

*The* lines we draw  
between work/life

by Yasmine van Maasakker

# Content

02	Abstract
03	Note to the reader
04	Methodology
05	Meditation on value in Calligraphy; an introduction
07	Meditation on meaning(lessness)
11	Meditation on work
13	Conclusion; revalue value
14	An afterword on work/life
15	Bibliography

# Abstract

The lines that separate our work and leisure life seem to be less defined than what they once were. My generation (gen-y but also millennials) grew up hearing "Do what you love, and you'll never work a day in your life. Which reinforces the idea that our attention belongs more rightfully on profit than on pleasure." (Conway, 2019)

We give value to our time, how we spend it, and at what cost. But the term value is predominantly connected to capital. Neoliberalism has influenced the way we view value, and so it plays a part in how we relate to work; how, where, and at what cost.

There is an urgency to determine what value is to us personally and let it count all hours of the day, all days of the week. Not just in our 'free time', which we often still spend on work outside our working place. It seems as though working hard has been made increasingly easier, as the dexterity of technology lets us be available and ready to work all waking moments of the day. But work done in our own 'free time' is remaining free from profit. "working longer hours, answering work emails on our phones from parties, funerals, and bed, and doing more, always, with less." (Jaffe, 10). But at the same time it allows us to be more mobile and move away from the four corners of our office, maybe eventually move away from the neoliberal notion of value; which is profit.

I will take time and meditate on my notion of value. To redefine the line I draw between work/life.

## Note to the reader

The house I grew up in was my home first and foremost, but it was a place of work too.

I grew up in my mother's home. As she was an interior designer, she often worked from her home office and the house also functioned as a showroom. My second home was at my father's, where the opposite took place. I was only there every other weekend, and during the week he would work from an office, I wouldn't see much of his work life.

These examples have influenced the relationship of and how I grew up with 'work'. I wonder how the balance of my personal life and working life will be. And so the purpose of this research will be a precaution for myself and maybe others, as I have been overworked twice, at the age of 19 and 24.

I started practicing calligraphy when I was unknowingly overworked for the first time. Since then, I have continued to practice this throughout the four years of education at the art academy. Calligraphy was a creative outlet in which I didn't have to add any big intentions or meaning whilst the work I had to deliver to the academy had to convey a message with my opinion embedded and include a social significance. Sometimes I would just want to make something without having to dig deep and explain why without becoming a self-acclaimed expert in a subject I just got to know a few weeks before. My calligraphy allowed me to relax, as there were merely the practical and optical rules of spacing and shaping letters. I was learning by doing without anything being placed upon me.

# *M*ethodology

To question the neoliberal and my notion of value that dictates the reasons why, how much and when I work, I will meditate on new values which are overshadowed by the idea that "everything we need and want to have has a price tag attached." (Jaffe, 7)

I have conducted experimental research; where I searched for values in my calligraphy work that resonates with my personal values. I started to write with the sentence "The relationship I have with..." in a non-work environment to maintain a clear personal connection towards the subject.

These personal views are combined with qualitative research of writings about work throughout generations. And views of creative professionals and philosophers on work, art and politics, the working society, and the beauty of daily life.

# *M*editation on value in Calligraphy; an introduction

*"Principles are the territory. Values are maps. When we value correct principles, we have truth; a knowledge of things as they are." (Covey, 1989)*

I have found value in letters for as long as I can remember, even in the simplest form of writing. Before I was taught in school, around the age of five, I asked my parents to print out the alphabet and I took my little desk and sat outside copying the shapes of the letters. When I got a 'Sinterklaas gedicht' written by my older sister, I would draw over and follow her handwriting as I thought it was beautiful. When I was ten, I drew the names of my family in big bold colourful letters as I didn't know what else to draw. At sixteen I was completely hooked when I had my first typography class, and around the age of nineteen, I tried my hand at calligraphy for the first time.

I am more conscious of this practice now as it is moving away from a hobby and towards work, I recognise that it has always given me a sense of slowness of time. Time which I take for myself, which I can materialise and give to others.

When I started with calligraphy, it seemed as if I had done it before. I surprised myself and I felt as if I was fourteen years old again; sitting behind my piano where I could let out the energy residing in my mind and body, composing a rhythm formed by the muscle

memory in my fingers, pressing into the black and white keys, creating musical notes. Only this time, I didn't have any muscle memory of hours of practice, and I had little energy to express myself as I was quite empty due to being overworked. It gave me a euphoric feeling of being in control again as almost everything else which I produced felt as if was out of focus, filled with mistakes.

musical notes/keys  
Not only do keys represent letters from 'a' to 'g' and were chanted in my head, but the philosophy of typography relates back to music too. "We think typography is black and white. Typography is really white, it's not even black. It is the space between the blacks that really makes it. In a sense it's like music, it's not the notes, it's the space you put between the notes that makes the music." (Vignelli, 2007)

Calligraphy requires repetitive practice to understand not only the construction of letters but also the way to hold the tool you use, how each brush or pen moves, how much pressure to apply, and ink to use. How to breathe with your movement, what to focus on, where to be confident or where to be very precise. The muscle memory allows me to switch onto a

different knowledge network of my body. Another source of energy. Art historian and philosopher Yanagi writes in his book 'The beauty of everyday things' about similar work of artisans.

"Thousands of times, tens of thousands of times, it is this repetition that frees their hand from thought. [...] There is not a smidgen of doubt. The free flow of the brush, the dynamic formation of the shape, the natural unshackled aura... their hands appear no longer to be their own but under the sway of some external force." (Yanagi, 43)

It feels as if practicing calligraphy comes naturally, painting letters and placing them in compositions. It gives me a certain kind of peace and fulfilment. The hours of practice become a meditation itself, a bodily practice which locates the value within the corporeal rather than the over-stated mental realm.

I found another form of value that lies in the process of creating, playing, and sometimes flowing into a hyper-focus. Drawing perfect (and sometimes not so perfect) straight lines, connecting and placing

curves with just the right amount of spacing. Applying the optical rules of what seems 'right' to do, sometimes checking and going back to the rules of techniques on spacing. And starting over again, adjusting or flipping around these rules to make the forms anew.

Creativity is in its essence a representation of anything in our lives made visible as a structure or abstraction. A structure with rules, composed in new or different ways. Creativity is a composition of rules rearranged. Calligraphy has as many rules as you want there to be. There are enough to break or go around. Using brushes and different surfaces give me new rules to learn and break. These rules can become ever-changing variables, allowing me to find constant newness and creativity within my creative process.

Depending on my capacities of productiveness, focus, and energy, differing day by day, I can choose to step into a mindless meditation or playful creative practice. Changing from the corporeal to the mental realm without exhausting myself as each one charges the other.

## *M*editation on meaning(lessness)

*'Sometimes doing something leads to nothing' (Alÿs, 1997)*

The letters I draw\* are firstly abstracted of their meaning. Words are deconstructed into shapes and formed by movements of the brush. They do not communicate an existing language, only remnants of it.

The relationship we have with meaning - or the lack of it, is mostly negative. Where there is a lack of meaning, there is a lack of knowledge, opinion, or value. This ideology has put a certain pressure on what we do for a living, as we try to define ourselves through our profession. "Our work has moved from an occupation to a status; centring our work around personal beliefs and opinions" (Skyles, 104). It is as if our jobs have become a reflection of who we are and a way to

represent ourselves. But who are we without our work?

Within the art academy, meaninglessness is not to be embraced. 'What is the meaning of your work, what can it mean to others, what do you stand for?' are questions that are asked frequently. Not knowing or choosing not to form one opinion can feel like a shortcoming, as if to say you don't know what you want or who you are. But it could be the start of something truly valuable. There is a resemblance between embracing meaninglessness and meditation. There is no judgment and everything that is, just is. By observing without judgment or wanting to know or control something, you gain stillness



שְׁמֵהּ  
וְשֵׁהּ  
נִכְנָנִי כִּי



awareness and knowledge from observing without opinion. And perhaps by doing so, you will understand yourself better too. Even meaningless things can be carefully studied and noted, or expand your thought process. I find that abstracting the meaning from letters and simplifying the work allows space for meaning to grow or even show itself. It allows to create first without judgment and to be looked at in retrospect to see a coherence, conclusion, or... meaning.

"Still, without knowing all that there is to know, his hands continue working swiftly in the process of creation... He himself has lost all thought, is unconsciously at work. Just as faith appears of its own accord from ardent

belief, beauty naturally appears in works unconsciously created." (Yanagi, 30)

Being asked to find meaning is to be asked to rush towards a finish, look into the future and find a result. It sometimes discourages the process of making (when asked too early) instead of observing where meaning can grow. I believe if creative processes are slowed down and the fast pace of production's efficiency is ignored, more meaning and thus value will show.

*\* I draw, as I do not apply any meaning in my letters. If I would, I would be writing. "Writing calls for one further shift, prompted by the discovery that letters can be arranged in meaningful combinations to form words." (Ingold, Tim. Lines A Brief History, 2016)*

# Meditation on work

The starting point of my work is the surface I work on. It determines what technique I have to apply or maybe need to practice first. I make use of the serendipitous encounters with objects from thrift stores and markets, left to be useless, are broken and collected a layer of dust. By placing them in a different light I increase the value of something that has been shunted aside. "Likewise, when one comes too familiar with a sight, one loses the ability to truly see it. Habit robs us of the power to perceive anew." (Yanagi, 33) This might be the case for the way we perceive our work and the structure it has been built up from.

"Neoliberalism encourages us to think that everything we want and need must be found with a price tag attached" (Jaffe, 7) Which is the beginning and end of why we seem to work. There are so many valuable things around us that are intangible and not meant to fall into commercialism. But in reality, almost everything around us seems to be labeled, valued and defined. If not converted into a product, it has been turned into a service.

An example of a working structure that is already removed further away from the neoliberal is the cultural sector. Doesn't always take part in the economic sphere and thus immaterial payment of fulfilment or other payment in kind seem to be the standard. "Free labor and rampant exploitation are the invisible dark matter which keeps the cultural sector going." (Steyerl, 3)

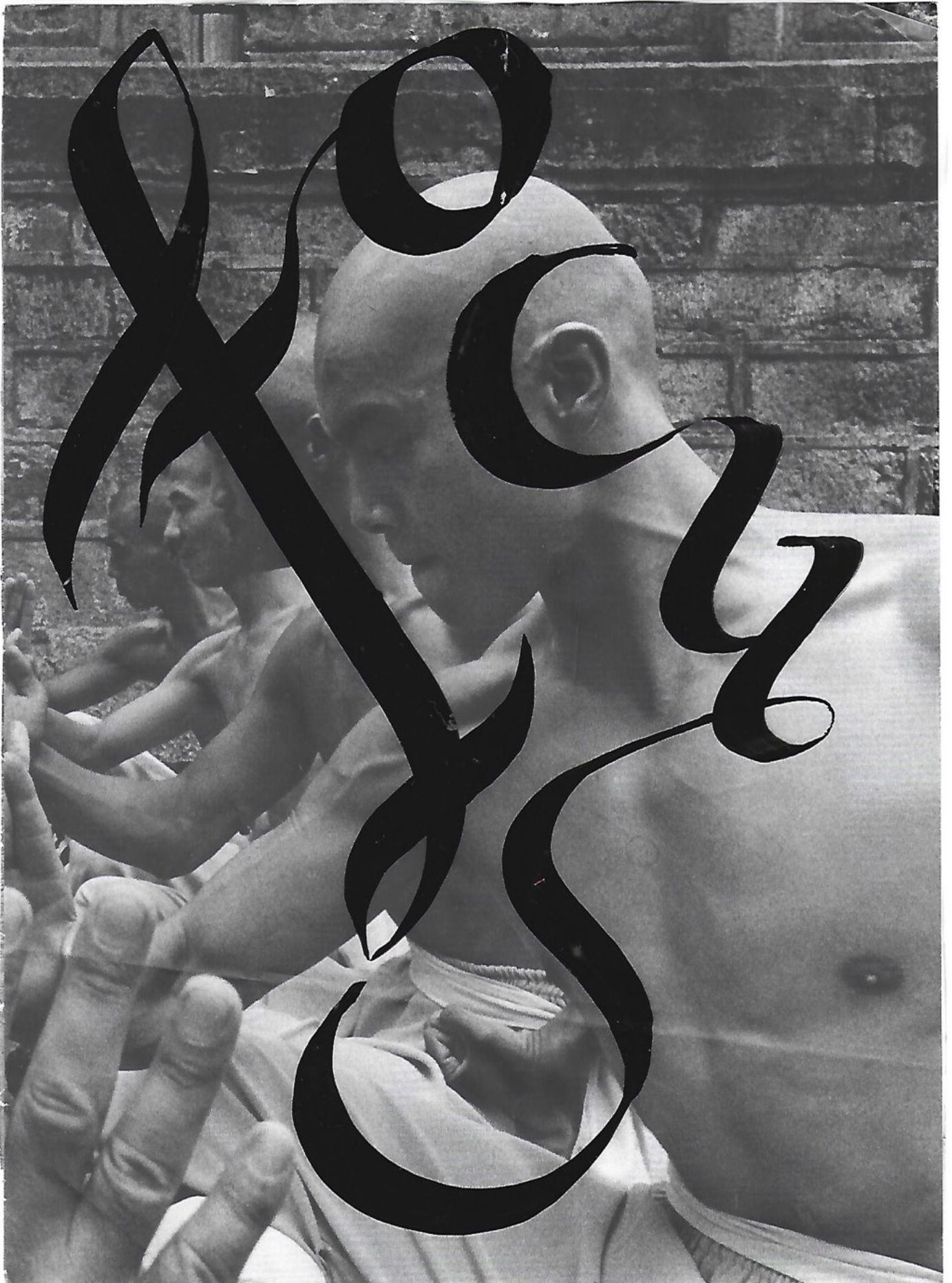
This feels like dark matter, as the working structure of the cultural sector is not only less defined which makes it seem fluid, but there are also layers of work that seem effortless or invisible to the outsider. The hours of practice and dedication before a simple work is created are hidden in (digital)

sketchbooks. Its working structure differs from sectors that are more corporate, less subjective, and are not the typical nine to five jobs. The lack of rules and structure makes it easy to keep the definition of value undefined so exploitation can be condoned. It is therefore necessary for the artist to determine their own worth and value of their work in order to protect themselves.

The idea that our work is our passion, it being able to fulfil or it being our life's purpose, is another factor that applies not only to creative practices but to all work conducted with (the idea of) love for a profession. It's what makes creatives vulnerable to rampant exploitation. My generation (Gen-y but also millennials) grew up hearing "Do what you love, and you'll never work a day in your life. Which reinforces the idea that our attention belongs more rightfully on profit than on pleasure." (Conway, 2019) This has its roots at the beginning of the industrial revolution. Art historian and artisan William Morris describes: "Artisans were robbed by the industrialisation of their love for their work." As they had to hand in their tools to work at the factory. The craft had fallen to commercialism where quantity beats quality, not just of products but work too. This event faded the perception of art as a profession and questioned the worth of the artisan. Being an artist or artisan seems to be a privilege rather than a profession, as it is a profession of passion.

The idea that our work is our passion, that it's able to fulfil or be our life's purpose, is another factor that applies not only to creative practices but to all work conducted with (the idea of) love for a profession. It's what makes creatives vulnerable to rampant exploitation. My generation (Gen-y but also millennials)





grew up hearing “Do what you love, and you’ll never work a day in your life. Which reinforces the idea that our attention belongs more rightfully on profit than on pleasure.” (Conway, 2019) This has its roots at the beginning of the industrial revolution. Art historian and artisan William Morris describes: “Artisans were robbed by the industrialisation of their love for their work.” As they had to hand in their tools to work at the factory. The craft had fallen to commercialism where quantity beats quality, not just of products but work too. This event faded the perception of art as a profession and questioned the worth of the artisan. Being an artist or artisan seems to be a privilege rather than a profession, as it is a profession of passion.

My generation (Gen-y but also millennials) is searching for fulfillment in life through their jobs. This causes them to do more as if the idea of ‘fulfilment’ is fair pay for their overtime. “working longer hours, answering work emails on our phones from parties, funerals, and bed” (Jaffe, 10) It seems as if we are not in control, of where and when we work. The lines we draw between our work/life are more likely to be drawn by others than ourselves. The current neoliberal structure we work in is based on efficiency which increases the mobility to work from any place at any time and made faster to do more. The technology that provides us this efficiency, is generating a pace that is catching up with us.

There is a balance we need to preserve for ourselves in which we determine the value we give to the hours of sourcing, production, repetition, and practice. It is necessary to understand that the love of our work is our drive and fuels our energy, but is not a reason to sell ourselves short.

When do we check in with ourselves, when do we take a break, and when are we truly responsible for our job? The capitalistic notion of efficiency asks us to keep going as quickly as the technologies around us. These technologies were once machines, intended to take off the workload and cut working hours, instead, it picked up the pace to work more.

Working, being functional and efficient, getting things done, or fulfilling a purpose is exactly what gives a sense of accomplishment, satisfaction, and fulfilment. But what happens if we work more than we can bear to reach this never-ending endpoint? This imbalance of our personal needs and demands of our work needs redefining in order to take care of ourselves.

Covey is famously known for his self-help book in the ‘90s which helps to improve yourself to improve all other aspects of your life such as work. He describes the definition of efficiency as follows; Efficiency is a matter of balance. The efficiency is not to be found in how much we produce, it’s in how we maintain and invest in the ‘machine’ which produces. “It’s in the balance of obtaining desirable results with caring for that which produces those results.” (Covey, 41)

Ideally, I would like to embrace and value the freedom of my generation and fulfil the expectation that machines were supposed to provide us with; fewer working hours. I would like to see my future as “a place where you have the power to decide where and how hard you will work, and whether you will control the thing you make or the service you provide” (Jaffe, 10)

## Conclusion; revalue value

*'Instead of designing products, creatives will be designing making systems, going design back its initial strength of relating to and synthesising our times.'* (Edelkoort and Fimmano, 2021)

The most important value in calligraphy for me is the ability to reclaim my time, aligning the pace of production to my breathing. Calligraphy requires patience and hours of practice. I have to take time and be in one place, doing one thing. The repetition eventually becomes effortless, conducted from muscle memory. It takes the practice from the mental to the corporeal realm, allowing me to free my mind from thought and be present.

The current neoliberal structure of work would confiscate this important value of taking time, as it is designed to be efficiently fast. Therefore, I will preserve this value by applying my calligraphy practice into the secondary but mandatory work, such as paperwork; paying taxes; issuing invoices; enquiring submissions; writing emails; promoting my work; work which will always be present within any money-making practice. Instead of the digital technology which provides the efficiency to work anywhere at any time, I will use the slow technology of writing. I will be bound to my working place and working hours. By applying the technology of writing (in calligraphy) I will slow down the process, but efficiently use these hours to practice at the same time.

Not only will this turn the often hidden work into actual work, it will also mean that it can be valued yet again. The paperwork will become

my calligraphy work which can eventually be sold, or valued for me personally as it becomes documentation of the process of my work. And because there always will be paperwork, it will become my life's work. As these tasks will always be present as long as I work as a freelance, artisan artist.

As our understanding is mostly neoliberal and materialised, I will describe the following notion as a tangible object, but it can be read as something intangible too; as an experience or relationship with yourself or another. As it is both true to tangible and intangible matters.

When we don't spend enough time making the objects that we fill our lives with, these valuables break and wear off faster. Also, the value we give them decreases as the relationship we have with them is less long and thus less strong. The production of it is removed further away from us and out of sight. We don't see the time reflected in the objects we fill our lives with as it is all made as fast and efficient as possible and also not likely to be passed down from generations before us.

To be efficient is not necessarily equal to being fast. There is more value to slowing down and, work, creating, live more durably. I will control the rhythm of my work, by using the rhythm of my practice, based on the rhythm of my breath.