

Working Moments

One of the paradoxes of work is that it is both ubiquitous and invisible. Ubiquitous in the sense that (almost) everything that surrounds us is a product of work, we dedicate a large part of our lives to it, and it is of central importance to our selves, it provides subsistence, identity, friendships, value, status and satisfaction (if we are lucky). But it is invisible in that we rarely think about the work of others and we don't look at the world around us as being a product of work. Many things that are clearly 'work' we describe as being something else: artistic creation for example. We have 'art works' but we don't think of artists as being 'workers' in the way that people working in offices, schools or supermarkets are seen as workers. Is this because artistic production is 'creative'?

All work has a creative element to it – one historic definition of work is 'the creative transformation of the world' – and although often that component is small, for some their work does allow them to realise some of their creative potential: these people often describe their work in very positive terms. Yet for many, perhaps most people, work is experienced in negative ways as boredom, insecurity, danger, drudgery, humiliation, discrimination and depersonalization. Work is a profoundly social activity: it takes place in social environments, it has social consequences and our definitions of work are socially negotiated and constructed. Yet, as the images in this 'Working Moments' exhibition show, many jobs require us to imagine that we are alone and to behave accordingly.

Gruhn and Lakmaier help to reveal aspects of work that we lose sight of too easily. The attempts to humanise the dehumanising office environment stand out – look at the 'what's your excuse' sign and the office wall decorated with personally selected pictures – and remind us of the alienation that we experience at work. Alienation from ourselves, from what we are capable of doing, but also from others. The profound loneliness of work, even in the shared space, is an experience that is new: only in modernity have we been both connected and disconnected in this way, and the plethora of communication devices surrounding the disconnected individual office work becomes ironic. Attempts to humanise the office remind us of the reason why we try: we would rather be elsewhere and we often do this by daydreaming or fantasising. But there is another aspect to the way we personalise and decorate our workspaces: as well as trying to escape we also feel that we are on show, on display and must show that we can express ourselves in a range of different ways. These images capture this sense of unease, disconnect and wanting to be elsewhere and this reminds us of our feeling of vulnerability at work: we seek protection in friendships, family photos and personal objects. Yet we cannot make that vulnerability go away for ever: work crises, funding gaps, recessions recur.

The office is a gendered space: as our society shifted towards a service sector economy more and more women have been drawn into workplaces of this type. And here women's roles are mythologised: they

are constructed as good at service sector roles because that is their 'nature'. Workplaces are sites of compliance in that we need to stick to rules that are largely not of our own making, and the consequences of breaking rules at work are often severe for some. But another myth we construct about women is that they are more compliant, less militant workers, even though history shows that a great many major industrial disputes and victories have been organised and won by women. Despite the threat of sanctions, rule breaking and misbehaviour, resistance and rebellion are common features of work, although these may be expressed covertly. 'Working Moments' engages with the ideas of non-compliance, resistance and rebellion at work: subverting dress codes, using inappropriate body language, deploying emotions not sanctioned by organizations are all ways that individuals resist the increasing demands being made upon them, and retain a core of their self and creativity. 'Organizational misbehaviour' can be fantastically creative, particularly when organizations adopt and display corporate cultures based upon the managed emotions of their employees.

Work today for many people means 'more': more effort, more hours, more commitment, and more parts of our selves are being used in our work, particularly our emotions as employers ask us not only to produce but to do it with a smile, or a frown when necessary, on our faces. But work also means 'less': less pay and less security. Many images of work do not reflect this: company reports and advertising show happy teams of fresh faced office workers waiting to serve you and articulating the corporate ideology. Yet TV shows like *The Office* succeed in part by resonating with our actual experiences of office life: stress, boredom, pointlessness, loneliness and isolation.

In the art gallery we are presented with another mythical account of work, this time the work of the artist. When we think about artistic production the image that is conjured up is often that of a lone artist creating a unique product, a myth perpetuated by the art industry. Galleries don't highlight collective efforts at producing shows, but instead the individual creator; the teams of people behind exhibitions are obscured by the myth of the art work. The images in this exhibition serve to dispel this, and many of the other myths at work.

Dr Mark Erickson

School of Applied Social Science

University of Brighton