

Laugh Out Loud

(Human) Robots

From across the Internet, it is not always easy to tell a human from a robot. After spammers outsmarted an earlier version of the reCAPTCHA test, which involved typing in the letters or numbers in an image, Google, its owner, now uses a secret algorithm that is based on how “human” your behavior is: how you move your mouse, if you always click in the same way, how quickly you react.¹ You invisibly cross over the human/robot line many times a day, and likely don’t even know you are doing so—until you do something a little too mechanically, and a prompt pops up, asking you to prove you are human. Because these tests are behavioral, they are essentially arbitrary: how do you define what “human” behavior is? Search the web too quickly, and Google will challenge you to prove you are not scraping its results. Interact too slowly with a video—for example, by letting it autoplay in the background—and YouTube will ask you to show that you’re still there. What is the “right” amount of interaction for a human? Worse, these definitions of “human” are often exclusionary: some algorithms look upon web browsers that don’t load images with suspicion, reasoning that robots typically speed things up by requesting only a web page’s text—but persons with visual disabilities may also forgo images.²

That tests for humans can be fraught with inequality is not surprising if we take a wider historical view: as critical race scholars point out, race was invented as a technology “for differentiating subjects from objects.”³ Sylvia

Wynter has shown that Eurocentric culture has repeatedly fashioned “humanity” in its image by distancing itself from what it imagined to be non-humans or subhumans.⁴ In a previous moment of automation, for example, white Detroit auto workers blamed their Japanese counterparts for layoffs during the 1980s, and stereotyped Asians and Asian Americans as embodying the robotic. To take a closer look at the line between human and robot online, then, must be about more than detecting fraud.⁵ In a logistical system that fuses together human and robotic work, and in a moment when the idea we typically most associate with humanness, emotion, is slowly being imitated and automated by artificial intelligence, examining the human/robot line is also to examine the uneasy junction of race, work, and emotion in our digital environment.

Consider this example: in 2018, thousands of fake accounts bearing gray, crudely drawn avatars suddenly appeared on Twitter. Though each account bore biographical descriptions, for instance about their aspirations for social justice, their creators—a group of alt-right trolls on boards such as Reddit—also gave them expressionless faces, and account names such as NPC4921337. NPC is an abbreviation for “non-player character,” and it refers to computer-generated characters in video games that are pre-programmed to interact with human players in certain ways, such as saying canned lines about the weather. The trolls invoked the NPC’s mechanical bearing and scripted responses to mock the supposed inability of liberals to think for themselves. In this rhetoric, NPC-like liberals are “completely dependent on their programming,” spouting the same one-liners about deposing Trump or killing capitalists as a result.⁶ Indeed, the profiles’ “About Me” sections often contain pseudocode depicting their internal “programming”; referring to Trump, one typical profile reads “if(man.Color == Color.ORANGE) man.Bad = true.”⁷

However gray and colorless, these avatars were typically intended to represent (and belittle) persons of color: one avatar evoked the football player and activist Colin Kaepernick, while other avatars tweeted about “graycism” and used the hashtag #GrayLivesMatter.⁸ Several meme creators also used NPC avatars to illustrate and represent the conspiracy theory that African Americans have been “brainwashed” by the media to vote Democratic (or so people like Kanye West argue).⁹ In this dismaying line of thought, so-called free thinkers see persons of color as lethargic drones who merely imitate the look of humanness but are unable to think for themselves.

While the NPC memes may represent an extremist worldview, the logic underlying them is in fact commonplace; that logic is what Sianne Ngai terms “animatedness,” the old stereotype of racialized subjects as excessively

or minimally emotional and expressive—and, simultaneously, puppetlike and lacking control over their own bodies, as if they had been animated by another.¹⁰ Whether Asian Americans stereotyped as repressed and unfeeling robots that are emotionally inscrutable, Mexican migrants as automatons for manufacturing and construction, or African Americans as hypersexualized and overly emotional bodies that are always out of control, animatedness becomes a technology through which subjects are racialized. What's especially interesting for a discussion on bots is that Ngai's thinking links animatedness to a problem of media. Writing in 2005, she observes that the largest "live" events on television (OJ Simpson, Rodney King, 9/11) all transmit the spectacle of racialized bodies. Liveliness, spontaneity, and zeal, Ngai speculates, draw their force from the liveness of the medium, allowing television to become a device to display and train us in racial difference. Just as television teaches its viewers to appreciate the "spontaneous" and the "lively," digital platforms implant norms about animatedness in the very idea of the user, even if those norms refer now to acceptable amounts of sociality, interactivity, and expressivity.

Racial animatedness is readily visible in the world of gaming, where the NPC meme originated. Examining the multiplayer game *World of Warcraft*, Lisa Nakamura has demonstrated that many players profile certain styles of repetitive motion and stilted speech in gameplay as "Asian," due to the historical presence of other players based in China who engaged in a practice of mining virtual gold for sale offline—so-called gold farmers.¹¹ Likening the gameplay of asocial or noninteracting characters to NPCs or nonhumans opens the door for everyone else to target them with vitriol, violence, or in-game death. Nakamura's example shows how a crude racial logic is reinscribed onto data bodies, despite the absence of visible signs of race; after all, every actor is an arbitrary animation on-screen. To make this distinction between human and nonhuman therefore requires some fumbling about, since there is no "naturally" human state. As Wendy Chun writes, the idea of the human is instead "constantly created through the jettisoning of the Asian and Asian American other as robotic."¹²

There is some irony here. By focusing entirely on the work of making money, gold farmers anger other players who are attached to an idea about gaming and expressivity or "fun." Gold farmers aren't playing by the rules, paradoxically, because they are playing by the rules too well. In contrast, customers of gold farmers are wealthier players, often North American and European, who effectively outsource the repetitive work of mining gold to Asians so that they can focus on the more interesting or expressive parts of

gameplay. This dynamic underscores a racialized system of labor that is at the heart of many digital platforms for “fun,” sociality, or expressivity: liveliness is something that can be, and increasingly is, purchased from lower-wage microworkers elsewhere. More generally, microworkers quench the seemingly insatiable demand by persons and corporations—as well as the social algorithms that evaluate them—for popularity, for having an audience, for being liked. They can encompass thousands of computers or phones and laborers, and be employed to stream a song, watch a video, or click “like” on a post in the thousands and millions; they amount to a vast transfer of “likability” from the Global South to the Global North.

Yet the labor of human robots is imprecisely described by the metaphors we currently use to understand exploitation. Digital scholars often use the images of the “digital sweatshop” and the “maquiladora” to describe the labor system at the base of digital capitalism.¹³ However sympathetic I am to those ideas, it’s an open question of how the microworkers themselves might view and work within this labor system, or of how well those metaphors apply to the ordinary experience of digital environments. Mary L. Gray’s interviews with the on-demand laborers, often pejoratively referred to as clickworkers, showed that her subjects understand their job as one that “takes quite a bit of creativity and insight and judgment,” rather than as a series of menial, sweatshop-like tasks.¹⁴ And while scholars of digital labor tend to think only of microwork as clicking on images, moderating content, cleaning datasets, or converting images to text, these same platforms for microwork are increasingly used for the assembly and recirculation of emotional labor and care. While journalists and scholars typically attempt to humanize microworkers by emphasizing their aspirations for better lives, or by describing them as individuals entitled to (but deprived of) the same forms of meaningful work as their peers in wealthier countries, they nevertheless position microworkers’ lives just outside the category of the human; in the words of Kalindi Vora and Neda Atanasoski, they are surrogates for humanity.¹⁵

This precarious position—lacking agency and thus personhood—is a state that I call lethargy.¹⁶ From the outside, a lethargic body is enframed in the supply chain; a lethargic body looks robotic. The lethargic body is either less animated than a “proper” human or, paradoxically, overly animated, because in the latter case, the suggestion is that it is an automaton controlled by someone else: as the deprecating Internet jargon *sock puppet* suggests, the animation comes from without. Rather than a condition to be cured, however, lethargy holds its own potential. As this essay explores, lethargy creates space for other forms of affective experience delinked from animatedness.

To help us think through the lethargy within microwork, I turn to an artwork, *Risas enlatadas*, or *Canned Laughter* (2009), by Mexico City-based artist Yoshua Okón, which depicts a fictitious maquiladora in Ciudad Juárez. Instead of processing textiles or electronics, however, it manufactures shiny red cans of laughter destined for US sitcoms—cans labeled evil laughter, manly laughter, and sexy laughter, among others. As we are learning, a dystopian world where low-wage workers across the border or around the world laugh, cry, or otherwise emote for white audiences is not as far away as we might think.

Canned Laughter

In *Canned Laughter*, you enter a concrete space that resembles a factory floor—indeed, in its first iteration, Okón rented a former assembly plant in Juárez—and come across a long table styled as an assembly line. On it, there are the cans, which you can listen to, and there are 1990s-style televisions playing a video loop of corporate propaganda stamped with the name of the fictitious factory (“Bergson,” after the French philosopher who wrote about, among other things, laughter). Hung on racks are workers’ uniforms, and on the wall, there is a video loop showing a German conductor coaxing a chorus of Mexican workers through various types of laughter. “This laugh, a witch’s laugh, is from my home town, the Black Forest,” he says at one point. A few minutes later, the video cuts to show workers at the assembly line, injecting sound in the cans by operating a machine that dips a rod into the metal, or testing quality by seeming to inspect the sound.

How are we to interpret this? We might begin with the artist himself, who writes that *Canned Laughter* shows the “impossibility [of] translat[ing] and reproduc[ing] true emotions through technological means.”¹⁷ While Okón is clearly taking a shot at the fakeness of canned laughter, this explanation feels inadequate; what, after all, is “true” emotion? To suggest that there is a “true emotion” in the body that technology then distorts is to ignore the ways that the body is itself physically and culturally technical: love letters are produced by hands grasping pens and alphabets and scripts for praising the beloved. Technologies mask, amplify, and convey emotion to us. And crucially, technologies shape the terms by which the emotion of others is registered, turning, for example, a nonresponse by a gold farmer into an example of a racialized threat to the rules of the game.

Rather than reading Okón’s artwork as humanist satire, we might be better off taking the artwork seriously, that is, as a documentary on the very



11.1 Still from Yoshua Okón, *Canned Laughter*, 2009, projection video in installation. Courtesy of the artist.

immanence of “reproducing true emotions through technological means.” If it seems counterintuitive to call this essentially arduous and manual work technological, the difference is that rather than work progressing from human to robot, as futurists might have expected, we have entered a phase where it’s more cost-effective to hire human robots—what Amazon CEO Jeff Bezos terms “artificial artificial intelligence.”

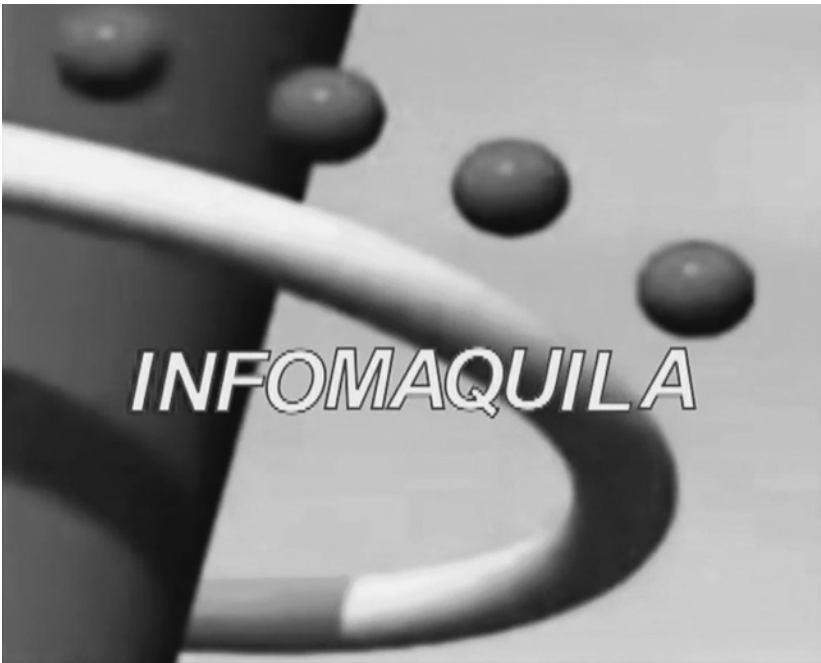
The artist’s own description for it is the “infomaquila,” which briefly flashes on screen during one of the inane corporate videos that loops on the television sets. This is a word that he likely borrowed from the filmmaker Alex Rivera, who in his contemporaneous film *Sleep Dealer* (2008) describes an info-maquiladora in Tijuana called Cybracero Systems Inc. A cybracero, in Rivera’s description, is a cybernetic update of the 1950s Mexican guest worker, or *bracero*, tasked to pick crops for California’s agriculture industry and then return home at the end of the picking season. The cybracero is “safely” contained behind a US-Mexico border wall; physically implanted with telepresence technologies, the cybracero animates robots north of the



11.2 Yoshua Okón, *Canned Laughter*, 2009, installation view, *Yoshua Okón: 2007-2010*, Yerba Buena Center for the Arts, 2010. Courtesy Yerba Buena Center for the Arts. Photograph by J. W. White.

border to water lawns or construct skyscrapers, or, in a different form of (re-)animation, provide “memories”—narrated feelings and impressions—to willing buyers. The cybracero helps to whitewash this future by moving colored bodies out of view, just as today’s microwork platforms help to mask the identities of digital laborers from their employers, so that employers are executing a computer program, rather than employing individual bodies.¹⁸ Exclaims one of *Sleep Dealer*’s characters, “They want work without the worker.”

The laughter of Okón’s own outsourcing firm similarly displaces the workers’ national origin, and, in turn, the racial capitalism underpinning this strategy. Imagining the fictional world Okón creates, Anca Parvulescu writes that the workers’ canned laughter is “exported to the rest of the world, including presumably back to Mexico . . . [and] likely to be consumed by the same workers who participated in Okón’s installation, after their working hours in the maquiladora.”¹⁹ Parvulescu’s suggestion is that the workers, if real, would be doubly exploited: they presumably do not recognize the sound



11.3 Still from Yoshua Okón, *Canned Laughter*, 2009, monitor video in installation. Courtesy of the artist.

of their own laughter on the sitcoms, even as they consume those shows to unwind after a day of work. They pay both times—with their body in the factory, and with their eyes at night—and thus they “express their gratitude for their chance at being oppressed.”²⁰

Again, however, I want to move beyond applying a one-size-fits-all model of oppression to either this artwork or to microwork. The artwork’s reflexivity pushes us to talk about the infomaquila model differently, for it stages a problem about critique by making its ostensible message a little *too* obvious. Witness *San Francisco Chronicle* art critic Kenneth Baker, who writes that there is “no doubt as to Okón’s intervention. Intended as critical satire of the global corporate order, it feels forced in every respect, at best pleasing viewers with the thought of the artist having employed some needy people for a while.”²¹

To be sure, the literalism of seeing former maquiladora workers mechanically performing maquiladora work does lead to a sense that something, in the critic’s words, “feels forced,” as if someone telling a joke had insisted



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11.4 Screenshot from Alex Rivera, *Cybracero Systems* (www.cybracero.com), 2009. Courtesy of the artist.

on asking “get it?” afterward. But what the critic misses is that the feeling of frustrated satire is part of the artwork’s very design: the word *enlatada* means “canned,” but as Amy Sara Carroll notes, it also means “canceled” or “put on ice,” as in the English expression “the project got canned.”²² In other words, *Risas enlatadas* tells you, quite directly, that it won’t succeed: laughter is cancelled here. If one of the contracts of performance is that a performer performs, and the audience reacts, here, Okón severely limits the audience’s ability to react. The workers seem to laugh on our behalf, as if they were a reaction GIF, our reaction GIF. This interpassive use of laughter short-circuits our response, making it all but impossible to resolve our experience through aesthetic judgment. Consequently, the artwork doesn’t feel like critique or satire, nor does it allow much unguarded pleasure or humor. Instead, it moves us toward something more ambivalent: perhaps a feeling of expecting laughter to happen and being disappointed, a feeling of things being “forced,” somehow, whether the satire itself or the forced laughter the workers themselves perform.

And the critic’s dismissal of the artwork as a vehicle for “pleasing viewers” by employing “needy workers for a while” inadvertently reveals one of the conceits of the project: if you are the viewer pleased, you are indirectly those workers’ employer. As you look around, perhaps “sampling” a can of

laughter or examining the rows of uniforms for their symmetry, are you not behaving like a factory supervisor? Perhaps you consider the assembly line, the ways workers are organized, and the logistics of the supply chain as if you were an administrator of a process or institution.²³ Or perhaps you focus on the glistening, almost bejeweled red cans (a clear reference to Warhol's soup cans), like a client coming to inspect their purchase. None of these positions allow for a straightforward position of opposition.

Similarly, there is a more ambivalent relationship between microwork and microworker than outsourcer and exploited victim. Referencing Payal Arora's critique of big data, Antonio Casilli argues that even those "'at the bottom of the data pyramid' are just about as involved in creativity, online recreation, and leisure—and just about as subject to mechanisms of data extraction" as users elsewhere.²⁴ And documentary filmmakers and ethnographers have shown that what most well-meaning scholars in the West might term "mindless" or "fraudulent" work may well be a source of pride. The interviewees in Garrett Bradley's short documentary about clickfarmers in Dhaka, *Like* (2016), for example, describe their work in terms of getting their foot in the door in the online marketing and the information technology sectors; clickfarming is a creative way of finding work in a constrained job market and of, in the words of one subject, "maintaining and surviving."²⁵ In a particularly thought-provoking sequence, one subject likens clickwork to sex work: Facebook sells the idea of romance, he says, but clever marketers such as himself sell "love" and "like." This is particularly trenchant, given how much of the exploitation in digital labor (indeed, as I have argued, the very subject position of the personal "user") has resulted out of the mystification of an economic framework as doing things "out of love." This is how online platforms convince us to give our time freely to write online reviews,²⁶ and how Facebook convinces us to "like" the advertising posts inadvertently promoted by our friends. And it is also the line of thinking that justifies the low wages paid to Amazon Mechanical Turk workers, who are—in this line of thinking—housewives doing microwork as a fun hobby, in their free time, for a few extra dollars. (The platform positions itself as an enjoyable alternative to "just sitting there," but the recruitment of couch potatoes into the ranks of the gig economy is another instance of digital capitalism's clawback of idleness.²⁷)

This is not to dismiss the fact that microworkers and "info-maquiladora" workers sometimes labor under terrible working conditions.²⁸ I simply mean that describing such work as inherently mindless or robotic is troublesome. We must be careful not to describe these workers as passive, robot-like labor-

ers who could become *more human* by doing more dignified work—or, even worse, by receiving attention from Western saviors. Instead, to supplement traditional models of digital labor, we might try to offer finer-grained descriptions of how one makes do within a compromised (digital) environment—including how one “maintains” and “survives,” to quote the worker whom Bradley interviewed. And here is where the ambiguities in *Canned Laughter* might point the way toward a different vocabulary. Even as its intensities (or lack thereof) of feeling are hard to parse into real or manufactured, human or robotic emotion, *Canned Laughter* seems to show us laughter uncoupled from the workers’ affective states. They laugh to a rhythm demanded by a conductor, and it could be funny, or not. “Funny” may coincide with the sound of laughter, or it may lag. In a model of exploitation, we might equate performance with inauthenticity and assume that all the laughter Okón’s workers produce is false. But a closer examination of the installation shows something else going on.

Performance under Working Conditions

Consider a moment from the longest sequence of Okón’s video, when the maquiladora workers are performing as a chorus. They stand shoulder to shoulder in their uniforms and are orchestrated by a conductor, while a sound engineer records on the side. As they laugh, they are also listening to themselves laugh—and that laughter they produce seems to arrive a fraction of a second late. This causes a slight out-of-sync quality to the sound, an effect underscored by the camera panning over individual faces that react differently and move differently to form the sounds. The sounds coming out of their mouths are coded as laughter, but they aren’t necessarily moved by it. Their faces articulate the canned phoniness of the performance. Which leads, at times, to moments of meta-laughter: there is a woman on the assembly line who begins laughing spontaneously at the men in the chorus, presumably in an off-script moment when she is supposed to be silent. And a few workers occasionally break character, as it were, and seem to guffaw at the ridiculousness of the sounds they are producing—even as they are producing them.

One way of describing this moment might be to say that the woman and the man are laughing authentically in the middle of the task of faking laughter. But rather than continually attempt to distinguish between authentic and fake, as the CAPTCHA test purports to do, consider that fake laughter can lead to real laughter and vice versa; indeed, laughter is inherently unstable.

Instead, the laughter indexes a state of emotional undecidability that occurs within this logistical system, where it is unclear what (or who) is feeling. Laughter, after all, is commonly produced in response to social and power dynamics. Particularly in the awkward encounters between two parties on opposite sides of a transaction—say, viewer and worker—one often laughs to cover over something else, over what we might call the friction in that difference. Indeed, we might conclude that laughter is not just the cover for that ambivalence but the very embodiment of that friction.²⁹

What I am claiming is that the laughter in the video operates at the unstable border between emotion and affect. This is a fuzzy hinge that nearly every person who has written *LOL* in a text message understands intuitively. *LOL*, laugh out loud, is very likely written because the person is not laughing; it is a marker that simply acknowledges the genre of humor. As the most popular definition of *LOL* in Urban Dictionary puts it: “nobody laughs out loud when they say it. In fact, they probably don’t even give a shit about what you just wrote. More accurately, the acronym ‘lol’ should be redefined as ‘Lack of laughter.’”³⁰ The same thing goes for *haha*. Explains one commentator, *haha* “doesn’t really reflect how much they are actually laughing/how much they actually thought something you said was funny.”³¹ Both words are phatic gestures, like *uh-huh*, meant simply to acknowledge that you are communicating—indeed, even a way of acknowledging the need for you to respond, to be just animated enough.

Thus *LOL* is not simply a masquerade, a way of cloaking one’s identity from surveillance or data platforms, or pretending to be otherwise while maintaining a hidden inner life, all of which would require us to resurrect the distinction between fake (and therefore subversive and presumably agentive) and real (and therefore presumably not subversive and non-agentive). All laughter is at some level real. Instead, *LOL* is not the full feeling of humor but rather the space or hesitation of it, the attempt to express something while not yet being ready to commit to a specific emotional endpoint. It is not what we could call “live” laughter, but canned, underperformed laughter: laughter as deadvoice.³² Thus *LOL* stands primarily for a moment of undecidability and *unresolved affect*: it asks for time to think or feel, akin to a “pause game” feature. In a moment when expression has become instrumentalized, such deferrals are what literary scholar Anne-Lise François describes as a “recessive action,” something that works within the “productive” time of narrative to create a different temporal structure.³³ François focuses her study on moments of unfulfilled expectations, on actions not accomplished, and on things done with no consequence. For Okón’s artwork, the momen-

tary confusion in laughter that I have described as a LOL also mediates the anticipations of time differently. Even though the individual's laugh proceeds as expected, and even though the logistics of production continues to assemble each laugh into a larger, choral whole, such deferrals function not as ways of resisting the temporal impositions of digital capitalism, but rather as ways of buying time for oneself.

While failing as a productive mode of critique—indeed, it typically looks like a stale or “forced” critical move—lethargy may offer a new field of the political to explore. Scholars have ample tools to detect and valorize moments of resistance or refusal, and these keywords have become staples of humanistic inquiry, which tends to valorize the agentive and political outspokenness (rather than, say, passive actions such as listening or vacillating). Yet as Kevin Quashie points out, we often miss the quieter and more reticent forms of being within and adjacent to those political moments; after all, it is perhaps the ease by which *Canned Laughter* appears as an allegory for standing up against capitalism that makes it harder to see the current of underperformance that runs underneath.³⁴ And the role of agency itself seems to have changed. Digital platforms incentivize, nudge, prod, and even coerce users into producing a certain form of liberal subjectivity, where one “speaks up” and “takes a stand.” Though digital capitalism bills this frenetic activity as a form of empowerment, it incorporates such forms of liberal agency into its system of control.³⁵ In this context, the decoupling of liveness or animateness from the user, particularly for persons of color, can offer a means for temporarily setting that pressure aside.

I say decoupling because outright refusal may not be possible in the always-on world foreshadowed by *Canned Laughter*. Lethargy approaches but ultimately is not passivity, because passivity, like rest or downtime, is generally foreclosed to the lethargic subject. Consider a final sequence from the video, where the workers are shown in the rather un-Fordist position of standing in a circle outside, holding hands and taking a company-mandated meditation break. The workers Okón interviewed said these breaks were common inside real maquiladoras, which have begun to operationalize silence and mindfulness as a tool of productivity. This is arguably even more depressing than, say, simply overworking the workers. Capital metaphorically captures all expression, even the absence of expression. And this operationalizing of silence is increasingly common in digital culture. A variety of techniques such as “scroll tracking” captures what a user doesn't look at on a webpage, or what a user fails to click on in recommendation algorithms.



11.5 Yoshua Okón, *Canned Laughter*, 2009, three-channel video projection with audio. Courtesy of the artist and Sfeir-Semler Gallery Beirut/Hamburg.

Of course, persons of color—especially African Americans—were deprived of the ability to do nothing long before digital trackers existed. As Lauren Michele Jackson puts it, even “when we [Black people] do nothing, we’re doing something.”³⁶ The newspaper headlines about two Black men arrested for waiting in a Philadelphia Starbucks gave rise to a new phrase: “waiting while Black.” Antiblackness means African American life is inextricable from policing affect in public—avoiding too much noise, or too much joy, as in Ralph Ellison’s telling of the laughing barrels positioned in public places in the South, through which Black persons were obligated to shunt the sound of their laughter when they felt an urge to laugh come on.³⁷ But the Starbucks example reminds us, yet again, that even the opposite, the act of waiting and doing nothing in an environment *designed for waiting*, can be criminalized and read as “loitering.” Scholars should analogously attend to the myriad of ways that a racialized environment polices the act of doing nothing, whether this is practical—for instance, prepaid debit cards primarily issued to the unbanked that charge exorbitant inactivity fees, or sit/lie laws that prevent people from remaining still on the sidewalk—or more metaphorical, as in the way persons of color are expected to perform the

emotional labor of commenting and educating on social issues, rather than being allowed to remain silent.

While lethargy describes the state of being forced to constantly move and be animated, lethargy also acts by gradually spreading out, flattening, or detuning oneself from this regimen—allowing oneself to grow bored of it, be reticent, underperform. And by doing so, canned laughter shows us that the special privilege of being live or human is not particularly special after all. Canned laughter can make one laugh as much as live performance. Okón's choral performance is the performance of "staleness," after all, of pre-recorded emotion. The canned or lethargic qualities of this artwork invert this equation and put the "human" on lesser footing than the manufactured, object-like qualities of the robotic. After all, why should the highest aspiration for digital technology be to be more vital and more human (and why should that be our aspiration, too)? Lethargy is exhausting, but it also exhausts the oppressively live environment in which colored bodies are animated against their will.

In the end, lethargy is a kind of dwelling longer in the negative or ambivalent affect of a situation. We write *LOL* because we don't have anything else to say in the moment, because we are required to respond, but aren't sure how to feel. But that state of postponement is valuable, too. When an artwork doesn't produce the right reactions, and leaves us interpretively idle, with "dead time," as it were, it causes a decoupling of the subject from the media environment around them: bored, one begins to do the laundry list or begins to notice one's body cramp up.³⁸ This deferral might help us notice the mediation that occurs at the level of the phatic, the social, and the racialization of subjects within that environment. For that environment—how much someone laughs, or doesn't—is, like breath, something that can exhaust or enliven subjects unequally. If lethargy doesn't rise to the level of an intervention, it gets us one step closer to acknowledging the ordinary weight of each forced interaction, like a column of atmosphere that weighs on our shoulders, but that we have nonetheless become accustomed to enduring.

NOTES

1. Not so surprisingly, Google benefits when you "fail" its reCAPTCHA test, because then it forces you to teach its computers how to recognize cars, stop signs, and storefronts. For more on the initial shift away from traditional image-based CAPTCHAs, see Google Security Blog, "Are You a Robot? Introducing 'No

CAPTCHA reCAPTCHA,” December 3, 2014, <https://security.googleblog.com/2014/12/are-you-robot-introducing-no-captcha.html>.

2. Campaigners for accessibility further note that audio CAPTCHAs are poorly executed and virtually incomprehensible, while those with dyslexia may find blurry images impossible to solve. See “Captchas Suck,” Access Lab, November 2, 2017, <https://axesslab.com/captchas-suck/>.

3. Neda Atanasoski and Kalindi Vora, citing Wendy Chun, “Race and/as Technology,” in *Race after the Internet*, ed. Lisa Nakamura and Peter Chow-White (New York: Routledge, 2012), 38–60; and Beth Coleman, “Race as Technology,” *Camera Obscura* 24, no. 1 (2009): 177–207. In Kalindi Vora and Neda Atanasoski, *Surrogate Humanity: Race, Robots, and the Politics of Technological Futures* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2019), 14.

4. Sylvia Wynter, “Unsettling the Coloniality of Being/Power/Truth/Freedom: Towards the Human, after Man, Its Overrepresentation—An Argument.” *CR: The New Centennial Review* 3, no. 3 (2003): 257–337.

5. *Robot*, after all, has always referred to labor: it originally designated a certain number of days of unpaid labor that serfs were compelled to work in the Habsburg monarchy.

6. BasedMedicalDoctor (Reddit user), as quoted by Kevin Roose, “What Is NPC, the Pro-Trump Internet’s New Favorite Insult?” *New York Times*, October 16, 2018, <https://www.nytimes.com/2018/10/16/us/politics/npc-twitter-ban.html>.

7. Profile of NPC201620201337 (anonymous Twitter user), as archived by Josh Emerson (@josh_emerson), “wow the trolls are taking this NPC thing so seriously,” Twitter, October 14, 2018, 9:13 a.m., https://twitter.com/josh_emerson/status/1051461034433765376.

8. See, for example, @N83652574, “I just made a twitter account like 10 minutes ago and already i am discriminated. I AM LITERALLY SHAKING RIGHT NOW #NPC #GrayLivesMatter #NPCmeme,” Twitter, November 1, 2018, 7:52 p.m., <https://twitter.com/N83652574/status/1058144735838326785>.

9. See Roose, “What Is NPC?”

10. Sianne Ngai, “Animatedness,” in *Ugly Feelings* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2005), 89–125.

11. Lisa Nakamura, “Don’t Hate the Player, Hate the Game: The Racialization of Labor in World of Warcraft,” *Critical Studies in Media Communication* 26, no. 2 (2009): 128–44.

12. Chun, “Race and/as Technology,” 51.

13. For examples, see Jonathan Zittrain, “The Internet Creates a New Kind of Sweatshop,” *Newsweek*, December 7, 2009, <https://www.newsweek.com/internet-creates-new-kind-sweatshop-75751>; Lydia DePillis, “Click Farms Are the New Sweatshops,” *Washington Post*, January 6, 2014, <https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/wonk/wp/2014/01/06/click-farms-are-the-new-sweatshops/>; and

Julian Dibbel, "The Life of the Chinese Gold Farmer," *New York Times Magazine*, June 17, 2007, 36–41.

14. Mary L. Gray, unpublished talk for "Labor in the Global Platform Economy," University of Michigan, June 1, 2019. Also see Mary L. Gray and Siddharth Suri, *Ghost Work: How to Stop Silicon Valley from Building a New Global Underclass* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Harcourt, 2019).

15. Vora and Atanasoski, *Surrogate Humanity*.

16. See also Tung-Hui Hu, "Wait, then Give Up: Lethargy and the Reticence of Digital Art," *Journal of Visual Culture* 16, no. 3 (2017): 337–54.

17. Yoshua Okón, *Canned Laughter*, 2009, https://www.yoshuaokon.com/canned-laughter_text.html.

18. Lilly Irani, "The Cultural Work of Microwork," *New Media and Society* 17, no. 5 (2013): 720–39.

19. Anca Parvulescu, "Even Laughter? From Laughter in the Magic Theater to the Laughter Assembly Line," *Critical Inquiry* 43, no. 2 (2017): 506–27, 522.

20. Parvulescu, "Even Laughter?" 511.

21. Kenneth Baker, "'Yoshua Okón: 2007–2010' Review: Uneasy Video," *San Francisco Chronicle*, November 11, 2010, <http://www.sfgate.com/entertainment/article/Yoshua-Ok-n-2007-2010-review-Uneasy-video-3166758.php>.

22. Amy Sara Carroll, *REMEX: Toward an Art History of the NAFTA Era* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 2017), 94.

23. While not explicitly a work of institutional critique, *Canned Laughter* nonetheless references the art market and the art institutions that fuel it. See, for example, Benjamin Buchloh, "Conceptual Art 1962–1969: From the Aesthetic of Administration to the Critique of Institutions," *October*, no. 55 (1990): 105–43.

24. Antonio Casilli, "Digital Labor Studies Go Global: Toward a Digital Decolonial Turn," *International Journal of Communication* 11 (2017): 3934–54, 3946; Payal Arora, "The Bottom of the Data Pyramid: Big Data and the Global South," *International Journal of Communication* 10 (2016): 1681–99.

25. *Like*, directed by Garrett Bradley (New York: Field of Vision, 2016), at <https://vimeo.com/160794617>.

26. Tiziana Terranova, *Network Culture* (Ann Arbor, MI: Pluto Press, 2004).

27. Katharine Mieszkowski, "I Make \$1.45 a Week and I Love It!" *Salon*, July 24, 2006, <http://www.salon.com/2006/07/24/turks>, as quoted by Vora and Atanasoski, *Surrogate Humanity*, 100.

28. Because "sweatshops" are typically closed to academic research, we tend to hear more in-depth studies of benign workplaces than not.

29. Anna Lowenhaupt Tsing, *Friction: An Ethnography of Global Connection* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2004).

30. Urban Dictionary, s.v. "lol," by no_one_2000, accessed March 19, 2021, <https://www.urbandictionary.com/define.php?term=lol>.

31. Urban Dictionary, s.v. “haha,” by Entity1037, accessed March 19 2021, <https://www.urbandictionary.com/define.php?term=haha>.
32. Something similar occurs in Lauren Berlant’s idea of underperformance or “flat affect” as a way of capturing the hesitation and unintelligibility of a subject’s own desires to himself as he attempts to “allocate expressivity.” See Lauren Berlant, “Structures of Unfeeling: Mysterious Skin,” *International Journal of Politics, Culture, and Society* 28 (2015): 191–213.
33. Anne-Lise François, *Open Secrets: The Literature of Uncounted Experience* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2007).
34. Kevin Quashie, *The Sovereignty of Quiet: Beyond Resistance in Black Culture* (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 2012).
35. See Wendy Chun, *Control and Freedom: Power and Paranoia in the Age of Fiber Optics* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2005); and Hu, “Wait, then Give Up.”
36. Lauren Michele Jackson, “We Need to Talk about Digital Blackface in Reaction GIFs,” *Teen Vogue*, August 2, 2017, <https://www.teenvogue.com/story/digital-blackface-reaction-gifs>.
37. Ralph Ellison, “An Extravagance of Laughter,” in *The Collected Essays of Ralph Ellison: Revised and Updated*, ed. John Callahan (New York: Modern Library, 2003), 617–62.
38. Scott Richmond, “Vulgar Boredom, or What Andy Warhol Can Teach Us about Candy Crush,” *Journal of Visual Culture* 14, no. 1 (2015): 21–39.