

!Mediengruppe Bitnik

Is anybody home lol

April 27 - June 24, 2017



Exhibition view, *Is anybody home lol*, 2017

“There is a crack in everything. That’s how the light gets in.” (Leonard Cohen, Anthem)
But !Mediengruppe Bitnik says, “that’s where the light gets out.”

What influence do automated, algorithmic and artificially intelligent systems have on our reality and everyday life? How can we understand the man-machine relationship when man is increasingly embedded in larger circuits of ecology, technology, economy and the networked reality? Who is still part of the system and who is responsible?

Is anybody home lol is the question, that the !Mediengruppe Bitnik is asking in their exhibition in the EIGEN + ART Lab and they give a variation of possible answers in four works. The expression of digitalization and technologization of the present day is their artistic material. It is the loss of digital control that irritates them. Their work deals with the interest of testing and discovering misunderstandings about technologies and their misuse.

It is then relevant to ask “if anybody is home”, when “Der Rosenkavalier” by Richard Strauss is transmitted live over the opera telephone of Zurich, an employee in the control room of the London Underground monitoring system is personally requested on his computer to play a game of chess, a female bot on a dating platform encourages the user to chat and flirt, or a website by Captchas wants to find out whether a human being is really using the computer.



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Zurich. 2007. You are at home. The phone rings, you answer, at the other end of the connection is an automated voice: "This is the autonomous opera telephone of Zurich. For your pleasure and entertainment, we have placed a bug in the Zurich opera. In a few moments you will be connected live to the opera house. You can lay back and listen to today's performance of 'Der Rosenkavalier' by Richard Strauss from the comfort of your living room. Enjoy!" The live broadcast from the opera house begins immediately. You can follow the ensemble through the telephone line - the sound rattles slightly - or you can hang up; then an intermediary computer uses a generator to decide at random which Zurich household is to be called next.

In *Opera Calling* (2007) the !Mediengruppe Bitnik intervenes with the Zurich opera system, whereby they hide bugged telephones in the opera hall. Through this direct transmission, a virtual listening-room that stretches beyond the premises of the opera house, in the form of a "home delivery service", is created.

!Mediengruppe Bitnik also re-evaluates the space and system in *Surveillance Chess* (2012), a hacker intervention by the artist duo in the London Underground surveillance system, just before the Olympic Games in 2012. By manipulating unencrypted connections between monitoring cameras and control centers, !Mediengruppe Bitnik replaces the real-time image on the monitor with a personal invitation to play chess. They open up a play situation between them and those who have monitored the events in the control center, and have so far been safe. Both players now have the same rules and opportunities. The one-dimensional monitoring system is transformed, it becomes a medium of communication. At this moment, the public space, privatized and controlled by opaque surveillance systems, is being redesigned. The cards are reshuffled, the game can begin, it is open ended.

In their newly adapted installation *Ashley Madison Angels at Work in Berlin* (2017) one can see five female bots from the hacked Canadian online-dating platform Ashley Madison that are shown on five monitors. Bots – more present and frightening than ever – are programs, that perform actions that imitate human behavior, or even are provided with a human-like body. They react, interact and communicate with us. The platform Ashley Madison has deployed 272 fem(ale)-bots in Berlin alone in order to increase the rate of female users. At EIGEN + ART Lab five of the bots will be active and the visitors will be able to engage in a virtual conversation with the simple pick-up line „is anybody home“.

The idea that we have been surrounded by bots for such a long time, that we communicate with them on a daily basis and that we can hardly distinguish them from real people, is presented to us once more when we stand before the large, luminous surface of the work *Solve this captcha: Is anybody home lol* (2016). !Mediengruppe Bitnik starts where the surface breaks, where the system closes and questions are no longer asked. Their work opens up humorous, critical and far-reaching answers to a presence which is no longer accessible just by looking at it.



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