FIGURE

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conversation with **THOMAS PELLEREY GROGAN**

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L'ami du feu, Polyester resin, stone grit, oxidised steel, polylactic acid, copper powder, stepper motor, single-board computer, power supply, computer fans, push button, accelerometer, 11-inch screen and interface, video loop, 7 min, 90 × 24 × 19 cm, 2021.

YouKnow, Documentation of the filming process, 2019.
Photographer: Amina Bihi.

NOAM ALON *in conversation with* THOMAS PELLEREY GROGAN

NA Can you share your earliest memory of encountering art and how it shaped your path towards becoming an artist?

TPG I remember assembling jigsaw puzzles based on paintings by Paul Klee, Hilma af Klint and other modern artists, which gave me a first sense of composition and colour. Around the same time, I was fascinated by the TV programme *Art Attack*, trying papier-mâché projects with my mother. Her partner also introduced me to drawing on T-shirts with special pencils, which sparked my interest in making things by hand.

Growing up in Grenoble, I was lucky to have regular access to the Musée de Grenoble, known for its great modern art collection.

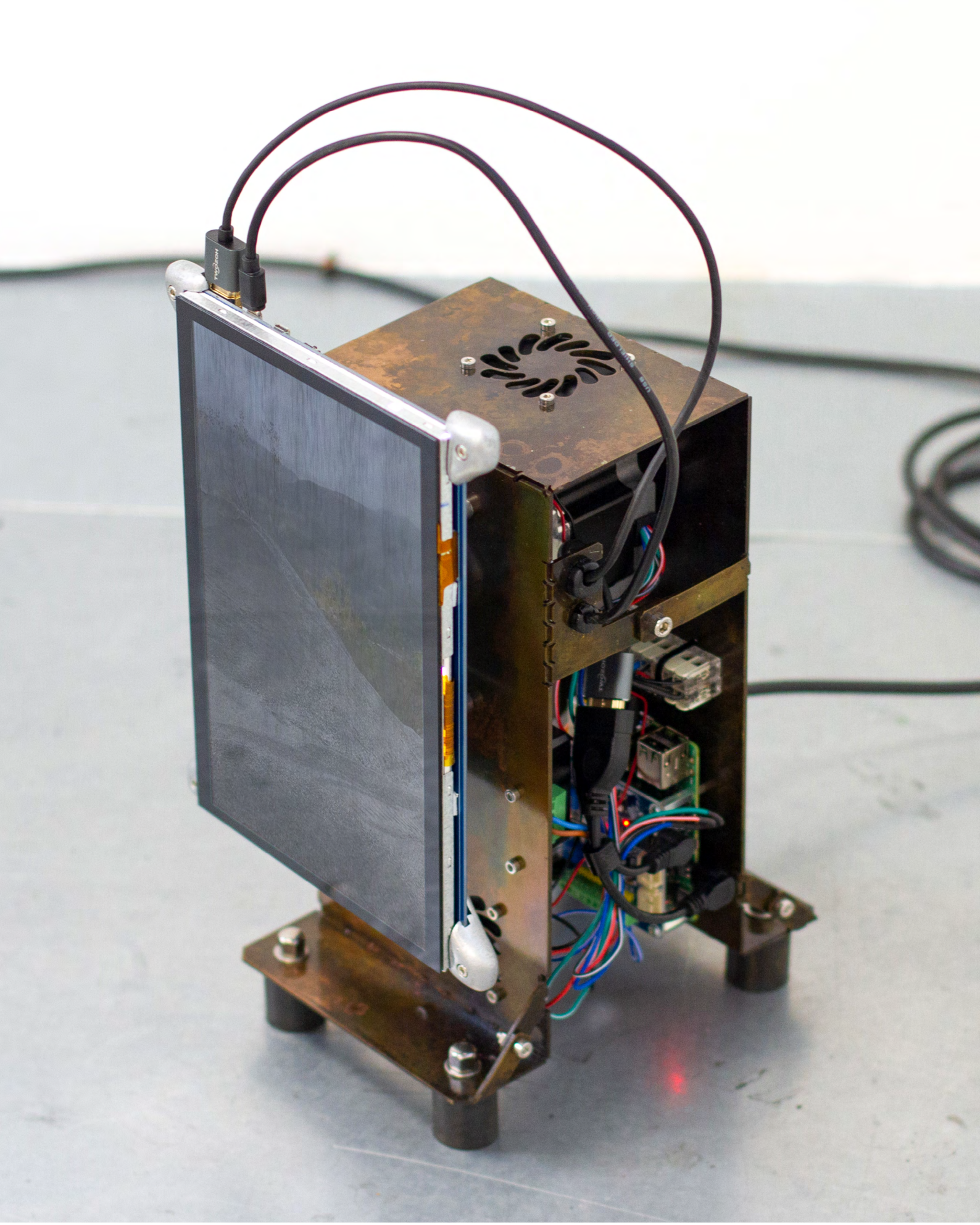
YouKnow, Documentation of the filming process, 2019.
Photographer: Amina Bihi.

That environment shaped my awareness of art as something significant, though at first I didn't imagine it as a viable career. For my family, design felt more reassuring and concrete than fine art. As the eldest child, I felt the responsibility to choose a path that would seem "reasonable", so I turned towards industrial design.

After a year at the faculty of arts in Saint-Étienne, which helped me build a portfolio, I was admitted to ECAL in Switzerland. At that time, basketball was a major part of my life: from age 12 I trained daily in a specialised programme and even played at a professional level in Saint-Étienne. Choosing to attend ECAL allowed me to give up basketball and commit fully to my studies. In hindsight, it was an essential decision, one that aligned better with the direction I wanted to take.

At ECAL I studied industrial design, but I gradually discovered the possibilities of speculative design. Encountering the work of Anthony Dunne and Fiona Raby at the Milan Design Week was a turning point. Their course *Design Interactions* at the Royal College of Art explored human–technology relations in ways that felt both critical and imaginative—closer to science fiction than to traditional industrial design. I also noticed how artists like Marguerite Humeau were emerging from this field, blurring the boundaries between art and design.

What I valued most in the design process was the research dimension: before proposing an object, we were trained to investigate its social and anthropological context. Even if industrial design often creates as many problems as it solves, that methodology taught me to think holistically, to start wide before narrowing down. This orientation still informs my practice today,



Le marchand de gravier, Patinated brass, stainless steel, resin, 10.1-inch screen, stepper motor, motor controller, single-board computer, gyroscope, power supply and fan, video loop, 44 s, 16 × 23 × 6.5 cm, 2022.

Le marchand de gravier, Patinated brass, stainless steel, resin, 10.1-inch screen, stepper motor, motor controller, single-board computer, gyroscope, power supply and fan, video loop, 44 s, 16 × 23 × 6.5 cm, 2022.

particularly in my interest in supply and demand dynamics: how industries generate artificial needs, how audiences or consumers respond, and how objects circulate in this system. My work often mimics industrial aesthetics while incorporating a DIY sensibility, as a way to question these mechanisms and propose alternatives.

After ECAL, I pursued an MA at the RCA. Ironically, during my BA I had produced rather artistic projects, but for my final diploma I deliberately presented a very orthodox industrial design project—a designer's toolbox—because I knew it would secure my degree and therefore my admission to the RCA. Once there, I could finally expand towards the speculative and critical direction that resonated with me.

NA You describe your practice as an investigation into technology. Does this come, for instance, from a technophobic position–a fear that machines may take over–or from a more techno-utopian approach, where technology is seen as a tool for healing and support?

TPG I wouldn't describe my position as either technophobic or utopian. It is more of a love–hate relationship. Technology is neither inherently good nor bad; it is simply a dominant force shaping our lives and societies. What interests me is the way a handful of people—engineers, entrepreneurs, decision-makers—make choices that affect everyone else. This is why I often use technology itself as a medium to question those decisions and their consequences. Dunne and Raby articulate this very well: in a world where innovation accelerates relentlessly, we sometimes need to pull the brake and pause to reflect before it is too late.

My attraction to technology may also come from my background. My family is from Savoy,

Ojo Rojo, Video still, Single-channel video, 16 min 50 s, 2023.

a rural, mountainous region where daily life is deeply rooted in nature. Growing up, I felt the need to move toward the big city, to be closer to the places "where things happen." In London, I would cycle past Downing Street every day, and that proximity to events I used to only see on the news felt significant. Technology, in that sense, became a way of situating myself in the present.

More recently, becoming a parent has shifted my perspective. Raising a child has made me rediscover the simplicity of life, where ten square centimetres can suddenly become a whole universe, without the need for screens or digital devices. At the same time, I remain almost nerdishly fascinated by innovation and new tools. What matters to me now is balance: carving out time both for immersion in highly technological environments and for a more rudimentary, tactile experience of the world.

NA You refer to the politics of sound-making, which seems to be a crucial thread in your work. Could you expand on what you mean by "politics" in this context? Since you frequently deal with urban noise, is it primarily linked to questions of sound pollution, or something broader?

TPG When I speak of the politics of sound-making, I often refer to the way different soundscapes shape—and are shaped by—social and spatial conditions. The work of Canadian composer R. Murray Schafer is central here. He distinguishes between *hi-fi* soundscapes, typical of rural environments, and *lo-fi* soundscapes, characteristic of urban life. In a *hi-fi* landscape, individual sounds stand out clearly: a bird call, the rustling of branches in the wind, each identifiable and distinct. By contrast, *lo-fi* soundscapes are saturated: a continuous hum or buzzing, where sounds overlap and merge into background noise,

Echoes from the wells, Rusted steel, papier-mâché, cardboard, speakers, holy well water, PET bottle, hydrophone and audio card, live audio feed, 200 × 240 × 240 cm, 2024.

Echoes from the wells (detail), Rusted steel, papier-mâché, cardboard, speakers, holy well water, PET bottle, hydrophone and audio card, live audio feed, 200 × 240 × 240 cm, 2024.

as in dense urban areas.

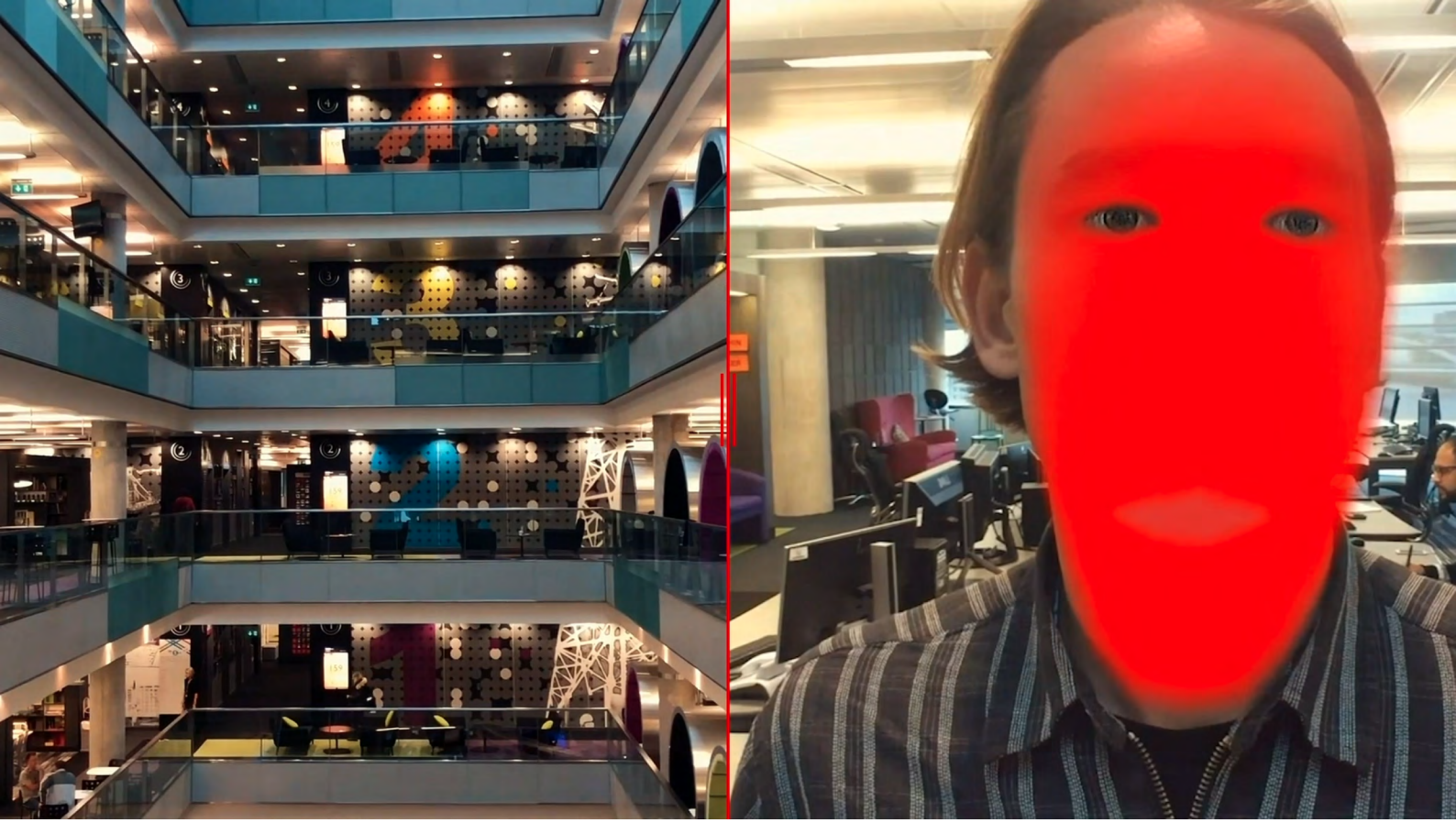
Much of my practice plays with this opposition. Sometimes I juxtapose the two within a single work, other times I explore them in separate projects. A good example is *Echoes from the wells* (2024), developed in a gallery on Morning Lane in East London, a space constantly overwhelmed by traffic noise. My idea was to turn the gallery into an empty chamber of the street, almost like a noise-cancelling device.

The installation took the form of a stripped-down fountain: a large, symmetrical metal structure, circular in form, functioning as a 360-degree sound system with low- and high-range speakers. It was connected to a hydrophone placed outside, in front of the gallery, immersed in water drawn from St Anne's Well in the Malvern Hills—a site long associated with healing properties. The water acted as an audio filter, mediating the urban noise and transforming it into a more therapeutic, inverted soundscape.

In this way, the project staged a dialogue between hi-fi and lo-fi environments, rural clarity and urban saturation. The politics lies in how sound reflects modes of living: the pastoral and the industrial, the restorative and the overwhelming, and in how art can mediate or even neutralise these tensions.

NA You have collaborated with corporate and industrial sectors. Could you tell us more about these collaborations, and whether you sometimes see them as paradoxical in relation to your practice?

TPG One of the most interesting collaborations I had with the corporate sector was during a residency with FACT in Liverpool in partnership with the BBC. The theme was "The Future World of Work", and each of the five residents was paired with a professional organisation. I worked with



YouKnow, Video stills, Series of video essays, Variable duration, 2019.

the BBC's Research & Development department in Salford, near Manchester, at a moment when debates around AI were just beginning to enter public discourse. This was 2018, shortly after I had returned from a six-month residency in Moscow where I worked with philosopher of technology Benjamin Bratton on Artificial Intelligence at the urban scale. During that time, we explored the social and economic transformations and the potential risks that AI could bring across different layers of society and its corporate infrastructures.

At the BBC, I conducted interviews with journalists and researchers, focusing on how automation and AI might transform news production. My premise was speculative: in a post-truth era, perhaps trust in information would shift away from large institutions towards citizen journalism, where neighbours or local peers document events, supported by platforms that gamify or monetise participation. This scenario raised questions about fake news, deepfakes, which were just emerging at the time, and the risks of automated information cycles. This led to a series of video essays I co-wrote with architect and writer Paul van Herk, in which I took on the role of a citizen journalist (*YouKnow*, 2019). Filmed with a custom-built camera rig, the videos trace my journeys between BBC offices in Salford and London, accompanied by a voice-over narrating our text, with lines such as: "We may one day live to see a constant feed of disguised adverts and an ideal terrain for astroturfing."

What struck me most was that, within R&D itself, very few people were aware of these issues. In part, this reflects the BBC's position as a public broadcaster: more accountable and risk-averse than private companies, and therefore

Piqûre-Lunaire (detail), Documentation of the filming process using a 360° stereoscopic camera, Variable dimensions, 2019.

Piqûre-Lunaire, Video still, 360° stereoscopic video, 12 min 25 s, 2019.

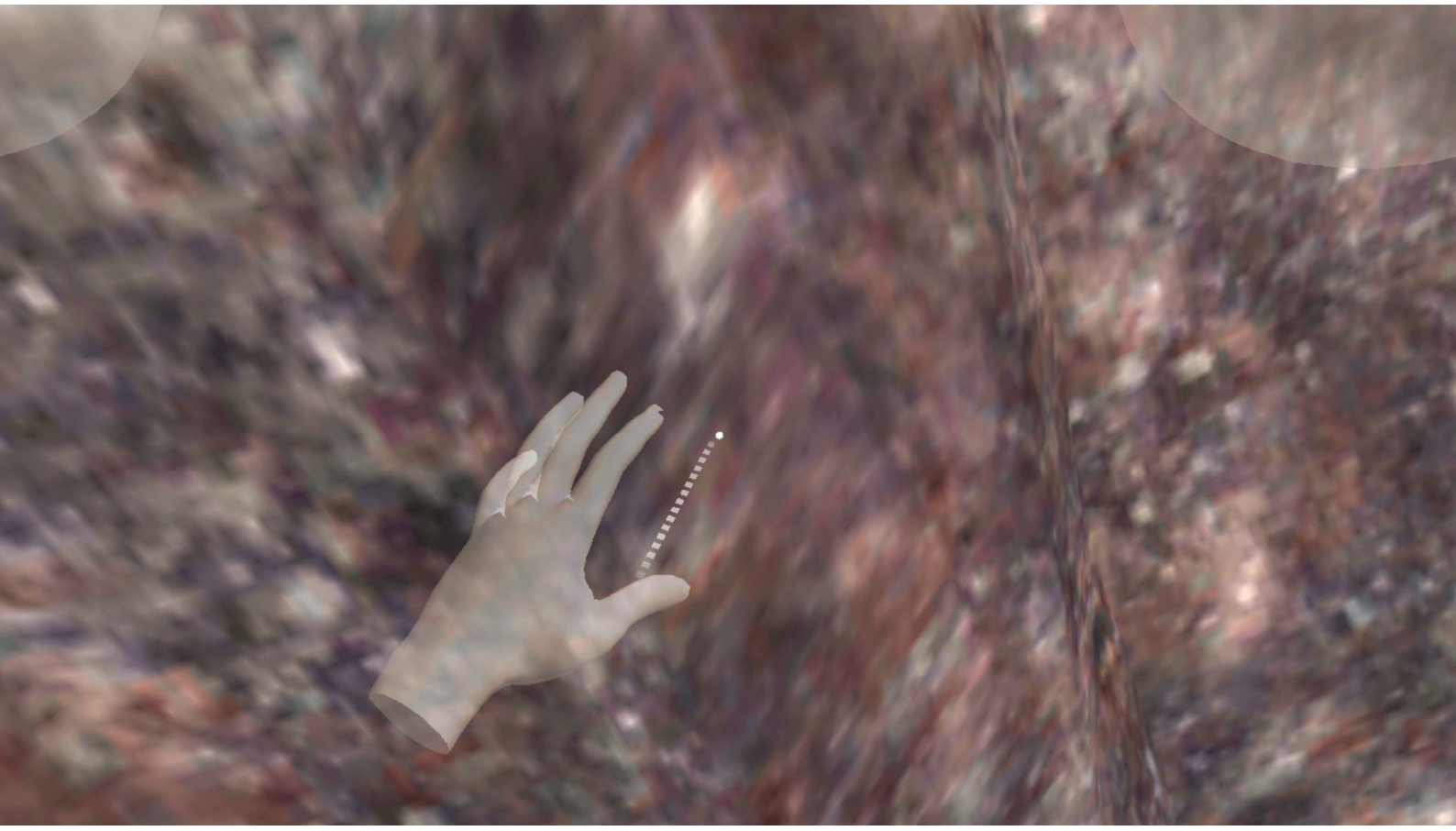
slower to adopt disruptive technologies. Still, the residency allowed me to work closely with one journalist to prototype an application that could help detect AI-generated content. Even if modest, the project left a trace within the organisation, prompting reflection on the risks of automation in the news. More broadly, these corporate collaborations raise paradoxes. On one hand, they provide access to tools, knowledge, and infrastructures that would otherwise remain closed. On the other, they risk absorbing artistic inquiry into corporate priorities. For me, speculative design provides a way through: it allows me to temporarily adopt a sector's perspective, question its assumptions, and then return to my own practice with new material for reflection.

I explored similar dynamics during a residency at La Becque in Switzerland, where I examined winemaking. There, I looked at how landscapes are used for storytelling in marketing, how technology supports production, and how narratives of terroir are both natural and constructed. The resulting work, *Piqûre-Lunaire* (2019), is a 360° video essay set on the shores of Lake Léman, imagining a near future where winemaking becomes increasingly esoteric and mediated through virtual reality. In both cases—journalism or agriculture—my role is not to provide solutions but to expose the politics embedded in technological systems and the stories they generate.

NA In *Thinking like a mountain* (2021)—an installation combining a stacked stone sculpture with a VR game where audiences virtually transform large rocks into smaller ones, balance small stones to (re-)form larger ones—you reference horticultural therapy. Yet it also evokes the myth of Sisyphus. How do you situate this work between these two poles?

Thinking like a mountain, Iteration #1, VR game with headset, polyester resin, stainless steel, galvanised steel, aluminium, rubber, PLA, VR headset, 11.6-inch screen, 240 × 220 × 220 cm, 2021.
Photographer: Agnese Sanvito.

Thinking like a mountain, Iteration #1 (detail), VR game with headset, polyester resin, stainless steel, galvanised steel, aluminium, rubber, PLA, VR headset, 11.6-inch screen, 240 × 220 × 220 cm, 2021.
Photographer: Agnese Sanvito.



Thinking like a mountain, Iteration #2 (detail), VR game with headsets, polyester resin, stainless steel, galvanised steel, aluminium, rubber, PLA, VR headset, 11.6-inch screen, Variable dimensions, 2021.
Photographer: Reinis Lismanis.

TPG *Thinking like a mountain* began as a personal experiment, almost a paradox: attempting to digitise horticultural practices, where repetitive gestures and interactions with nature support well-being, something inherently material—soil, roots, stones—by translating it into a virtual environment. From the outset, I was aware that this tension between the physical and the digital was central to the work.

What I did not anticipate, however, was an additional therapeutic dimension. During the exhibition, a group of young visitors with neurodiverse conditions engaged with the piece. The simplicity of the gameplay—breaking down and reassembling rocks—proved remarkably accessible. The virtual reduction of the world to a few elemental actions created a calming experience. This unexpected response opened up the possibility of linking the work to additional therapeutic practices.

At the same time, the piece carries an echo of the myth of Sisyphus. The endless cycle of breaking and rebuilding stones evokes both futility and persistence. Yet rather than leaving the player alone in this task, the work also integrates a collective dimension: like an exquisite corpse, each participant can pick up where another left off, transforming the burden of repetition into a shared process of continuity.

NA Your project *Echoes from the wells* made me think of Boris Groys's text *The City in the Age of Touristic Reproduction*, in *Going Public* (Sternberg Press, 2010) where he writes: "If indeed anything of permanence exists in our cities, it is ultimately only to be found in such incessant preparations for the building of something that promises to last a long time; it is in the perpetual postponement of a final solution, the never-ending adjustments, the eternal repairs, and the constantly

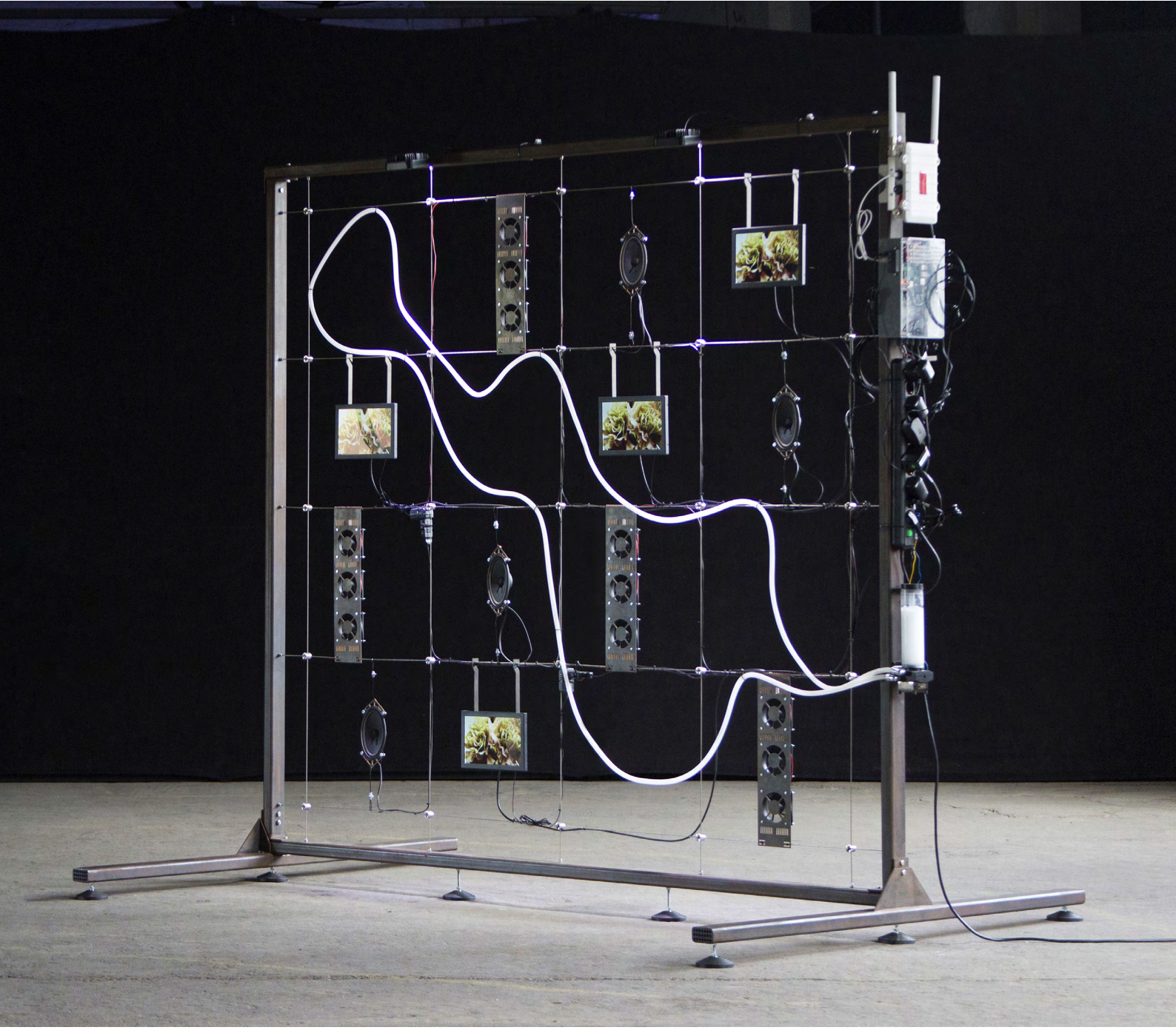
piecemeal adaptation to new constraints." Can you walk us through the process behind this work in relation to Groys's idea of "eternal repair"? Could this also connect to your other work, *Floral Automaton* (2017), which engages with "smart cities technologies"?

TPG In many ways, *Echoes from the wells* embodies my ambivalent relationship with technology: I don't embrace it uncritically, but I use it as a way of situating myself in the present. Much of my practice draws on older, folkloric, or even esoteric traditions, and this work was conceived as a kind of contemporary reimagining of the "fountain of youth". Instead of water, it works with sound, channelling the therapeutic symbolism of wells into an acoustic experiment.

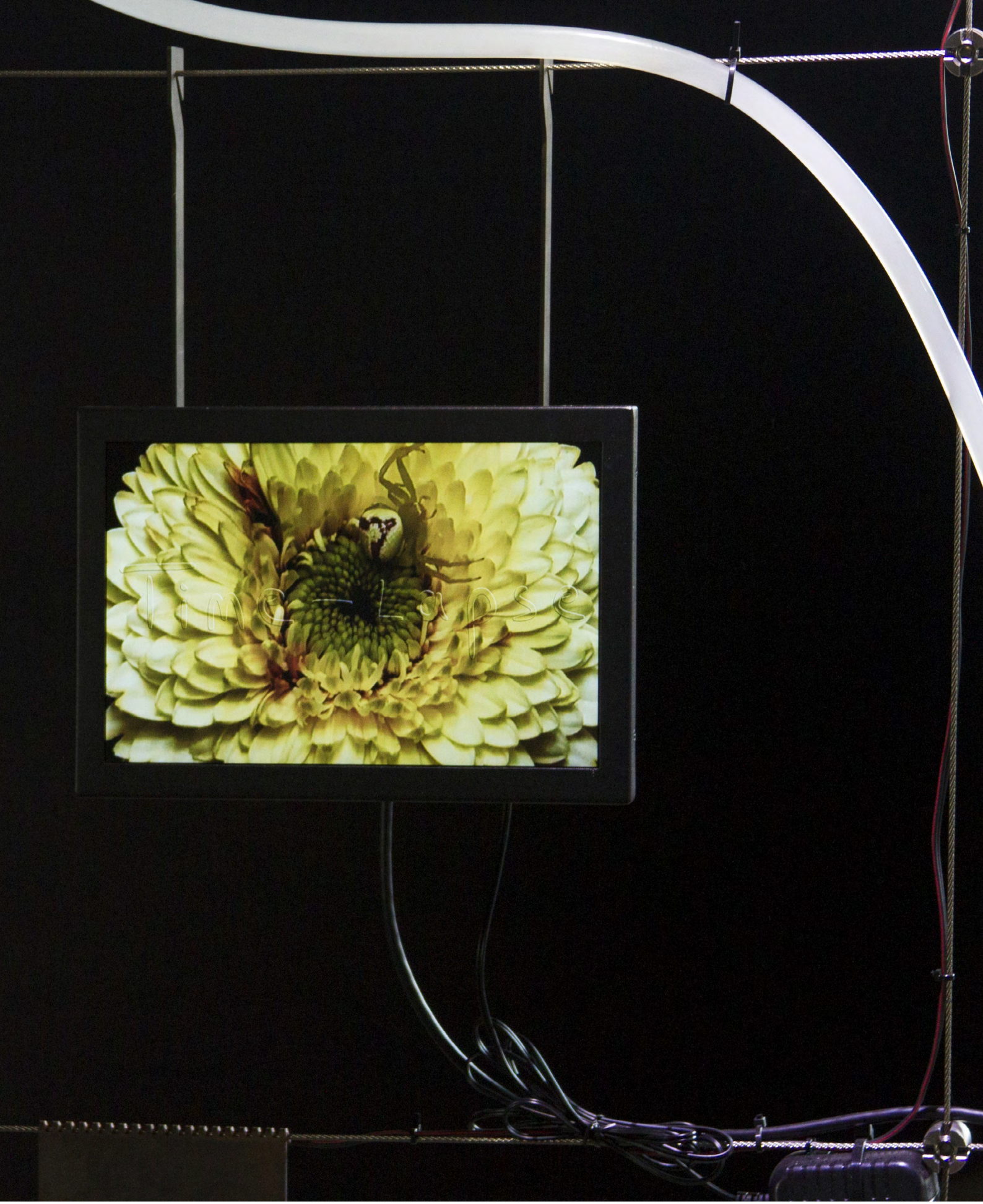
In this sense, the piece resonates with Boris Groys's idea of "eternal repair". Rather than producing permanence, cities are defined by endless maintenance, adjustment, and improvisation. My work tries to materialise this constant cycle of entropy and renewal—the paradox of labour that never ends, but also generates its own meaning.

This line of thought also connects to *Floral Automaton*, a more direct critique of "smart cities technologies". At the time, Internet of Things (IoT) sensors, which are small devices capable of collecting and exchanging data across a network, were still relatively clunky, and I used them to control a hybrid vegetal-digital wall where humidity, CO^2, light, and temperature levels dictated the activation of fans, floodlights, and water-cooling systems. When the conditions were right, digital plants bloomed on the installation's screens. The work questioned the fantasy of a seamlessly automated environment by revealing both its fragility and its absurdity.

Underlying both projects is a broader



Floral Automaton, Oxidised steel, polyethylene, galvanised steel wire rope, PVC tubes, acrylic, floodlights, distilled water, full range speakers, water pump, smart city sensors, computer fans, motor controller, single-board computer, video loop, 1 min 30 s, sound loop, 4 min 25 s, 240 × 220 × 220 cm, 2017.



Floral Automaton (detail), Oxidised steel, polyethylene, galvanised steel wire rope, PVC tubes, acrylic, floodlights, distilled water, full range speakers, water pump, smart city sensors, computer fans, motor controller, single-board computer, video loop, 1 min 30 s, sound loop, 4 min 25 s, 240 × 220 × 220 cm, 2017.

concern with automation and labour. If machines increasingly relieve us of daily routines, what do we do with the surplus of free time? Is the act of vacuuming—to take a banal example—merely a chore, or does it also serve as a mental reset, a rhythm that structures thought?

NA In *L'ami du feu* (2021) and *Ojo Rojo* (2023) we see encounters between nature and mechanical engines. In recent years, the material dimension of the virtual has become increasingly evident. For example, the (perhaps exaggerated) claim that every ChatGPT query requires half a litre of water to cool servers. How do you address this tension between immaterial technologies and their very physical infrastructures?

TPG Through my love of cable management. Most technologies are designed to conceal their infrastructures, such as the wires, chipboards, and controllers, but I prefer to bring them to the surface. My work emphasises that digital systems are never purely immaterial; they rely on very tangible architectures of hardware, logistics, and energy.

Even when I create video-based pieces, I usually design sculptural casings or supports, so the work remains anchored in the physical. In kinetic works like *L'ami du feu* or *Ojo Rojo*, I use digitally controlled mechanical movements that echo the everyday automatisms around us such as escalators, bus doors, and ventilation systems, turning them into sculptural gestures. It is my way of exposing the invisible labour that sustains supposedly seamless technologies.

The visible components in my installations also refer to custom hardware, subcultures and DIY practices that resist industrial standardisation. For me, this visibility is not only aesthetic but political—an homage to forms of technological hacking and upcycling that challenge the supply and demand logic imposed by manufacturers.

L'ami du feu (detail), Polyester resin, stone grit, oxidised steel, polylactic acid, copper powder, stepper motor, single-board computer, power supply, computer fans, push button, accelerometer, 11-inch screen and interface, video loop, 7 min, 90 × 24 × 19 cm, 2021.

By reconfiguring and reusing existing hardware, I try to celebrate a more resourceful and critical relationship to technology, one that acknowledges both its ingenuity and its cost.

Recently I became fascinated by microchip assembly competitions, where participants solder components under microscopes against the clock. These events are even streamed on Twitch, transforming an industrial skill into a kind of esports. It is mesmerising, but also paradoxical.

NA Yes, especially considering that in Europe or the US this becomes a playful competition, while in China or elsewhere workers actually perform the same task under intense time pressure, often underpaid, to produce chips at industrial speed.

TPG Exactly. It is a form of labour tourism. I thought of it in relation to other examples too, like advertisements for grape harvesting in France that turned out not to be jobs at all but experiences people had to pay for. What is a grueling necessity in one context becomes a spectacle or a hobby in another. That tension fascinates me and often finds its way into my work.

NA In your series of public performances *Here, We, Go* (2016-2021) you guide audiences through a six-stage process to remotely visualise a distant site. As a sculptor, do you think of performance as a kind of "fourth dimension" of art in relation to space—painting as two-dimensional, sculpture as three-dimensional, installation as 3D in space, and performance as human movement within space? How does this resonate with other aspects of your practice?

TPG For me, the performance in *Here, We, Go* (2016-2021) was mainly a way of making my sculptural work more accessible. My installations, with their exposed cables and complex setups, can leave people unsure if they are meant to interact with them. In this project, the performative element

Here, We, Go (detail), ABS, powder coated steel, chromed aluminium, coated aluminium, acrylic, polyethylene, galvanised wire rope, polyurethane foam, faux leather, MDF, vinyl, rubber, motor controllers, DC and stepper motors, smartphones and tablet, Variable dimensions, 2016-2021.
Photographer: Charlotte Robin.

Here, We, Go (detail), ABS, powder coated steel, chromed aluminium, coated aluminium, acrylic, polyethylene, galvanised wire rope, polyurethane foam, faux leather, MDF, vinyl, rubber, motor controllers, DC and stepper motors, smartphones and tablet, Variable dimensions, 2016-2021.
Photographer: Charlotte Robin.

activated the sculptures and invited direct participation. So yes, I see it as another dimension, but more as a performative layer than performance in the theatrical sense.

NA I sometimes feel that performance in the art world lacks specificity. On one side, there are representational performances rooted in theater and the body as sculptural material; on the other, performances where movement simply activates objects or environments. Many artists, of course, navigate across these categories.

TPG Exactly. I would describe what I did less as "performance" and more as a "performative act". The sculptures themselves were already probing the body's possibilities; my role was to guide audiences into that process, not to stage a theatrical event. In that sense, it was closer to a workshop than a performance.

To explain: the project was based on a six-stage process adapted from *controlled remote viewing*, a technique developed in the 1960s by artists and researchers interested in telepathy. I guided participants through a sequence of meditation, visualisation, and interaction with the sculptures. At the end, they could share the images they had envisioned, creating a collective moment of exchange.

So yes, perhaps it was less a performance in the conventional sense and more an experimental workshop. And maybe that term feels less pretentious, but also truer to the intention.

NA Let's turn to your current project *Valley* (working title) (2025), a solo show you are preparing for the gallery Xxijra Hii, which dissolves the boundaries between sensory perception, architectural form, and environmental data, and reflects on London's perpetual construction sites. Does the temporary title "Valley" also nod to the "uncanny valley"—the unsettling gap between resemblance and difference—and if so, how?

Ojo Rojo, Video still, Single-channel video, 16 min 50 s, 2023.

TPG That is a really interesting parallel. Honestly, I hadn't consciously thought of the uncanny valley, but it works quite well.

The project actually began as a continuation of my previous work, *Ojo Rojo*, which explored horizons and how environments shape our sense of belonging. I have long been interested in how we form an immediate impression of a place—whether we feel drawn to it or repelled by it—before we can rationalise why. Later, of course, we can analyse it: the light, the acoustics, the architecture. But the first impression is almost ineffable.

In researching this, I came across René Daumal's *Mount Analogue*, a novel originally published in 1932 about a mythical, invisible mountain, a metaphor for humanity's eternal quest for transcendence. Growing up in a valley myself, I was struck by the symbolism of mountains as bridges between the material and the spiritual, something the philosopher Mircea Eliade also discusses.

Rather than seeking an external mount analogue through a physical quest, I decided to construct my own version here in London—a mountain shaped from the city's raw material. In *Valley*, I work with environmental data such as light, air, and sound to create an installation that captures this ongoing tension: the search for transcendence within an urban landscape that feels perpetually under construction.

So yes, the title *Valley* holds that double resonance: my own biographical valley, the metaphorical valley as a site of passage and becoming, and now, as you suggested, the uncanny valley—that space of discomfort between familiarity and strangeness.

NA Finally, a big and open-ended question: in your view, how could London become a better city for its residents?

YouKnow, Documentation of the filming process, 2019.
Photographer: Amina Bihi.

TPG That's a big one. I don't know if it is my role to say how London should be, but I would certainly hope for a better quality of life. What I find compelling about living here is precisely that the city is never "finished". There is always something to debate, rearrange, or reimagine.

If I had to single out one issue, though, it would be commuting. London is so rich, full of small pockets and micro-communities, but they often become inaccessible. At the RCA, many of us started living centrally, but over the years we were pushed further and further outwards. By zone 3 or 4, you stop seeing people, and your world shrinks. You can live in one of the most cosmopolitan cities in the world and still experience only a tiny fragment of it. If the city could make these pockets more accessible, if commuting were less exhausting and more fluid, then perhaps its diversity could truly be lived on a daily basis.

NA I must cite again Boris Groys, who wrote: "Traditionally, cities isolated themselves from the rest of the world in order to make their own way into the future. A genuine city is not only utopian, it is also anti-tourist. It dissociates itself from space as it moves through time." He gives examples like Jerusalem or Lhasa, where cities became pilgrimage sites accessible only through devotion. So when you speak of commuting and accessibility, it resonates: perhaps London's fragmentation is not just accidental, but also a kind of intentional isolation—a way of defining who belongs to the "centre".

TPG And what fascinates me is that London operates differently from somewhere like Paris. Paris is a hyper-centralised bubble: elitist, tightly defined, everything revolving around the centre. London doesn't quite work that way. Those who succeed here often move out to the countryside, taking their wealth with them. The city itself becomes the factory, the place where labour and culture are produced, while the benefits are reaped elsewhere.

Cat's Paws, Resin, single-board computer, TFT display, Li-ion battery, video loop, 3 min 41 s, 10 × 13 × 8 cm, 2024.

Thomas Pellerey Grogan, Figure Figure 2025
Courtesy of the artist.

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