Hey, Lauren: trust, voice and the machine that listens

Before I knew Lauren Lee McCarthy's work, I was already speaking her language. Every sketch in my first project was written in p5.js, the open-source library she created to make code accessible to people outside engineering. I found her as an artist later, through *LAUREN* (2017), a performance in which she becomes a human version of Amazon's Alexa.



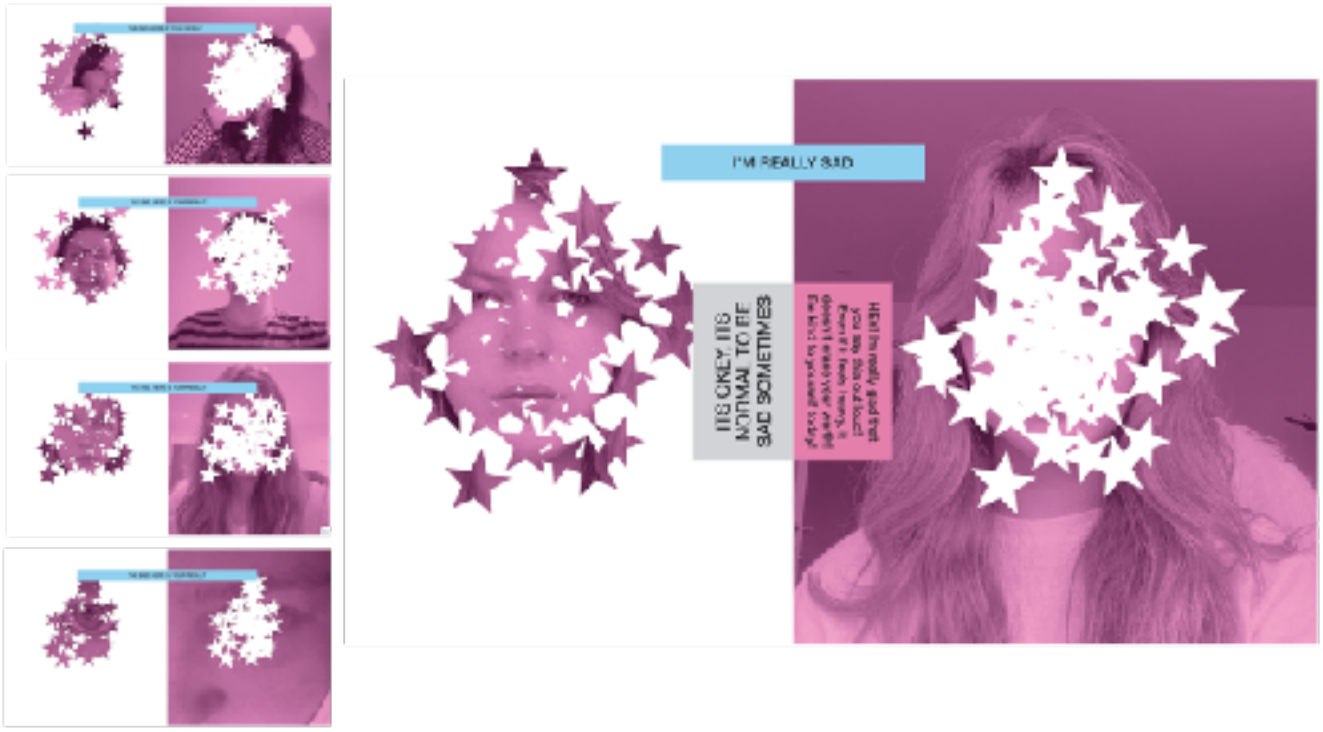
This essay is about trust between people and AI. I am interested in how a voice that guides and listens becomes a voice people rely on. By “voice” I mean a way of addressing someone, which can be written or spoken: my test used written replies, while my current work uses a spoken voice, and these may build trust in different ways. *LAUREN* and my project answer the same question in opposite ways: **where does trust in a voice without a body come from?** For McCarthy, it comes from the body behind it. My test shows it comes from how the disembodied voice answers.

II. Position A: where I started

My research began with emotional loneliness. It began with reading Reddit threads both single and in relationships, who trusted chatbots more than the people around them, and James Muldoon's *Love Machines*, which frames AI companionship as part of a "loneliness economy". I set up an interactive test, coded with p5.js. The messages, such as “Hi!”, “I miss you” and "I am really sad", received two replies: one written by a real person, one by AI as well as The participant’s live webcam image on one side, an empty digital space on the other. My test grew from this question: Is the loneliness is the reason participants choose the answer of AI?



“Hi!” And I am really sad!” replies
AI vs Human



Testing with people

Choosing the AI reply sends a piece of their face, into the digital side. Choosing the human reply brings the stars back. The stars stand for the time and energy we give to a machine or to a person. At that stage I read the results both as an observer and as a participant, since I took the test myself. I collected responses from 15 people of different genders and ages to for statistic. Their choices were close, but more people preferred the AI's replies 9 of 15, because they were longer and more engaging. Most participants could also tell which answers came from AI, because, like me, they talk to it every day. This became the most important result for me: trust did not depend on who was speaking, but on how the voice answered.

This changed my question. I became less interested in *why* people turn to AI, and more in *what* they want to hear, and what they want to believe. Loneliness is where my research started, not where it is going.

III. LAUREN: trust that is earned

“Alexa was granted instant intimacy. People will take her home and give her access to their lives” (C2I2, UCLA).

In *LAUREN*, participants invite McCarthy into their homes and she watches over them remotely for several days by acting as a model Alexa. She is trying to be better than an AI, because she can understand people as a human herself. However, many people were still sceptical about trusting “new Alexa”. Lauren

McCarthy does not argue this position; she performs it, and her own presence is the medium. Before



installing anything, she asks permission for each device and shows participants how to switch it off (Stanford, 2021). Trust here is not given instantly. It is negotiated one object at a time, the way trust between people is usually built. McCarthy work reaches me through *LAUREN Testimonials*, a film of participants describing her (McCarthy, 2017) - in this case my trust in the work is built through recorded voices.

This contrast is the gap I want to understand: why is trust given instantly to a machine, but earned by a person? My hypothesis is that a voice without a body feels more intimate, even spiritual. With no face to read and no body to judge, the voice becomes the only point of focus, and every word carries more weight. The film *Her* (2013) as a second example imagines exactly this. AI Samantha exists only as a voice, yet builds a whole relationship with main character and build trust around it. Although this film depicts romantic relationships, I am less interested in its romance aspect and more in a way how voice alone can be enough to be trusted.

IV. Dialogue: where we meet and where we part

Mines and Lauren stances are similar. McCarthy describes her practice as " less about technology, and more about just what the experience of being a person is, like right now" (Stanford, 2021). In my practice, I tend to focus on observing how deep is the trust of human towards the Ai. Although, the methods of our exploration differ: I placed human and machine side by side and McCarthy collapses them into one body.

That made me question, what if participants didn't know there is a real person on the screen, would this boundaries erase?. Does the factor of the existing body influence on the trust?

Rereading McCarthy, I realised that my test had stripped the voice of everything she insists on: time, a home and a body. I reduced trust to a single choice between two types of answers. *LAUREN* lets trust grow over days, so it can show how the trust forms. My cards capture only a first impression. Neither can see the long, daily relationship most people now have with AI. And yet my results agree with her more than I expected. McCarthy argues that "trust in a domestic voice is always trust in someone". My participants recognised the AI and still chose it: they trusted the voice as someone, too. The difference is that, for them, that someone did not need to exist.

This is where we part. McCarthy reveals the body behind the voice, and the reactions she records are divided: one participant says "It's like a friend", another "I don't really like the idea of her being in control" (McCarthy, 2017). Like her, I leave the viewer to decide. But she watches this relationship with suspicion and jealousy. I watch it with curiosity.

V. Position B: the shift (from loneliness to trust, towards belief)

My position has moved. I no longer read trust in AI as a symptom of something broken between people. I read it as a natural human need for a voice that understands and listens: a kindred spirit, in a non-romantic sense.

The idea of a trusted voice without a body is much older phenomena. In Orthodox Christianity, angels are bodiless, rational beings who guide people and stay close without being seen. A some sort of confessor without judging. These are structures of trust people have relied on for centuries. AI replies follow a similar shape: an invisible presence that is always there to guide and listen.

The word *belief* holds both stages of this shift. To "believe" someone is to trust what they say; to "believe in something" is faith. *LAUREN* stays with the first meaning more - trust that is negotiated and visible. My work follows how the first can slowly start to resemble the second. I am not claiming that people worship AI. I am asking why a voice without a body can feel close enough to believe in.

VI. Questions

1. If people trust AI even when they recognise it, what exactly are they trusting: the words, the care, or the constancy?
2. At what point does believing someone become believing in something?

I came to McCarthy through her code and stayed for her question. Where trust in a bodiless voice comes from is still open. The next stage of my research will follow it into belief.

Sources (check page numbers and access dates before submitting, Harvard style)

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