

Artistic Engagements with Machine Generated Voice: Holly Herndon's *Holly+* & Jane Frances Dunlop's *select important things*.

Jane Frances Dunlop

Machines gain and make voices in many and different ways. At the end of April, while Grimes released her AI voice, inviting the internet to make a song quite literally with her, Universal Music was chasing an unauthorised pop song that made use of the voices of two other Canadian artists – Drake and the Weeknd. Just a week before, Drake, responding to a different deepfake recording, commented ‘This is the final straw AI’ (Horon, 2023). It is worth noting that two notable examples of open-access vocal masks are both art projects by women (Grimes, 2023; Herndon, 2021): their work with machines becomes particularly interesting when considered as an effort to outsource the embodied labour of performing. Both women, and I am talking about Holly Herndon and Grimes, are also white (as am I obviously: all three of us are similarly aged and often sport fine art-coded long hair with blunt fringes). ~~And despite the fact that these women led a conversation about ownership and artistry in the midst of a proliferation generative AI creations, granting access to their voices through tools with which others can easily play with a voice that is not their own, the fact remains that it is deepfakes of black artists and experiments with vocal blackface that seem to be hold the internet's imagination most strongly.~~

In my current research and artistic experimentations, I aim to ask what kind of data a voice *carries*, what kind of data a voice *is*, and – most essentially – what can be heard the frictions of voices coming together? In what follows, I will examine the literal and metaphorical possibilities of "voices" as both communicators of data as well as data themselves, drawing on different modes of multivocality to chart the entangled contradictions connects that public assemblies to deep fakes. I will use theatricality to connect the different ways voices come together: theatricality provides a means for thinking through artifice, through the process that enact artifice as well as authenticity.

Theatricality names the ways in which a performance - artistic, social, cultural or political - shows the terms and means of its construction (Burns, 1972; Carlson,

2002; Davis, 2003; Dunlop, 2024; Féral, 2013). It is used to describe what happens – what is gained, lost, implied – by the transformation of a text into a performance, and by the attending audience’s awareness of, through their participation in, that process. Like its kin term performativity, when the concept travels outside a theatre [and even when it stays within one] theatricality provides a powerful lens for understanding both knowledge and world building as ongoing and collective endeavours.

Vocality is implicated in theatricality: a voice participates in its own unique, embodied, and relational performance that is also always already entangled with meaning and discourse. The voice as ‘contingent, contextual, sonorous articulation’ – after Adriana Cavarero (Cavarero, 2005, p. 14) overlays with the voice as what Barthes calls an ‘articulation of the body and of discourse’ (Barthes, 1991, p. 155).

These ideas come out of my most recent – that is to say, current and ongoing – project *select important things* (2022). I became interested in voices because I wanted to clone my own: I wanted to clone my own voice because I was trying to figure out how to give voice to the knowledge system I was creating: how to create a multivocality that also at the same time collapsed or contradicted any sense of difference between the voices present. *select important things is inspired by Knowledge Representation, the field of machine learning that studies how to represent human knowledge, as well as by feminist approaches to knowledge and contemporary crises of truth. It was sparked by an essay on Knowledge Representation produced by the MIT AI Lab in the mid-90s that considers how to “capture and represent the richness of the natural world” for the systems that teach machines how to use, interpret and create knowledge.*

This question: how humans make knowledge and how knowledge makes the world, is perhaps the continuous line through my work. My preoccupations are epistemological but perhaps more specifically discursive: not simply what knowledge is, but how its moving gives the world shape.

In the introduction to their book *Data Feminism*, Catherine D’Ignazio and Lauren Klein write that the term data:

dates to the mid-seventeenth century, when it was introduced to supplement existing terms such as *evidence* and *fact*. Identifying information as data, rather than as either of those other two terms, served a rhetorical purpose. It converted otherwise debatable information into the solid basis for subsequent claims.” (D’Ignazio and Klein, 2020a)

It is this conversion from ‘debatable information’ into something more solid that I want to consider as and through theatricality, while also asking how an inversion process – from a more solid form of ‘data’ into something both more specific and also less dependable – occurs in the making and using of vocal clones as masks or skins for other people’s words.

Obviously, this conversion isn’t a neutral transformation. Rather, like performance, it is a process that constitutes a specific reality through its enactments. In *Data Feminism*, D’Ignazio and Klein are specifically concerned with how “systems of counting and classification that perpetuate oppression” (D’Ignazio and Klein, 2020b).

In *Dear Science and Other Stories*, Katherine McKittrick is similarly focused on what accrues to the processes of conversion of information into data and back again: “Disciplines are coded and presented as disconnected from experiential knowledge; experiential knowledge is an expression of data (the objective census numbers factually show that the poor living here experience...)” (McKittrick, 2021, p. 36). The refrain throughout this story is “Discipline is empire”: a statement about epistemological violence that McKittrick echoes off the work of Sylvia Wynter, Franz Fanon, Aime Cesaire, and Edward Said. In the stories through the book, McKittrick traces how data operates as disembodied articulation that disavows the embodied discourse it captures and converts: from contemporary algorithmic death oracles in ‘Failure’ to the Zong in “(Zong) Bad Made Measure” (McKittrick, 2021).

Thinking alongside the critical reflections of these theorists, we can understand data as implicated in its own kind of theatrical process. Data as not simply information but rather a consequence of conversion process that turns information into a particular form of legible knowledge: it is subject to what Jean Alter describes in his definition of theatricality as the ‘constant process of re-creation through transformation which revives old texts in new performances’ (Alter, 1981, p. 115). It is in these ‘new performances’ that data is revived, embodied with real and material consequences.

While all machine voices are in some way theatrical [and I hope to elaborate on how at some future point], my focus now is on the voice clones which most clearly enable me to trace the lines of theatricality that run through crowds, choruses into these vocal composites. Voice cloning uses deep learning to analysis and classify a person's voice, turning it into 'voice profile' that can then be used with text to speech or speech to speech systems. This process takes hours of voice recordings basis for training a model, transforms it into a voice profile that is a composite of those recordings, re-rendered as data that can, in turn, be mapped onto text or masked over the speech patterns of another voice (Napolitano, 2022, pp. 40–41).

I spend a day playing with Grimes's voice, playing things back to my spouse who is insufficiently excited or assumed: they say they don't know what Grimes sounds like, but it changed my voice, I say: it made my voice into another person's voice. It is a clone of Grimes voice: I know this. Her voice has been recorded, those recordings analysed and some machinic order to it extracted, a mask that can be laid on top of my voice, once it has been analysed and a certain shell of how I was saying what I was saying has been extracted. Together, these processes produce a new voice. A composite of my voice speaking words that I recorded, and Grimes speaking whatever she recorded to get the system to learn how to make a mask, how to mimic both me and her at once.

I put my voice, my ideas, into Grimes's, into various machine voices. The thing I am working towards but have not yet arrived at is my own voice, and where it sits in this process. I became interested in voices because I wanted to clone my own: I wanted to clone my own voice because I was trying to figure out how to give voice to the knowledge system I was creating: how to create a multivocality that also at the same time collapsed or contradicted any sense of difference between the voices present. *select important things* is series of minor definitions and anecdotes, it is things I know: not all of them but a growing collection that "*capture and represent the richness of the natural world*" and then starts to categorise and organise it in different ways.

York University, Toronto
24 May 2023

Bibliography

- Alter, J., 1981. From Text to Performance: Semiotics of Theatricality. *Poet. Today* 2, 113–139. <https://doi.org/10.2307/1772468>
- Barthes, R., 1991. *The Responsibility of Forms: Critical Essays on Music, Art, and Representation*. University of California Press.
- Burns, E., 1972. *Theatricality: a study of convention in the theatre and in social life*. Longman.
- Carlson, M.A., 2002. The Resistance to Theatricality. *SubStance* 31, 238–250. <https://doi.org/10.1353/sub.2002.0022>
- Cavarero, A., 2005. *For More than One Voice: Toward a Philosophy of Vocal Expression*. Stanford University Press, Stanford.
- Davis, T.C., 2003. Theatricality and civil society, in: Davis, T.C., Postlewait, T. (Eds.), *Theatricality*. Cambridge University Press, pp. 127–155.
- D’Ignazio, C., Klein, L., 2020a. Introduction: Why Data Science Needs Feminism. *Data Fem*.
- D’Ignazio, C., Klein, L., 2020b. 4. “What Gets Counted Counts.” *Data Fem*.
- Dunlop, J.F., 2024. *Dissonance: the theatricality of internet performance practices*, in: *Theatricality and the Arts: Film, Theatre, Art*. Edinburgh University Press, Edinburgh.
- Féral, J., 2013. Performance and Theatricality: The Subject Demystified. *Mod. Drama* 25, 170–181. <https://doi.org/10.1353/mdr.1982.0036>
- Grimes, 2023. *Elf.Tech [WWW Document]*. Elf Tech. URL <https://elf.tech/connect> (accessed 3.7.24).
- Herndon, H., 2021. *Holly+*.
- Horon, S., 2023. Drake calls AI cover of him rapping Ice Spice “the final straw” [WWW Document]. *Mail Online*. URL <https://www.dailymail.co.uk/tvshowbiz/article-11974861/Drake-calls-AI-Generated-cover-rapping-Ice-Spices-song-Munch-final-straw.html> (accessed 3.6.24).
- McKittrick, K., 2021. *Dear Science and Other Stories*. Duke University Press, Durham and London.
- Napolitano, D., 2022. AI voice between anthropocentrism and posthumanism: Alexa and voice cloning. *J. Interdiscip. Voice Stud.* 7, 35–49. https://doi.org/10.1386/jivs_00053_1