

happiness is only real when shared

Happiness in the Age of Personalised Corporations, Smart Tech, and Digital Media at the Gus Fisher Gallery

By Alena Kavka

happiness is only real when shared is the Gus Fisher Gallery's follow-up to their re-opening exhibition, *We're Not too Big to Care!* Held in 2019 following the gallery's temporary closure for refurbishment, the exhibition staged a meditation on the Gus Fisher Gallery's location within the corporate landscape of the Auckland CBD. With works that spoke to the impact of consumerist labour practices on the individual, *We're Not too Big to Care!* took a hard-line, realist approach to the mandates of capitalist labour and consumption, albeit with an optimistic bent—an insistence on human emotion, touch, and humour that raised the exhibition's affect above the conveyor belt drudgery of capitalist production.

As we find our feet post-2020, *happiness is only real when shared* is a cogent acknowledgement that the world—and capital—no longer works like it used to. This exhibition takes place in a more obviously mediated environment, with no hanging artworks, and one that has collapsed into an uncanny, absurdist dystopia. Instead of artwork that delineates the conflict between automated capitalism and human will, Gus Fisher's current iteration points to a much more diffuse, and possibly more insidious, reorientation of the locus of power. With works borrowing from various discourses of "happiness" and "wellness", *happiness is only real when shared* speaks to the co-option of the language of happiness by corporate, consumer, and technological spheres under accelerated capitalism.

Mark Schroder's "Fortune Teller" occupies the centre of the show. A sprawling, "total installation",¹ "Fortune Teller" fills the entire main space of the Gus Fisher gallery with a maze of prefabricated walls and tarpaulin that leads to nowhere. Schroder, a financial lawyer by day, extends his interest in establishing fictitious companies to the foyer of the heritage building, once a reception area for the television studios that occupied its wings. The work is site-responsive in a further sense: it was also informed by a 1986 renovation that removed the foyer's low ceiling to expose its grand glass dome in an attempt to improve the happiness of its employees. Seizing upon the question of what "happiness" comes to mean when it enters the corporate vocabulary, Schroder transforms the space into an ad-hoc administrative hub by installing *The Bureau of Happiness*, a fictional firm entrusted with the production of affirmational materials for companies and their employees.

A labyrinthine set strewn with aspirational posters and corporate value statements, "Fortune Teller" frames the expropriation of the language of happiness and wellness by corporate entities as a useless machine. Viewers are carried past desks, a smoking area, and a boardroom, all in a state of disarray. Littered with office ephemera, trash, and motivational memos, the haphazardness of the office's display communicates the precarity of the firm's *raison d'être*. Its prefab walls are plastered with policy statements that list nominal values such as "integrity", "excellence", and "respect", sided next to stock images of suited men and women, and copies of pages from the motivational business text, *Who Moved My Cheese?*² The absurdity of the corporate setup is reminiscent of the late anthropologist David Graeber's thesis on "bullshit jobs",³ which proposes that much of the paid labour undertaken within late capitalism is meaningless. According to Graeber, workers are inducted into self-satisfying chains of labour that act solely as a means to their own end: employees tick boxes, fulfill metrics, and middle manage, actions established for no other purpose than to complete the gratuitous chain of labour within which they reside.

"Fortune Teller" expresses the meaninglessness of the Bureau's labour in a firm that purports to ensure the wellbeing of corporate staff, while impossibly striving to fulfill monthly KPI's through the vague labour of its employees. The installation folds in on itself: there is no logic that binds office to meeting room to boardroom, but a mess of rubbish and aspirational slogans that get worse the closer you look ("Don't Wait for Failure. Create It"/"Success Doesn't Happen to You"). Lifelike objects turn out to be made from ceramic. The structure shuffles viewers back and forth, with no implicit hierarchy to dictate the viewing of its sections. An endless loop. As much as the firm speaks of its own uselessness, it also

points to the similarly meaningless, and paradoxical, signification of corporate ethics through discourses of “happiness” and “wellbeing”. This language, like the structure of the installation, has become divorced from any concrete signification of meaning. “Integrity”, “success”, and “excellence” become empty signs used to personify corporations in order to elicit trust from their customers and employees. As the suggestion of an ethical awareness or personality translates into revenue, it is precisely the emptiness of these words—their commodification—that ensures corporate success.

What is happiness anyway? What is wellbeing, fun, or peace if not espoused by a corporate Twitter account?⁴ The two video works in the exhibition continue to explore the languaging of happiness by interrogating the manifold resonances of “happiness” and “wellbeing” in the digital age. Wong Ping’s “Fables 2” is Aesop’s fables on speed: a series of five short animations featuring morally conflicted animals rendered in a hyperactive, video-game style. In it, the age-old cautionary tales that have long acted as moral guides to a life well-lived collide hysterically with the circumstantial constraints of consumer-capitalism, cultural trends, and political strife. Hilarious, absurdist, and dark, they proclaim a new morality for a TikTok world.

“Kitty A.I.”, by Pinar Yoldas, also uses an animal avatar to explore a happy, well-lived life (what we might think of as “well-being”) under contemporary conditions. Like Schroder’s piece, notions of happiness are again examined by dint of their packaging: a dystopic vision in which happiness comes down to good comms. Speculating a not-so-distant future in which Artificial Intelligence has superseded human forms of governance, “Kitty A.I.” imagines the rise of “applied micro-democracy”

delivered straight through your phone in the form of the internet’s darling: a cute kitten. The work represents both the symbolic packaging of a malevolent force as well as the real plausibility of a future run by non-human governance. If human politics is destined to dysfunction, would we not all be happier if our lives were run by an adorable, sentient kitten, who at the very least would relieve us of the burden of our existential distress?

The final work in the gallery space, although sitting apart from the primary exhibition, runs with the thematic entanglements of technology and wellness. “Now you see me”, produced by Vanessa Crofskey and Kimmi Rindel’s collective, Wellbeing Analysis Techniques Limited™, explores the private, domestic interior to Schroder’s public, corporate face. It occupies The Booth, a wall niche and erstwhile phone booth that serves as a discrete exhibition space for a rotating programme of site-specific installations. Comprising of a smart mirror inbuilt with the day’s weather, affirmations, and reminders to breathe and drink water, “Now you see me” comments on the ramifications of wellbeing discourse as vaunted by the consumer-tech industry. By literalising the elision of mirror and screen, the work raises questions of surveillance and control in the domestic space, where notions of contemporary “wellness” see the body exporting its regulatory functions to technological reminders—introjecting corporatised and technological mandates for self-maintenance into the lungs, the digestive tract, the skin. It not only raises the issue of technology instilling within itself its own antidote (none so self-evident as Apple iOS’s tracking of “Screen Time”), but remarks on the utility of personal self-improvement to the neoliberalised market—what essayist Jia Tolentino’s terms “optimisation”.⁵ The continually improving self, bolstered by “health” regimes, fits perfectly within the infinite

workday of accelerated capitalism. It is a streamlined and efficient body whose maintenance does not interrupt the production of labour, but has in fact become its very aesthetic.

Ultimately, it is this aestheticisation of happiness that binds the works in the exhibition: what happens when happiness is made into a signifier of corporate values, or a technology of self-care. Both instances are symbolic acts, a wrapping of language, whether around the corporation or the self. In the era of Instagram, the self is marketed as much as presented. Indeed, there is much to suggest that the self-fashioning of wellness might serve as a 21st-century form of self-discipline, governance marketed so well that we exert it upon our own selves, physically ingest it, as “self-improvement”. But there is another kind of happiness at play here, too. Navigating the exhibition’s installations elicits its own kind of joy, which has much to do with the light, narrative tone struck by each piece. The humour in the works derives from their recognisability: the modular office space, the rise of A.I., our prosthetic relationship to technology. And to recognise is to see the possibility of an alternative—an out—making clear that there can be happiness beyond “happiness”.

¹ Kerber Verlag, “Ilya und Emilia Kabakov: On the ‚Total‘ Installation,” <https://www.kerberverlag.com/en/465/ilya-und-emilia-kabakov>.

² Wikipedia, “Who Moved My Cheese?” https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Who_Moved_My_Cheese%3F.

³ David Graeber, *Bullshit Jobs: A Theory* (London: Allen Lane, 2018).

⁴ In recent years, a new form of online marketing has seen corporate Twitter accounts mimic millennial humour to appear more personable, and more appealing, to younger consumers. By referencing memes, using internet slang, and playfully “roasting” competitors, corporate brands affect a particular form of self-deprecation, producing an “authentic” image of self-awareness in order to target the powerful youth market. See for example, Rachel Sugar, “Steak-umm’s new marketing strategy: millennial angst with a side of meat puns,” *Vox*, 28 September 2018, <https://www.vox.com/the-goods/2018/9/28/17910462/steak-umm-viral-tweet-authenticity-angst>.

⁵ Jia Tolentino, “Always Be Optimizing,” in *Trick Mirror: Reflections on Self-Delusion* (London: HarperCollins, 2019).



This essay response was submitted independently by the author to Gus Fisher Gallery on the occasion of the exhibition *happiness is only real when shared*, 2021.