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for *IF YOU CAN'T GET OUT OF IT GET INTO IT*

Technological advances since the start of the century both facilitate and sustain a fast paced, quick-to-change competitive market, where the traditionally stable bureaucratic model and its corresponding cubicle layout apparently struggles to keep up. So how does the post-cubicle workplace function, and what does it look like? Although some credit is certainly due to the forward-thinking (and affluent) tech sector in reframing how employees interact with each other and the space around them–for example, the campus-style workplaces of Silicon Valley–it is the Dutch value system of *het nieuwe werken* ("new way of working"), as both a visual aesthetic and a workplace culture*,* that provides a more comprehensive framework through which to approach and understand the kinds of trends that are becoming ever more present in office environments today.

Het nieuwe werken is grounded in the idea that technology determines both how and where we work. It is focused on the interconnected elements of sustainability, employee wellbeing (mental and physical), mobility and flexibility, facilitated by new technologies in a social, seemingly non-hierarchal and increasingly diffused workplace.

Surely no-one misses the grim, lonely days of the grey office cubicle. But what else has been left behind? Today's workplace may be more "clever", more sustainably designed (even if the frequently updated gadgets that hold it together aren't necessarily so), and more sensitive to the impact of stress and boredom on its workers. But *het nieuwe werken*'s obsession with health and efficiency still finds its endpoint in measurable organisational outcomes; design trends only catch on if the research and statistics support an increase in worker productivity. At its worst, the optimism of innovative design shrouds the more sinister aspects of the contemporary workplace: a problematically vague distinction between work and leisure, between worker and boss; and the lack of physical presence in a de-personalised and everywhere-but-nowhere environment fits all too nicely into the precarity (and scarcity) of the neoliberal job market.

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Although I'm currently unemployed, I'm part of a virtual office. At the start of the year I enrolled in an Online Diploma in Business Administration, partly to improve my job prospects, partly as something to do other than apply for jobs, and partly as a pre-emptive measure to get out of Work for the Dole.

The private company that runs these courses provides me with two portfolios to complete for each unit, which I download from the online classroom as .pdf files. Each portfolio contains a workplace narrative in second-person narration. Requests from virtual co-workers set up the tasks that I'm assessed on, and once I've completed the portfolios, I re-upload them to the online classroom. Rather than receiving a grade, I'm deemed either "competent" or "not yet competent". As the latter category implies, I'm given a second chance if I fail.

Because this virtual office and the narrative that sustains it is an educational tool, it makes sense for my given character to be working its way through different departments, to be climbing the ladder as it gains more respect and more experience. Sometimes it briefly tricks me into thinking that I, too, am working hard, proving myself and getting somewhere. I know the company's long-term objectives back to front. I'm young, capable, full of energy and enthusiasm, brimming with big ideas. I'm working my way up.

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In the *het nieuwe werken* model, workers aren't so much regarded as white-collar cogs-in- the-machine as they are "creative entrepreneurs"; therefore, the work environment should ideally function to both liberate and inspire their individual potential.

It seems contradictory to have this translate as communal working space, but collaboration is key in *het nieuwe werken*. This can even extend to how the workplace itself is managed: take the decentralised model of Holacracy, for example. In a seemingly democratic shift, workers become "their own boss", delegating specific roles and tasks to themselves alongside colleagues in self-organised circles. Research shows that this horizontal approach has improved worker morale–and of course, their productivity–but it ultimately means a heavier workload: management tasks are simply outsourced to the workers themselves, rather than eliminated entirely. (And wages, of course, are never up for negotiation.)

A collaborative work space is also a de-personalised work space: an individual worker's clutter must not be left at the communal table, and it should be taken with them when they leave. This lack of physical trace is perhaps understandable considering that most work takes place (and is stored away) in the invisible realm of the screen, yet the ability for the worker to completely disappear at a moment's notice is rather alarming: it makes the dead-end cubicle days seem comfortable and secure in comparison.

Managing employee stress in such precarious circumstances, then, becomes a priority. *Het nieuwe werken's* focus on sustainability and wellbeing manifests in its preference for biophilic design, or the introduction of natural elements into the built environment. Research proves that such a workplace can reduce a worker's physiological stress, increase their attention span, and improve their overall mental health. Ergonomic furniture, also, attempts to alleviate the physical problems associated with a typically sedentary lifestyle.

Of course, all of this could be seen as *het nieuwe werken's* attempt to solve the problems it has created. Nevertheless, acknowledging that office work can be both mentally and physically detrimental to the worker is a welcome step; in this respect, its efforts to redeem itself are rather necessary.

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In an early portfolio, my character worked under a marketing manager by the name of Ivon Nadir. It quickly became apparent that he was unpopular; he had a tendency to run off for coffee breaks whenever someone needed him, and he was always rescheduling meetings at the last minute. When he wasn't flustered, he brought an air of negativity to the workplace–always complaining that satisfaction circles and performance reviews were "unnecessary" and a waste of our time. Everyone found him stressful to be around. Ivon was toxic.

After a particularly disappointing interaction with Ivon, my character went for a walk around the nearby park, as it often does, to clear its head; it offered its usual interior monologue about how it's trying to please everybody and who's a good role model and who's not. The park is also where my character tends to run into Don Brand, the marketing director. Don is everyone's friend. He's patient and supportive, and he sees a great deal of potential in my character. On this occasion, Don was happy to lend an ear, as he always is, and he told my character not to worry too much and to be my own role model.

The next task in the portfolio was to organise a handover; Ivon was being "transferred to another department". My character was to be the new interim manager.

The disappearance of Ivon made me realise that he had been a respite of sorts; I identified with him more than I did with my character. (I also didn't think the satisfaction circle and the performance review - the tasks I had just completed - were all that necessary. I had just assessed myself so I could be assessed by a marker; but was I assessing my actual self or my character? What did this have to do with business administration?) Was it real-world common procedure to be

shunned, and eventually replaced, for failing to meet the criteria of the ideal co-worker? And despite my best efforts to hide them, would my Ivon-esque qualities betray me and keep me from holding down a job, if I even got a job?

I felt a sudden blaze of resentment towards this second-person narrator, pre-determining what I was meant to be thinking and feeling, forcing me to inhabit this aspirational character for the sake of continuity. In the end I closed my laptop, and went for a walk around a nearby park.

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The proliferation of portable technologies as well as the absence of personal space allows for a diffused work environment: an employee can work from their laptop in a café, or a meeting can take place at a lunch bar down the road. This also explains why certain coffee shops, bars and restaurants–despite being leisure spaces–tend to have similar design features to the office.

The now familiar trend of sleek minimalism offset by rustic and industrial elements is intended to provide some kind of relief from today's screen-dominated lifestyle, though the sheer scale of this trend owes a lot to technology. Such work-leisure sites are meant to be "unique" or "authentic" enough to be interesting, yet generic enough to be conveniently moved between: *het nieuwe werken's* "frictionless dynamism" cannot function without this homogeneity.

Social media, with its ability to influence and popularise taste, has been instrumental in spreading and maintaining the faux-artisanal aesthetic across the globe–that is, among cities and neighbourhoods that are economically similar. Through this development of taste, it becomes a kind of aesthetic gentrification that creates its own exclusive class of users. The mobile and the convenient are at odds with the diverse and unpredictable local; the former's affluent and tech-savvy demographic declares the latter unfashionable, outside of the falsely unique space it so effortlessly moves through.

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I'm at the end of another portfolio, and the management tasks are stressing me out. I close my laptop, and decide I don't feel like being productive today. A luxury, maybe, but it doesn't feel like one. I'm feeling a bit fragile. I'm beginning to wonder if the Diploma was such a good idea after all.

I think my judgement was clouded when I signed up, to be honest. Within days of leaving university, I was cold-called by a representative of the company - I

assume they got my details from Centrelink - and, unsure about how the next year was going to unfold, I was in a position to say yes to anything that would give me some sense of structure whilst improving my chances of getting work. But really, shouldn't this kind of training be happening in a real workplace, where I'm being paid to learn on the job? Isn't it a bit infuriating that there is a profit to be made from those locked out of the job market?

I guess it's good that I'm doing something alongside looking for work, that I have something to refer to when someone (usually hostile to my art practice) asks what I'm doing with myself these days. Perhaps the virtual workplace can be a solace of sorts; it's nice being told that I'm going somewhere. I decide to get back into it.

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