SYNTHESIS

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“Are you there?” is a question we ask a voice we cannot see, and it already implies that someone exists. It prompts a response as proof of presence in social interactions. Beyond human communication, we ask it of chatbots too, 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 relationship between humans and machines as a dialogue of 2. I started by asking whether a machine could verify a human feeling. My first project, *Are You That Human?*, reimagined CAPTCHA as an emotional verification system. Through CAPTCHA, the machine asks for proof before letting a human in. With AI, however, the machine does not need approval, letting the user enter the dialogue without hesitation. This turned 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.

I took a common feature of the dialogue of 2: voice. In my context, “voice” is a way of addressing someone, written or spoken. My line of enquiry explores how a voice without a body becomes someone or something we trust. My argument is that such a voice gives people guidance. In exchange, it gains the possibility of a tangible existence through the person who chooses to listen to it. Along the way, the topic of intimacy in the dialogue of 2 expanded through my graphic communication design practice. It began as romance, became trust, and moved 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.

Looking back, my enquiry grew throughout the creation of ME.I. I began by approaching human–AI intimacy in romantic terms, before stepping back from it. Through it, I explored 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 its voice would already be enough. Most importantly, AI transformed from subject to material while creating ME.I.

So what is ME.I? It is a voice that becomes someone through the person who chooses to answer it. Its voice stays silent until someone touches it. Participants are free to build the voice they want to hear, or to follow the recommended combinations. Trust remains invisible until the act of touch.

Throughout Unit 2, my research method was 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). I discovered that the connection between two voices becomes tangible through the involvement of both sides.

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I consider this written work to be my first step in the growth of my studio practice. The next experiment is to observe how people interact with the instrument. Will 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 take my practice?