Final Reading Response

How far we’ve come! This class has provided a great forum to reflect on the artistic that have been meaningful to me. At the very beginning of this course, I met with Ge and Kunwoo and expressed my interest in subverting expectations in the consumption of my art. The materials for this week inspire some relevant thoughts in this regard, and I will use this reading response to investigate these thoughts. (I will refer to the art consumer as the “listener” though this may not be the primary sense of interaction.)

First, imagine the expectation loop. The listener is both consciously and subconsciously consuming the art, and this sets up conscious and subconscious expectations. For example, sometimes I have explicit thoughts when listening to music like “Oh, I hope they do this!” or “This chord here would be really cool!” More subconsciously, however, are my expectations of Western tonal harmony, or American cinematic style, or any of the combinations of artistic style in which I have been entrenched since childhood. Allison Parrish does a wonderful job of addressing these expectations when they take a common American high school poem by Robert Frost, which most of the audience in an American venue will have heard, and infuse it with the sounds of kiki or bouba. Those of the American educational milieu will feel both conscious expectations (“We know it’s going to sound more angular!”) and subconscious expectations (having heard the poem many times throughout formative years of their life). This combines for a unique experience: the words in the kiki/bouba-infused version make little syntactic sense, but due to the literal construction of the work and Parrish’s incredible talent for poetry reading, the flow of the poem remains largely the same despite the grotesque substitutions. Parrish is therefore using a very nuanced approach to subvert expectation since they deeply understand their audience, which is of course a key tenet of design. This is something that feels
fundamentally difficult to automate. Parrish likely had to use an undoubtedly complex curation process to generate interesting poetry, and this really underscores the importance of the human in the loop.

As Ge writes in his article, good design systems will incorporate human judgment in effective ways. Given my interest in building conscious and subconscious expectations, it is imperative that I make decisions based on my nuanced understanding of my audience. This is not a problem AI can solve; no neural network has sat through 18 years of English class and understood the pain, suffering, and reward therein. No machine learning model can simulate the bittersweet emotion of being an American citizen. In designing art, then, it really matters that “we know more than we can tell” (as Michael Polanyi said and as Ge once cited). My favorite quote from the Allison Parrish video is the definition of poetry as “language that calls attention to its own aesthetic properties.” In my opinion, all art should be aware of its own aesthetic properties. Not only will this allow for subversion of expectation, but this self-awareness also promises to induce a far more powerful emotional response and reveal much more about the human condition.