

January 2020

Presenting whilst retreating in the age of the corporate lanyard

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Recommended Citation

Willems, Simon and Warren, Samantha (2020) "Presenting whilst retreating in the age of the corporate lanyard," *Organizational Aesthetics*: Vol. 9: Iss. 1, 1-17.

Available at: <https://digitalcommons.wpi.edu/oa/vol9/iss1/1>

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Presenting whilst retreating in the age of the corporate lanyard

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Today, for the first time in her 20 year academic career, Sam is wearing her staff pass in a holder attached to a lanyard around her neck. Sam's wearing the lanyard that was issued to her on her first day here, back last summer – it's corporation purple (a colour she happens to love) and it matches the top she chose to wear today so pleases her sense of aesthetics. It was also the only one she had in her desk; she would have much preferred to wear her "Native Instruments" lanyard given to her at a recent "Meet-Up" for music producers and DJs. She would prefer to wear this as (she thinks it) shows she is a cool person, who has chosen an obscurely coded lanyard that is not related to her job or organization. She is noosed maybe, but still a rebel.

The main reason Sam is wearing her pass and lanyard today is because there has been a change in printing processes at her School. Colleagues now need to tap their cards at the printer to access their documents from the queue and can do this from anywhere on campus – which Sam thinks is a truly wonderful thing. Wherever she is working around campus, she can send a document to the print queue from her laptop, pop to any printer and retrieve it. That makes her proud to work for her university, for an employer who enables the minutiae of this kind of working as well as talks the rhetoric of the truly mobile academic. So why her

disquiet about wearing the corporate lanyard?

Fig.1 Sam wearing her Portsmouth University lanyard. Courtesy of Sam Warren.

She's resisted the wearing of a lanyard (and associated card) all this time because she doesn't like the way it identifies her as an "organizationally compliant" person. It's felt like a corporate labelling process to her, aimed at keeping tabs on employees in a visibly displayed form. Until now, the only people who really wore their passes around their neck at the universities she has worked for are professional services staff – it would be mightily interesting to reflect why a Professor doesn't want to be marked out as PS staff, but for now we will neatly sidestep that potential uncovering of Sam's hubris and ego-driven defences by focusing on the lanyard as an object of organizational symbolism – an example of an everyday object that speaks volumes but has so far escaped the interest of organization studies and management scholars, despite many other objects of organizational life being keenly investigated.

And so begins our little excursion into the world of the lanyard – through the sensibilities of a management professor (Sam) and practising artist who has just completed his PhD in an art faculty (Simon). We begin with a brief history of the lanyard, and a review of how its analysis fits into an organization studies framework of symbolic artefacts before presenting the work of five artists who have taken their inspiration from it. We present this "exhibition" as a dual commentary. Simon has curated the works and written the "show notes" which are followed by Sam's reflections on the pieces from the view of an organizational scholar. The paper concludes with a conversation between Sam and Simon as to what we have learned through this artistic interpretation of one of corporate life's most mundane objects, and discusses Simon's installation at the Art of Management and Organization conference in Brighton, 2018. A small mixed media installation, this comprised a single painting and sculpture. Featuring a fountain of corporate lanyards draped over a metal bowl on a plinth, with the inscription "How Not to Disappear Completely" written and repeated in a child's handwriting, it was placed as an "exhibit" in a corridor underneath Simon's painting *Motivational Pull* (After Carlo Bonavia) The painting is an appropriation of Bonavia's *A Praying Hermit in a landscape*, who was an 18th century Italian Rococo painter. This installation formed part of an ongoing series of artworks that explores the enactment of corporate team-building activities within the context of hermit landscapes taken from art history, and we hear more about it during the conversation between Sam and Simon that closes this article.

Origins of the lanyard

It seems a little curious, that until recently, most of us hadn't even heard of the word lanyard, let alone knew what it meant or where it came from, given its ubiquitous presence in our daily lives. Rooted in 15th century maritime history, lanyard derives from the French word *lanière*, meaning strap or thong, which was made from scraps of rope on board ships, presenting a hands-free solution to working on a vessel, whilst keeping weapons close at hand. It is from this utility, as an attachment, that the history of lanyards is largely a military one, gracing different traditions over the centuries. Lanyards were used to connect a sword, pistol or whistle to a uniform by cavalry and naval officers. This is where decoration meets function; a soldier's or sailor's status determining what braiding or colour combination might apply. Any appraisal of the lanyard now within a contemporary context cannot ignore this antecedence, which is so central to the object's DNA.

Taken as art, the lanyard doubles up as a portable ready-made; a neat little number, fuelled by this question of how its aesthetic might be evaluated given its purpose; an institutional critique snuck in on the sly in a pocket-sized format. As we note above, the lanyard is an example of an everyday object that speaks volumes, tapping into issues of identity, security and control, a means by which the individual is identified *through* the organization. Of course, these issues are by no means new, but what is new – and here it seems important

to register that despite their introduction in the 1990s, it wasn't until the noughties that lanyards really gained ground as a truly pervasive phenomenon – is the way in which this ribbon clipped on to our ID badge or keys could be aestheticized to the point of becoming more significant than the ID badge itself. This is the irony, the lanyard is not the ID badge, but that which connects it to the body: its practicality usurped by its force and power as a fetishized accessory.

Given this, it is quite easy to see how the lanyard ticks all the right boxes as a global motif par excellence, lending itself to an arena of contemporary art practice. And perhaps, within this context, more than anything else, it is the way in which it emphasises the aesthetic enticement and fixing of cultural and artistic standards within the social relation of immaterial labour and a service-based economy (Hardt & Negri 2000; Berardi 2008; Lazzarato 2010; Han 2015), that it becomes a politically complex object seeking examination. And yet in surveying how the lanyard has made its presence felt within contemporary art, like organization and management, it seems in the main to have escaped interest. It conjures up images of Tate Modern invigilators more than it does artists working with it as material. Perhaps it is so familiar and potentially divisive in how people respond to it, that little space has been afforded to stand back and develop a critical lens through which to focus on it.

The lanyard as a symbolic organizational artefact

We can trace the major roots of symbolic approaches back to the 1980s when authors such as Dandridge (1980), Turner (1986) and Frost et al. (1991) were among the first to write about the importance of understanding organizations as meaning structures rather than pre-existing realities, placing (inter)subjective processes – such as language – at the heart of their analyses. They asked questions about how meanings were generated and passed between people, with varying degrees of power and influence. Importantly, they drew our attention to the communicative role of the physical spaces organizational members produced and inhabited. The poster child of this movement was perhaps Schein's (1986) "three levels of culture", still drummed into every management studies student by their first Christmas at university: a thesis which was among the first to suggest that we could recognise the deeply held feelings and beliefs of organizational members, through the rituals, folklore, celebrations and *artefacts* in and around their workplaces. Studying the material culture of organization for clues about what happens there, and why and how it does, gained traction as it transmuted into the aesthetic approach to organizational life, led by Gagliardi (1986) and Strati (1999) to name just two and where the shift was to an "aesthetic mode of knowing" organizations based on sensing and intuition, above rational ones (read: statistical/ scientific). Latterly Rafaeli and Pratt (2006) urged us to look "beyond mere symbolism". Instead they were among the first to stress how artefacts in organizations were mobilised as *objects* imbued with meaning-through-use and imbricated in social relations through the practices around them, rather than passively "giving off" impressions to those who encountered them. A review of studies taking objects as serious analytical sites is far beyond the scope of this article, but to give a flavour, attention has been paid to uniform and dress (Pratt and Rafaeli 1997; Caven et al. 2013), personal workplace objects (Warren 2006) Most recently, we have seen a sharper turn to social-materiality which stresses the *entanglement* of people and their things and questions the very boundaries between object and subject (Carlile et al. 2013). How are the lanyard, wearer and organization entangled – and what might the effects of that be? We consider the playful, subversive character of art to be the perfect vehicle through which to do so.

The lanyard as artist provocation: an exhibition

1. FEMKE HERREGRAVEN



Fig.2 (left) Femke Herregraven, "Liquid Citizenship" (lanyard) Installation still from *The State is not a Work of Art*, Tallin Art Hall, 2018. Courtesy of the artist.
Fig.3 (right) Femke Herregraven, "Liquid Citizenship" (ID badge) Installation still from *The State is not a Work of Art*, Tallin Art Hall, 2018. Courtesy of the artist.

Curator's note: For Femke Herregraven, the lanyard lies at the heart of her project *Liquid Citizenship*. Developed as an installation for *The State is not a Work of Art* exhibition at Tallin Art Hall in 2018, *Liquid Citizenship* started life as an online game. Turning citizenship into a commodity, individuals were assigned nationalities with corresponding lanyards upon arrival, in which each country was pitched at an appropriate fee. Critiquing the burgeoning reality that nationality is reducible to "liquid" capital (e.g., see Bauman 2000), the appeal of any one given nation is played off against another. Citizenship is no longer a birth right, so much as an investment to be weighed up, traded in or revoked. Passports open doors to education, healthcare, social security and safety or they don't. The lanyards themselves – perhaps unsurprisingly – are rendered black and white, uppercase sans serif with no frills attached. The ID badge, on the other hand, comes in a range of industrial shades with all details clearly marked; the country of assignment, as well as the nature of one's status: "naturalised", "economic", "trafficking" and so on.

Sam's reflections. This reminded me of how delegates wander round conferences strategically, but surreptitiously glancing at other delegates' midriffs to work out whether they are worth talking to from the information hanging from the lanyard. It made me think of how Othering is often based upon a selfish motive – what use is this person to me? What will I gain from recognising their humanity and individuality? And that we make judgements about others on the basis of superficial characteristics – in the case of Femke's work here, it's a rectangle of paper encased in plastic, but according to literature on "lookism", we routinely make snap judgements about people on the tiniest of details (Willis and Todorov

2006). The sameness of the font, and the lanyard itself gives the impression we are all equal and treat each other the same, but this is a myth.

2. MINDY ROSE SCHWARTZ



Fig. 4 Mindy Rose Schwartz (left) *Goat: Turkey: Pig: Horse: Rooster*, bronze and plastic, approx. 12" x 5" x 2.5", 2002. Courtesy of the artist.

Fig. 5 Mindy Rose Schwartz (right) *Skull*, cast bronze, lanyard, key rings, keys, 20 x 5 x 2", 2001. Courtesy of the artist.

Curator's note: This is a very different sense of utility than that offered up by Mindy Rose Schwartz, whose one-off constructions appear totemic and alien-like. In this scenario, craft aesthetics take precedence over use-value, with only the dangling keys reminding us where purpose figures in the equation. There is fragility to Schwartz's left field sculptures, in which their physical vulnerability is matched by shamanic overtones. It is interesting to consider such artworks in light of the catwalk success of the lanyard in 2018, in which several fashion houses, including Givenchy, Prada and Burberry, all included lanyard variations in their autumn/winter collections (Bramley 2018). However, there is a nostalgic dimension to these pieces: the tchotchke heads harking back to the *X-Files* (1993-2002), suggesting animal hybrids redolent of the Intergalactic bar in *Star Wars*. What marks them out beyond their sci-fi charm, however, are their decorative overload and fierce singularity. Barely readable as lanyards at all, these spidery chains are the very antithesis of what we might deem corporate.

Sam's reflections: These beautiful creations tug at my heart-strings. I yearn to own one, to wear it with pride and have it shout YOU DO NOT OWN ME! to my organization, and I WILL NOT CONFORM! to everyone I meet. But of course I will be conforming because I will be displaying my identity card around my neck and/or have my functional artefacts close to hand (e.g., keys) which enable efficient passage through my workplace. Mindy Rose's feminine pieces bring to mind the "everyday aesthetics" of the arts and crafts movement and my grandmother who refused items on the dinner table unless they were in beautiful receptacles, and tried to make ugly (read: masculine) household items aesthetically pleasing. She once made miniature curtains to cover over the façade of her video recorder. These "lanyards" embody the struggle to be truly individual *and valued for that* in a corporate world. I read them as a feminist softening of what Due-Billing (2011) has called the "phantom of the male norm" in organizational life. Imagine if we all wore these wonderful things! How our perceptions of "suited and booted" chief *financial* officers and marketing directors might change. The male ones, and the non-male ones who have to dress like them (see Shortt et al, 2014)

3. BEAGLES & RAMSAY



Fig. 6 Beagles & Ramsay (left) *Type IV Fun*, 2017. Courtesy of the artists.
Fig. 7 Beagles & Ramsay (right) *On the Beach*, 2017. Courtesy of the artists.

Curator's note: But the power of the lanyard as a fashion accessory is not lost on Glasgow-based collaboration, Beagles & Ramsay. Integral to their 2017 Headstiff Collection and NEW HEADS ON THE BLOCK & ROPE A DOPE T-shirt range, variously captioned ID badges complete the look. Available in a heady mix of colours, a straight-faced smiley features on one, where "WHO OWNS THE CHEESE?" can be read on another. Part of their 2017 exhibition PINGPINGJERKSPASM at The Pipe Factory in Glasgow, Beagles & Ramsay's high-octane graphics resonate with a late Nineties rave vibe. They are reminders of the role

that dance music and festivals have played in the lanyard's post-millennial evolution. Yet the nature of this aesthetic appropriation serves a purpose. The icons and slogans rifled off here, whilst playful, point towards the pathological. Work and organization – like leisure – are presented as late-capitalist fodder; elements within what Maurizio Lazzarato describes (after Deleuze & Guattari) as capitalism's "machinic enslavement" (Lazzarato 2014). Lanyards read like tics, markers of tourettic release that chart the dismantling of the individual subject within the production of human capital. This is no less apparent than in the sequence of still images that the two artists generated using 3D animation and gaming software. In what looks like a desert of oversized office furniture, "On the Beach" presents a family caught at dusk; the father fronting the scene with a lanyard around his neck, from which a loud red label reading "MUSH" spars out with the fading sky.

Sam's reflections: These are powerful images that cut right to the heart of the futility of being an individual in a consumer society. Expressions of "individuality" clamour around the figure's neck, whilst at the same time being just like everyone else. Wearing the same slogans and displaying the same sentiments. As homogenous and anonymous as if he were wearing a cardboard box on his head. I love the humour in this. You can't look at it without laughing out loud, because it's absurd. *Yet it's what we all do every day* when we conform by consumption. Showing just how different we are – by being like everyone else. But there is another sense to this that I find striking, and that is that the figure's true identity, his face (and we assume from his dress and stance that he is male I guess?) is hidden, protected, even safe, from the gaze of others.



I am reminded of debates about the burka that were prevalent a few years ago (e.g., see Kersten and Abbott 2012) and how a seemingly oppressive garment can be experienced as liberating, but that this does not negate the subject's own disciplining gaze upon herself, e.g., for the woman who wears full make-up underneath the veil.

I am also reminded of the trend to "personalise" lanyards as a way to be different at work – the diamante lanyard appears to be a motif for this. Figure XX is a supermarket cashier, she told me she wore it to brighten up her day and bring a sense of herself to work. Against her masculine uniform, she has chosen what seems to have become a ubiquitously female symbol in the 21st century - faux jewels that sparkle. A small act of subversion perhaps, except for the fact that her employer has her to wear it. This is perhaps what's really important here – her employer allows it because it's harmless, a "safety valve" for the pressures of working in the dehumanizing, high-pressure and emotionally laborious mass food retail industry. But does this render it powerless as a mode of resistance?

Fig. 8 Supermarket cashier with diamante lanyard. Courtesy of Sam Warren.

MARTINE SYMS

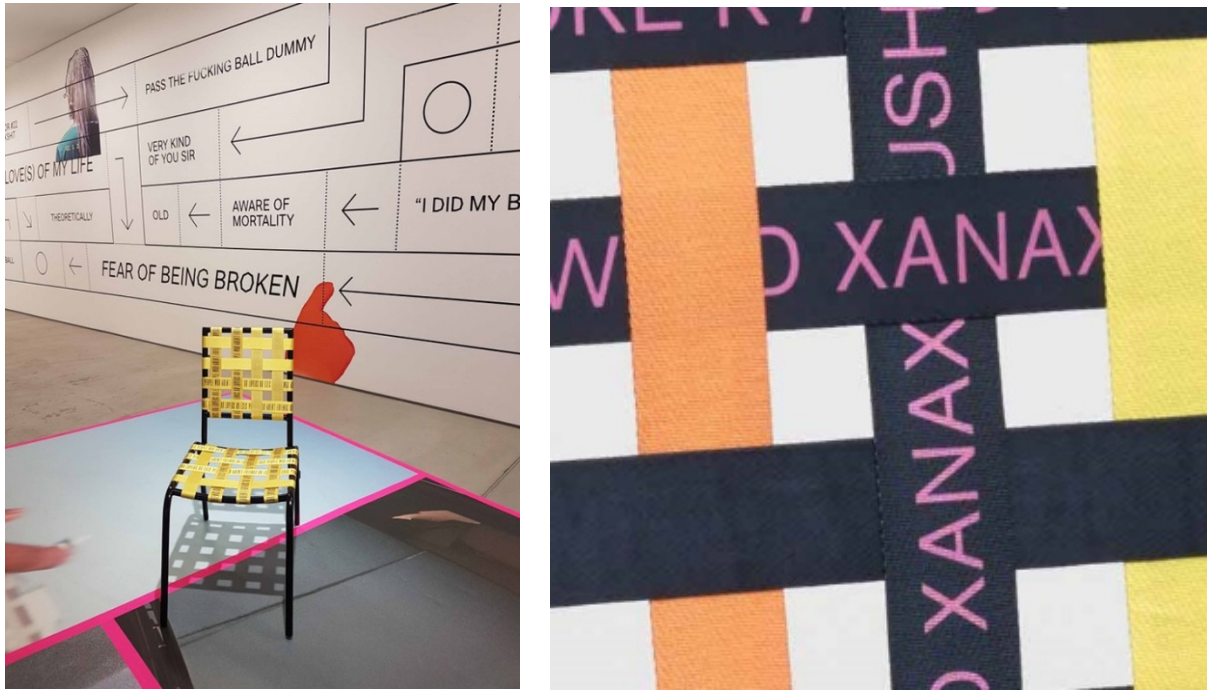


Fig. 9 Martine Syms (left) *Grande Calme*, Installation shot, Sadie Coles HQ (London), 2018. Courtesy of Sadie Coles HQ. Photo: Robert Glowacki.
Fig. 10 Martine Syms (right) woven polyester strap (detail) 2018. Courtesy of Sadie Coles HQ.

Curator's notes: The role of furniture is key for Martine Syms, whose basket-woven lanyards upholster each stretch of chair within her series of steel-framed prototypes. Part of an installation that Syms presented for her 2018 exhibition *Grande Calme* at Sadie Coles HQ gallery in London, each of the thirteen featured seats displays broken lines of text repeated throughout the polyester lattice-work. Displaying random captions such as "STEP 1 TAKE A FAMILIAR STORY STEP 2 WRITE I HAVE MISSED THE POINT", Syms' worded entries refer to a personified threat model of software vulnerability, running through the exhibition, which takes her interior world and internal narrative at its centre. Having taught herself coding as a teenager, Syms became aware of how the term "threat modelling" referred to the one companies and organizations use to protect their digital presence, whilst exploring privacy and visibility issues surrounding the circulation of images (Stone 2018). Interestingly, it was through the politics of this within her research and the decision to disengage with social media that, Syms claims, led her to look at the question of security in the first place.

Although these chairs are less about function and use than the larger digital message of which they form part, they throw the question of "organizational compliance" into a different register altogether. In re-appropriating the lanyard as a detail within an object, that itself is a detail within an object, Syms both highlights the complex stratification of organisational power underpinning it, whilst bringing attention to its universal domestication within a post-digital age. But she does something else; Syms also uses the question of security and control within a larger organizational context, as a template to frame how this resonates and infiltrates the individual. This is what Syms shares with Beagles & Ramsay in their critique of machinic enslavement, as well as Herregraven, in her gamification of citizenship

as liquid capital. And despite the fact that Schwartz's exquisite finery appeals to the other-worldly and the handmade, in contrast, it is precisely this way of working from the outset that in its labour, forms its own terms of resistance.

Sam's reflections. The lanyards are used for what I would call "proper utility" here – woven into the fabric of the chairs, built into the everyday of the organization. The topic of the exhibition, "threat modelling" is all about control and that seems to loop back into the lanyard-fabric. We cannot escape them since we are reliant on them (unless we want to stand up all day). But at the same time, they *are* there to support us as we sit and go about our business. An interesting double movement.

So what sense can we make of the lanyard's symbolic role through the medium of its use in art? We end our article with an interview between Simon and Sam to come to some conclusions.

Meet the Curator

SIMON: I think I'd like to start with a confession: that apart from the AoMO conference in Brighton last year, where my contribution to the conference *was* my lanyard fountain installation, and I consciously made the decision to wear one in honouring the conference theme of *performance*, I've never actually had to wear one. Or, at least, that is, I've managed to avoid it.

SAM: Really...well that *is* interesting. Do you think the AoMO experience and wearing one at the conference allowed you to address the ambiguity of power idea that I know you've mentioned before?

SIMON: Well yes, there's almost like a dual narrative there. The actual object, in its utility and function, is counter-intuitive to the very thing that it's about.

SAM: Yes that's exactly it, and that's something that seems to be the case with most of my reactions to these four artists; that, on the one hand, there's "this", but then also there's "this"; "both", "and" - so not "one" or "either-or".

SIMON: There's a tension I think between the lanyard's status as an object, that is, as a highly aestheticized object, and its social and political reality as an object. And it's interesting when you think about when a lanyard becomes favourable....I think you give the diamante example in the text where you refer to faux jewels that sparkle as a female symbol in the 21st century.

SAM: That everything has to be sparkly and prosecco-related....

SIMON: Yes. But your point is really important, there, in what happens to the subversive aspect of that - how does that configure?

SAM: Right. Yes, well that point was in response to the work of Beagles & Ramsay. The fact that consumerism and the identification with faux plastic sparkly jewels is infantilising in reducing women to little girls, reinforcing that idea of women as flibbertigibbets, but done through the idea that you're choosing this sparkly lanyard when actually it's not a choice and has been pre-programmed as something that you *must* have. And of course the only choice you really have – and my reading of this comes from Bauman in *Work, Consumerism and the New Poor* - is not to choose; so again, this idea of a toothless resistance. But it also makes her feel better to wear that sparkly lanyard, so who the hell are we to say "Oh yes, you are being oppressed here, your sparkly lanyard is not a symbol of your individuality at all...it's actually you being enslaved by your conformity."

SIMON: Right. I suppose it's about inhabiting different realities and where the frontiers of those realities collapse between a suppositional argument of critique against her sense of feeling better about herself.

SAM: So if we're looking at the ambiguity of power idea, that would be an intersection of her feeling empowered...?

SIMON: But empowered, ironically, through the primary move to “disempower”. But I think this is interesting as you also touch upon this yourself in referring to the “Native Instruments” lanyard, an organisation that you’re happy to be associated with and represented by as a music producer. You *warm* to that lanyard. I remember when I taught in prison and had a photo clip-on ID badge that I felt positive about wearing to begin with - in a time before lanyards really took off - which I’d leave attached to my belt on the way back from work sometimes - feeling good about my decision to work in a problematic institution that was a little *different*. Likewise, I have a friend who has just left the Royal College of Art, and came to art in her late 40s, who talks very proudly about wearing her RCA lanyard. I guess there’s a plethora of different reasons why an individual in one organisation might feel proud about their lanyard - whether that’s to do with the sparkly aesthetics of the diamante; being read as cool and creative in studying at a prestigious art school; or being represented by an organisation that’s a little different.

SAM: Yes, I was going to ask you: what did working in a prison say about your identity?

SIMON: Well I saw it as a political decision to work in a prison, so therefore it was an extension of that political decision.

SAM: And therefore the display of that decision. And it doesn’t matter even if other people don’t get it or not.

SIMON: Right. So I guess there’s the ownership of that reality to one as an individual that reframes the empowerment/disempowerment idea on another level.

SAM: For me it’s about being owned by the organisation. That’s what I’m resisting. It’s not that I haven’t felt proud about the different places I’ve worked at because I have. So for me it’s not as simple as saying I don’t want to wear the lanyard because I’m not proud to work here. It’s more that someone told me to wear the lanyard and marked me out as an organisational person, and that’s what I’m not happy about...that’s what I want to resist. So in a way, the Native Instruments thing it’s about resisting *that* colonisation and using an object to do that. It might not be immediately meaningful, but it connotes a whole range of meanings that *this* person is somehow connected to a music technology company and a whole load of associations that I’d like to think might be made there...as a middle-aged woman, as a professor of a business school. I like to play with those ideas, that this is not what you expect to see. And all of that encapsulated in that one little thing that I wear around my neck.

SIMON: There are two parts to this in a way, not that they are mutually exclusive. If you look at the evolution of the lanyard from the late 1990s going into the noughties, there’s the broader corporate dimension and association - and therefore late-capitalist association - but then there’s also the celebratory festival-rave going association. That is, the culture at musical events where colourful lanyards are given out, often with the programme of who’s performing lining the text - right?

SAM: You know that’s so true.

SIMON: So thinking back to the artists that we’ve looked at, we get that vibe from Beagles & Ramsay...that *lively* sugared-up aesthetic.

SAM: I’m wondering if it’s something to do with the fact that once you put something within a paid employment context it’s no longer the same and you *have* to be there and follow the rules and they will sanction you if you don’t. Again that idea of power comes in here, that you’re *not* free to just not wear your lanyard.

SIMON: I suppose there’s a distinction between an ID badge just being an ID badge - that could just be functional, disclosing who you are, your department and role, the insignia of the organisation etc. as a necessity - on the one hand, and the coercive aesthetic enticement of that same object appealing to the senses, on the other. It’s the thinking behind that which I resent. Take the Tate Modern example I refer to...the tangerine orange lanyard with the blurry sans-serif font. It’s the logic of attempting to allure the worker-wearer into feeling good about working for a purportedly “cool” organisation by

attempting to seduce them....like they should feel *pleased* about that. As opposed to, or distinct from, the scenario where it happens in a library, for example, where the lanyard just says "STAFF", with white text on black ribbon.

SAM: Yes, well you actually wonder who the "aestheticizing" is for. The person who works at the Tate knows they work at the Tate, and if you're visiting the place, you know you're *in* the Tate, so the only useful function is to signal to others that you are an employee....so just having "STAFF" on it is all you actually need.

SIMON: That's interesting, and also if we look at that scenario where there are certain situations and contexts in which that is quite critical. It's *critical* in a hospital where it signals nurse or doctor, that we know who they are, and it's *critical* in a school that we know who the teachers are and so on. So let's not negate the value of that.

SAM: Yes, and often it's used exclusively within that capacity just to hold the ID badge.

SIMON: Okay. So if we take that idea of "aestheticizing" - the colour, the texture, the nature of the material - that is something with my installation at the AoMO conference, where I wanted to create lanyards that would *read* off the painting. And let's be honest, the lanyards aren't reading off a colourful painting; they are reading off a slightly muted solarised colour schema, full of greys and beiges. When I arranged the lanyards in the bowl at the conference like the petals of a dead flower, I wanted something diametrically opposed to the punchy colours and big graphics one normally associates with the lanyard. So when you look at it, you're confronted by these unexpected tones and a child's handwriting that you can't quite make out that it's saying "How Not to Disappear Completely" which gives the text - hopefully - a conceptual value. That's the thing about lanyards, when you come away from the "functional" school-library-hospital scenario, the aesthetic possibilities tend to be maximised and stepped up to arrest the beholder. Whatever colour they are - and sometimes the design is based around a photographic image - whatever material they are, and that can be anything from polyester through to nylon, bamboo and god knows what else, their aesthetic potential saturates their presence.



Fig. 11 Simon Willems, *How Not to Disappear Completely*, Installation shot, AoMO Conference – University of Brighton, 2018. Courtesy of SRFilmPhotography.

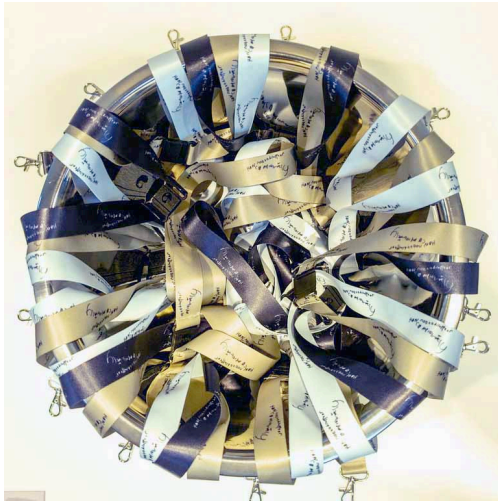


Fig. 12 Simon Willems, *Untitled (Lanyard Fountain)*, Installation shot, customised polyester lanyards with metal lobster-clips and stainless steel bowl, dimensions variable, AoMO Conference – University of Brighton, 2018. Courtesy of SRFilmPhotography.

Fig. 13 Simon Willems, *Untitled (Lanyard Fountain)*, Installation shot, customised polyester lanyards with metal lobster-clips and stainless steel bowl, dimensions variable, AoMO Conference – University of Brighton, 2018. Courtesy of the artist.

SAM: Yes, well you see, I don't think I got that at the AoMO conference. You use the phrase read-off the painting. What do you actually mean by reading *off* the painting?

SIMON: Precisely this: when I say "read-off", I mean chromatically - "literally" - read off the painting, in terms of colour and how that can extend beyond the painted surface to define the colour of the lanyards. The colours of the lanyards at the conference were *literally* sourced from the painting that hung behind them - like a swatch. I quite like the idea that you can have a painting that then dictates how the aesthetic decision-making of the lanyard is directed and governed. The process frames the painting as an organisational index, which echoes the image in the painting which features corporate teambuilding participants hurling a giant inflatable ball over a hurdle in a hermit landscape from art history, where the team-builders have replaced the hermit.

SAM: Can you remind me how the figure of the hermit fits into all this?

SIMON: Oh yes...of course. Well the pairing of the hermit and corporate team-building participant has been a central element within my practice for some time now. Originally, this was to do with the figure of the hermit in art history - or at least within the Western canon - embodying the wilfully asocial and *tortured*. I was interested in the specifically ascetic nature of this societal resistance, because for me it represented a counterforce, if you will, to the corporate-teambuilding participant, who symbolises a kind of compulsory...*obliged* 21st century sociality and different kind of torture altogether. I was interested in setting up these two motifs in a way that their juxtaposition created a friction. At the same time, what fuels them both is this double movement that they have to "present" whilst they "retreat". This is what appealed, the idea of creating a space through these seeming opposites that could critique the culture of play and "structured fun" underpinning a Post-Fordist economy of production. It was the way in which this double movement read as an ambiguity of power and tapped into the question of agency in the workplace that drew me in. But significantly, beyond this, it was the way in which

the lanyard also hinged on this double movement that really accounted for why the installation at AoMO came together in the way it did *with* the lanyards.

SAM: Do you know what that reminds me of – and this no insult whatsoever on what you do – is all the nonsense you get in the V&A or any other major public gallery or museum, where they merchandise everything on the basis of a particular painting, like Monet for example.

SIMON: Of course, like coasters and tee shirts, I get that...

SAM: So you get to know Monet by how he appears on a mouse-mat. It reminds me, in my own PhD thesis I wrote about the fact that critical scholars are usually very disparaging about that type of kitsch but kitsch is what *brings* a lot of people *to* art, and so kitsch is very much a class-based thing – since according to traditional logic, “real” art is only accessible to the cultured classes. Steve Linstead (2002) wrote a nice paper about that in *Organization*.

SIMON: I think so, absolutely. But there’s a temporal dimension to the colour choice though because it slows things down...it’s more of a *tone* than a colour for a start and its quietness, visually, has a conceptual function, in contrast to the Tate invigilators where you read and clock what’s going on immediately.

SAM: What does that do in terms of power - does it return power? As people have to peer in to see what’s going on and can make more sense of it for themselves?

SIMON: I’m not entirely sure. For me it’s about opening up a critical space, that’s the aim. But if I imagine myself or someone else actually wearing one, away from the art installation, I would like to think that in its design and the thinking behind it that it could act as a form of resistance that some people might get on that level. Of course, it would be funny to imagine an exhibition of mine where I insisted that everyone had to wear one. I loosely mooted the idea to the director of the gallery that I work with in Paris a few years ago and you should have seen his face, he really didn’t take to the idea. But to be honest, I’m not particularly drawn to the participatory art dimension within what I do...or at least I’m very sensitive to the question of oppressing the audience with the idea that they *have* to participate.

SAM: But that reminds me of Femke’s work at the beginning. I loved that...it really did resonate with me. That was really strong. You know it’s what happens at a conference, especially in America, in Management. It’s like “right I’m not talking to you....there’ no point talking to you” and you see these eyes flick down to your midriff to check out your lanyard and I’ve found myself doing it. And that othering on the basis of tiny details is something that is worth bringing attention to.

SIMON: Right. But with Femke’s, the participatory and the performative were absolutely essential in flagging up a political reality and bringing attention to its minutiae as a game. Maybe I could perhaps try something along those lines...

SAM: For the benefit of this recording, Simon is visibly uncomfortable and cringing at the prospect.

SIMON: Maybe I should be locked up in a glass box at the centre of an exhibition space watching people watch me watching them wearing one of my lanyards...*perhaps*. But I think you raise an interesting point in what is the reality of that - what is the reality of wearing something where you can’t really place the colour or the aesthetics of it; and similarly, you can’t necessarily - unless you go right up to the person - place the text and what it’s actually saying? That has a conceptual value and something that I feel still has mileage in exploring.

SAM: Right...how does that change your relationship with that person. Again though, in going back to my reflections on Femke’s work, it would also mean that you would have to *obviously* engage with the other, in a way that would bring you into a different relationship with them. You wouldn’t be able to just have this great big thing with a name and institution on it, you would have to *work* at getting to know that person. But of course, that would not be sustainable in a huge environment. I’m thinking of

Simmel's work on Metropolis and Mental Life here, and the idea that anonymity in a large complex city environment is essential to mental health. So again, we are in a paradox as this is something we shouldn't be too quick to lament.

SIMON: Yes, I know the text, which makes me think about my PhD, which looked at the idea of anonymity within contemporary painting as a performance and form of subjectivity rather than a *flattening* and type of expression at the level of representation.

SAM: Which brings us back to Beagles & Ramsay with the box on the head which makes me laugh out loud. You know it's just a funny image...I really like that humour.

SIMON: Yes, and with Beagles & Ramsay there's this frenzy and pace...the *grinding* of the "machine"... and the "rave" aesthetics, particularly in the video pieces I've seen of theirs; the way in which that broader clubby aesthetic fuels choices of colour, the graphics, the lanyards. It's very much that we're marooned in this reality. That's probably what sets Beagles & Ramsay apart, on that temporal level, in that there's a completely different tempo in what they do.

SAM: Contrast that with Mindy's work which are the gentlest, loveliest pieces....I need to possess one - *I want* this in my life.

SIMON: Well they're virtually not lanyards

SAM: I was looking at the pictures again today and thinking *are* they lanyards or are they just jewellery? You know, but they have got keys hanging off them and you could hang other things off them and I love that. I would absolutely love to wear one of those....it's a thing of beauty. It really spoke to me, this one, because I live a life where I try to put the aesthetics of the everyday first....what Beatriz Acevedo calls "bonito living" - the idea that actually this moment now is all we have, and so everything as much you can should be beautiful. The Arts & Craft movement, you know, that art should not be reserved for the high table. It's about an aesthetic sensibility and making everything please you, and even if you've got no money you can do that, in the way you arrange things and so on....all of those things. And to me, that absolutely flies in the face of the masculine rationalist ethic of every organisation. That's why I wanted to see the CEO's all suited and booted - can you imagine....how that would play with gender codes, with sexuality, because if you saw a man wearing one of these, it would be, like, "well they're clearly gay", you know? And - probably because I am a feminist scholar - I found that really the most powerful. Don't get me wrong, they're all powerful, but Mindy's work touches on those particular issues.

SIMON: Because they're barely lanyards, they kind of undermine the supposition of what a lanyard is. You need the keys at the bottom - hanging off - to signal what might otherwise simply read as a very beautiful necklace. They have a certain fragility to them.

SAM: That's right. But I don't see them as fragile. I didn't get that. I got the feeling that they were delicate and appeared like that but that they were strong platted leather thongs. But I get that there's something here about the shamanic, a Native American culture where, you know, these things are built to last. So to me their strength is in their delicateness. And this is what I meant when I say we don't value the feminine - and I mean feminine as a conceptual term to denote this idea of softness, of vulnerability, and that kind of thing; which is driven out of organisations, and if it is brought back in, it has to be reified as useful in some way, or decorative. It's not seen as strong *in* and *of* itself, and strong in its own terms. It's always as a counterpart to balance the masculinist hegemony of the organisation. It's really important in contemporary organisations where we're having conversations about toxic masculinity, inclusion and all of that stuff, that if inclusion just means fitting in the mould of the dominant group, then it's not inclusion - is it? Inclusion means being valued in your own terms.

SIMON: Absolutely. That's right. And what about Martine's work....they move away from celebrating a particular type of beauty or localised craft aesthetic. The aestheticisation is

reigned in and pared back to reveal another agenda directed at security and technology and how those questions impose themselves on the issue of identity and protection.

SAM: With Martine's, I was particularly drawn to the chair and the fact that this to me seemed like a use of the lanyard that was proper utility, you know, it was truly functional. Whereas a lanyard that's around your neck is holding a pass, but it's not necessary, you could put the pass in your pocket. Whereas this was the solidity of a chair and what do you use a chair for, it's for rest, it's for support, and all of these things came to me, that the lanyard was woven into the fabric. And it's really interesting, the idea of threat modelling in software, which started me thinking about what threat modelling is all about – it's about control, and we're back to power. So, it's about the threat modelling in an organisation, you know, that it's somehow woven into the fabric of the organisation and built into the everyday. But at the same time, it's a support and a rest...so again, as you say, an ambivalence of power.

SIMON: Yes. Well that's what is really interesting in looking at these various artists that they respond to the question of resistance and the ambiguity of power problematic in different ways. You know, like the difference between Femke and Mindy, for example, where they are literally inhabiting different aesthetic worlds and immediate associations in the way they ask questions, but at the same time, critiquing the same socio-political late capitalist reality. Their local concerns in making the lanyards may well differ, but individually they both take account of that complex tension between the decorative and the functional...and the fetishisation that surrounds that. Martine is interesting in this respect, as well, because when you look at the work and her installation photos you see how she recognises the role of the lanyard within a much greater network of power - "as a template to frame how this resonates and infiltrates the individual" is how I put it. The idea of software threat-modelling, then, comes to index a much greater threat directed at the individual.

SAM: Which might return us nicely to the origins of the lanyard – not that I know anything about life on a fifteenth century French naval ship – that without them your life would be in danger, because they safeguard weapons. That's quite a nice return to that idea that your life depended on them in order to support whatever it was you were doing with munitions.

SIMON: Right. It was only later that lanyards became about various braiding codes denoting rank. When you think about them in the context of potentially saving your life, then that changes everything. Or at least, it lends them a beautiful function in that context. But it's interesting how their history and evolution went largely unnoticed until the turn of the millennium when the lanyard was catapulted into a stupid - late capitalist - aestheticizing culture.

SAM: And it *is* a stupid aestheticizing. But maybe I wouldn't think that if it was a different form of aestheticisation.

SIMON: Something is lost, it seems, in that process when one thinks about their original protective function in what it served.

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