

PERFECT SENSE A solo show by Chris Shen, curated by Eunice Tsang

Perfect Sense is a peculiar exhibition that also happens to be an experimental solution to a physical problem. In mid-December 2021, I found myself in a quandary. I was in the laborious process of securing the venue (the one you're standing in) for *Current Plans*, when I received the notification that I would have to be away from Hong Kong for a few months. How could one run a space without being physically present? What kind of (inaugural) exhibition could exist in such a complicated time and space? I found myself pulled back to a dialogue I had been having with Chris Shen that stretched back a few months which revolved around the idea of creating a clandestine project space in which everything would be automated. After a series of back-and-forth, we concluded that while I'm away his automated machines might as well take over, comfortably alone with themselves, just as automation has been accelerating in other industries. Why not in this art space as well? When the humans are away, the machines come out to play. It made perfect sense.

It is, of course, not without irony that we conceptualised this exhibition (bearing in mind that irony is the founding pillar for *Current Plans*). In the 1950s, an American psychologist named Paul Fitts developed the MABA-MABA (Men Are Better At; Machines Are Better At) list with a pioneering aim to 'search for a general answer to the problem of dividing responsibility between men and machines'. By proposing 11 statements about things which 'Men Are Better At' versus 'Machines Are Better At' (for example: men are better at improvisation and flexibility while exercising judgement; machines are better at responding quickly, applying great force, and reasoning deductively etc...) it became a formative, though imperfect, basis for human-machine function allocation. Which tasks should be allocated to automated machines; and which are better suited for humans? Just because a machine can do it better, does it mean they should be delegated to do them? Stemming from these complex questions about division of labour, *Perfect Sense* has been conceived as an uncanny, reactive environment that probes at questions around the technologies of consciousness and our somatic relation to automation.

In *Perfect Sense*, Shen presents site-specific installations, four of which are new commissions that activate upon motion sensors. Some more elusive than others, they intervene in the architecture and design of the space, sometimes creating surprising mood shifts to liminal spaces, sometimes creating an obstruction, or act of service, depending how the visitor sees it. These installations vastly transform the atmosphere

when activated, thrusting the unwitting visitor into moments of disconcerting precariousness. Shen constructs these installations with ready-made objects and positioned strategically in covert places, waiting to be triggered by the unsuspecting visitor. If automated devices were created to assist our lives by easing our burdens, they require our full trust and total consent. But they simultaneously pose a challenge – what if they don't do what we thought they would? Automation inherently implies a pre-determined system. The programmer lays out the automation's brain: if A happens, B activates, and so on. What if both A and B are uncertainties, and may even change without notice? How would these instruments turn on us? As our senses heighten in response to the analogue mechanical sounds, how do our bodies in turn react to these mechanical limbs that are reacting to us?

Rather akin to entering a haunted house, it is only with the visitors' own courage and willingness to explore the vacant, (seemingly) unsupervised space, will they gradually understand the relationship between their movement and gestures, and the output of the automated installations. Through the transformation of the space from a generous container to a kind of macabre machine that waits and reacts, Shen invites the visitor to experience how automation can become not just a tool, but a space for self-awareness and reconsideration by stimulating our sensory system in order to alter and expand our everyday experiences with banal objects.

1. Threshold (Auto), 2022 A disco light automatically activates upon the visitor's entry, and floods the space with garish dizzying colour. This humorously subversive act attempts to elicit an automatic and universal response of surprise and delight and is a semi-permanent fixture of *Current Plans*. **2. Not Saliva (Auto), 2022** A hand sanitiser strategically positioned at the entrance automatically disinfects whoever opens the door. A playful reference to a work previously exhibited in 2019 called *Saliva (Auto)* in which a similar machine dispensed the artist's own saliva, it is commentary on trust and loss of autonomy. **3. Nearness (Auto), 2022** consists of an image slowly revealing itself over 7 minutes on a TV. A commitment of stillness is required from the viewer if they wish to view the video in full. Triggered by the viewer's movement, the VHS machine will rewind the tape back to the beginning. Whilst the position offers an intimate viewing, the open space allows the possibility of disruption from other visitors. **4. Drawn Door (Auto), 2022** plays with the idea of trust and convenience that stems from our relationship with automation. An absurdly cumbersome installation constructed from items including a car wheel, a laundry pole and office chair connects the door with a chain. The banality of physical labour is emphasised over the 4 minutes it takes to complete the simple act of opening a door. **5. Lume (Auto), 2022** shows 24 automatic security lights arranged in a circle to trigger each other indefinitely. Playing with the idea of machines potentially grasping full autonomy without the need of human input, the lights seem to create and live in their own emergence ecology, where simple entities form complex behaviours as a collective.