SIGNALS FROM THE STATIC

(I Need a Yoko)

An interactive installation examining the fragility of communication

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Technical Collaboration: Brandon R.S. Borom (New York Institute of Technology)

NEW YORK, USA

THE EXPERIENCE

You sit at a telegraph key within a linen enclosure. A small LCD screen rests beside an antique brass tapper, its surface darkened with patina. A printed Morse alphabet lies on the table next to it.

You transmit one word — what love or connection means to you.

Dot. Dash. Pause.

Each letter appears on the screen in real time. When complete, you hold to send.

A brief silence follows.

Then a voice responds — not yours.

It may return your word clearly.
It may echo imperfectly.
It may answer only: “Almost.”
Or: “Still listening.”

Recognition occurs in the moment of sound.

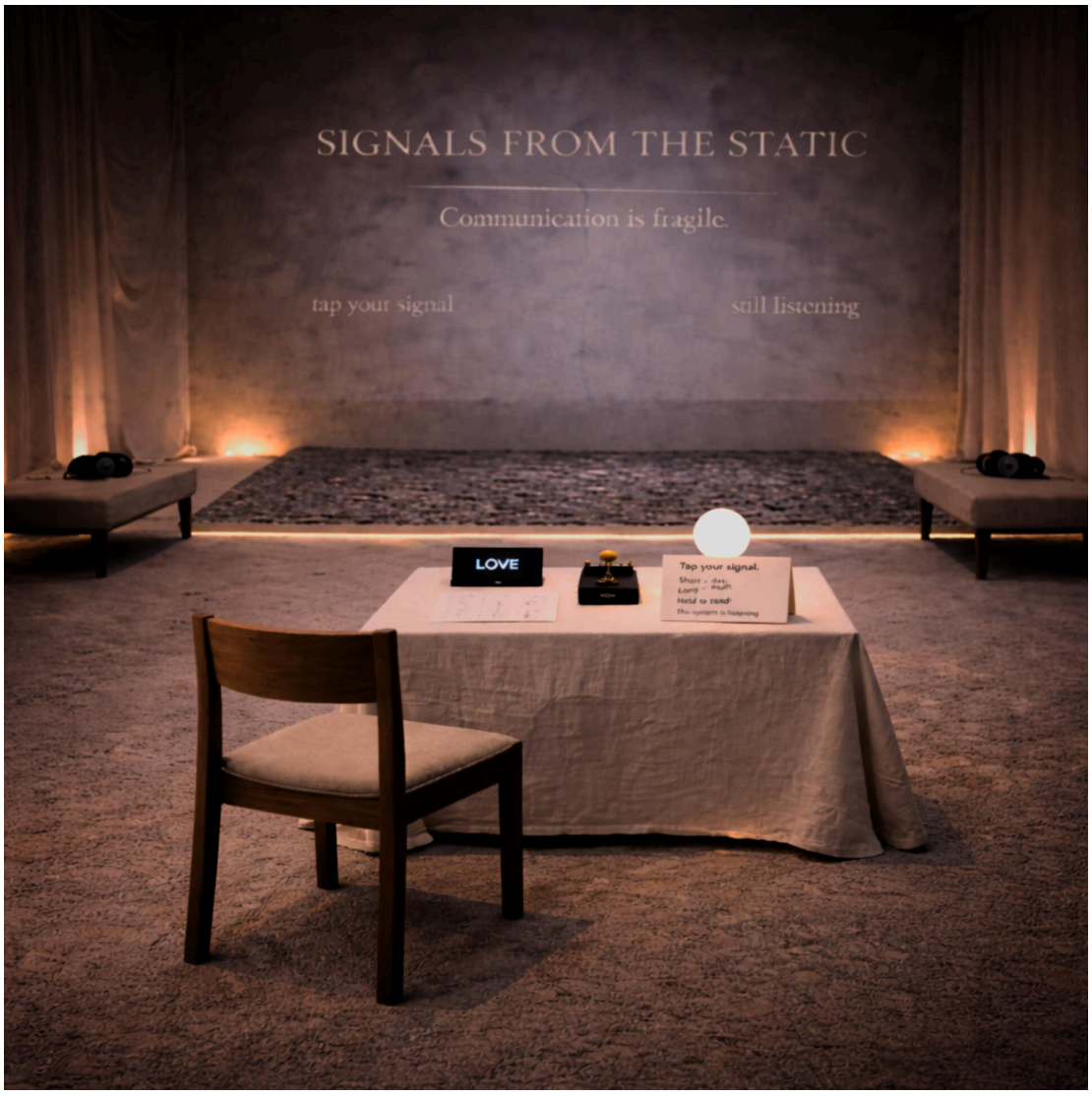
You do not receive yourself back. You receive otherness.

Your word appears briefly on the matte brown wall before dissolving. Earlier transmissions resurface faintly, then fade.

The message is yours.
The resonance is not.

This installation extends a signal I began years ago — a Morse transmission sent into distance, waiting for a voice to answer.

SPATIAL ENVIRONMENT



A restrained 4m x 4m enclosure of semi-transparent linen panels defines the interior. A central table houses the telegraph interface and LCD display. A ceiling-mounted projector casts text onto a matte brown projection surface that absorbs light and intensifies contrast. A narrow strip of gray gravel marks the base of the projection surface — terrain, threshold, ground.

Two reflection benches line the side walls, each with headphones offering a glitch-derived soundscape composed from fragments of the source composition, *I Need a Yoko*. Low-intensity LED sources provide a subtle reactive light response.

The space is minimal and deliberate. Sound is intimate and voluntary. Transmission remains central.

CORE THESIS

Communication is fragile. Distortion is not failure — it is what makes reaching across distance feel risky. This installation stages what it takes to reach: the effort to encode, the courage to transmit, the uncertainty of reception. A dot held too long becomes a dash. A word returned in another voice carries new weight.

The system does not guarantee you will be understood — only that you will be heard. And even that is never certain.

If communication becomes frictionless, nothing is risked — and nothing is truly given.

In contrast to systems that promise seamless connection, this work preserves the instability that intimacy requires. It asks: What happens when you send “love” and receive “almost”? What does it mean when a stranger’s voice holds your word?

The installation refuses the fantasy of perfect communication. It makes audible how precarious connection already is.

As machines increasingly mediate communication, the work asks what remains human in the signal.

No personally identifiable data is collected. All transmissions remain anonymous.

INTERACTION SYSTEM

A working prototype validates the complete human–machine–human signal loop:

- Visitor transmits Morse code via a mechanical telegraph key
- An Arduino (C++ firmware) measures press-duration and interval thresholds in real time
- Timing tolerances intentionally allow micro-variations in pressure and duration to influence decoding
- Decoded characters appear live on an LCD interface, permitting correction before commitment
- Upon transmission, serial event data is sent to a Python environment where the signal is routed through a probabilistic selection system drawing from human voice recordings and AI-mediated responses
- The transmitted word appears briefly in projection before a responding voice returns it
- The system returns either a recorded human whisper or a generative AI-mediated vocal response that may echo, transform, or subtly distort the transmitted word
- Prior transmissions resurface algorithmically at reduced opacity before dissolving
- When a new participant enters, the field clears, allowing each transmission to unfold within its own moment of listening

The system is not a deterministic sender–receiver pipeline. Embedded C++ handles real-time signal parsing at the hardware level; higher-level routing introduces probabilistic return. Calibrated ambiguity exists in both decoding and response selection.

Latency is preserved as experiential space rather than minimized as error.

Effort. Decoding. Return.

POLYPHONIC VOICE ARCHIVE

The installation employs a growing archive of recorded human voices across ages, genders, accents, and languages.

Each transmission activates a probabilistic selection model. A response may return in the sender's original language, as another word for love drawn from a different language, as a synthetic mediation, or as a system utterance such as “almost” or “still listening.”

The system does not translate or normalize meaning. It allows cross-linguistic resonance and incompletion to emerge.

Words remain in their original form. A German word remains German. A Spanish word remains Spanish. No language is flattened into equivalence.

Visitors cannot control whose voice returns their word. You reach for connection and receive difference.

The installation asks: Can you accept that?

LIVING ARCHIVE

Each transmitted word joins a multilingual record of attempts, arrivals, and near-misses.

Previously entered words resurface intermittently at low opacity— residual presence. A visual field of how people have tried to name connection in this moment.

Over time, the installation becomes a collective document of longing.

Not who said what.
But that someone tried.

INTERDISCIPLINARY COLLABORATION

Developed in collaboration with Brandon R.S. Borom, a senior in Electrical and Computer Engineering at the New York Institute of Technology completing graduate-level coursework, the project integrates embedded systems engineering with AI-assisted voice synthesis.

An Arduino-based Morse decoder translates tactile input into serial data, processed through a Python environment that selects randomized human recordings and generates AI-mediated vocal responses.

AI is not positioned as a substitute speaker. It resonates. It extends. It listens imperfectly.

The collaboration bridges signal processing, human–computer interaction, and generative systems to explore how computational architectures might participate in acts of witness rather than extraction.

ALIGNMENT WITH INTERACTIVE ART +

Transformative Interaction Model

This installation models communication as encounter rather than transaction.

Participants transmit a word using Morse code, introducing slowness and embodied effort into the act of sending. The system does not guarantee reciprocity. A response emerges unpredictably.

Recognition occurs only upon hearing. The participant does not receive themselves back.

Instead, the system introduces otherness, delay, and incompletion. All transmissions accumulate anonymously within a shared visual field.

By removing deterministic exchange, the work asks participants to risk uncertainty as the condition of connection.

You send “trust.”
You might receive “trust” in another voice. You might receive it in another language.
You might receive “almost.”
You might receive someone else’s word entirely.

The installation asks: Can meaning exist in that gap?

Structural Refusal of Platform Logic

The political position emerges through structure.

Where platform systems monetize intimacy through behavioral profiling, algorithmic personalization, and data extraction, this installation operates differently: anonymous transmission, unpredictable reception, collective memory without ownership.

Within platform systems, frictionless interfaces eliminate the attention care requires. Personalization narrows encounter. Platform communication captures performance for profit.

This work refuses those mechanics through how it functions.

Technology witnesses without extracting.
Communication resists optimization.
Randomness generates encounter rather than confirmation.

The installation does not simulate an alternative infrastructure.
It operates as one.

Human–Machine Coexistence

The system layers human whispers and AI echoes.

Human voice arrives first. AI extends it.

The machine does not replace. It resonates.

The work asks: What happens when machines are designed not to optimize connection, but to hold its fragility in view?

EXIT MOMENT

At the threshold of departure, a final line appears:

Where is your Yoko?

Beneath it, a discreet QR code links to the originating composition *I Need a Yoko*.

The installation stands independently. The origin is revealed only after transmission. The question follows the visitor out.

ARTIST STATEMENT

I composed I Need a Yoko as a work about longing for a witness — someone who will hold what you create, who will hear what you are trying to say even when the signal is imperfect.

The composition opens with Morse code: a deliberate, fragile transmission sent into distance. Later, a ham radio operator enters — a voice listening across static. It concludes with a question: Where's my Yoko?

I am proud of that structure. It was my first attempt to compose longing as transmission rather than confession.

This installation extends that architecture into shared space.

Here, Morse code is no longer symbolic. It is embodied. You must press the key. Time the signal. Trust the decoding. You feel the effort required to send something that matters.

When a stranger's voice returns your word, something shifts. The word is no longer fully yours. It becomes shared, altered, exposed.

That exposure is the point.

I built this work because I no longer trust systems that promise connection without risk. Intimacy requires uncertainty. It requires delay. It requires the possibility of mishearing.

Communication is not broken. It is fragile.

The installation does not attempt to repair that fragility. It holds it in view — and asks whether we are willing to keep transmitting anyway.

— **Toby TomTom**

Toby TomTom *is a New York–based interdisciplinary artist working across sound, mixed media, installation, and interactive systems. His practice examines signal, memory, and the thresholds between human and machine listening. Drawing from composition, material assemblage, embedded systems, and spatial design, his work explores how communication is shaped by timing, distortion, and collective resonance.*

His installations integrate tactile interfaces, computational processes, and polyphonic archives to test alternative models of transmission.

He lives and works in Sea Cliff, New York (USA).