

# WHAT IS (OF OUR) HUMAN MAKING?

I have joined the *Museum Boijmans van Beuningen* in Rotterdam as part of a new exhibition program.

This extraordinary museum [\[Link\]](#) holds the largest collection of contemporary art in the Netherlands. Experiments in temporary and often provocative exhibitions, rather than permanent displays of the collection, are the museum's specialty, and it runs over twenty a year. It also runs ARTtube – a collection of videos about art and design – [\[Link\]](#)

The museum first came to my attention when it hosted Peter Greenaway's curatorial work "*The Physical Self*" back in 1991 [\[Link\]](#) – an eclectic assemblage of items from the museum's collections plus live performers, naked and seated in vitrines.

The museum itself as *gesamptkunstwerk* – a total work of art, as Director Sjarel Ex, puts it.

**Design Column** is the new program – short three month exhibitions of items drawn from the design collections in response to matters of contemporary concern.

*Design Column #2 The Human Index (running until December 16 2012 – [\[Link\]](#))*  
*Museum Boijmans van Beuningen, Rotterdam*

The second presentation in the new Design Column series by Museum Boijmans Van Beuningen focuses on the hopelessness of the prevailing economic situation. The exhibition makes clear that the financial system is completely alienated from society and it is becoming increasingly urgent to make people the central concern

again. 'Design Column #2 The Human Index' presents projects and works of art that seize upon this urgency.

The crisis that simply won't go away gives artists and designers inspiration for projects and works of art that make people the central concern again. Design Column #2 The Human Index shows projects that put people and human interests once again at centre stage. These projects provide a new perspective on the discussion about the meaning of value.

#### A frame – the contemporary economic abyss

In her documentary *Money & Speed: Inside the Black Box*, director Marije Meerman [\[Link\]](#) takes us back to May 6, 2010 to look again into a financial abyss. Between 2.42 and 3.07 pm that afternoon the Dow Jones Industrial Average plunged 1000 points, then almost completely recovered. This was the largest single day decline ever, with nearly 10% of the total value of the stock market wiped out, and yet regained within minutes. It was the *flash crash*.



Money & Speed: Inside the Black Box, Marije Meerman (director), 2011, photo: Catalogtree, Courtesy: VPRO

What happened? What caused this? There is no consensus.

What is clear is that trading on financial markets has changed radically over the last couple of decades. Automated processing of financial data accompanies ultra high speed trading where microseconds between selling and buying can make all the difference to profit and loss. The quantities of data are colossal, flowing through financial data centers, anonymous windowless warehouses spread in a ring around New York's Wall Street, crunching numbers delivered by fiber optic. As computer processing power increases, time is telescoped down and the intervals in trading are so short that what matters is not measurable time but sequence, simply what comes before what. The financial market approaches the state of a (quantum) **black box** – impenetrable, unfathomable, where we perceive only inputs and outputs. This is the world of *deep data* and *deep time*, buried deep beyond human apprehension.

## Reactions

**Ai Weiwei** daubs bright new paint on old pots, defaces them, smashes and grinds up precious ancient Chinese ceramics, irreverently turning them to his own artistic purposes. [\[Link – Amazon\]](#) [\[Link\]](#)

But how do we know that this is really what he does? Are these genuine antiques? After all, he set up an architectural studio called FAKE Design and regularly shows replicas of ancient works. We would have to recruit a connoisseur, deeply knowledgeable of the minutiae of material pasts, to inspect the goods firsthand in order to establish authenticity, or not. He mucks around, modifies, recycles old precious stuff, even when we're not sure that's what it is (anymore)! I'm an archaeologist. I should be horrified. I actually chuckle at the seriousness of what he does. Because the past, what is left of it, needs us now to live on in the present, to look after it, care for it, work with it, restore, repair, adapt, replicate, recycle, and yes, over paint or modify. Ai Weiwei does all this with self-conscious flair, ironically, of course, pointing to the analogies with China's iconoclastic Cultural Revolution, Mao's desire to erase tradition and the past.



Ai Weiwei, Coloured Vases, 2011, Courtesy: Collectie de Heus-Zomers

**Dadara** [\[Link\]](#) fakes money, lavishing care, craft, and attention, a fetishistic attention, on painting beautiful bank note originals for his own private bank. Printing money for art, art for money. The websites and temporary bank tellers' booths that may pop up anywhere, in a European city center or in a countercultural festival in the empty wastes of the Nevada desert, offer exchange deals, cash and Euros, or even just a good idea, as the price for a bank note copy. Dressed up in business suits, Dadara and his board of directors of **Exchanghibition Bank** [\[Link\]](#) mock the pretensions of financial institutions, irreverently, even cynically declaring their scam. When the state won't fund the arts, but will bailout banks, then the artist should found a bank. But a bank with a difference. Money is here again realized as an agent in exchange, in contracts between people through material forms.

The first coins were struck in ancient Lydia; they were of high denomination and were probably to pay mercenaries fighting for the state. These coins, ancestors of our money economy, were an adaptation of the sealstones of the ancient Near Eastern city states used to impress the mark of a trader upon a seal, guaranteeing quantities and qualities of goods to the recipient who would recognize the mark – confirming trust in the relationship and exchange.



Dadara, 2012 biljet, 2012, Courtesy: Dadara and Famous Auctionhouse

**Jane Ní Dhulchaointigh** works in a remarkable material – Sugru [\[Link\]](#), an adhesive and self-setting rubber putty designed for DIY modeling and repairing. It is a hacker's delight, perfect for modding, for customizing pretty much anything.

With Sugru you don't have to take the world the way it comes to you – remake, reshape, add, modify, fix it yourself. Put a better handle on your laptop – your own custom design. Sugru slogans are: “the future needs fixing” and “hack things better”. Hot rodded cars and custom pimped rides come out of a similar aspiration to do better than the industrial designer, the standard corporate product delivered to a demographic category. The enthusiasm for such a material, she says, is down to the growth of user-generated content online: “If digital stuff can be manipulated, then people are going to expect it from physical products as well.”



Jane Ní Dhulchaointigh, Sugru. 2003, Courtesy: [Sugru.com](http://Sugru.com)

**Atelier Van Lieshout** [\[Link\]](#) offer us allegories for the future from pre-industrial economies and societies. Agricultural improvement and rationalized industrial production threw people off the land and into the cities and factories of the nineteenth century. Few of us anymore experience directly farming and food production, the visceral materiality of the abattoir, the damp earth of the field, working flour mill and workshop, managing the pyro technologies of the smelting and forging of metal through tacit knowledge, tuning into the *quiddities*, the raw

qualities of ore, fuel and energy combined in the smelter. Their *Prototypes* signal the character of a design and making praxis, informed and knowledgeable practice, that doesn't exceed the everyday, a human scale: if you can't get it done today, let it be.





Atelier Van Lieshout, Smelter, 2012, Collection: the artist



Atelier Van Lieshout, Seven Prototypes, 2012, Collection: the artist

**Maarten Baas** [\[Link\]](#), in his *Sweepers Clock* reveals a substantial human time, created in (re)enactment, in rhythmic (re)cycling performance, even ritual. He has chairs made from furniture waste – scrap turned to new use. Other furniture is of clay kneaded over a metal core. The clay here is Promethean, a living material, bearing the signature thumbprint of maker, establishing the co-presence of maker and material, maker and user, the past in the present – *actuality*.



Maarten Baas, Sweepers Clock, 2009, Courtesy: Den Herder Production House



Maarten Baas, Plain clay bench, 2011, Courtesy: Den Herder Production House

### Commentary – breaking the frame, escaping the abyss

Time itself changed in the last decade of the eighteenth century. Tradition, in the sense of the past acting as guarantor of contemporary security, was placed under suspicion. We can no longer trust that things have always been this way, even as we are subject to the vagaries of fate. The future now looks insecure. Temporal continuity with the past has been broken. Calculable, divisible abstract time moved center stage, as a key to measuring labor and commodity value, while deep time has come to characterize a natural world divorced from human experience, yet similarly subject to measurement and calculation.

James Hutton, geologist of the Scottish enlightenment in the 1780s and 90s, was perturbed by some of the rock stratigraphies near his farm. On the Berwickshire coast at Siccar Point he found an exposure of sandstone, shales and greywacke, with the strata of the sedimentary rocks lying at a sharp angle to each other. Hutton

argued that there was only one way that such sequences of strata could be explained: one layer had been laid down horizontally on the ocean floor, then elevated, folded, and the tops of its folds eroded, subsequently sinking back into the ocean where it formed the base on which the sand was later deposited and consolidated. This required immense amounts of time beyond human comprehension – a sublime, deep time, in which “we find no vestige of a beginning, no prospect of an end”; indeed, “minds seem to grow giddy looking so far into the abyss of time.”

In France the authorities of revolutionary enlightenment instituted another time quite independent of tradition and religion. To accompany the overturning of the absolutist Bourbon monarchy, a fissure made in the very fabric of history itself, the temporal slate was wiped clean with decimal time: a rational, universal, abstract and perfectly calculable division of time into 10 hours per day, 100 minutes per hour, 100 seconds per minute. Time was started up again in Year 1 of the French Republican Calendar, what had been Anno Domini 1792. The calendar lasted only 12 years and you rarely see one of the decimal clocks made in those times; but the principle of abstract calculable time as the core of modern life has remained with us.

With such fissures in history, and tradition offering no answers, colossal resources have been given over to data gathering, monitoring and surveillance of everyday life, measurement and analysis, with the aim of regulation and control of society and the economy. The building of these knowledge-based systems has involved the development of instruments and techniques of observation and measurement, standards and infrastructures that facilitate comparison and analysis, statistics operating upon databases, as well as institutions and management structures that allow the translation of observation into data into information into policy into execution. If all of human life and experience is in principle calculable and subject to knowledge, that we might understand better the likely outcomes of particular actions, attention is thrown onto the future because some sort of assessment of likely risks can be made for virtually all habits and activities; this is the core now of healthcare industries, insurance, government policies, and, of course, banking and the financial services industry. These abstract and comparative knowledge systems throw suspicion on traditional answers and precepts in favor of research and data analysis oriented on the future and implying assessment of opportunities and threats. The result is society focused on control, even when our persistent experience is that things are increasingly out of control.

The paradox that seems now so prevalent is that the more data gathered and analyzed, the more information available, the more effort made to control a runaway world, the greater the proclaimed powers and pretensions of state and corporate agencies, the worse it gets.

Do certain design principles and practices offer a response to this paradox? Not knowledge abstracted from making, but making as knowledge, as savviness and know-how?

There is no going back to a premodern eden, the kind of craft-based locally-focused economy so favored by arts-and-crafts socialists. Instead, what do we see here in these wonderful and provocative exhibited works and projects? (And I am conscious of many resonances and parallels in the *Maker Movement* in the United States.)

Mock the pretensions of alienated design. Irreverence and parody is an attitude suited to grounded and reasoned intervention, attending to local and human need, rather than grand, perhaps overbearing and top-down imposition.

The aesthetic of this human centered design is one antipathetical to the preciousness of the overworked artifact, the overfinished perfection of the iPhone or Blackberry, the polished, aseptic, finished, complete morbidity of an industrial aesthetic, death designed onto a *tabula rasa*, the slate wiped clean. Instead – provisional imperfection.

Pragmatics? Make do, improvise, bypass, enact, work around, modify, customize. Iteration – try this out, give it a go, modify, try again, in the light of experience. This world is constantly “in beta”, in test, in trial. Do not aspire to finality, to an end, to a predetermined *telos*.

The key to this human-centered design is time. The temporality of this making involves iteration, modification in the light of experience, returning to a local need, getting to understand people’s local worlds better, and acting on new insight born of use and experience – returning constantly to the conjuncture of need, artifact and occasion in stratigraphies of intervention, in layered, accumulated modifications. Time here is composed of opportunities to intervene, to act on the spur of the moment, and so make a difference. Life is to be found in iteration, in the genealogy of modified, modified, modified ... . This kind of time is what in ancient Greek was termed *kairos*. It is far removed from that time of the financial

trader asymptotically tending towards abject, dead singularity.