

Markers of Somatic Experiences and their Hybrid Approaches

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[See table of contents](#)

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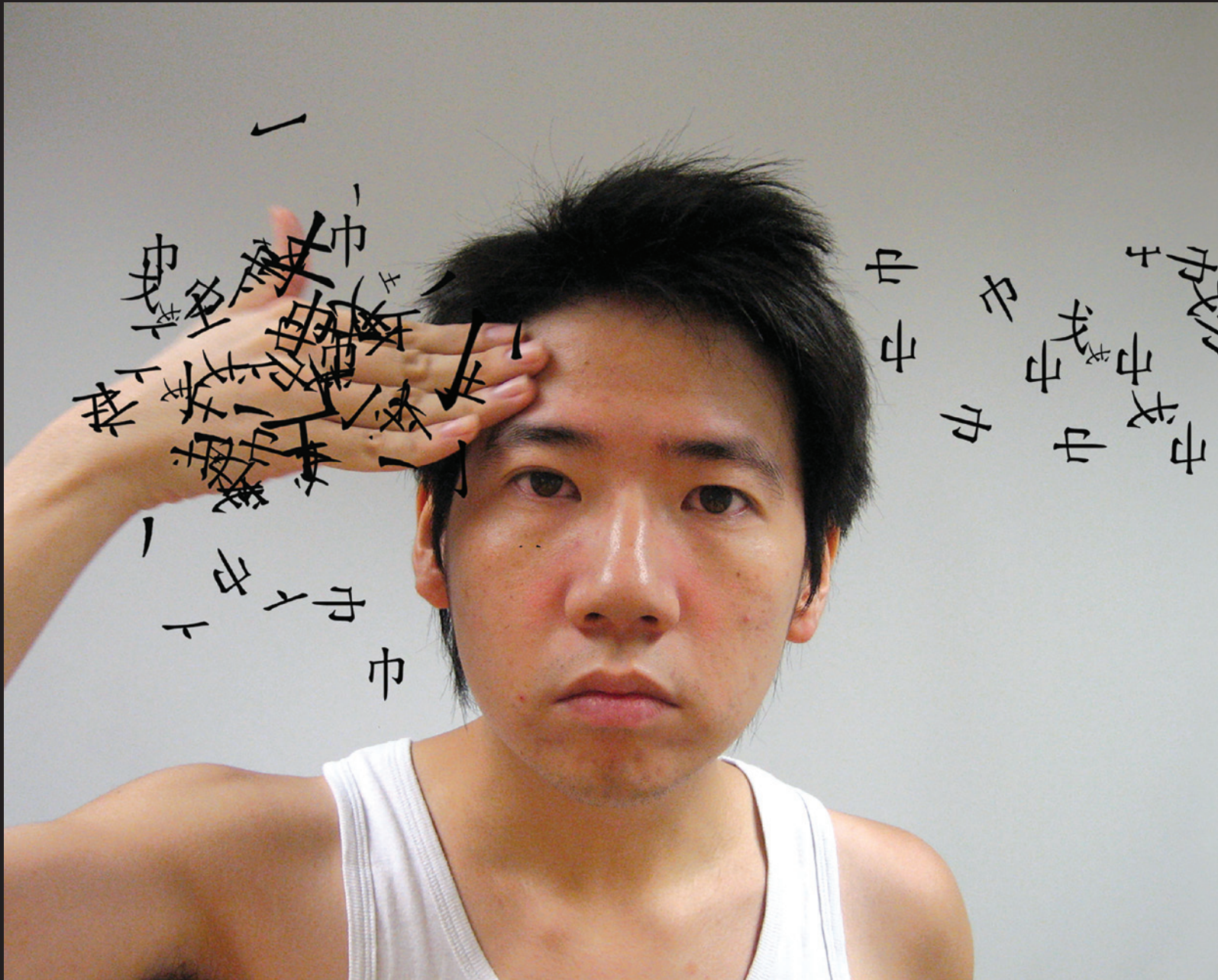
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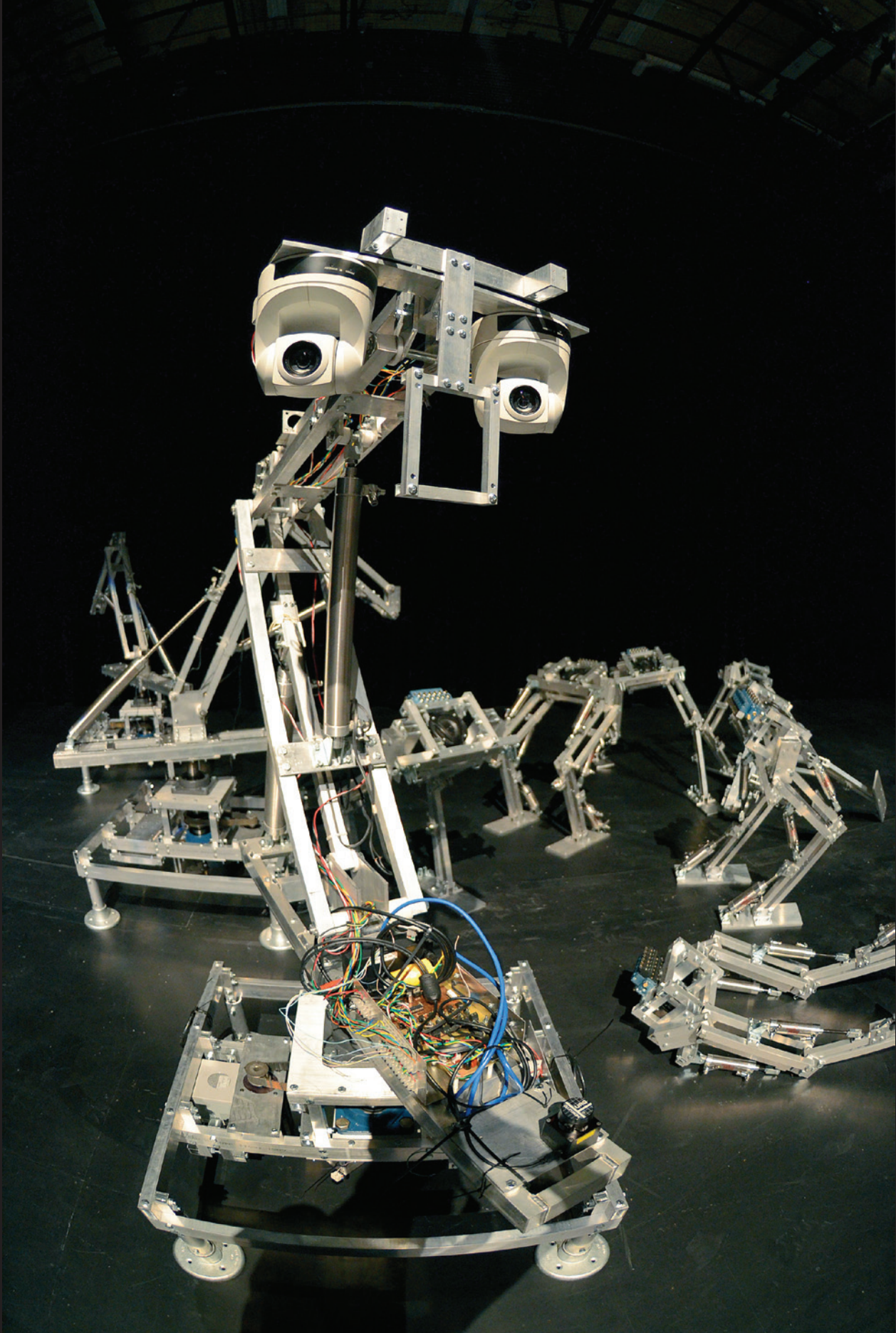


*Markers of
Somatic Experiences*



Hung Keung, *Bloated City & Skinny Language (Version II)*. Hong Kong Museum of Art, Hong Kong. © Photo: imhk lab.

*and Their
Hybrid Approaches*



Bill Vorn, *DSM-VI*, 2012. Prototypes. Photo: B. Vorn.

As matrices of sensation or transmitters of somatic experiences, some artworks plunge viewers into unforgettable, multisensory encounters. Often described as visceral, coming from bodily responses, either emotional or corporal in nature, these phenomena imply “not just the process of thinking bodily but how the body informs the logic of thinking about art”² in the setting of an exhibition. These artworks emphasize the individual’s experiential role, as well as the physical engagement evoked by materiality and sensoriality. All the details of an artwork chart the road to perception by capturing reality and the essence of the sensible itself, as demonstrated by the anthropologist François Laplantine.³ Thus, contemporary artists have developed countless strategies to derive this responsiveness, and some of them have found ways to bring it to new levels of complexity. This is the case for the four artists I invited to be part of this feature section, Bill Vorn (Montreal), Byeong Sam Jeon (Seoul), Félicie d’Estienne d’Orves (Paris), and Hung Keung (Hong Kong).

I first experienced *La Cour des Miracles*, the spectacular robotic art installation created by Bill Vorn and Louis-Philippe Demers, at the Musée d’art contemporain de Montréal in 1997. I will always remember the deep pity and sorrow triggered in visitors by the incredible, ponderous, metallic, and noisy machine-creatures. Since then, Vorn has never failed to surprise us with innovative and provocative robot universes, which have always been engaging and, somehow, disturbing. His sculptures, composed of cold aluminum bars, roughly cut and assembled with nuts and bolts, engage with visitors’ emotions.

People associate themselves with everything they resemble and respond to anything that mirrors their reactions. From the legend of the golem to Leonardo da Vinci’s mechanical knight, the human figure has long been used to facilitate communication. In art, the representation of the human body eases the expression of emotions, often bringing viewers closer to their perceptions of themselves. However, with Vorn’s machines, spectators project themselves onto the meticulously programmed behaviour of his sculptures. As Vorn writes, “the automaton [is] a mirror that fascinates us and makes us see ourselves differently.”⁴

While using a different approach, Byeong Sam Jeon also creates catalysts of sensation. In a recent study of brain scans at Carnegie Mellon University, researchers confirmed: “Each medium creates a different sensory and somatic experience and develops different circuits in the brain.”⁵ Through collections of familiar objects, Jeon’s installations give viewers the sense of being members of a group, of being a bodily part of the entire work. The quantity and type of objects he selects and the symbols and messages hidden behind each medium create the effect. For instance, in his installation titled *Beautifully*, he choreographed the opening and closure of 1000 umbrellas as if he was manipulating a grid of pixels.⁶ In another work, he collected 500 000 compact discs from around the world and installed them on the facade of an abandoned factory. At night, this historical building mutates into a giant video screen. Byeong Sam Jeon emphasizes the voluntary simplicity of his art and unveils the essence of his practice, which grows out of his personal history and remains grounded in it at the same time.

Offering a similar immersive experience to Jeon but in an alternative manner, Félicie d’Estienne d’Orves completely rematerializes the interaction between bodies and video interfaces. Her installations remodel our physical and sensory experiences, revealing the interconnectedness of mind and body, and temporality and spatiality. In 1690, the philosopher John Locke first published a report concerning a blind man who associated sensations across different sensory modalities. Today, processing one sense through another is known as synaesthesia. Numerous artists throughout history have explored the psychological, perceptual, and emotional influences of synaesthesia. D’Estienne d’Orves brings something new to this by fusing, in a particular way, the sensations that arise from sound and light. For example, for her installation titled *GONG*, she invites visitors to sit on a spe-

cial platform placed in front of a giant aluminum disk used as a video screen. The vibrations, sound, and light bring the visitor into another dimension, giving the illusion of weightlessness. The experience is spectacular. According to art curator Kathleen Forde, the new generation of artists is responding to the sensory overload in our modern society and using technology in a way “that heightens our perception of the perception itself.”⁷ D’Estienne d’Orves uses “scientific data as a tool of composition” and presents us with what she calls “a core” of the universe.⁸ Also exploring the origin of the universe, Hung Keung revisits ancient Chinese concepts using today’s technology. The strong visual and conceptual aspects of his work and the way he incorporates cultural traditions with digital technology are unique. In response to the omnipresence of video and computer screens, many artists and writers have theorized about the screen’s sensorial effects on people’s perception of the world. According to art critic Françoise Parfait, video installations can be defined by the relationships between the artistic act and the space of representation.⁹ In the case of Keung’s work titled *Dao Gives Birth to One*, the video is presented in the form of a large scroll. Keung explains that he translated the philosophy of Tao (*Dao*) and calligraphy in the work and projected this into four dimensions, while trying “to visualize the cycling vigour of *Dao*.”¹⁰

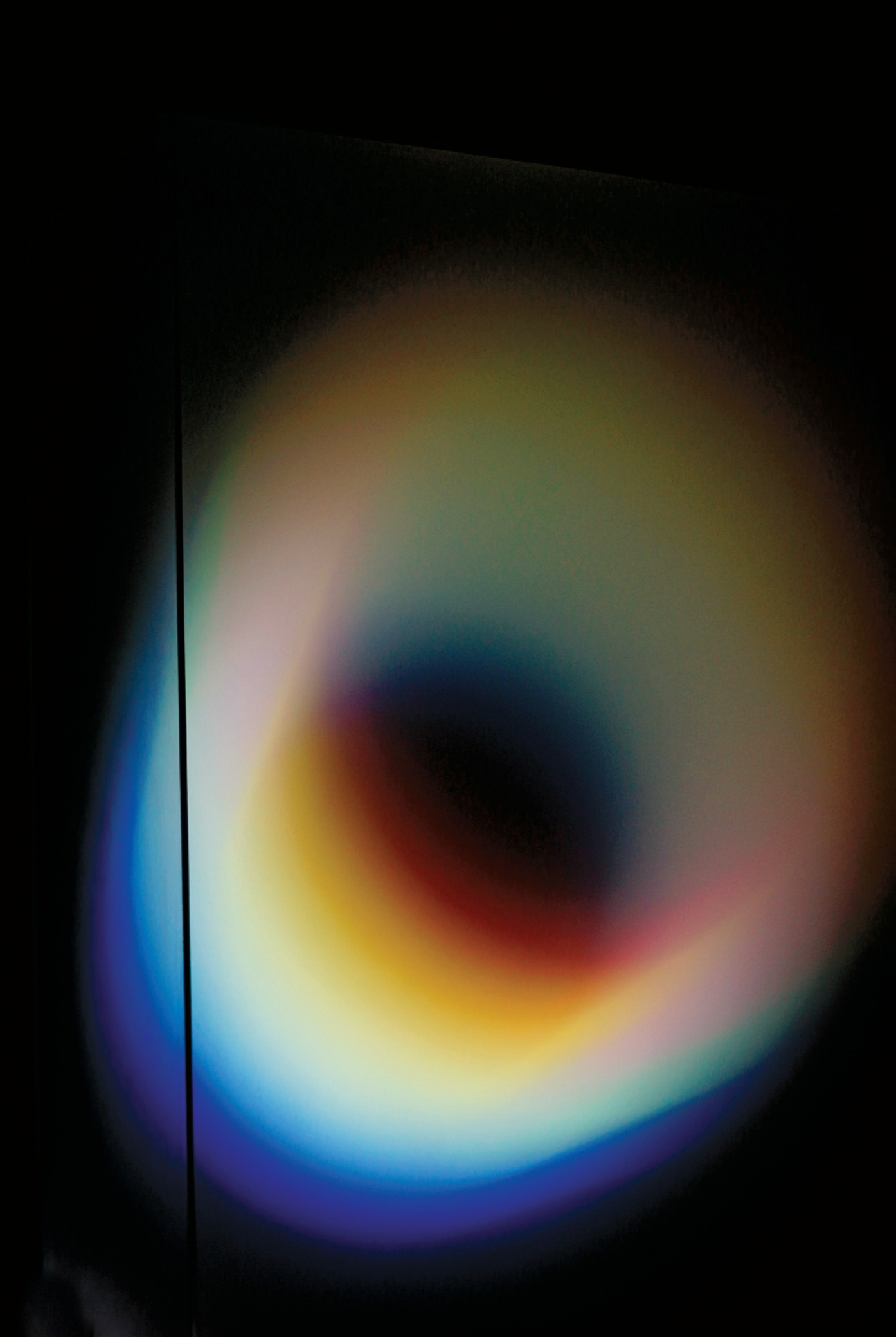
Media artists incorporate virtual dimensions conceptually, so that a work’s materiality expands the representational space, its physical space, and its temporal possibilities. When they share their insight into their hybrid approaches and research in digital arts, the audience can better understand their practices and how they engage visitors in the work. At a later point, it may become necessary to look at how the audience itself modifies the output, and how an individual’s sensory profile, which is culturally constructed, can change over time as the senses themselves are stimulated differently today.

In the era of so-called intelligent materials, these four artists have pushed the limits, conceptually and physically, while keeping the technology in their work almost invisible, or somehow irrelevant—a set of tools, nothing more. In the following pages, these artists share, in their own words, insights into their creative processes, inspiration, and methodologies. In this feature section, the reader will find a rare moment of intimacy with these artists, in which the details of their artistic practices are unveiled, and in their own way.

Philomène Longpré

Philomène Longpré is a media artist whose research encompasses robotic art, interactive video, and performance. Since 1999, she has developed fifteen responsive art systems that translate body language while exploring the interaction between the physical and virtual worlds. She holds an MFA in Art and Technology Studies from the School of the Art Institute of Chicago and a PhD in the Study and Practice of Digital Arts from the INDI Program at Concordia University, where she carried out research on matrix of sensations. (www.philox.net)

- 1 Pierre-Jean-Georges Cabanis, *Rapports du physique et du moral de l’homme* (Paris: Crapelet, 1802).
- 2 Annamma Joy and John F. Sherry, “Speaking of Art as Embodied Imagination: A Multisensory Approach to Understanding Aesthetic Experience” *The Journal of Consumer Research* 30.2 (September 2003): 259–282.
- 3 François Laplantine, *Le social et le sensible: Introduction à une anthropologie modale* (Paris: Éditions Téraèdre, 2005), 81–85.
- 4 Bill Vorn, “It’s Alive! Or the Fascination with the Automaton as Creative Tool” (2016).
- 5 Norman Doidge, *The Brain That Changes Itself* (London: Penguin Books, 2007), 308.
- 6 Byeong Sam Jeon, “Revisiting the Social Conventions of Everyday Objects” (2016).
- 7 Kathleen Forde, *What Sound Does a Color Make?* (New York: Independent Curators International, 2005).
- 8 Félicie d’Estienne d’Orves, “Les limites observables” (2016).
- 9 Françoise Parfait, *Vidéo: Un art contemporain* (Paris: Éditions du Regard, 2001), 160–163.
- 10 Hung Keung, “Traditional Chinese Ideas of Time and Space Applied to Art: *Dao Gives Birth to One*” (2016).



Félicie D'Estienne D'Orves,
Supernova, Cassiopée A, 2011.
Video projection on smoke in a
plexiglass case.
Music by Laurent Dailleau. (Prod.:
Maison des Arts de Créteil, Arcadi).
© Photo: Matthieu Kavyrchine.



Byeong Sam Jeon, *○*, 2016. Kinetic sculpture, Gimpo International Airport in Seoul, Korea.