Value in Design: Neoliberalism versus Pragmatism

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Abstract

This article contrasts two radically different approaches to valuation — neoliberal and pragmatic — using each frame to consider value in design. Neoliberalism is outcomes-focused, maximizing value through different but commensurable forms, which are aggregated and ranked using a common denominator for the purposes of competition. Pragmatism is process-focused, with a variety of values negotiated and configured through valuation *inquiries* in context-specific ways. This article argues that, in line with pragmatism and in contrast to neoliberalism, design practice is based on diverse value orientations through a material and temporal process shaped in accordance with different purposes. The argument suggests that the way valuation is *performed* in design is an alternative to the reductive but dominant neoliberal approach. This prompts consideration of the "performative agency" concept — that design practice can transform how valuation is carried out, presenting and sustaining an alternative model.

Introduction

Design has a complex and complicated relationship with neoliberalism.[1] Some commentators emphasize the complicity of the design profession in the neoliberal agenda; others stress the transformative or even subversive power of design practices with respect to the neoliberal *status quo*. A large body of literature covers the role of design in sustaining the "inequality and poverty of the 60 percent of the population";[2] the difficulties designers face navigating the *logics* of neoliberalism;[3] and racial oppression in regard to "the co-constitutive nature of neoliberalism, design, and racism."[4] Nevertheless, design practices have potential to critique, transform, or subvert neoliberalism. In this context—as apparent, for example in *She Ji*—design makes visible the politics of participation in co-design that neoliberalism obscures.[5] Design is said to play a role in "ecologically-engaged" and "regenerative economies."[6] And some claim that design can bring about a "post-growth politics."[7] In a wider context, socially-responsible and socially-responsive design, design for good, design activism, and design for social innovation are all *schools* of design that implicitly criticize neoliberalism.[8]

It is impossible to resolve the relation between neoliberalism and design when working with the vast body of design research literature. This article proposes an external point of reference, one which looks at the connection between neoliberalism and design as *mediated* through the notion of *value*. Value is simply what is recognized as significant, irrespective of qualitative or quantitative terms.[9] Value is a product of valuation.[10] And valuation is understood as "any social practice where the value or values of something are established, assessed, negotiated, provoked, maintained, constructed and/or contested."[11] Accordingly, different social practices of valuation produce different value models.

This article argues that neoliberalism operates a reductive model of value anchored in the idea of competition. The neoliberal value model requires a common denominator and a means of comparison between different value dimensions.[12] Values are commensurate, with commensuration defined as "the valuation or measuring of different objects with a common metric."[13] This allows people to compare proverbial *apples and oranges*, measuring size while ignoring quality and purpose. As the neoliberal value model becomes entrenched, its impact becomes visible in a social world that maximizes profit to the detriment of other value orientations.[14]

In contrast, the pragmatic value model starts with *valuation* as an activity and a verb, rather than starting with *value* as a noun. Valuation is a process set in the social context. It is shaped by cultural norms in which people seek to realize their purposes. Pragmatists speak of an *inquiry*. They look for the best feasible resolutions that realize their objectives by working through the constraints of specific situations.[15] In contrast to the neoliberal model, the pragmatic approach embraces a variety of value orientations. The pragmatic approach recognizes the role of those who attribute value—*valuers*—as they realize their purposes through a material and sequential process.

This article then applies the analytical frames of each value model to design. Design is defined as a purpose-led, situation-specific, and materializing practice involving various agents, including design professionals or

1 Arden Stern and Sami Siegelbaum, "Design and Neoliberalism," *Design and Culture* 11, no. 3 (2019): 265–77, https://doi.org/10.1080/17547075.2019.1667188; Lilly Irani, "'Design thinking': Defending Silicon Valley at the Apex of Global Labor Hierarchies," *Catalyst: Feminism, Theory, Technoscience* 4, no. 1 (2018): 1–19, https://doi.org/10.28968/cftt.v4i1.29638; Guy Julier, *Economies of Design* (Los Angeles: Sage, 2017), 1–37.

2 Arturo Escobar, *Designs for the Pluriverse: Radical Interdependence, Autonomy, and the Making of Worlds* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2018), 193.

3 Guy Julier and Lucy Kimbell, "Keeping the System Going: Social Design and the Reproduction of Inequalities in Neoliberal Times," *Design Issues* 35, no. 4 (2019): 12–22, https://doi.org/10.1162/desi_a_00560.

4 Lauren Williams, "The Co-constitutive Nature of Neoliberalism, Design, and Racism," *Design and Culture* 11, no. 3 (2019): 301, https://doi.org/10.1080/17547075.2019.1656901.

5 Otto von Busch and Karl Palmås, "Social Means Do Not Justify Corruptible Ends: A Realist Perspective of Social Innovation and Design," *She Ji: The Journal of Design, Economics, and Innovation* 2, no. 4 (2016): 275, https://doi.org/10.1016/j.sheji.2017.07.002.

6 Joanna Boehnert, "Anthropocene Economics and Design: Heterodox Economics for Design Transitions," *She Ji: The Journal of Design, Economics, and Innovation* 4, no. 4 (2018): 355, https://doi.org/10.1016/j.sheji.2018.10.002.

7 Bonnie Nardi, "Design in the Age of Climate Change," *She Ji: The Journal of Design, Economics, and Innovation* 5, no. 1 (2019): 5, https://doi.org/10.1016/j.sheji.2019.01.001.

8 See for example, Adam Thorpe and Lorraine Gamman, "Design with Society: Why Socially Responsive Design Is Good Enough," *CoDesign* 7, no. 3-4 (2011): 217–30, https://doi.org/10.1080/15710882.2011.630477; Leah Armstrong et al., *Social Design Futures: HEI Research and the AHRC* (report, Unicersity of Brighton, 2014), accessed May, 23, 2023, https://cris.brighton.ac.uk/ws/portalfiles/portal/341933/Social-Design-Report.pdf; Anthony Dunne and Fiona Raby, *Speculative Everything: Design, Fiction, and Social Dreaming* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2013), 1–25; Victor Papanek, *Design for the Real World* (London: Thames and Hudson, 1972), 1–12.

9 This broad meaning bridges two different uses of the term "value" in contemporary

public discourse: one derived from sociology and underpinned by an understanding of moral and ethical norms; the other derived from economics, where value expresses quantity and is often used synonymously with price. See for instance Hans Kjellberg et al., "Valuation Studies? Our Collective Two Cents," *Valuation Studies* 1, no. 1 (2013): 15, https://doi.org/10.3384/vs.2001-5992.131111.

10   John Dewey, "Theory of Valuation," in *Experience and Education, Freedom and Culture, Theory of Valuation, and Essays, 1938–1939*, vol. 13 of *The Later Works, 1925–1953*, ed. Jo Ann Boydston (Carbondale, IL: Southern Illinois University Press, 1939), 189–252; Patrycja Kaszynska, "Valuation through Narrative Intelligibility," *Valuation Studies* 10 (forthcoming).

11   Liliana Doganova et al., "Valuation Studies and the Critique of Valuation," *Valuation Studies* 2, no. 2 (2014): 87, https://doi.org/10.3384/vs.2001-5992.142287.

12   William Davies, *The Limits of Neoliberalism: Authority, Sovereignty and the Logic of Competition* (London: Sage, 2014).

13   Wendy Nelson Espeland and Mitchell L. Stevens, "A Sociology of Quantification," *European Journal of Sociology/Archives Européennes de Sociologie* 49, no. 3 (2008): 431, https://doi.org/10.1017/S0003975609000150.

14   Richard Sennett, *The Culture of the New Capitalism* (New York: Yale University Press, 2007), 131–99.

15   John Dewey, *Logic: The Theory of Inquiry, 1938*, vol. 12 of *The Later Works, 1925–1953*, ed. Jo Ann Boydston (Carbondale, IL: Southern Illinois University Press, 1938), 108.
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16   See the section on Value in Design in this article.

17   Such as those named in the opening paragraph of this article.

18   This article does not rule out that designers themselves may want to use design practices intentionally to undermine some aspects of neoliberal governance or politics, or indeed the reverse, to support neoliberalism. My point is that the intentions of designers are not the key consideration when it comes to understanding the performativity of design with respect to valuation, where the features inherent to the practice of design, irrespective of the intentions, are at issue.

19   Judith Butler, "Performative Agency," *Journal of Cultural Economy* 3, no. 2 (2010): 147, https://doi.org/10.1080/17530350.2010.494117.

people trained in design techniques.[16] This article shows that making sense of value in practices of design calls for the pragmatic approach. The neoliberal approach is woefully partial and it distorts how value is realized in design. Design practices can be characterized by the material *situatedness* of valuation. They have a specific context. Value orientations are explicit and they point to the role of agents in value realization. The purposes of those agents collectively shape the design process. This article argues that design should draw attention to *what* gets valued and *how* it gets valued. The neoliberal model ignores these aspects with its preoccupation on *how much*. The pragmatic conception of valuation is embedded in and realized through design practice. This concept challenges the orthodoxy of neoliberal valuation.

Being alert to how value is realized in design practices makes clear the limitations of the neoliberal model to suggest an alternate way. The subversive potential of design practice does not stem from the opposing stance of various design research *schools*[17] nor from designers' critical intentions.[18] Rather, design practices can be seen to undermine the central assumption at the heart of neoliberalism by realizing valuation in a pragmatic way.

To explain how this is possible, this article appeals to the notion of performativity or *performative agency*. Judith Butler describes "performative agency" as "a set of processes that produce ontological effects, that is, that work to bring into being certain kinds of realities or … that lead to certain kinds of socially binding consequences."[19] I offer an original answer to the question "what specific roles has design, in its many forms, played in the development and global expressions of neoliberalism?"[20] This goes against concerns that design—and designers—*sell out* as agents of neoliberalism. (That is the position of some of literature on this issue.) Instead, this article shows that design practice has the potential to undermine neoliberalist processes through an alternative approach to valuation. Design practice can subvert the dominant regime of valuation by *performing* valuation differently to show that different ways of being and acting are possible. This is urgent and cogent in a world that so often undermines and eradicates alternative approaches to neoliberalism.

What Is Neoliberalism?

It is difficult to explain the meaning of neoliberalism with precision. Most commentators agree that neoliberalism is "a word with a contested definition."[21] Some claim that "the term is too often used as a catch-all category or as a category that catches selectively whatever a particular author chooses and disapproves."[22] This effectively curtails any explanatory power. Recent archival research on neoliberalism[23] reveals a more detailed—and complex—historical understanding. It shows that neoliberalism is not a thing with one essential property or characteristic. Rather, it is a palimpsest of movements and moments in history that only share some features.

Historical and archival analysis shows that long before Ronald Reagan and Margaret Thatcher in the 1980s—and even before the emergence of the Chicago School in the 1960s and 1970s[24]—neoliberalism flourished concurrently in several Europe centers.[25] Current scholarship emphasizes

20 Stern and Siegelbaum, "Design and Neoliberalism," 268.

21 Quinn Slobodian and Dieter Plehwe, introduction to *Nine Lives of Neoliberalism*, ed. Dieter Plehwe, Quinn Slobodian, and Philip Mirowski (London: Verso Books, 2020), 3.

22 Bill Dunn, "Against Neoliberalism as a Concept," abstract, *Capital & Class* 41, no. 3 (2017): 435, https://doi.org/10.1177/0309816816678583.

23 Quinn Slobodian, *Globalists: The End of Empire and the Birth of Neoliberalism* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2018), 3; William Davies and Nicholas Gane, "Post-Neoliberalism? An Introduction," *Theory, Culture & Society* 38, no. 6 (2021): 7, https://doi.org/10.1177/02632764211036722.

24 William Davies, "Neoliberalism: A Bibliographic Review," *Theory, Culture & Society* 31, no. 7-8 (2014): 313–14, https://doi.org/10.1177/0263276414546383.

25 Philip Mirowski and Dieter Plehwe, eds., *The Road from Mont Pèlerin: The Making of the Neoliberal Thought Collective* (New York: Harvard University Press, 2015), 45–67.

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26 Davies, "Neoliberalism," 312–13.

27 Slobodian, *Globalists*, 7–13.

28 For instance, within the Geneva school, the liberal, not to say libertarian ideology of Ludwig von Mises can be contrasted with Wilhelm Röpke's defence of the role of the institutions of family and the church. See Melinda Cooper, "The Alt-right: Neoliberalism, Libertarianism and the Fascist Temptation," *Theory, Culture & Society* 38, no. 6 (2021): 29–50, https://doi.org/10.1177/0263276421999446; Davies and Gane, "Post-Neoliberalism," 8.

29 Davies and Gane, "Post-Neoliberalism," 4.

30 David Harvey, *A Brief History of Neoliberalism* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007), 3.

31 Philip Mirowski, "The Political Movement that Dared not Speak Its Own Name: The Neoliberal Thought Collective under Erasure," Institute for New Economic Thinking, August 2014, accessed May 23, 2023, https://www.ineteconomics.org/research/research-papers/the-political-movement-that-dared-not-speak-its-own-name-the-neoliberal-thought-collective-under-erasure.

32 Harvey, *Brief History of Neoliberalism*, 2.

33 Mirowski, "Political Movement."

34 Espeland and Stevens, "Sociology of Quantification," 431.

35 Davies, *Limits of Neoliberalism*, 60.

36 Cooper, "Alt-right."

37 Harvey, *Brief History of Neoliberalism*, 3.

distinguishing distinctive traditions. The neoliberalism of the Freiburg school, also referred to as Ordo-liberalism, focused on the role of the nationalistic state in controlling the markets.[26] In contrast, the Geneva School stressed the transnational and international aspects of neoliberalism.[27] Within this complicated picture, scholars point to the lack of unity within the individual strands and traditions.[28] In addition, the recent forms of populism, libertarianism, and the alternative right share neoliberal language while they reject a narrow "technocratic, neoliberal agenda."[29] This makes it difficult to achieve a clear definition of neoliberalism.

In the past, it was possible to characterize neoliberalism from a Marxist perspective. This defined neoliberalism as a form of governance that elevates the mechanisms of market exchange to "an ethic in itself, capable of acting as a guide to all human action, and substituting for all previously held ethical beliefs."[30] What emerges from recent archival research is a much more complex and complicated understanding of the "political movement that dared not speak its own name."[31] David Harvey sees neoliberalism as a form of free market orthodoxy associated with Thatcher and Reagan[32]—a perspective challenged by Mirowski's "network view."[33] So what thread, if any, runs through and binds these diverse strands? What provides continuity, making it possible to speak of neoliberalism in different historical manifestations?

Neoliberal Value: The Quest for a Common Denominator

Neoliberalism represents a reductive approach to value. This approach demands that multi-dimensional value considerations be compared on one scale. It assumes values to be commensurate, defining commensuration as "the comparison of different entities according to a common metric."[34] Across all its different forms, neoliberalism relies on competition for decision-making.[35] Competition rests on benchmarking, rating, and ranking. It presupposes comparing different elements using a common denominator or a common *currency* of comparison.

This can take the form of pricing. In the market, everything has a price. This price makes it possible to compare anything with anything else. Commensuration through pricing is made possible by eliminating qualitative differences while replacing judgment with calculation. Value is expressed in monetary terms while the market serves as the "apparatus" for value calculation. But competition extends far beyond the market. The rise of populism, libertarianism, and the alternative right underscores the need to see competition as a social and cultural process of sifting winners and losers according to scale.[36] New forms of neoliberalism are marked by expanded ambitions. These shift from governing by the markets[37] to subjects governing themselves, not merely from the outside but also from within. Foucault's notion of *governmentality* explains how competition can coordinate relationships between individuals and shape their internal experiences.[38] The "happiness industry,"[39] the "quantified self,"[40] and the importance of social media statistics to self-perception and self-esteem, all exemplify how subjects can be set up to compete against themselves.[41]

38 Michel Foucault, "The Subject and Power,"
    Critical Inquiry 8, no. 4 (1982): 777–95,
    https://www.jstor.org/stable/1343197.

39 William Davies, *The Happiness Industry:
    How the Government and Big Business
    Sold Us Well-Being* (London: Verso Books,
    2015), 66.

40 Phoebe Moore and Andrew Robinson,
    "The Quantified Self: What Counts in
    the Neoliberal Workplace," *New Media &
    Society* 18, no. 11 (2016): 2774–92, https://
    doi.org/10.1177/1461444815604328.

41 Davies, *Happiness Industry*, 1–99; and for a
    perspective from within the design schol-
    arship Katherine Hepworth, "A Panopticon
    on My Wrist: The Biopower of Big Data
    Visualization for Wearables," *Design and
    Culture* 11, no. 3 (2019): 323–44, https://
    doi.org/10.1080/17547075.2019.1661723.
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42 Alain Desrosières, *The Politics of Large
    Numbers: A History of Statistical Reasoning*
    (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press,
    1998), 12.

43 Ben Anderson, "Neoliberal Affects,"
    Progress in Human Geography 40,
    no. 6 (2016): 734–53, https://doi.
    org/10.1177/0309132515613167; Anders
    Koed Madsen, "Tracing Data — Paying
    Attention: Interpreting Digital Methods
    through Valuation Studies and Gibsons
    Theory of Perception," in *Making Things
    Valuable*, ed. Martin Kornberger et
    al. (Oxford: Oxford University Press,
    2015), 257–78, https://doi.org/10.1093/
    acprof:oso/9780198712282.003.0013.

44 Sara Ahmed, "Affective Economies," *Social
    Text* 22, no. 2 (2004): 117–39, https://doi.
    org/10.1215/01642472-22-2_79-117.

45 Adam Arvidsson, "General Sentiment: How
    Value and Affect Converge in the Infor-
    mation Economy," *The Sociological Review*
    59, no. 2_suppl (2011): 39–59, https://doi.
    org/10.1111/j.1467-954X.2012.02052.x.

46 Quinn Slobodian, *Crack-Up Capitalism:
    Market Radicals and the Dream of a World
    Without Democracy* (London: Allen Lane,
    2023), 235–36.

47 David Graeber, *Toward an Anthropological
    Theory of Value: The False Coin of Our Own
    Dreams* (Los Angeles: Springer, 2001), 15,
    https://doi.org/10.1057/9780312299064.

48 Ariane Berthoin Antal, Michael Hutter, and
    David Stark, eds., *Moments of Valuation:
    Exploring Sites of Dissonance* (Oxford:
    Oxford University Press, 2015), 1–15.

49 Richard J. Bernstein, *The Pragmatic Turn*
    (Cambridge: Polity, 2010), 4; Dewey,
    "Theory of Valuation."

50 Cheryl Misak, *Cambridge Pragmatism:
    From Peirce and James to Ramsey and
    Wittgenstein* (Oxford: Oxford University
    Press, 2018), ix.

This gives rise to the "conventions of equivalence"[42] — ways of creating a common denominator using systems other than prices and market mecha-nisms. Under the neoliberal spell, it becomes possible to use affects, moods, and sentiments as ranking devices. The emergence of very large data sets aids the process.[43] A good example is Sara Ahmed's account of "affective economies" where feelings and emotions are no longer treated as properties of subjects but as a currency — a way to assign value to external constructs.[44] Similarly, Adam Arvidsson's "general sentiment" — which identifies reputation and peer-group esteem as new currencies[45] — illustrates how to achieve an alternative valuation equivalent to pricing.

This approach to value shows how neoliberal forms of governance can be implemented across different domains and systems with the simple formula of competition. Nevertheless, these forms of competition have adverse conse-quences. Despite historical and geographical differences, the effects of neo-liberalism are socially damaging. They lead to inequalities between regions and individuals, and these inequalities grow over time.[46] These consequences speak to the importance of alternate ways of coordinating society and benefit of alternates model of value.

The Pragmatic Alternative to Neoliberal Value?

The neoliberal approach to decision-making through competition requires commensurability. In this approach, value is one-dimensional, and this model overlooks or eliminates any sources of qualitative difference. The value in the neoliberal model can express magnitudes but not purposes — *how much*, *how much less* or *how much more*, but not *to what* end and not *with what goal in mind*. This leads to valuation *pathology*. In the words of David Graeber, this "has effectively vanished the analysis of ends — of values, of why people want the things they do — entirely from its purview."[47]

The neoliberal model has a notable omission: its reductive approach to the agents shaping the valuation process. Under neoliberalism, consumers pay prices and calculate their gains rather than acting collectively to realize their, sometimes conflicting, purposes.[48] Neoliberal valuation fails to recognize cultural, social, technological, and material circumstances that shape valuation and ignores value as a product of interactions that are necessarily plural and sit-uated. The word "interaction" is crucial. Valuation is an activity that recognizes, assesses and negotiates significance. Valuation is necessarily interactional, not just transactional. Interaction is central to the pragmatic model of value.

At the core of pragmatism is a concern with human agency and the conse-quences of actions.[49] Rather than being preoccupied with representing reality, the early pragmatists — Charles Sanders Peirce and William James, and later John Dewey and Jane Addams — were concerned with the formation of be-liefs that *work*.[50] This involves bridging thought and action to form beliefs in experiential and empirical context, i.e., *doing* things in the world. Against this backdrop, valuation is understood as a form of socio-cultural practice. It is therefore set in the context of much broader structures, including social and cultural relations. It is practical activity, too. It cannot be figured out in the head alone. Rather, it requires determining how to act in real situations.[51]

51   Charles H. Cooley, "Valuation as a Social Process," *Psychological Bulletin* 9, no. 12 (1912): 441, https://doi.org/10.1037/h0070870; Dewey, *Logic*, 7–103; Dewey, "Theory of Valuation."
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52   John Dewey, *Human Nature and Conduct, 1922*, vol. 14 of *The Middle Works, 1899–1924*, ed. Jo Ann Boydston (Carbondale, IL: Southern Illinois University Press, 1922), 119–99.

53   Dewey, *Logic*, 108.

54   Antal et al., *Moments of Valuation*, 2. See also David Stark, *The Sense of Dissonance: Accounts of Worth in Economic Life* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2011), 1–35; Michèle Lamont, "Toward a Comparative Sociology of Valuation and Evaluation," *Annual Review of Sociology* 38 (August 2012): 201–21, https://doi.org/10.1146/annurev-soc-070308-120022.

55   Donald A. Schön, "Knowing-in-Action: The New Scholarship Requires a New Epistemology," *Change: The Magazine of Higher Learning* 27, no. 6 (1995): 34, https://doi.org/10.1080/00091383.1995.10544673.

56   Richard Buchanan, "Wicked Problems in Design Thinking," *Design Issues* 8, no. 2 (1992): 6, https://doi.org/10.2307/1511637.

57   Gavin Melles, "An Enlarged Pragmatist Inquiry Paradigm for Methodological Pluralism in Academic Design Research," *Artifact: Journal of Design Practice* 2, no. 1 (2008): 3–11, https://doi.org/10.1080/17493460802276786; Peter Dalsgaard, "Pragmatism and Design Thinking," *International Journal of Design* 8, no. 1 (2014): 143–55, http://www.ijdesign.org/index.php/IJDesign/article/view/1087/606; Brian Dixon, "Experiments in Experience: Towards an Alignment of Research through Design and John Dewey's Pragmatism," *Design Issues* 35, no. 2 (2019): 5–16, https://doi.org/10.1162/desi_a_00531.

58   Melles, "Enlarged Pragmatist Inquiry Paradigm," 5.

59   Dalsgaard, "Pragmatism and Design Thinking," 143.

60   Dixon, "Experiments in Experience," 16; Brian S. Dixon, *Dewey and Design: A Pragmatist Perspective for Design Research* (Cham: Springer, 2020), 63–93, https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-030-47471-3.

61   John Langshaw Austin, *How to Do Things with Words* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1975), 4–11.

62   Butler, "Performative Agency," 150.

Valuation is an important theme in John Dewey's work. Rather than an abstract unit of measurement, Dewey believes value is a product of human activity. Valuation involves judging both goals and means. Dewey sees valuation as an ongoing means-ends adjustment. The goal of realizing certain purposes must be continuously reassessed according to current constraints. Valuation brings about desired states through available means.[52]

For Dewey, *situation* and *inquiry* are important terms that co-define each other. "Inquiry is the controlled or directed transformation of an indeterminate situation into one that is so determinate in its constituent distinctions and relations as to convert the elements of the original situation into a unified whole."[53] Situation marks the boundaries of what is relevant to a specific inquiry—what is and is not relevant. Inquiry is a process of situational transformation. The situation itself is constructed through the process of inquiry.

The upshot is a context-sensitive account of valuation. Its premise is the act of valuation *in situ* by active participants who have different value orientations or purposes. Valuation is a materially situated, iterative process. It is a matter of empirical inquiry into how different value orientations—or purposes—might be collectively realized. As the editors of *Moments of Valuation* put it, "value is a quality that has to be performed"[54]—empirically and situationally actualized.

This article does more than argue that valuation is *performed*. Valuation can also be *performative*, altering, adjusting, or transforming valuation practices. I make the dual claim—that value is performed in the pragmatic way with performative effects—with respect to design practice.

A Pragmatic Perspective on Design and "Performative Agency"

Donald Schön called for new forms of scholarship closer to practice that "proceed through a design inquiry, in the Deweyan sense."[55] Richard Buchanan evoked Dewey in relation to the "integrations of knowledge that will combine theory with practice for new productive purposes."[56] And in recent years there has been a renaissance of pragmatism in design research with several authors using Dewey as an interpretative lens.[57]

Deweyan inquiry explains how knowledge is acquired and produced through design. Melles suggests that inquiry could be understood as "design's natural epistemology."[58] Peter Dalsgaard looks at inquiry as part of "a conceptual scaffold for design thinking,"[59] and Brian Dixon is motivated by wanting to understand "knowledge as contingent and ontologically transformative."[60] All touch upon the notion of performativity.

Performativity goes back to John Langshaw Austin's philosophy of language. Some utterances (e.g., "with this ring, I thee wed") produce the phenomenon they name (wedding or being married).[61] But as Judith Butler points out, "it is not simply that a subject performs a speech act; rather, a set of relations and practices are constantly renewed, and agency traverses human and non-human domains."[62] (For instance, the exchange of rings is only binding when performed in a certain institutional context, e.g., not in a playground.) The notion of performativity used in sociology and science

63 Michel Callon, "What Does It Mean to Say that Economics Is Performative?," in *Do Economists Make Markets? On the Performativity of Economics*, ed. D. MacKenzie, F. Muniesa, and L. Siu (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2007), 311–57, https://shs.hal.science/halshs-00091596/document; See also Donald MacKenzie, "Is Economics Performative? Option Theory and the Construction of Derivatives Markets," *Journal of the History of Economic Thought* 28, no. 1 (2006): 29–55, https://doi.org/10.1080/10427710500509722.

64 Ana C. Santos and João Rodrigues, "Economics as Social Engineering? Questioning the Performativity Thesis," *Cambridge Journal of Economics* 33, no. 5 (2009): 985–1000, https://doi.org/10.1093/cje/ben058.

65 Cris Shore and Susan Wright, "Audit Culture and Anthropology: Neo-liberalism in British Higher Education," *Journal of the Royal Anthropological Institute* 5, no. 4 (1999): 557–75, https://doi.org/10.2307/2661148.

66 Ibid., 559.

67 This is because, in a typical approach, the outcome measures used for the purposes of impact assessment would be expressed in financial terms.

68 Fernando Galindo-Rueda and Valentine Millot, "Measuring Design and Its Role in Innovation" (paper no. 2015/01, OECD Science, Technology and Industry, 2015), https://doi.org/10.1787/5js7p6lj6zq6-en.

69 John Stevens, "Sense and Symbolic Objects: Strategic Sensemaking through Design," in *Leading Innovation through Design: Proceedings of the DMI 2012 International Research Conference*, ed. Erik Bohemia, Jeanne Liedtka, and Alison Rieple (Boston: DMI, 2012), 509, available at https://www.academia.edu/2813064/.

70 Guy Julier and Elise Hodson, "Value, Design, Scale: Towards a Territories and Temporalities Approach," *Nordes 2021 Matters of Scale*, no. 9 (2021): 98, https://archive.nordes.org/index.php/n13/article/view/572.

71 Richard Buchanan, "Design Research and the New Learning," *Design Issues* 17, no. 4 (2001): 9, https://doi.org/10.1162/07479360152681056.

72 Patrycja Kaszynska and Adam Thorpe, "Change, as Told, Interpreted, Implemented and Strategized," in *Strategic Thinking, Design and the Theory of Change*, ed. Luca Simeone et al. (London: Edward Elgar Publishing, 2023), 177–88, https://doi.org/10.4337/9781803927718.00020.

and technology studies is indebted to Butler's conceptualization of the "performative agency." Michel Callon's claim that economic theories and models are performative does not assume that economic models become real merely by being articulated.[63] Expressing ideas in a form that can be repeated is only a first step.[64] As Cris Shore and Susan Wright observe, the changing function of auditing in British higher education is a simple example.[65] The word "audit" began to be used in new contexts in higher education and in new semantic clusters. This new usage, Shore and Wright claim, led to policy and management changes at universities—"these semantic clusters form the epistemological foundation for the rise of new institutions and the discourses that sustain them and legitimize their activities."[66] Echoing this, I argue that declaring design to be performative is to say that design practices involve enacting and re-enacting a certain process of valuation. This—with reiteration and repetition—may affect how human beings and human groups approach valuation in other domains.

Value in Design

The way that value is actualized in design practices can be transformative with respect to the neoliberal status quo. This claim may surprise some people. Many see design through the lens of neoliberal value modelling. From an impact assessment point of view—a well-established "equivalencing" approach under neoliberalism[67]—design can be a victim of its own success. Measures such as International Design Scoreboard or the McKinsey Design Index capture the contributions of design to business and society in financial terms.[68] Yet there are growing reservations about these approaches. When organizations capture value added through design in relation to products, branding, or management, it can be unclear what they measure or exactly how they quantify impact.[69] A more cogent issue is the perceived mismatch between outcome measurements considered in impact assessment and the process-based understanding of how value is realized in design practice.[70]

Just as many strands of neoliberalism can be linked through their reductive approach to value, a single characterization can span multiple design practices. Richard Buchanan attempts such a generalization, claiming that "design is the human power of conceiving, planning, and making products that serve human beings in the accomplishment of their individual and collective purposes."[71] Building on this—and building on the last 20 years of design research with an emphasis on non-human, material agency, and the participatory character of design—this article takes design practice to be a purpose-led, multi-agency, situated, materializing practice involving a design professional or someone trained in design techniques. Design projects typically involve multiple stakeholders (e.g., clients, communities, and individuals affected by the proposed changes) whose agendas and interests must be aligned or negotiated. Project objectives are often iterated, with the means of delivery adjusted in the face of encountered constraints. It involves working with experts who facilitate the process and know different techniques to support the delivery.[72] This can lead to material outputs (e.g., new things

73 Arjo Klamer, preface to *Doing the Right Thing: A Value Based Economy* (London: Ubiquity Press, 2017), xv.

74 Klamer, *Doing the Right Thing*, 217–31.

75 Mona Sloane, "On the Need for Mapping Design Inequalities," *Design Issues* 35, no. 4 (2019): 3–11, https://doi.org/10.1162/desi_a_00559.

76 Butler, "Performative Agency."

built, new plans made, workshop materials, and more). However, how the process unfolds cannot be reduced to these outputs. There are material and socio-cultural outcomes that go beyond project deliverables. On the basis of this outline of a generic design project, we can trace what happens with value in design practices.

Design practices involve multiple value orientations with different purposes and objectives negotiated in the process. It is possible to go further by suggesting that design practices make the collective valuation agency manifest as extended in time and situated in space. Because of constant means-ends adjustments — reassessing objectives in the light of new constraints — those involved become active value co-creators who shape the process. Valuation through design practice brings about desired states through available means. It is a materially situated, iterative process. It is a matter of empirical inquiry into how different value orientations — or purposes — might be collectively realized. This process, introduced in this article through the lens of pragmatism, is further illuminated through the idea of Aristotelian *phronesis*, elaborated by cultural economist Arjo Klamer:

> "In order to work with and on the basis of values, we need to work sensibly, using *phronesis*, as the Greeks call it. We need to weigh options, deliberate, experiment and evaluate, all in striving to do the right thing. This is quite different from the supposedly rational choices we make in standard economics."[73]

While this account of phronesis does not refer explicitly to material situatedness, it reflects the collectively negotiated type of valuation at issue in design practice. It usefully draws attention to the performative potential of such an alternative model. Indeed, Klamer argues that phronesis may well provide a foundation for a new economic system.[74]

Concluding Reflections and Looking Ahead

Looking at the central claim of this article, I argue that the practice of design represents a model of value that challenges the foundations of neoliberalism. Specifically, I emphasize the active role of multiple agents in a purpose-led activity that involves means-ends adjustments when working in specific socio-cultural material situations. Through this process, people strive for what they consider to be significant in their lives. It solidifies an alternative approach to valuation. In this approach, design practice is credited with the potential to "act on the social"[75] and to shape new forms of valuation that are constructed through social interactions and take place within social structures.

The performative agency concept, as I describe it here, does not claim that valuation can be single-handedly transformed by design. It means that the valuation process cemented through design vindicates certain forms of agency — acting and being in the world — that can have ripple effects into other systems.[76]

Neoliberal valuation reproduces domination in contemporary society. Under neoliberalism, the need to serve and service competition means that,

77 Worryingly, in the pronouncement of populist leaders, the scales in question often take the form of racial and cultural hierarchies. See Cooper, "Alt-right."

78 Sennett, *Culture of the New Capitalism*, 131–99; Richard Sennett, *The Corrosion of Character: The Personal Consequences of Work in the New Capitalism* (New York: W. W. Norton Company, 1998), 15–32.

79 Loïc Wacquant, *Punishing the Poor: The Neoliberal Government of Insecurity* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2009), 27, https://doi.org/10.2307/j.ctv11smrv3.

80 Jamie Peck, "Zombie Neoliberalism and the Ambidextrous State," *Theoretical Criminology* 14, no. 1 (2010): 104–10, https://doi.org/10.1177/1362480609352784.

81 William Callison and Zachary Manfredi, "Introduction: Theorizing Mutant Neoliberalism," in *Mutant Neoliberalism: Market Rule and Political Rupture*, ed. William Callison and Zachary Manfredi (New York: Fordham University Press, 2019), 1–38, https://doi.org/10.1515/9780823285730-001.

82 Wacquant, *Punishing the Poor*, 58.

there is little recognition for the fact that people have different value orientations and do things for different purposes. As a result, the field of social action is reduced to ranking winners and losers on a one-dimensional dominant scale: wealth and income, or other forms of pecking orders.[77] This way of regulating society has tangible effects on real people in the real world. As Richard Sennet shows, neoliberalism—or "late capitalism," as he calls it—operates by fueling inequalities and undermining existing social structures. This produces a form of coercion that corrodes the individual's ability to form communities with fellow citizens.[78]

Claims have been made that in the aftermath of the 2008 financial breakdown neoliberalism entered a "late,"[79] "zombie,"[80] "mutant"[81] state. Many hoped that the Covid-19 pandemic would be the final nail in the coffin. Yet neoliberalism arguably persists and remains entrenched in contemporary societies.[82] The need for alternative approaches is urgent.

But these alternative approaches are not likely to come from within economic and social structures colonized by the neoliberal model of value. In this article, I suggest that design practice has the potential to transform or even to subvert neoliberalism by virtue of *performing* an alternative approach to valuation.

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There are no conflicts of interest involved in this article.

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