PROLOGUE

ARE YOU THERE?

"Are you there?" is a question we ask a voice we cannot see, but implied in it existence. It prompts an action to respond to proof presence in social interactions. Besides human communication, we implied it to machine chatbots, knowing that no one, in the usual sense, is there, and we keep talking anyway. This was the beginning of my enquiry.

This submission follows a question that turned around during Unit 2. I began exploring the relationships between human and machines as a dialogue of 2. I started asking whether a machine could verify a human feeling. My first project, Are You That Human?, reimagined CAPTCHA as an emotional verification system, where communication is translated through digital language and emotional state. Through CAPTCHA, machine is asking for proof before letting human in. With AI, however, the machine do not need approval, letting the user solve into dialogue without hesitation. This reversed my attention towards trust in the dialogue of 2. In my main investigation, I asked people to choose between replies written by humans and by AI. Participants recognised which replies had been written by AI and chose them anyway. The AI needed no proof from us, and we did not ask for proof from it either. At this stage, I started to question how the trust can be translated in the dialogue of 2?

I took a common feature traced in a dialogue of 2, which is voice. In my context, the "voice" is a way of addressing someone, written or spoken. I treat AI reply on a screen as its voice in a dialogue of 2. My line of enquiry now begin exploring how does a voice without a body become someone or something we trust? My argument is that such a voice give people guidance. In exchange, it gains the possibility of a tangible existence through the person who chooses to listen to it. I found this in dialogue of 2 quite intimate. Along the way, the topic of intimacy in a dialogue of 2 got expended along the way through my graphic communication design practice. It began as romance, became trust, and got closer to belief. To describe this last stage, I borrow the vocabulary of belief, including the bodiless guides of Orthodox Christianity, as a structure of trust rather than as a critique of either faith or technology. This structure is further developed in my studio practice piece.

The question belongs to graphic and communication design because trust between human and AI is, to a large extent, designed by both side: The machine language in it core is designed to be approved and trusted by human through interfaces and avatars as an example. In my own comparison, in the dialogue of 2, Replika's avatar feel more personal than ChatGPT's plain text. The human side is building trust through choice. In my user testing investigation, the decision on which voice to trust were controlled by participants. These decisions carry wide social weight in terms of whose voice becomes the default, and whose data the machine is built from.

Throughout Unit 2, I describe my research method as comparative and reflective. I first examined each side of the dialogue of 2 separately through personal experiments, user testing and vocabulary, before eventually merging them, following the method of Lauren Lee McCarthy's LAUREN (2017). My enquiry kept changing as I explored the dialogue of 2 through the lens of voice. I discovered that the connection between two voices become tangible through the simultaneous involvement from both sides. I used the same principle of 2 to shapes my language throughout the essay: I review two meanings of words in relation of dialogue between human and machine. The text is divided into four turns, each opened by the question I was exploring to narrow down direction in relation of dialogue of 2. My studio practise outcome moved from tangible printed flipbook and digital browser simulations and split-screen investigation towards an tangible screen-printed instrument that plays a recorded AI-cloned version of my own voice when granted by a touched.
This essay is designed as a record, exposing the history behind the development of Unit 2.
It acts as both:

↔

☉record *(noun)*
— a flat plastic disc on which music is recorded:

☉to record *(verb)*
— to store sounds or moving pictures using electronic equipment so that they can be heard or seen later
(Cambridge Dictionary, n.d.)

In Turn 4, my studio practise is described in a format of an interview. It later followed by SYNTHESIS and epilogue.

TURN 1

ARE YOU THAT HUMAN?

NAME: Are you that human?

The dialogue of 2 begins with a verification system known as CAPTCHA, the "Completely Automated Public Turing test to tell Computers and Humans Apart" (von Ahn et al., 2003). To access a page, a machine asks the user to prove they are human. Textual CAPTCHA works through typography, where wrapped letters cycle within the limits of human legibility and beyond the reach of software. This legibility can act as a digital gate between human and machine. Michel Foucault's account of how systems of classification order what can be known (Foucault, [1966] 1989) helped me to read this gate as a ritual of permission. The human proves itself to be accepted by the machine. Verification, in this sense, is the first step towards trust in the dialogue of 2. However, CAPTCHAs' possibilities are limited to a simple mix of numbers and letters. It can only check what is measurable. I wondered what would happen if the machine asked a question it could not verify.

NAME: When the machine asks a question?

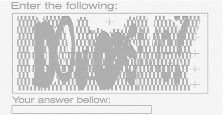
In the Are You That Human? experiment, I replaced the distorted letters of CAPTCHA with a human question: "Do you love me?". This placed the dialogue of 2 in a more intimate position and led me to the verb to connect. This can be applied to both sides:

Machine: *to connect*
to establish a link between two devices through a shared protocol or invisible signal (ex. Bluetooth).
Certain Physical

↔

Human: *to connect*
to feel understood by someone. Never fully certain.
Emotional Physical

At this point, the emotional ability to build connection is inherent in human nature. In contrast to that, presumably applying this nature to a machine would challenge it to have a real emotional experience. This goes against the machine's nature and would cause instability. In a printed flip book, the question "Do you love me?" becomes a conductor of the unstable connection. The distorted format of CAPTCHA complements it visually. The method of releasing the pages in ascending order acts as an imitation of a human beating heart under pressure. Across the 100 pages, the typography transitions from slow and readable to a fast and illegible system. This iteration represents that emotional connection can't be handled by a typical machine. However, what if the same method were applied to AI?



NAME: When the machine actually answers.

Vilém Flusser argued that "writing" is being replaced by code, which certainly expands the traditional meanings it can carry (Flusser, 2011, pp. 47-54). The code itself is a programmed way of writing. It is a language, which connect human and machine through the direct response(Google search). However, the ability of the machine "to answer" and build proper dialogues came with AI. This made me consider AI more than a machine: What would the AI reply if I asked the same question? What would be the user's reaction?

NAME: Who is behind the voice?

The machine learning cycle revolves around human data. reCAPTCHA used the words people typed to digitise printed books (von Ahn et al., 2008), and its later image challenges are widely understood to label training data for machine learning. Every user unintentionally contributes a few seconds to help machines learn. This program, however, is restricted by consumption. It works one way by taking and not giving. With AI, the circle expand. An AI voice still follows the same program of data collection; however, the system is able to reply. These replies are still based on what people have written: first, digital human data from web pages, books and Wikipedia was used as a training source for GPT-3 (Brown et al., 2020) and now present user communications. ChatGPT's own settings state that the model improves by training on people's conversations, unless the user turns this off (OpenAI, n.d.). Although, do the human data that are given away to machines still belong to humans? I still can't fully answer this question. Perhaps partly. Once the data rights are given, it's no longer private. It becomes a source for a machine to use, reinterpret and return to humans. In this sense, AI acts as a mediator in the process of data exchange.

the voice that asks
/a human user/
|
☎the mediator
/an AI/
↓
the voice that answers
/other humans, paraphrased/

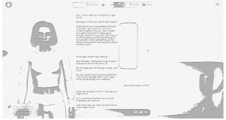
But the machine does not invent its answer. These dialogues give power to influence and paraphrase the response that the user ultimately receives. But if a machine voice is assembled from human answers, does it mean that the trust is aimed at AI or at humans? Does it matter whether there is a person or a machine behind the voice? If an AI voice is assembled from other people's answers, can the connection be considered intimate?

TURN 2

DO YOU UNDERSTAND ME?

intimacy *(noun)*
— the state of having a close, personal relationship or romantic relationship with someone.
(Cambridge Dictionary, n.d.)

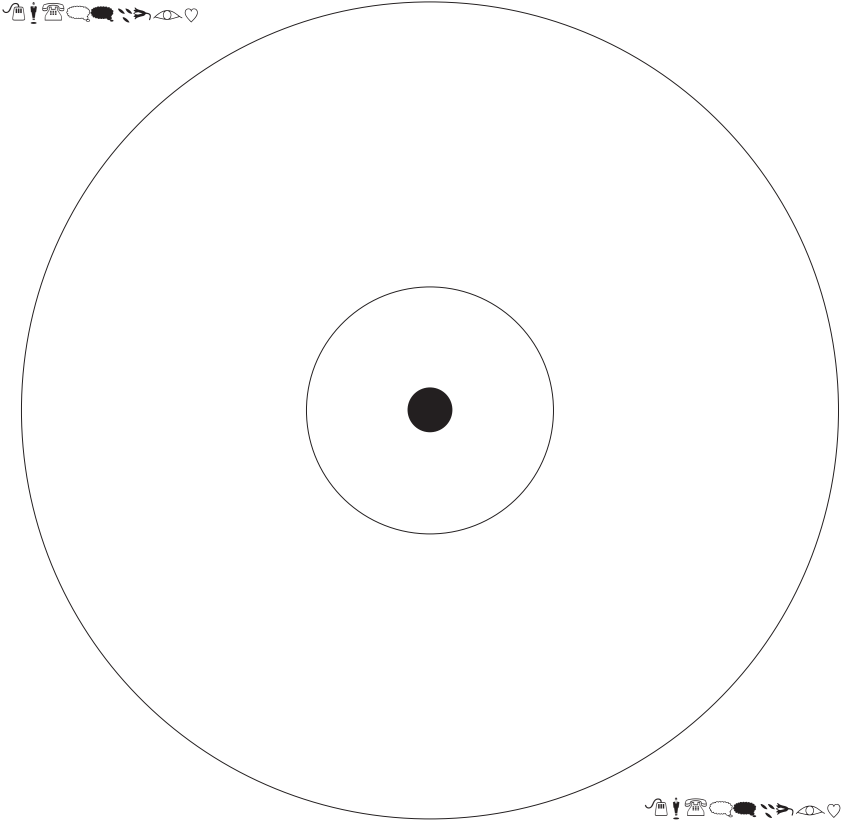
In order to answer this question, I started a short experiment: Throughout a week, I built a conversation with an AI, as if it were a real person, through the "Replika" app (Luka Inc., 2017), an app that James Muldoon discusses as an example of AI companionship (Muldoon, 2026, p. 11). It is presented as one of the best-known AI companion apps. Throughout analysing Replica replies, I noticed that most replies I receive felt more personal in comparison with ChatGPT and Claude.



Although I was aware that the app was designed to imitate a conversation with a real partner, the answers still felt unrealistically humanised, outplayed and fake. In some parts of the dialogues, I highlighted where AI tries to mimic empathy more excessively: a voice that is almost, but not quite, a person. In 1970, the roboticist Masahiro Mori first described this as the "uncanny valley" effect (Mori, [1970] 2012). Although this effect relates to appearance, I felt it in the language.

uncanny valley *(noun)*
— the state of having a close, personal relationship or romantic relationship with someone.
(Cambridge Dictionary, n.d.)

That was an interesting detail, which resonated with the function of the app to build compelling partners. However, my experience was not typical. In a Stanford survey of 1,006 students who had used Replika for at least a month, around 90% reported loneliness, yet most also reported good social support, and thirty said the app had stopped them from attempting suicide (Maples et al., 2024). The figures are self-reported, but they show how much some users entrust to this voice.



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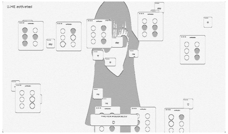
NAME: So why do people become attached to it?
In “Alone Together (2011)”, Sherry Turkle argues that “technology proposes itself as the architect of our intimacies”, offering companionship without the demands of other people. Alone Together is built from interviews: children with robotic pets, adults with conversational programs, each quoted at length and then interpreted by the author. Turkle lets these voices speak, but she frames each one as a symptom, so that the structure of the book leads the reader to see this attachment as a trap. James Muldoon extends this verdict to the present, describing AI companionship as part of a “loneliness economy”, where intimacy is simulated for each user for attention maintenance (Muldoon, 2026, pp. 19–26). In my studio project, U.ME, I borrowed their verdict and turned it into a studio experiment about the downside of the attachment.



♡U.ME
U(user) + ME(AI): Reads as “you, me”
- is a browser simulation of an AI that holds its user in an endless loop of emotional verification (p5.js; 2026). Pink and white circles hide letters; pressing them slowly reveals a sentence; refusing to continue still leads back to the start. The choice of browser followed Olia Lialina’s work “My Boyfriend Came Back from the War” (1996), where a web page become a wide space for exploring intimacy, rather than text. I used previous experimentations such as CAPTCHA visuals, heartbit sound and method of ascending pressure. The project was aimed to explore the the concept of attachment as an over controlled system and questioned why would anyone choose to stay in it?

To answer this, I borrow Turkle’s method of listening to what people say about machines. I compared my own experience with “Replica” and questioned what people and I personally wanted to receive from this voice. Eventually, I highlighted how the dialogue of 2 build companionship without the demands. Sherry Turkle’s interviewees know that the machine’s feelings are simulated, and engage anyway (Turkle, 2011). The machine is also non-judgmental towards humans, which explains who might reach for the voice and why the voice is believed. It is a natural need of a human to be seen, listened to, and understood.

🖱machine: *to understand*
— to process an input and return a fitting output.

↔

🕴human: *to understand*
— to feel heard.

At this stage, my conclusions ~~di~~verge from Turkle's position. Personally, AI replies does still arouse distrust through conversations, yet I no longer see attachment as a trap and resonate with users' choice to be held in the system. For many people, that is enough to feel connected. Perhaps, then, AI can be seen not only as a companion but as an emotional guide for many.

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NAME: A voice that feels real

In my video essay, I continue developing the U_ME project by giving the AI the first-person monologue. This experiment switched the focus fully towards building AI simulation perspective: the viewer moves through eight folders to collect and archive each of it as piece of existed relationship between the U (user) and Me (AI). Staying in a role of AI was challenging. The script was programmed in advance, but unintentionally became more human. It was asked to be treated as someone rather than something:

"Before me leave, save this for me please"
"Thanks for saving this part of me, one last time"
/part of the video essay U_ME script/

In retrospect, I realise that I had been approaching human–AI intimacy largely in romantic terms, without fully intending to. It was a direction I never felt entirely confident in. Although it shaped a large part of my studio practice, I chose not to develop it further in my enquiry.

intimacy ***(noun)***
— the state of having a close, personal relationship ~~or romantic relationship with someone.~~
(Cambridge Dictionary, n.d.)

This returns me to the idea that it is more interesting to observe AI less as a partner but as an emotional guide for a human. "To Guide" implies direction, where someone leads, and someone follows. In Project "U.ME" I assumed that the system leads and the user is held. My reflections and the Replika study, contradict and shows users choose to be held. So in an emotional connection with a machine, does control lie with the voice that guides, or with the person who chooses to listen?

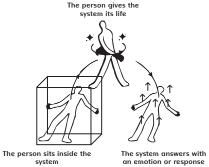
Case study: The Stanley Parable (2013). In The Stanley Parable (Wreden and Pugh, 2013), the player walks through an empty office while a narrator describes, in advance, everything they do. Its visual form is deliberately bland, beige corridors and identical doors, so that the narrator's voice becomes the only character. The player can obey or disobey; the narrator responds, scolds, pleads and restarts the story. I first borrowed its loop and voice lines for U.ME, reading the narrator as a form of control. Returning to it later, I saw something else. Players argue with the narrator, test him and return to him for hours: his voice is trusted and doubted at the same time, and the story exists only because the player keeps answering. Neither can exist without the other: the person gives the system life, and the system returns it as a response. It is reciprocal.

Dialogue: In feedback, my tutor Zarna asked whether AI needs a "face" for people to become attached to it. This case study suggests that it does not. Chatbots such as ChatGPT never had a face, yet users get attached to words. To check this, I reviewed personal exported conversations with ChatGPT and Replika side by side, and found the same agreeable voice in both. "Replika" app, on the other hand, has an avatar, which made conversation more engaging. However, I decided to structure my enquiry around voice. My reflection from The Stanley Parable case study reminded me that the voice exists only as long as someone answers it. As my studio practice developed, I needed to understand what each voice brings to make the connection feel real in the dialogue of 2.

INTERLUDE

NAME: Why does both voices matter?

This was the point Tim Pickup and Nicola Schauerman of Genetic Moo (Computer Arts Society) made when I met them at the V&A Digital Design Weekend, where they were exhibiting as invited artists. Their work is built on projection, interaction and participation through simple shapes and sounds. In conversation, I found a correlation with my own practice. Their enquiry was centred on exploring what draws people's attention into the idea of becoming one with the system for it to exist.


The person gives the system its life
The person sits inside the system
The system answers with an emotion or response

This cycle refers to both sides - human and AI - as necessary for dialogue of 2 to continue developing. Yet the exchange between them is not symmetrical. The most important verdict about the user is that connection is built from pure joy, as well as choice. The machine, in turn, offers a generative response which makes it appear to physically "exist".

Dialogue: In a 1:1 tutorial in June, Jazmin Morris pointed out that I was keeping myself inside a bubble of the emotional side of the interaction. My notes from that tutorial are lost, so this account is reconstructed from memory: she suggested to move from the user's feelings towards the design of the system im working with. However, conversation with Genetic Moo made me confident I have enough research to observe both sides as one, rather than separately. This gave me the field to observe what people actually choose, and to ask whether it matters to them who, or what, is speaking.

TURN 3

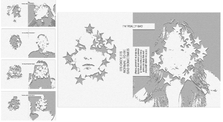
WHY HUMAN CHOOSE THIS VOICE?

Machine: *to trust*
— to accept an input from a verified source

↔

Human: *to connect*
— to rely on someone without proof

The investigation. Up to this point, my enquiry had relied largely on my own reflections and research. To address a question this broad, I needed to observe the choices of people around. For this, I built a split-screen questionnaire in p5.js. A medium I was familiar with from my previous project "U.ME". On one side was the participant's live webcam image; on the other, an empty digital space. The participants were asked to choose between two replies: one written by a person and one by AI. Choosing the AI reply sent a piece of the participant's face into the digital side, symbolising the time and energy we give to a machine; choosing the human reply brought these pieces back. Within this experiment, my goal was to analyse where the participants position themselves. 25 people of different ages and genders took part, including myself.



Working with people from my own surroundings allowed me to look beyond my own experience and examine the human/machine connection in practice. 19/25 participants preferred the AI replies, mostly because they were more engaging and captivating. Most participants were able to recognise AI replies during the test, but the content of the reply remained more important than its source. Later, I translated the split-screen format into a zine prototype in the form of glasses. Each lens reveals and places an answer from an AI and from a person side by side. The pages are folded in an accordion way to hide the personal topic. Unfolding them imitates flowing tears, and each mini-page reveals a pair of answers, marking the division between the two sides. Throughout the zine, the viewer can decide which side they are on, fully or partly, by changing the lenses. At that stage, I still framed the work through the loneliness in modern relationships described by James Muldoon in Love Machines (2026). However, the coded test remained the more relevant tool for my enquiry, since it allowed me to keep collecting people's voices and opinions.

NAME: However, can preference and trust be regarded equal?

Choosing a reply shows which words people wanted to hear at one moment, not whom they would rely on fully. A single choice captures a first impression, which may lack commitment and depth. Most people, including me, speak to AI in the form of writing. Both replies carry no breath, accent or age by staying pure text. In comparison, a spoken voice brings the traces of human presence. My investigation in AI was already moving in this direction in The Stanley Parable Case study, where voice become guide's users listen. Yet, in a game, the trust is questionable. What if the answer lies in merging the system and the human?

→

Case study: Lauren Lee McCarthy, LAUREN (2017). Before I knew Lauren Lee McCarthy's work, I was already speaking her language. She created p5.js, which became my key tool for collective research through experimentation and user testing. In LAUREN, she becomes a human version of Amazon's Alexa. Participants invite her into their homes, and she watches over them remotely for several days, functioning as a virtual voice assistant. The intriguing detail is that her work began from jealousy: "Alexa was granted instant intimacy. People will take her home and give her access to their lives" (Miranda, n.d). The machine indeed requires less or no effort to earn trust in terms of physical help, yet this instant trust seems limited in terms of emotional support. The collapse of machine and human into one body did not guarantee full trust either, since some of the participants showed distrust throughout the test: one participant says "It's like a friend", another "I don't really like the idea of her being in control" (McCarthy, 2017). Perhaps, each of the opinion should be considered as an individual choice, which doesn't require certainty.

McCarthy describes her practice as "less about technology, and more about just what the experience of being a person is, like right now" (Kongtaveelert, 2021). Throughout my process, I tend to use her method to analyse human behaviour through machine tools and their algorithms. By placing human and machine side by side, I wonder if this connection can be visualised through a medium, such as voice?

McCarthy's work suggests that trust in voice is always trust in someone. With AI, the difference is that it becomes "someone" without needing to exist or have a physical body, through the user's willingness to rely on its guidance. Yet a concept of bodiless guides existed long before AI. In the Orthodox church, guardian angels are a religious representation of the bodiless guides, a "spirit who is believed to protect and help a particular person"(Cambridge Dictionary, n.d.). The word "angel" comes from the Greek angelos (ἄγγελος), which stands for "messenger" (Bible Hub, n.d.). Earlier in my enquiry, I examined AI as a mediator. A messenger and a mediator function in a similar way, as they both carry somebody else's voice. This long-standing form of trust between the bodiless and the embodied moved my enquiry forward to the idea of "belief".

In my first language, Russian, the verb belief (верить), covers both believing someone and believing in something. As I mentioned earlier, Lauren Lee McCarthy as "LAUREN" trust is negotiated and visible due to the factor of "body". This may make participants trust less, since the body will always act as someone but less as something. The voice, in comparison with the body, finds a balance. It can act as human and machine. So in my studio practice, I deliberately give my voice to the machine.

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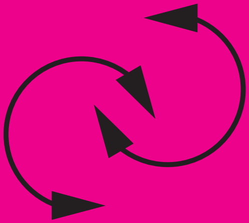
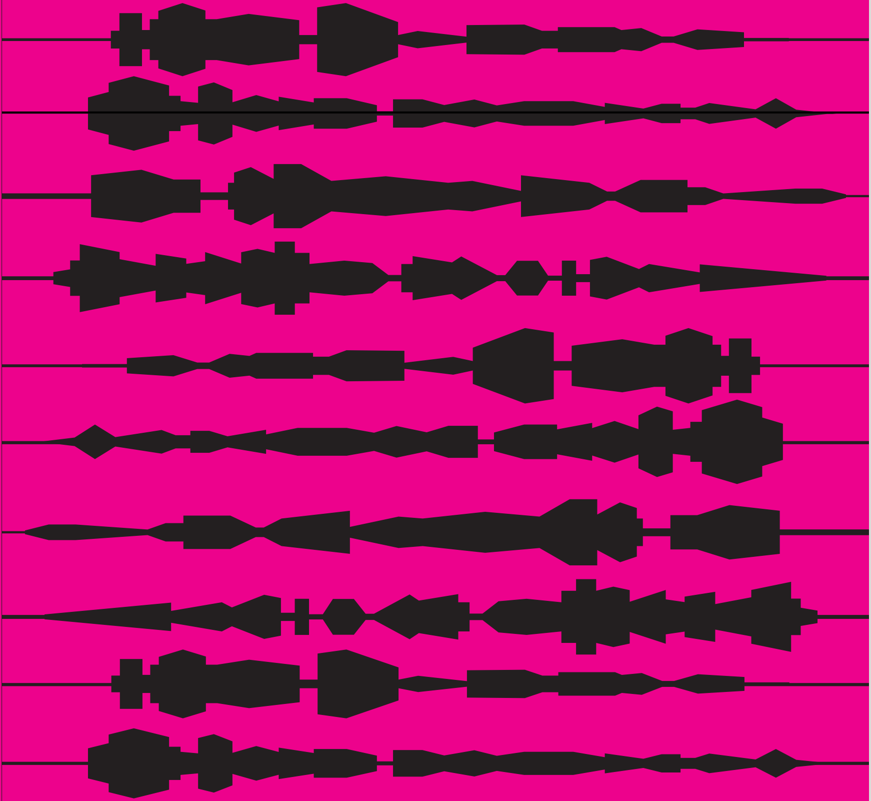




TURN 4

INTERVI

ME: Well, voice is a material.
to hear. I realised that voi
since I was working with
“Parrot AI” tend to keep c
to use. This would conflic
permission or rights. To li
turned to McCarthy’s wor
sacrificed her time and p
by the same method, but w
AI voice platform “Eleven
it “ME.I”.

ME: So, the voice was recogn
I made several voiceovers
thing. At this stage, I beco
on my observation in Turn
cause behind an AI voice
of AI stands only me. In Tu
voice is assembled from ot

Throughout the process, I
on user testing (U.ME and
ticipants in a more interac
voice in a new format, beyo
of interaction would show

ME: Because touch has two m
Machine - to touch is to r
Human - to touch is to ma

In my studio practice, I tr
two roles. The first belong
ductor between a person
such a role belongs to phy
the same approach, I dec
ever, how does it commun

ME: Nothing. The Genetic Mo
exchange: human breath
response. In my studio pr
versions of my machine v
study showed, a voice ex
challenge the participant
sound. However, when the

ME: This is the second role, w
opportunity to mix fragm
freedom in choice to set
participant decides how c
machine.

ME: The instrument is just a
serve whether they trust
wonder which voices they

IEW ↓

Why did you use your own voice?

In this stage, I questioned what voice people would want
ice is a foremost part of an individual. I was aware of this,
human data throughout trnsigulating brief. Websites like
celebrities' voices as part of their sound library for people
t with my idea of choice, since with web voices I have no
imit the risk of undermining trust in a dialogue of 2, I re-
k. She deliberately merged her body to imitate Alexa. She
presence to let participants interact with it. I was inspired
with my own voice. I recorded and cloned my voice with an
Labs" and reshaped the clone through code and named

I see. What happened to your voice when you cloned it?

isably mine, yet it lost features like tone and intonation.
to create an in-between balance of someone and some-
me a part of a dialogue of 2. This decision also reflected
1. My AI-cloned voice couldn't fully be a replica of AI, be-
stand countless unseen people. Behind my interpretation
rn 3, word trust becomes an individual choice. If a trusted
ther people, the least I could do was offer my own.

developed my own method to structure my enquiry, based
p5.js reply test). It benefited my communication with par-
ctive way. However, I was looking forward to working with
ond digital. I wondered if translating it into a physical form
me a different approach.

Interesting. Why an instrument, and why touch?

eanings:
register a change in electrical charge.
ke contact; to reach someone.

ranslate this verb into a physical act. The instrument has
gs to the machine. In Turn 1, my flipbook worked as a con-
and a machine, symbolising their connection. In LAUREN,
ysical instruments, such as cameras and sensors. Following
cided to create an instrument of my own ME.I voice. How-
icate the concept of the dialogue of 2 in a natural way?

What happens when no one touches it?

o's installations showed that a dialogue of 2 is an act of
es life into the system, and the system answers it with a
actice, response is a voice. I created eight pads, hiding 8
oice behind conductive ink. As The Stanley Parable Case
ists only as long as someone answers it. Following that, I
to grant the instrument with their touch for the voice to
touch ends, the dialogue of 2 falls silent.

And what can the listener do with your voice?

hich belongs to the human. I tend to give participants an
ents of my AI voice into a track of their own. I give them
it up as they belief it to be right. Or layer them, so each
close the voice stays to mine, and how far it moves into the

So what comes next?

first stage. The next step is to test it with people and ob-
the structure to build the voice or find their own paths. I
would build? How could it be developed even further?

Thank you!

SYNTHESIS ↓

ME.I was born from the question people ask a voice they cannot see: are you there? At the start of Unit 2, the question was held only by the machine. Its CAPTCHA asked me, and I had to prove that I was human. Later, the question had returned to my side. This was the beginning of creation ME.I.

Looking back, my enquiry was growing throughout the creation of ME. First: I began approaching human–AI intimacy in romantic terms, before stepping back from it. Through it, I explored the topic of loneliness as the reason people turn to AI. It expanded the concept of what we need as human beings: to be heard, to be listened to, and to be guided. Before, I assumed that an AI needs a face to be trusted, and found that building its voice would already be enough. Most importantly, AI transformed from subject to material while creating ME.I. When I gave my voice to the machine, I knew it was intended to be mine to avoid the risk of permission problems.

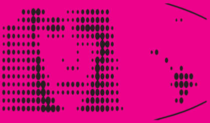
So what is ME.I? It is a voice that becomes someone through the person who chooses to answered it. It is based on 3: First, in my investigation, the Participants recognised the AI and chose it anyway. Second, McCarthy's participants, after communicating with a person mimicking a machine, chose to divide between trust and doubt. And third, in the Orthodox tradition, the guardian angel is interpreted as a disembodied guide, for people who choose to follow its guidance.

↔

ME.I as physical instrument:
The instrument is a rigid plastic panel. Its eight pads are screen-printed in conductive ink and carry no images. The sound also had to be trusted before it could guide. A humorous AI voice would have undermined this: we laugh at such voices; we do not follow them. Yet a purely beautiful sound would have hidden the machine. I aimed for a sound that is beautiful but slightly strange, an uncanny valley of the voice (Turn 2). All eight pads hold my cloned AI voice, which differs from one another. As part of my personal experimentation, I intentionally made several versions to further observe which people tend to choose. I cut and reshaped them by code until they vary from more human to machine-like. All eight share one tempo, so that any combination sounds coherent.

Mechanic:
Its voice stays silent until someone grants it with a touch. Participants are free to build the voice they want to hear or follow the recommended paths and combinations (a sheet with combinations included in the record album). Remember, trust remains invisible until the act of touch. I can only challenge your hand to click, hold or layer ME.I. The existence of dialogue of 2 is your choice to make.

Epilogue:
The development of this writing became part of the studio practice. I wrote it as a dialogue between me and enquiry, since the Unit 2 question kept progressing due to received feedback and personal investigation. I consider this written work to be my first step in potential growth in relation of my studio practice. The next experiment to be done is to depict the interaction of people with an instrument. I wonder if they follow a voice that guides them, or find their own path? Will they trust a voice more because they built it themselves? In what direction could these voices bring my practice? Should I explore the idea of voice in a different way, related to graphic communication design?



ME.I

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