

FIRST NIGHT EXHIBITION

## AI: Who's Looking After Me? review — cats, robots and the meaning of life

Science Gallery London, SE1



Cat Royale, 2023

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Tom Whipple | Tuesday, June 20 2023, 5:00pm, The Times

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★★★☆☆  
Rarely has an exhibition been more timely. So far 2023 has been the year of artificial intelligence. It is, perhaps, the beginning of the age of AI. How do you tackle this in art?

For visitors to Science Gallery London the first attempt at an answer comes in a video installation — and a driverless car that's a bit confused. Painted all around this car is a circle of white paint, instructing it to stop. Whenever it turns it meets a no-entry sign. You, a human, would simply drive over; it, computer-driven, is a prisoner of its programming. A tonne of metal, a miracle of software and hardware, defeated by paint.

It is a comforting start to the exhibition *AI: Who's Looking After Me?* Maybe, you think looking at this, the machines aren't so clever after all? Behind it, if this revelation of fallibility makes you want to make common cause with AI, there is a huggable robot. So it is that entering King's College London's museum space humans and robots can make an uneasy detente.



Newly Forgiven Technologies, 2022

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Can it last? And if it does, what does it mean? Among the more thought-provoking exhibits in this collaboration with the arts organisation FutureEverything is *Cat Royale* — a “futurist utopia where cats are watched over lovingly by an AI robot arm, tending to their every need”. It offers hours of footage where you can watch these real cats really playing in some sort of robot-run cat palace. This prompts a slightly uncomfortable question: if a cat plays in a box and no one is involved, does its life have inherent worth? My thought is, no — but then I don't really like cats. What about if it is a human, though? What if we are the pet, the robots we created the master? What, then, is the point of a cat, of a person, of a computer?



The Future is Here! by Mimi Onizuka, 2019

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The problem with being timely is that it is so easy to be behind the times. One installation investigates the use of AI in healthcare. Can a computer replace a human? Of course not. “Care”, it explains in one caption, “is like a temple, a sacred space full of magic, that no one can quite put their finger on.” In interviews patients explain the importance of the human touch, how humans will always be necessary. Looking at it, I think instead of the recent study that found that not only were ChatGPT email replies to medical queries more accurate than those from real medical professionals, they were judged to be more empathetic. That study is a disquieting counter to bromides about common humanity.

Another installation involves chatting with a computer about love, choosing from drop-down menus of answers. Two years ago it would have been impressive. All I can think today is how limited it is compared with a free-flowing conversation with any of today's large language models.

This is the problem that the curators face. The purpose of any exhibition about AI is to make us think about the nature of sentience, the purpose of technology and the future of humanity itself. The difficulty is, we already have something that achieves that. What is more, it does so in a way that is as startling as the most thoughtful artist, as unsettling as the most dystopian exhibit, and which is developing faster than any curator can keep pace. And you can experience it just by logging on to your computer. That thing is AI itself.

To January 20, 2024, [london.sciencegallery.com](https://www.sciencegallery.com)

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