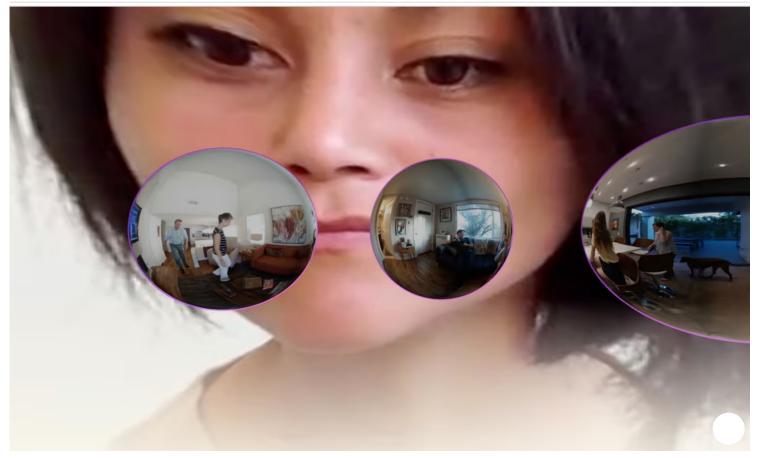Sign in

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Interview

Let me into your home: artist Lauren McCarthy on becoming Alexa for a day

Dominic Rushe

She livestreams her dates, once became a real-life Alexa and built a light that dims in boring company. As AI: More Than Human opens at the Barbican, meet an artist for the tech age

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In a gallery in downtown Manhattan, people are huddling around four laptops, taking turns to control the apartments of 14 complete strangers. They watch via live video feeds, and respond whenever the residents ask "Someone" to help them. They switch the lights on and off, boil the kettle, put some music on – whatever they can do to oblige.

The project, called Someone, is the latest in a series exploring our ever more complicated relationship with technology. It's by the American artist Lauren McCarthy and is a sort of outsourcing of Lauren, an earlier work in which she acted as a real-life Alexa, remotely watching over a home 24 hours a day, responding to its occupants' questions and needs like a flesh and blood version of Amazon's voice-operated virtual assistant.

Lauren, a video work, features in AI: More Than Human, which opens this week at the Barbican in London as part of its Life Rewired season, an investigation into what it means to be human in the digital era. McCarthy herself seems very human – thoughtful and careful in her answers – especially when compared to the "sexy and slavish" Alexa, as historian Jill Lepore recently described the digital assistant.

Replicating a replicant looking after total strangers was "intense" says McCarthy. "I slept when they slept. I'd take my laptop with me to the bathroom. Emotionally, it was exhausting, trying to think about who they are, what they wanted." Sometimes she was asked for things Alexa couldn't provide, or at least not yet: dating advice or a request to come over and help with a dinner party. But her "clients" were also "really aware that I was human, so they were patient. I was much slower. Some of them told me they felt bad about asking me to do things."

McCarthy, a graduate of the Massachusetts Institute for Technology (MIT), is fascinated by the "grey area" where technology, art and life meet. In an earlier piece, Social Turkers, she outsourced dating advice through Amazon's Mechanical Turk, a crowdsourcing service in which people around the world complete tasks requiring human intelligence. McCarthy streamed her dates as they happened and received advice by text. In another work, Relatable, people used pedals to control a light on a table that brightened when they were interested in a conversation and dimmed as they grew bored. Terrifyingly, if the light dimmed too much, it started to flash - a signal for people to step up their game.

If it all sounds a little bit Black Mirror, don't mention this to McCarthy. "I hear that comparison," she says, bristling. "For me, Black Mirror is very dystopian. I wouldn't make this work if it was just about fear and dystopia. There is always a hopeful element in my projects. For me, it's about the grey area where you are not sure what to think. Instead of being asked to react immediately, you can sit down and figure out which parts feel worrying, exciting, hopeful."

> **❝ You get things like Facebook because Silicon Valley people just don't know what it means to be a person**

To be fair, McCarthy's work is more nuanced than Black Mirror. She's interested in how people use technology to navigate anxiety-producing situations such as making friends, dating or even just asking "dumb" questions - situations she personally relates to. In fact, she was "almost jealous of Alexa" and her intimate role in people's lives. "I tend to get caught up in the small talk phase and never get past it. Every project I do is a slightly misguided attempt to connect with someone."

That's not to say that McCarthy isn't critical of technology. She doesn't own an Alexa herself and finds the amount of information the devices gather deeply creepy. "I just think about how it's constantly listening and recording," says the artist, who even turns off the auto-complete function on her Gmail. "It's so easy to let this stuff just guide you somewhere," she says, "without ever contemplating where it is going. We think of these things as neutral but there are specific decisions made about how they are programmed. What rules do they use?"

For McCarthy, many of the issues emerging in technology are down to the culture of Silicon Valley. "You get things like Facebook because those people are just not educated in what it means to be a person," she says, recalling her own experience at MIT, where she found there was little interest in "people skills". It's hardly surprising that all these issues of privacy emerge from companies founded and run by people who were taught that social skills are less important than knowing programming.

📷 'We are bringing these things into really personal territory' … Lauren McCarthy. Photograph: Max B Photo/The Guardian

Social media has been the hottest conflict zone in this clash. But now, as Amazon, Google et al race to push artificial intelligence into our homes, cars, schools, fridges and beyond, that conflict is moving from our phones and laptops into the wider world. "My hope is that you come out of Lauren with an understanding that we are bringing these things into really personal territory."

Because AI operates in the background, scooping up your data as you go about your life, it can be harder to grasp what is going on, she warns. "But when you switch it for a human, it becomes clear how personal this situation is. I would like these companies to have more consideration about what it means to have people as customers. What does it mean to control someone's home?"

While the arts have always been interested in technology, Silicon Valley has been oddly uninterested in the arts. McCarthy lives in Los Angeles, which has a thriving arts scene and has long inspired such luminaries as Ed Ruscha, John Baldessari, Mike Kelley and Frances Stark. It makes Silicon Valley, its neighbour, look like an art desert. Previous generations of the super rich - from the Medicis to industrialists, from the Guggenheims to Hollywood moguls - have been major patrons of the arts. Yet, for all their obsession with design, the technocrats have never seemed to be as in love with art.

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McCarthy thinks that part of the problem may be that as an artist "it's really hard to exist there and meet other artists. New York and LA are expensive but you can still make a life. In the Valley, it's almost impossible." The average one-bedroom apartment now rents for $3,690 a month in San Francisco, the highest rate in the US. Good luck finding a loft to work in. McCarthy wonders if this lack of interest could be hardwired into Valley culture. "They have these campuses where the executives in particular never leave that world," she says. "That terrifies me."

One of the curators of the Barbican show is Dr Suzanne Livingston, co-founder of the influential Cybernetic Culture Research Unit. Art, she believes, has an increasingly important role to play as we tackle the impact of tech. AI is at a "tipping point", she adds, burrowing its way further and further into our lives. "It's an interesting moment to reflect on where we have come from."

It's certainly the case that the idea of inanimate objects having life and soul has long been with us, from Pinocchio to the Golem to Kami in Shintoism, the belief that the landscape and forces of nature contain spirits – which, says Livingston, some have used to explain Japan's easier embrace of AI, an element also explored in the show.

Western ideas of the animated inanimate have tended to be darker, such as the killer robot Maschinen-Mensch in 1927's Metropolis, Hal in 2001: A Space Odyssey, the civilisation-destroying AI system, Skynet, in Terminator, or the increasingly angry and self-aware androids of HBO's Westworld. But again, these black mirrors have lacked nuance.

"Artists are able to get inside the tech and explore its potential in a freer way," says Livingston. "Lauren's work explores technology in an ambiguous way. On the one hand her work is about surveillance - but it's also about intimacy and sharing. It's very human."

AI: More Than Human is at the Barbican, London, 16 May-26 August.

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