



FUTURE  
CONSCIENCE

April 1–30, 2023

Presented by  
Yerba Buena Center for the Arts  
and Studio Forward  
at California College of the Arts

YBCA and the CCA Studio Forward class are a perfect match for this moment. As YBCA continues to offer itself as a public resource and a place for creative collaboration, the Studio Forward class brings rigor, imagination, and a sense of hopefulness as they conceptualize what the future might look like. Exploration of materiality, technology, and the built environment inside the galleries offer a palpable vision for the next generation of leaders in the arts, design, and engineering. By collaborating on this project, we offer one another a chance to learn, grow, and expand our collective understanding of place.

**Martin Strickland**, Director of Curatorial Projects & Public Experience, Yerba Buena Center for the Arts

What's so rewarding about our partnership with CCA is that we're getting to work with students who have grown up in a completely different context—as digital natives, as young people experiencing the world in a moment of explosive social change. It's been great to hear how people coming from very different disciplines might approach the idea of the future of connection—and then take that and make it physical. Embarking on this opportunity together to think about the future brings benefit for both sides.

**Abigail Gray**, Director, UX at Google



WELCOME!

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A conversation with **Helen Maria Nugent**, Dean of Design at California College of the Arts, and MFA Design Faculty **Saraleah Fordyce** on the purpose of Studio Forward, the importance of futures literacy, and the critical cultural role of art and design education.

**Studio Forward is a new, open-ended design studio at California College of the Arts** in which interdisciplinary teams of design students dive deep into a contemporary topic. Over the course of two semesters they work together with faculty and external experts to transform their research into exploratory, speculative, and discursive design projects.

This year's course explores the future of culture and connection through the lens of music and sound, building upon a series of international design charrettes focused on 'Designing the Future of Music' led by CCA alumnus Lawrence Azerrad. CCA Graphic Design Chair Rachel Berger coordinates the 2022-23 Studio Forward collaboration, and faculty leads Cristina Gaitán and Max Batt have been working side by side with students each week in the studio.

The exhibit, **Future Resonance**, is put on in partnership with YBCA and shares the students' explorations with the larger Bay Area art and design community. Studio Forward is sponsored by Google. Their generous philanthropic support lets us evolve our learning and teaching paradigms, and build a mutually beneficial bridge between academia and industry.

**Saraleah Fordyce:** What did you think might come out of the Studio Forward course this year?

**Helen Maria Nugent:** It's important to recognize that a course like this is not about solutions or finite endpoints, but about using the medium of design to ask questions about what matters to our collective futures, so we go into it with that in mind. In this research-focused course the faculty become mentors and wayfinding companions rather than answer givers.

**SF:** How does Studio Forward fit into the larger curricular plans of the Design Division?

**HMN:** UNESCO has identified 'futures literacy' as an essential skill for the 21st century. Designers are on the front lines of imagining and creating the 'new,' and the concept of literacy supports the importance and skillfulness required in the work of futuring. Across the Design Division students are in courses that advance their visual, cultural, and futures literacy while building robust craft skills. Studio Forward is a capstone experience that provides students with the time, space, and resources to put all of these skills to work. Speaking for all of our nine design programs, our goal is to equip emerging designers with the creative capacity to deliver inspired, generative solutions and the wherewithal to develop designed futures that act as a catalyst for change.

**SF:** A lot of the early speculative design that came out had a distinctly sinister or pessimistic aesthetic, but that seems to be changing.

**HMN:** Yes, dystopian science fiction is a familiar genre, but speculative and fictional design can be so much more than that. Studio Forward is built on the premise that design can be a tool for engaging others in the work of imagining a more inclusive, sustainable, and joyful future.

# FUTURES LITERACY

A COURSE LIKE THIS IS NOT ABOUT SOLUTIONS OR FINITE ENDPOINTS, BUT ABOUT USING THE MEDIUM OF DESIGN TO ASK QUESTIONS ABOUT WHAT MATTERS TO OUR COLLECTIVE FUTURES.



# NOTHING IS DESIGNED

WE ARE NOT  
AIMING TO  
PROBLEM  
SOLVE OR MAKE  
PREDICTIONS,

BUT TO CRITICALLY  
EXPLORE POSSIBLE,  
PROBABLE, PLAUSIBLE,  
OR PREFERRED  
FUTURES.

**Futures literacy is becoming a key skill for designers.**

One of the most provocative arenas of contemporary design, speculative design is a way of researching and making for potential futures with the aim of critiquing the present. It relies on storytelling with the future as the setting, and the plot implied by design artifacts. The purpose is not prediction, but rather a way to see the concerns of the present in a different light. It is a form of defamiliarization, and a branch of discursive design.

“Speculative design,” explains Sara Dean, the Assistant Chair of MFA Design, “questions the power and value dynamics that we have currently. It’s hard to work on the present and not reinforce the values or power dynamics in play. To speculate is to imagine different scenarios and situations that work can live in.”

Beginning in foundational courses and woven all the way through to MFA thesis work, this method of critical scenario casting uses traditional design skills, but for a different purpose. The aim is not to remove friction from experience, rather to add the friction that cues reflection and discussion among viewers.

**SF:** Why are designers specially equipped for future casting?

**HMN:** Designers are sense-makers. Design education teaches a breadth of creative methods and strategies for tackling complex problems and finding traction in the uncertainty of our hyper-changing world. Designers are also experts in the craft of communicating as yet unrealized concepts. Digital renderings, visual storytelling, video scenarios, models, and prototypes are all methods that bring the imagined scenarios to life so that stakeholders can ‘see’ the proposed concept, consider its positive potential, and identify negative consequences.

**SF:** How are traditional design skills at play in this kind of work?

**HMN:** We use the same technical, thinking, and craft skills, but more as a tool for advocacy and activism. In this type of work we are not aiming to problem solve or make predictions, but to critically explore possible, probable, plausible, or preferred futures.

**SF:** We often think of design as being in service to a client, but speculative work has a different agenda. Is it the agenda of the designer?

**HMN:** Critical and speculative design requires that the designer build out a position on the issues inherent in the project in order to spark dialogue. That said, the point of view might be one that the designer holds strongly, or they might build a project around a controversial position as a way to solicit more acute responses, reactions, or reflections. The advocacy in a critical speculative project is focused around building greater awareness of an issue and encouraging active participation from stakeholders.



**Art and design education fosters the creative thinking that the world needs.** It's common to mythologize the arts as existing at the fringe of society, but historically they require robust support to flourish. Attending art and design school may seem risky to some, with the career path being less obvious than others, and indeed, it takes a particular courage to choose this vocation. But, the larger risk we should be considering is a future world that is built without the strategic foresight, empathy, and problem solving disposition that a design education instills. We count on artists and designers to build bridges of vision from where we are to potential future models, to give form to ways of seeing and being that are not here yet. Our deepest beliefs and behaviors are made not of what we know, but what we feel, and designers are particularly facile at the cognitive flexibility and sensorial defamiliarization that is needed.

Like scientists, designers are hungry to know what is not working, to feel the effect of our actions, to see how we have got it wrong, and to give each other the honest feedback that is required to improve. Integral to our training is the ability to analyze a problem that is open ended, thinking about how to begin, to move through it, to develop parameters around a solution, and to be comfortable with real-world ambiguity. Our work lives in how it is experienced by others and we stretch ourselves to constantly imagine a larger scope of participants, moving beyond a human-centered model towards non-humans, ecosystems, and future generations.

**SF:** A robust design education requires immense resources, is that the right place to be putting our attention right now?

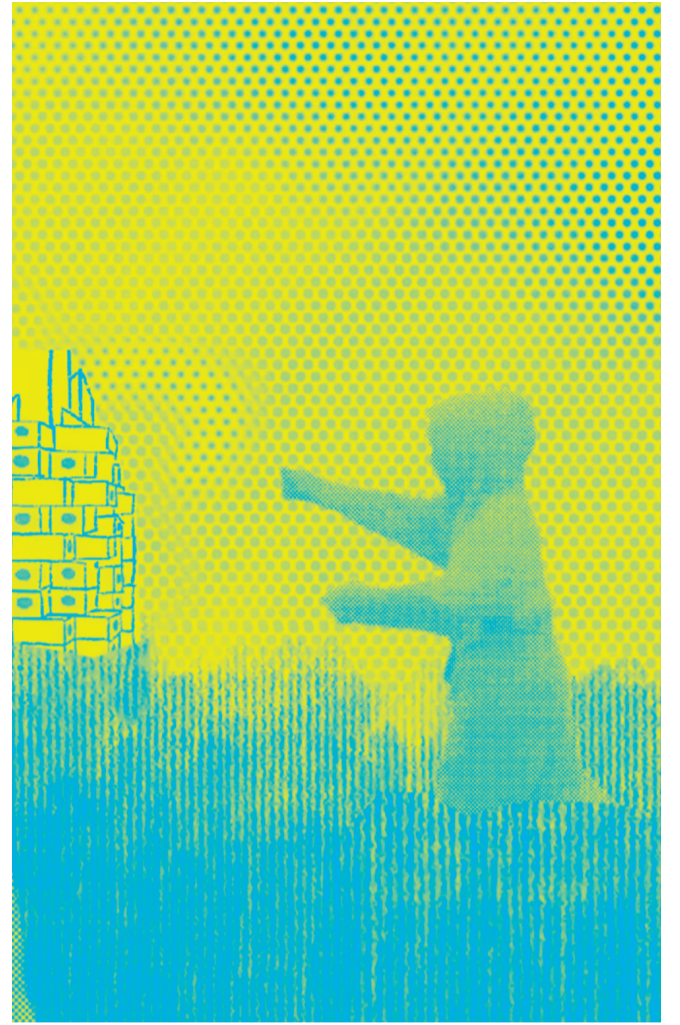
**HMN:** Design is a practice, not a set of quick rules. The only way to learn is to 'do' and that takes time. Design classes are small because it takes hands-on one-to-one instruction to help an individual move through the problems that arise when learning a new skill, tool, technology, material, or most importantly, way of thinking. We need more people that are skilled in dynamic problem solving and creative thinking across all sectors of our communities.

**SF:** How do we make design education more accessible?

**HMN:** Arturo Escobar talks about the world-making power of design, and as William Gibson famously said, "The future is already here—it's just not evenly distributed." Finding creative ways to open our doors to a greater diversity of students is the only way to ensure that this future world-making is inclusive and equitable. Our sponsors recognize the social, cultural, and economic value of design, and we are slowly seeing more support in the form of industry funded scholarships and corporate backed initiatives like 'Diversity in Design.' Sponsored courses like Studio Forward are another key way to level the playing field for students because they provide the means for making ideas at full-scale and high resolution, and sharing them beyond our walls.

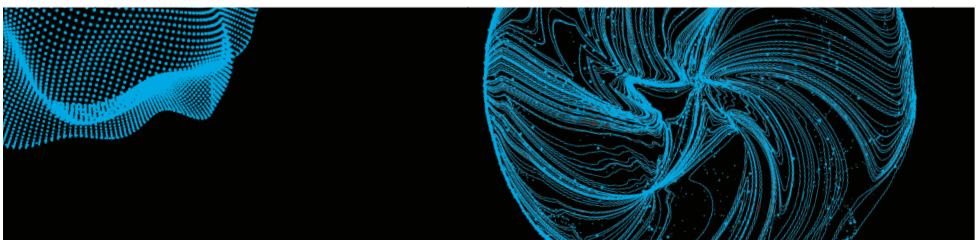
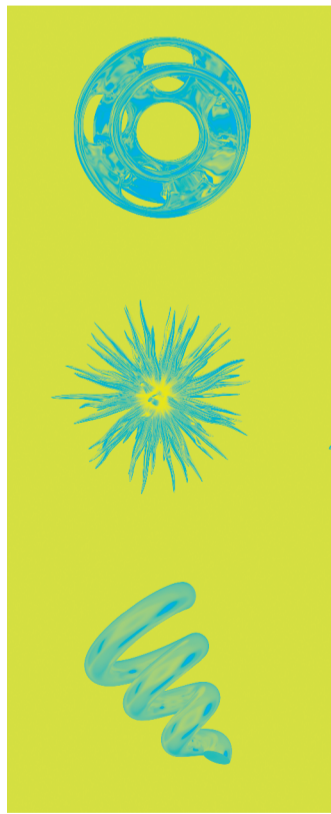
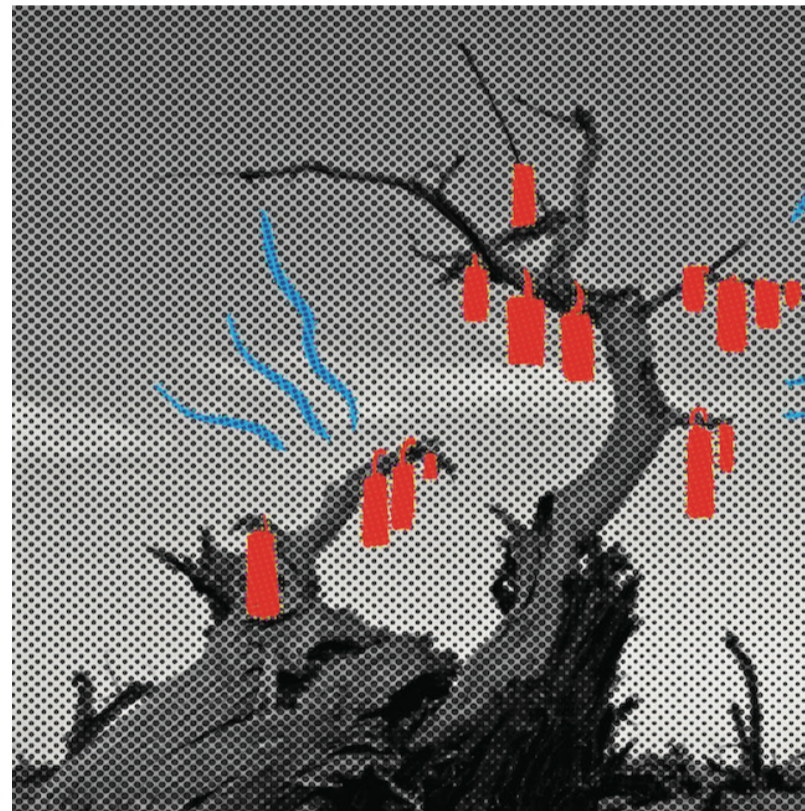


**FINDING CREATIVE  
WAYS TO OPEN  
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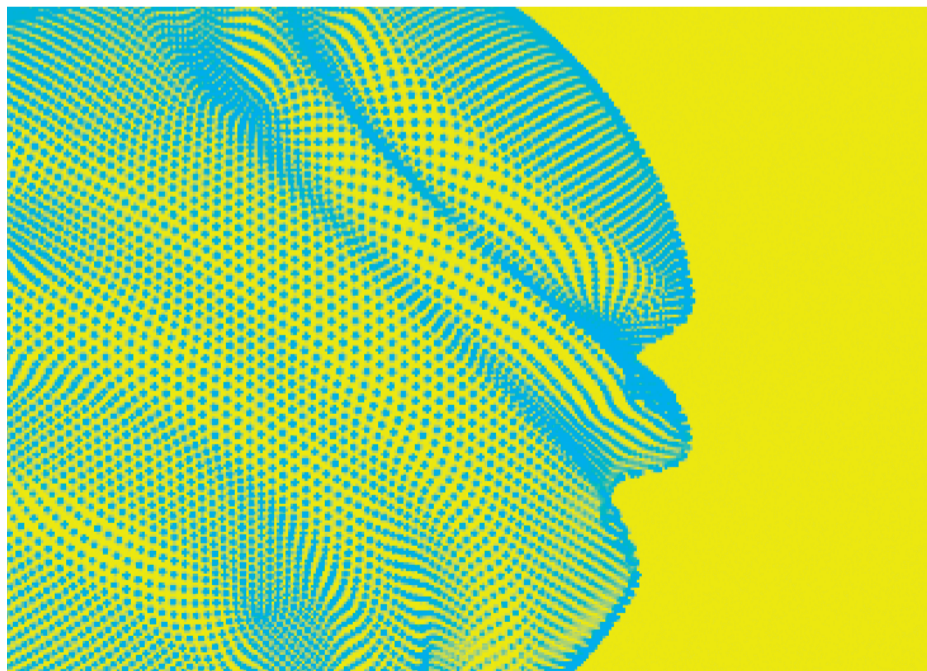
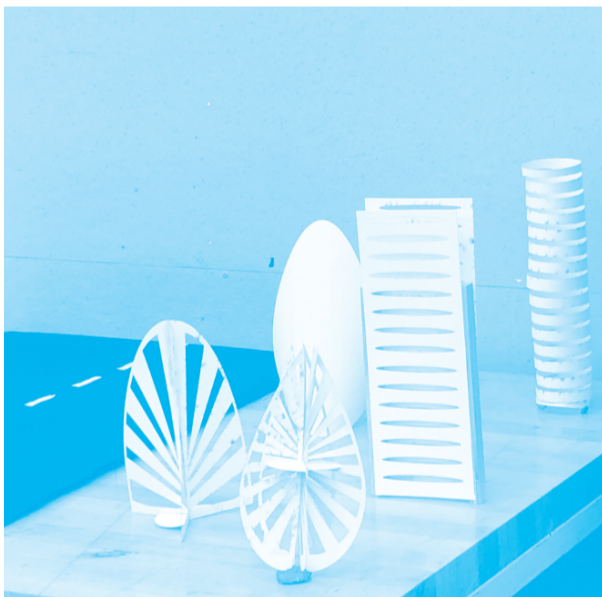
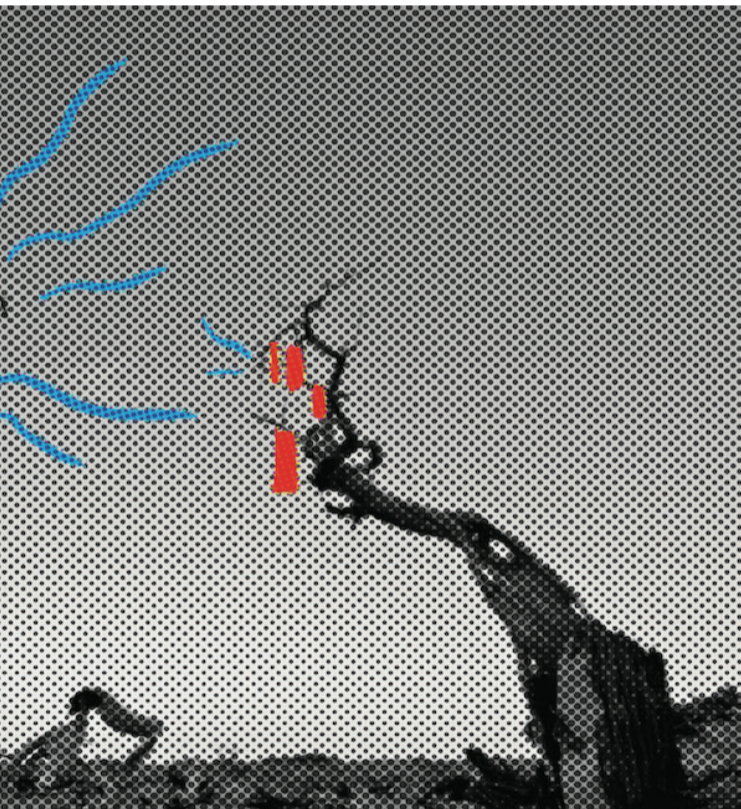
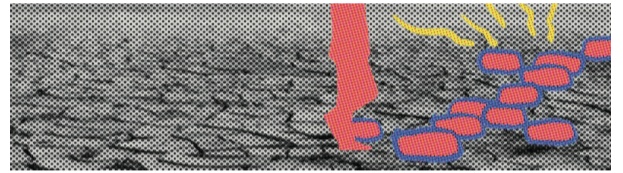
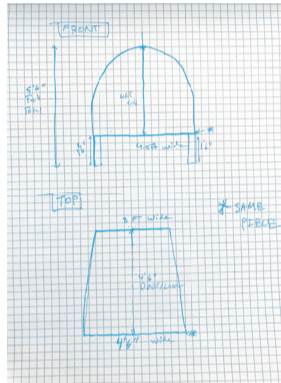
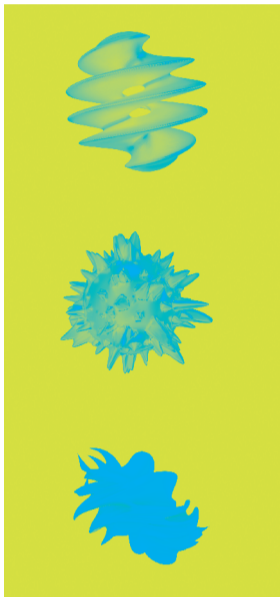


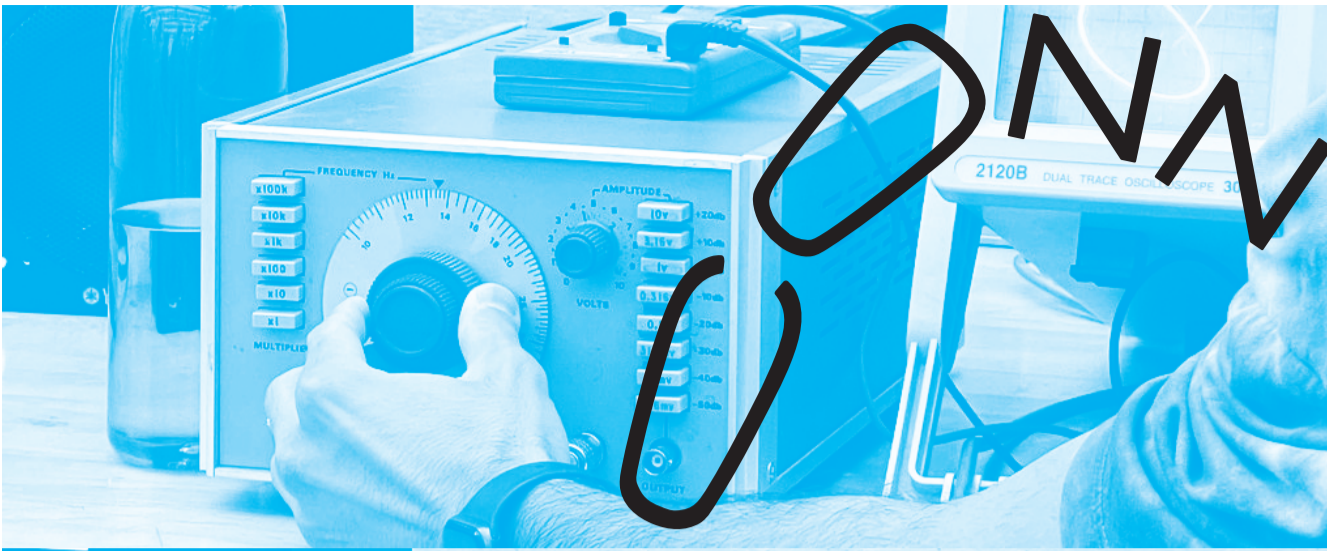
**Images of the Studio**

**Forward creative process.** Photographs of students at work by Nicholas Lea Bruno.

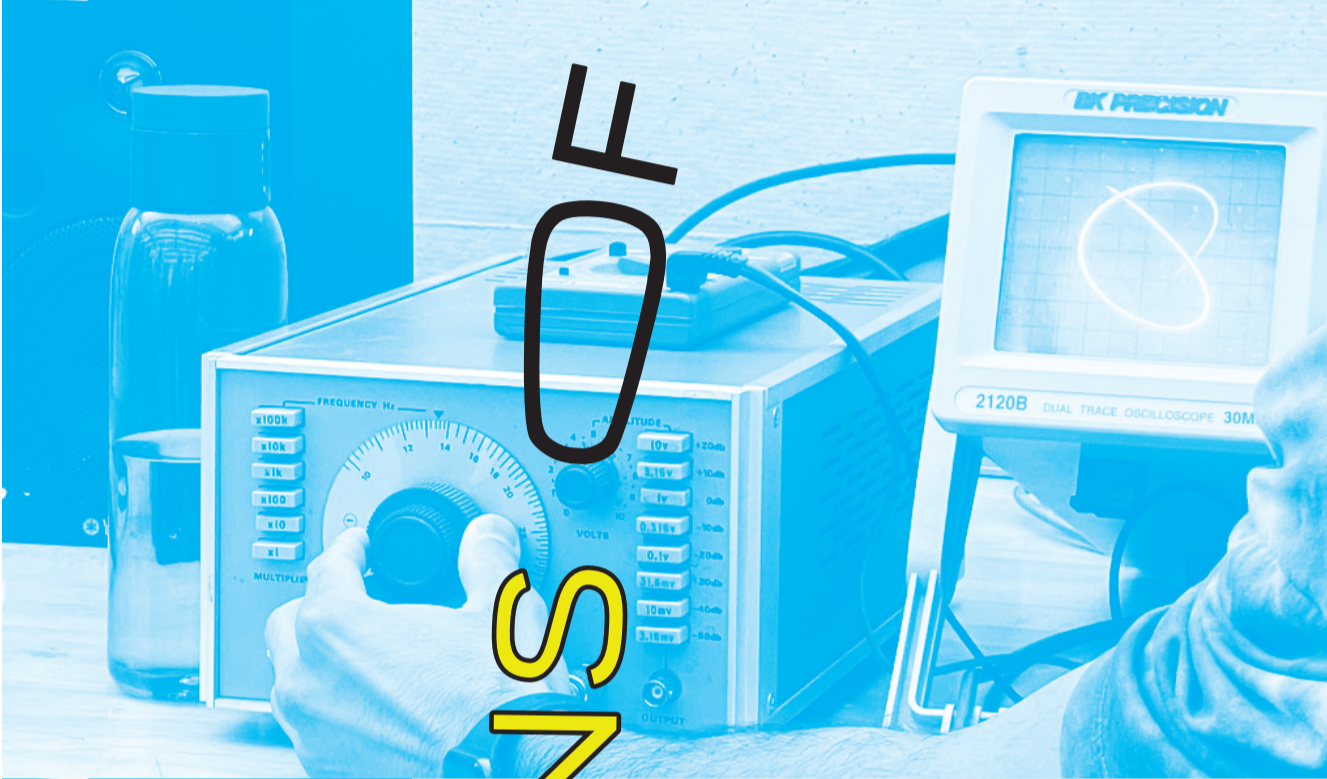




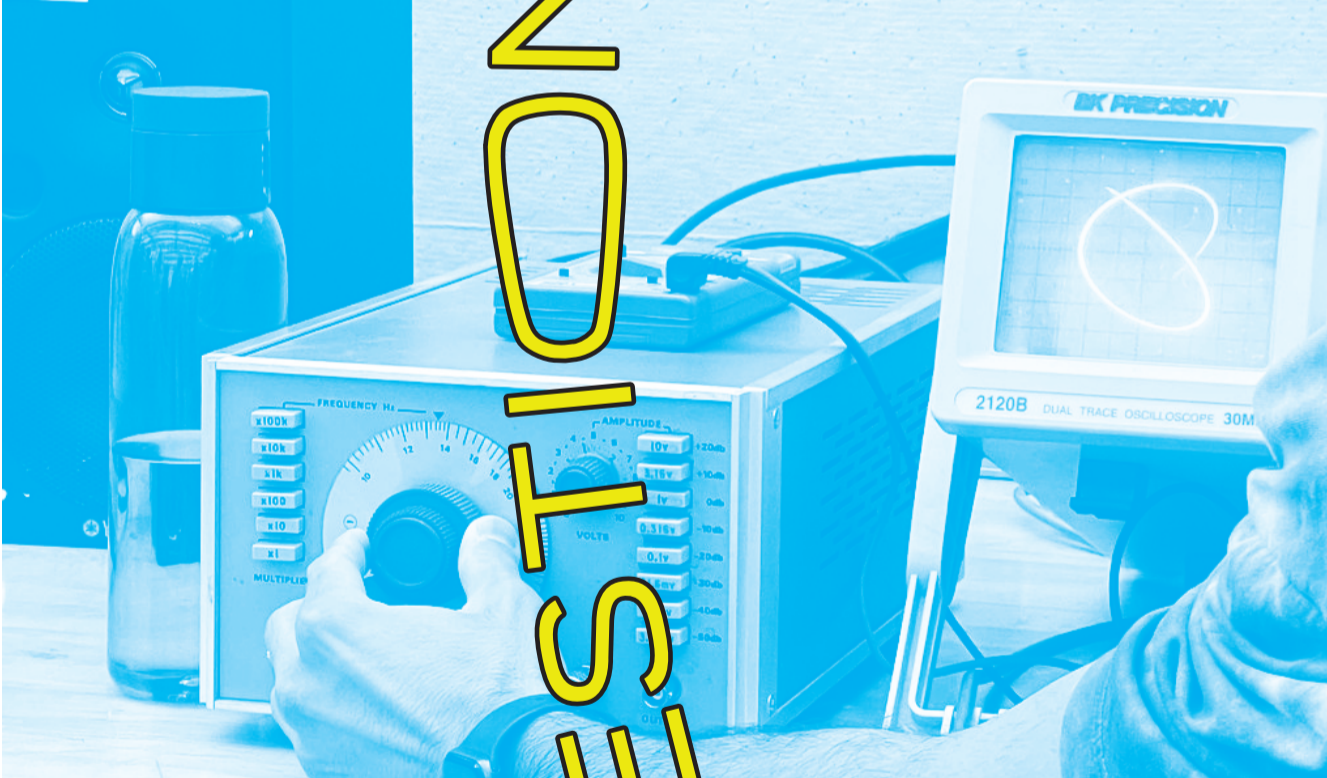




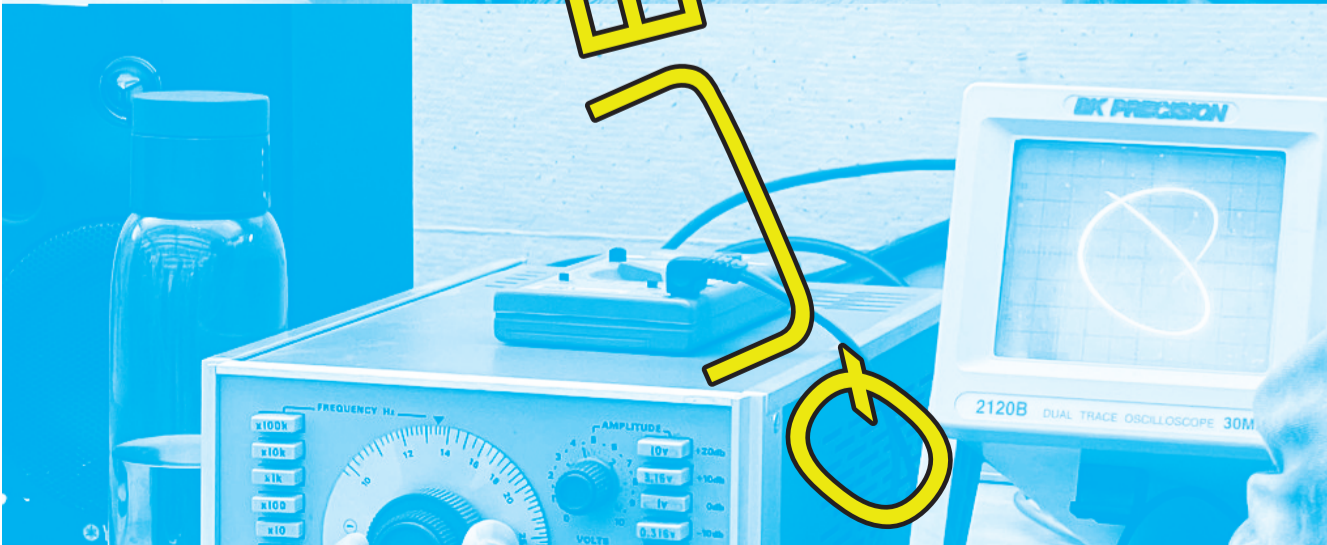
KNOWN



OF



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TESTING



EFFECT

## Curatorial Statement

In California College of the Arts' Studio Forward course, students learn speculative design methods that equip them to imagine and build better futures. For the **Future Resonance** exhibition, the students have chosen to create projects that redirect the tactics of speculative design to process what is going on for them *right now*—to mourn, to connect, to feel.

As we emerge from the social, political, and cultural isolation of the recent past, the projects in the show wrestle with questions of connection: How does technology disconnect us from ourselves, from each other, from nature? How might the technology we use right now allow for more connection? How can design be used to critique or amplify that connection? Some of the works draw on personal narratives to preserve memory and foster empathy across time and space. Others present intricate organic forms inspired by biotechnology to trace boundaries and investigate bridges between humans, machines, and the environment.

These diverse responses share certain qualities. Throughout the exhibition, the students embrace sound and light as fundamental materials in their projects, bathing their work in multisensory fields to envelope and engage visitors. Many of the students had not previously worked with sound. Through this work, they explore its power to propel connection, transform consciousness, and carry cultural knowledge across space and time.

**Future Resonance** holds an essential paradox. Resonance is a quality of sound—deep, full, reverberant—as in the resonance of a voice or instrument. It is also a psychological quality—evoking images, memories, and feelings—as in emotional resonance. In both cases, its reference point is the past, to something previously experienced. When paired with Future, Resonance stretches out, vibrating across time, simultaneously holding our memories, our right nows, and all our possible futures.

**Max Batt** and  
**Cristina Gaitán**  
Studio Forward Faculty

**Rachel Berger**  
Studio Forward  
Project Director

# THE BEAUTY OF THE NATURAL MARINE SOUNDSCAPE AND THE DESTABILIZING IMPACT OF HUMAN ACTIVITY ON THE MARINE SONOSPHERE.

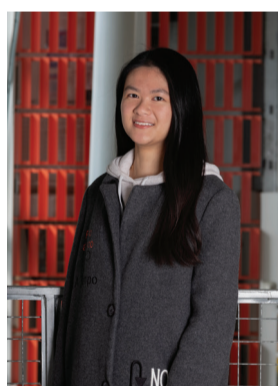
## **Sound is essential to the survival of marine life.**

Whales, dolphins, and other sea animals rely on sound to communicate, navigate, and find mates. Human activities like shipping and deep sea mining pose a deadly threat to marine life, not just by their presence but also by emitting toxic sounds into the soundscape. Mammals and fish aren't the only life affected by noise pollution. Plants, like seagrass, can experience significant damage after just two hours of exposure to toxic sound. Seagrass is a vital element in the marine ecosystem, providing habitat, food, and nurseries for invertebrates. This life-giving plant acts as a filtering system for the water and removes carbon from the earth's atmosphere. Seagrass is a key climate ally.

**Hear They Are** highlights the beauty of the natural marine soundscape and the destabilizing impact of human activity on the marine sonosphere. It aims to inspire a more harmonious relationship between humanity and our aquatic neighbors.



With a background in both industrial design and user experience design, **Taoyu Li** is passionate about problem-solving while creating opportunities for joy. She employs a deep understanding of form, function, and human behavior to create solutions that are aesthetically pleasing and generate a sense of calm and happiness.



**Jessie Peng** is a user experience designer passionate about human-centered designs focusing on human interactions and experiences. She embraces technology and values sustainability with the intention of applying her design to real-world challenges. Her goal as a designer is to reduce negative experiences in our lives and cultivate happiness.



**Viola Sun** is a user experience designer with a background in visual design, leveraging speculative and systems thinking to create opportunities that benefit all living species. She aspires to optimize user experiences at the intersection of design, media, and technology for a more enjoyable, inclusive, and sustainable world.

HEAR THEY ARE



# THE POWER OF STORYTELLING TO FOSTER HUMAN CONNECTION AND EMPATHY.

**Contentious political borders and the global pandemic have increased isolation and separated loved ones all over the world.** This work is an audio-visual installation featuring interviews about experiences of forced isolation, showcasing the unique experiences, emotions, and personal narratives people experienced during their time apart. Universal themes emerge from the stories we share. **The Absence Between Us** highlights the power of storytelling to foster human connection and empathy, and you are invited to reflect on your own experiences during times of isolation.



**Ziyan / Celia Cai** is a graphic designer and interaction designer. Her skill set includes assembling images, typography, illustration, motion graphics, and responding to user experience to create new pieces of design. Her goal is to deliver innovative concepts and well-executed solutions.



**Flora Nong** is a user experience designer who strives to create a future that is sustainable and inclusive. By designing seamless experiences for customer-facing products, Flora aims to spearhead product design methods that take sustainability and social responsibility into account.



**Zhuoran Zhu** is a designer and artist with a passion for storytelling through diverse mediums. She enjoys creating visually compelling narratives through illustration, comics, graphic design, and animation. With a keen interest in humanities and social sciences she is eager to discover new ways to tell engaging and impactful stories beyond the traditional art forms.

THE ABSENCE BETWEEN US

# STORIES OF GRIEF FROM THE PANDEMIC.

**We lost ourselves during the pandemic.** After undergoing a chaotic process, our grief manifested itself in a new way. 'It' now floats above us and is overwhelming. The reason for its appearance is not clear and it is hard to predict how we will navigate its presence or departure. **Segue** is an intersecting funneling system of tubes floating in mid-air. Each tube plays recorded audio with stories of grief from the pandemic. We hope you will touch and listen to our story cloud, and experience our belief in the importance of thoughts, sentiments, and wishes.



**Ashna Shah** is a multidisciplinary designer with a background in visual communication design. She believes in creating channels of communication that serve all realms of people and work. Happiness pushes her boundaries; her passion for poetry helps her fabricate; and lemons have aided her creativity.

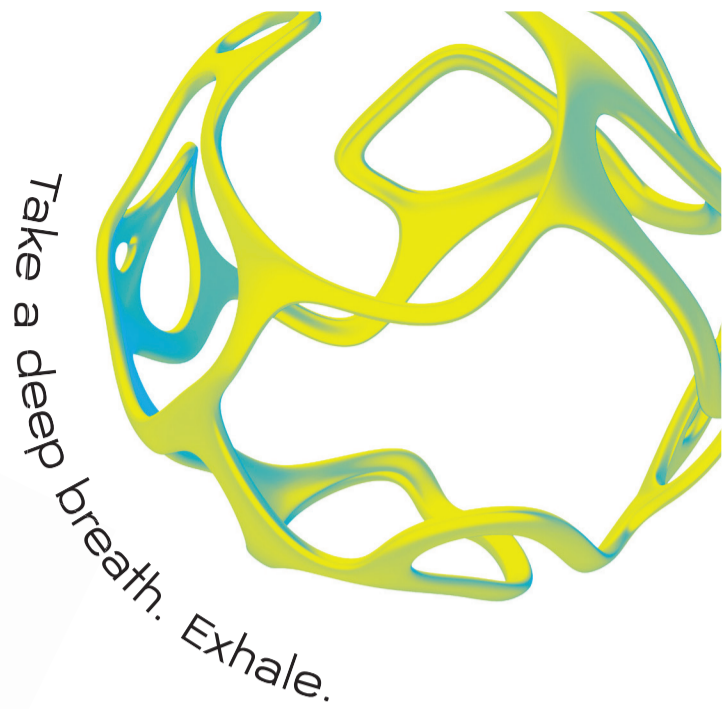
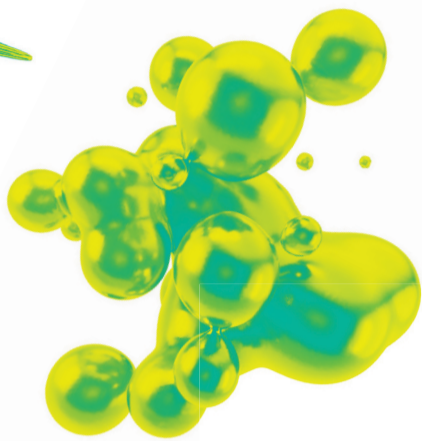
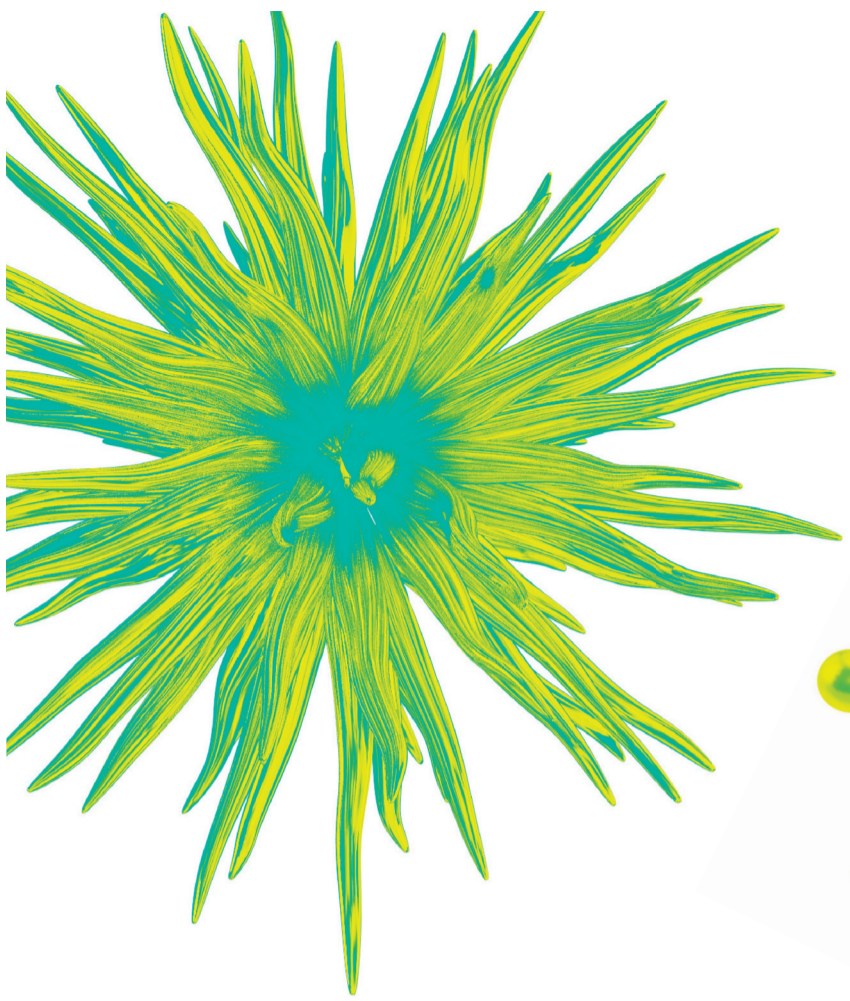


**Kennedi Watkins** is an interaction designer and activist. She has worked on projects in the realm of sound design, spatial work, public installations, and sensory experiences. Watkins' work brings a clear focus on physical representation of ideas, purposeful storytelling through connection, and the desire to make an impact in communities.



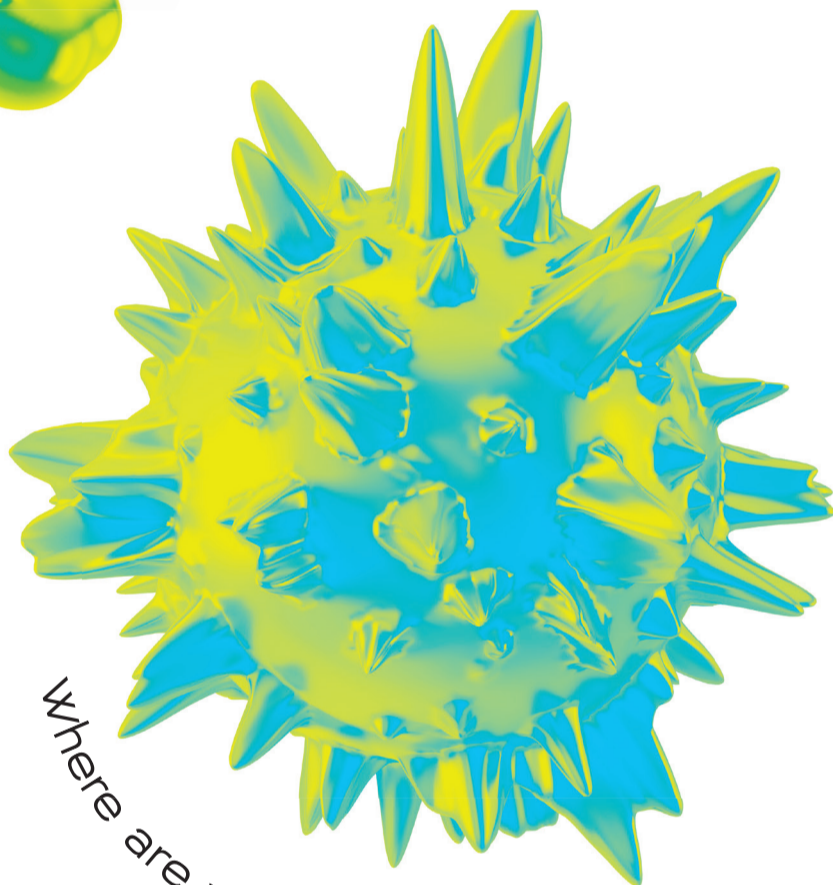


SEGA LJE

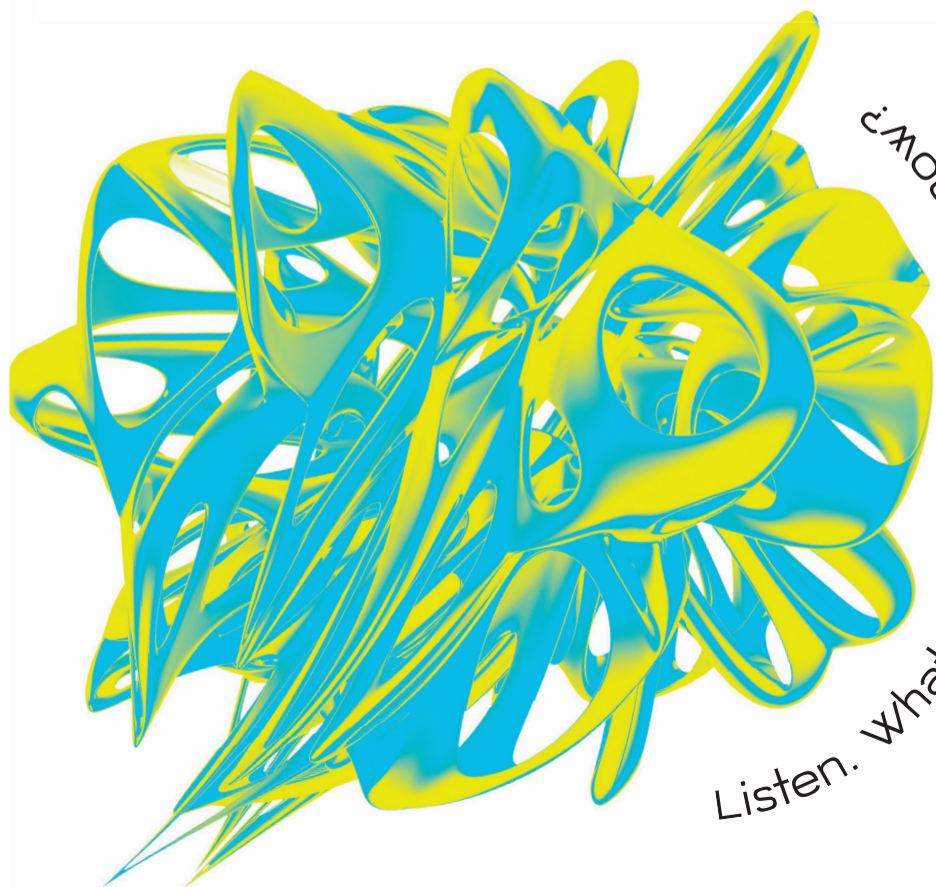
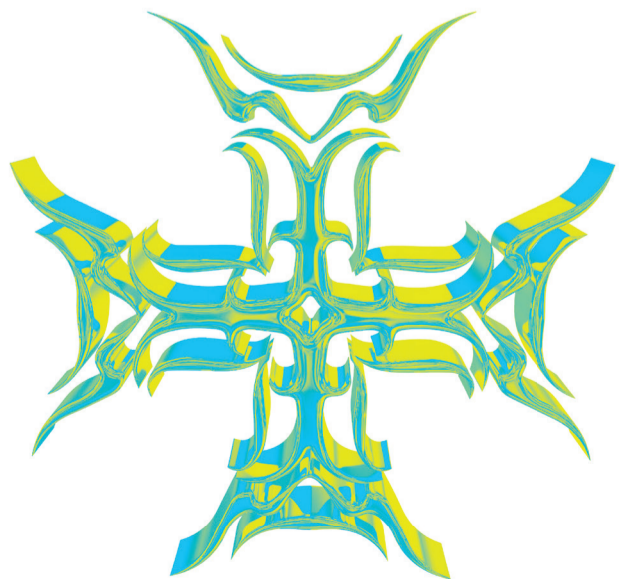


Take a deep breath. Exhale.

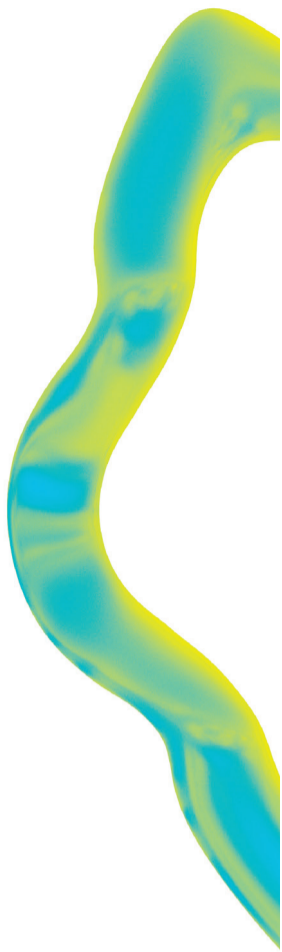
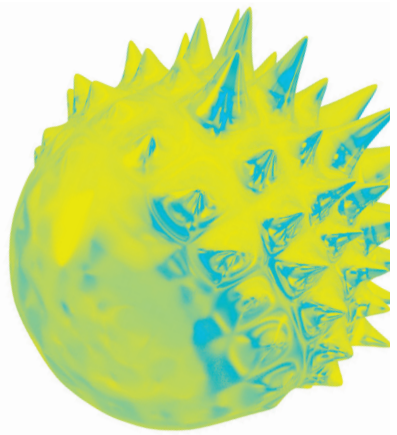
What do you do to feel a sense of calm in a world of chaos?



Where are your memories?



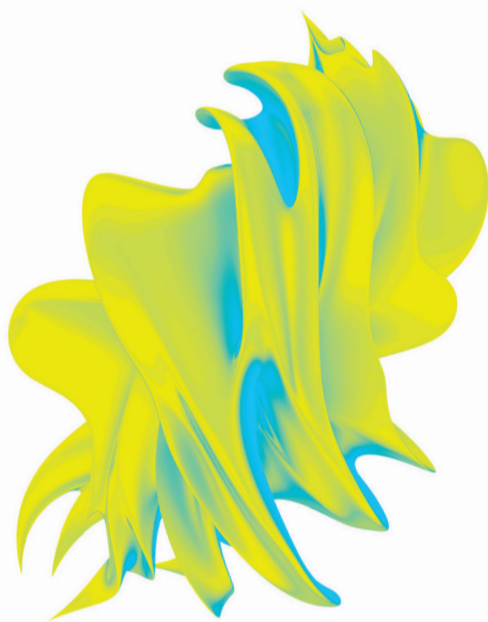
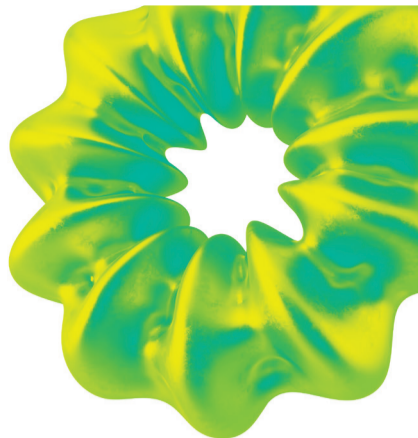
Listen. What can you hear right now?



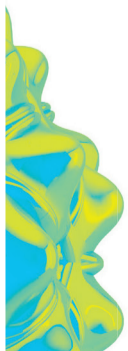
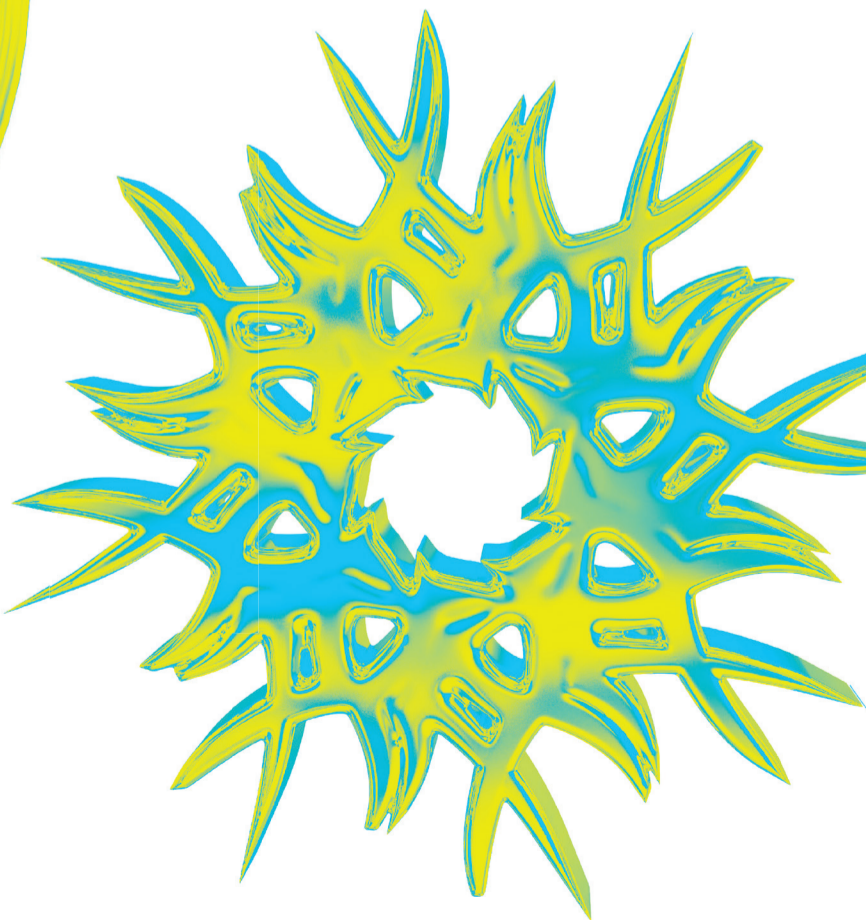
Stretch. Reach. Reach. Can you feel the hairs on your arm?

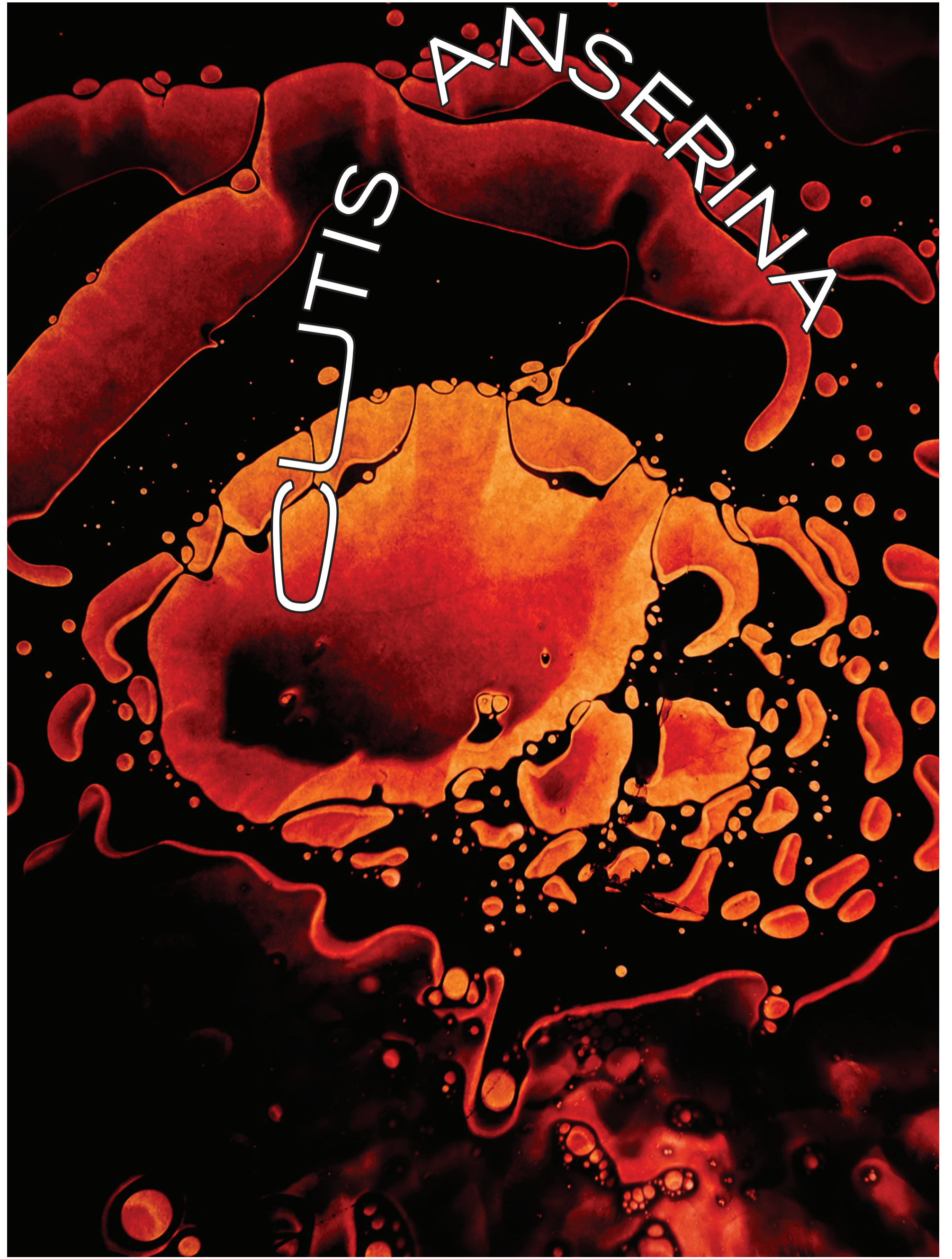


Technology brings us closer together and farther apart.



Take a deep breath. Exhale.





COLITIS

ANSERINA

# RE-ENGAGE THE MIND-BODY NETWORK OF OUR EMOTIONAL LANDSCAPE.

**How do we connect to the immediacy of emotional experience in a world that encourages complacent disengagement?** Our design team aims to re-engage the mind-body network of our emotional landscape. Experimentation with different sound frequencies, visual elements, and spatial design led us to the rediscovery of a long overlooked element of the human mind-body connection. **Cutis Anserina**, more commonly known as goosebumps, is involuntary, activated by the sympathetic nervous system, the same system responsible for our fight or flight response. While this reflex is most often caused by exposure to cold, **Cutis Anserina** can arise during the emotional experiences of awe, fear, pride, and excitement, causing tiny muscles attached to our hair follicles to contract.

By reintroducing the body to the instinctive phenomenon of goosebumps, our speculative wellness treatment is designed to empower people to identify and seek out experiences in their everyday lives that may induce the emotionally energetic effects of **Cutis Anserina**. The audio, tactile, and visual elements of the work stimulate the senses and encourage a reinvigorated sense of being.



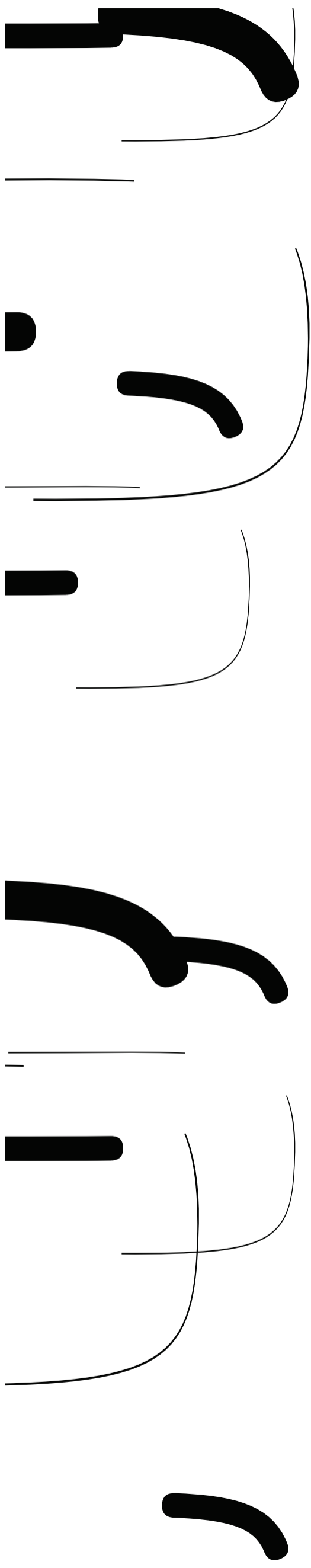
**Farzad Kargaran** is a multidisciplinary designer with a background in engineering and operations research. He is interested in crafting human-centered, immersive, and interactive experiences that inspire and promote wellness.



**Thomas Euyang** is a multidisciplinary designer with a background in filmmaking. Using tools like speculative design, storytelling, and fabrication, Thomas aims to design a more habitable and imaginative future.



**Han Ping Gabriel Tan** is an industrial designer whose work focuses on inclusivity. Whether he is designing a physical or digital product, Gabriel employs user research and user experience design to ensure he understands and meets the needs of his target audiences.



**MAKE IT MAKE SENSE!**



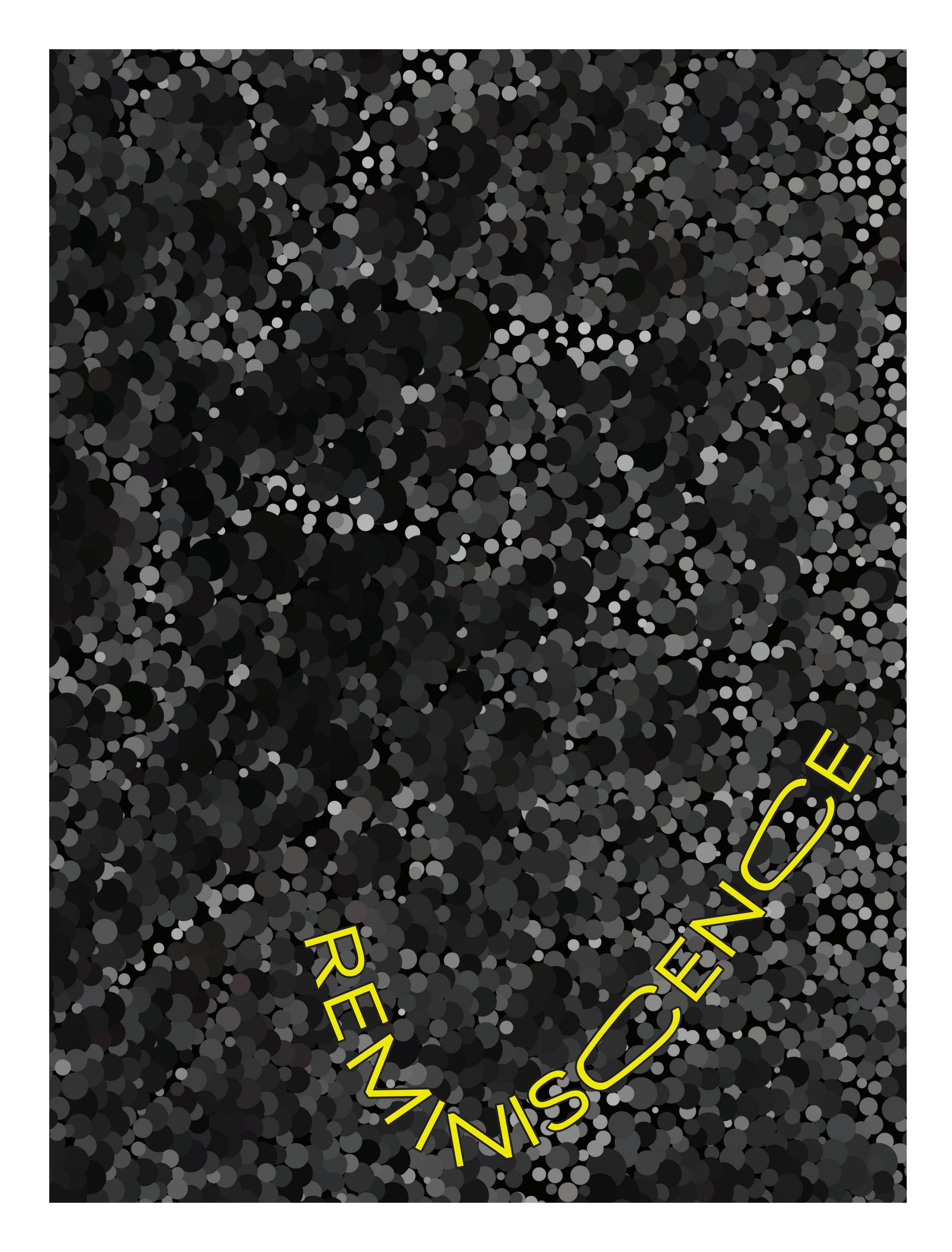
# STEP INTO MY WORLD AND LEARN THE WAYS I CONNECT WITH LANGUAGE ALONGSIDE MUSIC THAT I LISTEN TO.

**The need for quick and clear communication has increased exponentially over the past two decades.** As a designer, I try to balance these demands with my own style and interests. I want to show the ways music and my cultural identity influence my ability to understand and communicate with the world around me.

Visitors are invited to step into my world and learn the ways I connect with language alongside music that I listen to on a day-to-day basis. **Make It Make Sense** comes from our deep connection to music and my desire to use music as a tool for visual creativity in graphic design. The work takes a deep dive into language by creating an augmented multi-sensory experience. The project applies music and kinetic play to typography to create a more engaging space for reading education.



**Jordan Fitzgerald** specializes in branding, speculative theory, and design research. He connects people using sensory design as an invitation to explore their own creativity. Jordan's practice is inspired by James Baldwin because of the ways the author brought groups together to have honest conversations. Jordan aims to achieve similar and necessary discourse through his work.



REMINISCENCE



# A DIGITAL INTERFACE TO REPLICATE HOW MEMORY NATURALLY WANDERS IN HUMANS.

**We've entered the era of big data, and the amount of our personal online data is increasing at accelerated rates.** One of the more valuable pieces of data is our lived experiences, which are often encapsulated in pictures and videos. In reality, instead of consciously recalling these moments, our memories flood into our minds after responding to our surrounding environments. Each memory is personal, resonating with strong emotion.

**Reminiscence** uses a digital interface to replicate how memory naturally wanders in humans. Unlike traditional photo galleries, images are recommended similarly to how memories flood in response to our surrounding environment.



**Yuxi Wu** is a user experience designer. She is passionate about rethinking daily routines to discover opportunities for innovation. Yuxi uses intensive research, interviews, and insightful analytics to implement clear visual communication. Her past designs span multiple types of interfaces including 3D simulation and gaming, AR/VR, web/mobile applications, and digital electronics.

THE POWER OF DESIGN  
IS AT ITS GREATEST WHEN  
IT PUSHES MAKERS AND  
AUDIENCES TO IMAGINE  
BEYOND WHAT THEY  
THINK ACHIEVABLE.



An essay by  
**Lawrence Azerrad**,  
co-creator of the *Designing  
the Future of Music* initiative  
at CCA

**California College of the Arts has always had a special way of fostering creativity among its students, local communities, and beyond.** Since its founding in 1907, the CCA way has consistently been rooted in cultivating the kind of work that aims to shape the future that we want to see.

It's an approach to design that is inextricably tied to a moral imperative, the belief that design is more than about making something work, or about making something pleasing. As important as those factors are, the power of design is at its greatest when it pushes makers and audiences to imagine beyond what they think achievable, to consider how things might be different, and to make that difference a reality.

Design at its best invites us to dream. The act of designing becomes a tool to visualize what might be possible. It also gives us the space to consider the worst of possibilities, and how we might address those challenges. In forging a close relationship with possibility, designers and the public are able to venture into the opportunities of the unknown, where transformative change can be recognized and actualized.

DESIGNING



THE FUTURE

Similarly, music has long been a door to possibility, a way to understand how we feel about what could be, or what has been. Throughout history, music has provided a structure to frame our dreams, our hopes and aspirations. On every continent and across generations, music has been a means to give context to our fears and pains, our exhilaration in love, our laments of injustice, and a call for action.

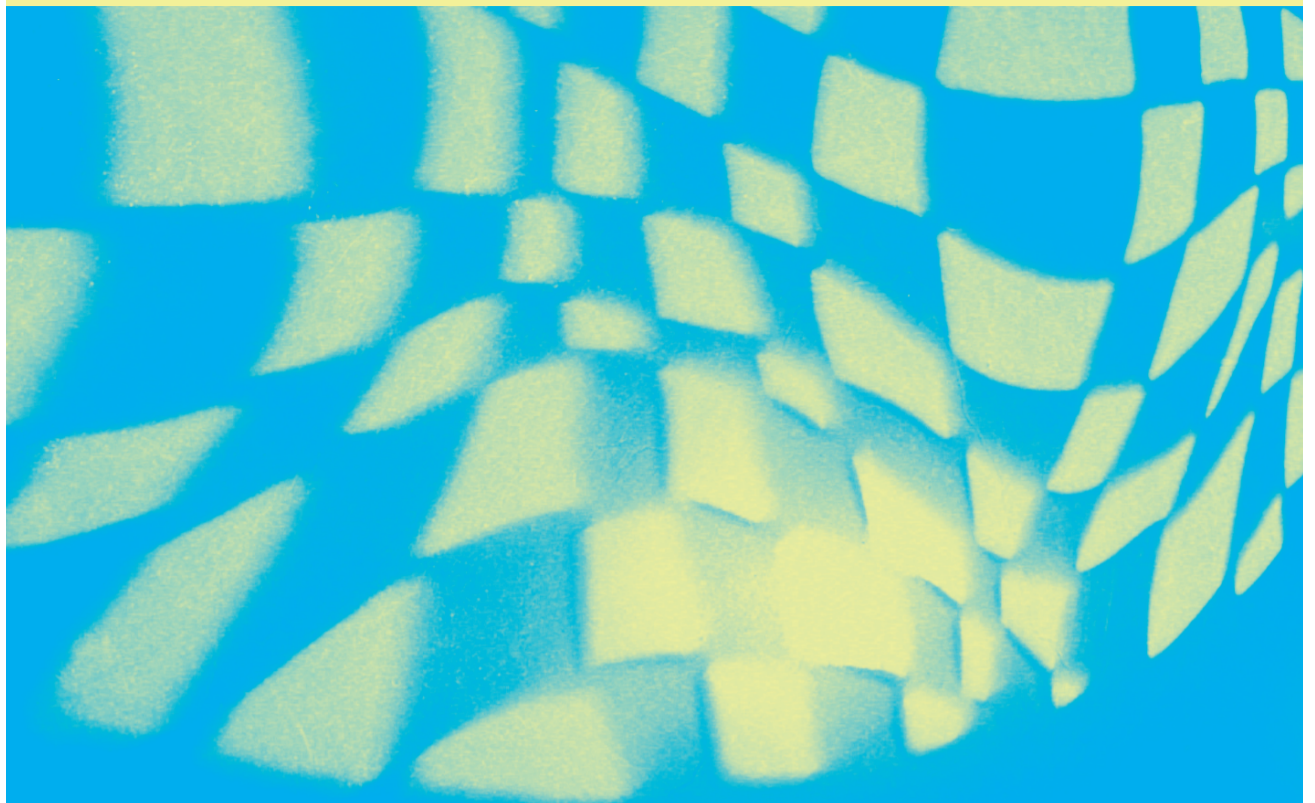
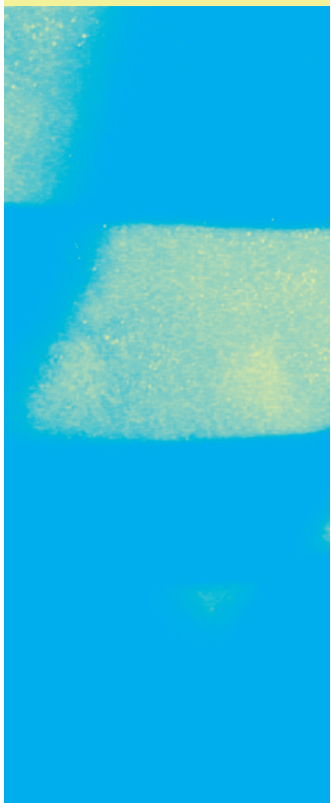
The actual life of a song is momentary and fleeting, only existing as long as the notes are played or the lyrics sung. But the wake of its impact can echo for generations. Long after they are first sung, songs can become anthems, powerful tools of social change for millions of people around the world.

It's precisely where music and design intersect that creates an experience more dynamic, forceful, and essential than each could on its own. When design cooperates with music, becoming a means to understand the content more intentionally, the power of both becomes supercharged.

The combination of design and music is strongest when the work goes beyond the realm of the album cover—and some album covers are monumentally powerful icons of culture. When design is more than

OF MUSIC





artwork that functions to represent music, when it deepens the listener's experience of understanding, meaning, and memory, that design is most essential to the human experience.

A key point of origin for this challenge lies within technology. Within the benefits of technology we often encounter new challenges. Design-driven technology can save lives, connect us to loved ones, and in the case of music, provide us with the means to access oceans of art and culture, across generations and continents. It's a miracle that, at the tap of a screen, we can listen to almost any song ever recorded at any time. This provides windows to other cultures and perspectives that can spark new experiences of understanding and empathy.

This nearly barrier-free access has changed how we actually listen. More doesn't always mean better. With the ease of immediacy we listen more fleetingly. A moment in the car or on the train. Something in the background while we're washing our dishes. A quick skip to the next song with the tap of a finger if our interest wanders. And industry statistics point to the fact that for many, our interest definitely does wander. In measuring skip rate, which refers to the likelihood of someone skipping to the next song on a streaming service, it's found that 24% of people skip to the next song in the first 5 seconds, almost

half of folks surveyed skip before the song finishes.

Skipping songs is just one small representation of the many ways that technology has changed the listener's relationship with music. New technology has also changed how artists who create music are paid. It's changed how we value music from a point of intentionality and appreciation.

When technology changes people, it's often not in the ways one might expect. But these changes provide us with a precious chance to answer these challenges through creativity and optimism in design. These challenges are invaluable opportunities to consider fundamental questions: How might we create things that foster discovery and wellbeing? How might we link artistry to community, the democratization of access to new equitable ideas and audiences? How might we enable new experiences across the full spectrum of the musical experience? This moment provides an invitation to unlock individual creativity, to inspire and evoke the sharing of memories, to open new doors to conversations, cultures, and identities so that we might be inspired to leave this world better than we found it.

It's these questions, challenges, and much more that are deconstructed in the work of Studio Forward exhibited

# DESIGN-DRIVEN TECHNOLOGY CAN SAVE LIVES, CONNECT US TO LOVED ONES, AND IN THE CASE OF MUSIC, PROVIDE US WITH THE MEANS TO ACCESS OCEANS OF ART AND CULTURE, ACROSS GENERATIONS AND CONTINENTS.

at the Yerba Buena Center For the Arts. The creatives in Studio Forward examine the almost limitless topic of sound in ways that provoke us to listen more deeply so that we might push the boundaries of what we truly hear in this world.

**Lawrence Azerrad** is a two-time Grammy Award-winning creative director, author and curator. His studio Macroscopic works with musicians and educational and cultural institutions who seek to visualize the future, such as The Red Hot Chili Peppers, Esperanza Spalding and Wilco, The Smithsonian National Air and Space Museum, The Cooper Hewitt Museum, USC, UCLA, and Berklee College of Music. He was the lead curator of "The Future Happened: Designing The Future of Music," a virtual music and speculative design exhibit online with The Museum of Design Atlanta. His initiative "Designing The Future of Music" includes programs at the Royal College of Art, the Imperial College of London, and California College of the Arts.





A profile of **Suzanne Ciani**

*On April 7, 2023, Suzanne Ciani performed at the opening celebration for **Future Resonance**.*

## SUZANNE CIANI TREATS HER INSTRUMENTS AS IF THEY'RE ORGANISMS... CREATURES TO GET TO KNOW BETTER.



**Suzanne Ciani treats her instruments as if they're organisms.** Not inert tools meant to be used but living things—creatures to get to know better. “I don’t feel compelled to completely dominate [an instrument] the minute it comes in,” Suzanne says. “I live with it. And I go by it—I keep my things on all the time . . . so I can go up to them at any time and interact. And that’s how I get to know them gradually.”

Suzanne comes to this philosophy by way of her late friend Don Buchla, designer of legendary Buchla synthesizers and an originator of the West Coast school of music synthesis. Buchla made synthesizers that behave in predictably unpredictable ways, in contrast with the straightforward designs of East Coast synthesizer maker Robert Moog. They take on a life of their own. “I look at the Buchla now and it’s not the same Buchla I had last year,” Suzanne says, despite having once worked on the factory line soldering their circuits. “It sat there for a year before it came alive.”

Suzanne was one of the first musicians to present the synthesizer as a professional tool and not merely a novelty. In 1974, she moved to New York City and cold-called advertising agencies until they let her produce commercial music. Within a few years, she was an in-demand session musician.

But finding a home for her personal compositions was another story. “I went to all the [record] companies and they said, ‘Well, what do you need?’ And I said, ‘Well, I need a studio for a week to do my recording.’ And they said, ‘Well, we’ll give you drums, bass, guitar for four hours to do your demo,’ ‘cause they’d think I was a singer.” No space for a solo electronic artist had been carved out yet. So, as she’s done for most of her life, Suzanne had to create that space herself.

# INSTRUMENTS AS ORGANISMS

She booked short sessions in traditional studios, recording music piecemeal. And then she got an opportunity. In 1979, Lily Tomlin commissioned Suzanne to score the music for the film *The Incredible Shrinking Woman*, providing her with the windfall she needed to turn her Park Avenue apartment into a studio. “I took that wad of cash and I redesigned my living room, put something down over the carpet, moved in a console, got a Synclavier. I hadn’t realized how exotic it was at the time. Everything just seemed so naturally evolving to me.”

Fully equipped personal studios, rather than bare-bones consumer-grade setups, were rare at the time. At one point, Dolly Parton visited and couldn’t believe what she saw. “She came to my apartment, and her jaw dropped when she saw my home studio,” Suzanne remembers. “And she said [to her manager], ‘We gotta get me one of these!’”

Even with her own studio, the process of translating her written compositions to recorded sound was arduous. “It took a long time because it’s painstaking, that experience of interpreting your score and getting it onto tape.” Without the visual aid of digital audio software, Suzanne and her collaborators would speak the measure numbers of her score into a microphone and use them as a guide to record snippets of sound in their appropriate places. Juggling all of those parts on an analog mixing console was another challenge—“You needed a lot of hands.” But having her own studio gave her the freedom to work on her own terms, without record label support. (The industry eventually came around, and her later solo albums were released on both Atlantic Records and RCA.)

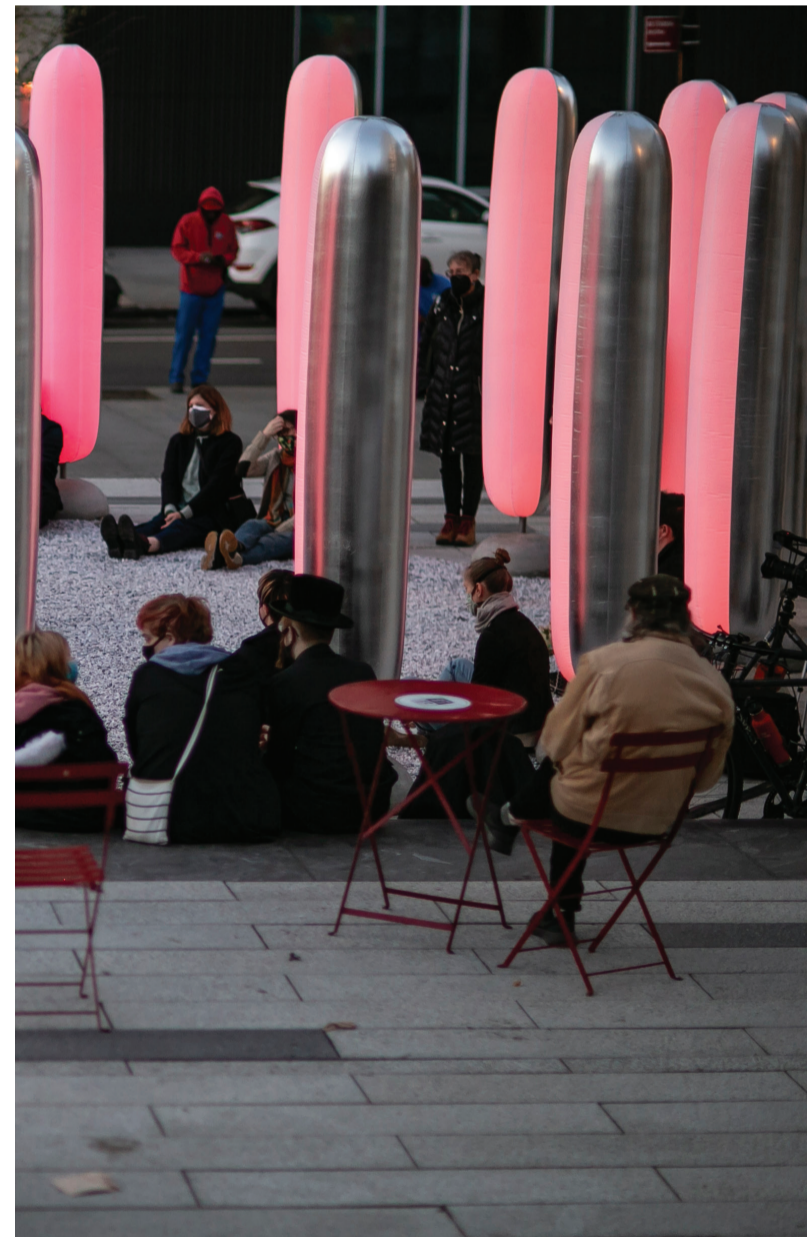
In 1986, Suzanne moved her studio from her living room to an entire floor of a building on Twenty-Third Street in Manhattan. But what the big studio offered in spaciousness it lacked in intimacy. “I didn’t like having a studio where I needed [another engineer] just to power it up. It was so big . . . I’m always happiest in my intimate space in my home and my home has always had a kitchen next door.” So after a health-related trip back west in 1993, she packed up her Buchla, sold most of the rest, and moved to Bolinas, California.

“Now I do do everything myself here in this remoter place and I’m happy to kind of just do it all. I sit here and I’m just happy as can be.” She sits on a bench in between her synthesizers and her piano—an anchor to her classical roots—and pivots between them while working on compositions. The desk space is reserved only for the instruments that she’s currently using. That is, the instruments she’s getting to know. And, of course, they’re always turned on.

Text by **Spencer Tweedy**, photograph by **Daniel Topete**. Originally published in *Mirror Sound: A Look into the People and Processes behind Self-Recorded Music*, by Spencer Tweedy and Lawrence Azerrad, Prestel, 2020.

A conversation with  
**Ekene Ijeoma**

In February 2023, Studio Forward hosted Ekene Ijeoma at California College of the Arts for a lecture, workshop, and preview screening of Real Talk Radio, a project he is currently developing with his lab Poetic Justice Group MIT Media Lab. The following interview with Ijeoma was conducted by Farzad Kargaran, a Studio Forward student. The text has been edited for length and clarity.



Top: Peacemaker, Bottom: Breathing Pavilion  
Images courtesy Ekene Ijeoma



**Farzad Kargaran:** You have degrees in information technology and interaction design. What led you to shift your focus towards art?

**Ekene Ijeoma:** For me it came down to representation. I was looking for ways to see outside the context of a chart, to see outside the context of a diagram. I wasn't interested in didactic representations anymore because I was looking for something that would expand my imagination about what it was I was trying to represent. I feel like charts are finite. Your understanding of something starts and ends with a chart. If you create another representation that's less literal than a chart, then things can become infinite because you start thinking about the things that you're not seeing. The problem with presenting data as facts is that data isn't always fact. You can tell many different stories with data depending on who's telling those stories. I use data as a material, as a medium.

**FK:** I admire your work because although data is ubiquitous, you infuse it with emotion, making it more impactful. The way you present and we perceive it is what sets it apart.

**EI:** I'm interested in bringing data into conversation with culture. That has less to do with the emotions and more to do with our relationships to cultural artifacts. Cultural artifacts have preexisting meanings that I'm just remixing. People have cried after experiencing my work, but I wasn't trying to be emotional or dramatic. I was just representing inequity or enacting justice using symbols that had personal meanings to my audience.

**FK:** How do you see the relationship between communication, technology, and human connection?

**EI:** Technology is just another tool for me. I'm interested in creating contemporary representations and interventions using contemporary tools, materials and cultural artifacts.

**FK:** In Studio Forward, we learn to imagine and build better futures. As a designer and artist who has explored themes of social justice and equity in your work, how do you define a better future?

**EI:** What is your definition of better? Better for who? There are a lot of better future initiatives that don't seem actually defining or questioning "better." I think better has become as meaningless as empathy. There's so many words you can put in place of better that define what that better is. A more equitable and just future is a better future for me.

**FK:** How can we use speculative design and futures literacy to reimagine ways of connecting with each other, with our world, and with ourselves?

**EI:** I'm not necessarily interested in speculation because a lot of the things people speculate about are someone else's current reality. I am however really interested in projecting the present into the future.

I call *A Counting* a speculation of what a truly unified society would sound and look like. There's over 600 languages spoken in New York City, but I haven't heard more than a few languages spoken in one area.

In the artwork, you can hear a tens of languages in one count. Therefore, that is a speculation on what the city would sound like if people were speaking their languages all the time everywhere. The work sounds a little disorienting, which is okay because if we are to live in a multicultural, multilingual society, we have to be okay with being in the discomfort that comes with disorientation. So that is a speculation that's gesturing toward a future in which people are okay with others sounding different and not understanding.

**FK:** What about the power of music? How do you use that in your artwork?

**EI:** I love music. But I'm not working with music so much as I am with sounds and voices—and silences as well. I use silence a lot across all my works. Why is music so powerful? Because it doesn't need language. I think it's the closest form of communication there is for universal expression. Music speaks to so many thoughts and moments within our cultural imagination.

**Ekene Ijeoma** is an artist who researches how social, political, and environmental systems affect people and develops sound, video, sculpture, installation, and performance using poetic and computational strategies. Across these various media, his work exposes the systems unjustly affecting people and engages people in communally changing these systems.

His work has been presented by MIT Museum (2023), Onassis Foundation (2022), Exploratorium (2021), Van Alen Institute (2022), Bemis Center for Contemporary Art (2021), Contemporary Art Museum of St. Louis (2021), Museum of Contemporary Art Denver (2020), Contemporary Art Museum of Houston (2020), The Arts Club of Chicago (2019), Design Museum Holon (2019), Museum of the City of New York (2019, 2018), The Kennedy Center (2019, 2017), Annenberg Space for Photography (2016), Neuberger Museum of Art (2016), Storefront for Art and Architecture (2015) and Museum of Modern Art (2015) among others. His practice has been supported by New York Foundation for the Arts (2022, 2016), New York State Council on the Arts (2021), Creative Capital (2019), Map Fund (2019), Wave Farm (2018), and The Kennedy Center (2017), among others.

He is an Assistant Professor of Media Arts and Sciences at Massachusetts Institute of Technology and the Founder/Director of Poetic Justice Group at Media Lab. Poetic Justice Group is a lab of interdisciplinary students and professionals. Currently, with Poetic Justice Group, he's researching how art can scale to that of injustice through developing works that are public, community-driven, multisite, and networked. These works include a series of software-generated sound and video composed of crowdsourced recordings that are remixed and live-streamed 24/7 over the phone and online.

I WAS LOOKING  
FOR SOMETHING  
THAT WOULD  
EXPAND MY  
IMAGINATION  
ABOUT WHAT IT  
WAS I WAS TRYING  
TO REPRESENT.

CCA Wattis Institute for Contemporary Arts



Textiles Studio at 350 Kansas

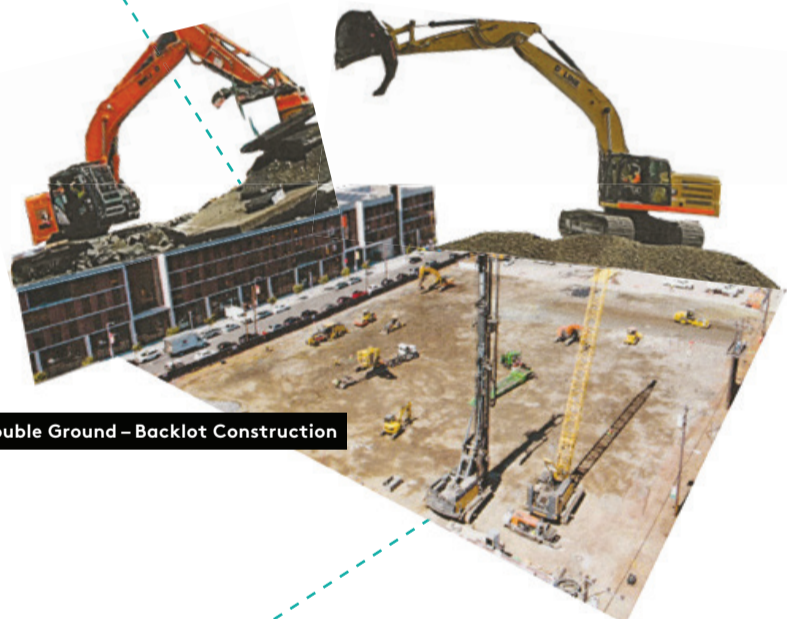


# EXPANDING

# POSSIBILITIES

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Double Ground - Backlot Construction



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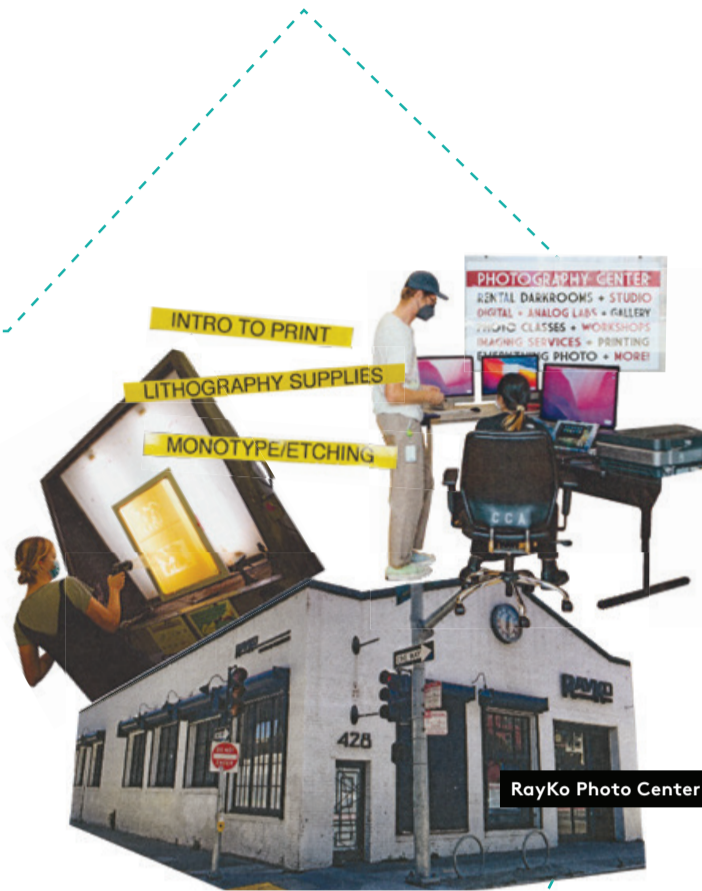


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those with radical curiosity  
and a welcoming educational  
environment where wonder  
and imagination are amplified  
through rigor and craft.*

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