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24/7

I wonder what you will notice first. A sweetly sickening mist? The mock Bezos fashions? An upright coffin-sized cage? The artificial day and night glow? I wonder what all of us will notice. First, last, and eventually. And what will we piece together. Here, in this exhibition, and out there, in our lives.

I write this before I've seen *24/7* by Eugenia Lim. I'm a remote contributor, like the many dispersed collaborators of this work orchestrated by Lim through these long half-life months of pandemic lockdowns. Her process involved not only a close circle of collaborators in a sculpture foundry, 3D-printers, and textile designers, but more distant manufacturers and unknown Amazon workers who have delivered materials and become embroiled in Lim's process, as we are in theirs.

At first, Lim sought to avoid any contact with Amazon products or services in the making of her work, but at a certain point this changed:

'I ordered some Red Bull via eBay, only for it to be delivered almost immediately via Amazon Prime. From that moment on, I decided to succumb to the complicity of the Amazon supply chain. Every element of the work, from the textiles used in the wall works to the Red Bull cans smelted down in the bird cage sculpture and the liquid in the air diffusers has some connection to the globalised and diffused labour and extraction of Amazon.'ⁱ

Lim's practice has long been concerned with issues of labour and value, systems of exchange, and the structural inequality of these systems, particularly for women and for migrants. Often there has been humour and a playful theatricality in aspects of her work.

Her 2019 video *On Demand* spotlights the stories of five workers in the so-called gig economy, but to generate power to play the video, gallery goers were required to pedal on stationary bikes facing the screen. In her touring work *The Australian Ugliness*, 2018, Lim performs the central fictional role of 'Ambassador', a gold-suited somewhat alien figure set against the backdrop of iconic sites around Australia. While she might bring the seductive qualities of design, architecture, fashion, and art into and under critique, Lim has a way of inviting audiences to commune with uncomfortable ideas without condemning.

But here, after this time we've all had, pushed closer to our limits, global and local inequalities exacerbated, and with the inability to collaborate at length in person, in *24/7* Lim has drained her often bright and golden colour palette. She has withdrawn her own bodily and performative presence. She leaves us with a solitary caged bird. A scent. Unembodied costumes. Grey with reflective patches.

If we look for comfort in *24/7* we might turn to a supposedly soothing glow and diffused mist. In the works *Olfactory* and *Diurnal Nocturnal*, Lim gestures toward a manufactured atmosphere, the generic simulation of light and air, day and night. These works are made of familiar domestic commodities. LED lights and aroma diffusers, gadgets of modern urban living. Presumably suited to those living in spaces with few windows, little fresh air, or daylight. The LED lamps are intended to aide our circadian rhythms – the sleep patterns we have abused with our addictions to technology.

Indeed, in those early months of lockdown when I found I had little grasp on time or daily routine, I shopped online for an alarm clock lamp that wakes me with a gently intensifying glow mimicking the sunrise, in attempts to banish my smartphone from the bedroom. Such things are at the innocuous end of the 'sleep hygiene' market. More serious sleep and wakefulness aides are present in *24/7* – Amazon sleeping pills are mixed into the aroma diffusers, Ritalin is present in the sculpture *Sleep no more* (*Zonotrichia leucophrys gambelii*).

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Perched on Amazon packaging, inside a mesh cage, Lim has cast a *Zonotrichia leucophrys gambelii*, or white-crowned sparrow, made of aluminium including smelted down Red Bull cans and Ritalin pills. The white-crowned sparrow is known to enter into a kind of waking sleep-mode that allows it to fly for up to seven days on end, during its seasonal migratory journeys from Alaska to Mexico and back each year. The birds' ability to remain fully functional during these long periods of unihemispheric slow-wave sleep, has made them the subject of many scientific studies focused on the functions of sleep.

The US military is one such interest group who seek to learn from the white-crowned sparrow, as they look for ways of reducing the human body's need for sleep. Writer Jonathan Crary warns this 'sleeplessness research should be understood as one part of a quest for soldiers whose physical capabilities will more closely approximate the functionalities of non-human apparatuses and networks.'ⁱⁱⁱ Crary's 2014 book *24/7: Late Capitalism and the Ends of Sleep* analyses our existing global markets and infrastructure for continuous work and consumption –

'A 24/7 environment has the semblance of a social world, but is actually a non-social model of machinic performance and a suspension of living that does not disclose the human cost required to sustain its effectiveness.'ⁱⁱⁱ

In this environment, sleep becomes the final frontier and only true interruption or resistance to what Crary describes as 'the theft of time from us by capitalism'.^{iv}

Researchers Kate Crawford and Vladan Joler have made an incredible study of the Amazon Echo, intricately mapping both the web of human labour data and the extraction of earth's resources involved in the company's 'Alexa' AI product. It is a depressing and rigorously condemning read that exposes the lie of digital technology as liberating or democratising. As with industrialisation and colonisation, the research shows that 'contemporary technology is deeply rooted in and running on the exploitation of human bodies'^v –

'A child working in a mine in the Congo would need more than 700,000 years of non-stop work to earn the same amount as a single day of Bezos' income.'^{vi}

There is something ungraspable about this. As if the far-reaching ecology of Amazon and its ilk are the contemporary technological sublime, we are unable to fully comprehend the complexity of these vast and punishing systems that we are embroiled with daily.

Meanwhile, Amazon's founder and executive chairman, Jeff Bezos was ejaculated into the stratosphere on his New Shepard rocket, suspended in suborbital space for four minutes at the cost of USD5.5 billion. As a motivational speaker, Bezos often calls on the idea of making important decisions based on projecting yourself forward to age 80, looking back on your life and trying to make sure you've minimised the number of regrets you have. He believes he is furthering a much grander human destiny through this extreme flight on the New Shepard, by avoiding stasis and propelling progress. Bezos, who boasts of sleeping a solid eight hours a night to ensure a clear head for decision making, has flown to the edge of space to inspire humanity and preserve Earth.

Even in captivity the white-crowned sparrow will experience migratory restlessness – losing sleep, flapping, and hopping on the spot – at the time of year they are genetically coded to migrate.^{vii} One of Bezos' latest investments is in Altos Labs, an age-reversal company on the quest for immortality.^{viii}

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So many ways to manipulate a suspension of living.

I wonder what all of us will notice and not notice. Here in this exhibition, and out there in our lives. Our lives inescapably full of Amazon purchases, billionaires, addictive technology, uppers, downers, artificial light and air.

— Rosemary Forde, 2021

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ⁱ Eugenia Lim, artist statement, 2021

ⁱⁱ Jonathan Crary, *24/7: Late Capitalism and the Ends of Sleep*, Verso, 2014.

ⁱⁱⁱ Jonathan Crary, 2014.

^{iv} Jonathan Crary, 2014.

^v Kate Crawford and Vladan Joler, 'Anatomy of an AI System: The Amazon Echo as an anatomical map of human labor, data and planetary resources', *AI Now Institute and Share Lab*, 2018. <https://anatomyof.ai/>

^{vi} Kate Crawford and Vladan Joler, 2018. <https://anatomyof.ai/>

^{vii} Rattenborg NC, Mandt BH, Obermeyer WH, et al. Migratory sleeplessness in the white-crowned sparrow (*Zonotrichia leucophrys gambelii*). *PLoS Biology* 2004, 2(7): e212.

<https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC449897/>

^{viii} Marina Hyde, 'Jeff Bezos is on a quest for eternal life – back on Earth, we're searching for Amazon's taxes', *The Guardian*, 10 September 2021. <https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2021/sep/10/jeff-bezos-eternal-life-amazon-taxes>

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SLEEP MODE

In March this year, Google launched the Nest Hub 2 smart display. Part of ‘ongoing efforts to support people’s health and happiness’, its headline feature is a ‘Sleep Sensing’ system powered by Soli, a proprietary miniaturized radar technology. As the bedside device bathes its somnolent human subject in low power radio waves, an algorithm activates ‘cough and snore tracking’ audio sensors, feeding nocturnal soundscapes, ambient room conditions, and millimeter precise movement data into a machine learning model that analyses sleep patterns. The recent profusion of sleep-tracking apps—part of a burgeoning global sleep-wellness industry projected to generate revenues of more than \$135 billion by 2023—has led to the rise of a new clinical disorder. In a ‘perfectionist quest to achieve perfect sleep’, individuals afflicted with *orthosomnia* are seeking treatment for self-diagnosed sleep disturbances to optimise their daytime efficiency¹.

Radar was originally developed as a defence technology. As Jonathan Crary notes at the outset of *24/7: Late Capitalism and the Ends of Sleep*, ‘war-related innovations are inevitably assimilated into a broader social sphere’, connecting military-industrial research to forge the ‘sleepless soldier’ with the emergence of a pervasive 24/7 environment for continuous work and consumption that demands a similar model of machinic performance². Central to Crary’s claim that sleep represents one of the great human affronts to the voraciousness of contemporary capitalism—until sleep itself is subjected to the tyranny of productivity metrics—is the relationship between time and financialisation. Even as we exist in a state of continual disequilibrium produced in the disjunction between the biological contours of circadian rhythms and the temporalities of networked systems, our waking hours are ever more aligned with the uninterrupted functioning of markets and the relentless commodification of ‘previously autonomous spheres of social activity’³.

According to Crary, the intrusion of the market into what were once unannexed times and spaces has naturalised the inequality of scale between global systems and individual, circumscribed lives. In a range of recent works by Eugenia Lim—including *ON DEMAND* (2019), *EASY RIDERS* (2021, with APHIDS), and *The People’s Currency* (2017)—we see this same scalar tension reframed as an opportunity to explore new forms of solidarity and mutuality that might emerge from the diverse lived experiences of an atomised, but interdependent, 24/7 world. Whether focused on the precarious urban terrain of the gig economy rider, or the Shenzhen factories that form crucial nodes in enveloping processes of global consumption, Lim asks us to acknowledge how we are implicated in the externalities produced by these systems, and seeks to create space in her work for resistance and collective agency despite the erosion of organised labour and the dehumanising algorithmic logic shaping large swathes of the contemporary digital economy.

By rendering the invisible visible—or in the case of the pieces that comprise *24/7*, a deliberate absence of the corporeal labour (from fulfilment workers to ‘Flex’ drivers) on which Amazon’s world domination is built—Lim’s work plays an important role in highlighting the sprawling, always-on infrastructure required to sustain our on-demand desires. Jesse LeCavalier has suggested the advent of this architecture of fulfilment reflects a new era of ‘logistification’ as transformative as earlier periods of industrialisation, mechanisation, and automation. Aiming to ‘flatten, connect, smooth, and lubricate’—necessitating predictability and control—logistical practices, which reach their zenith in the anticipatory AI models driving Amazon’s end-to-end inventory management, work to produce an overspecified version of the world that ‘leaves as little room for chance as possible’⁴. While media tend to fixate on performative experiments in hyper-local

¹ Kelly Glazer Baron et al, ‘Orthosomnia: Are Some Patients Taking the Quantified Self Too Far?’, *Journal of Clinical Sleep Medicine*, vol. 13 no. 2 (2017).

² Jonathan Crary, *24/7: Late Capitalism and the Ends of Sleep* (2013) 3.

³ *ibid* 74.

⁴ Jesse LeCavalier, *The Rule of Logistics: Walmart and the Architecture of Fulfilment* (2016) 7.

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futurism like drone delivery (another military-civilian transfer), it is in more mundane industrial estates where the planetary scale pursuit of seamless efficiency results in the dismantling or mutation of structural obstacles like national borders and labour laws.

Within Amazon's vast network of fulfilment centres, labour hire casuals are expected to maintain a constant 'Amazon pace' somewhere between a brisk walk and a jog, their performance monitored to the second⁵. As humans rapidly cede space in these facilities to indefatigable robots, the dream of machinic functioning persists in 'emotional wellbeing' initiatives like the AmaZen booth, where harried and anxious workers are encouraged to steal a moment to 'recharge [their] internal battery', a restorative metaphor usually applied to the therapeutic qualities of sleep⁶. Four months after Amazon unveiled—and quickly deleted—its AmaZen announcement, reports emerged that founder Jeff Bezos was an early stage investor in Altos Labs, an anti-ageing startup aspiring to reverse time through biological reprogramming at the cellular level⁷. By literally recharging his internal battery, Bezos is part of a small club of super-rich men hoping to outrun death, achieving the 'escape velocity' necessary to live forever.

Borrowed from celestial mechanics, this metaphysical leap beyond the limits of a prevailing gravitational force was also evoked in a collection on accelerationist aesthetics published the same year as *24/7*⁸. Left accelerationism, popularised by Alex Williams and Nick Srnicek amid the stasis of the post-crash Occupy movement, is animated by a belief that the infrastructure of techno-capitalism represents a platform capable of being repurposed towards collective ends, taking seriously Frederic Jameson's provocation that Walmart can be understood as a form of utopia⁹. While the term has since been mired in associations with an anti-humanist technophilia and even far right extremism, Williams and Srnicek's insistence on the emancipatory possibilities of digital technologies harnessed to progressive politics—reflected in key demands like full automation, a reduced working week, and universal basic income—aligns with an emerging web of ideas, encompassing everything from xenofeminism to platform cooperativism, which offers a potent vision of an alternative future.

Much of this energy is being actively channelled into sketching the outlines of a post-work world (including accounting for the unpaid labour of social reproduction), where the reclamation of 'temporal autonomy' creates the conditions for the return of sleep to our everyday reality¹⁰. In Greek mythology, the god of sleep, *Hypnos*, was the twin brother of death. Despite its association with the underworld, sleep was not only interpreted by ancient writers as a time of psychic healing, but also a way of cheating death and attaining a form of immortality¹¹. That is, sleep was not a way to avoid life, but to embrace it.

— Alexis Kalagis, 2021

Alexis Kalagas' writing and research explores how economic, social, and technological forces intersect to shape our contemporary urban experience. He is currently Head of Public Programs at Molonglo.

⁵ Patrick Hatch, 'In Amazon's "Hellscape", Workers Face Insecurity and Crushing Targets', *Sydney Morning Herald* (7 September 2018).

⁶ Matthew Gault, 'Amazon Introduces Tiny "ZenBooths" for Stressed-Out Warehouse Workers', *VICE* (28 May 2021).

⁷ Antonio Regalado, 'Meet Altos Labs, Silicon Valley's Latest Wild Bet on Living Forever', *MIT Technology Review* (4 September 2010).

⁸ Alex Williams, 'Escape Velocities', *e-flux Journal*, no. 46 (2013).

⁹ See Alex Williams and Nick Srnicek, *Manifesto for an Accelerationist Politics* (2013); Alex Williams and Nick Srnicek, *Inventing the Future: Postcapitalism and a World Without Work* (2015); Frederic Jameson, *Valences of the Dialectic* (2009) 421.

¹⁰ Helen Hester, 'Family Matters: In the Bubble of the Nuclear Household', *Architectural Review*, no. 1479 (March 2021).

¹¹ Helen Askitopoulou, 'Sleep and Dreams: From Myth to Medicine in Ancient Greece', *Journal of Anesthesia History*, no. 1 (2015) 71.