

# The Trouble with Value

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# Introduction

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In the last decade of his life, Marcel Duchamp is said to have signed as many reproductions of his works as he could, in order to purposely 'devalue his work'.<sup>①</sup> Logical contradictions such as this one were a defining feature of Duchamp's artistic oeuvre, which included the defacement of the Mona Lisa (*L.H.O.O.Q.*, 1919) or notoriously elevating a urinal to the status of art (*Fountain*, 1917). In many ways, his practices of appropriation and the creation of the readymade were forward-looking and have become common in the sphere of art today. However, he could have not known at the time that his attempt to devalue his work would not succeed. For instance, an authorised replica of *Fountain* sold for over US\$1,6 million at Sotheby's in New York in 1999,<sup>②</sup> and which private collector or art museum would not be happy to include a signed

<sup>①</sup> Footnote in Martha Buskirk and Mignong Nixon (eds.), *The Duchamp Effect: Essays, Interviews, Round Table*, MIT Press, Cambridge, 1999, p. 66.

<sup>②</sup> 'Marcel Duchamp Artwork That Has Reached the Highest Prices in Auction', Widewalls, <https://www.widewalls.ch/marcel-duchamp-artwork/l-h-o-o-q-1960/>, accessed 5 January 2020.

Duchamp in their collection? Regardless, this anecdote shines a light on the unstable relationship of value and authenticity in the sphere of art today.

Can we still say that something is more valuable because it is singular, unique? McKenzie Wark suggests that it is not necessarily the rarity of an object that makes it important in our present time, but that it is its property of 'spreadability' that increases its value.<sup>③</sup> In Wark's conception, information plays a key role in this process – the more a work is talked about, written about and circulated as image or text, the more value it gains, regardless of the number of its copies. In other words, what makes a work valuable is not necessarily its uniqueness and oneness, but rather its degree of circulation, whereas the work itself is 'a derivative of the value of its simulations'.<sup>④</sup> Since his entree to the canon of art, despite Duchamp's wishes, there has been no stopping the gluttony of art markets and art consumers.<sup>⑤</sup>

Simply being well known and recognisable by many are not enough to make an artwork as 'important' or generally accepted as valuable. The most widely acclaimed artworks carry qualities that grant them the potential to become vessels of desire – in affect or experience. As an experience, this may translate to being genuinely, personally touched by an artwork or simply feeling delirious as a result of winning a high-priced blue-chip artwork at auction. Affect, on the other hand, is a non-conscious experience of intensity that is neither personal nor social.<sup>⑥</sup> Yet where and how such is affective experience generated? Sara Ahmed provides a helpful insight here, placing the source of affect neither in the (art) object itself, nor in the language or images (information) surrounding it. In her words, 'affect does not reside in an object or sign, but is an effect of the circulation between objects and signs'.<sup>⑦</sup> As with Wark's formula, Ahmed concludes that as affective value is acquired over time, the more a sign circulates, the more affective they become and 'the more they appear to "contain" affect'.<sup>⑧</sup>

These viral and qualities of art that create the vertigo of circulation of affective experience and that of information have run in the undercurrent of my discussions with Krzysztof Siatka, co-curator of the eponymous exhibition project *The Trouble with Value*. Our view was not intended to be comprehensive,

<sup>③</sup> McKenzie Wark, 'My Collectible Ass', *e-flux*, October 2017, <https://www.e-flux.com/journal/85/156418/my-collectible-ass/>, accessed 11 November 2019.

<sup>④</sup> Ibid.

<sup>⑤</sup> Albeit, admittedly, there are better examples than Marcel Duchamp's work to illustrate the high demand and skyrocketing heights of art auction results.

<sup>⑥</sup> Erik Shouse, 'Feeling, Emotion, Affect', *M/C Journal*, <http://journal.media-culture.org.au/0512/03-shouse.php>, accessed 21 January 2020.

<sup>⑦</sup> Sara Ahmed, 'Affective Economies', *Social Text* 79, 22:2, Summer 2004, pp. 117–39

<sup>⑧</sup> Ibid.

rather it aimed to point at the convoluted nature and changing relationship of contemporary art to processes of valuation.

Our analysis took the form of two exhibitions, at Bunkier Sztuki, Kraków, Poland (2017–18) and Onomatopee, Eindhoven, The Netherlands (2018), and looked at these developments in a comparative mode of artistic practices that belong to the neo-avant-garde movement to those of today. Practitioners from the post-1960 neo-avant-garde movement were still able to deliver substantial shock value in their work, yet also clearly understood the mechanisms of the art world and its markets, and oftentimes responded to it with irony and a critical attitude. Thinking about our contemporary times, one might rightfully wonder if it's still possible to be avant-garde today. Can non-conformity and artistic radicality escape the neutralising tendencies of the structures that uphold the field of art, its markets and the all-swallowing tendencies of capitalism?

A contemporary artwork – no longer the product of the artist as ‘master craftsman’, nor necessarily a rare object – relies deeply on its modes of dissemination, on its narratives, on access to language, and on the infrastructure that enables its circulation. Alongside the question of the value of artistic labour, these elements formed the nucleus of my and Siatka's considerations, and the structure of this publication.

*The Trouble with Value* is divided into seven chapters that follow the seven major topics of our inquiry. Through the following contributions by writers, art historians, critics and artists, it expands the boundaries of the exhibitions and lends itself to further analysis and understanding.

In the introductory chapter, **Anthony Iles and Marina Vishmidt's** piece ‘Arte Futile: The Gift That is No-one's to Give and No-one Wants to Receive’ explores art's relation to labour under the capitalist economical regime, where alienated ‘labouring subjects less and less identify themselves with labour’. Iles and Vishmidt's analysis problematises the concept of artistic autonomy and discusses the political role of art today.

**Arkadiusz Póltorak** writes about contemporary art's relation to processes of legitimation. Following Shyon

Baumann's thesis that ‘legitimation occurs when the unaccepted is made accepted through consensus’, Póltorak unpacks the politics and crises of this process in the contemporary. Against rising nationalism, populism and austerity, he concludes that it is still necessary to fight for the *public* authority of art.

The next chapter, *Im/Material*, looks into neo-avant-garde practices and its various methods, such as the dematerialisation of an art object, and the transformations of the artwork's materiality. **Krzysztof Siatka's** essay takes as its starting point the concept of *spolia*, an art historical term used to designate architectural elements that were repurposed and reused in other buildings. He guides the reader through various examples from recent art history as well as artworks from *The Trouble with Value* exhibition project, in order to draw parallels between the usage of *spolia* and postmodern and contemporary artistic methods of appropriation, assemblage, referencing and contextualisation.

In a conversation between **Krzysztof Siatka** and Prof. **Maria Hussakowska-Szyszeko**, who is an art historian and partner of the late conceptual artist Feliks Szyszeko, the two elaborate on Szyszeko's artistic practice. Their discussion ranges across his key exhibitions and works, highlighting his playful yet sharp attitude towards central figures in the history of modern art, such as Marcel Duchamp or Piet Mondrian. Instead of delivering a critique, what becomes clear is that Szyszeko's attitude was rather to ‘toy’ with art history.

The conversation is followed by a reproduction of **Ewa Partum's** work, a noted example of Polish mail art, which is an invitation card to Partum's exhibition that took place at Galeria Adres in Łódź, Poland in 1974. Partum founded the gallery in 1972 with the aim to question the institutional framework imposed on art, largely focusing on ‘the art of correspondence’ in order to facilitate free exchange of ideas between artists.© The card, printed with the title *Now My Idea Is a Golden Idea* in golden letters, operated as a juxtaposition of the immateriality of an idea and symbolism of gold. For *The Trouble with Value* exhibition's Krakow edition as well on the pages of this book, the reproduced card gained another meaning, materialising as an art historical object and document.

©  
Description based on:  
M. Jankowska, ‘Adres’  
*in search for a site, that is, the Gallery as Idea*,  
Ewa Partum 1965–2001,  
Badischer Kunstverein,  
Karlsruhe/Muzeum  
Narodowe, Warszawa,  
2001, <https://artmuseum.pl/pl/filmoteka/praca/partum-ewa-dokumentacja-galerii-adres>, accessed  
11 January 2020.

Bridging the second and third chapter of the book, **Mladen Stilić** calls for the abandonment of work and times of idleness in his seminal text, 'The Praise of Laziness'. Laziness is a difficult process, it requires practice and devotion. Originally written in 1993, the text evokes the 24/7 economy of art, the anxiety of stopping and the pain of doing nothing. Concurrently, the text resonates with Vishmidt and Iles' assertion in the opening chapter of this book that art has a political importance and capacity to 'interrupt or displace capitalist time'.<sup>①②</sup>

The third chapter revolves around questions of the value of artistic labour. In my text, I attempt to make a claim on the disappearance of the figure of the Genius. Built up by popularised assumptions, the genius has come to be understood as an individual that responds to a 'higher calling', a desire to create. Since the product of their labour is considered 'exceptional', this understanding also stands in the way of their being remunerated for their work.

**Anca Benera** and **Arnold Estefán** contribute with four drawings – compressed monthly charts that represent the amount of time they have spent on their day jobs, earning their living, instead of making art. Since 2012, the artists have been measuring these moments by capturing the movement of the cursor on their screen when working as graphic designers, instead of dedicating their time to their art practice. Thus, the abstract drawings depict the amount of hours spent in front of the computer when not making art. The recorded period in this book corresponds to the exhibition duration at Onomatopee (April – July 2018).

**Rachel Carey's** text departs from her film installation *Liquidate It All Away*, which combined items found at flea markets and objects discarded by Onomatopee and Bunkier Sztuki, and presented them alongside clay sculptures created by the artist. Taking as its starting point the mode of valuation at estate sales, each object on display was priced by a professional appraiser based strictly on their use- or material value, rather than their possible status as artworks. Alongside image stills from her film, Carey's text provides a backdrop to the work and expands on the emotional and individual value granted to objects.

<sup>①②</sup>  
Anthony Iles and Marina Vishmidt, 'Arte Futile: The Gift That Is No-one's to Give and Which No-one Wants to Receive', *The Trouble with Value*, Onomatopee, Eindhoven, 2020, p. 29.

Using tools of data mining, statistical extrapolation, abstraction and fiction, the contributions in the fourth chapter engage with the topic of the infrastructure of art and the larger neoliberal system that upholds it. In their writing titled 'Map of Invisible Matter' artist duo **Fokus Grupa** elaborate on their long-term data research into the global contemporary art field, based on the announcements of the prominent art publishing and PR platform, *e-flux*. Over the past two decades, *e-flux* has come to dominate the flow of information, such as exhibition announcements, and the discourse on art. Fokus Grupa created a map of *e-flux's* activity from 2000, which spotlights the activities of *e-flux* clients and their performance. The goal of the growing database, whose work is ongoing, is to map the 'invisible matter' of the global contemporary art world, its actors and their relations.

**Femke Herregraven's** poetic text follows the narration of her film *Sprawling Swamps*. The film maps fictional infrastructures and geographical instability. Herregraven uses satellite- and self-generated imagery that maps unstable territories – swamps, ice caps, shifting shorelines – in order to dig into the cracks in our contemporary value system and imagine potential new forms of value into the future, such as exhaustion, gossip or even empathy.

**Monique Hendriksen's** contribution, 'On Everything' is a joyful and bright-witted text. It is about everything and nothing and, perhaps, it is also about the forces of creation, existence and cycles of life, where everything collapses into nothing and grows into totality again. The text is accompanied by illustrations from Hendriksen's video *Naturally False*, made for The Trouble with Value exhibition series. In this imagery, Hendriksen works towards an aesthetics that seems, on the one hand familiar yet on the other looks oddly unnatural, even artificial. In her films, instead of creating new imagery, she looks for models to represent the invisible, 'as diagrams depict abstractions'.<sup>①②</sup>

The following chapter, Other Monuments, brings together contributions that engage with personal or collective events in history. To do so, they employ various modes of dissemination, and circulation of images and information. **Karolina Grzywnowicz's** work *Still Life* resembles a commonly used industrial palette, yet it is made out of certified wood from

<sup>①②</sup>  
From a conversation with the artist and editor.

a 1350 year-old tree, grown in the Białowieża Forest. Despite national and international protest, in 2017 the Polish government authorised the logging of this last remaining primeval forest in Europe. The text, which is co-authored by **Aleksandra Janus**, provides a wider frame of reference for the sculpture and presents data of the low selling prices of wood logged in the forest. It is accompanied by images from the making of *Still Life*.

The chapter continues with more images, in this instance selected from the series titled *Geo* by **Kornel Janczy**. Janczy modifies satellite photographs of landscapes, clouds and human settlements with straightforward drawings. The lines of a marker create boundaries, artificial divisions, and name certain areas. Their humorous tone is, however, tempered by commentary on contemporary politics and rising nationalism.

**Gert Jan Kocken's** work, *Madonna of Nagasaki, Defacement 9 August 1945*, is a photographic portrait of a sculpture from the Urakami Cathedral, which was destroyed in the bombing of Nagasaki in 1945. The compelling image not only points to the power of images that were paradoxically created by destruction, but also speaks to the viewers' subjectivities and experiences. Kocken's second piece represented in the book, *Judenporzellan* portrays two porcelain ape figures. The decorative items were produced at the porcelain factory of Frederic the Great, King of Prussia, in the late-eighteenth century. In order to obtain official certificates and enjoy civil rights, the Jewish population was coerced into purchasing the figurines, one of which apparently belonged to philosopher Moses Mendelssohn. When the work is installed, the original photographs are displayed alongside a stack of posters – reproductions of the image – that visitors are free to take away and circulate. In this book, the reprinted images are presented together with a short fragment from German author Fanny Lewald's memoir *Mein Lebensgeschichte*, which includes a testimony about the sculptures' origin.©©

In 1994, Polish artist **Maciej Toporowicz** posted 150 envelopes from Rome to New York. There should have been nothing unusual about this act, had each of the envelopes not carried a stamp created by the

artist that featured the profile of former Italian dictator Benito Mussolini. The artist's action was a response to rising nationalism in Italy and beyond. Alongside a reproduction of the stamp, the works *Forza Italia* and *First Nation*, Toporowicz's text situates the pieces in their original context and bitter relevance today.

**Sława Harasymowicz's** writing 'The Jacket' is part of a long-term enquiry into a specific building in Kraków. Based on documents found in the post-1945 files at The National Archives in the city, the story describes the theft of a jacket. The edited translation of the records reveals a Kafkaesque story, recorded in a monotonous, bureaucratic voice, and contains multiple discrepancies. The building where the incident took place was also a childhood home of the author and, as she found out, had been shelter to hundreds of displaced people or 'repatriates', just over half a century earlier. 'The Jacket' is the record of a lost item, the sole property of a displaced person, but is also an account of alienation and loss of trust.

The sixth chapter engages with the role of language and narration in the creation of meaning in art, becoming it part of the 'material substance' of the work. Oftentimes in the practice of **gerlach en koop**, the essence of the work is situated between language and material. The visual and linguistic cues of the title or description complete the work, although none of these elements is more important than the other. The recto-verso image depicts a found object, titled *Headlessness* by the artists. The plastic bags (in Dutch called *hemdtasjes* or 'vest-bags') have been taken and filled with groceries and other goods, leaving the 'heads' to dangle isolated on the hook. 'Head' also refers to capital, from the Latin *capitalis*, or 'of the head'.

In **Sarah van Lamsweerde's** performance *Tell/Sell, a Common Story*, language becomes a commodity. During an art auction that took place at Bunkier Sztuki, the words of a story, which had been written by the artist, were sold off one by one. The publication features the sold words, collectively purchased by the audience of the performance at Bunkier Sztuki. The missing words of the redacted story remain in the ownership of the artist.

The last chapter, Post Scriptum, begins with the documentation of the project **Kra Kra Intelligence**

**Cooperative**, initiated by artist reinaart vanhoe and formed together with employees of Bunkier Sztuki. The aim of the collective was to bring together various art and non-art professionals who are responsible for the running of the Bunkier Sztuki institution. The result proved that lasting collective engagement requires a longer timespan than that of a few months surrounding an exhibition. This contribution consists of various small-scale proposals created to improve the working conditions at the gallery, as well as a letter to employees of the institution from the artist and a zine created during the project.

The poster by **Arnoud Holleman** and **Gert Jan Kocken** *Broken Thinker* depicts Auguste Rodin's iconic sculpture, created in 1881, in a wounded state. In 2007, the bronze sculpture disappeared from the sculpture garden of Singer Museum in Laren, the Netherlands, only to resurface weeks later, half-dismantled, with deep cuts running across its surface. Stolen for its precious material, the sculpture could not be monetised given the media upheaval surrounding the theft and the figure's well-known (art-historical) status.

In the years since its conception as a double exhibition and now book project, *The Trouble with Value* has tapped into ongoing discourses and foreshadowed developments that took place in the international and national art scenes. In the Netherlands in recent years, public discussion has been taken up around the meagre fees and relentless working conditions of freelance art professionals, echoing similar debates internationally. The slow yet important conversations lead to efforts to improve artists' remuneration as well as calls for mobilisation and steps towards collective action. It is only recently that arts institutions in the Netherlands are beginning to recover from the 2010 budget cuts initiated by the State Secretary for Education, Culture and Science, Halbe Zijstra.<sup>①③</sup> If anything, the cuts taught the Dutch public not to take its institutions for granted.

In Poland, the recent political appointments of directors to art institutions have shown an alarming trend, whereby art is being claimed back as a propaganda outlet of the state, led by the right-wing Law and Justice (PiS) party.<sup>①④</sup> The situation generated waves of protest in the local art communities, gaining international support.

Despite arts transformation to a tense arena where there's a lot to lose against political forces, such developments also signal the power of art, its necessity and capacity to tell stories unheard and to create symbols unseen elsewhere in public life. It seems there's a lot to hold on to and fight for.<sup>①⑤</sup>

①③ Halbe Zijstra served as State secretary for Education, Culture and Science in current Dutch Prime Minister Mark Rutte's first cabinet between 2010 and 2011. His name is linked to the €200 million budget cuts in the cultural sector during those years, resulting in the crisis of many and disappearance of multiple art institutions in the following period.

①④ Some of these stories made it into the international media, such as the appointment of the curator with a taste for right-wing propaganda, Piotr Bernatowicz, by the Minister of Culture as the new director for the Center for Contemporary Art Ujazdowski Castle (CCA) in Warsaw. (source: <https://www.nytimes.com/2020/01/08/arts/design/poland-conservative-art.html>, accessed 30 January 2020)

①⑤ In the months after *The Trouble with Value* exhibitions, politically motivated changes in management took place at Bunkier Sztuki, Krakow, followed by the resignation of the institution's director and curatorial team. This development was propelled by the local government who laid out plans for the merger of the institution under Krakow's contemporary art museum, MOCAK, contributing to the centralisation and homogenisation of art and its institutions, while ignoring local expertise and the historical significance of the art gallery.