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Nature, culture and politics in Indonesia

Loving the Inbox The artist as bureaucrat

by Chris Fite-Wassilak





‘She spoke with great difficulty, it was difficult to understand her, but what she said’ – the line remains unfinished, and the novel ends there. Published two years after his death, Franz Kafka’s *The Castle* (1926) is the infamously circular, frustrating tale of a newcomer to a feudal village who fruitlessly attempts to gain the recognition of the faceless authorities who run the place. Kafka had apparently planned the novel to end with the protagonist finally receiving, on his deathbed, a formal notification from the castle bureaucracy that he was granted permission to stay. The very existence of the unfinished story is telling. Written in his spare time as a clerk for an insurance firm, published posthumously against his express wishes, the manuscript itself heavily manipulated by his self-appointed literary executor – like the story within *The Castle*, any paper trail has a life of its own. Since the rise of the modern office in the eighteenth century, our obsession with the entrapments of organisational systems has only grown; almost a century after *The Castle* was written, it continues to feel increasingly relevant, and when confronted with innumerable, seemingly senseless regulations, incessant forms and questionnaires, we can simply use the adjective ‘Kafkaesque’. The contemporary protagonist, though, is no longer an outsider subjected to the whims of the system, but a worker inside the structure of the castle itself – think of Terry Gilliam’s *Brazil* (1985), *The Office* (2001–03 in its original UK incarnation) or the structural negotiations of *The Wire* (2002–2008): we have stepped ever inwards into the expanding reach of the procedural hoops of a bureaucratic paradigm.

With the office as a dominant cultural trope, and its anodyne worker the model of our time, it should come as no surprise, then, that artists have consciously taken on the role of the bureaucrat, where administration systems are both their primary source and medium. It should be noted that this adoption is, firstly, different from the office as aesthetic; something like, say, using filing cabinets in

an exhibition – such as Art & Language’s *Index 01*, holding all of their writings to date in 1972’s Documenta 5 – references cubicle culture and asks the audience to enact the tedium of paper shuffling, but it also remains an installed, aestheticised object. The artist-bureaucrat differs, too, from the simple fact of how most artists now spend a majority of their time: a desk jockey sat in front of a computer, sending countless emails and applications. The artist-bureaucrat, instead, deliberately takes on the role of the administrator, the systems operator, putting themselves forward to be the one filing, filling in affidavits, agendas and instructions, to be the one actually making more paperwork. In a postindustrial society, with the spread of corporate culture and the increased ‘professionalisation’ of the arts, what the artist is, or aspires to be, has changed drastically. The artist is no longer a wayward artisan, messing around with paint and metal, or even a go-to idea generator, popping out crazy concepts. The artist is a freelance project manager.

The arguable origins of this as an artistic strategy are dispersed, but find their roots in the 1960s and 70s, in projects that are highly repetitive, and heavily reliant on print media. We might look back to lone workers, like Tehching Hsieh punching-in to a clock-card machine in his own apartment on the hour, every hour, for his *One Year Performance* in New York in 1980–81 (that’s 8,760 times). Earlier, in 1965, California performance artist Barbara T. Smith decided to rent a Xerox photocopier and place it in her dining room: ‘the print media of our era would be the business machine!’ she proclaimed. Making collages and abstract designs with whatever she could get her hands on to place on the machine’s glass, including herself, she signed off a handwritten introduction to *In Self Defense*, a short book she had made at that time, as the ‘resident manager’. But we can also look to those who willingly immersed themselves in the uncomfortable dynamics of group organisations: Mierle Laderman Ukeles declared

above Government offices in *Brazil*, 1985, dir Terry Gilliam. Photo: ZUMA Press, Inc / Alamy Stock Photo

facing page Tehching Hsieh, *One Year Performance* 1980–1981, 1980–81, New York. Photo: Michael Shen. © the artist. Courtesy: the artist and Sean Kelly, New York

herself the unofficial artist in residence of the New York Sanitation Department in 1977, meeting every employee and documenting their conversations. In the UK, Stephen Willats had begun interviewing participants for his *West London Social Resource Project* in 1972, asking them to draw or describe their sitting-room mantelpieces and 'issues in their social environment' before turning their responses into gridded display boards of photographs and text. Perhaps most telling is the corporate self-styling of the Artist Placement Group, instigated by Barbara Steveni from 1965, fashioning themselves as an 'industrial liaison and consultant service', embedding artists temporarily in companies such as Esso and the UK Department of Health.

The artist as coordinator is a now-familiar role, particularly with those involved with the exigencies of social or 'collaborative' practice; whether the 'social sculptures' of Paweł Althamer, the choreographed actions of Jeremy Deller, the town-wide interventions of Kateřina Šedá or the social-consultancy interventions of WochenKlausur, artists have long needed to act as overseers and directors. The works of these groups and artists, however, are often project-based and outcome-led, temporary incursions with results that are designed to be visible, exhibited. What potentially differentiates a younger set of artist-bureaucrat practitioners from those preceding them is what we might call immersion. The artist-bureaucrat is both a knowing and nonironic adoption of the professional role, a critical occupation where the system itself is the work, where its processes might take over and within which the artist might disappear.

I first encountered Spanish artist Fernando García-Dory at a 2010 conference in Madrid he had organised around his *Inland* project (2009–); on a pleasant Sunday in the Retiro park, on a lane where traditionally only books are allowed to be sold, García-Dory had used his role to allow the market that day to instead be taken over by a set of Asturian cheesemakers; decades of strict convention had been bent under the name of an art project, the lane filled with wizened farmers and the heavy whiff of hut-aged cheeses. García-Dory's focus is on food, agriculture and the rural; but his approach is administrative, his medium being organisations, meetings and presentations. *Inland* has included a set of residencies in rural Spain, as well as a yearly shepherd school, in the attempt to keep the dying lifestyle of mountain shepherds in the north of Spain alive, with mixed results in terms of retention. García-Dory's globe-hopping, such as medium-term projects exploring land use and food in Finland and this autumn's Gwangju Biennale, setting up edible gardens and discussion groups, is countered by the larger, long-term span of the systems he's helped to found or initiate, such as the European Shepherds Network, or a nomadic people's meeting that later became the World Alliance of Mobile Indigenous Peoples. García-Dory once told me he found that "states, as a kind of corporation, have the capacity to convert an idea into an operative object or system. That is the total

work of art." García-Dory becomes an almost federal figure, locating a politics in connecting the negotiation of legislative parameters with the relative permissiveness of artistic channels, and to see what might grow in between.

Artist Ellie Harrison has described herself as 'a number cruncher, a paper pusher, the perfect post-Fordist worker', creating events, talks and campaigns that gleefully pick apart notions of democracy, labour and ethics. By now it's fairly public knowledge that Harrison is Glasgow-based, her current, publicly funded *The Glasgow Effect* project – in which she won't leave the city for a year – coming under tabloid and social media flak at the start of 2016. The criticisms ignored Harrison's body of work, which wears its politics, and its doubts, on its sleeve; plagued by a 'guilt of production' as an artist, she has chosen instead to act as a mischievous, doubtful and provocative rabble-rouser. This includes events that highlight working conditions through group actions, such as *Desk Chair Disco*, the dance floor rumbling with plush rolling office chairs, and *Work-a-thon for the Self-Employed*, which set the record for the most self-employed people working in one room at one

time (70), both staged in Newcastle in 2011. Many of her projects have a zany edge to their social probing, such as the seven-person bike roaming the Olympic Park in Stratford in July 2015, *This Is What Democracy Looks Like!*, letting people hop onboard and discuss the issues of their choosing with their fellow passengers: a set of newly elected, fresh-faced young councillors from London's eastern boroughs. But this is also alongside straight-up activism for saving aspects of the UK's floundering social democracy, in founding the campaigns Bring Back British Rail and Power For the People, calling for the UK's energy to be renationalised. She has also just launched the

Radical Renewable Art + Activism Fund, which aims to set up a wind turbine, or other renewable energy source, to create the means to fund a grant scheme for artists. Harrison's version of the bureaucrat is a colourful, determined advocate for advocacy.

In *The Soul at Work* (2009), theorist Franco 'Bifo' Berardi writes about the loss of solidarity that resulted from digital technology: sitting at our computers, phones always by our side, 'time is made cellular'. The work of these artist-bureaucrats is idealistic, large-scale, long-term organisations that become an expanded site of working, where the art, if we want to call it that, is in the meetings, the verbal communications and exchanges, independent of any exhibition method and the artist themselves. It's an attempt to use the means of a cellular society to counteract its individualistic, alienating effects. The work of García-Dory, Harrison and others, such as Can Altay and Jonathan Hoskins, suggests an attempt to dissolve the artist-ego in a communal entity, to create an entity that engenders its own solidarity, one that can develop its own, new paper trails. Implicit in their creations is the suggestion that, yes, we are all desk jockeys now, but

change is still possible; just after that next email... ara



Ellie Harrison, *Work-a-thon for the Self-Employed*, 2011.
Photo: Toby Smith. Courtesy the artist



from top Mierle Laderman Ukeles, *Touch Sanitation Performance*, 1977–80, handshake ritual with worker of New York City Department of Sanitation; talking with worker of New York City Department of Sanitation. Both courtesy the artist and Ronald Feldman Fine Arts, New York