

A big fish and a little fish are swimming along in the sea, and as they pass the big fish goes to the little fish,

“How’s the water?”
and the little
fish goes,
“What’s water?”

In 2003, David Foster Wallace apologized for using this allegory — he was giving a commencement speech at a small liberal arts college — explaining that he realized it was a day for big and important truths, but he wanted to talk about the fish, as what was more important than big and important truths was the water. The following series highlights artists, all relatively contemporary (more or less children of Facebook), who make work about the dangers of forgetting the water. The practices of each of these artists are also inscrutable, operating across a range of mediums as if to emphasize that mediums, like answers, are besides the point, actually headless horsemen of a sort: experience trumps language, and mediums provide the parameters to host.

Without further anew hosts at the table: Avery Singer, Bunny Rogers, Jabide-Khalil Huffman, Rachel Rossin, and Juan Antonio Olivares. Each makes physical objects and experiences based on expressions that, like the slogan, have a spectral quality: algorithms, CGI, cloud-generated data, images constituted by artificial intelligence. Just as Tiravanija manifests slogans as signposts, the poetic and complicated use of medium affords the technical ephemeral the chance to be weathered by human touch, choice, experience; to become objects (or homes) of desire, fear, prejudice, connection, evolution. However, where the origin of the slogan is tied up in the human hand, the way people turn thought into language and language into writing — the political text, the literary text, legal volumes, books with stately covers, the Xeroxed manifesto — the origin of the algorithm is tied up in code, a disembodied digital sea, whose powers,

like water, range from inane and totally harmless to the titanic and monstrous. When God told Noah the flood was coming, Noah took heed, understanding it was not men but water that had the power to wipe out a world. Digital water is essential to contemporary life — when was the last day you didn’t see a digital image, a digital fact, a digital; does the word even make sense as a modifier anymore? It also quenches a range of human desire (love, revenge, knowledge, hate, gluttony), and because we’re all new to the digital water game, it’s tricky

to know whether it’s fresh or salt water we’re drinking; Zuckerberg wanted to build a more connected world, to infuse the possibility of experience.

In 1937, Walter Benjamin famously declared that photography and film were going to revolutionize art, enabling anyone, anywhere, to experience its power, which he called “aura.” Aura, as he had it, was the object’s unique connection to a moment and it’s people and to the way that object carries those moments within in it. Written in Berlin in 1937, the text was almost like a plea to the people, to deploy and receive these mediums as political tools. The objective being to combat the mechanisms of fascism, which operates by means of slogans, systemizing people into masses that chant and march. If we want to give Benjamin’s prophecy a coda, reproduction via film and photography seems to pacify more than activate, but it is significant to reconsider the concept of aura, as the inverse of Benjamin’s argument would indicate that aura, the unique power of an object to unite a people and its moment, is a deeply political experience.

Regarding the problem of the water, this is great news: Here are five artists who are all materializing the immaterial and privileging the physical object as the lightning rod of experience, which is at core political, as their artworks in effect bottle the sea and allow us to examine it, which is harder than ever today, since it has swallowed whole swaths of our world and is now spawning its own in the form of AI devices like Alexa. While this new ocean may be less discriminating than traditional mediums, like newspapers or books, as those

DIGITAL

mediums, require literacy, time, and touch, by privileging the image over text it allows easy consumption with little need for participation. Just as the slogan robs language of its function, the digital robs experience.

For the 10th anniversary of *OOO*, which takes up the theme of utopia, we’ve combed this sea and aggregated the words of these five artists around the topic of medium. Their outputs are varied conceptually, aesthetically, physically, but it’s notable that each works across a spectrum of mediums — from painting and performance to experiential technologies like virtual reality — where medium acts as a process to arrive at an experience, allowing the object not be the final destination, but the host. Their practices emphasize the way our digital realm floats alongside of us, and as colorless as a chameleon, reflects and powers our impulses, and has an incredible ability to grant us, as Wallace said of the water, the freedom to “be lords of our own tiny skull-sized kingdoms, alone at the center of all creation.”

It’s very hard to bottle water if you are swimming in it, and if one does succeed, very difficult for an audience to recognize: Imagine, for example, the look of bottled air. It’s important to remember that one thing Alexa will never have is blood, bones, and the ability to choose to see humans as worthy of honor and respect. Creating objects out of things that have no objects and infusing life into those expressions, allows them to host experience, while emphasizing the experiences that only trees and houses and churches and theaters and mountains and temples and

deserts can allow. The other thing that binds these five artists are the registers of empathy available in their output — they are anything but “post-human.”

Wallace’s speech was much simpler than his sprawling essays and novels. It reflected an angst specific to America in 2005 — *Prozac Nation*, *Adbusters*, Radiohead, *American Beauty* — and was relatively unknown until 2008, when that writer took his own life by shooting himself in the head. A journalist found it on YouTube and incorporated parts

WATER

into his obituary. Easier to pluck a line from a speech than a 1,000-plus page novel appropriately titled *Infinite Jest*. A speech is written to be heard: “The capital-T Truth is about life *before* death. It is about making it to 30, or maybe 50, without wanting to shoot yourself in the head. It is about simple awareness-awareness of what is so real and essential, so hidden in plain sight all around us, that we have to keep reminding ourselves, over and over: ‘This is water, this is water,’” said Wallace at Kenyon College, standing before a class of graduates in June 2005. Twitter was founded just one year later; it’s founders said the medium was meant to empower people, allow them to share information freely, foster the creation of a more intelligent world.

These artists are reverse engineering the products of spectral digital systems into our world as objects, or bottles of water. They offer up the possibility to see the freedom the digital affords — great knowledge if we choose to look, time if we choose to use it for efficiency and not gluttony — as it systemizes our lives into entities that can be dictated, bought, and sold, vis-a-vis algorithms that are constitutionally incapable of dignity (think Cambridge Analytica). Tracking the habit of appropriation unique to the Internet, we offer the following statements from each, that illustrate the way a poetic use of medium allows one to find, as Audre Lorde wrote, the “places of possibility within ourselves, which are dark because they are ancient and hidden.” If poetry, as that poet wrote, is “the way we help give name to the nameless so it can be thought,” it’s also then constitutionally incapable of being co-opted for the purposes of the slogan.

Words
Allese Thomson

portraits
Lily Gavin

OOO Google describes you as an author, citing your awards in poetry, your books, your degrees from Bard College and Brown University. Work you've presented in galleries and museums included collage, painting, photography, karaoke, slide shows, lights, subtitles, texts, and much more, where often several of these mediums are collapsed in one work. It's as if you deploy systems as mediums, which trouble time as linear and disrupt historical memory. Nikki Darling wrote of your output, "this is a rejection of letting words do their job." In 2016, you shared in an interview with Artforum: "what happens in this process of taking this verbal thing and not memorializing it but fixing it, is interesting to me. If I want to make work about police brutality and being a black man in America in 2016, there is a responsibility. Poetry allows me to be the person being attacked, both the 18-year-old in a hoodie and the person standing outside of that. Writing provides me with the ability to slip in and out of different registers and that is ultimately why I'm working the way I do."

When I first asked your gallerist, Anat Engbi, about your artwork, at Art Base! Miami Beach, she wavered immediately on the word artwork, as if the question was that you're really more of a writer, a poet, and are, yes, making objects?

**JIBADE-KHALIL
HUFFMAN**

J-KH I started making art because there were things I couldn't articulate in writing. If you ask in one sentence what I do, I'd say I like working with media that already exists and exploding them with poetry. How do you make language as present as objects?

Most of my projects function by using the subtitle as a form of translation. In general, I'm thinking about a form of text that we're used to seeing over and over again — and then something else gets plugged into it. I love the idea of a film where the thing that is translated is not the thing we understand on the screen. I didn't have a darkroom and was longing to make pictures ... I thought of slides. It was amazing. I could take these pictures, process them, and they're done. And that very quickly became about projection and space; it became sculptural.

The idea of nostalgia and all the other connotations that come with projectors is something I'm always fighting against. I try to sort of reimagine what film can be and do. If you're thinking about a film being sort of flat, within that flat plane there's all sorts of characters, sounds, stories. But it's still a flat plane."





OOO Google Sketchup is as much a medium for you, as say, paint, but I don't believe anyone would ever describe you as a "Google Sketchup." Where a cursory viewer of your work might wax over engulfing digital alienation, you prefer to talk about comedy as an influence. Likewise, the figures in your work might evoke robots, because of their spare, geometric bodies, as much as the rhythms of Duchamp's *Nude Descending a Staircase*, an artist that unlike say, Picasso, believed less in mediums, but a lot in humor and play. Do you think there is a difference?

AS I hold the view that art begins when language takes a holiday. Digital image making is just a tool, a mode of invention. Every time the work leaves the studio I stop trying to judge what it does or might achieve. It's the point when I hand it over to the viewer. Humor and irony show a complete view and understanding of a subject. If you can publicly mock yourself, you can be your own worst critic. It's also fun — laughter is important.

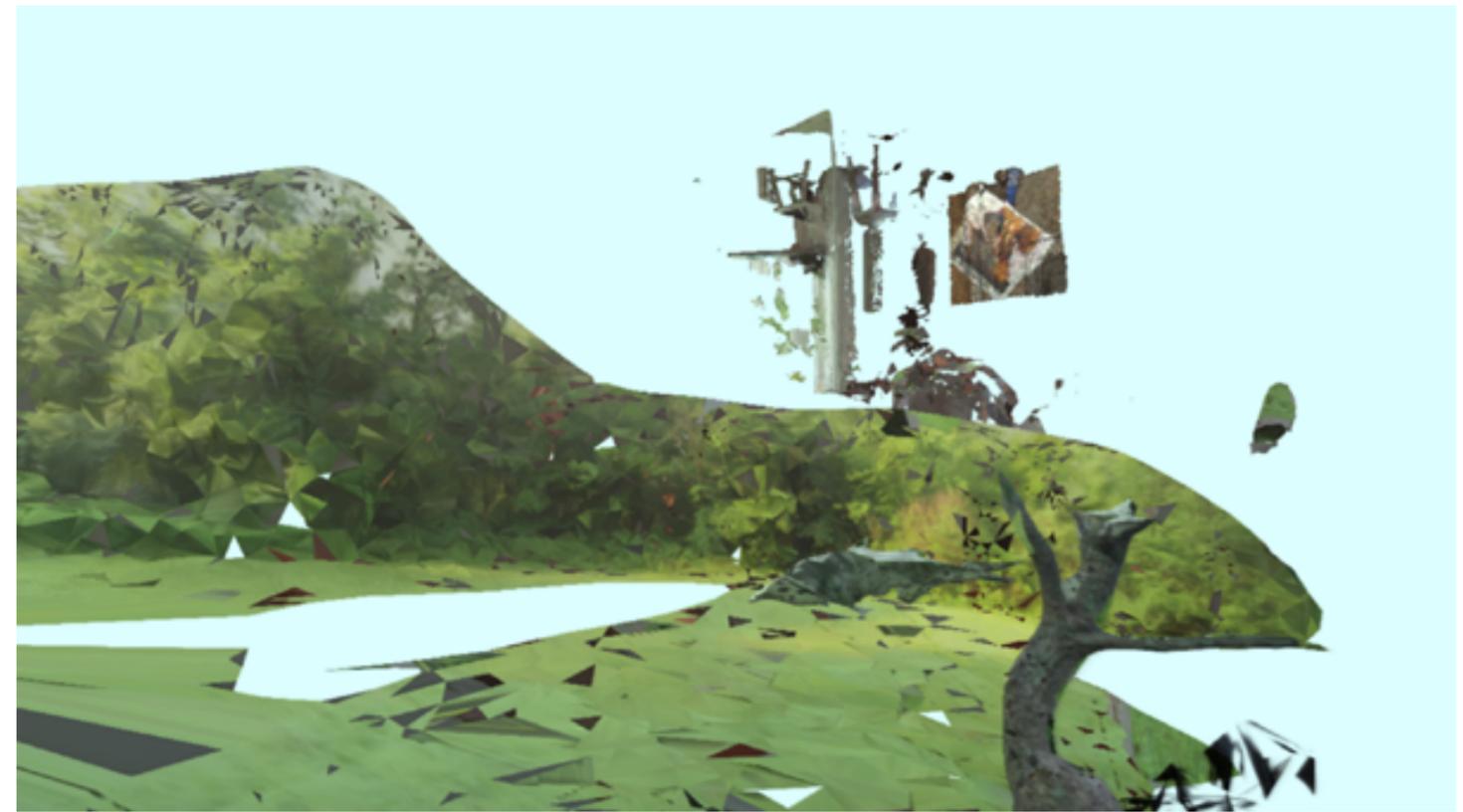
AVERY SINGER



OOO *Your practice expands across painting, sculpture, performance, installation, virtual reality, and more. Inside your virtual experiences, it often feels like you've tied a noose around our vision, allowing us to see and move just enough to understand that we can't actually move, as if to show us how free we really are. You then conceptually abstract this process and materialize it through painting, sculpture, performance, installation — as if they're like messages and process is their medium. What's your primary medium?*

RR I would consider physics, or, better yet, 'reality' my primary medium.

**RACHEL
ROSSIN**





OOO For your solo debut at the Whitney Museum of American Art you bathed everything in gray — the walls, the carpet, the curtain; even the sound feels gray, a relenting rain beating against the piece's non-narrative audio and permeating our own space. It's as if you're animating the 4-D animation software — the medium you made *Moléculas* in — into a fifth, sixth, seventh dimension, where we, as viewer, are immersed, and left unsure of what dimension we're actually in. (The modernist room? The icebergs? Space and the sun? A dream? Yours or ours?) The process seems to be less akin to the immersive experience of film and installations, of the contemporary canon, and to have more in common with Renaissance painting, where linear perspective was deployed to structure a multiplicity of stories and times within a single painting and single story, for the viewer to look upon. Why did you choose to work in Cinema 4D, 4-D animation software?

JUAN ANTONIO OLIVARES

JAO “I didn't really, I was just in Dusseldorf studying with Christopher Williams, who, ha, doesn't use Cinema 4D, and just playing around with it on my own, and saw that it really freed you up to compose meticulous images, both real and imagined, and in multiple dimensions. In the digital space of animation, at least in the way that I worked with it, you start from nothing: it's an empty space, and then you add the elements you want to begin to simulate. It's a type of freedom — anything is possible in that space. It also creates a high level of control and intentionality, which is inherently different from shot or captured video.

It's similar to the way I chose the Teddy Bear to deliver the narrative as it seemed like a universal symbol of empathy and I wanted to encourage viewers to project themselves into this scenario, which plays in endless loop. I didn't intend the piece to be a conversation with my father, I was actually writing my own script as a teddy bear when I saw my father, and I — his life was so different than mine, leaving Peru, the revolution — I wanted to know if he thought the world was maybe better for realities, and at a certain point the conversation reached a place I didn't expect and I asked him if I could record the conversation; he agreed, and I placed my phone between us to record. It was about three hours long. A few weeks later, as I was toiling on the hair of the teddy bear, it struck me that the conversation could become the voice of the teddy bear. I like to work off of impulses — it helps me reach a place beyond my control in the work.

Once I was more embedded in the fiber of the story, I began to make editing decisions that I thought would open up the material, I worked hard to distance myself from the material, which two years of working in 4D Cinema achieved — and yes, I believe in the energy of sites. I didn't really want the work to be about a conversation I had with my father. This is the second time that *Moléculas* has been shown in New York, and each installation of it adapts to the architecture and context of the space in which it is being exhibited. Every space has a feeling, a character, a history, and I try to work with it rather than obscure it or impose an idea onto it.

Does that answer your question? About medium? It's funny, that's what Christopher said to me too, about my work, medium being more like a Renaissance painting than a film.”



OOO *Many of your sculptural works — the dyed and beribboned mops, the melted cafeteria chairs — possess the seductive and often frightening air of having stepped out of a 3-D rendering and into our world. You cite that much of your inspiration comes from “personal homepages,” traces of life relegated to the digital, infused into life through a practice that spans poetry, performance, drawing, sculpture, film, video, installation, music, clothing, doll making, and more. What is medium?*

**BUNNY
ROGERS**

BR Media shifted to where now you choose the channel you want to follow. When I was younger, it felt like something happened and you saw it everywhere. The footage for the Columbine shooting is so clear in my memory. I’m able to recall it with such visual accuracy. It’s as if it exists in my head as a reel.

I want to allow for complex ways of viewing and articulating a trauma. Because otherwise you can never really pull apart your feelings toward something that has happened and eventually relate it to others. Talking about trauma is going to be problematic. It touches places within you that you don’t even know about. And things bubble up. You can ignore it, and keep swallowing it — I definitely still do that all of the time. But a lot of reactions and ways of registering things are automatic. For me, this is an attempt to understand the processing of trauma.

