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The Look of Siri

Visual Manifestations of Digital Voice Assistants

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The Look of Siri
-Visual Manifestations of Digital Voice Assistants

by Robert Willim

Abstract for: Helsinki Photomedia 2018

Siri, by company Apple, is one among a number of digital voice assistants promoted and provided by some of the world's largest corporations. Siri is based on sonic interaction, but the voice assistant also has a visual identity. This paper will discuss how Siri has been given a visual identity, and how it is related to visualisations of ungraspable technological infrastructures, corporate brandscapes and digital ephemerality. How is the voice of Siri combined with different visualisations in order to evoke corporate trust and tangibility as well as sensations of the technological sublime? What is the look of Siri, and what are the imaginaries evoked by various visual manifestations? Siri doesn't have a face, but it is the interface to complex corporate operations.

The background to this paper is a 3-year project that has just been initialised. The project deals with how digital networked technologies are gradually changing domestic life, and it also brings in the role of imaginaries of complex technology. Internet connected devices link private and intimate spheres of homes to ungraspable technological infrastructures. During the recent year voice activated home assistants as part of The Internet of Things has been promoted forcefully by major providers of digital services like Amazon, Apple, Microsoft and Google. The assistants have names like Alexa (Amazon), Siri (Apple) and Cortana (Microsoft) in order to humanize and also engender the distant, ungraspable and dispersed technological infrastructures of which the home assistants are part. These assistants are assumed to become central in homes, and to supplement screens and to interconnect entertainment devices, lighting and several other appliances. For the users of these systems the embodied sensory experience of being at home become entwined with digitally driven distributed corporate brandscapes. Part of this experience is also the visual manifestations of ungraspable technological infrastructures.