Lying Sophia and Mocking Alexa – An Exhibition on AI and Art

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Abstract

This abstract is the curatorial statement of an exhibition exploring the relationship between AI and art, curated by the author, to be launched in 2019.

Sophia, the humanoid robot who became a Saudi Arabian citizen is interpreted by Yann LeChun as a story intertwined with elements of ambiguity and deception co-compiled by the mass media and technological companies. Alexa, the cloud-based virtual assistant developed by Amazon, was reported as letting out eerie and unsettling laughter, which soon became viral on YouTube. A recent BBC news piece even reveals Alexa recording domestic conversations and sending them to people on the owner's contact list "by mistake".

"Sophia" and "Alexa" seem to be two contemporary metaphors on machine lives, two thin slices interposed among the imbricated discourses on artificial intelligence. Sophia symbolizes the imagination of AI cast by the mass media, films and television: highly human-imitating appearances, alert and responsive, and even diplomatic – a quasi-human being embedded among us. Alexa, on the other hand, is an "assistant" or "servant" who takes a machine outlook and resides in domestic corners, whose laughter implies the non-transparent, anti-regulating, even peeping, subversive dimension of the artificial intelligence black box – even a "mistake" to be amended.

Sophia's lies are projections of poetic imaginations, Alexa's mocking is a glitch in the algorithmic black box; what they share in common is a quantum-state like scenario of uncertainties, as if part of the "ZONA" in Andrei Tarkovsky's 1977 *Stalker*. This is the point of departure for this exhibition. In the alternations and evolutions of technologies, we've rarely encountered such a subject as the artificial intelligence: it is paradoxical, mind stimulating, and implies manifold future potentials – all trajectories that carry paradoxical and ambiguous underpinnings. Even as AI has been ubiquitously employed by microchips, processors, data mining and analysis, forming the new frontier of a global technological competition, it remains imperceptible and equivocal to the average citizen. Wrapped within information on mass media, AI has transformed into a story both the easiest to tell, and the most difficult to narrate.

In Tarkovsky's script, the stalker guides writer and a scientist to take a cable car, steer by the policemen's chase, traverse tunnels of dripping water, detour rooms filled with sand dunes, and finally approximate the core of "ZONA": a "Room" that makes beliefs true. The writer is concerned about the darkness of human nature that the Room suggests, while the scientist wishes to destroy the Room in case villains would take advantage of it; meanwhile, the Room endows the stalker with a meaning of existence.

The exhibition sets up a metaphorical "ZONA" which embodies our contemporary situation: a time-space where both science and art are simultaneously deprived of the power of autocracy and narratives that command assent. Artists and researchers involved in this exhibition blend perspectives of Sophia (bright, poetic, media imagination) and Alexa (dark, black-box, technological criticism). They investigate how AI shuffles global, technical politics, and the relationships between nations and civilians; the dark, inhuman labor of using real humans (in exhausting fashion) to train "human-like" algorithms; the creation of

subjects of surveillance; the aspiration to project the entire human spiritual architecture on one single technology form; and the fairy-tale construals of AI elaborated by mass media.

The concluding "Room" of the exhibition is to be built by the visitor ("stalker"). It interweaves the richness, uncountability/non-computability and vitality of the psychological world, and the implications of AI in the fundamental menace and nihilism of our own existence. Would it "break all the prophecies" like the event horizon in Vernor Steffen Vinge's assertions, or be "the biggest mistake we have ever made" in Steven Hawking's alert? The future of humanity is written in this "Room" containing unlimited new permutations and combinations.

Biography

Iris Long is a curator. She currently works as a researcher on art, science and technology at Central Academy of Fine Arts, with a research focus on how art responses to the current global reality of ubiquitous computing and big data. She lectures on data art at CAFA.

Her artistic work has been exhibited internationally in venues including CAFA Art Museum (Beijing), Chronus Art Center (Shanghai), Power Station of Art (Shanghai), V2_ Institute for the Unstable Media (Rotterdam), ISEA (Hong Kong), and so on. Her work has been shortlisted in Prix Cube Art Prize, and received an honorable mention in ifva, Hong Kong. She was shortlisted by the first M21-IAAC Award (International Awards for Art Criticism). Her translation work, Rethinking Curating: Art after New Media, received a nomination from AAC Art China awards in 2016.

Iris Long has a master's degree in Critical Writing in Art and Design from the Royal College of Art, UK.