

DESK

MEDIA AND MATERIALITIES AT WORK

BOUND

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Unsettling the Scene of Writing: From the Reign of the Desk to Writing in Transit

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Give me silence only, a desk, books,
And solitude and undivided time,
And like a lark cheering towards the heights
My mind swings on a liberated wing,
And the present, the ancient and the future, earth and heaven,
And everything I touch will resound in verse.¹

Anders Robert von Kraemer, *Diamanter i stenkol* (1857)

My energy derives from movement—from the shuddering of buses, the rumble of planes, trains’ and ferries’ rocking. [---] I’ve learned to write on trains and in hotels and waiting rooms. On the tray tables on planes. I take notes at lunch, under the table, or in the bathroom. I write in museum stairwells, in cafés, in the car on the shoulder of the motorway.²

Olga Tokarczuk, *Flights* (2007)

“The desk as we know it, is as good as dead,” Dutch designer Frans Willigers claimed as he was presenting his new design, the Last Writing Desk, in 2016. According to Willigers, the traditional, heavy, and capacious desk with drawers had become useless in face of new ways of working and the general use of laptops. Work and writing, obviously, could be performed anywhere and on any imaginable surface. As noted by media scholar José van Dijck, writing has become an increasingly social venture that “happens everywhere” and “fills all pockets of time and space.”³ The Last Writing Desk, a streamlined hybrid between chair and table, embodied this transition from sedentary and place-bound work to a situation increasingly marked by mobility, movement, and spatial flexibility. Simultaneously challenging long-standing notions about writing as a solitary, private, and domestic activity, the Last Writing Desk was “ready for departure” and custom-made for momentary work in semi-public spaces such as the airport.⁴

With the proliferation of desk-less offices and ergonomic alarms about “sitting as the new smoking,” the paradigm of mobility—induced by the promises of digital technology—certainly seems to imply that the days of the writing desk are numbered.⁵ But the writing desk is not merely a piece of furniture whose significance is limited to material properties and actual work habits; and the prophesy about its demise entails more than the introduction of novel work-life ideologies and the physical wellbeing of office workers.

Since its rise into more common use in the 13th century, the writing desk has acquired a standing as something of a primal scene in the genealogy of modern civilization and culture.⁶ Through its intimate connection with highly esteemed intellectual and elusive activities such as writing and thinking, the writing desk has been awarded an elevated position as a material and symbolic site of literary invention. As the centerpiece of the private study, it is part of an emblematic topography of literary creation, and it occupies a vital position in what one may call an iconic “scene of writing” or “theater of composition.”⁷ On the one hand, the desk may be seen as a technology that enables writing and literature, and as a writing tool that is “also working on our thoughts,” as Nietzsche would have it.⁸ In this vein media historian Markus Krajewski has argued that the writing desk is a piece of “thought furniture” (*Denkmöbel*), without which neither the production of literature nor the material practice of writing can be fully realized.⁹ On the other hand, desks can be said to serve a more symbolic function, as tangible signs of “the experiential vacuities known as reading and writing,” or as “the material counterweights to the lightness of thought.”¹⁰ In this way, literary scholar Andrew Piper suggests, the desk is, or has until recently been, about “locating this kind of mental and physical labor in space.”¹¹

If the reign of the desk is really coming to an end, this is an event that merits serious consideration; we need to ask what the desk represents, why it is being ditched, and with what possible consequences. Is the fall of the writing desk to be interpreted as a premonition of the very end of writing and literature altogether, or as an anticipated liberation of writing from spatial constraints as well as ceremonious expectations about solitude and silence?

Figure 2.1. The Last Writing Desk (design by Frans Willigers 2016). Intended for momentary work in public spaces, Williger’s design embodies a transition from place-bound and sedentary work to a paradigm of mobility and spatial flexibility. Reproduced by kind permission of Frans Willigers.

