

Anastasia Sosunova *Employee of the Month*

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"When everyone acknowledges their own imperfection, we do not drown each other in the well of self-importance. We do not search for perfect leaders to work for us. Let us connect everything we have, the best that a human can have: wisdom, truth, faith and love."

- Quote on the wall of a Senukai hardware store in Kaunas from its founder Augustinas Rakauskas.

A faux cake made of plaster and silicone lies on the floor of the gallery. Inside it, an engraved metal plate covered with a sticker depicting a faded sunset reads: 'Employee of the Month'.

Who knows who this cake is dedicated to - you may ask.

The CSSSD Kesko Senukai logo is mirrored on the surface of this cake. One of the largest DIY retail chains in Lithuania, supplying goods for house building, home repairs and improvement, Senukai stores were founded in 1992 by Augustinas Rakauskas, a Lithuanian businessman, spiritual leader and esoteric entrepreneur, as well as author of the books *The Spirit of Entrepreneurship* (2002) and *The Global Spirit of Feeling Mind* (2014). A man who believed in democracy, he started his business in Kaunas after his country regained its independence. According to a recent estimate, Kesko Senukai has just over 3,000 employees.

Taken as the title of Anastasia Sosunova's first solo exhibition at the gallery and in Milan, the slogan 'Employee of the Month' perfectly captures the spirit of fascination with the ethics behind some of the big DIY companies such as Senukai, OBI, Bricocenter, Tecnomat or Self, to name but a few. Reflecting on the principles behind these corporate structures, business models and working environments means trying to read labour entrepreneurship as a religion and business ethics as a code and a devotion, as well as a set of beliefs that see self-improvement as the primary goal.

Informed by these thoughts on DIY store methods, politics and aesthetics, which may be extended to many workplaces, including freelance and art practices, this project - here in its initial research phase - reflects on the 'management of relationships and human desires in business' through the lens of a post-work society. The human desire to connect and to fill the psychological, relational and cultural space left by the absence of work is indeed as much an ideological and spiritual matter as it is an economic one.

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The clashes of guru-leader / modern company structure; occult economies / neoliberal economies; self-religion / do-it-yourself; company branding / esoteric symbolism; entrepreneurship or labour / salvation are dichotomies that form part of a broader investigation Sosunova is currently conducting. These clashes could be read as the correlation between a form of capitalism and the quest for an ethical code that also addresses certain iconographies, symbols, social norms and behaviour that coexist and affect our collective thinking, at a time in history when digital technology lets work invade our leisure time even more.

In Employee of the Month, some of these issues are traced and re-contextualised in relation to a fascination with the ethic and practical aesthetics of the major DIY hardware store where some structural and architectural elements serve to display the products and attract customers with billboards clearly visible from a distance. Following the same methodology, two aluminium plates layered with etchings on copper and zinc held by metal clamps and handmade ratchet belts hang from the gallery ceiling. Mounted on plywood boards and framed in cast transparent epoxy structures made by the artist in her studio, these panels feature offset photographs of the endless aisles of a Senukai store on both sides, along with zinc and copper etchings of imaginary ecstatic figures and monstrous beings. This choice and gesture not only emphasise a display that recalls the posters of discount ads and the exhibition-making strategies, but also mirror the 'logic' inherent to the Orthodox icon, with its constellation of visual references and storytelling around a subject, concept or notion. In thinking about these aisles, Sosunova recalls how there is a kind of sacred geometry in them, like in churches or in museums.

Suspended from the same metal supports, a sculpture made of a combination of white and grey styrene and pieces of fabric divides the space diagonally. On the wall, a plaque framed with aluminium reads: "PLACES OF POWER," aggressively carved into the wood. In another (hand-drawn) etching on zinc, the figure of the 'Worker' or 'Builder' – a Soviet proletarian Tom of Finland, as Sosunova elicits – evokes a public sculpture from 1983 by Lithuanian artist Antanas Dimžlys located in the Lazdynai district, Vilnius. This unintentionally homoerotic and euphoric depiction of a builder – already shown in a different guise for her exhibition Jubilee at Britta Rettberg, Munich, in 2021 – is thus a recurring figure in the artist's re-imagining of certain queer iconographies, here no longer a symbol of a utopian world-building labour, but rather as an ecstatic late-capitalist store employee, one of Senukai's 3,000 workers, maybe. Or a merely an 'anonymous' employee, one 'simply not real': a mythical figure, a fantasy, a patron saint.

Also from Jubilee is a relief print on paper and black ink of a Sun Mother in which – following the interpretation given by the Soviet author Andrei Platonov in his socio-philosophical novel *Chevengur* (1928) – the sun is portrayed as the only entity capable of providing for the material needs of the members of the commune who have "Recruited it [the Sun] for eternal work, and dismissed society forever." In Sosunova's version, the Sun Mother has a laptop in their/her left hand, reaching up. Linked to religious imagery, this picture also stems from the canonical representation of St John receiving the Apocalypse, in particular from the seventeenth-century fresco

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by Gury Nikitin, also depicted in the *Apocalypse* by Albrecht Dürer, a woodcut from 1498 showing the Saint devouring the Book.

Through the combination of different materials and tools from various hardware stores (mainly from Senukai but also from DEPO, OBI and the Home Depot), the amalgam of techniques, symbols, visual narratives and history of imagery associated with propaganda, advertising, post work-society and to some extent with religion, *Employee of the Month* turns its attention to the emergence of suspended narratives that Sosunova has woven together in multiple visual registers which do not necessarily belong together. Whether viewed individually or as part of a wider and staged installation, the works focus on the collision between the process of DIY production (handcrafted, hand-shaped, scratched, painted, cut and carved) as a means for re-appropriating and activating personal connections with the post-work ideas and escaping from alienation, as well as the collective capitalist logic behind certain corporate and agency impulses on which the results of so many of our activities depend. Understanding this collision can become a means of creating a more open, fulfilling and spiritual reality where “wisdom, truth, faith and love” coexist in work and life, both as individuals and collectively.

But as the feminist thinker Lynne Segal reminds us in her book *Radical Happiness: Moments of Collective Joy* (2017), “He [William Davies] illustrates [in his book *The Happiness Industry*], how an employer’s seemingly benevolent attention to the apparent cheeriness of their workers can easily become a way of further manipulating and controlling them – by perhaps literally monitoring smiles.”

I wonder whether this cake is ultimately dedicated to us. And you made it.

Giovanna Manzotti

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Anastasia Sosunova (b. 1993 Lithuania) lives and works in Vilnius.

In her multidisciplinary practice, Anastasia Sosunova explores the power of systems of control, traditions and religious or enigmatic beliefs to shape the behaviour of individuals and communities today. Through a reflection on understanding and analysing the economic and spiritual structures of her surroundings – in particular with reference to Eastern Europe and Lithuania – the artist envisions arenas in which personal and collective stories, memories of past events, legends, secular faiths and the reinterpretation of ancient mythologies co-exist and interweave.

Sosunova works in various modes and media, combining graphics, sculpture, video and installation, in which the acts of worldbuilding and experiencing forms of alternative narrative emerge in realms defined by migrating and hybrid iconographies as well as by multi-layered identities. The unearthing of complex stories, rituals and collective psychologies, re-interpreted in what the artist describes as “an alternative form of contemporary folklore” – something “which teaches me that anything can be made up and everything can become a story, a speaking symbol” – are constant threads running through Sosunova’s work, as are the intersections of memory, fiction and social norms that, through their reframing, shape the contours of our contemporary condition. As the artist stated in a 2021 interview: “I like thinking about most of human culture this way, detecting prayer-charged sites, objects and rituals of the mundane.”

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