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Facing Value

Radical perspectives from the arts
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Rules of value creation
Be unproductive 1.
The Finnish artist Pilvi Takala is known for her performances in which she infiltrates existing structures and subtly disrupts them, thereby alerting us to what we are doing. In *The Trainee*, she poses as an intern at a large firm but instead of working harder than anyone else, as we have come to expect from trainees, she just stands in the elevator for hours on end, making everyone uncomfortable. She sits at her desk doing nothing, making everyone aware of the incessant emailing they are engaged in. Takala explains to her co-workers that she prefers to do her brain work in her head, rather than on a computer. *The Trainee* is an exercise in being unproductive in order to confront us with our productivity-obsessed working culture and the specific forms of productivity that have become dominant. Takala achieves this by situating productivity in inactivity and thinking, for example, and the questioning of norms that are taken for granted.

While productivity is well documented—countless books and conversations deal with stress (recent research 'found' that stress is actually a good thing), the pace of working, being busy, edging towards a burn-out etc.—far less attention is given to doing nothing, being consciously unproductive in the standard sense of the word. There has been a shift in attention, however, towards the value of boredom and a plea for less crowded schedules. But despite this, we still value being busy more than taking one's time. But there is actually value (also economic value) in doing nothing, in being a confrontational, non-working trainee. Through her work, Takala confronts us with our work ethics and our ideas of what being productive...
looks like. She was, in a sense, a physical manifestation of the tilting vision.

Here is an example taken from real life. A couple of years ago, a Belgian newspaper wrote about a man who, unbeknownst to his colleagues and supervisors, had been avoiding work for years. The man worked at a large office and one day simply left his blazer jacket hanging over the back of his office chair and never returned. Everyone assumed he was around but was getting a coffee, having lunch, or had gone outside for some fresh air. Colleagues were impressed by the fact that he was always there first thing in the morning and stayed longer than anyone else, even though they never actually saw him. The jacket told all. It was the stand-in for a hard-working man dedicated to his job. It took years for the organization to notice that he simply never showed up, that his jacket was all there was. The value of that jacket took a wicked turn and became not so much an emblem of dedication as a vessel for deceit.

In both Takala’s performance and this anecdote, we see French philosopher Michel de Certeau’s concept of *la perruque* (French for wig) in the extreme. *La perruque* is used by De Certeau to talk about all those moments when we mask private activities as work activities and hence avoid work. De Certeau gives the example of ‘writing a love letter on “company time”’. Nowadays we seem to be constantly ‘perruque-ing’ when liking things on Facebook or checking private emails during work hours. Because the divisions between work time and free time, between public self and private self, have almost completely dissolved, we find it less and less strange to be doing private things on company time (and the other way around). There is hardly anything as clear cut and neat as company time or private time anymore. Our lives have become a jumble of mixed-up and intermingling times in which we work while on the toilet via smartphone and get lost on someone’s Facebook wall behind our office desk.

In the case of the Belgian man, the valuable and useful are severely mixed up. A supposedly useful activity—working—is bypassed or avoided by an extensive *perruque* (or elaborate comb over) where the useful is not being validated in the traditional sense but through the qualities and extensiveness of his hoax, the fact that so many ‘free’ time was created, while still being paid for work not done. And if no one misses your contributions to dealing with the workload, how bad can it be to simply disappear, change your hairdo and be gone? Sadly for us, the companies where this trick would work are disappearing fast. We are installing more and more systems for checking in with colleagues and friends, systems that have an underlying value system (quick responses are good, slow are not) and forgetting that being a fast responder doesn’t mean you are spending your time useful, let alone valuable.

Part of the recent reappraisal of boredom, is the renewed attention given to the German writer Siegfried Kracauer, who wrote in his 1924 essay ‘Boredom’ about how modern cities and their many forms of entertainment over-stimulated people who were in a state of ‘permanent receptivity, constantly pregnant with London, the Eiffel Tower, and Berlin’, he writes. These city-dwellers lost the ‘self that would be able to tarry for a while without a goal, neither
here nor there. To counter this over-stimulation, Kracauer stressed the importance of boredom, not ‘the vulgar boredom of daily drudgery’ but ‘extraordinary, radical boredom’. In 1924 too, people apparently were likely to counter that work, to-do lists and obligations kept them away from being able to be bored, because Kracauer writes:

There is no one who has no leisure time at all. ... in principle, during those beautiful hours of free time everyone would have the opportunity to rouse himself into real boredom.

Boredom is necessary, argues Kracauer, because it will cure us of indifference, the natural reaction to over-stimulation, and ‘awaken us to new life’. It is through actively pursuing boredom that we can achieve ‘a kind of bliss that is almost unearthly’.

As technology critic Evgeny Morozov writes in The New Yorker, the radical, extreme boredom of Kracauer is not just ‘good for us’, it is ‘inherently political, allowing us to peek at a different temporal universe, to develop alternative explanations of our predicaments, and even to dare to dream of different futures’. Boredom in this sense makes the same move as we witnessed in relation to not-working: what is at first sight useless and without any value, becomes something extremely precious. Something to fight for, given the fact that media companies, public opinion, a narrow perception of what constitutes productivity, all seem to conspire against any wish we might have to not work, and to be, for example, bored and enjoy some unobstructed brain-time and thinking-time.

Why this is important, crucial even, is also voiced by Bojana Kunst, borrowing from Giorgio Agambens analysis of the (im)potential. She writes: ‘Only when the potential is not being actualized, one is opened to one’s being in time, to one’s eventness.’ In not-working, in embracing radical boredom, we do actualize the potential of the moment and hence open up to plurality, possibility, that which might be and might happen. As Kunst further elaborates in her book Artists at Work, in which she stakes a claim for laziness and less work as an antidote to the dominant discourse on usability and productivity, it is mainly with artists that these pockets of resistance can still be found: ‘Many contemporary artistic works ... have an interesting and incestuous relationship with laziness and non-work: mistakes, minimum effort, coincidence, duration, passivity, etc.’

Importantly, artists are not safe from the pressure to perform, to monetarize every second and make it count, to manage their practice and as such, they too loose ‘the force of waste’.

As Kracauer wrote in 1924, there is no one who has no leisure time at all. The problem is that we have forgotten to claim time for something else than leftover work, we let the work-type of activities ooze into what is actually our own time, our free time, whatever that may still mean. We are the ones checking messages on smart phones and keeping ourselves spasmodically updated on all fronts, on all matters, on things trivial and large, world-consuming and hardly worth noticing. As work-time and free-time, public-time and private-
time completely overlap, so do the important and the non-important, the pop culture-related and the refugee crisis-related.

We are as much part of the problem as the companies that develop the technologies that keep us from being bored (those are the same companies that, if they have the budget for it, design the type of workplaces that keep personnel from ever needing to go home). It is a network of actors and issues that have been woven together into a very complex patchwork of problems. This means that we will have to reclaim our right to be extremely, radically bored and find value in unconventional forms of productivity. Not for the sake of it, but to free ourselves, ‘get our heads back’ and seek out wild and free ideas. It is time that the useful and the useless are disentangled and that what is masked as useful (being busy, tapping on a phone) is unmasked as what it truly is: a form of over-stimulation that keeps us from the blissful state that is called boredom and that leads the way into new domains.

4 Ibid., p. 331.
5 Ibid.
6 Ibid., pp. 331–332.
7 Ibid., p. 331.
8 Ibid., p. 334.
13 Ibid., p. 187.
14 Think for example of the Google offices that provide their personnel with everything they could ever need, and more than they are ever likely to be able to afford at home, hence creating a workspace that one never needs to leave. See Benjamin Naddaff-Hafrey’s essay ‘Work Imitates Life’ for an analysis of this type of utopian workplaces: https://aeon.co/essays/is-the-utopian-workplace-just-a-ploy-to-keep-us-all-at-work.

For a dystopian and brilliant take on this new office and tech culture, there is Dave Eggers’ The Circle (New York: Vintage Books, 2013).