

SCENES

WITH "PILLOW TALK", CONFIDENCES ... TO THE PILLOW

By Thomas Corlin
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In the era of voice assistants, have we internalized the dialogue with the machine? Yes, according to the artist Begüm Erciyas, who makes us talk with a cushion.



Cushions to curl up on. Photo Ruben van de Ven

George Lucas imagined in his first film, *THX1138*, a 1984-style sterilized society in which individuals in distress would confess in interactive booths. With less totalitarianism and added humor, Turkish artist Begüm Erciyas puts us in a similar situation in his new creation, *Pillow Talk*. On the big stage of the Amandiers in Nanterre, around twenty visitors nestle in the hollow of giant cushions among sparkling draperies, under a warm half-light. Well installed, each initiates a conversation with a bot hidden in this somewhat grotesque form for about fifty minutes. Games, poetic digressions, silences, jokes, the exchange is slow but fluid, despite a few bugs that we cannot help but provoke.

Because our interlocutor is not infallible, nor does he establish a relationship of seduction like the famous vocal assistant with whom Joaquin Phoenix falls in love in *Her*. Our robot presents itself as a somewhat lame meditation companion, with laborious diction. He is easily tricked when he takes us into an exquisite oral corpse, or when he loses the thread of our answers, and it is in the end his fragility that establishes a bond. The cozy dreamlike decor and the many pauses in the discussions even give her a presence to which we are astonished to get used to, and which we miss when she is away.

We thus indulge with a synthetic empathy and familiarity - but very real - to this artificial intelligence whose interaction remains limited. When she simulates intimacy, when she pushes us to confide a secret, it is indeed our most human affects that are mobilized, despite our initial disbelief. Former biologist, Begüm Erciyas puts his finger here on an aspect of our contemporary condition where social and technological alienations generate quietly irrational behaviors. Where others would have tried to scare us, his experience reveals our new reflexes in a facetious and melancholy tone, before leaving us with a slight doubt and a little frustration. So much the better: what can we conclude if we had preferred to exchange with a robot rather than with a human comrade?

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***Pillow Talk* by Begüm Erciyas, until November 16 in Amandiers, Nanterre.**