



## Q&A: LET'S TALK ABOUT LAUREN

Online-Interview by Curator Rainald Schumacher with Lauren Lee McCarthy  
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### 1. Human AI Art Award 2024

Lauren Lee McCarthy

LAUREN: Anyone home?

17.11.2024 – 19.1.2025

**What was your point of departure for the *LAUREN* project in 2017? Did you start with the project for a specific 'art' exhibition, or as a scientific research project?**

**Lauren Lee McCarthy:** It grew out of my previous work, *Follower*, which was where I provided a service as a real-life follower for a day. I became interested in conflicting ideas around following, being seen, and surveillance. I always followed people with their consent and in public, but I saw AI and surveillance technology moving into our intimate spaces. I created the *LAUREN*-performance to think about the tradeoffs between agency and comfort, care and control. There was no specific exhibition, I began doing the performances in people's homes after they signed up on a website I made, called [get-lauren.com](http://get-lauren.com).

**Over the years, *LAUREN* was realized in the context of exhibitions in various ways. Was this an approach to reveal also different aspects, questions and subject matter of social interaction with people when it is monitored and managed by artificial intelligence?**

**Lauren Lee McCarthy:** I think of my works as systems. They can reconfigure to different situations and the form shifts to support that. Sometimes it's a performance in a home, other times an installation in the gallery, sometimes I am performing, other times members of the public are invited to be the intelligence. In designing a performance installation, the set is often constructed in direct response directly to the architecture and context, often using locally sourced materials. The context and form of each performance is different, and this leads to new questions, often prompted by the participants.

**What is now specific with the installation at the Kunstmuseum Bonn?**

**Lauren Lee McCarthy:** In *LAUREN: Anyone home?* local performers will train to take on the role of the intelligence, watching over the visitors that enter the *LAUREN* space. The installation

is designed to feel like a cross between a social space and a home space, while the *LAUREN* system watching further blurs the line between public and private.

***LAUREN* is not only about communication with a humanized machine, it's also about the communication in between people in general. So, where are we standing in our relation and communication to the others?**

**Lauren Lee McCarthy:** I'm fascinated by the way that we're trained to interact with technology, and how this shapes the way we interact with others. I believe that if we want to make a future that feels livable and humane, we'll need to put our relationships with people first, and try to design technology that supports that, not the other way around.

**And where are 'we' standing, in a time when many people due to lack of education or simply the lack of access to media, are not able to take part?**

**Lauren Lee McCarthy:** Considering access in all forms is essential. This means understanding the barriers to engaging with technology, whether it is education, location, race, gender, disability, or something else. What assumptions are being made about the users of various technologies? Who is included in the conversations about what is being built? Can we design technology embedded with values we want to hold?

**Since there are a few different descriptions about the early stage of the project *LAUREN*, could you please describe briefly the original set-up for the piece in 2017.**

**Lauren Lee McCarthy:** The original setup in 2017 took place in other people's homes, who signed up through a website I created. I would arrive, install a series of custom smart devices I made including cameras, door locks, faucets, and other appliances. I'd then leave, and remotely watch over the inhabitants for periods that ranged up to two weeks, controlling all aspects of their home. They could speak to me and request specific actions, but I would also act autonomously, trying to enhance their home environment. I performed for one home at a time, and during that time, they would be my complete focus — I'd sleep when they slept and carry my computer to the restroom if needed so my attention would be uninterrupted.

**There is a lot of talk about artificial intelligence. In your opinion, what could be the positive aspects for the future of the planet and a fairer, more peaceful world, and where are the greatest dangers?**

**Lauren Lee McCarthy:** AI is such a large word; I hope we soon get past talking about it as a single idea to understand how it specifically impacts us in different situations. The aspects of AI that interest me are the way that it can remove barriers to learning and solving problems. I see people use *Chat GPT* to guide them through all sorts of challenges. I question some of the values embedded in the datasets the tool was trained on. At the same time, it may level the playing field in terms of education and skilled work. Noticing the places where AI comes up short may give us insight into the human labor that's essential in these systems. The emotional experience of

interacting with other humans remains important and may not be something we want to outsource to technology at every opportunity.

I recently explored some of these questions in a work called *HOST*, which was a party essentially generated by AI. Performers carried platters of earpieces, allowing guests to decide whether they'd like to become a host for the AI. Once inserted into the head, the earpieces listen into conversation and deliver instructions into guests' ears.

**You were trained in programming, what is the open-source platform p5.js?**

**Lauren Lee McCarthy:** *p5.js* is an open-source tool and community focused on making learning to code more accessible. Like its predecessor Processing, *p5.js* uses the metaphor of a sketchbook, it intends to make sketching with code as easy as sketching on paper. It is commonly used in education, and by artists and designers making interactive websites, immersive experiences, drawings and prints, and physical outputs. *p5.js* is not only a web programming language, but also a project that emphasizes inclusivity and access in its community of users and developers. Historically, there has been a lack of representation of women and people of color in both the arts and in technology, and too often efforts to remedy come as afterthoughts. By contrast, *p5.js* holds diversity as a core value upon which the software is built, allowing all decisions to flow from this. *p5.js* attempts to model what a truly open software and artistic project could look like, gaining strength through the range of ideas and opinions its contributors bring to it.

**What projects are you currently working on?**

**Lauren Lee McCarthy:** I've spent the past year facilitating the exchange of *SALIVA*. It's grown from 1-on-1 performances to mail order kits to 'Saliva Speakeasies' and 'Bars' around the world. Participants can come spit into a tube, set the terms of use for their saliva, and select someone else's spit to take home in exchange. The counter-gesture of this saliva exchange sidesteps the anonymity of medical and corporate entities, and invites conversation about data privacy, race, gender, and class as they pertain to genetic material.

My new project is called *DRIVERLESS* — I'm designing a driverless vehicle. Through a series of performances, the system will get trained and tested, as we experience the feeling of moving at high speed towards the future, hands off the wheel, out of control. The first performance in the series is *GET IN*. Participants approach the driverless vehicle and decide whether to get in.

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