Radio Adelaide interview with ANAT Ideate 2020 recipient, Willoh Weiland and interviewer, Dr Naomi Hunter, 2 Sep 2020.

Hunter: You're listening to Festival City on 101.5. and on today's show we have been having some enlightening conversations with some of our ANAT recipients of an Ideate grant. And this afternoon we are talking to Willoh Weiland and Willoh is actually based on Tasmania, and the proposal of the research was the possibility for art and technology to transform our experience of intimacy through reimagining the role of the digital companion. So welcome to the show, Willoh.

Weiland: Hi, thanks for having me.

Hunter: It is our pleasure. Now Willoh, I read this little guide here about your proposed research, because we all know that when you're researching, where you begin is an idea, and where you end up, you never quite know how the research is going to go. When I'm thinking about our experience of intimacy and the role of the digital companion, I'm reminded of my niece at kindergarten where they have a little robot that can tell stories to the kids. And then I'm also reminded of a little show I saw about a nursing home when they had a robot dog companion. And I was wondering, you know, am I in the realm at all of the work that you do?

Weiland: Yeah, that's a good question. I think they're both great examples of the way that the companion or the idea of the companion is moving I guess a bit more beyond the instructional exchange that happens with Siri or Alexa or our computers into something that's more in the realm of storytelling and participation, and an authentic, emotional idea of companionship. And I think they're both good examples of how we can coexist with technology in a way that is kind of not task based, that is, that's what's what I'm interested in. I'm interested in those models and how they can be useful, I guess.

Hunter: And how did you come to this stage in your practice where you're looking at researching that nexus between art and technology? Where did your creative practice start?

Weiland: I've worked a lot with different science institutions. I started off a long time ago with actually another ANAT supported project called Void Love, where I did a six months residency at the Swinburne Astrophysics and Supercomputing Centre. I've worked at…

Hunter: Oh wow…

Weiland: Melbourne Uni at the moment in their Interaction Design Lab. But more broadly I'm interested in working with non-artists, be that scientists or community members or senior citizen dancing clubs or whatever, because I'm interested in the conversation around art and what it can be. But this particular project I think came out of a particular body of work that came out of feminism and intersectional feminism from a kind of performance perspective. And I got a fellowship working at Melbourne Uni and I started to, I guess I'm always kind of trying to insert those conversations around art into this future practice, and kind of thinking into how artists can participate in modelling what's next. Which the opportunities are, we're not always invited into the room or to be at the table, I think. And so this really came out of thinking about the way that the quality of interaction that we have with Siri or Alexa,

which we can observe in ourselves or in the way kids interact with those noises really I think to me, replicating a particular submission and misogyny about how we interact with women. And the research has come out of looking at that, and it goes right back to the conception of the female body in science fiction to how where the research into robotics, how we represent ourselves and how we represent the other which is usually female, is sort of where this is coming from. And I guess it's a kind of attempt to I guess interrogate those ideas about gender particularly, and how we conceive of other beings, that I think is so important as we go about developing these technologies, which become more and more integrated into our daily lives, like your example, we all now have an example of an interaction with a robot in a daily way. So yeah.

Hunter: So in terms of displaying the visual images and creating that digital intimacy, how would you portray those themes of gender, feminism, what would people be looking at when they review your work?

Weiland: That's a good question. I love these little Tamagotchi's, people probably remember them…

Hunter: From way back.

Weiland: …they're still going, and I'm interested in making an object or a wearable. I don't really know the answer to what it looks like yet. There's some beautiful examples. There's an example in an aged care of a robotic seal that's had a great kind of impact, and one of the reasons in the research that's reflected on is because it's not normally a type of animal that might exist in that environment. And therefore the interaction of the object itself is more to do with wonder and awe, and it has a different result in the participation in its kind of life or whatever. So that's, I don't know the answer except to say the idea that I think we're in this especially moment in history where our relationship with our technology is oscillating between fulfilling this deep emotional need in ourselves to connect and to be with other people, and also just being like deeply annoying because we have to be on it all the time and we've all got Zoom dread, and we're all going oh, another thing. And so I think that there's something in the trying to pay attention and navigate what we need from technology. And to think of it in a kind of more, you know, in the idea of an encounter with another being, as opposed to just a functional thing. And that, I don't think, it doesn't need to be a robot for that. And we all just need a lot more help I think with navigating this landscape. And hopefully that can be just a bit more gentle and nice.

Hunter: I pick up my phone however many times a day and now I've got an app on there that tells me how many times I pick it up, for whether it is work related or personal, and often when people say to me, did you remember whatever, I'll go, I've got my augmented memory here in my phone, because if I don't remember, I've put it in there to remind me that this thing is happening. And I was considering this idea of intimacy and something being a digital companion, and I was thinking, when we say intimacy, what are we talking about? But then if you think about that, my phone is in my pocket, against my body, probably most of my day, I use it for a lot of my work, that in itself is a type of intimacy. So when you're saying the experience of intimacy, do you want to just tease that out a little bit more for us?

Weiland: Yeah, I definitely don't mean Grinder. I think those things about proximity, about exchange, interdependence, trust, mutuality, all of those things that are very basically actually, and can be extrapolated to many relationships we have, be it with our plants or our pets or our mum, or there are these commonalities. And I think we have just by the nature of this moment, we've extended that to these devices. But what we don't have is, you know because this is to do with the capitalist machine, we don't have simplicity actually I think. The Tamagotchi I really love because it offers this really simple idea, which is you can kill it. And that is really, that's not something we're always, we're in a replaceable mode with our technology. And to me, those are, the high stakes nature of that reflects something interesting in that how we care for these things. Obviously, they're not people. It sort of reflects how we care for ourselves is the point. And I think that we, beyond the kind of Gwyneth Paltrow mindfulness memes and whatever, there is a real necessity to understand the boundaries of care, and the way that technology can help us care for others and for ourselves. And so that's a long-winded way of saying, it could be a FitBit, it could be…

Hunter: In a different way to killing off your Nintendo's.

Weiland: Yeah, exactly. Exactly, good example.

Hunter: I think that it's such a broad playing field there with the needs of an aging community but also especially being brought to light, this whole idea of physical isolation, that the notion of a digital companion actually isn't such a crazy idea. It's one of…

Weiland: The other mode I'm interested in is, if you want to think about what it might look like, I'm interested in sound as well as the visual. I think I love the, there's a lot of research into sensorial play into technology. We can trigger things with our eyes, we can use sound to navigate, all these things. And again, they're all very locked into a game narrative structure always drives us to winning or concluding. Companionship is not the same as an idea as a game structure. It's more open ended and it gives different things. I guess the other thing to say is I'm really, my process is usually to work with other people to try and understand these things. And it's art, not science. It's not like an extensive diet pool, but it is important to understand different ages, different abilities. Age particularly and technology really relates to how we understand it, as per the aged care example.

Hunter: Absolutely. Well it's such a broad field to mine from, I'm really going to be curious to watch your blog as it comes along. Have you actually started your blog as yet?

Weiland: My blog? So great of you to mention that. No, I think my blog will be very visual, is my plan. Lots of diagrams, less writing.

Hunter: I think that's fantastic, sometimes for those of us that are visuals, we can talk about a concept, but we sort of want to see, what does it look like? How is it going to develop, so that will be on the ANAT website, but do you also have your own website that we can direct our listeners to have a look at some of your previous works?

Weiland: I don't, no.

Hunter: No? No worries. I do know that you actually had I think something at MONA recently?

Weiland: Yep, I work at MONA. I co-direct the night time programming for the MONA FOMA Festival with my colleague James Brennan.

Hunter: I think that's going to be an interview for a whole other time. So much to ask.

Weiland: No worries.

Hunter: No worries at all. So we have been speaking to Willoh Weiland and she is a recipient of an Ideate residency, so we're looking forward to that visual blog so that we can follow along with the research, and curious to see what sort of outcomes will come from that research. So congratulations and good luck with all your research.

Weiland: Thank you so much.

Hunter: Alright, cheers, nice to talk to you.

Weiland: Nice to talk to you too.