

Arcadia Missa

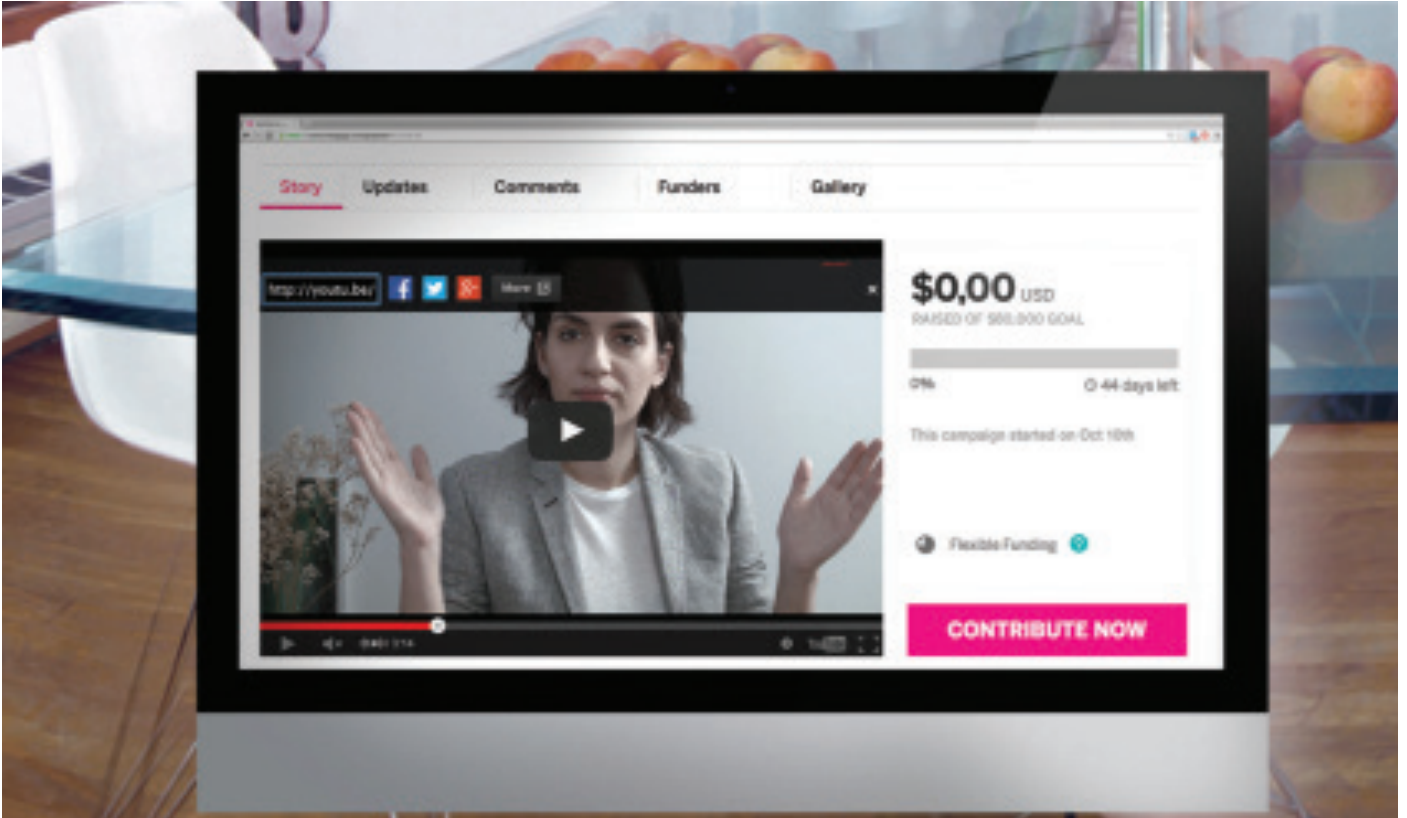
MAJA ČULE
PRESS

ARCADIAMISSA.COM
INFO@ARCADIAMISSA.COM

35 DUKE STREET
LONDON, W1U 1LH

do what you love with maja cule

Maja Cule's new exhibition, 'Facing the Same Direction' at Arcadia Missa is her first solo show in the UK. It consists of a film, works spread across an adjacent wall, a sculpture and an edition of a book that consists of printed out on-line reviews of a biro.



Underpinning the show by the New York-based, Croatian-born artist is an elegant unpicking of DWYL culture and a knowing manipulation of visual culture that's been mediated through the internet and smart-phones. We caught up with her as she was installing her exhibition...

Tell me about the Bic pens

Basically it's a compilation of 2000 online reviews of the Bic 'For Her' ballpoint pen, which were a range of pink and purple pens. The pens were released a couple of years ago and they were supposed to be designed specifically for women...

Nice, a female pen...

...yes! It had thinner barrel and was supposed to fit much better into a female hand! The book puts together online reviews of the pen. You can't actually buy it anymore in the USA, you can only get it online.

And do you think it was a feminine pen for women or a feminine pen for anybody who at the moment wanted to identify with the feminine?

I think it was totally made to try and get female consumers to buy it and then of course identify with the pen's femininity! User comments range from practical reviews to humorous reactions through to PhD style statements on gender theory.

Of course the implication of its existence is that other Bic pens are for men... You've previously made work which examined the visual trope of women smiling with salad - this image that bizarrely repeatedly recurs across the internet. Does this book relate to that work?

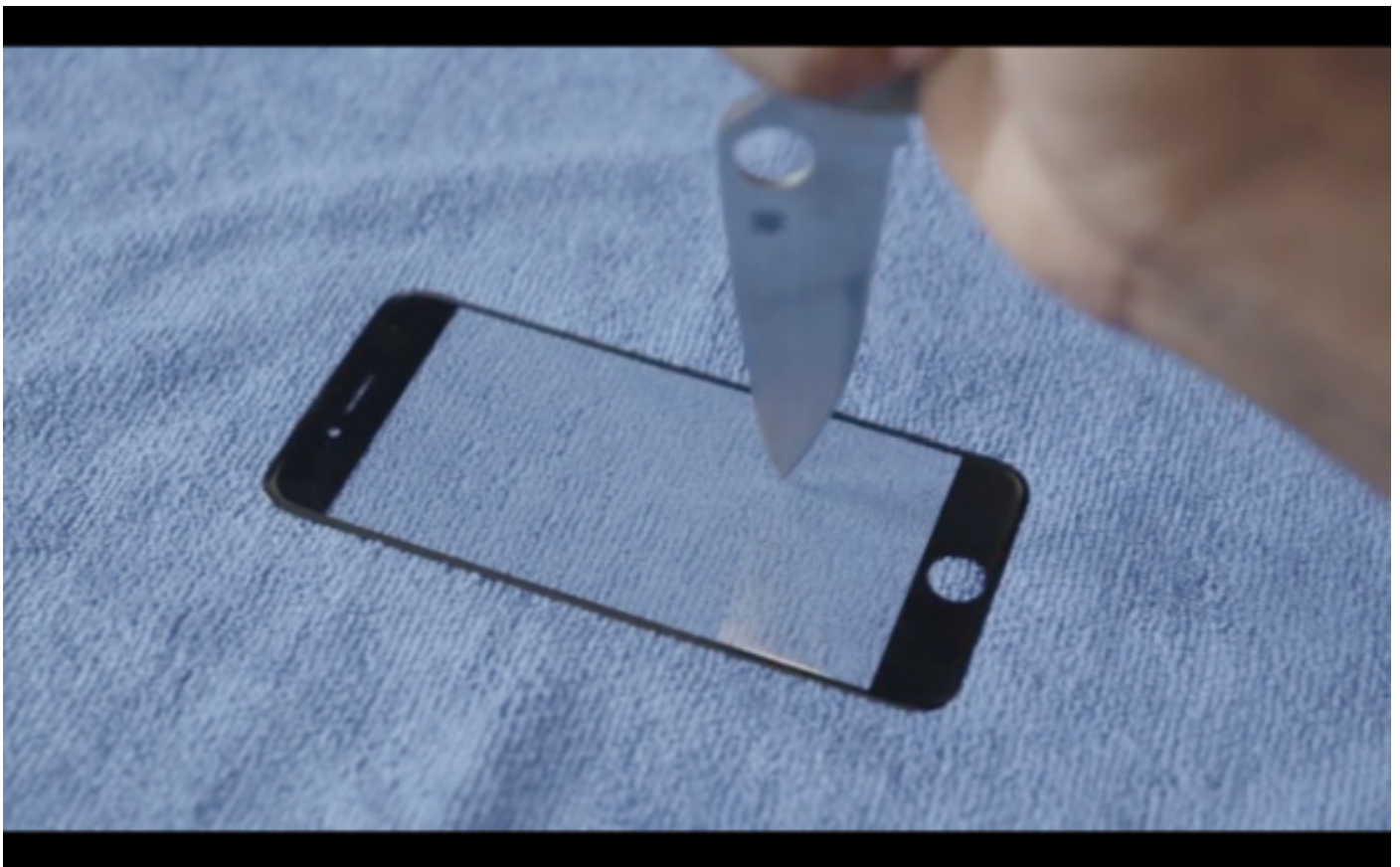
Yes, they are both about the idea of a consumer really identifying with a product and more than that, identifying their gendered identity through those products.

It's pretty insulting! How do you see the nature of your interventions? I'm interested in the way that you don't critique these products or tropes in an angry way that says "this is wrong".

Sure, I prefer to just say, "look, this exists, it's out there". These are really plain objects or things and you don't really notice them until you take them out of context. What I really like about the book is that it's like a bible of arguments from feminist theory but written in the really plain language of online product reviews.

Okay, so now tell me about the film!

Well the main actress is a fictional character called Alex and she's this character who is feeling really antagonistic to the whole Do What You Love culture that is common right now. In particular she's against this DWYL implication that work is something that you should really love and feel passionate about whereas work is often instead just really repressive and quite negative. So basically the first part is a monologue about her experience of doing freelance work and the whole process of building your identity through that. She decides to make an online Indiegogo campaign to seek crowdfunding in order for her to empower alternative ideas about work and disempower this idea that you really have to love your work.



Facing the Same Direction, Film Still, Courtesy Maja Cule & Arcadia Missa, 2014

Is that a real campaign?

Yes, it's a real online campaign by a fictional character

And tell me about the part of the film that is shot outside the Apple Store

That was shot during the release of the iPhone 6 in front of New York's Apple Store and it's this very interesting public space as it's the only place where filming is entirely allowed without a permit. I shot it on a Black Magic camera with some shots on the iPhone. The idea is that is that is that it was a real-life situation but with a fictional character responding to it so that you hear her thoughts about technology, work and the whole start-up industry.

It blurs in and out of fact and fiction

Yes, so you see these people who have been queueing for three weeks for this new technology but then there's this fictional part trying to establish a romantic scene between people who work in the Apple Store, where there's a bit between two girls and a guy where they lock eyes.



Photography Adam Dugas

And then it segues into a quite different second half..

Right, that's where she starts to rehearse the Indiegogo campaign whilst sort of doing an AirBnB rental on the side to make money. So then the piece on wall next to the film is an image of what looks like this typical AirBnB apartment....

Right...

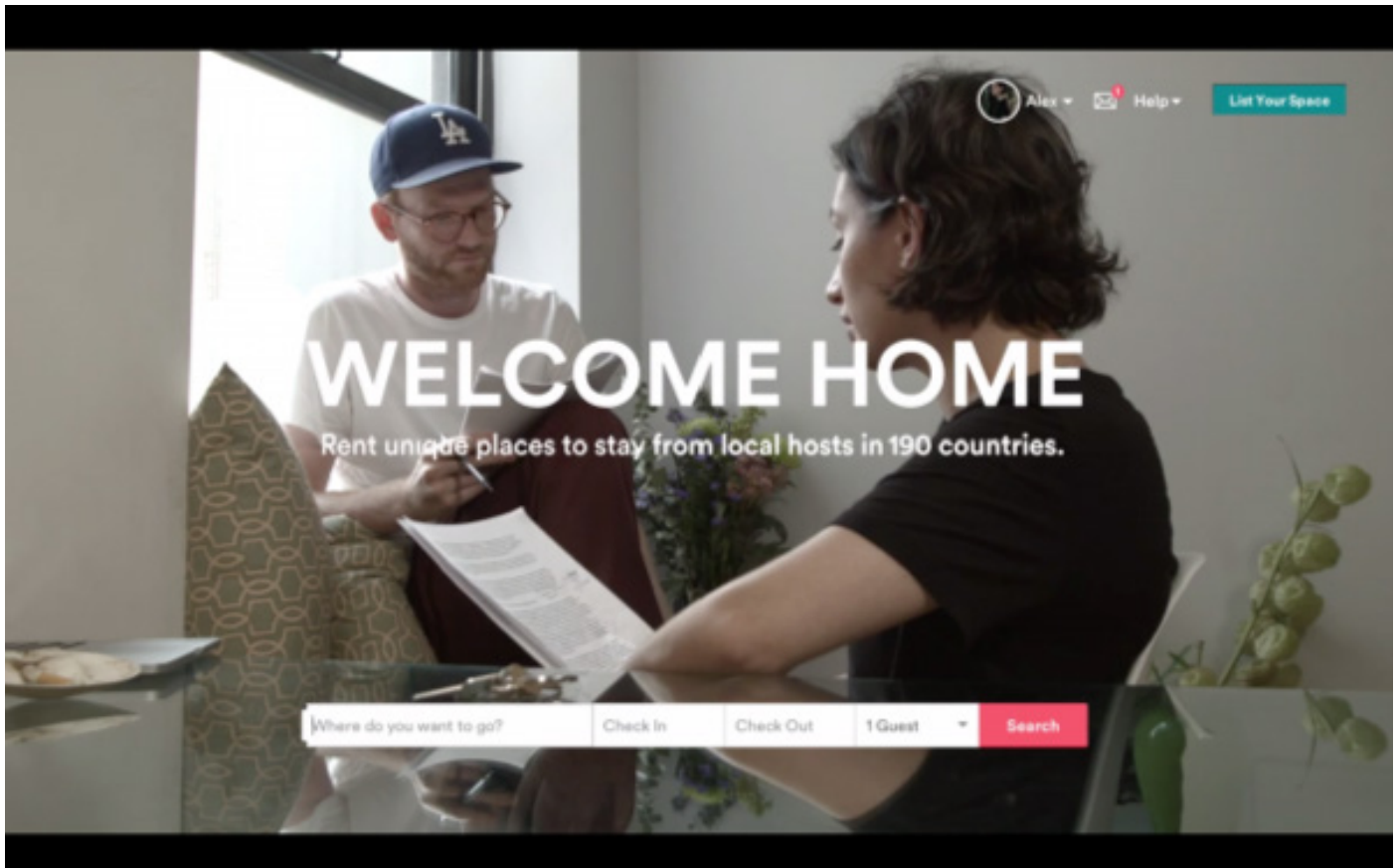
...it's the first film I've done with constructed dialogue, a script and narration but I wanted to get away from the idea of how to do 'correct' dialogue or narration....

Yes, I get that! But does it all circle back to the question of how people build their identity today whether through the latest technology or their jobs?

That is completely the core especially the idea that you are the work that you do and love, and the participation you make through technology and phones and you constantly re-define that through posting and re-posting about it.

https://i-d.vice.com/en_gb/article/do-what-you-love-with-maja-cule

Maja Cule | Facing the Same Direction



Maja Cule, "Facing The Same Direction", 2014 at Arcadia Missa

Introductory notes by curator Cadence Kinsey from a conversation that happened on Saturday 11th October at Arcadia Missa Gallery, London at the opening of Maja Cule's Facing the Same Direction.

I thought I would begin not by giving an introduction to Maja's work but to say something brief about one aspect of my own research, with the hope that it might offer some context for this conversation, and why it made sense for us to work together with Arcadia Missa on this exhibition.

Much of my work relies on unpacking received narratives and mythologies around the Web, and digital technology more broadly. For example, I have looked at the emergence of the historical construction of the digital as immaterial or 'abstract', by considering how it was constituted in the intersecting discourses of postmodernism, finance and genomics. Sometimes, this kind of work reveals deeply conflicting discursive narratives, and this is the case when one looks at the origins of ideas around collaboration, co-creation, and participation (and each of these is highly particular in its scope and historical significance). Participation, for example, has represented competing, but parallel, ideological positions. On the one hand participation has been conceived in terms of the decentralisation and democratisation of information sharing (an idea generally covered by the term 'networked publics') but, on the other, it has also been thought about in relation to histories of work transfer. Historically, 'work transfer' has referred to the problems of automation and de-skilling but, more recently, has also come to be associated with the removal of paid labour, as character-

ised by the terms 'prosumer' or 'playbour', which refer not only to the production or sharing of content within applications or websites (commenting, reviewing, uploading) but also with more basic actions associated with the use of them (clicking, sharing, liking, following).

Thus, there emerges an unresolved tension in the discourses of participation, which we may characterise as being between commercial optimisation and an Open Source ethics. That the notion of participation remains ambiguous in relation to Web cultures and economies is, of course, vital to sustaining its commercial bite: *Do What You Love (DWYL)* is so oppressive because it knows that if you love what you do, you are likely to do far too much of it, and for increasingly little reward. This we know from looking, for example, at the emergent working cultures of the New Economy of the late 1990s, particularly the tech and start-up industries, where work became more and more like play. More broadly, this is now expertly captured by social media: leisure time can be colonised, and capitalised upon, simply because it does not appear as work. But there is also a striking relationship between DWYL and both art and academia, since, as forms of supposedly unalienated labour, there is a historical distinction between these kinds of activities and 'work'.



Maja Cule, "Facing The Same Direction", 2014 at Arcadia Missa

This tension in the discourses of participation produces a series of ambiguities that are very interesting to consider, particularly in the context of recent art. Although much of this conversation was articulated at the end of the 1990s, it has only been in the last five years or so that this has entered the discourses of art in a significant way as a sustained enquiry into ideas around labour in the Web economy. Much of this work has been allied to the critical tradition of Italian Autonomist Marxism and has contributed to new understandings of the ways in which participation has been monetised. Arcadia_Missa have been important in formalising some of this through their programme of exhibitions, events and publications. My particular interest has been in practices that explore an ambiguous relationship to these structures, and do not simply make work about the digital economy. In so doing, they come close to dealing with the various forms of complicity that we engage in in our everyday experiences with the Web, instead of maintaining irrefutable positions of critical distance.



Maja Cule, "Facing The Same Direction", 2014 at Arcadia Missa

What I have found compelling is the idea that artists are a part of, not apart from, the kinds of economies that they are exploring. Participation in these cultures and economies can figure in many different ways, and one of the things I have tried to consider in the first chapter of my book is the various forms that this may take. For example, when I met with Maja at the beginning of the summer, we spoke a little about Airbnb. I had just arrived in New York the night before and was having some trouble with my hosts (they had assumed I was out, enjoying the city, and so were up most of the night, playing music, as they prepared their costumes for the Coney Island Mermaid Parade). Airbnb had also just launched an advertising campaign on the subway reading 'New Yorker's Agree: Airbnb is great for New York City'. In talking about the particular significance of Airbnb for New York, Maja happened to mention just how important this facility had been for artists, including herself at times, in providing them with an income that could sustain their practice without the usual obligations on one's being in certain places at certain times, as per the 9-to-5 model. Thus, it became evident that it would be impossible to think the 'sharing economy' simply as a thematic within recent art, but that it needed to be taken seriously as a structuring condition of arts production more generally. This immediately generates a high-stakes field of enquiry, which requires the reassessing of some of our most basic assumptions about the category of art, such as the question of its autonomy.

It is this relationship between the work and the conditions of its production which has become increasingly of interest to me in so far as it puts a different spin on the notion of participation. This is also something that is fundamental to Maja's wider practice. Elsewhere – such as in her film about Madame Tussauds, shown at Arcadia_MIssa in 2013 as part of a duo solo show with Dora Budor – she has looked at conditions of production, grappled with the technological capabilities of representation, and pushed against the edges and limits of image-making. Thus, the plan for this conversation [between the curator and the artist] is to draw out some of these ideas in relation to the show currently on view here, asking how the ideologies of the Web economy correspond to artistic production, what might remain of not working as a site of resistance, and unpack the problem of participation through the notion of doing what you love and loving what you do...



Maja Cule, "Facing The Same Direction", 2014 at Arcadia Missa

Cadence Kinsey is a British Academy Postdoctoral Fellow in the History of Art Department at University College London. She is currently working on a book project related to art after the Internet, which will be completed in 2016.

Facing the Same Direction

Arcadia Missa

Unit 6

Bellenden Road Business Center

London SE15 4RF

Exhibition runs October 12 – November 15

With: Anna Khachiyani as Alex, Justin Warsh as Man With the Microphone, Alex Hunter as Friend, Jose De Leon as Man With the Camera / Cinematography: Miona Bogovic, Tyler Sayles was the Script Editor, Video editing: Meriem Bennani. Thanks to Rozsa Zita Farkas and Tom Clark (Arcadia Missa), Cadence Kinsey and Silvija Stipanov.

DAZED

Stock photos and skyscrapers with Maja Cule

Discussing the state of the digital art scene with the artist taking our oldest image-making clichés and making them new



Maja Cule, *The Horizon*, 2013

As part of our new summer US project *States of Independence* we've invited our favourite 30 American curators, magazines, creatives and institutions to takeover Dazed for a day.

Today, it's the turn of Tumblr, the platform that has turned self-publishing into an art form. For their exclusive guest-edit, we'll be exploring the Tumblr aesthetic in its many forms – from the dA-Zed of Tumblr art, to pop quizzes with our favourite Tumblr publishers and spotlights on some of the best net artists blending IRL and URL(s) in radical new ways.

Maja Cule is one of the most exciting artists working with/in internet culture today. Her ability to take the most clichéd, banal aspects of our offline existence – stock photography, old movie tropes that we've seen hundreds of times, and even the chairs we sit on – and make them new in the context of her practice is capturing imaginations from NY to London. Her new film, *The Horizon*, appeared at the Phillips Paddles On! auction last week. We caught the NY-based artist whilst she was still on English soil, to talk about the appeal of women who laugh and eat salad, how Tumblr influences her practice and the state of the digital art scene today. For a lesson into how to turn cliché into contemporaneity, read on.

Could you tell us about *The Horizon*, as seen at the Paddles On! auction?

Maja Cule: *The Horizon* is a reconstruction of a classic film trope wherein the lead character, in a state of crisis, is drawn into a struggle on the roof of a skyscraper. The action scene, and accompanying fall, is often depicted in two frames: the first frame shows the hero desperately grasping at the roof's edge and

the second frame shows the distance to the ground, symbolizing the character's demise. In *The Horizon*, a model is caught in an infinite loop, hanging off the edge of *The Trump Building* located at 40 Wall Street.

Why the Trump Tower in particular?

Maja Cule: The Trump Tower building in the video represents the symbol of the financial crisis. In this area, the security measurements are so strong that it's impossible to open a window, so this scene could never actually happen. Financial district is also very interesting public sculpture site, the window where scene is shoot is overlooking the Isamu Noguchi's *Sunken Garden*, and the Jean Dubuffet's sculpture "Group of Four Trees", commissioned by David Rockefeller (who was then chairman of Chase Manhattan Bank).

Do you feel like being in New York and being in that environment has a big effect on your work?

Maja Cule: For sure. There's a lot of things that I really like about New York but I feel that it's probably the only place where I oscillate from feeling detached from surroundings and than again completely engaged so many times a day. It's so dense, sometimes real life feels like being online and scrolling for way too long.

Your work uses recycled imagery and takes them out of their contexts – is there something of the 'retweet' or 'reblog' in that process? Do you think the uniqueness of self-publishing processes influences your work?

Maja Cule: I think Tumblr is such a powerful blender that recognition of ingredients is impossible. I used to spend a lot of time trying to see it all, but now I feel like the only thing I get from all that viewing is a red eye. I'm interested in placing images in the context, and self-publishing processes that are more than an impulse or a reaction.

Yeah, I think we're all trying to figure out ways to talk about this art and there exists only limiting labels at times.

Maja Cule: What's interesting to me about Tumblr is that most of the people on display are either very familiar or a completely unknown model. There's nothing in between.



Let's talk about your work with stock photos. Your collaboration with DIS magazine on their DIS images seemed really fruitful for you. What draws you to stock photographs as an artistic medium?

Maja Cule: I decided to work with the "Women Laughing Alone With Salad" meme because I think its one of those fascinating memes that's completely unnecessarily assigned to gender and portrays an image of health that doesn't actually have anything to do with being healthier! According to stock photography, woman laugh while shopping, eating salad and exercising; man laugh while talking on the phone, by the laptop, after meetings, and reading newspapers; kids laugh just always. Obviously, DIS images was attempt to in-

vert these stereotypes. Stock photography is a code without a message. It's reached a point where content has been reproduced and mismatched so many times that it's completely lost its meaning.

The context of a single image changes so much from its original use, online. With the DIS images, there's almost a sense of tragedy in the falsity of the smiles. Do you see a sense of sadness to these stock images?

Maja Cule: Well, in ancient Greece, laughing portraits were associated with madness, arrogance or ignorance. It wasn't until the discovery of the chemical processes and the direct influence of laughter on health—that this association became common. The satisfaction as a result of consumption that is typically portrayed on stock images is a bit sad. The starting point for DisImages.com was to invert the existing stereotypes in stock images.

“What’s interesting to me about Tumblr is that most of the people on display are either very familiar or a completely unknown model. There’s nothing in between” – Maja Cule

What is inspiring you right now in your work?

Maja Cule: I'm working on a new video, that will be shown at Arcadia Missa in October, it continues to explore the limits of image production, given shape by technical, financial, cultural or architectural borders. I'm exploring how the so-called "sharing economies" like Airbnb changed the (previously) private spaces.

More generally, with auctions such as Paddles ON!, there's a growing sense of net art reaching a turning point in the public's awareness. Where do we go from here?

Maja Cule: With so much critical thought around internet art, it can only become much more interesting. I feel that people are making work that is so much more focused on specific segments of net economies, then it was couple of years ago when this term was starting to be introduced. Conversation online are creating new audiences. People can now recognize the groups they belong to, and mediate the conversation online, this used to happen in a private letter with one view and one Like.

An interview with Maja Cule



Maja Cule, Facing the Same Direction (2014) @ Arcadia Missa installation view. Courtesy the artist.

When I first met Maja Cule I already knew who she was from the days when she was part of the duo Dora&Maja (with the artist Dora Budor), but I tried not to act like a fanboy. It's hard not to be one: she is well-versed and articulate about everything including alternate economies, women issues, queer issues, Euro-centric issues, the rigidity of the social structure of the art world, time poverty, salad, horror movies, and how to survive. Those are some of the main threads running through Maja's practice, which takes a lot of forms, though it could be said that her main work is building fictional narratives that are often only a slice away from reality.

A few weeks ago she emailed me a version of her new video 'Facing the Same Direction' (2014), which is the centerpiece of her current show of the same name at Arcadia Missa in London. The video is about "Doing What You Love" (DWYL), the culture of not only working your ass off to support yourself, but also smiling and making friends while you do it – and then capitalising on those smiles. The video's main character is Alex, a woman who starts an IndieGogo crowdfunding campaign asking for \$80,000 to "pursue independent interest in projects" rather than working for wages in the typical sense. Alex's campaign launched on IndieGogo the day of the exhibition opening.

With other works in the show including a book of user comments taken from the "BIC pen for her" on Amazon, and large-scale prints of a clichéd yet unrecognisable live/work space, the theme of the crumbling work/life divide via systems like IndieGogo and Airbnb is a strong one. The so-called "sharing economy", which has quickly become a fact of life for those in the creative industries, has also become enacted as content for various projects – from the recent Airbnb pavilion in Venice to Constant Dullaart's purchase and distribution of instagram followers to others in the art world: "Hitching a ride is Uber, hospitality is Airbnb, and when you are interested you are a follower".

I loved the way Maja's video likewise became a performative intervention. When I saw it I wrote back to her, and then she wrote back too, and then I decided that in the spirit of the sharing economy we should capitalise on our relationship and turn our conversation into an interview. So we relocated the chat onto Google Docs

to make it seamless – though it was actually cobbled together during breaks from ‘real’ work, whenever Maja could find wi-fi while traveling (she was in London, Serbia and New York during those weeks). And why do so many of us likewise spend our break time talking about work? Because we love what we do.



Maja Cule, Facing the Same Direction (2014) @ Arcadia Missa installation view. Courtesy the artist.

What do you expect or want to happen with the ‘Facing the Same Direction’ campaign?

Maja Cule: The campaign extends the life of Alex as a fictional character, as she interacts with Indiegogo visitors, who have mostly so far been prosumers and spammers. This is one of the comments from a visitor: “Thinking about hitting full funding? Make it count. I will market, promote, review and revise your campaign giving you my expert opinion which will boost your GoGo factor.”

In a sense Alex is more real than her online audience at the moment. The comments are kind of an SOS to Alex, to help her become more of a product than she is at the moment. Obviously the goal of this campaign is not to raise the funds – the problem is that no one is interested in interaction unless funding is the goal. There are perks and rewards for backers though. One of them is to book Alex to do a lecture, and the highest reward is to take over Alex’s highly-rated Airbnb account.

So are you compensating Alex for being part of the project? Or is she taking part because she Loves What You Do?

MC: Alex will of course receive the proceeds from the Indiegogo campaign. It was very important to me that Alex would like what we did together. I didn’t do casting calls or look for an actress, because I thought this role should be played by someone who has her own ideas about work and finds DWYL culture to be an oppressive ideology. Anna Khachiyani [a writer and illustrator] who plays the role of Alex was the only person I could imagine to do this without acting. I also love what she does.

The character asks for “the greatest number of people to participate by making the lowest possible contribution” to her campaign. What do you/ does she mean by this?

MC: That line in the script is referring to Alex’s desire to participate, she believes that if the higher number of backers would support her campaign with the smallest possible contribution would be a greater success than to have one backer support the campaign.

The main theme of the video is DWYL: that it’s somehow a shortcoming if one doesn’t embrace and feel pas-

sionate about the wage labour that one is forced to engage in to survive. Is art just like any wage labor, or is the pressure to LOVE MY WORK even higher for artists?

MC: Um, it's more about how the idea of DWYL produced an oppressive ideology, where passion and emotion are supposed to exist 9 to 5, and success is measured in positive feelings during work hours. It's impossible to always love what you do and it's really not possible to be able only to love what you do. Everyone dislikes what they do at least for some period of time. I think that there is no difference between art and any other wage labor in the amount of emotional involvement and energy being put into it; it depends on the person, and their capability to be emotionally distant.

One of my favorite lines in the video is: "It's enforced to love what you do. If you want to disagree, then that's work too." This makes me think that maybe we're all too occupied with crap and constant updating for actual dissensus; do you think that the lack of unoccupied/unproductive time could explain the lack of a certain critical attitude? Distraction=capitulation?

MC: That is an interesting way to put it, as being distracted is an intensely passive state and offering a disagreeing position is the extreme opposite. Also, to be able to dislike something takes a lot of preparation, and at least 10 times more arguments than to simply like something. To dislike something is considered to be unacceptable, it's taking up too much valuable time, it's unproductive, unpredictable, it's what makes a bad product. This is an example of how interaction is influenced by economy and production and its efficiency, demand and functionality.

In the video there is also a reference to Airbnb. Like IndieGogo, I see a techno-utopian aspect to Airbnb — wellness, aspiration, safe adventure, and economic gain via community-building. Both websites represent the confluence of social networks with economic transactions. What interests you in particular about those platforms?

MC: I don't think there is a utopian aspect to Airbnb that lives beyond the advertising campaigns the company makes. Community building with Airbnb is similar to that of a workplace: it's regulated by universal politeness and financial obligations. I think that Airbnb provided substantial support to people who were renters and couldn't afford not to work. But Airbnb in that sense is a temporary solution.

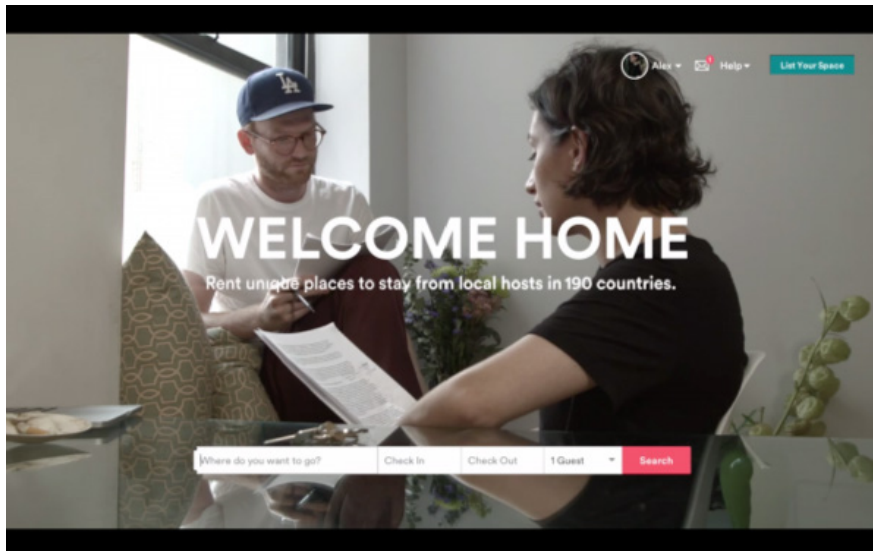
Here's a fake slogan for Airbnb: "What difference would a 30,000 yearly grant do for an artist in NY?" The discussion about sharing economies and Airbnb always skews in this direction; while hosts are earning money, they are also raising the value of real estate and causing greater inequalities in housing market. I feel the company's argument is like placing responsibility for climate change on a consumer. The effects Airbnb has on the housing market are tiny in comparison to a legal decision that would limit annual rent increases.....

The "universal politeness" in sharing economies that you mention reminds me of some of your projects focusing on health and well-being — like your DIS 'Laughing Alone with Salad' stock image collection (2013), or the video 'The Horizon' (2013) where a woman dangles off a building, suggesting precarity in physical and economic wellness. How does DWYL connect to the idea of "achieving" health?

MC: The 'laughing alone with salad' photo series was a meme that identifies code in stock images that is not true to our experience—false representations of happiness, health, gender and pleasure. I think of these images when someone says 'health', at the same time I know that the image has absolutely no connection with the feeling of being healthy.

In a similar way, in the 'Facing the Same Direction' video, Alex is not trying to do what she loves — she is just not working. All the other characters who appear in the video, are working, from the journalists to the Apple store staff to the people waiting in the line for an iPhone 6.

Your press release for 'Facing the Same Direction' includes a provocation to "Fail harder". How does the idea of capitalising off failure fit in?



Maja Cule, 'Facing the Same Direction' (2014). Film still. Courtesy the artist.

MC: The phrase “Do what you love” is apparently assigned to Confucius, and it meant finding pleasure in work or any activity in a balanced way. But DWYL is the mantra of an oppressive ideology, where professional identity is the only identity, and work is the only way to experience time. The idea of love and work just shouldn't be together. In Steve Jobs' commencement speech he says: “Your work is going to fill a large part of your life. The only way to do great work is to love what you do.” That sounds so tragic. It leaves no space for experiences outside of work.

Failure, like DWYL, is a term that got appropriated: at first it represented a basic negative result but is now often used to mean a risky action with a lot of creative potential. “Failing harder” and “learning from your mistakes” are new strategies that create attitudes towards work that are advertised as products via these mantras.

Do you ever feel like you fail?

MC: I feel freedom in doing work where it's hard to decide if something is a success or a failure, and results are often unpredictable. If I don't work for a while because I'm doing something else, that feels like a failure of time.

That sounds like one of the lines from the video: “Work takes up 80 per cent of your time. Every day you go and plug yourself in at the office, and yet you're never fully charged”. I wrote you in an email that this reminds me of Jonathan Crary's recent book 24/7, where he talks about the fact that we are never fully “off” and that that sleep is our last bastion of non-commodifiable, opaque time. What do you think? Are you ever really at rest?

MC: The line from the video that compares the body to a phone charger is an extremist view of productivity, which is completely divorced from feelings and the human capacity for different experiences. Jonathan Crary's view of sleep as a territory that hasn't yet been touched by markets is really interesting. I feel like the polarised view of body being in sleep/wake state is missing gray areas, the empty gaps that are necessary for processing experiences. If the human body depends on blank states to process experiences, rest, and prepare to be able to participate in new ones, that means that busy people grow to be close-minded. ‘Work less’ is the new DWYL. **

Maja Cule's Facing the Same Direction solo exhibition is on at London's Arcadia Missa, running October 11 to November 15, 2014.

Arcadia Missa