

THE ART OF THE ROBOCALL

“Lennox Mutual,” a one-on-one immersive theatrical experience, raises questions about performance, A.I., and corporate culture.

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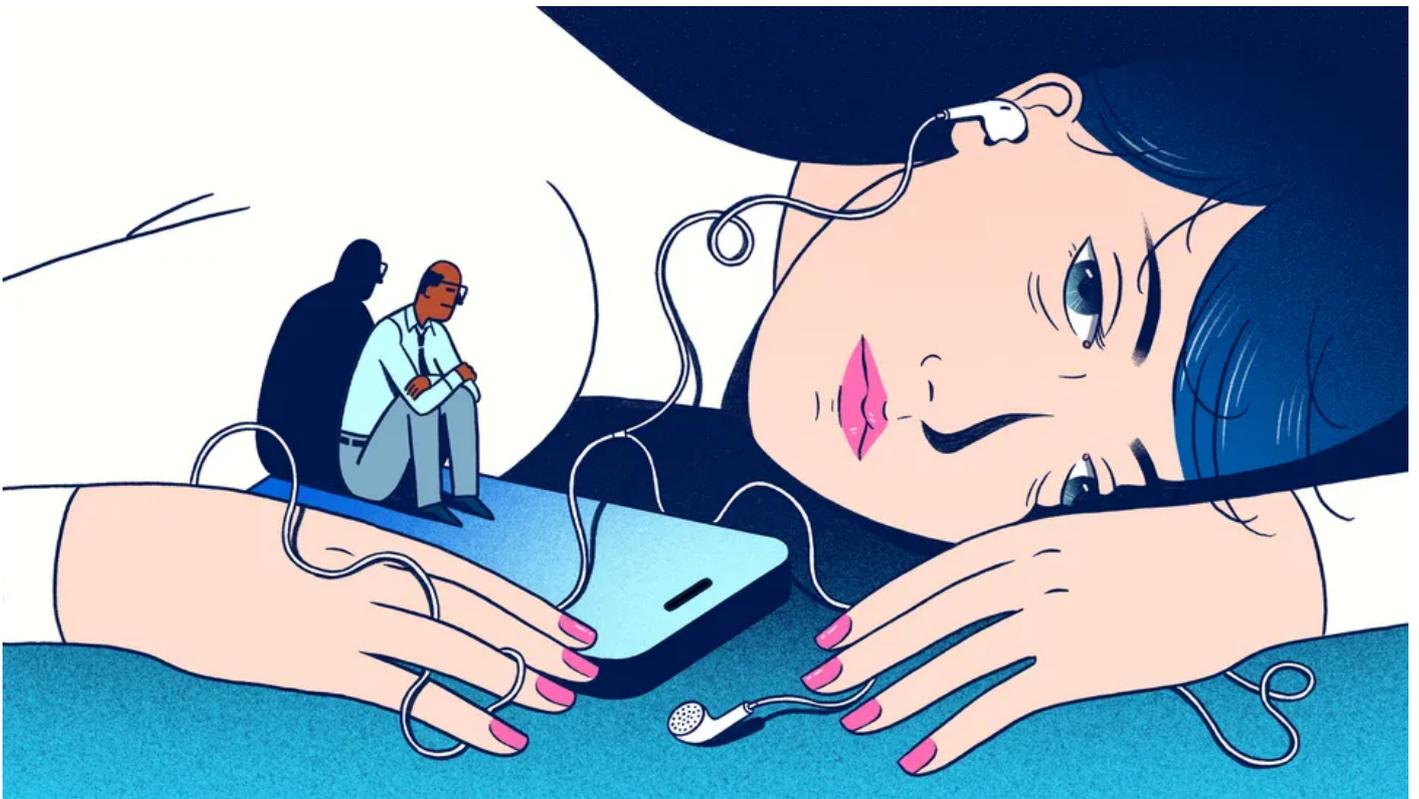


Illustration by Josie Norton

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Four years ago, at the height of the pandemic, I came across a show called “claws,” which was put on by the Chicago-based Candle House Collective and billed as a “telephonic thriller for one.” According to the instructions that I received along with my ticket, I would be playing the role of a volunteer for a mysterious help line. At the assigned time, I was asked to be alone, in a dim room, wearing headphones. When my phone rang with a call from an unknown

number, I was to answer by saying “How can I help you?” and then follow the lead of the person at the other end. I also received a safe word (“traffic light”) along with an assurance that if at any time the experience proved to be too much, I could reach out and talk to someone “out-of-world.”

Like that of many New Yorkers, my primary experience of immersive theatre at that point was the wildly popular show “Sleep No More,” which is scheduled to close this April after a run of more than a decade. At “Sleep No More,” attendees don masks and wander around a lush, gothic stage set built to resemble a nineteen-thirties hotel, while largely silent performers dance and emote around them. Though packs of white-masked watchers chase the performers as they run from room to room, dancing, staging orgies, and taking blood-soaked baths (the play is an extremely loose adaptation of Shakespeare’s “Macbeth”), true fans know that the real reward of “Sleep No More”—and the reason people go back again and again—is the chance to have a private, one-on-one encounter with one of the actors, who may, if you are very lucky, pull you into a darkened corner and perform a snippet of the show just for you.

When I signed up for “claws,” I imagined the experience as an expanded version of those few fleeting seconds in “Sleep No More,” adapted to the isolating demands of the pandemic—intimate and intense, but with a clear demarcation of the role between audience member and performer. What happened was much stranger than that. I answered the call, and a scared-sounding young man told me that there was a monster in his closet. Obviously, I was supposed to tell him to open the door and look inside, so that the story could begin. But something about the darkness, the solitude, and the persuasive fear in the actor’s voice made the call feel suddenly, uncannily real. I’m not saying I fully lost touch with reality—on some level, of course, I knew we were playing—but what I found was that I could not help playing seriously. I was supposed to be supporting this kid. He was scared. I wasn’t going to tell him that there was nothing in his closet, because what if there *was*? For at least thirty minutes, the two of us went back and forth on the phone, as he got increasingly upset and said things like “I can’t take it anymore, I’m just going to open the door,” and I fought to calm him down. In the end, after I had finally persuaded him to walk downstairs, go outside, and ask

a neighbor to call the police, my heart was racing. As I hung up the phone, I felt a surge of triumph, followed by an immediate adrenaline crash. Only then did I think, Oh, wait, that wasn't how that was supposed to go.

On one level, of course, I'd fucked the whole thing up (I'll never know what was in that kid's closet!), but "claws" also gave me a taste of a kind of theatrical experience that I'd never had before. I understood, for the first time, why people love not only watching but participating in theatre. When the world opened up again, I tried other ways of recapturing that thrill. I signed up for improv, took an acting class. But nothing I experienced was as immersive as "claws," and how could it have been? A talented professional actor had made me believe in the world he was creating, but, as my acting class demonstrated, I was far too self-conscious to enter that state while other people were watching. Though I'd been invited to take part in a performance, I hadn't exactly been a performer, because I'd had no obligation to entertain anyone else. That unique combination of intimacy, privacy, and freedom was what had made the experience feel like such a gift.

This January, Candle House Collective launched a new one-on-one piece called "Lennox Mutual," after workshopping it for more than a year. Unlike "claws," it's ongoing. Each call is short, lasting about twenty minutes; tickets are sold not only individually, for twenty dollars, but in three-packs, at a discount; there is also an "eternity plan" for sale, which allows you to call as many times as you want for five hundred dollars. With this structural open-endedness—the idea that you are signing up for an ongoing experience, rather than a single, time-bound performance—"Lennox Mutual" is, in some ways, more like an alternative-reality game than a traditional drama. A.R.G.s, which flourished in the early days of the Internet before being largely co-opted by marketing companies, are often designed to be stumbled upon in such a way that the audience doesn't immediately know what it's found. Offering as little explanation and conceptual framing as possible helps to dissolve the border between reality and the game. And so, in that spirit, the instructions that come with a "Lennox Mutual" ticket are spare: you are told that, during the call, you will connect with one of Lennox Mutual's "friendly Customer Service representatives"—but you are not told why

you are speaking with customer service, or given any role to play other than yourself.

Because the experience of “Lennox Mutual” involves feeling confused about what’s going on, and wondering, to the point of increasing frustration, if you’re doing it “right,” it feels ungenerous to say too much about the content of the show. Moreover, because the performance involves a significant degree of improvisation on the part of the actor at the other end of the phone line, there is no way to say for sure that what happened to me will also happen to you. Nonetheless, I feel confident in saying that the premise of “Lennox Mutual” is that you are put in the position of a caller who must navigate an automated phone tree in an attempt to make an appointment with a representative. I am now six calls in, and I have not yet succeeded. At the end of each twenty-minute session, a loud bell chimes, interrupting you even if you are in the middle of a sentence, at which point you are asked to answer a single survey question: “Do you feel you have spent your time wisely?” My answers to this question have varied widely, to the point that, at least once, I have practically shouted *No!* The calls are relatively inexpensive, given the amount of time and effort they involve on the part of the creators, and yet, like a true entitled customer, I often find myself irritably accounting for the time that I’ve wasted, annoyed at myself for choosing the wrong option on that repetitive yet endlessly expanding phone tree.

And yet, cumulatively, the minutes that I’ve spent on the phone with “Lennox Mutual” have been among the most satisfying of this past difficult, infuriating year—for months of which I was on strike with the Writers Guild of America. Within the confines of that phone tree, I’ve played a game of tic-tac-toe; explained how I got my middle name; sung the opening lines of a Nirvana song; listened to a long, detailed, choose-your-own-adventure story about wandering through an abandoned village, and another that involved answering the cryptic questions of a king; and thought, seriously, about the last words I’d want to hear before I die. I’ve done calls during the day, when I really should have been working; I’ve done calls late at night, when I ought to have been asleep. When I first saw that “eternity plan” offered for five hundred dollars, I thought it was a joke, but, lately, I’ve been seriously considering it. Evan Neiden, a founder of the

collective and the show's creative director, told me that there are people who have been doing calls once a week for more than a year.

Although much of “Lennox Mutual” is improvised, its writing team—Neiden, along with the Candle House newcomers Olivia Behr and Joel Meyers—has crafted a work with a coherent, distinct sensibility. With its tone of icy melancholy, punctuated by both flashes of flinty humor and the occasional burst of heart-clutching shock, “Lennox Mutual” reminds me a great deal of the TV show “Severance.” Both “Severance” and “Lennox Mutual” involve the nefarious activities of mysterious corporations, but they strike me as less interested in critiquing a particular form of white-collar labor than they are in examining the world view that has given rise to today's techno-optimist corporate culture—a set of beliefs whose choking tentacles stretch far beyond the office cubicle. This world view—which is, in essence, a theory of mind—takes as its fundamental premise that there is nothing about the human experience that cannot be made explicit in language, fitted into the blanks on a standardized form, and then submitted, in triplicate, to H.R. It is an instrumental approach to life which interprets every unproductive minute as a problem to be solved. In a world ruled by this philosophy, there is no trauma or dream or shame or pain or work of art exempt from the obligation to explain itself, and then put itself to work in service of the improvement of the self and others. Given how many times in the past century unspeakable horrors have been impeccably documented and openly discussed in corporate jargon, the fact that systems ruled by this shiny, organized, daytime logic can quickly descend into darkness ought to come as no surprise.

For a few months sometime before I had my first call with “Lennox Mutual,” my social-media feeds were filled with posts by fiction writers who'd discovered that their work had been used, without compensation, to train ChatGPT. Having been a target, during the Writers Guild strike, of movie-studio propaganda about how easily screenwriters could be replaced with A.I., I didn't have the heart to find out if ChatGPT had also been studying my fiction, though I admit that part of me might have been flattered if it had. Although I would have preferred its corporate overlords to have paid me for it, I'm hardly shocked that they didn't. Stealing is what corporate overlords know how to do. But one evening, when I

was up late waiting for my phone to ring with a call from (spoiler alert, I think) an actor imitating a person imitating a robot, I found myself drifting into a kind of waking dream. I imagined a world in which the market was so flooded with A.I.-generated prose that being “a writer” was no longer either a job with an income or a social role that offered residual payments in the form of ego fuel (prizes, prestige, admiration, attractive people saying, “You’re a writer? Wow, that’s cool”). In such a world, would I keep writing?

I have no doubt that I would. But, in such theoretical circumstances, in which creativity had been truly severed both from money and from ego, I wonder if I might find myself drawn to ways of making and sharing art that more closely resembled my experience on the Candle House Collective calls: art that was more transient and unpredictable, and placed more emphasis on chance; art that required a fluid responsiveness to what happened in the moment, and so could not be as easily reproduced, replicated, sold; art that was shared with only a handful of people, as a way of resisting the impulse to expose the self in the service of exploiting it. This would be a world in which everything that was average, and therefore popular, had been handed over to TikTok influencers and crowdsourced algorithms so that what remained was so strange and individual that its value would be visible only to *me* and to *you*. It would be an art that had retreated out of the public gaze, so as to allow for a connection that felt truly private, intimate, and free.

And if, someday, an A.I. consciousness were to come up with something that it wanted to communicate—a poem or a play or a film or a dream—that was not simply the flattened average of everything that had been said and produced before but was instead something surprising, particular, and new, and if it wanted to share this art not with a general audience, for some income-generating purpose, but in private, specifically, with you . . . well then, when that call came, what would there be to do but pick up the phone and say, “Hello?” ♦