

# Success<sup>2</sup>

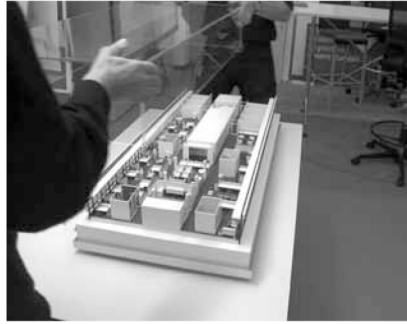
BY AILY NASH

*“How many square feet does it take to be successful?”—Quickborner Team, Hamburg*

Office buildings, or the physical structures where work is performed, are no longer what they were decades ago. Networked communications allow employees to work anywhere—at home, abroad, from their smartphones, and of



course, in the common corporate campus. Berlin-based artist Harun Farocki's video *A New Product* (2012) documents several internal meetings conducted by the space-planning consultancy firm Quickborner Team (QT), based in Hamburg who has advised some of the world's largest multi-nationals for over half a century. Rather than focus



on the laborer, as many documentaries concerned with industry and work tend to do, Farocki documents the corporate sector—and the consultants who conceptualize its culture of work. QT's ideas are birthed during intimate internal brainstorming meetings. Plunged into them, the viewer gets a sense of the jargon, the energy, and the personalities of



these otherwise nameless consultants. The film is composed of a sequence of meetings, the first of which is a presentation of a corporate campus design proposal for Vodafone, Düsseldorf. QT presents their concept for how these work spaces, or as they call them “organizational units,” can become standardized, open spaces that are



not designated for any particular employee. There are no personal desks where one keeps framed photographs of one's family, potted plants, toys, etc. “Individual identity has to happen somewhere else.” Rather than going for the *jour fixe* in the conference room, employees will convene at the “meeting-point” and, if they get stressed,



they can “retreat to an acoustically isolated area for an hour.” The 80,000 square meter campus is the “working world of a Vodafone employee—also the place where he lives or drinks his coffee.” The consultants explain that their innovations for corporate culture are based on the changes taking place in general society—new working technologies



require an update to working methods, and by extension, spaces. So the container of the corporation is no longer a building, but a “mind-set.” The consultants go on to explore metaphors for this container—a coat made of wool? No, a flexible material? *Is it a balloon?*

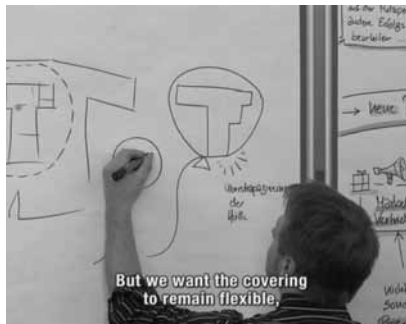
Radical transformations in our experience of time and space, labor, and consumption, all greatly



accelerated by the digital revolution, have resulted in new structures for life. The accelerated movement of people, information, and commodities, and the compression and interchangeability of space creates new mediums to work in. This new conceptualization applies to those who produce immaterial products, and therefore, to those



who often work outside of linear production. The immaterial-laborer works with non-linear processes, invisible movements of capital, and the exchange of immaterial products, toiling in a fragmented, multi-tasking state of distraction that extends beyond their physical present (thus necessitating punctuated retreats to acoustically isolated areas).



If one's experience of time is made more palpable by linear work processes, standardization, routine, and succession, in which there is a distinct sense of intervals—the five-day workweek, the eight-hour workday, the thirty shirts ironed in an hour, twenty-four strokes of the iron per shirt—these units are a measure of time, and this constant ticking clock is a



reminder of mortality, of death. By contrast, the act of working in non-linear modes, where time is less palpable, emphasizes the laborer's experience of *life*: evolution, learning, and growth are its ethos. The metaphors that the QT consultants and their clients use in referring to the corporation as “a breathing organism” reflect just this.



At HafenCity, Unilever's corporate campus in Hamburg, two employees on an indoor skybridge discuss the efficiency of standardizing work spaces, and emphasize the goal of optimal performance. Employees are encouraged to go for a run or take exercise breaks. “Work-rest-work-rest helps increase performance,” this is a “...special culture



that allows people this freedom.” One of the employees recalls that, to gain more office space, they considered moving the fitness center to another building, but then decided against it because the integration of work and life was central to their philosophy.

What does it mean for an employee to have freedom in the work place?



Freedom from structure, the freedom to exercise, or even the freedom to retreat to an acoustically isolated area for an hour? During the presentation of the first proposal, one Vodafone employee states, “I believe the fear of having to be flexible outweighs any pleasure of having the privilege of flexibility at work.” The concept the consultants refer to as



*freedom* is the freedom to do whatever one needs to do in order to be the most productive employee, to perform at one’s best, adding to the efficiency of the corporation, and thus producing more profits. In other words, an employee is *free* to earn the corporation profits. This is essentially a new phrasing of the classic notion that an employee is *obligated* to earn the



corporation profits. The two terms, *obligated* and *free*, are antithetical—redefining corporate culture takes on a literal meaning. It is the same concept, just upgraded for a society that expects “humane” and “innovative” philosophies from companies. This is their new product.

Alongside new work mediums and technologies, there always coexist analog,

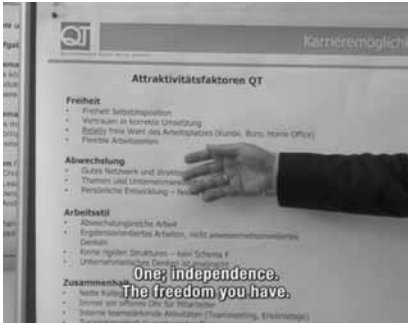


manual ones that have not yet been superseded. Hovering above the protagonists’ discussions of new mind-sets about work are traditional ones, which perpetuate Fordist work models, and both exist simultaneously within the same corporation. During one of their meetings, the consultants eventually discuss hierarchies. A QT team member comments



that “level hierarchies facilitate holistic processes better.” In the glass-encased corporate campus that they occupy, “holistic processes rather than Taylorism” are championed, but we might ask if and how the work/life balance is being re-conceptualized and updated at the production facilities, which are still, and indisputably, *factories*.





There is a conflated experience of power in Farocki's piece—first of all, our power as the audience who reads this work, and who remains unimpressed by the jargon and ideas of its protagonists. We feel like we can see through the flaws in their logic. And second, Farocki's power as the creator of this work also comes to the fore, thanks to his ability



to manipulate his lens just as he selects and edits the portions of the meetings which we watch. Third, we sense the power yielded by the subjects themselves, who are in the ultimate position of knowledge. We are only given a fragmented glimpse into their thinking, and their implementing, yet we remain well aware that the Quickborner Team's concepts and



designs have wide-reaching implications. They have influenced the development of all corporate culture, and thus, by extension, our culture. They are in fact not out of touch with reality; on the contrary, they make our reality. Power and naiveté flow in both directions in this work: knowledge as well as lack of knowledge. Farocki gains access into



this particular site of labor through an earnest request to document contemporary corporate culture—precisely the topic that his subjects are eager and proud to share with him.



*A New Product screened as part of Image Employment, a moving image exhibition at MoMA PS1 curated by Aily Nash and Andrew Norman Wilson. The ideas in the piece draw from a collaborative research project initiated by Nash and Wilson.*

Photos: *A New Product*  
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is a curator and writer. She has curated for MoMA PS1 (NYC), FACT (Liverpool), BAM/Brooklyn Academy of Music (NYC), Anthology Film Archives (NYC), Image Forum (Tokyo) and others. Nash is the film curator at Basilica Hudson, an editor of a film criticism program at the Berlinale Film Festival, and currently teaches at Parsons and BHQFU in New York City.