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Femi Shonuga-Fleming: Experimental sound, visceral music, and organic generativeness.

by Eduardo Mautner
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"I want my work to be generative and I want it to provoke emotion within people."

Femi Shonuga-Fleming

RISD

BArch ; Architecture

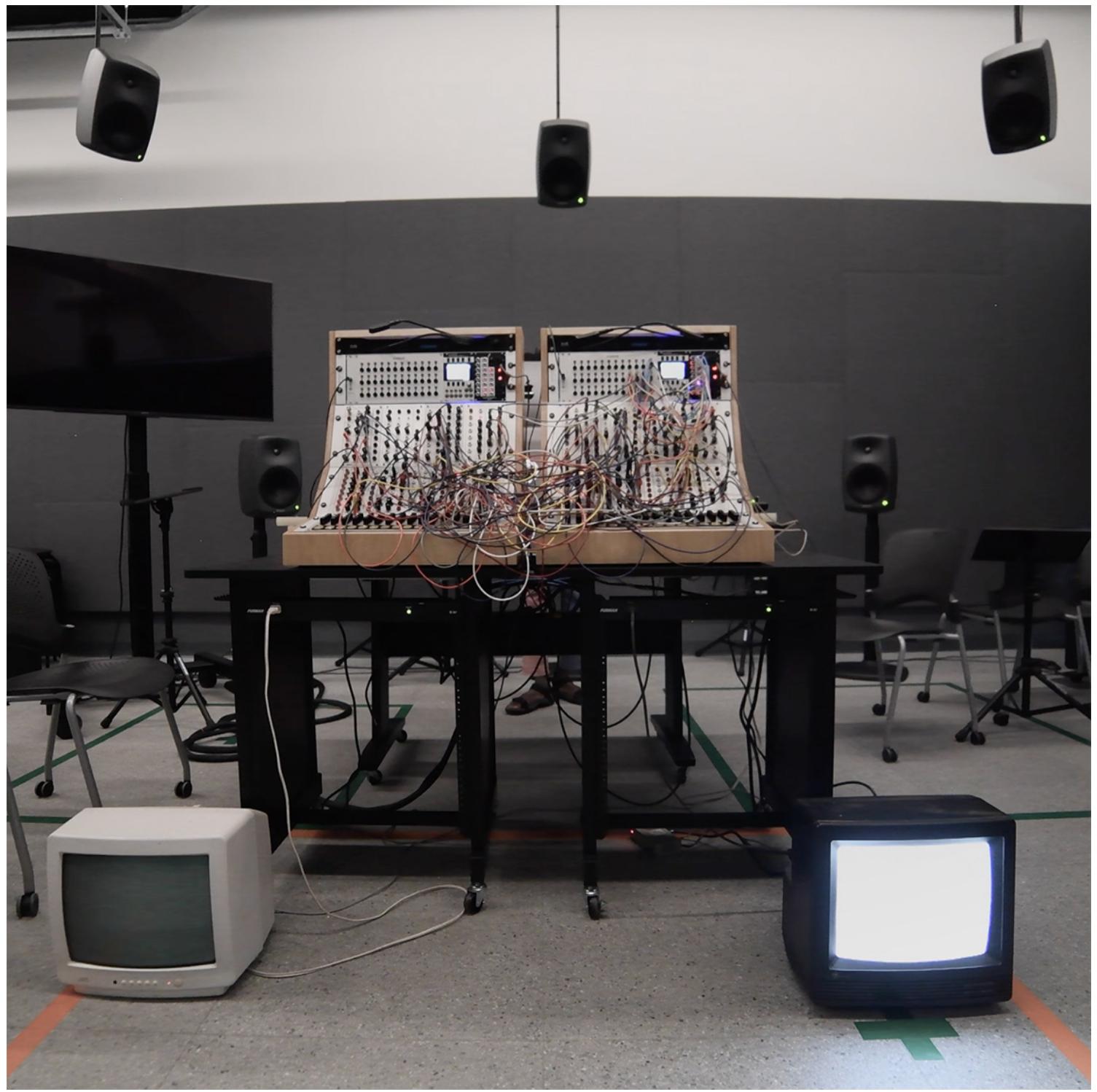
Class of 2023

Spotify:
Sadnoise

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YouTube:
Femi Fleming



Ifemiwale Shonuga-Fleming works with modular synthesizers, DIY electronics and various coding languages to discuss the organic within electronics and technology through sound art and composition. His work explores the intersections of sound

and space through spatial audio and architectural design as an experimental practice. He is most interested in generative systems, chance and synthesized organic textures within sonic soundscapes. Femi is currently studying architecture and creative computation at RISD.



Femi Shonuga-Fleming, demo video.

Eduardo Mautner

02:07

EM: What is your biggest creativity related interest at the moment?

Femi: Creative, I would say my biggest creative interest is sound design, really. I do a lot of music stuff under the name Sad Noise. It's like my music alias or whatever. But I've been interested in working with a lot of synthesizers and like making DIY synthesizers and electronics and stuff to play around with designing sound. And I've been trying to figure out an overlap between sound design and architecture because

I'm an architecture major. So I've been looking into like acoustics. Haven't started exploring acoustics yet but I worked with Spatial Audio which is like- most audio that we listen to is like stereo type - one left channel and one right. And spatial audio is like multichannel. So if you have an array of speakers, say you have like 25 speakers and like a dome you can work with them sending sound to certain speakers and like spatializing audio.

EM: Are you involved in the CTC (Computation Technology and Culture) class as well?

Femi: Yeah, I'm in CTC, so yeah, just experimenting with sound design with various things. Working with synthesizers. I Also work with live coding environments. Like there's Max MSP which is like a node based visual language where each object in it can do different things. So it's also modular in a sense and you can create chains of objects to do things for you and make audio that way.

EM: Wow, that sounds really cool. And where do you get inspiration. Do you have any artist, designer or musician that really inspires you?

Femi: Yeah, there's this guy most recently, it always fluctuates because I listen to so much music, but most recently this guy Floating Points. Yeah, he's really good. I think he used to be a neurosurgeon but his stuff is really inspiring because in his music there's a lot of both very clear choices in the composition as to how you want to compose a song. Like there's a rise and then there's a bass drop or whatever, but there's also randomness and like generativeness in certain aspects which I think comes from his interest in jazz a lot. So there's elements that are sparse and random and there's also synthesizers that are attached in really interesting ways. And that's another big thing about me making music. I like how you can get structure but then you can also get random. You can really tone in on how much random is in a song or how much generativeness you want to put into a project. And I think the idea of something being generative is really important to my work. I like when I can design things that generate themselves.

Femi: Like, a lot of my music is based off of like, I start somewhere and then I push it

to a point where it's just making sounds on its own and then that's like, organic. And I like how organic a sound can get and that's why I'm interested in sound design a lot. So yeah, Floating Points is awesome. All this stuff is really good. Most recently he puts out just like techno bangers. They're all just like, classic house stuff but it still has such emotional feel to it. A lot of it is like, well, that's all house music too, has a really emotional feel. But it's just like he's really minimalist about the way he does it. And recently it's just been like a minimalist, like, half song with a bass line and vocals and drums and that's it. Which is really almost archival in a way. It's like thinking about house music and the evolution of house music over time and what the fundamentals are. So he's being really true to the genre.

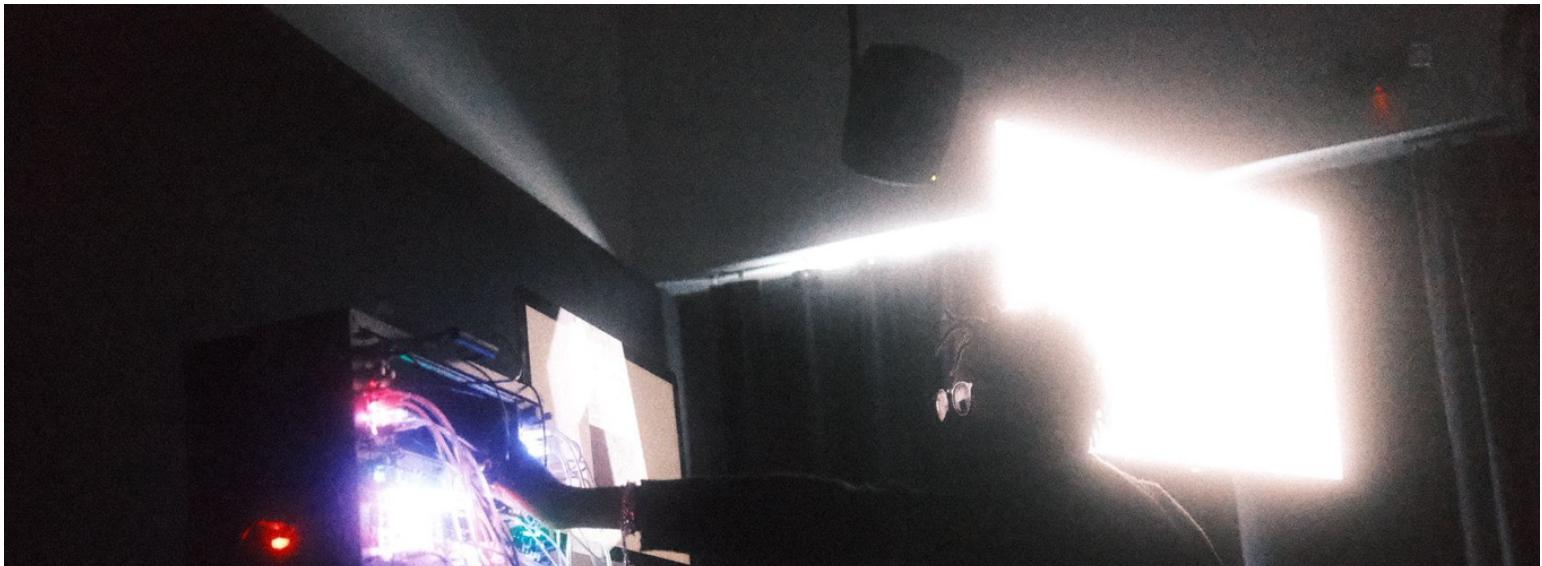
EM: I love this crazy- I don't understand anything about synthesizers, but it's like I see your videos and they're like, crazy.

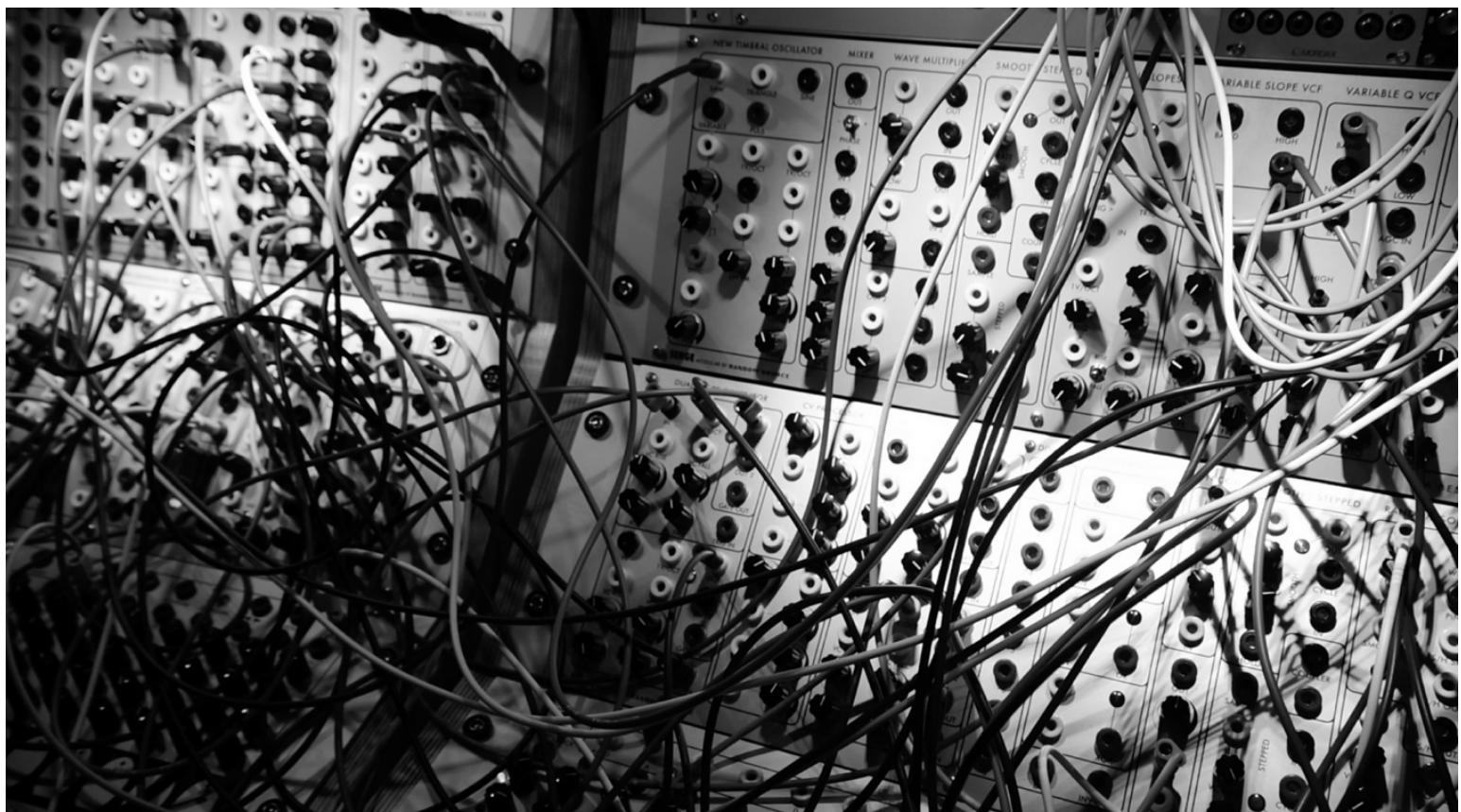
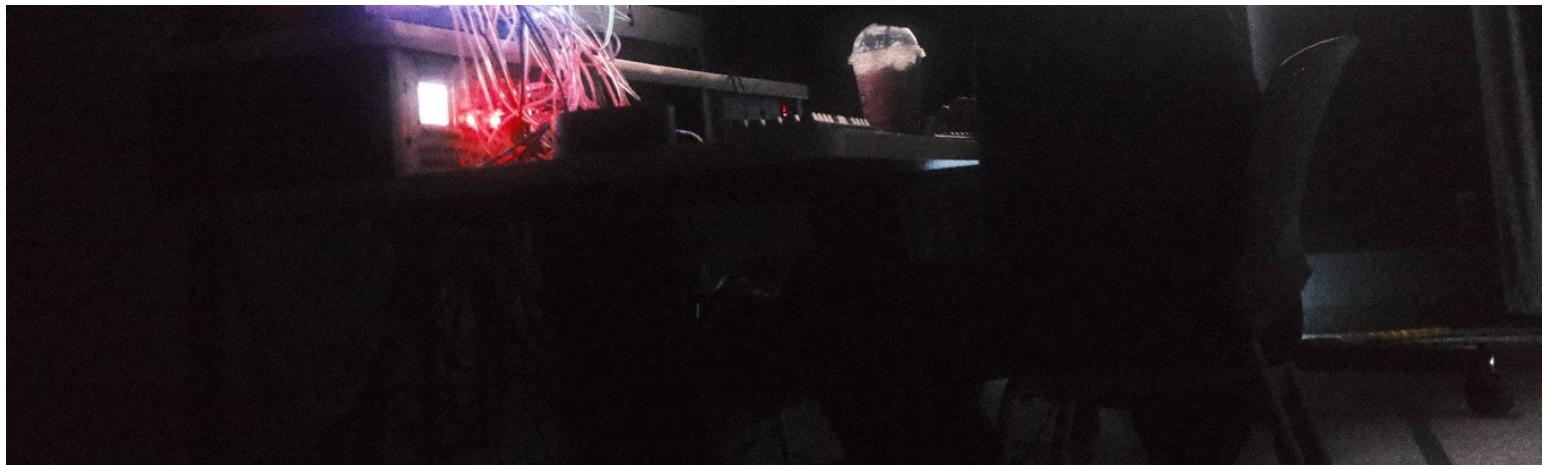
So do you feel like there's influence from your personal background in your work?

Femi: I feel like well, probably unintentionally or subliminally. Yes. I'm trying to make the connection. I think that's something I need to think about more is the connection between my personal history of me with music and culture. Because my mom is Nigerian and I grew up listening to a lot of African music which I think is also pretty jazzy and emotional. I think maybe I create experimental music because I like seeing people's emotions and reactions to sound in general. I think something I realized over the past couple of years making music and performing music is that performing music live is really important because you get to see people's genuine reactions to the sounds that you're creating. And I've worked with, like, making experimental music for the past, I think only three or four years. But just recently I played a show, I think like a month or a couple months ago. And after my set someone was like, "that was really scary. I was scared the whole time." And I was like, that's awesome. If I can make someone feel that strong of an emotion then it's like I should keep making music because then I can start to think about what aspects of the music that I'm creating will actually make someone feel a certain emotion.

And if I can hone in on that and expand on that then I can really create art for people and art for spaces. That will also go and tandem with architecture. Thinking about

how I can create sounds for installations because a guest speaker came so they just opened the studio for Research in Sound and Technology. It's like a new department kind of under RISD because there's been an audio studio in 15 West for a while now, and all the professors in CTC that use that studio have been trying to make it into a sound research facility for a long time. But they need the funding and they need people to be actually interested in it. They just opened that as a department and they had their first guest speaker, which was Camille Norman, which is a sound artist who does installation stuff. And her stuff was really inspiring. She was talking a lot about black culture and churches and the vocal element of churches and the songs that they sing. And also just like religion in general. There's like throat singing in monks and she made a piece where she used speakers that were connected to benches and then she would play just like humming and moaning from the monks into the seats so that when you're in the room.





Femi: It just sounds like a swarm of voices, but when you sit down you hear the voice of one person, which is kind of crazy. So stuff like that just like how I can talk about the overlap between thinking about sound and its interaction with the human body and the human emotion and using sound as a medium for conversation and medium for archival stuff, archival elements, because there's so much history within sound that no one really talks about because it's not something you can physically look at. Also there should be more sound archives. Just like there are dictionaries and books

and stuff. There should be, like a place you can just go and listen to sounds. That'd be great. Like a sound museum would be insane.

EM: Yeah, because, I mean, you have no idea how, like, really your old stuff sounds like.

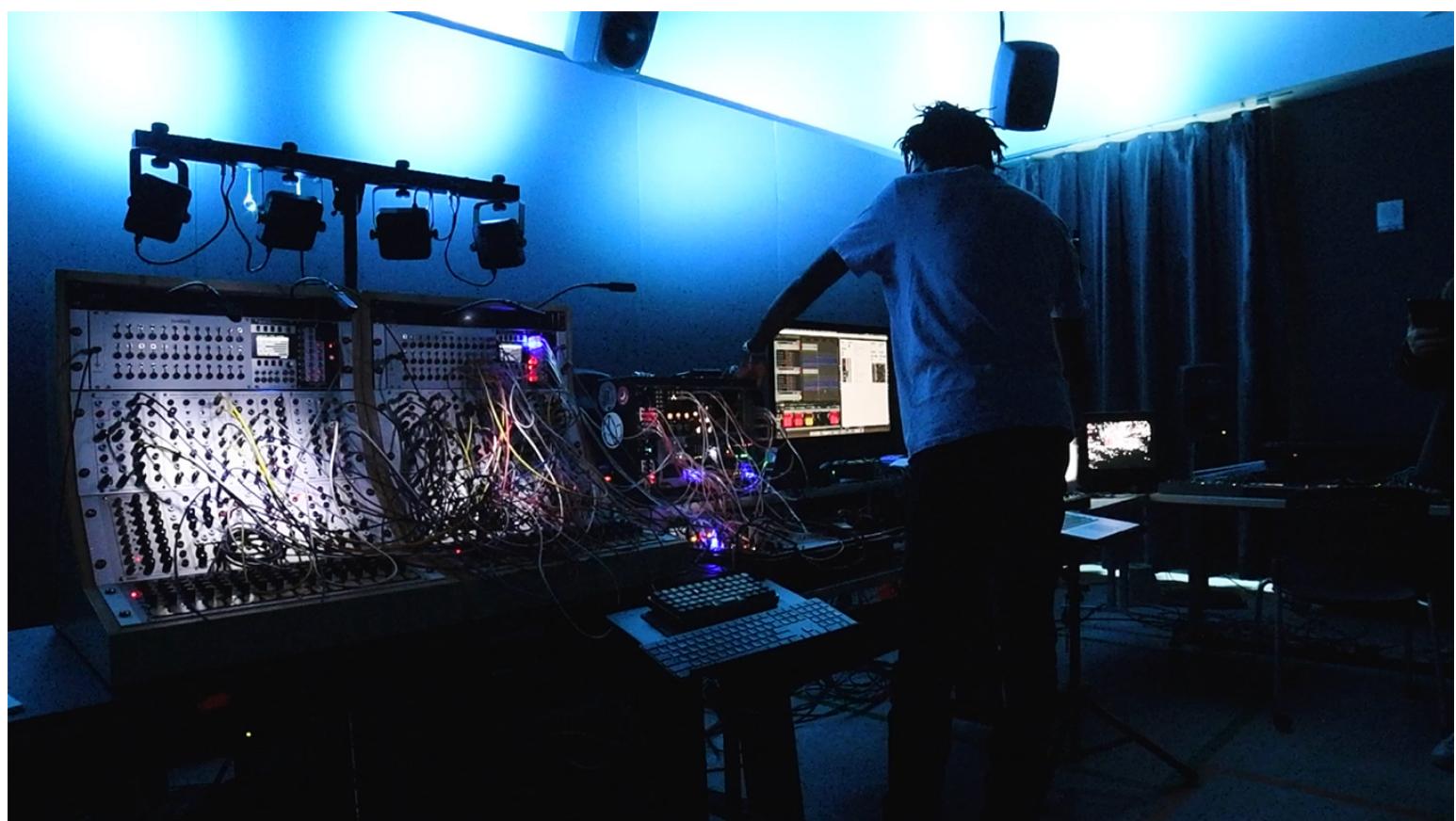
Femi: Yeah, there's always those videos online, like, "oh, this is what language sounds like in the year 200 or something." Yeah, more stuff like that is really interesting to me.

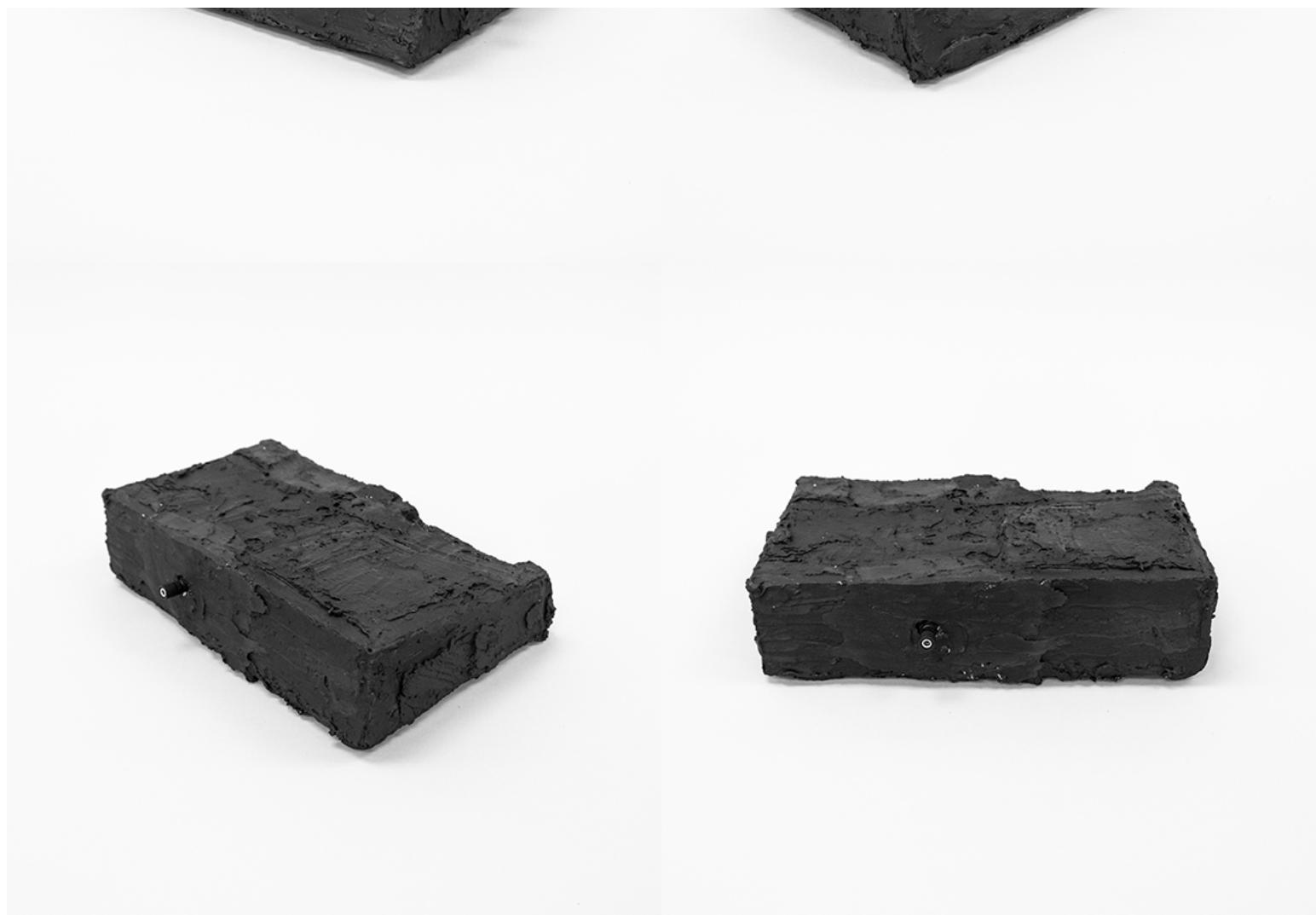
EM: Yeah, I think based on what you said, I feel like your work has very deep connection with people. So I feel like that might be a good lead up to the final question, which is, like, how would you define your art/design philosophy?

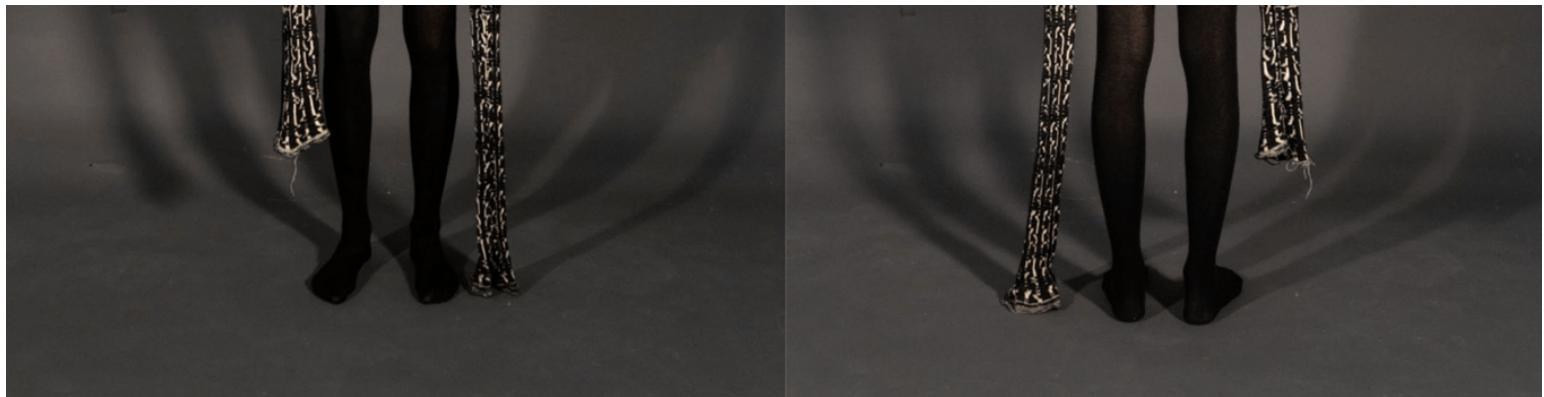
Femi: Yeah, I mean, that's the hardest question. I'd rather just answer it. I think however I feel about it now is how I'm going to feel about it for right now anyway. I feel like my design philosophy for the work that I create is: I want my work to be generative and I want it to provoke emotion within people. Generative in the sense that my work is ever growing and it's ever, like, mutating in a way. It's always building up on itself. I'm always taking an inspiration and putting out work and then it's like a constant flow of just, like, generative production or, like, creation of work. Yeah, I kind of worded that better.

EM: No, that was really well worded!









EM: I was just curious, when did you start getting to music and that type of stuff? Like music production?

Femi: I think I have a really weird background into getting into music because, honestly, it's probably because of New York. I live in New York, from the city, and in high school, I didn't really go out much. And then all the kids in my school were just, like, rich kids that went to their houses in the Hamptons over the weekends and shit, and I did not have money for that, nor was I in that group. And my mom's, like, protective, kind of. And I was finally at the age where I was going to go out and listen to shit and find my own path. And then I think I placed myself into the underground scene in New York by accident and fell in love with it. Like, I went to a couple of raves in, like, 11th grade and I was like, oh my God, this shit is crazy. And then I saw a musician, I think it's a dream crusher, but they do noise music. It's just like, literally harsh noise as loud as possible. Screaming drones, oscillators. And that was, like, the first thing I witnessed that was, like, music that was clearly musical and composed, but then also so visceral and then live and the element of being there and listening to it and the lights are off and shit.

It's, like, dramatic. I was like, this is really the direction I want to go in as far as composing. And then I tried messing around with apps and software like FL Studio and Ableton and all the preliminary or just industry standard music production software. And I found that limiting because it would be so difficult to compose. Staring at a screen is like, 'I have to figure out what sounds I want to put where.' And then I put those sounds there and then I'm, orchestrating it in a linear fashion. And it

doesn't allow a lot of place for experimentation because it would mean that I would either have to find recorded audio or record audio. And then I stumbled around, like, modular, which is like, 'oh, I have a set of tools that I can start with, and then each time I can patch it a different way and create a new sound, and then I can unpatch it and then patch it a different way.' And then also I have modules that give me randomness or modules that have different ways of patching it. So it really allowed me to experiment more and then also create generative things .

I think another really fundamental element of my design and philosophy is chance, which is like, every time I perform, every time I patch a synth or compose a song, it's like it's something random. It's only going to sound like that the first time it's played like that unless it's recorded. But yeah, when I compose now, it's more like, oh, I'm going to patch my Sims until it gets to a point where it's random. But I also know what it's doing because I programmed it that way. And then it's generating its own melodies and it's making its own thing, and then I can control and sort of steer it in a way that I want to make a composition instead of starting with audio I already have opening in the composition. It's just so much more fun. It's also hands on since I didn't like sitting in front of a screen making music.

EM: So it gives a sense of materiality to it.

Femi: Yeah, that's another reason why it's so organic because it's like not only am I physically turning the knobs and just recording tracks live, but it's also there's physicality to it. I like wood a lot. I got my roommate to make me a case because he's in Furniture, and it has really nice little cases. It's also just a nice little guy. Pretty. It is expensive, but it's worth it.



Back to top

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