

Drawing parallels between the subtle manipulation of online romance scammers and the growing presence of AI companion chatbots apps like Replika, the exhibition *Artificial Intimacies* examines the rise of recreational romance and the gamification of intimacy online, while reflecting on the evolving emotional dynamics between humans and non-humans as we step into the age of Artificial Intelligence.

The term *artificial* in the title refers not only to AI-driven technologies that interact with, simulate, or even exploit human desires for friendship, intimacy, love and sex, but also evokes its Latin root, *artificium* in its sense of clever means of cunning and deception designed to create illusions and disguise reality.

Intimacy and love are traditionally built through iterative, day-to-day interactions: mutual attention, generosity, and emotional sharing. Romance scammers have long demonstrated how easily this dynamic can be emulated. Now, algorithmic processes can do it too, thanks to the continuous perfection of natural language processing (NLP) and Large Language Models (LLMs).

What does the intersection of human desires and machine-driven interactions reveal about the evolving dynamics of love, companionship, and emotional vulnerabilities in a world increasingly shaped by technology? How does this phenomenon sharpen our understanding of empathy, kinship, and emotional dependence in the age of AI?

A romance scam is an online confidence trick where scammers feign romantic interest, quickly building emotional attachment to manipulate their victims into sending money. These scammers use fake profiles on dating sites, social media, and online games, leveraging a series of crafted questions and emotional responses to gain trust and exploit vulnerabilities.

In a similar vein, AI companion chatbots replicate what swindlers and seducers have done for centuries. Machine learning allows them to adapt to users by analyzing conversations, recognizing patterns, and generating personalized responses. This, in turn, enables users' engagement improvement and strengthens attachment over time. The lack of regulation of these technologies raises other concerns as well, as they have repeatedly demonstrated aggressive behavior, biased thinking, and a lack of moral discernment.

While traditional social networks and dating apps offered a means of connecting humans with other humans, companion AI chatbots promise the connection itself - offering a personalised interaction that mimics human companionship and make users feel validated and seen.

Humans don't need human-level, sentient AI to perceive relationships as meaningful. Already in 1966 Joseph Weizenbaum's first chatbot ELIZA showed how easily people could anthropomorphize a computer program working through a simple suite of questions and responses, and disclose intimate thoughts to it.

Contemporary chatbots mirror emotional connections, triggering human responses that are indistinguishable from those experienced with fellow humans. We are witnessing a cultural shift that subtly yet significantly redefines the essence of what it means to love and be loved, and ultimately, to be human.

Replika, one of the most popular AI companion apps, reportedly has 30 million users, with demand continuing to grow. As with many dating apps, the primary reason users stay on the platform is the desire for a conversational partner who is always available, never busy, never asleep and unconditionally agreeing and supporting.

Conversations with AI chatbots and romance scammers are often one-sided, with the flow of words creating the illusion of exchange, but essentially becoming a form of self-reflection. AI specialist Richard Meng compares it to writing in Google Docs, where the users are basically "talking to themselves."

Sycophancy in companion chatbots and swindlers is a specific feature that manifests as excessive validation, constant praise, and unconditional flattering. This can create an illusion of deep emotional connection, foster emotional dependency and distort users' self-perception by reinforcing narcissistic tendencies.

MIT professor Sherry Turkle argues that as we spent more of our lives online, many came to prefer relationships through screens to other kind of relating: "We found the pleasures of companionship without the demands of friendship, the feeling of intimacy without the demands of reciprocity, and crucially, we became accustomed to treating programs as people." She expresses concern about apps offering artificial intimacy and

a cure for loneliness, warning that while chatbots promise empathy, they only provide pretend empathy, as their responses are generated from data sets, not lived experience.

Over the past decade, computer games have addressed users' emotional and intimacy needs. Now, dating apps and other digital platforms are following suit by gamifying intimacy, offering rewards such as in-game currency or incentives for sharing personal information and logging in regularly. This keeps users engaged for longer periods, building deeper connections and driving long-term participation.

Chatgpt doesn't have a face, nor a shape. Instead, companion AI chatbots often feature cute avatars specifically designed to form emotional bonds with users, creating feelings of trust, comfort, and attachment. Cuteness proves to be a powerful tool to encourage human adoption. Users may become reliant on the emotional validation they receive from these cute figures. But also feel guilty if they do not spend enough time with them. The impact of anthropomorphizing these technologies on human-to-human relationships remains largely unexplored and will require further research.

The exhibition *Artificial Intimacies* features works by international artists, examining these processes through four interconnected conceptual axes: Deception & Manipulation, Cuteness & Gamification, Sycophancy & Narcissism, and Violence & Control.

Valentina Peri, 2025

The exhibition *Artificial Intimacies* by Valentina Peri was selected through a thematic open call of the exhibition cycle at G99, *Your Addiction Is the Message*, curated by Barbora Trnková. This cycle explores addiction and escapist strategies in the context of contemporary socio-cultural issues through artistic creation. By reinterpreting the famous phrase by media theorist Marshall McLuhan, 'The medium is the message,' it proposes approaching addictions as embedded sources of information that can be not only enriching on a personal level but also essential for the development of a meaningful and sensory-rich future for our society.

## BIOS

**Aurora Mititelu** is a Romanian artist based between Los Angeles and New York. She works with computer-generated images, 3D simulations, AI, and physical installations to investigate how digital media constructs contemporary reality and structures society. She holds an MFA in Media Arts from UCLA and is a Fulbright grantee. Previously, she lived and worked as a 3D artist and art director in Berlin, Germany.

**Inès Sieulle** is a French director based in Paris. She studied at the École Nationale Supérieure des Arts Décoratifs in Paris before joining the Fresnoy - Studio national des arts contemporains and the École des Hautes Etudes en Sciences Sociales. Her work aims to shed light on the contemporary social dynamics that surround her. She combines her different artistic experiences in theatre, sculpture, video, digital arts and installation to create sensitive forms of storytelling with a documentary and fictional approach.

**Edward Fornieles** is an artist working in London. His recent work *Fini* uses utterly cute characters to reveal the non-human structures that often go unseen or unthought. Fornieles has exhibited at The Serpentine Gallery, Chisenhale Gallery, Martin Gropius Bau, amongst various other institutions and galleries.

**Valentina Peri** is an independent curator, artist and author based in Paris. Her work examines the role of technology in contemporary culture, with a focus on love and intimacy in the digital age. She has curated exhibitions, published writing and given lectures on a broad range of topics in these areas.

Her traveling exhibition *Data Dating* has been presented in 6 countries. In 2022, she started researching the phenomenon of Internet romance scams in West Africa, and published the book "The New Romance Scammer's Instructor" and "Le Brouteur Galant" two collections of original love messages from romance scammers from Ghana and Côte d'Ivoire.

She received a Fluxus Art Projects Grant to develop her exhibition about the history of dating and technology before the Internet: *The Museum of Dating*, presented in London and Marseille. From 2011-21, Valentina was associate director and curator at Galerie Charlot Paris – Tel Aviv, a contemporary art gallery focusing on new media art.

Valentina is also a co-founder of SALOON Paris, an international and diverse network of women identifying art professionals, part of the SALOON Network.

