Hyperopia

by

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Abstract

Hyperopia is inspired by the Crystalist artist movement in Sudan, whose 1976 manifesto states, "The crystal is nothing but the denial of the objectification of objects. It is infinite transparency." Adopting the movement's intent to undo contradictions between semblance and essence, the project examines the value of image decay. Utilizing matrix-based media, namely the pixel screen, patterns are exposed and recycled. The microscopic and macroscopic nature of things is shown through repetitive and indulgent scrolling, zooming, clicking and swiping, revealing cyclical fractions of patterns and infinite extensions. The work is dense with second-hand images (and third-hand images, etc.), glitch and compression techniques, and the use of the color blue. While in the analog circuit blue means no signal, it "has great potential in showing internal dimensions and depths", and therefore "has the ability to create a Crystalist vision." The work consists of a gallery installation and a live cinema screening.

Keywords: decay; Crystalist School; digital navigation gestures; small files; live cinema; ritual

To Sahar.

I only see because of her.

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INTRODUCTION

ٱلَّذِي خَلَقَ سَبْعَ سَمَٰوَٰتٍ طِبَاقًا ۖ مَّا تَرَىٰ فِي خَلْقِ ٱلرَّحْمَٰنِ مِن تَفَٰوُتٍ ۖ فَٱرْجِعِ ٱلْبَصَرَ هَلْ تَرَىٰ مِن فُطُورٍ [3] ثُمَّ ارْجِعِ الْبَصَرَ كَرَّتَيْنِ يَنقَلِبْ إِلَيْكَ الْبَصَرُ خَاسِئًا وَهُوَ حَسِيرٌ [4] (Qur'an 67:3-4)

[W]ho created the seven heavens, one above the other [in layers]. You will not see any disparity in what the Lord of Mercy creates. Look again! Can you see any cracks? [3] Look again! And again! Your sight will turn back to you, weak and defeated. [4] (Abdel Haleem 382)

The numerous transformations of digital media have altered the way we see and perceive reality. According to sura Al-Mulk (Dominion), there is no disproportion or inconsistency in the universe. All parts are harmoniously connected and coordinated. There are no cracks, and the universe seems to break nowhere from the smallest particle to the galaxies and the cosmos. The act of looking again (and again and again), namely taking a closer look three times as indicated in the verses, results in one's vision turning back to the person who is looking, as the vision becomes worn out, exhausted and frustrated, for one is not able to find any inconsistency in the world. *Hyperopia* is a response to today's overindulgence in and overconsumption of second-hand images, third-hand images, etc., as well as today's overuse of cellular phones to consume and explore the world and the surrounding environment. An example of this is an image of the ocean. A firsthand image is to look directly at the ocean. A secondhand image is capturing an image of the ocean and looking at it. A thirdhand image is sharing the image of the ocean online and looking at it on the web. Is the person that is looking still searching for inconsistencies in the world around them and in the process exhausting their vision? Is the person that is looking, perceiving the world around them in a fragmented way, similar to looking through a crystal? It appears that today's mode of looking opposes the consistency of the first-hand image (infinite), where, in order to see something, one must crack it through capturing it on a screen, and looking at it again (second-hand image) through the media's surface (i.e. the screen of an electronic device), which is the mediator between the user and the digital image, and then through posting it online on social media, for example, and looking at it again (third-hand image). In this case, what is seen turns back to the person looking through multiple layers of consumption.

THEORIZATION

The term *hyperopia* is from the late 19th century, and loosely translates to "very acute vision". It comes from Latin, from hyper- "beyond, over, exceedingly, to excess" and the Greek word ōps which means "eye" or "to see". In ophthalmology, the term refers to a type of refractive error, namely farsightedness or long-sightedness, where distant objects appear clear and close objects appear blurry; a condition I have been diagnosed with while working on this project. The work deals with this notion of seeing in excess. This includes seeing beyond or between images, seeing in layers, overconsumption of images, exhausting one's vision and the vision turning back to the person looking. In the research phase, I took photos of stores in Vancouver and Cairo showcasing a product and its image attached to it, sometimes in black and white, and sometimes in color. [fig. 1-2]

Figure 1. Research Image of Dollarama store in Vancouver, Canada. 2022. Photograph by Mena El Shazly.

Figure 2. Research Image of vitrine in Cairo, Egypt. 2022.
Photograph by Mena El Shazly.

This project brings together relational aesthetics and artistic research in order to study contemporary practices and rituals of image decay. According to Hage, decay is a process that "has a temporality, a pace or a tempo, and a spatiality, a mode of occupying and evolving in space" (3). *Hyperopia* takes its point of departure from the premise of valuing the process of decay and the possibility to cultivate it, encapsulating the emergence of transformation and regeneration. Utilizing matrix-based media[1], namely the pixel screen, patterns are identified, observed, exposed and recycled. The microscopic and macroscopic nature of things is revealed through repetitive gestures and over-indulgence in scrolling, zooming, clicking and swiping, in the processes of revealing cyclical fractions of patterns and infinite extensions.

The work adopts the methodology of the Crystalist artists' movement in Sudan, whose 1976 manifesto states, "The crystal is nothing but the denial of the objectification of objects. It is infinite transparency" (Abdallah et al. 401). According to art historian Anneka Lennsen, the manifesto suggested new directions for art in Sudan, articulated in-process artistic ideas and outlined principles for future actions. *Crystalism*, according to the manifesto, suggests that there is the form or the surface of the crystal and that there are dimensions and spectrums within it, and that both, its semblance (the outer appearance) and essence (the inner reality), oscillate and extend infinitely inward and outward. Consequently, the semblance and essence do not negate the existence of one another as they both extend in all directions. Signed by Naiyla Al Tayib, Kamala Ibrahim Ishaq, Hashim Ibrahim, Hassan Abdallah and Muhammad Hamid Shaddad, and published in Khartoum's al-Ayyam newspaper on Wednesday, January 21, 1976, the manifesto covers major aesthetic and philosophical concepts, including, but not limited to, the unit of measurement, the measurement of space, time, knowledge, language, beauty, community, transparency, and fundamentals of plastic art. "Thoroughly committed to novelty, invention, and atomic and space-age practices", as Lenssen argues, the Crystalists understood the world as boundless and infinite, and called for pleasure as a method for uncovering truth, which has a dual nature but yet is unquantifiable. Through adopting their methodology of undoing layers of contradictions between semblance and essence, the project examines the value of not preserving an image in its original state. The work is loaded with second-hand images (and third-hand images, etc.), glitch and compression techniques, and the use of the color blue. While

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[1] The term indicates the heritage of the contemporary pixel screen in textiles as pointed out by Laura U. Marks in *Enfoldment and Infinity* and Sadie Plant in *Zeros + Ones*.

blue translates to no signal in the analog circuit, it "has great potential in showing internal dimensions and depths", and therefore "has the ability to create a Crystalist vision" (Abdallah et al. 399).

The Crystalists were criticized for not putting their theory into practice. They described their project as liberal, yet at the time, the state promoted more "Sudanese socialism" and the role of such art in the country's development (Lenssen). This may explain why the Crystalist manifesto did not resonate more strongly in Sudan at the time.

Hyperopia is created using late analog and early digital equipment, with the intention of proposing greener and alternative ways for media consumption and artistic expression. My interest in this specific era stems from its accompanying habits of media consumption that did not rely on streaming. Today, streaming media in high quality has become the norm, comprising a large proportion of the digital carbon footprint, as the majority of data centers, as well as the production of devices, rely on electricity derived from fossil fuels (Marks and Przedpełski). Moreover, I am interested in the specific aesthetic quality of such equipment, its pixelated forms, colors and grainy textures, in addition to how some popular small-file experiments at the time left visual traces in today's technological tools. "Small-file media are inherently political in privileging the potential of the unseen and the invisible by focusing on sound and the tactile qualities of the image as well as mobilizing other senses, rather than approaching the image in terms of what it represents" (Marks and Przedpełski). Finally, small files and compression techniques facilitate the production of encoded messages, allowing for the exploration of societal and political issues in abstraction, which enables artists to surpass censorship and reach new audiences and paradigms.

CONTEXT

Prior to pursuing my graduate studies, my visual art practice was twofold, consisting of producing longer-term research-based projects, and on the other hand, a pleasure-driven improvised live video art practice. The work I produced during my graduate studies became intentionally an attempt to synthesize the two practices, in the process becoming aware of my live setup as a trans-representational medium, possessing the capacity to contain images, animation, text, sound, material and more.

In 2020, I co-founded an "after-lifestyle TV station", *Death Spells*. My work on this multimedia showcase, which explores corresponding promises of immortality in ancient Egypt and social media, led me to engage with the notion of decay, from the perspective of digital representation and preservation, especially when it comes to personal and collective histories. In 2021, in collaboration with Omnia Sabry, I created a digital artwork in the form of a website titled *Walking through a Nile codex*. The project proposes a map of the Nile River as a living body resembling a plant in its construction, the roots upstream and the flower downstream. It deconstructs the components of the river and map, and creates a narrative that the recipient weaves, through the use of gestures on the touchpad to do things like zoom in and out, scroll up and down, double-click, and select items to create new possibilities. Through this project, I became interested in digital media's navigation gestures.

During the first year of my graduate studies, I investigated organic matter degradation producing miniature sculptural works, which I discuss in detail in a section titled "Never back to the original state" in the appendix. I also produced video exercises exploring different compressions from analog to digital, and from larger to smaller files. I worked with analog synthesizers, camcorders and mixers to explore image decay, such as grain and glitch practices. These explorations allowed me to experiment with multi-layered compositions and their infinite feedback. I started working with longer one-shot performance takes that are rehearsed, improvised and digitally recorded. Through these experiments, I produced the cover image for Issue Twelve of the Comparative Media Arts Journal. [fig. 3] Also, I began exploring the relationship between image and sound, producing shorter collaborative audiovisual exercises while utilizing the same technique of recording longer preplanned improvised takes. These exercises resemble more a

video music, and not a music video, in their form, while the sound synthesizes with the video. Because there is no post-editing, the result often contains minimal delays based on reflexes. The outcome, which later manifests in my final work, including *The Rain*, *A scroll, scrolling* and *Fibers*, explores the tactile aspect of video making, and its connection to my previous embroidery practices. [fig. 4-7] Moreover, I produced *The desert that furnishes a thousand offerings*, which centers around multiplicity of thought, perspective and conceptualization using the ancient Egyptian concept of the aggregated soul as a referencing point, and the sphinx as an example, arguing that the sphinx is an alter soul that could be defined as a mythical sum of bodily parts or an alternative ideal image of its representative soul. This project was the first attempt at using projection mapping techniques on light-sensitive photographic surfaces.

Also during my graduate studies, I delved deeper into the mindset of the crystal, and explored Crystalist themes of transparency. The structure of the crystal, namely its distinct macroscopic geometric shape with a highly ordered microscopic structure, became the lens with which I developed my work. I studied and experimented with the color spectrum, especially shades of blue, through manipulating light, distance and feedback with my analog setup. I got in contact with Lenssen to obtain a readable copy of the original Arabic text of the Crystalist manifesto published in Al-Ayyam newspaper. [fig. 26] I became particularly intrigued by the idea that "each theatrical performance is as multiple as the people who watch it", as described in the Crystalist manifesto: "we will ask audience members to change seats so that they can enjoy a greater variety of plays and have a more pleasant experience" (Abdallah et al. 400) My interest in this phenomenon led me to think about the transmedial manifestation of *Hyperopia*, namely the various forms that this project took place in, and its limitlessness of existing in time and space.
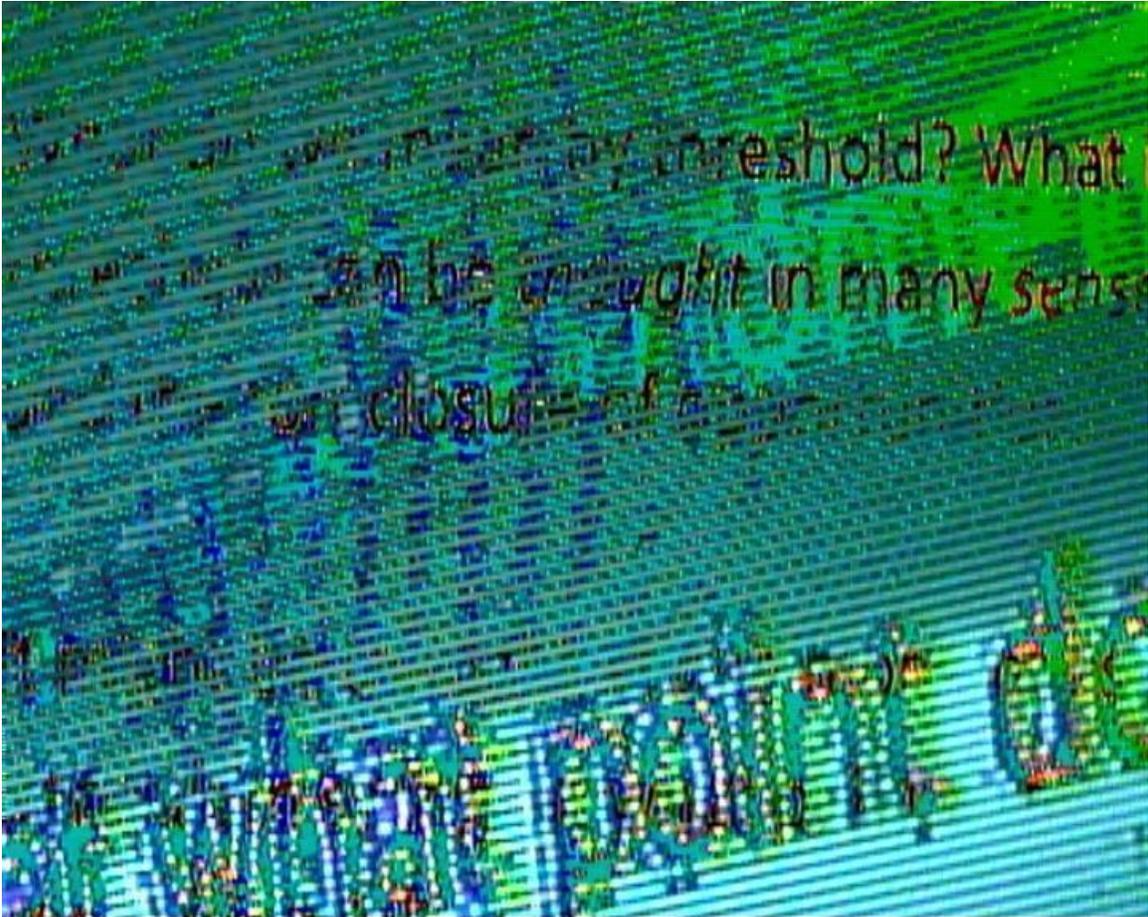
Figure 3. Cover photo of Issue Twelve, Comparative Media Arts Journal. 2022.
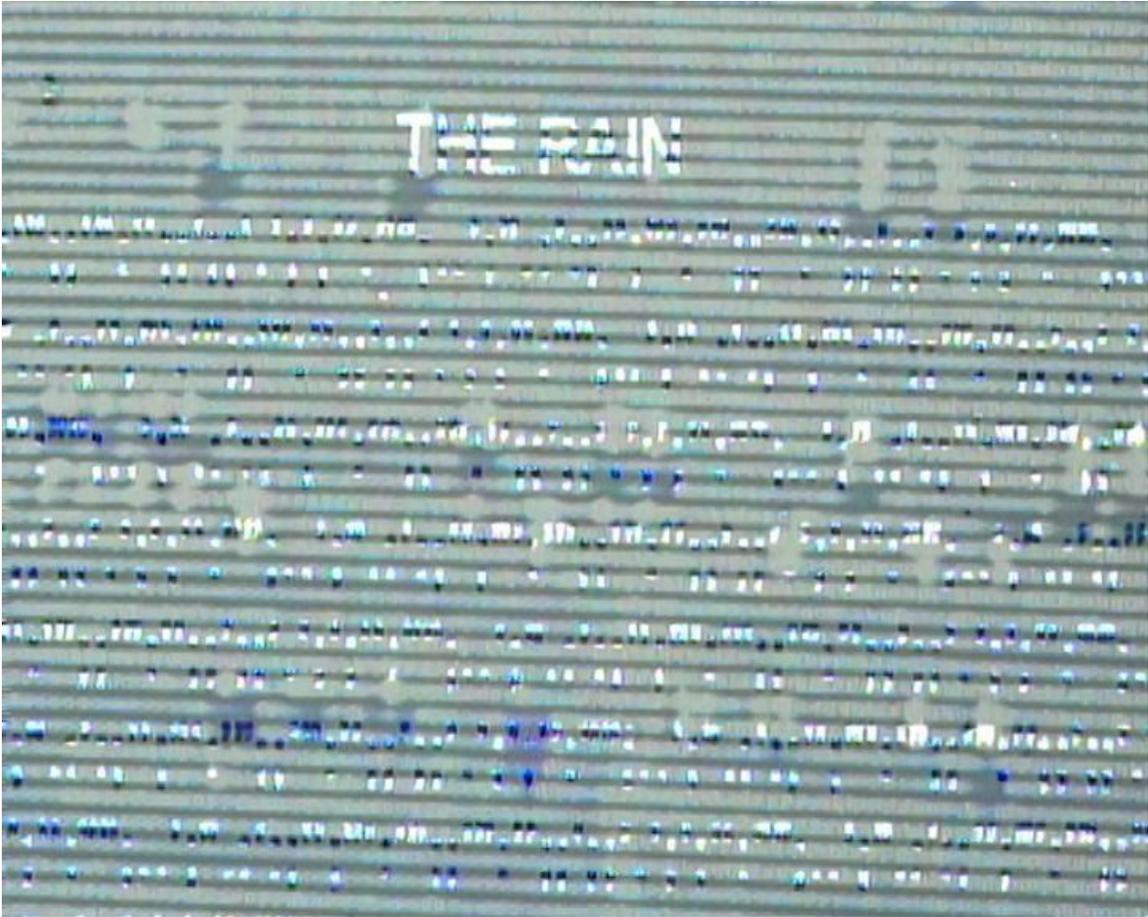
Figure 4.   The Rain, Video Still. 2022.

Figure 5.   **Installation view of A scroll, scrolling at 611 Alexander Studios. 2022.**
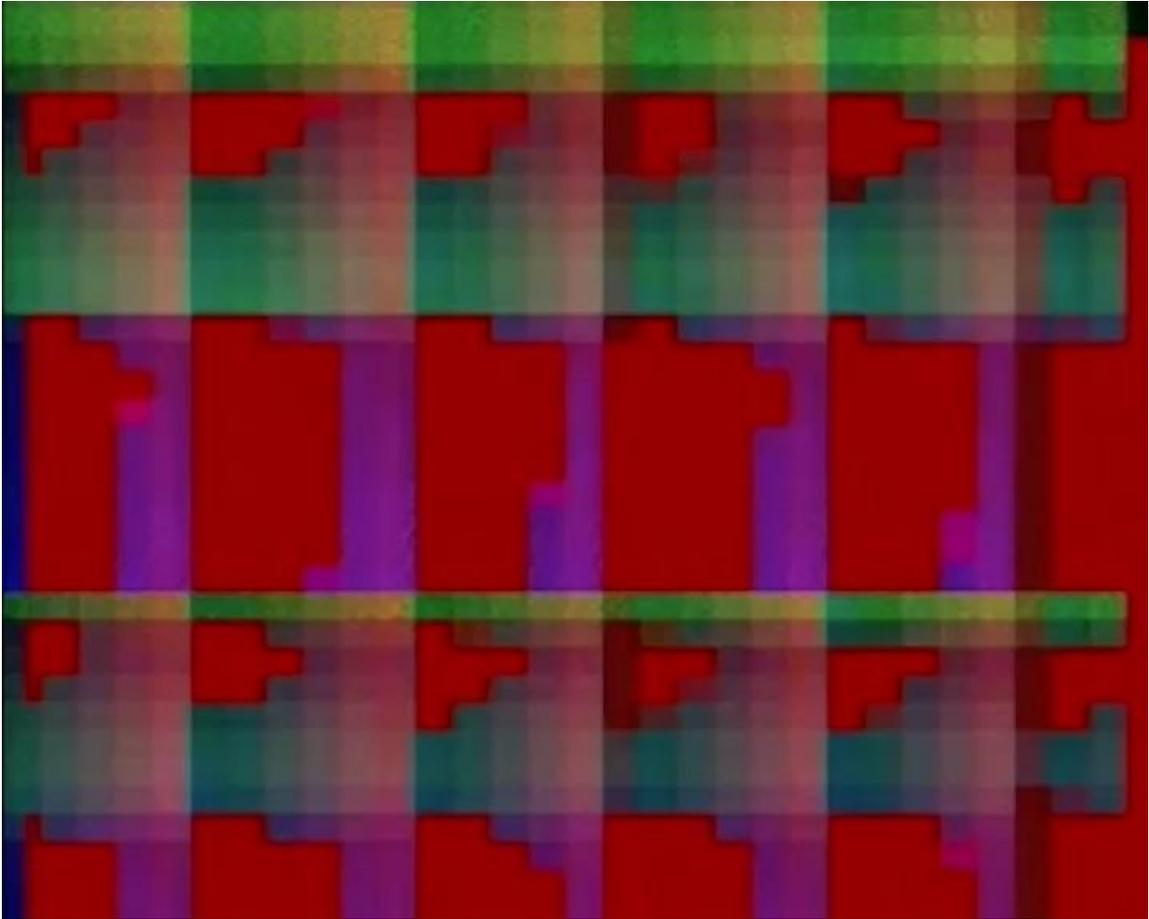Photograph by Mena El Shazly.
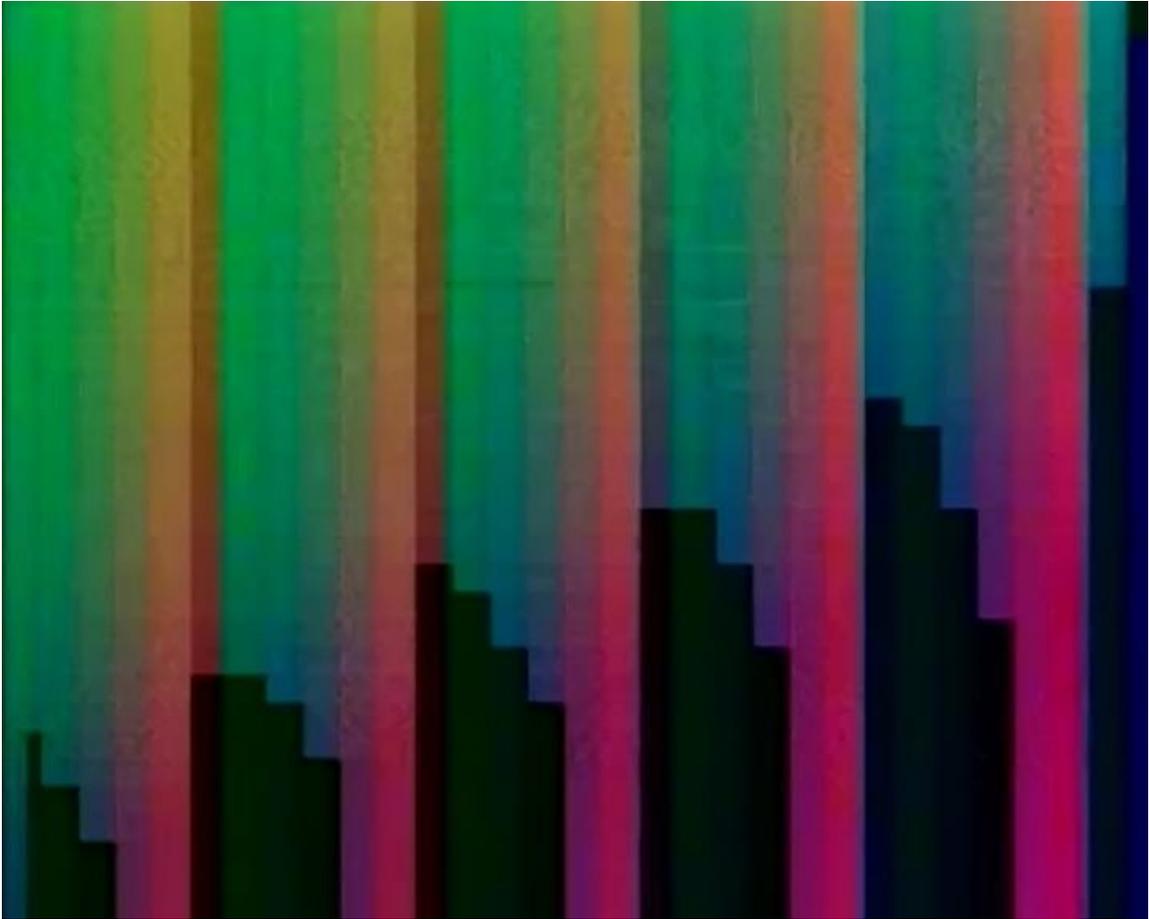
Figure 6.   Fibers, Video Still. 2022.

Figure 7. **Fibers, Video Still. 2022.**

UNITS OF SPACE AND TIME

Hyperopia is a multimedia series consisting of an installation and a live cinema screening. While both works are independent from each other and could be experienced separately, both share the same core, making them integrally connected. The original film is a captured performance consisting of longer takes using an analog video mixer, synthesizer, two 8mm camcorders with pre-recorded material, a TV monitor, sheets of typewritten paper, a mobile phone, prayer beads, a laptop, cables and converters. The installation and the live cinema screening are both created utilizing the same essential elements related to construction of layers, image decay, compression techniques, and video feedback. Most importantly, the two works demonstrate the project's spatial and temporal qualities from the perspective of the crystal, producing their own time, namely "more than one time" (Abdallah et al. 395).

At the Audain Gallery, nine still images are mounted on a one millimeter PVC sintra board. They are well-lit, mimicking the layout of a traditional photography exhibition. [fig. 8] Reminiscent of painting or trompe l'oeil, these stills reveal a great deal about my process, and two of the nine still images are treated as light-sensitive photographic surfaces. Utilizing projection mapping techniques, the two stills from the rain scene and the synthesizer pattern scene enter an infinite loop by projecting the same scene of each still image on it again. This closed circuit produces an infinite portal where the video and its still image amalgamate, transforming the image and the viewer experience. The series of nine images portrays different scenes from the live cinema screening, which are created using analog techniques through my video mixer, and also through controlling light reflection, distance and feedback. The series starts with a still image from the Port of Vancouver, featuring a container with the word ONE written on it. [fig. 9] Ocean Network Express (ONE) is a global container shipping company amongst the largest container carriers across the major trade lanes of the world. In addition to referring to mass consumption, number 1 is also "irrational", for it is characterized by its finiteness, yet contains infiniteness when divided by three, for example (Abdallah et al. 395). Other still images in the series include a microscopic image of *Plagiomnium insigne*, also known as the coastal leafy moss, a view of Vancouver's West End, and four prints of pixel close-ups that resemble embroidered stitches. [fig. 10-13]

Figure 8. Installation view of Hyperopia. 2023.
Photograph by Lauraine Mak.

Figure 9.   Hyperopia, Port Glitching Cable Scene, Video Still. 2023.
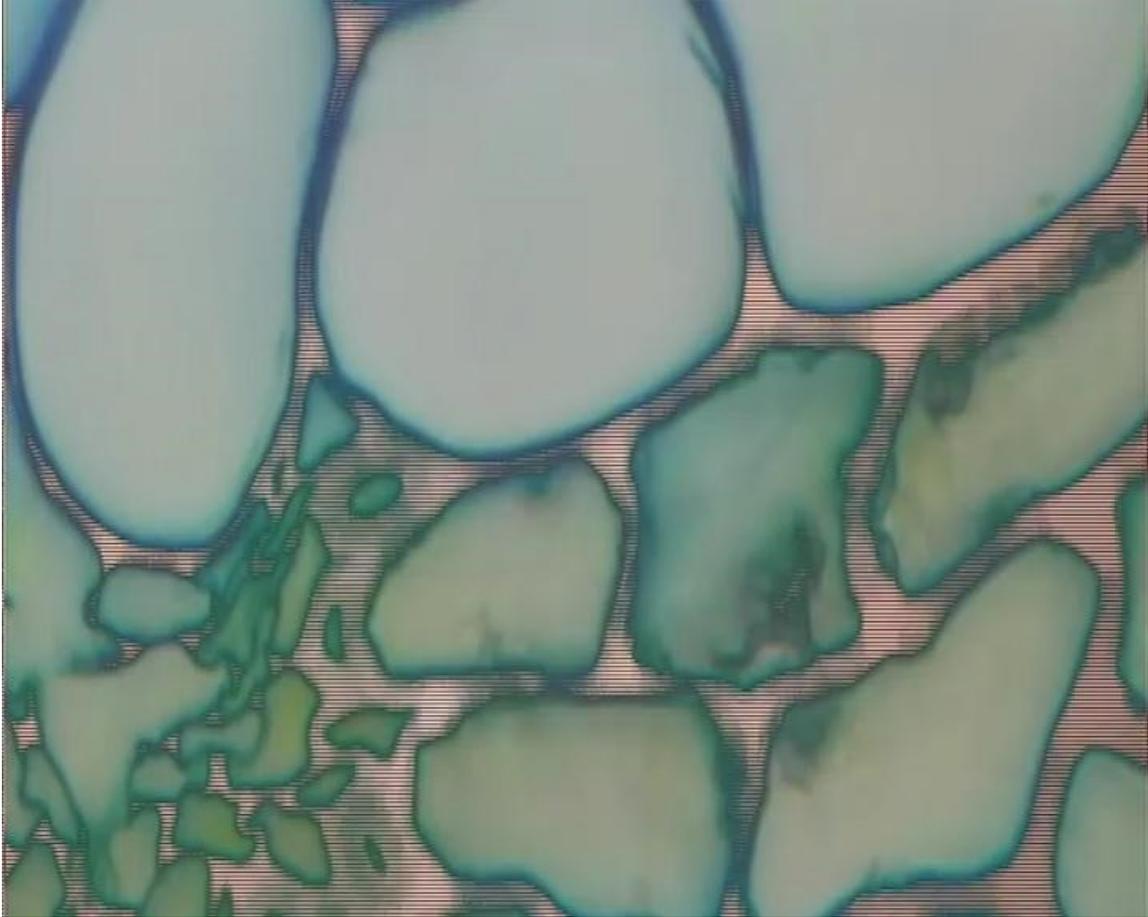
Figure 10.   Hyperopia, Microverse Hydrophilic Scene, Video Still. 2023.
Microscopic image of Plagiomnium insigne in collaboration with Drew Hall.
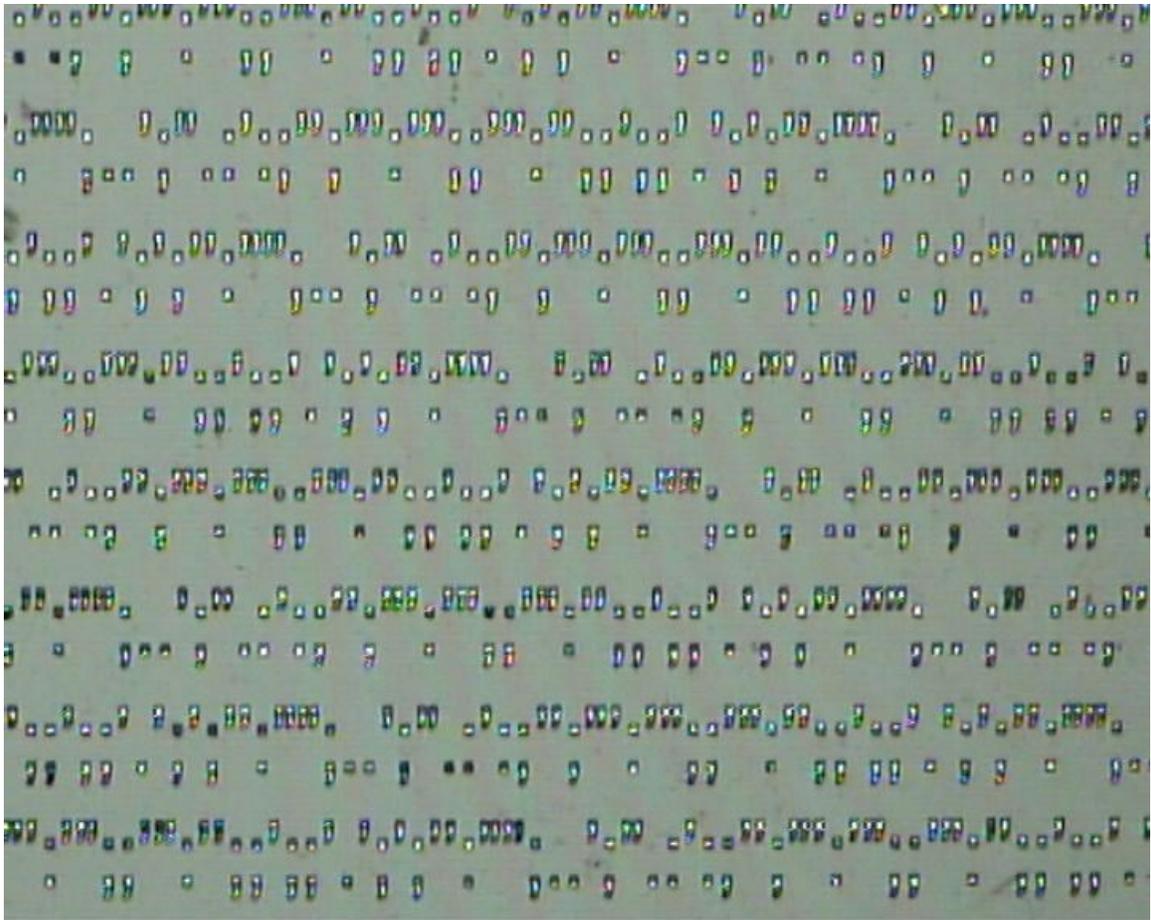
Figure 11.   **Hyperopia, The Rain Scene, Video Still. 2023.**
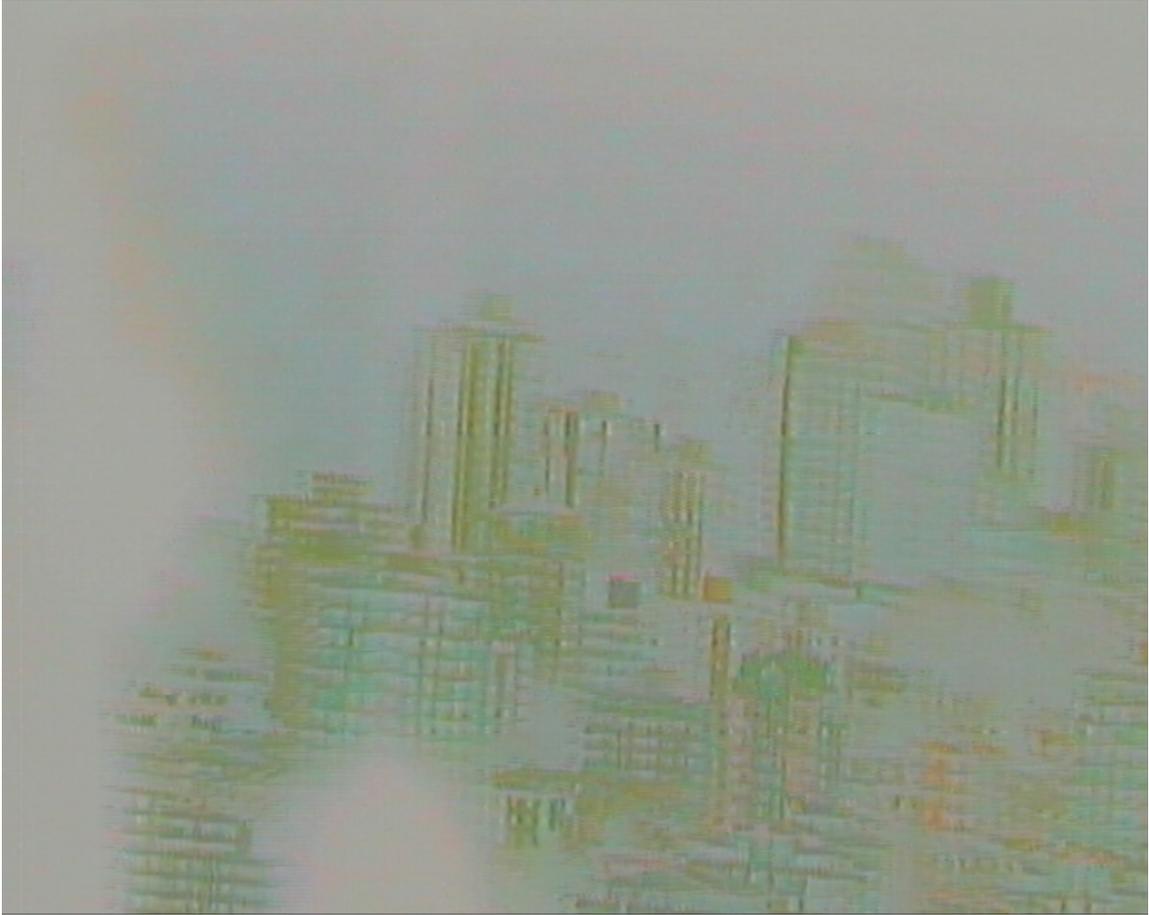
Figure 12. Hyperopia, Port Glitching Cable Scene, Video Still. 2023.

Figure 13.   Hyperopia, Video Still. 2023.

The live cinema screening at the Djavad Mowafaghian Cinema on Friday, September 15, 2023, is a 55-minute feature-length piece that I perform live in front of the audience with pre-recorded 5.1 or six-channel surround sound. While the sound is controlled from the projection booth, the image, which I perform operating the same tools of the original film to live edit and add effects on the film in real time, is converted from analog to digital and then projected on screen using an HDMI cable on stage. [fig. 14] The live cinema setup results in the audience seeing the image and how the image is being created simultaneously; the audience looks here and there, creating a double vision. The work somehow exists in between both sites/sights. The film portrays monotonous daily practices in the modern-day life of a character, Menna, who performs rituals, navigating the mundane while searching for patterns and their connections. Menna navigates her daily practices through scrolling, swiping, clicking and zooming, exchanges letter correspondences with her friend, Ferdinand, and performs a repetitive

act of washing herself throughout the film. The same character in the film is also seen on stage performing the film, sometimes literally reaching into the world of the film with her hands, for example. The film begins in the city with exterior grid-like structures showcasing straight lines, moving towards more organic shapes and structures of plant cell walls. [fig. 15-16] Midpoint in the live cinema screening, the character surrenders to artificial intelligence (AI), which takes over an entire scene, however the character quickly manages to gain back control over her analog equipment and the film. In the live performance, I lean back during the AI sequence, to emphasize that there is nothing for me to perform with computer-generated images.

Figure 14.   Hyperopia, Live Cinema Screening. 2023.
Photograph by Casey Wei.

Figure 15.   Hyperopia, Thurlow Trip Scene, Video Still. 2023.
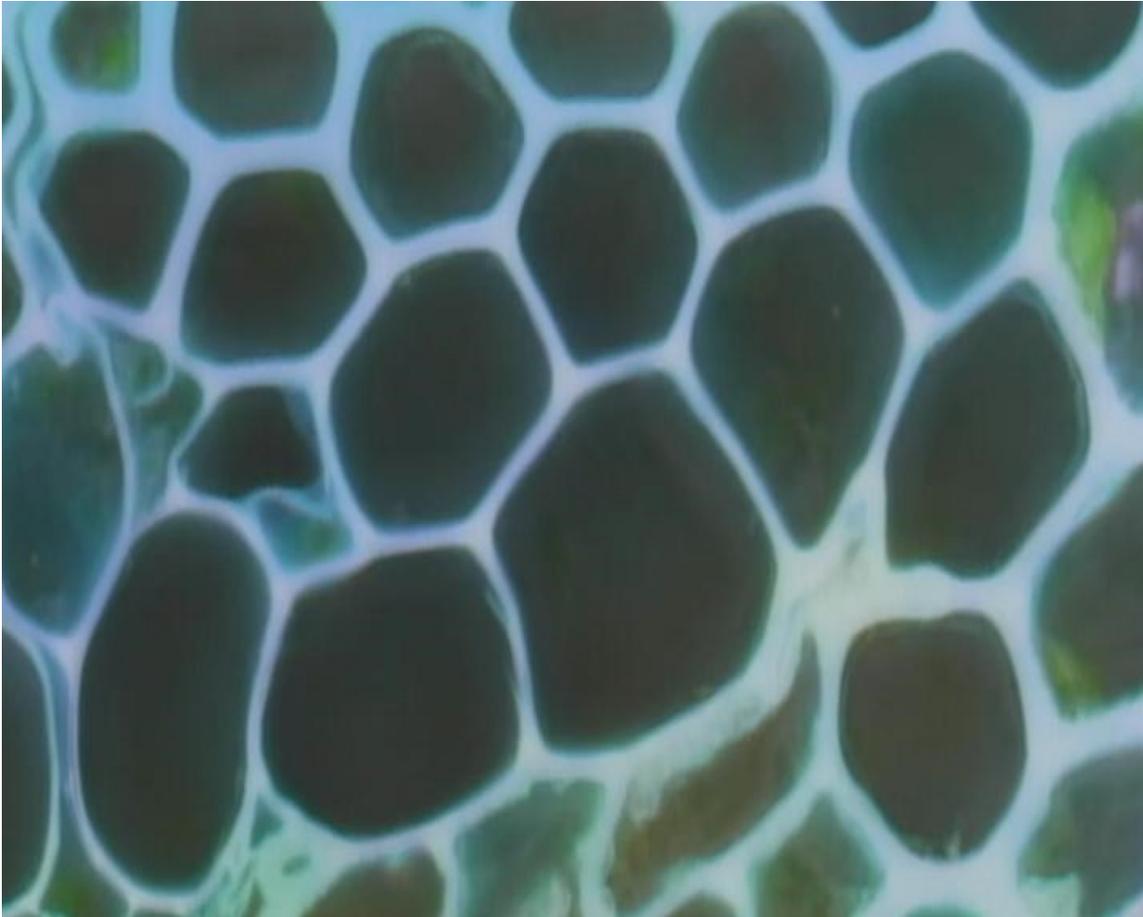
Figure 16.   Hyperopia, Microverse Hydrophilic Scene, Video Still. 2023.
Microscopic image of Plagiomnium insigne in collaboration with Drew Hall.

The film's sound is characterized by a recurrent rhythmic drumming that creates a sense of grounding. There are a total of six different drum types featured in the film that are played by different collaborators. For example, the sound of scrolling is played by Haniel Hout using a hamsa handpan drum and a rav vast drum. The four patterns throughout the film feature riq drum sounds improvised by Ali Hout. The sound of zooming is played by Alex Abahmed with a tabla. The sound of water in the bathroom scenes is improvised on drums by Konrad Agnas, the sound of rain is played by myself using a rainstick. Furthermore, a birdsong machine designed by George Rahi suggests the sound of birds. The more organic shapes and structures of the plant cell walls feature improvisational scores on the violin by Meredith Bates. Additionally, other parts have no sound, where a distinct pink noise was specially designed in collaboration with Abahmed to fill the sound of silence.

The film includes many collaborators, which are crucial to the development of the work and my practice. Working with Calla Paleczny on shooting the bathroom scenes, for instance, allowed for exploring a similar technique of sound and image synthesis that was experimented with earlier, where Paleczny's camera movement follows a sequence of body parts based on the visual score, yet leaves space for reflex delays and spontaneity of movement. [fig. 17] Also, the microscopic images are created in collaboration with two labs at the Department of Botany at the University of British Columbia, where we both playfully engage with color schemes through my analog setup, as well as through the use of different treatments for the samples in question, which will be further explained in the upcoming section.
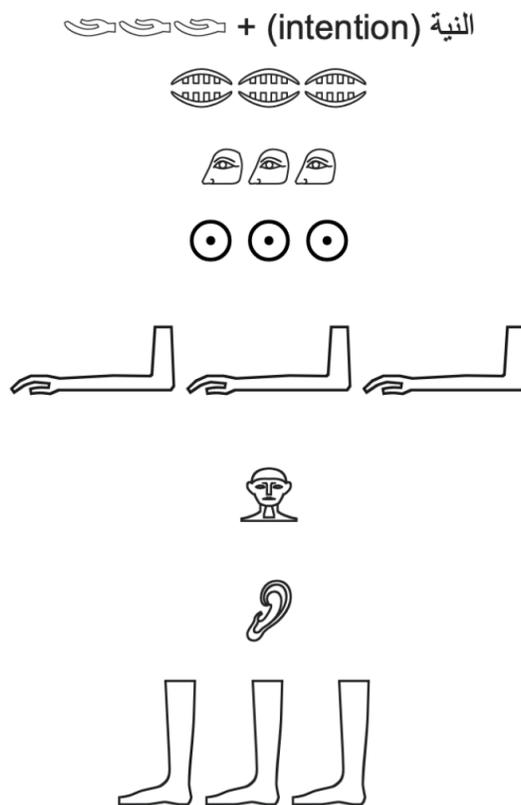
Figure 17.   Hyperopia, Bathroom Scene (Ablution) Visual Score. 2023.
Courtesy of the artist.

ENCODING AND DECODING

The work evokes cyclical fractions and infinite extensions which require constant encoding and decoding by the viewer, resulting in the same work producing several readings and meanings with multiple entry points. The work is constructed in a way that references phenomena or happenings that are backed up by enormous research and expertise. This requires each occurrence to be deciphered by an expert in the field to further understand it; however a non-expert could still be affected by it in its simplest artistic forms. The multi-layered meanings thus occur in a similar understanding of the Crystalist notion of the duality of truth, for this duality is not contradictory, "but perhaps it can be contained within a teleological quantity, namely, pleasure" (Abdallah et al. 393). The intention, as described here, is therefore speaking to each audience member, and acknowledging each member as an active recipient, who pleasurably explores the layers of the image. To further demonstrate this, I am going to analyze four thematic elements in the work, namely rituals, water, color, and language, showing how several layers of meaning could simultaneously exist.

In *Hyperopia*, I propose that zooming, swiping, clicking and scrolling are part of a cyclical process, and that these reusable gestures have become the main tools with which one experiences and navigates the actual reality. For instance, in a previous paper, I recall seeing a mother, who is reading a book on public transportation, while her daughter, who is sitting on her lap, naturally attempts to interact with the book through similar navigation gestures used on a digital screen. In this work, *Hyperopia*, I additionally make the proposition that some of the digital navigation gestures are ritualistic. Scrolling is recycled from older hand gestures and has subconscious origins in the act of using prayer beads, constituting the same monotonous movement. [fig. 18] Similarly, the bathroom scenes show the main character washing herself repeatedly in the same chronological order. [fig. 17] For a Sunni Muslim audience member, this act is the ablution according to their belief. However, an audience member who does not know about this can still recognize that the character is washing herself repeatedly. These two cyclical and ritualistic acts of the use of the prayer beads and the ablution are read differently by each audience member. The meaning in this case does not hinder the audience from following other thematic threads in the film as a whole.

Figure 18.   A scroll, scrolling, Video Still. 2022.

Another theme follows the idea that life continues to come from water. In addition to the ablution scenes that involve water, there are two scenes, inspired by the constant state of precipitation in Vancouver, where the film takes place. These scenes are created using sheets of typewritten paper, analog cameras and a video mixer to recreate an impression of rain. [fig. 11] Also, there are two microscopic scenes showing two different types of plant cell walls that have unique behaviors around water, *Drimys winteri*, which is a hydrophobic plant, and several moss plants, namely *Tetraphis pellucida*, *Sphagnum capillifolium*, *Plagiomnium insigne* and *Polytrichum commune*, which are hydrophilic plants. [fig. 26] [fig. 19-20] The film narrative moves from the straight line and the port correspondence scene to the organic structures and natural cell walls. Starting with the hydrophobic structures with their cuticular wax crystals that cause water repellency and concluding with the hydrophilic structures, the moss, which have specialized cell walls for managing water, embrace their moist habitat and grow on decay. For a botanical expert, this narrative is at the forefront, however for someone who does not follow this thread, they are still able to extract pleasure from the relationship of the colorful organic structures juxtaposed with the sound of the violin, for example.
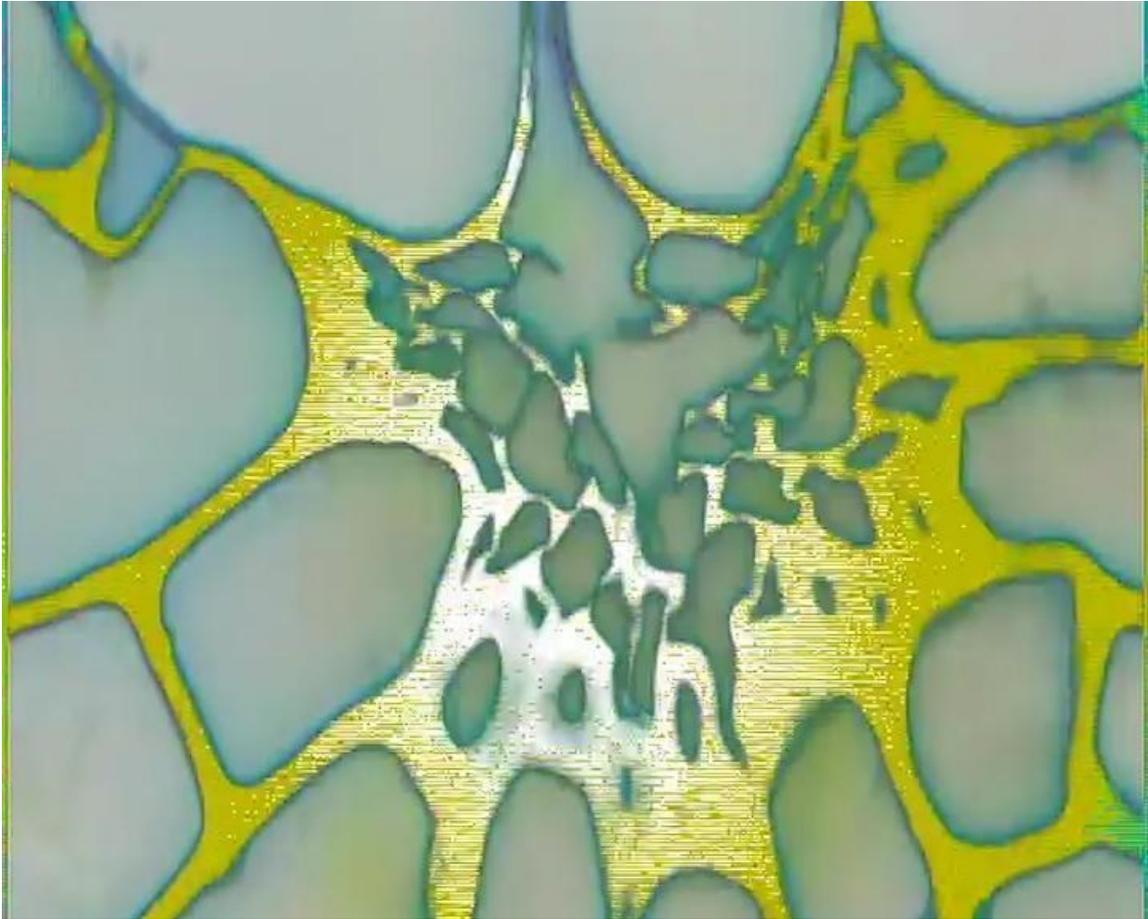
Figure 19.   Hyperopia, Microverse Hydrophilic Scene, Video Still. 2023.
Microscopic image of Plagiomnium insigne in collaboration with Drew Hall.
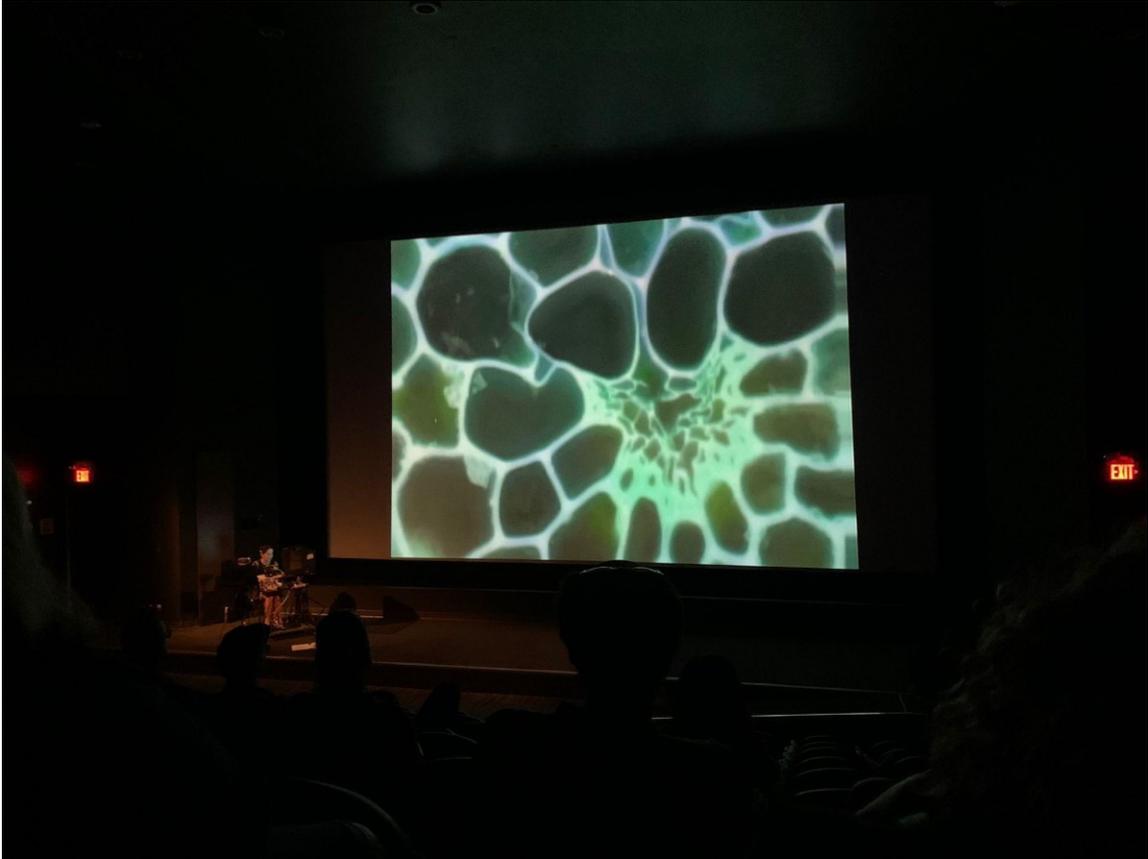
**Figure 20.   Hyperopia, Microverse Hydrophobic Scene, Live Cinema Screening.
2023.**
Photograph by Zhonghang (Daisy) Zhang.

In addition to water being a transparent substance, water is the perfect embodiment of Crystalism, as it changes color depending on "the amount of light falling on [...] and reflecting off of it" (Abdallah et al. 398), as well as its characteristics of limitlessness. The Crystalist manifesto describes color as a composite, and the colors of nature, just like geometric forms and organic forms, to be limitless. "The inclination of unlimited color toward other colors" led to the Crystalists advocating for changing all color names to be blueness or redness, for example, instead of blue or red (Abdallah et al. 398). In my opinion, the color spectrum of the analog video showcases ranges of color that contain depths and are meditative in nature holding the same color characteristics described in the manifesto. [fig. 21] From that perspective, *Hyperopia* is dominated by blueness, for "the human ability to see internal dimensions in the color blue" (Abdallah et al. 399), which is also created from the same shade of blue that translates to no signal in the analog circuit.
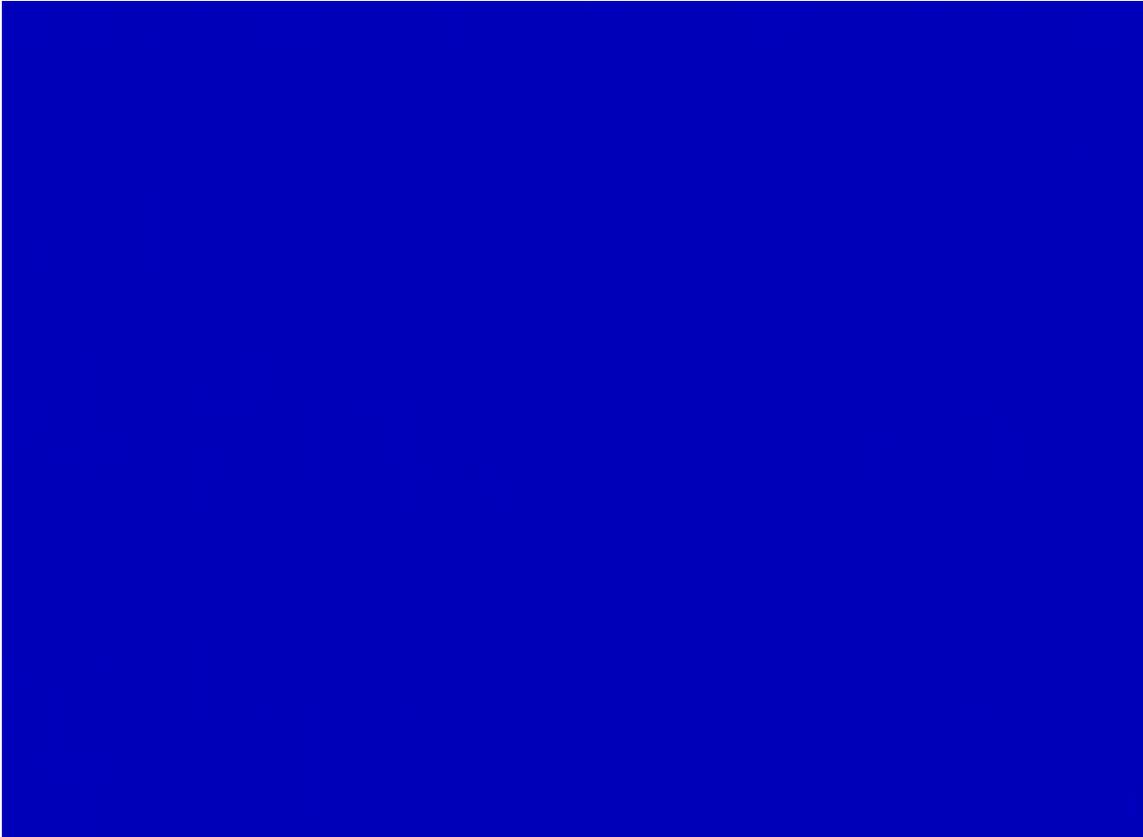
Figure 21. Hyperopia, Video Still. 2023.

Finally, language is objectified and is not always there to be read in the work. [fig. 22-26] The inaccessibility of certain words despite their physical presence is another thematic thread in the film. In the rain scenes, words and punctuation marks resemble falling rain, in the process engaging with the limitation of language, which is thus objectified and then dissolved "into a transparent crystal that moves in all directions" (Abdallah et al. 396). Furthermore, the letter correspondence with Ferdinand is a scene that is highly text-based, which is juxtaposed with the Port of Vancouver and its extremely busy cargo traffic, reminding the viewer about mass consumption and readymades in relation to language and communication. In July 2023, while I was working on this project, and for the first time in nearly 30 years, the West Coast port stood still as the labor union demanded pay increases to recognize their labor and make up for inflation. I continued shooting the port during the strike, as well as approached some of the workers and shot with them, which I quickly realized to be a potential for another intriguing future project. Witnessing the stillness of the port was an important

reminder for me to slow down and to rethink today's fast-paced lifestyles and patterns of consumption in the city, especially when it comes to image consumption.

In this section, four thematic elements were analyzed to demonstrate several layers of meanings within the work. The idea of seeing in excess, including seeing in layers and seeing beyond and between images, results in exhausting one's vision and the vision turning back to the person looking. In the case that we are still searching for inconsistencies in the world around us, then let us take pleasure in what we are seeing, and how it never goes back to its original state, just like everything else around us. In the end, all these layers of image indicate not breaks but continuity.
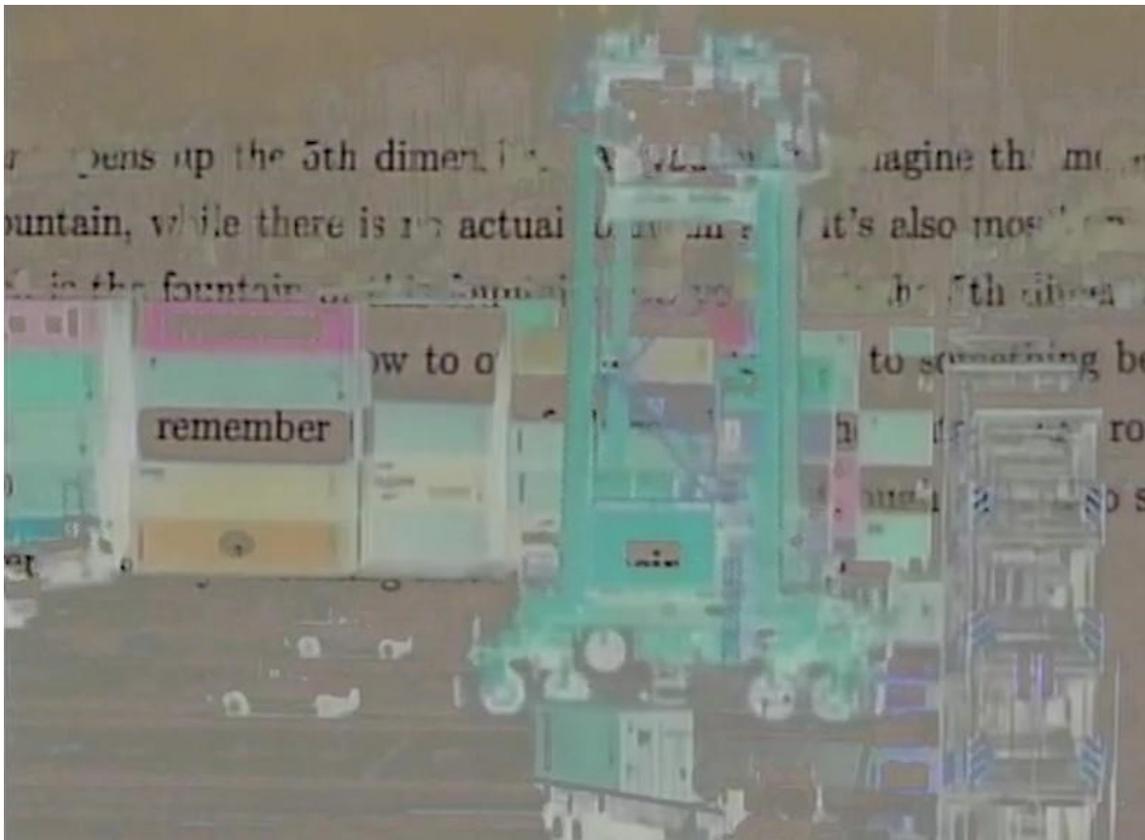
Figure 22.   Hyperopia, Port Correspondence Scene, Video Still. 2023.
Letter correspondence with Ferdinand Klüsener.
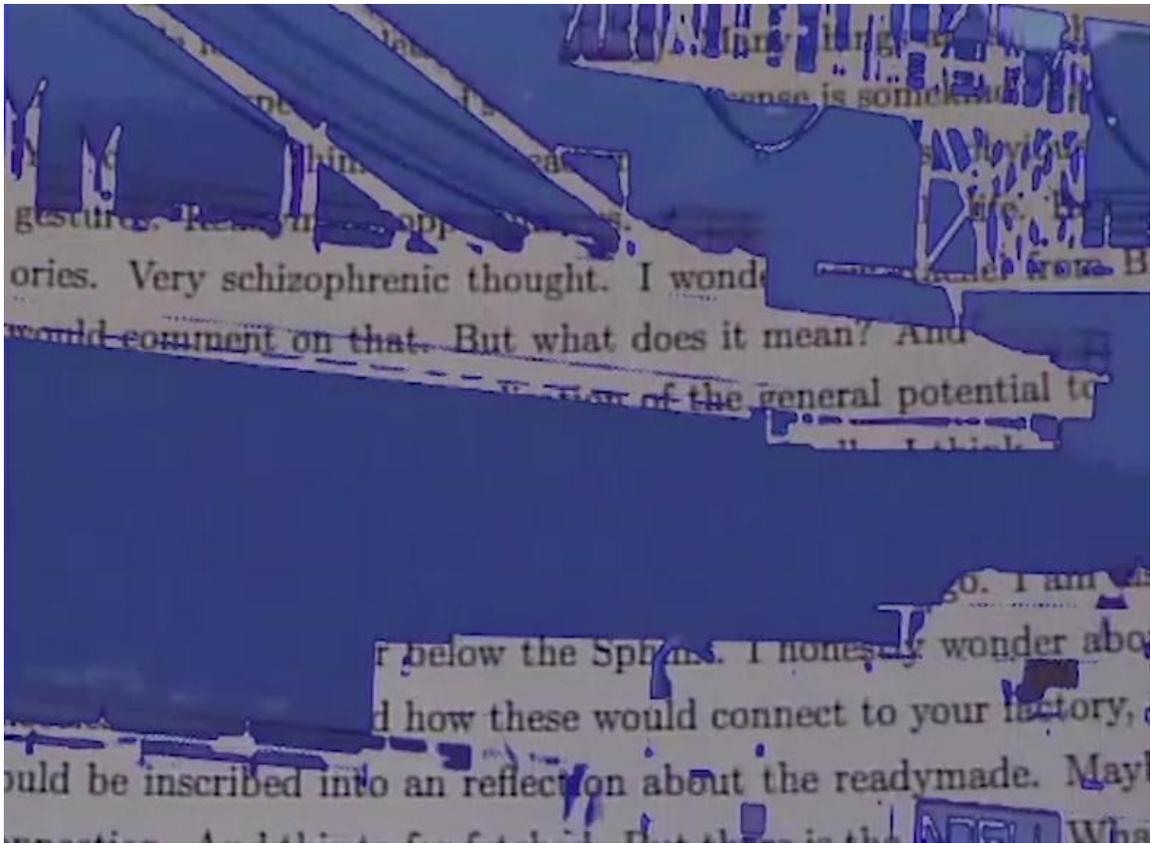
Figure 23.   Hyperopia, Port Correspondence Scene, Video Still. 2023.
Letter correspondence with Ferdinand Klüsener.
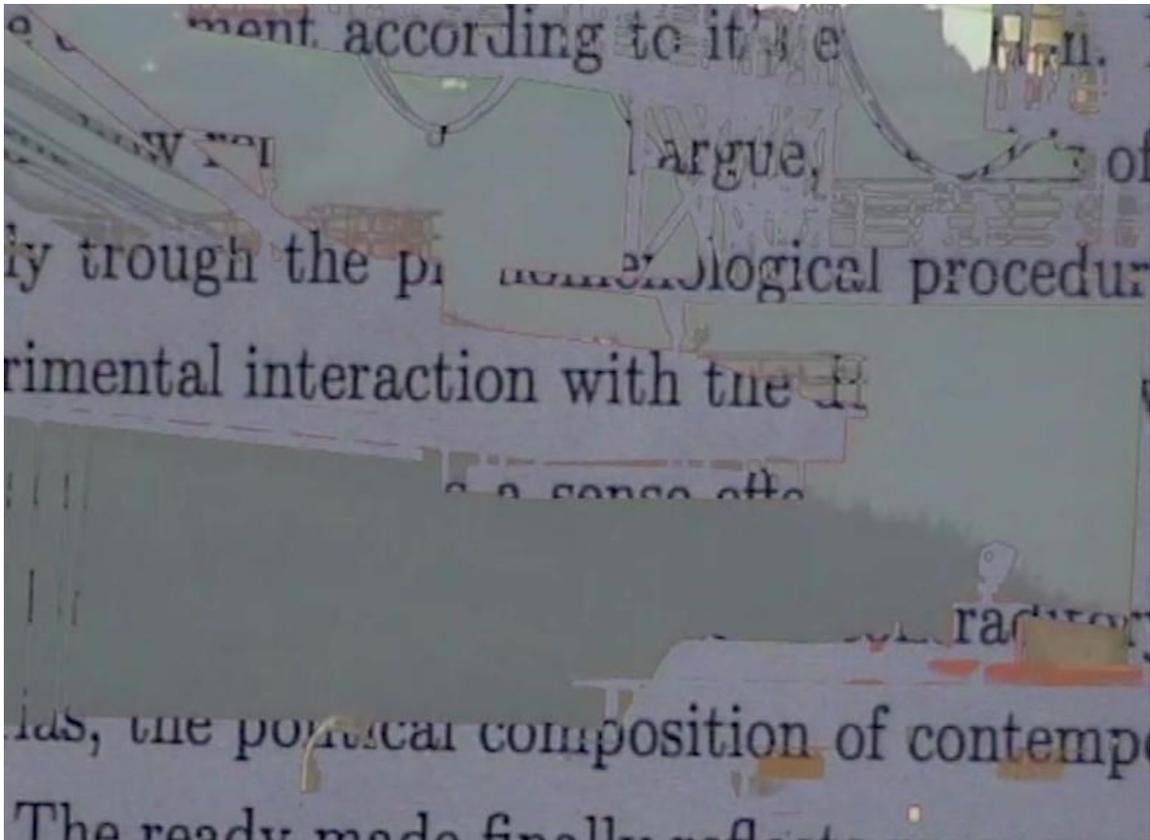
Figure 24.   Hyperopia, Port Correspondence Scene, Video Still. 2023.
Letter correspondence with Ferdinand Klüsener.
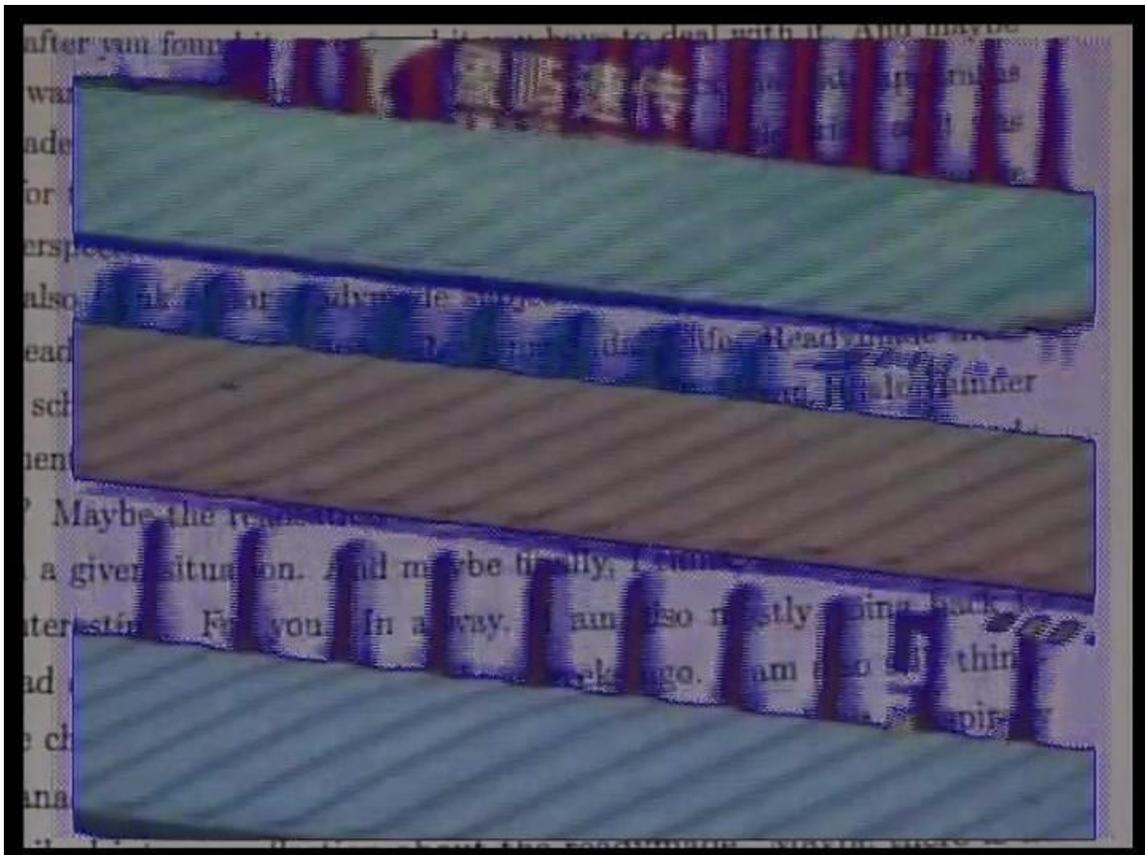
Figure 25.   Hyperopia, Port Correspondence Scene, Video Still. 2023.
Letter correspondence with Ferdinand Klüsener.
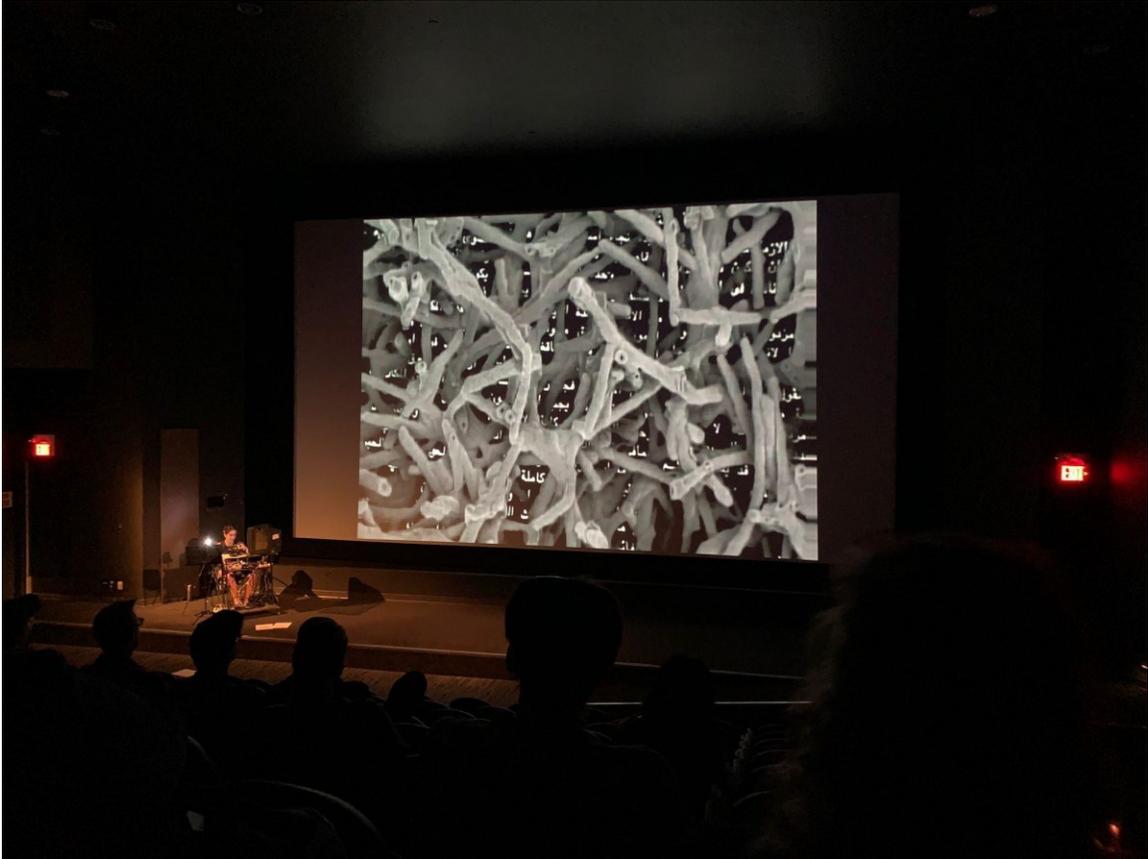
Figure 26.　　Hyperopia, Microverse Hydrophobic Scene showing the original Arabic transcript of the Crystalist Manifesto, 1976, in the background, Live Cinema Screening. 2023.
Photograph by Zhonghang (Daisy) Zhang.

CONCLUSION

As I am finishing up this chapter in my research and artistic journey, I strive to explore other matrix-based media in relation to this research, namely to go back to investigating the embroidered stitch in relation to the question of cultivating decay and arriving at new transformation and regeneration. Indeed, working with the longer format cinematic structure, as well as adapting parts of the time-based work in the gallery make me eager to produce more. Most importantly, I hope that my research and artistic practice sheds light on non-Western discourses which are crucial in the academic context more than ever right now. Brave young women of Sudan are taking to the street to fight for their own very basic rights chanting "We will continue the struggle", as I write this. All power to the people of Sudan, Palestine and Congo.

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Appendix A. Documentation Materials

List of video work

Hyperopia

Creator/Director: Mena El Shazly

Description: Hyperopia (2023), 55'32''. One-channel video. Stereo.

Filename: 1_Hyperopia_2023_55min32_One_Channel_Stereo.mp4

The Rain

Creator/Director: Mena El Shazly

Description: The Rain (2022), 04'18''. One-channel video. Stereo.

Filename: 2_The_Rain_2022_04min18_One_Channel_Stereo.mp4

Fibers

Creator/Director: Mena El Shazly

Description: Fibers (2022), 05'26''. One-channel video. Stereo.

Filename: 3_Fibers_2022_05min26_One_Channel_Silent_Compressed.mp4

Filename: 4_Fibers_2022_05min26_One_Channel_Stereo.mp4

A scroll, scrolling

Creator/Director: Mena El Shazly

Description: A scroll, scrolling (2022), 2'17''. Two-channel video. Silent.

Filename: 5_A_scroll_scrolling_2022_02min17_Two_Channel_Silent.mp4

Video documentation

Hyperopia Live Cinema Screening promo

Creator/Director: Mena El Shazly

Description: Promo of live cinema screening of Hyperopia performed at the Djavad Mowafaghian Cinema on Friday, September 15, 2023. Drums by Konrad Agnas.

Filename: 6_Hyperopia_2023_Live_Cinema_Screening_Promo.mp4

Hyperopia Gallery Installation projection mapping Sample 1

Creator/Director: Mena El Shazly

Description: Demo Sample of Hyperopia Gallery Installation.

Filename:
7_Hyperopia__2023_Gallery_Installation_Projection_Mapping_Sample_1.mp4

Hyperopia Gallery Installation projection mapping Sample 2

Creator/Director: Mena El Shazly

Description: Gallery Installation projection mapping at Autofictional MFA Graduating Exhibition at the Audain Gallery & SFU Goldcorp Centre for the Arts, September 6 – 23, 2023, and at Listen, Listen Festival, part of the Vancouver Improvised Arts Society & Black Orchid Factory, October 7, 2023.

Filename: 8_Hyperopia_2023_Gallery_Installation_Projection_Mapping_Sample_2.mov

Appendix B. Credits

At Simon Fraser University, we live and work on the unceded traditional territories of the xʷməθkʷəy̓əm (Musqueam), Sḵwx̱wú7mesh Úxwumixw (Squamish), səl̓ilw̓ətaʔɬ (Tsleil-Waututh), q̓íc̓əy̓ (Katzie), kʷikʷəƛ̓əm (Kwikwetlem), Qayqayt, Kwantlen, Semiahmoo and Tsawwassen peoples.

Sound (in order of appearance)
Konrad Agnas	Drums
Ali Hout	Riq Drum
Haniel Hout	F La Serena, Hamsa Handpan Drum
Haniel Hout	G Pygmy, Rav Vast Drum
Mena El Shazly	Rainstick
George Rahi	Birdsong Machine
Alex Abahmed	No-input mixer w/guitar pedals
Alex Abahmed	Tabla
Meredith Bates	Violin
Alex Abahmed	Sound Mixing and Mastering
Mena El Shazly	Live analog editing and mixing
Calla Paleczny	Videographer, bathroom scenes
Ghazal Majidi	AI generated macroverse scene

Microscopic Images
Department of Botany, University of British Columbia.

Crystals on plant cuticle
Dr. Anne Lacey Samuels lab

Drimys winteri leaf (up and low)
Zhonghang (Daisy) Zhang, PhD student, Dr. Reinhard Jetter lab

Tetraphis pellucida, *Sphagnum capillifolium*, *Plagiomnium insigne*, *Polytrichum commune*
Drew Hall, PhD student, Dr. Anne Lacey Samuels lab

Text
Ferdinand Klüsener, Letter correspondence, 2023
The Crystalist Manifesto, Al-Ayyam newspaper, 1976

Presented in partial fulfillment of the requirements of the Degree of Master of Fine Arts at Simon Fraser University.

Director, GCA Production and Event Services: Miles Lavkulich
SCA Technical Director: Ben Rogalski
SCA Production Manager: Emily Neumann
Communications: Brady Cranfield
Production Services: Darryl Strohan, Rodney Fenske

Special thanks
Laura U. Marks, Miwa Matreyek, Noé Rodríguez, Anne Lacey Samules, Anneka Lenssen, Lauraine Mak, Douglas Watt, Adham Zidan.

Appendix C. Alternative Discourses on Decay

In order to resist the dominating capitalist structures and to reestablish a relationship with the land and the environment, as well as the past and the future, it is crucial to reconsider the discourse on decay with the hope of cultivating it and arriving at alternative ways of thinking about transformation and regeneration. This paper is a presentation of alternative discourses on decay. It identifies several areas of interest related to time-based practices, and focuses on specific theories and occurrences that, in the process of witnessing decay, whether consciously or subconsciously, attempt to eclipse, access, resurrect, substitute and unfold it.

The paper is divided into five parts: the first segment that follows identifies decay's characteristics and explores it as a process that is being interrupted. The second part thinks about decay as a temporal practice that constitutes infinite extensions. It investigates the digital pixel and the embroidered stitch from a temporal atomistic, but also a Crystalist point of view, and thinks about them in relation to decay and regeneration. The third part focuses on decomposition and rot of organic matter to show that nothing goes back to its original state. The fourth part is a case study on a recently produced album of new musical arrangements of old recordings of early 20th-century songs from Egypt. And the last part reflects on how digital representations became an extension of the self, which results in discarded technological devices for the sake of the most-updated digital self, exploring few examples of regenerating or working with the discarded material.

Decay as a process that is interrupted

One problematic observation that comes up in relation to the idea of cultivating decay is that the process of decay is constantly being interrupted. Ghassan Hage's recent book offers an excellent overview on a topic that has been absent from the general discourse, and this absence leads to obscuring the fuller picture and complete cycle of the process of decay. The 11 essays by 13 contributors offer meticulous reflections on the current global socio-political crisis through the controversies of decay and its accompanying temporalities and contexts.

Decay is an integral part of any process, and "being a process, decay has a temporality, a pace or a tempo, and a spatiality, a mode of occupying and evolving in space" (Hage 3). Decay, in the modern and postmodern sense, ought to remain invisible, of course until it fails to remain invisible and becomes noticeable. According to Hage, Nietzsche differentiates between "normal" and "pathological" decay, stating that the latter is a modern disease that leads to the creation of "mortals". Hage characterizes "pathological" decay as one that has an experiential and perceptible effect, and is noticeable for its unusual rhythm and unexpected progression (3). In addition to spatial and temporal processes, there are other factors of decay that work together in a complex, dynamic and sometimes chaotic manner. For example, Hage distinguishes between two types of factors that could induce, accelerate or slow down decay: "endo-decay", which is decomposition from the inside, and "exo-decay", which is a result of external and environmental influences. However, these two processes are often entangled as a result of "the making and unmaking of social processes" (Hage 6). Hage rethinks Spinoza's concept of *conatus* in relation to "endo-decay" and redefines it an indicative of "the extent to which a thing's inner constitution influences its mode of decay" (9). Contrastingly, the work of maintenance is regarded as an "exo-decay", a factor that externally slows the process down. Hage reflects on maintenance, which is seen as unglamorous, in relation to construction, which is regarded as heroic (11).

Another example of decay as a process that gets interrupted, and speaking about glamour, is fashion. Roland Barthes is aware of the complex dynamics of fashion having roots in philosophy, economics, society, semiology and culture, arguing that "all new Fashion is a refusal to inherit, a subversion of the oppression left by the preceding Fashion" (116). Consequently, the economy of fashion does not leave a chance for clothes to decay. He goes on to argue that fashion experiences itself as "a right of the present over the past" (Barthes, 116).

Infinite extensions inward and outward

Decay has a temporality that extends infinitely, which I would like to further elaborate on through the digital pixel and the embroidered stitch. Firstly, both the digital pixel and the embroidered stitch are characterized by a time-based component and a repetitive act. Secondly, both the digital pixel and the embroidered stitch could be viewed as minimal parts, which require a multitude of their parts to constitute a whole.

This section deals with the question of cultivating decay and arriving at new transformations through understanding the minimal part. This is done by adopting the methodology of the Crystalist artists' movement in Sudan, namely through adopting their methodology of undoing layers of contradictions between semblance and essence. The Crystalists concluded their 1976 manifesto by recapitulating that "the crystal is nothing but the denial of the objectification of objects. It is infinite transparency" (Abdallah et al. 401). I will take a closer look at theories of temporal atomism and crystalism, arriving at the smallest part, the atom, and through a Crystalist analysis, argue that it extends infinitely inward and outward.

Laura U. Marks devotes Chapter 7 of *Enfoldment and Infinity* to atomism, tracing back the invention of the pixel to the year 1000 in Baghdad, Iraq. In the early 9th century, an Islamic group dealing with speculative theology, or *kalām*, preferred the use of rational argument to question existent and non-existent things and adopted a political position at the time that made them known as the Mu'tazila (those who withdrew). Unlike the rest of the *kalām* theologians who they disagreed with, the Mu'tazila had similarities to Deleuze's thought, according to Marks. For example, they regarded "the unseen as all that is in the past or the future", they "privileged the virtual over the actual", and believed that "non-existent things give rise to existent things" (Marks, *Enfoldment* 190). Atomist ontology views God to be eternal, and all existent things to be temporal based on God's command, consisting of a combination of atoms, which are "indivisible minimal parts", and accidents, which are "qualities, such as color and movement, that befall them" (190). A rich ontology of "existent and potential", or what Deleuze refers to as "actual and virtual", was made possible by such a conceptualization (190). Marks notes that there is a resemblance between this type of discontinuous relationship between the temporality of the minimal part, "whether atom, point, or pixel" (34), which has no inside, and "the contemporary cultures of globalization", for example, "events seem to occur independent of history" (199).

The Crystalist school published a manifesto in a newspaper in Sudan in 1976, which in my opinion also deals with temporal atomist themes, however using a methodology of "a high level of Crystalism" (Abdallah et al. 395), which means infinite transparency. For example, the manifesto, which was signed by five Sudanese artists, asserts that the fundamental idea of Crystalist thought is based on a rejection of "the essential quality of things, for it is now clear that any essence is nothing but a semblance

for another essence" (Abdallah et al. 394). Most importantly, the manifesto acknowledges that the atom was once known in the past as an "irreducible essence", or an *indivisible minimal part*, "but then a whole world was discovered within it—nuclei, electrons, protons. This applies to subatomic particles, sub-subatomic particles, and to the limitless forms of existence of the entire cosmos" (Abdallah et al. 394).

Through a Crystalist perspective, one can say that decay has a similar behavior, where the smallest part has the power to form infinite extensions. One can say the same about the digital pixel and the embroidered stitch, that each part simultaneously extends infinitely inward and outward.

Never back to the original state

Kader Attia's perception of repair in modern societies is worth mentioning here in relation to decay and the possibility to cultivate it. As an Algerian-French artist, Attia is interested in the complex relations between East and West, and how a society's own history is shaped, and how it affects the evolving of nations, individuals and collective memories. His socio-cultural research led him to explore repair, especially in modern societies. For Western societies, to repair something is to erase traces of the injury and to go back to the original state, while in traditional societies, it is the opposite, to fix an injury that keeps it visible, which results in never going back to the original state (Attia 9). Therefore, the repair had moved closer to "a fantasy of modernity", according to Attia, who believes that "the word *repair* is an oxymoron", for "every repair is entangled with the injury", and the two cannot be separated (9).

Fruiting plants are great examples of repair and decay as a regenerative process, and proof that nothing goes back to its original state. Any fruiting plant's reproductive process involves the process of decay. The seeds grow into a new plant with the help of the exterior of the plant decomposing. Factors that influence this decomposition process include temperature, moisture, light, air and microbial growth. I also have explored this notion in my work. The series of miniature sculptures, *Naming of Parts* (2019, 2021), is a study of the effects of light and air on leftover ends of carrots. Over time, as the carrot ends transfer their moisture to the surrounding air, they transform into ever-smaller, wrinklier forms. I took samples of this process by making silicone and alginate molds of the carrots, and, through plaster 'positives', I recreated the

carrot ends at various stages of decomposition. [fig. B.1] Here, I playfully engage with the limits of human vision by pairing this food, which is meant to improve our eyesight, with its ever-shrinking form.

Fig. C.1.   Naming of Parts, Gypsum plaster cast artifacts. 2019.
Courtesy of the artist. Photograph by Andrea Thal.

This study also took on a Crystalist approach, as I used two different types of molds to cast the carrots: Silicone molds to track the process of endo-decay of each carrot piece, and alginate molds to track the process of exo-decay. Since alginate is a water-based medium, I could trace this type of decay to be an exponential one, as the water came out of the alginate. While this study resulted in beautiful aesthetics of carrot decay, the behavior of decay became predictable over time. The carrot pieces never disappeared, but instead kept shrinking exponentially; however, the process got interrupted by either mold breakage or extreme rot. The exciting thing about the process is that nothing ever goes back to its original state.

The restored as a symptom that needs to be resurrected

Most of the time, decay indicates that something is rotting, disappearing, shrinking or no longer functioning. Maintenance and restoration work allows for preserving something for future accessibility. But how about things that become *immaterially withdrawn*, as Jalal Toufic puts it, despite their physical availability? Would this immaterial withdrawal be regarded as a form of decay? In *The Withdrawal of Tradition Past a Surpassing Disaster*, Toufic argues that a disaster can be considered a surpassing one if, "beyond the immediate death toll", "destruction of buildings" and the long-term hidden material and traumatic effects, "there would be an additional immaterial withdrawal of literary, philosophical and thoughtful texts as well as of certain films, videos, and musical works", despite their physical availability (11). A surpassing disaster is defined through its effect, which surpasses the material one, to an immaterial effect (11). Whether a disaster is a surpassing one or not, depends on the resurrection; in other words, what is physically saved from the surpassing disaster needs to be resurrected (Toufic 15).

In June 2022, Cairo-based composer, arranger, and multi-instrumentalist Nancy Mounir released her debut album titled *Nozhet El Nofous* (Promenade of the Souls). In this album, which is described on Bandcamp as "a remarkable communion with ghosts", Mounir indulges in "a musical dialogue" with eight archival recordings of early 20th-century songs from Egypt. My interest in Mounir's album stems from its treatment of decay. It is not concerned with maintenance or restoration work to a great extent, but instances of the decayed, dusty and grainy sounds of the aging vinyl recordings are still audible on purpose, leaving a trace that is not removed. Instead, it shows "the marks of time's passage, [which] are a trigger of affect and nostalgia, of a conversion of decay into treasure" (Herzfeld 59). The question of interest in regards to this album is: could this be an attempt at resurrecting the eight songs one hundred years later?

The archival recordings that Mounir engages with reveal lyrics, methods and techniques of an earlier, more liberated era in Egypt that the Egyptian culture is no longer familiar with. "The artists weren't afraid to sing about physical love or pain, and their voices reflected their feelings" (Ague). The recordings bring forth music that is characterized by "free rhythms and microtonality" (Ague). Such an approach to music making was the common approach before the standardization and codification of Arabic

maqam (modal systems), a political decision taken in the 1932 symposium known as the First Congress of Arab Music. While this decision was made to make it more convenient to notate music, none of those Egyptian musicians were included in the Congress. Does this mean that Mounir was attempting to resurrect these songs? "The last resort, these concepts", this was Jalal Toufic's answer to my question if Mounir's new arrangement could be regarded as a resurrection. In case it is not a resurrection, is what Mounir is doing a symptom that these songs need to be resurrected? Is the 1932 Congress itself a surpassing disaster? These archival works were not available after the congress; they were immaterially withdrawn.

From Mounir's own description of her album, she seems to not be concerned with the withdrawal nor the surpassing disaster. Mounir regards these songs as living organisms that she breathes and converses with, which is carefully executed by adding a layer of her own arrangements to the old songs. Mounir is obviously interested in layers, as the description of the work implies, and also in blurring the degree of separation between past and present, yet "beneath it all is a liberating attitude of defiance that feels timeless" (Mounir). Combining the past and the present, the old and the new, is not of interest; neither am I interested in the nostalgia of listening to these old songs. On the contrary, I am more inclined to believe - as Hito Steyerl put it - that history is occupying and invading the present, preventing the future from happening, and the only way to reactivate this history is through new works, in the present (Steyerl). To Toufic, a new arrangement is not a resurrection. However, it seems that Mounir feels a responsibility towards these old singers that were removed from history, and making these songs available, which could be argued, is a symptom that these songs need to be resurrected. This will only be revealed through waiting, now that the songs are available, as "resurrection takes (and gives) time" (Toufic 14).

Regeneration of technology trap

Decay has always had a direct fearful connection with the passage of time and dying. For instance, ancient Egyptians believed in resurrection as a tool to defeat mortality and access infinity, hence their outstanding mummification practices attempted to preserve the body and slow down decay. The same pursuit to attain immortality is clear in digital representations, for example on social media. In my previous project, *Death Spells*, I argue that there are parallels between ancient Egyptian funerary

practices and contemporary society's use of social media in the pursuit to attain immortality. Part of this project, an interview was conducted with Egyptologist Salima Ikram on October 29, 2020, where she says that "ancient Egyptians wanted to have an ideal afterlife that did not necessarily reflect their real lives". Similarly, the filters on social media, which bear no relation to real life, are a projection or "a wish fulfillment", according to Ikram. In another interview conducted on October 30, 2020, Egyptologist Ramadan Hussein explains that social media is a self presentation and a way to control your public image, adding that "the Egyptians did it the same way, decorating the tomb, not just with religious texts, but also decorating the tomb with your titles, your administrative titles. You pretty much highlight your career, you write your own biography." Also regarding mortality, it is interesting to note that the dead will eventually outnumber the living on Facebook, according to research from the University of Oxford Internet Institute published in April 2019 in the journal "Big Data & Society" (Öhman and Watson). This study opens questions regarding digital preservation of personal and collective histories. With the rise of digital existences in a world where the understanding of decay and repair is different than their natural processes, the self-representation requires technological devices to be constantly updated to keep up with the newest software, highest resolution, and socially accepted tools that are necessary to construct this digital self. Consequently, technological devices, like phones, cameras and laptops, are overused and quickly discarded leaving a big imprint or a big pile of technology trash. The devices also contain plastic, and "plastic objects appear immune to the "tendrils of decay." They invite no maintenance" (Debra McDougall 28).

There are, in fact, individual and group efforts to work with media technologies and to use this "trash" media in creative ways, for example in Egypt and Lebanon, where "[a] couple of lovely projects metonymize the Arab creative hack" (Marks, Poor Images 3903). The Cairo media art collective Medrar for Contemporary Art, which I have been an integral part of since 2012, "held the Open Lab Egypt workshops, teaching artists and tinkerers to hack computers, write code, and build digitronic artworks" (Marks, "Poor Images," 3904). Also, there are those that are obsessed with obsolete technology, repairing these old devices that are left behind, and finding ways to not only bring them back to life, but to transform them into a new creative tool.

In general, communication technology is advancing very rapidly, and the digital image has become an extension of our being, an extension characterized by presence

and transcendence. In a previous paper, I argued that if the digital image reflects our reality, one needs to reassess where these technological advancements will lead humanity, such as 'be present where?' and 'transcend to where?'. Being aware of these questions can help to resist recreating the same dynamics that exist in the physical world.

Conclusion

The tendency to ignore, interrupt or conceal the process of decay has always been common in the capitalist system, although now more than ever. Not facing the discourse of decay also means being constantly obsessed with the new, resulting in an ever-growing consumption rate and discarded material. While there were attempts by the neo-liberal market to infiltrate the aesthetics of decay into the system, for example integrating the aesthetics of decayed clothes to be "in fashion", this trend only creates a superficial approach to the discourse, encouraging more consumption. I believe the process of decay has the potential to teach us more about generation, resistance and hope.

Through the five parts, I intended to take a closer look at contemporary practices and occurrences that either attempt to deal with decay or happen as a result of it. I hope that this can serve as a starting point of an exploration that can lead to collectively imagining a future where decay is more accepted and integrated.

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