I’m Normandy Sherwood. In addition to working in the Expository Writing Program at NYU, I’m a writer and a director of theater. The thing I find most thrilling in the theater is the surprise.

Last fall, I took my students to a performance that was billed as a theatrical collaboration where humans and Artificial Intelligence were “Full Collaborative Partners”. As it turned out, that’s not what the piece was, and so I left still wanting to know what such a collaboration would entail. Why would a performer want to collaborate with an AI? Would it actually even be a collaboration?

And then, a play I directed this May used a teleprompter device to feed actors lines. We used it because of the quality of performance it produced in the actors— a wide-eyed attention, a sense of surprise, in the performers, at the language coming out of their mouths. It was thrilling to watch the work— the fast micro decisions a reader-aloud must make about the meaning of words before understanding what the end of the sentence or the paragraph will be.

This year, through the work of Writer and programmer Janelle Shane, I came across Talktotransformer, a project created by Adam King “as an easier way to play with OpenAI’s new machine learning model-- a language model called GPT-2 that generates coherent paragraphs of text one word at a time.” Talktotransformer, as you see behind me, is a predictive text generator that autocompletes a custom prompt (ranging in size from a word to a paragraph).

These three things converged for me in a project I want to build—a sort of performance social space— called AI Karaoke. The goal of the project will be to practice collaborations between human writers and performers and Artificial Intelligence.

The first form this project will take is a kind of Karaoke experiment: A human band will play improvised music in a loosely rock idiom. As in a karaoke bar, lyrics will be projected, slowly scrolling, for karaoke participants to sing. But these lyrics will not come from known songs—they will be generated live by GPT-2 (via Talktotransformer). Participants will sing songs they don’t know, surprising themselves and everyone else.

Karaoke as a social art form blurs lines between audience and performer. Usually this blurring happens is from a place of relative comfort: usually you know the song. AI Karaoke would be a social form that invites discomfort and invention -- participants must respond to the words scrolling across the screen and translate them into relationship with the music. They must bring what they read into their bodies quickly, following interpretive impulses without editing. They must be willing to be surprised: they must loosen their relationship with human-ish
qualities like certainty, meaningfulness, decision, taste. I think that it is by such a loosening that you come to a better sense of what these things are.