

Maaïke Lauwaert &
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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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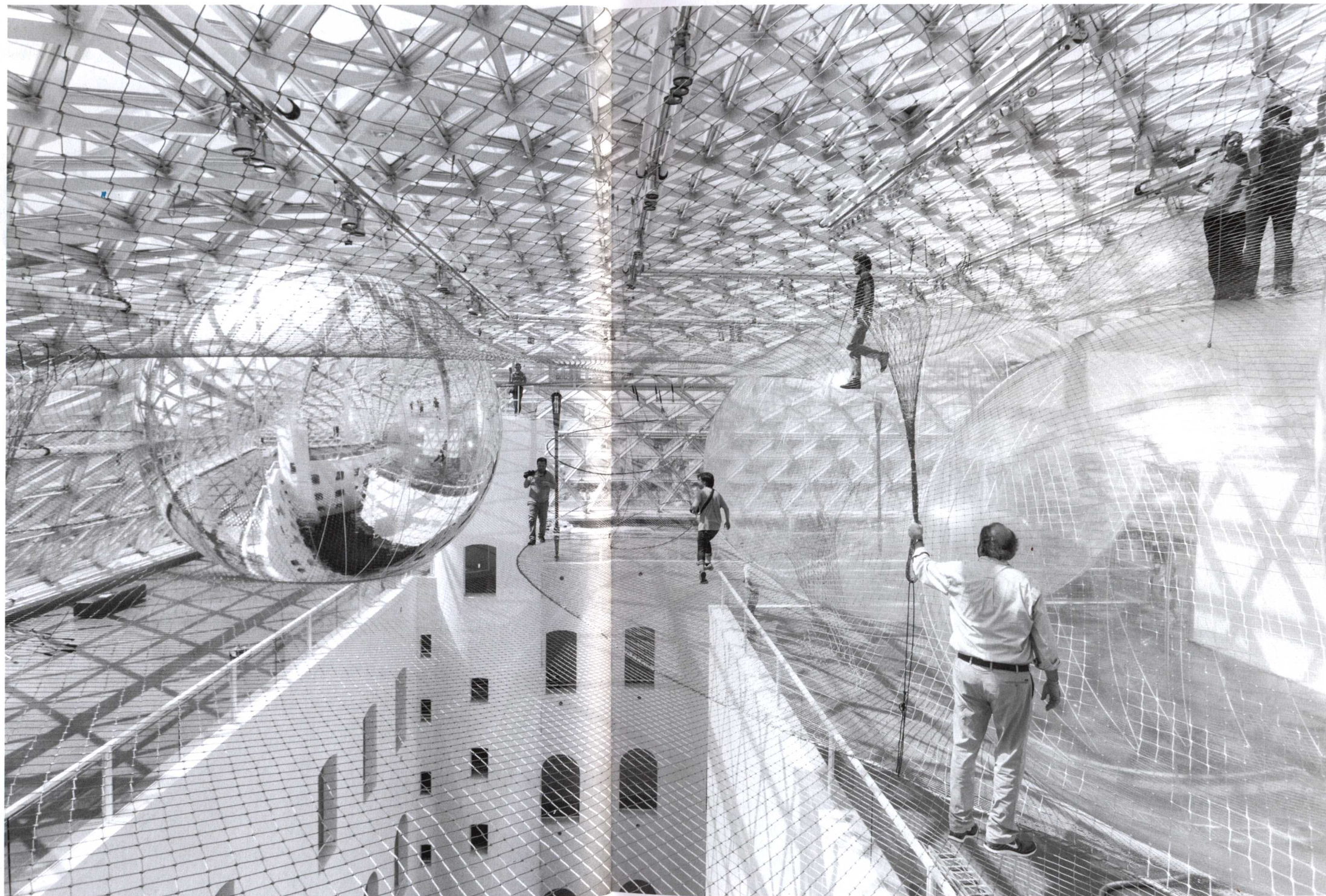
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Tomás Saraceno, *In orbit*, 2013



Palle Nielsen, *The Model. A Model for a Qualitative Society*, 1968

FACING VALUE

Reason being written by white male
↑ European philosopher

Roger Caillois, French philosopher and artist, quarrelled with surrealist André Breton about the Mexican jumping bean. Breton, as a follower of the mysterious and irrational, did not want to know why the bean jumped. Caillois on the other hand wanted to cut the bean open in order to find out why the bean sometimes moved or jumped. What drove Caillois was not a wish to disenchant the world. He was looking for a middle ground between disenchantment and enchantment, between research and poetry, between knowledge and dreams. After all, Caillois also believed in play and ivresse (drunkenness) as knowledge systems besides rational explanations.

The artist Reto Pulfer seems to hold this middle ground between disenchantment and enchantment as well, hovering as he does between an almost mathematical approach to his works and a completely intuitive, hands-on way of using materials. Pulfer speaks about his work in terms of a game, which is reflected in his use of materials, the system in which some elements reappear and change and in the made-up words and puns in the titles of his works.

An interview in *Mousse Magazine* illustrates this fittingly:

RP: 'Quite some titles of works give technical information: if a work has ZR in its title it means it is made with zippers and parts of it can be detached and attached in several ways. Such as the following mostly textile works: ZR Boot, ZR Der Exhibitionistische Eulenpinguin, ZR Autswaus O, ZR Potzwaus, ZR Innenzelt, ZR Der Exhibitionistische Bartpinguin, ZR Fliegzeug, ZR Spotwaus.'

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What else?

'If a work has the letter "O" in its title, it means it has "O-quality": like the letter O, it can be rotated. As in ZR Autswaus O, O Flanktons, or O Planktoms.'

And?

'Ofaz means a sofa: visitors can sit on it—like Ofaz so far, so good, and Ofaz 1442.'

And often there are numbers in the titles: Ofaz 1442, Steinspiel in 27 Zuständen, Aquariumspiel in 128 Zuständen, Die 60 Zustände des Z Feld, etc. Are these also part of a system?

'A number in the title usually indicates the total number of different ways to install a piece. Ofaz 1442 has six wooden boards to sit on, each board can be placed in any of the six fields ($6 \times 5 \times 4 \times 3 \times 2 = 720$), and furthermore each board can also be flipped upside down ($720 \times 2 = 1440$). There are two guitar strings I used in the performance to make music ($1440 + 2 = 1442$).'¹

This system has the suggestion of rationality but is clearly fluid, highly particular and very often hard to follow. Pulfer distrusts great schemes in which everything has its fixed place, therefore his system is a wolf in sheepskin. His music, language, objects, performances and installations as a whole examine the inexhaustible reservoir of possibilities that art offers, the endless variations between zippers, the O-quality of a work, and the number of ways in which it can be shown.

The term 'Zustand' is a central concept in his work, meaning a state, situation, the condition

something is in. A 'Zustand' is complete in itself but its stability is short-lived.²

Returning to Caillois, whose writing covered many domains and who famously wrote about play and games in *Les jeux et les hommes* from 1958 (later translated as *Man, Play and Games*), interesting lines can be drawn between play and value. Caillois sets himself the almost impossible task of classifying games and forms of playing. He starts by defining six core characteristics of play: (1) play is free (it should never be an obligation to play), (2) it is separated from other activities and takes place within a certain time-span and a pre-defined space, (3) the outcomes are uncertain and not fixed beforehand, (4) it is unproductive in the sense that no goods, wealth or other new elements are created during play, (5) it is rule-based and (6) make-believe, meaning players are aware of a kind of 'second reality or of a free unreality' that differs from real life.³

Caillois then sets out to organize games and playing into four different categories and forms depending on the dominant element of the game: competition (football or chess are good examples, as here one has control and the rules are clear), chance (with roulette or playing the lottery the outcome is completely out of your hands), simulation (this ranges from children playing at being a pirate to an actor playing Hamlet), and finally vertigo, a very interesting category that deserves a bit more attention. Vertigo, in Caillois' reasoning, is a characteristic of games, but also of rituals, in which one seeks the destruction of order and stability, in which one attempts 'to momentarily

GET THIS!

CONSIDER RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN PLAY & LEISURE

destroy the stability of perception and inflict a kind of voluptuous panic upon an otherwise lucid mind'. Caillois writes, 'it is a question of surrendering to a kind of spasm, seizure, or shock which destroys reality with a sovereign brusqueness', as in turning around until one falls to the ground dizzily.⁴ Caillois describes various forms of vertigo which he finds manifested in an extreme form in the 'culture complex known as shamanism'.⁵

Wherever found, it always involves a violent crisis and a temporary loss of consciousness in which the shaman becomes possessed by one or more spirits. He then embarks upon a magic journey through the other world, which he narrates and re-enacts. In some situations ecstasy is variously attained by narcotics, a hallucinating agent (agaric), chanting and convulsive movement, drums, steam baths, the fumes of incense or hemp, or even by hypnosis, through staring at the flames in the fireplace until entranced.⁶

Traditions comparable to shamanism, like voodoo or séances, are marginalized by rationalized and modernized societies, Caillois writes:

Whether it be cause or effect, each time that an advanced culture succeeds in emerging from the chaotic original, a palpable repression of the powers of vertigo and simulation is verified. They lose their traditional dominance, are pushed to the periphery of public life, reduced to roles that become more and more modern and

intermittent, if not clandestine and guilty, or are relegated to the limited and regulated domain of games and fiction where they afford men the same eternal satisfactions, but in sublimated form, serving merely as an escape from boredom or work and entailing neither madness nor delirium.⁷

It is especially in the arts that vertigo and simulation are kept alive, brought back from the peripheries into public life and given, once again, an important role. Sometimes in a tamed form, as Caillois writes, but sometimes with madness and delirium still intact. The delirium and loss of order and stability will be found mainly in performance art. Pulfer, for example, often performs playing live music inside his tent-like constructions. The references to Shamanism are easy to find.

The four dimensions of playing are not only found as individual phenomena; they can and often will be found in combination with each other, argues Caillois. Some football players or fans, for example, will experience vertigo as well, even if the game is heavily rule-based and competitive. And to make things even more complicated, these characteristics can also be placed on a line between two extremes. On the one end Caillois situates *paidia* (a turbulent way of playing, like in vertigo or simulation) and on the other ludus (a more calculated, rule-based way of playing, like in competition or chance). Ludus and paidia are not just opposites. Ludus should be regarded as complementary to and a refinement of paidia.⁸ Caillois regards the shift from paidia to ludus as a shift in time, as

a history of development: when children get older they refine their games in such a way that they change from carefree gaiety to rule-based conventions.

Caillois' work and writing, the work by artists such as Pulfer—who stand for an intuitive approach comfortable between the rational and the irrational—all entail a plea for allowing carefree gaiety to exist beyond childhood, for taking play and ivresse seriously as knowledge systems, for accepting the unproductiveness of playing and games outside of these domains.

Surrendering to the vertigo of a wild and untamed game, allowing that 'shock which destroys reality with a sovereign brusqueness', is something we hardly dare to do. But we need it in order to bring about a cultural change in which value is radically rethought and redistributed over new domains, new words, new options. A drunken rant might have equal value to a well-researched paper. Playing a board game at work might be as (un)productive as emailing for eight hours straight. Letting the shaman destroy our beliefs of what the world is made of, how it is organized and structured, is sorely needed.

1 David Lewis, 'Reto Pulfer: Some Whales and Some Ways of Installing a Sculpture,' *Mousse Magazine* 21 (2009), <http://moussemagazine.it/articolo.mm?id=493>.

2 http://stroom.nl/paginas/pagina.php?pa_id=7413124 Images!

3 Roger Caillois, *Man, Play and Games* (Illinois: University of Illinois Press, 1961), p. 9–10.

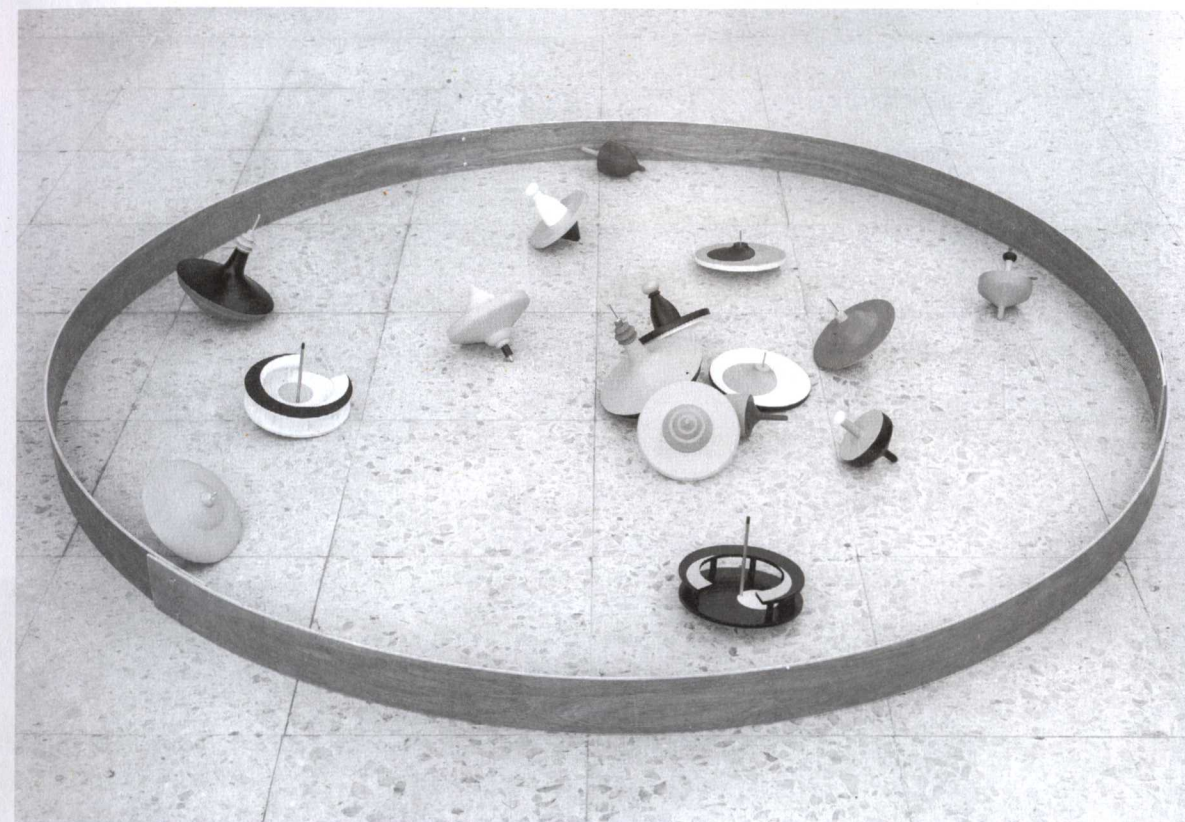
4 *Ibid.*, p. 23.

5 *Ibid.*, p. 89.

6 *Ibid.*, p. 90.

7 *Ibid.*, p. 97.

8 *Ibid.*, p. 29.

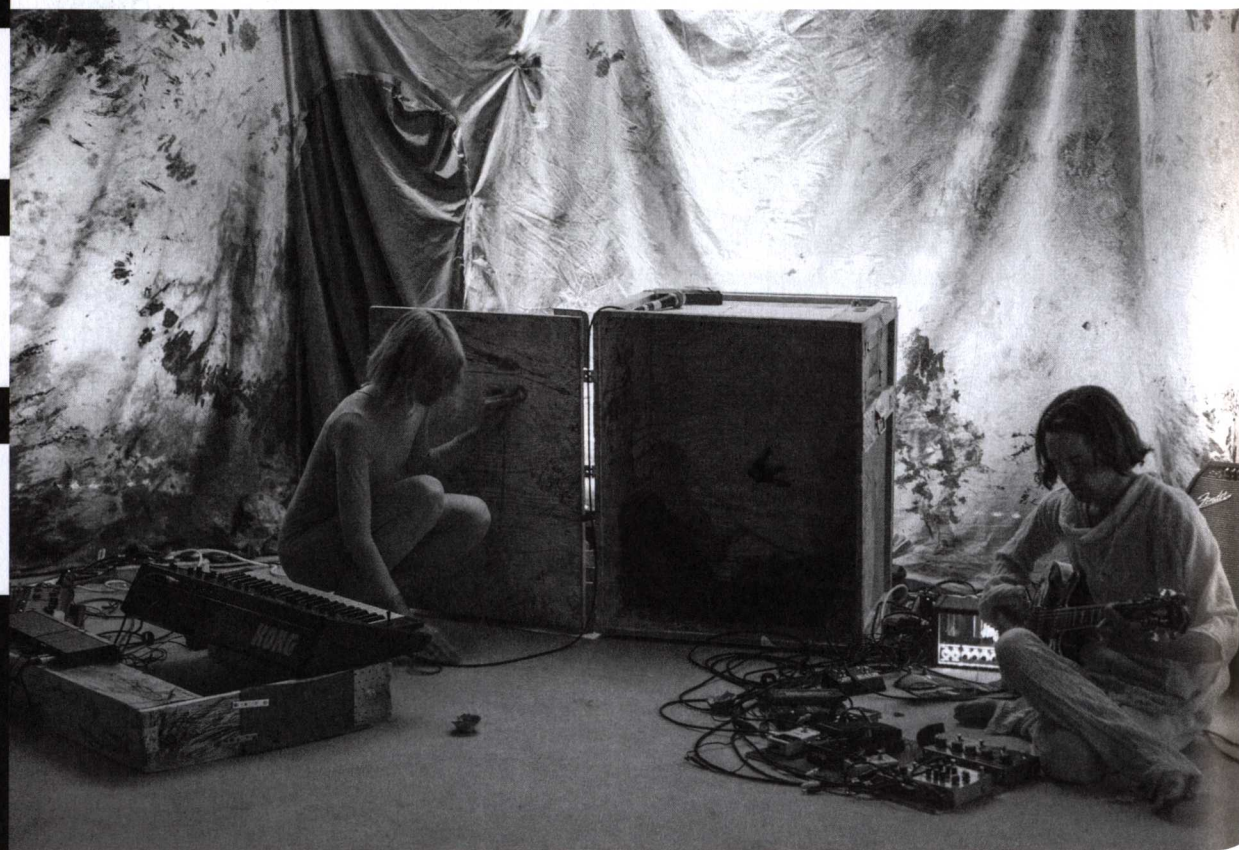


Céline Condorelli, *Models for a Qualitative Society*, 2016

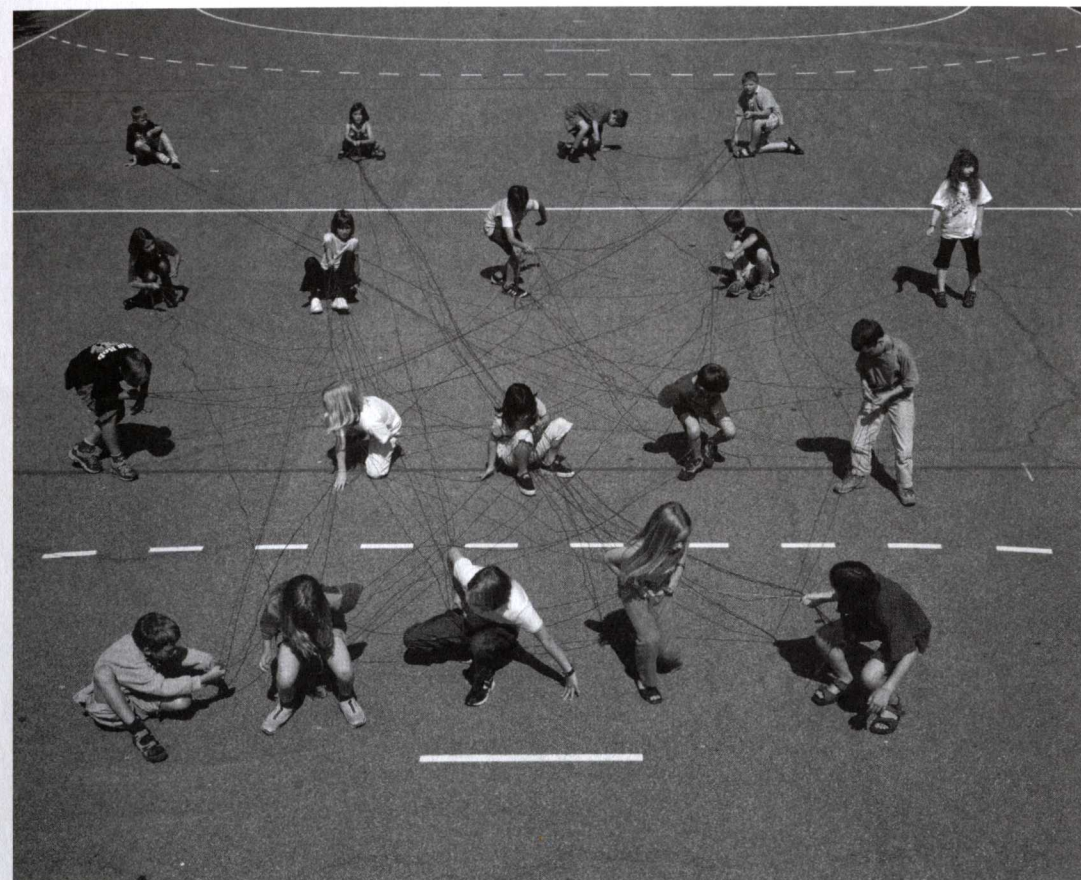


David Bernstein, *Zenwacky, Intropective Spatula*, 2015

FACING VALUE



Reto Pulfer, *Dehydrierte Landschaft des Zustands*, 2015



Uta Eisenreich, *Network, Teamwork*, 2002

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