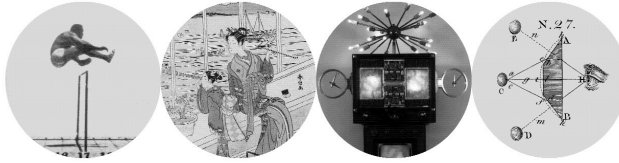# journal of visual culture

Geekospheres: Visual Culture and Material Culture at Work

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Abstract
This photo essay documents a kind of space that is called, in cyber jargon, the *geekosphere*. Geekospheres are the personal spaces that computer users create around their monitors, using trinkets, toys, mottoes, images and other emphemera. These highly individualized assemblages are not simply sites for personal expression. Rather, they often serve as vehicles for coded statements about the workplace and the experience of work.

Keywords
computers • new media • work

There is a name for the space around the computer screen: *geekosphere*. Netlingo.com, an online dictionary of cyberslang, defines the geekosphere as a space in which, 'trinkets, mementos, toys, and monitor pets are displayed. This is the place where geeks can "show their colors"' [http://www. netlingo. com/inframes.cfm]. But computer nerds aren't the only people who decorate their desktop space, or have an interest in what it looks like. You may not be a nerd, but if you work with a computer, there's a good chance that you have personalized it in some fashion. Perhaps you display photographs of pets, friends, family members and loved ones. Or perhaps you've saved a motto from a fortune cookie or a calendar and taped it to the side of the screen. Or maybe you've decorated your monitor with a flag, or a mandala, or a paperweight, or a stuffed animal. Even if you shake your head as you read this, thinking, 'Not me. I keep my computer monitor completely bare. No toys and cute little action figures for me', your minimalism is still a chosen form of expression.

What moods, pressures, practices, and desires shape the way geekospheres look? Hardware certainly plays a role in determining the geekosphere

aesthetic. Laptop owners, for example, must resort to stickers in their quests to personalize their screens. Geekospheres also reflect current trends. At the university where I work, a craze for Homies – popular miniature plastic figures depicting Black and Latino youth style – swept the geekospheres of administrative offices, turning Dells and Macs into tiny stage sets for hip urban tableaux. But geekospheres are not simply spaces of personal expression at work. They also reflect the conditions under which electronic labor takes place. Some employers tolerate geekosphere aesthetics. SUN microsystems in Australia even held a competition inviting workers to submit photographs of their geekospheres to the company newsletter [http://www.sun.com.au/news/onsun/1997–12/page14.html]. But more commonly, corporate employers restrict the numbers and types of personal items that can appear on desks and screensavers. Such rules limit office geekospheres to the generic trilogy: a balloon, a philodendron plant, and a formal portrait of a spouse or child.

I have been gathering photographs of people's geekospheres in a variety of workplaces, among them places of higher learning, medical offices, and retail stores, for a few years now (McCarthy, 2002).[1] This project began as a coda to a previous one, which used photographs to analyze the roles played by television sets in public places (McCarthy, 2001). As in this earlier project, these photographs are a way of pinpointing the place of the screen within the power relations and struggles that define a particular location. But the computer monitor has turned out to be a challenging subject for a photographic study. Whereas TV sets in public turn out to be strikingly photogenic, computers photograph quite badly. The grimy and often windowless locations in which electronic work takes place require the use of a flash, which over-illuminates the space and obliterates the image on the screen. Papers, water bottles and sticky notes clutter the frame. This ugliness, along with the very familiarity of the computer as an object, made the first few pictures hard to look at, let alone analyze.

When I eventually learned to look at these pictures of workspaces (see Figures 1 to 10), it became clear that one particular decorative tactic cropped up time and again, in different forms, from one geekosphere to another. This is the use of objects, images and words to say something about one's relationship to work and to co-workers. I call this mode of computer decoration a *tactic* because it is piecemeal, opportunistic and often somewhat covert (De Certeau, 1984: xv). A defiantly arranged stand of stuffed bears (Figure 5), a judiciously placed selection of framed family photographs (Figure 1), a humorously misanthropic cartoon, all of these assemblages communicate things to bosses, co-workers and clients that can't be spoken directly. The geekosphere, in other words, is not just a space of personal expression, it is also a space where workplace politics and power relations play out, often quite visibly.

In many cases, the geekosphere's elements speak volumes specifically about the experience of information- and knowledge-based work, and they make very visible the impermanences and speedups that define the electronic workplace. An administrator in an understaffed academic center decorates

her screen with an inspirational image: gun-toting Jane Fonda as Barbarella (Figure 8). In another office, a temporary worker tapes a picture of Andrew Mellon, whose foundation funds her position, at the bottom of the screen (Figure 7). Geekospheres speak to professional anxieties and frustrations too. Writers decorate their screens in ways that help them deal with the demons of procrastination, or to demarcate the limits of the workplace at home. One transfers a worn index card bearing the phrase 'just crank it out' to the frame of her monitor whenever she upgrades to a new computer (Figure 9). Another covers the screen with a cloth to signal the end of the workday and, by raising the cloth on the television screen, the beginning of leisure time (Figure 10). Computer screens, in short, are not just featureless gateways to a virtual elsewhere. Like TV sets, they are also objects that communicate across shorter distances, in the institutionalized, routinized, material world of the electronic workplace.

Figure 1
Family photographs prevent co-workers from piling papers on top of a medical secretary's computer monitor. Photograph by the author.
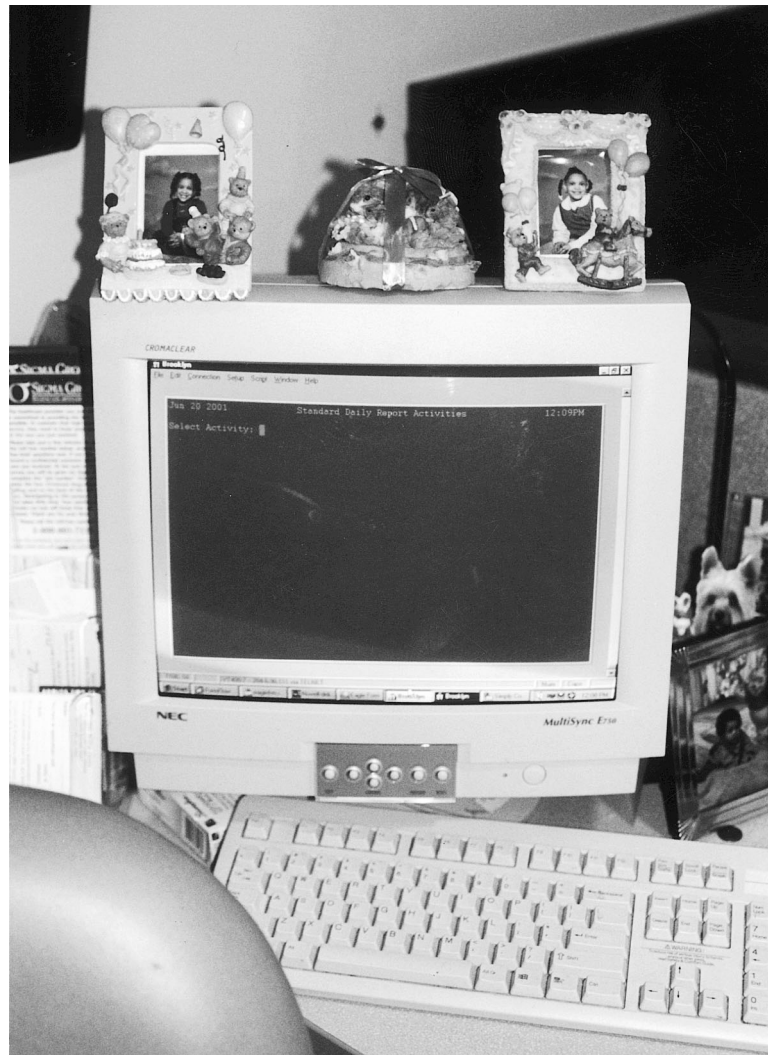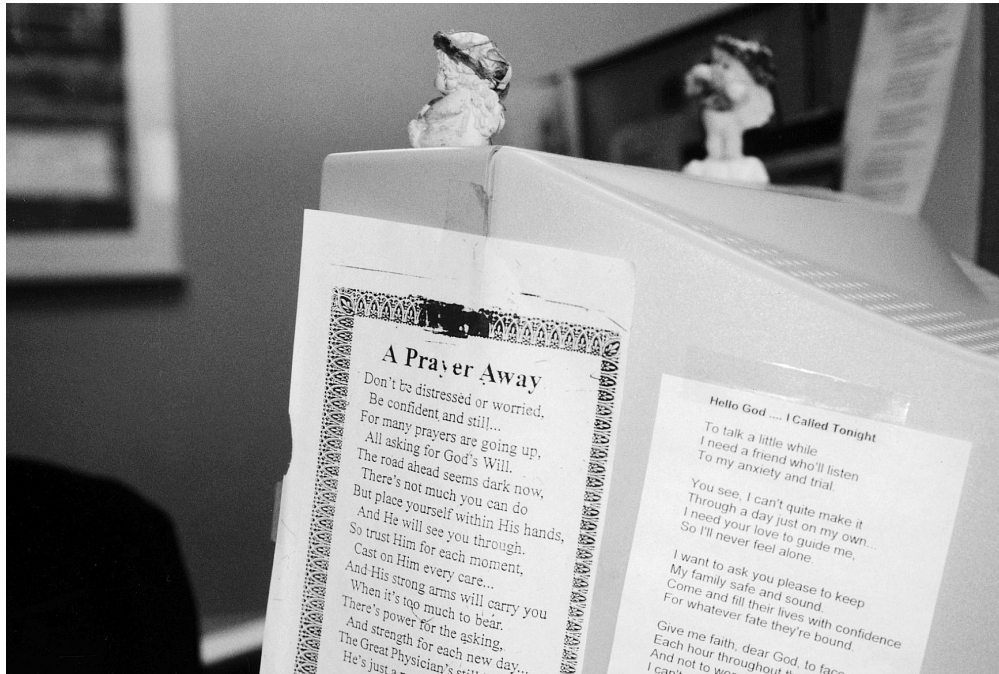
Figure 2 This computer monitor in a hospital laboratory displays inspirational religious messages for patients awaiting test results. Photograph by the author.
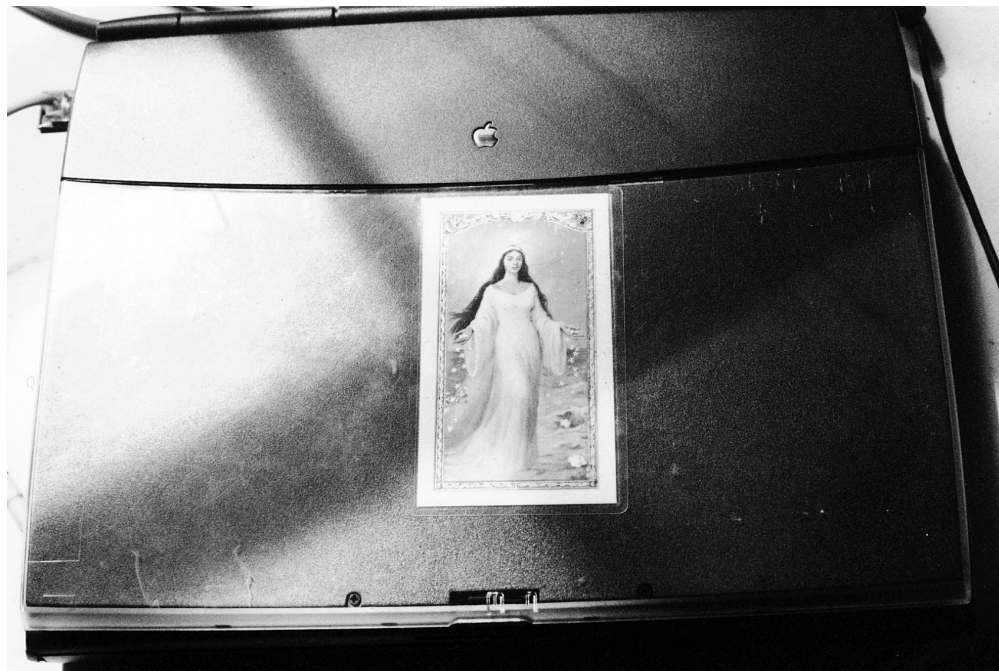

Figure 3 Laptop adorned with an image of a female deity. Photograph by the author.

Figure 4 Laptop adorned with college sports team stickers. Photograph by the author.

Figure 5 A geekosphere created by two librarians who share a passion for teddy bear collecting. Photograph by the author.

Figure 6 Small plastic animals and an engraved pebble decorate the disk drive of an administrator in an academic department. Photograph by the author.

Figure 7 Portrait of Andrew Mellon on grant-funded employee's computer. Photograph by the author.
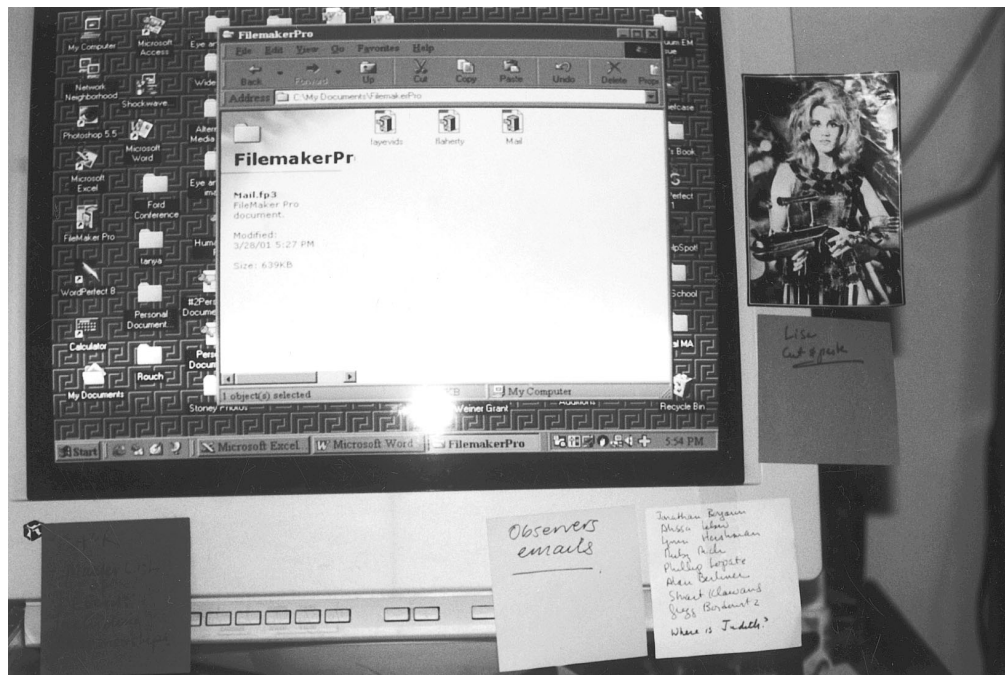
Figure 8 Barbarella as workplace persona. Photograph by the author.

Figure 9 A writer's 'note to self'.
Photograph by the author.

Figure 10 The cloth covering the computer screen marks the end of the workday. Photograph by the author.

Note

1. In addition to the photographs included here, there are many images of geekospheres on the internet. Some can be seen online at the following sites:[http://www.fotolog.net/cubist/; http://www.anigami.com/jimwich/ jimwich_archives/Geekosphere/JIMWICH_Geekosphere.html; http://www.geekculture.com/geeklove/geeksphr.html].

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[http://www.anigami.com/jimwich/jimwich_archives/Geekosphere/ JIMWICH_Geekosphere.html]

[http://www.geekculture.com/geeklove/geeksphr.html]

Anna McCarthy is an Associate Professor of Cinema Studies in New York University's Tisch School of the Arts. She is the author of *Ambient Television: Visual Culture and Public Space* (Duke University Press, 2001) and editor, with Nick Couldry, of *MediaSpace: Place, Scale and Culture in a Media Age* (Routledge, 2004).

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