Maaike 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

Yto Barrada, *Briques (Bricks) (Backsteine)*, 2003/2011

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On value 8

MONTAIGNE'S CAT

Richard Sennett

At the end of his life, the philosopher Michel de Montaigne (1333–92) inserted a question into an essay written many years before: 'When I am playing with my cat, how do I know she is not playing with me?'[1] The question summed up Montaigne's long-held conviction that we can never really plumb the inner life of others, be they cats or other human beings. Montaigne's cat can serve as an emblem for the demanding sort of cooperation explored in this book. My premise about cooperation has been that we frequently don't understand what's passing in the hearts and minds of people with whom we have to work. Yet just as Montaigne kept playing with his enigmatic cat, so too a lack of mutual understanding shouldn't keep us from engaging with others; we want to get something done together. This is the simple conclusion I hope the reader will draw from a complex study?

Montaigne provides a fitting coda to this book because he was a master of dialogical thinking. He was born the year Holbein painted *The Ambassadors.* Like Holbein's young emissaries to Britain, the young Montaigne had a political education as a member of the *parlement* of Bordeaux—a regional council of notables; like these two emissaries, he came to know the religious conflict between Catholics and Protestants close up. The civil wars of religion in the mid-sixteenth century convulsed the Bordeaux region, and threatened the village in which his family's own domains lay; tribalism of the religious kind led to the burning of enemy fields, the starvation-siege of towns, and random, terrorist murder. While Montaigne took the side of the Protestant leader Henri de Navarre, his heart was neither in religious dogma nor in professional politics. In 1570, two years after the death of his father, he retired to his estate, and even further within it to a tower within the south-east corner of the chateau, where he set up a room in which to think and to write. In this chamber, he began both to experiment with writing in a dialogical way and to think through its application to everyday cooperation.

Although he had retired to an intimate stage, and spent much of his time on the wine-making which supported the estate, he had not withdrawn mentally and emotionally from concern with the wider world. The great friend of his youth, Étienne de La Boétie, had written a *Discourse on Voluntary Servitude* (probably in 1553, at the age of twenty-two), a study of the blind desire to obey, and Montaigne elaborated many of its precepts in his own writings. The religious wars had implanted in both young men a horror of the craving for faith, for service to an abstract principle or to a charismatic leader. Had the two friends lived a century later, the theatrics of Louis XIV would have embodied for them the state's effort to induce passive, voluntary submission among a crowd of spectators to a leader. Had they lived in our own time, the charismatic despots of the twentieth century would equally have posed, to Montaigne and La Boétie, the threat of passive obedience. After La Boétie's early death, Montaigne continued to champion his friend's alternative idea of building political engagement from the ground up, based on ordinary cooperation in a community.

Montaigne was a seigneur who availed himself fully of his historic privileges, so there he certainly cannot be likened to a radical community organizer in the modern sense, yet he studied how the communal life around him was organized, hoping to gather from casual chats, the rituals surrounding wine-making and the care of dependants on his estate how La Boétie's project of participation built from the ground up might be realized.

Montaigne's emblematic, enigmatic cat lay at the heart of this project. What passes in the minds of those with whom we cooperate? Around this question Montaigne associated other aspects of practising cooperation: dialogic practices which are skilled, informal and empathic. Great writers usually inspire in us the sentiment that they are our contemporaries, speaking directly to us, and of course there's a danger in this. Still, Montaigne had a prophetic grasp about what these elements of cooperation entail.

Blaise Pascal singled out Montaigne as 'the incomparable author of "the art of conversation"'.[2] The 'art' of conversing is for Montaigne in fact the skill of being a good listener, as we have explored it in this book, a matter of attending both to what people declare and to what they assume; in one essay, Montaigne likens the skilled listener to a detective. He detested Bernard Williams's 'fetish of assertion' on the speaker's part. Fierce assertion directly suppresses the listener, Montaigne says; the debater demands only assent. In his essay, Montaigne observes that, in society more largely, the declaration of a speaker's superior knowledge and authority arouses doubt in a listener about his or her own powers of judgement; the evil of passive submission follows from feeling cowed.[3]

Montaigne disputes that the skilled detection of what others mean but do not say is the province of exceptional minds; this detective and contemplative skill, he insists, is a potentiality in all human beings, one suppressed by assertions of authority. The idea of everyday diplomacy would have made sense to him for just this reason; once freed from top-down commands, people require skill in keeping silent, in showing tact, in that lightening of differences which Castiglione called *sprezzatura*—at least this was so between Catholics and Protestants in the town next to Montaigne's estate when political authority collapsed as a result of the nation's religious wars; only the vigilant practice of everyday diplomacy allowed people in the town to carry on with life on the streets.

As a man moving around his local community, Montaigne enjoyed what we have called dialogic conversations more than dialectical arguments, tinged as all disputes were for him with the threat of descent into violence. He practised dialogics in his writing; his essays bounce from subject to subject, seeming to wander at times, yet the reader finishes each with the sense that the author has opened up a topic in unexpected ways, rather than narrowly scored points.

'Dialogics' is in fact a modern name for a very old narrative practice; the ancient historian Herodotus employs it, creating a mosaic of fragments which, as in Montaigne's essays, produce a coherent

CONSIDER FOR HOUSE BOOK PROJECT

1 Michel de Montaigne, 'An Apology for Raymond Sebond' in Montaigne, *Essays*, trans. M. A. Screech (London: Penguin, 2003), p. 505. My quotation, like the translation made by Saul Frampton, substitutes the words 'play' and 'playing' for Screech's literal 'passing time'; the original in French reads: 'qui sçait si elle passe son temps de moy plus que je ne fay d'elle' Cf. Saul Frampton, *When I am Playing with my Cat. How do I Know She is Not Playing with Me?* (London: Faber, 2011), p. 115.

2 Cf. Montaigne, 'The Art of Conversation', in *Essays*, p. 1044, note.

3 Ibid., pp. 1054–5.

large form, But Montaigne was, I think, the first to deploy this literary practice with a certain cunning: narrating in bits and pieces will suppress readerly aggression. By dissipating emotional temperature in the reader, as in an essay on cruelty, he hopes, ironically, to make the vices of cruelty stand out more in their sheer unreasonableness; he hopes in this way that, as he says, the reader will 'unlearn evil'.[4] For Montaigne, this was the point of dialogics—looking at things in the round to see the many sides of any issue or practice, the shifting focus making people cooler and more objective in their reactions.

As a man of his time, Montaigne was entranced by skill of a technical sort. Rather than the elaborate astronomical devices resting on Holbein's table, Montaigne was interested in more everyday crafts, such as carpenters' lathes, pew culinary tools; like clockwork spits for roasting, and above all he was fascinated by plumbing; water pumps for ornamental fountains and cattle basins seem particularly to have fascinated him. These prosaic interests become incorporated into a pair of essays, 'Habit' and 'Same Design: Different Outcomes'. Habits, he says, steady a skill, but the rule of unchanging habit is a tyranny; good habits are those 'designs' left free to produce different 'outcomes'. This precept applies equally, he argues, to machines and to men.[5] It seems obvious to him, and so he leaves it as just a stray observation. We've sought in these pages to dig deeper, to show that by modulating their habits people become more interactive, both in exploring objects and in engaging with one another. The craft ideal has governed our exploration of making and repairing physical things and social relations.

Montaigne was, Sarah Bakewell observes, the philosopher par excellence of modesty, particularly the self-restraint which helps people to engage with others.[6] Modesty encapsulates Montaigne's idea of civility, but his version little resembles the account of civility given by Norbert Elias. As a man, Montaigne was easy in his body, and wrote frequently about it, going into details about how his urine smells or when he likes to shit. Modesty without shame: Montaigne's idea of civility is in part that, if we can be easy with ourselves, we can be easy with other people. In a late essay he writes of informality,

> in whatever position they are placed, men pile up and arrange themselves by moving and shuffling about, just as a group of objects thrown into a bag find their own way to join and fit together, often better than they could have been arranged deliberately.[7]

These words could have been written by Saul Alinsky or Norman Thomas; they should have guided the programmers of Google Wave.

'Our self', Montaigne writes in an essay on vanity, 'is an object full of dissatisfaction, we can see there nothing but wretchedness and vanity.' Yet this is not a counsel to engage in Luther's anguished self-struggle: 'so as not to dishearten us, Nature has very conveniently cast the action of our sight outwards.'[8] Curiosity can 'hearten' us to look beyond ourselves. As has appeared in the course of this book, looking outward makes for a better social bond than imagining others are reflected in ourselves, or as though society itself was constructed as a room of mirrors. But looking outward is a skill people have to learn.

4 Montaigne, 'On Cruelty', ibid., p. 478.
5 Montaigne, 'On Habit', and 'Same Design; Different Outcomes', ibid., pp. 122–39 and 140–49; I am connecting the argument made on p. 130 to pp. 143–4. It should be noted that Montaigne, speaking as a *grand seigneur*, also praises the traditional habits as good in themselves, as on p. 134.
6 Sarah Bakewell, *How to Live: A Life of Montaigne* (London: Chatto and Windus, 2010).
7 Montaigne, 'On Experience'. Here I prefer the translation of Frampton to that of Screech: Frampton, *When I am Playing*, p. 270.
8 Montaigne, 'On Vanity', in *Essays*, p. 1132.

Montaigne thinks empathy rather than sympathy is the cardinal social virtue. In the record he kept of life on his small country estate, he constantly compares his habits and tastes with those of his neighbours and workers; of course he is interested in the similarities, but he takes particular note of their peculiarities: to get along together, all will have to attend to mutual differences and dissonances.

Taking an interest in others, on their own terms, is perhaps the most radical aspect of Montaigne's writing. His was an age of hierarchy in which inequalities of rank seemed to separate seigneurs and servants into separate species, and Montaigne is not free of this attitude; nonetheless, he is curious. It's often said that Montaigne is one of the first writers to dwell on his own personal self; this is true but incomplete. His method of self-knowledge is to compare and to contrast; he stages differentiating encounters and exchanges again and again in the pages of his essays. Frequently he is gratified by his own distinctiveness, but almost as often, as with his cat, he is perplexed by what makes others different.

Like Holbein's table, Montaigne's cat was an emblem fashioned at the dawn of the modern era to convey a set of possibilities; the table represented in part new ways of making things, the cat represented new ways of living together. The cat's backstory is Montaigne's, and La Boetié's, politics: cooperative life, freed of command from the top. What happened to these promises of modernity? In a pregnant phrase, the modern social philosopher Bruno Latour declares, 'We have never been modern.'[9] He means specifically that society has failed to come to grips with the technologies it has created; nearly four centuries after Holbein, the tools on the table remain mystical objects. As concerns cooperation, I'd amend Latour's declaration: we have yet to be modern; Montaigne's cat represents human capabilities society has yet to nurture.

The twentieth century perverted cooperation in the name of solidarity. The regimes which spoke in the name of unity were not only tyrannies; the very desire for solidarity invites command and manipulation from the top. This was the bitter lesson Karl Kautsky learned in his passage from the political to the social Left, as have too many others since. The perverse power of solidarity, in its us-against-them form, remains alive in the civil societies of liberal democracies, as in European attitudes toward ethnic immigrants who seem to threaten social solidarity, or in American demands for a return to 'family values'; the perverse power of solidarity makes itself felt early among children, reaching into the way they make friends and construct outsiders.

Solidarity has been the Left's traditional response to the evils of capitalism. Cooperation in itself has not figured much as a strategy for resistance. Though the emphasis is in one way realistic, it has also sapped the strength of the Left. The new forms of capitalism emphasize short-term labour and institutional fragmentation; the effect of this economic system has been that workers cannot sustain supportive social relations with one another, in the West, the distance between the elite and the mass is increasing, as inequality grows more pronounced in neo-liberal regimes like those of Britain and the United States; members of these societies have less and less a fate to share in common. The new capitalism permits power to detach itself from authority, the elite living in global detachment from responsibilities to others on the ground, especially during times of

9 Bruno Latour; *We Have Never Been Modern*, trans. Catherine Porter (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1993).

economic crisis. Under these conditions, as ordinary people are driven back on themselves, it's no wonder they crave solidarity of some sort—which the destructive solidarity of us-against-them is tailor-made to provide.

It's little wonder also that a distinctive character type has been bred by this crossing of political and economic power, a character type seeking to relieve experiences of anxiety. Individualism of the sort Tocqueville describes might seem to La Boétie, were he alive today, a new kind of voluntary servitude, the individual in thrall to his or her own anxieties, searching for a sense of security' in the familiar. But the word 'individualism' names, I believe, a social absence as well as a personal impulse: ritual is absent. Ritual's role in all human cultures is to relieve and resolve anxiety, by turning people outward in shared, symbolic acts; modern society has weakened those ritual ties. Secular rituals, particularly rituals whose point is cooperation itself, have proved too feeble to provide that support.

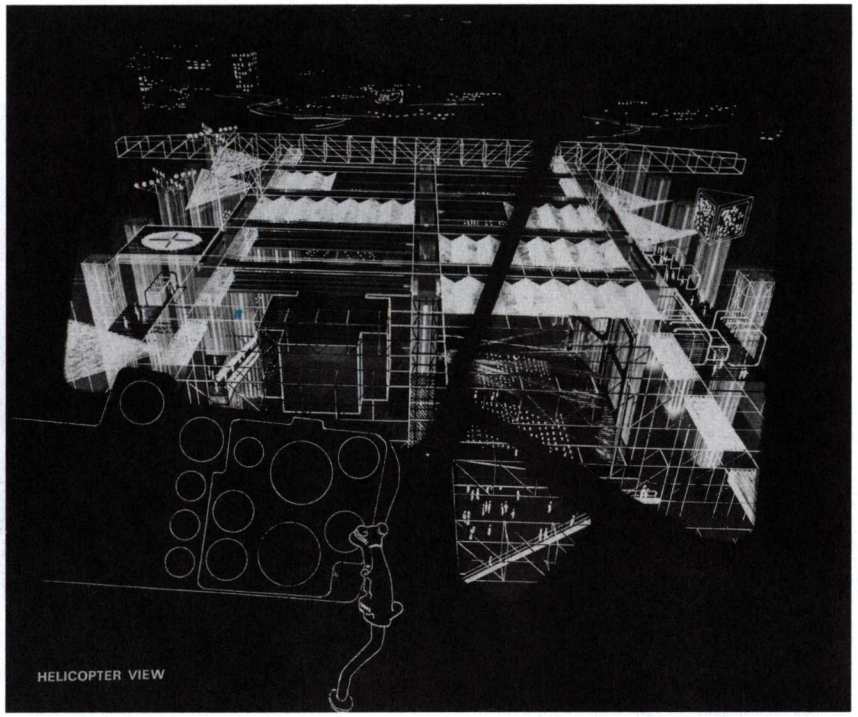
The nineteenth-century historian Jacob Burckhardt spoke of modern times as an 'age of brutal simplifiers'.[10] Today, the crossed effect of desires for reassuring solidarity amid economic insecurity is to render social life brutally simple: us-against-them coupled with you-are-on-your-own. But I'd insist that we dwell in the condition of 'not yet'. Modernity's brutal simplifiers may repress and distort our capacity, to live together, but do not, cannot, erase this capacity. As social animals we are capable of cooperating more deeply than the existing social order envisions, for Montaigne's emblematic, enigmatic cat is lodged in ourselves.

Together. The Rituals, Pleasures and Politics of Cooperation. London: Penguin, 2012, pp. 274–281

Richard Sennett (1943) is an American sociologist who has explored how individuals and groups make social and cultural sense of material facts, from the cities they live in to the labour they do. In his most recent trilogy of works—*The Craftsman, Together* and *The Open City*—he looks at more positive aspects of labour in a late-capitalist society.

10 The phrase Burckhardt first used, absurdly, in describing the foundations of Islam, in *Gesamtausgabe* (Historical Fragments), vol. 7, ed. Albert Oeri and Emil Dürr (Basle, 1929), pp. 266ff. The Burckhardt scholar Karl Weintraub argued, in his lectures, that the phrase modulated in Burckhardt's mind to become a label for Western modernity; this view informs Weintraub's book *Visions of Culture* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1966). It is not quite the view, I should note, of Burckhardt's recent biographer, Kurt Meyer, *Jacob Burckhardt* (Munich: Fink, 2009).

Frank van Klingeren's De Meerpaal, Dronten, 1968

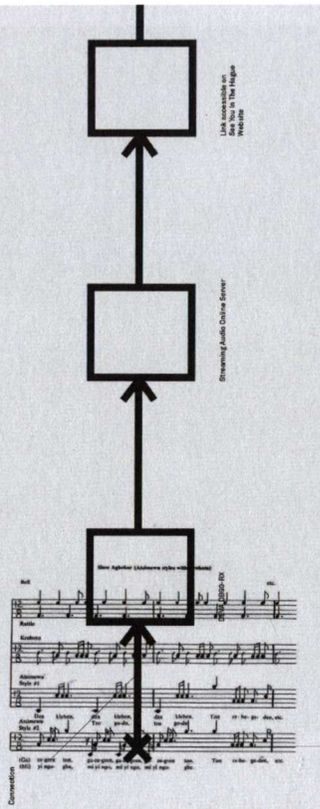


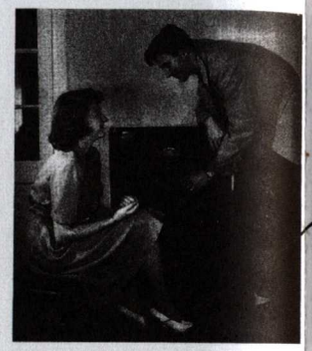
Cedric Price, *Fun Palace*, perspective from the Lea River site on photomontage, ca. 1964

John Körmeling, Happy Street, Dutch Pavilion at the World Expo 2010 in Shanghai

Cedric Price, *Fun Palace*: perspective from the Lea River site on photomontage, ca. 1964

Adrien Tirtiaux, *Prototype for an endless column*, 2016





By the 1930s radio listening had become a part of everyday life. Harcourt Index.

their minds. From rock 'n' roll to rap to hip-hop, music did more to bridge cultural gaps than anything else.

A QUESTION OF CULTURE

As commercial radio grew in popularity, the U.S. government felt obliged to form a body that would *oversee it.*

1901 Marconi sends successful transatlantic wireless signals.

1904 Hugo Gernsback is selling Telimco wireless sets commercially. John Ambrose Fleming invents the vacuum tube.

1905 Lee De Forest improves the vacuum tube and calls it an audion.

1906 Reginald Fessenden makes the first audio wireless broadcasts. The crystal radio set is born.

1909 The Marconi Institute opens in New York City to train wireless telegraphy operators. (The school is changed in the 1920s to the RCA institute, then in 1971 to the TCI College of Technology.)

1912 The RMS *Titanic* sinks. David Sarnoff plays a role in transmitting names of the lost. The Radio Listening Act is passed in the United States.

1914 American Society of Composers, Authors, and Publishers (ASCAP) is formed. The Canadian government forces amateur wireless operators off the air.

1915 Lee De Forest's Highbridge radio station begins broadcasting.

1916 David Sarnoff writes the Radio Music Box memo while with American Marconi.

1917 The Bolsheviks of Russia begin political broadcasting. The U.S. government forces amateur wireless operators off the air.

1918 Edwin Armstrong invents the superheterodyne circuit.

1919 American Marconi is reformed into Radio Corporation of America (RCA).

1920 Frank Conrad's KDKA begins broadcasting out of Pittsburgh. Marconi sets up station 2MT in England.

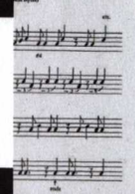
1921 Amateur radio begins in Europe.

1922 Wendall Hall becomes the first paid regular performer on radio.

1923 The *EverReady Hour* and the *Roxy and His Gang* show begin to air. The National Association of Broadcasters (NAB) is formed. The Operadio portable radio is available.

1924 Aimee Semple McPherson begins broadcasting. WGN (the World's Greatest Network) goes on the air in Chicago.

1925 The Chicago Cubs baseball team begins airing live play-by-play. The Scopes's "Monkey Trial" airs over WGN.



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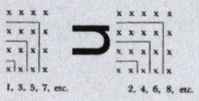


Intohyi y'amaraso iraytera
The fate of two fingers is to live together

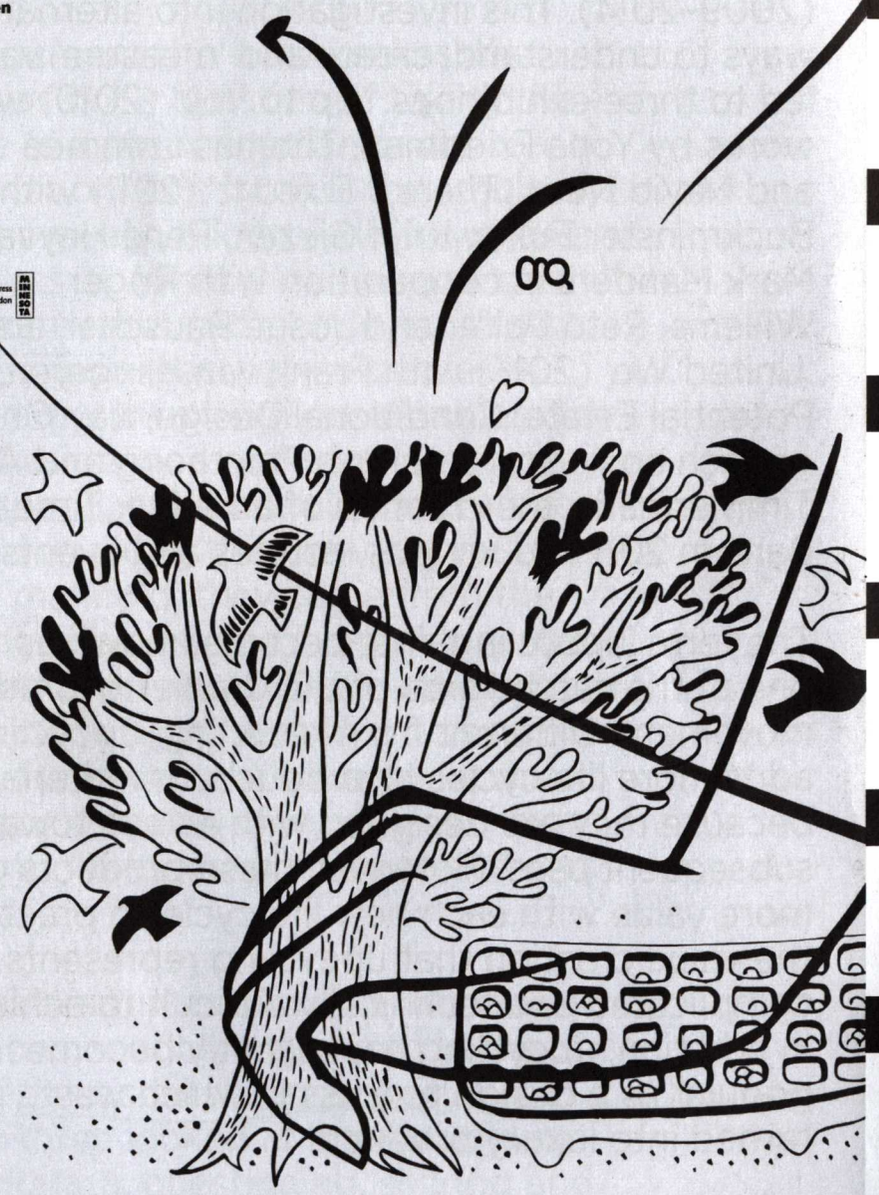
In the Break

The Aesthetics of the Black Radical Tradition

Fred Moten

University of Minnesota Press
Minneapolis • London

The French visu
flexible arms on



Ifumbire y'ubucuti ni amagambo
Friendship takes place in encounters

Christian Nyampeta, *How to live together: Radius*, 2014 (detail)