







# ALICE LANG

## OM NOM NOM NOM

Canned laughter is taken-for-granted on TV today. While we have come to accept its presence, we’ve also become blind to a strange paradox: our TV screens are laughing, instead of, and for us. Returning home from a long day at work we blandly ingest whatever’s thrown up on-screen – yet another Seinfeld repeat, or some other series. And even if we do not laugh, we are somehow still relieved. It is difficult at first to accept that a machine out there can “laugh for me”, yet gradually we become accustomed to what is inherently obscene in this phenomenon. As Slavoj Žižek has pointed out, what is most unsettling about canned laughter is that our most ‘intimate feelings can be radically externalized, I can literally “laugh and cry through another”’.<sup>(1)</sup>

Much has been written suggesting how, with new electronic media, the passive consumption of texts and artworks is over. Instead of merely looking at the screen we increasingly interact with it, entering into a dialogic relationship in the process (from choosing what we view to engaging in debate with a Virtual Community). In contrast to the notion that new forms of media are turning us into passive consumers staring blindly at our screens, should we claim, as Žižek does, that the so-called threat resides in the fact they deprive us of ‘our authentic passive experience’, thus preparing us for ‘mindless frenetic activity’?<sup>(2)</sup>

Alice Lang’s new series of work takes these sticky questions as a jumping off point, asking us to consider interpassivity<sup>(3)</sup> in relation to online forms of communication, where connectivity is perpetually deferred and camouflaged. As the starting point for her new text-based works Lang took a post she stumbled across while searching ‘forget I said anything’ on the Internet. Across a suite of heavily embellished posters she reproduces a missive from someone with the curious handle ‘teenagemutantninja slut’, who details the lengths to which he/she had gone to create a mix CD ‘for Vday’ – searching for songs on YouTube, copying each individual URL, plugging into an MP3 convertor to download each song etc. This user then spent a further 10+ minutes (!) inscribing and colouring a card for the would-be beloved. And then comes the clincher ‘I got up all the courage in the whole world to give it to you in the hallway ...’. Gulp. We can only assume the gift fell on deaf ears based on the hashtags that follow: #I just feel so crappy tonight #I just suck #personal.

It’s the last that struck me, however. Personal? Really? What lies behind the compulsion to share this private humiliation in a public forum? If you want someone to ‘forget I said anything’, why keep bringing it up? Yet, these forms of communication are symptomatic of our times: the borders between private and public grow hazy and an online presence can span the carefully curated to the embarrassingly confessional. No one presentation is ever entirely ‘true’ and regardless of approach, when we’re online we’re often hiding in plain sight – we’ve got the world at our fingertips yet we’re sitting in rooms by ourselves.

These and other inconsistencies are the fertile grounds for exploration embedded in Lang’s mixed media paintings. Interspersed with this passive aggressive rant about the making and meaning of a mix CD, she includes other fragmented words and quotes sourced variously from trolling, twitterbots, Tumblr, Google search results and slang. Text has been a constant in her diverse practice, often generated from everyday experiences. Yet when displayed in public contexts, they move from being personal statements to universal declarations – snappy aphorisms or ironic slogans for living. Lang’s interest in these statements lies in their generality, in how ‘they move from being personal to become subjective, nondescript and universally understood through the subjects’ own memories and experiences’.<sup>(4)</sup> In this way, she seeks to close the gap between artist and audience, and for a variety of purposes: to make us laugh, to challenge our assumptions about art and life and, in the process, to uncover the politics inherent in the everyday.

Lang has interspersed the bland share of ‘teenagemutantninja slut’ with more troubling quotes: ‘Lube Up Julia’ was extracted from a barrage of sexist trolling posted in October 2012, in response to then Prime Minister Julia Gillard talking education reform in a Facebook live chat. These forms of attack are depressingly commonplace when the subject is a woman, no matter how accomplished, no matter her stature in society. Rather than engaging in well-reasoned criticism or debate, the conversation often takes a blatantly misogynist turn. So this is the seething underbelly of the Internet, where bottom feeders cloaked in relative anonymity feel

relaxed and comfortable sharing their bile, never having to look the subject of their vitriol in the eye.

While the statements Lang includes in her artworks may have been casually conceived, their translation is anything but – her labour intensive approach exploits her chosen materials to the limit. The resulting works have been made over many hours, and using unexpected combinations of material – strips of holographic paper, sliced up holiday snaps, tightly controlled lines of colour. In her use of an intensive colour palette and op-art effects, Lang references psychedelic aesthetics, and the cumulative effect is one of dizzying excess – it’s hypnotic, virtually impossible to look away from her swirling vortex of optically vibrating colour. The posters pulse with energy, just as her bubble-lettered statements pop, loud and literal. Yet, by removing the textual referent from its source the underlying seriousness of Lang’s investigation is exposed, even if her tongue remains planted firmly in her cheek. She leaves it the viewer to bring their own subjective reading to her proclamations. Some are loaded with pop cultural inflections – colloquialisms such as ‘You Beauty’, or ‘Dickmatized’ – while others are reliant on personal interpretations drawn from memory and lived experience.

It is this point of tension, between virtual and actual, between on-screen avatars and physical selves, that Lang explores in ‘OM NOM NOM NOM’. I’m reminded of a speech Ray delivers to Shoshaunna in ‘Girls’, that polarising, often hilarious, dramedy that has spawned so many arguments about Kids These Days. This episode sees Ray admit to Shoshanna that when she sends him ‘texts full of emojis’ it is easy to dismiss her: ‘a panda, next to a gun, next to a wrapped gift? It makes no sense!’ And while there’s nothing inherently wrong with expressing ourselves through memes, GIFS, emojis or any of the odd emotional framework the Internet has given us, when you’ve got something important to say, Alice Lang seems to suggest, you still need to actually to say it out loud.

Bree Richards

1. Slavoj Žižek, ‘Will you laugh for me, please?’, accessed 21 June, 2013, <http://www.lacan.com/zizeklaugh.htm>
2. Ibid.
3. Philosopher Robert Pfaler coined the term interpassivity to describe the act of projecting one’s own self onto a remote object, that is, other people or things.
4. Alice Lang, artist statement, 2012

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Front: Alice Lang *Untitled (smiley)* 2012. Left: Alice Lang *You Beauty* 2013.

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