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*Erika Blair: This is Only A Test* at Rope

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508 W. Franklin Street (between N. Pace Street and Pennsylvania Avenue)

Baltimore, MD



Installation view, “Erika Blair: This is Only A Test,” 2016, at Rope Gallery. Courtesy of the artist.

## **“The object of power is power”: Erika Blair at Rope Gallery** by Noah Dillon

Erika Blair’s “This is Only A Test” was staged at Baltimore’s Rope Gallery the same week that a much-publicized legal battle between Apple and the Federal Bureau of Investigation intensified. Apple rejected the FBI’s demand that the computer company develop a method to hack its own phones so that the Bureau could glean data about Islamist mass murderers in San Bernardino, California. Apple rightly pointed out that the Bureau basically wants access to *everyone’s* phone. All this comes in the wake of previous failures by Apple to secure its users’ data, and 15+ years of government imperiously sucking up as much private information about citizens as possible.

At Rope, Blair presented a stark scene. Within the small gallery’s main space a short plinth supported a desktop HP printer. Three surveillance cameras were mounted

around the room and the printer would regularly spit out photos selected by the artist from each camera's live stream. Blair was sequestered in the basement, monitoring the scene on three laptops, a bit like the stereotypical spook from movies: slightly hunched in an industrial space repurposed as clandestine surveillance HQ.

At regular intervals, sound from massive speakers positioned next to Blair would rumble out a message appropriated from Chicago's 1990s-era Emergency Broadcast System: "The Chicago broadcasters are participating in a required monthly testing of the Chicago emergency broadcast system. This system was developed to provide information to the public during an emergency. This is only a test." It was deafening above, through the floorboards, and even more brutal below. The show ended up as a kind of three-hour performance — the artist enduring against extremely loud noise, against cramped quarters and discomfort, against the dreary monotony of a stakeout.

The EBS was developed so that the president (starting with Kennedy) could quickly reach the American public in the event of an emergency, presumably nuclear war or apocalyptic crisis. Although it now seems antiquated, other, less visible systems have usurped it. In May 2009, the Sri Lankan government announced a final victory over the insurgent Tamil Tigers by sending a text message to all of the nation's civilians. And the Amber Alerts that pop up on cell phones are not only indicative of public concern for kidnapping victims, but also of the power of government and telecommunications firms to collude in both gathering information from and disseminating information to citizens, which is creepy. The feeling of benignity that attends the EBS system is actually a desensitization to the intrusion of power into private spaces, one now heightened by our habituation to even more intrusive mechanisms, including the proliferation of surveillance cameras and the legally sanctioned collection of data.

Viewers walked through the gallery, socializing and drinking beer, but eventually most of them ended up in the small storefront space near the entrance, standing or seated on the floor and windowsill, talking. This is probably in part because of the assaultive noise and the storefront's greater seating opportunities, but one might also wonder if having your photo taken semi-surreptitiously over and over, and seeing it printed out in

the middle of a room, have something to do with the main gallery's emptiness. Given the opportunity, people probably want to avoid being spied on. Without explicit prodding, their behavior changed merely by the inhibitive coercion of inspection.

The forces shaping the battle between Apple and the FBI — and, more importantly, a broader conflict between the American people and their government — have also formed the nexus that Blair is exploiting. What she calls “surveillance capitalism” comes in seemingly greater quantities from the longstanding military-industrial complex, trickling down into regular civil life. You can buy surveillance cameras cheaply, and access them from afar. The technology that inspired Blair's use of sound, long-range acoustic devices, has moved from battlefields to urban crowd control and dispersal, such as at several Occupy encampments during 2011. And LRAD operate by principles similar to the parabolic loudspeakers now sometimes found in galleries or museums trying to minimize sound bleed in exhibitions.

The fallout of the Kennedy assassination (another of Blair's favorite subjects) culminated, in part, in the Church Committee of 1975 and the House Select Committee on Assassinations of 1976, which reinvestigated many of the preceding decades' most infamous state crimes, and seriously discredited the legitimacy of the US government, starting with the Central Intelligence Agency and the FBI. People had known that covert surveillance had gone on, but the vast and intrusive extent of it was made plainly clear for the first time. Perhaps we're seeing a replay of those same reconsiderations of federal power, 40 years later, as we remember that intrusion into the lives of private citizens is actually completely corrosive to democracy, even if, at the outset, the oversight seems restricted and beneficent. There is an opportunity coming, possibly, for people to reevaluate their relationship to political and policing authority, if it is felt and understood with the urgency one experiences as blaring sound waves rattle one's skull. Each small intrusion is a test of what limits a community places on power. What's the current threshold?