

# The Horizontal Worker

## – Green Screen #1

by KVM – Korean Vulnerability Movement  
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Notes for the exhibition “**I like to eat with my hands**” curated by RGKSKSRG  
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### From Playboy to Antropophagous

Hugh Hefner, analysed by Paul B. Preciado in his book *Pornotopia*<sup>1</sup>, is one of the precursors of ‘The Horizontal Worker’. Indeed, in his luxurious Californian mansion, he used a rotating bed as a large working table for the editorial work for *Playboy Magazine*. By doing so, he could literally capitalize on what was happening in the rich bachelor’s private house by broadcasting ‘live’, in ‘real time’, his daily interaction with the Bunny Girls. This 70-80’ soft-porn business, established before the emergence of the Internet, anticipates a switch from the society of consumption — of material goods — to the society of information — of textual and visual flux (both perpetually soliciting our attention).

In the era of 24/7 connectivity analysed by Jonathan Crary<sup>2</sup>, the founder of *Playboy Magazine* is not the only one surrounded by numerous screens and cables intermediating a flux of information. In the past decade, professional gamers also cared about how to continue their activity while minimizing any necessary rupture, augmenting themselves with new devices such as game stations, customised air-mousse, special joysticks, instant noodles and Snickers (Hefner was also a regular consumer of large volumes of Coca-Cola and amphetamines). Nowadays, all cognitive workers are concerned with this prolonged physical inertia. Thanks to the on-line instantaneity and virtual simulation, surfing on the Internet provides the feeling of easy and low cost travel.

The industrial age itself, in order to increase productivity, was aware of the need of relaxation of the (highly verticalized) worker. This kind of ‘humanist’ vision of labour and production is clearly observable in the book *Fatigue Study*<sup>3</sup>, by Frank and Lilian Gilbreth (1916). With the help of engineer-managers, the capitalist logic of surplus value was to implement ‘care’, paying attention to the tiredness of worker’s body, in order not to reduce productivity, which ought to be ‘sustainable’. Even the ‘allowed’ sleep at work that notably Google headquarters practice, by introducing a bunch of ‘futuristic’ lounge chair called Metro Naps in their office, is seemingly using care for the (cognitive) employees in order to sustain the high level performance in enterprise.

Nowadays, the horizontal worker is personified in the body of an immobilized receiver of flux, an ultimate information consumer and producer. Some people today, including a group of reclusive individuals known as *hikikomori* in Japan, mainly connect to the world *via* the Internet. They refuse to leave their tiny messy rooms where leftover food and cultural detritus builds a kind of second firewall inside their living space (or the outside world confines ‘social loser’s body’).

Another figure of the horizontal worker, the Japanese anthropophagist Issei Sagawa, killed a Dutch woman named Renée Hartevelt in 1981 in Paris. Sagawa ate her based on his belief in the classical ideology of cannibalism; that one could absorb the qualities they lack directly from the victim’s meat. Acknowledging his own feeble characters, he chose, as a result of that analysis, a sane, white, intelligent woman who was perfectly matched to the profile he sought. But the crime was far from perfect. After being arrested by the French Police, his wealthy father was the only one who tried to defend him by hiring a ‘performative’ lawyer. Two years after his arrest, Sagawa was released, and committed to a mental institution.

In London, to represent the incomprehension and even rage of the public, the Rolling Stones wrote *Too Much Blood* in the same

year (1983). Despite the public's unanimous disgust, Sagawa works now as a kind of TV entertainer, exposing his private life in the public media sphere. In the image we chose of Issei Sagawa, the first image in the series, his horizontal position on the bed is the one that is dominantly observed. He is also submerged by (soft porn) images and screens like in any other *hikikomori's* room. Commodities, images and money travel all around the world while the body is virtually surfing, in a horizontal position. The hands and fingers are the most busy part of this virtually surfing body; they tape, they click and they touch the screen to zoom in 'their' new dematerialized reality.

### **Vulnerability of Asian countries**

In our opinion, screens function as a prosthesis for the Asian people's vulnerable existence. That might be why the 'screen-oriented attitude' is a predominant phenomena that one can often observe in Asian countries. In 1976, in *The Society of Spectacle*, Guy Debord remarked: "The spectacle is the nightmare of imprisoned modern society which ultimately expresses nothing more than its desire to sleep. The spectacle is the guardian of sleep." South Korea has been introduced to this logic of Spectacle over the years of (modern Western) colonisation. Not to mention the Japanese occupation from 1910 to 1945, South Korea has also been a well-known test-bed for 'developed countries'— at least in the years following war; during the 1980s, the years of the so called 'Four Asian Tigers' (emergence of 'Second world' from Third world ); up until today.

In this context, screens have become a kind of pain-killer, or a 'guardian of sleep' in Debord's term. The high definition of the HD flatscreens literally functions to flatten the history, the mental architecture of subjectivities and the possible future for autonomous cultural development. Once Hong Sang-soo, a famous Korean filmmaker, said: "there is nothing else than food and sex in Korean (contemporary) culture".

Apparently, sex is losing its dominant position in Korean culture due to the accumulating tiredness and depression. As a result of that, food has become a kind of cultural

surplus value for Korean people. It is almost frightening that there are such a huge number of cooking shows on official and cable TV channels within this vulnerable country where (senseless) messages on food can reach everybody, everywhere, through different sorts of screens. Paul Virilio<sup>4</sup> said once in terms of technical evolution: "the great invention of modernity is the transformation of meat into vehicle". The most powerful contemporary invention would be the "transformation of food into information" (we saw already how, in eating (human) meat, Issei Sagawa could have access to the Media, which could also be considered a kind of dematerialized, ultimate vehicle).

Another important aspect of Korean vulnerability is the almost total absence of a social welfare system. In the context of such a vulnerable, precarious body, the "design objects" take a dominant position to constitute a kind of self-security. If a super-dependency on technology is quite remarkable in South Korea, we can consider it as a sign of its own burnout<sup>5</sup>. Since its apparition, during the neoliberal age of Ronald Reagan in US in the 80s, which is the same period that heralded the end of social welfare, the word *care* (and healing-something) was in vogue, frequently encountered in advertisements for all kind of commodities and services. A new belief that the design object and machines could 'care' for the tired body and soul, developed over this period of (speculative) economic growth.

The expression of fatigue, "pi-gon-hae" in the Korean language, is perhaps the only sentiment shared between South Koreans and other Koreans (living abroad), without dispute. Within a very old, confucianist, hard-working culture, where dying while at work has a (pseudo-)medical name *Guarosa* in Korea, (*Karoshi* in Japan), literally meaning the death by overwork, the worker-soldiers have been struggling within a highly competitive neoliberal environment, accelerated since the 1980s and almost 'motorized' by the 88 Seoul Olympic Game.

If, since the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, Taylorism has been completely embodied in the Western worker's body/soul, today

it still effects Chinese workers through the mass-produced *Made-In-China* economy, which circulates a kind of new artificial blood throughout the whole world (we recall the song by Rolling Stones regarding Issei Sagawa's affair, *Too much Blood*.) This is why we have chosen an image from an online newspaper, where a set of Chinese employees are strangely sleeping in their spring back chairs, sitting still in the stand-by position, in their anti-dust uniforms. The article comments that the company introduced this 'sleeping on the job' rule under the local government (Guandong) and that it proved to significantly increase productivity thanks to these after-lunch naps. Can "allowing a 30 minutes nap to workers" be understood as care? Is it not in fact a recent example of what Foucault has called a "disciplinary practice"? It demonstrates how specific use of the term 'care', on behalf of humanism, serves to confine humans rather than liberate them<sup>5</sup>.

### **Fake food for metal health?**

When Roland Barthes traveled to Japan in the 1950's, he analysed this highly organized and disordered society<sup>6</sup>, along with the overwhelming presence of plastic material that he considered "an embodied idea of infinite transformation". Indeed, many Japanese restaurants display moulded plastic foods in the window-displays of their shops. This "fake food" is intended to seduce passing customers. However, beyond this 'customer-hunting' function, although they do have a strong gastronomic culture, some Japanese food and cooking practices take this 'plastic food' idea even further! Kracie Happy Kitchen series is a kind of DIY cooking kit that shows how to make a tiny, colorful synthetic Burger or Pizza with a microwave. What they basically enjoy seems not the 'taste' itself but the materialized virtuality, that is, the 'pure' plasticity of foods.

American food engineering goes further still, in order to make more serious industrial fake food. Soylent, Inc. is inspired by the apocalyptic vision of 1973 film by Richard Fletcher, *Soylent Green*. This young company offers two types of drinks (liquid or powder to mix), a fast-food, nutritionally efficient. After receiving some skeptical market reaction, their

version 2.0 focuses more on the benefit of soy-based protein, as the bio-natural advertising of product, even if it is made mainly of 'safely' produced GM Soy bean according to the manufacturer.

In the last couple of years, many start-ups have gone to Silicone Valley, with projects based around vegetarian food substitution. We can easily find examples such as 'vegan eggs' by Hampton Creek Foods or 'vegan steak' by Beyond Meat. All products are packed in fancy plastic boxes with an organic 'look and feel' and a medicinal appearance. Consumers are, we argue, more and more excluded from the act of food production, which is already carried out in a realm of total abstraction ('commodification' in Marxian terms). If we imagine the food experiments of Silicone Valley gaining popularity and establishing new standards, it would come as no surprise when one day scientists, biologists, engineers would prescribe and produce what and how much we are supposed to 'absorb' on a daily basis. Most of us would be incapable of understanding our new food instructions on a scientific level.

### **From Virtual to Actual**

In the 21<sup>st</sup> century, control is delegated. One self-quantifies one's own duty for both productivity (confinement) and bodily health (care). The 'positive' horizontal worker — not the one only constrained to stay in a horizontal position thanks to the NTIC — looks for, a way or ways of producing a socio-ecologically healthy food: she/he wants to invent individual and collective knowledge/know-how on this new type of food, still yet to be invented.

We acknowledge that today's work-structure, furniture, architecture, and social instruments are designed by and for human use. We consider that this human-centrism blocks us from building a new 'sustainable' relationship with nature/culture. For example, we can imagine a scenario where the soybean is at the centre of the apparatus (instead of the human) and needs to be cared for by a collective action. Similarly, when we 'position' a living and vulnerable thing (animal) in the centre of all consideration for care, it restructures the current vertical value system and constitutes

a profitable shift of our comprehension of the relationship with the others.

In the course of modern history, work has been continuously segmented (with the aim of 'specialisation'), to raise efficiency and productivity for capitalistic profit. Each fragmented division of labour has a given value. And this value is fundamentally hierarchical. The hypothesis of horizontality at work reconsiders it in a radically different way. For instance, unconditional basic income would be a fundamental dispositive which could change our current vertical value structure (within which, as with the ancient regime, the highest and lowest are still arbitrarily determined, almost by birth). We have to invent other social tools like the unconditional basic income in order to promote horizontality (and not only to claim it, like management does), this is not just 'sustainable' reform, but represents a breakthrough.

Practically speaking, the horizontal worker creates a condition in which one can refuse (without concern for survival) to work and to be paid vertically. She/he would prefer to listen to his/her body/soul (and to take care of themselves). She/he could create their own mode of working rather than being mobilized for the profit of verticality. The unconditional basic income of 'existence' (Yves Citton) is one of the fundamental supports for this shift, in total affordance with our hypothesis of horizontal worker<sup>7</sup>.

### **I like to eat with my hands**

This version of Horizontal Worker presented at Wexford Arts Centre is KVM's artistic proposition which is a part of research for the exhibition *Cut & Care – A Chance to Care is a Chance to Care*. Some of the visual elements constituting this installation are explained in this text, while some of them are not (this is intended to avoid illustrating every single image which could inhibit further interpretation by the audience). Many 'abstract lines of association' could be drawn, traced and erased between the structures, human figures, devices and materials contained in the eighteen images that we have chosen

(from the Internet) and deliberately enlarged to be installed on a 'digital' green space (of simulation).

### **Prologue**

Two of these images were considered, by Wexford Arts Centre, to be potentially 'problematic' for the young public so we deliberately masked the most potentially 'sensitive' parts of them with multiple green squares of various sizes. In addition to this, RGKSKSRG installed a PVC 'butcher' curtain in order to 'soften' the way to our visual proposal. We, Korean Vulnerability Movement, intended that this ensemble of images would be considered as an iconographic analysis (of cultural phenomena, even affirming its 'poor' quality), not as eighteen separated photographs hung on the wall. One single image didn't make sense for this installation, but altogether they built a narrative, a visual constellation, brought to life by virtue of 'sampling the chaos'<sup>8</sup>.

#### Notes.

- 1** *Pornotopia: An Essay on Playboy's Architecture and Biopolitics*, Paul B. Preciado, Zone Books, 2014.
- 2** *24/7: Late Capitalism and the Ends of Sleep*, Jonathan Crary, Verso Books, 2013.
- 3** *Fatigue Study: the Elimination of Humanity's Greatest Unnecessary Waste*, Frank and Lillian Gilbreth, Sturgis & Walton Company, 1916.
- 4** *The Burnout Society*, Byung-Chul Han, Stanford University Press, 2015.
- 5** *De Cvratoribus: The Dialectics of Care and Confinement*, Vezna Madzosi, Atropos, 2013.
- 6** *Mythology*, Roland Barthes, Éditions du Seuil, 1957.
- 7** *Inventing the Future: Post capitalism and a World Without Work*, Nick Srnicek & Alex Williams, Verso books, 2015.
- 8** 'Sampling Chaos : Aby Warburg and the Photographic Atlas of the Great War', Georges Didi-Huberman, *Études photographiques*, n°27, 2011.

#### Images.

Anna Halprin, *Parades and changes* (1965) from the 1995 film by Centre Pompidou (c)Jacqueline Caux

Issei Sagawa, anonymous source, available on this blog, <https://donaldologie.wordpress.com/2014/03/23/pourquoi-le-japonais-cannibale-pervers-mediatique-issei-sagawa-atterri-a-paris/>