



Eva Díaz

Ron Clark, the director of the Whitney Museum's Independent Study Program (ISP), gave me a painting by Ellen Harvey in the early 2000s. It's a small oil painting on wood, about 10 by 12 inches, and is made in Harvey's characteristic photorealistic style—literally photorealistic, as it mimics the look of a Polaroid, with a white border that is wider at the bottom than on the sides and top. The work depicts the sign that hung outside the ISP on Broadway in lower Manhattan as seen from the standpoint of a person craning their neck to take it in from the sidewalk. The pale blue sign reads "FANTASY" in white block letters stacked vertically, with the numbers of the address, 384, in small white letters at the base.

Fantasy. Why fantasy?

Fantasy Fabrics was housed in the same building as the ISP, along with a few sweatshops that all seemed to produce cheap women's suits.

I was a student in the ISP in 1998–1999, and later worked there for nearly a decade, so I suffered the nightmare of trying to find a new home for a radical Marxist non-profit visual art program in a tight Manhattan real-estate market at the height of the tech boom. For in 1999, the program was evicted from 384 Broadway, along with the sweatshops and Fantasy Fabrics.

And when we left, the "FANTASY" sign also came down. That year, 1999, is also when filming began on *Startup.com*, D. A. Pennebaker, Chris Hegedus, and Jehane Noujaim's 2001 documentary profiling the failed internet start-up govWorks.com. Today, 17 years later, I still have not forgiven govWorks.com for kicking the ISP out of the cavernous loft at 384 Broadway that had been its home for more than 25 years.

GovWorks.com occupied the building for a mere eight or so months before folding.

Like the ISP, I struggle to maintain a toehold in New York City, which is now riddled with cheaply made "luxury" condos offering "one bedrooms starting at \$3,500." Hell no, not on an art worker's salary. This narrative is nothing new; it was also 17 years ago that 250 curatorial assistants and other clerical workers went on a four-and-a-half-month strike at MoMA, which was paying many of its striking employees full-time salaries as low as \$17,000 per year. I currently live in a rental in Rockaway Beach, Queens. Living more than an hour from "the city" is symptomatic of many artists' and writers' problems with the long-brewing—from Rudy Giuliani to Michael Bloomberg to Donald Trump—let-them-eat-cake attitude about screwing the poor and middle classes out of the metropolis. The first tech boom in part birthed the problems of diminished access to the city for those who do not single-mindedly pursue financial gain, problems that gestated in the Third Wayism of the Clintonian and Blairite neoliberal years. Then 9/11 brought down the hammer of quality-of-life policing and limitations on rent stabilization, continuing to cleanse the city of economic and racial diversity in the name of public safety and corporate free markets.

Hating on govWorks.com for so long, I hadn't considered ever watching the film. Yet for many reasons the year 2000 is in the air these days—y'all never thought George W. Bush nostalgia could be a thing, right?—and the govWorks.com catastrophe offers a means to come to terms with the social and economic contradictions of living in the urban United States today.

GovWorks.com was founded in 1998 by former Amherst, Massachusetts, high-school buddies Kaleil Isaza Tuzman and Tom Herman to act as a mediator between local government services and web-savvy citizens. A marketing video produced by the company portentously, and with strange impertinence, proclaimed: “We are all endowed with certain inalienable rights. You have the right to apply for a fishing license from your home at 3:15 in the morning. . . . You have the right to attend a town meeting in your underwear.”

The film reveals how, using this gossamer-thin business plan, govWorks.com raised an astounding \$60 million between May 1999 and December 2000, and by April 2000 had grown to 250 employees. But rather than developing the proposition they advertised, CEO Tuzman, a charismatic, Harvard-educated former Goldman Sachs analyst with the physique of a rugby player, and Herman, his less confident, bearded and bespectacled CTO, parade in and out of venture-capital offices, profiting from what seems to be a bottomless supply of millions in “start-up” capital. After one successful pitch, CFO José Feliciano crows to Tuzman: “I think we’re going to go IPO in eight months. . . . You’re going to be a billionaire. I’m going to be a lowly millionaire, but that’s okay.”

Lauded in the business media as “dot-com dreammakers,” and a “leader of the ‘revolution,’” govWorks.com ran through the \$60 million in less than three years with no income stream to balance their losses. The company had already collapsed by the time *Startup.com* was released; paying all those salaries, in addition to footing the now sky-high rent to secure the building on Broadway, meant govWorks.com was hemorrhaging \$1 million monthly in overhead expenses—more than the ISP spent every two years.



DoubleClick billboard, New York, New York, 2000.

As Tuzman’s girlfriend, Dora, remarks in the film: “This whole govWorks situation has a very human side to it, because you see a bunch of guys acting very grown up with their ties and their cufflinks and their pens and their credit cards. They’re such grown-up gentlemen. But you know what, they’re not!” Lest you feel too sorry for these men, with their adolescent delusions of masculinity, the film portrays countless moments of mind-boggling hypocrisy, greed, and pettiness, and captures two familiar tech-industry predilections: spinning a seemingly innovative way to enrich yourself as a beneficial cause for the public at large, and the dressing up of selfishness and rapaciousness as forms of spiritual growth.

Tuzman listens to Vedic chants in his car, bows to newcomers in humble greet-

ing, and makes prayer hands in gratitude with distressing frequency. Herman comes across as similarly unhinged, his management logorrhea masquerading as a positive social value. While leading a company retreat at his parents’ New England summer camp, he delivers a speech to his underlings exemplifying the blather of corporate mindfulness: his parents’ forest, he reveals, “is one of the more special places, actually, in my life. . . . If you’re all really silent you can hear the wind going through the pine needles up above in really remarkable fashion, and it makes it an even more special place to meditate.” The camera pans around the awkwardly silent, smirking, and eye-rolling “team” of employees angling their heads up to the sky. When Tuzman eventually double-crosses Herman, termi-

nating his employment in May 2000 by way of a curt two-sentence yet incredibly legalese-riddled letter—a TARDIS of a letter—Tuzman is then filmed seated alone in his office, eyes closed, intoning a mantra.

An establishing shot of *Startup.com* shows a close-up of the massive billboard that once dominated the triangular intersection of Broadway, Madison Avenue, and 22nd Street in Manhattan. “DoubleClick welcomes you to Silicon Alley,” the sign proclaimed in bold white text on a black background. I know precisely where this billboard was located because rich college friends rented an upper-floor apartment in the high-rise opposite the ad. In 1999 these friends were paying \$2,500 a month for a one bedroom in the doorman building, while my then boyfriend and I paid \$1,075 a month for a roach-y one-bedroom railroad apartment on the border of Sunset Park in Brooklyn. South Park Slope, the landlord euphemistically called it.

As a 21-year-old with no financial assets, I didn’t feel very welcome in Silicon Alley, or really anywhere in Manhattan. Working part time at the ISP, I supplemented my income with a gig as a legal secretary, but not before taking some cheesy and humiliating jobs. I was once a greeter at the New York Shoe Expo, which required me to don a beauty-queen-like red banner across my chest while pushing the elevator button for credentialed visitors. “Wear a short skirt and heels,” I was told.

Money, money, money. The wealth and expense of the city astonished me. Those trying to make their fortunes quickly were mouthy and pitiless, like the corporate lawyers I worked for. *Startup.com* is a picture of that avarice. But more deplorable was the silence of entitlement that cloaked those with privilege. Coming from San Bernardino, California—a decidedly unwealthy area

Mike Davis once termed “the junkyard of dreams”—and attending UC Berkeley on a full scholarship, I hadn’t ever encountered inherited wealth before. What can you say to rich friends across the unspeakable divide of class inequality? “Why doesn’t society do a better job at redistributing the ‘independent’ wealth you inherited for no reason other than having won a perverse lottery: a lifetime of advantage bestowed in utero?”

No, you just pay your half of the dinner check and wait for the train back to your fourth-floor walk-up in Sunset Park, while your rich friends hop in a crosstown cab to their swank buildings and bowing doormen.

Millions of little tech bubbles began to burst on Friday, April 14, 2000, a record-setting bad day on Wall Street. Even rich friends complained about how, seemingly overnight, their trusts had lost significant value, as overly wrapped up in tech-stock speculation as their “portfolios” were. The urban fabric, ripped apart by the influx of tech capital, was in tatters when the implosion of these firms left vacant buildings throughout Silicon Alley and other downtown neighborhoods.

But lots of people in New York and around the world made money shorting tech, and this new money stitched the urban fabric together in disconcerting new ways. The deindustrialization of Chinatown, Tribeca, and Soho continued, though the failed start-up offices that had kicked out the sweatshops were converted to luxury lofts, and ground-floor art galleries became luxury boutiques to service the newcomers: those rising in the Wall Street hedge-fund culture and the rich kids who had wisely reinvested their trusts, especially with all-cash purchases of Manhattan real estate. What had happened to Soho over 30 years happened to Williamsburg and Chelsea in 5 to 10 years:

deindustrialization, artists as pioneers of a frontier of gentrification, commercial art galleries in storefronts, next boutiques and cafés, then evictions and luxury high-rise condos tearing down three- and four-story apartment buildings.

Bubble and fabric: one evanescent, one delicate. Nothing like the rock of a fat bank account and the deed to a Manhattan apartment. And yet, the excision of economic diversity from central areas of Manhattan and Brooklyn means I rarely go to those places any longer. And yet there are more of us than them. Pulp’s 1990s pop anthem “Common People,” one of the great indictments of upper-class privilege, was released when I was 17: “You will never understand / How it feels to live your life / With no meaning or control / And with nowhere left to go. / You are amazed that they exist / And they burn so bright, / Whilst you can only wonder why. . . . / You’ll never live like common people.”

I have to reupholster a couple of fantastic 1950s vinyl Jetsons-inspired chairs I bought on the street for 10 bucks in “South Park Slope,” back in 1998, that first year I moved to New York. Taking the bus home to Rockaway from the city, I noticed a sign for a fabric store in Ozone Park, Queens. There aren’t many fabric stores left in Manhattan, as you can imagine, so I’ll check this one out soon.

Eva Díaz teaches at Pratt Institute in Brooklyn. She is author of *The Experimenters: Chance and Design at Black Mountain College* (2015). Her forthcoming book, *After Spaceship Earth*, is on the influence of R. Buckminster Fuller in contemporary art, with a particular focus on how the space “race” and colonization can be reformulated as powerful means to readdress economic, gender, and racial inequality, as well as ecological injustice.

Page 62: Ellen Harvey, *Low Tech Special Effects: Fantasy*, 1999.