

FICTIONS OF PRESENCE

Lee Blalock / Abram Stern / Chelsea Thompto / Xiaowei R. Wang

Curated by Dorothy R. Santos

September 14 - December 14, 2024
Opening Reception: September 14, 5-8pm

/ (Slash) 1150 25th St, Building B, San Francisco
Open Thursday-Saturday, 11am-6pm



Xiaowei R. Wang, *An Archive of Witch Fever* (detail), 2023
Mixed media (fabric, clay, stainless steel conductive
thread, human hair, fermenting indigo), dimensions variable

Fictions of presence play a fundamental role in everyday conversation in physical space. The advent of instantaneous transmission and feedback have simply made them more available to the mechanized transmission of culture. As a result, we are increasingly immersed inside a world of images—acoustic, iconic, and kinesthetic—capable of interacting with us and even directing our lives in the here-and-now, or rather, since the advent of instant decompression and processing via computer, in virtual space and “real time.”

—Margaret Morse, Ph.D., excerpt from *Virtualities: Television, Media Art, and Cyberculture*

Fictions of Presence is a group exhibition of works by artists who explore the mediation of the physical world and history through digital and analog

technologies, including optical character recognition, generative adversarial networks, physical computing, and internet-based experiences. As individuals, each artist leaves it up to the viewer to find personal resonances with the fictions they have created. As a collective, this show reveals how realities and truths can be found in speculative narratives, no matter how obfuscated they are.

This exhibition serves as a continuation of the curatorial work I have done with Dr. Heather Dewey-Hagborg in our ongoing dialogue about how our present experiences and knowledge production motivate artists to refigure the future by creating work, scholarship, and research practices that expose a multitude of lineages and slippages that often erase and neglect vital narratives. *Fictions of Presence* serves as a platform for the artists to explore how the development of algorithmic systems, machines, and software can be used to create alternative modes of presence. The opportunity to bring these artists together at / (Slash) and have their works in dialogue is a continuation of the shapeshifting, morphing, and mediation of complex ideas related to colonialism, hyper(in)visibility, translation, and loss.

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Through the intentional use of speculative botany and generative adversarial networks (GANs), **Dr. Xiaowei R. Wang** creates a multi-dimensional series of textile pieces modeled after clothing worn by plantation workers in the 18th century. The botanical patterns in *Witch Fever* (2023-present) are made with an out-of-the-box neural network that is then fed archival images of colonial plantations traversing Southeast Asia, the Pacific Islands, and the region known as Oceania. While the visual language of imperial botany inspires Wang, they also question the relationship between beauty, violence, and imperialism. Their contemporaneous re-telling involves what they refer to as "queer computing" and looking outside of time in a nonlinear fashion we might be accustomed to, such as the 24-hour news cycle or circadian rhythms. By using textiles to showcase this history, the artist also points to how the thread is spun to create data storage that melds and decays as ways of examining our conceptions of archives, memories, and sense of place in what Wang calls "an intimate geography across time."

Government-produced media, metadata, and (il)legibility are a mere fraction of the ideas central to the creative and research practices of **Dr. Abram Stern**. Their durational internet-based work *operational character rendition* (2015-present) performs optical character recognition (OCR) as a way to (mis)read unsearchable and low-resolution documents published by the United States Senate Select Committee on Intelligence (SSCI). Stern wrote software that performs document analysis using multiple dictionaries, including one with a list of American English words used for spell check functions and another with watchwords used by the Department of Homeland Security (DHS) analysts. To add another layer of detection and (mis)recognition, Stern takes into account the Damerau-Levenshtein distance, a concept in information theory and computer science used to measure the number of operations required to transform one word into another. For example, *intelligence* and *negligence* have a "distance" of 3. The ongoing

transmissions performed by the software challenge the viewer to question the increasing fiction(s) created by the machine's reading of highly sensitive material.

In her work *aguerraA* (2023-present), **Lee Blalock** focuses on how the process of (de)embodiment occurs through death. She is driven and fascinated by what she calls a 0(zero)body, a concept which she explores through her practice. In this installation, she creates an ecosystem where the element of water serves as, in her words, "a symbol of immersive and fluid virtuality." Through physical computing, organic resources, and various synthetic materials, Blalock programs the work to reveal a poem that "leaves this sun with hope for another" and changes as the elements affect the work over time. While death is often equated to a loss of physical body, for Blalock, it is instead an opportunity to transition into another realm of becoming and returning to the elements. The presence of a loved one transforms through a form(at) that becomes, as Morse reminds us in the world of images, iconic. By processing a natural and inevitable experience of the human condition through the metaphoric transformation of water, we might begin to understand the mediation of death through the repetition of movements and gestures by the machine and its parts.

Fog as a weather condition has often been transformed as a metaphor for (in)visibility in popular media or even as an obstruction to machine vision in military theater. **Chelsea Thompto** plays with what she sees as an aspirational idea of trans embodiment and morphologies in reenvisioning fog as a means for understanding and transformation as opposed to obfuscation or hindrance. It serves as another possibility of trans presence. In *Self Portrait as Fog* (2024), Thompto melts down a bronze nude self portrait she created in 2015 as a way of (re)presenting herself in another shapeshifting form(at). In *Fog Pill* (2022), her work of speculative fiction and biological invention, she turns "sweat glands into fog producing glands" as a "form of visual resistance, personal expression, and potentially rehabilitate restoration." In her latest intervention, *Protocols for Obscurity* (2024), an artist book and work of gameplay that comes from her exploration into scientific documentation entitled *Fog Series*, she provokes individual and collective imagining as new ways of being.

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The works in ***Fictions of Presence*** are meant to reflect the spectrum of how bodies are understood and mediated through space, time, language, and speculative worlds and imaginings. This exhibition serves as a way for Blalock, Stern, Thompto, and Wang's artworks to be in conversation about how we understand how evidentiary proof of phantasms and illusions suggest presence in ways we least expect. Each artist foregrounds the stories and narratives of what has been lost, misread, and obscured.

- Dorothy R. Santos

Fictions of Presence, curated by Dorothy R. Santos, is the fifteenth in a series of exhibitions at / (Slash), each organized by an independent Bay Area-based curator.

The exhibition is generously supported by The Andy Warhol Foundation for the Visual Arts.

Dorothy R. Santos (she/they) is a Filipino American writer, artist, and scholar. She earned her Ph.D. in Film and Digital Media with a designated emphasis in Computational Media from the University of California, Santa Cruz as a Eugene Cota-Robles fellow. She received her Master's degree in Visual and Critical Studies at the California College of the Arts and holds Bachelor's degrees in Philosophy and Psychology from the University of San Francisco. She is an Assistant Teaching Professor in the Art Department and Principal Founding Faculty for the Creative Technologies Program at the University of California, Santa Cruz. Her creative and research interests include voice recognition, speech technologies, assistive tech, radio, sound production, feminist media histories, critical medical anthropology, race, and gender. Her work has been exhibited at Ars Electronica, Rewire Festival, Fort Mason Center for Arts & Culture, Yerba Buena Center for the Arts, Southern Exposure, the Natalie and James Thompson Gallery, and the GLBT Historical Society. Her writing appears in *Art21*, *Art in America*, *Ars Technica*, *Hyperallergic*, *Rhizome*, *Slate*, and *Vice Motherboard*.

Lee Blalock (she/her) is a Chicago-based artist, 80D1punk, and educator presenting alternative and hyphenated states of being through technology-mediated processes. Interested in how technologies support the idea of impossible anatomies, behaviors, and performances, her work is an exercise in body modification by way of amplified behavior or "change-of-state". Lee's interests include embodied cognition, anatomy and biomechanics, bionics, mechatronics, human/non-human entanglement, and computational abstraction. She has presented work domestically, internationally, and virtually at many institutions including Feral File, Ars Electronica, the Wrong Biennale, NYU Abu Dhabi Art Gallery, Experimental Sound Studio (Chicago), ICA (Philadelphia), 205 Hudson Gallery (NY), and the Art Institute of Chicago. Lee is an Associate Professor in the Art & Technology/Sound Practices Department at the School of the Art Institute of Chicago and practices various forms of embodiment as an everyday athlete.

Abram Stern (they/he) is an artist and scholar whose work builds upon collections of government-produced media and metadata. They interrogate the material produced by public bureaucracies and the infrastructures that mediate our experiences of them. Their work has been published in *Media-N: Journal of the New Media Caucus* and *Information Polity* and their projects and collaborations have been exhibited at the ICA at Maine College of Art &

Design, Real Art Ways, New Langton Arts, and other fora. They hold a Bachelor's degree in Digital Media from the San Francisco Art Institute, a Master of Fine Arts in Digital Art and New Media and a Ph.D. in Film and Digital Media from the University of California, Santa Cruz.

Chelsea Thompto (she/her) is a transdisciplinary artist and educator working at the intersections of art, trans studies, and technology. Her research-based studio practice spans a variety of media which often include code, video, sound, writing, and sculpture and her work has been shown nationally and internationally. Born and raised in Iowa, she has spent most of her life between the Midwest and California and is now an Assistant Professor of Creative Technologies at Virginia Tech. She serves as the Executive Editor of *Media-N: Journal of the New Media Caucus*. She received an MFA in 4D Art and an MA in Gender and Women's Studies from the University of Wisconsin, Madison.

Xiaowei R. Wang (they/them) is an artist, writer, organizer, and coder. They are the author of the book *Blockchain Chicken Farm: And Other Stories of Tech In China's Countryside*, a 2023 National Book Foundation Science and Literature Award winner, and New York Times Editor's Choice. Their multidisciplinary work over the past 15 years sits at the intersection of tech, digital media, art, and environmental justice. As of 2023, they are one of the stewards of Collective Action School (formerly known as Logic School), an organizing community for tech workers, a faculty member at ELISAVA's Master in Design for Responsible AI, and a Postdoctoral Scholar at the Center on Race and Digital Justice.

/ **(Slash)** is a nonprofit visual art space founded in 2018 to advance and promote the expanding field of contemporary art in San Francisco through exhibitions, publications, and public programming.