

Giacometti. Whereas Warren works through a slow building-up of material, Giacometti's process was one of constant deconstruction. 'Try again, fail again, fail better' was the phrase Samuel Beckett applied to his process, and both Cahn and Warren embody this vulnerability of the body and mind in which fragility provides a vehicle of doubt or wariness, yet is open to change. Warren's larger sculptures reflect the wiriness of Giacometti, such as the juxtaposition of *Hot Nike*, 2020, a hand-painted bronze on a painted MDF plinth, and *Femme Assise*, 1949-50, a painted plaster work by Giacometti, but there are also chords of dissonance between her more experimental pieces. Whereas *The Glasses*, 2014, in hand-painted bronze on MDF, suggests a suitcase on wheels and disturbs through its provocative hint of fleeing, her wall constructions that employ neon, wood and curious references to cats appear almost conservative. Warren succeeds more with her blowing up of female figures into bulbous contortions of Giacometti's skinny women, almost as a feminist critique of gender bias, as with *The Irregulars*, 2011, placed near Giacometti's *Mother and Daughter*, 1933. Here lies a touch of ambiguous caricature shared with certain pieces by Cahn – an ambiguity that is a tool for freedom.

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#### Artists' Books

### José García Oliva: How May I Serve You?

Online customer service has become ubiquitous in the past decade. Issues are resolved, questions answered and complaints swiftly managed in a matter of minutes from any digital device, but this type of interaction, which consumers have now grown accustomed to, is not an equal conversation. On the other side of the screen and, physically, often on the other side of the world, a real person *has* to smile while typing. José García Oliva's *How May I Serve You?* brings to light the stories of two customer service agents from Pakistan, outsourced by UK-based companies.

The project started in 2020 as a website ([howmayi-serveyou.co.uk](http://howmayi-serveyou.co.uk)) with a live chat function through which the public could address questions to Malik Ayaz and Saadia Abbasi. For its 2022 iteration, Oliva recreated the atmosphere of a customer service office with four cubicle desks, each with a computer available to contact the agents. The walls housed quotes from the conversations, as drawings on graph paper attached to file folders and framed, or as a screen divider with letters shaped out of steel pins: 'I like to use my real name' and 'Keep on smiling' are two examples. The chromatic theme was blue, a colour associated in the psychology of branding with calmness, security and trust.

The book functions as an archive of the project, bringing together the visual documentation of the three participatory performances with the conversations between Malik and Saadia and members of the public, which were edited in the form of two continuous chat threads. The performances were attended by 346 participants and their questions reveal not only a genuine curiosity regarding the professional lives of the two agents, but also an interest in the ways

in which their work affects their family life, wellbeing, plans for the future and position within the wider context of global capitalism.

The customer service industry is built on the premise of hierarchy; the customer is always right and their satisfaction and comfort are prioritised at all times. In practice, this means that Malik and Saadia do not use their own names or their own portraits; instead they employ western names and photographs of white people. They are trained to adapt their accent depending on the location of the customer, but they cannot disclose where they are based. Mirrors are installed in their cubicles as a reminder to keep on smiling. They adhere to strict scripts, which occasionally prevent issues from being solved. This, in turn, can prompt a rude or even abusive reaction from the customer, especially towards female agents. The unrealistic volume of work (aiming to speak to 300 customers in eight hours), having to work nights, weekends and on religious celebrations, as well as the poor remuneration, lack of professional opportunities, the constant supervision and the fear of redundancy are all contributing factors to a life of alienation and dehumanisation.

This line of work requires a flexible sense of self, one that bends between the customer's expectations and the companies' policies to the point where it can cancel the workers' own identity altogether. Although Saadia and Malik expose the situation through their honest engagement with the public, never do they sound complaining, though they are firm in their factual account. They approach the neocolonial system, of which their workplace is a part, with graceful resilience; when chatting about her prospects of moving to the UK, Saadia says: 'Yeah they [the UK] came, took, tore us apart and leave but that's history now. We need to live in present and think for the future. UK is motherland of many Pakistanis and Indians now.'

Her thoughts for improvement are clear and sensible. If the outsourcing companies ensured a minimum wage of £400, which would more than double the present income, the workers would be able to live decently, and it would mean that their own satisfaction would be taken into consideration for once. The financial element of their collaboration was paramount for Oliva, who ensured that the agents were compensated for their participation in the performances, while the profit from the book sales will go towards Malik and Saadia's effort to unionise.

Artists have considered the representation of modern labour ever since the advent of the working class in the 19th century, from the Lumière brothers' film *Workers Leaving the Lumière Factory*, 1895, through Edward Hopper's mid-century *Office at Night*, 1940, to the more contemporary Andrea Bowers's *The Worker's Maypole, An Offering for May Day 1894 (Illustration by Walter Crane)*, 2015. Yet Oliva's participatory framework aims to create a middle ground – beyond the facades put in place by global capitalism – where the dynamic between customer and agent is rebalanced to allow the emergence of an honest, humane conversation that could circumvent that ghastly check-my-smile mirror.

José García Oliva, *How May I Serve You?*, 2023, Sold Out Publishing, 48pp, 978 1 914180 05 7.

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