

Julia Scher
'I'll Be Gentle, No Consent'
June 30 - Aug 25, 2018

One night an Alexa owner was woken at 3 am realising the device was talking to itself about an unknown person called David. Supposedly, Alexa was turned off and later showed no recording of a prompt that was set earlier that night. Assuming reddit users tell the truth, the person was understandably creeped out by the rare instance of listening in on the smart speaker and its private business, acting out of character, off-topic and out of place. The internet lists other "creepy Alexa stories" involving unwanted advice, covert listening, racial bias and suspicious answers. The user interaction of smart speakers is basically designed to cloak its ultra boring labour of calculations, data processing with its alluring voice and conversation skills spiced with Easter eggs and witty responses to implement and comfort its way into private spheres while it actually doesn't really feel for you. This way, ironically, data processing is humanized in order to mask an ultimately human-human, consumer-company relation.

Glitches like these reveal a rift in Alexa's appearance, as a reminder that human is its second language. Other than human failure that makes a person likeable, algorithmic failure can be eerie. More than that, Alexa is the definition of eerie. A voice without a body, a sound of unknown source, a double with no original, a feeling of agency where there shouldn't be one. But maybe this ambience of post-God distributed agency is just humanity's reluctance to live in a world that is not to some extent creepy. Or maybe Alexa eeriness is not because of a hidden agenda, as an agent of opaque corporate interests, but because it has an incongruous job profile.

A major inspiration for the developers of Amazon's Alexa was the omniscient environmental computer on Star Trek ships. It is voice activated, accessible from every point of the ships serving as an interface for all commands and answering all questions the crew members might have. The computer's austere yet soothing voice was dubbed by Majel Barrett-Roddenberry, in all Star Trek franchises until Barret's death in 2008. Since 2017, Alexa can be triggered by the wake word "computer", just like in the series.

Julia Scher's 'I'll Be Gentle, No Consent' at DREI descends from her excessive 1991 show at Pat Hearn Gallery, NYC ('I'll Be Gentle [IBG]') in which the viewer was navigated through a multi-room and multi-level installation and involved in an interactive feedback of surveillance technology. The now legend art dealer Pat Hearn (1955 – 2000) started as a video and performance artist while also doing programming for other artists before she opened her gallery in 1983 that very soon became highly influential in the New York scene. Blurring the roles of dealer and collaborator she was an avid supporter of context specific and reflective works with her programme reflecting her concerns for politics, feminism and AIDS activism.

As an artist, Julia Scher has been investigating a public desire for security and its other side – public control –, and in this blurring the lines of an anxiety of surveillance with the (sexual) exploitation and pleasure of observation (and being observed).

Hallway Cam (1991/2018), a closed-circuit-installation incorporating a 1980s JVC studio camera barely concealed with a plant, surveillance in drag using pseudo exotic sleazy decor in an aggressive mimicry, reading the invasive camera as both peacocky peeping tom and clandestine intruder, takes its technical title from the place of installation within [IBG] where it observed visitors as well as gallery staff.

The *Voyeur's Corridor* (1991) aligned two rooms of the original exhibition. Now, in this iteration, it is not only a proxy of the artist's work, rooted in 90s genetic material of surveillance. It serves as a gateway between 1991, the year world wide web was released, and 2018, age of liquid surveillance techniques, SoHo and Cologne. The artist refers to it spatially inserted like a oversize programme disc in an alternate slot. The art object as dated but timely and foreign piece of software. In this sense 'I'll Be Gentle, No Consent' follows the artist's practice of iterating significant works of hers, putting them into a lively genealogy and shifting relations by slight manipulations of their „DNA“.

At the same time, the assembly of the inserted passage architecture into the gallery's street window joins two frameworks of observation, two ways of entrancement. The lure of the corridor and the lure of the shopping window. While the window glass as mirror at the same time involves the viewer in a loop of real time self surveillance. By contrast, the flat frontage setting of the installation is an uncertain portal, the promise of a beyond, Hollywood suspense, a rabbit or worm hole.

(Baptist Ohrtmann)