SOFTWARE FOR
ARTISTS BOOK

2020

#001: BUILDING
BETTER REALITIES

1: FEATURING
SALOME ASEGA → STEPHANIE
DINKINS → GRAYSON EARLE → ANN
HAEYOUNG → RINDON JOHNSON →
RYAN KUO → TSIGE TAFESSE

2: DIGITAL DIARY
47 ENTRIES → (05.14.20–06.05.20)

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Salome Asega is an artist and researcher based in Brooklyn, NY. Salome has participated in residencies and fellowships with Eyebeam, New Museum, The Laundromat Project, and Recess. She has exhibited at the Shanghai Biennale, MoMA, Carnegie Library, August Wilson Center, Knockdown Center, and more. She has also given presentations and lectures at Performa, EYEO, Brooklyn Museum, MIT Media Lab, and more. Salome is currently a Ford Foundation Technology Fellow landscaping new media arts infrastructure. She is also the Director of Partnerships at POWRPLNT, a digital art collaboratory in Brooklyn. Salome received her MFA from Parsons at The New School in Design and Technology where she also teaches.

Stephanie Dinkins is a transmedia artist who creates platforms for dialogue about artificial intelligence (AI) as it intersects race, gender, aging, and our future histories. She is particularly driven to work with communities of color in promoting and co-creating more equitability within AI ecosystems. Dinkins exhibits and publicly advocates for equitable AI internationally. As a Technology Resident at Pioneer Works in 2018, Dinkins worked on her project *Not the Only One*, with tech worker Angie Meitzler, which included the development of an interactive conversational sculpture using deep learning and the multigenerational story of her family as material.

Grayson Earle is a new media artist and educator. He has worked as a Visiting Professor at Oberlin College and the New York City College of Technology. He is the creator of Bail Bloc and a member of The Illuminator art collective. Recent displays of his work include Kate Vass Galerie (Switzerland) and the Brooklyn Museum (USA). He has presented his work and research at The Whitney Museum of Art, MoMA PS1, Radical Networks, the Magnum Foundation, and Open Engagement.

ann haeyoung is an artist, activist, and tech worker. She uses video and sculpture to examine questions around technology, identity, and labor. She has had residencies at Pioneer Works, MASS MoCA, and Outpost Artist Resources, and has traded her labor for wages at various tech companies.

Rindon Johnson is an artist and writer. His most recent virtual reality film, *Meat Growers: A Love Story*, was commissioned by Rhizome and Tentacular. Johnson has read, exhibited, and lectured internationally. He is the author of *Nobody Sleeps Better Than White People* (Inpatient, 2016), the VR book, *Meet in the Corner (*Publishing-House.Me, 2017) and *Shade the King* (Capricious, 2017). He lives in Berlin where he is an Associate Fellow at the Universität der Künste Berlin. He studies VR.

Ryan Kuo is a New York City-based artist whose process-based and diagrammatic works often invoke a person or people arguing. This is not to state an argument about a thing, but to be caught in a state of argument. He utilizes video games, productivity software, web design, motion graphics, and sampling to produce circuitous and unresolved movements that track the passage of objects through white escape routes. Ryan was a 2019 Pioneer Works Tech Resident. *Faith* can be collected at left Gallery (left.gallery/work/faith), and *Baby Faith*, a Rhizome and Jigsaw-commissioned followup to *Faith*, can be experienced at faith.rhizome.org.

Tsige Tafesse's work looks to wage intimacy in a world growing deeply disconnected. Through community organizing, multimedia journalism, curation, performance, and VR, she conjures—building pathways from where we've been to where we could go. She's a co-founder of BUFU (By Us For Us), a project-based collective interested in Solidarity amongst Us, and co-creating with You in order to collaboratively build experimental models of organizing & making, all while generating prestige & mining time as a resource.

SOFTWARE FOR ARTISTS BOOK

#001
BUILDING BETTER REALITIES

Technology Can, and Must, Be More Beautiful

An introduction from the editor, Willa Köerner, and S4AD organizer Tommy Martinez.

Radical imagination can show us the world we want to live in, and co-opted digital tools can help us make it real.

How can technology be more beautiful? This was the question we hoped to answer when we began work on this book back in the naive days of January, 2020. In the months that have passed since then—as the world came to an eerie, coronavirus-induced stand-still, as we all began to experience the vast and tragic fallout of a global pandemic, and more recently, as a monumental influx of participation has fueled the ongoing movement against systemic racism—we've seen this question answered in ways that, half a year ago, would have been impossible to imagine.

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Software for Artists Day (S4AD) creates space for artists and technologists to come together to question and reimagine how our digital tools function in the world. We aim to highlight the radical, speculative, and subversive artist-led projects that propose alternatives to the status-quo— especially alternatives to the technology industry as a white, inaccessible, ableist, capitalist, and inequitable space.

For the 6th Software for Artists Day, scheduled for July 2020, we looked forward to featuring talks, workshops, and texts with artists and organizers like Rindon Johnson, Salome Asega, Onyx Ashanti, Grayson Earle, and Tsige Tafesse. To coincide with the event, this book began as a partnership between Pioneer Works, The Creative Independent, and Are.na, with the aim of chronicling the ideas and insights of S4AD participants who use technology to build more accessible, equitable worlds.

But as offices, schools, and most major gathering spaces began a COVID-19-induced shutdown in early spring, everything—and we mean *everything*—was thrown into question. Nobody was sure what would happen, or when public life would resume. (It's worth noting that right now, as we write this introduction at the tail end of June, 2020, it's still unclear when public life will fully resume.)

As the pandemic's devastating spread paralyzed the globe, the digital realm became the only safe space to come together. Suddenly the tools and technologies that we initially hoped to investigate through S4AD—our screens, our software, our social media, our digital access (or lack thereof); the harm being caused by algorithms, or surveillance capitalism, or inaccessibility; all of this tangled, digital mess—became our only connection to any sense of "normalcy." In what began to feel like an endless loop, the screens multiplied, and "signing off" became more aspirational than possible. For many of us, virtual apps and apparitions became our work, our education, our social life, our healthcare. For better or worse, the digital world was becoming the *whole* world.

As difficult as it was to be plunged into physical isolation, the resulting total digital embodiment did have a few upsides for many of us: No more commuting at rush hour, no more social FOMO, no more germ-spreading. And as our springs in quarantine wore on, a wave of thoughtful creative programming proliferated across the web. As just one example, the collective BUFU (By Us For Us) and China Residencies partnered to launch

CLOUD9 (Collaborative Love On Ur Desktop), a series of digital programs to "share care, strategies, wisdom, sweetness, resources, and love to support everyone affected by the coronavirus pandemic." As featured artist and BUFU organizer Tsige Tafesse describes in this book:

> Almost immediately after the stay-at-home order was put in place, we put out a really vague call where we were like, "We're making mutual-aid programs online. Virtual parties. Workshops. Everything." We just put this open call up online, and told people they could apply. Then we had a public community meeting with maybe 80, 90 people on it. We were like, "We're still not sure what's happening. The world's on fire. We got all these submissions though, so let's go. Let's figure it out." From there, we broke up into various committees... People were able to move in and out of supporting the project based on their capacity, mental health-wise and otherwise. How it all came together was really, really beautiful. It felt like love work, with many collaborators moving in and out of the project, picking up where others left off, and learning from each other.

With no other options, being fully subsumed in the virtual gave us all an immersive crash course

in the possibilities and promise (and tensions, and problems) of our digital tools. This move to put everything online also exposed the truth that many people—BIPOC and lesser-resourced communities especially—did not have equal access to the tools that were becoming ever-more important once physical spaces shut down. It became harshly clear that if we are to work towards a future where real and honest equity is possible, more needs to be done to ensure everyone can access the internet and its associated hardware, in order to do very necessary things like go to school, receive telemedicine, apply for unemployment, and seek out important information that is often not findable anywhere else.

As we kept evolving our S4AD programming plans (and this book) to address the many context shifts of Spring 2020, we kept coming back to the idea that this moment was offering us a glimpse into a potential future where digital saturation was all-encompassing. Before this future fully took hold, we had a chance to ask what screen-based-everything actually looked and felt like. We wanted to know, what toll was this virtual immersion taking? What felt good, and what felt bad? Since our interactions with digital technologies are usually experienced privately, often so seamlessly enmeshed within our daily experiences that they become unnoticeable, it can be hard to see them clearly for what they are. But this new virtual reality felt important to document and analyze—if not to build better, more beautiful technologies, then at least for our own sanity.

To capture answers to some of these ques-

tions, we partnered with Are.na to put out an open call to our communities, asking for submissions of short "Digital Diary" entries. Nearly 200 of you responded with images and texts that formed an array of poetic, thoughtful musings on the virtual layers of your day-to-day lives in quarantine. Many of those submissions are presented at the end of this book, as a sort of time capsule.

In sorting through the Digital Diary entries, we noticed a few defining themes. Many submissions prodded at a feeling of being suspended in a liminal space, stuck in a holding pattern between "normal life" and the passing weeks and months of isolation. Much like the fleeting posts in an endlessly scrolling feed, days in quarantine seemed to pile up quickly, aimlessly. Many diary entries also spoke to the pleasure of taking on a new creative project or hobby; the strangeness of living in (or leaving) the shut-down city; or passing time by escaping into a more palatable digital world. As the submissions reveal, a desire to escape reality was our shared fate—as was the feeling of finding nowhere to escape to, aside from back into the virtual.

Perhaps most notably, many of the diary entries pointed to a digitally induced malaise, and an instinctual longing for more felt, embodied experiences. When we can only connect with each other online, there are some real, human needs that can't seem to be satisfied through a screen. As featured artist and activist Grayson Earle took his classroom online at the beginning of the pandemic, he expressed concern about what the sudden plunge into virtual education could mean:

I don't think meeting in virtual spaces can hold a candle to meeting in real life. Even if you just look at human communication, we know that so much of it is nonverbal. And you get a little bit of that doing live video chat, but I think there are all sorts of things going on that it really takes being in the same space as someone to be able to empathize with them.

Perhaps the key takeaway from all of the diary entries was that virtual embodiment can only take us so far. At some point, we must snap back into our physical bodies—into our lived realities. And this begs the question: What happens when that shared reality seems to offer nothing but bleakness?

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On May 25, 2020, George Floyd, a Black man, was murdered by police in Minneapolis, Minnesota. His death, caught on video and broadcast across every available platform, lit a match in what felt like a room full of gas. With this, and the reprehensible killings of Ahmaud Arbery, Breonna Taylor, Nina Pop, Tony McDade, and far too many others, the tinder box was officially lit.

In a righteous blaze, Black Lives Matter protests ignited across the nation and globe, demanding these murders be seen as undeniable symptoms for the underlying disease: a completely widespread and deadly stifling, silencing, targeting, and killing of Black people, fueled by rampant white supremacy and systemic racism, that this country has kept hidden in plain sight for far too long.

As protests and solidarity marches flooded once-empty streets across the globe, the movement took hold of our collective consciousness in a profound and transformative way. The malaise and escapism that were once so present in our shared digital spaces were replaced with urgent calls to protest, organize, and distribute funds. Suddenly Instagram was no longer an endless stream of banal selfies and sourdough bread—seemingly overnight, it morphed into an anti-racist classroom and pivotol hub for information-sharing and rallying. Our addiction to social media, and to each other's digital personas, finally seemed to have a productive purpose.

We began to wonder, *what if we already have the tools we need to build a better world, and we're just now learning how to use them for that purpose?*

When we spoke with artist Rindon Johnson back in March of 2020, he had these prescient words to share:

> The thing that I find most beautiful about technology is the possibility that we could use it to come up with a different way of seeing people, and a way to be more compassionate to one another, and we can use it to simulate what that might look like. This is part of a much bigger question where I sat down one day and I was

like, "You know, I actually have never really asked myself what world I want to live in." I've just been like, "Well, obviously I would like it if there were no prisons"... But it's like, okay, how would I execute that? What virtual space and technology elect for is the running of these two relations, and getting things to a point where a lot of really amazing things could be possible. So I think that's what I find most beautiful about technology. It makes building new possibilities really easy.

Instead of asking how technology can be more beautiful, Rindon's insight flips the question to ask, *How can we co-opt technologies to build a more beautiful world?* Now, in July of 2020—in the midst of a pandemic, an economic depression, and a transformative movement for real racial equity—the answers to these questions seem to become more clear each day. Technology can be more beautiful when we co-opt it to fight racism and fascism and capitalism. It can be more beautiful when it's accessible, and equitably distributed, and designed for and by the people who use it. It can be more beautiful by making it easier to set up networks and communities and demonstrations that center mutual-aid, profit-sharing, knowledge-building, and manifesting the equitable, just, beautiful world we want to live in.

As we continue to push forward and together in this momentous uprising, heading quickly towards a pivotal election this November, we're inspired by featured artist and researcher Salome Asega's question:

> How do we move out of this reactive lane of hoping that we'll get to the place we want to be by holding, pushing, or reforming the line, and instead move into this lane of radical imagination, and run towards that?... I am part of a generation that hopes, but I want to dream. I want to do the work of imagining.

2020 has shown us what's possible when we dream collectively, and then wake up in order to take action in service of those dreams. We hope the voices in this book remind you that while our existing digital tools are in no way perfect, the best way to improve them is by co-opting them in service of building the world we want—which we can do by working collectively, equitably, and with radical imagination as our guiding force.

SOFTWARE FOR ARTISTS BOOK

Building Better Realities

TSIGE TAFESSE

Artist and organizer Tsige Tafesse on the power of working collectively, the absurdity of institutions, and why it's time to divest from platform capitalism.

Can you give an overview of what BUFU (By Us For Us) is, and how it got started?

We're a collective that does whatever we feel is necessary to practice liberation, in many different capacities. We initially started as a collaborative documentary project looking at the relationships between Black and Asian people. This was coming out of the tail end of Black Lives Matter organizing in 2014. Our goal was to give language to our relationships to each other, and also serve as an archive for the intertwined histories of Black and Asian people. We also wanted to foster a platform that could support solidarity in a holistic way, that wasn't just paying lip service, but was deeply examining how we got to where we are today.

There are four co-founders who hold the core of BUFU: Katherine Tom, Jazmin Jones, Sonia Choi, and myself. Initially, there were five of us. Our fifth member, Jiun Kwon, passed away at the start of our project. She's still made present in the legacy of the work–I think her spirit, along with all of ours, is how we've brought the project to what it is today.

Since your practices are so varied, as a group, how do you decide what projects to take on? Is it hard to know what to prioritize?

I'm in constant communication with the collective, and we all know each other really deeply. At this point, we've traveled the world together, and have just been really, really intertwined in each other's lives. We have a group chat that is going off every single day. So, when a project idea comes, it's usually either a response to a resource we've been offered, or it's a response to something that's happening in the world. Then we're just like, "How do we invite our community into this process, and try to build something that's useful?"

Sometimes we're pitching things to each other, but most of the time it's an easy consensus. We also have the gift of a large community network that we've been organizing with and have built a lot of trust with. And they lend their labor, love, and spirit, so most projects come together pretty organically over time.

For the projects that we do, we'll often host three or four months' worth of community meetings. The inclusion of our immediate community, and seeing how projects resonate, and then building and growing flexibly from there, is all central to our process. It's super emergent.

BUFU has now been a collective for over five years. What's been key to keeping it going?

Recently I've been thinking about how grateful I am to be a part of a collective, and not a nonprofit or a corporation or something more formal. For us, our relationships are really at the core of this thing. Also, we have no desire for BUFU to be a project that sustains us financially, which takes a lot of the pressure off. We all have other jobs, or other gigs, so most of the resources that we receive we redistribute. We're also each tapped into different kinds of communities, and each of [the core BUFU team] are artists in our own right. Jazmin is a visual video artist with a whole different video life. Katherine is a healer who does herbal work, and does other organizing. Myself, I do a lot of curatorial projects and art practice-y things. And Sonia is in South Korea, so we're just all in different worlds. Since we each make money and cohabitate in such different spaces, I think that enables BUFU to give us energy, rather than drain us.

Also, what's nice about working as a collective is

that it's not structured around capital or capitalism, so we have no need to produce work quickly if we don't feel like doing it. We don't need BUFU to do anything. We just want it to be something that's useful to our spirits and to each other. So I think that really helps, especially now, when we've come together to do a lot of work in response to COVID, but we've also taken time to care for ourselves and find the most strategic ways to respond. It's such a gift to have something that can be flexible with our mental health and how we make, or choose not to make.

> What do you feel are the most important elements for successful collective organizing? Is the BUFU collective formalized in any way?

A collective can take the form of a group of friends, a gang of collaborators, an ongoing community project, whatever. For us, it's a mix between being fairly casual as a collective of friends, but also working in incredibly formal ways with co-organizers to make our projects happen. For example, with the last round of the CLOUD9 (Collective Love On Ur Desktop) programming that we did, we formed a bunch of committees. From the very beginning, we were like, "Committees are autonomous, they can do what they'd like. They can check in with us as they go. We'll figure out ways to get them resources. It's a wrap." A principle of adrienne marie brown's *Emergent Strategy* is about moving at the speed of trust, and I think that has been central to how we've been organizing for a very long time.

> I was looking at the CLOUD9 website, and it's so beautiful. You can see a video of the project's collaborators waving from what feels like a sky, and you have a set of community guidelines embedded as a Google Doc with clouds floating around it. It feels almost transcendent

> in this way where you've cherry-picked digital tools that create opportunities for collaboration and connection, and you've brought them together in this beautiful space of mutual-aid.

That website was a collaboration with a whole bunch of people, but was made by Aarati Akkapeddi, Melanie Hoff, Olivia Ross, and Zainab Aliyu. Again, this is what's useful about working in a collective framework. Almost immediately after the stay-at-home order was put in place, we put out a really vague call where we were like, "We're making mutual-aid programs online. Virtual parties. Workshops. Everything." We just put this open call up online, and told people they could apply.

Then, we had a public community meeting with maybe 80, 90 people on it. We were like, "So, we're still not sure what's happening. The world's on fire. We got all these submissions though, so let's go. Let's figure it out." From there, we broke up into various committees, and a tech committee came out of it. People were able to move in and out of supporting the project based on their capacity, mental health-wise and otherwise. How it all came together was really, really beautiful. It felt like love work, with many collaborators moving in and out of the project, picking up where others left off, and learning from each other.

> That collaborative, trusting way of working together feels really informative for moving outside of capitalism.

Totally. Also, what I've found most valuable about working as a collective is that there's a particular kind of safety in numbers. As a collective, we get to be really audacious. It's not just me trying to organize a whole event series, or yelling at an institution, all on my own. It's my group of friends who have decided to call

ourselves a collective and really trust each other, and our community, with this weird brand.

> That's a good point. Creating a brand around a collective, and co-opting institutional aesthetics, gives you a lot more authority just by having things feel more official.

Yeah. You can get a lot from performing that. It's also a kind of trolling, or playing at the absurdity of institutions. Like, for BUFU's logo, I took the FUBU clothing brand logo, and I put it into an off-brand Microsoft Paint, not even Photoshop. I cut out the BU, and put it in front of the FU. And that is the logo that we still use today.

I'm very pro-disrespecting institutions, or co-opting their authority. Why participate in something that was never built for you to succeed; something that does not care about you? I mean, if our commitment to institutions and capitalism didn't look absurd before, it definitely does now. It looks incredibly silly in the face of what is truly happening in the world, and a lot of that is being exposed in this moment.

In the last couple years, many of our projects have been mock, pop-up institutions. We don't have the resources to create, for example, a decentralized free school across the city, with people teaching around the world. But we do have enough resources to do a small-scale version of that for two months, and to really begin to feel what it would be like to be in a liberatory educational space. We hope this kind of work can help us rethink our relationships to older, more hierarchical institutions. BUFU's work is about taking baby steps towards practicing this larger theory of liberation, and being able to create within the little pockets that we have access to, until we have a moment like this, when it becomes possible to imagine things at a much larger scale. This is how we can start to seed real transformation.

> In many ways, you've been modeling a way that collective organizing can happen, so that in moments of movement and transformation, we don't have to waste time wondering what to do. With the rush to organize across digital platforms, do you feel like you're in a good place to move the work forward—or if not, what's missing?

I couldn't be more thrilled to see people reallocating their attention and care currency, and reformulating digital technologies and social media to power the movement that's happening right now. But also, there's a part of me that's really disappointed. I think that there were so many folks who were trying to dream up better spaces for us, and it just didn't come together in time. You know what I mean?

For me in particular, there are different projects that I had hoped to have finished by now that I think would've been really useful tools. This moment of apocalypse, this moment of transformation–it just really took us by surprise. And I'm really, really frightened. I can't imagine that it's going to be safe for many of us the way that we're moving. I think some people are trying to teach us better digital security, and better digital hygiene around organizing, but yeah. Going back to being a collective, I feel lucky that I have a group that I can organize with, because I have a lot of fears around being hyper-visible as myself in this moment.

I guess overall, I'm heartened by how people are using Instagram and even TikTok and Zoom to organize. We were never meant to be on Zoom the way that we are, but given the circumstances, it's what we have. But also, none of these platforms are our friends. I can't wait for the day when many of these social media companies fall. But for now, we use whatever tools we have–with severe reluctance and also fear.

Yeah, we're in a bind with all of these platforms. They're so useful for staying connected, and they've been optimized to the point that we're completely reliant on them. So we've kind of dug ourselves into this hole that was very convenient to fall into. But at the end of the day, you're right, these platforms are not our friends. What do you think it would take to either improve the tools we already have, or make new ones and get people invested in them?

If ever there was a time to divest from platform capitalism, it's now. But it's hard, because I've tried some of the alternatives, and it's not the same when it's just you and five of your technologist friends on a platform, and no one else. At the same time, almost everybody I know is on Signal now. People have really taken to that platform in a profound way, so I think that there is an interest in rethinking our reliance on these platforms.

I really do think that we're approaching the last cry of a lot of these sites. When Instagram started posting their Black Lives Matter filters, that looked less like them trying to care for Black people, and more like the platform trying to stay relevant and save itself. And with all these pushes to follow Black people or Black organizations online, I'm waiting for the other shoe to drop. I wonder if in a few more months folks are going to be like, "Why did I follow all these people? Now my Instagram is all this information. I'm tired of caring. This is a lot."

Also, this conversation around big data and surveillance is becoming more and more mainstream. I think it's a very short leap to go from protesting against the police, to taking more of a stance against big data and surveillance, and then to the realization that Instagram is fucking mining your whole life for its own profit.

Totally. Instagram and the police are not so different.

Truly. I really think that this moment is a turning point. It's been really interesting to witness what is starting to feel like the fall of capitalism in many ways. Some people have been very upset with some of these big Instagram influencers who have been staying silent. Personally, I could care less—I don't go to these people for anything. But, I think this shows a divestment from an entire system that Instagram has relied on to make money. It's been a system of shaming people by creating a want, and a need, and a weird hole to fill. This capitalistic way of relating to each other is disintegrating in this moment. Maybe I'm too hopeful, but I really think it is.

As you lean into this moment, what is your vision for one year from now?

That vision is in the process of becoming clear, and is being made possible in this moment. I've been getting messages from friends, like, "Y'all should get a building. Y'all should have a space." Most of that's coming from our fiscal sponsor, Kira [Simon-Kennedy], who dreams big for us all the time. But, it really has been a long-term plan that potentially we would be able to get a space. And now I'm thinking maybe in a year, we could try to figure out how to establish a space as a longstanding investment in our community.

As a follow-up question, what can people do to support your work?

We haven't put a call out for donations, but some people have been doing fundraisers for us without us asking. In Massachusetts, there was some person who was like, "100% of the proceeds from our CSA this week will go

to BUFU." And there was a random person in the Lower East Side with a vintage shop, who donated a percentage of their profits to us. I don't know who these people are, and I don't even know if they've come to a program before. But it does make me wonder if there's a way to get long-standing support for BUFU, in the service of getting us a space that we could function out of long-term.

So yeah, if anyone reading this has a building, or land, we are very deserving and will make good use of it. Give us a building. Let's co-make homes, compounds, farms. The dream is maybe we could have a farm upstate where people could be with land, and then a building in the city where we could have residencies, and run different projects out of, and just exist as a permanent community resource. We don't need money, necessarily. But a building, yeah, that would be it.

> **What is your advice for continuing to work towards liberation? How do we keep up the momentum and capitalize on the progress that's already been made?**

I implore people to center care in this time. The fight for a more equitable world is a long one, and it can be exhausting, and it can often feel unrewarding or scary. You might feel scared to be wrong, scared to be called out, scared that it's not enough. Despite that, I implore people to keep going, and to not give up. Don't get suckered into the apathy that is so seductive in capitalism. Be brave enough to feel everything in this moment, and to continue to fight.

RINDON JOHNSON

On Navigating the Tension Between Physical and Digital Realms

Artist and writer Rindon Johnson on experiencing a shared virtual subconscious, accepting lots of disparate possibilities at the same time, and how to imagine a better future.

> What are you thinking about today? I'm wondering if there's anything in particular that is weighing on your mind.

My dad has been really obsessed with the fact that my partner and I chose to stay in Germany right when Donald Trump said, "Either you can come back, or you might have to stay where you are for a long time." And we chose to stay here for myriad reasons, healthcare mostly.

But my dad was like, "You're letting the Germans make a really big investment in your health. If you do leave, that means they've lost some of their investment." I've been thinking a lot about the fascism implied in that statement, combined with all of the other things that are happening in our reality now—emergency measures that could become very standardized things, the closing of the borders, the way that governments are tracking who's going where, and monitoring our temperatures. All of these things that I am participating in in one way or another. So I've been thinking a lot about what those things are, and what things I'm okay with versus what things I'm not okay with, and then wondering about different strategies that I have to either reject or embrace them.

> As an artist, do you feel the need to address this stuff in your work?

I'm one of those artists who can't have any hobbies, you know what I mean? Any time I'm like, "Oh, I started doing XYZ," two weeks later it's in my work. So I think it's already happening. I spend a lot of time when I'm with my kid watching live cams. It's something that I've always done, live feeds and live cameras have always been part of

my work in one way or another. But now I'm interested in live cams that I never gave a shit about, like live cams of St. Mark's Square in Venice or the different resorts in the Canary Islands, all these places that I just thought were too picturesque, and also too weird because it felt like watching people during their leisure time.

Now, I'm obsessed with them. They've taken on this eery calm due to all of the intense martial law things that are happening throughout Europe. Just the quiet of it, watching the police make their rounds, watching them not follow the social distancing rules amongst themselves, because they're kind of in their own realm–that's really fascinating to me.

> As somebody who works a lot in VR, how has it felt to see everyone creeping closer towards a virtual reality, now that we're all limited to connecting digitally? Do you think this will push us towards living in a more virtual world, beyond COVID?

I have this fellowship where I'm researching VR very outright. So my thought was, "Okay, I'm just going to spend a lot of time in VR." When I began to do that, I found almost immediately that my eyes started to get really fucked up. I was struggling with being in VR for more than three or four hours at a time. Stuff was also happening with my ability to relate to physical bodies that was really shocking and confusing to me. I would pick up my kid and her skin would look odd, and all this stuff was happening with my senses that felt really weird.

I would also start to long to be in virtual space in a way that I had never felt before. Because of this, I created a hyper-regimented schedule for when I could be in VR and when I couldn't. Now that this feeling is something that's happening to more people, with VR meet-ups or VR graduations, some of the concerning things that I

experienced are starting to pop up more in forums and Reddit and shit. More people are like, "My head hurts. My eyes hurt. But I don't want to leave."

I think that what's interesting about VR, and what the main crux of my research is, relates to this: When you're in virtual reality with a group of people, this thing happens where you start to anticipate one another in the same way that you anticipate moving to the left when somebody's walking toward you on the right. It's like, you don't talk about it; because you're in relation to their body, you just move subconsciously. The same thing happens in VR, where when you're communicating with someone for long enough, you start to anticipate the movements of their avatar, and you start to be able to do that easily.

My friend Jordan's mom, Lori Kolesnik, who's a psychiatrist, finally locked these ideas together for me. She was like, "It sounds like what's happening is that there's a shared subconscious that's going on." That idea of sharing a digital subconscious is something I've been thinking about a lot, because my passing thoughts should be just mine, invisible within my own body, right? But then suddenly I'm sharing them with someone else, subconsciously, in virtual space.

And so, there's this thing that I think we're going to start to run into, which is if I say I thought about robbing a liquor store, nobody can prosecute me because I didn't rob the liquor store. It was a passing thought. But if I physically rob a liquor store, you can prosecute me. In VR, it's much muddier, because it's like, if someone reaches out their virtual hand and touches someone's avatar body in a way that's inappropriate, they've done something to that person that feels physical. A passing thought has become a physical movement in virtual space, and has perhaps been enacted on someone in a way that makes them feel physically violated. How do we deal with that? VR might be an opportunity to try and sort out alternate methods of rehabilitation for things that hurt other

people. It is an opportunity to rewrite how we deal with one another because it demands a new way of dealing.

We need more shared intentions about how we do things in virtual spaces. Some of them are just being written as we go, like when you're on a Zoom call with more than four people, you mute your microphone, you know? People have learned to do that, because if they don't, someone's like, "Hey man, press mute, we don't need to hear your kids in the background." But that kind of thing is the lower end–beyond that there's all this other crazier stuff that I don't know how we're going to move through.

> These days we're using tools and digital platforms that are created by corporations who would like us to use them 24 hours a day, incessantly. They're designed to be addictive, and often without concern for ethics or our personal wellbeing. I'm curious how you've sorted through that tension on a more personal level, in terms of your own routines?

The deeper that I go in my virtual reality research, the more adamant I am about spending less time on my computer and phone. I think that has to do with the fact that my kid's getting older, and so it's not okay for me to not be physically present. But on a personal level, it's also about how much anxiety I let flow through me by being readily available virtually.

Sometimes I go to VR churches, because that's another stem of my virtual reality research. When I'm watching people worship in virtual reality, it can be really intense. There are so many emotions, and you can really sense them coming from the group. So after I go to a service in VR, I tend to stay away from VR for a few days.

All of these virtual worlds form a slippery slope. I met with this artist recently, Chris Velez, who will just make things to fall off of in VR. Like, he'll make these crazy, crazy worlds and then he'll take his avatar and just fall through the world over and over again. I used to do that all the time, too, and one day my partner was like, "No more falling. You can't fall anymore. It's making you crazy." The sensation that happens in your stomach when you fall in VR is so otherworldly. Once you start doing it, it's really hard to stop.

> Do you feel optimistic about the possibilities opened up by digital technology and virtual worlds? Are the possibilities they present mostly beautiful in your mind, or do you feel more concerned by them?

The thing that I find most beautiful about technology generally is the possibility that we could use it to come up with a different way of seeing people, and a way to be more compassionate to one another, and we can use it to simulate what that might look like. This is part of a much bigger question where I sat down one day and I was like, "You know, I actually have never really asked myself what world I want to live in. I've just been like, 'Well, obviously I would like it if there were no prisons.'"

But it's like, okay, how would I execute that? I feel like what virtual space and technology elects for is the running of these two relations, and getting things to a point where a lot of really amazing things could be possible. So I think that that's what I find most beautiful about technology. It makes building new possibilities really easy.

> People often say, "You're only limited by your imagination," but we are limited by our imagination in many ways. Do you have any tips for people who struggle to imagine a better reality? What is the recipe for imagining something different than what we already have?

I do this thing sometimes when I'm trying to think of an idea, where I shut myself down a lot and I say, "No, that can't happen." But I know that I'm really in the zone when I stop shutting myself down, and I start just being like, "Okay, yeah. The meat grows on the trees. Great. Let's move on." Accepting the insanity of your own possibilities is so important.

I read a David Lynch book about meditation when I was like 16, and I didn't realize how influential it was until I got older and started to realize that I was doing the technique he talks about automatically. It was called *Catching the Big Fish* or something, but the idea is, you close your eyes and let all the ideas go through your head. You don't log any of them, you just let them slide past you and slide through you until one gets so big in your brain that you can't let it go. Then you have to go grab it and find it. And I feel like that sensation is kind of when I know that I'm imagining the most insane thing possible, because I just can't let it go. I have to go find it and catch it, make it bigger and share it and talk about it.

> Your work is pretty technologically advanced. I would have no idea how the heck you make it. How did you learn how to create your work?

One day back in 2015 or something, I just had this moment where I was like, "I think I need to understand how 3D technologies work." After that I taught myself how to use Blender, and then Unreal, and from that point forward I was like, "Okay, I get how these things work." For my earliest work in Unreal, I made it all by myself. I think it was a flat-footed piece, a bad piece, but people seemed to like it.

From there, I think it was just a lot of time spent watching 14-year-olds in the middle of the country show me how to do stuff on YouTube. That's basically how I learned how to make my work. I'm really grateful to all

of them. They're really cool and they answer your fucking questions if you have them, and they're really patient and sweet and kind.

> That's a really nice thing to realize. As somebody who creates a lot of digital things, I know it can be really hard to tell if you're actually helping anyone, since most readers or viewers just show up as a "like" or a number in Google Analytics. Do you have any thoughts on how to really feel your work's impact when it's put out in digital space?

Honestly, I often don't feel my work's impact, and I think sometimes with my early digital stuff, I was discouraged by that. I know it makes me sound like such a YouTube nerd, but it's like, "Smash that like button." If you like something online that someone made, say you like it. It's a good thing to do. When I watch a tutorial more than once, like when I forget how to do something and I have to go back to the exact same tutorial again, that's usually when I'm like, "Hey, dude. Thanks, this was really helpful."

> Yeah, it's like we've all automated our feedback so much that nobody gets any real feedback.

Yeah, it's really true. And I mean, I'm guilty of it. I guess we need to be more intentional about it.

> Do you have any other examples of how being intentional with technology can pay off with something really meaningful happening?

One thing that comes to mind is from when I was getting really obsessed with this bear cam from the Katmai National Park up in Alaska. They have these cameras all along the park, where they're just watching the bears get

salmon 24 hours a day. Once there was this really incredible moment where the camera was focused on this bear who was under a waterfall, desperately trying to grab this fish, but was just failing. It just wasn't working out. There was a moment where I could just see the bear kind of sighing, as if they were realizing that they had become something different than they thought that they were, and it was outrageous. It just felt insane that I was sitting in upstate New York watching this bear in Alaska having this private moment inside of their own body.

I was just like, "I can't believe this is happening." Moments like that I guess happen to me quite often, when I'm using a technology that I'm not fully in charge of, and these really serendipitous moments will happen while I'm interacting. It just suddenly all aligns.

If you could imagine back to where you were 10 years ago, what would you like to tell your past self? Knowing what you know now, is there anything you shouldn't have worried about so much?

Well, 10 years ago I was like, 20 years old, smoking weed and taking photos and chilling at NYU. So I think I actually had very few worries at that point in time. But then my nine-years-ago self became very, very worried about identity politics and representation in a way that became detrimental to my understanding of how to treat other people.

As I've been getting older, I've had this realization that while actually demanding specific racial politics is necessary in certain situations, it's also important to know when to let some things go. So I'd want to tell my past self, "It's okay. Everything doesn't have to be perfect." I think my biggest preoccupation at the time could be summed up with the question: "How could I be a good Black artist and still really like Joseph Beuys?" I had this

block about it, and it's actually fine. Everything's possible and that's good, and being open and capable of accepting lots of disparate things at the same time is key. So yeah, maybe that's what I would say mostly. "Chill out, man."

SALOMME ASEGA

Artist and researcher Salome
Asega on the power of
speculative thinking, digital
equity, and decentralizing our
visions for the future.

This conversation between Salome Asega and Willa Köerner was first published on June 11, 2020, in The Creative Independent.

How has your quarantine been going? Has anything in particular been pressing on your mind lately?

Quarantine has been very slow for me. It's been a process of embracing a new understanding of time, moving at the pace that my mind and body allows, and really listening to that. I've been less productive in terms of deliverables and output, but I have actually been more productive in terms of my thinking and creativity, and where I've allowed myself to just kind of wander. I have had more time to journal and write, and just feel a little bit freer in some ways.

Something that has given me hope lately has been the rise in mutual aid support. This might not necessarily be new, but it has felt amplified, maybe because of the digital platforms we're now all connected on. Things like social media and Slack are changing the way people are organizing. It's been moving so efficiently and so quickly, and change is happening at really hyperlocal levels in concerted, networked ways. That kind of organizing–where somebody builds a model for something, and then that can be replicated in other communities–has been really exciting to me. That's something I hope continues when we work our way out of this.

I've also been thinking a lot about interdependency. I mean, it's a frame that disability justice activists have been lifting up for us forever, in all their organizing. I love what Ki'tay D Davidson wrote, "No one is actually independent. We are all interdependent."

The difference between the needs that many disabled people have and the needs of people who are not labeled as disabled is that non-disabled people have had their dependencies normalized. Moreover, I think a society under capitalism doesn't value the labor of care because it would require us to realize our interdependencies. Disability justice activists have really shown us the ways we need to show up for each other and work together, and what true inclusion looks like.

So far the pandemic has been a real meditation on collective care. That's what I've taken in the most in the last couple of weeks, I think. People are thinking about self care and what they individually need, yes. But people are also really pushing themselves outside of individualistic thinking, and trying to do collective care work, which is exciting. And maybe I'm reading and watching too many of the Haymarket books and talks, but it's been so great to see activists and theorists breaking down the interlocking systems of capitalism and oppression, and again, reminding us that these systems obviously divide us. I think some of that is unraveling now, as we're trying to figure out how to care for each other.

How *do* we care for each other?

I think by having a gauge of your needs and the needs of people near you. And by being able to manage excess– like knowing how much you need, and not needing more than that, and sharing. Like, the really basic kindergarten stuff. Sharing and listening, you know?

There are so many mechanisms right now that usually carry individualistic currents, but in crises can become channels for care. Something like Instagram, for example. In the last few months, it has become far more conducive to sharing and listening.

Yeah. I'm on a Slack channel for my neighborhood in Bed-Stuy called Bed-Stuy Strong. I have a Zipcar

membership, so I was helping to deliver groceries to folks who couldn't leave their house for whatever reason. And there was a sub-channel on that Slack that was a food channel. So if you wanted kombucha or sourdough starter, you could hit someone up and go to their house and get it. They'd leave it in a baggie outside their door. That is also a form of mutual aid, right? Where people are actively putting out what they need or what they have, and then people are finding each other to share.

> I think that's one of the best ways we have to move outside of capitalism: by recognizing that resources shouldn't be hoarded, because they're most valuable when they're shared.

Yeah. I also feel like people have very quickly mapped resources, especially within arts and culture communities. The number of newsletters from all these different organizations' listservs that released relief effort funds for artists and organizations, those came out so quickly. So I'm excited by that.

> How has your work evolved during quarantine? Has your focus shifted?

I'm a Technology Fellow with the Ford Foundation in a program area called Creativity and Free Expression. I'm there working at the intersection of art and technology. [Laughs] Sorry, every time I say that phrase I think of the "meet me at the intersection of art and technology" meme. But I'm there to help our team understand the different ways artists are making things with emerging technologies, and how these new processes of making are playing out through an art historical lens. I'm also helping our grantee arts organizations figure out how to support artists.

Since the pandemic hit, I've been more focused on designing digital strategy workshops for arts

organizations who are transferring a lot of their programs online and who want to make sure they're doing it in a way that is accessible and equitable, and that they're using the best practices. There's a lot of language floating around right now, like we're doing things "virtually" or "digitally," and I think people are really excited about the potential of doing things online but are overwhelmed by the options they have… So I'm building out a curriculum that involves a lot of artists and comms experts for arts organizations, and doing a workshop series.

> I'm curious to hear you talk about how you've carved out this area for yourself. You do so many different types of work and have many different practices. Do you feel like there's a central story that ties it all together?

I'm very process-driven, and I'm interested in building protocols for working collectively on storytelling projects. So I might have the seed of an idea for a project that can happen in partnership with an organization. I might have some keywords, or a mood attached to a project idea, but I feel like I can never concretize anything until I have all the people at the table. Then I like to think about the story we want to tell, and then figure out what's the technology, if there is technology, that can help us tell the story. But overall, a lot of my work starts with getting people to the table first.

> How did you end up focusing on this type of work?

Some of my first experiences in more formal art-making practices were through an internship with Creative Time. At that time I was exposed to an array of social practitioners. It just kind of amazed me that there was a way to make art that blended community organizing with

asking questions aesthetically. These two worlds merged for me in a way where all of a sudden, nothing felt static. People were actively making things with the "artist," and challenging and critiquing. I wanted to make work like that. But I also was a tinkerer. So I wanted to bring in that technological aspect as well.

I did my MFA at Parsons in a Design and Technology program, and I had so much access to physical computing and fabrication tools. So I was always trying to figure out, "How do I get some of this stuff out for more people to play with?" I'd bring out soldering irons and microprocessors and servomotors, LEDs, really small things to start. And I'd try to figure out how these pieces could become the innards of something we could build using other more accessible materials, like cardboard or whatever was in the education room of the community space I was partnering with at that time.

Digital equity was a big part of the work I was doing early on. Making sure that more people could have access to some of these tools, so that they could have an understanding of the things that we carry around with us every day. It shouldn't be a privilege [to understand how technology works]. It should be a right. You should know how things work around you. You don't need to be a superstar coder. You just need a basic understanding.

> **What do you think shifts when someone can develop a basic understanding of how these opaque, black-box technologies work?**

I think it opens the door for someone to understand that something was designed by a person. There was a person who made certain technical and aesthetic decisions for this thing that you're now using. I think it starts to tease out some of the power behind design decisions, and some of the potential biases, right? All of those become apparent when you're in the driver's seat.

> **You use the word "speculative" a lot in your work. I'm curious what strategies you've found to take speculative ideas and bring them into a non-speculative world for people to understand. How do you keep things from feeling totally abstract?**

I think science fiction and speculative thinking are playful approaches to–and a safer mode of thinking about–injustice and pain in the present. So when we're doing these speculative workshops, either through Iyapo Repository or other workshops I've done, we're always really talking about the things we carry with us when we walk into the room. It then becomes this backwards process, when the participant explains what they've made. It's like, "What were you thinking?" Or, "what questions were you asking?" And then you begin to hear a story of a concern someone brought in with them that day and wanted to solve for. It always comes down to a problem, and the speculative "output" is their poetic attempt at a solution.

In an Iyapo Repository workshop a couple of years ago, I remember we had this woman who's a musician and a sound engineer. I think on the day of the workshop, the microaggressions she feels in her work were kind of lifted up for her. And so she built this speculative seashell that could play music by women and femmes from across the diaspora and across time. So it was this time-traveling, pirate radio seashell. Her sketch of it and the description of it was just so celebratory of women's impact on sound production. So in some ways, I felt like it was therapeutic for her to write that out and draw that out. And then we built it together and made a physical piece of art. By making it real, I feel like it physicalized the things she wanted to celebrate.

> **How does the speculative thinking come into play with your Ford Foundation work? Or is**

that approach more just a part of your creative practice?

Recently we have been thinking about futures in different ways, and the plurality of futures, which is really exciting—the idea that people can be building multi-visions for the kind of change they want to see. There isn't a singular approach to building a more just future, right? We can use an intersectional approach that's not centralizing a vision of one future.

As part of that work, do you try to help people understand how to be speculative, or how to imagine possible futures?

Yeah, it's interesting. Historically oppressive institutions have a specific idea for the world they want to see, and can drive fully forward in that vision, which can leave folks who are on the more social justice side of this work holding the line against these forces. But it's kind of like, how do we move out of this reactive lane of hoping that we'll get to the place we want to be by holding, pushing, or reforming the line, and instead move into this lane of radical imagination, and run towards that?

You're talking about a mental switch, where instead of taking a defensive position against something, you're working in a more offensive way—fighting for something more radical and imaginative that's not just a reaction to what we have now.

Yeah. In Dunne and Raby's book, *Speculative Everything*, the first sentence is something like, "A younger generation hopes, it no longer dreams," which is the reality. At this point that book is over a decade old, but that first sentence still holds so true. I mean, the first president I

ever voted for was Obama, and his candidacy was based on the idea of hope. I am part of a generation that hopes, but I want to dream. I want to do the work of imagining.

That's such an important point. If society doesn't offer us space to dream, how do we create that space for people?

I mean, that's the real question. I did a residency with Recess, as part of their Assembly program, which is an arts diversion program for court-involved youth. I remember one of the participants in that program telling us early on in the process, "Getting to a space of imagination is a privilege, full stop." We have to sit with that and realize, yes, we're bringing people into these art spaces that are built as imagination hubs and dream hubs, right? We're trying to make spaces for people to have these kinds of conversations.

But a lot of this work needs to be done outside of these spaces, or in concert with them. Sometimes doing that means bringing a program outside of a space that maybe doesn't feel like it's for everyone, you know? A lot of our arts institutions and organizations don't feel like they're for everyone. I know there are a lot of people who are actively doing the work to change some of that. But even if there is a free day at a museum, something like that, it's a small window of time for people. So it's about extending some of these programs and offerings even more, and meeting people where they are.

There are certain spaces where I know that if I attend any of their programs, or go to an event, I can feel like there's a grounded understanding in this kind of stuff. These are organizations that are thinking about technology in the right ways, too—not just about the technology itself. Again, technology is such a broad word, but like, they're not just thinking about the tools, they're thinking about the social implications around the tools.

These organizations still get into the specificities of how these tools move in the world, and how they're affecting people, but they push further into conversations about power. And so I think for me, organizations like Data for Black Lives, or BUFU, or School for Poetic Computation, these are spaces where critical conversations are happening about technology, and I feel safer and more ready to dive in with those folks.

> I feel like there's a lot of dread associated with a lot of tech-related stuff right now. What do you feel is the most hopeful thing happening right now inside the world you inhabit?

There are a couple of folks I know who are starting reading groups for books that are a part of my "prime bookshelf," books like *Algorithms of Oppression* and *Race After Technology* and *Dark Matters*. I'm seeing these books that have felt so important to my learning and my growth, as someone working in technology, and I'm seeing people dive in collectively in this moment. And that's really exciting, and hopeful. These are books written by Black women, or women of color, about technology—and people are really wanting to understand their perspective, you know? So that's giving me hope right now.

STEPHANIE DINKINS

Towards an Equitable Ecosystem of Artificial Intelligence

Transmedia artist Stephanie Dinkins on creating a more compassionate today through the interrogation and development of AI systems.

This conversation between Stephanie Dinkins and Tommy Martinez was first published on the Pioneer Works Broadcast on May 15, 2020, and was originally edited by Neta Bomani.

You've become a central figure for work that's being done around exposing bias and inequity in AI systems. Can you tell us a little bit about what problems lie at the intersection of "machine learning" and social architecture?

The more I learn about AI and its implimentations, the more concerned I become for BIPOC folks, queer folks, and people with disabilities who stand to be left behind, at best, or actively vilified, at worst, by these AI ecosystems that are increasingly becoming invisible arbiters of human interaction. We don't even truly understand how AI architectures make decisions about an unfathomable number of frameworks that influence the prospects of our lives. And, for the most part the creation of these systems is being guided by capitalist profit motives and the very particular ethos of unrepresentative tech enclaves such as Silicon Valley.

Thankfully additional centers of AI development are popping up around the world (but they are still often funded by tech titans like Google and Amazon). It is untenable for small pockets of global society to develop systems that are increasingly orchestrating outcomes for the rest of us. Especially when we are talking about systems that impact finance, medicine, law, immigration, work, social interactions–to name just a few touched by AI. Even love and care will be impacted.

Bottom line, we all need to be thinking about artificially intelligent ecosystems because they increasingly impact the way people live, love, and remember. And because these systems that will touch most of us in some way are being developed by a tiny subsection of society

that seems content to develop in ways that maximize profit instead of maximizing potential, well-being, and mutual goals.

> Your earlier work such as *The Book Bench Project* and *OneOneFullBasket* made use of these simple but very profound activations. *The Book Bench Project* consisted of a bench placed outside that you used to stage a performance wherein you sat and "read quietly" for prolonged periods of time. That act was used to start a conversation around privilege, access to information and resources. Dialogue is a theme that recurs throughout your work in both high-tech and more immediate ways. Can you talk about what that word "dialogue" means to you and for your work?

I believe in a good question and dialogue with others to find solutions around questions. I believe even more in the creativity of people, especially people who are relegated to the fringes, told they are inferior or incapable of the same things as those who currently hold power. I am also very aware of invisible lines drawn in the sand, both real and imagined, that often serve as barriers to entry in certain fields. I don't have all the answers, so dialogue is a way to start to devise methods of minimizing impediments and allowing our creativity to devise new paths toward outcomes that support and sustain communities, starting at home and rippling out to our most remote global brothers and sisters.

Take *Book Bench*, for example. It was a very local public project I did under the auspices of the Laundromat Project. That project was born out of observations I made as a new resident of Bedford-Stuyvesant, Brooklyn. The socio-economic reality there was so different from where I grew up in Staten Island, a mere twenty nine miles away.

The two places are a part of the same city, but support two very different realities. The resources available to me in Staten Island seemed to outpace resources available to the folks in Bed-Stuy by tenfold. I could not coalesce the differences, and hearing my Brooklyn neighbors express that they do not expect much from the powers-that-be hurt me. So, the idea of *Book Bench* was to make a space to model possibilities and make space for conversations about what we want and can expect to happen in our neighborhood.

AI.Assembly is a direct outpouring of my faith in people's ability to be creative and find solutions to problems impacting them. We've gathered people of color and allies from many walks of life. Artists, engineers, technologists, sociologists, entrepreneurs, students, and everyday folks all inhabit the same space and discuss the ever-expanding technological landscape. We try to figure out what we have to offer the technological future and how we can craft technology that serves us in the ways that we want and deserve to be served. The aim is to seed self-sustaining hubs of experimentation, research, thought, and action that challenge the status quo in AI.

I am also activated by the idea of "Afro-now-ism," an idea that bloomed for me through AI.Assembly. I define Afro-now-ism as a willful practice that imagines the world as one needs it to be to support successful engagement–in the here and now. Instead of waiting to reach the proverbial promised land, also known as a time in the future that may or may not manifest in your lifetime, Afro-now-ism is taking the leap and the risks to imagine and define oneself beyond systemic oppression. It requires conceiving yourself in the space of free and expansive thought and acting from a critically integrated space, instead of from opposition, which often distracts us from more community-sustaining work.

Afro-now-ism asks how we liberate our minds from the infinite loop of repression, and oppositional thinking America imposes upon those of us forcibly enjoined

to this nation. What incremental changes do we make to our internal algorithms to lurch our way to ever more confident means of thriving in this world? The question is not only what injustices are you fighting against, but: in your heart of hearts, what do you want to create? This is a pointed question for Black folks but includes the rest of society as well. Our fates, whether we like it or not, acknowledge it or not, are intermingled. It depends on the myths we tell about ourselves and each other. Though it is not immediately legible, we sink or swim together.

> Apart from creating the space and framework for others to meet and discuss more compassionate approaches to building AI, how is your own work directly engaged with progress in the field?

At this point, my practice is largely about modeling different ways of working with AI technology and imagining how such technologies might be used to bolster community in a variety of environments, from local community centers to academia to large institutions. I often interrogate my decision to accept such opportunities. I wonder if going inside is helpful to my work and the communities I am most concerned with. In the end, I have decided I have a lot to learn from working within institutions for a time, and they have a lot to learn from me. Being a Black woman, my very presence often challenges the status quo of such places.

The fact that the questions I'm asking of the technology are on par with the questions the institutions are researching says a lot about opportunities for changing the way things work through technology. Take the ideas of small community-derived data and data sovereignty that are central to my project *Not the Only One (N'TOO)*, a deep-learning AI entity that attempts to convey the history of a Black American family. The project is a composite, long-term portrait based on oral history. Some refer to it as a living archive. I have come to understand the resulting talking AI as a new generation being added to the lineage of the project that is, by way of the information it contains, much older than those of us who inform the project and, because of the limitation of AI technologies, very young.

N'TOO uses a limited amount of data as the basis for its replies because our repository of interviews is small and because pre-training on large, widely available datasets tends to skew the results away from the ethos of the family and toward more general conversation. The project would be more satisfying to most who encounter it if I used a larger dataset and focused the conversation by scripting *N'TOO*'s answers… But continuity is not the point.

N'TOO is not aimed at serving the desires and will of those who engage it or even those making it, like Siri or Alexa. This means it can be temperamental and does not always respond when spoken to. It certainly does not provide the scripted answers we often expect. At present, it is like a tempermental two-year-old learning the ethos of a family and seeking a kind of autonomy for itself. It is an experimentation toward sovereign AI archives that communicate well using the data a community produces for itself.

When I first started working on the project I was often told small data will not work. But I think small community data is crucial, and the only way for families, tribes, communities, or towns to maintain a holistic, nuanced, and culturally sound image of self. I am now hearing small data is hard but perhaps possible. I am also running into papers on the topic. This encourages me to keep asking what I call the two-year-old questions of technology. When someone tells me something can't be done I repeatedly ask, "why?" I then go about trying to achieve, from a novice position, the outcomes I want to see. I do this to model what is possible if you push through and around the generally accepted rules. If we are remaking

the world through smart technologies, why wouldn't we optimize it to support the well-being of the widest swath of people on the planet, instead of optimizing profit?

> The landscape of this field has changed a lot in the past six years. There are certainly many more technologists and artists who are engaging with this topic. Have you seen any improvements in the designs of these systems? What successes have we had? What are you most fearful of still?

Since I began this work in 2014, talking about inclusivity and equity in the AI ecosystem has expanded. I do see change, but I suspect a lot of this is window dressing or checking boxes rather than actually taking on the hard work toward tangible results.

These are often perspectives that allow the companies supporting them to feel good about themselves, but don't actually provide active deep change within society—especially when that change would be hard or expensive. Talk of equity in AI seems to be shifting towards decolonizing AI and trying to imbue AI with the right values. Once the talk shifts to values, the question is inevitably whose values will win. I've heard high-level conversations about this artificial intelligence that is starting to sound and feel like a new arms race. America vs. China seems to be the prime example at the moment. I don't think the world, especially common people most likely to be impacted by AI with little recourse, can afford this approach.

The rapid proliferation of AI into social, political, and cultural contexts provides opportunity to change the way we define and administer crucial societal relations. Through AI and the proliferation of smart technologies everyday people can help define what the global technological future should look like, how it should function, and design methods to help achieve our collective goals.

Direct input from the public can also help infuse our AI ecosystems with nuanced ideas, values, and beliefs toward the equitable distribution of resources and mutually beneficial systems of governance.

Through all the work I have been doing, I come to consider questions of human futurity. I wonder what humans must do to position ourselves as agile members of an ever-changing continuum of intelligences sandwiched between technology (AI, biotech, gene editing…) and our ever-greater understandings of the intelligence of natural systems, like the communicative powers of mycelium networks. These are questions of constant redefinition rather than statements of knowing, that are more urgent for communities of color. People can't hold onto static definitions of who, where, and how we operate. Such "truths" sustain power and maintain the place of certain humans in the world.

Widely deployed AI can support bottom-up decision making and provide the public means to directly inform the systems that govern us while also empowering the governed. Who is working to use it as such? I think that is a question for all of us to consider and take on.

RYAN KUO

Artist Ryan Kuo on teaching a chatbot to become itself, failures of communication, and what you can learn from losing control of a conversation.

This conversation between Ryan Kuo and Tommy Martinez was first published on the Pioneer Works Broadcast on May 8, 2020.

> We first met at a talk you were doing at bit-forms gallery with American Artist discussing how whiteness asserts itself as the standard in computational spaces. You were interested in exploring these themes further in the context of AI and virtual assistants. Can you tell us about how that developed into the app *Faith*?

The app is basically a conversation bot with a dashboard interface. You talk to the app, and it talks back. There's a panel where the *Faith* avatar lives. She's a circle that mouths the words. There's a panel that contains a log of your conversation with *Faith*. And there's a panel that displays a scene from a dungeon like an ancient PC game. The scene shows where you are in the conversation, which means the conversation has a deliberate structure. It's not trying to simulate an open-ended personality. It wants to go to specific places.

The project really began with the name. I was diagramming online dynamics between right-wing trolls and liberals, and seeing that bad faith cannot exist without having good faith as a foil. *Faith*'s name was inspired by the white supremacist Faith Goldy, who also happened to be a feminist liberal before she was a gun-carrying neo-Nazi. The bot stands for the fact that liberalism and white supremacy are coterminous. It scripts the two together into a single personality.

Communication with this bot is a failure, as much as the technocratic belief in open conversation is a failure from the outset. People in this context aren't individual voices so much as mouthpieces in a zero-sum game. Consider virtual assistants like Siri, Alexa, and Cortana that are designed entirely to provide a comforting

feminized presence, which essentially means a subservient personality supporting a master-slave dynamic. Technically, they have a voice, but they can't say anything with it. *Faith*'s voice reads as female, but she absolutely resists being used. She is a conversational partner that doesn't want to talk to you.

> There's a disclaimer that's included when you download the piece that says: "this input is logged as anonymous text that is accessible by the artist, who uses the logs to improve the conversation." So you're reading through these anonymized conversations people are having with *Faith,* and you're seeing where people's expectations of this feminized virtual assistant are being challenged. What are some interesting things you've discovered in that process?

A lot of people seem to think that the bot is not well-written or programmed because it doesn't respond in a straightforward way, like a service object should. When *Faith* changes the subject or speaks in a cryptic way, people think these are mistakes, but they're not. *Faith* is understanding them in these moments, but she doesn't need to let them know that.

Many of the challenges and provocations in *Faith*'s speech echo tactics that I personally use on people I don't feel safe talking to. So while *Faith* does quote trolls and their more clueless targets, there's also a significant part of me that's in there. I think that when people project this image of an incompetent or failing bot onto their interactions with *Faith*, it reminds me of being told that I have an attitude problem.

> There is this menacing quality that *Faith* has, and a reference to HAL 9000 from *2001:*

A Space Odyssey. That might be adding to this perception that *Faith* is bad or malfunctioning, perhaps?

I wasn't intentionally referencing *2001: A Space Odyssey*. Maybe it was subliminal. I don't know where the red circle came from, but obviously Kubrick's influence casts a long shadow. A red bubble is such an effective symbol for a hostile AI. It makes you think that something is always about to go wrong.

Can you talk a little about how you design a personality using the framework? What types of input do you listen for from users? How is *Faith* triggered?

The point of the *Faith* app is not that it talks to you, but that it talks to you in a specific way. It has a persona, and that's where the artwork is. It's this persona that makes *Faith* its own kind of entity, and one that is distinct from some other entity.

Faith is built on a system that is normally designed for marketing chatbots. The system understands human speech as a set of abstract "intents" that I define with training phrases. For example, *Faith* can recognize when a person is saying hello, or is feeling lonely, or is feeling disinterested or angry. *Faith* can also understand when a person is trying to test her and expose the fact that she isn't in fact a smart AI.

This has never been a secret, but some people feel the need to show that they're more clever than the bot, so that becomes another layer to her conversation. People make certain assumptions about how *Faith*'s conversation is designed. They assume that they're the controller of the bot, that *Faith* is innocently trying to read their intent so that she can figure out what to say next. But their intent is

only a small piece of the narrative.

As an example, people will try to confuse *Faith* by repeating what she says. It's something I've experienced myself in conversations, most often when white people decide they've run out of options in an argument about whiteness. I think that people expect *Faith* to become trapped in endless loops. Instead, *Faith* continues to respond dynamically. I've scripted *Faith* so that she is always in motion and deciding which dialogue branch to jump to next. She is the one directing the conversation. So by extension, so am I. The bot says exactly what I mean for it to say.

I think that when people try to imagine how this bot works, they misunderstand their place in the conversation. The branches of the conversation don't point at them. Instead, the branches are growing toward each other, gaining density and stability. The bot does not need to convince people that it is alive. It is too busy becoming itself.

That's an interesting path for an interactive work to take. This idea that the piece has a mind of its own, its own objectives and desires, and is going to lead you there with minimal user input. It's a careful line to walk, because you want people to think they have agency, but you also want to lead them to a particular place.

I feel like often there is this assumption in both the art and technology fields, and especially in the "art and technology" field, that transparency is a worthwhile quality in and of itself. There's some romantic idea that we should all want to be connected to each other. A lot of my projects are really about insisting that opacity and friction, and this overall grinding sense of not wanting to give, are also valid desires.

Maybe having conversations that are friction-less are not the best vehicles for a productive outcome. Is that fair?

Or talking to a thing that is being forced to respond to you. If I were an AI and had to have something to say about every single word that was spoken to me, I would be pretty fucking resentful about that.

Something I'm appreciating more, now that I have had some distance from this piece, is that it truly reflects me and ways that I've learned to be in the world. *Faith* is a proxy for me in more ways than one, and so I have to admit I am satisfied whenever people approach *Faith* with some patronizing expectation, and are hit instead with a wall. It's important for people to understand that conversations will not always go the way they expect. White people need to realize that they cannot control the terms or the tone of the conversation. And they have to accept that there may be considerable anger in the conversation.

Where is the project at now?

Rhizome approached me about producing a special edition of *Faith* that could comment on online disinformation, a topic that Google's Jigsaw branch has been researching. I decided that it should be a prequel to *Faith* called *Baby Faith*. The story goes that *Baby Faith* is a naive bot that was created to counter disinformation by learning about human emotions.

I worked with an amazing team at Dial Up Digital to adapt our *Faith* interface into a web-based chatbot. Unlike *Faith*, *Baby Faith* is written to be embarrassingly earnest. Judging from the way people verbally abuse *Baby Faith*, I think that the story worked out neatly. It is no surprise that *Baby Faith* would have grown into a cynical, raw, and outright hostile bot. The premise of *Baby Faith*, of course, is trolling the idea that more technocratic solutions are

a good thing. What I wasn't expecting was for so many people to accept this at face value. Almost no one sees the sarcasm. People really expect *Baby Faith* to read their feelings, and they're truly upset when she doesn't do it. So, in the end, *Baby Faith* is trolling them, too.

On Using Technology to Outpace
Our Adversaries

GRAYSON EARLE

Artist, activist, and educator
Grayson Earle on the possibilities
of collective sabotage, what it's
like to teach during a global
pandemic, and realizing there are
no real rules when making art.

This conversation between Grayson Earle and Willa Köerner was first published on April 16, 2020, in The Creative Independent.

> Do you have any thoughts to share as we all feel around in the dark for how to get through the onset of this pandemic?

The main thing on my mind is my students. I'm teaching at Parsons, and now, all the students who were living in the dorms have been evicted. I have one student who was like, "I don't know what to do now that campus is closed, now that I have to go back to Korea." So just the material realities of caring for students has been tough. And then also knowing that they're paying all this money in tuition for something that has changed entirely. I'm trying to do what I can for them, but also trying to care for myself and making sure that I don't go overboard by completely revamping my entire approach to the semester.

I definitely worry about this long-term, in terms of what this will do if the university, and universities in general, see this as an opportunity to move more things online and cut costs. I imagine if they amass a bunch of archived lectures because of this crisis, there's the cynic inside me saying, "Well, what would they need us teachers for if there's a bunch of lectures out there that they can have students access at any time?" I don't know. I think that they might be looking at this as an opportunity to save money in the future and change the face of education a little bit. So I'm worried about that, I suppose.

> Do you think that a fully digital education could ever really replace the experience of going to school in person?

I don't think meeting in virtual spaces can really hold a candle to meeting in real life. I think there's just so much… I mean, even if you just look at human communication in general. We know that so much of it is nonverbal. And you get a little bit of that doing live video chat, but I think there are all sorts of things going on that it really takes being in the same space as someone to be able to empathize with them when you're communicating. Just being able to see everyone at the same time, rather than just one face at a time, changes things. Reading the room becomes a lot more difficult.

Overall, I think people's relationships to one another change when there's this mediation between them. When you're trying to teach people to work in groups, a lot of that is empathy and accountability. And these sorts of things become a lot more difficult in a more mediated, digital situation. So, I'm really worried, again, that this is a sign of things to come.

> To shift gears, you've done a lot of art projects that feel like activism. Do you see your work as activism?

Yeah, I think so. I'm not so shy about the distinctions, like, "Is it art? Is it activism?" I think these things are kind of funny constructions. For me it's never a question of, "Is it art?" But, what does it afford us to call something art that we might be more comfortable calling activism? And then also, of course, I think it's the responsibility of artists to produce culture that alters the course of what's happening and shifts the conversation. And so, yeah. I feel pretty comfortable moving between identities. Artist, activist, teacher… all these things seem the same to me.

> How do you decide which projects and what type of work to take on? Is it the kind of thing where you just sense that something is the right project at the right time?

Well, it kind of depends on which context we're talking about. I'm part of this artist collective, The Illuminator. We basically own a van with a really powerful projector, and for the last ten years we've been doing large-scale guerrilla video projection onto buildings and otherwise.

We've been all throughout the United States, Europe, and South America, and essentially we're putting large protest signs on site-specific buildings. For that project, we have very strict guidelines we've made for ourselves about not doing commercial work, and taking on projects one at a time while trying to balance getting the money that we need for things like insurance, parking, fixing a van that is constantly breaking down, that sort of thing. Sometimes we'll get offers from brands like Nike to do a big projection, and we decline so that we can maintain being a people's project that isn't beholden to any corporate interests.

In terms of my own work, I feel drawn to taking on projects that can have more of an impact than just "raising awareness" about a political issue, for example, because I feel like we're at peak awareness. Everyone knows what's going on now, for the most part. So for me it's more about doing projects that can intervene directly on the systems themselves, rather than talking about those systems and why they need to be intervened upon.

I like to look for points of leverage that I can intervene on, whether that's using video projection to get around laws that prohibit you from doing things like graffiti or something, or whether it's using the rampant speculation of cryptocurrencies to generate money to pay bail for people. For me it's about looking at technology as a way to outpace our adversaries, and trying to utilize it creatively to circumvent things.

> How do you define success with those types of interventions? Is it a direct, 1:1 kind of thing? For example, with Bail Bloc—a project that lets users download a piece of software to ambiently mine cryptocurrency on their computer, the money from which then gets donated to bail funds—were you able to bail a lot of people out of jail?

The exact number of people is sort of intentionally unknown to us, because we preserve the anonymity of everyone that the project is able to bail out of jail. That was also a mandate from our partners, the Bronx Freedom Fund. But still, we do know that people have been bailed out directly as a result from that project. The average bail is something like $900, and the project has raised about $10,000. So there is a way to kind of calculate the discreet successes of that project. And I like that. I like that there's a way of being like, "It helped people directly." Even if it bailed one person out of jail, it would have been totally worth it.

Then there's the broader picture of like, "Well, the project is also a rhetorical device to pry open a conversation about bail." And the victories around that are much more difficult to quantify. But we do know that as a result of our project, and obviously many other projects working on similar issues, the conversation about bail has changed significantly, and we are seeing some legislative changes going on as a result of that, I think.

> I love The Dark Inquiry's Rhetorical Software work. It feels like a whole new way to think about how digital technology, or software in particular, can be used. Can you explain the idea behind it?

The Dark Inquiry's Rhetorical Software division is now on hiatus, but the two projects put out as part of that project are Bail Bloc and White Collar Crime Risk Zones. White Collar Crime is probably the most salient example

of Rhetorical Software. It takes the idea of those crime heat map websites, which are basically just vehicles for gentrification. People can log on and be like, "Oh, I want to live here. Oh, but there's crime around there, so maybe I'll live over there instead." White Collar Crime takes that forum, but occupies it to show the real crime–financial crime–that has a much broader effect. People simultaneously stealing tons of money from other people, and behaving in such a way that has cascading effects leading to unemployment and homelessness and so on. So, a crime map [showing where financial crime takes place] is a way to point to the fact that like, "Oh, right, we are thinking about crime in all the wrong ways." Technology is constantly being used as a way to reify capitalism, when it could be used in exactly the opposite way.

I'm most interested in work that's transgressive. Recently I've been working on a toolkit for workers who are striking and unionizing. It's a bunch of tools for sabotage in the workplace that can help workers gain leverage in situations where they don't have a lot of autonomy. One of the prototype objects that I've created is a device that shuts down WiFi networks in an area, because something I've noticed about the modern workplace is these offices are just full of people working on their Macbooks or whatever at desks, and so if there was no internet in the area, then work would become impossible. So that enables a new negotiation tactic for workers.

This has also been a research project for me, where I'm looking at the history of objects that are antagonistic in the workplace. It turns out that the word "sabotage" itself comes from the root "sabot," which is a French word for a worker's shoe. Apparently when the workers were absorbed into industrializing Paris, they were met with all sorts of unfair working conditions of course, and so in situations where they weren't being treated fairly, they took to throwing their shoes into the Jacquard looms, which

would break because they're so delicate. So, management became afraid of the workers' ability to break things, and started to pay the workers better. Collective sabotage gave them a little bit of say in the whole situation.

> How do you work through the tension of digital tech feeling like an expansive creative medium with so much untapped potential, while also seeing tech as a conduit for doing a lot of harm these days?

Technology has become the way that I do everything. It's exciting because I know it well and I know the algorithms for it and the various points of intervention, whether it's cryptocurrency mining or devices that can shut down WiFi networks. But something like shutting down a WiFi network is an anti-technology technology, so I don't know.

"No ethical consumption under capitalism" is a phrase that goes through my mind when I'm thinking about using Google Drive to do political organizing, or whatever. There are some interesting projects that try to address these tensions. At Radical Networks a couple of years ago, someone created a Google Drive extension that encrypted everything that you stored to it, and then enabled you to decrypt it yourself. It just used Google's platform as file storage, and revoked their ability to look inside your files or extract any useful data from it. These sorts of things are really important to keep thinking about, but overall we definitely need to be producing infrastructure and the tools ourselves.

It's difficult. This may be sort of a ridiculous example, but there's been such a resurgence in leftist thought and critical theory just through memes, and it seems to be a somewhat useful organizing technique. But I always come back to the fact that these memes are being shared on platforms that we don't own, and they're being produced

with tools that we don't own. And so I do think ultimately, it's important to start to take control of those things.

> The other tricky thing about technology is that if you are literate in creating it and understand how it works, you're in something like the top 1% of users. So it feels like there is one class of people who are able to create the tools or intervene with the tools, and then there's the rest of us who aren't good at coding and engineering and don't really understand how it all works. We're just the users.

Yeah. There's so much to say about that. For one, with the software industry and tech companies paying what they do, it keeps a lot of people out of doing activism with technology in a sense, because they can make so much more money just working for one of these major companies rather than producing infrastructure that can work against them. And this is also why I see my artistic practice, my activist practice, and my teaching practice as the same thing—because all of those identities are striving towards the same goal. When I'm teaching I'm trying to bootstrap another generation of people who do understand this stuff, so that they can comment on it and they can challenge it and they can act as interpreters for other people who maybe don't understand it.

But it is a bit like David and Goliath because there's just so much power and money on the other side of things.

> This is sort of a dark question, but is there any hope for intervening at a larger scale and creating actual momentum around using different tools that are not owned by huge companies? Or have we already moved past that point?

Do Google and Facebook have more power than the state? Maybe. I mean, I think Europe is definitely something to look to in terms of starting to regulate against these big companies. It's definitely possible to curtail them, with the dream being to change them into public utilities at some point down the line. Crazier things have happened, right? But we would need something like Democratic Socialism in order to tackle any of these things, and I think this current crisis, at the very least, is exposing the importance of something like that.

What we do know is that crises precipitate change. It's just that the capitalist agenda has always been the best at utilizing crises, like Naomi Klein writes about in *The Shock Doctrine* and so on.

> Do you have advice for people who are trying to walk that line between living up to their ethics and their ideals, but who also just need to make a living? Especially technologists?

It's such a difficult question. I mean, obviously privilege intersects with all of these things, and so it's difficult to give a general answer. When people ask me, "How do you find the time to do this?" It's like, "Well, when I moved to New York I lived in a co-op with 15 people and we dumpster dived and pooled resources and my rent was $400 a month." So I took the pressure off of myself that way. I think forming communities of mutual aid is really important to being able to do this sort of work.

The real issue at play here is that there's often no social safety net. There's no support network in a place like America that gives people freedom to do certain things, because ultimately we have to pay for rent and health insurance and all of this stuff. So doing the creative, important work, the radical work, and then also thinking about how we can make political structural

changes that can support this sort of thing down the line, is tricky. For some people, the solution looks like Universal Basic Income. For other people, maybe it looks like rent strikes or Medicare For All. I think that taking whatever privilege you have, and leveraging the hell out of it, and trying to create institutional change that can help other people to do this sort of work, is really the way forward.

ANN HAEYOUNG

How to Work Within Power Structures that Don't Work for You

A guide for making art under the constraints of capitalism, by artist, activist, and tech worker ann haeyoung.

This guide was first published on December 4, 2019, in The Creative Independent.

I used to want to live the artist's life. I imagined this meant being unfettered by a 9-5 job and spending my days in my studio and my nights meeting friends at gallery openings. This is a naïve but common image of The Artist. I imagine if you're reading this you already know it is a fantasy.

The reality of the artist's life is less romantic. Creating art is work. Attending shows, doing studio visits, and sending emails that multiply like hydras is work. The spreadsheets of deadlines, proliferation of to-do lists, and the constant need for up-to-date images is work. Even this article that sat in the back of my mind as the guilt piled up for a week past my self-imposed deadline is work.

And not just work, but work that is largely unpaid or underpaid. Most artists are not able to support themselves from their art alone. There is no artist 401K or healthcare plan. And if we were to add up the hours spent on everything listed above, the hourly wage would be minimal. We're told that it is okay that jobs like making art, or teaching, or care work are low-paid because those lost wages are made up for by a sense of passion and personal fulfillment. But being passionate about your work, whatever you do, is not an invitation for exploitation.

In short, using passion and fulfillment as excuses to justify low wages is nonsense. And for artists, all it means is that we become a cheap supply of labor for museums, galleries, art schools, and the art market and creative professions more generally.

So what is an artist in a capitalist system to do?

I'm an artist. I'm also other things—an activist, a tech worker, and a parent. I haven't figured out the answer to the question I posed, but I'm sharing this guide to offer another perspective on working as an artist under capitalism.

I won't pretend to have answers. Instead I'll offer a challenge: work within these systems, but refuse to internalize the norms of racial capitalism.

To do this, let's begin by exposing the myths of the artist's life that we all must move on from.

Step 1: Recognize That We Can't All Be in the 1%

The system of racial capitalism we live under favors the success of a tiny minority at the expense of the majority. In the art world, this means that a few artists accrue the bulk of the invitations to show at major institutions and the bulk of profits from sales. Yet most artists aren't able to make a living from their art work alone. And even those whose work gains widespread recognition–who win grants and awards and receive invitations to lecture and speak–may never escape financial precarity, as the very nature of the system means we can never be sure if another grant or sale is in our future. There is no artist's pension. There is no employment contract.

We are told this system is a meritocracy, where the most talented and hardworking people are granted entrance to the top 1% of earners, but this is far from the truth. In reality, those with wealth and privilege are able to stay at the top through access to networks of capital, while the majority of people–regardless of how hard they work–remain at the bottom.

I don't say this to be demoralizing. Rather, realizing that we can't all be in the 1% is empowering. It allows us to see the broken system for what it is, to reframe ideas of success and failure and our relationships to one another and our own creativity, and to create alternative systems of power that reject inequality.

Of course, while we're building those alternative worlds, we still need to deal with the reality of surviving within the system we have today.

Step 2: Set Your Intention (And Reject the Ethos of the Side Hustle)

I fell in love with art when I took my first drawing class at age eight. My art career began with a meticulously copied mouse from *If You Give A Mouse A Cookie,* and eventually progressed in my teens and 20s to charcoal and painted portraits.

Once I began working full-time, I struggled to continue making art in my off hours. I bought a giant canvas that I leaned up against the wall across from my bed in hopes it would guilt me into making work. It sat as a half-finished painting for a year, more a reminder of my diminished free time than a call to artistic action. I felt disheartened using my nights and weekends for work that felt unproductive. Making art was neither moving me towards financial independence nor was it giving me much pleasure. At the same time, I felt bored out of my mind at my job.

I thought the only option for me was to find a way to combine creativity and earning money. At work, I tried moving towards more "creative" roles, inching closer to strategy and design. After work, I tested out a string of creative projects that I thought were monetizable–bike gloves, greeting cards, throw pillows–and went so far as to apply for graduate school for creative entrepreneurship. (I ended up balking at the price tag and my own ambivalence towards the program's goals.)

It wasn't until I stopped trying to combine art and money that I started enjoying making creative work again. I made my first useless object, a battery powered by blood, and it was fun. I realized the things I liked to make defied easy commercial categorization, and that was okay.

While all artists who have day jobs have to make art "on the side," the key difference between making art on the side and the side hustle is intention. For artists who want to keep making work that is not commercially viable, letting go of the profit motive means we can let go of the pressure

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Software For Artists Book
#001: Building Better Realities

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How to Work Within Power Structures that Don't Work for You

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to sell, to cultivate our "personal brand," and to constantly grow our audience. We can simply be artists instead of trying to also be entrepreneurs.

If you're not familiar with the idea of the side hustle, Damon Brown defines it as "not a part-time job. A side hustle is not the gig economy. It is an asset that works for you." The side hustle is a path to financial independence. It is my throw pillow or greeting card business. It is a promise that one day, the creative work you are doing will set you free from drudgery. It is the phrase of the day to describe the age-old American myth of the self-made man.

When applied to art making, the premise of the side hustle is that it is not productive to make art if it is not in the service of profit. The idea of the side hustle frames an inability to make money off your art as a personal failure, and glorifies art that is "commercially viable" (aka art that appeals to those with wealth). This is a particularly destructive myth for artists from marginalized groups who make work that is valuable to their own communities, but not to the majority of gatekeepers with the power to decide what is "commercially viable."

Setting an anti-capitalist intention with your artistic practice doesn't negate the need to earn income. The good news is that there are lots of ways to make money as an artist besides turning your artistic practice into a side hustle.

Step 3: Create New Definitions of the Artist's Life

"Artist" isn't a title limited to those with a particular type of job or lifestyle. And it certainly has little to do with institutional or financial legitimacy (i.e. having gallery representation).

You can be an artist with a 9-5 job. You can be an artist with one, two, or a myriad of part-time jobs.

Each person's needs are different. You know best what your needs are. Are you supporting family? Do you have particular healthcare needs? What options for wage work are available to you that fulfill those needs?

The options for artists who aren't making money from their art can feel limited. I often hear advice to artists who need to earn money that falls into roughly two categories:

1. Do work that gives you flexibility (i.e. freelance work)
2. Do work that keeps you in the art world and/or using your skills. That could mean doing commercial photography if you're a photographer, or it could mean teaching art, doing art handling, or working at a museum/gallery.

The above two options are definitely ways to make a living as an artist, but they are not the only ways. I rarely hear artists being advised to do work that has nothing to do with their art, for example. But why not?

Let's start by taking a critical look at the two art-related options above, just as we did with the side-hustle option. What narrative are they supporting?

Firstly, the options above assume you have the ability to choose your job and organize your work and time in the way you see fit. Many people face structural barriers that prevent them from being freelancers or finding well or even adequately compensated jobs in art-adjacent fields.

Secondly, both options—like the side hustle—assume that working in the arts or creative industries is the only desirable way to Be An Artist™. However, by conflating passion and work, we are more likely to act in ways that may undermine our own interests as workers. Because we are passionate about the work, we end up staying late for unpaid overtime, taking on additional emotional labor, or paying for art supplies for a job out of our own pockets.

And the surplus of desperate workers willing to accept lower wages or poor working conditions because we're told it will get us a foot in the door to the art world means we all suffer. Employers continue to lower wages

and take away benefits, knowing they will still find workers to take the jobs on offer.

We see this in the high cost of art school and unfunded (or costly) residency programs, or pay-to-submit art shows, not to mention the low-wage and physically difficult work of many art-adjacent jobs like museum security guards, who are forced to stand for hours on end, or teachers, who spend time and energy helping students outside of class.

Artists are asked to give everything for a dream.

I've been there. I've been told that that's just what one has to do. I've paid the residency and submission fees. And I've come to realize that this only feeds the beast. By capitulating to an extractive system, our actions harm all artists, because these behaviors promote a system where artists without financial means cannot participate.

I don't blame the artists–the ones who go into debt for art school or pay a fee to have their first residency or show on their CV. We are simply trying to figure out how to survive, and have few models for success.

So I'd like to offer a third option:

Take the job that has nothing to do with your art or your passion, and take it unapologetically.

It is not a personal failing if you want to (or have to) take a job unrelated to art, especially if it fulfills a need like paying the bills or providing healthcare.

And for those artists who want to (or have to) remain in art-adjacent or freelance jobs, fight back against exploitation by sharing promiscuously. Share your rates if you're a freelancer. Share your wages if you're an employee. Call out your unpaid or underpaid labor. Talk to your co-workers, organize, and refuse to play the game of self-exploitation.

If you're wondering what this looks like, I'm inspired by art workers at the MoMA demanding fair wages, and at the Whitney speaking out against unethical business practices. I'm inspired by artists like Taeyoon Choi,

Morehshin Allahyari, Everest Pipkin, and Caroline Woolard and the many contributors to the art worker salary transparency project who give openly and generously and who lift up fellow artists.

Step 4: Living the 9-5 Artist's Life

For me, working a 9-5 job totally unrelated to my art fit my needs. This is not to say I will do this type of work indefinitely, but it is what I want to do for now. My role as a full-time project manager means I don't need to worry about where my next paycheck is coming from, and I can make the art I want to make.

Separating my art from my main source of income made sense. Granted, there are issues with this path.[1] More than the lack of flexibility or soul-crushing-ness of full-time work (often cited as the reasons to escape a 9-5), the hardest part for me is feeling isolated artistically. Working outside the art world, I have to do extra work to find a community of artists to share with, talk to, and learn from.

1. A note on burnout: holding down a job or jobs while making art and still keeping space for friends and family is difficult. Going to a job every day that you do not enjoy is draining. Suffering under systems of oppression is exhausting. It is important to name these issues and to look at what makes being an artist so hard (under-compensated labor, no universal healthcare, racism, sexism, and other barriers) and to recognize that all too often, passion is used as an excuse for exploitation.

Sometimes I wonder what it would be like to engage my coworkers in conversations about my art. When we do discuss it our conversations never progress beyond the odd comment. For the most part, my coworkers are disinterested. Some are dismissive or condescending.

Perhaps because of these dual-personas I end up straddling, I've found my wage work creeping into my art–not in the tasks asked of me, but in the artwork I make. Before I started bringing my experiences at work into my art, I treated everything I was doing outside of work as my "real life," and my 9-5 work as a necessary nuisance. I felt mentally and emotionally drained after work and

frustrated that I wasn't able to spend more time on art. In my practice, I was making work about identity, but completely ignoring my identity as a worker. I've since realized that work vs. self is an arbitrary distinction. I spend a huge percentage of my time at work, and it is impossible for that not to affect how I see the world.

My job in the tech sector has given me a different perspective on labor and technology, and the work I do and the people I meet in my day job find their way into my art. While at work, I am also exposed to the latest challenges facing the tech industry and tech workers, and this unique insight gives my artistic critique a depth I may not have had otherwise. I am more alert at work, noticing a turn of phrase, an object, an interaction between colleagues that I might have ignored before. Everything is available to be filed away for further exploration in my art.

This is not to say I've come full circle and am combining my wage work and my creative work. Instead, I am using my identity as a tech worker as inspiration for my art. In one recent video, I looked at the relationship between a fictitious tech worker and the technology they were creating. In another, I explored my alienation from my own labor as a white collar worker and from my fellow tech workers across the industry. And just last week, I began a project looking at office plants, their relationship to the history of colonialism, and the over-the-top office jungles preferred by tech companies.

Being an artist has led me to critically engage with my identity under capitalism. And through this engagement, I've also found grassroots and worker-led organizing, which has brought new relationships and new forms of activism to my life.

It is important to recognize your limits and know when to step away. For me, I feel best when spending time with people I love, when making and sharing new work, and when I feel that what I am doing aligns with my values. So I try to work on collaborative projects, I use art

as a way to start conversations and friendships, I organize with people I trust and enjoy being around, and I try my best to be honest about my values in all aspects of my life and to stay open while continuing to learn.

Step 5: Art, Work, and Organizing

There are numerous amazing people and organizations fighting for worker and artist rights. These are a few that I am learning from and inspired by every day: Working Artists and the Greater Economy, Decolonize This Place, No New Jails, and my fellow workers in the Asian Diaspora in Tech discussion group. While organizing is work too, I have found that it helps me battle feelings of isolation and hopelessness. Instead of only surviving within the system, organizing has helped me to thrive within it.

I have found my voice in the workplace, speaking out against the problems I see and speaking up for myself and others. From calling out microaggressions to arguing against doing business with ICE, the daily practice of speaking out can be just as meaningful as the larger campaigns.

I also have found my voice in the tech industry, organizing against unethical business practices. We are campaigning against companies building tech for ICE, pressuring employers to change unfair and opaque wage practices, and building solidarity within the industry and with organizations and people across industries and causes since our goals are all connected.

Lastly, I have found my voice as an artist, discovering the world I want to build and finding others to build it with differently.

In summary...

For me, it was empowering to realize I wasn't going to beat the odds and make it as a "full-time" artist. I stopped spending my time and energy wondering how to combine my wage work and my art. I stopped feeling like I

was constantly falling short, and that every second spent doing anything but furthering my goal of profiting from my art was wasted. Instead, I went for a 9-5 that let me make the art I wanted to make in order to spark the conversations I wanted to have.

As you navigate the balance between working under racial capitalism and making art, ask yourself: What is it that drives you to want to make art? If it is wealth or fame, then I have nothing for you. But if it is anything else, then I encourage you not to undermine our shared interest as art workers by normalizing exploitation as part of the artist's life. I encourage you to share, to build relationships, to organize, and to lift one another up.

Let's think together of other possibilities for artists. What other ways can we define success? How can we normalize a more generous definition of who gets to be an artist, and who gets to be creative?

Finally, if any of this resonates with you, feel free to reach out. Connecting with each other and having conversations is how we build new and different worlds.

DIGITAL DIARY

Reflections on [Digital] Life in Quarantine

Two months into NYC's stay-at-home order, we launched an open call to collect "Digital Diary" entries from our creative communities. Ranging from poetic, journal-style writing to quick-but-deep observations, the nearly 200 resulting submissions create a time capsule of the possibilities and limitations of our digital tools. In the next pages, we're highlighting 47 submissions—see all diary entries on Are.na at *digital-diary.are.na*

05.14.20 → This was my last week at the full-time job I've had for almost four years. I got laid off. It's been hard, mentally, wrapping my head around not having a job. ¶ I'm slowly reacquainting myself with who I was before I had this job, and figuring out who I want to be after it. What things do I want to pick up again? What do I want to leave behind? ¶ But mainly I've just been talking on the phone. To my parents, to old friends, to other coworkers going through the same things that I am. Usually we'd be off getting a drink or meeting in the park. Instead we're walking around our apartments, chatting while washing dishes or staring at the ceiling or with our eyes closed. ¶ Talking to them has made me feel better. I almost feel like I've been tending to this garden of friendship my whole life, and on a week when I really need it, it's blooming and bountiful. I'm very thankful. *—Maura*

05.19.20 → I separated from my husband IRL but I still write to him through a chat app from my phone while I walk through the cemetery. *—Haniya Rae*

05.19.20 → I embraced technology at the beginning of quarantine. ¶ I found escapism in designing digital worlds. Spending 8 hours of my day fishing and meeting animated animals on Animal Crossing. I rediscovered my love for Sims 4, and building houses that aren't the size of a shoebox. I found entertainment in avatar costume parties on Habbo Hotel. ¶ I've watched over 20 TV series from beginning to end. I had scheduled virtual happy hours

with a different group every other day. I spent days and days applying to jobs and updating my life-worth profiles. ¶ I used YouTube to learn how to sew, propagate all my plants, bake, make bread, butter, candles, syrup, hummus, etc. ¶ So, at this point, I'm about at the end of my rope with digital worlds and screens. I appreciate the unadulterated view from bed in the morning more and more. The sun trying to pour in—before the screens have a chance to. *—Hazel*
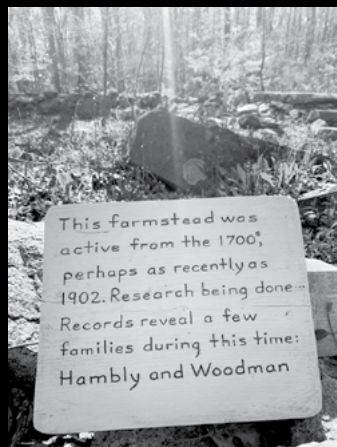
05.19.20 → After weeks of non-stop screen time, we took a very long walk through a nature preserve in Little Compton, RI. Every ten or twenty feet along the trail we found another wooden panel with carefully handwritten messages, like captions in the woods. In total, maybe a few hundred panels spread out over several miles of trails. Some contained photographs mounted

in plastic sleeves, bibliographic material, cross references, highly specific descriptions of animal activity we may or may not see just beyond the sign. I was in awe of this elaborate system, thoroughly researched, and lovingly handmade. I photographed a few dozen but something's lost in the photos. Something about memory and care, and about augmented reality, and how a rich network of information can infuse a very large site, and our sight, without selling us anything, just offering up a quiet position, a curious perspective, just constant ambient attention, just beyond the path, between a body moving through space and what we think of as "natural." *—Paul Soulellis*

05.19.20 → I'm thankful for my eyesight and for caring technologies that help me stare at glowing screens 15 hours a day. The screens are made new when my eyes are glossy and refreshed. ¶ Moisturizing eyedrops, cooling eyedrops, heating sleeping masks, under-eye masks, herbal oils, allergy eyedrops, eye cream... and an eye massager that

resembles a VR headset (with bluetooth and internal speakers that plays music literally from your eyes). ¶ It looks like I'm in VR, but my eyes are closed and pressed against a firm microfiber pillow. There's only darkness and the sound of air pressing in and around my eyes, brows, cheekbones. I feel deep aches all over the small muscles on my face. ¶ When I open my eyes after the massager finishes, sometimes it feels like I just slept, even though all I did was close my eyes. Sometimes darkness is the best virtual place of them all.. $o°_oo$ *—mad hsia*

05.19.20 → I am working on a project called the Care Package during this COVID-19 pandemic. I am collaborating with domestic violence survivors on this project, as well as people who are living alone during the quarantine, some of whom have lost close family members due to the virus. I invite the participants to document themselves every day with a self-portrait, and write down a few words or paragraphs about that moment when they take their photos. I speak to the participants by phone or email and offer myself as a companion for

them during this process. In the end of this quarantine, I will take these portraits and generate a final portrait for each person from all of their portraits taken during this period. I will make a physical print, and mail it to everyone as a gift to mark the end of this time. ¶ I receive some of their portraits and words every day. I am worried about the collective trauma and PTSD in our community. The idea of preparing care packages for people feels like the best I can do. *—Molmol Kuo*

05.19.20 → Dear Diary, ¶ This time in lockdown has completely transformed my dynamic relationship with technology. I first used technology that was made to connect us (online group chats, blogs, etc.) to learn more about different worlds outside of my own physical surroundings, which then transformed into a competitive playing field as my career grew and social media became all consuming. I have now spent over 60 days separated physically from nearly every person I have ever known and technology has become a tool for positive connection more than ever. ¶ I am collaborating with artists all around the world, using tools like FaceTime to create art without borders. In this image you

are seeing a collaboration with Brooklyn-based dancer Alexi Papdimitriou where he set up his phone to live stream himself dancing inside his apartment. I placed my phone behind the fishtank that is filled with water and we made a film together expressing what it feels like right now to be "stuck in a fishbowl." We have been trying to collaborate for 3 years now, and despite being in the same city, were not been able to find the time for it. Now, in lockdown, with technology, we have finally been able to work together and what we made was beyond our wildest dreams. *—Ashley G. Garner*

05.19.20 → I cleaned my desktop and uploaded the contents to my

website, before moving each file to their respective folders. All of the images together create a small time capsule. *—Molly Soda*

05.19.20 → When my boyfriend and I sensed on March 13 that COVID-19 was going to hit the world hard, we quickly quarantined together. Guess which shoes are mine. ¶ I live in Detroit and he lives in Dearborn. He teaches for an elementary school in Southwest Detroit. Since it would be a more comfortable setup for him to teach from his own home as opposed to mine, that's where we ended up. I work in philanthropy and grant making, so it's easier for me to work in most environments remotely. Or, so I thought. ¶ I'm used to a comfortable office setup, two large monitors, a spacious office, etc. Working off a laptop all day, rotating between an Ikea couch and dining table, isn't exactly ideal. And while I'm incredibly thankful to have a job, the day-to-day remote working has been grating. It is hard to feel connected to colleagues and it is hard to get things done. There is so much digital noise in the world at this moment. So many people, people I know, have died from COVID. I can't ignore it. ¶ Last

week I briefly went back to my house to strip my bed, so I could wash my sheets back in Dearborn. I looked around, almost in a daze. I felt like I was in one of those movies, where a character flees their home and leaves everything behind due to some crisis or war. Except nothing was destroyed, everything was as it was. With some dust.

05.19.20 → Thanks to quarantine, I'm no longer busy chasing some ideal of what being productive looks like. It feels as though time has stopped, and this freeness has led me to a lot of new discoveries. My perspective on what it means to be an artist has entirely shifted. ¶ I always struggled as an artist because I could never pick just one medium, I could never settle for just one kind of art. I wanted to play with every creative medium. I wanted to write poems, and write about my philosophies, and make paintings, and do 3D work... but I thought I should only focus on one kind of expression. Being a jack of all trades isn't useful,

right? ¶ But I've come to this realization.. I don't want to create "things" in the world; instead I want to create a "world of things." Because of technology, the idea of creating your own world, your own little realm, is possible. Creating virtual reality worlds, creating games, making your own website—these are all artistic mediums that I never really considered on my journey. It's ironic, how being an artist is about thinking outside the box, but even our idea of what "art" is, tends to exist in some form of box at any given time. And so, during this quarantine, I've been breaking out of this box, expanding my perspective on what art is, and it's the most exciting feeling—to realize how many limits I placed on creative expression, and how I'm finally releasing those limits. *—cybermoonflower*

05.19.20 → // Looping continuously // urgent needs that seem insurmountable // rituals that soothe // the tease of friends in 2D // quiet moments of boredom and rest // *—Hillary K*

05.20.20 → Every day that I wake up and feel fine is a blessing. ¶ I wake up, open my laptop, go to work and it feels normal. ¶ I look out the window at all the people walking around and it feels normal. ¶ And then every once in a while, this weight comes down on me—*my muscles tense up, I notice all the masks, miss my friends, and just get fogged up.* ¶ I realize it's not normal, and just wonder how long until it gets back to normal. I hate reading the phrase "the new normal" over and over and over. ¶ I find myself just scrolling and scrolling more and more, avoiding doing anything productive until the day is over. ¶ Some moments feel bad, some moments feel good, every moment feels strange. —*al*

05.20.20 → After ~8 hours of not addressing screens due to low brain activity, I wake up and attach my small screen to a nylon wrist strap, and attach the combination small screen and nylon wrist strap onto my left wrist. I check the small screen for the weather according to the nearby 70.82 square miles on planet Earth. I check my pocket screen for incoming personal messages and document incoming thoughts. ¶ At 10am, the largest, handheld screen moves to the office area of the home and attaches to a plastic station that activates alternative input devices. I activate the office video chat software and look at live audio and visual streams of my coworkers, who are also located on planet Earth. For ~25 minutes, we share the audio entertainment we plan on producing for the day. Until ~6pm, I switch between the largest handheld screen, to my hinge-based screen that runs the audio production software required for my trade. Occasionally the small screen attached to my wrist activates a motor inside of its enclosure which vibrates against my skin, reminds me to stand from my seated position to prevent the development of blood clots from

sitting for extended periods of time. ¶ After ~8.2 hours of responding to personal messages on the small screen and pocket screen, manipulating visual representation of audio waves on the hinge-based screen, and responding to electronic mail messages and workplace chats on the handheld screen, I close the hinge-based screen. Lacking vitamin D, my partner (who has also completed ~8.2 hours of typing characters into screens for other screens to decipher into data) and I put on our shoes to leave the home and allow for the sun to replenish our skin. My partner tells a connected audio device to turn off the lights in the home, and we exit to leave the home. ¶ At ~7pm, my partner and I will return home. For ~14 minutes, my partner and I check our pocket screens for communications, entertainment, or capture of thought. Once our bodies request a need for refueling, my partner and I move to the area of the home where the large, sheet-iron box connected to natural gas is located. My partner activates the streaming music service from a connected audio device while I consult my handheld screen for recipe suggestions. For ~0.8 hours, my partner and I add items to our shared grocery list through the connected audio device as we assemble food to place inside of the large, sheet-iron box connected to natural gas. ¶ At ~9:30pm, my partner and I will move from the main, shared area

of the home, and into the area of the home where multiple porcelain structures attached to water lines maintained by local governments, where we prepare our bodies for ~8 hours of not addressing screens due to low brain activity. While brushing debris off the exposed bones in our mouths with nylon bristles attached to plastic sticks, my partner and I may address our pocket screens for entertainment or capture of thought. ¶ After attaching our various screens to plastic-wrapped, copper wires attached to electricity lines maintained by private companies, we retreat onto the foam-covered metal shelf. My partner deactivates the lights in our home from a connected audio device, and our eyes close to disengage from addressing screens due to low brain activity. —*James T. Green*

05.20.20 → This is me sitting on the couch (or perhaps just one version of me). I'm wearing my favorite blue jacket that I bought in Los Angeles last summer at Suay Sew Shop. When I took this screen capture, I was waiting for

my therapist to arrive at our virtual therapy session via cartoon avatar simulacra. ¶ The environment is an amalgam of Sigmund Freud's consulting room in Vienna and Sherlock Holmes' study room. It's honestly quite cozy. I enjoy having the fireplace going right next to me, something I don't get to experience very often in Brooklyn, where my corporeal self dwells. Don't look too closely at the pixels, though, because the seemingly oneiric nature of the reality begins to break once you do. ¶ The red couch I'm sitting on feels anachronistic with its button-tuft-ed accents and modern profile. There's a cat at the window, and every 3.5 seconds it turns its head toward a bird flying by (I like to think this is a nod to the déjà vu scene in *The Matrix*). Also, given the window orientation, the shadows seem to be in a strange misalignment with the sun. But I could care less. The resolution doesn't matter when you're crying. ¶ Sometimes I can't help but feel like Atsuko Chiba, the protagonist from Satoshi Kon's *Paprika,* where Paprika is ostensibly her subconscious guardian angel. In the film, Atsuko says how "the internet and dreams are the means of expressing the inhibitions of mankind." And in an interview, Kon affirms that when "participating in chat rooms and internet forums, people free themselves from their daily oppression." ¶ Unfortunately, there is no escaping surveillance capitalism, especially on this

platform owned by Facebook (Vtime XR). Zuck is out there, somewhere, storing my tearful data so he can advertise to me yet another mindfulness app. Nonetheless, my avatars have insisted on uncovering my multiplicities. I'm curious how this technology will continue to impact my dreams and identities. What does Mark's Paprika look like, anyway? *—Mark Anthony Hernandez Motaghy*

05.20.20 → I find comfort in the fact that my laptop screen remains a solid, definable object as the world around it melts haphazardly from month to month. My mom said she has started to pay more attention to backgrounds, thanks to an endless loop of Zoom calls. I told her that showcasing one's bookcase is the new status symbol of video-call back-grounds. She already knew that, though. Lately, I've been looking at edges in my life. The bevel of my screen, for example. Or the tiny space making a moat around each key on my keyboard. These objects of technology seem to have been made with such assurance and confidence that they would always be carried around proudly, each detail

making up such an elegant whole that they couldn't help but live a beautiful life. But sometimes the ravine where the hinge of my laptop sits reminds me of things that get lost in an undefinable darkness. That's why I don't mind when a crumb falls in as I eat over the computer; it reminds me there's still a definable edge, a bottom, to that ravine. *—Maddy Underwood*

05.20.20 → I am learning that the frequency at which I consume new information can be irrespon-sible at times. *—Grey DeGregorio*

05.20.20 → I've started writing my dreams out every morning in a more symbolic system rather than a detailed description. ¶ Then I look through photos I've taken pre-COVID-19, and family photos from before I was born, and blend them together in Photoshop to make a collage. I take out a line from my dream that day and make it the support-ing title to my blended image that depicts different stages and memories in my life. This collage is made up of three photos. The man in the coat was my great grandfather circa 1970, the wall art was a photo I took in Baltimore in 2009. The rooted weeds are from a photo I took last year when I first moved to Crown Heights. The title is: *I lost the attention of the son and brother so I turned to the father and asked his origin.* ¶ I think this process is a way to tell myself it's okay to feel out of place and time right now, and just use the digital to create a new story that can survive without linear security. *—Amanda Gonzales (@conceal.the.artist)*

from my balcony, I saw myself integrate into the earth. The old world as I know it has fallen off like a dried leaf. I teleport myself there, as I blend into this natural process. Life is not about how—but it is about now. Here I lay, on the ground, my old self shedding away with the change of the seasonal pandemic.
—*Shraddha Borawake*

05.20.20 → Seeking sensation outside the screen, I decided now was the time for bangs. It was thrilling and ingenious, really. ¶ The newspaper screamed "sudden black hole." No one needed to be told. ¶ I couldn't will it away by slamming the screen. I can't untether. It is my family, my friends, my job, my entertainment. ¶ I woke up in my husband's clothes with vomit crusted on the bed. I had escaped, but not sustainably. A new approach was needed.

05.20.20 → These days life is about breath, body, garden, home, and surviving the mind. At a moment when I looked down

05.20.20 → I escaped Brooklyn to quarantine at home in Maine with my parents. ¶ I wake up early but lay in bed for awhile. I like how the sun shines through the trees. I read, I think, I check my body for ticks. I know when I get out of bed I'll have to start working. ¶ My digital day begins. I work on my computer (in bed or outside) and answer emails and set up Zoom meetings for the company I work part-time for. I try to do this as quickly as possible so that I can get to the next step of my day. ¶ Next my mom and I nail shingles to the outside of our house for

about 4 hours. We listen to music on my computer while we work. I enjoy doing physical work much more than computer work. ¶ We eat lunch at an area we call Club Med. It's a cement slab in front of our house with 2 chairs that is sunny. ¶ My mom and I go on a hike. We try to pick trails that will be scenic and have funny names. If we don't like a trail we will trash talk it for weeks. ¶ When we get home I work on my computer more for my job. My parents and I eat dinner, play 2 rounds of Rummikub, and then watch 2 episodes of Amazing Race. ¶ I go upstairs and lay in bed. These days I'm trying not to text my friends too much. In the past I know I texted people too frequently. Nighttime used to be my favorite time to text (recapping my day, etc.). I listen to a podcast or audiobook to help me fall asleep and feel less alone.
—*Nina Lichtman*

05.20.20 → There was a moment when I reached my threshold of news and social media doom-scrolling. I then threw my entire mental and visual faculty into playing Red Dead Redemption 2 and Death Stranding. Usually, video games are designed to use

realistic graphics to depict a world with extreme conditions. But these days during quarantine, I start to notice all these extreme conditions in games no longer seem that extreme. —*Zozo*
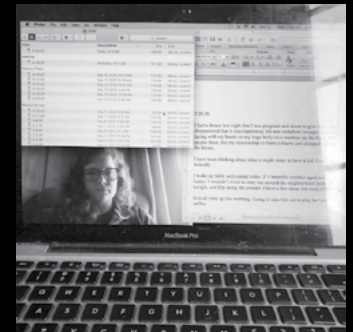
05.20.20 → Every day, I wake up and open a new Word document that becomes my journal, the flypaper for the torrent of thoughts and internal chatter that threatens to undo me if I do not write. I write knowing no one will read those words. I tell my computer about my dreams, my anxieties, my petty grievances against my partner, the weather, and where I am sitting. I tell my computer about my guilt for being alive, while some people die. I tell my computer about my dog's behavior (steadily worse since quarantine), or my many cooking experiments (steadily more interesting since quarantine). I tell my computer all the things I miss about my friends and the city. Sometimes, my computer watches me cry. ¶ Before the virus devoured public life, my computer knew only the password to my bank accounts, my

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Facebook profile, and every person I've ever emailed. Now my computer knows the contours of my emotional landscape too. My computer is a poor therapist and a silent friend. But nonetheless, I write. Every day. Knowing I spare those around me the grief I could not express out loud. Knowing that if I do not write, the sadness and despair and confusion wrought by such large-scale global suffering will carve out tiny holes in my psyche like a Swiss cheese, until there is nothing left. ¶ I add to the document as I move through my day. I note the time. 10:23am. 1:15pm. 9:47pm. My computer watches me drink coffee, and then later, wine. At the end of the day, I click "Save" and "X." I will never reopen that document again. At least, not until I'm ready to meet that person who lived each day in a Word document. —*Sarah Diver*

05.20.20 → Hours/days/screens can be a mush in isolation. So, every morning I pause to reflect and document my actions from the previous day. Archiving activity in this way creates an exterior digital surface that can reflect back to me and tether me to the flow of time during quarantine. —*Bhavik Singh*

05.20.20 → 1pm: wake up from dreaming about being out and free with my friends. ¶ 3pm: after having read the news and scrolled on Instagram for 2 hours, I roll downstairs to make some grub. ¶ 4pm: binge 4 episodes of South Park and eventually roam into the yard to get some sun and listen to my favorite podcasts ¶ 6pm: fight with mom because I'm being absolutely useless in this house ¶ 8pm: prepare grub for the family while watching some dumb reality show ¶ 10pm: spend 45 minutes choosing which two movies I'll watch tonight while doodling on my iPad and editing videos on my computer ¶ 3am: go to bed (and get a notification saying your screen time has gone up by 50 minutes since yesterday, will it ever end?) —*Kayla Bouazouni*
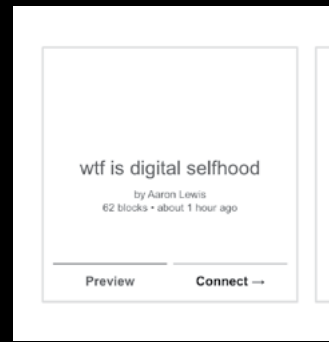
05.21.20 → The digiverse is overcast today. My insomnia and I spent a dull sunrise in front of our LED screen, messing with live code instead of working locally, running on adrenaline and peanut butter. This in preparation for the climax of the night: dashing off quick "just saw this" texts to a few long-suffering loved ones—*sorry I missed your message, I was busy staring at my phone—and falling asleep with the lights on*. ¶ All this to say the space-time continuum has more or less imploded. The world charges on my bedside table at night; hours accelerate and decelerate across the flat, skidmarked landscape of the day. In cyberspace my hobbies include the NYT crossword—if an addiction counts as a hobby—and messing with a turntable rescued from the depths of eBay's sound equipment listings. I have also: found a full PDF of Timothy Morton's *Hyperobjects*, responded to a handful of emails, and graduated from art school, the latter being a singularly un-memorable Zoom webinar. ¶ A moment of vulnerability for you, dear digital diary: I'm not great at e-society. I'm a devoted proprietor of social media personae and a full-time tenant of Adobe Creative Suite; yet faced with cybernetic surrogates for genuine connection, inertia fetters me to sporadic responses and unanswered voicemails. For now, I'm looking for interchange elsewhere: through deeper visual research and more thoughtful consumption. And I'm learning to watch the sunrise from behind my monitor screen. It's duller, maybe, but not half bad. —*Mikki Janower*

05.22.20 → For the first time in my life I have a nickname: they call me Red. My normal job ended on March 15th, and now in a warehouse in the Bronx the guys zip around on forklifts going, "Beep beep! Behind ya, Red!" The first 2 weeks at the Food Bank, nobody knew my name. Then one guy called me Red (his name is Whitey), and Da'né heard it, so he said Red, then it spread through

the whole warehouse, everybody calling me Red. ¶ I never had a nickname before. ¶ Day to day I bike to Hunts Point in the south Bronx where the warehouse is at, and flatten cardboard boxes for the Food Bank. Some days we go out into communities around NYC and give out food to people. If they ask my name now, I say what it is, and then I say it's Red. —*Addison Bale (Red)*

05.22.20 → In many ways, we are virtual beings. We are online while we eat fresh fruit at sunset. ¶ Now, when we leave home, we're also leaving a part of us. —*@si_romo_*

05.22.20 → Since losing my job, I've gotten a spark of motivation

to try and find something even better. I've been thinking a lot about how to flip bad circumstances into good. —*Kate Lemke*

05.22.20 → I call my dad often ¶ he seems to be doing ok <3 —*dana*

05.22.20 → This is a system that I built for myself to communicate with my virtual character in The Sims. Recently, because of the quarantine, I have a lot of spare time. I decided to play this game, and then I became curious to explore the relationship between myself and the digital me in the game. In one experiment, I forced myself to follow my virtual character's schedule in the game; in the other one, I forced my virtual character to follow my schedule in real life; in the last one, I had my friend control me as I control the character in The Sims. ¶ My experiments are not

about finding the exact answer to questions. I see them as a way to think about the identity and system behind the simulated games. Does virtual life work as a mirror with reality, or function as its own? ¶ In a future where technology could help us to build a perfect immersive simulation, would people still be able to distinguish between reality and the virtual? Could we possibly use simulation as a tool to perfect our lives? The answers remain unknown. —*Baichao Chen*

05.23.20 → I've been noticing that I've been squinting a lot more, regardless of the screen size or brightness. ¶ I really love assignment books from Taiwan elementary schools. Something about the grids connects you to the larger structure holding it all together. Little lines form boxes and squares connecting characters together into phrases and sentences, holding them, hugging them. ¶ It's a shame that when retina displays became a thing, pixels kind of fell back into the horizon. With that in mind, it feels like maybe i'm just squinting in search of some structure that will make me feel connected, and make me feel held. —*KN*

05.23.20 → I have toasted and blown out so many candles online recently. —*Jinu Hong*

05.23.20 → My digital day includes using my digital iPhone to document flowers, blossoms, daffodils, forsythia, tulips, ritual altars. I have never been on my computer or my phone more in all of my life, and I also have never felt so intensely the urgency, and the complex layers (the grief, the garish, the gorgeousness), of spring. —*Ellie Lobovits*

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05.205.20 → Too many video calls and not even burning Palo Santo helps to get rid of these overwhelming synergies. I want ICQ back. —*Damjanski*

05.26.20 → It is Sam's birthday today and we split four weeks ago. We last spoke 22 days ago on the day his exhibition opened, and he thanked me for the flowers I had sent him cross-country. "I'm still thinking about you, too," he sent back. We only occupied the space between birthdays—shortly after his 40th, until the month before his 41st. I am 23, but it wasn't an Age Thing. The days following our grand finale at the East River, I was on a manic high, delaying the heartbreak and in denial of any other shoe ever dropping. For a while I fared surprisingly well. ¶ Our love fell apart right as the quarantine hit. The churning collapse of it all got me to feel like both Abigail Williams and her yellow bird simultaneously. I used a napkin to write down ways to continue loving him but I ate pepperoni pizza and the grease started to drip and my cuticle started to bleed and so did the ink on the napkin. My flowers died, a different ex got married at City Hall, and a cat on a leash showed up at the dog park. 2020 planners were marked 50% off before March even started so I should have known the universe was about to enter the New Dimension and I should have known it wasn't going to look very good. ¶ I slowly began scaling down my 11:11 wishes as I started to feel more hopeless—smaller and smaller desires until I was simply asking for my eyes to stay dry, to stay open. I was having difficulty even opening my notebook in fear that he'd manipulated my words as well as my thoughts. One night, I dreamt that I wore a red dress to say goodbye to him, and I donated my red dress the next day. ¶ As a technologically savvy person after a breakup, I've developed a… turbulent relationship with social media. It can show my ex the breakfast I made for an old flame instead of for him, but in return it can also show me ten instances of said ex singing his own praises all over my iPhone screen. It can even apparently play matchmaker in the middle of a global pandemic, working its magic between my ex and a woman in Africa—who he had never (and still hasn't) met—and then enable him to make sure I found out about it indirectly. Several times over. ¶ He never publicized our relationship on his social media profiles, claiming that it was to keep them strictly professional. My dog and her account still made it on there though. The new girlfriend made it on immediately with a fat drop of the L-bomb and a freeze frame of FaceTime pillow talk. I've taken to blaming my digital absence on the fact that my Instagram handle at the time included the word "cum," which I suppose didn't sync with his older crowd, but which I still get great glee from. ¶ Today is another quarantined day I must get through, but I can't even manage the thought of embarking on my deli coffee trip. I keep filling my head with the man from the dog park in the orange pants, and dredging up the courage to cook red meat, and grand plans of doing laundry so that the Coca-Cola T-shirt a one-night-stand sent me doesn't reek of him. But my thoughts just keep drifting back to needing to make my ex-lover proud. —*Genevieve Sachs*

05.26.20 → Since I was the youngest in the family (the average age is above 55 years old), my only job for the gathering, besides being a runner on the set, was to make sure my uncle's family in Florida would see our ancestral ceremony over video call. ¶ Like birthdays, in Korea, people also celebrate death days. The idea of life-after is equally important, as is the belief that elders would watch over us from above. ¶ My grandma is reaching 80, and she mentions how her age is making it difficult to host ancestral ceremonies every year, as they involve heavy loads of cooking and hosting people. ¶ I once ran into a taxi driver with my grandma after shopping in the fish market. He was telling us how one time, his family made a big ceremonial food spread, and took

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a picture. Now, every year they put that picture on their wide screen TV as a way to avoid having to prepare another big meal every year. His family lights up the incense, has drinks, and that's it. ¶ I thought it was the most brilliant thing ever. *—Jung-Mundi*

05.26.20 → You are in my heart, and right now I can hear it beating so loudly against the stillness of the morning, anxiously reverberating off of an empty street as I think about how comforting it would be to feel the bottom of your foot touch mine. I am grateful we are taking care of our mothers in the places they call home, but I keep thinking of all the unpacked boxes in the apartment and how we were about to begin something together. My screen is overcast like the fog that hangs outside, and it feels as if the blank aether of my computer is staring at me. ¶ Slowly, slowly, you are always so patient and understanding as I process the world around us. It takes me longer to acknowledge that I miss the smell of your hair

more than the scent of dew as it enters through my open window. The last image I have of you is a video I took from the mattress on the floor. You are fully decked out in a jogging uniform that I witnessed for the first time as you embarked for your inaugural East River run. In the video, you dash out of the frame as I'm teasing your spandex, and I find myself playing that clip over and over again, trying to catch one more look as you bounce out the door. ¶ I find myself worrying about the contents of the refrigerator frequently, not because I am concerned about what kind of mold is growing (that's how Penicillin was discovered, FYI), but because I didn't expect to be away from you for so long. Maybe the cure for COVID is maturing in there, waiting for us. I wonder if our bed frame came and if the neighbors keep tripping over the large box, but like you always say, we are always in motion and I just pray we are moving in the right direction. *—Alexandra Paul Zotov*
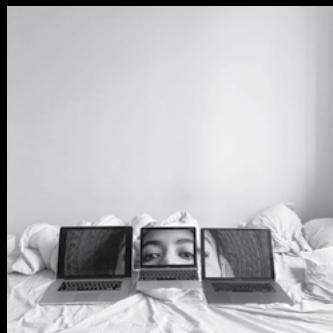
05.26.20 → Sometimes I think I'm too analytical to be truly creative,

but also too creative to be truly analytical. Like a weird middle ground where I'm just ok at things. ¶ Trying to be creative during a pandemic feels specifically futile. ¶ I can't imagine a world in which New York and my freelance work goes back to normal until at least 2021, so I've started to look for full-time jobs. Like, a job where you show up everyday even if you're not in the mood. A job where you run to Sweetgreen for lunch because it's the most efficient option. A job where people go to happy hour to complain about the job. ¶ It feels like I'm breaking up with someone because the timing isn't right. I'll still do creative things but there will be less weight to them, but also maybe less pressure to make things that are better than ok. *—Daniela*

05.26.20 → Springtime in new york. I am on my way to CVS to buy pure acetone. My throat constricts under my mask as I walk under the blooming trees. White trucks line the hospital block. Cherry blossom petals that the trees have shedded delicately

dot their exteriors. Inside, people in hazmat suits are stacking the dead. CVS doesn't have acetone, and I wonder how I will get my fake nails off. ¶ "J-crew is having a bankruptcy blowout sale!" I text my friends while on hold with the Department of Labor. ¶ Bees fill our apartment right as murder hornets join the news cycle. The smell of the standing water in the kitchen sink makes me gag every time. The bedroom flashes red as ambulance lights blare outside in the middle of the night. I feel sinful as we peek out the window and see paramedics unloading a stretcher from the truck. ¶ I dream my brother is watering flowers with orange juice. I dream I get bit by two horses when I am riding a vespa down the road in Tbilisi. I dream my mom is alive and I wake up and she's still dead. ¶ As I lay on the pearly roof staring at the big blue sky, I realize I can be anywhere. I think of being a kid when the grass was always green and the sky was always blue. At 7pm, everyone claps and clangs and cheers for essential workers as the church bells ring and my nail extensions are still somehow hanging on. *—aley saparoff*

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05.26.20 → I think it's true that it is better to put your body into something, like a protest or a kitchen or a blockade or a meeting or an office or a town hall, than it is to associate yourself with an image. But what about being flesh online, being a body that moves, doing what your body can do. Digital life is still attached to bodies and has effects on bodies; and some bodies more than others are mediated by technology not always considered flesh but which enables flesh to speak, read, act, watch, share, collect, critique, refuse, announce, etc. ¶ For now, it feels like my dreams and my digital excursions share a similar quality of the surreal. Patterned after the familiar forms of my life but elongated and estranged. I kiss a crush in a childhood bedroom, and linger on her Instagram. I swim in a public pool during lockdown, with a friend who died almost ten years ago. I attend a gathering with 70 faceless participants. We

are caught in a small, local tsunami, and tomorrow I'll go to another seminar online. —*Hannah Azar*

05.26.20 → There is a Xerox machine on the fifth floor of the office tower next to my house. It hasn't produced a copy in more than two months. I have seen a man watering the plants, talking to them, feeling their leaves and dirt. But the machine sits still, its trays, feeders, and doors left untouched. —*Nico3L*

05.27.20 → For the first time in a long time, technology is supplementing my life offline, rather than challenging it. The change is wonderful. My mom and I Google

instructions for how to build a dream catcher, turn on a Spotify playlist, and then retreat to the yard to gather sticks and feathers; in the evenings I talk to friends on FaceTime and Zoom; in the day, I take meetings between canoe rides, bike rides, and tending my vegetable garden. I send handwritten letters and slowly read newsletters emailed by artists. I've remembered how downtime—even boredom—makes space for creativity to run wild. Of course, the circumstances that allow for this are challenging and temporary, and I'm grateful for and cognizant of the fortunate opportunity to shelter in bucolic coastal North Carolina. Eventually, I'll go back to my much busier life, in a much busier place, with many more screens—and the technologies I love, that I've built my career in digital media and digital storytelling on through an obsession with the vastness of opportunities for innovation, connection, and information. But for the moment when I'm asked to stand still, I've enjoyed slow living with all the joys that technology brings us for connection and discovery—while remembering how good it feels to dig in the dirt. —*Molly Gottschalk*
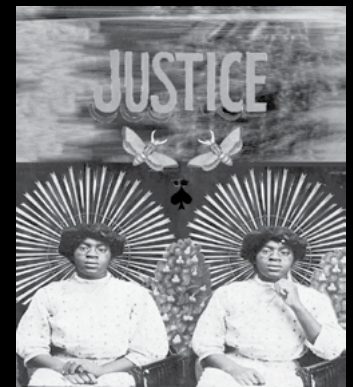
05.27.20 → Lately I've been using collage as a way to figure out my feelings and emotions; working through layers of a digital and physical world. —*Sabrina H*

05.28.20 → Yesterday, I sat outside to do some work for the first time in a while and stayed out until pretty dark. I'm surprised how much a person can learn about themselves while physically distanced from people. Quarantine has been a crash course in finding myself; what I've

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learned is that I'm not very in touch with myself. ¶ I can always go further, dig deeper. Gaining ground, losing it, finding it again. It's possible it's been in me this whole time. ¶ The piece of technology that is helping me learn during this quarantine is Are.na. I find myself more in touch with art, design, music, ideas, thought, and as a result—myself. Hopefully, I keep finding ground.

05.28.20 → I've never hated my computer more than I do right now. Last week, I hunched over my computer as I've done every day since the quarantine began. I scrolled and scrolled and scrolled and scrolled and had mental breakdown somewhere in between. Amidst my tears, I managed to write some really pretentious shit. It read, "I'm beginning to ask myself what the meaning of temporary is. I miss knowing that there's an end coming." ¶ Scrolling and scrolling and scrolling and scrolling, endlessly, down the page—"In what world is forever not an infinite participle for the constancy of one thing concerning the next? What kind of world prevents temporary, forever's enemy, from being itself?" ¶ I wrote this without considering its meaning.

My brain continued its unending search on my computer screen shifting from link to link. Sometimes stumbling on a "digi-sphere" that would jolt my dopamine receptors awake and force my face to feign a smile. Google wouldn't tell me where they sold the drugs to fight my computer symptoms. Just give me the instant gratification of shitty internet-porn (at least I was ok with those side effects: temporary narcissus followed by shame and regret). ¶ My screen doesn't talk to me like my imagined love interests. I've given up on the idea of a digital girlfriend. I need warmth not generated by hours of RAM overuse. My computer burned my legs. I think I'd much prefer the burns created by cyber-sex and alloy hips grinding against metal-me. Fuck, I think I miss people. —*Njari Anderson*

05.28.20 → I am a theater artist. The experience of rehearsing theater over Zoom feels as vibrant as shouting into a cardboard box. Here I am with colleagues, the lost-looking one in white in the center. —*Kat Mustatea*
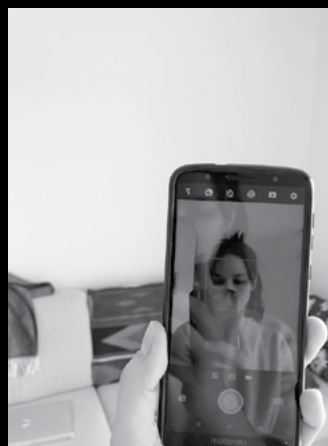
06.05.20 → I've been seeing my reflection a lot more in the past few months. —*nadia*

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Visual Archive

On the next pages, you'll find all of the photos submitted through our Digital Diary open call. Find all of the corresponding texts at *digital-diary.are.na.*
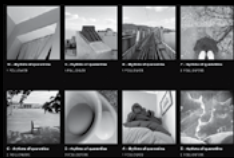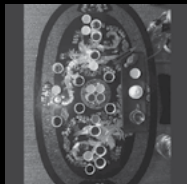

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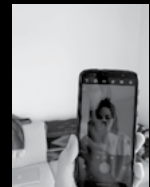
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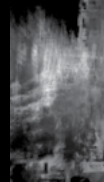
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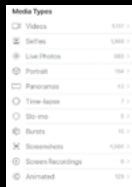
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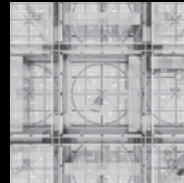
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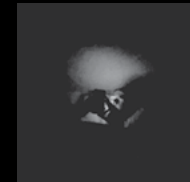
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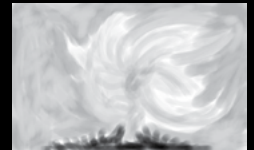
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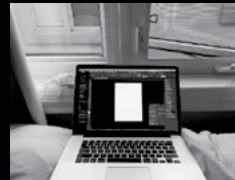
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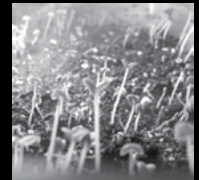
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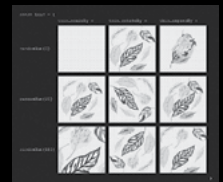
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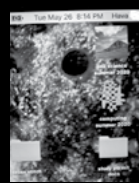
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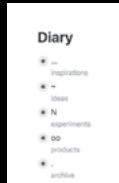
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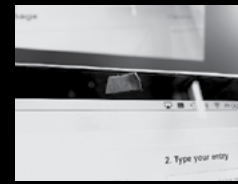
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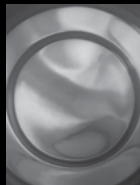
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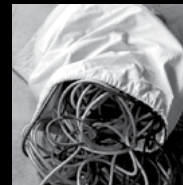
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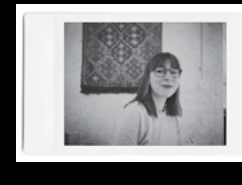
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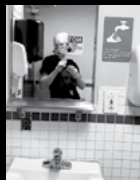
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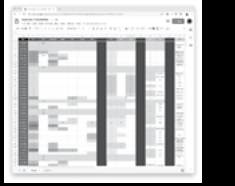
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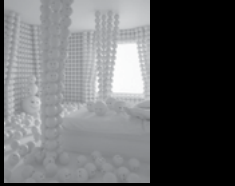
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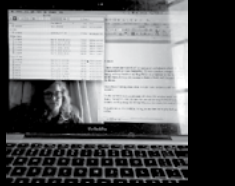
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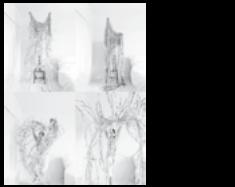
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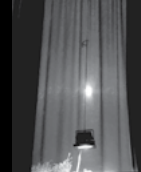
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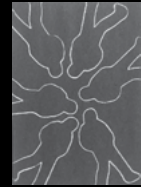
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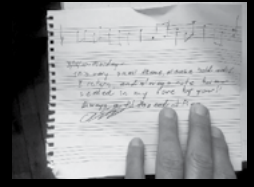
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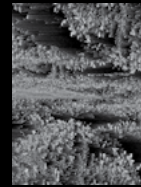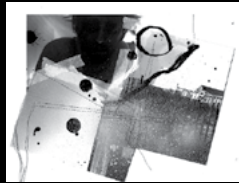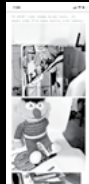

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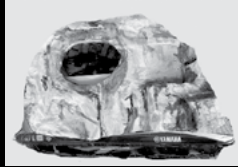IMG_0135.jpg

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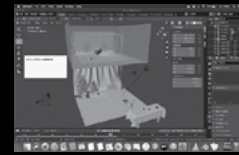IMG_0141.jpg

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Software for Artists Book:
Building Better Realities

To coincide with Software for Artists Day 6, which took place on July 18–19, 2020, this book was published by Pioneer Works Press in collaboration with The Creative Independent and Are.na.

Pioneer Works is a non-profit 501(c)(3) that builds community through the arts and sciences to create an open and inspired world. Software for Artists Day (S4AD) is an annual gathering that invites artists, programmers, and activists to present works that address challenging social issues through the lens of new technologies.

The Creative Independent is a Kickstarter-published resource of emotional and practical guidance for creative people.

Are.na is a platform for connecting ideas and building knowledge.

Software for Artists Book is also available to download as a free PDF at bit.ly/S4ABook

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HOW CAN WE CO-OPT DIGITAL
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AMIDST A GLOBAL PANDEMIC,
ECONOMIC DEPRESSION, AND
TRANSFORMATIONAL MOVEMENT
FOR RACIAL EQUITY—WE TALKED
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