www.apache.be/gastbijdragen/auteur/gaston-meskens/>)
- Member of the research & activism collective stRaten-Generaal (<http://www.stratengeneraal.be>)
- Supporting Board member of the Intellectual Capital Institute of Africa (an NGO based in Ghana).

contact

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Gaston Meskens [philosophical activist, hyperreflexive artist]

current activities > philosophical activism

hyperreflexive art < current activities



current activities > **philosophical activism**

Philosophical research and activism related to a human rights for global governance.

The research – under the title of ‘The possibility of Global Governance’ – is concerned with developing a rationale for a human rights based approach to intellectual capacity building in the interest of ‘fair and effective’ global governance. That rationale shapes as a normative ethics view on a ‘fair dealing with complexity’, with consequent considerations on the implications for what I see as the three formal ‘interaction modes’ of human intellectual capacity building, being education, research and democracy. The research is based on a critical analysis of the working of the ‘knowledge-policy interface’ in general theoretical sense, and is done in the practical context of on-going global governance policy processes (mainly the United Nations Commission on Sustainable Development, the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change, the United Nations Non-Proliferation Treaty negotiation process).

This research is done in a part-time (unfunded) cooperation with the Centre for Ethics and Value Inquiry (Faculty of Arts and Philosophy, University of Ghent, Belgium). I also cooperate with a number of civil society organisation on the issue of human rights.

All info on this work is at <http://www.the-possibility-of-global-governance.net>

Case-related research on the ethics of radiological risk governance

In the interest of developing a critical case in the context of my work on global governance, I rely on my background in theoretical physics and nuclear physics to engage in critical research on the ethics of societal justification of nuclear technology, with a focus on the particular role and responsibility of science as a policy-supportive knowledge producer. I am interested in the normative grounds and practical meanings of the concepts of transdisciplinarity and inclusion as a way to reform science into a reflexive scientific assessment practice that takes into account the social contexts wherein it functions and what it can and cannot do as science.

This work is done as part-time researcher and lecturer with the Science and Technology Studies group of the Belgian Nuclear Research Centre SCK•CEN. In that context, I also work on building critical-intellectual capacities through education, in cooperation with the SCK•CEN Academy for Nuclear Science and Technology. The research and the policy work is not meant to serve a particular advocacy in favour or against nuclear. It is ‘independent’ in the sense that I spend as much time showing the outside world that it is credible as I spend explaining the nuclear world that it is relevant and needed. (a new website that collects this work is currently under construction)

A general overview of my interventions as ‘philosophical activist’ is at http://www.thephactcollective.org/thephactcollective_tour.htm

hyperreflexive art < current activities

An ‘art as research’ practice on social agency and humanism.

Philosophical activism as a personal engagement also needs some kind of meta-reflection. I do this in the form of an art practice that develops parallel to my philosophical research. This ‘art as research’ practice advances from a reflection on what social agency and humanism can mean ‘in a world still struggling with the cramps of modernity’.

In practice, I suggest the structure and working of a hypothetical research institute - **the Institute of Idle Curiosity for Elements of Seduction** - that engages in the study of ‘a new humanism beyond the comfort of polarisation’, and work in that conceptual structure in various ways: I create installations (‘research labs’ of the Institute), set up collaborations under the name of the Institute’s artist collective TRAGIC REALIST FICTION and organise activities (shows, discussions) as part of the research programme of the Institute. The history of modernity is a major source of inspiration in this work. In that history of political, social and scientific ‘progress’, I identify and study various ‘signs of hyperreflexivity’ that are generally overlooked in the stereotype interpretations of that history. I see these signs as ‘early warnings’ of the melancholy that unavoidably has to come with any human attempt of progressive rationalisation.

Reflections on the issue of artistic agency

The role and position of art and the artist in relation to issues of social justice have a central focus in my work, and this in both the meanings of ‘art as research’ and ‘art as activism’. I explore the idea of ‘reflexivity as art activism’ in the way it can function as a critical mirror towards political populism, scientific positivism and social conformism. I write and organise lectures and happenings on this idea and cooperate with interested institutes on various projects related to it (now mainly with the Rijksakademie Amsterdam).

[...]

The journal of the Institute (at <http://www.metaspect.org>) and the website of the Institute’s back office (at <http://www.idle-city-else.org>) are the main entry points to the whole of my art practice.

metareflection

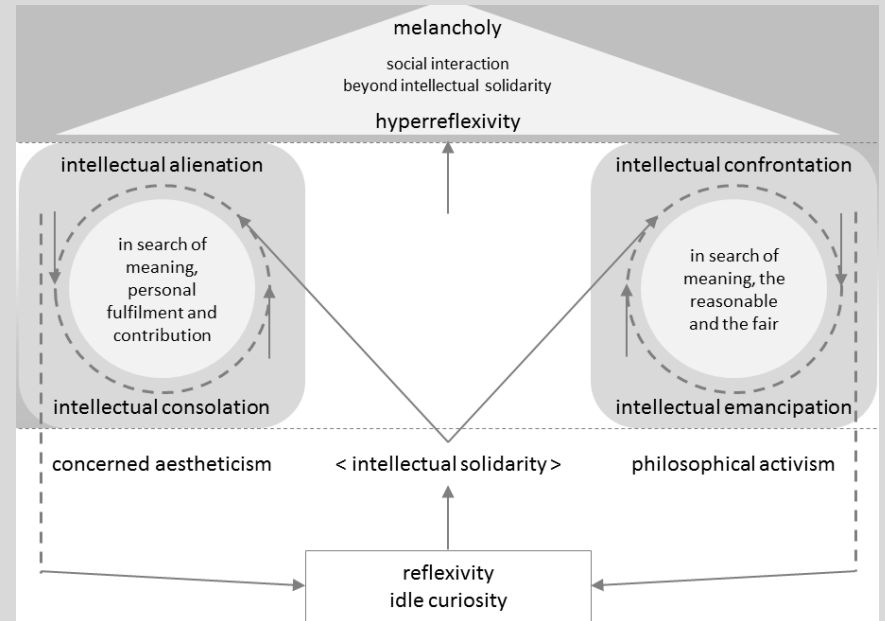
PHACTIVISM

My drive as philosophical activist and artist is a concern for an advanced form of social justice: a social justice that cares for intellectual solidarity in the way we deal with the uncertain, the complex and the unknown in both our social and political interactions. All my art and philosophical activism can therefore be said to deal with the ethics and aesthetics of human interaction modes and of the different roles and mandates people may take up in this respect. These interaction modes include those that shape and give meaning to our personal life ('the social') as well as those that shape and give meaning to our forms of social organisation ('the political'). The distinction between these two basic sets of interaction modes is significant in this perspective. Acknowledging the limited capacity of rational reasoning in and for social organisation, intellectual solidarity is as much about fostering wonderment and ambiguity in social interactions as about caring for reflexivity and transparency in political interactions. In short, working around the idea of intellectual solidarity translates as researching the question of how humans can(not) and should (not) use knowledge and value references in social and political interactions. I do not only study the question, but also formulate answers. The basis of the totality of my work is the research and development of an ideological vision ('a new humanism beyond the comfort of polarisation') that I inquire in public through philosophical activism and art.

PHILOSOPHY

The Institute of Idle Curiosity for Elements of Seduction is three things:

- > a conceptual framework for my philosophical activism and art practices;
- > a metaphor for the ideological idea of an advanced human condition 'standing stronger' against political populism, scientific positivism and social conformism (and their mutual conspiracies). That human condition emerges essentially through three interaction modes among which humans can 'switch' (see scheme fragment right):
 - concerned aestheticism for the social (intellectual solidarity between alienation and consolation)
 - philosophical activism towards the political (intellectual solidarity between confrontation and emancipation)
 - the metastate of hyperreflexivity (the state beyond intellectual solidarity that leads to melancholy)
- > a 'hyperreflexive' art work in itself, attempting to be reflexive with regard to the proposed ideological visions, and realised in the form of a continuously growing 'assemblage' of conceptual, virtual and physical settings, suggested and shown through physical installations, in schemes and texts and on internet.



metareflection

ART AND PHILOSOPHICAL ACTIVISM

I do not consider my philosophical activism practices as art. The art and philosophical activism practices stand next to each other and feed and influence each other. In my opinion, art and philosophical activism are the two essential meaningful ways to research and express visions on how we can and should deal with the complex, the uncertain and the unknown, but they take opposite directions. While contemporary art explores and uses 'the functional hermetic' to argue through alienating atmospheres, philosophical activism is concerned with creating functional clarity in the interest of enabling argumentation in atmospheres of trust. However, they meet again when confronted with the possibilities of and limits to making a meaningful point themselves and with the consequent implications for their own agency. And that 'state of awareness' is again metaphorical for the way we humans deal with the world and each other: hyperreflexivity as the ultimate state of melancholy.

I consider an 'intellectual expression mode' as a mode of expression that makes statements on the basis of a rationality that is 'internal' (inherent to that expression mode), but that is also claimed to be meaningful for the general discourse in society. In that sense, art, philosophy, science and politics are the four fundamental intellectual expression modes, and, in that sense, one must also recognise that art and philosophy are the only modes of intellectual expression that can integrate reflexivity with respect to their own agency without needing to 'metamorphose' into another expression mode. Reflexivity in art can be 'shown' as art, reflexivity in philosophy can be 'shown' as philosophy. For the other two fundamental intellectual expression modes, being science and politics, that is not possible. Science and politics intend to make truth claims. Scientists aim to prove that descriptions of specific natural or social phenomena are true on the basis of objective observation, experimentation and reasoning and that, on the basis of those truths, new reliable hypotheses can be made. Politicians, on the other hand, claim to represent the interests of specific groups of citizens and that this gives them a legitimate mandate to speak and act on behalf of these citizens. With the understanding of reflexivity as an awareness of the conditions for and limits to making these claims, it follows that reflexivity in science cannot be expressed *scientifically* and that reflexivity in politics cannot be expressed *politically*. Therefore, science and politics that would start to reason about the limits of their own rational strategies and that would try to integrate these reasonings *in* their strategies would become resigned-philosophical.

Considering that art, as intellectual expression mode, is not meant didactic and that it cannot be dialectic (it can 'argue' but never respond to an argument), what is it then? After conceptual art, contemporary art is always critical, even when it would be meant consolatory. Whatever the subject, I see art as a way to 'say' or 'show' something about the human condition that cannot be explained. I 'use' art as a way to reflect on the fundamental lack of evidence and the limits of reason to guide personal life and instruct social organisation. The aim is not to plainly show incapacities, but to suggest the aesthetics of the human and social condition 'between intellectual alienation and consolation', or thus the aesthetics of these contexts where rational evidence rather obstructs or manipulates human interaction instead of inspiring it. These contexts include the trivial ones of love, sex and friendship, but also that of everybody's quest for personal fulfilment and contribution. Last but not least, it includes the contexts wherein every human with an 'intellectual mandate' (the scientist, the politician, the philosopher, the artist, the activist) is confronted with the limits of reason to justify that mandate. Beyond those limits of reason, the scientist, the politician, the philosopher, the artist and the activist all fall back on what they believe but cannot prove, fear but cannot account for and hope but cannot guarantee. That state of hyperreflexivity is the ultimate human intellectual condition. It is melancholic for all of them, but it is also the human condition that is systematically suppressed in a postmodern society driven by positivism, conformism and populism.

the institute of idle curiosity for elements of seduction

