# BASKET
# TABLE
# BUTCHER'S
# BLOCK

*Lucy Holt*

# DESK APPEAL

It almost goes without saying. Ubiquitous and mute, the desk is everywhere. Part of the furniture in its most basic sense, it stands mostly overlooked in the corners of bedrooms and in identical rows, replicated through office buildings, libraries and call centres. In its simplest form, it provides a working surface in every meaning. A surface for working on, a surface which serves a purpose, which provides services as and when required, or not.

Cultural material is, by its nature, produced. Often, that site of that production is the desk. Sometimes it might be the easel or the kitchen table or the potter's wheel, but more often than not it's the desk. It is the implied object within every text, the wooden elephant in the corner of the room. Case in point: it is a compelling thing when writers point to the thing at which they are sitting. When then situate themselves at the desk. It's like stepping into a private space of creation. Intimate and precious, yet also almost always underwhelming or inadequate.

Desks are deeply paranoid spaces, or at least, we tend to bring our paranoias to the desk. As I write at my desk, which isn't really a desk or necessarily mine, but is most often the kitchen table of my shared flat, hastily taken over once my flatmates have gone to bed, I listen to the upstairs residents as they shuffle their feet across the hardwearing carpet tiles which are blue or green. They feel close. Sometimes, if I work in the kitchen during the day it feels as if those neighbours have decided to stay in too, simply to spite me. I hear them shuffling in what sounds like fuzzy socks or slippers from room to room, their floorpan mapped identically on top of mine as they track me from above. We can't see each other, obviously, and I doubt we have ever met, but like a strong magnet they seem to know my movements before I do. It becomes infuriating. I have to try to shake them loose, passing from kitchen to sofa to end-of-bed in order to throw them off the scent.

I wonder if it's a common thing to find the act of sitting at a desk, and the act of writing almost one and the same. In an age of ephemeral writing, with things noted down on phones and tablets, and of the so-called agile workspace, this is an absurdly traditionalist viewpoint to hold, but it's also so often true; writing is desks and desks is sitting and sitting at desks is the work of writing. This is impractical, unsustainable even, but I buy into it wholesale. This is not as useful as it sounds, for sitting at a desk does not necessarily mean I am more productive in my writing, nor even that I necessarily produce anything at all. Nor does it mean that I can't bring myself to write away from a desk – that would be melodramatic. Rather, I mean that the act of sitting at a desk engages a sort of latent muscle memory. In the most basic sense, my body is in the right alignment to give my mind some sort of chance.

One reading of this state of affairs may be that it's a sort of self-centring, a turning back in on oneself. A more cynical reading is that it's learned behaviour, from years

of desk-based education, compounded by the productivity guilt of the nine to five workday. Either way, sitting at a desk is the only situation in which I can achieve a state of flow which resembles anything useful, or clever, or efficient. I can't get my head around it when people tell me about writing their first novel on the tube, or filing university assignments from their phone. Where's the elbow room, the steady margins to act as buffer. How on earth do you know where you stand, so to speak?

Productivity is an obsession. It is fascinating though, to think about how people fill their time, or don't. It seems that there's a small fortune to be made in the business of unearthing and writing about the daily rituals of writers. From digital magazine The Cut's massively popular 'How I Get I Done' column[1], to Mason Currey's books on the daily rituals of notable people. Every single profile reveals remarkable things, even if the details themselves are unremarkable. Whether it be through manic fits of creativity or painstaking discipline, the idea that there may be some secret – some magic key – in the daily work habits of famous authors and writers is a pervasive and appealing one. The feeling that there might be a way to circumvent boredom, lack of time, lack of inspiration, or an excess of distractions is a difficult one to shake.

Not far from the end of this writing project (time-wise, not wordcount-wise, for what it's worth), I found myself scrolling through Twitter. Endless Twitter scrolling is not something that comes up in Currey's profiles. Writer Lauren Elkin has put a name to the concept of bedmin. "New concept: bedmin. Admin you do in bed because you're too tired/sick/whatever to properly work at your desk. Is it a thing?" she tweeted. I was sitting up in bed. I was doing 'bedmin'. You know; booking train tickets, organising inboxes, doing some pre-emptive route planning, booking in appointments, buying socks on Amazon. Important stuff. The reason the concept struck a nerve (and it really did, albeit mostly with freelancers, writers and academics, or more likely some combination of the three) was that while bedmin feels useful, it is in opposition to desk work, and especially in opposition writing. Whilst it may feel tasks are being completed, bedmin is just the sensation of work. You get a sweet productivity rush from doing a small thing, but it's short-lived. Small admin tasks worm their way into your brain and give you an excuse to not to do the big, crunchy work of having ideas and executing them. They are imagined barriers to doing the thing you don't want to do, and the bed is a physical barrier to that very same thing. Back to work, I thought.

In my tiny bedroom in a shared flat in East London, which was far too tiny for even the most innovative of desks, the daily ritual of creating the perfect conditions to work was part of the routine itself. I imagined an infinitely better version of myself, who got up for 7am runs or swims, who sat at a desk with a pot of coffee and wrote

[1] Anon, *How I Get It Done* (2020) <https://www.thecut.com/tags/how-i-get-it-done/> [accessed 8th March 2020].

all morning, who never checked social media or emails. Sometimes I'd sit on the sofa hunched over the coffee table, but this invariably failed. Without the proper equipment, the real work was being deferred, and was happening elsewhere. That desks allow a sort of embodiment of writing is something that I intuitively know to be true. Situated at a desk, more so than a kitchen table or coffee shop ledge or library booth, you come into yourself.

There's an Edward Hopper painting from 1940 called *Office at Night*. It depicts a man and a woman in a New York office in the early evening. She, the female figure, is stood by the filing cabinet. He's sat at a heavy-duty desk, complete with bottle-green banker's lamp. The scene is, well, awkward. It's heavy with awkwardness. There's something strained going on between the two, for sure. The artificial lighting suggests it's way after the end of the working day. As a viewer, it's impossible to get a grasp on the layout of the room, it protrudes into and disappears away from the edge of the frame in impossible ways. Our viewing position is unclear. We see a portion of another desk, opposite the one the suited man is sat at. We presume it is that of the woman who we presume to be the secretary. Notably, there is a typewriter on this desk. There is no typewriter on the man's desk.

One reading of the painting as that we're witnessing an affair, or at least the moments leading up to one. The thinking behind this being that two people of the opposite sex alone in an office after hours is, could only be, the precursor to an affair. In 1948 Hopper revealed his thinking behind the painting to be less transparent. The feeling of prying, catching a glimpse of a private moment is deliberate. The painting was "probably first suggested by many rides on the 'L' train in New York City after dark glimpses of office interiors that were so fleeting as to leave fresh and vivid impressions on my mind."[2] It's not just the man and the woman then, and their barely-there sexual tension, but the office itself, it's peculiar architecture, the lighting, that serious green carpet.

I am as guilty as anyone of fetishing the desk, or the work produced at desks, or perhaps simply the image of the writer creating work at a desk. Of course, the people in Hopper's painting aren't writers per se (though we'll pay some attention to the relationship between the secretarial work and writing later), in fact there's a complete absence of any discernible 'work' going on in the scene at all. Perhaps that's what accounts for the image's strange atmosphere, its wrong-ness. But the idea that the confluence of desk/lamp/nighttime might produce an image that has a

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2 Anon, *https://www.edwardhopper.net/office-at-night.jsp* (2012) < https://www.edwardhopper.net/office-at-night.jsp> [accessed 8th March 2020].

compelling interior life of its own, that's something easy enough to arrive at. It seems desks and voyeurism have an unexpected closeness. Think about: the things you keep in the drawer of your desk. Think about: riding the overground during evening rush-hour, peering into the fluorescent lit offices which look like apartments, and apartments which look like offices. Think about: the things you can spot from above the top of your computer monitor, and the things you chose to hide behind it. The things you might deliberately leave on screen, or immediately shut down.

In her 2001 single *Life on a String*, Laurie Anderson sings: "A summer night the hot, the heat/sit at my desk, fluorescent light/drawing a picture of a perfect moment." I always think it's telling how she's "drawing a picture" and it's double meaning, how her warm body at night-desk is a perfectly framed image of the artist. I also think about how she's drawing rather than writing. No one's ever written a perfect moment. It's messier and more self-conscious than that.

At night, when my flatmates have finally vacated and the uninterruptible night stretched ahead of me, I often become aware of how I must look, in silhouette, from the street outside. Hair scraped back, sleeves pushed up, the blue hum of artificial screen light uplighting my face from below. Occasionally topping up the same mug of peppermint tea, daubing at the circles under my eyes with my middle fingers. Taking my glasses off and putting them back on again. I, like the man in the Hopper painting, am lit awkwardly by a green banker's lamp. I, like the man in Hopper's painting, probably look pale, confused and a little overfaced. Like Anderson, I'm aware of how the stage is lit. It's a destabilising thought, and a distraction. You might even begin to think that all this fidgeting and sighing and twitching is the same sort of thing as creating, as doing the work.

I could list the number of desks or desk-like things I've sat at in my life. I'm not sure it would be particularly useful. As a child I had a reclaimed school desk with a proper, lift-up lid. It was brilliant, so much-used it ended up living awkwardly in the middle of our living room, just sort of plonked there, facing the TV. I'd sit at it to eat my breakfast and my tea. It had a tiny, non-adjustable bench which I was destined to grow out of far too quickly. Then, as a teenager I had a very unattractive hardwood thing, all badly proportioned with sticky drawers, which I was constantly hoofing my knees into the underside of.  As an undergrad, I lived in a series of identical house shares with a series of identical house share desks, regimented in non-colour and non-design but always sturdy, and always a little more generously sized than they could have got away with. I sat at a vast corporate desk in a repurposed Victorian school house in my first graduate job, it was white and plasticky, and so luxuriously expansive in width I barely spoke to anyone all day. I proudly kept things like hand cream and multivitamins in the drawer, a sign of my recently established maturity.

When the business moved to new premises, the desks got cosier, the chairs got more ergonomic, and personal drawers were swapped for communal cupboards.

I can't claim to have done every type of desk work. I have never worked in retail or in a call centre or in academia or recruitment. I have never started a start-up or fallen foul of a pyramid scheme. I doubt I will ever be a CEO or an architect. I will probably never play any of these things either on television or films. I have, however, committed most of the so-called sins of desk life. I've been visibly hungover and I have been visibly drunk. I have been bored, read books, and eaten most of my weekly meals. I've listened to podcasts and watched football matches and completely phoned in all my work from the 20th December to the 1st January. I've devoured every major breaking news story across every major platform. I've napped. I've had panic attacks. Applied my make-up at 4.56 on a Friday. Made cute yet annoying notes for co-workers and got crumbs everywhere. I have developed incredibly tight shoulders. I have hunched from over-familiar male co-workers who have leaned over my desk chair to peer at my screen, breathing a little too closely to my ear. I have attended corporate lunch-break yoga, to loosen up my tight shoulders. I have spilled tea and coffee and Lucozade over expensive hardware and I have not been fired. I don't think any of these experiences are particularly unique, and in isolation they are certainly not very interesting, but I think about what they mean a lot.

Writing 'on' the desk is a pun, a bad one, and that appeals to something obvious and juvenile in my brain. But it's also a provocation. In writing this essay, whilst sat at a desk, I am utterly present in this writing, simultaneously removed from it. I am here in my now, but I will never be present in the now of the reading. Desk-time and desk-space are elliptical, evasive things. There are all sorts of 'nows' and all sorts of 'heres' present in the writing of the text. Yet, through the distance of time and space and reading, a curious, Escher-like something begins to happen. The desk begins to write itself into being. Only through revisiting, redrafting and reweaving the threads does it appear to read as something both coherent and spontaneous, that it has been thought through but that things occur in sequence, ideas follow ideas, no one image jumps ahead before it has has time to fully gestate, seemingly organically, in the belly of the body of the text.

For instance, in this particular version of re-drafting 'right now' I'm sitting in a cafe. Now I'm on a Transpennine Express train getting poor wi-fi and increasingly fed up. This bit I wrote in a notebook in Hull. This bit I wrote before I wrote the last bit. I'm making all this up. And I'm not. As the well-word essay writing mechanism goes goes; "In this essay, I am –"

At the end of *Life on a String*, Anderson sings: "but me, I'm just looking for a single moment/so I can slip through time". Like the desk on which I write, which is part

cluttered, part curated (whatever that means), this essay is part social history, part assemblage of artefacts. It is somewhat at odds with the forward motion of a text, however artificial or not. At once thrown together and carefully arranged. The desk operates as a place for us to affix our attention, providing – like a primary school geography trip – a literal plot with hard boundaries through which we can survey and inventorise a microcosm of things.

Like a desk too, there are parts well-worn from constant use, and there are dark dusty corners less frequently reached for. There are things which are visible on purpose, and there are things which accrue new meaning when viewed atop the desk. Like that old school desk, there are layers of meaning scratched into the surface. Like all desks, this writing will probably be insufficient for the work I want to do on it, in the end (or even here at the beginning) it'll become a site of frustration, of mental block and of self-loathing. Excellent. So, the desk. Apparatus of transmission. A slip through time. Site of labour. Extravagance. Waste of space. Portal. Shrine. It's complicated.

# JEROME
## & JENNIE

In the beginning, the desk occupied a symbolic role. In Western society, before the 17th century, desks were only to be found in churches, monasteries and palaces. Adapted tables upon which the works of upholding Church and state was carried out. On the very first page of Mark Bridge's 'An Encyclopedia of Desks', there's a picture of Albert Dürer's famous engraving, *Saint Jerome in his Study*.[3] The book, which is a fairly dry historical overview of the styles of desks popular in every century since the 1600s, seems to find some affinity in Saint Jerome, as if he acts as a talisman for serious study, or the study of study. As if the endurance and replication of his image tells us something about our enduring fascination with the image of the desk.

There are many versions of Jerome in art galleries across the world, it is an image which inspires translation across space and time. Each artist brings a different set of ideals about study to their depictions of Jerome. Arguably though, the most famous version of Jerome is Dürer's from 1514. In it, the saint sits working on a slanted writing prop, which is atop a flat table. It is, what art historians would call a disciplined image, precise and geometrically constructed. The atmosphere is in statis. The room is spotless, save for a handful of highly symbolic objects relating to Jerome's own personal mythology; a skull, a lion. There's a whole network of Jeromes in galleries across the world, and thus a whole network of desks and objects around desks. There's Caravaggio's, more commonly referred to as *Saint Jerome Writing* which is housed in the Oratory of St John's Co-Cathedral, Valletta, Malta. There is a 1652 painting by the Flemish painter Henrick de Somer in the Galleria Nazionale di Palazzo Barberini, Rome. And there is Antonello da Messina's Jerome, in the National Gallery in London.[4]

In Messina's *Jerome*, we the viewer look into the study, though the view we have is augmented; we cannot see the ceiling or either of the enclosing walls. There's a lot going on in the image, from the dual outside landscapes of urban and rural in either window, to the symbolic placement of a lion. Despite the heavy symbolism in the image, the focal point is the desk, precisely centred in the composition. His desk is a purpose-built construction. It's made of archways and shelving which connect and bisect each other. Not a table with a sloped writing block placed on top like Dürer's, it's smart, and clever; a piece of furniture designed solely for the purpose of study. It's conspicuously modern, to contemporary eyes almost stylish.

Despite the relatively modern architecture, the message of *Jerome in his Study*, of the Jeromes collectively, is a traditionalist one. The title is a pun, even if it wasn't directly intended as one, though the 'his' may as well remain unspoken. Jerome *in* Study. But study was, until relatively recently, something to only be possessed by

[3] Bridge, M (1988) *An Encyclopaedia of Desks*, 2 edn., London: Quantum Books.
[4] Campbell, C. (2014) *Antonello da Messina, Saint Jerome in his Study | The National Gallery, London*, Available at: https://www.nationalgallery.org.uk/research/research-resources/exhibition-catalogues/building-the-picture/entering-the-picture/antonello-da-messina-saint-jerome-in-his-study (Accessed: 3rd December 2019).

men. Yes, Jerome is in *his* study, but in his symbolic guise as a religious figure and scholar, study belongs to him. He is doing the sacred work of translation, his sanctity stems from the work he is doing, the two are indivisible. As the archetypal pious man, he has great privilege, and much of that privilege is to remain undisturbed.

It's funny the other things in the image which undergo their own translations. Jerome's desk is situated on a raised platform, at the bottom of the steps, which delineate the desk area from the rest of the study, there are a pair of slippers which we imagined he has kicked off in order to ascend to his workplace. It's funny, almost, the implied image in the image. Of Jerome, a saint, kicking off his slippers to shuffle upstairs and get stuck into the business of writing.

For centuries after Jerome, the desk would be found in institutions of Church and state only. Reading and writing wasn't something which played a role in the domestic concerns of ordinary people. Even in the mid-eighteenth century, desks were something only nobility concerned themselves with, and even then it was all a bit of a performance. The french word for furniture, *meuble*, has its roots in 'mobile'. Furniture, for the elite, was something to be shifted around as they moved, whimsically or seasonally, from palace to castle to estate and back again.[5] If these historical reference points tell us anything, it is that the early history of the desk was steeped in ceremony; short-hand for power, status and discipline. The architecture behind workplace hierarchies and power structures. It's serious business, one which is no less complicated, no less saturated with symbolisms spoken and unspoken today.

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Sat at a desk, on the cusp of the third millennium, theorist Sadie Plant began to write a path through the new possibilities of connectivity. The internet was beginning to make its presence felt via personal computers inside domestic spaces, and there was a profound sense of the materiality of written communication shifting and changing. In 'Zeroes and Ones' (1997) she wrote a story of correspondence: "In and out of the punched holes of automated looms, up and down through the ages of spinning and weaving, back and forth through the fabrication of fabrics, shuttles and looms, cotton and silk, canvas and paper, brushes and pens, typewriters, carriages, telephone wires, synthetic fibers, electrical filaments, silicon strands, fiber-optic cables, pixelated screens, telecom lines, the World Wide Web, the Net and matrices to come." [6]

In the late nineteenth century, the Jacquard loom was reimagined by Charles Babbage and Ada Lovelace. The mathematical system of punched holes (zeroes) and

[5] Bridge, M (1988) *An Encyclopaedia of Desks*, 2 edn., London: Quantum Books.
[6] Plant, S., (1998) *Zeros + Ones*, 1 edn, London: HarperCollins, pp.15

the absence of punched holes (ones) became the first Analysis Machine. It's invention marked a point at which the word 'computer' shifted meaning, from a person who carries out the manual labour of computing, to the machine which computes. Programming is weaving, and the language of computers speak in yarns spun. Information is rhythm, and this history as told by Plant, has a specifically female rhythm. "The yarn is neither metaphorical nor literal, but quite simply material, a gathering of threads which twist and turn through the history of computing, technology, the sciences and arts." When she writes about computing, she speaks in terms of imagination and invention. "Ada's method, as will appear, was to weave daydreams into seemingly authentic calculations." The journey from the loom to the desktop computer is one told through stories, rife with sexual politics and invisible barriers.

Historically, when women have taken their seat at a desk in the context of the workplace, it has been a proxy for machine labour. In the former mill towns of Lancashire and Greater Manchester, disused mills were pretty normal primary school trip destinations. Women would spin cotton into thread, stationed at rows and rows of identical industrial machinery. Not conducive to daydreaming, work was gruelling and lethally dangerous. "You can't imagine how noisy it would have been", the tour guide would say. The woman's role within the mechanism of the textile mill was at once highly technical and incredibly banal. She had to be cleverer than, and yet subservient to, the machines that spun cotton into fabrics which made her bosses rich. The smaller these women were, the better they were able to perform the vital labour of keeping things running smoothly. Of course, during the industrial revolution, smoothly didn't mean smoothly for those on the shop floor. Picking up gathered fluff from under a machine might risk getting your hair caught in the innards of the loom, which couldn't distinguish between cotton or human hair.

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The QWERTY keyboard is an invention so ubiquitous its name has become a tautology; QWERTY is a keyboard. Keyboards are QWERTY. In America in 1870, a man named James Denmore laid out the keyboard in a way to improve word flow rate, allowing for 10-finger typing. They were marketed in a way which was "even" accessible for women. Thus began a fraught relationship between women and typing which would come to define workplace gender relations for the next century and a bit.[7] The typing pool, common in most corporate office places from the middle of the 20th century, was deliberately designed as a resource for male workers, the theory being that the women would marry within the business and leave without requiring

[7] Ahmed, S. (2012) *Typing – it's complicated,* Available at:
https://www.theguardian.com/lifeandstyle/the-womens-blog-with-jane-martinson/2012/jan/23/typing-its-complicated (Accessed: 3rd December 2019).

pensions. The word pool itself, in this light, takes on a sinister quality. A pool of women available for  the use of men, both during the working day and outside of it. File it with words like 'resource', 'surplus', 'disposable'.

With the advent of the personal computer, workplace gender hierarchies began to shift. Initially resistant to what would have been seen as secretarial work, male executives were more comfortable with the idea of computing information. Whereas typing at typewriters was an act of subservient translation, Personal Computing was men's work. It required intellectual heavy lifting, and jamming numbers into spreadsheets didn't require secretarial college-honed ability to type a hundred words a minute.

Whilst touch typing had been taught on and off in schools for a long time, it was considered the work of women to get their skills up to scratch. It involved discipline, and a complete aversion to going off-piste. Like the women in textile mills, you have to be master of, but completely subservient to the tools, they get the credit of the heavy lifting but the mistakes are on you. While the stakes aren't as high, the work less physically perilous, the embodied work of the typing pool was just a reproduction of the same hierarchies of labour. As Plant writes that the introduction of the Jacquard Loom was "bitterley opposed by workers who saw in this migration of control a piece of their bodies literally being transferred into the machine". As they say; same shit, different century.

Think of *Mad Men*, the already iconic 2000s HBO series in which beautiful, troubled advertising executives perform the office politics of 1960s New York City. While the women enter the workplace through the typing pool – out in the open, easily observable, essentially replaceable – men are afforded the luxury of retreat. In their private offices they sit at excessively large desks, the site of minimal manual work, but a nucleus of discussion. The 'table' at the heart of under-the-table dealings, sexual transgression and lunchtime or pre-lunchtime boozing. It's no coincidence, not even an unspoken perk of the job. These moral ambiguities, which are facilitated by the big desk, are simply part of the job. In that same first episode, we see Don Draper enter his office and open up a drawer to retrieve one of five folded, perfectly pressed white shirts. Their starched-white uniformity is at odds with the transgressive behaviour of their presence facilities, like a row of picket white fencing in a would-be perfect neighbourhood, it's overt innocence is rendered sinister. The implication is that he has spent the night somewhere other than at home with his wife and children, the implication that there are five of them is also that this is no one-off.

Later on in the series we see the contents of Don's desk come back to haunt him. It is from the drawer of the desk that long-standing nemesis Peter Campbell finds the

evidence of his secret life, and of his major deception. Sometimes a big desk can provide too much room for transgression. There is much too much room for secrets to get consumed by the bowels of the desk, many dark corners from which things may be revealed.

Back in that first episode though, we follow new secretary Peggy Olson on her first day as she is ceremonially shown the ropes by Joan Holloway. On showing her the typing pool, she says "try not to be overwhelmed by all this technology[...]the men who designed it made it simple enough for a woman to use". She's only half joking, but it is funny. It's this kind of thing Sadie Plant's writing about when she says "when computers were virtually real machines, women wrote the software on which they ran. And when 'computer' was a term applied to flesh and blood workers, the bodies which composed them were female".[8] The idea that women should be masters of, yet intellectually overshadowed by, the machinery of the office didn't seem a paradoxical one at the time.

Over the course of the first series of *Mad Men*, we see Peggy move from secretary to copywriter, something which the writers of the show are keen to remind us would have been an exceptional manoeuvre. Her negotiation of her own private desk space mirrors that of her ascension to parity with her male colleagues. Of course, true parity is never possible. She is always the interloper. Despite moving away from the pool, she is still seen as a resource to be exploited.

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When Virgina Woolf wrote 'A Room of One's Own' (1929) she was, famously, writing about the financial security and seclusion necessary for women to be writers.[9] Implicit in that is a desire to shut the door against the world and the "grossly material things" with which we have to contend if we wish to make things in the world, even if the things themselves aren't necessarily material, such as websites or advertising campaigns or laws. The woman who carves out the time and space to write is a woman who, in the model of a long tradition of men, has retreated from the world to be cerebral and serious. This, historically speaking, is an extremely bad thing for a woman to do. In 2018, when the world began to discuss more openly our surplus of monstrous men, Claire Dederer published an essay in The Paris Review about their art.[10] It wasn't that same essay about monstrous men and their art you may have read by countless other writers, in countless other publications. No, it wasn't that essay at all. Dederer did something she wasn't supposed to. She became jealous of the men and their monstrously important art, how they strode around

[8] Ibid, p. 37.
[9] Woolf, V., (2004) *A Room of One's Own*, 36 edn, London: Penguin.
[10] Dederer, C. (2017) *What Do We Do with the Art of Monstrous Men?,* Available at: *https://www.theparisreview.org/blog/2017/11/20/art-monstrous-men/* (Accessed: 3rd December 2019).

steeped in critical success and unburdened by guilt. She wanted to know how she, Claire Dederer, writer, could get a slice of the monstrous pie.

"Look at all the awful things I haven't done. Maybe I'm not a monster." I return to this constantly. "But here's a thing I have done: written a book. Written another book. Written essays and articles and criticism. And maybe that makes me monstrous, in a very specific kind of way". The secret to doing the work, she concludes, is that there isn't one. You just have to do the work. You have to be as neglectful as you have to be in order to be as attentive as you need to be. You have to dredge up the time and space to do the work, which means you have to carve viscously into the soft flesh of your other responsibilities. You have to reclaim the land from the sea. You have to say no when you want to say no and also when you don't want to say no. You have to relish your 'no's, indulge in them. In short, you have to chain yourself to the desk, and you have to love it.

"How selfish?" Dederer asks of her male counterparts: "Plenty selfish, I learned as I observed these men from afar. Lock-the-door-against-your-kid-while-you're-working selfish. Work-every-day-including-Thanksgiving-and-Christmas selfish. Go-on-book-tour-for-weeks-at-a-time selfish. Sleep-with-other-women-at-conferences selfish. Whatever-it-takes selfish." Sometimes being selfish is a compromise. Sometimes it is a delight.

When reading up on Saint Jerome/s in his stud/ies, I encountered this quote from, of all men, Niccolò Machiavelli: "I strip off my muddy, sweaty, workaday clothes, and […] I enter the antique courts of the ancients […] And for the space of four hours I forget the world." [11] The bit about four hours is fascinating. Spookily, specifically, fascinating. Four hours is just about the amount of time you can really work for, before your attention begins to squirm and unge. Four hours is significantly less than the average office-based working day, but four hours is a disruptive amount of time to secrete yourself away if you do, say, have a day job or children or aging parents or run a book club or attend therapy or whatever. Four hours, if you're the cerebral thinking man, the problematic genius, is kind of perfect. What some people would give for four hours. Taking four hours of undisturbed desk time if, like Dederer, you're a woman in the world with responsibilities, is well, monstrous.

Desks. Monsters. There's a whole constellation of furniture which comes to mind when thinking of men who are monstrous, who are tyrants, who control empires, literal or otherwise, from behind big desks. They are; they are boardrooms and conference tables, hotel bedside tables, lecterns, casting couches. There are pieces of

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[11] Campbell, C. (2017) *Antonello da Messina, 'Saint Jerome in his Study',* Available at: https://www.nationalgallery.org.uk/research/research-resources/exhibition-catalogues/building-the-picture/entering-the-picture/antonello-da-messina-saint-jerome-in-his-study (Accessed: 10th October 2019).

furniture which come to mind when I think of women in Dederer's predicament. They are the kitchen counter at night, the train table with power socket, the bus seat first thing in the morning.

# DESKS,
# REAL AND IMAGINED

Perhaps on the desk there sits a dictionary. Certainly, at the beginning of a critical or non-fiction writing, it is common to include a brief definition of the terms being dealt with in the writing. Whilst this might be obvious or theatrical or lazy, it's also quite useful, in a way. To take the thing, and turn it over in your hands, to get a sense of what you're dealing with. Like reaching for the dictionary, it is a habit or a ritual. Like the dictionary stashed in the top left or top right of the desk, it acts as an anchoring point for things to come. An ad-hoc paperweight, safely keeping the accumulated things it brings together. There are many reasons why you might reach for a dictionary, if nothing else, it's an interesting thought experiment.

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Now generally understood to mean a piece of furniture designed for the purpose of doing reading, writing or other types of work, the word desk emerged in the mid-14th Century when it referred to a table specifically adapted for writing purposes, from the Latin *desca*, meaning "table to write on". [12] This, in turn, came from the Latin *discus* meaning platter or dish. The place onto which food is served up became short-hand for the apparatus of writing. Whilst a desk is often perceived as a private space, and the dinner table a public one, it's easy enough to imagine how the rituals of serving and dining, the temptations and flourishes involved in presenting a meal to guests, the idea of giving forth to others, of devouring, of sharing and transmitting might align themselves.

In Provençal, *desca* roughly means basket. This is interesting, to think about the desk in terms of what it might contain, what it might bring together. Instead of a two-dimensional surface of transmission, the desk might be a three-dimensional container. It might creak, it might have gaps. The desk could be a generous and capacious space. And there's another etymological root too: that of the butcher's block. I like that as an image. Of the desk being a site of butchery – which it so often feels like it is. The hashing and rehashing of drafting, the rearrangement of parts on the page. Of the work of desk-work being corporeal. It feels both grounding and elevating at the same time. Butchery isn't for the weak of stomach. It takes guts. It's also real, hard work. And a skill, delivered precisely, repetitively. The butchers block becomes layered with scars.

There's a completely rational and un-poetic explanation as to why these disparate objects; the basket, the table, the butcher's block, would come to convene and converge at the humble "desk", but it doesn't make the images any less interesting. Desk as a capacious vessel, a place of collection and transportation, non-watertight. Desk as cutting board or operating table. A site of flesh, of skill, of butchery, of craft.

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[12] Anon (2019) *desk (n.),* Available at: *https://www.etymonline.com/word/desk* (Accessed: 10th September, 2019).

There's a secondary meaning. The desk as informational exchange within an institution; the site of a specific type of knowledge or responsibility; or more broadly as a catch-all term for organisation, which is quite funny if you think about it. Bureaucracy, or the process involved in the organisations of organisations, comes from the french word bureau, a type of writing desk with drawers. A desk in it's bureaucratic sense can be something like an outpost of a nation state, or a newspaper's frontline in a foreign country. The 'front desk' is the first point of contact you might have with an organisation. It might be an exclave of information or diplomacy, or a networked frontier, chances are it's more of a metaphorical than physical desk.

In 'Keywords' (1976), Raymond Williams the meaning of the work considered bureaucracy.[13] He pointed backwards to a usage from 1818, describing "Bureaucratie or office tyranny, by which Ireland had been so long governed". Office tyranny. He made sure to explain that, through usage, 'bureaucracy' absorbed a meaning beyond that of a process of working through which things are done by the book, but also the supposed frustration inherent to it, pointing to "the rigidity or excessive power of public administration". In the world of bureaucracy, the desk isn't just a site of work, but a site of excess work that seems to multiply exponentially under its own weight. Not a way of doing things, but more commonly, a way of preventing things from being done through a frustration of process. See also: paperwork, red tape. Office tyranny. Fittingly, the etymological reading of 'desk' concludes "it is not always possible to tell whether a literal desk is meant or not".


This is all to say that the linguistic line between what a desk is, and what it stands for, is a complicated one to parse. Physical usage and symbolic purpose elbow for space. And there are all sorts of economic and psychological factors at play too, which mean what a desk is literally facilitating and what it is *doing* in a certain situation converge and diverge often. A CEO might choose to furnish their office with an obnoxiously large desk, despite the fact they sit in meetings, speak at conferences and attend lunches all week. Someone in academia or the creative industries, with arguably a bigger need for literal desk space, may not have one at all, due to institutional powers beyond their control. There are opinion pieces in business magazines which ruminate on so-called 'Big Desk Theory', discussing the pros and cons of having a physically oversized desk when you're at the top of the workplace food chain. And even within the confines of the desk-top itself, there are all sorts of unspoken codes at play. Highly paid bosses may benefit from having

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[13] Williams, R. (1976) *Keywords: A Vocabulary of Culture and Society*, London: Croom Helm.

incredibly messy desks, a sign of their busy schedule and their erratic genius, whilst lower ranking employees have to maintain complete order with theirs, less they appear to not take their work seriously enough. In the office, between the hours of eight and six, we might feel 'chained to our desks' but at other times, we might desperately seek the time and space to get on with the things we want to do. So that disclaimer, that "it is not always possible to tell whether a literal desk is meant or not" feels as necessarily slippery as ever.

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If the etymology of the desk is an inward journey towards its origins, then the logical outward journey is one away from fixed meanings, where language is even more slippery. French poet Francis Ponge was fascinated by the poetic potential of the desk. In 1991 he published 'La Table', a meditation of his kitchen table. Regarded as a poet of things, he made it his life's work to consider everyday, unassuming objects through a sustained process of revisiting.[14] Between 1967 and 1973, he would note down some musings on the table at which he was writing. For Ponge, the table operates much as a desk does. He doesn't allude to doing anything at it other than sitting, reading and writing. It doesn't have a domestic function. He doesn't so much as eat his breakfast or drink a cup of coffee at the table.

There's something in Ponge's recurrent desk visits which resonate. One of the notations reads "The table comes to place itself under my elbow/The table a memory placed at my elbow/As I remember the table (the notion of the table), some table comes under my elbow".  And later: "The table serves as a support for the body of the writer that I sometimes {try to be | am} so that I don't collapse". Ponge is, over a series of mornings, over a series of years, circling around, trying to get closer to the thing at which he is sat, which he couldn't physically be any closer to. He is attempting to get at the essence of it, performing his research as a sort of obsession. He refers to the table as "soil for the pen", and as "durable mother". The relationship is symbiotic, he moves his body to the table, the table nourishes him, offers a type of care. There's a duality between the blank slate (literally, *tabula rasa*) and the permanent, unwavering physicality. In Colombina Zamponi's translator's notes, she notes that through Ponge's writing, "the text itself becomes a workshop, laboratory and artist's studio all at once". The metaphorical space of the table opens up under Ponge, almost infinitely, as long as he continues to bring his physical body to it.

The poet's body at the table/desk is a rich image for Apollinaire too, though it contains more frustrations and limitations, less theatricality. In Oliver Bernard's translation of 'Table' (1965) he writes "my table is oblong, its corners are round".[15]

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[14] Ponge, F. (2002) *The Table*, 2nd edn., Cambridge, Massachusetts : Wakefield Press.
[15] Apollinaire, G. (1965) *Selected Poems*, 2nd edn., London, England: Penguin Books Ltd.

There is a charm or a seduction to setting forth the physicality of the table, with its edges both hard and soft. Apollinaire's table, which – like Ponge – he treats as a desk, is a capacious one, full of detritus. It contains much to be distracted by. "I would have liked to work this morning, but I have done nothing but rummage among my old drafts". And later, "I am bored". His mind wanders to a sign spotted earlier: "ATTENTION/DANGER DE MORT". It's presented on the page graphically, the letters in formation as they would be on a triangular sign. Is there a danger in paying attention? A danger to not doing? He ends: "I shall suck my fingers until darkness being complete I get up to light a lamp". It's as if the poet's body and the table/desk are in a sort of symbiosis, as if the body is the fuel for the work, and vice versa. At the table-desk, in the implied dusk, Apollinaire writes himself dry.

Marina Tsvetaeva wrote of emptying herself out at the desk, though the implications are vastly different.[16] In late July of 1993, she wrote: "Fair enough: you people have eaten me,/I—wrote you down./They'll lay you out on a dinner table,/me—on this desk." For the three poets, the desk presents it's own set of possibilities and limitations. For Ponge, it required a constant revisiting and realignment of the body. For Apollinaire, there are frustrations and distractions and ghosts from the past. For Tsvetaeva, though, things are far messier. The speaker of the poem is vulnerable and angry and revulsed by the people who "eat and eat".

Tsvetaeva goes on to write: "Everything was decided for us/back in the ocean:/Our places of action,/our places of gratitude." Everything is compromised. For Tsvetaeva, the poet's body at desk metamorphoses into a number of images, which are brutalised and often painful. While Ponge and Apollinaire, who have an abundance of time to sit and consider, possessing the excesses of tedium like desk-based flaneurs, the speaker in Tsvetaeva's 'The Desk' body has no such luxury. They are brutalised at and by the desk. The poem ends "Gunpowder, your soul, at the autopsy./And I will be laid out bare."

It's tempting to read Tsvetaeva's own troubled biography into the poem, as we so often do when women write as 'I', when women write about writing. She encountered tragedy and nearly every turn. Hunger and starvation and death played recurring roles in her life, it is perhaps telling that she might render the desk as a dining table, that she might render herself the meal, or a piece of flesh to be picked over. For the speaker in the poem, it is simply not possible to be ambivalent about the desk, and by extension, the writing. When she writes of "our places of action, our places of gratitude", it feels as if she's traversing the deeply fraught relationship between having space and using it, having a voice and using it, and the pressure to perform

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[16] Tsvetaeva, M (2012) *from "The Desk",* Available at:
*https://www.poetryfoundation.org/poetrymagazine/poems/55423/the-desk-56d23708ed037* (Accessed: 3rd February, 2020).

gratitude for being allowed a sliver, when it's not enough and you're expected to bare your soul in return. Everything is compromised. Like the monstrous men, or the women of typing pools, there's a sense of having to be content with enough, and not asking for any more. For knowing one's place and not transcending it. There's also a sense of explosive rage. Desks, real or imagined, where these anxieties play out, over and over, in different spaces and different eras. Tsvetaeva's desk is brutal, dislocated, precise. Famished. Violent and inevitable. It is table, but it is a capacious basket, a butcher's block too. Aren't they all?

# HOT DESKS

In 2017, I got myself a proper job. I'd graduated from university and while I'd had several other jobs before, and found working in the hospitality industry fun, and fulfilling, in that it didn't fill me with dread every morning, I felt an immense amount of unspoken pressure to 'convert' the value of my studies into something more career-shaped. I'd worn the cap and gown, and got the photographs back. Now, the clock was ticking.

At that time, I couldn't have described exactly what comprised career-shaped in my mind, but I knew that it came with its own set of hard edges. It struck me that a lot of my peers were moving off into careers which I didn't really understand and found difficult to explain, and I wondered how they found them, whether they understood them either. I had a couple of ideas, a rough outline, though. A proper job, I imagined, would begin and end at roughly the same time every day, it would follow the rhythms of a monday-friday working week, it would be situated within a fixed location, which I would commute to in the same way every day. It would involve being part of a team which reported to a chain of increasingly senior managers. It would involve lunch hours and smart-casual dress. For some reason, all this appealed to me massively.

Within this portfolio of boundaries, there was one which seemed so overwhelmingly obvious to me. Frustrated after a long shift on my feet I said to a friend: "I just want to sit at a desk, you know". She got it. I had decided that the version of myself I most aspired to be was that of a competent young professional woman, and whilst the details of what that might entail were sketchy in my mind, the physical environment in which she would come to exist was precise and material. I would, I believed, swoop into my buzzy, non-specific work environment in a long smart navy blue coat with ample time, set down my black coffee-to-go and pull up my chair where I would begin a day of hard work on a sleek desktop computer, pinging out emails and producing intangible digital content for the ether. This would be a creative job. Crucially, in this perfect version of my most realised self, my nail varnish would never be chipped, and I would never, ever be hungover. I might even go to the gym before work.

Whether the ordered, boundaried nature of this imagined work made it 'proper', or whether its proper-ness necessitated these material conditions mattered not. So I pitched up with my laptop in a local coffee shop and began prodding around on the internet to see if it might offer me a pathway to my future self. It was around this time that I had a conversation with a good friend. She'd lived in London since dropping out of art school, working on a beauty counter in a Selfridges in the City. Every day, she said, she'd have unpleasant encounters with impatient customers in suits. She said that every night after her shift she'd stare up at the silhouettes of workers in keyboards or striding importantly around the identical floor plans of their

identical offices. Every evening, no one would offer her a seat on the Tube, despite her visible exhaustion. She found it absurd. "Why does their sat-down job make them superior to me, with my standing-up job?" and then "What do people even do in offices all day?" I was mortified at her naivety. "Well they –". Um. I realised that I didn't have a satisfactory answer either. Neither of us could picture with any sort of clarity what the majority of people who work in business or finance do all day, why it might be good, or better than whatever we were doing, and yet the supposed glamour of the city skyscraper still held its own mythological appeal.

The corporate office, much like the independent coffee shop, has its own visual language. In 1997, architects Santa Raymond and Roger Cunliffe published the book 'Tomorrow's Office'.[17] Its subtitle was "creating effective and humane interiors". In a Charles Hampden-Turner penned foreword, he writes "to be flexible without fragmentation, to combine home styles with work styles, to be stimulated to excitement without straying into boredom on the one side or chronic stress on the other – these are the balancing acts the authors seek". While the pre-millenium office spaces they investigate now seem dated (those of large, faceless law and finance firms in the City of London) it feels that the book documents the beginning of a turn towards what we might now recognise as the cool, highly-stylised contemporary office. There's a focus on the logistics of organic encounters, whether it be the ability to "lean over each others" desks to discuss the new product in all its intricacies" or the "lush reception area, the intelligent lifts, the long walk to the person you want to see".

'Tomorrow's Office' makes no apologies for the fact that it sees these offices of the future as merely the setting and/or catalyst for more effective (profitable) work. I found myself amused at the overly sincere dedication inside the front cover from the authors: "For our respective children: Jemima, Joshua and Tabitha: and Rachel, Harry and Luke. They are tomorrow's gold-collar workers: Tomorrow's offices are for them." It reads like parody, but it's also not too hard to empathise with the author's aspirations for their children. It's easy to arrive at the conclusion that if we all must struggle under late-capitalism, that we might as well do it in well lit rooms with ergonomic chairs, big windows and bowls of fruit. You probably would want that for your kids, I can imagine that.

The place I found myself working at in that job was unapologetically one of "tomorrow's offices", this was one of its major selling points. I wasn't quite a gold-collar worker, but it wasn't half-bad either. A digital creative agency in Sheffield, the office had won prizes for being the most sought-after space to work in the industry. And they'd done a good job of it, they really had. So much so, it won a

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[17]  Cunliffe, R and Raymond, S., *Tomorrow's Office: Creative effective and humane interiors* (London: E & FN Spon, 2000).

handful of interior design awards, namely 'Most Inspiring Place To Work In The North', which wasn't a tongue-in-cheek dig, but a highly contested accolade.

The office, which we never referred to as an office but as interchangeably the 'the studio', 'HQ' or just 'Sheffield', was a completely repurposed cutlery factory. One of the city's many, many disused cutlery factories. Inside, the floors had been levelled and left as unpolished concrete. The walls, exposed Yorkshire brickwork, naturally. Shiny sliver ventilation tubes filled the loft cavities. Banks and banks of iMacs were overlooked by floating walkways. There was a little kitchenette that looked like something from a daytime cookery programme, we were encouraged to stray from our desks, to form huddles in glass cubicles and on beanbags and in snugs, which had carpets designed to mimic the cracks and discolouration of a concrete factory floor. It was great. If you've got to locate yourself in one building for at least forty hours a week, why shouldn't it be a place with Chesterfield sofas and ping pong tables and craft beer on a friday afternoon? Why shouldn't you want to Instagram every inch of your workplace? If, in a workplace where the product of your labours is intangible or exists only in the digital realm, I understood completely why the interior design agency appointed to design our digital creative agency might gravitate towards neutral colours, raw materials, and rough edges. Everything about it sought to affect the tangibleness of stuff. It's very stuffness, reflecting the descriptor 'studio' back at us. Having initially meant the workshop or workspace, in contemporary art and design discussions, the studio more frequently refers to a set of people working together or around a set of ideas, often in disparate locations. Whilst the creative professions might fetisishe the idea of craft and making, it's the looser, literally more empty version which they inhabit in these cases.

And there's a broader irony to this too, because these spaces were once the literal sites of production in industrial cities. Sheffield is as good an example as any. Once world-famous as a steel-producing city, it now has a deeply complicated relationship with its industrial roots. Still very much there, but pushed out to the fringes, leaving in their wake spaces like the cutlery works and prime city centre retail, ready to be inhabited by the agents of 'new' creativity. At their workstations, spinning yarns, digital or otherwise. Indulging in the neat tensions of it all. It's Sadie Plant all over again.

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The term 'industrial chic' first came to prominence in the late 2000s.[18] It came to encapsulate a tendency for new work and living spaces to mimic the gestures, silhouettes and materials of what would have previously been thought of as practical

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[18]Bateman, K. (2015) *The History of the Word "Chic",* Available at: *https://www.etymonline.com/word/desk* (Accessed: 10th September, 2019).

workspaces, those which would have had little aesthetic considerations when initially designed like factories, warehouses and mills. In fact, what might be deemed aesthetic concerns, or the absence of them, were influenced by the insurance companies, who discouraged attics and recommended flat roofs. Fire safety was to be improved by open-plan layouts. Concrete and steel was a given. Excessive adornment or decoration was discouraged, leading to the unfinished looking roughness of exposed brick and pipework. Then, in the 60s and 70s, 'chic' entered the scene via New York City. Overpopulation in Lower Manhattan led artists to swerve the conventional retail market and move into abandoned industrial spaces. It's a well-told story of gentrification which has been replicated in cities globally, but a laissez faire attitude to interior design meant the aesthetic of industrial chic was born. As a term, it has come to be a catch-all for all things unfussy and hard-edged. Like it's more domestic, fustier cousin 'shabby chic', it manifests itself as an aesthetic for people who don't *do* interior design; an aesthetic for the sorts of people who like things which work or are well used, who don't cow to fads, in short; who are themselves unfussy and hard-edged. Of course, it's all a performance.

Now recognised as being something existentially French, 'chic' the word itself is believed to come from the German 'schick', meaning skill. Presumably, a skill for putting things together in a way which suggests sophistication, the correct amount of care. Chic is self-defining. If it's conspicuous, it's too much. Chic is chic is chic. Which is why industrial chic is such a contrivance. It goes without saying that in an advertising agency, a shipping container serves no useful purpose. Digital banner ads and mood films don't have to be shipped anywhere. A container has to be manipulated in order for it to serve a purpose in that context; doorways and windows punched out of it, ethernet cables installed. I don't know if you've ever tried to take a conference call in a shipping container, the reverberations make it near-impossible. It is not only the literal opposite of chic – try-hard and over-engineered – but it stands for a type of manual labour that is fetisihised, and completely absent. It's a joke, a bad joke, because we, as creatives, would never have to engage with a shipping container in its natural habitat. We will never work at a docklands or in a packing warehouse. And even more pertinently, we will never consider making a deal with people traffickers to smuggle ourselves into a new country, packed in the back of one of these. It's an *ironic* shipping container. It's a punchline, a vicious one. Ha, we think. We cannot even imagine.

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Talking of bad jokes, there's one moment in BBC drama *Life on Mars* (2006) that stands out each time I re-watch it, which is quite frequently. A joke of sorts, but a rare one in that it gets better over time. DCI Sam Tyler, sent back in time to 1973, is sent to investigate a suspected murder at a factory. On turning up to the crime scene,

he realises the factory will have particular significance in 33 years time. "I don't believe it. I live here. I will live here", and then, "this is all going to be flats in 40 years". Tyler and the rest of CID walk into the deserted factory, rows and rows of identical looms flanking them as they approach the mutilated body of the victim. Through moments of flashforward to Tyler's life in 2006, he realises the precise location of the victim's body: "he's in my flat, he's under my kitchen table". For Tyler, the industrial space is haunted by the spectre of its domestic future. The murder victim is just one of coutless casualties of industrial decline to come.

Later, in a more light-hearted moment of reflection, WPC Annie Cartwright asks "why would anyone turn a factory into a block of flats?" Sam replies, perhaps more on the nose than he realises: "It's supposed to look nice". Annie is unconvinced. "Houses should be houses, factories should be factories. I mean, things are built for a purpose". The episode's major plot twist is that the victim wasn't murdered at all, but was in fact a victim of a gory industrial accident, and a botched cover-up by workers to ensure the factory remained in operation. It's a race against time to preserve the industrial history of the mill, and DC Sam Tyler 'from' 2006, knows it's a losing battle. Series 1 of *Life on Mars* aired in 2006. It was first conceived in 1999. The repurposing of things from the past as a more glamorous version of their former selves is a grim joke we just can't stop telling.

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Back in the office-not-office, I was struck by how easy it was to be taken in by the beautifully rough edges of the place. I began to buy wholesale into its earnestness. It looked good, and I liked how good it looked. And I liked how good other people thought it looked. Yes, I thought, I work in that cool office. If I can't show off what I 'make' here, because it doesn't really exist in any tangible way, and if it did, it wouldn't belong to me anyway, at least I can show off the building. It was self-perpetuating – the company won work because clients wanted to come and spend time at our place, because they wanted to show it off too. The feeling was that the work we were doing was as hard or as vital as the materials we were surrounded by, that we didn't just think about things in strategic terms, but we actually *made* them.

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Online, there are whole communities dedicated to perfecting, documenting and sharing beautifully designed workplaces and workspaces, with an emphasis on the selecting and placing of beautiful objects on and around them.  If you search #officegoals on Instagram you get a peek into a world where the desk is a stage, waiting to be set. It's absurd, and addictive, and just a little tempting too.

#dreamdesks and #deskporn are much the same. Once upon a time there might have been some synaptic leap required in order to express lust or envy at the sight of a desk. Now, having or pursuing one is symbolic of having achieved that most contemporary of pots of gold – having an aspirational career. It's worth mentioning that most of the desks posted under these hashtags appear to be home desks, which again feeds into the idea that the most aspirational work you can do is freelance or home-based, with its vague suggestions of creativity and freedom. Often, the 'goal' of the #officegoal is simply the existence of the office itself.

Without friction, things are easy. If your desk is full of beautifully positioned objects, as opposed to, say, the evidence of disorder and chaos and unhealthy habits, then the work must be good. If the work is good then you'll do more of it. You make your desk look nicer. You might be inclined to share an image of your perfect workspace online. The more you look at these images, the less you see, in that everything looks exactly the same. Same whitewashed walls, same Eames-lite chairs, pot plants, images of pot plants. There's a lexicon of ephemera that is, in theory, unrelated yet completely coherent. These objects include, but are not limited to; an angle poise lamp, a bluetooth-connected smart speaker, a terrazzo plant pot, several clustered candles, some small and ceramic objects, a wire or perspex paper tray, some precariously balanced artwork, rarely, if ever, affixed to the wall. A motivational quote, perhaps. A terrarium, definitely. The colour pink. A New York Magazine article subtitled 'The Tyranny of Terrazzo', the look was termed 'The Millennial Aesthetic'.[19]

Rarely, in images which perpetuate this image of idealised desk-life do you see an empty yoghurt pot, a long-cold half-finished cafetiere. These spaces are clinical, hermetically sealed from the bodily activities of work (that's another point, you rarely see these spaces as inhabited with people. Think: showroom). These objects, which are highly aesthetic and yet utterly ubiquitous, form a self-selecting constellation, pulling everything in. Mass-produced and sentimental at once; minimally covered in mess, timelessly of the moment. An aesthetic defined through replication online has grown and morphed, encompassing all iterations of itself.

In 'Double-tracking' (2019), Rosanna Mclaughlin cites a theory from the 90's, called "the anxiety of work-in-progress", popularised by David Balzer.[20] According to Balzer, the "curatorial boom" of the 1990s was supplemented by a boom in the performance of individual busyness, especially in the art world. The idea that everyone might be, and should be, doing a million things at once gained traction. Artists weren't just making art, they were facilitating workshops, hosting panel

[19] Fischer, M. (2020) *Will the Millennial Aesthetic Ever End?*, Available at: *https://www.thecut.com/2020/03/will-the-millennial-aesthetic-ever-end.html* (Accessed: 6th March 2020)
[20] Mclaughlin, R. (2019) *Double-Tracking: Studies in Duplicity*, 1st edn., London, England: Little Island Press.

discussions, and founding collectives. They were organising, getting busy, and the business was part of the work. Mclaughlin takes this further, suggesting that in our own individual lives we suffer from the same anxiety of work-in-progress, the idea that our lives should be broader and deeper and busier than ever before, and that we should always be working towards the next big things, whilst running several smaller big things in the background. The desk, with its ability to act as a plinth for disparate objects, reframes any object that might be placed upon them as of or adjacent to work. It creates connotations and associations which the item off-desk wouldn't otherwise have. It's the natural stage for the performance of this anxiety.

Once reserved for performing a very specific type of work within the context of the art world, 'curation' has also absorbed it's own set of alternative meanings. It is now unremarkable to talk about curating a wardrobe, or a bookshelf or a cocktail menu. Things which may have previously been referred to as editing, designing, refining, or simply liking things can now be filed under the curatorial trades descriptions act. This is very, very irritating to people in the art world, but it should also be endlessly fascinating. Balzer again: "'Curation' is of course a buzzword, but its history is a great case study for where we're at: an abundance of stuff, with a scarcity of context." [21] The idea of curation, that we make active decisions about the things we do or don't include in our lives, and that there are enough people observing who care, is a narcissistic conceit, and an appealing one too. With an implied audience for nearly every activity we undertake in our lives, almost everything also becomes an aesthetic decision. Angle-poise lamps are an aesthetic decision. A disordered pin-board full of post-its and to do lists is an aesthetic decision. The absence of yoghurt pots is an aesthetic decision.

In slippery economic times, when homeownership and career stability feel like insurmountable up-hill struggles for vast portions of the population, the desktop is a flat surface on which to place an illusion of permanence. It is stable, it doesn't move. As the conditions of home rental often prohibit making any changes to the decor of a place, objects take on extra, talismanic importance. Your landlord might be able to tell you what colour to paint your walls or what temperature to keep you home, but they can't tell you what to do with your tiny patch of desk. Objects which, we might quietly hope, might be interesting through the fact of their assemblage by us, as very interesting individuals. In the terrazzo article, Molly Fischer writes "for a cohort reared to achieve and then released into an economy where achievement held no guarantees, the millennial aesthetic provides something that looks a little like bourgeois stability, at least". [22]

[21] Molotkow, A. (2014) *The Rise of the Curator in Popular Culture,* Available at: *https://www.theglobeandmail.com/arts/the-rise-of-the-curator-in-popular-culture/article21504823/* (Accessed: 10th September, 2019).
[22] Fischer, M. (2020) *Will the Millennial Aesthetic Ever End?,* Available at: *https://www.thecut.com/2020/03/will-the-millennial-aesthetic-ever-end.html* (Accessed: 6th March 2020)

A tiny resistance to the temporality of modern living, perhaps, but miniature desk assemblages, whether performed for online audiences, or just performed for the self, are in themselves impermanent. Curating 'proper' is, by definition, a temporary act. Art exhibitions are scheduled to end. The audience moves on, the gallery is whitewashed, the artworks are put into storage, something new is installed. The assemblage is always destined to be disassembled. Even in the workplace, the desks are slipping from under us. As organisations take steps to move away from rigid seating plans and enforce 'clean desk policies', the idea that workers have to stay on their toes is marketed as an act of generosity. That you can choose where to sit is seen as a marker of personal responsibility. In reality, it often feels like workers are expected to be everywhere at once, to not take up space and to not gather dust. Critic Tobias Revell describes this as "a semantic sleight of hand".[23] The fetishisation of hot desking, and especially hot desking within organisations is an act of removing employees security, whilst packaging it as a brave and exciting new era for workplace dynamic.

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If you happen to work in metropolitan areas, or catch public transport on a regular basis, you'll have seen a very specific type of advertisement. They normally come in saccharin shades of teal and purple, have large, punchy fonts, and grotesquely up-close images of dripping kebabs or steaming bowls of noodles. The headline usually says something witty about eating on the go, or during meetings. About how busy you are. A pun on being fed/fed up. The adverts then offer you a miraculous solution; from an app on your phone, it is possible to order food to your desk. Desk becomes table.

'Dining al desko' is one of those irritating phrases that floats around the workplace, accidentally adopted as non-ironic speech, like hump-day or lean in. More so than the jargon, it seems to say something about what we've come to expect from the conditions of work. I find these as fascinating, really, because they presuppose that non-stop days and all-night work sessions are the new normal. That instead of questioning how we got here, whether this is the most useful way to organise our lives, the best we can do is have some nice food delivered to the 'here'. It's no surprise that big tech firms exploit these new normals, but even so, the lurid colours, the I-wish-I'd-thought-of-that headlines, the too succulent to be true food photography appear to be the backdrop of a world in which anything is an unwanted distraction if it breaks you from your phone or your email or whichever other screen you spend most of your time at.

[23] Revell, T. (2015) 'Working up a Sweat', *Dirty Furniture,* September, p. 146-159.

In 2019, essayist Jia Tolentino released a collection entitled 'Trick Mirror'.[24] In it she wrote, broadly, about the new relationships with the self forged through excessive time spent online. One essay, on new food and exercise trends, really stood out. "Barre feels like exercise the way that Sweetgreen feels like eating: both might be better categorised as mechanisms that help you adapt to arbitrary, prolonged agony. As a form of exercise, barre is ideal for an era in which everyone has to work constantly-you can be back at the office in five minutes, no shower necessary- and in which women are still expected to look unreasonably good". If you ignore the fact that the references are NYC-centric, what Tolentino is talking about is a sort of universal to nine to five culture. Sweetgreen, the trendy, lunch break-friendly salad bar, and barre, the cult workout class designed to give you the body of a ballet dancer without the dancing, are accessories to the desk. Salad, as Tolentino points out, easily consumed in one sitting whilst checking emails remotely, is an enabler of desk life. Similarly, barre class, which gives you the physique of a dancer without any of the skills, means that you don't have to let 10 hours of daily training get in the way of your desk job. It's no wonder that Sweetgreen restaurants and Barre gyms locate themselves in the middle of busy working districts, just as the City of London is filled with identical sushi places and bootcamp gyms which are deserted at the weekend. There's no way you'd go in for these things unless you were short on time in a very specific way. They aren't entertainment or a cultural experience. And yet salad bars and fitness classes and apps primarily designed to deliver takeaway for one on a Tuesday night brand themselves not as if they are solutions to a very specific set of working conditions, but as lifestyle choices in themselves. Being this sort of busy is normalised. The question isn't how do I get off the treadmill? But, what else can I do whilst I'm on the treadmill to make it better for me?

One of the strangest things is not that the fast anonymous salads, or the steaming dumplings actually look quite good, it's that the idea that you might be busy enough to justify all is equally appealing. Of course, there are many people in the world who are genuinely too busy to cook for their families whilst holding down jobs and other responsibilities. This isn't to whom the likes of Uber Eats and Deliveroo and the countless competitors are advertising on the tube. It's the city workers who attend 5am HIIT sessions and talk incessantly into their AirPods. It's the media strategist doing hot yoga on her lunch break. It's the creative team who haven't slept in 48 hours working on a pitch to a major advertising client. Being the right type of busy is very cool, and whilst the phrase 'al desko' most certainly isn't, the very concept that your desk might become a dining table, social space is a fascinating thing. We're all sitting at miniature shrines to our own personality.

[24] Tolentino, J. (2019) Trick Mirror: Reflections on Self-Delusion, 1st edn., London, England: 4th Estate.

# 8 YOGA POSES
# YOU CAN DO AT YOUR DESK
# TO RELIEVE STRESS

They say the most difficult thing about maintaining a yoga practice is turning up to your mat, every day. A rectangular sheet of foam, not quite big enough to fit a human body, not quite thick enough to be properly comfortable, the yoga mat is a strange, portable space. For those who swear by the restorative properties of yoga, it's a sanctuary or refuge. In the street though, the yoga mat is a beacon. Brightly coloured rolls of foam poking out of bags or strapped onto shoulders act as signifiers for those on a mission towards self-improvement. For this reason, they come with their own set of well-worn cliches.

That corporate office life and yoga should become so synonymous is strange. In some ways, it's inevitable. Sitting at a desk makes you tight. Yoga makes you loose. Working at a computer hurries the mind. Yoga slows it down. Corporate life is giving your time for someone else. Yoga is making time for yourself. At least, the way the relationship is figured in the West, where yoga is seen more as a remedy to everyday life, a sort of beneficial supplement to, than an intuitive part of, everyday life.

Online, you can find countless resources explaining how best to practice yoga whilst seated at a desk all day. The implication is that, with a little time and effort and simple breathing patterns, you can cancel out the damage done to your body *in situ*. Whilst located at the site of the work. The implication being that you can be both in your body and outside of it at the same time. The following poses are inspired by one such article.[25]

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[25] Yoga For Beginners (2019) *Office Yoga: 8 Yoga Poses You Can Do At Work,* Available at: *https://www.yogabeyondthestudio.com/blog/yoga-for-beginners/office-yoga-8-yoga-poses-you-can-do-at-work/* (Accessed: 2nd February 2020).

*Seated Crescent Moon Pose*

*When sitting over a desk or computer for extended periods, the body tends to hunch forward. Sitting in a Seated Crescent Moon realigns the spine. Take time away from your desk to practice the pose, which will allow you to return to work with more space in the spine, allowing for a clearer head and sharper focus.*

Most jobs are bullshit. This is the thesis of David Graeber's 2019 book 'Bullshit Jobs'. [26] What began in 2014 as a speculative essay about labour, or the lack of it, in the modern blue-collar workplace became a full-length book in 2019, documenting the previously non vocalised phenomenon of the mostly work-free workday.

The vast majority of people working in office jobs aren't working. As in, despite pressures to look busy, Graeber uncovered not just individuals, but whole workplaces where employees spent much of their time and energy on looking busy, performing the cadences of the busy work day or week, whilst mostly feeling underworked and underwhelmed. Instead of bosses breathing down their necks, they were doing the opposite. And instead of feeling pressure to speak out against these strangely oppressive conditions of non-work, employers were actively dissuaded from doing otherwise. This manifested either implicitly, through a culture of silence or explicitly, by bosses who were all too happy to keep the delicate house of cards intact.

Whilst the idea that you have to be suffocatingly busy in your work life has currency, the reality – for the massive strata of workers who exist between manual labour and the CEO class – is significantly quieter. These workers are paralysed into silence by the idea that they might be penalised for exposing the system. Instead of enjoying a life with an excess of free time, Graeber identified that the majority of individuals stuck in under-stimulating roles felt they made them depressed, thinking about all the things that they weren't able to do whilst they weren't working at their desks. Graber writes that "anyone who has a bullshit job, or knows someone who has had a bullshit job, is aware then, that the market is not an infallible arbiter of value".

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[26] Graeber, D. (2019) *Bullshit Jobs: A Theory*, 1st edn., London, England: Penguin Random House.

*Wrist and Finger Stretches*

*While standing, place your palms together in a praying position. Have your elbows touch each other. Your hands should be level with your heart. Your arms should be touching each other all along the length of the forearms. Now, with your palms pressed together, slowly spread your elbows apart. Do this while lowering your hands to waist height. Stop when your hands are in front of your belly, or when you feel the stretch. Hold the stretch for 10 to 30 seconds, then repeat.*

According to the NHS website, Repetitive Strain Injury is a general term used to describe the pain felt in muscles, nerves and tendons caused by repetitive movement and overuse. The condition mostly affects parts of the upper body, such as the forearms and elbows, wrist and hands, and the neck and shoulders. A common cause of Repetitive Strain Injury is keyboard use.[27]

Graeber, again: "Every day we wake up and re-create capitalism. If one morning we woke up and all decided to create something else, then there wouldn't be Capitalism any more. There'd be something else." This state of being is not some mistake of capitalism, but a condition of it.

Devices such as ergonomic keyboards and mouse mats are designed to alleviate the symptoms of Repetitive Strain Injury. In effect, they hold the arms and wrists in positions where they come under less strain. They do not, however, offset the repetitive actions of typing, clicking and scrolling.

The challenge of living under the conditions of bullshit work is performing a type of busyness. Greaeber discovered an unspoken conspiracy, where colleagues would allow each other to exist in suspended reality, reading long-read articles and browsing social media through plug-ins which made the content look like work on-screen. The main actions which characterise this sort of limbo is the fidgety, restlessness. A paranoid clicking and flicking between windows. A perma-paranoia.

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[27] Anon (2020) *Symptoms of RSI,* Available at: *https://www.nhs.uk/conditions/repetitive-strain-injury-rsi/* (Accessed: 2nd February 2020).

*Chair Pigeon Pose*

*While seated in your chair, place both feet flat on the floor, with your ankles directly below your knees. Bring your right knee up to your chest by hugging it. Cross the right knee over the left at a 90 degree angle, keeping the foot flexed as to not put pressure on the knee. Rest your right ankle on your left thigh, just above the left knee. Hold for 5 to 10 breaths before switching sides.*

Many restorative yoga practices such as Yin Yoga position themselves as the antidote to sitting at a desk all day. Increasingly, organisations will invite masseuses or yoga instructors to conduct short-form classes, where employees are invited to relax and recline at their desks or during their lunch hours. There are windows designated for unwinding, though overt unwinding outside of these times is frowned upon.

*Sit and Stand Chair Pose*

*Begin seated in your chair, with your knees bent 90 degrees and your feet flat. Press down from your heels, trying not to move the feet in towards your chair or move your arms, and make your way up to standing. Now, from standing, slowly sit straight back down, refraining from leaning forward and/or from shifting the hips from one side or the other. Repeat 5 or 10 times.*

Contemporary office design is focussed on engineering the natural encounter. While email and instant messaging means that employees in different departments need never actually meet in person, the value of the 'watercooler moment' can't be overstated.

When we sit at desks all day, the underused glutes and hamstrings lose their motivation to help us get up, and we rely on the upper back and even the neck to hoist the body to standing.

In an environment where there are fewer reasons to move around freely and to communicate in person, Break-out- areas, light and natural corridors, and places to 'huddle' are designed into work spaces, to encourage off-line meeting and conversation.

The visual language of these spaces are often contradictory; cosy and clinical, homely and corporate, quirky and functional, industrial and ethereal.

*Desk Chaturanga*

*Rest your hands about shoulder width distance on the edge of a sturdy desk. Step your feet backwards so your torso is a diagonal line to the floor. Your feet firmly placed, inhale as you bend the elbows to a 90 degree angle, hugging the elbows in towards the ribs. Exhale as you press your body back up to the starting position. Repeat 8 or 12 times.*

The body at work, the body at rest. The seated body, the standing body. Do we pay more attention to the writing when our body is actively standing? Is sitting a passive position? A sloped top is a repellent surface, with no purchase for things to gather on top, to accumulate.

Virginia Woolf's nephew and biographer Quentin Bell wrote that Woolf "had a desk standing about three feet six inches high with a sloping top; it was so high that she had to stand to do her work."[28] It implies that "her work" is a thing with fixed edges. That it is an inflexible thing, a repetitive process of labour positioned in opposition to the sitting desk, which has fewer limitations of discomfort. Unlike standing, you can spend hours at a sitting desk. We are encouraged to do so in the workplace. Hours sprawl forth endlessly in front of you, it is possible for the work to dissolve entirely through being pushed to the edges through hours of procrastination.

In 'The Literature of The Standing Desk', Dominic Smith writes: "The standing desk, on the other hand, is less capacious and sentimental. There's very little room to store abandoned manuscripts, rejection letters, or knick knacks. Distractions are kept to a minimum. It's taller, sleeker, and less hospitable than its slouchier cousin."[29] If the seated desk is a microcosm, then the standing desk is precisely its opposite. There are no allowances for comfort or procrastination. It is the physical manifestation of the hard work of drafting, or re-writing. At the standing desk, there is no place for the ephemera of distraction.

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[28] Barrett, J. (2016) *The Desks of Virginia Woolf,* Available at:
*https://medium.com/@JimBarrett/the-desks-of-virginia-woolf-60e28ebf72f* (Accessed: 10th September, 2019).
[29] Smith, D. (2014) 'The Literature of the Standing Desk', *The Millions,* [Online]. Available at:
*https://themillions.com/2014/05/the-literature-of-the-standing-desk.html*(Accessed: 10th January 2020).

*Desk Upward Dog Pose*

*Set up for this pose in the same way as the Chaturanga above. With your arms straight, lower your hips toward the desk, refraining from sinking in the lower back by engaging the muscles in your legs. Stretch your chest between your shoulders and gently tilt your chin upwards while sliding the shoulder blades down the back. Hold for 5 to 10 breaths.*

While you might imagine the concentration-enabling design of the standing desk would make it ubiquitous in the modern office, it still has a strange stigma attached to it. Still considered the preserve of eccentric CEOs, it is simultaneously too much of a pain, and too much of an extravagance to be part of the furniture in most corporate workplaces.

In the marketplace of durations of work, there is a clear up/down binary. The axes of the workplace are different. Whilst the majority of the workplace operates longitudinally, on rows and rows of computers at desks, then work which operates laterally is often exceptional or noteworthy. To roam freely, to work standing, to not sit in rows is considered an eccentricity.

In relief to the rows and rows of identical desk-top computers sat on rows of desks, which emulates the factory production line or workhouse, the idea that a CEO moves with such agility through their work day that sitting down is an inconvenience is a pervasive one. The standing desk, for all it's properties of well being, of good posture and alignment, is a place from which anxieties of status are reiterated and broadcast from.

*Desk Plank Pose*

*Place your hands shoulder width distance or wider at the desk edge. Step your feet back until your feet are directly under your hips. You should feel a pleasant stretch in your spine. Avoid any sensations of pinching or twinging. Hold 5 to 10 breaths and let this pose help you undo all the negative effects of sitting.*

In the 1990s, Linus Torvalds was working on the invention of Linux. The software engineer, widely regarded as inventing open-source software and some of the first widely used operating systems for personal computers, is known to walk at a desk attached to a treadmill set to move at 1 mph and he is about to change the world. He calls it his 'Zombie Shuffling Desk'.

When Victoria Beckham was pictured using a treadmill desk in 2014, in impossibly high heeled boots and a long trench coat, the image became a viral hit.[30] On one level, Beckham was confirming her transition from pop star to business woman. She was no longer a pop star, but a woman striding confidently forwards at the helm of her empire. On the other hand, everything about the image looks totally uncomfortable. There's no way she can comfortably walk like that. Any serious attempt to exercise would off-set any productive work done on the computer. It feels as if what Beckham is doing is performing the contradictions inherent in a certain model of ambition or success, one which sees stasis as a wasted opportunity. The point is that whilst she's walking, she's certainly not getting anywhere.

Like the type of forward-motion the treadmill replicates, the treadmill desk in some respects, the ultimate metaphor for office monotony made real. The pressure to look busy at all times. Movement without progress. Unthinking repetition of certain acts ad absurdum. Zombies. Zombies everywhere.

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[30] Revell, T. (2015) 'Working up a Sweat', *Dirty Furniture,* September, p. 146-159.

*Shavasthana (Corpse Pose)*

*Savathansa is a neutral pose. Sit on the floor with your knees bent, feet on the floor, and lean back into your forearms. Lift your pelvis slightly off the floor, and with your hands, push the back of the pelvis towards the tailbone, then return the pelvis to the floor. Inhale and slowly extend the right and the left leg, pushing through the heels. Make sure the legs are positioned equally to the midline of the body, with the feet turned out evenly. Narrow the front pelvis, and lightly soften the lower back.*

*Gently lift the base of the skull away from the back of the neck, and release the back of the neck down towards the tailbone. Use a folded towel for support if you need to. Make sure your ears are equidistant from your shoulders.*

*Reach your arms towards the ceiling, perpendicular to the floor. Rock slightly from side to side and broaden the back ribs away from the spine. Release the arms to the floor. Turn the hands outwards and stretch them away, creating space between the shoulder blades. Spread the collarbones.*

*Move your attention from the tips of your toes to the tips of your fingers, paying attention to each body part as you move through the body. If you notice tension or imbalance, spend some time relaxing the body part before moving on. Pay attention to your breathing. Notice where your body touched the mat. Stay in the pose for 5 minutes for every 30 minutes of practice.*

Altwork's lying-down desk is part-therapist's couch, part highly covetable design object. The website features depicts a woman in chic all-black outfit, completely horizontal, her stilettoed feet neatly crossed at the far end of the lying down desk as she works at a laptop, which is suspended on a shelf perfectly in her eye-line. Next to her, on another floating shelf, a cup of coffee. She wears thick black framed glasses. She looks alert, but serene. Retailing at around £5,830.00, there's no pretending that as a piece of furniture, the lying-down desk is for the average worker.  Its ergonomic design promises to "redefine how people interact with their computers", by "supporting your body" and "eliminating discomfort". With a choice of two colours; 'Moonlight' and 'Nightsky', invoking romance and distance and science fiction, Altwork promises a desk experience that is, quite literally, elevated.

The idea that there's a way to make work not feel like work is a seductive one. The idea that with the right equipment, everything might come a little easier, that there's a shortcut to productivity. If only you pay attention to the alignment of your spine, the placement of your limbs, the pressure on your pelvis, the removal of all friction in your life. You need never attend a lunchtime yoga class again. But how far away is it

really, from that most unglamourous of experiences; sitting up in bed late at night, drowsily trying to finish something before a deadline or another early start?

# DEMATERIALISED DESKS

"Why is the sky blue?" is not actually a question young children tend to ask all that frequently. Instead, it's one that we reach for as an example of the limits of everyday understanding of our world. It's the equivalent of a shrug. An example of a phenomena so close to us, so all encompassing, that we do not question it, it is considered juvenile. It's understandable then that we don't really ask why we haven't stopped to ask why the internet is blue – it's a silly question. It is because it is. The vast majority of our interactions with digital information and the platforms through which we access them are couched in bluish tones. You might not have noticed it yet, but they are. The Internet is Blue, and all other colours play bit-parts.

Yet, when you ask the internet why it's not predominantly red or green or silvery gold, you get only practical answers, often answered in the negative. It is not red because *x*, it can't be green because *y*. Like most pervasive cultural phenomena, what has become something so baked into the fabric of our digital lives began as something purely functional. The creators of the first popular web browser, Mosaic, had blue text links because it was the darkest colour available that wasn't black. And blue has sticking power: It survives focus groups, it wins a/b tests. It is generically inoffensive. Nobody notices blue as it gets waived through, unquestioned.[31] It also accumulates. There are many more namable shades of blue than of any other colour. Unlike red or green or orange, it possesses less emotional urgency. One of the most convincing reasons for the blueness of the internet, though, is men.

Mark Zuckerberg, founder of Facebook is red-green colourblind, a condition which affects six times as many men as women. He chose Facebook blue because of its apparent richness, to him. "I can see all of blue" he said. (How can he be so sure, you might ask). The creators of Google tested 41 shades of blue before setting on the shade that, chances are, you can conjure in your own mind this very moment as 'Google Blue', despite blue making up just one third of the coloured letters of the ubiquitous logo. Outside of social media and within the world of private messaging, blue takes on a new meaning. With Apple devices, a message in a blue bubble means it was delivered via the internet, rather than green for sms messages, which seems clunky and analogue in comparison. When a message connects on the digital plane, we say "it's gone blue". Elsewhere, buttons and links are often bluely neutral. Of course, most search engine links are electric blue, filled with the possibility of discovery, which is extinguished once they are clicked for the first time (to return to a previously-clicked link to find it a strange dark purple).

When a green would be too obvious and a red counterintuitive, blue digital buttons cooly invite you to share documents and connect to services, to open browsers and download applications. Here, azures and persians contain within them gradients of

[31] Rhodes, M (2016) *The Most Popular Color On The Internet Is...,* Available at: *https://www.wired.com/2016/09/popular-color-internet/* (Accessed: 4th December 2019).

aquamarine and turquoise, creating soft, smooth pellets to click. They are almost tactile. Blue comes with its own feelings of authenticity too; a 'blue tick' on Twitter means the account corresponds to the person to whom it claims to be. Here it is calming and trustworthy and just a little but exclusive.

Your desk is leaking blue, too. It has been doing so for some time. In that, our desks are dematerialising in front of us, letting in and becoming part of wider informational networks. Work is dematerialising in front of us too. This doesn't just mean the festisisation of highly stylised co-working spaces, though that is part of it, but that the body sat at the desk increasingly acts in dematerialised or disembodied ways. In work and in leisure pursuits, our desks are increasingly hosts of, interfaces to, wider digital networks.

On social media, we click 'interested', sending out ghost versions of ourselves to events we never intend to attend. In the world of big data and Artificial Intelligence, the term 'prosthesis' is used to refer to the modelled behaviour of consumers within a system, their ghost limbs acting as real people might. We log onto virtual desktops, so that we might be able to synthesise the ability to use our work computer from our home computer, or vice versa. Sadie Plant writes about the phenomena of Occult Connectivity, she was writing about it back in 1997 in fact, giving a name to the feeling of being so connected to the digital realm, that the effect is that of being stalked or surveilled by supernatural forms of knowledge.[32]

Word processing is networked too, as versions of our colleagues become ghostly cursors, fidgeting and blinking, their disembodied limbs all present too inside the same Google Docs from different locations and time zones. We plug our personal data into apps which monitor our screen time, how efficient we've been at work, how frequently our attention has strayed, how many steps we've managed to steal from being desk-bound all day. And the physicality of desks has responded to this new networked reality. Holes and troughs and invisible sections are designed into desks, allowing them to better facilitate the apparatus of the digital world. 'Cable Management Desks' have become a furniture category of their own, allowing us to more elegantly plug in the devices which enable dematerialisation.

We figure digital informational networks in terms of the blue realms; the Cloud, the Ether. In his book on Information Politics (2015), Tim Jordan wrote about the textures of cloud computing: "The ideology of the cloud is that of the ether and white fluffiness, like so many pleasant sheep gambolling in the heavens, which gives a visual and mythical dimension to the magical experience of using the cloud. The experience of the user and the ideology of the cloud are both forms of magic".[33] The

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[32] Plant, S., (1998) *Zeros + Ones*, 1 edn, London: HarperCollins, p.143
[33] Jordan, T. (2015) 'Clouds', in Jordan, T. (ed.) *Information Politics.* London: Pluto Press, pp. 83-97.

cloud is, however, a metaphor. And a metaphor supported by, not vapour or whimsy or magical thinking, but a lot of complex hardware. The Ether too, whilst technically a scientific concept proposed by Aristotle, is commonly used as shorthand for emptiness or strangeness. When stuff 'goes out' onto the internet, we describe it as having disappeared into the Ether. When we broadcast our thoughts online to unknown audiences, we again talk about the ether, usually accompanied by theatrical hand gestures and wild eyes. In visual depictions, the Ether is space-y and atomised. It is also usually blue.

In Tom Melick's essay on the dematerialised classroom within the context of the art school, he wrote "whenever dematerialisation is invoked it is good practice to look around for what has been stashed away or overlooked (for example, undersea cables making so-called wireless communication possible, or the enormous labour and energy that goes into maintaining the hardware that supports billowing clouds of data)."[34] Melick was writing about a shift within art schools to move away from studio work and studio space to a dematerialised way of working. From "studio to study", as he puts it. He is critical of the romanticisation of dematerialisation, very aware of what is lost when these shifts are made. In theory, cloud networks move us from the personal to the collective. In practice, Melick writes, they create an environment of paranoia. From fewer classes to discontinued courses to online submission systems which are vetted for plagiarism, the atmosphere is one of precarity and scarcity. And Jordan warns us that connectivity isn't necessarily utopian, it's a neutral force which can be manipulated. "Everyone is connected, adding into those things, generating information which can be harvested by those who own the cloud network."

When it comes to magic, a disappearing act is the oldest trick in the book. As workplaces move away from fixed desks to hot desking or 'clean desk' policies, businesses move away from fixed premises and into highly covetable co-working spaces, and individuals increasingly pursue freelance set-ups, the designing out of traditional office architectures like cubicles is positioned as a sort of magical streamlining. Instead of regimented lines and right angles, the topography of the dematerialised office is, not unlike the Cloud itself, soft and fluffy. There are clusters and huddles and constellations. People are untethered, they float. Jordan writes: "the system to appear to the user as infinite, and we may observe in such a system's infinity and automatic availability something close to magic."[35]

There's a visual trope which is creeping into advertising. Someone is holding their phone uncomfortably close to their face whilst looking down at the screen. The

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[34] Melick, T. (2019) *The Dematerialisation of the Classroom (a lesson in showing up),* Available at: *https://www.artandaustralia.com/online/disquisitions/dematerialisation-classroom-lesson-showing* (Accessed: 5th March 2020).
[35] Jordan, T. (2015) 'Clouds', in Jordan, T. (ed.) *Information Politics.* London: Pluto Press, p. 84.

blue-white glow is lighting their face from below. They are smiling. Instead of being in the company of friends or family, the blue-white glow has come to stand for a sort of warm, fuzzy feeling. The implied message at which they are smiling is the digital equivalent of a hug. If only we were to be so lucky as to receive a message to make us gaze so lovingly at our phones like that. It's worth pointing out that companies which use this sort of imagery in their advertising are by and large phone companies, who have staked a lot on making us believe that digital connectivity is de facto a positive force in the world. That a blue glow is the same thing as physical interaction in the material world. And yet, at the same time, we're told that the blue glow of screens is hurting us, is damaging our eyes and aging our skin. We're told to turn our social media feeds to night mode or put a warm orange filter over the screen at dusk. Online, you can buy blue light filtering glasses, designed to keep your eyes fresh and unstrained after hours of screen time. Jordan writes: "pitting materiality against immateriality obscures the cloud's dynamics of power because clouds as a platform are both earthly and magical".[36] Sometimes, you can't stop the ethereal seeping into the real world. Sometimes metaphors are real, too.

At the start of 2020, PANTONE, the colour matching company announced their colour of the year. Something of a PR exercise, the colour of the year announcement attempts to tap into a cultural zeitgeist or pervasive mood, setting the tone, so to speak, for the year to come. 2020's colour was named 'Classic Blue', described as "instilling calm, confidence, and connection, this enduring blue hue highlights our desire for a dependable and stable foundation on which to build as we cross the threshold into a new era".[37] It's definitely an internet blue, a little duller than Facebook blue, less teal-ish than Wordpress, blue but not far off Microsoft Word blue at all. It's a blue that wallpapers the workplaces of the internet. It sits on nearly every digital desktop, which in turn, sits on so many real desks. It's a blue that is utterly familiar, and at the same time utterly forgettable. It stands for so many things, and yet despite the claims of it "instilling […] connection", is very unlikely to provoke an emotional response.

The desk is leaking. The gaps between its physical edges and the soft projects of our bodies and the infinities of the digital world are closing, seeping through. There are possibilities and they are infinite and you cannot hold back the tide. Just because you can see the sky though, doesn't mean it's blue.

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[36] Ibid, p. 87

[37] Pantone (2020) *Pantone Color of the Year,* Available at: *https://store.pantone.com/uk/en/color-of-the-year* (Accessed: 2nd March 2020).

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