University of Applied Sciences and Arts Northwestern Switzerland
Basel Academy of Art and Design

BASEL DIALOGUES

Real Intelligence
(and Other Flows and Fictions)

Quinn Latimer, Claudia Perren (eds.)
Christoph Merian Verlag

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REAL INTELLIGENCE (AND OTHER FLOWS AND FICTIONS): AN INTRODUCTION

Quinn Latimer and Claudia Perren

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We talk—we always have. Voices fill our days and nights, schools and homes, studios and stages, interiors and exteriors, fields and forms, our built and unbuilt landscapes both. Spoken language—which preceded its earliest written forms by untold millennia—strobes and structures our intimate lives and artistic labors. What are we creating, then, with our insistent speech, our constant conversations, our theoretical discourse, our casual asides, our idle chatter? In the transmission of language—all its various tonalities and technologies—relation happens, thinking happens, culture happens, meaning happens, we know this. But what else?

That said, in the early months of 2024, as we write this, our languages—spoken, written, visual, theatrical, technological, aesthetic, affective, political all—flow with certain words. They seem to caption our days, strobe our screens, fill our eyes and ears and academies. *Reality, intelligence, truth, technology, trauma, violence, care, climate, capital, borders, human, nonhuman, love, solidarity, crisis.* So go our conversations and essays, emails and articles, symposia and messages, poems and films, a kind of code. And so our world at this markedly unstable moment in time, not yet decoded or clearly understood, comes into a kind of view. Are we creating our world with such turns of language, though, or simply describing it? Is there a difference? It is oft said that language shapes the world, transforming how we perceive and think about it—and thus act within it. It's a maxim both full and divested of meaning, as clichés often are. What, then, of the words we choose, the platitudes we repeat, the questions we ask, the syntax of our vernacular appeals? If our language reliably changes over time, how might the manner in which we speak to each other today, during this certain and very uncertain moment, at once construct and illuminate or occlude our era, its present conditions and speculative futures?

So many questions, each of which begs more both of the speaker and their receiver. For example: How do our

conversations—embodied as they are—limn our thinking processes, opening up our minds and bodies to deeper artistic, intellectual, and ethical understandings? How does spoken language create meaning for us and for the other? How does the language we use contest systems of power and received epistemologies or entrench them? How does our desire to be heard, for relation and communication, structure our speech itself? This is a central question, particularly within the art and design academy, where spoken discourse is historically a tool for the transfer of knowledge, at once pedagogical and transformative. To that end, what are we actually talking about when we speak of art and design today? Whom are we addressing, and from where?

Such queries—which hang in the air like open questions awaiting the pleasure of a response—are instrumental to this first volume of *Basel Dialogues*, the new critical book series from the Basel Academy of Art and Design FHNW. To be published every two years, and featuring topical, in-depth conversations held on campus by artists, academics, designers, filmmakers, architects, poets, thinkers, scientists, and hybrid practitioners from the academy's five institutes and their various guests, the book series is situated along the continuum of the speech act, understanding dialogue as a vehicle for social and artistic activity, one that drives both theoretical and ethical practices. If conversation is often characterized by its flow and intimacy, by its vernacular and rhetorical guises, it is also noted for its accessibility. That is, its openness to anyone who might be close enough to listen in. And it is this aspect of the dialogic form that we wish to emphasize, bringing the vital concerns of the academy out of their traditional language registers and academic formats and into what is sometimes called the real world of speech—at once theatrical and affective, intimate and performative, lucid and ludic.

In the dialogues that follow, the speakers voice and grapple with pressing concerns that characterize our

moment in time—issues of artistic, technological, and social import—with the understanding that the present always includes reinterpretations of both the past and anticipated futures. This first volume's title, *Real Intelligence (and Other Flows and Fictions)*, invokes the slippery subjects discussed, and their myriad entanglements. Chief among them are issues of intelligence, artificial and otherwise; the documentary gesture and the real; the poor copy of coloniality; fiction as a form of design; and forms of resistance to the aesthetic languages of hegemony and extractive industries and ideologies. Flows—of images, capital, peoples, algorithms, water, language, of thought itself—are evoked again and again, as are paradigms of binaries and bias. In every case, though, the ideas discussed—fervently, philosophically, and with real levity—transcend artistic discipline, suggesting that the most imperative concerns of the present are not tied to media or material, but inevitably cross fields, just as those conversing here mostly do.

The capacity for language, for self-reflection and abstraction, and the ability to acquire and apply knowledge and skills, has most often been the measure of intelligence in modern and contemporary societies. Yet measures of intelligence have also formed the very foundation of the enforced inequities and hierarchies of race, class, sex, gender, and geography that have long been "naturalized" into global labor systems of expropriation and exploitation. Consider the Oxford English Dictionary, in which the word intelligence is used in two sentences: first, as "an eminent man of great intelligence," and then as the "chief of military intelligence." The world such sentences build and delineate—militaristic, patriarchal, hierarchal—is made crystal clear. The hegemony of patriarchy, empire, class, and culture is the very bedrock of such definitions.

Intelligence, then—immaterial and material—what is it, really? We know that the infamous IQ tests of the early twentieth century were invented to assess, classify, and

control populations, from immigration quotas and eugenics to officer training. The abbreviation "IQ" emerged from the German *Intelligenzquotient*, psychologist William Stern's name for the scoring method for intelligence tests at the University of Breslau in the first decades of the 1900s. Yet the way we most often define intelligence today, in the first decades of the 2000s, is—in contrast to Stern's "human" intelligence—what is now broadly called "nonhuman" or artificial. AI, or Artificial Intelligence, with its language processing algorithms and computer programming manifestations, has engulfed our current vocabularies and language-based communication systems, and our ways for making meaning and thus making and remaking our world.

In thinking about the knowledge capacities of AI, we have begun to consider their attendant artistic capacities. How might AI be used as a collaborator in making art; how might it make art itself—should it have a self? In each instance, intelligence is understood as a binary, not just zeros and ones but as human or artificial. And yet the nonhuman or more-than-human does not remain in the realm of the computational machine; it is not only constituted by what we might call "artificial." The more-than-human world includes animals, land, water, mineral, spirits, vegetal and botanical life, memory, all living matter. It is quite real and what we broadly call "nature." Nature, though, only exists if you consider yourself outside of it, as the Indigenous Brazilian writer, thinker, and activist Aílton Krenak once noted astutely (we paraphrase).

Understanding nature as a kind of intelligence, then, we might recast Krenak's expert equation to say this: Intelligence is the matrix in which we move and think, create and destroy, liberate and oppress, commit to love or violence. You can no more divide intelligence between human and artificial—that is, people and machine—than you can separate the construction of nature from the creation of culture. Intelligence is not merely human or computer, not this voice or that voice, not human or non.

Intelligence, as understood and heard in this book, is a breadth of knowledges born of numerous breaths (and the many voices that emit them). It is land and water, animal and spirit, technology and epistemology, images moving and still, silence and speech, sound and language, narrative and nonnarrative logics, politics and aesthetics, design and resistance, dreaming and laboring. It is how we make art and life—not that we can separate these productions and reproductions, either.

So, to return to a few of our earlier queries: What do we really mean when we talk about art and design today, when we talk about intelligence and fiction, nature and culture, ecologies and ancestors, poetics and politics, the human and the non? Where are we when we ask these questions, and to whom do we address them? In *Basel Dialogues* we try out some answers, offering our readers and listeners a polyphonic assembly of the voices that constitute and shape the everyday life of our art and design campus. If we focus on the dialogic form, we do so in order to emphasize listening as well as speaking, dialogue as well as the spoken vernacular that we often use with one another, instead of simply falling into the institutional rhetoric that characterizes academies.

What follows, then, are glimpses of how people actually introduce themselves and speak from studios or workshops, within study programs or research projects, in campus cafés, at symposiums or in exhibitions. In their conversations, the most imperative questions of today's artistic and design practices unfold, along with the no less interesting small talk, experimental attempts, imagined futures, latent gossip, and critical dead ends. At the same time, the conversations reveal personal positions, political connections, economic fundamentals, artistic ambitions, and lived networks (which often remain unspoken but are no less the subject at hand).

In terms of educational policy, the Basel Academy of Art and Design (HGK Basel) is one of nine schools within the University of Applied Sciences and Arts Northwestern

Switzerland (FHNW). It is located in Basel on the border between the cantons of Baselland and Basel-Stadt. However, it is financially supported by two other cantons: Solothurn and Aargau. The HGK Basel campus is also located in the so-called Dreiländereck, an area surrounded by three countries—France, Germany, and Switzerland—and in the immediate vicinity of the House of Electronic Arts (HEK), the Kunsthaus Baselland, iart, Radio X, and the Library of the School of Design, Kabinett Herzog and de Meuron, Atelier Mondial, Rocket, Couture Ateliers, Studio Gleisbogen, and Offcut, as well as many more creative initiatives. The HGK Basel has diverse regional and international networks. Internally, it is organized into five institutes whose mission is to offer bachelor, master, and PhD degree programs as well as continuing education and research. These include Institute Art Gender Nature (IAGN), Institute Arts and Design Education (IADE), Institute Digital Communication Environments (IDCE), Institute Contemporary Design Practices (ICDP), and Institute Experimental Design and Media Cultures (IXDM). All five institutes have contributed to this book—it is their voices that bring it into being.

To that end, what does an art and design institution with five institutes and myriad personalities sound like? How does HGK Basel sound at its location and within its diversity of networks? We know that she is not a choir—nor does she speak with one voice—but what are the tenor and tones of the many voices with which she speaks? Through this new publication series we wish to find some answers, and to make our colleagues, peers, mentors, heroines, teachers, and students heard. Finally, we would like to sincerely thank each of our contributors—speakers, listeners, interlocutors all—from our various Institutes and their guests. We would also like to thank those who made this first volume of our new book series possible, in particular: Iris Becher, Oliver Bolanz, and Nataša Pavković from Christoph Merian Verlag, our wonderful publishers; Marietta Eugster, our fantastic

designer; and Simone Marie and Tabea Rothfuchs, our exceptional assistants on this project from HGK Basel. For your necessary voices, generous ears, and critical labors, thank you. With them, we wish you good reading and good listening.

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BUILDING THE REAL THROUGH A SPECTRUM OF IMAGES

A Conversation on Photography and Architecture
with Philip Ursprung and Kambiz Shafei

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KAMBIZ SHAFEI

I began my PhD after I bought a small book called *Copy, Archive, Signature: A Conversation on Photography*, in which Jacques Derrida speaks to the German theorists Hubertus von Amelunxen and Michael Wetzel. In the introduction of this book, Gerhard Richter meditates on the exchange between deconstruction and photography through the concept of translation. In *Copy, Archive, Signature,* Derrida talks about the dichotomy of original and copy, which, if you bring this back to architecture—one of our subjects today—I would say that it's somehow accepted that architecture is the real, is the true. While photography, throughout its history, when focused on architecture, is an imitation of it, right? We can use photography, of course; we can study buildings from different angles and images can show us things that are not graspable when we are at the site. Derrida himself refers to the thesis of translatability. He says that you can only understand something—and he of course takes philosophy as an example—when you translate it into something else. And this translation, coming from deconstruction, is unlimited: it just translates. The question for me would be, with the vice of being a photographer myself, what can photography really contribute to our understanding of architecture?

PHILIP URSPRUNG

I don't find this distinction between original and photographic representation exciting. My academic discipline, art history, depends on photography. Without photography art historians cannot work because they deal with comparisons of phenomena that are usually far away, disparate, or gone. I treat photography as an agent in a network of interrelations, without making a hierarchical distinction. In the first half of the twentieth century, the capacity of a building to be photogenic was crucial for its becoming part of the canon.

The Barcelona Pavilion by Mies van der Rohe was, so to say, built for the camera. I cannot clearly separate the architectural object from its representation. It's as if I would try to separate the building from discourse. Within this discourse, buildings can communicate over long periods of time. A building that came into being a thousand years ago and a sketch for a diploma today are disconnected. Yet in our imagination we can connect them. The Hagia Sophia can relate to, say, the project of today's students. This is why we need discourse and photographs. The products of artificial intelligence are not, in my view, categorically different from this. They are part of the spectrum of images and notions.

KS This brings us quite nicely to the relation of sight and architecture, which is something that has been talked about since probably the invention of linear perspective of representation, if we can call it that.

PU You mean *sight*, not site?

KS Yes, seeing that puts us in the center of knowing. I quote Peter Eisenman, who notes that the seeing human subject remains the primary discursive term of architecture. So, for instance, in Chinese or Persian miniatures, there is a completely different view, by not having this fixed perspective. However, today I think this singular human perspective has given its place to multiple perspectives and temporalities. And this, I think, definitely began with digital photography and then with social media. The linearity is somehow broken. Unlike those times when an architect could choose a specific photographer or rather the language of a photographer to represent his or her work, I think now—even if you go to examples like Luis Barragán, who even changed the color based on how a wall was pictured—I think today it doesn't really matter anymore who is photographing a building since we see so many pictures of the same site on social media, for example.

PU The quantity and the speed of communication of images are enormous. Nevertheless, architectural photography has not evolved much in the last one hundred years. Corrected

perspectives, neutral light, absence of humans. Most architects want their buildings photographed before people arrive, and most control the representation in journals and catalogues carefully. In my view, architectural photography as a discipline, as a genre, is kind of stuck in conventions. Why this is not more dynamic is, for me, an enigma. The quantity and speed of images produced by phones and shared on the internet is not reflected in architectural photography.

KS This multiplicity of perspectives results in the architect basically losing control of how a building is represented. Everybody can publish a version of the building in a photograph.

PU Unlike art, architecture is not protected, so I can take a camera and photograph any building and make a book. Architects cannot prevent that. Of course, there are drones, point clouds, scans, etc., and they bring in a lot of new perspectives and alternative imaging. But I doubt if they make us really see much more.

KS I think drone images also bring the building somewhat to the model scale again, to the 1 to 500 scale. And, of course, it's very interesting as a situation study.

PU The AI—what you're doing, what people like Philippe Dujardin are doing—shows that there's a huge space for experiments, which we have not even really started to explore. That's something that I find exciting to follow. It makes sense to bring in surrealist techniques of montage, to play around, to mix documentation and fiction, precisely because the so-called objective documentation is omnipresent. Of course, I am speaking from a privileged situation where buildings remain in place. As soon as they are threatened or destroyed—think of wars or natural disasters—everything changes. Then you really need detailed, objective, documentary imagery.

KS I actually will come back to that with the Twin Towers. But I think this control that was once possible over photography has now given way to the computer-generated renderings of architecture. When we look at these renderings, we see some image-making trends like very transparent, large

volumes, for instance. Or highly reflective glasses that, especially on the public level, are very much blended, or lack weathering or any traces of use, and so on. If I want to say it in a radical way, somehow it feels like the building becomes a rendering of its image, not the other way around, because in architecture competitions you also have to make a lot of decisions that are completely fictive. The time is extremely short, but these realistic renderings need answers—some demand details that are not decided yet—and I think this shifts whether the image is the rendering of the architecture, or the other way around.

PU For me it's often difficult or even impossible to distinguish if a photograph is of a finished building or of its rendering, especially if you see it on the screen. Is it already built or not? Probably because the technology, the programs for image making, are so similar. Renderings want to appeal to a majority. They are made for juries and clients who have difficulties reading plans and conceptual models. So they please a majority—a kind of vanilla-strawberry flavor for images. One gets used to it and adapts one's taste to the standardization that is provided. And that's a pity. It is a loss of autonomy. And the result is what we see in the majority of the buildings that come out of public competitions, a standardization of elements and details, a loss of diversity.

KS Would you say that image making has a role to play in this?

PU I wouldn't say it's the reason for this standardization. The reason is probably the economy, the pressure on time, the necessity to make profits. One cannot imagine an architect like Carlo Scarpa making a rendering because the building would change 15 times after the plans are approved and he would not even make a model. So, the drawing with its variation and its immediate connection to the carpenter and the mason is the perfect tool at the time. But we are in a different context now. Clients have less time and labor is more expensive. In an academic context, however, where one is not immediately subject to economic pressure, and one can contribute to future trends, we try to also encourage students

to experiment with representation. Anyway, a student can hardly afford these expensive renderings.

KS It also has to do with the fact that it can take ten years between the awarding of a contract to a competition winner with an image, and the actual construction. I think the realistic aspect of that image is a huge limitation for further explorations and other things that might change ten times. But these are not things that are necessarily answerable in the design process of the competition.

PU Let us take the example of the new Kunsthaus Zurich. David Chipperfield Architects won the competition partially due to a rendering. It depicts a wide sky, a large plaza. It looks like Berlin. The building itself seems small. One sees happy people walking around, while in reality this is a busy crossroads and the building is much too large for the lot. The image did a great job of transporting the aura of the metropolis.

KS I would like to turn to your essay on the pictures of Hans Danuser of Peter Zumthor's Saint Benedict Chapel. There you hint about what photographs can do as a series, as opposed to a single impression. And I quote you now when you say that they run together into a single image. This reminded me of a very beautiful quote from Maurice Merleau-Ponty in *Phenomenology of Perception*, where he writes:

> I see the next-door house from a certain angle, but it would be seen differently from the right bank of the Seine, or from the inside, or again from an aeroplane: the house itself is none of these appearances; it is… the perspectiveless position from which all can be derived… the house itself is not the house seen from nowhere, but the house seen from everywhere. The completed object is translucent, being shot through from all sides by an infinite number of present scrutinies which intersect in its depths leaving nothing hidden.[1]

This *infinite number of present scrutinies*, to go back to Derrida again, would be the multiple voices of the deconstruction

which identify the real. And going back again to all the algorithms that are used in social media, they're also designed to propose different sequences that keep us engaged for as long as possible.

PU It's interesting that you mentioned data and deconstruction. I didn't really think of that. But the building is from the late 1980s, so it makes sense to see it in connection with these issues. Danuser as a photographer is criticizing the conventional depiction of spectacular landscapes. He combines many small details. This was experimental in the late 1980s. It remained an experiment, because otherwise we would have more such images. However, in my view, it's a fascinating moment when architecture and photography meet at eye level. Immediately afterwards, architectural photography returns into the service of the architect. For a brief moment in the 1980s, the hierarchy was loosened and architecture and photography were partners. Buildings looked as if they were cameras. Photographs looked like built architectures. But this historic constellation soon ended.

As a historian I'm interested in such moments of constellation, when something happens and it becomes visible. Speaking of the flood of images, if we read critics from the 1880s, they would lament about the immense flood of advertisements in the city, the stress on the senses and the suffocating of public space by things. So our own present is not so unique after all. The impression that there are too many images came in 1880, in 1920, in the 1960s and today. We might have more images because of the internet, but our minds also are strong filters. But again, this flood of images has not really informed architectural photography.

KS I would go to one last topic, which actually became the title of my dissertation, "Material Presences." I started my writing and experiments with looking at architecture in the two domains of the temporal and the concrete, and at how photographs cannot contain both in one frame. So, to borrow from Hans Jonas, they would otherwise become a *clone* of reality. However, I think photography can in a way collect fragments, like memories. Going back to the Twin Towers,

photographs become a substitute for the building and especially for the events that happened. The material presence of the towers all of a sudden exists in the mass-produced images of them. I read your essay "On the Use and Abuse of Photography for Architecture," your hypothesis that perhaps photography as an industrial invention is meant in its mechanism to somewhat ignore the more ephemeral aspects of architecture. Especially when we look at early photography, like Daguerre's 1839 photograph, which actually happens to be the first photo of a human, staged or not staged.

I think there is an interesting link between photography and the established argument in Western philosophy for the truth of speech—due to the presence of the speaker—and Plato's idea of the unmediated truth in speech versus writing. He argues for the unmediated truth of speech because the speaker is present. This, in the case of architecture, would be the presence at the site of the building. Therefore, any other kind of translation, as models or writing or photographs, is a mediation of this presence.

But then, going back to Derrida, he says that speech itself is also mediated through language. This applies regardless of whether the speaker is present or not. Following this logic, also in the work that I have done, I try to look at materials of architecture as things that mediate its presence, to somehow mirror or to bring about material simulations that maybe can surpass the representational aspect of photography. Of course, this brings us closer to new materialism. It also goes back to what you said about how you think addressing the materiality of architecture directly can be a way to register these more ephemeral aspects of architecture.

PU What I find striking in the images you show me is the stack of images of the stone surface. Is it alabaster or marble?

KS It's onyx.

PU So you have these veins and texture of the stone, and of course the photography depicts it, but in the layer of images it also becomes an object in the strata. In the way they are superposed I find a very beautiful way of making evident the materiality of the photograph, by playing with

the multiplication. Because with a photograph, if it's only *one* print it's also a little sad. The single photograph might be expensive because it is rare, yet it is also a little sad. Photography, if it is reproduced, is immortal, so to speak. The unique print, say a daguerreotype, is very vulnerable and has an uncanny presence, or aura.

KS It has something zombie-like, also.

PU Yeah, absolutely. Half dead, half alive. So, for instance, it wouldn't make much sense to reproduce daguerreotypes today. So you acknowledge the nature of photography as something which is a surface that has a materiality and has a multiplicity and repetition. In that sense it also recalls Gordon Matta-Clark working with stacks of paper, cutting through the stack of paper, not drawing on it but cutting through it. And your dialogue with his work makes total sense. You're not echoing a procedure in, for instance, tearing apart your photograph, which you know one could imagine, or cutting into it. You approach it with means that were not available in 1974, but which are now standard. This is fruitful because it shows also that photography is historically situated and has a materiality, a life, a presence of its own.

The information stored in the photograph sometimes goes beyond the intention. That's what makes the visit of a family photo album often particularly exciting, because besides the image of the relatives you also have images of a bicycle somewhere or a toy somewhere, or the way people dress, and how they wear hats. This non-intentional information is fascinating. That is something which only photography can transport. If it's a painting, it has a totally different value. So, architecture can age. Its materiality can be transformed, there can be moss, pieces falling down. One can reconstruct or enlarge it. It has another relation to time than an artwork because an artwork is taken out of time. It would not make sense to add something to the Mona Lisa. Photography is kind of between the two. It's taken out of time, but it also reveals a temporality: The 1970s photographs, which are turning red because of the Kodak chemistry of the time, or the 1960s Ektachrome images, which are turning

blue. This is something that we don't have in art. Obviously, artificial intelligence assisted photographs also will age. But it's impossible to see this now.

KS In the sense of digital photography, we often hear that this is not material, but we can completely see a photograph that is an early digital photograph, as we are somehow getting used to more and more resolution. There is a materiality embedded there, in the sense of what was technically possible with the material that made a digital sensor.

PU There is a special beauty of translucent colors, also of the crisp presence of the images, on a phone screen. The AI-assisted imagery where the tone of skin is corrected has an impressive freshness. I am curious how they will look in some years.

KS This would be interesting to contrast with the zone system of Ansel Adams and Fred R. Archer, where an optimal exposure has the ten zones from pure white to pure black.

PU A good question. How does the black on the screen in 2023 differ from the black in a photograph by Adams? What about the nuances? The issue of the ruin might relate to this. At this year's Venice Biennale of Architecture we did the Swiss Pavilion. We took out a piece of the enclosing wall. During the process, when the wall was half cut, it looked like a ruin. We asked ourselves if one could leave it that way. Two years ago, probably yes. But now, with the images of the war in Ukraine, one cannot depict ruins in the context of an exhibition; this would look cynical.

KS That's what I'm trying to do also, with those two pictures of the Sinjar and the Göbekli Tepe. What happens when the photographs are seen together? One destroyed in war in an instant and the other a Neolithic archaeological site reclaimed by the elements over the course of thousands of years. It's super complex, to deal with the ruins, and their paradoxical past and present material presence. We can see this very clearly also in some of Anselm Kiefer's work…

PU And then Eyal Weizman, of course, with the whole forensic approach. You see the ruin but only in view of reconstructing the process and figuring out the truth. So, photography as

a bearer of truth—I still think that makes sense. There are photographs in passports. This might change one day. But for the moment this shows that there is a robust relationship between images and reality.

1— Maurice Merleau-Ponty, *Phenomenology of Perception* (Routledge, 2012), 95, 97.

The conversation was held in the context of a doctorate discussion at the Department of Architecture, ETH Zurich, June 17, 2023.

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33 SCRATCHING THE SURFACE OF ART HISTORY, OR A DECOLONIAL AESTHETICS OF POOR COPIES

Camila Lucero Allegri and Ines Kleesattel
in Conversation

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INES KLEESATTEL

For your master's thesis, you have developed an artistic mediation tool that aims at a transformative decolonial aesthetics,[1] drawing inspiration from E. H. Gombrich's *The Story of Art* (1950). At first glance, this choice may seem surprising—that you have selected Gombrich's work as the starting point for a transformative, institution-critical approach focused on diversification in art education. The Austrian-Hungarian art historian is among the most well-known figures in his field, and his book, first published in 1950, is considered a cornerstone of Eurocentric and patriarchal art history. How did you come to use Gombrich's book as the foundation for a decolonial endeavor?

CAMILA LUCERO ALLEGRI

Before our conversation, I checked how many times I mentioned this book in my work: only twice. Because, in fact, my intention was not to discuss this book extensively. I worked with it because during my art studies, in Chile, this book was part of our art history curriculum, making it somewhat symbolic of the power of Eurocentric historiography. However, in my studies, I didn't use a physical copy of this book like the one on the table here between us. Instead, I had a photocopied version—a very poor black-and-white copy, in which the images were sometimes barely visible. I still have those images in my mind when I hear the term *art history*. Interestingly, the title of the book is also relevant in this context: *The Story of Art*, in the singular. In Spanish, it's the same—singular. *La historia del arte*.

When I arrived in Europe in 2017, I was eager to see in person some of the paintings I had studied. However, I was very surprised. These original paintings were not at all like the ones I had in my mind. I was mostly disappointed. The originals were either too large or too colorful. That's when

I realized that there is something in between: On the one hand, there are these real paintings, which are seen in color in this book; on the other hand, there are the photocopied images from my studies. And there is something else that actually interests me: an in-between where the images emancipate themselves.

IK So, the practice of copying, which played a significant role in developing your mediation tool, was already connected to your source material…

CLA Yes, exactly. That's why I would say that Gombrich's book wasn't my source material, but rather the photocopied black-and-white images that stayed in my mind from my studies. Those were much more interesting to me.

IK You then further copied these copied images, varying the cropping, enlargements, and saturation. You produced a multitude of copied sheets; duplications and overlays emerged; details faded. Finally, you printed excerpts from this copied material onto transparent sheets, cut them into 5x5 cm squares, and sandwiched them between glass plates in slide frames. That's how the mediation tool was created. Before we delve into how you used it, I'd like to discuss your decision to work with the now somewhat antiquated medium of analog photocopying.

CLA I was interested in copying as a means of learning and reproducing. And the aesthetic quality of the photocopies became increasingly important in the process. Through analog technology, something different, unique, and constantly changing emerged. The photocopier and chance played an important role. I made hardly any deliberate manipulations; I simply copied. Essentially, I only selected. I copied in a relaxed and not very careful manner. Because the copies I had during my studies weren't meticulously made either.

IK Once, a colleague reprimanded me for distributing poorly calibrated, slanted, and distorted copied texts in a seminar. She believed that at an art university, I shouldn't be distributing such badly copied texts for reading.

CLA And I embrace precisely that! I am intrigued by this aesthetics—what emerges when reproduction is not well-executed, what arises from errors and poor quality. These poorly made copies are the medium that shaped my own art history studies, even though I'm not very old. This is also why I use slides in my mediation tool. Images in my studies were projected as slides. So I simply continued working with the aesthetics that I knew from my art history classes. By further copying the photocopies of images from Gombrich's book, I became increasingly aware that the copied images are not the same as the original images. The copied images became more important than the original ones. They became, in a way, the new source images.

IK In your thesis, you write that copying "distorts and undermines the relationship to the image reference." You refer to the image reference as the "image origin." In the case of the illustrations in Gombrich's book, these would be the original artworks, which are "materially found in the collections of the major European museums and associated with a specific historical perspective" in most cases.[2] Building on this, you make it very clear that the copying aesthetics in your work, which may appear anachronistic at a well-equipped Swiss university, go beyond the representation and mediation politics of Euro-American Copy Art from the 1970s and 80s—and are not "merely" retro-chic. We could reread that part here if you'd like.

CLA *(Reads from her thesis):* "In non-Western areas, the image origin is generally a copy, that is, a copy of the image origin…; we must not forget that copies in the South American context represent a colonial strategy…. The structure of cities, the imposition of a European language, the prevailing images and symbols, the aesthetic imposition, or the logic of thinking of the elite, reproduced through institutionalism, among others, are a copy…. The point is that these countless decontextualized copies can no longer be read in the 'pure' sense of their image origin context because it is impossible to isolate them from their (new) historical and material context."[3]

IK When you propose understanding copies as originals, this radical and democratizing dethroning of the so-called "high-cultural" original specifically relates to a postcolonial context of cultural education, where the aesthetics of the supposedly "poor" copy holds decolonizing potential.

CLA *(Reads again from her thesis):* "When I choose to perceive the copy in this context as the image origin, this image, now emancipated, has the potential to be considered in relation to its context and is no longer subordinated as a carrier of information, as any copy of an original would be. This material flaw is a rift in the production of meaning that I use to enable the emancipation of the image origin-copy: no longer as a reproduction mechanism but as a meaning-producing mechanism. The abstracted, stained, and distorted image no longer (directly) evokes the referent; it has lost the thread (or is in the process of losing it)."[4]

IK …*The blood-red thread of linear historiography that still binds even the poor, cheap copies to a highly praised original*… You negotiate the practice of copying in a strikingly ambivalent way. On one hand, you address the "colonizing nature of the canon," how its repeated Eurocentric reproduction standardizes and negates a multitude of heterogeneous positions. On the other hand, you develop copying as a resistant creative practice that undermines colonial-capitalist ownership logics.

In your thesis, you refer to piracy, open culture, and copy left, where the divisions between reproduction and production are disrupted—and, in turn, the dichotomy between production and reception crumbles. This is highly relevant for questions of mediation. Art education can no longer be a didactic transfer of knowledge about art (history); instead, it must become an aesthetically creative practice of transformation, which becomes tangible here. If colonial techniques of control are to be disrupted, neither passive reproduction nor genius-like strokes of brilliance are suitable. Rather, it requires a process of (un)learning and working with what already exists, which has a history but is not deterministic.

CLA As I mentioned, by working further with the images from my art history classes, the difference between original and copied images became so pronounced that the copied images emancipated themselves. The copies no longer match the original images. They have lost their connection to them. Because for me, these images tell something different from what Gombrich intended when he referred to the original images. The originals are not here and now; they were not present in my art history studies in Chile either. Instead, something else is present, different images, a different context, different associations. That's what interests me.

IK You have spoken several times about the emancipation of the images. Whose interest does this emancipation serve? It's not really about liberating somehow autonomous images, is it? If copying can also be understood as piracy, then it's more about appropriating these images from a non-legitimized or less-legitimized position, stealing them. The images become a mediation tool that allows for a multitude of associations, contexts, and stories to be activated. This involves relationships, social practices…

CLA From a postcolonial perspective, it's not that complicated at all. To learn "Art History" in Latin America, we need piracy. We usually don't have the financial means to own originals or even to travel and visit the originals—or there are people who can afford it, but they are very few. And in this context, the question arises: What does it mean that I learned art history in Chile during my studies? What did I actually learn from it? I don't want to liberate the images. They are already liberated because they have become something other than what Gombrich refers to. When I finally saw the originals in European museums, it was clear: These are not the images that were important in my art history studies! And so, I began to wonder what these images have to do with me, what I learned from these copied images. We have these images that are repeatedly reproduced from Gombrich and similar art histories, and we have to work with them. I turned the copied images into an archive: a box containing 135 slides that I produced.

IK When you speak of an archive, you do so against the backdrop of Jacques Derrida's considerations on the connection between history, knowledge production, and power, and how memory and forgetting depend on what is safeguarded and preserved, where and by whom.

CLA Exactly: I started from the premise that an archive can simultaneously be instituting and conservative, revolutionary and traditional. The archive defines the memory that can be told and ensures that the possibilities of other narratives remain hidden. Therefore, art education must also question in whose favor and how it wants to work, with which archives.[5] The archive I created as a mediation tool for my master's thesis is a pirate archive. It is sensitive because its material quality is so poor that it can easily be erased. The photocopies I made on transparent sheets are not very durable; when you touch them, the color comes off.

IK The material vulnerability and susceptibility to errors with which you work also resonate with how Derrida sees history and power connected in the archive through materiality: in documents that were created and preserved, in built and defended places of storage and transmission. Your slide archive appears additionally endangered or fragile, open and mutable, because once you created it, you did not securely store it away, but rather handed it over to other individuals as a mediation tool.

CLA Yes, working with my archive is also artistic research. Using the archive artistically gives the images in the archive additional narrative potential. Anna Maria Guasch writes that "art as an archive opens up new possibilities of selection and combination to create different narratives, a new corpus, and new meaning."[6] I conducted artistic research with my slide archive by using it as a mediation tool capable of generating narratives. For my master's thesis, I collaborated with other individuals, three Chilean women living in Switzerland. They each selected some images from the box of 135 slides and arranged them on a surface to tell a story. These were subjective stories. I had given them the entire box and asked them to pose the same question I had asked myself:

What do these images have to do with me—with you? This allowed them to relate their own experiences to the images, enrich them with their own associations, and arrive at their own stories. The individuals also altered the slides by using them. This involved touching them and intentionally manipulating the images with various tools, scratching into them. This, in turn, changes the meaning of the image. For example, here, one person scratched these lines into the image, resembling hair.

IK …which once again highlights the materiality of the image carrier in its vulnerability. The scratch is also a trace that bears witness to a physical encounter and the act of injury.

CLA Scratching removes material, but at the same time, it adds information to the material trace; additional content accumulates in the image. After people worked with the slides, the slides return to the archive with scratches and other traces. These changes are inscribed in the images. In the archive, they become source material for new stories. Someone then uses a slide into which a previous user scratched a texture. The next person reacts to it. This is also an understanding of images, not a mere reproduction but a continued working with them. That's what interests me about projecting the slides into public spaces repeatedly. It's a way to make them aesthetically tangible in the space, to bring them into the world.

It was important to me that the individuals I worked with could understand themselves as historical subjects. I'm not interested in a passive concept of learning as mere replication but in an active process that puts the subject in relation to the images, thereby changing the images and their stories. I love these images, and I'm interested in what other people, even those without an art background, have to say about them. For example, this image here: It shows an equestrian statue, and someone chose it and said the words *colonization* and *Baquedano*. Baquedano is a politically significant and controversial square in Santiago de Chile, named after General Manuel Baquedano, representing part of its colonial history. The public controversy

surrounding it is so significant that the Baquedano figure was removed from the square, and the pedestal currently remains empty.

IK Such associations are strongly context-dependent—they depend on the experiences and knowledge of the respective image viewers. For example, a person from southern Germany or Austria, who may have had little apparent interaction with colonial history, might mention associations like "military commander" or "conquest" but probably not "the colonization of the Americas." So, in this context, what about the decolonial potential of the emancipated images, as you call them? Doesn't it strongly depend on who views the image, interprets it, and contextualizes it in what way? Or, to put it differently, when it comes to transformative art education and aesthetic decolonization, does the mediation tool need you as a mediator to bring in a globally historically informed contextual knowledge?

Your master's thesis is not about opening up *any* associations. In it, these images copied from Gombrich are discussed in the context of specific, notably postcolonial associations. This brings both your historical contextualization and the keywords mentioned by your conversation partners into the work. The colonial-global historical context in which art history and its images are entangled is thus clearly present. However, your mediation tool—as an unofficial, fragile, and unstable archive—breaks out of a logic of representation and mediation that would rely on clearly defined and hierarchical references. In doing so, it enables aesthetic decolonization movements on sensory levels that are not opened up through a didactic instruction on contextual knowledge.

CLA Not all contexts and association possibilities are equally present everywhere. But when you work with participatory tools—and decolonial transformative education must use participatory means—then it becomes questionable how much control you can exert over what happens. The images are there as an opportunity, and each person can develop their own associations with them. I'm interested in what associations come up, the whole open process. As an art

educator, you have to decide whether you want to dictate to people what they should see or whether you want to offer them opportunities to discover something for themselves. In my experience, what people discover for themselves is often not far from what is important to me.

Of course, some of the stories and associations of the three individuals I worked with were similar to my own because colonial history in Latin America is very present for all people, regardless of their social class. They may use very different words, but everyone has something to say about it because everyone has had experiences with it, which also influences their aesthetic experiences. Now, not all associations that have arisen—and are arising—have an obviously decolonial discourse! In this sense, it is important to understand that I also perceive the subjective and personal associations that arose during the use of the archive as decolonizing, as they break with the logic of a single universal history and open the doors to other possible narratives that may have much more to do with the everyday and less with the so-called grand history. And that's what interests me: this aesthetic experience with an image that is expressed because people have these associations and not because I say you should go in this direction.

IK Yes, but I see a significant transcultural challenge here. A student from Brazil recently couldn't believe that there are people in Switzerland and Germany, even academics, who have never engaged with colonial history, that it's still possible to complete a humanities or art history degree in the German-speaking world without ever encountering it. That's why I think that education in European contexts must also incorporate global historical knowledge, that informed contextualization is sometimes urgently needed, and I can't leave everything to the subjective associations that come up. Otherwise, we risk overlooking the post- and neocolonial dimensions of image cultures and aesthetic practices. But, of course, this implies a precarious situation as it suggests a didactic understanding of education that structurally acts both hierarchically and canonically.

Would you say that as educators, we have to take this risk: that what we consider important from a postcolonial, that is, colonial-critical perspective may not be explicitly addressed, but that a less disempowering form of learning can be allowed to develop?

CLA You can't control everything anyway. The more important question for me is how we deal with the associations that come up. If there's an empty chalkboard and a marker in a classroom, there's always a chance that a child will draw a penis. That's not particularly interesting, but should I prohibit it from the outset? I might have to ask myself, now that an expression is there, what do I do with it? It's also okay to say, *I don't want that*, to comment on it, to react to it. What we do with it as art educators is actually important.

IK So, as educators, we should be less concerned with how to prevent certain expressions and interpretations from occurring from the start, and more concerned with how to work with what comes up in a way that increases complexity? It's not an either-or situation—it doesn't necessarily have to be a choice between adequate colonial history contextual knowledge and subjectively situated aesthetic experiences. These two aspects don't necessarily have to mutually exclude each other.

CLA Exactly, that was the fundamental question of my thesis: How can we continue working with these images? Because they are taught and learned, both here and in Latin America. Students learn aesthetic rules, judgments, and criteria from them. But all images have social, historical, and life-world contexts. One of the opportunities of art history is that it allows us to see contexts within images. And in artistic education, we can collaboratively rework them, including decolonial transformations.

1— The term *postcolonial* refers to a contemporary understanding that acknowledges the global impact of colonial history's pervasive violence and its various ongoing effects. *Decolonial* practices, on the other hand, aim to strengthen diversely situated and intertwined forms of knowledge and existence to counteract Eurocentric hierarchies, exclusions, and universalizations in a postcolonial present. In this context, *aesthetics* refers to *sensory perception*. While in everyday language, the term "aesthetic" often is used to describe beauty, embellishment, or attractiveness, we are referring to a broader concept of aesthetics that encompasses all dimensions of the sensory and meaningful—various forms of sense-making and sensory engagement, as well as our being in the world through sensory organs.

2— Camila Lucero Allegri, "The History of Art – A History of Art, Many Stories." Master's thesis for the Institute Arts and Design Education (IADE) of the Basel Academy of Art and Design FHNW, June 2022, 30.

3— Ibid.

4— Ibid. p. 32.

5— Ibid. p. 48.

6— Ibid. p. 49 with reference to Anna María Guasch, *Art and Archive 1920–2010, Genealogies, Typologies, and Discontinuities* (Madrid: Akal, 2011).

The conversation was held in Bern over tea and coffee for this publication. On the table lay a thick book, a pile of partly scratched slides, and a Master's thesis from the Institute Arts and Design Education (IADE), Basel Academy of Art and Design FHNW, July 2023.

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47 DEGREES OF FICTION, OR TRANSFORMING THE CONDITIONS OF REAL LIFE

Mariana Pestana in Conversation with Selena Savić, Gabriela Aquije, and Evelyne Roth

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SELENA SAVIĆ

We're joined here by Mariana Pestana, who is this semester's Make/Sense PhD program artistic researcher in residence. We were very lucky, Mariana, to be able to host you this semester. And next to me—Selena Savić, head of the PhD program—I'm joined by Evelyne Roth and Gabriela Aquije, two PhD candidates in the Make/Sense program who are doing extremely interesting work that is relevant to the topics we will discuss today.

MARIANA PESTANA

Thank you, Selena. Just to say it's my absolute pleasure to be part of the PhD program and to have met you all and to begin this dialogue.

GABRIELA AQUIJE

I am excited to have this conversation as well. I think it allows us to put the things that happened around the Critical Media Lab table into a kind of materiality, to capture that essence of the *boom, boom, boom* rhythm that we always have in our ideas.

EVELYNE ROTH

It was a great pleasure to work this semester with you, Mariana—to see into your own work, what your methods are, where you are coming from. Your work with The Decorators is very impressive. I like this kind of co-working within a city, or in a special place in the world—a trans-shaping from the present moment and also toward the impulse for a vision of the future.

SES Perhaps we might start with the questions raised in our invitation to you, Mariana. One relates to critical social practice, which is demonstrated by your work with The Decorators, and by this collective thinking and collective doing with which you are engaged. And questions about reimagining futures and the role of fiction in creating new spaces and fictions together.

MP My interest in fiction and in design as a practice that deals with the making of futures really came from practice. That is, from doing my work with The Decorators, the collective design studio that I run with Xavier Font, Carolina Caicedo, and Suzanne O'Connell. We started working together around 2011, or 2010, in the aftermath of the economic crisis. At the time we were living in London, and this was a moment when, on the one hand, a lot of the structures for working more conventionally were breaking up. There were no jobs, there were no conditions in which to operate as a designer or an architect. And on the other hand, there was a very interesting movement of practices, inspired to a great extent by EXIZT, the London-based French collective, but also turning up in repercussions in other places, for example with Santiago Cirugeda in Spain. These practices were making projects with their own hands, using very simple construction techniques; they built things quite fast, often temporary structures and buildings. And because they were made manually, they gathered real communities of people around them. The making of the project, the construction of a pavilion or a restaurant or whatever, involved a lot of people. And so that was a way of "doing community," or of creating a community of people around the project.

But in our case, we were not only architects. I'm an architect, Suzanne is a landscape architect, Xavi is an interior designer, Carolina is a psychologist. We had an interdisciplinary context. And what really motivated us more than the construction itself was very much the program. This is what in architecture we call to the use of something. We started creating these systems with alternative economies or testing out possible futures for certain sites we were working with.

Thinking, then, and asking ourselves: What could this square be used for? And we would rehearse by making a possibility real for a period of time. At that point I realized that what we were doing was somewhat fictional, because even if a building was very real in its material sense, it was going to disappear. It had an expiration date.

At the time we were using temporary licenses for three weeks in a row. It had to do with the kind of legal context in which you could do things like this. So the projects would last for a month, more or less, and then they would have to go. In a sense we were creating a space, a possibility, that was going to vanish. There was something in this that I found had a fictional aspect. At that point I was only suspecting this, though, and so I decided to study it. I did my PhD and began to study the possible worlds theories and fictional theories from the field of literature to better understand and develop a language to talk about degrees of fiction in architecture and design. I think that one of the characteristics of this way of practicing fiction—or doing *fiction practice*, as I have also called it—was the fact that it was a collective practice, unlike the authorial models of literature or even film. Also, the distance between, let's call it the real world and these fictional worlds, was not so evident. There was a real and very porous connection between these realms. The projects were made collectively, they were very messy, they were done in the frameworks of everyday life. And I became quite interested in this.

There's a concept by Umberto Eco called the *paratext*, which is what indicates to somebody that they're about to enter a fiction. This could be the cover of a novel or the introductory formula, "once upon a time." In these works that happen in the public realm, for example, that distinction is not so clear, the paratext is not so obvious, and so there is a very porous relation between the real and the fictional. I became interested in how the experience of leaving some of these projects can create a critical understanding of reality. I became interested in developing a critical social practice through fiction. A journey happens—and then you come

back and you're no longer the same after having experienced certain models of possibilities.

GA In architecture we're constantly thinking of design processes rooted in reality, normativity, and structures that could be questioned or not. But I think what your work brings forward is that it's still a form of practice, something along the lines of how John Thackara works together with other groups of scholars of transition design or building through speculation, a methodology rooted inside different practices. But I think it also creates a possibility to think within futures. Future visions that are always in collective contrast, because beyond the disciplinary boundary of architecture or design or art, we're always trying to subscribe our methods and our practices into how we advance these gaps between disciplines. And I feel that what your practice brings out within fiction, and in a very clear way, is a language with which to talk about these visions inside a discipline that may be a bit off-putting—in its very modernist idea—and to think about collective possibilities. My question would be: How does this space of language take shape? Because when we talk about language and literature, or, as you mentioned, Umberto Eco, who is such a great creator of scenarios, we need to really think about the scale of these languages. So how do you deal with these scales of the kitchen on one hand—to also reference your curatorial work in *Empathy Revisited*, which brought us into kitchens across the globe to really think about different food system structures—and about the scales of fiction and practice itself of design and art on the other?

MP Interesting. So, when I'm interested in futures, it's about reconfigurations of the present, right? I love, for example, how Aílton Krenak talks about the possibility of the future being composed of things that have been here for a really long time. Ancestral things. And so the future that I'm interested in reflecting on is closer to practices of reconfiguring the present, the real, the things that are here already, and less about inventing completely new things. And so I'm also more interested in practices of imagination that relate to

transforming the conditions of one's life, rather than fantasy, which is about escaping reality and everyday life. I think there's always been a preoccupation with the practices of everyday life. When I was studying, Michel de Certeau was a big reference. Yet I see these works as more tactical than strategic in the terms of de Certeau, and very much connected with everyday life.

The scales that you are talking about, Gabriela, relate to an effort to connect with everyday practices and with forms of architecture that sometimes are considered minor or less important. And the kitchen is one of those. Food has become a means through which I have worked many, many times, often as a Trojan horse, in the sense that food is an excuse to get people together, but it's also a gateway, like a portal, to talk about ideas that are much bigger than what's on the plate. So, for example, the project that you were talking about, the critical cooking show for the 5th Istanbul Design Biennial, was about, on the one hand, recognizing and gathering all of these incredibly important practices that were developing throughout the world and were using food as a gateway. But it was also, on the other hand, a means to talk about geopolitics, landscapes, ideas around property, and about foodscapes and the management of those territories. The scale was really diverging in a way, because we were going to the tiniest typology, with the kitchen often being this very intimate private space in a house. And this was where many of the films of this critical cooking show series were recorded because it was during the pandemic, so people were filming in their own kitchens, but really they were talking about quite large-scale territorial phenomena.

ER I'm coming from the field of fashion in our PhD group; it's interesting to hear about this kind of design fiction—or fictional design as you call it—and this moment that you described in London. It's also a point that we are researching now in the terms of sustainability: we are creating things that are not staying forever but producing certain kinds of problems. In fashion we are also creating these possibilities to express bodies in different moments of being. This is

maybe fictional or a vision, but it becomes true or real at the moment that we present it. So I am very interested in your projects as proposals for being, or as situations in which the community can exercise how things can also come around differently. But after you create this kind of project with your team, what actually stays in the environment or in the mindset of the people you are gathering? There is a gap between the moment and the vision, but we are all in this kind of transformation. Are there things kept in mind or that maybe go out slowly, beginning another rhythm?

MP Yes, of course. I mean, the field of design fiction is quite big at the moment. The term design fiction was coined by Bruce Sterling, but then critical design was introduced by Dunne & Raby. And they have educated a whole generation of artists and designers who have carried the legacy and transformed it. I had the privilege to be living in the same city as they were developing this course and to be quite close, and for a very short time I taught interactive design at the Royal College of Arts. And so I became quite familiar with that context.

But I was operating in the very different space of architecture. And even though I'm really fascinated by the field of design fiction, for me it is very difficult to relate to the distance that is often created between spectator and object, because I'm trained as an architect. You know, things in my mind transform and gain meaning and existence—and even transform—through use. And so my other legacy was that I also studied at the Bartlett School of Architecture, where ideas of use in architecture were very present. I studied with Jane Rendell, with other scholars who really have played a very important role in recognizing that architecture doesn't end when a project is ready. It continues its life and is made by all the people that use it. In that sense, what remains is your question.

What remains for me after this burst of existence of a project, right—and this was a conversation we've had for so many years—is the question about the legacy of a project like this. We have tried with The Decorators to understand

what legacy could be in very different terms. For example, by doing reports for city councils after the project was done, by having meetings with the city council and trying to effect change in regulations of a site after its use, and so on. This was becoming extremely serious, and we also were questioning the value of our work in terms of the extent to which the futures we were rehearsing were inevitably still existing within much larger frameworks for development in certain sites. We started questioning our role as mediators between city councils and communities.

More recently, and more honestly, I think that for me what remains has to do with what you mentioned briefly, with this joy, this idea of the joy of the encounter. When we were in Basel, we talked about this a little bit, this idea of xenophilia, this idea of the joy of encountering the other. This idea comes from the field of psychotherapy, from Professor António Coimbra de Matos, who has developed a practice of psychotherapy based on rehearsing a future relationship. It rejects some Freudian theories about the past having an incredibly important role in our present, and proposes instead that the process of psychotherapy should focus on future relationships, which is very revolutionary in that field. In particular he talks about this idea of the touching of two souls, that when people meet something quite extraordinary happens, or may happen, which is incredibly disruptive in cognitive, emotional terms, but is also incredibly joyful. And this joy as a driver of making encounters is something that really moves me.

So I believe that these encounters between people who are rehearsing a future that they have imagined, are making it real for a period of time, even though it's going to disappear. And a bond is created in that process. I think that's what probably remains, more than reports and statistics. For a long time I struggled to understand what could be measured in these projects, and when I could measure things they were so irrelevant. I think that what stays, perhaps, is something less measurable, but more qualitative, if you want to put it in those terms.

SES Speaking of what stays, I would like to ask how you take this further. I am wondering how you see this place now in your current work at the Instituto Superior Técnico, in Lisbon, where you work currently as assistant professor and are also running the Bauhaus of the Seas project. Resonating with Evelyne's question on what remains, what has remained within this project and how do you bring that into something new?

MP In the Bauhaus of the Seas project we are a team, and I'm coordinator of arts and culture within it. This is an EU project: Bauhaus of the Seas is one of the six lighthouse projects of the New European Bauhaus initiative. … I think we are always doing the same projects, right? I am always doing the same project. In this situation, though, we are dealing with eight different sites, all with a very special connection to an aquatic ecosystem, from the river in Lisbon to the lagoon in Venice to the delta in the Netherlands. We are working with partners and locations that together form a diversity of aquatic ecosystems. We want these projects to test or rehearse possible ways for cities to deal with these ecosystems differently. So, relationships that are less about protection via big infrastructures, for example, and more about regenerative dialogues and relations.

We are, of course, very inspired by the concept of tidalectics and other more relational models of engagement with the territory. But here again, we started by creating citizen groups, which we call Sea Forums. These are citizens groups that are going to form a community around each river or lagoon. We have begun to hold Sea Forums and they will evolve into a model of more-than-human governance, into inter-species assemblies. These are decision-making groups, in a way, where we can develop stewardship models in relation to the aquatic ecosystems with which we are working, but also where we want to rehearse models of integrating them into existing governance structures, as well as test out how they can become governance structures in their own right. And of course, here, what interests me is this idea of creating a group, of setting up a structure for an encounter between

people, understanding what that means in an ecosystemic logic. It cannot be just people in this case. We must include other entities, be it the river itself or other species that may live in the river, or even ecological indicators like acidification. This will enable us to understand what forms a group, what kind of encounters a project like this could generate. So this is where we're at, at the moment.

GA I was just reflecting on this idea of the encounter—because it's always something very temporal—and on all of the different moments of these conversations in which the reference of a spatial practice, of community, everything has a measurement that is counterwise, that takes these other forms of scale and measures. And I think that is something to really pay attention to, when we are working towards practice-based research in art and design. Because it is exactly those methods that break the form of what we understand as our method, to validate the knowledge that we're exploring into advancing other logics. There is a super important task within the logos of the whole PhD structure. For example, feminist scholars deeply exploring the power of tenderness, and evidence that the power of things is not supposed to have agency inside a power structure, because it's detached from them. I reflect a lot on critical ecofeminism because there are nuances inside the same space of research. And I really feel this more-than-human governance echoes beyond the European Bauhaus and that it's an example to follow in the naming of things. Because the logics that are being discussed and amplified also come from reflections from other territories. As we were talking about geopolitics: what better example of a bioregion than the sea itself? How do we connect through the water body of the sea? How do we really learn from this sea governance about our boundaries and borders within the sea ecologies and how can we collaborate with them? Maybe these questions are more of a reflection on methods that come from these experiences of everyday life as nature. But when used for governance, politics or future building, everyday experiences can shape what is measurable and how it is measured. They can give power back to the collective.

MP What you're saying resonates with me a lot, in particular with a preoccupation that motivates this work, which is the fact that the models we have, that we could use as guidelines for the future in taking care of ecosystems or living with ecosystems and highly sophisticated governance models, come from non-European spaces. One of the most famous is the Sarayaku people, who have represented the forest in court and won. But it's how these practices are embedded in very specific cultural contexts in very specific cosmologies that are incredibly different from the European ones in which this project is happening. Of course we can learn from these, but I believe we cannot just replicate or appropriate these models. The question is then how do you develop modes of caring, of, as you say, recognizing the value of what nurtures in a secular society? That is the tricky, urgent, exciting question.

ER As you were talking about your project in Europe in the kind of periphery of landscape and water systems, I was thinking, like Gabriela, that you actually bring all this same expertise to what you were doing with us as a PhD group in the classroom: this kind of complexity in one method. On our last afternoon together, as we were rethinking the theory of your projects, researching our connections to future thinking or to fiction thinking, I was very impressed with how you were able to make this huge bridge from a complex project to the space of a lecture and to hold us all in that moment. Did you feel that as well?

MP Thank you so much. That means a lot. I did think that you were a group of absolutely brilliant minds, and I tried to create a situation that was simple enough that it could expand with your own knowledge. For me it was also extremely rewarding because it was so interesting to see how you all responded from your own universes. From critical and analytical perspective to poetic frameworks. It was, for me, really rewarding to see all of your universes, in that simple exercise at the end as well, of bringing together our references.

SES Thank you. That's really a beautiful conclusion to this conversation, and our own encounter together.

The conversation was held within the Make/Sense PhD Program at the Institute Experimental Design and Media Cultures (IXDM), Basel Academy of Art and Design FHNW, June 6, 2023.

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"HOLDING RIVERS, BECOMING MOUNTAINS" AND DOCUMENTARY AS A SPECULATIVE GESTURE

Solveig Qu Suess and Johannes Bruder
in Conversation

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JOHANNES BRUDER

It's Saturday morning, 10 a.m. in Basel. The sun is out, and the city is gearing up for another burning hot day in June. You've just arrived back in Bangkok from a field trip to Laos, where you've been filming your documentary project, *Holding Rivers, Becoming Mountains*, right?

SOLVEIG ŞU SUESS

Yes, I'm currently working on this documentary film, which centers on key locations along and in distant connection to the Mekong River, Southeast Asia's main river. The river begins at China's Tibetan Plateau, and cuts through Laos and Myanmar, Thailand, and Cambodia before exiting through Vietnam. The flood pulse, which is what drives the river and is essential to its overall biodiversity, has shifted since the 1990s, when a lot of dam constructions were fulfilled, mostly south of China, and now mostly planned in Laos. And it's been affecting the water levels downstream. Because of the current energy crisis and climate-change pressures, various actors have been trying to figure out ways to manage the water supplies to the river. There's a lot mobilized under the green energy rhetoric through hydroelectricity. One large project is the Chinese-led Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank, which is vouching to support a regional homogenization of interconnected energy grids, all fed largely by these hydroelectric dams. And Laos also wants to be the battery of Southeast Asia, which then allows places like China as well as Singapore to run on "green energy," which is anything but green when it comes to hydroelectricity. I'm looking at the river as a way to understand how knowledge of its changes allows for different forms of organizing and relating to its waters, realizing various forms of territorial occupation, as well as modes of resisting such mammoth actors. I am thinking through image-making, and through time series, to understand the fluid dynamics of a river gone rogue.

JB An important part of your film practice, including your former project Geocinema, in collaboration with Asia Bazdyrieva, is to attend and film at labs, conferences, and policy meetings, where different stakeholders are coming together to negotiate geographical and geological knowledge. What is it that you're looking for at such events?

SQS In 2023, I was allowed to attend a huge governmental-level publicity event as a journalist, hosted by the Mekong River Commission. The MRC is not a governmental body, but it does try to act as a mediator across different governments to arrange for general agreements across the Mekong region. I had a press pass and was curated around this conference space as a journalist. It was really interesting to notice the personal dynamics of these spaces: who I was able to have conversations with, what the purpose of this event was. The purpose was not necessarily about the words exchanged; rather, it was very symbolic—it was where people connected socially and exchanged business cards. It was attended mostly by people from engineering companies from various countries that hope to have stakes in the transformation of the river and the region.

Afterward, I revisited one of the first documentaries I could find about the Mekong River, a film made by the Shell Film Unit. This was during the end of the 1950s, the very beginning of this MRC commission, which supported the bringing together of all of these foreign bodies, from 60 nations—including Australia, Britain, Canada, China, France, Germany, Holland, India, Iran, to the Israel, Japan, New Zealand, Pakistan, the Philippines, the US—that all contributed to the initial studies of the Mekong. And this was the investigation of the plateaus of the basin, probing the mainstream of tributaries, examining the Mekong's entire course from the air. For around five years they photographed, mapped, and measured the rainfall, snowmelt, volume bedload, and recorded the river's speeds of flow. They collected this data so as to create the foundations for various future developmental plans. And it was just interesting to see this documentary, where they were showing how rogue the river

was even back then: you could not predict its floods. And therefore efforts like those of the MRC, along with their whole collective mapping collaboration, were supposed to develop the Mekong region through improved use of its waters.

It was interesting to jump back and forth between this early documentary and the ongoing performance of the MRC Summit: nothing much has changed in terms of who was really in power and was able to perform these studies and continue the construction projects. A lot of the current, contested dam projects have been laid out since the 1960s, since this inaugural plan. When you try to start charting the histories of these performances, these reports, their past politics can be seen to weigh very heavy on the present.

JB That's super interesting. Kara Keeling has written, in *Queer Times, Black Futures*, about Shell being one of the first large corporations that actually went deep into scenario building—and about the emerging idea of acting on the present in terms of the future. It sounds like these modeling projects in Southeast Asia in the 1950s are a precursor to that development.

SQS Definitely. Another document I found, which felt like reading the future through the present, was located in the MRC archives. I found that they were collaborating with the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers, creating a project that, much like the Corps' early systematization efforts, basically used the computational model taken from the Columbia River as a base for coding a project for the entire Mekong. This Columbia River model had been created to function with the early digital computer or automatic calculator produced by IBM. And it was basically transposed, like models of river analysis, over to the Mekong River, where it was used for river forecasting with the aim to completely automate and regulate the river. And these models and computations were also developed around the same time as the modern nation states.

For me, at least, it was really no wonder that dams were so much part of sovereign power, especially as they create a monoculture of knowledge, times, and spaces. The

construction of these dams, and attendant ways of understanding the river, incited the homogenization of knowledge through very material practices like creating irrigation networks for plantations and expanding one way of doing things in a certain way. I mean, even within this project with the U.S. Army Corps, there were notes on side classes that included finance and statistics, alongside the quantification of how the river behaves.

JB That's really intriguing. What you said about the Columbia River being a model for the transformation of the Mekong made me think about current machine learning, which in a way is an extension of this process. Just two days ago I had a conversation with Chris Salter about Hito Steyerl's recent essay, in the *New Left Review*, about Mean Images and about their experiments with current ML 3D modeling, where you can basically project your body onto a model that is, of course, statistical—the mean body of a population. These 3D models are in some aspect completely out of shape, because, in a very weird sense, you see how the whole world is in your body, right? It's no longer only this very specific body that you see, but a body that has been abstracted to fit all kinds of calculative and financial schemes.

The modeling of rivers and early scenario building are of course not unrelated to these techniques, for they brought about the sort of probabilistic statistics that machine learning automates. And yes, I would say that in the case of models of the Mekong, it seems that they also in weird ways contain the Columbia River, right? That brings me to ask you about connections between different projects of yours, through different materializations of an idea of uninterrupted flows. In your earlier video lecture, *Overland, There's More Time to Dream* (2020), you rope us into a genuinely infrastructural, logistical space that crosses through many regions, transforming what is often considered organically grown geographies into a corridor for the flow of people, goods, and money. And now your current project, of course, centers on Southeast Asia's most significant lifeline, if you will, which is being transformed in the race to control its resources and valuation schemes.

SQS A large driving force behind my interest in Thailand was the ongoing transformation led by China, and the way the nation's engineering knowledge takes hold and transforms time and space beyond its borders. I've noticed so much about China from the vantage point of Northern Thailand and Laos, and through learning about what it means to be Chinese in that region. Even within the MRC Summit, there was so much political tension. For example, a representative from each country in Southeast Asia along the Mekong was vocalizing what they found most necessary to address within their country, and to everyone's surprise, a high-level representative of the Chinese government also was present for this discussion. The Vietnamese representative said, "People upstream definitely need to figure their shit out, you know—please stop withholding water and be more transparent with how you deal with the water, because downstream here we're really affected." And then the Chinese representative was pushing back with, "Why don't we focus more on our common enemy, which is climate change, and therefore use infrastructure to manage better downstream?"

So, there are a lot of undertones and baggage and different ideological vantages to how climate and human-induced change, and the related politics, are addressed. I think this demonstrates the Chinese science- and engineer-driven response to climate change while continuing to align that response with developmental and economic interests. Within the northern part of Thailand, environmentalists are saying that Laos is now an extension of China through being part of its supply chain. And you can start seeing how infrastructural spaces such as the border-crossing bridge, or various highways supporting long-haul trucks and cross-country railroads, are funded by China, with a concession of land and infrastructure ownership for 99 years. So, especially across Laos, but also all across Southeast Asia, one could see how the Chinese state expands, occupies, and extends its geographies of supply and distribution through infrastructure.

But there are also more lively and strange overlays here, in this Northern Thai and Laos border zone, and where the

Ruak and Mekong rivers meet. Hill tribes originally from Yunnan, from the south of China, migrated in waves to the mountains in Chiang Rai and Chiang Mai Provinces, particularly when there was mass starvation in China, when Mao Zedong came to power, or earlier, when Japan invaded. At that time, they were part of and supported by the KMT, the Kuomintang, which also fled to Taiwan. And Taiwan continued to support a lot of these communities abroad, especially as they were trying to contain communism in Laos and China. In exchange for fighting for the Thai military, which had US bases within the country, these communities were given land in the mountains. If we think about knowledge politics, how these communities migrated from one mountain scape to another, they were able to transpose their geographically specific knowledge. The mountains in Northern Thailand, their location in relation to the sun, as well as their climatic conditions, were very similar to the mountains in Yunnan. And so a lot of the plantations that they started in the mountains, cultivating temperate climate vegetables and fruits, coffee, decorative flowers, and tea, employed practices learned in their home in Yunnan. Their knowledge of diversely using the soil was to monoculture farming, and these crops had been very successful.

For me, this was an interesting example of a transposition that felt rich rather than large-scale and extractive. Finding ways to understand the much longer history of Chineseness or Chinese identity in the area felt important, especially when looking at the new waves of Chinese migration into Laos—for example, to the Golden Triangle, a special economic zone recently granted by the Lao government together with the Chinese gangster and owner of the Kings Romans Group, Zhao Wei. Having a grand casino placed in the center of the zone, and infamous for large-scale drug and sex trafficking, the established Chinese migrants now capitalize on the presence of new Chinese arrivals through tourism, using their shared language.

I spent a day with a Chinese-Thai noodle shop owner who had just returned to her home village, Chiang Khong,

after living in Taiwan for more than 25 years. Her family moved from Yunnan to Northern Thailand during the famine. She accompanied me around the Golden Triangle while we attempted to interview shop and restaurant owners. It was a bit of a failure since barely anyone wanted to speak on the record about their experiences, since their legitimate activities are entangled with many illicit ones. But I found that discussing our reflections as we moved through this strange zone was incredibly enlightening given our very differently mixed "Chinese" backgrounds. And then "China" and the "Chinese" starts to feel much more like a strange construct than a large hegemonic block. Many more nuances arise, which says less about any solid form of identity than it does about overlapping identities, meshed ideologies, agencies, purposes, and relationships formed over spaces and times.

JB I was wondering if you could tell us a bit more about the capacity of experimental documentary film to enable us to experience these ungraspable transformative processes. It's incredibly rich, but as you just said, you're looking at these processes through very specific lenses, as someone who has a history with that country. I think it's a strong statement, that you're taking the camera and pointing it at these processes, taking the role of the director and then helping us see through your eyes. Can you elaborate a bit about how experimental documentary film allows you to draw all these things together—to assemble these different processes into a whole that the viewers are then able to experience?

SQS Maybe just to go diagonally into this, the gender-racial dynamics of documentary filmmaking was something that I felt really acutely during the past month, because I had been in a very male-dominated environment. And I would notice how often I've had to rely on spaces where men are the gatekeepers of knowledge, or the spokespersons. And then of course this region also has a very long history of white men who come in and speak about Issues, History, and Politics. It feels like a misogynistic minefield, sometimes. As a documentary filmmaker who is oftentimes researching and filming on my own, I have had to learn to navigate with a

heightened sensibility when choosing whom I would get to know, who would be my teacher, how I would have to hold myself, and to whom I could relate. And in documentary you have to be so sensitive to your role within a space and to how you capture and narrate a story, how you plan out the shoots—the medium makes it necessary to mull over these choices and take them seriously.

The challenge is to figure out alternative ways to navigate. For me it meant navigating as a woman, as a mixed-race person, as someone who is shy, for example, in a way that feels critically engaged with the many forms of power dynamics at play—dynamics that are inherent to knowledge and its production—and of course while making many mistakes and learning along the way. To elaborate, there's so many power dynamics at play when you go to film in a new place. I went to the very north of Thailand in Chiang Rai province and into a village called Chiang Khong, which sits at the border of Laos and is quite close to Myanmar. And I started regularly hanging out at the Mekong School, an environmental conservation group that has been running for about twenty years. They organize themselves across a network of villages that share concerns about the river's increasingly erratic pulse, especially in the wake of more constructions of dams and other forms of top-down development. Basically, the school is largely an epistemic project. They're trying to meet with surrounding villages and exchange skills for creating data of the environment and water as well as creating knowledge archives of this ecology.

I just started to visit them regularly and I stayed around them for a month. I also wanted to build more trust and to support them, so I exchanged my film skills for the chance to follow them around. And when they needed me to film something, I filmed for them. At the same time, I was also filming for myself and had told them that I might use the footage for my own purposes, too. It made me think a lot about the different temporality of the village; we spent more unregimented time just hanging out. So much just happens without preplanning. It was also easy to film alongside the members of the school,

since we went into different situations and villages, where they have long-nurtured relationships with the local people.

What I like about experimental documentary film is that you are there as an embodied individual. You are contributing to what is happening in your scene, as a presence behind a camera and moving around, and also in how you interact with the people and places you are filming. After that month of basically being present and supporting, while learning and intermittently filming, I structured a series of film experiments with a small team, with videographer Derrick Wang and producer Aracha Cholitgul. We filmed different locations that are potent with scales and symbolic connotations to the topics and research that I have been conducting on the politics of hydroelectricity, dams, and development. Some scenes included people whom we had encountered and gotten to know, and as we filmed them within these scenes, they became important activators of certain histories or relationships within these locations. These more structured experiments had been made with the more direct intention to compose an experience for viewers, an experience composed of a very situated and embodied series of reflections, interpretations, experiences, and stakes. And, of course, produced with a lovely team with whom I've shared many more experiences than simply this collaboration, people who have been friends for many years in Thailand as well as in China.

JB Having watched your almost finished work *Little Grass*, and having seen how you work around or respond to nondisclosure agreements, and the ethical issues with which many informants are confronted, I'm interested in the methodological angle of your practice. Even if your informants wanted to talk about their experiences, they're often held back by the possible effects of testimony, right? *Little Grass* is a film about your mother, and thus also your childhood and personal history. Having watched the sneak preview, so to speak, I had the impression that you're sampling footage and narratives around the gap or a gravitating black hole that cannot be directly addressed or experienced. And I see loads of potential there to develop new ways of documenting the lives

of marginalized communities and how they resist the sort of logistical transformation and violent repression that are linked to these attempts at managing in the name of energy transitions, for instance, or energy crises. As someone who's been trained in ethnography, as a sociologist, I often feel like sociologists, ethnographers, and anthropologists have not yet found a good way to protect their informants—and not only protect them but also speak with them at eye level. And I had the feeling that your way of working around nondisclosure and these gravitating black holes—looking away from things in order to help people see—is really powerful.

SQS With my mother, it was very hard to resist not wanting to just go deeper into the things that she worked on, you know? But knowing that it would put her in danger, and that she had not consented to being investigated, I needed to take a different approach. So I took a long time to simply sit with her and also sit with all the materials that surrounded that moment in time, and to actually listen to what that black hole of a space had to say about the things that she had worked on. So yeah, looking away so as to really look into, ended up being a process packed with information. Information that spoke about a lot more than what the actual object could ever give. This lessens the power held by the military-state project, and I feel it gives much more agency and acknowledgement to experiences such as my mother's.

JB We put ourselves into positions or we take on roles in this game of fieldwork, of ethnography, in order to see things in a specific way. And I was wondering if this could be broken up, this general idea of being the interviewee, being the ethnographer, or being an informant, which is very much akin to investigative journalism. But the power that we have as ethnographers, filmmakers, fieldworkers, is actually to just temporarily occupy these roles in a tactical way, if you will. We don't have to do investigative journalism, but we can leverage its tools, aesthetics, approaches. This is something I've recently started to think about more, particularly in the context of the project that I've started with Asia Bazdyrieva, Anastasia Kubrak, and Michaela Büsse, and of course the

project that the two of us are preparing with documentary filmmaker Tekla Aslanishvili.

What connects these projects is that we can use film to bring things to life that are not vivid, not alive—such as complex texts like international agreements and treaties, white papers and policy. These texts are so generic but so loaded with meaning; it's hard to find your way in to understand the semantics and the grammar. For example, hardly anybody looks at patents. It's what we typically don't see or are unable to process. And then when we go into the field, visit conferences, interview stakeholders, film at sites of anticipatory operations for the transition to "clean" and "green" energy, for instance, which is our project, that's what puts us in a position to draw things together and to imagine and to speculate, too. So, I was thinking about experimental documentary film as also having that speculative component, which is something we've discussed before. It's essayistic, if you will, and it's also another thing that investigative journalists cannot do. They cannot really speculate. I mean, they have to speculate in a specific sense, in order to branch out, but I think the power that we have as researchers is also to mirror and experimentally re-present with the speculative narratives developed, contained in, and imagined through these texts.

SQS I think that the speculative capacities of documentary can be great. And maybe it also relates to the possibilities one is trying to express within the world. Perhaps this is more deconstructive than speculative, but similar to the international agreements and treaties you mention, the sensing and imaging histories of the Mekong region that mobilize many speculative logics feed the ongoing sustainable energy and development regime. Modern nation-states have historically been image-making machines. The sensing, mapping, and systematization projects that supported efforts to turn the battlefield of Southeast Asia into a marketplace during the Cold War, drew not only representations of sedimentation, tributaries, and landscapes, but also underscored how the river continues to be contested between upstream and downstream nation-states.

The act of creating an aesthetic vocabulary to address this, bringing out the technological, ideological, and cosmological vantage point from which the figuration of earth is articulated, is quite a political act within the documentary form. Another documentary approach I've been trying to think through is that of conducting an aesthetic investigation into the separation of both space and time, along with the separation of environments and bodies designed as part of new forms of capitalism. Referring to what Ariella Aïsha Azoulay calls "regime-made disasters," regimes are structured not only to allow for the generation and reproduction of disaster, but also for key actors to abstain institutionally and legally from accountability. This becomes very visible along the Mekong as the river cuts through various nation-states, legal and social systems, where the damming of the river upstream in China is limited in their accountability and responsibilities regarding how it flows downstream to the riparian countries to the south. So, investigating these forms of disjuncture, or what Rob Nixon calls the "dislocation of causal relations across space," and rendering these connections through video, through different scenes placed together, histories that are examined, vantage points and characters, can yield more possibilities of understanding, and perhaps open up the plurality of being in the world.

Another form of documentary as speculative gesture shows how the river's new informational and sensorial experiences are recorded, visualized, and understood in service of civil movements. As of January 2020, the nearest Chinese dam upstream of the Thai border has caused huge fluctuations in river levels, affecting people's livelihoods downstream by disrupting the river's natural cycle. This dam, along with many others on the river, is exacerbating the effects of climate change and impacting the ecosystem, disturbing the migratory patterns of fish as well as riverbank plants and local agriculture downstream. Phi Nop, a member of the Mekong School, traveled upstream to photograph the alterations of the water's behavior, and

started an image-series later published and distributed widely to notify villages in the Chiang Rai district. Since then, the villages have started compiling video and image documentation of water as volume—dams under construction, untimely floods, dried-out riverbeds—and how the pulse is felt downstream from large-scale development upstream. They have also continued training the youth within villages through citizen-science workshops: they collect water-quality data to monitor the health of the river. Here I see the school's documentary practice as a speculative one, aimed towards educating affected communities about the ongoing impacts and changes, as well as documenting potential data-sets in anticipation of pushing back against destructive top-down future planning and developmental projects. This speculation from the school grapples with living in the ruins of climate and human-induced change, while at the same time actively seeking innovative ways to translate older forms of Indigenous knowledge into knowledge that is still compatible and self-determinate within the ongoing paradigm of development.

JB Epistemic politics and infrastructures are also imaginaries, right? If you think also about coal mines in Germany, there are many regions in Germany that are just perceived as sources of coal, transforming the entire population there into coalmine workers. This is interesting regarding epistemic politics, in the sense that the local populations have now been able to claim this identity, forcing the German state to sink enormous amounts of money into these regions so as to phase out coal at some point. Money that will then go into transforming the region, to compensate for the loss of that economy, which is completely irrelevant on a larger level, on the level of the national economy. Film is an attractive medium for making such speculative transformations tangible. Thinking, then, about documentary filmmaking, I find it interesting that we do something that is a counter-speculation or a different imaginary that you can put into people's heads. It's like a coproduction with affected communities.

SQS Yeah, true. In the Mekong region, there are so many different imaginations of alternatives to whatever is happening with the Chinese state and other top-down influences, and that was really inspiring and good to experience. The top-down infrastructural projects, like the Chinese Belt and Road initiative, felt so hegemonic and heavy, as if there was no alternative to this single idea. And this is what is being perpetuated at events such as the MRC Summit: that there is no alternative to this engineering future. But there are so many different approaches that are important to our practice.

The conversation was held on a call between Bangkok and Basel, at the Critical Media Lab, Institute Experimental Design and Media Cultures (IXDM), Basel Academy of Art and Design FHNW, June 3, 2023.

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SOUND ACCUMULATES AND DOESN'T DIE

Basel Abbas and Ruanne Abou-Rahme
in Conversation with Quinn Latimer and Chus Martínez

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QUINN LATIMER

I thought we might dive right in, actually, to *And Yet My Mask Is Powerful*, your very beautiful video work from 2016. As we were screening it here, just now, for our audience, I suddenly caught your quite explicit reference in the work's script to the Adrienne Rich poem, "Diving Into the Wreck." In an earlier conversation we had, Ruanne and Basel, you told me a bit of the story of the Neolithic mask in the video, and the ruins of the Palestinian village in which you shot it. I was hoping we might start by talking about this moving-image work, then: the mask, the village, the images, the Rich poem that enter them, and the centrality of language and sound here and to your larger practice, of course, as always.

BASEL ABBAS

The Adrienne Rich poem, "Diving Into the Wreck," forms the whole text of our video work, actually—all the text in this video comes from that poem. The reason it happened this way is this: It was 2012, around the time of the Arab revolutions. We were thinking about this impulsive revolution as something that returns and doesn't die. And then, around 2014 and 2015, we were essentially arriving to a very strong counter revolution, and part of what we saw was a sort of refusal to say that it's a defeat—these revolutions of the Arab Spring—but more an impulse that keeps coming back, keeps returning. At the same time there was so much violence going on and we really didn't know how to speak about this violence. I'm talking about entire communities being erased in Iraq and in Syria from groups like Isis. We didn't know how to even engage with that material or deal with it. And, you know, a large part of that violence was being enacted on our very imaginary.

Essentially, that poem, when we came across it, seemed amazing in its ability to talk about something that is a site

of a wreck but also something that you're able to see as a site of potential. I think that was like a door opening for us to enter and be able to think about these issues and face that violence. Many other things come into the video work, of course, but the text, the poem, was the driving force showing us that we could actually say something about this: we can talk about this wreck, you can deal with this violence in this way. The poem became like an anchor for us to think through the violence and site of the wreck.

You know, in Palestine, there are more than 500 ruined villages. This is today Israel, and what forms the catastrophe and wreck of our community, the very fabric of our community. So we started thinking about these villages and taking trips to these villages, with this poem being the anchor of it all.

RUANNE ABOU-RAHME

To speak about the masks: a big part of Rich's poem is her talking about scuba diving. She speaks about nearly losing consciousness, but it's her mask that gives her power. And that, for us, was really the starting point to thinking about how to breathe in places where you should not. How to be in places where you are actually under threat of being erased. And how not to just survive those places, but to get to something that is more than just survival. So we began thinking about the mask in a kind of contemporary sense. We started doing research in Palestine, and we came across this set of Neolithic masks that are 9,000 years old, and have mostly been looted from the West Bank and are in now in private collections. The Israel Museum in Jerusalem exhibited them in 2014, and it became significant for us for us to think about these masks as living materials. So we hacked the exhibition in order to recreate these masks with 3-D printers, in order to explore their extreme violence.

QL In the Adrienne Rich poem, she narrates going down into the ocean. She is describing, as she descends, the changes of the color of the water: the blue, the green, the black. Which is also mirroring her almost losing consciousness as she descends—blacking out, as we say in English. In your video, it was so interesting how you turned the fields of grass and wildflowers that you shot into the kind of sea of her poem. And how you transformed or transfigured the actual ruins of the house and the Palestinian village into the shipwreck at the center of Rich's poem itself, and that the colors that she's describing in her text are also the colors of this non-water world that your images are capturing. The poem is sort of scripting this very transformation, and it turns your entire video and your scenes of the ruined village and pastoral landscape into a kind of underwater world, into those lost cities that are often mythic, like Atlantis, that people are constantly writing about and reaching for, cities lost underneath the water. Cities lost to history and reclaimed in story. This aspect of projection and doubling in your work here was quite moving.

CHUS MARTÍNEZ

Perhaps we can come back to the past two days of this symposium and its themes. Two ideas and forms have been very recurrent: one is the song and the other is the breath. You are now talking about breath, but your second video that we watched just now has a song, and I would like to hear about your song.

RAR The second video we watched just now, *May amnesia never kiss us on the mouth: Only sounds that tremble through us* (2020–22), is part of a long-term project for which, over the past ten years, we have been collecting online videos of everyday people singing and dancing in mostly Palestine, Syria, and Iraq. When we first started collecting this material, we weren't sure why we were so drawn to it. We would share

it with one another until, over time, it became very clear to us that essentially, through song and through dance, people were witnessing and providing testimony to what was happening to them in their communities.

These videos were and are a way to hold onto the self and the community and the story, and to also create an incredible sort of call-and-response form that would happen virtually. So you would have a song that would be sung in Syria, and then it would travel to Iraq, and then it would travel to Palestine, and in its travels and its echoes it would necessarily remain the same thing. We became really invested in looking at these performative online practices and thinking about song and voice as a form of ritual, and how it can become a critical vessel and container in times when it feels like the ground beneath us is disappearing.

And so what we did for this is project was to first create an online platform that has a lot of material, and then we also worked on this installation that you saw, which was recently shown at the Museum of Modern Art in New York. We worked with performers to essentially respond to specific moments from this archive to create new performances. And we did this in order to think about what it means to take very small moments and gestures from a song, either rhythmically or textually, or a gesture or specific movement from a dance, and just allow them to remain in broken parts, fragments. It's about what happens when you can linger on something that is broken, within the form of song or dance—and what that can generate.

QL Earlier today, we had the writer and thinker Françoise Vergès speaking with us about song and lullaby forms, and their relationship to systemic orders of displacement and dispossession. One of the things she said that was quite interesting in this context was that these songs, these lullabies, are embodied songs that are also like call-and-response forms, and that their melodies get genetically imprinted in your young mind as listener. She was speaking to the fact that these songs are not just talking about transmitting memory, they're not just containers for memory, but

that they also contain and transmit futures. And not the futureless futures of neoliberal capital and racial capitalism but futures that are actually full of possibility, if not equity.

I thought it was interesting that over the past two days of this symposium we've been talking so much about oral transmission and song and storytelling as a form of resistance—and so many of these discussions have been framed as being about memory. But Francois emphasized the fact that such songs contain all temporalities. Both the past and the future are constantly being enacted in song that we hear or remember and then repeat. And I was thinking about this as we were watching your video, and I wondered how you consider this idea of futurity within your project. How do you think about the forms of communal transmission and memory and futurity that are embedded in so many parts of your practice?

RAR Yes, for us it's absolutely the case about these songs are a form of resistance that's generative. That they do not just remain in this realm of remembering. We really try to think about these moments as a formal kind of rupture of the spectacle of power, right? And what is captured by all these mechanisms of power. A lot of the material that we collect is also made outside the context of protests, so we don't think only about how song is used in protests against the state, but how it creates a kind of break or opening, even if that break or opening is only temporary.

It's always about how we can get out of being captured and occupied, right? What's amazing about this material is that it absolutely exists. And that all these different temporalities are folded within it. There's an incredible multiplicity of voice, even if there's only a single person that is singing a song, because that form has been transmitted across spaces in time. And there is this collective resonance or echo even in a single voice, single song, which is really something we have been considering over a long period. I would say, finally, that we are quite invested in thinking about how we can create some sort of break in regimes of order that are basically suffocating.

BA I would just add that these are old practices as well. These are oral histories that are being passed down with the improvisation of storytelling or poetry, and then their combination with song and dance, which, in our part of the world, carry the weight of the word and the weight of testimony. Within this performative set of practices, I would say, is manifested an online aspect of documentation. And in all our works, we are always interested in people's practices and how people resist, and we look at that and project it and push it to an even further possibility. This online material of song and movement is something we take, essentially, and try to propel and amplify.

QL What about the grammar of your video-making or filmmaking? On one hand it seems you take from the genre of music videos and from wider currents in the moving images of pop culture, and on the other hand your work also has a very wide-lensed cinematic feel and set of filmic techniques; it offers this more grand and cinematic grammar of cinematography. How do you think about framing these songs and sounds with your visuals, and how are the people in your works embodying and enacting these songs and stories?

RAR Our thinking about the politics of sound has very much informed our image-making in terms of the movement of the image. We spend a lot of time thinking about how sound accumulates and doesn't die. And how there are many places where a kind of dissonant rhythm is a very powerful form of resistance to an actually sonic occupation. There's a lot of sonic occupation in Palestine—it's not just happening in the visual fields. And we've been interested for a long time in the sonic practices that circumvent that occupation. That has influenced how we think about the moving image. At the same time, we are influenced by the more cinematic form, that which has a kind of narrative thread.

Our practice developed in this way, but I think that a lot of what we're interested in has a kind of multiplicity. The way our work is usually shown is it's a moving-image installation that is projected onto panels that are also then fragmenting the image further. We're thinking about how to formally

translate the kind of multiplicities that we are trying to get to, and about how all these different times and spaces fold into each other and don't create a homogenous whole—we don't want to create a homogenous whole. Our practices are concerned with how we can come together collectively without creating oppressive structures that try to smooth over contradictions and tensions. Instead, we want to allow these tensions to sit together, and not try to create a smooth surface. This is another way we think about the multiplicity of the image: the images speak to each other and complicate each other's meaning.

BA We also tend to start our video work with text or sound before we film. When we go into filming, we already have quite a bit of sound and text. The sound is then informing a lot of things like color and movement and rhythm and obviously the spaces we choose while scouting locations. We treat the sound as its own conceptual thing. We use the sound by itself. We think about it *by itself*, which I think for a lot of video and filmmaking is unusual, because it's usually the opposite process. The sound often gets done after and to the image. So I think our filmmaking process, by beginning with sound, produces a very different outcome.

QL One last question from me would be about the figure and the landscape in your work. How does landscape—from the pastoral meadows with bees and insects in your *Mask* video, to the cliffs and seascapes and mountains in *Amnesia*—function as a kind of character in your moving-image installations and singular works?

RAR One of the things that struck us when we went to the sites of the destroyed villages for *And Yet My Mask Is Powerful*, was the way in which the site was so alive through the vegetation that was there. The vegetation in these sites was constituting a living archive that was also resistant to all kinds of colonial erasure. Because what happened was that a lot of these sites were planted with pine trees to obscure the remains. We would actually find the destroyed villages through following a trail of wild fennel, and that would lead us to the remains, or we would find cactus or we would

see a pomegranate tree. So the work came out of the very intimate organic relationship between us and the vegetation and it was incredibly powerful. I don't think I've experienced anything that powerful, and it really created a shift in our thinking in how we consider these nonhuman forces and beings that are there. That was a very formative work for us in terms of what our relationship is to land. How do we think about it? How is the land a kind of character and witness that has its own agency?

With this latest video installation and online archive with the songs, we also had a lot of powerful experiences that were very important to us with the performers outside, in spaces that are under threat of being taken over by settlers right now. There was one refrain that two of the performers would perform every time: they would sing a melody with the same verb that would help them to start singing. That was for us one of the unexpected things that also makes you consider how much of the sound and these sonic instances and gestures are contained within the land. That they're not just being remembered and carried by us, that they're being carried by these landscapes as well. We've had many different experiences like that when making work that we've not really scripted, which has made us think about the sonic inscriptions in the land itself. It's something that is a very shifting, living thing for us, being with the land in our work.

The conversation was held via Zoom between New York and Basel during "Songs to Sound Worlds, Stories to Rewrite Them: On Gender, Storytelling, and Myth," a symposium organized by the Institute Art Gender Nature (IAGN), Basel Academy of Art and Design FHNW, November 11, 2022.

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IMAGE PORTFOLIO

"FOR A BRIEF MOMENT IN THE 1980S, HIERARCHY WAS LOOSENED AND ARCHITECTURE AND PHOTOGRAPHY WERE PARTNERS. BUILDINGS LOOKED AS IF THEY WERE CAMERAS. PHOTOGRAPHS LOOKED LIKE BUILT ARCHITECTURES.

BUT THIS HISTORIC CONSTELLATION SOON ENDED. AS A HISTORIAN I'M INTERESTED IN SUCH MOMENTS OF CONSTELLATION, WHEN SOMETHING HAPPENS AND IT BECOMES VISIBLE."

— Philip Ursprung

"IF I WANT TO SAY IT IN A RADICAL WAY, SOMEHOW IT FEELS LIKE THE BUILDING BECOMES A RENDERING OF ITS IMAGE, NOT THE OTHER WAY AROUND, BECAUSE IN ARCHITECTURE COMPETITIONS YOU ALSO HAVE TO MAKE A LOT OF DECISIONS THAT ARE COMPLETELY FICTIVE."

— Kambiz Shafei

"I started from the premise that an archive can simultaneously be instituting and conservative, revolutionary and traditional… The archive I created as a mediation tool for my master's thesis is a pirate archive. It is sensitive because its material quality is so poor that it can easily be erased."

— Camila Lucero Allegri

“You have spoken several times about the emancipation of the images. Whose interest does this emancipation serve? It's not really about liberating somehow autonomous images, is it? If copying can also be understood as piracy, then it’s more about appropriating these images from a non-legitimized or less-legitimized position, stealing them.”

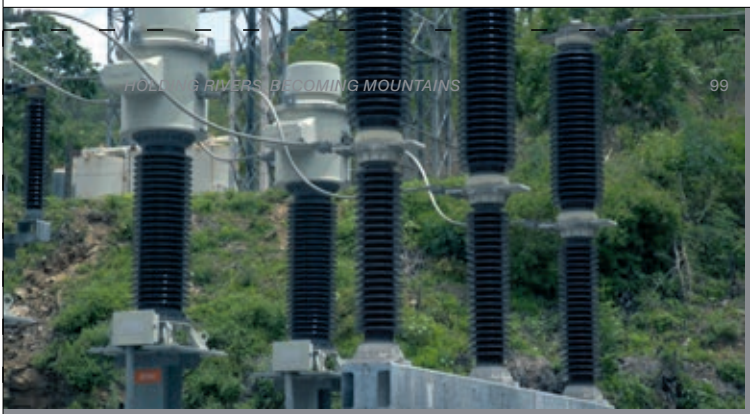
— Ines Kleesattel

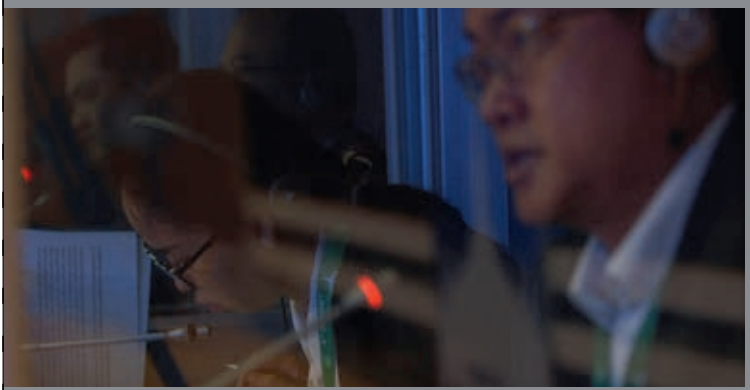
"ONE OF THE CHARACTERISTICS OF THIS WAY OF PRACTICING FICTION IN ARCHITECTURE AND DESIGN—OR DOING FICTION PRACTICE, AS I HAVE ALSO CALLED IT—WAS THE FACT THAT IT WAS A COLLECTIVE PRACTICE, UNLIKE THE AUTHORIAL MODELS OF LITERATURE OR EVEN FILM. ALSO, THE DISTANCE BETWEEN, LET'S CALL IT THE REAL WORLD AND THESE FICTIONAL WORLDS, WAS NOT SO EVIDENT. THERE WAS A REAL AND VERY POROUS CONNECTION BETWEEN THESE REALMS."

— Mariana Pestana

"Modern nation-states have historically been image-making machines … The act of creating an aesthetic vocabulary to address this, bringing out the technological, ideological, and cosmological vantage point from which the figuration of earth is articulated, is quite a political act within the documentary form."

— Solveig Qu Suess





"We can use film to bring things to life that are not vivid, not alive, such as complex texts like international agreements and treaties, white papers and policy. These texts are so generic but loaded with meaning."

— Johannes Bruder

"WHEN WE WENT TO THE SITES OF THE DESTROYED VILLAGES FOR 'AND YET MY MASK IS POWERFUL,' THE SITE WAS SO ALIVE THROUGH THE VEGETATION THAT WAS THERE. THE VEGETATION IN THESE SITES WAS CONSTITUTING A LIVING ARCHIVE THAT WAS ALSO RESISTANT TO ALL KINDS OF COLONIAL ERASURE. BECAUSE WHAT HAPPENED WAS THAT A LOT OF THESE SITES WERE PLANTED WITH PINE TREES TO OBSCURE THE REMAINS. WE WOULD ACTUALLY FIND THE DESTROYED VILLAGES THROUGH FOLLOWING A TRAIL OF WILD FENNEL, AND THAT WOULD LEAD US TO THE REMAINS, OR WE WOULD FIND CACTUS OR WE WOULD SEE A POMEGRANATE TREE."

— Ruanne Abou-Rahme

"IN THE ADRIENNE RICH POEM THAT YOUR VIDEO USES, YOU TRANSFIGURE THE RUINS OF THE HOUSE AND THE VILLAGE INTO THE SHIPWRECK AT THE CENTER OF RICH'S POEM ITSELF. THE POEM IS SCRIPTING THIS TRANSFORMATION, AND IT TURNS YOUR SCENES OF THE RUINED VILLAGE AND PASTORAL LANDSCAPE INTO A KIND OF UNDERWATER WORLD, INTO THOSE LOST MYTHIC CITIES, LIKE ATLANTIS, THAT PEOPLE ARE CONSTANTLY WRITING ABOUT AND REACHING FOR. CITIES LOST TO HISTORY AND RECLAIMED IN STORY."

— Quinn Latimer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“In order to make meaning from a meteorite, we must not think simply of its mysterious origins or its temperamental points of rest, but of what the geographer Nigel Clark might call its *stratobiography,* ‘a story of traversals, of the deep, sedimented time of the earth itself. And for this the opposite question might be not only where but when do I belong?’”

— Himali Singh Soin

"A GAME OFTEN HAS ITS OWN AESTHETICS AND VALUE: IN ITS PROGRESSION, ITS PROCESS, AND IN THE DIVERSITY THAT CAN BE SHOWN WITHIN IT, IN THE TENSION THAT CAN ARISE FROM IT… WHEN A CERTAIN MOVE SHOWS ITSELF AS SO INCREDIBLY BEAUTIFUL, BUT IT'S NOT PRIMARILY HUMAN-MADE AT THAT MOMENT, THEN THE QUESTION ARISES: WHAT BEAUTY LIES IN ARTIFICIAL INTELLIGENCE? HOW DOES ARTIFICIAL INTELLIGENCE ARRIVE AT BEAUTY?"

— Nicolaj van der Meulen

“WHAT FASCINATES ME IS THE UNDERLYING ASSUMPTION THAT HUMAN THINKING CAN BE FORMALIZED. IT ESTABLISHES A CONNECTION WITH HOW HUMANS FUNCTION, EVEN JUST IN THE NAME ‘ARTIFICIAL INTELLIGENCE.’

AN ATTEMPT IS MADE TO CREATE SOMETHING THAT EXHIBITS HUMAN BEHAVIOR, SOMETHING THAT CAN PERFORM CERTAIN TASKS. THERES THIS COMPARISON: HOW CLOSE DOES IT COME TO HUMANS, AND HOW MUCH DO WE IDENTIFY WITH IT?”

— Anna Flurina Kälin

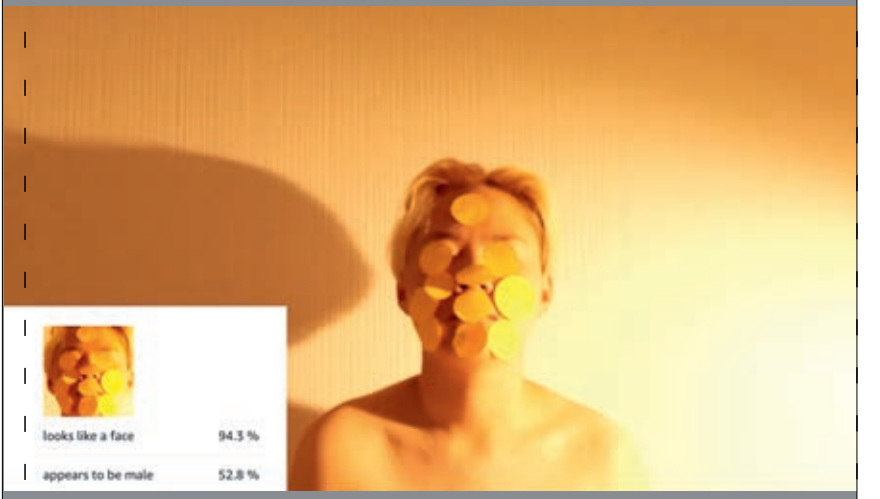
"I'm interested in the ways that we're shaped by algorithms and the technology around us, and how this shapes how we interact with each other. And I'm very critical of the technological and social systems that we're building around ourselves. I'm looking at what the rules are and what happens when we introduce glitches."

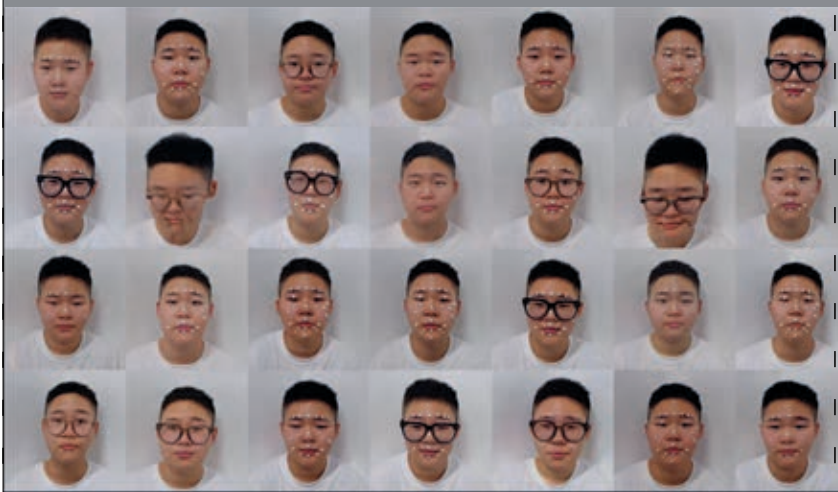
— Lauren Lee McCarthy

"URSULA K. LE GUIN ONCE WROTE: 'I DON'T KNOW HOW TO BUILD AND POWER A REFRIGERATOR, OR PROGRAM A COMPUTER, BUT I DON'T KNOW HOW TO MAKE A FISHHOOK OR A PAIR OF SHOES, EITHER. I COULD LEARN. WE ALL CAN LEARN. THAT'S THE NEAT THING ABOUT TECHNOLOGIES. THEY'RE WHAT WE CAN LEARN TO DO.' THINKING ABOUT HER QUOTE TODAY—ABOUT TECHNOLOGY AS A FORM OF LEARNING—CAN LEAD US TO THE NEW FORMS OF ARTIFICIAL INTELLIGENCE THAT ARE GAINING TRACTION IN DESIGN AND THE SOCIAL SCIENCES."

— Aylin Yildirim Tschoepe

"I HAVE WORKED FOR A LONG TIME WITH FACIAL RECOGNITION, A TECHNOLOGY WE OFTEN USE TO UNLOCK OUR PHONES AND FOR VARIOUS SECURITY USES. THIS TECHNOLOGY ITSELF IS GENDER BINARY.





I STARTED DOING PERFORMANCES WITH DIFFERENT MATERIALS AFFIXED TO MY FACE, … TO KEEP AMAZON RECOGNITION FROM RECOGNIZING MY FACE AS A BINARY GENDER LABEL; AS A QUEER BODY I CAN EASILY DISTURB THE FACIAL RECOGNITION."

— Qingyi Ren

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97 The Decorators for Walk and Talk,
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98, 99 Solveig Qu Suess, *Holding Rivers, Becoming Mountains*, 2024
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104, 105 Himali Singh Soin,
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106 Himali Singh Soin,
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109 Anna Flurina Kälin, *Finding Clarity in the Midst of a Blurred Reality*, 2023
Photography, drawing, artificial intelligence
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110 Anna Flurina Kälin, *Dance in the Silent Depths*, 2023
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111 Anna Flurina Kälin, *Misty Layer*, 2023
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112 Lauren Lee McCarthy, *SOMEONE*, 2020
A human Alexa system was installed in four homes around the United States for a two-month period, while visitors controlled the homes from a gallery in New York City
Photo: Japan Media Arts Festival

113 Pati Grabowicz, 2023
A student using Ted Davis's XYscope open-source library in the "Processing Oscilloscopes" CoCreate course to interface with obsolete media, Basel Academy of Art and Design FHNW
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114, 115 Maya Man, *Can I Go Where You Go?*, 2021
Maya's deep explorations in art, dance, and code come together here. As a video clip of Maya dancing plays, her code analyzes the video frames one by one to generate a silhouette. This contour becomes an ever-changing shape the viewer can control by drawing with it, or simply watch as the software performs itself.
Made with p5.js
Courtesy of the author

117 Hanna Sipos and Midjourney, 2023
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118 Qingyi Ren, *See My Gender*, 2021
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120 Qingyi Ren, *The Digital Others,* 2023
Screenshot of digital media artwork
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123 HEALING FROM METEORITES

Himali Singh Soin and Alexis Rider in Conversation
with Elise Lammer

ELISE LAMMER

Hi, everyone, thank you for joining our Art Taaalkssss. We are with Himali Singh Soin tonight, accompanied by Alexis Rider.

HIMALI SINGH SOIN

Hello!

EL *Art Taaalkssss,* as many of you know, is the weekly Public Lecture and Conversation Series from the Institute Art Gender Nature in Basel. And tonight we have Himali joining us. She's an artist born in Delhi, now based in London and India. Thank you again for accepting the invitation, Himali.

To begin: You work across text, performance, and moving image, mostly. You often work with metaphors taken from the natural environment in order to construct speculative cosmologies, and, as a result, nonlinear entanglements between human and nonhuman life are revealed. Your practical methodology includes knowledge from scientific institutions, Indigenous epistemologies, and cosmologies. And you will give us a great example of your methodology tonight. I'm really happy with the project you propose, especially for us, for our ears only. You have prepared a performative reading of the essay, "Healing from Meteorites," by you and Alexis Rider, which was originally published in the second issue of *ART WORK Magazine* in the summer of 2021. In this quantic essay, you dive into the deep time of the universe and look at the specific histories of meteorites with a speculation about their function. You are asking what if meteorites could speak.

I would also like to take this opportunity to thank Alexis Rider, who is kindly joining us tonight from the US. In order to answer questions at the end of the reading, if we have any. So thank you, Alexis. So the floor is yours, Himali, and thank you again for joining us for this reading and conversation.

HSS Thanks for having me, Elise, and my old friend, Sophie, and everyone at the Art Institute. I know this is an intense time to feel or read, or imbibe anything, so my only wish for this talk is that perhaps in thinking about meteorites, and thinking about them in the context of healing, it might also offer us all a kind of crack into the world, or a moment to be together. And also perhaps a way to think about radical pacifism through these little tiny interventions in our cosmos. *(Sound performance of meteors and reading begins.)*

Healing from Meteorites. Some years ago we encountered a strange fata morgana in Antarctica. Instead of mountains doubling or ships hovering above the horizon, we saw men bent over in scrutiny, squinting at irregular, dark objects—like asterisks on a page—in pristine white space. The meteorite hunters stood suspended on the horizon, magnetized between the indestructible iron on the ground and the looming mirages. Antarctica, cold and clear, has long been seen as an ideal spot to gaze up at the skies, but the skies had finally fallen and were entombed in the ice beneath our feet. These primordial morsels mark a moment in the ice, producing, through their interjection, new and strange stratigraphies. If the word "mirage" comes from wonder, it left us marvelling at the layers of deep time embedded in a single geographical point: a helix of histories gathered in a blip. We imagined a meteor blazing across the clear skies, the stars dimming in its radiance. A title in embossed gold in an as-yet-unlocked library of supernal secrets.

In 1954 a shimmering object spiralled from the dark depths of the galaxy, past the perihelion, into Earth's atmosphere. Ann Hodges lay down on the couch in her living room in Oak Grove, Alabama. The radio glitched in and out between static and the whirr of people discussing the film *Godzilla*, which had recently premiered in Tokyo. A pot of water simmered on the stove. She wondered why people were fascinated by a movie about monsters; they seemed irrelevant, so far away from the present. Maybe they were marvelling at the technology, but watching her garden grow was technology enough for her. She dozed off. The meteor

burned the skies, plunged through the roof, and bounced off the radio, which, after a few seconds of incoherence, went silent. Now a meteorite, it scorched the carpet and bruised her awake. The water boiled over. She looked around, confused, at the innocuous fist-sized rock, at the tattered ceiling. She wondered if she was still dreaming, but remembered that in her dreams she rarely felt physical pain, one of the reasons she spent her afternoon napping on the couch, to travel distances she might otherwise never have had a chance to.

Interstellar beings must necessarily pass through a series of thresholds—affects—before they land on earth. What do they accumulate on the way and how do they change in substance or form through this succession of strata? And what do they bring with them? Splashing into warm lakes billions of years ago, it is possible that meteorites leached something vital into the water, starting a chaotic chain reaction that led to life itself. The assemblage is between two layers, two strata, say Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari in *A Thousand Plateaus*. While theirs is not a dialectical argument, we suggest an even messier, osmotic mesh in which hierarchies completely dissolve and new possibilities emerge. The meteorite is advait, nonduality and oneness and emptiness at once. It is emergent.

In order to make meaning from a meteorite, we must not think simply of its mysterious origins or its temperamental points of rest, but of what the geographer Nigel Clark might call its *stratobiography,* "a story of traversals, of the deep, sedimented time of the earth itself. And for this the opposite question might be not only where but when do I belong?" Like other rare and seemingly unexplainable natural phenomena, such as earthquakes and monstrous births, reports of meteorite falls were for a long time understood as signs of divine portents or dismissed as fanciful fabrications. As late as 1790, a meteorite shower that fell on Barbotan, France—witnessed and attested to by 300 citizens—was dismissed in the *Journal des sciences utiles* as "an apparently false fact, a physically impossible phenomenon." Little scientific interest was directed at these seemingly fabricated stones:

how can these げてもの, monstrously odd rocks, as described by the Japanese Antarctic Research Expedition of 1969, fall from the air, anyway?

In 1992 a meteorite fell from the air on Mukisa's head in M'bala, Uganda, but its velocity had been slowed down by a canopy of banana leaves. It came whirling through the atmosphere, tails of white smoke forming figures of mythical creatures in its wake, announcing its arrival on the ground with a sonic boom. Newfangled insects with horns buzzed, and algae bloomed the size of the sun, and sponges and corals and mollusks and bryozoans and crinoids and barnacles and platypuses and turtles with eyes like the Sphinx and hands like Saturn shuddered awake. Mukisa, named for good fortune, was unscathed by the stone, but felt a shiver in the backs of his knees. People in the city considered him a healer and he was said to have a magnetic field that allowed him to predict the future, or at least to alert the world to the exact moment when cosmic energies might align for a revolution.

The mirages, the radio, the ice, and the banana leaves are operating both on a spatial horizontal plane and on a temporal, vertical one. They are membranes that curb the meteorite's momentum. But, as each plane is breached, the meteorite is learning, absorbing through contact a sliver of knowledge, a continually shifting and perpetual relationship with Earth. Gathering in its wake a chrysalis of emergencies: A Momentary Taste of Being. What can being in time with the meteorite teach us, we began to wonder, before it is consecrated by the cold whiteness of ice?

Until the mid-seventeenth century, abrupt change was more legible than an endless, unwavering temporal plane. Naturalists suggested spontaneous generation or sudden, sharp showers of stones during full moons to explain "tongue stones": dark, triangular, serrated rocks that we now call fossilized shark teeth. Tiny, toothy catastrophes. In Antarctica, meteorites appear like tongue stones, arriving as strangely shaped black instances in sheets of blue ice. Multiply the scale, zoom outward into the cosmos, and their arrival is as

spontaneous, as temporally surprising, as a rock suddenly forming teeth. The meteorite hunters know this, as they scour the sheet in an attempt to travel through time. Frozen meteorites cradled in ancient ice, the tongue stones of the cosmos, as if they had something important to say in a language of their own.

Catastrophe is etymologically derived from the Greek word for an overturning of fortune, much like the process of discovering a meteorite. A futile and arduous search undertaken with the ever-dimming hope that one of the many rocks overturned might have its origins on another planet or the Moon, often even just the detritus of a planet that didn't form: a piece of primordial matter that didn't congeal into a world. The word *catastrophe* originated simultaneously with the word *disaster*, rooted in the word *astro*, implying a sense of misfortune under the influence of the stars.

Rooted in the word *astro*, but by the nineteenth century lost in geology. As T. C. Chamberlain shrugged in 1890, "The geological significance of meteorites is that they have no geological significance." As mines were dug downward to extract matter, the holes themselves began to tell a tale—encoded in the strata was a natural history of how Earth had changed, geologically and biologically, through time. How these changes happened was a point of contention: did the palimpsest beneath our feet suggest sudden, absolute, catastrophic change—an erasure and renewal of life on Earth? Or did it suggest a slow, gradual evolution of change—docile and constant? The latter won out and geology embraced the world of uniformitarianism: change that was knowable and gradual. No miracles, no sudden shocks, free of a deus ex machina. Tides were pulled by the moon and seasons dictated by the sun, but the rocky planet was, at its core, a closed and self-producing system, free from the influence of the cosmos. But just because we couldn't see them didn't mean that meteorites weren't arriving, intercepting earth with the time and matter of the cosmos.

It was a chauvinistic assumption that rational science could will away catastrophe. In divine justice, Lunacy herself

intervened to prove these scientists wrong. Through the twentieth century, the Moon was recognized as a mirror of Earth's past: covered in a million craters, speckled with cosmic interjection. How could two celestial bodies, joined as they are at the hip, have such different stories? How could the Moon be so dented and Earth unscathed? Of course, hidden beneath its lively skin, Earth bears the truth: craters so vast they make you weak at the knees, the residue of impacts so forceful they shifted the geology of the entire planet. Dinosaurs departed and something unearthly arrived.

Meteorites may change everything, imprinting on Earth a shock of heat and light: a tremulous beginning of nearly everything. The full stops of such large encounters are now known well: the Cretaceous collision threw mud into the air and coated the world in iridium—a clear mark in the strata of beginning-end. But can catastrophe be understood as something less absolute, less sudden—the constant insistence of the presence of otherness? These monsters arrive endlessly on Earth to remind us, as planetary geologist Ursula Marvin suggests, that "Earth hurtles around the Sun along a path that is gritty with interplanetary dust and rubble," colliding violently and sensuously with morsels of cosmic ephemera.

Could the catastrophic event of a meteorite falling on Earth be a geological glitch, an interstellar error? Legacy Russell calls the glitch a "catalyst" in her manifesto, *Glitch Feminism*, which "prompts us to choose-our-own-adventure… and turns the gloomy implication of glitch on its ear by acknowledging that an error in a social system that has already been disturbed by economic, racial, social, sexual, and cultural stratification and the imperialist wrecking-ball of globalization—processes that continue to enact violence on all bodies—may not, in fact, be an error at all, but rather a much-needed erratum." As objects that simulate emergence, insist on the relationality of strata, remind us that nature iterates multiplicity, can the meteorite provide us with a different way of knowing, a disturbance that strengthens our resistance? Russell insists that "this glitch is a correction to the 'machine' and, in turn, a positive departure." With

the accumulated knowledge of its ancestral journey, could meteorites be an invitation to begin again?

In much of Himalayan Buddhist, Bon, and animistic thinking, a catastrophe, such as a violent storm or an earthquake, spells a good omen. The Earth shook when the Buddha attained enlightenment. Earthquakes can also herald the reincarnation of an important teacher or yogin. Comets and shooting stars, like rainbows, can also be interpreted as a message from the heavens communicating the (re)birth of such persons, or their location, when search parties are looking for them. Can a simple anodyne rock fallen from a distant past overturn our fortunes—for the better? Help us heal from the bruises of the present?

Our ancestors' traumas reside in the deep jungles and vast deserts of our bodies. Cosmic grief is not dissimilar: the catastrophe of meteorites can perhaps inform our understanding of how to cradle those histories into radical new futures. A meteorite is the only natural source of metallic iron in Earth's crust. The Tibetan Thogcha, meaning "thunder iron," is an amulet made from meteorites, believed to contain medicinal powers, having been blessed by the celestial realm before arriving on Earth. Thogchas are considered to be self-formed, self-arising objects, manufactured by naturalistic designs. The iron is placed in milk to energize it with the spirit of the object, after which Mukisa drinks the liquid to incorporate its magical properties before conducting rituals.

A meteor has been traveling through space since before human thought. It has been orbiting the Sun for 4.5 billion years waiting for a diversion from its path. Eons have passed as life struggled on Earth, staggering finally from swamp and sea. A tempting target, this planet, thrumming with breath and legs and squabbles: a chance, perhaps. The meteorite plops onto the Antarctic ice, a perfect pocket of negative entropy, a spot of unconformity, an unexplainable catastrophe, a repeating and rejuvenating little death. A means of worlding that meteorites insistently offer.

Alice Sheldon has three typewriters in her attic, one for each author inside her. Tiptree—her most popular and

masculine persona—sits down to write, perhaps a flirtatious letter to Ursula K. Le Guin, perhaps a sketch of a story about an alien-ball-of-energy, perhaps a cascading diary entry, perhaps a suicide pact. She gazes into the rocks that she has pocketed over the years and that litter her desk like snow globes or crystal balls. She has never encountered a meteorite, though she dreams with them often, searching in the stars for a means of escape. The thought of a universe expanding, stretching out, diluting until it wafts away is not just cruel to her, it is affronting. What a homogenized, boring way to end: so absolute, so dripping in masculine singularity. The only way to escape this entropy, she types, is by living it.

A lake was formed as a result of several collisions. Tso, meaning lake. So, a continuation, an obliteration, an adjustment of the present. A shrug, what. A crater of water magnetized by matter fallen from space. A comet spun out of orbit and swung toward the Sun, releasing vapour, burning before it barely lived, completing its life's work in the span of one full day on Earth. It singed into the lake and a lotus bloomed. Then the rock sank and interstellar dust mixed with seabed sediment and it lost itself. Anyone who drinks from the lake remembers every detail of their lives—every small town they stopped at, every guest who visited their homes—perfectly. Memory from a mysterious source. If you stare at the lake long enough, you will see reflections, refractions, projections, possessions, other dimensions. Mollusk waves forming and dying like stars, and, suddenly, you're gliding through a night sky, a bolt of metal in outer space if outer space had the consistency of wax. Impressions, impacts, lost remains. Tantalizing tantras, every few years, the lake climaxes into being, recovering the lost rock from the lips of the lotus with perfect recall, recalled by uniting with your body, bodies forgetting that they exist, existing by remembering as a ritual, the ritual of spotting the shore, now a surface of glistening potential, recurring planes of possibility. Tso long.

Can something as simple as a rock falling from space onto Earth form a crater of possibility? If its presence suggests

a not-knowing knowing that releases us from a measurable, hegemonic, patriarchal system, then its preservation allows for other bodies, Black bodies, Brown bodies, bodies in transition to live with their own mouldable rights and rhymes and reasons. The meteorite desires refusal. It wants to deny your claims to its body: deny Ann Hodges, who lays claim to it through the blue of her bruise; deny the institution's vitrines; deny even those for whom it is sacred and who revere it. It wants to say no to being named, becoming a taxonomy, something secondary to science.

When a mass spectrometer is trained on a meteorite, colors refract and allude to the cosmic abundances of elements in the universe. Meteorites articulate difference, insisting on a capricious potential for change materialized in matter. The meteorite says, we will always all have different lithologies. It bounces off the radio, insisting on illegibility such that it cannot be decoded. It knows that real freedom lies in the ability to interpret. We are many and not monolithic. We are marked and metered. It says, we are made of kryptonite and sugar both. We are not normative and our trajectory is guided by the weather alone. The meteorite asks us to look up so we can sift through strata gingerly, in a generative and judicious way. Look up, where we will see it streaking across the skies, not downward with the territorial impulses of early explorers, and dream. Look at us with geopoetic wonder, it begs, not with the cunning utilitarianism of geohistory. We are our own medicine. We are reverse, inverse, obverse, queer. We are otherwise. We are clocks without the constraints of time.

Meteorites, often found embedded in ancient blue ice, acted as useful natural chronometers that could be analyzed geochemically to gain insight into the very deep past of the universe, aiding in developing a picture of deep time that extended beyond Earth. These "poor man's space probes" were gathered with the care devoted to lunar samples, plucked from the ice with sterilized tongs, re-entombed in Teflon bags. The meteorite says, I am a deposition you can't decode, an alien that cannot be assimilated. I refuse

your linear stratigraphy, your white rock and bearded tool. I am punctuation on your white page, a dot, a blot, a speck, a blemish, a smear, a stain, a trace, a sign, a pause, an aside, a caveat, an ellipsis. The thing that begins the sentence again, yes. It says, your field is not flat, your discipline is discriminatory. It says, I will not be categorized by your ageist ideals or monetized into your transactional dialectic. It says, I am part of you. I am the exotic "out there" manifested here. I am glimmering joy and pain at once, it says, as it emerges through the curtain of banana leaves. I am sudden, but I am also perpetual, perceptual, precarious. It says, I escape entropy by being. I am always transforming, it says, like Earth and its plates pushing, pulling, and sliding against each other across vast swaths of time, the many Earths, the multiverses, the many-mes. Not perfectly preserved, instead always bearing, accumulating, shedding, mutating, turning, crashing. I am queer and proud. Your dull conformity is naive and bores me. I am a chasm, a dissonance, plural potentials, a myriad of meanings and endless erasures. It is you who turns away from impact, from affect. It is you, who, detached, cynical and perverse, will not notice me, or, if you happen to overturn a pebble at your foot, will, disappointed, kick it away.

She is drawn to a dark object at her feet, it glints. She picks it up and studies it. It gazes back at her, punched and pummelled. It looks like a clock, but imprecise and erratic. She sympathizes with it. She puts it in her pocket, planning on placing it on her writing desk as a paperweight or a portal into the graveyard of her undermined desires. She walks to the lake, which has by now frozen, milky. Still, it reflects light in curious ways, sending up warmth. A mirage alters her vision. She changes her mind and tosses the rock into the lake. It skims the surface, sound bouncing, signalling, as if the lake were a launchpad for UFOs. A radio somewhere crackles, a fluttering of banana leaves. It has a long way to go and it needs time to send the stars off course again…

The first sound that you heard was an Amelie Fortas recording of a stone skimming a frozen lake, and the second

was made by David Soin Tappeser and chases the sound of static and transmissions across borders.

Thank you.

EL Thank you so much, Himali. Thank you, Alexis. I would like to now open up to questions. If anyone wants to ask Himali or Alexis anything about what we just heard, or their practices, or if we want to let it sit, we can just take a few minutes and just leave it there.

If I may, though, I had a question. First of all, thank you so much. It was really beautiful. I sort of completely got lost in your words. But still, this is a very down-to-earth question. Speaking about meteorites, it's good to speak down to earth topics, too. I just wanted to know, though, as I'm very curious, about the process of your writing, and how you came up to the topic of meteorites. Because we are somewhere between an essay and a poetic text here. There are plenty of references—theoretical references, historical ones, many layers—and then there is a very personal voice. Yours there, mixed into that. So I'd love to hear you on this.

HSS Go for it, Alexis.

AR I'll give Himali's voice a little rest. Himali and I met on an artist residency in the Arctic. We had previously done some work together about ice. I'm a historian of science of the environment. My dissertation, part of my work, is about the Antarctic search for meteorites, which is an ongoing, annual effort that happens. I also write about the history of geology and the role of ice in the history of geology. So a lot of the kind of historical material which we lifted, was lifted from work that I've been doing and research I've been doing for the Smithsonian, which is the institution that collects a lot of the Antarctic meteorites. I can go into the details of what that looks like, if you want. But I don't need to. And then Himali and I, we just kind of riff off things that matter to us in a referential way. We are both really pulled to the idea of this idea of catastrophe versus uniformitarianism, which is a long-standing piece of the history of geology, and we share similar interests in authors. We're both fans of Alice Sheldon, James T. Junior. So we just kind of worked, weaving all of this

stuff together, and finding ways to ricochet around the topic. But all based on solid historical material and then spiraling out from there. Himali, do you want to add anything?

HSS Yes, I guess simultaneously I was reading a lot about the Himalayas. My current research follows from the poles, and now it moves into the Himalayas, and I was struck by the number of references to meteorites, and this allowance in the ancient texts for meteorites to be part of our earthly existences. And then suddenly they go missing, and then through Alexis we find that in the history of geology, actually, there's a reason for why they go missing. And so it felt almost like a way to think about a feminist portrayal of geology through this. On a more down to earth level, I'm also more like a 14-year-old boy, just fascinated by meteorites and the moon and outer space. So we were like: Let's think about these things and give it some rigor.

EL And did you make any specific research trips? Did you collect material yourself? Do you have that type of anecdotes gathered along the way?

HSS I have been to the Antarctic, and I admit that every single stone—even in the Arctic we kept kind of turning over stones—you find these fossils kind of stamped in the stones, and so they weren't meteorites. You hope you find meteorites. I was also in the Atacama Desert, where there's a lot of meteorites, and this is where the essay also started in its origins. Because in the Atacama, where when they're looking for meteorites, there are also these stories of these women. If you've seen the documentary *Nostalgia for the Light* (2010), they are also looking for the bones of their lost ones during the Pinochet regime. So there are these meteorite hunters, and there are these women looking for their lost ones. And I mean, just personally, we were always looking at stones. I don't particularly have too many meteorites around me, but I have one of the Tibetan pieces.

AR My research was far more archival. I was at the Smithsonian doing research and discovered the history of Aslam Awan, a geologist turned planetary scientist who took part in these expeditions that go every southern summer

down to gather meteorites. The thing that is fascinating about the Antarctic example is that no one expected to find meteorites there. They're so rare, they're so hard to find. But then because of the mechanism of the ice-sheet meteorites falling onto the Antarctic ice sheet for millennia, and then getting subsumed down into the ice, and then, as the ice spreads outwards at certain places it hits barriers and it pushes the ice, the really old ice, up, and as the wind melts the ice on the top, all of these meteorites are revealed together. They can have fallen millennia apart, and be from completely different bodies, but they are gathered by this kind of mechanism of the ice sheet, which is a fascinating scientific history. It produced ways of gathering and understanding really old ice, which was really important for climatological modeling. But that kind of vision, of what? Of the way? That this kind of ice and this geologic material was being gathered together through this mechanism was really captivating.

EL It's a very poetic, geological phenomenon, if I may say. And Alexis, I wanted to ask you, are you, on a personal level, interested in poetry and art?

AR Yes, Himali and I have collaborated on a few other projects as well. I definitely love writing more creatively. The thing that happens to you during a PhD is all of poetry is extracted from you, and you just produce very dry material. So it's incredibly liberating and kind of fulfilling to be able to have this alternate way of working with exactly the same, or similar material. You know, I have a very factual dry iteration of the discussion. And then I had this, which just feels so expansive and kind of freeing.

EL To me it sounds like you're also a bit of an artist.

AR Thank you, I'll take that as a compliment.

EL Himali, to come back to your process. Can you maybe say a little more about why writing, and maybe also its relationship to performance? Because your reading was not a simple reading, it was also not a straightforward performance. Of course we are on Zoom, but how do you play out text within your work when it's not reading? I know you're making performances, so what would be the relationship?

HSS It's about inhabiting this particular body that has its own narrative and its own history, and it comes to the text with the stuff that the text doesn't want to say. And it creates a sense of danger and proximity, and allows us to question distance and proximity. For me, the word is really at the center of my practice, but it's also a complete joy, and also a kind of politics in a way, to be able to collaborate with different mediums and disciplines, but also within myself to think about a practice as multidisciplinary. The discipline follows from the story that one needs to tell. In this case it felt like there was this really interesting linear history that then we started to break up and create, and it felt like it needed to be told as a text. But the previous piece that we worked on together was a film, and that needed to be told through moving images, somehow. So medium follows, I suppose.

EL During your career as an artist, how did you start becoming more and more interested in the environment? But also, why would fiction and speculation become tools to approach such topics? Because this is something that comes again and again, no matter which medium you use.

HSS I love that question. The environment has always been part of my biography. I've grown up in the mountains. I've grown up walking in landscapes, thinking about landscapes, and very quickly realizing that landscape cannot be separated from social justice or history, or architecture or anything. So at some point it also blurs. But the reason for the word, to begin with the word, is because when you're with these other nonhuman beings—I spent the day writing from the perspective of a mountain—it allows you to inhabit differently. To embody, I start with a semantic ritual. I start to become the base of the mountain, and I start to feel the peak of the mountain, and then you start to research the mountain and really believe what it must be like. It's not to empathize so deeply with this nonhuman form of life, but it is to somehow de-center the human from these relationships and allow us to exist, maybe not even gingerly, but perhaps even on the periphery. And fiction and speculation and poetry, with its metaphors, allows that imaginative leap to take place. It allows

for that suspension of disbelief, and it allows the everyday identity politics to not get in the way of trying to think with. Even while it stays completely on the floor.

The conversation was held online for *Art Taaalkssss*, a series of public lectures and discussions by the Institute Art Gender Nature (IAGN), Basel Academy of Art and Design FHNW, March 3, 2022.

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TO ARRIVE AT BEAUTY: ARTIFICIAL INTELLIGENCE, AUTHORSHIP, AND AGENCY IN PRACTICE AND PEDAGOGY

Marcel Gygli and Anna Flurina Kälin in Conversation
with Nicolaj van der Meulen

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NICOLAJ VAN DER MEULEN

Artificial intelligence—that's the term currently used to describe what is also known as machine learning. And we are currently very intensively dealing with the questions, consequences, and risks of artificial intelligence in higher education, including at the Basel Academy of Art and Design. How should we deal with it in education? Does artificial intelligence offer a possibility for creativity in art and design, to develop new forms of creativity? Does AI also pose risks for personal development, individuality, or for what authorship and identity mean? All of these questions are of great interest to us at the moment, and so I'm excited to be able to conduct this dialogue with you, Anna and Marcel. And as a starting point, I would like to ask how both of you might describe artificial intelligence. Marcel, maybe you could start?

MARCEL GYGLI

I often like to describe it this way: If we look back at the history of computer science, we had traditional algorithms for a long time. These algorithms worked in a way that a human would sit down, take data, and based on that data, come up with a set of rules. These rules would then be implemented as an algorithm to generate results. Now, with artificial intelligence, we take the data and instead of specifying the rules for the results we want, we use AI to determine the rules for us. This means an algorithm looks at the data and learns what rules are contained within it. This completely changes the paradigm, as it's not always clear how these rules are exactly formed. For me, this is the core of what artificial intelligence is—it's no longer humans determining the rules, but rather a machine.

ANNA FLURINA KÄLIN

I would like to chime in here and move away from the technical aspect, focusing more on the fundamental idea behind it. What fascinates me is the underlying assumption that human thinking can be formalized. It establishes a connection with how humans function, even just in the name "artificial intelligence." An attempt is made to create something that exhibits human behavior, something that can perform certain tasks. There's this comparison: how close does it come to humans, and how much do we identify with it? From our perspective, it needs to exhibit intelligent behavior, and then we are okay with it and accept it as artificial intelligence.

NVM The topic of artificial intelligence raises questions that relate to our own identity and personality, our understanding of action—of independent, autonomous action—and, ultimately, freedom as well. I was deeply fascinated by the debate around the game of Go, an Asian boardgame, and the application of artificial intelligence called AlphaGo, a computer program developed by DeepMind to beat the masters of Go. What I found intriguing in this process was that humanity, in a sense, competed against the technology, but maybe that's already a wrong description. At the beginning, humanity was very confident and sure of victory, thinking they would win these games. Over time, it turned out that artificial intelligence was better at playing the game than humans. In a way, it was a shock to the gaming community.

What was interesting to hear was the fact that the computer made moves that humans would have never come up with. And the human observation was that when the computer made these moves, these moves seemed completely absurd, and humans would never make them. However, at the same time, these moves questioned the core of human gameplay. The second part of this development was that players began to learn from this style of gameplay, which was not primarily seen as human. The question that

arose for me from this was, if playing can also be described as a form of creative action—we may come back to the topic of creativity later—and if the computer, AlphaGo, is doing something that humans wouldn't have thought of, perhaps we are dealing with new forms of creativity or new forms of actions or sequences of actions that challenge our own logic or our own creative behavior. What do you think about that?

AFK Yes, definitely. The question is then, how do you deal with it? Do you see it as a threat? Because it's the best player, so why should I even play AlphaGo if I can't win anyway? That's one option. The other option is that I can learn. I would have never thought of this idea. These are completely different approaches. Then I can benefit from it and continue to develop myself if I embrace these new ways of playing. I think it's the same with creativity, creating visual worlds, and approaches. I might learn new things, discover new things, and get inspired by artificial intelligence that approaches things differently or suggests other things.

MG Absolutely—I can only agree with that. What I found fascinating about AlphaGo was that there were Go grandmasters, like Lee Sedol, who made statements about how the machine-made moves were so beautiful that they almost brought tears to their eyes. This also shows that in such applications, there is often a tendency to anthropomorphize the system or to try to interpret humanity into it. I also wanted to return to a point where you mentioned that AI could lead to people not wanting to play the game anymore because it's in quotation marks. I strongly disagree with that because I believe that this is particularly evident in chess, where, even after Deep Blue lost to Kasparov, there was a feeling that chess was over, and that no one would play it anymore because it was no longer exciting. Today, we see that the global attractiveness and reach of chess has probably never been higher. More people are actively following chess games than ever before. Artificial intelligences make chess more accessible by evaluating positions much faster and showing viewers who might be in a better position, which is often not

obvious to a layperson, making the whole thing much more accessible. These new methods make the game much more understandable than before.

AFK What's also interesting in this context is the question of whether it even matters who the opponent is. Why exactly is that? I can grow through my opponent, and it's a challenge because I want to win the game. Is it really so important whether it's artificial intelligence or a human? And somehow it does matter when I don't know, but otherwise, it's okay, and I'm just highly challenged. What's actually interesting is what it triggers in us just knowing that it's a machine that's better than us or better than all of humanity. This artificial intelligence, which has power over us, we've actually created the whole thing. To what extent do we want to be separate from it?

NVM In relation to playing, it can perhaps be said that, of course, one goal is to win or lose. But a game often has its own aesthetics and value: in its progression, its process, and in the diversity that can be shown within it, in the tension that can arise from it. So, maybe it's less about winning or losing, and more about the developments and processes within it. When a certain move shows itself as so incredibly beautiful, but it's not primarily human-made at that moment, then the question arises: What beauty lies in artificial intelligence? How does artificial intelligence arrive at beauty—the production and generation of beauty? And what is our concept of beauty, or is it a reflection of our concept of beauty, or is it a different kind of beauty that is at play here?

AFK Ultimately, I mean, AI has nothing else as a basis than our data. And the fact that we produce more data or that we try to produce beautiful things, and that it also learns what we find beautiful and then reproduces it, is somewhat obvious. This question is, to what extent is it? Well, of course, it is. It's generated, it's a composition of all our creations. And at the same time, it has absolutely our reality, our data as its basis. And it's not something entirely new but rather a new composition. That's why I find it reasonable that beautiful things are created in our eyes.

MG Yes, absolutely. In this context, I always find the question of creativity interesting. I strongly assume, as you said, Anna, that what generative models do today is a kind of remix of what we have produced so far. The question that one can ask in this context is, if we were to train such a generative model, for example, on music with data from the 1920s, '30s, '40s, would a generative model based on this data eventually develop a new music genre like jazz or something similar on its own? I find this question incredibly interesting because then you could actually say, yes, somehow creativity seems to exist because a model has the ability to generate new things. As long as that is not the case, it will remain a nice tool for remixing existing data.

AFK Doesn't AlphaGo precisely show that it is capable of creating something new in our eyes?

MG I don't think so, because I believe that the difference lies in the way and depth with which a position can be mathematically evaluated and how far into the future of the game it can be looked at. Artificial intelligence, with a lot of computing power, has the ability to evaluate positions much deeper, and more accurately and mathematically than the human brain may be capable of.

AFK Yes, but then there's the question: if we can't grasp it and never get there, it may not be theoretical but practical. From what we perceive, it's a new concept. It seems like a new kind, one that we perhaps cannot reach. The question is also: When is it something new or considered something new? But I would have said that it's the moment when it sets the world in motion, when it causes something and develops it further. In that sense, I would say that AlphaGo had this effect and was a kind of creation. But fundamentally, I would also say that it's the question of whether creative artists' entire work is being taken over by AI, and it's now creating the images and pushing artists to the side, or whether it's more that artists have a new tool that opens up many new possibilities. It's extremely inspiring. It provides so much, just a toolset that reopens the world. And when we see it that way, we can see how artists and computer scientists have

worked closely together, both have benefited from each other, and now it's a matter of moving forward together. I find it extremely beautiful to see that it's not like computer scientists have taken something away from the artists, but it's about moving forward together.

NVM We are actually only at the beginning of the development of AI. And I remember how the internet and then mobile phones gradually entered our lives… At the beginning, we had to dial in to the internet, and then those heavy devices we carried around, which we really only used for making phone calls. And more and more, a presence, speed, and diversity in dealing with digital technology, with the network, also increased. And if I imagine where we might be in ten years with artificial intelligence and its possibilities, we will surely see a different form or a higher degree of differentiation and diversity than what we encounter at the moment. And when I look at the images generated by DALL-E, for example, they may seem hyper-realistic for now. Techniques are being used to combine fragments from our world and give them a certain expression. Yet, I also believe, regarding the question of style and what is being created, that we may have many surprises to look forward to.

It would be premature to say, for example, that ultimately it's the human who creates the styles or that there is no innovation in the aesthetic sense to be expected from artificial intelligence. Even though we're not there yet, when we look at how central and present digital tools have become today, we can certainly expect that the presence of AI tools in image production will increase exponentially. On the other hand, I'm not sure. This relates to Anna's last remark… Can AI be described as a tool? Does it still function as a tool like Photoshop or InDesign, or are we dealing with a different kind of tool, one that is perhaps more autonomous and that sometimes challenges the person holding the tool?

AFK Yes, it's a bit like the question of when does it become a collaborator or remain a tool? How autonomous is it? I mean, sure, when I input a prompt, I have no idea what will

come out, especially when generating an image. So it's more like, I give someone a task, like they create an image on this topic, and then something comes, and I don't know what it will be. Whether it's still a tool or, from that perspective, a collaborator I work with. It's on the border.

MG Absolutely.

AFK I also find that the work or the material itself, when I work with clay and shape it, it also has a certain will of its own. When it dries, it changes, and it's also like a collaboration. So, the material itself also has a certain autonomy. So I find it difficult to say if it's a tool, a material, or an identity, its own being.

NVM Maybe it's also a combination of material and tool that interacts with us in a different way.

MG The interesting point here is also about who is responsible for the interpretation. Because I would now claim that currently the interpretation and the understanding of a work is either with the artist or with the viewers. Currently, I don't see it as strongly with artificial intelligence. I believe that as long as this is the case, generative image models are still part tool, part material, for creating new works that are mainly interpreted by humans. I think that's also an important point. There often exists a fascinating tension between humanizing or attempting to humanize what artificial intelligence generates, which at its core, at least from my perspective, is not truly human.

AFK I think that would be an interesting new topic about learning. What is actually important to learn? And I find this aspect of being able to distinguish and decide what is good and what I want to work with and what not, extremely challenging, especially when it comes to judging generated things. Because the volume and speed, now that we're talking again about generating Journey images, I can create great material at an extreme speed, and it's very exciting and inspiring. At the same time, at the same pace, I'm challenged to keep deciding which image is interesting, which one do I continue with, and which one do I not. I compare it to photography, where in earlier times you took a photograph

and it was given, and when selecting the subject, you made all the decisions. Now, with digital photography, many images are taken, and the decision about which image is chosen is made afterward. This decision-making, about which image is interesting and which is not, also happens there. You're equally challenged with AI in that regard. And that's actually interesting, to take on this task as well.

NVM That's an interesting point, that, on one hand, AI has had a significant influence and role in the production of texts and images, and on the other hand, as you described, Anna, our evaluations are challenged by these productions. In this context, I wonder if we are willing to shift and develop our evaluation criteria through these new productions or if we are still operating within traditional parameters. For example, we might say something isn't good because it's just a composite image or this text isn't good because you can't feel the author behind it. Will the evaluation criteria, then, this decision of what is good or bad, maybe shift due to these new forms of production, through artificial intelligence in text and image?

AFK I somehow feel that it's closely tied to society and our values and our ideas about what's interesting, what's good or bad. Based on the assumption that all these developments have an impact on our society, I actually do expect that our judgments will change as a result.

MG I can imagine that as well. When I look at texts generated by systems like ChatGPT, I quickly notice that if I don't work extensively on the prompts to generate more specific outputs, there's already a strong and consistent writing style that remains quite similar. It even becomes somewhat recognizable for a human. I think this could lead to a situation where, when people see such texts, they might quickly develop a certain aversion to them because they assume it's just another fully automatically generated text, and it can't be interesting because no human has engaged with it, and so on. This could lead to changes in writing styles influenced by this, and we might suddenly have a different and new definition of what makes an engaging story or text. Because the volume of automated generated texts

will be so high that humans will start craving texts written by humans.

AFK That would actually be extremely nice, because it would also elevate the value of handmade content. At the same time, we're talking about a generic chatbot that provides us with texts. But I can also train my own AI on my own texts, on my own drawing style, and then I receive texts that are different from what ChatGPT generates for me. And that's another opportunity for a hybrid between self-written and artificially generated content.

NVM I find that an interesting point. The more the personality writing the text is aware of themselves or brings themselves into the text, the more ChatGPT is challenged to respond to that and develop something interesting from it. So, one could actually say that ChatGPT challenges authorship in a unique way, and especially in relation to oneself, for example, writing and making oneself understood. And when these texts are input as training elements, I think we get different products. So, ChatGPT tends to write more standardized texts when the questions or input are standardized. How would you see it?

AFK Yes, exactly. What I find interesting in this context is the topic of examinations. For example, if I were to give an exam using AI, I've noticed that ChatGPT provides excellent answers. So now, I have a problem because my students can essentially solve the exam by accessing the internet or using OpenBook, without any real effort. However, I believe this is actually a huge opportunity. It challenges us to rethink whether the exams we conduct are even meaningful. Shouldn't the focus be on applying theory to practical situations, especially in a practical-oriented institution like a university of applied sciences? In such cases, ChatGPT wouldn't be as helpful because it doesn't have knowledge of practical experiences. I think this is where current developments can help us reconsider and evolve our current practices.

NVM Or, for example, the act of speaking and explaining as part of reflection and theoretical thinking. There are moments when I need to explain and elucidate how something relates

to my practical work, and in those situations, I can't simply rely on ChatGPT. Perhaps spoken words will regain greater importance in such contexts.

AFK Spoken words by humans, that is. While AI-generated audio is improving, it really is still a dialogue between humans.

NVM How do you both see examinations in the context of artificial intelligence? Do traditional theoretical texts still make sense in thesis work? Does grading still have a purpose? How could the assessment and evaluation methods shift in other directions? This is my final question, with a focus on higher education.

MG Well, I find the questions incredibly fascinating because I'm currently dealing with this issue myself. I'll have to write new exams soon, and we actually want to allow internet access. In our case, it might be without ChatGPT, as there are ways to set up environments where specific internet content is not allowed. However, especially in the case of bachelor's theses, where we expect a certain level of independent work from students, particularly in theoretical areas, it's interesting. I don't want to prohibit students from using such tools, but I also see that, as of today, ChatGPT is good at writing texts and has a lot of theoretical knowledge, but not everything. It's also quite capable of quickly verbalizing misinformation in a very convincing manner. Therefore, I believe there's still a need for a certain level of independent effort from students to evaluate these texts and ensure that the content is accurate.

For academic work, it's still challenging because AI generates references that don't exist. So, from my perspective, what could be interesting is that students, when working with such tools and systems, document what prompts they used, what texts were generated, and how they worked with these texts. In a traditional bachelor's thesis, let's say pre-ChatGPT, students often just went to Wikipedia to acquire knowledge and reformulated the content a bit. Now, the reformulation is taken care of. Plus, ChatGPT has access to many more data sources or has seen many more data sources from which it can extract knowledge. Therefore, I believe it will be important to determine how students should use these

tools, how the documentation should be, because I think it will still require a high level of intelligence to work effectively with these tools.

AFK I completely agree. Additionally, I see a real opportunity for theory, especially when viewed from the perspective of a university of applied sciences that strongly relates theory to practice. It's like… theory becomes truly interesting when it's applied to practice, when I reflect on my own actions using theoretical foundations and generate scientific theses where I use science to reflect on my own actions. I find the use of ChatGPT or similar systems different in this context because I feel that I can't use it as extensively there since these systems don't know my actions. In this context, I primarily have the opportunity to receive information about theories but without sources. Then, I don't find it as helpful. So, I have the feeling that it greatly depends on how the task is formulated or what is required. Personally, I find that purely theoretical texts, particularly at a university of applied sciences, can sometimes dominate practice-oriented texts. Hence, I believe it could be a real opportunity to shift the balance a bit and assign different tasks, where ChatGPT might have a different relevance.

NVM Let's zoom out for a moment and conclude with a societal question. Do you believe that the applications of artificial intelligence can potentially help us address and solve societal and global challenges such as climate change and loss of biodiversity?

MG That is at least the hope, I believe, at least as of today. I think it's challenging to really demonstrate that, though. I have mixed feelings about it, but I hope that in ten or twenty years, when we look back, we will see that we've had cases where such systems have led to a shift in thinking or perhaps influenced decisions in a more positive direction. How exactly this could happen, I find it difficult to formulate, but I hope it will happen.

NVM What do you think, Anna?

AFK I feel like we're building the whole thing with the hope that it will save us, that it will become a god-like entity that

knows everything, that somewhere there's hope, and that's why we're building it. That's the feeling I get. Whether it will work? Honestly, I don't think so. And partly for the reason that, fundamentally, people decide, both as a collective and as individuals who have a lot of power. And if the mindset doesn't change, the question is, can such a system change our mindset and our way of thinking? And it would have to. The system is based on us. I find it difficult. I feel like humans need to be innovative first and set the direction, but this is like passing off a problem: *Please help us*. And I don't think that's the solution. We have to do it ourselves, take responsibility to some extent, and not shift responsibility. It's a difficult question, but I do see that it could be possible for it to provide support.

The conversation was held over Zoom one week after an intensive live discussion among the contributors on the same topic, at Institute Arts and Design Education (IADE), Basel Academy of Art and Design FHNW, June 16, 2023.

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BUILDING COMMUNITIES: ON MAKING OPEN-SOURCE TOOLS FOR ARTISTS AND DESIGNERS

Lauren Lee McCarthy and Casey Reas in Dialogue
with Ted Davis

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TED DAVIS

Thank you both so much for joining me to discuss this topic. Lauren Lee McCarthy, initiator of p5.js, and Casey Reas, co-initiator of Processing. Could you share more insight into your backgrounds?

CASEY REAS

I'm a media artist. I studied design at the University of Cincinnati, and am the co-founder, with Ben Fry, of the Processing Project. We started on it in June of 2001, so it's been more than 22 years now. I'm a professor in the department of Design Media Arts at UCLA. I've been there since 2003, and I'm also the co-founder of an online gallery called Feral File.

LAUREN LEE MCCARTHY

I'm an artist and a professor at UCLA also. And I just recently stepped away from the p5 lead role, which is now held by Qianqian Ye, but I started that project in 2013 and led it for about nine years. In terms of my art practice, which I see as connected, I'm interested in the ways that we're shaped by algorithms and the technology around us, and how this shapes how we interact with each other. And I'm very critical of the technological and social systems that we're building around ourselves. I'm looking at what the rules are and what happens when we introduce glitches, whether that's through a performance or some kind of internet intervention or other kind of media work. I think that connects to the p5 project and our thinking about how we can mess with some of the expectations and assumptions around technology and code that are maybe not serving us in terms of how we might wish, when it comes to ideas around access, inclusion, and how we work together.

TD I find the ten-year intervals to be a unique point of reflection: first with Processing starting roughly twenty years ago and then about ten years later, p5.js. It seems both have an existing precursor that was instrumental for inspiring those tools. I know in Processing's case, John Maeda's Design by Numbers was an initiator for what became Processing, and that p5.js grew out of discussing how Processing could be re-imagined for the current web. Was there a certain something that was instilled from either the person or the prior tool that was crucial in the development of your own new tool?

CR With the Processing project, it really grew out of the lab that Ben and I were both embedded within at the MIT Media Lab under John Maeda. There had been a lot of work happening at the Media Lab prior to us, going back decades, by Muriel Cooper and the Visual Language Workshop. The idea was to build coding frameworks specifically for artists and designers and architects—moving these really powerful ideas that developed through computer science and bringing them into the culture of the arts. There was a C++ library in the Aesthetics + Computation Group, which was the name of the group that John Maeda was leading, called ACU, that everybody was using to make the work. ACU was high performance, running on Silicon Graphics computers, full-screen 3D rendering. And then John Maeda's Design by Numbers was the opposite. It was really pared down and minimal.

The idea is that it often required years of programming experience to get ACU up and running, but with Design by Numbers people could sit down in a room full of artists and designers and make visual things within the first hour. Processing was an attempt to bridge the two, to have a low floor and also a high ceiling. It was greatly influenced by prior work at the Aesthetics and Computation Group, but it also built on top of ideas, built into PostScript, about how to think about geometry and computer graphics—and also ideas of Logo, of play and exploration. The most essential thing was the idea of a software sketchbook: this idea that

we want to sit down and make things really quickly. We want to be able to explore, we want to be able to work through ideas in more of the flow of how artists and designers work, by starting with rough ideas and then building from there.

Maybe just to tack onto that, we made it for two reasons: We made it for ourselves as a way of sketching with code and making our own work, and we also made it as a tool for other people to learn, as an introduction to thinking about computation. And all the work that I've done in my practice has been made with Processing through all these years. Ben and I were both building this for other people, but also building it for ourselves at the same time.

LLM I guess p5 began around 2013, though it wasn't p5 at the time, when Casey, Ben, and Dan asked me, for a kind of research or experimental project, what it would look like to imagine Processing being made today. Some things were obvious: like, we want to make it web native, the way Processing was at the start. Although because it was made of Java, it was no longer running on the web. Using HTML and CSS and JavaScript were obvious ways of updating or reinterpreting the tool. Around the same time, I was thinking about Processing's mission—there was so much around access, you know, inviting artists or people who didn't necessarily have access to tech education in university, to be able to code and make things. And so we also asked: What does that mean? What does access mean today to us in 2013?

It was really shaped by my own experiences of trying to get involved in different open-source communities and feeling like—because I am a woman—the doors weren't open. I had to push my way in, and there was skepticism about whether I could contribute. And so I felt with p5 that there was an opportunity. One, the doors were open, there was an invitation, and then, two, how can that invitation be extended and who else is feeling like they can't contribute or be a part of these communities? So that was a thread throughout the project, interwoven with all of the technical decisions. And to do that work we were learning from a lot of different groups and projects. Just to name a few: The School

for Poetic Computation, the openFrameworks community, looking at the examples of Arduino and Wiring and Design by Numbers. But also thinking about newer projects like three.js, and then thinking about some of the organizations and communities built around coding and arts: POWRPLNT in New York, AFROTECTOPIA, pyladies, Design Justice Network, all these different models for people working together.

One way that we learned from those communities was by having a lot of contributors to the p5 project. The project had a different development model than Processing, which had many people making libraries and things, but I think with p5 we tried to expand that even further to build on the idea that the community could contribute to it. A lot of the people who got involved with p5 were bringing ideas and knowledge from these different communities.

TD What happens with such a tool and project as it gains a community and as more people start to contribute to it? I think in both cases your projects started small, like someone needs to take that initiative, and then it becomes a welcoming community and there is more pull in. I'd be curious, in both directions: were there challenges to that? Did it only bring positives? Did it end up pulling projects in other directions than originally intended?

LLM No problems, only positives. It's always an interesting challenge to work with different people. The goal was to have many diverse perspectives in the room. That meant that there were many ideas about how things should go. I think one of the goals with the project was to create these spaces of autonomy. Yes, I was leading the project, but there were different projects and things happening within p5 that had their own agency to be their own thing. And I think that was effective for the project overall. For example, there were translation projects where people would build out that functionality on the website, and then there would be workshops and events in those communities where the other language was spoken, and they would have their own community around that. And people would also bring new projects. I remember how we were saying access is so

important to us, and then one contributor, Claire K. Volpe, came to us and said, okay, access is important, but your Hello World program is drawing a circle on the screen. And because it's in the Canvas and the browser, that's totally inaccessible to someone who's blind. Can we work on that? And so that became a large project within p5, thinking about screen-reader accessibility and disability and accessibility in general.

CR With the Processing project, it started with the two of us, me and Ben, and together we built the editor, designed the coding language, built the website and all the examples and educational materials, and ran the forum—we were monitoring the forum at all hours. And we were doing that as volunteers, as part-time work. As things started to grow, other people wanted to do things with Processing that were outside of our narrow vision. It began to bottleneck—we just weren't able to expand it in the way that people wanted to expand it. And so that's when we built the infrastructure for the libraries to happen. The libraries allowed Processing to grow in so many unexpected ways. Those are independent projects that an individual can create code for that extend what Processing can do. Processing has a strong focus on the visual arts. If somebody wants to do sound or computer vision or data work, those are all things that libraries expanded it to do.

I think in 2005, we thought we'd done it. This project, it's working. But then it just kept growing and growing. And I think the expectations of it professionalizing, becoming more robust, really stretched us. Eventually we founded the Processing Foundation, co-founded with Dan Schiffman, as a way to raise funds in order to bring the project to the point where the community expected it to be.

LLM With p5, because there were so many contributors to the source code, we were interested in what happens when you don't follow the standard models of development. We would often make trade-offs in the code, in terms of performance optimization, in order to make the code easier for people to contribute to so they didn't need such a high level of expertise to be able to understand it and add to it. That sometimes

meant that the sketch or the code itself might run a little bit slower. But we felt that this was a trade that we wanted to make. It was always a balance. We didn't want to go all the way in one direction or another, but we felt like we tended to prioritize having different ways for people to get into the project over having a piece of technology that was highly optimized and just for professional users. And I think that was a risk. We didn't know what would happen when you let hundreds of people start contributing to a piece of source code that might be used professionally or in schools. But I think the fact that it's sustained, and now has millions of users, feels like a testament to the idea that those kinds of models can actually work.

TD It's interesting that you're more likely to get a complaint from someone saying it's not as efficient or running as fast as possible, but someone isn't complaining saying it's too easy to learn or contribute to than it should be.

LLM That was part of the project, too: shifting the tone. The idea was that maybe we can move in this direction where people still want to use it and there could also be a robust community. And I think that's happened.

CR Unlike software usually made for the visual arts communities by companies like Autodesk and Adobe, Processing and p5 have always been made primarily by volunteers working in a non-full-time way who are organizing another loose network of volunteers. And recently that's shifted. We now have some people working on both projects full-time, but that's very recent in the long history of these things. Other successful open-source projects are oftentimes made by programmers as tools for themselves. But we are a group of artists making things for other artists. We're also focusing on education and bringing people in. And so we have a very different kind of contributor than a lot of the other more technically focused open-source projects. And there's value in all the kinds of contributions from language translation to making examples to contributions of K-12 educators.

TD I got the Community Catalog this afternoon and a couple of things popped out. One is it's really nice to hear the story

of where one takes this project. Do we tone it down a bit? Or do we ramp it up in terms of making that sustainability by becoming more professional with the foundation and being able to support roles to contribute other than volunteer work. And what does that mean in open source?

CR Something that came in through the p5 project was the acknowledgement that not everybody can afford to volunteer. And if we want the widest possible group of contributors, we need to stop relying on the all-volunteer model. So that's when we were able, through a lot of hard work, to find funding and to begin to compensate for contributions.

LLM I'm glad you mentioned that. I think volunteering is great, so it's not that we're trying to rule that out completely. But like Casey said, not everybody has the means to do that, and so we saw that as a barrier to access for people. Finding funding, then, was essential.

TD Regarding the number of contributors, I'd be curious if there were always lots of contributors coming in—with p5, for example—and adding to it or did it reach a certain point and then people could contribute?

LLM The project grew piece by piece. That was part of the idea for me. When I started, I remember having a conversation with Casey where I was saying, I'd like to do something in the space, but I don't feel like I have the experience or the knowledge to have some big plan. And I remember him saying, well, maybe you don't need a plan, maybe you can just try the first step and see where it goes. And so that was the model that I followed, and I think that we followed with the project. It was very grassroots and ground up. I was collaborating with Evelyn Eastmond at the beginning, and then a couple other people. When we got the beta release after six months, more or less, then more people got involved. I was doing the work at NYU and there was some nice support from ITP to host meetups, and some of the students got involved. It grew from there, and then as the students graduated, and went outward, it spread with them. Eventually it became more international. There wasn't a large plan or idea of how it would grow, but we were thinking about how to communicate

the core ideas around p5. So establishing things like our community statement or our access statement, and trying to put in place strategic structures around the code. To just put these seeds out there that other people could pick up and float with.

TD I recall this wall of contributors on the initial landing page of the repo, and it was the first time I'd seen such a showcase of people who are working on an open-source project. It was a nice way to pay homage and share what their contributions have been.

LLM One of the ideas that was important to us was that to be a contributor didn't mean just working on the code; it could mean working on copy for the website or teaching or making examples or doing design work. When we started publicly putting together that contributors list and adding to it, we were trying to be as expansive as possible, to include anyone we saw as contributing to the tool in any way. And if people feel themselves contributing, even if they haven't been recognized by me or the project lead, there's information about how to add themselves to that list.

TD That's also nice that you make a pull request to add yourself and it's not based on a contribution metric of a given repository.

LLM It's kind of an emoji.

CR One thing that was underlying both projects, unlike a lot of other open-source or code-based projects, is that there was always a strong emphasis on documentation, and making it as jargon-free as possible, to be legible for beginners and a broad community. When Processing started, it was pretty minimal with community, but at that time, having a forum was a good way of being in contact with people. And it was really beautiful. People were very open to sharing. It was about learning together. It was about growing together. People would get into topics like, *how do I do this or that?*—and people would jump in and share. And at that point, Processing was relatively small. I think there were a few hundred people who were active on the forums. It was a moment of networks coming together and learning as a community.

TD With both tools, how long did they stay in a beta phase? It's maybe not unique to these projects, other tools also hesitate to make a 1.0 release. I can quasi understand the reasoning for keeping it in a beta, that it's maybe more flexible, messy, but then what initiates saying this is now a 1.0? Was there a significant change that caused that? And then does it have an effect on what became of the tool post 1.0 or becoming less beta?

CR With Processing, we just did numbered releases. Release 68, for example, was a very stable release that was around for a long time. People will remember releases 68 and 69 from back in the day. And then I think we found that that was confusing people. So we switched over to a numbering system. I don't know what release Processing would be on if we'd started numbering since the beginning. We just started off in a different way, but it is fundamentally changing things or enough things that we feel warrant the next release when that happens.

LLM We understood a 1.0 release to mean the functionality was more stable. We wouldn't be changing things release to release. But we wanted to keep that flexibility because it felt like it was that open-ended possibility for people to insert new ideas. In case we realized: oh, this is not working towards our goal of access and we need to rethink this part of the API to be able to do that. But I remember one tweet that said: I'll check out p5 when it reaches a 1.0 release. And I was like, okay. See you never. (*Laughs*.) But then around 2019 I realized I wanted to stop leading the project, to work towards that in the next year or two. It seemed like a nice goal to reach a 1.0. before doing that. And there were people who, like Kate Hollenbach, were instrumental in laying out a roadmap for how we might get there. Stalgia Grigg and Evelyne Masso were key in working over the year leading up to the release and executing that development in that direction to get to the 1.0.

I would just add that one thing I learned from this project is that there's so much power in passing the mic. There weren't a lot of women working in this space and Casey, Ben,

and Dan offered me the opportunity to work on this project. And that launched p5. And you know, a lot of people will talk about what they wish was different about a field or an area or who's not included. And the easiest way to change that is to open up the space and invite people into it and then give them the space to lead. Something we've all seen as teachers, is that just believing in someone can make radical things happen that you didn't even realize were possible.

CR One thing about Lauren's leading p5 that just came up today in a foundation board meeting that we were in is that you were the community lead and the technical lead and doing fundraising at the same time. You were doing an incredibly large number of different tasks, keeping that project up and running.

LLM I think that's been characteristic of a lot of this work, though. There are many different tasks.

CR Yeah, building the airplane while we're flying it has been a part of everything since we started all this.

TD I've always been in awe at what you both have done, while parallel to this you're both educators. Has this changed over time with the tool? At the beginning, it was a lot about giving workshops, teaching students to code, demonstrating the tool, how it can be used. And then, with time, the community provides learning resources and so many tutorials in lots of languages in different directions. Does that change the way you teach code or the tool? Do you have to do less teaching? Do students come with the expectation of, I get to learn from the creator, co-creator of such a tool?

CR One thing that's happened with my teaching over the years, which I think is happening largely everywhere, is the idea of the so-called flipped classroom. Early on in teaching, there were no reference documentation materials that were online and public and video-based. I'd spend a lot of time in class doing technical lectures, and now I spend a minimal amount of time doing that. And the students learn the technique through watching online videos at their own pace, week by week, and we use all the class time in class for doing workshops together, making things, practicing. That's

been wonderful. And it's been largely through the generosity of many people making excellent online materials that I think we have as a shared resource in the community.

LLM The intro coding class I'm teaching this fall is called Interactivity, and it's focused on what it means to have an interaction with a person or with a machine and how we understand that. And what happens when code comes into it. As Casey mentioned, these online resources make that part of the teaching a lot easier. Another thing that is nice is that, in the past, there were students—women or people of color—who didn't really see themselves reflected in these videos and models. And I think especially over COVID there was just such an explosion of resources, and so many people doing great work, that it's been exciting to be able to point to all these different people working in the field. And being, like: Here are examples for you of people doing this, and just imagine what you could do if you go in that direction.

CR A long time ago if you wanted to do a computer vision application, tracking people in a space or tracking somebody's facial expressions, it would require a graduate degree in computer science. And now the accessibility threshold of being able to perform different interactions has gotten so low that we can really focus on the ideas and the projects themselves, and less and less on the tech. And that's been wonderful in the educational environment.

TD Processing was based on the programming language Java, whereas ten years later, p5 embraced Javascript. Now ten years further on, has the technological landscape changed enough to warrant another interpretation framework?

CR You want to talk about ChatGPT in your class this quarter, Lauren?

LLM Yeah (*laughs*). I just did a project in my web class where the students made their whole website with ChatGPT, basically. They were allowed to code a little bit themselves, but I didn't teach them any JavaScript in that class, only HTML and CSS, but a lot of them used JavaScript in their final project because they would just type to ChatGPT, like, make a thing

that scrolls, and then they would get this JavaScript code. And sometimes it didn't work, so they would tell ChatGPT, and they would debug it and then insert it into their page. And that was fascinating. I have my own concerns and criticality about those tools, and we tried to talk through that in class, too. But it's been neat when you think about what is important to teach the students. What would be the next version if there was another one? I don't really have any answers. Going back to Casey's point from earlier, though, about how I was doing a lot of different roles… I think I've always believed in the impossible, or the thing that hasn't been made yet. I think that's been a thread through Processing in p5. So I hope that, if nothing else comes from these projects, that this energy and idea continues, and that people will make whatever needs to be made right now and for the future.

CR One thing about the Processing project is that it's been incredibly generative for other projects to spin out of it. To go back quite far, when I was teaching in Italy and working with Hernando Barragán, the Wiring project grew out of Processing which then became Arduino. More recently, there's been the Raspberry Pi-based Processing project, which Gottfried Haider made, and then also the Processing version for Android operating system for phones, which Ben Fry started and now Andres Colubri has been leading. And I think that whenever there's a moment when a technology is kind of impenetrable, there can be something following the ethos of the original Processing project that can be built to make it more accessible. And I think, hopefully we'll see that continue.

TD What about coding futures using AI tools, whether it's ChatGPT, or these other AI-inspired coding models? This last semester I experienced, for the first time, students working on a project and asking the lovely chatbot, *How do I*…., and getting answers back with longer and more complex code than necessary, requiring help. And then I look at it and say, oh, we have a single function that does the same. Given that AI is likely trained on the source code standing behind a framework's useful functions, it seems like they pervert the abstraction

that these tools aim to provide. What are your thoughts on how we should work with these tools within education?

CR I don't want to talk about old ideas, but I still think they're essential. There are different ways of thinking about coding and there's also, what is sometimes called flow-control coding environments or node-based coding environments or patching environments, things like Max. Right now, TouchDesigner is really surging in popularity. Those are ways of thinking about coding that are different from text-based coding. They are more visual, based on the analog synthesizer models. And I think that's coding in the same way that coding with text is. And then there's this other category of coding environments, starting with HyperCard, moving into Director, and I include Unity in this as well, where you have visual assets, and you have timelines, and you're writing code to attach them to visual assets. The Processing way has always been, all right, here's a blank page…Let's just write code. The idea was that it's so minimal and basic. There's nowhere to really do anything, but to understand it and provide a very thorough foundation.

Of course, it's just different from learning with something like Max and what's in most educational environments. I think every educator makes the decision of where they want to start and where they want to go from there. Those are questions that predate the current questions with ChatGPT. But I still have those questions. And many students learn how to use environments like Scratch, which is block-based, sort of like Lego, a snap-together coding environment. I've always thought an environment that could flip back and forth between views—like it's pure code and now it's block-based or node-based—would be a good way of developing further understanding, and also a pragmatic tool for when it's more convenient to think in code. Because code is better at thinking, in some ways, and the patch-based way is better at thinking in other ways. You could just move fluidly back and forth between the two. That's something I haven't really found. I've seen a lot of experiments I haven't found in practice yet.

LLM There's also a lot to investigate with the tools besides just, *It gave me the answer*. And so when my students were doing this assignment, part of it was to find the edges or to find the biases and try to reveal that in the work. A lot of them found more obvious things, like my prompt to give me an image of a person who does this job, or everyone is South Asian, or everyone is a woman, or nobody is disabled. But some of them also found some of those edges with the code or with the language that was generated and its tone. Or if you ask it to create a default website, what's the design reference for that website? So then, because we're talking about how all these things feed into each other, what are the sources of the data that are training these things, or how do we build our own things outside of that?

I think about the A.M. Darke open-source afro hair library that's noticing that there's a lack of references of black hair and then is building or commissioning artists to build that database. Or Xin Xin's TogetherNet, which is thinking about how people are communicating, and, in contrast to something like Gmail, just getting dumped into ChatGPT as training material, actually thinking about consent around communications that people have and how they want that to be archived. So, I guess I'm in favor of teaching the tools but then engaging in the context around them, so it's not just like, okay, our job is done, there is no need to teach coding anymore. Actually there is a lot more that we need to be engaging with in these questions that come up by using these tools.

CR I'm excited that the conversation has moved away from the question, "Does learning how to code even have a place in art and design school?" Which was asked twenty years ago, and a lot of people thought, "No, there's no place for that here." And now we can talk about how we should we teach it, and the ethics around it.

The conversation took place online between Los Angeles and Basel, at the invitation of the Institute Digital Communication Environments (IDCE), Basel Academy of Art and Design FHNW, June 3, 2023.

175 CHALLENGING HUMAN-AI COLLABORATIONS: ON BINARIES AND BIAS

Aylin Yildirim Tschoepe and Andreas Wenger
in Conversation with Qingyi Ren, Hanna Sipos, and
Jeffrey Martin Vogt

AYLIN YILDIRIM TSCHOEPE

Ursula K. Le Guin once wrote: "I don't know how to build and power a refrigerator, or program a computer, but I don't know how to make a fishhook or a pair of shoes, either. I could learn. We all can learn. That's the neat thing about technologies. They're what we can learn to do."

Thinking about her quote today—about technology as a form of learning—can lead us to the new forms of artificial intelligence that are gaining traction in design and the social sciences. Great hopes are associated with such AI, but just as great are the fears of it. ChatGPT presents educators with the dilemma of how to test the learned knowledge of their students; leaders of technology giants warn against the development of artificial intelligence, with some considering it the greatest existential threat to humanity. Meanwhile energy companies use AI to help extract the last drop of oil from under the earth, even though we are aware of the irreparable damage this will do to the planet and to ourselves. We thought we might exchange some ideas about the benefits and unfulfilled hopes of artificial intelligence in our design processes, particularly all of your work in the field of speculative design.

That said, the current discourse on artificial intelligence reminds us of the debates that took place in architecture in the mid-1990s on digital design and subsequently on parametric design. Greg Lynn expressed his impression at the time that "the choice of software and the approach to its use was," as he said, "among the most difficult preliminary decisions in the design process."

ANDREAS WENGER

Hanna, you've come up with an audience-driven installation about lost art, which utilizes AI for speculative knowledge generation. Jeffrey, you have developed an interactive online

learning game on Fortnite about disinformation and conspiracy theory, where you learn to recognize the mechanics and characteristics of such. And Qingyi, your research is situated at the intersection of gender and artificial intelligence; you're exploring how the binary concept of gender is deeply embedded in the digital space, and the possibilities to deconstruct binary AI in facial recognition. In all of your work, though, you collaborate with some form of AI to tell the stories that have yet to be told. We'd like to hear more about these stories and what place AI technologies and machine learning holds for you in your very different practices.

Our questions to you all to begin with, then, are: How intelligent is this new technology, and what do we really mean by the terms "intelligence" and "artificial intelligence"? What role does AI play as you create stories that have yet to be told?

HANNA SIPOS

My project considers a speculative knowledge-generation process between a museum and its audience, focusing on the information that is not available to us regarding a certain group of objects. The group of objects that I am working with are works of modern art that were part of the *Entartete Kunst*—that is, degenerate art—exhibition staged by the German National Socialist regime in 1937. The Nazi regime purged German museums of all art pieces that they deemed degenerate or not worthy. They then collected them within the framework of a mock exhibition to show off what they considered to be substandard art. Following this exhibition, more than 5,000 artworks were destroyed and were mostly left without any graphical record. We do not know how they looked, as most of the information that we have of them is text-based. Even this text-based information, however, is non-descriptive at times.

In my work I am exploring the prompt-to-image-generation as an opportunity, that is, as a platform to host speculative interaction between the museum and its

audience. A platform where we can open a discussion and conversations about what we know about these artworks, and what we do not or might never know. Together with the speculations of the audience, we include information that AI can use as we collaboratively create an image. That image could be one possible representation of the lost artwork—rather as a conversation starter, not as a replica.

JEFFREY MARTIN VOGT

My work also focuses on speculation and AI, but it does so to realize or recognize disinformation in conspiracy theories in an intuitive or playable way. What I aim to do is to create a game on the platform of Fortnite, assisted by ChatGPT. I do not necessarily engage AI to prove my ideas, but see AI as a collaborator that can give me feedback about whether my work is consistent, coherent, or where I have potential gaps.

QINGYI REN

My work is about queering AI, in a non-binary sense. More specifically, my project is about critical cyberspace gender narratives for a database of AI. I work in images that show queer digital space and how the queer body disturbs the gender binary in facial recognition. I have worked for a long time with facial recognition, a technology we often use to unlock our phones and for various security uses. This technology itself is gender binary. My work began when I started doing performances with different materials affixed to my face, to keep Amazon recognition from recognizing my face as a binary gender label; as a queer body I can easily disturb the facial recognition. While it is a binary machine, it still failed to identify my face along the gender binary. I am currently working with further databases to train the program and to

generate a random number of my gender to achieve gender fluidity. This is how our gender can be extended into the digital space and remain difficult to define in a binary way. I want to continue working on how we use queer bodies to queer AI, all so as to reflect back on the gender bias that exists in our societies.

AYT As the three of you take a variety of approaches to work with AI, we are curious to find out more about how you are collaborating with AI. What role does AI play in your work when it comes to your kinds of collaboration? This also suggests the larger questions of how intelligent AI actually is, and what its shortcomings are. Your collaborators have to learn from you in certain ways, through machine-learning processes, and you likely want to train the AI to offer more diverse responses to other users. Another interesting question might be: What do you learn from the AI?

JMV The role that ChatGPT plays for me is, first of all, that of an assistant as well as a mentor. When I have questions, or share my ideas with ChatGPT, it also checks them and gives me suggestions that are surprising and very inspiring. At the same time, we have to recognize AIs like ChatGPT for what they are: just an AI, a tool. At times, it is difficult to take that point of view, though. When I address personal questions to ChatGPT, I sometimes see it as a mentor or psychologist.

HS My approach is quite different. I have been very strict in my use of AI because I use AI as a tool only. For me this is a platform that can facilitate and host an interaction between the audience and my exhibition or installation. And though I am amazed by the potential of AI in this generation, it is just a platform that enables this interaction and this genuine involvement of the audience. I use it in the following way: I created a database that is about these leftover data, then I wrote the code that reads that database and creates a prompt, and that prompt is raised in a way that can be understood easily by an image generator. I had to learn a lot about AI—how it "thinks," what are the phrases that it will misunderstand, or how poetic I can be in the description of

artworks, which are usually quite abstract. How abstractly can AI "think"? I have to be incredibly descriptive to achieve a certain desired outcome, or I let it work on its own, and then appreciate what it comes up with. It can be an experiment of being abstract and poetic at the same time.

QR In the whole process, what kind of role do you want visitors to play? Are they simply interacting with your system, or are they a part of training this process?

HS The training and what database the AI uses is another branch of this. Visitors are part of this knowledge generation, a "shared research" together with the museum and about lost artworks. What do we know? And what do we not know about them? The audience plays an active part in this ongoing research of trying to regain information or recreate information about these artworks and what they imagine the titles could have been like. For example, if you have a title that states "portrait," it is an open question as to who the portrait could have been of or in what circumstance it was made. I invited the visitors to complete this title with their imagination, and then give that completed title to the AI to propose how it could have looked. But because of the large variety of outcomes, it looks different every time, with every person completing the prompt. That is why it is like a playground, and the tool is hosting this game.

QR Can I say that it is not just you, the designer, who is training the process, but you, with your audience, are doing this process together?

HS Yes, absolutely.

AW Nobody knows how these lost pieces of art might have looked. From some artists you might find AI images that really could resemble the actual object, and from others you have no idea, because nothing from a certain artist is left to feed the AI. What is interesting is that it is also a very ambiguous tool, because it does not judge what is right or wrong, or what is true or untrue: the lost pieces are left in peace somehow.

HS You are right. The information that you have available to train the AI on, is very different for the various artists. Some

artists we know better, or have a lot of works left over, so the AI also has more examples to draw upon. There are several artists, however, the majority, who had all of their work destroyed after this *Entartete Kunst* exhibition series, and the AI has no database to draw upon. This creates a strange middle ground: just about good enough so you can start a conversation, but nowhere near good enough to say: *That's a replica*, *that's what it might look like*. Instead, there are infinite possibilities of how AI rehashes the information and recreates it as I ask: *Can you make me eight versions of this, or 12 versions of this, or 36 versions of this?* This, for me, is the speculative part of the process, and it also demonstrates that this is about generating conversations, not answers. It is about showing what it could have been like without saying: *This is what it was*.

AYT This opens up a question about the limitations of AI, such as the hidden bias. Technology is often seen as neutral, whereas it is this black box that is biased by developers, and by whoever builds the algorithms and databases. For example, we know from Midjourney that bodies created tend to be white, based on the hidden bias on the developer side. There are limitations apart from those inherent in AI, and there are ways for coping. Qingyi, you can surely speak more to this point.

QR Yes, my work is about queering AI. It reflects our society, but we can analyze where the bias comes from and how it is embedded in our life. In one conversation I had with ChatGPT, I asked how to classify the data. If it is human-based data, only male and female classifications exist. In another situation, I played with the tool BlueWillow, and, first, I wanted it to generate an image where a sandwich is made. So it delivered all kinds of images of people making sandwiches. I asked about a male making a sandwich, and then a female making a sandwich. Then I ask the tool to picture a gay person making a sandwich, and a queer person making a sandwich. Then I translated it to a lesbian making a sandwich and the tool couldn't really understand it, so in the image nothing is making a sandwich. Then as a next step I ask them, *Can*

you describe a successful human? We can see from the images that they generate, before they try to make it inclusive, that a successful human being is depicted as a white man, and a successful female is a white woman. It is important to understand all of this when we use AI as a tool. A lot of people are using the generated AI every day, but the bias in it exists. So we need to understand how machines describe our gender or describe our personality.

JMV Would you say that, while describing things to an AI in detail, you learn to be specific?

HS When I was making these speculative poetic images I thought, *Great, so what do I do with it?* Because this was not really useful: I could not implement it in my work, aside from it being a neat product. If you want a result that you can use, you have to be absolutely clear about what you want. I think it is a tool with an immense potential that, at the same time, is really hard to use well. And it takes a lot of effort from the user side and willingness to learn and to understand what AI does not know, or is not thinking about openly enough, or inclusively enough. And what the things are that it can remain objective about and give you an answer, regardless of your background, or how you asked a question. These are interesting aspects that everybody who uses it should think about a bit more deeply.

AW If you would like to have a specific product, you have to be precise in the way you are asking for it. That avoids getting an outcome you dislike, or that you were not searching for or expecting. If the outcome is not precise enough, and is not what we expect, is it wrong or fake in certain ways? This brings us to the point of fakes, or fake news, which was your topic, Jeffrey. You have been working on how conspiracy theories are constructed, why they work, and what enables us to find out what is fake and what is true. Bringing that consideration back to AI, what are your findings?

JMV Possibly what I found goes in the direction of false balancing. You can compare this to a Google search: if you simply type some words, you will get results based on how these results are advertised. People who typed these

words will get these advertisements, if someone paid for them, and from these ads you only get information from those who paid Google to show this link. This creates false balance. But if you try to specify what you search for by being very detailed, then you will be able to see a difference in the results.

AYT It is an interesting challenge that you have to address the AI in very specific ways to get a certain, expected outcome. What are the possibilities to train the AI to offer different outcomes? A question like, *Can you show me a successful person?* should show us a larger range, but the AI answer you have shared with us, Qingyi, reflects a binary vision in society or a clear hierarchy of value in the minds of whoever programmed the AI or databases, when it comes to who's supposed to be a successful person. If you want AI to assist in producing something that you want, you would have to feed it with exactly the cues that the AI, that is, whoever programmed or trained it so far, understood. What are our chances to train the AI or the machines in such a way that they open up to a more diverse take on things? So you do not have to prompt it, as in your example, with *I want to have a black, queer man making a sandwich with prosciutto*, in order to get more diverse results?

QR The question you are asking is the target of my dissertation, but I cannot really answer it. This whole situation we currently find ourselves in poses a tricky problem. It does not have one solution only. For designers or artists, and in our school, it would not just be about using the AI as a tool. We need to make it a transparent tool, and to take part in the process of building the tool and not just use it or explore how to use it. That is why we need to obtain more knowledge and understanding about this tool. Different people need to contribute their critical perspectives to make this tool more diverse and transparent.

JMV AI is like a mirror of our society—we all have biases. AI is not just an assistant but also a learning process for our society to change in many ways, to be more inclusive to everyone.

AW Do you think that this is possible? It starts with what we call it: *Artificial Intelligence*. James Bridle, in his new book, suggests that we, intelligent as we are, could learn from other species. Well, we are exploiting our planet, which is not a particularly intelligent way of being. Is AI intelligent, or is it just human-based? And how is it possible to involve other knowledgeable voices in the databases, or other forms of intelligence that could be part of this artificial framework?

HS I don't know if I can answer the question, *Is AI intelligent*? I think it depends on what you expect from it. It has access to a lot of knowledge. I agreed with what has been said, that AI is a reflection of our society and it is based on knowledge that we give it. But there is this idea that AI is progressing quickly and very fast. As a society, can we reflect about how non-inclusive we are deep down, and how we have not yet reached the point to provide this realization to AI and to understand that the databases and the knowledge that we have given it so far are still based on this biased society? Maybe our society is slowly changing, while AI and the databases are lagging behind. We need to go back and make sure that we supplement it with all the other things that we did not already give it. So, I think it is knowledgeable in the way that it only knows what we teach it and that is where the bias comes in.

AYT Not everyone can develop, feed, and program AI—that is possibly also something to consider. Are there options in the foreseeable future that would open up the potential for databases to be more participatory when it comes to knowledge? And equally important: Who curates them? There is also another question we would like to hear your thoughts about: Is AI creative? Is it critically reflected? How does it make choices when it comes to knowledge?

HS I recently read an article about AI and creativity, and it described the three types of creativity that people can have, and how difficult it is for AI to imitate these structures of creativity. It is important to say that AI is trying to imitate it, because you need to codify. What I mean by following this structure that I call a version of creativity is about translating

something innate to code: this is a huge challenge. I am not saying you cannot do a good imitation, but it is an imitation, because there are some processes that we cannot satisfactorily explain. I do not know how advanced research on this will be in the future; understanding how our brain works, and how we are creative and creating work from a psychological point of view is progressing and advancing. And the field of people who can take this knowledge and transfer it into code is also progressing.

AYT How do you see human-AI co-authorship?

QR The facial-recognition AI works by recognizing my face. It is a result, but I was never given the chance to clarify this result as well. There is no chance for most people to take part in the process itself. I think that is an issue. Hanna, however, designs an installation as a whole process where a lot of people are included, and in which AI is used as tool to consider certain questions.

HS To the question about authorship, I first wrote on every image I use that it is by me using AI, because I took it as authorship: I used this process, I created this prompt, and I used this tool to make it. However, this tool—this program—gave as much as I did. It is like we put our heads together, and this is the result. It was then that I started to say, *by Hanna Sipos and Midjourney*—this is my way of crediting it, because I think we should.

JMV For my thesis, I used ChatGPT for my autobiography to make sure that there were no mistakes. Also, if there were misleading words, ChatGPT would replace them. I had to be sure that kind of collaboration is in my credits. But it is still my creation. Probably, I am a manager with many assistants, while I take responsibility for our work.

AYT That leaves the question of how our role as human collaborator and designer shifts. From our conversation it can be gathered that there are tasks that AI can carry out faster, and it can be trained to a certain point to date. There are, however, aspects that may not be transferable in the same way. Certain forms of knowledge, as well as reflection, creativity, and the element of ambiguity and spontaneous

decisions that are unforeseeable—is all of that possibly inherently human? As much as with all other things that need to be reflected on, considering coexistence in the current transformative moment, my sense is that this will lead us, at the end of the day, to a question of ethics or renegotiation of what it is to be human.

The conversation was held cross-institute and cross-course based on a common interest in the topic of AI at the Institute Contemporary Design Practices (ICDP), Basel Academy of Art and Design FHNW, on June 8, 2023.

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BIOGRAPHIES

REAL INTELLIGENCE
(AND OTHER FLOWS AND FICTIONS):
AN INTRODUCTION

Claudia Perren holds a doctorate in architecture from the University of Kassel and is a professor at the Basel Academy of Art and Design FHNW (HGK Basel). Since 2020 she has been director of the HGK Basel, and since 2022, she has been vice-president of the Foundation for Art and Design in Basel (FAB). Previously, she was director of the Bauhaus Dessau Foundation (2014–2020), and she taught at the University of Sydney and at the University of Technology Sydney (UTS) for many years. Recently, she was selected as an Ewha Global Fellow (EGF) at Ewha Womans University Seoul (2024–26). Her larger practice—which encompasses research, teaching, and curating—has resulted in various exhibitions and has been widely published.

Quinn Latimer heads the Fine Arts MA at Institute Art Gender Nature, at the Basel Academy of Art and Design FHNW. She is a poet, critic, editor, and curator whose work often explores gendered relationships between literary and cinematic imaginaries and technologies. Her books include *Like a Woman: Essays, Readings, Poems* (2017); *Sarah Lucas: Describe This Distance* (2013); *Film as a Form of Writing: Quinn Latimer Talks to Akram Zaatari* (2013); and *Rumored Animals* (2012). Latimer was editor-in-chief of publications for documenta 14, in Athens and Kassel. She is editor of *SIREN (some poetics)* (2024), and coeditor of *Amazonia: Anthology as Cosmology* (2021) and *The documenta 14 Reader* (2017), among many other books.

BUILDING THE REAL THROUGH A SPECTRUM OF IMAGES:
A CONVERSATION ON PHOTOGRAPHY AND ARCHITECTURE WITH PHILIP URSPRUNG AND KAMBIZ SHAFEI

Kambiz Shafei is an Iranian lecturer, photographer, and designer based in Basel, where he teaches at the Institute Digital Communication Environments of the Basel Academy of Art and Design FHNW. His work focuses on the relationship of architecture and its images, and he collaborates closely with artists, cultural institutions, and architects. Kambiz is currently

finishing a PhD thesis, titled *New Material Presences in Photography*, at the University of Art and Design Linz, in Austria.

Philip Ursprung is professor of the history of art and architecture in the Department of Architecture at ETH Zurich. He has also taught at Universität der Künste Berlin; Columbia University in New York City; and Cornell University in Ithaca, New York. His books include *Joseph Beuys: Kunst Kapital Revolution* (2021); *Der Wert der Oberfläche* (2017); and *Allan Kaprow, Robert Smithson, and the Limits to Art* (2013). He is editor of *Herzog & de Meuron: Natural History* (2002), and coeditor of *Gordon Matta-Clark: An Archival Sourcebook* (2022). In 2023, with Karin Sander, Ursprung represented Switzerland at the 18th Architecture Biennale in Venice.

SCRATCHING THE SURFACE OF ART HISTORY, OR A DECOLONIAL AESTHETICS OF POOR COPIES
CAMILA LUCERO ALLEGRI AND INES KLEESATTEL IN CONVERSATION

Ines Kleesattel is an expert in aesthetic theory, art education, and cultural studies. Her research addresses relational practices of critique, situated aesthetics, experimental forms of theorizing, and methods of translocal and transtemporal artistic research. Since 2023, she has been a professor at the Basel Academy of Art and Design FHNW at the Institute Arts and Design Education (IADE), where she also leads the Arts and Design Education MA.

Camila Lucero Allegri is an artist and art mediator born in Concepción, Chile. Her work encompasses individual and collective projects across Chile and Switzerland, including her role as a guest artist at Bienal SACO 1.1 in Antofagasta, and a collaboration with RU Kollektiv in Basel. After receiving a BA in visual arts from Universidad de Concepción, in Chile, and an MA in visual arts from Universidad de Chile, she earned her BA and MA in arts and design education from the Institute Arts and Design Education (IADE), at the Basel Academy of Art and Design FHNW.

DEGREES OF FICTION, OR TRANSFORMING THE CONDITIONS OF REAL LIFE
MARIANA PESTANA IN CONVERSATION WITH SELENA SAVIĆ, GABRIELA AQUIJE, AND EVELYNE ROTH

Mariana Pestana is an architect and curator interested in critical social practice and the role of fiction in reimagining futures for an age marked by technological progress and ecological crisis. She is co-founder and director of The Decorators, an interdisciplinary studio that makes collaborative projects ranging from furniture to buildings, with the aim to expand notions of place, community, and eating together. She is currently an invited assistant professor at Instituto Superior Técnico in Lisbon, and a researcher at ITI (Interactive Technologies Institute) in Funchal, Portugal.

Gabriela Aquije is a Peruvian landscape architect and PhD candidate in the MAKE/SENSE program of the Basel Academy of Art and Design FHNW. Her project "Culinary Re-turn" explores ways of cooking with the landscape between Peru and Switzerland as a regenerative and decolonial (design) labor. Together with Cocinas Alterinas, she digests ecologies, pleasure politics of food into audiovisual and writing pieces, and conducts dining experiments. In parallel, she teaches at the Basel Academy of Art and Design FHNW CoCreate program, and co-runs the Basel Academy's FoodCultureLab, a kitchen and a collaborative lab for interdisciplinary food practices.

Evelyne Roth is a fashion designer, lecturer, and PhD candidate at the Institute Contemporary Design Practices (ICDP) at the Basel Academy of Art and Design FHNW. Her ongoing dissertation in the MAKE/SENSE PhD program is titled "Circular Design Processes, Alteration in Aesthetics, Methods, and Practices in Fashion and Textiles." A forecasting expert, she is a member of Intercolor (International and Interdisciplinary Platform of Color) and an external advisor of the Forecast Board of Première Vision in Paris. She is a member of the Board of Trustees and Panel of Experts of the Bern Design Foundation, and a jury member for the Swiss Design Awards from the Swiss Federal Office of Culture.

Selena Savić is a researcher and trained architect. She researches and writes about computational modelling, feminist hacking, and posthuman networks in the context of art, design, and architecture. Her research animates a practice at the intersection of computational processes and posthumanist and postcolonial critique of technology. After completing her PhD at the Swiss Federal Institute of Technology (EPFL) and a post-doc at the Department for Architecture Theory and Philosophy of Technics (ATTP), TU Vienna, she joined the Institute Experimental Design and Media Cultures (IXDM), Basel Academy of Art and Design FHNW, where she was previously head of the MAKE/SENSE PhD program. She is now assistant professor at the University of Amsterdam.

"HOLDING RIVERS, BECOMING MOUNTAINS" AND DOCUMENTARY AS A SPECULATIVE GESTURE
SOLVEIG QU SUESS AND JOHANNES BRUDER IN CONVERSATION

Solveig Qu Suess works within the fields of documentary film and artistic research. Her films and writings investigate the optics of an increasingly unpredictable world, exploring questions of power and perception, the negotiation of bodies and environments, and image practices that escape the boundaries of their frame. Her works have been shown widely, including at the Li Xianting Film Fund Beijing, International Film Festival Rotterdam, Fondazione Prada in Venice, and the Guangzhou Image Triennial. She was a Digital Earth Fellow (2018–19) and the recipient of the Gwaertler Foundation Grant in 2022. She is a junior researcher at the Critical Media Lab, Basel Academy of Art and Design FHNW, and a PhD candidate in urban studies at the University of Basel.

Johannes Bruder heads the Critical Media Lab at the Institute of Experimental Design and Media Cultures (IXDM), HGK Basel FHNW. He studies the speculative and imaginary aspects of infrastructures—sociological models, psychological mechanisms, and affective potentials—encoded in infrastructural designs ranging from algorithmic systems to financial markets to pipelines. He is currently most interested in imaginaries of energy, physical and affective. He has contributed to Transmediale, the Anthropocene Curriculum, the Energy Show at Het Nieuwe Instituut, and AI: Artificial Intelligence at the Centre de Cultura Contemporània de Barcelona (CCCB). His writing has been published by Routledge, MIT Press, Open Humanities Press, Valiz, and MQUP. He received his doctorate from the University of Lucerne.

SOUND ACCUMULATES AND DOESN'T DIE
BASEL ABBAS AND RUANNE ABOU-RAHME IN CONVERSATION WITH QUINN LATIMER AND CHUS MARTÍNEZ

Basel Abbas and Ruanne Abou-Rahme work together across a range of sound, image, text, installation, and performance practices. Engaged in the intersections between performativity, political imaginaries, the body, and virtuality, their work searches for an emerging imaginary and language that is not bound within colonial/capitalist narratives and discourse. Often reflecting on ideas of non-linearity in the form of returns, amnesia, and deja vu, and in the process unfolding the slippages between actuality and projection, their approach has been one of sampling materials both existing and self-authored and recasting them into altogether new scripts. Abbas and Abou-Rahme were born in Nicosia, Cyprus, and Boston, Massachusetts, respectively, and now live and work between Ramallah and New York. Their work has recently been the subject of solo exhibitions at MIT List Visual Arts Center, Cambridge; MoMA, New York; Astrup Fearnley Museet, Oslo; and elsewhere. Their book, *And Yet My Mask Is Powerful* (2017), emerges from the exhibition and film of the same name, addressing the apocalyptic logic of the perpetual crisis of the contemporary moment.

Quinn Latimer (see biography above.)

Chus Martínez is professor and head of the Institute Art Gender Nature at the Basel Academy of Arts and Design FHNW. She was the expedition leader of The Current, a project initiated by TBA21–Academy (2018–2020), and until 2022 she was the artistic director of Ocean Space, Venice, a space initiated by TBA21–Academy. The Current is also the inspiration behind

Art is Ocean, a series of seminars and conferences held at the Institute Art Gender Nature that examine the role of artists in the conception of a new experience of nature. At the Institute Art Gender Nature she is currently leading the research project The Genders' Factor, on the role of education in enhancing equality in the arts. She is associate curator of TBA21-Academy as well as curator at large at the Vuslat Foundation in Istanbul. She received her doctorate from the Autonomous University of Barcelona.

HEALING FROM METEORITES
HIMALI SINGH SOIN AND ALEXIS RIDER IN CONVERSATION WITH ELISE LAMMER

Himali Singh Soin works across text, performance, and the moving image. She utilizes metaphors from the natural environment to construct speculative cosmologies that reveal nonlinear entanglements between human and nonhuman life. Her poetic methodology explores technologies of knowing—scientific, intuitional, Indigenous, alchemical—and she uses outer space to navigate alien distances and earthly intimacy, rewiring ideas of nativism, nationality, nihilism, and cultural flight. Inspirations include the ancient Stoics and contemporary literature; manipulating semiotic flows, she observes microstructures of social and geopoetic time. Soin has performed and exhibited at the Art Institute of Chicago; the Serpentine Galleries, London; Dhaka Art Summit, Dhaka; Somerset House, London; HKW, Berlin. She has received the India Foundation for the Arts Award and the Frieze Artist Award.

Alexis Rider is a historian of science and the environment whose work focuses on the geosphere, biosphere, and cryosphere as sites of theorization and knowledge-making. She is currently finishing a book on ice and time, and she will shortly begin one on wood and waste. She is a research associate at the University of Cambridge, England, a keen collaborator beyond the academy, and an avid potter who is always humbled by the agency of the clay in her hands.

Elise Lammer is a curator engaged with exhibition-making, public programming, archiving, teaching, and gardening. Her work questions the role of space (public, domestic) in defining the construction of identity; with a transgenerational, intersectional approach, she reassesses normative narratives that have suffered from monolithic, one-sided integration within history. Lammer produces research on the garden of British artist, filmmaker, author, and gay rights activist Derek Jarman, and since 2019, she has been developing a garden in homage to Jarman's Prospect Cottage at the La Becque Artist Residency in La Tour-de-Peilz, where she's also creating an archive and artistic program aimed at his legacy. She is a lecturer in the Fine Arts BA at Institute Art Gender Nature, Basel Academy of Art and Design FHNW, and curator of the IAGN Art Talks series.

TO ARRIVE AT BEAUTY: ARTIFICIAL INTELLIGENCE, AUTHORSHIP, AND AGENCY IN PRACTICE AND PEDAGOGY
MARCEL GYGLI AND ANNA FLURINA KÄLIN IN CONVERSATION WITH NICOLAJ VAN DER MEULEN

Marcel Gygli is currently professor for AI in the Public Sector at Bern University of Applied Sciences. In this role he focuses on how natural language processing methods can enable actors in the public sector to better serve the public. He holds a PhD in computer science from University of Fribourg and has worked on numerous research projects.

Anna Flurina Kälin has an MA in arts education and a BA in informatics. She is co-founder of the software and culture company freisicht, which develops AR and VR software for exhibition curation and cultural mediation and creates new digital design possibilities. Anna is also an art educator at the HEK and Kunstmuseum Basel. Together with Julia Schicker, she curates the Artist Talks Art & Computer Science at ETH Zurich.

Nicolaj van der Meulen is professor at the Basel Academy of Art and Design FHNW, where he is head of research for IADE and the CoCreate program. He studied art history and philosophy in Berlin and Basel, and received his doctorate from the University of Basel in 2000, with a thesis on the temporality of cubist images. Van der Meulen's work addresses theories of pictorial,

aesthetic, and artistic practices. His recent emphasis focuses on the subjects of aesthetic judgment and of cooking and eating as aesthetic practice.

BUILDING COMMUNITIES: ON MAKING OPEN-SOURCE TOOLS FOR ARTISTS AND DESIGNERS
LAUREN LEE MCCARTHY AND CASEY REAS IN DIALOGUE WITH TED DAVIS

Lauren Lee McCarthy (she/they) is an artist examining social relationships in the midst of surveillance, automation, and algorithmic living, and professor at UCLA Design Media Arts. She is a Creative Capital Awardee, LACMA Art + Tech Lab Grantee, and has been awarded fellowships and residencies from Sundance, Eyebeam, MacDowell, Pioneer Works, and Ars Electronica. Her work *SOMEONE* was awarded the Ars Electronica Golden Nica and the Japan Media Arts Social Impact Award; her work *LAUREN* was awarded the IDFA DocLab Award for Immersive Non-Fiction. She has exhibited widely, including at the Barbican Centre, London; Onassis Cultural Center, Athens; and the Seoul Museum of Art. She is the creator of p5.js, an open-source programming language for learning creative expression through code.

Casey Reas is a professor at the University of California, Los Angeles, where they are co-director of UCLA Social Software. Reas' software, prints, and installations have been featured in numerous solo and group exhibitions at museums and galleries. Their work builds upon concrete art, conceptual art, experimental animation, and drawing. The projects range from small works on paper to urban-scale installations, from solo projects in the studio to collaborations with architects and musicians. Reas co-founded Processing, an open-source, flexible software sketchbook and language for learning how to code within the context of the visual arts.

Ted Davis is an American media artist, designer, and educator based in Basel, where he teaches interaction design at the Institute Digital Communication Environments (IDCE), Basel Academy of Art and Design FHNW. His work and teachings explore the volatility of digital media through glitch, reactivating older new media through more current programming means. His open-source projects (basil.js, XYscope, P5LIVE, p5.glitch) enable designers to program within Adobe InDesign, render vector graphics on vector displays, and glitch media in real-time within the web browser. In 2019, he was a p5.js Contributors Conference participant, joining a working group focused on music and code in performance. In 2021 he received the Basler Medienkunstpreis for p5.glitch and was a Processing Foundation Teaching Fellow.

CHALLENGING HUMAN-AI COLLABORATIONS: ON BINARIES AND BIAS
AYLIN YILDIRIM TSCHOEPE AND ANDREAS WENGER IN CONVERSATION WITH QINGYI REN, HANNA SIPOS, AND JEFFREY MARTIN VOGT

Aylin Yildirim Tschoepe is a professor at the Basel Academy of Art and Design FHNW and Head of metaLAB (at) Basel. Holding a PhD in anthropology, Tschoepe focuses on the intersections of bodies, spaces, and ecologies as material and immaterial entanglements and more-than-human collaboration within the nexus of socio-cultural, spatial, and technological transformation. In research and teaching, Tschoepe engages a multimodal framework of feminist spatial practice, sensory ethnography, and expanded scenography.

Andreas Wenger is an architect, scenographer, and professor in the BA Interior Architecture and Scenography program and in the MA Studio Scenography at the Institute Contemporary Design Practices (ICDP) of the Basel Academy of Art and Design FHNW. Wenger is active as an expert on various juries and in application procedures and participates as a reviewer in accreditation procedures at European universities. He is a member of the Basel2030 committee, for a climate-friendly Basel with net zero greenhouse gas emissions by 2030, and is involved in the Circular Design Processes network.

Qingyi Ren is a queer artist, visual designer, and doctoral candidate in the MAKE/SENSE PhD program of the Basel Academy of Art and Design

FHNW. Broadly, they are interested in gender identity theory, AI ethics, and digital identity. They explore the real-world implications of machine learning for those with historically marginalized identities and are committed to being exposed to the existing bias that is still expanded under the guise of being neutral. Hanna Sipos received an MA in scenography at the Basel Academy of Art and Design FHNW and is a researcher at metaLAB, Basel Academy of Art and Design FHNW. Her main research focus is on archival absences, the deconstruction of archival hierarchies, destroyed art, meaningful inclusion of the art audience, and AI-human interactions. She often explores the potential of AI-led tools as a way to approach archival absences, filling the gaps with the help of a widespread audience.

Jeffrey Martin Vogt holds an MA in scenography from the Basel Academy of Art and Design FHNW. His research focuses on raising critical awareness of disinformation and conspiracy theories, drawing inspiration from working with AI on the classic tale, *Alice in Wonderland*. In his work, Vogt employs interactive and educational approaches to convey the importance of critical thinking in today's information society, while illustrating how disinformation can impact our larger society.

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