PHOTOWORK

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#prank4offices

A quick search of the hashtag 'prank4offices' on Instagram reveals evidence of two co-workers engaged in an office prank war with each other. Evident are a range of pranks including; multiple photographs of Justin Bieber's face neatly arranged to cover a desk, tin foil covering a workspace, belongings balanced precariously in a pile, the entire contents of someone's desk cling film-wrapped to an office chair and a desk surrounded by hundreds of water-filled cups. The two employees are known as Iamronjay42 and Iaminstapauli0 on the photo sharing website 'Instagram'.

"Ha! I got in there early doors my friend. It. Has. Begun."
"Bring it on my friend, bring it on"
"Two can play at that game"
"Your desk has some strange exotic lurgy...I think it is the anti-productivity lurgy"
"good luck getting anything done m'boy!"
"I would describe this as a very minor inconvenience at most."
"Ouch. Using my own prank on me. Touché"
"Remember @iamronjay42 , bubble wrap is supposed to be relaxing. Just trying to help dude"
"MWAHAHAHA"
"OMG, I was only gone for lunch for 45 mins! What I'm most shocked about is not that you have covered my entire desk in photos of the Bieber, no. It is that you covered up my ACDC MUG WITH BIEBER #heathen**"**

The public nature of their skirmish echoes that of many other office workers' actions that are made visible across the network, where company time and resources are subverted for the production of pranks often involving a set of, predominantly physical, skills that are no longer required in the office environment.

Previously, acts of creativity such as office pranks, were produced for a private and localised audience. This research began with the discovery of a blu-tac penis in an office workplace in 2003, which showed an incredible attention to detail and investment of time and effort. It led me to question the function of autonomous creative practices that occur in controlled spaces such as the office. Who created this object? How long did it take them? How much were they paid whilst doing it? What was the impetus for its creation? The very nature of the object suggests a creative act that is at odds with acceptable workplace practices, and it clearly subverted company time and resources. But who was the intended audience? Was it a prank

directed at a coworker? Or was it potentially created to be photographed, and then disseminated via social networking platforms, thereby reaching much wider acclaim? Without context, this (slightly disturbing) creation raises more questions than answers. However, the act of pranking when completed on work time subverts the everyday routine and becomes an act of resistance against dominant structures; it is a statement of autonomy within a heteronomous system (Roberts, J 2007). The production of objects such as this in the workplace is reminiscent of Michel De Certeau's concept of 'La perruque'; where;

> "the worker who indulges in la perruque actually diverts time (not goods, since he uses only scraps) from the factory for work that is free, creative, and precisely not directed toward profit." (De Certeau, 1984, p.25).

De Certeau refers to love letters written on company time by a secretary or a cabinet maker using company equipment to make his own furniture, and in these examples the perpetrator uses their pre-existing job skills for personal gain. Whereas with the office prank, the office worker unearths latent physical skills that are no longer required within the contemporary office workplace to act creatively and - it could be suggested - artistically.

There exists a 'sculptural desire' in the workplace; that is, a basic human need to bring into existence unorthodox combinations of office stationery and objects, which are not in the interests of productivity or indeed the wider company values. The shift from manual labour, to that of 'immaterial labour', as defined by Maurizio Lazzarato (1996), where the product of work is immaterial and intangible, has contributed to what Jean Baudrillard (2005) defines as a 'spectacular alienation'. Baudrillard discusses the changing nature of work or home and our interaction with 'buttons, levers, handles, pedals' having replaced 'pressure, percussion, impact or balance achieved by means of the body'. (Baudrillard, 2005, p.51). In the contemporary office, our interaction with computers and phone systems utilises only our extremities to manipulate intangible forms which therefore negates our 'sculptural desire'. The actions contributing to pranking are very physical; making, building, reworking and designing the work environment, both to relieve the boredom and, it is suggested, as an antithesis to the alienating effect of immaterial labour.

So the worker may be motivated to prank by a physical desire to interact with the workplace. They are also motivated to perform for a localised audience which is made up of the victim and their colleagues. However, in a networked culture, photographs of office pranks are publicly disseminated, increasingly visible and accessible. Jean Burgess (2010) established the term 'vernacular creativity' as a way of discussing the often physical creativity that everyday people engage in as part of and behind their involvement in a networked culture. Increasingly, the networked, mobile phone photograph is used as an integral component part of the distinctly creative and playful processes of the office prank. The intention to perform acts of vernacular creativity and the intention to photograph (and therefore share it) appear to be bound into the same action. As a result, the office prank - once existing as a distinct act, separate from any

photographic representation - is now a regular theme of 'listicles' on platforms such as Buzzfeed. With titles such as '23 Office Pranks That Went Way Too Far' and '40 Hilarious Office Pranks That Will Make You SO Glad You Don't Work Here' it is clear that there is a celebration of exaggerated and spectacular actions within the everyday that regularly engage audiences.

The intrinsic motivation, comprising the sculptural desire and the local audience, has now been joined by an extrinsic motivation comprising the online audience, an increased awareness of the actions of other prankers and a desire to become accepted by these communities of practice. The visibility of these photographs has made a direct connection between making the prank and a perceived online audience. The result of this, it is suggested, is a competitiveness and ultimately in some cases an increased ambition for the scale and quality of the prank / it's photographic representation.

Iamronjay42 and Iaminstapauli0 are in fact fictional characters acting out a fictional office prank war. In reality, they are a vehicle for me to think about the process of making office pranks from the perspective of an artist. For me as an artist, making 'work' (in the art sense) is often done in the workplace or in everyday situations, utilising everyday 'stuff' to construct temporary arrangements. Don't tell work, but this is often done on company time too. Making work in this way can sometimes feel like being an illicit 'artist-in-residence' in the office, and blurs the boundary between artist and worker. The act of making art in the workplace, and the act of pranking on the face of it seem very similar. For several years, I have been collecting an archive of screenshots showing inventive office pranks, collected through regular searches of the hashtag #officepranks on Instagram. These temporary arrangements created by office workers can informally be compared with the work of contemporary art photographers. The incongruity of placing many bright pink flamingos all over a colleague's office is superficially reminiscent of a Sandy Skoglund, or filling an office cubicle with balloons could be likened to an Anne Hardy photograph.

So what is the difference between the creative processes involved in office workers pranking each other, and the creative process of an artist such as myself? The above comparisons remark on similarities at an aesthetic and process level, but do not take into account the *intention* of the creator. However, these two distinct spheres of production increasingly share similar characteristics, which blurs the boundaries. In this networked culture, more and more people are photographing an expanded range of subject matter (Champion, C 2012). In fact, both the artist and the everyday creator of photographs are increasingly taking the *same* everyday as their subject, made possible by the increased availability, portability and efficiency of new technologies (Gomez-Cruz 2012), the subsequent ubiquitous nature of the photographic image (Kember, S 2012) and the artist's increasing fascination with the everyday.

By creating Iamronjay42 and Iaminstapauli0, acting out an office prank war and posting the images onto Instagram I have aligned my practice with that of the office pranker. However, from my production of

images for the project and regular engagement with vernacular photographs from the archive, it is clear that whilst the office prank is an inherently creative act, it is often not an original act, seeking instead to emulate or propagate tropes and memetic approaches previously applied by others within the wider community. Ultimately, staging office pranks is like playing pranks on yourself; you are both the instigator and the butt of the joke. Artists who stage scenes for a photograph always have to dismantle it themselves in the end. Ironically, this is also the role of the victim of the office prank. It was a rather unexpected by-product of this process to be the recipient of several pranks at work myself, but then I guess I had it coming.

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