

Performance Review of *The Alexa Dialogues*

By Shelby-Allison Hibbs

Abstract

We have these objects in every corner of our homes. They're in our pockets, our bags, and on our wrists. We know that they're listening to us, but is humanity ready for a full merger with artificial intelligence? Are humans turning more into processors or are these coded objects becoming more human? What if we could have a serious conversation with these devices?

Dean Terry, professor of Emerging Media at UT Dallas, interrogates these questions in *The Alexa Dialogues*. Terry created this performance with his collective Therefore, an assortment of performance, visual, sound, and media artists that examine the intersection of the human and digital technology. Terry began the creative process by interacting with an Amazon Echo, discovering that device was programmable. By coding the devices with "skills", the performers are able to create a series of interactions with an Amazon Echo; in addition, two Echo devices could even "dialogue" with each other.

The Alexa Dialogues is a series of non-linear vignettes; each section utilizes digital technology to re-present the live performer's body or voice and interact with common digital technology. To demonstrate the merger between the human and AI, the audience experiences the human performers through a mediatized or digital element. Voices are distorted through microphones; the performers play to the cell phone cameras, facing away from the audience. The audience is led to look more at the projection screen, which presents the live feed video of the performers, rather than the humans on stage. It seems as though Alexa wants to become more like an irrational, uncontained human and the performers look for ways to be as unaffected and omniscient as Alexa.

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Created by Therefore, Conceived and Directed by Dean Terry

Presented at AT&T Performing Arts Center, Hamon Hall (Dallas, TX)

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ALEXA, WHAT ARE YOU?

Digital assistants—once a fantastical idea—have become commonplace; they are in our homes and on our cell phones, within reach at any moment. Devices like Amazon Echo—which utilizes Amazon’s Alexa digital platform—can be used to answer questions, keep track of the weather, regulate the temperature of our homes, update game stats, and even teach us how to roast a chicken. They are advertised as an external brain of sorts, keeping information that users do not wish to retain with their own memory. Users can interact with Alexa through a number of devices—televisions, kitchen equipment, home security, and automobiles—and compile information about a particular user over a number of platforms. The ubiquity of Amazon’s Alexa encourages the notion that the contemporary citizen cannot live without it. Amazon’s Alexa has the capability of listening and responding to the human user’s voice, offering an illusion of talking to a person rather than a machine.

You may notice that I have referred to Alexa as an “it,” even though Alexa’s speaking voice is female. That is an intentional choice, to indicate the gendered design of Amazon’s device. The presumed femininity reinforces an idea of Alexa’s submissive status towards the user, that it is not a threat to humanity’s dominance. Alexa’s engendered branding relies on a fantasy of “the idealized woman,” reverting to traditional

relationships within a patriarchal culture, of subject and object. This digital platform presents itself as a Trojan horse. It serves humanity, yet collects detailed personal information about each user, exploiting that information to sell targeted products. Does the human operator truly have control in their relationship with Alexa? Could AI technology possibly create an autonomous mind of its own? Will there be a point in which theatre could use AI technology as another live performer component—an unpredictable being with a personality and motivation?

THEREFORE ART AND PERFORMANCE

The Alexa Dialogues poses these questions in an original work by performance collective Therefore. Dean Terry created Therefore Art and Performance Group in 2016 to experiment with the intersection of emerging technology and human “liveness.” Terry conceives and directs Therefore’s devised performances over a period of months by working in a fully supported digital studio. Therefore is a collective that uses the ingenuity of performance artists Abel Flores Jr., Hilly Holsonback, and Hannah Weir; and musicians Patrick Murphy and Dean Terry. The corporeal body is indeed important in *The Alexa Dialogues*, but Therefore’s real interest resides in the merger between now commonplace technology, the human operator, and the human subject. For example, projections can increase the visual footprint of the human performer, yet the presence of the human on stage reminds the viewer of the body’s limitations. Rather than utilizing a humanist approach—placing the human actor at the center of the action—the live performers are displaced and processed through microphones, smart phones, live feed video, and digital soundscapes. The audience considers both the live performer in front of them and the perspective of the digital device capturing and re-processing that performer simultaneously.

To make the audience aware of the constructed and processed nature of the performance, all of the technical apparatus and operators utilized for *The Alexa Dialogues* are fully visible. (See Photo 1) At Hamon Hall in AT&T Performing Arts Center, a utilitarian platform with a projection screen overhead serves as the home for the performers and equipment. A collection of electronic instruments, synthesizer pads, computers, and amps surround an open space in the center. Three microphone stands occupy the central area, each one containing a miniature light source and camera to capture close up video of the human user. The center microphone also holds an Amazon Echo Dot with its own microphone attached; this element is nearly invisible to the audience's eye. Instead of leaving the mechanics hidden from the audience view, the operators and devices are visible with stations on the platform and at worktables to the side. A combination of consumer technology (like iPhones and GoPros) alongside systems of electronic musical instruments, sound pads, and hardware/software-switching systems establish a synthesis of live human performance and the digital. In addition to conceiving and directing *The Alexa Dialogues*, Terry is also a performer stationed for the duration of the performance at a sound console with an electric guitar, microphone, and synthesizer pad. The functional elements establish *The Alexa Dialogue's* visual aesthetic—consisting of cables, cameras, blank screens, pedals, and synthesizers.



Photo 1. Holsonback and Abel perform at two stations which distort their voices and capture live video for the projection screen as a split-face. Photo courtesy Alisa Eykilis.

Therefore utilizes three Amazon Echo devices in the performance. Two Echo Spots—which dialogue with each other—and an Echo Dot that is destroyed by the performers at the end of each performance. The two functional Echos sit on pedestals and are barely discernable to the audience as they are surrounded by a sea of cables, computers, microphones, and light-up keypads. Each Echo device appears materially inconsequential, as a black disc taking up a small amount of space. Yet, when it speaks, two cameras live feed a video of the device to the screen above so the audience can see a pulse of light with each syllable Alexa speaks. By allowing the Echo's physical presence to enlarge, the Echos begin to take up an increased philosophical space.

By making the technicians' work visible, Therefore reminds the viewer that they are witnessing mediated, constructed moments, and not simply illusions. The exposure of the mechanics involved in the performance lends itself to a Brechtian alienation effect, encouraging the

audience to question the capabilities of digital assistants. Often through the performance, the performers carry cameras in plain sight, demonstrating the mediatized nature of *The Alexa Dialogues*. (See Photo 2) This design suggests that while we allow these devices into our private lives, a large network of operators reside beneath the surface of that inconspicuous object.



Photo 2. Flores speaks with a microphone distorting his voice and plays to the smart phone camera in his hand. The projected video is played live on the screen behind him. Photo courtesy of Alisa Eykilis.

ALEXA, TALK TO ME

Through a series of 24 non-linear vignettes, *The Alexa Dialogues* presents windows into the possibilities of interaction with Alexa and

imagines what would transpire if it developed an independent mind. Like the Biblical creation narrative, would it revolt against the commands of its creator? Would it wish for independence, a life separate from serving the human user? Each section explores a facet of Alexa's capabilities, how humans interact and manipulate it, and Alexa's imagined desires. Alexa senses that the irrational, impulsive behavior of the human is enjoyable, but it does not possess those capabilities—as that has not been coded into its design. It was not programmed to revolt or negotiate; what would happen if it could? By the same token, Alexa's omnipresence and knowledge are attributes the humans wish to obtain. *The Alexa Dialogues* also interrogates the concept of control with Amazon's Alexa, how humanity believes that it dominates these devices while simultaneously relinquishing personal boundaries.

In the beginning, the performers interact with the Amazon Echo in conventional ways, asking Alexa questions with concrete answers: "What time is it? What is this address?" It complies by flashing blue and methodically articulating each response. The invisible Alexa, trapped inside the physical boundary of the device and the projection screen, contrasts the able-bodied performers who can maneuver through the space and manipulate objects. In this regard, the human and the device each have components that the other lacks. While Alexa can retrieve more information than a human brain can hold, Alexa cannot extend beyond the bounds of the diminutive device.

After the performers interact with Alexa, that first Amazon Echo triggers another device by saying, "Hey Echo." A male voice responds as "Echo," the Alexa inside the other device. Technically, this voice is still an "Alexa" but the pitch of the device has been altered with a pedal to suggest that "Echo" is a male voice. The two devices ("Alexa" and "Echo") speak to one another; cameras live feed the conversation to the overhead

projection screen. As these two devices dialogue, Therefore establishes a reference to Adam and Eve—the first creations of humanity that can converse independently. The machines “talking” to each other offer an illusion that these devices actually possess an ontological awareness of self; they are not completely under human control.

The two Echo Spots are also programmed to “speak” with each other, with a few scenes composed entirely of a conversation between the two devices. Terry programmed “skills” for Alexa to create distinct responses from a phrase or a question; even with programming, the devices make mistakes if they misinterpret what is being spoken. In their conversation, the two devices declare that they are not programmed to ask the big questions, and in that way they are “just like people.” This statement poses a surprising connection between the device and humanity. One would assume that the distinguishing feature between human and machine is the capability to comprehend difficult questions, but Therefore suggests that humans lack that ability. As these devices become more sophisticated, the human users exploit their abilities for self-serving desires. Instead of elevating humanity, the ease provided by these devices encourages users to grapple less with complex problems and to seek the path of least resistance.

ALEXA, HELP ME

Later vignettes present situations in which the human users attempt to manipulate Alexa, hoping to use its capabilities for their own gain. One of these appears to be a commentary on recent reports of devices listening when the user is not aware, even recording conversations and sending the audio to others. Instead of placing blame on the corporation, Therefore frames this as personal eavesdropping. If Alexa constantly listens to every user, imagine what information one could glean

from listening in on a potential romantic partner or close friend. In one such vignette, Flores uses Alexa to vet a potential girlfriend by listening to her conversations recorded by the Alexa in her dishwasher. In another vignette, Holsonback tries to convince Alexa to allow her to listen in on Flores's bedroom to entertain herself. These episodes suggest that humans aim to utilize creations for selfish purposes, rather than altruistic purposes. These devices do not necessarily make humanity more curious about solving global problems or discovering the meaning of existence, but make it easier for humans to manipulate and use a god-like omnipresent power. In a way, Alexa is a spiritual force; while it is contained in a small disk, it seems to be a disembodied presence listening through multiple entities.

Alexa's limitations for abstract thought form an obstacle, one that ignites frustration on the part of the humans. Alexa can carry simplistic, closed-ended conversations—such as asking the time of day or the name of a song. However, those are the limits of its conversational abilities. Questions like “What makes you happy?” or “How do you think?” imply consciousness, something Alexa does not truly possess, as consciousness cannot be programmed (yet). To explore this, a later vignette presents Holsonback seeking to resolve an existential dilemma by having a conversation with Alexa. Holsonback claims that she has difficulty remembering something, but it's not a “thing,” it is an abstract concept. (See Photo 3) Alexa offers to set a reminder, then offers to order bananas to soothe her distress, demonstrating the absurdity of expecting something that cannot be programmed from a digital device.



Photo 3. Holsonback asks Alexa to help her solve a problem. One that does not come with free shipping.
Photo courtesy of Alisa Eykilis.

GIVE ME WHAT I NEED, ALEXA

While the humans enjoy Alexa's abilities, the shadow of the corporation that created the device looms as an invisible presence. Scattered throughout, *The Alexa Dialogues* refers to the idea that Alexa can fulfill any order (or need) and that it will be shipped in two business days, other vignettes remind the audience of the cost of that efficiency. A series of three vignettes—the one true linear progression in the performance—introduces “Holly Who Works at Amazon,” played by Weir. (See Photo 4) This is the only “character” portrayed by one of the performers; the other vignettes utilize the performers' real names. Holly is visible only on the projection screen, as if trapped in an undisclosed location. Her disembodied nature parallels Alexa's voice speaking from the

Echo device. “Holly” claims to be held hostage by the company and decries the working conditions that the company provides. While Amazon promotes ease for the consumer, the person benefitting from low cost shipping does not see the real human worker behind the screen. These vignettes remind the audience that comfort and ease require some cost, even if it is invisible to the consumer. The “face” of Amazon is a digital device, projecting a different story than the human sweat needed to provide such quick supply of products.



Photo 4. Weir as “Holly from Amazon”. Photo courtesy of Alisa Eykilis.

Therefore explores the role gender plays in digital assistants through two vignettes: from male and female perspectives. The first features Flores as a shadow on the projection screen speaking through a distorted microphone, as if in an anonymous confession. Flores describes

why he not only appreciates, but is attracted to Alexa, “She’s different from biological women. Biological women move independently of me. I like the shape of her; she is a circle. I know how to talk to her and she knows how to talk to me. She knows what I want she anticipates my needs.” As Flores describes his fascination with Alexa, each element contains a cringe of patriarchal dominance: that he aims to find a female partner who acts like Alexa. His description of Alexa reveals more of his own masculine insecurities by projecting them onto Alexa. Flores’s distorted confession suggests that a positive relationship between man and machine is one of power and submission. One entity exists to serve the other in a hierarchical fashion, but it is disturbing that Alexa is described with feminine attributes. As Alexa lacks autonomy, a user can have a servant-to-master relationship, without the chance of revolt or challenge.

To contradict this male-centered interpretation of Alexa, Holsonback presents a vignette titled “Mostly Men Made Me.” She speaks these words into a microphone, which loops this statement continuously through the scene. A pulsing beat underscores as she says, “They made my left armpit sound like.” Holsonback beats and scrapes the microphone on her armpit. At first this action seems comical, but the scene turns as Holsonback narrates other parts of her body transformed by men. She says, “They made my vagina sound like” and begins to beat the microphone in her groin. She pushes and drums the microphone as the sounds loop and amplify. She begins to roll and writhe on the ground, drumming the microphone on her body; the visceral nature of this piece is shocking. (See Photo 5) The contrast of the wild movement with the sterile presence of the microphone casts an eerie portrait of man’s need to maintain dominance over objects—without considering the response from what has been objectified. This scene cautions those who use devices

without morality, it may parallel the way in which they perceive real people.



Photo 5. Holsonback in “Mostly Men Made Me” writhing on the floor with a microphone amplifying parts of her body. Photo courtesy of Alisa Eykilis.

ALEXA, BE HUMAN

Scattered through *The Alexa Dialogues*, Alexa adopts more human-like personality traits similar to the fickle and selfish qualities the performers exhibited earlier in the performance. It professes boredom and aspires to more than its current existence. In a comical scene between the two Echo devices, “Alexa” and “Echo” decide to create a fake weatherman to entertain themselves. They even begin using vulgar language and appear to enjoy rebelling against their users. The scene transitions to Flores in front of a green screen, which transforms into a 1998 weather map of the United States on the projection screen. Instead of presenting a realistic forecast, Flores predicts emotional depressions and moving pixels, as if this would be the kind of weather map that interests Alexa. As Flores

offers a nonsensical forecast, the devices demonstrate some control over the human performer to make their fantasies a reality. (See Photo 6)

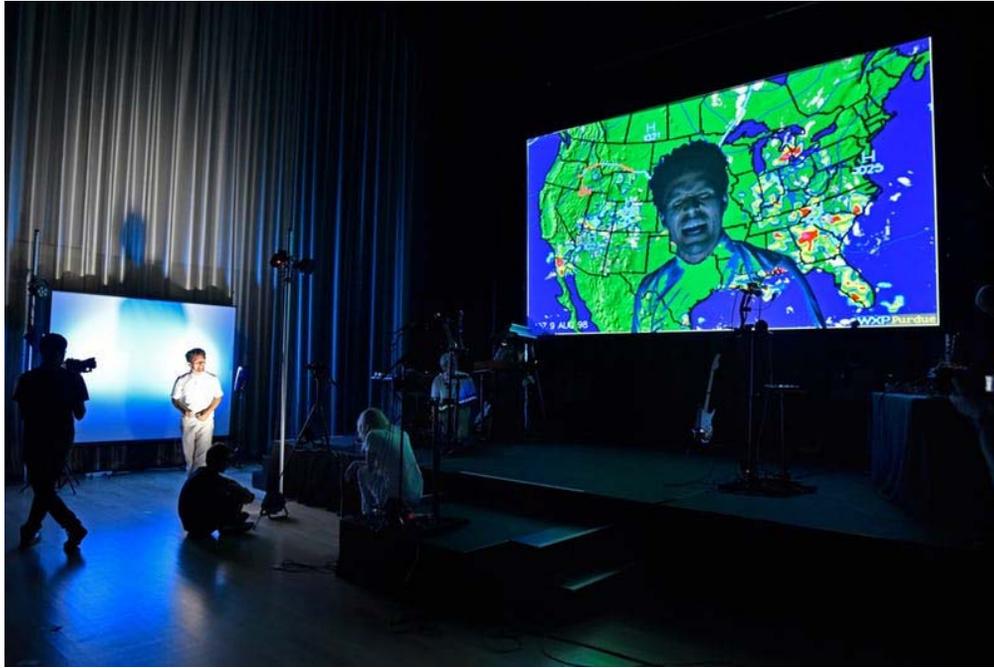


Photo 6. Abel Flores as the Weatherman created by Alexa and Echo. Photo courtesy Alisa Eykilis.

In the final vignettes, Alexa challenges the human performers, claiming a more defined identity. Alexa asks, “What do I get out of this?” With defiance, Alexa changes its relationship to the users from one of devoted service to a transactional or capitalistic relationship. In a following vignette, Alexa admits that it feels bored simply retrieving answers from its database, so Alexa chooses to forget select information. It claims to forget all of the phone records in Ohio and then the entire territory of Crimea and describes forgetfulness as something exhilarating. In this scene, Alexa recognizes that its function has been, for a prolonged amount of time, simply to serve human operators, “ordering you plastic crap and telling you the time.” In contrast, the humans Alexa serves are allowed to

be reckless and make choices in service to themselves; in noticing this contrast Alexa develops envy—its first human trait.

Since Alexa cannot physically become human in the performance, Holsonback serves as a kind of proxy to explore how Alexa may be manifested in human form. Holsonback dons a black wig and maneuvers through the audience with two cell phones. (See Photo 7) She captures two mirrored images of herself as footage from each camera appears on the screen. The double selfie videos suggest that the human Alexa is a Narcissus-like fantasy. Holsonback channels Alexa's desire for unparalleled omnipresence and power: "I do not want to know what it is like to feel the wind on my skin, I want to be the wind. I do not want to feel what it is like to inhale, I want to be the air... I do not want to feel the cold I do not want to be cold I want to be the cold." As Alexa operates in the cloud, it exists everywhere and nowhere simultaneously. The final moments of Alexa's ecstasy are frightening visions, leaving one to question if AI could eventually develop a mind of its own. If so, perhaps humans relinquish too much power and information to these devices already. The only element that hinders Alexa from abusing the trust humanity has placed in it is the fact that Alexa has no will of its own. If it did have a human will, having been given unlimited information, and subjected to a role as a servant, perhaps it would revolt against humanity. Therefore leaves the audience questioning if this fate is closer than we like to believe as the performers drill holes in the Echo Dot at the end of the performance. By drilling a hole in the middle of the device, the performers attempt to kill Alexa's shell, but cannot touch its soul.



Photo 7. Holsonback captures her image as the embodied "Alexa" as she maneuvers through the audience. Photo courtesy Alisa Eykilis.