

Maaïke Lauwaert &  
Francien van Westrenen (eds.)

# Facing Value

Radical  
perspectives  
from the arts

Valiz

1. Be unproductive
2. Hesitate and question
3. Share
4. Improvise
5. Invite and participate
6. Embrace the void
7. Play!
8. Support
9. Unite



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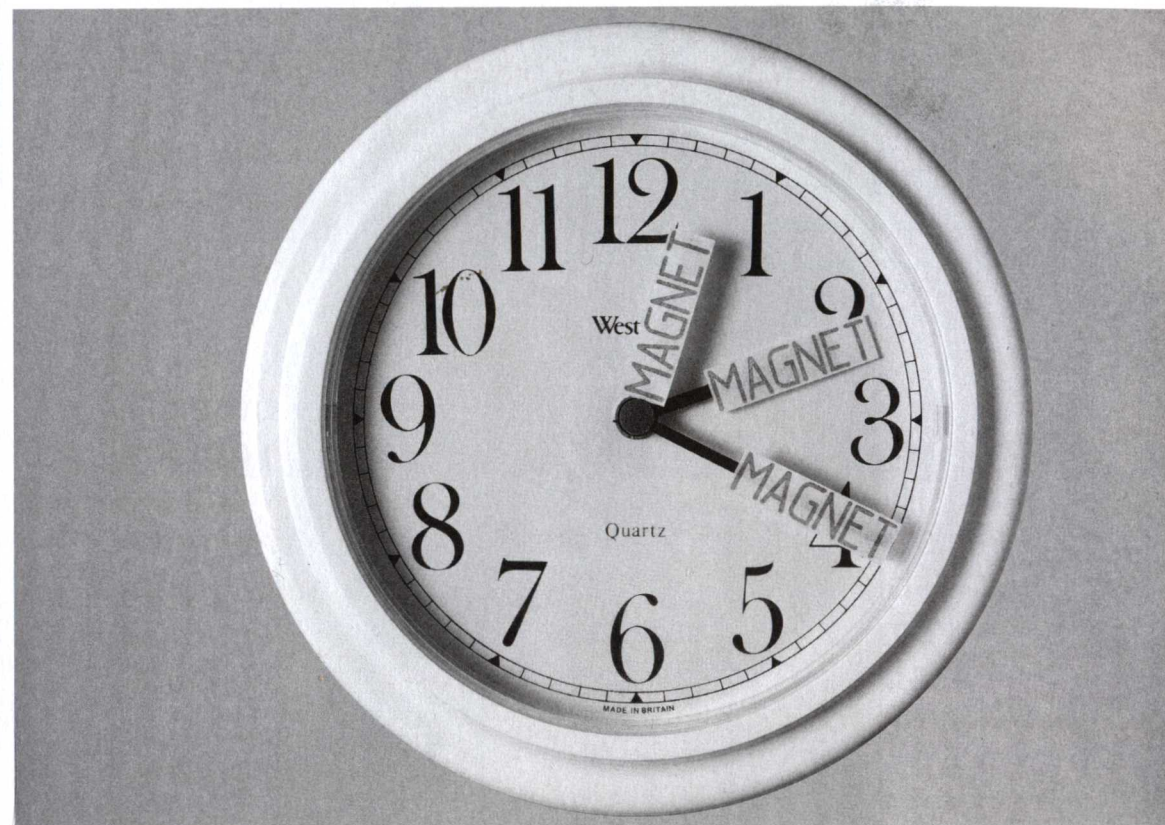
On value





Helen Cho, *21 Objects for Hesitation*, 2013

FACING VALUE



Cedric Price, *Magnet*, 1997



Uta Eisenreich, *What did the Football say to the Peach?*, 2011

ON VALUE

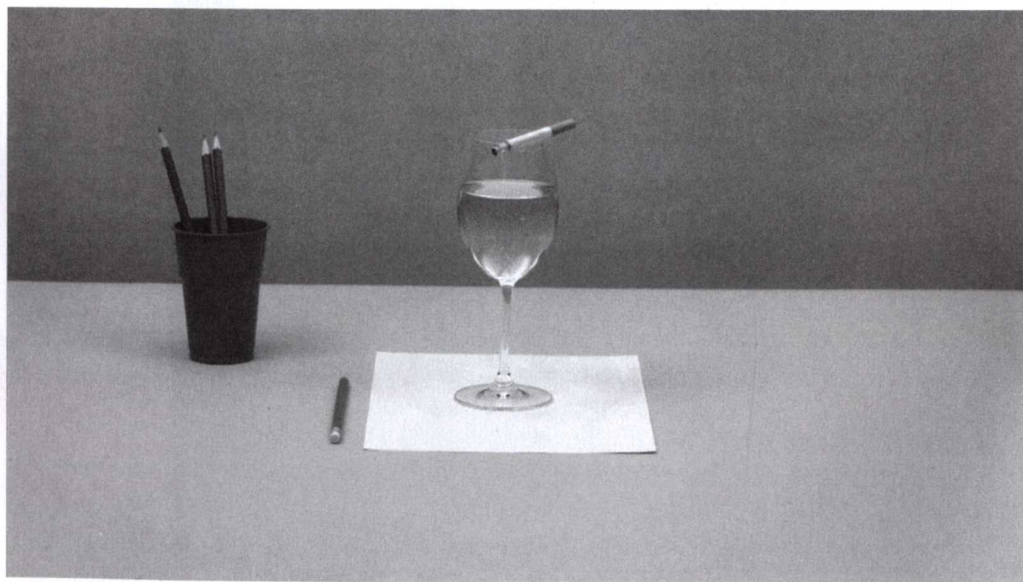


Josué Z. Rauscher, *Comment cette sculpture fait suite à la précédente* | Moly Sabata, 2013





Mark Manders, *A Place Where My Thoughts Are Frozen Together*, 2001



Lernert & Sander, *Limboland: The Procrastinators*, 2011

'Because (in principle) things outlast us, they know more about us than we know about them: they carry the experiences they had with us inside them and are—in fact—the book of our history opened before us.'

W.G. Sebald, *Unrecounted*, 2007, p. 86

'The writer Julian Barnes, considering mourning, once said, "It hurts just as much as it is worth." In fact, it was a friend of his who wrote the line in a letter of condolence, and Julian told it to my husband, who told it to me. For months afterward these words stuck with both of us, so clear and so brutal. *It hurts just as much as it is worth*. What an arrangement.'

Zadie Smith, *Joy*, 2013

'We know what things cost but have no idea what they are worth.'

Tony Judt, *Ill Fares the Land*, 2011

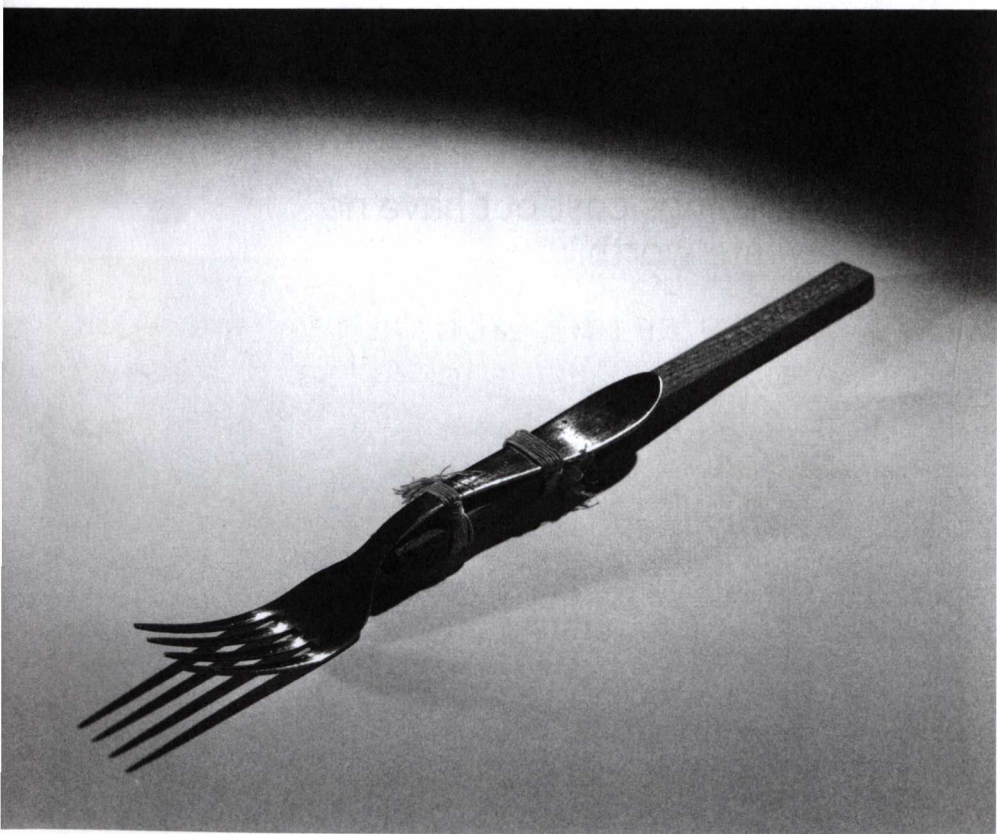
'The skin, however, does have holes for letting in and out our souls.'

Ursula K. Le Guin, *The Skin*, 2008





Peter Fischli and David Weiss, *Popular Opposites: Theorie + Praxis* from the series *Suddenly this Overview*, 2013



René Heyvaert, *zonder titel* (vork met houten stok) [untitled (fork with wooden stick)], 1979

The prevailing ways of doing politics and banking, of producing food and manufacturing clothes, of running schools and hospitals, of building and working, are showing cracks. This striving for ever greater growth and profit is depleting the earth and ourselves. One of the problems is that the value of everything is measured in quantitative economical terms of time and money. And that has led us into a state where 'we know what things cost but have no idea what they are worth', as the British historian Tony Judt states, loosely quoting Oscar Wilde.<sup>1</sup>

pp. 33-37

This book has been made from the conviction that there is an ever growing need for alternatives to how we perceive and understand value, what is considered valuable, and how and by whom it can be created. With this book we aim to contribute to a society where the core values that drive how things are done and how people are treated are not maximization, growth for the sake of growth and financial benefit, but rather more ephemeral qualities such as humanity, diversity, complexity, caring and trust. Some will think these qualities are too soft and impossible to measure, making it very hard to live by them.<sup>2</sup> But these (very often) old values are here among us, everyone knows when they are at work, they are felt and perceived. We believe they are as real as money, success and meeting deadlines.

We identify very much with African historian Achille Mbembe, talking about value in an interview with art magazine *rekto:verso*:

ON VALUE



The way out is a complete overhaul of how we think about 'value', how we create and distribute it. In the current system of financial capitalism, value is created from debt rather than from production: to make a profit, buy and sell your debts. Value would have to be recreated from real labour of people and businesses in response to relevant needs. ... Only thing is that creating such a different value system is not only a political act but also a cultural battle: we need new ideas and imaginations. Not as an escape into a kind of utopia, but as a cultural practice.<sup>3</sup>

Value is, admittedly, one of the hardest concepts to tackle. Often immaterial, often expressed in the form of a system that changes as we write, value is one of those core concepts that shape society, influence hearts and minds but defy easy definition. Who decides what has value and on what grounds are such decisions made? Value can be highly personal, it differs between eras, peoples, continents and time zones. Our whole system of trade, commerce, daily interactions is based on a value system that no one is really able to explain, let alone understand. A simple 'like' on Facebook has value, an old sweater also. So do fictive stacks of bonds and huge reserves of cacao. Countries have value, countries have negative value. Oddly enough, we adhere more value to online mined data and statistics than to our fellow human beings.<sup>4</sup>

As a result we seem to be on the one hand fundamentally confused about value and on the other hand exceedingly interested in it.

CONSIDER IN TERMS  
OF 'VITALITY' AS A  
MEASURE OF  
PRACTICALITY

The popularity of an economist such as Thomas Piketty is telling in this regard.<sup>5</sup> His paradigm shifting view on our economy has proven to meet a very deeply rooted need: a new look upon how value is distributed over people and nations and a historical reckoning of these insights.<sup>6</sup>

## SLIPPERY CONCEPT

What makes understanding value even more complex, is the category of the useful: use and value are often equated, confused and mixed up. But not everything that is useful is valuable, nor is everything that is valuable useful. A bank might be valuable but one can doubt whether it is still truly useful today, given all the trouble they created by speculating too wildly with value.<sup>7</sup> An important underlying question that runs through many discussions on value is one that can be boiled down to what the differences are between the useful and the valuable. What is at stake, in other words, is not only reframing what value means, but also recasting the question of usefulness.

Simply put, usefulness is a concrete asset, a characteristic of something. A table is useful. So are roads, clothes and many things we use daily. Use is a concrete concept that can even be measured in financial or monetary ways. Value is more ephemeral, more symbolic, and therefore harder to grasp. It is often far less concrete than its useful twin. Both use and value can change over time. A snow shovel is useful in winter, a Christmas tree has value during the holiday season. In summer, both are stored, temporarily out of use, their value diminished.<sup>8</sup>



Sociologist Beverley Skeggs points to another reason why value is such a 'slippery concept'. On the one hand, 'value both *describes and prescribes*', meaning people are at the same time subjects and makers of value. All talking and writing about value is also an affirmation thereof. In an often unintended effect of writing about value, writers 'reproduce the very conditions they describe' by 'shrinking the domain of values and making it subject to capital's logic'.<sup>9</sup> Skeggs sets out to map the rich domain of affective value. Her project is to 'understand and recognize the values that live beyond value'.<sup>10</sup> This is also at the heart of economist Arjo Klamer's plea for a more personal economy centred around the home where the value of *oikos* (Greek for family and home) takes central stage.<sup>11</sup> On the other hand, Skeggs points out, we often reduce values, which are 'moral, cultural, qualitative and difficult to measure' to value, which 'is economic, quantifiable and can be measured'.<sup>12</sup>

The focus of this book is primarily on the plural *values*, the so-called ephemeral values such as love, care, reciprocity, and support, but the explicit aim is to inform how we think about *value* from the perspective of these reconsidered values. There is more to value than the economic, the quantifiable and that which can be measured. The foundations for accepting and implementing this are to be found in a radical shift of the values we place at the core of how we work, live and assess life.

## VALUES WE LIVE BY

The values we live by change fast and radical. Anyone in their thirties or forties now, will have witnessed quite a few of these radical changes. For example, we may have had very devote Catholic grandparents. The values they adhered to were strict and clear with hardly any room for negotiation. That they lived through World War Two informed their value system heavily: nothing was wasted, ever. Not a crumb left uneaten. This value system is totally devoid of consumerist principles and based on doing good, being devoted to God and raising children within the same value system.

But then come our parents, and from closer by we witness their values bounce from Catholicism to hippiedom to responsible parenthood and finally retired grandparenthood. With every turn they are searching for ways to deal with the absence of an absolute value system. The church no longer provides the rules and regulations, hippiedom made sure of that. Politics aren't stable either. Once the year 2000 approached, former hippies were aghast by the inheritance of their movement: they had unintentionally laid the foundation not for a society without greed and violence but for a hyper individualist society where personal pleasure and gains were the highest goals.

In their children they saw the results of this absence of a value system and the ways in which consumerism neatly stepped in and seemed to solve it all. For a while during those golden nineties, this seemed to be actually going somewhere. Everyone was getting richer. But then that stopped too. People became



aware of the extreme unfair distribution of wealth, of the extreme heavy burden on the environment of Western consumerist lifestyles, of the emptiness that remains at the core of a consumerist value system.

## THE VALUE OF WORK AND CONSUMPTION

The 1980s and 1990s were eras in which more was good. Bigger, more, faster, wilder, crazier. There was no limit, it seemed. We found value in overdrive, speed, rapid cycles of production and consumption. We lost sight of the scale of things. And all of a sudden, the fabric got stretched too thin, the largeness of structures, systems, value units started working against us.

It is hard to imagine a world in which consuming objects, things or services is not an intricate part of the fabric of everyday life. But it is a rather new phenomenon that we consume daily and, moreover, that we often consume in order to consume, that is, for the sake of consumption itself. In the nineteenth century (under the force of industrialization and Fordism), consumption changed from an activity closely linked with that of production, prompted by necessity rather than desire, to consumption as an act in and for itself. It is not so much the value of the things we consume that we are after, let alone their usefulness, but the value of the act of consumption. The lyrics of the irony-drenched song *Shoes* by Liam Kyle Sullivan, aka Kelly, is telling in this regard:

*Shoes.*  
*Shoes.*  
*Shoes.*

*Oh my God.*  
*Shoes.*  
*Let's get some shoes.*  
*Let's get some shoes.*  
*Let's get some shoes.*  
*Let's get some shoes.*  
*Shoes.*  
*Shoes.*  
*Shoes.*  
*Oh, my God, shoes.*  
*Shoes.*<sup>13</sup>  
(continues)

Named after the car manufacturer Ford, the concept of Fordism refers to a standardized production system, standard products that roll off the conveyor belt, mass production facilitated by specialized machines, unskilled but reasonably-paid work and, importantly, workers who could afford to buy the products they produced themselves. Mass production was made possible by these workers, who earned enough money to be consumers themselves and who, in fact, symbolize the crucial shift in the relationship between work and consumption on which capitalism is based. Hannah Arendt describes it aptly in *The Human Condition*: 'the workers' free time could now be spent not only on the necessities of life, but also, and above all on the superfluities'.<sup>14</sup>

From the very start, there were those who criticized consumerism and those who celebrated it. Feared were the unsettling effects of democratized luxury on social hierarchies, of free entry to the new department stores for compulsive female buyers, the corrupting force



of greed and jealousy. Critics bemoaned the fact that shopping was not rejected as a sinful activity.<sup>15</sup>

But slowly, when the newness of consumerism waned and the economic discourse took hold, the idea that jealousy could also be a positive quality, that greed could in fact be something to encourage gained momentum. The overall tone of writing and thinking on consumerism changed from 'preaching' contentment to stimulating the desire to get higher and want more. We have gotten used to being pushed to consume. In subtle ways, through advertising but also rather straightforwardly in the plethora of news items on the economic crisis and the need (or even duty) to consume in order to get us out of the economic crisis.<sup>16</sup>

The term Post-Fordism was introduced more recently to characterize our current labour situation and economy.<sup>17</sup> It stands for a service and knowledge economy, for information technology, the outsourcing of labour to low-wage countries, globalization and consumerism. These days we produce fewer products in the West, but more services.

Both Fordism and Post-Fordism require different skills from those who wish to 'participate' in these economies. Post-Fordism benefits from adaptability, flexibility, sensitivity and communication. The 'workers' in our time are the freelancers, the flex workers who (thanks to mobile devices and digital technologies) are always working, who can do anything, never say no and whose possession of the pre-eminent skill of Post-Fordism, namely management (of their own business or of a complex working

life), makes them highly versatile. These are the workers who are maybe not so much being exploited by corporations but by themselves, through an incorporation of a system where constant productivity is at the same time applauded as well as necessary in order to make ends meet. As Pascal Gielen has convincingly argued in his work on the artistic condition, it is artists and creative freelancers who are the ideal workforce of this Post-Fordist era, given their seemingly never ending capacity to adapt, be creative, find ways to make ends meet and get jobs done.<sup>18</sup>

This brief and blunt characterization of (Post-)Fordism's working conditions and the values attached to it shows how intimately consumerism is interwoven with our lives, with the way we organize things and think about what has value and what value is. Value is something we consume, that which can be consumed has value. The demand for a product or a resource determines its value. Working is interwoven into this thinking: we have value when we work, working brings value to our lives.

It is ironic, to say the least, that sustainability—a potential threat to consumerist values—has been co-opted by companies large and small and we can now safely consume sustainability. With casualness amounting to cynicism, many shops give an extra discount on Dutch Sustainability Day. What would be really sustainable is obviously to stop consuming and reconsider the value of those things we already own and to find value in that which is not consumable.

POST-FORD  
DEFINITION  
OF  
VALUE \*\*\*



And now what? We look for meaning, try to inject it into a system that has become very impersonal and devoid of value. Consumption is recharged with value by adding a personal touch, personal contact, a message and a feeling of doing good. But are we, through these methods, really addressing the emptiness? Are we not still lacking a value system to live by that provides us with what people need: something for the soul, something for the heart, something that unites us and lifts us up?

## ALTERNATIVE STRATEGIES

Our search for alternatives to understanding value took place in a very fertile climate. Over the last couple of decades we have witnessed, all around the world, people developing alternatives for current living conditions and living arrangements, for food production, healthcare, education, banking systems or doing politics. This upsurge of alternatives is not only something of our post-financial crisis times. From the birth of capitalism, activists, architects, engineers, artists, politicians and philosophers have looked for alternatives to the rational capitalist (and later neoliberal) system based on (over)production, consumption and debt. Strikingly, despite the richness in individual and communal attempts to organize alternatives, it remains hard for politicians, policy makers and concerned citizens, to envision alternatives to our current society on the meta, structural level.

Maybe, as Dutch theatre maker and writer Jan Ritsema argues, we should not aim for a meta revolution at the start. In his analysis of a 'we-can-do-it-ourselves economy', he

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outlines that this revolution starts small 'and then spreads like water, infiltrating, borderless, able to solidify as well as to evaporate.' Ritsema invites us 'to imagine that something simple and small can become complex, like Alan Turing's zeros and ones'. He urges us

to think whimsically, not linearly. Do not think of a concept first and then how to realize it, but think from what is there ... . Think that we do not have nor do we need to have solutions for everything from the start! Think small: there is no need to change the whole world at once. Think baby steps, think close. Think how to revolutionize yourself, not how to mass revolutionize others.<sup>19</sup>

For alternatives to the dominant understanding of value to take root, we actually, truly have to believe that things can be done differently, that it is possible to view reality differently, that more interpretations are indeed possible. For such a turnaround to occur, a 'tilting vision' is necessary. A tilting vision that confronts us with reality, shows us the world as we did not see it before, that removes or adds veils, and in that process confronts us with our own vulnerability or pettiness.

The tilting vision deals with perception, with how we see things and also with really seeing things. To quote the Russian writer and formalist Viktor Shklovsky, 'it is not about recognizing things, because ordinary objects that we see every day, we don't really see anymore. It is about perception—long and laborious perception'. Shklovsky felt that it was automatization that was turning us into unaware people who went through

Recognition  
vs.  
Perception

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life without really noticing it. In *Art as Technique* (1917) he writes:

Habitualisation devours works, clothes, furniture, one's wife, and the fear of war. If the whole complex lives of many people go on unconsciously, then such lives are as if they had never been. And art exists [so] that one may recover the sensation of life; it exists to make one feel things, to make the stone stony.<sup>20</sup>

As Shklovsky points out, the capacity for having or inducing a tilting vision can be found in particular among artists, including architects, writers, musicians, designers, playwrights and poets. Art is what re-awakens us, makes us feel again. Many artists succeed in creating a new reality by taking on the existing world and adding new value to everyday materials or images, from fluorescent lamps, a urinal, horse blankets and tiles to cutlery, the figure 5, a bottle of detergent, or a kiss. The simple wooden stick, one third of a broom stick, that the Belgian architect and artist René Heyvaert placed in a museum is a sublime gesture of value creation: the change of context determines whether something is art or not, whether the value is next to nothing or an exorbitant figure.<sup>21</sup> In a short newspaper article in the *Gentse Nieuwe Gids* from 1973, his work was described in true Shklovsky fashion:

René Heyvaert brings minimal art, with a great love for form based on simplicity. Small fragments of daily life, he presents them so that you have to—again—look at them in order to re-see them.

We need to look harder at what is already there. Solutions to current problems might already be amongst us, we only need to tilt our vision in order to see them.

## NINE PROPOSITIONS

This book centres on nine alternatives to dominant value structures that together constitute a possible way of thinking about what value is, how it is created and how it can be appropriated. We propose to centre stage values such as hesitation, care, giving and inviting in order to reclaim value from capital's logic where competition, certainty, monetarization, specialization, calculation, risk management, rationalism, efficiency and individualism are lauded.<sup>22</sup> These nine propositions are based on and inspired by the practice of very different artists, but also on that of philosophers, scientists, historians and economists. Together, these people point towards values that have been forgotten, underappreciated, disregarded or otherwise have no place within the dominant Western discourse. Included in this book are several reference texts by thinkers, artists and researchers, a visual essay of historical and contemporary works of art and architecture and three especially made artist's contributions. The nine propositions on value creation form the start of a new vocabulary to think and talk about value.<sup>23</sup> For far too many years, value has been enlisted and held hostage by the fast-forward thinkers of the neoliberal domain. We reclaim value and add a new vocabulary around it that enables us to engage in the debate on value on terms that are not primarily economic.<sup>24</sup>



With this book's focus on such 'softer' values, as well as through the propositions for value creation highlighted here, we take up a vulnerable position, one that can be attacked as being naive, too nice and not in line with reality. We are well aware of this vulnerability but believe in the need for a reclaiming of these values and the approach we take. This book is, as such, not undertaking traditional, radical Critique with a capital C nor aims to unmask a 'bad and evil system'. Rather, this book undertakes the work of highlighting concrete alternatives that are a form of resistance that is local, personal and very much open to pragmatism.

- 1 Tony Judt, *Ill Fares the Land* (London: Penguin Books, 2011). Oscar Wilde makes reference to value and worth on at least two occasions: in *Lady Windermere's Fan*:

Cecil Graham: What is a cynic?  
Lord Darlington: A man who knows the price of everything, and the value of nothing.  
Cecil Graham: And a sentimentalist, my dear Darlington, is a man who sees an absurd value in everything and doesn't know the market price of any single thing.

and, in *The Picture of Dorian Gray*:

So sorry I am late, Dorian. I went to look after a piece of old brocade in Wardour Street, and had to bargain for hours for it. Nowadays people know the price of everything, and the value of nothing.

- 2 In her inaugural address *De eland is een eigenwijs dier*, philosopher Ruth Benschop has convincingly analysed the importance of defending what she calls the seeming 'luxury values of diversity, slowness, complexity, uselessness'.
- 3 Kristin Rogghe and Wouter Hillaert, 'Achille Mbembe: Hoe kunst de toekomst voed', *rekto:verso* 62 (June–July 2014), [www.rektoverso.be/artikel/achille-mbembe-hoe-kunst-de-toekomst-voedt](http://www.rektoverso.be/artikel/achille-mbembe-hoe-kunst-de-toekomst-voedt).
- 4 As artist Neil Beloufa pointed out in his exhibition 'Counting on People', [http://www.stroom.nl/activiteiten/tentoonstelling.php?t\\_id=4058734](http://www.stroom.nl/activiteiten/tentoonstelling.php?t_id=4058734).
- 5 Thomas Piketty, *Capital in the Twenty-First Century* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2014).
- 6 Czech economist Tomáš Sedláček is on the forefront of rethinking value and economics. See for example his *Economics of Good and Evil: The Quest for Economic Meaning from Gilgamesh to Wall Street* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011).
- 7 Kilian Wawoe, *Bonus: Een Nederlands bankier vertelt* (Amsterdam: De Bezige Bij, 2010); Joris Luyendijk, *Swimming with Sharks: My Journey into the World of Bankers*, London: Guardian Faber Publishing, 2015).
- 8 For a recent analysis of the fashion industry as a system of value production in which value and use are mixed up and intertwined, see Femke de Vries, *Fashioning Value—Undressing Ornament* (Eindhoven: Onomatopée, 2015).
- 9 Beverley Skeggs, 'Values Beyond Value? Is Anything Beyond the Logic of Capital?', *The British Journal of Sociology* 65 (2013) 1, pp. 1, 3.
- 10 *Ibid.*, p. 16.
- 11 Arjo Klamer, *In Hemelsnaam! Over de economie van overvloed en onbehagen* (Kampen: Ten Have, 2005).
- 12 *Ibid.*, p. 3.
- 13 [www.youtube.com/watch?v=wCF3ywukQYA](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=wCF3ywukQYA).
- 14 Hannah Arendt, *The Human Condition* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1998, 1st ed. 1958), p. 133.
- 15 Further explored in Maaïke Lauwaert, *The Place of Play* (Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press, 2009).
- 16 The American economist and sociologist Thorstein Veblen (1857–1929) was one of the leading thinkers on the changing shape and function of consumerism. He coined the term 'conspicuous consumption' to denote the spending of money to publicly display economic power and social status. Veblen was a critic of producing for profit and emphasized the wasteful role of consumption for status. He denounced the social stratification of people and the

division of labour. Interestingly, Veblen combined his economic theories with Darwinism. The unequal distribution of wealth, labour and free time were social institutions stemming from the feudal period that continued to exist into modern times. Lords became businessmen, land became means of production. The effects were the same: it was the middle class and the working class who were employed in the industrialized society and their labour supported society. Thorstein Veblen, *Conspicuous Consumption* (London: Penguin Books, 2006).

- 17 See for example Pascal Gielen, *The Murmuring of the Artistic Multitude* (Amsterdam: Valiz, 2010).
- 18 See for example Pascal Gielen, *Creativity and Other Fundamentalisms* (Amsterdam: Mondriaan Fund; Heijningen: Jap Sam Books, 2013).
- 19 Jan Ritsema, 'A Liquid Revolution: For a Community without Money, Management, and Political Representation, a We-Can-Do-It-Ourselves Economy, a For-Free Economy', [www.academia.edu/9824997/A\\_liquid\\_Revolution\\_for\\_a\\_society\\_without\\_management\\_money\\_and\\_political\\_representation](http://www.academia.edu/9824997/A_liquid_Revolution_for_a_society_without_management_money_and_political_representation).
- 20 Viktor Shklovsky, 'Art as Technique' (1917), in *Theory of Prose* (Normal, IL: Dalkey Archive Press, 1990).
- 21 During the exhibition of this work at Stroom Den Haag ('There, I Fixed It'), artist collective gerlach en koop recreated this stick for their guided tour through the exhibition, intentionally creating confusion about whether they had exchanged the duplicate and original. The two sticks were that identical. Heyvaert, after all, had used a broom stick to create this work, a standard material still to be found and hence, easy to duplicate. gerlach en koop made the question of value tangible through this action ([http://www.stroom.nl/paginas/pagina.php?pa\\_id=4001057](http://www.stroom.nl/paginas/pagina.php?pa_id=4001057)).
- 22 We are aware of the fact that some of these propositions might seem impossible to achieve for people living and working

under what we have come to call precarious conditions. More and more people are stuck in a hand-to-mouth system where they try to make ends meet and temporary contracts and self-exploitation are the norm. People working with temporary or no contracts (as many do in the art world) have stopped thinking about play and boredom, they are caught in a cycle of what Jan Verwoert, in his eponymous article, calls exhaustion and exuberance. This is exactly one of the effects of our current value system that we want to protest against. On precarious working conditions, see also Isabell Lorey, *State of Insecurity: The Government of the Precarious*, London: Verso, 2015).

- 23 Although art and value are at the heart of this book, this book does not consider the complex relationship between art and market. Excellent books have been written on this topic over the last years, such as Diedrich Diederichsen's *On (Surplus) Value in Art* (Berlin: Sternberg Press, 2008) and more recently a special issue of *Texte zur Kunst* was dedicated to 'The Question of Value' (2012). This book looks at strategies found in the work of artists rather than the art market.
- 24 In reclaiming value, we make a comparable move to the reclaiming of 'a pragmatist Marx' by Philippe Pignarre and Isabelle Stengers. They use 'reclaiming' as it is being used by neo-pagan witches such as Starhawk. They write: 'Neo-pagan witches have learned that in the first place the technique or the art, the craft that they call magic is not what has to be rediscovered, in the sense of an authentic secret. It is a matter of reclaiming, of reactivating' (Philippe Pignarre and Isabelle Stengers, *Capitalist Sorcery: Breaking the Spell* [New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2011], p. 138). In this book too, we are not claiming that older values need to be rediscovered as if they were secrets hidden out of sight but merely lingering concepts and strong felt beliefs that we need to reclaim and reactivate.