

Witte de With Center for Contemporary Art

***Para / Fictions Writing Back series***

*Foreword:* Calla Henkel & Max Pitegoff

Response by Emily Henderson

In the first iteration of the *Para / Fictions series*, where art, text, and literature co-mingle in the exhibition space, the language of entrepreneurial startup culture is explored by the Berlin based artists Calla Henkel and Max Pitegoff with writer Emily Segal. In *Foreword*, Calla Henkel and Max Pitegoff present a semi-fictional short story, “Photography and Eating,” derived from their observations of the startup scene in Berlin. The story, printed on A4 aluminum sheets, is based on a series of interviews the artists conducted visiting startups to photograph work spaces. The project evolves into what becomes a more curious examination into the specific language and mindset of startup culture and the adaptation of the creative class into marketable jargon used by for-profit ventures. In the late 90s and early 2000s where institutions sought to expand art by way of ‘relational’ tactics and community involvement, the language used by the semi-fictional startups are hyped where ‘community’ is a buzzword along with emphasizing the ‘we are all togetherness’ such as in co-working and open space work plans. The artists highlight this language to demonstrate the disingenuous nature of tech startups by showing their inability to differentiate between creative culture and startup culture. Furthermore, they bring to light how startups contradict themselves by appropriating the creative lifestyle in Berlin for their brand identities while still working to change and improve the city with ‘experiences’ and products to be consumed.

This parallel ‘world’ is further explored in Emily Segal’s component of the installation where a novel-in-progress tells the story of an artist working at a startup. With posters of text wheat pasted on bubble gum pink colored walls, the effect is reminiscent of Douglas Coupland’s “Generation X” paperback cover - illustrating the artists’ interest in 90s pop and youth culture. Parts of text are whited out, making the editing process visible by adding, subtracting, erasing, and altering the tone and character of the novel. The story evolves from

a more literal depiction of an artist and a woman working at a startup to looking more critically at the culture that surrounds this business, both inside and out. Segal's installation highlights the work/non-work in startups and the hype that must exist in order to perpetuate an aura of desire and creative culture within startups.

In *Foreword*, the text is performative, in the narrative unfolding through the story and also in the action of Segal working at a startup. One can see the performance as well in Henkel and Pitegoff's text, where the interviews blur the line between conceptual performance and commercial labor. As in Segal's work with K-HOLE, and in her use of trend forecasting as an experiment that also crisscrosses the art and commercial worlds, her novel is a fascinating example in how subversion can be a marketable commodity and also how it can be used to discuss startup culture if not cultural appropriation in a critical manner. Within *Foreword*, Henkel and Pitegoff effectively bring to light through focusing on the language of startup culture how city livability as a lifestyle for artists is not the same as city livability as a brand.