

GARAGE



Why The Gig Economy is Creatively Bankrupt

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In a conversation with GARAGE, K-HOLE founding member Dena Yago obliterates the WeWork aesthetic.

Artist, poet, writer, and founding member of trend forecasting art collective K-HOLE, Dena Yago trains a materialist's eye on the world of contemporary art. A recent body of work includes panels of felt punctured with the outlines of paintings and stock photos of laborers—from Courbet's wholesome *Grain Sifters* to the denizens of co-working lofts. Her latest solo exhibition, *The Shortest Shadow*, which opens at Atlanta Contemporary on April 12, weaves a southern sci-fi autobiography from the cultural fibers of two fantasy rabbits: stars of *Donnie Darko* and *Bambi*, respectively. GARAGE met Yago at an LA cocktail lounge where the bartenders wear lab coats and the DJ sounds like Spotify.

GARAGE: Jerry Saltz recently looked up “precariat” in the dictionary—the definition is basically, “uncertainty, irregular work, financial insecurity”—then he wrote something like, “What’s the big deal? That’s been the case for 99% of artists throughout time!” What do you think about that idea—that there’s something inherently precarious about art and artists?

Dena Yago: Yeah, there’s a fetishistic imaging of the precariat, including 1099 workers and freelancers more broadly, that represents their position as emancipated, free, and fluid. That presents an image of choice and lifescaping rather than a reaction to market conditions. The reality is way more squalid.

Did you hear about the Uber driver who committed suicide, with passengers in the car? What a horrifying demonstration of the gig economy's fucked-upness.

There was also the Uber driver who went on a killing spree and picked up fares in the middle of it.

In Kalamazoo. But back to the precariat—as a class of laborer, the artist is a model citizen in that precarity is inherent to the wholly unregulated art market and mythologically tied to an artist's reticence about structure and stability.



Drawing by Dena Yago. Courtesy of Atlanta Contemporary

In your essay “On Ketamine and Added Value,” you talk about how something that fails in the real world can still succeed as art.

There's a lot of art which is corporate fan fiction—romanticizing the way that commerce works, trying to demystify the inner workings of capitalism. A recent example is how artists have gotten into cryptocurrency and blockchain, even investing in coins like Ripple that are antithetical to the ethos of blockchain and decentralized networks. Sometimes artists address commerce or tech culture with an air of criticality, but they really just want to be tech bros.

But you know what commercial work is actually like.

Yeah, and it's worse than you think. If anything, working in a corporate setting made me more idealistic about art. You realize that it is a space where the baseline is discourse and skepticism, as compared to marketing or tech. It's disheartening to see any nuance of identity or community get completely flattened out. At least in art—not in the market but in communities of artists—there are greater allowances for depth and time spent with things.

So art shouldn't try to be something it's not?

I'm not saying that necessarily. Art can try to be anything, and sometimes its failure in being the thing itself is what reveals its boundaries.

My show at Atlanta Contemporary is going to include a number of textile sculptures that are a continuation of the works included in *The Lusting Breed* at Bodega last year. With those works I was thinking about forms of gendered labor in the images, processes, and materials used. While the Atlanta Contemporary show also looks at the history of women and textiles, I'm using other imagery in the work. But, for example, an early iteration of the show included a textile sculpture with an image cut into it from *The Wing*, a women-only co-working space in New York. I contacted them and requested to come in and do an hour of shooting, and the response I got was, “We cannot accommodate your request at this time.”

But they let you in eventually?

No, they didn't. So I had to rely on their press imagery, which is really good enough—women lounging on chais-es-lounges and sitting at pastel terrazzo coffee tables with their laptops, working, in pastels. You look at it and you see the absurdism of the joy and enthusiasm and positivity expressed in these images that depict affective, immaterial labor. I assume that they turned down my request because it wouldn't matter if I just represented it as a photograph or abstracted it into a textile sculpture—the act of putting it on display could be seen as being critical, or trolling.

Like they're aware of the thinness of their self-image.

Across the board there's an awareness that you must own the means of production of your own self-representation. And that letting in another lens is dangerous to the entire construct.

The abstractness of stock images can be unsettling. Everyone looks the same when they're on their laptop. And beyond the laptop trope, there are also stock social media images. Take *In inity Mirror Room*, or the Museum of Ice Cream, or *Levitated Mass*. These things are functioning in and of themselves as content farms. A lot of the reason that those things are really popular is that they provide a backdrop that's divorced from context.



Dena Yago, *The Grain Sifters*, 2017. Courtesy of Bodega, New York

Because art isn't the real world. I see that with your practice as well. You have an inside perspective on the commercial sector, and commercial activities could be seen as "selling out," but your experience ends up being the polemical part.

If some art is fan art, then maybe it exists because there's no space for it in any other discourse. Chris Kraus wrote a good essay about this, about how art has absorbed a lot of other practices that are no longer supported within their given genres, like experimental, independent film or "art writing"—artists who write poetry or science fiction within the frameworks of an artistic practice. Or multimedia journalism, for lack of a better term, that doesn't want to exist as a Vox article. And artistic research. I know how to function in a commercial sphere—K-HOLE provided me with that skill—but there are certain times when that's not enough. Art has become a lynchpin for representing classist, elite society—"artwashing" is now a widely understood concept. I think that a lot of that is a tech-driven culture that equates artists with "creatives" and holds nebulous "creativity" and "disruption"—a cringeworthy word—in high regard.

Should artists guard against that confusion?

In New York, the price of a WeWork membership is cheaper than an artist studio. An artist could just go to work at WeWork, but that sounds awful. They'd be role-playing as themselves, in a perverse way, and their work would be reduced to one of those stock images, an artist working on a laptop. Co-working spaces are so much about a performance of creativity—you show up, get your latte, and... Someone non-art related asked me, what do you do, do you go to WeWork or something? No, I go to the public library.