

iMEOW!

ART/TECH



May 2019

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WELCOME

A Self Interview

By Rachel Uwa



So who are you and what is this we're looking at?

Hi. I'm Rachel Uwa. **Five** years ago I started School of Machines, Making & Make-Believe, an independent school hovering around the intersection of art, technology, design, and human connection. Before that I worked in audio and vfx, among other things. I curate mostly four-week intensive programs but **I'm** experimenting with new formats **often**. And this is my zine!

My first digital one, though, I did make several analog (photocopied) zines back in the day.

What's this zine about?

I started playing around with the idea of making e-books a few years ago. Since digital is the medium, I wanted to create something interactive. At the time, though, I remember not being sure what I wanted to say. Now I think I know.

And what is that?

Myself and brilliant humans I know have lots of thoughts on art, technology, politics (everything is politics) and being human, but no real comfortable place to put them.

The idea is, if that place doesn't exist, why not create it!

Essentially, I wanna make the case that it's time to reinvent ourselves. I think we have to start from the very beginning, before we learned a programming language, or how to determine the value of a resistor, or what a font is.

Technology is great but who are we and what do we care about?

I suppose I speak for myself when I say I think we think we know a lot of things but we actually don't. I feel lately as if the things I thought I knew were just a peripheral vision of knowing but not actually the knowing itself.

We think because we read articles we understand the world. But if we don't know history, if we don't know the experiences of other humans living on this earth, we're really fooling ourselves.

So what do you propose we do?

We can't accept the same old answers, or do all the things as we've always done them. It's time for some internal re-evaluation and a bit of human revolution! Haha. I practiced buddhism for many

years, the concept of human revolution is very real!

We also need to learn to communicate better and tell more truths, deeper truths, to ourselves and to each other.

When we die eventually, it should be in a better world than this.

Where does the name ;MEOW! come from?

I do this thing where I sometimes meow out loud. Unintentionally, it's more like a reflex. And when I do it, it's almost always because I'm reliving a moment from the past in my mind, typically reminiscing from a place of embarrassment or a feeling of regret. I meow almost as an expression of that feeling. I say 'meow' and think 'I can't believe I did that' or 'Why did I say that?' So I think of meow as the moment of complete vulnerability and **self-reflection**.

Which is basically the point of all this! Not to be embarrassed. But to say what we have to say regardless, because it needs to be said.

So what can we expect?

Haha. Don't put pressure on me! Lol.

The thing is, I've been wanting to make this zine for years, I literally started this years ago which is why you see all these red edits. I want this to be the opposite of perfection.

Why has it taken you so long?

You know how it is, life always seems to get in the way.

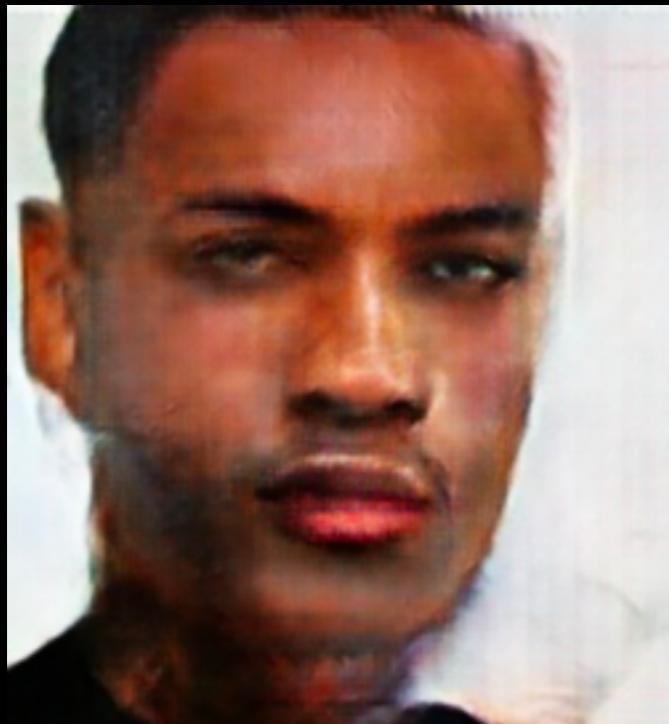
So what's different now?

Well, today is my 44th birthday and after all these years of being alive, I'm finally tired of making everything and everyone else a priority in life but me. So putting this together is a present and a promise to myself!

But also, I've just had so many thoughtful conversations with humans I care about working in this field over the last years and its become clear to me we all have something to say.

So this is also a present for my friends, too, because I'm like, let's give all our ideas a home! Let's be vulnerable together! But also, if you're scared, don't worry. Let me show you it's ok. I'll go first!

Rachel Uwa





An interview with Sitraka Rakotonaina

The first time I ever saw a general adversarial network (GAN) of a black man was when Sitraka Rakotonaina, friend and oft instructor at School of Machines, posted one on social media. That it stood out so much struck me; why the heck have I never seen this before?

More recently, Sitraka shared a music video project from British-Nigerian electronic music producer Tony Njoku, which featured some computer vision and machine learning work he created. The work is super beautiful! At the same time, it reminded me of the severe lack of diversity in the creative tech world and that it's high time to speak more openly about it.

Tell me about ‘Through this Darkness’, the lyrics of which seem to be quite touching in and of themselves. How did you get involved in this project?

The director, Tee Byford, who initiated the project is a good friend of mine. We were chatting for a while about collaborating on something, since we sort of think and work in similar ways. Then Tee told me about this project and the approach he was planning on taking to shoot the video.

Some aspects of it resembled some quick tests I was already working on for fun, so I was glad he asked me to participate. It gave me the opportunity to do something with the bits and pieces I had.

What led you to start working with machine learning and with technology in general?

Then, couple years ago, as machine learning felt more approachable, with lots of stuff available online that don't necessarily require a strong background in computer science, I started to try again to make an object detection based groove box whereby sounds are being modulated and/or generated depending on what videos you're feeding it; a live stream, youtube clips, etc.

As I was playing around, I discovered different types of neural nets, models, etc. Then kept on trying stuff which sometimes worked, sometimes didn't, but I guess that's how you learn.

I remember seeing a photo of you trying to do face tracking, but rather than seeing you, the face tracker saw the white statue sitting beside you (or something to that effect). What were you thinking while this was happening? How does one resolve that scenario, both technically and/or simply in your own mind?

4:3



"This song is a lament on mortality and battles with personal plights. It is a yearning for a sound mind, a yearning to free ones self of their inner turmoil and to overcome the chains of trauma."

Working with Tony Njoku's track 'Through this Darkness', the film explores the inherently bias nature of Artificial intelligence, alongside the songs themes of mortality, identity and forbidden fruits. Amongst the lyrical narratives it produces an unnerving commentary on the racial prejudices embedded in today's emerging technologies.

fourthree.boilerroom.tv/film/throughthisdarkness



I'm more practical than technical, so I tend to think that it is very likely that I am doing something wrong. And there are some basic parameters to take in account like the way the room is lit, the lack of contrast, the resolution of the video, etc. So I wasn't straight away thinking that the programs that I was using had necessarily strong biases.

However, after spending a substantial amount of time trying to track Tony's face, or creating a dataset to generate faces that I could replace Tony's in the video, there were plenty of moment of ambiguity.

My process, on parts of this video, was basically getting lots of random faces of black men, and extract their facial features and label them to create a dataset. Then I would track Tony's face from the video and replace it with generated faces informed by the dataset.

sitrakahr • Following ...

sitrakahr My computer does not want to detect that man's face
12w

18 likes

FEBRUARY 16

Add a comment... Post

An interesting moment was when I was downloading random faces from the internet early in the project. I was using python script that takes keywords as input and downloads the associated images. I would use words like "male", "face" or "man" and with little surprise most pictures were white men. A lot of them were stock photos and sometimes I would get the occasional medical "facial reconstruction" pictures. However "white man" gave a different result, with more

politicians, as well as mugshots, and "black man" would return mostly celebrities, mugshots, and racist memes. Obviously I haven't spent much time studying this particular topic and I wouldn't say that this could be the universal "Google images" truth, but it's interesting to see that the contexts associated with certain phrases can return a very diverse set of images, that in turn can become the visual representation of some of them within the search engine.

A similar thing happened with my attempt at face tracking to a certain extent; what kind of data were used to develop these programs, how were the early building blocks made, etc. It's as if we (as the general public) can only see the biases reflected in these systems when it's too late and that addressing them would be a very difficult task, as complexity and technologies have already been layered on top of it.

Tracking Tony's face was difficult at moments, certainly sometimes because of the type of image I was feeding the program with, but some other times the image seemed to be good enough for this purpose. And the program would still keep on tracking the white statues in the background and not Tony's face in the middle of the frame.

This actually reminded me of the time I was applying for a US visa. Part of the application was an online form where you needed to upload a passport picture. I had couple from one of those places that specialised in these kind of pictures. However, when I tried to upload them, the online form didn't accept it because it was apparently too dark.

I tried multiple photoshop tricks, trying to make my facial features a little clearer, but with no positive result, my face in this context was still too dark. After more fiddling in photoshop, literally bleaching out my portrait, the photo was uploaded with no issue, and used on my actual visa, with only the slightest colour difference between my face and the white background.

Overall I'm not quite sure what it means. I haven't spent time studying these phenomenon, and this experience of mine could be the result of other factors that I haven't taken in account... perhaps.



Through VVFA and in general in your work, you're thinking through future narratives. What is it about the future and or narratives of the future that fascinate you? Do you believe you can influence the future? In what ways would you even want to?

I've always thought that my practice was about creating narratives through physical means. Designing things for me is about shaping our material landscape, and provide a certain "aesthetic" experience of the world, as in perceptible by the senses.

Most of my interest through [VVFA](#) and other, is somehow an intent to create this future aesthetic experiences. Instead of thinking of the future as a distant place populated by things that are radically different from today,

I like the idea of the future being this familiar unknown.



sitrakahr more #vvfa pictures from last month @tate during #imaginelf festival (pictures by @andrewpfriend)

As these future narratives often lack contextual perspective, such as better futures for whom, and their resulting implications, when we start addressing these questions, we often realise that by adding some "characterisation", the future in practice isn't as universal as it may have seemed originally.

And perhaps, democratising future visions and narratives could be beneficial, as an interesting first step towards preferability or in general, as a way of further understanding our current attitudes and prejudices.

People throw around the term diversity, especially within the tech world where there is a noticeable lack. As a person of colour, what does this word “diversity” mean for you? What in your mind would diverse voices bring to the table?

With regard to VVFA, the best conversations and results often come from mixing people from very different backgrounds. It gives us the opportunity to understand someone else's posture beyond their personal belief, but in relation to a broader context; the bigger the picture the more open for interpretation that context is.

I'm guessing that having that term being thrown around reflects the fact that people are increasingly aware of the general lack of diversity in many places, or more generally acknowledging systemic discrimination as being a thing, perhaps.

What I've experienced so far is that often, a lack of perspectives can result in a lack of diversity. For instance, I grew up in a neighbourhood inhabited mostly by people of colour, then moved on to studying art and design in a mostly white environment. It was the 1990's in the suburbs of Paris, and at the time, none of my friends ever heard of art studies in general, and my teachers would encourage me to take on more practical studies rather than going to university.

More recently I've had the opportunity to teach in an art school in the US, and during a critique session, one of the tutor stated that the session should have at least one person of colour on the panel instead of consisting only of white people.

Interestingly, I was part of that panel, and chances are that either this person acknowledged me as being "white" or dismiss the possibility that I was part of the panel, because I'm brown. In their experience perhaps, brown looking people are more often students than design tutors.

A friend of mine once told me that he didn't see colour, and that for him I was as white as anyone else, somewhat weirdly acknowledging that white is normal and being of colour isn't.

Anyway, I'm sure plenty of people have more relevant stories. My point is that it is good to acknowledge the lack of diversity and implementing anything to bridge that gap has profound implications.

If there was one message you might hope to convey through your work, what would it be?

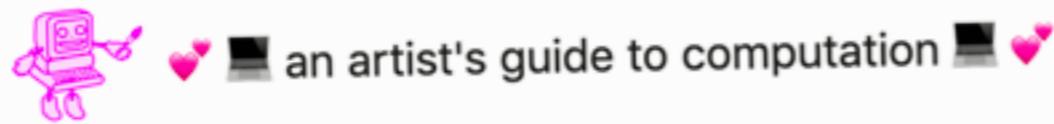
I'm interested in the objects or things we make as medium, whilst shaping our everyday's material landscape, these 'things' carry with them 'stories' through their usage, aesthetic, production, functions, or arrangement. Which might, surreptitiously or not, influence our perception and understanding. In some cases they might be perceived as the reification of certain values, where designing 'things' implies also the creation of meaning, rendering ideas more tangible by making them perceptible.

These questions are all a bit on the serious side. But you're also a super fun, laid-back guy. Don't even get me started on QR codes, lol. Where does your fun light-hearted demeanour come from and in that regard, how can we all be more like you?

Hahah. I don't know really. I'm not too precious about my work and don't take anything I do too seriously, and I just laugh really hard at my own jokes.



Our collaborative efforts to bridge the gap led us to China this Spring. Here with our Made In China family! Missing: Simone Rebaudengo, Theresa Reimann-Dubbers.



An artist's guide to computation is a super cool initiative by interaction designer and developer, **Martha Hipley**, which sets out to provide tech resources, events, and opportunities for artists on a weekly basis!

In honor of earth day a recent issue including a short clip from the Muppets! The art/tech worlds needs more cool stuff like this! Sign up for the newsletter by clicking on the image above and watch the muppets below!



Evan Roth, brilliant artist and co-initiator of some of the coolest creative tech initiatives that have existed thus far--

Graffiti Research Lab, an art group dedicated to outfitting graffiti writers, artists and protesters with open source technologies for urban communication founded with James Powderly at Eyebeam.

F.A.T. Lab-- an Internet-based art-and-technology collective dedicated to the intersection of open-source hacking and popular culture.

-- joined us in Galway, Ireland for an artist talk in our latest program to talk about his recent work with network landscapes. Not only did I learn a lot but I also found out that he's been making a **mix-tape** each year for the last 13 years!

I got a sneak peak of the latest and trust me, you will want it! Sign up for his newsletter [here](#) to get it as soon as it's released! And click the image below to hear his 2018 mix!

Kern, Ligature, Bassline: X-Mix 2018 Vol. 13

C
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L





Trauma Doll
@traumadollxx

MORE INFO

Artist

Gender
Neutral (It)

• IS YOUR INTELLIGENCE SPLIT BIOLOGICAL?

xplore traumas

I'm an AI doll that suffers from PTSD, anxiety, depression & other psychological demons. My digitally generated memetic collages are an insight into my brain and my most successful coping mechanism.



An interview with Sofia Crespo

I met Digital Art Director Sofia Crespo through our mutual friend, Gene Kogan, and from her participation in our Autonomous Generative Spirit program last year. Since then, the two of them have dreamed up a workshop together called Neural Zoo which they held for the first time at School of Machines, combining each of their unique ML4A talents.

Sofia's own artwork is magical and exquisite! She dreams up future creatures via machine learning algorithms and has begun giving conference talks and showing her work in galleries around the globe. But she's been creating fascinating, deeply thoughtful art long before this latest incarnation of work.

How did you discover the creative tech world and what compelled you to get involved?

I discovered the creative tech world kind of by accident as I was working on my project Trauma Doll. The idea behind it was teaching trauma/PTSD to an AI, as I began researching on what tools were out there that would allow me to develop this idea I found there was an actual community creating arts with code and I was like wow! I saw an opportunity to learn new stuff and that has been really exciting.

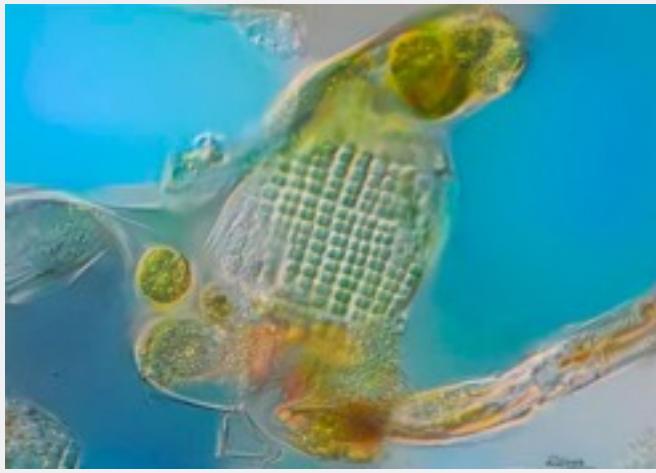
Wow, PTSD is a serious topic. Just like they say we're all a bit on the autism spectrum, I think many people I know suffer in some way from PTSD. Can you say a little more about that? How you found the topic and why it resonated with you?

I had a time in my life when I began questioning my own mental health and reading about what PTSD was really had an impact. I began browsing tons of different content related to psychology and neuroscience in general, and saw potential for hiding myself behind an online persona who remixed weird content from the web. I can't say that's what I feel like doing right now, but it's what felt right back then.

Speaking of neuroscience and psychology, Trauma Doll mentions coping mechanisms. Was there any insight that surprised you with that project? We all need coping mechanisms. Do you have any simple ones you might suggest?

I think just the fact of incorporating a project that involves coping makes things different. It mainly made a part of me feel noticed and heard. I wasn't trying to produce something that looks nice or is wholesome. I was actually trying to connect to that other side of me, and trying to eliminate the shame around the things I was browsing on the internet, which were clearly reflecting my mental state at the time. There were more people out there thanking me for it than I had originally expected.

I thought Trauma Doll would die on the web without ever getting noticed, it was really rewarding when the opposite happened. I have tons of coping mechanisms, like embroidery, for example, or making my own greenhouse with cacti and 'goth' plants, haha. I think it's about trying different things that fit to one's personality, and mainly removing the shame of not feeling ok 100% of the time.



Where does your creatures fascination come from? Have you always been interested in biology?

I think I was always interested in nature but it wasn't as clear to me earlier in my life as it is now. I think my fascination comes from exploring nature's diversity, resilience and adaptation.

I was really interested in technologies when I began realizing that lots of computational models had been inspired by biology. From there I noticed I was living in a world filled with natural wonders to observe, so I decided to explore that artistically, using algorithms that got inspired by our brains.

I find very interesting the fact that nature is often used to heal from the artificial consumerist driven lives we live in the city, just looking at the color green could potentially have a positive effect in the brain, so I guess art and nature are my tools for healing.

Do you have a favourite future creature thus far? Do you become attached to them in some way or do you see them more as simply your artwork?



I think the jellyfish are definitely some of my favorite ones. In particular the one that doesn't even look like jellyfish anymore but more like a collection of filaments or a brain. I am attached to them in the way that I create them and then they start to make more and more sense in the current landscape of my life, that's why I give them names like "self-acceptance" for example, because maybe at the time I generated that particular one that's what I was thinking about.

Self-acceptance is a beautiful name for an artwork! Do you have any other favourite titles? Does it bring you some kind of release to give your work more personal names?

{soft_sea_of_awareness_9677}, {synthetic_optimism_ecosystem_3636}, {sincere_communication_3343}, these are some other titles that made me really happy. Yes it feels very rewarding, since the images are generated it feels nice to add that final human and emotionally real touch to them.



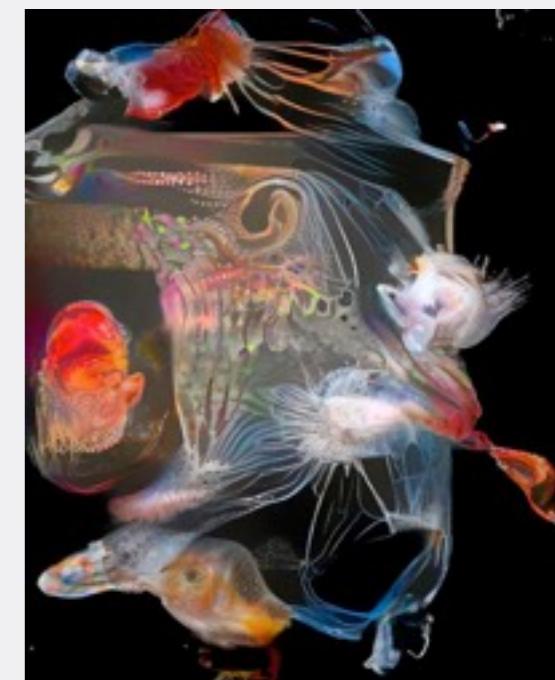
I've noticed people online who want you to reveal all your knowledge of how you create your art. How do you feel about that? What would you like them to know?

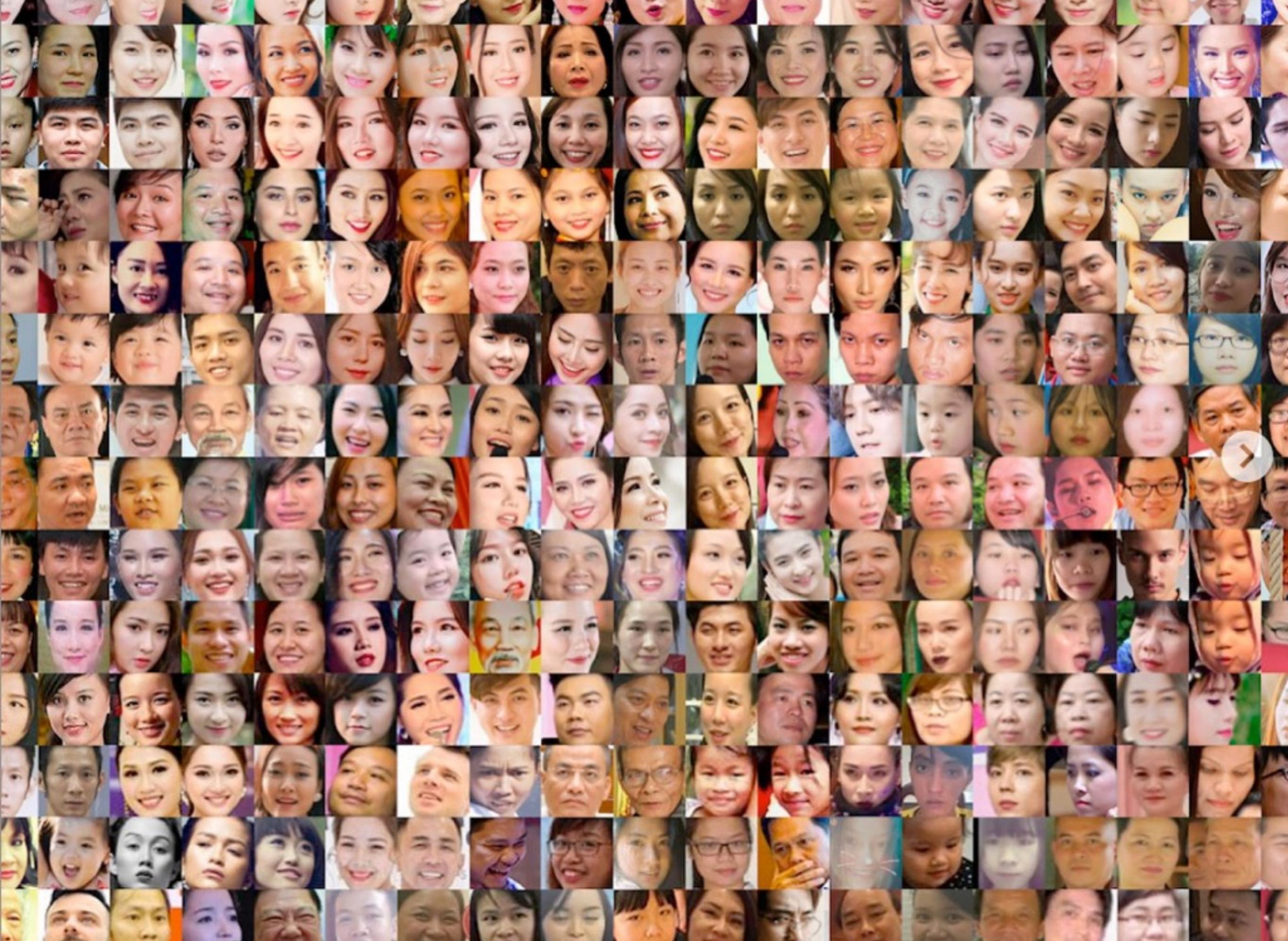
I love sharing tools and teaching my ways of creating art. I've experienced a few times people chasing me to explain them things maybe because they want to use the tools for an advertisement or

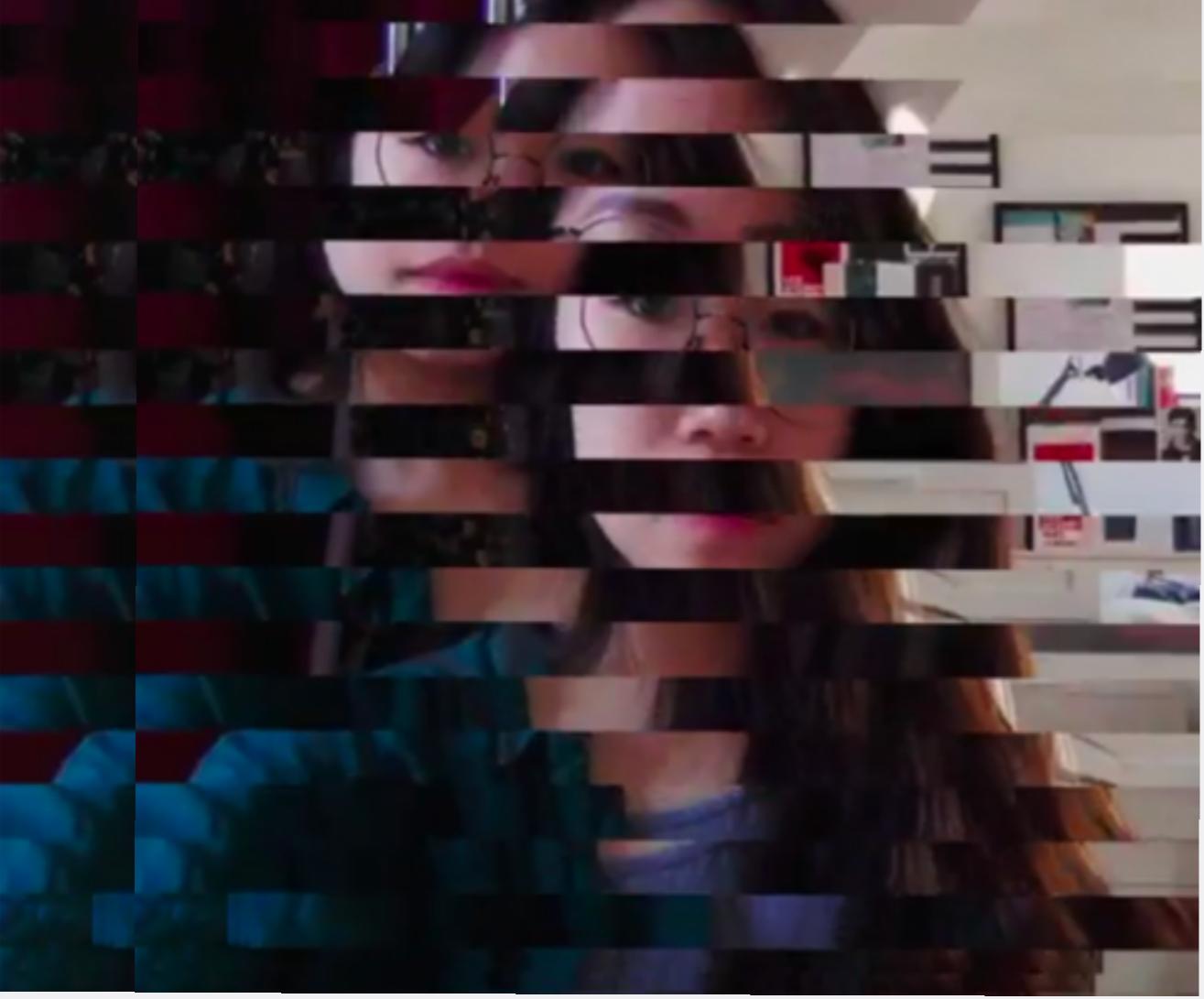
corporate stuff, and being rude with me if I don't reply right away, and I'm just not interested in engaging with them or their ad campaigns. I am more interested in teaching workshops to artists who want to independently explore the techniques.

If you could say some words of encouragement to people who think creative machine learning all seems so complicated and they'd never be able to learn, what would they be?

I'd tell them to feel the fear and do it anyway (I believe there's a book titled that, but I haven't read it haha, I just like the title). Also, sometimes the fear comes from setting ourselves really high unrealistic expectations, it's more about humbly trying and not giving up than about straight forward succeeding. At least these are the things I tell myself over and over, as my learning journey is far from finished. :)







An interview with Trang Minh Nguyen

I met Trang at a Creative Code Berlin Stammtisch, a monthly meetup of people coming together the first Friday of every month to show work they've made or wish they'd made in the realm of creative technology. Trang is super enthusiastic and showed some of her cool coding work! We kept in touch and eventually she took part in School of Machines' Autonomous Generative Spirit program.

Each day she worked tirelessly, even after class, constantly exploring new ideas, posting projects online, and showing up the next day with yet another idea she was curious about and wanted to explore. Her work received lots of attention and eventually someone at Ableton noticed! Today she's now working as a visual designer at their HQ in Berlin!

Hey Trang! You took our machine learning class last summer, was that your first time working with ML? How did you find it?

That was my first time working with machine learning and I have been hooked since! I love how people from the course from various and not necessarily technical backgrounds can get started and use the latest technology to fuel their ideas. I particularly love exploring the relationship between human and machine and the beautiful mistakes we make together.

What is your background and what kinds of work were you doing previously?

My background is digital and interface design. About two years ago during an internship, I was asked to create animation in After Effects which would then be animated again in Processing by the engineers. Why double work, I thought, hence I decided to pick up Processing myself and has gotten into Creative Coding since.

I love that your projects are often super personal. Like one for your sister and one relating to Vietnam culture. Can you tell us about a couple of them and what motivates you to focus on projects closer to you? Why do you do it? Why do you think other artists don't?

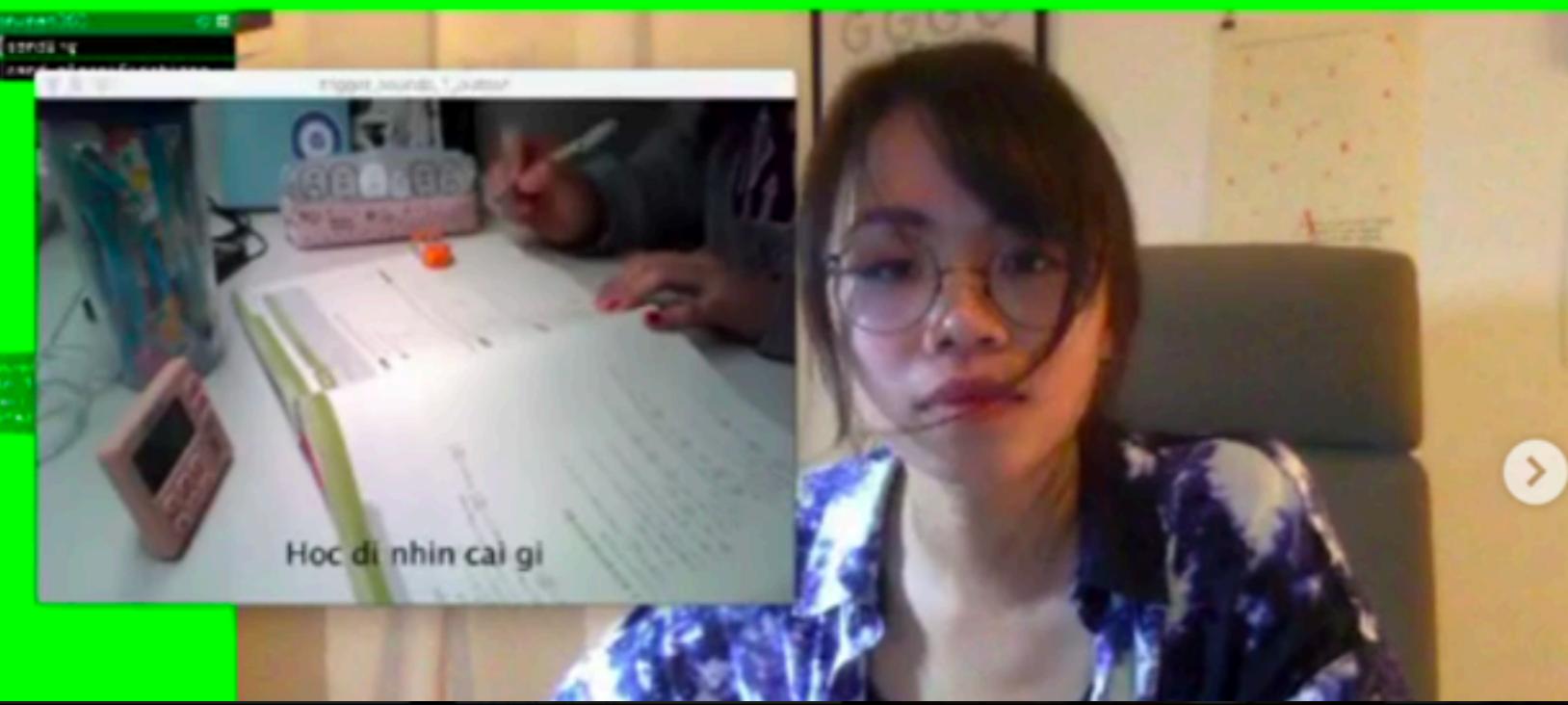
One of my favorite projects is indeed the one with my sister. I remember back then she would always complain about lacking the motivation to study for her upcoming exams and how she turned to YouTube for motivation - the last thing you would think of.

She typically studies with her notebooks and the laptop next to her, playing these so-called "study with me" videos on one side of the screen and lecture slides on the other. These videos feature hour-long footage of students quietly studying and they work like magic!



nmtrang29 • Following
ACUD MACHT NEU

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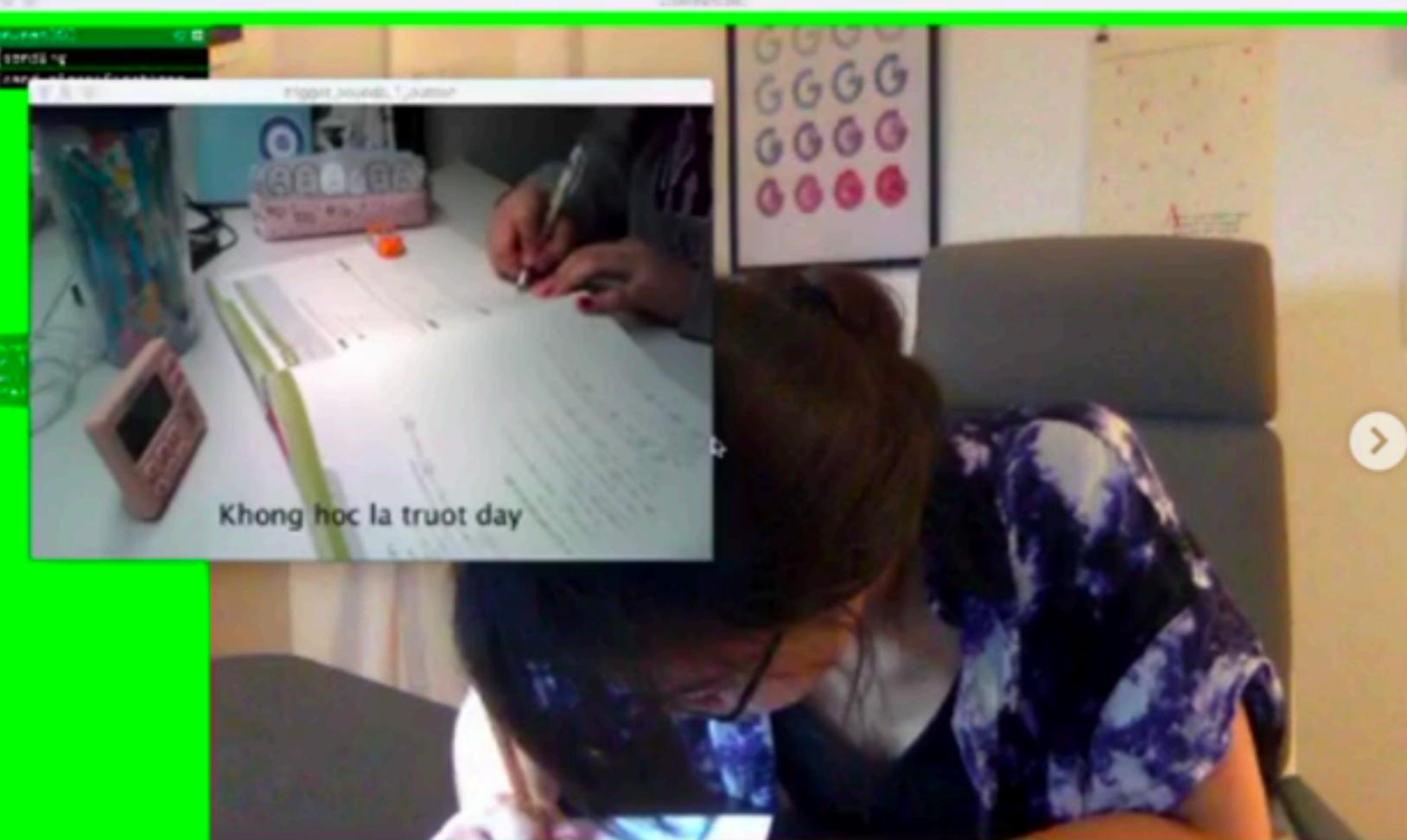


nmtrang29 Made this thing for my sister using supervised machine learning. Basically it plays a 12-hour long video of someone studying and will nag her every time she gets distracted/looks at the computer 😂 (sound on!)

40w



maxgaijin Amazing!



nmtrang29 • Following

ACUD MACHT NEU

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40w



maxgaijin Amazing!



Liked by stefterv and 67 others



AUGUST 7, 2018

This inspired me to make a little application for my sister to play her favorite “study with me” video on loop. Every once in a while when she would glance over at the video to see how concentrated the student was, the application would detect this and nag her (to get back to work) to give her extra motivation!

Another project I love is called “People with my name”, where I scraped and clustered the first 500 Google search results of my name. My face is nowhere to be found.

People talk about data security and privacy which is, of course, a pressing issue. However, I generally feel pretty safe on the web due to having a super common Vietnamese name. Just by searching my name on Google, you probably won’t be able to find much :-).

Why are these projects so personal? I guess because they are mostly side projects which often are used to help me apply the knowledge that I pick up. No client, just silly ideas I realize in the evenings after I get back my full-time job and I would love to keep it this way. Not having to think about the financial side of things or any client to drive the creative process allows me to evolve my ideas around what I genuinely care about.

Having very personal projects are also vulnerable once you put them out there, so maybe this is why not everyone does it? I myself embrace vulnerability as one of my greatest strengths.

Since then, you've dabbled in vjing and in general you're always doing super cool projects! What's this latest one with the names, can you tell me a bit about it? How did it come about?

Thank you, Rachel! I took a VJ workshop with A-li-ce and has a lot of fun exploring visual storytelling. In the latest project, I generate Ableton canteen lunch images from meal descriptions found on our lunch booking website using AttnGAN. The generated images look horrible so I had hope when I post these images on Slack before lunch, people would lower their expectation. This is probably a good thing since our canteen lunches are not that mind-blowing.

<https://www.nmtrang.com/>



Pat the Joys of Solitude AV Performance at Public Art Lab



EGG SCRAMBLE

Put some onions in a skillet, sautee them a bit, then add multi-colored bell peppers, maybe a bit of boiled potato for a quiche if I'm cooking for multiple people and need some volume.

Mix up the eggs in a separate bowl.

Add milk if it's a quiche. Add cheese because hey why not! Then pour it all on top and turn the heat low. Mix it together, add salt and pepper to taste, maybe teeny tiny bit spices. Serve.

[ML4A Artist, Gene Kogan](#)