

# HAPPY ANNIVERSARY CRITICAL PRACTICE

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It may surprise you to learn, as it did me, of the tradition in the United Kingdom, the United States and beyond of celebrating ten years of marriage with gifts made of tin. Was this, I wondered, because tin sounds like ten? Why else choose a base metal to mark such an important occasion, especially for those who value the institution of marriage. Yet it seems several qualities of tin effectively symbolize enduring matrimony. According to the jeweller H. Samuel, tin is 'resistant to corrosion, whilst still being pliable'; reaching a ten-year wedding anniversary depends on the 'flexibility' of those involved (2018: n.pag.).

For sure, these are qualities of Critical Practice Research Cluster, which celebrated ten years of being together in 2015. For more than a decade, this motley crew of artists, designers, curators, educators and other practice-based/led researchers have been challenging each other and their associates to broaden and connect their engagement through the critical practice of art, the field of culture and its organization (Critical Practice 2019a: n.pag.). These are familiar commitments for other art-led formations that operate in the overlap between culture and politics. When, for instance, the New York-based collaboration Group Material (1979–96) describes its work as '[exploding] the assumptions that dictate what art is, who art is for and what an art exhibition can be' (Ault 2010: 49), it might well be referencing the values that galvanized Critical Practice to self-organize as a London-based research cluster in 2005.

Something else these collaborations share is that both have explicitly refused to pursue the values of the art market. If following this is tantamount to rejecting the commodification of art, it hardly goes far enough for Critical Practice. Depending on your relationship with capitalism, the art market symbolizes a high point or a low one in neoliberalism's broader drive to marketize every aspect of life. Like it or not, what Karl Polanyi termed 'market society' has come to pass. As anthropologist David Graeber explains, 'the triumph of the World Market—in which the most gigantic, totalizing, and all-encompassing universal system of evaluation known to human history came to be imposed on almost everything' (2001: 89). Faced with this economic authoritarianism, what should we do?

This is a loaded question in the worlds of contemporary art, many of which have been shaped by conceptualism and its failed project of dematerializing the art object. In 1969, the American critic Lucy Lippard was hopeful that those making this art would 'be forcibly freed from the tyranny of a commodity status and market orientation' ([1973] 1997: xxi). This was thanks to conceptual art often being slight in its material presence but thick with ideas, many of which mitigated against a sensuous experience in favour of art as information. But three short years later, even these expressions were increasingly bought and sold. 'Yet with a longer view,' Lippard writes in *Six Years*, 'it is also clear that the conceptual artists set up a model that remains *flexible* enough to be useful today' ([1973] 1997: xxi, emphasis added). Suffice to say that flexibility is a quality that gives more than metal and matrimony their enduring strength. In Lippard's view, the flexibility that sustains conceptual art stems from 'the most exciting "art" [...] still being buried in the social energies not yet recognized as art' ([1973] 1997: xxii). It was similar thinking that compelled Critical Practice to critically appropriate the market as a form, embracing it as a readymade, with this culminating in *#TransActing: A Market of Values* (henceforth *TransActing*) in 2015. If historically many critical artists have struggled to escape the market's grip, the cluster instead seized it to better grasp the values that propel the economy, with these manifesting across the market as a forum for exchange.

The following are some eclectic reflections that consider a core set of values in Critical Practice, especially those connecting the cluster's social reproduction (its day-to-day self-organization, self-governance, etc.) to its outwardly facing cultural production

Figure 4.1: The meeting is the medium. Critical Practice in action: Cinzia Cremona, Fangli Cheng, Kuba Szreder, Verina Gfader, Angela Hodgson-Teall, Metod Blejec, Neil Farnan, Claire Mokrauer-Madden, Marsha Bradfield, Amy McDonnell, Eva Sajovic, Helen Brewer and Neil Cummings (behind the camera). Photo credit Neil Cummings.



(specifically the four markets that Critical Practice has convened to date). Openness is a value that receives special attention as both intrinsic and extrinsic to the cluster. Implicit in what follows is the vital role of openness in constellating the theory, practice and evaluation that support the cluster's sustainability through a continuous process of change. I consider this with reference to 'the market' as one of the cluster's preoccupations. Critical Practice attempts to prise open the market to make its contradictions explicit. This suggests the need for and potential of the market to change through an injection of creativity, collaboration, enthusiasm, care and openness, with the latter outstripping the 'open market' as it is usually understood.

I offer these reflections as a long-standing member of Critical Practice. Since joining in 2006, I have been involved in its everyday maintenance and have collaborated on numerous projects on a wide range of artistic, economic, social, technological, political and other issues. This sustained engagement has made my relations with Critical Practice a deeply meaningful aspect of my life

and work. If, though, this is akin to a figurative marriage, it is without the matrimonial knot. The cluster is instead a network, one that is flexible but also fragile, especially when pulled together through interpersonal relationships. Networking as a verb highlights the affective, practical and other types of recursive labour that go into ordering all these heterogeneous human and non-human actors (Latour 2005). This brings us to the cluster's social reproduction as a point of departure and return for all of its activity.

## Open house

That 'economy' comes from the Greek words *oikos* (meaning household) and *nemein* (meaning manage) points to why we can think about the cluster's self-organization in terms of its house-keeping. This and other social reproduction has unfolded through a decision-making process based on rough consensus. This distribution of authority tracks with the aspiration to self-organize as a flat hierarchy. Whilst the agonism of this ongoing process has been captured in the cluster's meeting minutes and expressions of organizational ethnography (Critical Practice 2007, 2008, 2019a; Cummings and Critical Practice 2011), a great deal of business occurs 'off the page' (Bradfield 2013: 9). Chatting at the pub, conversations whilst in transit and other socializing have created the cluster's shared history through moments of informal and candid reflection. This exchange has also nurtured a sense of intimacy where complex relationships come to the fore. Even now, with Critical Practice increasingly distributed as a global network, the critical practice of the cluster virtually connects its members in Chicago, Ljubljana, London, Sydney, Warsaw and beyond.

I think it fair to say that no one anticipated Critical Practice would reach its tenth anniversary. Compare the cluster's decade-plus of activity to other personal and professional ventures: whilst 60 per cent of start-ups in the United Kingdom wind down within three years (May 2019), the unlucky number is twelve for marriages that end in divorce (Norris 2018). Perhaps the durability of Critical Practice relates to its slow process of membership. In my case, it took several years to get to grips with the cluster's approach to practice and feel as though I belonged. This is ironic given that it was multidimensional openness that first attracted

me. Membership is open to anyone willing to abide by the aims and objectives that are aligned with those of the open organizational movement (P2P Foundation 2017). There is no formal induction process or tests to take, no membership card, no fees to pay – hence the running joke that being so open has made Critical Practice remarkably difficult to join.

It seems fair to say that Critical Practice is more effectively open in its organizational transparency. The cluster's meeting minutes, project plans and budgets have all been published in the public domain on a dedicated wiki (Critical Practice 2019a). On the one hand, this has put the cluster on display, opening it up to scrutiny in a dual spirit of peer-to-peer and public accountability. This part of Critical Practice has been informed by reaching back and down into the UK's earthy history, rooting around for precedents to support the cluster's particular culture of openness. These include the Charter of the Forest (1225), which codifies and organizes what the United Kingdom once held in common. It offered guidance on how commoners could use the commons for their personal subsistence whilst sustaining this bounty as a community resource (Standing 2019: 61). Perhaps more than anything else the commons has inspired the ethos of Critical Practice – its self-organization, self-governance, as well as the content, form and open access to its projects, processes and other outputs that its membership would cocreate.

The cluster's commitment to commoning for more equitable and sustainable futures tracks with growing international interest in what Guy Standing describes as a drive to 'take back the commons, revive their principles of sharing, solidarity and universality, and ensure that commoners – "we, the people" – are properly compensated for any loss' (2019: 59). For its sins, Critical Practice has always focused more on abundance than on scarcity. Especially in its formative years, the cluster's enthusiasm for the digital commons was unbridled. Witness its massive and sustained wiki work (Critical Practice 2019a). More broadly, techno-utopianism would prove indispensable to catalysing but not collectivizing the production of information, images, music and other resources. But in the first decade of the new millennium, before the ascendance of Big Data, using Creative Commons licensing to provide open access to the cluster's administrative, evaluative and other traces seemed to

Critical Practice to be politically progressive, in fact, a radically progressive thing to do.

On the other hand, the cluster's production draws on the peer-to-peer pragmatism of open-source programming. This hand of Critical Practice has been waving to others who share its faith in the effectiveness and resilience of networks for distributing risk and reward. Again, openness – not only to new ideas but also as cultural and methodological diversity – played an important role in building Critical Practice as itself an open network. Granted the cluster was founded by students of Chelsea College of Arts, University of the Arts London (UAL) and their tutor Neil Cummings and was hence made possible by this institutional privilege. Yet from the very beginning, art education and its institutions were things that Critical Practice aspired to open up.

Taking this as its license to operate, Critical Practice encouraged those without any formal affiliation with Chelsea College of Arts to join the cluster and benefit from its extracurricular programmes. The cluster also convened members at different stages of their personal and professional development on equal footing. To my knowledge, it has been the only research group at UAL that has ever brought together students, faculty and staff as well as those with no institutional affiliation. The qualities of this openness chime with large-scale, open-source cultural initiatives that have crossed national, disciplinary and other boundaries by operating online. In keeping with the ethos of Wikipedia as the 'free encyclopaedia that anyone can edit', the Critical Practice wiki is an aggregate of live documents. Content can be changed by anyone with a readily available password and basic knowledge of how to edit MediaWiki, the open-source software that powers the cluster's organizational hub and online archive – Wikipedia's too.

Describing the critical practice of Critical Practice in this way risks papering over its fault lines. In the world of anniversary celebrations, tin may be revered for its pliability; but beyond its symbolism for enduring marital relations, and even within this union, there are limits to how far a person can flex. It is hard to say how much the cluster's dependence on free labour has excluded those struggling to make ends meet. This and not Critical Practice has been their priority. For sure, members have come and gone depending on what their time, energy and other resources would allow.



This goes to the heart of a contradiction that has tested the cluster. As largely self-funded, Critical Practice has survived on free labour. Yet it has also chafed against the narrative of self-actualization through the hyperflexible cultural practice that has been held up as an ideal to which all workers should aspire (Carrotworkers' Collective and Precarious Workers Brigade [2012] 2015). For as long as I can remember, Cummings, one of the founding members of Critical Practice, has cautioned against making plans that rely too heavily on the cluster's human resources. Mindful that enthusiasm, camaraderie, interest and goodwill can and should only go so far, he has instead extolled the economic, interpersonal and other fragilities that compel a culture of care.

Through careful trial and error, the cluster has coordinated its social reproduction with the cultural production of its events, exhibitions, publications and further outputs designed to engage others beyond its membership. In the process, Critical Practice has cohered a set of complicated values, amongst them openness as in transparency, inclusivity and emergence. These have been tested and retested through a shared repertoire of forms, including the marketplace, which I will discuss soon enough. But most of all, the cluster's sustainability has been about tracing and retracing a network of human beings who are interested in using art and design in the service of social practice to figure out ways for living on purpose in a complex, tumultuous and increasingly inequitable world.

## **Context: Value, research and neoliberalism**

So much happened between 2005 and 2015, the time spanning the cluster's first decade of activity. By 2010, Critical Practice and those in its UK network were feeling the effects of the 2008 bank bailout. The cluster was experiencing first-hand the deep cuts and dwindling funding for research, which paralleled hikes in student fees to £9000 in 2011. Political and sociological theorist William Davies describes the self-actualization of neoliberalism as 'the elevation of market-based principles and techniques of evaluation to the level of state-endorsed norms' (2017a: xiv). This entails a double movement: the market has been extended through privatizing the

formerly public sphere whilst non-market institutions (e.g. universities and the NHS) have been actively reformed by the neoliberal state to make them more *businesslike*. At the same time, legislation and other strategies have been introduced to crush collective resistance to econometrics. These strategies include the precariatization of work through the rise of zero-hour contracts, which effectively atomize instead of unionize workers (Davies 2017a: xiv).

Dizzy from this double movement, many of us working in the fields of architecture, art, craft and design, as well as higher education, especially in the arts, humanities and social sciences, have grown increasingly anxious about the ways in which culture is being evaluated to rationalize its financial expenditure. In the United Kingdom, this is driving the likes of the Research Excellence Framework (REF), the Teaching Excellence Framework (TEF), the Arts and Humanities Research Council's *The Cultural Value Project* (Crossick and Kaszynska 2015) and Arts Council England's evidence review, *The Value of Arts and Culture to People and Society* (2014). From within the econometrics-obsessed nexus of neoliberalism, the need for alternative economies has become palpable. What seems required are critical and creative forms of practice based/led research that honour the specificity of their intrinsic values whilst also demonstrating their broader extrinsic significance and, crucially, do so in ways that align both types of value and insist on their interdependence.

Between 2005 and 2015, Chelsea College of Arts was a hotbed of value-based research. The now defunct Contemporary Marxism Collective, of which I was also a member, was a testing ground for some of the insights that came to comprise Dave Beech's important book, *Art and Value: Art's Economic Exceptionalism in Classical, Neoclassical and Marxist Economics* (2015). In retrospect, Critical Practice's commitment to hands-on practice (i.e. 'understanding through doing') provides ample evidence of its engagement with Marxist ideas without direct reference to Marx. Above I outline some of the ways that lived experience – replete with its conditions and contradictions – has been a salient preoccupation in the cluster's work, including its self-organization. Similarly, immanent critique has been central in Critical Practice without being theorized as a Marxist method. For those less familiar, it will be useful to know that immanent critique critically



engages with the systems and rules at play in a given context, with this approach stemming back to those of Hegel and Marx.

Consider *TransActing*'s stall infrastructure as a case in point. The cluster used the market to critique the wasteful practices of degree shows, most immediately that of Chelsea College of Arts where Critical Practice was based and *TransActing* took place. This immanent critique did not languish at the level of theoretical discourse but was pressed into practice, with this giving voice to growing social concerns with environmental and other forms of sustainability, including those of large institutions like universities. At the same time – and crucially – *TransActing* piloted a practical response to tackling this systemic problem at a local level as detritus from the 2015 degree show was upcycled to create the stalls for *TransActing* (see 'Taking Enzo to market: Open stalls' in this anthology for further discussion).

All this is to say that if the ken of Contemporary Marxist Collective was rigorous discourse that consolidated and extended Marxist theory, for Critical Practice the priority was on facilitating inclusive, experimental and often non-discursive forms that embodied Marxist values without necessarily labeling them. Being good Marxists and being recognized as such has never been a motivating factor in Critical Practice. This stems in part from the knowledge, hard-won through experience, that rigorous theory, Marxist or otherwise, tends to give way to the pragmatic demands of realizing collaborative events like *TransActing*. These demands include discursive competence but they also entail a knack for working with other and often disparate materials – be they recycled planks of wood or the emotional intelligence required to build an inclusive and meaningful community of practice. The alternative *modi operandi* of Contemporary Marxism Collective and Critical Practice help to explain why more crossover between the groups was not forthcoming.

In addition to commoning and the open-source production as two of the cluster's preoccupations mentioned above, Critical Practice adopted and adapted several other practical theories that complement those of Marx, in part because they proved more amenable to the cluster's practice based/led research. These are Marcel Mauss's sociological research on gift economies ([1954] 2002), actor-network theory (especially that of Bruno Latour) (2005) and, more recently, Stephen Wright's philosophically inspired

thinking on use, set down in his popular publication *Towards a Lexicon of Usership* (2013). Added to these is the feminist thinking of the geographer-economists, J. K. Gibson-Graham, which would become a hinge for much of the cluster's mature work on value, especially its preoccupation with values that are not usually valued: 'trust, care, sharing, reciprocity, cooperation, coercion, bondage, thrift, guilt, love, equity, self-exploitation, solidarity, distributive justice, stewardship, spiritual connection, and environmental and social justice' (2014: S151). It became increasingly important to Critical Practice that its economy of kindness and care should highlight the often invisible, feminized and essential-but-badly-paid work that motors social reproduction writ large (see '*TransActing* as an iceberg' in this anthology).

All of these approaches repurpose Marxist values for a post-structuralist context. While Mauss examines the kinship system as an alternative site to the factory for producing value (Graeber 2001: 152), Wright positions user-generated culture as operative beyond a labour-based regime that turns on commodification. Latour attempts instead to offer an observational approach that analyses associations in the process of shifting. For actor-network theory (ANT), value arises from a network of human and non-human actors produced in the process of associating – relating, exchanging, interacting, etc. thus transforming historical materialism into a tool to examine the emergence of groups and social aggregates. Using this theoretical range to engage with value, values, valorization and evaluation – in a word, axiology – chimed with the methodological heterogeneity that Critical Practice holds dear. In this way, the cluster's cultural production aimed to practically and experimentally challenge the widely perceived hegemony of Marxist theories of value as the most effective critique of capitalism.

I have sketched this contextual terrain in some detail en route to positing the value of practice based/led research like Critical Practice for diversifying and perhaps even invigorating the knowledge enterprise of higher education. This involves moving beyond the conceptual inquiry that marks research in the humanities and social sciences when it asks: What should we think? (Turabian 2007: 8). Davies, for instance, posits that we should think of neo-liberalism as 'the disenchantment of politics by economics', with this resulting from the relentless spread of economic calculation

beyond the market (2017a: xiv). As the title of his important book makes clear, he is principally concerned with *The Limits of Neoliberalism*. Here rigorous critique maps this threshold, replete with its contradictions. And yet, as Davies also observes, simply *explaining* why the pre-2007 paradigm persists will do little to address the growing inequality it engenders (2017a). Nor will critique alone topple the authority of evaluation based on the price system, the limits of which Graeber captures in compelling terms: 'No one will ever be able to produce a mathematical formula for how much it is fitting to betray one's political principles in the name of religion, or to neglect one's family in the pursuit of art' (2013: 224). Granted, we make conversions like these all the time, but this has taken on oppressive significance with the growing formalization of the audit culture writ large as a mandate to extract economic value at all costs.

So what should we do? For Davies this involves reducing the scope of economics (2017a: 196) while enhancing the reach of 'collective entrepreneurship', especially if this, 'which – like individual entrepreneurs – saw economic normativity as fluid and changeable, could produce new forms of political economy, with alternative valuation systems' (2017a: 203). Enter Critical Practice and its season of value-based research. But before discussing this in relation to the cluster's four markets to date, I want to conclude these initial reflections with two interim thoughts.

The first relates to my sense that so much value in Critical Practice stems from how the cluster has aligned its outwardly facing cultural production and its self-sustaining social reproduction to gain greater insight into the creative practice of economy as the vital field that it is. Because art takes its authority from beyond the market's reductive metrics, art is open to diverse interpretations and hence irreducible significance. The political consequences of this evaluative openness are many, including art's sensuous potential to join forces with other kinds of knowledge in the service of a meta-evaluation that might throw the status quo value of valuation into productive doubt. This, in effect, was the remit of Critical Practice's value-based research. It fostered an alternative economy, one that challenged the poverty of econometrics by using heterogeneous evaluation to generate richer and more abundant meaning – understanding too.

The second point I want to make relates to celebrating the first ten years of Critical Practice being together. At stake in this tin anniversary are deeply anthropological values. I like to imagine that Graeber is describing the cluster when he calls for a tradition that sees 'human beings as projects of mutual creation, value as the way such projects become meaningful to the actors, and the worlds we inhabit as emerging from those projects rather than the other way around' (2013: 238). We can also recognize in Graeber's thinking the avant-garde drive to merge art and life. What does it mean to live with creative purpose – as an individual practitioner and as part of a community like Critical Practice? How can we use culture to create experimental economies and reclaim the market as a forum for dynamic but emergent and also equitable exchange? These are questions the cluster has been keen to address.

## **Not all markets are created equal**

We can trace the cluster's interest in markets back to its founding document. The earliest version of Aim 1 on record states: 'We will explore the field of cultural production as a site of resistance to the logic, power and values of the ideology of a competitive market' (Critical Practice 2019b: n.pag.). Since then, this aim has been rewritten several times, most notably in 2013 when it became Aim 3: '[We will] model alternatives to an exploitative market where wealth is accumulated for its own sake' (Critical Practice 2019b: n.pag.). This change reflects the realization – arising from practice – that the cluster's application of the market model (discussed below) does not so much eliminate competition but instead reconfigures it. In this, a shift occurs from an economy based on money to one that trades in attention.

Nevertheless, Aim 3 was reverted back to Aim 1 several months later in 2013 and returned to its original phrasing. If memory serves, this was because the subsequent version failed to capture the rampant financial inequality arising from neoliberal competition that is implied by the first and enduring version. This is not something that Critical Practice has theorized at length, but Davies's critique does important work in this regard. He argues

Figure 4.2: Stalls at *The Market of Ideas*, which was commissioned by the *London Festival of Europe* (16 March 2008, Chelsea College of Arts). Photo credit Neil Cummings.



that by generating, representing, testing, celebrating and enforcing competition, neoliberalism affirms its claim to being a free society, unfettered by authoritarian control (Davies 2017a: 41). What, however, this too often elides are the many and varied inequalities that drive economic and other forms of rivalry. Recall the example mentioned in passing above, that 40 per cent of start-ups in the United Kingdom survive their first three years, which, simply put, depends on 60 per cent going bust (May 2019 : n.pag.). Add to this the performativity of markets that is captured in the adage 'success begets success'. As competitors scale, they often gain the advantage by acquiring or obliterating their rivals. More and more (money, power – value) is concentrated in the hands of an elite. In what world can this be considered fair and just?

This returns us to the question: What should we do? Crucially both Davies and Critical Practice agree that the problem is not the market per se. It is instead how this matrix of exchange has been expanded and instrumentalized in the service of powerful economic actors, including the neoliberal state (Davies 2017a). This is something Davies taps into when writing about the supporters of nationalist movements as 'the left behind':

The economy is cultural: class and identity constitute each other. This is why the perspective known as 'cultural economy' (or 'cultural political economy') is now more valuable than ever, if it can illuminate the ways in which markets, property rights, work and consumption produce distinctive identities and affects, not as side-effects or as false consciousness, but as integral components of how they operate. (2017b:n.pag., original emphasis)

It is striking the cluster's interest in markets was catalysed by a similar focus when prompted by the question: 'What's cultural about economics?'. In response, Critical Practice organized its first market in 2008 as a one-day event marking the culmination of *The London Festival of Europe*, a much longer programme that took up the question, which in the shadow of Brexit holds added poignancy: 'How to Make Europe Dream?'. Drawing on the critical potential of art when it works as social practice to both represent and test new forms, Critical Practice set about imagining an alternative to the common market that was then enjoyed by the UK as part of the EU.

This market as a continent-sized apparatus for buying, selling and otherwise circulating goods and services without tariffs was reflected upon by Critical Practice in a much more intimate market of ideas, one exploring the economization of culture and the culturalization of the economy. The call for Critical Practice to mobilize its social practice as practice-based/led research stemmed not from a desire to liberate art from the clutches of capital and shore up a romantic vision of art's exceptional status as an autonomous sphere. Instead, the cluster's aim was to better understand the tensions between culture and economics by cinching them tighter, thereby making them more acute – more perceivable – through the market matrix composed of emergent and wide-ranging forms of exchange.

This market as a spatiotemporal frame assembled thirteen stalls and convened a milling crowd to interact with each practice being shared, cross-pollinating information and understanding amongst them. For instance, Graeber hosted conversations about some 24, mostly non-commercial, social transactions to explore forms of exchange, telescoping into instances such as 'group



communism and sharing' and 'balanced egalitarian exchange', so practical ways to avoid or alleviate debt relations, especially those that are long term (Critical Practice 2019c). Other stalls featured a chef, a curator, a radical barber, several economists, various artists, a permaculturist, a philosopher, a screen printer, a thief, a videographer and many others besides. Together the stallholders exchanged knowledge with a milling crowd on issues as diverse as well-being economics, waste management and the visualization of market society.

What for Critical Practice this first market confirmed was the potential of a form akin to a tradeshow. It was unpretentious but could also support deeply experiential encounters for those taking part. This informal and decentralized programme created a 'many-to-many' exchange as an alternative to the 'one-to many' dissemination used in the likes of academic conferences and news broadcasts to convey authority via focused messaging.

The cluster realized a second iteration of the market in 2010 at *PARADE*; it was more ambitious. Some 30 stalls were held by international stallholders to explore publicness (being in public, public space, public infrastructure, public funding, public goods, etc.). Market day took place in a bespoke structure also built in public

Figure 4.3: Stalls at the *Market of Ideas* for *PARADE*. The bespoke structure was built in public from 4320 black milk crates lashed together with some 30,000 cable ties (May 2010, The Rootstein Hopkins Parade Ground, Chelsea College of Arts). Photo credit Marsha Bradfield.



from some 4320 black milk crates. These were rented for the occasion and lashed together in the hot sun on the grounds of Chelsea College of Arts (see Cummings and Critical Practice 2011).

Two years later, Critical Practice was commissioned by the avant-garde festival *steirischer herbst* to facilitate a market as part of *Truth is Concrete* (2012) in Graz, Austria. The cluster intervened in the 24/7 cultural marathon by creating a makeshift peer-to-peer exchange. This solicited a range of responses to the festival's theme, another chiasmus: the interplay of artistic strategies in politics and political strategies in art. Critical Practice's market in *Truth is Concrete* can be described as a 'soft shoulder' of the marathon, a place where contributors could pause, mingle and catch their breath. In this way, the market constellated an expanded network of solidarities with a global reach. It helped to fortify the shared commitment amongst wide-ranging marathon participants to cultural production as a practical means of contesting the ethical, environmental, social, creative and other bankruptcies that neoliberalism is trying to declare.

By 2013, evaluation had emerged as the cluster's primary concern. Critical Practice facilitated a series of field trips, including a visit to Sotheby's Contemporary Art Auction. That night, the sale totalled an eye-watering £87,971,500. How does this accumulation relate to waste and friction? To explore this question, environmental lawyer Rosie Oliver talked rubbish as we ambled across

Figure 4.4: Stalls in the P2P Exchange commissioned for *Truth is Concrete*, part of *steirischer herbst* (26 September 2012, Graz, Austria). Photo credit Marsha Bradfield.



the Isle of Dogs and learned to beachcomb from a mudlark scouring the banks of the Thames for tidal treasure. Economic geographer Angus Cameron reflected on the movement of capital across borders as we walked around Greenwich, crossing the meridian several times.

My relationship with Critical Practice shifted in 2013 when I took up a post-doctoral fellowship based in the cluster, a role that enabled me to focus on progressing our research on value. For more and more of us in higher education, this trajectory depends on writing grant applications. A turning point came in March of 2015 when Critical Practice received £15,000 from Arts Council England. This gave the cluster a total of £32,000 (much of it coming from Chelsea College of Arts) plus £48,000 of in-kind support to realize a large-scale event, one that would mark the culmination of our current body of research and celebrate our first decade of activity.

*TransActing* took place on the Rootstein Hopkins Parade Ground, beside Tate Britain, in July 2015. It was a spectacular pop-up market with a difference. Instead of consuming more stuff and things, this arena encouraged the milling crowd to swap skills and services, to exchange in order to repair broken goods or gain knowledge and other resources. Some of the 65+ practices that featured were a fab lab, a people's bureau, a skillshare, a pinhole photography booth, a listening stand, a bricklaying demonstration, a speaker's corner, a permaculture tent, refreshments-for-promises, organ donation – even a kiosk buying tears.

*TransActing* was hosted in bespoke stalls developed with the critical design practice, public works, and assembled with help from the market's stallholders and others who enjoy the practical pleasure of a build. In a typology inspired by home furniture designed by Enzo Mari ([1974] 2008), the market's stalls were interspersed with other spaces of assembly. The exchange of a local currency in units of Time, Creativity, Knowledge and Wellbeing contested money as the universal measure and medium of value.

Whilst the values of commercial markets dominate contemporary life, including art and its education, other values can and do coexist. Some, like care and generosity, even flourish. Nurturing and celebrating these values in a spectacular one-day event was one of *TransActing's* prime concerns (Critical Practice 2019a). Another was to mobilize interdisciplinary practice-based/led research across architecture, art and design to wrest exchange from the

clutches of neoliberalism. *TransActing* did this by highlighting something that is easily forgotten, especially during periods of economic downturn, which can feel like the new normal for those in the 99 per cent. Financial transactions composing the world market are only a fraction of the sum total that produces our lives – in fact, the former only comprise the small number of those in banking services. What about the wealth of interpersonal relations through which commercial, cultural, institutional, material, organizational, social and other forms of production take place?

*TransActing* aimed to reclaim the market as a technology for coordinating activity to value people and the planet over profit. To understand the broader significance and potential application of this as practice-based/led research, we imagined what such a market would entail. Here, values would circulate not as equivalents but as agonistic complements as they are transacted through decentralized decision-making that trades impersonal abstraction for face-to-face exchange. The result was *TransActing*. Forgoing art for art's sake, the stalls in the market unleashed the logics of architecture, art, design and other disciplines to engage issues that to many matter most: health and wellbeing, experiment and play, history and horticulture, the natural and built environment, alternative and free education, meaningful social relations, civil liberties and human rights to name just a few. *TransActing* modelled a world that we might actually want to live in and invest our time and energy in creating and sustaining. The project demonstrated how cultural production as interdisciplinary practice-based/led research is vital to modelling alternative ways of doing and being.

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The background of the entire cover is a dense, overlapping collection of small, irregularly shaped wooden tokens. These tokens are in various colors: natural wood, red, yellow, and green. Many of the tokens have text and symbols embossed on them. Some of the visible text includes "Critical Practice", "#TransActing: Time", "#TransActing: Knowledge", and "TransActing". Symbols include a heart, an infinity symbol, and a stylized flame or leaf shape.

# **TRANSACTIONING AS ART, DESIGN AND ARCHITECTURE**

## **A NON-COMMERCIAL MARKET**

**Edited by**

Marsha Bradfield  
Cinzia Cremona  
Amy McDonnell  
Eva Sajovic



**TRANSACTIONING  
AS ART,  
DESIGN AND  
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# **TRANSACTING AS ART, DESIGN AND ARCHITECTURE A NON-COMMERCIAL MARKET**

**Edited by**

MARSHA BRADFIELD

CINZIA CREMONA

AMY McDONNELL

EVA SAJOVIC



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# TRANSACTING AS ART, DESIGN AND ARCHITECTURE

## A NON-COMMERCIAL MARKET

**An interdisciplinary anthology exploring alternatives to the principles of commercial markets that dominate contemporary life.**

This book applies an experimental ethos to collaborative cultural production. Expanding the fields of art, design and architectural research, contributors provide critical reflections on collaborative practice-based/led research. The volume builds on a pop-up market hosted by the London-based arts cluster Critical Practice that sought to creatively explore existing structures of evaluation and actively produce new ones. Assembled by lead editor Marsha Bradfield, with help from other members of Critical Practice, the chapters contextualize the event within a long history of marketplaces, offer reflections from the stallholders and celebrate its value system, particularly its critique of econometrics.

**Marsha Bradfield** rides the hyphen as an archivist-artist-curator-educator-researcher-writer. She has been affiliated with Chelsea College of Arts at University of the Arts London since 2006. **Cinzia Cremona** is a Sydney-based artist, researcher, writer and curator who works with video, performance and digital technologies from networked practices to expanded reality. **Amy McDonnell** is a London-based curator in socially engaged art practice and an environmental campaigner. **Eva Sajovic** is an artist and a senior lecturer at University of the Arts London.

