



TransActing: A Market of Values at Chelsea College of Arts, London (2015) featured more than 65 stalls exploring value beyond money as the universal equivalent of exchange; facilitated by Critical Practice. Photo credit: Marsha Bradfield.

MA TRANS - Art, education, engagement

SOME DRAFT GUIDELINES TOWARDS A SUSTAINABLE SENSIBILITY FOR CREATIVE PRACTICE

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20 November 2023 by [Marsha Bradfield](#)

TEXT

These thoughts cohered further to a talk I gave in November 2022 for a series on ecopedagogy hosted by MASTER TRANS– Socially Engaged Artistic Practices (HEAD – Genève). The gap between that presentation and this publication afforded time and space for me to evolve my understanding of a sustainable sensibility for creative practice. In lieu of a conclusion, this text culminates in some draft guidelines selected from a longer list.¹ They represent an affirmation but also an extension of the position I offered in 2022.

In my initial presentation, drawing on the publication *Transacting as Art, Design and Architecture: A Non-commercial Market*², I presented a project I had realised as part of the London-based cluster, Critical Practice. We upcycled detritus from a BA degree show at Chelsea College of Arts

(University of the Arts London), resourcing the art school's overflowing skips. Using open-source principles inspired by Enzo Mari's furniture design from the 1970s, we built 60+ stalls for an open-air market. Our aim was to prise this technology of transaction away from profit-making and reclaim the market as a social form for peer-to-peer exchange. In doing so, we explored the widespread and pernicious confusion between value and price (i.e. 'The price of everything becomes the value of everything'³). And we celebrated heterogenous values that are irreducible to money as a universal medium of exchange. These are values like care, trust, loyalty and openness.⁴



Artist, academic and activist David Cross wearing his graduation robes from the Royal College of Art and dressed as the zombie at *TransActing: A Market of Values* at Chelsea College of Arts, London (2015). Photo credit: Marsha Bradfield.

To date, most of my discussion of this non-commercial market has focused on its collaborative realization, institutional critique and reflexive engagement with the market as a social form. Latent in these reflections are concerns that underpin cultural production in general. These include how art, design, curating, performance and other cultural practices are taught and taken up, and how we as cultural producers each feel about and relate to our work.

If we produce culture, it is because somehow culture produces us. This being the case, '[W]hy is it,' asks David Graeber regarding Marx's theory of value, 'that we somehow end up creating a world that few of us particularly like, most find unjust, and over which no one feels they have any ultimate control?'.⁵ As Graeber goes on to observe, this is at heart an existential question. It is also one that is becoming more urgent and even more intractable as we grapple with climate crisis as a consequence of industrialization that Marx could not have foreseen.



Chipping away at the ice block that artist Afshin Dehkordi used to examine diminishing value. Part of the stall for Open School at *TransActing: A Market of Values* at Chelsea College of Arts, London (2015). Photo credit: Doris Koch.

How to think about and produce culture as global warming turns to global boiling? This complex question springs from a common desire to keep going despite the proliferating and connected challenges faced by individuals, communities and the planet. Of course, many of us are querying this drive for self-preservation and rightly so.⁶ The growing threat of climate crisis has paralyzed even the most resilient artists, designers, curators, art educators and other creative practitioners. We are committed to transforming the world for the better. Yet the demands and uncertainty of this process can become too overwhelming and the personal opportunity costs too great. And so, many of us give up. We quit!



TransActing: A Market of Values at Chelsea College of Arts, London (2015) facilitated by Critical Practice. Photo credit: Kuba Szreder.

The alternative, which includes but is irreducible to persisting, demands a sustainable sensibility for creative practice. This captures another mood of our times, as we grope for hope, reframing our disempowerment and investing our energy in new relations. Unfortunately, there is little about

this we can take for granted because good intentions are no guarantee. So if we end up producing something less than ideal, let us not forget the odds were stacked against us.

With this in mind, I want to share some guidelines that I am habituating in my cultural production as I ride the hyphen as an artist-curator-educator-writer, etc. The understanding encapsulated here is hard-won through experience and still evolving through practice. These principles also share an indomitable commitment to pursuing meaningful work. I float this possibility as a provocation in response to the question: How does your artistic practice/research deal with contemporary ecological emergencies?

My sustainable sensibility for creative practice aspires to buck the logic of the 'latest and loudest' that drives hyperproduction and overexposure.

Eschewing novelty and trends, I want to focus on practice that is small and slow – practice that models modest methods to raise awareness about the qualities of the sustainability that distinguish each approach. I want to celebrate examples, however partial, fragile or otherwise imperfect. I want to invest in communities of evaluation: constellations that are more sensitive to a heterogeneous range of values and the nonbinary potential beyond value creation/value extraction. This responds to economist Mariana Mazzucato's call to action: If the goal is to produce smart growth that is more inclusive and sustainable, we need better and more complex understandings of value.⁷

As a cultural producer, I am committed to challenging the logic of winner-takes-all to instead nurture an authorial ethos where more nuanced value recognition and distribution take pride of place. I accept this is not especially sexy work. It avoids the attention economy when it finds form in low-visibility networks whose activity is situated and specific. Often small-scale and typically slow-paced, this activity fails to attract the fanfare and funding garnered by what is latest and loudest. Consequently, mutual support becomes essential to value systems that are alternative to the norm. Those of us involved constellate and re-constellate, with this sometimes resulting in solidarities that are as awkward as they are necessary.⁸

My sustainable sensibility for creative practice holds fast to the spiral that moves action research forward through cycles of personal and professional iteration.

This is research in its most literal sense, albeit irreducible to ‘looking again’ and the ocularcentrism this implies. This approach forgoes the act of making new work for the sake of it to deepen our relationship with past practice. Why don’t we review and resource old work more often? This is not just a practical question or an ethical call to reflect on our individual experience. This question stems from a deep epistemological concern, fundamental to practice as an interface for encountering and making sense of the world and ourselves. No longer can I think of this as an adventure that is entirely ahead of me. Most of us have already collected heaps of resources: our notes, studies, sketchbooks, drafts, images, publications, lectures, voice memos and other recordings. As we demystify the black boxes we affectionately call our ‘personal archives’, we come face-to-face with our past selves, replete with their hopes and dreams. How can these histories guide our futures?

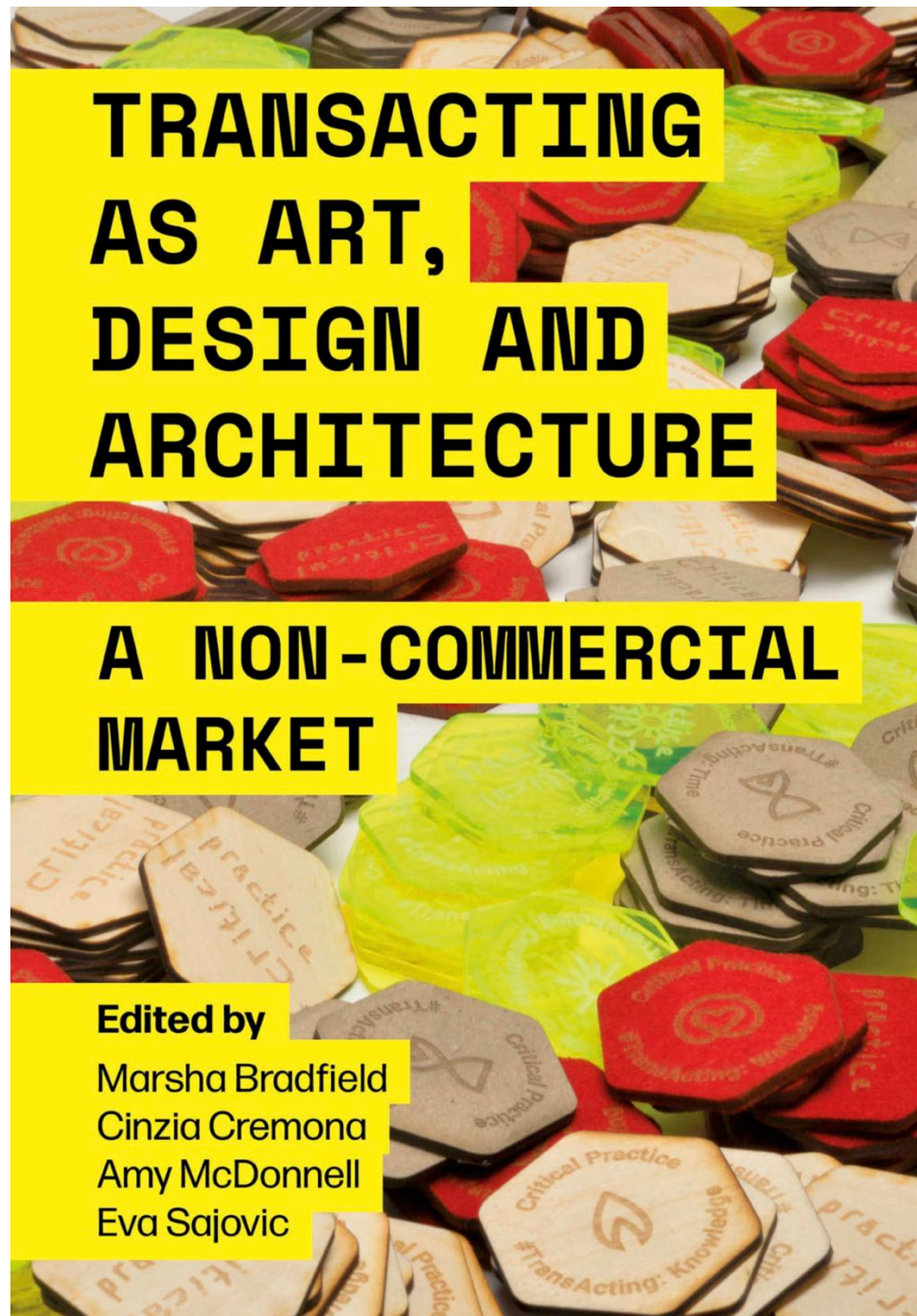
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My sustainable sensibility for creative practice embraces the unconventional and the counterintuitive.

For instance, Wikipedia tells us that ‘extractivism’ as a concept comes from the Portuguese, ‘*extrativismo*’; and when coined in 1996, the term described the for-profit exploitation of Brazilian forests.² The role played by extractivism in climate crisis helps to explain why today the phrase ‘extracting value’ has a de facto negative connotation. Yet we also know that not all value extraction is created equal, and these differences depend, of course, on the value involved. Consider wisdom as a case in point. Layers of experience are pressed together as we activate our memory through sensemaking and calibrate it in context. As we dig into our knowledge and pull out a precious gem, we are enacting a kind of metaphorical extractivism. While there is good reason to lament extractivism as an economic model for exploitation, the act itself is not

inherently bad. In this spirit, we must not shy away from thinking against connotations and evolving new denotations. Critical and creative forms can help us to challenge the status quo of meaning – to disrupt the business as usual of language – in the worlds of art and beyond.



Open-access publication celebrating *TransActing: A Market of Values* and the tenth anniversary of *Critical Practice* (Intellect, 2023).
Download the open-access PDF [here](#). Photo credit: Neil Farnan.

Notes

1. Marsha Bradfield, "Future (Re)view: (Re)reading, Future (Re)Vision: A Few Reflections on Recollection, Reception and Response in Practice-Based Art Research Or: Hindsight Isn't Always 20/20" [talk], VIII Art of Research Conference, Aalto University, Helsinki, 30 November – 1st December 2023. ↩
2. Marsha Bradfield, Cinzia Cremona, Amy McDonnell and Eva Sajovic (eds.), *Transacting as Art, Design Architecture: A Non-Commercial Market*, Bristol: Intellect, 2023. ↩
3. Mark Carney, *Reith Lectures: How We Got What We Value*, Episode 1 [recorded lecture], BBC, 4 December 2020, available at <https://www.bbc.co.uk/programmes/m000py8t> (last accessed 3.10.2023). ↩
4. J. K. Gibson-Graham, "Rethinking the economy with thick description and weak theory", *Current Anthropology*, vol. 55, n° 9, p. 147–153, available at

- www.journals.uchicago.edu/doi/full/10.1086/676646 (last accessed 27.5.2017). ↩
5. David Graeber, "It is value that brings universes into being", *HAU: Journal of Ethnographic Theory*, vol. 3, no. 2, 2013, p. 222. ↩
 6. Brad Evans and Julian Reid, *Resilient Life: The Art of Living Dangerously*, Cambridge: Polity Press, 2014. ↩
 7. Mariana Mazzucato, *The Value of Everything: Making and Taking the Global Economy*, London: Penguin, 2018. ↩
 8. Incidental Unit, available at <https://incidentalunit.org/> (last accessed 3.10.2023). ↩
 9. "Extractivism", in *Wikipedia*, available at <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Extractivism> (last accessed 3.11.2023). ↩

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