

Shamiran Istifan at Basel Social Club 2026

June 14th - June 20th 2026

In the words of Supervillain Sam Altman: “*“Successful people create companies. More successful people create countries. The most successful people create religions.” I heard this from Qi Lu; I’m not sure what the source is. It got me thinking, though--the most successful founders do not set out to create companies. They are on a mission to create something closer to a religion, and at some point it turns out that forming a company is the easiest way to do so. In general, the big companies don’t come from pivots, and I think this is most of the reason why.*”

At Basel Social Club 2026, we present two installations by Shamiran Istifan that deal with the current condition of white collar work and workers. Her presentation circles the expectations of the corporate office, wherein one must increasingly perform devotion, compliance, and selflessness, all tracked and evaluated in order to assign worth to a working person (rather than to their work per se), both within The Company’s hierarchy and beyond. You must assign omnipotence to the tenets of late-stage capitalism. You must *be* your job, in doing so declare your destiny. Money = success and non-compliance = destitution. Such an extreme relationship evokes the zero-sum edicts of late-stage religions, wherein you can again choose only one way to relate: devotion begets eternal salvation; ambivalence, hellish misery. All these demands are undergirded by a rainbow of track-keeping and pace-measuring devices.

Shamiran’s work is couched in productivity-surveillance. She combines the aesthetic languages of ancient religions and digitized workplaces in an attempt to materialize modern workers’ anxieties. Both trap people in circular procedural frameworks wherein worth must be demonstrated regularly to avoid grave consequences. God and AI are watching, measuring your behavior down to the split second.

The two works both lie at different ends of a branching subterranean hallway at the labyrinthine open plan office complex that this season’s Basel Social Club occupies. One branch of it terminates in a poetically bleak utility room, the other at the nexus of a dark passageway that again traverses the bowels of the building. In this latter location, Istifan’s luminous curtain beckons, spelling out the word “Family”, invoking the central human bond no leading authority dares to question, if only to invoke it *in abstracto* in order to desubliminate its power to suggest loving horizontality, while reasserting old and hidden hierarchies. The Corporation = The Family. Here, the term floats as a curtain, to be passed through into a dark realm of materialised metaphors: the underbelly of the postmodern office.

At the second location meanwhile, Istifan has set up a kind of altar that continues her series of chrome-colored pillow works with cherubs sewn into them, next to whom hovers an all-seeing electronic eye. Visitors meet three of the ancient supernatural beings known for gentle guardianship. Here they lord over a literal surveillance apparatus; heavenly protection morphs into suspicion. The cushiony material nods to the office spaces transformed into ‘fun zones’ in the naughties, aimed at increasing worker’ productivity by keeping them swaddled and confined to the office. The system over which the angles here preside captures low-res images of visitors that linger long enough for its facial-recognition software, then prints these out with a randomly assigned motivational quote. Visitors can take these or leave them to sediment.

- KJP & EF, 2026