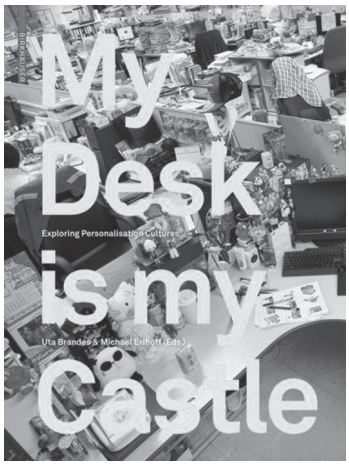
My Desk is My Castle: Exploring personalisation cultures

Uta Brandes and Michael Erlhoff (Eds.)
Review by John Walsh

In the late nineteenth century two young Oxford Egyptologists began excavating some middens west of the Nile, on the site of the Greco-Roman city of Oxyrhynchus. Bernard Grenfell and Arthur Hunt were looking for the lost literary masterworks of classical antiquity, and over the next few decades they did unearth some treasures – poems by Sappho and comedies by Menander, for example, and bits of plays by Sophocles and Euripides, along with Old and New Testament apocrypha (including the gospels of Thomas, Mary and James). But for the most part the vast trove of papyrus dug up by the dogged Englishmen recorded the quotidian intercourse of a bureaucratic society: wills and bills, codes and edicts, licenses and petitions, along with personal letters and horoscopes. Searching for the sublime, the trackers of Oxyrhynchus had discovered a load of old rubbish. If it was any consolation, Grenfell and Hunt could consider themselves pioneers in a new field. Detritus studies, it could be called.



Uta Brandes and Michael Erlhoff (Eds.) 2011 *My Desk is My Castle: Exploring personalisation cultures.* Birkhaüser, 2011 [ISBN: 978-3-0346-0774-2] [320pp]

My Desk is My Castle is an Oxyrhynchian type of endeavour. It's a rummage through the stuff, well, let's be honest, the junk that clutters up the modern workstation. The book's authors – 21 of them are credited – have pored over the items deployed on and around the desktops of wage slaves and salary men and women, counting and categorising the small, but often numerous tokens of office-worker self-assertion. As its subtitle says, the book is an exploration of "personalisation cultures", which means it's an expedition into behavioural territory lying somewhere between pathos and pathology. It's a landscape both all too familiar and easily ignored, for it is, sad to say, the environment in which many of us pass half our waking hours.

First, a note about the scope of the project. The contributors to this "international desk project" are affiliated with academic institutions in 11 cities around the world: Auckland; Barcelona; Cairo; Cologne; Curitiba; Fukuoka; Hong Kong; Milan; New York; Pune; and Taipei. In each place, teams of students were despatched to offices in four types of workplaces differently tolerant of personal idiosyncrasy: banks and insurance companies (traditionally uptight working environments); administration departments of unspecified but presumably generic enterprises (characteristically a little more forgiving of "personalisation"); call centres (vigilantly alert to any signs of individualism); and design studios (self-consciously permissive of spatial customisation).

The "methodological concept" of the exercise was "the interpretation of visual data". That is, the office visitors took photographs of desks and their accretions of objects and then the authors tried to make sense of this material, in part by sorting items into "clusters" – "toys and figurines", for example, "life accessories" and "plants and greenery", the latter also defined as "personal horticultural organisms". (Advertently or not, the book does have its funny moments.) Altogether, 686 desks were photographed, and 9246 "non-work related, two or three dimensional objects … were identified as private items".

The authors describe the desktop items as "telling objects". The problem is, they're talking in sign language, and that may be interpreted in many ways (all of them, the authors apologise, "Western-based"). Therefore, although the book has a method, it's not exactly scientific. The authors' practice of imputing meaning is directly related to the passive way in which information was recorded. Desks were photographed, but their users were interviewed in a very cursory manner. Only two questions were asked of the desk users: Which object on your desk would you miss the most if removed? And which the least? The answers weren't much help, the authors report: "To our surprise … these short interviews added little-to-no additional information about the employees' motives."

It's not clear whether this tentative inquisitorial approach was the product of timidity or intentional disinterest. In a sense, the teams visiting workplaces were despatched as reporters, but any cub reporter returning to an editor as empty-handed as these researchers would expect an ear-reddening tirade. The fear factor certainly seems to have been a research impediment in New York, where office visitors encountered a typically abrupt Big Apple reception. On this note, one of the collateral pleasures of *My Desk is My Castle* is the book's rather ingenuous confirmation of stereotypes. In the book New Yorkers are rude, Aucklanders are laid-back, Milanese designers are obsessed with style, and office workers in Hong Kong and Fukuoka are terminally addicted to big-eyed furry toys. And it wasn't a total surprise that the book's most overtly sexual object – a dildo-shaped eraser – should have been found in the drawer of a German desk. (With a typically straight face, the text treats this bizarre discovery as "part of a peculiar and secret male gender narrative".)

The silence of the desk operatives has allowed the authors to speak volumes. As substantive explanations from object-owners were not sought or gathered by the teams carrying out the hit-and-run "research", the authors were free to speculate freely about object-deployment motives. Thus a plenitude of desk-top objects is linked variously "to the fear of poverty or at least of losing these objects and not being able to find them", to memories of deprivation in newer boom economies, to the constant threat, in some countries, of natural disasters that will sweep away any possessions except those close at hand, and in Hong Kong, to "a palpable degree" of post-colonial anxiety.

The ascription of motive occurs at an individual as well as a general level. For example, on the desk of a Taipei female employee, a figure of "a little man with white hair and a long moustache wearing a simple long robe with a mandarin collar" – a kitsch object, the authors declare, but "from a European perspective", they quickly add – "could express the desire to get married or the happiness about being married". But, "on the other hand", and rather disappointingly, "the little figurine might have sat there simply because its owner liked it".

Well, yes. Who knows? Ignorance isn't always a barrier to omniscience, however: "One male Japanese employee had prominently placed a Ferrari mouse-pad on his desk, alluding to his desire for mobility and, because it is not a Toyota, to his dream of travelling the world." Perhaps he just liked the logo? Or perhaps he's a fan of Formula One? And is eschewing a mouse-pad advertising Toyota – surely the standby brand of the world's rental fleets – really an expression of a yearning for international travel?

Talking of dream analysis, the leeway allowed by the book's untethered interpretive approach of course accommodates a Freudian divagation. This occurs in the chapter on "gender staging" and is prompted by a consideration of that ubiquitous desktop accessory of female employees, the handbag. To a Freudian, a handbag is never just a handbag. "Handbags are concave containers with a large 'throat'", the authors write, "that may evoke the fear of being swallowed up and that leads into a dark cave whose contents remain a mystery to the outsider." Male office-workers should be very nervous. Does the presence of so many handbags, with their capacious and "taboo-like" interiors, explain the counter-deployment of erect little action figures? And what's with all the bananas? Each desktop, it seems, is a potential battleground in the gender wars.

While the sight of a woman fossicking around in her "concave container" might be unsettling, there is an even scarier office scenario to contemplate. "If we look at all the stuff sitting on desks, as recorded in the photographs and studies in this book, the question arises as to whether these things might have a life of their own." The unknown author of this remark – mostly, it's impossible to know who wrote what in *My Desk is My Castle* – cites Marx's observation in *Capital* that in developed markets objects seemingly assume an autonomous existence, but he or she could just have easily, and perhaps more amusingly, referenced the folkloric trope of the secret lives of inanimate objects. From *The Adventures of Pinocchio* and *The Steadfast Tin Soldier* to *Toy Story* and *A Night at the Museum*, there's a long tradition of psychologically fecund tales of toys coming to life. There is a dark side to these stories but, my God, their nightmarish quality would pale against the horror show that would result if the battalions of figures in *My Desk is My Castle* leapt to life.

The book, in a way, is a victim of its own plenitude. Because it has so many authors its tone is uneven, and its focus skittish. Amidst the rather tendentious speculation there are some welcome ideas that promise to give the book a bit of heft. For example, an interesting comparison is made between the English focus on the protection of private space and the European struggle for public rights. It doesn't go anywhere, this discussion – there are no English desks in the book – and it doesn't do the rest of the content any favours, because it highlights its Lilliputian concerns. And that's not meant pejoratively: this is an account of small things, and small protests of individuality. The world of work is precarious, in these days of financial crisis, globalised out-sourcing and casualised employment. In response, office workers attempt to humanise their space – denied *lebensraum*, they try to create their own little *heimat*. It's an understandable reaction, but this reviewer had another one. After reading *My Desk is My Castle*, I promptly cleared all the crap from my desk. False consciousness is as precarious a defence against the realities of modern employment as a castle is against the realities of modern warfare.