

<https://doi.org/10.34074/scop.1023001>

*THE EXCHANGE: INVESTIGATING TIME, LABOUR, AND VALUE*

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Published by Otago Polytechnic Press. Otago Polytechnic Ltd is a subsidiary of  
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## THE EXCHANGE: INVESTIGATING TIME, LABOUR, AND VALUE

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*The Exchange* was part of a practice-based Master of Fine Arts completed through the Dunedin School of Art. My intention was to create the perfect ceramic bowl, repeat the form hundreds if not thousands of times, and investigate the dispersal of the resulting bowls. The key themes explored in the project were time, labour and value.

As well as being visually pleasing, the perfect bowl had to be a satisfying shape to hold and use, and multi-purpose to be as useful as possible – a bowl for breakfast, lunch and dinner, and for drinking out of, if required. My perfect bowl had an open form, a foot ring, was made with 1.25 kilos of stoneware clay and glazed with a high-fired wood-ash glaze in a gas kiln. Each bowl was given a unique identifier consisting of a two-word, four-letter phrase – such as “fake news,” “home fire,” “busy body” – and a number between zero and 9,999.

As an ordinary item in our kitchens, the meaning of a bowl is acquired through use. We all have our favourites, whether in terms of the item's shape, size, colour or history. And as part of our everyday activity of eating there is an active, even performative, character to a bowl. The dispersal method chosen for *The Exchange* project reflected this engagement by involving people as participants. Each bowl took approximately one hour to make – from preparing the clay to making, firing and documenting the final product – and was exchanged for an hour of the participant's time. The exchanged hour could be measured in all sorts of ways: it could be the hourly rate someone earned, or an hour doing something for me, or for another person or pursuit I felt was important or valuable. Participants could choose as many or as few bowls as they liked. Each one was valued at one hour of my time and I exchanged it for one hour of theirs.



By the end of the project nearly 300 bowls had been made and were available for exchange. Each exchange was discussed and agreed by both parties and documented by way of a non-binding contract, my written record and photographs as appropriate. The first exchange was made in February 2021 and the last in December that year, by which time I had completed 69 exchanges for 259 bowls. Exchanges were varied, and included baking for me and others, bead making, website help, locally dug and processed clay, gardening, wool spinning, massage, haircuts, prose writing, and poetry. Eleven of the exchanges were for voluntary work, three for money, and the remainder were for me, including nine pieces of writing and/or poetry and one consisting of conversation.

## MEASURING SUCCESS

While measuring 'success' or 'failure' in a project like this is not straightforward, I see social, economic and political outcomes flowing from it. As far as social value is concerned, the different perspectives participants brought to the project and the conversations we had as we negotiated hours for hours were a richly rewarding part of this project. Discussions were often about the ideas behind the project, such as the value of labour and time, the search for perfection and the attraction of handmade things. Many participants brought welcome feedback, often mentioning that the bowls were in regular use and talking of how much they enjoyed using them. One participant said her teenagers were more engaged in family meals when the bowls were used.

Economic values were very much to the fore. There was a strong element of self-determination in the way the exchanges were valued and, by eliminating a fixed price for the bowls, access was equal for all and not dependent on income or perceived status.

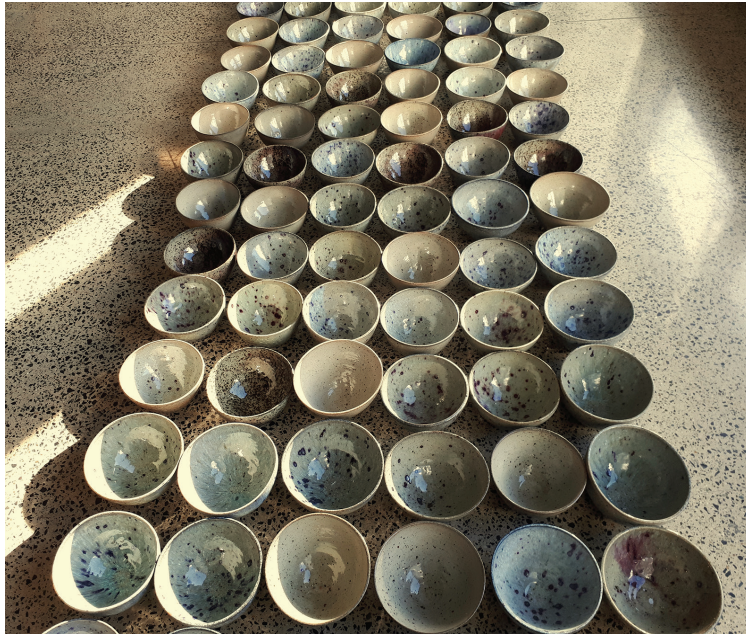
Political considerations also emerged from the consideration of time. The decoupling of time from the usual drive for doing more with less allows a broader perspective to be taken on how we use time, opening up new possibilities including seeing time as available for grassroots political and collective activities.

## TIME, LABOUR AND VALUE

Time and labour were inextricably linked throughout the project. Time for most of us now centres on clocks, calendars and diaries; a commodity to be managed daily. Conventional economics dictates that workers should constantly strive to do more in less time. Countering this, an important principle of *The Exchange* was that both parties set their own hour equivalents, unrelated to mainstream economic measures. These hour equivalents were also unrelated to the conventional hierarchical character of hourly rates that feeds the impression that people on higher rates of pay have more value or worth to society than those on lower rates.

The repetitive aspect of the process was intended to highlight mass production, and in particular issues relating to skilled versus unskilled labour, 'cheap' factory labour, and anonymous workers on production lines versus artists working in a studio environment. While these issues remained relevant, the project seemed determined to resist a reading involving mass production. Any attempt to make the same bowl over and over was thwarted by the range of colours obtained from the same glaze recipe and the way the shape frequently distorted in the firing process. The coding system was intended to be the only identifying difference between bowls, asserting the uniqueness of each one in the face of mass production, but instead only highlighted the differences. My skill set, while extending beyond that of an untrained assembly-line worker, did not become so fluent that I could turn out bowl after bowl looking the same. Differences between skilled and unskilled labour and artist versus factory worker are not as clear-cut as might have been imagined.

Value in our economic system of market capitalism is a slippery concept. We often equate it with price and like to feel that we've got good "value for money" with our purchases. But it works the other way, too. We're willing to accept that an item from a premium brand has more value than one that serves the same purpose from an



unknown maker. In the same way, a ceramic bowl handmade by an artist potter in the studio is seen to have more value than one from the factory floor. It was noteworthy that many participants in *The Exchange* found it difficult to set a value on their time and equate it to the value of a bowl without the fallback position of a fixed price for the bowl.

### EVERY MINUTE IS PRECIOUS

*The Exchange* became a central part of my larger MFA project “Every Minute is Precious” – a title taken from one of the writing exchanges about time. As the process of making got underway, the two-word phrases started to take on a life of their own and generated ideas outside the orbit of *The Exchange*. Some of the phrases lent themselves to making into ceramic word blocks which could incorporate a range of experimental glazes. A further set were used in a series of letterpress works produced at the University of Otago’s Otakou Press. An exhibition documenting the exchanges and the larger project was held at the Dunedin School of Art Gallery, Riego Street, Dunedin, 14-18 March 2022. A photographic record of the exhibition and more details about *The Exchange* project can be accessed at [www.exchange.arts.nz](http://www.exchange.arts.nz).

Dunedin artist **Liz Rowe** graduated with a Bachelor of Fine Arts, majoring in sculpture, in 2007. She pursued a full-time art practice for the next few years, working across several disciplines including ceramics, painting and sculpture. In 2013 her interests took a turn sideways when she decided to investigate chocolate making, establishing craft chocolate company OCHO. After six years, and with the company growing, she decided to bow out and return to the arts. Liz completed a Master of Fine Arts in March 2022.