

# DECISIONS, DECISIONS, DECISIONS: AMBER BOARDMAN'S CARTOON WORLDS

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In Max Weber's assessment, twentieth-century modern life was confronted by the spread of 'disenchantment' – from the German *Entzauberung*, which literally translates to 'de-magic-ation'. Borrowed from Friedrich Schiller, disenchantment describes the negative effects of scientific reason and bureaucratic regulation, which fail to bring about superior knowledge of the conditions under which one lives. In contrast to Marx, Weber held that modernity could be an 'iron cage' precisely because of its success. This has less to do with class inequality or alienation than with how the processes that allow the human intellect to soar are the same ones that produce meaninglessness; rationalisation dispirits as it uplifts. The specialised self-regulating structures of twentieth-century life were, Weber thought, ill-equipped to handle older human needs for spiritual closure, for taking positions on rhetorical unrationalisable questions of self-worth. Morality, myth and happiness are tempered by the calculability of everything, which may not be a completely bad thing for those whose public duty is to represent heterogeneous moral and political ends. In a pithy iconoclastic tone redolent of Marshall McLuhan, Weber states: 'Today the routines of everyday life challenge religion.'<sup>1</sup>

Flash forward about 100 years or so to a world in which re-enchantment routines are everywhere in an effort to ameliorate the effects of a contemporary moment that is always in the shadow of its update. Of course, in the background of Weber's 1917 assessment, unacknowledged, were the avant-gardes' own attempts to fill the disenchantment vacuum, at about the same time that advertising was making giant leaps forward in the guise of what Edward Bernays called 'public relations'. In other words, the re-enchantment industry is about as old as the disenchantment diagnosis, to the point that it is now difficult to determine if we are perhaps mostly disenchanted by the superabundance of re-enchantment options: the anomalous contemporary practices of what Jane Bennett terms a 'wonder-disabled' world.<sup>2</sup> Skirting Weber's matter-of-factness, Bennett proposed in 2001 that we should reinvest in the wondrousness of matter as a way to

potentialise an ethical orientation that encourages 'a stance of presumptive generosity (i.e., of rendering oneself more open to the surprise of other selves and bodies and more willing and able to enter into productive assemblages with them)'.<sup>3</sup> But this, too, sounds like another hollow re-enchantment option, one which deploys Deleuzian materialities of becoming to avoid moral prescription, despite the fact that such open 'co-mingling' metaphors really only ever jibe with the left.

How to represent neoliberal disenchantment without opting for frictionless connectivity or one-dimensional cynicism? This is a question repeatedly posed in the work of the Sydney-based artist Amber Boardman, a painter who renders the anguished expectations of our algorithmic times in cartoonish unreality. Born and raised in the United States before relocating to Australia in 2012, Boardman makes figurative paintings attuned to the contemporary splintering of the universal into a multiplicity of differences. Probably every generation of artists after Weber saw themselves as addressing something similar; however, when the backdrop changes, so do the problems. Today, a new cast of concepts are in town: individuated wellness regimes; data-driven politics; non-binary binaries; the anachronism of three-dimensional space; and what Fran Lebowitz (shadowing Slavoj Žižek) ascribes to social media, 'friends without friends'. If, since the 1990s, life has been about the constant reshaping of multiple performed identities, Boardman, in response, suggests that self-malleability can be exhausting.

'Decision Fatigue', Boardman's recent 2021 exhibition at Sydney's Chalk Horse, yielded paintings of supermarkets, dating apps, home renovations, porn thumbnails, clothing racks and dour-looking student portraits. Of course, pop first put this issue of endless consumer decision-making at the forefront of art, in homage to the 1960s neologism 'lifestyle' which spread throughout the world. Today, with even more information at our disposal – and more markets – flâneurial window-shopping is a finger swipe away. Unlike pop, impersonality doesn't really cut it in Boardman's world. That said, neither does outright passion. The apparent