

# CROSS- WIRES

IN THIS ISSUE OF SAH JOURNAL, FIONA CASHELL INTERVIEWS AMERICAN ARTISTS REBECCA ULIASZ AND QURAN KARRIEM – PH.D CANDIDATES IN THE COMPUTATIONAL MEDIA, ARTS & CULTURES PROGRAM AT DUKE UNIVERSITY, NORTH CAROLINA.

WE HEAR ABOUT THEIR INNOVATIVE PRACTICES AND CURRENT PROJECTS IN NOISE AND VISUAL PERFORMANCE, AND LEARN HOW COLLABORATION HAS PLAYED AN ESSENTIAL ROLE IN DIVERSIFYING AND EXPANDING UPON RESEARCH AND CREATIVE OUTPUT. WE DISCUSS THE CHALLENGES THAT EXIST IN PURSUING PRACTICE-BASED RESEARCH, AND CONSIDER HOW THE ARTIST/RESEARCHER CAN FIND WAYS TO NAVIGATE THE INSTITUTIONAL STRUCTURE – IN AND OUTSIDE OF THE ACADEMIC WORLD.



IMAGE: COURTESY OF THE ARTISTS





“WHAT BECOMES OUR MATERIAL FOR  
LIVE PERFORMANCE IS ALSO MY  
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IS BEING USED.”

IMAGE: COURTESY OF THE ARTISTS

**FIONA:** I guess I’ll just start by asking, what is CMAC?

**REBECCA:** CMAC stands for Computational Media, Arts and Cultures. It is its own PhD program. It was previously part of the visual studies department. The year we got accepted into the program was the first year that it received some external funding via a Mellon grant. Then it became its own program outside of art history.

As a PhD program, it is fairly new and plays a different role within the wider scope of institutional activities. The university is keen for us as researchers and practitioners to navigate the system and the ways in which we engage with departments differently. So it’s very fluid.

In addition, within the program we have many different lab initiatives that give you the opportunity to work in different kinds of groups with different faculty on more collective projects.

**QURAN:** CMAC is organized around labs. Different faculty members have their own labs or pairs of faculty members might run a lab around their interests. I’m sitting in the PhD lab for Digital Knowledge right now. This model is in effect all over Duke. I’ve been interested in that question of what it means to be a lab. What does it mean to be part of a project that ends up being a study on the performance of knowledge that requires a lab structure? What is the humanities trying to access by adopting a lab model?

**REBECCA:** That’s something that’s quite present at Duke. Just in terms of the way these labs are popping up in various departments as a way to kind of seemingly ground or make relevant the type of work that a humanities-based scholar does in the first place.

**FIONA:** It identifies something, doesn’t it? If you call something a lab, then you’re identifying the work it produces in a specific light.

**REBECCA:** Yes. You’re looking to certain types of tools and methods that you can use that may qualify your work in some sort of way, within a different context. Often, these are the projects that are getting funding from the university.

**FIONA:** A lab distinguishes itself from the traditional academic model, which is probably good. It is something that doesn’t necessarily have so many boundaries attached to it, as is often

the case in academia. Would you say your experience so far has been pretty positive?

**REBECCA:** Yes. I compare it in some ways to the types of experiences that I had while doing my MFA at Stony Brook University. I felt very much like the looseness of the structure within the program could allow me to flourish or fail. A lot of what we are doing now at Duke is similar. We are collectively figuring out how to navigate a structure which can and does change. There's a certain amount of research expected from you; there is an outline to what is expected in terms of a body of work or certain types of research output.

**FIONA:** What have they outlined?

**REBECCA:** They don't define it so much as they are like, what is it that you want to do?

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— “IT’S REALLY HARD TO FIGURE OUT HOW TO GROW INTO YOUR FIELD OF SCHOLARSHIP, WHILE AT THE SAME TIME TRYING TO DEFINE WHAT THAT FIELD IS... WE HAVE TO OPERATE WITH A CERTAIN DEGREE OF SINGLE-MINDED, UNFOUNDED CONFIDENCE.”

**QURAN:** From the outside, I think the question is: how do you make sure that whatever it is you are wanting to do, that the program is serving that? It's a different kind of measuring rigour or way of measuring expertise. What is interesting is seeing what emerges out of these interdisciplinary intersections that you're exploring. It's amazing but it can also be really overwhelming. As a tiny cohort, having each other to talk to is important. As a close quarter of people, we're all figuring it out together. We are all doing different research, but it's still very liminal.

**REBECCA:** The whole experience has underscored to me the importance of having people around that are on the same page and trying to figure it out with you. At the same time, I long for the types of broader interactions because we are still kind of in isolation. We're a really, really tiny program. I wish that there were more of us, or that we were more connected to people that were familiar with a practitioners way of working, because, it's really hard to figure out how to, at once, grow into your field of scholarship or your field of discipline, while at the same time trying to define what that field is in the first place. It's difficult to figure out how to qualify it. In that sense, a lot of the qualification has to be kind of self-imposed. I think we have to operate with a certain degree of single-minded unfounded confidence.

**FIONA:** It goes back to the idea of practice-based research, in that it is a relatively new entity in the realm of academia, so inevitably, things are still getting figured out. Candidates such as yourselves are sort of paving the way for future artists or researchers. It is interesting that within practice-based

research, the formula isn't so refined, not compared to the way it works for other PhD programs. Practice-based seems quite loose; open. I mean, how do you guys feel about that? Is that a good thing - do you think?

**QURAN:** I feel like for me, it is seeming to relate to theory in this very organic way. In practice, you're working and engaging with materials in an aesthetic way but also it is very internalised, in that, it seems really easy to be like, I make things and then I theorise my own practice. It's a very insular process.

**FIONA:** You're both producing new forms of research. What do you have to compare it against?

**REBECCA:** I'm having this weird moment where I'm presently in upstate New York at Signal Culture and have been doing a lot of archive work. On reflection, I think it is not a new mode of scholarship whatsoever. In the first kind of moment where the US government was funding art practices, there was this totally radical type of work that was happening within artist circles, especially when artists circles started to form art departments like the one at Buffalo State University. The types of experimentation with sound and image and video that were happening there were very, very grounded in the medium as a way of doing philosophy of the medium, and the medium as a way of building a more robust educational model. It had very little to do with this sort of idea of producing a concrete object or even thinking really about aesthetics and the ways in which we are presently kind of fed it through the art education model. But that sort of utopian idea of making has remained intact in these tiny, weird departments

across the US. Especially ones that are at the forefront of media. So I think it's interesting to think about how the model at Duke University does or does not have anything to do with that.

**FIONA:** Can you expand on that?

**REBECCA:** There is a certain type of scholarship that's associated with Duke that's heavily grounded in literature and theory. While every artist thinks about critical theory, we are having to try to contextualise our work within the framework of the institution, which is difficult at times.

**QURAN:** Thinking about the relationship of media theory to literature for instance, and how that is situated at Duke—something that is new in a discourse like media theory or media archaeology is very similar to what media artists and electronic musicians have been doing since this technology emerged.

**REBECCA:** Totally. I think academia is late to something that they're trying to claim was their idea. While artists are essentially saying, *we have been doing this for decades guys* (laughs).

**FIONA:** While you're still pursuing individual research, you have also formed a collaborative group called *Governance*. How did that come about? What is it about?

**QURAN:** We were in a performance technology lab with Thomas F. DeFrantz who is a Professor of Dance and African American Studies at Duke, and one of the CMAC affiliated professors. He had this great space with all kinds of electronics and soldering irons. I was working with him and he just let me move all of my music equipment into it.

Then we both moved in there as research partners and started making stuff— cross-wiring synthesizers; visualizing sonics and vice-versa using analogue and digital; making stuff from motion that we have since used in lots of performances. Just having that space and that resource, we just really kind of connected. Before that, we only met on the prospective weekend. We didn't even know that the two of us would be who Duke would end up choosing. We nerded out about synthesizers that first weekend we met. Then we both ended up getting into Duke and have collaborated continuously out of the gate. Then our first project was an interactive object called The SynthBall.

**FIONA:** I've seen it. I think it's amazing.

**QURAN:** We ended up getting some nice funding from Duke to continue that project. We were collaborating, working together and sharing ideas all the time, so it just made a lot of sense to put a label on what we do.

**FIONA:** I think audiences need some sort of identifier.

**REBECCA:** Yes. The project evolved; in naming it and developing it and investing in it and thinking about it. I think that in terms of our methodology, it speaks to the importance of literally having a space together because this allows for a different type of working and making that has made this project possible. Part of a practice is having a space to have these kinds of unforeseen, or unexpected chance-based encounters. A lot of experimentation goes into that.

**QURAN:** Noise shows in the studio!

**REBECCA:** Yes!

**QURAN:** The continuity of having the same space for a certain amount of time is really important for the stabilisation of our practices. There's a lot of flex spaces around but they are not permanent and it's not enough to create engagement and sustained production. Finding good, permanent spaces is a struggle.

**FIONA:** I've come across this issue of studio space so many times – in America and in Europe – universities offering practice-based PhD programs with no studio spaces. Spaces are useful physically but also mentally; that you can go into a space and it's a stabilized environment that you can return to. You can leave your equipment. There are all these different necessities that help you to stay in creative mode, and if they are taken away from you, then that can be a serious disruption.

**REBECCA:** Yeah. I think it's really indicative of the types of scholarship that exist. If a studio is not offered, then this would suggest that the institution wants you to be working in a different



*SYNTHBALL*. 2018. SYNTHBALL IS A “LUCID DIGITAL INSTRUMENT” DESIGNED TO EASILY INTERFACE WITH REAL-TIME AUDIO-VISUAL SOFTWARE.



mode, or that they don't understand the kind of resources needed. It shows that certain kinds of research are visible and perceived differently on an institutional level, and certain kinds are not.

**FIONA:** Well, I think interestingly, this conversation sort of feeds back into the type of digital work that you're doing, which actually involves quite a bit of hardware and equipment - which I gather is crucially important in both of your practices.

**QURAN:** Yeah. I've been really interested in the questions surrounding liveness, and the physicality of performance. I'm really interested in how we can be expressive with electronic or computational infrastructures, which then leads to a natural curiosity of what materials can be interfaced with.

**FIONA:** Is materializing the digital something that you think about?

**REBECCA:** I just don't know if I make any sort of distinction within the types of tools that I'm using or bringing into a space. My entire performance practice

has always been premised on the material affordances and constraints of the things that I'm putting into a circuit with each other. My initial engagement with performance was in this idea of interfacing things that were not made to be interfaced together; shifting the context of a tool and questioning the new ways I could engage with systems and technology in a space. This is how we approach work as collaborators: thinking about what kind of systems we can set up and what it will take to set them up and build them; selecting what goes into a space; figuring out how we might interface with those items and what might happen when they interface with each other. That's what becomes our material for live performance. I think the material element is also my presence in it. I'm just as significant as any tool that is being used. All the materials are kind of on the same level.

**FIONA:** So, in terms of the performances, I think this is an interesting aspect of the research because, while you're introducing it to an audience, there's obviously other things going on, on multiple levels. Can

you talk about what it's like to do these performances and how important they are in terms of what you're researching?

**QURAN:** I think about it in terms of engaging with specific communities and contexts. There's this interesting kind of tension in performing at DIY noise spaces versus performing in academic spaces. The improvisational aspects are quite important. I think we share an interest in what's happening in real-time. I'm particularly interested in human decision and computational decision. I think that was a big part of our discussions surrounding the term governance or "govern-mentality". How do you make decisions? How do you automate in conjunction with decision? How I'm approaching performance in real-time is kind of self-reflexive, but it's also movement with the audience, you know? So, it's good.

**REBECCA:** I agree with that. I don't think you can distinguish or differentiate your modes of working from one another. I can't draw you any sort of formal boundary between my writing and theory, or measure how I engage with x, y or z. They are building off of each other in interesting ways. I think each way of working has specific affordances.

**FIONA:** How much of the theoretical research and writing is feeding into the live performances?

**REBECCA:** They are two ways of approaching the same thing. I spend most of my life reading and writing but I don't think that I have figured out the way to articulate them together. I find myself trying to adapt to the constraints of each medium. How does one bring a very material, practical and pragmatic way of working into something like an

academic paper? And is that reductive? Do we want to do that? I don't necessarily think that you need to mesh them together. I know that there can be two ways of working on the same thing, and that doesn't mean that they're not totally weaving into one another. You don't have to be so didactic about it.

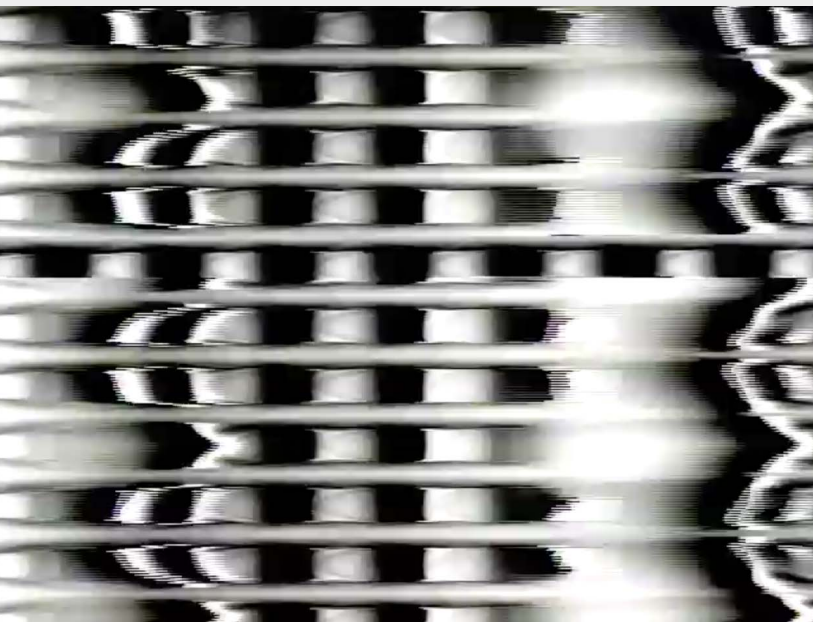
**QURAN:** I start from practice. When I'm reading, I'm kind of validating or disputing theoretical concepts based on my experience in my practice, which is tricky to navigate, but it does help. Sometimes I'll read something and find a precise description of a feeling that I have. I can hook on to that and use that. In works in reverse; if I disagree with something, I can write about that too.

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**FIONA:** Are there other fields of research that you are interested in? Other disciplines you find you're wanting to tap into?

**QURAN:** I've been gravitating towards emerging fields of research in areas such as media archaeology and software studies. It can easily be coextensive with my practice. Thinking about how to examine technical objects that draw on what my aesthetic interests are and developing courses



A GENERATIVE VISUAL PRODUCED  
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to engage with modes of theory from those positions. In terms of reading, as Becca alluded to, it's a lot of critical theory— philosophy of technology, etc. In critical theory, how do you integrate ethnographic research with methods that are getting outside of pure theory? How do you make theory specific to a context? How do you do that across a variety of critical or theoretical approaches? Is theory itself moving towards the specific and the local?

**REBECCA:** In getting outside of a discipline, and really adhering to many disciplinary protocols, I think we're trying to figure out how to mash multiple things together and work in multiple ways. It forces you to be self-reflective. For example, in my writing, by working with the same ideas in a different way, I can realise the inbuilt assumptions or the inbuilt ways of approaching a field or media I would like to challenge. It kind of forces you to acknowledge your own blind spots. In that sense, just in terms

of what Quran was talking about, I think there is a move within theory to consider the local and the material/concrete. Specifically, what actually does theory need to do to still be relevant and alive still? How can theory make itself not die out as a discipline?

**FIONA:** What do you mean by local in terms of theory?

**QURAN:** Local instead of trying to derive a universal concept about something.

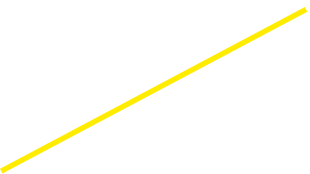
**REBECCA:** Philosophy versus theory.

**QURAN:** Explicating a specific thing, and maybe trying to locate it with other things in terms of phenomena or trends. Then in going back to the question of discipline. I was trained as a musician. That's a disciplinary norm that I carry. I feel the need to practice an instrument every day, but then I also like to make noise.

**FIONA:** Quran— you are coming from music, sound, synthesis and production, and Becca— you're very much coming from a visual art, digital art and aesthetics background. What's happening in terms of a crossover in your skills and in your artistic objectives? Let's say in terms of *Governance* — when you're performing — are you both invested in exploring aesthetics or are you both invested in exploring the noise synthesis part of the performance as well? Or are you coming at it from different angles?

**REBECCA:** Well, we are definitely coming at it from different backgrounds just in terms of 1) our formal training and 2) maybe the ways that we found noise. I came to noise via experimental video, and part of that is the ethos





of hand building and thinking about signal as material and thinking about live 'liveliness'; the ways that a signal can be manipulated in real-time that also exposes the materiality of tools. In thinking about performance, I have to say I never carried the stigmas of a formal music education (laughs). That's not something that I possess at all. In some ways I do everything totally wrong. That's part of my work and part of what I bring to a space; a kind of total ignorance. I'm also bringing in techniques of sampling and mixing and image-making. Manipulating images in real-time with musicians was something that I didn't even think was part of my critical practice per se, but it ended up being that actually.

**QURAN:** I studied composition and electronic music, and then I did an MFA in sound design, so I've been steeped in synthesis. I taught sound synthesis before I came here to Duke. When we think of the composer imposing the compositional idea, I think what I'm after is a kind of inversion of that. Just being a body in a space; engaging with the reality of the space and producing something while listening to the room itself. The people there – that's a really strong part of a noise process. The embodied experience of shaping sound and visuals in a space in a real-time setting is something I value and enjoy.

**FIONA:** Historically there would be a traditional value or expectation attached to a sound, music or visual performance. So, in terms of what you guys are doing in your live performance, you're not really attaching a set value to the type of aesthetic that's produced or the type of noise that's produced. Am I correct in saying that? That you are letting things be as they will be?

**QURAN:** Yes.

**REBECCA:** I think there is something that happens in terms of choices and decisions that are made before and during a performance that can shape it. Rather than intentionally making it be something it's not, it's about constraining a system enough; like in choosing the types of gear that you want and deciding the ways in which the equipment/technology will interface with each other. Then we can explore the range of possibilities that comes out of that. You navigate various things during a performance, through the way that you're engaging with the audience to the type of space that you find yourself in. So, the things that do and don't work when you get to a space are pieces of the contingency that happens that then take effect in the nature of the way that the performance happens.

**QURAN:** There's an emergent aesthetic that is becoming identifiable. People who are familiar with what we do, they show up at the space and they connect with us and that ultimately shapes the performance. It's a fundamental part of the project.

**REBECCA:** Yeah. I think that speaks to our location and where we find ourselves; not just at Duke but in the broader kind of noise and the weird experimental sound community that can be found in the 'research triangle'. The social experience of doing these performances I think has allowed us to develop as a project in a big way.

**FIONA:** You're doing it in a way that's quite fluid; open-ended. The way you're moving from venue to venue, doing site-specific performance, and every time you do, the output changes

depending on what equipment you bring or what you decide to do on the night. It's quite interesting that as you move through this research process, that your performances are changing along with your other modes of research. They are also changing because of the different variables you encounter. It's not static. In terms of the direction it's going to move, do you see yourself incorporating other performers or other ways of working? For instance, working with dancers, musicians?

**REBECCA:** For sure. I think part of our practice and our way of working is to remain open. Part of our ongoing conversation is the question of how does electronic performance actually become more performative? What are the affordances of it as a medium? How does this become something that is engaging in a live setting? What are the properties of doing something in a live setting that challenge what electronic music performance has been traditionally? Part of that would be working with others. I mean, our performances could incorporate moving bodies either in a sensor-based way or image-based way, where there is potential for a sort of integration or collaboration that could happen. That's something I've done in the past that I'm really interested in doing again. Everything we do or consider doing is part of an ongoing process that's shifting regularly.

**QURAN:** Some of our bigger sets that we've been able to do have had some minor kinds of staging. Our first show was a big installation. I think we're both interested in developing this aspect further.

**FIONA:** I like the idea of things building around what you're doing, be that physical structures or performance, etc.

**REBECCA:** It all has to do with the types of spaces we get access to.

**FIONA:** When you perform you sometimes wear special outfits, correct?

**REBECCA:** Sometimes we wear lab coats.

**QURAN:** The lab coat was something that was part of the first public show we played and has since reoccurred. In that show we had all kinds of live cultures and plant life and it was very performative.

**FIONA:** In terms of performance versus performative, there are different definitions in the art world of what is considered 'performative' and the different variations that exist of 'performance'. Obviously, there might be some crossover in terms of what you're doing via live performance and performance that has a narrative attached to it; performance that is edited in some way or pre-prepared in some way. Do you ever think, should we do something else? Should we expand on this? Should we add another performance onto the performance? I find myself thinking about the New York based collaborators LoVid (Tali Hinkis and Kyle Lapidus); how they integrate physical bodily performance with live performance.

**QURAN:** Thinking about being at an institution with resources; we know with the support of others like the theatre department, we could literally build anything. Considering that type of accessibility versus noise and DIY

venues; we have to move back and forth between those modes.

**FIONA:** That must change the overall feel of things and impact the objectives of what you are doing.

**REBECCA:** Right. I think that's an interesting thing you said Fiona about what differentiates the idea of performance from something being performative. I think discourse has a lot to do with it. What you take as a performance in one context becomes something that is not in a different one. We have this idea of adapting our practice to these different spaces, while at the same time trying to challenge what we can do in those spaces. It's still a wildly different thing to do a noise performance in an academic space then it does to do one in a DIY space. However, regardless of the space, it is still noise performance. We don't change what it's called, and that's important. I think that there is a certain type of performativity that we're taking on, even in the gesture of bringing noise into a performing arts venue, especially one that is known for its conservativeness around this type of thing. So, I do think that there's a certain type of adjustment to the affordances of a space but also there are things we won't adjust on or change. That approach is part of our practice.

**FIONA:** This is an obvious question regarding noise versus sound. Why do you call what you do noise rather than sound? Is it both? What's the distinction?

**REBECCA:** There are a lot of definitions of noise and it is a term that means very different things in a lot of the disciplines we are working across.



*VIDEO WEAR, 2003. LOVID.*  
IMAGE: COURTESY OF LOVID.

It has theoretical implications. Media Studies of noise are taken in different ways than they are in Political Theory than they are in Music, etc. For me, noise means belonging to a certain type of creative community that has a certain type of ethos beyond the institution. Noise means a lot of things. It identifies us with a certain type of artistic genre and prioritises our ways of working and the people that we work with. That kind of social infrastructure is really important to us.

**QURAN:** It really is disruption, and a kind of indeterminacy which are both highly contextualized. The noise that Becca is talking about is indicative of a way of belonging. Right? It's a belonging to people who have an aesthetic orientation. You make a collective out of people who want to be anti-collective and disrupt, in a way.

**FIONA:** What is the relationship of that to social issues or politics? I mean, I think what you said regarding noise is very interesting – that it's a form of disruption. Are you thinking about these things when you're making, researching?

**REBECCA:** I think they're pretty integral and foundational to both of us. It has interestingly forced an evolution in the ways that we're thinking about our individual and collective practices and our projects, in terms of the types of institutional resources that we're dependent on and the ways that we navigate those or choose not to navigate those. Also just in terms of the idea of having a collective structure that is collaborative and makes work in a way that is self-sustaining; thinking about what other radically different types of structures we can do this type of work in because there are things that are implicit and inbuilt to academia that we explicitly do not want to be reliant upon and that we are aware we need to be independent of.

In terms of the political question, I don't think that one can do this type of scholarship on something that is, in essence, a political object without having a concern for that. So, that is a specifically potent point for both of us. I think in terms of working on ubiquitous computation, a lot of the social infrastructures and communication media we work with do or do not carry certain implicit politics. So, yes; it's at the core of what we do both on a conceptual and logistical level.

**QURAN:** For sure. I'm really interested in how objects, and especially computational or operative objects, construct norms, cultural customs and those sorts of things. In terms of

the production of normativity that's very flexible or hyper-temporal, I think that's at the core of my scholarly and aesthetic projects. It's at the core of my technical practices. I'm very interested in looking at how technical systems and bureaucracies operate, seeing if there's something there that I can articulate through an aesthetic practice. So, yeah, you can't turn it off.

**FIONA:** You have a lot of autonomy when you're on stage performing, which I think is really beautiful. You're breaking down all kinds of boundaries on different kinds of levels– technological and performative, social, etc. What you've both said thus far has really helped me think about noise differently, so, thank you for that! We have covered a lot of ground, but before we wrap things up, in terms of your personal research, can you tell us how that is going and what you're up to?

**REBECCA:** We're both at the point in our program where we're preparing for our qualifying exams. It's a moment of gathering many things together and trying to synthesize some sort of future dissertation project. Which, you know, requires some sort of articulation of future planning. So that's something I'm thinking a lot about right now. I'm also just trying to figure out how my past experience of being a visual artist is weaving its way into this.

**FIONA:** Your pathway Becca of going from being a painter to doing what you're doing now in computational arts is quite a trajectory, I think.

**REBECCA:** Yes, but I realised recently I have always been working with visual technologies in some way. In terms of the image, there is always an excess

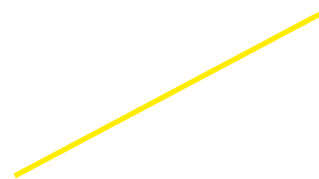
present. So, what then is the role of producing, looking at, understanding and interpreting or critically analysing the digital image? What kind of practices are engaged in reading and interpreting images? Videos of our president can be generated and any piece of information that is circulating can take real effects. So yeah, I've been thinking about how images affect us and the ways in which we do or do not feel as though we have any sort of language to read them.

Other areas of research that I will stay engaged with are early computational art, early internet art practices and contemporary media art practices.

**QURAN:** I've been thinking about the notion of objectivity, and in technical systems the postures of political transcendence in the way of eligibility, sovereignty and performance. My inclination is that it's originating in this idea of divine right, or something like that. The notion of sovereign power and the way technologies are used to generate awe, or indeterminacy. Also exploring political transcendence through obfuscation or noise, and computational techniques and computational systems. Investigating how they are deployed and understanding the transference of responsibility and decision. I'm interested in how that discourse has progressed and its effect on democracy. The idea that you can translocate agency onto a machine then kind of pretend it's an autonomous act.

**FIONA:** It makes me think about how data is now becoming this form of currency. People are just starting to realize their information is now a sort of commodified by-product of their daily lives.

**REBECCA:** It's not even some sort of arbitrary, accidental thing. Our entire infrastructure is designed to constantly generate information to be used in any way, whatsoever. The intentionality behind the entire structure is incredibly complex. It's a whole other conversation to be had, for sure.



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