David Chatfield
Thesis
or
What's with the Cubicle?

Introduction

or, How To Make A Cubicle Interesting Enough To Write About

The office is strange place. It is usually a room or sometimes an entire floor filled with cubicles, rows and rows of boxes crammed with human beings huddled over desks staring in one direction. It is commonly seen as a dehumanizing place. At least that is the what many tend to imagine when asked to consider an office cubicle. The problem is how ubiquitous this image is when trying to reconsider the office it is difficult to escape such commonplace images. I see the cubicle as a mundane and generic thing designed to uniformly house human beings, and ultimately human beings are strange, wonderful, disgusting, beautiful, compassionate, mean, kind, spiteful, anti-social and social creatures. The contrast between the mundane space and such complicated creatures inserted in that space is odd--often absurd. Sitting back from my desk in an attempt to rest my eyes from intense computer work (or maybe just to avoid the work all together) I would become very self–conscious and I would think, "What a completely absurd thing this is." I thought it a horrible place for a human being to exist. How can one thrive doing work here? How can one feel valued when crammed in such a deadening space? I believe there is an inherent need for humans to work, and they obviously need a place to do that work. A desk and other accoutrements are all necessary things, but are office and cubicles the ideal means to work? Whenever an office is "redesigned" to be "better" and "more accommodating" to human behavior, it seems more an attempt to hide the desks and cubicles. But they are usually still there in one form or another. The cubicle became for me an anathema for working, let alone human existence. However my disdain for the office cubicle was contradicted in a critique by former *Art In America Editor* Janet Koplos. She described how much she loved her cubicle. For her it was a place where everything she needed was at hand, and she had an efficient space where

she could write, unencumbered by thoughts of the space around her.[1] So my focus has changed and has become less about what a horrible place it was for me, but simply to reconsider the space while asking others to do so. I want others to become similarly self–conscious about being in an office, and hopefully make them aware of their value as a worker in that space. To reconsider the office cubicle one must look into its history and find ways to present the cubicle in new ways. The office and the cubicle have a deep and strange history tied to warfare, which interestingly elevated the subject to a level which allows for a new awareness of it, and so my goal has been to similarly elevate the cubicle, its associated objects and to examine the relationship between human beings and the objects associated with work.

Reconsidering the Cubicle

or, I'm About To Reference Monty Python In My Thesis.

A springboard for reconsidering the office cubicle has often been the pirates of *The Crimson Permanent Assurance,* the short feature presentation which precedes *Monty Python's The Meaning of Life* does exactly that, and does so in a way that speaks to my initial view of the cubicle. It demonstrates the shift from a time in history where human labor was valued to one where workers are seen only as commodities to be used, traded and discarded all in the pursuit of profit. Seriously, it's not just as an example of what a typical office worker fantasizes about doing to their boss. The plot is as follows: a group of elderly workers "strained under the yolk of their oppressive new corporate management"[2] rebel against said overlords when one of their own is fired. Using swords made from stamp-handles and ceiling fan blades, and receipt holders turned scabbards, they quickly take over and transform their Edwardian office building into a pirate ship. "Weigh the anchor" commands the rebel leader, the order relayed by the office secretary through the office intercom,

---

1   Conversation with Janet Koplos in my studio June 22, 2011.
2   The Crimson Permanent Assurance
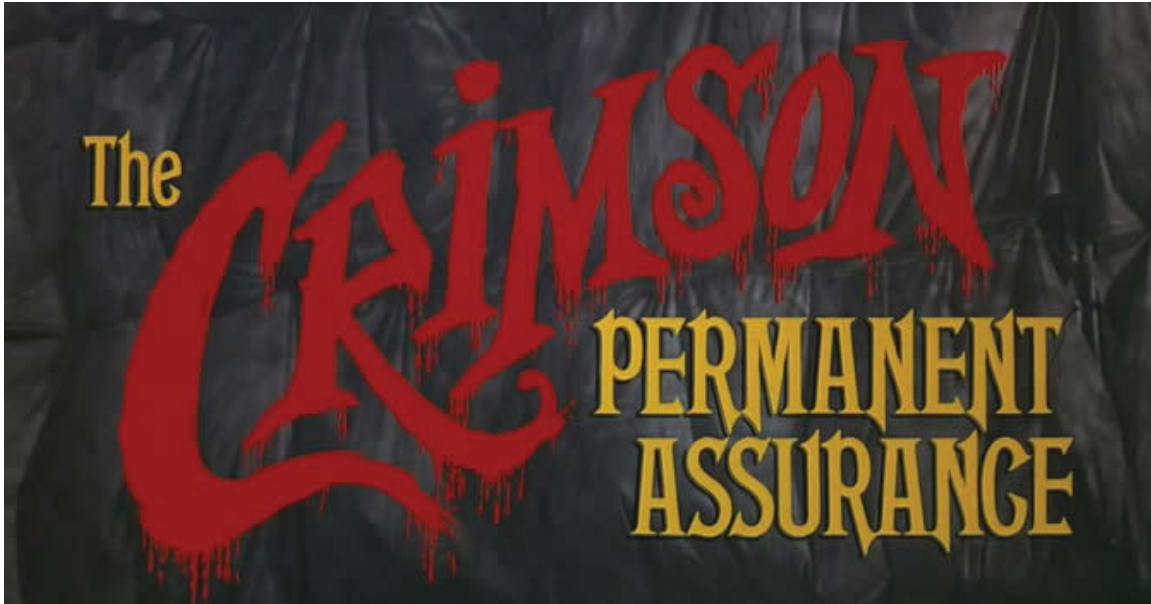
Figure 1. Still Image from The Crimson Permanent Assurance segment of the movie Monty Python's The Meaning of Life.

while canvas covered scaffolding billow in the wind. The building then sails away into "the wide accountan-cy."[3] Our heroes sail into a sea of glass sky-scrapers and quietly come alongside the "Very Big Corporation of America." Firing filing-cabinets turned carronades into the pristine glass windows, they swing into a corporate conference room on coat racks turned grappling hooks and take revenge upon the evil 80's corporate enemy. After laying waste to the corporate landscape they sail off into the sunset and directly off the edge of the world.

Transforming office workers into Pirates that fight 80's corporate stereotypes brings attention to how workers are seen as 'lowly' or 'menial' and are often reduced to simple commodities. To transform them into something larger brings attention to their social status at a time when corporations were at their height of power and wealth, and social inequality was on the rise. At some point in post-industrial history, the Economy became driven largely by abstracts, purely conceptual commodities, Futures for example, traded back and forth to make increasingly more and more money. Making an office building a Pirate Ship, and the objects that surround the

---

3   The Crimson Permanent Assurance

worker into weapons of war makes one conscious of these objects and their relationship to the worker wielding them. This short film is not alone. Two movies similarly exaggerate corporate

Figure 2. Mutiny by receipt holders on the Crimson Permanent Assurance

culture: the movie *Wall Street* (1987) exemplified the greed of the 1980's corporate raider and his prideful greed, and *American Psycho* (2000) paints the Corporate world not just as evil but truly psychotic. Both films elevate modern office culture to absurd levels while focusing exclusively on the villains, There are no protagonists to confront Michael Douglas and Christian Bale placing the viewer in that role. *The*

Figure 3. The Crimson Permanent Assurance weighs anchor and sails off into the wide accountan-cy

Crimson Permanent Assurance shows lowly workers fighting back with the weapons of labor, objects that require human effort and direct interaction, objects that sharply contrast the abstract tools of the modern economy. The office as an element of the modern economy becomes a stage for the fight against social control.

The Cubicle as Means of Social Control,

or It's All Minimalism's Fault

In the fight between the corporate overlords and the menial workers the cubicle came to represent social control. It is a neatly designed, minimalist stage for the politics of human interaction. In Anna Chave's critique of the Minimalist art movement parallels Henri Lefebvre's critique of urban planners which will be discussed later. She talks about how the artists meant their work to be an apolitical statement amidst the highly charged sociopolitical environment of the 1960s. The minimalist artists claimed to be responding to the culture of brutality that existed since WWII, specifically the Vietnam War and the violent government response to the radical social movements of the time. They wanted to create a blatantly apolitical object that lacked any social context, as if to create an experience for the viewer that acted as the salve to the politically wounded nation. But Chave understands how no object is without context, politic or ideology, whether it be a wooden mass sitting in the middle of a gallery or a cubicle. Minimalist art was precisely about control, specifically the "relations which sustain the hierarchies of communication… who speaks to whom, why and for whom."[4]   A cubicle similarly speaks to those relations between individuals and communicates hierarchy. The minimalists use of industrial materials, such as wood or metal spoke to industry and power, much like the industrially produced cubicle, minimalist art could be modular. The power struggle between viewer and artist surrounding a minimalist object reflected societal struggles rather than worked against them. Chave even calls the relationship a patriarchal one, in that the viewer was affected by the work in the same way they are affected by society at large, the industrial, masculine materials of a minimalist object presented "societies steeliest face; the impersonal face of technology, industry and commerce; the unyielding face of the father."[5] Even in art the apolitical

_____
4   Chave pp264
5   Chave pp270

Figure 4. Modular cubicle construction

intent of the maker is contradicted by the simple presence of a person. The cubicle presents a minimalist space designed to be a utopia of equality and efficiency, but is instead a microcosm of societies politics. It can be argued that it is a compacted stage where human politics are amplified. And those in charge deftly use the space to enforce social control. Society's elite benefit from maintaining the hierarchy and the framework provided by the cubicle keeps politics in check. At least to a point, as the presence of human beings tends to alter the spaces and thus those frameworks constantly evolve to accommodate society, for good or bad. Those in the highest realm of power understand the power that art and design had on the larger political stage. It was recently confirmed that the CIA used Abstract Expressionism and the New York School as a propaganda tool against Communism. Even though much of the political elite and most regular citizens hated the art it "could be held up as proof of the creativity, the intellectual freedom, and the cultural power of the US. Russian art, strapped into the communist ideological straitjacket, could not compete.[6]" Art itself may not have ended the Cold-War per se, but was certainly used as a tool. Art, design and architecture were to become essential, if secondary weapons in the arsenal of the Cold-War as well as the means of a new kind of social control.

---

6   Saunders

Cubicle Utopia,

or the Politics of Space

   Urban planners in 1960's France would exemplify this idea, and turn it into official practice where "planned space was considered 'pure'; it was a scientific object and hence had a neutral character... in other words, apolitical."[7] Urban planners of France wanted an efficient, apolitical human/space interaction. Space was to be ideally minimalist. Henri Lefebvre talks about the science, philosophy and planning the French urban planners employed. He talks about how urban planners developed an epistemology to determine how modern spaces were to be organized. This epistemology matches the systems that came from the war–time organizational systems. "This body of knowledge... is a science of space, be it at the macro-scale (the community) or at the micro-scale (the dwelling unit)."[8] He talks about how urban planning was distilled to a precise science in order to promote an unbiased framework. Regimented cubicles appear to be equal in rank, uniform and as apolitical as the larger urban grids they inhabit. According the planners of said spaces, the occupants do not have to think about the space, only move through them efficiently in order to accommodate commerce. Lefebvre states that the so called "apolitical" means of organizing individuals does not take into account those that occupy the space, the politics inherent in human interaction, nor how that might affect the space. Designers thought that individuals need the space to be regimented, and any specific needs would be addressed on the local level within the framework established by the planners. However Lefebvre calls such spaces a "social product"[9] He argues that no matter how a space is organized or how apolitically it is designed, "Space is political and ideological. It is a product literally filled with ideologies."[10] Such ideologies were on full view at the Moscow Summit and in advertising of the time, where women's domestic roles were publicized as a part of the Cold–War strategy.

---

7   Lefebvre pp30
8   Lefebvre pp30
9   Lefebvre pp31
10   Lefebvre pp31

Figure 5. 1950s, American Airlines workers and early computerized work stations

Also note how Lefebvre calls space a "product," the cubicle itself becomes an element of commerce as it was sold as a domicile for the worker who spent an increasing portion of their day working. He also calls space a "historical product"[11] or a component of its time. In this case the cubicle is inexorably tied to the politics of the day, as American capitalism became ever more influential there came an increasing need for more productivity on the part of the worker. The cubicle became more ubiquitous and uniform. The Cubicle itself became a mass-produced commodity. He goes on to describe how a formal study of space cannot be considered without a social analysis of space, or what he calls the "contents of space."[12] The people that occupy that space have to be considered in its design, an argument that parallels the social-sciences employed by the military. There is a close relationship between the occupant of space, say a cubicle, and their role in larger society. For example, the divide between classes could be seen in the hyper–specialization of labor, and the office space began to reflect the hierarchies of class. Bosses occupied lush offices with couches, windows and assistants, but workers down the ladder would have fewer accommodations, if only a desk. The cubicle becomes an element of social control, and its occupant becomes modular, much like the standardized modular cubicle they work in, they can be moved, reassigned, removed and replaced. They become one of many individuals placed in rows and rows of "cockpits" each

---

11   Lefebvre pp31
12   Lefebvre pp31

an item being sold or traded in the economic battle, worker becomes conscript and eventually becomes a commodity. Lefebvre talks about this relationship and the hierarchy inherent in this economic warfare: "there are interrelationships between the production of goods and that of space. The latter accrues to private groups who appropriated the space in order
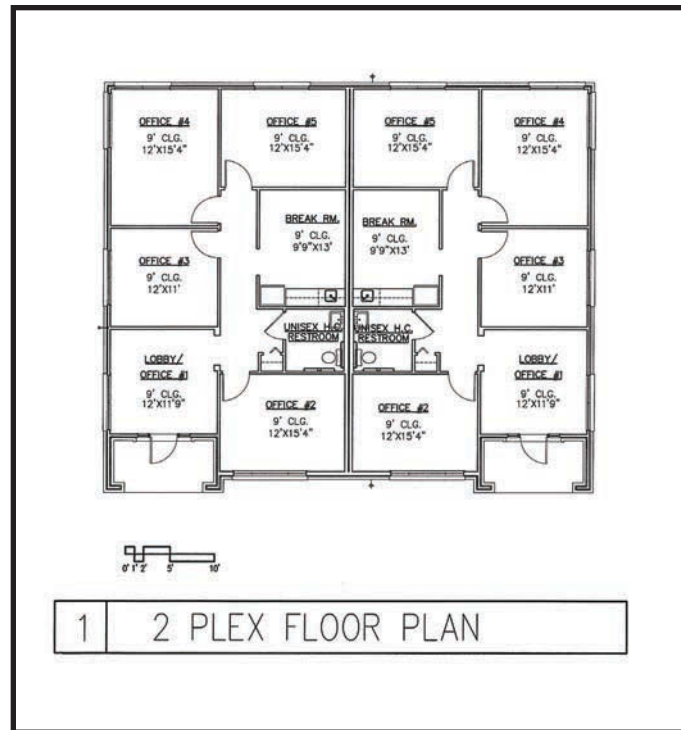

Figure 6. Floor Plan

to manage and exploit it."[13] Those at the top of the hierarchy, the managers/generals use the space to tightly control their worker/conscript. Socioeconomic roles were a major part of that control, or as Hookway states "social practices become encoded within spacial locals"[14] and individuals are controlled by how that space is organized, and where one finds themselves in that space. Those at the top of the hierarchy control the "allocation of time and space...directed towards reconciling the large-scale allocation of space with the socioeconomic organization of society, taking into account the continually increasing complexity and diversity of society."[15] As society changes so does space. The apolitical spaces designed by wartime strategists were imprinted by the social constructs of the post-war era. The minimalist cubicle office was designed to neutralize hierarchy and politics, in a fashion analogous to Abstract Expressionism universal, non-elite emphasis on gesture as emotional content which pretended to take no political sides, no biased view of political power struggles.

---

13   Lefebvre pp31
14   Hookway pp45
15   Lefebvre pp35

Paradoxically the uniform, apolitical, and egalitarian cubicle stood as an example of Western Democracy's cultural superiority over Fascism and Communism.

Cubicle As Cold-War Weapon,

or, Only Nixon Can Go To ~~China~~ Russia

In 1959, the two sides of the Cold-War came together at a Summit in Moscow. A debate between then US Vice-President Richard Nixon and Soviet Premier Nikita Khrushchev was held at the American National Exhibition in a suburban model home which was cut in half in order to better display the interior. The private space of the home, where human interactions—especially gender based interactions usually kept behind closed doors—was now on full view, broadcast world-wide as the stage for a debate between two individuals representing divergent economic ideologies. American economic power was represented by kitchen appliances rather than missiles. The space was specifically chosen at a point in the Summit where Nixon appeared to be faltering to the more aggressive Khrushchev. William Safire, then a press agent for a Home Builder showing at the Exhibition, recommended the model home to Nixon's military aide.[16] The space was an ideal model for the power of capitalism, where Nixon was able to proclaim, "What we want to do is make more easy the life of our housewives."[17] The role of the woman was on full view and used to demonstrate, albeit ironically, American freedom and power.[18] The post–war domestic space was filled with new technologies designed for efficiency, and an image of a woman at the command of that space was shown as an example of American economic might. During and after the war a woman's role could be seen everywhere in advertising, opening domestic space as a component of commerce, and now the image of the perfect household was on display on the world stage as a weapon of the Cold-War. In the face of mutually assured destruction, economic power became key and as demonstrated at

16   Safire
17   Safire
18   Colomina pp16

the Kitchen Summit, the excesses of capitalism were now a weapon against Communism.

P o s t – w a r space, as seen in the publicized domestic space, can be seen as

Figure 7. A "typical American house," Moscow, 1959: Photograph by William Saffire.

a convergence of the public and the private, where the a once clearly defined line gave way to demand for a new organizational model, made necessary by the Cold-War. Designed by former soldiers, domestic and work spaces were now interchangeable in that interior spaces absorbed "the new logic of office space, which in turn came from the military."[19] The efficiency sought by the military bled into the creation of new public and private spaces, especially when those spaces and the items of convenience occupying those spaces, were being sold in massive numbers to an increasingly wealthy middle class. The husband/pilot occupying the cubicle fought the economic war on the front lines, enabling the creation of, and then purchase of, what was advertised to women to create a new kind of home. The housewife became the general in command on the home front fighting the war in her clearly defined support role. New efficient technologies made life easier and were available to everyone who had the means. The availability of cheaper and cheaper technologies allowed for a more efficient home, and that home was put on display, as at the Kitchen Summit, to show off America's economic prosperity and consequential strength. The cubicle and the kitchen were integral in this fight.

---

19   Colomina pp18

As private space became public through advertising and international summits, domesticity became the model for public spaces. Domestic roles, previously hidden in the home, also entered into the public sphere. Conversely when considering urban spaces — drive–in movie theatres, highways, office cubicles—"scales had been conflated, that everything in the post–war age was domestic."[20] The disappearing line between public and private spaces came directly out of the war-time studies on the human interaction with spaces and mechanical interfaces. The office cubicle became a prime example of a simultaneously private and public space, which in turn influenced domestic spaces. "Public space could only be sold by offering it as a form of domestic privacy."[21] A domestic space like the living–room was taken outside, as cars with couch–like bench-seats became a place where one could entertain, and be entertained at the Drive-In, where movies and newsreels were projected on a giant television screen, making watching television on the couch with a date a public event.[22] As a nation became wealthier and the expectation to spend that new wealth grew, workers needed to spend more and more time at the office. Couches and lunch rooms were added for additional domestic comfort so men could relax with a drink in their hands, and commerce was allowed to continue unhindered. During both wars, women worked in place of those overseas, but after the war they were relegated to their traditional domestic role, even in the work place. The secretary acted as proxy wife, allowing the men to work in comfortable efficiency. They would be allowed to contribute to the work load, but were also expected to act as a sort of domestic host to clients. The office place became a compacted stage for domestic and socioeconomic politics, which were now on view for public consumption. The hierarchy found in the military conflated the hierarchy at the work–place. Whereas at the industrial factory you generally had only two classes, bosses and workers, the new white–collar work force had managers, middle managers, assistant managers, etc. The division of

---

20   Colomina pp12
21   Colomina pp12
22   Colomina pp12

responsibility became more complex as well, specific job types were divided and sub–divided. The tests to determine a soldier's specific job were applied to the increasingly specialized work-force. Top managers had their nice offices with couches tables and even bars, and of course doors, to ensure privacy and separation from the employees. One could practically sleep at the office if work demanded it. Lower on the hierarchical ladder, workers had no such privacy initially; however, the accountant's desk quickly evolved into the cubicle, a station where one was surrounded by his work area, able to reach his tools easier. Those tools also increased in number and efficiency, from paper and pencil to adding machines, typewriters, phones and filing cabinets, to computers and flat screen monitors. The human–machine interaction studied in the cockpit was easily applied to the new commerce–driven interface. The cubicle also developed walls, giving privacy to work in peace and theoretically more efficiently. With the enclosed space they were also able post pictures of family. Large desks and smaller and smaller interfaces allowed for plants and personalized decorative items, making the space more home–like. The office space was designed and occupied by former soldiers, who would be fighting the Cold-War through productivity. Suddenly commerce had been weaponized. New systems of organizing people within space designed during the war became an ideal means in fighting that war.

A Brief History of the Cubicle,

or The Cubicle as Cockpit

The image of a soldier is one of an unthinking cog in the machinery of war. A Soldier is required to take orders and execute those orders without question. As generals of WWI and WWII entered into the private sector it follows that the new conscript in the Cold-War would be expected to act similarly. Commerce required the cubicle pilot to be as unthinking, and thus the space they occupied would have

*Figure 8. The Link Trainer, used to train pilots in instrument
flying or supermarket children's ride, you decide*

to accommodate an efficient and obedient worker. Beatriz Colomina writes about retiring top Generals and soldiers re-entering the private sector after the War and how their entrance into Corporate America was the impetus of major societal changes. Specifically, she talks about how during the War, psychology and other social sciences were used as new kind of weapons to make the military smarter and more efficient. Understanding how human beings interacted with each other, their environment and the tools of war added to traditional military strategies. As the Veterans of WWII became regular citizens they brought this understanding of psychology to new environments. Both public and private spaces were to be changed by the returning soldier. Post-War life was dominated by the escalation of the Cold-War, a conflict primarily fought through ideology and proxies. These new additions

Figure 9. Office Cockpit Digital Comp, David Chatfield

to the private sector were also active participants in the Cold-War, and fought this war with the lessons they learned during WWII. These new strategies and designs were to become weapons in the Cold-War; they would redefine space, human interactions within that space, and organize new systems of power and authority in efficient, minimalist spaces. Along these lines, Branden Hookway argues how the evolution of the fighter-plane cockpit reflected the reliance on human psychology, and what was learned transitioned into the post-war era cubicle. The cockpit became the cubicle, and the pilot became a conscript in a new kind of warfare, one defined by psychological and economic tactics. During the First World War flying machines

were used for the first time as a combat weapon. But they were simple machines, with little more than rudimentary flying controls, canvas wrapped around wood frames, and a gun. The pilot flew with only "unmediated visual data"[23] and instinct, with only basic apparatus to measure altitude and attitude. One would often get lost in dense clouds, and vertigo was a common occurrence. During both wars, planes necessarily became faster and more powerful. By WWII the air war became an integral part of both side's strategies. Therefore, as the technology of warfare evolved, new strategies were needed. Because the pilots needed more and more information to be able to fight more efficiently, and also because the planes flew faster and higher, the cockpit needed to evolve in order to accommodate the human element. Logistics, intelligence and new ways to manage emerging technologies became what Hookway called the "professionalization of the war machine."[24] Industry and Academia were integrated in an ever evolving military strategy, and the social sciences became more prevalent in developing that strategy. The cockpit was central in this strategy and how it was eventually applied to the post-war private sector. The pilot needed to know where they were in relation to the Earth quickly, especially when their eyes were largely focused behind them looking for the enemy. Cold temperatures at higher altitudes and stronger G-Forces became a deterrent to relying upon human instincts to fly. Efficiency became the focus, allowing a pilot to focus on the fight. Thus military strategists, in conjunction with psychologists and engineers found a need to create a "tightly calibrated feedback loop between man and machine."[25] *The Link Trainer* was the first flight simulator, and though it closely resembles a child's grocery store ride, it created a contained environment to study the feedback loop between man and machine, and train pilots to fly with instrumentation exclusively. With the help of simulators, the cockpit was redesigned with this human–machine interaction in mind. The cockpit's design became central in the effort to streamline a pilot's

---

23   Hookway pp38
24   Hookway pp22
25   Hookway pp26

ability to fight as efficiently as possible. The pilot now had little to think about other than the job at hand which certainly aided in their survival. The loud and cramped cockpit was an ideal place to test new ideas, as the pilot had to contend with extreme temperature and altitude changes, all amidst the stress of combat. In addition to cockpit design, human psychology was used to develop standardized testing which measured a soldiers cognitive abilities in order to classify the soldier, and match them to a specific position.[26] One such test measured aptitude with the tools of war, specifically the guns on battleships, which constantly moved with the ocean waves. This test would later help predict their aptitude on the larger battlefield. The body–machine relationship was thus formalized, the body became "systemized [within a] technologically mediated environment."[27] When the war was over, former soldiers structured their environment in a familiar way, with the systems they established during the war. Their purpose was no longer conflict, so their new system was applied to commerce. The Generals entered into Corporate America and quickly integrated organizational systems made for war into daily American life, from politics to business. It was determined that the cockpit and the interaction found within, was a space where "the prototype of post–war space"[28] was found and cubicle was to become the new command station for the Cold-War.

The Office In Art

or, Offices You Say? Have You Looked At Hopper?

Edward Hopper is best known for his early, pre-WWII office spaces and those that occupy them, and was adept at using visual means to control the subjects in the painting. He deals deftly with human interaction, or the lack of interaction within urban spaces in his work *Office at Night*. His paintings exemplify how the politics of human interaction, and the attempt to control said politics, are heightened in compact

---

26   Hookway pp28
27   Hookway pp37
28   Hookway pp26

spaces, predicting what will transpire in the cubicle of the future. He tightly controls the space in order to talk about the inequities found in human interaction, and uses the framework of the modern office as a formal structure which acts as a barrier

Figure 10. Edward Hopper, "Office at Night" — 1940

to the two figures in the office. The space is rife with sociopolitical tension. The unequal relationship between the man and woman is amplified in the confined work space. As previously stated, after World War II, the women entered the work-force in large numbers and the previously separated sexes had been moved into a confined office space where social inequities are magnified. In *Office at Night* a man sits at a desk intent on a piece of paper. His desk is inaccessible because of foreshortened perspective. His desk is backed up to a white wall. Considering the structure of the wall to the right of the desk, the wall seems extremely close to the man's back. The stark white wall envelopes the figure, further collapsing the space between the back wall and the man. Following the desk to the left the eye runs into a file cabinet. Tonally, the desk and the cabinet are similar, negating the space between them. The man is trapped behind his desk, eternally staring down at his single sheet of paper. In the lower left corner sits a desk with a typewriter, at which the viewer could be sitting, hinting at the future of man–machine relationship which would become

more and more ubiquitous in the coming decades. Standing to the left of the file cabinet is the women with her hands on a partially open drawer. She looks away from her task, but she isn't quite looking at her superior either, her eyes are turned down almost in thought. She is contained tightly between the desk and the empty chair to her left, unable to move away from her task. The large green shape beneath her only allows the eye access to a path tapered by the bottom front of the desk, to the lower left and the sharp corner of a second desk, or the door to the far left which is also inaccessible. The door is a part of a partial wall, the eye moves along it till it is interrupted by the irregular shape of a typewriter, and above the wall are two pillars of contrasting color. *Office at Night* demonstrates how space can affect the relationship between the two individuals.   The space is architecturally simple, walls containing objects used for work, but the two figures do not interact. Their actions are self involved and seemingly unaware of the other. Hopper tightly controls the space to explore human relationships in a modern office space, potentially as a response to the changes going on in design which were influenced by War–time psychology. The compact space magnifies the social inequities, at least in Hoppers view. He uses the office as a stage to play out the politics of human relationships, in this case the male/female dynamic in a patriarchal, white collar work environment.

Conclusion,

or, Why Paint A Time Clock?

Jacques Ranciére says "It is up to the various forms of politics to appropriate, for their own proper use, the modes of presentation or the means of establishing explanatory sequences produced by artistic practices rather than the other way around."[29] So apparently one just can't paint a subject and hope the material plays well with said subject. Ranciére talks about what he calls the mechanical arts, photography

---

29   The Politics of Aesthetics, pp65

and film, in contrast to the more organic modes of presentation like clay and oil paint, and how mechanical arts allow for the anonymity of the artist in the depiction of the c o m m o n p l a c e, which helps bring the message closer to the audience. In

Figure 11. David Chatfield, "It's Not About The Clock, or, Ka-CHUNK" — 2011

other words the artist's hand interferes with a viewer's access to a work. In painting something so commonplace as a time clock, stapler or cubicle, according to Ranciére, oil-paint would not the ideal material. So to choose paint is to choose to interfere, to distract the viewer with evidence of the artist's hand. Evidence of hand is evidence of work. In presenting objects associated with work (while also negating the figure), the viewer is placed in that role as the worker. "Interfering" lets the viewer know someone deemed this object important enough to present. Evidence of the physical act of the artist speaks to work and labor, as does the texture and physical presence of paint. Jacques Ranciére defines how art can be perceived as having a message, how it "inscribes a form of community" and how its content depends on "artist social modes of integration, or the manner in which artistic forms reflect social structures or movements."[30] To use oil paint is to acknowledge the vast history of painting, and to associate that history with the mundane is to elevate the subject. To use paint,

---

especially in a style tied to a particular time in history, (in this case Modernism), I am using the material to look back to a time in history when labor was seen as valuable. Not only was art used as a weapon of the Cold-War, it was directly tied to the post-Depression economic recovery. Many artists were hired by the Works Progress Administration, a program created to combat unemployment, spur economic activity, invest in infrastructure, and in the case of artists, invest directly in our cultural heritage. To paint enlarged vintage work-related objects is to look at the history of labor. Time-clocks are not really used anymore, at least in the form I am presenting. Most current time management is either digital (credit card like swiping devices) or virtual (online log-in systems). A painted and enlarged vintage time clock asks the viewer to reconsider their relationship to the that object and the work it represents, to directly imply their place in Colomina's human-machine relationship and their role as a worker.

Ranciére states "the dream of the suitable political work of art is in fact the dream of disrupting the relationship between the visible, the sayable, and the thinkable without having to use the terms of a message as a vehicle."[31] The cubicle was designed so the occupant wouldn't have to think about the space and keep them quietly and efficiently working. The cubicle worker isn't necessarily seen as a "laborer" in the way a factory worker of garbage man are. In contemplating his own role as a cubicle denizen Thomas Turner explains why the white-collar worker feels oppressed by their cubicle prison, and have lost their distinction as laborer; "Vocation is the establishment of the work of our hands. It is very serious business, and a very serious way of looking at the work we do, whether we paint portraits, take pictures of ninth graders for yearbooks, fill garbage trucks, teach dance, drive a truck or sit in a cubicle. If we feel oppressed, it is often not because of our work but because of how we interpret our work as being inadequate or useless."[32] To think of

---

31   The Politics of Aesthetics, pp63
32   Thomas Turner

a cubicle worker, or painter for that matter, as laborer is an odd concept in terms of our service-industry dominated economy. By elevating and altering the mundane cubicle by presenting a proto-cubicle, with objects and materials tied to a specific time in history, I want to defy the viewers expectations of the cubicle in the hopes they will be aware of their role as a cubicle bound laborer, their role as commodity in the larger economic system, or at the least the overall value of work. I seek to place the viewer directly in a space that evokes the war-related history of the cubicle, with objects that speak to a time when the cubicle was first coming into being. I ask the viewer to sit in a proto-cubicle with a heavy metal desk and chair, which have elements of ergonomics and white-collar work, but are lime green and are imbued with industrial heft. I hope to further emphasize the man-machine dichotomy and allow the viewer to contemplate their role as worker. Turner himself looks to history for another proto-cubicle, the monastic cell, as a means to reconsider the cubicle and its occupants; "Looking at our work as a vocation much like the monastics do– that in the toil of a studio, office or cubicle is an opportunity to cultivate meaningful community through an understanding of our work as vocation and our presence as a mask of God."[33] He calls the cubicle a "non-monastic cell"[34] where the work done is for a higher purpose (the 'mask') and the workers presence is defined not by the limitations and divisions inherent to the cubicle, but by the individual on the other side of the cubicle wall. Cubicles exist both as private and public space, which can cause tension, but Turner's solution is to push away from the desk and embrace the community of workers, the public aspect of the cubicle row, and realize the value of vocation as means towards finding purpose and building community. Turner states, "Work is not trivial when it has a higher calling, to not be drudgery but to be a way of passing love and compassion to others. Our work, probably more than anything else in the day, is our greatest and most powerful way to be neighborly."

---

33   Thomas Turner
34   Thomas Turner

To consider the cubicle as a place to build community and work towards a higher purpose goes against it's commonplace nature, especially difficult because of its ubiquitous place in popular culture, like in the movie *Office Space (1999)* or television show *The Office (2005).* Yet the cubicle has a strange and complicated place in human history and has roots in both spiritual pursuits and warfare. The cockpit that evolved into the cubicle has been reincarnated; drones flying missions over Afghanistan, Pakistan, and Yemen are being flown by pilots sitting in cubicles in Arizona and New Jersey, making kills via a joystick and computer screen. After considering the history of the cubicle this seems to be a logical evolution. But the disconnect between the work space and its occupants is problematic, and I simply seek to demonstrate that widening gulf, and ultimately the value of the human worker that sits hunched over a desk in that gulf.

Bibliography

American Psycho. Dir. Mary Harron. Perf. Christian Bale, Justin Theroux and Josh Lucas. Lions Gate, 2000. Film.

Chave, Anna. *Minimalism and the Rhetoric of Power. Art In Modern Culture.* Phaidon Press Ltd. 1992. 264-281

Colomina, Beatriz. *Cold-War Hothouses*. New York. Princeton Architectural Press. 2004. 10-21

De Angelo, Joseph. *The Link Flight Trainer: A Historic Mechanical Engineering Landmark*. June 10, 2000. Roberson Museum and Science Center, Binghamton, New York

Lefebvre, H. and Enders, M. J, *Reflections On The Politics Of Space*. Antipode, 8: (1976) 30–37

The Office. Created by Greg Daniels, Ricky Gervais, Stephen Merchant. Perf. Steve Carell, Rainn Wilson and Jenna Fischer. NBC Universal Television, 2005. Television Series.

Office Space. Dir. Mike Judge. Perf. Ron Livingston, Jennifer Aniston and Gary Cole. Twentieth Century Fox Film Corporation, Cubicle Inc, 1999. Film.

The Meaning of Life. Dir. Terry Gilliam. Perf. Sydney Arnold, Guy Bertrand and Andrew Bicknell. Celandine Films, The Monty Python Partnership, Universal Pictures, 1983. Film.

Ranciére, Jacques. The Politics Of Aesthetics. London: Continuum, 2009.

Safire,William. "*The Cold-War's Hot Kitchen". The New York Times*. July 23, 2009. Accessed October 15th, 2010. http://www.nytimes.com/2009/07/24/opinion/24safire.html?_r=2

Saunders, Frances. "*Modern Art Was CIA Wweapon'". The Independant*. October 22, 1995. Accessed November 10, 2010. http://www.independent.co.uk/news/world/modern-art-was-a-cia-weapon-1578808.html

Turner, Thomas. "*The Monastic Cubicle. Curator Magazine*. January 14, 2011. Accessed November 21st, 2011. http://www.curatormagazine.com/thomasturner/the-monastic-cubicle/

Wall Street. Dir. Oliver Stone. Perf. Charlie Sheen, Michael Douglas and Tamara Tunie. Twentieth Century Fox, 1987. Film.