

Amanda Schmitt in conversation with Sandra Erbacher on the occasion of her upcoming solo exhibition at GRIN

AS: I thought we could perhaps begin with what I find to be the most unquestionably disturbing image in this exhibition, the form featured at the center of the photograph, *ComSystem*. To reference the infamous Martin Kippenberger painting, *With the Best Will in the World, I Can't See a Swastika* (1984), I'd like to ask, can you see a swastika?

SE: I can definitely see a swastika! This image and its implications is so striking, so disturbing to me that it automatically became the center piece, and, essentially, spawned the whole idea for the show. The image set in motion a whole train of thoughts. It got me looking into the parallels between fascism (or more precisely totalitarianism) and bureaucracy via not only the history of Nazi Germany, but also books like Orwell's 1984, David Egger's *The Circle*, Orson Well's adaptation of Kafka's *The Trial* and, more recently, Netflix's *Black Mirror Series*.

For this show at GRIN, I wanted to create a corporate lobby of a fictional company that presents itself as relatively neutral, impersonal, yet authoritative. However, lurking within that space are dark undertones of covert manipulation and control from above.

AS: With the best will in the world, I cannot help see a desk that is shaped like a swastika, and thus, a swastika.

The swastika is an ancient religious icon that was developed in Southeast Asia and has been used in the practices of Buddhism and Hinduism as a sign of peace and good luck for thousands of years. However, at the beginning of the 20th century the icon was co-opted by the Nazi party in Germany and used as a symbol to spread national pride and power for their political party. The swastika in a contemporary Western sense now represents the reification of anti-Semitism, general intolerance, and hate.

I'd like to believe that the manufacturer grossly oversaw this product's resemblance to the 20th century hate symbol. What do you think? In your research, have you found that this was a manufacturing coincidence, or a deeply motivated intention on behalf of the product-maker? Can you share further information on this particular item of corporate furniture?

SE: I have actually found this image in the book *Office Furniture* by Susan S. Szenasy, which is part of *The Office Book Design Series* (1984). It was featured in the section for adjustable desks and storage. Last summer, I did some more research into the manufacturer, Krueger Wisconsin, hoping I would find the image in its original context. However, when I looked at an archive of their official product catalogues, and in particular, the one featuring this particular desk series, this image was nowhere to be found. While Szenasy makes reference in her book to the

modular desk's potential to "undulate into infinity" (pointing towards its original religious use), it is still shocking to me how she chose to ignore the more recent history of the symbol of the swastika and its associations of anti-Semitism and hate.

I chose to include the image in this show for the inherent tension between the banality of the object it represents, the ideological connotations it carries as the official symbol of the Nazi party, and the actual violence it represents, which was committed under the Nazi's rule.

AS: As a German artist making work in America, can you please explain *Vergangenheitsbewältigung* and what it means to you?

SE: The term *Vergangenheitsbewältigung* can be translated as 'coming to terms with the past' and specifically refers to the "unique condition of being German in the 20th century" (The Guardian). It extends to the political, social and cultural sphere as well as the personal, psychological realm and describes a nation trying to deal with the trauma of the Holocaust, and the notion of collective culpability under the national socialist regime.

The notion of a collective culpability is deeply entrenched in the psyche of generations of Germans to this day. The work of a whole generation of artists such as Anselm Kiefer, Gerhard Richter, Martin Kippenberger, or Georg Baselitz who were born during or immediately after the war is defined by a conscious or subconscious drive to come to terms with the past.

I locate my work within this tradition. And it was by no means a conscious decision to follow along this path. I remember in art school struggling to free myself from being labelled a German artist. My professors in London would read my work (then, dark and heavy paintings of mangled trees and chain link fences) as a direct attempt to deal with German history and trauma; later, during my MFA at UW-Madison, my work became very abstract, impersonal, and clinical in a subconscious reaction to shake this label. I was hiding behind a wall of post-structuralist theory.

It wasn't until the last year of my MFA, in fact until my final presentation that everything seemed to fall into place. Even though the work in the show was a more classical institutional critique of the museum, one of my MFA committee members, Michael Jay McClure, spotted and commented on the link between (corporate) bureaucracy and the psycho-social condition of post-war Germany.

I think it was vital for my development as an artist to live and work outside of Germany. I needed the physical and emotional distance to be able to let go of the struggle to emancipate myself from my country's history and to reject the national sentiment of collective culpability and melancholy. Living and working in the U.S. I finally began to acknowledge the fact that the things I feel compelled to talk about have been directly and indirectly shaped by the history of the country I grew up in and the collective psyche of its people.

AS: What a very eye-opening and precise line of thought that McClure was able to recognize in your work! It seems that this might be what led you towards your continued

research into corporate ideologies and initiatives throughout the second half of the 20th century.

To return to the topic of *ComSystem*, the design of the Krueger desk was created to optimize the flow of information between co-workers, and thus to facilitate the optimization of labor. This kind of office mentality develops from a German concept, *Bürolandschaft*, or “office landscape”. From the 1950s onward, this has opened up a whole school of thought, and even its own economy, eventually evolving into the open plan offices of Silicon Valley that often emphasize leisure and downtime more so than production itself; in other words, an investigation into values of labor time vs leisure time. Over the course of only half a century, corporate values (in America) have evolved from the optimization of labor to a coopted systemization of liberation. The model purports that a worker’s well-being and creativity are an asset that must ultimately be monetized.

Artists are often viewed as individuals who have complete freedom in their professional practices. Do you believe this is a misconception, and if so, how does your practice relate to a corporate practice (if at all)?

SE: I do think this is a misconception, but let me get back to that in a minute...

Office landscaping was initially celebrated for its potential to optimize the flow of communication and to break down hierarchies in the office. However, because of the costs associated with production, design and marketing, it never really took off on a large scale. A case in point is Herman Miller’s famous Action Office I (1964). Although it won a design award, it was deemed too expensive, difficult to assemble and therefore unsuitable for offices at large corporations. The second iteration, Action Office II (1967), was designed using standardized, interchangeable components and movable walls to increase worker privacy and provide room for the personalization of work space. Essentially, it was the birth of the modern cubicle, now the symbol of white collar worker alienation and isolation.

Although you do see a breakdown of the cubicle landscape and an emphasis on freeing workers from confined spaces, I think it is misguided, simplistic, and dangerous to translate this trend into a liberation of workers. While we are seeing the traditional office space disappearing, it is no coincidence that we are also witnessing an increase in precarious employment, or freelancing. Companies outsource work to freelancers – a cheaper alternative than hiring permanent staff. This may seem to translate into worker flexibility, independence and autonomy, but it also means financial struggle and economic precariousness for a rapidly increasing segment of the population. Some theorists celebrate this development as hierarchy-dissolving, post-capitalist and post-bureaucratic, indeed, as Marx’s dream of power to labor, to the people come true; others call it a precarious path to nearly permanent underemployment.

Freelancing is the fastest growing sector of our economy and according to estimates the number of freelancers in the American workforce is around 30% (to rise to between 40-50%

until 2020) leading some writers to speak of a precarious office proletariat or “precariat” (Saval 2014). Of course, some of these workers choose to leave the permanent workforce, most others are pushed out. Most don’t have health insurance and are in constant need of money.

I believe many artists such as myself fall into this category. Most artists don’t make enough money to live off through exhibiting and/ or selling their work. Like myself, many of us choose to teach to make ends meet and fund our artwork, but since many universities have cut tenure track jobs and replaced them with part-time adjunct gigs that often limit you to teaching one class per semester per institution, the adjunct professor who doesn’t earn benefits and scrambles from class to class and semester to semester, often working at 2-4 different universities at the same time, epitomizes this process of perpetual, precarious freelancing.

AS: As an artist, your practice is an individual one. Have you ever been employed in a group or corporate environment? If so, what were your experiences? How -- if at all-- does your professional as an artist relate to the job of a corporate employee, such as a secretary, data analyst or accountant?

SE: I had a summer job in my Dad’s office when I was 16. I mostly had to sort and distribute mail. It was a typical cubicle farm that felt really anonymous. Everyone was hidden away in their workspace. I barely spoke with anyone all summer and it was mind-numbingly boring.

When I was in my early to mid 20s I did some internships in journalism at a couple of smaller newspapers and a big German publishing house. I hated it. I went into journalism thinking it provided some sort of job security, while offering relative creative freedom, but it turned out to be very different from what I expected. There was nothing creative about it, everything was about following rules and regulations starting from word counts, the format an article had to be written in, to formulating interview questions in such a way as to elicit a response that would adequately reflect the ideological inflection of the company and would push sales. While part of me enjoys working within a set structure for the stability it provides, it was stifling and soul-destroying. I felt increasingly conflicted and even though I was offered a permanent job by the big publishing house at the end of my internship, I decided to quit and return to London to study art.

I have to admit there are times I resist the perpetual financial precariousness of an artist’s career and I dream of having a monotonous, repetitive, stable job like library work (I used to be a library assistant at Goldsmiths for almost 10 years). But then I remind myself of how god-awful I felt at these various employments. I need the creative freedom, to be able to talk about matters that have urgency to me, even if it comes at the expense of financial instability (which, as I have mentioned, isn’t a given anymore in a corporate environment).

AS: The title of this exhibition, “*The World Should Know No Men But These*,” is pulled from a quote by Max Weber, a German sociologist and economist who was active in the 19th century, and heavily influenced by Karl Marx and Immanuel Kant. Weber agonizes

over the idea that “the world could one day be filled with nothing but those little cogs, little men clinging to little jobs and striving towards bigger ones - a state of affairs which is to be seen once more, as in the Egyptian records, playing an ever-increasing part in the spirit of our present administrative system, and especially of its offspring.” He continues, “This passion for bureaucracy ... is enough to drive one to despair.”

Do you share this agony towards the bureaucratic system, or do you offer a more hopeful view? Should we understand Weber’s words from a cynic’s perspective, or should we use them as a jumping off point for a force of change?

SE: I think there are different types of bureaucracies, government and private sector, to begin with. And since there is definitely a move towards outsourcing and de-centralizing bureaucracies, it does feel like there is a move away from the classical image of an authoritarian, overbearing, hierarchical bureaucratic system (at least in the private sector).

Again, I have my doubts that this actually translates into greater worker autonomy or upwards mobility. I would say there is a re-structuring of bureaucracies, but I’m not sure what this will look like in the future from an administrative, organizational point of view.

Perhaps, if we think about a move towards a decentralization of bureaucratic power, one could apply a Foucauldian concept of power as dispersed and all permeating rather than top-down (Marx). Within this view, there could potentially be more opportunity for individual agency and intervention, however I still struggle to see how this would affect anyone, but a privileged few.

In relation to the administrative bureaucratic system, I am also intrigued by the bureaucratic mindset, which we associate with workers as “cogs in the machine”. By that I mean the surrender of critical thinking and reasoning to a higher authority, a kind of follower mentality. Within a bureaucratic system this mindset is the result of specialization, the rational division of labor, and alienation, of not being able to see the bigger picture.

I am interested in further examining this intersection of bureaucratic power and authority and the surrendering of one’s agency via historical sources, fiction, and popular culture.

While there is definitely a subtle dystopian tone in my work, I think there is also playfulness, humor and disruption. I try to introduce a sense of subversiveness, most clearly via my language based works, which perhaps comes from, if not hope, then at least a stubborn desire to resist to the status quo.