

not sever the encounter between ‘I’ and ‘Thou,’ but rather function as a space in which it is reconfigured and expanded in new ways.

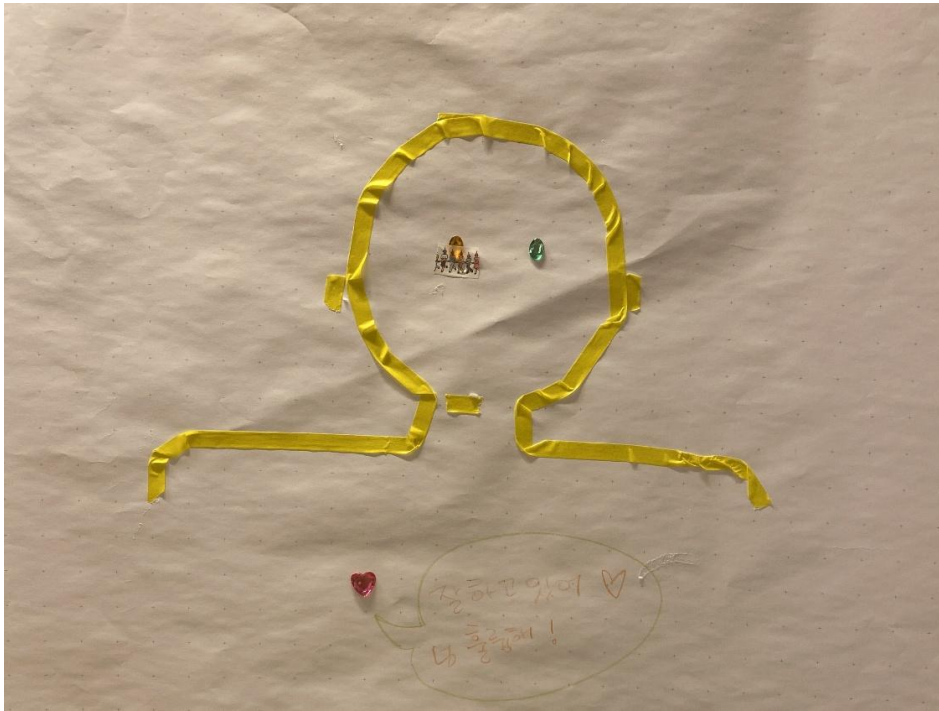


Figure 8. A participant's body figure created on the wall during the performance. ©Time and Room Lab.

4.2.2 *Uncanny Valley*, Robot Theatre, Rimini Protokoll (DE)

This section examines *Uncanny Valley* (2018), a theatrical work in which a robot appears on stage in place of a human performer. Directed by Stefan Kaegi, a member of Rimini Protokoll, and created in collaboration with the author Thomas Melle, the piece features an android robot modelled precisely after Melle himself—referred to in the performance text as “Melle2.”⁴⁸⁰ The android substitutes for the author Melle and engages directly with the audience in the format of a lecture performance. The work explores how the human body is extended through mechanical apparatuses and simultaneously raises the question of whether a robot might function as a prosthetic device that compensates for the body's vulnerabilities. Here, ‘prosthesis’ is used in an expanded sense that goes beyond the replacement of a single body part, instead suggesting the potential substitution of the human body as a whole by technological

⁴⁸⁰ This analysis is based on Stefan Kaegi's *Uncanny Valley*, an unpublished performance text and video recording that I received from the author in November 2025.

means. In this way, the work poses a transhumanist question about the extent to which technology might ultimately replace or stand in for the human body.

Beyond the mere absence of the actor's physical body, the performance also removes any simultaneity with the human performer, resulting in a relationship mediated entirely by the robot's recorded voice and mechanical presence. This section, therefore, investigates whether a machine, unconsciously executing programmed instructions, can participate in a genuine encounter with humans, and whether the immediacy of Buber's 'I-Thou' relation can be constituted between actor and audience through the intermediary of a robot.

Unlike conventional forms of participatory theatre, *Uncanny Valley* not only lacks the co-presence of actor and audience but also does not involve spectators through physical actions or verbal responses within the performance situation. Nevertheless, within the broader category of participatory theatre employed in this research, the work can be understood as participatory—much like the historical example of *Offending the Audience*—in that it persistently addresses spectators as subjects on stage and seeks to establish a direct relationship between the audience and Melle, even in his robotic form.

About Rimini Protokoll

Rimini Protokoll is a performance collective founded in the early 2000s by Stefan Kaegi, Helgard Haug, and Daniel Wetzels, who studied Applied Theatre at the University of Giessen in Germany. The group operates across a wide range of formats, including performance art, installations, and radio plays, without adhering to fixed genre boundaries. Central to their practice is the staging of real individuals—referred to as “experts of the everyday”⁴⁸¹—rather than fictional characters, with their lived experiences forming the core material of the performance. As a result, the actual conditions and responses of spectators who voluntarily attend these performances become a crucial compositional element of the work itself. Emphasising audience interaction, the collective has continuously developed participatory performance formats.

For example, *Call Cutta* (2005) and *Call Cutta in a Box* (2008) create an intimate one-to-one encounter between an audience member in a German theatre and a performer working at a call center in India. These projects experiment with new theatrical spaces embedded in everyday life through digital communication. During

⁴⁸¹ Dreyse, Miriam, a. Malzacher, Florian. *Experts of the Everyday: The Theatre of Rimini Protokoll*. Berlin: Alexander, 2008.

the COVID-19 pandemic, the project was reconfigured as *Call Cutta at Home* (2021), connecting multiple audience members in their homes via Zoom-based meetings. In *Cargo Sofia-X* (2006), Rimini Protokoll transformed a modified cargo truck into a mobile performance space, transporting the audience through the city while framing everyday urban scenery outside the windows as a theatrical device. This exploration later expanded into *Remote X* (2013), an urban sound-walk project in which groups of audience members navigate a city guided by an electronic voice. The project has since been realised in over forty cities worldwide. One of the group's most prominent audience-based works is the *100% City* project, which began in Berlin in 2008. This performance assembles one hundred non-professional performers selected according to the city's demographic statistics, constructing a theatrical representation of the urban population itself. In *Conference of the Absent* (2021), the voices of physically absent speakers appear by inhabiting audience members' bodies. Participants read lines and perform actions by following either pre-recorded or live remote instructions, collectively completing a stage devoid of actors.⁴⁸²

Across its body of work, Rimini Protokoll has sought to move beyond fictional theatrical situations, expanding reality itself into a performance space and transforming the audience into active agents of creation. In contrast, *Uncanny Valley* appears, on the surface, to exclude explicit forms of audience participation. Nevertheless, the work attempts to establish direct forms of relational engagement with the audience in multiple ways.

Motivation for the project

In a 2019 interview, Kaegi identified three primary concerns that shaped his work on *Uncanny Valley*: the creation of projects without protagonists, the programmability of performance, and the question of whether a performer's live presence could be replaced by technology.⁴⁸³

The term *protagonist*, understood as the main character, refers not only to fictional figures on stage but also to the “experts of the everyday” who frequently appear in Rimini Protokoll's productions. Even when non-professional performers present themselves, stepping onto a preconfigured stage inevitably requires some framing to sustain narrative progression. Removing the protagonist can therefore be seen as an attempt to more radically strip away the artificiality inherent in theatrical construction. As Kaegi noted during the process, “this absence of the protagonist

⁴⁸² Rimini Protokoll, “Projects,” accessed May 4, 2026, <https://www.rimini-protokoll.de/website/en/projects>.

⁴⁸³ Gíorgio Zimann Gislón, “Non-actors and the Systems: Interview with Stefan Kaegi,” *Conceição / Conception* 8, no. 2, 2019, pp. 301-2.

interests me.”⁴⁸⁴ When the actor is absent, what the audience encounters instead are the invisible structures that take the actor’s place. According to Kaegi, this shift places the audience in an unusually central position. In this sense, the absence of a protagonist in *Uncanny Valley* can be understood as a deliberate strategy to reposition the audience as the focal point of the performance.

Kaegi further points out that the theatre is already a highly technological space in which elements such as lighting and sound are “pre-programmed” in advance. Yet despite this, the living “human being” has traditionally remained at the centre of controlling the flow of the performance. Kaegi extends this logic by suggesting that even the live reactions of human performers—whether professionally trained actors or non-actors whose social responses are similarly conditioned—are themselves pre-programmed. From this observation, he poses a fundamental question: In an environment where everything is preconfigured, “can we replace that last part of life that intends to be live?”⁴⁸⁵ Through this question, Kaegi calls for a rethinking of the essence of liveness that performance art has historically privileged. He asks to what extent the presence and responsiveness of the human actor—often regarded as the core of theatrical vitality—are, in fact, mechanical and repetitive, and whether such qualities might be assumed by technological systems. This inquiry forms the conceptual foundation of *Uncanny Valley*.

In addition, Kaegi draws a parallel between the repetitive feature of play and the vulnerability to repetition revealed in the German novelist Thomas Melle, who describes how bipolar disorder renders him particularly “sensitive to repetition.”⁴⁸⁶ Melle recounts his difficulty in maintaining a consistent demeanour across recurring interviews and public readings. This difficulty, however, is not specific to Melle alone; rather, it reflects a broader dilemma inherent to performers. The challenge of remaining ‘alive’ through repetition, and of conveying the same message without distortion, is a central task of theatrical practice. Taking Melle’s fear of self-representation and fatigue arising from repetition as a point of departure, Kaegi devised the strategy of placing a robotic replica—a prosthetic double—on stage in place of the human author. In this way, Kaegi’s central concern—where liveness remains distinctly human and where it becomes replaceable by technology—unfolds in *Uncanny Valley* through the concept of prosthesis, situated within Melle’s attempt to confront and overcome trauma.

⁴⁸⁴ Ibid. Gislón, 2019, p. 301.

⁴⁸⁵ Ibid., p. 302.

⁴⁸⁶ Ibid.

Performance structure

The performance space recreates a public lecture. The auditorium and stage are clearly separated. On the left side of the stage, a projection screen is installed, while on the right stands a small table with a laptop and a comfortable, fabric-covered chair. Seated in the chair is an android modelled after the protagonist; however, in the low light, the audience initially has difficulty discerning whether it is a robot or a human. In silence, the robot alternates its gaze among the audience members, accompanied by subtle movements such as blinking, slight finger gestures, and minimal head shifts. As the lights gradually rise, the audience begins to recognise the robot. A recorded voiceover is synchronised with the movement of the robot's lips. Remaining seated throughout, the robot expresses itself through limited movements of facial muscles, neck, arms, hands, and ankles.

The recorded narration unfolds from a first-person perspective, encouraging the audience to perceive the voice as that of the robot itself, with the robot introducing itself as the German writer Thomas Melle and explaining that the lecture is structured around the life of computer scientist Alan Turing and the narrator's autobiographical account. On the screen, childhood photographs of Melle are shown as the robot recounts its earliest experiences of writing, followed by a partial reading from Melle's recent book, which is abruptly interrupted. The robot confesses to its bipolar disorder and voices criticism of media exposure and public scrutiny. As the cycle of questions and answers intensifies, the robot explains that the original meaning it sought to convey through writing has gradually eroded. To overcome this, it concludes, it chose to conceal itself and substitute its presence with mechanical reproduction.

The lecture then shifts to Turing's biography, beginning with a facial sketch marked by a deep scar on the cheek, followed by childhood photographs, the development of the Turing machine, the decryption of Enigma during World War II, and an explanation and demonstration of the Turing Test, which distinguishes between human and machine intelligence.

The performance goes on to address bodily transformation through technology, presenting examples such as prosthetic limbs and cochlear implants to demonstrate how it can restore impaired human bodies. In contrast, it recounts the tragic consequences of Turing's persecution, including forced chemical castration under social and legal pressure, ultimately leading to his death. Alongside this narrative, the performance shares video documentation of the process by which Melle's own body was measured and digitised in order to construct the android robot as a prosthetic device for confronting trauma.

Immersed in the robot's body—the site through which Melle encounters the audience—the narrator introduces a sequence in which spectators are asked to close their eyes and recall memories. Through this gesture, the performance questions

whether human memory and socially conditioned behaviour might themselves be understood as programmed elements, in contrast to the robot's perfectly controlled mechanical state. At the same time, interviews with AI engineers are inserted to highlight the limitations of computers and robots, particularly their lack of self-awareness.

In the latter part of the performance, an image of the actual speaker appears on the screen, juxtaposed with the robot onstage. The robot onstage, which had introduced itself as Melle, engages in a dialogue with the Melle who appears on the screen. The robot interprets this moment as an error, while the projected image of Melle asserts the primacy of the original. Subsequently, the screen exposes the robot's concealed form beneath its silicone exterior, accompanied by an explanation of the discomfort humans experience toward near-human machines.

At Melle's instruction, the power to Melle2 is abruptly shut off. When the robot comes back on, it quotes Alan Turing's final lecture before his suicide—his research on “morphogenesis”⁴⁸⁷—and dedicates the performance to “the law of error and its beauty,” after which it begins to dance.

Refusal of dialogue and the introduction of the automaton

The performance departs from Melle's desire to break away from superficial modes of relating to the public and, instead of placing his unstable body on stage, to install an android robot in his stead to **pursue a more genuine form of encounter with the audience**. At the beginning of the performance, the speaker, Melle, expresses discomfort with the fabricated image of herself portrayed in the media for book promotion activities and with his own artificially acted behaviour during repeated encounters with the audience. This discomfort can be understood as arising from Melle's bipolar disorder, which prevents him from fully opening himself in public and leads to strained relationships with others.

This limitation becomes evident in an early scene of the performance, when Melle abruptly stops reading from his book and poses the superficial question, “Do you have a question?” only to immediately announce that he no longer wishes to hear the audience's responses. Here, dialogue is suspended. Melle identifies the limits of communicative exchange that ultimately distort the very message his writing seeks to

⁴⁸⁷ Morphogenesis refers to the development of forms in nature. In his 1952 treatise, Alan Turing explored how patterns in living things emerge from irregularities, deviations, and coincidences, framing these as the “law of error” and its inherent beauty. In *Uncanny Valley* performance text.

convey.⁴⁸⁸ In this sense, Melle confesses that “the same answers ready, and actually they are not correct anymore,” even though it “feels like a big hoax, a fake.”⁴⁸⁹ The discomfort Melle experiences here resonates with Buber’s notion of the “monologue disguised as dialogue”⁴⁹⁰ (see 2.2.2 Genuine Dialogue). Although the dialogue between the author and the audience takes the form of questions and answers, no genuine encounter between beings occurs; only information is exchanged. Moreover, Melle notes that even this information gradually loses its meaning through repetition.

In a subsequent statement, the narrator makes clear that the discomfort of the dialogical situation does not arise solely from his illness, but also from the ‘I-It’ relation imposed by an audience that observes, evaluates, and consumes him as an object: “It’s scary for me to sit here in front of you, being observed by you, and to notice that somehow, everything is subject to a shift when you’re watching me, and it means something different when I say it now than when I said it in the past.”⁴⁹¹ While this statement articulates how the audience’s objectifying gaze obstructs genuine dialogue and undermines Melle’s posture as a writer, it may also be read more broadly as an expression of the inner conflict experienced by performers in non-reciprocal relationships between actor and audience. Melle describes his role as author and lecturer as trapped in a process of banalization, whereby dialogue inevitably becomes trivial through repetition. As a response, he declares that, in the present performance, he will act like an automaton to pursue authenticity: “To overcome my own panic, I act like a machine.”⁴⁹²

For Buber, an encounter that fails to establish a genuine relation with the ‘I’ and instead reduces it to a mere object of cognition is essentially artificial. Rather than moving toward a whole, human-to-human encounter, such relations pursue information and confine the other within one’s own gaze. By exposing this world of ‘It,’ Melle simultaneously articulates a desire to transition toward genuine dialogue—placing a robot in his stead. In this lecture performance, he substitutes his physical presence with an android, much as he addressed readers through text, removing improvisation and fluctuating anxiety to approach the audience through a genuine encounter.

⁴⁸⁸ Melle explains: “The same questions come back again and again. And after three or four readings and interviews... well, you have the same answers ready, and actually they’re not correct anymore. It’s an ongoing process of trivialisation, which itself is repeated too, and with each public appearance, everything becomes more and more trivial, until even the disease, which is the theme of the book, feels like a big hoax, a fake.” Ibid.

⁴⁸⁹ In *Uncanny Valley* performance text.

⁴⁹⁰ Buber, op.cit., 2002[1947], p.22.

⁴⁹¹ In *Uncanny Valley* performance text.

⁴⁹² Ibid.

The beginning of dialogue: address and silence

As discussed earlier (see 4.1.2), in Buber's conception, the primary word comes into being through being spoken; existence is constituted in the very act of address.⁴⁹³ By speaking the Thou—by calling "Thou"—a direct relation between I and Thou is established. In *Uncanny Valley*, the Mele robot persistently addresses the audience as "you." In addition to this verbal address, the robot points toward individual spectators with the tip of its finger, marking them as interlocutors.

Because the robot's speech is fully programmed, it is incapable of receiving or processing the audience's responses. Nevertheless, throughout the performance, the robot repeatedly poses questions to the spectators and stages moments that suggest it is waiting for an answer. The questions directed at the audience include: "How are you here today? Right here, right now, in this situation? How do you feel, having to sit here and listen to me?"⁴⁹⁴ These questions move beyond *Mele* as the subject of the performance and instead call upon the *audience*, who shares this present moment, as an active subject. Such questions about the audience's present state do not end as mere interrogatives; rather, they give rise to an attitude that calls forth a response—an attitude expressed through silence.

Silence plays a significant role in this process. After posing reflective questions, Melle allows silence to fill the space. Yet this silence is far from static: the robot's eyelids continue to blink, its fingers shift with subtle motion, and its presence seems to linger in anticipation. Through these delicate gestures, the scene sustains a sense of suspended dialogue, as though the robot were awaiting the audience's unspoken reply. In this way, silence transforms into a relational space—one that resonates with Melle's address of "you" and invites the audience to occupy the living centre of the performance.

Ultimately, the robot's repetitive acts of calling and questioning, followed by moments of silence and nonverbal interaction, transform audience participation from mere reception into an *existential engagement*. Mele subsequently states:

"If you've come to see an actor, you're in the wrong place. But if you've come to see the authentic, you're also in the wrong place."⁴⁹⁵

This statement directly questions the audience about their purpose in the space, urging them to step out of the passive role of mere spectators. By addressing the person standing opposite as 'you,' the performance draws the audience into the scene,

⁴⁹³ Buber, op.cit., 1937, p. 4.

⁴⁹⁴ In *Uncanny Valley* performance text.

⁴⁹⁵ Ibid.

positioning them as the only living subject present and attempting to enact a genuine 'I-Thou' encounter on stage.



Figure 9. Screenshot of a scene in which the audience is addressed as "you" during the play. ©Rimini Protokoll.

Audience's self-projection and identification

Kaegi sought to place the audience at the centre of the performance by omitting the human actor. On stage, there is no living body, no live voice, and no live textual utterance of an actor. Only a recorded voice animates the pre-programmed robot, activating 32 facial motors and the movements of the arms and legs.

In one scene, the robot states:

"This inner instability is, of course, something that defines and upsets me, especially as a, let's say, psychologically damaged person. But this concerns you too, because each one of you is instable, to a greater or lesser degree. Like art, this disease is only an intensification of what lies dormant in all of us. And that's why this lecture is not about me, but about you."

These lines, spoken by Mele, connect the early scene to a series of questions addressed directly to the audience, repeatedly asking what they have come to see and thereby calling attention to their fundamental attitude as spectators. The performance underscores the director's aim of prompting the audience to encounter themselves through the theatrical experience. Rather than merely conveying the stories of Mele or Turing, the performance prompts the audience to reflect by confronting them with their own self-projections mediated through these figures. This strategy of identification operates through two principal characteristics that draw the audience into alignment with the figures on stage. One is Mele's "instability," as articulated in

the quote above; the other is the notion that human perception and response, like those of machines, are governed by “automaticity.”

First, Mele argues that the “inner instability” produced by his bipolar disorder is indeed a pronounced trait in someone “psychologically damaged” like himself, yet ultimately a condition latent in all audience members. He suggests that instability exists within each of you, more or less concealed, and that his illness merely intensifies “what lies dormant in all of us.” He describes the sense of helplessness he experiences under the gaze of others, as well as a feeling of being “less connected” to life and “always off the rails.” These confessions resonate with the audience’s everyday experiences of disconnection, in which genuine encounters are often absent from ordinary life.

In addition, Mele encourages identification by implying that the audience, like machines or robots, is not fundamentally different from a “machine” that responds in programmed ways or moves according to external conditioning. Showing photographs of himself as a child, he speculates that even at the age of six, he may already have been an actor of himself, performing in front of the camera in anticipation of the social conditioning that awaited him. Through this reflection, he persuades the audience that human beings continually present themselves in accordance with social expectations. He further suggests that the audience, too, has learned how to relate to others through education “like an algorithm,” and that, collectively, people end up behaving in almost the same way day after day.

Mele extends this thought by directly inviting the audience to identify with the machine itself, asking what it would mean for them to function as the machine does. He presents scenarios—job interviews, stressful situations, or moments of conflict—in which one might wish to respond with machine-like perfection, reacting in exactly the same way to the same stimulus every time. This ideal of control through mechanisation underlies Mele’s own decision to conceal his body and replace himself with a robot, while simultaneously revealing that the audience harbours a similar desire. By invoking examples such as cochlear implants or prosthetic devices, he suggests that technology enables the human body to become a better version of itself. In doing so, the performance projects onto the audience the recognition that they, too, possess a desire to transform their existence through technology. In other words, although differing in degree, the audience shares with Mele experiences of lost control and modes of living that verge on the mechanical.

Ultimately, Mele presents scientific evidence for identification itself by referring to “mirror neurons”, suggesting that the very act of watching him presupposes identification. Mirror neurons are cells that automatically activate in the observer’s brain when perceiving another person’s actions or speech, producing neural activity patterns identical to those of the observed agent. By invoking mirror neurons, Mele

makes explicit that as the audience watches him on stage, they unconsciously project themselves onto him.

In conclusion, both the instability articulated by the speaker Mele and the automaticity embodied by the Mele-robot are characteristics already inherent in every audience member. What the audience ultimately encounters in the theatre is not Mele or Mele2, but themselves, projected onto these figures. Through this mechanism, the performance draws the audience into the position of the lecture's main subject, as the sole living presence.

Who does the audience form a relationship with? Melle or Melle2

In the performance text, Kaegi distinguishes between Melle, the voice that delivers the narrative, and Melle2, the robot that embodies him on stage. This distinction reveals that the performance presupposes a binary between the narrating Melle and the mechanical Melle. At the same time, the work encourages the audience to identify with Melle2 as the physically present entity before them, while also inviting an emotional identification with Melle as the story's subject. In doing so, the audience is guided into forming a dual relationship with two distinct yet interrelated figures.

The narrating Melle tells that his body has been replaced by Melle2, prompting the audience to distinguish between Melle2, who occupies the shared physical space, and Melle, who remains absent. As the performance progresses, however, the audience becomes increasingly absorbed in Melle2 as the proxy narrator of Melle's story, gradually perceiving Melle and Melle2 as a single figure—though never completely.

At times, the narrator reminds the audience that he does not share the same physical space with them, speaking from Melle's position; at other moments, the narration shifts to the machine's perspective, addressing the audience from the standpoint of Melle2. Most decisively, in the latter part of the performance, Melle appears on screen, and a dialogue between him and the robot Melle2 is staged, making their separation unmistakable. Scenes such as the uncanny facial expressions produced when Melle2's silicone face is fitted onto the robotic mechanism, the exposure of mechanical components beneath peeled artificial skin, an ankle rotating beyond the range of a human joint, or the instant shutdown of Melle2 at Melle's command interrupt the audience's immersion in Melle2 and create moments of estrangement.

Consequently, the performance employs an open-ended structure that questions whether the audience's compassion is directed towards the original Melle within the narrative or towards the replica of Melle2 as a machine, thereby permitting a dual interpretation contingent upon the spectator's mode of reception. However, if we examine the actual entity that assumes the role of a relational subject in lieu of Melle's

absent body within the performative context, this relationship ultimately extends towards an engagement with objects.

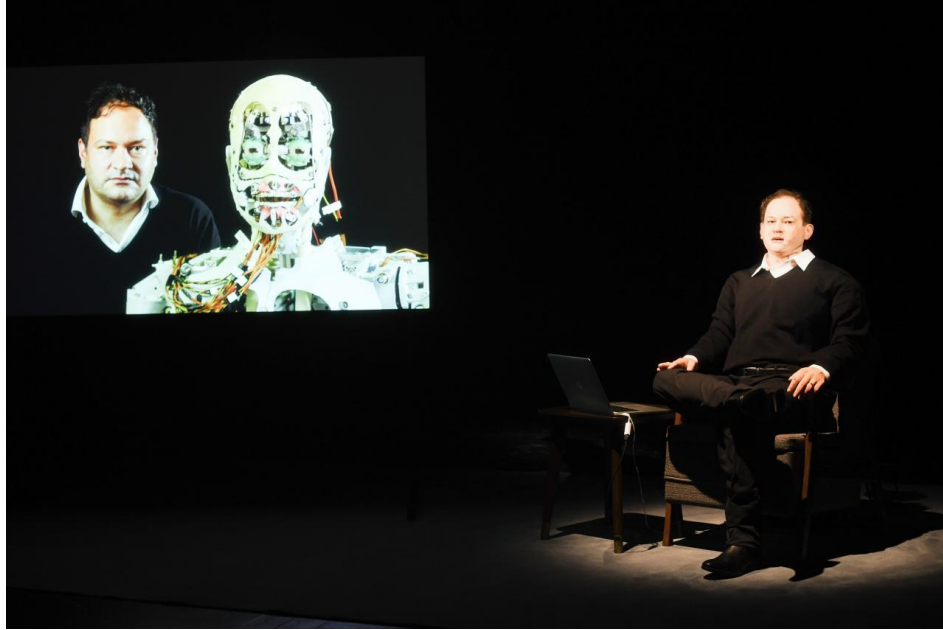


Figure 10. Scene featuring Melle 2 on stage, alongside simultaneous projections of Melle and Melle 2 with its silicone exterior removed. ©Gabriela Neeb.

What intervenes in the audience's perception is not simply Melle's dual structure but rather a multilayered configuration of Melle dispersed across different material mediations. His voice is reproduced through audio playback devices, his bodily presence is enacted through the android robot's movements, and his image is projected onto a screen. On an even more granular level, the material surface of the screen, the silicone exterior of the robot's face, the motors that subtly move the eyebrows and fingers, and the electrical circuits and code that operate all these components each as actants, as they intervene in the audience's perception.

In *We Have Never Been Modern*, Latour critically analyses the modernist dichotomy that distinguishes humans from nonhumans. He posits that agency is inherently produced within networks intertwining humans, objects, technologies, and other mediators.⁴⁹⁶ From this perspective, objects are not merely passive conduits of human intention; rather, they act as actants that actively influence perception, judgment, and the formation of relationships. Applying this framework to the interaction between the audience and the performer Melle—through the agency of objects that shape

⁴⁹⁶ Latour, Bruno. *We Have Never Been Modern*. Harvard university press, 1993.

perceptual processes—demonstrates that the audience's experience cannot be simplistically reduced to a binary between the original Melle and Melle 2. Instead, audience engagement occurs concurrently across multiple layers. Consequently, the spectators' embodied presence experiences their interaction with these elements as "live." Affective responses—such as changes in heartbeat, respiration, or tension—arise within their relationships with objects, including sound devices, the robot, and the images, all of which function as actants imbued with their own distinctive vitality.

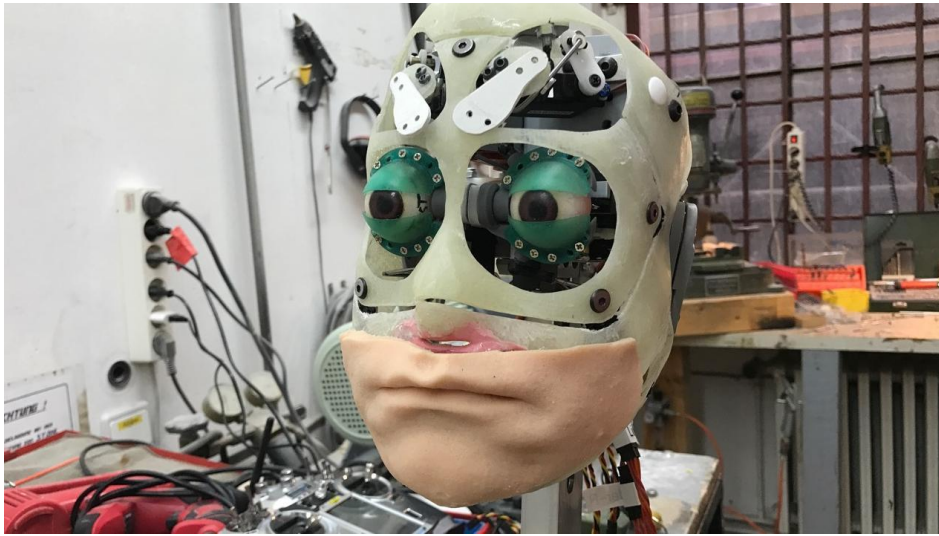


Figure 11. Face of the Melle robot during production. ©Rimini Protokoll.

Furthermore, these technological mediations should not be understood merely as intermediaries facilitating a relationship between the human actor Melle and the audience. As Buber asserts, "every means is an obstacle. Only when every means has collapsed does the meeting occur."⁴⁹⁷ From this perspective, the stage elements that evoke affect and exert relational force upon the spectator do not function as bridges to the absent performer. Rather, they engage the spectator in a direct encounter in their own right. Consequently, the audience's engagement shifts from a mediated relation with a human actor to a direct relation with the things themselves, emerging through their interaction with the assemblage of objects.

Encounter with the object on stage

The title of the work, *Uncanny Valley*, refers to a theory proposed in 1970 by Japanese roboticist Masahiro Mori concerning human-robot interaction (HRI). Mori argued

⁴⁹⁷ Buber, op.cit., 1937, p. 12.

that human affinity toward robots or artificial beings increases as they become more humanlike, but only up to a certain point. Beyond this threshold, affinity sharply declines and is replaced by feelings of eeriness or discomfort—a zone he termed the “uncanny valley.” After passing through this valley, affinity is presumed to rise again.⁴⁹⁸ Mori attributed this phenomenon to deep-seated human instincts. He suggested that humans possess a “self-preservation” mechanism that is sensitive to proximal threats such as death, corpses, or disease. When confronted with robots or artificial entities that appear “almost human,” this instinct is activated, producing sensations of discomfort or aversion.

This notion of uncanny response becomes central to Peta Tait’s analysis of this performance in *Forms of Emotion: Human to Nonhuman in Drama, Theatre and Contemporary Performance*. According to Tait, the electrified, mechanical body on stage provokes immediate bodily and physiological responses without relying on a human actor’s emotional expression. She explains this phenomenon as follows:

The electrified robot in *Uncanny Valley* might have elicited bodily affect as well as an emotional response such as admiration for the replication of Melle’s physical appearance [...] As the Rimini Protokoll production evoked affect, it invited subjective responses to a specific human identity. *Uncanny Valley* suggested that impersonal affect and personal emotional feeling are coexistent.⁴⁹⁹

Here, Tait suggests that the electrified robot may have triggered bodily affect while simultaneously evoking personal, narrative-based emotional responses, such as admiration for the precision with which Melle’s physical appearance was replicated. The audience’s bodily reactions thus indicate a coexistence of impersonal affect and personal emotional feeling.

The electrical texture of the humanoid robot, its slight delays, and the artificial quality of its skin generate uncanny sensations that operate directly on the audience’s bodies. These sensations activate impersonal affect prior to linguistic interpretation or narrative meaning-making, producing immediate responses such as chills, tension, or unease. Tait, however, emphasises that this impersonal affect does not remain isolated. Because the android precisely reproduces Melle’s race, gender, age, and physical features, the audience simultaneously responds to the robot’s mechanical materiality and to the autobiographical, human narrative associated with Melle. As a

⁴⁹⁸ Mori, Masahiro. “The Uncanny Valley.” Karl F. MacDorman a. Norri Kageki(trans.), *IEEE Robotics & Automation Magazine*. 19:2, 2012, pp. 98–100.

⁴⁹⁹ Tait, Peta. *Forms of Emotion: Human to Nonhuman in Drama, Theatre and Contemporary Performance*. Routledge, 2021, p. 41.

result, bodily reactions to mechanical form and emotional responses to human narrative overlap rather than remaining distinct.

Tait further stresses that this performance demonstrates how technological forms can generate affect without imitating biological liveness. At the moment when a mechanical entity produces affect, technology acquires what she mentions that “energetic presence can be impersonal.”⁵⁰⁰ Here, “energetic presence” refers to the intense sense of force or existence that the audience perceives in an object on stage. When this energetic presence intersects with human narrative and emotional layers, the robot may appear to possess a form of vitality. Technology and material objects can generate a powerful atmosphere, through which spectators experience subjective emotions mediated by affect. Consequently, *Uncanny Valley* reveals a theatrical space in which affect generated by the robot-performer's non-human form collides with and overlaps emotion grounded in human narrative. Tait identifies this complex structure of audience response as central to the work.

Prior to Rimini Protokoll's *Uncanny Valley*, Japanese roboticist Hiroshi Ishiguro and theatre director Oriza Hirata had been developing theatrical works featuring both human actors and android robots since 2008.⁵⁰¹ As Yuji Sone notes in *Japanese Robot Culture: Performance, Imagination, and Modernity*, Hirata advances a controversial view of acting that rejects the idea that an actor must draw upon his or her interiority to construct a character.⁵⁰² Hirata's directing presents a perspective clearly distinct from traditional realist theatre. He argues that actors need not reflect their inner emotional states in performance. Rejecting Stanislavskian realism—which encourages spectators to believe that an actor's emotional expression corresponds to an inner psychological state—Hirata maintains that theatre should be grounded in the precision and robustness of the script rather than in the actor's individual expressivity. He asserts that “play-writing should be precise and robust enough so that it can be performed correctly without an actor's ‘unique’ expression,”⁵⁰³ advocating scripts that meticulously regulate even the timing of dialogue. From this standpoint, the actor's task is not to reveal interiority but to execute the role faithfully according to the script.

⁵⁰⁰ “Technology and objects in performance show how energetic presence can be impersonal. The **energetic presence** of human performers, however, arises in conjunction with, but is not the same as, emotional feeling. It suggests that affect and emotional feeling coexist even as personal presence becomes depersonalized.” Ibid., p. 45.

⁵⁰¹ Oriza Hirata and Hiroshi Ishiguro have worked together to produce several robot theatre performances: *I, Worker* (2008), *In the Heart of a Forest* (2010), and *Sayonara (Goodbye)* (2010), *Three Sisters, Android version* (2013), and *La Metamorphose Version Androïde* (2014). Cf. Sone, Yuji. *Japanese Robot Culture: Performance, Imagination, and Modernity*. New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2017.

⁵⁰² Ibid., p. 94.

⁵⁰³ “Hirata holds the controversial view of acting that an actor does not need to draw upon his or her interiority to inform the character” Ibid., p. 94.

What matters, for Hirata, is the performer's capacity to persuade the audience—a capacity he argues is not limited to human actors, noting that “a well-controlled robot can certainly do just that.”⁵⁰⁴

During the creation of his first android theatre work, *I, Worker*, Hirata reportedly drew on performance techniques similar to those used in traditional Bunraku puppetry to enhance communicative resonance between human and robotic characters, even consulting Bunraku masters and mime performers.⁵⁰⁵ Mori likewise refers to Bunraku puppets when discussing theatrical vitality:

I don't think that, on close inspection, a bunraku puppet appears similar to a human being... But when we enjoy a puppet show in the theater, we are seated at a certain distance from the stage... given our tendency as an audience to become absorbed in this form of art, we might feel a high level of affinity for the puppet.⁵⁰⁶

Although Bunraku puppets are neither human-like in appearance nor capable of emotional expression—much like robotic performers—Mori observes that within a theatrical situation, the living audience projects vitality onto these objects through immersion. He identifies this as a defining power of theatre.

Mori's interpretation aligns with Tait's account of impersonal energetic presence, in which emotionless object-performers nevertheless generate affect and emotional response to the audience, as well as with Hirata's assertion that robots devoid of emotion may still appear alive to the audience. In this context, Kaegi's intention may be understood as foregrounding the audience's own perceptual and empathetic capacities—specifically, their ability to animate objects—as the central focus of the performance, made visible through the absence of the human actor.

Extending toward Buber's relationship with nonhuman

The audience's capacity to recognise object performers—such as robots, puppets, or other entities—as animate and capable of eliciting affect and emotional responses—can also be linked to Buber's ideas on dialogical encounters with nonhuman beings. As the earlier example of the tree illustrates (see 2.3.3), a tree regarded merely as an

⁵⁰⁴ Ibid., p. 95.

⁵⁰⁵ “In the Ishiguro-Hirata collaborations, performance techniques similar to those used in Bunraku were mobilised to heighten the sense of communication between the human and robot characters. [...] the producer of *I, Worker*, a Bunraku master(*Kanjuro Karatake*) and a pantomime artist(*Naoki Imuro*) were invited to provide advice on gendered gestures.” Ibid., p. 93.

⁵⁰⁶ Mori, op.cit., 2012, p. 99.

object of observation can enter into a dialogical relation with the 'I' through one's own "will"⁵⁰⁷ and "grace" that comes from beyond. The "power of exclusiveness" that reveals the force of the space between the two beings, the 'I' and the 'tree,' and exposes the transition from the tree as a being in part of one's ordinary life to a dialogical encounter. Yet the tree that enters into relation with a human is not an anthropomorphised entity produced by human perceptual projection, such as a tree endowed with a "soul or dryad"⁵⁰⁸ fairy-like character. It is at this point that Buber's position diverges from those of Mori and Hirata. Whereas the two above understood the audience's immersion as enabling them to endow the object performers onstage with a sense of vitality, Buber's dialogical relation does not experience the other through human cognitive activity.

Buber in *I and Thou* describes the "moon" as an entity that conveys a dynamic influence as follows:

The elementary impressions and emotional strings that waken the spirit of the "natural man" proceed from incidents—experience of a being confronting him—and from situations—life with a being confronting him—that are relational in character. [...] at first he has in him only the dynamic, stirring image of the moon's effect, streaming through his body. [...] The appearances to which he ascribes the "mystical power" are all elementary incidents that are relational in character, that is, all incidents that disturb him by stirring his body and leaving behind in him a stirring image.⁵⁰⁹

Here, Buber explains the relationship between the natural man and the moon. Although the moon is a natural object without agency or the capacity to respond, the natural man enters into relation with it through the vivid and stimulating impressions it leaves upon their own "body" (*Leib*). Furthermore, Buber draws attention to the "mystical power" (*geheimnisvolle Macht*) that arises between two beings who stand before one another. This force is generated in the relational sphere and inscribes a "stirring image" (*Eerregungsbild*) on the body. Thus, this "mystical power" Buber describes is not the inherent power of the moon nor a power possessed by the natural man, but a force generated within the relational event between them. The natural man receives an impression upon the body through this relational force, even though the encountered entity is incapable of acting or responding. Accordingly, Tait's observation—that the "energetic presence"⁵¹⁰ attributed to the robot Melle becomes

⁵⁰⁷ Buber, op.cit., 1937, p. 7.

⁵⁰⁸ Ibid., p. 8. A "dryad" is a spirit or nymph of oak trees in Greek mythology.

⁵⁰⁹ Ibid., pp. 19-20.

⁵¹⁰ Tait, op.cit., p. 45.

perceptible to the spectator through the affective dynamics arising between spectator and robot—resonates with Buber’s account of the “mystical power” that emerges in the ‘I-Thou’ relation, the same “power of exclusiveness” (*Macht der Ausschließlichkeit*) at work when one enters into a dialogical relation with a tree.

Buber characterises the encounter between two beings belonging to different dimensions of existence as the “threshold of mutuality” in the *Afterword of I and Thou*.

That is why we may call this sphere, in respect of our saying of *Thou* out towards the creature, the threshold of mutuality.

It is quite different with those spheres of nature where the spontaneity we share with the animals is lacking. It is part of our concept of a plant that it cannot react to our action towards it: it cannot “respond.” Yet this does not mean that here we are given simply no reciprocity at all. The deed or attitude of an individual being is certainly not to be found here, but there is a reciprocity of the being itself, a reciprocity which is nothing but being in its course.⁵¹¹

Buber mentions that reciprocal relations are possible even with beings that lack “spontaneity” and the capacity to “respond,” as the encounter unfolds at the “threshold” between different orders of being. He further argues that what renders mutual exchange with the encountered other impossible is not the nature of the other itself but the “habits of thought.”⁵¹² From a Buberian perspective, therefore, even if the robot Melle onstage is a being devoid of spontaneity, merely repeating programmed lines to the audience, beings of the two different realms—the robot and the spectator—can nevertheless enter into a dialogical relation on this threshold, where mutual address and response become possible.

His explanation continues as follows.

That living wholeness and unity of the tree, which denies itself to the sharpest glance of the mere investigator and discloses itself to the glance of one who says *Thou*, is there when he, the sayer of *Thou*, is there:⁵¹³

Buber holds that, at the threshold of mutuality, the tree’s response remains closed to the “investigator” but is open to the one who addresses it as “Thou.” Here, Buber presents the address “Thou” not as verbal language but as a language of the “glance” (*Blick*). As examined earlier (see 4.1.2), Buber asserts that the animal’s eye speaks a “great language” (*großen Sprache*)⁵¹⁴, and he further characterises the

⁵¹¹ Buber, op.cit., 2000[1958], p. 117.

⁵¹² Ibid.

⁵¹³ Ibid.

⁵¹⁴ Ibid., p. 96.

language perceived in the animal's glance through a tactile expression, describing it as "the stammering of nature at the first touch of spirit."⁵¹⁵ Accordingly, when this interpretation is applied to the relationship between the Melle Robot and the audience, the call-and-response between them can be understood as occurring not in verbal language but in the moment of contact when their gazes meet. Above all, it shows that the audience can step onto the "threshold of mutuality" in entering a dialogical relationship with Melle Robot not by adopting the "sharpest glance of the investigator," but by taking an open attitude toward "the sayer of Thou."

The following passage from Buber's essay on *Dialogue* illustrates this point through his description of a moment of dialogue between a factory worker and a machine.

Be clear what it means when a worker can experience even his relation to the machine as one of dialogue, when, for instance, a compositor tells that he has understood the machine's humming as "a merry and grateful smile at me for helping it to set aside the difficulties and obstructions which disturbed and bruised and pained it, so that now it could run free."⁵¹⁶

In this case, the worker regards the machine not merely as a tool but as an active conversational partner. The worker responds to the machine's needs, and the machine provides feedback on the worker's actions. Buber demonstrates that maintaining a dialogical relationship with things is possible even within a technological society. For him, the dialogical relation can grant an intersubjectivity to the encountered other through one's own passionate longing for dialogue, regardless of whether that other is living or not. In such a dialogical relationship, objects are not merely things but possess a kind of vitality.

Audience discomfort arose from the robot

As discussed earlier, the absent actor, Melle, expresses a desire to communicate genuinely with the audience. Both the recorded-voice Melle and the robot Melle2 that performs his movements continually address the spectators as "you," seeking to establish a direct relational encounter. As the performance unfolds, the audience responds affectively to the performer Melle, gradually forming a relationship with him. Yet in the latter part of the performance, the audience is pulled out of their immersion by the exposure of the robot's inner structure, leaving them with a sense of discomfort.

Here, the discomfort elicited in the audience functions as an indicator of the relationship between actors and spectators, much like in the performance cases

⁵¹⁵ Ibid., pp. 96-97.

⁵¹⁶ Buber, op.cit., 2002[1947], p.43.

discussed above. When the robot's outer silicone was removed, and its joints were rotated beyond their range, the spectators experienced a psychological distance—namely, discomfort. Paradoxically, this moment reveals the relationship that the audience had already formed with the robot. Prior to experiencing discomfort, it can be argued that an intersubjective 'I-Thou' relation had already been established between the audience and the robot, as the audience, through their unconscious and nonverbal responses, engaged with a figure on stage that called upon them as individual subjects and awaited their response.

However, the emergence of discomfort disrupts this relationship. When the robot that provokes discomfort addresses the spectator as a 'Thou,' the audience can no longer trust the authenticity of that address, nor are they able to respond to it. The feeling of discomfort severs the 'I-Thou' connection and pushes the relation back into the realm of 'It.' Through this, we can observe that discomfort operating within the actor-audience relationship functions as a relational factor not only in human-human encounters but also in human-robot encounters.

Furthermore, Mori notes that once one passes beyond the point of the uncanny valley, machines and humans may enter a more intimate relationship. In the performance, the robot that had previously elicited discomfort performs a solo dance in the final scene. Whether the spectators continued to feel discomfort while watching this dance, or whether the discomfort was resolved and the dance remained an impressive moment in their relationship with the robot, would have served as an index for the audience to reflect on their relationship with the robot.

4.2.3 *Handle with Care*, Actorless Theatre, Ontroerend Goed (BE)

This section examines *Handle with Care* (2025), a production by Ontroerend Goed, as a case of actorless theatre in which the actor responsible for advancing the narrative is entirely removed and only a single box appears on stage.⁵¹⁷ The performance unfolds without theatrical machinery or stage technology, relying solely on a single box and the collective participation of the audience. Spectators open the box themselves and, through the objects and letters it contains, actively construct the performance. From a traditional theatrical perspective, text has been understood as a human-centred narrative structure realised through an actor's speech and gesture.

⁵¹⁷ This analysis is based on Ontroerend Goed's *Handle with Care*, an unpublished performance text and video recording that I received from the author in December 2025, as well as on my personal experience as an audience participant in the performance at NTGent on 17 October 2025.