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# Ashley Gjøvik, alert pitcher dismissed by Apple, alone against all

The fault of this employee, dismissed in 2021: having revealed that the Californian firm transforms its employees into guinea pigs. Going so far as to track them down in their privacy.



Photo Pascal Perich for Telerama

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«**R** *privacy, this is the iPhone* », trumpets a recent Apple advertisement. For a long time, the brand with the apple has built its reputation on a promise: its devices with impeccable design are backpackers who do not sneak, those who use them can sleep on both ears. This is much less true for employees of the company.

Ask Ashley Gjøvik. Responsible for the engineering program, this 36-year-old American woman was brutally dismissed in September 2021. His fault ? Having revealed that, to improve the functionality of its products, the Cupertino firm does not hesitate to transform its teams into guinea pigs, subject to invasive surveillance and bound by secrecy as if they were working for an intelligence service. Using hundreds of confidential documents cross-checked by multiple testimonies, *Telerama* can tell a corporate culture where silence is a cardinal value and intimidation, a practice deployed at the highest level. Solicited, Apple refused to comment.

## **I became revolutionary when I realized that they didn't care if we could die.**

Gjøvik's story begins as a remake of 'Erin Brockovich, this alert launcher immortalized in cinema by Julia Roberts. In early 2020, moving to Santa Clara, in the heart of Silicon Valley, his health deteriorated. Dizziness, palpitations, bleeding, vomiting ... She worries, consults with the cohorts of doctors and eventually discovers that her accommodation is built on land eaten away by toxic waste. They are particularly invasive in this part of California: for decades, the massive production of semiconductors has polluted the soil, loaded with carcinogenic solvents that rise to the surface over the years. At his nearby workplace, on Apple campus, at Sunnyvale, the young woman feels similar symptoms. She advises her hierarchy, calls for tests.

His annoyed insistence: his employer ends up urging him not to discuss the problem any more with his colleagues. It warns the American environmental protection agency. In 2021, on Slack messaging, in a canal created by employees at the time when the #MeToo movement hits Apple, it chews its words less and less and gathers anger. In the first row of which is the fate that the temple of

technological cool reserves for its flock. « *I became revolutionary when I understood that they didn't care that we could die* », she remembers.

## **I never really managed to integrate myself, it made my job easier when I burned everything.**

Gjøvik is not a product of the Californian technological elites, who only have to cross the street from the Stanford campus to join a multinational offering comfortable six-digit wages and bonuses. She lived « *a shitty childhood* » on a farm on the outskirts of Portland, in rainy Oregon. She worked from the age of 14, demonstrated against the war in Iraq at 16 and cut ties with her family at 20.

After starting at Nike ( « *I was trying not to think about child labor* » ), she landed a bit by chance at Apple in 2015, broke and in debt. « *I started working in technology because I needed to understand the complex systems* », she explains in a funny submachine gun voice, her dog Captain on her knees. She kills herself on the job, seventy hours a week for five years. It takes off, but not the fold of local culture, which often resembles social experimentation in a closed environment : « *I never really managed to integrate, it made my job easier when I burned everything.* »

Little tasting this wind of rebellion, Apple decided to put her to forced rest in August 2021, invoking an internal investigation launched on the basis of his accusations. Not cooled, Gjøvik seizes the federal agency responsible for enforcing labor law. At the end of August, she revealed on Twitter the existence of a clandestine program, Gobbler ( later renamed Glimmer ). Deployed in 2017 to employees, this internal tool accompanied the launch of Face ID, Apple's facial recognition functionality, which allows you to unlock your phone with your face. In an email sent on August 3, 2017, which we were able to consult, a video team engineer explains the main lines: to drive the algorithm, you have to feed it. Once activated, Gobbler takes a photo as soon as he detects a face. It's an eye that never blinks. « *In terms of data, we want more* », adds the greedy engineer.

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In another document, Apple specifies some rules. The application cannot be used in France or Germany ( it would be illegal there due to local regulations ) and employees are requested not to download immortalized photographs in intimate places. Gjøvik is recalcitrant, but to wrest the consent of his guinea

pigs, the employer knows how to trick. One summer day, she is invited to a « *aperitif of data collection* » in their twenties, without further details. Prohibition of speak without getting the green light from the legal department. Once there, a stone's throw from the historic headquarters of the company, she discovers « *what looks like a military complex* » protected by guards. You have to give your phone, pass a door, close it, open another, and enter four by four in a cylindrical space in the middle of a dodger to have the portrait drawn. A real force-composed trombinoscope, whose objective is to improve artificial intelligence

A few days after her first revelations, on September 9, Apple fired her and summoned her within the hour, alleging a violation of the company's intellectual property. It is found in the viewfinder of the « *Worldwide Loyalty Team* », house investigators who have often had a career in the police or the secret services. In the past, these private individuals have not hesitated to enter homes to find a prototype of lost iPhone. In 2017, Apple even boasted for having arrested twelve overly talkative employees. We do not joke with the industrial secrets of the first market capitalization on the planet. In a letter sent to the Labor Department on March 4, 2022, Apple's lawyers justify the dismissal of Ashley Gjøvik : « *She chose to disclose information that she was required to keep confidential.* » Gobbler is never named there, the company confining itself to evoking « *the study* » under the code name Omega.

Au fil des ans, Apple a multiplié les expérimentations de ce type, enregistrant et stockant toutes sortes d'informations intimes et biométriques sur ses salariés-testeurs : scan des conduits auditifs pour optimiser l'ergonomie des AirPods (les designers s'enorgueillissant de posséder « *l'une des plus larges bibliothèques d'oreilles de la planète* »), mesure du sommeil, pression artérielle et même surveillance du cycle menstruel. Sous couvert d'anonymat, une ex-salariée a accepté de nous transmettre les photos d'un kit proposé par Apple en 2019 en échange d'un bon d'achat de 10 dollars, afin de mesurer la qualité des glaires cervicales de son utérus. Inquiète des conséquences d'un refus, elle a accepté de se prêter à l'exercice, qui la hante encore.

**Vous ne devez avoir aucune  
attente en matière de vie privée  
lorsque vous utilisez vos  
appareils personnels ou ceux de  
quelqu'un d'autre à des fins  
professionnelles. Apple**

Si le géant de la tech n'hésite pas à coloniser le corps de ses collaborateurs, ceux-ci sont priés de ne pas moufter. La politique interne d'Apple, elle aussi

confidentielle, annonce la couleur : « *Vous ne devez avoir aucune attente en matière de vie privée lorsque vous utilisez vos appareils personnels ou ceux de quelqu'un d'autre à des fins professionnelles, lorsque vous utilisez les systèmes ou les réseaux d'Apple, ou lorsque vous vous trouvez dans les locaux d'Apple.* » Mais ça pourrait ne pas durer. Fin janvier, le gendarme du droit du travail a estimé que la politique d'omerta de l'entreprise violait la loi, ouvrant la voie à un procès. Est notamment visé un mémo intimidant envoyé par le grand patron, Tim Cook, une semaine après le licenciement de la lanceuse d'alerte. « *Nous savons que les auteurs de fuites constituent un petit nombre de personnes, écrivait-il. Nous savons également que les personnes qui divulguent des informations confidentielles n'ont pas leur place ici.* »

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Pour l'avocat Seth Goldstein, qui a récemment aidé les travailleurs d'Amazon à combattre les pratiques antisyndicales de Jeff Bezos, c'est un signal important : « *Les révélations d'Ashley mettent en lumière le pire de la culture d'entreprise dans la Silicon Valley. J'ai bon espoir que son cas permette de faire bouger les choses, car les gens n'ont plus confiance en ces sociétés.* » La lanceuse d'alerte, elle, n'est pas près de rendre les armes, même si le combat l'a éprouvée. « *J'ai parfois l'impression d'avoir perdu mon identité, et je n'ai jamais été aussi proche du suicide depuis l'adolescence* », she explains to the brink of tears, adding that she found comfort in a book on the moral wounds of returning GIs. In early February, she had an appointment with investigators from the Securities and Exchange Commission, the authority of the US financial markets. In the complaint it addressed to a dozen judicial or privacy authorities, it announces with a touch of humor its future reconversion into public international law, human rights and « *mega-dystopian corporations* ».

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