

Laid-Back Company Allows Employees To Work From Home After 6 PM [1]

The timeliness of a pair of events recently came to my attention through a text by the philosopher Franco Berardi. Perhaps unsurprisingly it involves the trajectories of two white men. First, in 1977 Charlie Chaplin died. But a few years before this, a man named Richard Nixon ended the Bretton Woods system, irreversibly shifting the international monetary system and cancelling the direct convertibility of the United States dollar to gold, thus creating a free-floating currency de-linked from any material that could constitute its value. Now, it might be that at this moment you are thinking: uh, what does this have to do with painting? And so I ask here that you read on a bit further and perhaps it may start to make some sort of sense.

As both tramp and dictator, Charlie Chaplin created an embodied resistance, a triumphant protagonist digging his way out of the adversity embedded in our capitalist drama. With his death, perhaps also came the inklings of a death of another sort – the (perhaps naïve) idea of a popular uprising within the horizon of modernism. And by this point, whatever clarity Fordist means of production might have afforded us had already started to muddle, the social stratifications and economic structures mutating to create ever-new means for extracting surplus.

After the end of the Bretton Woods system, the flimsy paper materiality of money detached itself from the metal it was meant to represent, the sign detached from the signifier. And so signs are compared and exchanged with other signs in increasingly abstract transactions and negotiations. Meanwhile, the worker follows this trend too. The office is replaced by cafes with free wireless internet; the factory is relocated at ever greater remove from its consumers; products and job descriptions sublimate into mobile phone applications and teams of “trust engineers” managing your social media “experience”. [2]

The lived milieu of post-fordism is increasingly characterized by the simultaneous creation and professional management of precarity. [3] Work and (seeming) non-work now encompass all time and activity. We escape our boredom by checking email on our phones, and the distinction between “networking opportunity” and “catching up with friends” is often pretty blurry in that list of upcoming Facebook events. The self-management required in this structure entails layers of meta-work: self-assessment, detailing of aims and objectives, engagement in so-called ‘professional development’, and of course, self-care. Corporate multi-nationals now provide any number of “perks” for their staff: a yoga or pilates class over the lunch hour (but when do you eat lunch?) and to retain you during your most productive years, there is also a \$20,000 benefit available to freeze your eggs. [4] Meanwhile “health engagement companies” sell software (or as they prefer to call it: an “engagement ecosystem”) to corporate clients to improve the performance of their health and wellness initiatives, “combining the latest behavioral science, cutting edge technology, and data analytics” to track employees weight, exercise habits, and other health indicators to create rewards systems for employees who become “healthier”. [5]

So where does this leave us? Perhaps I should admit here that I own a yoga mat and I like to eat chia seed pudding. And yet, I would like to think that there could be such a thing as sincere irony, and that there could be a hopefulness in this. But can I wink and stare at the same time? I’m not sure where to go from here, so instead I will leave you with a quote from the philosopher whose writing started this text:

Irony implies the infinite process of interpretation, whereas cynicism results from a (lost) faith. The cynic has lost his or her faith; the ironist never had a faith to begin. [6]

1. This title is borrowed; it is actually a title of an article from the satirical online newspaper, *The Onion*, published November 4, 2014, <http://www.theonion.com/article/laid-back-company-allows-employees-to-work-from-ho-37358>.
2. The term “trust engineers” was used by Facebook to describe a department whose work involved performing experiments on unknowing Facebook users and analyzing this data to better understand and effect human social relations online. The department has since changed its name to the “Protective Care Team”.
3. Irene Götz, “Sensing Post-Fordist Work Life: Recent Perspectives in the Ethnography of Work”, *Ethnologia Europaea: Journal of European Ethnology* 43:1 (2013), 76.
4. Facebook and Apple are among the companies that currently provide this service to their female employees.
5. Much of this wording comes from the website of RedBrick Health Corporation, www.redbrickhealth.com.
6. Franco Birardi, *The Uprising* (Los Angeles: Semiotext(e), 2012), 166.